

Author • Yuishi Artist • Kagachisaku

volume

8

An Introvert's

HOOKUP HICCUPS:

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

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Prologue: A Wonder Lasts but Nine Days?

Harem.

It wasn't a word we heard often in our daily lives, but many people probably knew it regardless.

The word referred to an environment in which many girls were around a particular boy—specifically, when many girls *liked* the same guy.

Multiple guys liking the same girl was called a reverse harem, as in the reverse harem ending of an otome game.

In any case, the word “harem” described a situation of one-to-many.

How many people, then, knew that this word originally meant something else?

I wasn't terribly familiar with the word either and only knew what little I learned when I looked it up. It seemed, though, that it was first used to describe a specific place—a forbidden place or territory. That, apparently, was its original definition. So how did it come to mean “multiple girls” or “multiple guys”?

Japanese people were probably just good at changing things up like that. I'd heard something before too, about stuff like ramen, curry, and sushi; Japan took in elements from other cultures, assimilated them, and built upon them to make something new. That unique trait—a transformative ability some might even call grotesque—was probably the essence of what could be called Japanese culture.

That I was proud of such a country...wasn't what I was trying to say here at all. I was just trying to escape reality, looking up the etymology for a word I wouldn't normally be interested in.

The truth was that there was currently a very questionable rumor going around about us...or, rather, about *me*.

I'll have to explain the rumor in more detail later, but to start: I only learned about it in the first place because my homeroom teacher told me about it. Although, given the word "harem," you could probably guess what kind of a rumor it was.

The story actually went back several days. Specifically, just a few days after the class rep...er, Shirishizu-san turned into a gyaru, I was called into the faculty room.

I hadn't been called there since around the time I started going out with Nanami. Back then, it was because the teacher had been worried about me. This time, though, it wasn't me that the teacher was worried about.

"So, you're saying that the class rep's sudden change is just a makeover?" the teacher mumbled.

"Um, yes. I think that's probably all it is," I replied.

The teacher sighed in relief; he had brought up Shirishizu-san with me with quite the concerned expression. It seemed that her transformation had been quite a shock for him.

It had surprised me too; I mean, I couldn't even tell that it was the class rep at all at first, so I completely understood how he felt.

I could, but...then I couldn't understand why he was asking *me* about it. As in, why did he call *me* in, when he could've just called in the class rep to ask her directly?

"Sir, don't you think you could have asked her instead of me?" I asked.

"Oh, come on. There's no way that a male teacher can ask a female student, 'So, I noticed you changed your style. Is something up?' People will claim it's sexual harassment," he muttered in despair.

"Really? I mean, if you're only trying to give students some guidance, wouldn't it be allowed?"

"I think so too, but the school's always telling us to be careful about stuff like that," the teacher grumbled, grimacing slightly as if remembering something unpleasant. Musing up his hair, he sighed, this time in exasperation.

I guess it's tough being an adult too.

But then, maybe it also depended on the student. In fact, if it was Shirishizu-san, it probably would've been okay. She didn't seem like the type to make a fuss about a teacher pointing out her makeover and claim she was being sexually harassed.

But what the teacher might have thought is if Shirishizu-san's appearance had changed, maybe her personality might have changed too. At least I knew what was really happening, so I didn't reach that conclusion.

I tried to see it from the teacher's perspective: if I had a serious student suddenly turn into a gyaru right after summer break...

Yeah, I guess it is kind of awkward to try to ask her directly.

That was probably why, in order to put a safe distance between himself and Shirishizu-san, the teacher asked me instead. That made sense.

"Don't worry. Shirishizu-san hasn't changed on the inside," I said, trying to convey to him that Shirishizu-san's transformation only involved her appearance. I couldn't tell him anything more specific, though, so he would have to ask Shirishizu-san directly about her actual state of mind. The only thing I knew was that Nanami was the one who'd coordinated the class rep's new outfit and style.

It suited Shirishizu-san well—I wanted to give Nanami a solid two thumbs-up. I couldn't say that to the teacher, of course; it would just sound like I was bragging about my girlfriend.

Wait, was it even okay in the first place to compliment another girl who was wearing an outfit that my girlfriend picked out? It probably was, but since I wasn't completely sure, I should ask Nanami the next time I got a chance.

It seemed like my meeting with the teacher was over. But just as I stood up to go, I heard the teacher murmur something.

"I see, so it's not that she's become a member..."

"A member of what?" I asked without thinking, in the way anyone would when hearing something unexpected or unrelated to the conversation.

But as I did, I noticed the panicked expression my teacher suddenly made, the kind of expression one makes when they said something to someone they weren't supposed to say.

"What do you mean? A member of what?" I asked again.

I had to say, looking back, that it was absolutely the right decision for me to have followed up with this question.

In some situations in life, ignorance was bliss. There were, however, just as many instances where *not* knowing could lead to something that couldn't be rectified.

Now was probably the latter.

It was good for me to ask, after all; I was able to hear about something that was happening to me totally without my knowledge. "Well, uh, so," the teacher began, scratching his cheek a bit as he deliberated on how to answer me. Rather than rush him, I simply waited for him to continue.

He eventually made up his mind—he moved forward in his seat, spreading his knees apart and placing his hands on them in a serious, yet dramatic pose. Slowly, he opened his mouth and said, "Misumai, I want you to listen to me calmly, without getting upset."

"Okay," I said with a nod, even though I had a very bad feeling about what he was about to say. The teacher seemed relieved by my initial response, because he nodded several times himself before he continued.

"Misumai, are you aware there's a rumor going around about you right now?" he asked.

"Rumor? No, I'm not. Is it about me and Nanami again? I don't tend to pay attention to weird stuff like that," I replied.

"The rumor says you're making a harem for yourself," the teacher said.

"Excuse me?"

That's right. That was how I found out about such a dishonorable rumor about me.

According to the teacher, it went something like this:

Yoshin Misumai—dissatisfied with just Nanami Barato—made a move on Kotoha Shirishizu when the two of them were taking supplementary classes together during summer school. Thus, Kotoha Shirishizu’s gyaru transformation was due to her falling for Yoshin Misumai during summer break, and as a result, the membership of the Misumai Harem increased to four: Nanami Barato, Hatsumi Otofuke, Ayumi Kamoenai, and Kotoha Shirishizu.

Those were the three main strands of the rumor.

There were other vicious elements as well, but since they were mere variations on the above three, they didn’t need to be spelled out.

I didn’t even know where to start, but the main issue was clear: people were accusing me of building my own personal harem.

The Misumai Harem.

Though it seemed more like defamation personally, this was the rumor about me that was currently going around. Okay, so maybe I wasn’t sure if I was using “defamation” correctly, but that wasn’t really the point here.

I never thought that a word I only saw in manga and whatnot would ever be used in association with my own last name.

Just who in the world came up with that name? Even the teacher knows about it too...

“I’m only dating Nanami. I only *like* Nanami,” I murmured.

“Well, yeah. The fact that this is how you respond in front of a teacher just proves how unfounded the rumor is,” the teacher said, somewhat exasperated. I was always trying to be careful not to say things that suggested just how much I liked Nanami, but that was precisely what I ended up doing.

Still, it was important to make things very clear: I only liked Nanami, and Nanami only liked me.

Both Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san had boyfriends as well—they probably didn’t have eyes for anyone else. Including them in my fictitious harem was just

rude.

Shirishizu-san...clearly wasn't interested in me like that. Plus she wasn't really comfortable around guys in general.

"Yeah, well, since that was what I thought too, I made sure to deny the rumors among the teachers at the very least," he said.

I had assumed that he was the only teacher who knew, but it seemed that the other teachers on campus had asked him about it too—about whether I was in inappropriate relationships with multiple girls.

Isn't this situation pretty serious, then?

I mean, maybe it was pretty normal for rumors about students to be the topic of conversation in the faculty room, but even then, I didn't feel comfortable having those rumors be about *me*.

"Still, I wonder why a rumor like that would have such legs. It's so clearly baseless," I muttered.

"Huh? Misumai, don't tell me you don't realize it," the teacher said.

Not realize what? The expression on his face, though, didn't seem to be one of discomfort; he seemed genuinely surprised.

"Misumai, you only ever hang out with girls," he said.

In that moment, my brain froze.

Um...what? Only with girls? No way. That can't possibly...be the case, can it...?

Shoot, no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't recall ever really talking to other guys. At best, it was a brief exchange of pleasantries in the classroom.

I mean, I didn't have friends to begin with, so that was to be expected. I really only spent time with girls at school.

Looking at it that way made me seem like a really gross dude. Or a major player.

As I sat there reviewing my recent behavior, the teacher continued. "If a guy in high school doesn't spend any time with other guys his age and only hangs out with girls instead, then of course other folks will get jealous and start talking

about how he's trying to make a harem. I remember that stuff happening back in my day too."

His words—so logical that I couldn't even argue with them—stabbed me in the chest. The last bit of hope I had about the situation being a simple misunderstanding vanished.

It all made sense: if people saw me as not having any guy friends, and then Shirishizu-san suddenly turned into a gyaru and started talking to me, then it seemed inevitable for people to think I was starting a harem.

I guess I was simply reaping what I sowed.

"At the least, leave the faculty room to me. I'll try to clear up things with the rest of the teachers," he said.

"Is there possibly a way to stop this rumor?" I asked helplessly.

"Once it's spread like this, it's a bit tough," he murmured.

That was true. I should probably be grateful that at least I had a teacher on my side.

Speaking of—somehow my teacher sounded as if he had experience with this kind of thing, more than just what was going on with me now. Did he, perhaps, have something like this happen to him? It would be helpful to have someone who might know about this stuff firsthand.

But if that was the case, would it be possible that he didn't let the rumor slip to me accidentally, but rather mentioned it offhand on purpose? Of course, he must have wanted to ask about Shirishizu-san too, but even so.

Still, what could I do to make this rumor go away?

"Maybe I really should make some guy friends," I muttered.

I knew that alone wouldn't dispel the rumor, but I couldn't stand the thought of people continuing to misunderstand me. For now, this was about the only solution I could come up with.

In terms of guy friends too, the only person I could name off the top of my head was Shoichi-senpai. That was it. Plus he was the captain of the basketball team, set to graduate next year. I should probably take the news of this terrible

rumor spreading as some kind of divine intervention.

Maybe I was thinking too idealistically about things, but it was certainly better than being negative about the situation.

“That’s probably not a bad idea. There’s no need to force yourself to make friends, but our class trip is coming up too. It’d be a fun time to hang out with some guy friends,” the teacher said.

Class trip. That’s right. I totally forgot about that. What did I do when I was in middle school? I feel like I just went around by myself. It wasn’t all that fun, so I don’t really remember.

It’d be nice to get to be in the same group as Nanami, but it’d be a little sad if I couldn’t. Yeah, it’s probably a good idea to make some friends. I don’t feel like forcing myself, but even then...I should probably make some kind of effort. Now, the only problem is...

“How exactly do you make friends?” I murmured.

I had no idea how I was supposed to go about doing that. What did I do when I was younger?

The teacher, though, looked at me with a wry smile and said, “I don’t think I’ve ever heard that from a student with a girlfriend.”

“Really?”

“I mean, I do hear it from guys who have friends, but no girlfriend, that they want a girlfriend,” he added.

Right—that was probably true.

Even though, as usual, I felt like I was doing things out of order, I still had to wonder if I would actually manage to make any guy friends. At this point, though, that was something no one could tell.

Chapter 1: Temptation and Reason

While I was at the teacher's office, Nanami waited for me in the classroom like she usually did. In other words, I didn't tell her to go on home without me. In fact, I had suggested to her myself that we go home together.

In no way did I assume that she would wait for me. That bit was probably important.

What was different today was that Shirishizu-san was there as well, along with Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san.

The four of them seemed to have waited for me...or, rather, the other three were here to probably make sure Nanami wasn't left by herself.

Just as I was about to rush over to Nanami, what I'd heard from the teacher a moment ago suddenly crossed my mind.

"A harem, huh?" I grumbled softly, making sure that no one else could hear me.

I reexamined my situation objectively. One guy, rushing toward a group of four girls. I really *did* seem like the protagonist of a harem manga.

Of course, I only *seemed* like one; I wasn't *actually* the protagonist of a harem manga.

I wasn't, but...maybe others couldn't help seeing me that way. That was a total blind spot. Wait, could I really call it a blind spot?

For starters, I was the type of guy who, in a manga, would obviously be a background character. I was someone totally unsuited to be the main character. I just so happened to be having some very interesting experiences as of late.

As long as I'm Nanami's protagonist, then that's all that matters, I thought, embarrassing even myself. I couldn't help wanting to kick myself for even thinking that.

"Thanks for waiting, Nanami," I said as I approached her.

“Oh, welcome back, Yoshin! What did you talk about? More supplementary classes? Maybe we can do another study session,” Nanami returned.

“No, it wasn’t about supplementary classes.”

Nanami let out a disappointed “I see.” If I *did* need supplementary classes right after having some over summer break, then I’d be in real trouble. Even so, I said, “But we can still have a study session though.”

Nanami’s face lit up at my remark. Her smile was so bright that I felt I had to squint. *Wow, what a blindingly beautiful smile. Did Nanami wanna have a study session that badly? Wait, she’s talking about what she should wear. Um, is that really necessary for studying? Huh? The next costume?*

Otofuke-san and the others were now chiming in with their own opinions about a potential costume. *Wait, what’s a whip for? Excuse me? Why would a tutor have a whip?*

I felt somewhat sheepish, being right there while all the girls were giving raunchy hints regarding Nanami’s outfit. I couldn’t help suspecting that cosplaying would become one of Nanami’s new hobbies.

What kind of a costume is she going to tutor me in though? Damn, I hate myself for getting my hopes up.

“And? What was it you talked about with the teacher?” Nanami suddenly asked.

“Oh, uh...”

We’d finally made it back on topic, but I wasn’t sure if it was the kind of thing I could bring up in the middle of the classroom. I took my eyes off of Nanami for a moment and glanced over at Shirishizu-san, who only tilted her head and returned my look.

Shirishizu-san was wearing the new gyaru-style clothes that Nanami put together for her. Half of the guys in class were very happy with the transformation, while the other half wanted the original version back. When she had shown up at school with her new look, it caused quite a commotion. It was a post-summer makeover reveal, albeit a day late.

Given that I didn't really remember what Shirishizu-san looked like before—back when I used to refer to her as “class rep”—I had to admit I didn't find her current look to be terribly unnatural.

I really only met her for the first time during summer break. The only thing I had to say about her new look, therefore, was that it suited her just fine.

Of course, I never expected her transformation to stir up such a weird rumor.

“Could it...have something to do with me?” Shirishizu-san asked.

“Well, that too,” I responded reluctantly.

I guess she would notice that something was amiss. Shirishizu-san then sighed and looked down at her clothes. Tracing them with both her hands, she looked over at me again and said, “I thought so. I've caused you more trouble again.”

She then continued to trace the outlines of her body, this time with a more sensuous gesture. She probably figured out that my conversation with the teacher had something to do with her appearance. I had to admit that she was pretty astute.

The hint of sexiness in Shirishizu-san's movement made Nanami turn slightly red. The fact that Shirishizu-san was doing that without realizing what she looked like made it even worse.

Nanami often did things without thinking about them either, but Shirishizu-san did so in a different way. I had to be sure to keep a lid on my thoughts when I looked at Shirishizu-san.

“I guess dressing like this right after summer break *would* get people talking, huh?” Shirishizu-san said as she pinched the hem of her skirt and lifted it. I couldn't see anything from my angle, but it was enough to make me look away.

“Kotoha-chan?!” Nanami yelled.

“Whoops, sorry. I did it again,” Shirishizu-san said. From the corner of my eye I saw her let go of her skirt. I really should've completely turned my back instead.

“I'm not used to the skirt being so short, so I can't help flipping it,” she added.

“How does *that* make any sense?” Nanami muttered, totally bewildered. I had

to agree. If the skirt was too short, wouldn't she feel compelled to cover herself up with more layers? Regardless, I elected to keep looking away as I continued talking.

"I just told the teacher that you had a fashion makeover, that's all," I said.

"He really should've just asked me himself," Shirishizu-san replied.

"He told me he was scared of sexual harassment accusations," I explained.

Shirishizu-san as well as Nanami and the others let out a collective "ahhh," as if that made complete sense. *I guess that's a common interpretation, then.*

"So, what else did you talk about?" Nanami asked.

"Huh?" I let out.

"I mean, you said 'that too' earlier," Nanami said, sidling closer toward me. Maybe because I'd glanced at Shirishizu-san earlier, but Nanami was now very close to me despite us being in the classroom.

Since it was after school, there was no one around but us. But Nanami's proximity still embarrassed me. Just then Nanami moved to link arms with me, as though to show off how close we were.

Should I really tell Nanami what I just found out when she was acting like this? I mean, it was a given that I would tell her, but this classroom probably wasn't the place to do it.

"Not here," I finally mumbled.

Unfortunately, though, I couldn't think of somewhere better. I wanted to talk about it with everyone who was involved, but I just didn't have any good ideas for an alternative.

"Is it something that's hard to talk about at school?" Nanami asked.

"Kind of," I murmured in response.

I didn't have the guts to say out loud here that there was a rumor going around about me trying to build a harem—even if there was no one around to hear me.

After that conversation with the teacher, though, I couldn't bring myself to go

to a karaoke box with everyone either. Going to karaoke with a bunch of girls right now felt like it would just strengthen the rumor even more.

Yeah, the more I thought about it, the more I realized that this really was all my doing. Like, of course people would think I had a harem; I had the gall to go to karaoke with just me and three other girls.

Still, being unable to come up with any other place to talk, I was about to suggest a karaoke box anyway when Nanami intervened.

“Then how about we go to your work, Yoshin?” she suggested.

“Huh?”

“I haven’t seen Nao-chan since we visited for my birthday. Plus I wanna be able to introduce my friends to her,” Nanami explained.

I didn’t expect her to suggest that. She had seemed hesitant about going to my workplace before, so I was surprised that she would bring up the idea herself. I recalled, though, that she and Nao-senpai had become friends after we had last visited the restaurant on our date.

Hmmm. They’re a restaurant, but it’s okay to just get tea and stuff too, right?

As I went back and forth in my head, Otofuke-san and the others began clamoring that they wanted to see where I worked too. Perhaps they had heard something about it from Nanami.

A café *did* seem like an easier place to chat about this. Plus, people from school probably wouldn’t go there.

Oh, shoot. We can’t.

“Nanami, I forgot that they’re closed right now for break,” I said.

“Really? Oh, I see. What a bummer,” she replied.

Although she was clearly crestfallen, there wasn’t anything we could do about the restaurant hours. We couldn’t go bother them during their precious free time, after all.

We would have to visit my work some other time, but the general idea of going to a store was a good one. We could probably chat about things at a

coffee shop.

To get things started, we all made our way out of the classroom in order to head to a better location to talk.

As a side note, I was to be scolded by Nao-senpai regarding this incident at a later date. When I told her about it, she became incredibly upset.

As she put it: *“Four gyaru girls?! Why didn’t you bring them?! I could have had a seriously relaxing break!”*

She sounded just like a high school guy.

I had no idea Nao-senpai would complain about such an unexpected issue. After all, I was way more preoccupied trying to figure out just exactly how I would explain the rumor to everyone.

That was why I didn’t realize that there was someone watching me—or, rather, *us*—at that moment.

Even if I hadn’t been preoccupied, though, I still doubt I would have noticed it. Considering how things went later, we should have just stayed in the classroom to talk.

Had we done that, we probably wouldn’t have been met with any weird misunderstandings. In the end, our precautions totally backfired on us.

It wouldn’t be long, however, before I found out just who exactly was watching us.



Question: If you told a group of people that they were rumored to be part of a new, scandalous harem, how would they react?

Answer: Any number of ways, as I was witnessing right now.

Nanami fumed. Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san laughed. Shirishizu-san...had no particular reaction.

Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san were laughing so hard that they were slumped over the table, clutching their stomachs. Since we were at a café and didn’t want to disturb the other people inside, they were trying their best not to

be too noisy.

“Seriously! What’s with that rumor?! How rude!” Nanami exclaimed, clearly upset. It was rude indeed, and she was rightfully angry.

I wasn’t expecting Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san to start laughing though. I had assumed they’d get upset like Nanami. Though given that the rumor was more about me, they probably found it super amusing that I was the one that people were gossiping about.

“If that’s what people think, then I’ve got to show them all that I’m the only one!” Nanami exclaimed, gripping her hands into tight fists.

“Wait, Nanami. Calm down,” I said.

Flames seemed to dance behind Nanami, and I had the illusion that the heat made her figure sway with menace. The warm weather suggested that summer wasn’t long behind us, but I felt like I was seeing Nanami through the last bit of hazy summer heat that had dissipated a few days ago.

We had left school and made our way to a nearby coffee shop. Nanami and I were sitting next to each other, while the other three sat across from us. I felt like I was in a job interview or something.

“I so *am* calm. In my head, I’m coming up with different ways to show the whole school just how close you and I are, so that this stupid rumor about a harem goes away immediately,” Nanami said.

Her body was swaying, but her eyes held no light. *Whoa, that’s creepy. I’ve never seen Nanami’s eyes look like this. Even during summer break, she never looked so intimidating.*

Even with eyes that in no way suggested any kind of flirtiness, Nanami clung to me nonetheless. Her hand gripped me with unseemly strength.

What’s going on? Nanami is right next to me, but I’m so nervous I’m sweating.

The situation had me consider, yet again, something that I had contemplated before.

Does Nanami have yandere tendencies by any chance?

I wasn’t sure if “yandere” was the appropriate term here, but I felt like we’d

encountered a few scenarios like this before.

“Oh, come on. It’s actually kind of funny. We only see harems in manga and stuff anyway,” remarked Otofuke-san.

“Yeah, yeah! It’s just a rumor. There’s no way anyone’s taking any of this seriously,” added Kamoenai-san.

As they were about to continue with a laugh, though, the two of them fell silent.

The air turned viscous, as though a heavy lump of lead had been placed on our bodies. Suddenly, all of us felt as if an indescribable weight were pressing down on us.

We drew in our breaths as we turned pale, sweating profusely and trembling. Before, I had only heard of people falling silent when they were afraid, but at the moment we seemed to be modeling that behavior perfectly.

Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san froze as well, as they glanced over at Nanami.

“Did you two say something?” Nanami asked.

“No, ma’am.”

Wow. Neither one of them is smiling now.

I’d never seen Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san look like this. I had also never seen the smile currently on Nanami’s face before—a smile meant to dominate.

The two of them looked at me beseechingly, but there was nothing I could do either. All I could do was to take Nanami’s hand to try to calm her down.

When I squeezed her hand, I felt the air around us relax a bit.

Just as quickly, Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san both inhaled deeply, as though they had been underwater for some time and finally made it to the surface. I loosened my shoulders a bit and exhaled—though I made sure Nanami didn’t notice. At this moment, she was acting so serious, in a way I didn’t think I’d ever seen before.



All this was to show just how much Nanami disliked the whole harem thing. And I got where she was coming from. Though I did think a fictional harem could be kind of interesting, in real life...

If I were to think through things from Nanami's perspective—contemplate the possibility of her having a relationship like that with people other than me—it would be unbearable torture.

It wasn't quite the same thing as being cuckolded, but I still couldn't stand the thought of it. I would never forgive the guy.

Does Nanami like any celebrities? I don't have anyone like that, though I do like manga characters and stuff. I wonder if that also counts as something we can't forgive.

Wait, I'm straying here. Let me get back on topic. I'll never get anywhere if I keep digressing.

In any case, Nanami probably disliked the idea of a harem in real life too. That was probably why even rumors of one upset her so much—though she seemed to be feeling less anger, and perhaps more discomfort.

Either way, I had to get her to calm down somehow. I couldn't stroke her hair out in public at a café, but maybe I could at least stroke her hand.

I thus let go of her hand at once and began stroking the back of it with my finger.

Unlike mine, the back of Nanami's hand was soft and smooth. I knew just by touching it how beautiful her hand was. It had no imperfections—I felt like I could keep touching it forever. That was how beautiful and smooth Nanami's hand felt.

When I touched her like that, I felt her body react slightly.

As the five of us continued debating what to do about the rumor, I continued stroking the back of her hand in an attempt to soothe her.

I saw Nanami steal a glance at me from time to time from the corner of my eye, so I smiled back at her in reassurance.

Right, to reassure her—or so I thought. But then Nanami turned away from

me. Every time my fingertips touched her hand, her body quivered.

Hmmm? What's with her reaction? Why are her cheeks red? What's going on?

"Hey, Nanami, your face is kind of red. Is it too hot in here?" Otofuke-san asked.

"Oh, you're right. You're all red, Nanami. Are you feeling feverish? You should go home and sleep!" Kamoenai-san added.

"Huh? No, this is... It's nothing," Nanami murmured.

Nanami was, in fact, very red in the face. Her cheeks were flushed, she was short of breath, and her eyes were teary. She seemed like she was suddenly down with a cold.

Nanami fidgeted for some time, but she seemed to finally give up and whispered, in a voice only loud enough for the five of us at the table to hear, "Y-Yoshin...is doing something pervy to me."

"Me?!" I yelled.

Wait, I feel like I've had a bomb thrown into my camp all of a sudden. Plus it's not even the kind on a timer—it's the kind that explodes immediately.

The three in front of us turned to me with an expression that I'd never seen before, like what they were staring at was a heap of rancid garbage. *Such terrifying stares!*

"Misumai...you dare do such a thing at a coffee shop?" muttered Otofuke-san.

"Wow, that's too much, even for me... You should really wait until you're alone," added Kamoenai-san.

"Pervert," diagnosed Shirishizu-san.

Oh no, their voices were lower than I'd ever heard them. The mood certainly changed from a moment ago, but I couldn't say I was happy feeling these stares stab into me.

I had no idea Nanami was feeling that way, so her response completely blindsided me. After all, stroking someone's hair wasn't considered perverted,

was it?

If that was the case, then stroking the back of someone's hand couldn't be considered perverted either...could it?

"Please let me explain," I said as I raised my hand, then proceeded to explain what I was doing to Nanami. I couldn't use Nanami's hand to do so, so I used mine instead.

Once the others heard my explanation...

"How is that considered pervy?" Shirishizu-san asked, tilting her head. Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san seemed to feel the same way, amused exasperation on their faces. It was Nanami's turn, though, to object.

"It totally *is* pervy! I mean, he's touching my hand all soft and gentle! There were times when he was barely touching me too!" she protested.

"But he's only touching you, right? Hmmm. Misumai-kun, how about you try it on m—"

"No way!" I instinctively refused as Shirishizu-san suddenly placed her hand on the table. I had no desire to touch the hand of any woman that wasn't Nanami.

Shirishizu-san picked up on the tone of my response, so she pulled her hand back as she muttered, "Oh, this isn't okay either." The person who grasped that hand, though, turned out to be Nanami.

"I'll do it for you," Nanami said.

"I'm sorry?" Shirishizu-san let out.

Nanami smiled brightly as she proceeded to touch the back of Shirishizu-san's hand. Her movements seemed a lot smoother than mine. The touch of her fingertips seemed to send shivers through Shirishizu-san's body. Paying no mind to her reaction, Nanami let her fingers crawl over Shirishizu-san's hand. Shirishizu-san, meanwhile, pressed her other hand to her lips, as though stifling herself from any possible outcries.

Once Nanami had completed her exercise of stroking Shirishizu-san's hand, Shirishizu-san slumped over the table. Smiling, Nanami turned and looked

toward the other two.

“Now it’s your turn,” she said to them.

As though unable to refuse, the two of them slowly extended their hands toward Nanami. They were looking at Shirishizu-san over the table next to them with fear in their eyes.

Still, the two of them also seemed to be taking things a bit lightly—as though they thought that Shirishizu-san was overreacting. And yet...

Ultimately, the two of them met the same end as Shirishizu-san, with all three of them left slumped over the table in the end.

“And? Your thoughts?” Nanami asked the three of them, with a satisfied smile brimming with something like maternal affection. She carried the air of a teacher gently guiding her students through a question with an answer she already knew herself.

I swallowed hard. I didn’t know if it was from fear or from something else, but I felt a shiver go up my spine just from seeing that smile of hers.

“This is...indeed pervy,” mumbled Shirishizu-san.

“Sure is,” murmured Otofuke-san.

“Yup,” finished Kamoenai-san.

This couldn’t be happening. They were all singing a completely different tune from before.

I wasn’t sure if it was to circulate oxygen throughout their system, but all three of them were breathing heavily. They were all short of breath as though they’d just run a marathon, and they were looking at each other while still slumped over the table.

Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san were muttering something about having someone do it for them...or doing it for someone themselves.

I’m so sorry about this, Soichiro-san and Oribe-san, I apologized in advance, inside my heart.

As I sat there, stunned by just how quickly the three of them had changed

their minds, I felt something soft touch my hand. The moment I registered the sensation, my entire body jumped.

When I slowly looked down, I saw that Nanami's hand was placed upon mine.

The hand that I always held—the hand that I'd even held with fingers intertwined—was now placed on top of mine.

"N-Nanami-san?" I whispered, reverting back to my old way of addressing her. It of course wasn't actually old, since it had only been a few months. Still, I didn't even have time to feel nostalgic about the fact that I used to address her with the honorific.

Taking a sidelong glance at our three companions still slumped over the table, I started trembling, as if their condition were to be my future.

I couldn't figure out if I was trembling out of joy or fear.

With her palm still sitting on the back of my hand, Nanami whispered into my ear, "I'll do it to you later too."

Her words sounded so gentle and sweet, they seemed to melt into my ears. At the same time, Nanami showed me a glimpse of her tongue, like a snake about to consume its prey.

Hearing and seeing her, I shivered yet again, even as Nanami quickly let go of my hand.

I hadn't even moved—I hadn't even had anything *done* to me—and yet my breathing became heavy. Either because my reaction was just what she'd expected, or because it was amusing, Nanami laughed innocently, like a child entirely pure at heart.

Women are frightening. I don't think I can win.

However, the atmosphere, once laden with anger and discomfort, was now completely gone. Whatever Nanami was going to do to me later, I would just have to deal with it then.

Just as we began to feel more relaxed, Shirishizu-san—her upper body still sprawled out on the table—raised her hand. I wondered if it was still quivering because of what Nanami had done to her.

“Yes, Kotoha-chan,” Nanami said like a teacher in a classroom.

“Yes, so,” Shirishizu-san began as she lifted her head slowly, as though she had been called upon. The other two remained stretched out across the table, still in the midst of recovery.

After she raised her head, Shirishizu-san glanced at me with her cheeks still flushed, then quickly looked back at Nanami and said, “I can now understand that Misumai-kun was doing something terribly pervy to you under the table.”

“There’s no need for you to understand that,” I insisted.

A terrible misunderstanding seemed to be underway, but my protests fell on unsympathetic ears. Shirishizu-san caught her breath as she continued.

“So you’re planning on doing stuff like this at school to try to disprove the rumor?” she asked.

“Yeah, I’m gonna be super flirty with him in front of...”

“You probably shouldn’t, since you’ll get suspended,” Shirishizu-san continued.

“It’s that bad?!” I blurted.

Coming from someone who served as a class rep, the comment sounded inordinately heavy and serious. It also sounded like a slight exaggeration, but the two sitting next to her were nodding in agreement.

Did Nanami really happen to have that much technique in just her fingers? *Shoot, my heart is pounding already.*

“How about you keep the flirting to a minimum, since it might be against school rules, and try going around the school festival together or something instead?” Shirishizu-san suggested.

This was the first time anyone ever said that something I did was possibly against school rules. I had no recollection of doing anything so harmful...at least, not in front of everyone.

It was true, though, that with Nanami in her current state, she might start talking about doing something even more extreme. Like kissing in front of everyone.

I guess there's no way she'd go that far.

Even if Nanami did get kind of carried away, she'd still maintain a sense of self-awareness. If we went so far as to kiss on school grounds and got caught, we probably *would* end up getting suspended.

Or would we? The last time I checked, school policies were so vague that you could interpret them however you wanted. They weren't so specific as to say kissing on school grounds would merit a suspension, or something like that.

Shirishizu-san's comment, though, seemed to have gotten Nanami thinking. Now that I thought about it, she did say something that caught my attention.

School festival? What is that, again?

"That's right, I forgot that the school festival is coming up," Nanami remarked.

"Yeah. If you go around campus with just the two of you, you'll probably be able to show everyone that you're an exclusive couple," Shirishizu-san said.

"That's a great idea! I didn't even realize that I would be able to spend the school festival with Yoshin this year. Wow, I can't wait. I know we went to the summer festival together, but the school one will be different," Nanami said.

I couldn't help but smile at how excited she was. More importantly, though, I was still trying to figure out in my head what the heck a school festival was.

School festival... School festival... Did we even have anything like that?

I mean, we *were* a school, so we probably did have something like a culture festival. The only memories I had from last year were of me playing games, though, so I really didn't have a clue.

"What did you do for the school festival last year, Yoshin?" Nanami suddenly asked.

"Huh?"

I was at a loss for words when presented with Nanami's question. *Um, uh...well...I can't even remember. Just what am I supposed to tell her?*

"Oh, you don't remember, do you?" Nanami guessed accurately, slight exasperation in her voice. I wondered how she knew, but even *that*, she

seemed to pick up on.

Nanami tapped me on the tip of my nose, and when I lowered my head momentarily, she brought her face really close to mine. She looked into my face, forcing me to lock eyes with hers.

She smiled, as though she saw through everything, and said, “I’m your girlfriend. Of course I know.”

“I give up,” I muttered, raising my hands in surrender. Even those, Nanami took as she entwined her fingers with mine.

I felt like I would never be able to keep secrets from Nanami ever again. I didn’t have any intention of keeping secrets, but still, it was a scary concept.

“Are these two always like this?” Shirishizu-san asked.

“Uh, yeah. Actually, they’re being pretty tame right now,” Otofuke-san replied.

“They’d usually be kissing right about now,” Kamoenai-san added.

That exchange forced me to return to the present moment.

Nanami didn’t seem terribly perturbed hearing her three friends talk about us though. She just calmly and quietly shifted away from me, hinting at an uncharacteristic poise.

With a cool smile emerging on her face, Nanami combed through her hair with her fingers and brought her drink to her lips.

The three others let out an impressed “wow” as they watched Nanami. I joined in, as all four of us watched Nanami...and watched...

Oh, Nanami’s quivering now.

“Don’t look at me!” Nanami exclaimed, both hands covering her now bright red face.

Oh, yeah. I’m relieved now. She wouldn’t be Nanami without this moment. Either she was trying to hide her embarrassment, or our staring must have embarrassed her instead. I kind of prefer the former.

“Um, Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san,” Shirishizu-san began tentatively.

“Uh...er, yeah. You can just call me Hatsumi,” Otofuke-san said.

“Me too! You can call me Ayumi,” Kamoenai-san chimed in.

“Then, Hatsumi-chan and Ayumi-chan...were you two in the same class last year too?” Shirishizu-san asked.

“Yeah, all three of us were in the same class,” Otofuke-san replied.

Grateful to Shirishizu-san for very blatantly changing the subject, I focused my attention on soothing Nanami, who was bright red to her ears and still covering her face.



Baron: There you go, Canyon-kun, being a manga protag again.

Peach: A harem... You think I should join too?

What are you saying, Peach-san?

I was playing my online game for the first time in a while, sharing with Baron-san and everyone what had happened at school that day. I wasn't looking for advice, necessarily, but it had been a while since I'd reported to them like this. I used to play every day while Nanami and I were still on the dare, but lately, I'd only log on to ask them for guidance when something weird happened.

When Nanami and I resolved the awkwardness between us the other day, everyone was so happy for me, like my good news was theirs too—though they did make sure to tell me that they wouldn't touch a marital dispute even with a ten-foot pole.

Canyon: It's just a rumor. I am very much not forming a harem.

Peach: I'm just kidding. I don't wanna get in a fight with Shichimi-chan.

Peach-san was right. Through the recent incident with Nanami, I learned the hard way that fights were best avoided.

Peach: But if you really *are* making a harem, I could totally join as the token loli target.

Peach-san?!

I didn't know how to respond, but in my stead, Baron-san scolded her that it was bad to tempt me like that. I didn't realize that was what she was doing.

Baron: You know, I've heard that even if harems look good on the outside, the inside is a very different story.

Canyon: Is that true?

Baron: I don't know it that well myself. But even if the women in the harem all like the same guy, it's common for the women themselves not to get along with each other.

That does sound pretty scary.

In manga, though, the girls tended to get along. If anything, I'd seen stories where the girls were even trying to get other girls to join their harem. Even in reverse harem stories, I had the impression that the male characters in the harem worked together to protect and care for the girl they liked.

Baron: Well, even if there are harems where everyone gets along, I feel like those might be in the minority. It seems like the most difficult aspect of a harem is loving everyone equally.

Canyon: Equally? But is that really so hard?

Baron: Sure it is. I mean, everyone has to *feel* like they're all being loved equally. Not a single person can feel dissatisfied—even when each person has a different view of love.

Oh, I see. Yeah, that does sound hard.

Even between just me and Nanami, we managed to end up perceiving things differently. Trying to do that with multiple people? I didn't think I could handle that.

This probably just meant that harem-type stories should just stay as stories—pure entertainment we could read about or watch, not something to enact in real life.

Wait, why are we even talking about this?

Baron: In any case, just be careful when you make your harem, Canyon-kun.

Canyon: But I'm not making a harem!

Dammit, even Baron-san was getting in on the joke. Even other players in our party were starting to chime in, saying that they, too, were envious of me for having a gyaru harem.

As a purely conceptual consideration, it did sound kind of nice. In reality, it was anything but. I didn't know what to do even if they were envious of me.

Canyon: Well, I have no one else to blame for only hanging out with girls. So I thought I should take this opportunity to make some guy friends too.

Once again, there were more messages about people being jealous or questioning if what I was going through really was so bad.

What am I supposed to do? It all started because of my relationship with Nanami in the first place.

Baron: I mean, really. You really *do* do things out of order. It never stops amusing me.

Canyon: I'd rather you just told me how to make guy friends...

The moment I wrote that, though, the messages in the chat stopped coming.

Hmmm?

I was sure that there would be more teasing, or people telling me that it was easy to make friends. Instead, the silence continued for a bit longer.

Canyon: Um, did I say something weird?

As I sat there, flustered, Baron-san finally resumed the chat.

Baron: Well, to be honest, I don't really know what to tell you...given that I don't really have that many friends myself.

Peach: I didn't have any friends until just a little while ago either...and I only got to know the friend I have now because she talked to me first.

From there, everyone started sharing their grievances about having no friends.

Yikes. I felt like I'd stirred up a hornet's nest. Everyone seemed to have their own opinions and troubles when it came to friendship. I learned a lot from our conversation, but it also made me realize just how difficult making friends could be.

In dating, it only took one confession to make a couple. Did friendships work the same way? Could you just ask someone to be your friend?

It had been so long since I last had friends that I really didn't know anymore.

Baron: Well, if your culture festival thingy is coming up soon, then maybe it's a good idea to try to get to know the people in your class better. I know that sounds like boring advice, but still.

Canyon: I think that's a good idea too. I'll do my best to make up for the fact that I wasn't trying all that hard before.

Baron: Good luck. When it comes to high school boys, if you just talk about sex, you should be able to become good friends soon enough.

That, unfortunately, wasn't my strong suit. How was I supposed to talk about sex? Just as I was ready to give up, Baron-san gave me another piece of advice.

Baron: Oh, and of course, even if you *are* talking about sex, be sure never to talk about your girlfriend. You shouldn't get so excited about your first friend that you forget your priorities.

I wouldn't do that! That was what immediately came to mind, but I felt like that last piece of advice was one I should keep in mind. Getting too excited about my first friend...yup, that definitely seemed like something I would do.

After that, Peach-san got really interested in talking about sex, making Baron-san panic about the fact that he'd talked about something he shouldn't in front of a middle schooler.

Yeah, I really should be careful.



The school festival. It was, in essence, a culture festival. Our school just happened to call it a school festival, but I assumed that we did all the same things for it as other schools did for their culture festival—exhibits, food stalls, theater and band performances. The festival was an event where the students came up with their own ideas about how to show off their class and school. The food and drink wasn't anything fancy, but the festival at least offered a lot of variety.

It wasn't an event that required a lot of explaining. But since I didn't remember a thing about what I did last year, I felt like I needed to reacquaint myself with the details.

Families were able to attend this event too. And, actually, *only* families were able to attend this event. The school allowed only current students and their families to participate, and the latter needed to request permission beforehand. Unlike at other schools, our school festival didn't permit students from other institutions or even our own alumni to attend. In the past, other people used to be able to, but various recent events led to stricter attendance policies. Kamoenai-san in particular seemed unhappy with this aspect of our school festival.

The plan that Nanami and I came up with to dispel the rumor at hand was pretty simple: to go around campus together during the school festival. That was it.

Since it was strange to stop hanging out with the others, we decided that the best way to combat the rumor was to let everyone know that Nanami and I only had eyes for each other.

We were, in essence, tackling the fact that we hadn't made that clear before. Personally, I thought the school was getting a little too worked up about a single couple for nothing. I had to assume that people just liked rumors and gossip. Maybe there was even a secret website collecting all these different stories that I just didn't know about.

I didn't really wanna get involved in stuff like that though.

Also, the other mission was for me to make some guy friends.

We decided to tackle this through school festival preparations. I would have

to make an effort to get to know people's names and faces too.

There was a chance that Nanami and I might end up working in different groups to prep for the school festival, but we'd already accepted that might happen. Such a thing might even help disprove the rumor a bit.

Just a bit, though. We knew that it wouldn't make the rumor go away completely; the fact that it was going around meant there were people who wanted to spread it.

After all, the longevity of a rumor depended not on how true it was, but on its entertainment value. That was why we could only treat its symptoms, rather than cure it. I had no intention of trying until the rumor disappeared completely either. We were only going to be in high school for about a year and a half more. In other words, I just had to tough it out until graduation. All I wanted was for people to realize that the reality was different from what the rumor said. I just had to endure it until then, but...

"Um, can you maybe let go of me now?" I requested feebly.

"Nope. I'm gonna do this for a bit longer," Nanami replied, her voice bouncing into my ear with joy. Nanami tightened her grip on my body, pressing her own against mine.

Just to be clear: Nanami was hugging me from behind. She had her arms wrapped around me, pressing up against me with quite a bit of force.

The last few days, since having that conversation at the coffee shop, Nanami had been hugging me like this whenever we were alone.

What was more—and I wasn't sure if this was intentional—she always did it when she was dressed somewhat scantily. Today, she was wearing a top that revealed both her navel and her shoulders, along with a pair of shorts.

"You've really been into hugging me like this lately," I muttered.

"I'm charging up on my Yoshin substance," she replied.

What kind of substance is that? I'd only read lines like those in manga. I never thought I'd hear that in real life. It was actually pretty embarrassing to have someone say it to me.

“I mean, I know we don’t know yet what we’re gonna do for the culture festival, but we might have to spend some time apart because of all the prep work, right? That’s why I’m charging up now, while I can,” she continued.

“By that logic, I should be charging up on my Nanami substance too,” I returned.

“Wait, you’re not recharging with this? Do you...want something more scandalous?” Nanami said. Then, bringing her lips closer to my ear, she added in a whisper, “You’re such a perv.” Since I was feeling Nanami along my entire body, I probably *was* getting my fill of Nanami substance right now too.

When we found out about the harem rumor, Nanami had first thought about doing this at school regularly as well, so that everyone would see us like this—specifically, that the other girls weren’t doing it, but she was.

We regularly hung out together at school and held hands, but we’d never been this physically close. She thought that doing so, then, would help make the rumor go away.

I was glad she reconsidered.

I didn’t think we would necessarily get suspended, but if we did this kind of thing at school, I was pretty sure it would just create more rumors. I certainly hadn’t seen any other couple doing anything like this at school.

What did guys usually do with their girlfriends at home?

With thoughts like that coming into my head, I was actually beginning to want friends that I could talk about this stuff with. I guess I’d never thought about it before. I only ever talked about stuff like this with Baron-san and everyone over the internet.

Meanwhile, Nanami really was coming up with all sorts of ways to hug me. The other day she had her arms around my waist. Before that, she was hugging my torso from the front. And the time before that, she was holding my arm from the side. She was coming at me from all different directions.

Today she was hugging me from behind, bringing her arms out front around my shoulders.

In other words, there were all sorts of things pressed against my back. I felt them when she hugged me other times too, but today, I was *really* feeling them.

“Hey, Nanami. I’ve been wondering whether I should say this, but...I can feel things pressed up against my back. What do you make of that?” I asked.

“Well, yeah, you’re feeling them because I’m pressing them against you,” came her reply.

What did you just say?

The content of Nanami’s all-too-eager response left me speechless. *I’m pressing them against you.* I never thought there would come a day when I would hear that line said in real life. I was also petrified by the fact that she was doing it intentionally, not accidentally.

“You’re a boy too, aren’t you, Yoshin?” Nanami said, rocking her own body as if to rub it up against mine.

According to one theory, the human back had multiple nerves running through it, and, while not as many as in the hands and feet, was still quite a sensitive region of the body. I didn’t know if that was true, but considering my current situation, I was willing to believe that it was.

Actually, whether it was true or not wasn’t important right now.

On my back, I felt Nanami intentionally pressing...

“You like boobs, don’t you?”

Nanami said those definitive words. Wait, was this the first time she used that word with me? Or had she said it once before?



I had the illusion that my own body was moving against my will—but I stopped myself with sheer force. This was probably what people called rationality.

“Nanami, if you do something like that, I...won’t be able to hold myself back,” I said. I was trying to tell Nanami that I was at my limit, all the while restraining myself with every ounce of willpower I had.

Okay, fine, maybe the situation wasn’t that dire. Still, I wanted Nanami to restrain herself...and realize that I was just a guy.

We’d got into a similar situation the time we went on our observatory date, but that day, we hadn’t been this close to each other; it was simply that we had gotten worked up and didn’t want to go home. Had Genichiro-san not come to pick us up, I felt like we could’ve gone all the way.

I knew that I was being a total wuss, but I couldn’t help feeling that I wanted to maintain a somewhat chaste and proper relationship while Nanami and I were still in high school.

Of course, I wanted to do it. A lot. I was a male high school student—of course I felt that way.

But that was precisely the kind of contradiction I was battling.

“Well, I mean, if that’s what you want, then I’m okay with that.”

Nanami’s response completely took me by surprise. *Wait, why are you making up your mind so easily?*

As I sat there, complete chicken that I was, Nanami squeezed me even more tightly. I took one of her hands and stroked it gently.

“To be honest, I’m a little scared...of doing things like that,” Nanami said.

“O-Oh...really?” I managed to ask.

“Yeah. I know that we got carried away that one time, but when I stop and really think about it, I get pretty scared,” she continued. She made sure to add that she wasn’t scared of me, necessarily.

She was afraid of the act itself, of having our relationship change after the

deed was done, and of how people around us might react to us doing it. She was afraid of many different things.

This probably wasn't just because she was a girl. These were Nanami's own thoughts and feelings.

"But at the same time, I feel like I wanna do it too. I wanna be connected to you, and...I'm also scared that you won't like me if we don't do it," she said.

That's absurd.

There was no way I would dislike her just because we didn't do it. That just made me sound like a terrible guy who was only dating Nanami for her body.

"I see," I murmured instead, mindful not to deny what she was telling me.

She still seemed to have things she wanted to say, so I needed to wait until she finished before I denied or affirmed anything. The first thing I had to do was listen to everything that was on Nanami's mind.

"I'm a conflicted mess. Inside, I both wanna do it and don't wanna do it. So I just cling to you like this," Nanami concluded.

Her words—not at all gloomy, sounding just like her usual self—made their way smoothly into the deepest part of my chest. As some people might put it, they resonated in my heart.

Time passed quietly. It felt like me and Nanami were sitting under the shade of a tree, gazing up at the sky—a warm and almost cheerful feeling.

It was a very odd feeling, given what we were currently talking about.

"That's why—and I know this is kind of unfair—I was thinking of leaving it up to you," Nanami finally spoke.

"To me?" I murmured.

I felt Nanami nod behind me.

"If you want me, then I'll do it. If you're hesitant, then I'll stop. I thought it might make more sense to accept whatever happens in the moment," she said.

That...sounds like a tremendous amount of responsibility.

But there, too, was a contradiction. Even though Nanami said that she would

leave it up to me, she was also the one to initiate more intimate moments with me like this. If she was really going to leave it up to me, then wouldn't she do nothing, and only then have me choose what to do next?

"But doesn't this...qualify as you making the first move?" I asked.

"Hmmm," Nanami moaned softly, then peeled herself away from me.

She then sat on the floor in front of me, folding herself into a loose kneel, her bottom touching the floor but her knees bent and her feet delicately splayed on either side of her body. Because she was wearing shorts, the position made her look particularly alluring.

"I said I would leave it up to you, but I didn't say I wouldn't try to seduce you," she explained, blushing shyly but looking as though she'd somehow scored a point off of me. She then laughed, slightly embarrassed.

Seduce...so she was trying to seduce me.

Well, I guess I kind of knew that too. Still, I had to laugh at her bold declaration of seduction as I muttered, "What in the world?"

"Tee hee. I mean, you know, I'm a girl too. It would suck to think that my own boyfriend wasn't interested in me...or my body. That's why I seduce you," she said.

"Didn't I say something like that before? It sounds incredibly selfish now," I returned.

"Girls *are* selfish! You know, it makes me selfishly curvaceous."

I'm not sure that has anything to do with anything.

But I felt like I got what she was trying to say. In the end, human emotions were complex, and while they appeared to follow logical patterns of thought, they could just as easily be inconsistent or unpredictable.

Messy, contradictory feelings filled my heart, like I held both the will to live and the desire to die simultaneously—though that made me sound like I was suffering from chuunibyou.

That was probably how Nanami felt right now too.

That must *also* be why she was trying to seduce me. And if, as a result, I tried to do it with her...then she would accept that too. She was, until the end, the one giving me the choice.

She really was being selfish, but I didn't dislike that at all.

"I should tell you first and foremost, that...I wouldn't dislike you just because we couldn't do sexy stuff," I said.

"Then you *don't* wanna do stuff like that?" Nanami asked.

"I wanna do it a *lot*. It's been really hard lately. I'm constantly fighting the more logical side of me," I responded.

"O-Oh, wow...it's a little embarrassing when you say it like that," she muttered, smiling in a clear attempt to mask her fear and discomfort. She twisted her body as if to hide it, but she probably didn't realize she looked even more like she was trying to tempt me that way.

Was this my first or second time saying something like this to Nanami? I couldn't really remember, but I really *did* want to do naughty things with her.

She was always pressing up against me without a care in the world, and since she had such an incredible body, everything about her was soft and warm, and she smelled really good, and every time she just completely overwhelmed all my senses...

It was impossible *not* to want to do sexy things with her.

"Hey, Yoshin...you're saying everything out loud...jeez," Nanami mumbled.

"Oh, sorry...it totally slipped out," I said in shock.

Shoot, I said it all out loud. Well, gosh, I guess it's all out in the open.

"But, given all that...I'll still rein it in a little bit," I said.

"Really? But you don't have to," Nanami began.

"I guess I have mixed feelings about it too. I wanna do it, but...I guess a part of me is still scared," I confessed.

"You are?"

Yikes, I wasn't expecting to have such a frank conversation with Nanami about

this. It's not even hot right now, but I'm sweating. But I also think that it's important to talk about this stuff with her.

Baron-san told me before too, that what was important for a woman wasn't necessarily the same as what was important for a man.

For me, being good to Nanami meant that I wouldn't ask for her body, but would instead emphasize our emotional connection. According to our conversation a little while ago, though, Nanami was letting me make that choice.

In other words, Nanami was interested, but she was too embarrassed and nervous to be the one to initiate.

Her feelings made it important for me to share with her how I felt.

"To be honest, I do feel a desire to take our relationship to the next level by...having sex with you," I said.

"Se—?!"

I hadn't said it directly before, but in that moment I used the word "sex" for the first time with Nanami. The moment she heard the word we'd been dancing around, she turned bright red.

Keep going, Yoshin. You have to tell her what you're feeling.

"Actually, a guy in our class asked me about it a long time ago. Whether I wanted to do stuff like that," I shared.

"O-Oh, I see. And? How did you respond?" Nanami asked.

"I think I said that I could stand not doing it, if doing it meant you were gonna get hurt. I'm pretty sure."

At least, that was how I felt back then.

"Then, if I'm *not* gonna get hurt, then you...w-want to do it?" she suggested.

"Um, y-yeah..."

At that point, silence settled between us. We were both red and sweating. Maybe because we were both looking down, but we couldn't really look each other in the eye.

“Things between us have changed now too, so a part of me definitely is like, maybe...? But at the same time, I can’t help thinking that I might mess up,” I said.

“It’s...possible to mess up? Really?” Nanami asked.

“Yeah, well...I won’t get into details, but it *is* possible to mess up. Definitely.”

To be honest, I had looked up a bunch of things once just in case things with Nanami went in that direction.

How could I not? My girlfriend is Nanami. There’s no way I can do anything to embarrass her when the time comes!

Except, the more I looked things up, the more anxious I felt about making a mistake. But that was mainly my problem.

“Of course I’m thinking about the dangers that it might pose to you, and the importance of being good to you. But in the end, that’s all just a front. I’m afraid of messing up...and making things awkward,” I confessed.

That was why, until I became more confident, I wasn’t going to have sex with Nanami.

That, for now, was the conclusion that I’d reached.

“I see,” Nanami whispered.

I thought that maybe I would disappoint her, but Nanami sat down next to me and began to gently stroke my hair. She seemed like a mother comforting a child. With each stroke through my hair, I felt like she was telling me what a good boy I was; I was embarrassed, but it also felt good.

“Oh, well. I guess you’re not gonna do anything naughty, huh? And when you have such a willing girlfriend too. What a shame,” Nanami said, continuing to stroke my hair as she grinned devilishly. With the hand that wasn’t stroking me, she lifted her breasts as if to show them off to me.

Whether she was being kind or she was trying to turn me on—I wished she would choose one or the other.

“When you can’t hold yourself back anymore, I’m always good to go, okay?” she even said.

Seeing her tempt me with her gleeful smile, I sensed a kind of mischievous rivalry bloom within me—that feeling of wanting to pick on the person you liked.

I mean, Nanami was trying to provoke me, and was doing so because she felt safe in the fact that I told her that I wasn't going to have sex with her. She must have thought I wasn't going to do anything after having made such a declaration.

That made me resolve to do something else, something entirely different. I wasn't sure if it was the right decision, but with Nanami saying this to me, I couldn't *not*.

"What are you talking about, Nanami?" I asked.

"Huh?" Nanami uttered hesitantly.

"I only said that I wasn't going to have sex with you. I never said I wasn't going to do sexy things with you!" I announced.

I knew I sounded ridiculous, but if I was going to stand any chance against Nanami, I had to display this exact amount of preposterousness. I couldn't just let her have her way with me.

"Whaaat?!" Nanami screamed, her voice ringing out with a rather excellent vibrato. As if her surprise was the signal, I continued on, just as determined not to let her know how I was really feeling on the inside.

"Look, Nanami. Don't you think there are things we have to do so as to not mess up when the real deal comes around?" I asked.

"Huh? To not mess up, we should...practice?" Nanami muttered.

"That's right, *practice*. We need practice. A whole lot of it."

"Wh-What?! Wait, you can't mean...?!"

I felt Nanami draw in her breath.

"You've got it—a whole lot of practice means we're going to do...everything!"

Now I've said it.

Of course, we needed to decide just how far we could actually go, but I was

thinking of doing *some* things.

I had several reasons for thinking that way.

First, apparently practice was vital to avoid mistakes. It had something to do with not getting too keyed up when it came to the real thing. The both of us being relaxed was really important. But in order to achieve that, we needed to be comfortable with things, and that was only possible by putting ourselves in similar situations.

Guys can be sensitive, you know.

Second—and I knew this sounded weird, but—I felt that saying I wasn't going to do anything was likely to cause problems for us in the future.

It happened a lot in manga and things. A character would care so much about the other character that they ended up doing nothing, and instead gave off the impression that they didn't think the other character was attractive at all.

To absolutely prevent that from happening, I was making this statement now. Nanami was incredibly attractive, so there was no need for her to ever worry about a thing like that. I was determined to use both actions and words to convey that I wanted to do a lot of things with Nanami.

Last.../ just really wanted to do lots of things with her. That was all.

I was a healthy male high school student. I had as much sex drive as anyone else. Actually, I felt like my sex drive had been invigorated thanks to Nanami, making me super interested in all that stuff. If I repressed myself too much, I'd probably go berserk at some point. That was why I wanted to touch Nanami...in moderation. That was why I was going to do lots of different things with her. I was totally down with sexual misconduct—just as long as we didn't get caught.

I would have to figure out just how far we were allowed to go though.

"P-Practice... Practice? W-We're gonna practice?!" Nanami stammered, repeating the word "practice" over and over.

To be honest, I was mortified by what I said. Sweat was pouring down my face, and my hands were shaking. I couldn't deny that I got carried away and said something ridiculous. Still, I didn't regret it...I didn't think.

There was a saying that went, “It’s better to ask and be embarrassed than to not ask and never know.” I wasn’t sure if that applied in this case, but it meant that it was more embarrassing to go through life not knowing, than to come off as ignorant for just a moment.

Most things were probably like that. Honestly, even if I was feeling embarrassed now, it was better than *not* being embarrassed for a brief moment but regretting something later.

As Nanami and I each battled our own demons, she suddenly shifted places. She sat on her heels on the bed, straightened out her back, and placed both hands lightly on top of her thighs.

Without thinking, I followed suit. The two of us made a strange scene: sitting formally on the bed, facing each other.

Nanami breathed in and out deeply, then looked at me with determination in her eyes.

Just as I was starting to feel intimidated, she slowly extended her hands forward. Then, placing her fingers gently on the bed, she bowed lightly and said, “I have much to learn, but...I shall be in your care.”

At her unexpected formality, I, too, responded by touching my fingers to the bed and bowing.

“Me too. I shall be in your care as well,” I said.

Being so formal with each other made us blush, and by the time we raised our heads we couldn’t help but laugh at each other.

Of course, Nanami wasn’t going to end things there. She lifted her fingers and brought them up to her chest and, with a little tilt of her head, asked, “In that case...do you wanna start practicing today?”

I froze in place—still bowing to Nanami—when I heard that.

I knew I had suggested the whole idea myself, but hearing it from her filled me with nerves. As a man, though, there was no way I could go back on my word. It was better that I didn’t. For now, though...

“M-Maybe I’ll start with trying to touch you,” I managed.

“Wouldn’t that be a step backward?” Nanami asked with mild exasperation.

She might have been correct, but with the way I was feeling, if I didn’t start at that basic step, I felt like I would stumble—in all sorts of ways.

I reached out my hand slowly toward Nanami, but then pulled it back for some reason. I was chickening out at the most important part. *Wait, how did I used to touch her, anyway?* The more I thought about it, the less capable I became of touching her. I just kept extending and pulling back my hand, over and over, until eventually...

Nanami lost it.

“For crying out loud, at least *squeeze* them! I’ll show you how it’s done!” she yelled.

“Huh?! Nanami, calm down!”

As a result, I ended up getting squeezed all over by an enraged Nanami.

It looks like we still have a long way to go.

Interlude: To Squeeze and Be Squeezed

“Oh...ah...yes, there...that feels good...”

“L-Like this?”

“Yeah. Yoshin, is this really your first time? You’re so good at this.”

Right now, Yoshin was...squeezing me.

Well, squeezing my *shoulders*, to be precise.

I said it in a confusing way. Though I guess I *did* say it that way on purpose. If I said that I didn’t, it would be a lie. So, yes: I said it confusingly on purpose.

As I was messing around and groping Yoshin, I realized that he and I were on my bed.

Why was it that—even though it was totally fine when we were just teasing or playing around—just thinking about that fact suddenly made me feel really self-conscious?

So that he wouldn’t pick up on what was going on with me, I purposefully acted up and touched his body even more, squeezing it and stroking it.

Yoshin was pretty muscular, but that didn’t mean his whole body was rock solid. I mean, he was firmer than me, but there were still parts of him that were soft. Touching his body felt strange, different even from my dad’s.

I’d touched his stomach before, but since I hadn’t touched him all over like this, I kept wanting to feel him more and more.

On top of how I felt, his reactions every time I touched him were priceless.

He writhed when I tickled his belly. He moaned when I touched his neck. He went into shock when I stroked his foot. He blushed from embarrassment when I squeezed his chest.

I had to say, I felt like I was beginning to really understand why a man wanted to touch a woman’s body. I so enjoyed seeing his reactions.

Maybe this was akin to being mean to the person you liked. I'd never done anything like that before, so I guess what I was doing now was just me being a late bloomer.

Did Yoshin ever feel this way?

Having Yoshin be mean to me didn't sound like such a bad thing, though thinking that did make me sound like some kind of a pervert.

Enough about me. Let's get back to the situation at hand.

"Nanami, your shoulders are so stiff. Is it because you work really hard studying?" Yoshin asked.

"Hmmm, wouldn't it be because of my big boobs?" I replied.

"Uh, just how exactly am I supposed to respond to that?" he muttered.

"Um, maybe that you're willing to support them for me from now on?" I suggested.

"I don't think I've ever heard a worse declaration of support before."

He's right—it does sound pretty terrible. Just how exactly is he supposed to support them, anyway? Would he have to just literally hold them up? But how? From the bottom?

Either way, his shoulder massage felt really good. If he was willing to do this for me from time to time, that would be more than enough support for me.

That's right, a shoulder rub. After I messed around with Yoshin's body plenty enough, we decided that Yoshin should practice with me as well.

Now, where to touch?

At first, we thought about having him touch me in all the places I touched him. One by one—touching, stroking, squeezing. Unfortunately, though, Yoshin got too embarrassed, and I eventually did too.

Since I wanted him to practice, and I also wanted him to touch me, I ended up asking him where he *did* feel comfortable touching me.

The place Yoshin chose was my shoulders.

Truth be told, my initial reaction was to be disappointed. When it got down to

it, though, his massage felt unexpectedly good.

I once heard that the word “treatment” came from another word that meant “to handle” something, meaning that the hands were an important part of the process. Yoshin’s shoulder massage seemed to be the perfect example. I couldn’t help appreciating the fact that he was touching me with his hands.

It felt good. And I felt safe.

“I feel like I haven’t given anyone a shoulder massage since elementary school, when I used to for my dad,” Yoshin shared.

“It’s been that long since you’ve done it? I bet he’ll be really happy if you do it now,” I suggested.

“It’s a bit weird to do that as a high schooler though,” he replied.

Maybe he got embarrassed after imagining himself giving his dad a shoulder massage, because he suddenly tightened his grip on my shoulders. His touch sent a mild shock through my body, causing me to let out a strange moan.

Hearing myself surprised me; I didn’t expect my voice to come out that way at all.

I quickly covered my mouth with both hands, but I couldn’t get rid of the fact that I’d already done what I did. Yoshin, too, was frozen and unable to say anything.

“S-Sorry, was that too strong?” he asked.

“Oh, no, yeah. I’m fine, I’m fine. I was just a little surprised,” I managed to say.

“Really? Are you sure it didn’t hurt?”

“Yeah, not at all. Not one bit.”

It really didn’t hurt at all. I was surprised, but it actually felt the opposite of painful. How could I feel this way, when all he was doing was massaging my shoulders?

“Yoshin, can I ask you for a favor?” I asked with some amount of reluctance.

“A favor? Yeah, anything for you,” he replied.

“Can you do that to me again, one more time?” I requested.

“Huh?”

Oh, Yoshin’s gone speechless again. No, no—I’m not trying to get him to do anything weird. I genuinely wanna know where that reaction came from.

The excitement I felt at Yoshin doing that again felt just the same as the night before a big trip. It was a strange feeling, like I was both excited and scared about something.

It was so quiet that I could hear my own heart pounding. Without thinking, I had braced myself.

“Um, then...here goes, okay?” Yoshin said.

“Okay.”

Yoshin resumed squeezing my shoulders. No matter how much he tried to replicate what he did earlier, though, I wasn’t able to experience the same sensation as before.

Am I not supposed to be expecting it so much?

“How is it?” he asked.

“Hmmm, it feels good. I wonder what it was that I felt earlier though,” I said.

“Maybe I accidentally hit a pressure point or something,” he suggested.

Accident, huh? If that was the case, then it would be difficult to hit upon the same spot again. I guess that was just that. It seemed I’d have to wait until it happened again for me to figure out what it was.

After that, Yoshin continued massaging my shoulders for some time.

“Wow, that felt really good. My shoulders feel so light now,” I said, swinging my arms in circles. I could move them a lot more easily than I usually could. I swung them in both directions, and then I brought my hands behind my back and touched my palms together.

Oh, yeah. I can totally do this.

“Wow, you’re so flexible. I can’t do that at all,” Yoshin said, impressed.

“Really? Then how about I give you a massage this time?” I suggested.

"I don't feel like my shoulders are that stiff, but maybe they are?" he wondered.

"Maybe? I get stiff in places other than my shoulders too. Like my chest and stuff," I added.

"Ch—?"

Yoshin froze mid-sentence.

"Wait, did I not tell you before?" I asked.

"I believe...it's the first time," Yoshin murmured.

Really? I could've sworn I told him before. My chest was on the larger side, so it actually got pretty stiff and sore. Massaging it from time to time was necessary for comfort.

If I didn't tell Yoshin, maybe I told Hatsumi and Ayumi, or even Saya or something.

Well, anyway.

"It's pretty rough, because when your chest is big, you get pretty sore and stuff. And then your neck and shoulders and even your back start to hurt too," I continued.

"I-I see," Yoshin mumbled.

"Look, like over here..."

"You're gonna explain it even more?!" Yoshin exclaimed, just as I tried to show him where exactly my body tensed up. In rare form, he proceeded to stare at me with narrowed eyes.

Whoops. He must've realized that I was sort of teasing him.

"I mean, if we're actually gonna practice, then you're gonna touch my body more, right?" I asked.

"That's true, but..." Yoshin muttered.

"If that's the case, then while you're at it maybe you could help me get rid of this stiffness in my chest," I concluded.

Yoshin's gaze traveled over to my chest. I hadn't felt him look at me like that in a while. I knew that he was looking at me when I was in my bathing suit and stuff, but it had been some time since he last looked at me like this in my room.

With his gaze on me, I brought my breasts together with both hands to accentuate how large they were.

"Don't you...?" Yoshin began.

"Hmmm?" I said, wondering what he wanted to say.

Hearing his uncertain voice, though, I tilted my head and looked into his eyes. He seemed nervous about meeting my gaze, but after a moment he finally looked back at me.

That made me so happy that I felt my lips slowly curve upward into a smile.

"Um, I just wanna ask to make sure, but...don't you feel uncomfortable having me touch you in places like that? Like, actually, or maybe even subconsciously?" he asked.

"Hmmm, that's kind of a difficult question," I said.

So far, I didn't feel uncomfortable with him touching me. I wondered how I felt deep down though. Maybe I should think about it when I was calm, instead of when I was all excited.

I took his hand and brought it up to my cheek. The cool sensation of his palm felt so good. *Hey, wait a minute. Why is his hand so cold? It's so different from when he was giving me my shoulder rub. Is it that he doesn't feel all nervous now that we're finished? Or is it because he's feeling nervous?*

"Yeah, I think I'm okay. But, I mean, isn't it too late to be asking that now?" I said to him.

"Now? I mean, I guess I asked earlier too, but..."

"No, like, you've already put sunblock on me and stuff when I was in my bathing suit, so really, you've touched me in all sorts of places already," I explained.

I heard Yoshin gasp softly in surprise.

It probably wasn't that he forgot; in his mind, he probably just distinguished between touching me in *that way*, versus touching me before getting into the ocean because he needed to.

As a matter of fact, I didn't really think about it until now either.

"You're absolutely right," he murmured.

"Tee hee, I guess we've already had a lot of skin-to-skin contact, huh?"

Yoshin must have remembered, because he was turning slightly red. *It'd be so nice to get back to the beach—especially when we aren't fighting.*

That beach trip might not happen until next year, so instead I leaped at Yoshin for a hug, causing us both to fall onto the bed.

"While we're at it, maybe from now on when we're alone, we can give each other massages. We can get rid of all our stiffness *and* practice touching each other. Practice makes perfect, right?" I offered.

"Massage, huh? I guess that's less embarrassing than just touching you outright," he returned.

"Make sure you get me nice and loose without getting all shy about it, okay?"

"I'll do my best..."

Just like that, we ended up adding massages to our list of regular activities.

Now I can finally touch Yoshin without having to come up with any excuses. Where should I touch him next?

Chapter 2: Just a Slight Bit of Effort

Life was a back-and-forth between practice and the real deal. After all, once we came into this world we had to practice walking, running, and riding a bike, didn't we? None of those skills were things we knew from birth.

There might be cases where people walked into things cold, with no advance preparation, but that probably only happened when they had already been practicing all the time and suddenly had something come up. Perhaps the true geniuses of the world were the people who didn't need to practice. They were given just one piece of the puzzle and could nonetheless understand the whole picture. That was probably true talent.

Unfortunately for me, I was as ordinary as one could be. Practice, therefore, was super important for me. I was pretty certain I was not the type to be able to go into anything without it.

Looking back, when I first started dating Nanami, talking with Baron-san and everyone served as a kind of practice. So my dating her wasn't at all without preparation; I got advice ahead of time, went through several simulations, and then finally, went into the real deal. I didn't practice nearly enough, so I had tended to mess up a good amount. Still, I probably did pretty okay for a total beginner.

Of course, my thinking about such life lessons was usually a sign that I was going through something not terribly amazing.

To other people, it probably wasn't a big deal at all. For me, though, it *was* a big deal, and every single person involved was supposed to be taking the matter extremely seriously.

Seriously... Okay, fine, even if we *were* taking it seriously, we were really just making out.

After all, we *were* talking about me getting used to Nanami's body and doing "stuff like that."

It was an important step in taking my relationship with Nanami to the next level—a step that would come eventually. Still, it wasn't something I could say out loud.

I mean, just imagine: me, at a job interview, being asked, "What have you worked hard at in life?" and proudly replying, "Making out with my girlfriend."

I definitely would not get hired. Not that I was actually going to say that to anyone.

"Practice... Practice, huh?" I muttered, making my hands take the shape they had when I was massaging Nanami's shoulders, as if by mimicking what I had done before I could confirm that our practice had already produced results.

I thought about it afterward, and it turns out I hadn't touched Nanami in many places. I'd touched her face, held her hands, and felt her back. I'd even touched her stomach.

Massaging her shoulders, though, was probably a first.

Despite how she carried herself, Nanami's shoulders were very stiff. I knew she said that her shoulders were sore, but I had somehow assumed that they would still be soft. Not at all—they were a lot more tense than I'd imagined. I almost couldn't believe that a part of Nanami's body could be so stiff, though I didn't tell her that.

Maybe *because* I was so shocked, I was actually able to massage her shoulders without much hesitation. Nanami kept saying things that made me feel like she was trying to tempt me, but in the end, I could claim that I got through the task okay.

Now, we had even made the promise that we would continue giving each other massages from now on.

That was fine. It wasn't entirely appropriate, educationally speaking, but if we kept practicing, it would help us be more confident when the time for something more actually came.

The problem lay elsewhere. Since I started my practices with Nanami, I began to think that maybe I should practice *the other thing* too—making friends, that is.

Seriously. I was so clueless that I was essentially asking myself, “Uh, just what am I supposed to do to make guy friends?”

I could do small talk, I was pretty sure. If someone talked to me, I could respond. I could greet people in the morning. I could greet them on the way home too.

But—I just couldn’t bring myself to actually start having a conversation with someone.

Like, I couldn’t figure out what exactly I was supposed to talk about. When I tried talking about the weather, the conversation just ended up going nowhere.

I was forced to come face-to-face with just how poor my communication skills were.

And honestly, a part of the reason I was doing so poorly was most likely because I wasn’t exactly trying to make friends out of the goodness of my heart.

The reason I decided to make friends in the first place was because of that rumor. I thought making friends would discourage the rumors that I was creating a harem. So, by trying to make friends now, wasn’t I just taking advantage of anyone who’d be a potential friend?

Wasn’t friendship something you developed naturally, rather than something you fashioned intentionally? Wasn’t that what friends were supposed to be?

Those thoughts were probably what was partially holding me back. In other words, it was all guilt. Of course, it probably didn’t make sense to feel guilty if I didn’t even have any friends yet.

“Why so down, Yoshin?”

“Ugh...!”

As I mulled over those questions in silence, Nanami leaped onto me from behind.

“Oh, I was just wallowing in the fact that I can’t make any friends,” I mumbled.

“Jeez, you’re *still* thinking about that?!” Nanami gaped, seeming genuinely shocked.

What do you mean, still? That's the biggest conundrum I'm faced with right now. Nanami, though, continued hugging me as she rocked her body back and forth. She leaned all her weight on me as though asking me for a piggyback ride, as if demanding that, if I had time to quibble over something like friends, I should be paying more attention to her.

I should probably move for now, I thought as I began to walk, with Nanami trailing behind me on my back. Nanami must have found that amusing, because she giggled and started yelping excitedly.

"I mean, isn't it super easy to make friends?" she asked.

"Jeez, thanks a lot," I replied in mild protest.

Once I sat down on a chair, Nanami finally let go of my back. She tried to sit on the desk in front of me, but she stopped herself, realizing that that would be too revealing.

Come to think of it, the first time I really started thinking about Nanami was also when she was sitting on a desk in the classroom. *Did Nanami just like doing that?*

"What were you trying to do just now, anyway?" I asked her.

"I was gonna sit on the desk and then put both my feet up on your shoulders," Nanami declared.

"Yeah, absolutely not."

I was more expecting her to sit on my shoulders or something, but what she was planning was definitely a bad idea. I kind of wanted her to do it at some point, but now was *not* the time.

"So, what does it take to make friends?" I inquired.

"Huh? I guess I never thought about it. Aren't you friends if you just hang out together?"

Well, of course she would say that. That's precisely what's so hard for someone like me. I can almost picture someone painting happy, perfectly beautiful little trees and saying, "See? Very easy."

It isn't easy at all. Maybe this is something I just have to practice too. But how

exactly am I supposed to practice this?

“I mean, I can introduce you to some of my friends...but then again, all my friends are girls,” Nanami muttered.

“Isn’t that counterproductive?” I asked.

“But I don’t *have* any guy friends,” Nanami rejoined.

“And to be honest, I prefer it stay that way.”

What kind of a guy had his girlfriend introduce her girlfriends to him? Maybe that was less uncomfortable than having her introduce her guy friends to me, but it still wasn’t going to work. Besides, given the rumor that was going around, meeting Nanami’s friends was definitely a bad move. Just as I was thinking that, though...

“Well, I guess I can’t introduce my friends to you. I don’t want any more girls to end up liking you,” Nanami murmured.

That was too adorable. I was about to hug Nanami right then and there and tell her that I only had eyes for her.

I was about to...but then I stopped myself.

“Get a room, guys...”

Fine, it was actually those words—coming from somewhere within our classroom—that made me stop.

Nanami and I looked at each other, then both looked down at the floor out of embarrassment.

That’s right. There aren’t that many people because it’s lunchtime, but we’re still in our classroom. I was so deep in thought that I totally forgot. Wait, there definitely weren’t this many people around a minute ago. If there are more people now, it must be getting close to the end of the lunch hour.

There were gradually more and more people around us, all shooting us furtive looks. There was quite a variety of gazes being shot our way—some looking at us reassuringly, some mixing hostility and envy. All the different gazes made us feel even more embarrassed.

“L-Let’s continue this when we get home,” Nanami offered.

“Y-Yeah. Good idea,” I replied.

Even that exchange was met with a bewildered “What are they gonna do when they continue?” *No, nothing at all. We’re doing a lot of things because I can’t do anything.*

I wondered if this was a fallout of our regular practice—that because Nanami and I had gotten closer, we were starting to lose sight of what was publicly appropriate or not. I guess that had to be our next task.

I was starting to realize just how important—and difficult—practicing really was.

As a side note, I heard later that some of the guys who thought they were fairly close to Nanami were dismayed to hear her say she had no guy friends. That taught me that it was possible for people to be bummed out about things like that.

But, sorry, guys. I think I’m good with Nanami not having any guy friends for a while, I thought, making myself feel very much like a possessive and controlling boyfriend.



“We’ll now begin our homeroom session. On the agenda is deciding what we’ll do for the school festival.”

Two people stood at the front of the class. One was a male, and the other a female student—Shirishizu-san. This was the first homeroom session since Shirishizu-san turned into a gyaru where the class reps were leading the discussion.

It was clear that the students couldn’t hide how bewildered they still were about her transformation.

Still, despite her new gyaru appearance, Shirishizu-san seemed to be playing it cool. I couldn’t remember if this was how she always was, but I could believe that maybe, this was how she had been from the start.

“Does anyone have any ideas about what they’d like us to do as a class? For starters, these are the different categories for potential programming,” Shirishizu-san said calmly. It wasn’t clear whether she noticed the intrigued looks being sent her way by other students. Either way, she opened the session nonchalantly: business as usual.

As a side note, at our school, each class had two class reps—one guy and one girl. Apparently there were some class rep pairs who got along so well that they became romantically involved.

Maybe the male class rep next to Shirishizu-san was thinking about that, because he kept stealing glances at her with his cheeks slightly flushed. His movements were also somewhat stilted.

“Is something the matter?” Shirishizu-san asked him, tilting her head.

“Huh? Oh, uh, nothing,” he replied, proceeding to write the programming categories up on the blackboard. It seemed Shirishizu-san was going to lead the discussion, while the male class rep was to serve as secretary.

There were four main categories: performances, food stalls, exhibits, and events. The most popular was events, followed by food stalls. What seemed to be less popular was the performance category—though maybe it wasn’t quite right to say that it wasn’t popular.

Performances meant preparation, and being in front of a lot of people, which was daunting. And rehearsals for the performances were time-consuming too.

Rehearsals. Here, too, practice was important.

Because performances took so much work, every year multiple classes vied to put on events instead, so which class got to do what event was decided by lottery. The classes that didn’t get picked had to choose a different category.

There were some events that didn’t require a lottery, but things like the haunted house were so popular that apparently they needed one every year.

Furthermore, performances were rarely first picks and were usually second picks at best. The people who applied to put on performances were primarily people involved in club activities that lent themselves to performing.

I, for one, thought it would be easier if all classes could do whatever they requested, but apparently that didn't work either. Things sure sounded complicated.

Since we didn't have classes during the school festival, some students would ditch. The extroverts who liked events like these participated very actively, while introverts like me just did the bare minimum and got away with it.

Our school festival, in other words, was a mishmash event where all sorts of people participated in their own unique ways. Maybe that was how it was everywhere though.

I sounded like I knew what I was talking about, but this was all secondhand information I'd gotten from Nanami. There was no way I could remember school events from my first year. Last year we probably did something like an exhibit or something. Something super low-key... We weren't a terribly enthusiastic class.

I wondered what Nanami's class had done. She mentioned something about an animal café before...or was that about a friend from a different class?

Nanami's seat and mine were fairly far apart, so it was a bummer that we couldn't chat during times like these. Even if there was a really exciting topic, we weren't able to talk about it until much later.

I hope we can sit next to each other the next time we change seats.

"Well, then. Does anyone have any ideas for what we should do?" Shirishizusan said.

At a time like this it could be pretty nerve-racking to be the first person to speak up. Everyone, therefore, fell silent, waiting for someone else to raise their hand. Things were no different just because you said something first, but since I tended to get anxious about things like that too, I understood how everyone else felt. Though in my case, I was just staying quiet because I didn't have any ideas to contribute.

The mood in the room became heavy with nervousness and tension. It felt like the moment before a sharpshooter drew on their weapon. Who was going to speak first?

In the silence, it was an unexpected candidate who broke the silence.

“Can I say something here?” asked the male class rep, who had been writing on the board until then, as he set both hands on the lectern placed at the front of the room. Naturally, everyone focused their attention on him.

The silence now felt different from before, full of anticipation for what the class rep was going to say.

There was no need to wait for people to settle down, given how quiet the room already was. It wasn’t entirely clear what the class rep was waiting for, but he seemed to be holding back for some reason.

He closed his eyes, breathed in deep...and then began to speak once more.

“How about we...do a performance?” he suggested, turning back to the board to use red chalk to mark the word he had just written himself.

No one was saying it, but everyone was thinking, *Um, why?* Once again, the heaviness of the air in the classroom took on a different quality.

“What makes you say that?” Shirishizu-san asked her male counterpart, paying no mind to the general attitude of the rest of the class. She seemed to be prompting him for his reasons.

I had to admit, I was curious about that as well.

“This, of course, is my personal opinion,” the male class rep said as a lead-in. He then brought a tightly gripped fist up to his chest and declared, “I want to make youthful memories of my junior year school festival that I can look back on.”

Memories?

I had to tilt my head in confusion. Others around me were doing the same, with question marks seemingly flying around their heads. Nanami looked just as confused.

“We only get three school festivals while we’re in high school. But my first year, we just did some random photo exhibit, and I didn’t feel like we accomplished anything meaningful at all!” he shouted, raising his fist in the air as if to slam it down on the lectern. He instead brought his fist down incredibly

slowly, though, so it ended up making no sound.

“That’s why, this second time around, I want to learn from last year’s mistakes and do something that’s actually memorable! I wanna make memories that we can bring up and laugh about when we get together for our class reunion!”

Wow, he was already talking about a reunion way out in the future. That was even further away than our graduation.

But somehow, the more I listened to him, the more I found myself feeling the same way. When I looked down, I saw that I, too, had my hand gripped into a tight fist.

“But why a performance? If we’re trying to make memories, we can do that with a food stall or an event of some kind,” Shirishizu-san pointed out.

“Those are popular, so we’d have to compete for it. If that’s the case, then I wanna put down ‘performance’ as our first choice since it’s a safe bet and start the prep work ahead of time,” he explained.

“And you don’t wanna do an exhibit because you did that last year,” Shirishizu-san confirmed.

The male class rep nodded several times and reiterated, “I’m sorry that this is such a personal reason. But I want to make the most of my youth!”

I see... I couldn’t say that I did anything terribly memorable my first year either. But that didn’t make me say I wanted to do something special in my second.

I didn’t really understand how he felt. But that didn’t mean I wasn’t moved by what he said. Plus, it sounded nice to be able to make memories with Nanami by taking part in a performance, though I was probably going to end up doing something backstage anyway.

“What do you think?” the male rep asked, his anxious words echoing throughout the classroom.

And with that, the classroom erupted in discussion. Everyone just started talking. They were, however, all speaking in low voices, making it difficult to

hear what they were actually saying. It was just a wave of murmurs and noises that assaulted the ear.

When I looked around, I caught Nanami's eye. Wanting to know what she thought, I gestured with a pointed finger to ask her intentions. Nanami replied by making a circle with her fingers.

Seeing her reaffirming smile, I felt my emotions stir even more.

I was about to do something that I would ordinarily never do. If I didn't do it, though, I felt like I was going to regret it.

"I think I'm in favor of that idea," I muttered.

Everyone in the class spun around to look at me.

I said it. I said something entirely uncharacteristic of me. I never guessed that so many people would turn to look at me. I'd never felt so many pairs of eyes on me before.

Nevertheless, the die was cast, and I couldn't go back anymore. I couldn't take back the words I'd said. I shouldn't have spoken if I was gonna regret it, but I still kind of regretted that I said anything.

Still, I continued.

"Um, I just thought...that it'd be nice to make some memories too, I guess? Um, yeah. I'm sorry..."

Dang it, say it until the end, Yoshin. You're fading out and no one can even hear you. I know I'm not used to doing things like this, but this is still pretty pathetic.

As my voice trailed off, though, the classroom just seemed to get noisier—and the louder the people around me grew, the more embarrassed I became.

Jeez, now I'm sweating everywhere. I really shouldn't have said anything.

I glanced at Nanami in panic, and saw her wink at me. She then raised her hand enthusiastically and declared that she, too, was in favor of the idea.

At the same time as Nanami's endorsement, I heard myself being called out by name.

“Thank you, Misumai! You felt like you couldn’t give it your all last year either, huh?! I’m so glad we were in the same class—you totally get me!” the male class rep exclaimed.

Um, wait. We were in the same class last year?!

I was flummoxed by this revelation, but nonetheless, I gave a weak nod. *I’m sorry, I had no idea we used to be in the same class.*

Also, I only realized it then, but the guy who kept trying to talk to me was the male class rep himself. He was the one who asked me if I was a virgin. Could it be that he was talking to me because we used to be in the same class?

So far, only Nanami and I had clearly expressed support for the class rep’s idea. Everyone else was chattering, but no one articulated that they supported the proposal.

“Huuuh? But if that’s the case, then I wanna do a food stall! I wanna do something where people will take lots of pictures!” shouted one.

“I’m not good at being onstage, so if we’re gonna do something memorable, I’d rather do an event. I wanna be on the production side,” offered another.

“We have a lot of cute girls in this class! I wanna make them do cosplay!” said a third.

“My club is doing a dance performance, so I’d rather do something that *isn’t* onstage,” murmured a fourth.

Maybe because of my initial comment, people in various corners of the classroom were now speaking up. The various different opinions we were hearing now made it hard to believe that the class had been so silent earlier.

“Whoa, no way! Misumai! We’re the only ones supporting the performance idea! You’ve gotta back me up!” the class rep called out to me.

“Huh?!”

I was practically dragged up to the front of the class. The class rep swung his arm around my shoulders, and suddenly I found myself at the center of attention, all eyes now on me. I couldn’t hide my panic; I’d never experienced anything like this before. My toes started tingling.

“Come on, Misumai! We’ve gotta get more people on our side! We’ve gotta tell them the pros and pros of our idea!” the class rep said.

“Wait, what exactly am I supposed to do?!”

I only supported his idea on a whim; I had no intention of championing the proposal in any way. It wasn’t like I could come up with a way to persuade people to our idea right on the spot.

My classmates immediately started raising their hands to ask me questions, seemingly paying no mind to how visibly flustered I was.

Um, why?!

“What do you wanna do for the performance, Misumai?” someone asked.

“Uh, well, I guess I hadn’t really thought about it,” I mumbled.

“Why did you decide to support the idea, then? Is there something specific you wanna do?” asked another.

“Well, I guess...I didn’t really do anything my first year either, so I thought it’d be nice to make some memories this year too,” I managed to say.

“With Nanami, you mean? Oh, how far have you and Nanami gone, anyway? Have you two had sex already?” someone called out.

“No comment!” I yelled.

“I’m sure we can make the most of our youth even if we don’t do a performance, so how about we do something else?” someone suggested.

“Oh, well, maybe you’re right,” I conceded.

“Misumai?! You can’t let these people sway you!” pleaded the class rep.

The questions came so fast that I struggled to answer all of them. There were some of them that I felt were just wanting to ask about Nanami and had nothing to do with the festival. There was no way I could answer those. My support of the idea; the possible performance; Nanami; manga, anime, and video games I liked; places Nanami and I went to on our dates; my favorite foods; my first love; my penchant for gyaru girls... I felt like they were asking me all sorts of nitty-gritty questions. When I peeked at Nanami in a bid for help, she

just smiled, as if the situation was totally amusing to her.

Don't sit there smiling—help me! Don't just wave at me so adorably!

Just as quickly as my classmates asked me questions, the class rep continued scribing all their various ideas up on the blackboard. *How did he manage to do that so quickly?*

As a side note, it seemed the male class rep wanted to specifically do a theater piece for a class performance. He made sure to write that idea at the top of the list.

Theater performance, maid café, cosplay exhibit, yakisoba stall, haunted house, maze, treasure hunt, tapioca stand, Korean cheese corn dogs, tabletop RPGs...the board was filled with a massive array of ideas. Hearing all these ideas thrown freely about was extremely tiring but also kind of fun.

During my first year...well, if I couldn't remember it, it was probably because I didn't participate in the first place. Standing here at the lectern and getting peppered with questions, I realized, was already me participating in a way I hadn't last year. Though it really *was* exhausting. I also felt like there were some weird ideas making their way onto the board too, but the class rep seemed not to be censoring anything at this point.

Once all the ideas were written up on the board, I finally returned to my own seat and slumped over my chair. *I-I'm spent... I'm absolutely drained. I honestly never associate with anyone, so it's no wonder this wears me out so much...*

"We sure shook out a lot of ideas," Nanami said.

"Yeah, seriously. And who in the world suggested doing a gyaru café?" I asked.

"Aha ha! Do you wanna try dressing up as a gyaru too?" she returned.

"I wouldn't look good in... Wait, huh?"

Wait a minute. Nanami sounds really close to me.

When I turned toward the direction of her voice, I saw that Nanami was sitting right next to me. We were conversing so normally that I didn't even realize it.

Huh? Wasn't she in her own seat until just a minute ago?

"I came to visit!" Nanami said, smiling and making peace signs with both hands.

A look around the classroom revealed that everyone had moved around to their desired spots in the classroom to exchange ideas with their friends.

So here was Nanami, sitting in the seat next to mine, staring at me with her cheek resting on her palm. Nanami...was sitting next to me.

The earlier hope I had of sitting next to Nanami had been realized before I knew it. Though it would only last for a short while, I couldn't help but smile, but fortunately Nanami smiled back at me as well. *Shoot, if this were permanent, I don't think I'll ever be able to concentrate in class.*

"So, what do you actually wanna do? Is it still the performance?" Nanami asked.

"Not really. If something else comes up that's good, I won't insist on the performance," I replied.

People asked me this when I was at the front of the classroom too, but I really only said I was in favor of the class rep's idea because I agreed with his idea of using the school festival to make memories. It wasn't that I was fixated on the idea of putting on a performance, so now, with all these different possibilities, I had to admit I felt torn.

If I had to choose, though...

I sneaked a look at Nanami. The strongest desire I had was to do something that would allow me to make the greatest number of memories with Nanami. I knew we'd already decided to go around the festival together, but I had to assume that doing the prep for whatever our class would do would be its own kind of fun. If that was the case, maybe a food stall was the way to go.

"Oh, but a maid café could be nice too. It might be fun to make crepes in the back and stuff," Nanami remarked.

"Huh? No maid costume?" I blurted out. Nanami looked at me, her eyes widened in slight surprise. I watched her as my own question—which took even

me unawares—circled inside my head.

I mean, come on. It's Nanami in a maid costume we're talking about here. Of course I want to see it. I wasn't sure if I could say something like that here, though, so I kept quiet, unable to speak.

For a while, Nanami and I just sat there, looking at each other while frozen in place. Eventually, though, her expression returned to normal, and she stood up from her chair. With both hands, she lifted the desk in front of her and moved it so that it was touching mine.

The space that had existed between the two desks immediately disappeared.

Without saying a word, Nanami sat back down in the chair and, turning to look at me with her cheek resting again on one palm, raised the corners of her mouth.

She then brought her face close to mine and said with a teasing grin, “You wanna see me in a maid costume that much, huh?”

I blushed at her smile. It would have been strange for me to deny it, so I murmured that, indeed, I did want to see her.

My affirmation made Nanami look even happier, more joyful.

If we weren't in homeroom now, Nanami probably would've leaped into my arms already. She probably would have rubbed her body onto mine while she was at it.

She won't, will she? I mean, we're in class right now and everything.

“And? What kind of a maid uniform do you like?” Nanami asked.

“Huh? What do you mean, ‘what kind’?” I repeated.

“You know, like a miniskirt or a classic one. A traditional Japanese-style one is cute too, and if you like the sexy kind, there's bunny maids and swimsuit maids too,” Nanami explained, listing off the different types of maid uniforms.

I knew the miniskirt type and the classic type, but I couldn't immediately picture what a bunny maid or a Japanese-style maid looked like.

“Why do you know so much about maid costumes?” I asked.

“Probably because Hatsumi and Ayumi and I once chatted about what kinds of maid uniforms would make our boyfriends happy. We did a bunch of research then,” she said.

I couldn’t imagine how the three of them had landed on that topic. I was extremely curious, but at least I now understood how Nanami knew so much about it. It’s probably why she was able to come up with so many different options so quickly.

“For your reference, we decided that Oto-nii would like the bunny maid, and Shu-nii would prefer the Japanese-style maid,” Nanami concluded.

Why did it make me feel so guilty to hear about the preferences of people I knew? I had to admit, though, that the conclusions that the girls had reached seemed to fit the image I had of the two men.

I bet Nanami would look good in everything.

“And? What’s *your* preference?” she asked me once again.

“Oh, come on. You’re gonna ask me that now?” I retorted.

I’ve never thought about what kinds of maid costumes I like, but I should at least choose one that fits my image of Nanami. Maybe the minisk—

“I bet you’d go for the bathing suit maid, huh?” Nanami declared, beating me to the punch.

“Wait, how?!” I protested.

But, yeah, she’s right in saying that that’s probably my favorite.

I knew that there were people in this world who thought that clothing that was too revealing was actually a turnoff.

I, however, wanted to make one thing clear: *I love very obviously revealing clothing too.*

I was focused at first on what seemed most fitting for Nanami, but even if I didn’t consider that, a bathing suit maid wouldn’t necessarily be what I would think would best suit Nanami. Still, that was probably my favorite one.

What’s so bad about being true to one’s desires?

“You’re right, I would go for that,” I finally muttered.

“You’re such a perv!” Nanami giggled, poking me in the stomach. I was glad that it was noisy in the classroom; if everyone else was quiet, there was no way we could’ve talked about a topic like this.

It was confirmed: if Nanami ever became my seat neighbor, I would never pay attention in class again. I understood now. If it did happen, I’d have to remind myself to take class seriously despite it.

“Well, we’re probably gonna take a vote soon, so we’ll actually have to think about it,” Nanami commented.

“True. What’s a theater performance even supposed to be like, anyway?” I wondered out loud.

“I think one of the things they did last year was a play that was based on a manga or something,” Nanami said offhand.

I had no idea. I was pretty sure that last year I went home early without watching a single performance. I must have not bothered to participate in the school festival at all. A story based on a manga did seem simple enough to do as a play. But I bet that even so, whoever played the protagonist would have their work cut out for them.

“Kenbuchi-kun, you wrote down ‘theater performance’ here, but what exactly are you interested in doing?” Shirishizu-san asked the male class rep. Her question seemed to come at the perfect time.

“Hmm? Probably a love story. I wanna get to make out with a girl, even if it is just make-believe!” he exulted.

“Can’t you try to be less transparent about what you want, at least a little bit?” Shirishizu-san sighed.

As we overheard their exchange, Nanami and I looked at each other and smiled sheepishly.

I never knew, though, that the male class rep’s name was Kenbuchi. He was even in the same class as me, but I had no idea. I *really* had to make more of an effort to get to know my classmates better.

“A romance, huh? I wonder what kind of a story we’d do,” said Nanami.

“If it’s gonna be a play, then I guess it’d have to be different from a normal relationship like ours, huh?” I replied.

As soon as I said that, though, the class—which had been bustling with noise until then—suddenly went still.

So taken aback by the unexpected quiet, I looked around the classroom. I couldn’t help feeling that everyone was looking at me...and at Nanami too. Nanami was now sitting up as well, looking around at everyone in return.

Hmmm? Why are Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san over there looking at us with their mouths hanging open?

Another moment later, though, a chorus erupted in the classroom.

“Just *what* about you guys’ relationship is normal?!”

It was, as it were, a comment from basically everyone in the room.

Nanami and I shrank back from the force of their question. I then looked around at everyone staring at us. They all seemed so confused, and I couldn’t help feeling confused right along with them.

I closed my eyes and thought about what they asked—then slowly opened my mouth and answered, “Everything?”

“Uh-uh. *No way*. It’s pretty much not normal at all,” Otofuke-san piped up. Everyone else nodded in agreement.

Oh, come on. That can’t be... Wait, aren’t we normal? Well, okay, I guess I did kind of suspect we weren’t. We did kind of start off weird, and I do remember people making comments basically every day. And that hasn’t really stopped, actually. So I guess it really isn’t normal, huh? But it doesn’t hurt to think that we’re normal, right?

As I let my shoulders droop in dismay, Nanami patted me lightly, saying, “Oh, come on, Yoshin. Who cares if we’re not normal?”

“I mean, if you feel that way, I guess it’s fine,” I mumbled.

“Besides, if we’re not normal, then that means we can do lots of things that

are a little weird,” she added.

“Wait, what exactly are you thinking of doing?!”

The class, which had quieted down somewhat, once again broke out in commotion. Of course, Nanami’s comment was the cause of it, but she didn’t seem to be bothered at all.

Or, maybe this was again the case where she really *did* care, and she was going to get super embarrassed about it when she and I were alone later.

Once, when her friends had said something mildly disparaging about me, she made some rather questionable remarks as well. Of course, it wasn’t long after that people in the class found out that we hadn’t even kissed by that point. We hadn’t talked about stuff like that in class since then, so it was possible that our classmates *still* thought Nanami and I hadn’t kissed yet.

Wait, does this mean that we’re going to be interrogated even more now?

Once I realized that, our classmates’ stares started to feel more curious. Given how worked up everyone already was, I couldn’t help thinking that they were all going to pounce on us any minute.

Fortunately, though, my concerns ended up just being concerns—because someone from behind the lectern called out to shift the mood of the class.

“Well, then. How about we move on to a vote? We’ve probably heard everyone’s ideas by now,” Shirishizu-san said with a single loud clap.

The sound echoed throughout the room, snapping everyone out of their mild frenzy. They all turned to look at Shirishizu-san, no longer paying any mind to me and Nanami.

When Nanami and I looked at her too, Shirishizu-san sneaked a peace sign at us. It seemed like she had intervened and prevented us from getting any more uncomfortable questions, and for that, I was grateful.

With the mood of the class now having reset, everyone got up and returned to their respective seats. Nanami pulled the desk she was sitting in away from mine and, waving, went back to her seat as well.

“We’ll start the vote now, then,” Shirishizu-san called out.

And with that, the voting began.

Oh shoot, I was so focused on the topic of maid costumes that I forgot to ask Nanami what to vote on. I wonder if I should go for something maid-related after all.

Giving more thought than I ever had to what we should do for the school festival...in the end, I raised my hand in support of the idea that I most wanted to do.



It wasn't always possible to know what we were mentally or emotionally capable of. In fact, sometimes we hit our limit when we least expected it—and only then did we learn what our limit actually was.

In fact, once we *did* reach our limit, it often took a long while for us to recuperate. *What's done is done. Best be prepared.* We had a lot to learn from those who came before us, but that was often easier said than done. That might sound like we were being too easy on ourselves, but still.

To put it more directly: I was *way* over my limit.

And once I hit that limit and surpassed it, I ended up needing to have Nanami comfort me.

More specifically, I was currently in Nanami's arms as she patted me. I felt like a total baby, but given that I'd totally reached my mental capacity, her gesture was more soothing than anything I could have asked for.

I had my face buried in Nanami's chest as she stroked my back.

"Isn't this the first time you've gotten like this?" she asked.

"Yeah, I think so. I guess I really was at my breaking point," I said, my voice muffled.

Dispelling the rumor about the harem, trying to make guy friends, practicing with Nanami, keeping up with my part-time job, thinking about the school festival... And on top of all that, today I ended up talking with a bunch of my classmates for the very first time.

A total whirlwind, and in such a short period of time too.

Bluntly, there was a lot to do. This would have been unthinkable for the Yoshin from just a short while ago. Of course, I understood that a good portion of them were things I'd opted in for myself.

"Do you wanna take a break from our practice for a while?" Nanami asked me gently as she patted my back.

"That actually comforts me, so I'd rather not," I mumbled. The practice she was talking about was *that* practice that she and I were now tackling. *That*, I really didn't want to take a break from.

It wasn't that I wanted to do sexy things. I'd just heard that the act of touching was good for both the heart and the body. I didn't want to eliminate things that could be helping with my stress even a little bit.

"Then do you wanna kiss?" Nanami suggested.

"We're in a classroom, so we probably shouldn't," I replied.



That's right—we were currently in an empty classroom at school.

Our homeroom finally ended, and we managed to decide what to do for the school festival. We still had the lottery to go through, but at least we as a class knew what we wanted to do.

In the end, the votes ended up in favor of doing a cosplay café. There were many people who wanted to do a food and drink stall, so there was a compromise between them and the people who wanted to wear lots of different costumes.

Apparently school festivals nowadays really emphasized photo ops, with many extroverts posting all sorts of photos to social media. I never even thought about the idea of photo ops, and given that I didn't use social media at all, it wasn't a factor I took into consideration. Maybe that made me seem like an old geezer.

Given that he had really wanted to do a theater performance, Kenbuchi-kun looked like he was about to cry some serious tears of blood when the vote concluded. I felt kind of bad for him, especially having backed his plan at one point. But in the next moment he recovered, seeming completely fine when he said he'd be able to make the most of his youth even with a cosplay café. He was probably right that he'd be able to make some great memories either way.

So, was a cosplay café basically a concept café? Would we have to prepare a lot of things, then?

Still, with no way to stop an entire class now excited about the idea of making memories, we ended up going with the idea of the cosplay café after all. Plus, if we lost out in the random drawing, we'd be back to square one.

Therefore, after a full day of really interacting with classmates for the first time, I had hit my limit.

I couldn't really put it into words, but it was like something inside of me just snapped. I felt like something heavy had barged into my chest and was now suffocating me.

Maybe standing in front of the class and talking to everyone—and feeling extremely nervous because of it—triggered this reaction. Not that I knew for

sure.

Still, I had no idea that my emotional capacity was so limited. It all happened so quickly, and I didn't know what to do.

Nanami, though, swooped in to rescue me.

"Yoshin, over here," she said.

"Huh?"

Before I could really say anything, Nanami grabbed me by the hand and began walking. She remained silent, not responding to anything I managed to say.

We entered an empty classroom that seemed like a multimedia room, and then walked toward one of its corners. When we finally reached the window, Nanami let go of my hand. Even when I called out her name softly, she just stood there with her hands on her hips, as though she were deep in thought.

I watched her in silence, mentally considering if I had upset her somehow. Nanami nodded several times, as though she had confirmed an idea, then began to slide one of the desks toward the window.

She then sat down on the desk and extended her hands out toward me.

"Come here," she said.

That was all she said—and yet, I slowly approached and embraced her, as though magnetized.

Once I dived into Nanami's arms, she wrapped the curtain around us so that we could hide behind it. I understood then why she had moved the desk over to the window.

That was how we ended up the way we were now.

Since we were wrapped up in the curtain, I felt safe, somehow certain we wouldn't be seen even though we were still in a classroom. People might wonder what we were doing if they peeked in though.

"How did you know?" I murmured to Nanami.

In response, Nanami again patted me on the back, like she was soothing a small child. She continued tapping me lightly, maintaining a steady rhythm.

Nanami smiled slightly, then whispered in my ear ever so gently—so much so that her voice and breath felt like warm sunlight in my ear.

“Just a guess. And even if I was wrong, it’s still a win if you get to hug me,” she said.

I didn’t say anything in response; I just tightened my grip around her.

“Sometimes I get overwhelmed too when a lot of things happen all at once. And when that happens, I ask my mom to do this for me,” Nanami continued.

“I see. But why now?” I asked.

“If I didn’t do it, I thought you might wear yourself out. So I wanted to do this for you before we went home,” she explained.

I felt my eyes sting at her words.

I didn’t cry. I hadn’t quite gone that far. I just *almost* started crying. I believed that distinction to be important.

If I tried to say anything, though, I felt like something inside of me was going to break. I decided it was better for me to stay silent.

When I tightened my arms around Nanami again, I heard her giggle. I couldn’t see her face, but I imagined her looking at me with a slightly exasperated smile.

I was probably being pretty annoying. I somehow felt, though, that even if it was okay for me to ask her to pamper me like this, it *wasn’t* okay for me to cry in front of her. Maybe it was just my pride talking.

Have I ever cried in front of Nanami? Maybe I have.

Still, I was pretty sure I never all-out bawled in front of her. Call me old-fashioned, but somewhere deep down, I still believed that men shouldn’t be seen crying.

Would Nanami still like me if I cried like that? Or would she be totally repulsed? I hadn’t a clue what other people were like either.

I kept thinking about that as I closed my eyes, still clinging to Nanami.

Nanami’s hand glided up my back and moved toward my head. Then with the slightest bit of strength, she pressed my head more firmly onto her.

I went from being held against her chest to being sandwiched by her breasts. *Wait, is this even okay? It feels super soft and wonderful, but is this really allowed?*

“The sound of a beating heart is supposed to help you calm down. Have I done this for you before?” she whispered.

I heard the *thump-thump* of Nanami’s heart.

With my mild shock holding me in place, I ended up focusing all my energies on listening. As the steady rhythm reached my ears, I discovered that the sound was so soothing that it nearly lulled me to sleep.

Still cradling me against her, Nanami patted me on the back once again.

I knew she had done something similar to this before, but I never imagined we’d be doing this in an empty classroom on campus. Still, even though I had my face stuffed into her chest, for some reason I didn’t feel myself getting worked up sexually. It was probably because the situation was so far removed from any kind of sexual desire. The fact that we were at school must have also played a part.

As Nanami and I continued embracing like that, though, we heard one of the doors to the classroom slide open.

Nanami jumped from surprise even as she remained sitting on the desk, and I quivered from sheer shock. My heart rate, which had been steady until then, suddenly shot up, as both Nanami and I began to sweat profusely.

“Man, cleaning sucks. The fact that it’s not even our classroom makes it suck even more,” we heard a male student say.

“Come on, let’s just get it over with and get out...of...”

“Hmmm? What’s up, dude?”

“What...is that?” the other male student asked hesitantly.

I knew that the curtain shielded us from view, but we could tell that the intruders had gone speechless. Okay, Nanami and I were just as much intruders ourselves, but still.

From behind the curtain, Nanami and I locked eyes. She must have been in a

mild panic as well, but she seemed to have calmed down when she saw my face. She closed her lips tightly.

What do we do?

“Let’s act completely normal. Just play it cool, like we weren’t doing anything at all,” I whispered to her.

“Got it. Let’s act like we weren’t doing anything wrong. We weren’t, after all,” she agreed, also in a whisper as we both nodded at each other. *That’s right, we aren’t doing anything suspicious. I was just having Nanami comfort me a bit.*

I slowly peeled myself off of Nanami, and she and I stood next to each other inside the curtain. We looked at each other as though to signal that each of us was ready, then we flipped back the curtain dramatically.

Like a scene from a movie, we stepped out with the sunlight shining behind us. *That’s right—we’re not doing anything wrong.*

With two male students—maybe they were a year below us—staring at us, Nanami and I sashayed toward the door on the other side of the classroom.

“Thanks for all your hard work,” I said to them.

“Good luck cleaning!” Nanami chimed in.

With matching nonchalant smiles, we swiftly exited the classroom. There was a third student, a girl, and given that she was blushing with her hand covering her mouth, she must have had a more accurate guess than her two male cohorts about what Nanami and I had been doing.

As soon as we left the room, though, we heard excited squeals from the girl accompanied by confused mutterings from the guys.

Nanami and I quickened our pace, intent on putting a safe distance between ourselves and the classroom as fast as possible.

“Th-That was close,” I stammered.

“S-Seriously,” Nanami agreed.

Rather than fooling them, I felt like we had left them with a very questionable impression. Still, I thought we handled the situation as best we could. We didn’t

tell them our names, so it was possible that they'd start talking about us like some kind of a weird ghost story or an urban legend of our school. Still, it was better than having yet another strange rumor get around about us.

I guess we just had to leave it all up to fate.

"Should we go home for today, then?" I suggested.

"Yeah. Oh, but we've gotta go get our bags," Nanami reminded me.

Oh, that's right. I totally forgot, since Nanami just whisked me away and we were, um, recharging.

"Are you okay now?" Nanami asked, smiling at me as she touched my hand gingerly. I pressed my hand against my chest and breathed deeply several times.

Emotionally speaking, yes...I feel calm now.

"I'm okay now. Thank you," I said, now smiling myself as I tried to express my gratitude for what she had done for me. Nanami, though, pouted as though she was somehow dissatisfied with what I said. She was making her usual face with her cheeks all puffed out.

"Aren't you gonna say that you wanna do it some more?" she complained.

"I'm allowed to?" I asked.

"Of course," she muttered, grinning and sticking out her tongue as she clasped her hands behind her, seeming somewhat embarrassed. She was probably saying this because she trusted that I really was feeling better.

When I promised her that I would ask her to do it again, she happily linked her arm with mine. We were almost back at our classroom, but I guess it was okay even if someone from our class saw us.

When I opened the door to our classroom, though...

"Huh?" I let out, seeing that almost no one was there.

Though, to be more precise, there was one person left in our classroom.

That didn't seem terribly out of the ordinary, of course, so I decided just to grab my bag and head home. That was when I realized, though, that that one

person was sitting in *my* seat.

I thought for a brief second that the person had made a mistake, but that seemed not to be the case; the student was sitting in my chair with their arms crossed, their knees spread open wide.

It was a tall, large, male student with long blond hair. From afar, he actually looked fairly handsome. *Who is this?*

Just in that moment, Nanami gasped.

“Do you know him?” I whispered to her.

“Um, well...it’s not so much that I *know* him,” she mumbled.

Nanami seemed uncharacteristically hesitant to speak. It was true, though, that he didn’t seem like the type of student that she would know. *Oh, could it be...?*

“Um, he confessed to me once before,” Nanami shared apologetically. *That does seem like something that’s difficult to bring up.*

What does someone like that want to do with us now? It seemed unlikely that he wanted to talk about Nanami all of a sudden.

I can’t go home without getting my bag first though. I guess I just have to go to my seat.

“Give me a second, okay?” I told Nanami.

“Oh, um, sure,” she replied.

I parted from Nanami and headed toward my seat. The classroom wasn’t terribly large; I would reach my desk soon enough. The whole time, though, I studied the guy that was sitting in my seat.

He had long hair that was dyed blond, though his roots were showing their natural black color beneath. He was large, and seemed muscular, but wasn’t quite the buff type. His eyebrows weren’t dyed, but they were shaped extremely thin. His eyes were sharp, and he had his eyebrows furrowed deeply. At first glance, he gave off the impression of being terribly irritated and unapproachable.

I felt like I'd encountered an animal in the wild. Tension ran through me, as if my body was trying to warn me that he would punch me if I took my eyes off of him for even a moment.

His narrowed eyes pierced right through me, and I felt like those alone were enough to deliver a fatal blow—like in fantasy and action manga, where just a character's mere intention to kill could lay out another character flat.

I eventually made it to my seat.

I met the student's eyes up close, feeling the force of his stare full on. I did, but...I just picked up my bag that was hanging off the side of my desk.

I must have looked like a complete idiot as I crouched to get my bag while locked in a staring contest with him. Still keeping my eyes on him, though, I proceeded to back up.

I walked backward slowly, careful not to bump into any desks.

"Wait, where are you going?"

His question stopped me in the middle of my tracks. I had hoped there was a possibility that he just happened to be sitting in my chair while waiting for someone, so I thought I would try to go home without saying anything. It didn't work though.

No, I can't give up yet.

"You're waiting for someone, right? Don't mind me, I'm just gonna go on home," I said to him.

"No, man. I was waiting for you."

Dang it. So he was waiting for me. I guess that means I have a visitor.

"I'm Takumi Teshikaga. Sorry for the bother, but...I've got something to say to you," he said to me.

This is one of those, right? Where someone asks to borrow something, but you really have no right of refusal? I feel like I can even see the intimidation wafting out of him. Honestly, I'm scared.

Well, given that he wanted to talk to me regarding something related to

Nanami, I couldn't back away now—no matter how scared I was or how much I was trembling.

It was a good thing I'd had Nanami comfort me. If he'd come to me when I was still in my depleted state, I would have been in a complete panic.

"That's fine, but I don't wanna involve Nanami," I began.

"Oh, this doesn't involve Barato. I only wanna talk to *you*—man to man," he said.

Huh? This isn't about Nanami?

If that was the case, then I really had no reason to hear what this person...Teshikaga-...san? -senpai? had to say to me.

I just wanna hurry up and go home with Nanami... Hey, wait a minute. Maybe this is my shortcoming. Maybe I need to listen even in situations like these—and that's what's gonna help me make friends.

If that was the case, then maybe hearing him out was my first step to changing. After all, I'd already said yes, so I couldn't very well back out now.

Yeah, I should at least hear what he has to say.

"That's fine, but do you mind if we keep it short? I was planning to go home with Nanami," I said.

When I mentioned Nanami's name, though, I saw Teshikaga-san's body twitch. Was he reacting like that even though our conversation would have nothing to do with her, simply because he'd confessed to her before?

"I can't guarantee that," he eventually replied.

"I see. Would you like to speak here?" I asked.

"Nah, not here. Let's go out back," he said.

Was this one of those manga plot points about delinquents where a character gets called out behind the school building? I never thought it actually happened in real life. It was a little nerve-racking, but for some reason I couldn't help feeling a bit excited too.

"Nanami, we're gonna go talk a little bit. Do you mind waiting here?" I asked

her.

“Oh, sure... Are you gonna be okay?” she returned.

“Yeah, I’ll be fine. If anything happens, I’ll bolt out of there. Then we can go home together,” I joked—only to realize that Teshikaga-san was looming right behind me. *How did he get there so fast? And, boy, is he tall.* I felt like he was almost as tall as Shoichi-senpai. Why were there so many tall people in my life who loomed over me like this?

“I’m not gonna be rough, I promise,” Teshikaga-kun muttered.

“I see,” I simply replied. “All right, Nanami—we’re off.”

Just as I started making my way out of the class, Nanami approached me. She then proceeded to kiss me on the cheek.

“See you soon,” she said, waving demurely. I returned the gesture and told her I would be back as soon as possible.

I contemplated kissing her on the cheek when I returned as well. After all, I felt like she gave me the courage to face whatever was in store for me next. I felt invincible. Er, at least I *felt* that way.

“You two are close, huh?” Teshikaga-kun commented as we walked.

“Yes. Nanami is my girlfriend, after all,” I replied.

“I see.”

After that brief exchange, we continued on in silence. The back of the school building wasn’t terribly far, but my feet felt heavy, as if they were being dragged down by the general mood between us.

In any case, I had to say that I sure had a weird relationship with this spot behind the school.

There was the confession from Nanami, and also the incident with Shirishizu-san, both taking place at this exact spot. It must be because it was the perfect place for talking about things in private.

Soon we reached the back of the school. The scene felt darn near nostalgic to me—that feeling where it was just two people there, with something about to

happen.

“So, what was it that you wanted to discuss?” I asked.

“Uh, before we get to that...how about you stop sounding so formal, since we’re in the same grade and all,” he suggested.

Wait, we’re in the same grade? I for sure thought he was a year above me.

I had no reason to insist on being polite, and given that I wanted to get this thing over with so that I could hurry up and go home, I decided just to oblige.

“Uh, got it. So, what did you want to talk about?” I asked again.

Maybe because I’d assumed he was older, it felt strange talking to him so casually. I guess I was going to get used to it sooner or later though.

Once I started sounding more casual, Teshikaga-san...I mean, Teshikaga-kun seemed to sigh in relief. He then began to say something...and stopped. Maybe to gain some momentum, he swung his arms around—but that came to a halt as well.

What’s going on?

For some time, Teshikaga-kun continued starting and stopping several times.
Does he want to say something potentially weird?

Grimacing, Teshikaga-kun breathed in deeply...

...and punched himself in the face.

Not seeming to care about the fact that I was completely speechless from shock, he then gripped his fist even tighter.

I’m next?!

“It’s about...”

Just as I covered my head and was about to crouch into a complete defensive position, I heard his muffled voice.

It was a tiny little sound that was the complete opposite of his forceful act a moment ago.

“Um, I’m sorry?” I asked.

“It’s about Shirishizu,” he mumbled.

Although his voice was still soft, it was at least audible this time. *Wait, did he just mention Shirishizu-san? Why is he bringing her up all of a sudden?*

As I stood there confused, Teshikaga-kun glared at me as if he could stab me with his eyes alone.

“Is it true that you’re dating both Barato and Shirishizu at the same time?” he asked.

“E-Excuse me?”

“I was surprised that she suddenly changed the way she looked, but...is that because of your tastes? Does Barato know that you’re cheating on her with Shirishizu? Is this some kind of an open relationship or something?”

“W-Wait, wait, wait! *What are you talking about?! Is there a rumor like that going around?! I shouted, trying to get him to pause his barrage of questions.*

I knew that there was a rumor, but I didn’t think that there was one about me two-timing. *You’ve gotta be kidding me. I think my panic level is even higher than when I first heard about the harem rumor.*

The rumor that I was making a harem was of course an issue, but it was one that didn’t seem terribly realistic. Most people who spread it probably also just found it amusing.

When it came to two-timing, though, I felt like the rumor suddenly took on a rawness, a kind of plausibility.

I felt really odd about it, but maybe it was because there actually *were* people in this world who two-timed their partner. Maybe there was a sense that, well, two-timing was a real possibility.

“So? Tell me—is it true?” he asked.

“No, uh...”

My girlfriend is the one who transformed Shirishizu-san.

I absolutely could not tell him that.

I had to do everything I could to make sure that he wouldn’t target Nanami

next.

Still, if I claimed that I was the one who changed Shirishizu-san, then I would be his target. Maybe that was the best solution, but Nanami would worry if something happened to me.

I can't have that. But how am I supposed to explain this?

As I struggled to decide what to do, out of nowhere I heard the sound of a scrape against the ground—like someone suddenly skidded to a halt in a place covered with sand.

I looked toward the direction of the sound. *Speak of the devil.* Those were the words that came to my mind.

“What *exactly* are you doing?”

The voice was soft and yet somehow intimidating. The moment I heard it, I felt a chill run up my spine.

The person who spoke with such ire slowly stepped forward. Not even glancing toward me as I stood frozen in place, the person stood between me and Teshikaga-kun as if to protect me.

It was Shirishizu-san.

When she walked past me, I saw from the corner of my eye that there were tiny drops of sweat forming on her forehead. Her cheeks were also flushed, and she was slightly out of breath.

Still working to steady her breathing, Shirishizu-san narrowed her eyes at Teshikaga-kun, who was now standing in front of her.

“Ko—Shirishizu...why are you here?” he asked.

“I heard from Nanami-chan back in the classroom. Taku-cha—Teshikaga-kun, what are you trying to do, calling out Misumai-kun like this? Does it have something to do with me?” she returned.

Seeming flustered, Teshikaga-kun failed to respond. He looked away from her and pursed his lips in frustration.

He remained silent, while she didn't press any further.

Wh-What should I do? As I struggled to come up with a good response, I heard someone else from behind us.

"Kotoha-chan...you're...too fast...jeez..."

It was Nanami. She must have come running, because she was now bent over with both hands on her knees, wheezing.

I rushed over to her as she continued breathing heavily. I had to admit, I felt a lot better now that Nanami was with me.

"Nanami, are you okay?" I asked.

"Oh, Yoshin...gosh, it's really hard to run in my uniform... I haven't done that in a while," she managed to say.

I took out my handkerchief to dab at her sweat as she steadied her breathing. Nanami closed her eyes and let me wipe her sweat away. She had her eyes half closed, maybe out of both embarrassment and comfort. As I continued dabbing at her face, I asked her what had brought about this turn of events.

Apparently, Shirishizu-san came to the classroom after Teshikaga-kun and I left, and she mentioned that it was rare for me and Nanami not to be together. Nanami then remarked that Teshikaga-kun had brought me here to the back of the school. It really was just an offhand remark on Nanami's part.

When Shirishizu-san heard that, though, she turned pale for a moment—then just started running. Apparently she didn't even wait to hear what more Nanami had to say.

And then Nanami, who was left behind in shock, ended up following Shirishizu-san.

"Hah...hah...I wonder what happened to Kotoha-chan... She seemed really worried, but... Wait, huh?"

I didn't know the answer to Nanami's question, but I could well imagine that Teshikaga-kun and Shirishizu-san did. Like an encounter between two rivals in a movie, the two of them were staring at each other, not moving at all.

The two had very different expressions on their faces though.

While Shirishizu-san's face had been filled with anger, Teshikaga-kun had seemed almost frightened. He didn't at all look the way someone who seemed like a delinquent would.

The one who couldn't stand the silence had ended up also being Teshikaga-kun, the delinquent.

"I was worried. You changed your appearance all of a sudden," he murmured.

"Well that has nothing to do with you, does it?" Shirishizu-san replied.

"It does have... Well, yeah, I guess it doesn't."

"If you're gonna hurt my friends, then I'm not going to forgive you this time," she declared.

Silence dominated the space around us while Teshikaga-kun and Shirishizu-san remained with their eyes locked on each other. The one who lost the staring contest was, once again, Teshikaga-kun.

When she saw that, Shirishizu-san turned on her heel and started to walk away. Just as she was about to walk past me, though, I heard her voice for just a moment.

"Taku-chan—you dummy!"

Taku-chan? Come to think of it, she had started saying that—and then stopped herself—earlier. I couldn't see the expression on her face, but gazing at her as she walked away, she seemed like she was about to start crying.

The three of us watched as Shirishizu-san left us behind. We didn't dare try to approach her. Nanami must have been slightly scared because she was basically stuck to me.

Once we could no longer see Shirishizu-san, a sound rang out near us that was akin to a blunt object colliding with something.

When Nanami and I spun around in shock, we saw that Teshikaga-kun had fallen to his knees on the ground. He then bent over so that he became completely prostrate.

He quivered as he tried to lift himself up again on both hands like some small newborn creature, but it seemed like he would keel over with the slightest

poke.

“Ugh...I’m so sorry...”

His words were quaking even more than his body was.



“That was pretty pathetic of me, huh?” Teshikaga-kun said.

His speech had returned to how it was earlier, but he was still curled up into a small ball as he sat with his knees cradled. It looked like he was in gym class or something, but it really didn’t fit his outward appearance.

He looked like a total delinquent, so his behavior right now seemed entirely unfitting. At the same time, it really suited him. I knew that was a contradiction, but that was the only way I knew to describe what I was seeing.

After Shirishizu-san left, Nanami and I rushed over to Teshikaga-kun’s side. He crumpled to the ground so suddenly—of course we were worried.

He didn’t seem at all like the delinquent that he came off as earlier. He wasn’t intimidating anymore. Or maybe I had just assumed that, and he hadn’t been trying to intimidate me in the first place. His eyebrows had drooped downward in the outer corners too, so that even that part of him didn’t look scary at all.

“Um, so, Teshikaga-kun, what’s your relationship with Shirishizu-san?” I asked.

“Me and Koto—Shirishizu have known each other since we were little kids,” he explained.

Ah, so *that* was it. Seeing them earlier had me guessing that they knew each other from before, but I wouldn’t have guessed that they knew each other since childhood. That must have been why Shirishizu-san showed him an expression that she didn’t show us normally either.

“I see. So that was why you were worried about her,” I remarked.

“Something like that,” he muttered.

“Then you must like her,” I went on.

Teshikaga-kun’s face turned beet red immediately. Even though he wasn’t

saying anything, his expression spoke volumes. He might as well have just declared it himself.

Nanami, too, covered her mouth with both hands to stifle an exclamation of shocked excitement.

Not letting his silence deter me, I continued on, in order to put an end to the conversation that he had wanted to have with me.

“Don’t worry. I’m not two-timing with Shirishizu-san,” I said.

“Huh? What’s that all about?!”

There was an unexpected reaction—from Nanami, of course. She probably understood that this was a strange rumor too, but anger seemed to bubble up inside her even then. Maybe the rawness of the idea of two-timing made her feel that way.

I tried to calm down Nanami and explain to her what had happened: that Teshikaga-kun wanted to talk to me because he was concerned about the sudden change in Shirishizu-san’s appearance.

I didn’t blame him, given that her makeover happened at the same time as when the rumor must have started.

“Oh, so that’s what this was all about. You don’t have to worry about that. I was the one that came up with her new look,” Nanami explained.

“O-Oh, I see,” Teshikaga-kun mumbled.

“She looks good, right? Besides, don’t you prefer girls who look like that?” she asked.

“Uh, um, no...not really,” he stammered.

I tilted my head at Nanami’s comment. Why did she seem to know Teshikaga-kun’s preferences? Oh, of course; she said that he’d confessed to her before, so she must’ve interpreted that to mean he liked girls who looked like her—in other words, like a gyaru.

Ah, that’s right. Teshikaga-kun confessed to Nanami before. But he’s acting like he likes Shirishizu-san. What’s going on?

I had heard before that people often projected what they were doing onto others when making accusations.

That must mean...

“Teshikaga-kun, were *you* trying to two-time?” I asked.

“Not at all! The only lady I admire is...!”

“Lady you admire?” Nanami and I blurted at the same time, confused by his sudden change in diction. *I mean, who says “admire” nowadays?*

After remaining silent for some time, Teshikaga-kun eventually scratched his head roughly as if in resignation.

“I used to be pretty small and weak, so I got picked on a lot. And the one who always helped me...was Shirishizu,” he explained.

He then began to take us down his path of nostalgia. The story he shared was filled with so much joy, and it was clear just how much he liked Shirishizu-san. It was almost unimaginable from the exchange that we’d just had.

Given such a story, though, it was probably one that he kept close to his heart.

“And in middle school, I confessed to Shirishizu,” he went on.

“Huh?” both Nanami and I let out as we turned to each other.

Was that not the story that we heard from Shirishizu-san the other day? The one where a boy that she was close with confessed to her? Was the boy in question Teshikaga-kun?

“I confessed, and I messed up everything,” he finished, gritting his teeth and grimacing as he shook and squeezed his fists tightly. His fingernails seemed to dig so deeply into his palms that I thought he might start bleeding.

He didn’t explain what happened, but the expression on his face reminded me of one I saw on Nanami’s face at one point.

“I was the *worst*. That’s why, at the very least, I wanted to help her find happiness, even if she didn’t know. When I heard about the rumor and peeked into your class, I saw you and four girls heading off somewhere. I just assumed,”

he said.

That must have been the day we all went to the coffee shop together. I had no idea we were being watched.

Nanami and I didn't know what to say to him, but Teshikaga-kun just stood up and turned away from us to start walking.

"Sorry to have taken up your time. I guess it was a misunderstanding, so...I'll be off now," he said.

Seeing him begin to take off in such a dejected manner, and remembering how his expression a moment ago had reminded me of Nanami, I couldn't keep myself from calling out to him.

"Teshikaga-kun!"

I thought he might ignore me, but he stopped in his tracks. He didn't turn around, but all I needed was for him to listen.

"I think we can reflect on what we've done and even try to fix things. At least, that's what I believe. I don't think it's too late, even now," I said.

Maybe these were just empty words that didn't comfort him at all. Even so, I knew someone who reflected on what they did and tried to fix things.

That was why, even if it sounded irresponsible, I couldn't help saying it.

I didn't know if my words reached him, but after several moments, Teshikaga-kun raised his head and resumed walking.

I didn't think that I imagined him uttering a soft "thanks" before he did so.

"Nicely done, Yoshin," Nanami said.

"Thanks. But was it really though? I didn't realize rumors could be such a pain," I replied.

I couldn't possibly have guessed that Shirishizu-san's past would suddenly become tangled up in that too. Still, I was glad that Teshikaga-kun seemed to be the rational type.

I wasn't taking it too seriously until now, but if I didn't take care of the rumor sooner rather than later, it might put Nanami in danger too.

“Nanami’s the only one I like though,” I muttered to myself.

“Wh-What’s gotten into you all of a sudden?!” Nanami shouted.

“Oh, I was just thinking what I could do to make that rumor go away. If there was like a ‘best couple contest’ at the school festival or something, we could’ve entered it to help dispel the rumor,” I said, suggesting something I otherwise never would. I knew there were things like that in manga, but that probably didn’t happen in real life.

“Th-Then, do you wanna try entering it?” Nanami asked, hesitantly.

“Huh? There really is one?”

Seeing Nanami look at me with so much hope in her eyes, I couldn’t bring myself to tell her that I thought it didn’t actually exist.

Interlude: Falling Asleep, Stealing a Peep

The annual “Best Couple Contest.” One of the events held during the school festival, something I was pretty sure was organized by one of the school clubs. Basically, one of their traditions. Last year, it was just another school event to me. I might have seen it briefly onstage, but I didn’t bother to learn much about it.

Now, though, I regretted not having paid more attention to it. I never expected Yoshin to even mention taking part in it.

Knowing Yoshin, though, he probably didn’t actually know that our school held such an event at all.

“So you’re gonna enter the couple contest, huh?” said Peach-chan.

“Well, I guess I’d like to,” I replied after I’d told Peach-chan all about it. It felt funny to be talking by voice over the internet like this.

“That’s so cool. There’s one at my middle school too, but I have zero reason to participate,” she said.

“You have one too?” I asked.

“Yeah. The contestants wear matching outfits, or sometimes they swap their clothes and stuff. People try out a lot of things,” she explained.

If I’m gonna do it, maybe I’ll go for the matching outfits? Wait, it might be kinda fun to have Yoshin wear girls’ clothes too. Yeah, because then I can wear his clothes, and he can wear mine...

I was starting to get some good ideas, though maybe I just preferred stuff like that.

“A high school festival, though, huh? What kind of thing is your class planning?” Peach-chan asked.

“It’s not official yet, but we’re thinking of doing a cosplay café. With cute costumes and stuff,” I told her.

“Cosplay, eh?” Peach-chan muttered.

That’s right—Yoshin cosplaying in girls’ clothes could be really fun. We chatted about maid uniforms, so maybe Yoshin could even try wearing one.

Yoshin’s pretty muscular, so an oversized one that hides his body would be good. Maybe the classic maid look? His hair is short, so maybe he should wear a wig? No, maybe it’s better just to style his actual hair instead. He looks pretty young, so I bet he’d make a cute maid. I so wanna give him a makeover.

“Hello, Shichimi-chan? Are you listening?”

Peach-chan’s voice brought me back to reality. *Oh, jeez. I was totally daydreaming about the whole thing.*

Peach-chan was raising her voice uncharacteristically. Her voice was usually really cute, like a bell chiming, and it seemed that it didn’t change even if she spoke loudly.

I bet it would’ve been fun to have met her at our school festival.

Unfortunately, though, our school didn’t permit outside guests to attend. The only ones who could attend were the students’ family members. The policy was pretty strict, which was a real bummer.

“Are you gonna cosplay too, then? I wish I could see it,” Peach-chan said.

“Well, it’s not really for sure. But if we do end up doing it, then I wanna wear something fun,” I shared.

At first, I thought about just working in the back doing food prep, but since Yoshin talked about wanting to see me in a maid outfit, I kind of started wanting to wear a costume too. I probably couldn’t get away with wearing a bathing suit though. The bathing suit maid look definitely wouldn’t fly at school. A sexy outfit *might* be overlooked, but a bathing suit would probably bring the teachers’ wrath down on me.

Maid outfits, Chinese cheongsams, and uniforms from other schools were possible ideas. A sailor-style uniform could work too. How about an anime cosplay?

If I’m gonna do it, maybe I should wear something that Yoshin would like.

What does he like? That's probably what I'll be wearing when he and I go around the festival too. What won't be weird to walk around campus in? A cop costume? I probably can't be a bunny girl. That'll get me in trouble. Well, I guess I can really think about all this when our class application gets approved.

"But isn't a cosplay café a lot of work?" Peach-chan asked.

"Yeah, we might end up drawing names to figure out who's gonna do what," I replied.

I was pretty sure that was what we did for our class last year too. That was a lot of fun, but I was pretty sure I was nowhere near as excited as I was now.

Was it because of Yoshin? Or was it because this year's class felt more united? Either way, I was already looking forward to this year's school festival.

I was, but I was also worried about something: Teshikaga-kun. It looked incredibly likely that he was the one that had confessed to Kotoha-chan on a dare.

It seemed to hurt Kotoha-chan to see him. Our school festival was supposed to be fun; I wanted her to be able to enjoy it too, without worrying about anything. Or was I meddling too much by trying to help?

"Hey, Peach-chan, do you think it's possible to tell someone you like them, but have it all lead to a misunderstanding?" I asked.

"Huh? Hmmm. I wonder. I guess I'm not sure. Do you think it is?"

"I'm not sure either," I murmured.

I heard what Teshikaga-kun said, and I had also heard how Kotoha-chan described what happened in the past. But their stories were different; Teshikaga-kun said he messed up, while Kotoha-chan said it was all just a dare. Those two versions didn't match at all.

Was Teshikaga-kun just embarrassed? That didn't make any sense, especially since that might lead to her disliking him. But then, why did he do it?

I knew it was an issue between Teshikaga-kun and Kotoha-chan, but I couldn't help thinking that I wanted to do something for them.

Did I want to help because, like me, Teshikaga-kun confessed on a dare, and I

could very easily see myself in his situation? Or was I empathizing with Kotoha-chan instead?

Yeah, maybe I am just meddling.

Today's events really caught me by surprise though. I never could've imagined that Kotoha-chan could get so angry. I caught a glimpse of that when we spoke behind the school building, but she hadn't been angry then, exactly. I guess it was just extra scary when people who were usually serious got upset.

"I'm not going to forgive you this time."

"Oh!" I exclaimed softly. Come to think of it, Kotoha-chan said that she wouldn't forgive him *this* time. Did she already forgive him for last time, then? Plus, she kept wanting to refer to him by his nickname. Was it possible that she wanted to make up with him too?

The next time I could, I should ask her directly. It was better to just ask her than to speculate about how I could help. I shouldn't try to surprise her or try to fix things in secret. Teshikaga-kun himself seemed to have chosen to try to help Kotoha-chan secretly, but it seemed his intentions weren't clear to her at all.

And I should talk to Yoshin too. He was probably also concerned about Teshikaga-kun.

"I wonder if there's prizes. It'd be so cool if you guys won," Peach-chan continued.

"I guess I'm okay with not winning, just as long as I get to do it with Yoshin," I said. "Oh, that reminds me—there's something about dating that I wanted to ask you."

"Hmmm? What is it?"

"Do you think our relationship...is normal?" I asked.

I put up a tough front in front of Yoshin, but it shocked me that our class thought of us like that.

Well, maybe it wasn't that it was a shock. I just thought that he and I were doing a pretty good job of making our relationship seem normal in front of everyone, so now knowing otherwise, I couldn't help but want to ask Peach-

chan this.

In response, though, Peach-chan drew in her breath and then fell silent. Then, after a considerable pause, she finally opened her mouth and muttered, “I-It’s normal.”

“Sorry to force you to say that,” I murmured back. She tried, but her response told me everything I needed to know, and I had to accept it. I had to come to terms with the fact that my relationship with Yoshin really wasn’t ordinary.

I said this in class too, but maybe I should just own up to our reputation and do something to Yoshin that wasn’t terribly “normal” either. And that thought was the beginning of the secret plan that I was now starting to cook up.



“Yoshin, what do you want me to do to you?”

“Well, that came out of nowhere,” he said in response.

No time like the present—at least, that was what motivated me to call Yoshin and ask him straight out. He sure didn’t hesitate to be honest though.

It wasn’t the first time I’d said something like this, so Yoshin seemed pretty used to it, though still exasperated by it.

“Is this about what happened at school today? Are you really thinking of doing something?” he asked.

“That too, but I thought for the couple contest that we should try to stand out somehow,” I explained.

“O-Oh, you were serious about that, huh?” he muttered.

“What do you mean? You were the one that suggested it,” I said, purposely trying to make him feel guilty. I could tell that on the other end of the line, Yoshin was getting flustered.

Even exchanges like these felt fun to me.

“You don’t have to force yourself to enter it though,” I said. “You didn’t know that our school actually had a best couple contest, right? I’m sure it can be pretty nerve-racking to get in front of people.”

No response came from Yoshin. He fell silent. *Hmmm? What's happened?*

Instead, a strange sound was coming from the phone. A sound, or rather, it was Yoshin groaning over and over. *What on earth is going on?*

I listened to him continue groaning for some time, wondering just what exactly was agonizing him so much. But I found out soon enough.

"Maybe we can consider entering it," he finally murmured.

Huh? I couldn't immediately respond to his comment. It wasn't that I became speechless; my mind just completely went blank.

Wait, enter...enter? As in, the couple contest?! Really?! I was talking to him on speaker phone, but I picked up my phone without thinking.

I had been lying down, but I leaped up from the bed. I placed the phone that I'd grabbed slowly before me, then sat formally in front of it on my heels.

"M-M-May I inquire what precisely you mean by that, sir?" I stammered.

Oh, jeez. I was being all formal with him out of nowhere. He might think that I was being weird all of a sudden, but I didn't have the wherewithal to care. My heart pounded as I waited for him to respond.

Yoshin remained silent, but at least he was no longer groaning. The quiet made my heart pound even harder. Maybe Yoshin felt the same way. The silence almost hurt my ears.

"Um, I meant exactly the way I said it," he finally said. "As in, I thought that declaring in front of everyone that I only had eyes for you would help with dispelling that weird rumor," he explained.

"O-Oh, I see," I muttered.

His response was so matter-of-fact that it even helped calm *me* down.

He was right though: if he and I entered the couple contest together, then at the very least, the people who were spreading rumors about two-timing and harems would quiet down a bit.

But if that was the only reason we were entering the contest, I had to admit that honestly, that would make me a little sad. I knew that was selfish. I knew

Yoshin was doing all this for me.

Just being able to enter the contest with him made me happy, but still, I wanted more.

“And...also...” Yoshin began.

“Huh? Is there another reason?” I asked.

“Yeah. Well, I don’t know if it’s a *reason*, but...”

He paused once again. *What other reason is there?* I couldn’t think of anything. Was there something that Yoshin was having trouble with?

“No matter the result, I thought it’d be a nice way to make more memories with you,” he said.

I felt my entire body growing hot from hearing his words. *Oh, there it is again. It’s that feeling I have for Yoshin sometimes. This is what it means for your heart to go pitter-patter, isn’t it?*

“Hee hee. No matter the result, huh?” I said, chuckling.

“Well, you know. A contest might really just be a chance for guys to brag about their girlfriends, so I thought maybe you wouldn’t really like it. But I guess you can only really do that in high school and stuff,” he said.

“But *you* don’t dislike that?” I pressed. “It would be like me introducing you to people and bragging that you’re my boyfriend.”

“I guess I’m not entirely comfortable. But we only do junior year once, so if it means making memories with you, then maybe I can handle it,” he said.

I felt a little uncomfortable too, but another, bigger part of me wanted to enter the contest. Maybe it was just the simple desire to show off and flaunt the fact that Yoshin was my boyfriend. I didn’t really like the idea, and yet I couldn’t help thinking about it. I wondered how Yoshin felt.

“Maybe I want to tell everyone just what a wonderful woman you are, but I also wanna keep all those adorable things about you all to myself,” he said with a laugh, mentioning how it was all just a big contradiction.

I couldn’t help giggling myself, realizing that we were both having similar

thoughts.

“Except I just can’t seem to make up my mind completely to enter. I know it’s kind of pathetic,” he added.

“Oh, it’s fine. We don’t have to decide to enter until the very end, so we can think about it together,” I said to him.

“That’s true. Yeah, let’s think about it together,” he replied.

“Push comes to shove, we can enter at the last minute and draw all sorts of attention!” I exclaimed.

“Please don’t!”

Yoshin’s trying to change too. I couldn’t help but think that as he spoke. Until recently, he probably never gave a thought about changing in any way.

Just as I was changing, Yoshin was changing too.

That was probably a lovely thing. I wanted to change for the better too. The more I thought that, the more I wanted to see his face.

“Hey, Yoshin. Is it okay if we turn on our cameras?” I asked.

“Huh? Yeah, of course. I totally forgot we could do that,” he replied.

“We totally can! Okay, here goes,” I said, lying back down on my bed and placing the phone next to me as I switched over to video mode. After a brief moment, Yoshin’s face was displayed on my screen—the face of the boyfriend that I loved so much.

“Oh, were you sleeping?” he asked.

“Just lying down. I’m in my pajamas though, so that I can fall asleep anytime,” I explained, opening up my arms on the bed to show him the pajamas I was wearing. I was wearing my favorite set in pink, so I was actually glad that I got to show them to him.



When I asked him multiple times whether he thought they were cute, Yoshin obligingly told me that he thought they were. Just for that, I felt incredibly happy.

“Aw, it’s the *pajamas* that are cute?” I asked, my tone of voice growing involuntarily sweeter. I knew that, if anyone else saw us, they would think we were being ridiculous. Shoot, even *I* would think that if I looked back on this later.

Right now, though, it was just the two of us, so I could be as sweet and ridiculous as I wanted to be. After all, every girl loves to hear just how cute and pretty she is.

“Of course, they’re cute because you’re wearing them,” Yoshin corrected himself.

“Hee hee.” I let out a giggle, grinning wildly. Both Yoshin and I were now being unbelievably saccharine. On my screen, Yoshin appeared to be sitting somewhere.

As I maneuvered my phone in order to show him more of me in my pajamas, Yoshin suddenly turned away from the screen. I got a glimpse of his ears, which had turned slightly red.

“Nanami, they’re getting a little undone,” he muttered.

Huh? What about my pajamas could possibly be getting undone? I moved my head to look down at my chest while still lying down. *Oh, I see. I’m lying down, so the fabric around the buttons got bunched up. He can probably see my bra. But...I can’t really do much about that.*

“Jeez, what a pervert,” I mumbled.

“No, I really couldn’t help it,” he protested.

“I’m just kidding. It’s okay, you can look! I’m actually wearing a really cute bra today.”

For some time after that, Yoshin and I went back and forth about him looking at my underwear. *I’m telling him that he can look, but he’s being such a gentleman. It’s not like I’m flashing him. And he’s already seen so much anyway.*

He's seen me in a bathing suit, and in all sorts of other situations too. Oh, but I guess people do say that men like a certain amount of modesty. Jeez, it's so complicated.

But maybe it was just that Yoshin was cute when he got embarrassed. And if so, I didn't mind all the back-and-forth.

Bashfulness was adorable. Everyone probably felt that way. Most definitely. That seemed like a cringey generalization, but who really cared, anyway?

The more I thought about that, the more I wanted to flash him and see him get super flustered—but I somehow restrained myself.

I've gotta stop talking about underwear...

"So, uh, what were you doing just now, Yoshin?" I asked.

"I was thinking of making some rounds in my game," he replied.

"You mean the one you always play with Peach-chan and everyone?"

"Yeah. I haven't really been able to play much lately."

Yoshin and I continued chatting about random topics. Maybe it was because we were each in our own rooms, but our conversation today felt different from usual.

Since I was lying down, I started feeling much more relaxed, and talked a bit funny. And at one point, Yoshin and I both yawned at the exact same time. We thought it was so funny that we both cracked up and claimed that we were both copying the other.

"I think I'll go to sleep now though," Yoshin said. "I think I'll call it..."

"Hang on, Yoshin...keep talking to me," I muttered, sounding even more clingy in my half asleep state. I ordinarily would never sound like this. It felt good though—I felt like I could just fall asleep like that.

Not yet though...just a little bit longer...just a little bit, I thought to myself, trying desperately to hang on to the last bit of consciousness I had.

"But if we're gonna keep talking, I'm gonna have to lie down too," he said.

"Let's fall asleep talking...sleep while on call," I managed to say.

I wasn't even articulating myself clearly anymore. Yoshin said something, but I couldn't make it out. I could tell, though, that he also moved and lay down on his bed.

Doing this is nice, once in a while...

"We've slept together, but I don't think we've ever fallen asleep while on the phone," I murmured.

"I think you're right. It feels different from usual, huh?" he replied.

"Tee hee. I think I wanna do this...sometimes," I whispered.

I was sleepy, but I didn't want to fall asleep. I felt like we were lying side by side, and I wanted to stay awake forever. But I knew I was fading fast.

It was like I had walked into a thick fog, and my brain was dissolving into the surrounding mist. And all the while, Yoshin's gentle voice echoed inside my head.

Just before I finally fell asleep, I thought I heard him tell me good night.

I bet I'll have the sweetest of dreams tonight.

That was when I finally sank deep into slumber.

Chapter 3: Moonlight and Bunny

As was often the case with mental blind spots, it was in the act of doing that we came to great, but obvious, realizations. Falling asleep with Nanami while we were on the phone was one such blind spot.

It probably wasn't *actually* that much of a blind spot though. After all, I'd even wondered to myself before whether Nanami knew about falling asleep together while on the phone.

What *was* a revelation for me was doing so while on a video call.

I talked with Nanami on the phone almost every day, but those were just voice calls. And when I imagined falling asleep on the phone, I thought about just talking until we fell asleep. I'd never thought about talking while seeing each other. I also never thought about the fact that we could, in fact, do that with our smartphones.

It was just the other day that I realized that was a possibility. And, as a result, Nanami and I started falling asleep while on the phone quite regularly.

Regularly, as in, basically every day.

Until now, we would call each other, talk, then say good night once we got sleepy and hang up the phone. But after that night, everything changed.

With just a single video call, our everyday routine changed.

If I was lying on my bed, Nanami would be lying on her bed too. We would chat about anything and everything, and before we knew it, we would be asleep—and it would be morning.

What was great about this was that it was possible to stay on the line until morning and to see Nanami's sleeping face the first thing I woke up.

Usually one of us fell asleep first and the other hung up, so this rarely happened. And it's not like our batteries lasted forever either.

But it did happen—once. And I had to say, I woke up with a start.

I was in so much shock, I thought my heart would explode. For a moment, wildly, I had thought that Nanami had stayed over at my place the night before. Then I realized that I shouldn't wake her up, so I just decided to watch her sleep without saying anything.

I couldn't bring myself to hang up, so I just stayed that way, gazing at her. Then, Nanami's eyes slowly opened. I watched as her eyelids gradually lifted, my heart pounding in my chest.

Is this how the gods felt, when Amaterasu stepped out of the cave of Ama-no-Iwato? Not that Nanami was refusing to open her eyes the way the goddess was refusing to come out of the cave, but her formerly closed eyelids were now opening to reveal her beautiful eyes that I loved so much. They were still sleepy, but they were lovely nonetheless. Half asleep, Nanami gave me a somewhat rumpled smile as soon as she saw me.

Still lying down, she muttered, "Good morning" to me as she slowly emerged from her slumber. When I returned the greeting, Nanami closed her eyes and sank back into bed, as though she was powerless against the force of gravity.

I heard her steady breathing once again, but it quickly stopped, and Nanami suddenly opened her eyes wide.

"Huh?" she let out, registering the phone in front of her face and looking around. She then looked back toward me again.

"Holy crap. Were you *watching me*?" she asked. She sat up slowly, embarrassed, and backed away from her phone as she covered herself with her blanket.

After blinking a few times, Nanami must have calmed down somewhat because she puffed out her cheeks with obvious discontent. It seemed she was unhappy at the fact that I had woken up first and had been gazing at her. Still, I managed to tell her good morning and begin talking to her about the most mundane of topics.

It was, in short, a lovely day from the very start. After that, Nanami began showing up in my dreams more frequently. In fact, these last few days, I was starting to have difficulty distinguishing dreams from real life.

I was also feeling that I wasn't getting enough sleep, despite the fact that I was sleeping enough hours every night. Perhaps it was the fact that I was on the phone as I slept that was degrading my quality of sleep.

There seemed to be many pitfalls to this, but I couldn't stop. I felt like I was becoming addicted. *I really need to restrain myself...*

Nanami, too, began yawning more frequently at school, perhaps because her sleep had also become equally poor. That would trigger a yawn from me, and we sometimes even yawned at exactly the same time.

When we admitted to each other how sleepy we were, our classmates made fun of us—even those that I wouldn't have talked to just a little while ago.

"Well you two sure are rubbing it in our faces. Are you guys sleep-deprived for the same reason?" one of our male classmates asked. I could tell that he was teasing us, but it still was a relief that it was clear he meant nothing bad by what he said.

How was I supposed to respond though? Maybe I was just supposed to agree lightheartedly, or just say that it was a coincidence.

I remembered hearing somewhere that the trick to having a good conversation was to say things that allowed for the exchange to keep going. If I said something here that didn't allow a response, of course the conversation would just die out—and I also wouldn't be able to make any friends. If I was truly serious about making friends, I had to come up with the right response.

"Totally. Yoshin won't let me sleep. And I end up doing a lot of things to him too," I heard Nanami say, however.

Shoot, I took so long to reply that Nanami beat me to it! Am I thinking too much? Maybe I should have been speedier in my reply.

Nanami rubbed her eyes as she let out another yawn. I wanted to stick my finger in her mouth, but since we were at school, I had to hold back.

Hmmm? Why is it suddenly so quiet around us?

"O-Oh. I-I see, he won't let you sleep, huh?" the male student repeated.

"Like, so much that you can't sleep? Like, a lot of things?" the girl he was with

also muttered.

Wait, are people misunderstanding something?

By the time I realized it, the two students who had asked us the question were turning red and taking a step away from us. They looked furtively between me and Nanami, and then at each other.

“B-But didn’t you say before that you guys hadn’t even kissed yet?” the female student pressed. *Why are you insisting on this point?* Upon hearing the question, though, Nanami seemed to wake up more fully.

Then, she turned to look at me.

She neither denied it nor affirmed it. She just blushed slightly, looked at me, and then turned away from me. All I ended up doing was blushing and looking away too.

The others must have sensed something, because the entire class stirred for a moment. Someone whispered, “So they finally did it...”

We didn’t say anything and remained silent instead, as though that was our only response.

“Nanami-chan, did you do something lewd?” Shirishizu-san suddenly asked, her candid question reverberating oddly throughout the classroom.

That single question silenced me, Nanami, and everyone else as well. No, wait, I saw from the corner of my eye that Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san alone were stifling their laughter, their faces turning bright red.

Nanami raised her head, then looked away. She then brought the tips of her two index fingers together and muttered, “No, we haven’t.”

“Oh, I see, so you haven’t. Then you weren’t talking about sex, huh?” Shirishizu-san confirmed.

“What? I was just talking about falling asleep while talking on the phone. Why would anyone think...?”

Nanami must have finally started thinking more clearly, because she seemed to be recalling what she had said as she turned to me with a panicked expression. She even seemed to be tearing up.

Dang, even now while she's panicked, I can't help but think of how cute she looks. Even though it's kinda sad. But she's still cute. Gosh, restrain yourself, Yoshin.

As soon as the class heard Nanami mention falling asleep while on the phone, everyone seemed to relax a bit. I secretly thanked Shirishizu-san in my mind, though I would soon realize that I was too quick to do so.

"Then you haven't done anything sexual yet, huh?" Shirishizu-san asked.

"N-No, I haven't! Why would you ask such a thing?!" Nanami replied.

"I guess I'm just curious. I've never done it before either, so I've wondered what it was like. It's a little surprising that you haven't yet though," she said.

"But that's because Yoshin won't do anything to me," Nanami lamented.

Yikes! Why is this coming back to me?!

For a moment I thought that the guys would look at me with renewed hostility, but it turned out that they just turned red and looked away. The girls were also turning red, but they were staring at Nanami as though they were curious and wanted to hear more.

I was grateful that the guys weren't looking at me like they wanted to kill me, but their reactions honestly surprised me. I thought they'd be more interested in this kind of stuff. Still, staying on this topic any longer could be dangerous.

Just as I thought that, though, the bell rang.

"All right, settle down, folks! Let's start class," the teacher said as he walked in, making everyone in class scatter back to their seats. The teacher watched us as he tilted his head, completely unaware of what we had been talking about just moments before.

As soon as everyone sat down and class was ready to begin, the teacher stood at the lectern and clapped his hands once.

"All right, let's begin homeroom. We're continuing our previous discussion about the school festival. Can we get the class reps to report back about the results?" he asked, stepping back to let the class reps take his place at the front of the room.

Today was the day the results of the lottery for our school festival activities were announced. Depending on the results, we might have to reconsider what we were going to do for the festival. Classes whose first choice didn't get chosen would have one more chance to change their proposal—though most just settled for their second choice.

I was unexpectedly nervous. It wasn't like when I was on the phone with Nanami before bed, but I still felt my heart pounding. I was pretty sure it was the first time I felt this way about a school event.

The class reps came to the front of the class, with Kenbuchi-san stepping forward. He cleared his throat once, very deliberately. Then, drawing a deep breath, he declared loudly, "Our first choice has been approved!"

When he raised his fists into the air, the entire class cheered loudly in response. We were so loud that the teacher from the class next door came to admonish us. And although she scolded us to be quiet, we were too excited to stop shouting and cheering.

Even I ended up cheering with both my hands in the air. As soon as the class quieted down a little bit, though, Shirishizu-san asked, "Are you really okay with the fact that we're not doing a performance, Kenbuchi-kun?"

"Oh, yeah, of course. I just said that back then because we weren't getting anywhere in our discussion. As long as I can find a way to enjoy my youth, I'm fine with anything. Plus I have a feeling our class is gonna have a lot of fun regardless," he replied.

"I see," Shirishizu-san said.

"Plus there are so many cute girls in our class. I'm so stoked about the cosplay!" he added.

"I see," Shirishizu-san repeated.

I knew it was the same words said twice, but the way she said it the second time sounded like she was saying something entirely different.

To be honest, though, I had to agree with Kenbuchi-kun—though it was just Nanami that I was excited about seeing in cosplay, not some random girls.

“What’s up?” Nanami asked, as she made her way over to me, her face puzzled at how I looked at her.

What’s she gonna wear? Is she gonna end up wearing a maid costume after all?

“I’m looking forward to the school festival,” I said instead.

“Yeah. I can’t wait to walk around with you. It’s gonna be so much fun to have a school festival date,” she replied dreamily.

A date. Hearing her say that embarrassed me a little. But she was right; this, too, was going to be a date. Honestly, I thought of dates as something that pretty much only happened *outside* of school. To go on a date *at* school though? I had a feeling that I would constantly remember it every time I was on campus.

“Now that we’ve figured out what we’re actually going to do, I’d like for us to choose the festival executive committee for our class. We’ll need to elect two, so if anyone would like to self-nominate...”

I heard Shirishizu-san continue to explain the logistics as the class continued its ruckus. I didn’t know there was such a thing as an executive committee. It sounded like a lot of work.

And, of course, there were no self-nominations. The class had suddenly grown quiet, making it difficult to believe just how worked up we had been a moment ago.

What does an executive committee member even do? Honestly, I’m a little curious.

“Please don’t be intimidated by the title. There’s already a main festival executive committee for the school, so all we’re deciding today is the representatives from our class. You won’t actually have to manage the school festival itself,” Shirishizu-san continued, her tone kind and supportive. She was smiling as though to reassure any person here that they could nominate themselves without worry. Her words were so reassuring that, had the situation been different, we all probably could have listened to her for hours. Even so, no one stepped up to volunteer.

“Damn, it didn’t work,” Shirishizu-san muttered.

The quiet of the room was shattered by that remark. I was surprised as well. *Shirishizu-san, I never knew you were the type to say things like that. Oh, Kenbuchi-kun looks pretty shocked too.*

“Sh-Shirishizu-san, I never knew you talked like that,” he was telling her.

“Huh? I figured I didn’t need to play the part of the Goody Two-shoes anymore. I’m bored of it, to be honest,” she replied nonchalantly, rustling up her wavy hair dramatically and serving a bewitching smile.

Everyone seemed at a loss for what to do. Shirishizu-san’s new personality fit her postmakeover look so perfectly.

“I like,” Kenbuchi-kun murmured.

Are you kidding me? He clearly fell for her right then and there. Still, no one raised their hand to volunteer for the position. Prepping for the school festival was fun, but no one actually wanted to take on such a responsibility. None of this was surprising.

“Can I say something?” Kenbuchi-kun raised his hand as the classroom began to return to its normal state. When Shirishizu-san nodded, he quietly placed his hands on the lectern.

“This is up to the person, of course, but,” he began, then glanced over in my direction. My heart jumped at the seriousness in his eyes, and I flinched back slightly.

Kenbuchi-kun breathed in deeply, then asked me, rather than the class, “Misumai, do you wanna try being on the executive committee?”

“Huh?” I blurted out.

I was *not* expecting that proposal. Or, maybe this was more of a nomination. Regardless, I couldn’t wrap my head around why this task was falling into *my* lap.

As I sat there speechless, Kenbuchi-kun continued, saying, “Misumai, you were the first one to back up my idea for the festival. You said then that you wanted to make memories too. I thought maybe, if you were on the executive

committee, you'd be in the prime position to do that."

I had no idea he even remembered what I said back then. It was true that I said that, but I couldn't help wondering if this turn of events was putting perhaps too much pressure on me.

"Besides," Kenbuchi-kun started again, though he stopped immediately. He then shook his head and stared directly at me. Finally, he puffed out his chest and proceeded to strike it with his own fist. "Of course, I won't leave you to do all the work by yourself. As a class rep, I'll support you in any way I can. So, what do you say?" he asked with a smile, as though trying to keep the mood light.

I'd half suspected it when we were brainstorming ideas for the school festival, but Kenbuchi-kun was the pretty passionate type. He took the initiative and spoke up in front of people. He did his best to change the mood of the class for the better. He seemed a little bit like the class clown, but maybe even that was one of his strong suits. He was the complete opposite of me, and somehow that passion of his was blinding.

I could tell that the other people in the room didn't care either way. What was happening right now was probably just between me and Kenbuchi-kun.

If I were in my classmates' shoes, I probably wouldn't have cared who ended up on the executive committee either. What was more, I was someone who wasn't really a core part of the class either. Their reaction was totally expected.

All of a sudden, I was embarrassed. Here I was, thinking I could just make friends when I had done nothing to actually make that happen before. What made me think that I—who had never tried to be proactively involved in class—could do anything with such a half-assed attitude? That would be too good to be true.

A journey of a thousand miles, though, began with a single step. Rome wasn't built in a day. Constant dripping wore away the stone. In the spirit of all the old sayings, the important thing was to *start*.

Just like I poured my energies into my relationship with Nanami, I should try pouring a tiny bit of those energies somewhere else.

I start here. This is where I begin.

“I don’t know if I’ll be any good, but I’ll give it a shot,” I said.

I sounded pretty pessimistic, but I couldn’t help it. This was my first time doing something like this, after all—agreeing to be on a class committee, or at least, telling someone that I was willing to do something like that.

Still, I said yes because I felt like I wanted to try.

Kenbuchi-kun and Shirishizu-san were smiling and looked quite happy. Everyone else just seemed relieved that one of the spots was filled, but even that made me glad that I took on the role.

Immediately, a voice rang out from beside me.

“Then I’ll be the second person.”

It was Nanami. She raised her hand excitedly, and Kenbuchi-kun quickly wrote both my and Nanami’s names on the blackboard. Nanami smiled and flashed me a peace sign.

“Are you sure? I know I said I’d do it kind of out of nowhere,” I asked.

“What, you don’t wanna do it with me?” she returned.

“Well, I mean, of course I’m happy if we get to do it together.”

“Right? This way we can be together even when we’re prepping for the festival. Let’s make it a great event,” she said, smiling an innocent and toothy grin. Just as I started laughing along with her...

“What is this, a rom-com?!” someone in the class shouted.

They were pretty spot-on. This was a pretty classic setup: two people, not yet a couple, working together on a big project that inevitably drew them together. The only difference was that Nanami and I were already going out.

“I mean, I’ve heard that people who get together during the school festival break up pretty fast, but maybe it doesn’t matter if you’re already dating. I guess they’re perfect for it, then, huh?” someone said.

“It’ll be fun to see what kind of work this married couple will do!” another person piped up.

“Hey, Misumai-kun! If you get bored of Nanami, I’ll totally help you out!” called out a girl from afar.

“Who was that?! Who just tried to steal Yoshin away from me?! I’ll never forgive you!” Nanami shot back, even though no one had any idea who had made the comment. Even this series of exchanges was fun, so much so that I couldn’t help laughing.

“Don’t worry, there’s no way I’d get bored of you,” I said, trying to reassure Nanami, who had stood from her chair to intimidate the other girls in the class. She seemed disgruntled still, but she nonetheless sighed and sat back down.

“You’re being so unfair,” she said.

“Am I?” I asked.

I was being completely honest though. If I was with Nanami, every single day would be so much fun. I was pretty confident that I would be able to stay with her without ever getting bored.

I wondered how Nanami felt. Was I becoming the kind of guy that she wouldn’t get bored with either?

“I’m craving black coffee all of a sudden,” someone suddenly remarked. Many nodded in agreement.

Shoot, I was carrying on like usual, even though we were in class. Maybe because Nanami and I were acting flirty, there were people around us who were starting to blush.

“Okay, don’t start making out now. Can we get the two exec members to come forward and say something to the class?” Shirishizu-san asked, clapping her hands a couple of times. *Wait, what? Do I have to?*

Nanami walked to the front of the class with zero hesitation. She stepped lightly, seeming not at all nervous about talking before a large crowd. I, on the other hand, was pathetically hesitant.

Nanami, though, waved me over to her gently.

That’s right. I decided that this was where I was going to start. This, here, is my first step.

I forced my body to move, even though it was stiff with nerves, and began to make my way toward the front of the class. People's attention made my body tingle; the tips of my fingers grew cold, and I was even starting to sweat. Nanami was still calling to me, but I couldn't stop my body from reacting this way.

Come on, Yoshin. You can do this.

I then turned at the lectern and looked out at the rest of the class. I had stood here before, but the classroom was noisy then, and I didn't have a chance to look around at everyone.

When I looked out more calmly, seeing everyone look back at me made me the slightest bit afraid.

Still...

"Um, I'm Yoshin Misumai. I'm very grateful..."

And that was how, even with fits and starts, I managed to say something to everyone in the class, as if I were introducing myself to them for the first time.



"So Mai-chan, you're on the school festival exec committee, huh? Heeey, that's nice! You must be stoked to be doing it with Nana-chan, to boot. Super stoked, eh?"

"Please don't make fun of me, Yu-senpai," I muttered.

Today was my first day back at work after the end of summer break. It'd been a while since I was last here, so everyone wanted to know what was new in my life. When I told them about the school festival, Yu-senpai seemed even more excited about it than I was. Her eyes were sparkling, and she was skipping around giddily.

Though a decent amount of time had passed since I'd last been at work, surprisingly, I wasn't too nervous about it.

I had only intended to work during summer break to substitute for Shoichi-senpai, but I was grateful when they asked me to continue even after the summer ended. I had heard in recent news that businesses all over were short-

staffed, so the owners probably just wanted to hang on to anyone currently working for them. Still, I couldn't be sure if I was being all that helpful.

I didn't really have a reason to refuse, anyway; they were allowing me to take time off for exams, and told me they could be flexible with my schedule in case I wanted to spend time with Nanami.

The more income I had, the better, so their offer was like a dream come true for me. I wouldn't need to find another job either.

I was currently only scheduled to work during lunchtime on Saturdays and Sundays, but I was hoping to add shifts on weekday evenings too. Of course, I was thankful that they were willing to keep me on at all, but I couldn't help but be curious about what it was like to work the dinner shift too.

We'd open soon after we finished prepping. This would be my first week working that wasn't during summer vacation, and I wondered how crowded the restaurant would get. I guess I did feel kind of anxious about that.

"And is Nana-chan coming today? Is she gonna visit her boyfriend's workplace and stuff?" Yu-senpai asked. She seemed to have taken quite a liking to Nanami. She waved her index fingers from side to side in a gesture I had no clue how to interpret, but then she formed a heart shape with her hands and thrust it out toward me.

"Yes, she's coming in the afternoon. We're going to prep for the festival together once I get off work," I replied.

"Wow, the whole exec thing must be a lot of work," Yu-senpai commented.

"Oh, no. I just don't know that much about school festivals in general, so we decided to go on a date to check out things we might need, and to have some snacks to decide what food we might serve," I explained.

"Oh, so it's just a date, then," Yu-senpai remarked, though contrary to her terse remark, she was grinning wildly at me.

She was right—it really was just a date, a school festival date in the guise of prep work. Though we really did need to research what we'd serve in our class café, so it wasn't one hundred percent just for fun.

Okay, fine, our research was going to consist of us walking around and trying different snacks, but still.

“Aw man, that’s so nice. I want to go on a date with a pretty girl like Nana-chan too,” Yu-senpai said, swaying her upper body from side to side as she prepped the restaurant for opening. Though I was also helping on prep, Yu-senpai was much faster than I was.

I took a glance at her, and Yu-senpai seemed entirely immersed in her fantasy about going on a date with a pretty girl, her look far-off and distant. *Wait, does Yu-senpai like girls? I mean, I’ve heard that friendships between girls were fairly similar to romantic ones. Is that what she’s feeling?*

“Are you interested at all in getting a boyfriend, Yu-senpai?” I asked. Last I heard, she said that she had never had a boyfriend in her life, so maybe she might want to date someone.

Senpai, though, brought her hands together, grimacing and groaning at the same time.

“A boyfriend, eh? I wouldn’t mind one if he were the cute type. He doesn’t have to be handsome; I’ve had my fill of guys like that. I’d rather have one whose reactions to things are cute,” she explained.

She seemed slightly embarrassed about her response, but honestly, it *was* pretty unexpected. But perhaps we’d gotten a glimpse of it when she met Nanami for the first time; she had said, after all, that she had wanted Nanami for herself when they first met. Though, maybe that was a little different, given that Nanami was a girl.

“But I really do wanna go on a date with a pretty girl too. Maybe *anyone* is okay, as long as they’re cute,” she remarked.

“Why do you sound like you just made a major discovery about yourself?” I had to ask.

Rather than answering, Yu-senpai laughed like a villain and said, as if she were a middle-aged man, “Gosh, I sure would like to get a chance to hang out with Nana-chan too. Come on, now, why don’t you let me take her out somewhere, just me and her? I won’t do anything weird, I promise.”

“Now that you put it that way, there’s no way I’d say yes,” I declared.

“Darn it. Well, in that case, I’ll just have to get a boyfriend and go on a double date with you two. A boyfriend though? Hmm...since I just made this new discovery, maybe I should get a girlfriend instead,” she wondered aloud.

Trying my best to ignore Yu-senpai, who was engaged in an interesting debate with herself, I continued preparing the restaurant to open. Although she continued moaning and groaning to herself, she nonetheless managed to carry out her tasks impeccably.

The restaurant was opening soon, so the time for idle talk was over. Work that day wasn’t terribly busy. Compared to summer break, foot traffic to the restaurant seemed to be much slower.

Since Nanami was coming, I guess it worked out well.

Speaking of, isn’t this the first time I’m seeing Nanami while I’m at work? I mean, last time she and I were both here as customers. Oh shoot, I’m kinda getting nervous.

The moment I realized this, a hollow, metallic sound of a bell rang throughout the restaurant.

Jeez, snap out of it—I’ve gotta focus. I immediately greeted the customer in my usual way, calling out before seeing who it was. I tried to sound energetic, but my voice immediately caught in my throat.

“Welco—?!”

The new customer was Nanami.

She wore dark baggy pants with a white shirt layered under a sweater. It had gotten a bit chilly lately, though it wasn’t yet cold enough for us to start bundling up. Maybe her outfit today was hitting the right balance between showing off and covering up.

She was wearing glasses—a rare occasion—and had a small purse hanging from her shoulder. I was pretty sure it was one of those things called a sling bag. She smiled, her eyes twinkling behind her glasses.

In response to her excited expression, I calmly—very calmly—smiled back at

her.

“Welcome. Will it be a party of one today?” I said as a formality.

“Nope, it’ll be a party of three!” she replied.

Three?

My smile remained even as question marks flew about my head, and, as if on cue, the door to the restaurant opened. Another ring of the bell heralded two more people: Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san.

These two were smiling just as broadly as Nanami was.

Otofuke-san was wearing an asymmetrical, navel-baring top with tight pants, while Kamoenai-san wore a frilly off-shoulder top with shorts.

Isn’t she cold right now?



“It’s wonderful to have you here,” I muttered.

“It’s wonderful to be here!” the three of them replied in unison. I had to admit, I was completely caught off guard. I never thought that all three of them would come visit together.

“A party of three, is it? Right this way, please,” I said, showing them to their table as I did my best to stay composed. In response, the three of them let out an exaggerated “woooow.”

“Here we are.” I gestured to a table by the window.

“Thank you!” they returned.

When I made my way back to the kitchen to get water for the table, Yu-senpai glanced over at the three girls and whispered, “Hey Mai-chan, Mai-chan! What’s with that super cute, sexy gyaru group?! Their outfits are so revealing! I mean, jeez!”

“Please don’t characterize my girlfriend and her friends as a *sexy group*, Yu-senpai,” I lamented.

“But seriously. Wow. Nana-chan looks so cute in glasses. I mean, what in the world? Damn...”

It seemed senpai was quite taken by Nanami wearing glasses. It would have been better for me if she had been drawn to the other two rather than Nanami—though I probably shouldn’t have been thinking that. I guess her earlier words still had me on guard.

“Mother is so happy to see Mai-chan with friends. You always used to play by yourself,” Yu-senpai said between pretend sobs.

“What exactly are you playing at?” I murmured.

Senpai laughed even as she continued her fake cry, but I couldn’t help protesting anyway. We had only just met this summer break, after all.

But wait, wasn’t this situation more bothersome than I fully realized? There were three out there and one in here, and all of them were seemingly hell-bent on teasing me.

For now, though, I let senpai play pretend and returned to Nanami's table in order to do my job.

"Thank you for waiting. Are you ready to order?" I asked, placing the glasses of water in front of the three girls as they studied the menu. They raised their heads and looked at me, though, as if impressed that I was actually doing my job properly.

"Hey, you're not half bad at this," Otofuke-san said.

"Yeah, really! Are you actually, like, a jack-of-all-trades or something?" Kamoenai-san asked.

Wow, they're complimenting me. I'm really happy, but also, what am I supposed to say? What are you supposed to do when your friends come visit you at your work?

The fact that I always froze up when faced with the unexpected was probably a testament to my inability to handle change, my lack of adaptability. If being on the school festival executive committee could help me overcome this shortcoming, that'd actually be really cool.

"Nah, honestly it feels like I'm constantly just trying to keep my head above water," I managed to reply. I was in the middle of my shift, so it wasn't like I could just stand there and chat, but it would have been rude of me to say nothing.

But wait. Why isn't Nanami saying anything?

The other two must have noticed the same thing, because they shifted their gazes away from their menus to stare at Nanami. Nanami was looking down at her menu, but also stealing glances at me.

Hmmm?

"What's wrong, Nanami?" I asked.

"Um, it's just that," she began.

Nanami then placed the menu—which she had been studying closely, as if trying to hide from me—on the table. She then closed her eyes and breathed in deeply.

She then turned to me and with her hands on her cheeks, as if trying to endure some unidentifiable emotion, muttered, “I can’t decide if you look more cute or handsome in that apron.”

“Oh, uh...um, thanks,” I murmured back.

Since she had taken so long to comment on something like that, her doing so surprised me so much that in the end, that was all I could manage to say.



Preparations for the school festival proceeded rapidly. And even when I came to realize just how difficult being on the executive committee was, I somehow managed to do my duties thanks to the people around me. It was surprising how emotionally exhausting it was to do things we weren’t accustomed to: submitting forms to the school, managing safety concerns, figuring out the food and drinks, assembling the ingredients, deciding on the menu, and all sorts of other things.

To cope with the mental fatigue while we prepped for the festival, Nanami and I, um, tried out various ways to heal each other.

“Today, we’ll be taste testing items to put on our school festival menu,” I announced.

In response, there came applause from the people who had elected to remain after class ended. Just as I’d said, we were conducting a taste test of our potential menu items after school.

The room that we’d been assigned to conduct this test was a rather large, empty classroom...and it just so happened to be the one that Nanami and I once embraced in. What a coincidence.

Here and there were decorations for the school festival, a clear sign of how far preparations had progressed.

“Hey, this is pretty good! I might even be able to make this at home,” someone said.

“Yeah, it’s nice that it seems pretty easy to make,” another student commented.

“Hmm, not sure I’m a fan of this one,” a third person muttered.

I heard a variety of opinions being shared throughout the classroom. Most of them sounded positive, which made me happy.

“Yeah, it’s a relief to see that things are coming along. A beer right now would be perfect,” the teacher said as he joined the students in tasting the snacks. We couldn’t serve alcohol at the school festival, obviously, so he was going to have to settle for a soda.

The main item for our café menu was going to be popcorn.

We weren’t allowed to use any open flames for the school festival, but portable hot plates were okay. But even with hot plates, the kinds of dishes we could make were pretty limited, and we also had to be careful not to serve undercooked food.

We had to go through numerous workshops run by the school to learn about all the forms we had to submit and the many different ways to avoid food poisoning. On top of that, we also had to submit our menu for review and approval. *And*, if it turned out our menu overlapped at all with another class’s, we might even have to redo it entirely. So, after making sure to follow all the guidelines laid out for us, what we ended up settling on was popcorn.

“Wasn’t popcorn super popular a while back?” someone asked.

“I hear it’s a must-have at that mouse theme park. But I’ve never been there, so I can’t really say,” a classmate answered.

“But even if it’s not trending, it’s what I always get at the movies,” someone else added.

Everyone was trying out different flavored popcorn that they liked and sharing their thoughts. Salt, caramel, butter, consommé, curry, chocolate, soy sauce—since we were just adding seasonings to store-bought popcorn, food poisoning wouldn’t be a problem for us. Even I could do it, which meant it really wasn’t hard at all.

“You really hit the jackpot, huh?” Nanami said to me.

“Nah, I can’t really take the credit for it. Baron-san helped me come up with

the idea,” I confessed.

That’s right—I had asked Baron-san to help me prepare for the school festival, mainly with planning and advanced preparations.

I hadn’t intended to have him help me like this at all; it was just that when I told him I became an exec member for the school festival, he’d offered on his own, asking if I could use a hand in any of the planning.

Though I was initially hesitant to accept his help, I decided to in the end because I didn’t want the years of ignorance and inexperience that I’d built up until now about stuff like this to potentially get in the way and trouble people.

Baron: Canyon-kun is all grown-up now...and that makes me so happy.

Hadn’t I just heard Yu-senpai say something similar? Or rather, was that like the thing to say nowadays?

Since we thought just popcorn by itself might get boring pretty fast, we also decided to decorate waffles and other premade snacks so that they’d be fun to take pictures of.

We contemplated adding more items to cook on a hot plate, but ultimately decided against it; more options would probably be too difficult to manage.

A school festival was a *festival*, after all. We had to enjoy ourselves too. Fortunately, our school didn’t rank the different programs and food that the classes offered for the festival like other schools might’ve.

Oh, I should try some popcorn too, I thought, picking up some that was nearby and bringing it to my mouth. *Yeah, it’s pretty good. Wow, I haven’t had popcorn in a really long time...or, wait, have I had it recently? Maybe I have.*

“I’m gonna have some too! It’s been a while. The caramel one is really good,” Nanami said.

“You like that flavor?” I asked her.

“Mmm, I think I like most flavors as long as they’re sweet. I’ll get fat if I eat too much though. I’m pretty sure my chest is still getting bigger too,” Nanami

replied, mumbling toward the end.

“That *is* rough,” I murmured in return.

Wait, was I allowed to say such a thing? It seemed odd to say that it was wonderful, so I was pretty certain I said the right thing just then. Nanami had said that last part about her chest in a voice loud enough for only me to hear. She probably didn’t whisper it in my ear because we were in a classroom with other people.

It was weird for me to be with everyone after school, just chatting and snacking together. Emotionally, I felt like I was on some kind of high.

This must be what a festival is all about.

“Come to think of it, we didn’t get popcorn when we saw that movie on our first date, huh?” Nanami said.

“Oh, you’re right. We didn’t even buy drinks that day, did we?” I asked.

“I mean, it was our *first date*. I was super nervous,” she mumbled.

“Yeah, me too,” I murmured in return. “Should we try getting something the next time we go?”

Nanami agreed excitedly, bringing another piece of popcorn to her mouth. Maybe eating the sweet ones made her crave something savory, because I noticed that she was eating the consommé-flavored one this time.

Looks like they like the trial snacks, I thought to myself, when Nanami cradled some popcorn in her palm and muttered, “Maybe we can get some popcorn the next time we watch a movie in your room.”

“Oh. Uh, th-that seems like fun too,” I replied.

I didn’t think we had ever watched a movie in my room before. But when you were watching a movie at home, what were you supposed to do with the lights? Turn them all off? Whenever I watched something at home with my parents, we didn’t do anything like that.

“Um...hey, Yoshin. What do you think of this flavor? Say ‘aah’!”

“Wha—?!”

It must have embarrassed Nanami to talk about watching a movie alone together in my room; she tried to shove some popcorn in my mouth to distract me from her reaction. Judging from the way it smelled, it was probably curry flavor, one of the more unusual flavors we thought we'd try.

This wasn't the first time Nanami was feeding me, so that itself wasn't an issue. The problem was the distance—not the distance between me and Nanami, but rather the distance between the food and Nanami's fingers.

We ate popcorn with our hands, so she was holding it right between her fingers. To have her try to feed me that was more than a little iffy. If I refused, though, Nanami might feel dejected. *Yeah, I should just go for it.*

I ate the popcorn from Nanami's fingertips. She didn't dare try to stick her fingers in my mouth, but even then, my lips brushed up against her fingers.

With a slight rustling sound, the popcorn was placed into my mouth.

The curry-flavored popcorn somehow managed to taste sweet. Nanami then offered the container of popcorn out toward me, as if she wanted me to return the gesture.

Our exchange, though, halted then and there.

"Enough already, guys," we heard someone say, making us spin around toward the direction from which the voice came. That was when we discovered our classmates had been watching us with bated breath.

The girls were staring at us, their cheeks flushed and their expressions overly serious. One girl had even covered her eyes but was still peeking between her fingers.

The guys, on the other hand, were looking at us with a mix of exasperation, envy, and anger in their eyes. They weren't directing those emotions at Nanami, of course; it was solely for me.

The teacher, meanwhile, was looking at us with disbelief in his narrowed eyes.

"Hey, Hatsumi...are those two always like that?" someone asked.

"Ah, um, yeah...pretty much. That's just their MO. And when they're worse, they're *much worse*," Otofuke-san explained.

“I’d heard about it, but I didn’t realize they were *this* bad. They’re all over each other,” another classmate commented.

“And they haven’t even gone all the way yet!” Kamoenai-san piped up.

“Come on, that can’t possibly be true,” someone else muttered.

Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san, could you possibly help us instead of adding fuel to the fire? Hey, wait, it totally is true though. We really haven’t done anything yet.

By the time I realized it, there was a small group of people interested in our relationship all gathered around Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san. *Wait, shouldn’t you ask the couple directly? No, wait, I don’t think that’s a good idea. Wait, who just said our “show” paired perfectly with the popcorn? Isn’t that usually about pairing alcohol and food? Though I guess we can’t drink yet, since we’re underage.*

I was supremely embarrassed, but there wasn’t really anything I could do. Maybe the only way I could respond was just to sit back and just try to take it all in stride.

“Here, Nanami. My turn,” I said, making a move to feed her.

“You’re gonna do that *now*?!” she exclaimed.

“I mean, it just seems like we won’t be able to wrap this up without a good punch line,” I offered.

“That’s not something you have to worry about!” she shouted.

She was absolutely right, of course. It seemed I was so embarrassed myself that my brain wasn’t functioning properly. Ordinarily, I would never do anything like this.

This turned out to be quite the taste test. At least no one was taking photos of us or anything.

“Hey, Nanami. Can I upload a photo of you two flirting with each other to the group chat?” someone asked.

“Absolutely not!” Nanami yelled.

So they *were* taking photos of us. Yeah, that was a no from me as well.

Nanami charged into a group of girls near her and began grappling with the ones who had their phones pointed at her. It was probably better for me, as a guy, not to butt in on situations like this.

Oh, Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san aren't intervening either. Is it just me, or are they looking at Nanami like they're her mom or something? What's with the tenderness?

"Nanami is going at it with other girls over her boyfriend," Otofuke-san muttered.

"She's so grown-up... She makes her onee-chan so happy," Kamoenai-san joined in.

They were both dabbing at their eyes with their hankies and pretending to cry. *Honestly, is that like the thing to say right now? Or is this all genuinely a coincidence?*

"Come on, seriously! We're supposed to get more done today, right?! Aren't we gonna try on our costumes?!" In the meantime, Nanami was yelling as she stood, red-faced, in the middle of a group of girls.

With Nanami's exclamation, everyone seemed to return to their senses. She was right though; we were supposed to have a taste test *and* try out some of the costumes, but we had completely forgotten.

The costumes were left up to the students—whether to bring something they already had, use festival funds to purchase one, or make it themselves.

We were putting on a cosplay café, in which we would host and entertain the customers while wearing a variety of interesting costumes. We could've decided on a unifying theme for the costumes, but we figured that cosplay was already a theme on its own. I guess an *actual* café would've done better to choose a specific concept. If we were aiming just to have a good time, though, not settling on a theme was probably a better bet. Oh, but since Halloween was coming up soon, we did decide to include a little bit of that in our decorations.

"Okay, then the girls will go and get changed first. You can look forward to our return, Yoshin," Nanami said as she stood up.

“Oh, yeah. See you when you get back,” I said.

The girls all got up and followed Nanami to another classroom to change. As they opened the door to leave, I caught a glimpse of the hallways. Maybe because all the classes were preparing for the school festival, the hallway was full of decorations.

Hmmm, what should I do until Nanami gets back? Just as I thought that, one of the guys sat down in the seat next to mine with a loud clatter.

It was Kenbuchi-kun. Yeah, even I remembered his name now.

“Hey, Kenbuchi-kun. What’s up?” I said in greeting.

“I just wanted to say thanks,” he replied as soon as he settled in the seat. I didn’t think I’d done anything to deserve that though.

What’s he talking about?

Kenbuchi-kun must have sensed my bewilderment, because he continued, snacking on some popcorn as he did.

“You know—you backed me up when we were talking about what to do for the festival. And you even went along with being on exec,” he explained.

“Oh, no way. It wasn’t that big of a deal. I chose to do that,” I replied.

Wait, is that response too unfriendly? But I didn’t do those things because I was trying to help him, necessarily. How else am I supposed to reply though?

As I began to mildly panic at the idea that I was being too brusque, Kenbuchi-kun just smiled coolly at me and said, “Still, it made me really happy. You’ve never hung out with anyone since last year, and I never really knew what you were thinking, but now that I’m getting the chance to actually talk to you, you’re pretty interesting,” he said.

I never knew that was how he thought of me. I couldn’t argue against it though. Everything he said was completely valid.

“So let’s enjoy the school festival, huh? We’ve gotta make the most awesome memories this year, with everyone in the class!” Kenbuchi-kun said, extending his hand out toward me. This was the first time I had talked to someone like this and been offered a handshake, so for a moment I didn’t know what to do.

Somehow, though, I was able to naturally take his hand. I had to admit how nervous I was, though it was different from when I held Nanami's hand.

The hand that I took felt surprisingly warm.

"You're right. Let's make it happen, Kenbuchi-kun," I said to him.

"Oh, come on, you don't have to be so formal. You can just call me by my first name. Oh, is it okay if I call you 'Yoshin' too?" he asked.

"Huh? Yeah, that's fine, but...um, your first name...your first name...?"

Shoot. His first name, huh? His first name...

Wait. What's Kenbuchi-kun's first name again?

I froze with my hand still gripping his, sweat suddenly pouring out from every pore of my body. Kenbuchi-kun turned serious as he saw me sweating—as if he perceived immediately what was going on in my brain.

"Misumai, it can't possibly be that, despite having been in the same class since last year, you...don't know my first name?" he suggested.

"Uh, um...well, uh," I stammered.

Unable to say more, I nodded hesitantly in response to his question. *I mean, really...come on, I can't claim to know what I don't.*

With his hand in mine now quivering, Kenbuchi-kun slowly released our handshake and spun around on his heels.

"Dammit! I hate you, Misumai!" he yelled.

"Huuuh?!"

Saying nothing else, Kenbuchi-kun stormed out of the classroom. My hand, now suddenly empty after the abrupt end to the handshake, hung limply in the air, trying to grasp at someone who was no longer there.

I thought I'd made a friend, but that friend had just burst into tears and ran away from me.

Yeah, that's totally on me.



Kenbuchi-kun returned soon after he ran off, smiling so broadly that it made me doubt whether he had actually been crying just a moment ago. With an almost obscene smile, he walked back into the classroom and linked arms with mine, saying, “Hey, I guess stuff like that can happen, huh?” before sauntering off again.

Why is he in such a good mood? I wondered, but then I found out soon enough—because the door to the classroom slid open and all the girls who had left to change into their costumes walked back in.

“Look here, males of the class! Cosplay girls, coming through! Make way!”

The so-called extroverted girls of the class marched through the door in various cosplay. The fact that they were wearing outfits that they usually weren’t permitted to wear at school seemed to have added to their excitement.

Their costumes, too, were quite eye-catching. Nurse, police officer, nun, maid, zombie, kindergartner...they really were all over the place.

Nanami had said before that she was used to doing cosplay because she and her friends often dressed up when they visited photo booths. It seemed that everyone here was really into the idea too.

There was someone cosplaying as an anime character, but her outfit wasn’t terribly revealing. It was a good thing we’d mentioned that point to the class. At this rate, no one would be getting in trouble because of a risqué outfit.

Wait, where’s Nanami?

The girls were now chatting excitedly, showing off their costumes to all the guys. The guys, too, were cheering all the girls in cosplay.

Nanami, however, wasn’t among the girls. When I looked closely, I realized that Otofuke-san and the others weren’t there either. *What’s going on?*

“Is something the matter, sir?” someone said, coming up behind me as I scanned the room for Nanami.

“Whoa?!” I shouted instinctively. Whose voice was this? I knew I didn’t know most of the people in class, but I was sure I’d never heard such a husky, pretty

voice before.

When I turned around, I saw that the person standing behind me was...a very handsome young man. He had his hair tied at the nape of his neck and was wearing a tailcoat—or was it a tuxedo? Were they the same thing? I wasn't really sure, but anyway, he was wearing what appeared to be a butler's costume.

"Um," I started, as the handsome young man placed his left hand on his chest, then brought his right hand back behind his chest as he bowed to me. Each of his gestures was so beautiful that I couldn't help but stare in awe.

Hey, wait a minute.

"Otofuken-san?" I asked, still unsure.

"You are correct," she said. "I am terribly sorry, but Lady Nanami will be here any minute now. May I ask you to wait for her for just a bit longer?"

Wow—what an amazing voice she had. Her posture was also excellent, and she looked more handsome than most guys I'd seen. Her butler cosplay was eliciting fanatical cheers from the other girls in the class.

"You look really handsome," I complimented.

"Heh heh, right? This is the first time I've dressed up as a guy, but I don't look too shabby," she replied, flicking her low ponytail and assuming a more relaxed stance. She was technically back to her usual self, but because of her costume, I could only see her as a handsome guy. I had never known such magic was possible.

From behind Otofuken-san, Kamoenai-san also poked her head out. I was so surprised by Otofuken-san that I didn't even realize Kamoenai-san was standing there.

"Who knew Hatsumi would turn out so handsome? But then, I guess she *is* popular among the girls too," Kamoenai-san remarked.

"Huh? No one's ever told me that," Otofuken-san said.

"That just means you have a lot of secret admirers," Kamoenai-san said.

The dress that Kamoenai-san wore was frilly, but it was a revealing pinafore

with a very open neckline that showed off her cleavage. The ribbons around her waist were tied on her right-hand side, and although the costume was sexy, it also seemed like something out of a fairy tale. *I feel like I've seen this somewhere before.*

"Where is that costume from, Kamoenai-san?" I asked.

"It's cute, isn't it? I went on a date at a festival and saw a lady wearing it. I really wanted to try wearing it myself," she explained.

"It does suit you," I said.

Kamoenai-san lifted both her hands to her sides and twirled around in place. *I remember now—this is a dirndl. It's a traditional outfit from Germany. I saw it on the internet once.*

With its revealing neckline, this dress was bound to catch people's attention as well. When Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san stood next to each other, they almost seemed like they made a pair—one butler and one maid.

"Where's Nanami?" I asked.

"She was struggling a little bit with her costume, but she should be here with the class rep soon," Kamoenai-san said.

Was her outfit that difficult to put on? What exactly *was* a difficult outfit, anyway? Just as I hoped that Nanami wouldn't appear in a terribly revealing costume, the door slid open...and in walked Shirishizu-san.

And all the guys gasped at her appearance.

Shirishizu-san was wearing a very long, red coat, along with a pair of long, red pants. Wrapped around her chest was a piece of fabric, leaving everything else on full display.

Isn't that a biker gang uniform? There's even weird kanji written on the back of the jacket.

Shirishizu-san looked as though she'd stepped out of an old-timey gangster manga, but with her hair styled in waves, somehow the outfit suited her perfectly.

All the guys were staring at her open-mouthed, myself included. As for the

teacher, he was panicking and asking her with a stammer, “D-Do you have something you want to share with me?!” It seemed the teacher now had yet another thing he had to worry about.

The look did suit her, but I was in such shock that I couldn’t pull myself together. Shirishizu-san then stuck her head outside of the classroom. She seemed to be talking to someone—maybe Nanami?

“Everyone has unique costumes, but what’s Nanami dressed as?” I asked Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san. I started to feel nervous about Nanami’s outfit; if she was delaying her entrance for it, what exactly was she wearing?

The two only grinned devilishly in response. *Why do they look like that? What on earth is Nanami wearing?*

That was when Otofuke-san declared: “Just for today, Nanami’s wearing a bunny girl costume!”

Bunny girl?! By bunny girl, you mean that bunny girl? The Playboy Bunny with the ears and everything? Huh? Wait, seriously? No, really, hang on a minute!

I could feel the guys around me starting to murmur with excitement in response to Otofuke-san’s remark. *This is bad. I have to shield Nanami!*

And to be honest, I genuinely hadn’t expected those two to choose such an outfit for Nanami. I had mistakenly assumed that Nanami would wear something that wasn’t too revealing. *Wait, but maybe a bunny girl outfit itself isn’t terribly risqué? No, the point is that it’s Nanami in a bunny girl costume! I wanna see it, but I wanna see it when we’re alone!*

The door to the classroom opened mercilessly, as if in spite of my inner turmoil.

When Nanami walked in...

“Huh?! Why is everyone looking at me like that?!” she exclaimed, taking a step backward from the shock of all the pairs of eyes turned toward her. I was about to make a mad dash toward Nanami to shield her from everyone’s view, but...I stopped in my tracks.

“Huh?” I muttered.

“Wh-What is it, Yoshin? Oh, what do you think of this outfit?” she asked, taking a step toward me and opening her arms wide.

Nanami was pink all over. She was covered from head to toe in soft, fluffy fabric, and not a square inch of her body was showing.

Uh, isn't this just a furry rabbit-shaped onesie?

A loud cry of “daaammiiit!” echoed throughout the classroom. It shook the entire room, so much so that I thought the glass windows would break from the sheer force of the volume.

Turned out most of the guys in the class were wailing, slumped over desks, or collapsed on the floor. They seemed to be in the throes of despair upon witnessing Nanami's costume.

Despite my surprise at how shocked they were, I had to admit I felt relieved.

Nanami's costume looked like loose-fitting footed pajamas. The only parts of her body you could see were her hands, feet, and face. It wasn't revealing at all. It didn't seem to be designed with mobility in mind, though, because you really couldn't see the shape of her body either. The hood had bunny ears attached to it, making it rather adorable.

“I think it looks really cute on you,” I finally replied.

“Tee hee, I'm glad,” Nanami said giddily, bringing both her hands up to her mouth. *Yeah, she really is super cute.*

“I mean, this is a bunny too, so she technically *is* a bunny girl. It wasn't a lie,” one of the girls in the class remarked.

“Oh, come on! If Barato was gonna dress up as a bunny, we'd all expect something else!” a male student protested.

“There's no way she'd wear that in front of everyone,” another girl interjected.

Now the guys and girls were engaged in a heated debate. I understood why the guys might've gotten their hopes up. I, on the other hand, was fully and completely serene at the fact that Nanami's body was safe from prying eyes.

When I thought about it, though, I couldn't help wondering about one thing:

Why is it just for today?

Earlier, Otofuke-san mentioned that this outfit was just for today. That must mean that Nanami would wear something different for the festival itself. *Why would she do something like that? I think this outfit is actually really cute.*

“All right, it’s time for the guys to get changed too!” someone announced, as the girls began to grab the guys by their shoulders. Some of the guys closed their eyes, as though resigned to their fates. The girls seemed to be having fun though—a *lot* of fun, given that they had various costumes and makeup tools in their hands.

Truth be told, the matter of the guys also doing cosplay in our class was an entire discussion. A lot of people thought that it was more interesting for the girls to do cosplay, while some even wondered if there was any demand for the guys to cosplay to begin with. Since I felt like there wasn’t any real point for me to cosplay, personally, I was leaning toward having the guys not bother with it at all.

There was a faction among the girls, though, that argued against this stance—and insisted on letting *them* be the ones to make over the guys. In fact, Nanami was a part of that faction.

Today, therefore, was a kind of rehearsal. I thought I saw some of the girls holding maid outfits and stuff, but maybe I imagined it. I must have. I really hoped I did.

“Yoshin, you’re coming with me!”

“Huh?” I uttered as Nanami gripped my shoulder and began dragging me away. Some of the guys in the class attempted to call after me, and I tried to grab hold of them. My hand, though, only grasped at thin air. Coming to terms with the fact that I simply wasn’t going to be able to win, I just let my hand fall to my side.

Can’t I just change in the classroom along with everyone else? Why do I need to go to a different place, just by myself? And where am I even going, exactly?

Our school had a changing room for girls, but I was pretty sure we didn’t have one for guys. I couldn’t possibly be going to the girls’ changing room...

Wait a minute. Is it just me, or are we heading back toward our own classroom?

“Okay, we’re here,” Nanami said.

“What do you mean, ‘we’re here’? It’s just our regular classroom,” I replied.

Indeed, we were now in the classroom we sat in every day. Since anyone who was staying behind had done so to prepare for the school festival, no one seemed to have had any reason to stay in this particular classroom, away from the others. Since we hadn’t turned on the lights, the classroom was very dark. In fact, I had never seen our classroom this dark before, so much so that it actually felt kind of foreboding. I could now understand why so many people described schools at night as being scary.

“Get on in there, Yoshin,” Nanami insisted, sliding the door open and shoving me inside.

“Oh, sure,” I murmured. *Wow, it’s really dark in here. Where’s my seat, even?* The room felt so different from usual that I had no idea where things were.

I then heard the door slide closed. The light, though, remained turned off. *Huh? Why?* In the darkness, I heard Nanami’s footsteps and the sound of fabrics rubbing against each other reverberate in the classroom. As I heard her gradually approach me, step by step, it almost felt like my life had suddenly become a horror film.

Nanami then stopped right in front of me.

“What’s wrong, Nanami?” I asked hesitantly.

Nanami, though, said nothing in return. The classroom was dark because the lights were off, but thanks to the moonlight that was coming in through the windows, my eyes were slowly becoming accustomed to the darkness—at least, enough for me to be able to make out the outlines of things.

For some reason, I couldn’t bring myself to ask if we should simply turn on the lights, so I just watched Nanami in silence.

Then...

Nanami began taking off the bunny onesie she was wearing.

“Huh?!” I blurted out.

Nanami pulled down the zipper on her costume in one go, then opened the front with a dramatic flourish. She did it with such force and so quickly that I missed my chance to turn away.

I saw that underneath the loungewear, she was wearing a black outfit. Or, it wasn't so much a black outfit, but more like a black bodysuit that seemed awfully familiar.

Nanami then slowly, carefully removed her onesie. The way she moved as she let her clothes fall to the ground in order to step out of them seemed eerily seductive.

As I stood there stupefied, Nanami slowly moved toward a desk nearby. She then took out a large headband from the drawer and placed it on her head.

When that last piece of the puzzle was revealed to me, I finally understood what Nanami's costume was supposed to be.

Is this...a bunny girl outfit?

She had on a leotard-like bodysuit that boldly revealed her shoulders, a bow tie and collar around her neck, cuffs on both her wrists, and fishnet stockings on her legs.

Huh? Huuuuh?!

While I remained confused beyond belief, Nanami placed a hand on her hip and tilted her body in a slightly diagonal pose.

“So...what do you think?” she asked.

“Wh-What do you mean, what do I think?!” I stammered.

Her stylish pose, her sexy outfit, her adorable expression...this cosplay was a whopping combination of all three elements.

“You look really pretty. You’re sexy and beautiful too. But why are you dressed like that?” I managed to ask.

“Hee hee, I look pretty, huh? That makes me happy,” she said, jumping in place with joy like a real bunny. She then sat down on a desk and struck a pose like a gravure idol.

Nanami was sitting in front of me; I couldn’t take my eyes off of her.

“Um, you can take pictures if you want,” she offered.

What kind of an offer is that? Also, what kind of establishment is this? For now, though, I did my best to suppress my desire to whip my phone out and take said photos.

“No, I mean, why a bunny girl?” I asked.

“I thought I could surprise you,” she simply replied.

I am. I’m super surprised. But wait—that’s the only reason?!

I didn’t know what to say, but while I stood there struggling to respond, Nanami continued her explanation, saying, “I went to your work the other day, right?”

“Um, yeah. Right, you did come,” I said.

“Well, back then, Nao-chan told me that a lot of girls wear something safe and appropriate on top, but underneath have a cute and sexy bunny girl costume on, and on the day of, they just take the top layer off,” Nanami explained.

“What the hell is that lady teaching you?!” I exclaimed.

I had no idea Nanami was learning stuff like that when she came to visit me at work. Come to think of it, I recalled that Nanami and Yu-senpai were talking about something during Nanami’s visit, but I had no idea *this* was what they were talking about.

Nanami then hopped off of the desk and showed me her phone.

“See, this is Nao-chan’s photo. She looks super sexy, doesn’t she? She told me they did a bunny café,” she said.

Her phone displayed a photo of Yu-senpai flashing a peace sign while wearing a bunny girl outfit. She did look sexy, but I couldn't believe they actually decided to do that at a school festival.

"They would totally get in trouble though," I murmured.

Nanami nodded. "Yeah, she said they got caught and yelled at by the teachers a ton."

Ah, right. Of course.



But why would *Nanami* do something so risky, then? I mean, I was happy she had, don't get me wrong. Being able to see Nanami dressed up like this made me *really* happy.

"You've been working so hard prepping for the festival, so I thought maybe it'd make a nice reward if I showed you something like this," Nanami said, giving me an intent look and running her hands along the curves of her body, as though she knew exactly what I was thinking.

It certainly *was* a reward, but I hadn't expected her to undress right in front of me. Though I did like that very much.

"But why aren't you turning on the lights?" I asked.

My eyes had gotten used to the darkness, but Nanami was showing off her bunny suit with the lights in the classroom still turned off. She was posing in different ways, so she seemed aware that she was being looked at. If that were the case, wasn't it better to turn on the lights?

"Huh?! Um, uh," Nanami stammered, suddenly flustered. She looked away from me, as if embarrassed. *What's wrong?*

"I-If the lights are on, then you can actually see everything. That's too embarrassing," she muttered.

Whoa. That's way too cute. I knew we were at school, but I was overcome by the desire to squeeze her tight. I bet her cheeks were flushed pink too.

Just as I thought that I could be satisfied even in the dark, given that I could see enough in the moonlight...

Click.

An unexpected sound reached my ears—an inorganic sound, of plastic hitting plastic, like a switch was suddenly getting flipped.

And then there was light.

That was a very dramatic way to put it, but in reality, it was just that the lights in the classroom were turned on.

It had been dark until a moment ago, so at first I couldn't see things clearly.

But then, Nanami in her bunny girl suit leaped into my field of vision.

It was only the level of light in the room that changed; Nanami's outfit was the exact same as it was in the dark. And yet—how did the sight of her stimulate me so differently now?

There was a moment's delay, but Nanami immediately covered herself up with both hands to hide herself. She seemed to have enough wits about her to know what would happen if she screamed out loud. Even so, she turned completely red and released what almost sounded like a silent scream.

After seeing her like that, I committed the sight to memory and then turned toward the door. And the person standing there...

"Why don't you two have the lights on?"

...was Shirishizu-san. She still had her hand on the light switch and was looking at me and Nanami, frozen in place. Nanami looked over toward Shirishizu-san and let her hands fall to her sides.

"Kotoha-chan, what's up?" Nanami asked meekly.

"You two were taking a while, so I came to check on you. The lights were off, so I turned them on 'cause I thought maybe you guys weren't in here," Shirishizu-san explained.

Then, she paused as if something had dawned on her. She looked between me and Nanami several times. She seemed to have realized something; her expression immediately turned apologetic, and with one of her hands raised, said timidly, "D-Did I by chance interrupt something? Like...were you guys trying to do it in the classroom?"

"No, no, no! We weren't trying to do anything!" Nanami and I replied in unison. We weren't so far gone that we'd try stuff in a classroom at school. That was definitely *not* what we were trying to do. I did want to squeeze her for a moment, but I at least managed to remain rational.

"Huuuh? Even though Nanami-chan's a super sexy bunny right now? Misumai-kun, are you seriously, genuinely not gonna do anything? Like, you weren't going to do anything at all?" Shirishizu-san asked.

“But of course I wouldn’t in a *classroom*,” I mumbled, implying that if we were anywhere else, maybe I’d have gotten into some trouble.

Still, Shirishizu-san seemed not to be convinced, because she kept murmuring to herself. In fact, she even remarked, “Even *this* isn’t enough, huh?”

Excuse me? Was Shirishizu-san in on this outfit too? Not just Yu-senpai?

“Well, do keep things under control at school, okay? I’ll tell everyone that you’ll come back in a little bit,” Shirishizu-san said before she walked out of the classroom, her final remark making it unclear whether she ultimately believed me or not. She also left the lights on, so that I could continue seeing Nanami’s figure very clearly.

In the end, the only people left in the classroom were Nanami in her bunny girl costume and me in my uniform.

All of a sudden, I felt exhausted. I sat down in a random seat, and Nanami sat down next to me. She then slumped over the desk and turned her face in my direction. Seeing her in her bunny suit, splayed over a desk at school...felt very surreal.

“You totally saw everything,” Nanami said, her eyebrows furrowed in consternation even as a seductive smile played on her lips. Her expression made my heart leap, more than when I first saw her clearly under the lights a moment ago.

“Please don’t wear that during the festival,” I begged. I couldn’t stand the thought of other people...no, other *guys* seeing Nanami like this. I felt a mix of emotions, ranging from possessiveness to jealousy.

Nanami’s smile changed at my request. It went from an alluring one to that of a young girl, filled with innocence and delight.

“You’d be jealous, wouldn’t you?” she asked.

“Of course I would. Another guy seeing you like that is just not okay,” I replied.

Nanami’s smile grew even wider at my response, and I couldn’t help at that point but smile awkwardly myself.

“Don’t even worry. I just wanted to show this to you. I’m gonna wear something different for the festival,” Nanami said, getting up from the chair and twirling in place. She must have stopped feeling embarrassed, because she was letting me see her from every angle now.

Shoot, maybe the back holds even more destructive force than the front. Like around her butt and stuff... No, stop, stop. Restrain yourself, Yoshin.

Either way, I felt relieved that this outfit really was only for today. If Nanami had intended to wear this on the actual day of the festival, I would have tried to stop her with everything I had. Everything, and then some. I was the only one who needed to see her like this.

“Where did you get a costume like that from, anyway?” I asked.

“From Nao-chan! She helped us with the other costumes for our class too,” Nanami explained.

So *that* was how everyone managed to wear so many different costumes. There was quite the variety, after all. *Wait, why does Yu-senpai have so many different costumes?*

“She said that she was preparing for her future boyfriend. I feel like Nao-chan can get one anytime she wants though,” Nanami said.

Yu-senpai was seriously unpredictable. Even though she came off at first as a really outgoing party type, she sometimes said things that were anything but.

“So what are you *actually* gonna wear for the festival?” I asked.

“That’s gonna have to be a surprise—though I guess you’ll find out beforehand,” Nanami said, giggling softly before she got in a good stretch, which showed off the outline of her body even more. I nearly lost my mind.

“All right, then! Shall we get working on your costume too?!” Nanami exclaimed.

Ah, right. I forgot that Nanami was going to choose my costume for me. She had told me that she wanted me to leave everything to her.

That was when I remembered what Nanami had said earlier, and a shiver went up my spine. That Yu-senpai “helped us with the other costumes for our

class too”...

“Um, j-just for the record, what kind of costume...do you want me to wear?” I asked, my voice trembling in fear. I had a bad feeling about the next few moments of my life, and I tried to fight it off. Nanami then replied, simultaneously bashful and expectant.

“Um...this,” she murmured.

What she held in her hands was a large, frilly, cute...maid uniform.

Interlude: Two Maids

The funnest part of a school festival was prep.

I'd heard someone say that before, but it was true: prepping really *was* fun. And compared to last year's, this year's prep felt *especially* fun.

It's probably because Yoshin is with me, I thought to myself, letting an unladylike smile spread across my face.

"Hey, Nanami! Where's your hubby?" someone asked.

"My husband's gone to submit today's application to the office. He should be back soon," I replied without missing a beat.

"Yikes, she didn't even hesitate," came the response.

I was already used to this kind of teasing. If anything, it made me kind of happy to have people refer to Yoshin as my husband. Just a little while ago, I would've been embarrassed and too flustered to reply.

With most of the prep work now done, the setup completed, and the real deal looming the next day, most people in our class were gathered together after school.

And just what had we planned to do now that all the work was done?

A pre-party, of course!

The school hadn't organized this, by the way. Our school didn't do an official pre-party; we just had an after-party instead.

It was thus up to each class to decide whether to do a pre-party or not—though it was required that we submit an application in the event that we did.

Classes that didn't finish prepping had to work until the last minute, but classes that had completed their setup could submit the necessary form to get the permit for holding a pre-party somewhere on campus.

Most classes wanted to do a pre-party, though, so they worked hard to finish

the prep work early. Our class, fortunately, had made it on time as well.

“Your costume really is sexy though, Nanami. A real feast for the eyes,” one of my girlfriends joked.

“What are you talking about? It’s not revealing at all. It’s totally normal,” I replied.

“Oh, come on, it totally shows off your boobs. Like, what is this? It’s almost like a pop-up book! I want to say I won’t allow it, even though I totally do,” she laughed.

“A pop-up book?!” I exclaimed, covering my chest with my hands and twisting to try to hide my entire body. I couldn’t help but think about it after she had described it like that.

Does my outfit look that sexy?

I glanced down at my costume, but I couldn’t really see it that way. If anything, I thought I had chosen one that wasn’t terribly risqué, and plus, it was a cute costume that was one of my favorites. Though I had to admit the skirt was pretty short.

I was wearing a maid uniform. Since it was a tried-and-true classic, I chose one that I thought Yoshin would like. It was true that the apron hit right beneath my chest and kind of emphasized it, but there were other girls who chose way more revealing maid outfits, so I was pretty sure that those were a lot sexier than mine.

“The garter belt really does it for me though,” someone added.

“I must say, I wouldn’t mind black stockings without the garter belt myself,” another chimed in.

“Are you kidding me? Aren’t white stockings both cute *and* sexy at the same time?” someone else claimed.

“Knee-high socks are undefeated,” another voice murmured.

Everyone began discussing maid outfits...or, rather, hosiery. *Why are they talking about things like they’re a bunch of guys?*

“Yoshin said this looked cute, so that’s all I care about,” I declared.

“Yeah, yeah. You have a boyfriend, good for you,” one of the girls complained.

“So are you gonna have sex in that?” another girl asked.

“Of course not!” I yelled.

I started to say, “I’m just borrowing this costume,” but then I stopped myself. That sounded like I *would* do it if the costume wasn’t borrowed. Replying like that would come back to bite me.

Besides, I wanted my first time to be more... *No, wait, I shouldn’t think about that here.*

“You’ve really changed, Nanami,” I heard someone say, voice choked with emotion, as I sat there going back and forth on the matter.

Changed? Me? I tilted my head, wondering if that was true. Aside from dating Yoshin, I didn’t think that I’d changed in any particular way.

“Just a little while ago, I could have never imagined Nanami talking so much about boys,” someone remarked.

“Seriously. She never came when we invited her out to mixers and stuff,” another girl chimed in.

“The guys always got super disappointed when Nanami didn’t show up. Sure did a number on my self-esteem,” someone else added.

“Remember how protective Hatsumi and Ayumi were though? They always hovered around Nanami whenever some dude would try to confess to her.”

“She always seemed interested in talking about sex, but then she’d pretend like she wasn’t at all. But she was cute ’cause she would turn all red and stuff.”

All these different assessments of past me were now coming to light. They were talking about things that even I didn’t know about.

I mean, guys just made me uncomfortable; I couldn’t help it. Sure, my discomfort had decreased a little, but even still, I still couldn’t really bring myself to hang out with guys other than Yoshin.

But...I guess I have changed, huh?

“Do you think I was more likable before?” I asked.

“Nah. I prefer the way you are now. Plus, you’re cuter,” one of my friends replied.

With all my friends talking so much about how I’d changed, I couldn’t help but ask them if it was a change for the better. I had no clue; I hadn’t even noticed that I *had* changed. But in a heartbeat, everyone said it was, and I was so happy to hear it.

“Hey, so is everything okay with the class rep?” someone asked.

Huh? Kotoha-chan? Why?

“Oh, yeah, she’s gotten really pretty lately, right? And it seems like she really gets along with Misumai. Did something happen with them over break?” another person asked.

“She lets her guard down so much now,” a third girl piped up, “that she makes me nervous just watching her. It’s like she doesn’t realize it, or she doesn’t even think about it. Don’t you think more guys are after her now?”

I agreed that Kotoha-chan had gotten prettier, but I couldn’t understand why they were bringing up Yoshin too.

“But didn’t she get a makeover because she has a thing for Misumai? So that he’d pay more attention to her?” someone suggested.

“Oh, yeah, I’ve heard that rumor too,” another replied.

“Huh?” I couldn’t help blurting.

What’s with that rumor? I haven’t heard this one before. Kotoha-chan getting a makeover so Yoshin would notice her? But I was the one who did her makeover!

If I had to be honest, I didn’t care much about the rumor itself. But I *did* care a little bit about what other people thought when they heard that rumor. It wasn’t so much about me, but more what other people thought of Yoshin. I didn’t want people thinking badly of him.

“I’ve heard people talking about Yoshin cheating on me, but...what do you guys think about rumors like that?” I asked, slightly afraid of what they might say. Everyone else, though, immediately fell silent.

Even though the silence only lasted for a few seconds, I felt my blood run cold. And then...

The next moment, everyone burst out laughing.

“Huh?!” I let out.

Everyone was laughing, but I could tell they weren’t mocking or ridiculing me. They seemed to be laughing because they found something to be genuinely funny.

As I sat there wondering what, exactly, was funny, confused to no end, everyone started talking at once.

“What, you actually care about that dumb rumor, Nanami? Gosh, you’re so adorable,” one of my friends said.

“Seriously, the idea that Misumai would cheat on you? Who would come up with a stupid rumor like that? None of us buy it. There’s no way Misumai would ever two-time,” another girl declared.

“I mean, if he’s all over you like that *and* he’s somehow two-timing, then there’s no way we can trust *any* guy anymore,” someone added.

“Yeah, it’s so totally different from when my boyfriend was two-timing. Wait, or was it three-timing?” another remarked.

Wait, go back to that last comment. How is that even okay?

But at least no one believed the rumor that Yoshin was cheating on me. Everyone just laughed and told me how, even as objective spectators, they could tell how much Yoshin was head over heels for me.

So that’s how everyone sees Yoshin, huh?

I felt so warm inside, hearing that. I was so happy that the people around him understood that he wasn’t that type of person. It was almost like someone had stamped *me* with that same vote of confidence.

“So, yeah. I guess no matter how much Misumai likes the gyaru type, the class rep has no chance,” one girl declared.

Wait, so they do believe the rumor that Yoshin likes gyaru girls. Why?

Wouldn't they ordinarily not believe that rumor either?

"Um, I was the one that did that whole makeover for Kotoha-chan though," I confessed.

"Really? Nanami, what are you doing, helping out your own rival?" someone asked.

"Huh? Rival? No way, Kotoha-chan...likes someone else, I think," I responded.
Probably...though it's just a guess.

Everyone looked shocked by my disclosure. They also seemed a little disappointed.

"Darn, a love triangle would have been really something," someone muttered.

"It's not like that at all. Seriously guys, I'm gonna get mad," I said.

It seemed everyone was more partial to dark and tempestuous love stories. When I pouted and glared at them, though, everyone started screaming in overreaction. *Seriously, these girls...*

Just as we were wrapping up the conversation, Yoshin returned to the classroom.

I ran toward him when I saw him, and he smiled at me bashfully—wearing his maid uniform.

Cute...you're too cute, Yoshin. I asked him to wear it because I wanted him to get used to the outfit during the pre-party, but man, am I a genius. He looks adorable. Now that I think about it, I guess he even went to the teacher's office in that getup, huh? He did say something about being too lazy to change.

"We're so sorry, we were just borrowing your wife for a little chat!" someone said to Yoshin.

"Really, I'm so jealous that Nanami's husband loves her so much. How could anyone get between these two lovebirds?" another remarked.

"She was all waiting for you like a loyal little puppy. Your wifey sure loves you too, huh?" said a different voice.

Before I knew it, everyone was crowding behind me, egging us on as they

teased us.

Jeez, that wifey thing again?! I mean, I like it, but isn't this the first time they're doing that to Yoshin too?! Just as I turned toward my friends to get them to stop, though, Yoshin said something completely unexpected.

“No worries at all. Thank you for keeping my wife company while I was away,” he said, speaking entirely naturally with a bright smile on his face. In contrast, everyone else froze, as if time stopped and the air around them suddenly froze right along with them. Yoshin’s unlikely response essentially silenced all the girls that had been teasing me.

I was no exception. I wasn’t expecting him to say anything like that—he had never called me “wife” so publicly before! *Y-Y-You’ve never used that word before!* I shouted at him inside my head.

“Um, hmm?” Yoshin muttered, scratching his cheek with an awkward smile on his face. Despite his earlier remark, he seemed to have suddenly returned to his usual, timid self.

“I guess I missed the mark, huh? I thought it’d be funnier if I said something like that, but I guess I really shouldn’t try to do things I’m not used to,” he said, now red with embarrassment. He must have thought that his comment fell flat. Now he was laughing out loud, fanning himself with his hand and saying, “Is it getting hot in here?”

Just how exactly am I supposed to respond here?

“Is Misumai...actually kind of funny?” someone whispered.

“Like, maybe sort of an airhead too?” another asked.

“And is he actually cute or something? Is the maid outfit doing some magic here?” a third murmured.

That last remark brought me back to my senses. I was happy with everyone thinking more positively of Yoshin, but...something made me feel all mixed up inside.

And, as a result...

“H-He’s mine, okay?!” I declared, firmly claiming ownership as I hugged

Yoshin tightly.

My head immediately cooled and I became calmer, as I was instead overcome by an embarrassment that threatened to practically explode inside of me. *What am I saying...? Seriously, what am I saying?!*

Everyone else stared at me in surprise, then immediately started getting all worked up. In fact, it wasn't just my friends—everyone in the classroom was now staring at me and Yoshin.

I couldn't move my body—the only thing I could move was my head. *Wh-What do I do?* I looked back and forth between Yoshin and everyone else. Yoshin was smiling wryly, while everyone else was laughing out loud.

“Don't worry so much! Of course we're not gonna take him,” one girl said.

“Nanami, you're so cute when you get all panicky like that,” another commented.

“Oh, if you're so worried, you should enter that thing! You know, that thing!” someone shouted.

“Huh? What are you talking about?” someone asked.

“You know, the Best Couple Contest for the school festival! If you enter it and kiss in front of everyone, then all those dumb rumors will go away in a heartbeat,” another girl explained.

“There's no way I can do that!” I shouted, trying to ward off a friend who was now trying to hug me while pursing her lips for a kiss. As I did so, I pictured myself kissing Yoshin in front of everyone at school.

There's no way I can do that. And we'd totally get yelled at.

“Come on, now. Nanami's looking flustered, so let's call it a day,” Hatsumi announced as she began to drag the other girls away the moment she got wind of all the commotion. It seemed she took a while to free herself of her fan club too, what with so many girls being smitten with her in her butler costume.

Ayumi, meanwhile, was lecturing the boys in the class about how to move and think like a girl—demonstration included.

Most of the boys were cosplaying as girls. There were some boys who looked

good, some boys who didn't, some boys who'd given up, and some boys who just looked embarrassed. Although their emotional responses differed, they were all staring intently at Ayumi as she explained to them the ways of girlhood.

Well, they were probably staring at her because she was wearing a dirndl. But if it wasn't Shu-nii staring at her, Ayumi wouldn't even bat an eye.

"Well, then. Shall we get started with our pre-party?" Yoshin suggested, seemingly trying to change the subject. With his remark, I moved with him to stand together in front of the blackboard. *It's finally time for the pre-party... I'm super excited.*

"Hey, Misumai! Give us a toast!" someone yelled.

"Huh? Seriously?" Yoshin muttered.

Despite the sudden request, Yoshin cleared his throat once and began speaking, albeit somewhat bashfully.

"Um, thank you to everyone for all your hard work. I've never done anything like this before, so I realize that I've been very lacking as an executive committee member. Despite that, we've been fortunate enough to prepare all this, thanks to all the effort that everyone..."

"Jeez, you're way too uptight! Quit being so serious!" someone yelled, sending everyone off into fits of laughter. I had to laugh too; Yoshin really *did* sound uptight. He himself was smiling like he was having a good time though.

"To be honest," Yoshin began, "I really didn't feel like I was a part of the class before. I'd always spent time by myself, and that never bothered me. I wasn't lonely."

With those words, the mood in the classroom shifted slightly.

"But then, I met Nanami, and...I experienced a lot of things, and...even though it all started with something kind of unexpected, I started thinking that I wanted to enjoy going to school with everyone in this class," he continued.

Yoshin was speaking each word as though trying to convey something deeply important to him.

"I know I've been apathetic about things this whole time, but if I can talk with

everyone...and get to know everyone even just a little bit through this school festival, then I couldn't be happier," he concluded.

I felt like I wanted to cry, just a tiny bit—but I wasn't going to. It was only the pre-party, after all.

"Oh, and let's be sure to have fun tomorrow at the actual festival. Cheers!" Yoshin said. Then, a moment later, everyone joined in with another energetic "Cheers!" I thought that they were all going to take a drink, but everyone placed their paper cups on their desks and began to clap.

Yoshin bobbed his head up and down in an awkward, embarrassed bow. I, too, joined in and bowed toward everyone.

"In the end, you're just flaunting your relationship with Barato! Dammit! I'm so jelly!" someone yelled.

"Don't make such an emotional speech in a maid costume! It's hard to know how to react!" shouted another.

"And you even look good in it too!" another voice claimed.

With more jeering came more laughter. As if in response, I grinned mischievously and grabbed onto Yoshin's arm. There were more cheers, and as if he was expecting it, Yoshin said, "She's my girlfriend, after all."

The class responded with even more good-natured heckling. And with that, our pre-party finally began.

As everyone enjoyed themselves, Yoshin and I sat down in a spot where we had a clear view of the whole class.

"Thanks for all your hard work, Yoshin. Cheers," I said.

"Same to you, Nanami. Cheers," he replied.

When our paper cups touched, we looked up and around at everyone in the class. As we patted each other on the back for all our efforts, Yoshin whispered, "It was so much fun."

Hearing those words come from the bottom of his heart, I felt my own heart growing warmer too.

“The real deal’s not until tomorrow! Isn’t it too early to be talking about it in the past tense?” I joked.

“I know, but it’s really the first time I’ve participated in a school event like this. I can’t help but get really emotional about how much fun it was,” he explained, then added, “It’s all because of you. Thank you.”

When he said that, I embraced him instantly. I was so happy that I would’ve probably kissed him if we weren’t in the classroom. I nearly kissed him on the cheek, but I stopped myself from doing even that.

Just in that moment, though, a shadow fell upon me and Yoshin.

It was Kotoha-chan—in that old-timey, and yet mysteriously alluring delinquent costume of hers.

As everyone else murmured among themselves, Kotoha-chan spoke hesitantly, in a voice so soft that only Yoshin and I could hear her.

“I wanted to talk with the two of you. About tomorrow. Do you have a minute?” she asked.

To her question, Yoshin and I replied in unison, “Of course we do.”

Chapter 4: Even a Carnival Has Its Limits

Feeling so excited for a school trip that you can't sleep the day before. It was said that everyone goes through that at least once in life, but embarrassingly enough, I didn't recall a single time I ever felt that way.

I *did* recall not being able to sleep out of nervousness the day before my date with Nanami. When it came to school events, though, I was pretty sure I'd never been so excited or full of anticipation that I couldn't sleep the night before.

That was why I never expected myself to be unable to fall asleep the day before something.

I contemplated contacting Nanami because I couldn't fall asleep, but I decided not to since I didn't want to wake her. But that was why I was so sleepy the next day.

"If you had called, I would've sung you a lullaby to help you fall asleep," Nanami said to me. *You're not even treating me like a kid anymore—you're treating me like an actual baby. Wait a minute, maybe that isn't such a... No, that's not a bad idea, but I really should stop right there.*

Today, finally, was the day of the school festival. All the preparations had been completed, and the principal gave their opening remarks. Everyone had already changed, more than ready for the event to begin.

The school festival ran across two days, with an after-party also being held on the second day. Apparently the after-party was organized by the executive committee. *An after-party, huh? I know last year I went straight home and played games, but I guess this year I'll be staying until the after-party too.*

"It's finally here, huh? Gosh, I'm so excited! Let's make it count!" Nanami said to me excitedly.

"Yeah, let's," I returned, taking a close look at Nanami as she gripped her hands into fists in an attempt to fire herself up.

Nanami was wearing a maid uniform with a frilly miniskirt that really emphasized her breasts. The apron hit right beneath her chest, thus bringing to the fore the two round protrusions. From under her short skirt stretched two garters that held up stockings resembling black knee-high socks. She had pinned a headdress in her hair as well.

It was true that her outfit wasn't as revealing as the bunny girl suit she'd worn previously. In terms of sexiness, however, it was putting up a pretty good fight. Some might very well have declared the maid costume the victor.

When I proposed that she, um, tone things down just a tad bit, she rejected the idea immediately, citing how doing so might decrease cuteness. Maybe pretty girls really were a guy's eternal source of temptation.

On the flip side, though, they also provided plenty of eye candy.

"When the bell rings in a few minutes, it'll be the opening of all the food stalls and exhibits! Let's be sure to stay safe, but let's definitely enjoy the school festival too!" I announced to the class.

Everyone responded with a loud cheer. When I looked around the class, I saw that there were both guys dressed up as girls, and girls dressed up as guys. Well, given that most of the guys were dressed up as girls, it definitely looked like the class had fewer guys overall.

Even though everyone was currently waiting in the classroom for the festival to start, we were going to be taking turns working at the café. We had come up with a shift schedule for everyone, so when the café opened in a few minutes, some people were probably going to take off to go check out the other stalls and things.

As a side note, I'd asked to be on the same shift as Nanami. At first I wasn't sure if it was really okay to let personal matters interfere with my work schedule, but actually, everyone ended up telling us to be on the same shift anyway.

And so I gladly took them up on the offer.

"Seriously, though, even though you're dressed like a girl right now, you look like yourself," one of the guys in the class said to me.

“Yeah, usually in these situations the guy ends up looking so pretty that everyone mistakes him for a girl,” someone else chimed in.

“No way. I mean, you both look like yourselves too,” I protested.

The guys who had been studying me closely just laughed and agreed. We were all dressed up in women’s clothing, wearing Chinese cheongsams and girls’ school uniforms, among other costumes.

The handsome guys actually looked pretty good in girls’ clothes though. Even their gestures seemed ladylike, though that was probably due to Kamoenai-san’s lessons. Personally, I thought that the guy who first teased me genuinely passed as a girl in his costume.

“Huh? Are you joking? I think Yoshin is the prettiest out of everyone here,” Nanami said, suddenly appearing from behind me. All the guys laughed, though, saying that she was clearly biased. I had to agree with them, though I felt bad for Nanami.

Before I could tell her that, though, Nanami began a very impassioned presentation.

“Look carefully, everyone. Yoshin is wearing a classic maid uniform, and there are *several reasons* I chose that for him. Would you all like to hear?” she asked.

At Nanami’s quiet but clear voice, all the guys in the room immediately gave her their full attention. Nanami ran her hands down my body, explaining the significance behind my outfit choice.

“Yoshin is actually pretty buff, so I chose a uniform that’s on the larger side. By hiding the outlines of his shoulders and cinching his waist, I managed to create a feminine silhouette,” she explained.

With Nanami’s remark, the guys began touching their own waists and shoulders, looking down at their bodies. Several of them even bit their lips, as if they compared their builds to mine and found theirs lacking. *Uh, why?*

Even as she saw the guys looking somehow frustrated, Nanami’s presentation continued.

“By having a collar around his neck, I also covered up his Adam’s apple. You’d

never know it, but a guy's throat is totally different from a girl's! And by adding white gloves, you can create a sense of purity while also covering his masculine hands," Nanami went on.

A good number of the guys brought their hands up to their throats or looked down at their own, bare hands with expressions of utter despair.

Hang on a minute, why does everyone look like they've been had? And why are they looking at me differently from before too? Before, they looked like they were having fun. Why do they look like they're somehow jealous of me now?

"The clincher, of course, is his face. Can you all tell? What exactly is making Yoshin's attractive face so adorable?" Nanami asked.

"It can't be?!" several of the guys gasped.

Nanami wagged her finger from side to side, the motion effortlessly amping up the drama of her presentation.

Maybe we really should've gone with a theater production for the school festival, just like Kenbuchi-kun wanted. Though I guess it's too late now.

"That's right, I did Yoshin's makeup! I did a natural look to make his eyes softer and face prettier. And as a finishing touch, I had him wear a black wig!"

My girlfriend is totally into this presentation.

I had been confused initially when she had wanted to put makeup on me, but it totally made sense now.

Wait, did she just say "natural look"? She put all those different layers on me, and that's considered a natural look? Just what about this is "natural"?

As I sat there getting my makeup done, I had wondered if this was how it felt to be a plastic model getting a thick coating of paint.

Wait, why are there guys kneeling on the ground now?

"With all that in mind—what do you think? Don't you think that Yoshin is the prettiest of all?" Nanami finally asked. She must have been satisfied with the speech she had given, because she placed her hands softly on my shoulders and then brought her own face next to mine. I could tell that she was beaming, a wide grin on her face, just from her general mood. She almost seemed like a

craftsperson who had just completed a project, and was boasting about what she had accomplished.



As if spurred on by her question, one by one the guys looked at me. They were surveying me, as though trying to determine something.

“Now that you mention it...”

“Yeah, I guess he does seem quite cute...?”

“Totally, I think I could go for that. Even though it’s Misumai.”

Everybody stop! Get a hold of yourselves! I’m not cute at all! You’re all just getting carried away!

I felt pinned down by their stares, with the sense that a massive wave of trepidation was upon me, when all of a sudden every guy looking had their heads whacked from behind.

It was...Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san.

“Quit messing around. It’s almost time,” Otofuke-san said, wearing her butler costume, just as we heard the bell ring. Immediately, we began hearing excited voices coming from the various classrooms.

Our school festival had finally begun.



“Thank you for coming! How many in your party? Two? Right this way, please,” I said.

Since the work at our school festival café was essentially the same as at my job, I was able to seat and serve customers pretty easily.

I had, however, neglected to consider the one crucial difference that existed between waiting tables at my job and waiting tables at the school festival.

“Hey, you’re kinda cute. You wanna walk around the school festival with us?” one male student asked.

“I’m terribly sorry, but I’m afraid this isn’t that kind of an establishment,” answered a female student.

“Wow, you’re so handsome, onii-san. Would you like to hang out with us when you’re on your break?” another girl customer asked.

“That’s such a flattering invitation, but I’m afraid, my lady, that I’m an onee-san.”

“Huh? Wait...Hatsumi?!”

So many customers were hitting on us. That really was the difference, and it was a big one. There were people at my workplace who’d visit hoping to chat with Yu-senpai, but no one actually hit on her.

People were probably getting carried away because it was the school festival. Most were doing it for laughs, and they didn’t seem to be actually trying to pick up anyone.

As proof, whenever the server politely declined, they all gave up pretty quickly. Almost as if it were a new way of saying hello, visitors to our café chatted up all the pretty girls and the handsome guys.

Our café also offered another unique service.

“Thank you for coming, sir. Trick or treat?” one girl asked a customer.

“Huh? Um, uh,” a boy muttered, struggling to reply.

“Oh, since you haven’t answered, would you prefer a trick? In that case, please excuse me,” the girl said as she placed her hand on the boy’s ear and began to toy with it. The boy, who had come alone, was rendered speechless, turning bright red.

“Hee hee, I tricked you! Well, then, right this way, please!” the girl said as she removed her hand from his ear and opened her palm wide, proceeding to guide him to his seat. The boy, still red, followed her with unsteady steps.

In a similar way, our servers would play lighthearted “tricks” for people who visited the café. If someone chose the “treat” option, they would give them a bag of candy; most visitors, though, opted to be tricked.

Not all the servers did that, actually; it was primarily a handful of girls that were heading the effort. They had even written “Today Only! Halloween Event!” on the blackboard.

It felt like an actual café, but since we were just a food stall at a school festival, it was mostly just for show. The tricks weren’t anything too crazy

either. People were mostly tickling or touching the visitors, though for some teenage boys even that might be too much. Still, the servers only touched people with their hands, and even the select few who did so were the girls who were more extroverted and often were mistaken for being affectionate.

This, though, was actually an act that would be against the rules if our school *did* rank the programming put on by the various classes. I was genuinely glad that we didn't do that here.

Since we had flirty visitors, girls who weren't comfortable with that often served other girls. Anyone who didn't mind it served everyone.

Thankfully, therefore, Nanami hadn't been hit on by anyone yet.

"Customer waiting for popcorn to go! Thank you for waiting! Please be careful on your way out," Nanami said, handing the transparent container of popcorn to the girl waiting for her order. The girl, upon receiving her popcorn, began talking to Nanami excitedly.

"Nanami-senpai, your outfit is so cute!" she exclaimed.

"You think so? Thanks!" Nanami replied with a smile.

"Are you going around the festival with your boyfriend like that? I'm so jealous," the girl added.

"Yeah, we're going in the afternoon. I'm really excited for it," Nanami said.

Seeing as how the girl referred to Nanami as "senpai," she must have been a student in the grade below. It made me realize just how many friends Nanami had, and seeing Nanami so happy, I couldn't help but be happy too.

I had to work hard to keep up with her. Our classmates had been kind enough to give me and Nanami a break at the same time, so in return I had to give my work my best effort.

"Hey, onee-san, can we order? Excuse me, onee-san with the black hair in the maid costume?" someone called out.

Maid costume with black hair? Who is he talking about? As I looked around the classroom, the voice grew even louder.

"Yeah, you, onee-san! The one that's looking around right now! Can you take

our order?”

Me? Huh? He's talking to me?

As I pointed at myself in surprise, the group of guys that must have been trying to get my attention all nodded. If they were calling me “onee-san,” then they must all be first-years.

They weren't so much extroverted as maybe troublesome, more like delinquents. Well, given that they were customers, I obviously wasn't going to *not* serve them.

“Thank you for waiting. What can I get for you?” I asked.

“I'd like an order of you, please!” one of the guys answered.

What? What the hell is this guy thinking? But his friends just laughed at his remark and seemed to be enjoying themselves. *I* didn't find it nearly as funny. A weird chill went up my spine.

“I'm sorry, but I'm not available to order. If you're ordering popcorn, I recommend the caramel flavor. How does that sound?” I asked, smiling, doing my best not to let my discomfort show while I was working. These kinds of people just got worse if you took them seriously; it was best not to let them know they were getting to you in any way.

“If you're gonna feed it to me from your own mouth, I'm good with anything!” the guy said loudly.

Huh? Can it be that this guy is hitting on me? You're joking, right? What's this guy thinking? I'm a dude. Or no, wait, he called me “onee-san” earlier. Does he actually think I'm a girl?

“What do you think, onee-san? How about you skip work and come hang out with us? We'll do something fun,” the guy continued.

“That's your type, man? Even sounds like a dude,” one of his friends asked him.

Oh, good job, Friend Number One. Except I don't just sound like a dude, I am a dude. If only you were smart enough to actually figure that out.

“Oh, come on! That gap is the best part! Right, onee-san? You'll come, right?”

the guy insisted.

“Nope. I’m actually a guy,” I tried to explain.

“Oh, she’s pretending! That’s too cute!” he said.

Seriously, he’s still not getting it?

This whole thing reminded me of something. There was a live streamer that people said talked in a weird voice, but once they changed their avatar to that of a really pretty girl, people started saying that their voice was unique and cute.

It wasn’t clear whether changing to an attractive appearance helped make everything else about them attractive, or if simply gaining followers increased the number of people who thought them cute. Regardless, the point was that the audience’s perception of the streamer changed as soon as their appearance changed.

Wasn’t this situation another instance of that? As in, with Nanami putting in so much effort to make me believably look like a girl, even my extremely male voice just seemed like a cute quirk to people.

Otherwise, I can’t possibly expl—

“Don’t just stand there, onee-san, say something!” the guy said sweetly, suddenly putting his hand on mine. The moment his hand touched me, what felt like a swarm of insects started crawling all over my skin, spreading throughout my body.

This was no longer just a matter of discomfort. *What is this? I can’t even speak right now.* It wasn’t quite fear, but I nonetheless felt an unpleasant feeling welling up from inside me. Was this how girls felt whenever people hit on them? I knew this was totally out of character for me, but I dearly wished to sock this guy in the face.

Of course, I couldn’t do that in our café. Just as I was trying to decide how to decline his invitation...I suddenly felt the other guy’s hand getting peeled off of mine.

I didn’t notice because I was looking away, but Nanami had come to stand

next to me.

“I’m terribly sorry, but please refrain from such behavior,” Nanami admonished gently, her voice like she was scolding a young child, perhaps owing to the fact that the guy was a year below us. She also seemed to be trying to resolve the issue as quietly as possible, so the other people in the café wouldn’t be disturbed.

Otofuke-san and the others must not have noticed because they were in the middle of serving people, but Nanami did. The guys, though, didn’t seem at all fazed by Nanami showing up.

“Wow, this girl’s really pretty too! Awesome. Are you guys friends? How about you join us too?” the guy asked as he reached out toward Nanami, a sleazy smile playing on his lips. The moment Nanami shirked back, I leaped into action.

Standing in front of Nanami, I grabbed the guy’s hand and tightened my grip on it.

It was fine; I was calm. I had to keep a cool head, especially in times like these. I had to remain calm while I tightened my grip on his hand too. All I wanted to do was to teach him, very gently, what would happen if he tried to lay a finger on Nanami.

“I’m sorry, sir, but I must ask you to leave,” I said.

“Huh? What are you getting angry...? Ow, owowowowow! Damn!” the guy yelped.

“Hey! What the—?!” his friend shouted, confused.

Don’t you dare underestimate an introvert who works out as a hobby. If there’s one thing I’ve got, it’s muscles. In terms of sheer power, I would never lose to a first-year. Even though I’d most likely lose in an actual fight.

Of course I wasn’t going to be violent. I was simply, and politely, asking them to leave.

When the other guy reached out to assist his friend, I grabbed his hand as well. Immediately the guy became immobile, seemingly out of pain.

I then forced the two guys to stand and dragged them outside of the classroom, releasing my grip on them in order to pull out my phone and take a photo of them.

“From here on out, all of you are banned from this café. I’m also reporting this to our teacher. Even if it’s the school festival, you guys are totally out of control. You need to learn to enjoy things in moderation,” I said.

Personally, I thought I was getting a bit preachy, but nonetheless I turned to walk back into the classroom. That was when the second guy appeared to have realized I was a guy, but...

“You gorilla maid! How dare you get all full of yourself, just because you’re kinda my type and I wanted to be nice to you!” the first guy yelled.

Wait, this one still hasn’t figured it out?! Even his friend looks kind of stunned—like, “Dude, how have you not figured this out yet?”

The first guy, though, raised his fist in the air while looking at me. *Well, shucks. I guess I’ll just have to take a punch now and then sort things out after the festival.*

Just as I made that decision...

“What the hell are you two doing?”

The sudden question made the first-year freeze mid motion.

It was a low, intimidating voice that spoke, dripping with menace. The guy turned slowly toward Teshikaga-kun, who had appeared out of nowhere, and lowered his fist meekly.

“T-Teshikaga...-san,” he murmured.

“I-It’s not what you think,” the other guy added.

The scene in front of me felt straight out of another world, a school life manga centered on delinquents. Teshikaga-kun glanced over at me, then over at the male students who had been hitting on us...and then back at me again.

Having just demonstrated a textbook double take, he let his jaw drop and then pointed at me with a quivering finger.

“Misumai, you’re...a girl?” he asked with trepidation.

“No, no. I’m a guy. I’m only dressed like this today because it’s the school festival,” I replied.

“I see. So it’s not one of those stories where a girl who usually dresses up as a guy pretends to actually be a guy in order to date a gyaru in secret?” he pressed.

Hmmm? What an odd take. I tilted my head in slight bewilderment, but Teshikaga-kun paid me no mind and proceeded to glare at the two guys instead.

“Hey, I don’t know what the hell you two were up to,” he began.

“Oh, they hit on me,” I added as context.

“Okay, look, you’re free to like whoever you want, but don’t you dare force people to do things, or be violent in any way toward the people you like. You’ll only regret it later,” Teshikaga-kun said.

The first-years nodded their heads fervently and then scurried off. Given that I didn’t have that much time to spend dealing with those guys, I was grateful that Teshikaga-kun showed up.

“Thanks, Teshikaga-kun. For coming here,” I told him.

“I mean, I owed you one. Plus I got called up, so I had no choice,” he replied.

It was true—I *had* invited Teshikaga-kun to our café. I hadn’t intended to ask him to be a bouncer to protect us against unwelcome guests though; that was just unbelievably good timing.

I had invited him because of Shirishizu-san.

“So, what’s this all about?” he asked.

“Sorry, Teshikaga-kun. Give me a second first.” I then hurried toward the back of the classroom. To be precise, I was going to check on Nanami. I saw that she was with a few of the girls, but she appeared slightly anxious.

I ran toward her, already regretting that I even left her side at all.

“Oh, Yoshin—were you ok—”

“Nanami, are you okay?!” I shouted, grabbing onto her shoulders firmly, but

not painfully, as I looked into her eyes. She didn't...seem that uneasy anymore. Still, she had walked into the line of fire for my sake. Of course she wasn't *not* scared.

"I-I'm fine. Are you okay? They didn't hit you or anything?" she asked.

"Oh, yeah. I'm fine too. I got help. Nanami, are you *sure* you're okay?" I insisted.

"Y-Yeah. You stood up for me, so...I'm okay," she said.

Thank goodness...! Hearing her response, I crumpled to the floor on the spot. If Nanami had gone outside of her comfort zone just to step up for me, and then had experienced something really scary at the school festival, then everything would have been ruined.

And even though she said that I had stood up for her, she had defended me as well, so we were even. She really was a huge help. I never would've expected that kind of situation would make me freeze up like that.

"Are you sure you're okay though, Yoshin? I never thought they'd hit on you," Nanami continued.

Yeah, I didn't expect that either. There's way more people they could've hit on rather than me. Oh, maybe the other girls were too cute, and they thought I was at least in their league?

"Yeah, I was okay. They just touched my hand a little," I responded.

When I raised my hand to indicate the spot, Nanami immediately took it and covered it up with her own. Even though I was wearing a glove, I could still feel Nanami's hand gently enveloping my palm.

After kneading my hand for some time, she then proceeded to place my hand on her chest, while still keeping it wrapped in her hands. *Okay, I can't quite tell what her chest feels like, but I can certainly tell that it feels very warm.*

"Okay! Overwriting complete!" Nanami announced, smiling and releasing my hand to wave both of hers in the air at me. Nanami was always there for me, and I would never get tired of that being reaffirmed.

All of a sudden, applause broke out in the classroom. When I turned around, I

saw that the café customers were clapping for me and Nanami.

“And there we have it, folks, our lovey-dovey couple! How about a nice, sugar-free drink after such a sweet display of affection? A round of drinks on the house, for all the trouble we’ve caused! Please continue to enjoy your visit!” someone announced.

I’ve never heard anyone say “saccharine display of affection” before. Oh, well. We had an awkward disturbance, but I’ve gotta get back to my post too. With both me and Nanami blushing, we parted and returned to our tables.

Of course, there was no way we’d be able to go back to serving the guests without everyone teasing us. People kept telling me how jealous they were of our relationship, or how much they wanted a girlfriend like Nanami, or how wonderful relationships between girls were...

Um, I know I’m wearing a maid uniform, but we aren’t both girls.

“Hey, Misumai-kun. There’s a customer here waiting to see you,” a girl wearing a cheongsam said to me apologetically as she pointed toward the entrance.

“A customer?” I repeated, looking over toward where she was pointing and finding Teshikaga-kun standing there with a slightly dejected expression on his face.

Well, maybe not dejected. Confused, or nervous?

“Um, can I come in now?” he asked.

“Yeah...sorry, I completely forgot about you,” I muttered.

Whoops, I was so focused on Nanami that I completely forgot I’d left Teshikaga-kun hanging. *I’m so sorry. Your order’s on me...*

The classroom stirred with the appearance of Teshikaga-kun, but I simply walked him over to an open table. With him following without a word, I felt some of the girls in the class begin to murmur excitedly.

“Here we are,” I said to him.

“Uh, thanks,” he said, sitting down without any protest. Maybe he really was nervous; he was fidgeting and seemed restless. I felt bad, because I knew that

what was about to happen next was only going to make him even *more* uneasy.

Usually, once we showed the customers to their seats, we would proceed to take their orders and whatnot...but here, I simply asked him to enjoy his visit and left his table.

The person who appeared instead to take my place was...Shirishizu-san.

“Ko—Shirishizu,” Teshikaga-kun murmured.

“Welcome,” Shirishizu-san said coolly.

It felt surreal to see Shirishizu-san in her biker gang uniform waiting on Teshikaga-kun, but maybe in a way, they were the perfect pairing.

With her eyes narrowed as usual, Shirishizu-san’s face didn’t betray much emotion. Though perhaps she was simply putting her all into seeming unaffected.



The two remained silent, but Teshikaga-kun finally raised his head as though he'd made up his mind. Just as he seemed about to speak, though, Shirishizu-san beat him to it.

"Taku-chan, do you wanna go around the school festival with me today?" she asked.

"Huh?"

Teshikaga-kun's response, though in total contradiction with his frown and highly intimidating demeanor, was one that suited the boy that he really was.



Double date (noun): an event in which two couples, rather than one, go on a date together.

In other words, it was an activity that involved four people.

When I went to the night pool with Nanami, we went with Otofuke-san and everyone. Was that a double...or, rather, a triple date, then?

Except that time each couple ended up doing their own thing, so maybe it didn't actually qualify as such. I assumed that a double date involved two couples enjoying the same events at the same time, together.

That all being said, was I technically on a double date right now?

"Misumai, can you explain to me what exactly is going on?" Teshikaga-kun asked.

"Oh, come on, now. Let's just enjoy the school festival for a bit. I'm sure you have things to talk about with Shirishizu-san too. Today will be a good opportunity for you two to sort stuff out," I offered.

Teshikaga-kun seemed somewhat confused by my response, but to be honest, I didn't actually know the details of what Shirishizu-san was trying to do either. Nanami probably knew just as little.

The only things Shirishizu-san had asked us to do was to get Teshikaga-kun to visit our classroom during the festival, and then walk around with them. Shirishizu-san confessed to us that it would be really hard for her to be alone

with Teshikaga-kun, so she wanted me and Nanami to be there too. We agreed immediately, thinking it wasn't a big deal, but...

"Still, are you actually cool with this? You know, like, walking around in a maid outfit and whatever?" Teshikaga-kun asked.

"It's too much of a bother to change, plus it'll be good advertisement for the café. And Nanami told me that she wanted us to walk around like this," I explained.

He was right though: I really *was* walking around school while still wearing my maid costume.

I'd heard that wearing a skirt felt uncomfortably breezy on your legs, but personally I was more bothered by the feeling of fabric rubbing against my legs when I walked.

In any case, it was me in my maid uniform, Nanami in hers, Shirishizu-san in her female biker gang getup, and Teshikaga-kun in his school uniform, which he had altered just shy of being against school rules. The four of us were, in essence, on a double date.

A group of maids and delinquents seemed odd indeed.

"And, actually, you should really be talking to Shirishizu-san, not to me. It's a double date, so it doesn't make any sense for two guys to be chatting with each other," I said.

"D-Double...?! Wh-What are you...?!"

Teshikaga-kun's reaction seemed adorably innocent. Okay, me saying that was kind of annoying and condescending; it wasn't too long ago that all this was new to me too. I was pretty certain that Teshikaga-kun's reaction and emotions were something I should never forget.

"Looked like you were really popular with the girls back there. Is it true that all your girlfriends are also delinquent types?" I asked.

"Are you really asking me that right now, Mr. Harem? I've never even had a girlfriend. I...might have been popular, but I always said no to everyone," Teshikaga-kun replied.

Well, well—it seemed rumors really were unreliable. Teshikaga-kun was no stranger to having rumors spread about him, it seemed. But since he was a handsome guy, maybe that kind of thing just happened.

“If that’s the case, then I wished you hadn’t believed that rumor about me either,” I remarked.

“I feel bad about it. But since it involved Shirishizu, I couldn’t keep myself from seeing if it was true,” Teshikaga-kun muttered.

“I see. Shirishizu-san is really important to you, huh?” I said.

Teshikaga-kun blushed momentarily in response, but then his expression immediately turned gloomy. He shook his head slightly and said in a self-deprecating tone, “I don’t have the right to feel that way.”

I could understand why he would say that, but at the same time, a part of me thought it was far too early for him to give up like that. He first needed to hear how Shirishizu-san really felt.

“If that’s the case, then why did you confess to Nanami?” I asked him.

“That was,” Teshikaga-kun started, visibly struggling to reply before looking away from me. That was the one question I genuinely wanted to ask him. Teshikaga-kun clearly liked Shirishizu-san, and yet he had also confessed to Nanami. His actions contradicted how he actually felt.

I wasn’t trying to ask why he would confess to Nanami if he liked Shirishizu-san, or to tell him that I would never forgive him if he had been planning to toy with Nanami’s feelings, even if it was all in the past. Not at all.

All right, all right—I do feel that way. Just a little. Still, I couldn’t not ask him.

“It wasn’t like I was trying to actually do anything to Barato. I just thought back then that, like, maybe Barato would at least reject me,” Teshikaga-kun mumbled.

“You confessed to Nanami wanting her to say no?” I asked.

“Something like that,” he murmured.

We both fell silent after that revelation. I was just starting to believe that his reasoning was something I just wouldn’t understand when Teshikaga-kun began

speaking softly.

“During my first year, for some reason a bunch of people started asking me out. And to get them to stop, I asked out Barato,” he explained.

“So you used Nanami?” I returned.

“I don’t deny that. But I kind of had no other choice,” he said, adding, “I’m sorry.”

Teshikaga-kun didn’t seem like he was going to offer any more details. Honestly, I didn’t like how he used Nanami, even though we hadn’t known each other then.

But if I pressed this, I would get in the way of us enjoying the school festival. More than anything else, I wanted to spend the day with Nanami totally unbothered. To that end, I should just let this go—for now. For today, I needed to just shake this off.

“Hey, stop chatting with each other! Come on, let’s go!” Nanami said, giving me a hug at just the right moment. Shirishizu-san made her way over to the other side of our group to stand next to Teshikaga-kun—who opened his eyes wide at her sudden proximity, as if slightly bewildered.

When he quickly muttered a soft “Let’s go,” Shirishizu-san nodded without saying anything in return.

Even while Nanami and I took each other’s hands and began chatting between the two of us, the two of them remained silent. I didn’t think it was just my imagination that they both seemed somewhat delighted though.

There they were: the one who confessed on a dare, and the one to have been confessed to. It was funny what we ended up having in common.

“Well, then. What should we go see first? Any recommendations, Nanami?” I asked.

“Hmmm, maybe the haunted house? It’s classic. I think they have one every year,” she suggested.

“Sounds cool. I don’t think I’ve even been to a haunted house at a regular amusement park,” I replied.

“Hee hee, I’ve always wanted to do that thing where I freak out and grab onto the person next to me,” Nanami laughed.

You’re telling me that ahead of time? Would a haunted house at a school festival even be that scary? But how would I know? I haven’t even been to a regular haunted house.

“You guys okay with that?” I turned and asked Shirishizu-san and Teshikaga-kun, given that we had been planning to go around the festival together.

“Um,” Shirishizu-san eked out.

“I guess,” Teshikaga-kun let out.

Hmmm? I had to admit their reactions surprised me. Both of them seemed somewhat pale, and they hesitated to even say anything. They both looked away from us and seemed resistant to meeting our gazes.

Can it be...?

“Are you two...afraid of haunted houses?” I asked.

The two quivered in response to my question. Actually, Teshikaga-kun trembled a bit more than Shirishizu-san did. It turned out we had made an unexpected discovery about him. Nanami seemed not to have guessed either, because she was also smiling awkwardly.

“Maybe somewhere else, then?” I suggested.

“Right. There’s so many other options,” Nanami added.

If they were uncomfortable with the idea, then that was just that. It wouldn’t be any fun if they were forced to go. Nanami and I started looking for a map of the school festival, debating other destinations we could choose.

“N-No, we should go,” Shirishizu-san muttered.

“Y-Yeah, I-let’s,” Teshikaga-kun joined in.

Their voices were trembling. Even to an oblivious bystander, it was clear that the two of them were forcing themselves to go along with the idea. Still, they both had their hands closed into fists, as if determined to do it anyway.

Well, their fists were quivering too...but they didn’t seem like they were going

to back down either.

“Um, of course we can go, but anytime you’re not feeling it, you can just let us know, okay?” Nanami reassured them.

“I mean, it’s just a high school festival. It can’t possibly be that scary,” I added.

Shirishizu-san and Teshikaga-kun nodded in silence. My comment seemed to have made them feel better, though, because some of the color returned to their cheeks. *It can’t possibly be that scary, right?*

That was what I thought, but...

“Okay. This seems pretty intense, doesn’t it?” I had to admit.

The haunted mansion we arrived at seemed way scarier than anything we had imagined. Even though it was being held in just another classroom, it seriously looked like a whole other place at first glance.

The haunted mansion seemed to be taking up two classrooms’ worth of space, and a pathway had been created to connect the two of them. That pathway, too, had been made invisible from the outside.

The concept seemed to be “the Seven Wonders of the School.” I didn’t even know that our school even *had* seven wonders, but it seemed the organizers were making the most of the school setting.

Was the female student at the entrance meant to be the check-in person? She was wearing our school uniform, but with creepy, heavy black makeup around her eyes. And she wasn’t smiling at all.

Like, *at all*. I guess not having her say “Welcome!” with a big smile on her face like a typical greeter would was meant to add to the frightening mood of the haunted house.

“You okay?” I asked Nanami.

“Yeah, this seems totally scary and awesome. Like, this might be the real deal,” she muttered.

“How are those two doing, though?” I asked her.

To be honest, even though I didn’t think this place would be all that scary,

what I was seeing now completely floored me. Nanami looked like she was ready to jump right in; she seemed so excited to enjoy the scariness of it all.

The other two, in contrast, were practically blue in the face. They were shaking all over.

“They’re definitely *not* okay,” I murmured.

“W-We are!” Shirishizu-san shouted.

“Y-Yeah, we’re totally fine!” Teshikaga-kun insisted.

They simply refused to admit that they were not okay. It was clear that there was no escape route once you entered the haunted house, so if they wanted to back out, it was now or never.

“Shall we go in, then?” I said.

When we tried to enter, the girl at the entrance quietly gave us a form that read “Consent Form of DEATH.” I swallowed hard. This seemed to be their welcome.

The form stated, in frightening language, that we understood entering the haunted house would expose us to the risk of our hearts stopping. All we had to do was sign our names in acknowledgment, but even that simple act felt scary. *They’re really going all out here...*

Once Nanami finished signing her name, she took my hand in hers. With our arms linked, she looked back at Shirishizu-san and Teshikaga-kun and called out, “If you get scared, it’s best to stick close to each other. It’ll make you feel safer.”

Hearing her advice, the two glanced at each other and took one small step each to close the gap between them. It seemed they weren’t going to go so far as to cling to each other right then and there.

But that was just a matter of time.

“Ahhhhhhhhh!”

“Gaaaaaaaah!”

We heard very, very loud screams coming from behind us. The screams were so loud that I was pretty certain the people *doing* the scaring felt like patting

themselves on the back for their accomplishment.

Of course, we were screaming too. But the two behind us had such outrageous reactions that how Nanami and I responded pretty much paled in comparison.

“Eek!”

“Whoa!”

Just as we saw a red light flicker on ahead of us, someone slowly appeared underneath it. They were wearing a white lab coat, with their long hair hiding their face. The lab coat seemed to be splattered with blood everywhere. *Whoa, th-that actually scared me...* Nanami seemed to have been spooked too, because she tightened her grip on my arm.

Shirishizu-san and Teshikaga-kun followed in the same path behind us, but their screams were about ten times louder than ours. They were yelling so loudly that I worried they were going to bust their throats.

“Aren’t you scared, Yoshin? You can leap into my arms too, you know?” Nanami whispered in my ear after she heard them yelling behind us.

Nanami’s whisper always sent shivers up my spine, no matter how many times I heard it. At least when we fell asleep together she was only talking to me over the phone, but hearing her speak directly into my ear really did a number on me.

“It is pretty scary, but I’m not sure I wanna have to hang on to you for moral support,” I replied.

“Huh? But that one time we were on the gondola, you were hanging on to me for dear life,” she remarked.

Oh, true.

She was right about that. Nanami had already seen just how pathetic I could be. That night, I had clung to her as she comforted me...

Remembering the incident made me feel embarrassed. But since our path was lit with red lights, I was pretty sure no one would notice.

I knew that it was too late for me to worry about my image and pride, but the

actual mechanics of clinging to her eluded me. Was I supposed to squeeze her, or was I only supposed to touch her a little bit?

As I wondered about how to proceed, I heard yet another scream come from behind me.

When I turned to look, I saw that the two behind us were holding on to each other in a full embrace. They were practically attached to each other, so much so that it made the earlier step they took toward each other look modest and adorable in comparison. Now they seemed to have forgone all the ideas of propriety and awkwardness they held on to earlier. If anything, they seemed to be enjoying the haunted house to its fullest.

“Are heights still scarier than this?” Nanami asked.

“Um, they might be. Though a haunted house probably gets me more in terms of jump scares,” I shared.

“I see. So you’re scared more by heights than by ghosts, huh?” Nanami said with an annoyed pout, though she quickly changed her expression to one with a smile. She then glanced up at me and, covering her mouth with her hand, said, “In that case, I’ll just have to take you on a Ferris wheel next.”

“You don’t need to make so much effort to scare me,” I murmured.

“What do you mean? You’re so adorable when you try to cling to me. I was thinking that could happen again this time,” Nanami said, giggling.

A boyfriend who grabbed onto his girlfriend at a haunted house sounded utterly pathetic. But it seemed that was precisely what Nanami wanted.

It wasn’t that I *wasn’t* scared though. This haunted house was actually pretty solid, and the people inside were made up really well to look like actual ghosts and monsters. I kept thinking about the way they were going to scare me next, or the decorations that stirred fear simply by just how they looked, or the red light that seemed to seep into the semidarkness. The only reason I wasn’t frightened out of my wits was...

“Whooooa!”

“Nooooooooo!”

That was probably the reason: the loud screams that echoed right behind me. When people were more frightened than you, it was somehow much easier to remain calm yourself.

Nanami seemed surprised now and then too, but she wasn't shaking as she walked or anything like that.

Hmmm? Come to think of it...

"You're not scared of haunted houses?" I asked Nanami.

"Not as much as I thought, though I was sure that this would be scarier than the one I went to as a kid," she explained.

So she simply matured? That's a bit sad. But just as I thought that, Nanami tightened her grip on my arm and stepped closer to me.

"Maybe it's because I'm with you, huh? Since I know you'll protect me no matter what, I just feel okay because I'm safe," she said.

"Y-You think so?" I stammered.

"I do!" she said confidently, rubbing her head on my arm. Maybe I was okay too because of the sense of security I felt from knowing that Nanami was with me.

Even though we were both wearing maid outfits, we were both attached very closely to each other. I knew for certain that, even through our clothes, I could feel the warmth of Nanami's body against mine.

When I told her that I felt the same way, Nanami clung to me even more, and...

"Grrroooarrr! Get a roooom!"

"Whoa?!"

"Yeek!"

With absolutely zero warning, one of the people dressed up to scare visitors popped out, screaming at us. It also kind of sounded like he had somewhat of a personal vendetta against us.

The "ghost" had gone completely off script with his comment, and Nanami

and I couldn't help but turn to each other and laugh.

That seemed to ramp up the ghost's wrath even more, as other ghosts suddenly appeared out of nowhere and tried to scare us even more—almost as if to prevent me and Nanami from getting any time alone.



The haunted house was turning more and more into a survival game, while the whole time Shirishizu-san and Teshikaga-kun were screaming out of genuine fear. Suddenly, it felt like things were getting a little out of control, while behind us we also heard more screams of genuine fear. It seemed like things were hitting the fan all at once.

In a panic, we all rushed to make our way to safety.

“Hah...hah...hah...!” Teshikaga-kun panted.

“Jeez...wow...th-that was scary,” Shirishizu-san stuttered.

The minute we made it out of the haunted house, Shirishizu-san and Teshikaga-kun seemed to be overcome by a wave of relief, looking down at their feet as they struggled to catch their breaths. Teshikaga-kun had both hands on his knees, as though trying to keep himself from falling over. Shirishizu-san seemed unable to support herself at all, because she was leaning against Teshikaga-kun.

At first glance, they looked like they were nothing *but* very close to each other.



Once we left the haunted house, it was just about the perfect time for lunch. Along the way, several people asked to take pictures of us. I couldn't help wondering why. Since it seemed like a good way to advertise for the café, though, we gave our okay, requesting that they not upload anything to the internet.

We agreed that it would be nice if all this got more people to come to the café the next day too. Soon enough, though, a certain scent strung us all along to a nearby food stall.

“We can't go around a school festival and *not* get curry,” Nanami declared.

“Really? I guess I don't remember eating it last year either,” I mumbled.

Given that I'd been enticed by this stall because of the smell of curry in the first place, though, I guess I didn't have the right to question its significance at a school festival.

“You’re having the mild curry, right, Taku-chan?” Shirishizu-san asked.

“Um, uh, yeah. You’re right. Wait a minute...are you having the extra spicy one?” he asked her.

“It ain’t curry if it ain’t spicy,” she said. “You want a bite?”

“No thanks,” Teshikaga-kun mumbled in return.

After we’d left the haunted house, the distance between Shirishizu-san and Teshikaga-kun seemed to have closed somewhat. Even though they still seemed a little awkward with each other, they were at least talking a lot more than before they went into the haunted house.

Teshikaga-kun seemed like he had a bit more to go, while Shirishizu-san...well, I guess I couldn’t say for sure, but at the very least, she seemed to be talking to Teshikaga-kun as much as she talked to us.

Talking was important; what we thought and felt would never get through to someone else unless we spoke them out loud. We shouldn’t expect people to read our minds.

That was why we needed to put things into words. We needed to talk with people about things we didn’t want them to misunderstand, directly and without hiding things. We just needed to recognize that anything we could say later, was something we could say now.

Although that really was the most difficult part. I was still learning by doing, after all.

“But really, Taku-chan, you’re still scared of haunted houses, huh?” Shirishizu-san remarked.

“Sh-Shut up! You still don’t like ghosts either!” Teshikaga-kun retaliated.

“Of course. They’re scary. Things that are incomprehensible are frightening. I guess if I could understand them, they wouldn’t scare me so much,” she reasoned.

“I’d be scared even if I *could* understand them,” Teshikaga-kun murmured.

Still eating their curry, the two of them continued talking, cautiously, as though fumbling their way forward. Because they were smiling from time to

time, though, the air about them seemed warm and peaceful.

They were a heartwarming sight to behold. Just as I was telling myself that, though, someone poked me in the side.

“Hey, Yoshin—pay attention to me too,” Nanami said.

“Oh, sorry,” I mumbled. Just as quickly, what I was thinking earlier became a reality. Of course Nanami wouldn’t know what I was thinking unless I shared it with her. My lack of follow-through really was uncool.

“What kind of curry did you get, Yoshin? I got the chicken one,” Nanami said.

“I got the keema curry ’cause I’ve never had it before. I had no idea it had ground meat in it,” I replied.

“Oh, I don’t think I’ve had it either. Can I try?” she asked.

“Sure, here you go,” I said, getting some on my spoon and feeding it to Nanami. She tasted it happily, with some mumbling about making it herself one of these days.

She then brought forward her spoon with her own chicken curry on it. When I ate it with no hesitation, Nanami smiled with joy.

“The chicken’s really tender. Do you think it’s homemade?” I remarked.

“Seems so, huh? I wonder how they did it,” Nanami said, spooning her own curry into her mouth again to taste it more carefully. The curry was quite good, devoid of the greasiness that instant curry from a pouch often had.

I had another bite of my curry, the scent of various spices spreading throughout my mouth and wafting up through my nose. It was actually kind of spicy, but still pretty tasty.

I only realized then that Shirishizu-san and Teshikaga-kun were watching our short exchange with their mouths hanging open.

“How can you feed each other so naturally?” Shirishizu-san mumbled.

“You’re basically a married couple. Amazing,” Teshikaga-kun added.

Wow, it’s actually pretty embarrassing when they make such an observation out loud. But it’s better to do this kind of stuff casually, instead of getting all shy

about it or trying to make it unnecessarily romantic. That way the people around you won't think it's super weird either.

That's my defense, anyway.

"We *are* going out, after all," I said, trying my best to feign calm and continuing to eat my curry as though nothing had happened.

I thought I heard someone around me mutter something about an indirect kiss, but I probably just imagined it. For now, it behooved me to pretend I couldn't hear anything.

"That's wild, guys. What do you have to do to get that way?" Teshikaga-kun asked, astonished, yet his voice sounded somewhat grave. It seemed as though the question was of extreme importance to him. The question seemed to carry with it a hint of genuine grief, so I thought seriously about how to reply.

"I guess I'm not doing anything special. Though I do try my best to be honest with Nanami about what I think and feel," I said.

"Be honest...that's it?" Teshikaga-kun repeated.

"Yeah, that's really it. I feel bad that I don't have any grand ideas to share, but...I just don't want us to have any weird misunderstandings, so I do my best to put everything into words to tell Nanami," I explained.

That was all it was.

Even then, there were times when I still messed up. Relationships sure were difficult.

It would've been nice if I could have said something much cooler and more profound as a response, but unfortunately, I didn't have any such cool thoughts. But if I said I was only doing things like that because I wanted to, would that sound too self-serving?

"I see. I guess you're right," Teshikaga-kun said as he set his spoon down, seemingly deep in thought. He then turned slowly toward Shirishizu-san and bowed his head.

"Shirishizu, I'm sorry that I did such an awful thing to you," he said.

It was such a simple expression of apology. When she heard him, Shirishizu-

san opened her eyes wide. Her face quickly returned to its default, narrowed eyes and all, until she let out a small sigh and spoke in a somewhat exasperated voice.

Except that her voice also sounded happy and wistful at the same time. If on the outside she looked normal, emotionally she might have been all over the place.

“You’re saying that all of a sudden?” she asked.

“I tried to take a cue from Misumai and be honest about my feelings right now. You don’t have to forgive me. But I’ve always wanted to apologize to you,” he explained.

“What’s with that? How many years has it been? And in a place like this?” she said with a slight laugh. Teshikaga-kun furrowed his eyebrows, seemingly at a loss. Shirishizu-san, though, picked up some of her curry on her spoon and, without looking at him, brought it closer to his face.

“Here, say ‘aah,’” she said.

“Huh?” Teshikaga-kun was totally flummoxed by the spoon now floating before his face.

“I’m not gonna forgive you so easily, but if you eat this, then I’m willing to consider it. It’s your absolute favorite—*extra spicy* curry,” she declared.

Was this Shirishizu-san’s way of getting a little revenge? Or did she just want to feed Teshikaga-kun? I wasn’t sure which it was, but I could sense Teshikaga-kun hesitating slightly as he eyed the spoon. If he wasn’t good with spicy stuff, then it definitely wasn’t going to be an easy thing to take.

Despite his reluctance, though, Teshikaga-kun gripped his hands into fists and ate the curry offered to him in one go. He closed his eyes, chewed, and...

Letting out a silent scream, his body twitched and shuddered wildly, like a broken toy. At the sight of Teshikaga-kun struggling, Shirishizu-san laughed loudly and with more joy than we had ever heard her before. “Aha ha! Wow, you really do hate spicy stuff, just as much as you used to,” she commented.

“Dammit...and when did you suddenly get used to it?” he asked.

“When I was binge eating because you dumped me, I ended up liking it.”

“I didn’t dump you, exactly,” he murmured, covering his mouth and still trying to recover from the spiciness of the curry. Shirishizu-san, though, just smiled at him happily, as though she was having the time of her life.

Was Shirishizu-san actually a bit on the sadistic side? Nanami and I both trembled slightly at this unexpected side of her. Shirishizu-san, though, continued nonchalantly eating the curry that was making Teshikaga-kun writhe in pain. I swallowed hard. *Is it really that spicy?*

“Do you want some too, Misumai-kun?” Shirishizu-san asked, lifting up some more curry with her spoon in response to my blatant staring.

At her gesture, Nanami and I, and even Teshikaga-kun, donned expressions of shock.

“No!”

When both Nanami and Teshikaga-kun raised their voices in protest, Shirishizu-san seemed to realize what she had done and brought the spoon back to her own plate. I was glad she thought more about what she was doing, but it was true that she seemed somewhat clueless about these things. Even Teshikaga-kun was sighing in relief.

“Right, of course. It would be an indirect kiss. I can’t be doing that to Misumai —”

Shirishizu-san’s voice trailed off, and her face gradually turned red.

“D-Did you realize that...it was an indirect kiss?” she asked Teshikaga-kun.

“Huh? Um, no... Yes,” he answered sheepishly. In response, Shirishizu-san started hitting him with both fists, her face now completely scarlet. Her punches, though, didn’t have any strength behind them—they seemed more like light taps.

As Shirishizu-san continued hitting him while calling him “idiot” and “pervert,” Teshikaga-kun also tried to defend himself, even as flustered as he was. Even though he seemed not to know what to do, he also seemed like he was enjoying the situation.

I hope they can keep moving forward like this so that they can finally make up. Wait, practically speaking, haven't they already made up?

Oh, shoot. We got carried away, and now one of the students running the curry shop is coming to give us a warning. Say what? You can have fun at the school festival, but no hanky-panky allowed? Yes, absolutely; I'm so sorry. What's that? No, the four of us aren't Teshikaga-kun's harem. I'm a guy, and I'm dating Nanami... Oh, right. I'm still in my maid uniform.

The student left after telling us that none of the classrooms on the fourth floor were in use, and that we should go there if we wanted to make out. Was it me, or was that an indirect way to tell us to get the hell out once we'd finished eating? If that was the case, we should be grateful that they didn't straight-up kick us out.

"Taku-chan—one of these days, I want you to tell me why you did what you did," Shirishizu-san said, her face now back to its normal color, staring straight at him. Unlike the playful mood from earlier, she now exuded an intensity that seemed to leave him with no choice.

Even with the taut atmosphere, though, Teshikaga-kun simply nodded and said, "Okay."

Come to think of it, neither Nanami nor I had heard that it was actually Teshikaga-kun that confessed to Shirishizu-san on a dare. The two weren't saying so outright either. I wondered if it was better for us to pretend like we didn't know anything. The rest was up to them, so it was probably no use for us to worry about it anyway.

"Hey, I was gonna ask. Are you gonna be in the Best Couple Contest tomorrow?" Shirishizu-san suddenly asked me.

"Oh, yeah. I submitted the entry form. A few people from the class said they'd come to cheer us on," I replied.

"Are you gonna wear that?" Shirishizu-san asked hesitantly.

"Um, I don't know," I mumbled.

That's right: Nanami and I went back and forth about it, but in the end, we decided to enter the contest. Everyone from the class backed us up on the idea

too. They said that we were being so flirty with each other, that the whole school might as well see us too. Nanami and I couldn't help laughing when we heard that. At the time, though, we thought that that wouldn't be such a bad idea either.

"I see. In that case, Taku-chan—should we enter the contest tomorrow too?"

With Shirishizu-san's sudden suggestion that they participate, Teshikaga-kun seemed at a complete loss for words.



School festival, day two.

This was the day when outsiders were allowed to attend the festival. And by "outsiders," I really just meant guardians and families of students; they were considered outsiders only because they didn't ordinarily come to campus. They actually could have come on the first day too, if they had been invited by a student and put in an application for their attendance. Most students found it embarrassing for family to come on the first day, though, so such cases tended to be pretty rare.

Apparently the event used to be more like a local festival, where anyone who wanted to could attend. Given the times, though, this newer practice was probably normal—or, that was what I assumed. I didn't know what things used to be like before, though to be honest, I didn't really want my parents to come either...

"Oh my, what a cute server we have here. I had no idea I'd given birth to a daughter," my mom chuckled.

"Yoshin, I never knew you looked good in these kinds of clothes too. I must say, I'm surprised," my dad commented.

Because of *this*.

Even though I made sure my parents knew that they shouldn't feel like they had to come to the school festival if they were busy, they *insisted* on making the time to stop by.

Plus they'd told me that *after* I'd already decided on what costume I was

going to wear. It didn't seem like a good idea to change my costume and make a fuss about the whole thing, so I just gave up and went with it.

I'd given up, but...why did my mom and dad look so happy?

"Oh, Nanami-san. You're wearing a maid outfit too? You look so lovely. Isn't it just wonderful to be young?" my mom said.

"It's so nice to see you, Shinobu-san! Do I look okay? Thank you so much!" Nanami replied giddily.

"Maybe I'll try wearing one too so that I can have Akira-san see me in it," my mom added.

Please don't. Why in the world do I have to see my own mother wearing a maid costume? Please, Nanami, don't egg her on.

I looked around and saw many of my classmates were similarly flustered, laughing nervously as their own family members arrived at our café. Since most of the guys were dressed like girls, they more than anyone else seemed completely at a loss for how to act.

Just as I'd shown my parents to their seats and thought that I'd weathered the storm...well, if it wasn't one thing, it certainly was another.

"Welco...me," I ended up muttering.

The next party was also a family. In fact, it was a family that I myself knew very well. I had to wonder why they had to come precisely in that moment, but alas, I couldn't very well say that out loud.

"Is that you, Yoshin-kun?" came a bewildered question.

"I'm impressed that you could tell," I replied with some hesitation.

Well, of course they could tell. Even if I was dressed like a girl, I still had my regular ol' face on. This time it was Genichiro-san, who seemed so shocked by my appearance that he just kept opening and closing his mouth without being able to say anything. Tomoko-san and Saya-chan seemed to have been standing right behind him, because they both poked their heads out from each side of him and let their jaws drop when they saw me.

"Onii-chan...no, wait. *Onee-chan?*" Saya-chan murmured.

“Oh, dear. Am I going to end up with three daughters in the future?” Tomoko-san said, chuckling.

Spare me. Well, I guess I should’ve expected the entire Barato family to come visit. I had been so focused on my own family that I hadn’t quite prepared for this turn of events.

Actually, it might have been more honest for me to say that I just didn’t want to think about it.

“Do you dress like this at your actual job too?” Genichiro-san asked suspiciously.

“No, sir. Absolutely *not*,” I declared, only to see Tomoko-san and Saya-chan look disappointed. *Wait, why are you two getting all bummed out?*

“Oh, you’re all here!” Nanami exclaimed, then added, “We’re actually full right now. What do you want to do?”

Nanami had walked over toward us at just the right moment, as though she had been sent from the heavens to rescue me. *Oh, thank goodness. Now I can finally...*

“Wow, onee-chan, you’re totally going for the cute and sexy look. Jeez, why are you showing off your boobs so much?” Saya-chan remarked.

“Saya?!” Nanami exclaimed.

Wow, you really said it, Saya-chan. But Nanami probably chose her outfit because she genuinely thought it would be cute, and she didn’t even realize how sexy it would actually look. Oh, see, now she’s hiding her chest because she’s thinking about it. Is it just me, or does that just look even more provocative?

Just as soon as Nanami began pushing her family out the classroom door, though, my mom stepped in to try to save the situation, suggesting that both families just sit together. Nanami accepted the offer, albeit somewhat unwillingly.

Witnessing something normal for home happen at school instead felt pretty strange.

“Hey, Misumai—who are those people?” Kenbuchi-kun asked me, his

curiosity super obvious. He was wearing a kimono, perhaps as a way to hide his figure.

“Those are my and Nanami’s families,” I explained in the simplest terms possible. In response, Kenbuchi-kun first let out a small cry of wonder. He then opened his eyes wide in shock and stared at me so hard, I thought he was going to burn a hole through me.

“Wait, you’re both already on good terms with each other’s families? You’re basically counting down to the wedding, then,” he muttered.

It was embarrassing to hear someone say that. I mean, not that we were *really* counting down to the wedding, but still. Our relationship seemed to surprise Kenbuchi-kun, but I didn’t know how else to explain it either.

Our relationship really did develop that way by accident. I met Genichiro-san by accident, and it just so happened that Nanami’s family was willing to spend time with me. And then we all went on that family trip together...though there was no way I could tell him all of that.

“And who’s that super cute girl who looks like Barato?” he asked.

“Oh, that’s Nanami’s younger sister,” I explained.

“Wait, *that* cute girl calls you ‘onii-chan’? You’re basically winning at life, dude,” Kenbuchi-kun remarked.

I have nothing to say to that either. I mean, I guess she does call me that. But I’m not sure if I’m winning at life, exactly. After all, you don’t know if you win or lose at life until you die...though I guess that’s not what we’re talking about here.

For some time after that, Kenbuchi-kun and I continued our back-and-forth, primarily with him asking me to introduce him to Saya-chan. I said no, but he tried really hard to convince me otherwise.

Someone eventually yelled at us to get back to work, though, so we had to stop talking about it. I laid the blame for our delinquency entirely on Kenbuchi-kun.

“Wait, isn’t it about time, Misumai? For the contest, I mean?” Kenbuchi-kun

suddenly asked.

“Huh? Already? Oh, you’re right. Sorry, I guess I have to head out,” I replied.

“Sure thing. Break a leg, man. We’ll all go cheer you guys on later. Sounds like it’ll be worth a watch,” he added.

Worth what, exactly? I can’t tell him not to come though. Well, no matter. Let’s do this, I guess.

“Is it that time already, Misumai? In that case, here—change into these,” Otofuke-san said, handing me a bag with a change of clothes inside.

“Thanks, Otofuke-san,” I said, glancing in the bag to find a butler costume inside.

In the end, I begged to not have to participate in the couple contest in my maid outfit. Dressing up like a girl in front of all those people would be just too much for me.

Since my regular school uniform wouldn’t be at all interesting, though, we decided that I’d wear the spare butler costume set we had on hand. A maid and a butler went well together, after all.

Nanami wasn’t too enthused about the idea at first, but once I tried on the costume, she seemed much more willing. From the bottom of my heart, I was grateful—and relieved.

“Hey, Nanami. Shirishizu-san too. It’s time for us to get going,” I called out.

Our classmates wanted us to announce when we would leave for the contest instead of sneaking off quietly, so that they could make a big fuss out of it. At my announcement, the girls in the class began shooting off reminders, telling us what to keep in mind. The three of us hyped each other up for the contest with the entire class clamoring right along with us. It was starting to feel like a big send-off party.

“Wait, the class rep is going too? Huh? With who?” I heard Kenbuchi-kun mutter. From the corner of my eye, I could see how bewildered he was. *Ah, right—now and then it seemed like he might be crushing on her, didn’t he?* I apologized to Kenbuchi-kun inside my heart, though it wasn’t really my fault. I

thought I might've heard someone crumple to the ground as I left the classroom, though that was probably just my imagination.

Along the way, I stopped by our classroom and changed into the butler costume, then we all headed toward the gym. Teshikaga-kun was already there waiting for us when we arrived.

He was wearing a striking—and appropriate—delinquent outfit, as though trying to match Shirishizu-san's costume. He honestly looked great in it; the delinquent look suited him perfectly. He and Shirishizu-san seemed to be going as a pair of biker gang members.

There was a visible circle of space around Teshikaga-kun, as though people were trying to glimpse him from afar. Since Teshikaga-kun was a pretty handsome guy, most of the people trying to steal glances at him were girls. It wasn't clear whether he realized that or not, but he certainly had a dour expression on his face.

Teshikaga-kun greeted us with a slight smile as we arrived. His change in expression elicited an audible titter among his admirers.

"Sup. Glad to see you made it finally," he said.

"Um, yeah. It's nice to see you too. You look pretty pissed though," I returned.

"A bunch of girls tried to talk to me while I was waiting for you guys. It was such a pain," he muttered.

Wow, is this guy as popular as Shoichi-senpai? Come to think of it, I haven't seen Shoichi-senpai at all. I wonder what senpai's doing for the festival.

I hadn't been able to see senpai at all because of our respective schedules, but maybe I should have contacted him just to see how he was doing.

Just as I was contemplating doing just that after the contest...

"Hear ye, hear ye! Participants for the couple contests must check in here! We'll be starting shortly, so don't delay! Last-minute participants are also welcome!"

I heard a familiar voice crying out. Nanami seemed to notice too, because she looked toward the direction where the voice was coming from at the same time

I did.

It was, of course, none other than Shoichi-senpai.

“Senpai, um...what are you doing?” I asked hesitantly.

“Well, well, well! If it isn’t Yoshin-kun! Looking quite dapper today, aren’t you? Oh, I’ve been meaning to thank you for working at the restaurant. You’ve been such a tremendous help. I’d love to be able to work together with you one of these days too,” he said.

“Oh, of course. And I should really be thanking you for introducing me to the owners. But, wait—what exactly are you doing *here*?” I asked.

Senpai was dressed today in a suit—blue jacket, black pants, and white shirt. He was wearing a bow tie and appeared almost like an emcee of some sort.

“I’m emceeing for the couple contest—the annual tradition hosted by the basketball club. Can it be that the two of you are participating as well?” he asked in return.

This event is organized by the basketball club?! I had heard that it was hosted by some club or other, but I hadn’t quite expected *this*. Since senpai was tall and stood out in a crowd, he was the perfect choice to direct people toward the contest.

Wait, isn’t senpai the captain though? Should captains be doing stuff like this? While I froze in bewilderment, senpai promptly turned to Teshikaga-kun and Shirishizu-san.

“Oh, and here’s Teshikaga-kun! Are you entering the contest as well? What a rare treat! That must mean that the young lady next to you is your partner!” senpai remarked.

“R-Right. But, uh, how do you know who I am?” Teshikaga-kun murmured.

Wait, senpai’s being so friendly to him, but they don’t even know each other? Unfazed by Teshikaga-kun’s reaction, though, senpai raised both his hands with a flourish, as if he were acting out a dramatic scene.

“I’ve done my research on everyone who’s ever asked out Barato-kun in the past. It seems, though, that you’ve already found a new love. How wonderful—

congratulations are in order,” senpai declared, clapping his hands as he continued guiding us toward the check-in table. He talked the whole way there, in fact, as if he seemed genuinely excited. I was impressed that he didn’t run out of breath at all.

“You’re not gonna enter the contest, senpai?” I asked.

“Since the club is organizing the event, members can’t participate in the competition. If that wasn’t the case, I supposed I could’ve asked someone to enter with me,” he explained.

Good-looking people sure think differently. Who would have been his partner?

In any case, it was rare to see even Shirishizu-san be somewhat overwhelmed by another person. She seemed like the type to be able to maintain her cool with just about anyone, but clearly there seemed to be some exceptions.

After bowling us over with his energy and excitement, senpai turned to us and said, “I actually wasn’t expecting you to enter the competition either, Yoshin-kun. You didn’t seem like the type of person to enjoy stuff like this. The only reason I didn’t invite you myself is because I would have been heartbroken if you had turned me down.”

“I’m so sorry,” I said. “There are actually several reasons for this...”

“Is it those rumors going around, by chance? Well, knowing you, I know that those rumors don’t have a lick of truth to them. But taking part in this competition is probably the perfect way to make them go away,” senpai said as he smiled and combed his hair back with his hand. Every once in a while, senpai said some very astute and perceptive things. It really was kind of impressive.

“Yeah, something like that,” I managed to say.

“Well, well. We do have some fantastic prizes for the winners, so I do hope you enjoy the process,” he added.

Oh, I had no idea there were prizes. Well, we were unlikely to win first place, but now that I knew we could possibly win something, I was willing to put in some effort.

We completed our check-in with senpai’s help, and now all we had to do was

to wait until it was time for us to go up onstage...

“And just so you know, anything goes in this couple contest. What I mean is: just for today, even if you kiss each other onstage, you won’t get into any trouble. Though that simply means that I’ll be the one getting yelled at,” senpai said, putting his hands on his hips and laughing heartily. He then winked at us, as if aware that his statement had totally caught us off guard.

Nanami and I...and even Teshikaga-kun and Shirishizu-san were all of the same mind.

“As if we could do that!” we all shouted in unison, though even that didn’t seem to faze senpai at all. If anything, he just laughed even more loudly and then returned to his task of drawing people to the contest.

With his comment lingering in the air, though, there was no way we *wouldn’t* think about kissing now. I stole a glance at Nanami’s lips, while she, too, looked furtively in my direction.

We had kissed many times before, but even so, we quickly glanced away as soon as our eyes met. Teshikaga-kun and Shirishizu-san, on the other hand, were fidgeting and seemed unable even to look at each other anymore. They certainly did seem very innocent.

Even as we couldn’t help feeling awkward around each other, we all moved together to one of the side rooms in the gym where we were told to wait until the start of the event. There were more participants than I was expecting, around ten couples or so.

From what I’d heard, the plan was to split us up into two groups of five couples each. From each group, two couples would be advancing to the finals—with four couples total competing for the top. It seemed like some tournament you read about in a manga.

Teshikaga-kun and Shirishizu-san happened to be in the same group as me and Nanami. Our group was going second, so we might have an advantage here, considering that we would be able to watch the first group go through the contest ahead of us.

As we waited, the check-in came to a close and an announcement was made

about the start of the couple contest itself. *So it's finally begun, huh? I'm getting kind of nervous.*

The first group was called up, and each couple was introduced in front of the audience in the gym. The emcee shared the names of the individuals and how long they had been together, as well as what was so special about the two. *Wait, so Shoichi-senpai really is the emcee?*

Every time Shoichi-senpai excitedly made another announcement, everyone in the audience cheered very loudly. *You're telling me that I have to go out there in front of everyone? Seriously?*

My palms began to sweat. I remembered how Kenbuchi-kun had wanted our class to do a performance for the festival, but now I was glad that we hadn't gone down that path. I never realized that being in front of a crowd could induce so much fear until now.

Even though I was sweating, I felt my fingertips growing cold. It almost felt as though I was gripping ice in my hands. I even began to suspect that blood had stopped running through my fingers at all.

In contrast to the contest—that was getting increasingly heated onstage—I felt my entire body dropping in temperature. All of a sudden, though, I felt something warm touch me.

It was Nanami's hand.

"I-I'm starting to get kind of nervous. My hands are freezing too," she said.

That couldn't possibly be true though. Her hand was so much warmer than mine. I squeezed it, trying to feel it more. The warmth of her hand was comforting, and I felt safe, my nervousness slowly leaving my body.

Just a moment ago I felt like I couldn't even speak. Now, though, my mouth moved with no problem.

"I feel nervous too," I said to her.

"Right? I thought being a ring girl would make me numb to this kind of stuff, but I guess this is an entirely different thing," she shared.

"I see," I replied, then added, "Thanks for that."

Nanami was probably telling me that she was nervous because she knew that I was nervous. Knowing that made me utter those words of thanks.

I had to pump myself up too—after all, there was no going back at this point.

“No no no, I’m literally super nervous right now! I mean, I managed to get through being a ring girl because I didn’t have to say anything. I’ve never had to talk while being onstage before,” she protested.

Whoa, seriously? I thought she was just being nice to me, but it seemed I was wrong. Now that I thought about it, Nanami’s palm was pretty sweaty too. I guess she wasn’t kidding about this.

Since I had tried to work myself up, I was feeling a little less nervous than before. *Looks like it’s my turn to cheer up Nanami now.*

“It’s okay, Nanami. If there’s anything I can do, I’m happy to do it,” I told her.

“Really? Like, *anything?*” she repeated.

“Yeah, anyth—”

“A kiss, then,” she said, then leaned in to kiss me on the cheek.

Huh? Here? The other people in the waiting room were looking at us with their eyes wide open too. I mean, I really wasn’t expecting her to do something like that all of a sudden.

Nanami kissed me so that her lips merely grazed my cheek, and then she pulled back and tapped her own cheek lightly with her finger. *Does this mean...she wants me to do it back to her?*

“Here!” she said.

“Seriously?” I muttered, then kissed her cheek lightly as Nanami continued poking it with a huge smile on her face. It was, of course, my first time kissing her when everyone around us was staring at us. I was mortified. I didn’t think I’d actually do something like what Shoichi-senpai said about kissing onstage—or, well, a version of it.

The moment I looked around, I realized that our little exchange had garnered a lot of attention. I even saw some girls looking envious and asking for their own boyfriends to do the same. The guys were refusing, saying that they

couldn't do something like that so publicly...

Really, I had thought that we were surrounded by couples. *Seems like I got carried away.* I was starting to feel even more embarrassed.

"Why don't you guys just take the prize already," someone muttered—even though I couldn't quite tell who it was.



The Best Couple Contest was getting more heated than anyone could've expected. This development was truly unexpected. Why were people getting so excited, even though I was one of the people who had advanced?

In the first battle among the five couples—even though I wasn't sure if I could really call it a "battle"—Nanami and I managed to beat out the others.

It involved couples answering questions presented by the emcee and getting points if both individuals were able to answer correctly. Nanami and I were lucky enough to be able to answer the questions without any problems, and before we realized it, we had gotten all of them right. Really, we were so spot-on that I was kind of in shock.

We answered questions about where we went on our first date, who asked out whom, when we had our first kiss, what I liked about her, what she liked about me... They asked us so many questions that I was starting to believe I had signed on for a public humiliation instead of a Best Couple Contest.

People were probably getting so worked up because they were witnessing a real upset—a case of David and Goliath, where the underdog was suddenly starting to put up a fighting chance. People were compelled to root for someone going against the odds.

As a side note, Teshikaga-kun and Shirishizu-san, too, answered almost all their questions correctly. From our group, therefore, it was me and Nanami, plus Teshikaga-kun and Shirishizu-san, who ended up advancing to the next round.

"Now let's have you tell us just how badly you want to win this competition!" Shoichi-senpai said, bringing the microphone toward us. *Why is he so into his role, anyway?*

Of course, there was no way I would be able to give any kind of smart response when I had a mic shoved in my face onstage. All I could say was that I would do my best. Nanami must have gotten used to being in front of a crowd, though, because she got the audience cheering by announcing, “I’ll show everyone just how awesome my boyfriend is!” I should have said something cool like that too.

And now, in the final round, Nanami and I were faced with the most difficult task yet.

We were asked to take turns saying out loud what we liked about the other person. The couple that ran out of things to say first would lose. Nanami and I had managed to stay in it until the end.

Teshikaga-kun and Shirishizu-san, too, had stuck with it until the final round as well. They both looked like they were about to cough up blood as they went back and forth, saying what they liked about the other person. They were visibly suffering so much that I started to wonder why they were still doing it at all. Maybe they just couldn’t turn back anymore.

Because we all had gone on for so long without being able to determine the winning couple, we were given the most outrageous final task of all: we were asked to declare our love for the other person. It was, in essence, a public confession. We were competing over what we would say *now*, rather than reenacting what we had said when we first started going out.

We had five minutes to think about what to say. After those five minutes, I would tell Nanami how I felt...in front of the entire audience.

Well, given that we were already dating, it was odd to think that I was going to tell her how much I liked her. Regardless, it was very clear that this event really was geared toward people who were primarily extroverts. It most definitely was *not* an idea that I would have come up with myself.

As I stood there thinking that, though, I heard the people who had gotten eliminated muttering something like, “Wow, I’m really glad I didn’t get that far.” *Wait, is this event getting kind of crazy, even for the extroverts in the room?*

Maybe this was one of those things where people got swept away by the mood of things, and then only later thought back more calmly to what they did

and ended up performing major facepalms. I kicked myself for skipping ahead and already starting to contemplate what I had done, and would still need to do, when the whole thing wasn't even over yet.

But then...

"Yoshin, you don't have to force yourself, okay? It's really fine, but...sorry, I guess I'm actually kind of looking forward to what you're gonna say."

The moment Nanami said that to me, I knew I had to give this everything I had.

Only you and Nanami are here right now. No one else is here. It's not embarrassing at all. Just tell her how you feel. Think about how best to put your feelings into words.

In the span of those five minutes, all of our shared memories from the last half year, as well as all of my various emotions, ran through my head and heart. Nanami and I met, went out on dates, confessed to each other again, kissed...

Wow, it's already been nearly six months, huh? It's been a while, but it also feels like it all passed in a blink.

From a distance, I heard someone call out to ask if we were ready.

Yeah. I know just how to express my feelings.

I took a step forward onstage. There was only Nanami in front of me, and before we knew it, the spotlight was hitting just the two of us.

"It's been six months since we started going out," I began, "and wow, has a lot happened. We've gone to so many places together; we even got to spend your birthday together. Honestly, I never even imagined that I would ever feel this way about someone."

I was always alone. And I was fine with that. But now, I can't imagine being without Nanami. I don't even want to imagine it.

"In the last six months, you've given me so much happiness—so much that I don't think I'll ever be able to repay you," I continued.

Every bit of happiness that I felt—the happiness that came only from being with someone, a happiness that I had never felt before—was something only

Nanami made possible. And I realized that the feeling only became stronger over the course of the last half year.

We shared things that were fun, things that gave us joy. I knew that we would one day share sadness, and probably even fight with each other too.

Even still.

“That’s why I’m going to spend the rest of my life making you happy, with everything I’ve got. From this day forward, I know that I’ll only love you, Nanami,” I said.

It might have sounded like empty words. People might say that I was all talk and no walk. But in this moment, it was how I felt.

“I love you, Nanami.”

The moment I said that, I felt a shock run through my body as I lost my balance. At the same time, cheers rang out, loud enough to make the air tremble, and surrounded my entire body.

Nanami had come bounding into my chest, and I managed to embrace her just as I caught her.

“You’ve given me so much too,” Nanami returned. “And from this moment on, I’ll give my all to you, to give back everything you’ve given me. We’ll be together forever!”

And with that, Nanami kissed me.

It wasn’t a long kiss, just a light one where her lips brushed mine. She pulled back immediately, then looked at me with the most brilliant smile on her face.

“I love you, Yoshin!” she exclaimed.



The moment of silence that followed seemed to last forever. No one said anything, and just as I stood there unable to say anything either...

A thunderous applause erupted all around us.

“Who asked you to propose? Jeez,” I heard Shoichi-senpai say with exasperation in the midst of it all. His comment, though, only made the cheers grow louder.

Hey, wait a minute—you told us yourself to tell the other person how we felt! That’s why I gave that declaration every ounce of myself. How can you tell me that was too much?

In any case, that was all the time that Nanami and I had. As we bowed to the audience from where we stood and began making our way out of the spotlight, Nanami whispered, “When we’re alone later, will you kiss me too?”

“Of course,” I murmured.

“All right, you two. Once we’re finished with the whole event, *then* you can go and make out all you want,” Shoichi-senpai—who had obviously heard us—said while holding the mic up to his mouth, so everyone in the audience guessed the gist of what Nanami and I had said to each other. More good-natured hooting ensued.

As the two of us shuffled toward the back of the stage, we saw that Teshikaga-kun and Shirishizu-san were looking at us with mild disbelief. *Sorry about that...*

“Well, now—that adorkable display of affection was certainly enough to dispel any strange rumors going around, wasn’t it? Next up, shall we ask Teshikaga-kun and Shirishizu-san to come on up?” senpai announced.

“You’re gonna make us go up after *that*?” Teshikaga-kun muttered.

I’m super sorry. Maybe we overdid it. With palpable reluctance, Teshikaga-kun and Shirishizu-san walked toward the front of the stage and turned to face each other. Teshikaga-kun faced Shirishizu-san head-on, as if he were about to fight her.

“Well, then! Do declare your love to your heart’s content!” Shoichi-senpai

said, snapping his fingers. With that, the lights in the gym went down, and a spotlight shone upon the two of them.

So this was how it looked... I had no idea.

“I’ve always caused so much trouble for you, ever since we were kids,” Teshikaga-kun began. Illuminated by the spotlight, he chose his words carefully, as though he was remembering something from the past. Shirishizu-san listened, smiling gently.

“I’ve gotta be honest, I’m grateful that I get to stand here with you right now. I...did something really terrible to you. And I would never ask you to forgive me for that,” Teshikaga-kun continued as he smiled, something wistful and not at all happy. Shirishizu-san took a step toward him in response.

“I’m glad that I got to make all these great memories with you today. This is enough for me. It’s *more* than enough, since all *you’ve* done is make me happy.”

What came out of Teshikaga-kun’s mouth didn’t sound like words of love; they sounded like words of parting. The people in the audience began to murmur, confused by his ambivalent message.

Shirishizu-san, though, slowly walked closer toward him, then stopped when she was close enough to reach out to him.

Then, with seemingly every ounce of strength she had within her, she slapped him on the face.

“Huh?”

With the stunning sound of flesh hitting flesh, Teshikaga-kun—who couldn’t have possibly expected such a turn of events—fell to the floor. Given the outfit that Shirishizu-san was wearing, her slap and its result created a spectacular image.

Still on the floor, Teshikaga-kun pressed his hand to his cheek. He looked up at Shirishizu-san in shock. Actually, all of us did—me and Nanami, Teshikaga-kun, Shoichi-senpai, and everyone in the audience that was watching what was unfolding onstage.

Maybe because this was a part of the school festival, not even the teachers

stepped in to stop them. That made sense, since it wasn't like all the teachers were assembled here. The only people present were those who had come to watch the event.

Everyone's eyes were glued to the stage. It was as simple as that.

I thought I heard someone swallow hard, but just as I realized that my own body had made that sound, Shirishizu-san yelled out loud.

Her voice was *loud*—entirely unimaginable from the way she normally carried herself. She yelled with so much force, as though she was trying to expel all the emotions that had been piling up inside of her for so long.

“Just how long do you plan on dwelling on that stuff for?!” she shouted, as though she could yell the sense into him.

Everyone stared with their mouths hanging open. Even Teshikaga-kun, hand still on his face, looked up at Shirishizu-san in shock. Then he stood up in his stunned state...and continued listening to what she had to say.

“You’ve always been like this! Just carrying everything inside you and *never telling me anything*! Do you have any idea how worried I was about you?! And you just try to end everything all by yourself!” she exclaimed.

Her voice rang out loud and clear. It was as if she were trying to speak louder than the cheers we had heard earlier. Her voice was so loud and so shocking, it was as if with her voice alone she was trying to start a quake that could rattle the entire gymnasium.

Such rage coming from someone who rarely seemed angry, who instead usually looked sleepy and remained quite quiet, was—to put it simply—frightening. So much so that even I, who had nothing to do with the situation, quivered with fear.

“Who said I wouldn’t forgive you?! If you do something wrong, you apologize! And then you make up! But you! You want to ghost me?! Do you have any idea how many years it’s been?!”

How was Teshikaga-kun taking all this—this incoherent mass of emotions that seemed to assault him with everything Shirishizu-san had been thinking about all this time?

I couldn't tell by looking at him; all I could do was to watch over them both.

"You must have had a reason for it all, right?! Then just *tell me*! I won't know if you don't tell me! I don't care if it's uncool or totally pathetic!" she continued screaming. Then, hitting him weakly in the chest, she finally eked out, "Let's figure it out together. We've known each other for so long, haven't we?"

When she stopped shouting, everyone remained silent.

"I'm sorry, Kotoha."

Only those words from Teshikaga-kun echoed through the silence.

"I guess I *was* trying to be cool. I wanted to protect you, but I just ended up getting lost and making you worry. But...I won't do that anymore," he said.

Teshikaga-kun stole a glance at me, then set his lips in a straight line. As though he had come to a decision, he breathed in deeply, then looked down at Shirishizu-san.

"Will you...be my friend again?" he asked as he pulled her in for a hug, a move that must have taken him a lot of courage to make. Shirishizu-san, though, burst out laughing in response to his question.

"Of course that's where you'd end up, huh?" she muttered, so softly that we were probably the only ones who heard. Still, she looked up at him happily and nodded.

"I'd be glad to," she said.

I thought I saw something other than sweat glimmering at the corners of Teshikaga-kun's eyes when she said that. A different kind of applause from earlier broke out for the two of them. It was a kind and warm applause, one of celebration and blessing. The two looked slightly embarrassed as the audience continued to clap. They were holding hands tightly, as though telling each other without words that they would never make the same mistake again.

As the event space filled with tenderness, there was one person who just couldn't keep quiet.

"How do you expect us to believe that you two aren't dating already?" Shoichi-senpai asked.

“Why would you say that now, senpai?” I asked in turn. Though it was probably safe to say that senpai’s question was one that everyone watching wanted to ask as well.

Teshikaga-kun’s face, flushed beet red, gave us the only answer we needed.

Epilogue: How to Make Friends

The after-party for our school festival was an occasion for all of us to pat ourselves on the back for a job well done. There were events held for the entire school, as well as parties put on by individual classes.

Of course, there were also people who chose not to attend the after-party, and instead just celebrated among their friends.

“It’s all over, huh?” I murmured, glancing over at the stage as I stood by myself.

I really enjoyed my first school festival with Nanami—what was, in many ways, my first school festival in general. A lot of things happened, I guess. I mean, for one, I never thought I’d dress up as a girl.

“Oh, it’s Misumai-senpai! That one that was kissing onstage!” a girl called out as she walked by.

“Are you alone right now? Please send our regards to your girlfriend!” her friend walking with her added.

“Oh, sure. Thanks,” I muttered.

Now random people reached out to me when I was alone. People from all over the school, in all different grade levels, had seen me and Nanami in the couple contest. I would greet them or wave to them in response, which would have been unthinkable just a little while ago. I even surprised myself with my new behavior. Right now the gym was decked out for a dance party for all the students, and it even included a space for everyone to partake in some elegant finger foods. The students were all grabbing and enjoying whatever they wished. There was juice and snacks, music playing, people singing and dancing. Everyone here was just freely enjoying themselves.

“I still can’t believe we won first place,” I murmured again.

Long story short, Nanami and I were lucky enough to win first place in the couple contest. Teshikaga-kun and Shirishizu-san had jointly decided to

withdraw from the competition on the grounds that they weren't really a couple.

When it came to certain things, those two were perfectly aligned. Maybe it was things like that that made them a good match for each other.

The first place prize was a pair of tickets, probably to an amusement park or something similar. *Maybe for our next date? I'm looking forward to... Whoa, that's cold!*

"Well, aren't you popular, young man," Nanami said, standing there with drinks in hand as I spun around. She had changed out of her maid costume and was wearing her regular school uniform for the after-party. I had done the same as well. I had to admit, I felt a lot more myself wearing pants instead of a skirt. I couldn't quite get used to how fluttery that thing was.

"Aw, darn! You looked so cute in your maid outfit—you should wear it again soon," Nanami complained.

"If an occasion ever comes along for it, sure," I said vaguely.

Nanami seemed to detect that there would, actually, never be a time for it. She pouted and began to protest, but I wasn't willing to wear it again anytime soon.

For now, I just wanted to enjoy the after-party with Nanami.

"Misumai! Dang, you were awesome!"

Just as I was trying to settle into the mood of things, though, a particularly rowdy group approached us. It was our classmates, with Kenbuchi-kun leading the way. They surrounded us and began talking about what a huge success today's school festival was.

"Seriously, I never expected you to actually do it onstage! I got shivers just watching you. I really respect you, man—like, seriously," Kenbuchi-kun said.

"Oh, um, I was just getting carried away," I muttered.

It was actually Nanami who started it, but to be fair I was the one who gave her a reason to do so at all. But I honestly didn't think she would kiss me onstage. And now she was surrounded by the other girls in our class, also

blushing from embarrassment.

I never thought there would come a day when I would get to talk with everyone in class like this though.

“Amazing job, everyone,” I managed to say, raising the cup I was holding. Everyone else raised their cups in response. That small gesture made me so happy that I couldn’t help but softly say, “Cheers.” I then heard everyone else respond with a loud “Cheers!” as I found myself touching my cup to everyone else’s. It hit me, then, that this really was the end of things. A tinge of sadness shaded my heart.

As I stood unable to figure out this specific loneliness that I was feeling for the first time, Nanami sidled up close to me, making everyone cheer at us. I felt both embarrassed and slightly tickled, a combination that was also new to me.

Suddenly, though, I heard a familiar voice calling my name. It was my mom.

“Yoshin, there you are. Your father and I are going home. What do you want to do?” she asked.

“Oh, um, right.” I glanced over at my classmates. Then I turned to her and said, “I think I’ll stay for a bit longer. I’d like to spend some more time with everyone.”

My mom looked at me, eyes suddenly wide, as if the sight in front of her was completely foreign to her. *I get it, I get it. Even I know that that isn’t something I usually say.* Today, though, was the school festival. At least for one day, it ought to be okay for me to get carried away and say something like that.

Because now I finally felt like I had become a part of the class. Even though it came kind of late.

“Not to worry, ma’am! I’ll watch over Yoshin and make sure he’s safe,” said Kenbuchi-kun.

“Oh. Well, in that case, I’ll entrust him to you,” my mom replied.

“Leave him to me!” Kenbuchi-kun said enthusiastically.

Wait, why are my mom and Kenbuchi-kun talking like they’re buddies? It was now my turn to look at the two of them as if I was seeing something incredible.

With my index finger pointed at them, I opened and closed my mouth without being able to say anything.

“It was Kenbuchi-kun who escorted us to the couple contest,” my mom explained.

“Yes, it was I who walked them over,” Kenbuchi-kun said, making it sound like a confession despite the peace sign he was flashing. *Wait, wait. My parents watched the couple contest?!*

Nanami and I both froze, but my mom proceeded to pull out her phone and flash it at us as if she saw nothing wrong with the situation.

“I’ve recorded *everything*,” she even declared.

So, my parents not only saw me declaring my love for Nanami...they also recorded it?

I thought I heard Nanami asking my mom to send her the video, but her voice somehow sounded like it was coming from very far away.

You’ve gotta be kidding me.

“Oh, wow. He’s collapsed,” someone said.

Well, of *course* I would. Wow, I never knew that when your strength left your legs, it was the knees that gave out first. At least I managed not to spill my drink.

Everyone seemed to be chuckling. I would have laughed too if this were about someone else, but...*dammit*.

I felt an emotion bubbling up within me that I hadn’t felt in a while. And as if to expel that emotion, though, words tumbled out of my mouth.

“Hitoshi...what the hell have you done?!” I shouted as I stood up, letting my emotions take over.

“Whoa!” Kenbuchi-kun—or, rather, Hitoshi—let out, though he was grinning as though there was something amusing him.

Dammit, why is he smiling like that! Jeez, he seriously did not need to do that! I just know my parents won’t let this go for a long, long time!

“What, Yoshin, you remembered my name?” he said, smirk still on his face.

“I felt bad that I didn’t know last time, so I looked it up in the class roster and memorized it! I didn’t know when to bring it up, but now I’ve had to use it in the worst possible moment, you *jerk!*” I yelled.

“Aha ha! Oh, who cares? It’s fun when people get all emotional,” Kenbuchi...Hitoshi said, laughing and clapping his hands as if he was having the best time. I even started to feel rude for trying to continue acting polite toward him.

Everyone watched me press for him to apologize while Hitoshi kept playfully insisting that he didn’t do anything wrong, but...

“Yoshin, you’ve made such a nice friend, haven’t you?” my mom remarked.

I noticed something strange about my mom’s voice. I felt like it was trembling—just slightly, so much so that if it were any other time, I might have missed it. Though I couldn’t be certain, since she didn’t seem like she was sad. And more importantly, having her say that in front of everyone with that gentle look in her eyes was pretty embarrassing.

But...she wasn’t wrong.

“Yeah, you’re right. He is my friend,” I said.

“Well well well, are you starting to fall for me?” Hitoshi asked, grinning still.

“I am *not*. I won’t forget this, man,” I muttered.

I somehow felt like I’d been set up. I most definitely was going to get back at him one of these days for bringing my parents to the gym. I didn’t know when, but I would.

“I see. In that case, you have a good time, okay? Just let us know if you’re going to be late,” my mom said.

“Oh, right. Got it,” I returned.

My mom then turned and left, waving at me. My dad and Genichiro-san’s family were all waiting at the entrance to the gym. They were waving to me, so I waved back.

I felt like we'd just had a back-to-school night, even though we had no such thing in high school. Was the school festival supposed to do something similar?

"Speaking of, where's the class rep?" Hitoshi asked.

"Oh, Shirishizu-san should be..."

I was about to tell him that she was probably with Teshikaga-kun, but I stopped myself. *What do I do? Is it okay to tell him?*

He hasn't said clearly that he likes her, but he kind of seemed interested in her, right? Like during home room, and before the contest and stuff? If I tell him where she is, will he be heartbroken? I just can't shake off the feeling that that will happen if I do.

"Anyway, dude, your mom's super hot. Is she, like, the cool beauty type? Someone like that asks me for a favor and you bet I'd say yes. No hesitation," he continued.

Ah, okay. He'll be all right.

"Shirishizu-san is with Teshikaga-kun right now," I said flatly.

Oh, he's fallen to his knees.

It seemed like I'd unintentionally gotten my revenge after all. He wasn't actually crying, but he was moaning in despair, emitting a low, groaning voice that sounded like it was coming from the center of the earth.

"Why do the girls that I think are kind of cute all end up being taken?!" he yelled, his words conveying true suffering. Yet everyone around him just went about like they weren't terribly concerned.

Maybe I was the only one who didn't know that this was how he always was. I patted him on the shoulder to try to console him, but he just let out another moan accusing me of having a leg up on him because I had a girlfriend. *Yeah, maybe I just need to leave him alone for a bit.*

Just as I looked up, thinking that time would heal all wounds, it seemed we had spoken of the devil—because Shirishizu-san returned.

Accompanied by Teshikaga-kun.

“Dammmit aaaaaall!” Hitoshi wailed.

Oh, he’s run off crying. Uh, should I go after him? I don’t really know what I’m supposed to do in situations like this. I don’t feel like it would help much for me to go talk to him either. No, wait, he’s stopping to talk to a girl. Yeah, I don’t need to do anything. I’ll just check in with him later—though it’ll be more trouble if he asks me to introduce him to another girl or something.

“Hey, Teshikaga-kun. Did you, um...manage to clear things up?” I asked, being unable to come up with anything better to say. It was obvious that he and Shirishizu-san had cleared the air between them. They weren’t holding hands, but they *were* standing awfully close to each other. It was probably a good thing Hitoshi was no longer here.

I wasn’t going to ask them what happened between them in the past, or what they talked about today. That was between the two of them, and it would be uncouth of me to even bring it up. From now on they would continue to grow and strengthen their relationship. I’d been there from the start, and all I wanted for them now was to be happy.

“Yes, thank you very much for your support,” Teshikaga-kun replied.

Hmmm? Is it just me, or does he sound kind of funny?

Teshikaga-kun stepped forward, and then he bowed toward me awkwardly.

“Misumai-san, as you can see, I’ve been able to establish a friendship with Kotoha once again. I will always be in your debt for this,” he continued.

“Well, no, I mean, this is all because you two worked hard at it, right? I didn’t do anything. Really, I didn’t do anything at all,” I insisted.

This was true. About the only thing I did was to call Teshikaga-kun over to our class. After that, the two of them resolved it all on their own. He really had no reason to thank me.

“No, everything has been thanks to you, Misumai-san. Therefore, I do hope that you will continue to teach me your ways, master,” he said as he bowed to me quietly.

Huh? Wait, what in the world is this guy saying?

“Master?” I repeated, not knowing what he was talking about.

“Yes. From now on, I’ll look to you for guidance on anything related to romance. Therefore, I feel it most appropriate to call you ‘master,’” he explained.

Wait, you know that you look like a total delinquent, right?! Why are you talking like you just stepped out of a battle manga?! Stop him, Shirishizu-san... Oh, no can do. She’s grinning like mad because of the whole romance bit. Shoot, now everyone else is smiling too and looking like they’re having the time of their lives. Yeah, sure, stuff like this sure is fun, huh? I think I finally get it now too.

I felt like a group of girls somewhere let out a cry of despair, but I was just gonna pretend like I didn’t hear that.

“No, uh, you really don’t have to call me ‘master’ or anything like that,” I muttered.

“But as someone who was very rude to you, I feel it necessary to put a clear end to my past behavior,” he offered.

“Um, well, I mean, I’m happy to talk with you whenever something comes up! Just, not as a master, but like...more as a friend,” I managed to say.

Wow, saying stuff like that is actually kind of embarrassing.

Given how similar some of our experiences were, though, I actually felt like I might become pretty good friends with Teshikaga-kun. Even if the way we first met was pretty awkward.

“Thank you so much, master,” he replied.

Was he listening to me at all? Well, he’ll stop calling me that soon enough. All I had to do from this moment on was to interact with him like we were regular friends.

As a gesture of said friendship, I offered him my right hand. Teshikaga-kun straightened his posture and took it.

As we shook hands, it really hit me that things had finally come to a close. A lot had happened, and even though it was different from what I had imagined at first, I was sincerely glad that I’d managed to make a guy friend.

As I stood there, somewhat emotional, I suddenly felt something warm and soft press itself against my arm. When I looked down, I saw that Nanami had come to attach herself to me.

“Just wanna remind you that, even if you make friends, I’m still gonna be your number one,” she mumbled.

Seeing her face filled with mixed emotions—like she was kind of miffed, but also happy that I was making friends—I couldn’t help breaking into a smile. So *cute*. There was no way to compare Nanami to any guy friend I would ever make, and yet she probably still couldn’t keep herself from saying it.

Realizing just how loved I was, I gently stroked her hair. It felt soft, like the most luxurious fabric in the world, and I wanted to keep touching it forever.

Nanami seemed to like having her hair caressed, because she half closed her eyes as if she were going to purr.

“Don’t worry, I would never forget that. You’ll always be my number one,” I told her.

“Tee hee, I’m glad to hear that,” she said.

She smiled, and just as I thought all over again just how much I liked her...

“They’re making out again,” someone muttered.

Hearing that comment come from somewhere, Nanami and I remembered that we were in public and frantically scanned the room. Having thus snapped back to reality, we both looked back at everyone staring at us. They were all looking at us as if to say, “These two really can’t be helped”—and with that, we decided to call it a night.

And that was how our school festival came to a close. Fortunately we’d managed to put a stop to those strange rumors, but we did end up starting an entirely different one.

That Misumai and Barato kissed onstage at the school festival.

It was no use crying over spilled milk. Since we had no way to combat the truth, all we could do was to accept the new rumor, even as it left us with our heads in our hands.

Afterword

Happy new year. I look forward to making the best of this upcoming year again with you all.

Actually, it might be a bit late to be saying that in March. Since this book was the first one I released this year, though, I felt I wanted to give a formal greeting to everyone who was kind enough to pick it up in their hands.

To be honest, though, I've been going through several cases of illness and injury since we entered this new year, despite the fact that I'd already gone through a purification last year, since the year before was supposed to be a calamitous one for me based on my age. It seems, though, that this year has been filled with more misfortune than last year.

I've continued treatment for my duodenal ulcer since last year, but I also injured my knee this year, among other parts of my aging body. Even as I write this, I'm suffering from the knee pain that I'm feeling.

I mean, really—I want to shout at the top of my lungs to all the young people reading this book, all the students and people in their twenties.

Health before wealth.

They say that the recklessness of our youth manifests in our bodies after we've aged, but honestly, I really wasn't reckless at all when I was young. And yet, my body has still taken a ton of damage. It frightens me to even think about just what my body would've been like if I *had* been reckless.

Even though I'd like to say that there is no need to overwork ourselves, there will always be moments in life when we *do* have to do a bit more than we really ought to. For the sake of those unavoidable moments when we just have to hustle, we should make it a habit not to push ourselves too hard, and instead save up our energies for when we most need them.

Maybe what's most important is learning when exactly we need to stretch ourselves a bit.

Well, then. Enough of all this talk about body aches and unsolicited advice from an old fogey. It's time we moved on to talking about this book.

Once again, thank you for picking up volume 8.

I mean, really, I never thought I'd ever come to publish an eighth volume of anything. I wrote this in the afterword for volume seven as well, but there are special meanings held by numbers. There are many significant meanings held by the number seven, but eight is also the same way: it has many different, special meanings.

Perhaps the most famous one of them is that of broadening.

When written in kanji, the number eight opens up toward the bottom, thus being said to signify prosperity and expansion.

The Arabic numeral "8" is also said to be good luck because it has no sharp corners; when turned sideways, it symbolizes infinity; it also supposedly has positive religious meanings; et cetera., et cetera.

I feel incredibly lucky to be able to bring forth such a lucky eighth volume, for the first time in my life.

Bad meanings associated with numbers? It's best just to ignore such things.

This auspicious volume will probably also do wonders to wipe away any misfortunes for these months following my calamitous year.

In this volume, our Yoshin and Nanami continue to be their usual lovey-dovey selves, while Yoshin also experiences his own set of growth and changes. In that sense, maybe I was able to incorporate in it an element of expansion as well. I didn't necessarily plan for it, though, so I'm glad that I've been able to give the volume such significance even after the fact.

As a side note, one of the incidents that occur in this volume includes my own personal experience. It might be fun to ask you to guess what that incident might be.

Unfortunately, though, it's not the incident with the bunny.

There might be folks who start with the afterword, so I'll stop here with the spoilers. I look forward to having you read the actual volume.

And about our two new characters, Shirishizu and Teshikaga: as I wrote their storyline, I kept wondering to myself whether these two weren't, in fact, going down the path of the more common, tumultuous rom-com plot. Mutual affection, misunderstanding, estrangement, reconciliation... Those seem like all the necessary ingredients of a classic rom-com.

I might have written this before, but a part of me was thinking that in this series, I have couples *other* than our two protagonists walking the path of the classic, tumultuous rom-com.

Otofuuke-san is in a relationship with her stepbrother.

Kamoenai-san is in a relationship with her childhood friend who is much older than her.

Shirishizu-san is in a relationship with her childhood friend of the same age.

Each one of the couples is based around a particular relationship that serves as a starting point for a slow burn development, or includes a small misunderstanding that goes terribly wrong.

As I write, I often think about what fun it would be to write a spin-off series or two. If you have any burning desires about the couple you want to see a spin-off series for, the wish might actually come true if you send a note to the editorial department! (LOL) Though there is that small problem of whether I have the *time* to write such a spin-off...

In any case, because of that, our two protags might get into a small fight here and there, but for the most part, they'll be in charge of the making out in this series.

They really are quite hands-on in this volume, aren't they? So much so that even *I'm* wondering why they don't just go all the way.

Regardless, it would mean a lot to me if you would continue to watch over

these two as they continue on in their relationship journey.

Actually, you might have noticed it if you checked the announcement for this volume printed in volume 7, but volume 8 actually differs slightly from its original description. I'm pretty sure that in the afterword to volume 7, I'd mentioned that volume 8 would include both the culture festival and the class trip. Of course, this volume *only* contains the culture festival.

Now, here's a little backstory.

In the beginning, I was planning to end this series at the end of volume 8, having covered the characters' junior year in high school.

A part of me believed that, as a rookie writer, eight volumes would be the limit to how long I would be able to continue a series. And because of that, I was scheming to cram into volume 8 all the school events swirling around in my brain that I wanted to include in the overall series.

After being able to get all the way to volume 8 as a total newbie, I thought it would be asking for too much to want to write more. And rather than not be allowed to continue the series, I thought it was better just to end the story of my own volition.

That was what I was thinking, anyway.

When I wrote the plot for volume 8 accordingly and handed it to my editor, though, they told me that it might include too many events and advised that I, in fact, cut back on some of the plot elements.

When I then confessed to them about my concerns, though, they informed me that I would actually get to publish volume 9 as well. And through that initial meeting, we arrived at the content of the current volume 8.

Having now completed volume 8, I want to kick myself for having ever thought that I would have been able to compress its contents to try to include more.

Luckily, it looks like I'll be able to continue this story. And being able to publish volume 9 makes me want to say...

Let's aim for volume 10!

That's right. I wrote this in the section for the author's remarks, but I'd like to aim for volume 10 this year.

First I have to work on volume 9 though. Regardless, this is all thanks to everyone who's supported this series. I'm truly grateful.

With the release of this eighth volume combined with the two comics volumes, I've now been involved with ten book publications. The third volume of the comics adaptation is set to be released in March, so that would bring the total up to eleven. Please do check out the comics version as well!

The comics adaptation includes fresh interpretations of the original, and it captures scenes and characters that I couldn't fully depict. I am always, always looking forward to the manga that Kanna-sensei creates. It makes me realize just how fortunate I am to be doing the work that I do.

I'd like to live a long and full life so that I can share many different stories with you, and so that I can take in many more stories as well.

Er, I guess we've come right back to the health talk again...

Being able to share such good news is all thanks to the readers who support the series, and also the hard work of everyone involved in its production.

Kagachisaku-sensei, thank you for drawing so many wonderful costume illustrations to go with the culture festival event. They all look so soft and cute yet sexy all at the same time. I couldn't be more grateful. I actually feel guilty about how much the illustrations are costing and how many requests I make. I'm looking forward to your wonderful illustrations for volume nine as well. Thank you in advance for everything you do.

Nagomi Kanna-sensei, thank you for always drawing such an adorable Nanami. She looks cuter with every episode, and I'm always looking forward to how she develops each time. I always learn so much seeing in your storyboards and the subsequent, released episodes your interpretations of how Yoshin might act. That influence appears in volume 8 as part of a positive feedback

loop. I want to take this moment to thank you for that.

To my new editor, S-sama—with this new volume, I've been able to work with you from the very beginning, which means that I've also caused you a lot of trouble. Thanks to your advice, I was able to fully write out the key event that is the school festival. I know that I still have much to learn, but I thank you in advance for your guidance and mentorship.

In addition, to all the people who have been a part of the design and editing process, those people involved in the translation for the overseas editions, those involved in the audio manga, those working in the promotion and marketing...

And, of course, to all the readers—I thank you all from the bottom of my heart.


I'll work hard as I continue writing this story.

I look forward to seeing you all in volume 9.

Because with volume 9 comes the start...of the class trip!

Yuishi, Who Wants to Cram All Their Favorite Elements into Volume 9 Too

March 1, 2024



Nanami's eyelids opened to reveal her eyes—the beautiful eyes that I loved so much. Her eyes were still sleepy, but they were lovely nonetheless. Half asleep, Nanami gave me a somewhat rumpled smile as soon as she saw me.

“...Morning.”

**A GREAT START TO THE DAY WHEN
YOU FALL ASLEEP “TOGETHER”♪**



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AT THE COSPLAY CAFÉ♪

The **cosplay café** run
by the **class beauties**
draws a huge crowd!

The café also seems
to feature some
unique costumes...?



A SPECIAL COSTUME FOR THE
BOYFRIEND'S EYES ONLY ♪

“So...what do you think?”

Nanami pulled down the zipper on her costume in one go, then opened the front with a dramatic flourish. I saw that underneath the loungewear, she was wearing a black outfit.











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An Introvert's Hookup Hiccups: This Gyarū Is Head Over Heels for Me! Volume 8

by Yuishi

Translated by Satoko Kakihara Edited by Dan-Tran Cong-Huyen

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Original Japanese edition published in 2024 by Hobby Japan This English edition is published by arrangement with Hobby Japan, Tokyo English translation © 2024 J-Novel Club LLC

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Ebook edition 2.0: October 2024

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