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Prologue: Karaoke Do-Over

It can take a lot of courage to truly communicate with someone else. Telling someone something—sharing with them—might be much more difficult than we can imagine. It could feel like performing in an elementary school play. Well, okay, maybe that wasn't quite the same thing.

Still, I was often unable to do as well as I hoped, because I was so worried about making a mistake or failing in some other way. The worry did actually make those two situations kind of similar.

I worried about the other person disliking me, or me upsetting them because of what I said, even if I was just overthinking things. That was why I always made it a point to say whatever it was I wanted to say, as honestly and directly as possible. Honesty is the best policy—at least, that's what I believed. I also knew that I started thinking that only after I started going out with Nanami.

Still, I should have realized that being *too* honest could also make the other person nervous.

Thinking about it now though, the fact that I didn't was probably how my little blunder began in the first place.



"Congrats on finishing summer school, Yoshin," Nanami said, bowing to me with a formal air about her.

"Oh, uh, thank you," I replied, also bowing in return. That's right: as Nanami just announced, I had managed to complete my summer school obligations without a hitch. I was finally free of school until the end of summer break. That was all it was—and yet, being done with summer school was liberating.

Summer school didn't feel so bad while I was in it, but once it was over, I realized that there was nothing better than not having to go in the first place. At least I got to have lunch with Nanami the whole time, and we also managed to go on dates after I got out of class each day. Still, I was now finally able to spend

time with Nanami without anything holding me back.

The one thing nagging me was the fact that I hadn't yet shared with Nanami what I heard at the very end of summer school. I only wanted to talk about happy things now that we could spend time together, so I couldn't quite find the right time to bring it up.

I was doing my best not to let my preoccupation show, and with the idea that I wanted to get my thoughts on the situation in order before talking to Nanami about it, I let more time pass than I had intended.

But I really need to tell her soon.

Given my struggle, it struck me just how strong Nanami must have been when she immediately told me about the letter she found in her shoe locker. *I have to do my part too.*

"We should toast, huh? Congrats again! Cheers!" Nanami shouted.

"Yeah, congrats to me. Um, cheers."

I wasn't sure if it made sense for me to congratulate myself, but I clinked glasses with Nanami anyway. The *clink* of the glasses touching echoed around us.

Needless to say, we were celebrating the fact that my summer school had officially ended. We weren't in Nanami's room like we usually were; we were back at the karaoke place we came to previously. I felt like I was getting a do-over of the time we came after we'd finished our exams. A karaoke joint also seemed like a more convenient place for talking to her about what was on my mind, even if I hadn't yet been able to bring it up with her.

I also couldn't refuse since Nanami had told me she wanted to sing with me—as in, she wanted to sing duets together. Unlike last time, I had studied up on some potential songs, so I was pretty sure I could manage to get by.

That aside, though...

"Glug...glug...gooh, that's tasty!"

Nanami downed her drink loudly and exhaled as she took the glass away from her lips. What a bold way to enjoy a refreshing beverage. Maybe because she finished off her drink in one go, she also took a deep breath.

"Wait, why are you drinking it like it's alcohol?" I asked.

"I thought maybe it would help set the mood! Come on, Yoshin, you try it too."

Being so told, I brought my own glass to my lips and downed the drink without pausing for air. The fizzy soda spread throughout my mouth, leaving a pleasant, popping sensation before traveling down my throat. Honestly, it *did* feel good.

I didn't often chug my drink, but doing so now made me feel like I'd found a new source of joy in my life. I put down my glass and like Nanami, took a deep breath. I couldn't have stopped myself even if I'd tried. I now understood why some adults chugged their drinks.

For some reason, after I finished Nanami started clapping beside me. "Wow, you really chugged it down! You didn't need me at all!" she exclaimed.

"Oh, come on. It's not even alcohol," I muttered.

Her applause was just a little embarrassing. The karaoke room was dimly lit, so she probably couldn't tell that I was blushing.

"You know, I actually heard that it's bad to chug alcohol. I wonder if you're not supposed to do that with juice either," Nanami remarked.

"I wonder, huh? Though I guess it doesn't seem like the best thing to do for your body."

"Yeah, that's true. Oh, should we get seconds? You want the same thing?" she asked.

"Oh, yeah. Thanks."

Nanami picked up the phone in the room to order another round of drinks, turning her back to me as she did so.

Why is it that people's backs seem so defenseless when they're on the phone?

"Yes, thank y— Huh?!" Nanami yelped, just as she was about to complete her order.

"Oh," I exclaimed in equal surprise.

Hearing her yelp, I froze up immediately. Maybe because she'd let out such a strange cry, Nanami ended up slamming the handset down on its cradle. We both fell silent, the *slam* of Nanami hanging up so abruptly reverberating throughout the room.

Nanami, now totally unoccupied, slowly turned around. As her face came into clearer view, my heart started pounding. And, as expected—with her eyebrows raised and her face red—I understood immediately that Nanami was upset.

Yeah, I've totally done it this time.

Well, you know, it was just that when I saw Nanami's back so vulnerably on display, I couldn't resist the urge to stroke it, with the tip of my index finger, from top to bottom. I couldn't deny the accusation that it was sexual harassment. Wait, was sexual harassment only applicable to deeds and actions at the workplace? No, that probably didn't matter at all.

At Nanami's expression, I hurriedly lowered my index finger that was still raised in midair. Touching her like that was totally on impulse. I knew that I felt the urge to be a bit mischievous, but I had no idea I would actually end up doing it—though that, too, sounded just like an excuse.

Still angry, Nanami slowly made her way toward me. She seemed just like a cat—a cat completely locked onto its prey. As though timing it just right, she leaned forward slightly.

I genuinely feel like I can see cat ears and a tail on her. Nanami with cat ears... I can definitely go for that. Maybe she could wear them for me sometime...

In that single moment when I was trying to pretend like nothing was happening, Nanami leaped at me without any warning. This wasn't a metaphor: she literally flew at me like a rocket and hugged me tight.

The force of her leaping at me and wrapping her arms around my waist was too strong to brace against, so I ended up losing my balance. We both fell over backward onto the sofa in our private karaoke room. Being pushed down like that, I wasn't sure whether I was allowed to resist in any way. I fell over with some force, but it didn't hurt at all thanks to the sofa cushion.

Nanami's soft body was fully touching mine, but rather than getting up off of me right away, she simply slid to move off of my waist. Then, burying her face in my chest, she wrapped her arms around me and placed her hands on my back.

I was curious for maybe a moment about what she had planned, but then I pretty much instantly got what she wanted to do.

"Whoa?!" I yelped, as Nanami placed a finger on my back and stroked it up and down. Wait, maybe she wasn't stroking, exactly. Since she was only using one finger, it was more like she was tracing.

Unlike getting tickled, having her run her finger along my back made my hair stand on end. I couldn't laugh out loud; only strange noises escaped my mouth.

By the time I realized it, Nanami had brought her face up close to my ear. In what was basically an embrace, she whispered into my ear, "Got you back."

My ear tingled. My back tingled right along with it. A strange kind of numbness spread throughout my body. Even my brain seemed to freeze in shock. Was this what pleasure felt like?

No, this was bad. At least, it was bad to let Nanami do as she pleased. With that in mind, I tensed my body to prepare it to move.

But instead, my body was suddenly flipped over seemingly without any resistance at all. Like I had been pulled. *Hold on, did Nanami just pull me?*

It felt like my middle school judo instructor throwing me onto the mat. In other words, it *seemed* as though I had resisted out of my own free will, when in fact Nanami had *made* me resist.

Having smoothly switched positions on the sofa, I was now in the opposite situation from earlier—as in, I was on the top, and she was on the bottom. I raised my upper body to look down at Nanami, with her now-tousled hair and mirthful grin.

"Oh my, you've pinned me down," she said, seeming entirely nonplussed, letting out a fake scream with both hands in the air. The edge of her uniform shifted, revealing her stomach a bit.

"Are you doing this on purpose?" I asked.

"Oh, can you tell?"

Of course I can. I got up on my knees and shifted my body away from Nanami's, doing my best not to put too much weight on her. It wasn't the easiest position to be in, but I could just consider it exercise.

Having suddenly stopped moving, the two of us were both slightly out of breath. We looked at each other in silence for a moment, but Nanami was the one who spoke first.

"Did something happen?"

Asking that one simple question, she looked at me with the most gentle gaze. Although she surprised me, I answered her honestly and said, "Can you tell?"

Nanami laughed happily and said, "Of course I can." Still lying beneath me, she opened up her arms as if to invite me in.

Resignation—that I couldn't fool Nanami even if I tried—welled up inside of me. In fact, despite the circumstances, I somehow felt very calm. I wondered if I'd managed to regain my composure because of what Nanami said. Well, no, I couldn't possibly be composed when we were positioned like this. If anything, this was a moment when I definitely wouldn't be able to stay calm.

But still, as if drawn by some invisible force, I let myself fall into Nanami's arms. And just in that moment—the door opened.

"Thank you for waiting..."

The karaoke staff person cut her words short, freezing mid movement. I was impressed that she managed not to drop the drinks that were on her tray.

I leaped up from on top of Nanami and turned toward the staff person. That's right, we're at a karaoke place. What in the world am I getting us into?

The staff person, who looked like she might be a gyaru herself, placed the two drinks on the table and smiled brightly at us. Nanami, still lying down, raised her head, while I sat next to her and thanked the staff person.

"I'm terribly sorry, but I'm afraid I must ask you to refrain from such conduct," she said to us.

"Th-That's not it. We were just, um, hugging each other, and we had no

intention of doing anything like that," I stammered, trying to deny any notion that Nanami and I were doing something questionable. But it quickly became obvious that no matter what we said or did, we'd just be digging a deeper hole for ourselves, so in the end Nanami and I simply apologized.

After the exchange, the staff person smiled and got up to leave. When she opened the door, though, she turned her head back toward us. I thought she was going to leave parting words of admonishment, but that wasn't the case at all.

"By the way, even though I have to ask you to restrain yourselves inside our establishment, if you do want to engage in such activities, the motel by the river is a good place. Even if you're in high school, they can't tell if you're wearing normal clothes," she said.

"Excuse me?!"

Paying no heed to the exclamations that escaped from both my and Nanami's lips, the staff person slipped out of the room with no further comment. Even though we were at karaoke, the room was now totally silent.

Um, a m-motel? Did it really look like we were about to engage in such activities?

With such a raw and explicit suggestion suddenly being made to us, I completely froze and even forgot about the drinks that were now on the table before us. The staff person, too, was already gone.

Come to think of it, is Nanami okay? I shifted my gaze and looked toward her. She was sitting there, still as a rock with her face completely red.

Shoot, what am I supposed to do now? Dammit, was that employee trying to be helpful? I mean, how does she know about stuff like that in the first place? No, wait, I really shouldn't go there.

Nanami stole a glance at me too, then immediately looked away and hid her face from me. Her reaction made me even more embarrassed.

Maybe I was just imagining it, but I felt like Nanami slid farther away from me as well. *The motel by the river, huh...?* Even though I had zero intention of patronizing the place, I felt like I might not be able to forget that piece of

information so easily.

Despite the fact that we were at karaoke, Nanami and I stayed quiet for some time after that.



I was the one who eventually broke the awkward silence.

Of course, despite our silence, it wasn't that there was no sound at all. It was just that the room felt quiet, since Nanami and I weren't saying anything.

"G-Getting back to our previous topic," I started, "the class rep said something about you to me just as we were finishing up our summer class."

I realized that it was a weird thing to start talking about, but it was something I had to share with Nanami at some point anyway—though I actually blurted it out now because I felt I had to talk about *something*.

"About me?" Nanami asked.

"Um, yeah. Sort of."

Nanami looked at me, confused. I, too, had to search for what to say next, despite having been the one who had started the conversation. I guess I had no other way but to tell her just as I'd heard it. I had to admit that it felt difficult to say—guilt clogged my throat. I felt like I was tattling or something.

Trying to force my lips—which had suddenly grown heavy—to move, I slowly, slowly told Nanami what I had heard from the class rep, trying to remember each word as clearly as possible.

"I know why Barato-san confessed to you."

I was pretty sure that was how she had phrased it. Maybe because I was reciting what the class rep had told me, I felt like I came off sounding slightly theatrical, the way she had as well.

The moment Nanami heard what I said, her eyes widened in surprise. Then her brows furrowed, sad, and I couldn't help but feel sad with her.

After thinking for a moment, Nanami muttered, "The reason I confessed to you, huh?"

Her soft voice was quickly drowned out by the other noises in the room, but it stayed in my ears as if it were stuck there with glue. There was only one reason for Nanami confessing to me, after all.

"Still, since I already know about it, none of this really means anything," I said.

Nanami, on the other hand, sipped her drink slowly through a straw and let out a long sigh. She placed her half-filled glass on the table and, playfully, as if put-upon, leaned back onto the sofa and kicked her feet up into the air.

Because she lifted her legs so suddenly, the force of her movement produced a slight breeze that brushed against my cheeks. Her skirt, too, fluttered slightly, revealing her thighs a bit. Even though the room was slightly dark, I could make out that much.

Paying no mind to the fact that my gaze was focused on her thighs, Nanami sat up and brought her legs up to the sofa so she could sit hugging her knees.

If I had been standing in front of her, I would definitely have been able to see her underwear. But since I was next to her, my current angle would fortunately hide that from me. That was probably why Nanami had chosen to sit that way in the first place. I also wasn't sure if this was something I could call "fortunate."

Isn't your underwear showing? No, there was no need for me to say that. We weren't in that kind of a mood anymore anyway. The air now felt heavy for a different reason.

With her arms still wrapped around her knees, Nanami tilted her head and turned toward me.

"I don't mean to keep bringing this up, but this 'reason' that the class rep is referring to is probably the dare, right?" she asked.

"I'm pretty sure that's it. She even said that she thought we would break up in a month."

"Wow, she knows that part too, huh?"

Hearing Nanami sound so sad, I scooted closer to her. When she noticed what I was trying to do, Nanami leaned her body into mine while still hugging her legs. Even though the sofa was spacious, I was still impressed that she could

move her body in such a deft way.

"I have to say, I really did do something terrible, didn't I? When I think about it now, I honestly can't believe I did something like that," Nanami said.

"Don't worry about it anymore. I'm totally over it, and besides, what I did wasn't too far off either."

Nanami let her body sway, wondering out loud if what I said was really accurate.

I heard once that when we feel down, regret washes over us in waves. That was probably how Nanami was feeling right now.

What should I say?

"I mean, if that whole thing hadn't happened, there would've been no way you would've ever confessed to me," I declared. "And the chances of me asking you out would've been even less."

"Huh? Wait, you really wouldn't have asked me out?"

"Why do you look so shocked? If I had said, 'Nanami-san, I like you. Will you go out with me?' what would you..."

"I would've said, 'I'd be delighted to.'"

Her eager reply had me speechless. I wanted to tell her that that was beside the point, but I also felt happily embarrassed by just how quickly her response came.

I didn't know if she really understood the implication of our discussion though.

"That's not what I mean. If I had confessed to the 'you' from before we started going out, then you wouldn't have said yes, right?"

Saying it out loud made me kind of sad, but in response to what I was really asking, Nanami nodded slightly, her face sour.

"You're right—back then I would have rejected you. I probably would've said, 'I'm sorry,' and refused right away," she responded.

"Why do you look like that?" I asked.

"Just imagining myself rejecting your confession makes me hate my past self," she murmured.

I never imagined she would feel that way toward herself from the past. Perhaps this, too, was an indication of how much she cared for me.

I've got to do my best to keep up with her. If I'm not careful, I might end up drowning in Nanami's love. Or am I overthinking things?

"It makes sense though, right? If we only did what we thought was the 'right' thing to do, you and I would've never started going out," I said.

We would've never gotten together. Just the thought of it made shivers go up my spine. Me, not going out with Nanami—I couldn't even imagine something like that.

That was why, even if other people thought we were being foolish, as long as Nanami and I made things right, everything was as it should be. What the class rep thought, then, didn't really matter.

Nanami seemed to have calmed down a bit, because she let out a low moan.

"Do you think she was the one who put the letter in the shoe locker?" she asked.

"I think that's very likely, given the timing for all this."

The class rep hadn't declared that she had been the one to give Nanami the letter, but that was probably the case. I wasn't sure why the class rep even told me any of this in the first place. She seemed to have her own reasons, but I still couldn't understand them all.

"Our class rep is a really serious person. I can understand that she can't overlook what I did," Nanami sighed.

I didn't like that I was making Nanami look so unhappy. Even though I knew she was partially responsible for the situation, it still didn't sit right with me.

"The class rep's that much of a square, huh?" I asked, trying not to show what I was thinking inside. I also genuinely didn't know much about the class rep at all.

"Yeah, she's really straitlaced. She can be odd, but I've seen her scold

delinquent-type guys with zero hesitation. She seems like she has a really strong sense of right and wrong," Nanami explained.

"Delinquents," I muttered. Wasn't that somewhat dangerous, no matter how serious she was? Actually, I had no idea we had delinquent students at our school in the first place. Maybe I didn't know because I never came into contact with them.

"Still," Nanami murmured. I turned my head to look at her, then waited for her to continue speaking. Nanami then turned her gaze slowly toward me and asked, "So, when are you meeting up with the class rep? Can I, um, maybe..."

"Huh? I'm not gonna see her."

When I answered as if by reflex, Nanami looked at me in shock. Not sure if what I said was really so shocking, I continued to explain by saying that now that I finally had more time to spend with Nanami, there was no way I was going to carve out even a moment to meet with the class rep.

"You're not gonna see her?!" Nanami exclaimed.

"Wait, is it that surprising?" I asked in return.

"I mean, don't you wanna know? Like, what she might tell you, or what she might actually be thinking instead?"

I wasn't terribly interested, to be honest. If I didn't already know the circumstances behind Nanami's confession, maybe I would have wanted to know. I also didn't understand what Nanami meant when she asked about the class rep's thinking.

"We hadn't even decided on when we would meet," I explained.

"Really? Then how are you..."

"I got her contact info. She just told me to get in touch with her if I felt like it."

"Oh, so you did get her contact info," Nanami murmured.

I guess I hadn't told Nanami that yet. It wasn't anything to hide, so I showed Nanami the piece of paper with the class rep's info on it. I also didn't really know how exactly to contact the class rep with this information either.

Nanami stared intently at the piece of paper. Then, suddenly panicked, she asked, "Is this something you're allowed to share with me though?"

The class rep never stopped me from doing so. Rather, she probably didn't even dream that I would tell Nanami any of this in the first place.

"If it bothers you, I can just toss it. I don't think it's worth contacting her anyway," I said.

"Um, well, maybe I want you to get in touch with her, at the very least, though it's up to you in terms of when. I'd like to hear what she has to say too, but I guess that might be kind of difficult, huh?"

I didn't expect Nanami to make such a request. I thought instead that she would want me to toss out the class rep's contact info. Wanting me to meet her threw me for a loop. Maybe I should ask her later what she meant by all this.

"Then let me just add her to my contacts and get in touch with her now. You might feel better if I do it in front of you, right?" I asked.

"I've thought this before, but you can be efficient at the strangest times, you know that?" Nanami muttered.

I felt like Nanami seemed mildly scandalized, but I was probably just imagining it. I proceeded to add the class rep's contact info to my app, then chatted with her to set a date to meet while Nanami was next to me the whole time.

But in that moment, I failed to realize just how anxious Nanami was really feeling.

Chapter 1: Do You Prefer Ring Girls?

In the end, I decided to meet with the class rep at school after summer vacation ended.

It felt very strange to contact another girl while sitting next to Nanami herself. Nonetheless, it was my decision to wait until the end of summer break to meet with the class rep. Nanami asked multiple times if that was really okay with me, and each time I said it was fine.

Actually, the class rep asked me multiple times if that was okay with me too. I didn't expect that the two of them would ask me the exact same question.

It didn't make sense not to be direct with the class rep, so I told her that I had no intention of seeing any girl aside from my girlfriend by myself during summer break. That explanation finally seemed to convince her. At least I wouldn't have to think about this issue for the remainder of the break.

Nanami still seemed like she was worried about something else related to the class rep. I couldn't quite figure out what that something else was though.

Maybe I should talk to her about it at a different time.

The truth was that I had a reason for wanting to spend my energy only on Nanami. That was why I decided not to meet with the class rep during the break. That reason...was something that was a first for me, though not a first for Nanami.

I had no need not to just come out and say it: it was about my part-time job.

"I'm starting to feel nervous," I murmured.

Once I reminded myself that it was, in fact, my first time ever holding a part-time job, I began to grow even more nervous than before. My first day was tomorrow. Oddly enough, my part-time job was starting the same day as Nanami's.

I was going to be working at a Western-style restaurant near our school that Shoichi-senpai introduced me to. It was run by acquaintances of senpai's, and it was also supposed to be a pretty popular place. Would I be able to handle working somewhere like that? I wasn't in a position to be picky, but a lot of things about it had me anxious.

"You're feeling nervous already?! No need to be so keyed up," Nanami commented, smiling wryly at me. She seemed to be business as usual, maybe because she was used to working. Her part-time job starting soon didn't seem to worry her at all.

"It's just that I've never worked before in my life. I get really nervous when I'm about to do something I've never done before. I think I'm trembling," I lamented.

"You're gonna make yourself sick if you're already feeling so tense," Nanami muttered.

"Didn't you get nervous when you were gonna go work for the first time?"

"Not for the first time, I guess. Maybe because Hatsumi and Ayumi were with me too. If anything, I think I was more nervous when I confessed to you, or when we went on our first date together."

Those were very heartening words indeed. Nanami was right though—compared to how nervous I was before our first date... *No, wait, I might be even more nervous this time than I was then.*

Maybe it was more accurate to say that back then, there was so much going on in my head that I didn't even have the luxury of nerves. Thinking about it that way, this time around I might have it more together.

Got it together...er, probably not.

"If you're so nervous, do you wanna try touching my boobs?" Nanami asked.

"Why?! No, wait, I feel like we've had this conversation before," I muttered.

"You didn't touch them then either. Oh, but I don't mean it in a sexual way. I just remember hearing that people tend to feel more relaxed when they hear the sound of a heart beating."

"I think I've actually heard of that too. No, still, why are you the one proposing this idea? You don't have to put your body on the line like that for

me."

Nanami winked at my question and then stuck her tongue out at me. They seemed to be very cute and calculated gestures on her part. It was kind of a shame, but I didn't feel it was right for me to actually touch her chest then and there. We were still out in public, after all.

Today was our late date before Nanami and I started working. We had seen a movie earlier, and just now finished eating lunch.

I had been thinking about what we should eat, but since Nanami mentioned that she wanted to have ramen, we ended up coming to a chain restaurant that was a bit on the nicer side. It was summer break and a fairly hot day to boot, but apparently eating hot ramen in hot weather was the thing to do.

I could see what she meant. I could, but...

"Gosh, I feel so hot after having that ramen. Look how much I'm sweating," Nanami said, pressing her breasts together and leaning forward as if to show me her cleavage. There wasn't anyone around, but I couldn't feel at all calm having her do that while we were out in public.



Today, Nanami was dressed in light clothing, with skinny pants that showed off the curves of her legs. She looked very stylish and also somewhat sexy.

Until just a little while ago, we had both been eating ramen while sweating, so I hadn't really thought about her outfit. Now that the meal was over, I couldn't help staring at her.

"Yoshin, wipe my sweat for me?" Nanami asked.

"Please don't try to make me wipe the sweat off of there. I don't mind wiping your face, but I definitely can't wipe your chest while we're out and about. You've gotta let me off the hook here," I replied.

"If we weren't out, then you'd wipe it for me?" Nanami said, flashing a toothy grin while swaying her body giddily from side to side. Every time she moved, beads of sweat slid down her skin, soaking into her clothing.

If we weren't out... No, that won't do either. I do want to try my hand at wiping sweat off of her chest, but I don't know what might happen if I do.

"Actually, sweat collects underneath my chest too. If I don't take care of it, it turns all red and stuff. It's such a bother," she added.

I felt like I learned another strange factoid. How was it even possible for sweat to collect under someone's chest? I looked down at my own body, but I couldn't understand how sweat could possibly collect anywhere in that region.

My curiosity was definitely piqued, but I couldn't bring myself to ask her to show me the next time it happened. I'd be fine if she reacted like she had earlier, but if she looked at me with complete disdain, I wouldn't be able to take it.

"That does sound rough," I finally muttered.

"Yeah, it is rough. It's so tough being a girl," Nanami murmured back.

I felt like I'd dig myself into a hole if I said anything more, so I decided not to pursue the matter of one's chest any further. Though I was pretty sure it would stay in my head for quite a bit longer.

I mean, really. How does sweat collect under someone's chest? Nope, don't think about it. Don't think about it at all. Oh, but my eyes just keep traveling

there. Damn.

Just as I thought that, Nanami and I locked eyes. Or, it was more like Nanami peered into my face to make eye contact.

I felt certain she was going to tease me again, but instead, Nanami just smiled gently at me.

"Do you feel less tense now?" she asked.

"Huh?"

Her voice was kind, not at all like when she was making fun of me earlier. Confused at first by her question, I placed my hand over my heart. The strange feeling I had earlier was now nearly gone. A tiny bit of it still remained, but it wasn't so much that it made me restless. I felt like I would be okay. After all, they did say that feeling some amount of stress was healthy.

"Yeah, I'm still a tad nervous, but I think I'll be all right now," I replied.

"Good, good. I got to relax by watching you too, so I guess we both win."

"Was it that amusing to watch me get all flustered?" I asked.

"Hmm, I wouldn't say it was *amusing*. More like, cute? Like I just wanted to squeeze you. I wanted to hold you tight and pat your head and tell you what a good boy you are," Nanami said.

I felt like Nanami's standards for what was cute were gradually changing as well. Or, maybe based on what she was saying, her maternal instincts were coming through.

To be patted on the head by Nanami. Maybe I'd like that on a day when I felt really down on myself.

In any case, I felt like now I was ready to take on tomorrow. Being apart from Nanami felt like something we hadn't done in a while, but I was pretty sure I would be fine.

After that, we settled the bill and left the ramen shop. We also decided to go Dutch this time. Once I got my first paycheck, I wanted to take her out to a nice restaurant.

Just as we stepped outside the eatery, Nanami came up beside me and moved to link her arm with mine—and then immediately stopped.

Huh? Wasn't she going to link arms? What happened? Maybe it's too hot, so she changed her mind. I can understand that, though it does feel kind of sad.

As I felt slightly let down, Nanami shook her arms as though trying to loosen them up.

"I suddenly remembered that I still have to finish a few things," she announced.

"Finish things?" I wondered out loud, tilting my head. Nanami, though, went ahead and raised her palm up toward me after tracing something on it with her finger. In front of my face, I saw Nanami's lovely hand along with her long, thin fingers. They were as beautiful as ever, and I couldn't help thinking how different they looked from my own.

She wasn't wearing any rings or other accessories on her fingers today. I thought vaguely to myself that I wanted to give her a ring as a gift someday. A ring...a ring, huh?

I wondered if there would come a day when we would both wear one.

Just as I was letting my mind wander, I heard Nanami say something very unexpected.

"Here, drink up and finish it off! Go for it!" she exclaimed.

Huh? Drink? Drink, like, water or something? But Nanami isn't holding anything to drink right now. We haven't bought anything to carry around with us either.

"Do you wanna get something from the vending machine?" I asked.

Seeing me totally confused, Nanami adorably waved her hand from side to side. After staring at her swaying palm for a bit, I caught her gaze.

"They say that if you write the word 'person' on your palm three times and then drink it, that you feel less nervous, right?" she declared.

"Oh, right, they do. I think I've heard of that. So, what's this hand for?" I asked, indicating Nanami's palm.

"Huh? That's what I'm saying, if you drink up all the people from my hand, the spell will be complete. Go ahead, don't be shy!"

I couldn't help tilting my head even further at her response. She still had her palm raised up toward me. *Drink from her palm. Wait, what?*

"So? Aren't you gonna drink up?" Nanami asked, now being the one to tilt her head as she waved her hand at me.

"Well, uh, how am I supposed to drink, exactly?" I asked.

"Mmm, maybe nibble on it. Or kiss it," she replied.

Oh, I see. So she actually means for me to drink from her palm. As I debated what to do, Nanami added one final option to the list.

"You could even lick it," she muttered.

Doesn't that seem a little bit creepy? No, wait, that's not it. That isn't the part I want to question. Not at all. There's a much bigger issue that I need to point out. I could be the one who's misunderstanding things. I need to double-check, just to be sure. In anything, confirming the information you're working with is important. That's the only way people can reconcile any differences in their understanding of the same situation.

I pointed at Nanami's palm with some trepidation and, opening my mouth tentatively, asked, "Aren't you supposed to do that with your own hand though?"

"Huh?!" Nanami exclaimed, freezing with her palm still raised toward me.

With an awkward silence settling between us, Nanami began alternating between looking at her own palm and showing it to me.

Finally, though, she exclaimed, "Just do it anyway!"

"Yes, ma'am."

She just went with it.

Yeah, I feel like I made the wrong decision there. I might not have been insensitive per se, but I definitely wasn't considerate enough. But what should I do now? I don't have the emotional fortitude to lick her hand, and if I'm going to

pretend to drink, maybe it's better if I just kiss it.

Pausing to note that I found licking her hand to be more difficult than kissing it, I realized just how much my relationship with Nanami had influenced me.

Touching her hand gingerly, I pressed my lips to her palm. When I touched my lips to Nanami's skin—soft, damp, and smooth as silk—I got to enjoy that sensation for just a few moments.

I then stepped back and locked eyes with Nanami again, only to find myself immediately overcome by embarrassment.

Wow, I know I just did that myself, but this is super embarrassing! This is like something out of a shojo manga or whatever!

Nanami, too, had turned beet red. Right, yeah, of course she would.

Even our steps became faster too. As if to justify that it was our walking speed that was making us flush, we walked briskly in silence for some time after that.

Just as a side note, Nanami explained to me later that, in the Barato household, it was quite common for family members to drink the word "person" traced onto one another's palms. Ordinarily, it seemed, Tomoko-san did it for Genichiro-san, or Genichiro-san did it for Tomoko-san.

That was why I ended up having to promise to Nanami that the next time she got nervous, I would have her drink the word "person" off of my palm too.

When we would actually execute that, though, only the gods knew.



When doing something for the first time, a strange exhilaration as well as a certain sense of excitement bubbled up inside of me. It was odd; I had dreaded the arrival of this day as much as I wanted it to hurry up and happen as soon as possible.

My fingertips grew cold, tingling with numbness. I guess my emotional state was starting to manifest itself physically. Maybe I wanted this day to come just so these confusing sensations would go away.

"My name is Yoshin Misumai! I'll be working here starting today. It's a

pleasure to meet you!" I said, raising my voice as much as reasonably possible and bowing with gusto.

I was starting my part-time job today, and so I wanted to sound as enthusiastic as possible when introducing myself. A part of me was overdoing it because I was nervous, but still, I knew that first impressions were important.

"It's a pleasure to meet you too. I'm the owner, Hitoshi Kinaoshi."

"Yes, it really is nice to meet you. I'm Raika, Hitoshi's wife."

The kind-looking couple in front of me returned my bow with one of their own. The man had a gentle demeanor, with his hair cut very short. The wife had light brown hair in a short bob, with eyes that turned slightly downward in the outer corners, giving her a soft impression.

I was going to work at a Western-style restaurant operated by a married couple. It was located fairly close to our school, though I never knew about it before.

Apparently some of our teachers occasionally came here for lunch, and the restaurant made deliveries to the school too.

"Shibetsu-kun doesn't work many hours during the summer break, so having you here is a great help to us. I heard you wanted to save up so you can do things with your girlfriend, is that right?" the owner said with a cheerful smile, while out of nowhere revealing my motivation for working in the first place. Shoichi-senpai...I know I didn't ask you to keep it a secret, but I had no idea you'd share that with them too.

"I'm sorry for having such impure motives," I mumbled.

"No, no, not at all. Do you know what Shibetsu-kun said to us when he interviewed to work here?" the owner asked.

"Knowing senpai, maybe something about wanting to buy basketball equipment?" I suggested.

"He said that he wanted to work here because the omurice we serve is so delicious."

Senpai, what kind of interview response is that? Still, I've never done an

interview for a part-time job before, so maybe that's a common answer. The owners here hired me without an interview whatsoever, so, yeah, maybe it totally is normal.

"We hired him on the spot. He was too funny not to," the owner continued.

Ah, I see. I'm probably not wrong here, then. If they're calling senpai funny because of that, then the reason he gave for wanting to work was actually pretty unusual. But this owner seems like quite a character too, given what senpai's told me.

"I'm sorry. My husband really likes interesting people, so that's his deciding factor when hiring folks. He says he doesn't want to hire normal people because that wouldn't be any fun," his wife said, now stepping into the conversation to apologize to me. I mean, I had no complaints about his hiring practices—I was just grateful for even getting the job in the first place.

Except...

"Um, I think I'm pretty normal though. So, in this case, wouldn't I be unhirable?" I asked hesitantly.

It was true: I was a very normal male high school student. I wasn't good at basketball like Shoichi-senpai, and I didn't have any other distinguishing characteristics or interesting traits either.

That was what I thought, but then the owner responded enthusiastically, his eyes practically twinkling with excitement.

"What are you talking about?! A normal high school boy, dating a *gyaru*? You're so special that you might as well only exist in a manga! You're plenty interesting!" he shouted.

Wait, really? With such a passionate declaration though, I couldn't find the words to reply.

"So! Until we open, why don't you tell us more about yourself? Since we didn't have an interview, this'll work instead!"

The owner's fascination with me took me aback. I can't possibly be all that interesting. What should I even talk about?

Just as I was trying to come up with something to share, I felt something heavy weigh down on me.

"Oof...!"

Though I didn't fall over, I did stumble and lose my balance for a second. What in the world?! What's going on all of a sudden?!

Something heavy, warm, and very soft was leaning on my back. When I finally managed to regain my balance and looked to my side, I found a face.

A woman's face. And a rather gaudy one, to boot.

"Well, hello there! Guten Morgen! I have arrived! Could it be that you're our new part-timer? It sure is a pleasure to meet you!" the woman said to me cheerfully, making a peace sign next to my face. When I remained sitting with my mouth hanging open in surprise, the woman stepped away from me and twirled, like she was dancing.

Then, with a curious look around, she tilted her face and asked, "Oh? Is Shibe-chan not here today?"

"Nao," the owner's wife said, sighing, "Shibetsu-kun is taking time off starting today."

"Oh, is that right? I see, I see, so *that's* why this young'un has come to help us out instead."

She's a gyaru. She's a total gyaru-san. And she's a totally different gyaru from what Nanami and her friends are. She even looks totally free-spirited: flamboyant hair, super tan skin, jewelry everywhere, and a curvy body from top to bottom. Wait, did I just see a tattoo? I thought I just saw a heart-shaped tattoo peeking out from the neckline of her shirt. Wh-What do I do? How am I supposed to interact with her?!



While I was in total panic mode, the gyaru-san stuck her right hand out toward me.

"I'm Nao Yutari. Nice workin' with ya!" she exclaimed.

"Oh, uh, I'm Yoshin Misumai. It's nice to meet you."

I shook her hand, since I couldn't very well refuse to. It would probably be weird if I said that I couldn't shake a woman's hand just because I had a girlfriend. Maybe, once I got off work for today, I should try asking Nanami whether it was okay for me to shake hands with other girls or not. I mean, I was sure this was probably okay. Still, I wanted to let Nanami know about it later.

With her hand still holding mine, Yutari-san tilted her head, right to left. The moment I started wondering just what she was trying to do, her face suddenly turned sleepy, and she said, "Misumai...Misumai... Misu-chan isn't cute, so can I call you Mai-chan?"

"Huh? What?" I asked, confused.

"You can just call me Nao-chan. Naonao is okay too!"

Wow, she's super forward. What should I do? She's a type of gyaru that I've never encountered before. I mean I only know three gyaru, but still.

She was acting really familiar with me really quickly. Was this what a real extrovert was like? Everything I thought I knew about extroverts was being turned on its head. Or were the other extroverts I met just taking it easy on me?

As I remained unable to say anything while still locked in a handshake, Yutarisan anxiously tilted her head even further. Her entire body was now basically diagonal.

"Did you not like it? Would Suma-chan be better? Something else?" she asked.

"Just a moment. I'm still processing everything mentally, so if you could please slow down a bit, that would be great," I requested, declaring defeat even though I knew how pathetic that must seem.

I'm sorry. It's too much, too fast—I'm about to shut down. The iYoshin specs just aren't strong enough for this. Any more input, and it'll just be information

overkill. This person is absolutely the most, um, unique character I've ever met.

But the moment I thought that, I realized how rude I might've sounded. When I tried to apologize, though, the woman—without seeming to mind at all what I said—simply muttered, "I see, sorry about that."

Her carefree smile in response, surprisingly, reminded me of a little girl.



My first day at work wrung me dry.

Wearing a borrowed apron and using a truly old-school pad of order slips, I spent much of the day jotting down customers' orders.

I assumed the restaurant would be slow during the summer break, but of course, working people didn't have a summer break to begin with. At lunchtime, a wave of people in business suits rushed in. This restaurant seemed to be quite popular, because the lunch hour basically felt like a war zone.

It took everything I had in me to keep up: to take orders, convey them to the owner, and carry food out to the right tables. I went through the motions, desperately trying to remember what they had explained to me earlier. The whole time, I was frantic—more frantic than I had ever felt in my life.

People who were used to the lunch rush, though, seemed to have zero problems.

"Oh, Hashi-chan, long time no see! Today's special is cutlets, so make sure you order anything but that."

"Why, Nao-chan?! I wanna eat cutlets too!"

"Huh? But didn't your doctor tell you to cut down on fried stuff? Are you all better now?"

"I'm fine, I'm fine! I'm taking medication now, so they said I can have it once in a while. So I'll go ahead and have the daily special!"

"Gotcha. And what about your friend there? It's your first time coming here, isn't it? I bet Hashi-chan's treating you today, huh? Oh, how nice. I wished someone would treat me to lunch too."

Just like that, Yutari-senpai continued chatting with the customers, all the while doing her job flawlessly. With the way she interacted with the regulars, she seemed to be the poster child for the restaurant. She was definitely a gyaru, but she looked great in an apron, which made her seem a little bit like Nanami.

I was extremely grateful for the fact that even as she did her own work, senpai also helped me out whenever I needed it. Serving water to the customers, wiping down tables, taking plates of food out—even as all those tasks made my head spin, she gave me precise instructions on what she wanted me to do next.

"Mai-chan, that table's open, so can you seat the party that's been waiting?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am!" I shouted in response.

"Oh, such enthusiasm."

My goal for the day was to be as energetic in my speech as possible. Truthfully, Nanami's advice had helped me come up with the idea in the first place.

At first, I wondered if being energetic when I couldn't even carry out my tasks properly might not come off as being disingenuous. Nanami, though, told me that it was the opposite.

It was precisely *because* I still couldn't do my work properly, that I had to be energetic.

An experienced worker had a different perspective on things. Apparently Nanami had been told the same thing when she did her first part-time job—even if she made mistakes, it would be easier for others to help her out as long as she was energetic and kept a good attitude.

Just as I was learning that working required a different mindset from studying, I was also realizing just how difficult working actually was.

Mom, dad. Thank you for all your hard work, every single day.

As my first day went on, I spent much of it overcome with gratitude and respect toward my parents. The two of them go to work a lot earlier in the day,

and come home a lot later too ...

And just like that, the lunch hour ended as soon as it began.

Once we saw off the last of our lunchtime customers, we hung up the "Closed" sign. This restaurant temporarily closed after lunch in order for the staff to rest and prepare for dinner service.

It was only once the sign was up that I was finally able to let myself relax a bit.

"Wow, that really was a lot of help, Misumai-kun," said the owner.

"Really, I couldn't even tell that this was your first time working," added his wife.

"D-Do you think so? Was I at all useful just now?" I asked, unable to keep myself from smiling at the owners' words of praise. Still, given that I was both out of breath and fatigued in a way I never had been before, even smiling felt like a somewhat forced effort.

Sitting down in the now empty restaurant, I felt like all strength had left my body.

Wait, will I be able to stand back up? I can't imagine how adults out in the real world manage to get through a full workday. I have nothing but respect for them.

"Really, really! Mai-chan, you were super energetic and totally awesome. Even the regulars were complimenting you too," added senpai.

Getting praised was a blessing. Just hearing that comment lessened my exhaustion.

Just in that moment though, my stomach growled very noticeably. Because I had skipped lunch, hunger saw that it was now the perfect time to strike.

Wow, now that I think about it, I'm absolutely ravenous.

"Aha ha, that's quite the sound. I should probably make you your lunch. What would you like to eat?" the owner asked.

"I want the daily special! I've been wanting to eat the cutlets this whole time," my senpai replied without missing a beat.

"I'm sorry, Nao. We're all sold out of the special."

Hearing the owner's wife, Yutari-senpai was so shocked she was left speechless.

Yeah, those cutlets really did look tasty... They were deep-fried to a perfect golden brown, with tomato sauce and lemon slices on top. The accompanying side of vegetables also added a nice touch.

"What would you like, Misumai-kun?" the owner asked me.

"Oh, uh, I..."

When they handed me the menu, one particular dish caught my eye.

"I'd like the omurice, if that's okay," I finally replied.

"Of course. Coming right up."

I had been curious about the omurice that Shoichi-senpai had mentioned in his interview. Even during the lunch rush, I was thinking of how tasty it looked. Finally being able to eat it was genuinely exciting. If it was good, then maybe I could come here with Nanami and have it with her.

Was bringing your girlfriend to your part-time job okay though? Or was it like bad manners or something? Maybe I should ask next time.

"So, you're Shibe-chan's kohai, right? What's you guys' relationship? Do you play basketball too or something?"

As we waited for our lunch, Yutari-senpai sat down as well and spoke to me, fiddling with her phone at the same time. Actually, since she was looking mainly at me, maybe the phone was more of an afterthought.

Shibe-chan... I was pretty sure I'd never met anyone who called Shibetsusenpai that. Did senpai feel any particular way about being called that? Actually, it was more likely that he didn't mind it at all.

My relationship with Shoichi-senpai, huh? She probably already knows that we're friends, so it's more likely that she's asking for the details. Hmm, how can I explain this to her? In the end, I chose to respond in a safe and vague manner.

"No, I'm not on the basketball team. We ended up getting to know each other

over a small incident," I explained.

"Oh, I see. Shibe-chan's good at taking care of people, isn't he? He's pretty easy to pick on, but the younger kids really seem to look up to him."

I couldn't just say outright, "I fought with him over my girlfriend and won through a really cowardly move." Honestly, if she asked me to explain how that happened, I didn't think I had the confidence to do so.

"And how do you know him, Yutari-senpai?"

"Boo! That's so not a cute name. Call me Naonao or Nao-chan or something!"

"I'm sorry, but I have a girlfriend, so I can't call any other woman by her first name."

"Oh yeah, you're working a part-time job for your girlfriend, right? Like, to earn money for going on dates? That's so cute. Hmm. In that case, 'Yu-chan' would be fine too," she said.

Was that even a compromise? It was a shortened form of her last name. Still, even with Nanami, I had only called her with a "chan" only once or so. As in, I was pretty sure I did...once.

Yutari-senpai gave me an expectant look. What do I do?

Rebuffing her request might complicate our future relationship, work or otherwise. It wasn't so serious as the power dynamic between senpai and kohai, but rejecting the request outright might spoil the mood too.

Still, I didn't feel comfortable calling a woman that I'd just met by her first name so easily. I mean, I called Tomoko-san and Saya-chan by their first names, but they were Nanami's family, so they were probably exceptions to the rule.

Well, then. After a long deliberation, I decided...

"How do you know him, Yu-senpai?" I asked.

"That's what you settled on, huh? You're such a serious one, Mai-chan. That's good, that's a good trait to have!"

She seemed somehow impressed with me, but that was as far as I was willing to go. I honestly couldn't call a woman aside from my girlfriend with a "chan,"

so she was going to have to let me shorten her last name and just add "senpai" to it.

Seeing Yutari-senpai...Yu-senpai's reaction, I guessed that there wasn't going to be a problem with that. *In that case, I shall call her Yu-senpai from now on.*

"How do you and Shoichi-senpai know each other, Yu-senpai?" I asked again.

"Hmm? Shibe-chan and I are childhood friends. We've been together since we were little kids."

Childhood friends?! I kept my scream inside to make sure the shock wouldn't show on my face. I felt like this was the first time I'd ever met someone with an actual childhood friend. But Shoichi-senpai didn't say a word about it. Was it not important enough to mention?

"You're childhood friends *and* you work together? What an interesting connection," I remarked.

"Actually, me, onee, onii, and Shibe-chan are all childhood friends," Yu-senpai said, pointing to herself, followed by the owner cooking in the kitchen and his wife standing with him.

I see. I was told this was a restaurant run by senpai's acquaintances, but I guess everyone here is actually childhood friends. If Yu-senpai's calling them "onee" and "onii," then does that mean she's sisters with the owner's wife? I suppose the two of them do seem a bit like sisters.

"Oh, this is an old photo of onee. She used to be a total gyaru. Lookee here! She's super hot and cute, right? Shibe-chan used to always say that he was gonna marry her."

It didn't seem like a huge deal to Yu-senpai to just casually reveal a huge revelation about Shoichi-senpai's past romantic interests. Did this have anything to do with senpai confessing to Nanami? When I get the chance, maybe I can ask him about this.

"By the way, are you...a high school student?" I asked Yu-senpai.

"Huuuh? Do I look that young? I'm in college now! I'm a young and healthy female university student!"

Senpai's declaration was accompanied by her very excitedly flashing me a peace sign. A college student, huh? Shoichi-senpai must be the youngest of these four, then. Senpai being the youngest seemed oddly fitting to me.

After that, Yu-senpai continued asking me lots of questions—what Shoichisenpai was like at school, and what my girlfriend...Nanami was like.

Senpai seemed to exemplify the saying that being a good talker really meant being a good listener. I wasn't terribly good at talking, but my conversation with senpai seemed to go relatively smoothly. Though this, too, was probably because of my own experiences with Nanami.

"Sorry to keep you two waiting! Here's Misumai-kun's omurice, and Nao's Napolitan pasta. And then this is on the house—for getting through your first day here."

As Yu-senpai and I were chatting, the owner and his wife brought us our lunches. With steam gently rising from it that carried a wonderful aroma, the omurice truly looked delicious. They'd even added flan as a dessert, and it looked homemade too, darker in color than the supermarket kind.

Wow, I haven't had flan in a long time. Is it steamed? I don't eat it often, but when you get to have it at a restaurant like this, I've gotta admit it's pretty exciting.

I wanted Nanami to see this too. I was just about to ask the owners if they'd let me take a picture when I remembered that I had left my phone in one of the backroom lockers.

It seems rude to leave freshly made food untouched just to get my phone. Maybe I should just save taking photos for next time. Oh, Yu-senpai is taking photos right now like it's totally normal. She's so quick.

"Oh, Mai-chan, I'll take a photo for you. Here, strike a pose!" Yu-senpai called out.

"Huh?"

When I made a peace sign without even thinking, Yu-senpai took my photo on her phone for me. It all happened so fast, that I had to wonder if I didn't accidentally make a weird face.

After Yu-senpai told me she'd send the photo to me later, she gave thanks for the food and started eating her pasta right off of its skillet. It was a relief that I'd be able to show Nanami a photo after all.

I should have my food too, before it gets cold.

"Thank you for this food," I said with my palms together in front of me before picking up my knife. When I inserted it into the egg, the omelet split in two and spilled over the rice that it was sitting on top of. It was my first time eating the type of omurice where you had to split the egg in half.

The omurice excited me even just looking at it. I quickly switched from my knife to a spoon and scooped up a portion. Under the half-cooked egg, there was rice stir-fried in butter. Rather than just ketchup, the sauce seemed to be an actual tomato-based sauce. The vibrant combination of red, yellow, and white made the dish a delight for the eye.

I put the spoonful of food directly into my mouth. The sweetness of the egg and the acidity of the tomato sauce spread across my tongue. The egg could have been too much, but the sourness of the sauce kept it in check.

As I chewed, the sweet scent of the egg and the richness of the butter wafted up to my nose. Just a moment later, it was followed by the aroma of herbs in the tomato sauce. The taste of the various ingredients blended together in my mouth in a perfect balance, none of them overtaking the other.

This is...

"Delicious," I muttered, without even realizing it.

It tasted so good on an empty stomach that I thought I could cry. Maybe because it was after my first work shift ever, but I also felt pretty emotional. I thought I could keep eating it forever. My spoon seemed to have a mind of its own and wouldn't stop scooping.

"Hey, onii, did you switch up the bacon? It seems more fragrant than usual," Yu-senpai asked.

"Good nose. I got some that's better quality than usual. What do you think?" the owner asked in response.

"Yeah, it's super delish. I feel like you could stir-fry this with just spinach or something, and it'd turn out really good. Oh, I wanna eat spinach and bacon au gratin next time!"

Yu-senpai, too, was eating her pasta like it was super tasty. Her meal seemed to make her really happy. As she ate she shared various thoughts on the taste of the dish, and the owners were responding to her with smiles on their faces too. They seemed to truly get along.

Yeah, I really do want to come here with Nanami. The food is super delicious, and the place has such a great atmosphere. Will she like it if we come here on one of our dates?

Say, what's Nanami doing right now? I mean, I know she's working. But I can't help wondering what it's like.

Was her part-time job hard too? Because up until recently I had been so frantic working, I couldn't keep myself from thinking that maybe she, too, was having a really busy time as well.

It could simply be because we were separated, but Nanami was constantly on my mind. It was a strange feeling, a bit different from loneliness. *Do I feel this way because after so long together, we're suddenly apart?*

As I watched Yu-senpai eat her pasta with a smile on her face, I had the feeling that, even though it had only been one day, we'd be able to work well together.

As in, I had to work hard to make sure I wouldn't get in her way.

"Hmm? What's wrong, Mai-chan? Oh, do you wanna try the pasta too? You're a growing boy, huh? Here you go, say, 'Aaah.'"

"Oh, was that not enough for you, Misumai-kun?" the owner's wife asked. "No need to be shy, you can just tell us."

By the time I realized what was happening, a forkful of pasta was floating in front of my face. Oh, I must have been zoning out, which must have made senpai think that I wanted some. That wasn't my intention at all.

Still, Yutari-senpai was really quick to try to feed me. It was clear that Yutari-

senpai's idea of propriety was different from most people's. I made a mental note that I would have to be careful about this in the future.

"I'm sorry. I have a girlfriend, so I'll have to decline offers like this," I said.

I felt bad, but I most definitely wasn't able to eat off of the fork that was offered to me like this. I made sure to give a clear refusal, even as I apologized.

I was prepared to say sorry if senpai became upset, but she and the owners were looking at me with surprised expressions of admiration instead.

"Oh wow, a high schooler who can say no!" Yu-senpai exclaimed.

"It's been a while since I've seen someone refuse that because he has a girlfriend," the owner's wife remarked.

Wait, is this rare? I thought this was normal.

Given that I had a girlfriend, I thought that it was only right that I distance myself from other women, or have firm boundaries when interacting with them. It seemed instead that I was in the minority.

"I'm sorry, Misumai-kun. My little sister can't seem to maintain personal space between people," the owner's wife said, her brow furrowed in consternation as she slapped Yu-senpai upside the head. *Oh, so senpai really is her younger sister.*

Senpai, despite being slapped, didn't seem to mind the situation too much. She stuck her tongue out instead and, seemingly without much remorse, laughed cheerfully as she remarked, "Oh, come on. It's so much nicer when everyone gets along. Love and peace, as they say!"

"You're very bad at respecting personal space. You've had trouble with that before, haven't you?" the older sister said.

"Jeez. You used to be a total gyaru before too. You were all tanned, and you and onii used to..."

The owner's wife covered senpai's mouth, and senpai resisted with all her might. The owner himself watched them with a grin as he ate his own meal.

I, too, watched on with a smile on my face as the two sisters continued to bicker harmlessly.

Leaving his wife and her sister to do as they pleased, the owner turned toward me and commented, "It really did help to have you here today. How's the food?"

"It's really delicious. I think it's the first time I've ever had an omurice this good."

"Well that's good to hear. But are you sure you're allowed to say it's your first time? Isn't your girlfriend's cooking better?"

"Oh, that's not it. It's just that I've never had omurice made by my girlfriend before."

The owner shrugged his shoulders, laughing as he said that that made perfect sense.

Should I try cooking omurice with Nanami some time? It'd be nice if the owner taught me how to make it.

"Speaking of, what's your girlfriend like?" he asked.

"Um...she's very cute."

I found myself struggling to describe her. She was cute, and kind, and super fun to be with. I could come up with all sorts of compliments for her, but I didn't know how to explain all that to someone else. I also didn't know if I should say that she was a gyaru.

Unfortunately, the two sisters who had been fighting rowdily until now heard the owner's question and suddenly came closer toward me. Approaching me in complete unison, they opened their mouths at the exact same time and exclaimed, "I wanna see what she looks like!"

Their voices were in complete harmony, reaching my ears like a funny duet. I didn't expect that they'd want to see her. It was only my first day, but they all certainly had their questions lined up for me. Maybe this was totally normal for extroverts. I felt like Shoichi-senpai was kind of like that too.

I didn't have my phone on me, so I couldn't show them a picture of Nanami. As an excuse, it was a pretty weak one, given that all I had to do was go and grab my phone.

Therefore, I gave up and went to get my phone from the locker. When I finally got to it, I saw that I had a message from Nanami.

Hmm? Didn't she say she might not be able to text me while at work?

As I opened her message, wondering what was going on, I let out a strange cry. I wasn't at all expecting what I saw.

"Huh?!"

Nanami, it turned out, had sent me a photo.

A photo of herself, wearing a ring girl costume.

"H-Huh? Didn't Nanami say she was only working backstage? Wait, why is she wearing this? And why is she taking a photo?!"

Nanami wasn't the only one in the photo. Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san were in it too, wearing the exact same costume. The three of them were striking a pose, as though they were taking some kind of a PR photo.

No, wait. It looks like Nanami's just hanging on to Otofuke-san. The other two seem completely into it though.

I looked down again at the photo of Nanami.

Wow, I can't believe Nanami managed to put that on.

The top piece had more surface area than a bathing suit, but it very boldly revealed her cleavage and her shoulders. Just above where her breasts met, two straps crossed to make an X.

On the bottom she wore shorts that also showed off her midriff. There were strings visible above the pair of shorts too. Was it the kind of underwear that was supposed to be shown off? The strings seemed to extend upward at exaggerated angles.

In any case, the shorts revealed so much thigh that if someone told me she was actually wearing a bathing suit bottom, I would have believed them. I didn't know that ring girls wore that kind of uniform.

The outfits were black overall, but each had different colored accent lines. Nanami's had blue, Otofuke-san's had red, and Kamoenai-san's had orange.

Most astonishingly, there was a heart-shaped tattoo of sorts on Nanami's belly, just to the side of her navel. It wasn't there when Nanami wore her bathing suit, so it was probably a stick-on. The color of the heart was different for each girl, matching the color of their costume. It was most definitely some kind of tattoo sticker.

I shifted my gaze away from Nanami in the photo and looked upward.

"Nanami...it totally did happen, didn't it?" I muttered.

Thinking back on it, when Nanami told me that she'd only be backstage and wouldn't have to wear the ring girl costume, it was only a sign that all this was bound to happen.

The reality of it was probably different, but I couldn't stop myself from thinking that. I felt like that moment set Nanami's future into one in which she would end up wearing the uniform.

Is this okay though? She isn't being forced to wear it, is she?

If she was being forced, I felt like Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san wouldn't have let it happen. So it was likely that Nanami herself had agreed to wear it. Still, it was just way too dang sexy.

"Oh, shoot. I'm keeping everyone waiting."

Snapping back to the present, I returned to where the owners were waiting, my phone still in my hand. When I hurriedly arrived at their table and apologized for making them wait, they all asked me if something had happened.

"I just got a message from my girlfriend," I began to explain.

"Oh, do you need to go call her back? You don't have to worry about us," the owner offered.

I realized then that the photo she sent me had shocked me so much, I'd failed to read what her message actually said. Maybe she'd written why she was sending me such a photo.

Could it be that she's asking me for help? If that's the case, then I have to run

to her. Though I'm not sure what I'll be able to do once I actually get there. But wait, if she's sending me this photo, she can't be asking for help. There's no way her friends would let Nanami do something that she was uncomfortable with...right?

The questions kept coming, but I made up my mind and opened the message from Nanami. I scrolled past the photo and looked at what she had typed.

Nanami: Dear Yoshin, How's work going? I'm working hard. As in, that's what I ended up doing. A girl didn't show, so I have to wear the costume now too. Looks like only the girls who wear the costume get to take it home. Since you were looking forward to seeing it, I'll do my best to wear it! For now, I'll just send you a photo. You'll be able to enjoy it when we get home!

The message seemed to be tinged with a "to hell with it!" kind of attitude. No, that probably was how she was actually feeling.

Seeing her message, though, I had to hold my head in my hands. I'd heard a saying that what people said in the second half of their speech was often their honest thoughts.

They said the polite thing first, and only after that, spoke the truth.

In other words, the latter half of the message was Nanami's honest feelings. Which meant that...

Isn't this all my fault?!

Well, I wasn't sure if I could say that this was, in fact, my fault. At the very least, Nanami was doing her best to wear the costume for my sake. She truly was putting her body on the line.

I was still wrestling with all the oncoming guilt when Nanami sent me another photo.

She had her arms crossed beneath her chest, winking at the camera as she lifted and gathered her breasts together. She seemed to be sweating out of nerves though, so she was probably forcing herself. When I looked more closely, her winking face also looked somewhat strained.

Yeah. Thank y— No, wait. Don't thank her for this. Even though I know you

kind of want to.

Dammit. I hated myself for how excited this photo made me feel for what was to come. I was a healthy high school student, though, so I kind of wanted to be forgiven for that.

"Wh-What's wrong, Misumai-kun?" the owner asked.

Seeing me suddenly cradling my head in my hands, the three others peered into my face, concerned. That's right, I'm still at work. I'm making people worry about me.

"Um, it seems that someone couldn't make it to her part-time job, so my girlfriend ended up having to do some unexpected work. I'm sorry to make you all worry," I answered.

"Oh, yeah, that can happen, huh? That's rough," Yu-senpai remarked.

"Right. And I got a photo of my girlfriend at work, and it kind of shocked me a little," I continued.

"What?! Hey, I wanna see! Work uniforms are cute, aren't they? Hey, onii, let's make cute uniforms for our restaurant too. Like a maid uniform. What kind of a place does your girlfriend work at, Mai-chan?"

Cute uniform? Can I call this uniform...cute?

Well, maybe it was cute. I could imagine women calling revealing costumes like this one "cute." Maybe I was being prejudiced, but still.

Yet Nanami, as well as Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san, also tended to say that revealing outfits were cute, so I didn't think I was too far off.

"Lemme see, lemme see!"

As I was lost in thought, Yu-senpai hopped behind me and peered into my phone. Because I just so happened to have Nanami's photo displayed on the screen, Yu-senpai ended up getting a clear view of it.

Well, senpai was a gyaru too, so maybe she wouldn't think much of it. If anything, she might see Nanami's photo and get excited, saying that it was a cool outfit and stuff.

To my surprise, though, senpai didn't utter a single word.

In fact, she fell into complete silence. While I looked at her and tilted my head, the owners just smiled wryly instead. They seemed to be accustomed to such a turn of events.

Senpai took a step away from me very, very quietly, sinking into a chair that happened to be perfectly placed there.

Then she looked at me, with her face—as I finally realized it—now turned completely red.

"Th-That might not be, um...suitable for a uniform, maybe. As in, wow, your girlfriend's, uh...really, um..."

Extremely embarrassed, senpai opened her mouth with caution, as though choosing her words very carefully.

"...erotic," she finished.

That's what you came up with after all that, senpai?

Still, the images overlapped in my mind—senpai, her cheeks bright red, and Nanami.



"Thanks for all your hard work today," the owner said.

"Yes, thank you, Misumai-kun. We'll see you again tomorrow," the owner's wife added.

"Later, Mai-chan! See you tomorrow!" senpai called out.

After getting off work, I headed to Nanami's part-time job. She had told me beforehand that she wouldn't be able to see me because she'd be working late, so I hadn't planned on visiting her.

But I couldn't stay still. I honestly did really want to see her, but the uniform was a big part of it too. I felt like if I didn't go see her, one of the event competitors might hit on her. In my mind, all kinds of concerns were rearing their ugly heads.

That was why—though I usually wasn't the type—I decided to go let the

people there know that she had a boyfriend. In short, I wanted to keep those other guys in check. I figured they wouldn't try to hit on a girl who wasn't single.

I'm sure that Nanami's coworkers didn't want any kind of trouble like that on their hands. Still, I was so worried that I wanted to go see her regardless.

Even though I'd just finished my first day on the job, the thought of seeing Nanami kept me from feeling at all tired. More accurately, I was fighting the urge to just flat-out run to her.

Is this just the high of working for the first time?

While on the train, I checked some of the new photos I now had on my phone. The owners had taken them for me to commemorate my first day at work, and they were of me and the other restaurant employees.

I had several, some with four people, others with three. It wasn't a terribly large restaurant, but they usually seemed to have four people working at lunchtime, with a few more staff added for dinner.

Since I wasn't going to be on the dinner shift, there were some people I might never get to meet. A part of me felt grateful, since I knew I felt too awkward meeting new folks anyway. Given how nice the owners were, though, I had a feeling that the dinner shift employees were just as kind.

Apparently, Yu-senpai sometimes stayed on to work the dinner shift too. She even said herself that in the evenings, she was still the restaurant's poster child. Working all day—wow. Hats off to her, sincerely. Jobs were really no joke.

I couldn't keep the smile off my face as I looked at the photos. They told me that I could show them to Nanami, and that, if anything, I should bring her to the restaurant next time so that they could give us a discount.

I felt extremely grateful for their offer, and I definitely wanted to say yes...but the idea of taking my girlfriend to where I worked seemed a little embarrassing.

But that might be better than having her come visit me while I was working—that would be even more mortifying.

When I thought that, though, it suddenly occurred to me that maybe Nanami felt the same way too.

I had actually messaged her, saying, "I just got off work, and I was wondering if I could come visit you for a bit." Checking my phone, I saw that my message hadn't yet been marked as read.

Would she actually dislike me showing up like this? Nanami tended to be pretty shy too, and she might actually be uncomfortable with the thought of me seeing her wear that uniform.

Shoot, I was so jittery from my postwork high that I wasn't really thinking straight.

Just as I looked down at my phone to send Nanami another message, the one I sent to her earlier became marked as read.

I immediately flinched in response. *Oh, shoot. Is there a way to delete a message? Maybe that's what I should've done.*

Even after she seemingly read the message, Nanami didn't immediately reply. With my hands frozen in place, I stared at my phone screen. A high-pitched noise began to ring in my ears, followed by the sound of my heartbeat, mixed with the noise in the train car. Even my throat felt dry, perhaps out of nerves.

Even though in reality it probably took only a few seconds, the time it took for Nanami to respond felt like an eternity.

Finally, though, she replied.

Nanami: You're gonna visit me?! Come, come! I can see you if it's for a little bit. Just call me from the back entrance and I'll come and get you!

Her message made me sigh with relief. I would have been so bummed out if she had told me to not come see her.

I was still concerned, though, so I made sure to double check.

Yoshin: Are you sure? Like, is it really okay if I see you at work?

Nanami: I guess I do feel a little embarrassed, but...I'm pretty sure you won't be able to see me actually working. So if we're just gonna see each other a little bit, it's totally fine!

I see, that's totally true. If Nanami's wearing that costume, it's because she's working as a ring girl now. They go around the ring in between rounds. I definitely wouldn't get to see that. What a relief. The anxiety I got from the thought of seeing Nanami like that completely vanished, like I'd only imagined it.

Just then, another photo arrived on my phone. I didn't know how she did it, but the photo depicted Nanami in a chair wearing her ring girl costume, with the phrase "I'll be waiting" added to the image. She had her long legs crossed, posing as though she was blowing a kiss. She was wearing a jacket now, maybe to combat the air-conditioning. Although her outfit was now less revealing, she somehow managed to look cooler than before.

Do I actually want to see Nanami right now? Or is it just the outfit? No, it's the former. Most definitely the former. Seeing her makes me genuinely so happy.

For now, once I got off the train, I made a mad dash to the event arena. Arena...what should I call it? It's not a gym. Maybe a facility? Or an event hall? Oh, whatever.

The location was a rather large...facility. I feel like I've seen this place before. Maybe one of our school clubs competed here or something? I don't remember because I didn't really care when it was announced, though I'm pretty sure it wasn't the basketball team.

Yoshin: I'm here.

Nanami: Got it, come round to the back. I'll come get you.

I headed around toward the back, just as I had been told. A security guard was stationed there though, so I stopped. I didn't think I could go any farther.

In the back of the building, there was a booth where the security guard was stationed and next to it, an automatic door that seemed to be operated by a key card. Beyond the automatic door, I saw another door. A double security system, maybe? We didn't have a door beyond a door at school, so it was an unfamiliar sight to me.

As I waited, the door beyond the automatic door slowly opened—and I was at

a loss for words.

I mean, wow. That's really all I can say.

When Nanami came through the door, she saw me and waved her outstretched hand at me. She had taken off her jacket from earlier, leaving the area around her shoulders completely exposed.

I raised my hand too, giving her a demure little wave back. My response seemed to make Nanami even happier.

I thought I'd be okay because I'd seen the pictures, but man...seeing it for real, the impact is on a whole other level.

I didn't know if I could call it "impact," but that was the only word I could come up with. I felt like I was being bowled over by the sheer force of Nanami in her costume.

Once the automatic door opened Nanami hurried over to me. I couldn't help smiling, so I did just that—but what she did then was completely unexpected: she leaped at me and embraced me.

Huh?!

"Thanks for coming to see me!" she exclaimed.

Whoa! You're gonna hug me for that?! Wait, the security guard is stealing glances at us. I'm so sorry for doing this here.

Having someone else nearby was what kept me relatively calm. If it were just the two of us, I would have been in full panic mode.

I didn't know if I should hug her back, so my hands ended up just hovering in the air awkwardly. And because Nanami was rather scantily clad, I could very clearly feel her soft skin and the warmth of her body against mine. I only realized it because she leaped into my arms, but her outfit was completely backless too. From certain angles, would it look like she wasn't wearing anything at all?

If I hug her back now, my hands are definitely going to directly touch her skin.

After going back and forth, I gave her a faint hug, but was careful not to let my hands touch her skin.

It seemed that was what Nanami was waiting for; the moment I hugged her back, she moved slightly away from me and, tilting her head, beamed at me.

"It's kinda hard to talk here. Should we head inside?" Nanami suggested.

"Wait, I can go in?" I asked.

"Yeah. Actually, when I told everyone that you were coming, they told me to bring you inside."

"Everyone"? Who's that? Her coworkers? While I stood there, unsure, Nanami just pulled me by the hand and walked us back into the building.

The inside looked like our school hallway, just slightly darker, giving off a somewhat sterile impression. Along the way, various staff people were walking around. As I saw them, they looked at me too, stealing glances as I walked along, holding hands with Nanami.

Am I standing out too much? No, wait, it's probably Nanami. "Anyway, that first photo of you in the uniform really surprised me," I finally muttered.

"Sorry about that. I was kinda surprised too. They just up and told me that one of the girls couldn't make it and asked if I could take her place. I agreed to do it in the end because of the costume and the pay," Nanami said somewhat mischievously, sticking her tongue out a bit. She was blushing a little though, so there was probably still some embarrassment about the whole thing.

I mean, yeah, it takes real guts to wear an outfit so bold. Oh, but I almost forgot to say the most important thing.

"Nanami," I started.

"Hmm? What's up?"

"You look really cute. That costume looks great on you."

Nanami blinked a couple of times at my remark and fell silent. Gradually, though, a smile spread across her face. Her face slowly turned red, and she looked to the ground. Her facial expressions changed so rapidly that I couldn't take my eyes off of her.

"What are you saying all of a sudden? I mean, I guess that makes me happy and all! I guess!" Nanami shouted.

"Well, I mean, I thought I should tell you things like this right away," I replied.

"Seriously, I feel like you're getting really smooth lately. I bet you're gonna be a total ladies' man when you grow up," she declared.

How does that work? Don't people say that to kindergartners or something? Not that I'm gonna be anything close to that in the first place.

"In that case, don't you think you're getting more used to being around guys too? You probably wouldn't have worn anything like that before," I retorted.

"Not really. I've always felt fine wearing cute clothes, and it's not like I wear that stuff for guys anyway."

Is that so? Well, it's true that you should wear whatever clothes you want to wear for yourself. You shouldn't have to get any flak for that. If those are her tastes, then that's just the way it goes.

Still, what might seem just cute to a girl might seem kind of sexy to a guy. That does worry me a bit.

"Would it have been better if I didn't say that you were cute, then?" I asked.

"No way! That's why I'm kind of torn about it. I always want you to tell me I look cute. *And* sexy," she added.

Is that even allowed? Isn't that, like, sexual harassment? "Sexy" is kind of hard to say though. "Nanami, you look sexy." Yeah, I don't know if I can say that out loud. I can at least manage calling her cute.

"Oh, but I do wanna make it clear," she began.

"Hmm? Make what clear?" I asked.

"I'm wearing this outfit for *you*, Yoshin," Nanami said, mischievously flashing a devilish, toothy grin.

Wow, she totally got me again.

I was speechless, but that seemed to come at the right time. Nanami stopped in front of a door and knocked—lightly, three times. A moment later, we heard a voice from the inside. I didn't know whose voice it was, but it was a woman's.

Nanami took my hand and walked into the room. Just before we entered, I

managed to read the sign that was on the door: STAFF WAITING ROOM.

This room looked like a resting spot for Nanami and her coworkers. Maybe she was here with Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san. When I checked inside the room though, I saw...

"Oh, hey, hey. Is this your boyfriend, Barato-chan? Isn't he kinda average? Like, really average?" a woman remarked immediately.

"You think so? I think he's kinda cute. Yeah, I could go for that. I totally could. Maybe I should," contemplated another.

"Stop. Don't try to steal other people's boyfriends, you ho," berated a third.

There were a few women in the room other than Nanami and her friends. Each of them was wearing a different colored uniform, and all three were looking at me, as though trying to suss me out.

When I looked around, I saw that Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san had strained looks on their faces. There were...yes, there were men in the room too: Soichiro-san and another good-looking guy.

The room isn't that big; is it not crowded with so many people inside? Oh, but I should go say hello to Soichiro-san first.

"Long time no see, Soichiro-san. I hope it's not a bother for me to show up like this," I said.

"No, not at all! It's been a while, huh, Yo? We haven't seen each other since we went to the pool, right? Still so lovey-dovey with Nana here?"

"Yes, I always make sure to tell Nanami how much I like her. We're planning on making a lot of memories together this summer break too."

"O-Oh, uh, right. I was just teasing, but I guess you can say stuff like that like it's totally natural, huh? Maybe I should take a cue from you," Soichiro-san muttered.

I didn't realize that he was teasing me. I'd assumed he was just worried about us, given that he was like an older brother to Nanami. Now I felt stupid for having answered him so earnestly.

I heard that Soichiro-san had a fight today, so maybe he was feeling amped

up. His muscles looked as good as always though; he wore shorts and just a shirt on top, probably so that he could remove it easily.

Next to him was yet another handsome martial artist. He was blond, with a scar on his face. The scar actually really suited the energy he was giving off. Unfortunately, he seemed like the type of person I would immediately run away from if I happened to run into him around town. Since Soichiro-san looked so gentle, I wasn't afraid of him at all, but I had to admit this other guy scared me a little. I also felt like he was glaring at me.

I'm not...just imagining it, it seems.

When I bowed to the other guy in greeting though, he returned the gesture like nothing was amiss.

Maybe he's actually a nice person?

"I can't believe he went and said hi to So-kun when such a sexy lady is so interested in him. He's such a funny one. Yeah, I could totally go for him," said one of the women in the room—the one who kept considering me.

"Come on, it's totally normal for him to say hi to people he knows. What the hell made you think he'd come to us first?" another asked in return.

I felt like they were taking the conversation about me in a weird direction. Should I say hello to those women over there too? Yeah, it's important to greet people properly.

Just as I was thinking that though...

"All right, come on, folks! Next up's the four of us, so let's go wait in the wings! Don't forget anything, all right?" Otofuke-san said as she stood up and ushered the three women I didn't know out of the room. For a brief moment she turned toward me and winked, so I smiled and bowed to her before she left.

"Oh, we're up next, huh? Let's go be looked at, then. Gosh, I love the attention," one of the other women murmured.

"Hatsumi-chan, wait! Please let me just say hello to that cute boy! Oh, jeez, please don't pull on my uniform! Okay, I get it! I won't hit on him, I swear!"

shouted another.

"Yes, yes, we'll get out of your hair now. Oh, Barato-chan's boyfriend—have a nice visit, okay?" said the third and final one.

The three women who were looking at me like I was on an auction block were dragged away from the room by Otofuke-san. I saw off the last person—the one who wished me a nice visit—with a slight bow. She gave me a thumbs-up before slipping out of the room, as one of the other women claimed that she was trying to get ahead of the others.

Wow, they're all quite the characters.

"You don't have to go with them, Kamoenai-san?" I asked.

"Nanami and I are going up next. You really got here at the best time, Misumai. You can chat with Nanami for a while now!" she explained.

"I see. Then you're right, I did really come at the perfect time."

"But wasn't Nanami saying that she wouldn't be able to see you today because she was gonna have to stay until the event ended? Why did you come all the way here? Did you suddenly wanna see her?" Kamoenai-san asked.

I couldn't immediately respond to her question. I mean, yeah, it's true that I suddenly wanted to see Nanami, but...

The truth was really that I was worried about her. But I also worried that if I said something like that, people might think I was being too controlling or that I didn't trust Nanami enough. I couldn't shake those concerns.

It looked like, however, that Nanami was wondering the same thing. With her head tilted slightly, she peered into my face, waiting for my answer.

How do I explain myself?

I ended up just conveying everything I was thinking.

"Um, it's true that I wanted to see her, but I was also feeling kind of worried," I began.

"Worried? Worried about what? So-nii is gonna take me home, so you don't have to worry about that," Nanami asked.

"Oh, it's not that. It's just...you know, you're very pretty, right?" I continued.

"Wow, he's suddenly talking sweet about his girl!" Kamoenai-san exclaimed, giggling excitedly. She started spinning in her chair, round and round as though she were playing a game. I proceeded with my explanation.

I thought I saw Nanami instantly turn bright red, but I decided not to comment.

"And then I got a photo of Nanami—who is already very pretty—wearing this super sexy outfit. I mean, I was entranced instantly, but I was thinking other people might feel that way too," I elaborated.

"Entranced'?" I heard Nanami mutter under her breath, so I decided to carry on with my explanation regarding my surprise visit. If I didn't, I wouldn't be able to continue.

Soichiro-san also looked interested in my explanation. The guy next to him was looking at me too...though he still seemed to be glaring at me.

"What I'm most worried about is people hitting on her. I know that Nanami would never go along with someone like that, but what I'm more worried about is..."

That was where I paused.

I tried to clarify my thoughts as I finally gave voice to what had been going through my mind all this time. After all, it wasn't as though I had these ideas concretized beforehand.

By articulating them, though, I was able to sort through my own feelings.

That's right. What I was worried about—what I feared—wasn't that Nanami would go along with some other guy that randomly hit on her. What I was really worried about was...

"I think that Nanami has gotten a lot more comfortable around guys than she used to be. Still, getting hit on by a total stranger is scary. That's what I was thinking."

Yes—that's what I was afraid of.

Some might say that if she was afraid of such a thing, she shouldn't wear such

revealing clothing in the first place. But wearing revealing clothing was not an invitation to get hit on.

That was what worried me about Nanami.

"And if that was the case, if I let people know on her first day of work that I was her boyfriend and tried to warn them off, I might be able to prevent someone from hitting on her. So I just rushed over here."

Of course I knew that that didn't eliminate the possibility of Nanami getting hit on entirely. Even if they knew that she had a boyfriend, some people might think they were special enough to still try to pick her up.

There was also the possibility that people might turn on me with hostility. Even then, if I could alleviate Nanami's concerns even a tiny bit, then I knew that it was worth stepping up. That was probably what I wanted to do this whole time. Since it took me until now to realize it, though, it seemed I still had a long way to go.

"So, that's why I'm here. Though I'm not sure if I'm making any sense," I concluded.

"Yeah no, I get it. You're just doing the usual Misumai thing. And Nanami's all red too. You guys really are made for each other!" Kamoenai-san said, laughing, just as Nanami clung to me.

There's something soft pressing up against my back. Stay calm, Yoshin.

"Thank you," I heard Nanami say softly behind me. With those words, I knew that everything I had done was worth it.

When I glanced over at Soichiro-san, I saw that he was chuckling. No, wait, the person next to him was shaking, and Soichiro-san was actually laughing at him?

The guy next to Soichiro-san glared at me even as he continued shaking. I couldn't help feeling frightened, but in the next moment, that emotion was completely eclipsed by surprise.

"Barato-chan really had a boyfriend!" the guy next to Soichiro-san screamed, crumpling to the floor in tears.

Huuuh...? I don't think I've ever seen an older guy seriously weep like this. With both hands on the ground, blobby tears leaking from his face, he looked like some outdated emoji.

"I told you! Nana has a boyfriend that she's totally in love with," Soichiro-san said.

"Dammit! Why are all the cute girls always taken?! I trained so that I could be popular, but I can't get any girls at all!" the guy continued lamenting.

Wow, he's really loud. I felt like the entire room was shaking from the vibrations of his voice. He was so loud that I was convinced listening to him for a long period of time would damage my eardrums.

Kamoenai-san hopped off of her chair, covering her ears. It must have made some kind of a sound, but I couldn't hear it at all over the din of the guy's wailing.

"Well then, we'll leave the two of you alone for a bit. Let's go, So-nii," Kamoenai-san said.

"Good call. Hey, you can keep crying, but we're gettin' outta here," Soichirosan said to the other guy.

Between sobs, the other guy managed to reply, "Yessir."

The three of them proceeded to leave the room to give me and Nanami some privacy. I felt bad for a lot of reasons, but Kamoenai-san's parting words then completely blew away any such feeling I had.

"Oh, I don't think you should do anything sexy while you're here though. There are no cameras, but we can basically hear everything. If you *really* have to do it though, make sure you keep it quiet."

Kamoenai-san left before we could respond. She did, however, manage to poke her hand in through the opening of the door one last time to wave at us before finally disappearing.

Only Nanami and I remained. Nanami, fully clad in her ring girl costume.

She and I were quiet for a moment. Without saying anything, we both sat down on the chairs in the waiting room. We faced each other, quietly, as if

keeping the other in check.

I decided to break that silence deliberately.

"I'm sorry, Nanami—for acting like I maybe didn't trust you. I was just worried," I began.

"Uh-uh. I'm really happy about how you felt about me. Really happy. Thanks for looking out for me."

Nanami's response made me sigh in relief. Just as I was feeling glad about my decision though...

"Actually, I was worried about you too," she said.

"Huh? About me?"

Nanami pulled out her phone and showed me a photo on it. It was the photo that I'd sent in reply to the ones that she had sent me—the one I took with the people at my work.

"This girl's really pretty, isn't she? She's just wearing normal clothes, but she still looks kind of sexy. I had no clue that there'd be someone like this at your workplace," Nanami said.

"Oh, but Yu-senpai was nice. She helped me a lot because I was so inexperienced. She's also much more serious about her work than I first thought," I explained.

"I see. She's 'Yu-senpai,' huh? I didn't realize she was someone you could rely on so much," Nanami went on.

Though I might have just been seeing things, Nanami looked a little annoyed by what I'd shared. What should I do? I didn't think that a photo would cause any kind of misunderstanding.

I thought that maybe I'd made her mad, but it turned out that wasn't the case. As if she suddenly thought of something, Nanami stood up from her chair and sat on mine instead. To be precise, she straddled me so we were now face-to-face.

Right in front of my eyes, in my field of vision...was her chest.

"Since I'm still worried, is it okay if I leave my mark on you?" Nanami asked.

"Huh? What? Huuuh?!"

Even though I was so flustered, Nanami merely flashed me a happy, seductive smile.

The fact that we would both end up putting a mark on each other was a story for a different time.

Interlude: Some Disturbing Rumors and My Tears

"How did this happen?"

How many times, over the course of their lives, did people ask themselves this?

On this day, I was asking, "How did this happen?" for the umpteenth time in my life.

"Well, if Yoshin's happy, maybe it's okay," I said to myself.

Oto-nii had introduced me to a job working at a martial arts event. Initially, I was supposed to work in sales, just handling various goods and merch.

And yet, here I was, somehow parading around the ring instead. It all went to show that life really was full of surprises.

With one of the girls unable to make it to the event, I reluctantly agreed to take her place, with the added promise that they'd pay me more than my original job would have. It also seemed that the uniforms were only given out to the girls who wore them.

Still, even though I knew it was too late, I couldn't help but think, Couldn't they have just made do with five ring girls, instead of making so much fuss to have six?

Apparently six girls was the ideal number for photographs, considering the aesthetic balance of having six girls evenly spread on either side of the competitors. Even then, wouldn't five girls have been okay?

With the bright spotlight shining down on me, I held the board indicating the round number and walked slowly around the ring. The entire time, I felt the gaze of everyone in the arena, pinned solely on me.

If it weren't for Yoshin, I would've never taken on a job like this.

All the eyes staring at me now felt like an amplified version of the gazes that were on me when I used to commute to my previous school, or even when

spending time at my current high school. When I thought that, shivers went up my spine. Even then, being able to keep working despite all these eyes on me made me realize I had managed to mature somewhat.

Sure, this was just me singing my own praises. But it was enough motivation for me to get through this slightly uncomfortable experience. I actually felt like I could do well right now even without resorting to self-praise.

That's because... As I walked around the ring, I stole a glance at a certain seat in the audience.

There, a certain man—Yoshin—was sitting, watching me.

With his cheeks slightly flushed, he was looking up at the ring and gazing at me. He was staring at one person only: me.

Just knowing that he was looking at me in that way made me feel like I could ignore a hundred other stares coming my way. I couldn't believe just how differently I felt just because he was sitting there. All I wanted was for him to look at me more.

I felt grateful toward Oto-nii for having convinced Yoshin to stay. He told Yoshin to stick around for a match or two, and managed to secretly snag a seat for him.

Oto-nii joked that he might get yelled at later. Well, that was for him to handle. For now, I had to let Yoshin see just how well I could do this job.

I winked at Yoshin, making sure that no one but him would notice. I felt like some of the people around him started murmuring among themselves, but Yoshin himself just blushed even more. Still, he continued to smile at me.

A warm, even burning, feeling began to rise up in my chest.

There would probably come a day when I would end up confronting him with this feeling—a feeling so hot that, if I didn't let it out, it would burn me to a crisp. One day, I would scorch Yoshin with all these emotions, leaving burn marks on him that would never fade.

And after he'd suffered those burns, I would be sweet to him, heal him, and comfort him. I would gently caress the burns with all my tenderness...then I

would burn him again. I would go after him with all my deepest, darkest feelings.

I had such a premonition—a conviction—lurking inside me.

Here I was, being so dramatic. But honestly, I couldn't really get through this without the help of such silly thoughts. All the emotions I kept bottled up were swirling inside of me. If I didn't at least put them into words in my own head, I couldn't make sense of anything, and I felt like I would lose all control.

Recently, I had realized that I might be a little needy. I was partly uncomfortable around guys probably because that part of me feared rejection.

I knew that no longer mattered. I might even be wrong about the whole thing. Maybe I just wanted an explanation for this feeling that I couldn't seem to get rid of.

I would have never guessed what a clingy girl I could be. Even if I didn't think I had a dry personality, I thought I was at least pretty easygoing.

Either way, I didn't know if all this was good or bad.

At the very least, Yoshin accepted me. If he didn't, who knew what I would have done. I probably would have totally lost it.

I had a lot of reasons to feel the way I did. Those reasons were also what drove me to, um, straddle him earlier. That sounded kind of pervy, but we didn't do anything like that. I just, you know, sat on his lap, facing him.

Yeah, maybe in this uniform, that wasn't a terribly good idea.

It was too late; I'd already done it. Next time, though, I should probably give it a little more thought before I did it.

Anyway, the reasons for why I did what I did: I hadn't been able to share them with Yoshin yet. I knew it wasn't fair for me not to tell him, because he always told me everything. Still, I couldn't share these feelings with him so easily.

After all, my anxiety was probably for nothing.

That letter was probably what was causing these feelings—the one from the class rep that asked me whether the dare was still going on or not. If she had only sent *me* the letter, I probably wouldn't have felt this way.

The problem was what happened after; she told Yoshin about it. She told him that she knew why I confessed to him.

Yoshin didn't seem to care, saying that he already knew. When he told me about it, though, I couldn't help wondering: why did she tell both me and Yoshin? It would have been so simple if she'd just contacted me. Or, she could have just told Yoshin. As I thought more about why, I arrived at one idea.

Does the class rep like Yoshin too?

That was what I suspected.

Ordinarily I wouldn't have given it any thought. It seemed neither funny nor even possible. After all, Yoshin didn't even know the class rep's name. There was just no way.

That was what I would have thought—ordinarily.

But I was aware of myself—a girl who hadn't known Yoshin at all, but who after spending time with him, ended up liking him so, so much.

If that was what happened to me, how could I be so sure that it wouldn't happen to someone else?

Of course, I couldn't deny that I was probably more easily influenced than other people. I also knew that the odds generally weren't super high. Still, there was no guarantee that someone else would never feel the same way I did.

Once I started suspecting it, even the slightest possibility was enough to make me spiral.

There was no proof, and the class rep hadn't suggested anything like that either. Just because I now had that suspicion, though, everything the class rep ever did began to seem questionable.

Maybe she only took supplementary classes to spend more time with Yoshin. Maybe she never ate lunch with us because she couldn't stand being near me.

All of this was worse because I had nothing to either confirm or dispel my suspicions. Doubt would float to the top of my mind and then disappear just as

quickly, over and over in an endless loop. I wished my mind would firmly lean one way or the other.

I finished walking around the ring before I even realized it, all while plagued by such thoughts. I quickly left the ring and returned to the waiting area.

It was too bad I couldn't be near Yoshin. Since he had sneaked into the audience, I couldn't very well go to him dressed in my ring girl costume. For now, I had to be patient. The seat he occupied just happened to be open. Yoshin wasn't going to be able to stay the whole time.

"Hey, hey. Barato-chan. Barato-chan!"

The match resumed soon after we left the ring. Oto-nii wouldn't be fighting for a bit longer because he was the headliner, but this current match was getting really heated too.

I stole a furtive glance at Yoshin instead of the ring. Even though he seemed confused by the match at first, maybe because of its growing intensity, he seemed to be watching it intently now.

He's so cute. It was so adorable to see him moving his body subconsciously, shouting along with the people around him, getting super into the event even though he wasn't really used to it.

Men might not like being called cute, but I wanted to shout it at the top of my lungs.

Yoshin is cute!

Of course, there were things about him that were cool, and he also made my heart beat faster...

"Hey, earth to Barato-chan! Are you listening to me?"

"Huh? What? Oh, I'm sorry," I said, flustered.

I was so focused on Yoshin that I didn't realize someone was whispering to me. The ring girl sitting next to me was trying to tell me something. I was pretty sure she was called Rina-san.

"You were super into the match. Is it that interesting?" Rina-san asked me.

"Oh, no, um, it's just..."

"Or were you actually looking at your boyfriend?" she said teasingly.

Yikes, she totally had me figured out. Rina-san gave me a warm smile. But wait, wasn't she the one who said earlier that she could go for Yoshin...?

Rina-san must've picked up on my ambivalence about how to interact with her, because she shrugged, crossing her legs seductively.

"Are you on edge because I said I could go for him? Don't worry, I would never do anything with someone else's boyfriend. Though I would tease people here and there," she said.

"Oh, I see. I mean, I'd actually prefer you not tease us either," I mumbled.

"If you guys break up, I'll swoop right in."

"We're not breaking up!"

Rina-san let out a soft laugh. I felt relieved, but I also felt the need to be equally vigilant. A mature girl that was way too sexy...that reminded me of the girl at Yoshin's part-time job.

That made me feel even more insecure.

"Anyway, your boyfriend is so funny. He's totally into you and didn't even glance in our direction. My pride was completely shattered," Rina-san continued.

"Really?" I asked.

"He didn't look at me one bit when we were in the waiting room. Usually when I'm dressed like this, guys at *least* give me a glance or two. Jeez, just thinking about it again makes me sad," Rina-san muttered.

I couldn't help but be a bit delighted by her comment. Back there in the waiting room, there were so many girls prettier or sexier than I was. I thought it was inevitable that Yoshin's gaze would go toward them.

Whether consciously or not, though, Yoshin didn't look at them.

That is, he didn't look at anyone but me.

Oh, shoot. I'm so happy. I could tell that the corners of my lips were beginning

to turn upward. I knew I felt Yoshin looking in my direction, but I didn't believe he was looking *only* at me.

I was still embarrassed, but now I was a little bit glad to be wearing this outfit. I'd always planned on taking it home to show it to him, but having him look at me when I was the only girl in the room was different from having him look at me when other girls were around too.

I now kind of understood why some people said that being looked at was a *good* feeling.

Oh, no. I shouldn't feel like I'm superior to other people just because of this. Yeah, Yoshin was only looking at me because I'm his girlfriend. I have to get that through to my head. Tee hee, it still makes me happy though.

"Gosh, she's so amusing to watch. Her expressions change so much, it's so cute. Yeah, I could go for that," Rina-san murmured.

I felt a sudden shiver go up my spine. Wait, huh? What was that? I looked around me in confusion, but I didn't feel anyone strange looking at me—anymore.

"Rina-san, did you say something?" I asked.

"Nope, nothing at all," she returned.

I thought she said something. Am I imagining things? Oh well, I guess it doesn't matter.

Today is a good day. I don't feel awkward at all anymore. Even though I probably won't be able to go home with him today, I'm already looking forward to the next time he and I go on a date.

I've gotta work hard at my job too. The event runs for three days, so after that, we can go out again. They'll pay me right away, and I'll get to keep this uniform too. Wow, everything's coming up roses. When I get my paycheck, maybe Yoshin and I can go on a trip, just the two of us...

I'll take this outfit...on our trip...stay the night...so eventful...

"So your boyfriend works at a restaurant?" Rina-san asked with a wry smile as I continued fantasizing. Yikes, there are event guests around us, so I shouldn't let

my mind wander too much. I suppressed my excitement and decided to hold off on the fantasies until later.

"Yes, he does. He stopped by today after working for the first time ever," I replied.

"Wow, his first part-time job, huh? Don't you wanna see where he works, then? It's such a turn-on seeing someone in an environment you don't usually see them in."

"I really do. He sent me a photo, but it wasn't of him working. Even though he did look cute in an apron," I muttered.

"Did seeing him in an apron turn you on?" Rina-san asked.

"Why does your mind have to go there?!"

I didn't think I was turned on, per se. Yeah, I just thought he looked cute. That was all.

"If he's that cute, let me sneak a peek! Come on, you have his photo, right?"

With zero hesitation, Rina-san brought her palms together and begged me in an adorable way. *Dammit, this pervy lady can't be stopped, even after her terrible comment from earlier.*

After all that was said and done, though, I probably let her get away with it because I was way too nice—a total pushover.

When I told Rina-san that I would show her the photo after the match ended, she pouted like she was sulking. Still, we weren't back in our waiting room yet.

Rina-san seemed to only be pretending though. She soon turned her attention back to the match. Seriously, if she just keeps her mouth shut, she's gorgeous. It's too bad she's just a little too sexy. Oh, whoops. I have to focus on the match too.

My turn with Rina-san as ring girls ended soon after that, so we switched with the next pair of girls. The break couldn't come soon enough. Even though all I did was walk around, I was still exhausted.

As soon as we were back in the waiting room, Rina-san asked to see the photo again. I pulled up the photo Yoshin had sent me. Letting Rina-san look for just a

moment should be fine.

I kind of felt like I was bragging about my boyfriend. I'd have to apologize to Yoshin later for showing off his photo without his permission. Apologizing for things like this was important.

Rina-san peered into my phone excitedly, but her enthusiasm gradually faded.

Hmm? What happened?

She lifted a finger to point at the woman in the photo.

"This girl," she murmured.

"Oh, that's the senpai at Yoshin's workplace. Do you know her?" I asked.

"Um, yeah. Uh, well... We don't know each other, but I've heard some things about her before," Rina-san muttered, muddling her words as she shied away from me. I couldn't help tilting my head at her reaction. What's going on? Is it something she can't tell me?

"It's only a rumor," Rina-san began with some hesitation. She looked around furtively before opening her mouth with some amount of caution.

I waited for her to continue, my head still tilted in confusion as she appeared to be choosing her words carefully.

When I heard what she said next though...even though her voice was soft and careful, it still felt like a thunderclap went off in my head.

"This girl was kind of famous in high school for going after guys who had girlfriends and, um, stealing them," Rina-san finally said.

It's just a rumor though. Just something I heard.

Rina-san's reassurance didn't reach my ears at all.



I was back in my room after finishing my first day on the job.

Yoshin had waited for me until I got off work. I had told him that he could go home before me, but Oto-nii told him to feel free to wait for me in the staff waiting room instead.

That was how we ended up coming home together, with Oto-nii giving both of us a ride. He had told us that we could make out in the back seat, but we obviously couldn't do that while he was in the car. In the end, we made sure to keep things PG.

Instead, I had just sat there chattering away next to Yoshin, saying anything but what I had heard from Rina-san. The thought had been sitting there in the back of my mind, but I couldn't bring myself to say anything about it when Yoshin was in front of me. I just couldn't put it into words. It surprised me, but I just didn't know what to say.

"Gosh," I said, sighing. I was such a coward. Had I just asked him about it when we were in the car, I wouldn't have ended up feeling this way.

Up until a while ago, I had been having such a great time with Yoshin. After we said our goodbyes, though, I was truly down in the dumps. Well, maybe that wasn't right—maybe something was just nagging me.

I didn't even like thinking that we'd "said our goodbyes." The expression itself was totally normal, but just the thought of Yoshin and I saying goodbye made me feel sick. I should try not to use it so much.

Rina-san apologized profusely to me for what she said, saying she had no idea it would shake me so much. She even gave me a big hug.

Did I really look so shocked?

Even though her hug was so soft, and she smelled so nice, it didn't make me feel better at all. I couldn't keep myself from sighing again.

"A rumor, huh?" I muttered to myself.

Rumors could be super tricky: there was no way to verify whether they were true. Yoshin said once before, though, that where there was smoke, there was fire.

Yoshin's oddly familiar with proverbs like those. Is he into stuff like that?

In any case, it was dangerous to believe rumors outright. I knew that, but still...

"Seriously," I mumbled, looking at the woman on my phone. She was in the

photo that Yoshin had sent me, the one with everyone from his workplace. There were four people in it in total—two women, one man, and my boyfriend.

I should be there too. I really should've asked Shibetsu-senpai to introduce me to his workplace.

While tracing Yoshin's figure on my phone screen, my finger touched the image of the woman next to him. She looked like a gyaru, but she also looked more mature. She really was beautiful.

A mature, beautiful gyaru smiling so innocently—right next to my boyfriend. Yu-senpai.

That was what Yoshin called her. Yoshin rarely called someone by a nickname so soon after meeting them.

Does he get along with her so well already? Or is she just a really helpful senpai?

Maybe she's forcing him to call her that. Is that it?

That couldn't be the case. Yoshin was pretty good about being able to say what was on his mind. He was a high schooler that could say no.

That was how I knew that Yoshin probably didn't have any negative impressions of his senpai. But even though I knew that, human emotions were weird; I couldn't shake off the nagging feeling. Seeing how close together they were in this photo wasn't doing me any favors either.

This honestly is just too close. Like, was it really necessary for them to stand so close to each other? I wonder if the rumor is really true.

For some time, my mind kept going around in circles, the same thoughts spinning in my head over and over again. My brain felt trapped in a maze, completely unable to find the way out.

Jeez, seriously!

I flopped onto my bed, trying to escape the maze forming in my mind. I had just got out of the bath and wasn't even fully dressed, only wearing my underwear. It didn't matter; I was just going to put on pajamas anyway. My current state didn't embarrass me too much, since during the day I was

practically wearing the same thing.

Is this how people get used to things? Or maybe I was just letting myself go down a slippery slope.

Whatever—I'm just gonna call Yoshin while I'm dressed like this.

I picked up my phone with the distinct feeling that I was about to pull some kind of prank. I dialed Yoshin and waited...but he didn't pick up.

He'd picked up immediately all the other times I'd called him. But for some reason, he was taking longer than usual today.

Is he taking a bath? Or is he already in bed? Maybe the first day on the job tired him out. Or maybe...

My call went through as all these thoughts were running through my head. An automated voice informed me that the person whose number I dialed could not come to the phone. *Maybe he really did fall asleep*.

I hung up, more than slightly bummed out. This is the first time Yoshin didn't pick up my call.

Just then, though, Yoshin called me back.

This really might have been a first for something like this. Seeing the photo of him displayed on my phone, I swiped to accept the call.

"Hello? I'm sorry, Yoshin. Were you asleep?" I asked.

"No, I was up. Sorry I couldn't pick up your call," he replied.

"Oh, no worries. You must have been tired, with your first day at work and all."

"Yeah, that too, but I was actually on the phone with Yu-senpai."

I felt my heart thud in my chest. It might have been because I was still damp from my bath, but I was feeling a little sweaty too. Maybe I should have worn my pajamas after all.

Yoshin was speaking on the other end of the line, but his voice sounded far away. Even though I knew I had my phone pressed to my ear, every other word coming out of his mouth refused to enter my brain.

I was just barely able to understand what he was saying—or so I felt.

"O-Oh, I see. She contacted you...about work," I murmured.

"Yeah, she wanted to know if I could stay and work until a bit later tomorrow," he explained.

It was normal for her to call him about work. Completely normal. People from my work contacted me too, and if anything, contacting me ahead of time was so helpful of them.

But wait, isn't it the manager or owner who calls in situations like this? Why is the senpai calling him? And more importantly...

"I didn't realize the two of you exchanged contact info," I mumbled.

"Oh, yeah. It was Yu-senpai who actually took the photos I sent to you, so she had to send those to me. Plus there might be times when she has to contact me about work and stuff. Wait, didn't I tell you?" he asked.

"Ah, right. Yeah, you did."

He was right—Yoshin had gone to the trouble of asking me whether it was okay for him to exchange contact info with his work senpai. And I'd said yes. I'd even told him that he didn't even have to ask me about things like that.

I had given him permission myself, and yet I had forgotten about it. No—I was pretending, subconsciously, to have forgotten. I couldn't believe myself.

It was all the muddled feelings inside me that pushed out my next words.

"I don't like that."

I said them loud and clear. I practically let them assault him.

Sometimes, feelings were like water in a dam. They could usually be kept in check, but once they reached capacity, they overflowed. Even if you wanted to stop them, you couldn't. And that was what happened to me.

"No, no...I don't like that. Yoshin, please...don't go to work," I begged. "I don't want you to."

"H-Huh? Nanami, what's wrong?" Yoshin asked, panicked.

"Please don't go to work. I don't want you to..."

"Wait, please calm down, Nanami. What's going on?"

Even I didn't know what I was saying. Incoherent phrases—words of utter refusal—were gushing out of me in a way I couldn't control.

Was I always so emotionally fragile?

I was a mess inside, and I kept babbling nonsense—and yet there was a part of me that was calmly observing the whole situation. It was like a stranger had taken hold of my mouth to speak, and I couldn't breathe.

Now I'm crying. I just took a bath, but I might have to take another one. Will my eyes be puffy tomorrow? I'll probably have to cover it up with makeup.

I wasn't crying wildly. I wasn't even sobbing. My eyes were just overflowing with tears. I didn't understand what I was feeling at all.



The whole time, Yoshin was comforting me and trying to soothe me. But it just made me feel worse and, somehow, even more sad.

"Sorry, I'm so sorry. I'm gonna go cool my head. I'll talk to you later, Yoshin," I let out.

With that, I hung up the phone, ignoring Yoshin even as he continued speaking. This was also the first time I'd ever acted this way toward him.

I'll have to take a bath again and clear my head. I have work tomorrow. I have to get it together. I can't be causing problems for other people.

But my body is refusing to move.

After I hung up, I just stared at my phone, totally frozen in place. As I sat there in mild shock, a message arrived on my phone.

Yoshin: I'm not sure what's bothering you, but if my job is making you unhappy then I'll quit. Though it'd be nice to continue, I guess.

His thoughtful message only made me hate myself for forcing him to be so kind. I sent him a response, telling him that I was fine and to enjoy work.

That's right. Quitting so suddenly would only trouble other people. I should know better. It's work, after all.

I then slapped both cheeks with my hands, trying to switch gears.

At that time, I couldn't even imagine that for the first time since Yoshin and I started going out, I would go days without hearing his voice.

Chapter 2: Sunscreen and My Nervousness

Some say hindsight is twenty-twenty, but I wasn't sure if that applied in this case. What was I supposed to have done instead?

I couldn't answer my own question.

Two days had passed since I became unable to contact Nanami. To be precise, it had been two days since she and I stopped talking to each other on the phone. She was still exchanging messages with me—but she wasn't picking up my calls.

I hadn't heard Nanami's voice since that last phone call two days ago. Some people might get withdrawals in a situation like this.

Baron: Fighting between you two is pretty rare, isn't it?

Canyon: Do you think this is a fight...?

That was the comment I got when I casually mentioned what was happening to Baron-san and Peach-san. Is this really a fight, then?

I did something to make Nanami upset, and now she wouldn't talk to me on the phone. Well, maybe she wasn't *upset*, per se, since she was still responding to my text messages.

She even sent me photos every day, and as a result, my phone now contained a wealth of photos depicting Nanami as a ring girl. Her uniform was the same, but she looked different each time because of her makeup and tattoos. The photos she sent me captured the subtle, day-to-day differences.

Canyon: It doesn't really feel like a fight though...

Baron: I guess if it was a real fight, she might read your messages but not bother to respond, huh? If she's still responding, then maybe she isn't mad at you? Maybe?

Peach: When my dad and I are fighting, I don't talk to him for a while either. I also don't return his

messages, but I do apologize to him later about it.

I got a sneak peek into Peach-san's private life, but I figured what she described was pretty normal. Nanami was still responding to me, so I didn't think she was upset.

But she wouldn't pick up the phone. How could I explain this? Well, maybe I could guess—and guess pretty accurately. She said it the last time we talked.

"I don't like that."

That statement pretty much summed up everything. Nanami didn't like something about me, and even asked me not to go to my part-time job.

Would it have been better if we'd just had a normal fight, instead of what's happening now? On second thought, though, that might have turned out poorly too, given that I'd never really fought with anyone before. Never did I imagine that all my years of failing to form relationships with others would come and bite me in the ass like this.

I usually spent time by myself, and I didn't really recall getting close to anyone, even during elementary school. Because of that, I didn't really know how to properly fight with other people. Even if I understood disliking or feeling exasperated with someone, I was never close enough to anyone to get into a fight with them.

Not knowing how to have a fight also meant I didn't know how to make up. It was even possible that I hadn't really fought with my parents either. Well, maybe I had, but fighting with your parents was probably different from fighting with friends.

All of that is to say that I didn't know the first thing about fighting with your significant other.

It was a first for me—but one that didn't make me happy at all.

I had once talked about a future where Nanami and I could fight a lot, but also make up a lot too. I didn't know back then just how emotionally difficult that could be.

People talked about getting into friendly fights, but I didn't even know if this

was a fight to begin with. Still, being in this kind of situation with Nanami felt pretty rough. It would have been great just to apologize like normal and have it be the end of that. But in this case, that probably wasn't going to work.

Canyon: It's probably a bad idea to apologize when I don't even know what I did wrong, isn't it?

Peach: Probably. I feel like I'd get even more upset if someone did that to me.

Baron: If it were me and I didn't know what I did wrong, I might just ask them straight-out.

Yeah. That makes sense, even to me.

There was an undeniable urge just to apologize for the sake of apologizing, but if I didn't understand what I was apologizing *for*, it would be like adding fuel to the fire.

I was suffering from a complete lack of information. What did Nanami not like? Well, I mean, she probably didn't like *something* about my job, but what exactly did she not like about that?

Could it really have something to do with Yu-senpai?

Still, even though senpai was a little touchy-feely, it wasn't that she did anything all that questionable while we were working. Though she did tell me numerous times that I should come have a meal at the restaurant with Nanami.

Hmmm.

Baron: Well, you'll probably just have to have a heart-to-heart with your girlfriend.

Canyon: You're probably right. I'll try to come up with something.

I felt like talking to Baron-san and Peach-san helped me sort through what little information I did have.

I had to talk to Nanami, first and foremost. I had to ask her what she didn't like, what made her feel uneasy, and what I could do about her anxiety. I felt like that order was the most appropriate for asking my questions.

I should keep it simple. Anything too complicated might make me mess up.

We'd finally made it to our true summer break—I didn't want things to be uncomfortable between us. I wanted to be with Nanami. I wanted us to spend time together. That was why I needed to act.

Take action. That was all there was to it. I couldn't sit here, playing armchair detective, nor could I fumble my way through the dark without a plan. I had to come up with something solid, then execute it.

"Here we go, then," I murmured.

Seeing a message arrive on my phone from a certain someone, I replied to it in the affirmative. It was pretty late in the night, but a response came immediately.

I then got in touch with Nanami, and she seemed not to have a problem with the development either. As I sighed with relief, I also felt a familiar kind of nervousness settle in my own chest.

I never knew that reconciling with someone could feel so nerve-racking.

No, it'll be fine...just fine. Everything will be okay. Be strong, Yoshin.

Silently, I made up my mind and reached out into the empty air before me, curling my hand into a fist, as though reaffirming my own decision.

I was going to spend the night with Nanami.



I woke up drowsy, my sluggish body still weighed down by sleep. As I suppressed a yawn, I heard someone else letting out a soft and adorable yawn of their own next to me.

I let my eyes wander over in the direction of the adorable yawn, trying to steal a glance.

"Gosh, I'm so sleepy," Nanami murmured, in a slurred speech that I rarely heard from her. I felt the corners of my lips creep upward slightly, and thought to myself that if Nanami found out I was laughing, she might get a little upset with me.

Nanami was next to me. In that fact alone, I felt so much relief and comfort.

She was rubbing her eyes gently as her head continued bobbing up and down. She seemed to be resisting sleep, even though her eyes were teary from somnolence and she seemed ready to go back to bed at any moment.

Watching her, I couldn't help yawning either. Now it was my turn to rub my teary eyes. I sensed someone looking at me, and when I turned, I saw that Nanami was watching me yawn, smiling.

When our eyes met, though, she immediately turned away. It was like I'd come across an animal in the wild.

Regardless, I was sleepy. Not surprising at all, though; it was currently five in the morning.

We were sitting in a moving car—a rather large one, probably what people called a midsize car. Nanami was next to me, and the both of us were trying to stay awake. I would have never guessed that we would be heading out so early in the morning.

"You know the two of you could've just joined us later, right?" a voice called out to us from the driver's seat.

"No, I wanna go with everyone else too," Nanami mumbled.

"Me too. I wanted to be able to participate from the morning," I added.

Soichiro-san was the one driving. Hearing both of our responses, he happily whispered, "I see."

I felt even more relieved, seeing Nanami acting almost like a fussy child. She even sounded cute mumbling her protest to Soichiro-san.

Nanami let out another soft cry as she yawned. I could feel another yawn coming on, myself.

I took a look out the window in a bid to wake myself up. The sky was slowly brightening into day. Because of the early hour, we were the only ones on the road. It seemed fun to drive on an empty road like this one.

Maybe it'll be nice to go on an early morning drive sometime. Gosh, I'm so easily influenced.

With the view outside giving me a change of pace, I decided to try to talk to

Nanami.

No one could have known just how much courage it took for me to do that. It was odd, to need so much courage to do something I usually did without a thought.

With my heart pounding in my throat, I said to her, "Nanami, if you're sleepy, do you wanna nap a bit? I can wake you up. You could lay your head on my lap?"

"Mmm...no, I'm okay, I'll stay awake," she muttered back.

This was the first conversation Nanami and I'd had in three days. Or was it two? Anyway, it was our first conversation in a long while. I secretly sighed with relief, glad that our exchange at least sounded normal.

It felt like we hadn't even seen each other in over a month. I was so glad she was willing to ride in the same car as me—and that she was willing to sit next to me.

After my momentary relief, though, I had a realization: Nanami was keeping her distance.

Under normal circumstances, when Nanami was this close to me, she and I would be practically attached. Now, though, she was sitting one, even two paces away, seemingly unwilling to approach me any further.

When I thought about it more, it dawned on me that she gently rejected the offer of my lap pillow earlier too. Before, she would have leaped at the chance to sleep with her head in my lap.

Maybe this isn't the time for me to sit back and go with the flow. Isn't this the first time there's ever been this much distance between the two of us?

No, wait.

What made me think that that was normal in the first place? I knew I was just raining on my own parade, but thinking about it more made me wonder if what was going on now was even strange in the first place. Maybe for all the other couples in the world, this much distance was actually pretty normal.

I was only realizing it now, but it was like my idea of normal was slowly

crumbling. After all, you couldn't really enjoy a lap pillow in a moving car.

If this was considered normal, though, then it made me a little sad.

Wow, Nanami's totally influenced me. Am I actually the really needy type—or do I have the potential to be? I'm always thinking that we don't touch each other enough.

I heard once before that the moment human beings became accustomed to a particular luxury, they strongly resisted having it taken away from them. Maybe this was an example of that.

Until now, I had been enjoying days of emotional extravagance with Nanami. I thought I was aware of it, but apparently I wasn't—at least, not enough. I had been taking it all for granted.

This seemed like a pretty significant revelation.

When I stole a sidelong glance at Nanami while still grappling with my emotional struggle, I found her looking at me in the same way. When our eyes met, my heart skipped a beat, and I had to laugh to hide my awkwardness. Nanami, too, chuckled without looking away this time. Still, her smile looked somewhat stiff.

It also occurred to me that I had never really been one to approach Nanami myself. She had always been the one to take the initiative. Maybe there had been times I initiated it, but I honestly couldn't recall. I might have refrained out of fear that it would seem like sexual harassment for the guy to start things like that—though maybe "sexual harassment" wasn't the right way to describe high schoolers flirting with each other.

All right, I've made up my mind. Once we get through this, I'm going to initiate more flirting with Nanami myself.

I sat there next to Nanami, with a resolve that some might describe as somewhat inappropriate.

To explain our current situation: we were riding in Soichiro-san's car. Nanami and I sat in the back, while Soichiro-san and Otofuke-san sat up front. There were only people in the car that I knew.

They seemed to be concerned about us and sending furtive glances our way, but they weren't actively talking to us. I felt that they were trying to give us space.

I'll definitely repay you all for your kindness and consideration.

Today, we were on our way to go camping.

Camping. An event for extroverts, where people set up tents in the middle of the vast wilderness and grilled meat. Where adults drank alcohol, and where everyone enjoyed the great outdoors. Oh, and they mostly slept in said tents.

And here I was, on such an extrovert-friendly trip.

About two days ago, on Nanami's first day of work, Soichiro-san had told us that there was going to be a camping trip to celebrate the conclusion of the martial arts event. He had invited me and Nanami to come along.

Not everyone was going, apparently—just Soichiro-san's friends, the ring girls, and other folks who could make it.

Given that it still seemed like a good number of people were going, I'd gone back and forth on whether to join the party or not. I knew that this experience would involve the most number of people I'd ever gone on an outing with. There would be tons of people I didn't know, and that was enough of a reason for me to hesitate.

Apparently when Soichiro-san brought it up with Nanami, she'd sounded unusually reluctant too, saying she would go only if I was going. It was then I learned that what was going on between us had even affected Nanami's willingness to socialize.

Since Soichiro-san had told me that I could let him know the day before, and that he would come pick us up on the day of the trip, I made up my mind the day prior and asked Nanami to go with me.

I thought I might have caused trouble for having said yes so last minute, but apparently Soichiro-san had prepared everything under the impression that Nanami and I would be going. Personally, I thought Soichiro-san had kind of jumped the gun there.

I shouldn't think about what he would have done had we said no.

It seemed Soichiro-san had been wanting to take Nanami out for a camping trip for a while though. Nanami had apparently declined all his previous camping invitations.

Camping *did* seem like an activity that would typically involve a lot of guys, so Nanami might have been less willing to participate. Even I pictured camping to be the kind of thing that extroverted guys did. Though nowadays more girls were going camping, I still had a difficult time getting rid of the preconceived notions in my head.

Truth be told, I'd never gone camping before either—at least, not that I could remember. I mean, why in the world would I bother to eat my meals outdoors? A regular trip seemed perfectly fine to me. What on earth was the point of intentionally making your life harder, when every day we were surrounded by modern conveniences?

Plus I'd thought it was just too bothersome.

I understood that the point of camping was to enjoy it, rather than to think about the point of it. Still, there were probably other people who had the same thoughts I did.

The reason a person like me would suddenly want to join in on a camping trip obviously wasn't to camp; it was to break through my current situation with Nanami.

The current situation could no longer continue—in so many ways it was extremely unpleasant. But I had no idea what I should do, or how.

So I decided to get help from a third party.

I knew it was kind of pathetic. It would have been a lot cooler if I could have solved the problem on my own. I decided, though, to prioritize resolving the situation over looking cool.

Since I remembered seeing somewhere that doing something unusual was good for abolishing the status quo, I decided that that was precisely what I was going to do.

"Have you ever been camping, Nanami?" I asked.

"Oh, um, yeah. With my dad, probably when I was in elementary school. Though I don't really remember," Nanami replied.

"Then we're both pretty much beginners, huh? Though I've never gone camping at all."

"We should try to enjoy it, huh?" she muttered.

Even though it was an awkward exchange, maybe we managed to take one small step forward.

As expected, neither Nanami nor I had touched on the fact that we hadn't spoken in two days. I, for one, was afraid that doing so would mess up a lot of things. It also wasn't the kind of conversation to have in a car.

Even as we continued talking in short fragments, I couldn't seem to close the distance between us. It irked me—to the point of frustration.

For the record, I had shared the current situation with Soichiro-san. Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san knew about it too. They were surprised that Nanami hadn't hinted at anything about it while at work. I was somewhat relieved to learn that she seemed normal while she was with her coworkers. The possibility of our situation affecting Nanami's daily life and work concerned me quite a bit.

In any case, we were trying out camping in order to resolve this issue. Of course, I would tell her about this plan once we fixed everything. I hoped, then, we could look back on this and laugh.

As we drove down the empty road to the campsite, all these hopes were with me as well.

The only cause for concern was the fact that I was jumping into a situation where there were lots of people I didn't know. Given how genuinely shy I was, I felt legitimately anxious. Still, I was willing to leap into any situation with any number of strangers if it meant we could go back to the way Nanami and I were before. This was no time to be shy.

It just occurred to me, but depending on how you looked at it, my willingness to go to any length to get to flirt with Nanami again might have made me a

terribly inappropriate human being.

No, flirting was healthy. As long as we didn't cross the line, it was okay, wasn't it?

But was I really doing the right thing here? I knew I was struggling precisely because I didn't have the answer, but insecurities always followed me around. All this worry and frustration felt familiar to me. Where had I experienced it before?

I didn't have a lot of life experience, and I knew it wasn't that long ago either. After thinking about it for a few seconds, I remembered what this feeling reminded me of.

It felt like the time when Nanami and I were dating on a dare. When we were both fumbling ahead, with zero idea of how to do anything, just doing our best and wondering if things were happening the way they were supposed to.

The only difference was that we were now actually going out, and that we both knew with certainty that we liked each other. Despite our current situation, I liked Nanami, and I didn't doubt that Nanami liked me either.

That was why I could keep going.

Though I had to admit that I was feeling somewhat impatient. My mind was saying that I had to resolve things, and quickly. If the situation continued for much longer, I might actually start to doubt Nanami's feelings for me.

I didn't need to let this drag on. Early detection and early treatment were key. That was the way to keep the damage to a minimum.

"Yoshin?" I heard Nanami murmur next to me.

"Hmm?" I said.

For the first time today, *she* was initiating a conversation with me. I had to suppress how excited that realization made me when I looked at her.

Nanami then spent some moments in silence, seemingly at a loss for words. I took in her outfit for the day while I waited for her to continue.

She was dressed somewhat conservatively, perhaps in consideration of the fact that we were going camping. Maybe she had chosen clothes that weren't

too revealing to avoid getting sunburned.

She wore a half-sleeved top in a cool hue paired with a long skirt, topped off with a pair of black-rimmed glasses. With her hair down, she gave off an overall fresh impression.

The fact that she didn't have a part of her hair braided made me feel kind of sad—even though maybe she just didn't have time because we'd left so early this morning.

Nanami brought her hands together in front of her stomach and tightened them into fists.

She was wearing her seat belt, of course. It pressed into her chest, creating a truly magnificent effect.



Stop, stop. Don't think about things like that. This is the time to be serious.

"Let's have fun today, huh?" Nanami said, flashing me the smile that I always loved. I didn't think I imagined the slight discomfort that crept into that smile though.

Still...

"Yeah, let's have fun," I said in return.

She was smiling at me—and that was enough for now.



"You guys were totally lovey-dovey with each other earlier. What in the world's the problem, then?" Soichiro-san asked me the moment we stepped inside the tent. I thought Nanami and I weren't our usual selves at all; to Soichiro-san, though, it seemed we were being plenty flirtatious.

After arriving at the campsite, setting up the tent, and completing our other prep work, the two of us were finally inside the tent, which was when Soichirosan asked me the question.

He and I faced each other, both of us topless. Wow, it's getting pretty hot inside the tent. I can feel myself sweating.

But we weren't shirtless because of the temperature.

"Well, I guess we always would do a lot more," I muttered.

"More? What more do the two of you do when you're together?" Soichirosan asked in disbelief.

"Um, well, we usually sit a lot closer to each other and stuff," I murmured.

"Stop. I know that I'm the one that asked, but you don't need to tell me. It's probably better to keep stuff like that to yourselves," he said. Then, probably as his more honest response, he added, "If Hatsu wanted to do the same thing with me, I don't think I'd take it well either."

But I personally thought that it was already too late—because right now, Nanami and her friends were in a different tent, getting ready. Getting ready for various things.

"I got worried because you said you guys weren't speaking to each other, but it didn't seem that way at all. How long have you guys been like this?" Soichirosan asked.

"About two days," I replied.

"That's super short! One time, when Hatsu and I got into a fight, we didn't talk for a month!" he shouted.

"A whole month?! Isn't that way too long?!"

I didn't think I could stand not talking to Nanami for an entire month. Rather, what would have to happen for a couple to not speak to each other for a whole month? I tried imagining what it would be like—one month without speaking to Nanami.

Oh, no. Just thinking about it makes me wanna cry. Yeeks, that's super scary. What would I have to do to anger her so much that we wouldn't talk for that long? Cause I'd have to be the one in the wrong if that were the case. Yeah, most definitely.

"Shu told me that when he and Ayu fought once, he didn't talk to her for a few weeks either," Soichiro-san added.

"What terrible things did you and Shuya-san do?" I asked in earnest.

"Huh? Why do you assume that we were in the wrong?"

"Just a feeling. I want to know for future reference."

Soichiro-san san ended the conversation with a sheepish, "I'll tell you some other time." His reaction told me that he, too, recognized that he and Shuyasan had been the ones at fault.

No, I've gotta be careful—that could totally happen to me too.

"Right now, we're talking about you guys. Today's plan is to get you two alone together. Come to think of it, this is something we do to people who haven't gotten together yet," Soichiro-san ended in a mumble.

"I really appreciate this," I replied.

"As long as you guys get drunk and have a heart-to-heart, everything will be

fine."

"We're underage so we can't drink."

Soichiro-san, having forgotten that fact, just shrugged. It was really Nanami who couldn't hold her liquor. I recalled the whiskey bonbon incident—what would happen if she *actually* drank?

"Should we go, since we're changed and all?" Soichiro-san suggested, both of us having gotten ready as we were talking. But it was then that he dropped his final bombshell.

"By the way, you guys are sleeping in this tent together tonight. No sex, okay? It'll be too noisy."

"Oh, right. I understand."

Wait. Huh? What did Soichiro-san just say?

"I'm sorry. What did you just say?" I asked.

"Hmmm? We put the two of you together when we divided up the tents, so you guys can talk to your hearts' content tonight too. But no sex while camping. It's impolite, so don't cause trouble for the others."

"That's not what I meant!" I shouted.

Wait, isn't it a bad idea for me and Nanami to sleep in the same tent? What's the point of that warning anyway?

Soichiro-san furrowed his eyebrows, as though he couldn't understand the source of my confusion. *Don't look so confused.* I'm *confused!*

"In this tent, at night? Just me and Nanami?" I murmured.

"Look, conversations are easier like this. You're outside, so you feel more liberated, but since you're still in a tent and it's nighttime, there's a sense of privacy," he explained.

"I-Is that true?"

"Yup. That's why, if you're not gonna drink, then you should at least talk in a place where you feel a bit freer than usual. Having people around will help you feel calmer too."

So that's how things are? He does sound oddly convincing. But I also feel like I'm being talked into something I wouldn't normally do.

But yeah, Nanami and me alone together, huh?

"I'll do my best," I declared.

"You do that," Soichiro-san responded.

I wasn't hoping for anything sexy to happen, but I did at least prepare myself to be alone with Nanami when the time came. Soichiro-san san was cheering me on too.

"Oh, one word of advice though—it's not possible to sleep two people to a sleeping bag," he said.

"You've tried it before?" I asked in a low voice.

Soichiro-san did not offer a response to my question.

We then stepped out of the tent. It was still light out, but because it had been so dark inside the tent, I felt like I'd stepped out of a cave or something.

It was a clear, blue sky, with not a cloud in sight. The sun was strong, forcing me to narrow my eyes and use my hand to shield them from the light. Though it was hot, there was a pleasant and refreshing wind blowing. Before me was the ocean, its waves calm and gentle.

Today's camp was—as one might have guessed by this point—at the beach. I was shocked too. I had imagined we would be camping in the mountains, so I hadn't expected it to be by an ocean at all. We had been in the tent because we were changing into our swimsuits.

That, of course, applied to the girls as well.

"Sorry to keep you guys waiting! The beauties in their bathing suits have arrived!"

As soon as I heard those words, the men around me buzzed with excitement. Was it just me, or were the people in my immediate vicinity also getting nervous?

In the next moment, though, the girls arrived.

"Wow," I muttered the moment I saw them, my admiration coming out entirely outside of my control. The vibrant group consisted of Nanami, her friends, and the other ring girls I had seen when I visited Nanami at work.

Nanami was wearing a different bathing suit from the one she wore to the pool last time. Or, rather, the design of the bottom piece looked similar, but she was clearly wearing something different on top.

She was in a white, body-fitting jacket that had a blue zipper in the front. Though she was most likely wearing it in order to hide how revealing her bathing suit was, since the jacket was so close-fitting, she might have actually ended up making herself look even sexier than if she were simply wearing a bathing suit. Her jacket revealed the curves of her body, highlighting the size of her breasts. It also showed off a bit of her cleavage too.

Was it perhaps not the best to have an outfit that clearly showed the outlines of one's body and revealed the tiniest bit of skin? There was no way I, at least, would be able to refuse Nanami if she looked like that. Thus was the tragic saga of being a man.

The girls formed quite a sexy group, but maybe I didn't feel worried about them getting hit on because all the men around were super buff martial artists. It seemed like each guy was going up to the girl that he wanted to approach. Anyone watching would most likely refrain from butting in.

Oh, shoot. I've gotta go greet Nanami too.

I cautiously made my way over. The last time I saw her wearing a bathing suit was at the night pool. There was lighting there, but the whole place had been dimly lit, and everything had felt so surreal. I didn't manage to get a really good look at her in her bathing suit then.

Okay, who am I kidding? I was totally looking, but it was too dark to really see anything.

In any case, the last time Nanami was so scantily clad, I hadn't been able to see much.

This time, though, the closer I got to Nanami, the more nervous I felt. Since I was walking on sand, my steps made no noise, but with every step, my heart

seemed to leap in my chest.

All my thinking made me reach Nanami before I even realized it. There she stood, bathed in sunlight. She genuinely looked like she was glowing. Wait, is she actually shining right now? Huh? She's totally shimmering!

It wasn't just the backlight; Nanami's body really was glowing.

Could it be that the sunlight was reflecting off of her skin, or maybe even off of her sweat, since it was so hot out? Was that where the light was coming from?

She's absolutely beautiful.

As I was thinking that, though, Nanami started twisting her body, as though she was trying to hide herself. With her face turned away from me, she shyly muttered, "Um, Yoshin, it's a little embarrassing when you're just staring at me like that. Can you at least say something?"

"Oh!" I let out.

Shoot, the sight of her was so mesmerizing that I forgot to say a single word in reply. *Did I seem like a creep just staring at her like that?*

What was I supposed to say in such a situation, though? Maybe it was best just to pay her an honest compliment. In moments like these, in particular, it was probably even more important to acknowledge and praise her.

"Sorry, you're just so beautiful right now that I couldn't take my eyes off of you. I know I'm not saying anything terribly original, but you look *great*," I said.

When Nanami heard my awkward response, she slowly turned toward me. It probably wasn't just the sun that was causing her cheeks to flush.

She placed a lightly formed fist on my chest, probably to hide her embarrassment. I heard the soft sound of flesh hitting flesh, but with her fist still touching me, Nanami paused. She then turned her gaze toward her own hand.

Nanami lowered her gaze, then slowly moved it back up. When our eyes finally met, hers were wide open.

"Yoshin, you're...n-naked?!" she stammered.

"Oh, yeah. I mean, we're at the beach, and I'm wearing a swimsuit, so..."

Nanami then slowly opened her fist, placing her palm on my chest. I shivered involuntarily. I had assumed she would take her hand off of me, so I wasn't expecting this turn of events.

She continued touching me—stroking my chest and making light pattering sounds.

"I-I'm touching you," she murmured.

"Um, yeah," I muttered back.

Her behavior bewildered me. Nanami, on the other hand, just smiled guiltily as she kept her hand on my chest.

What was unfortunate was that I couldn't return the gesture. Though I guess that was how things had to be.

"Are those two doing something pervy over there?" muttered someone in our midst, forcing us to snap back to reality. The comment affected Nanami more than it did me; she panicked and took her hand off my chest.

Where Nanami's hand had been was left with a strange sense of emptiness. I placed my own hand there, but the feeling didn't go away for some time.

"W-We're not!" Nanami yelled in protest. The people around us were looking at her with a warm, protective gaze. I, too, felt something warm rising up in my chest as I looked at her.

"You guys are already going full throttle?"

"Well, even more than usual. I guess Nanami at the beach is..."

Both Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san were muttering in exasperation as they came to join us. Kamoenai-san paused for a moment as she brought her index finger to her lips. Then, after groaning in thought, she pointed her finger at Nanami and declared, "Erotic."

"Ayumi?!" Nanami shouted in protest.

It was another statement wherein the speaker didn't have much to say even after giving it some thought. I wasn't sure if being called erotic was a

compliment either. Kamoenai-san only laughed though. *Sorry, Nanami—either way, I think I've gotta agree with her assessment.*

It wasn't just that her outfit was revealing; seeing Nanami in her bathing suit under the clear light of day was incredibly alluring. The area above her chest that peeked out from under her jacket, the bottom piece of her layered bikini, and her long, thin legs, slightly damp with sweat—they all screamed summer to me.

"But you and Hatsumi look sexy too. What's with those brand-new swimsuits?" Nanami continued.

"Wait, why am I getting brought into this?" Otofuke-san asked in self-defense.

"Huuuh? We don't stand a chance against you, Nanami," Kamoenai-san replied, and for some reason, struck a pose. Otofuke-san, meanwhile, hid slightly behind Soichiro-san as if embarrassed.

Otofuke-san was wearing an orange bikini, one that was almost red, with a short wraparound skirt. The skirt was too short and didn't have enough surface area to really hide anything, so most of her legs were exposed.

Kamoenai-san's swimsuit, meanwhile, appeared to be a dress at first glance, but it had strategically placed cutouts around her waist and various other parts. What kind of a swimsuit is that, anyway? Since her back is totally exposed, wouldn't people who see her from behind get the wrong idea?



Given that the two of them were here with their boyfriends, it seemed that they really chose to prioritize looking sexy.

Those were probably different from the swimsuits that the two wore at the night pool. They are different, right? Hey, wait a minute...

I remembered clearly that Nanami's bathing suit was different, but I realized now that I didn't really recall what kind of swimsuits her two friends had worn.

Oh, well.

Some might tell me to be more interested in people other than Nanami, but it probably wasn't okay to remember how girls other than my own girlfriend looked in bathing suits. I'll just assume I'm doing the right thing.

I'm relieved Nanami is wearing a more modest bathing suit. The bottom was layered and looked sexy, but at least she had a jacket on top.

It was then, though, that I remembered something Kamoenai-san had just said.

"We don't stand a chance against you, Nanami."

Why did she say something like that? No matter how I looked at it, Nanami's bathing suit seemed more conservative than those of her two friends. She was even wearing a jacket, making her outfit not terribly revealing.

Wait. A jacket?

At the exact same moment that I had my realization, Kamoenai-san came toward me with a suspicious grin all over her face. She spoke tempting words—just like a little devil.

"That's right, Nanami's wearing a jacket. Don't you wanna know what she's wearing...underneath?" she asked.

"U-Underneath?" I stammered.

This should have been obvious, but if Nanami was wearing a jacket, then her actual bathing suit was underneath. But the thought hadn't entered my mind at all.

In other words: was the bathing suit hiding under Nanami's jacket even more

scandalous than those of her friends?

With me utterly frozen, Kamoenai-san sidled up to Nanami and whispered something in her ear. When I glanced over at Otofuke-san, I saw that she had covered her face with one hand while the other rested on her hip. Otofuke-san didn't seem to have any intention of stopping her friend, however.

Kamoenai-san then whispered to Nanami again and gave her back a gentle push. With that, Nanami took a few steps forward and ended up right in front of me.

I was feeling nervous before, but I was practically hysterical with nerves now. With her jacket slightly unzipped, I could see a peek of Nanami's skin. That peek had me fantasizing about what kind of bathing suit she was wearing underneath.

Standing right in front of each other, both Nanami and I were at a loss for words.

It was Nanami who broke the silence.

"U-Um, uh," she began, hesitantly.

I listened in silence without interrupting her. It felt like a very long time before Nanami spoke next.

So this is what it means to wait with bated breath.

The others seemed to be watching over us as well. The silence was almost eerie, so I probably wasn't imagining things.

"So, um. Sunburn is really bad for your skin," Nanami said.

"U-Uh, yeah. I've heard that too," I managed to reply.

"So, in order not to get sunburned, it's...necessary to put on sunscreen."

"Yes. Yes?"

That "yes" wasn't meant as my lack of understanding; it was to express my disbelief. Yes. Was the situation I so often read in manga actually happening to me?

But it was incredibly hard for me to be the one to step up and offer to put

sunscreen on Nanami. As in, it didn't seem like a good idea for the guy to offer to apply sunscreen on a girl in the first place. A guy was only allowed to do that if a girl asked him to; her asking him meant that she had given permission for him to touch her skin. I just couldn't be the one to say it first.

Wait for her to say the magic words.

It'd be super embarrassing if I was misreading the situation. But because I hadn't said anything yet, I was still in the clear.

Nanami then offered me a plastic bottle, which I hadn't even realized she was holding.

Maybe it was what Kamoenai-san had handed to Nanami earlier. It was a bottle I didn't recognize—it looked like shampoo.

With her cheeks flushed, Nanami looked down at her feet and asked, "Will you put sunscreen on me?"

I repeated her words in my head. Will you put sunscreen on me? To think that this was actually happening to me...

Was there anyone in this world who could refuse such a request? To protect her skin meant touching her skin. At least for me, I didn't have the option to say no.

"I-I'd be delighted to," I muttered.

In that moment, I thought I was responding in the most calm, gentlemanly, and smooth way possible.

Only later did I realize just how terrible that response must have come off.



Putting sunscreen on your girlfriend's body.

A very typical setup in manga and other media. A very straightforward one, in which the boyfriend literally just put sunscreen on the girlfriend's back.

So this actually happens in real life, huh? I'm in mild shock right now.

"U-Um, thanks for doing this," Nanami mumbled.

"S-Sure thing," I replied.

We had laid out a picnic blanket on a stretch of the beach a bit removed from our tents and were now sitting on it on our heels. You might wonder why we were sitting on our heels. I was wondering the same thing.

The only thing I could say was that my body just naturally decided to sit that way. Nanami seemed to feel the same.

And sitting thus, she bowed to me.

Only Nanami and I were sitting on the picnic blanket. There was no one else around; it was just the two of us. Having come so early in the morning, there weren't many people at the beach, so it felt like we had rented out the whole place.

The others had divided up into two groups: those getting into the water, and those prepping the barbecue.

I'd thought of helping with the prep work, but since there was someone in the group who was apparently a hard-core barbecue enthusiast, I was told that high schoolers should just go and enjoy themselves.

Though it was probably just a ploy to get me and Nanami alone together, I was grateful for the convenient excuse that allowed me to put sunscreen on Nanami.

I also didn't expect to feel so nervous outdoors.

"Um, here you go," Nanami said, handing me the sunscreen.

"Oh, right," I replied, looking intently at the bottle. What came upon me now was an awkwardness very different from the one I had been feeling as of late.

I'm really supposed to put this on her, huh?

Nanami was still wearing her jacket. Of course, in order for me to apply the sunscreen, she would have to take it off. But could she, given what she might be wearing underneath?

"Nanami, that jacket...wait, it's a jacket, right?" I asked.

"Oh, this? It's a rash guard. You wear it on top of your bathing suit, and you can just go into the water with it on. It's nice because it also keeps you warm," she explained, unzipping the rash guard slightly and pinching a piece of its

fabric.

A rash guard. I never knew such a thing existed. If you could walk right into the water with it on, then maybe it was made of the same material as a swimsuit. That was probably why it stuck so closely to her skin, and showed off the curves of her body.

The same as a swimsuit... It can't be that she's not wearing anything underneath, right? It's the same material, so maybe she's not wearing the top piece of her bathing suit, and all she has on is her rash guard.

If that was the case, then what Kamoenai-san said made perfect sense. I, however, personally wanted to ask her to put on a regular swimsuit immediately.

"Of course that's not the case!" Nanami shouted.

"Huh?! Did I say all that out loud?!" I replied in shock.

"You started muttering partway through. Jeez. Of course I'm wearing something underneath," she murmured.

I felt like I really committed a classic blunder. But I was still relieved. *Yeah, if* she's wearing something underneath, then I have nothing to worry about.

Nanami lay down on the picnic blanket with her rash guard still on. I had thought that she was going to take it off before lying down, but that wasn't the case.

Could I put sunscreen on her even with her still wearing it? I watched Nanami, wondering what was going to happen next.

Nanami raised her upper body slightly while on her belly. I immediately heard the sound of a zipper unfurling. Once the dull, metallic sound stopped, the front of her rash guard opened, fabric spreading to the sides.

Nanami then proceeded to dexterously remove it. Because the material clung to her skin, she slowly pulled each one of her arms from the sleeves. Finally, she fiddled with something around her chest, then slipped off the rash guard that covered her back. Once she balled it up and placed it under her head, like a pillow of sorts, Nanami's entire back became exposed.

Her back looked beautiful, with not a blemish on it. I almost felt driven to worship it. I gazed upon her back intently...then realized something.

Whoa, aren't these strings super thin?! W-Wait, they're so thin—can they even do their job properly? Is this normal? This is crazy.

Also, Nanami currently had both of her hands under her face as a makeshift pillow. In other words, she was lying on her belly with her hands above her shoulders.

I could see them. Her sides, and, uh, her chest being pressed down.

Wait, is this okay? Am I allowed to see this?

I hadn't even started putting the sunscreen on her, and I was already restless. I have to shield her so that no one else can see. Wait, but then they'll just see from the other side.

I wasn't even seeing her bathing suit from the front, but things were already looking rather risqué.

"Can you maybe start with my back?" Nanami asked.

"Y-Yes!"

If I didn't hurry, this beautiful back of hers was going to get sunburned. I mean, Nanami would still be beautiful with a tan, but that was a different issue.

First, her back. But...how am I supposed to do this? Oh, wait. Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san gave me tips before they went into the water. You're supposed to put it directly on the skin, like this...

The white cream of the sunscreen emerged, dripping onto Nanami's back. I'm pretty sure you're supposed to put it on directly like this...and spread it. Spread it, and apply it. Yup, I'm going to put it on her properly.

I slowly extended my hand toward Nanami's back. I wished I could do it more briskly, but I just didn't have the courage.

In slow motion, I placed my hand on Nanami's back.

"Oh...!"

The moment I did, Nanami let out a sound: a suggestive moan, one that

escaped even though she was trying not to say anything. Her voice was soft, loud enough that only I could hear it. I knew for certain, though, that I hadn't imagined it.

I continued, my palm sliding over her back. Each time my hand moved, though, Nanami let out another moan.

Top to bottom, bottom to top. Sometimes I even moved my hand in a circle. It was almost as if Nanami's back were a canvas, and I was trying to paint on it.

Now I'd touched Nanami on her stomach *and* her back. Had I touched her chest a little bit too? I guess a person's back felt entirely different.

Though I seemed calm on the outside, on the inside, I was screaming. Nanami's back was soft and smooth. Touching it felt so good.

Her smooth back—though I knew this sounded terrible—was slightly slippery with sunscreen. It thus felt even *more* smooth than normal.

"You can use your fingers too, Yoshin," Nanami mumbled.

Use...my fingers?!

I didn't know what she meant, then I realized that I was only using my palms to apply sunscreen on Nanami's back. Did she mean for me to use my whole hands instead?

Trying to do as she suggested, I touched Nanami's back while being more conscious of my fingers, all the way to their tips. Her back, which I'd previously only felt through my palms, I could now feel through my fingertips as well.

For now, I did my best to apply sunscreen generously, all over her back.

I kept telling myself over and over that all I was doing was putting sunscreen on her back. If I didn't, I was going to be in serious trouble.

The most challenging part was putting on sunscreen underneath her bikini string. It was the same act of applying sunscreen on her back, and yet...

I slipped my hand underneath the string and spread the sunscreen.

It was just one string. It wasn't like I'd stuck my hand inside her clothes or done anything more extreme than that. Still, I felt the string above my hand,

and that sensation alone shook me to my core.

This was probably what it felt like to be sucker punched. I'd never been punched before, so I couldn't be sure. But I was dizzy, undeniably so.

Is my brain releasing too many endorphins? I feel like I'm about to faint. I'm not getting heatstroke, am I? I don't think I'm dehydrated.

Once I finished, I sighed, full of mixed emotions. In response, Nanami muttered, "Th-Thanks."

I thought I managed to get the parts that I could think of, so I took my hand off of Nanami's back. When I did, I very clearly heard the sound of something damp.

Her back, now slick with sunscreen and glistening in the sunlight, seemed oddly alluring. Though I didn't have those intentions at all, I felt like another sexual fetish was awakening inside me. What would one even call this fetish?

In any case, I'd accomplished my mission—or so I thought.

"Um, if you don't mind, can you maybe get the top...and the bottom too?" Nanami asked.

"Top and...bottom?" I repeated.

I could vaguely guess what she meant by "top." She probably meant around her neck and shoulders. If she didn't apply sunscreen there, she'd definitely get sunburned. What, though, did she mean by "bottom"?

I let my gaze travel down from her back. *Um, when she says "bottom," she doesn't mean...her butt, right? Huh? I definitely don't think I should be touching there.*

I recognized, though, that portions of her were...peeking out from under her bathing suit. *Are those the parts that get sunburned?*

"Um, Yoshin...you're looking at my butt so hard I can feel it. Not there. I mean my legs," Nanami said.

"Oh, legs. Legs. Yeah, legs. I knew that."

Of course. I couldn't possibly be allowed to touch her butt. Most certainly not.

I knew that, obviously.

With her back still toward me, Nanami skillfully used her hands to hide her bottom. I'm so sorry, I was definitely looking. I mean, you said "bottom"—how could I not look?

But since Nanami had small hands, they couldn't hide her entire butt from me. Was I so perverted that even *that* seemed like a turn-on?

Anyway, I've gotta pull myself together. Let's start from the top then, shall we?

I looked down at Nanami, still lying on her stomach. I'd got her back, but since I hadn't gotten her neck, her shoulders, or her upper arms, I started touching her body once again.

"Ahn...!" Nanami let out once more.

Her neck simply seemed like an extension of her back, but getting her shoulders was quite an ordeal. Every time I touched her, Nanami moaned in a way that sounded very suggestive indeed.

I couldn't touch her front because she was lying on her stomach, but if I wasn't careful while touching her shoulders, my hand could easily slip in that direction.

I wasn't going to put sunscreen on her front. Even if my fingertips did touch, it was only up until her collarbones or so. Maybe not even that far.

Even so, when she murmured "Not there" to me, I couldn't help feeling like I wanted to touch her more. Not that I did, of course.

By the time I had finished applying sunscreen to her entire upper body, I had become completely silent. Next up was the bottom.

Her legs, all right? It's just her legs.

I smoothed sunscreen over her thighs, the back of her knees, her calves...part by part, slowly, carefully. I also let my hands travel south of her ankles. When I put sunscreen on her feet, I felt a new kind of nervousness that I'd never felt before.

Because Nanami had told me that she wanted me to get the front of her feet

too. So when I got there, I ended up lifting her feet slightly, trying to bend her ankles in a way that wouldn't hurt her.

The strangest sensation came when I was putting sunscreen on her toes.

Touching her toes was weird. It was a part of her that, under normal circumstances, I'd never have the chance to touch. Or, maybe it wasn't that it was weird, but more that it was completely out of the ordinary.

Even more than when I was touching her back—even more, perhaps, than when I might touch her chest—I felt like I was doing something I wasn't supposed to. My fingers were touching her toes, spreading sunscreen on them. Our physical contact was merely superficial, but it felt like the two of us were mixing together much more deeply and fluidly than that.

"Okay, I...think I'm done," I declared, then collapsed onto my back, right then and there. An indescribable fatigue came over me, as though I'd used up every ounce of energy I had in my body. I started sweating like I just finished a marathon.

Nanami had pulled her rash guard back on, and was now looking down at me while I was on the ground. How did she manage to get dressed so fast? I mean, not like I wanted to see her bathing suit or anything, but...

Still, because she was peering into my face with her body above mine, I couldn't help that my gaze traveled to the part of her that was shaking.

Because the fabric of her rash guard fit tight against her body, I had assumed it was also stiff. *That* part of her body, though, was still shaking softly. I just couldn't process what my eyes were seeing.

The world is so strange.

"Thanks, Yoshin. While we're at it, do you wanna get my front too?" Nanami asked, slightly lowering the zipper of her rash guard and flashing a teasing smile.

"Of course not!" I exclaimed, instinctively declining her sudden offer.

Hey wait a minute. This feels like...

With the sunscreen in hand, Nanami was applying it to herself on the parts I

hadn't touched, slipping her hand into the opening of her slightly open rash guard.

I can admit it—I gulped when I saw her hand slip underneath her jacket.

"Here, it's your turn now. Come on, Yoshin!" Nanami said as she pulled her hand out of her rash guard and directly proceeded to place it—the hand that had just been on her stomach—on *my* stomach and chest.

I-Isn't this some kind of an indirect something something or other?! Jeez, my mind is such a mess. I can't even think straight.

I couldn't seem to move at all, so shocked was I by Nanami's unexpected action. I was tired too, but her hand moved so suddenly, and she seemed so much like her usual self that I couldn't bring myself to move.

The part where Nanami was touching me felt cool. Her palm moved. It was small, and yet it felt so much larger than it was on my skin.

"Huh? Huh?! Hey, N-Nanami?!" I yelled.

"Fine, I'll just put it on you like this. Take that!" she exclaimed.

Nanami ignored my bewilderment, running both her hands over my body. My stomach, chest, arms, hands, fingers...she spread the sunscreen all over me.

A coloring book. Is this what it feels like to be a coloring book? I used to do that when I was a kid, I thought, my mind desperately attempting to escape from reality.

Nanami then rolled me over and continued putting sunscreen on my back as well. Okay—Nanami couldn't actually roll me over by herself, so I helped a bit.

With her palms all over me, I realized that there were fewer and fewer parts of my body that hadn't been touched by Nanami. Of course, not my entire body. In the end, though, Nanami ended up touching most parts of my body in one way or another.

By the time we finished, Nanami seemed tired, but her smile suggested satisfaction. I, on the other hand, was out of breath, but for an entirely different reason from the one before.

I mean, come on—my girlfriend just ran her hands over my entire body.

There's no way I can get up right now. I can hardly breathe.

Nanami started applying sunscreen to her upper body again. Why? Didn't she just put some on earlier? She did keep her rash guard on though.

Wait, if she's wearing a rash guard, did she even need me to put sunscreen on her back? No, wait, don't UV rays burn you through your clothes too?

Once she finished applying sunscreen again, Nanami lay down next to me.

We began to feel the heat of the sun upon us. We had sunscreen on, so we weren't going to burn, but it was still hot.

"Nanami," I muttered.

"Yoshin," she murmured at the same time.

As we lay there, we both ended up opening our mouths at the same time. Immediately afterward we locked eyes and exchanged awkward smiles. We both tried to yield the floor to the other, but I gratefully took up her offer and decided to share my thoughts with Nanami first. Unfortunately, I didn't have anything terribly meaningful to say.

"Why did you put sunscreen again on your front?" I asked her.

"Hmmm? You don't burn as much if you layer sunscreen. And..."

"And?"

"If I put sunscreen on my body right after I used my hand to put some on you, it's kind of like an indirect kiss, don't you think?" she remarked, making a claim that an adolescent male high schooler might have also made. As in, wasn't that the same thought I had earlier?

Nanami then giggled and came toward me. Though she was still lying down, she somehow managed to hop over and approach me.

Little by little, the distance that was between us in the car seemed to be closing.

We were so close that our arms almost touched—no, they probably were touching. She was willing to get that close to me.

We both turned, facing each other while still lying down.

"I'm sorry, Yoshin," she said, a wistful smile on her face.

I thought about what an apology from her might mean, then responded with, "You mean about not picking up the phone?"

"That too, but also about how I said that I didn't like stuff about your very first day of work," she explained.

Ah, Nanami actually understands what she's apologizing for. That's where she and I are different.

"I didn't mind," I began, then stopped. I'd be lying if I said that. So I decided to rephrase in order to be honest about how I felt.

"I was really worried. I was afraid I'd made you upset, so I tried doing lots of different things," I confessed.

It would have been cooler had I been able to tell her that I didn't mind at all, but hiding my feelings like that would probably cause more problems later on.

To say that we were angry when we were angry, that we were sad when we were sad—that was better in the end. Maybe we would fight more because of it, but it was better than keeping it all inside. Though I guess it depended on the situation.

Nanami opened her eyes wide in surprise, though, and laughed.

"I'm really sorry. I was all mixed up back then. I didn't think I'd make any sense if I tried to put it into words," she explained.

"I see. Yeah, there are definitely times when our feelings and our words make no sense at all," I replied.

"Yeah, I'm sorry I'm such a pain of a girlfriend."

"It's okay, guys like things that are a pain."

Like plastic model kits and things.

Though it seemed kind of weird to liken romantic relationships to plastic models, at least for me, I tended to like things that were kind of a pain.

So, I welcomed whatever pain Nanami would bring me.

"You're just gonna agree with me? You're not gonna insist that I'm not a

pain?" she demanded playfully.

"Oh, come on. I like you because you're a pain."

Nanami happily whispered, "I see." She then raised her upper body. I followed suit.

When she got up, though, the opening of her rash guard revealed a bit of what was underneath. I got to see—just for a split second.

Huh? I don't think I saw any fabric. But when I saw her back, there definitely was a bikini string. What's going on? Maybe I imagined it, since I only got to see for a split second.

"I-In any case, what made you say it in the first place? What made you unhappy?" I asked, trying to distract her from noticing my agitation. Nanami shifted her legs to hug her knees, then tilted her head to look at me.

"Actually, I haven't really figured it out either. Could you free up some time for me tonight? I'll make sure to sort it all out by then, so maybe we can chat," she answered.

"Oh, yeah. Of course. Plus it looks like we're gonna be in the same tent tonight," I replied.

"Oh, I see. Then at night we can be tog..."

Nanami stopped midsentence.

Like a rusted doll, Nanami turned her head toward me in a slow, stilted motion and met my gaze.

Hmmm? What's with her reaction? Wait, it can't be...

"We're...in the same tent tonight?" she asked.

"Yeah, that's what I've been told," I mumbled.

Nanami moved once again like a rusted doll, this time looking down into her lap.

"You didn't hear? You hadn't heard, huh?" I murmured.

Nanami nodded slightly in response. I see, so she didn't know. I just assumed that she had...

I fell silent too. I couldn't tell what Nanami was thinking, but she was most likely embarrassed.

I had assumed that things would be awkward between us until morning, so I didn't have the wherewithal to even consider doing something naughty. What about now, though? After having put sunscreen all over each other's bodies, would we be able to keep things under control at night?

There's no use thinking about it. I'll just leave that for the future Yoshin to deal with.

"Nanami, let's do stuff!" I suddenly yelled. "If we do lots of beach stuff and get super tired, at night we'll just pass out immediately!"

"Y-Yeah! Let's go do all kinds of stuff!" she returned.

We both leaped up, and I offered Nanami my hand in order to escort her. She gently placed her hand in mine.

I felt like we were holding hands for the first time in a long time—though in reality, it had only been a couple of days.

"Shall we?" I asked.

"Yeah!" she exclaimed.

Nanami and I set off together to join the others.



Everyone on the camping trip was happy that Nanami and I reconciled—so much so that they seemed like they were celebrating something about themselves. But not everything had been resolved. Tonight, I was going to talk with Nanami—alone.

It was no use thinking about that right now, though. I came on this trip in order to spend time together with Nanami. I was feeding two birds with one scone. For now, I should just enjoy myself.

That was what I was thinking, but I was immediately faced with a question: what does one *do* at the beach, anyway?

This happened when I went to the night pool too. At that time, I think I just watched other people for cues. All I remember was that Nanami looked incredible in her bathing suit, and that we both rode on a floatie together.

It'd be great if I could enjoy this trip in the same way. But first...

"Okay, let's start by warming up!" I exclaimed.

"Oh, we're actually gonna do that?" Nanami asked.

"Well, I mean, the water's so cold," I muttered.

Seriously, the water really was cold. I didn't think that even the water at the night pool was this cold. I had assumed that the water here would've been warmer given how hot it was, so this was totally unexpected. I mean, it was frigid.

"Wow, you're right. It's super cold! Hee hee, here we go!" Nanami yelled.

"What the! Whoa, that's freezing!" I shouted in response.

Nanami, who only had her feet in the water, kicked wildly and got water all over me. It wasn't that much, but when it hit me I couldn't help yelping. I tried to retaliate by kicking water at Nanami too, but she managed to get behind me in a flash and splash water on me again.

"Jeezus! Come on, don't mess around! We gotta do that warm-up!" I said to her.

"Yikes, I've been told," Nanami said, laughing.

Nanami—who seemed to be having a blast—skipped out of the water as if she was running away from me. The footprints she left on the sand dried up under the strong sunshine. I followed her, tracing the lingering dents in the sand. My own footprints overlapped Nanami's for a moment, but they quickly disappeared.

When I looked around, I saw that there were other people doing warm-up exercises before going into the water. Copying them wouldn't look too weird. I didn't know that much about warm-ups either, so I figured we could just do what I usually did before my workouts.

"Okay, shall we get started, then?" I asked Nanami.

"Yes, sensei!" Nanami replied enthusiastically, with her hand raised in the air. I was rarely called "sensei," so this whole scenario felt pretty refreshing.

For now, we could start with our upper body and then move on to our lower half. Nanami copied me as we both did our exercises. She raised her hands in the air, twisting and stretching her body just like me.

This was meant to be a regular warm-up, and yet...

As she did the exercises, Nanami's figure seemed both wholesome and seductive at the same time. Was it because Nanami was my girlfriend? Or did she seem this way because we were spending time together for the first time in a while?

I can't, I can't. Forsake all earthly desires...

"What's wrong, Yoshin?" Nanami asked. She suddenly popped up in front of me. "It won't be good if you don't warm up properly."

"Whoa?!" I shouted, so surprised I fell and landed on my butt. The beach sand had been cooking under the sun all day, and was so hot that I let out a little yelp.

"Yeeks. Did you burn your butt?" Nanami asked.

"I didn't, but boy, that's hot. The sand feels fine on my feet, but on my butt it's scorching," I replied.

"Aha ha, you've got sand on your behind. Here, I'll get that for you," Nanami offered, patting my butt a few times.

She had no ulterior motive; she clearly didn't. I realized on my own that I didn't actually need to get rid of the sand because I was going to step into the water anyway, but I didn't say anything to Nanami.

Well, this is odd. I think Nanami slapping my butt has awakened in me yet another weird fetish. How many times is this going to happen to me today? I'm discovering way too much about myself.

With my butt now sand-free, Nanami paused for just a moment, clearly deliberating—then plopped down on the sand next to me. I missed my chance to say anything at her sudden behavior, but Nanami immediately grimaced and

shot right back up.

"Jeez! What on earth? That's crazy hot! I had no idea the beach could be like this!" she exclaimed.

"What are you doing, Nanami?" I muttered.

"Well, you were saying how hot it was, so I was curious. Wow, but that really was super hot," she mumbled back. Nanami then turned and showed her back to me. So much sand was stuck to her butt that I wondered if mine looked like that earlier too.

"You wanna try dusting it off?" she offered.

"No way!" I shouted in response. What an outrageous suggestion. Nanami, though, only laughed, and began patting the sand off of herself. She seemed to be showing her shaking butt to me purposefully, so I dutifully gave it my full attention.

No, maybe she's using me as a shield from other people. This is just one of the benefits of being her boyfriend, I thought, trying to convince myself. It was far more likely that Nanami just didn't care much about stuff like that.

Yeah, Nanami was often pretty carefree and unguarded. It was fine when she was conscious of it, but when she wasn't, her actions often brought me to the verge of a heart attack. Though she was probably intentional when she suggested I pat the sand off her butt for her, her eventually doing it herself right in front of me was most likely done without thinking.

Seeing her this way made me realize that I really needed to stay by her side and protect her. The circumstances that triggered this realization were honestly pretty questionable, but still.

"All righty, now that we're all warmed up, let's get into the water!" Nanami declared excitedly.

"Yeah. Oh, Nanami—one more thing," I began.

"Hmmm? What's up? If you're worried about someone hitting on me, since you're here, I think it'll be fine."

"Be careful not to have your bathing suit swept away by the waves, okay? If

that happens, tell me immediately. I'll take care of it."

"Is that even something to worry about?!" she shouted.

Well, of course it is. So many things had happened in the past that I knew it was right to be concerned about something like this. There was no way I could let anyone else see Nanami in such a state. Even I hadn't seen what she had on under that rash guard.

"Jeez, you're such a worrywart," Nanami said with a wry smile, clinging to me. She didn't seem to mind doing so even in her swimsuit.

That made me so happy. I didn't mean the skin-to-skin contact; I just felt happy that we returned to the same closeness we had before.

Though we did detach ourselves when we got into the water, since it was difficult to stay so close together. The cold water stabbed at us, but our bodies had been baking under the sun for long enough that the sensation felt good.

Once we'd walked into the water far enough for it to be thigh level, Nanami turned toward me. Then, just like earlier, she gleefully splashed me.

Not to be outdone, I splashed water right back at her. This felt like such a cliché thing to do at the beach, but it was a lot of fun when you were actually doing it yourself. And that was how we spent the rest of our time together.

As a side note, although Nanami's bathing suit didn't get washed away, her rash guard did—throwing the two of us into a huge panic.

It seemed, yet again, I had needlessly foretold another accident.

Interlude: Alone on the Beach

Making up with Yoshin...is that even the right term? In any case, I apologized to Yoshin for my recent behavior, and our relationship was able to return to normal.

Turned out Yoshin was concerned about what I said to him the other day, too. It was so like him not to just lie and tell me that he didn't mind. I guess that actually made me kind of happy.

Though maybe "happy" wasn't quite right—knowing that he was sincerely thinking of me made me feel guilty, but also grateful.

The fact that it was us putting sunscreen on each other that helped us make up was a bit—er, a lot—weird, though. I mean, what kind of reconciliation was that?

Still, being touched by Yoshin, and then touching him back...made me feel all warm inside. It made me feel so good.

And it wasn't just my back. He touched my legs and arms and shoulders too. Being touched by him, in so many places, feeling his hands on me—it made me feel so safe, and that weird, nagging feeling inside of me slowly disappeared.

I realized then how amazing it felt to be touched by someone, so I wanted to return the gesture. I wanted to touch him too. I'd be glad if he felt the same way.

When he touched my neck, though, it felt both itchy and ticklish, which was why I had to tell him not to touch me there.

I wonder what that was all about. Well, anyways.

After that, Yoshin and I hung out a lot in the water. We had a great time splashing around, eating barbecue, sunbathing, reapplying sunscreen on each other...

Gosh, it was so much fun.

Oh, I really did freak out when my rash guard got washed away, though. Yoshin went to look for it while I hid in the water, so at least no one saw me.

Oh, right. My bathing suit.

It seemed my weird stubbornness caused other people a lot of trouble this time around. Rina-san, especially, apologized to me so many times—even though she really didn't have to worry about it. Besides, she gave me lots of advice about how to make up with Yoshin too.

One of the things she told me...led to the bathing suit I wore. She gave it to me herself, actually, telling me that if I asked him for forgiveness while wearing a super sexy bathing suit, he'd be like putty in my hands.

Too bad I was so embarrassed that I ended up wearing a rash guard over it.

That was why Yoshin hadn't seen my bathing suit top. Even when my rash guard got washed away, Yoshin remained a perfect gentleman and refrained from looking.

Ayumi said that the bathing suit looked totally erotic though. I wondered if that was true. Maybe, one day when we're alone, I'll wear it for Yoshin again and show him.

And now, having spent the whole day hanging out and having a good time, Yoshin and I were in our tent—just the two of us.

I-I'm not gonna show him now. Yeah we're alone, but I'll do it some other time. One day.

I was such a wuss that I had to come up with excuses. Since it was evening, I was wearing regular clothes over my bathing suit. If I were to show him the bathing suit now, I'd have to take my clothes off, and that felt even more dangerous than what I was thinking.

Yoshin was wearing his swimsuit too, but he was wearing a shirt on top. The temperature hadn't gone down that much even though it was already evening, but still, it was important to protect ourselves from the night air.

So, here we were, in our clothes, sitting across from each other in the tent.

The adults were still drinking outside. They had asked us if we wanted to join

in, but since we couldn't drink, we declined.

I mean, I don't wanna have to hang out with drunk people.

Hatsumi and Ayumi—who had now met up with Shu-nii—were out there, having fun. I was just going to leave them to it.

"E-Everyone seems to be having a great time, huh?" Yoshin commented.

"Y-Yeah, they sure are," I agreed distractedly.

That was, after all, why we were able to be alone together.

In the tent with us were our bags and the two sleeping bags we would use for tonight. We'll sleep here, huh? This might be my first time using a sleeping bag.

Since we were gonna be in sleeping bags, we weren't going to be close to each other the way we were on our last overnight trip. We'd be next to each other, but still separated.

The moment I caught sight of the sleeping bags, though, I remembered the advice that I was given earlier.

"No sex at the campsite, okay? It'll bother the people around you."

I felt my cheeks instantly grow hot. Because I suddenly turned red, Yoshin noticed and widened his eyes in surprise.

We haven't even done it in a normal place! Of course we wouldn't do it at a campsite!

That was how I responded when they gave me that advice, but now, I felt a tiny bit like I might have done something along those lines without the advice.

The tent didn't seem so small when I was in it during the day, but now, at night...suddenly it seemed tiny. At sunset, it had gotten dark, and the only light came from outside or from our phones—we had to squint just to see the person in front of us. It was like we were in a room with the lights turned off.

Thinking about lights being off reminded me of a shojo manga character saying that she wanted the lights turned off when it was her first time. My current situation, at least, seemed to match what I remembered of the story—and I felt my nerves act up in response.

"What's wrong, Nanami?"

"Yeek!" I exclaimed, nearly leaping out of my skin to his sudden question. Yoshin probably had no idea why I was so caught off guard; if he knew, I'd be so mortified I could die.

Though Yoshin seemed a bit taken aback by my exclamation, he didn't seem to detect what was going through my mind.

"Isn't it kind of nerve-racking, sleeping here together? I've never slept in a sleeping bag before," he said.

"Me neither, I think. Since I can't remember, it might as well be my first time," I replied.

"How am I actually supposed to sleep in this thing? Am I supposed to stick my feet in here? Wait, they're not going in. What am I supposed to do?" he muttered to himself, looking at the sleeping bag and trying to figure out how to use it. He was supposed to stick his feet in, but they weren't going in smoothly. He continued to struggle, and honestly looked kind of adorable while he did.

It seemed like a good idea to also check my sleeping bag, so I started fiddling with it next to Yoshin. *Hmmm, this is kind of confusing. Oh, wait a minute.*Maybe this is supposed to...

"Hey, Yoshin. I think you're supposed to open it up first. Look, you can do this and make it like a futon," I told him.

"Huh? Really? Oh, you're right. It's actually pretty big," he murmured.

"This way we can sleep together, instead of separately," I remarked.

The moment Yoshin heard my comment, though, he fell silent. I did too, of course.

Why did I say that? Oh, look, Yoshin doesn't know what to do either! I'm not inviting you to sleep with me! That's a total misunderstanding! It just accidentally slipped out of my mouth!

Yoshin was looking back and forth between me and the sleeping bag in his hand. I just thought that if you opened it up flat, you could sleep on one and use the other like a blanket!

"Th-That's not what I meant!" I shouted desperately, thrusting my palm out at him as if to physically prevent him from saying anything. I immediately started unzipping my sleeping bag—it would be easier to just show him what I meant.

The sleeping bag was larger than I imagined, and it ended up consuming most of the floorspace in the tent. It had enough surface area for about two people to be able to lie down on it. Shoot, did I just make it worse? Look, Yoshin's even more weirded out now! What do I do?! Do I just lie down to show him? But then that looks like I'm trying to seduce him...

As I held my head in my hands, trying to figure out what to do next, Yoshin sat down on his heels on top of the sleeping bag that I'd opened up without saying anything. He then smiled kindly at me and asked, "Nanami, do you wanna use my lap as a pillow?"

Oh, that's what he said to me this morning in the car. That's right—he offered me his lap as a pillow, but I declined. Maybe now, I can have him do it for me.

When I nodded in silence, Yoshin kept his gentle smile and patted his lap a couple of times. Like a moth to a flame, I approached him—just as I'd been invited.

Maybe because it was pretty dark in the tent, I didn't feel that embarrassed. With my head now in his lap, Yoshin spread the sleeping bag in his hand over me like a true blanket. It was fairly large, and I couldn't help holding it close to me for the warmth of it. Wow, this feels so nice. Wait—what are we doing here again? My head began to feel hazy, but I remembered our real purpose. That's right, Yoshin and I are supposed to talk right now.

But Yoshin wasn't rushing me to speak. He just seemed perfectly content to be patient and wait for me to start. From time to time, he patted my head like he would a small child. Some people might not like that being done to them, but I did; it made me feel safe. I also kind of liked it when someone patted me on my stomach.

To have someone who would touch you, and have that someone be a person you felt safe touching—what a lovely thing. My anxiety began to disappear.

That was why I felt comfortable talking.

"So, what I didn't like was...the idea that there would be more people who would like you, in places where I couldn't see," I suddenly began, with no preface at all whatsoever.

It was a raw outpouring of my feelings. I did my best to sort through my thoughts, trying to articulate how I felt and what I was thinking in that moment.

Yoshin, though, just accepted all of it in silence.

"I heard a rumor. I know that it's really rude of me to say this, but it was a bad one," I continued.

"A rumor? Like what kind?" Yoshin asked.

"That your senpai at work is someone who steals other girls' boyfriends," I mumbled.

Would he be exasperated that I believed such a rumor? Or would he be angry? I knew it was childish of me to have believed a rumor like that. No one even knew if it was true. Even Rina-san, who was the one that told me about it in the first place, seemed to be taking it with a grain of salt. So it was on me that I believed it at all.

I knew I was the one to blame for this.

It was bad to lie, of course. But I also read somewhere that believing a lie without question was just as bad.

I didn't agree with that opinion at first, but now I understood the logic in it. Irresponsible, blind faith was dangerous. It was rude to both yourself and the other person—though in this case, I was the one that got all worked up about it for no reason.

Even then, I really did have a tendency to get mixed up with things like rumors and lies. It wasn't something I was terribly happy about, of course. *Maybe I should try going to that shrine that we went to on our date, just so I can cut ties with those habits.*

"A rumor, huh? I wonder how it got started," Yoshin remarked.

"I just heard it from one of the ring girls. I guess they were in the same year as your senpai at school," I explained.

Rina-san seemed to have told me because she was worried about me. If the rumor was actually true, then she would have regretted not telling me about it.

"I'm sorry. It sounds like I don't trust you," I said.

Yoshin listened to me for a good while. His response to me in the end was...silence. That made my blood run cold. What's Yoshin thinking? What if he dislikes me, because I said something weird, over something so stupid?

But I wanted to be honest with him about my feelings—because I thought that that was the least I could do to express my sincerity. Still, I couldn't help thinking: what would I do if someone took Yoshin away from me? But that didn't get me any closer to an answer, and besides, I knew that Yoshin wasn't that kind of a person to begin with.

Despite all that, I still thought, what if the other girl was prettier than me?

"Well, if that's the case, then it is worrisome, isn't it?" Yoshin quietly said to me, as I continued feeling uneasy.

"You're not upset?" I asked.

"I don't really have a reason to be. If I were in your shoes, I would say the same thing. I'd probably be careless too, and say lots of things I probably shouldn't."

I really messed this one up, Yoshin added, as he began to tell me more about the senpai at his workplace—the senpai who was super outgoing and didn't understand personal space.

Oh, I didn't realize that he was calling her by her last name, not her first name. I totally thought that he was calling her by her first name. Wow, this is super embarrassing.

"So, I have a feeling that some misunderstanding in the past caused that rumor to start in the first place," Yoshin said.

"A misunderstanding, huh? If you're gonna go to these lengths to defend her, then maybe she's not such a bad person," I replied.

"Yeah. I mean, she is super friendly, so I can understand how guys could get the wrong idea." Yoshin then added that either way, I didn't have to worry about him. When he did so in a mocking tone, shrugging his shoulders, I giggled slightly and decided to ask, "And why do I have nothing to worry about?"

"Because I have a super adorable girlfriend," he replied.

Hearing that made me incredibly happy. Yeah, even if the rumors were true, if it was Yoshin, he would be fine. I could say that with confidence.

In that moment, my body felt enveloped by a sense of relief.

Actually, there was one more thing I was worried about. Just as I was about to say what that was, though, I was suddenly overcome by drowsiness.

Now that one of my main worries had been cleared, I felt super relaxed. A comfortable, irresistible sleepiness spread throughout my body.

With my head still in Yoshin's lap, I fell asleep.

It was the first time in two days that I slept anxiety-free.



When I woke up, Yoshin wasn't with me. I remembered falling asleep with my head in his lap. The sleeping bag was left the way it was when I fell asleep. Yoshin was the only element that was missing.

It was dark outside, and since it was dark inside the tent too, I used my phone as a light source. It was 4 a.m., around the time I woke up yesterday.

Even though it was so lively the night before, everything was now quiet and still. The others had probably gone to bed. *I sure did get up at a strange time.*

Had Yoshin been next to me, I probably would have stayed awake. He wasn't there, though.

Is he outside?

I decided to go outside and see. The sun wasn't up yet, and since I would feel chilly with the way I was dressed, I decided to add another layer.

The white dress I brought would do the job. Since my bathing suit was dry, I could leave that on.

I pulled the dress over my head and stepped outside.

No one was there. The weather was calm, with barely a breeze. In the distance, I could softly hear the waves crashing against the shore. *Is Yoshin in the restroom?*

Without the sun, it was dark, but it was the kind of dark that implied dawn was soon to arrive; somehow there was still enough light for me to see. It was a strange time of the day.

When I looked around, I saw a familiar silhouette, far off in the distance.

It was probably Yoshin.

He was sitting alone on the beach, gazing out at the ocean. I slowly approached him. What is he up to?

I grew closer to him, one step at a time, my dress fluttering around my knees. Even though I knew it wouldn't happen, I felt like if I approached him too quickly, he might disappear altogether.

"Morning, Yoshin," I said to him.

"Oh, hey, Nanami. Morning. Did I wake you up?" he asked.

I shook my head slightly and sat by his side. Unlike how it was during the day, the beach now felt cool against my skin.

It was the same beach, and yet—based on the sun, or lack of—it was so different.

Yoshin and I sat next to each other, silently gazing out at the ocean. The sound of crashing waves echoed through the quiet night. The ocean is scary at night, but it's kind of fantastic. I think I like it.

The sky, normally a crisp blue, was now pitch black. It almost looked as though we could get sucked into it.

"Could you not sleep because I was in the tent?" I asked him.

"Oh, no. That's not it. I mean, I was sleeping next to you, after all."

Wait, seriously? We were sleeping together?

I opened my eyes wide at his unexpected comment. It was true, though, that the way we were using those sleeping bags, it really was possible to sleep together. I see—so he really did sleep with me.

What a shame. I quietly hugged my knees. I felt like I was in PE class. I can't believe we were sleeping together, and yet I have absolutely no memory of it...

"That dress," Yoshin mumbled.

"Hmmm?"

I was feeling a little sad, but then I heard Yoshin begin to say something. Still hugging my knees, I looked in his direction.

"I've never seen that dress before," he continued.

"Oh, yeah. You're right, I've probably never shown it to you. I thought maybe something like this would be nice for when we were at the beach," I explained.

"It makes you seem really ladylike," he commented.

"Wait, are you saying I only *seem* that way now?" I said, giggling. Yoshin looked at me with a wry smile on his face. I knew he was complimenting me, but I couldn't help being a little snarky. Still, saying that I seemed ladylike now made it seem like I normally wasn't that way.

But then, maybe the way I've been acting lately has been about as far from ladylike as it gets. I've been doing sorta pervy things to Yoshin too. And besides...

"I am wearing yesterday's bathing suit underneath, so maybe it's not quite ladylike?" I remarked.

"Y-You're wearing your pervy bathing suit?" Yoshin muttered.

I-It's not a pervy bathing suit. It's just kind of a slightly sexy one. Besides, I'm wearing my dress over it, so you can't even see it. And if you can't see it, then it's definitely not pervy.

I cleared my throat, then stood up, as if trying to pull myself together. I then spun around once in front of him, almost as though I was showing off my dress to him.

I loved the way the skirt fluttered in a wide circle. Even though the dress was so simple, I personally really liked it.

Having completed my turn, I sat down next to Yoshin again.

When I tilted my head to indicate that I wanted to hear his thoughts, Yoshin seemed to pick up on my meaning and said simply that the dress looked nice on me.

With a more serious expression, Yoshin leaned back and looked up at the sky. Maybe because it was just before dawn, we couldn't really see any more stars. All that was above us was a clear sky.

It was still dark, but we knew that soon, dawn would come.

"I was thinking about that rumor we talked about earlier," Yoshin began.

"You mean the rumor about your work senpai?" I asked.

"Yeah. I think it'd be a good idea to find out if it's true. Otherwise, you'll probably continue to feel uncomfortable. I don't want that to be the case."

It was true, since even though my part-time job had ended, Yoshin's was going to continue for a bit longer. If I was going to feel weird about things, it probably was better just to find out the truth.

Yoshin must have been thinking about that the whole time. That made me happy, but I didn't want things to get awkward for him at work either.

"Nanami, do you remember what we said about your birthday?" he suddenly asked.

"Hmmm? What about it?" I asked.

Come to think of it, my birthday was coming up. Wow—I was so worried about the rumor that I had completely forgotten.

If Yoshin and I hadn't come on this trip, would things have stayed awkward between us until my birthday? That...would've been awful. I'm so glad we resolved things now.

"For your birthday—I'll convince my parents too. So maybe we can try to be together the whole day," Yoshin suggested.

"Huh?"

It wasn't until Yoshin made his suggestion that I remembered that I had said

something like that before. I had said it almost like a joke, half knowing that it probably wasn't possible—spending the entire day with Yoshin on my birthday.

It was a terribly childish wish, yet one that also seemed to capture every ounce of my desire. To be together from morning until night.

I thought it was impossible, practically speaking—and yet Yoshin said to me out loud that he was willing to make it happen.

"I mean, maybe it's not actually possible to be together right from the stroke of midnight, but just for that one day, let's stay together even past our curfew," he continued.

"Why? I mean, are you sure?" I muttered.

"Yeah. Also, should we try going to my workplace on your birthday? I kind of want you to meet senpai and then judge her for yourself—to see if she's actually like what you've heard."

We can clear things up then and there, he concluded.

Suddenly feeling fidgety and ticklish all over, I wrote our two names in the sand where he couldn't see. Then, no longer able to stay sitting, I slowly stood up.

"How about we go on a little walk, Yoshin?" I suggested, now standing upright and extending my hand out to him. We were alone, at night, by the ocean. I thought it would be nice to walk along the beach together. The sun was coming up soon, and in these few precious moments between midnight and dawn, I wanted to walk beside Yoshin, just the two of us.

Yoshin took my hand without saying a word, then stood right next to me. We kept our hands linked. It made me so happy that I had to squeeze his hand immediately.

"Shall we go on our walk, then?" he said.

"Yeah," I said softly.

With that, we started walking. Everyone must still have been asleep; no one was around. Even though it had been so lively the previous evening, everything was unbelievably quiet now.

It seemed like Yoshin and I were the only two people in this world—I was scared, delighted, and so happy all at the same time. I wanted this moment to last forever, so I walked deliberately slowly.

"Actually, there's one more thing I'm kind of feeling uneasy about," I began.

"What is it? I want to hear everything," he replied.

"Yeah, I guess I finally feel okay sharing this," I muttered.

And so I told him about the other hang-up I'd been dealing with—my worry that maybe the class rep liked him too. That maybe that was why she couldn't forgive the dare, and decided to warn Yoshin about it.

I was really worried about that. Yoshin listened to me and continued walking as he scratched his cheek slightly.

"Hmmm," he groaned. I had to admit I felt slightly anxious about his reaction, but I didn't feel panicked. I didn't know if it was because it was nighttime, or because we were taking a walk together, but at the very least, my heart felt calm and at ease.

"I can't imagine myself liking anyone but you," Yoshin said, smiling like he was at a loss.

His smile rendered me speechless.

Both of my anxieties came from my worry that Yoshin would end up liking someone else, someone not me. But his smile made me realize what a fool I'd been.

Instead of worrying that he would like someone else, I should've liked Yoshin more, and worked hard to make sure that he would like me more too.

If I was feeling anxious, I should've been doing things *not* to feel anxious. Keeping things simple and not complicating them too much was actually enough.

If Yoshin was telling me that he wasn't going to like anyone but me, then I had to do whatever I could to make sure I could help him sustain his feelings for me.

That was what I had to do from here on out: I was going to have to play offense, as strategically as possible.

If that was the case, should I finally show him my bathing suit? With one of my hands still holding Yoshin's, I pinched the hem of my dress with the other.

"You wanna see my bathing suit?" I finally asked him.

"Wait, how did we get to this point? Uh, that really caught me by surprise," he responded.

Oh, I guess that was too sudden of a move. I just felt like I wanted to lift up my dress and finally show it to him.

When I told him that, Yoshin thought for a moment and then put on a serious expression. What he said next wasn't what I expected.

"In that case, can I kiss you, Nanami?"

I was surprised by his sudden proposal of a kiss, but I was also so happy. But why suddenly a kiss though?

"That's fine, but...why?" I asked.

"I thought I should be more proactive from now on, so that you won't feel anxious about things," he replied. He then smiled shyly and continued by saying that he hadn't really been the one to say things like that before.

If that was his reason, then there was no way I could refuse. Not that I had any intention of doing that, but still.

I realized that the sky was glowing. *The sun must be coming up soon.* People would start getting up soon.

We wouldn't be able to kiss each other then either. That was why I closed my eyes gently. When I did, I felt him place his hands on my shoulders.

As dawn broke around us, Yoshin and I kissed.



The next day, the others found us still asleep in our tent, and all seemed to wonder the same thing.

"Well, well. They sure look like they're very close."

"I'm glad they look like they were able to make up. But, like, how can they

sleep like this?"

"I'm impressed—they still haven't managed to do anything..."



Chapter 3: Night Owls or Early Birds

Birthdays—a day to celebrate the day of one's birth, occurring once a year. I thought I saw somewhere that the practice started overseas. Maybe there, celebrating with cake was commonplace.

Celebrating with cake was now a common Japanese practice too, but since such a dessert didn't always exist in Japan, I could understand that eating it wasn't necessarily a traditional custom.

In any case, such trivial and minute questions weren't really important now. What was important was the act of celebrating a birthday. We weren't celebrating my birthday, or even my family's.

We were celebrating Nanami's birthday—and I was going to go all out to do so.

This was embarrassing to admit, but I had never celebrated anyone else's birthday—at least, not for as long as I could remember. Maybe once back in elementary school, but since I couldn't really remember it, it didn't count.

Well, even if I did remember it, it probably wouldn't help me to celebrate my girlfriend's birthday now. I would have been just a little kid, after all.

This year, for the first time ever, we were spending Nanami's birthday together. Even though that wasn't the only reason, I still wanted to make Nanami's wish come true as much as possible.

That was why...

"All that said, I humbly ask for your permission," I said, straightening my posture and bowing to my parents.

My parents faced me with sour looks on their faces, while I, on the other hand, was sitting before them on my heels, doing my utmost to express just how sincere I was. Sitting on one's heels was an effective way to communicate the purity and honesty of one's mind; a dignified appearance suggested an earnest, upright attitude.

"Could you please run that by me again?" my mom requested, still dour, her index finger raised to indicate that I repeat myself.

Hmmm, well then. I suppose I ought to take it from the top again.

"First, starting with the night before Nanami's birthday, I'd like her to sleep in my room," I began.

"Okay, there's your first problem. Yoshin, of all places, why would you suggest your own room?" my mom countered.

"I've already said this, but I won't do anything weird. I swear it," I replied.

My mom now held her head in her hands, but she gestured for me to continue. If she wants me to go on, then she should stop interrupting me, I thought—though I had to admit that I understood how she was feeling. If I were in her shoes, I'd have all sorts of questions too. Still, I couldn't help but gripe about her behavior at least a little bit.

"Next, when we wake up, we'll hang out a little bit at home and then go out. There's gonna be an art walk happening at a museum on her birthday, so we were thinking of going to check that out," I continued.

"That's good, a very high-school-appropriate date. Marvelous," my mom chimed in.

She couldn't seem to help commenting on every little thing, but I had to ignore her. Otherwise I couldn't get through my explanation, and besides, we were mainly going to the museum in order to do one of our summer break homework assignments. It wouldn't be our main outing anyway.

My parents seemed to approve of the idea nonetheless, since they were both nodding enthusiastically. Even when I described the plan to them before, they seemed happy about this part of it.

The problem was what came next.

"From there, I was thinking of us having dinner together and then going somewhere where we can enjoy the view at night. So, uh, I wanted to ask for your permission to come home later than usual," I concluded.

"And just how late were you thinking?" my mom asked.

"I was thinking ten o'clock at the earliest," I muttered.

This was the part my mom was most unhappy about—our being out too late.

To be specific, my mom wasn't particularly concerned about *me*. She seemed reluctant to give her okay because it would mean someone else's daughter was going to be staying out late—more specifically, because *I* was going to keep said daughter out late.

"And do her parents know of this plan?" my mom continued.

"Once I've talked things over with the two of you, I'm going to go explain things to Nanami's family," I responded.

I'd actually given this explanation three times already. My parents weren't rejecting my proposal outright, but they just seemed unable to rid themselves of their unease.

I could understand that staying out late might sound like it could be dangerous, but since we were going to places with lots of other people around, I didn't think we'd actually run into any real issues.

"And you're not going to spend the night elsewhere?" my mom suddenly asked.

"Huh?" I said, dumbfounded by her question.

She hadn't asked that in the previous go-arounds. My mom responded to my confused response by simply repeating herself, her intent still unclear.

"You're not going to spend the night elsewhere?"

Hearing the question a second time finally seemed to make its meaning sink into my brain. Spend the night means... "spend the night," right? The night...as in, is that what she's asking?

I wasn't expecting my own parents to ask me this, so I didn't know how to respond—but I only fell silent because I was unsure on how to respond, not because she called me out on my true motives. Unless I said something, though, she was going to assume that she had hit the nail on the head. I had to avoid that at all costs.

"Um, no, we're not going to spend the night elsewhere. Absolutely not," I said

finally.

"I see," my mom murmured.

Honestly, Nanami and I had already spent the night together so many times. It seemed pointless to make this an issue. Still, I felt it was important to make the point clear.

Because—we had never spent the night all by ourselves, just the two of us.

Whenever we had spent the night together, there were always other people around. Our camping trip the other day got us pretty close, but even then, we weren't alone by any stretch of the imagination.

Wait a minute. Isn't it kind of weird that we've spent the night together so many times, even with other people around?

If I thought about it too much, I was going to spiral. Stop thinking about it!

"Well, I think it shouldn't be a problem."

Even as my mom continued looking at me with a stern expression on her face, someone stepped in for a timely assist: my dad. He had a wry smile on his face and was looking at my mom, rather than at me.

Why?

"A high school student should be able to think like a mature adult. And if it's Yoshin, he won't do anything questionable," my dad continued.

"Personally, it's the idea of him thinking like an adult that most concerns me," my mom muttered in response.

"I see. Thinking of the old days really does make you worry, doesn't it?" he remarked.

"Akira-san?!" my mom shouted in response. I looked at my parents, their conversation leaving me in the dark with all the things they implied, and didn't say.

My dad was looking at my mom with a nostalgic expression, as my mom sat there looking sheepish.

"This is just to say that that place actually holds a lot of memories for your

mom and me too. It's probably changed a lot since the time we were there, though," my dad explained. My mom, though, gave my dad a weak punch. Seeing my parents flirting like this was pretty mentally trying. I couldn't watch.

Did my parents feel the same way when they saw me and Nanami? I felt like I suddenly had to apologize to them.

Once my parents stopped flirting with each other, my mom seemed to finally realize how exasperated I was, watching them. She looked at me and, clearing her throat, said, "Jokes are fine, but it is pretty embarrassing to talk about these things seriously with your own son."

I'd prefer you didn't, actually, either joking or serious.

In the end, despite some twists and turns, my parents eventually gave their okay for our date to last past our usual curfew. It would be our first time staying out so late, just the two of us. We'd stayed out late before, but there were always adults around. Our camping trip was no exception.

I knew it was still a ways away, but I was already starting to feel excited. This was probably what it felt like to look forward to a school field trip. I might even be *more* excited than that.

"I'll swing by and pick you two up though," my dad said matter-of-factly.

"Why?" I replied without thinking. I felt someone had just doused me with ice water; my fledging excitement died instantly.

I mean, what kind of a date ended with a parent picking you up? Wasn't it a date until the moment you dropped off your partner at their house? I wanted us to be able to enjoy the mood right up until the very end.

It seemed, though, that my parents weren't willing to compromise on this point.

"What are you going to do if the two of you get carried away, spending her birthday night alone together? Watching how fast you two are moving along, we're worried that by the time you graduate from high school, we're going to have a couple of grandkids. Or even three," my mom warned, not even taking a breath to pause throughout her declaration. My dad was also nodding next to her in agreement.

Bowled over by both her intensity and serious expression, I couldn't help but nod. They used to talk about wanting grandkids quite often, but it seems now they had only been joking. The more seriously they considered the situation, the more nervous they became.

Well, I guess this is where we'll have to settle this time, I told myself in the end.



When I explained my plans for Nanami's birthday to Genichiro-san and Tomoko-san, they gave me their blessing without much difficulty at all.

They did worry about *me*, though, so I had to believe that their concerns were about something different from what my parents had in mind.

My parents worried about Nanami, and Nanami's parents worried about me. Given that I was the one explaining the plans, Nanami's parents must have felt that they didn't need to worry about their daughter.

What the two sets of parents had in common, though, was that they all wanted to come pick us up at the conclusion of our date. They must have worried about something happening because we were going to be staying out late.

I accepted it as being par for the course, but...

"Jeez, they so have nothing to worry about," Nanami said.

"Yeah, but you know it really can't be helped," I replied.

"I wanted us to spend the night somewhere—it's my birthday, after all," Nanami muttered.

"Um, Nanami-san?" I said in disbelief. Isn't that something I, as the guy, should be saying? Why am I having to be the one to put a stop to it?

Either way, Nanami probably wasn't serious. She was most likely just teasing me. That was why I decided to try my hand at a little counterattack.

"In that case, should we sneak out and try to spend the night together somewhere?" I suggested.

Nanami drew a short breath and cast her eyes downward. Shoot, this is usually when she turns all red and gets embarrassed. I wasn't expecting her to react this way.

Maybe what I said was too creepy, even as a joke. Even if we were close, a certain level of courtesy still had to be maintained between us. I guess I needed to be more mindful about what I could and couldn't say.

After looking down for some time, Nanami raised her head and muttered, with a very serious expression, "That probably wouldn't be a good idea, huh?"

Yeah, I definitely shouldn't have said that. Nanami got way too serious because of it. I don't think I've seen her this way in a really long time. In her eyes was the cold fire of a seasoned warrior. To have made her look so determined—I really had to be more mindful in the future.

"Yeah, you're right. I'm sorry I said something weird," I said.

"No, not at all. I'm happy you said that. I was just about to totally take advantage of you," she replied.

Huh? Was I in danger just now? I for sure thought I had creeped her out, but it turned out that wasn't the case.

I couldn't help but think that Nanami was getting more and more proactive lately. Or was I just imagining it? I think I have to be more careful too. There are a lot of things to watch out for. I mean, I feel like we've grown even closer since our conversation the other day.

Right now, in fact, was no different.

We were currently in Nanami's room, with her sitting right next to me, our arms completely linked.

We were sitting on the floor with our backs against the bed, which was the only reason I was able to keep myself calm. If we were sitting *on* the bed, I was pretty certain I wouldn't have been able to contain myself.

The other times when we had been in Nanami's room together, we'd sat with a tiny bit more distance than we were currently. The change now was most likely because Nanami was still feeling anxious about what we discussed the

previous evening.

As a side note, Nanami was wearing rather thin loungewear at the moment, making the feeling of her body against me even more difficult to resist.

"I almost forgot—did your parents say it was okay for me to sleep over at your house the night before my birthday?" Nanami asked.

"Oh, yeah, they were fine with that. They said they'd both be there too. What do you want for dinner that day?" I asked in return.

"Hmmm, in that case, it'd be nice to get to cook with Shinobu-san," Nanami replied.

"For your own birthday?" I asked.

Nanami laughed, saying that it was *because* it was the day before her own birthday that she wanted to do that. I wondered if I should help cook too, but I realized that it might be difficult to fit three people in our small kitchen. If I was going to help, maybe I could find something to do elsewhere.

Nanami's birthday was only a couple days away. I couldn't help feeling giddy about the fact that I could celebrate the day she was born with Nanami herself. I would even get to be with her from the night before. The moment I thought that, though, I decided to ask her another question.

"I know this is kind of late in the game, but is your family okay with you not being with them on your birthday?"

"Oh, yeah. Given that it's my first birthday since we started going out, they told me to spend it with you instead of with them," Nanami replied.

I had checked before that it was really okay, but I couldn't help asking again. I knew Tomoko-san and everyone probably wanted to celebrate Nanami's birthday on the day of, so I couldn't help feeling bad.

This year, though, I was grateful that they were letting me steal Nanami away.

"I know your birthday isn't going to be much of a surprise, but I hope you can still enjoy it," I told her.

"I'm happy just to get to spend it with you. So there's nothing to worry about," Nanami said, hugging me tight. I was happy that she felt that way.

We further discussed together the plans for our date. I'd already bought her a present too. There was no element of surprise, but I still wanted Nanami to have a great day.

There were people who liked surprises, and then there were people who didn't. It was, therefore, important to talk to each other like this and acknowledge where our preferences lay. Understanding each other was key, after all.

"Oh, but I do have one thing I wanna ask you for my birthday. Is that okay?" Nanami asked.

"Something you wanna ask me?"

Nanami then shifted away from me and raised her index finger, tilting her head as if to look into my face. I felt like she was striking that pose knowing full well just how cute it made her look. If she asked me for something looking like that, I felt like I would end up saying yes to anything. Saying that she only had one thing to ask me also made it easier for me to agree.

Nanami probably wasn't going to give me the specifics for what she wanted until after I already said yes. Once she had my word, then she'd tell me what she actually wanted.

The only thing I could do, then, was to agree to her request even when I knew that it was a trap. Knowing Nanami, though, she probably wasn't going to ask for anything too crazy. At least, that was what I thought.

"Sure, what is it you want?" I asked her.

"Can you call me 'onee-chan' for the day on my birthday?" she requested.

"Excuse me?"

My brain froze. It turned out she did ask me something crazy.



I'd never counted down to a birthday before in my life.

I knew that online streamers sometimes did countdowns for their birthdays, but I didn't really watch those either. I didn't even count down to the New Year, so of course I wouldn't do it for birthdays.

That was why I never expected that I, of all people, would be doing a birthday countdown.

"It's almost time, huh?" Nanami said.

"I'm feeling kind of nervous," I muttered back.

Nanami was in my room. That in and of itself was a relatively common occurrence, but she had never stayed in my room this late, so that was probably what was making me nervous.

It was eleven o'clock at night. There was only one more hour left until Nanami's birthday.

Nanami was lying on my bed in cute pajamas, while I was on a futon that I'd laid out on the floor.

She's so cute. It's so odd to see Nanami on my bed too. Is it even my bed anymore? Isn't it Nanami's at this point?

Even with my new anxiety making me fret about whether I'd be able to sleep in my own bed starting the next day, in my heart, I was worshipping the sight of Nanami in her sleepwear.

"Thank you for the meal," I said.

"What's gotten into you all of a sudden?" she asked, laughing and rolling around on my bed. My sudden remark was half in reference to the dinner from earlier, the other half in reference to the current situation. *Oh, who am I kidding: I'm mostly talking about what's happening right now.*

"I just wanted to thank you for the delicious dinner," I said.

"You already said that when we were eating. Plus it was fun to get to cook with Shinobu-san again. And you helped too."

Good, I think I've managed to get by without her knowing what I was actually thinking. Just as I thought that, Nanami came toward me on the futon.

"You're not gonna sleep with me?" she asked.

"Impossible," I immediately replied.

She smelled good. I thought she used the shampoo my family used, but she

smelled completely different than I did. Was she wearing perfume or something?

Nanami brought her face closer to me and proceeded to sniff around my hair and my neck. She was so close to me that her breath tickled me, and I felt my body starting to react in a funny way.

I took more care than usual when I washed myself today. I was in the bath longer than usual too, so I was pretty sure I was clean. But I was still nervous.

"We really do smell the same. It's a different scent from when we went on our trip," Nanami said, her expression melting into a happy smile. She then raised both her hands and waved me over, as though telling me to do the same.

You mean...I'm supposed to sniff too?

I pointed at myself and tilted my head, but Nanami only nodded slowly. She then invited me toward her once again. *Am I really allowed to do this?*

Still hesitating, I sniffed at Nanami. Anyone seeing us would wonder what the hell I was doing, but I gradually breathed in Nanami's scent.

Smell was very important. Apparently, people who were a good match for each other found each other's scent to be pleasant; those who weren't a good match, on the other hand, often disliked how the other smelled.

Except I'd also heard that disliking the scent of a family member was a different phenomenon altogether. Maybe it had something to do with how we often got into fights with our families when we were adolescents.

Perhaps it was similar to our penchant for disliking those who were similar to us. I wasn't sure because I'd never looked into it, but the takeaway was that if you found the scent of a person who wasn't related to you pleasant, then they were probably a good match for you.

I just spewed out a bunch of factoids, but the conclusion here was that I found Nanami's scent to be very pleasant indeed. So, at the very least, we were probably a good match for each other.

In order to fully enjoy it, I let Nanami's scent fill me up. I'd heard that smell and taste were closely related senses, and right now, it felt like I was tasting

Nanami.

Wow, that sounds really creepy, even to me. I definitely shouldn't say that out loud.

Nanami definitely smelled like the shampoo I always used, but she somehow smelled even better. I wondered if this was Nanami's own scent, or if it was just how I perceived her. I couldn't be sure, but I was definitely filled with bliss.

"Th— I mean, yes. You smell very good," I said.

"Th—? Th—?" Nanami inquired.

Shoot, I must be getting too loosey-goosey, because I was just about to say something super creepy. I nearly thanked her for yet another delicious meal. This is no good. Is all this just the result of all the things that have happened recently? I feel like with every turn, I'm saying things to Nanami I've never said before.

I thought I was able to get through another close call, but Nanami suddenly hugged me and whispered in my ear, "My pleasure."

Her words entered my ear, along with her teasing chuckle. *Dang it, I got caught*, I thought, turning bright red.

I wasn't at all myself today. Unless I managed to calm down a little at some point, I wasn't going to be able to keep up. I was going to run out of breath. I mean, her birthday hadn't even started yet. It was still the day before, and here I was, already way past full throttle.

I had the day off from work tomorrow, which meant I'd get to spend the whole day with Nanami for the first time in a while. I knew I was really looking forward to that, but I still didn't expect myself to be acting this way.

As a side note, Nanami and I had met up in the evening today.

Apparently her family had celebrated her birthday with her earlier in the day. The timing made sense, since I was going to have Nanami all to myself on her actual birthday.

I had work during the day too. I felt like I was finally getting used to it. Maybe because I'd only just recently started working, but I felt some guilt that I was

already taking time off.

No, I should let it go and just enjoy the day as much as possible.

"Almost, huh?" Nanami said, bringing me back to reality. She was right—it was almost time.

Sitting next to each other on the futon, we looked at the clock displayed on our phones. It was the analog type, one where we could see the second hand.

We had less than a minute to go. The second hand was steadily progressing toward the next day. We watched over it with excitement.

When there were just ten seconds left, we both began to count down.

Six...five...four...then, looking at each other, we counted down all the way...to zero!

"Happy birthday!" I shouted.

"Thank you, thank you!" Nanami exclaimed.

It seemed out of character for me, but I wanted to congratulate Nanami on her birthday in a louder voice than usual. Nanami hugged me in thanks.

Several moments later, there came a knock at my door. Well, there was a knock, but no one said anything. Wondering what was going on, I stepped outside, only to find that there was a tray of cold drinks on the floor by my door.

I wondered if it was alcohol, but it was just bottled soda. Did my mom put this out here for us?

Oh, there's a note. Let's see... "It's late, so just drinks for a toast," huh? "What's up?" Nanami asked.

"I found these," I said, handing one of the bottles to Nanami. I wondered why they were bottled, but I figured I could ask my parents about it sometime later.

When we opened them, a brisk sound echoed throughout the room.

"Cheers. Happy birthday," I repeated.

"Thanks. Cheers," Nanami replied.

We toasted each other with a clink of our bottles. Our actual date would be tomorrow—no, technically today. Today, we were going to go on our first birthday date together.

I wondered if I would be able to sleep with all this excitement, with Nanami right here with me to boot. Can I sleep? Can I really manage it? Well, I guess my parents are here, so it's not like we can actually do anything.

"Really, though. Happy birthday, Nanami."

I wanted to say it over and over again—to tell her just how grateful I was that she had been born into this world.

Nanami thanked me with a smile, but then quickly changed her expression. She seemed to have remembered something, her eyebrows furrowing.

"That's not it. That's not it at all!" she declared.

Hmmm? Huh? What? I was slightly confused by her sudden remark. I wondered what I did wrong. Did she maybe not like the way I was wishing her a happy birthday?

My guesses were wrong, though. Well, I was technically right in thinking that she didn't like the way I wished her a happy birthday.

"'Onee-chan.' Remember?" she reminded me.

Oh—she was serious about that. Wait, even if I'm gonna call her that, I thought it was gonna be tomorrow, starting in the morning. Am I really supposed to say it now? Dang, her eyes are really sparkling right now. She's got all sorts of expectations. Should I say it? I should say it, huh...?

What should I do? I'm already super embarrassed. But, come on—it's Nanami's birthday. Her birthday! I should just think of it as part of her birthday present. Come on, Yoshin.

"Um, happy birthday, onee-chan?" I muttered.

The moment the words came out of my mouth, I felt an overwhelming impact. To explain more clearly: Nanami leaped into my arms in what was practically a tackle.

It all happened so suddenly that I found myself knocked clean down to the

floor.

"That's right, I'm your onee-chan! You can let me spoil you rotten!" she said, patting my head. She was treating me completely like a little brother—nay, a small child? Wait, how is this something for her to get so excited about?



"Here, let's have you sleep together with your onee-chan for her birthday," Nanami continued.

"Wait, let's calm down, Nanami," I managed to say, trying to stop her as she began to pull the covers over the two of us. Still, Nanami didn't stop; she wouldn't stop.

Since we were about to go to sleep, we couldn't be terribly loud. Still, Nanami continued fawning over me like I was her little brother. *Is she not going to stop until she's satisfied?*

For some time after that, I let her do as she pleased—nonetheless determined that I would have to stop her if she tried to cross the line.

Soon after that, Nanami must have gotten her fill, because she returned to her rational self and apologized to me profusely on top of the futon.

After some back-and-forth, however, it was determined that I would continue calling her "onee-chan."

We did not sleep together.



Years ago, I heard a saying that children are eager to enter adulthood, while adults yearn to return to childhood.

I didn't quite understand what those words truly meant, but ever since I started working part-time, I'd gradually come to see how difficult it was to be an adult that worked every single day.

But even so, I still wanted to be an adult—in terms of age, mind, and finances. I hadn't felt that way at all before, but now I wanted to hurry up and become an adult, to do the things that only adults could do.

Having a girlfriend probably had a lot to do with it. Some might think that I was getting full of myself just because I had a girlfriend now, but I just couldn't help how I felt.

Depending on whom you asked, this could either be a sign of growth, or yet another instance of a man's downfall being caused by a woman. I, for one,

wanted to think of it as growth.

What triggered all this contemplation was most definitely Nanami's birthday.

Today, Nanami turned seventeen.

Nanami Barato, seventeen years old. The phrase "seventeen-year-old Nanami-san" felt like the headline of a breaking news article. In any case, Nanami was now one year older than I was.

Still, discussing a woman's age was essentially taboo; it wasn't something I should bring up myself.

But on this day, I couldn't help feeling our age difference. That wasn't necessarily because it was Nanami's birthday though.

"Um, o-onee-chan? I would really appreciate it if you wouldn't make me call you that out in public," I murmured.

"Tee hee, it tickles me when you say that. I just feel so happy. But you're right, we'll probably seem more like a couple if you don't call me 'onee-chan' while we're out," Nanami replied.

She did request, however, that whenever we were alone throughout the day, I call her "onee-chan" as much as possible.

As a side note, we ended up settling on "onee-chan" for how I would address her. We also tried out "nee-san" and "nee-chan" and stuff like that, but according to Nanami, "onee-chan" was what felt most right. That made sense, given that Saya-chan called her that as well.

I wondered if Nanami wanted a younger brother that badly. When I asked her, she explained that a younger sister could sometimes be a bit of a brat, so she wanted a cute and adorable younger brother as well.

Apparently she really wanted to spoil, indulge, and dote on said adorable little brother.

Wow, if Nanami really had a brother, he'd probably end up having all sorts of weird fetishes.

As an only child, I couldn't quite say I understood where she was coming from. But I had no doubt that if someone was pampered and spoiled by

Nanami, they'd probably become addicted to it.

"Since we're basically all alone right now, I'd like it if you called me 'onee-chan,'" Nanami said.

"Fine, onee-chan," I muttered.

Here she goes again. Though I guess it's also on me for going along with it.

Right now, we were at an art museum. I'd shared today's plans with Nanami beforehand, and I was happy to see that she seemed to be enjoying things so far.

At first I considered coming up with the date plan all by myself and surprising Nanami with it, but then I decided that it would all be for naught if she ended up not enjoying herself.

After giving it some thought, I shared with Baron-san and the others that I was considering revealing to Nanami my plans for her birthday date ahead of time, and they all seemed to support the idea.

Baron: I think that sounds good. Just make sure you don't end up putting it all on her to come up with ideas. As long as the both of you think about it together...though, I guess that's not a problem for you two.

He was right about that. What was key was that I came up with a plan first and then asked Nanami for her opinion. I was really glad, though, when she seemed excited about the places that I had thought really hard to come up with.

"We're lucky that the weather is nice, huh?" Nanami said.

"Yeah, I'm glad it's not too hot either," I replied.

The two of us were walking through a forest, where works of art were being displayed in the midst of nature. We'd talked about seeing the indoor exhibits if it rained, but since it was sunny, we took a relaxing stroll outside.

Nanami's outfit today seemed rather mature overall. Since our date involved some amount of walking, she was wearing sneakers...or, wait, were those actually sneakers? They seemed different from the sneakers that I was familiar

with; they looked a bit more stylish.

She was wearing a sleeveless solid-colored shirt and pants. Her outfit wasn't terribly revealing, but it also exuded a sense of womanly sexiness.

Another thing that made me happy was that she was wearing the dolphin pendant I made for her for our one-month anniversary. Since it was handmade, though, it didn't seem to go with her overall look today.

Still, I was grateful that she was even wearing it in the first place.

"Are you sure coming to a museum was okay, though? I mean, it's your birthday. We could've gone somewhere more fun," I mumbled.

"Not at all! This is plenty fun. Besides, don't we have an assignment asking us to go to an art museum? We can check that off our to-do list at the same time. It's a win-win," Nanami replied.

Nanami was so serious, taking care of both a date and her homework simultaneously.

Even as I was overcome with awe by her diligence, Nanami slid her arm against my body and twined our arms together. It was mild out today, but it still felt hot, so that was probably the reason Nanami was wearing a sleeveless shirt. But it also meant that I ended up feeling the skin of her arm directly against mine.

"Besides, the main event is tonight, right? I'm so excited," Nanami said with a smile, making a peace sign and placing her fingers up against her lips.

Nanami seems strangely sexy today.

But she was right about this evening. Today we had two destinations planned; we'd spend the day at this art museum, and then at night, we'd head to an observatory. We were thinking of going there after sunset, but my dad actually had a tip for me: he said that it would be better for us to get there *before* the sun had set completely—that, if possible, we should arrive there about an hour before sunset.

With that in mind we ended up modifying our plans a bit, so that now we were going to go to my workplace to have dinner, and then head to the

observatory right after that. Taking into account the travel time to the observatory, we would end up having dinner quite early.

In that sense, I guess we actually had three destinations today.

I made a reservation at my workplace, and since the owner promised to give us special treatment, I was feeling half excited and half scared.

Will they tease me the next time I go to work?

When I thought about it, I realized that no one around me had ever really teased me about stuff like that, though that might've been because I never really hung out with my classmates before.

"Something wrong? If you're worried about something, please tell your oneechan all about it!" Nanami said excitedly.

"Wait, we're still playing at that?" I asked.

"Of course! I'm your onee-chan for the whole day. And, actually, maybe we can even make it kind of a sexy thing," Nanami suggested, crossing her arms beneath her chest and looking quite smug. Jeez, I guess she must really like playing the older sister.

Our time at the museum passed very gently and slowly. Maybe it was because it wasn't terribly crowded that day, but it was also true that art museums were generally quiet places to begin with.

In a way, it was similar to a movie date; we looked at a piece of art, exchanged our thoughts on it, then moved on to the next piece.

In the midst of doing that, I took a glance at Nanami's chest. And no, not in a pervy way or anything.

There on her neck hung the handmade, awkward-looking necklace that I'd given to her as a gift.

Just a moment ago, I felt so happy that she was wearing it. Now, as we chatted while looking at works of art, I began to feel embarrassed by it.

It was a clumsy piece, made by a beginner through much struggle and effort. I knew I shouldn't be comparing it to actual art pieces, but I couldn't help myself.

"You're actually wearing that necklace?" I murmured.

"Oh, you noticed? Yeah. I wanted to wear it for my birthday," Nanami replied.

"A total amateur made it, so it's a little embarrassing. It doesn't really go with your outfit either, does it?"

"Not at all. I usually display it on my desk cause it's so pretty. Don't tell me you're thinking that because we're here at an art museum," Nanami suggested.

Dang, she's sharp, I thought, smirking to myself. She saw right through me. Nanami frowned a bit and lightly pinched my cheek. It didn't hurt at all, but she continued playing with it between her fingers.

"You really do think about these things, huh? As long as I'm happy with it, then that's all that matters. It really was such a lovely present," she said.

"I was super frantic when I made it though. Now that it's all said and done I can't help judging it more calmly, especially since we're at a museum," I returned.

"Why would you compare it to museum pieces?" Nanami mumbled in exasperation, narrowing her eyes at me.

"Well, yeah, you got me there," I said. Then, still feeling her piercing glare, I continued by saying, "You keep getting more and more beautiful, Nanami."

"Huh?!" she uttered.

"Seeing you wear something I made makes me really happy. But it's a little embarrassing too, I guess? I mean, objectively speaking, my gift just seems so out of place," I mumbled.

I didn't think I was wrong about that. Beautiful people wore beautiful things, because beautiful things made them even *more* beautiful. So was my handmade necklace really enhancing Nanami's beauty? I had a feeling that unless the necklace was on par with the artworks on display at this museum, it maybe wasn't going to match up.

I couldn't really explain it, but that was the thought that popped into my head.

When I attempted to share with Nanami how I felt, her whole face turned

red. Was it because I said that she looked more beautiful than before?

Given that she was older by a year, though, she didn't take my comments lying down. With her cheeks still flushed, she looked at me and went straight for a counteroffensive.

"Girls become prettier when they're in love. I'm in love with you, so...if I'm prettier than before, then it's all thanks to you," she said. With another mumble of thanks, she hid her face again.

Needless to say, her words did a number on me, and for some time after that, we strolled through the exhibition in silence.

Since we were outdoors, a gentle breeze was blowing, making the necklace sway.

Nanami is wearing something that I made for the first time. I guess that's more than enough.

"I'll make something better next time," I murmured.

"Y-Yeah. I'm looking forward to it," she replied.

I didn't know when that would be, but I could at least say now that there was one more thing I wanted to do—one more thing to look forward to.

After that, we made our way around the museum. I wasn't much of an art person, but experiencing it like this actually turned out to be pretty fun.

I wondered if Nanami was having fun as well. There didn't seem to be any need for me to worry, though; she chatted with me about how coming to an art museum made her want to start drawing.

The only opportunities I had for making art was during art class at school. I didn't know much about it, but I could understand how she felt. I, for one, started feeling like I wanted to handcraft my next gift for Nanami too.

"I wanna make something for you too," Nanami said.

"But you're always giving me homemade bento," I replied.

"I know, but I wanna give you something that lasts," Nanami murmured.

She really doesn't need to feel like that. But I gratefully accepted her thoughts

anyway. Nanami, though, continued staring at me. Her gaze was somehow insistent, different from how she looked at me before. It seemed kind of feverish, almost kind of...sticky.

I had never seen Nanami look at me this way.

"Your ears aren't pierced, right?" Nanami asked suddenly.

"My ears?" I repeated.

Come to think of it, Nanami had her ears pierced. I wondered if it was more unusual *not* to have one's ears pierced nowadays. I, of course, had never had my ears pierced.

Nanami lightly caressed my earlobe. I wasn't sure if a shiver went up my spine because she was touching my ear, or because I sensed something more in that caress.

"I want you to let me pierce you," Nanami muttered.

My body quivered at her quiet remark. It wasn't from fear; her voice—tinged with a dark passion and a mysterious allure—brought me undeniable pleasure.

When I imagined Nanami's hands leaving such a mark on my body, I was overcome with both fear and anticipation.

Getting an ear piercing probably wasn't a big deal for people used to it. That wasn't the case for me, though. I wondered if I maybe had some hidden masochistic tendencies.

"I guess for now, I don't have any plans to get my ears pierced. I'm gonna have to pass," I finally said.

"Really? Not even as my birthday wish?" Nanami replied.

Sorry, Nanami. I have to refuse, because if I say yes now, I'm probably going to lose control.

Does this mean Nanami has dark, yandere-type tendencies too? I felt like it could be a real problem if she started going in that direction.

Even though I turned down Nanami's suggestion, she didn't seem to give up. A back-and-forth on this seemed to be inevitable. She was even still touching

my ear.

Maybe she wanted to wear matching piercings? I wasn't sure if I'd be able to resist that temptation, though I also wasn't entirely sure that I needed to.

"It's a little early, but do you wanna go to my work?" I suggested.

"Oh, yeah. Let's!"

Though I was only trying to change the subject and ended up with a total non sequitur, Nanami seemed really into my suggestion. Maybe, just for today, she was willing to drop the whole piercing subject.

But our real challenge was just about to begin. We were heading into the day's climax: visiting my workplace. In all seriousness, I was very nervous. Even Nanami seemed nervous.

"B-But wait. Won't it be rude for us to show up early though?" she asked.

"I think it'll be fine. I just checked with them—they said it'll be easier for them to treat us if we come in before the dinner rush."

"I see, I'm glad. Oh, but maybe we should bring them a gift or something," Nanami began to wonder.

"We're just eating at my work," I mumbled.

Nanami seemed like she was nervous, but in a weird way. I could guess why: it was probably because of the matter with Yu-senpai.

Today, Nanami was going to meet senpai for the first time.

I had actually asked Nanami if she wanted to come visit me at my workplace before her birthday. Nanami, though, said that she wanted to emotionally prepare herself, choosing instead to go on her birthday. That made sense, since if she had visited before her birthday, I would have been working, thus leaving Nanami and senpai to meet one-on-one.

I was nervous about going to my part-time job with my girlfriend. Nanami was feeling nervous about meeting senpai for the first time. With our respective anxieties filling our chests, we reached our destination.

"Wow, it's so cute," Nanami muttered when we reached the restaurant. I, on

the other hand, never even knew that one could describe a business as being cute. I only ever thought of the place as a Western-style restaurant.

Even though I usually entered from the back, today I went in through the front entrance. I felt more nervous than if I were visiting a place I'd never been to before.

When I opened the door, I heard the bell that hung from the door chime lightly. I was usually the one to *hear* it ring, not the one to make it ring. What a strange feeling it was.

We were immediately greeted by senpai, who skipped over to us. Since it was a bit early for dinner, there was only one other party aside from me and Nanami. We seemed to have made it just in time before the place got too busy.

"Hello there! A party of two... Oh, wait, it's Mai-chan! Well, hello!" senpai exclaimed.

"Hello. I know we're a bit early, but I just got in touch with the owners a little while ago," I said in a low voice.

"Yeah, I heard! You're here with your girlfriend, right? Come right this way, please!" senpai said.

"Thank you."

Senpai led us to our seats. Beaming, she told us that she would bring water over and returned to the kitchen.

I hadn't formally introduced Nanami to her, but senpai was stealing a glance at Nanami and waving with a smile on her face, so she probably didn't have a negative impression of her.

Nanami was bowing slightly to senpai, though, her eyes wide with surprise. Then, turning toward me, Nanami tilted her head and muttered, "Mai-chan?"

"Oh..."

Shoot, I forgot to mention that to Nanami. Nanami seemed bewildered by the fact that I'd been called "Mai-chan"; she was crossing her arms, and tilting her head this way and that.

I know it's just going to sound like an excuse if I explain it now, but I still have

to tell her.

"Um, for some reason, senpai has taken to calling me that," I began hesitantly.

"Mai-chan...I guess that's one way to call you. Darn, I feel like I've been one-upped," Nanami remarked.

Hmmm? Her reaction isn't what I expected. She looks like she just lost a battle of some kind.

While Nanami stayed vexed, senpai returned to our table with water, wipes, and menus. This seemed like the right moment to introduce Nanami to senpai.

"Thank you for waiting. I've got your waters here," senpai said.

"Thank you. Yu-senpai, this is my girlfriend, Nanami Barato. Nanami, this is my work senpai, Nao Yutari-san," I announced.

"I'm Nao Yutari! Nice to meet you!"

"Um, I'm Nanami Barato. It's nice to meet you too," Nanami mumbled back, shaking the hand that Yu-senpai excitedly thrust out toward her. Senpai was swinging Nanami's hand up and down with a huge smile on her face, while Nanami seemed to be more than slightly overwhelmed.

I didn't think I'd ever seen Nanami reacting this way. Hold on—was this the first time I'd introduced Nanami to an acquaintance of mine? I'd been introduced to Nanami's acquaintances before, but had I only introduced Nanami to my parents? I seriously didn't really know anyone aside from my parents though. There really couldn't have been anyone else.

Maybe Nanami was nervous—she seemed super timid and quiet. I thought maybe I needed to step in and help, but Nanami quickly glanced over at me and murmured, "Um, I didn't realize that he was calling you 'Yu-senpai' because of your last name."

"Oh, yeah. That's right! My last name feels too noble and stuffy because of the kanji, so I wanted him to call me by my first name. He told me that he couldn't, though, because he couldn't call anyone but his girlfriend by their first name," Yu-senpai explained.

Wow, why do I feel super embarrassed right now?

This felt different from having my parents talk to Nanami about me. It also felt different from Nanami talking about me to someone else. Someone at my workplace was telling my girlfriend about me. That was all it was—and yet it felt so embarrassing. Both my cheeks felt hot, and I felt sweat starting to drip down my back. My body temperature seemed to have dropped too.

What in the world is happening?

"Yoshin said that?" Nanami asked.

"Yup. He totally surprised me; I didn't think for a second he'd say no. Plus, when I tried to call him by his first name, he said I couldn't, because he didn't want anyone aside from his girlfriend calling him that," Yu-senpai continued.

"Wait, I never said that. You just made that up!" I said in a panic.

Why are you lying like that?! You were calling me by my last name in the first place! That was why I didn't really say anything about it.

Yu-senpai waved her hands happily as she laughed.

"Aha ha, you got me there. Still, what's so bad about a little fib when it comes to adorable moments like these? You treasure your girlfriend so much, don't you?" senpai asked.

"That's true, but," I muttered in protest.

Grinning like a cat, Yu-senpai looked at me with a teasing look on her face. I responded without thinking, but once I remembered Nanami was literally right next to me, I was mortified.

Nanami seemed somehow happy too, and suddenly it felt like it was me against the two of them. Had Yu-senpai done that on purpose?

"Oh, right, Nanami-chan...can I call you Nana-chan? Or do you prefer Nami-chan instead? I thought it'd be nice if we could be friends!" senpai exclaimed.

"Oh, then should I call you Nao-senpai too?" Nanami suggested.

"Huuuh? No way, you should totally call me Nao-chan. Especially since Maichan doesn't call me that." Senpai was pulling out all the stops with Nanami now. I was pretty sure I'd never seen Nanami seem so bowled over. She was adorable, but in a different way from usual.



Perhaps Nanami had never called an upperclassman with a "chan" before either, because she seemed reluctant to address senpai that way. Soon, though, she shyly opened her mouth.

"Nao-chan?" Nanami let out, softly.

In response, Yu-senpai looked up at the ceiling.

Hmmm? What's going on?

Just as I started to get concerned watching senpai, she turned to me, her eyes stern and serious.

"She's way too cute. Being called 'Nao-chan' by a high school girl is making me crazy. I can't take it. Please give her to me," Yu-senpai said, her request so rushed it seemed to come out all in one breath.

"No, ma'am," I replied instantaneously.

What the hell is this senpai saying? I'm absolutely not gonna let that happen. Senpai, though, didn't seem to mind my response too much, as she let out a casual "Aw, shucks." She pouted, but made her way back to the kitchen without much fuss. There weren't many other diners yet, so she seemed to have time to spend at our table.

Nanami, on the other hand, watched senpai walk away with a look that could only be described as taken aback. I so rarely saw this expression on Nanami. When she turned toward me, she sighed and muttered, "She's something else."

"Yeah, she kinda comes on strong," I said, agreeing.

"But she doesn't seem like a bad person," Nanami added, smiling as she brought her palms together. Yu-senpai *did* come on pretty strong, but at her core she was a good person—at least, that was what I wanted to believe.

That was also why I couldn't understand why there was such a strange rumor about her.

It was possible that she had done something when she was younger and more foolish that could have led to such a rumor, but it seemed unlikely that Shoichisenpai would hang out with someone like that. And perhaps even more relevant: would Shoichi-senpai introduce me to a potential job where someone

like that worked? It was these thoughts that disinclined me to believe in the rumor.

But regardless of all that, I wanted to eliminate Nanami's anxiety about this once and for all. When I was contemplating asking senpai about it before the restaurant got too crowded, I realized that she was making her way back to our table.

We had ordered beforehand, so I thought she was bringing us our food—but I was wrong.

"Here you go! It's not a welcome drink or anything like that, but it's my treat! Here, drink up! Like, now, while I'm standing right in front of you!"

Just as Nanami and I were about to thank her, we both froze in place.

Senpai had placed a pretty large glass in front of us. Inside was a clear, carbonated drink, with lively bubbles popping and fizzing. There was an abundance of fruit inside the clear glass, mostly tart fruits like lemon, kiwi, and strawberries.

The problem was that senpai had only brought one glass. Well, no—the fact that there was one glass wasn't the issue; the problem was the *straw*.

There was one glass, with one straw.

The straw split in two at the part where one sipped from it. One tip was pointed toward me, the other toward Nanami. There was even a heart shape in the center.

Straws like these actually exist?

I almost wanted to ask why they had such a straw at a Western-style restaurant. Senpai, meanwhile, was looking at us with her eyes sparkling, as though urging us to drink.

"Um, I have to ask: what exactly is this?" I managed to say.

"Well, sir, it is our establishment's most special drink for couples, one that is only ordered by those in the know," replied senpai, her tone and speech the complete opposite of how she'd spoken to us earlier. She even added a picture perfect, deep bow, conveying the utmost respect. Wait, is she being serious

right now?

When I glanced at Nanami, she was letting out a soft "wow" under her breath. It wasn't a "wow" of distaste—it was, in fact, one of delight.

I had to say, I really didn't realize drinks with straws like this existed. This was almost so cliché that I was pretty sure it was rarely served anymore.

"Uh, thank you," I murmured.

"You're very welcome!" senpai replied, striking a pose and looking quite pleased with herself. Dammit, I know I just thanked her, but am I really supposed to do this here? This is where I work. Is this really something I should be doing, at my place of employment?

Still, it just wasn't an option to ungratefully refuse something freely offered to us. I guess I therefore really couldn't say no at this point. Had this been any other restaurant, I couldn't deny that I would have been interested in the drink.

"Then, um, should we go ahead and drink it?" I asked Nanami.

"Y-Yeah!" she agreed enthusiastically.

Not really knowing what to say, Nanami and I clenched our fists, as though preparing to go into battle against the drink before us. If anything, we *had* to drink it now. There weren't that many people around, so no one would pay us any mind. It had to happen now.

"Oh, should I snap a photo of you two?" senpai suddenly piped up, bringing me and Nanami to a screeching halt. Are we supposed to get a record of this? For what? So we can laugh at it later?

Before I could say no, though, Nanami thanked senpai and very willingly handed over her phone. It was impossible to stop Nanami.

It seemed we weren't going to get a do-over. Either way, if I were to stop myself one more time, I probably wouldn't be able to start back up again.

Knowing that, I took the plunge, and brought my lips to one of the straw tips.

Nanami, too, quickly followed suit and placed her lips on the other.

Wait, isn't this the kind of straw where you can't suck unless you match your breath with the other person? Something about the air escaping from the other

end or whatever?

Nanami must have thought the same thing, because she signaled to me with her eyes. She then looked down at the straw and opened up her palm.

Does this mean that we're going to drink in five seconds? It does, right?

I opened up my palm as well, and since Nanami nodded slightly, I decided that we had gotten on the same page. This whole thing was beginning to feel like a collaborative effort.

I nodded too, and prepared myself for the moment. We were both going to count down with our fingers...and when we folded over our final finger, we were both going to drink at the same time.

Just as we began counting down...

"Oh, that straw's actually made up of two different straws, so you can each drink whenever you want," senpai remarked.

Nanami and I nearly slammed our heads onto the table.

Oh, she's right. I can totally drink it like normal.

Nanami seemed to have tried it as well, because she took her mouth off of the straw and began laughing.

Senpai, I wish you'd tell us things like that ahead of time.

Yu-senpai must have sensed us looking at her with mild annoyance, because she began frantically making excuses. "Well, it's just that, I mean, you two looked so serious, and I thought it'd be bad for me to interrupt!"

Jeez, this senpai. Wait, isn't she supposed to be working? Aren't they gonna yell at her soon? If she's okay, though, I feel like I should ask her now.

"Senpai, I have a question I wanted to ask. If it's rude of me, though, please feel free to yell at me," I began.

"Hmmm? What's up? Ask away," senpai replied.

"So, the other day, I heard this rumor about you," I continued.

Senpai listened to me speak as though she was just listening to regular chitchat. I made sure to add that I only heard it as a rumor, and that the person

who shared it also said that she wasn't sure how true it really was.

Once I'd finished talking, senpai looked up at the ceiling, looking slightly sheepish.

"Ah, that rumor, huh? Wow, it really is a small world if even you guys heard it. But this time, though, I guess I have to admit that I'm sort of reaping what I sowed," senpai said.

"Wait, does that mean," I murmured.

"Oh, no, no. I haven't done anything like *that*," senpai clarified. "It's just, you know, people say that I have zero sense of personal space, right?"

I nodded several times at senpai's remark. I mean, that really was how I felt: she honestly seemed to have no conception of personal space—and didn't even seem to realize it.

"I'm not doing it intentionally. But there's been so many times when I'm talking to guys like we're normal friends, but then all of a sudden they tell me that they broke up with their girlfriends and want to start going out with me," senpai explained.

"Huh?" Nanami whispered, as if in shock. Somehow, I could kind of understand what senpai was saying. Senpai truly didn't think twice about getting close to people. It was almost like she just wasn't capable of measuring physical or social distance.

I didn't want to make generalizations, but...men easily mistook kindness for romantic interest. And if someone as pretty as senpai was being nice to them, chances were quite high that they'd misinterpret the situation. For senpai to capture the hearts of guys in relationships, though, might be attributed to her devilish quirks.

"And you're saying that that started the rumor?" I asked.

"Yeah, probably. I mean, I've never had a boyfriend my entire life. And despite how I look, I've never done anything sexy with anyone either!" she added.

"I think you just demonstrated the problem," I said.

Yeah, that must be it. That last part was way too personal. If she's always this frank and down-to-earth, I can see why a number of guys have misconstrued her intentions.

Nanami, meanwhile, seemed both relieved and deep in thought.

"That's why you have nothing to worry about, Nana-chan! I have zero romantic feelings for Mai-chan! And Mai-chan, I'm sorry if I made you misunderstand! I definitely can't go out with you!" senpai declared.

"Huh? Wait, did I just get dumped? Even though I don't have any romantic interest in Yu-senpai either?" I said.

"Hey, that kind of stings! But I figured you'd say something like that," senpai said, laughing wholeheartedly.

Nanami, too, seemed like she'd found peace of mind. Sighing as if relieved from a great burden, she turned toward senpai and said, "I'm sorry. I...kind of took the rumor at face value."

"Oh, no worries, it's my fault. I'm trying to be careful, but it's so set in me that I have a tough time drawing the line with folks. I even stopped calling guys by their first names so that they wouldn't get the wrong idea," senpai shared.

Um, that's probably not the point. It's what you're doing, rather than saying, that's causing the misunderstandings. But yeah, I guess stuff like that is hard to fix.

Deeply ingrained behaviors were difficult to change. I knew that too. If I could change myself easily, I'd probably be living a more normal life right about now.

"Nao, quit slackin' off! The food's almost up!" the owner called out from the kitchen.

"Whoops, I guess I got carried away. Well, then—enjoy your meal, you two," senpai said, waving as she left us to head back to the kitchen. The only thing that remained was the drink that she had given us for free.

Not knowing what else to do, we both let our lips wander over to our straws. Our faces were so close that I felt my heart pounding every time I took a sip. I guess that was part of the fun, though.

Nanami must have resolved her worries, because she was smiling and overall seemed to be in a good mood. I, too, was glad that we were able to clear up any misunderstandings about senpai and my workplace.

I shouldn't have forgotten, however, this crucial point: that I had to be careful *precisely* when I felt relieved—when I let my guard down, and was at my most vulnerable.

"Nao-chan's older, but she's so cute. I'm glad that the rumor is just a misunderstanding," Nanami said.

"I'm happy you're happy. This way we can enjoy your birthday without anything hanging over our heads," I replied.

"Yeah! But does Nao-chan really get that up close and personal?"

"Yeah, I think she does. Even on the first day, she nearly fed me..."

"What?" Nanami said, in a voice so low I couldn't believe my ears.

In an instant, the air between us became extremely heavy. I let my guard down—I totally did. It wasn't even that senpai fed me. She only *tried* to. Still, I shouldn't have said anything.

Sweat poured out of my pores all at once. No, she didn't. She really didn't feed me. So please just stop looking at me like that. I'm getting super scared.

Is this...fear?

As I sat there, processing my emotions with all the skill of a heartless robot, Nanami looked at me and smiled.

Am I forgiven?

I was wrong.

"Your onee-chan is so sad to learn that someone else tried to feed you your food. I suppose this can only mean that I should take this moment to feed you too, right?" Nanami said.

Oh, crap. Are we really doing the whole "onee-chan" thing here too? We're at my workplace, so I was hoping she'd let me off the hook. But I don't think I'll be forgiven until I call her that.

"We're at my work though," I muttered—a last-ditch attempt.

"You don't like me feeding you?" Nanami asked innocently.

How unfair. When she puts it that way, I can't possibly say that I don't like it. But Nanami probably wants to have everyone see us.

Finally, I gave up and made up my mind.

After that, Nanami requested that I call her "onee-chan" at my workplace and that I let her feed me at my workplace as well.

I'm totally gonna get made fun of the next time I show up for work.



"Thank you for coming! Please stop by again!"

With Yu-senpai's send-off, Nanami and I left the restaurant. I felt bad that senpai took the time out to do that, given that the place was starting to get crowded.

We had our meal, and when the owners came over to our table saying that they wanted to meet Nanami, I introduced her to everyone. I was glad Nanami seemed happy about that.

The only thing was that they all found out about the whole "onee-chan" bit. I explained to them that it was only for today, but they were all grinning at me.

Man, I really don't wanna go back to work, I couldn't help but think.

"It was such a nice place! Maybe I'll try coming the next time you're working," Nanami said.

"That would be a little embarrassing," I muttered.

"But I wanna see you in your uniform. Can I? Please?"

Why, yes, of course.

I probably didn't look terribly interesting, since I was just wearing an apron over the uniform the restaurant gave me. Still, if Nanami was curious about it, then that made me happy. But I still felt embarrassed.

We left the restaurant and headed to our final destination, holding each

other's hands.

For our last stop, we were headed to the day's main event: to see the view at night from the observatory. The sun hadn't set yet, so it looked like we were going to be able to see the sunset from there, just as we'd been suggested.

Everything was progressing smoothly, with the date going without a hitch and us being able to accomplish our mission of seeing the night view. We hadn't had a single moment of turbulence. All in all, it had been a very calm and fun date.

And yet, as we walked with our hands linked, we were overcome with nerves.

The reason was because of something that happened while we were at the restaurant. I'd introduced Nanami to the owners, and when they asked us what we were doing afterward, we shared with them that we were going to the observatory.

That was when the owners' eyes lit up.

When I wondered what the deal was, we learned that the observatory we were now headed to was apparently called a "lover's sanctuary." I had included the spot in our date plan without knowing anything about that.

I didn't hear anything about it from my parents either. Maybe the place wasn't called that when my parents went there years ago.

If it was just a regular old sanctuary, I probably wouldn't have gotten so nervous. The problem, though, was why the place was called that.

A place fit for a marriage proposal...a place brimming with romance...

Apparently, that was why they called it a lover's sanctuary.

I was extremely nervous from the moment I learned that. Nanami probably felt the same way. She was trying to act normal, but her movements seemed somehow stilted.

I wasn't expecting for this awkwardness to return—not when we had come this far.

"Th-The view at night is gonna be so nice, huh? It's a clear evening, so I bet it'll be really pretty," Nanami said.

"Y-Yeah, definitely. I've heard that it's really pretty around sunset too," I replied.

"Oh, cool. Maybe we should pick up the pace, huh?"

"We still have time, but...you're right, we should probably hurry a bit."

It wasn't actually so late that we had to rush, but maybe our heightened emotions were urging us to reach our destination as quickly as possible. At least, that was how *I* felt.

I felt nervous—of course I did. Even still, I wanted to get there fast. I just couldn't stay calm. It wasn't as though I was going to do anything there. And yet...

Should I do something there? Aren't we supposed to do things like that only after we've given it a lot of thought? Is it okay to do something like that out of the blue? No, calm down, Yoshin. We're merely going there to see the view, not for me to propose. More importantly, we aren't even old enough to get married.

I felt like I'd said something similar before, but that was only *something similar*. It was like night and day between saying something similar and *actually proposing*.

Yeah, today we're just going to enjoy the view...

Even though that was what I was thinking, I found myself asking, "How do you want to be proposed to, Nanami?"

The words burst out of my mouth of their own volition, aiming straight for Nanami. The easy conversation we'd been having up until that point flew out the window, as I felt Nanami draw in her breath.

Yeah, even I'd be shocked if someone asked me that. I feel shocked myself for asking it. Why did I say it in the first place?

"W-Well," Nanami muttered, squeezing my hand—so much so that I thought her thin fingers were going to dig into me. Did Nanami always have such a strong grip?

Nanami seemed to think for a bit, but then she tilted her head.

"A proposal, huh?" she whispered, her voice full of emotion. I mean, it must

be a bother being asked that as a high schooler. I wasn't even sure what I was asking myself.

Nanami then smiled gently and asked, "In that case, how do *you* intend to propose, Yoshin?"

Huh?

I wasn't expecting to be met with a question, so all my thoughts completely froze. *Propose.. If* I'm *going to do it?*

I, of course, wasn't thinking about doing anything like that, so I couldn't come up with an answer at all. *Just how am I supposed to respond?*

For starters, is the only thing involved in a proposal the actual question about getting married? How would I propose... Do I do one of those, "Take the girl to a fancy restaurant, buy her a ring, and give it to her" sort of thing?

Maybe because I was still only a high schooler, but that image didn't really click with me. It either seemed like I was trying too hard, or I just simply couldn't imagine myself doing it.

"Maybe I'd like to bring it up, just in the middle of our day-to-day," I murmured, the words naturally bubbling up from inside of me.

"Of our day-to-day?" Nanami asked.

"Yeah. For example—and this is just an example—maybe we eat something tasty together, and we watch TV together, and in that moment, when I think about how happy I am, maybe...I just casually ask you if we should get married," I said.

Maybe that was the only kind of proposal that the me right now could imagine myself making. Asking if she wanted to marry me, without a whole lot of fuss—that was what felt most right.

"Maybe girls want something more romantic, but that's about the only kind of proposal I can imagine," I added, feeling bad that the idea honestly seemed pretty boring. Nanami, though, was laughing, delighted.

But I do wonder. I mean, as a guy, this is the kind of proposal that I'm able to come up with. A girl would probably dream up something totally different.

Something way more dramatic.

I guess I had never thought about it all that seriously before. After all, how many high school students seriously thought about marriage?

"In that case, I guess that's how I want to be proposed to," Nanami finally said.

"Huh?"

I was still mulling over the question when I heard Nanami's plain and simple statement.

Is that okay, though? I mean, my idea doesn't feel special in the least. My doubts must have been showing on my face, because Nanami poked the tip of my nose. When I blinked on reflex, she smiled at me—warmly, happily.

"What I want is a proposal from *you*, not a proposal from some random person I don't even know. That's why if you propose to me, any way you do it will make me happy," she explained.

She also added, laughing, that she didn't really know for sure, and that it might change in the future. That made sense—I didn't really know for sure either.

We were going to be college students one day, and then become adults after that. When we started thinking about stuff like that more seriously, maybe the thoughts we had now would change. No, they most definitely would.

That didn't mean, though, that the conversation we just had wouldn't mean anything. What was important was that we continue to remember how we felt, in the here and now.

"I'll look forward to the future," Nanami whispered.

"Yes. Please do," I replied.

I contemplated the future before us. All I wanted was to do my best to help keep the smile on Nanami's face.



Although, just a moment ago, I was trying to think of a cool way to propose to

Nanami...

"Whoa whoa whoa. What is this? It's super scary. Wait, is it shaking? It's shaking, isn't it? Are we gonna fall? We're not gonna fall, are we? Okay, let's calm down. We've gotta calm down."

"Yoshin, you're talking super fast right now," muttered Nanami.

Now, here I was, being astonishingly uncool in front of her.

We were currently on the gondola lift headed for the observatory. There were several ways to get there, but this was the method we'd chosen. One could travel by car or even hike, but since hiking wasn't really an option for our date today, we opted to go by ropeway.

We did, but...I didn't anticipate this turn of events at all.

"Oh my, Yoshin. If you're scared, your onee-chan will hold your hand for you. Here, I can squeeze it super tight," Nanami offered.

"Th-Thank you, onee-chan," I squeaked.

Wow, I'm totally uncool.

I never knew that a ropeway could be this scary. I didn't even know that I was afraid of heights.

In the beginning, my heart pounded with excitement as Nanami and I got on the ropeway, boarding a gondola that was surprisingly large and high up.

It didn't take long, though, for my heart to begin pounding out of fear instead. Actually, the pounding might have been from fear since the very start.

I thought maybe I was imagining it at first, but as the gondola moved farther along the ropeway, the more my legs shook. As the view outside the window climbed higher and higher, I increasingly began to feel that my feet had been thrown out into the air.

Whenever the gondola swayed ever so slightly along the way, I was convinced I was done for. I damn near leaped into Nanami's arms. I was pretty sure I had tears in my eyes. I was practically leaking sweat from everywhere, my feet felt like they were swaying, and my entire body was fidgeting restlessly.

All of these symptoms came together to signal one thing: fear.

Though it felt like an hour, it probably took less than a minute for me to get like this. In any case, it was the longest minute I'd ever experienced in my life.

I was pretty certain it took five minutes to get to our destination. That meant that this hell was going to continue for another four minutes. Honestly, I wanted to play it cool if I could...but I just couldn't.

The only thing I wanted to do now was to depend on Nanami as my onee-chan. I knew it was her birthday, but beggars couldn't be choosers. I was seriously terrified. I never wanted the ability to teleport myself more than I did in that moment.

This is bad. I'm so scared even my thoughts are becoming incoherent. Also, is this ride really going to end in five minutes? What if it isn't five minutes, but actually fifty minutes instead?

Oh no, the ground and the forest under us are growing farther and farther away. It's a pretty nice view, but I'm just too scared to enjoy it. Maybe this ride wouldn't have been so terrifying if we'd gone on it after sunset. Am I just scared because I can still see everything below me?

"Here, now, Yoshin. Everything is fine. Your onee-chan is right here with you," Nanami said soothingly.

"Onee-chan!" I yelled, unable to help myself.

Compared to my pathetic self, Nanami appeared terribly dependable. She almost looked handsome; to me, she just seemed to sparkle.

Around halfway up the mountain, where we seemed to be furthest from the ground, was when it hit me the worst. Though the gondola seemed perfectly stable as it moved along, it also felt like it was swaying in the wind.

If we plummeted toward the ground...at the very least, I needed to save Nanami. Wait, wasn't it also possible for the floor to fall out below my feet, and send only me tumbling headfirst out of the gondola? The floor looked like it was metal, but it was entirely possible for the screws keeping it together to come loose.

"Come on, Yoshin. Calm down, stay calm...take deep breaths, now," Nanami said, coming close to me and holding my hand as though to allay my fears. Unlike the way we usually held hands when we walked, she was clasping my hand gently.

She really warmed my heart. It also made me feel even more like a loser, but I couldn't deny the things that scared me. I had to first admit that I was scared, and then accept it.

"I'm okay, onee-chan. I think I'm starting to calm down," I muttered.

"Yeah? Don't push yourself, okay?" Nanami said.

The ground was growing closer, and my heart grew calmer along with it. We were probably going to be arriving soon.

Those five minutes felt exceedingly long. I didn't think I'd ever gone through a longer five minutes in my life. At least it wasn't painful or unpleasant. It was just five minutes of sheer, unrelenting terror. I didn't know what I would have done had Nanami not been there—I couldn't even imagine it. I probably would have gone insane.

I feel like I ended up making a memory that I didn't really wanna make.

The speed of the gondola gradually slowed as the ground also neared. This treacherous time was finally coming to an end.

When the gondola came to a halt with a loud clang, an announcement let us know that we had arrived at our stop. *Thank goodness, seriously...*

Nanami was holding my hand the whole time. It was as though we were child and guardian rather than boyfriend and girlfriend. But I really couldn't care less.

I felt safe.

Desperately suppressing the urge to make a mad dash off of the gondola, I waited patiently for the other passengers to disembark. Had I been by myself, I probably seriously would have run outside.

Nanami and I then slowly stepped out of the gondola. There was a small step, so I cautiously swung my foot forward until I felt the ground beneath it.

Oh my god—solid ground!

Human beings really shouldn't live away from the ground. We probably shouldn't fly, or do any other unnatural things. At least, I couldn't.

We'd finally made it to the observatory. Now it was time for me to enjoy the scenery with Nanami...

"Yoshin, I have some bad news," Nanami muttered.

Hmmm?

It was then that she very regretfully informed me that there was one more cable car ride we needed to take to actually reach the observatory.

Ah, yes. That's right. I'd looked it up, but I was so freaked out I completely forgot. There's still more ways to go. The cable car, huh? Just how high is it going to be?

Is this how people on death row feel? Right now, the ropeway gondola and the cable car looked to me like nothing but guillotines.

I convinced myself that I was merely imagining Nanami's look of joy at the situation.

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"I...I think I'm gonna die..."

"Oh my goodness, you are being so melodramatic. Literally just existing in a high place won't kill anyone," Nanami said to me.

"Dying from fright isn't completely out of the question," I replied.

"Well, this is rare—you're looking very sharp as you say something terribly pathetic," she murmured.

Yeah, she's totally right.

At first I was perfectly normal, but then I gradually said less and less, and then, I felt a chill crawl over me, and then, finally, I started blabbering in a fit of panic, spewing completely incomprehensible madness.

At least the cable car wasn't that far removed from the ground. That really saved me. It was a car, after all. Of course it had to be attached to the ground. Sure, it was on high terrain, but at least it wasn't suspended in midair like the

gondola. That alone made me feel much more reassured.

All hail solid ground.

Oh no. If I look outside the window, it's still kinda scary. Only a little, though, so I can still take a peek. Yeah, it's a little spooky, but it's a nice view.

While I sat there trying to cope, Nanami was next to me, seemingly deep in thought. What's she thinking about? Just as I asked myself that, she turned to me with a very warm smile.

Um, I don't know why, but—even though she's smiling—I have a very bad feeling about this.

"Hey, Yoshin," Nanami began.

"What's up, Nanami? Oh, uh, also, I think I'm okay on the cable car, so I don't think I need to call you 'onee-chan' here," I muttered.

"How about we go on a Ferris wheel next time?" she suggested.

"Please have mercy on me, onee-chan."

If she was going to spare me that, I was willing to do anything—as long as it didn't involve being in high places. I didn't expect her to propose that, though. A Ferris wheel? Did she mean that Ferris wheel? Like, one of the most popular activities for couples? And, by the way, every movie, manga, and novel terrorist's favorite target?

I could ride one, I was pretty sure, but not without immediately bursting into tears. I might even pass out if I went on a thing like that. If it happened to break down and stop while I was riding it, my heart would probably stop right along with it.

I knew there were situations where one's girlfriend would get scared and leap into the arms of her lover. If we went on a Ferris wheel, I was pretty sure I was going to leap into Nanami's arms instead.

Wait, would I be able to move enough to even try to hug her? The trepidation would probably just totally paralyze me. But Nanami seems to want to go on it. What should I do?

"If you want to ride it, I'll give it a try once!" I exclaimed, raising my index

finger forcefully. *Once—just once!* If it was going to be the first and last Ferris wheel ride of my life, then I could do my best to get through it.

I can, right?

As I sat there, already doubting my resolve, Nanami gently caressed the back of my hand.

"Sorry, sorry. You're just *so* cute when you're flustered. I couldn't help but tease a bit. You really don't have to force yourself, okay?" Nanami said.

"Was it that cute?" I muttered.

"Yeah, you definitely were! I got quite the show," Nanami said, chuckling.

I didn't quite understand what girls found cute, but I did have to admit that I'd probably find it cute if Nanami was in a mild panic. Maybe it was the same thing. At least she didn't say that I looked uncool. It was so much better for the person you liked to think that you were cute, rather than for them to think that you were lame, and then dislike you.

"Actually, I was wondering," Nanami began.

"Hmmm? Was there something weird?" I asked.

"If you're afraid of heights, do you think you'll be okay at the observatory?"

Oh, she definitely had a point. Since I had only learned today that I had a fear of heights, there was no way for me to look into that question ahead of time.

Was I not going to be able to enjoy the view from the observatory either? I really hoped, since it was Nanami's birthday and all, that that wouldn't be the case.

"It'll be okay! Your onee-chan is here with you, so there's nothing to worry about!" Nanami said, entering into onee-chan mode to try to comfort me. I mean, that was kinda fun too, but it didn't resolve the fundamental problem.

When push came to shove, I would have to pretend like I was okay.

All the while, the cable car moved along at a merry pace, until it finally reached the summit and arrived at the observatory. The uneven sway of the car as it stopped felt like a mirror of my own agitation.

Nanami and I then got off of the cable car and headed for the observatory. A warm breeze seemed to welcome us as we stepped through the building to the outside.

I closed my eyes as the wind caressed my face. When I opened them...

"Wow," we both murmured in awe.

Before us was the sky, nearly cloudless, and so blue I felt almost swallowed by it. The blue of the ocean was beautiful too, but this was something else.

Maybe it was because the sun had yet to set, but the sky was in a natural gradation, holding shades ranging from deep blue to white. The city below was more visible than I expected. From here, one had a three-sixty-degree view of the entire area. With this rare sight in front of us—a view we ordinarily would never see—Nanami and I looked at each other, and, without a word, started running.

Our attention had been focused on the blueness of the sky, but there was a strange object in the central area, with a square border surrounding it. I wondered what they were for, but before I looked into that, I wanted to enjoy the view first.

When Nanami and I got closer to the outside fence, the blue sky overwhelmed us even more.

"Wow, this is so cool! You can see the entire city at once! I wonder where my house is," Nanami said excitedly.

"They said the view was great at night, but it's super pretty even before then," I remarked.

"Wait, Yoshin, are you okay? We're pretty high up. Aren't you scared? You wanna hold hands?" Nanami asked, subtly reaching her hand out toward me. I finally realized then that I actually wasn't scared at all. I knew we were really high up, but I was perfectly fine. I was so prepared to have to pretend I was okay, that I almost felt a little let down that I genuinely was. Still, I had to admit I was relieved.

"I think I'm all right. Maybe I feel fine because I have both feet on the ground," I said.

I wasn't afraid to look at the scenery before me. If anything, I felt awe. It was the total opposite of when we were on the ropeway.

Though it was a relief that one of my concerns had been resolved...

"I see," Nanami said, looking somewhat disappointed. Could it be that she wanted to hold my hand? Or maybe she wanted the opportunity to console me again?

"Shall we hold hands?" I suggested to her.

"Yeah!" Nanami exclaimed.

I didn't know the exact source of her disappointment, but there was no problem with us holding hands. Nanami happily grabbed my hand, intertwined our fingers, and squeezed our hands together.

Nanami was being quite overt in her affection, even though we were out in public. But upon looking around us, it seemed most of the visitors were couples —even couples that looked our age. Everyone seemed to be taking in the scenic view.

Maybe here, it wouldn't cause problems for us to be a bit flirty with each other. If anything, it might have even been expected.

Of course, there were families present, as well as solo visitors. But couples seemed to be the overwhelming majority.

That made sense; this place was a sanctuary for lovers, after all.

The moment I considered letting go of the last of my nerves, a clear, bell-like ring pealed into the air. I turned to locate the source, and saw a couple making an object ring by pulling on a cord of some kind.

Ah, so it was a bell. Upon further observation, I noticed it hanging at the top of the structure. I was so taken by the scenery that I hadn't noticed, but all around us were various points of interest. The square border seemed to serve as a frame; people were taking photos while standing behind it.

"Should we take a look around? We can go ring the bell later too," I suggested.

"Oh, that sounds nice! A collaborative effort! But it's pretty loud, huh?"

Nanami replied.

I had to agree with her. People turned to look when the bell pealed, and the couple that had made it ring seemed taken aback by how loud the bell actually was.

If we were going to ring the bell, then we had to be prepared to call attention to ourselves.

When it was time for us to approach the bell, we saw that there were locks attached to its surroundings. *Why locks?*

A closer look revealed an explanation posted nearby. Hmm, let's see, now...

"I see, you write your name on a lock and put it on the fence around the bell. It's like a good luck charm that's supposed to help you stay with the person you're with forever," I explained.

"Let's do it!" Nanami exclaimed, her eyes filled with determination. In her eyes, and even around her, passionate flames danced wildly like an aura. When she looked around, though, she remarked, "Shall we buy the lock later? Seems like the sun's about to set. It's already so gorgeous."

"Huh? Gorgeous? Whoa, what the," I murmured.

And so we trotted over to the outer fence once again. What was before us was a slightly different scene than the blue sky we witnessed earlier.

The blue sky, the pink evening sun, and the white smattering of clouds—all the different colors came together to present a view that seemed like something straight out of a landscape painting.

With the sun nearing the horizon, the light was beginning to dim. But that was precisely why the light that still remained shone even more brilliantly. The city below us seemed to be bathed in the same colors as well.

I glanced over to my side, to Nanami.

Her face, shaded by the sun and sky, looked so beautiful. I felt like I could cry at any moment.

If the scenery was a landscape painting, then what would Nanami be? Maybe a religious painting; her presence exuded beauty, majesty, and power—so

much so that I was tempted to worship the very sight of her.

All those thoughts ran through my mind as I looked at her.

"Hey, Nanami. Smile," I said.

"Huh? Oh, jeez. Come on, you should be looking at the scenery," she replied.

"I wanna get a photo of you against this backdrop."

Maybe it sounded lame, but that was how I genuinely felt. I decided that I was going to have fun here, so that much must be allowed.

I learned this before this visit, but apparently this time of the evening was called the "magic hour"—a precious time, not even twenty minutes, right before the sun set for the day. I wanted to get a picture of Nanami during that twilight.

Against the blue and pink sky, Nanami gave me an embarrassed smile, paired with a little peace sign. I was so captivated by her that I nearly forgot to take the photo, but I managed to pull myself together and take one with my phone.

Seeing me so satisfied, Nanami smiled at me with mild exasperation. I couldn't help laughing at myself too, but just in that same moment, she sidled up against me.

"Since we're here, we should get one of the two of us too," she said as she brought her face up against mine. She then switched her camera to selfie mode and snapped a photo. Though a photo had been the source of such recent tension between us, I was happy that now, we were able to take photos together like this again.

It was gradually getting darker. There was still a bit of light left, but it was diminishing by the second. As it did, though, the color of the light also changed; it looked pink to me a moment ago, but now it looked more like a bright yellow. Since the sun was setting, maybe I should have seen that coming.

The place almost looked even more beautiful than it did during the day. Against the encroaching darkness, the last bit of light emitting from the sun seemed so bright that it could burn us.

They do say that you're not supposed to look at the sun directly...

"I wonder if sunglasses would let me look at the sun directly," I murmured.

"Huh? Yoshin, you wear sunglasses? Or do you want me to get you a pair for your birthday?" Nanami asked.

"Oh, no. I was just thinking out loud. Don't mind me."

"I guess I just wanna see you in sunglasses," she protested.

We stood next to each other and watched the sun go down. With the sky darkening, the lights below us began to turn on one by one. The lights at the observatory, too, began to turn on. Even though it was dark, we were still able to maintain visibility.

But the stars still hadn't appeared. We just couldn't see them, even as the sky dimmed and darkened.

Oh, the present—I almost forgot.

The birthday present that Nanami had once mentioned offhand—of course I'd bought it for her. It was something I thought up after hearing her request.

I was going to give it to her here. I was incredibly nervous, but this was the final mission that I'd planned for myself.

But jeez, was I anxious. I wasn't supposed to be *this* anxious. I imagined things being a lot smoother: I'd simply give her the present and see how happy it made her. At least, that was how I had *wanted* it to go.

Here and now, however, my heart was pounding, and I was nowhere near smooth. Just earlier, too, I had revealed how super uncool I was, with my newfound fear of heights. Nanami seemed to find it amusing, but I was absolutely kicking myself. So I aimed to redeem myself by giving her the present.

Unfortunately for me, I'd had no idea that this place was called a lover's sanctuary, and that it was an ideal spot for marriage proposals. I should have looked more into things beforehand. I did so well researching the location of the observatory and how long it took to get here, but I stopped myself from learning more about it because I wanted to be able to enjoy things on the day.

All of those decisions led me to my current state.

Daylight was gone, and the sky was now a deep navy blue. Was this how the sky always looked just after sunset? Would it get any darker?

Just as I was thinking that...it happened.

Something soft brushed up against my cheek. When I glanced over next to me, Nanami had already pulled away and was smiling bashfully. The lights around us were lighting up her face.

Nanami had kissed me on the cheek.

She had probably been waiting for it to grow darker. I was so taken aback by her kiss that I just stood there, pressing my hand to my cheek.

I had the vague sense that no matter how many times she kissed me, I would never get used to it—though I guessed that that wasn't really going to be a problem.

"Thank you for today. I want to tell you more just how grateful I am, but...this will have to do for now," Nanami said, giggling softly and looking slightly embarrassed as she touched her own cheek. The sight of her banished all my nerves.

All my unnecessary doubts just disappeared. If Nanami was happy, then what more could I ask for? If I gave her the present, she was probably going to be even happier. What could be better?

I was overthinking things. Didn't a great man once say, "Don't think, feel"? *Feel* Nanami more, Yoshin. Just not in a pervy way.

"What are you talking about? It's about to get even prettier. The night's just getting started," I remarked.

"Hee hee, I'm so happy that we get to be together like this. Won't you kiss me back?" Nanami asked, touching her finger to her cheek and taking a step toward me. Now that I had rid myself of my doubts, I had nothing to fear. I was more than happy to take on her request.

With no hesitation, I kissed Nanami on the cheek.

Oh, shoot. Now that I've done it, I feel super embarrassed. I really can't get used to this, no matter how many times I kiss her, or she kisses me. How do

other people deal?

Nanami, on the other hand, was squealing in delight. With the sun disappearing completely behind the horizon, the sky turned black as well. The city below was now completely lit up.

"It's so beautiful," Nanami whispered as she looked out at the city lights.

I thought that lights at night would be mostly white, but it turned out there were more orange lights than white ones.

Orange, white, blue, red...a myriad of lights were scattered everywhere.

The observatory itself was lit up too, and the lights from the city and the lights from the observatory seemed to illuminate us gently.

"I wonder if my house is over that way. I never knew how pretty it could be when you looked down from above," Nanami commented.

"Yeah, I never thought about it either, but it really is nice," I muttered.

It was on me that I didn't take the opportunity to say something here like, "You're more beautiful than the view, Nanami." I thought of it too late, and it would be weird if I said it with such awkward timing.

To make up for it, I decided now was the right time to give Nanami her present.

"Happy birthday, Nanami. I got this for you," I said to her, taking the gift out of my bag and handing it to her. Nanami took it with glee, holding it close to her chest.

"Wow, thank you! What could it be?" she asked.

"They're mugs. You said you wanted something we could both use, so I got us a pair of matching mugs," I explained.

"Mugs, huh? That's so nice! Let's use these for tea when you come over. Thank you so much," Nanami said, still happily holding the gift bag to her chest. This, at least, was a present that I had come up with based on Nanami's request.

I had prepared one more present for her, though.

"I also got you this," I muttered as I handed Nanami a small, square box.

Taking the wrapped box in her hands, Nanami tilted her head in wonder and asked, "What is it?"

I struggled to say out loud what it was, but I made up my mind to reveal the contents of the box.

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"Um, it's...a ring," I mumbled.

"Huh...?"

"Actually, it's a pair of rings..."
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That was the real reason I was reluctant to give her the second gift. In my defense, I hadn't known that this place was supposed to be a lover's sanctuary.

I was worried that giving her a ring at a place known as an ideal spot for proposals might come off as being a bit too much.

It was also true, though, that if I didn't give it to her now, I probably wouldn't find the chance. Genichiro-san was probably going to pick us up on our way home, and the idea of presenting a ring to Nanami in front of her father was way too embarrassing.

Besides, I wanted to give her her present when the mood was right. And if I really wanted to do it that way, then I had to do it now.

I was afraid of how she would react, but Nanami just stood there, frozen, with the box in her hands. Oh no, maybe it was too much. She mentioned at one point that she wanted one, so I thought it might be okay, but...

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"They're a pair?" she muttered.
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"Oh, yeah. So, um, there's one for me too..."

Nanami looked down at the ground in silence, and then slowly handed the box back to me. I had to admit that that nearly killed me, but I had to accept that the gift was just too much. I was still riding high emotionally from the aftermath of our camping when I'd chosen it, but it was clear I'd made a mistake.

That was what I was thinking, when...

"In that case, can you put it on my finger for me?" Nanami mumbled, gently pressing the box into my hands with her head still down. It took a very long time for me to process what she said.

Does that mean...she likes the gift?

"You wouldn't even look at me, so I thought," I began.

"Jeez, don't look at me. I probably look super goofy right now. I don't think a girl should even look like this," Nanami retorted, turning away and waving both her hands in front of her face. If I was going to put the ring on her finger, though, I needed her to look up at me. Or, wait, maybe I didn't?

With Nanami still unable to raise her head, I carefully unwrapped the gift, then took her ring out of the box.

The moment I took her right hand in mine, she looked up.

I smiled at Nanami—her face so red I could see it even in the dark—and slowly slid the ring along her thin finger. I placed it on the ring finger of her right hand.

The ring traveled smoothly along her finger, and when it finally met resistance, I removed my hand.

Nanami was frozen in place with her hand still thrust out before her, and she was staring at the ring on her right hand. She seemed completely unable to believe what she was seeing.

"It's not too tight?" I asked.

"No, it fits just right. It's so pretty," she murmured.

Good. I'm glad it's the right size.

I managed to measure Nanami's finger while we were at camp and she had been asleep. I had to look up how to measure ring size on my phone, but it looked like I'd gotten it right.

Nanami gazed at the ring on her finger, and then, as if she simply couldn't contain her joy, leaped into my arms. Fortunately, I was able to catch her, so we ended up embracing.

The people around us all were in the midst of their own moments, so they didn't seem to pay any attention to us. Though we were in public, it felt like we were the only two people in the world.

When I squeezed her, she squeezed me back.

After holding each other for a while like that, we eventually let go and took a step away from each other, though we kept our hands on the other's arms and looked into each other's eyes.

"Happy birthday, Nanami."

"Thank you, Yoshin."

The smile on Nanami's face was as bright as all the city lights below us.

Interlude: I Don't Want to Go Home

The city at night was an absolutely beautiful view.

But he was even more brilliant than that, I thought, smiling with a glance at my right hand.

Glistening on my finger was the ring that Yoshin had given me as a present, just a moment ago. The ring that *he* gave *me* was now on my finger.

"Tee hee hee," I couldn't help saying aloud with a smile.

The mugs I expected, because he had asked me what I wanted and I had mentioned them as potential options. The ring, though, was a total surprise.

I didn't really do surprises, nor had I been surprised much before. I never knew that it could make me so happy. It was just so *lovely*.

I bet he thought really hard about it. And it was that I most treasured.

I traced the ring, enjoying the feel of the metal on my skin. The silver ring gave off a warm glimmer of light, one that seemed even more beautiful than all the lights of the city put together.

No, it didn't even compare—it was breathtaking.

"It's just a cheapo thing."

That was what Yoshin said, but there was no ring that could be more valuable than this one. It was priceless.

After all, Yoshin wore an identical ring on his finger too.

When I asked him if he had his ring with him, he said that he did—so I asked him to let me put it on him.

I didn't know if that was what receiving a ring did to someone, but I suddenly had an irresistible urge to do that to him too. So I took his right hand and put the ring on his ring finger.

In that moment, it really hit me: Oh, they really are a matching pair. These are

rings for a real couple.

On the ring finger of my right hand, there sat the proof of my boyfriend's love for me. Just thinking that made me feel all giddy. I wanted to wear it every day. Oh, but maybe I couldn't wear it to school. I just wanted it with me somehow.

When I put the ring on Yoshin earlier so that we finally matched, I ended up blurting out a question.

"We're not gonna put it on our left hands?"

I kind of said it as a joke, but he responded to me with, "Your left hand is for the future." He really got me with that line, and in a way he hadn't managed in a while.

It's just a joke...is it a joke, though? I guess it doesn't matter, since I'm super happy right now. Still, even if it's on the right hand, if it's the ring finger...then it means what I think it means, right? It does, doesn't it? Or doesn't it? Wait, calm down, Nanami. Today is my birthday, I'm still a high schooler, and I just turned seventeen. It's still way too early for stuff like that.

Yoshin had worried that the gift might come off as being too much, but I was pretty sure that I was the one that was too much. I had all sorts of things inside me that could totally weigh him down. I was already thinking about stuff like this.

Still, I was happy—really happy. I was so happy that I could barely keep myself from jumping like crazy.

"H-How about for starters, we try ringing the bell?" Yoshin suggested in a panic, trying to change the subject.

"Y-Yeah. Let's!" I agreed. He was right—if I wasn't careful, I might end up staring at my ring and admiring it the whole time, failing to do anything else. I still had other things I wanted to do here: I wanted to ring the bell with Yoshin, have another couple take a photo of us, take a photo of them in return... Since we were here, we might as well put the lock on the gate too.

Now, though, I had something on my finger that was even better than a lock. I didn't need to rely on a good-luck charm anymore.

No, I should still do it. When it comes to stuff like this, more never hurts.

"Our names, and...what else should we write?" Yoshin asked.

"Hmmm, that's a good question," I said in return.

It appeared that we could write both our names and a message on the lock before we fastened it to the fence. Writing each other's names with a message —making a vow of true love—all of that sounded so amazing.

Won't it be embarrassing though, if we break up? We won't break up. There's no way. We'll always be together.

Well, I knew that the more time passed, the more room there was for rational thought to barge in and declare these kinds of things super embarrassing, so it was best just to do it right now, in the heat of the moment.

"How about we write...that we'll always be together?"

Hearing him say precisely what I was thinking a moment ago made me incredibly happy. Yes, let's go with that. Let's write that, and then hang up the lock.

We wrote the words together, and then attached the lock to the fence together. When I heard the metallic click of the lock, I felt like I had made some kind of an oath.

What was this feeling coursing through me? Was it omnipotence? Right now, I felt absolutely invincible. No one stood a chance against me. I could do anything; I could try anything. I could do things that I couldn't usually do.

I didn't even care about being called "onee-chan" anymore. Every time the lights of the observatory illuminated the ring on my finger, I couldn't keep myself from grinning widely.

"Hee hee hee..."

A very creepy laugh escaped my mouth. I probably had a nonstop, ridiculous smile on my face right now. Not that I cared what the other people around me thought about that, though. Right now, I felt like I could deal with anything that dared to stand in my way—the issue with the letter, or anything else.

"I'm so glad you like it, Nanami," Yoshin said.

"Yeah, I love it. I can't tell you enough how grateful I am," I said.

I wanted to kiss him right then and there, but there were people around, so I had to keep myself under control.

Oh, but I'm so happy. Oh so happy.

I rubbed the ring with my fingertip again. It was getting darker around us—and late too. The observatory would close soon, and we would have to go home.

We have to go home...

"I don't wanna go home," I murmured without thinking.

My words melted into the air around me without reaching his ears. They barely reached mine; how could I expect Yoshin to hear them?

I didn't want to go home—I *really* didn't. It wasn't just a subconscious thought lurking in my mind; my own desires were spelled out to me so clearly I couldn't help but be aware of them.

I occasionally stayed with Yoshin until it was this late, but such times were rare. We had been allowed to do that, though, because there was always an adult with us. On the trip, at the pool, and while we were camping too. There was always someone else with us at night.

Tonight, though, it was just the two of us.

Yoshin and me. Alone together for the very first time. On my *birthday*. At a time like this, it was totally normal not to want to go home. It had to be.

Okay, fine, maybe I was the only one who felt that way. Oh, well. Regardless, that was how I felt now: that I didn't want to go home.

"I don't wanna go home."

"What?" I muttered, incredulous at the fact that Yoshin said the exact same thing I said earlier. I was so elated that we shared the same feelings, in fact, that I was about to suggest to him that we not go home and spend the night together instead.

I knew, though, that if I did, the final fort I had inside of me might collapse. I

didn't know how Yoshin felt, but I knew that I would probably try to get him to spend the night together with me.

But, how?

Just then, certain words I had heard before replayed themselves in my mind.

"The motel by the river is a good place. Even if you're in high school, they can't tell if you're wearing normal clothes."

Where did I hear that? I remember it because it was so memorable. But...a motel? Motel?! Are we really gonna go somewhere like that? Is that what Yoshin is thinking? My mind racing, I said to him, "In that case, Yoshin, maybe we should..."

"I don't wanna go home... If I head home, I have to go on the ropeway again. Do I have to? It's completely dark. Is it gonna be even scarier than it was during the day...?"

I was way off!

I nearly let out a shrill shriek, straight from the pit of my stomach. I was so glad I didn't tell him I didn't want to go home either.

I really, really cut it close. Our conversation wouldn't have made any sense at all. I wasn't afraid of the ropeway and could go on it just fine, so Yoshin would have been confused about what I was talking about too.

Wow, I was so about to say something totally embarrassing...

That was what I thought, but when I looked at Yoshin more closely, he sort of looked like he was blushing a bit. Wait, why is he turning red?

If he was scared, I would have thought he would have been more pale. For some reason, though, his cheeks and his ears were red.

Can it be...

"When you said that you didn't wanna go home...did you mean something else?" I asked.

Yoshin's body jerked when he heard my question. He refused to look at me, as if his whole body had frozen in place and he simply couldn't move.

When I continued gazing at him from behind, his body began to tremble—as though he felt my stare.

I get it...

I approached him, one step at a time. With every footstep, his back quivered.

I totally get it...

I was so close to him I could touch his back. Yoshin really was shaking. I couldn't help being slightly amused. Wait, no, this was no time to be amused.

I had to muster up my courage.

I pinched the hem of his shirt and whispered, in a voice so low that only he could hear, "I don't wanna go home either."

His body jerked even more this time. It was probably different from the previous times his body had quivered.

He turned around slowly to look at me.

His face was completely red. I was pretty sure mine was too.

"No, um...I-I meant," he stammered.

"You said you didn't want to go home, but in a different way. But then you got embarrassed, so you pretended like you meant something else, right?" I suggested.

When he heard me, Yoshin nodded meekly. Of course—I feel the same way. And it's because I feel the same that I can tell he does too.

Still holding on to his shirt, I took another step toward him.

"I don't wanna go home either. I mean it in the same way," I whispered into his ear before quickly stepping away. *Play it cool, play it cool.* I tried, but I felt my face flushing.

After that, we both nodded in silence. I didn't really know why, but that was what we did. Then, with our hearts pounding, we left the observatory.

My heart kept doing somersaults in my chest, beating faster and faster with every step I took. If my heart rate kept going up, I was probably going to collapse.

We conversed only in single-word phrases, our exchanges starting and stopping intermittently. There seemed to be more time when we were silent than when we were talking.

That was how nervous we were when we thought about what was to come.

Yoshin was even silent on the gondola ride back.

That might have been what surprised me the most: Yoshin wasn't scared at all—so much so that I wondered what all the hullabaloo had been about on the first leg of the trip.

Is it because it's so dark outside that the height doesn't really register with him?

Or is it because he's thinking about what's gonna happen next?

I got nervous just thinking about it too, which made our ride on the ropeway end before I even realized it. What are we gonna do now?

Except...Yoshin and I had both forgotten about something very important.

"It's late, so I've come to pick you up."

"Dad," I muttered.

"Oh, Genichiro-san," Yoshin also mumbled.

Right, that was the agreement. I was so worked up that I'd totally forgotten about it. Yoshin, uncharacteristically, seemed to have forgotten as well. He was smiling awkwardly, as though this development had flustered him slightly.

Jeez, if things were going to turn out this way, I should've said that we didn't need to be picked up. But...no. There was no way that would have worked. They wouldn't have let us go on this date if either of us had said that.

I felt like I'd been instantly pulled back down to earth. Yoshin, too, let out a sigh, like he finally found a moment to collect himself. He and I looked at each other and shrugged at the same time.

My dad looked at us, his gaze seeming to indicate he sensed something was afoot. Yeah, I definitely can't let him find out what's going on.

There was something I realized because of this incident—

If no one had come to pick us up, we probably would've done something we really shouldn't have.

The impulse to want something the more forbidden it was was an entirely natural phenomenon. We definitely needed someone to keep us in check. Our parents probably told us that they would come pick us up for that very reason.

Oh, well. I guess this is the end of our date.

"Shall we go then, you two? Hop in," my dad said.

Wait, isn't Yoshin's father here? When I looked around, I saw that it was only my dad that was here. Did they end up going with just one person to pick us both up?

Yoshin and I got into the car to head back, but... Huh? Are we going just to my house? Aren't we going to drop off Yoshin first?

"Did you two enjoy the birthday date?" my dad asked.

"Yeah, I did," I replied.

"It was a lot of fun. Thank you for that," Yoshin added.

"Ha ha ha, there's no need to thank me. It seemed you were able to give her your present at the observatory too. What did you receive, Nanami?" my dad asked.

"Um, mugs and a ring... Wait, what?" I couldn't help saying.

"A ring, huh? Must be nice to be young. Maybe I should give a gift to your mother too one of these days," my dad continued.

"Um, yeah. I'm sure mom would really like that," I said.

Huh? Why does my dad know that Yoshin gave me my birthday present at the observatory? Did Yoshin talk to him about his plans?

When I looked at Yoshin, though, he was shaking his head wildly. *Hmmm?* How did my dad know, then?

Could it be...that my dad was there too? By himself? As our conversation with my dad continued throughout the car ride, I couldn't quite get rid of the strange feeling that his remark from earlier stirred in me.

Once we reached our house, my dad got out of the car. Huh? Is he going to drop me off first, and then take Yoshin to his house after?

"Come on, you two. We're here," my dad said, with Yoshin and I following him into the house.

That was when we saw—everyone was waiting there for us.

"Happy birthday, Nanami!"

"Happy birthday!"

Hatsumi, Ayumi, Oto-nii, and everyone else fired off their party poppers in unison. Yoshin and I just stood there in shock, our eyes opened wide.

It turned out that we had walked into the second part of my birthday celebration. We were all going to celebrate together, and apparently, Yoshin was going to get to sleep over at my house again.

I was so grateful that everyone had gathered to celebrate my birthday. At the same time, I was so moved by the fact that I was going to get to spend more time with Yoshin—I leaped straight into his arms again.



Part two of my birthday celebration began with everyone teasing us.

I only learned this later, but...

Apparently, the observatory we went to had a live feed that was streamed online. The camera was on from morning to night, broadcasting in real time.

Since the camera was at a distance, it wasn't possible to see visitors' faces. But the images were clear enough that, if you knew what your friends were wearing, you could identify them.

Apparently, Hatsumi thought at a certain point that maybe Yoshin and I would have made our way to the observatory by then, and she started checking out the live feed on her phone—eventually finding people that she thought might be us.

When Yoshin and I heard that and realized that we were being watched the whole time, we fell silent from shock. My dad somehow knowing what happened at the observatory now made total sense. *I see, I see...*

For our next outing, I'm most definitely going to keep our destination a secret!

Chapter 4: The Circumstances We Don't Know

Our eventful summer vacation finally came to an end.

This year's summer break was seriously intense. I realized that it was my first summer break where I had a girlfriend, but I couldn't help wondering if this experience was considered normal by everyone else.

It was certainly more fulfilling than just playing games every day, but I also felt super tired. It genuinely made me sad that our vacation was ending. I mean, before, whenever the break ended and I had to go back to school, the only thing I thought about was what game I was going to play when I got home that day.

"What should I do, Yoshin? I don't think I wanna go back to school," Nanami murmured.

"Funny you should say that, Nanami. I feel the same way," I replied.

Like me, it seemed that Nanami was also wrestling with these feelings. I never imagined that I would hear Nanami say that she didn't want to go to school.

Of course, we couldn't *not* go—so we dragged ourselves unwillingly to school. We had to motivate ourselves to go, and took an extra long time to get there.

We put on our uniforms, held hands, and walked the same path we took to campus every day. Gradually, we began to feel like we were getting back to our usual selves.

It had been a while since I last saw Nanami in her uniform too. During the break, she had always worn regular clothes.

Oh, shoot. I just remembered Nanami in her ring girl costume and her bathing suit. Calm down, Yoshin—right now, she's just wearing her regular school uniform.

"Hey, by the way—did you manage to finish all your summer homework?" Nanami asked.

"Oh, um, yeah. Yes. I'm pretty sure I did," I replied.

I managed to finish my summer homework—the archnemesis of summer vacation—thanks to help from Nanami. To come clean, I really only managed to finish it because I was under her strict watch.

She, as usual, cosplayed as a teacher the entire time.

Nanami had been wearing all kinds of outfits in front of me lately, so I was starting to think she was becoming less shy about cosplaying.

I couldn't say this out loud, but...I kind of wanted her to wear all kinds of different outfits for me someday.

The fact that school resumed on a Monday seemed to add to the postbreak blues. If this had been Friday, though, I guess the weekend right after would have messed up our schedule too. At least we only had our all-school assembly today, so it was better than having a full day of classes.

"If you finished your homework, then you should be all set for the assessment tests in the afternoon," Nanami added.

"What?" I muttered.

"Huh?"

Wait, what's that? What assessment tests?

As I started panicking, Nanami looked at me with the slightest hint of sympathy in her eyes.

"We had one last year too," she murmured.

"Seriously?" I groaned, looking up at the sky as if seeking help. I had completely forgotten about this. We had it last year too? Are you kidding me? You've got to be kidding me... But if that was what Nanami was telling me, then it had to be true.

Studying my reaction, Nanami smiled wryly, letting out a deep sigh.

"If you really did your summer homework, then you should be fine. I was the one tutoring you, after all. And the results of the assessment tests have nothing to do with your grades anyway," she explained.

"Really? Then there's nothing for me to worry about," I muttered.

"Are you really so unmotivated without some kind of reward? Gosh, Yoshin—even though summer break is over, I see that you still want your onee-chan to coddle you," Nanami continued.

You're gonna bring that up now, on our way to school?! I thought it was only for your birthday. What am I gonna do if someone hears us?

I-I really have to ace these tests. I wouldn't know what to do if she mentions it when we're in our classroom. It's not that I don't like it, but it can't possibly be good to have our classmates find out that I was calling Nanami "onee-chan." They're gonna wonder what we usually do behind closed doors.

Either way, I have to do what I can—both about the assessment tests, and about the other thing too.

"So, Yoshin...we're gonna have that talk today, right?" Nanami asked.

"That's the plan. I was thinking of going by myself, but..."

"I'll definitely go with you. It's about the both of us, after all," she said.

She would probably have come with me even if I told her that I'd go by myself, so it was easier to just plan on us going together.

I did, of course, intend to hear the story along with Nanami.

What story, you ask? It was, of course, the case of the class rep.

I had zero intention of seeing the class rep during summer break, which was why I told her that I would talk with her once we returned to school. Given what happened between me and Nanami, waiting until after the break was the right thing to do.

The day of the assembly, then, was what I considered to be the perfect day for this; classes would end early, and people would head home soon after—the ideal moment to discuss things in private. The assessment tests totally weren't on my radar, but our day would still be a shorter one than most.

Since I felt like I had the wind taken out of my sails, though, I should probably regroup.

I used the number the class rep gave me to confirm our meeting today, and to let her know Nanami would also come to hear her story.

I had thought about taking Nanami along as a surprise, but since I didn't want things to get complicated because of it, I let the class rep know ahead of time. I figured everyone needed time to mentally prepare.

But what I really told the class rep was that, since I had a girlfriend, I didn't feel all too comfortable being alone with another girl.

The class rep, though, seemed genuinely confused by my update.

She asked me all sorts of questions—why I wanted to discuss something that should be a secret from my girlfriend when she would be there with me, whether Nanami was okay with that herself, and even why I told Nanami about it in the first place.

The class rep's messages conveyed to me just how bewildered she must have felt.

If I had been in her shoes, I probably would have been confused too. If this were a manga, I'd probably talk with the class rep alone and not tell my girlfriend at all, thus leading to all kinds of misunderstandings.

But I had had enough of that kind of drama recently.

The photo incident with Yu-senpai was more than enough for me. Seriously. Carelessness led to one's demise. Well, I guess it was more likely to be a stress-induced stomachache instead of death, but it was a serious mistake nonetheless.

That experience taught me it was best to resolve the issue with the photo, as well as this current issue with the class rep, as quickly as possible. I wanted to avoid trouble at all costs.

I was going to end things—simply, plainly, and cleanly. And for that reason, I needed Nanami with me when I met the class rep.

Had the things during summer break never happened, I probably would have met with the class rep by myself.

I had already told Nanami about the thing with the class rep, but even back

then, I felt like something bad would happen if I met with the class rep alone. It was just a feeling I had, but still.

I wasn't sure if it was all in my head, but either way, I took the liberty of trying to prevent any possible misunderstandings.

Nanami and I were going to go together.

Two against one seemed unfair, but it wasn't like we were going to fight or have a duel. So I figured it should be okay.

We entered the classroom at the same time and greeted our classmates who had arrived early. In return, they teased us that we were as close as ever, and asked why I didn't get a makeover during the summer.

I'd totally forgotten that I'd considered dying my hair over the break. Given all the things that happened, though, if I'd actually gotten my hair dyed, I probably wouldn't have gotten around to it until it was so late in the break that it would have stayed that way when I came back to school. It was probably better that I didn't do that after all.

When I looked around, I saw that the class rep was already sitting in the classroom.

"Good morning," I said to her, approaching her seat.

"Morning," she muttered brusquely. She seemed somewhat perplexed by my greeting, but at least she responded.

Maybe she really was a bit wary of me. But I just went back to my own seat; it wasn't really something that bothered me either way.

The class rep kept stealing glances at me, clearly confused. I felt bad, but I was going to let her stew in that bewilderment of hers until after school.

Nanami might think less of me if I actually said this, but I felt like I was allowed to be a tad mean to the class rep. I knew this happened a while ago, but the class rep intentionally said something troubling to me during the break. Plus, it upset me how anxious all this made Nanami.

I didn't care about me; I didn't really mind the potential trouble that much. But for Nanami to have to deal with the possible misunderstanding that maybe the class rep liked me—that wasn't something I could so easily forgive.

I knew I was only taking it out on the class rep, but still, I wanted to keep her on edge a bit.

I couldn't tell Nanami any of this, of course.



The assessment tests went unexpectedly well...I thought.

Maybe it was because I took summer school seriously and diligently completed my homework. Or maybe it was because Nanami had tutored me. Either way, I felt like I did a pretty good job on the tests.

With one task done, the next one was about to begin. It was, of course, not the kind of task we would have learned about in class.

I had no idea what to expect from this conversation with the class rep.

Nanami and I were waiting for her at a certain place—a place that held a lot of memories for us.

It was the place where the two of us began. It was also the place where the dare ended.

We were in the back of the school building—where Nanami confessed to me.

Surprisingly, it was the class rep who suggested this as our meeting spot. She told us ahead of time that she might be late, and suggested we wait for her here.

Nanami and I were intimately familiar with this location. If the class rep chose it, then she must also know about our ties to it.

"I wonder what she's gonna say to us," Nanami murmured.

"It'll be okay. I don't think anything bad will happen," I told her.

After all, I already knew about the dare, so if that was what the class rep was going to tell us, then the whole conversation was going to turn pretty silly, pretty quickly.

If that was the case, however, then perhaps it could help end the conversation quickly.

The real problem was how the class rep knew about the dare, and whether anyone else did too. I assumed that she wasn't the type to go around telling everyone. That was what unsettled me though: why *didn't* she tell people?

It was when I reached out to Nanami's hand to soothe her anxiety that the class rep showed up.

On the surface, she looked perfectly normal—though I admit I didn't really know her well enough to know one way or the other. When I say "normal," I mean that she looked as cool and collected as she usually did during summer break. Her serious demeanor didn't seem to have a single crack in it. The fact that she could keep that up despite Nanami's presence impressed me.

"I'm sorry I'm late. The teacher asked me to help with a bunch of things because of the assembly," she explained, apologizing in a way that seemed to downplay just how demanding the tasks might have been.

"Oh, that's not a problem. You must have a lot on your plate too," I said.

When the class rep saw Nanami, though, her eyes opened wide momentarily in surprise.

"So Barato-san really came, huh? I have to admit I'm a little surprised," she said, while still sounding like she wasn't. Yet, looking at her expression, I would have guessed that she actually was surprised.

"Yeah. I mean, we had things we wanted to ask," I muttered.

"Things you wanted to ask?" the class rep repeated.

I took out a piece of paper and showed it to the class rep. It was the letter that had been placed in Nanami's shoe locker. The class rep saw it and at once, mild shock flashed across her face.

Soon enough, however, she regained her usual composure. She didn't seem to have the most expressive of faces.

"You're the one who put this letter in Nanami's shoe locker, right? Why did you do that?" I asked.

At my question, the class rep turned her gaze to Nanami, her eyes hostile. When that quickly faded too, she looked at me again and sighed.

"You're right, that's the letter I sent to Barato-san. I never would have thought that you'd even find out about that. So...what did you think when you saw it?" the class rep asked.

"What do you mean?" I muttered.

"Did you think that your own girlfriend couldn't possibly do something like that? But what that letter says is the actual truth—even though you probably don't even know it," she continued.

Er, actually, I do know. I feel really bad for the class rep, since she looks super serious about all this. But I already know it. Dang, this really is turning into a kind of farce...

All I wanted to know was why the class rep sent that letter to Nanami. I wasn't much interested in anything else. Just as I was thinking that, though, the class rep said something that even I didn't know.

"Also, there's something I have to apologize to you about," she began.

"To me? But I don't think you've done anything to *me* that you have to apologize for," I replied.

I kind of wanted her to apologize to Nanami, actually, but when I heard what next came out of the class rep's mouth, I fell speechless.

"On the day Barato-san confessed to you, I was the one who threw the water out of the window," she said.

Her declaration made both Nanami's and my brains shut down momentarily. The one who...threw out the water that day? Just thinking about that fateful moment made my head throb. My injury had completely healed and there should have been no pain, but I couldn't keep myself from touching that part of my head anyway.

Nanami's eyes were wide open too as she stared at the class rep.

"I'm really sorry about that. I had no intention of hurting you. It's just that..."

The class rep paused mid sentence. She then stole a glance at Nanami and, with her head held high, continued, as if using her posture to convince herself that she had done nothing wrong.

"I just wanted her confession—a confession sparked from a *dare*—to fail," she announced loud and clear.

The class rep wasn't looking at me—she was looking straight at Nanami. That was when I realized something: that the words she had just spoken were steeped in hatred.

It was different from the impersonal, stiff way she spoke over summer break. Right now, the class rep was directing very clear emotions toward us...no, toward *Nanami*.

I stepped in front of Nanami to shield her with my body.

"I was told the culprit of that incident was never found. Didn't you come forward to confess that it was you?" I asked.

"I did. I told the teacher that I was the one who dropped the bucket. But...they didn't believe me," the class rep replied.

They didn't believe her?

When I twisted my neck in bewilderment, the class rep laughed almost self-deprecatingly and remarked, "Despite how I look, I'm a mild-mannered honors student. Math can be tricky for me sometimes, but otherwise, I do well in school. I even volunteer to help the teacher."

"You mean, they didn't believe you because of that?" I asked.

"They assumed I came forward in order to protect someone else. I never thought my good behavior would lead to that kind of misunderstanding," the class rep concluded, a wry smile on her face as she looked up at the school building. Above us was that window that was now locked and sealed, never to be opened again.

I could understand what she meant. If she had come to me and told me she was the one to do something like that, I probably wouldn't have believed her either. It might be different if I'd caught her in the act, but if she was only telling me, then I would find it hard to believe.

More importantly, though: if the class rep knew of the true nature of Nanami's confession and tried to ruin the whole thing, then...

"Did you not tell the teacher about the dare?" I asked.

"Don't worry, I didn't say anything about that part of the confession," she replied.

Nothing would have changed anyway, even if I had, she muttered, seeming resigned. She was right to assume the teachers would probably think twice before stepping in on something that was just hearsay.

But it was still a relief to hear. If the teachers didn't know, then there was no problem. We wouldn't need to worry about them thinking badly of Nanami.

"Why do you seem relieved?" the class rep asked, grimacing. My reaction completely baffled her. Unlike what she had displayed before, this seemed like a genuinely emotional reaction.

"Aren't you...I mean, Barato-san confessed to you because of a *dare*. Isn't that unforgivable? Why do you look so relieved?" she pressed.

With every word she spoke, the class rep was practically spitting venom. Nanami, overwhelmed, actually took a step back. I swiftly took her hand in mine, hoping to reassure her.

But that seemed to only anger the class rep more.

"Why are you defending her? She said she'd dump you after a month. And when I thought you two were going to break up, you just kept dating. And now everyone is talking about how much you guys like each other. I just don't get it," the class rep muttered, her words now overflowing with so much quiet rage that even I was intimidated. I felt like I'd never been presented with such open hostility before. Maybe when I went up against Shibetsu-senpai. And even then, it had felt like a much...kinder hostility.

This time, the malicious energy felt so strong that a part of me just wanted to take Nanami and run. My legs even started shaking a little.

I knew that was pathetic. But I never knew until now how scary a truly angry woman could be. To be fair, it could also be that I was just bad at dealing with hostile people in general.

Still, I had to pull myself together. I couldn't back down.

Even if I was uncool in front of Nanami, I absolutely couldn't let her see me run away from this.

"Can I ask you one thing?" I asked the class rep.

"Of course. Though I think it's better for you to ask Barato-san rather than me," she responded.

"Do you maybe like me or something?" I blurted out.

As soon as the question left my mouth, it struck me how conceited I must've sounded. Even playboys nowadays didn't say such ridiculous things.

Oh, see now? Everyone else is thinking the same thing.

Nanami stared at me in total shock, while the class rep gave me a thoroughly exasperated look, as if I was some kind of an idiot.

It wasn't like I was dying to ask that either! It made me sound like a total creep. But unless I clarified this point once and for all, I couldn't continue the conversation, nor could I reassure Nanami. I wanted to know for certain that the class rep didn't like me.

It cost me to ask it, but still...

"Um, uh, I mean, why would you...?" the class rep muttered, her tone still hostile, though confusion seemed to be winning out in her voice. She was waving her hands around, which for her might as well have been an extreme overreaction.

We were having a serious conversation, so I was trying to keep it in, but I could feel how hot my cheeks were getting, and that I was starting to sweat.

"Well, I mean, I just want to know why you'd trouble yourself to sabotage the dare. Like, if you were doing it out of a sense of justice, or...something else," I explained.

"O-Oh, I see. Um, right, so...I absolutely do not like you like that, so don't worry. I...had someone else that I liked," the class rep replied.

I knew it was strange to be relieved to hear that someone didn't like me, but I was: we had managed to clear up at least one concern that Nanami had.

I could also tell that Nanami, who was still standing behind me, was also relieved. Saying I was glad for the class rep's disinterest seemed insensitive, though, so I decided just to keep my mouth shut. Out of context, my words would make me sound like a terrible guy. In situations like these, it was best not to say anything unnecessary.

So if she didn't do it because she had a crush on me, then why did she do it? Pure righteousness? Were people really capable of doing something like that just for justice?

"But then, that means the confession really had nothing to do with you. Why did you try to stop it?" I asked.

"Nothing to do with me? Well...I guess you're right. But I still couldn't forgive something like that," she said.

"You couldn't forgive...as in, you couldn't let it go because you take things like that very seriously?" I wondered out loud.

Was she really so serious a person that her sense of justice would compel her to intervene? I could understand that it was normal for some people to feel like they couldn't let just things like that go. In that case, such an angry reaction made total sense. I really couldn't say anything to criticize that.

Still, pouring water on someone in order to stop such a situation...wasn't exactly throwing a wet blanket, but it certainly was a move that would be frowned upon.

The class rep, though, shook her head as if to deny the suggestion. She then grabbed her uniform around her chest, as though the area was causing her pain.

"No, it's not because I'm serious. And it's not because of justice. I just couldn't forgive such a thing," she said.

"Wait, but isn't that precisely..."

"Because I was also confessed to on a dare before."

What?

I was at a loss for words. I was also confessed to on a dare. At this revelation,

Nanami and I wordlessly exchanged glances.

Maybe because she caught us doing so, the class rep went on, saying, "There was someone I liked, and he confessed to me. I was so happy—so, so happy.

But then he told me that he only asked me out on a dare. He made fun of me, and it ruined me. It hurt me so much...!"

She had started off speaking softly and calmly, but her voice gradually grew louder and more forceful. It was as though remembering the incident had rekindled her anger.

"I became uncomfortable around boys, and eventually I decided that it was better not to go out with anyone. And then...I heard it by accident, the thing about the dare. That someone else was going to have to go through the same thing I did," the class rep went on.

Her heartbreak was so palpable that even Nanami and I could feel her pain. I finally understood why the class rep was so hostile toward Nanami.

Nanami squeezed our intertwined hands, which had grown hot over time. I squeezed back.

"I just needed to stop the dare, any way I could. And to be honest...I wanted whoever did such a thing to get what was coming to them. I tried to get the retribution I couldn't get for myself back then," the class rep said.

With such a hurtful experience in her past, it was perfectly understandable why she'd then hear something about a dare and instantly feel compelled to do something about it. For the first time, I felt like I was having an actual conversation with the class rep.

We didn't interrupt her until she finished her story. We listened to her in silence until the end.

To me, the class rep was acting based on her sense of justice. She tried to stop the dare to prevent anyone else from going through what she did.

But entangled with her sense of justice was a darker desire. Even though Nanami didn't confess to the class rep on a dare, the class rep wanted to be the one to punish Nanami anyway.

If the punishment was only to pour water on Nanami, though, then maybe the class rep wasn't such a terrible person after all. She didn't deliberately drop the bucket; it was probably just an accident. She must have heard Nanami's scream and was so shocked by it that she lost her grip on it. And then the bucket just so happened to hit me. That was why things got a little complicated.

"So why are you sharing this with me now?" I asked.

"Because...because I still can't forgive any of this," she muttered.

Maybe it was from recalling such an awful moment in her past, but now the class rep was standing before us with tears in her eyes.

I didn't know exactly what that past was like, but it wasn't difficult for me to imagine that she must have experienced a lot of pain then.

Thinking about what the class rep said earlier, though, I also understood that the reason she was telling me any of this *now* wasn't simply out of a sense of right and wrong.

I stepped forward, trying to hide Nanami and protect her even more. We were only exchanging words here, so physically blocking Nanami didn't really mean much. Still, I couldn't stand the idea of Nanami having to see the class rep like this.

"You can't forgive...the dare?" I asked.

Or was it the fact that we were *still* going out, despite the dare? I had to ask. The class rep, though, opened her eyes wide in response.

She breathed in deeply, then in a low voice—but still very clearly—replied, "That's right. It's a dare...it's a confession based on a dare. It's *fake*. So how is it that you can keep going out with her, and be so happy while completely in the dark about everything? Why do you both look like you like each other so much?"

You were confessed to on a dare too—so why do you seem so happy?

I couldn't do that. It's not fair.

This was the true source of her hostility. She wasn't just directing the words to Nanami; she was saying them to me too.

The moment she said that, the hostile gaze she had been directing toward Nanami came to include me as well. In the eyes of the class rep, I was also committing a reprehensible act. That was why, when Nanami didn't respond to the letter that was left in her shoe locker, the class rep approached me. In other words, she did it hoping that it would ruin our relationship.

It wasn't justice that motivated her. It was resentment.

"So, this is everything I know...and why I bothered to tell you any of it now. And now let me ask you a question: why are you still trying to protect Baratosan?" the class rep asked me.

Seeing her so close to tears, I hesitated for a moment whether to tell her the truth or not.

She told us all this not because it was the right thing to do, but more in order to make herself feel better.

I sympathized with her situation. I really did. But the thought that I could have easily ended up just like her made me hesitant to tell her the truth.

As I stood there trying to figure out what to do, Nanami stepped out from behind me. She then started walking slowly toward the class rep. In a panic, I ran to catch up with her.

What is she going to do?

When she reached the class rep, Nanami bowed deeply to her and said, "I'm sorry."

The moment the class rep seemed to register that Nanami was apologizing, she looked to be at a loss for words.

"I know that apologizing won't help, but...I'm sorry. I feel like I caused you a lot of pain," Nanami said.

Then, raising her head, she looked straight into the class rep's eyes. Even though Nanami didn't do anything directly to the class rep, it was undeniable that Nanami had affected her regardless.

I couldn't defend her from that.

But I could be by her side through all this.

"It's true that I confessed on a dare, but I honestly like Yoshin. That's the truth, and that's why we're still going out even though the one month is up," Nanami explained.

"What do you mean? What are you saying?" the class rep asked.

Anyone else could have been enraged, but the class rep still kept her cool. Just because she was calm, though, didn't mean she wasn't still upset.

As proof of that, the next words out of the class rep's mouth were aggressive and forceful.

"What do you mean, you ended up liking him even on a dare?! How does that even happen?! I didn't get that! Are you trying to tell me that, even after finding out the truth, you still like Barato-san?!" the class rep demanded, turning to me to ask her final question.

Nanami accepted all of the class rep's outbursts in silence. She probably had no intention of arguing with the class rep. That was why, after apologizing, she didn't try to defend herself in any way.

Maybe because the class rep knew that, she ended up directing her question to me as well. In response, I said calmly, "You're right—I like Nanami. Even after everything, I still like her just the same."

"But why?" the class rep muttered.

"Because I already knew about the dare," I said simply.

"What?"

And this was when I told the class rep everything—about the relationship between me and Nanami.



Personally speaking, I thought I had been as understanding as I could of the class rep's recent actions.

Well, to be precise: I really was understanding. After all, I was much more

convinced by the actual reasons she gave than by some mere pleasantries about a sense of justice or what have you.

The class rep was clear that she had acted based on her emotions—personal emotions that worked in concert with her past experience. Though what she did was dangerous and couldn't be swept under the rug so easily, I understood her motivations for doing what she did.

I might have thought to be understanding, though, because of the state that the class rep was in.

Long story short, the class rep ended up crying. And she wasn't crying quietly or anything like that—she was practically bawling. She was like a little kid throwing a fit. I had only gotten to know the class rep through our brief conversations during summer school, so her breakdown took me completely by surprise.

There was another thing I didn't expect.

Nanami ended up crying with her. She wasn't bawling like the class rep, but was crying quietly, equally shocked by the situation in her own way.

The class rep eventually explained to us why she did what she did. Even though she was crying, and a good portion of what she said was incomprehensible, I was able to piece most of it together.

The class rep used to have someone she liked, a childhood friend whom she had known for many years. He ended up confessing to her when they were in middle school.

Apparently, though, he had confessed to her on a dare. He revealed that to her soon after his confession, so they had never actually dated.

That alone would have been enough to hurt someone, but that boy actually went on to confess to Nanami later. I had no idea this guy even went to the same high school as us.

Nanami ended up rejecting him, obviously. Regardless, that moment planted a small seed of jealousy in the class rep's heart.

Of course, the jealousy wasn't anything serious. The class rep was confessed

to on a dare, and her first love didn't work out, but then Nanami was confessed to by the same guy for real. That was all it was. Anyone would have felt similarly, and if that had been the extent of the story, then the class rep wouldn't have done anything.

The problem was what came after—when the class rep heard that Nanami was going to confess to someone on a dare too.

It was a development that ignited an emotional tumult within the class rep, leading to her throwing a bucket of dirty water from the upstairs window. The dropping of the bucket itself, at least, seemed unintentional. And even that, I had managed to thwart without knowing. But Nanami's confession was still successful, thus leading to the start of our relationship. I wondered how the class rep felt when we announced it in class.

After that, the class rep didn't take any action at all.

If Nanami and I were going to break up after a month, the class rep felt she wouldn't have to make any waves in order for our relationship to come to an end. She thought that if she said anything unnecessarily, she would end up hurting me, in the same way that she had been hurt before.

The relationship between me and Nanami didn't end after a month though.

That was when the class rep thought—that if we were still dating even after a month, maybe Nanami was thinking of an even more horrendous way to break up with me.

At the same time, the class rep probably realized something, albeit subconsciously: the possibility that we were *actually* going out now. She was, however, unable to accept that.

Because such a turn of events never unfolded for her.

No longer caring how others might consider her actions, the class rep ended up leaving the letter in Nanami's shoe locker just before summer break.

I mean, I guess maybe she really couldn't help herself? As in, I understand that that doesn't mean she's totally off the hook, but had I been in her shoes, I might have done something similar too.

Like, if the person I like confesses to me on a dare, and then soon after confesses to someone else for real but gets rejected, and then the person who rejected the confession confesses to yet another person, also on a dare...

Okay, I'm getting confused just thinking about it.

So I guess the only thing the class rep couldn't have counted on is the fact that I knew about the dare from the get-go. But her being the one to do all this and her reasons for it really shocked me, so I guess that makes us even.

"How did you...already...know about it?" the class rep managed to ask between sobs.

"I mean, I was there in the classroom that day too," I muttered in response.

"But how?" she continued, hiccuping. "I didn't even notice you were there."

Even as Nanami tried to console her, the class rep glared at me, her face drenched in tears. At least she didn't scare me anymore.

But aside from that, how unnoticeable was I, really? Were my ancestors ninja or something? I was pretty confident, though, that now I might be a bit more noticeable.

The class rep sat and continued crying for some time after that. Maybe Nanami was going with the flow of things, or maybe she felt bad for the class rep, but either way, she didn't stop comforting her.

Seeing Nanami hugging the class rep brought the word "mother" to my mind, but since it didn't seem fitting for the situation, I kept my mouth shut. I made a mental note to mention it to Nanami later though. Nanami was holding the class rep as she comforted her, so I couldn't hug Nanami myself. That actually made me feel a little sad.

The class rep didn't stop crying, but since there was no one else behind the school building, at least we weren't going to be spotted by anyone.

After crying her eyes out and being consoled by Nanami, the class rep must've gotten it out of her system—because she eventually raised her head and looked at me with suspicion.

"Hey, Misumai-kun...can I ask you something?" she inquired, letting out the

last of her sobs.

"Sure, you can ask me as many questions as you want," I replied as lightheartedly as I could.

"One will do for now," the class rep murmured. She then wiped away her tears and, sniffling, quietly shifted away from Nanami, who had been sitting nearby the entire time. The moment she did, though, I heard her whisper a soft "thanks" to Nanami. Then, with a quick shake of her head, as if to shift gears, the class rep turned and gazed at me.

I swallowed hard at now being the focus of her attention. I didn't know what she was going to ask me. A slight tension rippled throughout my body.

"How were you able to like Barato-san, even though you knew it was a dare?" she asked.

Why was I able to like her, huh...?

It was a simple question, but also an extremely difficult one. *How I was able to like her.* I could come up with potential responses for *when* I liked her, but I'd never even thought of *why* I was able to like her.

"Maybe because I worked really hard so that she would like me, even though it was a dare," I finally said.

"You worked hard?" the class rep said, with some hesitation.

"Yeah. Um, I can't really explain it, but...having her like me also meant me liking her too."

"What is that? What does that even mean?" the class rep muttered.

I guess it's the chicken or the egg.

I couldn't have done the things I did to get Nanami to like me if I didn't like her myself. The process of doing so was what probably made me end up liking her for real. Maybe I was just easily influenced, or maybe I had the cause and effect totally backward. Still, didn't people say that you had to like the other person first before you could get them to like you?

All of those factors probably just clicked into place for me. Because everything lined up, Nanami we were able to end up liking each other.

Maybe it wasn't just simple luck. Maybe we drew a lot of the luck to ourselves, and as a result probably had had a whole lot of good luck come our way. If any single thing had gone wrong, we probably wouldn't have gotten to where we were today.

"I see," the class rep muttered, seeming somewhat convinced, though I wasn't confident that I had given her a satisfactory answer. She heaved a deep sigh, as though she was thinking about something.

Sensing the class rep's mood take a turn, Nanami said to her, "I'm sorry that I was thoughtless and caused you all this trouble." She then turned toward me and said, "And I'm sorry to you, too, Yoshin. I got you involved in all this."

"Sure, but I'm probably just as complicit as you are. And if I'm gonna get involved in anything you do, then as your boyfriend, I couldn't be happier," I said to Nanami.

Maybe the correct response there was actually to say, "Not at all," or "It's not your fault, Nanami." But I didn't feel it was right to turn away from the truth.

And I didn't think that Nanami wanted that from me either.

Nanami confessed to me on a dare. I accepted her confession knowing that. If this was the result, then it was on both of us. We had to act with that in mind.

Nanami smiled at my answer and muttered a soft thanks. I smiled back at her.

Seeing my expression and Nanami's in turn, the class rep muttered, with some sadness and regret, "I wonder if I should've worked harder when I received my fake confession."

"I'm not sure. I mean, you were told pretty quickly afterward that it was all a dare. It could've been that, even if you had worked hard at it, things wouldn't have really changed," I replied.

"How blunt of you, Misumai-kun. But...I guess now I can understand that he could have had his own reasons for doing what he did. Like, why he picked me as the one to confess to on a dare and stuff," the class rep said.

Now that she was more calm, the class rep was looking into the distance, as if remembering her past. It was scary to face the source of your trauma, but right now, she seemed to be doing everything in her power to confront it.

"If I had just thought back then about why he was doing it, then maybe I could've actually ended up dating my childhood friend. Or maybe we still would have broken up," she continued.

In the end, though, she laughed softly and said, "Well, I guess it's too late now." The smile on her face looked sad, but it seemed as though a load had been lifted from her shoulders. She also no longer displayed the odd theatricality I'd sensed about her before.

Maybe she had finally been able to reconcile with what had happened.

The class rep inhaled deeply, then exhaled slowly. She did that several times, and then slowly closed her eyes as well. After a moment she stood up and, upon opening her eyes, bowed her head deeply toward us.

"I caused so much trouble for the both of you. I'm sorry," she said.

Taken aback by her apology, Nanami and I looked at each other.

It occurred to me then that I could have traveled the very same path as the one the class rep had. If any one thing between me and Nanami had gone awry, and we had had a misunderstanding, our relationship could have gotten twisted, could have even fallen apart entirely...

Just thinking about it sent shivers up my spine.

But that, too, had been a completely plausible outcome. With full knowledge of just how likely another future could have awaited, I was convinced that every single event had significance.

That I had been confessed to on a dare. That I had saved Nanami from the falling bucket.

Nanami must have understood what I was thinking from the look in my eyes, because she nodded slightly at me. I nodded back, and then I turned to the class rep and said, "Please raise your head. I'm totally fine, and Nanami..."

"I'm fine too! And I totally forgive everything!"

We really had been the cause of the problem, after all. If the class rep was willing to apologize about the letter at least, then we had nothing more to ask.

When the class rep heard our declarations, she looked up at us, smiled softly,

and let out a soft, "Thank you."

Unlike the wistful smile she'd shown earlier, this one seemed like it came from her heart. The class rep then sighed in relief, and...crumpled to the ground.

"Now that it's all done, I think my knees have totally given out. I know I started this whole thing, but I was so nervous the entire time," she muttered.

As if trying to calm herself down, the class rep inhaled deeply, then exhaled slowly. She took several deep breaths, but she still seemed unable to stand.

It would probably be better for us to stay with her until she was able to pull herself together.

"I, um, didn't realize at all that you were uncomfortable around guys," I commented to the class rep.

"Yeah, I got that way after what happened in middle school. That's why I really had to work myself up to talk to you," she replied.

Was that why she barely talked to me during summer school, and never ate lunch with me? Maybe she always spoke in an overly formal way because of that too.

The fact that she was uncomfortable around guys was something she had in common with Nanami as well. Nanami's discomfort came from an incident in elementary school when a boy had done something to her. Nanami didn't seem to remember that incident well, but if the class rep experienced a similar thing while in middle school, then she would have remembered it very clearly. It must have been quite traumatic for her.

I hoped that our conversation would help lessen her trauma, even if only a little bit.

"You don't like boys either, huh? Then we're the same," Nanami said to the class rep.

"You're like that too?" the class rep asked Nanami.

"Yup. Honestly, it used to be really bad," Nanami replied. She then added that she was better now because of me. Perhaps out of consideration for the class

rep, Nanami didn't cling to me like she usually did.

It was true—I had complex feelings about it, but Nanami's aversion toward guys was definitely decreasing. It still worried me though, especially the thought of guys approaching her. I knew I would just have to trust Nanami in that department though.

"I see, so it's thanks to Misumai-kun. But you also seemed pretty okay even before you started going out with him," the class rep remarked.

"You think so? Well, I guess I was doing a lot back then so that I would be okay," Nanami muttered.

Just then, Nanami raised her index finger as if she'd thought of something. She turned to the class rep, a wide grin on her face, before leaning over to whisper into the class rep's ear.

Although the class rep seemed bewildered at first, she eventually gave a slight nod, probably won over by the force of Nanami's serious but giddy persuasive skills.

It wasn't until the next day that I would learn what exactly Nanami had whispered to the class rep.

Epilogue: Makeover Reveal, One Day Late

The day after the class rep, Nanami, and I had our conversation, there was a bit of a commotion in our classroom.

Actually, maybe it was more accurate to say that there was a commotion in the whole *school*, not just in our classroom. Even I was surprised, since I didn't know anything about what was going on.

In order to explain why there was such a commotion, I would first have to talk about what happened after our conversation the day before.

So, the day before, I didn't end up going home with Nanami. How long had it been since the last time we'd gone home separately? But all Nanami had to say was that she needed to stop by somewhere with the class rep.

So instead, I'd ended up reporting to Baron-san and everyone with the details of what transpired with the class rep. Since recently my focus with them had just been on playing the game and not giving reports, doing so now made me feel kind of nostalgic.

They only said one thing to me.

Baron: People who hurt you without even realizing it are super troublesome. They're not even conscious of what they've done. Be careful. This probably won't be the last time this happens.

People who hurt you without even realizing it, huh?

It seemed like such a bother to have to worry about people like that. Still, what happened this time around with the class rep did teach me many important lessons.

It's not like I wanted more of these incidents to happen, but it was probably important to know how to act quickly if it ever were to occur again. This time I happened to be dealing with a girl, so it wasn't violent at all. I couldn't say that that would always be the case in the future. Maybe it really was time for me to

start learning martial arts from Soichiro-san.

As I was chatting with my online gaming friends, I received a text from Nanami.

Nanami: Let's go to school on the early side tomorrow!

"Early side"... We were usually pretty early, but I guessed she wanted to be even earlier than that. I'd have to get up earlier than usual. When I replied to Nanami in the affirmative, she responded by telling me to look forward to tomorrow.

Is there something going on tomorrow? I had wondered to myself then. In actuality, there really hadn't been anything—until we arrived at our classroom.

It happened after we walked in and began talking in the sparsely populated classroom. A day unlike any other day—a most definitely extraordinary day—began to unfold.

A gyaru I had never seen before walked into the classroom.

At first glance, I could tell that she was a thin and very attractive gyaru, of a different style from Nanami's.

Who is she? Just as I was thinking that it must be someone's acquaintance—maybe from a different class, or even a different grade—the gyaru began to walk toward me and Nanami. She looked confident, with her head held high...and she was letting various parts of her body bounce.

I thought I had gotten used to things like that because of Nanami and her friends, but having someone I didn't even know suddenly approach me like that was honestly kind of scary. I couldn't help but shrink back.

No, wait, I have to at least protect Nanami. When I glanced over at Nanami, though, she was waving excitedly at the girl.

Huh? Does Nanami know this girl?

Oh, I see, maybe it was one of her gyaru friends...but what in the world was a "gyaru friend"? After all, it was no one I'd ever seen before.

The girl stood before us, then smiled and raised her hand in greeting to say, "Good morning, Nanami-chan. Misumai-kun."



"Morning, Kotoha-chan!" Nanami replied.

"Huh?" I muttered, confused by Nanami who was responding to her like it was the most natural thing in the world. Wait, she called us by name, but I don't even know who this gyaru is!

As I remained perplexed, the gyaru Nanami called Kotoha looked into my face and met my gaze. My heart jumped at her sudden behavior.

"It's me, Kotoha Shirishizu," the girl said to me.

"Uh, I'm sorry... I'm afraid I don't know anyone by that name," I mumbled, unable to match the girl's face to anyone I knew. I was pretty certain that I didn't know a gyaru like this.

Long, slightly wavy hair. Skirt as short as Nanami's. Shirt collar boldly unbuttoned. Uniform slightly modified. A touch of jewelry to finish off the look. The girl also had something around her neck...a choker, I thought it was called. Yeah, I definitely didn't know this person.

Seeing my reaction, the gyaru in front of me put on a forced smile, while Nanami smiled wryly as if I exasperated her.

"It's the class rep," Nanami said, her palms lifted as though to introduce the girl to me.

"Huh?!" I blurted out.

Uh...the class rep, you say?

My shock was muffled by the sound of the entire classroom erupting in loud murmurs. It seemed no one else had realized it was the class rep either.

That made perfect sense. I was pretty sure I'd never seen such a dramatic makeover before. I was so taken aback by the class rep's transformation that I couldn't help staring, from her head down to her toes. I mean, seriously—there seemed to be nothing left of her from the previous day.

In response to my stare, the class rep simply flashed me a peace sign with a blank expression on her face.

"I had no idea your name was Shirishizu," I mumbled.

"That's all you have to say about my new look?" Shirishizu-san replied, giving a wry smile, my comment clearly off the mark. I can't help it—I'm totally confused right now, and there's no way I can give any kind of reasonable reaction.

"You really do only have eyes for Nanami-chan, huh?" Shirishizu-san added with her expression still blank, though now with mild exasperation in her voice.

She was right in that other people's changes didn't interest me, and that only Nanami's did. My excuse, though, was that I genuinely had a difficult time remembering people's names and faces. I wished people would cut me some slack about that.

"Still, you really did go for it, huh?" I murmured.

"Nanami-chan gave me lots of advice. I've never worn my skirt this short, so I don't feel entirely comfortable," she said, pinching the hem of her skirt and lifting it up a bit. I couldn't really see anything from my angle, but I still couldn't suppress my mild shock.

Nanami covered both my eyes in a panic as she hurriedly admonished Shirishizu-san.

"Careful, Kotoha-chan! We can see your undies!" Nanami shouted.

"Oh, right. I shouldn't do that when my skirt is so short, huh? But if it's just my underwear, what's the big deal? It's not like I'm gonna lose anything," she said nonchalantly.

"It's a huge deal! And you do lose something!" Nanami exclaimed.

"I see. A gyaru outfit seems liberating, but I guess there are still restrictions, huh?" Shirishizu-san said to Nanami.

I guess something does get lost...

More importantly, I didn't realize that Shirishizu-san was like this. I'd assumed that she was the cool type, but maybe she was more of a klutz...or quite possibly an airhead?

She must have sensed me looking at her oddly, because Shirishizu-san moved on to pinching the hem of her shirt next. At least she didn't proceed to lift that

up.

"Nanami-chan taught me. That I can feel...stronger this way," she murmured.

Ah, I see. I remembered that Nanami, too, felt uncomfortable around guys, and dressed like a gyaru to fortify herself mentally and help overcome her discomfort.

Just as I saw in Shirishizu-san something that I could have very easily had, Nanami, too, must have sensed something about the class rep that reminded her of herself.

"What do you think of the outfit I put together for her? It looks cute, right? I don't look good in chokers, so I'm a little jealous," Nanami said, turning to me.

"Really? I actually think you'd look nice in a choker too," I replied.

"Hmmm, when I wear one, though, I feel like something is off," Nanami murmured.

As a total outsider to fashion, it seemed like a completely incomprehensible world to me. As Nanami and I kept going back and forth on the subject, though, I realized that Shirishizu-san was watching us with a gentle smile on her face.

Her gaze didn't contain any of the hostility that had been there during summer school.

"I just want to say I'm sorry to the two of you," Shirishizu-san suddenly said.

"Don't even worry about it. Are you feeling better about things now?" I asked.

"To be honest, there's still a part of me that's all mixed up. Parts of me are still jealous of you guys, while other parts still can't figure out why I did a thing like that," she muttered.

It wasn't realistic to expect feelings she'd harbored for so long to just disappear completely overnight. But still, she looked more cheerful than before.

Shirishizu-san, too, placed her hand on her chest and laughed. She almost seemed like she was trying to convince someone of something.

"But, after I shared with you what I'd never talked about before, and I cried a ton, and just got it all off of my chest... I did feel a little bit better. So I haven't

felt this good in a long time," she said.

"I see. I'm glad to hear that," I replied.

"We're always here. If you ever want to talk about anything, just let us know, okay?" Nanami added.

Nanami stunned me with those words. She was really just incredible; I was pretty sure I could never think to say anything like that. I guess I still had mixed feelings about forgiving Shirishizu-san for what she did.

That was probably normal, though. If we could change our minds and feelings as quickly as we could flip a light switch, then things would never have to be so difficult in the first place. The only thing we could really do was come to terms with the things we couldn't control.

I believed that time would eventually resolve these feelings too.

"I probably should at least kiss you on the cheek, as an apology or a show of gratitude," Shirishizu-san suddenly said to me.

"No thank you," I said immediately.

"Then, should I do it to Nanami-chan instead?" she asked.

"I don't think I like that idea either. But, wait, if you don't have romantic feelings for Nanami, is that acceptable?" I contemplated out loud.

I wondered what other people thought about their girlfriends kissing—or being kissed by—other girls on the cheek. Maybe doing it with a guy wasn't appropriate, but if it was with other girls, was that okay? I didn't have a clue.

In any case, Shirishizu-san didn't seem very serious about it. Just as I was shrugging at her offhand remark, though, I realized that more people in the classroom were starting to stare at us.

Everyone seemed to be curious about the class rep postmakeover.

It really was quite the summertime makeover, although the reveal was technically a day late.

I guess people couldn't help being curious. Would they have made such a big deal of her transformation if she had shown up like this yesterday?

"If something happens again, I'll definitely come to you two. And I'll do my best to be there for you guys too," Shirishizu-san said.

She must have noticed that people were looking at us, because she ended the conversation abruptly, as if concerned her presence would be disruptive to me and Nanami. She then walked away from us without another word and simply walked out of the classroom altogether.

Huh? Wait, is she okay?

Though I was slightly worried, I figured the class rep would be able to take care of herself. I turned and looked at Nanami. She was...pouting, her cheeks slightly puffed out.

I poked her cheeks to make them deflate and asked, "What's wrong?"

"I feel like my worries are coming true," Nanami replied.

"Your worries?"

"Yeah, that Kotoha-chan is gonna like you."

I had thought that things were now settled, and that we didn't have to worry about anything...but that seemed not to be the case for Nanami. Concerns like these were probably never going to disappear.

Except, well, I'm pretty sure that Shirishizu-san is never going to like me.

I wondered what I could do to allay Nanami's fears, as she continued looking somewhat nervous. Maybe today was a good day for us to go on a super fun date after school.

And, with that, we drew the curtain on the series of incidents that had been disturbing our peace for some time.

As a side note, the news that Shirishizu-san had suddenly turned into a gyaru traveled from the classroom, all the way to the teachers' lounge.

The teachers ended up asking me whether I knew the reason for the transformation...but I guess those were just minor details.

Afterword

The number seven, I feel, holds a very special significance. The seven days in a week, the Seven Lucky Gods, the Seven Wonders of the World, and the seven seas are just a few examples.

In a religious context, there are also the seven deadly sins. The seven deadly sins tend to get picked up as a motif in different works, so I imagine there are many people out there who are familiar with the concept.

The seventh volume, therefore, has quite an auspicious number attached to it. It's lucky number seven. What did you think of this volume? I couldn't be happier if you were able to enjoy it.

This is the seventh volume for me, ninth if I count the manga version. The second volume of the comics adaptation was recently released. I hope you'll check it out.

This volume included some tumultuous events. Still, I'm pretty sure that they weren't actually terribly turbulent. I do feel bad if anyone out there was hoping for something more dramatic. If the volume didn't meet your expectations, then it was completely due to my shortcomings. I admit, though, that I wouldn't actually want any serious tumult that would lead to a breakup befalling our two characters.

Though I can't say what will happen to them in the future...

When it comes to these two, though, I have a feeling that even such a turn of events would become yet another reason for them to make out with each other—and that they'll continue being the intimate couple that they are.

They say that one should not get involved in other people's marital quarrels, but I think our protagonists are only capable of getting into the kinds of fights that others around them would find adorable.

A rom-com that we can read without worry or stress. I write every day,

thinking that it's okay for the world to have such a work as well.

On an unrelated note—boy, did we have a really hot summer this year. In fact, it's actually still slightly hot, even as I sit here writing this afterword.

For the first time in twenty-nine years, Hokkaido set a new record for the number of consecutive days where the high was over thirty degrees Celsius. We even had days where the temperature in Hokkaido was higher than that in Honshu. It was hot last year, but this year was even worse.

Strangely enough, it was summertime in the story as well—but it most definitely wasn't *this* hot for the characters. I wonder what it will be like next year. I'm already getting a little scared.

I know I just wrote that it was summer in the story...but the summer really ends with this volume. After that, it will be autumn, and then, of course, winter.

For high schoolers, both autumn and winter are filled with various events. I'd like the characters to get to wear various seasonal outfits as well. If it's the end of summer, they can dress light. Then they can add some layers for the autumn, and then winter will have its own set of clothes. I'm already looking forward to the kinds of fashion choices I'll have Nanami make.

If you have any requests for the kinds of outfits you'd like to have appear in the story, I would be more than happy to hear from you.

Thinking back now, many things happened before volume seven was released. Volume two of the comics adaptation went on sale, a version of volume seven with a tapestry of Nanami came out, I got a duodenal ulcer...

And...we also got an audio manga adaptation. Yoshin and Nanami were given voices.

The work had been given an ASMR video in the past, but the audio manga is an entirely different video. There were voices attached to the manga version.

I was allowed to be present during the recording, and I have to admit, I was moved. I never thought that there would come a day when I would get to be present at a recording session with actual voice actors.

The end result is absolutely fantastic, so please do check it out on the Ace Comic Channel on YouTube. If you could give it a thumbs-up, it will lead to future projects as well.

This, too, is all thanks to the readers, as well as the hard work of everyone involved in this publication. Every day I'm blessed with new experiences, and I'm able to enjoy writing in so many incredible ways.

It would be amazing to be able to continue gaining such experiences.

I'm very grateful to Kagachisaku-sensei, who once again provided the illustrations for volume 7. I look forward to continuing to work with you.

To Nagomi Kanna-sensei, who is in charge of the manga version. Thank you for continuing to produce such wonderful work in volume two as well.

After this volume, there will be a change in my editor. It wasn't that I did something terrible and thus required an editor change; in fact, it was an extremely positive change.

I was only able to publish this series because of my previous editor. It makes me sad to think that I would never have been able to present this volume to all the readers if they had never reached out to me. I very much hope that we will get to work together again one day.

And to my new editor S-sama, I look forward to working with you as well. I may cause you trouble due to my ignorance and lack of experience, but I would be honored to get to work with you to produce something good together.

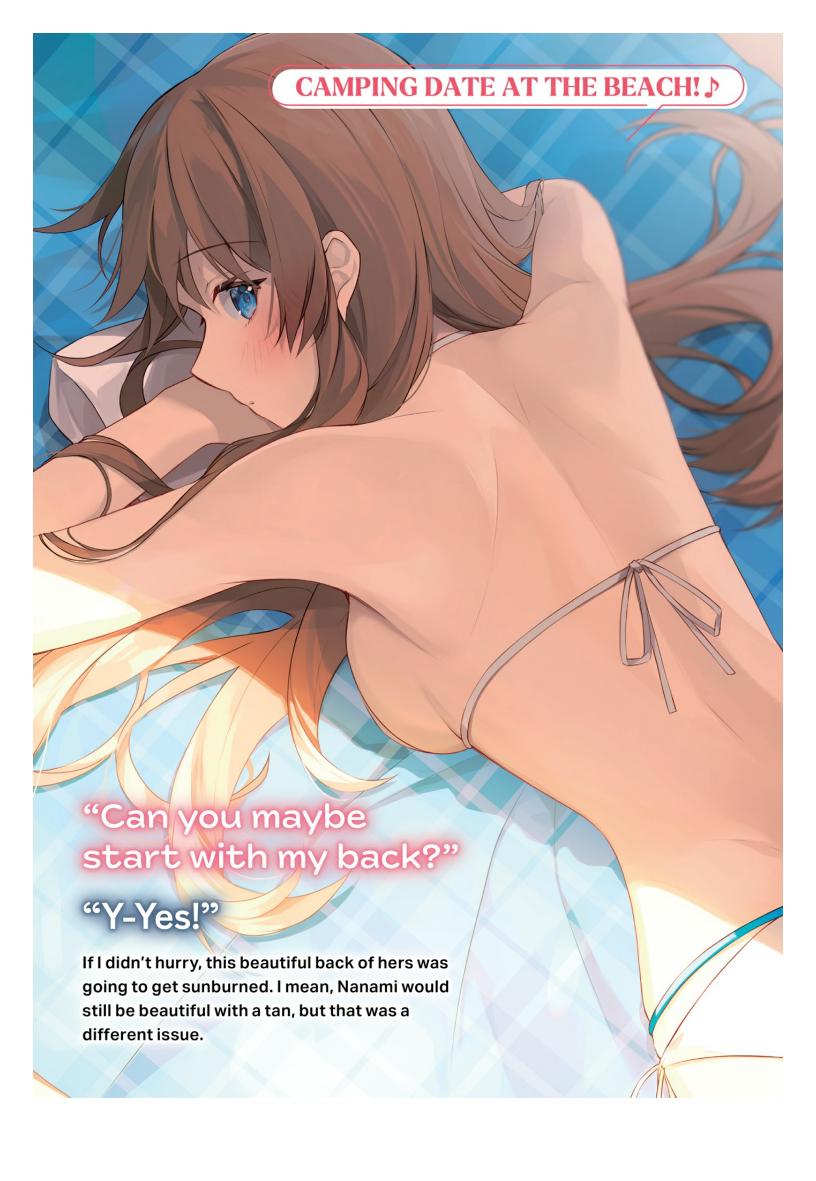
I'm so relieved that everything wrapped up smoothly. Now, then, what kind of a story should I write next? I'm looking forward to it already.

Well, if there is a volume 8, I shall see you all then.

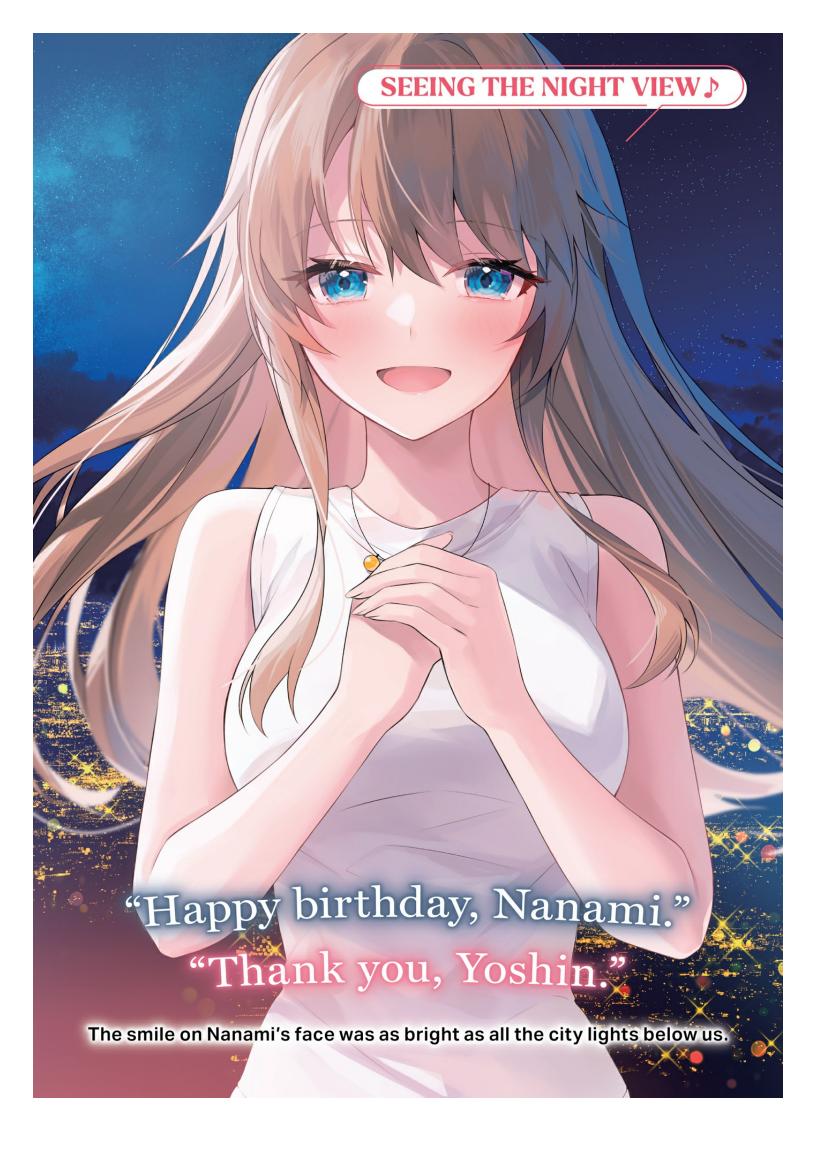
There will be a volume 8, right...?

Yuishi, Who Is Thinking about What's Next for Volume 8

October 2023







Bonus Short Stories

Marking Do-Over

Nanami and I were alone in her room, facing each other. I was sitting on her bed, while Nanami was sitting on my lap.

We looked like we were holding each other, but there remained an awkward space between us. She was holding my shoulders with both hands to stop herself from falling off. I was holding Nanami by the waist to keep her steady. I worried a little about being too tempted to let my hands travel close to her hips —though, of course, I couldn't tell her this.

For the record, Nanami was wearing pants today. We both figured that it was probably a bad call for us to sit like this with her wearing a skirt, so she took the time to change.

We were positioned quite questionably, but Nanami wasn't smiling at all. She was, in fact, looking at me with utmost seriousness in her eyes. That was probably the only reason I was able to keep myself calm. Had she had even a slightly seductive look on her face, or eyes that were the least bit inviting, I would've been in real trouble.

"Here I go, then," Nanami murmured, the moment I thought I felt secure.

"O-Okay," I stammered. I could only manage one word to her declaration.

She went to all this trouble to change her clothes. Just what is Nanami intending to do?

Of course, I already knew what she was going to do. It wasn't something I'd experienced many times before. It was embarrassing for me to even put it into words, so I should just let things unfold without me narrating.

Slowly—slowly—Nanami leaned her upper body closer toward me. It was reminiscent of when we kissed each other, but it was slightly different.

Nanami's face veered away from mine, as she instead buried her face in my

neck. And then I felt her lips.

They were soft and warm, and they also tickled. All those sensations were concentrated on my neck simultaneously.

Nanami then opened her eyes wide...and sucked.

Well, okay, we were holding each other, so I didn't actually know if she opened her eyes wide. But that was what I sensed her doing.

The next moment, though, I heard a sound come from my neck that I didn't even think was possible to be produced by a human body.

It was a dull, almost gross sound that I was pretty sure shouldn't be heard coming from Nanami. If I had to give an approximation, it was close to the sound that you made when you tried to use a straw to suck up the very last bit of juice at the bottom of a cup.

What was more, as if in response, my skin started to tremble.

Nanami continued what she was doing for a while, but—either because she ran out of steam or because she gave up—she eventually removed her lips from my neck.

Maybe it was because she had been sucking in her breath for a while, but she was breathing heavily, her shoulders heaving. Her breath tickled me slightly, but I tried my best not to let it show.

"Nanami," I muttered.

"Wh-What...what is it...Y-Yoshin?" Nanami managed to ask.

"How can you be so bad at this?"

"How can you be so blunt about it?!"

Sorry, I just can't help myself.

After I apologized to Nanami—who was puffing out her cheeks to make it very clear to me how displeased she was about my comment—she proceeded to suck on my neck again. The result, unfortunately, was the same as before.

My neck turned slightly red, but she failed to leave a hickey, yet again.

That's right: Nanami was trying to leave a hickey on my neck. Unfortunately

for her, she was so bad at it that she simply wasn't able to make it happen.

"So much for a do-over," Nanami muttered as she put her weight on me, her breath starting to return to normal. Her face was right next to my ear, and maybe because she had been sucking in her breath continuously for some time, she still seemed slightly short of breath.

As I listened to her breathing, I became increasingly aware of the softness of her body. Even as I tried to take in that sensation, I managed to pat Nanami on the back, as if trying both to console her and to help her breathe normally again. Nanami must have liked the feel of it, because she rubbed her cheek against me.

When I visited Nanami at her part-time job, she brought up the idea of me leaving a mark on her. We ended up not doing such a thing though. I mean, with her job as a ring girl, it would be a bad call for her to be walking around with a visible hickey.

People would wonder what was going on. There would probably be a huge commotion.

My protests didn't quite seem to click with Nanami, so I had to try to convince her without getting into too much detail. In the end, she agreed—reluctantly—but she still seemed dissatisfied with how things turned out.

Nanami insisted on trying to leave a mark on me instead, but she couldn't do it well. In fact, she couldn't do it at all. That was why our attempts at marking each other then ended rather quickly.

After that, Nanami and I were faced with bigger issues, leading us to leave the matter of the hickey unsettled.

At least, that was what I believed.

Once things between us had calmed down, Nanami suddenly made a declaration: "I want to try marking you again!"

Why now?! I wondered. In the end, though, her zealousness bowled me over, and now here I was in such a compromising position.

I couldn't deny that I was enjoying certain benefits too, of course.

We were sitting facing each other, but because of the grotesque sounds we'd just produced, we weren't feeling terribly romantic. Still, Nanami's body was warm and soft, and it certainly smelled good.

Oh, shoot. If I start thinking about it too much, I'm gonna get carried away. I've gotta get a grip on myself.

Still, I couldn't deny that I was pretty happy.

"You wanna call it a day?" I asked.

"But it kind of sucks that I can't do it, especially when I'm trying so hard," Nanami mumbled, sitting up straight and looking at me, clearly frustrated. She was even pouting, like a sulky child.

Nanami then began swaying, her upper body moving back and forth. She kept pressing her body against mine and then slowly leaning away again. The movement gradually turned forceful, and the part of my body that was supporting her also began to sway. Our movement was steady, but the more we swayed, the more difficult it became for me to hold on.

If she's going to feel better by bumping into me over and over, then I guess it's fine, but...

"Whoa," I blurted out.

"Huh?" Nanami joined in.

I must have been distracted, because I couldn't keep my balance and instead fell backward onto the bed. I toppled over slowly, the mattress offering only slight resistance.

When I sunk into Nanami's bed—where she fell asleep every night—her scent seemed to billow around me. I was completely enveloped in it.

"S-Sorry," Nanami muttered, flustered and blushing slightly—even though this was a situation where I kind of wanted to thank her.

For the time being, though, I smiled and stroked her hair, trying to convey to her that I didn't mind one bit.

At least now, Nanami would probably give up on the idea of trying to give me a hickey. In total contrast to the peaceful thought that I had, though, Nanami

asked, "Come to think of it, aren't you gonna try?"

"Try what?" I asked, trying to play dumb. Nanami didn't say it outright, so I wanted to push back at least a little bit. Even though it was probably meaningless.

"Like, aren't you gonna try to leave your mark on me?" she asked.

"Uh..."

Nanami raised her body slightly from her perch on top of me, then proceeded to peer down into my face. Her long hair brushed gently against my cheek, tickling my skin.

She was silent, and I didn't say anything either. She only looked at me, her gaze full of expectation.

She then quietly moved away from me, the warmth and softness of her body leaving mine. I sat up on the bed to watch her next move. Nanami moved around the bed on her knees, then eventually rolled onto her back.

"This should make it easier, right?" she said, her hands on her chest as she looked at me.

Giving Nanami a hickey while she lies on her back? Um, is that even allowed? "Are you sure?" I murmured.

"Um, just a hickey, right? Then that's fine," Nanami replied. Her uncertain answer made it quite unclear whether she was actually trying to be seductive or not. I thought about this before, but I had a feeling that Nanami didn't quite know the significance of getting a hickey.

If I tried to explain it to her, though, it might come across as sexual harassment. Maybe I should just try to give her one somewhere she can easily hide, like her arm or something.

Contemplating my strategy, I approached Nanami slowly. We were both silent, while I only managed to hear the loud thudding of my own heart.

When I looked down at Nanami, she closed her eyes tightly and craned her neck to better show it. I quess that's where she wants me to do it...

In the end, I couldn't resist the final temptation I was faced with.

The next day...

"Morning, Nanami-chan. Hmmm? What happened to your neck? It's kind of red," Shirishizu-san said to Nanami.

"Morning, Kotoha-chan. Really? Is it that red?" Nanami replied.

"Yeah. It looks like maybe a bug bite or something."

"Oh, this? This isn't a bug bite. It's the mark that Yoshin gave me."

"Excuse me...?"

In that moment, time stopped in the classroom.

Everyone looked straight at me.

Despite my panic, I was unable to stop the words from coming out of Nanami's mouth. Dammit, I thought it was covered up by her shirt, but Shirishizu-san must have noticed it anyway...

"Y-You mean Misumai-kun?" Shirishizu-san asked.

"Yup. I felt like I wasn't doing it right, but Yoshin was great. It hurt a little bit, but it really was just a tiny bit," Nanami continued.

"O-Oh, I see..."

Now look—Shirishizu-san is turning completely red. And all the guys are inching closer to me too. I couldn't recall the last time I had felt such piercing, murderous gazes.

What should I do? Should I run?

"Um, Nanami-chan. Do you, um, know what you're really saying?" Shirishizusan asked.

"Huh? Of course I do. It's, like, a symbol of love, right?"

Hearing Nanami's response, though, Shirishizu-san closed her mouth that had been hanging open and—with her cheeks still flushed—whispered something into Nanami's ear.

As she did, Nanami's face gradually turned bright red.

"Huh? What...?! Um, wha...?! No, no! That's not it! He just gave me this mark! We haven't done anything weird!" Nanami protested.

"Is that right? I thought that maybe we had something to celebrate," Shirishizu-san remarked.

"No, no! That's not it at all!"

The more Nanami denied the suggestion, the closer the guys in the class gathered around me. In the end, I was surrounded. I had nowhere to run. Damn. What do I do?

The last words I heard from Nanami and Shirishizu-san were...

"Do you wanna wear the spare choker I have with me?"

"Yeah...do you think it'll cover it...?"

After that, Nanami stopped talking about leaving marks—at least while in public.

The Hunt for the Rash Guard

Having your bathing suit washed away by the waves.

It might as well be a manga trope nowadays: a character comes across a girl whose bathing suit top has been washed away by the sea, and is thus helplessly topless.

Did that actually happen in real life? A bikini was held together by just a few strings, after all, so it was entirely possible that they could come loose—and apart.

Today, though, that shouldn't happen. After all, Nanami was wearing a rash guard. She had a zipper in the front, but there was no way the whole top could

get washed away.

At least...I thought that couldn't happen.

"Yoshin...?" Nanami muttered to me.

"Wh-What's wrong, Nanami? Did something happen in the two seconds I took my eyes off of you...?"

Nanami and I had been tossing a beach ball back and forth in the water. It almost felt like we were trying to make up for all the time recently when we hadn't been able to touch each other at all.

We got so excited that we ended up throwing the ball wildly, in a completely different direction than intended. I left Nanami for a brief moment to go and retrieve it.

The ball was carried away by the waves only a short distance from us. It really didn't get that far at all. I didn't think I was away from Nanami for even five minutes.

In that brief window, though, Nanami had immersed herself into the water, all the way up to her shoulders.

"Huh?" I murmured to myself.

When I looked more closely, I noticed something odd about Nanami's upper body. Rather than the color of the rash guard she was wearing until a moment ago, I instead saw the color of naked flesh.

Wait...could it be...?!

"Yup. I'm afraid my rash guard got washed away," Nanami mumbled.

"But how?!"

"I didn't mean to. I was just trying to shift my bathing suit a little bit," Nanami explained helplessly. She was smiling awkwardly but was hiding her upper body underwater. She was still wearing her bathing suit top so she wasn't *technically* topless, but still...

Even though she wasn't topless, because of what her hands were covering, she actually ended up looking like she was. This was an instance where hiding

the bathing suit actually made the image more risqué.

Could this actually be...a very questionable bathing suit? No—stop, stop. I shook my head multiple times to keep myself from thinking about unnecessary things.

"Nanami, until I find your rash guard, hide behind me...or use this beach ball to cover yourself," I said.

Even though I offered my back as an option, I only turned my back to her assuming she'd elect to hide herself behind the beach ball instead. *This way, at least, I don't need to see her either...*

But then, I heard Nanami murmur, "Thanks. I'll get behind you then."

"Huh?" I let out, shocked by Nanami's response.

"Huh?" she repeated.

I wasn't expecting what she did at all—that she would approach and attach herself to me very, very closely.

This happened at the night pool too, but when Nanami attached herself to me underwater, a very strange sensation traveled throughout my back. It was cold, and yet also warm...

Plus, this time I felt a softness against my back that was incomparable to anything I had felt at the night pool. Just that fact alone told me how much smaller Nanami's bathing suit was this time, compared to the last.

"Nanami, um...aren't you going to use the beach ball?" I asked without even thinking.

"Oh, um...yeah, well," Nanami began. "With the beach ball, instead of being covered up, they're just...gonna spill out from the sides."

They're gonna spill out.

She didn't say what exactly, but her response was enough to shock my entire system.

Feigning calm, though, I pointed my finger to a spot a short distance away and said, "Nanami, hide behind those rocks and don't get out of the water, no

matter what."

"Um, okay. Wait, what are you gonna do?" she asked.

"I'm gonna go find the rash guard as fast as I can. I'm gonna come right back, so do not let *anyone* see you."

"Um, uh...okay. Wait, whoa!"

I wasn't sure if the heavens detected just how intent I was on finding Nanami's rash guard—but it didn't take long for me to locate it.

Now, how exactly am I supposed to hand this to Nanami without looking at her bathing suit...?

My battle against my own desires was going to continue for just a bit longer.



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An Introvert's Hookup Hiccups: This Gyaru Is Head Over Heels for Me! Volume 7

by Yuishi

Translated by Satoko Kakihara Edited by Dan-Tran Cong-Huyen

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