

Table of Contents

Color Gallery

Table of Contents Page

Copyrights and Credits

Title Page

Cast Intro

Chapter 1: Close Contact! A Day in the Life of Aijo Rentaro!

Interlude: Hakari and Karane's Shopping Trip

Chapter 2: The Visitor

Interlude: Shizuka and Nano Go to a Comedy Show

Chapter 3: Go! The Rentaro Robot!

Interlude: Kusuri and Kurumi at the Park

Chapter 4: From Circlet Love Story

Interlude: Hahari Gives Mei Paid Time Off

Chapter 5: Have We Met Somewhere Before?

About the Creators

<u>Newsletter</u>





CONTENTS

- 1 CLOSE CONTACT! A DAY IN THE LIFE OF AIJO RENTARO!
- ◆ HAKARI AND KARANE'S SHOPPING TRIP
- 2 THE VISITOR
- SHIZUKA AND NANO GO TO A COMEDY SHOW
- 3 GO! THE RENTARO ROBOT!
- KUSURI AND KURUMI AT THE PARK
- 4 FROM CIRCLET LOVE STORY
- HAHARI GIVES MEI PAID TIME OFF
- 5 HAVE WE MET SOMEWHERE BEFORE?

KIMI NO KOTOGA DAIDAIDAIDAIDAISUKINA 100NIN NO KANOJO BANGAIKOIMONOGATARI ~SECRET LOVE STORY~
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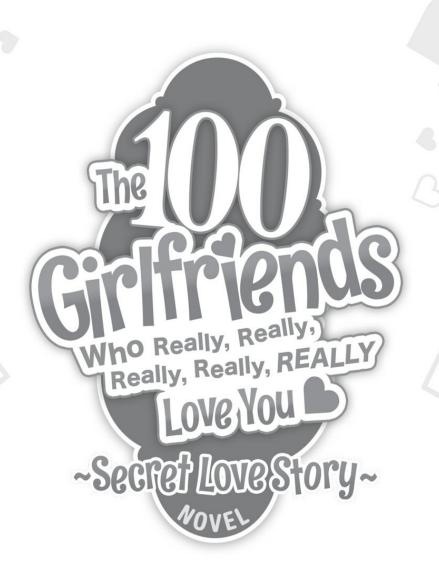
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First-year high school student. A quiet, book-loving librarian.



First-year high school student. Has the best grades in her year. Obsessed with efficiency.



Twenty-nine years old. Chair of the board. Hakari's mother.



Third-year junior high student.
Hoodies and headphones are her
trademarks.



Nineteen-year-old maid who faithfully works for the Hanazono household.

9



One hundred girls rejected him in the past, but he is destined to meet one hundred soulmates as a high schooler. Even as the numbers grow, he loves all his girlfriends with the same fiery intensity.



NOVEL

THE 100 GIRLFRIENDS
WHO REALLY, REALLY,
REALLY, REALLY,
REALLY LOVE YOU
SECRET LOVE STORY

Rentaro's Girlfriends



First-year high school student. A glamorous, sexy girl who boasts the largest bust size in the family.



First-year high school student. Has a snappy retort for every crazy situation.

Chapter 1:

Close Contact! A Day in the Life of Aijo Rentaro!

FIFTEEN-YEAR-OLD AIJO RENTARO WAS WALKING around town. There were few words to describe what he was feeling—but "over the moon" was as close as language could get. He was about to go on a date with the love of his life.

Dear reader, for today's excursion, let us trace his footsteps over the course of a single day.

Saturday, 9 a.m.

"Hope you haven't been waiting long, Hakari!"

Rentaro came running to the entrance of the clock tower in the shopping district. The young lady he had arranged to meet was already standing there.

"Heh heh, I only just got here. Don't you worry!" she said with a dulcet smile. Her name was Hanazono Hakari, and she was Rentaro's girlfriend.

As Rentaro paused to get his breathing steady, Hakari stared intently at his face.

"Hm?" Rentaro scratched his cheek, puzzled. "Is there something on my face?"

"You've got the same handsome eyebrows, eyes, nose, and mouth on you, Rentaro-kun. You're still the hottest guy in the world!" She smiled gently; one could practically hear the hearts trailing at the end of her sentence.

"Ngh!"

Rentaro clutched his chest on pure reflex, feeling as if his heart were about to explode. Fortunately for him, his heart throbbed at a steady rhythm, and it did not, in fact, burst into tiny pieces. If that degree of stimulation was enough to

destroy him, he would have stopped functioning a long time ago.

"Wanna get going, then?"

With supreme nonchalance, Rentaro took Hakari's hand and started walking.

Hakari's breath hitched slightly. "Of course!" She squeezed his hand in return.

They walked along for a while, hand in hand. Feeling her small, soft hands against his skin was a joy. Eventually, they arrived at their destination: a cat café.

"I stumbled on this place not that long ago and fell in love with one of the kitties here!" said Hakari.

Yes, coming here had been her idea.

When they took their seats, a cat immediately climbed onto Hakari's lap. "Oh, look! They're already cuddling up! See, Rentaro-kun? This one looks just like you!"

"I-I guess?"

The subject in question didn't appear to be quite convinced, although the cat certainly did have the thick eyebrows and determined gaze that one would associate with Rentaro.

"Goooood little kitty." Hakari gently stroked the cat's back.

Rentaro watched her with fond eyes. "This is kinda embarrassing. It's sort of like you're petting *me*..."

Perhaps it was because Hakari's earlier words still rang in his ears. Rentaro scratched his cheek, which had reddened ever so slightly.

Seeing her boyfriend so flustered, a somewhat mischievous smile lit up Hakari's face. "Heh heh." She leaned forward. "I'll give you a good petting too!"

When Hakari stroked his head from across the other side of the table, Rentaro stiffened for a moment in mute shock. Before long, however, he relaxed under Hakari's touch. Her slender fingers combed through his stiff hair, tickling him slightly. Neither of them spoke.

Just as they were enjoying themselves, however...

"Eek?"

Because Hakari had changed her posture, the cat on her lap also went on the move...right into her skirt. There, it started licking Hakari's inner thighs.

"Ahh!" Hakari let out a cute shriek. "My goodness, what a cheeky little thing!"

She promptly accosted the audacious feline and started stroking its forehead, scowling all the while. Although she wore an expression of stern authority, her thoughts were an entirely different story.

Eh heh heh heh heh. Being licked by a cat that looks like Rentaro-kun is just like being licked by Rentaro-kun himself—in fact, this makes me want to ask him to lick me even more, and in all kinds of places too!

Hakari pictured Rentaro licking her in a *very* naughty spot, her imagination running wild. Her cheeks flushed, her breathing turned ragged, and her heart pounded relentlessly. Her breasts rose and fell whenever the cat rubbed against her underwear. It took all of her self-restraint to stop herself from moaning. And then her drenched honeypot... (*The author has omitted any further description to avoid having to change the book's rating.*)

Saturday, 12 p.m.

Eventually, Hakari bid Rentaro farewell, saying she had practice to attend. Rentaro's next destination was a space in front of the local zoo. When he arrived at the rendezvous spot, a girl with blonde pigtails was already waiting for him.

"Hi there, Karane! Hope you weren't here long!"

"It's not like I was waiting for you or anything!"

The girl who had immediately gone full tsundere was Inda Karane. She was also Rentaro's girlfriend.

"Wanna get going, then?"

Rentaro, who was used to Karane's mode of communication by now, mentally translated what she said to "Don't worry. You didn't keep me waiting at all."

Then, he took Karane's hand and started walking toward the zoo's entrance.

She stiffened for a moment. Then, after a pause, she let out a "Hmph."

Judging by the fact that all she did was turn her slightly flushed face away, she certainly wasn't averse to his touch.

Then, at the park...

"Hmph... It's kinda cool, I guess. Strong and imposing. That tough, thick-looking skin makes it look like some old relic."

"Yeah, rhinos are strong and cool."

"Hmph... The waddling is cute. It's kinda agile and beautiful when it swims too."

"Penguins are great whether they're in water or out of it."

"Hmph... The way it goes around with bamboo in its mouth, it's sorta like a cute, fluffy toy."

"Pandas are so cute that you'd think they were the result of an alien intervention or something."

That was how the date went. Karane toned down her prickly side with each enclosure they visited, and Rentaro watched her, smiling.

"Oh, it's the petting zoo," he remarked. "Do you wanna stop by, Karane?"

"Well, fine, if you're that insistent!"

"Yeah, I really wanna go! Come on!"

Although it was Rentaro's suggestion, it was actually Karane who had been staring fixedly at the sign. He merely gave her a gentle push of encouragement. Karane knew that too, although she was unable to show it honestly. Seeing her attempt at nonchalance made Rentaro swoon.

"Hey, it's a bunny! They said you're allowed to cuddle it! Hey, Karane, you try it too!" He egged her on.

"Hmph..."

Karane picked up the rabbit as if she had no other choice, her attitude one of long suffering. Once she'd lifted it, however, her eyes started sparkling. She handled the creature carefully, as if it were made of glass.

"It's so soft and fluffy..." mewed Karane.

"Yeah, so cute."

"The way its nose twitches is so adorable. And if you listen carefully, it sounds like it's humming. What a fascinating little guy."

"Yeah, so cute."

"It smells faintly of grass. I can't get enough of it!"

"Yeah, so cute."

All of a sudden, Karane whipped her head to the side, away from the rabbit, scowling. "But it's not like I think that way!" She must have exhausted her entire soft side.

Looking away from the animal, however, meant that her gaze fell elsewhere... right on Rentaro's eyes.

"Yeah, so cute."

"Ngh?!"

It was at that moment she discovered that Rentaro had been looking at Karane and calling *her* cute the whole time.

"Bunnies are cute, but the way you dote on them is the cutest thing in the galaxy. I want to watch you do this forever, Karane."

"Wh-what ...?!"

Karane's face turned bright red at Rentaro's frankness. Before long, she reached her limit. She seized Rentaro in a frontal embrace.

"I-I'm so happy," she whispered, her true feelings reflected in her actions. Yet, as the seconds passed, her grip tightened. "But it's not like I think that way!" she exclaimed.

"Now it's a girlfriend petting zoo!"

For his part, Rentaro seemed nothing but grateful. Turning a lover's embrace into a bear hug was *very* Karane, after all.

Saturday, 3 p.m.

Karane parted ways with Rentaro, saying that she had plans with a friend. Rentaro headed off to his next meeting spot: the library. In front of the building stood a small girl, fidgeting restlessly.

"Were you waiting long, Shizuka-chan?"

The girl turned her head in Rentaro's direction. Her unruly hair jolted adorably in mute surprise.

too, arrived presently.>

The girl who used a text-to-speech app to repurpose lines from books as a proxy for her own voice was Yoshimoto Shizuka. She was also Rentaro's girlfriend.

<Let us sally forth.> <To Shangri-la.>

With his smiling girlfriend in tow, Rentaro entered the building. "Is there anything that came out this month you'd recommend?" he asked when they reached the new arrivals section.

(You may entrust it to my capable hands.)

Shizuka hopped between shelves, pointing out her selections. Rentaro chuckled as he watched her. She was just like when they first met. Much like then, he tried to commit the titles of this batch of recommendations to memory so that he could borrow them all.

"You really know your stuff."

(I am but a dilettante.)

The bashful young Shizuka's cheeks turned pink at Rentaro's praise. Then her gaze slid to one side, next to the novels—at the new manga arrivals.

"So this library has manga as well," said Rentaro, following her gaze. "Oh, there's a new volume out." He casually picked up the latest volume of a series he followed.

(Is that perchance the one in your favor?)

"Yeah, it's really good. It's a love story," Rentaro explained. "Although they're adults who are normally very well-put-together members of society, they act like junior high school kids when it comes to romance. It's adorable."

In lieu of a verbal response, Shizuka nodded multiple times to show that she was listening.

"The first volume is out on loan. You can borrow my copy, if you're interested."

«I gratefully accept.» Shizuka looked just as happy as Rentaro about making a promise.

"But I do have to wonder... Do you have any interest in manga?"

Shizuka's literary diet consisted chiefly of novels. Manga wasn't off the table, but she didn't project the image of someone who read a great deal of it. At Rentaro's question, Shizuka lowered her head somewhat self-effacingly. Then she fiddled with her smartphone.

<That which is loved by my lover,> the app intoned, <is what I wish to love.>

Rentaro clutched his heart at this laudable sentiment. "Ngh!"

<Have you other approbations?> <I am interested in reading.>

"Let's see... What genres do you like?"

<Does a love story not bring cheer?>

"I can help you with that! There was a period when I marathoned a whole bunch of romance manga!"

Part of that was because he'd been trying to study up on dating. In the end, none of it had been put to use, and he'd racked up a record of one hundred rejections. However, if he imagined that it had all been for this day, then none of it had been a waste.

"This is a wholesome love story set in high school! I love it so much! This one is full of funny misunderstandings, but the romantic parts will totally make you swoon! Oh, and you've *got* to read this one! It's a classic enemies-to-lovers story! And this one..."

As he spouted off his recommendations, Rentaro's gaze happened to fall on a certain title on the manga shelf. It was a series he hadn't yet read himself. *Oh, Hakari said good things about this one.* It had been mentioned in one of the magazines at the cat café. Rentaro casually picked it up from the library shelf.

Only to be utterly stunned.

The manga was part of the genre known as smut. The cover showed a half-naked man and woman having a heated entanglement. Rentaro reflexively returned the book to the shelf. He figured it was a bad idea to show Shizuka anything *too* stimulating.

"Ha ha...that might be a bit too soon for us."

Shizuka nodded fervently at him, her face bright red. Technically, she was the same age as Hakari, which meant that it would have been perfectly normal for her to read slightly racy manga. Not that there was anyone around to point that out.

Saturday, 6 p.m.

Shizuka left, saying she had plans to eat dinner with her family. Rentaro's next destination was the planetarium. At the exact moment he arrived, the person he had arranged to meet up with appeared from around the corner.

"Wow, Nano. You're always exactly on time!"

"It is most efficient to arrive precisely when everyone else is present."

The beautiful girl who prioritized efficiency was Eiai Nano. She was also Rentaro's girlfriend.

"Okay, let's go on in," said Rentaro. "The show is about to start."

Nano nodded. Together, they entered the building and went through the reception area.

"There are special seats for couples to watch together," Rentaro remarked as they sat and lay back in an extra-wide seat.

"Watching footage with minimal movement is an efficient form of dating."

"Yeah, but that's not the reason why I chose a planetarium. Oh, it's starting."

Rentaro was still smiling when the lights went off and a video about the constellations started playing on the ceiling. He spent the next half hour watching with deep interest.

When they left the planetarium, Nano opened her mouth.

"How illogical..." were the first words she said. "None of the stars align that way. They simply contrived it to make the Sagitta constellation look like an arrow. Given that they merely joined two stars together to form Canis Minor, they ought to name it the 'Straight Line' constellation instead."

"Ha ha, there are a lot of constellations like that, yeah."

"There is a strong possibility that the people who named the constellations were chronic insomniacs."

"That doesn't mean they just hallucinated it all...at least I don't think they did!"

"There is also the likelihood that they devised those names as pranks, only for them to spread too far to rescind them later."

"Even in the modern day, that doesn't happen too often!"

Rentaro had kind of expected this, but Nano really didn't seem to buy into constellations at all.

"Er... Sorry, was it not fun for you?" Rentaro asked abruptly, feeling slightly anxious.

However, Nano replied as if her feelings were obvious. "Hm? Of course I had fun. Everything is fun when I am with you, Aijo Rentaro," she said, looking him directly in the eye.

It was more than enough to make Rentaro's heart throb painfully.

"I feel the same way about being with you, Nano. Even when we're not together, I have fun imagining Air Nano!" Rentaro gushed.

"An imaginary me is no substitute," Nano said, responding with a cold truth.

At that moment, Nano's body began to tremble.

"Oh, sorry! I didn't realize! It gets cold when the sun goes down!" Without any hesitation, Rentaro took off his coat and draped it over Nano's shoulders.

"Are you all right, Aijo Rentaro?"

"I'm all good! I wear that coat for times exactly like this!" Rentaro gave her a thumbs-up and rolled up his sleeve in demonstration.

"Thank you..."

As Nano put her arms through the coat's sleeves, her face brushed against the collar. She gave it a sniff.

"Oh? It doesn't smell funny, does it?!" Rentaro asked, flustered.

Nano shook her head. "It merely smells of you."

Judging by her mildly flushed cheeks, she certainly did not mean that in a negative way.

"O-okay..."

For some reason, Rentaro found himself feeling strangely bashful. He turned his gaze to the sky, partly to avoid Nano's eyes. It was now thoroughly dark, and he could see the stars twinkling in the night sky, though there wasn't anything in particular he wanted to look at.

"Oh, look at that, Nano!" said Rentaro, somewhat excited. "The position of those stars—"

"They explained that one to us at the planetarium," Nano finished for him, having noticed what Rentaro was pointing at. "The Straight Line Constellation."

"You mean Canis Minor!"

The two stars linked together looked like a small dog. (Well, not really.) Even

so, they twinkled brilliantly in the sky.

Saturday, 9 p.m.

After saying goodbye to Nano, who had gone home to study, Rentaro ran to his next meeting spot: the local park.

"Rentaro! Over here!"

The girl waving enthusiastically after having spotted Rentaro was Yakuzen Kusuri. She was also Rentaro's girlfriend.

"Sorry, Kusuri-senpai. Did I keep you waiting long?"

"Not to worry! Kusuri just got here!"

Although the girl only looked about eight years old, she was actually a third-year high school student—older than Rentaro.

"Kusuri brought this for today's date," she announced in a singsong voice. "Homemade by Kusuri, aye!"

Kusuri rummaged through her bag. What she pulled out was...not a homemade bento.

"Drugs!" she hooted.

"Kusuri-senpai's homemade drugs! I'm so honored!"

Her gift was a pharmaceutical drug in a test tube. Kusuri researched and developed all kinds of medicines, and their effects were just as eclectic.

"This is 'Make Park Hundred Times More Fun Medicine'!"

"Whoa, that's awesome! What happens when you drink it?"

Rentaro's enthusiasm was genuine thus far. Until...

"It makes you really high and hallucinate, aye!"

"I'm gonna ask just to be sure, but is this appropriate?!" He couldn't help but speak a little wildly, because the explanation he heard did not sound

appropriate at all. "Publishers really look down on that kind of thing these days! Put it away! Quick!"

"Tch." Kusuri reluctantly stashed the drug back in her bag.

"You can have fun without drugs! Look, there's a swing!"

"Oooh! Park is kinda exciting at night!"

After that, the two of them enjoyed the playground equipment. They swung on the swing, all the way to its zenith. They flew through the air with the Tarzan ropes, and played tag on the jungle gym. Once they were done with the more energetic activities, they went down the slide.

Watching Kusuri in high spirits brought a smile to Rentaro's face. He wanted to match her childlike joy.

"Let's go on seesaw next!" Kusuri declared as she enthusiastically plopped on the seat at one end.

Rentaro followed suit, sitting on the opposite seat, but...

"I figured this would happen." He couldn't help but chuckle selfdeprecatingly. Their weights were so lopsided that the seesaw tilted entirely in his direction.

"Then Kusuri drink Medicine-Reversing Medicine, aye!" Kusuri whipped out a test tube and chugged its contents.

Her body grew rapidly. In an instant, she had transformed into a buxom young lady. This was Kusuri's true form. Due to a failed immortality medicine, she normally possessed the body of an eight-year-old. Only when she drank the Medicine-Reversing Medicine could she revert to her original form.

With that body, the weight discrepancy between her and Rentaro was no longer that of a child versus a teen. Theoretically, they could play on the seesaw without a problem, but...well...

"Feels weird for two high schoolers to play on seesaw," she remarked.

"You only realized that now?!"

Kusuri, now replete with a ponytail and glasses, seemed embarrassed, judging

by the faint flush of her cheeks. Her mental age seemed to grow with her physical body. At the moment, she was every bit as mature as her appearance suggested.

"In any case..." Kusuri stood, walked over to Rentato, and cast a sideways glance. "The park at night is...fun in another way."

Rentaro glanced in the direction Kusuri was looking and saw a couple making out in the bushes.

"Oh! Uh..."

Kusuri was standing right in front of where Rentaro was sitting on the seesaw. On top of which, she was leaning toward him, and their faces were almost touching. Being in such close proximity to an adult's sexy allure made Rentaro stiffen. His heart pounded...

Mwah. Kusuri planted a kiss on Rentaro's forehead.

"Leave it at this for today, aye," she said with a cheeky grin.

In her child form, she was endearing in an innocent sort of way, but this Kusuri was very sophisticated and beautiful. Rentaro was once again reminded that both versions had their distinct charms.

"With Make Park Hundred Times More Fun Medicine, the seesaw might have been more enjoyable, even in this form," Kusuri remarked, after a silence.

"I feel like that just paints a scarier picture, so I'd really appreciate it if you stopped right there!"

This sort of propensity was another one of Kusuri's charms, at least as far as Rentaro was concerned.

Sunday, 12 a.m.

Though Kusuri went home to sleep, Rentaro still had another rendezvous lined up.

"I'm here, Hahari-san!"

It was less of a meetup and more of a house call.

"Why hello, Rentaro-chan! Come on in! I just finished work for today," Hahari said.

"Wow! You're such a hard worker!"

The woman shuffling papers around and exuding adult charm was Hanazono Hahari. She was Hakari's mother, and also Rentaro's girlfriend.

"I'm so sorry we had to have our date at this late hour, dear. My Saturday was fully booked."

"I'll come running at any hour, Hahari-san! Whatever time fits your schedule!"

"Tee hee. You're such a sweetie." Her slightly bashful demeanor made her appear younger than usual. Rentaro thought she was adorable. "But...you do understand what it means to visit a women's room at this hour, don't you?"

And then came the one-eighty. The seductive smile on her face gave her the air of a carnivore locking onto its prey.

"Let's enjoy ourselves tonight, hm?"

"Y-yes...!"

As Hahari stroked his chin, Rentaro stiffened a little and dug his hand into his pocket. Having anticipated what would unfold next, he had made sure to bring those.

"It's so fun playing cards!" he cried out as he revealed a deck of cards.

"Oof! Oh, Rentaro-chan, you're always such an innocent, wholesome boy!" Hahari subtly clutched her head in her hands. "That's all well and good, but isn't there something else we could do? A more *adult* kind of entertainment?"

"Ah... I understand."

Even Rentaro wasn't so simpleminded as to believe that a mere pack of playing cards would be enough for the entire night. He had something else up his sleeve.

"You're talking about UNO, aren't you?"

"How is UNO more adult?" This time, Hahari didn't even bother trying to hide

her disbelief. However, she quickly composed herself, covering with a cough. "Rentaro-chan, I see how it is. You are firm in your beliefs and I respect that."

Rentaro stuck to his wholesome principles. Hahari nodded in approval.

"Putting that aside for now... How about we play house? I'll be the mother and you'll be the baby!"

"How did we get from cards to this?!" Rentaro couldn't help but shout, even though he always wanted to grant his girlfriends' desires to the best of his abilities. "Well, if it's family friendly, I don't mind..."

"Why, yes! It's very, very family friendly!" Hahari insisted. The drool on her chin made that seem suspect, but Rentaro decided to ignore that for the moment. "Now then, lie down, my darling!"

Hahari gently coaxed him into laying his head in her lap.

Whoa?! His view was instantly blocked by two enormous mounds. Yeah, I'm really doubting that this is family friendly!

Crushed under the pressure, Rentaro was about to suggest a rain check, but...

"Every day is bliss with you as my boyfriend, Rentaro-chan!" Her gentle voice warmed his heart. "But you know that it's fine if you want to be spoiled every once in a while, right?"

He could just barely see Hahari's motherly expression.

Ah, he thought. So this is what Hakari grew up with...

It vaguely occurred to Rentaro that Hahari must have raised her daughter with just as much tender, loving care. A sense of ease washed over him, and his eyes felt heavy.

"Are you sleepy, my dear? We can't have you wetting the bed, so let's get you a diaper!"

"Worry not! I'm wide awake"

Sensing that falling asleep had become a hazard, Rentaro desperately tried to avoid any interference with his underwear as Hahari's maternal energy continued to envelop him.

Sunday, 3 a.m.

In the early hours of the morning, Hahari waved Rentaro off, saying that she had a meeting with a foreign corporation. In order to meet his next rendezvous partner, Rentaro left Hahari's room...and that completed his journey.

"I have been waiting for you."

"Whoa! You're already here! You're a super-maid!"

Meido Mei stood right outside the door, dressed in a maid uniform. She was a bona fide maid who worked for the Hanazono family. She was also Rentaro's girlfriend.

"Mei-san, is there anywhere you'd like to go or anything you'd like to do?" asked Rentaro. "There might be a limit to what's possible at this hour, but I'm happy to oblige."

"Something I'd like to do?" Mei tilted her head upward slightly, her eyelids tightly closed. "Yes, I would like to clean that window."

"Huh?" Mei proceeded to wipe a window with a cloth, wasting not a single motion, leaving Rentaro in the middle of the hallway blinking. "Wh-what's the problem with that window?"

"I clean it every day," Mei responded matter-of-factly.

"Um... May I ask if that's part of your day job?" Rentaro asked gingerly.

"Yes, it is." There was no hesitation in Mei's answer.

"Just to be clear, did Hahari-san ask you to do that, or...?"

"I merely do it of my own volition."

"So, in other words, cleaning that window is your heart's desire?"

"Yes, precisely."

Upon hearing this frank declaration, Rentaro's face lit up with a smile. "Then let's have a window-wiping date! It looks like fun!"

Rentaro promptly procured some cleaning tools and stood next to Mei.

Whatever his girlfriend wished to do was something he wished to join in on. Mei gazed fondly at her devoted boyfriend before turning back to the task at hand. The two of them cleaned the window together.

"Wait. Why's your part so much cleaner than mine, Mei-san?"

The gap between their skills was left clear as day. Despite Rentaro's best efforts, small smudges and uneven spots were still left behind. Mei, on the other hand, moved with practiced efficiency—her side was clean as a whistle.

"If you would allow me to say so, I believe these tools may be easier to handle while you are still learning."

"Oh, you're right! Thanks! This is a lot easier than before!" With the new tools, his second attempt was a marked improvement. "Feels great watching yourself improve in real time!"

Seeing Rentaro's guileless smile, Mei momentarily struggled for words. "I am delighted to share the joy of learning a new task with you, Rentaro-sama," she said finally.

"I totally get it!"

The comment brought a smile to Mei's face. In Rentaro's mind, however, he'd replaced the words "learning a new task" with "going on a date." At that moment, he didn't see it as work in the slightest.

"You learned the job bit by bit, just like I'm doing now," he remarked.

"Young and inexperienced as I am, there is much that I learn every single day."

"You have such a great work ethic. I've gotta study hard too."

Even now, Mei demonstrated how she wiped the windows clean without a hint of complaint. She had honed this talent through many hours of hard work, but the maid was not yet satisfied with her skills.

A question occurred to Rentaro. "This is still a job, though. Aren't there ever times when you've thought, 'This is tough,' or 'I'm exhausted'?"

"My job? Tough?" Mei tilted her head in confusion.

Rentaro gulped. "It's never even occurred to you once, has it?!"

"I am always elated when I am useful to Hahari-sama."

"Spoken like a textbook workaholic!"

"But now," Mei said, glancing in Rentaro's direction, "that is not the only thing I live for." Her cheeks were ever so slightly flushed. "Being able to spend time with you, and with everyone else, also brings me joy."

"Same here. You give me so much happiness!"

Indeed, it was just as Mei declared. Nothing could be more fun than spending time with the person you love. Even if that time was spent cleaning.

Sunday, 6 a.m.

When Rentaro left Mei to start her morning tasks, he headed off for his next destination. A somewhat slender young girl waited for him in front of a restaurant known for its breakfast buffet.

"Good morning, Kurumi! Sorry I kept you waiting!"

"Morning. Don't worry. I wasn't waiting or nothing."

The girl in a hoodie who refused to meet Rentaro's eyes was Haraga Kurumi. She was also Rentaro's girlfriend.

"Anyway, let's go inside already, Rentaro-senpai. I'm getting hungry..." Her stomach was making a very distinct rumbling noise.

"Argh, now I'm getting pissed off!" She scratched her head in frustration.

Rentaro took her by the hand. "Okay, let's go in and order!" He wasted no time getting her inside and finding seats. "Two people for the breakfast buffet, please."

"Sure! Please, help yourselves!" the waiter responded cheerfully.

"Okay, let's go grab some food," said Rentaro.

"Mm-hmm... Whoa, there's a ton of stuff here." Kurumi still looked disgruntled, but when she caught sight of all the food stacked across the cavernous room, her eyes regained their sparkle. "The sausages, bacon, and omelets are to die for! Whoa! The roast beef is *soooo* good too! They have a whole set of dried fish! Should I have rice or bread? Why not both?! Soup with or without miso? I say again, *why not both*?! I can't get enough of that smoothie, either! Nice, they even have a ton of sushi!"

On and on she went as she stacked an impressive tower on her plate. In the blink of an eye, she'd already created a mountain.

"Miss?" said a nervous-looking waitress. "We ask that you not take more food than you can eat..."

"This is all going down the hatch, for sure! You'll see, Miss!" Rentaro beamed and gave a thumbs-up in support.

"I-I see..."

The waitress seemed less than convinced, though one could hardly blame her. She was currently dealing with what appeared to be a troublesome customer. Soon enough, however, she would see the truth.

After returning to their seats, Rentaro and Kurumi both clapped their hands together. "Itadakimasu!"

Kurumi's eyes sparkled as if she were beholding treasure. After a bit of deliberation, she started devouring the sausage.

"Yummyyyyyy!" Her sparkling eyes exploded in pure glee.

The waitress watched, utterly bewildered. Kurumi packed away the food at an astonishing rate, all while savoring every bite. Before long, her plate was empty.

"Okay, next!"

In the blink of an eye, Kurumi had devoured her first serving, which normally would have been enough for a small family. She waded back into the sea of food for seconds. Kurumi digested food at a superlative speed. Even straight after a full meal, she still found herself unsated.

"Hmm? Are you done already, Rentaro-senpai?" she asked, tilting her head questioningly. She had just noticed that Rentaro only had a coffee cup in front of him.

"Yep. Just watching you have so much fun eating is enough to sate me."

Kurumi blinked in surprise. "W-well, if you say so!"

She looked down, face slightly red, and resumed her meal. If Rentaro was perfectly honest, he was confident that just hearing her girlish voice when she'd exclaimed "Yummyyyyyy!" would be enough to sustain him for days on end. Today, however, he had eaten enough to feel fairly full. Not so full that he couldn't eat another bite, but...

"Hey!" a waiter yelled to the kitchen staff. "At this pace, we'll be totally out of food in just a few minutes!"

"We're past our limit here! Bus out anything that's done!"

"If we run out of food, our reputation as an all-you-can-eat place is gonna tank!"

"We're low on ingredients! I'm gonna dash out and get more!"

"Holy cow! When they said that this was 'all going down the hatch,' were they talking about wiping out our stores too?!"

Rentaro felt a bit sorry for the harried-looking staff members, who all looked as grim as soldiers on a battlefield.

Sunday, 9 a.m.

"Kurumi, didn't you say you had somewhere to be around this time?"

"Yeah, but not anymore. I was gonna have the limited-stock ramen they sell at nine, but the restaurant's closed today."

Right on the heels of the buffet, Kurumi planned to eat a whole other dish. This was par for the course for her, however, so Rentaro didn't bother calling her out on it.

"Okay, do you wanna keep hanging ou—hm?"

Rentaro was just about to invite Kurumi to accompany him to his next destination. However, just as they left the restaurant, he spotted a group of girls. There was no way Rentaro could mistake any of them. Hakari, Karane, Shizuka, Nano, Kusuri, Hahari, Mei... They were all Rentaro's girlfriends.

"Hey, guys. Didn't everyone besides Hakari have plans?"

When Kurumi joined the pack, all eight were assembled. Karane and the others glared at Rentaro.

"Forget about the date. Go to sleep!" they all—with the exception of Kurumi and Mei—barked at him.

"I'm retracting my plans!" Karane exclaimed.

"Rentaro-kun," said Hakari, "I had no idea that you had been up for twenty-four hours."

"Whoa. Are you for real, Rentaro-senpai?" Kurumi looked shocked.

<When every fellow made contact,> Shizuka's app intoned, <the truth came to light.>

"Sleep deprivation causes the brain's functions to decline, lowering efficiency," Nano pointed out.

Rentaro nodded earnestly at his fretting girlfriends. "But I exist at your beck and call twenty-four hours a day," he declared, his eyes clear and guiltless.

Mei was the only one who sympathized with Rentaro. "I also devote twenty-four hours of my day to Hahari-sama," she said.

Naturally, this only earned her a scolding.

"You were up all night working too?!" Hahari groaned. "You ought to get some sleep yourself!"

"Yes, my lady."

"Aye, you can take this 'Stay Stimulated All Night Medicine' if you don't wanna sle—mmf!" Kusuri was about to bring out an obviously inappropriate drug when Shizuka gently stifled her mouth.

Rentaro's girlfriends circled him.

"Let's have a nap date!" Karane insisted. "We'll join you!"

"Technically, it's still too early for a nap," Hakari pointed out.

"Why don't we have our nap party at my house?" Hahari suggested.

"Pajamas have already been prepared," said Mei.

"Why've you got pajamas for all of us?" Kurumi demanded.

"It would be more illogical for Hanazono Hahari not to have pajamas on demand," Nano interjected.

"Yay!" Kusuri jumped for joy. "A morning sleepover! Aye!"

Verily, what an amusing prospect!>

And with that, the entire group made for the Hanazono house in good cheer.

Surrounded by his eight girlfriends, Rentaro had a moment of introspection. Yesterday, everyone had their own plans, so I had to do a series of one-on-one dates...but I have the most fun when I'm with everyone.

Normally, an eight-timing man would experience hell on Earth if his girlfriends got together, but this particular group—the Rentaro family—were all in sync.

This is a story about a man who would eventually woo one hundred girlfriends, a tale of love and peace, overflowing with smiles.

"Hahari-sama, I believe there were sightings of a suspicious person around here," said Mei.



"Make sure you hold Mommy's hand so you don't get kidnapped, Kurumichan!" Hahari addressed the youngest of the group.

Kurumi scowled. "Stay away, weirdo."

"Dear me, I'm so scared, Rentaro-kuuun!" Hakari exclaimed.

"Hey!" growled Karane. "Don't you take advantage of the confusion to cling to Rentaro's arm! Get those fat tits outta here, or I'll tear 'em off!"

"It would be most efficient for the eight of us to take turns on guard duty," Nano remarked.

(I am no roughhousing soldier!)

"Oh, by the way," Kusuri spoke up belatedly. "Kusuri might've experimented with 'Paints You Black Like a *Detective Conan* Culprit Medicine' around here not too long ago... Oopsie, hand slipped—"

Well, maybe peace was a pipe dream.

Interlude:

Hakari and Karane's Shopping Trip



Hakari and Karane happened to bump into each other in town and made muffled exclamations of surprise at the exact same moment.

"It's not like this is a coincidence or anything!" Karane spoke first.

"Should I take that to mean that you specifically went out of your way to find me, or...?"

"No way, Jose!"

"So we've basically hit a roadblock in the conversation on Turn One." Hakari sighed in exasperation. "I'd better be going then," she said with a small wave.

"Yeah, well, obviously I've got stuff to do too." Karane turned her head away slightly.

They started walking to their respective destinations...which turned out to be in the same direction.

Karane frowned. "Hey, you aren't tailing me, are you?"

"No, I just happen to be headed this way," Hakari responded serenely.

"I'm turning right here. See ya."

"I'm also heading right."

"After that, I'm going left."

"Same as me, then."

"Then after that—"

"I'm probably going the same way as you."

The two girls exchanged quips as they walked along. A common understanding formed between them. They probably had the same objective in

mind, didn't they?

"This is the store I was going to," Hakari announced.

"Yeah," Karane said after a stilted pause. "Same here."

They had wound up at the same general store. They walked inside together, Hakari looking somewhat content compared to Karane's uncomfortable demeanor.

"Oooh, how wonderful!" Hakari's eyes sparkled at the voluminous rows of goods.

"It's not bad, I guess." Karane, for her part, also looked satisfied.

Then they started walking...in the same direction once again.

"Like I said before, why're you following me?!" Karane demanded.

"From my perspective, you're the one tailing me."

As the two of them bickered, they paced about the store until eventually, they stopped—in unison—in front of a certain shelf.

"Oooh, this pendant is so cute!" Hakari piped up cheerfully.

"Hmm?" Karane also gazed at the pendant in question with deep interest. "Oh, think I might buy that."

With an oh-so-nonchalant air, Karane picked up the pendant.

As her eyes turned to Karane, Hakari's expression flickered as if she had just realized something. "Excuse me?! Don't you dare copy me!"

"Whaaat? I went for it first."

They'd had the same argument not so long ago when deciding what side dishes to include in the bento they had made for Rentaro. This time, they were much more subdued about it. They snorted in unison, attempting to hold back their laughter.

"You also a fan of this?" Karane asked after a while.

"Yes, I like it very much."

"I want it, too, though... And it just so happens that they've got two in

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stock..."
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"So they do."

"We've got no other choice! Gotta suck it up, right?!"

"Yes, yes. As you say, no other choice."

"You got a problem with that?!"

"Did I say I had a problem?" Hakari smiled. "Come on. Let's go to the counter."

"Hmph. I'm only going with you because it'd be inefficient for us to go separately!"

"Now you're sounding like Nano-san..."

The ribbing continued all the way through the purchasing process. The next day, when the pair showed up wearing matching pendants, the others couldn't help but regard it as a heartwarming display of friendship.

Chapter 2: The Visitor

O NE DAY AFTER SCHOOL, THE RENTARO FAMILY gathered on the rooftop like they always did. However, on this occasion, Nano had arrived just a little later than everyone else.

"It's rare for Nano-san to be late, isn't it?" Hakari remarked.

"I had business to attend to," said Nano.

"Needed to pee?" asked Kusuri.

"No."

Shizuka tilted her head ever so slightly in confusion.

"Aijo Rentaro," Nano asked, "may I speak to you right now?"

"Sure, but there's something I want to ask you first." Rentaro's smile quickly transformed into a serious expression. "Who are you?"

At this question, the girlfriends (barring Nano and Shizuka) looked utterly mystified.

"My goodness, Rentaro-chan! What are you saying?" asked Hahari.

"Hey, quit it! It's not like you to joke like that," Karane said.

Though they were the only ones who spoke up, the other girls stared at Rentaro questioningly.

<I, too...> Shizuka gathered her courage amid the strained atmosphere and spoke using her smartphone, nodding repeatedly as she typed. <'Tis merely my intuition, but...> <I have a sinister feeling.>

Karane frowned. "You too, Shizuka?"

"Mei, have you got any idea what's going on?" asked Hahari.

"Nano appears to be the same person to me, as far as my eyes can tell," declared Mei with her eyes firmly shut.

Kurumi was lost for words. "Please tell me that's a joke."

"No, she has a point," said Rentaro. "Nano is definitely unchanged, as far as her cellular structure goes."

"Where exactly is that confidence coming from, Rentaro-senpai?" Kurumi demanded.

"Well, according to my metronome, Nano's breathing is 0.1 seconds out of sync from usual! There was also a 0.99 to 1.01 percent discrepancy in her stride a moment ago! And her blinking is almost random!"

"Wouldn't that just mean she's becoming more human?" Karane retorted.

Kurumi came in with some follow-up snark. "You're seriously measuring every organ in her body?"

To that, Rentaro clenched his fist and opened his eyes wide. "I...don't want to miss a single tiny detail about my girlfriends. Every day, I use my mental single-lens reflex camera with the best-quality image and shutter speed to record you in my heart!"

"Ngh!"

Rentaro's loving words prompted all of the girlfriends (except for Nano) to clutch their chests in unison.

"That reaction just told me everything," Rentaro declared. "You are Nano, but you're also not. If I had to explain, it feels like...someone is controlling Nano's body."

After a long pause, Nano(?) let out a quiet sigh. Her expression indicated that she had an inkling of what Rentaro was talking about. At this very out-of-character display, his other girlfriends began to have their own doubts. "Hmm?"

"I would never have conceived that someone would see through my ruse." Nano(?)'s intonation sounded strangely choppy and robotic. "I was not aware Earthlings had the ability to control every aspect of their physical forms."

"That's just one very particular Earthling." Kurumi tilted her head. "Wait... 'Earthlings'?"

<From that turn of phrase, could it be...?!>

Shizuka gulped.

In the midst of all the tumult and confusion, Kusuri asked the question on everyone's mind, her tone nonchalant. "Aye! Is Nano an alien?"

"Yes." Nano (the alien?) nodded in reply.

"I am currently borrowing the body of the Earthling known as 'Eiai Nano' for a temporary duration."

"This is crazy! Right, Mother?" said Hakari.

"Yes, wh-who would have thought Nano-chan was such a jokester?" Hahari concurred.

Mother and daughter were still half-skeptical. Well, *mostly* skeptical. Observing their somewhat stiff faces, Nano (the alien?) gave a single nod. "My main body is right here."

When a small, strange-looking creature crawled out of Nano's ear, their jaws dropped to the floor. Even Mei's eyes were wide open like saucers.

"It's like that hand monster from Parasyte!"

"Now do you believe me?"

Nano's mouth enunciated the words, suggesting that the "main body" did not possess a way to vocalize Earth languages.

"Screw you! Give back Nano's body!" Karane lunged at the alien, but Hakari and Hahari seized hold of her.

"Heel, Karane-san! Heel!" Hakari insisted.

"Who knows what yanking the alien out will do? Maybe Nano-chan's brain will fall out with it! Let's not make any hasty moves before we find out what's going on!" Even with mother and daughter working together, Karane threatened to slip out of their grasp. "Mei, you hold down Karane-chan too!"

"Yes, my lady."

With Mei joining the fray, the three somehow managed to restrain Karane. At this point, a salivating Hahari took advantage of the confusion to sniff Karane's nape, only for the younger girl to send her flying. Fortunately, Mei neatly caught her mistress.

All of these shenanigans were finally enough to restore Karane to her senses. It wasn't clear from Hahari's actions whether or not she had anticipated that Karane actually *would* calm down.

At any rate, Karane settled for glaring daggers at the alien.

"You're actually an alien... How's this even canon?" Kusuri didn't seem wholly convinced that an alien stood before her. After recovering from the initial shock, she seemed more weirded out than anything else.



Could you be a messenger from the beyond?> Shizuka trembled like a frightened animal.

"I dunno. That *may* just be some weird special effect or something." Kurumi still looked skeptical. "Mmm, may... May queen potatoes!"

Even in these dire circumstances, Kurumi's mind still jumped to food, causing her stomach to rumble conspicuously. Shizuka passed the scowling Kurumi her leftover potato chips from lunch to tide her over.

Meanwhile, Karane turned her sharp glare in Rentaro's direction. "Wait, what about you, Rentaro?! Why aren't you saying anything?! Are you just gonna stand there and watch as an alien takes over Nano's body?!"

Rentaro was silent for a moment. "I'm not sensing any hostility at this point," he said. "If we antagonize it, we risk putting Nano in danger."

"Urk!" Karane groaned. No doubt she saw the sense in what Rentaro said.

"But if it shows even the slightest intention of harming Nano..." Rentaro turned to Kusuri, who gave a single nod as she pulled a test tube from her pocket. Rentaro took it and opened the lid. "I'll sic this Exclusively Melts Extraterrestrial Beings Medicine on its behind!"

A cute "meep!" escaped Nano's mouth. Evidently, Rentaro had succeeded in intimidating the alien, especially when his eyes took on a manic gleam. He made as if to throw the tube.

"How the hell do you have such a specific drug for this exact situation?" Kurumi pointed out bitingly.

It turned out that Rentaro loved his girlfriends so much that he'd asked Kusuri to prepare a drug *just in case* any nasty aliens ever showed up. What a considerate boyfriend!

"L-let's all just calm down here, Earthlings." The "main body" scurried back inside Nano's ear, though this would do nothing to protect it from the Exclusively Melts Extraterrestrial Beings Medicine. "I have absolutely no intention of harming this individual."

Despite Nano (the alien)'s plea, Rentaro kept the test tube ready, not easing

up an inch.

"Furthermore, I did not take it by force. I received her permission to borrow it in advance."

At this sudden plot twist, everyone tilted their heads in tandem. "Huh?"

"I will briefly switch my consciousness with that of the individual known as Eiai Nano," said Nano (the alien). She closed her eyes, only to reopen them a moment later. "The switch is done."

"Aye, is that you, Nano?" Kusuri asked Nano(?).

Hesitant glances were exchanged. Had the switch really taken place as she claimed?

Rentaro spoke first. "Thank goodness! It's you, Nano!"

<Nano-san.> <You have returned!>

When the two people who were capable of differentiating between the Nanos spoke up, the others breathed sighs of relief.

"You've been recording the differences between the before-and-after, haven't you, Mei?" Hahari was astute at times like this. "I'd like you to prepare an identification algorithm, just to be thorough."

"Yes, my lady. I will proceed with utmost haste."

Hakari, for her part, looked strained. "I don't know whether to be grateful or mad that you've been secretly filming."

"Inda Karane." Having now been recognized for who she was, the real Nano turned her gaze to Karane. "I am glad that you were angry on my behalf. Thank you."

Karane stiffened at these frank words of gratitude, and a blush bloomed on her face. "Ugh, I just wanted to know how it feels to beat up an alien, okay?!"

Everyone gazed at her fondly as she turned away in a huff.

"So, Nano, why did you allow an alien to borrow your body?" asked Rentaro, concerned.

«Was it unavoidable, mayhaps?»

Nano nodded briskly. "By allowing an alien to use my body as a host, I could delegate my movement capabilities, increasing my personal efficiency."

"You actually saw the *upside* in being possessed by an alien?!" Karane said incredulously.

Standing next to Karane, Rentaro recalled how Nano had said on their first date (before they were officially dating) that she had wanted automatic movement capabilities. He lowered the test tube, finally coming to terms with the situation.

"Furthermore..." Nano turned to Rentaro, her cheeks pink. "Aijo Rentaro said that he would still love me, even if an alien possessed my body."

"But of course! I'll love you from the deepest depths of my heart no matter what happens!" Rentaro shouted at the top of his lungs.

Karane gave Nano a side-eye. "So when it was controlling you, you weren't trying to call out, 'That's not me,' or anything like that?"

"I was still conscious while the alien was in control. We shared senses and stimuli as well. Under this arrangement, the only logical conclusion was that I was still in possession of my personhood, regardless of any alien interference."

"Ooookay..."

Karane shrugged, defeated.

"But the alien must have had some goal in mind when it borrowed your body, right?" Rentaro asked.

"It would be more efficient for it to answer your question directly." Nano closed her eyes once more. "The switch is done."

"Mei, can you confirm?" Hahari asked.

Nano's physical appearance was utterly unchanged, leaving those unable to distinguish between the two filled with uncertainty.

"I believe that there is a fifty-one percent chance that the alien is now in control."

Hakari groaned. "That's only slightly better odds than a coin flip."

"Aye," said Kusuri. "Schrödinger's Nano..."

"One of them's bound to be the real Nano-senpai," Kurumi remarked.

Nano (the alien) looked from Rentaro to Hakari to Karane. "Before I speak of my objective, I would like to thank you," she said.

"What are you thanking us for?" Rentaro tilted his head, puzzled.

"It's not like an alien's got any reason to thank us!" Karane pointed out.

Hakari grimaced. "Just this once, I agree with Karane-san."

"I was called by you to visit this planet," said the alien.

The three exchanged confused looks.

An instant later, however, their faces were struck with a look of understanding as they recalled their first kiss *as a trio*. They'd aligned themselves on the roof back then as if they had been performing a UFO-summoning ritual.

"We actually summoned one?!" they yelled in unison.

Indeed, they had.

"Where the hell was this foreshadowed?!"

In volume one of the manga, published by Young Jump Comics.

"That was in a throwaway panel at the end of the chapter! How does that even count as foreshadowing?!"

They were quite right, of course, but it was foreshadowing nonetheless, at least in this humble author's opinion.

"But Nano-san—I mean, Alien-san—why is that something you need to thank us for?" asked Hakari.

"What, you're calling it Alien-san? You've got your own name, don't you?" said Karane.

"The name of my mother planet is pronounced @¥→X###\$%."

All three groaned. "Why's it gotta be gibberish?!"

"Then I invite you to make up a name." The alien paused. "Hm? I see... The

individual known as Eiai Nano has suggested the name Nano Two."

"There's half-assing something, and then there's this!"

It was a very efficient, Nano-like suggestion, but since nobody had any other ideas, it passed by default.

Nano Two proceeded to explain its circumstances. "Our home planet is running out of energy, so I set out to find a new source. Then, after I was summoned to this planet, I happened upon a bountiful resource."

"Aye, do you mean wood, petrol, or drugs?" asked Kusuri.

"One of those things is not like the others," Kurumi said.

"It is against our laws to invade or take finite resources without permission," Nano Two explained. "The energy source I discovered when I arrived flourishes within Earth's organisms—particularly humans. We call it Emotional Energy."

"Emotional Energy?" The group found the concept inscrutable.

"With our technology, it is possible to convert a creature's emotional fluctuations—their Emotional Energy—into power. My own species's emotions fluctuate very little, however, so it is not very useful on our home planet..."

"I get the feeling that you're more emotional than Nano-chan normally is," Hahari said.

"When Nano-sama's expression changed for the first time, it was a moment for the history books," Mei remarked.

A peculiar standard for making history.>

"You humans possess an emotional variance that our species finds unthinkable," Nano Two went on.

"Oh, really?" The humans exchanged glances. They kind of understood what the alien was talking about, but at the same time, they didn't.

"We have detected spikes of emotional energies within the confines of this space. Unfortunately, however, we do not yet understand the conditions for activating it. We have deemed that further outsider observation would produce limited resu—"

"So you want to observe us from inside Nano's body?" Rentaro cut in.

"Precisely. We had hoped to carry this out unobtrusively, but—"

Nano Two blinked, and the original Nano took over for the second part of the sentence. "—now that the truth is out, it is more efficient to ask for your cooperation."

"That sums up the current predicament," Nano Two said, taking over once more. "Now then, do any of you have ideas about what could be causing these spikes?"

"That's kinda putting us on the spot." Rentaro looked over his shoulder at his girlfriends. Judging from their pensive expressions, nothing seemed to have immediately come to mind.

But then...

"Oh! I think I've got it!" Hakari suddenly raised her hand, causing *a certain* part of her to jiggle like jelly. Karane glared at them, visibly discomforted. "The person whose emotions fluctuate the most in our group has to be Karane-san!"

"Who're you calling emotionally unstable?!"

"Allow me to posit that the intense Emotional Energy is actually...tsundere energy!"

"Now you're just talking out your ass..."

"Her energy is indeed quite strong," said Nano Two.

"Yes, indeed." Hakari might have been joking, but the others nodded along, completely straight-faced.

"The individual known as Inda Karane produces energy that you call 'tsundere.' Because her body operates on a higher-than-average capacity, her energy circulates entirely within her body, leaving no surplus behind," Nano Two continued.

"So her Emotional Energy works entirely to strengthen her body," Hakari mused. "That must be why her other parts are a bit...well..."

"What're you implying?!" Karane glared at Hakari. "Besides, which of us

salivates like a dog in heat at the drop of a hat?! Aren't you the one who's emotionally unstable?! I bet you have, I dunno, degenerate energy or something!"

"Why, that's impossi—"

"Her energy is indeed quite strong," said Nano Two.

"Yes, indeed." The others nodded along, completely straight-faced.

"The individual known as Hanazono Hakari produces energy that you call 'degenerate.' This serves to make her skin more sensitive, leaving no surplus behind."

"The hell are you using that energy for?" Karane gave Hakari a very judgmental look.

"I'm just using it to function, surely!" Hakari shouted helplessly. "Besides, I bet my mother has to be just as—"

"Ah, yes. Speaking of energy, I'm sure that Mei's powers of loyalty are rather considerable, no?" Hahari looked over her shoulder, impeccably evading her daughter's friendly fire.

Mei quickly bowed. "I am honored to hear that."

"The individual known as Meido Mei produces an energy that you call 'loyalty.' This allows her to routinely perform her duties without ever compromising her high standards," said Nano Two. "If I were to extract her energy, she would..."

"She would...?" the others prompted.

"Perish."

"That was savage!"

While everyone else looked flabbergasted, the subject in question seemed entirely unruffled. "My life exists for Hahari-sama's sake, so I suppose that is logical," Mei chimed in. If anything, she seemed vaguely proud of herself.

"Aye, if Karane's angry energy isn't good enough, what about Kurumi's hangry energy?" asked Kusuri.

"The individual known as Haraga Kurumi produces energy that you call 'hangr

"How do you even understand that?!" Kurumi demanded. "She just made 'hangry energy' up on the spot!"

"She compensates for her sparse physical energy with her hangry energy. If I were to extract her energy, she would—"

"Yeah, yeah. I see where this is going..."

"—experience a tenfold increase in hunger."

"Don't you freakin' dare!" Kurumi, who was already ruled by her stomach, growled threateningly at Nano Two.

Shizuka raised one of her tiny hands. <I would like to propose a suggestion.> <Kusuri-senpai.> <An insatiable, inquisitive spirit.> <Would you not say?>

"The individual known as Yakuzen Kusuri possesses a 'mad scientist' energy
__"

"That's kinda different from what Shizuka said," Kusuri pointed out.

"If her energy were to be converted into fuel...the machinery it powered would function in completely atypical ways."

"So it's basically a virus!" everyone shouted.

"Kusuri's medicines can eliminate viruses in a jiffy!" said Kusuri.

"Yeah, and it would also eliminate their whole society."

It appeared that Kusuri's emotional temperament spelled doom for the alien civilization.

"So what about Shizuka-senpai?" Kurumi asked. "She's kinda, you know..." She paused, her voice now an embarrassed mumble. "She's got cute energy, I guess?"

Hahari, finding Kurumi's awkwardness adorable, patted the younger girl, prompting her to flee at top speed.

"The individual known as Yoshimoto Shizuka possesses what you call 'cute' energ—"

"Okay, I get you're parroting what I'm saying, but can that really be an energy source?" asked Kurumi.

"Yoshimoto Shizuka's cuteness contributes considerably to her conduct. It is logical to consider it her emotional disposition."

"Didn't expect you to emerge so suddenly, Nano-senpai."

"It would be sacrilegious to take Yoshimoto Shizuka's cuteness from her," said Nano Two.

"Doesn't it seem more like Nano Two is the one being ruled by their emotions?" Kurumi gazed at Nano Two with slight trepidation. Things were getting off-track.

"You've explained all of our respective emotional energies," said Hahari, "so now it's Rentaro-chan's turn."

"Wait, please!" Hakari held up a hand to restrain Hahari, who was blatantly attempting to fish for information about Rentaro. "Mother, are you trying to avoid your turn in the spotlight?"

"Urk!"

"Okay, Nano Two-san, please expose my mother's embarrassing energy!" <I'll take you down with me.> (Such was her mentality.)

"From what we can detect, the individual known as Hanazono Hahari possesses the kind of energy described as..."

Just when Hakari thought she had scored one over her mother...

"...'Motherly.'"

"What?" Hakari gaped at her mother with nothing but pure, involuntary surprise.

"She regularly channels an immense torrent of this energy into the individual known as Hanazono Hakari. Our technology is unable to convert it, though," Nano Two announced dispassionately.

"Mother...!" Hakari's eyes welled with tears.

"Well, that's no great surprise, is it? A mother always thinks of her child."

Mere moments ago, Hahari had been scowling and muttering "Urk!" due to her impending humiliation. Now she was all tender, loving smiles—a textbook mother.

"That's why you're always welcome to suckle on your mommy's teat! That's motherhood for you!"

"It has been found that her emotional disposition heightens her desire for 'diaper role-play,'" Nano Two added.

"You sure did your research!"

Hakari watched her mother drool with a look that could only be described as the picture of dismay.

"Everyone possesses a large amount of energy," said Nano Two, "but..."

"You can't extract their energy at this point, huh?" said Rentaro, sharing her disappointment.

The emotion displayed on Nano Two's face was only slight, but it was still quite a bit more expressive than the usual Nano. "Furthermore, although your individual energies may be described as great, they still pale in comparison to the largest reactions that have been recorded here on many prior occasions."

A thought suddenly occurred to Rentaro as he gazed at Nano Two's downcast face. "By the way, what's Nano's energy source like?"

"The individual known as Eiai Nano is an extreme case. According to our observations, her emotions fluctuate far less than the average Earthling. Even our own race cannot compare. However, at its maximum value, it reaches the same high levels as the rest of you. She is a mystery even aliens cannot solve."

It was hard to tell whether Nano Two was making some kind of alien joke.

So when does Nano's heart experience a major fluctuation? mused Rentaro. Not to be full of himself, but...pretty much only one thing that came to mind.

"Can you observe Nano's current emotional state in real time?"

"I can. When I first encountered Nano, she was her typical self, but ever since

entering this space that you call 'the roof,' she has been experiencing fluctuations."

Nano Two's words backed up Rentaro's theory.

"Okay, so..." He gently put his arms around Nano. "What if I do this?" "Ah..."

A startled gasp. Had it come from Nano Two, or...?

Rentaro felt Nano's heart pounding faster and faster. The sound of his own beating heart reached her in turn. Their heartbeats reinforced one another in an endless feedback loop. When Rentaro gently stroked Nano's beautiful hair, her heart let out another powerful throb. Although her face remained expressionless, it steadily reddened—a testament, perhaps, to her body's involuntary reaction.

And if that was the case, then it was unbelievably adorable. Unable to dam his emotions, he tightened his arms around her slightly, and Nano hesitantly embraced him in return. At this shy gesture, Rentaro found himself falling in love with her all over again. He adored absolutely every little thing about her.

"Inconceivable! The individuals known as Eiai Nano and Aijo Rentaro have just produced today's highest energy count! But what kind of emotional activity is this? It does not exist in our culture! What even...?!"

"How does your culture understand tsundere and hangry, but not thi—mff!" Kusuri's question had been cut short. This was a critical moment in the plot, so Shizuka had gently covered her mouth.

"This is the energy born from the touch of two people who love each other... Love Energy!" Rentaro's voice boomed.

"Love Energy! Is this the power of *romance*?!" Nano Two's eyes widened as if stricken with emotion.

Karane and Kurumi looked embarrassed at this straightforward declaration, though not altogether unsatisfied. Shizuka and Kusuri were, frankly, delighted to discover that the display had generated so much energy. At the same time, it was hard to blame them for blushing.

Hearing Rentaro's words of love (even if they weren't explicitly directed at them), the Hanazono women squealed, "I love you too!" Mei stood next to them with her usual serene expression, although her cheeks were slightly flushed.

"I will research the word 'love' in your human languages... Fascinating. It appears to be an emotion that heightens the desire for reproduction."

"You're not exactly wrong, but that's one heck of a way to phrase it," said Rentaro.

"Given that our species reproduces asexually, the concept is unfamiliar to us. Regardless, what an exceeding amount of pure energy! May I please extract some of this?! I will only take the parts that are flowing out of the body. There should be no impact on the people in question!"

As he gently pulled away from Nano's body, Rentaro looked back over his shoulder at his other girlfriends. All of them, without exception, nodded back at him with zero hesitation, their faces scarlet.

"Take whatever you want! My—our—love has no limits!"

At Rentaro's words, the girls clutched their chests again and swooned.

Then, it was Hyper Hug Time.

"Rentaro-kun, you're so strong... Ngh..."

He wrapped his arms tightly around Hakari's curvaceous, womanly body. Her sweet, luscious scent filled his nostrils. Hakari hugged him back fiercely, arms locked so tight that they might never let him go. From up close, her lovely, beaming smile looked as if she'd been tickled. He tried *very* hard not to feel conscious of how her soft, full breasts were pressed up against him. He also pretended not see her inner thighs tensing up.

"Ugh, this is for the alien, got it?! It's not like I want a hug or anything!" Karane said.

Despite her words, Karane showed absolutely zero resistance to being hugged. It was cute how, perhaps out of nervousness, her slender body

stiffened up slightly. A fresh, soothing scent washed over him. When she went to gingerly hug him in return, all she really did was let her arms hover around him. This was simply how she expressed herself; she was never honest with her feelings. It certainly had nothing to do with how Rentaro's spine would snap if she put her strength into the hug...probably.

<A warrior's embrace.>

In spite of her blustering words, Shizuka's physique was so diminutive, one would fear accidentally breaking her if they used too much force. Rentaro placed his arms around her carefully. Her gentle fragrance blended with the soothing smell of a well-loved book. She put as much strength as she could muster into reciprocating the hug, but to Rentaro, it merely felt like a light pat. Her utterly adorable face, blushing yet determined, was pressed against his chest, her sighing breath tickling him ever so slightly.

"Time for a huggle, aye!"

Up next was Kusuri with her similarly petite frame. When she came running in for a hug, he sensed a mix of medicines and a child's unique sweetness from her. It was heartwarming to see her wrap her arms around him so eagerly. When Rentaro returned the hug, however, she (rather adorably) turned bright red up to her ears. It affirmed to him that she possessed the romantic passions of a mature young woman. As a side note, he thought he saw her trembling, and he *might* have heard a gushing sound from her lower body, but it was best to pretend that was all his imagination.

"Mm..."

Kurumi avoided his gaze and said very little as he pulled her into an embrace. Amid all the food smells clinging to her, he detected the aroma of a young woman on the cusp of maturity. Although she did not hug him back tightly at first, he heard her mutter, "Hug... Hagukizuke..." As she repeated the name of this traditional Japanese pickle from the Kohoku region in the Shiga prefecture, the intensity of her embrace grew. Rentaro made a mental note to prepare this cuisine for her with the utmost haste once this chapter wrapped up.

"Rentaro-chan, let me hug you tight!"

Hahari seized him in an embrace with the same enthusiasm as Kusuri had in

her eight-year-old form. However, Hahari's body was very much that of an adult. In an apparent display of motherliness, she pulled Rentaro's head to her considerable bust. A strong fragrance, reminiscent of Hakari's, enveloped him. On the other hand, the maternal way in which Hahari gently stroked Rentaro's head was an act of someone who'd brought new life into the world. She looked almost like a saintly mother from a painting—well, maybe not quite, thanks to the drool dripping from her mouth.

"Please excuse me."

Mei straightened her back and stood at attention as Rentaro approached for a gentle hug. Underneath the clean, laundered smell of her maid uniform lay the definite scent of an adult woman. She refrained from squeezing him too hard—was it because of her tactfulness as a maid, or because of her shyness? The answer lay in her slightly flushed cheeks and the way she squirmed happily, like a dog wagging its tail.

Rentaro did the full circuit.

"Hmm..."

Initially, Nano Two had been jumping about in excitement—a rare sight indeed for any Nano—but at this point, the alien looked rather glum. There seemed to be a dilemma.

"Although it certainly is a lot of energy, this is not enough to distribute across my entire mother planet... If only I could reliably extract an even higher level of energy. I have observed record highs from this location countless times..."

In other words, something more romantic than a hug. Rentaro had an idea or two, but before he could verbalize it...

"Ah!" Nano Two exclaimed, as if she had just remembered something.

"Speaking of which, I detected the highest energy levels the very day I arrived on this planet. Perhaps you could obtain the same results if you replicated the actions you took at that time. If I recall, you and your lovers did something like this."

All of a sudden, Nano Two drew her head close to Rentaro's. Without a hint of

hesitation, Nano's lips went straight to Rentaro's for a kiss—only for Rentaro to gently stop her with the palm of his hand.

"I can't do that."

At Rentaro's firm rejection, Nano Two tilted her head so far to the side that it was almost horizontal. "Was there some kind of prerequisite activity required? I can oblige..."

"Yeah. The prerequisite is...you have to be my girlfriend."

"Hmm?" Nano Two looked up, meditating on Rentaro's words. After a few seconds, however, she tilted her head again, this time in the opposite direction. "Were the individuals known as Aijo Rentaro and Eiai Nano not in a romantic relationship?"

"She is one hundred percent, without a doubt, the most beloved person in my entire world!" yelled Rentaro.

Nano's emotions seemed to react to this, because Nano Two's cheeks turned slightly red. "So then, if there are no issues..."

"You're mistaken." Rentaro shook his head slowly. "Even if every cell in your body is identical to Nano's, you're still not her. I still love Nano, even with you in charge, but all of my love is for her, not you."

"Is that so?"

Nano Two closed her eyes. She still didn't look like she quite understood, but she seemed to have at least guessed at what Rentaro was trying to say. Before long, her eyelids fluttered back open.

"Have you swi—"

Before Rentarao could finish his sentence, Nano's lips covered his.

"Mmf..."

For a short while, the two of them gazed at each other as if they were the only two people in the world. Eventually, Nano pulled away slowly, as if ruing the fact that they had to part.

"The switch is done." She responded to the previous question. One could

detect a hint of smug satisfaction in her tone.

"That came across loud and clear."

Despite the blush that had conquered Rentaro's face, he still poured all his love and affection into his smile. The next moment, however...

"Whoooooooooooo!" Nano Two abruptly shattered the romantic atmosphere with her most excited squeal yet. It was enough to make Rentaro jump a bit in shock.

"This is it! The sheer amount of energy... Please keep this up, my good sir!" she shouted gleefully.

"Weren't you supposed to be an alien who doesn't exhibit much emotion? You just gonna retcon that?" Kurumi pointed out sarcastically.

In any case, Rentaro didn't need Nano Two to tell him what to do. He went ahead and kissed all of his girlfriends until they were weak in the knees.

After returning to Nano's level of constraint, Nano Two bowed her head deeply at Rentaro and his girlfriends. "Thank you very, very much. You are the saviors of my planet."

"I'm glad we could help you out," Rentaro responded, his smile one of unadulterated goodwill.

"I-it's not like we did it for you, Nano Two!" said Karane.

"Then what on earth were we doing for this entire chapter?" Hakari shot back.

'Twas not so different from peacetime.'

"Aye, take this Endlessly Expand Energy In Your Body Medicine as a souvenir, Nano Two!" said Kusuri.

"Isn't that the sorta thing you use to implode energy-absorbing monsters?" Kurumi pointed out.

"I certainly enjoyed seeing a much more expressive Nano-chan," Hahari remarked.

"I have recorded everything in 4K," said Mei.

And thus, the girls uttered their teary(?) parting words to Nano Two. At that moment, however...

"Then this shall be where we part ways."

The humans blinked in shock as the alien creature crawled out of Nano's ear. They were all at a loss for words, despite it being the second time they'd seen the eerie sight. Once Nano Two had finished emerging, it slipped its way down Nano's body and then tottered toward the rooftop door.

Everyone shared the same thought: *No UFO? You're just walking all the way home?*

On the other hand...

"Goodbye," they whispered.

Though they had only spent a short time together, Nano Two felt a bit like a comrade-in-arms.

As she watched the alien go, Nano's expression might have contained a faint hint of loneliness.

At last, their interplanetary cultural exchange with the alien envoy came to an end. Or so they had thought.

A few days later...

"Aijo Rentaro."

Rentaro gaped in surprise the moment Nano—no, Nano Two—spoke to him. "Whoa, Nano Two?! What brings you here?!"

"I am impressed." Nano Two had an ironic smile on her face. "You immediately perceived me, despite my adjusting for the previous error."

"Well, yeah. I'm Nano's boyfriend!" With this less-than-coherent explanation, Rentaro smiled and gave a thumbs-up. "So why are you in Nano again? Didn't you return to your home planet?"

"I returned briefly several days ago. However, I must periodically distribute

more energy—such is the nature of the task. My planet has set up a machine to receive the transmissions, so I will be sending energy from Earth at regular intervals."

"Uh, cool."

That doesn't explain why you'd need to take over Nano's body, Rentaro thought.

"The individual known as Eiai Nano has agreed to lend her assistance because..." Nano Two paused and blinked. "It is an efficient means of using my body when I am sleeping or wish to concentrate on something else."

"Wouldn't you want sleep time to be for sleeping, Nano?! It's still your body, no matter who's in charge!"

It was impossible to tell whether Nano was joking or not with such a straight face, but her lips might have turned ever so slightly upward.

Interlude:

Shizuka and Nano Go to a Comedy Show

s this the venue, yoshimoto shizuka?"

<Indubitably!>

Nano and Shizuka had gone to a live comedy show. Shizuka's local bookstore had held a lottery, where she won a ticket for two people to see the show. She decided to ask Nano to come along.

"Do you often attend this sort of function, Yoshimoto Shizuka?"

Embarrassed as I am to admit it, 'tis a first for me.>

"Likewise. The world of comedy is completely unknown ground for me."

This perhaps explained why Nano looked somehow less confident than usual.

<As long as we are together.> <It shall be amusing.>

Nano paused, thinking. Although her expression did not necessarily change, Shizuka's words appeared to have dispelled her unease. "Indeed," Nano replied. "You make a logical point."

The comedy show started soon after that.

"Back when we were in school," began the duo's straight man. "You were too chicken to confess to the girl you liked. I know you always regretted that, but I'm sure you can make things right."

"Illogical," said Nano. "Nothing can change the past."

"I agree, I've changed a lot," said the second comedian, who played the funny man role. "Do you know any guys I can practice with?"

"Ask a girl!"

She gave a hearty laugh.>

"So I need some advice about 'fessing up to a friend... I was thinkin' of doing it today."

Nano was surprised. "By changing his accent, he is clearly signaling that a new skit has begun."

"I see... Well, I commend you for wanting to pay your debt to society. I'll be waiting for you when you get out."

"Hey, I'm not confessing to a crime. I haven't even done one!"

She gave a hearty laugh.>

"I was talking about confessing my love to Yuuko-chan, you doofus!"

"It'll be hard to get a message to her from behind bars..."

"Why's it easier to believe that I'm a criminal?!"

"Recurring punchlines are an effective tool."

She gave a hearty laugh.>

Nano and Shizuka reacted to the show in their own unique ways until the set reached its conclusion.

Meanwhile, the comedy duo on stage was quite bewildered, to say the least. The people in this crowd have some weird as hell reactions! Is it going well? Or are we bombing?

Afterward, the girls discussed the show.

"That was fun."

I busted my gut laughing!>

The pair walked out of the venue, looking satisfied. Although Nano hadn't cracked a smile throughout the entire show, nor did Shizuka let out a single audible laugh, they had most certainly enjoyed themselves.

"However, it was inefficient for the straight man to exaggerate his movements for every joke."

Shizuka grimaced slightly at Nano's *unique* perspective. <You did not approve, then?>

"This trajectory is the most efficient. 'The hell's up with you?'" Nano recited a

typical line spouted by Japanese comedians as she tapped Shizuka lightly on the chest. There certainly were no wasted movements, and it was also strangely stylish.

She gave a hearty laugh.>

"The hell's up with you? The hell's up with you?"

«She gave a hearty laugh.» (She gave a hearty laugh.)

When Nano kept hitting Shizuka rhythmically on the chest, passersby shot them strange looks. "What are they doing?" Anyone from the Rentaro family, however, would have recognized what was up with a glance.

Nano blinked suddenly. "It is possible to streamline this further. This should be the most efficient solution. The hell's up with you?"

«She gave a hearty laugh.» «To reach the heavens.»

Their expressions displayed genuine, heartfelt enjoyment. Even frivolous occasions such as these were precious experiences.

As an addendum, Nano's straight-man shtick was a big hit with the Rentaro family when she unveiled it the next day. For a short time, she even earned the moniker "Nano the Straight Man," although that was a story for another day.

Chapter 3:

Go! The Rentaro Robot!

"OHH! LOOKS LIKE THE RENTARO FAMILY WAS first to the rooftop today," said Rentaro.

"We are in possession of the biggest group, so that sounds reasonable from a probability perspective," Nano remarked.

<Comrades.> (We are.> (Brothers-in-arms!>)

"Hmph! It's not like I came because I wanted to or anything!" Karane insisted.

"Uh, are you being tsundere toward the roof?" asked Hakari.

The four first-year girls took their usual places, chatting happily all the while.

"Yo." The next to join the group was Kurumi, nodding her head slightly in greeting. "Yo...yogurt! I'd kill for some yogurt!"

Kurumi's word association prompted her stomach to start rumbling as always, so Rentaro whipped out a tub of yogurt from the bag of food he always kept on standby for her. "I thought you might say that, so I brought you some!"

"Today, Kusuri make Karane try 'Lose All Reason Medicine' and see what happens," said Kusuri. "Okay, Karane, take nice, good sip!"

"If I drank that, I would end up crushing your little spine, wouldn't I?" asked Karane.

"A-aye, that was a joke..."

"Your drugs frequently go beyond jokes," Kurumi commented.

<If only it were not so.>

"Karane-san, you wouldn't even need to take a drug to perform that kind of feat on the regular," Hakari commented.

"One could say that Inda Karane actually has a strong sense of reason, given that she only expresses a limited extent of the violence she is capable of," Nano

chimed in.

"You think I'm some tragic monster who's desperately restraining herself from hurting people?" Karane grumbled.

Things had gotten even livelier after Kusuri showed up. All they needed now was for Hahari and Mei to join the group, and then the entire gang would be assembled.

"Urgent news, everyone!" A frantic Hahari came dashing onto the roof with Mei at her side.

What avails you?>

"I bet she just made some new baby clothes or something," said Hakari.

"She always says that whenever she makes a whole ton of clothes and wants someone to try them on," Karane agreed.

"She asked Kusuri if she could make medicine to turn people five years old," Kusuri remarked.

"You don't have to go along with that. In fact, I'd appreciate it if you didn't," said Hakari.

"It is more efficient to target an age before teeth have grown in," Nano said.

It wasn't unusual to see Hahari, the oldest member of the group, in an excitable state. In fact, everyone else was used to seeing her flustered. This time, however...

"The vice principal suddenly turned into a giant and went on a rampage! She's causing mayhem in town!"

"Well, that came out of nowhere!" Karane and Kurumi reacted swiftly to Hahari's report.

"It is possible that Hahari's mental state has worsened. That could be the result of these delusions," came Nano's equally rapid-fire comment.

"No, I'm not the only one who saw it!" Hahari looked at Mei. That glance alone was enough for the maid to completely anticipate her master's intentions.

"Please look at this." Mei showed everyone a news clip on her smartphone. The screen displayed the vice principal, who was indeed now taller than your average apartment building.

"Geh heh heh! I'll snag every hot guy! Give 'em to me, and I'll give 'em a big smooch! Behold my Stuff a Hottie Into My Mouth technique!"

The hapless cries of the town's menfolk rang out as each male was sucked into the vice principal's mass of hair, one after the other. It made for a hellish sight.

"No, seriously, is this still a rom-com or have we gone into another genre entirely?!"

Everyone (besides Nano and Mei) gaped in shock at this utterly surreal video.

"That implies we were a normal rom-com to begin with," Nano said.

"Anyway," said Hahari. "The time has come to use the secret weapon!"

"You can't just skip to the climax already! Do the exposition!" yelled Karane.

"I still haven't digested the fact that the vice principal suddenly turned into a giant," said Kurumi, who appeared to have finished her yogurt, judging by the adorable sound of her rumbling stomach. Karane nonchalantly handed her a cookie, saving Kurumi's stomach from distress.

"Mei!" Hahari barked at her maid once again.

Right on command, Mei pressed some kind of switch. "Yes, my lady."

<I sensed the will to proceed.> <In spite of all obstacles.>

The roof shook violently. Shizuka gulped audibly, sweat running down her cheek.

"An earthquake?! Everyone, get under me!" Rentaro spread his arms and covered the smols of the group—Shizuka and Kusuri—with his upper body.

Then, just as a drooling Hakari came toward him with an intention other than self-preservation in mind, the roof and the school building steadily split apart. Something rose from the ground.

"I thought that this might happen, so I had something developed... The

Rentaro-chan Robot!"

It was exactly as the name implied.

The robot's slender body was over twenty meters tall. Like Rentaro, it had thick, symmetrical eyebrows, along with prickly hair. Though it was a machine, it still retained Rentaro's willful eyes. Its limbs and body shape also resembled Rentaro's—really, it was a dead ringer overall.

"You thought what might happen, so you had what developed?!" yelled Karane.

"Look," said Hakari, "it actually is coming in handy..."

"Yeah, that's the weird part!" Kurumi retorted.

"By the way," Kusuri said cheerfully, "the reason vice principal got so big was 'cuz Hahari told Kusuri to make Biggifying Medicine, and vice principal drank it!"

"Goodness gracious, Kusuri-chan! You promised not to tell!" Hahari covered Kusuri's mouth as she spilled the beans.

It was too late, however—the truth had already come out. The others groaned. "So, you're taking credit for solving a problem *you* created!"

"A reasonably logical conclusion." Nano appeared to have surmised the cause right from the very start. "That was the only conceivable reason for a person to turn into a giant."

Kurumi shot her an incredulous look. "The fact that you can even *think* of a reason why someone would turn into a giant is what's crazy here."

"Aye?! Did Hahari tell Kusuri to make Biggifying Medicine just to turn vice principal giant?"

To wreak such devastation upon a fellow under your employ...>

"No, no, you've got it wrong! The vice principal drank it by accident!" Hahari waved her hands frantically, trying to reassure the worried Shizuka. "What I really wanted to do was drink it myself and then wrap you all up as your big mommy!" Hahari appeared to be in rhapsody imagining that hypothetical scenario.

Kurumi turned a cold glare at her. "Then the vice principal made a fair call."

"The drug was in my pocket, but I dropped it in the hallway," Hahari explained. "Then the vice principal found it and said, 'The boys might drink this!' She then chugged it all in one go."

"The moral of the story is take care with dangerous substances," said Karane.

"To be fair, the vice principal's got to have more than a few screws loose if she drank an unknown liquid out of a test tube with zero hesitation." Kurumi looked rather exasperated at the whole story, although deep down, she knew she might have done the same thing if she felt a bit parched.

"Vice principal lost her marbles as a side effect of the Biggifying Medicine and turned into huge threat! We gotta use robot to stop her and make her drink Medicine-Reversing Medicine!" Kusuri declared.

Karane side-eyed her. "You're saying that as if she's normally in possession of her marbles."

"Please... Let's all pilot the robot," Hahari said with an utterly straight face. She spoke in a quiet voice, but one filled with firm resolve.

"Why are you so gung-ho about getting in the robot?" Karane shot back.

"Don't tell me this is a 'Shinji, get in the damn robot' joke, aye?" asked Kusuri.

"Stop reading into it! Now I feel like I made a bad joke!"

"You're all failing to understand the gravity of the situation here." Hakari cut off the banter, her expression deadpan.

"Wh-what?" said Karane. "Sure, I know the town's in danger, but..."

"That's true, but you have to recall what the vice principal said earlier!" Hakari insisted.

The girls' eyes widened in understanding. Their gazes swiveled to Rentaro. If the vice principal had been serious when she'd said "Geh heh heh! I'll snag every hot guy!" then...

"Rentaro's in danger!" gasped Karane. "N-not that I think Rentaro is a hottie or anything!"

<Our beloved.> <Rentaro-kun.> <Could he be whisked away?!>

"It would be logical to use the measures already in place to stop her."

At Nano's words, the girlfriends nodded in unison.

"You're all doing this for me? I'm so grateful! I want to stop the vice principal's rampage and help the people in town! Let's pilot that robot!" While Rentaro spoke of earnest justice, there was just a hint of excitement in his words as well. Rentaro was very much a boy, after all.

"Open the boarding gate!"

Rentaro turned to the robot, snapped his fingers...and the robot had absolutely no reaction whatsoever.

"It doesn't have that function," Hahari said apologetically. "You'll have to use that ladder to climb into the cockpit. I'm so, so sorry! I'll be sure to make improvements for next time!"

"Uh, okay..."

Rentaro looked a little embarrassed, but he took the lead, nonetheless. The girls boarded the machine after him.

And so, everyone got inside the Rentaro Robot.

"I'm surprised at how much room there is in here," Hakari remarked.

"Go Go Go, Rentaro! Take down the big baddie, Rentaro!"

"I expanded the cockpit so we could all relax in here!" Hahari declared.

"Go Go Go, Rentaro! Take down the big baddie, Rentaro!"

"Okay, so we all got swept up in the moment and climbed inside," said Kurumi, "but there's only one control panel."

"Go Go Go, Rentaro! Take down the big baddie, Rentaro!"

"Restricting controls to one user is an efficient means of avoiding unnecessary conflict," Nano commented.

"Go Go Go, Rentaro! Take down the big baddie, Rentaro!"

Too many cooks spoil the broth!>

"Go Go Go, Rentaro! Take down the big baddie, Rentaro!"

"Okay, can we talk about this loud, annoying music?!" By the song's fifth loop, Karane had finally gotten fed up and tore into it.

"It's Rentaro-chan Robot's theme song!" Hahari insisted. "Admittedly, I don't know much about mecha, but I've heard that every giant robot needs to have a fist-pumping theme song!"

"Yeah, but we're the only ones who can hear it," Kurumi pointed out.

Karane groaned. "At least make it less repetitive!"

"Aural repetition is an efficient means of brainwashing," said Nano.



"Go Go Go, Rentaro! Take down the big baddie, Rentaro!"

"Go Go Go Go!"

During that whole conversation about the repetitive soundtrack, Kusuri sang along to the Rentaro Robot's theme song cheerfully, Shizuka bouncing along to the beat. The brainwashing appeared to be well underway.

"I used the spare space in Rentaro-chan Robot's computer to include a song," said Hahari, "but there was only enough room for two lines..."

"Then you should've made some more damn room!"

And so, they turned off the poorly received (at least among some of the girls) opening theme song before the joke got run into the ground.

Returning to the topic at hand.>

"It's our job to lend moral support to Rentaro-kun as he pilots the Rentaro-kun Robot!" declared Hakari as she clenched her fist with gusto.

"No," said Hahari. "Well, that is our job too, yes, but we have an even more important duty!"

Mei was the only one who didn't look absolutely baffled.

"Rentaro-chan, will you try moving the Rentaro-chan Robot?"

"Uh, sure." Rentaro responded to Hahari's command, gripping the controls. "Okay...launch!"

Much like before, he seemed faintly giddy with excitement. Mei had just instructed him on the basics, so he knew how to use the controls. He attempted to move the Rentaro Robot forward a couple of steps, but alas, the machine came to a total standstill after just the first step.

"Huh? What?" However much Rentaro pushed and yanked at the controls, the robot didn't show the slightest response. "Sorry, did I make some kind of mistake?"

"No, you performed magnificently," Mei informed him.

"Then why'd it suddenly stop moving?"

"Well, you see..." Hahari turned to the confused young lad, her expression tense. "It's out of fuel!" She was deadly serious.

"You only had enough for one step?!" the snarkier members of the group yelled in unison.

"To make a movable giant robot, pretty much all the internal storage has to be dedicated to giving it driving force." Hahari frowned and sighed. "That means there was almost no room for fuel."

"Why is that the only part of this chapter that seems even slightly realistic?!"

"I mean, come on! You should have prioritized fuel storage over a cockpit the size of a hotel lobby!"

Karane and Kurumi's gazes turned even icier.

Hahari seemed unperturbed, no doubt because she was well accustomed to this sort of treatment. "Returning to what I said earlier," she said, keeping the plot trucking along, "Rentaro-chan Robot is powered by our love!"

"So you decided to overcome a realistic limitation by introducing an even more insane concept?" said Kurumi.

"No, wait. Wasn't this kind of thing introduced in the last chapter?" Hakari pointed out.

"Huh?" Then, the reality of it dawned on Kurumi. "Oh."

"Indeed," said Hahari. "Rentaro-chan Robot is powered by Love Energy!"

(I was under the assumption.) ('Twas a throwaway jest...)

"It is efficient to recycle concepts."

No sooner did Nano say that than an alien creature crawled out of her right ear. "I provided the technology," Nano Two said with Nano's mouth.

"So you're back again, Nano Two."

Rentaro's mouth curled up into a smile.

"Did you call me?" Another alien creature emerged from Nano's left ear.

"There's another Nano Two?!" the group chorused.

"Nano Two, did you multiply?" asked Kusuri.

"I am Nano Three."

"I am not an engineer, so in order to comply with the request of the Earthling known as Hanazono Hahari, I summoned the necessary personnel from our mother planet."

Nanos Two and Three appeared to be taking turns speaking from Nano's mouth. The naming inspiration for Nano Three once again followed the efficient, tried-and-true method of "slap a number on the end."

"Allowing them to control my body at night means I can ensure my body is used efficiently for twenty-four hours per day." It was impossible to tell whether Nano was joking or not.

Kurumi looked slightly weirded out. "You're basically just letting them leech off you."

"So now you understand, yes?" Hahari was positively drooling. "In order to move Rentaro-chan Robot, we must all get lovey-dovey!"

"Mother, don't tell me you developed the Rentaro-kun Robot specifically for lovey-dovey antics?" Hakari cast her a dubious gaze. Although, she was also giving a thumbs-up.

"All right, if that's how it's gonna be!" Meanwhile, Rentaro had turned to his girlfriends, brimming with resolve. "Let's all take turns and hug!"

Rentaro's declaration was brazen to the extreme, but every girl nodded. They might have done so a little shyly but with utter certainty.

Long story short, the hugs filled up the Love Energy meter. At last, the Rentaro Robot was able to proceed.

"Geh heh heh!"

"That's enough, Vice Principal!"

The vice principal was still sucking the menfolk of the town into her hair when the Rentaro Robot appeared, blocking her way. "Oh yeah." A thought occurred to Kusuri. "Why's vice principal still got clothes on?"

"Maybe she wasn't willing to give up her last bit of respectability as a human being," said Karane.

"I suspect that the clothes remained intact after biggification as a reference to some form of media," said Nano.

"Wow, Kusuri-senpai. That sure was convenient," said Hakari. "Were you always able to make drugs like that?"

"With current scientific prowess, Kusuri's drugs can't make clothes stretch like a Saiyan's!" Kusuri responded with palpable frustration.

"I feel like that's a lower bar than turning people into giants," Kurumi pointed out with a straight face.

Hahari glanced at Mei, who nodded and launched into an explanation. "There is a reason why the honored vice principal's vestments can stretch so considerably. Given that she has a tendency to engage in intense physical activity, Hahari-sama helped fund and develop Saiyan-type clothing for the vice principal out of the benevolence of her heart."

"That's even less plausible!" shouted Kurumi.

That was about as much plot-hole-filling exposition the topic of the vice principal's lack of nudity deserved, so they wrapped up the discussion there.

Just then, however...

"Ooh, I spy with my big eye a male specimen of the species! And a decently sized one at that!" The giant vice principal jumped at the Rentaro Robot standing in her way. "Take this! My French kiss!"

No sooner did she say that than she smothered the Rentaro Robot's lips—which was where the main camera was installed.

The robot's occupants shuddered as the vice principal's tongue slithered across the monitor. "This is cursed!"

"Mother, why did you put the camera in the mouth?!" Hakari demanded.

"Don't blame me. I didn't think that this would happen! Besides, putting cameras in both eyes would have made it hard to sync up the footage in real time, and we didn't have the processing space. Putting it in just one eye would have been unintuitive as well. Having the camera differ too much from how human beings normally perceive things would have come with risks, so the lips were the best option!"

"What's with all the weirdly realistic limitations?" Karane moaned.

"Given the circumstances, it would have been logical to put the camera in the middle of the forehead," said Nano.

"A Rentaro-chan in any form with a mole on his forehead would definitely be cute," said Hahari, "but he wouldn't be the same Rentaro-chan!"

<At the point of mechanization.> <Rentaro-kun.> <Was no more.>

As the girls bantered, however...

"Urk! I can't shake her off!" Rentaro had been earnestly grappling with the controls for a while now.

Unfortunately, the machine merely groaned noisily under the vice principal's vice-like grip. He was unable to move it any farther. In fact, the vice principal succeeded in pushing him to the ground.

"I heard a male voice... Is there a *boy* inside, hmm?" She seemed to have detected Rentaro's voice by touching the robot directly. She pressed her ears against the robot's chest, right where the cockpit was located. "Come on out, my pretty!"

Just when it seemed like she was pulling her face away, a mysterious liquid squirted from her mouth and onto the Rentaro Robot's body—and to make matters worse, it started to melt the robot's armor.

"Kusuri-senpai, wasn't the medicine only supposed to make her big?!" Hakari asked shrilly.

"K-Kusuri's got no clue..." Kusuri was aghast. "This evolution is beyond all comprehension!"

"A human's gastric acid has a pH of one, which is an extremely high

coefficient. It is possible that her enlarged body has subsequently strengthened the acid secreted in her stomach," said Nano.

"She's puking on us?! Gross!" said Kusuri.

"Who cares what that liquid is?! We're kind of in a bind here!" said Hakari.

"Either way, I don't wanna swim in something that came out of a person's mouth," said Kurumi.

Hahari wore a grave expression. "This is bad," she said, turning to Mei.

"This cockpit is constructed out of materials that break down easily in acid," Mei explained.

"Okay, first off, why'd you use material like that?" Karane demanded.

"There is a high possibility the acid will swiftly melt through the armor and gush into the cockpit," Mei continued.

"In that case," said Hahari, "we are all...toast."

"Is it too much to ask for a little tension?! What's with the casual explanation?!" Karane's eyes were practically popping out of her head.

"Urk! I'll soak up all the acid with my body if it comes to it!" Rentaro was determined to quite literally put his life on the line.

«Rentaro-kun.» (I cannot simply leave you to perish!) Shizuka showed equal willingness to put herself in the line of fire.

"I will protect Hahari-sama's body with my life." Mei was likewise determined to shield Hahari.

Nano's cold retort stopped all three in their tracks. "There is insufficient surface area for you to absorb everything."

"Today of all days, Kusuri only has acidic drugs!" Kusuri clenched her fist and groaned. "Might have neutralized it if had alkaline drugs, but alas..."

"Even if you were prepared, one or two test tubes wouldn't be enough to fix this." Hakari sighed. "It doesn't have to be alkaline. A large amount of any liquid should be enough to neutralize it, I think..."

Hahari's eyes widened in surprise at her daughter's words. It was as if a

lightbulb had switched on in her head. "Rentaro-chan! Could you shift your position a bit so that the vice principal's mouth is on the Rentaro-chan Robot's crotch instead?!"

"Huh? Uh, okay, I'll give it a shot... Hey, is this gonna be all right?! You know, from an artistic perspective!"

"It's our only option!"

Despite not knowing the reason for any of this—or even whether this was in any way tasteful—Rentaro responded to the firm will in Hahari's eyes. "Okay!" He swiftly adjusted the controls. "Aaaaaaaargh!"

He was still firmly within the vice principal's grasp, yet by wriggling and squirming with all of his might, he was able to shift his position ever so slightly. The vice principal didn't seem perturbed. If anything, she looked more excited.

As the acid continued to rain down upon the robot, Rentaro kept maneuvering this way and that. Eventually, the vice principal's mouth ended up planted on the Rentaro Robot's crotch. A hissing noise could be heard, and the acid started to melt the armor covering that particular area. Rentaro felt a slight shudder down his own corresponding body part as well.

"Press the white button, now!" Hahari commanded, not providing any explanation once again.

"Okay!" Rentaro identified the white button among the numerous colored buttons on the control panel and pressed it without any hesitation whatsoever. With a terrific gushing noise, a transparent liquid burst from the Rentaro Robot's crotch and started pushing back against the vice principal's fluids. "Whoa?!"

"Rentaro-chan! Set the output to maximum!"

"Roger that!"

Rentaro pushed the lever at his side as far as it could go, causing the liquid jet to intensify.

"Ugh?!"

Unable to fend against the torrent of water any longer, the vice principal

backed away a step.

"Phew, we got out of that pinch!" said Rentaro. "Thank you so much, Haharisan!"

"Yes, we've been saved, b-but why does it have the ability to shoot liquid from *down there*?!" Hakari puckered up her face as if she was experiencing a migraine. Even as the torrent died down, the Rentaro Robot's crotch was still trickling. "It's almost as if—!"

"It's the peeing function!" Hahari declared stridently.

"You just went ahead and said it!" Hakari's scowl deepened.

"Not to worry, it's just water!"

"At least you had enough sense not to give it some *other* kind of purpose," Rentaro commented, ever the optimist.

"Anyway," said Karane, "care to explain why you included a peeing function?"

"Oh dear!" said Hakari. "Karane-san, don't make her say the quiet part out loud!"

"I wanted to biggify myself and change Rentaro-chan Robot's diapers!" declared Hahari. Her shamelessness was off the charts.

"See? Now you've done it! Of course it would be something like that! That's the whole reason you decided to make a Rentaro-kun Robot in the first place, wasn't it, Mother?! It's all coming together!" Hakari clutched her head in her hands.

It should also be noted that Hahari was currently drooling a significant amount.

"If I change the Rentaro-chan Robot's diaper while everyone is inside it, it would be like changing everyone's diapers at once, wouldn't it?"

"Not even slightly," Kurumi said flatly.

"The extra-large diaper for the Rentaro-sama Robot has finished production," said Mei.

<Her proclivities.> <Transcend the heavens.> <By jove...!>

"Had you achieved maximum efficiency by storing Medicine-Reversing Medicine in that space instead of water," said Nano, "our victory would have been assured."

As evidenced by all of this banter, the tension in the cockpit had relaxed somewhat now that they had escaped mortal danger.

"We managed to get out of that jam this time, but close-quarters fighting is still dangerous!" Rentaro gripped the controls, still tense. "Is there a function that allows us to fight at long range?!"

Hahari nodded promptly. "Yes, there is!"

"There is a strong possibility that this will also end in a crass joke."

Nobody could contradict Nano, given that they had seen the gigantic (pun not intended) pile of evidence for themselves. Hakari clasped her hands in prayer—perhaps she was begging for a reprieve, however slim the chance.

"Rentaro-chan, press the blue button this time!"

"Yes, ma'am!" Rentaro once again responded to Hahari's order by smashing the corresponding button.

Then, something fell from high in the sky, the tip sinking into the ground like a knife through butter.

"It's the Rentaro-chan Sword!" declared Hahari.

"I knew it would be a dirty joke!" Hakari moaned, seemingly on instinct.

"Huh?" The other girls looked at her in confusion.

"Huh?" Hakari mirrored their blank expressions. "Oh...!"

Having apparently realized where the discrepancy lay, her cheeks turned scarlet.

"Aye? It's just a regular big ol' sword," said Kusuri.

"Not that big swords are a regular thing. But, yeah," said Kurumi.

"To be fair, aren't giant swords kind of a staple for giant robot media? Not that I'm an expert on it or anything, but—oh." Karane cut herself off. Something must have dawned on her as well, because her cheeks turned faintly red. "Why,

you! Did you interpret 'Rentaro's Sword' to mean that?! You're just projecting your own dirty thoughts, you sicko!"

"Urk!"

Having realized that she had fallen on her own sword (pun also not intended), Hakari had no words to defend herself.

"Aye?" Kusuri still looked confused.

Some of the other girls, however, appeared to be focusing their attention on the lower half of Rentaro's flesh-and-blood body, prompting him to blush faintly.

<Prithee, tell.> Shizuka's smartphone interrupted the awkward exchange.
<From whence did this sword emerge?>

"It was dispatched from a helicopter, waiting on standby," said Mei.

"Money is a simple and efficient solution," said Nano.

"I'm just spitballing here, but wouldn't that be breaking some kind of law?" said Karane.

"Oh my, didn't you know, Karane-chan?" said Hahari, cackling. "Money can be so very, very useful."

Were you to become our enemy.> <I would rue the day.>

Author's note: Please rest assured, dear reader, that Hahari was merely cackling like a capitalist villain for effect. She never broke any laws (whatever they were). In fact, she received the government's enthusiastic approval for creating the robot.

"Okay, but why does a machine meant for diaper role-play have a sword?" asked Kurumi.

"Kurumi-san," said Hahari, "could you please stop openly referring to it as 'role-play'?!"

"Without that word, I wouldn't even know where to begin in describing this."

"I figured young boys love to play with toy swords. Tee hee!" Hahari put a hand on her cheek, looking slightly bashful. "I've never raised a boy, so I'm not

quite sure, though. Did I make the right assumption?"

Hahari's display of motherliness made Rentaro swoon. "Absolutely!" he declared as he clutched his pounding heart. Nevertheless, cold logic made him hesitate on using the Rentaro Sword. "Still, it doesn't seem right to whack the vice principal with a sword..."

"It doesn't have a real blade, of course, so it isn't that lethal."

"That still doesn't mean it isn't lethal," Karane pointed out.

"Given its sheer mass, it would be reasonable to consider it a deadly weapon," said Nano.

Kurumi snorted. "Toy, my ass."

After listening to the four girls, Rentaro came to his decision. "Okay!"

With eyes full of resolve, he picked up the Rentaro Sword and readied it, pointing it toward the vice principal.

"As long as I don't actually hit her with it and only use it to keep her in check..."

Bleeeehhhhhhh!

"It melted!" The blade was gone in the blink of an eye after the vice principal launched a second wave of acidic liquid.

"The Rentaro Sword was also made of material that is extremely weak to acid," Mei explained.

"Why does that keep coming back to bite us in the ass?" Kurumi demanded. "What sort of stuff is it even made of?"

"Maybe nickel?" Kusuri seemed to have taken Kurumi's rhetorical question as an earnest one. It wasn't as if nickel was *that* susceptible to acid, though.

Meanwhile, Rentaro was taking his fight with the vice principal seriously in his own earnest way. "Urk! Without a weapon, I've gotta use footwork to keep my distance from the vice principal and fight with my fists!"

The Rentaro Robot started shadowboxing.

"No, Rentaro-chan!" Hahari went back to looking smart and professional.

"You have one other weapon! Press the green button this time!"

Right on command, Rentaro pressed the third button. All of a sudden, the Rentaro Robot's eyes lit up and shot a powerful beam straight at the vice principal.

"Argh!"

The vice principal must have possessed immaculate reflexes because she narrowly sidestepped the attack. Nevertheless, the beam had forced her to retreat slightly.

"That's 'The Beam That Shoots from Rentaro-chan's Eyes'!" said Hahari. "It only has enough force to lightly shock a person, so there's no need to worry!"

Then should you not have tried that first?>

"Instead of whacking with a sword, it's way faster to go zappy-zap with a beam, aye!" said Kusuri.

"True, but..." Hahari's expression seemed somewhat somber, as if there was something more she wanted to say.

"Huh?" At that very same moment, Rentaro's voice rang out, confused. "The Rentaro Robot suddenly stopped moving. Wait, don't tell me..."

"It has run out of fuel," said Mei.

"Indeed," said Hahari. "'The Beam That Shoots from Rentaro-chan's Eyes' uses up a *lot* of it!"

"That makes sense from an energy-consumption perspective," said Nano.

"Do you have to say the full name of that beam every time?" asked Kurumi.

While this conversation raged on in the cockpit...

"Huh? Is it trying to trick me into dropping my guard?"

Although she was still wary of an incoming attack from the robot, the vice principal had noticed that the machine had gone stock-still. She advanced once more, slow and cautious.

"Don't you think the vice principal is acting more rationally than normal?" Karane pointed out.

"There is a possibility that the enlargement of her body has caused her mental faculties to overflow, thereby restoring her thought processes to normal levels," said Nano.

"Does rationality work like that?" Hakari sounded doubtful.

Rentaro nodded along to this completely inconsequential conversation. At the same time, however, his face took on a serious expression. "Running out of fuel means we're in trouble! We've gotta charge up quick, everyone!"

The girls responded promptly though a little shyly to his request. Even those who were acting huffy were all too ready to lend their aid.

Fast forward some vague amount of time.

"Urk! The beam didn't land!" Rentaro groaned.

The vice principal avoided the attack by leaping between buildings with surprising nimbleness. It was a feat that put Minamoto no Yoshitsune, the famed samurai who allegedly dodged his enemies by jumping ships eight times in a row while wearing a full suit of armor, to shame.

"At times like this," said Hakari, "you can really tell that she was a former athlete."

"Nah, this goes well beyond the realm of athletics," said Karane.

"Our fuel will run out shortly," Mei announced.

Faced with the prospect of running out of juice *yet again*, the girls took turns hugging their boyfriend pilot from behind.

"Nice! We got her this time! Wait..." Rentaro gasped. "Was that a clone?!"

"She is merely sidestepping at rapid speed, giving the illusion that there are multiple copies of herself," said Nano.

"What do you mean 'merely'? That's actually insane," said Kurumi.

"Our fuel will run out shortly," Mei announced.

The girls knew the drill by now. They took turns kissing Rentaro's cheeks, one on each side.

"Okay, I think I've finally got a handle on the vice principal's movements. If I take things step-by-step, I should land a hit. What the hell? She's got wings now?!"

"Don't ask Kusuri. Her evolution has gone well beyond Kusuri's imagination."

We bear witness.> <To a new life form.>

"Our fuel will run out shortly."

This time, the girls took turns feeding Rentaro candy in order to replenish their Love Energy. This was an obnoxious display of affection that appeared even Kurumi's stomach.

"Woo-hoo! Now we're flying too! With jets!"

"Be careful, Rentaro-chan! If you use the jets in your stomach, 'The Beam That Shoots from Rentaro-chan's Eyes' will consume even more energy!"

"Our fuel will run out shortly."

The girls took turns patting Rentaro on the head, thereby satisfying Hahari's compulsive head-patting desires as well.

"Phew..." Rentaro panted heavily. "The vice principal is one tricky customer..."

After countless clashes and still no end in sight, Rentaro and his girlfriends were showing signs of exhaustion. The power of their love might have been endless, but their stamina still had limits.

"By the way," said Hakari, "I've been wondering something for a while... The vice principal took a lot of damage from bumping into buildings and whatnot. So how did she already heal up?"

"She has the metabolism of an athlete. It is possible that this allows her wounds to heal quickly," said Nano.

Karane rubbed her temples as if in pain, watching the vice principal on the

monitor. "Who cares about that trivial stuff?! What about the entire rest of her?!"

"She's basically not even human anymore," said Kurumi.

At present, the vice principal possessed birdlike wings, deerlike antlers, and the sharp fangs of a carnivore. Her body was covered with innumerable fishlike scales, and deadly catlike claws protruded from her fingers. A turtlelike shell shielded her back, and a snakelike tail swished about, slamming against the ground.

To be precise.> (It has undergone metamorphosis.>

Right as Shizuka's smartphone spoke, rabbitlike ears sprouted next to the vice principal's antlers. This was the only cutesy thing about her, which, ironically, had the opposite effect and made the entire thing incredibly jarring.

"Oh! Kusuri gets it!" As she watched the scene, Kusuri brought a fist to her palm. "The vice principal also drank BunBun Fantasy Medicine! Biggifying Medicine and BunBun Fantasy Medicine both meddle with genes. This is what happens when you mix them, aye! Rapid healing is another side effect!"

"Oh, yes, now that you mention it, I always carry a vial around with me so I can feed it to everyone on the go." Hahari let out a long-suffering sigh. "I must have dropped it along with the other one..."

"Our fuel will run out shortly," Mei announced dispassionately.

"What do we do? The longer this goes on, the more disadvantaged we'll be," said Hakari. "The vice principal will only get stronger. Things are not looking good for us..."

"Don't you have any stronger weapons?" Karane demanded. "Like a function that unleashes the robot's hidden power?"

"There is one, but..." Hahari glanced at Mei.

"You are referring to the kamikaze mode, yes?" the maid explained with a bow.

"Did you make this robot to kill us?" asked Kusuri.

This simple question appeared to stab Hahari directly in the heart. "Dear me!

Of course not! Yes, it *is* called kamikaze mode, but that doesn't mean it will actually launch a suicide attack! It beefs up all the robot's functions by consuming a vast amount of energy. Once that energy is gone, the fuel can't be replenished. You can only use it once!"

"In that case, it would be logical to use it after shoring up the maximum amount of energy," said Nano.

(I fear that we will be unable to keep up!)

Yes, it was just as Shizuka declared. The girls had been taking turns to replenish the Love Energy as the battle raged on. However, because the robot was constantly consuming that energy, they were barely keeping it afloat.

"You must generate an immense amount of Love Energy in one fell swoop," Nano Two said, using Nano's mouth.

Nano Three emerged from one of Nano's ears. "I recommend the act of romantic affection Earthlings refer to as 'kissing."

"Yes, that sounds like our only option!" Hakari seemed quite eager to get on with it.

"Well, if it's to save everyone in town, then I *guess* it's fine!" Karane turned away in a huff, but her desire was plainly evident on her face.

Unfortunately, Rentaro shook his head slowly. "No... We can't do that."

"Wh-why not?!"

"I-it's not like I'm saying we have to do it or anything..."

Both girls were plainly shocked.

Rentaro's reasoning, however, was unexpected. "I want to kiss every single one of you with my fullest concentration! I can't do that while I'm piloting!"

The love he poured into his agonized scream made his girlfriends swoon.

"If that is your problem," said Nano Two, poking out from Nano's ear, "then may we suggest—"

"—that we pilot the robot briefly in your stead?" Nano Three offered.

Rentaro didn't need to think twice. He nodded eagerly.

"Thanks a ton, you two! All right. Let's get going, everyone!"

Nanos Two and Three extended their tentacle-like limbs from their host's body to pilot the Rentaro Robot. They didn't even need to use the control panel —they were able to manipulate the robot directly. Given that the two aliens had provided the tech in the first place, it stood to reason that their lack of opposable thumbs was no impediment.

Meanwhile...

"Mmf..."

Hakari pressed her lips against Rentaro's passionately. The instant he felt the sweetness of her peach-like lips, his brain filled with endorphins. It was a unique feeling, one totally distinct from touching any other part of her. They'd both closed their eyes to kiss, but when he cracked them open, he saw that she was staring at him. It was strangely embarrassing for their eyes to meet under these circumstances. She looked as if she was melting from the pleasure. Watching her, Rentaro was filled with unsurpassable happiness.

"Hmph..."

Karane's harrumph was weaker than usual as she waited expectantly for her kiss. Rentaro pressed his lips against hers gently. When they touched, her shoulders jolted adorably. Their lips merely brushed against one another's at first, but she gradually deepened the kiss. At the same time, her frown melted away, her breath caught in her throat, and she seemed to secretly relish the whole experience. It was all so very characteristic of her; Rentaro thought that this was very adorable.

<Mwah.>

Shizuka's smartphone read out the kissing sound effect the moment Rentaro's lips met hers. With her eyes closed and her cheeks flushed, her expression seemed somehow more adult than usual. Rentaro's heart pounded even more frantically than it normally did around her. He was keenly aware that, despite her small stature, she was just as old as Hakari and Karane. Nevertheless, it was still cute to see her trembling slightly. It was a very

wholesome display.

"It's Kusuri's turn, aye!"

With a gentle tenderness, he let Kusuri throw her arms around his neck and accepted her kiss. Although it was cute how she pecked his face all over with her smoothes, there was also something vaguely sensual about her, which got his heart pounding. Despite all this, she had the small lips of a child, which made it all feel somewhat immoral. But this was quickly washed away by the pleasure of the kiss.

"Mwah."

Whether she was copying Shizuka or evoking memories of the time when she was a kiss zombie, Nano quietly enunciated the kissing sound effect as she held Rentaro's chin and covered his lips with hers. Now that Rentaro was so close, he saw that her face was a little redder than usual. The sight made him turn bright red in turn. The softness and warmth of her lips reaffirmed once more that she was very much a human being. (Not that this wasn't already obvious.) "Mmm..."

Hahari grasped Rentaro's hand tightly and let out a sweet, lascivious sigh when he brought their lips together. Their faces were so close; he marveled at how similar the smell of her breath was to Hakari's. Despite the similarities, however, Hahari's lips certainly felt different from her daughter's (although they were equally entrancing). When he opened his eyes slightly, he saw the expression of a young girl. It was enough to make his heart pound intensely.

"Rentaro-senpai..."

Kurumi looked up at him, blushing deeply. Her lips were firmly shut tight as he went to her. When he drew near, her lips parted ever so slightly, revealing the tip of her tongue. It briefly stroked his lips before retreating back into her mouth. Kissing Kurumi always made him feel a bit ticklish. It was also cute and very much like her to keep moving her tongue around from time to time, as if to confirm the taste of his lips.

"Please excuse me."

Mei spoke up after a slightly longer pause than usual. He wrapped his arms around her gingerly in return and captured her lips. Although she was generally

the type to show restraint, she accepted him thoroughly, displaying a level of affection that she normally kept close to her chest. When they kissed, she put enough strength into her hug that he felt as if she were holding him up. That, too, he found adorable.

Fast forward some vague amount of time.

"Rentaro Robot, enter hyper mode!" roared Rentaro as he took the controls once more.

On cue, the Rentaro Robot purged a number of its parts. There was a raucous whirring noise, and a storm of smoke escaped the exhaust port. It was clearly a larger amount than anything it had produced before.

By the way, Hahari had gone ahead and changed the name of this mode, given that "kamikaze mode" was a bit much.

"Here we go! One more time!" Rentaro manipulated the controls, and the Rentaro Robot broke into a run. It was faster than it had ever been by an order of magnitude. "Incredible! Now we can fight toe to toe with the vice principal!"

"Hey, hold on a sec there, Rentaro! Won't you lose control if you go too fast?!" Karane yelled.

"Not to worry! My blood's pumping through my veins harder than ever, thanks to you all kissing me. I've got so much energy, I might explode!"

"Unless you were a rubber man or something, that would totally blow your heart to bits," said Kurumi.

Gear Two reference aside, Rentaro actually *was* succeeding in reining the out-of-control horse—er, robot.

The vice principal readied herself as the Rentaro Robot approached, more cautious than ever.

"Huh? It's moving differently now."

"This is where it ends, Vice Principal!"

The vice principal got on all fours and hissed loudly. Then, they clashed.

"Whoa! Even when we were going all out, our strength never matched up," said Hakari. "But this is incredible!"

<His strength is like that of a mythical ogre.>

Far from losing to the vice principal, the Rentaro Robot even started to overpower her, bit by bit.

"In this position, knocking her off balance by targeting the back of her knee would be most efficient," Nano remarked.

"Aye! Pick her up and throw her, Rentaro!" Kusuri called out.

Rentaro grabbed the vice principal by the back of her legs, throwing her majorly off-balance.

"This is the final blow, Rentaro-chan! You can do it!" Hahari cheered.

"You have used thirty percent of our remaining energy," said Mei. "You have three minutes of activity remaining."

The vice principal let go of the Rentaro Robot, perhaps in order to prioritize preventing herself from falling over, and planted her feet firmly on the ground. This turned out to be a fatal mistake.

"Yaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

Without a moment of hesitation, the Rentaro Robot grabbed both of the vice principal's arms and used the momentum to spin her around. She instantly lifted off the ground—even the vice principal's new form was helpless without any proper footing. He kept spinning her around, the centrifugal force mounting...

The Rentaro Robot finally flung the vice principal into the air. She shot off into the distance at ferocious speed, now no more than a glint in the horizon.

"We won!" Rentaro beamed in satisfaction.

Although the Rentaro Robot was roughed up all over, it folded its arms and struck a cool and formidable pose.

"Yippee! You did it, Rentaro-kun! I'm so impressed!" cheered Hakari.

"It's not like I thought...that you were cool or anything!" Karane insisted. Then, after a pause, she added, "Well, maybe a tiny bit."

A splendid throw, my good sir.>

"Impressive," said Nano. "You sent her flying at the most efficient trajectory."

"Not bad, Rentaro-senpai," Kurumi said begrudgingly after a moment of pause.

"Your hard work paid off, Rentaro-chan!" Hahari squealed. "Theeeere's a good widdle boy!"

"I have prepared a victory toast for us all," Mei announced.

And thus, the mood in the cockpit turned festive. But then...

"Wait a minute. We sent her flying instead of giving her Medicine-Reversing Medicine." Kusuri pointed out. Sweat rolled down her cheek. "Kusuri said to throw her, thinking she would hit the ground and then take medicine..."

There was a long moment of silence.

"Oh."

Everyone winced. "We screwed up" was written all over their faces.

"Don't mess this up, Rentaro Robooooooooooooot!"

The rest of their adventure was brief. Rentaro sprinted after the vice principal and caught her just in time (i.e. before she hit the ground *and* the robot ran out of fuel). After they administered the Medicine-Reversing Medicine, the vice principal returned to normal, her eyes rolling around in her head.

It was kind of a sloppy ending to the chapter, all things said and done.

Interlude:

Kusuri and Kurumi at the Park

BEHOLD!" KURUMI SAID TO NOBODY IN PARTICULAR. "The legendary hot dog! They only sell it at a stall at this park, and only when the mood strikes them!" She sat on a park bench one early afternoon, hot dog in hand and mouth drooling. Her eyes sparkled.

"Itadakimasu." After clapping her hands together, she eagerly sank her teeth into the hot dog.

"Yummyyyyyyyyyy!" she shrieked in pure delight, as she always did.

So far, so good. After Kurumi finished off her hot dog and appeased her stomach, however, the plot took a turn.

Kusuri tottered into the park, camped herself on a grassy patch, and pulled out a test tube.

"This seems like good spot to experiment, aye. Let's see what happens if Kusuri pours Grass Grow Ginormous Medicine here."

"Am I the only one getting the feeling that this is a massive red flag?" Kurumi muttered.

Apparently still oblivious to Kurumi's existence, Kusuri scattered the contents of the test tube all over the grass with a self-important flourish. The next moment, the grass seemed to sway for an instant before abruptly shooting up like a rocket. If that wasn't uncanny enough, it twisted and contorted in a very unplantlike fashion. Kurumi watched with an obvious scowl.

"Yikes!" squealed Kusuri, as the grass coiled around her. "G-grass now doing tentacle play!"

"Called it." she snarked.

Even so, Kurumi ran to Kusuri's aid. She pulled Kusuri out of the grass, at which point Kusuri applied Grass Get Gentle Medicine. The pair breathed sighs

of relief.

"Thanks, Kurumi! You helped Kusuri out of a bind!"

"No problem. But, uh...wouldn't you have been screwed if you had been by yourself? You ought to exercise a bit more caution."

"Now to drink this Body Gets Big, Big Shock Medicine and see what happens! Aye!"

What happened next was predictable. "Got big, big shock... C-can't move..."
Kusuri murmured.

Kurumi clutched her head in her hands as she watched Kusuri collapse and start twitching. "What the hell did you expect? Where's the Medicine-Reversing Medicine?!"

"In breast pocket... Ohhh, zippy-zappy..."

"Is this it?" Kurumi pulled a test tube from Kusuri's pocket. "Okay, drink up."

She held Kusuri in her arms like a baby and poured the liquid into her mouth. The effect was dramatic—Kusuri's twitching instantly ceased.

"Thanks, Kurumi! You helped Kusuri out of a bind! Now for the Become Bird Magnet Medicine!"

Kurumi rolled her eyes. "Don't you know when to quit?"

Kusuri began to transform. Her child's body turned into that of a mature young lady. The Medicine-Reversing Medicine had reverted her body to its original form.

"Quit? Why does Kusuri need to do that?" The grown-up Kusuri tilted her head in confusion as she put on her glasses. "Concept of failure does not exist in experiments. Everything is for the sake of collecting data. Trial and error contribute to final result. It is necessary in every field."

Kurumi blinked, saying nothing for a moment. "The way you always keep soldiering on," she said eventually. "I kinda...sorta...respect it, I guess?"

"It tickles Kusuri to hear praise from her kouhai. Oh. Hold still a moment."

"Hm?"

Kusuri reached a hand toward Kurumi's lips. Despite her confusion, Kurumi did as she was told and stayed put.

"There was ketchup on you, aye... Mmm."

Kurumi blinked, stunned.

Kusuri wiped the ketchup off Kurumi's lips and promptly brought her finger to her own mouth. Kurumi's face turned beet red.

Kusuri, for her part, seemed puzzled by Kurumi's reaction. "Kusuri always does this sort of thing."

"Y-yeah, but you're always in your kid body when you do that... In this form, it's kinda..."

Kurumi's heart pounded.

At that moment, however, Kurumi's stomach let out a cute grumble. It seemed her metabolism had already churned through the hot dog she'd eaten only minutes earlier.

"Argh, I want some meat buns!"

Her current cuisine of choice seemed to have been sparked by a certain something in her purview.

"Then Kusuri will come with you. We'll buy some together, aye."

A little while later, the two girls sat on a park bench, stuffing their faces. Parents in the area glanced fondly in their direction.

Chapter 4: From Circlet Love Story

An Excerpt from *Circlet Love Story:*"An Unexpected Gift"

MY NAME IS KAMAKURU, AND I AM A KNIGHT sworn to protect the princess of this fair nation. When the princess had completed her duty as an envoy to a neighboring nation, I was tasked with guarding her on the return journey. I kept a vigilant watch over our surroundings as I rode my horse beside her carriage.

"Rumors speak of recent banditry in this area," said the elderly knight inside the carriage. "It would be wise to stay alert."

He was the princess's chaperone and my teacher. Even when I was young, he was ever the staunch ally.

"Stop the carriage!" we both shouted.

The attendant hurriedly pulled the reins, bringing the horse to a standstill.

Soon enough, men who appeared to be bandits appeared from the bushes in droves. They grinned, showing no inclination to attack for the moment. The situation was swiftly coming to an impasse.

Before the silence could persist any further, I turned to the young man whom I suspected was the leader. "Come, speak. I would lend you my assistance, should you need it," I said, lacing my words with an implicit warning.

"Heh... Hand us all yer valuables, and we'll spare yer lives."

"Oh... Hey, Big Bro!" said a boy who appeared to be the young man's henchman. "I saw this guy in a dream. He's a loser who can't protect his lady!"

At last, I understood their attitude. They must have assumed that we were easy pickings because the princess was guarded only by myself and the elderly

knight.

"You think we would be cowed by numbers? We fear nothing!" I drew my sword, hoping to allay the princess's nerves as she watched from within the carriage. "I shall seize victory, here and now!"

Then, with a roar, I swung my blade at the bandits. Though the entire group struck at once and I was clearly outnumbered, their skills were poor. With little effort, I was able to hold them off and dashed past the underlings to make for the leader, who remained at the bandit party's rear.

He scowled. "So, yer after me, eh?!"

Cutting off the snake's head quickly was best in a battle such as this.

"You underestimate me! I'm the best there is at swordplay! Say goodbye to yer precious lady, 'cause yer gonna lose pathetically! Huh?"

"Oh? What a coincidence. Swordplay is also my forte."

Our blades clashed fiercely several times over.

"Hyaaa!"

"Urk?!"

I thumped the leader with the flat of my blade, and his eyes rolled into the back of his head, collapsing to the ground. He was out cold. I did not want to subject the princess to the sight of bloodshed, so I hadn't sliced his flesh.

"Oh no... Big Bro!"

"The boss got done in?! These knights are no joke! Retreat!"

"Yeah, I'm backin' off too! I bet the boss would tell us to flee over his corpse!"

The bandits turned into a disorderly mob and scattered to the wind.

"I-I'll get you back for this!" The boy yelled before turning his back on the leader and running.

I took a step forward. I'd better pursue them, I thought.

"You've done enough! Come back!"

The elderly knight's voice snapped me back into my senses. I was a knight

sworn to protect the princess. Now that the pressing danger had passed, I had no further need to embroil myself in this matter. As that realization hit me, I stopped and sheathed my sword.

That was when a voice suddenly called out to me.

A young boy emerged from the bushes, shouting his adulation as he ran toward me. "Sir Knight! I was struck by your skilled swordplay! Would you please make me your squire?!"

"And who may you be?"

"I was being held captive by that bandit group you defeated! They attacked me when I left my hometown in the country to become a knight. I am in your debt—please let me be of use!"

"I'm afraid I must refuse." Given that I had no need of a squire, he would be nothing more than a hindrance.

"We mustn't abandon the lad here either. How about we take him along to the royal capital as a probationary squire?" the elderly knight suggested. "Your Highness, what say you?"

From inside the carriage, I could see the princess give a small nod. When was the last time I had heard the princess's voice? I wondered. She had not always experienced such difficulties with conversation. 'Twas the environment within the castle that made her that way. Knowing her circumstances made me all the more vexed.

"If the princess insists..."

"Thank you kindly, my good sirs! Her Highness's magnanimity has filled my heart with gratitude!"

The young boy knelt. *Good grief,* I thought. It appeared that we would be bringing a most unexpected souvenir home for our troubles.

Side. S

I sighed in relief as I watched the boy—played by Rentaro-kun—successfully join up with Sir Kamakuru's group.

"My goodness," said Hakari-san, "Even as a wannabe squire, Rentaro-kun is so dashing!"

"Aye!" said Kusuri-senpai. "What a splendid performance!"

It wasn't just those two—everyone else showed signs of relief.

"Okay, so the carriage is headed for the royal capital, right?" said Hahari-san. "We ought to follow Rentaro-chan."

"Yes, my lady," said Mei-san. "I shall pursue the carriage on foot."

"That's not what she was ordering you to do," said Kurumi-san.

"It would be more efficient to skip ahead to the next scene," said Nano-san.

"There's no fast-forward button in real life," said Karane-san.

Having watched the previous scene unfold from behind the bushes, we began to move to our next destination. How did we end up in this situation, you might ask?

It all started a short while ago...

"Hmm?"

We opened our eyes at almost the exact same time. The first thing that hit me was the strong smell of greenery. It didn't make sense. Weren't we on the school roof?

"Wh...?!"

My hoarse voice got lost amid everyone's surprised shouts. Our eyes widened at the sight before us—a totally unfamiliar forest.

"Huh?" said Hakari-san. "How did we end up here?"

"Hahari didn't abduct us or anything, did she?" said Karane-san.

"Dearie me, I wouldn't do that without consent," said Hahari-san.

"So you would do it if you had permission?" Kurumi-san retorted.

"GPS isn't showing our location for some reason," said Nano-san.

"Military satellites aren't displaying information either," said Mei-san.

"How do you have access to military satellites?" asked Kusuri-senpai.

We were all terribly confused. And then, all of a sudden...

"Wh-whoa! Watch your step, everyone!" said Rentaro-kun.

First there was confusion, then there were screams. A bunch of unconscious men were sprawled at our feet.

We fled in a panic. As I ran, I felt someone's gaze on me and glanced over my shoulder. That was when I saw a trembling boy peering at us. He looked so mortified that he was unable to even stand. *Wait...* This was my first time laying eyes on him, but he seemed somewhat familiar...

The boy's shout interrupted my thoughts. "How the heck did a bunch of girls fall from the sky and wipe out a group of bandits?! Sure, I came out of it okay, but who would have thought the outside world was so weird?! This is creeping me out. Forget about being a knight. I'm going back to tilling fields in the country!"

With that, the boy sprinted off like a scalded dog. *Hmm, yes, there's something strangely familiar about all of this...*

"Shizuka-chan, that boy just now... Don't you think he matches the description of Sir Kamakuru's squire in *Circlet Love Story*?" asked Rentaro.

A light bulb went off in my head. I nodded frantically. Yes...this explained my déjà vu!

"He dropped something." Rentaro-kun picked up an object fashioned like a four-leaf clover. She recognized it as the squire's signature hair ornament. "Do you think we might've wound up inside the story?" Rentaro-kun said it as if he were joking, but I could see sweat drops starting to pour down his face.

I had an inkling of why that might've been.

"If we really are inside *Circlet Love Story,*" Rentaro continued, "and if that boy really was Sir Kamakuru's squire...then won't the story go off the rails if he doesn't meet Sir Kamakuru?"

I nodded even more fervently. The squire was a very important character in *Circlet Love Story*, and his absence would change the plot significantly.

"H-hey, it's not like we know that for a fact." Rentaro-kun fell into thought. "Oh, I know! If this really is the world of *Circlet Love Story*, then Sir Kamakuru and Princess Io should show up in a bit!"

So we hid in a nearby bush before the group of bandits woke up, keeping an eye on the situation. Before long, Sir Kamakuru and Princess Io really *did* appear. Thus, to ensure consistency with the story, Rentaro-kun put on the hair ornament and acted like the young boy who had run away.

The rest of us aimed to be mere bystanders, making sure Rentaro progressed through the plot safely. However, things weren't quite so simple...

An Excerpt from *Circlet Love Story:*"A True Knight"

The princess was incarcerated and would face execution before long—for a crime she had not committed, of course. Unfortunately, those who wished to frame her had fabricated some damning-looking evidence. My plan was to rescue her forthwith, conceal her identity, and resolve the situation.

"How do I sneak into the castle, though?"

Given that the princess was locked away under strict surveillance, infiltration seemed nigh impossible.

"Is Sir Masa here?" a voice called out. "The knight who needs help?"

When I turned around, I found the elderly knight alongside an unfamiliar lady knight. "She attends the neighboring country's third prince," he said, gesturing to his companion.

It made sense why she'd be here. I had heard whispers that this prince sought the princess's hand in marriage. Doubtless, he had his reasons for wanting to rescue her. What will happen now that our ranks have swelled, I wondered.

"Though the castle's fortifications are formidable, there remain one or two holes. Like that one. See?" The woman pointed at a hole that did indeed appear to lead into the castle.

"Only a dwarf would be able to traverse a hole that size," I said.

"I may not be anything as special as a knight, but I do have one unique skill I'm proud of," she said, before letting out a high-pitched whistle.

A rat came running out of the hole and rapidly climbed up to the lady knight's shoulder. It let out a little squeak.

"I see," I said. "So you are a beastmaster! The rat is your servant!"

"I've been having this little one toss sleep bombs at my targets. It even swipes keys for me."

With her rat-training skills accounted for, I had no qualms about asking for her assistance. Unless our opponents had deployed mechanical mice weapons from the ruins of an ancient civilization, I was certain that this would work.

"I'll stay here, just in case there's a problem. What about you, sir?" she asked, addressing the elderly knight.

"I, too, ask that I remain on the sidelines." This was a logical decision. If he and I were both captured, the princess would be without allies. "It is up to you to carry the day."

I nodded firmly. At the moment, I was unaware of what he truly meant by those words, however.

Nom, nom, nom.

"I'm stuffed." The maids were talking in their sleep. I snuck in quietly so as not to disturb them.

"Princess, I have come to rescue you! I apologize for my tardiness!"

"My knight?!" The princess looked terribly shocked when she saw me open the door.

"First, let us hide you away in a different country! In the meantime, I shall

work to improve the situation here!"

"What do you mean, 'improve'?" The princess's eyes closed with sorrow. "I grew up being told that I was the unwanted child of a mistress. That I was unneeded. That I would never find a good match. My elder brother's subordinates have even poisoned my meals because he did not want me as a sister."

The princess had many enemies within the court, yet there was almost no one she could call an ally. Throughout her entire life, she had not a single soul she could call a friend. She lived a lonely existence, trapped in the castle. Alas, such was the miserable truth.

"This incident started because a faction opposed my marriage proposal, one I had not asked for. If my life has no value, then I would rather—"

I cut her off before her frail voice faded entirely. "Your life does have value! It has value to me! My most cherished wish has always been to protect you, Princess!" I shouted without a moment of hesitation.

"But I am not royalty now, just a mere criminal. You are my knight no longer. Even if everything were to work out somehow, I would eventually be married off to someone in a different country."

"None of that matters to me." The princess's eyes widened at my curt reply. Indeed, I was not her knight at present. She was correct in that regard, which meant we could converse as equals. "I will decide who my lord is, even if no one has given me orders. When I decide upon my master, I follow them anywhere, be it another country or the ends of the earth itself. And..." I drew the sword at my hip. "You alone are my liege."

I knelt, bowed my head, and offered my sword to the lady I served. Silence stretched for what felt like a terribly long time.

"Yes...! My knight!"

When the princess took my sword, I became her knight in the truest sense.

"I'm glad to see you back, Sir Knight! This way should be safe!"

When I escaped from the castle with the princess, my squire guided me through the back streets. For a while, the three of us ran. Then, we stopped abruptly, startled.

Someone loomed ahead of us. She appeared to be nothing more than a prim and proper maid at a glance. Yet, there was something strange about her. I sensed there was something she kept close to her chest. As the princess's knight, this perception came naturally to me.

"You ought to have finished your work for today, young miss. And yet, your uniform is as clean as ever, almost as if you are declaring that you do not, in fact, work at the castle."

"Heh heh. You really would have been daft if *that* had gone over your head." The voice belonged not to the maid but to a young girl who had just appeared after her. The maid promptly took her place behind the girl, who had a peculiarly seductive air about her.

"Who are you?"

"Would it ring a bell if I said I was one of the Four Heavenly Monarchs?"

"You hail from the empire?! Then you must be the empire's foremost tactician!"

The empire was known for attacking other nations out of greed and ambition, and their forces were led by four generals known as the Four Heavenly Monarchs. The sole female member of the group was known as a cunning leader.

"I have something that you need," the tactician general said somewhat theatrically. As she spoke, the maid approached, holding a leather bag.

"Do you not fear my blade?" I asked the maid, whose eyes were firmly shut tight for some inscrutable reason.

"Even if you were to cut me down, I would happily give my life for my master."

"I must say, you seem *too* loyal, even for a personal maid." I took the leather bag from her and peered inside. I had not expected to find such a large sum of

gold coins nestled within. "My word! What are you planning?!"

"Do you not require funds to live life as runaways?" asked the tactician general. "You may use it all. That is of no concern to me."

That was not what I had inquired.

"How familiar are you with the empire's Four Heavenly Monarch system?" she continued, apparently grasping my intent.

The Four Heavenly Monarchs were by no means a monolith. In fact, I heard tell that they battled each other for the seat of the empire's next chancellor. If all of them were to follow their ultimate ambitions, then the country would be split into four factions.

"You're saying one of the Four Heavenly Monarchs entrapped the princess, and it would be a problem for you if he succeeded?"

"Precisely. Now, then... I'm rooting for you, O tragic princess and her knight." With that, the tactician general departed.

Side. S

"Phew, I was so nervous! Do you think that went well?" asked Hakari-san when she returned from playing the role of the tactician general.

I nodded fervently.

"You totally nailed the villainous vibe," said Karane-san. "Put a shiver down my spine."

I agreed; the scene was very atmospheric.

Now, you might be wondering why Hakari-san was the stand-in for the tactician general. It all started the day we came to this world...

After arriving at the royal capital, we marveled at all the unusual sights. That was when a fundamental issue came up in conversation.

"Sure, I agree that we ought to keep an eye on Sir Kamakuru and Princess Io, but how are we gonna make a living in the meantime?" Karane-san asked.

"Ah... Of course," said Hakari-san. "We don't have any money in this world..."

"I have an idea," said Hahari-san. Her tone implied a hidden meaning.

"In that case, please allow me to operate separately from the rest of you for a short while." Following her master's orders, Mei-san promptly took her leave.

The rest of us (myself included), were deeply puzzled, although Hahari-san's intentions came to light before long.

That night, Hahari-san flaunted her generosity at a restaurant in the capital.

"Okay, my dears, ask for anything you'd like!"

Even as her stomach rumbled conspicuously, Kurumi-san looked hesitant. "I'm grateful and all, but are you sure we've got enough money for this?"

The question seemed to spark an idea for Nano-san. "If we were to be arrested for dining and dashing, then we could live in a jail cell. This would be the fastest way of securing food and essentials."

"The least good form of speedrunning, aye," said Kusuri-senpai.

"No, no, I do have money!"

Hahari-san put a leather bag bursting at the seams on the table. The contents spilled out, revealing quite a bit of money. Although they were copper coins, the lowest denomination of currency in the kingdom, this was certainly enough to provide food and lodgings for the night.

"Spices appear to be worth a lot in this world, at least in the royal capital."

I was surprised. The book mentioned that the empire had a monopoly on spice exports. Thus, spices were regarded as luxury goods in other countries. It was amazing how she figured that out so quickly...

"So, to add spice to the spice," Hahari-san continued, "I got Mei to make some mayonnaise!"

"That's the most predictable isekai trope ever!" everyone else shouted.

"I sold a whole lot of mayonnaise in the capital and am already in the process of establishing a mayonnaise specialty chain! At the rate it's growing, we'll never have to worry about money!"

"We have already begun negotiating with the owner of a building in order to open our first branch," Mei-san chimed in.

Kurumi-san, who did not normally show much favor to Hahari-san, looked impressed. "A businesswoman sure comes in handy at times like these."

Hakari-san had a similar reaction. "If only she showed this side of herself more often..."

"Wait, how long are you thinking of staying in this world if you're planning a business here?" asked Karane-san.

"I'll continue for as long as our return date remains up in the air." Hahari-san smiled softly; hers was a gentle, reliable, *motherly* expression. "It is my responsibility as the adult here to ensure that we all survive in this world."

"Wow, Hahari can talk like an actual adult," said Kusuri-senpai, looking somewhat uncomfortable.

Personally, I thought that she was genuinely dependable, but...

"Hmm? Yoshimoto Shizuka, is something the matter?" Nano-san asked me.

Startled, I promptly shook my head. I suspected that my concern must have unconsciously shown on my face. It was hard to quell this hazy sense of unease. An unpleasant chill ran through me, as if we were poised to make a fatal mistake.

Some time passed after that.

"We will now commence the opening ceremony for Hanazono, the mayonnaise specialty store!" Hahari announced to the excited crowd. "Please feel free to take a look at the menu, everyone! Food will be free today!"

Her offer sounded generous, but Hahari-san's expression was slightly maniacal, much like that arc during the manga where she was the bad guy. *Once they get a taste for it, they're mine,* she thought.

"Oooh, this is soooo delicious... It's frustrating, but... I can't stop eating!"

One girl stood out prominently amid the store's otherwise cheery atmosphere, weeping as she wolfed down mayonnaise-related foods. Although she appeared to be the same age as me and the other first-year high school students, she had a curvaceous figure like Hakari-san's. There was a mature air about her, one ruined by the tears. Just as I was thinking to myself that I might have seen her somewhere before, Hakari-san approached her with a slightly strained expression.

"Um, I apologize if I'm being intrusive, but I thought I should tell you that too much mayonnaise isn't good for you, you know?"

"I have crazy heartburn, it's true..."

"By your leave, I have brought you some hot milk," said the ever-helpful Meisan.

"Oooh, the warmth is spreading through me..."

Tears cascaded down the young lady's face as she drank the hot milk.

"Has something happened to upset you recently?" asked Hakari-san. "Perhaps you'll feel better if you talk about it."

"My job hasn't been going well lately..."

"Ah, I see. That's never easy, is it?"

Hakari-san was a good listener, and the woman gradually opened up about her troubles. My unease magnified considerably.

"Okay, so! I planned on making money in this country by smuggling spices here and selling them, but nobody bought a thing! What's up with people around here?! They keep saying they don't need spices. Just pour mayonnaise over everything, and they're good! The worst thing is that mayonnaise actually tastes really damn good! Darn it all! I'm going home! And I'm taking mayonnaise back as a souvenir!"

Hakari-san didn't say anything until the lady was out the door. "Shizuka-san." She turned to me, her expression hard. Like me, she must have guessed that something was wrong. "Was this...Mother's doing?"

All I could do was nod stiffly. The young tactician general, who had risen to the ranks of the Four Heavenly Monarchs because of her genius-like acumen, was supposed to aid Sir Kamakuru and Princess Io in their hour of need. Only now, she'd overdosed on mayonnaise and had most likely used up all her funds.

"Oh my goodness gracious," said Hahari-san once I explained our dilemma. "I understand what must be done. I will take responsibility by acting in her—!"

Hakari-san raised her hand, cutting her mother off. "No, Mother, I'll do it."

"Hakari... Facing off against an armed knight is dangerous. I appreciate your concern, but that's why, as your mother, I must—"

"No, that's not it. Your age just doesn't match the character at all."

"You have a point. If I were to stand in as her, it might contradict information they might hear about the little tactician general later."

"Mother, I want you to focus on running your business so we'll have the funds to lend aid."

"My daughter has defeated me with pure logic..."

And with that, Hakari-san made her debut in the story.

An Excerpt from *Circlet Love Story:*"A Miracle"

"I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!"

Even amid the sound of the pouring rain, the princess's apology rang out loud and clear.

"Now that you've...made it to this cave...you should be fine..." I gasped. "You merely have to wait...for the other knights to lend you their aid..."

"No! You shouldn't have taken that assassin's arrow for me!"

The arrow was lodged deep in my shoulder. It felt hot and throbbed with pain. My consciousness dimmed.

"I...I never wanted anyone to sacrifice themselves for me," said the princess. "I'm scared! I'm so scared!"

As much as I wanted to put the princess's mind at ease, I couldn't. My body was too weak to obey me.

"I'm sorry... I'll draw some water for you. I pray that it will help you recover."

The princess's gloomy voice drifted off as she stepped away. Something soft then pressed against my cheek. I forced my eyes open, wondering what it could be, and found a small pup snuggling against me. *Well, fancy that.*

"My apologies... Was this cave your...home? Could you...permit us to stay a short while?" I asked, looking into the pup's eyes. "At least...until aid arrives..."

The pup turned its head away from me and simply sprawled itself out beside me. I would not describe it as terribly endearing behavior, but at that moment, I appreciated the warmth of life in this frigid cave.

"My knight!"

At the sound of the princess's scream, I sprang up, startled. But alas, I was struck with a most dreadful dizziness. My vision dimmed, and I could not hear a sound.

The princess continued screaming something that I could not make out all the while. I focused with all my might and found that she was running toward me. Three hazy figures followed her. It finally dawned on me. *This is the forty-fourth assassin.* I cursed my foolishness for assuming that, simply because we had reached our destination, I could leave the princess's side. What an ass I was!

"Hyaaaaaaaaaa!"

I swung my sword at the assassin leading the fore with the last vestiges of my strength.

"Whoa?! Give a comrade a break, would you?!"

I blinked in surprise at the familiar-sounding voice. Ah, so they had come for me—the beastmaster, the elderly knight, and my squire...

"Good lord! What a grievous wound you bear!"

The elderly knight's voice put me at ease, and I let myself collapse against him.

"Live! You must live!" he shouted.

"But of course. I have no intention of...dying here. No... This has awoken me to a new joy." It appeared that I still had enough strength within me to engage in light banter. "But I suppose that I...can leave the princess in...your hands...for you two are true warriors..."

I sensed someone swallow a gasp of surprise. Who was it, I wondered? "It's under control, brother!" the beastmaster said jovially.

The elderly knight nodded silently. That, too, I could understand. We were worthy rivals who had fought together beneath the banner of justice. I was comfortable entrusting the princess to them. With that, I finally rested my eyes.

"M-my knight!"

I exhaled, and my hazy vision abruptly cleared. The princess kneeled before me, her face twisted in sorrow as she wept. Ah, that was so terribly...

"Wh-what purehearted tears!" The voice seemed to be coming from, of all things, the pup. It had climbed onto the princess's lap at some point. When her tears fell on its body, a powerful light gleamed, and it let out a bark. The light enveloped my body.

"My wound...is healing? Who are you?"

"Tis I, the governor of this land. Or I suppose it would be more accurate to call me its custodian."

"Well, color me surprised! Though you appear to be a canine pup, you were a guardian beast all along!"

"Ancient literature states that creatures with extraordinarily long life spans become divine spirits known as guardian beasts."

Egad. This would mean that something with the appearance of a very young child could be an elder who had lived for eons.

"O mortal, through your tears, I have borne witness to your cruel destiny. I

fear that the vicissitudes of fate may rob you of your pure heart."

The entire cavern lit up as the guardian beast spoke, and the shimmering sparkles flowed into the princess like a cascading wave. As the light settled within her, the back of the princess's right hand glowed with a mysterious pattern.

"O mortal, I shall bequeath you with a portion of my strength. Perhaps the power of healing shall be useful to you."

"Y-yes! Thank you ever so mu—"

A loud booming noise cut the princess off. The light ceased altogether at the same time, leaving only darkness behind. I lit a fire and observed our present situation.

"The entrance is totally sealed! It won't budge no matter how much I push or pull!" the beastmaster moaned.

"It appears the heavy rain knocked rocks from the cliff," said the elderly knight grimly. "Realistically, we will not be able to clear them all away."

"What a deep burden you carry," the guardian beast muttered sadly. I wondered if he was referring to the princess's god-given destiny.

"Sir Knight, what if we venture deeper inside?!" My squire spoke up with terribly forced cheer. "Perhaps it will lead somewhere."

"Inside is a dead end." The voice came from precisely the direction the squire was looking. "I took a short nap in here, waiting for the rain to pass. Is it night already?"

I turned the torchlight to this newcomer, revealing a boy—no, a girl—with a large hammer slung over her shoulder. Her face was obscured by a mask. It was difficult to make out her features, but I could still tell that her hammer was large and cumbersome in contrast to her slender frame. I had entered the cave under the assumption that nobody else was inside, but it appeared that someone other than the guardian spirit had arrived here before me.

"I'm so sorry," said the princess. "I'm afraid that my unfortunate fate has affected you as well."

"Huh? The hell are you talking about?" The girl was silent for a moment. "Oh, the entrance is blocked, huh?" She seemed to have surmised the situation. "Are you calling a mild inconvenience like that an 'unfortunate fate'? How ridiculous!"

"Are you saying you have the means of resolving this dilemma?" I asked. "If so, then I leave our fate in your hands."

"You mean that scrawny-looking guy? Or is she a girl?" asked my squire.

"I'm a girl, you dumbass!" she shouted.

"It's hard to tell underneath your mask and all that heavy armor!" said my squire.

The girl brought her mighty hammer down on the rocks as if to shut him up. I was convinced her slender arms would not prevail against those colossal rocks, but they crumbled from that single blow. The next moment, a boom rang out as the rocks turned to dust, leaving me in a state of utter confusion.

"My word! I must apologize. Evidently, I belittled your strength!"

Who would have conceived that this girl was a berserker, a warrior blessed with the ability to temporarily enhance their physical might?

"Oh, look, the weather's already cleared up," she remarked. The storm appeared to have passed while we were trapped inside the cave. "How long are you gonna stand around all mopey like that? Why don't you just come outside? Anyway, I'll be seeing you."



With those dauntless parting words, the girl strode cheerfully out of the cave and disappeared into the distance. I had been prepared to face death for a while, and yet, my life had already been saved several times over. What providence!

Side. S

Karane-san left Sir Kamakuru and returned to us.

"Karane-san's ability to demolish large rocks comes in handy, even on a different planet," said Hakari-san.

"You know I can't actually do that!"

Why did Karane-san stand in for the berserker? Well, it all started a little while ago...

As was our typical routine, we were preemptively visiting the locations in which the story took place to ensure that there were no deviations. This incident happened when thick clouds began to cover the sky, prompting us to head for the cave.

"Oho! Aren't you cute lasses? What do you say about spending some quality time with yours truly?"

We turned around upon hearing this voice, where we were confronted with a slender boy—or maybe a girl?—wearing a mask. The androgynous-looking individual waved cheerfully as they approached. Their other hand carried a large hammer. It occurred to me at once that this was the berserker set to appear in the forthcoming cave scene!

"Um, we all have a boyfriend..."

Hakari-san tried to rebuff the berserker, but they didn't appear to be listening. "That hardly matters. Isn't love meant to be free? Let us sally forth to Shangri-la!"

The berserker tried to put a hand on Hakari-san's shoulder. However...

"This is the most efficient way to repel a sex pest."

Nano-san poked them in the eyes.

"Yeowch!"

"This is what you get for trying to touch Hakari without her permission." Karane-san followed up with a crippling punch to the face.

"Oof... I-I'm so sooooorry!"

The berserker fled. They even left their trademark hammer behind in the panic.

"Nano-san, Karane-san!" There were tears of joy in Hakari's eyes. "Thank you so much!"

"D-don't get the wrong idea! I just didn't like the look of their face!" Karanesan turned away in a huff.

Although I was relieved that they helped Hakari-san, a terrible thought struck me at the same time.

Nano-san noticed me trembling. "Yoshimoto Shizuka? Was that an important character just now?" she asked.

I nodded back at her, and sweat ran down her cheek.

"Y-yeah," said Karane-san, "but we had to drive that a-hole away, didn't we?"

I nodded vigorously in reply. Helping Hakari-san was most certainly the right thing to do. Nevertheless, I explained that the berserker played a significant role in the story. They would make flirtatious comments to Princess Io but ultimately assist in crushing the rocks sealing the entrance of the cave.

"Okay, then I'll pick up the slack! Heh, this thing is..." Karane-san wrapped her hands around the giant hammer. She tensed her muscles, and with a magnificent display of strength, she rested the hammer on her shoulder. "No sweat!"

"But not even you would be able to demolish a bunch of big rocks, right?" said Hakari-san. "Or maybe you can."

"I'll, uh...cross that bridge when I come to it!"

"We ought to eliminate all elements of uncertainty. We must find the perfect time to explode the rocks. That will guarantee the ideal result," Nano-san suggested.

Hahari-san let out a gloomy sigh. "According to the Hanazono Company's research, this world does not have a precedent for creating explosives."

"However, it does have the raw materials," Nano-san pointed out. "As long as you possess the sufficient know-how, you can make bombs and explosives."

"Another stereotypical isekai trope!" everyone else shouted.

"Anyway, here's a bomb I made earlier," said Nano-san.

Kusuri-senpai blinked. "You blazed through the steps like a cooking show, aye."

"The materials were obtained from the various regions in which the company does business," said Mei-san.

"All your talk of companies and business... It's like you guys are in a completely different story," Karane-san commented.

In any case, the matter was settled.

As a side note, Hahari-san provided the berserker's mask and armor. Apparently, she had anticipated something like this happening and had made costumes for all the principal characters. Though I was certainly impressed by her foresight, she had followed that up by saying, "I want to see you all in cosplay!" Typical Hahari-san.

Karane-san gave a thumbs up. "Nice timing, Nano!"

"My apologies, Inda Karane." For some reason, Nano was visibly sweating.

"The rocks in this world were more durable than their terrestrial counterparts.

The bomb was not enough to destroy the rocks altogether. You ended up doing half the work yourself."

"What?" Karane-san's eyes widened.

"In less fortunate circumstances, you would have been trapped inside too."

"That's what you're hung up about? Look, I made it out just fine. No problem, right?"

"That is merely an opinion based on hindsight."

"Besides, knowing you, even if I didn't manage to break the rocks, I bet you would've done an instant recalculation and made a better bomb."

"I used up all the materials on hand, so it would have been impossible to adapt immediately."

"Then I'm sure Mei or someone would have done something."

"I suspect that it would've taken a day or so in that scenario," Mei-san pointed out apologetically.

"Not even Mei can do everything," Hahari-san said with a sigh.

"Gathering materials from across the entire world in just one day is still pretty damn mind-boggling," Kurumi-san said.

The atmosphere was relaxed at that point. At the same time...

Nano-san clenched her fist. "My miscalculation put you in danger, Inda Karane."

"Don't be so down! Kusuri knows what it's like to majorly screw up." Kusurisenpai gently patted her on the shoulder.

Seeing Nano-san so miserable, Karane-san sighed softly. "I'm really not bothered at all. It's just annoying to see you all down in the dumps and apologizing! Besides, it's not exactly *efficient* to get hung up on stuff from the past, is it?!"

Nano-san blinked, as if startled by Karane-san's words.

Hakari-san smiled. "Can I take this to mean that you're trying to say, 'I'm fine, so hurry up and get back to your usual self'?"

"Quit it with the stupid translations!" Karane-san shot back, although her cheeks were somewhat flushed.

"You are correct in saying that it is more efficient to consider the next task

instead of dwelling on past events." Nano-san appeared to have taken Karane-san's words to heart, because she spoke with her usual tone. "On this occasion, I prepared the smallest possible bomb in secret out of consideration for this world's environment. Next time, I will not show the same restraint."

"This isn't just about bombs, you know," Karane-san pointed out.

"Wouldn't you just end up doing that really stereotypical isekai thing where you impress everyone with Earth science?" Kurumi-san chimed in.

Regardless, the important thing was that Nano-san had a positive outlook. As for the bombs... Well, I didn't foresee them making another appearance anytime soon.

An Excerpt from Circlet Love Story: "Shangri-La"

"Heh, a fellow can't get through by ordinary means," said the bandit. "You just gotta push ahead!"

In the midst of a furious storm, the beastmaster grimly faced off against a sea serpent that blocked their boat's passage. The colossal creature reminded them of the legends of Bahamut. "Hey, can't someone make a mechanical cat weapon?" she asked.

"I find myself ill-equipped for naval warfare," said the elderly knight.

"I'm warnin' ya!" cried the bandit's henchman. "I'm all gristle, no meat!"

"Don't you chicken out!" the bandit shouted back. "Keep shootin' them arrows, you dummy!"

"My knight!" the princess shouted. "I will strengthen your body! This should help you defeat your foe!"

"As you command, my liege!" I declared.

"I'll make sure it's all under control, brother."

The beastmaster called a flock of seabirds to block the sea serpent's vision as I borrowed the power of the crest to jump as high as the World Tree. I struck the

sea serpent with a blow that surpassed the speed of sound, and its head split in two. Using my foe's sinking body as a scaffold, I jumped back onto the ship.

"Splendid work, my knight." The princess greeted me with applause. Perhaps she thought that a spot of giant killing was worthy of praise.

At almost the precise same moment, the elderly knight poked his head out from the wheelhouse. "My apologies, but the helm will not turn! Hold on tight so that you do not fall off the ship, my good folks!"

The storm raged harder, washing us all away.

Eventually, we emerged on an island of some sort. The ship was grounded and in want of repair. Would we find what we needed here? Ah, but our first priority was ascertaining a food source.

I was still deep in thought when the elderly knight returned ahead of the scout, bearing an armful of fruit. "I have gathered victuals. Please take what you fancy."

This resolved the food problem, for now.

"What kind of fruit is this?" asked the princess.

"I know not myself," admitted the elderly knight. "However, in times of strife, it is standard practice to secure a stable food source. Given that this fruit is plentiful, I would say that this environment is blessed in that regard."

The princess and I took the fruit from the elderly knight. Like her, I bit into it experimentally. "T-to think that a piece of fruit could contain so much juice!"

A delectable taste that I had never hitherto experienced spread across my tongue. Entranced by the fruit's sweet seduction, I ate until there was nothing left of it.

"I reckon it ain't a bad idea to rest here awhile," the bandit remarked.

"I agree, Big Bro!" said the henchman.

This had been a long, perilous journey. Indeed, I saw the wisdom in resting our weary bones for a spell.

"Tee hee, catch me if you can!"

"Ha ha, please wait for me, Princess!"

I chased the princess as she ran across the sand. She was not running at a full sprint, of course. Several days had passed since we'd washed up on the shore. Here, our lives were unbound and peaceful. I wondered if this was...

"The fabled Shangri-la?!"

It appeared that the henchman had been pondering the same thing. He seemed to be performing a peculiar dance, juggling fruit in both arms. What a joyous scene.

"I am eating. Can you not fill your stomach quietly?" the elderly knight grumbled.

In contrast to his verbiage, he was currently soaking in a bathtub while devouring two armfuls of fruit. Had there been a need to keep watch, I would have thought his energies were best applied in that direction, but we knew already that this island was devoid of any dangerous beasts or other threats.

That was when the princess stopped in her tracks just ahead of me. She seemed flustered and startled.

"Did something happen?" I asked.

She was peering at something beyond the rocks, red-faced. When I followed her gaze, I found the beastmaster and the bandit staring at each other in an altogether ardent fashion.

The princess and I gasped at the sight of them mouth-to-mouth. I'd had no inkling that they were in that sort of relationship.

"Hey, Princess Io! Sir Masa! Were you peekin'?" the bandit demanded.

"Not at all!" the princess insisted. "I may have accidentally intruded upon your intimate moment, but I had no intention of interfering."

The beastmaster laughed. "You look like a boiled octopus, Your Highness. Was that too stimulating for you?"

The princess's cheeks were red, and she appeared to be terribly shaken. In that regard, I was much the same.

"Prithee! Do you mean to say you've previously partaken in osculation? And by osculation, I refer to the act between lovers..."

The bandit scowled. "It's not like it's my first time or nothin'. I've been doin' it for ages..."

"I see," I said. "You have already locked lips with her..."

"So you are lovers, then," said the princess hesitantly.

"I've always been kind of a bullish woman, though, so I told him to give up on me," the beastmaster insisted.

"That side of you adds to your charm as a woman," said the bandit. "Sides, you've always had a pretty face."

"Keep sweet-talking like that, and I might just fall for you." The beastmaster scratched her beet-red cheeks, the signifier of a maiden in love. It all but seemed that the two were already deeply entwined, though they seemed far from the old married couple phase of a relationship.

"My knight, I wish to share a kiss with you."

The princess's hallowed face steadily grew larger within my vision. I had to stop her. But why? I could entrust my body to her. Yes, because I too desired—"Hm? Sir Knight, look over there!"

My squire had arrived at the scene while I was unawares. When I turned my gaze to where he pointed slightly yonder, I observed a hooded girl looking down upon us from atop the hill.

"It is time to wake from your dream, all of you..." *Munch, munch*. "Shucks, this doesn't taste of anything. Maybe it's 'cause I know this is a dream..."

As she spoke, the girl demolished the fruit in her path at a most alarming speed. I had thought the fruit limitless, but there was an almost dreamlike quality in seeing it all disappear in rapid succession. *Hmm? A "dream"?*

"You speak of waking? You refer to us?!"

I certainly felt awake. Yet the girl's words inspired a peculiar fretfulness within me.

"Remember..." Munch, munch. "Uh, what was the line again? Right, what exactly did you come here to search for?"

Ah, but of course! I was the princess's knight, not her lover. My duty was to return the princess to where she needed to be. This was not our final destination. In the beginning, we only stayed at this island as a temporary lodging while we gathered materials to repair the ship.

"Now wake up! You must be hungry in reality!" yelled the girl as she bit down on the final piece of fruit.

Munch, munch.

And with that, everything abruptly turned black.

When next I opened my eyes, my body was thoroughly entangled in vines. Upon closer inspection, I saw my companions were rousing and in much the same state. Everyone appeared slightly emaciated.

"So we were under an illusion, hmm? I suspect it happened the moment we first ate the fruit. This island entraps its visitors by showing them a paradise, then devours them. In that case, I would hazard a guess that we are currently in the stomach of the island itself."

The elderly knight's analysis sent a chill down my spine. To think that the island was preying on us while we were caught in a delusion...

Side. S

Phew, I thought. I was relieved to see that everything had worked out fine this time.

"By the way," said Karane-san, "how do we wake up Kurumi?"

"Got a feeling she'll wake if we stuff random food into her mouth, aye," said Kusuri-senpai.

"Would Mommy's milkers do?" asked Hahari-san.

"If you're prepared for her to cut all ties with you the moment she wakes up, then by all means, be my guest," said Hakari-san.

"Perhaps she will appreciate some Hanazono Company mayonnaise?" Meisan suggested.

Wrapped in a futon, the sleeping Kurumi-san made some animalistic sniffing noises. Then she opened her mouth wide and practically inhaled the mayonnaise.

"Yummyyyyyyyyyyyy!" she squealed, her eyes springing open to reveal throbbing hearts.

"The most efficient means of rousing her," Nano-san commented.

At last, Kurumi-san was awake like the rest of us, safe and sound. Indeed, she had played the role of stirring the characters from their dream by jumping into the island's clutches herself.

Let us turn back the clock once again.

We had come to this island via a boat prepared by Hahari-san.

"I'd heard about this event in the story, so I bought a boat with Hanazono Company funds," she said.

"Because of your astute leadership, the company is now capable of purchasing dozens of ships," Mei-san declared.

"Yummyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!"

Sir Kamakuru and the others had already embarked on their journey to the dreamworld. We were there to watch over them.

"How'd your business turn into a massive conglomerate *already*?" asked Karane-san, somewhat exasperatedly.

"She's resourceful at making money. That much I'll give her credit for," said Hakari-san.

"One ought to separate competence from personality," Nano-san

commented.

"Kusuri hears plenty of businesspeople are wackos, aye," said Kusuri-senpai.

"Yummyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!"

In the original story, a hermit had landed on the island. Out of concern for the emaciated knight and his group, he delved into the dreamworld and stirred the captives awake by making all the fruit rot. Unfortunately, we had interfered with the plot quite significantly by this point. If nobody else came to the island, then it would be up to us.

"Yummyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!"

By the way, what on earth had Kurumi-san been up to all this time?

"Yummyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!"

I turned to her, and my eyes widened in shock. She was devouring fruit by the fistful.

"What?" Kurumi-san noticed my reaction. "The fruit I'm *not* supposed to eat is this one, right?"

She pointed to the fruit which Sir Kamakuru and his group were eating.

Yes, she was eating a different variety of fruit, but that was the problem. It was supposed to be eaten by the hermit. This was the sole fruit on the island, the one which made the eater retain their lucidity when they entered the illusionary world. Unfortunately, I had been a step behind in explaining this.

"N-not to worry! I'll just go in his place! I gotta watch the timing and wake everyone up when I'm supposed to, right? That's it?"

True, it was technically possible to resolve the inconsistency that way, but something struck me as off. The way the original story was written, you were supposed to enter the dreamworld immediately after eating the fruit.

"H-hey, I'm not sleepy at all." Kurumi-san threw herself down on the ground in a panic. "Will it work if you force me to sleep?"

"Hmm." Kusuri-senpai put a hand on her chin in thought. "You've all built up a resistance to hallucinogens from constant exposure to Kusuri's medicine.

Nothing this weak will work on you, aye. I don't think you'll enter the dreamworld, even if you fall asleep right now."

"When the heck did our bodies get accustomed to that?!" Karane-san yelled.

"N-no way!" Kurumi was aghast. "That means none of us can go help in the dreamworld!"

"Hm? Kusuri didn't say that," Kusuri-senpai said nonchalantly, although I could not fathom what she was talking about. "Kusuri will make medicine that steamrolls the resistance and sends you straight to dreamworld, aye!" she declared firmly, a bright smile on her face. She was the very picture of a reliable chemistry club leader.

Nevertheless, I had to admit—as shameful as this thought was, considering I was relying on her help—I had my concerns. Would her medicine be okay? From an, erm, literary perspective...

"Aye, it's done!"

After I finished schooling Kurumi-san on the corresponding lines of the story, Kusuri-senpai's voice rang out.

"Nullify Resistance to Kusuri's Medicine Medicine!"

"That's what you're going with?!" Karane-san and Kurumi-san shouted in unison.

"Eh? What did you think it would be?"

"Er, well, I totally thought you'd made a medicine that would send someone directly to the dreamworld."

"Unfortunately, Kusuri's not good enough to make medicine like that at the moment..."

"In that case, it would be appropriate to describe it as a medicine that steamrolls resistances and sends you straight to the dreamworld," Nano remarked coolly.

"W-well, anyway, I can go there if I take this, right?" Kurumi asked Kusuri-

senpai carefully.

"Without your resistance, fruit should have regular effect, aye!"

Fortunately, it looked like the story would get back on the rails.

"Then I'll give it a shot."

No sooner had the drug passed her lips than Kurumi-san plonked to the ground, fast asleep.

"You could sort our lives into a before and after our bodies got corrupted by drugs," said Karane-san, wincing.

"Mei, get a futon and pillow for Kurumi-chan," said Hahari-san.

"At once, my lady."

Mei-san set up a futon and pillow and laid Kurumi-san on it. This was all well and good, but... Was it just my imagination that Kurumi-san's sleeping face looked uncomfortable? Her stomach continued to rumble even as she slumbered.

Back in the present, Kurumi-san had regained consciousness.

"About this whole thing... Um, sorry, everyone." She bowed her head, ill at ease. "I caused a big fuss, especially for Kusuri..."

"Kusuri didn't think it was a fuss one bit." Kusuri-senpai smiled brightly. "It's nice to help a cute kouhai in need!"

Kurumi-san bowed again at her senpai, slightly flustered. "Thanks, Kusuri. I was able to help them because of you."

"Oh, Kusuri is also happy you agreed to an experiment so cheerfully, aye!"

Kurumi side-eyed her. "You should've kept that one to yourself."

As an addendum, we later heard that Rentaro-kun was able to keep his lucidity in the dreamworld through sheer force of will.

"I could never forget reality when you're all in it!" he declared.

Yes, that was so very much like him...

An Excerpt from *Circlet Love Story:*"The End of the Journey"

When at last we reached our journey's end at the royal capital where it had all begun, I heard rumors of a rampant plague. There were people slumped over at our destination, having collapsed at various junctures. Some in a particularly wretched state were even leaking urine, the poor souls.

"Tch. Is this all my life amounted to? No, I can't believe it... I don't wanna die..."

On the road, I saw a tearful woman gripping the hand of a man who seemed to be on death's door.

The princess ran over. "O Guardian Beast, please lend me your power!" She held her right hand over the man. The crest on the back of her hand shone brightly, enveloping the man.

The princess had honed this power through the many trials we had encountered on our journey. It was unclear to me, however, whether she was capable of curing the plague or not.

"P-please!" cried the woman. "Please do something to help him! He's my husband!"

"I...I want to heal this person! I want to heal him with all my might!" The light on her hand intensified as the princess grimaced and screamed in agony. "O, that I may restore him!"

Perhaps her earnest wish was granted, for the man's pallor began to visibly improve.

"What the...?" The man opened and closed his fist, an absolutely dumbfounded expression on his face. "Am I healed?! The central hospital said there was no hope!" He jumped up to his feet.

"The central hospital... Are many others like you there?" asked the princess.

"Y-yeah. Only the serious patients, but even that's too many for them to handle..."

"I see. Thank you very much."

With that information on hand, the princess thanked the still-bewildered man and walked off briskly.

Three days passed after the princess had begun healing people at the hospital.

"Princess, is it not time to rest yourself? There are others who can nurse the ailing in your stead."

Though I worried for the princess, who worked tirelessly day and night, she shook her head. She had an ironclad will. "Please support me so that I do not fall."

"As you command," I said, placing my hands on the princess's back.

"Tee hee! Just that was enough to fill me with endless strength."

"I am undeserving of such praise!"

"I have always been useless as a princess, nothing more than an accessory. But today I finally can be of help to my people."

I believe that the distance between myself and the princess had closed considerably throughout the course of our journey. Yet there were some thoughts that we both knew we could never voice. Upon returning to her home kingdom, our relationship could not continue in its current form.

"I was unable to achieve anything while I was captive in the court. It was because of this journey, because of the challenges I overcame, that I am who I am now... Frail of heart though I was, I was able to face those trials because you were at my side. Thank you, truly."

"I ought to be the one thanking you. I am ever so happy to be your knight."

"Listen, please. There is something I want to tell you. I—"

The princess had only just started speaking when the door to the hospital room violently flung open.

"Your Highness, your crime has not disappeared. You will accompany us immediately."

It was the knight brigade. We had, of course, investigated the princess's predicament in full before entering the country. Despite that, she'd chosen to return out of deep concern for her people. She displayed no indication of relenting.

"Healing the sick takes priority right now. I will leave of my own volition when every patient has been restored to health," she said, quiet yet firm.

The knights flinched. The frail princess they knew from the castle had transformed into an almost entirely different person. Her proud, dignified conduct was the highest proof of the purity of her conscience.

"My princess will not run or hide. I ask that you respect her wishes, for the moment," I said, inserting myself between the princess and the knights.

"If that is what you insist, then...very well."

To my surprise, the knight who had spoken pulled back without a fight and bowed deeply to the princess.

"You saved my mother when she was in critical condition. She had already given up. The miracles you created at this hospital were her sole support... I am grateful, from the bottom of my heart."

It warmed me to see that the princess's actions—so filled with her love—could indeed reach the hearts of her people.

Two months passed in the blink of an eye. At last, all the patients were cured. The medical authorities finished creating medicine and antibodies, which would hopefully serve to suppress the plague in future.

"Your Highness! You are a saint!" The head of the hospital and their staff wept with gratitude. "You are the saint who saved this country!"

"I am unworthy of such praise," the princess declared.

Jubilant voices celebrating the goddess's ascension festival could also be heard outside. It was the princess's power that had restored the people's cheer.

"My apologies... I feel slightly dizzy..."

No doubt the princess was utterly spent. When she collapsed, I gently caught her in my arms. At that moment— "Well done, my sister. Before, you were useless, and now you are praised as a saint. Are you proud of yourself?"

The door opened to reveal the second-eldest prince of our fair nation, along with the knight brigade.

"However," he went on, "it is undeniably true that you have administered healing through some means or other. Tell me. How did you cure the incurable?"

"The guardian beast I met on my travels gifted me with the power of healing," the princess said.

"Oh, a guardian beast, you say? Lies will only serve to further embarrass you." The prince chuckled with utmost contempt. "Instead of such idle nonsense, let us speak of a more plausible tale. Having obtained the seed of a plague, you spread it around the capital knowing you alone held the cure. Then, you swoop in to play the hero and bask in the people's adulation."

It was the most preposterous false accusation, yet this was a country where crows would be painted white if the authorities insisted that it be so. The conversation was thrust in a disturbing direction.

"My dear sister has falsified her benevolent deeds! Apprehend her at once, my good fellows!"

Supposing that I had best chart an escape route, even if it meant cutting down all the knights, I gripped the hilt of my sword. Before violence could break out, however, a familiar voice rang out, loud and clear.

"Cease this immediately! It is you who deserves to be taken away, Prince!"

It was the elderly knight. Upon arriving at the capital, he had quickly concealed himself, awaiting this very moment.

"Huh? What foolishness are you spouting? Apprehend this blasphemer too!"

"Then what do you say to this?"

"What is that document? My word?! *Impossible*! How could that exist, and out in the open too?!" The prince had inadvertently let his feelings slip.

"This letter documents your scheme to conspire with the nobility of the Empire and subvert the state. I have read through it countless times, and there is no mistaking it. In your ambition to slay your father and older brother and assume the throne, you used your sister to your own ends. 'Tis quite the verbose letter, I must say."

"No, it wasn't me! These are lies! My sister was actually trying to sabotage me!"

"Will you swear that to an interrogator? Take the prince to the castle, men."

"Yessir!" the knights barked in unison.

"Do not touch me! I am a prince of this nation! There will be consequences!" When nobody responded to him, he began to shout louder. "This must be some kind of mistake! How can this be the end for me?! Impossible! Ridiculous! Arrrrrrggghhhhhhh!"

"He is already incoherent, I see," the elderly knight murmured as the prince's voice receded in the distance.

"I'm surprised," the princess remarked. "To think that my brother was such a sly fellow. If I may speak frankly, I never expected that any evidence would surface."

"Regrettably, I was only able to investigate the matter in our own country. I owe these people my gratitude," said the elderly knight, pointing to the beastmaster.

She was a knight from the neighboring nation. We had parted ways with her shortly before returning home, at which point she switched places with our knight brigade.

"Hey, it's been a while," she said. "A source told me that I'd score big if I looked into the empire's nobles."

"Pullin' one over on the security was laughably easy," the bandit added.

"Compared to an endless corridor of traps, it was a piece of cake," his henchman chimed in.

When we decided to return to our kingdom, they had vanished while I was unawares. I assumed it was because they were wanted criminals, but in truth, they'd worked with the beastmaster, operating behind the scenes in the Empire.

"I am deeply grateful, everyone." The princess bowed her head deeply. Her tears fell to the hospital floor. "For you do not shun the person I have become... You went to great lengths for me. Although there were difficult times, the days we spent together on that journey were..."

Although the princess had been cleared of suspicion, she was signaling the end of the adventure.

"...like a dream to me. It was Shangri-La!"

In the end, we were all friends who had embarked on a long journey together. Listening to the princess's tear-filled speech, none of us could hold back our tears.

"Cheer up, little princess. This ain't gonna be farewell forever, ya know?" In a rare display of gentleness, the bandit patted the princess gingerly on the shoulder. Even he seemed to be aware of how uncharacteristic this was for him, however, because he turned his face away immediately afterward. "That said, I'm a wanted man in this kingdom. I gotta get my ass outta here, and soon."

"Hey, don't count me out, will you?" the beastmaster shot back. "Don't you reckon it's time for us to elope?"

"Hey, I'll come along too!" said the henchman.

"Oh? A journey with two men?" The elderly knight seemed dryly amused. "That would require some tactical maneuvering, I would expect."

The beastmaster grinned. "You mean something like, 'I have feelings for only one man. But if another one enters the picture, my eyes might just wander?"

The bandit was alarmed. "Hey, if I asked you to marry me, would you say yes?!"

It should have been a familiar sight from our journey. Well, perhaps that was all the more reason why I found this scene so peculiarly amusing. I expect anyone would see the humor in it.

"Ha ha ha ha ha ha!"

She gave a hearty laugh. We all did.

Side. S

I was so relieved that we managed to reach this point...

The tactician general investigating the empire from the inside to discover which nobles were conspiring with the prince had all been part of the original story. She would then disguise herself as a secret agent and team up with the beastmaster and the bandit. Although I knew who the conspirators were, we didn't have any connections to the nobility. Or so I had thought.

"The Hanazono Company's empire branch has many dealings with the nobility," Hahari-san revealed.

"I will sneak into the empire as a maid under Hahari-sama's employ and make a secret deal," said Mai-san.

And with that, the matter had been settled.

"Jeez, won't Hahari leave a serious hole in this world once she's gone?" Kurumi-san commented.

"Tee hee, there's no issue at all," Hahari-san said coolly. "I have already passed all the actual production on to other hands."

Hakari-san grimaced slightly. "My mother's annoyingly good at business..."

"Anyway, can you really sneak into the Empire so easily?" asked Karane-san.

"Wasn't Mei raised as a spy?" Kusuri-senpai pointed out.

"Please allow me to clarify." Mei-san spoke up. "I honed many different skills so that I may carry out any order Hahari-sama may give. On this occasion, I

suspect that a number of those skills will come into play."

"My goodness, Mei! What sort of ridiculous task are you expecting?"

"What if the one you love is taken away somewhere where you'll never see them again? That's a powerful motivator," said Hakari-san.

"There is a high possibility that any individual who would threaten Aijo Rentaro is already a nonfactor," said Nano-san.

Either way, we were all very relieved.

"Hey, guys! You all did good!"

At that point, Rentaro-kun returned to us. Going by the story, the squire boy would have no further appearances.

"Shizuka-chan, all that's left is that scene!" Rentaro-kun said.

I nodded, my heart pounding vigorously. At the end of the day, we had interfered with the story at so many points. Would *that* scene really, truly occur?

An Excerpt from Circlet Love Story: "Fate"

Now that all suspicion had been cleared, the princess was allowed to return to the royal court. His Majesty bequeathed me the title of captain of the knight brigade. Although it was under the pretext of a promotion, I wondered if he perhaps suspected that *something* had happened between the princess and me during our long journey together. This was the last day that I could be the princess's knight.

"I will formally accept the third prince's marriage proposal," the princess told me, which led me to believe that her engagement to the neighboring country's prince had also been decreed by the king. "They reminded me once again that I must maintain abstinence until marriage, even though I have always been chaste."

From her words, I could tell that the king did indeed suspect us of

indiscretions.

"Princess...are you all right with this?" I asked.

The princess shook her head. It did not surprise me that her heart rejected the marriage. She wore a defeated expression that was very much reminiscent of her time as a captive of the court.

"Even so," she said, "I understand that there are some fates which can never be avoided. Were I to turn down the marriage, relations between our countries may worsen. It is the duty of royalty to ensure peace and stability for the people."

I paused. "Is that really what life's like at court?" I could not help but murmur.

What must it be like to live for a concept as enormous as the country itself? It brought the sheer gulf between me, who only thought of himself, and the princess, who was concerned for the good of all, to the fore. And yet, despite all that, I still...

"But...even so..."

I could sense that the princess was fighting back tears.

"In spite of everything...I love you," she whispered, her voice a strangled whisper. "I apologize," she continued, voice trembling and tears streaming down her face. "Pray, pay it no heed." As if to cut me off before I could interrupt her, the princess spoke without pause. "I ask not for an answer."

Her words served as a plaintive reminder. "I know already that there is a maiden promised to you."

His Majesty had bequeathed a betrothal to me alongside the title of knight captain. Needless to say, however, I did not possess the slightest feelings for a fiancée whose face I had never laid eyes on.

"I only wished to make my feelings known!" The princess looked down, tears streaming down her face.

"I love you too."

The words sprang from my mouth, unbidden, as I placed my hands on the princess's arms. She stared up at me, dumbfounded.

"And yet..."

Alas, she lowered her head again, sorrowful.

"Our love is forbidden by fate."

"Then we need only defy fate!"

It mattered not to me whether a betrothal had been forced upon me, or if others schemed to drive us apart. I resolved to do away with all such fetters. This, and only this, was the fate ordained by God!

"Let us go forth together..."

To open the door and venture forth to a hitherto undiscovered world! "lo!"

As I reached out my hand once more for the princess, she—

Side. S

I sniffed loudly.

"Thank goodness," sobbed Rentaro-kun. "I'm so happy for them!"

Princess Io took his hand, and Sir Kamakuru threw his arms around her. Rentaro-kun and I were quietly beside ourselves with emotion as we watched the two of them come together. I was so grateful, not just for being able to progress this far but to actually witness the scene play out in person!

Looking over my shoulder, I saw that everybody else was tearing up as well. I was so happy we could share this moment together. And then I blacked out.

"Mm..."

Slowly, my consciousness returned to me.

After what felt like a pleasant nap, I opened my eyes and found myself on the familiar school rooftop.

Rentaro-kun yawned. "When did I fall asleep?"

"I deeply apologize for falling asleep without Hahari-sama's command," said Mei-san.

"You know you can sleep without my say-so, right?!" Hahari-san retorted.

"Given that we all slumbered simultaneously," said Nano-san, "there is a high possibility that we came into contact with some kind of harmful substance."

"Kusuri doesn't remember well, but she might've given out medicine, aye..."

"Looks like you're right on the money, Nano-senpai," Kurumi-san commented.

"How cute!" Hakari-san giggled. "You held hands with me while you were asleep, Karane-san."

"Whaaat?! I bet you were the one who latched onto my hands!"

Everyone had woken after me and were now chattering. Still, I had to wonder: when *had* I fallen asleep? And what a peculiar dream I had.

"Hey, I had this weird dream," Rentaro-kun said.

I was a little surprised to hear him verbalize exactly what I was thinking.

"You know the novel me and Shizuka-chan like? *Circlet Love Story*? We went to that world, but then a bunch of things happened, and I ended up being a stand-in for one of the characters. It had me running ragged, but it was a lot of fun."

I was even more surprised to hear that his dream was identical to mine, right down to the fine details.

"W-wait, you too?" said Hakari-san. "I had the exact same dream!"

"Me too," Karane-san admitted. "And I've never even read the book..."

"I, too, dreamed that I was supporting Hahari-sama," Mei-san remarked.

"That alone doesn't make it sound any different than usual," Hahari-san pointed out.

Who would have thought that everyone had experienced the same dream? Could it be...?!

"Was it the Dream-Sharing Medicine or the Isekai Medicine?" Kusuri-senpai wondered aloud.

"The former sounds at least somewhat plausible," said Nano-san.

"Yeah, that sounds about right," said Rentaro-kun.

It might have just been a dream. Yes, it was more realistic to think of it that way. But even if it had been a dream, I got to experience an irreplaceable adventure with my friends and boyfriend. Yes, to me, it was the Shangri-la of dreams!

Hmm? Wait... I couldn't help but notice the hair accessory Rentaro-kun wore. It was a four-leaf clover, identical to that of the squire boy's...

Interlude: Hahari Gives Mei Paid Time Off

"M EI, I AM GIVING YOU FREE TIME."

Mei's eyelids, which were normally shut tight, opened wide at Hahari's words, revealing rainbow-colored eyes. She trembled ever so silently, keeping raging - emotions at bay. When she closed her eyes once more, Mei bowed reverentially toward Hahari.

"Hahari-sama, I thank you for everything you have done for me. I sincerely wish for your health and happiness."

Hahari cocked her head in confusion at Mei's grim reaction. "What?"

A moment later, however, her expression changed to one of understanding.

"No, no! I'm not firing you! I'm telling you to take paid time off!" She corrected herself hurriedly.

"I understand, my lady." Mei closed her eyes again, this time in relief.

"You were cleaning in the middle of the night again, weren't you?"

"I exist at your beck and call twenty-four hours per day."

"Then I ask that you use the time to take care of yourself so that you can work at top efficiency when needed."

Hahari's words prompted Mei's eyes to open again in surprise. "You have a point" was written on her face.

"Anyway, you have today off, so spend it however you like."

"Yes, my lady."

Mei bowed to Hahari, indicating that she accepted the proposition.

Mere minutes later, however, Mei presented Hahari with a cup of tea.

"What is this?"

Hahari's eyebrows knit, and she put a hand to her cheek.

"Darjeeling tea, grown at the foot of the Himalayan mountains," Mei explained brightly.

"I was not asking about the specifics of the tea." Hahari sighed. "Today is your paid day off. Why are you working?"

For a moment, Mei tilted her head as if she could not fathom what Hahari was saying for the life of her. "Oh my!" she exclaimed, after a very lengthy pause indeed. "I was working just now?!"

For the third time that day, her eyes sprang open, revealing her utter shock and dismay. It appeared that she wasn't at all aware of what did and did not constitute work.

"I apologize for being unable to comply with your order!"

"It's fine. It wasn't an order anyway. But I did tell you to do what you like, didn't I?"

"You did...but..." Mei hesitated, before finally mustering the will to continue. "I poured you tea because it was my sincere wish to do so."

Very Mei-like words indeed.

"I appreciate your feelings, but... Oh, I know." Hahari whipped out her diary and checked her schedule. "I've done all my pressing tasks for today. Let's kick back on a luxury cruise together!"

They secured a flight that very day. Several hours later, Hahari and Mei were aboard a boat, lying on beach chairs in their bathing suits.

"Isn't lazing the day away and not doing much of anything nice?" asked Hahari.

"I suppose so." Although Mei agreed, she couldn't hide her restlessness. "The most important thing is doing what you want to do, yes?"

Seeing Mei so conflicted, Hahari let out another small sigh. "Fine, then. Do as you like."

Mei jolted in surprise. "Yes, my lady! Please have this tropical juice. I can see

that your shoulders are stiff, so would you allow me to massage you? Also, please allow me to wipe off that smudge."

At the prospect of serving Hahari, the maid spontaneously came to life. Her employer could only smile exasperatedly at her now-jubilant servant. Nevertheless, Hahari could not deny that Mei was doing exactly as she wanted, bustling about like a busy bee. But still, there was one thing she refused to budge on.

"Listen to me, though! You absolutely *must* get some proper sleep! This is important to your health!"

"Understood, my lady. I will rest for an hour per day."

"Eight hours!"

"Yes, my lady. I will sleep for eight hours per day."

From that day forth, the servants of the Hanazono family stopped talking quite so often about a certain "workaholic" maid who never, ever let up for a single moment.

Chapter 5:

Have We Met Somewhere Before?

RENTARO-KUN IS LATE TODAY, ISN'T HE?"

The girls were on the rooftop, as usual, when Hakari made this observation. Everyone else had gotten into their spots long ago, but Rentaro was nowhere to be found. The Class 1-4 girls often went to the rooftop with him, but today he'd said, "I gotta go to the toilet," and they'd parted ways in front of the classroom.

"Should I call him?" Karane already had her smartphone out and was dialing Rentaro's number. "He's not picking up."

Unfortunately, no matter how long they waited, Rentaro never answered. Eventually, Karane frowned and ended the call.

"Time to look for him, aye!" Kusuri piped up.

"Rentaro-sama's smartphone location indicates that he is in the 1-4 classroom," said Mei.

"Why did you just nonchalantly dig up Rentaro-senpai's smartphone location?" demanded Kurumi.

"Don't you worry!" said Hahari. "The app required mutual consent!"

"Knowing Rentaro-kun, he might be helping a teacher out again," Hakari remarked.

(Then let us move to assist!)

"More people means more efficient searching," Nano commented.

The girls exited the rooftop, chattering all the while. They headed to the 1-4 classroom where they found...

"Rentaro-kun?" Hakari asked hesitantly.

"What the heck are you doing?" Karane demanded.

Rentaro sat at his desk not doing much of anything, a dazed look on his face.

At the sound of his girlfriends' voices, he turned around to face them. For some reason, slight surprise flickered across his features before he broke out into an awkward smile.

"I don't know," he said, shaking his head slowly. "I'm certain that there was something I had to do, but I can't remember for the life of me."

His girlfriends tilted their heads in puzzlement at this rather abstract reply.

«Was a favor asked of you?»

"Did you forget to wear a diaper?" asked Kusuri.

"I'd say wearing a diaper says more about what you've forgotten about living as a human being," Kurumi said.

"Speculating is inefficient," Nano said. "We ought to investigate things that are related to the matter at hand."

"Indeed," said Hahari. "Rentaro-chan, do you remember anything that *could* be relevant?"

"I shall transcribe every word without fail," Mei said.

They all turned their gazes to Rentaro.

"Er, um, before that... Sorry, can I ask you something?" Rentaro raised a hand timidly, sweat dripping down his face. "Have we met somewhere before? I'm not familiar with any of you."

The girls gasped in unison. "What?"

Tension filled the room.

"I mean," he went on hastily, his smile slightly stiff. He must have noticed that the girls were highly weirded out. "I'm sure I would remember if I met anyone like you. I was just kind of wondering why, um, you all seemed to know me."

"What the hell is this? Some kind of jo—?!"

Karane cut herself off before she even finished her sentence. She knew better than anyone that Rentaro would never joke about something like this. She bit down her words, gritted her teeth, and hung her head down.

This left only one possibility.

"Oh no!" Hakari trembled, her face pale. "Has Rentaro-kun...lost his memories?!"

"Are you saying I've got amnesia?!" Rentaro was sweating bullets, looking for all the world as if the possibility had never even occurred to him.

"Why are you the one not getting it?" Kurumi snapped back with her obligatory snark, although even she looked ill at ease.

Throughout all of this, Rentaro had given off the impression that he was dazed and out of sorts. Then, he seemed to collect his wits.

"Whoa?! Now that I think about it, I was just at my junior high school graduation ceremony. How am I suddenly in a high school classroom, wearing a high school uniform?!" Apparently, this was where his headspace was at. "But... Hmm... What could've given me amnesia?"

It was to be expected that Rentaro, having lost his memories, would fail to remember the trigger.

"When I came to, I realized that I was sleeping at this desk for some reason. There was this weird meteorite near my feet. Plus, there's a dent on the side of my head. That's all, but..."

Apparently, he did have an inkling.

Rentaro pulled out a fist-sized, meteorite-type object from his pocket, prompting finger-pointing from all directions.

"The evidence is staring you in the face!" everyone shouted.

"Egads! You have a point!" It appeared that Rentaro's brain had finally started working again. He turned to the girls and bowed his head deeply in apology. "I'm so sorry! It looks like I've forgotten all about you!"

"Don't beat yourself up over it, Rentaro-chan." Hahari smiled. "It wasn't your fault. Here, let me rub your boo-boo." She gently stroked his head.

"But I'm just so surprised." Rentaro surveyed the group once more. "I had no idea that I had so many cute and pretty acquaintances..."

"Bozo," Karane muttered, her eyes still firmly trained on the floor.

"What? Sorry, what did you just say?" Rentaro asked, his expression very apologetic.

Karane lifted her head and glared right back at him. "We're not just any old acquaintances, you bozo!" she yelled. The corners of her eyes were teary.

"What? Then why do you know m—?"

Me, he was probably about to say.

"Because I'm your girlfriend!" Karane shouted once more, holding a hand to her chest.

It was enough to dispel whatever he was previously trying to say.

"Girlfriend...?" he parroted, almost as if he couldn't wrap his head around the word. "Girlfriend?!"

A moment later, his eyes widened into saucers.

"Wh-whoa... Who would have thought I would be dating someone as wonderful as you?"

As he gazed at Karane, Rentaro scratched his slightly reddened cheeks. At that moment, however, Hakari cut in.

"I'm your girlfriend too, Rentaro-kun!"

"Say what?!" Rentaro's eyes boggled further, setting a new record.

(I, too...) (We were in love.)

"Say whaaat?!"

"You and I have romantic relations."

"Say whaaaaat?!"

"Kusuri's dating Rentaro too!"

"Say whaaaaaaat?!"

"Don't count me out as your lover, Rentaro-chan!"

"Say whaaaaaaaaat?!"

"I'm also, uh, your girlfriend, Rentaro-senpai."

"Say whaaaaaaaaaat?!"

"I, too, have the pleasure of being courted by you, Rentaro-sama."

Each consecutive reveal caused Rentaro's eyes to widen ever further. At this point, he looked almost inhuman. He stayed like that, eyes boggled, for a few seconds. Then, his eyes reverted to their original size.

"So, am I meant to figure out who's the real one?" he asked tentatively.

Nano shot this down immediately. "This is not a game of Werewolf."

"Haha, just kidding." Rentaro shrugged, his expression relaxing. "I might not be the sharpest tool in the shed, but even I figured out it was a joke partway through all of that."

"I thought it was some kind of joke at first too, but it's one hundred percent real!" Karane said.

"But that doesn't make sense unless I've been eight-timing."

"That is the explanation!" Hakari insisted.

Rentaro didn't look convinced. "I've been eight-timing? That sounds like a funny premise for a manga."

You are not wrong about that.>

"Mei," Hahari called out.

Mei surmised everything solely from that utterance. "Yes, my lady." In the blink of an eye, she set up a projector in the classroom and hit play. "This is days-old footage from within the Rentaro-sama Robot."

As the footage from inside the cockpit played, Kurumi glared at Hahari. "You totally filmed that on the sly, didn't you?"

Rentaro freaked out. "Okay, first off, why are we all inside what looks like the cockpit of a giant robot?!"

"Because we were in the cockpit of a giant robot, aye!" Kusuri's explanation only deepened Rentaro's confusion.

Meanwhile, the projector showed the kiss scene. Rentaro stared in fascination as his onscreen counterpart exchanged deep kisses with the girls many times over.

"Are you serious?" he said finally. He looked over his shoulder, trembling.

His girlfriends nodded at him in unison. The light of truth lay in all eight pairs of eyes.

"I see... So after getting rejected a hundred times, I ended up seeing eight girls at once... I thought that could only happen because of divine intervention or something. Life sure is full of surprises, huh?"

As he shook his head from side to side, Rentaro seemed to come to terms with the situation. Tranquility came over his face.

"Now please watch my next performance. The title? Cheating Male Commits Harakiri, Featuring a Dagger That Would Kill You with the Most Pain Possible (It Was in His School Bag for Some Reason)." Rentaro brought the dagger down with frightening speed.

"Holy heck! Don't stab yourself!"

The girls all lunged to stop Rentaro's arm in its tracks.

"Let go of me! A scumbag cheater who hurts his precious girlfriend doesn't deserve to live! I shouldn't spend another second on this earth!"

"Melt-Ya-Face-Off Medicine will stop Rentaro!" Kusuri shouted.

"As if we're gonna let you use that on him!" Kurumi shouted back.

"Our first priority is restraining Aijo Rentaro," Nano said.

"Right!" Hahari declared.

"Yes, my lady." Responding to Hahari's implicit command, Mei looped a rope around Rentaro.

Stripped of his mobility, Rentaro wept bitter tears.

"Urgh! Just let me die! Let me diiiiie!"

"Rentaro-kun, you are mistaken about one thing," Hakari said.

"What? Are you saying I wasn't eight-timing?"

<That part.> <'Tis the truth.>

"Aaaaaaaargh! Time to slice my belly open!"

"Listen to me, Rentaro!" Karane yelled.

Rentaro stopped crying at the sound of her angry voice. He quivered like jelly.

"In the beginning, I thought it was all so dumb," she went on. "Having more than one girlfriend? I thought your brain had gone to mush."

"So I did give you grief—!"

"But!" Karane interrupted him, a steely will visible in her eyes. "Now, I think... that I'm glad it happened!" She turned away and pouted.

"No matter how many girlfriends you get, we'll never stop showering you with love!" Hakari insisted.

"Aijo Rentaro loves all his girlfriends equally," said Nano.

"Your love is completely and utterly genuine! I can say this with confidence because I suspected otherwise at the start!" said Hahari.

"If I may, I am touched that you care for me with equal fondness compared to the others," Mei remarked.

"Besides, we wouldn't all be...getting along like this if we weren't your girlfriends. I might not even have been able to chat with my classmates," Hakari said.

When she turned around and looked at the others, they were all nodding vigorously.

You are all precious to me.>

"Kusuri love, love, loves spending time with you all, aye!"

"Eating with you guys is better for my tastebuds than eating alone."

Tears streamed from Rentaro's eyes. "Thanks, everyone! *Hic!* I hear your feelings loud and clear!" He appeared to have shelved the harakiri idea. "I'll make sure to remember everything I knew about you all! And if I find out that I

was the world's worst boyfriend, I'll commit harakiri properly next time!"

Never mind. Apparently, it was still on the table.

"Tee hee, I can guarantee that's not the case," Hakari said.

"Rentaro is the bestest boyfriend in the world, aye!" Kusuri declared.

"If you really were a flaming piece of trash, I would've stuck a dagger in you way earlier!" Karane said.

"I can guarantee your sincerity, Aijo Rentaro," said Nano.

"If you sucked, I would've gone feral on you," Kurumi said. "Now hurry up and remember everything already."

«I await your return.»

"Rentaro-chan, we'll do anything and everything to assist you!" Hahari said.

"Please give me your orders," said Mei.

"Okay, then," Rentaro said after listening to his girlfriends' reassuring words.

"I have a request for you all..."

Rentaro's face was serious as he made his suggestion.

"This place has a strong sentimental significance for me and you, Rentarosama."

Mei had ushered the group to Onigasaki Park.

It was Rentaro's request that his girlfriends take him to places that held strong memories for them. The idea was to use those places to trigger and restore his own memories. The girls agreed without hesitation.

"Oh, how beautiful!" Rentaro exclaimed as he looked up at the blooming sakura trees.

The girls also voiced their admiration.

"Wow, it's the sakura-blooming season," Hakari said.

"Which is all-year-round, for some reason," Karane pointed out drily.

Kurumi was silent for a moment, then said, "Now I'm craving sakura mochi."

"Gramma made Kusuri some sakura mochi, so let's eat up, aye!" Kusuri shared her snacks with Kurumi, a heartwarming sight to be sure.

Rentaro gazed at the scene for a while, a smile on his lips, before turning back to Mei. "Have we come here before to look at the flowers?"

"Yes. You also had many orders for me."

"Ordering my girlfriend around? Doesn't that make me an abusive lowlife?!" Rentaro bonked his head viciously.

"N-not at all, Rentaro-chan!" Hahari was quick to stroke his wound. "Mei struggles with other forms of communication. I'm sure that she asked you to give her orders, didn't she?"

"Yes, it is as Hahari-sama says."

"And after that? Could you tell me what you did?"

"As you wish, my lady. Afterward, I came to the conclusion that the only way I could carry out Rentaro-sama's order was to end my very life."

"How the hell could I make my girlfriend feel that way?!" Rentaro moaned.

"Calm down, Rentaro-chan!" Hahari restrained his arms before he could self-flagellate again. "Mei, context!"

"Yes, my lady." Mei bowed solemnly. "I derived my self-worth solely from being useful to those who are precious to me. I believed that I possessed no inherent value."

Behind her firmly shut eyelids, Mei appeared to be swimming in memories. A fond smile came to her lips.

"Thus, Rentaro-sama, out of great consideration for me, told me his wish. It was much like an order. Then, Rentaro-sama—"

"Urk?!"

Before Mei had even finished speaking, Rentaro let out a moan and clasped a hand to his head.

Hahari stroked his head. "Rentaro-chan, do you have a headache?!"

"N-no," Rentaro answered, a little apologetic. After getting back to his feet, he shifted his gaze to Mei. "You are not allowed to be of any use to me at all.' Is that what I said?" he asked hesitantly.

Mei's eyes did not quite spring open, but she did look terribly surprised. "Has your memory returned?"

"Ah, no. It was just something that popped into my head. It's not a memory, exactly, but I might have just realized what I would say in that situation."

Shizuka beamed. ('Tis progress nonetheless!)

Nano, in contrast, never let up her deadpan expression for a moment. "I expect that tracing your thinking patterns from before the amnesia is an effective means of restoring your memories."

Rentaro seemed encouraged by their words. "I was just asking myself if there was anything she could do besides throwing her life away. Did I come to the same conclusion the first time?"

"Indeed, you did," said Mei. "You said that you appreciated me, no matter what I did or where I was. This made me think that the only way I could *not* be useful to you was to end my life."

"But...wouldn't that be the point I was trying to make? That you help me just by existing. Mei-san, you've got plenty of worth without needing to follow commands or go out of your way to be useful."

Upon hearing Rentaro express the exact same sentiments from that earlier scene, Mei was at a loss for words.

"When you love someone, all you want is for them to be there. The mere fact that they're alive is a blessing on its own...right?"

"It is just as you say," Mei said, a smile bright on her face.

Seeing this, a light of understanding came over Rentaro. "I see... So I was in love with Mei-san..."

His quiet murmur had a trace of loneliness in it, perhaps because he had no memory of this love. Nevertheless, his eyes were filled with determination when he clenched his fist.

"I'll get that love back. Just you watch... Will you wait for me a little while?"

To this quiet declaration of resolve, Mei responded...

"Your wish is my command."

"That wasn't a command!"

It was a word-for-word repeat of what they had said at the time.

"A place I have strong memories of with Rentaro... Yeah, that's got to be here."

They had returned to the school, where Kurumi led them to the cooking classroom.

"I've got a crazy fast metabolism. I'm always hungry, and it ticks me off," she explained. "Before I met you, I always used to spend as much time as possible by myself so I wouldn't take my frustrations out on people."

Hakari smiled. "Oh yes, you did tell us that you weren't planning on getting chummy with us when we first met."

"And now look at you, huh?" Karane grinned too.

Kurumi turned away. "I dunno what you're talking about." Her cheeks were slightly flushed. "Right now, I'm just like Nano-senpai. I'm not just playing along because you're all Rentaro-senpai's girlfriends. It's because...I like you people."

"Sounds like a proposal!" Hahari squealed. "Let's get married!"

"That's not how I meant it!"

"I have prepared a marriage registration form. Please fill it out," Mei said.

"Don't need it!"

The warm, cozy atmosphere was only slightly marred by Kurumi's forceful attempts to fend off Hahari's hugs.

Kurumi's stomach began to rumble. "Fill it? Fillet? Mmm, sounds tasty!"

"Whoa?!" Rentaro turned to her in surprise. "Are we doing a word association game now?!" He could understand how she'd gone from sakura to sakura

mochi, but this was a bit of a stretch.

"She's always like this. We're used to it, aye," said Kusuri.

«Such is her inclination.»

"I-I see..."

While they spoke, Mei briskly started filleting a fish in the cooking classroom. This was enough to sate Kurumi's hunger for the time being.

"Okay, back on topic." Kurumi coughed, her cheeks still slightly pink. "So, because of my situation, I got snappy at you when you were being nice to me, Rentaro-senpai. But you never stopped being kind. You made me a menchi katsu sandwich, and it was so yummy... It made me happy..."

Upon witnessing this shy yet heartfelt admission of love, Rentaro and the others swooned.

"Anyway!" Kurumi went on, her tone somewhat flustered. She pulled out a premade hamburger and katsu sandwich from her bag. "I dunno if this'll come in handy for triggering your memories, but...I wanted to make a mechi katsu sandwich for you, this time, Rentaro-senpai."

"According to the Proust effect, familiar smells can trigger memories," Nano remarked. "Perhaps that will apply here."

Encouraged by those words, Kurumi pulled the beef out of the hamburger. "First off, you fry the hamburger patty."

"Ah." Rentaro let out a little gasp as he watched Kurumi pour ketchup on the beef. "You've got to make sure the beef is dry first, or else the oil will splash on you. Be careful—it stings so bad it feels like the world's ending."

As Rentaro spoke, he pulled out a kitchen roll. Kurumi turned to him, her eyes gleaming with expectation. But when Rentaro showed no indication of remembering anything, her shoulders slumped slightly in disappointment.

"I know. You told me that it happened to you," she said as she wiped down the juices on the patty with a towel.

She put the patty into the oil, where it emitted a satisfying hiss. An appetizing scent began to fill the room.

Finally, Kurumi picked up the menchi katsu sandwich. "It's done!" she announced, her voice brimming with accomplishment. "Eat up, Rentarosenpai."

She passed the sandwich to Rentaro.

Grrrrrrrr!

At that same moment, however, her stomach growled up a symphony. Kurumi's expression darkened with a scowl of irritation. "This whole time I was thinking about menchi katsu sandwiches, I was imagining eating it myself!"

"Then eat it yourself!" he insisted.

"But I made this for you, Rentaro-senpai!" Normally, she would have accepted the proposition with delight, but today, she gritted her teeth and remained firm. "I've always wanted to pay you back for what you did that day!"

Even in the midst of Kurumi's ire, her constant consideration for her boyfriend came across loud and clear.

"I understand now," Rentaro said, after a pause. "I gladly accept, then."

This time, Rentaro took the menchi katsu sandwich in an apparent display of understanding. Kurumi's stomach grumbled even more violently when the sandwich left her hand. Perhaps it was separation anxiety.

Meanwhile, Rentaro took a knife from the cooking classroom and cut the sandwich neatly in two. He held up one of the halves for Kurumi.

"Here, let's share."

She stared at his hand—the hand which she had spurned once before.

"You really enjoyed the sakura mochi and the fillet, right? I think I'd have an even better time eating alongside someone who enjoys their meals as much as you do."

For a long moment, Kurumi said nothing. "Even without your memories, you're still the same Rentaro-senpai."

This time, she earnestly accepted the gesture, and they both chowed down on the menchi katsu sandwich.

"Yummyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!"

"Yeah, that was super delicious."

As he gazed at Kurumi's expression of unbridled joy, Rentaro smiled happily.

It was Hahari's turn next.

"Is this...a place with shared memories?"

Rentaro looked slightly bewildered when they arrived at their destination. A resplendent mansion that nevertheless appeared to be an ordinary residence stood before him.

"Indeed... The place where you and I met, where we became boyfriend and girlfriend, where you became a girl—it all happened here: the Hanazono residence!"

"You don't just meet people for the first time at their house, do you?!"

"Also, what's with that last bit?" Kurumi demanded.

Ignorant she was to the events of that day...>

"Knowing Hahari, you can probably imagine what went down," Karane said.

"It was terribly degenerate!" Hakari sighed. "But my mother did a good job!"

"Rentaro was adorbs, aye!" Kusuri exclaimed with a coo of adoration.

"I would argue for a regular implementation of the event," Nano said.

"That would certainly be possible," Mei pointed out. "I have outfits prepared for Rentaro-sama at his convenience."

The girls chatted cheerfully as they entered the Hanazono residence.

"Now then, why don't we replicate our first meeting so that we can stimulate some memories, hmm?" said Hahari as she took a seat on a fancy armchair and crossed her legs.

She then closed her eyes and took a deep breath, as if attempting to occupy a different state of mind. When she opened her eyes...

"Rentaro-chan, please go out with me!"

...nothing had particularly changed about her.

She must have realized that too, because right after she finished shouting, she blinked in surprise.

"My apologies, Rentaro-chan," she said a little bashfully. "My love for you was so overwhelming that I messed up the performance."

"You did get the location right, at least," Karane pointed out flatly.

"Was that how it played out?" Hakari was rather embarrassed at watching her mother's confession scene in person.

"Uh..." Rentaro stumbled over his words. "Well, um..."

"And now you're replicating the scene too!" Karane blanched.

"So that's how it went." This time, Hakari smiled fondly at the flustered Rentaro.

Meanwhile, Hahari closed her eyes once more. "I shall try that again."

She took another deep breath, flicking a mental switch. When she opened her eyes again...

"Rentaro-chan, please go out with me!"

...nothing had particularly changed about her this time either.

"It's very hard for me to adopt the attitude I had back then, even as an act... Well, in that case..." Hahari threw a glance at Mei.

"Yes, at once, my lady."

The maid immediately sprang into action. She switched on the monitor in the room, then rapidly clicked around on the computer attached to the device.

"This is the security footage from this room."

A scene began to play on the monitor.

"Finally, we meet face-to-face, Aijo Rentaro-kun. And Inda Karane-san."

It was the Hahari from that day.

"I am Hakari's mother, Hanazono Hahari."

The Hahari onscreen gazed down at Rentaro coldly.

"Who's this?" Kurumi asked, after a beat. "Her twin sister?"

"This is Hanazono Hahari before she became a degenerate," Nano said.

Was that not always the case?>

"Kusuri totally forgot Hahari was ever like this."

"I was right there, and I still I have a hard time believing my memories," Karane remarked.

Hakari said, "Once, I respected her..."

"Oh my, Hakari, have you awoken to your tsundere side?" Her mother tried to press their cheeks together only for Hakari to push her away.

"If only you didn't do this...!"

Meanwhile, the footage continued to play.

"Why would I ever believe your empty promises?"

The Hahari from back then was utterly ruthless toward Rentaro.

Rentaro pointed at the screen, sweat dripping down his face. "Um... I'm just taking a wild guess here, but were you opposed to me at the start?"

"Indeed, I was." Hahari nodded lightly. "I was trying to exterminate you so that you would never make Hakari sad."

"That's some pretty serious opposition!"

"I believed that a five-timing man would never be able to give Hakari a happy life."

"I can't fault that logic..."

"But I was wrong." Hahari smiled gently at Rentaro. "You promised me, Rentaro-chan. You promised that you would take really good care of Hahari."

For a moment, Rentaro did not say anything. "And you? Did I say the same about you?"

Hahari's eyes widened in shock at hearing those words all over again.

"Yes, you did." This time, she responded with a slight giggle. "And you've stayed true to that promise to this day, Rentaro-chan. You've made me, Hakari—and everyone else—happier than we've ever been. Yes?"

When Hahari looked over her shoulder, the other girls nodded enthusiastically.

"I did all that...?"

Rentaro gazed down at his hands, still in half disbelief. Nevertheless, he was becoming more convinced of his past self slowly but surely.

"I want to make all of you happy once again!"

The group's next destination was the chemistry lab at school.

"Kusuri met Rentaro here and became his girlfriend, aye!" With a cheeky grin, Kusuri dove into the lab, only to reemerge within seconds with a test tube. "Okay, medicine time!"

"What, right now?!" Rentaro's eyes bulged.

"We play with drugs all!!!!!! the time, aye! Fun times!"

Rentaro gulped audibly at the sight of Kusuri's ecstatic expression. "Uh, if you're playing with drugs, then, um...has this school's morals fallen to the wayside?"

"Yakuzen Kusuri's drugs are legal, for the moment," Nano said.

"The law just hasn't caught up yet, is all," Kurumi remarked.

Their comments only raised further questions, as far as Rentaro was concerned.

"Rentaro might remember something if he takes medicine!" said Kusuri. "Look at this: Human Magnet Medicine!"

"Watch out, Noble Prize committee!"

Kusuri giggled at Rentaro's reaction. "Rentaro said same thing back then."

"I think pretty much anyone would react that way after seeing it for the first

time."

"Also, be prepared for three days and three nights of excruciating constipation after drinking it."

"Those are some crazy side effects!"

"At least it's not life-threatening," said Hakari. "In that sense, I suppose it's not a bad trade-off..."

"Her medicines can kill you?!" Rentaro asked incredulously.

"In gacha terms, it's about as frequent as a Super Rare pull."

"That's not actually unheard of!"

"Don't be shy." Kusuri pushed a test tube against his cheek. "Drink up!"

"Everything I just heard makes it really hard to agree to this!"

Rentaro eventually seemed to resign himself upon facing Kusuri's dogged insistence. After taking a deep breath, he swallowed the contents of the test tube in one gulp. Nearby metallic objects and magnets instantly started sticking to his body.

"Whoa... This is neat...!"

"Before, Kusuri drank the opposite version of what you took and got stuck to your body. Kusuri fell in love at first sight and wanted an excuse to get clingy. But now..."

Without putting any liquid into her mouth, Kusuri hugged Rentaro tightly and looked up at his face.

"Even without medicine, Kusuri can stick to you, aye! Because Kusuri is Rentaro's girlfriend!"

"Ngh!"

Rentaro and Hahari both clutched their chests at the sight of Kusuri's sweet and angelic smile. Something translucent appeared to escape their bodies.

<Their souls.> <Are departing!>

"I shall stop them."

Mei crammed the escaping soul-like objects back into their respective bodies. His lucidity apparently restored, Rentaro pressed a hand against his head.

"Urgh...!"

"Does Rentaro remember something?!" Kusuri asked eagerly.

"Ah, no... A scene kinda popped into my head, but...it was totally ridiculous. I think it was just my imagination or something..."

"Everything gets ridiculous when Kusuri-senpai's involved," said Kurumi.

Rentaro hesitated slightly at those words, then opened his mouth once more. "So, um, I saw myself in this situation...and I sensed this trickling...kind of like urination..."

"That actually happened, aye! Kusuri remembers it! Let's replicate it right here and now! Don't worry, Kusuri is wearing diapers, of course!"

Just as Kusuri casually attempted to soil herself, Rentaro spoke up hastily. "Just because you're in diapers doesn't mean that's okay! I'm worrying up a storm over here!"

Mercifully, Kusuri had just recently been to the toilet, so Rentaro was able to persuade her to hold it in.

"By the way, Kusuri-senpai, don't you have a medicine that can cure amnesia?" asked Hakari.

"Kusuri wouldn't have such a convenient medicine lying around."

"Have you been going through this book with your eyes closed?" Karane demanded.

Something about the girls' conversation appeared to tug at Rentaro's memory. "Is 'senpai' a nickname for this girl?"

<Nay, in truth.> <She is a senior student.>

"So, uh, does that mean she skipped grades or something?" Rentaro wore a confused look.

"You'll understand after a close-up demonstration, aye!"

Kusuri glugged down the Medicine-Reversing Medicine.

"Whoa..."

Kusuri's body promptly began to grow larger. Rentaro rubbed his eyes in disbelief at what was happening right in front of him. This did nothing to change reality, of course.

"This is Kusuri's actual body, aye."

"The heck?!"

"It would be best to simply accept this as fact," Nano said.

Rentaro blinked and turned to Shizuka. "Are you also—?!"

"Think about it logically," Kusuri cut in. "What's the likelihood that there's more than one person like Kusuri in this school?"

"Logically, there shouldn't be a single person like you on the planet," Kurumi pointed out.

Hahari appeared to consider this. "If my company could mass-produce Kusurichan's medicine, then the world would become a paradise of itty-bitty youngsters, wouldn't it?"

"I shall contact the laboratory," Mei said.

"Don't!" Karane yelled.

While the conversation veered off track, Kusuri slid on a pair of glasses and tied up her hair. "They mentioned amnesia-curing medicine." She turned to face Rentaro. "It may not be right this minute, but Kusuri will definitely learn to make it. So don't you worry, Rentaro."

She smiled, looking like quite the dependable senpai indeed. At the sight of this mature Kusuri, Rentaro's heart pounded hard.

"Thank you so much." He gave her a small smile. "Okay, let's make it a competition! What will get my memories back first? Your medicine or my efforts?"

Even as he accepted Kusuri's idea, his eyes never lost their resolve.

[&]quot;This is a location that lingers strongly in my memories."

Nano had led them to the amusement park where she and Rentaro had had their first date. This time, the entire group toured the park, retracing the couple's footsteps.

"This is a recreational implement, not an equestrian training device," Nano said.

"Uh-huh," said Rentaro. "I see..."

"Yeah, that's what everything in an amusement park is going to be," Karane said.

"They've got eateries here too," Kurumi remarked. "Just thinking about it is making my tummy rumble..."

They passed their time chatting on the merry-go-round.

"Everyone in the haunted house is a human. However, the unspoken rule is to treat them all as supernatural entities," Nano said.

"Uh-huh," said Rentaro. "I see..."

"If you get scared, you're all welcome to hug Mommy!" said Hahari.

"I am not afraid because they are, in fact, humans," Nano said.

(What if humans are the real monsters?!)

"Would you like to listen to a tale from my childhood?" Mei asked.

"Why are you bringing that up out of the blue?!" Karane demanded.

The group was so focused on chatting that the haunted house's monsters barely registered to them.

"I still have not grasped the meaning behind riding in oversized teacups," Nano said.

"Uh-huh," said Rentaro. "I see..."

"Yippee!" Kusuri squealed. "It's so much fun going 'round and 'round, aye!"

"There is an influential theory that they exist as brainwashing devices or to strengthen the semicircular canals of the inner ear," Nano went on.

"I'm pretty sure you got the actual answer a few lines ago!" Karane yelled.

It'd never been clearer that the bubbly Kusuri and straight-faced Nano were polar opposites.

"There is a rule that you must hopelessly get lost here," Nano said.

"Uh-huh," said Rentaro. "I se—wait, is that really how you're supposed to approach this?!"

"Well, people do get lost in mazes," said Hakari. "She's not wrong, per se..."

Even in the big maze, everyone chatted happily.

Nano had another matter-of-fact explanation up her sleeve for the next attraction. "This implement exists to remind you of life's proximity to death," she said, looking up at the Ferris wheel.

Once again, Rentaro couldn't help but react on pure instinct. "That doesn't sound right either!" he shouted. A moment later, however, understanding appeared to dawn on him. "Are you...maybe...afraid of heights?"

Nano blinked in surprise. "Have your memories returned?"

"What? No, I just figured from your expression..."

"I see," said Nano, after a pause. Although her expression did not change, her cheeks did blush faintly. She looked happy, somehow. "Now, let us board."

"What? You're getting on?!" Rentaro chased after her in a panic. "But if you don't enjoy heights, then—"

"It would be inefficient to forego an action that could possibly restore your memories."

"You don't have to push yourself for m—"

"Besides." Nano gripped Rentaro's hand tightly as she walked. "I am fine if I do this."

Rentaro and his girlfriends, who watched from the rear, clutched their chests upon seeing the cool, collected Nano do something so cute and girly. "Ngh!" they groaned in a vain attempt to still their beating hearts.

Thus, their time at the amusement park came to an end. Everyone posed for a photo together in front of the monument at the central plaza.

"Oh, that instant camera is the same as mine," Rentaro said afterward, pointing at the one in Nano's hand. She had been using it to take pictures of herself and the group all day.

"I bought a camera identical to yours after our date at the amusement park," she explained.

"Oh, you did, h—urk?!" Halfway through his utterance, Rentaro scowled and clutched his head. "Did I...take the pictures last time?"

Nano started in surprise. "You did. These are the photos from then," she said as she pulled out a wad of photos from her bag. The edges were ever so slightly burned.

"Heh heh. Looks like we had fun back then too." Rentaro smiled cheerfully at the photos.

"I did enjoy it. Despite expectations." Nano repeated the same words she uttered that day. "But I thought it was a meaningless day."

"But that's—"

"Wrong, I know," Nano finished. "Aijo Rentaro, you were the one who taught me that." She turned to face Rentaro, unblinking. "You taught me the fun of amusement parks. That happiness in itself has meaning." Then she looked back at the other girlfriends. "That there is meaning in spending time with the people you care about."

The girls' eyes lit up.

"The previous me would have said that it was more efficient to live as an amnesiac than spend time trying to restore memories that might not return." Nano's gaze turned to Rentaro. "But now, I want those memories to come back, regardless of efficiency." She blinked a single time. "They are important to me."

Rentaro blinked back. His fist clenched as he listened to those earnest, unadorned words. He placed his fist to his chest and replied with an equally earnest vow. "Of course! I'll get those memories back, just you see!"

Their next stop was the school library, where Shizuka took the reins. In this

quiet space, Shizuka lowered the volume of her text-to-voice generator. The robotic voice resounded softly.

«This is the fabled land.» ('Tis I, the governor of this land.)

"Oh...you're a librarian?"

<And that was the truth.>

The verbal exchange was very similar to their first meeting.

<By decree, I was told to...> <...introduce my recommendations.>

"Were you now? Sorry, I don't remember." Rentaro apologized, looking uncomfortable.

Shizuka shook her head in response. <I can teach it to you again, however many times necessary. > She gave him a small smile. <Once upon a time, I... >

As the smartphone spoke for her, Shizuka pulled a single book out of her bag. The title inscribed on the cover was *Circlet Love Story*. Shizuka flipped through the pages and pointed at the words: *Conversed in this manner*. Then she fiddled with her smartphone again.

At present.> (These are my means.)

"I see..." Rentaro gazed at the smartphone with great interest, nodding thoughtfully. "That makes sense. This way, you're able to meet people's eyes when you communicate."

When he smiled at her, Shizuka's eyes widened ever so slightly in surprise.

You once spoke of something similar to me.> You gave me strength.>

"Huh? I did that? Urk!" Rentaro scrunched his eyes shut and rubbed his temples before slowly opening his eyes. "Now that you mention it, I did just get this mental image of me silently plugging the book's text into an app..."

When Rentaro turned his eyes to her, Shizuka nodded vigorously. Her finger hovered in the air uncertainly for a moment, then she tapped on the smartphone screen.

«I was once a lonesome individual.» Shizuka lowered her eyes, slightly melancholic. «I accepted my fate.» «It was that or resignation.» «For I did not want to become a burden to others.>

The Rentaro family grimaced, attempting to stifle their pain, as they listened attentively to Shizuka's story.

<I changed when I met you.> For a moment, Shizuka lowered her eyes, then she brought them up to meet Rentaro's directly. <You gave me so many things.>
<Not simply this power.>

Shizuka's serious expression changed, ever so gradually.

<The warmth in my heart.> <And...>

She gazed at him lovingly before turning to the others.

<The happiness.> <Of having so many wonderful friends.> <At my side!>

"Ngh!"

Her angelic smile was enough to knock out the entire group.

"Shizuka-chan's cuteness ought to be listed as a natural monument!" Hahari squealed.

"As you command, my lady," said Mei. "I will process a request."

"There is a ninety-nine percent chance it will get approval," Nano said.

"When even Nano-senpai is this down bad, you know things have gotten out of control," Kurumi said.

"It happens more often than you'd think, aye," said Kusuri.

While this conversation was going on, Shizuka turned back to Rentaro. <I owe it all to you.>

Rentaro waved this off. "No way." He paused in thought briefly. "I couldn't possibly have done that. You achieved it through your own efforts. I don't have the right to take any credit, the way I am now."

There was something hollow about his tone. Rentaro's guilt was plainly evident in the way he grimaced and scratched his cheek.

Shizuka took a few seconds to respond.

(Until that moment, I...) Her hesitation resurfaced momentarily. Nevertheless,

she pushed on. < I thought that I had best not convey it to others. > < How I feel. >

Shizuka's eyebrows creased, perhaps because she was imagining a less happy version of herself in another universe.

I was overflowing with so much emotion that I was beside myself.>

Once more, her sorrow gave way to a smile.

I wanted to tell you.> (That I love you.)

Rentaro watched her as she busied herself with her smartphone, his heart pounding.

<After many twists and turns...> <I was asked...> <"Has your brain fallen out?">

"How could I have responded so cruelly to such a brave confession?!" Rentaro attempted to punch himself, not for the first time that day.

"Calm down!" Karane stopped him. "I was the one who said that!"

Hakari smiled awkwardly. "It was our first time seeing you add another girl to the throng..."

<See for yourself.> Shizuka's lips curled up into an unusual, cheeky smile. <How the tale ended.>

Rentaro's eyes widened as he grasped the nature of Shizuka's request. "Yeah! I'm going to remember every conversation we ever had between us!"

His declaration rang out loud and clear.

And finally, they went to their last destination: the garden behind the school.

"Here," said Hakari, "this is the place..."

"Not that it has any emotional significance for me or anything!" said Karane.

"Aye, then why bring us here?" asked Kusuri.

Hahari giggled. "Karane-chan's just being coy as usual, eh?"

"No way! I'm not being coy or anything!"

"Shall I bring the lie detector?" asked Mei.

"Not only do her pupils exhibit a slight dilation but her heartbeat is erratic as well," said Nano. "These are signs of lying."

"No way! I'm not lying or anything!"

"This is going nowhere, Karane-san. Could you put a lid on it, please? Just for a little while." After one too many of Karane's suspiciously specific denials, Hakari pretended to zip the girl's mouth shut. "There's a rumor in this school that if you ask someone out while presenting them with a pink four-leaf clover, they are guaranteed to say yes."

"You've got to be a dumbass to believe stuff like that when you're in high school!" Karane turned her back to them with a huff.

Hakari responded with an utterly straight face. "Please stop with the exact same song and dance."

For a moment, Karane said nothing. Then...

"You're an idiot." Unlike her previous displays of huffiness, her voice came out as a strangled whisper. "You spent the whole night looking for the clovers just 'cause you thought it *might* make us happy. Then, after all that, you asked both of us to be your girlfriends."

"What an unjustifiable sin!" Rentaro moaned.

"Oh, but please don't misunderstand, okay?" said Hakari. "Karane-san wasn't actually criticizing you."

"There's no way I'm criticizing you or anything!" Karane turned away in a huff yet again.

Kurumi peered at her, fascinated. "Wow, you're actually saying that as if you mean it for once."

"After that, you started adding more girls one after another," Karane went on. "But like I said before, I'm fine with that now."

"I was just glad you didn't dump me," Hakari said with a self-effacing smile. "That was enough to satisfy me."

"Hey, don't lump me in with you! I'm not the type who gets their rocks off that easy!"

"I would appreciate it if you didn't say things that make me sound like my mother, Karane-san."

"You're one and the same in that department!"

"Oh, please, you two," Hahari cut in. "You mustn't fight over me!"

<Though she was the cause.> <They did not fight for her sake.>

Hahari's intervention did temporarily halt Hakari and Karane's banter, however.

Karane coughed and went on. "You're the kind of idiot who put a crazy amount of thought into our first kiss when we started dating. You complimented us without a lick of hesitation. You did anything and everything to make all your girlfriends happy. You even accepted a girl like me for who I am." She lowered her gaze. "I swear, I'm gonna make you remember all your dumb memories if it's the last thing I do!"

When she looked back up, her eyes glinted with an obstinate will, almost as if she was glaring at Rentaro.

"Thank you! I'll do everything I can to remember!" Rentaro's gaze was similarly steely. "How about you bonk my head as a test?"

"Jeez, you're not a faulty appliance," Karane responded to Rentaro's straightfaced suggestion with an equally serious expression.

"There is a certain logic to revisiting the shock that made him lose his memories as a method of treatment," Nano said.

"If Karane bonks Rentaro with all her strength," said Kusuri, "his head will fly off..."

"Maybe it would be better if someone like Nano-senpai did it," said Kurumi.

"What kind of monster do you take me for?" Karane demanded.

<They recalled her past actions.>

"I don't want to cause Rentaro-chan pain," said Hahari. "Can't we make this a last resort?"

"Understood, my lady," said Mei. "When the time comes to deliver a blow to

Rentaro-sama's head, I shall be the one to do it. Give me the order, and I will strike him however many times necessary until his memory returns. *However* many times."

"That sounds freakier than if I did it," Karane pointed out.

As the girls engaged in this cheerful(?) discussion, Rentaro folded his arms and groaned. "Ugh, how to cure amnesia? Would Google be helpful? Urk, damn it! I don't know how to make this work! How do I get my precious memories with you all back?!"

Hakari regarded him silently for a moment. "To be honest," she muttered, "a part of me thinks that it doesn't really matter whether or not you remember."

Her words went completely against the grain.

"Wha—?!" Karane looked stunned.

"I mean, you can see it, right? Even without his memories, Rentaro-kun has never stopped being himself."

"I agree on that count," Nano said.

"I guess I can see it..." Kurumi said.

"Aye, Kusuri agrees!"

<As do I.>

"Even as an amnesiac, Rentaro-chan will always be a cutie!" said Hahari.

"If you may allow me to say so, I share Hahari-sama's opinion," said Mei.

"Sure, you might agree, but are you really okay with things being like this?" Karane retorted, before letting out another huffy snort. "I mean, I know he's the same as well!"

She, too, indicated genuine agreement, unusual though it was.

"His memories are very important, of course," Hakari went on, "but I wouldn't want the current Rentaro-kun to feel awful about it... Besides, there's also a chance that they'll come back to him over time."

"Kusuri will keep working on amnesia cure!"

"See? It's fine if we just wait, right?"

Hakari and Kusuri's logic was beginning to have a noticeable effect on the group. *True, that is an option...* they thought. But then...

Mei jolted in surprise. It seemed she'd received some kind of notification. "Hahari-sama," she called out before whispering something in her ear.

Hahari's eyes widened. "A fairly large meteor is flying toward the school?!" A sudden catastrophe!>

The entire group was stricken with shock at this new plot twist.

"Don't tell me everything's gonna get destroyed without any foreshadowing!" Karane wailed.

"Maybe the meteor that hit Rentaro-kun's head was the foreshadowing..."

"That's hella sloppy of the writer, if true!"

After getting in that quick joke, the group began pacing frantically.

"Tell the students to evacuate!" Hahari barked at Mei.

"Yes, my lady."

"It is safest to shelter in a place without windows," Nano remarked.

Let us hurry into the castle walls!>

In the midst of all the kerfuffle, Rentaro stood very still, apparently deep in thought. Before anyone could accuse him of dawdling, however, he sprinted to Kusuri. "Do you still have some of that Human Magnet Medicine?!"

"Hmm? Well, yes, but..." Kusuri gave him a puzzled look as she pulled out three test tubes from her pocket.

"Sorry, but I'll be taking all of those!" Rentaro grabbed the three test tubes and downed their contents in a flash.

"Whoa! Drinking more Human Magnet Medicine will make you more magnetic, but the constipation will get that much worse! And you'll vomit!"

"Is that all? I can handle it!" Rentaro declared as he dashed for the grounds.

He'd begun sprinting almost on pure impulse.

It's pretty likely that a meteor will have iron in it! If I can get it to come to me...!

His heart pounded wildly in his chest, and not simply from the physical exertion.

This was hopeless. This was reckless. He was going to die. Fear threatened to drag him to a standstill. Even so, he didn't stop for a single second. An emotion far more powerful than fear drove his feet forward.

I've got to protect them all!

That was the only thought coursing through his being.

Is that it?!

Something glimmered in the sky. As soon as he spotted the thing, it grew steadily larger in his vision. It did not take him long to determine that the meteor was headed straight toward him.

Am I really capable of catching it?!

The meteor steadily drew closer—it made the earlier meteor, the one that had knocked him unconscious, look like a pebble. To make matters worse, the magnetism was making it hurtle toward him at a faster-than-average speed.

This was hopeless. This was reckless. He was going to die.

The timid bugs around him buzzed as they took flight.

Ignoring it all, he braced for impact. Just you see... I'll catch it!

Then, it crashed.

He was not conscious of the moment of collision. The only thing he felt was the sensation of his body being ripped apart. In reality, however, his limbs were still firmly attached to his body. Miraculously, he had even managed to catch the meteor. A wave of heat blew his clothes off, but that was minor in the grand scheme of things.

"Urk!"

The meteor hadn't lost its momentum. He could feel the weight of it bearing

down upon his body. If left unchecked, the meteor was bound to crush Rentaro along with the school.

I'm not...strong enough...! Rentaro thought, gritting his teeth.

Right at that moment, however...

"Aijo," yelled a voice.

"Rentaro," yelled eight voices. This was followed by scattered shouts of "-kun," "-chan," "-senpai," and "-sama."

"Your voices give me unlimited power!"



Power coursed through Rentaro's body. With a grunt of exertion, he successfully stopped the meteor in its tracks. The girls hurried over to him.

"You dummy! You big, old, pea-brained fool! What the hell did you do that for?!" Karane whacked Rentaro repeatedly, though there was hardly any strength in her blows.

"You could have died, Rentaro-kun!" Hakari's hands trembled slightly as she gently clasped his arm.

'Twas a miracle you survived.> Tears poured down Shizuka's face, her body trembling more than usual.

"My heart almost shattered at the mere thought of your potential death, Aijo Rentaro." Tears also leaked from the corner of Nano's eyes as she clasped a hand to her chest.

"Not even medicine could've brought you back to life, aye!" Kusuri wept, her voice seriously distraught.

"There's no point if you lose your life, Rentaro-senpai!" Kurumi glared at Rentaro. The corners of her eyes were teary, but she refused to let them fall.

"I'm so sorry!" Hahari bowed her head deeply, her expression bitter with selfreproach. "I'm supposed to be the adult who takes care of things, but everything somehow ended up in your hands."

"I deeply apologize for not possessing the ability to catch a meteor!" Like her master, Mei bowed in a show of deep remorse.

"I'm sorry for worrying you all!"

Rentaro lowered his own head in return. He felt genuinely awful about causing his girlfriends such agony. Nevertheless, his eyes burned with a strong will when he finally looked up at them.

"But...if this happened again, I'd do the same thing all over."

His girlfriends were dumbfounded.

"I'd do anything to protect the girlfriends I love! And I also promise that I will always return to you!"

The reaction this time was a little more giddy.

"Whoa, you're saying you love us?!" Karane's eyes glittered with anticipation.

Hakari was much the same. "Did getting hit by a meteor again restore your memories?!"

Sadly, however, Rentaro shook his head slowly in apology. "Sorry, I didn't end up remembering anything!"

<It is nothing to fret over.>

"The idea that a shock can cure a condition is, ultimately, a folk remedy," Nano said.

"Then leave it to Kusuri's medicine, aye!"

"My laboratory will also lend its assistance!" Hahari insisted.

"Yes, my lady," said Mei. "I will make the arrangements."

"But, well...just like Hakari-senpai said, it's not the worst thing in the world even if his memories don't come back," said Kurumi.

Rentaro was so moved by their words that his tears threatened to fall. But he held it in.

"The truth is, I have a confession to make. I...wasn't lying to you all, but there is something I didn't mention."

The girlfriends tilted their heads in confusion at this sudden, apologetic display.

"I thought it was super weird, so I kept quiet about it. I mean, I'm amnesiac... As far as I'm concerned, today's my first time meeting you all." Rentaro clenched his fist tightly. "But from the moment I laid eyes on you, I had feelings for you. I loved you so much, I could barely hold it in! My memories might have been wiped, but my feelings never disappeared. I'm certain of it!"

The girlfriends' faces flushed beet-red at Rentaro's blushing confession.

"I'm really sorry that I'm a useless boyfriend who can't even remember you all...but if you can allow me..." Rentaro straightened his posture, his expression serious and intent. "I hope you and I can start dating again!"

With his head still bowed low, he reached his hand out toward his girlfriends. Silence reigned for a moment. Then, everyone responded in unison.

"But of course! Gladly!"

"I swear, if you don't make me happy again, I won't give you the time of day!"

<Let us sally forth once more!>

"I was just as inclined to ask you."

"Let's fricken gooooo, aye!"

"I'd love to start with you all over again, Rentaro-chan!"

"Let's eat again together sometime."

"As you command."

But their moment was swiftly interrupted.

Da-duun!

A strangely familiar jolt ran through Rentaro's brain.

"Sorry...let me retract part of what I said."

The girlfriends exchanged bemused glances. What part was he talking about?

"I love you all way, way, way, way, way more than I did moments ago.

Because I now have my precious memories of you!"

The shock was twofold.

"I can't believe I managed to forget all of our precious memories! So, I think I should cut open my stomach!"

Rentaro whipped out his old friend, the dagger, and the girlfriends scrambled to hold him down.

"Don't you freaking dare!"

"But anyway... I wonder why I lost my memories?"

"Because a meteor hit you on the head, duh."

Karane delivered a quick and snappy retort, but Rentaro shook his head to it. "I can say this for certain now that I've remembered everything, but I would

never forget my beloved girlfriends just because a meteor hit me!"

It was possible to interpret Rentaro's declaration as nothing more than delusional ramblings lacking any firm basis in reality, but...

"Besides, I still had my memories for a while after I got hit," Rentaro continued.

"What?" His girlfriends again tilted their heads in unison.

"Right after that, I felt sleepy all of a sudden. It was when I woke up that my memories were gone..."

The mystery of this inexplicable incident only deepened. But, well...

"Hey, as long as you remembered in the end. All's well that ends well, right?" said Hakari.

Her words had a clear effect on the group. "I guess she's right," they all thought.

The group instinctively headed back to the rooftop. Nobody even had to suggest it.

"Huh, so he reclaimed his fate through his own strength of will."

A certain somebody watched the Rentaro family from the shadows.

He was a weird dude on national watch lists—just kidding, he was the God of Love. In his hand was a document detailing Rentaro's destiny. Until just a short while ago, the "soulmate" column had been blacked out, but now, it clearly showed the girlfriends' names.

Indeed... Not even this silly novel would make Rentaro lose his memories without a reason. Or throw in a meteor without any foreshadowing.

"I wondered what would happen if his soulmates' names got blacked out due to various circumstances..."

When the names were tampered with, the individuals ceased to be Rentaro's soulmates. Thus, he lost his memories of ever meeting them.

So, when Rentaro met the girls in his amnesiac state, he was unable to love

them in return and make them happy. No, far from it. Their situation invited misfortune and disaster. One thing led to another, and a meteor came hurtling down to fulfill their fated doom. Yet, by reconnecting with his girlfriends, Rentaro had been able to *reclaim* them as his soulmates.

"He is no ordinary fellow, to be sure," said the man with a deity-like bearing as he clapped his hands. So far, so regal, but he just had to open his mouth and continue. "This was just as emotionally moving as when Chihiro took the quiz to turn her parents back into humans! Bravo!"

Not too long ago, the god had *spirited away* his attention at work to watch a certain movie for the first time. During the penultimate scene, he yelled out "Bravo!" and broke out into applause. This caused his cup to topple over, spilling coffee over the names of Rentaro's soulmates. So yes, dear reader, now you know what the *various circumstances* were.

Figuring that there was a genuine possibility that Rentaro would set fire to the shrine if he caught wind of the truth, the god swore silently that he would keep his lips sealed forever.

About the Creators

ORIGINAL STORY WRITER

RIKITO NAKAMURA

Thank you for buying the 100 Girlfriends novel! It's amazing to see this series adapted to novel format! Given that the original story was pretty loose when it came to suspension of disbelief, timelines, and whatnot, I hope you can treat the novel as a parallel experience and have a good laugh!

ARTIST

YUKIKO NOZAWA

Woo-hoo! The *100 Girlfriends* novel is now on sale! Personally, I was stoked to draw Rentaro on the cover for once!

NOVEL WRITER

HAMUBANE

It's such an honor to work on a series that I really, really, really, really, really, really love! I tried to inject my own brand of comedy and heart-pounding romance into this novel, so I really hope you enjoy it!



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