

5th  
Date

You | Were

Experienced,

I | Was | Not:

OUR DATING STORY

Makiko  
Nagaoka

Artist / magako

5th  
Date

You Were

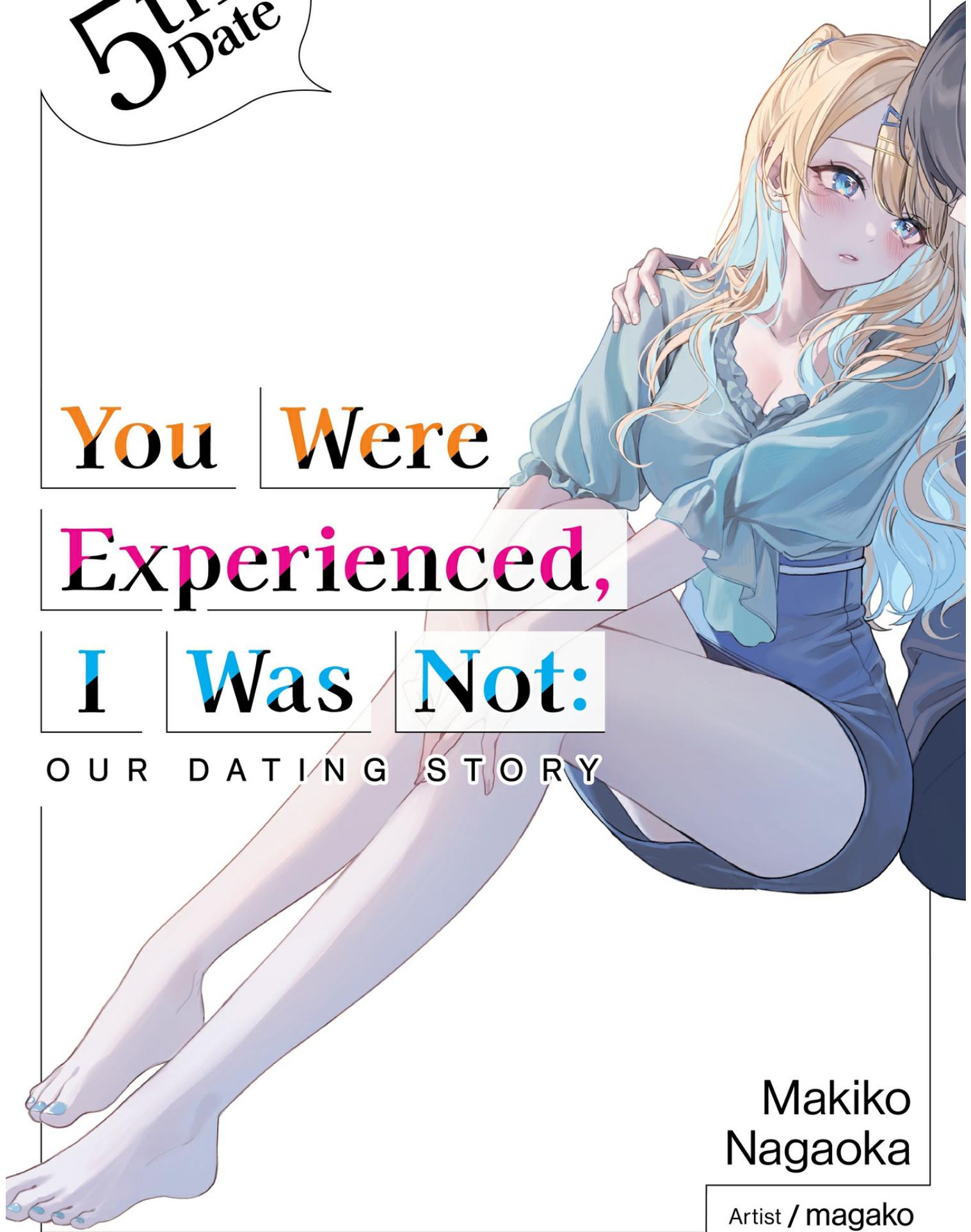
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# Prologue

*“Do I wanna do it with you?”*

About half a minute had passed since Runa had asked me that shocking question. It'd happened in that shop with photo sticker booths we'd gone to at the end of our Harajuku date on Valentine's Day.

I was petrified and freaking out on the inside.

“Do it?” Do what? Obviously, she meant...sex.

*Wait, you’re telling me Runa might want to have sex with me?! And why’s she asking me that?! How would a virgin like me know?!*

Runa tilted her head in confusion. She seemed to be waiting for my answer.

We were currently standing inside the booth behind its plastic cover. There were roughly three centimeters between us, meaning that was how close Runa’s miraculously cute upturned eyes were to my face. And being enveloped in her floral-or-fruity scent was enough to make me lose my calm by itself.

The words she’d just said to me repeated endlessly inside my head. My heart was pounding hard enough it hurt. I couldn’t think straight.

In the end, the only thing I could say was...

“I-I dunno...”

Runa looked a bit disheartened and averted her eyes. “Okay...”

As I walked her home from Station A, silence hung between us. The streetlights placed here and there along this narrow residential road dimly illuminated the asphalt.

When we’d just started dating, I’d made sure she’d be home by 6 p.m., but recently, that had been extended to 8 p.m. We were already a little past that today. She wasn’t *required* to be home by any specific time—that had simply been where I’d been drawing the line.

Normally, if we wrapped up one topic in our conversation, Runa would bring up a new one right away. I glanced beside me, wondering what she was thinking, and I saw that she looked deep in thought with her eyes pointed at her feet.

I could sense her warmth from our linked hands as always, but it felt like her heart was out of my reach. It was frustrating.

I made up my mind. “Runa?”

She looked over to me with a start. “Hm? What is it?”

“Oh, uh...” I got flustered since it wasn’t like I had anything to say. “I mean...I was just wondering what you were thinking.”

“Well...” Runa shook her head slightly, looking a bit stuck. “I was thinking more about what I said back there.”

“Huh?”

“At that shop...”

What she’d said at the shop...

*“Do I wanna do it with you?”*

“Oh, right...” I said.

What more *was* there to that topic...? I could tell the subject had shaken me up enough to make my face hot.

*Good thing it’s dark out here.*

“Wait, wh-what do you mean by that?” I asked in a fluster.

Runa looked confused. “Sure, I don’t get how *I* feel, but I don’t get how *you* feel either.”

“Huh?”

“Like, do you really wanna do it with me...?” she asked.

There was something gloomy about the look on Runa’s face. It made me panic a little.

“What...? S-Sure I do.”

I figured it was best to tell the truth here, but I was worried I'd creep her out if I sounded too enthusiastic. But as a result, you couldn't tell what I was emphasizing by the way I'd said it.

"So you say. You said that at that café too."

Was she talking about the chocolate place from earlier today? She'd made a fuss asking me about what kind of porn I liked while we had been there.

"Still, though... You turned me down once," Runa pointed out.

"Huh?"

"The day we started going out... You decided not to do it back then," she said. It looked like she was sulking a little.

"Well, uh, that was..." I began, disconcerted. "We'd only just started dating and I kinda wanted to treasure our relationship..."

"I know. Even I felt a little relieved when I realized we didn't have to have sex right away just because we were dating," Runa said as she cast her eyes downward. "But I've come to love you so much... These days, when I imagine doing it with you, I'm worried if you even *wanna* have sex with me in the first place. I mean, wouldn't it be pretty pointless to worry if I wanna do it or not when *you* don't wanna?"

We came to a stop, having just arrived in front of Runa's house.

She went on. "You're the serious type. You don't bring up sex even when we're alone together. So I was wondering, like, maybe you don't really care about all that stuff as long as our hearts are connected... Like, maybe you don't need sex..."

"What...?! W-Wait, uh...!" I sputtered.

Being a guy (and one who, in fact, thought about dirty things pretty often), I'd been talking to Runa like it was a given that guys wanted to have sex. So when I'd told her I'd wait until she wanted to, my words had carried the implication that *I* was up for it whenever. I hadn't talked to her about sex out of consideration for her as I knew she tended to go with whatever her boyfriends wanted to do. I didn't want to bother her about the subject without a good

reason.

I'd never expected it to backfire in such a way. Perhaps, in Runa's mind, I'd become something of an ascetic, someone devoid of lust. Come to think of it, this might've been the reason she'd been so eager to test the waters on the subject of sex today...

"I-I *do* want to do it. You don't need to worry," I replied. Embarrassing as it was to say, I needed to clear up this misunderstanding.

"Are you just saying that for my sake?" she asked. "Like, since I'm starting to feel like it, are you figuring that you might as well roll with it?"

"It's not like that...!"

Did Runa think this way because *she'd* had sex with her exes out of consideration?

"Maybe you love me as your girlfriend, but I don't arouse you all that much because I'm a gyaru. Maybe you'd prefer a pure and proper girl like Maria after all..."

"N-No, I wouldn't. And why would I even confess to a girl who didn't arouse me?" I replied, interrupting her. My feelings weren't being conveyed correctly and it was starting to make me impatient. "I'm hornier than you think, okay?"

I didn't know why I had to stress this to my girlfriend while standing in front of her house at night, but seeing a persistent look of uneasiness on Runa's face was making me feel desperate.

"I read dirty manga and watch porn like anybody else. And when we're not together, I keep thinking about when I'll be able to do it with you. In fact, by now I must've used you about five hundred times as... Oh, never mind."

I hurriedly stopped myself—I was getting caught up in the moment and had been about to go into the raw details about how I spanked my monkey. I hoped she hadn't caught on, but now, a puzzled look appeared on her face.

"Huh? You used me five hundred times as what?"

"Uh, well, it's..."

"Oh! Do you mean...?!" Runa turned as red as a tomato in an instant, seeming

to have hit upon a realization. She opened and closed her mouth repeatedly. “Wait, we’ve been dating for about eight months, right? So if there’s thirty days in a month, eight times three is twenty-four, so two hundred and forty... You did that at least twice a day?!”

I was speechless. “Huh? Um...?”

It wasn’t like I’d had an accurate count of times in mind before I’d said that, so I’d rather she didn’t think about the specifics. Wait, she wasn’t good at math — How was she running the numbers so quickly?! She couldn’t do that normally!

“You do it that much...? To me...?”

She quickly turned so red that I could tell even in the dark. I’d never seen her like this before.

“Um... Yeah...” I replied. Awkwardness came over me too, but since I’d said it myself, I couldn’t just take it back...

*What the hell am I telling her...?*

“So yeah... I always want to do it with you,” I added in desperation, trying to make myself crystal clear.

As I stood there with a flushed face, Runa gazed back at me with an even redder one. “No way... I’m so embarrassed...!” she said quietly, as though the words were leaking from the depths of her heart.

And then...

“Waaah, I can’t take iiiit!!!” Runa shouted suddenly and disappeared into her house in an instant.

# Chapter 1

Later that week, I'd gone to cram school after classes at my normal school had ended.

"I need your advice on something, Sekiya-san..." I began, out of breath, as soon as I saw him.

"What is it this time? Everything's settled between you and Kurose-san now, yeah?" he replied.

As usual, we sat at a table in the cram school's lounge located on the top floor. There was still natural light coming into the room at this time of day. Students who had yet to take their shot at college entrance exams were starting to gather here now since their normal classes were over, but I'd already made sure that Kurose-san wasn't among them.

"I told my girlfriend I wanted to have sex and she was like, 'I can't take it,' and ran away..."

Sekiya-san sighed, seeing me speak as I maintained a pose like Ikari Gendo. His reply was half-hearted. "It's so nice to be in your second year of high school. You still have time to worry about stuff like that."

Judging by the way he acted, he'd yet to get a passing grade on any exam.

"If she 'can't take it,' then you're shit out of luck. Just throw in the towel and break up," he added in an offhand manner.

"I-It wasn't like a rejection or anything..." I hurriedly said.

"Then what was the issue?"

"It was like she was too shy."

Sekiya-san sighed at that.

"And she ran away from me," I added.

"Oh yeah?"

"When do you think we'll be able to do it?" I asked, returning to the Gendo pose and sighing.

"How would I know...?" Sekiya-san said. He sounded like he really didn't care one bit.

Looking in front of me, I saw him reclining all the way back in his chair. He was staring up at the ceiling. Once he noticed that I'd looked up at him, he stood up.

"I can't take this," he said. "Can't take *you*. You're getting on my nerves too much. Get lost."

"Isn't that a bit much?!"

"Don't you have your answer already? Her 'I can't take it' means 'I'm embarrassed,' right? So all you gotta do is either wait until she's not feeling that way anymore or make it so it's no longer embarrassing for her."

"H-How would I do that?" I asked.

"How would I know?! I don't have time for this right now."

There seemed to be genuine irritation in his voice. He had a sharp tongue even on a normal day, but perhaps this was indicating just how dire things were with his exams. I'd assumed he had contingencies and simply hadn't told me that he'd secured a spot at a college or two that were easy to get into, but it looked like he *really* hadn't gotten into anywhere. And that meant he wouldn't be getting in touch with his girlfriend, Yamana-san, anytime soon. I started to feel bad for talking to him about this subject.

"Besides, you've been dating for, what, over half a year? Maybe almost a full year? Either way, it's unbelievable to me that you still haven't had sex after all this time," Sekiya-san added, his tone now calmer. "Doesn't being with your girlfriend make you wanna bang? Even if you're not dating her just for sex."

"W-Well, it does, sure..."

"I get it, okay? I get that it ended up like this because there's something more important to you than sex. But I wouldn't understand something like that, so I can't give you any advice there."

As I sat there with nothing to say back to him, Sekiya-san looked at me with

sincerity. “Well, since you’ve managed to hold out this long, is there really a need to get impatient now?”

“Huh?”

“You wanna marry her, no? All married couples stop fucking eventually anyway.”

I blushed at the sudden appearance of that strong word.

Sekiya-san continued, looking unconcerned. “You should see my parents. They’re the fakest married couple around. Always have been and for as long as I can remember. Dad’s been cheating like there’s no tomorrow since forever and Mom gave up on him long ago. She doesn’t leave him since she apparently doesn’t want to abandon her status as the wife of a private clinician.”

The muscles in my face went stiff as Sekiya-san suddenly revealed his family’s circumstances.

He went on, not looking at me. “Just a few months ago, it came to light that Dad had his hands all over a receptionist and that girl lost her job. That guy’s such an idiot. His wife’s close with an old lady working in his office—*of course* she’d find out if he got himself a mistress at the clinic. He even did it with a nurse before.”

“I-I see...” I said, finally managing to say *something* in response.

This was quite the story. Between his and Runa’s family circumstances, perhaps married couples cheated on each other more often than I’d thought. My parents weren’t exactly all over each other, but as far as I knew, nothing like that had transpired between them in all the years they’d been together. It made my heart pound to have people close to me talk so normally about situations I’d expect to find in a soap opera.

“Ever since I was a kid, I respected my dad as a doctor...but I didn’t wanna be like him.”

When I saw Sekiya-san say that with a distant look in his eye, something occurred to me. When he’d gotten into high school and became popular with girls, he’d dumped Yamana-san for a strange reason: he hadn’t wanted to two-time her. If you were to ask me, it was just a “Just don’t, then?” kind of

situation...but perhaps his peculiar fastidiousness on the subject came from the way he felt toward his father.

"What were we talking about, again? Anyway, you're just talking about your wonderful love life like always. Go to hell," he said.

Despite his foul language, Sekiya-san had given me something resembling advice, so I figured he was a good person at heart.

I sighed. "Sorry," I said, trying to dispel the increasingly heavy mood.

Sekiya-san frowned at me. "You're not really sorry, are you?"

"I am, although I might do this again..."

"That means you're not sorry."

"Good to know."

"You messing with me?"

It was a little relieving to see him smile again. I couldn't help but wish for spring to come soon, along with the day that his smile would be directed at Yamana-san.

\*\*\*

But I couldn't afford to be wishing for others' happiness all the time.

During homeroom at the end of classes one day at the end of February, we were given career aspiration surveys.

"As you've been told before, your answers on these surveys will be used to assign you to a third-year class. Please take this seriously," said the teacher in charge of our class.

I could hear students around me reacting.

"Seriously...?"

"It's too early..."

I looked down at the survey on my desk. Under the "higher education" and "employment" areas, there were three spots for us to write down a prioritized list of the colleges or jobs we were aiming for.

*If I put “Houo University” there, would they believe I was being serious?*

As I sat there in nervous contemplation...

A sunny girl sitting in front of Runa turned around and said, “Hey, Runa, what’re your plans for the future?”

“Well... I haven’t decided yet...” Runa replied, appearing to be thinking it over.

We were walking our own paths, facing forward and aiming high, but it seemed like we were looking at a steep climb to become our ideal selves.

\*\*\*

On Sunday later that week, Runa and I were studying at McDonald’s near Station A. We were preparing for our final exams, which would be starting the next day.

I had my eyes mostly pointing at my notebook, but I stole glances at Runa across the table from me. She sat there and stared down at her textbook.

Sekiya-san had accused me of talking about my “wonderful love life,” and he’d been right—I didn’t see Runa having said that she couldn’t take it as something all that serious. I more saw it as her having seriously considered what it would be like to have sex with me and having gotten too embarrassed as a result. It was probably what had actually happened.

Still...

“Need help with anything?” I asked.

Runa glanced at me for a moment. “Huh?!” She then immediately averted her eyes and her cheeks grew flushed. “N-Not really... I’m okay... Okay, maybe not...”

“So you do?”

“B-But if I start asking for help, I’d need help with too much stuff...”

“Let’s go through things one by one, as long as they’re things I understand myself. Can you show me?”

“Oh, nah, it’s okay... C’mom, I’d feel bad to distract you from *your* studies!”

Runa said, flustered and red in the face. Her eyes wandered all over the place.

“But we’re studying together, so might as well. What do you need help with?” I asked.

I got up and sat next to Runa. As I did, our elbows lightly touched through our uniforms.

“Ahh!” Runa cried out.

She immediately pulled her arm away, along with the rest of her body. It was like she had been zapped by electricity. Runa then looked at me with a blush on her face. Her expression was as timid as that of a fawn, and her eyes looked slightly moist.

“That was so sudden... You should warn me first...”

“S-Sorry...” I said on impulse and moved a bit farther away.

It had been like this ever since that day when Runa had told me she “couldn’t take it” and ran away. If I tried to take her hand, she’d cry out cutely, get all bashful, and move away from me. Simply coming close to her was enough to make her restless and turn as red as a tomato. She didn’t look me in the eye much either.

If I thought of it as her seeing me as a member of the opposite sex more than before, it didn’t seem so bad. But honestly, I didn’t know what to do. It left me at a bit of a loss.

With things being the way they were, I couldn’t just invite her to my room to study together like we always had. So instead, we’d come here for the first time in a while.

As if to do something about the awkwardness of the situation, Runa reached out for an apple pie box on the table. She took the pie out and began to eat it—she’d previously left it unfinished because she’d apparently been full after the hamburger she’d had first.

“Apple pies are good...” she began after chewing for a bit. “But I like the cake your mom always serves us.”

“Ah, those from ‘Champs de Fleurs.’”

When Runa came over to study for tests, my mother would often buy sweets from a local patisserie for us.

“Our entire neighborhood probably serves cakes from that place when they have guests,” I replied. “The shop owner studied in France. He even brags about how he’s been on state TV before.”

“It’s pretty crazy, yeah. It’s that cake shop on the way to your place, right? The really fancy one.”

“That’s right. He said he’d go all out next time you came over...”

*Whoops.* This was almost like I was urging her to come to my place to study for exams.

As expected, Runa blushed and hung her head. We’d finally managed to have a nice conversation going, and I’d gone and ruined it. Sighing inwardly, I brought my eyes to the textbook.

Still... How long would this go on for?

*“Her ‘I can’t take it’ means ‘I’m embarrassed,’ right? So all you gotta do is either wait until she’s not feeling that way anymore or make it so it’s no longer embarrassing for her.”*

Sekiya-san’s advice kept running through my head. He’d said to make it so it’d no longer be embarrassing for her... I wished I could. I really did... But how?

Unlike the English grammar problem in the textbook in front of me, my kind of problem didn’t have a sample answer written anywhere. It made it all the more difficult for me to solve.

The mood got heavy and I looked up. It was a Sunday afternoon in late February, and as far as I could see, practically all the seats here were occupied. There were multiple people at each table and the counter was nearly full too—packed with students studying for finals and people using their laptops. If I strained my ears, I could hear what sounded like foreign pop music quietly playing in the background under the moderate noise of this place.

As I lowered my gaze a bit, Runa’s fair thighs, peeking out from under her skirt hem, entered my field of vision.

Looking back on it, when we'd come here to study for our end-of-term tests together right after we'd started dating, I'd been too nervous to actually study. The fact that I had been sitting here with my admired *Shirakawa-san* shoulder to shoulder, as boyfriend and girlfriend... That alone had been enough to make my heart pound. Her scent had jumbled my thoughts. I'd wanted to look at her gorgeous profile forever... My heart hadn't been able to calm down at all.

In retrospect, back then, I might've been acting similarly to how Runa was today. Losing my composure when she came close to me, blushing, acting all weird...

I'd wanted to get close to her but had been too nervous to do so.

Did that mean I needed to act the way Runa had acted back then? She'd always been cheerful and energetic with me. No matter how creepy I'd ended up looking when my nervousness had gotten to me, she hadn't minded it. Instead, she'd continued to proactively try to talk to me.

“Gotcha!”

Just like that, she'd given me my first kiss on that boat at that park. My head had been filled with thoughts of sharing physical intimacy with her. I must've been worried stiff, and she'd dissolved that nervousness.

Of course, kissing her *here* was out of the question. I wasn't such a free spirit.

Still, that was probably the key here.

I couldn't afford to be confused. I needed to keep trying to talk to her, in my own way.

After all, I'd actually wanted to get close to her back then too. But since I'd been too unused to girls and had too little confidence, I hadn't been able to act naturally as Runa's boyfriend.

I couldn't say for sure why Runa was the way she was now, but if shyness was the reason, then it probably wasn't because she didn't like me anymore. I must've been on the right track.

“Anyway, I'll help you with those problems,” I said, drawing closer to her again.

Runa put herself on guard for a moment. “Oh, i-it’s okay!”

“I *want* to, though. Is it this problem?” I asked, pointing at what she appeared to have been looking at.

Runa replied with a nod, her cheeks rosy.

“Okay, so in this one, you have to fill in the gaps...”

There was a line written in English:

( ) he ( ) ( ) failed the test, she ( ) ( ) ( ) happier.

A Japanese translation was nearby:

If he had not failed the test, she would have been happier.

“English has a word used when talking about conditions or possibilities. Do you know what goes in that first bracket?”

“Hmmm... ‘If’?”

“That’s right. So if you remember what we learned about the subjunctive mood...”

As I explained things, Runa’s expression clouded over and she deeply hung her head.

“Runa...?”

When I called out to her, she looked at me. “Oh... I’m listening. Go on.”

“O-Okay... So, we know that the ‘he’ in this sentence actually failed the test, right?”

“Yeah...”

“Now, this sentence suggests things that differ from what actually happened in the past, so you have to use the subjunctive past perfect...”

I stopped there because Runa was acting undeniably strange.

At that point, she looked up at me. “Ryuto?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you know if Sekiya-san managed to get accepted anywhere?”

“Huh?”

I was taken aback for a moment, not having expected her to ask such a thing.

“No... I still haven’t heard anything about that,” I said. I saw a worried look starting to appear on Runa’s face, so I hurriedly added, “B-But considering how much he studies every day, I’m sure he’ll get into *somewhere*.”

Runa’s expression brightened up. “Yeah, that’s gotta be it!”

“R-Right.”

“It’s just, when I saw this problem, I remembered Nicole and got all worried...” she said, sounding a bit downcast.

The sight of her filled me with emotion. “You’re considerate of your friends,” I said.

At that, Runa looked at me for a moment, but she averted her eyes right away. I kept looking at her, trying to get the conversation going again.

A few moments ago, I’d made up my mind. Even if she was embarrassed, I’d keep trying to talk to her.

“I really...like that...about you...” I managed to get out. While it might not have come out very smoothly, I’d tried to say it and that made me relieved.

I looked at Runa again and found her gazing at me with a red face. However, once our eyes met, she averted hers again, hung her head, and started to fidget.

My first thought was that this wasn’t going to work, but Runa’s cheeks stayed rosy and she kept glancing at me. She seemed less nervous compared to before, and there was happiness in her expression too.

“Um, Ryuto...” she began, shyly but happily.

“Hm?”

“You wanna go shopping after finals?” she asked.

It had been a while since Runa had spoken to me while actually looking me in the eye. I was so happy about it that I was about to agree without thinking, but I checked my mental calendar first.

“Okay...” I said. “You mean before our school trip?”

Once finals ended on Friday, we would have time off to recover from exams until Thursday the following week. Then, on that Friday, there would be an end-of-term ceremony and we’d get our finals results. After that, it would officially be spring break.

We second-years had a school trip that week, starting the Monday after the ceremony. I was prepared for it, but since this was what the people in charge had decided for us, I couldn’t help but think it was a waste of a spring break.

“Yeah,” replied Runa. “Right after finals are over. How about Sunday?”

“Right...”

I was about to accept, but before I could, Runa hurriedly added, “Also, Akari will be there too. Is that okay?”

“Huh? S-Sure...but why?” I asked. I found myself at a loss from an unexpected name popping up in our conversation.

“She asked me to go shopping with her first. Akari wants to be a stylist and is gunning for a technical school specializing in that stuff, but since she’s P-size, shopping is difficult for her. Apparently, she’s been feeling a little uncertain about what to do after graduating lately.”

“What’s P-size?”

“It’s the same as ‘petite.’ S-size is for slim people, but since those clothes are designed for people who are average height, S-size is too big for short girls.”

“I-I see...”

“Anyway, since I’m average height, she said she’d like me to try things on. She wants to feel the fun of putting together outfits with different pieces and

reaffirm her dream.”

“I get that, but then why not go as just the two of you?” I asked. “Sure, I guess I could carry things for you, but wouldn’t I just be in the way...?”

*...of their girl talk.*

In fact, I thought it would be kinda awkward to hang out as a group of three there with Tanikita-san.

As I thought that, Runa’s eyes started to dart around. I had no idea what this was all about.

However, she looked relieved and lowered her voice. “Um, actually... I wanted you to invite Ijichi-kun.”

“Icchi?” I was highly surprised by another unexpected name coming up. “You mean...like a double date? Did Tanikita-san suggest that?”

“There’s no way she would!” Runa said. “It’ll be a surprise for her. It’s just...he’s on her mind so much. But because she rejected him before, she can’t be honest and tell him how she feels, you know? I was thinking that if they got closer now, things might go nicely between them on the school trip.”

“Hmm...”

Would it really go so well? Even if Tanikita-san was feeling like that, Icchi only had KEN on his mind at the moment. The matter filled me with worry, but just as I’d told Runa a moment ago, I liked how considerate she was of her friends. If there was some way I could help, I wanted to.

“Okay. I’ll try inviting him.”

Runa’s face lit up even further at my reply. “Hooray!” Raising her hands a bit, she hopped toward the other end of the seat, away from me. “Thanks, Ryuto—Whoa!”

I heard something fall on the floor, but Runa picked it up in a hurry.

It was my backpack. Since this was a table for two, I’d put my belongings on the bench. It seemed like Runa had just knocked it onto the floor.

“Sorryyy... Oh, did this hole open just now?” she asked after she looked at my

backpack. She then showed me the bottom.

My backpack was made of cloth—canvas, specifically, which was a pretty durable material. However, textbook corners tended to rub against the bottom of the backpack, and eventually, it had ripped in one spot.

“Ah, no. That hole’s been there since around the start of the year,” I replied, scratching my head. “It’s the only bag I really have. I walked to cram school and back with several textbooks in it every day during winter break and the weight made it wear out. I *do* think I should buy a better one...”

For people with no interest in fashion like me, buying accessories was a total pain and really brought your mood down. I’d been putting off replacing my backpack since I could still use it, and this was where that had gotten me. It was embarrassing to have my girlfriend see that my backpack had a hole, and I worried that she might’ve been put off by it. Those two things left me unsure what to say.

“Huh...” Runa seemed to be in thought.

“Sorry. It’s lame, right?”

My humility was met with a light shake of her head. “No, not at all. It just shows how hard you’ve been working, having to carry so many study materials around, right?”

“Well, I guess...”

I couldn’t tell if I’d grown fully accustomed to it, but it was true that I was carrying heavy textbooks between my place and cram school all the time.

“I’d better follow your example, at least a little,” said Runa with a smile. She looked significantly more relaxed than before.

I didn’t know if my approach was bearing fruit, but either way, I figured we’d keep moving forward like this, no matter how slowly.

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Two days after our finals had come to an end, it was Sunday, and Icchi and I went to Shibuya.

Icchi frowned at the crowd at the ticket gates. “You really *have* changed,

Kasshi... Only normies go to Shibuya, you know. So, tell me, why do I have to walk alone with another guy through such crowded streets just to get some food?" he complained.

If I'd told Icchi up front that we were going shopping with Tanikita-san and Runa, he might've refused to come, and I hadn't wanted that to happen. So, I'd instead said that there was a cheap café with great food and asked if he wanted to have lunch together. Of course, he'd suggested that we invite Nisshi as well, but I'd told him that Nisshi had said he was broke and that we should go without him. To be on the safe side, I had actually told Nisshi what was going on to make sure he'd tell the same story if Icchi asked him.

"Yeah, well, what can I say...? Anyway, thanks for coming, Icchi. Sorry..."

He'd find out the truth shortly, but I apologized beforehand, just in case.

That aside...something had been bothering me way too much for a good while now.

"Say, what's with that getup...?" I asked.

When I'd met up with Icchi today, his absolutely crazy outfit had made me do a double take.

A shabby T-shirt. Pilled, gray track pants. Worn-out sneakers. Such a look just barely sufficed for a trip to the local convenience store.

I was rather ignorant of fashion too, but even I didn't have the courage to go to Shibuya in a tracksuit that I wore at home.

Icchi had always been far removed from the concept of fashion, but why of all things did he have to show up in such an extreme outfit to a double date with Tanikita-san—a highly fashionable girl who aspired to become a stylist? The sight of him even made *me* flinch, and I was a guy.

"Me? And what's with you?" Icchi asked. "Are you suddenly trying to be fashionable? This is a T-shirt I always wear, you know."

Icchi seemed a bit angry—maybe he was hungry.

Now that he had mentioned it, the black T-shirt he was wearing with its generic English line of "Do your best" and some strange character drawn on it

did look quite familiar. Still, I seemed to remember it being not as loose on him before...

Then, it hit me: the shirt probably looked so shabby because it didn't fit him anymore. Now that he'd lost an extreme amount of weight, his T-shirt—which was probably at least an XL—was far too big for him.

"Then...what about those pants? There's no way you should leave the house in those, right?"

"Well, with how much weight I suddenly lost, the only things that still fit are track pants. These have an elastic waistband, so I just tighten that and they won't fall off no matter how loose they are."

"Oh..."

That explained it. This was how things ended up if a guy had lost weight and changed his appearance but didn't care for said appearance.

"Still, Kasshi," he said.

"Hm?"

"Now that I'm skinny, it's a bit cold."

Sure enough, it was March right now. We'd been promised relatively warm weather, but almost nobody was walking around in just a T-shirt and nothing over it. The temperature was such that even I was wearing a denim jacket over my hoodie.

"Up until now, I would wear just a windbreaker over a T-shirt, even in the middle of winter. I don't even have anything with long sleeves to wear indoors."

"Then you should buy new clothes, man..."

Would Tanikita-san be disappointed if she saw him like this...? On the other hand, if this made her disillusioned with him and she fell out of love, maybe that would be a more peaceful outcome for both of them...

I was a little worried and all those thoughts kept popping up in my head, but I led us to the statue of Hachiko where we were supposed to meet up with Runa and Tanikita-san.

With it being the weekend, the area in front of the statue was teeming with people. It was almost lunchtime, so maybe a lot of the people here were meeting up with someone for a meal.

“Hey, Kasshi, where’s that café? Where are we going?”

“I-I’m a little lost...”

The weather was fine, but there was kind of a lot of clouds overhead. I was getting swallowed up by the huge waves of people moving due to the walk light, but I looked for Runa’s head in the crowd while avoiding Icchi’s suspicious gaze.

“Ah, there you are! Over here, Ryuto!”

Looking toward where Runa’s voice came from, I finally found her. Nimbly snaking through the crowd, she made her way over to me.

“I gotta say, Ijichi-kun, you stand out!” Runa said. “It’s convenient in these crowds! How tall are you again?”

Startled by Runa’s sudden appearance, Icchi, who was behind me, lost his cool as he tried to answer the question.

“Wh-When they measured me at the nurse’s office the other day, I was a hundred and eighty-two...”

“Wow, you’re still growing! That’s amazing! Maybe you’ll end up two meters tall!”

I couldn’t tell if Runa was joking or being serious, but either way, Icchi quickly went silent. He just couldn’t keep up with her.

“Nah, even guys don’t grow that much at our age. Right, Icchi?” I asked, doing my best to sound cheerful.

Icchi gave me a hell of a look. “K-Kasshi?! Why is Shirakawa-san here?!?” he asked quietly but pressingly.

“Well, that’s...” I began, looking at Runa while trying to find something to say.

“Are you trying to torture a loner like me by showing off how nicely you two get along?! If you wanna spend time with your girlfriend, why bring someone

else?!” Icchi was grinding his teeth and looked about to cry.

“W-Well, it wouldn’t have been just *two* of us here...”

Saying that, I glanced behind Runa. Icchi raised his head to follow my line of sight.

She was small and tended to get swallowed up in the crowd, so I hadn’t noticed her at first either. But there she was...Tanikita-san.

“Ahhhh!!!” Icchi exclaimed upon seeing her. His face looked like he’d just seen a ghost. The surprise left him speechless, and he could only keep opening and closing his mouth.

Meanwhile, Tanikita-san was flabbergasted too—from seeing just how extreme Icchi’s getup was.

“Sorry, Ijichi-kun. I wanted to go shopping with Akari and Ryuto. It would be pretty unbalanced if it was just the three of us, right? So I wanted you to come too... Like a surprise, I guess.”

I couldn’t tell if Runa’s words had registered with Icchi as he stood there with a pale face.

“We’ll all be on that school trip together, right? Things should get fun!”

Runa’s cheerful encouragement proved futile, however, and disappeared into the noise of Shibuya.

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Thus, everyone was here now, but I would’ve felt bad for Icchi if we’d gone shopping right away after I’d made it sound like we were going for lunch. We all went to an all-you-can-eat pizza place in Center Gai.

The brick patterns and red accent color of the interior made it look Italian, probably. We sat at a table for four by the window and silently ate the pizza slices each of us had taken from the counter.

According to Runa, this was a popular all-you-can-eat place with cheap and delicious food that was always crowded on Saturdays. Since it was still a bit early for lunch, I could see some empty tables.

Given that there were many groups of young people here, the place was filled with lively conversation. That made our group stand out a bit.

Runa and Tanikita-san sat on the bench placed against the window, and me and Icchi sat across from them.

Tanikita-san was focused on the slice in her hands. She occasionally sneaked glances at Icchi, at which point she'd blush and nibble on her food. It made her look like a small animal, which was cute.

I'd been worried about her reaction to Icchi's extreme getup, but it didn't look like it'd had any effect on her affections for him whatsoever.

Icchi, being Icchi, stiffly pulled in his chin and looked only at the pizza in front of him as he ate single-mindedly.

*Now what...? Where are things headed here?*

With that internal remark, I looked over to Runa and saw that she too had a stiff expression on her face as she ate her pizza.

When Runa went to the counter to get another slice, I got up with my plate too.

"Has Tanikita-san ever had a boyfriend?" I asked as we stood side by side, refilling our plates.

Runa tilted her head slightly. "Well, I dunno. She doesn't like talking about stuff like that. I've always assumed she wasn't interested in dating any of the guys in her vicinity."

Basically, she probably had no experience in that area. Neither did Icchi, of course, so we probably couldn't expect either of them to take the lead.

This was looking to be a hell of a day already... Our double date with Yamana-san and Sekiya-san had been a hundred times more fun in comparison. Well, setting aside what had happened between them at the end...

With thoughts like that in my head, I already felt like I wanted to escape reality.

We somehow got through lunch and finally set out to go shopping.

Runa and Tanikita-san weaved through the congested traffic without hesitation, disappearing into a building with a cylindrical shape towering high above us that had “109” written at the top—Shibuya’s symbolic fashion landmark. Even I was familiar with it.

Stepping inside, we were greeted with just the kind of resplendent view that I had imagined. It was lined with clothing brand stores for young women.

Glancing a bit behind me for no particular reason, I saw Icchi casting weird looks all over the place like he was some kind of pervert. I was nervous too, so I knew how he felt.

“You usually buy pretty-style gyaru stuff, Runy, so I wanted to try making outfits in different styles today,” Tanikita-san explained to Runa standing next to her.

I supposed it should’ve been expected that Tanikita-san would liven up as soon as she was back in her element.

“Let’s go to the fifth floor first! There’s some stuff I’m curious to try but I can’t really wear myself,” continued Tanikita-san.

With that, she led us to a store named “GYDA,” but I couldn’t tell you what that meant, of course. It was full of clothing in chic colors that gave off an “older girl from the city” kind of vibe. You’d be hard-pressed to find a place that would be more difficult for an introverted guy to go anywhere near.

“As long as it accentuates your curves, an outfit can make you look both healthy and sexy even if it covers a lot of skin,” Tanikita-san began, speaking fluently as she appraised different articles of clothing with great care. “This is a good choice for the bottom. So that means your top should be like this... This and this should be good too.”

“What, really?! I wonder if this’ll suit me...” Runa said.

“You’ll be fine! Go try it on!”

“Kay!”

Taking the clothes from Tanikita-san, Runa went into the dressing room after

getting permission from a staff member.

And, after a few restless minutes of waiting together with the still-uncomfortable Icchi...

“How do I look?” asked Runa.

She had stepped out wearing a style that was different from the gyaru outfits I was used to seeing her in.

A tight, short tank top resembling a sports bra. Full-length pants, like ones from a tracksuit. The lines going down the side of them stood out due to the brand logo appearing on them against a white background. Even if her pants were made out of the same absorbent fabric as the ones Icchi was wearing, they gave off an entirely different vibe. They were tight, like a wet suit, and clearly showed off the shape of her butt and thighs. It didn’t feel very erotic, however, even with her exposed belly and shoulders—it was probably because she also wore a checkered shirt that hung from her arms like an angel’s raiment. On top of all that, Runa wore a hat and sunglasses in a subtle shade. It was only natural that she gave off a different impression from usual.

“This is great! You look just like the kinda sporty girl I’d expect to find on the American West Coast!” Tanikita-san exclaimed, clapping her hands. Evidently, Runa’s outfit had turned out better than she’d imagined.

“Eh, is it okay? Did I get it right? I’ve never worn anything like this before,” Runa replied.

“It *really* suits you! Right, Kashima-kun?”

I nodded at the nervous-looking Runa. “Y-Yeah... It looks extremely fashionable.”

Her cheeks flushed at that. It felt like her eyes were a bit moist too as they peeked out from behind her sunglasses.

“R-Really...?”

*Wow, she’s being bashful... How adorable...*

Up until now, when I’d complimented Runa, she’d be more like, “Really? Thanks!” This reaction felt fresh and cute.

It was still rare for her to make eye contact with me, and she was acting distant, but I figured it wasn't all bad.

"A'ight, let's go somewhere else! Excuse me, we wanna see lots of stuff today, so we're gonna go for now!" Tanikita-san said to a staff member.

"Have a good day! We'll be waiting for you to come back!" came their cheerful reply.

This exchange shocked me—I'd assumed you had to buy the things you tried on.

"Let's go to LIZ LISA next!" said Tanikita-san.

"What, seriously?!" replied Runa, startled. "You realize that's not my style, right?! I've *never* worn any of that stuff before!"

Once we got to that store, I understood why she'd said that. The display cases were overflowing with frills and ribbons. The number of pink and monotone items here stood out.

"Doesn't this kinda stuff make you think of Mia? If it suits her, wouldn't it suit you too? Since you're twins?" Tanikita-san asked.

Now that she mentioned it, this style *did* seem to have something in common with what I'd seen Kurose-san wear several times when she hadn't been in her uniform. The clothes here gave off a slightly more showy and gyaru-like vibe, though, so if Runa wore them, it might be a truly exquisite sight.

"Ehh...? This is a first for me, you know. I wonder if it'll suit me..."

Looking nervous, Runa nonetheless took the things Tanikita-san had picked out for her and headed for the dressing room.

Several minutes later, Runa still hadn't come out. She was taking her time.

"How's it going, Runy?" Tanikita-san asked from outside the dressing room.

"Well..."

"What's wrong? It's the correct size, right?" With that, she narrowly opened the curtain and stuck her head in. "Oh hey, you *did* put it on! Come on out!"

"Eh, but..."

“C’mon!”

The curtain was pulled open and Runa appeared before us.

Her face was beet red. And as for her outfit itself...

She had on a flashy white blouse that was adorned with ribbons and frills on the collar and chest. Below it was a frilly pink miniskirt with suspenders. Something about it rang “gothic lolita” while also being similar to a maid outfit. Since I’d seen her in one at the photo sticker shop the other day, it didn’t feel all that strange.

“Isn’t it surprisingly good? Whatcha think, Kashima-kun?” Tanikita-san asked me.

Nodding my stiff head, I replied, “Y-Yeah, she’s cute.” My bashfulness was making me act a little weird. I also hadn’t wanted Icchi to hear me, so I’d said it in a barely audible voice.

Whichever way Runa took my reply, she looked ruffled. “I-It’s not weird?” she asked. “This kinda stuff would look better on a pure and proper girl, like Maria...”

“That’s not true! Hime gyaru was pioneered by hostesses, so it’s okay to have showy hair too,” Tanikita-san immediately retorted.

“Hmm, I see...”

Runa still didn’t sound confident. She sneaked peek after peek at me while averting her eyes right away.

Seeing her like that, I recalled the resolution I’d made the other day: I was going to proactively try to talk to her. It was going to be embarrassing in front of Tanikita-san and Icchi, but I had to try.

“You...” I began.

This really was embarrassing. Doing it was out of character for me to begin with, and I was in a place like this, with people around me to boot.

“You look...cute.”

It didn’t come out very smoothly, but I managed to say it louder than I’d done

earlier.

“Whaa...?!” Flustered and red as a tomato, Runa uneasily made her way back to the dressing room, taking extra steps to do so. “I-I’ll go change!” she exclaimed and closed the curtain.

And then...

“Kasshi... You’ve really changed,” Icchi said. “Never thought I’d see you say the kind of generic lines you’d expect from some cheap flirt...” He looked at me with reproach in his eyes.

Runa’s fashion show, as produced by Tanikita-san, continued after that. At the next store, she tried on another unusual getup: a top with large sleeves and a tight, high-waisted miniskirt made of synthetic leather.

“Here comes an adultlike gyaru wearing EMODA!” exclaimed Tanikita-san when she saw her outfit. Then, at the next store, she said, “A short top with puff sleeves and bootcut jeans—Y2K fashion! It’s like BLACKPINK, so it’s really cool, don’tcha think?!”

At this point, I could barely understand what she was saying anymore.

“B-Black pink...?”

I hadn’t heard her very well. Maybe it was another K-pop idol, as usual.

One thing I was sure of, however, was that despite how different all these outfits were from what Runa wore normally, they all suited her well. It surprised me. It went without saying that Tanikita-san’s sense of fashion had a lot to do with it, but I was once again astonished at just how good Runa’s figure was.

“You’re so lucky, Runy. Anything looks good on you,” Tanikita-san said as she watched Runa in the dressing room. It was as if she’d been thinking the same thing as me. “If I had a figure like yours, I’d probably be all over these stores and in their dressing rooms every day. Hey, you should become a model.”

“Eh, no way! Bubble tea turns my stomach to jelly.”

“Well, just put up with it! You could be a model!”

“Ehh, not a chance!”

Runa was being as cheerful as always as she talked to Tanikita-san. It frustrated me a bit to see her like that. Our hearts were supposed to be getting closer, no matter how slowly, and yet I felt a distance between us.

“Hold on, Akari, are we gonna keep doing this? And aren’t the guys getting tired?” said Runa. She suddenly looked our way and blinked several times.

I blinked repeatedly in reaction to it. “Nah, we’re just watching, after all...”

Then, I turned my eyes toward Icchi next to me and saw that he looked relieved. His eyes had been lifeless ever since we’d entered the building, and his happiness that things were finally coming to an end seemed to be plainly written on his face.

Tanikita-san took out her phone. “Wow, you’re right. We’ve been at this for two hours!” she said, eyes wide in surprise. “Thanks for keeping me company, everyone! Okay, I’m pretty satisfied, so let’s take a break for a bit. My treat!” She was visibly in a good mood.

“Before that, though...” Runa began timidly. “Mind if I go buy some stuff I tried on earlier once I change?”

“What, really?! There was something you liked?! I’m so happy! Which store was it?”

Runa blushed at that. “Um... Well... LIZ LISA...” Her voice trailed off completely.

“Seriously?! Didn’t see *that* coming! Runy, you’re gonna make your debut as a hime gyaru?!”

Since I didn’t remember any of the brand names, it was only at this point that I realized what store they were talking about. That outfit that had looked like a maid’s... It was certainly unexpected, considering she’d been more embarrassed about wearing that than anything else.

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Thus, with Runa carrying a shopping bag from LIZ LISA, we headed to a family restaurant located on the third floor of a nearby building.

While it was crowded inside, we got some drinks from the self-service drink area and took a breather. Sitting at a table by the window, we could see people walking around Dogenzaka down below.

“That was really fun,” said Tanikita-san, still in high spirits as she drank her hot chocolate. “The only problem with trying stuff on is that you can only match pieces from the same brand.”

“Yeah, true,” replied Runa.

“It must be nice to be a stylist... You get to borrow stuff from different brands...”

While Tanikita-san and Runa sat across the table from us and talked excitedly, I sneaked a peek at Icchi next to me. He was sipping his cola and looked just as bored as he had before.

If things went on like this, then why had we even brought him along? We needed to get him to talk to Tanikita-san at least a little...

I figured that it would be difficult for Icchi to join the conversation if I wasn’t part of it, so with that in mind, I timidly started to talk to her myself.

“Tanikita-san, do you have any other careers in mind besides being a stylist?” I asked.

“Hm? Yeah, well, there’s a bunch of things,” she said, replying to me without hesitation. “I’ve always wanted to be a stylist, but recently, I’ve been thinking that making clothes would be nice too.”

“Yeah, she’s real good at it!” said Runa. “The cultural festival outfits used by class D when we were freshmen—they were your work, right?”

Tanikita-san smiled with a hint of pride. “Well, I can do it as long as I have the patterns. I often make simple cosplay outfits for my geek friends too.”

“You can make those yourself?” I asked.

“Oh hey, I wanna see them!” added Runa.

Faced with our looks of respect, Tanikita-san smiled. “Really? Okay, I’ll bring something that’ll probably suit you some other time, so you’d better try it on.”

“You’re kidding! Man, that’s kinda exciting!”

While Runa was in high spirits, Tanikita-san looked a bit dejected. “Still, I don’t just want to be somebody who makes clothes by hand. I wanna be one of those people who make clothes in a broad sense. Like that’s their job title. A designer, a fashion director... Something like that.”

“Huh...”

Now that she had my and Runa’s attention, Tanikita-san got to the heart of the matter. “There are times when you walk into a store and just fall in love with some clothes at first sight, but those clothes won’t fit you. I wanna make it so those sad kinds of experiences won’t happen as often.” The look in her eyes was unusually serious as she spoke. “Most clothes for girls are only size S or M. It’s not uncommon that a brand will only make clothes in one size too. So for small girls like me, as well as bigger ones, it’s hard to buy trendy clothes.”

“Now that you mention it...” replied Runa. “I wonder why they don’t make clothes in more kinds of sizes?”

“Because it would raise their costs in many ways. Big companies like Uniqlo can expect even less common sizes to sell to some degree, so they can afford to make clothes in many different sizes. But that’s probably too much to ask of smaller brands.”

“Makes sense...”

Tanikita-san kinda appeared wise now. As I sat there, impressed, she lowered her gaze.

“I’m the smallest in our class. Say we had twenty girls in class—I’d still be a one-in-twenty minority among them. There are only so many clothes you can sell if you cater to people like me, so businesses write us off. That’s because if you make clothes for people of average height, you can sell them to ten out of those twenty people. About half of the population might buy your products.” As she spoke, it felt like her many years of suffering appeared on her face. “Even an S-size is too big for me. Because I’m into K-pop right now, I’ve been wearing shorts and miniskirts all the time, but it sucks how oversize and long items have been a part of Japanese mainstream fashion for the past ten years or so. I keep getting frustrated in dressing rooms. Like, ‘Oh, if this skirt was just three

centimeters shorter, it wouldn't drag behind me...' Because of the way many things are designed, you can't modify them yourself either."

"I see..." said Runa. It seemed like this was the first time Tanikita-san had explained this.

"B-But wait..." I said, desperate to reenter the conversation to give Icchi a chance to join it too, even if the mood wasn't really right for it anymore. "If you became a designer, wouldn't you end up having to make clothes for average-height people for business's sake?"

Tanikita-san raised her head. "Pretty much," she said in a clear voice. "So, if I have my own brand, I want to only target small people."

"Hey, that sounds good!" Runa replied happily, clapping her hands. "I'd guess there's a demand for it."

Tanikita-san nodded. "Yeah. There are some P-size brands already, but their presence in the clothing market is too limited. I have a hard time finding stuff in the right styles and designs that I want, so if I make clothes myself, that wouldn't be a problem anymore either," Tanikita-san said cheerfully before hanging her head a bit. "I like fashion, but the only mannequin I can dress up as I like is my P-sized self. So I was thinking that if I became a stylist, I could dress up beautiful women with good figures, coordinating outfits for them as long as I like until they come out perfect. But as a designer, I could make it so there's more clothing in the world that suits me. So that would be nice too."

"I see..." I replied.

"That's so cool! I'll support you no matter what you choose, Akari!" Runa added excitedly.

At that, a dreamy look appeared in Tanikita-san's eyes. "If I become a designer, I wanna make bags too! Bags are seriously great. It's one of the few fashion items that you can have that are exactly as the designer ideated, regardless of your figure."

"'Ideated'...?"

Tanikita-san had used a difficult word and I was having trouble keeping up, but she didn't wait for me and went on instead.

"You know how Western-style clothes, no matter how amazing their design might be, can look all wrong on you if you don't match the body type they're made for?"

"Yeah..." replied Runa.

I'd often heard people say they liked how some clothing looked on models or mannequins, but when they tried them on themselves, the clothes didn't suit them at all.

Tanikita-san went on. "That's not a problem with bags," she explained. "What more could a fashionista ask for than something that looks perfect because it's exactly as the designer envisioned?"

Seeing her like this, it occurred to me that regardless of whether you were an introvert or a gyaru, it was normal to end up talking quickly when you were speaking about your favorite things.

"And not just any bag, but a *designer* bag," she went on. "Hermès and Chanel are the obvious big names. Vuitton's OnTheGo has a godlike design too. But for myself, I'd want a Dior or a CELINE. After I graduate, I'm gonna save up some money from my part-time job and buy a Dior phone holder."

Her words made me recall how she'd previously told me that Runa might've had a sugar daddy after she had seen Runa with a brand-name bag she'd received from her grandmother. I realized now that she'd noticed the brand of someone else's bag because she had a great interest in them.

"Speaking of Dior, I haven't seen you carry yours around recently, Runy. Though I see you have a Gucci today."

"Oh, that one?" Runa said. "I gave it away to Maria. Figured it suited her style more." As she said that, she pulled out her phone, tapped on the screen, and showed it to Tanikita-san. "See? Isn't she cute?"

"Wow, seriously?! That's way too generous of you! I've seen similar ones go for over three hundred thousand yen, you know?!" exclaimed Tanikita-san, eyes wide open.

Runa smiled awkwardly and played with her hair. "Yeah, well, apparently my grandma bought it twenty years ago when she was abroad on a trip. At the

time, it was about a hundred thousand without tax, but when she took it to a pawnshop the other day, she was told that since that design was out of production and the bag itself wasn't in good condition, they would only give her five thousand for it. She was disappointed and gave it to me. I guess that's kinda what I did too."

"What?! That pawnbroker had *no idea* what he was looking at! There are fans of vintage stuff who like older designs! Why don't you put it on Mercari?! It might sell for what your grandma bought it for!"

"Nah, she's using it now."

"Oh, okay."

While I listened to their conversation, I was looking at Runa's phone as it sat on the table.

I could see a picture of Runa and Kurose-san close together while wearing casual clothes. It was probably a selfie of Runa's. She wasn't fully in the frame. She was smiling, and so was Kurose-san, who was leaning against Runa's arm. Anyone could tell by looking at them that they were very good friends.

Not even a month had passed since their reconciliation around Valentine's Day, but they were already starting to go back to being sisters. The thought of it warmed my heart.

"So, are you going to become a designer? Or a stylist? We're here today so you could make that choice, right?"

I looked up when I heard Runa ask that only to see Tanikita-san looking out the window with a difficult look on her face.

"Well..." she began.

It felt like the people walking around Shibuya at this hour on weekends somehow had a relaxed gait.

"Maybe I'll give it some more thought before deciding. It could be that there's no wrong option here... There are people who start their own brands after making a lot of money as stylists. For now, I'll put 'stylistics' as my first choice for higher education, and 'fashion design' second, I guess."

"I see. That's for the best." Runa's expression cleared up too once her friend had made up her mind.

Suddenly, a serious look appeared on Tanikita-san's face. "Still, there's one thing I did make sure of today." As Runa and I watched her, she looked back at me, then at Runa, before smiling. "Looks like I really do love fashion. I definitely wanna work in the field." Her eyes were burning and her voice trembled with the strength of her feelings. "Thanks for coming with me, Runy. Kashima-kun. And...Ijichi-kun," she said, looking at each of us in turn. When she looked at Icchi at the end, she did so with somewhat downcast eyes and a blush on her cheeks.

Icchi couldn't bring himself to look at Tanikita-san and made himself small as he fidgeted.

*This pair isn't getting anywhere, are they?*

Icchi still wasn't joining the conversation at all. If I didn't do something before the mood dictated we call it a day, bringing Icchi along would end up having been pointless.

"It's nice when you have something you can be so passionate about," I said, to make sure the conversation didn't end there.

"But Ryuto, you love gameplay videos, don't you?" asked Runa. "And Ijichi-kun, you build some amazing stuff. I watched some of it."

*Thanks for the assist, Runa.* In actuality, she might've only just now remembered today's secret objective.

Icchi continued to fidget. "Oh, uh, right..."

"You should check it out too, Akari. He's really amazing."

Tanikita-san was staring at one spot on the table, her lips pursed. Somehow, I got the feeling she'd actually already seen the footage long ago.

"I-I'm gonna go get some more to drink!" she said, getting up with her cup in hand.

"Ah, Akari! I'll go too!" said Runa, getting up as well with her glass of iced tea that still had a bit left at the bottom. She followed Akari in a hurry.

Being suddenly left alone with Icchi, I didn't know what to talk about. But he spoke up to me instead, and in an unexpectedly lively manner.

"Speaking of videos, some people who watch are asking to see my face. What do you think? Should I go for it?"

"Huh?"

While I did think it was like him to not say anything about our current situation and instead start talking about something like that, I couldn't really keep up with him. Was he excited because Runa had praised his building skills?

"W-Well... You should decide that on your own, I think," I replied.

"I know, but just be straight with me here. I'm not that ugly now that I've lost weight, right? Like, objectively, what do you think?" he asked.

"Y-Yeah... B-But I don't know about your clothes. It's pretty crazy to go shopping in Shibuya in a tracksuit you wear at home..."

"Well, I simply thought we were going to have lunch and that was all."

"S-Sure, I guess... But don't you think it's about time you bought something in a different size?"

"I don't know much about clothes, though. Like, where do I buy them and how do I match things? I don't even have the right clothes to go buy clothes in the first place," he said. "Hey, didn't you used to be like that too? Even if you've started looking a bit better recently."

"Well, that's thanks to Runa... I mean, Shirakawa-san..."

The fact that I'd called Runa by her name in front of Icchi had shaken me up, but my friend just sighed.

"You can stop that, you know. Don't you two call each other by your names when you're alone together? Why not do it in front of us too?" he asked.

"O-Okay..." Embarrassing as it was, I decided to do as he'd said. "I don't know anything about fashion either, but these days, Runa...looks at clothes for me too when we go shopping."

At that point, she and Tanikita-san returned from the self-service drink area.

“Oh yeah! Why don’t you have Tanikita-san pick out some clothes for you while we’re at it? She’s a future stylist, so she should be good at that, right?!”

As I immediately shared the brilliant idea that had suddenly appeared in my head aloud, Runa’s eyes began to sparkle.

“That’s right, Ijichi-kun! Whatcha think, Akari? What kinda clothes would suit him?”

“Whaaat?!” Tanikita-san replied, clearly confused by this development. She hadn’t sat down yet and was standing next to the table with a glass in hand. “Wh-Why do I have to choose clothes for him?!”

“Aren’t you—”

“What’re you talking about, Runy?!” Tanikita-san yelled, interrupting her. Perhaps she’d thought Runa was about to reveal her romantic interest to everyone.

“I haven’t the slightest bit of interest in Ijichi-kun!”

She’d shouted that so loudly that the people around us turned to look.

Runa and I, as well as Icchi, all stared at her without a word. Icchi looked confused—he must’ve been wondering why a girl who’d already rejected him once was saying such things now.

Tanikita-san went pale. Icchi’s reaction seemed to have brought her back to her senses. In the next moment, she went red in the face and proceeded to slurp down her melon soda in one go without even sitting down.

“That’s right! Zero interest!” she said. “None at all... But come with me for a minute!” Forcefully slamming her empty glass down on the table, she reached for Icchi’s chest and grabbed his T-shirt.

“Whoa!” he exclaimed.

Although she’d been the one to pull him toward herself, Tanikita-san was blushing at having his face so close to hers. She glared at him with as self-assured an expression as she could muster.

"I know a lot about men's fashion too!" she insisted. "Someone great like me wouldn't have the slightest bit of interest in you, but I'll make an exception and pick out some clothes! You better be grateful!"

Icchi was shaking, completely unable to speak. Our part of the restaurant was abuzz over the unnatural sight of a guy who stood over 180 cm tall freezing up as a girl more than thirty centimeters shorter than him maintained a tight grip on his shirt.

*What are we supposed to do about this development...?*

As I looked at Runa in confusion, she turned to look at me at the same time. Our eyes met.

"Aha... Aha ha... I wonder how things ended up like this," she said with a stiff smile on her face.

I figured I had the same expression on too.

And so, Tanikita-san headed to the register, dragging Icchi behind her. It took us a moment to get ready to leave, but we chased after them in a hurry.

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Tanikita-san pulled Icchi by the arm as she left the restaurant behind. She walked briskly, making her way back to the vicinity of 109. She then cut across Center Gai and headed to a white, three-story building with ZARA written on the outside. There was a line of fashionable mannequins in the store's windows. It was the kind of place you'd naturally expect many fashionable people to visit. What was a bit relieving for me, however, was the fact that this was the first time today that I'd been brought to a store of a clothing brand that even I recognized.

As we stepped inside, Tanikita-san checked the directory and got on the escalator. We followed her and found ourselves in a men's section on the third floor.

"Hmph!" Tanikita-san huffed, and she finally let go of Icchi's arm. Her face was still red as a tomato. "Why am I even...?!" she said as she went around checking the clothing displays. "Anything would look fine with how tall you are!" She quickly checked some tops that were hanging up and picked one of

them out. "I guess you can try this one!"

Then, she speedily moved to the corner with pants and once again, without any hesitation, picked out a pair.

"And those!"

She followed that up with some outerwear.

"I bet even this would suit you, because of course it would!"

The pile of clothes in Icchi's arms that Tanikita-san had chosen continued to grow.

"What're you standing around for?! Get in the dressing room already!"

Her shouts couldn't get Icchi to move, however. He just stood there, dumbfounded and motionless. She seemed to have overwhelmed him.

"Okay, Icchi, why don't you go try that stuff on?" I suggested, giving him a push on the back. "You don't get an opportunity like this every day. I'll keep you company and stand near the dressing room! It's not like you have what it takes to buy clothes at a place like this all by yourself, right?!"

"Y-Yeah, I guess you're right..."

Somehow, I had managed to get Icchi to agree to this. I walked slowly and led him to the dressing rooms.



“Is this right...?” said Icchi as he stepped out of the dressing room with unconcealed concern on his face.

I didn’t think he had anything to worry about, though.

He was clad in a long-sleeved shirt made out of jersey fabric with breast pockets as details. His fitted long pants clung to his legs. He wore a thin overcoat over it all that reached his knees. Even I, a layman when it came to fashion, could somehow tell that the rather loose top helped make his skin-tight pants look good.

“You look great, Icchi!”

Compared to his crazy getup from a few minutes ago, he was like a different person. This outfit made him look undeniably handsome, and it even got on my nerves a bit.

“I knew it would look good on you!” exclaimed Tanikita-san. “Just what I expected! I’m not even one bit surprised! A guy as tall as you can just toss on an overcoat and it looks just fine! What are you, a lamppost?! Man, it’s so boring how predictable this was! Try not to hit your head too much when going through doorways, yeah?!”

Tanikita-san’s breathing was rough as she had her outburst. It seemed like the fact that she’d done a better job making an outfit for Icchi than she’d thought had agitated her.

“No kidding! That’s a nice outfit, Ijichi-kun,” Runa added as she clapped her hands.

Seeing her do that made me feel a bit conflicted. I’d never thought I’d bear such an emotion toward Icchi.

“What, really? This is good? Are you serious, Kasshi?” Icchi asked.

“Y-Yeah. It suits you really well.”

My seal of approval finally caused a look of relief to appear on Icchi’s face.

“Okay... But man, clothes are expensive. I counted how much this would all cost while I put it on, and it was eighteen thousand yen.”

*That's a math guy for you.*

"I can lend you some money! How much are you short?"

Icchi lightly shook his head. "Well, my folks gave me twenty thousand to buy new clothes while I was in Shibuya, so I *can* afford it... It just feels like a waste to spend so much on these. I was planning to secretly buy games with that money."

"Y-You can't do that, Icchi! Your parents would be disappointed!"

It seemed that Icchi's mom and dad weren't happy with their son going out in such a getup either.

"It's not a waste either!" I continued. "You might decide to show your face as Cheerful Yusuke sometime, right?! Wouldn't Kids look up to you if they saw you dressed well?!"

I was getting unusually desperate, but I was eager to do at least *something* about my friend's clothing that made it embarrassing to walk with him. In addition, I wanted to bring him and Tanikita-san together, since he was totally overwhelmed by her going weirdly out of control. I figured that getting him to buy the clothes she'd picked for him was the only way to fix things.

"Well... I guess I'll buy them, if you insist..."

Whether my feelings had actually reached him or not, Icchi reluctantly agreed.

"Thank you!" said the clerk behind us as we left the store.

Having taken us up on our unanimous suggestion that Icchi change into his new clothes then and there, Icchi now looked completely different as he walked through Shibuya. The ZARA bag in his hand contained the crazy getup he'd had on until a short while ago. The bag must've been freaking out over the unexpected intruders.

"You really think this will make sure Kids don't make fun of me?" Icchi asked. His whole body made his restlessness clear.

"Yeah. You'll definitely be all right," I said. "On a serious note, though, you

should think calmly if you want to show your face or not. You know what kinda world we live in... People might start all kinds of rumors about you."

"Well, I know the risks. Some Kids keep telling me I really shouldn't show my face."

Icchi was known as "Cheerful Yusuke" on Twitter. That was apparently where Kids talked to him.

"But we're introverts, you know? And unlike you, I don't have a hot girlfriend. I've always lived a life away from people's eyes. But now that I've finally become an Active Kid and there are people who make a big deal about me... Am I really not allowed to get carried away, even a little bit?"

"Well, I get how you feel..."

Suddenly, Icchi poked me with his elbow. "Hey, check that out," he said.

He was pointing at a showy blonde gyaru across the street who was walking in our general direction. Of particular note was her outfit: her tight, knit minidress that almost showed her underwear lines was sexy enough, but the chest area was open in a semicylindrical shape that showed off her cleavage.

You'd expect pretty much any guy to do a double take at the sight of such a stimulating outfit. The same went for me, of course, even if I didn't move my head to do so. I was glad Runa was walking in front of me.

After turning to stare at the gyaru with her cleavage out as she walked away from us, Icchi sighed as if his eyes had had their fill.

"I hope I get to do an older girl like that—someone who probably has a lot of experience. Even if I never got to have sex again afterward."

He hadn't said that all that loudly, but it was enough to reach Tanikita-san and Runa as they walked in front of us. The former turned around in apparent reaction to what he'd said.

Tanikita's face was seething with anger. "Ew, creep! This is why virgins are unbearable! How disgusting can you be?! Can you just stop breathing already?! And get buried too! Fly through Brazil on your way to the moon!"

*Seriously?! Was that really called for?!*

“Akariiii!!!” Runa yelled, smiling as tears welled up in her eyes. She couldn’t play mediator between the two anymore.

Since I was aware of Tanikita-san’s crush on Icchi, I knew she’d only said this out of jealousy. Icchi, however, was utterly bewildered. He’d taken it as one hundred percent pure trash talk.

“S-So what...? Virgins can’t even have dreams now? It’s a virgin’s dream to have a beautiful, experienced girl take the lead...” Icchi grumbled in a quiet voice after Tanikita-san turned to face forward again. “And why’s she just assuming I’m a virgin, anyway? I may be an introvert, but it’s not okay to look down on people so much.”

“Oh...”

*I’m sorry, Icchi, this one’s on me!* When Tanikita-san had fallen in love at first sight with Icchi Ver. 2.0 despite wanting a nonvirgin for a boyfriend, I’d told her that Icchi was a virgin.

“W-Well, you were in that crazy...I mean, that *sustainable* getup, and that must’ve been why she assumed you’re unpopular!” I said.

“‘Sustainable.’ Yeah, right. I heard you say ‘crazy.’”

“B-But you’re okay wearing what you are now! You look so cool that nobody would think you’re a virgin!”

“Really...?”

Icchi looked pleased all of a sudden.

“That’s right! C’mon, it’s the weekend, let’s only think about fun things!”

“Well, I guess you’re right,” Icchi replied in a clear voice.

It sounded like he’d already moved on from what had just happened. That was something I quite liked about him.

But...that was precisely why I could tell he was still deeply hurt by Tanikita-san having shot him down. It had made him avoid school for most of a month and lose a lot of weight.

He sighed. “Man, that gyaru was so sexy...” It seemed he’d decided to only

think about fun things now and his voice was much quieter than before. “Sexy gyaru are great... I thought the demon gyaru was like that too. Who could’ve thought she was actually so pure and devoted? It’s a bit of a letdown. I wanted her to toy with us.”

“W-Well, even that gyaru we just saw might be pure on the inside...”

As I gave my needlessly serious reply, I noticed that a brooding look had come over Icchi’s face at some point.

“When I said that to Nisshi the other day, he got angry and told me not to talk about Yamana-san that way.”

I could imagine getting upset if someone talked like that about a girl you liked. I’d be uncomfortable with hearing something like that about Runa too.

“Hey, Kasshi,” Icchi suddenly began, looking at me with a serious face. I couldn’t tell what he had on his mind. “Does Nisshi have a crush on the demon gyaru?”

Caught off guard by him hitting the nail on the head, I couldn’t keep my eyes from wandering. “I-I don’t know... Why don’t you ask him?”

“I don’t want to. I’m afraid he’ll get angry again.” Icchi turned to face forward. “Everyone’s scary...when it comes to love talk.”

“That’s just how serious everyone is about love.”

“It must be nice when you can be serious about it.”

His offhand manner of saying that made me nervous. “C-C’mom... Weren’t you serious about Tanikita-san too? You even confessed to her...”

“Don’t bring that up... I’d rather forget that ever happened...” Icchi gave me a weary look and then cast his eyes downward. “KEN’s enough for me for now.”

It seemed safe to say that for the time being, Runa’s plan to bring Tanikita-san and Icchi together had ended in complete failure.

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“Haah... That didn’t go well at all,” Runa said as she drooped her shoulders. We were riding the train home after having parted with Tanikita-san and Icchi.

“I wonder why Akari’s gotta be like that? He’s totally gonna hate her.”

“Well... Maybe the timing’s just bad,” I replied. “You know how timing can be important when it comes to love.”

I might not have understood that concept back in the day.

My first-ever confession had ended in failure. And when I’d met her again four years later, Kurose-san had fallen in love with me, but that time, it’d been my turn to reject her.

People’s feelings and situations would change all the time.

The fact was probably that only those who fell in love with someone who was currently interested in them could have a happy relationship.

The scar that Tanikita-san had left on Icchi when she’d rejected him had yet to heal. She was surely aware of it too, and her guilt prevented her from being honest. Such was my conclusion after watching those two today.

“Gotta say, though, Tanikita-san sure loves fashion. I hope she can become a stylist or a designer for real,” I said, changing the topic to distract Runa from her lingering dejection.

“Ah, yeah. I guess we have to fill out those career aspiration surveys soon...”

I’d managed to take her mind off that one thing, but Runa’s expression was still clouded over.

“By the way, what’s Ijichi-kun gonna do after we graduate?” she asked.

“He’s going to college. He said he wants to be an architect, so he’s looking into colleges with appropriate majors.”

Even KEN surely wouldn’t expect Icchi to connect his in-game interests to a real-world profession.

“I see. And you’re going to Houo, right? I guess everyone’s decided already...” she said. “Wow, you guys...”

Yamana-san wanted to go to a nail tech school, and Kurose-san would go to college to become an editor. It was certainly true that the people around Runa were steadily deciding on their futures.

“What about becoming a model? Like Tanikita-san suggested,” I said jokingly, trying to stop the mood from growing too heavy.

“Well...” Runa began, but without her usual energy, “I’ve never given clothes shopping much thought like how Akari does.” Leaning on the handrail next to the door, she gazed out the window of the train.

It was gradually starting to get dark as the sun began to set.

“I’ll see some cute clothes on Instagram and go buy them. Or if a store clerk recommends something cute to me, I’ll try it on and buy it just like that... That’s how it always goes.”

“Isn’t that because anything looks good on you? I think you have what it takes to become a model,” I said.

While she was of average height, she had long arms and legs. Her proportions were well-balanced. And, of course, she was cute.

“Well... I’d be happy if that was the case. But it’s a fact that I just don’t think about it.” With an anxious expression appearing on her face, Runa looked at me for a moment. “Maybe I’m kinda cute and have a good figure—so what? All models are like that. Even I can’t imagine that a carefree girl who doesn’t think about anything and doesn’t put any effort into making herself look her best would succeed so easily in modeling.”

Hearing that, I realized that Runa had put more thought into becoming a model than I’d expected. It was proof that she was starting to seriously contemplate her future as best she could.

“In that case, if you *did* become a model, you could just resolve to work hard from that point on. You could figure out what you’d need to succeed and do your best...”

“Yeah, I guess... Successful people are probably all like that,” replied Runa, hanging her head. She then lifted it a bit. “I think the problem is that I don’t *feel* like working hard. At least not when it comes to being a model or being in showbiz...”

The sound of the train jostling around drowned out Runa’s voice here and there, which made me realize just how quietly she had been speaking.

Looking away from the window, Runa lowered her gaze to the spot in front of her feet. “When I was six, we had to write our dreams for the future to go into our yearbook. I put down ‘wife.’”

I listened in silence, imagining how Runa had looked at the age of six.

“I was the only one in my class who put that. Our teacher didn’t seem to like it much and asked if I was really okay with it. She said that I could become an astronaut or a baker or something else *and* a wife. She was normally very kind, like an older sister, but in that moment? She was kinda scary... I didn’t know why she was saying such things to me, so I cried. I didn’t want to be an astronaut or a baker—I just wanted to be a wife.”



She spoke haltingly, and once she was done, a small smile appeared on her face. It seemed to be the self-deprecating kind.

“Maybe you’re not allowed to dream about becoming a wife in this day and age. Still...it was the best thing for me.”

I could tell she was feeling somewhat melancholic.

“It might take me some time to find a new dream,” Runa went on. “But I’m giving it as much thought as I can, trying to get started on the whole thing. You’re working so hard, and I wanna be a girl who’s suitable for you.”

She blushed as she kept her eyes pointed downward. She looked so cute that a smile appeared on my face all on its own.

“You already are...” I began, but I stopped myself out of awkwardness.

“Hm?”

“I mean... Even the way you are now...you’re already too good...for me.”

As I managed to lay out my true feelings, Runa blushed even further, still looking down.

“I dunno about that...” she said.

“Sekiya-san told me something,” I began. “He said I should do *something* first, and if that doesn’t work for me, to look for a different path. It was really relieving to hear that I didn’t need to look for my dream job from the start.”

Runa’s eyes lit up at my words and she lifted her head. “Sounds like good advice. Smart people say some good stuff, huh.”

I could tell that she was genuinely impressed, which made me a bit jealous. For a moment, I even regretted mentioning that advice had come from Sekiya-san and thought that I should’ve taken the credit for it myself, as dishonest as that would’ve been.

It felt like I was getting a bit more jealous on the whole recently. While the subject of Runa’s ex-boyfriends hadn’t sat well with me even in the past, I felt like I hadn’t gotten jealous about things like this back then.

The only reason I could think of as to why was, of course, our lack of physical

intimacy recently. Even today, we hadn't held hands once. And sure, it had been impossible to do so in front of Icchi and Tanikita-san, but now that we were alone together... But even though I had such thoughts, I still couldn't find an excuse to make it happen.

As I walked Runa home from Station A, I could only think about how I wanted to hold hands with her.

It was like that time we'd gone on a date to Ueno Park. Back then, I'd managed to take advantage of Runa getting off the boat to take her hand. But I was different now. Runa and I had held hands dozens of times, and I should've been able to do it more naturally... More smoothly.

The quiet neighborhood filled with many wooden houses was already completely dark. Taking advantage of the weather getting colder, I suddenly drew close to Runa and touched her hand, trying to take it in mine.

At which point...

"Ahh!" she yelped, jerking away from me. "That surprised me..."

Even in the dark, I could tell how flushed her face was.

Admittedly, I was losing confidence here. Sure, I knew she didn't hate me, but it still hurt a fair bit to get rejected.

Runa and I stopped walking and faced each other, standing on the side of the road between streetlights. There were barely any people around and there were just some homes nearby.

"Did I do something?" I asked. "Something that's making you avoid me...?"

"Huh? I'm not avoiding... Ah!" It seemed like what Runa had just done had suddenly occurred to her. "That was, uhh... It was kinda embarrassing..." Her cheeks grew even redder. "I love you too much... I can't even look you in the eye these days... My heart pounds so much I feel like I could die."

Her words pierced through my heart. But happy as I was to hear them...

"Um, does this...have anything to do with me telling you that I think about you in a dirty way?" I asked.

Runa nodded without a word, her face still red. “It’s like, ever since then, when I’m with you, I end up thinking about it... It’s so embarrassing.”

*So that really was it.*

“I used to think you didn’t really get horny... At first, I even thought you had ED. I never could’ve thought you’ve done that f-five hundred times to me...”

“Forget about that number! It’s completely off!”

“It’s less?” she asked.

“It might be...”

“Or it might be more?!”

Given the way Runa had reacted, even I was getting flustered. “I mean, I don’t know! I really didn’t count it!”

“So... You’ve done it *countless* times?!”

“Well, uh...”

*Sort of...*

“What can I say...? I’m sorry for being so horny...”

Runa fidgeted. “Y-You don’t need to apologize... I’m happy about it, anyway... It’s just... It’s embarrassing...”

“And that’s why you won’t hold hands with me?”

“Yeah... I mean...” Runa was still moving about restlessly. “You do it with that hand, don’t you...?”

“What?! Whaaat?!“ I involuntarily hid both my hands behind my back.

“Then... Do you want to hold my left hand instead?”

“Huh...? Does that mean y-you do it with your right?” she asked.

“What?! Y-Yeah... I’m right-handed, so...”

*WHAT IS THIS CONVERSATION?! This keeps getting more and more awkward —so awkward I could die!*

“Gosh, it’s embarrassing... I dunno which part of you I should look at, Ryuto...”

My words seemed to have had the opposite effect—Runa was blushing even more. Holding hands with her seemed out of the question now.

After standing there frozen with embarrassment and regret for a while, I took a deep breath and tried to regain my composure.

This wasn't a main road, so while people occasionally came from the direction of the station and passed through here, it was quiet around us. The scent of miso soup wafting from beyond the cinder block wall made me feel somewhat nostalgic.

I managed to calm myself down just a bit.

"So, um... Do you think you'll feel less awkward with time?" I asked.

Runa nodded timidly. "P-Probably... I feel like it won't be a problem eventually if I spend more time with you."

"In that case... Let's see each other more often," I said, still flustered myself.

Things were progressing frustratingly slowly, and I wanted to do something about it.

"Um... How about tomorrow?" I suggested. "Do you have any plans...?"

We were on our postexam break and didn't have school again until Friday, so unless she'd already made plans with friends or something, she should've been free.

"Ahh..." Runa looked awkward, however. "I don't think tomorrow will work, sorry..."

"Oh, okay. Plans with Yamana-san?"

"Huh? No..."

"A beauty salon?"

"Nope."

I had mentioned the types of things she was likely to be up to, but she had shaken her head both times.

"Okay. Then what about Tuesday?" I suggested.

“Umm... I have stuff to do on Tuesday too...”

“Oh, huh. Then...Wednesday...?”

“That won’t work either...”

“I-I see... Are you up to the same things every day...?”

“Y-Yeah...”

Runa didn’t say anything more, so I couldn’t tell what her plans actually were. Asking her any further would just make me sound like some kind of possessive guy trying to take control of everything my girlfriend did, so while I was a bit curious, my only choice was to give up.

“Well, what about Thursday?”

“Sorry...”

“I guess Friday wouldn’t be an option, since we have school... And I have cram school on Saturday... What about Sunday?”

I figured I’d ask just in case, and at that point, Runa looked like something had just occurred to her.

“Oh, Sunday would work,” she said. “After 3 p.m.”

“What, really? Then let’s hang out then.” I got happy all of a sudden, which showed in my voice. “Wait, that’s White Day. Is there anywhere you wanna go?”

The thought that Runa might’ve left half the day open precisely because it was White Day made me love her even more.

She seemed to think it over for a bit. “Hmm... The movies, maybe?”

“The movie theater?” I asked, surprised by her reply.

After all... When we’d just started dating and she’d asked me where I wanted to go on our first date...

*“Since it’s our first d-date...maybe we could watch a movie...?”*

*“Hmm? You sure that’s what you want? Is there a movie you wanna see or something? Are you into movies?”*

That'd been the exchange we'd had.

Runa didn't seem to have much interest in movies. She'd previously told me that when she wanted to watch something, she would just use her father's streaming subscriptions.

And now, she was suggesting we go to a movie theater.

"Is there a movie you want to watch?"

It was a natural question, but Runa looked taken aback, however.

"Well... What's even playing these days? I'll look it up later..." she said.

*Well so much for that!*—came the comically exaggerated retort in my head.

Still, I was genuinely happy about going on a date with Runa. I wasn't against going to see a movie either. After talking through some basic things like where we'd meet, we decided to call it a day.

"Bye, Ryuto."

At first, Runa waved at me from her porch, but then looked like she'd come up with something. In the next moment, she ran back and stopped right in front of me as I stood outside her gate.

"Runa...?"

I wondered what this was about, and she held out her arms...and gently embraced me.

It was a timid hug, as if she was trying not to cling to me too much. It was like she was humbly putting her arms around a sacred tree.

"Sorry about earlier..." she said.

I could tell by her flushed face just how much courage this required of her.

Runa's voice was nearly trembling. "I love you, trust me... I just need some time."

Right after she said those words, something glistening spilled from her eyes.

"Wh-What's wrong?!" I asked, not understanding the meaning behind her tears. I backed away from her in surprise.

Runa looked taken aback too as she kept her eyes on me.

“I dunno...” Wiping her tears with her fingers, she tilted her head. “When I said ‘I love you,’ tears came out on their own... Ah, it’s happening again...” Continuing to wipe her eyes, Runa smiled a bit. “It’s like in those love songs. I guess they weren’t lying... Never thought I’d cry just from saying ‘I love you’...”

Sniffling, Runa smiled again. The edges of her eyes were slightly red, making them look sexy. Even in the orange-tinged glow from the lights outside her house, she was stunningly beautiful.

With a feeling of satisfaction, I waved at her. I either had to do that or give in to my desire to reach out and embrace her.

“I’m looking forward to Sunday,” I said with a smile.

Runa gazed fondly at me, her eyes glistening. “Me too...”

*Ah, I love her so much. Even before this moment, I’ve loved her as much as it is possible for me to love someone—but it looks like there’s actually still room for my feelings to grow.*

Looking up, the cloudy sky above was covered with a white haze. The moon wasn’t out tonight.

Despite that...

“The moon sure is beautiful, isn’t it?” I said.

“Huh? Where?” Runa looked up in confusion. “I don’t get it.”

“Right here,” I replied, pointing at her.

“Oh.” Her lips turned up into a smile. “You mean...me? I didn’t take you for the type to say things like that...” Runa blushed and smiled bashfully at me.

“Well, I’ll be going, then,” I said.

“Okay. Good night. Be careful on your way home.”

We lightly waved at each other and I began to walk into the night. My path might have been illuminated by streetlights instead of the moonlight, but my heart felt as full as the full moon.

## Chapter 1.5: A Long Phone Call Between Runa and Nicole

“Haah...”

“Hey, what’s with the sighing? You spam me with messages, I call you as soon as my shift is up, and now all you can do is sigh?”

“Man... Nicole...”

“What?!”

“I’ve just got so much on my mind.”

“Go on.”

“You know how I said I’ve been acting weird when I’m with Ryuto these days?”

“Oh? Remind me—weird how?”

“Like, my heart pounds like crazy, I can’t look him in the eye... I can’t even hold hands with him...”

“Yeah, you’re in love, all right. So?”

“Weren’t you like that too when your love for Sekiya-san was one-sided?! How were you able to hold hands with him so normally after that?!”

“Huh...?”

“Tell me, because I’m *seriously* in a pinch! I’m hurting Ryuto with the way things are now.”

“...”

“Please! You gotta help me, Nicole-sama!”

“Pfft!”

“Wh-What? Did you just laugh? I’m being super serious here!”

"Heh heh, it's just, you're talking like a middle schooler right now. Your level of experience and your romantic skills don't match up."

"Yeah, well..."

"Then again, it *is* your first time being in love. I get it."

"Then...?"

"To be serious with you for a moment, it *is* awkward, at first. Why don't you try putting up with it and touching him anyway? You'll go from 'nervous' to 'horny' before you know it."

"Huh?!"

"You're gonna want to have sex. Just from holding hands."

"Whaaat?! S-Seriously?!"

"Uh-huh. So do your best."

"...I don't think I can."

"Why not?"

"Because then we'd probably end up having sex!"

"Huh? You don't wanna?"

"No, it's just... I've never told you, but...I'm probably a cold fish."

"Huh? A cold...? Wait, are you saying what I think you're saying?"

"Yeah... Nowadays, I think that might be why my exes got bored and left me for other girls."

"How'd you end up a cold fish with how much you've done it?"

"Well, I didn't feel like having sex, so my boyfriends were more into it than I was."

"I guess you wouldn't be very interested in sex, yeah. You haven't masturbated either, right?"

"Nope... But recently..."

"You have been?"

“Sometimes, I feel like doing it...when I think about Ryuto.”

“Well, won’t things work out, then? If you feel like having sex, it doesn’t have to be like it was before.”

“Ehh... But, like...”

“What?”

“Ryuto probably thinks I’m really good at it. He’s probably got high expectations since I’ve done it with so many guys. Even Ijichi-kun said that virgins want an experienced girl to take the lead, though Akari gave him hell for it.”

“Ah, yeah. She’s never done it herself.”

“Oh really? That’s what I thought, but...”

“Of course she hasn’t. I can tell when I see someone like myself. Her eyes keep wandering all over the place whenever Yuna talks about her boyfriend.”

“Huh, I see. I’ll keep an eye out for it next time.”

“So, what were we talking about again?”

“Anyway, it’d be Ryuto’s first time, so maybe he’d want me to take the lead... He’s *totally* gonna be disappointed in me if things keep heading in this direction!”

“Haah...”

“What do you think I should do, Nicole?!”

“With how much experience I have, are you really asking *me*?!”

“But you know so many things! Is there anything at all you can tell me?!”

“...When I was in middle school, a friend said she practiced with a bottle of Oronamin C in her mouth.”

“Whaaat?! What does that mean?!”

“I told you I’m still on the outside! Don’t make me say any more!”

“Well, whatever, I get it! So you think that would help me stop being a cold fish?! I can be a hot fish?! Really?!”

“How would I know?! Don’t ask me!”

“C’mon, don’t be like that...”

“Anyway...do you really need to think so hard about it? Even cold fish is delicious, you know.”

“Only if we’re talking real fish! I don’t have that kind of confidence in myself!”

“Well, from what I heard from Nishina Ren...”

“Huh?”

“Apparently, Kashima Ryuto’s been a fan of this YouTuber guy since middle school. KEN, was it? He plays some games or whatever.”

“Ah, yeah. I think I’ve heard about that.”

“Isn’t that amazing? He’s held the same interest for two, even three years now. Were any of your exes like that?”

“Hmm... I think there were some who stayed in their clubs for a long time.”

“Clubs are different since there’s peer pressure. If someone holds a simple interest in something for years on end without anyone forcing them into it, I think it’s safe to say that person is patient.”

“Yeah, maybe...”

“So even if you’re a bit of a cold fish, I don’t think it’d make him lose interest in you.”

“I think so too, but, like, I don’t wanna disappoint him even a little bit...”

“He won’t be disappointed. Trust me.”

“Come to think of it, you’ve been into nails for a long time too. Since middle school, yeah?”

“Uh-huh. And you know how persistent I am in loving the same one guy all these years. Even though Nishina Ren keeps nagging me about it, being all like, ‘What’s so good about a guy you’ve barely seen at all since you started dating?’”

“I see... Heh heh.”

“Hm? What?”

“Nothing. I was just thinking you’ve been mentioning Nishina-kun a lot these days.”

“So what?”

“Nothing... Just thought you’re getting along well.”

“He’s a friend. I have senpai already. His exams are almost over.”

“It’s pretty rare for you to become friends with a guy, though, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, well, the overwhelming majority of my male friends were always after you until recently. They’d wanna be friends with me so they could get closer to you.”

“Huh? Really?”

“Really. It’s a relief they’ve stopped approaching me now. There was never a need for me to become friends with those guys in the first place, so they won’t be missed.”

“That sounds like you.”

“Ren...actually looks at me.”

“Eh? Wait, Nicole, do you call Nishina-kun by his given name?!”

“Huh? There’s nothing special about it, you know. Full names are long, you know? I called Shuya and Kaisei by their given names too. But since they were after you, I haven’t heard anything from them in a long time.”

“So I guess Nishina-kun is your only male friend now.”

“Aren’t things basically the same for you too? Those LINE groups we’re in with guys in them are all dead these days.”

“They all stopped calling or messaging me around the start of summer break, I guess. I’m okay with it since I have Ryuto, but it’s a bit sad to think that I was the only one who thought we were friends.”

“Yeah, well, that’s just how guys are. Why would they bother with a girl they can’t date or have sex with?”

“Hmm? But then what about Nishina-kun?”

“What do you mean?”

“He messages you because he’s interested in you, right? Is he really just a friend?”

“...”

“And now you’re going silent.”

“...Maybe I *want* to think of him as a friend. It’s unfair, I know.”

“Nicole...”

“Kashima Ryuto decided to quit being friends with your sister, yeah? That’s pretty amazing. I can’t do something like that, though. The way things are now, I can’t be *that* faithful to senpai.”

“I don’t think there’s anything wrong with that. Sorry, that was mean of me... It would be way too rough on you if you were left without any male friends now. Things are already hard enough.”

“...It won’t be long now. Senpai said he’ll have his exam results in the middle of March. I feel bad for Ren, but once senpai’s exams are over, I won’t have time for anyone besides my boyfriend.”

“Totally... I hope that time comes soon. Poor Nishina-kun, though.”

“Eh, he’ll be fine. He’s a good guy, so he’ll find someone new right away.”

“Yeah. Then we’ll all be happy, I guess!”

As she forced those words out in a cheerful way, Runa’s eyes wandered to her desk. When she spotted the English grammar textbook on top of a pile of textbooks, her expression slightly clouded over. She shook her head as if to chase unpleasant thoughts away.

## Chapter 2

“You’re drinking Oronamin C? I didn’t know you were into energy drinks.”

On Friday, the day of our end-of-term ceremony, I spotted a familiar brown bottle on Runa’s desk and asked her about it. The ceremony had already ended and we were hanging out in the noisy classroom.

“Huh?! Wh-What do you mean?”

For some reason, Runa was flustered. It seemed like her awkwardness when it came to me was still ongoing...

“W-Well, you know, we’re getting our exam results back and all. I figured I’d get fired up for it,” she said.

And with that, she took the bottle and downed what little was left of its contents.

“I don’t think there’s a lot of people who fire themselves up for getting test results,” I said with a smile. “I’d understand if it was for the exams themselves, though.”

Runa turned red in embarrassment. “R-Really? I’m totally hyped to get our results, though!”

I then spotted two extroverted girls who looked like they wanted to talk to Runa, so I decided to head back to my desk.

“How about we go home together later?” I asked before leaving—just in case.

Runa looked to be at a loss. “Umm, sorry...”

*Figures. Oh well, we’ll see each other on Sunday, so I’ll have to be satisfied with that.*

“Okay,” I replied. “Let me take care of that for you at least.”

As I reached out toward her, Runa looked confused. “Huh?”

“The bottle. You’re done with it, right? I’ll throw it out on my way.”

“Oh, uh... Y-You can’t!” Runa then quickly clutched the empty bottle of Oronamin C to her chest like it was something precious.

“Huh?”

“I-I need to take it home...”

“An empty bottle? Are you going to use it for something?”

“Use’?!”

Runa turned completely red in an instant.

Figuring that she was just embarrassed for some reason that someone found out she had planned to reuse an empty bottle, I searched for what to say here.

“Ah, I’m guessing you want to put a flower in it like a vase? That’s nice. I’ve seen that kind of thing at my grandma’s place, making it seem less lived-in and like people don’t actually live there. Taking the label off makes it seem new and unused.”

At that, Runa calmed down somewhat. “Y-Yeah... That’s right. Okay, I’ll go wash it out!”

That certainly was a good idea if she wanted to take it home. It would make sure her bag didn’t get dirty.

Runa headed to the hallway in a half run, bottle in hand. The extroverted girls who’d been waiting to talk to her chased after her.

Now alone, I headed to my desk when suddenly...

“Hey, Kashima-kun!”

Tanikita-san had appeared in front of me, but her expression was unusually grim.

“Wh-What’s going on, Tanikita-san?”

The last time she’d looked like this was when she’d suspected Runa had a sugar daddy.

Tanikita-san glanced over to the corridor and spoke quietly. “Okay, so, Runy might *actually* be cheating this time.” After having said just the sort of thing I’d expect her to say with that expression on her face, she beckoned to me. “Let’s

go to the balcony so nobody hears us.”

“O-Okay...”

When we stepped outside, Tanikita-san looked around again. The weather was still cold in the middle of March, so despite the clear skies, I couldn’t see any other students out here at such an odd hour.

“Hasn’t Runy been acting kinda weird recently?”

Her words caught me off guard a bit.

I *did* think the whole talk of Runa cheating was another one of Tanikita-san’s misunderstandings, but Runa’s recent behavior *had* been bothering me. She was almost constantly busy with something even though we were on a school break after our exams, and she’d been acting strange with that bottle of Oronamin C earlier too...

“Do you know anything, Tanikita-san?” I asked.

She shook her head forcefully. “Not a thing! I say we tail her!”

“Whaaat?!”

I hadn’t seen that coming.

“You’re coming too! Even if I found evidence of her cheating, you wouldn’t just take my word for it, would you?”

“Eh...?”

“You didn’t believe me when I said she might have a sugar daddy either! But I’m glad that was just a misunderstanding, though.” Finishing her grumbling, Tanikita-san looked at me. “So, are you coming or not?!”

“Huh?”

“DO IT!” she yelled.

After her random shout, I somehow ended up agreeing to tail my beloved girlfriend after school before I even knew it.

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“Runy’s been so mean lately. She keeps turning me down. Remember when

we went to Shibuya and she promised to wear a cosplay that I made? Well, I borrowed some from a friend right away, but when I asked her on LINE about when she had time, she said she's not gonna be free until our school trip. How awful is that? And so when I ask her what's got her so busy, she just says 'stuff!' I think I've said this before, but Runy never ever tells me anything important. Like, when Mia came to our school? Nikki seemed to already know that she was Runy's sister, and she knew about Runy dating you too. I only found out when the rest of the class found out, you know? I get it that Nikki's her best friend, but frankly, aren't we close enough too? I'm supposed to be her second or third best friend! At least that's how I see us. But this is the treatment I get. Awful, no? Whatcha think, huh? As her boyfriend and all."

As we made our way to the train station from school, Tanikita-san let out a barrage of complaints about Runa.

"S-Sorry, I guess..."

"Huh? I'm not looking for an apology from *you*. You're her boyfriend, not her dad. Though I'm not sure how I'd feel if her dad apologized to me instead... Anyway, I'm just asking what you think of her being like that, since you're together."

"Well, what can I say...?"

Sure, there were times when Runa acted in ways that seemed rash to me, but I knew she had her reasons. Besides, I also knew that Runa valued Tanikita-san as a friend, so even if she had kept something a secret, I didn't see it as Runa neglecting her friend. Even if she kept something secret from me, our relationship was built on enough trust for me to be certain that she wasn't cheating on me or anything.

That surely wasn't the kind of reply Tanikita-san was looking for, though.

"I don't know..." I said instead. "It's not like I know the relationship between you two all that well, anyway..."

"Huh? So, what, you're saying I'm lying?"

"N-No, but, like, we can't really know the truth until we hear what she has to say about this..." I countered.

"You know we're tailing her *because* she refuses to say anything, right? And besides, there's no other way for us to know unless she tells us. Like how I didn't know that the new girl was her sister or that she got a boyfriend."

"Y-Yeah, I guess so..."

"You know that much and are still reacting that way?" she asked. "You're really not the type to rock the boat, huh."

*This is so tiring!*

If a girl like Tanikita-san was my girlfriend, would she give me hell every time something unpleasant happened? I didn't know if things were ever going to get any better between Tanikita-san and Icchi, but I was getting worried about him already.

Actually, what if this talkativeness of hers was the reason that Runa kept important things secret from Tanikita-san in the first place? I began to suspect that more and more by the minute.

As for Runa herself, she was walking alone at the edge of my vision. I'd thought tailing her would involve us hiding behind utility poles and stuff like that, but she wasn't showing any signs of turning around at all. Instead, she seemed to be hurrying somewhere, so Tanikita-san and I were simply walking in the same direction as her.

"I'm not sure we should be tailing her like this, Tanikita-san..."

"Ah, Runy's at the station. She's gonna get on the train that's coming now. Let's run for it, Kashima-kun!"

"Huh?!"

As Runa disappeared behind the ticket gates, Tanikita-san suddenly broke out into a sprint. Chasing after her small figure, I once again felt sympathy for any boyfriend she might have in the future.

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Since we'd run, we had managed to board the same train as Runa without issue. It was the usual train she'd take to Station A, the stop closest to Runa's house.

However...

“She’s not getting off, huh.”

Even when the train arrived at Station A, Runa stayed inside the car. Tanikita-san and I could see that from the area next to the farthest door of an adjacent car where we stood.

As I wondered where she was headed, she got off at the next stop without hesitation. It was Station K—the one closest to my home.

“Does Runy need something around here?” asked Tanikita-san.

“Who knows...? It doesn’t look like she’s going to see me, at least...”

“Oh, this is close to where you live?”

We climbed the stairs, chasing after Runa. She had just passed the ticket gates.

“She’s headed in the direction of my place...” I remarked, seeing which way she was going.

After leaving the ticket gates, she turned right, passed through a roundabout, and headed toward the shopping district next to the station. There was no hesitation in her steps as she briskly walked through the streets that I knew very well.

Then, she stopped at a certain place with a stylish white exterior. The European-style sign read “Patisserie Champs de Fleurs” in cursive. If I hadn’t been familiar with it already, I probably wouldn’t have been able to read it.

“This place...”

*“But I like the cakes your mom always serves us.”*

I remembered Runa having talked about cakes from this shop near where I lived.

She opened the door and went inside. As I watched her through the glass, she then opened a door with a sign that read “Staff” and disappeared behind it.

Looking over to Tanikita-san beside me, I saw her standing there with her mouth hanging open.

“Oh...” she said, as if her strength had left her. “C’mon, Runy, if you got a part-time job, why didn’t you just say so?!” She looked a bit indignant, but then she did a one-eighty and her expression morphed into one of relief instead. “Well, I’ll be going, then. Oh yeah, I gotta catch up to someone I ran into in front of the station earlier!”

With that, Tanikita-san left like the wind, leaving me by myself.

“Uh, oh...”

Not even getting a chance to say goodbye, I stood there, dumbfounded. Once again, Tanikita-san had made me do all kinds of things and then disappeared. Though I supposed I could consider this as part of me simply going home.

*Anyway... Runa, of all people, got a part-time job? And it’s in my area too.*

Everything was pointing at it, but it was extremely hard to believe. I stood absentmindedly near the shop for a while.

Then, a door on the side of the shop opened up and Runa appeared. This staff entrance faced a rented parking lot next to the building. I’d been standing next to the parking lot, so upon seeing her, I was caught off guard and drew close to the shop’s glass wall.

“Ah, hey, Nicole.”

Runa seemed to be on the phone. It was safe to say that the person on the other end of the line was Yamana-san.

While she wasn’t looking my way, I moved over to the parking lot’s sign and crouched behind it. My reasoning was that I lived in the direction of the parking lot anyway, and it was better to wait to leave until Runa left. Sure, Tanikita-san had forced me to come here, but I still felt guilty for tailing Runa and didn’t want to run into her now—whatever her reasons for keeping the job a secret might have been.

“Yeah, it’s all good. You haven’t started work yet today, right? Let’s talk for a bit... Yeah, I came here at top speed to make sure nobody from school saw me, so it’s still way before my shift starts. I asked if I could start early and was told to rest until it was time.”

I could hear Runa's cheerful, resounding voice even without straining my ears.

"Yep. I can't work any shifts next week because we're going on that school trip, though, you know? And I just started this job too. I feel bad, so I wanna work as much as I can this week to make up for it."

Evidently, this was what had kept Runa so busy this week.

"It's totes fine! I wanna get Ryuto a great birthday present!"

Hearing that, I realized my birthday was indeed coming up at the end of this month. Between all the different events in my life like our exams, White Day, and the school trip, I'd forgotten about it, but Runa had remembered. I must've told her the date at some point.

"I'm sure he'll be surprised! I can't wait! He doesn't know I'm working, so there's no way he's gonna expect an awesome present."

I involuntarily peeked over the sign.

Runa was blushing and had a happy smile on her face. "I wonder if it'll make him happy..."

Was she making such a face because she imagined how happy I would look? The very thought of it filled me with love for her.

"Oh, seriously? Yeah, I guess I'll go get lunch or something. A coworker said there were some pieces of cake left. 'Kay, bye!"

Saying all that in a hurry, Runa tapped on her phone. It appeared that her call with Yamana-san was over. Then, she went back inside.

Gazing at the staff entrance, I stood there filled with emotion for a while.

*Runa got a part-time job. She wanted the money to buy me a birthday present and she's been keeping that a secret.*

Now that I knew this, my pent-up feelings from recent days cleared up. It was like the pieces of a puzzle fitting together.

"So that's what it was..." I said, a smile naturally appearing on my face.

I wanted to watch Runa work, but if I kept hanging around here and stared at the shop, in the worst-case scenario someone might report me even if Runa

didn't notice. So, I had to give up.

*Runa is so cute. I love her so much.*

I was hungry since I'd left school before noon, but my steps were light as I walked my usual route home. With the bright sun of noon in March shining down on me, I was happy.

There was one remaining mystery, however.

"Wait... So what was that Oronamin C bottle for in the end? She doesn't need it for work, right...?"

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And so, Sunday came, along with White Day.

Runa and I met up at a local shopping mall after 3 p.m. We were going to watch a movie at the movie theater on the top floor.

"Sorry for the wait, Ryuto..."

When Runa showed up at the entrance to the theater, she looked shy. Her cheeks were red.

*"Sorry for the wait, Ryuto!"*

Normally, she would've come running with a huge smile on her face and full of energy. But that wasn't so important.

The most different thing about her today was...

"Are those the clothes you bought the other day?" I asked.

Runa was wearing a white blouse with ribbons and frills along with a similarly frilly pink miniskirt. I didn't remember what the brand was called, but this was one of the outfits Tanikita-san had put together for her in Shibuya.

"Y-Yeah... Does it look weird?"

"No. It suits you well."

Honestly, these clothes were a bit unusual—they felt more like cosplay. Right now, the looks Runa was getting from others were different, seeming to be

from curiosity, but the outfit undeniably suited her. She was emanating a feeling of being from a different world, much like what a professional cosplayer could produce.

“Wh-What do you think?” she asked.

I’d already told her that her clothes suited her, but she kept glancing at me and fidgeting.

*Is there...something specific she wants me to say?*

*In that case...*

“Y-You look cute.”

I ended up saying that a bit quietly out of awkwardness. After all, such a uniquely fashionable gyaru had a guy like me, with generic clothes and a generic face, as her boyfriend. Minding the eyes around us, I couldn’t be all sweet with her in public.



However, when Runa heard me say that, her eyes lit up.

“Heh heh... I’m so happy. I bought these so I could hear that from you...”

“Huh?”

“You like clothes like these, right?” she asked.

The sight of Runa blushing in an outfit that was new to her was so cute that I was simply captivated. I stared at her, forgetting to reply.

“Also...” She then paused, fidgeting and playing with the hair framing her face. “I’ve been dying my hair ever since my second year in middle school... But recently, I’ve been thinking maybe I should make it black again.”

Her words brought me back to my senses.

“B-But why, Runa?”

She’d been so proud of being a gyaru and of her blonde hair, so what could’ve brought this on?

As I stared in disbelief at her, she shyly lowered her eyes.

“It’s just... I want you to like me more,” she said. “I wanna be the kinda girl you like.”

“Runa...”

I was extremely happy. I wanted to hold her. How could I be any happier?

But while I thought that...somewhere deep inside, I was confused.

“I love you so much already... You don’t need to force yourself,” I said.

Runa was too adorable as she shared her feelings with me as best she could, so at that time, I couldn’t say anything more than that.

The movie Runa had chosen was a Western rom-com. A man and a woman with completely opposite personalities got to know each other at work and, through conflict, grew closer over time. While solving a major problem together, they realized they were perfectly suited for each other and became a couple.

The theater wasn't all that big, and only about thirty percent of the seats were taken. I could see other people here, but nobody was sitting to the left and right of us, so it was a comfortable watching experience.

Runa and I shared a popcorn that we'd put in the drink holder between us. As I ate some during the movie, my hand would brush against Runa's when she reached out for popcorn as well. While it made me concerned, I thought it would've been strange to apologize to my girlfriend for something like that, so I kept an eye on her reactions and didn't say anything.

Illuminated by the light of the movie in this darkness, Runa's eyes were sparkling. She looked at me with those glistening eyes, seeming bashful. With the way she'd been acting recently, it wasn't a surprise that this would make her feel that way.

Keeping that in mind, I went to focus on the movie again, but I felt something land on my shoulder. And as I checked what it was...

I was startled to find Runa's head there.

*Why...?! She was so embarrassed before, so how come...?!*

The realization made my heart pound and I redirected my focus to my left shoulder.

Her floral-or-fruity scent grew stronger in the air. I did my best to focus on the movie, but feeling her warmth again for the first time in a long while took over all of my senses and made my heart race. I just couldn't ignore Runa's presence beside me no matter how much I tried.



Runa leaned against me for the rest of the movie.

During the last scene, when the main couple shared a loving kiss, I grew conscious of Runa and adjusted my position slightly. She lifted her head from my shoulder and looked at me. Her eyes trembled with apparent expectation.

*No way... Can I kiss her? Sure, it's dark here, but someone could see us...*

With my heart beating loudly, I brought my face close to hers, when...

DAAAAA!

A tune blared through the hall, making me freeze. It seemed that the movie had just ended and it was time for the end credits to roll.

Looking over at Runa, I saw her make a surprised face too. When our eyes met, she gave me an awkward smile.

We hadn't managed to kiss, but oddly enough, Runa's smile left me feeling fulfilled and warm on the inside.

After leaving the theater, we strolled around the shopping mall and decided to have dinner at a food court on the first floor. Eating at a table on a wooden deck under an atrium that extended to the third floor felt just a bit special.

There was a wide choice of food available from udon to ramen to hamburgers... Runa and I both went for hamburg steak, which came with rice and soup. But as we enjoyed our slightly extravagant dinner together...

"Huh...? Shirakawa-san?!"

A woman had called out to Runa and approached our table.

"Ah, good evening!" replied Runa, hurriedly putting her fork down.

At first, I assumed this was someone from our school, but when I looked at the woman, I realized I didn't know her. She looked a bit older than us and she didn't seem to be a former classmate of Runa's from middle school or something like that. She was your typical contemporary, fashionable young

woman, so I could see her being either a student or a working adult.

“Are you on a date with your boyfriend?” she asked.

“Ah, yeah...”

She clapped her hands excitedly. “He does look sweet!”

I’d stopped eating and could only sit still.

“You were in today, right? Haven’t you been there all week? And you’ve only just started. That’s admirable, seriously.”

“Oh, uh, well...” Runa looked at me in panic.

Seeing her expression, I understood what this was about. This woman must’ve been someone, probably a coworker, from Champs de Fleurs—the cake shop where Runa worked.

It appeared they were close enough that Runa had told her that she had a boyfriend, but not that she had been keeping her job a secret in order to surprise me.

“Ah, sorry to barge in on your date, you two. Are you coming tomorrow?”

“No, I can’t this week...”

“Oh, right, you have that school trip, don’t you? Okay, see you the week after that, then!”

Seeming to have picked up on Runa’s lack of enthusiasm for this conversation, the woman quickly left.

Taking peeks at me, Runa looked uncomfortable. I could tell she was anxiously thinking about what to say.

“Who was that?” I asked. While I pretty much already knew, it probably would’ve been unnatural if I didn’t seem curious.

“Um, well...” Runa averted her eyes, looking stumped. “I-I dunno...”

I couldn’t stop myself from making a strong retort. “You don’t know?!”

*I know Runa is bad at lying, but come on!*

They’d had a normal conversation and the woman had definitely called her

“Shirakawa-san.” Actually, since we were on a date at a shopping mall that was within walking distance of where she worked, she could’ve easily imagined this happening yet she hadn’t come up with an explanation in advance. It was very much like her.

“Did she take you for someone else? Well, strange coincidences happen,” I said to help her out, feeling pity for her.

Looking relieved, Runa nodded. “Y-Yeah, that’s right. I wonder what that was about.”

Seeing that she still looked awkward, I took something out of my backpack in an attempt to change the topic.

“Here,” I said. “This is your White Day present.”

It was a small bouquet. I’d had it somewhat shoved into my backpack since I felt awkward about anyone seeing it, so it had gotten slightly smushed. I’d asked a staff member at the flower shop to make it for me after I’d shown them a picture of Runa, so the flowers must’ve been chosen in good taste.

Of course, it had been the first time in my life that I’d bought flowers all by myself, so the experience had felt extremely awkward.

“Flowers...” Runa uttered, gazing at the bouquet.

Then, something occurred to me.

“Oh, sorry, should I have gone with sweets, after all?” I asked, flustered. “I brought chocolate too, just in case...”

Then, I took out a glossy brown paper bag with chocolate inside. I’d gotten it at the chocolate place where we’d had chocolate drinks together on Valentine’s Day.

“Oh, thanks... I love their chocolate!” Runa opened her eyes wide and clapped her hands. What seemed to have captivated her, however, was the bouquet. “I think this is my first time getting flowers from a boy,” she said quietly, gazing at the bouquet of light-blue, yellow, and violet blossoms.

“R-Really...? That’s unexpected... I wonder why.”

I could easily imagine extroverted, handsome guys giving flowers to their

girlfriends. I'd been certain that Runa was used to getting them.

"I dunno. Maybe it just doesn't suit my look? Gyaru and bouquets don't really go well together," she replied after some thought. "Flowers have this prim and proper image, no? They'd kinda suit someone like Maria better... I remember back in primary school, when it was our birthday, I was kinda jelly when I saw her come home with a flower that she got from a boy. He had picked it from the roadside..." She'd kept her eyes down while she told that story, but then she looked at the bouquet in her hands and smiled. "Why did you go for flowers, Ryuto?"

"Oh, uh..." Her smile and her gaze made me stagger a bit. "Well, remember how you went home with that bottle of Oronamin C the other day? If you were going to put flowers in it, I figured you might like putting flowers around the house... Ah, I mean I'm sure this bouquet wouldn't fit into a bottle, but you could take one flower out and put it in..."

For some reason, Runa ducked her head. She had turned beet red.

"Runa...?"

As I called out to her, wondering what this was about, she raised her face.

"I-It's nothing... Thanks. I'll put these in..." she said, her voice trailing off, then leaned in closer to the bouquet. "They smell nice... I'm so happy..."

As Runa looked relieved, an innocent expression appeared on her face, much like a little girl's.

When I saw this, I realized something—Runa herself was like a bouquet.

Some flowers drew the eye with their vibrant colors, while others, such as the pure-white baby's breath, were sweet and ephemeral. All of these qualities came together and made Runa as attractive as she was.

Every element of this flower arrangement played a role in making Runa shine.

Such were my thoughts upon seeing Runa happily smiling with the bouquet in her hands.

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By the time we had finished our lunch and left the mall, night had completely

settled in.

We took a train from Station K to Station A. While I walked Runa home, I thought back to what had happened at the theater.

“What did you think of the movie?” I asked.

“Hm? It was fun,” replied Runa with a smile.

We’d talked about it right after seeing it too, and she’d said it had been fun and that she was glad things had ended happily for the couple on-screen, but it didn’t look to me like she’d had much attachment to the film either.

“Why did you want to go see a movie?”

Runa tilted her head. “Well... It’s embarrassing, but I wanted to be close to you.”

“Huh?”

“Remember how when we started going out and talked about going on our first date, you brought up going to see a movie? I didn’t really get it and wondered if you were into movies or if there was some particular one you wanted to see...” Runa slightly narrowed her eyes nostalgically. “But I think now I know what that was about. You wanted to be right next to your loved one... But then your heart pounds and you feel awkward, so you can’t look them in the eye... But you still want to be close to them, so you think watching a movie together might be a good idea. I’m sure it was like that for you too. Right...?”

“Y-Yeah...” I nodded timidly.

Now that she’d mentioned it, that might’ve been the case, but it was more like I’d simply given a generic suggestion for a first date.

“It’s been a while since I felt you so close to me... You were so warm, and my heart wouldn’t stop pounding.”

Her words startled me, bringing me back to when our eyes had met during the movie.

There were only a few dozen meters between us and her house. We relied on the streetlights as we walked down the road lined with detached wooden houses—a setting that had already become so familiar to me.

The distance between us was roughly twenty centimeters. Up until this point, I hadn't been able to bring myself to touch her, afraid of being rejected...

Making up my mind, I softly reached out for her fair hand. But at the same time...

To my surprise, Runa took my hand of her own accord. Although "hand" might've been an overstatement—it was just my pinkie, to be precise.

Holding my pinkie finger, she kept her head down and seemed to be enduring a wave of embarrassment.

It felt like her finger could snap if I were to put too much strength into mine. Controlling the way my hand was swinging the best I could so it would match her rhythm, I focused all of my senses on the warmth on my smallest finger.

She was right next to me, yet I could only touch her pinkie.

But as frustrating as that was...

For the first time in a good while, I was holding hands with Runa again as we walked together. The thought of it moved me.

I wished the road would never end.



But reality wouldn't allow it. Sadly, we quickly found ourselves outside Runa's house.

"We have to get up early tomorrow. Maybe at five or so. We didn't have to do that for a while, huh?" I said.

"Yeah... And we're going by shinkansen, so we can't be late."

Our school trip was finally starting tomorrow.

"Have you finished packing?" I asked.

"Not yet. And I can't pack my flat iron or my makeup until tomorrow either."

"I guess you'd better go to bed early, then."

As I said those words, the warmth of her pinkie left mine. It was sad.

Runa looked at me in silence. Her expression seemed painful, and her eyes appeared to be glistening... Maybe it was too selfish a thought, but it felt like she was seducing me.

My heart raced as we gazed at each other.

We were still outside, in front of Runa's house. It wasn't like these streets were completely empty either, so naturally, we couldn't do anything bold.

"O-Okay, see you tomorrow, then," I said, my voice a little shrill.

Runa smiled as if she were coming to her senses. "R-Right. See you tomorrow," she said cheerfully. Waving her hand, including the pinkie that I'd just held, she raised the bouquet in her other hand to her chest.

"I hope these flowers last until I come back. Better ask Grandma to keep the water fresh for me," she said.

"Oh, r-right."

Considering that she'd be away from home after tonight, I realized that perhaps I shouldn't have given her flowers. As I regretted not thinking things through, Runa smiled at me as if to give me peace of mind.

"Don't worry. I'm gonna take lots of pics of them tonight. And if they wither, I'll press them. Hey, that takes me back! I haven't done oshibana since

kindergarten..." Runa said excitedly, then waved the bouquet in front of her face.

I figured she might not have wanted to part yet. Of course, it made me happy, since the same went for me.

"Okay, I better go wind down so I don't stay up too late and oversleep," she said.

"Yeah... Good call."

Runa then gazed at me with sparkling eyes. "Hey, Ryuto?"

"Hm?"

"Is the moon beautiful tonight?"

I looked up. There was no moon in the sky tonight either.

However...

"Yeah. It's beautiful."

Runa looked relieved at my reply and a happy smile appeared on her face.

"Let's make the most of our school trip!" she said.

And with that, she went inside.

## Chapter 2.5: A Private Conversation Between Akari-chan and Mia

Two girls were sitting in a certain café in Tokyo.

“Don’t worry, Akari-chan. Calm down,” one of them said to the other. She kept nervously looking around, seeming to mind the eyes around her while the other was sprawled over the table between them.

“No waaaaay... I caaaaan’t!” shouted the second girl, whom the first one had called “Akari-chan.” She kept kicking her legs up and down. “I’m such an idiot! Ijichi-kun even bought the clothes I picked for him and they looked ridiculously good on him, so why did I have to act like that?! I’m always thinking about him when I’m not doing K-pop stuff, and the whole reason I was able to pick those clothes out was because I kept thinking about what sorta stuff would look good on him, so why...?!”

Akari-chan let out a stream of lamentations without pausing at all, as though she were casting a spell.

“I’m sooooo done with myself! People got over tsundere heroines in the early 2010s! I know it’s not in fashion these days! I just thought I really couldn’t let him find out I like him, but then this feeling flipped around and got dialed up to the max and before I knew it, I was one of those rude tsungire girls from the 2000s!”

“There’s nothing you can do about that now... Why not start fixing things tomorrow, on our school trip?”

“There’s no way I cooould! After what happened, there’s just no way I could change my character back to normal!”

“I’ll help, so let’s do our best, okay?”

“I just caaaaan’t! Also, I don’t want Ijichi-kun to fall for you, Mia, so actually, don’t help me!”

Even “Mia” seemed exasperated at that. Leaning back in her chair, she sighed lightly. She appeared to have already given up on minding the eyes around her and was defiantly calm.

“Has Ijichi-kun really not noticed how you feel?”

“Of course he hasn’t! He was super scared. Creeped out, even. I’m such an idiot! I wanna go back in time to when I was born and start fixing things from then!”

“He’s so thickheaded... How does he not notice when you make it so obvious...?” lamented Mia, then took a sip of her royal milk tea.

# Chapter 3

The next day was Monday. We, the second-year students from Seirin Private High School, were gathered near the Gin-no Suzu at Tokyo Station for our school trip. Since it was seven in the morning, many of us had sleepy eyes.

“Morning, Nicole!”

“Hey, Runa.”

“Hey, Akari, what’s with that suitcase?! Are you going abroad?!”

Runa stood out with how full of energy she was. Her makeup and hair were fully done too. As she talked and smiled with her friends, she looked just like her usual self.

“Morning, Ryuto.”

It was only when she spoke to me that she blushed and smiled bashfully.

“Morning...” I replied.

I was starting to think that her being like this wasn’t so bad. This was a special kind of Runa that only I could see, and the thought of it made me genuinely happy.

As we got on the shinkansen and filled its three-seat rows, our teacher handed out packed breakfasts to everyone. My usual group was sitting together —me, Icchi, and Nisshi. Nisshi had swapped seats with a student from our class.

We were about to get started eating.

“Time to eat.”

But then...

“I can’t... I’m gonna throw up if I eat now...” groaned Icchi, who sat near the aisle. He looked more like a zombie.

To my amazement, Icchi had apparently forgone sleep entirely the previous

night in order to finish the construction homework KEN had given him.

“Sheesh, dude! I’m gonna eat your share too, then!” replied Nisshi, who was sitting closest to the window. He took Icchi’s breakfast.

“You’re having two breakfasts?” I asked. “Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

“Well, why not? I’m still growing and all. I plan to grow another ten centimeters!”

Even though it was morning, Nisshi was excited. Perhaps it was because he was going on a school trip with Yamana-san. While we were in different classes, he seemed intent on doing everything in his power to sneak into our group as much as he could, even when we weren’t free to go where we wanted.

“You can rest easy and sleep, Icchi! I’ll wake you up when we get to Kyoto,” continued Nisshi.

“I won’t be able to get off in time if you don’t wake me up before then...” Icchi replied with his eyes closed. He’d already reclined his seat by about ten degrees.

“Okay. I’ll wake you up a bit before we get there, so yeah, just go ahead and...?!”

Before Nisshi finished speaking, Icchi had already begun to snore.

“Damn, that’s fast...” Nisshi said, digging into his double breakfast. “I’m gonna eat a ton and get bigger than him!”

“You should be careful. Eating quickly makes you grow horizontally instead,” I said.

And about a dozen minutes later...

“Ugh, that was too much... I feel sick...”

*See, what did I tell you?*

Nisshi stared out the window with vacant eyes, covering his mouth. His tray table had one empty breakfast box and one that had roughly twenty percent left in it.

“Don’t push yourself,” I said. “You’re not Icchi. You don’t eat that much to begin with.”

“Man... I wonder if I can get bigger by eating, or I have to get bigger first to eat a lot...” With that chicken-or-the-egg kind of line, Nisshi swallowed his tears. “Bleeeegh!”

“Hey, stop it, don’t throw up here! Hold it until you get to the toilet!”

“I want to, but I can’t get out ‘cause Icchi’s in the way!”

“Just please don’t get it on me, okay?!”

“Bleeeegh...”

“Hey, Nishina! Are you with Class A again?!”

All the noise we had made led our teacher to find out about Nisshi.

Our school trip had gotten off to a rather messy start.

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Come noon, we’d arrived in Kyoto and went to a hotel near the station where we’d be staying. We all had lunch there.

Each class was moving as a group today. After lunch, we visited Tō-ji Temple and Higashi Hongan-ji, and then we actually checked into our hotel.

It was a big, modern one near Kyoto Station. Somehow I’d imagined that going on a school trip meant that we’d be staying in some old ryokan, but judging by the guidebook, this was the kind of place we’d be staying in every part of this trip.

My time at dinner in the banquet hall was rich. I got excited over the paper-lined hotpot shabu-shabu and discovered just how surprisingly delicious tofu skin was. I had avoided it all this time without ever trying it...

After that, I went to my room and took a bath. And as I was preparing to go to bed...

I heard a knocking on the door.

At first, I figured it was just my imagination and ignored it, but then the

knocking came again. I headed to the door, wondering who was there.

Icchi, who was staying in the same room as me, was currently in the bath, so I was the only one who could answer it. Incidentally, students had been assigned rooms based on their groups. I was alone with Icchi in this room, and I knew Nisshi wouldn't go so far as to barge in on us here.

"Hey, Kashima Ryuto."

Opening the door, I found Yamana-san standing there. She was still in her school uniform, so maybe she hadn't had a bath yet.

"If you come to our room, you'll see something interesting. How about it, hm?"

"What?!"

*G-Go to a girls' room?!*

I really wanted to go... In fact, my mind had been there for a while now, as I'd been wondering if Runa was taking a shower right about now.

"Wait, what is that 'interesting' thing you're talking about...?"

"Come and find out. Follow me."

With that, Yamana-san turned around and started breezily walking through the hallway.

"Um, uh..." I began.

With no time to say anything to Icchi, I followed Yamana-san with wet hair and wearing the T-shirt and tracksuit I intended to sleep in. The sound of my hotel slippers hitting the floor resounded through the hallway.

The girls' rooms were a floor above ours. Since the school had booked the whole two floors, the only students in that hallway were girls moving between rooms to see their friends. The guilty pleasure of being in a place like this as a guy made my heart race.

Unlike the boys' floor where things were pretty quiet except for some groups of extroverts, cheerful voices could be heard coming from every room that we

passed here. Yamana-san stopped in front of a room that was particularly loud.

“We’re here,” she said and opened the door.

At which point...

“Cut it out, I’m gonna go change in the outside bathroom!”

Someone currently on her way out leaped into my chest.

“Whoa!” I exclaimed.

“Agh!” the girl said.

She had a sweet, gentle scent, soft skin, and dirty blonde hair that was loose and wavy.

For a moment, I thought this was Runa, but upon closer inspection...

“K-Kurose-san?!”

“Kashima-kun?!”

I had essentially caught her in my arms moments prior. She got away from me with astonishment on her face. Her cheeks were rosy.

“Kurose-san... What’s with that getup...?” I asked. While I was obviously shaken up by bumping into her, what surprised me the most was her outfit.

She looked like a gyaru from the old days. The sailor-suit style uniform wasn’t one we used at our school, and the skirt was so short that it almost revealed her underwear. Her tall, loose socks were folded over multiple times. Then, there was the hibiscus-print scrunchie on her wrist and that flashy hair color... Everything about Kurose-san’s current looks was completely different than her usual look.

“Th-This is...” she began with a blush, trembling.

She probably hadn’t expected to be seen by a guy like this. Kurose-san was shyly holding down the hem of her skirt, though it wasn’t like I could see anything anyway.

“That’s her mom’s outfit from back in the day!” called Tanikita-san from inside the room. “I was wondering how it’d go if Mia tried it on.”

Looking into the room, I saw that it was a Japanese-style one, unlike mine, probably because this was a room for four. The futon beds had been placed in a line on the tatami mats, and wigs and clothes were scattered around on top of them.

I realized what this was all about.

It appeared that because Runa hadn't made time to try on the cosplay before the trip, Tanikita-san had brought some of those outfits here. This explained why a small girl like her had such a disproportionately huge suitcase.

*Wait, so, does this mean Runa is wearing some cosplay too...?*

Having arrived at that thought, I looked deeper into the room, at which point Tanikita-san gave me a meaningful smile. Like Yamana-san, Tanikita-san was wearing her usual uniform.

"Runy's over here, Kashima-kun," she said.

Then, I saw someone moving slowly in the corner of the room. That area had been a blind spot when looking in from the hallway.

"Is that you, Ryuto...?"

When I saw Runa, it felt like something pierced my heart—and I wasn't exaggerating.

She was clad in a pure-white dress. Its design was simple, but its large collar and fluttering skirt made it look like something an idol would wear.

But what captivated me the most...was her long straight black hair.

I knew she was wearing a wig, but I still couldn't take my eyes off it or say anything.

Her large eyes looked more attractive than usual, perhaps owing to her diagonally slanted bangs. The contrast with the black hair made her clear, fair skin shine.

If she were an idol, you wouldn't be able to resist becoming her fan.

"That's a Nogizaka outfit! A friend asked me to make it for the cultural festival for her," Tanikita-san proudly explained. "Pretty good, don'tcha think? How do

you like *this* kind of Runa?"

Runa awkwardly averted her eyes from me and fidgeted.

"Y-Yeah, she's cute..." I replied.

In reaction to my words, Runa went even redder in the face.

She was really adorable. While this was my first time seeing her in such a prim-and-proper style, it didn't feel even the slightest bit out of character. In fact, it was almost like she was this kind of girl all along—a feeling further accentuated by her current meek attitude.

Frankly, she was really my type.

I wanted to hug her. I might've even gone for it then and there if not for the eyes around us...

Kurose-san had gone out into the hallway earlier, and at that point tried to return to the room.

"Come on, isn't it good enough that Runa does this? Why do I have to as well...? I'll go change!" she said.

Yamana-san grabbed her by the arm, stopping her. "Hold on for a bit, would you? Let's take some pics while we're at it."

"Exactly! Let's commemorate our school trip!" added Tanikita-san, readying her phone.

"What does this have to do with the trip?!" exclaimed Kurose-san.

"Hey, that's a good idea! I wanna take pics with Maria too," Runa said, quickly getting excited and putting her arm over her sister's shoulder and resting her hand on top.

"S-Slow down... What're these pics for, anyway?"

"To commemorate the occasion, like I said," Tanikita-san explained cheerfully.

The flashy gyaru Kurose-san was being overwhelmed by the prim-and-proper maiden Runa. While this was their usual dynamic, it was funny how they'd swapped who was wearing what style.

"A'ight, look at the camera!" exclaimed Tanikita-san. She was already taking

pictures.

Yamana-san watched Runa and Kurose-san with a grin on her face.

It was moving to see how Kurose-san had completely opened up to Runa and her friends.

Having witnessed the two sisters with these swapped appearances, I could now tell that Runa and Kurose-san were very similar. And that wasn't just in terms of looks—the air they gave off, their auras... That strong life force they had.

Maybe they had been born with it. Or, as Runa had previously said when comparing herself to jellyfish, maybe they'd ended up this way after living their lives getting pushed around by the currents of fate.

For better or worse, I'd lived a life devoid of ups and downs, so I was attracted to people with that kind of strength.

Sure, there were other cute girls out there, but I felt like I was starting to understand why I'd confessed to these two.

I'd told Runa it was because the timing was important when confessing one's feelings, but if something had gone just a little bit differently, perhaps I would've never ended up dating her. Instead, I could have begun a relationship with Kurose-san after she'd transferred here—though I couldn't be sure if Kurose-san would've fallen for me in such a scenario.

However, I had chosen Runa and was going out with her now. Maybe that choice had been brought about by coincidence and fickle fate, but I was satisfied with this outcome.

I wanted to be with Runa forever.

Having reaffirmed that feeling once again, I observed the two sisters with a smile on my face as the group merrily took pictures. But then...

"Hey, it's lights out already! Kashima-kun?! What're you doing here?! Get back to the boys' rooms!" exclaimed a teacher. It was the one in charge of Class A, and she had just appeared in the hallway.

"S-Sorry!" I replied and turned around in a hurry.

“And Kurose-san, Shirakawa-san, what is up with those outfits?!”

“Th-They’re...pajamas?” said Runa with a smile, trying to play it off.

“Yeah, I’m sure they are!” replied the teacher, not falling for it. “And don’t tell me you haven’t taken baths yet!”

Kurose-san’s eyes were teary. “I-I have! But someone hid my clothes before I got out, so I had to settle for this...”

“You looked pretty into it when you put that wig on in front of the mirror!” Tanikita-san said.

“W-Well, having gone that far, I had no choice but to go all the way, right?!”

That was what had happened, apparently.

I was relieved to hear that Kurose-san had enjoyed cosplaying like this too.

“C’mon, miss, being grumpy is bad for your skin. And I take showers in the mornings, so I can go to bed right away,” said Yamana-san, cheekily putting a hand on the teacher’s shoulder.

At that, the young female teacher started to repeatedly open and close her mouth.

“Just turn off the lights already!” she exclaimed at last.

Having observed this all unfold from far away in the hallway, I hurried down to the boys’ floor.

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We had to travel with our groups the next day too. We would take a bus from the hotel, visit Sanjūsangen-dō and Kiyomizu-dera before noon, and then we’d see Kinkaku-ji and Ginkaku-ji in the afternoon. It was a rather hasty tour.

At each site, we would be seeing the things that we’d learned about during integrated studies periods for real.

Nisshi had, once again, sneaked into our group like it was natural for him to be there.

Sanjūsangen-dō, which we visited first, was a recreation of the hondo—main hall—of the temple that had been built for Emperor Go-Shirakawa. It housed

1,001 standing Thousand-Armed Kannon statues. We'd learned all this ahead of time.

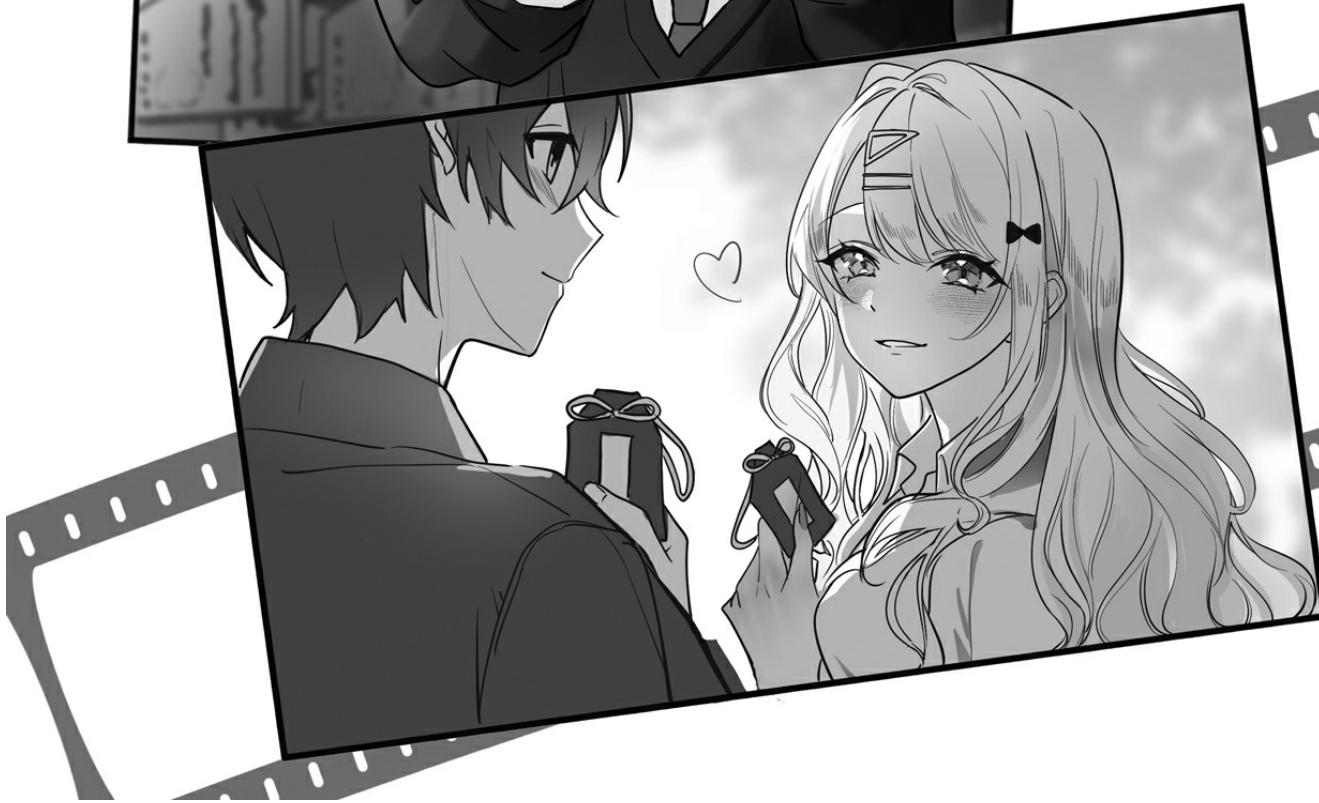
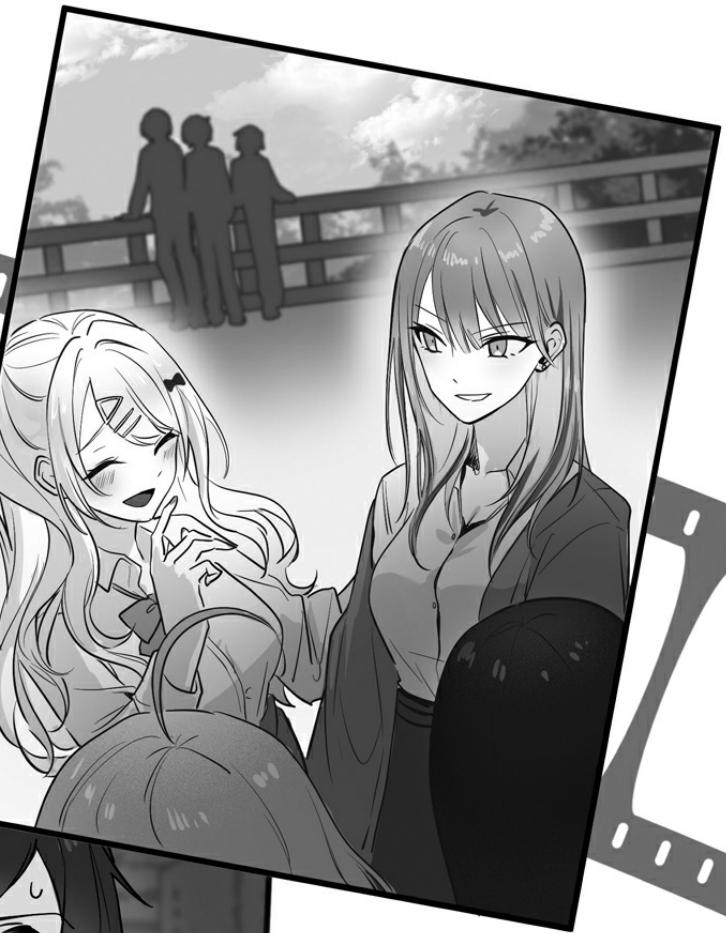
When we went inside the long and narrow hall, we found the long rows of those seemingly countless Kannon. Those wooden statues had all been made by hand, and apparently, each statue had different facial features.

"They say that one out of these statues is bound to look like the person you wanna see, right? Does that mean there are statues that look like us too?" asked Runa, checking the statues like she was looking for someone. "Maybe that one's you, Ryuto. It looks kind."

"I-Is it...?"

I couldn't really tell, but I was happy to hear Runa say that.

"I wonder which one's me?" she said.



“Well...” I groaned, looking at the nearby statues.

The statues farther in the back were raised as if they were standing on stairs, but the halolike parts of the statues in front were in the way. It was a bit dark here as well, so I couldn’t really make out the faces of the statues in the back rows.

“What about that one?” Kurose-san said as she approached Runa and pointed at a statue. “That’s a lot like your sleeping face from when you were little.”

“Ah, now that you mention it, maybe!”

I couldn’t tell which one they were talking about, but Runa was happy as she looked at the statue.

“Then you’re that one next to it,” she said.

“Eh? Was my face really so round...?” replied Kurose-san with a smile.

It warmed my heart to see the two sisters being on such good terms with each other.

“I wonder which one’s me...” uttered Tanikita-san, looking around.

Icchi, who happened to be standing next to me, pointed at one of the statues after seeing her like that.

“Isn’t it that one?” he asked. His voice was so quiet that only I could hear him.

Looking in the direction he pointed, I spotted a statue of an asurendra with an expression of wrath on his face. I couldn’t help but smile.

Tanikita-san turned out to have terribly sharp hearing. “Who’re you calling an asurendra?!?” she yelled, lashing out at us.

“No, I mean, the one behind it...” replied Icchi in a hurry.

Tanikita-san wasn’t listening, however. “Who do you think you are?! Just because you’re kinda tall and good-looking...!”

“Like I said, I didn’t mean that one...”

A nearby male teacher scolded them. “Tanikita, Ijichi! Keep it down.”

“What did I do...?”

Icchi was the type to get easily upset when scolded and his dejection was clear as day. I felt a bit sorry for him.

Next to us, Yamana-san spoke to Nisshi. “Ren, did you find any statues that look like someone?”

“Nah. Honestly, all their faces look the same to me...” he replied with a smile.

He wasn’t tense, and the air between the two was easy and natural. It was a bit surprising to me. When had they managed to grow so close?

“I wonder which one’s me...” Yamana-san said as if talking to herself.

Nisshi hung his head all of a sudden. “None of them.” He then looked Yamana-san in the eye for a bit. “You’re too beautiful for that, Nicole,” he said shyly.

“Oh... Okay. Thanks.”

It was a blunt reply, but Yamana-san was blushing too.

It felt like I shouldn’t be watching what was happening here.

“Hey, let’s go look over there, Icchi,” I said, stepping away with my friend.

After Sanjūsangen-dō, it was time for a visit to Kiyomizu-dera.

“Wow, we’re up so high!” Runa exclaimed as she looked at the Kiyomizu veranda from some distance away. “Damn! C’mere, Maria, take a look!” Runa excitedly pulled Kurose-san in front of her.

“You don’t have to tell me. I can see it myself,” she replied with a smile, looking a bit taken aback by Runa’s childlike joy.

“It’s, like, crazy! You could totally go bungee jumping there!”

“Those handrails are made of wood, though, so I’d imagine they’d break,” Tanikita-san said.

“A one-way bungee jump, eh? That takes courage,” added Yamana-san.

Runa smiled. “Well, guess that’s not happening, then!”

While the girls were happily talking to each other, we guys lined up in order of

height and looked at the veranda, resting our hands on the wooden handrail.

“Could you make a temple like this in Yourcraft?” Nisshi asked.

“Probably? Maybe I should give Japanese architecture a go one of these days,” replied Icchi.

“Damn, man, you’re the real deal,” I said. I genuinely respected him for that.

“Gotta say, though, we’re higher up than I expected,” Nisshi said quietly. “Looking down gives me the chills...”

While Nisshi was busy looking down, Yamana-san crept up behind him. Signaling me with her eyes, she forcefully pushed his back.

“Hey!” she yelled.

“Whoaaa!” Nisshi crouched down, looking like he was about to fall on his rear.

Yamana-san smiled. “What, you scared?”

“O-Of course not!”

“Not a fan of high places?”

Nisshi hung his head, still crouching down. “When I was in primary school, I was at an amusement park with my family and we went on a roller coaster. It broke down halfway and we got stuck at the top for thirty minutes...”

I’d never heard that story of his before.

“Huh...” uttered Yamana-san, looking displeased. “Well, I guess everyone has a thing or two they can’t handle. As for me, I really hate insects.”

Hearing that, Nisshi got up, his spirits having returned. “Really? I never would’ve thought that! I should buy a toy bug at a hundred-yen store and put it in your desk sometime.”

“Do that and I’ll fucking kill you.”

Nisshi kept grinning, unfazed by the anger on Yamana-san’s face.

I didn’t know her all that well yet, but Yamana-san’s manner of talking seemed similar to talking to Sekiya-san. They probably seemed similar even

though they hadn't dated for a long time because their personalities were alike to begin with. It seemed natural that they'd be drawn to each other.

Speaking of Sekiya-san... We had gotten to about when he'd be getting his final results from his college entrance exams. He'd said he'd let me know if he'd gotten in anywhere, and it was a bit worrying that I hadn't heard from him yet.

Watching Nisshi and Yamana-san making a fuss in a friendly way made me recall another pair from Sanjūsangen-dō. It was a bit depressing.

And so our visit to Kiyomizu-dera came to an end. We were heading to the bus stop, when...

"Hey, check that out. 'En-musubi no kami,' it says!"

Runa was pointing toward a set of stone stairs. At the top of them was a shrine archway made of stone. The large red writing on it read "En-musubi no kami"—gods of love and relationships.

"Jishu Shrine? We didn't learn about this place," I said.

"Let's go check it out," Runa suggested to everyone.

"You don't need help from the gods of love and relationships anymore, do you?" asked Yamana-san.

"Don't you want a good-luck charm, though? Like, a matching one with your boyfriend."

Yamana-san appeared moved by Runa's point. "Okay, let's stop by, I guess. I'd imagine Kyoto's good-luck charms are pretty powerful."

"Hey, should we really be stopping at places without needing to?" asked Nisshi. He sounded hesitant.

"It's fine, we just gotta get back in time," Yamana-san said optimistically and took the lead heading there.

Thus, we ended up stopping by the Jishu Shrine.

"Ah, there's the good-luck charms!" exclaimed Runa as she approached the shrine's shop. "This pair of charms say 'Your love will grow'! I'm gonna go with

these.”

Yamana-san was browsing too. “I guess I’ll get these, then. ‘A bell to bind the hearts of those who spend much time away from each other due to family circumstances, studying, or work,’” she said.

“That’s perfect for you! But wait, won’t you get back together really soon anyway?”

“Senpai will probably be busy with studies even after he starts going to college,” Yamana-san said.

“Are you getting those?” I asked Runa. “Want me to pay for them?”

“Nah, that’s okay! I’m the one who wants them.”

“You’re going to give me one of the two, though, right?”

I’d have been really shocked if that wasn’t the case, all things considered.

“Yeah... Okay, then I’ll pay half and you pay half?”

“Sure. It’s a thousand yen, so I guess that’s five hundred from each of us.”

Thus, Runa and Yamana-san successfully bought some good-luck charms. Looking around, I saw Icchi at a stand all by himself, writing something.

“What’re you up to?” I asked.

His face was like that of a real priest at work. “Well, you know, the whole ‘exorcism with hitogata’ thing.”

Icchi was writing on a thin white paper shaped like a person—a hitogata. The paper resembled a sheet of hanshi—Japanese calligraphy paper. Icchi had written his name and age on it.

He blew on it three times and then put it in the nearby wooden bucket filled with water. The person-shaped paper quickly came apart, starting from the limbs.

Icchi didn’t watch it happen—instead, he pressed his hands together in prayer and kept his eyes closed. He kind of looked really serious about this.

His attitude was giving me the chills. “So, what did you exorcise?” I asked.

Icchi opened his eyes but maintained his praying pose. “The connection with a certain weird girl. So that I can get a cute girlfriend.” He then glanced at Tanikita-san, who was cheerfully talking to Kurose-san.

“I-I see.”

*So it's finally come to this: Tanikita-san is now being called a “weird girl”!*

Well, she certainly *was* weird with the way she was now... I couldn't deny that, remembering how she'd acted at Sanjūsangen-dō.

Still, I was glad that Icchi actually wanted a girlfriend. Just the other day, he'd said that he wasn't interested in love.

I should mention that ever since Icchi had lost weight, the girls in our class had started looking at him as if they found him to be not so bad after all. But since Icchi was an extreme introvert and Tanikita-san was radiating extreme pressure, none of them could approach him. Incidentally, there probably wasn't anyone in our class besides Icchi who didn't know that she was a fan of his. It was actually strange how he hadn't heard about it yet...

“Are you done, Runy? Let's go to the bus stop,” said Tanikita-san.

The girls gathered and looked about to leave, when...

“Looks like this stone tells your romantic fortune,” said Runa, having noticed something nearby. It was a rugged boulder about knee-high. A note on it did, in fact, say it was a “love fortune stone.”

Then, I noticed another stone like this one a bit farther away.

“It says that if you can walk from this stone to that one with your eyes closed, your love will be fulfilled,” Yamana-san said, reading from the sign.

“Oh, I see. Let's try it, Akari!” said Runa.

“What?! Why me?! ”

Runa and Yamana-san looked at each other.

“Well, in our cases...”

“Our love is more or less fulfilled already, after all.”

“Whaaat?! In that case, Mia, you do it with me!” said Tanikita-san.

Kurose-san smiled softly. “I’ll pass. I don’t have feelings that I could have my fortune told on.”

When she finished speaking, our eyes met for a moment, which startled me. However, there was neither sadness nor irony in her smile. It looked like she was telling me, “I’m okay, don’t worry about me.”

Perhaps I was just telling myself that since it was convenient. But Kurose-san really was moving forward too. The thought of it brought a smile to my lips, if only a small one.

At some point, it was settled that Tanikita-san would be the only one getting her fortune told this way. She started walking, her eyes closed.

However...

“You okay, Akari?” asked Runa.

“What’s with your sense of balance?” added Yamana-san.

Indeed, Tanikita-san wasn’t walking in a straight line at all. Anyone could tell she was veering way off course.

“Slow down, Akari, take a right! Right!”

“Ah, you went past it! It’s a bit to the left!”

“Ehh?! What the hell?!?” Tanikita-san yelled in confusion.

“We should be the ones asking that,” countered Yamana-san without a moment’s delay.

The stone was only ten meters away, but it kind of felt like it was extremely far. Stumbling left and right as she followed her friends’ instructions, Tanikita-san finally got close to us. Icchi and I were standing next to the second stone.

“Right, Akari!” shouted Runa.

Tanikita-san was walking diagonally with such momentum that she could crash into us.

“Huh?” She tried to rapidly change direction, but her toes got caught on a protrusion in the stone ground.

“Watch out, Akari!”

Her body pitched forward and she was about to fall. At that point, Icchi, who happened to be right in front of her, stuck out his hand on reflex.

“Ah!”

With Icchi propping up her shoulder, Tanikita-san managed to avoid hitting the ground.

“Y-You okay?” Icchi asked cautiously.

Hearing his voice, Tanikita-san opened her eyes. Seeing Icchi in front of her, she looked so astonished that you’d think her eyes might pop out of their sockets.



Turning as red as a tomato, she pushed herself away from Icchi. “Wh-What’d you do that for?!” she yelled. “I opened my eyes because of that! I wasn’t done yet!”

Icchi was at a loss. “Eh, b-but...”

It was only natural. I was sure that anyone would hold out their hand in an instant if somebody stumbled like that in front of them. It could’ve been me or Nisshi in front of her, or any of the girls, of course, and they would’ve done the same. In fact, I’d have a problem with someone who chose to avoid her instead of holding out a hand.

None of that seemed to matter to Tanikita-san, however...

“Wh-What is *wrong* with you?! You’re tall, good-looking, good at games, and even nice to girls?! You’re seriously the worst guy I’ve ever seen!” she whined.

“What’s bad about any of those things?” asked Runa.

“She’s not talking trash about him at all,” added Yamana-san.

They both looked amazed by Tanikita-san’s behavior.

“She compliments him so much and he doesn’t notice... How, Ijichi-kun...?” said Runa.

Icchi, meanwhile, looked worn out. “Well, that exorcism did nothing... I want my two hundred yen back...” he said, sounding dispirited.

I didn’t know what the result of Tanikita-san’s love-fortune-telling was in the end, but once again, the mood was dictating that we get going. I made my way over to Nisshi to let him know since he’d been standing alone some distance away.

“What’re you doing, Nisshi?”

“Whoa!”

He’d had his back turned to me, and when I spoke up to him, he almost jumped in surprise.

“Man, it’s you, Kasshi. You startled me.”

Nisshi was in front of a set of hanging ema—wooden tablets with one’s

prayers—left there by visitors. He seemed to be writing on one of his own.

“You’re hanging an ema?” I asked, at which point Nisshi hid it behind him and backed away.

“Don’t look! Seriously, don’t, okay?!”

“That’s what people say when they really want you to look!”

“I really don’t!” he insisted.

“I get it, I get it.”

I figured it probably had something to do with Yamana-san, but given how serious Nisshi seemed to be about this, I decided not to press him any further on the subject.

We all went back to the bus stop after that.

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We had lunch near Kiyomizu-dera, then got on the bus and headed to Kinkaku-ji.

“Man, it’s crazy how golden Kinkaku-ji is! Just look at it!” exclaimed Runa.

“Want me to take a pic for you?” Kurose-san asked.

“You should be in it too! Actually, why don’t we all get in it?”

“Would we even fit? Wait, didn’t Akari buy a wide-angle lens for her phone?” said Yamana-san.

“Yeah, I’m putting it on now!” Tanikita-san replied. “Okay everyone, get together!”

“U-Us too?” I asked.

“Yeah, you guys too!”

“Come here, Ren,” said Yamana-san.

“Hey! You realize how huge you are?! Why don’t you bend down or something?!” Tanikita-san yelled.

“L-Like this...?” replied Icchi.

“Hey, no pushing! Also, your knees are touching me!”

“S-Sorry...”

“You’re seriously the worst guy I’ve ever met!”

After our chaotic visit to Kinkaku-ji, we got on the bus again so it could take us to Ginkaku-ji.

“Ginkaku-ji is so plain! You’d think that since ‘silver’ is in the name, that’d mean there’s at least some silver on it!”

“We learned beforehand that Ginkaku-ji isn’t silver, Runa...”

“But it’s just sooo plain! It’s even worse after seeing Kinkaku-ji.”

“Think it’ll look better with a filter?” Yamana-san suggested.

“Good idea, Nikki! I’ll go with pink,” said Tanikita-san.

“Pinkkaku-ji, then? That’s hilarious.”

“You guys wanna join us?” Runa asked.

“N-Nah, it’s okay. We took that pic together earlier,” I replied.

“I don’t want to be pink, anyway...” said Nisshi.

“And I don’t want anyone yelling at me...” added Icchi.

Thus, the second day of our trip came to an end and the bus took us back to the hotel.

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The third day was our last day in Kyoto. We’d be moving in groups the whole day and visiting more places we’d learned about during integrated studies periods.

The plan was to visit Fushimi Inari Shrine in the morning and then temples and shrines in Sagano.

Fushimi Inari Shrine was highly accessible—only about five minutes by train from Kyoto Station.

“Wow, this is amazing!” exclaimed Runa.

She wasn’t alone in that—everyone else sounded excited when met with this breathtaking sight as well. Just past the main hall of the shrine were the endless rows of vivid red torii gates that represented this place.

“Isn’t it crazy? It’s, like, totally rad!” she added.

“Stand over there, Nikki! You too, Mia!” said Tanikita-san.

“Okay,” replied Yamana-san.

“L-Like this?” asked Kurose-san.

“Okay, good!”

The girls were already eager to take photos again.

The Senbon Torii—or the thousand shrine gates—were located at the base of a mountain. Going through them felt like you were getting closer and closer to the mountain.

While the weather this morning was clear, the blue sky was hidden behind the trees, making our surroundings a bit dark. There was a chill in the air too. The place felt sacred in an odd way, as though it were cut off from the rest of the world. We didn’t feel like making noise, so I kept my conversations with Icchi and Nisshi to a minimum and mostly stayed silent as I followed the mountain path.

Our visibility improved a bit when we reached the so-called “inner shrine” meant for worship. With the Senbon Torii coming to an end behind us, this area was located on a flat clearing and was rather spacious.

We were to climb farther up from here to reach the Yotsutsuji intersection where one could rest and then go back down.

It was still morning, but there were more and more tourists coming up through the Senbon Torii, creating a crowd where we already were.

“‘Omokaru stone’? What’s this?” Runa asked.

“You make a wish and lift it up. Apparently, if it’s lighter than you expected, your wish will come true, but if it’s heavier, it won’t,” Yamana-san explained.

“For real? Try it, Nikki,” Tanikita-san suggested.

“Eh, I don’t wanna. It’s scary.”

We could see the girls were making a fuss near an old stone next to the inner shrine.

“Girls sure like fortune-telling and stuff...” said Nisshi.

“When I see a place that’s a mess, I feel like blowing it all up with TNT, like in Yourcraft.”

“You think some dangerous things, Icchi...” I said.

And as we guys held a conversation of our own...

“Ah, senpai?!” All of a sudden, Yamana-san spoke up with excitement, holding her phone to her ear.

*Senpai...* That meant she was talking to Sekiya-san.

Since he was calling her after having told her that he wouldn’t, it must’ve meant his exam results had come in.

I checked my own phone, but I hadn’t gotten anything from him yet. I supposed it was only natural that he’d let his girlfriend know first.

“Huh? Nikki, your boyfriend called?!” exclaimed Tanikita-san.

“I’m happy for you, Nicole!” added Runa.

With the two of them looking at her, Yamana-san kept talking with a happy expression on her face.

I looked at Nisshi, but his eyes were directed elsewhere.

We couldn’t really go any farther until Yamana-san’s call was over, so I chatted with Icchi in the meantime. But after a while, I looked at the girls again and noticed that something was off.

Yamana-san stood alone, away from everyone. She was facing the mountain and had her back toward us. While she was holding the phone to her ear, she was hanging her head.

As I looked on with curiosity, Yamana-san suddenly crouched down and

hugged her knees. Her back quivered as though she was having a crying fit.

“Nicole...?” Runa was nervously watching her as well, but she couldn’t go any closer because of how serious things seemed to be.

Yamana-san then got up and headed behind the inner shrine, as if to flee from our eyes. Runa chased after her out of concern, but soon came back and shook her head.

We waited for five minutes. Then five more.

Runa went to check on her again. This time, she returned with distress on her face.

“Oh no!” she cried. “Nicole’s gone!”

“What?!”

The guys and I went over to the girls too.

“What do you mean she’s gone?”

“She was on the phone behind that building until a few minutes ago. But I just looked and she’s not there anymore... I tried calling her, but no dice—her battery’s dead.”

“Is that because she talked to Sekiya-san for so long?”

“No way, right? It’s still morning, so a fifteen-minute call shouldn’t be enough...”

“Maybe she went to the bathroom?”

“Why would a dead battery make her have to go?”

As we discussed the situation with Runa, I got a call on my phone.

“It’s Sekiya-san,” I said.

Holding the phone in my sweaty hands, I tapped the button to answer the call and brought my phone to my ear.

“Ah, Ryuto? Is Yamana there?” It sounded like the usual Sekiya-san, but I could sense some impatience in his voice.

“No... She disappeared a few minutes ago...”

Sekiya-san went silent for a moment. I could tell my response had taken his breath away.

“Thing is, I just told her the results of my exams...”

I could already imagine what those were from how depressed his tone suddenly became.

“It didn’t work out this year,” he said.

“I see...”

“I’ll be a ronin for another year. Dad wished me luck.”

“What will you do about your relationship with Yamana-san?” I asked.

The girls were holding their breath as they looked on. There was tension in my voice too.

“I told her she can decide if she’d rather go on like this or break up.”

“What did she say?”

“That she didn’t want to make that decision...” he said. “Then, she started crying and cut the call. I kept trying to call her after that, but no luck.”

So that was why he’d called me.

“We’ll look for her—she might still be around. I’ll let you know if we find her,” I told him.

“Thanks. I’m really sorry.” He sounded unusually meek. “You’re on a school trip, right? Where’re you now?”

“Fushimi Inari Shrine in Kyoto.”

“I knew you were on a trip...but I also knew Yamana must’ve had this on her mind all this time. I felt bad about keeping her in the dark for so long—I got the last of my results two days ago, so I already knew what I’d be doing next...”

I could understand that, so I didn’t blame him.

After ending the call, I explained things to everyone else. We split up into smaller groups to search for Yamana-san.

"I'll check the lower areas. I think she would've had to pass by us if she went up instead," said Runa.

"I'll come too!" said Tanikita-san.

"Me too," added Kurose-san.

The three of them headed back to the Senbon Torii.

"I'll go check higher. Maybe she went up when nobody was looking," suggested Nisshi, taking the ascending path.

That left just me and Icchi. We checked around the inner shrine again and then went the same way Nisshi had.

The path got more and more precipitous from there. We started seeing some unpaved parts too. It had previously felt chilly, but before I knew it, my back was covered in sweat and I was starting to run out of breath.

"You really think the demon gyaru went this way?" Icchi asked, looking somewhat exhausted. "Would a heartbroken girl climb a mountain path alone?"

"Well... If she was that shocked, she might've done something even if she herself didn't understand why she was doing it..."

And that was why we were worried and were looking for her. Not that I thought it was such a big deal if a high schooler with a smartphone and some cash on hand were to get lost somewhere here in Japan.

"The demon gyaru's such an idiot. Why's she gotta be like this over love?" Icchi said quietly. Instead of disdain, there was something akin to jealousy in his eyes. "And Nisshi too. What's the point in chasing after a girl who's so shocked to hear that her boyfriend's going for a second ronin lap that she disappears on a school trip?" He gazed off at the distant parts of the path ahead of us.

"Yeah..."

I did think they were stupid. But I was too, getting happy or shaken up from every little thing Runa said or did. I was sure that this was what it meant to be in love.

We were inexperienced, and each of us surely had a long mountain to climb in our love lives. The greenery along the way extended far and wide. The climb

was painful, and it made us worry if we could make it at all. But because we wanted to know what lay ahead—what we could see up there from the top—we kept at it.

This pain, too, was part of being in love.

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About two hours later, we got in touch with each other again and met up at the Yotsutsuji intersection.

That intersection was located on a plateau halfway up the mountain. There was a teahouse there too where you could get a meal or some sweets. The benches in front of it were filled with tourists taking breaks.

“Nicole wasn’t in the lower areas...” said Runa.

“We split up and searched the main shrine, the crossroads, the teahouse... We even went to the train station...” Kurose-san explained.

They’d just arrived here, so they’d yet to catch their breaths.

“She wasn’t up the mountain either... I went all the way to the fountain, but couldn’t find her anywhere,” said Nisshi. He looked exhausted too.

“And we checked the Mitsutsuji crossroads...” I said.

But just like everyone else, it had been to no avail.

“Where’d you go, Nikki...?” Tanikita-san said dejectedly.

Runa took out her phone, seeming to have thought of something. “We should let our teacher know, right? Though she might get angry at us later...”

“Yeah, I guess. Better do it now before it’s too late,” I said.

With that, Runa took out the trip guidebook. She probably wanted to find the teacher’s phone number written on the last page.

“Okay, I’ll try calling Nikki again,” said Tanikita-san, pulling out her phone. “Oh wait, I don’t have any service here! Man, these bargain-bin phones are so trash!” She ground her teeth with force after looking at the screen.

“Do you want to use mine?”

“Thanks, Mia... Wait, I guess that won’t work. We’ve used LINE all this time, so I don’t know Nikki’s number.” Tanikita-san just couldn’t catch a break.

“090-XXXX-XXXX.” Nisshi rattled off some number all of a sudden.

Runa had been turning the pages of the guidebook, but she looked up in surprise. “Wow, that’s amazing, Nishina-kun. That sure is Nicole’s number.”

“You’re kidding! Wait, Runy, you remember Nikki’s number too?” asked Tanikita-san.

“Heh, yeah. I called Nicole every evening from my great-grandma’s home phone when I was at her place last summer.”

“Ah, when your phone was broken.”

It wasn’t really the time for it, but I felt nostalgic thinking about those days I’d spent at Sayo-san’s house in Chiba and worked at Mao-san’s beach hut together with Runa.

“Do you call the demon gyaru from your home phone too, Nisshi?” asked Icchi in curiosity.

Nisshi shrugged as if sulking. “Every night, I look at the number she gave me, thinking that maybe it’s time I finally call her.”

*He really loves her, huh.*

I could tell, and it was painful for me.

“Yeah, it didn’t work,” said Tanikita-san. She’d tried calling from Kurose-san’s phone, but it seemed like Yamana-san’s phone was still off.

At that point, I got a call once again—it was Sekiya-san.

“Did you find Yamana?” he asked.

“No... Not yet.”

Having made sure that Runa had finished talking to our teacher, I put my phone on speaker mode. I figured it was best to let Sekiya-san directly hear that we couldn’t find her from everyone.

He seemed to be on a moving train—I could hear the sound of it from the other end. He must’ve been really worried if he was calling in that situation,

since being on the phone on the train was typically seen as rude.

“I see... What are your plans for today’s free time?” he asked after hearing us out.

“Umm, after Fushimi Inari, we’re going to Sagano, have lunch, visit different temples...”

The clock at the top of my phone screen said it was 12:03. I hadn’t realized it was already this late.

“Then Yamana is probably in Sagano already,” Sekiya-san said. “She’s serious, deep down. She just wanted some time alone—she’s not the type to skip all of today’s plans.”

“Eh, but...”

“Oh, come to think of it...” began Nisshi, interrupting me. “Nicole said she was looking forward to seeing the Happo Nirami no Ryu in Sagano.” He spoke clearly so that it could be heard on the other end of the line too. “She said that glaring in every direction was pretty much what she did in middle school and smiled.”

“Oh yeah, she did say that! Nicole was really looking forward to seeing Sagano,” Runa added, bringing her hands together as if having found a ray of hope.

“Okay, let’s go to Sagano for now! Strike while the iron is hot and all that,” said Tanikita-san.

I ended the call with Sekiya-san.

“Well then...” I began.

But as we were about to descend the mountain together, I got another call from Sekiya-san.

This time, I didn’t put it on speaker mode and brought it to my ear. “Hello?”

“Who was that?” There was suspicion in Sekiya-san’s voice.

“Huh?”

“The guy who talked about the Ryu or whatever.”

“Ah, it’s Nisshi... Nishina Ren. A friend of mine.”

“Is he close with Yamana?” he asked in a matter-of-fact tone.

“Huh? Well, kind of... Though it’s more like he *wants* to get close to her...”

I knew how Nisshi felt and couldn’t lie here, so I ended up beating around the bush.

“Does he know Yamana has a boyfriend?” Sekiya-san asked.

“Y-Yeah...”

“Huh...” His tone wasn’t all that different from usual, but I figured he wasn’t exactly happy to hear that. It made me dispirited.

“I-I’m sorry, I guess... That my friend does that...”

“You’re going to Sagano, right?” he asked. “Let me know where she is if you find her.”

“O-Okay, got it.”

He didn’t seem to be angry or anything, but it was awkward for me, so I kept my replies short and got off the phone again.

We’d already started descending the mountain.

Hearing the clear sound of running water, I looked over to the rock face and found water streaming down over it. Thanks to the midday light, it sparkled like treasure. The sight of it was heavenly.

I didn’t really believe in miracles, but the word “miraculous” *did* feel like an apt descriptor for this mountain.

When we returned to the path, the somewhat cold air sent chills down my spine. The leaves on the trees around us rustled like rippling water. It was unsettling.

If somebody were to go missing on such a mountain, one might think they had been spirited away.

Cautiously following the uneven downward path thick with greenery, Runa came to my side.

“I wonder if Nicole’s okay... I’m worried,” she said, looking a bit pale. “She’s not as tough on the inside as she might look. When she was in middle school

and stressed over her parents' divorce, she apparently got ten piercings on her ears all in one day. Though she says that some of those holes have closed up by now."

"Ten...?"

By simple math, that was five per ear. Just imagining it made my earlobes hurt.

"And now her phone's off... I hope she's not getting any weird ideas... Ah!"

At that point, Runa stumbled on something. Perhaps she'd been so concerned about her best friend's well-being that she hadn't been paying enough attention to the path underfoot.

I caught her arm before I could give it any thought and then took her hand. She stiffened up a bit, but she didn't shout or jump away.

We walked down the rest of the mountain path firmly holding hands. It had been a while since I'd last felt the warmth of her palm. It filled me with emotion, despite our current situation.

"It'll be okay," I said sincerely. "Yamana-san is in Sagano—her beloved Sekiya-san said so." I came close to stumbling over my words, but I made sure to lay out my true thoughts. "So it'll be okay."

With that, I slightly put pressure on her hand in mine, holding it as though enveloping it.

"Ryuto..." When Runa looked up at me, there were tears in her eyes. It felt like they might spill if she lowered her head. She looked forward, keeping them in place. "Yeah. I'm gonna believe in that too." She looked at me again and there was a faint smile on her face. "Thank you, Ryuto." This time, she was the one to put pressure on my hand.

I was fraught with emotion. Just for a moment, I forgot all about Yamana-san and about the school trip...

As I single-mindedly went down the mountain, the only thing I felt was the warmth in my hand.

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By the time we got to Sagano, it was already 3 p.m. We'd had onigiri for lunch that we'd bought at a station kiosk while waiting to transfer trains. This would be the last place on the day's tour.

There were five temples in Sagano that we had to visit, but since time was running out, we split up and aimed to visit them while searching for Yamana-san.

We made three pairs: Runa and I, Kurose-san and Tanikita-san, and Icchi and Nisshi. After arranging to contact each other if anything came up, we went our separate ways.

Runa and I went to Tenryū-ji temple, which was the one with that "Happo Nirami no Ryu"—Dragon Glaring in All Directions—that Yamana-san had mentioned.

After passing through an imposing gate and walking down a wide stone road, there was a small lecture hall there. That dragon was painted on its ceiling.

"Let's go inside," I said.

Walking in side by side, we could immediately tell that Yamana-san wasn't here. Everyone in this hall was looking up at the ceiling, and it wasn't spacious enough for dozens of people to be here all at once. It wasn't the kind of place one could hang around for a long time.

The "Happo Nirami no Ryu" was a gorgeous Japanese-style painting done in ink. It looked like the dragon was glaring at you no matter what angle you looked at it from. Sure enough, something about it was intimidating, but in a solemn way. It kind of made me recall Yamana-san's sharp gaze back when I'd first talked to her at McDonald's.

"Let's go see the main hall," Runa suggested, looking disappointed that she hadn't found her friend yet.

Not saying much else, we left the lecture hall and headed to our next destination.

There, we found the figure we'd been after.

We entered the main hall. Built in front of a Japanese-style garden that was

registered as a Special Place of Scenic Beauty of Japan, this hall was an open structure, perhaps to allow for a good view of the garden. The spacious rooms with tatami floors were mostly off-limits. Tourists were to walk on the broad veranda surrounding them instead. Feeling the touch of the wooden floor through our socks, we came to a stop after getting to the part of the veranda that faced the garden.

We sat down there, letting our legs hang off the veranda toward the garden and placing our hands on the floor behind us. As we looked at the scenery, a female Seirin High student who was also looking at the garden came into view. While she had her back toward us, I could tell from the color of her hair and the way she wore her uniform that it was Yamana-san.

In front of me was the magnificent sight of Arashiyama's green trees, as well as a pond with a somehow tranquil feel to it, surrounded by various kinds of trees and rocks.

A Japanese-style garden, the broad veranda of a temple, and a gyaru.

The sight could hardly be any more mismatched, but the impact of having found the person we'd been looking for was so big that I almost shouted out.

“Ah!”

Runa actually did shout, though. She turned to look at me with disbelief written on her face.

“Nicole... There she is...!” she said.

Yamana-san noticed Runa running up to her and turned around. Seeing the two of us, she smiled a little, but it was the smile of someone stricken with grief.

“Seen the dragon yet?” she asked. “Hell of a glare, yeah?”

“Nicole...” Runa sat down next to her, looking exhausted. “I’m so glad, Nicole...”

With tears in her eyes, she threw her arms around Yamana-san. The latter closed her eyes and returned the embrace.

Crouching down next to them, I updated the rest of our group, as well as

Sekiya-san, over LINE. As for why I didn't call instead—it didn't feel right to do so at a temple.

"I was really looking forward to the middle of March," said Yamana-san once the two girls had calmed down and pulled away from each other. "I wanted to be with senpai the whole day. There were so many places I wanted to go with him on dates. All of that just got pushed back a year. The despair was just too much..."

Runa listened to her quietly with a look of worry and pain on her face.

"It's been four months, from November until now. And that was already so hard... And now I'll have to do it for another year. For three times as long as I've already done... I just couldn't take it..." Yamana-san bit her lip and hung her head. "But I hate the thought of breaking up even more... I wanna keep being his girlfriend, but I hate not being able to see him... This is just me being selfish, so I don't wanna force it on him... But that's all I feel right now, so I didn't have anything else to say to him... All I could do was hang up."

Some time into her speech, I realized she was talking about when Sekiya-san had called her earlier.

"It was painful to hear his voice even though we can't be together... It hurt to get messages from him too, so I turned off my phone... I didn't know what to do, so I wanted to be alone for a while...but I didn't want to cause trouble for everyone, so I came here since it's the last place we had to visit today... I guess I did cause trouble after all, though." Yamana-san looked ready to cry. "I'm sorry. I'm such an idiot... I didn't know what I was supposed to do at a time like this... I just had to go and do something stupid, and that caused trouble for everyone..." Tears then began to drip from her eyes.

"We're fine," replied Runa, teary-eyed herself. She drew closer to Yamana-san, as if to shield her from the eyes of passers-by, and patted her back.

Wiping her endless tears with her fingers, Yamana-san continued. "I know it's senpai who has it the worst right now... I hate myself for not being able to tell him right away that I'd wait and that he should do his best for another year... I wanna be a good girlfriend in front of him..."

"I understand, Nicole... It must be painful," said Runa.

And as she comforted Yamana-san...

“Nikki!”

Tanikita-san and Kurose-san showed up. It looked like they'd come running here after I'd told everyone that we'd found Yamana-san.

A bit later, Nisshi and Icchi arrived too.

Nisshi looked relieved upon seeing Yamana-san. “Nicole... I’m so glad.”

“I’m sorry, everyone. I’ve really ruined today’s plans...” Having calmed down by now, Yamana-san looked genuinely apologetic.

To avoid getting in everyone else’s way, we’d proceeded along the garden-viewing route and were now sitting on a bench below the lowest level of the veranda where you could look at the garden from the edge of the building. Of course, we couldn’t all sit down at once, so Icchi and Nisshi, who’d shown up last, were standing.

They were about to stop accepting visitors for the day, so there weren’t many new tourists coming now. Thanks to that, we could gather as a group without minding the eyes around us too much.

“Don’t worry about it! At least one pair went to each place we had to visit in Sagano, so we shouldn’t have problems with our homework,” Runa said cheerfully.

Since this was a school trip, we’d have homework about it over spring break. We’d need to fill the notebooks we’d prepared when studying in advance for the trip with things we thought or noticed after actually visiting each place. Honestly, I doubted any of us could focus on sightseeing while we were here in Sagano, but we *had* come here, so it was probably going to work out fine.

“Anyway, I’m glad you’re safe, Nicole,” Nisshi said, and the girls nodded in response.

Yamana-san gazed at him. “Ren...” The smile she gave him was faint, apologetic, and grateful.

At that point, a figure appeared in the corner of my vision, so I turned my eyes to look. Once I noticed them, I couldn’t tear my eyes away.

*I can't believe it. Why is he here?*

Either way, there was no doubt about it—it was Sekiya-san himself.

Like always, he was dressed casually and had a sling bag hanging diagonally across his torso—nothing fancy. When our eyes met, he nodded, looking a bit uncomfortable.

Noticing that I was staring elsewhere, the rest of my group started following my gaze too, looking one by one.

“Whaaat?!” Runa covered her mouth as she practically screamed.

And when I nervously turned to look further... Naturally, Yamana-san was staring too.

“Senpai...?” She looked dumbfounded, as though she couldn’t process what was happening or figure out if this was even real.

Sekiya-san looked at her for a while and gave her an awkward smile. It looked like he didn’t know where to start.

“Sup.” It was the kind of casual greeting you’d use with a guy friend.

The moment she heard that, Yamana-san opened her eyes wide and got up. She sprinted toward Sekiya-san...and the two embraced each other.

“Senpai...! No way... Is this real?!” Despite being in her boyfriend’s arms, Yamana-san didn’t seem like she could believe what was happening.

“I’m sorry, Yamana.” Resting his head against her neck, Sekiya-san held her tight. “I didn’t give you anything for White Day either. I’m really sorry that this is how I ended up repaying you.”

Pressing her face into his chest, Yamana-san shook her head. “Getting to see you is the best present I could ever ask for...” Her voice cracked from her tears, but she was happy too.

Sekiya-san held her even tighter. “I’m so sorry...Nicole.”

A tear streamed down from one of Yamana-san’s eyes when she heard that. I

could tell from her expression that it was a tear of joy.

Nervously, I glanced over at Nisshi. I did my best to avoid moving my head so he wouldn't notice my gaze.

He had hung his head and was clenching his fists.

A gust of wind blew through Arashiyama all of a sudden, making its trees sway together at once. The trees in the garden began to move too, and ripples spread through the pond.

Perhaps it was the fact that Yamana-san and Sekiya-san were locked in an embrace in front of such a magnificent garden that made this feel like a scene out of a soap opera.

I looked around. Runa had teary eyes and was clearly moved as she watched her friend. Kurose-san and Tanikita-san looked at the two with admiration and hints of sadness in their eyes. Icchi seemed bored and had his eyes on his phone.

Then, Nisshi started walking away, his pace brisk as he passed the garden. He seemed eager to just get out of there.

“Nisshi?” Icchi called out.

Nisshi didn’t look our way and kept on going.

Before I knew it, I was chasing after him.



Not sparing a glance at the garden to his left, Nisshi was walking quickly. He passed by the main hall, then the smaller drawing hall, and followed the narrow path that ran through the garden until he passed through the north gate. That gate was a small entrance located on the opposite side of the one we'd first come through.

Even after leaving Tenryū-ji, Nisshi didn't slow down.

A lush green bamboo thicket appeared ahead of us.

"Wow..." I let out.

I'd seen the bamboo thickets of Sagano in images many times before coming here, but they were still an overwhelming sight up close.

The last sunrays of the day rained down between the bamboo stalks that grew around us as if competing in height. Everything I could see was green. This path was as quiet as they came.

Nisshi walked on and so did I, a bit behind him.

Even after we passed the thicket, Nisshi didn't stop.

All temples and shrines would stop accepting visitors around this hour. Not many people could be seen on this country road, which felt more like a footpath between rice fields.

I couldn't tell if he knew where he was going or if I was following him. There was no hesitation in his step. For some reason, I didn't have it in me to call out to the small figure ahead of me that I knew so well, so all I could do was follow.

I wondered how long we'd been walking. Thirty minutes? Maybe almost an hour? The sun began to set, rapidly losing its brightness.

At a small road with a good view of a wide, desolate field, Nisshi stopped. I did too, a few meters behind him.

There were trees growing past the field and a mountain rose up behind them. The few buildings I could see along the road were Japanese-style detached houses one or two stories high—I couldn't tell if they were residential houses or temples. As far as the eye could see, we were surrounded by silent nature.

“The wish I wrote on that ema yesterday was to go out with Nicole. Looks like that did nothing at all,” began Nisshi with his back turned to me. “She gave me cookies, even if they weren’t homemade. As a thanks for White Day, apparently. I feel like an idiot for getting my hopes up from that.”

It appeared he had, in fact, noticed that I’d followed him.

Suddenly, I remembered the call I’d received from Sekiya-san. I hadn’t realized it at the time, but the train on the other end of the line must’ve been so loud because it was on the shinkansen.

“A boyfriend can show up empty-handed. You saw how happy that made her,” Nisshi went on.

I wanted to say something to him, but nothing tactful came to mind. Before I could think of anything, Nisshi continued.

“I would’ve been fine with anyone until a short while ago. I’d date any girl as long as she was cute.” He drooped his shoulders. “I wonder how it ended up like this... It *has* to be Nicole for me now... Looking at other girls doesn’t do anything for me anymore.”

Nisshi looked behind him just a bit, letting me see his face from the side. His expression was full of misery.

“Nicole probably feels this way too. Toward her ‘senpai’...”

It was hard to look at his smile—it seemed to indicate resignation or self-deprecation.

“It’s not that it couldn’t be me... I’m pretty sure it’s just that it couldn’t be anyone but him.” His face was full of his feelings for Yamana-san. “I want to go back to my old self. To wipe my memory and go back to before I fell in love with her.”

“Is that what you really want?”

But the moment I asked that, I thought it was an insensitive question.

If, by some chance, something were to happen between me and Runa, I wouldn’t want to forget my love for her. I wouldn’t want to forget, though it would’ve made things easier if I *could* forget in the first place.

A gust of wind blew past us, making the mountain trees and the field of grass rustle all at once.

Before I had realized it, our surroundings had grown a bit dark. The whole scene was losing clarity. The trees, the fields, the road, the figures walking in the distance—all of it was fading into darkness quicker than the sky was.

This might've been the first sunset that had made me feel so uneasy. It was then that I noticed there weren't any streetlamps around.

The word “ōmagatoki” came to mind—twilight was said to be the time when evil spirits could cross over into our world. I felt an instinctive fear of the dark.

It was a primordial dusk. Without a doubt, true night was about to set in in this area.

I really wanted to see Runa right now.

Nisshi wasn't going anywhere from this dark road, however. I was about to call out to him, but then he spoke first.

“Nobody needs me... I wish the night would just swallow me up so I could disappear...” He sounded crushed with grief.

“Nisshi...”

It wasn't true that nobody needed him. He was one of my few precious friends. He was a unique existence, and there wasn't anyone else like him in the world.

But that probably wasn't what he wanted to hear right now. At this moment, Yamana-san was his whole world—if she didn't want him, he didn't care about anything else.

I was like that too. If Runa were to disappear from my life, that would be as good as the end of the world for me.

Which was why I just knew that there was nothing I could say to him now.

“That guy was so tall,” Nisshi said.

I figured he was talking about Sekiya-san.

“He wants to be a doctor, right? And that's because his father's a doctor

too?"

"Yeah."

"I wonder if there's even one thing I could beat him at..."

I knew plenty of good things about Nisshi, but it wasn't like this was about winning or losing due to one's qualities.

He was sensitive and easily hurt, which made him fearful of strangers and prone to retreating into his shell. But he loved fun and would observe the world with large eyes full of curiosity and wariness, even if his perspective was a little bit skewed. I could tell because some of that applied to me too. That was why we were friends.

He was different from Sekiya-san, but I liked both of them. It was probably why Yamana-san was friends with Nisshi too.

I couldn't tell if he'd ever stood a chance with her in a romantic sense, though. And that was what was important to Nisshi right now, so I couldn't give him any thoughtless consolation.

In the end, the only thing I managed to say was...

"Let's go back to the hotel and watch KEN's uploads from today."

That line was unserious, but maybe Nisshi could tell how I felt.

"Yeah, you're right," he said, finally turning around and looking at me with a smile.

And so, Nisshi and I started to walk back through the dark and desolate countryside, not talking much on the way.

## Chapter 3.5: Love Talk in a Girls' Room

"Senpai was so amazing! When he heard I disappeared, he came to Kyoto 'cause he was worried about me! The teacher got really mad, but I didn't care at all 'cause I got to see him!"

That evening in the room after lights-out, Nicole was twisting around in her futon, clinging to the bedding.

"Ahh, I really wanted to be with him longerrrr!"

"You'll get to see him again tomorrow, right? Good thing he's staying in Kyoto," Runa said, lying on her futon next to Nicole. She was watching her friend with a smile.

"But I miss him already..."

Lying on a futon on the opposite side, Akari lifted her head. "And now *you're* all obsessed with romance! That's so nice... I want a boyfriend too!"

"Huh, that's unusual," Nicole said.

"For her to say that? Totally," added Runa.

"Time for some love talk, then."

The futons in the room had been placed in pairs against each other. At Nicole's command, each girl rolled over onto her stomach. Then, everyone brought their faces close together.

"I mean, it's just *me* now. Not having a boyfriend. Honestly, I'm jelly watching everyone be all sweet with their guys."

"I don't have one either," Maria said shyly from next to Akari.

"You could get one as soon as tomorrow if you put your mind to it, Mia!" replied Akari. "Are your standards too high? Are you not gonna date anyone unless he's tall and good-looking? Does he have to be some kinda perfect super guy?"

“Not at all,” Maria replied with a faint smile. “The boy I liked until recently... He was ordinary.” Her smile turned into a nostalgic one. “But he had a girlfriend.”

Runa’s face clouded over at that, but Akari didn’t notice.

“Ehh? I’m pretty sure you could just steal him from her. All guys like girls like you,” Akari said.

Maria smiled again and shook her head. “No, he rejected me. He treasured his girlfriend.”

“Wow, seriously?”

“But there was something I realized after it was all over: I was in love with a boy who treasured his girlfriend.” Maria spoke haltingly while Runa looked on with pain written on her face. “I was jealous of her. I admired how he loved her and wished that a boy could love me like that too... Before I knew it, I fell more and more in love with him. But that’s not a healthy relationship at all, though, is it?” she said with a smile and without any trace of her putting on a brave front whatsoever. “So, next time... I want a real love, one that’s between just me and my boyfriend.”

Runa smiled at that.

Nicole seemed lost in thought. “I wonder what real love is...” she uttered.

“Remind me, Nikki, how’d you fall in love with your senpai?” asked Akari.

“Hm? When I joined the ping-pong club and said hi to everyone for the first time, I thought he was kinda my type. He was fun to talk to and we were on the same wavelength, so I kinda fell in love with him more and more over time...”

“Wow, that’s amazing! Isn’t that what they call a fated partner?!”

“That’s what I’m hoping, at least.”

“Man, that’s so nice!” Akari wasn’t hiding the envy in her voice at all. “Ah, where’s my fated partner?!”

“What about Ijichi-kun?” Runa asked.

Akari’s face cycled through a hundred expressions in an instant. “There’s just

no waaay! I can't possibly go confess to him, so I'm kinda satisfied just watching! Like, there's a difference between admiration and love, you know...?"

"What if Ijichi-kun starts going out with some other girl while you're like that?"

"I reeeeally couldn't take that either! I can't let him belong to someone else!"

"Then your only option is to date him yourself," said Nicole. "His looks aren't all that bad if you think about it, and he's tall. Sure, maybe girls will stay away from him for a while because he's geeky, but eventually, someone will take him."

"What the hell! I can't take iiit... I could die just thinking about iiit!"

"Then do something already."

"I caaan't! I'm definitely not his fated partner..."

Burying her face in her pillow, Akari thrashed her legs up and down against her bedding.

"And anyway, are these 'fated partners' decided from the start?" asked Runa. "You could start with a 'he's kinda nice,' but then you can both decide that you're made for each other and cultivate those feelings together... Maybe you'll clash at first and some things won't go so well, but eventually... I feel like that's what real love is. You gradually approach each other and grow into each other's 'fated partner.'"

Seeing Runa's bashful and happy smile, Nicole and Akari exchanged looks.

"So...you're just talking about your wonderful love life, yeah?" said Nicole.

"This is why I hate girls with boyfriends!!!" added Akari.

"Hey, Akari-chan, you've been too loud for a while now. The teacher might come."

Maria's warning made Akari cover her mouth as though she'd forgotten all about the need to keep things quiet until now. When she made sure that nobody was coming, a look of relief appeared on her face.

The conversation in this room wouldn't be ending anytime soon.

# Chapter 4

The next morning, we went to Osaka. We all visited Osaka Castle together and then split into our usual groups to see other sights in the afternoon.

Our group's plan was to go to the Namba district. There, after having lunch, we'd hang around Dōtonbori and Shinsaibashi, go look at Tsūtenkaku, and then make our way to our hotel.

Apparently, our teachers only really cared about visiting Kyoto during this trip. But for many of my fellow students, places like Osaka and Kobe were *the* destinations of choice. Of course, suggestions like going to a theme park had been rejected.

"Oh look, it's the Glico running man!" exclaimed Runa.

"Runa, you're making the 'inochi' kanji instead of doing the pose," I said.

"Huh?!"

"You gotta raise your hands more, like this!" said Tanikita-san.

"Heh heh, I got that on camera. 'Inochi Glico,'" Kurose-san teased.

"Stop that, Mariaaa! Take another pic!"

After we took photos of each other doing the obligatory pose at the Ebisubashi Bridge in Dōtonbori, we went into a nearby okonomiyaki place.

Sitting at a table with an iron plate, we were preoccupied with watching the chef cook okonomiyaki in front of us.

With the exception of two people in our group, that is.

"Hey, senpai, how long will you be here for?"

"Well, since I came all the way out here, I'll stay for two more days. It's a good change of pace too."

"Seriously?! I'm so happy! Can you afford the hotel, though? You'll still have to pay for the shinkansen ride back, and you've bought clothes and stuff..."

“I have a credit card, though my dad will get angry if I use it too much.”

“Wow, that’s amazing, you’re an adult and all! ≡”

We’d met up with Sekiya-san earlier today after we’d split up into groups. At one corner of our table, Yamana-san and Sekiya-san were off in their own little world. Yamana-san clung to his arm and didn’t so much as glance at the okonomiyaki.

I, however, was worried about Nisshi. He was currently watching the okonomiyaki cook together with Icchi, but there was no way Yamana-san wasn’t on his mind.

All eight of us were sitting together at a table for six. Frankly, it was rather cramped. This was a popular place that was full of people and you couldn’t reserve tables here. We’d figured we could squeeze together on the bench seats somehow, so when we’d found an unoccupied table, we’d gone for it, knowing it would be a tight squeeze.

“A-Are you okay, Runa...? Do you have enough room?” I asked, minding the eyes of my friends.

The two of us were sitting on one side with Icchi and Nisshi. Our bench must’ve been more cramped than the one on the other side of the table since three of the people sitting on that side were girls.

“Y-Yeah, I’m okay...” she replied, but then she drew near me. “Can I move closer?”

“S-Sure, of course...”

I faked calmness, but on the inside, my heart skipped a beat as our hips touched. Our arms brushed against each other every time we moved them too. Maybe I should’ve just moved closer to Icchi, but somehow, I couldn’t bring myself to do it. I sat still instead.

The okonomiyaki on the iron plate steadily approached completion. The batter was currently baking under a silver, dome-like lid.

My face was hot—I wasn’t sure if it was the heat from the iron plate or Runa’s warmth. Sneaking a peek beside me, I saw that Runa’s face was red too.

The sizzling okonomiyaki made me feel hotter. I could feel that half of the senses in my body were focused on Runa.

Trying to distract myself, I spoke up to Tanikita-san, who was sitting across from us. “B-By the way, this place is really nice. How did you find it?”

She was the one who’d brought us here, claiming the okonomiyaki here was good.

This place, with its narrow frontage, was lively and constantly full of customers. The chef looked the type to take pride in his work and skillfully moved his hands as he cooked silently. I had high hopes the food would be delicious.

“Oh, I came here a few times when I was in middle school,” Tanikita-san replied nonchalantly.

“What?! You went to Osaka in middle school?!”

“Akari was a fan of an idol group from Kansai,” said Runa.

“Yep! There were a lot of concerts and things they did only here, so I’d come on night buses.”

“Wow... Going that far as a middle schooler...” I said.

“Yeah, I was super into it. Practiced Kansai dialect real hard too.”

“So *that’s* why you use it every now and then,” said Kurose-san, looking like she’d found the answer to something she’d been wondering about.

“Oh yeah, I asked Akari about it too, so I already knew,” Runa said.

Then, she and Kurose-san looked at each other and smiled. These sisters were on great terms already.

“Your meal is ready,” said the chef once our okonomiyaki were done.

We’d ordered several different kinds, so we cut them into pieces and shared with each other.

“This is great! Like, seriously!” exclaimed Runa.

Tanikita-san looked proud of herself. “I know, right? The yam in it makes it melt in your mouth.”

“Senpai, say ‘ah.’” Yamana-san was trying to feed Sekiya-san.

“It’s too hot, it’s still hot!” he replied.

“Oh, sorryyy!” She hurriedly blew on the okonomiyaki and fed it to him afterward. “Now do the same for me too. ”

“Wow... You don’t mind doing this in front of your friends?”

“But we won’t be able to see each other after you go back to Tokyo, will we? They all understand.”

Seeing Yamana-san become dejected in an instant, Sekiya-san gave in and picked up a spatula—we were using them instead of chopsticks.

Yamana-san held her mouth open. “Aah.”

Sekiya-san started feeding her some okonomiyaki. While she obviously looked happy, Sekiya-san had a gentle look on his face. I never saw him look like that at cram school. The expression on his face was heartwarming and it kind of felt like I shouldn’t be seeing it, so I averted my eyes.

At that point, Runa’s profile entered my vision. She’d stopped eating for the moment and was looking at the two in front of her with envy and fascination in her eyes. Her mouth dangled open too.

I stopped my hand as I carried my food to my mouth.

“R-Runa?” I asked quietly.

She looked at me, appearing to have been caught off guard. “Huuh?!”

“W-Would you like to...do that too?” I asked hesitantly.

Runa’s face brightened up in an instant. “Y-Yeah!”

She happily turned toward me and opened her mouth. Her eyes glistened as she looked at me. Her mouth hung open in a silly way, but it just felt like it wanted something other than okonomiyaki...

I gulped involuntarily.

It was probably just my virgin mind and I had everything wrong—or at least that was what I’d been convincing myself of every time I’d had that thought... But Runa sure had been sexy lately.

Like that time at the movie theater and later on our way back, for instance, when the look on her face suddenly felt seductive.

Then again, it wasn't like I could do anything weird here—we were smushed together on a seat for four at an okonomiyaki place. So, I simply carried the meal to Runa's mouth.

"Deeelish! ≡" she said with a radiant smile.

Our bodies were still touching in places, and those parts started to feel hot again... I picked up a glass of water—damp with condensation due to the heat coming from the iron plate—and downed it in one go, including the partially melted ice in it.

We'd finished our meals and were talking about how to handle the bill.

"Oh, let me take that," Sekiya-san said. "I showed up out of the blue and gave you stuff to worry about, so let me treat you at least once."

Tanikita-san instantly erupted with joy. "What, seriously?! You rock, Sekiya-san!"

"Okay... I'll take you up on that. Thank you."

Grateful, we put away our wallets too. But at that point...

"I'll pay. And..." Nisshi was the only one to put cash on the table—three thousand yen and some change. "This is my and Nicole's share."

Sekiya-san looked at him, going stiff for a bit.

"Your share is enough," he said. He took two of the thousand-yen bills, added some change from his own wallet to the pile, and held the rest out to Nisshi.

Nisshi bit his lip as he took the returned money and put it back in his wallet.

As for Yamana-san, she didn't see this exchange—she'd gone to the bathroom earlier.

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And so, sightseeing that day ended without incident and we spent the night in Osaka.

The following morning, we set off from the hotel to go to Kobe and everyone on our school trip went to the Kitano-chō district together.

Kitano-chō had rows of mansions with a historic air to them that stood along a road with numerous slopes. All the other buildings here were fancy too. It was just the kind of area you'd expect girls to want to take photos in because "the background would look nice."

"Senpai! Look how neat that house is!" Yamana-san was still clinging to Sekiya-san. "And man, these hills are such a pain!"

"It's almost over. Want me to pull you?"

"Love ya. ≡"

The two lovebirds were starting to get on my nerves. It felt like they were even more all over each other now than they'd been at that aquarium. Mainly Yamana-san.

And Runa was looking at them...with her mouth half-open again. There was envy in her eyes, and it felt like drool could come out her mouth at any moment.

"R-Runa?" I couldn't help but say something since she was being like that. "Is it too hilly? Do you want to hold my hand?"

Happiness spreading through her face, Runa nodded vigorously. "Yeah!" She looked so full of joy that if she were a dog, she'd surely be wagging her tail left and right.

I bashfully held out my hand, but it was only after Runa had taken it that I realized I'd offered her my right hand.

"Oh... S-Sorry," I said.

"Hm?" Runa didn't seem to catch on as she walked up the slope.

"That's my right hand..."

She blushed at my words. It seemed that she hadn't forgotten about the conversation we'd had the day before this school trip when we'd been on our way back from the movie theater.

“So, that means...” she began.

I released her hand and was about to pull mine away when, suddenly, Runa gripped it really tight. Looking over at her, I saw her hang her head. Her face was red like a tomato.

“It’s...okay...” she said, as if barely managing to get the words out.

“Wh...”

*What...? Really...?!*

*If a girl is okay holding a guy’s right hand, knowing he uses it as an outlet for his lust... Never mind, I must be overthinking it. Why would this mean Runa has an interest in having sex with me?*

Still blushing, she remained silent as we walked along the hilly road. Her grip on my right hand was strong. I couldn’t tell if her face was flushed because she was tired, embarrassed, or even...aroused.

With those thoughts going through my head, we reached the Uroko House at the top of a hill. It was a fancy, two-story Western-style house. As the name suggested, its exterior walls were covered in tiles that were shaped like scales —“uroko” in Japanese. Apparently, they were made from natural slate.

It had two beautiful round towers that particularly stood out, and their roofs looked like semispherical hats. There was a garden too, with well-maintained greenery. Behind the house was a mountain full of trees.

Runa looked around the garden and at the outside of the house. “Wow, this is amazing! I wish I could live in a place like this!” she exclaimed cheerfully.

While I found her innocence cute, I also felt apologetic.

“Well, it would be difficult for me to make that happen...” I said. “Sorry...”

“Huh?” Runa looked at me. She thought for a moment but then smiled broadly, appearing to have caught my drift. “Oh, don’t worry about it. I just felt like saying that.” She laughed and then smiled a bit bashfully. “What’s even more amazing to me...is to be with you, Ryuto.”

“Runa...”

As I got flustered, she drew a bit closer to me.

“I think I’d prefer a house that isn’t too big, since we can be closer that way,” she said with a mischievous smile.

Seeing that, I recalled how close we’d sat at that okonomiyaki place the day before. The sensation of Runa against my side came back to me, making my body heat up.

As my heart raced, we went inside the house and started looking around. And when we took the stairs to the second floor...

“Hey, check out this view, Runy!” exclaimed Tanikita-san as she turned around. She was standing by a window together with Kurose-san.

“Wow... This is amazing!” Runa said when she got to the window.

I followed her and stood beside her.

Considering how long we’d spent going up the hilly road to get here, the view from the window was thrilling. You could see the houses downhill, the high-rises in the direction of the port, and the sea behind them. It probably wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say you could see all of Kobe from here. And since the skies were clear this morning, the view was magnificent.

“It’s crazy! I didn’t realize this house was so high up!” Runa was in awe, glued to the window. “You can see all kinds of houses from up here. It feels so strange... We’re so far from Tokyo, but this kinda reminds me of it.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” I replied.

“If I could really live in one of these houses, I’d go for that one! I’ve always had a room on the first or the second floor, so I’d want to live in a house where my room would have a view of the sea.” Runa had an innocent smile on her face as she pointed at a house with many stories near the port.

I was sure she wasn’t giving it much thought, but a multistory house in the vicinity of Tokyo with a view of the bay would probably cost a ton. I really did need to get into a good college and work hard to make money.

I suddenly remembered something. “By the way, what did you write on your career aspiration survey?” I asked.

We hadn't met up much before the trip and I realized she'd never actually told me.

Looking at me for a bit, Runa directed her eyes at the scenery outside the window once again.

"I wrote that I was thinking about it. And that I won't be going to college." She smiled. "You know how I hate studying? It feels like, if I did go somewhere I could get into with no big goal in mind, it would just be an extension of high school. I'd be putting off making a choice about what to do with my life."

"I see..."

"The other day, when you told me what Sekiya-san had said to you... It really hit home. That whole thing about just doing something first and looking for a different path if that doesn't work."

"Ah..."

Once again, I couldn't help but think I should've told her that I'd come up with that myself.

"So, for now, I wanna do *something*." Runa hung her head a bit, but there was a smile on her face. When her eyes met mine, she shyly averted hers. "And so there's this thing I've been doing... Just started it, actually. I guess you could say it's encouraged me even more."

"Huh? What is it?"

"It's a secret. You might find out really soon, though."

Seeing her giggle mischievously, I figured this was about her part-time job at the cake shop.

"Okay." I pretended not to have any idea of what she was talking about.  
"Looking forward to it."

"Uh-huh! Please do!" Runa smiled happily. She then looked back at the picturesque scene outside the window with a relaxed expression on her face. "No matter what we end up like as adults..." she began, as if her mind was focusing on something far away, like the horizon beyond the sea. "I hope we can always be together while looking at something so wonderful."

Our eyes met as she smiled bashfully.

“I hope so too,” I said. My heart was filled to the brim with gentle feelings.

More and more visitors kept coming into the house, and the other members of our group were here too—but for a moment, it felt like Runa and I were the only people in this world.

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After that, we visited a few other houses in the area before heading elsewhere.

As we walked, Yamana-san was still all over Sekiya-san, clinging to his arm.

“Senpaaai! ≡ What did you wish for when you sat on Saturn’s Chair?” she asked him.

“To get into college next year—what else?”

“Ehh? That’s it?”

“Well, if I get in, then I can be with you,” he said.

“Oh, senpai! ≡ I love you! ≡”

But as Yamana-san started melting over her boyfriend’s unexpected display of affection...we ran into a male teacher from our school on the road.

“Yamana! Who is that boy?!” he called out.

Although the students had split into several different groups, that had only happened after we’d gotten to Kitano-chō, and almost all of the students on our trip were taking predetermined routes to wherever they were visiting. Apparently, some of our teachers were keeping watch in this area.

“Sorry, sensei!” replied Yamana-san.

“You run off from your group, you pick up boys, you break school rules in regards to your appearance... You’re such a problem student!”

Yamana-san stepped away from Sekiya-san in a hurry, but the teacher kept scolding her from behind us.

“Guess we gotta be on guard today...” Runa said fretfully to her friend,

sensing the teacher's gaze from far away. She also looked at Sekiya-san, who now walked ahead of us.

"This is really pissing me off!" grumbled Yamana-san, looking behind her. "I've never 'picked anyone up' to begin with. He's just assuming that from my looks, 'cause I'm a gyaru... This is my boyfriend and all."

And so, we left Kitano-chō and headed to Nankin-machi—Kobe's Chinatown—to get lunch.

However...

"Yamana-san, who is that?! Don't go picking up boys on a school trip!"

As we walked and ate meat buns, we ran into the teacher in charge of Class A who was on patrol. Yamana-san separated herself from Sekiya-san again, and once we got out of Nankin-machi, went right back to clinging to him once more.

"Seeenpai! ≡"

But then, as the girls walked through Kobe Harborland next to the sea, bubble tea in hand...

"Yamana-san from Class A?! What are you doing?! Are you picking up boys?!"

We ran into the head teacher for our grade.

"What a pain in the ass..."

Forced to separate from Sekiya-san for a third time, Yamana-san's face looked like a zombie's as she walked through the docks.

In front of us was the blue sea and a large white pleasure boat that had been moored there. The symbolic Port Tower and Ferris wheel made the area look fun, but with Yamana-san's rare time together with Sekiya-san getting interrupted over and over, the sight seemed to bring her nothing but gloom.

"What the hell. Just kill me already..." she grumbled.

Runa went over to her friend. "Everyone's visiting places around Sannomiya, so we're on the same route as them. No wonder the teachers are here," she said.

"Maybe we should've gone to Arima Onsen if things were going to be like

this?" Kurose-san said.

"Well, it's not like we knew Nikki's senpai would come when we planned out our route, so what can you do?" added Tanikita-san.

The two of them were sipping at their bubble tea.

"And anyway, why're they all assuming *I'm* the one picking someone up?! Even if, for the sake of the argument, somebody *did* pick somebody else up, what—they can't imagine that I'd be the one on the receiving end?!"

"That's because of your usual nonconformism, Nikki," said Tanikita-san.

"I don't wanna hear that from someone who gets scolded for her hair color all the time."

"My ears aren't pierced, at least. And I keep my nails and makeup to a minimum at school."

"Well, we're gyaru, so of course they'll pin stuff on us when something happens," Runa said with a cheerful smile, managing to salvage the mood.

Nonetheless, it didn't change the fact that it had become difficult for Yamana-san to be with Sekiya-san.

"Anyway, Nikki, there's a super good place for taking pics over there. Let's go check it out," Tanikita-san suggested.

"Sounds good! Let's go, Nicole!" added Runa.

"There's a monument over there too that would probably make a nice background."

"Oh, thanks, Maria! Let's go there too!"

As the girls tried to cheer up Yamana-san, I approached Sekiya-san.

Incidentally, Nisshi had been walking around with Icchi all day today. Icchi seemed glad about it too, since it let him avoid having to deal with Tanikita-san. The two were currently sitting on a bench in the shade near the docks. They were probably talking about KEN's videos or something.

"Sorry, I guess, Ryuto," Sekiya-san said once I had gotten close to him.

Seeing Sekiya-san being so unusually apologetic made me feel humble too.

“I’m the one who should apologize...” I said. “You came all the way out here, but we couldn’t set you up on a date with Yamana-san...”

“Nah, I came here of my own accord. And it’s only natural that your teachers would get angry if they saw Yamana walking with an outsider at a school event.”

Sekiya-san seemed to be sorry about the mood of our group sinking since Yamana-san was feeling down.

“By the way, I wonder why they’re not yelling at me at all for talking to you,” I said.

The head teacher who’d scolded Yamana-san earlier was looking our way, but they didn’t seem to plan on saying anything else.

“Well, it’s probably mostly because of Yamana’s lifestyle,” Sekiya-san suggested. “Also maybe they think it’s sexual if it’s a boy and a girl, but if it’s two guys? They’ll think you’re simply getting to know the locals.”

“I guess Japanese society is still full of subconscious prejudices...”

We roamed the docks talking about that until the girls’d had their fill. We strolled about the former foreign settlement area for a bit until it got dark and finally went back to the hotel in Meriken Park.

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The hotel’s restaurant had a view of the city at night. After having dinner there at an all-you-can-eat buffet, we split up by gender and were about to head back to our rooms.

Runa slyly called out to me. “Hey, Ryuto.”

“Hm?”

I had already been in the hallway, but I told Icchi to go on without me and returned to the restaurant’s entrance. There, I saw the four girls standing with serious looks on their faces as they had their eyes on me.

“We wondered if you’d do something for us, Ryuto...” Runa said as if representing the rest of the girls. She brought her hands together in a pleading manner.

“Wh-What is it?”

I started to get cold feet from the unusually serious mood, and Runa said something unbelievable.

“We want you to sleep in our room tonight.”

I needed a moment to process what she’d just said.

“Whaaat?!” I yelled. “Y-You can’t be serious, right? I-In a girls’ room...?”

“Keep it down, Kashima-kun!”

“Shut up!”

Kurose-san and Tanikita-san lashed out at me at the same time. Our classmates didn’t know what we were talking about—they looked at us with curiosity as our group stood around talking in a weird place before heading to their own rooms.

“We wanna let Nicole go to Sekiya-san’s room,” explained Runa, her voice significantly quieter now. “We felt so bad for her because of what happened earlier today... And this is the last night of the trip. Might as well take advantage of the fact Sekiya-san is staying in the same hotel...”

I recalled that Sekiya-san had just let me know he was staying here too since there had been rooms available.

“We want you to take Nikki’s place and sleep in her bed,” said Tanikita-san.

I was amazed. “Wh-Why me?!” I asked.

“Well, Nishina-kun would be the best option given his height and figure, but it’d be way too cruel to ask him to take Nikki’s place so she can spend the night with her boyfriend.”

“Yeah, that’s true...”

*Wait, Tanikita-san already knows about Nisshi’s unrequited love? Then again, there’ve been several opportunities on this trip alone for her to notice it.*

“And Ijichi-kun is too big, of course,” added Runa.

Tanikita-san covered her face and squealed. “There’s no way I could sleep in the same room with him! I wouldn’t be able to fall asleep!”

“Spending the night somewhere else is totally against the rules, so we can’t ask anyone from another group to help,” Kurose-san added with a brooding look on her face.

Technically, Nisshi wasn’t even part of our group, so I supposed the choices had been limited to me and Icchi from the start.

As for Yamana-san herself, she was hanging her head and blushing. Was she imagining her first night together with Sekiya-san, which would probably become reality if I accepted their request?

“B-But if I’m not in my room all night, wouldn’t the teachers on patrol of the boys’ rooms find out?”

Tanikita-san seemed completely unconcerned. “You can just put something under the blanket and make it look like someone’s sleeping there. Should be good enough, no?”

“Then why not do the same with Yamana-san’s bed?”

“The teachers have been strict with us after all the noise we made on the first night,” Kurose-san explained.

Tanikita-san nodded. “Exactly. They go over to everybody and point a flashlight at their face to make sure they’re really in bed. It wakes us up every time...”

That *did* seem to be more strict than we’d had it on the boys’ floor. I’d never noticed such patrols, though maybe I’d just been fast asleep after getting tired out during the day.

“And they’ll really have their eyes on Nikki after today, so they’ll probably be super strict tonight,” Tanikita-san added.

“But wait, if they point a flashlight at everyone’s faces, won’t they see that it’s me...?”

“It’ll probably be fine if you wear a wig and hide under the blanket a bit,” Runa said.

“I doubt they’d go so far as to pull your blanket away to check your face,” added Kurose-san.

“And it just so happens that one of the wigs I’ve brought with me looks like Nikki’s hair! The ends don’t have a different color, but I’m sure they won’t look that closely,” Tanikita-san said.

With all of them ganging up on me, I could no longer talk my way out of this.

“Please, Ryuto...”

Runa gazed at me with those upturned eyes like she was using a finishing move. No matter how much I wanted to, I just couldn’t say no.

“You know how she couldn’t spend much time with him today? And he’ll leave tomorrow. After that, they’ll barely see each other for another year ‘cause he’ll be busy studying for his entrance exams. I want them to make some memories while they can.”

Runa’s eyes glistened with her love for her best friend. It looked so sexy...but this wasn’t the time or place to have such thoughts.

“Umm... So, is Sekiya-san okay with this...?” I asked as my final attempt at resistance.

“What do you mean?”

“Is he okay with Yamana-san spending the night in his room...?”

At the end of our double date, Sekiya-san had staunchly rejected Yamana-san’s forceful advances and had put distance between them because it would interfere with his studies. I could just imagine him sending her away coldly even if she went to his room.

“Oh, that won’t be a problem!” Tanikita-san said. “I paid him a visit earlier and got his approval.”

*Well, that’s anticlimactic.*

“R-Really?” I asked.

“Yeah. He’s cool with it.”

“Okay...”

I remembered that time on the classroom balcony when she’d pressed me to tail Runa.

*“So, are you coming or not?! DO IT!”*

Perhaps Sekiya-san had ended up on the receiving end of that weirdly intense shout too.

“Anyway, he won’t mind,” she insisted. “So all we need is for you to come to our room.”

“I see...”

Three of the girls aimed their pleading gazes at me. Compared to theirs, Yamana-san’s was shy and apologetic, but it also suggested that she’d hit me if I turned them down.

After about ten seconds of deliberation...

“O-Okay.”

In the end, I had no choice but to accept.

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I headed to their room shortly before lights-out. When I got there, Tanikita-san put a wig on me right away.

“Hey, you look more convincing than I thought!” she exclaimed.

Yamana-san had taken advantage of the girls’ hectic preparations for sleep long ago and had already sneaked out to Sekiya-san’s room.

“This is nice, Ryuto. You look cute!” Runa was happy to see me wearing the wig.

“Kashima-kun has a kind face, after all. He’s suited for cross-dressing, but I’m not sure his face has the right vibe to let him be Nikki’s double,” said Tanikita-san.

“How about we add some makeup, then?” Kurose-san suggested.

“Hey, that’s a good idea!”

“P-Please no...!”

*I’m not into that kind of thing!*

After I managed to avoid having them put makeup on me, they secured my wig so that it wouldn't slip off even after I lay down. I slipped into the bed just before lights-out.

"Tanikita-san, are you sure you're okay sleeping there?" I asked.

She was lying on the extra bed near the foot of mine.

This was a room designed for three and had a line of three single beds. A fourth smaller bed had been brought in, replacing a couch. Considering the "ladies first" principle, I figured that I was the one who would be sleeping in the extra bed...

"Yeah, don't worry about it," Tanikita-san said. "I'm small and all. And I don't really care what kind of bed I have 'cause I sleep on a futon at home."

She was simple in unexpected ways sometimes. It felt like this was something she had in common with Icchi.

*Maybe it actually would go well if they started dating...*

"Okay..." I replied as I lay back down. My voice was unintentionally shrill.

I couldn't calm down at all. Especially considering that...

"Good night, Ryuto."

Right in front of me, Runa was in her bed, smiling.



“Good night, Kashima-kun,” came Kurose-san’s voice from behind me.

“Y-Yeah, good night...” I replied, facing mostly the ceiling before I turned toward Runa again.

I could concede that it was okay for Tanikita-san to be the one who slept on the extra bed here. But, of all things...why was I the one sleeping in the middle of this so-called triple bed? I set off on a long quest in search of the truth inside my mind...but I realized this wasn’t the time for escapism.

*“I’ll sleep closest to the door. It’s easy to see who’s in that spot, so they’d find out right away if you were there.”*

*“You should sleep in the middle, Kashima-kun. The way human psychology works is that they’ll check the first and the last beds carefully, but for the middle one, it should be good enough if there’s just someone lying there.”*

“Yeah! You’re so smart, Mia!”

That was how it had been decided.

Runa gazed at me without a word and then giggled. “We’re kinda close...” she said. She then blushed with a mix of awkwardness and happiness on her face.

That’s right—we were all close to each other on this “triple bed.” There was barely enough space for a person to stand between each mattress, so you could turn to your side and find someone’s face right next to yours.

Runa was just that close to me. We lay side by side, our eyes at the same level. We’d been like this at that ryokan in Enoshima too, but she was so much cuter now... Okay, she’d been adorable from the start, but, like, the looks on her face? The way she carried herself and her reactions to what I did...? Everything about her had become cuter.

If we’d been alone here, my self-control would surely have been defeated long ago.

Also, the fact I was so close to Runa also meant that Kurose-san was right there on my other side... The thought of it made my back itch a bit.

“Is everyone good? Can I turn off the light?” asked Kurose-san.

"Yeah, thanks!" replied Runa.

Kurose-san seemed to flip a switch next to her bed and the light went out. Darkness settled in, and the only thing I could hear was the rustling of clothes...

The fragrance of the three girls' shampoo, some kind of cream they'd put on their skin before going to bed, and the lingering scent of Yamana-san—they all mixed together and made me feel like I was in a girls' changing room. I'd never been in one, but this was probably what it was like.

My heart wouldn't stop pounding and I couldn't calm down. There was no way I could fall asleep quickly in a place like this.

Judging by their breathing, the first one to fall asleep was Tanikita-san, near my feet. Next, I watched Runa fall asleep in front of my eyes. From behind me, I could hear the rustling of clothes every now and then as Kurose-san turned over in her bed. Since she wasn't asleep, I couldn't possibly turn around.

And so I kept my breathing quiet as I lay facing Runa. Eventually, the fatigue from having walked around all day came over me, and before I knew it, it became difficult to keep my eyes open.

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When I woke up, it was still dark in the room. At some point, I'd turned onto my back. I looked at the curtains and saw that there was no light coming through the gaps yet.

Kurose-san was wrapped up in her blanket, her back toward me. The only part of her that I could see was her long black hair. She seemed to be asleep by now—I could hear regular, deep breaths coming from her.

My phone was charging next to my pillow, and I checked it to see the time. It was 2 a.m., which was a weird time to wake up. I was about to close my eyes once more when...

"Huh?" I let out, unintentionally loudly.

Runa's bed was empty.

At first, I thought she'd gone to the bathroom, but the lights weren't on in

there.

The teachers had the keys to this room, so there was no way she could've simply left while her roommates were asleep. That must've meant...

Pulling away the curtains, I found Runa on the balcony, as I'd expected.

This hotel was on the water, and every guest room had a balcony. Being able to enjoy a gorgeous night view was its selling point.

Runa had her arms on the handrail and was leaning on it as she looked absentmindedly at the port and the high-rises. The light from them illuminated the night.

I opened the door and called out to her. "Runa?"

She turned toward me. "Ryuto. Did I wake you up?"

"No... I don't know why I woke up."

"Me neither."

Putting on slippers made for wearing on the balcony, I stepped outside. I didn't want to wake Kurose-san up with our conversation, so I closed the door behind me. It wasn't as cold as I'd expected, but the late-night air was chilly nonetheless.

"I wonder if Nicole and Sekiya-san are asleep already," said Runa all of a sudden, her eyes pointed upward.

We were on the twelfth floor. Sekiya-san had told me his room was on the thirteenth. Incidentally, the boys' rooms were on the eleventh.

"Probably," I replied.

*Or maybe they're still up...* My imagination ventured into horny territory, making me embarrassed and envious.

"Nicole finally got to fulfill her love..."

The look in Runa's eyes was that of someone celebrating her best friend's happiness. However—and it might have been merely my imagination—there seemed to be something akin to envy in them too.

"It must be nice..."

I hadn't imagined it, as it turned out. It felt like those words had slipped out of her lips from deep inside. To me, it sounded like she was saying that she wanted to have sex too, which made my heart race.

I scratched my head, trying to calm down, when...

"Ah..."

I'd forgotten I had a wig on, and perhaps it had slipped off a bit while I'd slept. When I scratched my head, it got caught on my fingers and fell off.

"I need to put this back on... Actually, did it work?" I asked. "I wonder if the teacher on patrol found out... Did you notice them come by?"

"Nope, not tonight. Maybe nobody's come yet?"

"I see."

"Who knows, maybe the teachers are fast asleep 'cause it's the last night of the trip and they're tired," Runa suggested.

"That, or maybe they're having a dinner party."

"Yeah, maybe."

I tried to put my wig back on while we talked.

"Tanikita-san put this on me earlier... I'm not sure I can figure it out myself..."

"I'll do it for you. Gimme."

Taking the wig from me, Runa put it on my head. She was close, and I could smell that floral-or-fruity scent of hers. Her sudden approach made my pulse shoot up.

"Huh? It's not staying on... Oh, your wig cap's gone," she said.

"Oh? I guess it fell off. I wonder where it is..."

Apparently, the wig cap to keep my own hair down had slipped off at some point. That was why the wig had fallen off.

"I wonder if it's possible without one... What do you say I pin your hair down?" Runa asked.

Runa was doing her best to put the wig back on me. Her face was close

enough that her breath reached me when she talked. Her arms were raised up and she was touching my head.

She was wearing her usual pajamas that I'd grown used to seeing over our video calls—that thick and fluffy hoodie. As always, the zipper was open, and her trademark cleavage was peeking through. I normally only saw her like this on my phone's screen, but now, all of this was within reach.

Gulping, I looked down from the balcony. Naturally, there weren't as many lights on now compared to before I'd gone to bed, but the coast dazzled like a jewel nonetheless. The black sea flickered with reflections of the shoreside lights.

It was a quiet night. There weren't any traces of twilight in the sky nor any signs of it coming. A night free of impurities.

The room's windows were fully covered by curtains, so one couldn't see us from inside. Being this close to Runa, in a place like this...I couldn't help but think dirty things.

As my mind began to run wild, Runa spoke up.

"I gotta say... Now that I look closely, you have beautiful eyes, Ryuto," she said. She'd already stopped trying to put the wig back on me. Her eyes gazed at mine and wavered like the night sea. "Your skin is so nice too..."

Then, I did something that surprised even me—I grabbed her slender arms.

She made a small sound. "Ah..."

The wig fell from my head. We stared at each other without a word. I'd seen her without makeup on back in Enoshima too—without it, she looked more childlike than usual... However, her glistening eyes and her parted lips were those of a captivating, grown-up woman who was using her charms on a man.

"Runa..."

I brought my face toward hers on an impulse and we kissed. Then, we slowly pulled our faces away and gazed at each other once more.

"Ryuto..."

Her slightly open eyes sparkled, and her cheeks were rosy enough that I could

tell even in the dark. Constant, shallow breaths escaped her lips, like those of someone feeling feverish.

The moment I saw that expression on her face, I could almost hear my sense of reason shatter inside my head. Before I knew it, I was kissing her again. This time—deeply, like a man starved. Her parted lips were like an invitation, and I pushed my tongue between them. At first, her tongue twined with mine, but it immediately pulled away—I gave chase, seeking it.

A small groan came from the back of Runa's throat. "Ngh..." Her tongue then started to move more rapidly, as if incited by the sound.

My body was heated up and a fire burned in my chest. At some point in this, we'd started clinging tightly to each other, pressing our hips together. I felt something soft and pliant against my chest—I glanced down and saw her fair cleavage bouncing in front of me.

As I pulled my face away to draw a breath, Runa watched me with a bewitching expression. Her eyes looked intoxicated, and her lips were moist with saliva—which could've been hers or mine. They were slightly parted as if still craving me.

"Runa..."

I couldn't stop myself anymore. As I went for another deep kiss, my mouth and my head became filled with Runa. Wanting to feel her more, I reached out and felt her soft mounds through her hoodie.

Runa moaned and twisted about. "Ahh..."

The fire in my chest burned hotter, driving me to touch her chest even more. With thoughts no longer entering my head, I pulled down the zipper of her hoodie with the intent to slip my fingers closer to her fair skin.

Runa's lips parted from mine. "W-Wait!" she said hastily.

She pulled away and looked at me, flustered. "Let's not...take this further..."

That brought me back to my senses too. "Y-Yeah, you're right... Sorry."

*What am I doing...?*

After standing there in a daze for a while, I regained my sanity. I went pale.

“I’m really sorry...” I said. “Let’s go back inside... Those patrols might come too...”

“Yeah...”

I picked up the wig that was lying at my feet and then went back into the room with Runa. Giving up on putting the wig back on, I got into the bed and covered my head with the blanket instead.

As I thought back on what had just taken place, my heart wouldn’t stop pounding. But at the same time...

“W-Wait!”

“*Let’s not...take this further...*”

Recalling the troubled look on Runa’s face made me depressed. Had she not wanted to...?

I figured it was only natural, though. After all, I’d asked her to tell me if she wanted to have sex. She’d yet to say anything, so that kind of preliminary encounter must’ve been undesirable for her.

*What the hell is wrong with me?*

I’d told her I’d wait until she wanted to do it with me, and yet here I was, losing to my lust. I had gotten complacent and had almost done something rash. If Runa hadn’t stopped me, I didn’t know how far I would’ve gone.

Either way, I had to say that instincts were crazy. Even a total virgin like me could kiss someone deeply just like that.

*Her face was so sexy and cute... Ah, but wait, maybe she was actually against it even at that moment...*

The endless spiral of arousal and self-loathing inside me made sure that I couldn’t get any sleep after that.

Before I knew it, light began to trickle into the room through the gaps

between the curtains and around the edges.

As I freed my face from under my blanket, my eyes stopped on a bed next to mine.

“Mmh...” At some point, Kurose-san had rolled over in my direction. “...kun...”

Her mouth was moving and she was saying something—maybe she was in a lighter stage of sleep.

“Kashima...ku...n...”

My heart skipped a beat as she said my name.

Her eyes were closed. She was obviously talking in her sleep, but it was enough to shake me up.

*“I don’t have feelings that I could have my fortune told on.”*

She’d acted like she’d put it all behind her...but maybe it wasn’t so easy to change how one felt. It pained me to think about it and made me feel guilty.

There was a light knock on the door. I checked my phone—it was thirty minutes before we were supposed to get up. I couldn’t imagine a teacher coming by at such a time, so there was only one person that I could think was on the other side of the door.

“Yamana-san...?”

Since everyone else was asleep, I went to open the door and, indeed, found Yamana-san in the doorway.

“Thanks.”

She entered the room with an awkward and bashful look on her face.

“Nicole...?”

At the same time, Runa got up from her bed. I’d kept things quiet, but perhaps she hadn’t been sleeping very deeply either.

“Wow, it’s already this late?! Crap!” Runa said. “I need to do my makeup and hair... But first—Nicole, congratulations!”

“Oh, uh, yeah... Thanks...”

Meanwhile, Tanikita-san had woken up too from all the chatter. “Welcome back, Nikki! So, how does it feel to be an adult, hmm?!”

She sure had a lot of energy for someone who had just woken up. It was quite the topic too.

However, Yamana-san scratched her head with an indescribable look on her face. “Well... There was no penetration...”

“What?! Why?!” Runa and Tanikita-san cried out simultaneously.

Yamana-san sat down on the middle bed—the same one I’d been using. Runa and Tanikita-san surrounded her on either side. Naturally, Kurose-san had woken up a while ago as well, given all the noise.

Yamana-san hunched her shoulders and had an awkward and bashful look on her face. “Well... It was bigger than I thought...”

“What, it was *that* big?”

“I heard from girls who’ve already done it that it’s usually proportional to the guy’s height...”

“Seriously?!” yelled Tanikita-san. “Just think about how crazy Ijichi-kun’s might be! Wow... This is really making my imagination run wild!”

“Akari-chan, we’re talking about Nicole-chan right now,” Kurose-san said, chiding her.

“Go on, Nicole,” said Runa.

“Well, it probably would’ve been fine if it wasn’t my first time...” Yamana-san began, scratching her cheek. “I tried pretty hard, but it just wouldn’t go in... I clenched my teeth and tried to bear it, but he told me not to force myself and patted my head. So...we fell asleep holding each other. Not that I managed to get much sleep.”

“I see...”

“What?! That’s pretty awful of you, you know!” Tanikita-san became even more frantic. “So his thing was up all night?!”

“Nah, I’d feel bad about that, of course...” Yamana-san brought her hand to her face and whispered something to Tanikita-san and Runa.

“No way! You’re so bold, Nikki!” said Tanikita-san.

“It’s hard to believe it was your first time!” added Runa.

Whatever Yamana-san had told them had gotten them both really excited. Kurose-san seemed to have heard it too—her cheeks were red and she was blinking repeatedly.

*Do girls tell their friends things that are that private?! And actually, why can’t she tell me while she’s at it?! I’m dying of curiosity over here!*

A feeling of alienation tore at me as I still stood by the door.

Also, I realized I needed to get back to my own room soon or people would find out that I’d spent the night elsewhere. I was worried if I’d manage to wake up Icchi, but either way, I had to leave.

“Um, so, I should be going now...” I said, feeling bad about putting a damper on their merry chat.

They all glanced at me briefly.

“Ah, you’re still here, Kashima-kun. Go already.”

*Don’t be like that, Tanikita-san!*

Runa wasn’t looking my way much either. “Oh, right. See you later, Ryuto...”

I couldn’t tell if she was absorbed in her friend’s story or feeling awkward about what had happened earlier.

But unlike the two of them...

“Thanks.”

Looking over to where that third voice came from, I found Yamana-san looking right at me from the bed.

“It’s thanks to you that I’ll have good memories of this trip. You have my gratitude.”

I’d never really seen such a kind look on her face before.

Suddenly, I once again recalled the day when we'd talked for the first time. She'd been like a whole different person back then. Those sharp glares she'd given me had felt antagonistic like she'd been sizing me up.

The seasons had changed several times since then, and now here we were. It felt like she approved of me—not just me being Runa's boyfriend, but also as her own friend. It was strangely moving.

“Oh, uh, it’s no big deal...”

Stuttering that out, I left the room as if making an escape.

This is completely incidental, but I ended up spending more than five minutes knocking on the door of my own room after that. I could hear loud snoring before Icchi eventually woke up. As a result, the extroverts from nearby rooms started calling me the “Crazy Knocker,” which made me sound like some sort of a mighty warrior the likes of which the world had never seen before.

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Today, we would be exploring Nunobiki Herb Garden near Shin-Kobe Station. Then, we'd board a shinkansen and be back in Tokyo before evening. All of the students would be moving together for the entire day, so since the teachers would have their eyes on us, we said goodbye to Sekiya-san in front of the hotel in the morning.

Nisshi probably didn't know that Yamana-san had spent the previous night with Sekiya-san. I couldn't imagine the girls telling him, and when I'd told Icchi why I was leaving, I'd asked him to keep quiet about it. There probably wasn't anyone else that could clue him in.

“Man, I miss senpai so bad...”

“Still, you got to be together, so at least there's that, right?”

“Well, I guess so... Heh heh heh. ≡≡≡”

Then again, with Yamana-san acting like this, it was probably only a matter of time before Nisshi caught on.

“Hey, so, have you seen KEN in person yet?” asked Nisshi.

“I hear there will be an offline meetup eventually,” Icchi said.

“That’s nice... Take pics of his face without sunglasses for me, would you?”

“No way. I don’t want to get banned for life right after actually getting to play with him.”

The Nunobiki Herb Garden was located on a high elevation—you had to ride a gondola lift to get there. The hill was adorned with all kinds of flowers, and the view from up there was even more amazing than from the Uroko House.

*“No matter what we end up like as adults... I hope we can always be together when looking at something so wonderful.”*

Recalling what Runa had said, I looked at her. Today, she’d had girls around her all day. She had stuck especially close to Yamana-san and would occasionally talk to Kurose-san and Tanikita-san.

“We’re looking at something wonderful *now...*”

“Did you say something, Kasshi?” asked Icchi, turning my way.

It appeared I’d let my inner thoughts slip out.

“Nah... It’s nothing,” I replied.

I’d barely spoken to Runa at all since our conversation on the balcony last night.

“*Let’s not...take this further...*”

What had she meant by that? Had she actually been against it?

I wanted to know how she truly felt, but it was kind of scary to ask her about it.

Thus, with things between me and Runa feeling rather strained, our school trip came to an end.

## Chapter 4.5: A Long Phone Call Between Runa and Nicole

“Haah... Man, I love senpai. ≡”

“Yeah yeah.”

“Haah... It was *amazing*. ≡ I wish that night could’ve gone on forever...”

“That’s all you’ve been saying for a while now.”

“Heh heh. ≡ Sorry. ≡”

“So...”

“Hm?”

“What’s going to happen between you and Sekiya-san now...?”

“What do you mean? It’s the same as before. I love him, so what’s there to do? There’s no way I could break up with him.”

“I figured...”

“Well, I’m gonna do a lot of part-time work this year, keep my head busy, and earn as much as I can. Having nothing to do is bad for you. You just end up thinking about stuff, getting lonely...”

“Yeah... Maybe.”

“What about you? Any progress after spending a night in the same room as your boyfriend? Though I guess there’s no way anything happened since your sister and Akari were there.”

“...”

“What, *did* something happen!?”

“...We kissed on the balcony.”

“Only kissed?”

“Yeah... It was really hot, though.”

“For real?! Who started it?”

“It was Ryuto...but I wasn’t against it either.”

“Wow, that’s so naughty!”

“Hey, I don’t wanna hear that from someone who practically had sex last night.”

“Aha ha! Anyway, that’s nice. It was good, right?”

“Yeah...”

“...What? Something wrong?”

“Nah.”

“What is it? Something else on your mind?”

“Well, not really... It’s like, Ryuto’s the one I wanna tell how I really feel, more than anyone else.”

“...I see. So you’ve finally met a boyfriend like that.”

“Yeah...”

“That’s great, then!”

“It was just as you said, though.”

“Hm?”

“I put up with the awkwardness and touched him anyway...”

“And you got horny?”

“...Yeah.”

“Wow, look at you, sex queen!”

“Again, I don’t wanna hear that from you!”

“Heh heh. So, how’s your Oronamin C practice going? Any progress?”

“Well, I gave it a try, but it really felt wrong... It’s just a bottle, after all.”

“Well, yeah.”

“And it’s cold too.”

“Try putting it in hot water first.”

“That’s not the problem here! It’s just that the more I try to do anything with it, the more empty it makes me feel on the inside!”

“Aha ha!”

“It was kinda demotivating...”

“You realize I only brought it up because you were so eager to stop being a cold fish, right? I wasn’t actually recommending doing it.”

“Sure, but...”

“Have you tried looking stuff up online? You might find a better way.”

“Well... Maybe that’s not a bad idea, but still...”

“Hm?”

“I get the feeling I might not be a cold fish with Ryuto.”

“Really? That’s good, then.”

“Yeah... I’m not confident at all, though.”

Hugging her knees on her bed, Runa looked toward the window. The brown bottle on the windowsill had a rather withered flower in it—one from the bouquet she’d received on White Day. She’d asked her grandmother to take care of the rest of the flowers, and the ones that hadn’t wilted were on the dining table.

Gazing at the flower, Runa’s expression related.

“That’s just a thought I had when we kissed on the balcony...”

A hot sigh escaped her mouth.

# Chapter 5

Our school trip ended, spring break started, and I didn't get to see Runa for a while. She wouldn't tell me what was keeping her so busy no matter how many times I asked, so I figured it was probably her part-time job.

As for me, I had spring classes at my cram school and was mentally preparing to start studying for college entrance exams for real.

“Sekiya-san.”

I ran into him in the study room. It had been a while since I'd last seen him—okay, maybe “a while” was an exaggeration since I'd seen him at one point after our school trip—but considering we'd run into each other almost every day before his college entrance exams, it really had been a while.

We went to our usual ramen chain café for lunch.

“I'm planning on going to a different cram school,” he told me. “One that specializes in medicine. I've been going there for trial classes and enrolled yesterday.”

“I see...”

“That's where my dad went too, so he gave his permission.” He spoke in a matter-of-fact tone, drinking water while waiting for his ramen. “Cram School K is fine, but I simply started going there without any specific reason when I was in high school and just kept going there. I didn't even start taking their medical course until later on. There are a lot of people there who are still in high school, and the people who hang out in the lounge all the time are an eyesore, you know? I kinda want to concentrate more.”

I sighed. There were, indeed, some extroverts who only seemed to be here to constantly hang out in the lounge and talk to members of the opposite sex. It was no problem for me to just ignore them, but maybe for Sekiya-san, as someone who'd given in to the pleasures of life too much at one point, seeing

people like that tested his motivation.

“I guess we won’t see each other much anymore, then,” I said, feeling sad about it.

“Don’t worry about that.” Sekiya-san shook his head. “I like the study room at Cram School K, so I’ll stay enrolled there too. I’ll be coming on Saturdays, so let’s keep having lunch together.”

At that point, our ramen came, and we started slurping down our noodles without a word.

*It looks like spring sure has come. The season of change. Everyone’s changing.*

*Runa got a part-time job, I won’t get to see Sekiya-san as much, and the tension in my cram school classes is starting to rise... My environment is gradually shifting too.*

“Have you seen Yamana-san since we got back?” I asked after having eaten most of my noodles.

“No, that’s out of the question now. If I did, there’d probably be no end to it.”

“To what...?”

“Having sex.”

I’d figured as much.

Sekiya-san put down his chopsticks and sighed. “She’s been constantly on my mind ever since then.”

“Was she that good?”

“She was real hot,” he said. “Like, damn. I want us to live together. Be with her forever.”

He appeared calm on the outside, but I sensed that he was suppressing his excitement. As a fellow guy, I could tell.

“You didn’t go all the way, though, right?”

Sekiya-san looked surprised. “She told you that much?”

“N-No, I just overheard when she was talking to Runa...”

Technically, she'd said it to a few people and not just Runa, but it seemed better for me to not go into too much detail here.

"Is it hard the first time?" I asked out of curiosity.

"Who knows...? It was my first time with a girl who'd never done it before."

That was a bit surprising to me. He'd said he'd fooled around in high school—perhaps he'd literally only had casual relationships with girls who actively approached guys.

"You wouldn't want to force things if your girlfriend's in pain, right? Especially since mine is still a minor," he added.

"You even care about that, huh."

"Well, you know. Soliciting minors *is* a crime and all."

"Soliciting...?"

"I'm technically an adult already, but she's still seventeen. I want to play by the rules, and not just in terms of the law," he said.

"You're giving it proper thought, I guess..."

I could more or less imagine what he was getting at, but I made a mental note to look up "solicitation of minors" later.

"I really shouldn't be seeing her..." Sekiya-san said with a distant look in his eyes. He must've had Yamana-san on his mind.

"Um, can I ask you something?" I felt bad about interrupting his thoughts, but there was something I really wanted to ask someone with experience. "Is it possible for a guy to tell when a girl wants to have sex?"

"Huh?"

"I mean, like, by the look on her face or how she acts... Are there any signs that show she wants it...?" I asked.

"What, so you're close to your 'graduation' too?"

"W-Well, maybe..."

"It's the same as normal communication, no? Conversations are like playing

catch—you see how the other party reacts and change the trajectory of your throw accordingly. In this case, you kiss her, and if she has a horny look on her face, you try taking things further. If she doesn't seem to be into it, you stop.”

“I see...”

I recalled the last night of the school trip. I'd thought Runa had had that “horny look” on her face, as Sekiya-san had put it...but she'd stopped me anyway.

Sekiya-san consoled me casually. “Well, don't stress too much about it. You're still young.”

I must've looked glum—I was, in fact, a bit overwhelmed by the uncertainty of it all. But at times like these... As always, asking other people about my problem wouldn't truly solve the problem.

I had to ask Runa herself. I wouldn't be able to sleep peacefully again unless I heard the truth directly from her.

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☆ Luna ☆: ♡♡♡ Happy Birthday! ♡♡♡ Congratulations, Ryuto! ♡♡♡♡♡

The moment the clock struck twelve and it became my birthday, I got a message from Runa. It was full of hearts, followed by stickers of Mabbit with maracas and one of him breaking open a confetti ball and dancing.

☆ Luna ☆: Looking forward to tomorrow's date! ♡  
Actually it's not tomorrow, it's already today!

She followed that up with a flustered-looking Mabbit and another one that looked excited.

The excitement she displayed when talking to me on LINE hadn't changed since we'd started dating. It was heartwarming, and I turned my thoughts to the upcoming birthday date.

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We'd agreed that our date would start just before noon.

*"I ordered a birthday cake! From that Champs De Fleurs place near where you live! You just need to pick it up—could you do that before we meet up?"*

That was what she'd told me on the phone, so I was currently on my way there, feeling excited.

I got to the shop with its fancy white exterior. The inside was filled with the sweet smell of baked goods. Today wasn't a holiday or a weekend, but there was a line anyway—this place was popular.

"I'm picking up an order. F-For Shirakawa." I said, following Runa's instructions.

"Oh," replied the clerk. "Just a moment, please."

With that, she hurried deeper into the shop.

It took me a moment to realize the clerk was the same lady we'd run into at that shopping mall food court on our White Day date. I didn't remember faces that well and she gave off a different aura since she was wearing a uniform, so I hadn't managed to recognize her immediately.

After a while, the cake was brought out. What surprised me, though, was that the one who held it...was Runa.

She wore the same uniform as the other employees, which was a feminine white blouse and a tight skirt that extended down to her ankles... Her dark-brown apron was the same color as her skirt and only covered her hips and upper thighs. It was a rather chic getup. I couldn't tell if you would call the hat she was wearing a beret or a hunting cap, but it was the kind of stylish hat that café employees would wear.

Runa showed off the cake in her hands. "Is this what you ordered?" she asked.

She was holding a whole cake decorated with fresh cream, strawberries, and blueberries. There was a plate on top of it that read "Happy birthday, Ryuto ≡."



“Y-Yes, it is...” I replied.

Seeing me tense up, Runa giggled. “Why so formal?”

Her words reminded me of what she’d said when I’d confessed to her.

*“Why’re you being so formal? Aren’t we in the same class? We’re the same age and all.”*

While I’d been scared stiff, she’d spoken to me in a carefree manner with a smile that day. If I could talk to myself from back then and tell him how things were between me and Runa now, he surely wouldn’t believe any of it.

We’d gone through a summer full of ups and downs, an autumn where we’d felt a distance between us, a winter where my lack of maturity had been painfully clear...and now here we were. The season when I’d fallen in love with Runa was about to come again.

“Wait here a bit, I’ll go change,” she said quietly so her coworkers wouldn’t hear her.

She gave me the box with the cake and disappeared deeper into the shop.

I idly waited for her outside, and after a while, she stepped out from the back door in her casual clothes. She was wearing that same hime gyaru outfit she’d worn on White Day.

She looked at me with a bashful smile. “Okay, then, you ready to go?” she asked.

“Yeah...”

We started walking side by side.

“Were you surprised? That I got a part-time job.”

“Y-Yeah... Totally.”

“Really? You didn’t seem to react all that much, though...”

Runa looked a bit disappointed, so I got flustered.

“Y-Yeah, I really was! I was just so surprised I couldn’t even speak...”

"Oh yeah? I guess my surprise worked, then!" Runa smiled happily. "Remember how you said a job at a cake shop would suit me? That was why I went for it when I looked for a part-time job. And I thought of this place—it's close to where you live, it's fancy, and it has delicious cakes."

Runa's excitement was written all over her face as she spoke. I could tell she'd been eager to tell me about this all along but had been restraining herself.

"The uniform is a bit different from what you imagined, though, right? I still think it's cute," she said.

"Well, it's...refined? And stylish. It suits you."

"Really...? I'm happy to hear that." Runa smiled shyly. "Nicole told me that food places are often strict about how you look, but thankfully, since we wear hats at work, I can pin my hair up and they don't complain too much about the color. They *did* tell me not to go overboard with my nails, though, so I've been keeping them shorter and not so flashy these days."

She showed me her hands—her nails had been painted the elegant color of cherry blossoms.

"Serving customers seems like it's a thing I'm good at! All the employees and the customers are nice people, and the leftover cakes and sweets are delicious—every day is so much fun!" Runa said. Her energy was so infectious that I was having fun too.

"What made you get a part-time job?" I asked.

I recalled a conversation we'd had when we'd just started dating.

*"What about you? You don't have a job?"*

*"Nah, I'll pass on that. Nicole tells me about some real bad customers sometimes, and that sounds stressful. I get by with the allowance my grandma gives me here and there."*

Since she'd told me that back then, I had to wonder why she had changed her mind.

"I wanted to move forward too. Didn't want everyone to leave me behind." A serious look appeared on Runa's face all of a sudden and she hung her head a

little. “Maybe I just...wanted to find something to center my life around so I could feel like I’m standing on my own two feet. I’ve always been pushed around by the currents, after all. My family or other people always decided things for me.” Then, she looked forward. “Anyway, I wanted to start something so I could seriously think about my future.” A smile appeared on her face again, but there seemed to be a trace of self-deprecation in it. “Though...it’s embarrassing to admit that I got a job at a cake shop because you said it would suit me—I guess I’m kind of getting pushed around by the currents, after all.”

As we chatted, we had taken a train to Station A, and we were now walking toward Arakawa.

Apparently, there were rows of cherry blossoms on the riverbank there that Runa liked. I’d heard they started blooming early this year, and the ones in the Tokyo metropolitan area had actually already reached full bloom. As my birthday was going to overlap with cherry blossom season, we’d hoped to celebrate the former while doing some flower viewing. Things were going just as planned.

We passed through the busy shopping district and headed through a residential area to the river. As we walked, I thought about what Runa had said.

I had been influenced by many people, sure, but was that equivalent to what she feared she was doing?

“I think that if you find yourself moved by someone’s words...that’s because whatever they said was already inside you from the start—at least on a subconscious level,” I said, reflecting on myself. “And if that’s the case, then I don’t think doing what they mentioned is the same as being pushed around by the currents.”

Runa opened her eyes wide.

“For example... If I said I thought teaching math to middle schoolers would suit you, would you have gotten a job as a private tutor instead?”

Looking startled, Runa waved her arms all around. “No way! There’s seriously no way whatsoever! That’d never happen!”

“See?” I couldn’t help but smile at her reaction. “You can avoid things you

don't like or can't do."

She gazed at me as if I'd just said something that had never occurred to her.

"So you aren't being pushed around by the currents... You just have relationships with the other people in your life."

Previously, I'd had few friends and no girlfriend—and no opportunities to come to a realization like this. But after I had *really* met Runa, I felt like I'd somewhat come to understand what it meant to have other people in your life.

For the most part, I tended to only think about the relationship between us, but I had connections to others as well.

It was fun to talk to Icchi and Nisshi about KEN, but there was more to our friendship. We were by each other's side in both good and bad times. They'd shown me firsthand how difficult love could be. Sekiya-san, being older, was always several steps ahead of me—he gave me food for thought and made me realize things I wouldn't have otherwise. Yamana-san and Tanikita-san taught me how different girls could be from guys. And as for Kurose-san... She'd been my first love and had given me so many different experiences that I couldn't sum up in a couple of sentences.

I'd been influenced by many different people, and here I was now. Perhaps my core thoughts had been influenced by my parents since they'd raised me, but that wasn't the only thing that had helped me grow until now... It had been the people around me who'd taught me things that I couldn't have learned at home—such as how other people felt and how some things in this world were just out of our control.

The same must've been true for Runa... Perhaps even more so for her than for me, in fact, given how loved she was by the people around her.

"You've been inspired by all those people who are precious to you, right?" I asked. It would make me happy if I was counted as one of those people. "Besides, I'm influenced by you too."

"Huh...?" Runa looked surprised by that. "For real?"

"Yeah... Like I decided to go to cram school so early because I'm thinking about our future together..."

At cram school, I'd met Sekiya-san, and he'd inspired me even more. I'd then decided to aim for Houou University after being influenced by KEN, whom I respected.

"I don't have as many friends or acquaintances as you, but I've realized that I've been inspired by all kinds of people in my life."

Runa blinked slowly. "I think that's true, in your case. You think everything through before you act." Then, she slowly looked downward, as if a bit dispirited. "I'm happy that you're giving me support...but there was definitely a time in my life when people kept deciding things *for* me. Like my experiences with my exes." Runa glanced at me as she said that. She then went on, still hanging her head, and I held my breath. "It's easy when people decide things for you. If you just do as the other person wants, it will look like everything's going well...even if later on it turns out not to be the case."

As she recalled her relationship experiences, it felt painful for me too.

"Guys have a strong sex drive, don't they? I don't get horny like that for other people and can't keep up with that, so it was easy for me to just let them do as they wanted with my body."

At that point, something occurred to me.

"W-Wait!"

The moment when Runa had hurriedly pulled away from me on the balcony replayed in my head.

"Uh, Runa, I'm sorry about that night on our school trip..." I began.

It had been on my mind this entire time. The feeling of guilt over not having properly apologized to her had made me flustered, and it was difficult to speak articulately about it now. But I did manage to say it, and all at once. We'd stopped at a red light that night—and now that I had the opportunity, I lowered my head to her as well.

"I really regret it. I'd said I'd wait until you wanted to do it with me, but I lost control and didn't take your wishes into consideration... I'll make sure that never happens again. From now on, when we're alone, I'll control myself, like I've been castrated..."

“Castrated?! And wait just a moment!” Runa hurriedly interrupted me. “Listen to me, Ryuto.”

Raising my head, I saw a small smile on Runa’s lips.

“That whole thing I said about me letting my boyfriends decide things for me while I wasn’t horny was only true *before* I started dating you,” she said. “That night, I felt different.”

“Huh...?”

“The reason I couldn’t get horny with my exes wasn’t because I’m a girl and I didn’t have much of a sex drive—it was because I didn’t like those guys all that much.” Her smile was a little bittersweet. When our eyes met, her expression turned bashful. “When I kissed you that night on the school trip... It was awkward for me, sure, but...it also felt really good.”

As she spoke, she looked around, seeming to mind her surroundings. There weren’t any passersby around us, though—there were only some cars driving past.

“My love for you began to overflow from deep in my chest... My head became full of you, and I wanted to feel you more... Before I knew it, I lost myself in that feeling.”

“Wait, but...”

While I was happy and moved by her words, I couldn’t get the way she’d acted back then out of my mind.

Runa smiled as if she understood what I was thinking. “I stopped you that night...because if we kept kissing there, we would’ve probably gone all the way.”

“What?!”

My heart nearly exploded—I hadn’t expected her to say that at all.

“I mean, we were on a balcony... And besides, neither of us had...condoms...” Her voice grew quiet, and her cheeks became bright red.

“Oh, right...” I was embarrassed too. I could feel my ears heat up.

Runa touched my hand. Even though it was my right hand, she took and held it regardless.

“It’s awkward, but I know now that I wanna get closer to you anyway,” she said quietly, drawing closer to me. “It makes me feel awkward, but happy too. Touching you, that is.” Holding my hand tight, she looked up at me and smiled. “I’m glad I’ve realized that.”

“Runa...”

The lump in my chest disappeared and was replaced with my overflowing love for her.

At that point, I noticed that the light had turned green—it had actually done so several times since we’d stopped here. We hurried across the crosswalk.

The path ahead led to a bridge, and the riverbank was right after that.

“Wow, they’re blooming, all right!” Runa exclaimed while we walked across the bridge.

From where we were, we could see rows of pink cherry trees. They were in full bloom, just as the forecast had said.

“They’re so pretty!” said Runa.

Once we reached the riverbank, we walked past the rows of trees while holding hands. This was our spring break, but it wasn’t a weekend, so there weren’t all that many people here. I could only see a few others here and there—some were looking at the trees, and then there were families with little children having picnics on blankets.

Past the rows of trees was a railway overpass. Trains passed by on it every now and then—the same ones we took every day.

“This looks like a good spot!” Runa said.

She spread a picnic blanket out on the ground next to a beautifully blooming tree. Its branches hung down toward the ground. A perfect tree to view the cherry blossoms.

When I sat down, Runa adjusted herself into a formal pose and gazed at me. “Happy seventeenth birthday, Ryuto!” Her smile, too, was in full bloom, just like

the cherry blossoms.

“Thank you...”

This was the best birthday I could’ve ever had.

I wondered what good deeds I must’ve done in my past life. It didn’t feel like I could do as well in this one, but I wanted to know anyway, for future reference.

“A’ight, let’s eat!” exclaimed Runa.

She opened the soft cooler she’d put down on the blanket and took out an angular lunch box.

“Since we have a big cake, I made some light sandwiches.”

Opening the lid, I was greeted by the sight of neatly cut sandwiches packed tight in the box. Sandwiches with eggs, ham, tomatoes, lettuce, and cheese alternated among themselves, creating a colorful spectacle inside.

“I didn’t want it to be too light, though, so I also brought karaage.”

Giggling, Runa took out another box. When I opened it up, the golden-brown meal inside awakened my appetite.

“Sorry this is all kinda random,” she said.

“Nah, it’s good. As a guy, this is just what I like.”

“Heh heh. I remembered how much you ate on that sports day.”

It was a bit awkward to think she’d taken notice at the time.

“Thank you, looks delicious.” Expressing my gratitude for the meal, I dug into my birthday lunch.

The sandwiches were just as delicious as they looked, and the karaage were just as tasty as I remembered them being on our sports day. Runa blushed and smiled happily when I told her all this.

“Okay, now it’s time for dessert!”

With that, she picked the cake box up off the blanket—the one with the birthday cake she’d given me at Champs De Fleurs. I didn’t know too much about cake sizes, but it seemed a bit too big for two people to eat. Maybe four

people could finish it off.

“Ah, the candles! Wanna light ‘em?!” Runa asked, noticing a package of candles attached to the box.

“Huh? Won’t they go out on their own before I can blow them out?”

It was windy here, maybe because we were next to a river. The wind had only gotten stronger as the afternoon wore on—enough that it felt a bit cold, even.

“But it would be nice...” countered Runa. Rummaging around in her bag, she took something out. “Well, it’s a good thing I brought this!”

In her hand was a generic lighter that one could buy at a convenience store.

“Do you always carry a lighter?” I asked a bit nervously.

*It’s not like she smokes...*

Runa nodded calmly. “Oh yeah. I use it to heat my eyelash curler. Works really well! I learned it from my mom. There are electric curlers nowadays, but normal ones are much faster once you get used to them. Even Nicole and Akari started using them after seeing me do it. It’s really hot if you get your eyelid caught in it by accident, though.”

“I see...”

As always, she was a gyaru, all right. It brought a smile to my face to see her being her usual self.

“Happy birthday, Ryuto~! ♪”

Runa put the candles in the cake and managed to light them in a moment when we had a break from the wind. She began to sing and clapped in time with the tune. There wasn’t anyone near us, but it was kind of embarrassing—I almost felt like a little kid at his birthday party.

“Happy birthday, Ryuto~! ♪ All right!”

Runa finished her song and urged me to blow out the candles. I leaned in toward them.

“Woo-hoo!”

I blew the candles out while Runa clapped for me. The beginning of my

seventeenth year of life felt awkward, but I was happy.

“I made this cake, you know,” she said.

“What?! Really?!”

I looked at the cake again in surprise. The fresh cream on the sides was nice and smooth, and the fruit and chocolate decorations looked just as good as a regular store-bought cake.

“Wow...”

Runa got flustered. “Umm, o-of course, the head baker helped me. I did...like thirty percent of it? Or maybe like ten...?”

*That explains that.*

“He told me to act like I made the whole thing myself, but there’s no way that’d fly...” she said quietly as if speaking to herself, but then she looked at me. “But still! That writing is a hundred percent my work! I practiced so much every day, so I improved at least a bit at doing that, right?”

“Yeah, the writing looks nice. Thank you.”

Nothing felt off about it, and I’d just assumed the head baker had written it. Now that I looked at it more closely, I could notice the same roundness in Runa’s usual handwriting in the way my name had been written.

“It was real bad at first. ‘Happy B’ was all I could fit.”

“Who’s ‘B,’ anyway?”

“I know, right?” she said. “My coworker was like, ‘Is that short for Bob? Bobby?’ Her name’s Orito, by the way. She’s the one we saw at the food court.”

“Ah.”

“I told her afterward that I was still keeping my job a secret from my boyfriend and was gonna surprise him for his birthday. She asked the owner to give me my paycheck early. Also, I actually didn’t have work today, but the owner let me wait in the back room in my uniform just so I could give you the cake.”

Runa had a natural talent that no matter where she was, the people around

her loved her. I was sure of it. Her coworkers must've wanted to do something for her. It did worry me a bit, but as her boyfriend, I had to stay composed. After all, this was one of her strengths, and she should've been proud of it.

"Mm, delish!" she exclaimed.

We'd cut the cake up and were eating it together. It was as good as any other cake from Champs De Fleurs. The fresh cream on the outside was thick, but not too much. The moist sponge cake perfectly melted in your mouth—a feeling that was further improved by the fresh sourness of the fruit. It wasn't something you'd get tired of eating.

"Then again, a whole cake really is too much for the two of us," I said.

"Well, let's take a break for now." Runa put down her plastic fork and picked up her phone instead. "Hey, look here."

Seeing an image of myself making a stupid face on Runa's phone, I realized she was about to take a selfie.

She nestled close to me. "What a great shot! The cherry blossoms and the blue sky are so pretty!" she said.

After snapping several selfies with both of us in them, Runa went on to take some solo ones.

"I gotta take a ton of pics!"

"These cherry blossoms are in full bloom, after all," I commented.

The pink scenery spanned dozens of meters. It must've been the perfect spot for a gyaru to take selfies.

"Yeah. And also...this is the last time I'll have this hair color." Runa then looked at her phone with a bit of sadness in her eyes. "I'm going to the salon tomorrow. Gonna finally get black hair again."

"What...?"

While I wondered why she would do that, I also recalled something she'd said earlier.

*"I've been dyeing my hair ever since my second year in middle school... But*

*recently, I've been thinking maybe I should make it black again."*

Had she been serious about it?

"You're really going to make it black?" I asked.

Something else she'd once said came to mind too.

*"I'm a gyaru, and I wanna do all the things that gyaru do. All the places I wanna go, all the things I wanna do—none of them interest you at all, right?"*

And besides... Like she'd just said, she loved gyaru makeup enough to use a lighter as part of her beauty routine. Being a gyaru was such a big part of her identity, and here she was, saying that she'd get rid of what could be considered *the gyaru symbol*—her blonde hair?

"Yeah. You prefer black hair, right? I remember the way you looked at me that time on the school trip," Runa replied meekly as she gazed at me intently.

"Do you *really* want to dye it black...?"

"Huh...?"

"If you even have the slightest hesitation...and you just want to dye it because that's my preference...you don't need to."

My words left Runa speechless. She looked astonished.

"Remember that time at the beach hut when we talked about our tastes in members of the opposite sex?" I asked.

*"If we're talking about girls that are my type, it's true that I prefer pure and proper girls over gyaru... But... Shirakawa...Runa-san is my type, I think."*

"Like I said back then... The girl named Shirakawa Runa is my type." This was a bit embarrassing to say out loud, so I kept my eyes down. "I fell in love with you, a girl who already had this hair color...which means I like it too." I didn't know what kind of face Runa was making right now as I kept speaking. "If there's a hair color you actually want to have and you dye your hair again, you'd still be my type, even with a new color." I didn't know how to say this coherently and anxiously searched for the right way to end my thoughts. "I can't explain it very well...but if you want to change your hair for my sake, there's no point in that. After all...you're my type, no matter what you're like."

Having seen Tanikita-san be so picky about fashion led me to realize something. People who cared about fashion and style seemed to really mind one's clothing and personal appearance.

Which was why...

I was far removed from the concept of fashion myself. I didn't want to force my own simple preferences on the one special girl in my life. I didn't want to *influence* her that way.

"I just...want you to do as you like," I said. "With your hair, your clothes—everything."

When I raised my head at last, I saw that Runa was looking at her hands with a brooding expression on her face.

"Also, I do like that outfit, but it's okay if you don't wear it for all our dates."

Runa looked up at me. She looked a bit relieved, which convinced me that I hadn't missed the mark.

"I want you to spend your days looking in a way that makes you the most comfortable... I fell in love with you, and I think living that way is very much like you."

At that point, Runa spoke up as if explaining herself. "It's not like I'm forcing myself. I really just wanted to make you happy, that's it..."

"I know."

I knew Runa was that kind of girl.

"I just want to be with you for a long time..." I continued. "I mean..." Considering what I was about to say, I grew a bit bashful and hung my head. "I'm sure I'll love you regardless of what hair color you have...even after you grow old and your hair turns pure white."

"Ryuto..."

Raising my face, I saw that the area around Runa's eyes was red. Tears were welling up in her eyes. When she noticed my gaze, her usual cheerful smile appeared on her face.

"That might actually be fashionable in itself! Maybe I should do like my grandma and dye it purple or pink! I kinda can't wait!" she said. Then, Runa picked up her phone, tapped on it a few times, and brought it to her ear. "Hello? This is Shirakawa. I have an appointment for tomorrow... Ah, yes! Um, can we change it from dyeing my hair black and just doing the usual color instead? That's right. Okay, see you tomorrow! Thank you!"

After ending the call with what must've been the hair salon, Runa gazed at me. The edges of her eyes were still red.

"Thank you, Ryuto," she said thoughtfully, then laughed all of a sudden. "I'll love you even if you become a bald old man too."

I had to laugh as well. It spread through my chest, filling it with warmth.

"Oh, actually, I probably won't end up fully bald—I just won't have as much hair as before. Genetics..." I said.

"Ah, the same might be true on my side. The same thing's been bothering my dad lately."

"Really?" I asked. "I couldn't tell at all."

"He had coarse hair when he was young. He gets an undercut to hide the thinning parts."

Little by little, we finished the rest of the cake as we chatted.

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After finishing our meal, we packed up the picnic blanket and began walking through the rows of cherry blossom trees again.

"Wow, the petals are flying everywhere!" said Runa.

A strong gust of wind blew from the river, picking up numerous light pink flowers from the tree branches and sending them on a journey. They gathered and swirled in the air before flying toward us.

"The flowers only just opened up, but with a wind like this, the petals fall right away," I said.

"Yeah... You can only see the cherry blossoms in bloom here for about three

days a year.”

“I guess we made it, then.”

“Yep! It’s so lucky that it was on your birthday!” Runa said in excitement. Suddenly, something at her feet caught her attention. “Ah!”

She picked up a branch of a cherry blossom tree that had fallen. The stem was about as thick as a pinkie finger and was filled with blossoms and partially opened buds.

“Huh? How’d a good branch like this fall off?” Runa looked up, but there was no way to tell which tree it had come from.

“Maybe the wind knocked it down?” I asked.

“Poor thing... These could’ve still bloomed...”

“Do you want to take it home?”

“Huh? Is that okay?”

“It was on the ground anyway, so why not?”

“I guess so... It would just wither if I left it here,” she said.

Staring intently at the branch, Runa held it from the base.

“Isn’t this perfect to put in that bottle of Oronamin C?” she asked once we’d resumed walking. For some reason, she blushed—she always did that whenever the subject of putting flowers in bottles came up. “Maybe I should buy another bottle...”

“Why?”

“Well, uhh, i-it would kinda make me feel better...” she stammered. “Oh, yeah! The old one still has one of the flowers I got from you in it!”

“What? Hasn’t it been two weeks since then? Is it still alive?”

“Y-Yeah... Just barely...”

“You should throw it out if it’s wilted. We had a flower in a vase on a table before, and we noticed that once it started wilting, it was attracting bugs,” I said.

I figured that she might not've been telling the truth here and was just feeling guilty because she had thrown it out. I remembered she had previously mentioned pressing flowers too. But if she really did still have that flower, it was unsanitary at this point, so I made sure to tell her so.

"Y-Yeah, I'll do that if I have to..." she replied, mumbling a bit, and then looked at me. "Actually, is it okay for *me* to take this branch?"

"Huh?"

Runa gazed straight at me. "I mean, it's not every day you find such a pretty cherry blossom branch."

After Valentine's Day, things had become frustrating in our relationship for a while. Runa hadn't been able to look me in the eye or hold hands with me. But, at some point, we'd gone back to being able to gaze at each other like this.

As I gently reached out and took Runa's dainty hand, she bashfully tightened her grip on mine.

"Sorry it's my right hand," I mumbled.

Runa's face immediately turned beet red. "Stupid..." She looked up at me with reproach in her eyes, her face flushed like a boiled octopus.

This sort of thing was the difference between her old and current self.

We had changed a bit in some ways and had remained the same in others. But regardless, we were moving forward, and I felt that way from the bottom of my heart.

"So, is it really okay for me to take this? It's *your* birthday," she said again.

Suddenly, I remembered how she'd smiled as she held the bouquet I'd given her on White Day, and how I'd felt as a result.

"Yeah. Be my guest."

I already received a bouquet every day—one by the name of Runa. It contained many different flowers: bright and energetic ones like sunflowers, but also sweet and dainty ones like baby's breath.

The more I learned about Runa, the more flowers appeared in that bouquet, making the whole picture more colorful. It made me happy, and I looked forward to seeing it.

This was our last spring as high school students. Then would be summer, autumn, winter...and eventually, there would be a day when we'd take off our uniforms for the last time. Come next spring, Runa would become an adult, a woman with yet another aspect to her personality.

Runa wasn't going to college, so she might become a full-fledged member of society earlier than me. Maybe I'd have to chase her back again. While that made me nervous, it also made me want to see her new self.

At the same time, I loved the current Runa. I kind of wished we could be in high school forever, even though I knew it was impossible.

There was one thing I could say for sure—I was in love with all of the flowers currently blooming in Runa, as well as all the buds waiting to open.

I wanted to embrace all of her. And no matter what other flowers bloomed in her in the future, I would still do so.

Then and there, tightly holding hands with Runa as a strong gust of wind sent a flurry of cherry blossom petals our way, I made up my mind.

## Chapter 5.5: A Private Conversation Between Akari-chan and Mia

It was another day in a Tokyo café—crowded due to spring break—and once again, Akari-chan and Mia were sitting on opposite sides of a table with their drinks before them.

“This sucks sooooo much! There wasn’t a single good thing about our school trip! Like, give me a break already!”

Akari-chan was once again kicking her legs up and down amid her lamentations. Mia looked at her with sympathy in her eyes.

“I guess you annoyed him too much in the first half, so he kept his distance in the second...”

“That’s exactly right! It super super suuuuucks!” Akari-chan continued to flounder. “And you know what’s the worst thing about it all? Ijichi-kun blocked me!”

“What? On LINE?”

“No! On Twitter!”

“Huh?! You’ve talked to each other on Twitter before?”

“No! I just one-sidedly replied to his posts!”

“What do you mean...?”

“I made a throwaway account and pretended I was one of the KEN Kids so I could say what I thought about videos he’s in! When he was wondering the other day if he should show his face or not, I spammed him, telling him he shouldn’t! ’Cause like, if he showed his face, all those little bitches would go after him for sure!”

Mia cringed a little. “I-If you say so...”

“And despite all my efforts, yesterday, Ijichi-kun posted a picture of himself

from the neck down and was like, 'This is what my clothes are like btw.' They were the clothes I chose for him! And just as I thought, all those chicks fawned over him and were all like, 'So hot!' 'I wanna see more!' 'Show your face! ≡' Like, what the hell?! Cut the crap! So I replied to a couple of his posts and told him not to show pics of himself ever again and that his clothes didn't suit him at all, but he immediately blocked me! It's so over!"

"I think that's to be expected..."

"I wonder if he thought I was an annoying fangirl?!"

"I'm not sure he saw you as a fan in the first place..."

"What, you mean he thought I was a hater?! Even though I watched all the videos he's in and commented every single time?!"

"There's not much difference between an overzealous fan and a hater..."

"No way, right?! I wanna die so baaad!"

"How about making a new account?"

"I already have! Who else is gonna protect Cheerful Yusuke from all those little bitches?!"

As Akari-chan continued to bewail her misfortunes, Mia looked on with a stiff smile on her face.

## Epilogue

The wind grew even stronger. We were walking past the rows of cherry blossoms toward the train station, when...

Runa stopped in her tracks. "Ah! I almost forgot." Separating her hand from mine, she gave me the paper bag that she'd been carrying in the same hand as the branch. "Here's your birthday present!"

"Oh... Thanks."

"I wanted to give it to you earlier, but I was using it to weigh down the blanket. It totally slipped my mind."

I'd actually been wondering if my present had been inside it. As Runa had said, it'd been windy today, so we'd needed weights on the four corners of the blanket. We'd actually had to use everything we'd had on hand to keep the blanket down. The wind had picked up so much by the end of our picnic that the blanket was lifting up anyway, so we'd had to pack up in a hurry. I could understand how she had forgotten about it.

"Open it," she said.

"Okay."

I sat down on the curb separating the sidewalk from the slope with cherry blossoms on it and looked inside the large paper bag. I opened up the wrapped gift—it was a black backpack.

The backpack was stylish and had a simple, straightforward design. It looked sturdy and mature.

"I thought you might want to replace that backpack you use for cram school. Whatcha think?"

Suddenly, I remembered that while we had been studying for our exams, she'd seen that bag of mine with a hole in it. Had she really remembered such a tiny detail when choosing my present?

"I asked Akari about it since she's really into bags. It's great, right? I went for a daypack since I figured you prefer those."

"Wow..."

There was a logo on the bottom right of the backpack—it was that of a famous brand of men's bags that even I had heard of.

"Wasn't this expensive, though...?" I asked.

"I wanted to give you a proper gift, so..." Runa smiled at me. "Akari said that bags that only cost a few thousand yen are just stylish throwaways with a focus on style—if you carry heavy things in them every day, they'll get ruined real quick. This one is made of good materials and is well constructed, so it'll serve its purpose until your college entrance exams. You can probably use it even after getting into college too, on days when you need to carry lots of stuff."

It wasn't like Runa to give long explanations like that, and as she'd said, this had all apparently come from Tanikita-san.

"I've been earning my own money for the first time, and I have my first-ever job. I wanted to give you something you could use for a long time."

Runa was a bit shy as she said all that and looked at her cherry-blossom-colored nails. Her face looked a bit more mature than usual.

"Thank you..." I said. "Truly..."

The first present I'd gotten from Runa had been that Mabbit phone case on our one-week dating anniversary. I'd received so many things from her since then—both tangible and not. But this present was special, even among all of that.

Runa had put a lot of time and effort into earning her first paycheck, and she'd probably had to give up a rather large part of what she'd made to buy this backpack. For my sake, she'd given things serious consideration when choosing my present.

The thought of it moved me so deeply that I could almost cry.

Runa smiled happily. "Do you like it...?" she asked. "This little pocket here is for good-luck charms!"

With that, she opened the fastener of an external pocket on the backpack. There was a mesh net pocket inside it with something like a key holder there. I recognized the good-luck charm hanging from it.

“I put one in for you,” she said.

Hanging in that spot was one of the good-luck charms Runa had bought at the Jishu Shrine in Kyoto. She’d gotten a pair that day, and I’d left mine with her at the time. I had completely forgotten about it since.

“This will protect you when I’m not around.” Runa smiled a little, gazing at the charm.

“Thank you... This really makes me happy.”

I had so much to tell her about how I felt, but I couldn’t find the words... That was the best I could do, and I filled those words with as much emotion as I could.

Runa looked fondly at me. “And also...” She hesitated but went on. “It would be kinda cheeky to call it a present, but...” She paused there and her cheeks turned red in an instant. “There’s another thing I wanna give you, now that you’re seventeen. Would you take it...?”

“Huh?”

As I wondered what she was talking about, my heart skipped a beat at the *possibility*—we were *that* age, after all.

“Hey, remember what you told me when we started going out?” she asked.

I’d been thinking dirty things, so my reaction was belated. “Huh? Huh...?”

“You said the way I liked you was weak—that it was on the same level as liking a friend.”

“Oh, y-yeah...”

I remembered having said that. I’d ended up dating the prettiest girl in the school, so how could I—an introvert like me—have even said something like that? I still felt a cold sweat come on whenever it crossed my mind.

“You were right. Now that I’m dating you, I realize that I was just playing

around before. In my previous relationships, I was pretending to be the girlfriend of guys who were pretty much just friends.” Biting her lip, Runa hung her head. “I didn’t know I could feel like this back then... Didn’t know what it was like when your chest feels hot and tight when you think about a guy and to think that nobody could replace him. That it *has* to be him...”

“Wait... So...?”

*What about now? Can I take this as her feeling that way toward me now?*

“I was worried,” she admitted. “Up until now, I’ve left everything up to my boyfriends, and I’m probably pretty bad at it for how much I’ve done it... I was thinking you have high expectations and that I might disappoint you.”

I was speechless. I never could have seen this coming. Runa had been worried about something like that?

“But that night, when we kissed, I realized something. It’s like my body moves on its own when I’m with you. I wanna feel good...and to make you feel good too.”

Runa looked at me with a smile full of kindness and unconditional love.

“I really love you...Ryuto.”

“Runa...”

As I stood there, filled with emotion, Runa suddenly averted her eyes. Her face clouded over in worry.

“We’ll do our best together from now on... Maybe I won’t do so well, but...can you try not to be disappointed?” she asked.

“What?! You mean...?” My heart pounded so hard it felt like it could explode, and I couldn’t contain my excitement. “Are you saying you want to...?”

“Wait!” Runa said, interrupting me. “I’ll say it.” While she was blushing a little, her face was filled with resolve. “You already said you’d wait for me to want to have sex. And I promised I’d tell you when that happens. So...I wanna do it. Now. And so badly...”

I held my breath as she spoke quietly but decisively.

"I never knew it was so embarrassing and took so much courage to say that I wanna do it." She brought her hands to her chest. "You won't be my first..." she said with a sigh, her voice trembling. Then, she slowly looked up at me. "But can I become yours?" Her eyes wavered with what seemed to be slight regret, but there was enough anticipation in them to drown out that feeling. "I wanna become one with you."

Joy erupted from deep inside me and surged through my body. I wanted to embrace her tightly right away. But it wouldn't be like me to do so, and I was nearly shaking with impatience.

"Hey, Ryuto..." Runa looked at me with upturned eyes. "Wanna do it?" Her face told me she was enduring the shame. "I wanna have sex...if it's with you." Saying that bashfully, she lowered her eyes, and a happy smile appeared on her face. "This is the first time I've felt this way in my whole life..."

Just then, another strong gust of wind blew past us. It swept over all the cherry blossom trees at once, sending their blossoms up into the air. That wind had come not from the river, but from the south.

Spring had finally come. The spring of change.

My relationship with Runa was about to change too.

I'd rejected her on the first day of our relationship like I'd forgotten my place. I'd squirmed around on my bed in regret afterward. It had been almost ten months since that day. Such a long time...or maybe it actually hadn't been that long? No, it really had been.

I was honestly impressed with how well I'd endured so far, and I wanted to praise myself for it. But I was really glad I'd managed to put up with it until today. I felt that way from the bottom of my heart.

I loved Runa. So much.

She was too good for me—it was hard to believe the prettiest girl in the world wanted me in both mind and body.

I was so happy that it felt like my brain would go numb and I'd turn into an idiot.

“Runa...”

Mom, Dad.

Thank you so much for bringing me into this world.

My name is Kashima Ryuto, and I’m seventeen years old.

When we next see each other, I will no doubt already be an adult.

# Afterword

This series is getting turned into an anime! Hooray!

I never thought that news would come so soon... Readers, this is all thanks to you! Thank you so much.

Also, with the upcoming anime adaptation, the title's official abbreviation is now "Kimizero." Apologies for the inconvenience until now!

Furthermore, I've actively been involved with the anime adaptation to whatever degree I'm able to. That said, the production team is all wonderful. Sometimes, they even understand the world of Kimizero better than I do. On some fronts, I'm actually relying on them instead of the other way around (although I point out anything that bothers me, of course)!

Now then, here we are in volume 5. I left the school trip's destination ambiguous in volume 4, but the decision had to be made at last in this one. I couldn't travel myself to gather material because of the Covid pandemic, so I went with areas I was already familiar with.

In my twenties, I often hung out in Kyoto. When I was in college, several of my friends were going to Kyoto University, so I could stay with them for free for a long time. I also made some new friends in Kyoto at that time too. You could say my life is pretty connected to that place.

Thinking back on it now, I hardly did anything good there. In the evening—once my hangover from the previous day had passed—I'd go out into the city with my friends, get drunk once again at a cheap izakaya, walk around Hyakumanben while singing, make fun of those evenly spaced couples lined up at the Kamo River from a distance... But even so, I feel like that was the springtime of my life.

And because I went to Kyoto so many times, I'm proud to say that I've been to all the famous tourist destinations you'd find prominently featured in a

guidebook. They're all fantastic places, including the temples and shrines. There's the Philosopher's Walk, fascinating in each season; the Sanzen-in Temple, lush with greenery; the Ninnaji Temple in cherry blossom season; the cherry blossoms at night in Murayama Park, twinkling fascinatingly in the spotlights amid the rows of stalls; Suzumushi Temple, where the priest tells interesting stories... There are so many places I could recommend, but for the school trip's itinerary in this volume, I chose the ones that left the strongest impression on me.

I really love Tenryū-ji Temple—I pretty much always paid it a visit when going to Kyoto. When I sat on its broad veranda and spaced out while looking at the Japanese-style garden there (just like Nicole), time would pass in an instant.

On the other hand, I only went to Fushimi Inari Shrine once. The moment I set foot in it, I sort of felt this overwhelming presence—a terrifying amount of power. I don't have any sense for the supernatural whatsoever, and I've never felt anything like that anywhere else. That's how, in my mind, it became a place that you needed to mentally prepare yourself to go. Nonetheless, what I felt at the time is still vivid in my memory.

Sagano at nighttime is memorable for me too. The place where Ryuto and Nisshi watch the sun set was modeled after a road near Rakushisha.

So, you might be thinking—if I love Kyoto so much, why not make this trip all Kyoto? However, I love Osaka and Kobe too, so I got greedy and went for all three cities at once. Personally, I find the charms of Osaka to be its food, its people, and the city itself, so while I didn't really find it fitting for a school trip, I added it anyway because I wanted to.

When I was in my twenties and didn't have much money, I often stayed at Spa World in Tennōji. From there, I would set out to Shinsekai, eat scalding-hot kushiage, and then go to a small nearby café, enjoying the sweetness of a milkshake while inhaling cigarette fumes (such were the days). That was pretty much my routine.

Kobe is a city that I've visited frequently since I've been in my thirties. It's a secret dream of mine to move there when I grow old and visit the Takarazuka Grand Theater once a month.

As you can see, the school trip itinerary is filled with things I love. It would make me happy if I managed to convey the charm of each of those places even a little bit as this story unfolded.

As always, thank you so much magako-sama for the numerous beautiful illustrations! They're a feast for the eyes and soul!

To my editor, Matsubayashi-sama, I'm always grateful for your meticulous assistance!

And most of all, to all of my readers who've come this far, have always supported me, and who have brought this series to the point where it's getting an anime adaptation—I can never thank you enough. Please accept my gratitude from the bottom of my heart!

Well then, may we see each other again in volume 6!

August 2022, Makiko Nagaoka



5th Date

You Were Experienced,  
I Was Not: OUR DATING STORY

Icchi (After version). Just in case... ↑

IJICHI  
YUSUKE

SEKIYA  
SHUGO

## char a c t e r s

YAMANA  
NICOLE

NISHINA  
REN

KASHIMA  
RYUTO

TANIKITA  
AKARI

KUROSE  
MARIA

SHIRAKAWA  
RUNA



Though I feel like I'd want to be in high school forever, I also want to see what you'll be like when you grow up.



5th  
Date

# You Were Experienced, I Was Not:

OUR DATING STORY

Makiko  
Nagaoka

Artist / magako





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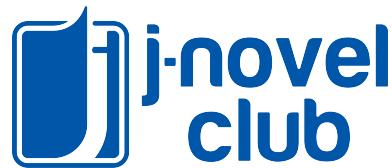
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Translated by Adam Edited by T. Burke

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KEIKEN ZUMI NA KIMI TO, KEIKEN ZERO NA ORE GA, OTSUKIAI SURU HANASHI. Vol. 5

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