

Author • Yuishi Artist • Kagachisaku

volume

6

An Introvert's

HOOKUP HICCUPS:

This **GYARU** Is Head Over Heels for Me!

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Prologue: The Dare That Should Have Ended

When we encounter something bad, how many of us are able to straightforwardly share that with others? I have a feeling that most of us end up hiding bad things from other people. That's the image I have in my head, anyway.

Maybe I only think that because that's what usually happens in manga and that sort of thing, like when the main character receives a threat, they end up acting on their own to resolve the situation. I imagine that most characters do that not because they're giving in to the threats, but so as not to drag the people around them into their mess. In that regard, it's a decision that often stems from consideration toward other people.

Nevertheless, the characters acting on their own always end up causing trouble for the people around them anyway. I feel like I've seen it in TV dramas too: main characters who act on their own and always end up in a tight spot as a result. Viewers probably feel all agitated watching it, wondering why someone would do such a thing, but the characters themselves probably thought really, really hard to get to that point.

I'm sure it's difficult to act calmly and appropriately in situations like that. I tend to let myself drown in negative thoughts, but I'm sure it's better to get advice from someone—though doing so probably requires a lot of courage. They do say that two heads are better than one. If you talk to someone, the two of you can probably come up with a solution that you couldn't have come up with on your own. When people come together, they can overcome just about anything.

"I sure wasn't expecting this though," I muttered, looking down at the letter sitting before me, not that I was sure I could even call the thing "a letter."

"Is the dare still going on?"

That was all that was written there. It wasn't in an envelope or anything. If it had at least been written on stationery, I could have deemed it a proper letter,

but the message was just printed on a plain old sheet of copy paper. That said, the situation wouldn't have been much better if it had been a legitimate letter.

The words had been typed rather than handwritten, using a regular serif font. I couldn't even guess if it had been written by a boy or a girl. At the moment, a typed letter felt inorganic and creepy, though maybe a handwritten message would have been even creepier. I'd never received a letter like this before, so I had no idea.

I stole a glance at Nanami, who was sitting next to me. She was looking down slightly and seemed a little bit pale. I probably wasn't imagining it; she must have been feeling kind of psyched out. I guess her having come across the message on our way home was a silver lining; if she'd found it first thing in the morning, it would have been difficult to try to comfort her at school, and we both would have gone through the day feeling unnerved. The other good thing was that Nanami had told me about the letter as soon as she'd seen it. I was really glad she'd talked to me about it even though she must have been feeling a torrent of emotions.

Still, I had to admit that a chill had run down my spine the moment I'd seen the letter. I felt like we each deserved a pat on the back for not screaming right then and there. I mean, finding a letter thrust into your shoe locker was like a scene from some horror movie. The chipper mood we'd been in earlier was now totally gone. We didn't say much to each other as we made our way home. Even when we got settled in Nanami's room, the air around us felt slightly heavier than usual. We had to do something to change the mood.

"You're not okay, are you, Nanami?" I asked.

"I'm oka— Huh? Wait, is there no other option here?"

Although Nanami had been about to tell me she was okay, she'd realized I was asserting the opposite. It wasn't really even a question to begin with. I mean, she clearly wasn't okay no matter how you looked at it. I knew that if I asked her normally, she would just force herself to tell me that she was.

I uncrossed my legs and sat properly on my heels. Strangely enough, when I did, my posture naturally straightened as well. I looked over at Nanami, who was looking at me inquisitively, though I wasn't sure if she knew what I was

thinking. Then I lightly patted my lap. Although I felt a little embarrassed, I did my best not to show it and smiled at her gently.

After I patted my lap a few more times, Nanami picked up on my message and approached me slowly, then laid her head on my lap. She did so fairly often, but this might have been the first time that she'd entrusted herself to me so cautiously. I proceeded to gently stroke her hair. Nanami remained silent, letting me do as I pleased, but after a while she seemed to regain her composure.

"I feel like this is the first time you initiated this," she mumbled.

"You think? We've done it so many times now, I can't really remember."

I realized then that I'd said something outrageous. *What am I saying?*

Nanami seemed dissatisfied by my response, because she puffed out her cheeks and pouted—but that expression immediately changed to a smile of relief. She deftly took my hand from her hair and held it in both of hers, running her fingers over it. She then started playing with it, rubbing it between both hands as though massaging it. I couldn't tell if it tickled, hurt, or felt good. Every time she touched me, a tingle ran down my spine, but I had to do my best not to let it show on my face.

"Do you feel a bit better?" I asked.

"Yeah, thanks. I'm okay now."

She'd looked pale earlier, but now she appeared much healthier. If her mental exhaustion had been eased a bit by having her head in my lap, then I couldn't have been happier. However, even though she was calmer, she didn't stop touching my hand. She touched my nails, my fingers, my palm, and then my whole hand as though studying its shape. *Um...*

"What's wrong?" I asked.

Nanami gazed up at me in silence. Even when our eyes met, she said nothing. After a while, she looked away and went back to studying my hand. I decided to let her play with it as much as she wanted and simply watched her in silence. It tickled, but I had to bear it. At least, that's what I was thinking when I felt her tugging at my hand. She gently pulled it closer and touched my fingers to her

lips. I felt the sudden, soft sensation and heard the faint, moist sound of her lips. Panicking, I clumsily yanked my hand away.

“Ngh!” she cried.

I froze with my hand raised in the air, wondering if I’d touched her in a weird place. *No, that can’t be it. I only pulled my hand out in a rush.*

“Jeez. Did you not like it?” she asked, puffing out her cheeks. She reached out as though in pursuit of the hand that had gotten away.

“I didn’t dislike it. I was just kind of surprised,” I said.

“I guess it was kind of sudden, but what’s the big deal about me kissing your hand?”

She does have a point, but I can’t help being surprised if someone does that. I mean, I wonder what made her suddenly kiss it in the first place.

Perhaps picking up on my question, she smiled as though relieved and kept her hands outstretched. “I was just amazed by how all my worries disappeared because you stroked my hair. I wasn’t expecting to feel so safe in a guy’s hands.”

“And that’s why you kissed my hand?”

“I thought that maybe if I put you in my mouth, even more of my anxieties would disappear.”

That sounded less like a kiss and more like cannibalism. I never knew she’d have such an intention. Too shocked to speak, I fell silent.

Nanami, still looking up at me, opened her mouth wide. I’d never looked inside anyone’s mouth before, but she had perfectly straight teeth. I watched as she stuck out her tongue and wiggled it slightly. She then let out a soft “aah.” I thought I saw the insides of her mouth vibrate and immediately felt my heart begin to beat loudly. With her mouth still open, Nanami continued playing with her tongue and voice. She then closed her mouth and tilted her head in my lap questioningly.

“You’re not gonna stick your finger in?”

Her question was clearly meant to make my heart skip a beat. *Wait, what is*

she asking me to do? Stick my finger in? Like, in her mouth? Is that what she wants me to do?

“Nope. Totally not,” I declared, raising my hands in the air. Nanami narrowed her eyes and grinned mischievously.

“You paused just then. I must’ve been so close,” she said, raising both corners of her mouth in an almost malicious grin. Then again, perhaps it wasn’t as malicious as it was mischievous. Both words started with an M, but they were, in fact, quite different. Nanami made a peace sign with her fingers and stuck her tongue out from between them like a snake.

If Nanami was a snake, then I was either a mouse or an egg. I blushed at seeing her act in a way that seemed to emphasize some unspoken intent, but I managed to poke her lightly in the forehead. Nanami moaned dramatically then laughed a little, pressing her hand to where I’d poked her.

“Man, aren’t you getting a bit too bold in the wrong sort of way?” I asked.

“Maybe. I mean, it doesn’t seem like you’re gonna make a move on me, so I have to try different things to seduce you.”

“I might have said something like that, but still...”

“It’s kind of embarrassing, but I’m gonna give it my all.” Nanami clasped her hands in front of her chest in determination. I didn’t have the heart to tell her that she didn’t need to work so hard. I mean, it wasn’t exactly the right thing to say. She seemed to take my silence as approval, because she mumbled to herself, “It’s hard to stay modest while trying to seduce someone, isn’t it?”

Astounded by the complete one-eighty she’d done from her earlier, downcast self, I was left unable to respond. In any case, I was relieved to see that her spirits were back up. “So, about that letter we found, shouldn’t we at least talk about it with your family?” I asked.

“With mom and dad? Really?”

“Yeah. I mean, I don’t think anything weird will happen, but just in case.”

Sharing things with people was important. If we kept everything to ourselves and then something happened, we would end up regretting not letting other

people in on the issue to begin with. Still, I was hoping that this happening at school would keep it from becoming anything really serious.

The letter itself was one of the reasons I thought that. Although it certainly was strange, it didn't seem to indicate any sort of intent. If it were a threat, then it would most likely have given us more of an idea about its purpose—for example, if it was targeting just Nanami herself, if it was trying to find something out about us both, or if it was trying to call us out to talk. However, this letter expressed no intention of any kind.

The lack of a specific purpose might have been creepy, but it also didn't indicate explicit malice. It was only asking whether the dare was still going on. Still, it was possible that the letter aimed to make Nanami and me feel awkward around each other, but now that we'd sat down and talked about it, that was no longer a viable outcome.

Nonetheless, it was better to be safe than sorry, so our best bet was to share what was happening with other people who knew about the dare. That included my parents, Nanami's parents, and Nanami's two best friends. And, just in case, I should add Shoichi-senpai into the mix. Acting too cautious would become exhausting, but it shouldn't hurt to ask for help from the people around us. We had to do everything we could in order not to regret anything later.

"I see. In that case, let's go!" Nanami got up off my lap, and the two of us headed to the living room. Nanami's mom, Tomoko-san, and her little sister, Saya-chan, had been in there earlier, though it seemed her dad, Genichiro-san, had since returned home as well. Wondering if something was up, they all looked at us. Nanami and I began telling them about the letter.

As a sidenote, the reason they were wondering if something was up was that the two of us usually hung out in Nanami's room until dinner, during which they apparently believed we were just making out—and yet we'd joined them in the living room much earlier than usual. *I didn't know that that's what they thought we were doing in her room...* Regardless, each one of them reacted to our story differently. Tomoko-san furrowed her brows with concern, Genichiro-san began to panic, and Saya-chan became pissed off. They all expressed their worry in different ways.

“And what do you intend to do?” Tomoko-san asked us.

“I guess we’ll just wait and see if anything else happens,” I replied.

Tomoko-san sighed in response. Saya-chan, on the other hand, seemed unconvinced; she was coming up with a disturbing proposal to find a way to punish the culprit. Genichiro-san had his arms crossed and wore a concerned expression. Even if he wanted to align himself with Tomoko-san, he was probably more in the same camp as Saya-chan.

Smiling awkwardly, I attempted to explain further in order to placate Nanami’s sister. “Truth be told, even if I wanted to take this person to task, I don’t even know their name or anything. There are no security cameras at the front of the school either—though I guess even if there were, the school probably wouldn’t show me the footage.”

The only security cameras the school had were outside the building. They were meant to protect us from suspicious people trying to come into the school, not to surveil the students.

The letter had no distinctive qualities, and even if we were to look for the sender, we would need to make the existence of the letter public to do so. I also wasn’t so sure whether I’d be able to locate any eyewitnesses. Of course, we would be more vigilant than usual, but even that would tire us out if we overdid it. That was why we had to tell people close to us about the situation, then just wait and see. Although that did feel a little frustrating, it seemed about the only thing we could do.

I wasn’t sure whether my explanation was enough to convince her, but Saya-chan, with her cheeks puffed out, seemed kind of upset. That part of her was very similar to Nanami.

“I see. That does seem like the only thing you can do for now. It’s not as though any harm has been done,” Tomoko-san replied.

“My thoughts exactly,” I said. “I know it’d be too late after something’s happened, so we’ll try to keep an eye out. In any case, we might need to ask for your help, so I hope that’s okay.” I bowed to the three of them, who unsurprisingly agreed to support us. I knew that I could try to protect Nanami on my own, but the more people willing to help, the better.

My safety was important too, of course. I'd thought about protecting Nanami no matter what that meant for me, but that could end up being a burden for the one being protected. That was why I had to act in a way that made both me and Nanami feel safe. Self-sacrifice may be virtuous, but I'd recently come to think that too much of it was actually counterproductive.

It was then that Tomoko-san murmured something that shattered my resolve. "Besides, the two of you can't afford to get distracted at a time like this."

Huh? What does she mean by that? As I sat there wondering, I saw Nanami nod several times as though she knew exactly what her mother was talking about. *Wait, what's going on? Do they have some kind of a family event planned? But if that's the case, Tomoko-san wouldn't say "the two of you," would she?*

As Tomoko-san's words continued to confound me, the answer to my question was revealed before I was prepared for it. It was an answer I didn't want to hear.

"It's almost time for your end-of-term exams, after all."

End-of-term...? End-of-term exams?! The phrase repeated itself over and over in my head. Shoot, I'd completely forgotten! Of course we were gonna have exams soon.

"You totally forgot, didn't you, Yoshin?" Nanami asked in a low voice.

I jumped guiltily and immediately began wishing I could tell her she was wrong, but I knew my reaction had totally given me away. *Yeah, I completely forgot.*

Remaining exactly where I was, I glanced at Nanami to find her glaring up at me through narrowed eyes. She was so close to me that it made me flinch again. I couldn't lie to those eyes of hers. I mean, even if I did lie, it would have been no use. Defeated by her accusatory look, I looked away and mumbled, "Yeah, I'd forgotten."

I totally felt like a kid getting scolded, not that I thought Nanami was going to scold me. Still, I braced myself for whatever was to come.

"Jeez, seriously? If you fail any, you're gonna have to stay for summer school."

We're supposed to hang out a lot over the break, so we've gotta study loads, okay?"

"I know, but I'm not sure I'm feeling entirely confident," I murmured.

"I'm gonna tutor you, so it'll be fine!" she said, patting me on the head. She wasn't putting any force into it, so the feel of her hand comforted me each time—and yet I felt a heaviness in my chest. It was true that since Nanami had started tutoring me I'd been able to follow along in class a lot more. Still, that didn't mean that I felt confident about doing well on the exams. The fact that I'd just been getting by until now didn't help.

Even Nanami's family was now looking at me with concern in their eyes. I felt more than slightly embarrassed by the whole situation. As long as Nanami was tutoring me, though, I couldn't possibly deliver shameful results. I knew the ride ahead would be rough, but I had to focus on my studies like a good student should. I clasped my hands into fists to solidify my resolve.

Before I knew it, Nanami had scooted closer to me and was whispering in my ear. "I'll make sure to give you lots of private lessons," she said.

Hearing her sensually soft voice, I felt myself jumping again, though this time for a different reason. My ear felt ticklish, and my body was shaking. It wasn't a sensation that I should get used to.

Nanami swiftly moved away from me, clasping her hands behind her back and smiling as if to say, "What do you think?" The dual nature of women really was scary—though I liked both natures when it came to Nanami. *Yes, I like that idea very much. I like it more than anything.*

With the letter, end-of-term exams, and summer break upon us, there were all sorts of things going on, but I had to start by doing the only thing I could. Still, the note had left me uneasy. Worrying about it didn't help, but I couldn't stop wondering what its purpose was. It wouldn't be too long before I learned the truth.

Chapter 1: Summer Uniform and Karaoke

My relationship with Nanami had successfully entered its second month, and for some time now, I'd been looking forward to us getting to hang out and be all flirty with each other as much as we wanted. I mean, come on—I was a guy. I couldn't help thinking stuff like that, especially since I'd learned that we both actually liked each other.

I had thought that the various causes of my anxiety—guilt, obstacles, sadness, interferences—had disappeared, and yet, all of a sudden, new issues were cropping up all around us. There really was truth in the old saying, “With light comes shadow.” Like, just as things seem to be going well, there's always an unexpected pitfall, hindrance, or some other bad thing waiting for you. Apparently, there are other phrases with similar meanings as well.

I'd probably been letting my guard down lately because things had been going so smoothly. Then again, I also wasn't that sharp when it came to recognizing dangers. Bad things had been happening one right after the other. The letter had been the first spanner in the works, but we now also had our exams to think about. I felt like I'd been struck by a blunt object.

“Oh, come on. Exams aren't exactly a bad thing, are they?” Nanami muttered in exasperation. It was a perfectly logical thing to say, of course. I'd previously assaulted Shoichi-senpai with a sound argument, but I now understood firsthand just how much logic could hurt people.

I stole a glance at Nanami, who was walking beside me. She was smiling wryly, looking just as exasperated as she sounded. On this rare occasion, she was wearing a pair of red glasses. Her hair was in one loose braid, with an additional braid at the crown of her head. The softly braided plait was draped over her shoulder and flowed down her chest.

I lowered my gaze from Nanami's face. A crisp white shirt, different from her usual school uniform, jumped into my line of sight. Among all the bad things that were happening, this was perhaps one thing that was refreshing: the

seasonal change in our school uniform. We used to wear blazers, but now we were wearing short-sleeved shirts, and Nanami's pleated skirt was now a cool light blue. That said, I couldn't really tell the difference in the skirt—except that she was making it even shorter than usual to boldly show off her legs.

I was wearing short sleeves too, and my pants were thinner than before, but the uniform for guys didn't really look that different regardless of whether it was summer or winter. Well, maybe it did, but I wasn't that interested in it to begin with. The girls' uniforms looked way more appealing than the guys'—though maybe I was just imagining it. Both girls and guys also had a kind of light summer sweater, but I didn't really like it and so had never worn it. I'd left mine at home, and Nanami wasn't wearing hers today either.

Nanami also wasn't wearing the usual bow at her collar today but instead had left the top couple of buttons on her shirt undone. The view there was pretty dazzling. To be frank, it let me catch glimpses of her cleavage. Whether she was doing it because summer was near or because the temperature was starting to rise, I could empathize with the feeling of wanting to keep your shirt open. I wasn't wearing my tie either and had my top button undone.

"Hey, Yoshin, lean down a little," Nanami, who had been looking over at me, suddenly said.

Lean down? Why?

Wondering what she wanted, I went ahead and did as she'd asked. Maybe she didn't like that I'd been staring at her.

"Mmm, yep. That's good," Nanami suddenly said in an approving voice.

Huh? What's good? As I was trying to figure out what she meant, I felt her gaze hovering over me where it usually didn't. *Wait, is she looking down my shirt?* I reflexively covered the gap. *Hold up. Why am I reacting like a shy teenage girl? Moreover, what am I doing when I was doing the exact same thing to Nanami a moment ago?* I felt foolish, while Nanami had a look of obvious disappointment on her face.

"Aw, you covered it up," she said.

"What were you looking at anyway?" I asked. It was now my turn to act

exasperated. Nanami took a step toward me and stuck her finger into the opening of my shirt. When I snapped straight up in response, she immediately pulled away.

“I thought your chest looked all sexy peeking out of your shirt like that. You work out, so your chest and abs look really sculpted.”

Is she giving me a compliment? I wondered. I’d never even thought about it, so I tried peering through the opening to check it out.

“Aren’t you used to seeing muscles like this though? Genichiro-san and Soichiro-san are a lot more buff than I am.”

“Nah, not really. I mean, they are buff, but it’s not like I’m into bulky guys. I guess they do make me feel safe though.”

I see. I’d had a feeling that maybe that was one of the reasons why Nanami had chosen me. There were muscular people all around her, and since I worked out a little too, I thought that might have made her feel more comfortable—not that analyzing it now meant much.

“So, how do I look?” Nanami asked as she spread her arms wide and started spinning slowly, her skirt fluttering in a way that was dangerously close to revealing too much. Twirling happily, she seemed to be showing off her uniform. Come to think of it, I hadn’t shared my opinion with her yet.

“The summer uniform looks good on you. You look really pretty,” I said.

“Thanks. It looks good on you too. That little glimpse of your chest looks sexy,” Nanami replied, smiling brightly. I know she was complimenting me, but I had to wonder if the word “sexy” could really be used to describe men too. It was a word that I didn’t usually hear to describe me, so I felt a little tickly inside.

“Okay, so you said I looked pretty, but what about in terms of sexiness? I saw you checking me out earlier,” Nanami said. She deliberately pinched the top of her shirt and flapped both sides open and closed, showing off her chest. My gaze was once again guided toward moving parts.

Dang it, she totally knows. Then again, I was staring, not just checking her out.

“You look both pretty *and* very sexy,” I said, delivering a super combo of

compliments. Nanami must have been satisfied by my response because her eyes narrowed in delight and she flashed me a teasing look.

Just as we finished complimenting each other, the wind picked up. It was a spring wind, but it still felt cold as it brushed over our skin. Nanami hugged herself and shivered a little. She had quite a bit of skin showing, so it wasn't surprising that she felt cold.

"Our uniform's changed, but it's still kinda chilly, huh?" she remarked.

"True. The timing doesn't really match the change in weather, does it?"

"Oh, I think I have an idea." Nanami hopped over to my side and proceeded to link her arm with mine. She was awfully close to me—noticeably closer than usual, in fact. Or maybe it wasn't that she was close; it was more that the surface area of where our bodies touched had increased. Because we were wearing short sleeves, more of our arms were revealed. That meant that when we linked arms, more of our bare skin touched than usual.

I'd come into direct contact with her back at the night pool, but although I'd felt nervous then, I'd managed to feign composure by telling myself that it was a special occasion. To be touching like this when we were wearing our normal school uniforms somehow felt more nerve-racking than when we were at the pool in only our bathing suits. Wearing clothes but still having our skin touch sounded risqué even in writing.

The parts where our bodies touched became hot and sweaty, making our skin stick to each other even more. When Nanami twisted her body slightly so that it detached from mine, those parts felt oddly cool. That made the fact that we were apart feel more pronounced than usual.

We weren't actually apart, though, since Nanami would only move momentarily and our skin would immediately come in contact again, making me feel the heat of her body once more. However, because of that brief moment of coolness, that same part felt even warmer than before. Maybe it really was true that skin-to-skin contact was a handy method of survival when you got lost up a snowy mountain.

"It's warm when we're attached like this. It feels so good," Nanami said. With her body close to mine, she began to walk. I ended up doing the same, more so

because I was being pulled along, but we soon ended up in step with each other.

I'd gotten used to people looking at us in situations like these, but today it felt like their stares were a bit different. The students around us were now accustomed to me and Nanami hanging out with each other and fewer people would stare than before. Maybe the difference today was because we had our arms linked while wearing our summer uniforms. They were way more likely to look at us when there'd been some kind of a change.

We walked for some time chatting as usual before I realized something very important. Nanami and I were fairly similar in height. I was just slightly taller than she was, so when I turned sideways while our arms were linked, her face was right there in front of mine. However, also because we were at a similar height, her chest was right below my face. In other words, I could just look down to take in the view of her chest as much as I pleased.

That was business as usual. Well, maybe that's the wrong way to put it, but I already knew how close we were in height. The problem was what we were currently wearing: our summer uniforms.

In my defense, this wasn't something I could control. How many times do I have to say that? I've been saying it so much that it's starting to lose all meaning by way of the Gestaltzerfall phenomenon. Still, even though I didn't actually know if it applied to this situation, it sure felt like I couldn't control what was happening.

I honestly wasn't trying to look. It was just that every time I turned toward Nanami to talk to her my eyes were naturally drawn to her chest. I hadn't noticed it much in the past because she used to wear a ribbon there, but this time she didn't have it on. That's why I couldn't help noticing.

You might think that this was nothing to write home about, given that we'd already walked around with each other in our swimsuits, but our perception of the world alters with the slightest bit of change. This time, we were in our summer uniforms. Even the phrase "summer uniform" was starting to lose its meaning.

My eyes kept wandering in the general direction of her chest, but each time I

intentionally looked elsewhere. I knew it was no use, but it still became a sequence of movements I had to go through.

When I was looking at the general area from far away, things were totally different. The impact of her chest being right there in front of my face was something else. Not only that, I couldn't resist the instinct to look at whatever was in motion. Apparently you could train yourself to go against your instincts; maybe I should seriously consider it. I mean, Nanami definitely noticed that I was looking.

Our eyes were just as expressive as our mouths, and I recently learned that you could often tell where other people were looking. I had to admit that I never thought I'd experience it firsthand. I mean, I never knew when other people were looking at me, and yet here I was, still managing to learn the lesson.

"You can't help it, can you?" Nanami suddenly asked.

My whole body froze. Her question made it clear that she knew. Nanami, however, seemed more relaxed about it than I'd expected. Actually, it wasn't so much that she was *relaxed* but more that she was somehow convinced of something.

Nanami grasped the collar of her shirt and began to waft it like a fan. Her skin became more and less exposed. The motion was even more visually tantalizing than before. Earlier, she'd done it a few paces away from me, but when she did it up close, I could even smell a sweet scent wafting from her. *Jeez, I seem like a creeper, don't I?*

"I mean, I couldn't help noticing when you leaned down earlier too," she said. "Our summer uniform is cool and cute, but it's more revealing, so it can make you feel more nervous."

That sounded like something I should be saying. I wondered why she would say something that sounded more appropriate coming from a guy. Maybe it was what she'd thought when she'd looked at me earlier.

"Should I agree with you, or should I say that's not the case at all?" I asked.

"Hmm. I mean, don't you get excited by this?" Nanami asked, opening up the

collar of her shirt even wider. I couldn't see her bra, but I could see her beautiful skin. I've said this before, but her outfit was less revealing than the ones when we were at the pool. If anything, I'd already seen plenty of her skin, yet this situation somehow seemed so much more suggestive.

I took Nanami's hands in mine and had her close her collar. She appeared happy but also somehow embarrassed because I was the one who'd made her cover herself up.

"Did you get excited?" she asked nonetheless.

"Yes, I did—very much so."

"Hee hee, I got all excited too, so we're the same," she said, reaching out to play with the collar of my shirt. I wasn't sure what was so interesting about seeing my chest, but maybe Nanami was thinking the same about me too. Speaking of summer clothes...

"Is your shirt see-through?" I asked Nanami, who was still messing with my shirt. I didn't mean it in a dirty way; I'd just remembered something. It must have been about a year ago, when we'd switched to our summer uniforms during our sophomore year. The guys in our class were getting all worked up about which girls' shirts were see-through or not.

I hadn't joined in on the conversation, or rather, I didn't really remember it since I hadn't been close with any of the guys who'd been talking about it. Still, talking about this made me recall the conversation. The guys had probably been talking about topics that made sense for adolescent guys, like what kinds of bras they'd get to see. The girls might have found the situation appalling, but as a guy, I could understand where they'd been coming from.

At this point, I couldn't be sure whether Nanami had come up in the conversation. Still, there was no way they *wouldn't* have talked about her. Hence my concern now. It wasn't that I *wanted* her shirt to be see-through. It was more that, as her boyfriend, I felt both possessive and worried, not wanting other people to see my girlfriend like that. However, I had to admit that my question wasn't at all appropriate. I could see Nanami turning red. Apparently, she wasn't afraid to open up her shirt collar in front of me, yet she couldn't cope with having something unexpected like that pointed out to her.

“Um, I’m sorry,” I murmured.

“Please don’t apologize! It makes me feel even more embarrassed!” Nanami exclaimed, looking down and thrusting her hand out to stop me. She then deftly brought that hand to her back and rubbed it several times. Then, as if to gather herself, she cleared her throat before pointing to her chest. I inadvertently looked at where she was pointing.

“I’m wearing a cami underneath, so I don’t think you can see anything. It’s not a cute one though. It’s a plain color, just to make sure no one can see it.”

“I see. Then I guess there’s no need to worry.”

“Actually, back when we were sophomores, Hatsumi, Ayumi, and I wore bras that were super visible underneath, and we got yelled at by the teacher.”

“Wait, that means I totally have to worry about that!”

What were you thinking, Nanami from a year ago? What were you three doing?

At our school, if your grades were good, the teachers never yelled at you. I couldn’t even imagine what kind of thing they were wearing to be scolded under such circumstances. Nanami must have seen the question written on my face, because she stuck her tongue out and began explaining what had happened back then. I was curious, but it was also embarrassing to hear a story related to her underwear.

“So, we went to buy cute matching underwear together and got excited about the idea of all of us wearing it to school on the same day. It was the type of bra to show off, you know? We figured if our shirts were see-through, then we should wear underwear that you should see.”

“Uh, is there such a thing?” I asked.

“Yeah, like, really cute ones. But you know, I guess our shirts were a bit *too* see-through. Now that I look back on it, I realize that we went a little too far. The three of us just got kind of carried away.”

If that had been the case, then the girls that the guys had been getting all worked up over last year must certainly have been Nanami and her friends. If

those three had showed up at school wearing bras that you could see through their shirts, then of course the guys would go crazy. I wondered if things would have been different if I'd been one of the guys making a fuss. When I thought about that, I realized that not getting involved had been a very wise decision indeed.

"Wasn't that embarrassing to do though?" I asked.

"Yeah, it was super embarrassing."

"Then why did you do it?!"

Nanami, perhaps recalling what it had been like, blushed and looked down at her feet. Her eyes seemed unfocused, and her expression was one of discomfort. "I...I just got carried away! I really was super embarrassed, and I ended up wearing my vest over my shirt as soon as I could."

"You were self-destructive even back then, huh?"

"What do you mean, self-destructive?! But jeez, I can't say anything to that. Oh, but I think Hatsumi and Ayumi spent the whole day without their vests on."

What were those two thinking?! Don't tell me that they did it on purpose to see which guys would try to come by to see their underwear, and then eliminate them from the potential candidates...

As I frowned and fell into thought, Nanami must have misinterpreted my silence. She stopped in her tracks and mumbled, "If you wanna see that bad, do you want me to show you in my room next time?"

I looked up at Nanami with a start. Although she was blushing, she still winked at me with a mischievous grin on her face. I felt like I'd been completely had.

Was it just me, or were Nanami's seduction techniques getting more and more intense? She seemed to be slowly closing in on me. *Is she going to entrap me and then pounce at just the right moment? How long will I be able to hold out? Do I even need to hold out?* Various questions kept swirling through my brain. Did I want to see her show off her bra? I couldn't tell from her expression why she was asking me such a question. I decided it was best to let sleeping dogs lie.

As we continued chatting, we finally arrived at school. The commute felt simultaneously short and long. It was an odd experience.

Let's do our best at school again today, I thought, trying to psych myself up, but both Nanami and I froze at the same time as soon as we saw the shoe lockers. *There isn't anything strange inside today, is there?*

Nanami had found that letter inside her shoe locker when we'd been heading home from school. There was no guarantee that there wouldn't be anything in there this morning. Nanami and I looked at each other, both our faces tense from nervousness.

"Do you want me to open it instead?" I asked, but Nanami shook her head slowly. I didn't want her to force herself, but I heard her whisper something.

"I don't want you to see my indoor shoes in there, so I'll open it myself."

It seemed Nanami disliked the possibility of having me see her shoes more than the idea of finding something disturbing in her locker. I wasn't quite sure about her priorities, but maybe this was normal for a teenage girl. I remembered my dad once telling me that looking at a pair of shoes was a great way to judge someone's character. Shoes got dirty and tired as you wore them, no matter what. Apparently you could tell a lot about a person by how well they took care of their shoes, how dirty the shoes were, and whether the heels were squashed down. It hadn't really struck a chord with me when he'd said it, but he had told me to take good care of my shoes, since doing so might come in handy in the future. In that regard, it made sense that Nanami felt reluctant about having her shoes seen by a guy, even if that guy was her boyfriend. It was probably a somewhat embarrassing thing to show someone to begin with.

"If there is something in there, don't hesitate to tell me, okay?" I said.

"Yeah, thanks."

Nanami and I reached for our respective shoe lockers in unison. We extended our hands very, very slowly, then both froze when we touched the knobs, as though we'd planned it ahead of time. We then looked at each other and, after nodding in silence, slowly opened the lockers. Light slowly filtered through the gaps, revealing what was inside them. When we opened the doors completely, though, we saw that there was nothing strange inside.

Nanami and I both sighed in relief. I wasn't sure what I would have done if there had been another letter inside. For Nanami especially, who had found the letter, the situation must come as a relief. We couldn't let our guards down, but it seemed we'd been able to avoid a situation where a letter was placed in her box on consecutive days. We had thought that finding another would be unlikely, but knowing for sure was comforting.

I walked with Nanami, who once again sighed with relief, into our classroom. A few people were already there, but as soon as they saw us, the room started buzzing with confusion. Nanami and I stopped in our tracks, wondering what was going on. A few people were looking at me and Nanami in turn, making us both tilt our heads inquiringly.

"Um, what's up, guys?"

Everyone fell into silence at my question. Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san hadn't arrived yet, so we had no idea what was going on. It was then that something crossed my mind. Was Nanami really the only one who'd received a letter? What if more letters had been sent to other people as well? For example, maybe a note had been posted up in our classroom. What if something like that had happened? It wasn't unimaginable. I should have thought of this yesterday. What was I doing being so careless?

I looked at the blackboard to check whether there was something there, but I saw nothing. It didn't look like someone had erased anything either, so maybe nothing had been written on it directly.

"Um, Misumai..."

In the midst of my frantic thinking, one of the guys came before us. He seemed concerned, repeatedly opening and closing his mouth in an attempt to speak. The words that finally came out of his mouth completely confounded me.

"Weren't you supposed to be dating Barato?!" he cried.

"What?" both Nanami and I said in unison, our mouths hanging open. We looked at each other and tilted our heads in wonder. When we looked back at the guy in front of us, I opened my mouth and kept my head tilted as I considered the implication of his question.

“Um, yeah?”

“Then who’s the girl next to you?!”

“It’s Nanami,” I said.

“What?”

This time it was the guy—or rather, the entire class that let out the same questioning word that Nanami and I had uttered earlier. Several of the female students in the classroom approached Nanami and examined her face. Nanami seemed to want to take a step back from their sudden proximity.

“Oh my gosh, it really is Nanami!” one of the girls shouted, looking up in shock. Nanami seemed surprised and almost hurt by the fact that they didn’t recognize her.

Wait, what’s happening here?

The girls were now surrounding Nanami and talking excitedly. They seemed to be having fun or at least reacting as though they’d seen something rare and interesting. For a moment, I wondered why they were all acting this way, but I understood when I overheard one of their comments.

“Why are you suddenly wearing glasses? Is this part of a makeover? I’ve never seen you wearing glasses, but you look so cute. I was wondering who this Miss Goody Two-shoes was.”

I’d seen glasses work as a disguise in manga and stuff like that, but I never knew that it also worked in real life. That may be an overstatement, but it was also understandable that to anyone seeing Nanami in glasses with her hair braided for the first time might feel that she was unrecognizable.

Nanami typically wore her school uniform like a gyaru and had never worn a braid and glasses to school. Because her style today was one that she didn’t usually sport, the other students must not have realized it was her. You could tell if you looked closely, but if you only saw her from afar or only glanced at her for a moment, you probably wouldn’t be able to recognize her.

I had previously seen Nanami in glasses, a braid, and relatively modest attire, so I hadn’t noticed anything unusual about her. However, it was only because I

had seen her like that before that I knew it was her. Even I hadn't immediately recognized her the first time I'd seen her in glasses—though I eventually had. That was why I couldn't ask the others why they'd failed to recognize her.

It made perfect sense that they would be shocked if they thought I was walking around with my arm linked with another girl. I felt happy about the fact that she and I had got to that point in our relationship and that the people around us also recognized it. The stares I had felt on our way to school were because people thought I was cozying up to a girl who wasn't Nanami.

Nanami was pretty popular, and she stood out. If she'd been acting like her usual self without others realizing that it was her... Wow, this was bad. Was there gonna be another wave of weird rumors? I felt slightly frustrated by the fact that I couldn't have preemptively done something to prevent that. I was about to have another problem on my hands. Oh well. If there were more rumors, I'd just have to deal with them then. Besides, I was fairly certain that as soon as other people learned about how Nanami looked today the rumors would die down on their own.

When I looked over at Nanami, hoping that our problems wouldn't escalate further, I saw that Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san had joined the circle of girls getting excited about her appearance. As I stood there marveling at the fun they were having, one of the guys turned to me.

"Is that what you're into? I don't think I've ever seen Barato wearing glasses before," he said.

So it *was* the first time Nanami had worn glasses to school. It must have been an unusual sight for them. I could understand why everyone was so excited.

In any case, was this what I was into? Judging from everyone's reactions, people probably didn't know that Nanami liked to dress in more modest styles too. It would be easy for me to respond and say that her dressing that way wasn't because of my preferences, but I figured it would be better for Nanami to tell them that herself. In the meantime, I should keep it to myself.

"Yeah, I'm into it," I finally replied.

"Man, it's so awesome that your girl's willing to dress the way you want her to. She looks good in glasses too."

It wasn't strictly a lie; her appearance today did incorporate some of my preferences. Even so, Nanami always dressed in ways that I liked. She even did her hair the way that I liked. The girls aside, I felt like the guys were getting a bit too worked up about the situation.

"Last year, she came to school with her bra showing through her shirt, so there were a lot of guys hoping to get to see that again this year. I guess you got in the way of that though, huh, Mr. Boyfriend?"

Well, that was one way of nearly giving me a heart attack. So it really had been Nanami and her friends that people had been talking about.

"Did you actually see her last year?" I found myself asking.

"Nah, by the time I heard about it, she was already wearing a vest so I couldn't— Whoa! Misumi, wait, calm down! I never knew you could make a face like that. You look hella scary."

I brought both hands to my face. *Uh, do I really look that scary?* When I pinched my cheeks with both hands, the guy offered me a strained smile.

"Forget it, dude. You look okay now."

I'd thought my expression had been pretty normal, not a super scary one. Maybe I was subconsciously jealous about what had happened in the past. *Man, that's really bad of me*, I thought. I mean, even if it was okay to be a little jealous, it probably wasn't okay to express that feeling outwardly.

Reflecting on my errors, I looked back at Nanami, who was now surrounded by all the girls in the class. I wanted to talk with Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san about the letter now that they were here, but it seemed like that would have to wait until later.



We didn't get a chance to talk with Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san until after school. The rumor that I'd feared—the one about me hanging out with another girl—ended up being not as big of a deal as I'd anticipated. It seemed I'd been worrying over nothing, but according to Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san, it was more likely that other people believed Nanami and I would never cheat on each other, given what a famously "adorkable couple" we'd become.

Though it was true that we would never cheat on each other, I wasn't sure how I felt about us being called an adorkable couple. Still, even if I was unsure about the label, I was perfectly aware that they were absolutely right and that there was no room for argument. Even though I had every intention of scaling things back, whenever I was with Nanami, I always ended up prioritizing her over what other people thought of us. I figured our reputation was the result of me doing that. Still, I didn't really recall flirting with her all that much at school. We didn't do that, did we?

Anyway, about that letter...

"The dare, huh?" Otofuke-san muttered. Both she and Kamoenai-san were scowling with their arms crossed. Since I hadn't wanted anything to happen with the letter, I'd kept it in my room and shown the two of them a photo instead. When I had, the two girls both had turned blue from shock. I completely understood how they felt.

"We found it in Nanami's shoe locker," I explained.

"That's so freaky. I wonder who'd wanna do that," Kamoenai-san said, looking at the photo with a nervous expression on her face.

"I thought about telling you both right away, but I wanted to help Nanami calm down first," I explained. "Sorry it took so long for me to tell you this."

"Nah, it's fine. I knew it must've been really tough for her to find this in her locker," Otofuke-san replied.

Nanami herself seemed to be reliving that moment, because she trembled a bit and pressed herself close to me. I took her hand to comfort her.

We weren't currently at school. Instead, we were at a karaoke joint. At first, we'd thought about talking in the usual empty classroom, but given what had happened, we'd decided it might be dangerous to discuss the matter at school. I had thought that we might just talk about it at Nanami's house, but Otofuke-san had made an unexpected proposal—hence the karaoke.

Apparently, Otofuke-san regularly frequented karaoke places when she wanted to talk about confidential matters. The rooms were relatively soundproof, and aside from those in your party, the only people who entered

were the employees. Plus, everyone else would just assume you were there to sing some songs. Learning that people came here for other things was a real eye-opener for me.

The confidential matters that Otofuke-san tended to talk about were to remain a secret. Kamoenai-san was hinting at them, though, so I assumed they probably had something to do with Soichiro-san. But let's get back on topic: why we now found ourselves at a karaoke joint.

"Maybe it was careless of us to talk about stuff at school," Otofuke-san said bitterly.

"I should've thought about that more too, but there's no point crying now," I replied. "The reality is that we ended up getting this letter." It was no use regretting our past carelessness at this point. Then again, my comment didn't really help either.

"Why'd they leave it in the first place though? And why did only Nanami get one?" Kamoenai-san asked, tilting her head. I wondered about that first question myself, but I didn't really understand what she was implying by the second.

As the three of us looked at her, Kamoenai-san fidgeted with embarrassment. *Wait, that's not why we're staring at you.*

"What do you mean?" I finally asked.

"Um, I don't really mean anything by it," Kamoenai-san mumbled, bringing her index finger to her lips. After making a show of thinking deeply about something, she pointed to me—or, more specifically, to the image of the letter on my phone. Everyone's eyes traveled to it. "I just figured that if this person knows about the dare, they'd give a letter to me and Hatsumi too, not just to Nanami. After all, we came up with the idea," she explained.

"Oh," I said.

Now that she mentioned it, I supposed she was right. Nanami was the one who'd carried out the dare, but these two were the ones who'd dared her to do it in the first place. Wouldn't the person who wrote the letter ask these two as well? *Oh, but if that's the case...*

“Then wouldn’t they give me a letter too?”

“Oh, that’s true. But I don’t know. Hmm, I can’t really put it into words, but I don’t feel like they’d send one to the two of you at the same time. If I were in their shoes, I don’t think I’d do that.”

Kamoenai-san was swaying from left to right, her head in her hands. *What does she mean?* I thought. She started spinning in place, moaning as if trying to gather her thoughts. Her movement was making me dizzy, but she continued muttering to herself.

“If you think about it, this person’s probably trying to end the dare, right? If that’s the case, they probably wouldn’t send the letter to the two of you and would instead just send it to Nanami. Hmm...”

I watched for a while as Kamoenai-san continued spinning, but eventually Nanami grabbed her around her waist and brought her to a stop. Nanami and Otofuke-san didn’t seem that fazed, so maybe this was a common occurrence.

“Have you gotten it out of your system yet?” Nanami asked.

“Yeah, thanks. Man, I’m not too bright, so I can’t really make sense of these things.”

“Oh, there, there. Come here, Ayumi. That’s a good girl.”

“Hatsumi, I can’t think straight,” Kamoenai-san moaned, approaching Otofuke-san on unsteady feet. When Kamoenai-san finally reached her, she squeezed Otofuke-san in a tight hug. Otofuke-san hugged her back in silence and patted her on the head.

“Does this happen often?” I asked.

“Yeah, pretty often. Ayumi tends to charge into things based on her gut, so it takes a while for her to gather her thoughts. Still, her instincts tend to be pretty spot-on,” Otofuke-san explained as Kamoenai-san leaned on her as though she’d completely melted. Any ordinary girl would probably have fallen over under the weight of another person, but Otofuke-san didn’t lose her balance at all. In any case, if Kamoenai-san’s instincts were often correct, then why was the letter only delivered to Nanami?

“Well, I guess thinking about it won’t really help us,” Otofuke-san said as the sound of a phone ringing echoed throughout the room. “Oh, I guess it’s about time.” It wasn’t one of our cell phones; it was the phone provided in the room itself. Still holding Kamoenai-san, Otofuke-san picked up the phone and proceeded to talk to the person on the other end of the line. “I think the two of us are gonna head out,” she then said to us. “What do you guys wanna do?”

What should we do? Should we go home too? Or...

I glanced over at Nanami. When our eyes met, the corners of her mouth curled up slightly. “Maybe we should hang out here just a bit longer,” I suggested.

“Yeah, that sounds good,” Nanami replied.

I’d only had an inkling that Nanami wanted to stay, but it seemed I was right. Since she’d been keeping quiet, I hadn’t been totally sure, which is why I’d been the one to suggest it. Nanami attached herself to me happily.

“Got it,” Otofuke-san said. “In that case, the two of us will get out of here, and the two of you can stay.”

Kamoenai-san, still supported by Otofuke-san, opened her eyes wide and looked back and forth between us. She then donned a very suggestive smile that sent shivers up my spine. *Uh, what’s with that expression? It’s creeping me out.* Before I could ask her what she was thinking, though, she and Otofuke-san had gotten ready to go and were already opening the door.

“All right, then. We’re off,” she said. “For starters, we’ll look into who put the letter in your locker. It’ll be a lot quicker if we can figure out who was hanging around the shoe lockers after school.”

“Yeah, leave it to us,” Kamoenai-san added. “We can’t talk about the letter, but if we use the girls’ network, we might be able to figure out who was there.”

The two of them tapped the centers of their chests. Their offer really was helpful. They already had a history of researching all of the male students at our school. Their reliability was next-level.

“Oh, but if you’re gonna look into things, I should too,” Nanami said.

“No, no,” Otofuke-san said, raising her hand to stop her from getting up out of her seat. “Just leave all that stuff to us. You can just keep hanging out with Misumai and take advantage of the fact that you two get to be alone.”

At that, both Nanami and I fell silent. *That’s right. We’re gonna be alone here for a while.*

Seeing us lost for words, the two girls went a step further. “Don’t do anything too sexy just because you’re alone in a soundproof room, all right?” Otofuke-san said. “People can’t hear you, but they do have cameras, so they’ll see *everything*.”

“I actually think you *should* go for the sexy stuff,” Kamoenai-san said. “They’ll never know if you’re just touching, so go for it! Oh, and no need to report to us later.”

“We won’t!”

“We wouldn’t!”

Amused by our panicked responses, the two girls left the room laughing. Nanami and I were left sitting awkwardly next to each other, unable to move as we watched the two of them take off. The door slowly swung back into place and closed with a slight click behind them. As if that were some kind of a signal, the two of us tensed up slightly.

We were alone in a private room.

Being in a room by ourselves while in a public place somehow made me feel extra tense. Was karaoke supposed to be this nerve-racking? Even though it wasn’t the first time alone with Nanami, the fact that we were in a somewhat darkened room increased my nervousness. *What do I do? I have to say something*, I thought.

“Was this okay, Nanami? I had a feeling you wanted to stay, so I asked to extend the time.”

“Oh, yeah. This was fine. I wanted to sing too, since we went through the trouble of coming here. I wonder if Hatsumi and Ayumi wanted to sing too.”

Ah, that’s right. You’re supposed to sing. It completely slipped my mind.

Singing did seem like a good way to relieve some stress. A lot of things had been going on lately, so maybe it would take our mind off things. When I thought about it some more, I realized we'd never talked about our tastes in music. I wondered what kind Nanami liked.

"Since all this weird stuff has been happening to us, maybe we should go all out to try to cheer ourselves up. Come to think of it, this is our first time going on a karaoke date, isn't it?" I said.

"That's true. Let's sing our hearts out, then! What kind of songs do you like to sing, Yoshin?"

Nanami must have been thinking the same thing I had. However, that was when I finally realized that I'd never actually been to karaoke before. This was the first time in my life I'd step foot in a karaoke place. Was it normal for people my age to have never done karaoke before, or was it weird? I was somewhat afraid to mention it, but I decided to tell Nanami the truth.

"It's actually my first time doing karaoke," I confessed.

"What?! Really?!" Nanami asked, tilting her head in surprise. So it *was* uncommon. But I didn't have any friends to go with, and I wasn't going to go with my family. It seemed it wasn't Nanami's first time though.

"Yeah. So, um, it'd be great if you could teach me how to do this," I replied, nodding.

"I see. Are you gonna be singing for the first time today, then?" Nanami asked.

"Yeah, I suppose so. Singing like this is a little embarrassing, though, especially when I've never been before."

"Not at all! But I see now. It's also your first time singing. I'm so happy that I get to share another first with you." Nanami pressed her palms together and smiled adorably, swaying from side to side. The fact that she was so happy ended up making me feel more embarrassed.

After that, Nanami got up and fetched some kind of machine. It looked like a tablet, but it was quite a bit thicker.

“We can do it on our phones too, but let’s try using this first. What do you wanna sing?” she asked.

Apparently, it was a machine you used to select songs. *I see, so that’s how you choose what songs to sing. It’s pretty impressive that you can do it on your phone too. Jeez, phones can do just about everything.*

I actually wanted Nanami to sing first, but she was eager for the opposite. I kind of thought that if she sang something, she’d start feeling better about going through something unpleasant, but if she wanted me to go first, then I was happy to oblige.

Well then, what shall I sing?



Nanami and I had an unexpectedly great time at karaoke. We were only there for about an hour after Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san had left, but singing took up a lot more energy than I’d realized. It also really took a toll on your throat. Even with everything I drank, my throat still felt kind of sore. I only sang about three songs and then spent the rest of the time listening to Nanami sing.

I was also starting to realize just how impressive those streamers who gave live music performances really were. After only three songs, I’d basically hit my limit, but those people would often sing for a really long time. Nanami sang a lot more songs than I did, but she also seemed perfectly fine.



Even more importantly, Nanami was an amazing singer. How can I describe it? I liked her regular voice too, but when she sang, her voice went a touch higher and became even prettier. It rang as clearly as a fresh stream—like I was standing before a cool mountain river that made me feel calm and refreshed. This was all just my imagination, of course, since I’d never seen a mountain river. I can’t do it justice because of my poor vocabulary, but Nanami could sing cute songs in a cute way and cool songs in a cool way. I found myself clapping every time she finished singing. And what about my singing, you ask? Oh, never mind that.

“So yeah, I ended up going to karaoke for the first time,” I said.

“Wow, that’s pretty rare nowadays, isn’t it? I feel like even middle schoolers like Peach-chan have done karaoke before,” Baron-san replied.

“Nah, I’ve never gone either,” Peach-san said. “I don’t have that many friends anyway.”

“Ugh, maybe we should stop talking about this.”

I’d ended up putting Baron-san in a tough spot. I’d even gotten Peach-san involved even though this wasn’t the point I wanted to make. For now, I had to do my best to get our conversation back on topic.

“Well, the whole reason we did karaoke was because we wanted to do something to take our minds off stuff,” I explained.

“Oh, right, the letter. That’s pretty scary, isn’t it?” Baron-san asked.

“Shichimi-chan must’ve been scared, but you must’ve been scared too, right, Canyon-san?”

I’d come out relatively unscathed, but Peach-san was right in saying that Nanami must have been really disturbed by it. That was why I was doing my best to take her mind off things. Still, that didn’t tackle the root of the problem. It would be great if we could get our hands on a clue of some sort, which was why I’d brought it up with Nanami’s friends, who also knew about the dare.

“In any case, it sure is mysterious, isn’t it?” Baron-san said. “If this were blackmail, the person would tell you what they were after, but since they’re just

asking, it makes it seem like they're really bad at communication."

"Right, precisely," I replied. "I can't figure out what they're after either."

"In pervy manga, this is where the perpetrator blackmails the recipient and tries to force them to go out with them, go on a date with them, or otherwise get them to do whatever they tell them."

"Um, Peach-san...?"

Wasn't that a really questionable thing to say? Even Baron-san was speechless. Just what kind of manga was she reading? Setting that aside, though, they'd given me something to think about. Peach-san was right; if a guy with malicious intent knew about Nanami's secret, he might be attempting something devious using that information. I had to think of concrete ways to protect her.

"This is just my take, but the person who wrote that letter might be a girl," Baron-san said.

"You think so?" I asked.

"Yeah. And given what the letter says, I can think of three possible reasons why they sent it."

Three sounded like a lot. I could only come up with one, and I wasn't even sure about that.

"The first is that they simply want to put a stop to the dare. Even though the dare's already ended, this person must not know that."

"That's true. If they knew, they wouldn't write something like this," I said.

That was something I'd thought about too—this person had probably sent the letter because they wanted to end the dare. But why would they want to do that? Was it out of some sort of sense of morality? I was also curious to know when they'd found out about the dare. If it had been early on, then the letter had been sent pretty late in the game. If they knew the dare had already ended, then they wouldn't be sending a letter like that in the first place.

"The second is that they're trying to trick you into telling them something. They're not sure if there actually is a dare, but they heard something about it,

so they want to confirm. Maybe they're just curious about a rumor they heard," Baron-san said.

"If that's the case, can't they just ask us directly? If it's a girl who likes rumors, surely they'd want to find out for themselves."

"I suppose that's true. Maybe this reason isn't terribly likely."

To be honest, the idea that someone might have heard about the dare was a little scary. If a rumor like that really was going around, where had it even come from?

"The third is that they're trying to break you two up. It would be the worst reason, especially given it's malicious. You would have to be really vigilant about a situation like that. Then again, if that were the case, it's odd that they wouldn't just come out and tell you to break up."

At that, I fell silent. That would definitely suck the most. Because the perpetrator hadn't explicitly stated what their purpose was, I'd been subconsciously trying to block that particular possibility out of my head. If this person did have malicious intentions, then I would have to protect Nanami from them. As I clenched my fists in silence, I heard Baron-san's kind words that were clearly meant to put me at ease.

"Since I only know you through the internet, all I can do is lend an ear to your problems, but I'm happy to give any advice that might help with solving them. This letter might be just a prank, but it doesn't seem like a lighthearted one."

"That's true," Peach-san added. "I can't do anything either, but at least I can hear you out and help you get things off your chest."

I was grateful to both of them and really appreciated just how much people around me supported me. It was such a great help for them to listen to me and give me advice on things.

"Thanks, guys. And, Peach-san, it'd be great if you could be there for Shichimi if she ever needs someone to talk to."

"Of course. If there's anything else I can do, please let me know."

Their support really meant a lot to me. I could be there for Nanami, and of

course Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san were there too. Still, she might want to share certain things with Peach-san since they only knew each other online. I'd experienced situations similar in the past: ones where things that were difficult to discuss with people close to me became easier to share once I shared them with people far away. That way, I could first talk with someone and organize my thoughts before bringing them up with people close by.

People might think that I should be able to readily share things with those close to me; I might even have thought that myself when I'd been alone. Still, actually encountering situations like those had made me realize just how difficult doing that could be. That was why I appreciated the fact that Baron-san and Peach-san were willing to listen to me. I really hoped that Nanami could talk to Peach-san about things she wasn't ready to share with me. I wanted her to be able to sort out her feelings and then tell me what she needed to share.

"Whenever any trouble arises, it's best to prepare for the worst. In this case, that would be protecting yourself from any ill will," Baron-san said in a scary tone. He was probably right about that; however...

"How exactly should I do that?"

"Well, to put it simply, I think it's best for the two of you to continue being really close to each other."

"That's it?" I said, taken by surprise. I'd thought that it might be difficult for us high schoolers to take precautionary measures, but what Baron-san had suggested was quite simple. I'd assumed he was going to talk about our mindsets, buying specific things to protect ourselves, or other more tangible things like that.

With a hint of a smile in his voice, Baron-san continued. "Oh, come on. Being close to each other sounds easy, but it's unexpectedly difficult to do."

"Is that true? I feel like we do it all the time."

"Well, maybe it won't be a problem for the two of you. Anyway, don't worry about what anyone else says, and make sure you don't create opportunities for anyone to take advantage of you."

I didn't quite understand what Baron-san was trying to tell me, but I did agree

that I should be careful. It wasn't like I could be with Nanami twenty-four seven, but I at least could tell her if anything ever happened to me.

"I don't expect anything violent to happen, but if this person does have bad intentions, they'll try to get at your mental and emotional weaknesses. That could be even more troublesome than violence," Baron-san explained.

"That's true. I'll have to be careful about stuff like that."

"They might try to get close to your girlfriend when you two have a minor disagreement, or they might even try to get close to you. Actually, that's more what I'm worried about."

"Of someone getting close to me?" I asked, caught off guard. What did he mean by that?

While I remained silent, Baron-san continued. "Like, let's say a girl who's after you and a boy who's after your girlfriend decided to work together. The third possibility I came up with was because of this, which is why I mentioned making sure you two remained as close as ever."

"Um, I know I've said this before, but I'm not popular at all."

"There's no guarantee that that'll remain the same from here on out. You can even think of this letter as a good opportunity. Like they say, the grass is always greener on the other side—which means that there are people who end up going after other people's boyfriends, believe it or not."

I'd seen stuff like that in manga, but did people really do that stuff in real life? I did want to be wary of the possibility that someone might be out to snag Nanami. That meant I mustn't ever do anything to betray her. I had no intention of doing that, of course, but I couldn't do anything to make her doubt me either.

"I'll be very, very careful," I declared.

"Good. As long as you keep it in mind, you'll be fine, and if anything happens, I'm happy to offer advice, so do let me know," Baron-san said.

"I'll listen anytime too!" Peach-san exclaimed.

I thanked both of them again for the umpteenth time, but I hadn't expected

myself to be the target in this situation at all. Was that really the case? I just couldn't believe it. Still, being able to talk about things with Baron-san and Peach-san had made me feel more ready to take on the situation. I felt like I understood what I had to prioritize and what I had to do. They say that tough times are simply roads to new opportunities. Maybe I should think of this letter as giving Nanami and me a chance to grow even closer.

"Now, enough of this gloomy talk. How'd your karaoke date go?" Baron-san asked.

"If you two were in a closed room all by yourselves, that must mean you did the kinds of things that lovers do, right? What did you do? Did you do pervy stuff?"

I understand Baron-san's curiosity, but why is Peach-san asking me this? Why's a middle schooler like her interested in something like this? Wait, is this normal for middle schoolers nowadays? That can't possibly be a positive influence on their education.

Unfortunately, we hadn't really done the kinds of things Peach-san had in mind. Given that it was my first time at karaoke, we'd mainly ended up singing various songs. In that sense, I felt like we'd successfully defused the bombshell that Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san had left in their wake. As Peach-san expressed her dissatisfaction with my report, Baron-san came to my defense.

"You're such a serious guy, Canyon-kun, though I can't say I don't understand how you feel. It's kind of difficult to make the first move, isn't it?"

"Yes, totally! You understand, don't you?" I exclaimed.

It's near impossible for someone like me to do something like that.

"Still, if your girlfriend ever makes a move, you absolutely can't refuse, okay? In times like that, no matter how embarrassed you are, you have to accept her and go along with it. Don't try to run away from the situation by claiming you don't want to do anything yet because you care about her."

Just as I'd been thanking Baron-san in my head, he'd suddenly pulled the ladder out from under me. Given how she'd been acting lately, it was entirely possible that Nanami would make a move. If that happened, would I be able to

respond appropriately?

“Is saying that I want her to save herself the same as running away?” I asked.

“This is just my personal opinion, but yes, I think that’s just you running away. When a girl works up the courage to do something like that, you shouldn’t evade her.”

“That’s so true!” Peach-chan said. “It would take so much courage for her to do something like that, so you should just take it head-on.”

Oh, wow. They’re both piling the pressure on me now. I’d unintentionally stirred up a hornet’s nest, but they were right to say I shouldn’t avoid the issue. I didn’t know if Nanami would actually do that, but if it ever happened, I would have to be prepared.

That was probably what it meant to be going out with someone. Remaining wishy-washy would be totally bad of me and might even make Nanami want to leave me. If we wanted to stay in a relationship and keep liking each other, we had to make an effort every day and consider things like that.

After that, I told Baron-san and Peach-san more about our karaoke date, confessing to them that I was a really terrible singer and asking them for tips on how to improve. The whole time, I kept thinking about Nanami. If the mood ever got seriously romantic, what would I do? I didn’t know the answer yet, but I should continue thinking about it so that I would. Would there come a day when I would have to make up my mind?

Interlude: Listening to Him Sing

Our unexpected karaoke date had come to a close, and I was now studying alone at my desk in my room. With our end-of-term exams nearing, I had to prepare accordingly, but Yoshin didn't sound like he was preparing at all. *How does he prepare for tests in the first place?* I wondered. *Should I teach him my study methods when we study together?*

We'd been studying together regularly, and Yoshin's grades were getting better, but getting ready for a big exam was different from regular studying. The best way to go about them was to figure out all the key points. As long as you kept up with classes, it was pretty easy to figure out what might show up. Still, it didn't seem like Yoshin had been a particularly studious sophomore last year. He looked like the serious type, yet he was so much less serious than even I was. That gap between his looks and his personality sure was funny to me. I'd thought he was a serious, studious type, but he'd turned out to be more of a muscular, athletic type.

I giggled slightly, and my glasses slid down my face. *Oh, I totally forgot I was still wearing them,* I thought. I took them off and put them on my desk. My eyes were a little tired, so I closed them and did a big stretch. It felt really good to loosen up my shoulders. I couldn't help yawning.

"Wow, I haven't sung like that in a while. Damn, my throat hurts. I wonder if I have any cough drops," I muttered, rummaging through my desk. *Cough drops, cough drops... Oh, here's some fruit-flavored ones. Maybe I'll have one and take a little break.*

I picked up my phone and played a video I'd recorded earlier. After a moment, I heard the audio on the recording. Music started playing in the background, then came the sound of Yoshin singing. Unable to pass up the opportunity, I'd begged him to let me get a video of him. I'd wanted to record one of his firsts. I didn't really think I was the type to be into recording things like this. I just thought it would be nice to look back on it one day and talk about the way we

used to be.

His voice sounded slightly different—a little bit higher—than it was when he talked. I guess that was because he was singing a song in a high key. Maybe because he wasn't used to singing, he seemed hesitant and also kind of nervous. I watched him, thinking how adorable he was. I hadn't told him that, but he really was cute. *I wonder if I should've told him. Gosh, I really wanna do karaoke with him again.*

I watched the video for a while, but when it ended, silence filled the room. I swiped my screen to see the image just before the karaoke video. It was the photo of the letter I'd received.

"Is the dare still going on?"

That was all it said. When I'd first read it, I'd gotten really scared. Now, I wasn't so scared anymore. Well, no. I suppose I was still a little bit scared. I couldn't help shaking.

Yoshin was holding on to the letter for me. He could have thrown it away, but he'd kept it, saying he didn't want anything to happen with it. He must have been scared too, seeing a letter like that. Still, I was so happy that he kept asking me if I was okay. That was why I felt better about it now.

"The dare is over, actually," I mumbled to the sender, whoever it was. That's right; the dare *was* over, so I could respond to the question with a resounding "no."

If they wanted to know, they could have just asked me directly instead of sending me a letter like this. I still didn't even know who it was from. Hatsumi and Ayumi had said they'd look into it for me, but I wondered if there was anything I could do. When I'd mentioned that to them earlier, Hatsumi had told me she'd be able to handle things better if something happened. Maybe she was going to ask Oto-nii to get involved somehow too. If Oto-nii and Shu-nii were gonna get involved, maybe I would feel a little better.

Wait, they weren't going to show up at school, were they? Oto-nii was Hatsumi's stepbrother, so he could actually get inside without any problem. What if I ended up running into him?

“What goes around, comes around. This must be karma or something,” I murmured to myself. The foolishness of my past self was now coming back to bite me. Stuff like that happened a lot, and I couldn’t blame anyone else for it. After all, it was all my fault.

Still, I couldn’t help but wonder when the sender of the letter had found out about the dare. The only times we’d properly talked about it at school had been right at the start and at the very end. Aside from that, we’d barely brought it up. Even when I’d talked about it with Hatsumi and Ayumi, I’d never used the word “dare.” At least, I was pretty sure I hadn’t.

This was no good—I couldn’t be sure of anything anymore. I didn’t remember the details of our conversations, but if I really had talked about the dare at school, then the person who’d sent us the letter must have heard about it then. I’d been careless, and it was all my fault. I’d thought everything was over and done with now and that Yoshin and I could finally be together without any more hang-ups.

Unless this got resolved, who knew what people would say about us? I mean, let’s say they got a picture of me and Yoshin making out. I’d feel totally sick! We’d have to do whatever they told us in order not to have the photo leaked or something. That said, we wouldn’t be caught dead making out at school, and I knew we shouldn’t do stuff that we didn’t want getting recorded.

In any case, I was pretty sure our school’s line for sexual misconduct was, you know, doing something *sexy*. If it was just kissing, then it shouldn’t be a problem. The reason I knew that was because one of my friends had, um, tried to do something like that at school with her boyfriend and had ended up getting suspended for it. I remember her laughing about it. At the time, I’d thought it was really foolish of her to do something so stupid at school, where they could totally get caught. Now, though, I understood a little better how she felt. Wanting to feel connected with the person you liked was a perfectly normal desire.

Still, as long as sexual misconduct was prohibited by school policy, there was nothing we could do. That was probably why everyone tried to do it in secret without getting caught. Then there were people like Hatsumi and Ayumi, who couldn’t do anything even if they wanted to.

Anyway, let's get back on topic. Today was Yoshin's first time at karaoke, so we'd focused on singing and hadn't made out at all. We might have been sitting really close to each other, but I'd been busy doing everything in my power to get Yoshin to think karaoke was fun. He'd wanted me to sing too to have a chance to shake off my anxiety. Thanks to that, I was now feeling way less nervous.

How was Yoshin feeling though? Did he feel better too? I hoped he wasn't still feeling weird about things. With that in mind, I decided to call him later.

I replayed the video of Yoshin singing. When I heard him, I somehow felt calmer. He wasn't particularly good. Maybe because it was his first time, there were parts when he was a little off-key. There was even a point when he couldn't hit a high note and started coughing. Still, maybe it was because of his lack of talent that the whole thing felt so dear to me.

I was sure there were lots of people in this world who were good at singing, but if you asked me who I'd choose between a good singer and Yoshin, I would always choose him. That was how comforting his singing was to me.

"I wanna sing a duet with him next time," I murmured.

We hadn't gotten to do it this time because Yoshin didn't know any duets. Well, he did know *some* duets, but we didn't know any of the same ones.

Just as I traced my finger over his image on the screen, my phone started to ring. Wondering who it was, I tapped to see it was Peach-chan.

"Hello, Peach-chan. What's up?" I asked after picking up the call.

"Ah, Shichimi-chan, how are you? I heard about the letter from Canyon-san."

Oh, right. Yoshin had said he would talk with Baron-san and Peach-chan about it. Peach-chan was even sweet enough to call me out of concern. With so many people looking out for us, I was both apologetic and grateful at the same time. It made me feel all warm and fuzzy inside.

"Yeah, I'm okay. Say, what exactly did he tell you about it?" I asked.

"Um, let's see. I'll leave out all the tiny details, but basically, he said..."

Peach-chan proceeded to tell me what Yoshin had shared with her and Baron-

san. She also looped me in on Baron-san's opinions and concerns. Some of what she said was pretty eye-opening.

"Oh, wow. I see. Hmm," I said into the phone.

"Um, Shichimi-chan, I'm getting kinda scared. Are you angry?"

"Oh, sorry, sorry. I'm not mad. I'm not mad at all," I said. Then again, I was kind of peeved. But if I was angry at anyone, I was angry at myself. I was embarrassed that I hadn't even thought of the possibility that Yoshin was being sought after by someone else.

Peach-chan was right—that was definitely a possibility. I mean, Yoshin had been getting more popular recently, and every time I talked about him, more of my friends mentioned how jealous they were of our relationship. When I'd told them we hadn't gone that far yet, some of the girls had even nominated themselves to take my place. Of course, I'd yelled at them, and they'd apologized, saying they were just kidding. Still, there were some things you just shouldn't joke about. But this was why it made perfect sense that someone could have sent me that letter with the aim of taking Yoshin away from me. It was still a total mystery how they'd found out about the dare, but regardless...

"I can't lose," I declared. "Thank you so much for letting me know, Peach-chan."

"Of course. But Baron-san was saying that was just one possibility. It's not a sure thing, okay? It's just one of the worst-case scenarios."

"Yeah, I know. But it's always better safe than sorry, right?"

Although Peach-chan seemed a little nervous about my stance, she didn't disagree with me. Baron-san was right—it was important to prepare for the worst-case scenario. Even when studying for tests, you had to consider what kinds of questions would be on them and which topics might come up. This letter was no different. I had no time to be sitting here feeling scared for myself. Yoshin leaving me would be the worst thing that could happen.

It wasn't that I thought Yoshin would be seduced by some other girl. I sincerely believed that he would never fall for something like that. However, believing that didn't mean that I should do nothing. *Because* I believed in him, I

had to put in the effort to make sure he and I would stay properly connected. Even though I'd said I'd be more proactive and I was complaining to myself about not being able to flirt as much, the truth was, I had probably let my guard down.

"All right, let's do this! I'm gonna do everything in my power to make sure no one takes him away from me!"

"Wait, does that mean you're gonna do something sexy?!"

What, why?! Aren't those thoughts of hers way too smutty for a middle school student? Well, I guess I do understand that kids her age get super curious about stuff like that. Hatsumi and Ayumi were pretty intense back then too.

Even so, Peach-san seemed really mature for her age. Her question even helped calm me down a bit. I took a deep breath.

"Well, I'm not so sure about the sexy stuff, but there are still a lot of things I can do," I said. "Now I realize I don't have the time to be moping around like this."

"I see. I'm glad you feel a little better."

Yoshin and I were facing multiple problems. I had to sort out whatever I could. First was the issue with the letter, which I no longer had to be afraid of. In fact, I was all fired up. I had to be strong if I didn't want to lose to anyone. The second issue was our end-of-term exams. If we failed, we'd end up having to attend summer school. I had to study hard with Yoshin so that we could both enjoy summer break to the fullest. Third and finally—this one was the most important—was summer break. I was going to hang out with Yoshin a lot and push our relationship forward by leaps and bounds. I was planning to do all kinds of stuff. Forget about being more proactive; I was going to outdo even that! I was going to make lots of memories with him so that there would be no way anyone could come between us.

At this point, of course, the only person who knew about these resolutions of mine was poor Peach-chan.

Chapter 2: A Reason to Motivate Myself

When there's a mountain of troubles piled on top of you, it's often pretty hard to figure out how to start dealing with it. That's exactly how I was feeling right now. In times like these, I'd heard it was best to prioritize. If you had deadlines, then you should prioritize the tasks that were due first. If you didn't, then you should sort them by order of importance. Of course, that all sounds pretty obvious, but it was easier said than done. What made it so difficult was the fact that the order of priority didn't always match up with your eagerness to tackle each task.

"No, come on. We have to start prepping for our exams."

Nanami was busy scolding me while I was in a world of my own. She was right; studying for our exams was our top priority. The primary responsibility of the student was to study, after all.

Currently, we were making our way to the rooftop to eat our bento during lunch break. As we talked, we quickly switched topics from wondering what I should do to calling out my excuses. Soon, we arrived at the rooftop and sat down at our usual bench. It was starting to get hotter lately, so there were fewer people around, and we often ended up eating alone, just the two of us. As soon as I sat down, I hunched over with my head in my hands.

"I just can't get myself to study," I moaned.

"Jeez," Nanami said as her brows turned downward in exasperation.

It wasn't that I disliked studying. No, wait. I'd always disliked studying so much that I'd never really done it. More recently, though, I'd been enjoying it because I'd been studying with Nanami.

That being said, as soon as I heard the phrase "exam prep," I immediately lost all motivation to study. I couldn't fathom why. I mean, I knew it wasn't good. Still, there were times when you just couldn't get yourself to do things even if you knew you should.

“Well, even if you say that, you’re still gonna study, right?” Nanami asked.

“Yes. I do want to study...I think.”

“If you fail, you’re gonna have to stay in school all summer. I mean, you shouldn’t be studying just because you don’t wanna do summer school. You should be studying every day anyway.”

Wow, Nanami really was sounding like a teacher. Her mindset was fundamentally different from mine. Contrary to the way she looked, she was actually super serious. She was scolding me for the first time in a while, but she was very obviously making a show of it by putting her hands on her hips and puffing out her cheeks. In her hand was a bag with our bento in it.

Man, she looks so cute even when she’s angry. This is no time to be thinking something like this, but getting scolded by her isn’t the worst feeling in the world. Seeing her in her summer uniform, yelling at me adorably with her cheeks puffed out like that, I feel like I’m about to open a new door that’ll lead me to some unknown fetish.

No, wait. She’s saying all this because she wants the best for me. I shouldn’t be sitting here harboring such impure thoughts. I shouldn’t be thinking that it’d be nice to have her scold me like this every once in a while. After all, it’d be rude if I did something on purpose to get her to yell at me and then end up angering her for real. That’s no way to get her to like me.

Is this how elementary schoolers feel when picking on kids they like? Whoa, am I doing that same thing now, at this age? That’s totally embarrassing. I never even thought of doing something like that when I was actually in elementary school. Why would I get the urge now?

“You’re thinking something weird right now, aren’t you?”

“What?! How did you know?!”

As I sat there feeling ashamed of myself, Nanami glared at me as though she’d seen right through me. Even though she couldn’t have known *exactly* what was running through my head, I still panicked when I saw her looking at me that way. Apparently, my face—including the smile that I thought I’d stifled—gave away much more than I’d realized.

Still looking at me with narrowed eyes, Nanami brought her face closer to mine. This wasn't bad either, but since I couldn't keep thinking stuff like that and I didn't want to lie, I raised my hands in front of me and told her the truth.

"I was just thinking you look cute even when you're angry."

"Is that all?"

I paused for a moment. "I was also thinking that it was kinda nice to get scolded by you."

Wow, when I actually said that out loud, it made me sound like a creeper. "Kinda nice"? What did that even mean?

Nanami removed her hands from her hips and brought the bento toward me. However, when I extended my hand to take it, she raised her hand so that the bento escaped my reach. I looked at Nanami, who locked eyes with me momentarily, then looked away dramatically and closed her eyes. "I won't give my handmade bento to someone like that," she announced.

"Please, anything but that!"

Although she remained turned away, I saw Nanami's cheeks twitch when she heard me cry out. From her expression, it appeared as though she was stifling a laugh. As I wondered what was going on, she opened one eye and stuck out her tongue. Then, still turned away from me, she touched the bento to my hand. Although I wasn't sure if I was allowed to have it, I took it from her anyway.

Still slightly fearful, I looked at Nanami but saw that she had turned back toward me and was smiling with her hands clasped behind her.

"Seriously, how's getting scolded supposed to be nice?" she asked, tracing her finger across my cheek. It was an unexpected gesture that made me wonder where she'd learned to do it. She brought her face closer to mine, then whispered softly in my ear in a voice no one else could hear. It was so truly quiet and gentle that as she spoke with a slight exhalation of breath, it sounded mysteriously seductive. "In that case, would you like me to give you a good scolding every now and then?"

Before I could respond, Nanami quickly moved away and smiled at me shyly. I was left speechless. Seeing that innocent smile, which was nearly impossible to

believe given her seductive whisper moments before, I blushed wondering what kind of an expression she must have had with her lips close to my ear. Maybe because she saw my cheeks turning red, Nanami's innocuous grin became even wider. As though trying to innocently seduce me, she brought her index finger to her lips.

"Shhh," she said as I tried to speak. Then, moving her hand away from her mouth, she pressed her hands to her stomach. "Gosh, I sure am hungry! Let's eat."



“Oh, uh, right. Here you go, Nanami,” I said, handing her the bento I was holding.

“Ooh, thanks! I wonder what it’s gonna be today.”

“I think it turned out pretty good, but it’s not nearly as good as yours.”

The bento I’d handed Nanami was different from the one I’d received from her—because it was the bento I’d made.

One of the things that had changed recently was our lunch hour. Nanami always made lunch for me, and I always ate it happily, but one day I began to ask myself whether that was okay. The only time I cooked was at home—or rather, at Nanami’s house when I went home with her and helped her make dinner. At my own house, I didn’t really cook much at all. Nanami, on the other hand, cooked most days. In fact, she cooked *every* day. Breakfast, lunch, dinner... That, of course, was a lot of work on her part. As soon as I’d realized that and before I’d even realized what I was saying, I’d proposed to Nanami that I would make lunch for her from time to time.

Nanami was really surprised by my proposal. She’d gotten really happy too, but she’d also become pretty worried. I thought maybe she might be worried about me making two people’s worth of bento when I wasn’t used to it, but she’d told me it didn’t make a difference whether you were making bento for one person or two, but I was right in saying it would probably be difficult if you weren’t used to it. So, as a compromise, we had started doing this bento exchange. Nanami wanted me to eat her bento, and I wanted Nanami to try my cooking.

As a side note, I was using Nanami’s usual bento box for packing her lunch. That was why I’d been keeping it at my house. When my parents had spotted it, though, they’d teased me about it to no end. Or, rather than teasing me, they’d seemed legitimately moved by the whole situation. Still, I felt like they’d been making fun of me.

“Wow, this looks delicious. You’re getting really good at making omelets, Yoshin.”

“I still can’t compete with you though. I can’t believe you do this every day.”

Making bento, from coming up with the menu to doing the actual cooking, was really difficult. Now I could understand why it was so annoying to have people say they were happy to eat anything. I did try to stick to my own rule of putting an omelet into every bento. Calling it a rule sounds kind of bad, but if I had at least one item figured out, the rest of the bento-making process was so much easier.

“Mmm, it *is* good. It has such a gentle sweetness to it,” Nanami said.

“We had honey in the house, so I tried using it.”

“Honey, huh? It’s the first time I’ve had it in an omelet. Maybe I’ll try it at home next time.”

Nanami continued eating the bento with gusto. The fact that I’d added a few more omelet pieces than usual seemed to be the key to success. I, too, brought a piece of omelet—this one made by Nanami—up to my mouth. The slight sweetness and hint of saltiness melted over my tongue. I’d taste tested my own omelet this morning, but Nanami’s was definitely better.

Having someone eat my cooking like this made me unbelievably happy. I felt like I was being rewarded for all the hard work I’d put into making it. It made cooking really fun. But reality can hit you even if you’re eating something delicious.

“So, about that exam prep...” Nanami said.

It’s always easier to face reality when you’re absorbed in some kind of happiness. I couldn’t turn away from this now; I had to face the issue head-on.

“Yeah, I suppose I have to get on it,” I moaned.

“Oh, no, um, I wasn’t trying to force you into it or anything. It’s just...”

I’d been trying to sound resolute, but Nanami seemed to want to stop me. As though to eat her words, she took another bite of her bento and began chewing. I didn’t know what was wrong, but studying *was* important. My slacking off had been my fault alone, so there was no need to let me off lightly for it.

Although she’d been the one to bring up our exam prep, she wasn’t saying

anything more about it. Instead, she continued sharing her thoughts about the bento I'd made and started telling me what she wanted to eat the next day. Tilting my head in wonder, I continued hungrily shoveling food into my face. *Yeah, my bento just isn't as good as the one Nanami makes*, I thought. It wasn't until we'd both finished eating and taken a sip of our tea that Nanami got back on topic. Even then, she still seemed reluctant to do so.

"When it comes to studying, motivation is the most important thing," she said.

"Yeah, I guess you're right."

As if trying to get off to a fresh start, Nanami brought her palms together in front of her chest and looked at me out of the corner of her eye. She was right—motivation *was* important. The problem was that I lacked that motivation.

"I know I study a lot now, but there used to be times when I couldn't really work myself up to study either, so I do understand how you feel."

"Really? I thought for sure you've always been on top of things."

"Nah, not always. That's why I tried to figure out which study methods worked for me, and mom and dad helped a lot too."

This was all news to me. I'd assumed Nanami had always been this studious. I supposed people who worked diligently each day and thought about what strategies worked for them over a long period of time performed differently.

As I sat there marveling at her accomplishment, Nanami once again fell silent and began fidgeting. Everything she was saying sounded so promising that I couldn't tell why she was so reluctant to say more—but I was about to find out.

"So, in order to get myself motivated, I, um, used to give myself rewards and stuff," she finally said.

"Rewards?"

"Yeah, like eating something tasty or splurging on an accessory I'd wanted for a while. Stuff like that."

In other words, she used a reward system—a way of motivating herself by planning a reward for when she accomplished something difficult. I'd never

tried it before.

“Apparently, it’s not so effective long-term. Like, people start finding it hard to do anything unless there’s a reward involved. But if it’s just once, it might be a good way to get you started.”

That made sense. Rewarding yourself for everything you did might make it so that you wouldn’t want to study unless you knew you were going to get something out of it. You might also start finding it hard to do anything unless you knew there was something shiny at the end. Still, if it was just once, then maybe I could work really hard if there was a reward waiting for me. If something enticing was being dangled in front of me, even I might be able to get into studying.

Having picked up on what Nanami was trying to say, I got to the point. “In other words, if I work hard at studying, you’re gonna give me some kind of a reward. I get that that might be cheating, but I definitely would feel more motivated.”

Nanami’s eyes widened for a moment, and then she nodded slightly. I was so satisfied that I understood what she was saying that I didn’t even notice her cheeks had turned red. The reason she was blushing was also the reason she’d been so hesitant to bring this up earlier.

“So what kind of reward are you thinking of? Would I get to eat a really extravagant bento? Or what about going on a date during summer break?”

All of the things I could come up with were things we already did on a regular basis, but in order to be a real reward, it had to be a little more extravagant than usual. If the reward was a date during the break, then maybe we could take a trip somewhere. Since we were both high school students, we couldn’t go on a trip as just the two of us. Still, I kind of wanted to invite other people and go out together anyway.

Wait, would it be okay for us to go by ourselves if we got permission? I’ll have to look into it. If we’re gonna do that, though, I should save up some money. I’ve been getting by until now on my savings and allowance, but if we’re gonna go on an actual trip, my savings definitely won’t cut it. Maybe I should get a part-time job so that I can go on more dates with Nanami. I’m not sure what kind of

job I'm cut out for, but if there's a viable option, I should go for it.

As I sat there fantasizing about the possibilities, Nanami muttered something. "Your reward is, um...taking a...th...gether."

She'd spoken so softly that I hadn't been able to catch what she'd said. Usually, even if she mumbled, Nanami's voice carried so well that I could hear her perfectly. Confused by the rare occurrence, I asked her to repeat what she'd said. Nanami looked down at her lap. As I marveled at yet another rare reaction, I noticed her ears—they were bright red, like the way ears turn red when you're out in the cold. No, they seemed even redder than that, but why?

Nanami came closer to me again, except this time, she approached me much, much more slowly than she had before. Then she whispered something in my ear so softly only I could hear. "For your reward, let's take a bath together."

I was too stunned to speak.

Huh? Bath? Excuse me?! By bath, do you mean an actual bath? As in, when you climb into a tub of hot water to get all warmed up? Are you serious?!

"Don't say it out loud, okay? People will hear you," Nanami whispered.

I immediately covered my mouth with both hands. Doing so wouldn't keep me from screaming, but it was better than nothing. I managed to swallow my words. Okay, I didn't actually swallow them, but it sure did feel like it. I swallowed hard, telling myself that it was my words I was swallowing. Then I took a sip of my tea to wash them all down.

A bath, huh? No, even though I'm calm, it's still not making sense.

"Nanami, um, what do you mean by 'bath'?"

"Oh, I was just thinking that going on a date or making a super nice bento might not be enough of a reward."

"I-Is that right?"

"Yeah! So I thought that maybe taking a bath together would qualify as a reward instead."

How had she arrived at that conclusion? It was absolutely insane. Someone else *had* to have put her up to this. A date or gourmet bento would have been

enough of a reward for me, but Nanami seemed to have made up her mind.

I felt ashamed of my own lack of self-awareness. This definitely wasn't okay. Nanami was making an offer like this in order to motivate me. Was I the kind of guy who couldn't even get himself to study unless his girlfriend went this far for him? Maybe Nanami was right in saying reward systems like this ultimately became unproductive.

At the same time—as a totally separate issue from whether I was studying or not—I was starting to think that it was rude of me not to seem interested. I mean, come on, Nanami was offering me a bath with her. Who was I to say that wouldn't be an appropriate reward? It was a fantastic reward, really. Setting aside whether I even had the guts, it wasn't my place for me to reject her offer.

“But still, getting naked would be going too far,” I muttered.

“What?!” Nanami looked up in surprise, her eyes as wide as saucers. Apparently, she hadn't expected me to say that at all. Given the fact that she was the one who'd suggested we bathe together, I tilted my heart in puzzlement.

“N-Naked?!” she yelped, covering her mouth as she flushed bright red. She swiftly leaned in closer to me and whispered, “Why would we be naked?!”

“Huh? I mean, if we're bathing together, wouldn't we both be naked?”

Nanami looked panicked and began muttering as if letting the fact sink in. “That's right. You would normally be naked, wouldn't you?”

Wait, was that not what she had in mind?

“I-If that's what you want, then I'm willing to bathe naked together!”

“Hold up, Nanami! Stop! I mean, it's my bad for associating taking a bath with being naked, but what were you thinking of instead?”

Nanami seemed about to take another leap, so I raised both my hands in front of her to stop her. She took a deep breath to collect herself. Then, still sitting down, she slid even closer to me. Leaning in again, she spoke softly so that only I would hear her. Her voice was barely above a whisper, but unlike earlier, it reached my ears loud and clear.

“I was, um, thinking of wearing my bathing suit while helping you wash up.”

“Bathing suit...”

I guess that would be okay, right? Wait, is that not okay? I wondered. The impact of the initial thought had me feeling like my sense of right and wrong had gone totally haywire. *Let me think about this. Since there's water in both places, wearing a swimsuit in the bath might be just like being at the pool.*

I recalled a scene at the night pool. Seeing Nanami in her bathing suit had been more than a little stimulating, but it had also seemed natural given the fact that we were at the pool. In that regard, it must also be natural to wear a swimsuit around any kind of water. Even though bathing together would be problematic, wearing swimsuits would eliminate that problem. Yeah, that made perfect sense. I mean, a bath and a pool were basically the same thing, just with the water at different temperatures.

All right, fine. I was trying to come up with excuses—taking a bath together would be a bad idea even if we were wearing swimsuits. While the water made it similar to the pool, the very fact that it was a bath made the idea completely scandalous. It was really strange that wearing the same thing in a different place upped the seduction level. Maybe that also had something to do with a bath being such a small, enclosed space.

I didn't know how she'd interpreted my silence, but Nanami followed up by murmuring, “It'd be a different bathing suit from last time...one that's kind of sexy.”

She'd wear a different but sexy bathing suit.

I thought the one before was plenty sexy, but it'd be even sexier than that! What? What kind of bathing suit could that possibly be, and when did she manage to buy something like that?!

As I stared at her without even realizing it, Nanami twisted her body and tried to cover herself up with her hands. Glowing red, she pointed her index finger up and said, “A-Also, not failing any of the tests is too easy, so you're gonna have to get above-average scores in all the subjects! If you do, then we can...”

She'd been speaking pretty loudly at first, but as she'd continued, her voice

had grown softer and softer. Although I was sitting right next to her, I could barely hear the word “bath” toward the end; at this rate, the people around us would probably only think I was getting scolded by her for some reason.

Above average scores, huh? That actually sounded pretty tough. Then again, it was probably tough for me alone, since an average score was supposed to be pretty normal. Still, even as a reward for such a difficult task, this was probably too good to be true.

What should I do? I wondered. Just a moment ago, I’d been thinking I shouldn’t simply reject such a proposal from a girl who’d worked up the courage to make the offer. I also didn’t want Nanami to think I was rejecting the proposal because I thought she wasn’t attractive enough. The attractiveness of the proposal had nothing to do with how attractive she was, but I could understand why someone might take it that way.

The reason I’d thought we shouldn’t do this was because my sense of right and wrong had been putting a stop to it. I had presumed—incorrectly—that bathing would involve getting naked together. After all, it *was* pretty normal to be naked in the bath, but Nanami was saying that she would wear a swimsuit. Wouldn’t this mean there was nothing to be concerned about? Something inside of me was telling me to take her up on the offer. However, something else inside of me was telling me to decline without hurting her feelings.

Now I finally understood those scenes I saw in manga, where the angel and the devil whisper into the character’s ear. When it’s actually happening to you, it really is difficult to make up your mind. Even so, I reached a decision.

“Nanami...”

“Wh-What?!”

I placed my hands gently on her shoulders. She nearly leaped out of her skin. The slight jolt of her body reverberated comfortably into my hands. Inhaling deeply, I calmed myself down and then shared my resolve.

“I’m gonna study really, really hard.”

I thought I’d done a pretty good job of expressing just how made up my mind was. That most definitely was not because I’d become fixated on the idea of

bathing with Nanami in her bathing suit. My newfound resolve had come from my understanding that unless I found a way to motivate myself, Nanami would have to take on my burdens with me. I should have been working hard from the very beginning—on my own volition, without anyone else having to tell me to. I had to study hard, get above average on all my exams, and enjoy summer break together with Nanami.

There was still that thing about the letter, but I had to get on top of my studies first. I was a student first and foremost, after all. That—not because of any reward—was why I had become super motivated, but Nanami seemed somewhat astonished. Wait, was she actually looking kind of suspicious?

Nanami thought for a moment, then flashed her usual smile. That is, it *looked* like her actual smile, but there was a slight bit of pressure that seemed to come with it. She brought her face closer to mine and looked at me with a piercing stare. The smile still on her face scared me a little.

“I see. I’m glad you’re feeling a bit more motivated. I guess the reward worked, huh?” she said.

“Oh, no. Actually, I just realized how pathetic I was being. I’m not doing it just for the reward,” I mumbled, expressing my excuse—I mean, my resolve.

Nanami remained silent, staring at me with the same smile still plastered to her face. The fact that she was still smiling, rather than glaring at me with narrowed eyes, strengthened my fear. I knew that the weather was getting warmer, but it wasn’t so hot that I should be sweating. Even so, I felt like I needed a towel. I guess this was what it meant to sweat under pressure.

Still looking at me, Nanami whispered slowly, as though to admonish me, “And what’s the truth?”

“I would very much like the reward!”

“Very well, then!”

And...scene.

Nanami exhaled from her nose with great satisfaction before puffing out her chest. She had a notably proud expression on her face—a very proud expression indeed.



I wondered if she was happy that her proposal had been accepted. If it hadn't been for the fact that the proposal had been for us to bathe together, I would have been able to more genuinely applaud the situation. I was still caught between going along with her idea or not. My thoughts were wavering between the two camps.

What kind of guy could say no to this though? If anyone like that existed, I wanted to meet them. I mean, it was a proposal made by one's beloved girlfriend. No matter the trap or ulterior motive involved, you couldn't *not* give an immediate "yes." I was a healthy high school male; of course I was curious.

Nanami's proud expression slipped away, and she started chuckling. No longer embarrassed, she seemed instead to be genuinely happy. Seeing her somewhat unexpected smile, I couldn't help laughing myself. We ended up laughing together for some time, which must have looked strange to those around us.

"Seriously, Yoshin, I can't believe you got all motivated as soon as I mentioned a reward. It's so tough having such a pervy boyfriend."

Despite what she'd said, Nanami seemed pleased. I couldn't fight the urge to reply in kind.

"Hey, wait a minute. Aren't you the pervert for suggesting it in the first place?"

Just as I was about to say, "It's tough having such a pervy girlfriend," I realized that that might open up a Pandora's box and immediately stopped myself. Was I the only one who found it more difficult to call a girl perverted than to call a guy the same thing?

Nanami, on the other hand, seemed completely unconcerned and was pinching the edges of her shirt. "Hmm, maybe I've been influenced by my pervy boyfriend. After all, you've done all sorts of things to me."

I felt the ripple effect around us as people reacted to her comment. She was now speaking normally rather than at a whisper, so of course people could hear if they were listening. I looked around in a panic. Everyone immediately looked away. *I haven't done anything though! Is this the start of yet another weird*

rumor?

I hadn't expected Nanami to reply like that and not even bother to deny it. *Nanami, you sure have leveled up.* Just as I was thinking that, I noticed her ears were red. *Ah, she's just putting up a front again.* I reached over and touched her blushing ears.

"Nnngh!" Nanami yelped, letting go of her shirt and leaping up into the air. I'd only touched her to point out how red her ears were, but the people around us started murmuring again. Maybe that had been the wrong way to go.

Nanami pressed down on the ear I'd touched and glared up at me, her face completely red as tears welled in her eyes. She was pouting too, trying to show me just how angry she was. "Y-You can't suddenly touch me and surprise me like that!"

"Sorry, I just saw how red you were getting and thought maybe you were overdoing it again."

"Jeez, I *was* embarrassed, but I was doing my best so that maybe you'd get even more motivated. You like it when I do stuff like that, don't you?"

I didn't dislike it. In fact, if I had to be honest, I liked it very much. Still, when it came to Nanami, it wasn't over until she got embarrassed like this. Seeing her self-destruct was quite endearing.

Regardless, thanks to Nanami, I now felt completely motivated to study. I might even go so far as to say that I was overly motivated.

"I can't help but feel motivated when you offer me rewards like that," I said.

"Jeez, you really are a pervert."

Nanami was about to start down the same path. I knew I could respond, but I decided to walk a different route instead. We'd never get anywhere if I didn't.

"I mean, wouldn't you feel kind of offended if I couldn't get myself motivated even with *that* as a reward?" I asked.

Nanami, who had been smiling suggestively, made a show of considering my question. She then crossed her arms and, adopting a bitter expression, muttered, "I most definitely would."

That expression of hers, with her brow deeply furrowed, was one I didn't see often. In fact, it made her look even more angry than her earlier one. *I knew it. Of course she'd get upset.*

"Ah, now that you mention it, that reaction would really piss me off. I'd be like, 'What, I'm not attractive enough? I don't do it for you?!' That kind of thing."

Nanami seemed genuinely upset. Putting her thoughts into words seemed to anger her more, because now she was kicking her feet. I supposed I could understand. Still, her skirt was on the shorter side, so her kicking made me worried that I might be able to see too much. *There isn't anyone in front of her, is there?*

She started rocking from side to side, all the while kicking her legs. Then she continued speaking, matching her words to the rhythm of her body. "Well, I guess it would make me angry, but I think I'd be more sad than anything. I'd wonder if you just didn't find my body attractive."

"Please don't say it like that. Besides, I really was happy about the reward."

"That's true. I guess you really do like my body."

Nanami looked down at herself, then placed her hands on her hips. She then slid her hands slowly upward while laughing happily. When her hands reached her collarbone, she removed them from her body. I followed the movement of her hands and felt my cheeks grow hot.

Her gesture was incredibly sexy, but Nanami was probably doing it without realizing it. I wondered what would happen when she did; the idea scared me a little. I felt like the people around us drew in a collective breath. That probably couldn't have been helped.

"In any case, where'd you get an idea like that?" I asked once I'd calmed down a bit.

"I was talking with Peach-chan the other day about what kind of a reward might get you motivated. She told me all about the kinds of rewards she reads about in manga and stuff."

That was unexpected. *Wait, seriously? Peach-san, what in the world were you*

thinking? What kind of manga do you usually read?!

In manga, however, the characters were usually naked. The whole bathing suit thing was something Nanami had come up with. The two girls seemed to have reached the conclusion that being naked would be way too embarrassing.

In my mind, the image I had of Peach-san was slowly transforming from one of a quiet middle school student into one of a very salacious middle schooler instead. I felt like Nanami and Peach-san combined would be a different type of dangerous from the Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san combo. In fact, the idea made me deeply concerned. *Maybe I should try to gently steer Nanami away from that direction when I get the chance. Still, I have to praise the two of them for what they came up with this time.*

“She also said that when you get really motivated, I should praise you by saying, ‘Wow, a lot came out.’ What does that mean, Yoshin?”

“What the hell is that girl teaching you?!”

This was no time for praise; this definitely called for a major talking-to.

I was absolutely shocked to learn just how much inappropriate information Peach-san housed in her brain.



That was how my mission of not getting any failing grad—I mean, of getting above-average scores on my end-of-year exams came to be. And I had to do it in all subjects. If you’d asked me from a year ago, I would have said that it was unthinkable. Still, normal people must do it all the time. I just needed average scores, after all, and I was supposed to be average. That being said, I actually had no idea how smart I was, given that I’d never compared test scores with my friends. Just how much of a loser did I used to be, anyway?

Now that I had a goal, the only thing to do was to work toward it. Motivation really was important. It was a wonder how I’d had so little of it before all this. Nanami couldn’t believe how quickly my attitude about studying had changed. I also couldn’t believe that I was the type to be so easily swayed by the prospect of a reward. Long story short, I worked hard at my studies. I worked my butt off, really. I studied so much that I didn’t even play video games. I studied harder

than I ever had before.

Baron-san yelled at me a lot—as in, he scolded me for having played my game before when I should have been keeping up with my studies. My parents were exasperated with me too. When I told them I couldn't believe they would react that way when their son was studying so much, they saw right through me and guessed that Nanami had come up with a reward.

For a moment, I wondered if Nanami had said something to my mom, but mom said it was just a mother's intuition. If I thought more about it, I would have known that Nanami wouldn't have been able to tell her. I wasn't even sure Nanami had told her own mom about it. Since Tomoko-san was acting the same as always, Nanami probably hadn't told her. If she had, Tomoko-san would probably be all smiles, making fun of us at every opportunity.

Actually, no. Maybe a normal parent would stop us if they found out. Taking a bath together seemed for sure like something that would get us in trouble. That meant that only me, Nanami, and Peach-san knew about the reward.

"Peach-san, just what kind of ideas are you giving my girlfriend?" I eventually managed to ask over the phone.

"Oh, from the sounds of it, I'd venture to guess that your reward is a bath. How nice! I hope you get to fully enjoy Shichimi-chan's curvaceous body!"

I felt like she was giving me the thumbs-up over the phone. *Seriously, what is wrong with this middle schooler?*

"Why the heck are you talking like a middle school guy? And more importantly, telling her to say a lot of anything came out is going a bit too far. That's not okay."

"It's not? A streamer I like said it once during a live stream, so I thought that maybe boys liked stuff like that. Wait, did it mean something weird?!"

Oh, shoot. I just said something I shouldn't have. It seemed Peach-san had been giving advice without knowing what it meant either. Her voice sounded somewhat panicked.

I see, so Peach-san didn't know either, huh? I don't feel like I can explain this properly to her. Nope, no can do. I'm gonna have to change the subject.

In the end, I thanked Peach-san for her help, though I did warn her to keep things at a manageable level. Thanking people was important. Peach-san was delighted and told me she was already pumped about giving advice the next time something came up. I didn't have the heart to tell her not to. I was a little scared of what she might say next, but I was also kind of looking forward to it. I wanted to believe it wouldn't be anything too crazy.

In any case, I worked hard at my studies day in and day out. People might tell me I should do that all the time, but I really did work hard. And at the end of it all...

"I'm exhausted," I groaned as I melted onto the bed. Using parts of your brain that you didn't normally use was so draining. Maybe because I'd been on edge these last several days, as soon as I'd relaxed the slightest bit, fatigue had hit me like a brick. I felt like I was about to fall asleep in my school uniform, but of course I couldn't do that.

"Yoshin, it's time for tea!" Nanami announced as she opened the door to my room and walked in with a tray in her hands.

You might be wondering why I was allowing a guest to do such a thing at my house, but Nanami had offered to brew us some tea when she'd noticed how exhausted I was. Ever grateful, I'd decided to take her up on the offer. I'd thought that maybe she wouldn't know her way around our kitchen, but there'd been nothing for me to worry about. She knew precisely where everything in my kitchen was. When I thought about it, I remembered she'd occasionally cooked in our kitchen with my mom, so maybe she'd learned where things were then. In fact, she probably knew even more about our kitchen than I did. Even though I'd started cooking occasionally, I didn't cook with my parents.

"Thanks. Sorry I made you do this," I said.

"No worries. Um, can you genuinely not get up?"

"Uh, I think I'll be able to in a minute or two."

Maybe collapsing onto the bed had been a mistake. I felt like I had no strength left in my body anymore, though that was probably just a matter of will. Was this burnout?

Nanami placed the tea on the table and sat down on the bed. I felt pathetic that I was basically immobile when Nanami had taken the time to visit. As the sound of the bed creaking reached my ears, I felt Nanami touch me gently. “I had no idea you were that exhausted. It’s a good thing we’re done with all our exams, huh?” she said.

“I must have run out of steam because I know there are no more tests to take.”

“Then maybe we should have tests all the time,” Nanami said, grinning.

That sounds terrifying. I can’t even stand the thought. As I moaned in trepidation, I heard Nanami begin to giggle. Her laughter lifted my spirits a bit. Even though I couldn’t see her, I knew she was laughing adorably, probably with a slightly mischievous smile on her face.

Looking up at the ceiling, I sighed softly. That’s right—our exams had finally ended today. It really had felt like one long battle. Exam week was essentially a large-scale combat event in the form of a three-daylong raid, which I had somehow managed to get through in one piece. Or perhaps I should say multiple pieces.

Still, I had to admit that normal people probably didn’t end up so exhausted. I was only like this because I was paying the price for not having studied consistently until now. True effort is working hard every single day. I’d known that in theory, but this time around, it had really been drilled into me. More than anything, though, if I was like this every time we took a test, I’d feel bad about Nanami helping me out.

As I lay there feeling slightly guilty, my ear began to tickle. It seemed Nanami was playing with it with her fingertips. I hadn’t realized she’d gotten so close. She traced my ear with her finger, flicked it, and then pinched my earlobe. My soft, bendable ear changed shape depending on how her fingers molded it, and a funny sensation—like an itch I had to scratch—ran through me with each touch. I wondered what Nanami thought every time my body reacted to her fingers’ movements.

“It really took me by surprise, you know? I mean, you ran out of steam as soon as the last exam was over,” she said.

“Yeah, I’m sorry about that,” I mumbled.

“I wanted to go do karaoke with you again to celebrate.”

“I really am sorry. I promise I’ll make it up to you.”

Karaoke, huh? I supposed I had heard a few of our classmates saying that they were going to go. Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san had gone too. I wondered if that was normal. It wasn’t something I was used to doing.

The whole time we were talking, Nanami continued playing with my ear. Since I felt like I owed her one, I just let her do what she wanted.

We remained that way for a while, but then the sensation suddenly disappeared. Just as I was wondering whether she’d gotten bored, I felt a slight impact on my stomach without any warning. Something hard and heavy laid itself on my abdomen. Trying to figure out what it was, I lifted my head and looked down, only to lock eyes with Nanami. I hadn’t been expecting her to use my belly as her pillow.

“Your tummy feels different from your lap. I wonder if it’s because you have a six-pack,” Nanami remarked, her head squarely on my belly.

“Isn’t it uncomfortable?” I asked awkwardly, not knowing how to respond.

“Umm, I guess it’s a little taller than my normal pillow. If I fell asleep, my neck would probably hurt the next day, but it feels nice to lie on someone like this.”

Nanami lifted her hand and attempted to touch my stomach. She was lying in a really awkward position, on her back with both her hands raised toward her head. Even my neck was starting to hurt. With her hands outstretched and her back arched, she was sticking her chest up in the air. I felt like I shouldn’t point that out to her though.

She dexterously began rubbing my stomach near her head. What was I supposed to do in this situation? Maybe I should just let things be until Nanami was satisfied.

“You’re really touching me a lot today,” I commented.

“We couldn’t really do all this while we were studying, you know? The ban has been lifted starting today!”

It was true that while we'd been preparing for exams, we'd been holding off on going on dates. We hadn't really gotten very touchy-feely with each other during that time either. We'd both agreed on waiting to do stuff like that until we were done with our exams.

Still in her awkward position, Nanami continued running her hands skillfully along my body. She wasn't touching anywhere weird, and since it was over my clothes, I wasn't getting too worked up. I totally wasn't, but if she kept going, I might start to feel something. *Uh, how long is this gonna go on?*

"You can touch me too, Yoshin," Nanami said.

"Huh?" I replied. *I can?!*

Both my hands reacted to Nanami giving me the okay. My body felt sluggish, but I could at least move my arms. However, there was just one problem. I was lying down, and Nanami was using my stomach as a pillow. In other words, we were lying in a sort of T shape. At this rate, if I moved my hands, about the only thing I would be able to touch was her head. Her head was okay, but below her head were her neck and shoulders, and then beyond that was her chest. If I really stretched out my arm, I might be able to reach her stomach, but that would be a risky move. If I maneuvered awkwardly, there was a good chance that I would end up touching her boobs instead.

"You know, when we were on our trip, I accidentally touched your stomach. Is it okay for me to do it now? I seem to remember you saying it was more embarrassing than me touching your chest."

Even though I'd tried to change the subject, I'd ended right back at the topic of touching. The incident had left such a strong impression on my mind that I couldn't help recalling it clearly.

I suddenly felt the weight disappear from my stomach. Nanami had raised her head. Had I been touching her, it would have been a pretty close call. Just as I was enjoying the sense of relief, an even heavier weight pressed on my stomach. Because I wasn't expecting it, I let all the air inside me escape my mouth with a loud "Oof!"

Huh? Is this her way of protesting? I wondered. When I lifted my head to look Nanami in the face, I discovered that her head wasn't there anymore. What I

saw was her skirt. *What? A skirt? It's a school skirt—one of the summer ones.* When I lifted my gaze, I saw Nanami straddling my waist. *Um, I understand why she'd sit up, but why is she straddling me instead?*

I was pretty sure this was what they called a mount in martial arts, like when the person on top was about to pummel the person on the bottom. *Is she going to slap me? No, wait. Even if she's angry, Nanami isn't the type to slap anyone. But if she isn't trying to do that, then what is she trying to do?*

Nanami's warmth, weight, and softness began to spread throughout my body. The pressure felt somehow comforting.

"Heh heh heh..." Nanami flashed me a fearless smile that seemed to suggest she was proud of herself. She didn't look angry, but her expression scared me a bit as I looked up at her.

"N-Nanami?" I said.

As I lay there, completely caught off guard, Nanami moved both her hands as she continued snickering. I braced myself, but Nanami's hands didn't touch my body.

"Ta-da!" she exclaimed proudly as she lifted her shirt, displaying her cute belly. I could even see her perfectly shaped belly button. Oblivious to my confusion, Nanami was triumphantly showing me her stomach. "Heh heh, I've actually been working on my abs in secret, so now it's okay if you touch me! Ever since I saw your abs at the pool, I've been working hard without telling you! What do you think? Huh? Huh?!"

Nanami was holding up the edges of her shirt and fluttering it like a matador. Didn't they do this sort of thing to rile up bulls? I remembered hearing that the color of the cape didn't really matter, though maybe I was wrong. In any case, none of that mattered at all right now. The problem was that her waving her shirt like that was getting *me* all excited. I felt like I was going to turn into a bull.

Nanami's eyes were sparkling innocently, like those of a child waiting to be praised. Was she waiting for me to praise her? If she was asking what I thought, that was probably it.

"That's, um, a pretty stomach you have there," I said.

I'd thought her stomach had looked beautiful even back at the pool, but I honestly couldn't tell much of a difference between it then and now. Maybe that was because she'd been wearing a bathing suit back then, which had ended up leaving a strong impression on me. However, her lifting up her shirt like this seemed to be doing more damage to me than if she were just showing me her stomach. I knew I'd already seen it, but there was just something about showing me something that would normally be hidden.

Even though I'd praised her, Nanami was still showing me her belly. As I asked why, she looked kind of frustrated. *Did I do something wrong?*

"Jeez, you have to actually check! Touch it! Come on!" she exclaimed.

"What?!"

Nanami took my hand and placed it directly on her stomach. I heard the soft sound of my hand making contact and felt her silky, smooth skin on my palm. On the trip, I'd been half asleep, and at the pool, we'd been sitting on the float with her back against my chest. This was probably the first time I was touching Nanami's stomach while facing her.

At first, I was touching her with just one hand, but soon I reached out my other hand too and began to use both hands. I was touching her stomach as she held her shirt up. It was soft, lean, and seemed about to break if I put too much force into my touch. Her skin felt supple and had a distinct feel to it. When I added a little more pressure, her tummy changed shape around my fingers. It had a soft and squishy texture that made me want to keep touching it forever.

"Nnngh... Aaahn!"

Nanami's sudden cry took me by surprise for a moment, but she remained on top of me. That was why I found myself touching—no, *squeezing* her stomach again.

She cried out again, and then a sigh escaped from her lips. Although I was beginning to enjoy myself, I was also beginning to wonder whether I was allowed to keep going. All I was doing was touching her stomach, but I felt like I was doing something completely bad. Or was just touching her stomach a bad thing?



Maybe it was just me, but I felt like Nanami was beginning to sweat—or was it my hands that were sweating? I couldn't tell at all. Because of the sweat, the sound of damp skin touching skin filled the room. I had fallen completely silent, and even Nanami was only letting out shallow breaths without saying a word.

When I realized she wasn't saying anything, I glanced up at her and saw that she was pressing her hand to her mouth to muffle her voice. Her eyes were tearing up, her cheeks were flushed, and her brow was furrowed as though she were in agony. I instinctively took my hands off her body.

“Phew!”

Just as I let go, Nanami's upper body collapsed against mine. With her now lying on top of me, we ended up embracing each other on the bed. Nanami moved her face closer to mine. I could hear her panting softly into my ear. Every time she let out a breath, a tingle spread from my ear throughout my body. I swallowed hard.

Then, as if that were some kind of signal, something else filled me with shock. Following the feel of her breath came a more direct sensation—one that differed from when she'd been playing with my ear earlier. I couldn't see what she was doing, but Nanami's hands were now on my body and so weren't anywhere near my ears. Still, it felt like my ear was being pinched by something—something soft and warm.

Is Nanami biting my ear with her lips?!

“Nom...”

“Whaaa—!”

Nanami's lips were playing with my ear. The soft, moist sensation was like nothing I'd ever experienced before.

Wait, isn't this bad?! I can't say for sure, but I have to stop this. This is getting out of hand. The whole time I was thinking that, though, the sensation didn't stop. Like Nanami earlier, it was now my turn to keep myself from saying anything.

“Hey, N-Nanami, why don't we calm down a bit?” I asked, putting my arms

around her and patting her on the back. I tapped gently as if trying to comfort a small child. I wasn't sure if that was the right move or not. She snapped back to reality and began talking while still holding my ear between her lips.

“Hi am halm.”

In spite of my efforts, my body instantly reacted to the intense sensation. I'd had no idea that having someone talk while nibbling on your ear could be so stimulating. Nanami removed her lips from my ear and rested her weight on me. We both remained silent for some time.

Even though I hadn't been aiming for this, I ended up holding Nanami on my bed. I wasn't holding her really tightly, so she could have wiggled out of my arms if she'd wanted to. Still, she didn't move. My body felt incredibly light, so much so that I couldn't believe how lethargic I felt earlier. And yet it still wouldn't move.

With neither of us moving at all, we lay together with her on top of me, both of us in our school uniforms.

“Nanami?”

I didn't know how much time had passed. It had probably been only a few minutes, but it felt like Nanami had been lying on top of me forever. When she heard her name, her body quivered, then she slowly raised her upper body off of mine. We were back in our mounted position from earlier, but her expression was different from before. Her eyes looked somehow blank, but there was also a light burning deep inside them. Her cheeks were flushed, and her hair had fallen out of place and over her eyes, giving her a highly seductive look. Nanami was just looking down at me.

“N-Nanami?”

She didn't say anything in response. Her body did react, though, as she began moving slowly. It was as if she were moving in slow motion. I followed her movement with my gaze. She reached out and touched my cheek. Her hand felt warm. Meanwhile, her other hand was touching my stomach as she supported herself on one arm. She gently stroked my cheek and then slowly slid her supporting hand along my body until she was lying on top of me again.

I didn't say anything. She didn't say anything. Only the sound of our breathing could be heard through the silence. There were no other sounds around us. We couldn't even hear our own heartbeats.

Slowly but surely, Nanami brought her face closer to mine. Then, as if she were biting them gently, she took my lips in between hers. It was the first time she'd done that, and it was different from any kiss we'd shared before.

Where'd she learn something like this? What's she trying to do? What's she going to do next? Question after question flew through my head as I lay there unable to gather my thoughts.



I wasn't moving, but Nanami was. *Oh no, is it okay to let Nanami do as she wants with me? But what'll happen if I respond? We won't be able to stop. Do we need to stop? Nanami and I are going out, and I like her, so...*

"I like you," Nanami whispered once she'd removed her lips.

Oh no. This is my limit. This is bad. This is gonna destroy me. I think I'm gonna go crazy. Our exams are over, so we're acting carelessly. But hold up. Did I forget what I promised Nanami and myself? And won't Nanami be hurt if I reject her now?

As countless thoughts whirled in my brain, I asked myself one last thing: *Hey, aren't I forgetting something?* I felt dazed. I felt like I'd forgotten how to breathe. I took one single deep breath, and Nanami's scent entered my nostrils. The sweet aroma seemed to be drawing me in. However, it was also that scent that helped me regain some of my composure, or maybe it was just that I'd exceeded what I could tolerate and had no choice but to become calmer. Nanami was definitely not calm. Nothing good was going to come from starting something just going with the flow, plus I hadn't prepared anything. At this rate...

"If you use them, then it's totally fine, depending on the frequency."

Oh, that's right. I have that thing the school nurse gave me. It's just one, but still.

I glanced over at my desk. Since I hadn't wanted anyone to see it or to throw it away, I'd ended up keeping it in my desk drawer. *Am I supposed to get up under these circumstances and go grab it though? Wait, wouldn't that actually be better? Right now, we're getting carried away, and we might end up going where we don't intend to go. But if I get up, maybe it'll give us a chance to cool down and collect ourselves. That way, Nanami can calm down too, and maybe rethink things a bit.*

I felt like I was overlooking something critical here, but I decided to go with the idea. That's right—I had to help Nanami calm down.

"N-Nanami," I murmured. I swear it wasn't on purpose. Nanami was moving, so I couldn't aim correctly. I was all panicky too. When I reached out to stop

her, my hand touched something soft and large.

“Ah!” Nanami cried. I’d touched her chest. It was ever so slightly, and I’d only touched it; I hadn’t squeezed it or anything. I’d just touched it briefly while moving, like I’d lightly caressed it. Nanami nonetheless shot up.

At least I’d succeeded in getting both of us to sit up. Next, I just had to put a pause on things by articulating what I had to prepare. I had to be the one to remain calm.

Uh, Nanami, why are you taking hold of my arm?

With an expression of ecstasy on her face, Nanami was now bringing my hand up to her mouth. I could have resisted, but I had no strength left in my arm. It just wouldn’t move. Then Nanami kissed my palm—the palm that had touched her chest. No, this wasn’t any old kiss. She ran her lips along my palm, sucking on it as if trying to consume it. I’d heard that your palms were a particularly important part of your sensory nervous system—that, in fact, they were superior to any other part of it. That must have been true; after all, we felt all sorts of things with our palms. What I wanted to say, in other words, was...

This is bad. What should I do? I have to say something. Nanami was holding my hand as if cradling it in between her breasts. I felt like she was putting me under a spell—a spell that was stripping me of all my desire to resist. Could any guy break free of a spell like this? And then there was a knock at the door.

“Wah!”

“Eek!”

Nanami and I leaped so high, we nearly fell off the bed. Startled, we both turned and looked toward the door. Nanami had lost her balance and was now leaning on me, while I had managed to sit up and stare at the door. Sweat was pouring from me, and I could hear my own heartbeat. My heart was pounding so hard, it was painful.

“Yoshin? I’ve been calling you for a while now, but you haven’t responded. Is Nanami-san here?”

“M-Mom, you’re home,” I exclaimed.

“Y-Yes, I’m here!” Nanami cried.

It was my mom. Well, I supposed it couldn’t have been anyone else. Nanami and I looked at each other.

That was it; I’d thought I was forgetting something. My parents had been on their way home. Besides, there’d been no guarantee that even if I had gotten up to get *that thing* I would have been able to calm Nanami down. It seemed I wasn’t entirely calm either.

Nanami and I looked at each other and both nodded slightly. I then stood up and walked to the door. When I opened it, my mom was standing there in her business suit.

“Hey, mom. I didn’t realize you were home.”

“I am. I see that Nanami-san’s here. You’ll join us for dinner, won’t you, Nanami-san?”

“Oh, yes. That would be lovely.”

Nanami, who had crawled off of the bed, was sipping the tea that was sitting on the table. My mom nodded and then turned around to leave. I thought she was about to head downstairs, but she turned her head and glanced back at me.

“You look a little off. Did something happen?” she asked.

“Uh, I’ve just been feeling kinda tired now that exams are done. I was lying on the bed, and Nanami was taking care of me.”

“I see. Thank you, Nanami-san.”

“Oh, no. It’s the least I can do as his girlfriend.”

My mom remarked on how sweet we were to each other and then returned downstairs. *She can’t possibly know what we were doing, could she?* I thought. There wasn’t anything we could do if she *did* know, but it would be super embarrassing to have our parents know about stuff like that—not that mom would say anything even if she did.

“I’m sorry, Yoshin. I know you weren’t feeling well,” Nanami said once I’d closed the door and sat down next to her, overcome by another wave of

exhaustion. *There's nothing to apologize for*, I thought.

"I'm sorry too. I was about to go all the way there," I said.

"It would be kind of awkward for Shinobu-san to know that though, huh?"

Her face completely red, Nanami continued sipping her tea with her knees pulled up to her chest. If I'd have been sitting in front of her, I would have seen her underwear, but Nanami seemed to neither realize nor care.

I, too, picked up the tea. It was lukewarm now, but I was grateful for the comforting temperature. I downed it in one go, which soothed my parched throat and enabled me to finally say something. "If we had kept going, it probably would have been bad, you know, since we hadn't prepped anything and all."

I'd used the word "prepped" on purpose. There must have been times when people did the deed because they were going with the flow of things, but what we'd been doing felt more like getting carried away by the heat of the moment. A feeling of both relief and regret passed through my chest. Nanami had a complex expression on her face as if the same was true for her.

"You're right. I hadn't even showered. Oh gawd, I hadn't even *showered*! Wait, did I smell bad? Did I smell weird at all?!" she exclaimed.

"N-No, you were fine. You always smell good, and if anything, that helped me keep my cool."

"Oh, good," she murmured. Looking relieved, she drew closer to me and brought her tea to her lips. Silence settled between us. I decided to be the one to break it.

"Just so we're clear, it's not that I don't want to do it with you or anything. It's just that I knew I was getting carried away. I mean, I want to do it, but I guess there's also something holding me back."

"No, I think you made the right call. If Shinobu-san had seen us, I wouldn't be able to come to your house anymore."

"That's true. And we also, like, have to prepare."

She was totally right. I couldn't stand the idea of having my parents walk in on

something like that. I stole a glance at my desk drawer. I was glad I hadn't taken that thing out. Nanami followed my gaze, wondering what I was looking at. She seemed to have picked up on something, because she then looked down at her knees and carried on drinking her tea. *Ah, maybe she figured it out.*

I wondered what other people did to prepare. When it came to stuff like this, I couldn't even ask Baron-san. I supposed I had to look that kind of thing up myself from here on out. Even though I might not be the one to make the first move, if we ended up doing something because I was swayed by Nanami, I would need to have *some* knowledge of what to do. It probably wasn't a bad idea for me to look up basic stuff at the very least. Before now, I hadn't looked anything up because I'd been so sure we wouldn't do anything. What happened today, though, made me realize that resolutions like that could fly out the window depending on the mood. If I rejected Nanami, I could end up hurting her, and one could never be too prepared. I should always be prepared for any kind of situation.

As I sat there thinking, Nanami's head snapped up. "Oh!"

"Wh-What happened?" I asked.

"Yoshin, I just realized something important," she said.

What could it be? What could be important to this conversation? She looks really serious. Maybe she made a terrible mistake on her exam, or is this about something she did earlier?

As I stared at her and swallowed hard, Nanami slowly opened her mouth. "We can't take a bath together. Our parents will be there."

"Oh!"

Well, I hadn't expected that. She was right though. Why hadn't I realized before? There was no way we could take a bath together. Were we supposed to sneak one together when no one else was home? No, I didn't even want to imagine what it would be like if anyone got back earlier than expected. This wasn't just about ethics. It would just be super awkward.

With both our mouths hanging open, Nanami and I looked at each other with dumbfounded expressions on our faces...and started laughing. We were both so

thoughtless—or rather, neither one of us had really thought about how to carry out our plan. Then again, it wasn't a simple thing to carry out in the first place.

“Well, it's way too early to be planning that anyway,” I said. “If I didn't manage to get above-average scores on all my tests, then I can't even get the reward.”

“Jeez, don't you wanna take a bath with me? Isn't it at least a little bit of a bummer?”

“Of course it is. It really is. I would love it if you would take a bath with me if there was an opportunity, but I'm just not sure how.”

“I'll figure something out!” she declared.

I didn't have a clue how we'd manage it. Also, if things had gotten this heated in our school uniforms, what would happen if we took a bath together? I really had to do some research.

The next moment, I felt something soft touch my cheek. I already knew it was Nanami's lips, but I turned to look at her.

“Do you wanna keep going?” she asked.

“Maybe we should call it for today.”

Nanami grinned at me, seeming both bemused and relieved. She'd probably had an idea how I would respond but had wanted to ask me anyway. No, maybe she was happy to hear that my response was limited to today. I didn't know which it was, but I decided not to ask. I then kissed Nanami on the cheek. We'd been doing much more until just a minute ago, but I still felt kind of embarrassed doing it.

Just then, my phone went off—which was pretty rare. At the same time, Nanami's phone also went off. That could only mean one thing. When Nanami and I looked at our phones, we saw that the message was from Otofuke-san. The message displayed on both our screens was the same one. She seemed to have sent it to the group chat the four of us had made.

Otofuke: Hey, so, at karaoke today, we heard...

The message in our notifications ended there, so we both unlocked our phones. The message appeared in our apps at the same time. When we saw it, both Nanami and I found our eyes widening.

Otofuke: Hey, so, at karaoke today, we heard about a few people who were there at the shoe lockers that day. They were...

The message included the names of several different people, one of whom we hadn't expected to see at all.

Interlude: A Secret Talk in the Nurse's Office

I was currently on a separate mission from Yoshin. This was due to the, um, *incident* that had occurred in his room the other day. Later that day, I'd had dinner at Yoshin's house, been dropped off by his family, and then gotten back to my room, only to writhe in agony on my bed when I was finally alone.

It was terrible. I moaned in such a deep voice that I surprised myself by how low my voice could go. I felt more like a beast than a girl. I wanted at least to pat myself on the back for holding it together until I'd gotten back to my own room, but my sense of embarrassment definitely trumped that small sense of accomplishment. Even though I'd felt pretty calm while I'd been with Yoshin, as time had passed, I'd slowly begun to feel more and more embarrassed about what had transpired.

Besides, there was another reason I was writhing like that. It was one of the reasons I didn't know what had driven me to do it. Truth be told, I'd been so worked up that I didn't really remember what I'd actually done. I might be contradicting myself, but I did remember that I'd done a bunch of stuff. I remembered that much perfectly well. I just didn't remember precisely *what* I'd done. It was a sensation I didn't really understand. I couldn't even recall what Yoshin had looked like or how he'd reacted. Seriously, how could I possibly forget? Was that what being overly stimulated was like?

It was totally true that at that moment, I had become something worse than a nymphomaniac. I wondered if Yoshin had been weirded out by me. If only I could remember how he had reacted, I wouldn't have had to worry like this. I had secretly thought that I wanted to make out with him once our exams were over, but my desires had burst out all at once. I never had any intention of going as far as I had.

Maybe a part of my reaction was due to my anxiety about the letter. I must have let my guard down because we'd made it over a different hurdle. Still, I'd had so much pent-up desire. I was glad Yoshin had become reenergized enough

to get up off the bed.

In any case, having reflected on my inappropriate behavior, I'd headed somewhere without Yoshin. I had come to seek advice from someone all by myself.

"Welcome to the nurse's office! Well, well, if I'm not mistaken, you were the one confessing to a certain someone behind the school building that one time, correct?"

"Oh, yes, that's me. I'm Barato—Nanami Barato."

"Well, of course I remember! I walked right in on it, after all. Welcome, Barato-chan. So, what brings you here today? Did you come to visit me?"

That's right—I was currently in the nurse's office. Yoshin was headed to see Shibetsu-senpai for something unrelated. I'd offered to go with him, but he'd told me he wanted to go by himself and that I should stay with Hatsumi and Ayumi. Apparently, that was just in case something bad happened while he was gone, but I'd figured I would be even safer with a teacher. That was why I'd thought this was a good opportunity to come to the nurse's office, which I'd been hearing about from some of the other students.

I'd run into the school nurse a couple of times, what with Yoshin getting hit by a bucket and her stumbling upon us confessing to each other for our one-month anniversary. She was also the one who had, um, given Yoshin that you-know-what.

"I'm sure this is when I should make you a cup of tea or something, but unfortunately, I have no way of doing that here. Sorry about that. Say, where's that boyfriend of yours with the nice muscles?"

"He's gone to talk with someone else right now, so, um, I'm here because I heard you give relationship advice."

There was a rumor associated with the nurse's office: that the nurse often gave out relationship advice to students who asked for it. It wasn't so much of a rumor, actually, since my friend had gotten help from her before—not that I'd been paying much attention when she'd told us about it. I also heard that some of the guys went to her for guidance too.

There were probably other people who gave out advice like that, but this person in particular was known for, um, talking with you about things that were kind of sensitive. People often said it was a big help to be able to talk with her about things that they couldn't even talk about with their parents.

"Hm? Relationship advice? Relationship advice, huh?" the nurse muttered. She then crossed her arms and leaned to the side melodramatically in her white lab coat. *Wait, does she actually not do the whole relationship advice thing?*

As I started to panic, the nurse retained her furrowed brow and strained expression as she began to press on both temples with her fists.

"What I do is sex education. Well, I suppose relationship advice and sex education are kind of similar, so maybe it's inevitable that folks would think that."

"Oh, um, I feel like they're quite different though, aren't they?" I asked.

"What are you talking about? High school romance is inseparable from sex education. In fact, I feel like it's no exaggeration to say that sex education is the true nature of high school romance," the nurse replied, her glasses glinting as she pushed them up with one finger. She was smiling in a way that made it difficult to tell whether she was joking or entirely serious.

What she was saying sounded outrageous but also oddly convincing. Maybe the advice reflected the gravity of the issues the student needed help with. Either way, the nurse seemed like someone you could count on—or maybe she just sounded convincing because I was thinking about what I'd already done myself.

"So what is it you wanted to talk about? Is sex with your boyfriend not going well or something along those lines? Oh, are you using contraceptives? Or could it be that you're doing it without? If going to buy them makes you uncomfortable, I can recommend a good drugstore—"

"What?! Uh, no, we haven't gotten that far yet!" I exclaimed, waving both hands in front of my face. The gesture ended up looking strange because of how panicked I was. The nurse looked at me, puzzled.

"Oh, is that right? The other gyaru who seem like they might be your friends

usually talk to me about things like that, so I just assumed. I guess I got a bit ahead of myself.”

The nurse had gotten to the point immediately, so I’d had to stop her. I mean, it was true that Yoshin and I hadn’t done anything, so there had really been no other response to give. What I did want to ask wasn’t necessarily unrelated though. Still, I supposed it really was true that other kids had already done it. Since Hatsumi and Ayumi most likely hadn’t yet, it must have been some other girls.

The school nurse was swaying from side to side, her lab coat fluttering along. She seemed so nonchalant, but I had to admit that I appreciated that about her at the moment. It was hard for me to talk about this kind of stuff with my parents. I also had a tough time talking about it with Hatsumi and Ayumi, much less with my other friends. That was why having an adult hear me out was such a big help.

“You don’t seem at all worried about sexual misconduct,” I murmured, finally managing to bring up what I had been wondering about. Usually if we talked about stuff like that with teachers, they’d yell at us for being inappropriate. I supposed this was precisely what made the school nurse popular and the topic of so many rumors. According to our school policy, engaging in sexual misconduct could lead to a student getting suspended, which was a pretty hefty consequence. The nurse didn’t seem at all interested in doling out such a punishment though.

“Hm? I probably mentioned this before, but it doesn’t make any sense to tell high school students not to do it. It’s more dangerous to force them to suppress those desires. Besides, if there’s an opportunity to do it, I think you should just go for it.”

“If there’s an opportunity?”

“Right. It’s all about experience. It’s better to have gone through it while you’re still young. It’s also good to do it before you learn anything weird. It wouldn’t be good to pick up any odd habits.”

Wait, we’re not talking about sports here! She’s saying some pretty unorthodox stuff for an adult. Our school has some pretty lenient policies, but

there are lines we shouldn't cross. Thinking about it, though, what she'd said was probably true. We had sex ed, but it's not like we actually learned how we were supposed to do things. It just felt like any other class.

"I mean, to think that sex is somehow impure is nonsense, if you ask me. After all, children are made through sexual intercourse. If anything, we should teach these things properly while you're all still in high school."

Other teachers would probably get angry if they heard her saying this, but it seemed the nurse had managed to dodge even their wrath. It was like she couldn't care less about things like that.

When I started giggling at the sight of the nurse opening up her arms exaggeratedly, she looked somehow pleased with herself. I guess my nervousness had disappeared without me realizing it.

"So, I know we got off topic, but what was it you wanted to chat about?" the nurse asked.

"Oh, right. Um, so, we haven't done anything like that yet, but one time, things started kind of going in that direction," I explained.

"Wow, way to go. Getting it on now exams are done, huh?"

"How did you know?!"

I had purposefully refrained from mentioning when exactly it had happened, but the nurse had figured it out immediately. *I didn't say anything about exams, did I?*

As I sat there flustered, the nurse wagged her finger at me and proudly sat back in her chair. "It's pretty common for folks to feel that way once exams are over. After a long period of abstinence, it feels good to smoke or drink—though I don't smoke myself," said the nurse as she imitated the gesture of smoking a cigarette. Because she looked somewhat young for her age, the gesture didn't really suit her.

The nurse quickly apologized for getting us off topic, then waved her hand for me to go on. I cleared my throat loudly to get myself together before continuing.

“Things were going pretty well, but his mom came in the middle of it, so we had to stop.”

“Aaah, I see. That is a conundrum. For the record, whose house were you at?”

“We were at his house.”

“Oh, that is pretty awkward. If his parents saw you two going at it, it certainly would be difficult for you to see them in the future.”

“Oh, no. We stopped because she knocked on the door, so we weren’t seen or anything like that.”

The nurse seemed genuinely relieved, almost as if this were about herself. It was true, though, that that had been a possibility. *Wait, does Yoshin’s room have a lock?*

The blood drained from my face. Of course—we were lucky his mom had knocked; Yoshin didn’t usually lock his door when he and I were hanging out together. All of a sudden, I felt even more frightened by the fact that I’d gotten so carried away. I mean, if we’d been at my house, I was pretty certain that my family would have walked in on us. I knew all too well what they were like.

I was starting to sweat. *No, wait. I should wait until later to worry about my regrets. I have to prioritize my questions to the school nurse.*

“I wanted to ask what I could do to get my boyfriend in the mood,” I said.

“Huh? But didn’t you just say that things were going pretty well? If that’s the case, then wouldn’t you go with the flow and just do it?” the nurse asked, tilting her head and furrowing her brow in confusion. In order to explain, I gave more details—at least, as many as I could recall. The whole time I talked, the nurse didn’t say anything. She didn’t tease me or make fun of me; she just listened to me seriously, in silence.

When I finished telling my explanation and exhaled, the nurse crossed her arms and leaned back in her chair. “Hmm, I see. So you’re quite the go-getter, huh? I’m impressed to hear you made a move on your boyfriend, but it seems your boyfriend was the one who didn’t seem entirely up for it.”

I blushed upon hearing the suggestion that I’d made a move on Yoshin, but I

couldn't really defend myself. It was my own fault. Still, even though I'd done all sorts of things to him, he hadn't really done much back to me. I at least remembered that much clearly.

Yoshin had said before that he wouldn't do stuff like that with me yet, so he'd probably been thinking about stuff as he'd lain there enduring what was happening. He hadn't been feeling all that well either, and we also hadn't prepared anything. That was why I understood how he'd felt. However, as a woman, I couldn't help feeling a bit scorned. Once I'd got back, I'd agonized over what I'd done, reflected on it, thought about it some more, and then reached a conclusion.

Couldn't he have brought himself to do even just a little bit with me?!

I knew perfectly well that I was contradicting myself, but this was an entirely separate issue. I mean, girls are complicated. That was why I was being kind of stubborn about the whole thing.

"I don't know if he wasn't up for it or if he was just kind of enduring it. That was why I wanted to know what I could do to get him more in the mood."

"Your boyfriend must genuinely care about you—so much so that it makes you anxious. He sounds kind of like my husband." The nurse half closed her eyes in a nostalgic expression that seemed less like that of an adult and more like that of a girl in love. As I watched her, thinking about how endearing she looked, the nurse seemed to realize her own transformation and laughed wryly before she continued. "If that's the case, then maybe I can at least teach you all the things I taught him."

"Taught your husband?"

"Yes. I've known my husband since we were in high school, but the guy never made a move on me. Even though he was interested in sex, he was a wolf in sheep's clothing, trying to be a gentleman. That's why I had to be the one to pounce on him in the end."

Wow, what a bold move. Getting to marry your high school sweetheart sounds so nice. I'm kinda jealous, or maybe I just hope I can do that too. I wonder if I can stay with Yoshin forever. I hope talking with the nurse will be helpful.

“Given that my husband and I broke up three times before we got married, I’m not sure if I should be giving advice.”

Wait, was I talking out loud just now? I thought. It seemed I’d been moving my mouth without even realizing it.

“Yep. We broke up once because of him, once because of me, and once because we were both being stubborn. That’s why you shouldn’t use us as an example. Still, I can at least share with you what I did.” The nurse wiggled each of her fingers individually, as though they were independent creatures.

If I have that kind of technique up my sleeve, would I be able to seduce Yoshin too? When I swallowed hard, the nurse grinned broadly. She looked as though she was genuinely enjoying our conversation.

“Well, then,” she said, “let’s jump into a more fun and practical sex ed lesson!”

What I learned from the nurse then were things I’m going to have to omit. Seriously, I learned so many things that were too embarrassing for me to repeat. They were all based on the nurse’s personal experience, and since her target had been her husband, she said that they may not all be fully effective on Yoshin, but that didn’t mean I couldn’t try out something similar.

I learned all sorts of things—like what kind of places were good, what kind of underwear was attractive, and what kind of language was effective. This was a significant part of my education. They didn’t teach it in school, but it was all very important. I mean, we were at school now, but I meant that they didn’t teach us this stuff in class. In fact, I worried whether the nurse was allowed to teach me things like this in the first place. As it turned out, it seemed the answer to that was somewhat vague. Apparently, she couldn’t teach this in class, but she could go into detail outside of it.

“What a conveniently ambiguous response, huh?” she said, laughing.

At the same time, I finally found out why I couldn’t ask my own mom about this stuff. I wouldn’t be caught dead asking her, “How did you seduce dad?” Even if she told me, I wouldn’t want to hear it. I could ask now because I was asking the school nurse—a total outsider. Of course everyone would want to talk with the nurse instead.

“You must really be experienced,” I murmured in admiration.

The nurse smiled in a way that seemed both embarrassed and proud. The meaning behind that smile, though, wasn't what I expected. “Do I seem that way? I've actually only ever been with my husband, so I don't have a lot of experience at all. I have no idea why people keep asking me about stuff like this.”

Given how knowledgeable she was, I had assumed the nurse had gotten a lot of experience. She'd even said that she and her husband had broken up in the past. Feeling I'd said something rude, I apologized to her immediately, but the nurse simply laughed and forgave me.

“Oh, no worries at all. If I seem that way, it must mean that I have a lot of experience with my husband, which definitely makes me happy even though I'd never tell him that,” she said, laughing bashfully again. Her cheeks were slightly red, and her smile seemed young and innocent.

Saying that one had a lot of experience with their husband sounded kind of funny to me, but I also thought it was a lovely idea. *But I get it now. If it's possible to gain this much experience with just one person, then I should be able to do a lot more things for Yoshin. Yeah, I should really go for it.*

As I sat there burning with determination, the nurse looked at me kindly. “Barato-chan, if you're going to do it, then make sure you properly prepare and choose the location wisely. Sometimes men can be more sensitive than women, so you'll want to make sure the feeling is mutual.”

“Right. Thank you so much for this. I'll do my best.”

“In that case, let's continue by discussing a technique that's even more advanced for a high school student,” the nurse said.

What? WHAT?! Paying zero mind to me as I sat there speechless, the nurse had continued teaching. She even taught me things that I was pretty sure an adult shouldn't be sharing with a student.

Huh? Wait, no way. What is that? No way. I mean, is that even possible? You can do that too? Whaaat?!

Just hearing about it made my entire body hot and red all over. I felt like I'd

learned so many things that I couldn't even share with Yoshin. I mean, maybe I was going to "share" them with him one day, but I definitely wouldn't be able to for some time.

Eventually, the nurse reached the end of her lesson. She sighed and wiped the sweat off of her forehead as though she'd done a good day's work. She was smiling all the while as if proud of what she'd accomplished. I, on the other hand, was sitting there with my head spinning. Every time I thought about what I'd learned, I felt my face glowing red. *How am I going to survive all this?!*

"If I'd have been drinking, I would've been able to give you more juicy tips, but this is probably it for today. If you want to hear more, we'll have to do it over drinks after you graduate."

There's more?! Even though I hadn't exercised at all, all I could do to respond was murmur a breathless "yes." Today alone had expanded my knowledge base exponentially.

The nurse removed her lab coat and smiled kindly at me. "I personally appreciate that your boyfriend is aware of the risks involved, but I also know how cruel it is to force high school students to suppress their urges. It's important to blow off some steam once in a while," she said, elegantly crossing her legs. She looked so mature doing that. I wondered if I could do that in front of Yoshin too.

"The risks?" I repeated.

"Yeah, risks. As far as I can tell, your boyfriend seems to be thinking seriously about the dangers of getting you pregnant and is making sure to treat you right."

That was probably true. Yoshin always thought of me first. He'd already mentioned that it would be really difficult if we got pregnant.

"But it's hard to move forward from there. They say that if you know your enemy and you know yourself, you won't need to worry even if you have to fight a hundred battles. What high school students truly need moving forward is proper sex education and practice."

"Wait, practice?"

“Yep. If you don’t have the proper knowledge, you could really get yourself into a pickle. Tell your boyfriend that adult manga and porn are not just entertainment and that they should be taken seriously.”

“Porn?!”

The nurse was now grinning broadly, enjoying my flustered reaction. *There’s no way I can say something like that to Yoshin! Actually, I wonder what kind he likes. Has he even seen it? I wanna know, but I’m too afraid to ask.*

“In any case, periodically blowing off steam is important,” the nurse said.

“Th-That’s true. Yoshin is a boy too, after all.”

“Hm? What are you talking about? You too, Barato-chan.”

Huh? Me? Me too? As I sat there completely baffled, the nurse placed her hand on her chin with a slightly exasperated look on her face.

“It’s not just boys who shouldn’t let themselves get too pent-up. It’s girls too. Be good to each other, okay? There are lots of different ways to take care of that.”

I couldn’t say anything in response. I hadn’t thought of myself needing to blow off steam. I’d assumed that Yoshin would be the only one.

It was true though. Even Ayumi had told me I shouldn’t keep things bottled up. With that in mind, I resolved to ask Yoshin to do stuff for me too. The nurse seemed to have read my mind, because she smiled another happy smile. Seeing her, I smiled right back.

“Well, I suppose this is all the advice I can give you. Do you feel like you have a handle on things now?” she asked.

“Oh, uh, yes. Um, can I ask you just one more thing?”

“Of course. Ask away.”

“If there’s ever an obstacle to our relationship or a hurdle we can’t overcome, what should we do?” I asked vaguely. I had an idea what she might say, but I wanted to hear it from someone else—almost like checking my answers on a homework assignment.

The nurse's eyes widened for a moment, but then paused. Deep in thought, she let out a low groan.

Just as I was wondering if I'd asked something too difficult, the nurse said, "Hmm. Well, I think it would be best not to face it alone. This might not be a terribly exciting response, but you should accept the help of others around you. There's always a limit to what one can do alone."

Grinning, the nurse added that she had mistakenly broken up with her husband a few times after trying to do things her own way. She was right—some problems would be too hard for just me and Yoshin to solve.

I thanked the nurse, who stretched her whole body and told me she was glad to help. Realizing I'd taken up a lot more of her time than intended, I got ready to leave. Thanking her, I headed for the door. As I did so, the nurse called out from behind me.

"There may be people who'll try to tell you that your relationship is inappropriate for your age, but stand tall and tell them proudly that it's not. And if anything does happen, come by and visit. I can give your boyfriend a lesson in sex ed too."

With that, I thanked the nurse one last time and set off to find Yoshin.

Chapter 3: A Promise for Summer Break

I was currently in the basketball clubroom. It was for a very specific reason... Oh, who am I kidding? I was just there to see Shoichi-senpai. I hadn't, however, come to pay a casual visit. I'd come to learn more about the person that had been seen near Nanami's shoe locker—because that person was the manager of the basketball team.

I didn't know the manager all that well, which wasn't a surprise, considering I'd barely spoken to her. In fact, I'd never spoken with her directly, and I only remembered meeting her on two different occasions. She was tall, reserved, and—as Shoichi-senpai put it—rather shy. I could count the things I knew about her on one hand. Even so, considering my own lack of interpersonal relationships, I seemed to know more about her than I did about others, and yet, I still didn't even know her name, class, or year group. Nanami probably knew about the same as I did.

Why, then, would such a person just happen to be standing by Nanami's shoe locker? I had thought that maybe the manager's locker was nearby, but apparently, that wasn't the case at all. All this had been shared by one of our classmates who'd gone to do karaoke the other day. Other people had been seen by the lockers as well, but the only one Nanami and I knew was the manager. At any rate, since her name had been brought up, I'd decided to talk to someone who knew her. That was why I'd come to see Shoichi-senpai, which turned out to be more complicated than I'd thought.

The moment I stepped into the basketball clubroom, Shoichi-senpai greeted me with a very energetic welcome. "Welcome to the basketball club!"

"Oh, no. I'm sorry, senpai, but I'm not here to join up."

Shoichi-senpai was unable to hide his disappointment, but while he did let his shoulders drop for a moment, he managed to straighten his back and right his posture.

"Well, I knew that. What was it you wanted to talk about though? Say, is

Barato-kun not with you today?" he asked.

"Nanami's at the nurse's office to discuss something personal, so I'm here by myself this time."

According to some of the other kids at school, the school nurse gave out relationship advice to students. Nanami had gone to take advantage of that help, but she hadn't told me what she was going to ask about. Although I felt a little sad knowing that it was something she couldn't talk to me about, I understood that stuff like that had to come up every once in a while. I also trusted that Nanami would talk to me when the time was right. Until then, I just had to wait.

"Hmm. It's kinda weird seeing one of you without the other. I guess I always imagine the two of you together."

Did Nanami and I really seem that inseparable? Well, maybe it wasn't so much how we seemed but how we actually were. I wasn't really interested in changing that, though, unless Nanami wanted things to be different.

"And? What was it you wanted to ask? If there's anything I can do, just say it."

"Um, well..."

It feels weird asking about the manager all of a sudden. Maybe I should start with some small talk. Uh, small talk... Okay. But what am I supposed to say? Oh, shoot. I forgot to plan any of this. I should've at least decided what to say in advance.

I had so little experience dealing with real people, that I'd forgotten to think things through. *I'm usually fine talking with Nanami. It's so strange. Why am I so bad at having normal conversations with people? Well, I guess complaining about it won't help.*

"Senpai, did you tell anyone about the dare?" I finally asked.

"What?!" he exclaimed, clearly taken aback. I was just as shocked by what I'd just said. No matter how you looked at it, it had come out of nowhere, but maybe that was better than beating around the bush. Still, even I thought it was an abrupt way to start. Shoichi-senpai nearly fell out of his chair, but he straightened up and quickly donned a serious expression.

“No, of course I haven’t. Why do you ask?” he responded.

“I’m sorry to surprise you like that. Let me explain,” I mumbled, showing Shoichi-senpai the photo of the letter. As I explained what had happened, he grimaced, then crossed his arms.

“What is this? This was sent to Barato-kun?” he asked.

“Yeah, it was inside her shoe locker. We’re doing our best to look into things, and I wondered if you knew anything about it.”

I knew I’d started off on the wrong foot, but I figured I should just be upfront and ask him to help us.

“Huh. I’m sorry, man, but I can’t think of anyone who might do this. Needless to say, I haven’t said a word.”

“I assumed you hadn’t. I’m sorry I asked.”

Well, this was no surprise. Shoichi-senpai only cared about basketball, but he wasn’t really the type to let something like that slip. Even if he did sometimes let his one-track mind take over, he probably wouldn’t divulge other people’s secrets so easily. I went back and forth in my head about whether I should bring up the manager.

“What’s up? Spit it out.”

“Huh?”

Shoichi-senpai had sensed my hesitation and was looking at me with a kind gaze. *Am I that easy to read?* I wondered. *I guess Nanami always says that.* Still, given that this was about the manager, I was finding it difficult to bite the bullet and ask him the question, but it would be weird to come all this way and not be able to ask.

“It’ll be fine. Leave whatever it is you’re dealing with to me. I’ll do my best to help,” he said, thumping on his chest and looking very dependable indeed. If that was really the case, maybe it was okay to ask him.

“Can you tell me what your manager’s like?” I asked in the end.

“Hm? Our manager? Let’s see. I get yelled at by her a lot, but she’s a very kind and reliable woman.”

She yells at him? Ah, I guess he's said something like that before too. I remember him saying.

"Also, I worry her a lot. Lately, she keeps asking me whether I feel bad about something."

"You worry her? Did something happen?" I asked.

"No, nothing recently. I did regret getting involved with you and Barato-kun, but I didn't let that drag me down too much."

I couldn't really picture Shoichi-senpai moping about any one thing for long. Still, there was something about what he'd said that gave me pause.

I continued asking a bit more about her, but I didn't learn anything out of the ordinary. All I could get was that Shoichi-senpai thought very highly of her. As we were talking, though, I realized what had given me pause earlier.

"Say, do you know if the manager's dating anyone?" I asked.

"Not that I know of. I asked her about it once, but she got really angry with me, so I haven't asked her since."

Ah, that would be the wrong move, wouldn't it? Nanami had told me the manager seemed to like Shoichi-senpai. Maybe that was why she was worried about him. I would have assumed she didn't like him that way, given how much she seemed to yell at him. Maybe she was a tsundere. I'd never met one in real life, so I couldn't be sure.

"You haven't told the manager about the dare, have you?" I asked.

"Of course not. Your secret's safe with me," he replied.

"Right."

Of course. Earlier, Shoichi-senpai had said that he hadn't shared it with anyone, so he probably hadn't told the manager either.

As I sat there moaning to myself, he turned to me, concerned. "Yoshin-kun, you've been asking about the manager a lot. Did something happen between you two?"

My heart skipped a beat. Why was I surprised though? If I kept asking about

her, of course Shoichi-senpai would realize something was up. I panicked for a moment, wondering how to explain the situation, but then I saw how serious he looked and decided to tell him the truth.

“Actually, we heard that the manager was seen near Nanami’s shoe locker that day. That’s why I wondered if you might know something about it.”

I heard him take a deep breath. Of course, her being there didn’t make her the perpetrator, but even the fact that she was among the suspects was shocking. There was a moment of silence between us.

“I see,” he said once he’d collected himself. “So that’s why you were so keen to know. I have to say, I’m relieved.”

“Excuse me?”

His response confused me. Why would he say he was relieved? Ordinarily, I would have expected a person to get upset or question the accusation. Shoichi-senpai must have picked up on my confusion, because he immediately smiled and said, “Oh, I thought for a moment that the manager had confessed to you or something. If that had been the case, I would have been forced to choose between supporting her and hindering her romantic endeavors.” Shoichi-senpai finished by muttering that he would do whatever it took to make her give up.

No, wait! Why would you think that? Maybe it was the most natural reaction though. If someone who didn’t know a person suddenly started asking about them, of course that would seem odd. I needed to be more careful. Even so, I was surprised he’d taken it like that.

“But it’s pretty unlikely that she was the one to do it. Our manager’s more considerate than anyone else I know. She’s the last person you’d think of threatening someone,” he said.

“I see.” That made sense. Otherwise, she probably wouldn’t bother managing a sports team. Besides, she seemed to have earned a lot of trust from Shoichi-senpai.

If that was the case, though, then one question remained: why had she been near Nanami’s shoe locker? Of course, she might have been in the vicinity by sheer coincidence. Had it really been a coincidence though? Things would be so

much easier if I could just ask her directly.

“Your tournament’s coming up soon, right?” I asked.

“Ah, you remembered. Yeah, the summer tourney’s just around the corner. We’ll have to be back on our A game starting tomorrow.”

I had thought he’d mentioned it before, but I was glad I’d checked. I felt bad for trying to talk about this at such an important time. I wanted to resolve the case sooner rather than later, but it wasn’t like we knew that the manager was the one behind this.

“Do you think it’d be possible to talk with the manager a little bit once the tournament’s over?” I asked. There would probably be less to worry about then.

Shoichi-senpai smiled wryly and thanked me for the consideration. “You could just go talk to her without my permission, you know? You two are in the same grade, so she’ll be in class already if you just dropped by,” he said.

Huh? I’d had no idea that she was in the same grade as I was. I didn’t remember seeing her at all, though, uh, that was probably because I had zero interest in other people. She was tall and stood out, so it was probably just that I didn’t know anything to begin with.

“I don’t really know her that well, so I feel like I wouldn’t be able to strike up a conversation unless you helped me out,” I said.

“I see. She is pretty shy, so maybe that would be better.”

Shoichi-senpai thanked me again for being thoughtful about this, but since I was getting them involved in a problem that Nanami and I were having, I felt that I should be the one to thank him—which I did.

As we continued chatting, there was a knock on the clubroom door. When Shoichi-senpai called out to the person to come in, Nanami entered, muttering a soft “Excuse me.”

“Did you get to ask that question, Nanami?” I asked her.

“Oh, uh, yeah, the question. Yeah, I did ask. There were zero problems.”

Isn’t that how you respond when there is a problem? I thought. Nanami

seemed panicked by my question, as she was blushing and sweating a little out of nervousness. I wondered what was up. I tilted my head in puzzlement, watching Nanami as she kept glancing in my direction. *Did the school nurse say something strange to her?*

“So how much did you two get to talk?” she asked.

“Oh, right. Well...”

I got Nanami up to speed with everything Shoichi-senpai and I had discussed. Nanami listened, nodding occasionally, getting angry with him, and even getting exasperated with him. Her expression kept changing, but I was spacing out too much to enjoy that. I kept wondering what she might have talked about in the nurse’s office, but I knew I should wait until we were alone later to ask—not that I was sure that she would tell me.

“I see. Then it probably isn’t the manager, huh?” she said.

With Nanami having reached the same conclusion I had, it seemed we were back to square one in terms of finding out who’d sent the letter.

“Yeah, once things calm down a bit, we should at least meet with her and ask. Maybe she saw something,” I suggested.

Since we couldn’t mention the dare, we’d probably only be able to ask her why she’d been by Nanami’s shoe locker that day. Also, if we were going to wait until after the basketball tournament, it would be after the summer break. I sure hoped nothing else would happen before then. If something were to happen, I’d protect Nanami at all costs. I’d have to be even more vigilant than before.

“Actually, do you have any plans for the break, senpai?” I asked.

Although my first thought had been to meet with the manager after the break, I wondered if it would be possible to talk with her during it instead. That way, we wouldn’t have to worry about any other students being around.

“For the break? I guess I’ll mostly be at practice. We’ll have the summer tournament, but even after that ends, we’ll have to prep for the winter one too.”

“Sounds like you’ll be busy. I’ll be sure to send good vibes for your tournaments, then,” I said.

“Much appreciated! This year, we’re going to make up for last year’s humiliation!” Shoichi-senpai declared loudly, shaking his fist.

Wait, does our basketball team usually make it to nationals? I have no idea about things like that. I was pretty sure that the team was good, since I vaguely remembered the school celebrating its performance. *Hey, does this mean senpai was trying to get me to join the team even when there’s a tournament right around the corner?*

“Then I guess you have no time to hang out, then, huh?”

“Oh, it’s not like that,” Shoichi-senpai said, unclenching his fist and staring at me hopefully. “We have to avoid overworking ourselves. I make sure to leave time for fun, and I even work part-time for a few hours a week.”

Um, is he waiting for me to invite him to do something together?

I knew this was just my imagination, but I felt like I could see a tail wagging behind him like a dog waiting to be played with. Unlike Nanami, who gave me the impression of a cat, Shoichi-senpai was definitely like a dog. He even had the blond hair to go with it.

“Th-Then, in that case, would you like to hang out sometime during the summer break?” I asked.

“Aw man, that sounds awesome! Yeah, let’s! The summer festival’s gonna be in full swing—how about we go there?”

Whoa, he’s totally into the idea. I noticed Shoichi-senpai’s tail wagging even more violently. But a summer festival, huh? I’d never been to one, so I didn’t realize it would overlap with summer break. Maybe I’d gone when I was a kid, but I didn’t remember at all. At least, I was pretty sure I hadn’t been since I started middle school.

“In that case, how about all four of us go—you, me, Nanami, and the team manager?”

It was just an idea, but if we were going to talk with the manager, then we

might as well get to know each other a bit. Unfortunately, I wasn't used to talking with people, and the manager was pretty shy. That's why I thought spending time together at an event would make it easier for us to talk—especially about such a difficult topic. I'd only really thought of it, though, because Shoichi-senpai had mentioned going to the festival.

Just as I was thinking that Shoichi-senpai might go along with the idea, someone else pounced on the proposal—of course, the only other person who would was Nanami.

“That sounds great! Going to the summer festival with the four of us sounds fun—it's like a double date! I've also been wanting to chat with the manager too.” Nanami was jumping up and down excitedly, her eyes sparkling. Her level of excitement had gone from zero to sixty in an instant, but in contrast, Shoichi-senpai's expression had turned slightly sullen. I wondered if he didn't like the phrase “double date” or if he was reluctant to agree to my idea in the first place, but as it turned out, his expression was down to neither.

“I can't help but feel like the manager wouldn't like spending time with me.”

For someone who seemed über-confident when it came to girls, Shoichi-senpai sounded extremely uncertain. Nanami was staring at him as though she was seeing something for the first time.

Worried about the whole situation, Shoichi-senpai smiled a wistful, self-deprecating smile. “I mean, the manager already does so much for me, and I know I cause her a lot of trouble. Plus, she tends to yell at me a lot.”

I was completely taken aback by Shoichi-senpai, who was starting to sound a lot like me. He wasn't acting like himself at all. Actually, no. This was different even from the way I talked. He was sounding more like a child worried about having someone dislike him.

Nanami seemed surprised by his behavior too, as she and I looked at each other. When I asked her wordlessly whether she'd seen him like this before, she slowly shook her head. I was kind of tickled that she understood what I was trying to say without me having to articulate it.

“You're acting weirdly pessimistic,” I remarked.

“Ah, yeah. I’m actually a little surprised myself. It’s just that when I thought about hanging out with her, I couldn’t help worrying whether it would be okay. But you’re right, this isn’t like me at all.”

Shoichi-senpai stood up and puffed out his chest as though trying to pull himself together. His posture made the pose look a little bit forced.

“Maybe if you invite her, you’ll know if she dislikes you or not. I don’t think anyone would agree to go to the summer festival with someone they don’t even like,” Nanami said, smiling encouragingly. She was right—no one would want to go to a festival with someone they didn’t like. She then added that that was her own personal opinion, given her limited experience with guys.

I was slightly surprised by the fact that Nanami of all people had used the phrase “experience with guys.” She stole a glance at me and smiled seductively. *Whoa, is it just me, or does Nanami seem sexier than usual? Seriously—did something happen at the nurse’s office?*

“I suppose that’s true. Hmm. In that case, I’ll invite the manager myself.”

In the brief span of my perplexity, Shoichi-senpai had gotten back on his feet. He was standing tall with his usual confident smile on his face.

“That would be great. Thank you,” I said.

“No problem at all. I’ll also do my best to report back with good news about the tournament!”

Relieved to see Shoichi-senpai back to his usual self, Nanami and I thanked him and left the clubroom. However, just before we did, I glanced at Nanami, who looked as though she was truly enjoying herself.



When it comes to exams, results are everything. This might sound somewhat harsh, but it’s an undeniably reasonable assessment. No matter how hard you work, no matter how great the progress, if the results just don’t cut it, you have a lot to reflect on at the end. Still, one can’t help craving validation for both their efforts and their results—even if those results simply aren’t up to scratch. What one shouldn’t do is become defiant and defensive about those poor results.

There would be others who would be willing to validate the process rather than the results. That is precisely why the only thing that the person in question could do was to reflect on the errors they had made. The results would surely follow the next time. If I didn't believe that, I didn't feel like I could go on.

“Whoa, seriously?”

I was in Nanami's room, looking over the exam papers we'd gotten back. We were supposed to be reviewing our test results, but it was turning into a consolation party for me. As I sat slumped over the table, wallowing in self-pity, Nanami patted me on the head.

“There, there. You worked really hard, Yoshin.”

In that moment, though, her kindness stung.



“I can’t believe I made such a newbie mistake!” I moaned.

Looking at my answer sheet for the math exam, I couldn’t help feeling down in the dumps. I wasn’t all that good at math, but thanks to Nanami’s tutoring, I had thought that I’d at least managed an average score or perhaps slightly lower. Even so, the paper I’d gotten back indicated a complete fail.

When I’d first picked it up, I’d been unable to believe my eyes. I’d thought that for sure I’d manage to avoid that. I hadn’t been super confident, but I’d thought that the probability of me failing was pretty low.

“Gosh, to think you just skipped a line,” Nanami mumbled as she continued patting my head. That’s right—my error was a very simple one: I had skipped a line on the answer sheet and so had written down the answers in the incorrect spots throughout the exam. Seriously, it was the kind of thing that only happened in comedies.

I had approached all my exams by first responding to the questions that I knew the answers to. When it came to math, though, I could answer way fewer questions than on the other exams. That was why I’d ended up writing the answers in the incorrect spots. It was probably also because I wasn’t used to answering them like that.

“Hey, come on, at least you only have to take one class over summer break. You managed to get above average on all the other subjects. You worked really hard!” Nanami said, trying to console me with a strained smile. Her thoughtful words lifted my spirits a bit, but they also made me feel even sillier for my mistake.

“The math test was really hard this time, and if you’d put the answers in the right spots, you definitely wouldn’t have failed. Your efforts really are paying off,” she said.

“I guess you’re right,” I mumbled, raising my head. I couldn’t sit there moping forever. That said, that last part was the hardest to process—after all, I’d been so close to an above-average score.

“Man, there goes my reward,” I mumbled without thinking. In actuality, I wasn’t that bothered about not getting the reward. If Nanami hadn’t been up

for it, then we could have just called it off. I'd said it without thinking. At that moment, though, Nanami's hand, which had been patting me on the head, froze. I immediately regretted what I'd said, but it was too late. When I slowly craned my neck to look at her, I saw that she was frozen in place, her hand still on my head.

Maybe I was imagining it, but her gaze felt colder than usual. I guess that wasn't a surprise, though, given that the reward had been taking a bath together (in our bathing suits). It made perfect sense that she would look at me that way if I was sad that I was going to miss out.

As I sat there resigning myself to my fate, I saw her glance over at the door of her room. She then took her hand off of my head, got up, and walked toward the door. Anxious that she might be angry and was going to leave, I couldn't get myself to move. I heard the door open, followed by the sound of it closing immediately. I felt like my fears had come true, but then something made my body jerk up.

Once the door closed, I heard the sound of metal clicking into place. I hadn't really heard that sound in Nanami's room, but I'd heard a similar sound in my room many times. It was a kind of a metallic clink. Surprised, I turned my head to look toward the door—and saw that Nanami was still in the room with me. She hadn't walked out; instead, she was standing with her back to the door, her hands behind her.

Did she just lock the door? What? Why?

I slowly raised my head off of the table. My head felt strangely heavy. As if in sync with my movement, Nanami began to drift toward me. Slowly but surely, step-by-step, she approached me. Then, without uttering a word, she sat down next to me.

I swallowed hard. Nanami's face was hidden in shadow, so I couldn't read her expression clearly. Was she going to yell at me? No, that didn't seem right. Still, the air between us felt really heavy. We were both silent, but my ears hurt somehow. Even though I knew I was probably just imagining it, they were ringing with all the quiet.

Beside me, Nanami seemed unsure about what to do next. She was bending

her legs, then stretching them back out and even waving her arms a bit.

“Um, Nanami...?” I said, unable to take the silence any longer. Nanami turned to me and met my gaze. The next thing I knew, she’d wrapped her arms around my neck.

“Huh?”

Paying my surprise no mind, she pulled me toward her with incredible force. Then, in one smooth motion, she placed my head on her chest. It had all happened so fast that I hadn’t had a chance to resist—not that I would have had any intention of doing so. Just like that, Nanami was sitting there, cradling my head against her chest.

“Uh, I know we can’t take a bath together, but I wanted to give you a reward for working so hard,” Nanami whispered, stroking my hair as if I were a child. I wasn’t sure if I could stay in this position for very long. I was leaning forward unreasonably and felt like my neck and my back were going to give out any minute. My body started quivering, but Nanami must have noticed, because she let go of my head for a moment. She then took my hand and stood up.

I could scarcely keep up with the rapidly changing situation, but I followed Nanami nonetheless. We were inside her room, though, so we weren’t going very far. The problem was where we were headed. We were headed toward her bed. You might think I was being overly dramatic, but come on—wasn’t this kind of a crazy turn of events?

The bed was only a few steps away from where we were sitting. In terms of time, it took only a few seconds to reach it, and yet the side of the bed felt incredibly far. Every time I took a step, I felt my feet growing heavier, as if there were weights tied to my ankles. Even that didn’t matter, though, because Nanami was pulling me along.

But it wasn’t just the heaviness. Every time I lifted my feet off the ground, they seemed to make tearing sounds, as though there had been glue slathered on the soles. When we finally reached the bed, Nanami spun around and switched positions with me as though dancing. I ended up standing right next to her bed as she proceeded to push me from behind.

If we’d been in a manga, the panel would have depicted the onomatopoeia of

a light shove, but in reality, there was no sound. I simply fell silently onto Nanami's bed.

I wasn't seeing my life flash before my eyes or anything; in fact, my surroundings moved slowly as I fell. I simply plopped down, albeit with an odd feeling. I heard the light creak of her bed beneath me. The covers were on her bed, so the soft comforter gently enveloped me. As I felt its softness, I smelled a pleasant scent coming from the bedding.

All of that took just a couple of minutes. I was already confused enough by this point, but then something even more confusing happened.

"Here I go!" Nanami said softly.

I felt a gentle breeze at my side. The next thing I knew, Nanami was lying right next to me.

We hadn't lain down together in the same bed since the time we'd gone on that trip a while back. No, wait—even then, we hadn't lain down like this. We'd just been lying in bed together when we'd come to. Nanami had still been asleep then.

To be in our school uniforms, lying together like this, felt very strange. Nanami, who had been resting on her stomach, turned to lie on her side. A lot of her skin was showing because of the summer uniform, and her shirt had shifted slightly out of place.

"Here," she said. "This is more of your reward."

Nanami reached out toward me and hugged me to her chest again. Of course, the fact that I was lying down meant that we could only end up in that position if I cooperated with her. Even so, the way I got there so smoothly was astounding.

Okay, I'll be honest. I moved here myself. There's no way a girl could move me like that on her own. I mean, come on. This is my reward. It would be rude of me to refuse. Of course, we know we're not going to do anything at all whatsoever.

"Wait, what's gotten into you all of a sudden?" I asked. I could hear Nanami's heart beating softly. Perhaps because I was so close, her pulse seemed somewhat fast.

Rather than respond to my question, Nanami lifted her body slightly. “Here, put your arms around me too,” she said.

“My arms? Y-You mean like this?”

When I inserted my hand into the opening between her and the bed, I ended up wrapping my arm around her back. Nanami and I were embracing on the bed.

“So, um...” Nanami said hesitantly, even though I’d thought she’d fall silent again. Because she was hugging me tightly against her chest, her voice sounded all muffled. Also, I was learning this for the first time, but when you’re hugging someone, you can hear their voice directly through their body—or maybe I should say that you could hear the sound as it traveled through their body rather than the air. “I learned from the school nurse that there are ways to make a boy happy even without having sex,” she said.

What is that nurse teaching people?! I thought. I was horrified, but since Nanami was holding me, I couldn’t really raise my head. If I did, I might, um, feel things even more directly.

“Besides, do you know how the school defines ‘illicit sexual behavior’?” she asked.

“Um, isn’t it just having sex and stuff like that?”

“To be precise, it’s any behavior ‘detrimental to the healthy growth of boys and girls.’”

I didn’t know that. If that was the definition, then we probably weren’t supposed to be doing what we were doing right now either—not that I could bring myself to stop. That was why what Nanami said next seemed so outrageous.

“In other words, it doesn’t apply to young women!” she declared.

“Wait! I don’t think that’s what they mean at all!” I cried with my face still pressed against her chest. When I did, Nanami let out a noise that sounded slightly like a moan, which was bad enough by itself. I mean, come on—what she was claiming was ridiculous. Didn’t “boys and girls” include both young men and women? I understood that they could have said “young people,” but still.

Nanami didn't stop holding me though. In fact, she hugged me tighter and pulled me even closer toward her. "Tee hee, you think so too, huh? But studying's still really important. If we don't study, we won't do well on our exams. That's why, from now on, I want to do lots of things that are all within the realm of what's healthy and appropriate."

"Within the realm of what's healthy?" I repeated.

"Yeah, this is one of those things. I'm actually supposed to unbutton my shirt and sandwich your face directly, but that's a little too embarrassing, you know?"

Um, this isn't all that different, is it? I know there's a shirt between us, but there's bare skin right on the other side of that shirt. I feel like Nanami's under some bad influence.

"I still feel like this isn't healthy behavior," I murmured.

"Oh, sure it is! The nurse said that anything you do that can't make babies is totally healthy and that even acts that *can* make babies are healthy as long as you use contraception."

"Aren't those standards way too low?!" I said, raising my voice again, which made Nanami gasp a little. Please stop—that echoes just above my head and runs straight into my body. It's making me act totally inappropriately. I wonder if that nurse is fit to be an educator. Wait, is this actually proper health education? Isn't she supporting our independence a bit too much?

"I learned lots of things. Look forward to them, okay?" Nanami said.

"I'm kinda scared, but I guess I am kinda looking forward to it too," I mumbled, half giving up. Nanami was still holding me, so her body felt warm and reassuring. The sinking feeling I'd felt from failing my test had completely disappeared.

"The warmth of your body makes me feel at ease," Nanami said. "I'd been all keyed up lately because of that letter and our exams, so this feels super relaxing."

"I don't feel that calm lying on your bed. It's like my whole body's wrapped up in you."

“Sounds like the beginner level of our ‘making out at home’ game has been a success, huh?”

“This is a game now?!”

By this point, I was amazed to find myself wanting to learn from the school nurse too. Then again, the school nurse was a woman, so maybe she would find it difficult to teach stuff to boys. More importantly, Nanami had said “beginner level.” What was going to happen at the intermediate and advanced levels? I was curious, but I was also afraid of what she was going to do to me. After all, this meant I’d probably be at her mercy.

Until now, Nanami had always been a little shy, which was absolutely adorable. As long as things didn’t get out of control, she always maintained a line that she wouldn’t cross. What she now had in mind, though, had the school nurse’s approval, regardless of the technicality. In other words, one of the reasons for Nanami’s hesitation had been eliminated.

Nanami probably also realized that doing this stuff wasn’t exactly appropriate. The fact that she’d locked the door made that clear enough. Would I be able to protect Nanami and keep her safe without hurting her feelings? That felt like a lot of responsibility—or rather, it felt like a whole traffic jam of responsibilities clogging my chest.

By the way, how long are we going to keep doing this?

“It’d be nice to solve that letter mystery, huh?” Nanami murmured.

“Yeah. I hope the manager knows something.”

“Nggh! It kind of tickles when you talk there.”

“Do you want to stop, then?”

“No sirree,” she replied, hugging me even more tightly. My mouth was covered up, making it hard for me to breathe, but I managed to shift my head.

For now, given that it would be inconsiderate of us to try to talk to the manager before the tournament, we just had to be patient. Still, it would be great if we could resolve the issue by the end of summer break. If the manager had seen something, we would be able to use that clue as a springboard. There

were several other potential culprits, and she might have been the one to see them.

In any case, why the culprit had chosen to send it to Nanami was still a mystery. It didn't make any sense. They'd just sent a letter—not even a threat. Was that really all it was? The letter asked if the dare was still going on, so wasn't it seeking a response? If that was the case, then I wanted to answer and get it over with. I wanted to let them know that the dare was already over.

As I thought more about the letter, another moment of silence passed between us. That silence felt somehow comfortable though, perhaps because we knew exactly what we were doing. It felt like Nanami was growing warmer. I wondered if her body temperature was rising because we were so close together. I listened closely and heard the sound of her steady breathing. As I listened to her slow and quiet breaths, I felt my eyelids growing heavier. Just as I began to contemplate how good it would feel to fall asleep right then and there, the sound of Nanami's breathing began to grow slightly more elongated. It didn't take long for that sound to turn into one of sleeping breaths.

I heard a gentle whistling coming from above my head. Listening to her steady breathing and regular heartbeat, I began to drift off as well. With Nanami's chest as my pillow, I felt my eyelids begin to close. *I don't want to wake her. Maybe I should take a little nap too.* If I fell asleep, I wouldn't get the urge to do anything weird. Thinking that was the best way to go, I decided just to surrender myself to slumber. We didn't have any covers on, but we were snuggled up against each other. We probably didn't need to worry about feeling chilly.

And just like that, for the first time of our own volition, we closed our eyes while embracing each other on the bed. Feeling the warmth of Nanami's body, I drifted off to sleep while filled with contentment.



As a side note, I have two things to add to the fact that the two of us had fallen asleep together. The first was that my arm fell asleep partway through, so much so that it lost all sensation. I was kind of shocked, to be honest. My legs had fallen asleep before, but I hadn't realized my arm could do that too. It was kind of obvious when I thought about it, given that my arm was under Nanami's body. Even if the futon was soft, there was still some weight on it, but I decided to grin and bear it, telling myself that the numbness I was feeling was a happy kind.

At the time, I wondered if the same thing had happened to Nanami too, but she was only holding my head, so she came out unscathed. I didn't know how to respond to what she said after waking up: "In the future, we should be careful when we use each other's arms as pillows." At that, we both turned red. I wondered if I should look up the proper place to put it, just in case the opportunity came up in the future. Then again, I'd feel kind of embarrassed to have that in my search history.

The other thing was that Tomoko-san came to Nanami's room because we weren't responding to her calling us. Of course, the door to her room was locked, and given the fact that we weren't saying anything... There's probably no need to explain how Tomoko-san reacted. In fact, Tomoko-san herself didn't seem to know how she should react—whether she should scold us or if perhaps even that wasn't the appropriate response. It was the first time ever that I'd seen Nanami's mother so flustered. I could finally see the resemblance.

Nanami immediately panicked and ended up telling her what we'd been up to. That couldn't really be helped. It might have been the first time we all felt so awkward around each other. Wondering if I would have acted similarly had my own mom discovered us like that in my room, I decided to be more careful in the future.

As another side note, once Tomoko-san calmed down, she teased us to no end.



"Wow, this is super relaxing," Nanami murmured.

"Yeah, it's been a while since we've been able to hang out like this."

“We’ve been spending a lot of time at home lately, huh?”

“Totally, but are you sure this is okay? I mean, we’re out on a date for the first time in a while, and we came to such a Podunk place.”

Nanami grinned as though to tell me that this was the very place she wanted to come to. If that was true, then I had zero complaints. She and I had come on a date, and as I’d said to Nanami, we hadn’t been on a date at all in what felt like a super long time. It wasn’t just a feeling; it *had* been a super long time.

Since the incident and with all our test prep, we’d been too busy to go on a proper date—even though we’d been together basically every day. We hadn’t made any progress when it came to the letter either. There hadn’t been any additional letters, so all had been radio silence on that front. It was creepy, and we were being vigilant while trying not to be too cautious. That was just where we were at the moment.

All that considered, life had pretty much gone back to normal. We were currently strolling through the park, feeling the warm sun on our bodies. It wasn’t that hot, but it was the time of year when wearing long sleeves felt like too much. Summer was just around the corner.

I was looking forward to the first summer that Nanami and I were going to spend together, but I was also a little anxious about what might happen. Still, it wasn’t an unpleasant feeling. Since this was our first date in a while, we had decided just to spend time together by relaxing rather than going all out. We’d figured that pursuing one activity after another would just tire us out and that just walking and talking together could be fun too. Even though we did that regularly, the fact that we were doing it outside of the house was what made it special. We could roam around the park, sit down on a bench when we got tired, go into a café to grab something to drink, or enjoy some window-shopping. A date without a purpose was just as fun—though maybe that was because it was the two of us.

Food trucks had become more commonplace lately, making it possible to buy crepes and ice cream in the park. When I glanced around, I saw that there was a line forming for the food truck selling the crepes. I’d seen lines at ramen stalls before, but I never knew that crepe places were so popular too.

“Come to think of it, I don’t think I’ve ever had a crepe before,” I remarked.

“What? Really? You didn’t ask your parents to buy you one when you were little?”

“Hmm, I don’t think so.”

Yeah, even when I thought about it some more, I couldn’t recall any memories of eating a crepe. Maybe that was rare nowadays. I felt like I’d seen a bunch of things about crepes on the internet at one point, but it hadn’t propelled me to go out and get one.

“I guess that means you’ve asked your parents to get you one before,” I said.

“Yep! When we were little, Saya and I used to beg them to let us eat one. I mean, don’t they just *look* tasty? Plus the shape is all cute.”

Nanami when she was little, huh? I’d gotten to look at some photos before, and she really did look cute.

“I know I gave them a lot of trouble by pestering them, but it made me really happy when they would buy one for us once in a while.”

The fact that it was only once in a while meant that her parents must have said no sometimes too. If it had been me in that situation, I would have ended up buying one for her every time. I knew that was probably the wrong thing to do, but even knowing that I would probably want to buy them for her anyway. Occasionally—*very* occasionally—I was overcome by the urge to spoil Nanami to no end. Regardless of whether she wanted that or not, I wanted to say yes to everything even though I knew that it was bad to overdo it.

“You’re not gonna beg today and say you really wanna eat one, are you?” I asked.

“What? I could, but aren’t you only asking because you wanna eat one yourself? I’m a very kind person, so I’m willing to join you in your first crepe experience.” Nanami attached herself to me as she teasingly played along. It was true that I definitely wouldn’t buy and eat a crepe if I were by myself. Perhaps today was a good opportunity to treat myself to my first crepe ever.

“How about we go grab one and walk around while we eat?” I suggested.

“Oooh, how exciting! I haven’t had a crepe in a long time. Do you want a sweet one or a savory one?” Nanami asked.

“Huh? There are savory crepes? I thought the batter was sweet like pancake batter.”

“The batter is a little bit sweet, but it actually goes well with things like cheese and ham too. I mostly tend to eat sweet crepes though.”

I couldn’t really picture one in my head. What were savory crepes like? I had to admit they had piqued my interest.

“You tend to like sweet ones, right?” I asked.

“Yeah, I do. I especially like them with strawberries, chocolate, and whipped cream.”

“Then maybe I’ll get a sweet one too. How about we get two different ones and try each other’s?”

Nanami paused for a moment, then mumbled, “Sure.”

Wait, don’t get embarrassed now, Nanami. We’ve already kissed, so why do you act all innocent at times like these? As I asked myself that, Nanami began to tug on my hand as though to make us both forget about how embarrassed she’d gotten.

Nanami led me by the hand until we were in line at the food truck. Aside from us, there were mostly groups of girls waiting. There were no other guys in sight. *Wow, I feel kind of embarrassed standing in line surrounded by girls,* I thought. *If Nanami wasn’t here, I’d probably want to run away. Yeah, I’m definitely out of place here.*

We arrived at the front of the line more quickly than we expected and then chose the crepes we wanted to order. I got one with chocolate and bananas, while Nanami got one with strawberries and whipped cream. *I see, so this is a crepe,* I thought. *The actual crepe itself is pretty thin. I thought it’d be thicker.*

Since crepes were hard to eat while holding hands, Nanami and I let go of each other for the moment. My crepe was still warm, and when I took a bite of it, the slightly bitter chocolate and the sweetness of the banana spread

throughout my mouth. Nanami, too, happily munched on her crepe. The whipped cream must have spilled out a bit, because I saw some on the corner of her mouth.

“Nanami, you have cream on you,” I said.

“Wait, really? Where? Um, Yoshin, could you get it for me?”

“Oh, yeah. Sure thing.”

We drifted off of the path and stopped in the shade of a tree. I handed my crepe to Nanami and looked for the pack of tissues I always carried with me. *Hmm, I’m pretty sure I have it somewhere.*

Just then, Nanami stepped forward and closed her eyes. She was holding a crepe in each hand, but her posture made it look like she was going to kiss me. Seeing her like that outdoors made my heart beat faster, but I held up the tissue in my hand to wipe her mouth. Just then, though, Nanami spoke up. “Oh, you can lick it off, you know?”

I froze. I looked at the spot next to her lips but shook my head slightly so that she couldn’t see. “I can’t do that. We’re outside,” I said.

“I see. Then if we were indoors, you’d do it.”

Oh, shoot. That was a slip of the tongue. Still, I was pretty certain I wouldn’t be able to pull that off even if we were indoors. If the cream were her cheek, it’d be different, but licking near her lips was a different matter. That might be even more of a challenge than kissing her normally.

Rather than licking her, I wiped Nanami’s mouth before taking my crepe back. It was at that moment, as I was receiving my crepe that she shouted, “Let me try!”

“Whoa!”

Nanami bit into the crepe in my hand. I would have given it to her even without her having to do that. Nevertheless, taken by surprise, I looked down at the part of the crepe that she had bit into. That’s when I noticed that the crepe had only one bite mark. It should have had two—on the spot where I’d bitten into and on the spot where Nanami had bitten it—yet there was only one place

with a small semicircular indent. In other words, Nanami had taken a bite from the same place I had.

Did she do it on purpose, or was it an accident? I wondered. I couldn't tell from Nanami's expression. Seeing her happy face, though, I could tell this was what she'd wanted to do. I supposed it was a small bit of mischief on her part.

"Hee hee, I ate some. This one's good too. Here you go," Nanami said, offering me her crepe in return.

Was she testing me? Should I eat from the same spot she had? We'd kissed before. We'd slept in the same bed too. If anything, Nanami had done all sorts of things with me. Yet why did I feel so nervous thinking about where to bite into the crepe? We'd done so many naughtier things than this. Humans really were strange.

"Are you not gonna have any?" Nanami asked, tilting her head. *I guess there's only one thing for me to do.*

I took a bite of Nanami's crepe. The sweetness of the cream and the tartness of the strawberries melted over my tongue. I'd thought maybe I would be too nervous to taste anything, but that wasn't the case.

"Yeah, this one's good too," I said, trying to maintain my cool.

"Right? I'm so glad that your first crepe experience is a good one."

Just as Nanami was about to take another bite of her own crepe, she suddenly froze in place. She had her mouth open slightly as it was inches away from it. I felt the urge to stick my finger in her mouth, but I resisted. She glanced at me for a moment, then let her eyes travel back and forth between her crepe and my face—or rather, my mouth. *Dang it, she caught on.*

I averted my gaze. Nanami, on the other hand, took a step toward me and brought her face closer to mine, staring at me as though trying to burn a hole with her stare. Was it getting hotter or was it just me? No, of course it was just me sweating.

"Oh," Nanami said softly, her face still close to mine. When I looked at her with a sidelong glance, I saw that she was looking down at the strawberry crepe in her hand. I hadn't yet taken another bite of the chocolate crepe Nanami had

given back to me. It was in the same state as when she'd bitten into it. Nanami seemed to notice as much. "I...I didn't do it on purpose," she mumbled quietly, her hand on my chest.

Oh, so it wasn't on purpose. I thought that maybe it was.

"Sorry, but I did it on purpose," I mumbled back. Nanami's eyes widened for a moment. She smiled, took my hand, and bit into my crepe again.



“I did that on purpose too, so now we’re even,” she said before taking another bite out of her own crepe. Then, in one fluid motion, she guided my arm toward my mouth. I tasted my own crepe again as directed. “How’s your first crepe ever? Is it tasty?” she asked.

“Yeah, it sure is,” I replied.

Looking somewhat smug despite her blushing face, Nanami smiled with satisfaction. I couldn’t help smiling in return. We were standing in the shade of a tree, so I figured no one had seen us. Still, just thinking about doing stuff like this outdoors was kind of embarrassing. Perhaps it was at times like this that you shouldn’t stop to think about what you were doing.

We continued walking and eating our crepes as we strolled leisurely through the park. This specific park wasn’t one we usually visited, but we found that there were all kinds of people there. There were people relaxing on benches and lying down on picnic blankets on the grass, fathers playing with their children, and families enjoying picnics together.

“It would be nice to have lunch at the park. Maybe I should’ve made one today. Hey, let’s bring bento and have a picnic next time. It’ll be fun,” Nanami said.

“Yeah, I hadn’t thought about that. Maybe we can both make and bring stuff.”

“Oooh, that sounds good. You’ve been so into cooking lately.”

“I’m nowhere near as good as you though,” I said.

As we continued on our stroll, we came upon a chain coffee shop. Since we’d been walking the whole time, we decided to stop by and take a break. The plan for today’s date wasn’t just to take a stroll but also to plan out our summer break—primarily, the dates we’d be having. That said, it felt kind of weird planning dates while we were on one.

The situation felt even more weird given the fact that just last year I’d just lazily played games right from the very start of the break and then rushed to finish all my summer assignments with very little time left to do them. This year, though, I had Nanami, and there were a ton of things I wanted to do. Our break

would be for less than a month, so unless we planned things out in advance, we might end up missing out.

“First off, we’re definitely going to the summer festival, right? Maybe I’ll try wearing a yukata. I’m pretty sure I have one,” Nanami said.

“A yukata, huh? I’m not sure I do. A guy doesn’t really need to wear one, though, I guess.”

“What?! But I totally wanna see you in one.”

“Oh, come on. Even if I wear a yukata, it’s not gonna look much different from when we were on our trip.”

Girls, on the other hand, looked very good in a yukata. That was what I was thinking anyway, but Nanami was shaking her head vehemently, insisting that I would definitely look different. *Hmm, I dunno...*

“I feel like a yukata would be kind of expensive,” I muttered.

“I see. Aw, but I really wanna see you in one.”

I had to laugh at that—she spoke as though she’d given up on the idea, but she totally hadn’t. Yukata aside, I was going to need a lot of stuff for this summer break. I didn’t have any decent summer clothes, plus there was all the money I needed for our summer dates to think about.

“Actually, I was thinking of working part-time during the summer break,” I said, sharing something I’d been thinking about for a while.

“Oh, you too?” Nanami replied. *What does she mean, “you too”?*

Apparently, Nanami had been thinking the same thing, because now she was looking kind of embarrassed. She swiped through her phone and showed me a photo. The image was of Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san, wearing somewhat revealing costumes—fitted black-and-white tops and shorts to match. Both girls were making peace signs as they stood either side of two very muscular men making funny poses. Neither one of the men was Soichiro-san.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“It’s from when the two of them were working part-time last year. They worked at one of Oto-nii’s events. I didn’t work there, but I did go and visit

them.”

We scrolled through a few more photos. Nanami’s two friends sure liked to have their pictures taken. Looking at them, you couldn’t tell they were high school students at all.

Wait, the fact that Nanami’s showing me these photos can’t possibly mean...!

“I was thinking of working at the event this year. It’s just for two days,” she said.

“Seriously?!”

Is that gonna be okay? She’d be wearing something that seems more like a bathing suit, showing off her midriff and most of her thighs to tons of people. Wouldn’t that be a dangerous part-time job for Nanami?

“This was last year’s costume. Cute, huh? I hear it’s gonna be a different one this year, so I’m looking forward to it. I bet it’s gonna be just as cute.”

“Wait, that’s not what I’m worried about. I mean, you’re gonna be looked at by a lot of people. Are you gonna be okay? Isn’t it mainly gonna be guys there?” I asked. I mean, did the cuteness of the costume really outweigh how revealing it was?

“Huh?”

“Huh?”

Nanami seemed surprised at my remark. Confused, I tilted my head in wonder. *I mean, is this really something for her to look forward to?*

“What?! Oh, no, no! I’m not gonna wear this in front of people! It’ll be backstage! I’m gonna be working backstage because apparently they’re short on staff!” Nanami explained, waving her hands in front of herself in a panic. Judging by how flustered she was, it seemed her job really wasn’t going to require her to wear the suggestive attire.

Oh, thank goodness. No, really. I’m seriously glad that’s not the case. I’ve never been so panicked before in my life. Just the thought of Nanami wearing something like that makes me feel like I’m losing my mind.

“That was really misleading,” I murmured.

“Sorry! I’m gonna help prep the costumes for the girls and get them changed into things. I’m also gonna do other stuff in the back, like sort through the tickets and stuff. Apparently, not enough people signed up.”

Ah, that’s a relief. But wait; isn’t this the kind of thing that happens before the girl ends up wearing the costume in the end? I mean, doesn’t that happen often, like suddenly they don’t have enough people to wear it and so the part-time girl has to step in? That’s not gonna happen, right?

As I continued feeling anxious, I heard Nanami mumbling something beside me. She had the tips of her fingers together and was moving them in a sea-creature-like manner. Was she worried about something related to the job? If that was the case, maybe she shouldn’t do it after all.

“Also, this isn’t public knowledge, and it’s separate from the pay, but apparently, you can get this year’s costume if you work the event.”

At that moment, my brain stopped functioning. You can get that kind of costume? Huh? That’s a thing? Wait, maybe she did say something like that before, but really? She can get one? For what though?

“I thought maybe you’d like it if I wore it when the two of us were alone,” Nanami said, holding her palms together with a seductive smile on her face. Seeing her with such an alluring air about her, I felt my heart skip a beat. That air quickly dissipated though, as Nanami returned to her usual self. I’d heard that women could have many sides to themselves, but I felt like Nanami had gained quite a number of new sides just in the last few days.

Nanami’s expression was making me feel anxious. Moving forward, she was going to continue growing and becoming even more attractive. She was attractive already, and she had a ton of friends. This part-time job was probably going to reveal another side of her as well, and she was probably going to make all sorts of new acquaintances that I didn’t know. If I said I wasn’t worried about that, I’d be lying.

Nonetheless, there was no way I could tag along to her workplace—that was for certain. Moreover, it would be excessively possessive of me if I did. That was why the only thing I could do was to trust Nanami and grow just as much so that I wouldn’t get left behind.

“So what kind of part-time job are you gonna do?” Nanami asked.

“Oh, me?”

Damn, I’d gotten so lost in thought that I’d failed to tell her I liked the idea of her wearing the costume when we were together. There was no way I wouldn’t like it, but I had to say it out loud. I had to look at the Nanami in front of me now rather than worrying about the future.

“So, uh, Shoichi-senpai’s gonna introduce me to where he works, and I’m gonna fill in for him when he’s got practice. Apparently it’s a family-run, Western-style restaurant,” I explained.

“I had no idea senpai worked at that kind of restaurant. That’s cool. I like places like that.”

“Yeah. I was told it’d just be for summer break. I’d be washing dishes and serving food mainly.”

“A server, huh? I wonder what kind of uniform you’ll be wearing.”

Uniform? I’d assumed I’d just be wearing normal clothes with an apron, but I guess I could be wearing a uniform. I hadn’t thought to ask. Maybe I should bring it up with Shoichi-senpai next time.

“I’ll come and eat there once you start working,” Nanami said. “If you find out about the uniform, let me know. I bet you’ll look really cool.”

“I’m not so sure about that.”

I usually wore my school uniform, so even if I was wearing a different uniform at the restaurant, I didn’t think I would look all that different. Then again, in anime and stuff, server outfits were pretty different.

I looked up a server’s uniform on my phone and showed it to Nanami. Her reaction was immediate. “Yoshin, if you can borrow this, I want you to wear it for me at home too,” she said, jokingly, but the look in her eyes was deadly serious. Although her comment didn’t come off that way, the air about her gave me no room to say no.

“Uh, yeah, okay. I’ll see if I can borrow it,” I mumbled.

“Maybe it’d be fun if I wore my new uniform and you wore your server’s

uniform while we were together.”

What kind of chaotic situation would that be? I grimaced slightly at the thought. Nanami seemed to imagine the same thing, because she furrowed her brows a bit as well.

From there, we ended up talking about the part-time jobs we hadn't even started yet, joking about them and sharing our concerns.

“I'm worried there'll be cute girls at your workplace,” Nanami mumbled.

“What are you talking about? *I'm* worried that there'll be good-looking guys at your event.”

“Hmm, I don't think so. The handsomest guy out there is sitting right here in front of me.”

“What? Well, the prettiest girl out there is sitting in front of me, so I guess there's nothing to worry about then, is there?”

Nanami laughed, but I couldn't quite shake off my worries. I knew they were unfounded, given that Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san would be there. Soichiro-san would also look out for her. If anyone were to do something to Nanami, he wouldn't stand idly by. Still, I felt kind of pathetic having to rely on someone else to protect my own girlfriend.

“Oh, and I was also thinking of maybe picking up some tutoring gigs,” Nanami added. “It'll probably be good for my future.”

She was even thinking of picking up a second part-time job. Tutoring would be a perfect fit for Nanami. She was essentially my tutor now, and because of that, my grades had really gone up. If I hadn't made that stupid mistake, I would have scored above average in every subject. Then again, Nanami working as a tutor might open up another can of worms.

Taking in Nanami's figure, I thought carefully. Yeah, if Nanami worked as a tutor for a healthy young guy, wouldn't all his sexual fetishes essentially implode?

“Just for the record, you're only thinking of tutoring girls, right?” I asked.

Nanami's eyes twinkled briefly, and she closed them as if to savor my

question. The next thing I knew, she was grinning mischievously. Her smile, which was already a bit wicked, grew broader as time passed. Eventually, she nodded several times as though convinced of something.

“I see, so you’re worried I’m gonna be tutoring boys, huh?”

“Well, I have several different reasons to be concerned, but yes, I am worried.”

“Tee hee. Well, there’s no need, since I’m only gonna be teaching girls. I’m planning on tutoring elementary and middle school kids.”

When I sighed in relief, Nanami giggled happily. I chastised myself for having let too much emotion show on my face, but since Nanami seemed to be enjoying it, it was probably okay.

“Aren’t you worrying too much? I mean, if it was just elementary school boys, then wouldn’t it be okay?” she asked.

“No. That could be worse.”

“Really?”

Yes, I was worried about Nanami, but I was also worried about the young boy. One misstep of the mind, and he might not be able to concentrate on his studies at all. If he was a middle school boy, it would probably be even worse. In fact, he might even try to do something inappropriate. Then again, if he was studious enough to hire a tutor, maybe it would be fine.

Was I really worrying too much? Maybe I needed to work on toughening myself up emotionally during the break so that I wouldn’t feel all this unnecessary fear. Also, I had to work hard so that I could continue working even after the break ended. Once I saved up some money, I’d be able to thank Nanami for tutoring me. It’d be nice to treat her to some kind of trip. I’d looked it up and learned that high school students could go away together as long as they had permission from their legal guardians.

I wanted to do lots of things for her to thank her for all that she did for me every day. Yeah, it was really motivating me to work hard at my new job.

“Let’s give our jobs our best shots!” Nanami exclaimed.

“Yeah, let’s.”

She reached out and took my hand. That alone made me feel like I could work for hours. The nervousness I’d felt about working for the first time was definitely fading.

That was how I managed to increase my motivation about work, but I would soon realize my own lack of awareness—or rather, just how painfully careless I’d been. In fact, I felt ashamed for not having thought of this before. If I had thought about it, I could have asked a long time ago. My negligence became clear when Nanami asked me a simple question.

“Say, when’s your birthday, Yoshin?”

Surprised by the question, I blurted out that my birthday was in winter—December, to be specific. For a moment, I wondered why she’d asked, but I froze when she replied.

“I see. My birthday’s August 7th, so...”

Huh? Nanami was born in August?

She kept talking, but nothing she said entered my brain.

“What?! Your birthday’s in August?!” I yelled.

Nanami jumped. “Whoa, that scared me.”

I couldn’t help it—I mean, I was shocked. I’d been completely caught off guard.

“Oh, didn’t I tell you? Yeah, my birthday’s August 7th. I’ll turn seventeen during the summer break.”

Although she was flashing a peace sign and looking somewhat proud of herself, I didn’t have the wherewithal to respond. Nanami’s birthday was during the summer break—of course I was in a panic. I understood that everyone had a birthday, but I’d never thought much about mine since only my parents celebrated it. If you set your birthday in an online game, the characters would send you birthday wishes or you might get special in-game items, but that was about the only way I recognized my birthday as a notable event. It wasn’t anything important.

I knew that was just an excuse, but that was why I hadn't known my own girlfriend's birthday. How did people normally find out about their partner's birthday anyway? There's no way they asked each other while introducing themselves, right? No, that definitely wasn't normal.

"Um, happy birthday?" I mumbled.

"Ha ha, it's way too early! But thanks anyway."

I was momentarily flustered, but Nanami was laughing happily. *I see. Her birthday, huh? Now there's one more thing for us to do during the break.*

On the bright side, now I wouldn't miss out on celebrating her birthday.

"But, yeah, if your birthday's in December, then I'm a little older than you, huh? Hmm, I see," Nanami murmured, deep in thought. Soon, she smiled an oddly gentle smile. Despite its gentleness, I felt an evil aura emanating from it.

"Hey, Yoshin, can you try calling me 'onee-chan'?" she asked.

"Why?!"

"Oh, come on! I just thought it'd be fun to see what it was like to have a little brother."

"We're in the same grade, and it's just a few months' difference. Besides, you already have a little sister."

Insisting that a younger sister was different from younger brother, Nanami continued asking me to call her "onee-chan." I'd had no idea that the thing I'd mentioned when we were talking about crepes would rear its ugly head now.

In the end, I ended up having to promise Nanami that I would call her onee-chan on her birthday. I'd never imagined that I'd have to call my girlfriend something like that. On a more serious note, I now had to think about what to get her for her birthday. My first summer with Nanami—filled with a whole lot of fun and just a slight bit of anxiety—was just around the corner.

Interlude: An Unexpected Reality

Summer break with my first boyfriend—just the thought of it had me all excited. In fact, I was pretty much on cloud nine. There were still sources of concern, like the letter, but I knew that I wouldn't be able to do anything if I kept worrying about them. I had to be careful, but I didn't want to be *too* careful.

I wasn't usually the type to make plans for summer break, but Yoshin and I chatted about what we wanted to do together. They say that large events are fun even when you're in the planning stages, and this time was no different. There were so many things we wanted to do that the break seemed even shorter than usual. It was a good thing that I learned Yoshin's birthday. I hadn't realized he was a December baby.

Since his birthday was right next to Christmas, we'd get to celebrate both events together. Then there would be New Year's too, so there would be lots of fun things in store at the end of the year. Thinking about winter when we hadn't even hit summer break was kind of silly. Still, I figured having so many fun events to look forward to was a good thing.

Speaking of birthdays, I wondered how most couples usually told each other when their birthdays were. I had only managed to find out because I'd just happened to ask him. I'd forgotten to tell him mine too. It seemed kind of weird to suddenly ask the person you're dating, "When is your birthday?" I was pretty sure the way things had gone for us was fine even if the way we'd found out was different from normal. Maybe it was poor form, but I ended up already begging him for a birthday present. I wondered what he thought. He did seem kind of surprised.

That was how our conversation went, but as we talked about our summer plans, we had come to a realization. Neither one of us had expected it. We were both talking about our plans for part-time work, and since Yoshin would be attending summer school, we figured there would be days when we wouldn't

be able to see each other. That was when we realized it—we'd actually see each other less during summer break than we usually did.

Yeah, we really hadn't expected that one. During the week, we saw each other at school and often spent the evenings in one of our rooms. Then on the weekends, we went on dates. Thinking back on it more calmly, it really seemed like we'd seen each other basically every day since we met. Maybe there had been a day when we hadn't been able to see each other, but neither one of us could remember it. That was how frequently we saw each other. It hadn't even crossed our minds that we wouldn't be able to see each other every day over the summer break.

I was a little worried, wondering if I'd be okay not seeing him. It was probably just me. I mean, would I be able to bear the days when I couldn't see him? That's all I could think about. It wasn't that I wanted to tie him down, but I wouldn't know what to do with such a change. I didn't think Yoshin would stop liking me because of it, but even so, I worried about the possibility. Jeez, maybe I liked him a little *too* much, or at least just worried a whole lot.

At that moment, though, I had a sneaking suspicion that perhaps seeing each other every day wasn't that normal. To me, it was only natural for us to always be together, but maybe that wasn't usually the case. I wondered how it was for my classmates who had boyfriends and decided to ask them, but when I tried asking Hatsumi and Ayumi first, the answer I got was, "We can't see our boyfriends every day, but we would if we could, so maybe it's normal."

I see, so they can't see their boyfriends every day either, huh? Is it because Oto-nii and Shu-nii both live by themselves? I feel like there should be more opportunities to see each other if your partner lives alone.

After that, I asked my other friends and ended up getting a range of surprising responses from them.

Friend A: I wanna see him every day, but my boyfriend wants to see me less, so we're fighting right now.

Friend B: I heard that guys get bored if they see their girlfriends all the time, so I'm scaling back.

Friend C: My boyfriend works full-time, so I can't see him that often. When I do get to see him, though, it makes me so happy, it's a turn on.

Friend D: I see mine maybe three times a week. But recently whenever we see each other, we end up just doing it and nothing else, so I might break up with him.

Some of the responses were so candid that just reading them made me blush. That last one especially had me confused. *You're just gonna break up with him? And you're doing it even if you're gonna break up with him?*

The more I heard from my friends, the more confused I got. In the end, however, I learned that people who saw their partner every day were in the minority. *But is it true that guys get bored if they see their partner every day? They get bored?!* I thought. This was my first time hearing of it. In fact, I might never have learned about it had I not heard it from my friends.

If what they said was true, then what I was doing was counterproductive. Still, the idea of Yoshin getting bored didn't click with me. Maybe in the future it might happen... No, that definitely wasn't possible. I kept getting more responses from my friends, but for whatever reason—club activities, part-time job, work, hanging out with other friends—hardly any of them saw their partners every day. In the end, it turned out that Yoshin and I were in the minority.

I see, so we're the exceptions, I thought. Not being able to see him made me feel anxious and lonely, but my other friends didn't seem to feel that way. I wondered how Yoshin felt. He tended to be pretty mature about things, so maybe he wouldn't feel lonely if we couldn't see each other. Or was it possible that us being apart made him sad too?

During our date, we had just ended by mentioning that it was rare for us to not see each other, but I hadn't managed to ask him how he felt. At the time, I hadn't really thought things through. When you feel uneasy about something, the best thing to do is to just ask, right? Even Yoshin had said that if we didn't say anything to each other and ended up having a misunderstanding, that would make him sad too.

Therefore, I decided to thank my friends and give Yoshin a call. We'd been together until just a short time ago, and I thought maybe it would take a little while for him to pick up, but I heard his voice on the other end of the line immediately.

“Hello? Nanami? What’s up?”

“Sorry to call you all of a sudden, Yoshin. Are you free to talk now?”

“Of course. Did something happen? You sound a little down.”

Huh? Did I? I hadn’t realized, but maybe my voice was lacking its usual pep. I was kind of happy that he’d noticed.

I didn’t want to beat around the bush, so I told Yoshin what I’d been thinking about—namely, what he thought about how often we saw each other. Yoshin listened to me without saying a word. He didn’t laugh once or tell me that I was worried about nothing; he just listened in silence until I finished talking. That was why I was able to feel at ease the whole time.

“I see. I guess other couples don’t tend to see each other every day,” he said.

“Yeah, it seems that way. That was why I got kind of worried, especially over that bit about getting tired of someone if you see them every day. Is that really true?” I asked.

“Hmm. Getting tired of the other person, huh?” Yoshin groaned at the idea. I wondered if it had struck a chord with him, but that wasn’t the case at all. “I guess it’s difficult, but that’s why I want to do my best to make sure you don’t get tired of me,” he declared.

Huh? When did we start talking about me getting tired of him? I wondered if I hadn’t been clear, but that wasn’t the case.

“Whether we get tired of each other seems more about whether we bore one another, you know?” he said. “That’s why I figured I should just try my best to make sure you’re always having fun. I mean, there’s no way I’m gonna get bored of you.”

“I feel the same way. I would never get bored of you, and I guess I don’t really know what it’s like to feel bored when you’re going out with someone,” I said.

It was true. There were girls who said they got bored, but I still didn’t really understand what that meant. I mean, I knew what the words meant, but I couldn’t quite get how that happened with a person.

“I’m glad you think so too, Nanami, but even then, I feel like I need to make

an effort just to be sure.” At that point, Yoshin paused as though he was thinking about something. “I haven’t really finished thinking about it, but I feel like if I ever become bored with you, then you’ve probably become bored with me too. That’s why I have to make sure that doesn’t happen.”

Was that even possible?

He laughed somewhat weakly. “Sorry if I said something weird. Anyway, in terms of not being able to see each other—I think I’d feel lonely, but maybe the break will be good practice.”

“Practice? What do you mean?”

“You and I are always together now, but there’s a possibility we’ll be apart in the future, whether it’s for college or work or what have you.”

“Oh, yeah. That’s true, I guess.”

Since I wanted to be a teacher, I’d have to do a teaching course. Even if Yoshin went to the same university as I went to, we wouldn’t be able to take the same classes. That meant that there would be times when we had to be apart.

“That’s why it might be good for us to practice spending time away from each other and for me to stop acting so controlling just because I worry about you too much.”

“Too controlling? You think about stuff like that too?” I asked.

“Oh, come on. I worry about you too, you know? I worry so much that I wanna be with you twenty-four seven, but that’s probably not healthy.”

I see. Yoshin always looks like he’s cool with everything, so I assumed he was fine, but I guess inside he thinks about the same kinds of things as I do. That made me kind of happy, but at the same time, I felt kind of bad. Before, I’d thought about how nice it would be for us to be together all day, every day, not go anywhere, and make it so that we could only see each other. He was right—that didn’t seem healthy. What would you call it? Acting needy? Controlling? I thought I’d heard those words before when people talked about relationships, but I wasn’t exactly sure.

“I see, so you get worried and lonely too,” I said.

“Of course. But getting worried might also seem like you don’t trust the other person, so you’re probably supposed to strike a balance,” he replied.

“A balance, huh?”

“Yeah. I guess we’re both just starting out in that respect, you know? So unless we think about things and actually practice, we might crumble under the pressure.”

It was true, for both of us, that this was the first time we were going out with anyone. If we didn’t make a conscious effort, we might end up messing something up. I could tutor Yoshin in school subjects, but relationship stuff was something he and I had to study together. If we were going to study, though, it would also be important to set goals.

“In that case, how about we set some goals during the summer break?” I said.

“Goals? What do you mean?” he asked.

“Like, for example, we say that for our one-year anniversary, we do something.”

I felt my heart pounding in my chest. *Of course, I haven’t decided on any specifics. I don’t mean anything weird by it, really. I’m serious. But if Yoshin tells me he’s going to do something on our one-year anniversary, I might just go along with it for him.*

Let’s leave it at that though. We really should pick a goal for the break, build ourselves up to it, and make some preparations. If we do set goals, a year will fly by in an instant.

As I sat there wondering whether Yoshin would say something, he slowly began to speak.

“There’s actually something I’ve been thinking about. This is my first time working part-time, but I thought maybe I could continue working afterward so that I can save up some money.”

“Is there something you wanna buy?” I asked.

“It’s not really something I want, but no matter whether I go to college or to a

trade school in the future, we're gonna become adults when we turn eighteen, right?"

"Oh, yeah. That's true. We'll be adults."

Of course—next year, both Yoshin and I would turn eighteen. We still couldn't drink, but becoming eighteen meant that we would be considered grown-ups. It was something to look forward to. Still, even back in middle school, we'd been told to act more like adults.

It's so weird. They tell us to act like adults, but when something happens, they tell us that we're still kids. Make up your mind, why don't you? I guess they're just trying to tell us to exercise some sense, so they'll probably say that to us forever. I feel like I'll be saying that in the future too.

"That's why, um..." Yoshin seemed hesitant about what to say next. It was odd for him not to be more forthcoming, but it was my turn now to wait for him to speak. It was important to give him that time. "I was thinking, after I turn eighteen and graduate from high school, maybe I could start living by myself. Regardless of what path I choose, I kind of want to be independent of my parents."

Living alone, huh? That sounded so cool. I'd been thinking of that myself, but my dad had said I could go to college from home. Living alone also came with a lot of concerns, whereas if I lived at home, it would be much easier to save up from any part-time work. I'd been going back and forth on it, but my dad's idea sounded pretty good. That was why I wasn't thinking of living by myself yet, but Yoshin seemed to have other ideas. I was kind of jealous of his decision, and I was worried at the same time. Just as I was wondering if he would really be okay living by himself, he said something completely unexpected.

"So, um, by that point it should be over a year since we started dating, so I thought it would be nice if you maybe stayed together with me."

I was left speechless. Or rather, I couldn't quite swallow his words. *What? Stayed? Together? Would that mean...?*

I wasn't sure how Yoshin interpreted my silence, but he continued speaking, much more quickly than before. "Sorry, forget I said anything! This really isn't something for right now, and it's definitely not definite; I was just thinking I

should get your opinion on it too. I mean, you know, it'd be hard to live together after just one year of dating, and we'd have to get permission from our parents, so it was more to say that I'm thinking of living by myself, so you can come visit me."

"Are you suggesting we live together?"

Yoshin, who had been talking nonstop, suddenly paused. I couldn't find the words to continue either. We both fell silent. Then each of us broke the silence at the same time—though with different levels of force.

"Yeah. But, I mean..."

"Let's do it!"

I spoke somewhat loudly, so I might have taken Yoshin by surprise, plus it sounded like I'd talked over him.



Why did I have to say, "Let's do it"? Couldn't I have said something cooler? Jeez, I got too excited. Wait, Yoshin's not responding. He'd started saying something, so I wonder if something happened.

"My ear..." he murmured.

"Oh. S-Sorry."

Yikes, indeed I had shouted way too loudly into the phone. I felt like it was the loudest I'd ever yelled in my life. I'd shouted even louder than when we'd done karaoke.

Yoshin ended up falling silent due to a different reason than before. "So, um, where was I?" he finally asked.

"Ugh, now you forgot because I was so loud," I said in dismay. Was it so bad that I'd made him forget what he'd been saying? I had to apologize the next time we saw each other in person.

I tried to remind Yoshin of what it was we were talking about. Then, brimming with anticipation, I waited for him to continue.

"Oh, right, that. Yeah, so I was thinking of living by myself, but I was also thinking that it'd be nice if we could end up living together in the end," he said.

"In the end?" I asked.

Huh? Doesn't the idea seem a bit more subdued this time around? What does he mean by "in the end"? Is there some kind of a problem?

"Practically speaking, we'd have to overcome a lot of hurdles if we were really gonna live together. We'd have to get permission from our parents, figure out where to go to school, figure out money issues, and do all sorts of other things," he explained.

"Oh, I see. So that's what you meant."

I'd gotten carried away when I'd said that I'd live with him, but there were lots of issues that still needed to be resolved. My dad seemed like he was against the idea of me leaving home to begin with.

"Also, this is just a thought, but if we lived together, we wouldn't feel insecure

if we didn't get to see each other every day."

"Oh, yeah, that's true. But if we lived together, don't you think we'd end up seeing each other every day anyway?"

"Not necessarily. We'll each have our own social lives, so there'd probably be days when we wouldn't really see each other. I mean, my parents are that way," he said.

I see. That's probably true too, but if we were living together, just the thought that Yoshin was waiting for me at home might be enough to keep me going. That would also mean I could be the one to welcome him home. I could get home a little early and would maybe feel a little lonely about the fact that no one is there, but then I could take out the groceries I picked up and cook dinner. Then Yoshin would come home while I was cooking, and I'd be there to greet him.

That would be good. Really good. I could even wear an apron when I went to greet him at the door.

As I was getting carried away by my own delusions, Yoshin's voice brought me back to reality.

"It's all just in my head though," he said. "I'll probably run into obstacles I can't even conceive of right now. But if I don't try it, I'll never know, so I figured we could set that as a goal for the time being."

"Huh? Oh yeah, right. Definitely," I replied, flustered.

He was right about the obstacles. It would cost a lot of money, first of all. In that case, I would have to save up a lot too.

After that, Yoshin and I talked about what kind of house we'd want to live in one day, how we wanted to divide up the housework, and other things. We were mostly just fantasizing about the future, so it wasn't terribly realistic. Still, it was such a fun conversation that it made me forget the worries I'd felt earlier.

Chapter 4: The Revelation and a New Problem

Spanning roughly an entire month, summer vacation was the most anticipated extended break of the academic year. Some regions even had summer breaks that ran on even longer than that. Unfortunately for our high school, our summer break was for less than a month.

In any case, during the last summer break, I had basically played my game all day and all night. I'd played my game when I woke up in the morning, played it after I ate lunch, and played it again at night. Basically, I had played the same online game all summer. I'd been doing my rounds on the summer-only in-game events, after all. I still remembered the dead heat in our fight for the top ranking. We'd been neck and neck with another team, and even Baron-san had ended up exasperated with how long I'd been playing it. Peach-san, too, had seemed a little weirded out by my obsession.

That was just how much I liked playing games. Thinking back on it now, I was impressed with just how much I'd been able to concentrate back then. Even if you were to ask me now to remember the passion I'd felt then, there was no way I could do it. You could say that the object of my passion simply changed. No, wait—saying that made it sound like my passion for gaming had withered away. Maybe it was more accurate to say that my priorities had changed.

Anyway, it was summer break: our long-awaited vacation. It was the very first day of it, and yet...

"Why am I here?" I murmured.

"Because you failed your test. That said, yours was a case we don't see very often, Misumai." The teacher sighed as he distributed the handouts. The only reason he'd given such an answer was because there were so few people in the class. I had no response to his remark, but I was also grateful that he'd kept the details under wraps. I was here because I'd made a really stupid mistake.

The teacher gave the remaining handout to the one other person in the classroom. Surprisingly, there were only two people from our class who had to

take summer school for math. I wondered if that was even possible, but I supposed it was. Since summer school was separated according to our usual class, other classes might have held back more students.

I had assumed that people from all different classes were going to be lumped together for summer school, but that wasn't the case. It sure was a cold world out there. Of course, I was grateful. Given that I hadn't even spoken to everyone in my own class, I couldn't imagine having to talk with people from other classes.

Incidentally, the one other person from my class taking summer school was a girl. She was someone I'd never talked to before. She wasn't paying much attention to me and was instead quietly examining the handout she'd received from the teacher. Since I tended to be shy, I was grateful for the distance.

"If you finish the entire handout during the four days of summer school, you'll be let off scot-free," the teacher announced. "You'll mainly be studying by yourselves, but you can teach each other if there's something you don't understand. Just don't copy each other's answers."

At least for math, you could get away with copying if you were both correct, but there'd be hell to pay if you both got it wrong. Different people struggled with different things, so there was little chance that you'd both mess up in the same way. Also, it really wasn't possible for us to teach each other. I mean, I didn't even know this person's name.

"If you finish early, you can get out of summer school early as well. That being said, that handout contains four days' worth of work, so it's unlikely you'll finish it that fast."

I glanced down at the handout, which was several dozen sheets of paper stapled together. I definitely couldn't finish all this in one day. Could I do it in four? I figured there was at least a possibility.

"Once you finish, grade each other's work and then bring it to me," the teacher said.

"What?"

The teacher had already left for a different classroom, so he didn't hear my

response. Hey, wait, please! There's no way I can get myself to work with someone I've never talked to before. Did he just assume we'll be fine since we're in the same class? Don't underestimate me, dammit. There are plenty of people in class I've never spoken to.

Just thinking that was enough to make me feel kind of sad, so I decided to get on with the handout.

As one might expect, Nanami and I had been going about our days separately since that morning. We couldn't very well come to school together when I was the only one meant to be there. We had promised to eat lunch together though. Apparently, she was going to bring me a bento. The thought alone made me feel like I had a date coming up, which was pretty crazy. Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san had said that they were coming too, so lunch might actually end up being more lively than usual. I couldn't help looking forward to it. Anyway...

As I worked on the math problems, I thought about the other day, when I'd said something outrageous to Nanami. A random thought was probably called that because it came to you without any kind of logic or warning, and I'd asked her, indirectly, if she wanted to come stay with me. Regardless of how I'd asked, though, it was true that I thought it would be nice if Nanami was there with me when I was living by myself.

If this whole incident with the letter had happened while we were living together, it would have been way easier for me to protect her. Still, I knew that I was being somewhat full of myself for thinking that. There was only so much I could do either way. In any case, it was a relief that Nanami was happy I'd asked her.

Having blurted out something like that, I now felt extremely uncool. How could I talk about living by myself while there I was having to take summer school? Then again, maybe those two things were unrelated.

But if I was going to live by myself, I had a lot of work to do. I had to learn to do housework. I'd just barely started cooking, and I'd never done the laundry or cleaned the house before. If I did make that my goal, I would have to start preparing now so that I could do more around the house. But even if I didn't

end up living by myself, those skills definitely wouldn't go to waste.

"Excuse me..."

Anyhow, Nanami had said that she was going to bring lunch for me today, but I felt bad making her do that on the first day of summer break. If I hadn't ended up in summer school, we could have gone on a date today, but going on a date every day would really deplete our wallets, so maybe this was okay too.

Well, once the four days of classes were up, we'd be able to enjoy the summer festival. We'd made plans with Shibetsu-senpai and the manager, so that could be my light at the end of the tunnel. I knew that we had another purpose there too, but that didn't change the fact that I was looking forward to it. As far as I could remember, it was my first summer festival.

Nanami said she's gonna wear a yukata. I wonder what kind. I'll have to wait until the day of.

"Um, excuse me..."

I'll be working my first job too. What should I use my first paycheck for? Maybe I can get something for my parents and other people who always helped me out. I wanna get Nanami a gift too. Jeez, I'm counting my chickens before they've even hatched. This is my first part-time job, so I don't even know how I'm supposed to go about it...

"Excuse me, Misumai-kun?"

"Huh? Me?"

I turned in the direction the voice was coming from to see the girl from my class, standing right next to me with the handout in her hand. *Huh? Is she really talking to me?* With all those thoughts running through my head, I must not have noticed that she'd approached me. *Uh, what does she want?*

"Um, I was wondering if I could ask you something," she said.

Me? It was the first time anyone had ever said something like that to me, so I didn't know how to respond. *Besides, how am I supposed to teach her any of this stuff?*

Her appearance totally fit the bill of a class rep. She wore glasses and had her

hair in braids, her shirt was buttoned all the way up, and she wore her skirt long. She was the complete opposite of Nanami with her usual gyaru style. At the very least, this was not the look of someone who had to take summer school during the break. If someone had told me she'd come to supervise the class, I would have totally believed them.

"Um, if it's something I can teach you, then sure. You're talking about the handout, right?" I asked.

Wow, that was a dumb response. Of course she was talking about the handout. The female student—man, talking about her like that makes me sound like the school nurse—nodded nonetheless. It seemed she was stuck on a problem at the very beginning of the handout—a problem that even I could solve without any help. I did my best to explain it to her as best as I could.

The girl then solved the problem without any issues. *Wait, did she really need me to explain this to her?*

"You're still going out with Barato-san, right?" she asked as she worked. Maybe to a serious person, our relationship appeared somehow improper.

Growing slightly anxious, I responded with slight trepidation. "Uh, yeah. We sure are."

"You were, um, injured once. Are you okay now? I heard you got a cut because you got hit on the head by a bucket."

"Oh, yeah. The cut itself wasn't that deep, so it was nothing."

I wondered if this was the right way to talk to a girl I'd just met. I knew I just had to get used to things, but it sure felt awkward.

As we sat there at adjacent desks, the door to the classroom abruptly opened, and in walked Nanami with a bento box in hand.

"Yoshin, I'm here! Are you working hard? I brought you the bento I—"

I shivered from head to toe, surprised at her sudden appearance. Nanami stood frozen in place, her hand still raised to show off the bento. She was wearing her regular clothes rather than her school uniform. I remembered then that during summer break, students could come to school wearing their normal

clothes, but that didn't apply to students attending summer school.

It was a hot day, so she was dressed lightly. She wore a baggy short-sleeved shirt and loose-fitting shorts that hit slightly above the knee. She was wearing her indoor school shoes, but she didn't seem to be wearing socks. Perhaps I just couldn't see them. Her hair was tied up in two braids, and on her head was a round hat with a brim at the front. I wondered what that type of hat was called.

Otofuoke-san and Kamoenai-san poked their heads out from behind Nanami and raised their hands in unison as a casual greeting. Otofuoke-san was wearing a sleeveless shirt, while Kamoenai-san was wearing a thin hoodie. They were both dressed lightly because of the weather, but wouldn't they get yelled at if a teacher saw them?

"Well, that's a rare sight."

Was it Kamoenai-san or Otofuoke-san who'd said that? I supposed they were right either way.

"Nanami, why aren't you moving?" I asked.

"Not..."

Not? I wondered what she wanted to say. Behind her, Otofuoke-san and Kamoenai-san were looking slightly panicked.

Nanami approached us slowly, then stood indignantly in front of my desk. She had the bento in one hand and her other hand on her hip. Because I was sitting down, I had to look up at her.

"Not fair! I wanna sit next to Yoshin and study too!"

Startled, Otofuoke-san and Kamoenai-san nearly keeled over. It was such a classic reaction. The girl sitting at the desk next to me blinked several times, obviously surprised.

Nanami, you usually do sit next to me while we're studying. I mean, I get that we sit apart from each other at school, but still.

"Um, you're not misinterpreting the situation, are you?" the female student quietly asked Nanami, having quickly returned to a normal expression after her initial surprise. Still with her hand on her hip, Nanami tilted her head.

“Misinterpreting? Like how?” she asked.

“Well, I mean, Misumai-kun and I are so close together that we might seem like we’re doing something suspicious.”

“Hmm. That’s not possible, so I wouldn’t think that at all,” she replied simply, not at all concerned. *I mean, it really isn’t possible, but it’s a little embarrassing when you say it like that to someone I don’t even know that well.*

“I see. You two really are in love with each other.”

Why am I blushing in my classroom? Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san were grinning mischievously. *Please don’t laugh, you two.*

“In any case, isn’t it rare for our class rep to be here? Don’t you get pretty good grades?” Otofuke-san asked.

“Math is the one thing I’m not good at,” the female student murmured. “It’s the only subject I consistently have to take supplementary classes for.”

Kamoenai-san nodded. “I see. Oh, hey, let’s get together and do karaoke again soon! I heard you sing for the first time the other day, and you’re pretty good.”

“I’ll think about it,” she replied hesitantly.

Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san seemed to be friends with the female student and had quickly struck up a conversation. *What did they call her just now? Class rep? Oh, so she really is our class rep.* I panicked a bit since I’d had no idea, but the three of them continued chatting excitedly as they worked through the handout.

Well, maybe they weren’t so much chatting as the two of them were teaching the class rep how to solve the math problems. Since my services seemed no longer needed, I decided to tackle my own. As I amped myself up, I realized Nanami had attached a desk to mine.

“Nanami?” I said.

“I should’ve worn my uniform too. We can’t sit next to each other like this at school that often.” Nanami rested her chin on her hands as she complained, but since the seating arrangements were determined at random, we couldn’t pull

that off so easily.

Seeing Nanami in her normal clothes, sitting at a desk in the classroom, gave me a strange feeling of disjointedness. She swung her feet back and forth, peering at the handout in my hand. Each time she looked at a different problem, she nodded as if she approved. I wondered if there was something wrong with the handout, but it seemed that wasn't the case.

"This has been made really well. I think I might want a copy. Maybe the teacher will give me one if I ask."

As someone who couldn't tell the difference between one handout and another, I didn't understand why she was so impressed by this one. It was just math, so wasn't this just a list of problems that had to be solved?

"Oh, you're doing them just like I taught you. Good job. If you hadn't messed up, you would've been totally fine."

As she watched me work, Nanami patted me on the head. *Wow, it's super embarrassing to be praised like this in the classroom. See, look—Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san are grinning at me. Even the class rep seems shocked. It's no wonder, since we haven't acted like this in the classroom before.*

"Nanami, that's kind of embarrassing," I mumbled.

"But I do this all the time."

"Oh, come on, you don't go that far. Plus, we're in the classroom. Even if there was no one else here, it would still be embarrassing."

Paying no heed to my complaints, Nanami continued patting my head. Since she was taking the opportunity not to listen to me, I decided I had no choice but to let her do as she wished.

I wondered why she kept on doing it. Maybe it was because she felt anxious—or maybe even jealous—about the thing the class rep had said earlier. *That would explain why she's insisting on patting my head like this... Ah, wait! Please don't take any pictures.*

I couldn't force Nanami's hand away, so I continued working on the math problems for the time being. Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san laughed, while the

class rep watched us in mild surprise. *I can't help it—Nanami probably won't be satisfied unless I let her pet me to her heart's content.*

The study session continued like that until I got to a good stopping point, and the bell rang to indicate the beginning of the lunch hour.

When the teacher came to let us know it was time for a break, he was shocked to find Nanami and her friends there, but nothing came of it. He teased me a little bit but simply told the three of them not to get in the way of our studying, and then he left the room.

That's all you're gonna say, sir? Well, Nanami and her friends got good grades, so I figured they weren't going to get into any trouble. For better or for worse, as long as your grades were good, the school didn't much care about what you did outside of that.

"Lunch break, huh? This feels a lot more easygoing than our usual class," I said, stretching to calm myself down. No, really, I'd had no idea that summer school would be this easy. If I had known that before, I might not have bothered studying and just done the supplementary classes instead. Since Nanami was tutoring me, though, I wouldn't dare to get myself stuck at summer school on purpose.

"Hey, don't go thinking this is easy. We'll make sure you don't end up in the same situation over winter break," Nanami said, flicking my forehead with her fingertip. I've said this before, but there was something wonderful about getting scolded by Nanami—not that I would make it happen on purpose.

"Shall we have lunch, then? I made you a bento!" Nanami said.

"We helped out today too," Otofuke-san said.

"Yup, we sure did!" Kamoenai-san added.

As the four of us chatted excitedly about whether to eat our bento in the cafeteria or right there, the class rep made her way out of the classroom. Nanami must have noticed, because she called out to her. I really admired that about Nanami. If it were me, I would have just watched in silence as the class rep left.

"Do you want to eat with us too? Only if you're up for it, of course. We made

a lot today,” Nanami said.

The class rep turned around slowly with a slightly gloomy expression. “Thanks for the invite, but I’m good. I wouldn’t want to intrude, plus I brought my own lunch.”

“Gotcha. Oh, and I’ll be making lunch every day while Yoshin has math class, so feel free to join us if you want.”

“Thanks. See you later, then.”

With that, the class rep left the classroom. What concerned me was that she did so without carrying anything. She had left her bag behind. *Oh well. Thinking about it isn’t going to solve anything.*

When I looked at the bento that Nanami had spread out on the desks, I saw that it was packed with a variety of dishes—various colored rice balls, fried chicken, omelet, little deep-fried shrimp, grilled salmon, potato salad... Just as Nanami had said, the bento was filled to the brim with my favorite items.

All four of us put our hands together to give thanks for our meal and then proceeded to dig in. It was just like we were on a field trip or at a sports festival. I knew this was summer school, but it was still kind of fun.

“Oh, so are you friends with the class rep?” I asked.

“Yeah. She’s serious and pretty quiet, but she comes when we have get-togethers and stuff,” Nanami explained.

“She came to do karaoke with us for the first time the other day after we finished our exams. That was pretty surprising,” Otofuke-san said.

I see. I’ve never been to any get-togethers with classmates, but of course, Nanami and her friends have social connections I don’t know about. I wonder if I should go to those get-togethers from time to time too.

“The class rep was also the one who’d seen someone around Nanami’s shoe locker.”

“Oh, right. She did tell us that while we were doing karaoke.”

I see. If we were able to get our hands on a clue because of that, maybe I should’ve thanked her. I can do that during class tomorrow.

“Oh, Yoshin, I put ground meat in our omelet today to change things up. Try it. Here, say, ‘Aaah.’”

“N-Nanami, we’re in our classroom,” I mumbled.

“We’re all friends here, so let her do it, though Nanami might have done it even if the class rep was here,” Otofuke-san said.

Give me a break, I thought, finally noticing that Nanami was going to keep holding the omelet up to my mouth until I ate it—at least, that was what her expression was telling me. If that was the case, then I should do it before the class rep got back. With my mind made up, I took a bite of the omelet that Nanami was offering.

Just at that moment, the class rep returned to the classroom to grab the bag that she’d left behind, and she ended up bearing witness to the whole thing.

“I’m sorry. Was I interrupting?” she said.

All I could do in response to her apology was to insist that she had nothing to worry about at all.



After that, my makeup classes proceeded without anything notable happening. Each day ended relatively early, and since Nanami was there daily to eat lunch with me, it felt almost like a regular school day.

I became friendly enough with the class rep that we were able to exchange and grade each other’s work, though I still wasn’t at a place where I could make small talk with her. I wasn’t sure if I could say that we became friends, but at least she was interacting normally with me. However, she never once ended up joining us for lunch; Nanami offered every time, but the class rep always had some reason or another not to eat with us. I supposed that might have had something to do with the fact that after the first day, Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san stopped coming by.

With the third day of summer school finally coming to a close—and with only one day remaining—the day that Nanami and I had been waiting for finally arrived. It was the summer festival! I wished that summer school were completely over, but unfortunately it wasn’t. Still, with only one day left of it, I

felt like I could enjoy the festival without any hang-ups. Even if I did still have to attend summer school, of course I was going to enjoy the summer festival. Those were two entirely unrelated things.

Shoichi-senpai and the basketball team had returned from their tournament, and most of the team members were also planning on heading to the festival. Apparently, they all wanted to enjoy the few days of summer break that they had left.

Having decided with Shoichi-senpai and the manager that we would meet them there, Nanami and I decided to head over together. We'd considered meeting up there ourselves, but Nanami was going to be wearing a yukata. That's right—Nanami was going to be walking around in a yukata. She was going to get hit on, one hundred percent. There was no question about it. Even when we were at the night pool, guys had started hitting on her the moment I'd stepped away. There was no way she *wasn't* going to get hit on when she was dressed in a yukata.

That was why walking there together was necessary. Of course, I had every intention of coming to her rescue if anyone tried to pick her up, but it would be better if no one hit on her in the first place. It would be pointless to scare her needlessly. There was just one thing I wasn't counting on.

"Are you not going to wear a yukata, Yoshin-kun? We have one that my husband used to wear. Would you like to try it on?" Tomoko-san asked.

"Oh, what a great idea! Let's both wear a yukata to the festival!" Nanami exclaimed.

"What? Oh, uh, no. Asking to borrow it would cause you too much trouble."

"Oh, it's fine. It's just one that got too small for my husband to wear. It'll probably be perfect for you."

"Yeah, yeah, let's have you try it on! I bet you'll look really good."

"Um..." I murmured, overcome by the Barato mother-and-daughter pair. For the record, Saya-chan wasn't there, because she had already headed off to the festival with her friends from school.

Genichiro-san didn't seem like he was going to join in on the mother-daughter

efforts, but since he was already starting to prepare the yukata just in case I said yes, it seemed I wasn't able to count on him for assistance either, not that I disliked the idea of wearing a yukata that much.

"In that case, I'll take you up on the offer."

The moment I said that, Nanami and Tomoko-san pumped their fists in unison. *Oh, come on, it isn't that big of a deal, is it?*

"Now that that's decided, let's get you dressed. Have you ever worn a yukata before?" Genichiro-san asked.

"Um, no. I haven't. This'll be my first time."

Since he offered to teach me how to put it on, I started learning from Genichiro-san step-by-step as he dressed me, but...

"Wait, why are you watching?"

"Gah! I've been discovered!" Nanami cried.

What do you mean, "discovered"? You were watching me like it was totally normal, with zero intention of hiding it. Nanami bonked herself on the head and flashed me a smile. I hadn't even received the yukata from Genichiro-san yet, much less taken my clothes off, so I was sure she wasn't really intending to watch. Besides, watching me change probably wasn't that interesting anyway.

After that, Nanami and Tomoko-san left the living room, though they were just on the other side of the door. Still, we were each going to get changed in a different place. This was my first time getting dressed in a yukata, and I sure didn't feel like I could do it myself. Genichiro-san told me that it would be easy once I got the hang of it though. He also said, "Well, if you learn how to do it, it'll come in handy," but I wasn't sure there would be that many opportunities for me to wear a yukata in the future. It wasn't the sort of thing I saw myself wearing a lot in my life. Still, it never hurt to know something, so I thought I might as well practice. Knowledge was power, after all.

I seemed to have finished getting dressed first, so I stood in front of the mirror to take a look at myself. The yukata was of a deep navy blue with thin white vertical stripes. It wasn't uncomfortable to wear—in fact, it felt *very* comfortable. It also felt cooler than I'd expected.

“Yup, the size is just right on you,” Genichiro-san remarked.

“Thank you so much. I had no idea that you could wear a yukata so comfortably. I’ve only ever worn regular clothes before.”

“Yeah, I remember that feeling of discomfort myself. I wore a kimono to my wedding, and it felt strange the entire time. It might not be a bad idea to start getting used to it ahead of time.”

Aren’t we getting slightly ahead of ourselves? When I fell silent, Genichiro-san laughed heartily. As I joined in, the door opened, and Nanami—having put on her yukata—slowly stepped into my field of vision.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” she said.

I had seen her in a yukata before, but that had been a very plain one that was included with the room at the hotel we’d stayed at. Even that had looked good on her; she’d looked really stylish despite it being a run-of-the-mill yukata you’d see at any hotel.

The Nanami standing before me now, though, was on a totally different level. I wasn’t sure if describing it by level was appropriate, but that was all I could come up with. If at the hotel she’d been at Yukata Level 10, the Nanami now was at Yukata Level 100. What the hell is a Yukata Level, you might ask? It was the only way I could describe her overwhelming beauty.

“What do you think?” Nanami asked shyly, playing with her hair a bit. I would have totally believed anyone who told me she was a young lady from a noble family somewhere. Sensuality, purity, elegance—she embodied all different elements of charm, even elements that seemed to contradict each other.

“You look great,” I said. It was such a boring response, but that was all I could manage. I didn’t feel like saying something terribly smooth or making some comment that was needlessly poetic. She just looked great, period. That really was all I could say. I was bowled over as she smiled shyly at my remark. The proud little peace sign by her cheek was adorable.

Her yukata used a refreshing blue, with blue and white stripes and flower designs scattered throughout. The flowers themselves were pale blue and purple. Maybe because she was wearing a yukata, she had done her hair up. It

was the same style as when we were at the hotel, but this time she wore a hairpin. The hairpin had blue and white flowers on it too. Maybe it was a traditional kanzashi hair ornament.

I wondered if the obi tied around her yukata was different from a regular obi too. I could see the blue bow peeking out from behind her. It was slightly different in color from the flowers on the yukata. *That color is indigo, right?* She looked like she was covered from head to toe in flowers.

“Oh, are you looking at the obi? It’s really cute, right?” Nanami said, turning and raising her hands slightly to show me her back. The obi was tied into the shape of a flower. She laughed innocently, letting it sway. Every time she moved, the obi also moved slightly, like a flower being blown by the wind. It had been tied securely, though, so it didn’t move that much.

“Nanami, don’t move around so much,” Tomoko-san said, smiling with concern. “Your yukata will shift out of place.” She looked at me, and her smile became even wider. “Just as I thought, it fits you perfectly. You look great, Yoshin-kun.”

“Oh, th-thank you.”

“Nooo! Mom beat me to it!” Nanami said, pouting like a little kid. Tomoko-san replied that she couldn’t believe her daughter hadn’t complimented me yet, but Nanami ignored her mother and took a step toward me. After staring at me in my yukata for a bit, she broke into a wide grin. “Yeah, you do look really great. You’re super handsome, and I feel like I’m totally gonna fall for you.”

As Nanami added that she already had, all I could do in return was to mutter a simple, “Thanks.” Being complimented so much like this was pretty embarrassing.

For a little while after that, we complimented each other on our outfits while Nanami’s parents taught us the things to keep in mind while wearing our yukata and how to fix them if they fell out of place.

“Well then, shall we get going?” I asked.

“Yeah, we shouldn’t keep them waiting.” Nanami quietly took my hand. She did it so naturally despite the fact her parents were right there that I took it

without even thinking. At least we were holding our hands conservatively, not with our fingers interlocked.

Tomoko-san and Genichiro-san looked at us with joy in their eyes. It would feel even more embarrassing to let go of her hand at that point, so Nanami and I simply told them that we were heading out.

As we walked out the front door in outfits we didn't usually get to wear, it felt as though we were setting off into a new world.



It was pretty standard in manga to find the guy giving a piggyback ride to a girl who'd worn a yukata to a summer festival since she'd ended up getting blisters on her feet from the wooden sandals. It usually happened during the festival, on the way home, or even just before the climax of watching the fireworks.

This time, though, we didn't need to worry about such a situation, since neither of us was wearing geta. Wearing a yukata with regular shoes might seem strange, but depending on how the shoes looked, it actually wasn't so weird. Nanami was wearing boots that made her look as though she'd stepped out of the Taisho romance era, while I was wearing flip-flops. Both choices of footwear matched the yukata seamlessly. At least, I thought so, anyway.

"There are more people in yukata than I thought. I guess I never paid attention before," Nanami remarked.

"Really? Didn't you wear a yukata when you came to the festival before?"

"Hatsumi and Ayumi said they only wear yukata when they go to the festival on a date, so when we went with the three of us, we just wore normal clothes. That's why tonight is my first time."

"It's the first for me too," I said.

Nanami laughed, saying that it was a first for the both of us, then. Being able to share an experience that was a first for both of us felt precious. I couldn't help feeling happy about it.

Still, Nanami definitely seemed to be garnering a lot of attention. At first, I'd thought I was just imagining it, but the rate at which dudes were turning to look

at her was pretty high. Then when they saw me walking next to her, they looked obviously disappointed. *I'm so sorry that I'm the one who's with her.*

Yeah, choosing not to meet up here had been the right call. She definitely would have gotten hit on. I did a little fist pump in my mind for having made the right decision.

Fortunately, there wasn't anyone forward enough to try to talk to her, perhaps because we were holding hands. Also, since it was a festival, we occasionally spotted people who looked like police officers. Maybe, despite the turnout, it was actually a lot safer here than on other days.

We had just heard earlier that Shoichi-senpai and the manager had already arrived. Shoichi-senpai alone seemed to have arrived earlier than the rest of us. He'd let us know about ten before we got there that he was waiting for us near the entrance. Hurrying to join him, Nanami and I soon arrived as well. *Let's see. Where is he? I don't see him. Oh, wait, is that him? Uh, he's surrounded by girls.*

A girl who clearly seemed older was talking to him, and when she left, a group of girls about his age went up to him. Between the time we spotted him and when we finally reached him, he'd ended up talking with several different individuals and groups of girls that kept coming one after the other.

What's going on? Is he emitting some weird kind of gravitational pull? I mean, I knew Shoichi-senpai was popular, but I never thought he would be this popular even outside of school. *Hmm, the manager doesn't seem to be here yet. If she was with him, maybe he wouldn't be approached by so many people.*

"Senpai seems super popular. What's with that?" I wondered out loud.

"Yeah, seriously," Nanami murmured, sounding slightly impressed.

Shoichi-senpai was wearing regular clothes today. It was my first time seeing him dressed in anything other than his uniform or basketball clothes, but he looked really handsome despite the simple attire. I supposed when you were handsome, you looked good no matter what you wore.

When Shoichi-senpai noticed our arrival, he started waving his hand wildly with a broad smile on his face. He definitely seemed like a giant, friendly dog. Could you call someone the puppy type?

As Nanami and I approached him, for a moment—just for a moment—I felt a sharpness in the air around us. It went away in an instant, though, when Shoichi-senpai greeted us.

“Well, don’t you two look so perfect for each other in your yukata? I can’t say I’m not envious.”

“Thanks for waiting. Are you by yourself?” I asked.

“Yeah, the manager said she was already on the premises and would be here any minute, so I told her not to rush. I know it can take a lot of time for women to get ready.”

I see, so the manager was still getting ready. It’s true that it can take longer for a woman to prepare for a special event.

“Um, I’m sorry to keep you all waiting,” someone mumbled behind us as soon as Nanami and I caught up. It was a rather low, husky voice. I didn’t recognize it, but Nanami and Shoichi-senpai both turned around. I saw then that the manager was standing there, wearing a yukata.

The manager was almost as tall as Shoichi-senpai, but the yukata suited her well. It was a subdued yukata in navy blue, with yellow designs scattered across the textile. She looked at Shoichi-senpai, then looked at me and Nanami with a hint of surprise.

“Oh, it’s you two,” she mumbled.

“Ah, I thought the four of us could go around the festival together. Now we’re all here!” In contrast to Shoichi-senpai, who was laughing excitedly, the manager slumped upon hearing his explanation. It was rare to encounter such a telling expression of disappointment.

Nanami approached the manager and gave her a small hug as if to console her. She was shorter than the manager, so she had to stand on her tiptoes.

I took a step closer to Shoichi-senpai and asked him in a whisper, “Senpai, what did you say to the manager when you invited her?”

“Uh, I just asked her if she wanted to go to the festival with me. Was that bad?” he asked, lowering his voice too for a change. *Oh, senpai—I’m not that*

sharp either, but don't you think the manager interpreted that as you going as just the two of you?

The manager seemed so crestfallen, it had to be that he had neglected to mention us joining them. Shoichi-senpai was clearly beginning to panic, but the manager simply sighed softly. Nanami and I watched the two of them, nervously holding our breaths. *They wouldn't start fighting all of a sudden, would they?*

Shoichi-senpai took a step back and started to sweat. He looked like he was ready to take a punch in the face, but nothing of the sort came to pass.

"I mean, I figured it must be something like that," the manager said in a voice filled with a complicated mix of both resignation and relief. When Shoichi-senpai immediately apologized in a quiet voice, she smiled as if to forgive him. Then she turned to us and bowed. "Thank you," she said in a soft, bell-like voice. "I'm looking forward to being able to enjoy the festival with you both."

We'd heard that she was shy, so she had probably mustered up a whole lot of courage to say that to us. Nanami and I looked at each other, then bowed to the manager and told her we were looking forward to the evening as well. Part of our goal today was to get to know the manager better. If we could end up becoming friends, then that would be even better.

Nanami walked up to me and took hold of my hand as if trying to show the manager. Unlike earlier, we had our fingers interlocked this time.

"It's kind of crowded here, so we should hold hands to make sure we don't get separated. I'll hold hands with Yoshin, so the two of you should do the same," Nanami said, lifting up our hands a bit and shaking them. Shoichi-senpai seemed like he was thinking the idea over, but the manager reached out to him without any hesitation.

"Shall we hold hands, then, Captain?" she asked.

"Hmm. Is that okay with you though? I have no qualms about holding hands with you, but wouldn't you feel uncomfortable holding hands with me?" he asked.

"It would be more troublesome if you got lost," she said hesitantly. "Imagine

if the captain of the basketball team that went to nationals got lost at a summer festival.”

“I see. Yeah, that does sound a bit lame. With a crowd like this, I’m fairly confident that I’d get separated from the three of you, so I guess that’s that. If it’s all right with you, then I’d really appreciate it.” Shoichi-senpai offered his hand to the manager, who took it slowly and squeezed it lightly. Was it just my imagination, or did she seem somewhat pleased?

With that, Shoichi-senpai began walking. Since the two of them were fairly similar in height, they seemed a good match when they walked next to each other. Nanami and I watched them both from a little ways behind.

“I wonder if the manager likes senpai,” I asked Nanami.

“I’m sure of it. I hope things go well between them at the festival,” she replied, watching them in delight. Was she planning on doing something to get them together? “No, I don’t think I’ll do anything special. Things might turn out weird if we meddle too much, and since the manager seems like she’s not planning to tell him how she feels yet, it’s probably best for the four of us to just have a good time so that they can grow a bit closer.” Like some kind of love expert, Nanami pointed her index finger in the air. She seemed super confident and convincing because she’d made such a declarative statement. Still, given that Nanami had only ever gone out with me, how could she say that as if she was so experienced?

As I stared at her with slightly narrowed eyes, Nanami’s face twitched, her expression shifting from one of pride to one of panic. People talk about the concept of a piercing gaze, but it really was possible to detect where a gaze was being directed. That was why I knew that Nanami knew exactly where I was looking. I didn’t say anything in particular, but our eyes spoke volumes. Nanami must have figured out what I wanted to say, because she lowered her finger as she made her confession.

“I’ve been, um, reading up on relationships and watching movies and stuff recently because I thought it might be useful in our relationship too.”

I had to say, I was quite pleased by her explanation. It seemed she was proud of the info she’d simply read or heard, rather than any knowledge she’d gained

based on her personal experiences. I had to laugh—she was always so adorable.

Nanami didn't miss my laugh, and now it was her turn to look at me with narrowed eyes. *Oh, come on. I can't help myself here.* It was a complete role reversal, as Nanami's gaze pierced right through me. My own gaze was coming right back at me like a boomerang.

"I thought you were cute, looking all proud of yourself, so I couldn't help laughing," I confessed. Nanami groaned softly and poked me in my side with her index finger. I was happy to accept her gentle attacks. As I stood there being poked, a certain desire rose inside me.

Can I poke her too?

The question slowly bubbled up from deep within, but I knew that I had to suppress the urge. I'd only cause trouble if I actually did that and startled Nanami enough for her yukata to fall out of place.

Not knowing my internal struggle, Nanami continued poking me—though that poking eventually reached its end.

"Hey, you two!" Shoichi-senpai called to us from slightly ahead. "Stop flirting with each other, and let's check out the festival!" Although his voice was loud, he was looking at us warmly, as though he was seeing something that brought him joy.

I wasn't expecting both me and Nanami to be seen through. I had to admit, it was slightly embarrassing. *Oh, the manager's nudging senpai for his comment.*

"Shall we go, then?" I asked Nanami.

"Yeah, let's. It's a double date!" she replied.

We trotted over to the two of them and began walking around so that we could all enjoy the festival. I'd never taken the time to visit a festival myself, but it wasn't much different from the festival I recalled in the deep recesses of my memory. There were stalls with different kinds of food, raffles, goldfish scooping, a haunted house... I didn't even realize festivals still had haunted houses. The realization made the classic attraction seem new and fresh to me.

Most importantly, there were a ton of people there. I heard that there would

be fireworks later, so maybe that was the reason.

“Has it been a while since you last came to a summer festival?” Nanami asked me.

“Yeah, it really has. It’s not that different from what I remember, but I can’t recall what I did the last time I came.”

“In that case, let me teach you how to have fun here!” she said happily.

Oh, right. Nanami comes every year, so she probably knows all the fun things to do. As Nanami leaned back proudly in her yukata, I bowed and humbly asked her for a lesson. For some reason, Shoichi-senpai and the manager also bowed and asked her to teach them as well. It was kind of amusing to see them do so in unison, but it also seemed a bit strange.

“Wait, really? Don’t the two of you come to the summer festival every year with the rest of the basketball team?” Nanami asked.

“Well, we do come as a big group, but I’ve never come with a girl before. I was thinking I could learn from the two of you,” Shoichi-senpai explained.

The manager blushed slightly. *Hey, maybe there is something there,* I thought as Nanami and I looked at each other. That moment passed quickly though, and the manager began to look somewhat uneasy. She didn’t seem like she was in a bad mood; if anything, she looked like she was afraid of something.

Since we’d come this far, I thought maybe we could ask her about things once we’d had a chance to enjoy the festival a bit. However, the manager began to mumble, “Um, I’ll go check out the festival with the captain. I wouldn’t want to intrude on the two of you. If anything, I should probably go home now.”

Nanami and I were both taken aback. *Oh no—is hanging out with us no fun? I guess that’s to be expected. I mean, when I think about it, the manager didn’t even know that we were gonna be here. It must have been a weird surprise for her,* I thought. Unexpectedly, though, Nanami objected.

“You’re not intruding at all! We really just got here, so how about we walk around together until the fireworks start? You’re the same age as we are, aren’t you? We should get to know each other!” Nanami exclaimed, skipping over to the manager with a friendly smile on her face. The manager seemed

overwhelmed by that smile, because she took a step back, unable to refuse. Then Nanami got even closer to her and said something in a voice that Shoichi-senpai and I couldn't hear. The manager's eyes widened in shock at whatever it was. Shoichi-senpai and I looked at each other and tilted our heads, but Nanami just continued smiling.

The manager's uncertainty lasted just a moment longer, but she soon nodded slightly, looking resolute. Nanami nodded with satisfaction as well and reached her hand out toward her.

"I should introduce myself again. I'm Nanami Barato. It's so nice to meet you!"

The manager looked at Nanami's hand with slight trepidation and then took it in her own. She held it for a moment, then shook it slightly. "I'm Rin Ikusagawa. It's a pleasure, Barato-san."

"You can just call me Nanami! We're the same age, so you don't need to be so polite."

That's right; we are the same age, aren't we? The manager—I mean, *Ikusagawa-san* shook her head in a panic, murmuring that she didn't feel terribly comfortable talking so casually with people.

"Oh, I see," Nanami said lightheartedly before slowly letting go of the manager's hand. Ikusagawa-san looked at the hand Nanami had let go of, as though trying to confirm something.

"Um, I should introduce myself too. I'm Yoshin Misumai. It's nice to meet you, Ikusagawa-san," I said, turning to the manager. It felt a little strange to do so, but when I thought about it, I realized that I hadn't even told her my name yet. I didn't go so far as to shake her hand though.

Ikusagawa-san narrowed her eyes a bit to look at me, then bowed and said softly, "It's nice to meet you too." She really was shy, though I completely understood how she felt.

Just as we'd finally prepared ourselves to enjoy the festival...

"And I'm Shoichi Shibetsu. It's a pleasure to meet all of you!" Shoichi-senpai said, puffing out his chest and introducing himself to us formally.

We know, senpai.

Ikusagawa-san just looked at Shoichi-senpai and smiled wryly.



Once we'd introduced ourselves to each other, we all set off to enjoy the summer festival together. We walked around eating food from different vendors, drawing raffle tickets, playing ring toss, and taking in the festival entertainment overall.

According to Nanami, when you were at a festival, you were supposed to enjoy the heat and the atmosphere of the event. That was apparently why, even when you did things that you might ordinarily be scolded for, you were able to get away with them when you were there. That made perfect sense—I mean, you wouldn't ordinarily be allowed to eat fried noodles while you were walking around out in public.

"Here you go, Yoshin. Say, 'Aaah.'"

"H-Hey, Nanami. Come on, now."

As I was eating from my plate of fried noodles, Nanami brought the hot dog she held out toward me. It was a pretty big one with ketchup and mustard on it. If I didn't hurry, the condiments were going to drip onto my yukata, so I had to take a bite out of it despite trying to refuse. The sausage split off in my mouth, its rich taste melding with the acidity of the ketchup and the spiciness of the mustard. Nanami, too, bit into the hot dog with a nice snap.

Even if we were sitting down, it would be hard to feed her fried noodles. I kicked myself, thinking I should have gotten something that was easier to share. Shoichi-senpai and Ikusagawa-san, meanwhile, stared at us with mild shock on their faces.

"Wow. I should've expected it, but you two really don't hesitate with the PDA, do you?" Shoichi-senpai asked, having attempted to choose his words carefully but ultimately giving up. Come to think of it, this was the first time Shoichi-senpai had seen us when we were like this.

Maybe we were affected by the heat of the moment, but Nanami was acting like we were alone, despite the fact that there were other people around. I

couldn't help feeling nervous about the idea of someone from our class spotting us. I still had some hang-ups about being seen by people when I was with Nanami like this—though it was debatable whether having hang-ups left was a good thing at all. I realized that I, too, had gotten carried away by the atmosphere. I'd let her feed me without any hesitation, but I really should have considered what we'd do at school.

"Um, this is totally normal! Yeah, completely normal!" Nanami suddenly shouted, having realized she was being watched. I wasn't sure if she was blushing because of the heat of the festival, or from the embarrassment of having been seen.

"It's normal? Really?" Ikusagawa-san asked tentatively.

"Yes, we do this all the time!"

Nanami had said that this was normal, but if that were the case, then the whole concept of "normal" would cease to make any sense. I was pretty sure that even Nanami herself knew that as she continued talking.

If this is normal, then... I thought, feeling a mischievous urge. *Yeah. It's totally normal, so why not?* I picked up some of the fried noodles and brought them close to Nanami's mouth. Noticing my slow movement, Nanami stared at me—or rather, at the noodles I'd picked up. Smiling slightly, I simply said to her, "Aaah."

Nanami froze as though her brain had temporarily shut down. She looked at me slowly, turned toward Shoichi-senpai and the manager equally slowly, and then finally looked back at me again. Flashing me a slightly strained smile, she closed her eyes in resignation—and opened her mouth.

Taking care not to drop any of the noodles, I slowly placed them on her tongue. The noodles slipped past her lips.

"That's right. It's quite normal, really," I muttered as calmly as I could as Nanami was chewing beside me. *Wow, this totally isn't normal at all.*

Since she was wearing a yukata, Nanami looked even sexier than usual. Trying to feed her when she looked like that made me more nervous than ever, yet strangely enough, I felt like I wanted to do it again.

For the time being, I resumed eating my noodles. I thought I saw Nanami glaring at me slightly as she pressed her hand to her lips and finished chewing. *Oh, come on—you did it first.* Shoichi-senpai, meanwhile, was eating a candy apple, while Ikusagawa-san had a savory okonomiyaki pancake. As I watched Ikusagawa-san out of the corner of my eye, I saw her look back and forth between the okonomiyaki in her lap and Shoichi-senpai next to her—and then make her move.

“Captain? Um, say, ‘Aaah.’”

What?! Ikusagawa-san used her chopsticks to cut off a piece of the okonomiyaki, then lifted it up toward Shoichi-senpai. Nanami and I found ourselves shocked. It was a bold move, but how would Shoichi-senpai respond? Both Nanami and I watched, our hearts pounding.

Ikusagawa-san’s chopsticks were trembling so much that I was impressed she could keep a hold of the okonomiyaki, and her eyes were downcast. Even in that situation, though, when Nanami and I felt nervous just watching them, Shoichi-senpai remained easy-breezy.

“Oh, you’re offering me some? There’s no need to twist my arm. Aaah!” he said, opening his mouth and taking the okonomiyaki from the manager with absolutely zero sense of embarrassment. Nanami and I watched with our mouths hanging open. Ikusagawa-san, on the other hand, sighed and shook her head.

Oh, right. Senpai is popular, so maybe this is no big deal for him. But earlier he commented on Nanami’s and my PDA. Can it be that he’s really dense only when it comes to himself? Wow, he’s almost like a manga character. I feel like it’s gonna be really difficult for someone to tell him that they like him.

“Man, what an awesome day this is. The manager is being nice to me, and the festival is so much fun!”

“It’s not like I’m always angry with you.”

Depending on how you looked at it, maybe their interaction also qualified as flirting. I thought it would be so nice if they could just continue like that and grow closer to each other. Nanami must have thought the same thing, because she squeezed my hand and watched the two of them with a gentle smile on her

face.

“Hey, wait a minute. I feel bad only taking and not giving back. Manager, would you like to try my candy apple?”

I felt Nanami’s grip tighten around my hand. As she squeezed it, she stared at the two of them with a twinkle in her eye. Taken aback by the turn of events, I decided to watch Shoichi-senpai too.

Shocked, Ikusagawa-san was opening and closing her mouth wordlessly as she pointed at the candy apple. Shoichi-senpai smiled gently. Tension filled the air around us once again.

Ikusagawa-san looked like a goldfish struggling for air, but eventually she closed her lips tightly and took a step toward Shoichi-senpai. Then, with her mouth slightly open, she brought her face close to his hand. Shoichi-senpai waited for her in silence. Once the manager bit into the apple and then took her lips away from it, only a small bite mark remained on its surface.

Shoichi-senpai smiled with satisfaction, while Ikusagawa-san’s face turned as red as the candy apple. *Wait, just what in the world are we watching?* I felt like we were witnessing a very sweet and innocent interaction. Even though Nanami and I had shared fried noodles and a hot dog, their exchange felt sweet.

“What are you talking about? Compared to what the two of you are doing, this is child’s play,” Shoichi-senpai said, exasperated. Even Ikusagawa-san—who hadn’t seen me and Nanami like this before today—was nodding fervently. *Wait, did I say that out loud?*

“You think so? I’m not so sure.”

“Oh, come on, of course it is. Even now, you two haven’t let go of each other’s hands. Plus, look how close you two are sitting. You don’t even realize it, do you? There are guys who’ve tried to approach Barato-kun, but as soon as they see the two of you, they just give up and leave.”

Excuse me? Wait, what? I had no idea. I knew that Nanami was drawing a lot of attention, but I didn’t know there’d been guys trying to hit on her despite my being here. Are you saying even those guys walked off? I didn’t realize we were flirting that much.

Nanami must not have realized either, because even though she was hiding her face with her hand, it was obvious that she was blushing. I'd heard that people often didn't realize things about themselves, but I'd had no idea I would be so clueless too.

"Well, you know, it's hard for an adorable couple to notice others when they're in their own little wor—"

Just then, the manager pinched his ear. "Captain, please be more mindful about what you say. You're being insensitive."

Shoichi-senpai yelped in pain. Even though he'd gotten this far without making her angry, this was the end of the line.

"Yeah, maybe from now on, we should hold back on flirting with each other when we're out in public."

"Huh?" Nanami murmured.

"What?"

Nanami must have said that without thinking, though, because she was looking down at the ground with her hand over her mouth.

I looked at her, flustered, and our eyes met. Nanami seemed to feel similarly, because the next thing we knew, we were both laughing awkwardly. *W-Well, given that we've been doing it without thinking, it might be difficult to willfully change that behavior. We should just keep doing what we've been doing.*

Just as I was thinking that, Nanami came closer to me and whispered in my ear, in a low voice that only the two of us could hear. "If we're gonna hold back in public, then we should make out more when we're at home."

More?!

When I looked at Nanami as she quickly shifted her body away, I saw that she was looking as cool as a cucumber. She shifted her gaze toward me without saying anything and smiled slightly. That smile of hers was hidden from view of everyone else by the blue fan she'd pulled out of nowhere. I was the only one who could see it.

If we're gonna hold back in public, then we shouldn't hold back so much at

home, huh? I feel like I've been presented with the ultimate choice. What am I supposed to do?

As I wrestled with my inner turmoil, I realized that both Shoichi-senpai—who had been crying out in pain earlier—and the manager had fallen silent. Nanami and I glanced over at them, and the two of them started muttering with Ikusagawa-san still pinching Shoichi-senpai's ear.

"I see. So this is the real thing."

"Wow. I feel like my brain is going to shut down."

What do you mean, "the real thing"?

"O-Oh, uh, say, won't it soon be time for the fireworks to start? Where should we watch them from?" I asked, attempting to change the subject. I didn't know the time for certain, but I figured it must be getting pretty close. Nanami nodded next to me.

"I see, so it's almost time for the fireworks, huh? In that case, will you all follow me?" Shoichi-senpai asked.

When I checked my phone, I saw that there was still some time left until the show, but it was a pretty good time to start moving to a better spot. Shoichi-senpai began to lead the way, so both Nanami and I followed. He and the manager seemed to know where we were all headed, but we seemed to be getting farther and farther away from where they would be.

"Where are we going, senpai?" I asked.

"Ah, there's a hidden spot that's perfect for enjoying the fireworks," Shoichi-senpai explained as he made his way toward the festival exit. "Folks rarely go there, so we'll be able to watch the show in peace." I had no idea such a place existed. If it was possible to avoid the large crowds of people, that certainly would be nice.

As we followed, we began to notice that there were fewer and fewer people around us. The streetlights became fewer as well, and before we knew it, our surroundings had grown quite dark. Once the darkness of the evening won over what few lights remained around us, we found ourselves in a residential area. We had walked quite a distance. *Is there really a hidden spot around here?*

“And here we are,” Shoichi-senpai suddenly declared.

Beyond the spot where we had stopped was a small park lit up by only a few streetlights. There was no one there, and with only a few pieces of playground equipment, the park felt somewhat desolate.

The place seemed hidden enough, but could we really watch the fireworks from here? There were fairly tall apartment buildings around us, so I felt like they might block our view.

“Not that way. This way,” Ikusagawa-san called out.

As Nanami and I stood tilting our heads, we finally saw that there was a four-story building behind us. Was it an apartment complex or a condo? Come to think of it, I didn’t know what the difference between the two was. Maybe I should look it up one day.

As Nanami and I continued looking up at the building, Shoichi-senpai proceeded inside. We followed him in a rush and entered the complex.

“Senpai, I don’t think we should be going in here without permission,” I said.

“Oh, no. This is where I live. I’m embarrassed to say that I live by myself, but my relatives are letting me live in their condo for the time being,” he said as we climbed up the stairs. *I see, so senpai lives here by himself. Huh? Senpai lives by himself?*

As we made our way up the stairs, I heard someone huffing and puffing next to me. It was Nanami.

“Are you okay, Nanami?” I asked.

“I...I’m fine. I just haven’t exercised in a while,” she wheezed.

Even though she said she was fine, she moved to take my hand. I squeezed it back as we walked. We were on the staircase, so since I didn’t want to tug at her too much, I just held her hand in case anything happened.

Sweating and running out of breath, we continued climbing higher. I thought maybe Shoichi-senpai’s room might be on one of the floors higher up in the building, but that seemed not to be the case.

When we arrived at the top of the staircase, there was only a single, heavy-

looking door and no room around us. *Uh, where are we?* Shoichi-senpai slowly opened the door, and a strong wind blew in, whipping around us. Once we passed through it, we came out onto an area surrounded by tall fences.

“Is this the rooftop?” I asked.

“Indeed. We get access to this rooftop only when there’s a fireworks show. Only the residents and their acquaintances can come, so it’s a well-kept secret.”

There were several people already there, sitting where they seemed to feel most comfortable. Some had brought up chairs and were enjoying some beverages.

“Ah, I should go and get some picnic blankets to sit on,” Shoichi-senpai said. “It might also be nice to watch the show with some drinks in hand. You all wait here, and I’ll go get them.”

“I’ll help,” the manager said.

Nanami and I offered to help too, but Shoichi-senpai told the two of us to wait, and left the rooftop with Ikusagawa-san in tow.

For the time being, Nanami and I decided to move to a convenient location, given that there weren’t that many people and there was a good amount of space for us to choose from. I’d never seen a rooftop of a condo, but there were a lot of different things lying about. It actually didn’t seem terribly different from our school rooftop.

“Wow, it feels so cool here,” Nanami murmured next to me.

“You were running out of breath back ther— Whoa, Nanami?!”

Nanami had loosened the front of her yukata and was cooling herself by wafting air into it with her hand. I was shocked to see her acting so indecently, but I also became worried about her feeling so hot. The rooftop was dark, so I couldn’t see anything from the opening of her yukata except her skin peeking through a bit.

Wait, her skin peeking through? Come to think of it, I think I heard once that women don’t wear anything under their yukata. It’s like that in manga, isn’t it? Huh? Is Nanami not wearing anything under it either? No way, that can’t

possibly be the case. If she really isn't wearing anything, then she wouldn't be fanning herself so vigorously. Yeah, I'm sure it's fine, but I feel bad that she's feeling so hot. Wait, doesn't Nanami have a fan? She's not holding it right now though. I wonder where it is.

"Nanami, do you want me to cool you down with your fan? You had one earlier, right?" I asked.

"Oh, yeah. Thanks. It's in my obi, actually," she replied.

In her obi? Wondering what she meant, I walked around behind her and saw that there was a fan inserted into the sash. *Oh wow, I didn't realize you could do something like this. That's pretty neat. Hey, wait. This is no time to be impressed. I've gotta help Nanami cool down.*

I moved to take the fan out of Nanami's obi, but I was careless because I'd forgotten the fact that she had loosened her yukata. I only discovered this afterward, but unlike Western clothes, a yukata could come loose just from the movements of the person wearing it. If you moved around like you were wearing a normal shirt, it could come undone in minutes, apparently. Moreover, an obi held the entire yukata together, but it worked completely differently from the way a belt did. If you moved around like you were wearing a belt, the yukata would quickly come loose from that too.

In other words, what happened was...when I took Nanami's fan out from her obi and tried to cool her down from the front, well, the obi on Nanami's yukata came undone. The final straw must have been when I removed the fan from the already loosened obi. Even without that, Nanami seemed to have been twisting her body in funny ways to insert the fan. That was why the obi became looser than I'd expected and ultimately fell apart.

What made it worse was that Nanami had been making movements to send cool air into her yukata because she was feeling hot. That was something no one accustomed to wearing yukata would do. And because her obi had come loose...

"Huh?"

The front of Nanami's yukata fell wide open. The overlapping collar came apart, the obi slipped off, and the yukata became a mere piece of fabric. It

seemed to fall even more quickly because I was fanning her.

As something white flashed before my eyes, both Nanami and I moved at the exact same moment. It was probably wise that we didn't shout out loud in panic. If we had, the people around us would have focused their attention on us, which would have been even worse.

Nanami quickly gathered up the yukata to cover herself, while I pretty much picked her up by the waist and carried her over to a spot where others couldn't see her. Saying it like that makes me sound like some perverted criminal, but that's the only way I can describe what happened. Even then, there weren't that many places where we could take cover, so all we could do was dive stealthily behind the entrance to the rooftop. Fortunately, no one was there, maybe because the spot was somewhat cramped.

"How?! Is this even supposed to happen?!" Nanami exclaimed.

I was thinking the exact same thing. All I could say was that multiple coincidences and a pinch of bad luck had come together to bring about this result.

"D-Did you see anything?" Nanami murmured.

"Uh, you're wearing underwear, right?"

"Of course I am!"

Nanami asked me what in the world I was thinking, but I couldn't help it: I was in a total panic. I felt relieved at the same time though. Nanami had been wearing something like a camisole underneath her yukata.

Because of that, we were able to avoid a situation in which Nanami's bare skin was exposed. Well, I did end up seeing a flash of white, but that was about it. Saying "that was it" felt a little odd though.

"What am I gonna do now? Oh, but it does feel nice and cool."

Perhaps because she felt safe where no one could see her, Nanami was feeling the breeze. I, on the other hand, felt torn, wondering whether I was allowed to see her like that or not.

No, there's no way I'm allowed to see, so I should probably look away.

I could hear the rustle of Nanami's yukata and the soft voices of the condo residents from far away. We continued like that for a while, but eventually, I was blindsided by a flabbergasting question.

"You're not gonna fan me?" Nanami asked softly, as though she hadn't given the question much thought. With that, I remembered that I still had Nanami's fan in my hand. I did say that I would fan her, but did that mean that I should turn around and do just that? Well, I guess that was the only thing her question could have meant. Wasn't that inappropriate under the current circumstances though?

As if to circumvent my worries, Nanami touched my back. Every time she spoke, her hand transmitted slight vibrations into my body. Those vibrations felt like they were reverberating through me as the words themselves. In reality, her words were reaching my eardrums, rather than as vibrations through her arm. With all my attention focused on her hand, though, I couldn't help thinking as much.

"I have my yukata wrapped around me, so it's okay for you to turn around. Once it cools down a bit, it'd be great if you could help me put it back on."

It was at that moment that I recalled what Genichiro-san had said to me earlier that evening.

"If you learn how to do it, it'll come in handy."

I never expected his words to be so true, and come back to haunt me so quickly at that. Either way, I had no idea how to help someone put on a yukata. *Should I just look it up on my phone?*

A thousand thoughts ran through my brain, but I quickly turned around. Regardless of what happened, I wanted to shout. At the very least, I probably wasn't going to do anything suspicious because we were outside. *Trust yourself, Yoshin!*

The next thing I knew, Nanami appeared before my eyes. Her obi was completely loose and barely holding on around her waist. It was diagonal and seemed to be hanging on through some sort of miracle. The yukata itself seemed to be wrapped around her entire body, and Nanami was holding the collar together with her hands. It looked as though the yukata would fully open

up as soon as she took her hands away.

I recalled seeing comments somewhere about how young people wore kimono improperly and that the casual ways that people wore kimono nowadays weren't the proper way to wear them. I didn't remember that because Nanami seemed to be wearing her yukata sloppily; it was the opposite. She now appeared as though she were essentially in the middle of taking off her yukata. At this point in her disrobing, I almost felt as though she were embodying a new kind of art form. There was a quality to it that was different from but just as good as tradition.

Obviously, Nanami couldn't step in front of anyone looking like this. If anything, her appearance was quite worrisome. And yet, that fact seemed entirely removed from her beauty at this very moment. I couldn't bring myself to deny that she was exuding a strange kind of enchantment through her appearance.

"Um, Yoshin?" Nanami murmured softly.

"Huh?! Oh, sorry. I was just thinking about how beautiful you look," I said, making no attempt to hide my feelings. It was hard to tell because of the darkness, but Nanami seemed to draw in her breath and then smile slightly.

I also thought I heard her mutter "pervert," but I decided just to focus on cooling her down with the fan in my hand. She whispered to me that I could get closer to her, but I could only manage being just a couple of steps away. I continued to fan her slowly from that distance.

I was trying to keep the airflow not too strong and not too weak. Nanami exhaled as she cooled down. The yukata really must have made her feel really hot. I felt okay, given that I wasn't wearing an underlayer like she was.

What are we supposed to do, though, once Nanami cools down? We'll need to tie the obi and get her dressed. Can I do it just with info I can look up on my phone?

As I was thinking that, I heard the voices of Shoichi-senpai and Ikusagawa-san. *Oh, they must be back. It looks like we're hiding in a weird place, so we'll have to explain to them what's going on.*

I heard Shoichi-senpai talking as he approached. “Oh? Where’s Yoshin-kun and Barato-kun? Could they be making out somewhere?”

This was the closest hiding spot to where we’d been before, so of course he’d make his way straight here. This was bad though. I couldn’t let anyone see Nanami in this state.

Just as I was considering stepping out to explain to them what was going on, I heard Shoichi-senpai’s footsteps stop. It seemed he had paused in response to something Ikusagawa-san had said.

Oh, good, I thought—but I was relieved only for a moment.

“Captain, I have something I want to ask you,” Ikusagawa-san said.

“Hm? What is it? If it’s something I can answer, then of...”

“What’s all this about a dare?”

At that moment, Shoichi-senpai stopped talking. Nanami and I froze too. Hearing that unexpected word—*dare*—she and I looked at each other. The answer to the question we had wanted to ask—and what Shoichi-senpai had denied—had suddenly presented itself.

As I wondered whether I should still reveal myself, Shoichi-senpai and Ikusagawa-san remained silent. After several moments, I heard Shoichi-senpai’s voice from very close to us. They seemed to have come quite close.

“Uh, what are you talking about, exactly?” he asked in a slight panic, pretending not to know.

“I heard about it by accident. When you were talking in the clubroom, I heard you all mention a dare. It seemed so serious. So just what kind of dare have you...?”

“That’s not something I can explain myself,” Shoichi-senpai said softly.

So that was when she’d overheard us. I supposed it had been a bad idea to talk about it at school. This was down to my shortsightedness.

After what sounded like words of rejection coming from Shoichi-senpai, I heard a loud thump from their general direction. When I peeked, I saw that Ikusagawa-san was embracing Shoichi-senpai as though she’d fallen into him.

Shoichi-senpai had his hands in the air, unsure if he should hold her back.

“At first I thought you were being blackmailed, but when I talked to the two of them, they seemed like such nice people, I didn’t know what was going on!”

She was speaking softly, and her voice was shaking as if she was about to start crying. *I see now. Knowing what she knew, everything must have seemed so confusing. She must’ve tried to get me and Nanami to be by ourselves because she was trying to get away from us, not because she was being considerate. She must have been so scared.*

“I’m sorry. I must’ve made you worry,” Shoichi-senpai finally said.

“Please don’t apologize. If you’re going to apologize, then tell me what happened.”

“That I can’t do,” Shoichi-senpai murmured. He probably wasn’t going to say anything. If that was the case and since the manager already knew about the dare, then it was probably best if I was the one who explained it all.

I glanced at Nanami, and she nodded. *All right, then. Here I go.*

“If I may, I can explain everything,” I announced.

Shocked at my sudden appearance, both Shibetsu-senpai and Ikusagawa-san jumped. *Oh, maybe I should have given them a moment.*

Shoichi-senpai was holding several of what appeared to be bags from a convenience store. Maybe that was why they’d taken a little while to return. In any case, I decided to explain everything to Ikusagawa-san. It was probably best that I shared everything rather than try to hide things.

Just as I opened my mouth to speak, though, Ikusagawa-san bowed her head to me.

“Please forgive the captain. I beg you!” she shouted.

Huh? Why? I was taken aback. *Me, forgive him? Why?* As I stood there speechless, Ikusagawa-san continued speaking while still bowing her head.

“I’m sure the captain lost to you and ended up having to do the dare. I know that this is trying to get off too easy, but I beg you—please forgive him!”

Shoichi-senpai lost to me? I wondered what she was talking about for a second, but then I remembered. *Ah, that's right. Senpai and I competed in a contest once.*

It had been from way back when Nanami and I had first started going out, so I'd completely forgotten about it. It was true that I had beaten Shoichi-senpai, despite my underhanded method. Had she connected that information to the talk about the dare? The story made sense if you tried to put the two strands together—or at least, it seemed to. Of course, there wasn't any dare when it came to Shoichi-senpai.

With Ikusagawa-san still bowing and Shoichi-senpai watching over her with concern, I finally brought myself to break the silence. "Um, please raise your head. I'll try to explain everything that happened."

"Yoshin-kun, are you sure you're okay with that?" Shoichi-senpai asked.

"I mean, if she already knows about the dare, then it's probably better that I explain everything to her fully."

"I'm sorry," he replied in a quiet voice. When Ikusagawa-san looked up, I began slowly to explain everything that had happened thus far.

"Where should I start? Well, at the beginning, I suppose."

Articulating everything we'd gone through was slightly embarrassing. I felt like I was revealing some deep, dark secret that I'd never shared before. Everything to do with Nanami was a good memory, of course, but I still couldn't help feeling that embarrassment. People say that anything in the past eventually becomes a good memory, but I felt like I needed a bit more time before I could categorize these events under "Good."

Ikusagawa-san listened to me in silence while I talked, but once I finished, she simply stared at me with her mouth half-open. *I guess that's to be expected. I mean, how are you supposed to react when you've been told such a crazy story all of a sudden?*

"Is that the truth?" she asked, glancing over at Shoichi-senpai. He simply pulled back his shoulders and declared that everything I'd said was the truth. She asked several more times just in case that was a lie or he was hiding

something. In the end, he finally managed to convince her by asking her, “Do you really think I’m capable of hiding something from you?”

I wasn’t sure about managing to convince someone with that method, but at least the misunderstanding seemed to be cleared up. Ikusagawa-san held her hand to her chest in relief.

“I’m glad. I’m so glad,” she murmured, her eyes brimming with tears. *Wow, she must have been really worried. I guess if someone I was close to seemed to be involved in some kind of trouble, I would be worried too.*

“I for sure thought that the captain had done something idiotic again and caused all kinds of trouble and that was why he had to do things for a dare until he atoned for his sins.”

Uh, that isn’t quite what I thought she was worried about, but okay.

“That’s terrible, Manager. Did you really think I would do something that bad?” Shoichi-senpai asked.

“You would. You are idiotic. What were you thinking, getting into a competition where the prize was a girl? That’s terrible. How could you even think to do that?”

I didn’t know if this was in reaction to her previous worries or if it was how she really was, but the manager was pummeling Shoichi-senpai with questions as if her quiet demeanor until now had all been a ruse. I thought I’d heard once that no one should get in the middle of a fighting couple. These two were adorable. As I watched them with an awkward smile on my face, Ikusagawa-san suddenly turned to me.

“Hey, what happened to Barato-san?”

“Oh, she’s over there.”

Without even thinking, I pointed to where Nanami was. The spot was completely in the shadows, so no one could see what kind of situation she was currently in. That was why we had to make our way over there in order for us to actually see her.

“I’ve been so rude to Barato-san. I have to apologize to her,” Ikusagawa-san

said as she quickly made her way over. She flew over there with such light steps that she could have been a basketball player rather than a team manager.

The whole thing happened so fast that I hadn't even thought about Nanami's current situation.

"Oh!" I cried.

"What?!" Ikusagawa-san exclaimed.

My realization essentially came at the same time as I heard Ikusagawa-san's scream. In a rush, I stopped Shoichi-senpai as he tried to run over to see what was happening. I tried to calm him down as he wondered why I'd stopped him.

"M-Misumai-san?! What are you trying to pull outdoors?!" Ikusagawa-san asked loudly as she poked her head out, her face so red it was visible even in the darkness. I mean, her reaction was to be expected, given the state Nanami was in.

"Well, uh, we had our reasons," I muttered.

"R-Reasons?! What kind of reasons?! Were you just not able to restrain yourself?!"

"Goodness, no!" I cried.

Man, I felt like I was creating even more misunderstandings. Figuring that I had to start by explaining the details, I moved to where Nanami was hiding.

Not knowing what was going on, Shoichi-senpai tried to follow me, but he stopped in his tracks when I asked him to stay where he was. *I'm sorry about this, senpai.*

"I-It's dark, and being outside can make you feel more liberated, so is it just natural for people to feel this way?" Ikusagawa-san mumbled, pressing her hand against her lips as her imagination ran wild. "But isn't this going a bit too far for high schoolers?"

Nanami was trying to hold her yukata up with an awkward smile on her face.

For the time being, I had to let Ikusagawa-san be while I attempted to help Nanami get dressed. How was I supposed to help her get in a yukata though?

“Oh, I know how to put them on. Shall I help?” Ikusagawa-san asked, coming back to reality. I was grateful since getting help from someone who knew what they were doing would certainly help. *But I don’t know.*

As I was debating with myself, I suddenly felt myself being tugged from behind. Thinking for a moment that maybe I was experiencing dizziness, I glanced around and saw that Nanami was holding on to the edge of my yukata.

When we locked eyes with each other, she shook her head slightly. *Is she thinking the same thing I am?*

I turned back toward Ikusagawa-san. “Thank you, I’m grateful for the offer, but I was thinking maybe I’d like to be the one to help Nanami put it on. Oh, but if you can let me know if I’m doing something wrong, that would be great.”

When I stole a glance at Nanami, I saw her smiling and nodding almost imperceptibly. *Ah, so she was trying to tell me she wanted me to do it. I’m glad I didn’t decide in a rush. Is this really okay though? I mean, helping her put on a yukata is essentially the same as dressing her. Even if Japanese clothes are different from Western clothes, this still feels really embarrassing.*

“Then, um, here we go, okay?” I said.

“Yes, please,” Nanami murmured back.

From there, I stumbled my way through putting the yukata on her, looking back and forth between Nanami and my phone. Judging from the videos I found online, helping someone put on a yukata didn’t seem that fundamentally difficult.

Right, helping someone put it on definitely wasn’t difficult—as long as it was *only* helping someone put it on. *Wow, she’s so close. Man, she smells good.*

Since helping someone to put on a yukata required you to open up the front of it completely, I unfortunately couldn’t help her there at all. I mean, if you isolated just that part of the dressing process, it was hard to distinguish if you were dressing them or undressing them. That was why I was trying to help Nanami from behind, but even though I was only touching her yukata and not her bare skin, I still couldn’t help feeling nervous.

Oblivious to all the feelings running through me, Nanami nonchalantly talked

about how she might be able to put on a yukata herself once she got used to it. I guess you weren't really taught these things; you just had to get used to them.

Eventually, somehow, we managed to get Nanami dressed in her yukata. Feeling like I'd accomplished some major task, I sighed and wiped the sweat off of my forehead. I mean, sweat was pouring out of me from nervousness.

I couldn't dress her skillfully or with a flourish, but I felt like Nanami at least looked presentable. I also couldn't get the bow of her obi to look anything like it had before, but as long as it wasn't falling apart, I felt like it was a win.

When I took a step back, Nanami looked down at herself, raised her hands, and made little circles in the air with them as if quite pleased.

"Tee hee, you really did it for me," she said.

I couldn't do much, but I was glad she was happy. Grinning widely, Nanami seemed happy like an innocent little girl.

Oh, but if you keep twirling like that, the whole thing's gonna come apart again. Well, I guess I'll just have to fix it if it does, though the prospect of doing so still makes me a bit anxious.

"You two really like each other, don't you?"

It was then that we finally remembered that Ikusagawa-san was with us. *Yeah, this is the kind of thing we have to start being more careful of. We slip into our own little world at times.*

Nanami stopped spinning around and came to stand by my side, putting her hands together in front of her as though trying to appear graceful. *Oh, come on. It's too late to pretend now.*

The next thing we knew, Ikusagawa-san was bowing to Nanami. "I'm so sorry to have suspected you of something so strange. I must have seemed so rude. I'm really sorry about that," she said.

"Oh, no, not at all," Nanami replied. "Really, you don't have to worry."

Hearing her lighthearted reply, I tilted my head in wonder. Nanami was the one who'd received the letter, so she had every right to say a thing or two in return.

“I know what it feels like to want to do something for the person you like,” she added softly.

Ikusagawa-san blushed—differently from how she’d turned completely red earlier at seeing Nanami undressed—and nodded slightly.

She must really like senpai. Seeing the interaction between Nanami and Ikusagawa-san, I couldn’t help being surprised by that reminder.

“Besides, I’m really the cause of it all, so there’s really nothing to worry about,” Nanami said, waving her hands around. Ikusagawa-san thanked her softly. *To want to do something for the person you like... I guess I know what that feels like too.*

“Thank you,” Ikusagawa-san said again.

Nanami smiled in return. *Okay, good. Now at least the case of the letter is solved. Good, good.*

Just as I was thinking that though...

“Is it okay if I join you guys now?”

Shoichi-senpai’s head appeared out of nowhere, making all three of us leap up in surprise. Nanami was so shocked that she was hanging on to me for dear life as if he were some sort of ghost.

With Nanami wrapped tightly around me, I found myself thinking back to that haunted house we’d forgotten to go to.



The mayhem had come to a close, and the time for the fireworks show was nearing. There were several groups of people scattered throughout the rooftop, but it looked like we would be able to enjoy the show without worrying about any crowds.

Shoichi-senpai laid out a picnic blanket on the ground and sat down. He then spread out drinks and snacks on the blanket, so it felt like we were really out having a picnic.

Nanami deftly sat down on the blanket in her yukata and began cooling herself down with her fan. Maybe because we were on the rooftop, we felt a

nice, cool breeze around us, which gave us a respite from the heat.

“I had a really great time today. I hope we can all get together again. Cheers!” Shoichi-senpai said.

We all picked up the bottles of tea that he’d gotten for us and touched them to each other’s in response to his toast. It felt kind of strange, but apparently the people on the basketball team closed out the evening by giving toasts like this. Maybe that was how athletic types did things. The drink—still cool even though it had been a while since Shoichi-senpai and Ikusagawa-san had bought them for us—felt soothing as it seeped into our bodies flushed with the summer heat.

Just then, light flashed over the rooftop. A moment later, a loud boom rang in our ears. When we turned toward the direction of the sound, we caught sight of beautiful sparks scattering into the evening sky.

Although we had missed the first one, we watched as a second and then a third lit up the sky. Having never seen fireworks from this close before, I felt moved by the sight of it all.

“Tama-ya,” Nanami whispered softly, joining the others around us as they called out the typical fireworks festival cheer. I followed suit, even though I wasn’t quite sure why we did that in the first place.

Fireworks of various colors lit up the night sky, then disappeared just as quickly. I rarely had the opportunity to watch fireworks so leisurely, so the experience felt new and fresh. I couldn’t even remember when I’d last watched fireworks at night like this. *And to think that I get to share the occasion with my girlfriend.* I glanced stealthily over at Nanami, who was sitting beside me.

“They’re beautiful, aren’t they?” she asked, her innocent smile looking breathtaking. If I were the smooth type, would I have told her that she was more beautiful than the fireworks? Nah, that would be trying to act a little *too* cool.

As I sat there, enjoying the changes in Nanami’s expression, Shoichi-senpai and Ikusagawa-san came into view. The two looked like they’d grown much closer over the course of the evening. I had a feeling that Shoichi-senpai cared about Ikusagawa-san in his own way, not that I knew anything about the

subtleties of romantic relationships.

I gently placed my hand on Nanami's. Her body reacted the tiniest bit to my touch, as her fingers moved slightly beneath my palm. She then entwined her fingers with mine, and we both looked at each other.

"It's been quite a night," I said.

"Yes, it has," she responded.

We tapped our plastic bottles of tea together in cheers. We were toasting to, well...a lot.

The case of the letter was now closed, and my supplementary classes would end after one more day. With these two things sorted, I felt like we were getting off to a pretty good start to our summer break. Once tomorrow's class was over, we'd be able to start doing all the things we'd been wanting to do during our vacation—start our part-time jobs, go on dates together, and even study. Because of our recent exams resulting in my need to attend summer school, I had learned my lesson and resolved to study a little bit each day. I also had to stop making such stupid mistakes.

Nanami's birthday was also coming up. *Birthday... Birthday, huh?*

"Hey, Nanami, what do you want for your birthday?" I asked.

"Huh? My birthday?"

I felt pathetic asking, as it might seem like I wasn't putting any thought into what to get her, but I was actually asking her so that I could put more thought into it. For example, if she told me that she wanted jewelry for her birthday, then I would be able to think about what kind of jewelry I could get her. If she wanted some kind of tangible object and expressed an interest in a particular genre of items, then I could think about what would make her happiest within the scope of her request. That way, I would be less likely to choose the wrong thing, and I'd still be able to surprise her while getting her what she asked for. It was the thought that counted, but I had to get creative about how to let that thought count.

Nanami might tell me that she would be happy with anything as long as I put thought into it, but I didn't want to take advantage of her flexibility like that. If

she asked for an item from a particular brand or something, it might be hard on my wallet, but at least it would be easier for me to decide. I had a feeling, though, that Nanami wasn't the type to make such a specific request. As proof, she was sitting next to me, trying to come up with a response to my question.

"Hmm, my birthday, huh? I really appreciate you asking, but are you sure I can request anything?"

"Yeah, of course."

Nanami continued hemming and hawing as she watched the fireworks. I waited for her response as I gazed up at them too. I never realized how many different types of fireworks there were nowadays, or maybe there'd always been this many and I just hadn't been aware.

Nanami remained silent for a while, but having arrived at an answer, she opened her mouth to speak. "I want you to spend all day with me on my birthday," she said softly.

Be with her all day? Is that all? I thought that was the same as her not really asking for anything, but apparently, that wasn't what she meant.

"I thought it'd be nice if we could be together on my birthday from the beginning to the end," she added.

Hm? Is that what she means by "be with her all day"?

"You mean from midnight until the date changes at the end of your birthday?" I asked to confirm.

Nanami simply nodded.

Wait, this isn't as simple as that "From good morning until good night" slogan from that toothpaste company. Does she really mean twenty-four hours, all day long?

I wondered if that would be difficult to pull off, practically speaking. I'd been able to stay with her from midnight the last time we'd gone on a trip, but our parents had been there, as it was a whole family affair. There was also that one time when I'd stayed over at Nanami's house, but her family had been there then too. So if we were alone, just the two of us... *Wait. Alone, just the two of*

us? Does that mean...?

“Wait. I’m sorry if I’m getting this wrong, but are you trying to say that you want just the two of us to go on a trip together?” I asked.

As soon as she heard me say it out loud, her face turned red so quickly, I thought I heard a *pop*. It seemed I was right though. *What a roundabout way for her to ask. A trip with just the two of us, though, huh? If we lie and try to sneak off together, it’ll make our families worry. Still, I want to make her wish come true.*

“How about we only do it if our parents give us the okay? If it is just the two of us, they’d be super worried if something happened.”

We were high schoolers, which meant that we could probably pull off going on a trip without telling our parents. After all, we had smartphones nowadays. If we put our minds to it, we could probably do anything. There were probably kids who did stay at their partner’s house while saying they were staying over at a friend’s. Regardless of what people thought of as right or wrong, there were probably tons of high school students who did that.

Still, I didn’t want to do that, especially given that I knew Nanami’s parents. In the end, it wouldn’t be good for Nanami. If we were going to go on a trip, I wanted it to be officially sanctioned. Even if honesty didn’t always pay, I wanted to make my decisions based on the fact that we *were* honest. I mean, any lies we told would eventually be discovered anyway, so it was better not to lie at all. There was no reason to lie and increase the risk of things turning out poorly.

Nanami must have anticipated my answer, because she furrowed her brow a bit as though she disagreed. “Yeah, you’re right,” she nonetheless muttered. She’d probably requested it knowing that it might not be possible. That was why I proposed a compromise.

“How about you stay over at my house, and we can celebrate together?” I asked.

I’ve stayed over at Nanami’s house before, but I don’t think I’ve ever had Nanami stay over at mine, have I? I was over at my house so little these days, that I couldn’t really remember. Since Nanami hadn’t stayed over at my house yet, maybe she could stay over for her birthday—I mean, if my parents said yes,

of course.

“Well, even if we can’t do that, we can be on the phone before we hit midnight on your birthday and stuff,” I said. “I feel like there are lots of ways to do it.”

To be honest, I was thinking that that would be the most likely scenario. Now that I thought about it, I had never fallen asleep with Nanami on the phone before. I’d never done that with anyone else either. But we always said good night to each other before hanging up and going to bed. *I wonder if Nanami has ever thought about falling asleep together while we’re on the phone. Her birthday aside, maybe we can try it out one day, you know, just as an experiment.*

Nanami seemed happy about the compromise and was particularly taken with the idea of staying at my house and hoped my parents would give us permission. If we could do that for Nanami’s birthday, that would be amazing. I would even be able to spend the money I’d been saving on something else. Maybe I could try buying a separate present as well.

“Is there anything you want for your birthday, Yoshin? It could even be something you want me to do for you,” Nanami asked suddenly.

“Something I want you to do for me? Hmm. I can’t really think of anything off the top of my head.” There wasn’t really anything I wanted, so if anything, it would probably end up being something she could do. I couldn’t even think of something like that though. Also, my birthday wasn’t for a while, so I had a feeling I would forget.

Nanami pressed herself close to me and continued chatting about my birthday while she watched the fireworks shoot toward the sky.

“I’ll do anything for you on your birthday. Don’t be shy,” she added.

I felt like I’d already told her she shouldn’t say that she would do “anything.” Saying that meant disregarding her right of refusal. Who knew what she might end up having to do because she made such an offer? Still, I didn’t feel like I could point that out to her at the moment. Naughty thoughts aside, I could tell that Nanami genuinely was willing to do anything if it was for me.

I felt happy, but at the same time, I felt a sense of danger. Doing just about anything for the person you love might seem like a wonderful thing, but it also includes an element of risk. Hitting the right balance is the difficult part. I knew that Nanami would be all right, but trusting her was not the same as leaving everything up to her. I had to be careful about that.

“I’ll think. I know it’s a ways away, but I’ll be looking forward to it,” I replied in the end.

Nanami, her smile growing broader, scooped up even closer. At that moment, a huge firework shot up and exploded like a gun salute.

Nanami looked up at the sky and then brought her face closer to mine to look into my eyes.

“It can be anything, even if it’s something a little pervy,” she murmured.

“How about we stop right there, so that we don’t ruin the moment?”

“Aw, dammit,” she said, clicking her tongue. Then, just as the next firework shot up into the sky, she leaned closer and touched her lips to my cheek. It came as such a surprise that my eyes widened and I pressed my hand to the spot where she’d kissed me.

“I hadn’t even kissed you yet, even though we’re both wearing a yukata,” she said, making a peace sign in front of her lips.

What does wearing a yukata have anything to do with kissing? I wondered. People around us weren’t looking at us at all, focused instead on the fireworks. Still, doing this while out in the open took a lot of guts, but I couldn’t resist the urge to kiss her back. *I’m gonna kiss her the next time fireworks go up, for sure.*

Having made up my mind in secret, I waited for the right moment while watching the show. The next round of fireworks went up. They were astoundingly large, and astonishingly bright, with multiples going off in a row. Everyone was focused on the sky above, so there was no way we would be seen. Thinking the timing was right, I brought my face closer to Nanami’s to touch my lips to her cheek.

“Wow, look, look! Yoshin, there are so many—”

At that moment, Nanami had turned toward me. My kiss landed not on her cheek, but her lips. I couldn't immediately pull away, so we remained like that for some time.



Once the consecutive fireworks had calmed down, I finally pulled away, and the world grew quiet again. Both Nanami and I remained silent. She didn't move away from me though. Without really thinking about it, I placed my hand on her waist.

Nanami jumped slightly, but she quietly drew closer to me. We were much closer to each other than we usually were.

We stayed that way while we continued watching the fireworks in silence. Even after the show ended a short while later, she and I remained attached to one another.

Glancing over at us, senpai said one simple phrase.

"So this is what they meant by adorkable."

"Captain, please watch what you say," Ikusagawa-san snapped.

Yes, I'm so sorry. Even though we weren't doing anything wrong, I still felt like I had to apologize. Nanami, on the other hand, heard Shoichi-senpai's comment and flashed them a peace sign.

Shoichi-senpai pointed his phone at me and Nanami. Apparently, he was taking a photo of us. I hadn't expected him to take a photo of us on the picnic blanket, so I probably looked really dumb at that moment. However, it seemed that we had managed not to get caught kissing during the fireworks show itself. Thank goodness for that. If they'd seen us, I would have been crazy embarrassed.

The consecutive fireworks from earlier must have signaled the closing of the show, because no more went up afterward. It seemed our night, too, had come to an end. It was a good time to go. We'd ended up staying out later than planned.

Nanami got to her feet and stretched. It wasn't that late, though, so it was a mystery why I had the urge to yawn. Shoichi-senpai and the manager had their hands in the air as they stretched out their backs.

Oh, that's right.

Before we called it a night, I decided to ask Ikusagawa-san something I'd been

wondering about. It was a good opportunity, and I felt that if I missed my chance today, I wouldn't be able to ask her about it later.

"So, about the letter you put in Nanami's shoe locker..."

"I'm sorry? What letter?"

Oh?

Ikusagawa-san and I looked at each other and tilted our heads. Neither one of us had a clue what the other was talking about.

Huh? What's this? I felt a chill run down my spine. Was this really happening after we'd come so far?

"W-Wait. Ikusagawa-san, didn't you put this in Nanami's shoe locker?!" I asked, showing her the image I had saved on my phone. It was of the letter asking about the dare, but seeing it, Ikusagawa-san looked even more clueless. What was happening when we were getting so close to the end?!

"Um, I didn't put anything in her shoe locker," Ikusagawa-san replied.

At this point, she had absolutely no reason to deny it. After all, she had already asked us about the dare. *Hey, wait a minute*, I thought, suddenly thinking back to what she'd said. *That's right. She never said anything about the letter.* I had assumed on my own that was what she'd been talking about.

Seeing my panic, Nanami and senpai both became nervous, aware that something was amiss. I, too, felt a contradictory chill all over my body despite the hot evening air.

"Did you go near Nanami's shoe locker?" I asked, barely managing to squeeze out the question.

"Um, yes. I was waiting by the shoe lockers because I wanted to ask Barato-san about the dare, but since it was getting close to the start of practice, I ended up having to leave before I could say anything."

She had to leave before she could say anything. If that was true, then she had in fact been seen by the shoe lockers—but that's all there was to it. *Then who was it that put the letter in there?*

The resolution we'd reached had been to another problem entirely.

Realizing that we were back to square one, I thought about what a vicious cycle life was and wished that I could escape reality.

Interlude: If It's Not One Thing

"Jeez," I muttered.

It was the last day of summer school, yet I didn't feel good at all. That was to be expected, I guess—after all, the previous night had ended with an unforeseen revelation.

In the end, Shoichi-senpai was right. The manager—uh, Ikusagawa-san—had simply overheard our conversation in the clubroom, but she hadn't put that letter in Nanami's shoe locker.

It was true that her comments and the contents of the letter had been contradictory. I just hadn't realized it. The letter had asked whether the dare was still going on. Ikusagawa-san, on the other hand, had asked instead what the dare was about in the first place.

They seemed similar, but they were different. The letter's question was most likely indirectly asking whether Nanami was still going out with me.

"I guess I'll just have to investigate some more," I said, pulling myself together. No new incidents had occurred since then, and none probably would during the summer break. I would have to think of some countermeasures before school was back in session, but for now, it seemed like that could wait. Maybe I was being too optimistic, but I figured that was better than fraying my nerves. It sounded cool to say that I would protect Nanami no matter what, but if I collapsed and made her sad, then all this would be for nothing. That was why I would have to come up with countermeasures in moderation.

"And that should do it," I said, solving the final problem on my handout. With that, my supplementary math classes finally came to an end. What a shame...or not. Seriously, I wished this day could have come faster.

"Is today the last day, Misumai-kun?" someone called out from a seat not too far from mine. It was the class rep. Just in these past few days, we'd become...not close enough to talk that much. Even so, I felt like we'd become

cordial enough to say good morning to each other or to make small talk. I wanted to refrain from becoming too friendly with girls at school, but giving her the cold shoulder would feel wrong of me. I'd been trying to find a good middle ground by talking about it with Nanami, but when I asked her, she'd just said, "Oh, I mean, as long as you're not gonna meet up with her alone, then it's totally fine for you to talk to her like normal."

Man, she was so open-minded about things. I felt really anxious every time Nanami so much as talked with one of her guy friends. If Nanami was okay with stuff like that, though, then I had to be more considerate about it too.

"Yeah, I only had supplementary classes in math, so I'm all done. What about you, um...?" Calling her "class rep" to her face felt really odd, so I still didn't know how to address her. I thought she might find my hesitation strange, but she didn't seem to have any particular reaction.

The class rep let out a soft "I see" before returning to her seat. I didn't know what was going on, but things somehow felt awkward—like the air around us was heavy. We hadn't eaten lunch together even once, but there were people who didn't enjoy eating with other folks. You couldn't force them.

"Barato-san..." the class rep mumbled.

Hm? Rather than respond to the soft voice coming from afar, I simply waited for her to continue. She seemed hesitant but nonetheless like she wanted to say something.

After several moments of silence, the class rep slowly opened her mouth again. "Are you going on a date with her again today?" she asked.

"Oh, um, yeah."

After that, there was more silence. *What should I do? Should I try to continue the conversation?* Unable to withstand the silence, I ended up mentioning things she hadn't even asked about.

"We're both starting our part-time jobs soon, so we thought we should hang out while we still could. It's kind of ironic that we'll be seeing less of each other over the break."

"Oh. I see."

Again, there was silence. We continued like that for a while, sporadically asking each question and then falling silent. She mainly asked about me and Nanami. I simply assumed that was because girls must like talking about relationships. I should have thought more about the significance of our conversation. Why was she talking to me in the first place? Then again, thinking about it wouldn't have made me realize what was happening.

"So you're still going out with her, huh?" she finally mumbled after her string of questions. Come to think of it, she'd asked me that before too. I remembered now. "I thought for sure you'd break up after a month or so."

With that single statement, my heart skipped a beat. A month was the time limit for the dare. Why had she expected us to break up after that specific amount of time?

I began to feel slightly uncomfortable. *Why is she suddenly bringing this up?*

"Say, do you know the reason Barato-san confessed to you?" she asked.

"The reason?" I murmured.

Under normal circumstances, most would assume that this was a question asking about how we got together—or what Nanami liked about me. But given my discomfort with the situation, even that question felt creepy.

What is she getting at, exactly? The answer to that question would soon become clear.

"I know why Barato-san confessed to you."

Excuse me?

What was she saying? I was probably staring at her right now with the most idiotic expression on my face—wide-eyed, without being able to utter a single word. I didn't know how she interpreted my reaction, but she was looking at me somewhat sadly. *Um, how am I supposed to react to this?*

"So you don't know, huh?" she said, getting up out of her seat and walking toward me. She did so slowly, almost as if she were a ghost. I stumbled to take a step backward. She then continued, perhaps because I wasn't saying anything in response. "It's none of my business, so I wasn't planning on saying anything,

but it just seems unfair that you don't know about it."

Everything felt surreal, like I was watching a play or some kind of TV show. Maybe that was also because she sounded like she was reading lines off of a script.

Finally, she placed a piece of paper on my desk. "If you want to know, you can contact me here. Barato-san probably won't tell you even if you ask. This is my last day of summer school too, so you can contact me during the break if you'd like."

The look on her face seemed melancholic or maybe even somewhat theatrical—or worse, even deceptive. She then began to walk out of the classroom.

"Hey, wait!" I called after her.

"I'm sorry to spring something so strange on you. I'll talk to you later."

Implying that she and I would talk again at a later date, she left the classroom. The only thing left was the piece of paper with her contact information on it.

The paper appeared to be the same as the type that had been placed in Nanami's shoe locker. It might have been my imagination, but that was how it looked to me.

Ordinarily, this would have been a time to become upset or uneasy. If I hadn't already known, then I would have felt that way. *Except...*

"I already know everything."

She made her declaration with such a heartbroken yet posed look on her face that I was overcome with an indescribable feeling.

What should I do now?

I continued asking myself that same question as I began walking toward the spot where Nanami and I would be meeting.

Afterword

Hey, it's Yuishi. I'm happy to be able to bring another book to you like this. Thank you for picking up volume six. Did you enjoy it? If you did, then I would feel very fortunate.

It's finally summer break in the story. The first four volumes depicted one month altogether, but from volume five on, the passing of time becomes slightly faster—though the passing of time still feels slow compared to how quickly the main characters' relationship is progressing. They haven't crossed that final line yet, but who knows when that could be. I might or might not have been told by my editor to tone things down a bit (LOL).

This volume contained some scenes of the summer festival, but I understand that many festivals had to be canceled because of the pandemic until just a little while ago. This year, the local snow festival resumed, so I trust that more and more festivals will be returning.

I myself got to go to the snow festival for the first time in several decades. I know we just switched from talking about summer break to talking about winter, but if you could let that slide just for the festival connection, I'd appreciate it. The last time I went to a snow festival was when I was a student, so a lot of things have changed since then. If the series continues, maybe I'll make our two protagonists go to a snow festival too.

Come to think of it, I remember a snow slide at the festival, but I didn't see that this year. Maybe I was looking in the wrong place. Speaking of snow slides, I have a sad memory associated with them. When I went to the snow festival once as a kid, there was a huge snow slide, and I was so looking forward to going on it. But when I went with my family, it happened to be a warm day, so the slide was about to collapse (or a part of it had already collapsed) and had to be quickly shut down. As an adult, I can understand that having it collapse under you would be a complete catastrophe, but at the time, I started bawling because I was so upset. From the following year, I made sure to go on the slides

that I wanted to go on as soon as I got to the festival. I think that's the most prominent memory I have of snow festivals.

I want to do my best not to have such sad memories in the story. I really do want our two protagonists to make lots of fun memories instead, although there is a turbulent development on the horizon.

Speaking of several decades ago—well, not exactly—there's something I've been doing for the first time in a while. You might already know this if you follow me on Twitter, but I've been really into watching movies at the movie theater lately. I had been watching movies before then, but I only went to the theater once last year, and for the most part, I just waited for movies to become available on streaming services. That's why it's been several decades since the last time I was really into going to the actual movie theater, though I'm a bit hazy about what kinds of movies I used to watch back then.

What started it was a fairly small incident. Starting this year, my work environment changed a bit, and I've been having to do a night shift once a month. Maybe I can't actually call it a night shift, since the schedule is somewhat inconsistent, requiring me to come home late at night on some days and in the early morning on others. Anyway, the first time I had such a shift, I don't know what compelled me, but I said to myself, "I'm gonna go watch a movie!" and I ended up going to an actual theater. After that, I ended up telling myself that I wanted to watch a movie in a theater at least twice a month. I was probably amped up after getting off of my night shift. In any case, ever since then, I've been on this movie kick. I watch with a cup of juice in my hand, telling myself what a lovely atmosphere a movie theater has.

Are you all the type that likes eating something at the theater? Or do you not like eating there at all? In my mind, the snack to get at a movie theater is popcorn, but this has changed from what I remembered as well. I remember popcorn only being salted, so I never knew that there were flavors like caramel and strawberry now. I was shocked to see that there was even olive oil flavor. There were also things like french fries, fried chicken, churros, and ice cream crepes. My, how times have changed. I wished they had things like that back when I was young, but since I didn't have much money, I probably wouldn't have bought them anyway.

The way I've been enjoying movies lately is to go to the movie theater first thing in the morning and enjoy a drink and a pizza or a hot dog as breakfast while I enjoy the show. I realize this only as I've been writing this afterword, but I haven't had any of the popcorn. Maybe I should try it out next time. Popcorn wouldn't make for a good breakfast though, so I would have to go during the daytime. If you have any movie recommendations, I'd love to hear them.

When I watch movies at home, I sometimes attend watch parties hosted by VTubers. They're great opportunities to watch movies that I wouldn't choose for myself. It's also a great learning experience for me to see what other people find interesting or what multiple people react positively to, since I get to see people's live comments and the VTubers' reactions. Maybe I'm just really into particular VTubers, but no matter.

In any case, for this year, I'm making an active effort to do things I didn't do the previous year or try new things I want to try. I debuted as a writer at the end of my thirties, so compared to other writers, I'm a much older newcomer to the industry. Because of that, I feel that I should constantly expose myself to new things and revisit things I used to do when I was young in order to maintain my sensitivity. Of course, I'm choosing things I can enjoy, rather than things I'd have to force myself to do.

Furthermore, precisely because I'm not so young anymore, I think it's important for me to remember the humility I had when I first started working and make a conscious effort to be exposed to various things. I'm enjoying the frequent visits to the movie theater, so I'm hoping to be able to try other things as well. I'm also thinking of picking up and putting together a model kit for the first time in years. I want to get into drawing pictures as well, though I've never really drawn before. I would also like to start writing a new series. Maybe drawing will come after writing or finishing this current one. I look forward to being able to produce more works for my audience.

In terms of new things, perhaps the hot topic of the day is AI. Making illustrations using AI is stirring up controversy, but the technology is making great advances in the field of writing as well. How we'll respond to such developments will be extremely significant. For me, I think I'll be heading in the direction of actively learning about AI and how to use it fully, rather than

rejecting it just because I don't understand it. I can of course understand people's desire to avoid anything to do with AI, but now that it's out in the world, we can't take it back, and we can't get rid of it either. I feel extremely grateful to be alive at a moment during all these transitions. I would love to see all kinds of new technologies come into this world while I'm alive.

First, though, I'll work hard so that I can bring volume seven of this series into the world. Yes, I think the announcement for volume seven is included at the end of this current volume, but I'm grateful to announce that I've been allowed to release another volume. I actually prepare two different endings every time I write one, but for this sixth book they let me know about the sequel early on, so I only had to prepare one. This is all thanks to my readers. I can't tell you how grateful I am. I wrote this in the blurb as well, but at this point, everything in the series is all new material, and we've entered a different route from the web novel. Volume five, too, was all-new material.

I have other things I'd like to be able to share aside from the news about the seventh volume, but I'll announce them on Twitter and other outlets as soon as I'm able. Please look forward to it. I can't say that I've mastered Twitter, much less any new technology, but I tend to tweet various things on the platform, so I'd be happy if you'd tag me from time to time.

This year is actually a calamitous year for me based on my age, so I'd like to visit a shrine for purification. That will be a first for me as well. I wonder what it'll be like.

I know we're nearing the end, so I would like to close with a few words of thanks. Volume six, too, has been graced with illustrations by Kagachisaku-sensei. To tell the truth, it was my editor and Kagachisaku-sensei who asked me "Aren't the characters going to change out of their uniforms for the summer?" after they met to discuss this volume. That was how I realized that I needed to go in this direction. For the wonderful summer uniform, regular clothes, and the illustrations of the yukata—thank you so much for everything.

To Nagomi Kanna-sensei, who creates the manga version of the series: every time I receive the storyboards, I learn so much about the different ways a scene can be developed. Please do as you please for the characters' clothes as well. Volume one of the manga adaptation has already been released, so please

check that out too.

To my editor, Kobayashi-sama: thank you for all the effort you put into our meetings. I know that my being unfamiliar with the industry causes trouble, but I very much look forward to continuing to work with you.

And finally, to everyone who is reading this book, thanks to you, I'll be able to release volume seven. I thank you in advance for all your support. At this rate, it looks like I'll be able to have Yoshin and Nanami continue flirting with each other until the end of their junior year, then their senior year, then in college... I wonder what new developments you readers would like to see. I hope to be able to write the versions of the two characters that you all would like to read.

Well then, I look forward to seeing you again in volume seven, which I'm going to start writing right now.

Yuishi

June 2023

SUMMER UNIFORM UNVEILED! ♪

An Introvert's

HOOKUP HICCUPS:

This **GYARU** Is Head
Over Heels for Me!



“Yoshin, I’m here! Are you working hard? I brought you the bento I-”

“Well, that’s a rare sight.”

In walked Nanami with a bento in hand. She stood frozen in place, her hand still raised to show off the bento. Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san poked their heads out from behind her. Was it Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san who’d said that? I supposed they were right either way.

“Nanami, why aren’t you moving?” I asked.

“Not...”

Not? I wondered what she wanted to say. Nanami slowly placed the bento she had in her hand on a desk nearby and approached us.

“Not fair! I wanna sit next to Yoshin and study too!”



“Huh?”

When I took Nanami's fan out of her obi and tried to cool her down from the front, well...

The obi came undone.

The front of Nanami's yukata fell wide open. As something white flashed before my eyes, both Nanami and I moved at the exact same moment.

Bonus Short Stories

The Battle at Karaoke

This could be said about anything, but doing something for the first time could bring on a lot of nerves. You could get nervous when you were alone, but if you were with other people—say, when you had to do something in front of an audience—you would feel even more anxious than if you were by yourself.

For someone like me, who never really spent much time in the limelight, this was even more so. If I was gonna be this nervous in front of my girlfriend—someone I knew and trusted—then I was pretty sure I would pass out in front of people I didn't know.

The music that had been playing in the room gradually grew softer, until it finally stopped. Just as it did, I heard a different sound—a sound of light clapping. It was something I hadn't heard very often in my lifetime.

Not knowing how to react to the applause, I scratched my head a bit as if I was embarrassed. Though, to tell the truth, I really was pretty embarrassed.

"Sorry, I know that wasn't very good," I murmured.

"Not at all! You said it was your first time, but you were super good!" Nanami replied, complimenting my singing despite it being clumsy and off-key. I felt grateful for that, though I also felt a bit tickled by the sentiment.

My gaze grew lower toward the floor as Nanami's clapping became louder. Nanami, though, seemed to watch me with a kind of delight.

"You're so cute," she said unexpectedly and under her breath. *Huh? Just what about my reaction is cute? I don't understand at all what girls consider to be cute.*

As I became more confused, Nanami kept repeating how cute I was. Hearing her, my cheeks began to turn hotter from a different kind of embarrassment than before. *Maybe I should sit down first.*

“What’s the song you just sang though? It was good, but I’ve never heard it before,” Nanami remarked.

“Oh, right. Uh, well,” I began, before immediately pausing again. I knew it was too late to realize this, but I had just sung an anime song. It was also a slightly older anime that never became terribly popular. I hesitated to tell her that it was an anime song, even though I knew Nanami wouldn’t think it was weird. Still, I couldn’t help feeling a slight bit of trepidation as I told her what song it was.

“It’s an anime song, actually,” I muttered.

“Oh, I see. I guess I don’t really watch that much anime. What kind of anime is it?” she asked.

I felt relieved at her response. Yeah, I should have known that Nanami didn’t have any weird prejudices against things like that. If anything, she seemed to take interest in the anime that I liked. Forgetting even to input the next song into the karaoke system, I looked up the anime that I sang the song from on my phone. One of the search results was—of all things—kind of a sexy scene, but I made sure to click on a different result to have it display on my phone.

“It’s this one,” I said, showing her the image.

“Let’s see here,” Nanami said, peering into the phone in my hand. I ended up looking down at her, but because she was wearing her thin summer uniform, what immediately came into my field of vision was her chest. No matter how many times I looked at it, I couldn’t get used to it. Wait, it seemed wrong to make it sound like I looked at her chest numerous times. Still, I *did* look at it a few times; I just couldn’t help it.

Taking care not to have Nanami notice my internal struggle, I turned away from her and ended up focusing my gaze on a camera instead. *I see, so there is where the camera that’s used for surveillance is set up.* As I thought vaguely about the camera monitoring us, I remembered what Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san said to us before they left. *That’s right, Nanami and I are alone in a private room right now. No, wait. Don’t get any ideas. We’re out in public, after all.*

Turning away from the camera, I returned my gaze toward Nanami once

again.

“Oh, this girl’s cute. Do you like girls like this too?” Nanami asked, raising her head just in that moment. Because I had looked down and Nanami had looked up, our faces ended up getting very close to each other, very quickly. Realizing what had happened, we both froze at the same time. We were so close that our lips were just nearly touching. I couldn’t help thinking to myself that, if we hadn’t managed to stop ourselves, we would’ve bumped into each other and been in quite a bit of pain.

Our faces were already only apart by the distance of a step or so. Nanami, though, took that one step closer to me. With a slight kissing sound, her lips gently touched mine.

Before I could react in any way, Nanami stepped away from me and stuck out her tongue. She then proceeded to lick her own lips. I just stared at her every move, my mouth hanging open in mild shock. My brain only caught up to me a little while later, when I was finally able to bring myself to slowly look into her eyes.

“Tee hee, I kissed you!” she exclaimed giddily. In response, I could only let out an idiotic “Y-Yeah.” Nanami, though, proceeded to slide herself closer toward me while still sitting down.

Should I kiss her back? I wondered, but I didn’t know how to initiate another kiss under these circumstances. I couldn’t bring myself to ask her if it was okay for me to kiss her.

Still, I found myself *wanting* to kiss her. *If I just kiss her and move away from her really fast, would that be okay?*

“So,” Nanami began, but just as she did so, I was already bringing my face closer to hers. Since she was sitting next to me, I couldn’t really get a good angle on her lips. I would have had to twist my body to approach her from the front, which would force me to twist my body in a weird way.

That was why I simply brought my face closer to her at the most direct angle—and ended up placing my lips on her ear.

“Huh?! Oh...nnnghh?!” Nanami let out.

Her body quivered, forcing my lips away from her ear. *No, this isn't what I meant to do. I was actually aiming for her cheek, but then Nanami moved, so I ended up landing on her ear instead.*

Clearly in shock, Nanami turned to me with her hands to both of her ears for some reason. With her eyes opened wide as well, she stared right at me. She was opening and closing her mouth, as though she couldn't manage to utter a sound.

Um...

"I kissed you?" I eked out.

"Where are you kissing me exactly?!"

She has a good point. I didn't know if it was because she had both her ears covered, or because we were in a karaoke booth, but her voice sounded slightly louder than usual. I drew back a bit, stunned by the force of her response.

With her hands still covering her ears, Nanami was now pouting.

"Jeez, if you're gonna kiss me, I wished you'd just kiss me on the lips," she muttered.

Her lips, huh? I was trying to kiss her cheek because it was hard to kiss her on the lips from my angle, but...

"Did you not like me kissing your ear?" I asked.

Seeing how upset she was, maybe it was unpleasant to have her ear kissed, even if that hadn't been my intention. If that was the case, then I had to make sure not to do that again in the future.

That wasn't Nanami's reaction though. Still pressing on her ears, Nanami sank lower into the seat and raised her head. Glancing upward, she murmured, "I, um, I guess my ears are kind of sensitive."

"Your ears are sensitive," I repeated.

"Yeah. When you kissed me, it felt like this electric shock ran right through me. And my body started feeling tingly all over," she continued, muttering.

Nanami's ears are sensitive. I felt like I learned a very valuable piece of

information. I wondered if she had other sensitive parts. Thinking about it made me want to find them.

What'll happen if I do it one more time? "Curiosity kills the cat"—I know that means that being too curious about something can lead to one's downfall, but why is it a cat? Thinking that it could've been anything else—like a dog or a bird—I felt my own sense of curiosity growing within me.

Maybe my level of reason was determined by whether I would be able to control my curiosity, or I would let it burst.

"Do you...have other sensitive parts?" I ended up asking.

I guess I'm not a person of reason after all.

I actually had no intention of asking, but the words just fell out of my mouth. It was completely subconscious. By the time I realized what I was saying, it was already too late.

Removing her hands from her ears, Nanami just looked at me, dumbfounded. Before I could apologize and tell her to forget what I said, I heard her mumble something.

As if I was lightly being pushed down onto a bed, her next question overtook whatever I was going to say, preventing it from leaving my mouth.

"Do you want to find them?" she murmured, opening up the collar of her uniform slightly to put her neck on display. Her smooth and beautiful skin, as well as the lovely shape of her collarbones, emerged into view.

Find them? Find them?! Wondering if I was really allowed to touch her, I reached my hand out toward Nanami. *If I'm going to touch her, where should I begin?*

As I was hesitant from trepidation to actually touch her, Nanami looked at me and grinned broadly.

"Jeez, you're such a pervert," she said.

Hearing her remark, I pulled back my hand in a panic. Nanami, though, gently enveloped my escaping hand in hers and pulled it closer toward her—and just like that, placed my hand on her own neck.

Nanami moaned softly as I felt the sensation of her skin on my fingertips. It was soft with a surprising firmness, and also somewhat damp. No, wait, maybe it was my hand that was damp from sweat.

I couldn't perceive any warmth. Maybe that was because my fingertips had grown cold from nervousness. I couldn't detect her body temperature at all.

Not knowing what to do next, I slowly took my fingers off of her.

Even though we were in a karaoke booth, everything around us was quiet. We could hear some kind of a commercial running on the television screen, but even then, the immediate space around us felt eerily silent.

"Hee hee, you touched me. But touching here didn't make me feel all weird the way it did last time," Nanami said.

"I-I see," I muttered in response.

"Yeah, it felt kind of normal. But, now that I think about it, earlier you kissed me on my ear, so maybe here, too, if you kiss...me..."

Her words grew softer and softer as she continued. Hearing her remark, I felt my own face slowly turning red. I ended up freezing in a weird posture.

Isn't it a really bad idea for me to kiss her there?!

Nanami's voice had grown to just above a whisper because she'd realized the same thing. If we did that, wouldn't we look like we were doing something totally inappropriate?

"Wh-Where are you most sensitive?!" Nanami suddenly shouted, charging at me as though trying to get rid of the awkward air between us and our mutual embarrassment in it. Not at all expecting her advance, I ended up losing my balance and having her pin me down on the seat.

Nanami then proceeded to run her hands all over my body in playful exploration. *Wait, even if you're trying to hide your embarrassment, isn't this going a bit too far?!*

I tried to resist, but I couldn't do so in any meaningful way—because, maybe in an effort to hide just how embarrassed she was, Nanami was clinging to me with an unexpected amount of force. Because I didn't know where I would end

up touching her if I fought back too much, I had to keep my resistance to a minimum.

“How about here?” she said, tracing her finger along the back of my neck. With someone aside from myself touching my neck, I felt a shiver run down my spine. Her fingertips trailed slowly along my neck, collarbones, and chest. Maybe because we’d just switched to our summer uniform starting today and I had the top button of my shirt open, Nanami was taking liberty and caressing my exposed skin.

Any more, and this is gonna get bad.

“Nanami, I think you need to stop,” I murmured.

“Hmmm? Are you giving up already?”

When I raised both my hands slightly to indicate my nonresistance, Nanami, too, stopped running her fingers on my skin. Because she was sitting on top of me, she seemed like she wasn’t intending to let her hands travel any further down either.

“Yes, I surrender.”

Upon hearing my declaration, she removed her fingers from my body and then brought her face closer to mine.

Because the sofa we were on was small, we were pressed up against each other to make sure we wouldn’t slide off. Because of that, Nanami’s face was close enough for me to feel her breath on me.

“I’ll forgive you, as long as you kiss me properly,” she whispered in my ear.

She was right that I only kissed her on the ear earlier and not actually on the lips. I wondered if that was what left her dissatisfied.

I placed my hand on Nanami’s cheek. Nanami quivered the moment I did, then closed her eyes. There wasn’t any real need for me to put my hand on her cheek, but I just worried that I would somehow miss my mark if I didn’t. I guess it was serving as sort of a guide.

I then brought my face closer to hers, until my lips eventually caressed hers.

I did nothing more than to let our lips graze each other, and yet my heart was

filled with so much joy and a sprinkling of embarrassment.

After kissing her—for not too long, not too short—I eventually pulled my lips away.

Nanami slowly opened her eyes and sat up, straddling over me as she broke into a gentle smile.

“Tee hee, we kissed,” she said.

“Yeah, we did,” I replied.

Seemingly satisfied, Nanami moved her body off of me and picked up the remote for inputting songs into the karaoke system. She had switched into a different mode as though nothing had happened between us.

And here I was, my heart still pounding in my chest. *Wait, maybe Nanami is just pretending to be calm too. Welp, I have no idea.*

Before selecting the next song, though, Nanami whispered to me and said, “We’ll have to find our sensitive parts on a different occasion, huh?”

When I looked at her, my eyes about to pop out of my sockets in shock, Nanami looked at me with a bewitching sidelong glance as if to seduce me, then smiled alluringly.

“Be gentle with me, okay?” she said.

What’s the right way for me to respond to this? I didn’t have any guarantees that what I was imagining was the same as what Nanami was imagining. Still, would that different occasion come one day?

“I’ll do my best,” I mumbled, which was also the best I could manage in that moment. Nanami, though, smiled with satisfaction at my response.

“And? What are you gonna sing next? Are you gonna go for another anime song?” she asked.

“Hmm, I’m not sure,” I muttered.

“Oh, if we’re doing anime songs, can I sing one next?”

“Yeah, actually, that would be even better.”

I wanted to hear Nanami sing too, so I had no reason to reject her proposal. I

felt like I preferred listening to someone good sing, rather than singing myself anyway.

Nanami operated the remote with ease. After a few moments, a familiar melody began to play throughout the room. *Wait, where have I heard this song before?* As I sat there trying to recall what song it was, Nanami picked up the microphone and stood up. Just as she started singing, I remembered it.

This is the opening to the anime that was playing when we were kids.

Nanami, paying no mind to the fact that she was wearing a skirt, was jumping and hopping and striking poses, going all out and singing to the fast-paced rhythm of the song.

I was surprised at the song that Nanami chose, but I began clapping too and shaking the maracas that the room was equipped with, trying to liven up the mood even more. I didn't even have time to wonder if I was doing it right, I was so focused on enjoying this moment together with Nanami.

As the last note rang out, Nanami struck her final pose and I broke out in applause. I was surprised at Nanami's song selection, but I was also genuinely impressed.

"Gosh, that was fun!" Nanami exclaimed as she plopped down next to me, beads of sweat appearing on her forehead after her song and dance routine. She caught her breath as she took a sip of her drink, then let out a long sigh.

"I didn't know you sang anime songs, Nanami. Plus you're super good, and you even did the whole dance," I remarked.

"Yeah, I used to sing and dance to this song with Saya when we were little."

"I mean, you seriously were amazing," I said, giving another round of solo applause. Nanami played with her hair a bit, trying to hide her embarrassment.

I didn't even expect that she had such talents. I'd heard before that people sometimes danced at karaoke to accompany their singing, just to liven things up more. I wondered if maybe this song was one of Nanami's favorites. I knew it was too late, but I started regretting the fact that I didn't regularly go to karaoke with people from our class.

“Actually, you’re the first person I’ve ever shown this to,” Nanami suddenly muttered.

“Huh?” I blurted out.

Nanami, making a small peace sign, flashed a toothy grin and said, “I hadn’t done it in a while, but I guess you just remember stuff like that, huh?”

With not a trace of the woman who had smiled at me so alluringly just a moment ago, Nanami sat there next to me, showing me her brightest and most innocent smile yet.

Fantasizing about Living Together

Even though I had suggested living together out of nowhere, Nanami seemed unexpectedly gung ho about the idea. In fact, her reaction was so intense that for a minute there, I couldn’t even remember what I had been talking about. I thought that maybe she would be creeped out by my suggestion, but my worries seemed to be entirely unfounded.

Of course, I was certain that things weren’t going to be that easy. We’d have to convince our parents and think more realistically about things like location and rent. The money would probably be the biggest issue.

Regardless of reality, though, it was super fun to talk together about what the two of us wanted to do.

“I wonder how big of a place you need if you’re living with two people,” Nanami pondered on the other end of the line.

“Hmm, I’m pretty sure it’d have to be at least bigger than our current rooms, right? We’d have to put a bed in there too,” I suggested.

“A bed, huh? Maybe we should get a double-sized bed.”

I nearly choked on my own spit when I heard her comment. That only implied one thing, and there was no way she didn’t realize what she was saying.

“Oh, come on. Don’t leave me hanging,” Nanami said.

“I mean, you started talking about a double-sized bed. Do you know what that

means? It means we would be sleeping together,” I mumbled.

“Of course I know that. I mean, when we’re going to bed, we’re gonna be sleeping together at the same time anyway, so don’t you think that would save more space?”

Oh, wait, maybe she doesn’t actually know what she’s saying. Nanami said the phrase “sleeping together” so casually, that I could only interpret it literally.

She also seemed more focused on saving space. If it was between having two single-sized mattresses and one double-sized mattress, I wondered which one would take up less room.

No, I have to try to change the subject without going into more detail. If I pursue this, I might end up in the sexual harassment zone.

“The size of the room is important, but we’ll have to figure out how to split up the housework too, right? I’ve heard that people take turns, or that the person who comes home first does stuff,” I said.

“Oh, true—housework *is* important. There’s the laundry, the cleaning, and the whole nine yards. Maybe taking turns is the best way to go, huh? Laundry, though...I guess I’ll have to wash your underwear too,” Nanami replied.

“Wait a minute! Don’t you think we should wash our own underwear?!”

“Huh? Why? I don’t mind washing your boxers at all.”

“But, if we’re gonna take turns...are you sure you’re okay with me washing *your* underwear?” I mumbled.

I didn’t mind washing Nanami’s underwear, but I wondered if women might not feel uncomfortable having men wash their undergarments like that. I only asked because the thought crossed my mind, but it still ended up sounding like a case of sexual harassment. Even though I tried to change the subject, I put my foot in my mouth anyway.

“Um, yeah, you’re right. We should probably wash our own underwear. Oh, but I might feel kind of embarrassed about having you wash my sweaty clothes too. So maybe we should do all our own laundry? But then that seems like we don’t get along even though we live together,” Nanami continued muttering.

I'd only thought of the underwear, but she had a point about regular clothes too. I guess women might not want men washing their clothes in general. I never thought about that.

I listened in silence as Nanami continued going back and forth about the laundry. *Hmm, I think I'm getting kind of embarrassed by the thought of Nanami washing my clothes too.*

"Yeah, we have to get used to it for our future anyway, so let's just take turns on the underwear too!" Nanami finally exclaimed.

"Nanami, let's calm down for a minute. We can cross that bridge when we come to it," I said, trying to gently steer Nanami away from a reckless decision. This was all a long ways away, so there was no need for us to decide now.

Nanami seemed to calm down after my remark, pulling herself together as she resumed talking about the topic of living together. She sounded very happy doing so.

"Gosh, it sounds so nice, though, living together," Nanami continued. "When I come home, you're gonna be in your apron, greeting me at the front door. And then you're gonna ask if I want dinner first, or the bath first, or..."

Wait, I'm the one who's gonna say that? I asked myself, just as Nanami came to a full stop. Wondering what was wrong, I finally heard Nanami speak in a voice that she barely managed to squeeze out.

"Is that what it means? To sleep together?" she murmured to herself.

"You thought of that just now?!"

That was how we carried on, fantasizing without end about the two of us living together.



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An Introvert's Hookup Hiccups: This Gyarū Is Head Over Heels for Me! Volume 6

by Yuishi

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Ebook edition 1.0: March 2024

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