

Author • Yuishi Artist • Kagachisaku

volume

4

An Introvert's

HOOKUP HICCUPS:

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

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Prologue: A Not-So-Bad Change

After Nanami-san and I... Hold up. I mean, after *Nanami* and I made it through that strange incident between us—the incident that had been like a fight but not like a fight at all—a small change took place. That change was different from the change that took place between me and Nanami-sa—between me and *Nanami*.

Nanami-san, Nanami... Hmm, getting used to calling her by her name was harder than I'd thought. Unless I made a conscious effort, I easily slipped back into using the honorific. Saying it aloud also felt kind of awkward. Maybe that was just how it was going to have to be for a bit, given that I hadn't addressed anyone this way for pretty much my entire life.

That said, it seemed that Nanami herself was enjoying seeing me go through all this. She especially seemed to get a kick out of hearing me rush to drop the honorific after calling her "Nanami-san" by accident. She would even smile at me now and again like she was teasing me. Still, I supposed I had no complaints as long as she was enjoying herself.

For now, let's set that aside. At least I'd managed to take my first step forward. The first step is always the most important—it's the step that requires the most courage. From here on out, I was going to consciously call her by her name each time. If I could keep that up, I had to get used to it eventually.

Damn, I got sidetracked again. Change... That's right, I was talking about the change—the change around me. I knew all sorts of things had changed since I'd started dating Nanami, but this one was a little different. To be specific, when I was by myself, a lot of the guys at school would now start talking to me.

When I'd first started going out with Nanami, people would ask me loads of questions or would try to get a look at me from far away, but barely any of them had actually tried to talk to me. Them doing so now made me realize that not only had I never really talked with the girls in my class, but I had also never really talked with the guys. I basically never started conversations myself, so it

had been pretty normal for me to not talk to anyone there. That was what made this such a huge change for me.

That said, most of our conversations were about Nanami. People would ask about me from time to time in the course of our conversations, but for the most part, we would talk about what Nanami was like, what kinds of places we went to on our dates, whether I'd been in Nanami's room... That sort of thing.

Before then, I'd felt that it was girls who really liked talking about relationships, but to my surprise, guys enjoyed it too. Maybe that was to be expected among groups of teenage guys—or maybe they just wanted to get whatever information they could out of me. I supposed that was also a possibility.

Their questions were all ones I was now unaccustomed to, but I did my best to answer them to an extent where I wouldn't cause any problems for Nanami. After all, it was important to keep some things private. That, and I wanted to keep information about Nanami all to myself. However, because I wasn't used to explaining these kinds of things, I sometimes said things that were a bit off the mark.

"So? Fess up. How far have you gone with Barato?" one guy asked.

"How far? There was the hot springs, I guess."

Like that, I'd given a strange response to a question that, had I just thought about it, I would have known was about the progress of our sexual relationship. The question had been so out of the blue that I'd answered it without even thinking.

Of course, my vague response invited a slew of questions about what that even meant, but I somehow managed to keep the staying overnight part to myself. I didn't even want to think about what people would say to me if they found out that we'd stayed in the same room. Since we'd gone with our families, it wasn't like we'd get in any trouble with the school or anything, but even then, that wasn't the kind of thing that should be publicly announced.

In any case, although I couldn't quite call my efforts smooth sailing, I was starting to be able to carry on conversations with my classmates. It was like going through rehab, in a way.

“And? How far did you end up going? I bet you guys have already done all sorts of things, huh? Dude, I’m super jealous that you have a girlfriend like her.”

“Huh? What do you mean? Uh...”

I’d managed to get around the whole hot springs topic, but because of that, we ended right back where we’d started.

The guy I was talking to looked kind of envious as he got lost in his own messed-up fantasy. I felt bad bursting his bubble as he was letting his imagination run wild, but the truth was, we really hadn’t done anything. At least, I didn’t think we had.

“No comment.”

The response I finally came up with wasn’t at all interesting. It was true that I wanted to keep our memories between just the two of us, but I also felt like the progress of our relationship wasn’t something to be announced to the whole world.

Apparently, though, even that response was more than enough to fuel the vivid imagination of a high school boy.

“Are you saying you guys are doing things you can’t even tell people about?!”

How do you reach that conclusion?!

As I sat there, shocked by his unexpected response, the guy in front of me crossed his arms and nodded several times with a satisfied expression on his face.

“Yeah, makes perfect sense,” he said. “We’re talking about Barato here, after all. I heard a rumor that she hadn’t even kissed a guy before, but I just knew that was a load of garbage.”

Hearing that, I was at a loss for words. *This is the exact opposite of the rumor that went around before.*

The truth was now going around as a rumor, and what’s more, that “rumor” was described as garbage. Even though those who’d stuck around in the classroom on that fateful day had heard the truth from Nanami directly, the kids who hadn’t been there got information through hearsay.

That photo of us had been uploaded to the class group chat, but most likely no one had shared what Nanami had said that day. That being said, I couldn't be sure, since I'd only gotten a glimpse at the chat log when Nanami had shown it to me. If we were making assumptions based on that image alone, it probably would be hard to believe that Nanami had never kissed anyone, and doing so wouldn't be that out of the ordinary.

Even though, to me, Nanami was a pure, somewhat shy, perfectly normal girl, she probably didn't show that side of herself to other people that much. Even I had only learned that about her after we'd started going out.

What should I do? I wondered. *Should I correct them? No, wait. I guess I shouldn't "correct" them.* That would mean that we *had* kissed—and we hadn't kissed each other yet. We'd kissed places other than on the lips, but since we hadn't kissed properly, that meant we hadn't actually kissed yet.

If I started explaining that, though, there would have been no point in me refraining from commenting earlier. *Yeah, since no real damage is being done, it's probably okay for me to leave things be.*

The moment I thought that, I felt something soft grab me by the shoulders, and my body instinctively flinched. As I slowly turned around in my seat, I saw Nanami with a smile on her face, leaning forward to bring her face closer to mine.

"What are you two boys talking about? Let me join you," she said, her hair swaying gently and brushing softly against my face.

Even if she hadn't intended it, her sweet scent tickled my nose and made my heart skip a beat. It was the same scent as usual, but smelling it left my heart pounding. *I'll never get used to this.*

I cleared my throat as if that might keep my cheeks from turning red. Then my eyes found Nanami as she stood there, smiling and tilting her head.

"It wasn't anything serious. Just stuff about how you and I were doing," I told her.

"You and me? Like dating stuff? I didn't know guys liked talking about that stuff too." She laughed lightly, her hands squeezing my shoulders. Her touch

tickled, and I had to force myself to keep from twisting my body.

The guy in front of me watched the two of us with envy. He then smiled wryly and, adding to my response, said, “Yeah, we were just talking about how rumors can’t be trusted.”

When Nanami heard the word “rumors,” she reacted with a slight twitch. Of course she would. Strange rumors about us had gone around just the other day—it was no surprise that she’d be somewhat sensitive to rumors in general. She was probably nervous that maybe another weird rumor was going around, which made her next question inevitable.

“Like what kind of rumor?” she asked.

Unlike the smile she’d had on her face a moment before, her expression was now one of seriousness. Maybe she was wary about what she might hear. I swallowed hard when I saw her expression.

Our classmate, however, didn’t seem the least bit bothered and shared the current “rumor” as though he couldn’t believe she hadn’t heard yet. As I sat there, I couldn’t help but wonder if it was okay for him to share it so freely, but I supposed it was no big deal for him since he wasn’t involved.

“Oh, you know, the rumor that you and Misumai haven’t even kissed yet,” he said.

When I heard it a second time, I realized that it was actually a pretty embarrassing rumor. Nanami’s face changed once again—from an expression of seriousness to now one of mild shock, with her mouth open slightly. I couldn’t tell by looking at her if her brain hadn’t quite caught up or if it was refusing to recognize the new piece of information.

As our classmate’s words gradually sunk in, her cheeks grew redder and redder. Once her entire face had reached maximum redness, she attached herself to my back to hide behind me, then raised her voice as though she were outraged.

“Huh?! What kind of a rumor is that?! It *is* a rumor, right?!”

“What? Uh, yeah, it is, but... Huh?”

He seemed overwhelmed by her reaction, or rather, he looked bewildered, surprised by a version of Nanami he'd never seen before. It was a sight I saw from time to time, but this must have been a first for him.

After thinking for a moment, Nanami came out from behind my back and stood up straight, puffing out her chest. "Yoshin and I kiss a lot! All the time!" she declared.

Excuse me?

Now it was my turn to be dumbfounded. I thought about what she'd said, dwelled on the words, let them sink into my brain, and then promptly turned bright red.

Wait, why are you telling a lie like that?!

"Uh, right," the guy replied, unable to say anything more. His response was totally understandable. There was no right reaction to a declaration of kissing.

However, Nanami's lie was immediately revealed.

"Come on, Nanami. What are you saying? You just said the other day that you two hadn't kissed yet."

"Huh?!"

The girl standing behind Nanami must have been in the classroom that day. I couldn't remember her name, but I had a vague feeling that I'd seen her face before. Nanami, having been set straight, was quivering from panic and confusion.

"Wh-When I thought about it some more, I realized we'd kissed loads! He's kissed me on the cheek and forehead and stuff!" Nanami exclaimed.

"What do you mean? He hasn't kissed you on the mouth yet, right?" the girl asked.

"No, he hasn't... I guess not."

"Nanami, you're so much more pure than you look. Do you want me to teach you how to do it?" The girl smiled teasingly and touched a finger to her own lips. Nanami stared at her, her cheeks glowing red.

“Oh, jeez! Seriously!”

Nanami—now as red as a tomato—began throwing a tantrum like a child. Seeing her transformation, the girl let out a mumbled “Oh, shoot,” and ran off like a rabbit escaping from a predator. Not missing a beat, Nanami took off after her.

Hmm... It looked like I was going to have to help clean up the situation. I could only assume that Nanami had blurted all that out in confusion.

“Barato can make faces like that too, huh? I had no idea,” the guy in front of me mumbled. The words lingered strangely in my ears.

To me, the way her expressions changed from one to the next was just part of who she was... No, it was part of the Nanami-san I’d been spending time with these past three weeks—part of the girl I’d come to know.

However, to my classmates, she was acting completely different. This was probably because she was starting to show them the version of herself that she usually showed me. On the other hand, I really didn’t know the version of Nanami that my classmates knew. I’d only vaguely known that she was a gyaru. I wondered if maybe I should ask Nanami about it when I got the chance—though it was possible that she wasn’t really aware of the difference.

As I was sitting there lost in thought, yet another unexpected question entered my ear.

“So you guys really haven’t kissed, huh? Wouldn’t that mean you’re still a virgin?”

I was half surprised, half impressed to discover that questions like these really were asked in high school classrooms.

“Yeah, that’s right,” I replied.

“Wow, you sure admitted that fast. Don’t you wanna do stuff like that though?”

Stuff like that, huh? It would be a complete lie if I said I didn’t want to do it, and to be perfectly honest, there had been many such temptations during our trip. Of course, our families had been there with us at the time, so I’d been able

to resist all of that. I wondered what would have happened if they hadn't been there. But more than the question of me wanting to or not...

"If Nanami would get hurt by it, then I could stand not doing it, even if I did want to."

That sentiment felt the most "right" to me. As my dad had once told me, if we did anything like that and something happened as a result, then the one who would have to shoulder the heavier burden would usually end up being the woman. If something were to happen to us as high schoolers, Nanami might have to give up her dream. When I thought about that, I couldn't say that the risk was worth the reward. After all, we were only in high school.

Even as I said that, though, I knew that if Nanami were to ask me for something like that, my reason would waver. There was no guarantee I would be able to hold myself back, and I might end up doing all kinds of things. I'm sure all guys my age felt like that, but it was especially in moments like those that we had to stay levelheaded. There were plenty of other ways for us to confirm the love we felt for one another, right? Though maybe that's not very convincing coming from me, given that I hadn't even managed to kiss her properly yet.

My classmate nodded. "That's really cool. Back when I had a girlfriend, I wanted to do it so bad, I could barely stand it. I wanted to get rid of my virginity fast too. I felt like I was horny all the time."

"There's no helping that," I said. "At least, that's just what I think. I'm sure it's totally natural to feel like we want to do stuff."

"Whoa, I was trying to steer the conversation toward some dirty jokes, but I feel like it's turned into some kind of moral lesson."

Wait, that was supposed to lead to dirty jokes? I thought. I wasn't good at stuff like that, and since my online game friends didn't really tell jokes like that either, I hadn't even picked up on it. When my expression grew troubled, my classmate laughed a little.

"In that case, you'll have to work up to your first kiss then. It's easier to do if it's an anniversary or something," he said.

“Wait, what?”

But my classmate had already stood up. He gave me an encouraging tap on my shoulder and then walked away. Meanwhile, Nanami returned, almost as though she were switching places with him. I wondered if he’d left because he wanted to give me and Nanami time with just the two of us.

“Welcome back, Nanami,” I said.

“Thanks, Yoshin. Gosh, I’m spent...”

Either from embarrassment or from chasing after her classmate, Nanami was red in the face as she sat down in the newly vacated seat in front of me. Once seated, she slumped over my desk as if to rest her weary body.

What my classmate had said before he’d walked away continued to echo in my head. Anniversary... It’s easier to try kissing on an anniversary, huh? I shifted my gaze toward Nanami’s lips as she breathed in and out quietly.

It was almost our one-month anniversary and the final day of us dating because of a dare. Was Nanami going to break up with me on that day? Or would she not? I knew what I was going to do, but I had no clue what her plans were. For better or for worse, we were now living our last moments before the end. I had to make it so I would have no regrets.

As I thought things over, Nanami pouted, still slumped over my desk. “You’ve been chatting with other guys a lot more lately. I’m happy to see you becoming more a part of the class, but since I’m your girlfriend and all, I have mixed feelings.”

“Does it seem that way? Don’t I still stick out?” I asked.

“Not at all.”

“But, I mean, I still can’t put people’s names and faces together.”

“Wait, seriously? Even though you were just talking to them?”

“Yeah.”

Nanami raised her head slightly and looked at me. Seeing her piercing gaze, I began to feel a little guilty and scratched my cheek to try and hide it. *I mean, you know... I never had much to do with these people until now.*

Nanami continued looking at me and smiled wryly as if to say I still had a ways to go. I couldn't help smiling back at her.

Maybe that was the beginning of our last week together.

Chapter 1: The Beginning of Our Last Week Together

Roughly three weeks ago, the slightly strange relationship between me and Nanami had begun. Since then, we'd experienced a number of changes. It was around a week now until our one-month anniversary—the day our slightly strange relationship would in one way or another come to an end.

Next week, I was going to tell Nanami how I felt about her. I had no idea what kind of a change that would bring. Whatever the case, I sincerely wanted to make that change as good a change as possible. There was no guarantee that there would be a happy ending, but I was going to aim for that regardless.

As I was thinking, the conversation I'd had with my classmate earlier brought a new question to mind.

"I wonder how far we can go and still have it be okay for a high school relationship," I mumbled.

"What do you mean?" Nanami asked.

We were in Nanami's room as usual, chatting about nothing in particular after we'd finished studying. I was looking at the photos we'd taken in the photo booth at the arcade to commemorate the day I'd called Nanami by her name. It was the first time I'd ever done something like that.

There were several different photos in the set. One of them was even saved on my phone, which I'd had no idea you could even do.

"Well, like in this photo, does kissing on the cheek count as being 'high school appropriate'?" I asked.

That's right. While we were in the photo booth, Nanami had kissed me on the cheek. It had been shocking even for a candid shot. Because of that, we'd ended up with a photo in which she was kissing me as I was sporting a dumbass grin.

If I'd done the same thing to her, we would've ended up kissing for real, huh?

When I gestured to the photo, she recalled the incident and blushed slightly,

but she quickly feigned composure and returned to normal. As a side note, when we'd taken that photo, Nanami had gotten so embarrassed about what she'd done that she'd turned beet red. I guess that didn't even need to be said though.

In any case, Nanami did a big stretch as if to take our attention away from the photo. She then yawned slightly, her eyes tearing up a bit.

"But if that's true, then, strictly speaking, don't you think we shouldn't be going to an arcade after school either? I'm not really sure what the school policy is. I'd never even thought about it," she said, leaning her body against mine as she rubbed her teary eyes. She reminded me of a cat as she rolled onto her belly and lay in my lap like that.

She wasn't quite using my lap as a pillow as she sometimes did, but I could feel the warmth and gentle pressure of her body spreading across my outstretched legs. I knew I was imagining it, but I felt like I saw cat ears on Nanami's head. Cat ears... Yeah, I could definitely work with that.

Nanami shifted to lie on her back and looked up at me. Since I'd been looking at her head, our eyes met when she flipped over. She seemed surprised for a moment but immediately flashed me a mischievous grin. She then brought her index finger up to her lips and tilted her head. Her hair fell across my knees, tickling me.

"What? Yoshin...are you saying you wanna do something more risqué?" Nanami moved her index finger slowly in an arc along her lips. With a somewhat sensual gesture, she lifted her finger away and pointed it toward me... Her cheeks immediately turned red.

"Don't say that and then get all embarrassed," I said.

Maybe she'd reached her limit, given the reminder of the photo. Finding even that to be adorable, I broke out into a wide grin, making her turn even redder. She began flailing around in my lap, pummeling my chest with her fist.

"Don't say things like that!" she exclaimed. "Jeez, we're supposed to decide where we're going on our next date!"

"Sorry, sorry! You were just being too cute!"

“Seriously! I’m not kidding, okay?!”

She was punching me, but it didn’t hurt at all—in fact, I would go so far as to say it felt kind of nice. Nanami continued hitting me for a while, but eventually, she raised both her legs and swung them down, using the momentum to sit up.

The weight I’d felt upon me disappeared, and I felt a temporary sense of loneliness at the small bit of warmth that remained. Whether or not she knew how I felt, Nanami picked up her phone and started searching for ideas. Still feeling the loss of her warmth, I joined her in looking up possible date spots.

Today, Nanami and I had decided that we would each come up with an idea for our next date. It might seem like there was no need for us to be in the same room in order to do this—after all, we could have just as easily come up with ideas once I’d gone home. However, we had a reason for doing things this way.

For our first date, I’d invited Nanami to go see a movie together. For our second date, Nanami had invited me to go to the aquarium, and we’d made some unforgettable memories. For our third date, we had gone on a trip to the hot springs and enjoyed the cherry blossoms. At the end, we’d even played a game together in my room and surprised each other in all sorts of ways.

Every single one of those dates was fun, each with their own irreplaceable memories. But now, with only one week left until our one-month anniversary, we were starting to plan what to do for our fourth date.

And therein lay our problem.

Since it was the date right before our one-month anniversary, both Nanami and I were pretty pumped up about it. The more we’d talked, the more we had both come up with places we wanted to go, which in turn had made it increasingly difficult to decide where to choose.

We could go back to the aquarium to watch the dolphin show we’d missed, go to see the cherry blossoms again as just the two of us, try out an amusement park or zoo we’d never been to before... We could also just explore the town, go watch a movie that we wanted to check out, or even hang out and watch a movie at home like we’d mentioned before. Like that, we had kept coming up with more and more ideas.

It had been loads of fun just to sit there going back and forth, even if our plan hadn't seemed to be coming together at all. At some point, though, we had to come up with a solid decision for what to do.

"It's kind of tough to settle on one thing, huh?" Nanami had muttered.

"Yeah. I guess there are just too many things we want to do. We'd never get through all these in just two days."

After some more brainstorming, we had ended up with an excessively long list of ideas. But no matter how many we packed into our schedule, we wouldn't be able to check them all off in the course of one day. Thus, we'd come to an impasse.

The reason I was so worked up about making the correct decision was that this date could potentially be our last. That was why I felt so strongly about taking her someplace I'd chosen myself.

Nanami, too, seemed really intent on making this the perfect date. I could tell she really wanted to spend the day with me somewhere that she'd suggested.

"Won't you let me do something for you to make up for the fight I started the other day?" she had even asked. However, considering how suggestive that had sounded, she'd immediately started blushing again and shouted, "Never mind!"

Of course, I'd reassured her that the misunderstanding before hadn't even been a fight and that she shouldn't worry about it at all, because I'd definitely been at fault too.

In any case, coming back to the topic of our date, we couldn't move forward unless we decided on what we wanted to do. Since we couldn't settle on any one thing, I'd made the suggestion that on Saturday we would go where Nanami wanted and on Sunday we'd go where I wanted. That way, we could each come up with a different plan for a date.

Nanami had seemed thrilled by the idea. "Let's do that! That sounds fun!" she'd said.

So, in order to prevent us from coming up with the exact same plan, we were now sitting next to each other in the same room, exploring potential ideas on our phones. That way, we could continue chatting as we searched.

Up till now, neither one of us had mentioned a plan to the other. We seemed to have an unspoken agreement that we would only tell each other once we had settled on something, but we still thought it best to share our plans in advance, rather than surprise each other on the day of. It seemed we both felt our third date had left with enough surprises to last us for a lifetime.

As we sat there, both on our phones, Nanami suddenly changed the topic of conversation. “Hey, Yoshin, about what you mentioned earlier...”

“Earlier?”

“The whole ‘high school appropriate’ thing,” Nanami mumbled, her eyes still on her phone. When I glanced over at her, I couldn’t tell from her expression what she was feeling inside. Maybe I’d made her worry.

“Oh, I mean, I wasn’t saying... I’m not looking to do anything weird, so I don’t worry.” I took my eyes off of my phone and smiled at her, trying to reassure her. She noticed my gaze and looked up from her phone.

“That’s not it!” she replied. “What I mean is, I know that mom and dad and Shinobu-san and your father too say that we have to keep things PG, but I don’t really feel like we have to be constrained by that.”

“As in...”

“As in, since we’re both high school students, anything we do is ‘high school appropriate.’ Don’t you think?”

That was a pretty outrageous argument. By that logic, we could do literally anything and no one could say a word against it. What’s more, if we used that as our excuse, we might not be able to stop ourselves from doing all kinds of things. I hesitated over whether to agree with what she’d said.

“Don’t you think that sounds kind of problematic?” I finally asked, still not being able to buy her argument. I didn’t entirely enjoy disagreeing with her, but I also felt reluctant to approve of what she’d said.

Nanami, on the other hand, didn’t seem upset with my reaction. In fact, she didn’t seem affected by it at all. “Yeah, you’re right,” she replied.

I hadn’t expected her to react that way, so I just looked at her and gave her an

awkward smile. She seemed to have expected such a reaction from me as well, since she continued her explanation.

“A friend has a boyfriend, and she, uh, does stuff with him that I’m not even sure I should be hearing about. I mean, it’s so much that I can’t even say it out loud...”

“What kinds of things is she telling you?! That makes me kind of worried in more ways than one.”

“I used to just listen to her without thinking about it much, but things have changed now that I have a boyfriend too.”

I began to feel uneasy, wondering what kinds of things she’d been hearing about from her friends, but she didn’t go into details. She had likely remembered some of the contents though, because her ears were turning pink.

Some time ago, I’d heard that girl talk tended to be way more scandalous than talk between guys. Was that really true? I’d never talked about stuff like that with other guys, so I had nothing to compare it to. Perhaps the reason Nanami was sometimes so bold when it came to stuff like that was that she’d heard crazy stories like that from her friends. Seeing the worry on my face, Nanami smiled as though to reassure me.

“But you know, Hatsumi and Ayumi are taking things pretty slowly. They told me one time that they’d only really kissed their boyfriends, so it seems like the pacing really depends on the couple.”

That was kind of surprising. I’d assumed that Nanami’s two closest friends had gotten pretty far with their boyfriends already, but apparently, that wasn’t the case. Maybe it had something to do with the guys they were dating. I’d heard that both their boyfriends were adults, so maybe they couldn’t legally do anything with high schoolers. If that was the case, then it made perfect sense.

“But since I hear all those stories and am always learning so much, when the time comes, we’ll have nothing to worry about.”

Just as I thought I could stop worrying, she’d hit me with that. My concerns seemed to have been spot-on. When Nanami winked at me, all proud of herself, I narrowed my eyes slightly and looked at her, exasperated.

“There you go, saying stuff like that again. I’m not gonna help you when something happens but you end up self-destructing, especially after making a statement like that.”

She laughed. “I guess I’ve just picked up lots of stories from other people, even if I haven’t done anything myself. You never know what’s gonna come in handy one day.”

“Why would you say that?!”

Despite my shock, I burst out laughing and Nanami joined in.

Once we’d both flushed the amusement out of our systems, Nanami turned serious and came closer to me. As I watched her, wondering what she was going to do, she leaned her back against my own. I felt her warmth spreading through my body. It felt so comfortable that I couldn’t say anything. Maybe she could feel my warmth too, because for a while she didn’t say anything. A moment of quiet settled in the room.

Then Nanami whispered, “Do you remember that one time when you kissed me while I was asleep?”

“Uh, did I do that?”

“Jeez, you’re just pretending like you forgot! I know you remember.”

Yes, I’m pretending. I was trying to play dumb because I still felt guilty about it, but she’d seen right through my act and laughed at me. I mean, of course I wouldn’t forget. It was an important memory of something that I’d done of my own volition for the first time—even if she *had* been asleep.

The warmth of her body as she shifted against my back felt comfortable, but I was now sitting there all red in the face because I was remembering what I’d done that night. *Seriously, I can’t believe I did that.*

“I’m truly, truly sorry I did that while you were asleep,” I said.

“Oh, no, no. I don’t mind it at all. I told you it made me happy, remember?” She laughed even more heartily, her back still against my own. But rather than getting angry with my apology, she seemed somehow relieved. As I was still sitting there, trying to deal with my remaining guilt, I was suddenly enveloped

by a soft, warm sensation.

Nanami was hugging me gently from behind.

I could feel her against my entire back. Her scent was gentle and reassuring. I savored her warmth, dreamily thinking of how happy I would be if I just fell asleep right there and then. Then a comforting voice that was somehow reminiscent of a mother's echoed in my ear.

"I think it's better for us to go at our own pace instead of worrying about what's appropriate for high schoolers. We don't have to force ourselves or anything. That's why, moving forward, let's just keep going like we always have."

When I heard her say that, I felt something I couldn't put a name to overtake my heart.

It was true that maybe I was too caught up in the "high school-appropriate" thing. That probably had something to do with the fact that today had been my first time in a while talking with a male classmate. When he'd told me that high school students wanted to do all sorts of things, I'd panicked. Feeling the pressure of the end of our relationship drawing closer probably hadn't helped either. When I'd realized I was deviating from what other people considered normal, I just couldn't help wondering if that was somehow a bad thing. However, Nanami's affirmation of my actions made me feel a lot better.

"You're right. We have all the time in the world. We can take it slow and do things at our own pace," I said.

"Yeah... We have, uh, all the time in the world," she replied.

Well, I didn't actually know if we had so much time, but even then, I told myself that I wanted to continue building our relationship slowly and without rushing too much. I wished for that precisely *because* the end of our relationship was drawing near.

And it was this conversation with Nanami that made me think of a place I wanted to go with her for our date on Sunday. It might not be a terribly exciting place, but I felt it was the kind of thing Nanami would appreciate. The gentle hug she'd offered me and the relief that had followed had reminded me of the

place. I was pretty sure I'd been there once with my dad and mom.

The haze in my mind dissipated, and my head felt a lot clearer. Perhaps because of that, another question popped into my mind.

"By the way, how far *do* you feel comfortable going with me right now?"

With her sitting there hugging me from behind, I'd ended up getting a bit cocky. However, Nanami didn't seem fazed at all. Still holding me, she brought her face close to mine and ever so softly whispered, "Actually, I'd like to know how far you're willing to take me."

She'd spoken in such a beautiful, gentle, comforting voice, and yet what she'd said was absolutely mind-blowing. The problem went way beyond the fact that she'd countered my question.

My entire face burned red, and sweat seeped from every pore of my body. I'd thought she would become all flustered by my question, but here I was, KO'd by an unexpected comeback. My heart became filled with a sense of defeat—along with an odd sense of satisfaction.

"I lose. I totally give up. Where did you learn to say a thing like that?" I asked, wondering if this had spawned from the talks she'd been having with her girl friends. My heart just couldn't take it. I raised both my hands in surrender.



Nanami just laughed. With her body still stuck to my back, she spoke in my ear again. Her breath tickled me, sending a shiver down my spine. “I’m totally embarrassed, but at least I got my own back. Truthfully, I don’t know what I’d do if you actually tried anything with me.”

Even though she’d said that, her cheeks weren’t red, and her ears weren’t flushed either. Maybe more than embarrassment, she was feeling delighted that she’d gotten me to give in. *Is this the kind of thing she’ll get embarrassed by when she thinks back on it later?* I wondered.

As I continued sitting there, Nanami moved away from me. Then, as though she’d suddenly remembered something, she brought her index finger up to her lips and smiled at me sensually. “If you ever wanna kiss me on the lips, let me know. I’m probably good to go whenever you are.”

I was at an absolute loss for words. All I could do was turn bright red and stare at her finger. I might have even stopped breathing. Eventually, though, a shout from Nanami tore through the silence.

“Say something!”

Having witnessed her self-destruct as always, I felt a sense of relief and burst out laughing. She tried to grab me with indignation in her eyes, laughing all the while.

Yup, this was the way she ought to be.



When I got home, my routine was basically the same as always: I would start up my computer, open up my game, and let my gaming friends know I was home. Because I’d been spending a lot of time with Nanami lately, I’d been playing my game on my phone less than before. I’d still been talking with my friends via the chat, but I’d really only been gaming properly once I was alone at home. I was still surprised that that change didn’t really bother me.

Now that I was back again, I was ready to report back about my love life. The other members of our group weren’t there yet, so I made a chat room specifically for me and Baron-san. I’d use the general chat to tell my other team members about it all later. Baron-san was the first person to ever give me

advice in regards to Nanami. Talking to him privately wasn't quite out of courtesy though. I just felt like I wanted to talk with him, just the two of us.

Baron: Wow, it's already been that long, huh?

Baron-san was spot-on as usual in his response. I mean, I felt the same way—it really was incredible how quickly time had passed.

On a sidenote, these “reports” of mine had become part of my routine by now. Baron-san had told me one time that I didn't really need to do them anymore, but he'd been outnumbered by the folks who'd said they wanted to hear how things between me and Nanami were progressing.

To tell the truth, if I didn't tell my friends and get their advice, I'd feel like I was missing something—even though I wasn't necessarily giving them all the details. Old habits die hard, I suppose.

Baron: Say, won't this be the last date before your one-month anniversary?

Canyon: Yeah. This Saturday will be the last.

Baron: And you're each going to come up with a unique plan, huh? That sounds nice. Maybe I should try coming up with different plans with my wife too.

Canyon: Shichimi's gonna be planning Saturday, and I'll have Sunday to take her wherever. We're each deciding what we want to do and taking the other out on a date. It's my first time doing something like this, so I'm pretty nervous.

Baron: What are you talking about? You've gone on lots of dates.

Canyon: Well, the first time, I got advice from everyone in the chat, and the second time, she was the one who invited me. The third time was all prearranged by our parents. So it really is the first time for me to come up with ideas all by myself.

Baron: When you say it like that, I guess that's true.

Before this, I would have asked Baron-san what I should do and planned the entire date based on the advice he gave me. This time, though, I was very intentionally refraining from asking him for ideas. For the very first time, the date was going to be made up of ideas that I came up with entirely on my own—though I was kind of worried whether she'd enjoy it.

Baron: Did you already decide on something?

Perhaps Baron-san had gleaned my intentions, because he wasn't offering up any suggestions. Neither was he asking me why I'd invited him to a private chat. Seriously, I couldn't thank him enough for everything he'd done for me from beginning to end.

Canyon: Yeah, I've got something in mind.

Baron: I see. You know, you sure have matured, Canyon-kun.

Canyon: You think? Honestly, everything still feels like way too much for me to handle.

Baron: Don't be silly. You're not even asking me what I think you should do. You're definitely a lot more mature.

Just knowing he saw me that way, I couldn't help feeling elated. I mean, let's face it—I had no idea whether I was getting any better at things like this or not. That was why him thinking that made me feel just a tiny bit more confident.

Baron: But you're probably right. You've gotta be feeling nervous because you're relying entirely on your own head for once—like you're unsure whether things will turn out okay with the ideas you came up with on your own.

I pressed my lips together bitterly. Baron-san was absolutely right: I *was* nervous. I understood that I shouldn't be nervous at this point, but I couldn't help how I felt. When I started thinking about whether my ideas were weird or whether she'd have fun on the date I'd planned, anxiety bubbled up inside me. It was slightly different from the panic I used to feel. Now, no matter what I did, I couldn't calm myself down.

Canyon: You're totally right. Do popular guys not feel this kind of worry?

Baron: Uh, I couldn't tell you what popular guys feel, but when I first asked my wife out on a date, I was so nervous, I couldn't sleep. So I know exactly how you feel.

I hadn't expected him to say that. To me, Baron-san seemed like the kind of adult who could do anything without even trying, so hearing about such a vulnerable part of himself felt really refreshing somehow.

Canyon: I can't believe you were like that too...

Baron: It's true though! Sometimes I'd overplan so that we'd run out of time to do stuff or I'd make all sorts of other mistakes along the way. There was even this one time when the restaurant I'd planned to take her to was closed. I guess it's a good memory now, but still.

Canyon: I would've never imagined.

As I listened to Baron-san sharing all sorts of stories of his past failures, I felt my nervousness slowly drain away. As arrogant as it might sound, hearing that even someone I thought was a perfect adult made all sorts of mistakes made me feel like I wasn't that different from him.

Baron: So, yeah, there's no need for you to feel nervous either.

Canyon: Do you really think so?

Baron: Soon, it's going to be a whole month since that dare confession. As someone who's been here for you throughout all that time, I guarantee it. If it's you and your girlfriend in question, then no matter what comes up, I'm sure you'll be able to turn it into a happy memory.

Canyon: Thanks. I really appreciate it.

The nervousness I'd been feeling before talking to Baron-san was almost gone. His advice was just as precious to me as it was convincing. I felt like I could always believe in what he said and was glad I was able to talk with him before the date.

Deeply grateful to have someone so mature on my side, I told Baron-san something else I'd decided on.

Canyon: Baron-san, I want to make this my last report before the anniversary. The next time I talk to you about all this stuff will be after...after everything has ended. That's my plan, anyway.

Baron: I see. And what made you decide that?

Canyon: Our next date will be the one I came up with on my own for the first time, so talking about

it with other people seems...

Baron: Yeah, you're right. That would feel somewhat insensitive. You ought to keep that date as a special memory between just the two of you. Don't worry. I get that.

Seeing Baron-san agree so readily, I felt grateful—and also apologetic.

Canyon: I'm sorry. You've helped me so much until now, so it seems like I'm being ungrateful.

Baron: Not at all. Don't let something like that worry you. But is it okay if I add one condition?

Canyon: A condition?

Baron: The report you give after everything has ended...make sure it's a happy one.

I agreed to his condition immediately. I had no intention of giving any other kind of report. I still felt slightly anxious, but nevertheless I believed that everything would turn out okay.

Baron: In any case, given that it's right before your date, shouldn't you be talking to your girlfriend instead of me?

Of course, Baron-san was being considerate, but after this conversation, I wouldn't be talking with him and any of the others for a good while. This was the only time I had to give him an update. Besides...

Canyon: It's fine. She's probably chatting with a lot of different people right now too.

With that, while still thinking of my girlfriend, I continued my conversation with Baron-san.

Interlude: Her Report

My room, which had been lively just a moment ago, suddenly felt too big. And, because it felt too big, it also felt kind of lonely. I knew this happened every time, but that didn't mean that I could get rid of the feeling.

I thought about Yoshin, my boyfriend, who'd been with me up till that point. Toward the end of our conversation, he'd asked the most unbelievable question. *How far do I feel comfortable going with him? Jeez, seriously?! The things he says! It's not even fair for him to ask a question like that all of a sudden!*

I mean, honestly, where in the world did he learn to ask stuff like that? From Baron-san?! Don't tell me it really was from Baron-san! Even if that's not the case, Yoshin does so much stuff without really knowing what he's doing! That's the most troublesome type of guy there is!

I knew thinking about all these things was making me angry, but that didn't mean I disliked remembering. In fact, a large part of me was actually enjoying thinking back to what he'd said and done. There was no way I'd let others know about that though.

At least I'd managed to deliver a pretty good comeback. Seeing Yoshin all embarrassed had made me super happy. It wasn't that I wanted to take the lead in things, but since I somehow always ended up getting embarrassed by the stuff he said, it was okay for me to get him back once in a while, right? And no one better point out how my embarrassment was of my own making.

In the end, though, I'd somehow managed to dig a hole for myself as usual, and Yoshin had given me that pitying look. *Seriously, what was I doing?*

Exasperated with myself, I looked at my phone, then tapped out a message to my usual group chat.

Nanami: Thanks for bringing me and Yoshin together, you two.

It was just a simple message with no preface of any kind. *Are they showering right about now?* I wondered. *Or are they hanging out with their boyfriends?* As I was thinking that, my message was marked as read, and I received two replies. Maybe they were both alone.

Hatsumi: What's gotten into you all of a sudden? All we did was dare you to confess.

Ayumi: Right? I'd get it if you were upset, but it's totally weird for you to thank us.

It wasn't that anything was up, per se. It was just... Maybe because I'd finally come up with a plan for our last date, I was suddenly feeling like I wanted to thank all sorts of people. I'd managed to thank my mom, dad, and little sister directly. I'd also sent a message to Shinobu-san and Toru-san earlier.

A plan for our last date... That's right—our last date. I had no intention of making it our last, but maybe Saturday and Sunday really would be the last time he and I would go out together. That was why, today, I'd been contacting everyone. Of course, after I'd done that, I would message Yoshin too. I'd already let him know that in advance.

Yoshin had told me that he'd be chatting with Baron-san today, so I probably still had time. I was pretty sure he was filling him in like usual. It was kind of funny that I'd ended up doing something similar.

There was one more person I wanted to thank, but before I contacted that final person, I had to thank Hatsumi and Ayumi: the pair who'd instigated this whole thing.

Nanami: A dare... Yeah, it all started with a dare, but I'm just so happy that I was able to meet him. I get to have this last date with him because of it. That's why I want to thank you both.

It took a while for the two of them to respond. When their replies finally did arrive, they didn't directly reference my own message. My friends must have sensed something from what I'd said.

Hatsumi: When it's all over, we'll apologize to Misumai too. That is, I want you to let us apologize to

him.

Ayumi: Yeah, for sure. No matter what happens, we want to do at least that.

For a moment, I thought that they shouldn't worry about it so much, but I stopped myself from saying so. Of course they'd be concerned, plus it seemed wrong of me to take away their opportunity to apologize.

Nanami: Yeah, let's all apologize together. I don't know if he'll forgive us, but still, let's go for it.

That said, the fact I'd gone through with the dare was all on me. I had no intention of blaming anyone else. Sure, I'd been dared, but I'd decided to do it. I had to take responsibility. Even if the two of them were going to apologize, I wasn't going to forget that.

Nanami: All right, already! Let's get it together! When all this is over and done with, let's get together and have a party! Maybe we can have your boyfriends join us and do a triple date? That would be fun!

I wanted to introduce Hatsumi and Ayumi's boyfriends to Yoshin too. It would be awesome to go somewhere all together. Oto-nii had a big enough car, so maybe he could drive and we could go somewhere farther away than usual. I kept coming up with ideas and sharing them in the chat.

Hatsumi: Yeah, let's go all out. And when we do, we'll treat you guys!

Ayumi: Uh-huh! Let's par-tay! We can do karaoke, go bowling, or even visit an amusement park or something!

I tried not to think about what would happen if things didn't go well. Instead, I chatted with Hatsumi and Ayumi about all the fun things we could do in the future. I think we all sincerely believed that such a future would come.

We chatted for a while, but since I didn't want it to get too late before I got in touch with the final person I wanted to thank, I said my farewells and left the conversation with my two friends. I then finally proceeded to message the

person I'd saved until the very end.

I could have called her, but since it was late and I didn't want to trouble her, I decided to send her a message. *Maybe she's asleep already*, I thought. *Middle schoolers might already be asleep at this hour*. As I was thinking that, though, the message I'd sent became marked as read and I received a response.

Peach: What's wrong, Shichimi-chan? I haven't done anything for you to thank me for.

Shichimi: That's not true at all, Peach-chan.

The person I contacted was Peach-chan. Ever since we'd talked on the phone, Peach-chan and I had actually been talking pretty regularly. I'd even chatted with her a bit about the upcoming date and told her how much I appreciated everyone's help. When she'd asked me whether we could chat again when it got closer to the date, I'd immediately said yes. We hadn't chatted so formally like this since the last time we'd talked on the phone.

Peach: Good luck on your date, Shichimi-chan! You must be really excited about it, huh?

Shichimi: I'm excited, but I'm also really nervous. It's my first time going on a date somewhere I chose.

Peach: Oh, that's right. I guess Canyon-san is your first boyfriend. Yeah, it's always nerve-racking to have to come up with a plan yourself. I totally know how you feel.

Shichimi: Really?! Wait, have you had to come up with plans for dates before too, Peach-chan?

I couldn't help latching on to her remark. *Isn't it super early of her to have gone on a date in middle school?* I thought. *Oh, but I guess Hatsumi and Ayumi were going on dates when we were that age. Wow, that's super impressive.*

Peach: Oh, no, no, no! One time when I was in elementary school, I invited a boy I was friends with to go to the science museum with me! It wasn't a date or anything like that.

Elementary school... Wait, people go on dates when they're in elementary school?!

Shichimi: Hold up! That's totally a date! That's so cool of you, going on a date when you were in elementary school... You were even farther ahead than I was, Peach-chan.

To think that Peach-chan had already been on a date. *A science museum, huh? I wonder if it'd be fun if Yoshin and I went to one together. Maybe I should ask him about it next time.*

As I sat there all impressed, I realized Peach-chan's fluster. I had been kind of surprised, but I supposed I'd probably commented too excitedly. I should have restrained myself.

Peach: Anyway, enough about me. Did you already decide where you wanna go? Or are you gonna keep it a surprise and tell him the day of?

Shichimi: Oh, no. We're not gonna surprise each other.

Peach: Aw, really? You said you were both coming up with a plan, so I'd just assumed you guys were gonna surprise each other.

Shichimi: We were thinking of doing that, but then we kept on talking and realized it was better to share what we were planning, rather than make things complicated. You know, 'cause we have to figure out what to wear and stuff like that.

Depending on where we were going, we would have to wear the appropriate outfits. Also, when we had been talking about where we wanted to go, we'd gotten so excited that we hadn't been able to keep anything a secret. Even then, though, sharing our plans with one another felt more right for the two of us. Knowing where we were going could make us even more excited.

Peach: And? Where did you pick?

Shichimi: I picked a theme park I'd been wanting to go to, so I'm planning to spend a day there with him. He said he wanted to go to the zoo and to a shrine on Sunday, so I'm looking forward to it already.

I'd picked a theme park because I wanted to make all sorts of fun memories there together. Yoshin seemed to have chosen for us to spend time together in a more relaxing way. Having an active day on Saturday before taking it easy on Sunday sounded like a pretty good idea. That way, I could also get myself

emotionally prepared. The shrine idea had been kind of unexpected, but I knew I'd be able to enjoy going anywhere as long as it was with Yoshin.

Peach: That's so nice. I hope you have all sorts of fun, Shichimi-chan. Then on your one-month anniversary next week, after everything's sorted, tell me how things turn out. I'm sure everything's gonna go great.

Shichimi: Thanks, Peach-chan. I'll do my best to share good news.

Peach: Actually, if things turn out weird, I'm gonna be super upset with Canyon-san! He hasn't shown up in the chat in a while, but if he makes you cry, I'm never gonna forgive him!

My heart warmed at her adorable and heartening encouragement, and I thanked her once again. The day had turned into one of giving thanks to all sorts of people.

After that, we chatted about nothing in particular. Peach-chan told me all sorts of things I didn't know about Yoshin and his time spent in-game, and we also talked a little bit about me and him. By the time we realized it, quite some time had passed since we'd started chatting.

Peach: Oh, wow. It's already so late. You're still gonna talk with Canyon-san after this, right, Shichimi-chan? I'll miss you until the next time we chat, but I'll be eagerly awaiting good news.

Shichimi: Yeah. Thanks, Peach-chan. Talk to you soon. Bye!

Once I'd hung up the phone, I let out a long sigh. Had I managed to thank everyone I wanted to thank? I was truly grateful to everyone for supporting us and helping us come all this way in only a month. In my heart, I thanked everyone one more time.

I wondered whether I should call Yoshin or not. Looking at my phone, I hesitated. I had told him I wasn't sure if I'd be able to call him that day and that he should feel free to go to bed and not wait up.

Still, after Peach-chan had asked about me talking with Yoshin tonight, I'd suddenly felt the urge to hear his voice. Come to think of it, that exchange of me telling him he could go ahead and sleep had sounded a lot like conversations between my dad and my mom. Even when dad told her to go to

bed before he got home, mom would always stay up waiting for him. Maybe it had ended up slipping out because I'd always liked those exchanges between them.

As I was kicking my feet, feeling embarrassed, my phone began to ring. It was Yoshin. On reflex, I swiped to accept his call.

"Hello?" Yoshin said, sounding surprised that I'd picked up so quickly.

Given that I was the one who'd picked up the phone, I should have expected to hear his voice, but it still made me so nervous, I felt like my voice was going to crack. I cleared my throat softly so that he wouldn't hear.

"Hello? Nanami? Is it okay to talk now?" Yoshin asked.

"Uh, yeah. It's totally fine. What's up? I know I said I might not be able to call you today..."

"Yeah, I was thinking about that, but I wanted to hear your voice all of a sudden. Am I bothering you?" he asked.

I wanted to reply immediately that he wasn't bothering me at all, but I couldn't quite force out the words. Hearing his voice, getting this unexpected phone call from him, filled my heart with so much joy.

"You know our next date is our fourth date, right?" he said. "I was just thinking that so much had happened up till now. I feel like it's been a long time since you and I met, but it's only gonna be our fourth date."

"Yeah, totally. It feels like I've been with you for much longer. We went to the movies for our first date, right? When I saw you at the mall the day before, you were so cool."

"Oh, that. That actually ended up being kind of a pathetic memory for me. I wish I could've come to the rescue in a cooler, smoother way."

"No way. Plus the aquarium was a lot of fun too, wasn't it? And even the time we spend together at school. When I'm with you, everything is a million times more fun."

"I know, right? Ever since I started going out with you, school's become way more fun."

The more we talked, the more memories flowed out of us. We were intentionally talking about what we'd done since we'd started going out, rather than our upcoming fourth date.

"Seriously, so much has happened until now," I said. "It's been such a blast, though I can enjoy doing anything as long as it's with you."

"Yeah, same. I know we're too young to be talking about our past, but even if it hasn't been that long, we've already made heaps of memories."

We really *did* have so many memories. I didn't know what it felt like for normal couples, but to me, our past three weeks together really felt dense with all sorts of goings-on. Was this normal for everyone that was in a relationship?

As we kept going back and forth about all the memories we shared, I suddenly remembered a detail from our aquarium date.

"By the way, do you remember Yuki-chan? You know, the girl we met at the aquarium. I bet it's adorable to have such a cute daughter. Hey, Yoshin, do you want a daughter too one day?"

"A daughter, huh? If I ever had a daughter... I feel like I'd never let her marry anyone. I'm pretty sure I'd spoil her rotten too."

"Aha ha, you're like my dad then. In my house, my mom tends to be the strict one. Maybe we'd be like that too—you'd spoil her, and then I'd be more...strict... U-Um, I mean..."

Once the words were out of my mouth, I realized what I was saying: that Yoshin's daughter would also be *my* daughter. By the end, my words had fallen to a soft murmur.

Yoshin seemed to realize it too. He let out a sudden "Oh..." and then grew silent. *Say something!* I thought. *You were the one who— Oh, no. I was the one who started it.*

An awkward silence settled between the two of us, but...

"I...I occasionally get pictures from Yuki-chan's mom! It sounds like Yuki-chan's saying she wants to see us again too!"

I was so desperate to change the subject, I was nearly shouting. Even over the

phone, I could feel Yoshin draw in a breath, but he responded immediately.

“Y-Yeah, once things calm down, it’d be great to have a get-together with all the people we’ve met, though I never thought an introvert like me would ever say something like that.”

I was thrilled to realize that Yoshin—who really was an introvert and liked being alone—thought it was fun to be with me. Even though our conversation had turned slightly awkward and even though I wasn’t sure how things would turn out...

“Let’s most definitely get everyone together sometime!”

And I sincerely wished for that.

Chapter 2: Our Last Date, Day 1

I'd been having this one dream just about every day lately. In that dream, it was the day of our one-month anniversary, and I was telling Nanami that I liked her. Nanami was surprised, but then she started saying something to me...

And that was when I would always wake up.

I'd receive no answer. Even if I tried to fall back asleep, I never got to see the continuation of the dream. The next day, the exact same part of the dream always replayed itself, as though I were stuck in some sort of a loop. That day was no different.

"Ugh, I can't believe I woke up so early," I muttered to myself after letting out a long yawn. It was a little after 5 a.m., and considering Nanami and I would be meeting at nine, I had nearly four hours to kill.

I'd had that same dream again. I'd heard once that your dreams are supposed to be the manifestation of your anxieties and desires. Was that the case with this dream as well? If that was the case, then wouldn't it make more sense to dream about today's date instead of the anniversary? It was our fourth date, after all—the first day of it, at least.

It probably made more sense to count today's date as our fourth and tomorrow's date as our fifth. For some reason, though, both Nanami and I understood that today and tomorrow counted as one single date. I guess that made sense considering we counted our trip from last week, with both Saturday and Sunday combined, to be our third date.

In any case, our date was finally upon us.

At Nanami's request, we had decided to meet up instead of having me pick her up. To tell the truth, I was reluctant to oblige, because I was worried about someone trying to hit on her while she was out heading to our meeting place by herself, but in the end, I'd given in. I was still worried though. *Very* worried. I wondered if Genichiro-san would follow her around as her bodyguard again.

Maybe that was another reason I'd woken up early. Of course I was excited about our date, but the more I thought about it, the more worried I became.

There was still enough time for me to go back to sleep, but I didn't want to risk oversleeping somehow. As I sat there, drowsily trying to decide what to do, my door suddenly began to open, albeit very slowly.

My door wasn't locked, so of course it was easy to open. However, I had no idea who was opening it. It couldn't be Nanami, right? The front door was locked, so that wasn't possible.

"Oh, Yoshin, you're awake. It's a bit early for you, isn't it? Are you excited about your date with Nanami-san?"

It was my mom. Well, of course it wouldn't be Nanami.

"Mom, you're back. You're home early. Where's dad?" I asked.

"I came back ahead of him. I got a call from Nanami-san thanking us, so I was concerned. You two have your date today, don't you?"

"Oh, I see. Nanami contacted you as well, huh?"

It seemed my mumbling reached my mom's ears, because she started grinning. "Hmm. Nanami, you say?"

I knew I'd made a mistake, but it was too late. I thought maybe she'd pursue the issue, but she didn't say anything more about it.

"I'll make some breakfast. In the meantime, you can go ahead and shower and get yourself ready."

"Uh, okay. Got it."

I thought her reaction was a bit odd, but I decided not to think about it and got out of bed. As mom had suggested, I then showered and got dressed. Although my head had felt somewhat hazy, the hot shower cleared it up. I wasn't in the habit of showering in the morning, but it turned out to feel pretty good.

After taking longer than usual to get ready, I found that my mom had indeed made breakfast for me, but there was only one place setting. It seemed she hadn't made any for herself.

“Aren’t you eating, mom?” I asked.

“I’ll eat with your dad when he gets home. You should go ahead and eat though.”

So that was it. It was nice that they got along so well. I took her up on the offer and sat down to eat my mom’s home-cooked breakfast for the first time in a while. This might even have been the first time in ages that I’d had a decent breakfast at all.

Rice, miso soup with tofu and green onions, pieces of omelet, grilled fish, seaweed... It was a very traditional Japanese breakfast that made me feel somewhat nostalgic. Maybe she’d even prepped it before she even came to my room. I hadn’t really had the chance to eat my mom’s cooking in a while.

I took a sip of the miso soup and felt myself growing calmer at the warm, familiar taste. My mom’s miso soup... Yeah, it really had been a while.

“I’m glad to see you two getting along well,” mom said all of a sudden.

“Huh?”

Her comment came as such a surprise that my response had sounded kind of idiotic.

“When Nanami-san suddenly called me up and thanked me, I thought it could be a preamble to her breaking up with you. I panicked a little.”

Ah, so that was why my mom had gotten all worried and come home by herself earlier than planned. Still, even though that mystery was solved, I couldn’t help but wonder what kind of thanks Nanami had given her.

“Yoshin, you didn’t make Nanami-san angry or anything, did you?”

“I don’t think so. I mean, we did have this fight-like thing, but we made up and stuff.”

“I see. Then you make sure to have fun with Nanami-san today, okay?”

“I know. Jeez, mom. You’re such a worrywart.”

After that, my mom and I chatted about nothing in particular. Just like with breakfast, it had been a while since I’d last talked with my mom like this. It felt a

little bit awkward but also kind of nice.

“All right, mom. I’d better get going.”

With that, I got up and finished getting ready. I even had mom check my clothes and stuff just to be sure. Apparently, nothing seemed off to her, so I was probably good to go.

“Aren’t you a little early?” she asked.

“I figured it’s better than being late. Plus I have a hunch that Nanami is probably gonna be early too.”

“I see. Well, do tell Nanami-san that I said hello.”

“Will do. Okay, I’m off.”

Finally ready, I headed off to meet Nanami. Having my mom see me off before a date was kind of embarrassing, but her seeing me off at all was a rare occasion. It actually felt kind of reassuring.

I walked pretty quickly, so I ended up getting to our meeting spot about an hour early. Even so, Nanami was already there. I’d had a feeling she might be, and as it turned out, I was right. The problem wasn’t that she was there early though—it was the two rather tall guys who were talking to her.

The moment I saw them, a chill went down my spine. If a girl as pretty as Nanami stood by herself, of course someone would hit on her. Was Genichiro-san not here today? *Dammit, stop picking up girls so early in the morning. I knew I should’ve gone to fetch her instead.*

Knowing it was too late for regrets, I quickened my steps and approached her. Nanami noticed me immediately and smiled. Right then, I called out her name loudly enough for the two guys talking to her to be able to hear.

“Nanami, thanks for waiting! Do you, uh, know these two?”

I’d chosen my words carefully in order not to provoke them, but also to emphasize that she was waiting for *me*. However, the response I got from Nanami was an unexpected one.

“Hey, Yoshin. Yup, I know them,” she said.

“Huh?”

Her words took the wind out of my sails and stopped me in my tracks. Seeing my confused expression, Nanami tilted her head in wonder. One of the guys in front of her turned toward me, and...

“Ah, Yoshin-kun. What are you doing, making a lady wait? Thank goodness we ran into her. What were you gonna do if someone tried to hit on her?”

Before me was a guy that I knew as well, speaking with his usual exaggerated manner. I felt all the tension drain from my body.

“Uh... Why are you here, Shibetsu-senpai?”

After realizing who it was, I heard myself speaking in a deflated voice. The person standing before me was Shibetsu-senpai, whom I hadn't seen in some time. He wasn't wearing his school uniform, so I hadn't recognized him.

I didn't know the other guy, but he was tall like Shibetsu-senpai and just as good-looking. Seeing as they were hanging out together, he was probably a member of the basketball team as well.

“We're having joint practice with another school today. We were headed there just now, but we saw Barato-kun standing by herself and decided to stay with her until you got here. You know, so no weird guys would try to talk with her or anything.”

“Oh, I see. Well, uh, thank you, I guess. And sorry for raising my voice like that.”

I bowed without really thinking about it. The agitation I'd felt thinking that Nanami was getting hit on evaporated at once.

“No worries, man,” Shibetsu-senpai replied, laughing cheerfully. “We still have time before practice. Getting to talk with a lovely lady before heading into a place crawling with dudes was a welcome turn of events.”

I had to smile wryly at his response. Jeez, I felt like such a fool having gotten all worked up, though Nanami seemed kind of happy about it.

“On a different note...”

When I looked up, I found Shibetsu-senpai leaning in to look into my face at

eye level. He was sporting a broad grin just like Nanami's.

"You called Barato-kun by her name! I'm so stoked that things are moving along!" Shibetsu-senpai spread his arms wide, reacting dramatically with his entire body. I felt embarrassed that he was rejoicing as though it were about himself.

"Oh, no, uh..." I stammered.

"What are you getting all bashful about?! Be proud, my man!"

Shibetsu-senpai laughed even more loudly and slapped my back, making me lose my balance. I leaned forward to keep myself from falling and was forced to stumble in front of Nanami, who caught me while I latched on to remain standing. She hugged me back tightly. There was nothing I could do to resist the soft warmth before me. Behind me, Shibetsu-senpai laughed even harder.

What's going on right now?!

"Well then. Now that Yoshin-kun's here, I suppose our job here is done. Where are you two headed next?"

When I took my face out of Nanami's chest and looked behind me, I saw the other handsome guy reach out his hand. Shibetsu-senpai didn't seem to notice. The other guy slowly extended his fingers and pinched Shibetsu-senpai's earlobe.

"Senpai, we'd better get going now. Let's not bother the happy couple."

"Ow, ow, ow, ow! Manager, not the ear, please! Don't you know human beings are rendered powerless when their ears are pinched?!"

"Yes, I do," the manager replied. His voice was calm, low, and husky—but also very beautiful. Wait, was the guy actually a girl? I supposed I had heard that the basketball team had a female manager.

It was probably rude of me to think that she was a guy. Her face was kind of androgynous, and her eyelashes were really long. She'd just looked so handsome standing next to Shibetsu-senpai that I'd just assumed that she was a member of the basketball team.

"You always end up taking detours, which is the whole reason we have to

head out early. Now let's get going," the manager snapped.

"Hmm... I have nothing to say in return! Well then, Yoshin-kun, enjoy your date! If you have a chance, come watch us play— Ow! Manager, please don't pull my ear!"

"Oh, uh, thanks. Take care, Shibetsu-senpai," I said.

The manager began to walk off, dragging Shibetsu-senpai along behind her. After several steps, she turned around and bowed to us, blushing, then continued on her way. In contrast, Shibetsu-senpai waved to us as he left, laughing—all while being dragged by the ear. I saw them off while still in Nanami's arms. Even when they had disappeared from view, I felt like I could still hear Shibetsu-senpai laughing.

"So, uh, what were you and Shibetsu-senpai talking about?" I asked Nanami once they were gone.

"Just the usual stuff, I guess. They have a big tournament coming up, so apparently they've been practicing a lot. I guess he and the manager were on their way to practice together."

Baron-san had told me I'd matured a lot, but Nanami must have changed too to be able to talk normally with Shibetsu-senpai like that. When I thought about it, I realized that she'd been talking with them with a smile on her face rather than the look of displeasure she would put on before. I felt ashamed recalling how I'd barged into their conversation thinking they were hitting on her.

Actually, now that I thought about it, her continuing to hold me was even more embarrassing. Even though there weren't that many people around, I felt like passersby were looking at us and grinning. Was I being too self-conscious?

"Um, Nanami? Do you think you can let me go? It's getting a bit too..."

"Oh, right, right. Sorry. You lost your balance, so I tried to catch you without even thinking."

Taking a step away from her, I finally got the chance to see how she was dressed. On top, she was wearing an oversized parka, under which was a crop top that showed her belly button. On the bottom, she was wearing white shorts that revealed her bare legs. Overall, she was showing off way more skin than

usual.

When my gaze trailed upward, I saw that she was also wearing a hat. I guess it was a kind of cap. It suited her, though what caught my eyes was less the hat and more her expression. She was looking at me as though she were expecting something, but her stare seemed different from usual.

Could it be that she wanted to do that thing she'd mentioned ages ago? Getting there before me to surprise me or something? I tried to cull through my memories and took a step closer to Nanami.

"Sorry I kept you waiting, Nanami."

"Jeez, what took you so long?! I can't believe you'd make your girlfriend wait like this."

Nanami crossed her arms and made a show of puffing out her cheeks and turning away from me. Her arms, crossed in front of her, emphasized her chest even more than it already was.

However, in the end, we both burst out laughing. We both already knew she'd tried to get there before me. Today, she'd finally been able to do it and was laughing happily.

"Nanami, don't tell me you showed up early just because you wanted to surprise me. If Shibetsu-senpai hadn't been here, you could've been hit on and stuff."

"Nah, I figured you'd show up early too. It was like that the first time too, remember?"

She was right. Thinking about it, that was how our relationship had started. Even if we told ourselves to stick to the time we'd set, we still always showed up way too early.

"Just for the record, what time did you get here?" I asked.

"Hm? Just a little while ago. Maybe like thirty minutes before you came."

"I made you wait for *thirty* minutes. Dammit, I'm really sorry."

"Don't worry about it. I was the one who showed up so early. And I thought this earlier, but..." Nanami took a step toward me and proceeded to *sniff* me.

Huh? Wait, what is she doing? Why is she sniffing me all of a sudden? I even showered this morning.

“I thought so. Yoshin, you smell different from usual.”

Oh, that’s right. I’d tried something when I was chatting with my mom. I’d forgotten all about it because I’d been talking with Shibetsu-senpai and the team manager. I didn’t think Nanami would figure it out this fast though.

“Yeah, I, uh, tried on some cologne. Is it weird?”

“Oh, really? That’s rare for you, isn’t it?”

If she didn’t notice it, I wasn’t gonna say anything, but she’d noticed in no time at all. That made me pretty—no, *very* happy. She seemed surprised though, so I explained how it had happened.

“My mom came home before I left the house today. This cologne was the one my dad wore the first time he and mom went on a date. We happened to have the same one in the house, so I tried it on. What do you think?”

With that, Nanami leaned in again to smell me some more, making me feel all nervous. When she’d gotten her fill of my scent, she grinned from ear to ear.

“It smells citrusy... How funny. It makes me kinda happy that you’re wearing a cologne your parents remember from their date.”

“I’m glad. If you didn’t like it, I was gonna try to wash it off.”

“No way. I like it. Besides, I never imagined you wearing cologne. I guess I’m just turned on by the unexpected.”

“Where’d you learn to say something like that?!”

Nanami grinned. *Did she learn to say that from Peach-san? How did they get close so fast?*

“It seems we both have stuff we want to ask the other. It’s still a bit early. Shall we stop by a café or something first?” she asked.

“Yeah, we still have time, I suppose. Let’s grab some coffee.”

I went ahead and took her hand in mine. This date seemed to be retracing our beginnings, and the day was just getting started. Despite it not being part of our

plan, we headed toward a nearby café, thinking that doing so felt more right for the two of us.



Nanami had told me a bit about the location for that day's date, but to be honest, the idea hadn't really sunk in. When she and I finally arrived, I ended up staring at it for a while with what was probably a blank expression on my face.

There I was met with an unfamiliar, Western-style building, a clock tower, and a plaza full of flowers in full bloom. The scene before me looked like something I'd encounter visiting a foreign country, and the sweet, toasty scent of baked goods wafting all around us when we entered only added to the feeling that we'd been transported far, far away.

Actually, given that I'd never been abroad, I couldn't be totally sure, but that was certainly the feeling I got. I'd once heard that different countries had different smells, so maybe it was the fragrance of the baked goods making me feel that way. If I turned around, I could see the familiar scenery I was accustomed to. The fact that just a few steps could change my surroundings so much was impressive.

"I had no idea a place like this even existed," I murmured.

"I didn't know either. At least, if Ayumi hadn't told me about it before, I probably wouldn't have remembered."

"Kamoenai-san told you about this place?"

"Yep. She said she came here on a date with her boyfriend one winter. I only remembered recently."

The theme park we were visiting had been established by a confectionery company to introduce its history and various products to the public. Visitors could watch as various treats were made, participate in sweets-making workshops, and enjoy various events held throughout the year. Embarrassingly enough, I'd only learned of the existence of this park when I'd heard about it from Nanami. Apparently, it was a pretty famous theme park, but I'd never even heard of it.

The entrance to the park itself was completely free. Although the various

events and workshops required the purchase of tickets to attend, there were plenty of attractions visitors could enjoy without a ticket. It was even fun just to walk around the park grounds.

The park was popular among not only tourists but also the locals. Whether visited by adults or children, it was fun for everyone to enjoy. Even today, the scene before us was bustling with families as well as couples on dates. Just from hearing about it, I could tell that we had a very fun day ahead of us. I could also understand why Nanami would want to come. For me, though, there was one thing about the park that bummed me out. It was the fact that...

“We’re not allowed to bring our own lunches in here, huh?”

That’s right. My biggest—and only—complaint about this theme park was *that*, because that meant I wouldn’t be able to enjoy Nanami’s cooking today.

“Well, it can’t be helped,” Nanami said. “I have a feeling it’s pretty rare that a theme park like this would let people bring in their own food.”

“Yeah, you’re right. We’re planning on eating out for dinner though, right? It just feels really weird when I can’t eat your cooking at least once a day.”

Nanami was consoling me, although she didn’t seem terribly bothered by the situation. For me, though, eating Nanami’s home-cooked meals had become a solid part of my daily routine. I’d felt fine when I hadn’t been thinking about it, but now that I’d realized a regular part of my day would be missing, I suddenly felt extremely restless.

“I’m sure the food in the restaurant is pretty good too,” Nanami said, still trying to make me feel better, but even as she said it, she was grinning. I was happy she seemed somewhat amused about my predicament, but I wasn’t just saying that to be polite. I genuinely felt sad about the whole affair.

I guess this is what it means to be completely led by your stomach.

When I thought about it, I realized how lucky I really was. I mean, just how many high schoolers out there could claim that eating their girlfriend’s cooking was a part of their daily routine? Yeah, if I complained any more about it, I’d most definitely be punished by karma. We were on a date; I had to snap out of it.

“All right, then,” I said. “It’s a bummer I can’t eat your cooking, but let’s have fun today. Also, you know, thank you for always making me such delicious food.”

“Oh, not at all. I only cook because I like doing it. But you’re right! We’re gonna have a blast today!” Nanami smiled happily, then swung my hand in hers back and forth in an arc. Yeah, it was best that we just focus on having fun.

We finally started making our way around the theme park. When I asked Nanami where we should go first, she tugged at my hand, saying there was a place she wanted to check out. As we strolled and chatted, we arrived at a courtyard with a garden of beautiful flowers.

As soon as we stepped inside, the aromas around us changed completely. Until a moment ago, the smell of sweet baked goods had lingered in the air. Here, though, we were struck by the many different scents of flowers. I was overwhelmed by the sheer number of flowers in bloom.

One of my strongest memories of flowers was of the cherry blossoms we’d seen together on our recent trip. At that park, pink and white petals had floated all around us, and we’d been able to experience the unembellished beauty of flowers in nature.

Here, in contrast, flowers of myriad colors were blooming in and alongside various man-made objects. Along the red-brick path, around a dome-shaped sculpture, inside a white picket fence, in the shape of a green arch... Blooming flowers decorated each and every such structure as far as the eye could see. A garden thoughtfully designed by human hands welcomed us. Although it was the polar opposite of a naturally occurring scene, this garden was in no way inferior in terms of beauty.

“This is incredible. Look at all the different flowers,” I murmured, overwhelmed by both the sight and the smell. It seemed Nanami was amused by my reaction; she peered into my face and tilted her head slightly.

“All the flowers in the garden are roses, apparently. They said there are more than two hundred different types here. They’re pretty, huh? Plus they smell amazing,” she said.

“Wait, seriously? I had no idea there were so many types.”

“Yeah, me neither. Well then, shall we go in?”

Still holding hands, we stepped into the garden. As we looked around, beautiful flowers of white, yellow, orange, pink, red, and purple delighted our vision. And they were all roses... In my mind, roses had always been red, so this was a whole new discovery for me.

“I’ve been feeling a long way from home ever since we got here, but this garden looks even more like it’s in a foreign country than where we were walking through before. Take that building there—I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything like that around town,” I remarked.

“Yeah, I wonder what country this place is supposed to look like. I guess it must be somewhere in Europe, huh?”

“Why Europe though? I mean, I do kinda think of France when I hear roses too, but still.”

I wondered if associating roses with France was just a stereotype. After all, it felt like something that had come about due to the influence of things like manga and video games, though I supposed as long as it was beautiful, I didn’t really mind where we were.

“It’d be nice to travel abroad together one day, don’t you think?” Nanami said. “Like on a honey—uh, like on a graduation trip! But that means I’ll have to save up a lot. Maybe I should get a part-time job.”

Although she was mumbling, I’d totally heard her sudden U-turn. *“Honey”? Was she gonna say “honeymoon”? I probably shouldn’t ask. Yeah. I should just take it to mean she’s really enjoying the date and not that she’s getting ahead of herself.*

Seeing the fountain, the flower beds, the clock tower, and the buildings against the backdrop of roses, I really did feel like we were traveling abroad. Then I came upon a strange hollow—or rather, a hole in the flower bed.

“Nanami, do you see that hole over there? I wonder what that’s about.”

“Huh? Oh, you’re right. I wonder too... It looks heart-shaped. I wonder if it’s supposed to be part of the design.”

Would some kind of a gimmick fly out of it, or something? I began to wonder, amused, when someone behind us spoke up.

“People stand there together to take photos in the middle of the flowers. You enter through there, and you take a photo as you stand in the opening. It’s really popular.”

When Nanami and I whipped around in surprise, we found one of the park employees standing there. At least, I assumed she was staff, because she was wearing what appeared to be an employee ID around her neck.

“If you’d like, I can take a picture of the two of you. It’d make for a fantastic memory for any couple.”

Glancing down at our clasped hands, the staff member smiled brightly, as though she’d seen something adorable. We blushed slightly just from hearing ourselves described as a couple. Even so, we didn’t let go of each other’s hand. Instead, we handed our phones to the staff member.

“Thank you. That’d be really nice,” I said to her.

“Thank you so much!” Nanami added.

I was sure that just a little while ago we would have immediately let go of each other’s hand. Perhaps this was what it meant to have matured since then.

Entering the flower bed via the path the staff member indicated, Nanami and I stood in the heart-shaped opening with our upper bodies visible above the flowers. The opening wasn’t terribly small, but we both smiled at each other, slightly embarrassed about the unusual closeness between us.

“Oh, that’s fantastic. Can you get a little closer? Perfect. Now, smile!”

Following the staff member’s prompt, we stepped even closer to one another, close enough for our bodies to nearly touch, and then made peace signs with our fingers. The staff member took a few photos of us that way but then frowned slightly. *Hm? Did the photos not come out well?* I wondered.

“These photos are great and all,” she said, “but would you like to try making a heart shape with your hands? It’ll look great in the photo, and I bet it’ll make a great memory!”

Wait, a heart? You mean that thing couples do, with each person making up half the heart with their hand? Feeling flustered, I turned toward Nanami and asked, “What do you want to do? Ah, I guess I don’t even need to ask.”

“Huh? Did I look that eager?”

“I’d say so. Your eyes are all sparkly. I guess you want to do it, huh?”

Nanami had blushed at the staff member’s suggestion, but with her eyes aglow, she’d immediately started looking at me, her gaze full of expectations. Was there a guy out there who could refuse his girlfriend when she was looking at him like this? I, for one, could not.

“What happened to feeling uncomfortable around guys? You seemed a lot more relaxed around Shibetsu-senpai too.”

“That’s all thanks to you, you know? You’re the one who taught me all these things, so you’d better take responsibility for it.”

Nanami leaned in closer and looked at me, a mischievous glint in her eyes. *There she goes, making suggestive comments again. We’re even in front of the staff this time!*

Looking down at her as she gazed up at me, her eyes still sparkling, I smiled wryly in defeat, only to be caught off guard by the staff member.

“Aw, this is too adorable— Uh, I mean, how lovely to run into such a loving, innocent couple! All righty then, go ahead and strike me a pose!”

Hearing that, Nanami and I both spun around to look at her. It was as though we’d heard her unfiltered thoughts for a moment, but I decided to pretend I hadn’t heard.

Adorable? Are we really? I was pretty sure this was the first time anyone had ever called us that. *She must just be exaggerating.*

Still holding hands, Nanami and I used our free hands to make the shape of a heart in front of us. *This is a lot more embarrassing than it looks.* I’d thought it would be fine, since all I was doing was making a simple shape, but I felt like once all was said and done, I wouldn’t be able to show anyone these pictures. Nanami seemed to feel the same way, since she was blushing and shivering

slightly.

“This is great! This is excellent! Okay, now in three, two, one... Say cheese!”

The lady took many photos as Nanami and I smiled through our embarrassment. She seemed to have gotten herself worked up, because she took photos of us not just from the front but also from the two sides. We managed to get tons of photos just from standing in that one spot alone.



“Okay! We got some great photos! Please make sure they look okay,” the staff member finally said, handing us back our phones as we stepped out of the flower bed. When I checked mine, I found that the photos looked even better than I’d imagined, but I definitely wouldn’t be able to show any of them to anyone, especially my parents. It was true that we’d made a great memory though.

“Wow, Yoshin, these photos are really awesome!” Nanami exclaimed, appearing more than satisfied. Yeah, all was well as long as she was happy. She might not be able to resist showing off the photos to her mom and sister, but I was willing to accept that just as long as she didn’t show them to my own parents.

Just as we were about to thank the staff member for taking our photo, she made another suggestion for a photo shoot. “I also recommend taking photos in front of that European-style building or in front of the clock tower. If you’d like, I’d be more than happy to take them. What do you think?”

“Thank you so much, but are you sure that’s okay with you?” I asked.

“I’m on the custodial staff, so roses aren’t my specialty. I get requests all the time to take pictures, though, so please don’t worry about it.”

This lady was amazing at customer service. We had no reason to refuse, so we gladly accepted her offer.

First, she got photos of us and the roses in front of the building. We didn’t make a heart shape with our hands this time, but the photos still made it look like we were on an overseas trip. Then, just when we were about to have our photo taken in front of the clock tower, cheerful music began to pour out of it. When Nanami and I spun around in surprise to look at the tower, the central part of it opened, revealing animatronic dolls of animals and chefs playing music and chatting. The scene was like something out of a fairy tale.

“Ah, perfect timing! This is gonna make a great video!”

The staff person didn’t seem fazed at all. She continued taking photos—and now videos—of us on our phones. Although we’d been surprised at first, we soon found ourselves enjoying the clock tower show.

“Wow, it’s the automaton clock!” Nanami exclaimed. “I’ve heard about it, but seeing it up close makes this feel like a fairy tale!”

“You knew about this, Nanami?”

“Yeah, but I kept quiet because I wanted to surprise you. Did you not look it up beforehand?”

“I thought it’d be more fun if I didn’t know what to expect, but yeah, this is pretty cool.”

We stood there taking in the display for around ten minutes or so. During that time, the staff person dutifully continued taking photos and videos of us. I couldn’t help but wonder if she was overdoing the whole customer service thing just a little.

Once the animatronics show ended, the staff member gave us some more information about the park and returned our phones to us. “You may already know this, but in the other buildings there are candy-making demonstrations held by artisans and factory tours that you can purchase tickets for. Please take a look if you have a chance. Also, the illumination show that’s held in this garden in the winter is really beautiful. Please do visit again when the time comes.”

When we thanked her again, she concluded her sales talk with a smile and walked away—though she did stop to whisper something in Nanami’s ear.

Once the lady had left, I noticed Nanami’s cheeks were completely red. *What in the world did she say to her?* I wondered.

“What was that about?” I asked her.

“Huh?!”

I stared at her, surprised.

“She, um, told me to come again,” she mumbled.

“Yeah...she told me that too.”

Would Nanami really react that way just from being told to come back? As I stood there wondering, Nanami began to explain. “She said there’s a children’s area and events that kids can enjoy too, so she told me to come again when we

had kids.”

When I heard that, I was at a loss for words. The lady had thrown me for a loop. *We’re high schoolers—it’s too early to be thinking about that stuff!* Still, given just how good she’d been to us, I decided to just accept it.

“In any case, I *am* curious about the illuminations in the winter, so maybe we can come back then,” I said.

“Yeah, that’d be nice. Well then, let’s continue this adventure!”

We looked at each other, both smiling as if to hide something as we intentionally changed the topic of conversation. We left the rose garden where we’d made so many memories and began our stroll through the rest of the park.

The buildings around us felt foreign to us, letting us get a taste of what it might feel like to travel abroad. There was also an open field within the park. Apparently, if you came just at the right time, you could watch a professional soccer team practice there. I didn’t know anything about soccer, but I felt like seeing them practice might be fun.

Along the way, there was a store selling hot dogs and soft-serve ice cream. Nanami paused for a moment, making me wonder if she wanted to stop by and get something, but when I asked her, she looked embarrassed.

“Not really... I just thought it might be kind of nice if we walked around together eating something.”

Oh, come on, now. Is there any guy who wouldn’t want to grab a bite when he heard something like that? I was overcome by a strange urge to try and grant every wish that she had, though I supposed I shouldn’t make such a big deal out of it.

Nanami kept making unnecessary excuses—“It’s not like I’m super hungry or anything, okay?!”—as we each bought soft-serve ice cream. She got a vanilla-flavored one, and I chose chocolate. Then we each paid separately and received our ice cream from the storekeeper.

“You know I could’ve bought both of these, right?” I said. “I still wanna thank you for all the lunches you make me every day.”

“Not today! We already agreed we’d both pay for our own half of today’s date.”

“I know, but I still feel bad about it.”

“Stop worrying! I mean, we’re just high schoolers. This is totally normal.”

That’s right. For today’s date, Nanami had requested that we go Dutch.

I had planned on paying for everything, just like I’d done before, but Nanami had insisted on paying separately for this date and had refused to back down. We’d ended up having a minor row about it, but she’d pushed so strongly that I’d had no choice but to agree.

“Besides, I feel bad about it too. You always pay for our dates...”

“Don’t be silly. There’s nothing for you to feel bad about. It’s just in return for the daily bento.”

Yeah, there was no need for Nanami to worry. She spoiled me every day by feeding me, so I was just trying to return the favor. Still, it seemed that Nanami wasn’t convinced.

“You’ve been cooking with me lately, so you don’t have to worry about that. It goes both ways, you know? We should do all our dates like this.”

I’d assumed that we were paying for ourselves for just this date only, but it seemed that Nanami wanted to continue doing this for *all* our dates. *It goes both ways...* I couldn’t exactly argue, but I still couldn’t help feeling vaguely troubled by the thought.

“I don’t know... Is that even okay?”

Grimacing at the strange feeling in my chest, I tried some of my ice cream. A familiar taste—slightly bitter, yet still satisfyingly sweet—filled my mouth. Yup, it was delicious.

Tasting something sweet helped to calm me down a little. What Nanami had said did make sense in a way. It was important that neither of us felt like we owed the other something... At least, I thought I’d read something like that somewhere before. It made sense, but our dates up until that one hadn’t actually been that big of an expense. That was why, at least on a day when we

wouldn't get to eat her bento, I wanted to be the one paying, or so I'd been thinking.

"It's fine! Oh, but if you're so worried, you can let me have a taste of yours. The chocolate one looks delicious too!"

Nanami must have sensed what I was thinking. Laughing, she stuck her spoon into my ice cream and, after digging out a small spoonful, brought it to her mouth. It was almost as though her smile were telling me to enjoy the day rather than continue mulling over things.

As she ate the ice cream, a bit that had melted on the spoon dripped down the corner of her lips. She ended up licking it off with her own tongue. Stunned by the subtle movement, I felt my heart skip a beat and found myself staring.

"Hm? Do you want some of this too? The vanilla's really good. Here, say 'ahh.'"

Having noticed me looking at her, Nanami scooped up some of the vanilla ice cream and brought it inches away from my face. Apparently, my stare had given her the wrong impression.

I couldn't just leave her and her spoon hanging, so I went in to eat what she was offering. The vanilla flavor slowly spread throughout my mouth. She was right; this one was tasty too. Still, to think that she'd feed me with her own spoon...

"See? You're glad we didn't get the mixed swirl, right?"

Nanami looked on, satisfied and smiling, as I swallowed the ice cream. Seeing that smile, I finally understood. The ice cream place also sold a mix of both vanilla and chocolate, but Nanami had explicitly suggested that we each buy the flavors separately. She must have made that suggestion because she'd wanted to do *this*.

Feeling that it wasn't fair for her to keep getting the better of me, I scooped up some of my own ice cream and brought the spoon closer to her face. "Here, Nanami. Say 'ahh.'"

"I've already had some," she declared.

“Oh? Did you not like it?”

“I didn’t *not* like it. Jeez, what kind of way to ask is that?!”

Even if she said that, this was the way I was used to being asked questions—and by Nanami herself, no less. I never thought that I’d be the one to ask a question in that way though. Still, Nanami laughed happily and tasted the chocolate ice cream again from the spoon I was holding out to her.

“It’s good, huh?” she said.

“Yeah, it is.”

Walking while enjoying soft serve... I was pretty sure I’d never done such a thing until now.

We continued strolling, looking around and making our way slowly through the park. After passing the European-style building that the staff member had told us about earlier, we noticed that there were more people here than there’d been before. When we looked more carefully, I realized they were standing in line for something.

“There’s a line over there. Shall we go look?” Nanami asked.

“Yeah, let’s check it out.”

Curious, we approached the line and saw that it was made up of families waiting to ride the miniature train. There were local kids as well as tourists from abroad. Everyone was talking all at once, making for a very multicultural scene.

“A miniature railroad, huh? The tracks we saw on our way here must have been for this. Oh, and there’s one going around even now! Wow, I didn’t even realize that,” I said.

I’d been so engrossed in walking and eating with Nanami that I hadn’t even noticed. The colorful trains riding along the jet-black tracks were filled with happy children and their parents. It was an adorable sight.

“What do you wanna do, Nanami? There’s a line, but do you wanna ride the train?”

“I wonder how long the wait is. If it’s not too long, I’d like to ride it, but I dunno. What do you think we should do?”

As we stood there, staring at the line and trying to make up our minds, my stomach let out a loud growl. Maybe snacking on an ice cream rather than having a full meal had made my stomach crave more, because I suddenly felt very hungry. Nanami burst out laughing while I turned scarlet from embarrassment. I mean, why did my stomach have to start growling so loudly at a time like *this*?

“Your stomach’s honest, at least. It’s almost lunchtime, so how about we eat first, and if it’s not too crowded, maybe we can ride the train after.”

“Ugh, I’m sorry. Yeah, it’d be great if we could do that.”

We turned around, leaving the line for the train behind, and walked back up the path we’d come down, heading toward a restaurant. Passing by the ice cream place along the way, I regretted not having chosen a hot dog instead, since eating one would probably have spared me all this embarrassment.

Well, it’s too late now. We can still enjoy ourselves all afternoon.

With that in mind, I chatted with Nanami about what we wanted to do after lunch. If it wasn’t crowded, we could go on the train. Since we both had money to spare, we could also buy tickets to go on a factory tour or take part in one of the sweets-making workshops. We continued chatting like this until we found ourselves in front of the restaurant.

There were two places in the park to sit down and eat: one was a restaurant that featured curry soups, and the other was a café-*cum*-restaurant. We decided to head into the latter.

Because it was still a bit early for lunch, the restaurant wasn’t crowded, and we were able to find a seat immediately. It might have been a good choice after all that we’d come here first instead of riding the miniature railway.

This café, too, offered a variety of curry dishes. I ordered a beef curry, and Nanami ordered a chicken and cheese curry. Then we each also ordered a mango lassi. The curry tasted really authentic thanks to its wide range of spices.

“Wow, this is really good,” I remarked. “The beef tendon is super tender, and maybe it’s to be expected, but there’s no gaminess or anything either.”

“Really? This curry’s tasty too. The chicken is soft and juicy, and it just falls

apart in your mouth. Do you want to swap some?"

"Uh, yeah, um, are you gonna do that here too?" I asked.

"Of course! There aren't that many people around right now, and it's fine to do it once in a while, right?"

And there, too, we fed each other spoonfuls of food. I wondered if I was imagining it, but I felt like the servers were looking at us warmly.

"Yeah, the beef one really is good. I'd never had beef tendon before, but maybe I should try making it at home sometime," Nanami mumbled.

"The chicken curry's good too. At home, we only have pork curry, so maybe we can try making chicken curry together too."

We continued to feed each other curry and imagine what it would be like to cook the two dishes together at home. The spice blend seemed pretty authentic, so even if we couldn't recreate the taste, we could at least use similar ingredients. In the end, even when we were eating out, we had ended up talking about cooking ourselves.

"But what should we do about dinner? I thought we'd maybe eat here, but the other place just had curry soups. Should we find somewhere else to eat?" I asked.

"I guess so. Should we try walking around near the park to see what we find? I'm fine eating at a family restaurant or something. Or..." Nanami suddenly paused, then turned to me with a mischievous grin. "Do you want me to make dinner and feed it to you? What was it you said? That you feel weird when you can't eat my cooking?"

To be honest, her idea was incredibly alluring. I felt the urge to jump on the offer, but I refrained.

"Let's not do that. We still have a lot to do here, so you'll be tired by then. I can't make you cook when you're tired. Let's have fun this afternoon, then tonight we can have dinner out like we originally planned."

"I...I see. Yeah, thanks. In that case, let's have all sorts of fun!"

"Shall we head back to the mini rail? It shouldn't be so crowded at

lunchtime.”

“Sounds great!”

With our lunch over, we returned to the place from earlier in order to try and ride the miniature railway. The line wasn’t as long as before; there were just over ten people in front of us and about three families behind us.

Just as I thought we might be able to get on the ride soon, we ran into some trouble. I happened to overhear the person at the ticket window speaking to the family waiting in line behind us.

“I’m terribly sorry. We’re going to be performing routine maintenance work, and we won’t be able to fit everyone on. Would it be possible to ask you to wait until maintenance is complete?”

It seemed that Nanami and I had just managed to squeeze on to the last ride. For a moment, I thought we’d gotten lucky, but then the little boy in the family started crying.

“We can’t ride it?” he asked, his eyes filling with tears. His parents tried their best to console him. From what I could hear, the family had plans later in the day, so they’d lined up to ride the train before leaving the park. The parents, looking troubled, were comforting the boy—who didn’t seem like he was going to stop crying anytime soon—but also they sounded kind of angry.

“Um...would you like to take this ticket?” I asked, turning toward the parents.

“Oh, please—you can use mine too,” Nanami added.

Before I even realized what I was doing, I was holding the ticket I’d purchased out to the family. Nanami, too, was holding out her ticket to them.

“Excuse me,” I said to the person at the window, “if we don’t ride the train, then would the three of them fit on?”

“Oh, yes. You two would have put us just about at capacity, but there’d be room for one more if a children’s ticket is purchased.”

It seemed the max occupancy was thirty, and Nanami and I would’ve made it twenty-nine. In that case, it should be okay for him to ride.

The boy looked back and forth between me and his parents, not seeming to

understand that there was now a chance he'd be able to ride the train. The boy's father looked at us hesitantly. "Um, are you sure that's all right?"

"We can ride the train later, so please take them," I insisted.

"It's true! We'll be here all day on our date!"

As if to help get rid of the parents' reluctance, Nanami entwined her arm with mine and smiled at them brightly. Actually, I'd experienced something like this before. A long time ago, some playground equipment that I'd put off riding until later broke, which meant I couldn't ride it at all. What should have been a fun memory had ended up getting overwritten by a sad one.

Now, of course, I could say that even that was a good memory, but if there was an opportunity for me to help keep a fun memory from turning into a sad one, then I felt like I could definitely make the choice to do that.

"Come on, little guy! You can ride the train, so you have to stop crying! You'll smile for me, won't you?" Nanami said, crouching down and gently patting the boy on the head.

The little boy looked at Nanami and blushed slightly—no, *a lot*—and scurried to hide behind his mother. Maybe he felt shy seeing a gyaru for the first time in his life.

Could this encounter have awakened a certain fetish in this young boy? I can't say I wasn't worried.

The boy, still blushing, poked his head out from behind his mother. "Th-Thank you, onee-chan, onii-chan," he said.

Just hearing those words from him was enough for me. The boy's parents took the tickets from us and paid us for them. They then purchased an additional children's ticket from the staff in the window.

Shortly after, the parents bowed to us a number of times, and the boy waved to us before the family set off on their train ride. Once we'd seen them off, I turned to Nanami again. "I'm sorry, Nanami. I gave away my ticket without even consulting you. I know you wanted to ride the train too."

"Nah, I knew you'd do it, so I wasn't the least bit surprised. I'm glad the little

boy seemed so happy.”

Nanami didn’t seem angry at all. In fact she was laughing lightheartedly. She entangled her arm with mine again and pressed her body up against mine.

“You were so cool, I fell for you all over again,” she said.

Having received the best compliment I could possibly imagine—one that made me happier than any other could—I, too, ended up falling all over again, for the girl who understood me even without me having to say anything. I couldn’t say that to her, though, because I felt too embarrassed.

“Looks like you can walk around the railroad too. Should we take a look?” she asked.

“Yeah, sure. Hey, wait—there’s a staircase there. I wonder if you can take pictures. Shall we go up and see?”

Off to the side was a staircase that led to a bridge where you could see the railway tracks from above. Nanami and I headed up the stairs. When we looked down from above, we were just in time to see the train pass beneath us.

“Look, the train’s running! All the kids on it look so happy... How cute,” Nanami said.

“You really like kids, huh?” I asked.

“I do! I bet I’ll make a really good mom.”

Nanami winked and puffed out her chest with confidence, to which I shrugged slightly and agreed. It seemed she didn’t like my reaction, though, because she laughed and began poking me in my side.

For some time, the battle between me and Nanami unfolded on the bridge, but Nanami eventually calmed down and recalled the little boy from earlier. “That boy was getting all red and embarrassed. I wonder if he’s shy. It was so cute.”

Nah, I was pretty sure that was just him getting all bashful in front of an older woman. I wasn’t going to mention the whole fetish thing, but I glanced furtively at Nanami nonetheless. If a teenage girl dressed like that helped to console a pure and innocent child, that child would most definitely develop a crush on

her. To be honest, I really was starting to feel concerned about having affected the boy's proclivities, though I wasn't sure if that was something I needed to worry about.

"Wait, look! He's waving to us from the train! Yoshin, you should wave back at him too!"

"Oh, you're right. He looks all happy. I'm glad."

The boy was waving excitedly at us— No. He was probably waving at Nanami. *Sorry, little guy. This onee-san is my girlfriend.* I waved at him, apologizing to him in my mind.

Although we hadn't managed to ride the miniature train, we'd still been able to learn that we felt the same way about each other. That alone made for a great memory. I felt like we'd been able to do that because we weren't on a date that involved such a packed schedule. And now we were having our picture taken with the train in the background as it went on its last journey—at least, its last journey before it went into the depot to get serviced.

One of the staff members had offered to take a photo of us with the train in the background. That staff member was the one who'd been working the ticket booth when we'd bought our train tickets earlier. It seemed that they, too, had felt really terrible seeing the young boy cry, so they thanked us for what we'd done for the family.

Apparently, the routine maintenance was to take about an hour. So, having had our photos taken, we decided we'd come back again around that time.

"Well then, now that our train ride's been postponed, what should we do?" I asked. "Where do you wanna go, Nanami?"

"Hmm... Is there anywhere you wanna go? Maybe we could tour the factory or something. I wonder what a place that makes sweets is even like."

"Yeah, a factory tour sounds awesome! That sounds exciting!" I responded loudly, catching Nanami off guard. I don't know why, but just hearing "factory tour" had made me feel really excited. There had to be lots of machines running in there. Even back in elementary school, when I'd gone on a tour of a factory that made red bean bread, I'd been really stoked about it.

“So boys just really like factories and stuff?” Nanami asked.

“Ah, sorry. I got carried away and got too loud.”

Nanami giggled. “You’re so cute.”

Her last comment made it seem like she hadn’t quite shaken off the feeling she’d had when she was talking to the little boy. I wondered if being called “cute” was a compliment. It wasn’t like I was the one who’d acted really childish in front of her. In any event, given the consensus, we decided to head to the factory.

The factory was on the opposite side of the park to the miniature railway. We had to walk from one end of the park to the other, but even that ended up being fun. Maybe it was because I was together with Nanami, but even the time we spent making our way there felt precious to me. It was also really nice to hold hands and stroll together at our own leisure.

Chatting while walking, we reached our destination in no time. We recognized the clock tower from earlier and only then realized that we’d gone back and forth across the theme park about three times already. We both laughed—maybe there *had* been a more effective way for us to traverse the park together.

“It looks like we need to buy tickets to tour the factory,” I muttered.

“It says ‘Ticket Center’ over there, but wow, that’s a long line.”

“I bet it’ll only take like ten or twenty minutes for us to get to the front of the line though.”

“Then time’ll just fly by if I’m chatting with you.”

As we stood in line along with everyone else, we talked about where we’d go after the factory tour. Even that was so fun that we nearly forgot we were standing in line. As we stood there chatting, we suddenly heard yelling from people that were standing about two parties ahead of us.

“What the hell? We’ve been here for ten minutes already, but this line isn’t even moving! We’re only standing around here because you said you wanted to see this place! Let’s just go somewhere else.”

“Come on, I always go to places you wanna go to, so why can’t you do something I like for a change? I was really looking forward to today!”

Apparently, a couple had started arguing after having stood in line for too long.

Wait, it’s already been ten minutes? I’d been so busy talking with Nanami that I hadn’t been paying attention. I supposed the line hadn’t moved that much. Maybe we really were going to have to wait for a pretty long time. Still, I wasn’t a big fan of people arguing so loudly like that.

Nanami must have felt the same, because she was frowning slightly. Just as I was thinking that fighting in front of people wasn’t wise, she suddenly muttered, “I wonder if we’ll ever fight like that too one day. I know we had a small fight the other day, but that was more like me sulking all on my own.”

It seemed that Nanami, having witnessed the couple arguing, was starting to imagine that we might one day end up fighting like that too. She was gazing anxiously at the quarreling couple. My heart ached to see her so sad, especially when we were supposed to be in the middle of a fun date. But...

“I can’t say for certain what the future holds, and maybe you’re right; we’ll have an even worse fight than before, or we’ll argue because maybe we have different opinions and stuff,” I said.

“Yeah, I guess a day like that’ll come, huh?”

My response made her face cloud even more with worry. I felt bad making her make a face like that, but I couldn’t so irresponsibly make promises about the future. That was why, looking into her eyes to reassure her, I said in a slightly louder voice, “But if that’s the case, then let’s try our best not to fight like that. I know that sounds idealistic, but if we always try to communicate with each other and try to care for and respect one another, I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

“Yeah, but even then, we’ll probably still have fights, won’t we?” she asked.

“You’re right; there’ll probably still be times when we’ll fight. I don’t think it’s really possible to be in a relationship where you don’t fight at all, so I’m sure we’ll have times like that too.”

It seemed she truly was worried, because she seemed anxious even hearing that. That was why I'd continued speaking in order to put her at ease. Such an anxious face wasn't fit for a date like this.

"As long as we do our best not to forget the way we feel for each other right now, we'll always be able to make up. I know it," I said.

Whether we could actually do that would be up to future me. Rather than irresponsibly saying that I was going to leave it up to my future self though, I'd come up with something I could focus on now instead. Something both present me and future me could focus on. If I did that, then everything would be fine.

"Yeah, you're right! Even if we fight, we just have to make up! I was the one who said I wanted our relationship to grow stronger like that! I was getting down on myself over nothing!"

Come to think of it, Nanami and I had talked about something like this during our aquarium date. Back then, we'd taken turns resting our heads in each other's lap. My face grew hot just from me thinking about it.

As I was reminiscing about that date, I realized that the yelling between the couple had died down. *Wait, are they looking our way?*

"Look, I'm sorry. Even a young couple like that is being so thoughtful. You're always so considerate toward me, but I wasn't being considerate enough toward you," the man was saying.

"And I'm sorry for raising my voice," the woman replied. "I know you don't like standing in line, but I forced you to come with me."

The couple, still stealing glances at us, was now apologizing to each other. It seemed they'd overheard our conversation. *Well, duh, if we could hear their conversation, then of course they could hear ours too.*

Their fighting had stopped, and it seemed they were linking arms and making up. The man and the woman then smiled awkwardly at us and bowed. It might have been my imagination, but it seemed like the atmosphere around us had become friendlier. Nanami and I, too, laughed and bowed to the couple.

"I guess they heard us, huh?" I said.

“I guess so. It’s a little embarrassing, but maybe it’s a good thing if it helped them stop fighting.”

Nanami smiled at me. I didn’t see any of the uneasiness from moments ago in her expression. The whole ordeal was pretty embarrassing, but if it meant that I was able to see Nanami smile, then I could live with that.

“If we were to fight, I wonder what it would be about,” she said.

“A fight between us? What about that thing about calling you by your name?” I asked.

“That was just me being weird! I mean like the kind of fight where we’d yell at each other,” she explained.

Having returned to her usual mood, Nanami began to imagine various potential scenarios for future fights. Maybe she felt more relaxed knowing we could always make up. *But even then, a fight, huh?*

“So, I’d have to yell too, right? I wonder why I’d do that,” I said. I couldn’t come up with anything. As I stood there thinking about it, Nanami suddenly pointed her index finger as though she’d thought of something.

“Maybe something related to food. Like it’s too bland, the miso soup is lukewarm, or something like that,” she suggested.

“We’d fight about that? Don’t you think that would only happen if I messed up with the cooking?” I asked.

“But if that’s the case, wouldn’t that make me a horrible person? Wow, coming up with stuff to fight about is really hard.”

“Yeah, it really is. It’s not like it would ever be about cheating or anything. There’s no woman better than you.”

“N-Never, huh? I didn’t realize I was so highly rated.”

“Would you ever cheat on me?” I asked tentatively.

“No way. Of course not. There’s no guy better than you, Yoshin.”

Apparently I was highly rated too. I felt like I was quite literally being overrated, but I supposed that just meant I would have to work hard to

maintain that reputation.

We continued chatting about things like that and soon arrived at the front of the line. We bought the least expensive tickets and continued on to the facility that we would be touring. As expected, the factory was the biggest building in the entire theme park. On the third floor, visitors could watch various products being made, and the fourth housed a café and a gift shop, as well as a space for events like the confectionery workshops.

As soon as we entered the facility, we were enveloped by a strong, sweet aroma. The place was filled with the scent of baked goods. It made me want to tear into the treat that came with the ticket, though I told myself to bear it for now.

“It smells so good,” I said under my breath.

“Don’t sweet smells like this make you feel really happy?” Nanami asked, apparently in agreement.

With that, we made our way up to the third floor to begin our tour of the factory. From the phrase “factory tour,” I’d pictured us staring at a mass production line through a glass window, but that wasn’t what we encountered at all. On display was a diorama with fairylike dolls making desserts, as well as a white mural. The place felt kind of like an art museum.

“Wow, there’s a lot more stuff here than I thought,” I said.

“Look, Yoshin! This diorama moves! Oh my gosh, it’s so cute! What is this, a fairy? I wonder if they sell the dolls. I kind of want one!”

While I’d been busy looking around, Nanami had already moved to the spot in front of the diorama. *How did she get there so fast?* I wondered. Intrigued, Nanami was turning the handle that moved the diorama as fast as she could. She looked so adorable getting all excited every time something in the diorama moved. I stood back, using my phone to record the scene. *Boy, Nanami really is cute...*

Once she’d gotten her fill of playing with the diorama, she finally noticed me pointing my phone at her. She cleared her throat once as if to regain her composure, and then we restarted our tour of the factory together.

“They make baumkuchen too. This is a factory, but it looks like they take a lot of care in making the cakes,” I said, mildly surprised.

“I never knew this was how they made this stuff. I’ve only ever baked things by hand, so this is pretty cool,” Nanami replied.

“Damn, seeing all this stuff makes me want to eat something sweet.”

“We’ve gotta stick it out for at least a little while. Apparently, there’s a place on the fourth floor where we can order layered parfaits. We’ve also got the workshop to get through.”

A sweets-making workshop... At first, I’d thought by signing up you’d get to experience working on the production line in the factory, but when I looked it up while standing in line, it seemed I was mistaken. It was more like a typical baking class. No wonder it was so popular.

We spent roughly twenty more minutes chatting and watching the production line. Of course, watching the same view for a long time made us eventually run out of things to say about it, so we decided to move up to the fourth floor.

When we arrived, the sweet smell became even stronger. It must have been a mix of aromas wafting from all sorts of different places—from the workshop, the gift shop, and even the café. It might have been a bit too much for someone who wasn’t a fan of sweets, but for me and Nanami, the fragrance on this fourth floor was intoxicating for our appetites. It was totally true when people said we all had a separate stomach for dessert. We both immediately craved something sweet.

“Hey, Nanami, shall we head to the lounge to grab something sweet?”

“That sounds good and all, but can we try the workshop instead? That way, we can eat what we make ourselves, you know?”

“With all these smells, I feel like I’m ready to eat right now. I wonder if I can hold out that long.”

“Oh, come on. We’ll be making stuff together! Besides, you haven’t been able to eat any of my cooking today, so I thought it might be a good idea.”

That actually did sound like a good idea. I’d all but given up on eating

Nanami's cooking that day. I didn't know how much a sweets-making workshop would cost to attend, but if it meant that I'd be able to eat something she'd made by hand, then I had only the highest expectations of what was to come.

"Shall we check it out then?" I asked.

"Yeah!"

This seems like fun. What kind of a workshop will it be though? Excited, we made our way toward the check-in area of the workshop. It seemed there were various options in terms of tickets. However, the staff member there bowed to us and imparted some tragic news.

"I'm terribly sorry, but all of today's workshop placements have already been reserved."

The moment we heard that, we both froze.

"Huh?"

"Whaaat?!"

My one-word response, along with Nanami's despair-filled wail, reverberated throughout the vicinity.



"Aw, man. I can't believe all the workshops were full. I'm so sorry, Yoshin. I should've checked in advance."

"There's nothing for you to apologize for, Nanami. I mean, you're not the only one who didn't check. It's just neither of us happened to do it, so please don't feel bad about it."

As Nanami draped her upper body on the table and continued to lament, I tried to console her while stroking her hair. With her leaning over like that though, I was having a hard time figuring out where to look.

The reason I was stroking her hair was because she'd gazed up at me as if asking me to do so. I hadn't noticed at first and just thought it was cute, so she'd shaken her head to tell me otherwise.

"I thought maybe we'd get into a fight like that couple from earlier," she

mumbled.

“I mean, I was looking forward to it too, so I think we both feel pretty bummed out.”

“Then should I stroke your hair to make you feel better too?”

“I think I’ll pass,” I replied, feeling conflicted for a moment but choosing to decline her offer.

After that, we roamed around the fourth floor for a bit and then arrived at the lounge that sold desserts. The lounge was a large and relaxing space with furnishings in muted colors. Sunlight filtered in through the window, softly lighting the room and making for a calm atmosphere. We’d chosen to stop and rest in this lounge because we thought we’d be able to chat calmly here—and we were still craving something sweet. This was how we’d found ourselves in our current situation, in which she was lying face down on the table.

We hadn’t realized, but visitors could go online to reserve their spots in the sweets-making workshops ahead of time. Nanami wasn’t terribly savvy at stuff like that, and I hadn’t checked the park website, thinking I’d be able to have more fun here that way.

Although you didn’t necessarily have to reserve spots online, our timing just so happened to suck; apparently, a large group had booked most of the spots, so the times that were usually open had all been filled. I knew it was important to prepare ahead of time, but this time I’d learned the hard way. That said, I guess we *had* decided to do the workshop on a whim.

“I should’ve looked into it more,” Nanami said with disappointment in her voice. “Or maybe we should’ve done the factory tour when we first got here.”

“We can’t help the way things turned out. Besides, it looked like the prices were pretty steep. Why don’t we just put that money toward desserts instead?”

“I guess it’s okay if you say it like that, but I’m still pretty bummed.”

A pleasant breeze caressed our cheeks as if trying to console us. When we’d entered the lounge, the server had led us to some terrace seats, since the weather was nice. There were people sitting here and there throughout the place, but it wasn’t as crowded here as the workshop. Luckily, we’d been able

to take a seat without waiting at all. As the pleasant rays of the sun and the refreshing breeze comforted us, Nanami's once gloomy expression began to turn more cheerful. I continued stroking her head, and, maybe because it felt good to her, she looked up slightly with her eyes half closed.

"This feels so good," she said with a sigh. "Sitting out here was a great idea."

"Do you feel a little better? How about we grab something sweet to calm down?"

Soon, the desserts that we'd ordered were brought to our table. Nanami had ordered a parfait that was made using a popular treat made by the sweets company, while I'd gone overboard and ordered chocolate fondue. For drinks, we had both ordered hot coffee. You're normally supposed to drink it after your meal, but I wanted to enjoy the combination of sweet and bitter tastes, so I'd asked them to bring everything out at the same time.

On the parfait was a piece of chocolate in the shape of a cute cat, and there were two white chocolate cats floating in the chocolate fondue. Both desserts looked so cute that they were a feast for the eyes before we'd even dug in.

"Hey, wait a minute. These cats..."

Feeling that I'd seen the cats somewhere before, I took out the snack that I'd received when I'd purchased the ticket for the factory tour. Looking at its packaging, I saw that it had a picture of the same cats as the ones floating in the fondue.

"Hey, Nanami, do you think the sweets we got with our tickets are different from regular ones?"

"Huh? Really?"

"Yeah, look. This part's a cat," I said.

Curious, I looked up the packaging on my phone. It seemed the ones visitors got with the ticket were different from the regular ones sold in stores. Mine had a picture of two cats playing together.

"That's so cute. I don't think I've ever seen it before. It kind of looks like you and me."

Nanami then showed me the pack of sweets she'd received with her ticket. Hers pictured two cats sitting next to each other, cheek to cheek. This was the first time I'd ever seen that as well.

"That's a little different from mine too, huh? I wonder how many designs there are. It's kind of embarrassing to think that one looks like us though," I said.

"Oh, come on. We can try being this close once in a while. Shall we try it when we get home today?" Nanami asked.

"You say 'once in a while,' but I feel like we sit together like that pretty often."

Perhaps thanks to the packaging, Nanami seemed to be in a better mood. The way she was smiling at me made me feel like I'd only imagined her despair from earlier.

"I guess we can look forward to visiting the workshop another time," I said. "Oh, there's loads of fondue, so how about we eat it together? Here, do you wanna try a strawberry? There's baumkuchen too."

Using the metal skewer, I dipped the fruit into the chocolate and offered it to her. Nanami, not having had the chance to start on her parfait, seemed to be slightly taken aback.

"I haven't even had my parfait," she protested, "but it does look good. I guess it wouldn't hurt to try it."

Nanami timidly brought her mouth toward the fruit I offered her. She then offered me a spoonful of her parfait, which I gladly accepted.

We spent our time on the terrace peacefully, eating our own desserts and also feeding them to each other. It felt really calming. Even after Nanami had finished her parfait, there was still a large amount of fruit, baumkuchen, and even potato chips left on my plate for the chocolate fondue, which meant we got to continue eating dessert for even longer. I continued dipping various tidbits in chocolate and feeding them to Nanami.

To be honest, the chocolate fondue was kind of on the pricey side. Since we were both paying for ourselves on today's date, I figured I'd be able to pay her back for her usual kindness by doing this.

Nanami was smiling as she ate the fruits that I brought to her mouth, and I occasionally managed to snap pictures of her expressions. As I sat there bringing another piece to her mouth, Nanami suddenly looked at me and narrowed her eyes.

“You’re thinking something funny, aren’t you?”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

It seemed she’d caught on to my scheme, but I continued to play dumb as she stared me down. She paused for a moment, then accepted the piece of chocolate-covered baumkuchen I was holding out to her.

“Thanks,” she said, smiling slightly as though she’d made peace with the situation. She had a bit of chocolate on the corner of her lips. Thrilled to be thanked, I reached out to wipe it off with my finger—then popped my finger in my mouth without even thinking.

Nanami looked stunned, but she was nowhere near as stunned as I was. *Wait, what did I just do? What did I just do?! That was super creepy. She’s definitely gonna be creeped out.*

“Uh, oh, crap! I mean, this was, um... I did it without thinking! Yeah, I, uh... I mean, you must be weirded out, right?” I stammered. My face must have been glowing from my wide mix of emotions, but Nanami’s face was even redder than my own.

I stuffed my mouth with fondue to calm myself down, but neither eating dessert nor drinking coffee helped me to snap out of my restlessness.

“Do you remember when you first met Shibetsu-senpai?” Nanami suddenly asked, her face still red.

“Shibetsu-senpai?” I repeated. I couldn’t figure out how he was relevant to the situation, but Nanami continued.

“That was the time I took a grain of rice off your cheek and ate it without thinking. Gosh, that feels like such a long time ago. But you know, sometimes I still feel like doing stuff like that.”

“Yeah, that does feel like a long time ago. Man, I was really embarrassed back

then,” I muttered.

“You were? You didn’t say anything. I could’ve sworn I was the only one that was all worked up about it. Now do you get how I felt?”

“Yeah, I get it. You must’ve felt like how I’m feeling now.”

Encountering the unexpected, making up afterward, growing even closer... When I thought about that, I felt like today’s date was helping us to retrace the steps we’d taken so far in our relationship. All of a sudden, it was like the day’s events had taken on new meaning.

“I think I’m gonna run to the restroom real quick. If you want, you can have the rest of the fondue. Wait here for me,” I told her.

“Okay, got it. I’ll wait here. Oh, and don’t you dare try to pay for us, okay?”

As I got up from my chair, Nanami slid the check away from me before I could reach for it, reminding me of our promise for that day. I had to laugh—I mean, she’d seen through me completely.

“Got it,” I said, raising my hands in surrender. “See you in a minute. I’ll ask the server to keep an eye on you to make sure no creeps come calling, so just relax.”

With that, I left the table. Although one of my missions had ended unsuccessfully before it had even begun, there was nothing I could do about it. If I tried to pay for her anyway, we’d definitely end up having a fight, so I decided it was best to just respect her wishes.

When I asked the server about keeping an eye on Nanami, they told me that most of their customers were families and couples but nevertheless agreed to watch over her for me.

“Wow, I’m pretty envious that anyone’s so loved,” they said.

It was only then that I realized I was doing something totally embarrassing. *Welp, it can’t be helped. I’m just worried, okay?*

When I got back from the restroom just outside the café, I caught sight of Nanami, who was gazing at the scenery and enjoying coffee by herself. She looked so beautiful that I took a photo of her from where I was standing.

The sound of my camera going off alerted her to my presence. She smiled at me, slightly embarrassed that I'd taken a candid photo of her.

After that, she headed to the restroom after me while I spent a bit more time relaxing at the café. When she returned, she took a photo of me too, as if to get back at me for earlier.

One of the servers also offered to take photos of us as we sat on the terrace. They snapped one of us feeding the other the last bit of fondue—or rather, they asked us to do it so they could take the photo. I wasn't sure if it was because we were at a theme park that so many staff members were so gung ho about taking pictures or if this was supposed to be normal.

After we'd thanked our server, we left the lounge. As predicted, we got into a tiff when we were about to pay. Nanami must have expected it too. She backed down pretty easily when I explained to her about the differences in our orders.

From there, we roamed around the fourth floor for a while. We bought and traded chocolate lollipops with each other and then took a bunch of photos near the exit, where there were chairs in the shape of coffee cups and red phone booths.

Was this what people considered a photogenic scene? Or maybe it just looked good on social media. I wasn't good with stuff like that, so I couldn't really tell.

Although we hadn't managed to take part in one of the sweets workshops, I felt like we more than made up for it in terms of the memories we ended up making. I sat down and began scrolling through the photos I'd taken throughout the day. Nanami crouched down in front of me and looked up at me bashfully.

"Hey, Yoshin, what are you doing?" she asked, grinning. "Don't tell me you've had your fill of this place already. They should be all done with maintenance on the railway by now, so let's go ride it! Plus there are places we still haven't seen. We've gotta check those out too! There's still so much left to do today!"

I looked back at her and blinked. She was right. The day's date wasn't over yet.

"I can't believe you were so depressed just a little while ago," I said. "I'm glad you're having a good time though."

“My sadness all went away, thanks to you. And besides, I think it was good that things turned out this way.”

“What do you mean?”

“We’ll have something to look forward to for next time! The park’s open later in the winter, and the illuminations are supposed to be really pretty, so next time, let’s make reservations and do the sweets workshop too!”

“Should we pinkie swear on it, then?”

I only asked that as a joke, but Nanami immediately brought her pinkie out toward me. I was surprised at first, but we smiled at each other and hooked our two pinkies together.



After that, we both burst out laughing immediately. Nanami was laughing happily, as though thrilled about our new promise. In that moment, I swore to myself to keep my promise to her no matter what.



“Wow, this railway’s pretty serious,” Nanami said softly.

“Yeah, I’m glad we got in. If they told us we wouldn’t be able to ride it, I would’ve thought we were somehow cursed or something.”

Nanami laughed. “If that were the case, our date tomorrow would have had to include an exorcism!”

“Wow, I’m not sure I’d be up for that.”

We were in the blue train car on the miniature railway, breathing sighs of relief. This time, we’d managed to get on the train without incident. It felt like we’d done a lot since our first try.

The train that carried us chugged along the tracks. I’d never been on an actual railway before, but it seemed like it would be fun to travel via rail together one day.

“It feels like it’s just the two of us,” Nanami whispered, and for good reason: there were only the two of us in the blue train car. The other cars, too, only had handfuls of people. There were even some that were completely empty.

Maybe it *had* been a good idea to ride the train around this time of day. When we’d tried to get on it earlier, there’d been an entire line of people.

“I know hindsight’s twenty-twenty and all, but maybe it was good that we ended up doing things this way,” I said.

“How about we sit together then? You know, like those cats on the package.”

Nanami came up and sat down next to me, pressing her body up against mine. If the car had been crowded, there would have been no way we could have done this. We really had chosen the right time to ride.

The train continued along its tracks as an announcement came over the PA system. The first landmark was a house made of sweets with cute dolls in the

background. Nanami and I took a selfie together with the house in the background. I felt embarrassed with our faces so close together, but we both smiled brightly as we took the picture.

“Whoa, cool! Isn’t that cute?! Wait, look over there! There’s even an actual crossing!” Nanami exclaimed.

With a loud clanging sound, the gate for the crossing lowered. Beyond that, there was a tunnel that looked to be made out of cream puffs. I thought it would be completely dark, but when we entered it, above us were lights that sparkled like stars shining in the evening sky.

Without saying a word, Nanami rested her head on my shoulder, and for just a brief moment, we both gazed up at what looked like a starry sky.

The train continued from there, entering a house that was made of different confectionery we recognized from earlier. Inside, there was a display of a polar bear poking its head out of some chocolate. I made sure to take a photo of Nanami with the cute bear in the background.

Once the train exited the house, we noticed a tower rising up before us. Several dolls wearing chef’s uniforms were holding it up. As we began to wonder what it was, we heard an announcement from the speakers.

“We are now approaching the Love Tower! For those of you here with your partner, please make sure to swing by once we’ve completed our journey.”

Love Tower? I thought. *It just looks like a bunch of dolls dressed up like chefs sitting on each other’s shoulders and stepping on each other as they try to climb up. How is that love? What kind of love? Is it some kind of love I don’t know about?*

Although I couldn’t quite figure it out, Nanami seemed intrigued. She turned toward the tower and gazed at it, her eyes sparkling. It seemed the place we were going next had been decided for us.

The train chugged along slowly, and Nanami and I continued chatting, our conversation as slow and relaxed as the speed of the train. Nanami, however, was perhaps preoccupied with the Love Tower, as she seemed a little restless at times.

She was usually the one to tell me that I was easy to read, but occasionally she would do stuff like this. She really was adorable. Or maybe this was just a sign that I was getting to know her better.

Finally, the train came to a stop at the station. Thus we completed our ten-minute train ride without any mishaps. With her hand in mine, we stepped off of the train, and I stretched a little bit. I felt stiff after sitting on the train.

When I glanced over at Nanami, I saw she was holding her hands together, fidgeting as she tried to say something.

“Hey, Yoshin, maybe next we can—”

“You wanna go to the Love Tower, right? Let’s check it out. I’m curious too.”

Nanami appeared surprised for a moment, then immediately broke into a grin and gripped my hand even tighter.

“But I still don’t get how that’s a Love Tower. It just looked like a tower with a bunch of dolls attached to it,” I remarked.

“Same here. But since it’s named after love, there must be something to it. I’m sure we’ll find out once we get there.”

We strolled along a sunny path, tracing a large semicircle from the place where we’d disembarked from the train. As we walked, we swung our arms in wide arcs, a gentle breeze rustling the leaves on the trees.

I hadn’t noticed it earlier, but in addition to the dolls attached to it, the tower had a rope tied around the bottom of it. Several more dolls were made to look like they were pulling at the rope. The male figurines wearing chef’s uniforms looked like they were holding up the leaning tower.

“No, seriously, how is this the Love Tower?” Nanami murmured, echoing my earlier puzzlement.

The tower itself seemed to include absolutely no element of love. I looked around us and finally spotted a small sign that explained the meaning behind the Love Tower.

“Nanami, there’s a sign over here,” I called out to her.

We stood in front of the sign and read it together.

“If you take a photo with the doll pulling on the rope, it’ll bring you luck in love,” Nanami read.

“Luck in love? It says here that if your love has cooled, then it’ll be rekindled; if it’s still burning bright, it’ll become even stronger; and if it’s facing trouble, then it’ll return to the way it was.”

“It doesn’t really say why though, huh? I guess it’s kind of like making a wish, maybe.”

Love is taking a photo of a tower being righted by a rope? I thought. *But any two people willing to take a photo like that probably aren’t having any problems in their relationship in the first place. This feels kind of forced, plus the name of the tower isn’t really explained. Is this just how it is?*

“How about we take a picture, Yoshin? You know, because it says our love will become stronger.”

Hey, we’re already here, so what’s the harm in taking a photo? We’ve already taken so many. It’s fine to take a photo like this too, right?

Sure, I knew I hadn’t taken much convincing, but who could blame me? Nanami said it would make our love stronger. That alone was proof that, right now, she felt the love between us was burning bright. Of course I’d be won over immediately.

Actually though, it was the last part of the explanation that made me most curious—the part about returning a troubled relationship to the way it was. If that was the case, then if our relationship ever was on the rocks—or if anything were to happen on our one-month anniversary—then we should still be okay. *I’ll be able to have courage*, I thought. It might only be for comfort, but I figured that when it came to things like that, the more the merrier.

“Who should go first, then?” I asked.

“I’ll take one of you first. Then you can take some of me.”

We started taking photos of each other as we pulled the rope in front of the dolls. The rope itself didn’t budge at all, so the photos we took came out looking kind of fake.

After that, a member of staff offered to take a photo while both of us pulled on the rope. We got one photo of me standing in front and Nanami standing behind me, and then another with both of us standing next to each other pulling with our hands on top of each other's. The photos looked like scenes from a picture book.

"Is our love stronger now?" I wondered out loud.

Nanami laughed. "Who knows?"

The photos just looked like we were pulling on a rope, but Nanami looked happy nonetheless. I was happy just looking at her joyful face, so I knew we'd made the right choice in taking them.

"It's starting to get late, huh? Where should we go last?" Nanami asked.

"Should we try going to the place that lady told us about when we were in the rose garden? It's pretty close to here."

"Yeah, it'd be nice to get some gifts for our families and stuff."

"Awesome. Let's go, then!"

We thanked the person who'd taken the photos, then walked a little ways and entered a nearby building. We'd passed the time riding the train and taking a bunch of photos, so it should have been about time.

When we entered the building, we noticed a large staircase leading to the upper floor...and were overwhelmed by it. Covered with red carpet, the staircase was as majestic as one you might see in a movie. If that movie were a musical, it would probably appear in the scene where the heroine came down the stairs singing; if it were a fantasy, it would be used for when the noble lady appeared and met the main character. In short, it wasn't the kind of staircase that you'd ordinarily see in real life.

"That's a pretty impressive staircase. Shall we take a photo, since we're here?" I asked.

"Oh, yes, let's."

"Here, how about you stand over there first? I feel like that'd give us a better shot."

Even as she tilted her head wondering at my instructions, Nanami placed her hand on the banister and turned toward me. The late afternoon sun filtered in through the stained glass window and illuminated Nanami, along with the red carpet and the banister with the detailed decorations. Nanami, though slightly perplexed, looked at me shyly and flashed me a gentle smile. Taken by that smile of hers, I captured the image in a photo that appeared almost like a painting.

“See? I got a really beautiful picture,” I said as I showed it to her.

“It’s kind of embarrassing, because it doesn’t really look like me,” she replied. “Here, let me take one of you too.”

“Oh, nah, I’m good. I mean, I don’t think I’d look any good in front of these stairs.”

“I want to take one! Come on, stand over there. Yeah, you look so cool!”

Nanami practically dragged me over to the stairs even as I protested. After making me stand upright, she took a photo of me. I knew she said I looked cool and all, but I was pretty sure I didn’t fit in at all with the gorgeous background. That was my personal opinion—or rather my stereotype, but somehow I felt like a staircase like that matched a woman better. That was just how I felt, anyway.

Once we’d finished taking photos of each other, we decided to move on to the next spot: the candy store. Lucky for us, there was a demonstration going on about the candy-making process.

I’m not totally sure how to describe this, but the white candy was warping in the hands of the artisan, shifting its shape like mochi. It didn’t at all look like the hard candy I usually ate.

The color of the substance made it look like it might be really heavy, but the movements of the artisan were so quick and light that it seemed to have no weight at all. The artisan stretched and rolled the candy, molding it into various shapes.

As I watched, I recalled working with clay in art class back when I was a kid. Unsurprisingly, the brilliant technique I was now witnessing was incomparable

to what I'd been doing back then.

Before I knew it, the white candy had transformed into a cylinder, with candy of a different color wrapped around it. The artisan then wrapped yet another layer of beautiful orange around that, ending up with a thick candy column. The next moment, though, that column was stretched out really thin.

It had happened so fast, I found myself stunned. The material that had moments before been so thick became even thinner than Nanami's fingers, then was cut into equal sizes by a different artisan. There was zero hesitation in their movements. Before we knew it, a mountain of candy lay before us.

Given that we didn't normally get to see how candies were made, our eyes were glued to the demonstration. Neither of us uttered a word. We were completely absorbed in how mastering a skill elevated it to the level of art.

Soon, a piece of freshly made candy was placed in front of each of the audience members, including us. It seemed the artisans were passing them out for us to try. Everyone seemed surprised by the speed with which the candies were passed out, but with fresh candy in their mouths, everyone was smiling happily.

"These artisans are incredible," Nanami whispered.

"For sure. Maybe we can pick up some of this candy as a gift too."

That was all we could say after watching such an amazing demonstration. I felt really lucky that we'd arrived at the perfect time.

"Shall we pick out gifts before we head out, then? And what should we do for dinner? Is there anything you wanna eat, Nanami?"

"How about we just go to a family restaurant? It'd be weird if we tried to get all fancy with it."

That was true enough, plus we hadn't made any reservations or anything.

With our plans sorted, we continued chatting as we chose souvenirs to take back. As we were looking, though, I noticed that Nanami seemed kind of restless and began to wonder if something was wrong. She kept glancing toward the back of the gift shop. As I recalled, there was a promotion on at the

time that gave visitors a chance to add their own photo to a heart-shaped slot in a candy tin. That was when it occurred to me. *Did we think of doing the exact same thing?*

“Nanami, did you by any chance sneak off to that store while we were at the lounge?”

“Huh? Uh, um...”

Nanami’s eyes darted around as she struggled to answer my question, which was rare for her. Seeing her like that, I couldn’t help but smile.

“Actually, I went there too,” I confessed.

“What? You did?”

Right near the lounge where we’d had our desserts, there happened to be another store that offered the same service, where you could place an order and pick up the gift later. I’d stopped by when I’d gotten up to go to the restroom, and I’d ordered a little something there.

Rather than replying aloud to Nanami’s question, I simply nodded. We then took each other’s hand and made our way toward the back of the gift shop. When we got to the pick-up window, we each received the item we’d ordered. We’d both chosen personalized magnetic tins featuring the photos we’d taken in the rose garden earlier that day. Seeing that we’d ordered the exact same thing, we looked at each other and smiled slightly.

“You chose that too?” Nanami asked.

“Yeah. You were feeling sad about the workshop, so I thought maybe it’d make you feel better. Plus the magnet one wasn’t too expensive.”

“I chose it because I wanted to give it to you as a surprise,” Nanami murmured.

“Does this mean we totally failed at surprising each other?”

By sheer coincidence, I had used the photo on my phone, in which we were both making a heart with our hands, and Nanami had used the photo on *her* phone, in which we were doing the exact same thing.

“I guess we should exchange them anyway—to commemorate our failed

surprise,” I suggested.

“Yeah, to commemorate our failure,” she said.

With that, with smiles on both our faces, we exchanged our magnet tins. At first glance, the two tins looked exactly the same. Knowing that she and I were the only ones that could tell the difference filled me with more joy than I’d thought imaginable.

After that, we bid farewell to the park.

“That was so fun! We should come again and do all the things we didn’t get to do this time, especially since they said the illuminations in the winter are supposed to be really pretty.”

Nanami was clearly enjoying herself as she smiled and swung her hand as it was locked with mine. Seeing her expression, which showed no hint of sadness about leaving, I ended up smiling along with her.

“Winter, huh? We’ll have to bundle up, then. I’m not that good with the cold.”

“Oh, really? Then maybe I can keep you warm,” she suggested.

“You don’t mind the cold?”

“I’m not good with it either, but you know, if we stick close to each other, it should be a lot warmer.”

Her hand still tightly clasping mine, Nanami brought her body closer to mine. I’d heard that if you get lost on snow-covered peaks, you’re supposed to huddle skin-to-skin to stay warm. Now I understood that logic.

After we’d walked for some time, Nanami looked up at me expectantly—but also in a way that made it seem like she was trying to seduce me. Seeing her, I gulped a little, and my heart skipped a beat.

“Come to think of it, you didn’t kiss me during our date today. Should I expect you to tomorrow?” she asked.

Hearing her question, I gulped even harder—so much so that I nearly choked. I had to take a few deep breaths in order to calm myself down.

“Uh... I guess you can look forward to tomorrow,” I mumbled.

“Oh, yeah? Then I definitely can’t wait. We’re gonna have so much fun tomorrow too!”

Seeing Nanami’s dazzling smile, I smiled at her in return. She seemed genuinely happy about my response as she pressed herself against me. And so, this was how the first day of our date came to a close.

Interlude: Upon the End of Day 1

Today's date had ended without a hitch. Actually, was it appropriate to say that? Even though a lot of things had happened, with the date now safely behind me, I found myself lying on my bed all alone.

I stretched out my arm and stared at my pinkie. Wasn't this the second time I'd done a pinkie swear with Yoshin? I was beyond happy to be making promises with him about our future. Just the thought brought a smile to my face without me even realizing it.

Even though I'd screwed up a bunch of things during our date, Yoshin had tried to make me feel better about them and even offered some hope for our future together.

It wasn't long now. There wasn't long left until our anniversary. I felt a slight prick in my heart when I thought about that, but I wanted to do whatever I could to keep the promise I'd made with Yoshin.

"It was fun," I mumbled with my eyes closed. A very comfortable feeling of fatigue permeated my body. Was this what people called a sense of fulfillment? I wondered how good it would feel just to fall asleep like that, but I did my best to resist the urge.

As I wallowed in that sense of fulfillment, I recalled the day's events, but an indescribable loneliness contradicted my satisfaction. It was probably because I found myself suddenly alone. I hadn't felt it at all on the way home after our date.

"In that case...!" I said out loud, sitting up on my bed energetically and grabbing my phone. I then quickly dialed the number I'd dialed so many times before. My call was immediately picked up.

"Hello?"

It was the cheerful voice of the person I'd been with until just a little while before. At least, I thought he sounded cheerful. Hoping that was the case, I took

a moment to respond, then heard him speak again on the other end of the line.

“Hello? Nanami? What’s up?” Yoshin asked. Hearing his voice, I felt my loneliness slowly drain away.

“Oh, sorry, sorry. It’s just that when I heard your voice, I felt really relieved.”

“Relieved? What’s wrong? Did something happen?”

“Yoshin...today’s date was really fun, wasn’t it? The things we got to do, the things we didn’t get to do...all of it was so much fun. I feel so happy, I can’t help wondering if it was all just a dream,” I said. It wasn’t just to reassure him—I sincerely felt that way from the bottom of my heart. I could tell he sighed with relief when he heard my response.

For a moment, I felt a shiver run down my spine as if he had sighed directly into my ear. I did my best not to say anything out loud.

“Yeah. I had a lot of fun too,” he replied.

“Do you think that’s why? I mean, do you think it was because I had so much fun today that I suddenly felt so lonely when I got back to my room? And I really wanted to hear your voice.” I lay back down on my bed. “I’m sorry I called all of a sudden.”

“No, I was feeling lonely when I got back home too, so this was perfect. I’m really glad you called. Thanks.”

I hadn’t expected him to say anything like that. My family was at home, so I’d only started feeling lonely once I’d gotten back to my room, but it seemed that Yoshin had been feeling that way ever since he’d stepped foot in the door. I should have called sooner.

“I wished you’d told me you missed me,” I said lightheartedly, hoping that I’d be able to make him forget the loneliness a little bit.

“Of course I missed you. I was just too embarrassed to say it.”

“Aha ha, good then! Still, I didn’t realize you were home alone. Where are your parents?” I asked.

“They left a note saying they went out on a date.”

“Your parents sure are close. I wonder what adults do when they go out on a date.”

“No idea. I bet they’re out drinking together.”

A date, huh? Actually, my parents went out together sometimes too. I’d never thought about it before, but I supposed those trips had been dates too. It was pretty cool to think that they still went on dates even though they were married.

Still, I felt like my mom and dad didn’t go out, just the two of them at night. Maybe it’d be fun for Saya and me to make some arrangements for them.

“Drinking, huh? I see my dad drinking sometimes too, but I wonder if it tastes good,” I said.

“How was it when you had those whiskey bonbons?”

“Forget that ever happened! But that time, I felt like I tasted the chocolate more than the alcohol—or at least I think I did.”

Thinking back, I couldn’t remember what it had actually tasted like, though I did remember the chocolate, along with the fact that I’d felt really sick the next morning. What *did* alcohol taste like, anyway?

“Well, since it made you feel so bad last time, I thought we shouldn’t drink, but maybe when we turn twenty, we can try drinking together,” Yoshin suggested.

After I’d had those whiskey bonbons, I’d sworn to myself that I’d never drink alcohol. But I supposed I was feeling more optimistic again—as they say, danger past, god forgotten.

“Yeah, let’s go drinking together,” I said. “Let’s stay together until we’re old enough to drink.”

I hadn’t done so consciously, but I’d added extra emphasis to the staying together part, saying it like a wish, almost like a prayer. Then I waited with bated breath, impatient to hear Yoshin’s response.

“Of course. Of course we’ll stay together,” he replied.

“Yay!”

His response filled me with so much joy. I felt relieved too, and had ended up replying even louder than before. I wondered if he thought it was weird that I was suddenly speaking so loudly.

“Anyway, I know I called you out of the blue, but what were you up to?” I asked.

“Not much. I guess I was thinking about taking a bath. You’ve gotta be tired too, Nanami. Did you already take one?”

“Nah, not yet. I thought I’d call you first. I see, so you haven’t taken one either...”

Knowing we were talking on the phone before taking our baths made me feel kinda nervous. Yoshin, about to take a bath... Maybe because I’d seen him fresh out of the bath when we’d been on our trip together last week, it was really easy for me to picture him. Because of that, I asked the question before I even realized what I was doing.

“Do you wanna bathe together?”

Immediately, I heard a loud, muffled thud on the other end of the line, as if something had hit something solid. I felt a tingling sensation in my ear, as though the air was vibrating.

“Yoshin, what happened? I heard a really loud noise!”

“‘What happened?’! That’s what I wanna know! Where’d an idea like that come from?!”

Only once he’d pointed it out did I realize the implication of what I’d just said. I’d been worried about him because of the loud noise I’d heard, but I supposed it made just as much sense for him to worry about *me* and my dumbass comment. Feeling suddenly flummoxed, I began to make various excuses.

“No, I mean, you know, because bathing is super relaxing. I heard before from a friend that she once took a bath while she was chatting on the phone like that, so I thought, since you were tired, that maybe we could try something like that too. Then, you know, you can relax and stuff.”

Actually, I hadn’t been thinking that at all, but I nonetheless continued to list

as many plausible reasons as I could think of. It was true that I'd heard that one of my friends had done something like that, but that hadn't even been on my mind when I'd made my suggestion. Yoshin seemed to buy my excuses though, because I heard him sigh softly.

"Nanami, you used to really dislike it when guys looked at you that way, right? You really shouldn't say or do things that would spur me on like that. I'm a guy too. If you say something like that to me, I might not be able to hold myself back," he explained quietly. He was giving me a very reasonable scolding, the kind I really couldn't say anything back to.

"Um, but if we're just talking, then you can't see me, and since it's just you, I'd be okay," I muttered.

"I know it's fine if it's just a voice call, but what if I got carried away and asked to switch to video?"

I gasped at his suggestion, a wild array of thoughts running through my mind. After a very long moment of silence, I managed to ask one question. "Would you? Ask to switch to video, that is."

Following my moment of speechlessness, Yoshin fell silent too. I felt a little nervous, but I was also curious what would happen if he actually did do that. The loud pounding of my heart echoed in my ears. My cheeks felt hot, and I began to feel dizzy as if I had a cold. Sweat started to bead on my forehead. Then his response tore through the heavy silence.

"Sorry. Turns out I don't have the guts. Just thinking about it makes me feel like I'm gonna keel over."

With that, we both started giggling softly.

"I wish I could say that's a shame, but just picturing it made my face turn all red," I admitted.

"Well, yeah. Even if we were just talking, the person on the other end would be completely naked. I feel I wouldn't be able to stay calm."

"Don't say that! Jeez, now I'm thinking about it. Agh, my face feels really hot!"

"Me too," Yoshin replied.

It was only then that we burst out laughing, as though each of us was trying to dispel the embarrassment we were feeling. Sure, back when we'd been on our trip, we'd both gone into the hot springs and then spent time together afterward, but I felt reluctant—or rather, bashful—about taking a bath together, even if it was just pretend. Was this something I'd be able to do one day?

“Well, it looks like it's still too soon for us to be taking a bath together, even if it's just over a voice call,” I said finally. “I guess that means we should go bathe on our own for now, huh?”

“Yeah. Besides, my phone isn't waterproof, so it'd probably break if I took it in with me. Actually, I'm pretty sure you shouldn't take your phone into the bath even if it *is* waterproof,” he said, laughing.

“Come to think of it, mine isn't waterproof either. I don't wanna break my phone; I have too many memories stored on it. I guess we'll just have to wait until another time.”

As it turned out, our venture wouldn't have been possible to begin with. I felt like we'd just worked ourselves up for nothing. Thanks to that, though, the loneliness we'd both been feeling seemed to have completely disappeared.

“Well, it pains me to leave,” Yoshin said, “but I think I'll go take that bath and then turn in for the night.”

“Yeah, I'll do the same. Good night, Yoshin. I'm looking forward to our date tomorrow.”

“Good night, Nanami. I'm glad we got to talk on the phone. I'm super excited for our date tomorrow. See you then.”

“Yup! See you tomorrow!”

Even after we said that, we both spent ages trying to figure out the best time to hang up and ended up chatting for a bit longer. In the end, we both hung up at the same time on the count of three.

I went to take my bath as I'd said, but once I stepped into the tub and calmed myself down, I found myself screaming.

“What the hell was I *saying*?! Seriously, what was I thinking?!”

Yoshin must have been totally weirded out when I’d suggested that. It was just that he’d mentioned taking a bath, and I hadn’t stopped to think about what I was saying.

In any case, I was taking a bath now. Given our conversation, Yoshin was probably also taking a bath at his house. If we *had* been on the phone in our current situations... Well, let’s imagine it, shall we?

“Nanami, I’m going to wash myself now.”

“Are you? I’m just relaxing in the tub.”

“Where do you wash first, Nanami? I tend to...”

“Oh, th-that’s where you wash first? I, um...”

The Yoshin I imagined started providing live commentary on his every move. Oh no. Oh no, no, no. Just imagining it was too much for me. I was naive and had assumed we’d have a regular conversation. Even if it was over the phone, talking like that would make it feel like we actually *were* taking a bath together. I sunk lower into the tub and submerged my lips underwater, blowing bubbles out of my mouth. Eventually, though...

“Nanami, how did you end up getting dizzy? What were you doing in there?”

After I’d let all the heat from my long bath get to my head, I was finally rescued by mom, who’d come to check on me out of concern. Now I was on the floor, wrapped in only a towel while trying to cool down.

“Maybe I’ll send a photo of you like this to Yoshin-kun,” she suggested.

“No, please don’t!”

With tomorrow’s date almost upon us, I ended up concluding the day in a somewhat worrisome fashion.



Chapter 3: Our Last Date, Day 2

Today was the final day of our last date before the one-month anniversary. I'd been waiting so long for this day to come. My heart felt like it was singing and I couldn't sit still. That said, I knew I couldn't let myself get carried away.

Having gone to bed earlier than usual the night before, I woke up early to start my preparations for the day's date. This wasn't because I was too excited to stay asleep; I'd just planned things this way.

I cooked by myself, ate the breakfast I'd prepared, picked out my clothes, and found a large bag to fit in everything I'd prepared. I'd borrowed a leather messenger bag that my dad used to use.

"I think this looks about right," I said, looking at the bento boxes I'd spread out on the kitchen table to let cool.

That's right. Today I'd made bento all by myself. Everything on the table was food I'd cooked on my own. There was enough for both Nanami and me. These would be the first handmade bento I'd made. That simple fact made me so emotional, I was shaking all over. I never thought I'd be able to do something like this, and I owed it all to Nanami. I had to take a photo to commemorate the occasion.

The zoo we were going to that day allowed visitors to bring their own bento. When I'd been doing research for our date, I'd come up with this idea to have Nanami eat a bento I'd made all by myself.

I'd already made sure to tell her I'd be bringing lunch today. At first, I'd considered surprising her by pulling it out when lunchtime rolled around, but after thinking it over, I'd decided against it. For one thing, if I did keep quiet about doing something like that, Nanami might have made us something herself, and it would have made for a pretty awkward reveal.

I'd already lamented about not being able to eat Nanami's home-cooked food yesterday. If I'd kept my plans a secret, there was a good chance she would

have ended up cooking for me. Of course, even if she *did* make bento and we ended up with two lunches, I would have most definitely eaten everything, but if I became too stuffed and unable to move, it would have ruined our date.

The other reason was that I didn't want Nanami to go through the trouble of making bento for a date that I was supposed to have planned myself. It seemed like silly, masculine pride, but I told her honestly how I felt. Even when I told her, though, it hadn't seemed to ruin the surprise, because Nanami had been shocked by the idea.

"Really?! You're gonna make bento yourself? That's amazing! I'm looking forward to it already!"

Given how excited and happy she'd been, I felt like things had turned out almost as well as if I'd surprised her. I'd been pretty surprised myself to learn that sharing plans with someone ahead of time—rather than keeping them a surprise—could be a nice surprise in its own right.

"Yeah, I think that's enough to feed two people."

As I was staring at the bento boxes, deep in thought, I heard an anguished voice from beside me. My dad was sitting there, his head in his hands.

Last night, my parents had come home really late. I'd woken up in the middle of the night and caught sight of my dad acting like a kid and clinging to my mom. My mom had been all smiles, which was completely unimaginable considering her typically cool demeanor. She must have really liked my dad's wanting her to spoil him. The alcohol probably helped.

I'd only learned this recently, but it seemed my dad was the type who lost all sense of reason when he got drunk. Unfortunately for him, he also was the type to remember everything that drunk him had done, even when he got up the next morning.

"Why don't you stay in bed a bit longer? You don't need to force yourself," I told him.

"Nah. I heard your mom saw you off yesterday, so I wanted to be the one to do it today. I wasn't expecting you to make breakfast," he replied.

"Do you think you can manage some miso soup? I just made it with some

onion and egg,” I said.

“I actually don’t feel all that bad. Do you think I could get the whole shebang? I never thought I’d be able to eat my son’s cooking in the morning.”

If he didn’t feel bad, why did he have his head in his hands? Well, I figured it was none of my business. I simply went about plating breakfast for my dad, as requested. Rice, miso soup, pieces of omelet, grilled salmon, fried chicken... They were the same items as I’d packed into the bento—nothing fancy, just the standard stuff.

“Who knew you’d get to be so good at cooking? It’s delicious,” dad murmured emotionally after taking a bite. He then proceeded to eat one dish after another. He must not have been feeling too terrible, because it didn’t look like he was forcing himself to eat.

“You don’t look hungover. Why were you holding your head like that earlier?” I asked.

“Oh, I was just remembering last night. You saw it too, didn’t you?”

My parents had been kind of noisy, so I’d ended up waking up to see what was going on. I hadn’t realized they’d noticed me though. It seemed weird to claim that I hadn’t seen them, so I decided to answer honestly.

“What’s so bad about it? It just means that you and mom are close. It’s way better than getting into fights when you get drunk,” I said, teasing him with a mean grin. When he saw my face, he only smiled awkwardly.

“Yoshin, you talk as though what happened last night doesn’t concern you, but it could very well affect you too,” he said as he requested a second serving of the miso soup.

I just tilted my head, not understanding what he was trying to tell me.

“Well, it also comes down to which one of us you take after, but if you’re like me and you don’t have a high tolerance for alcohol, what do you suppose might happen?”

“If I’m like you? You mean...?!”

As I handed him his soup, I thought back on the previous evening. Dad had

worn a smile on his face unlike any I'd seen before while hugging my mom as if he were moonstruck. He'd also been kissing her and rubbing his cheek up against hers, telling her how much he loved her and how adorable he thought she was. Was he telling me that I might end up doing something like that one day?

"Well, it *is* better than not getting along," he said. "I'm looking forward to what'll happen in the future."

It was now my turn to have a mean grin directed at me. His smile really did make it seem like he was excited about the future. Seeing that smile, I pictured myself acting like he'd been acting the previous evening.

If, when I'm old enough to drink, it turns out that I'm like my dad, would I do those same things to Nanami too? Just thinking about it made my cheeks hot. I'd have to keep it a secret from Nanami.

After that, dad and I continued chatting about random things. The bento cooled in the meantime, so I could finally place the lids on all the boxes. With everything sorted, I finished up getting ready. Since mom was still asleep, dad was going to see me off alone today.

"Stay safe out there. And tell Nanami-san we say hello," dad said.

"Got it. I'll be off. Are you two going out on another date when mom gets up?" I asked.

"No, we're gonna get back to our business trips today, so we won't get to go on a date. Oh, but we'll both get back on Wednesday, so how about we all have dinner together, just the three of us?"

Ah, that's right. I remembered them saying that their trips would last for about a month. The fact that the day they'd return was the day after my and Nanami's one-month anniversary seemed convenient, or even a little fateful. I hoped I'd be able to share some good news. No, I couldn't hope for it—I had to make it happen.

"The three of us would be great, but would it be okay for Nanami to join us? We'll cook. I think we'll have a lot to share with you guys," I said.

"Do you think her parents would be okay with that?" dad asked.

“I’ll let you know once I check with them. Okay then. I’m off.”

“All right, sounds good. Enjoy your day,” dad said, waving me off with a smile. Having been seen off by my mom yesterday and then by my dad today, I headed out on the second day of our last date.

Today, rather than meeting up somewhere, I was picking her up at her house. This was not only to prevent anyone trying to hit on her on the way there but also to accomplish something else I needed to do. When I sent Nanami a message to let her know I’d left my house, it was immediately marked as read. A response soon followed, saying that she was waiting for me. It was still early, but maybe she was waiting expectantly for me.

Not long after, I arrived at her house. We’d been messaging back and forth even while I was en route, so time had passed really quickly. Rather than ringing her doorbell, I messaged her to let her know I’d arrived. I soon heard footsteps coming toward the front door, which swung open to reveal Nanami—and Tomoko-san.

“Good morning, Yoshin,” Nanami said, smiling at me.

Her outfit was less revealing than it was yesterday, perhaps because we were going to the zoo. She seemed to be all set; in fact, she almost seemed like she was itching to get going.

“Morning, Nanami, Tomoko-san.”

“Good morning, Yoshin-kun. It’s so sweet of you to come pick Nanami up. You’re going to the zoo today, aren’t you? How nice. I hope you both have lots of fun.”

Tomoko-san seemed to have gotten used to me calling Nanami without the honorific. She was smiling happily. In fact, it was kind of incredible just how happy she’d become when she’d first heard me say it. She and Genichiro-san had practically been dancing with joy.

“Oh, Tomoko-san, here’s the thing I promised you. I’m not sure if it’s good, but it’d be great if you could try it,” I said, taking a large container out of my bag and handing it to Tomoko-san. It contained some of the dishes I’d made for our bento that day.

When Nanami and I had been chatting about me making bento for our date, Nanami had told me that her mom wanted to taste my cooking and had asked me to bring some if I had any left over. Of course I'd said yes.

"Oh my. Thank you so much! Everyone will be home today, so we'll all enjoy it for lunch," she said to me.

"Jeez, this was supposed to be for me. Yoshin, you're too nice," Nanami said, very obviously pouting. I felt a slight urge to poke her cheek, but I refrained so she wouldn't get mad.

I had thought about cooking just for Nanami, but I couldn't be sure whether I'd have another opportunity to cook for her family. Given how much Tomoko-san and the others had done for me, I wanted to express my gratitude to them while I still had the chance. Hence my decision to share the food.

"It'll just be you and me for lunch, so maybe you can forgive me," I whispered.

"Okay, fine. Deal," she said, switching her pout for a smile. Apparently, she'd just wanted me to see her sulking. Tomoko-san was smiling wryly at the scene.

Just when I thought we were ready to head out, Nanami turned to me and flashed me a slightly evil grin. "By the way, your parents went out on a date last night too, right? Shinobu-san said that they had drinks and that Akira-san ended up being all lovey-dovey with her."

"Oh, yeah. That's exactly what— Wait, how do you know that?"

Without saying a word, Nanami showed me her phone. There on the screen was a photo of my dad hanging on to my mom like a child. *Seriously, mom, what kind of photos are you sending her? And what's with the message?! "If Yoshin gets like this in the future, please accept him with open arms"? What are you telling my girlfriend, mom?!*

It seemed my decision to keep my possible drunk self a secret from Nanami had been for naught.

"It's gonna be so much fun drinking together when we're older!" Nanami declared.

"Uh, right..."

That was all I managed to say, but Nanami seemed to have forgotten something important: the fact that we were still in front of her house and that Tomoko-san was still listening.

“Oh dear, Nanami. Maybe you’re imagining that Yoshin-kun will want you to spoil him, but we don’t want to go assuming anything now, do we?” Tomoko-san said.

“Huh? No, but...”

Nanami and I turned around at Tomoko-san’s question. Tomoko-san stood there smiling, the container of food still in her hands. Nanami’s face twitched when she saw her mother’s expression. Tomoko-san, on the other hand, seemed to be enjoying herself.

“You might only be remembering yourself from the last time, but when your father gets drunk, he starts acting like a spoiled child too. Your behavior was nothing compared to how he can be, and if it turns out that you’re like your father, who knows which one of you will be acting like a child who wants to be coddled?”

Realizing what her mother meant, Nanami turned to me in a panic. She apparently hadn’t considered the possibility of being the one to act like the baby. Perhaps due to all the things she imagined in that moment, her face was turning very, very red.

“This, uh, just means we’ll have even more to look forward to when we’re old enough to drink,” I managed to say.

“Y-Yeah. It’ll be fun to see who’ll act more spoiled. I’m not gonna lose!”

When did it turn into a competition? For some reason, a strange sense of rivalry now seemed to burn in Nanami’s heart. I figured what Tomoko-san had suggested only sounded like an ominous premonition, especially given what happened with her before. However, if Nanami really did take after her father and what had happened with her before really was nothing, then I might want to find out what would *actually* happen.

Just as Nanami and I were managing to pull ourselves together, Tomoko-san very cheerfully made a proposal. “I for one would love to see the both of you

get all mushy and baby each other! When you both turn twenty, let's have a family party and all drink together!"

If my dad and Genichiro-san both got all clingy, and if Nanami and I also started acting that way too, that party would descend into utter chaos. Plus Saya-chan would feel left out...or maybe by then Saya-chan would already have a boyfriend. Either way, she still wouldn't be able to drink.

"Well, enough about the future. Enjoy your date today, both of you. I hope you have a wonderful time."

Even though she'd been the one to open up *that* can of worms, Tomoko-san switched gears and started waving us off. Nanami and I smiled faintly at her ability to switch from one mode to the next. In any case, she and I took each other's hand and smiled back at Nanami's mother.

"We're off then, mom," Nanami said.

"It was nice to see you, Tomoko-san," I said.

And this was how our last date before our one-month anniversary began.



"Didn't someone say before that Genichiro-san starts acting like a baby when he gets drunk?" I asked Nanami on our way to our destination.

"I guess it's like that at your place too, huh?" she replied.

"I only recently found out about that myself. My dad really was acting like a baby last night."

"Well, he seemed to be acting a lot worse than I was, but I wonder how bad it can actually get."

As we talked, Nanami was busy turning blue and red from nervousness and embarrassment. I was still pretty shocked by how she'd acted while drunk on whiskey bonbons, but being told that that was nothing, I had no idea what to expect in the future. Still...

"I'd be pretty happy if you wanted me to spoil you," I murmured.

"Same. But if we both get drunk and act like babies..." Nanami pointed her

index finger and then shifted her gaze to it as though she were projecting images with the tip of her finger. Naturally, I got sucked into the image as well. In my mind, I saw an illusion of chaos in which both Nanami and I, as adults, became so smashed that we both ended up wanting to be babied by the other.

“Let’s make sure not to drink when we go out,” I said.

“Yeah... It might also be good not to drink when we’re not with each other,” she said, apparently having imagined the same thing. Her face was twitching slightly as she said it.

We didn’t encounter any new problems on the way to the zoo. It felt like the first peaceful time we’d spent together while en route somewhere, given that we’d been encountering one trouble or another lately—so much so that Nanami had laughed earlier and said, “I sure hope nothing happens today!” At least for today, I wanted us to be able to enjoy looking at the animals in peace.

In any case, we soon arrived at the zoo and stood still to take in the sight.

“It looks a lot nicer than it used to,” I murmured.

Compared to how I remembered the zoo, its exterior had been improved considerably. Based on my research from the night before, I already knew that many of the structures had been refurbished and that the exhibits had been renewed. Even then, though, I hadn’t expected the park to look as nice as this.

The last time I’d visited must have been when I was in elementary school. Back then, the outside had looked pretty run-down—though that was a pretty hazy memory. Nanami seemed to be feeling similarly though, because she was staring at the zoo, wide-eyed.

“Wow, it looks loads nicer than it did before!” she exclaimed. “I haven’t been here since elementary school. Let’s have fun today, okay?”

We headed toward the ticket booth to pay for our entrance fee, holding each other’s hand the whole way. Just as I’d looked up yesterday, tickets were half price for any student who displayed their student ID. Nanami and I both took out our student IDs, but...

“Oh my gawd, you look so different in your photo!” Nanami exclaimed.
“Wow, your bangs used to be so long!”

“Aw, come on. Yours looks... Wait, why do you look so serious in this? This doesn’t look like you at all. This isn’t even a gyaru,” I told her.

“I figured it was for school, so it’d be better that way. I just tried it out, is all. Do you like this style more, Yoshin?” she asked, grinning.

“No, I like you the best as you are now.”

“Oh, I see. You like gyaru, huh? You’re such a perv.”

“How’d you reach that conclusion?!”

The receptionist in front of us smiled warmly and didn’t seem to mind our exchange. We both looked so different from the us in our photos that I worried about qualifying for the discount, but the receptionist handed us our tickets without questioning anything. Perhaps the IDs were more of a formality than anything else.

Nanami and I received our maps and entered the park. As we stepped inside, we were enveloped by the refreshing scent of the trees around us and the indescribable scent of wildlife coming from the animals. Was this what nature smelled like? Some people might find the smell of animals offensive, but I didn’t dislike the way the various smells blended together. Actually, I found it quite calming.

“Come to think of it, are you okay with the smell of animals?” I asked Nanami.

I knew it was too late to ask her, having already brought her to a zoo on a date, but I suddenly felt concerned. I really should have thought about this earlier. That said, Nanami didn’t seem to mind the smell. Instead, she was tilting her head, somewhat confused by my question.

“Yeah, of course. I knew we were coming to the zoo today, so I made sure not to wear any perfume or anything. That way I don’t smell all weird around the animals.”

“I’m not wearing cologne either, but I didn’t realize you hadn’t put anything on. You still smell good somehow.”

“Um, Yoshin...it’s pretty embarrassing when you smell me like that...”

Shoot. I’d just started smelling her without thinking about the fact that we

were in public. Still, why was it that girls smelled so nice even when they weren't wearing any perfume? It was the wonder of humankind.

Casting a sidelong glance at Nanami, who was turning red from my behavior, I let go of her hand for a moment to open up the map of the zoo. Nanami brought her face closer, peering in from the side to look at the map with me.

"Oh, wow, they have elephants too. Should we go see them first?" she asked.

"The zoo doesn't seem all that big. Maybe we can just walk along and see what we come across first."

With each of us taking one side of the map to keep it open, we took in the entirety of the zoo on paper. I couldn't exactly compare the map of the zoo today with what lived in my memory, but I was pretty sure it didn't use to have this many different areas. I remembered things being a lot more random—or, at least, the divisions of the areas had felt that way. Now, though, the zoo was divided into various areas with specific themes.

Still, the zoo wasn't terribly large, so it was probably possible to hit up all the different areas just by strolling around. If so, there was probably no need to waste our energy by walking back and forth. Besides, I already had a place in mind that I wanted us to go to first.

"Actually, do you mind if we go here first?" I asked, pointing on the map to the area closest to where we were standing. It was just inside the zoo entrance and had a separate sign even within the main zoo.

"Is that the petting zoo?" Nanami wondered out loud.

"Yeah, I read that you can pet loads of different animals there. I thought it'd be fun to do first. And also..."

"Also what? What's there?" she asked.

"Well, it looks like you have to get lucky, so we'll just have to find out once we get there."

I guided Nanami by the hand and entered the petting zoo. It seemed there were fenced-off areas inside there as well, but some of the animals were outside of them. The scene before us was really peaceful. Ponies, chickens, and

other birds of various colors were roaming freely about. Children accompanied by their parents were running around excitedly. I couldn't help smiling at what I saw.

"It's not often you get to just walk around like this and look at animals," I said.

"True. And you said we can pet them, right? Oh, Yoshin, look! There're sheep over there!"

Looking in the direction Nanami was pointing, I saw a small flock of sheep wandering out of their pen and leisurely walking about. These were the animals I'd wanted to see the most. From this distance, their fleece looked kind of stiff, but I bet it was super soft if you touched it. I was itching to feel it.

"Oh yeah, sheep! They're pretty cute, huh? That's awesome. Maybe we should go pet them. It looks like we're allowed."

"Do you like sheep, Yoshin?" Nanami asked, watching me acting strangely.

"Yeah, I do actually. Aren't they stupid cute? To be honest, foxes are my favorite animals, but there aren't any foxes here, and you can't really touch them because they might have parasites and stuff."

"Foxes? Not dogs or cats? You sure do have funny taste. Do you want me to wear fox ears one of these days?"

"You're the one saying funny stuff again... Wait, do you actually own fox ears?"

"I have a friend that put on an animal café with her class for the culture festival last year, so I think she'll give me a pair if I ask. They might have sheep ears too," she said.

I fell silent and replied with a simple nod. But first: sheep.

We approached one of the fluffy animals that was moving along slowly. We also watched our speed, walking quietly and calmly in order not to scare it. Even when we approached, the sheep—maybe because it was used to humans—didn't try to run away. In fact, it stood still and greeted us. Maybe I was imagining it, but it looked kind of sleepy, or was it just the warm weather making me think so?

When I looked around, I saw that even the ponies were standing still in the shade of a tree. The only ones actively moving around were the birds.

“Okay, I’m gonna go for it,” I declared.

“You don’t have to be so nervous. See, it’s so furry and cute. Plus it’s so gentle!”

While I’d stood there, hesitant to pet the sheep, Nanami had already started gently stroking its fleece. The sheep had its eyes closed as if it were asleep and was gently swaying its head from side to side.

Since Nanami had taken the lead, I made up my mind and brought my hand closer to the sheep. The texture of its fleece was rougher than I’d imagined. I’d thought that maybe it would be more bouncy, but its firmness seemed to win out. The feeling was also mysteriously comfortable, and I slowly began to stroke the sheep’s back. When I did, I felt a warm and strange sensation on my palm. It was both bouncy and rough. Rather than trying to move away from us, the sheep sat down on the ground where it was being petted. I wondered if it was telling us that we could pet it more. It really was a calm and gentle sheep.

“It looks like each one of these sheep has a name. Maybe this one’s a girl. They put a ‘-chan’ on her name,” I said.

“I wonder. Aw, animals are great. I feel so comforted right now.”



Nanami and I continued to pet the sheep for a while longer. We tried to keep our strokes appropriately gentle so as not to cause it any stress. After that, we moved on to pet different sheep so that we wouldn't spend too much time with a single one. All of the sheep were incredibly gentle and very sweet. I was tempted to hug them tight, but I figured that farm animals wouldn't be too into that.

"Man, these guys are so cute. I could pet them all day," I murmured.

"Wow, I never knew you liked sheep that much, Yoshin. But you're right; they are really cute." Nanami continued to pet the sheep. With its eyes partially closed, the one being petted looked almost as if it were smiling. There were other animals in the petting zoo too, but we were only petting the sheep. Suddenly, Nanami said something scary. "They're tasty too. Or, maybe they're tasty *because* they're cute. You know that saying about being someone so cute, you want to eat them right up?"

I mean, yeah, mutton does taste pretty good, I thought. Is that something we should be mentioning here though? At the end of the day, it was probably unavoidable. We humans even ate cute little sheep—though it wasn't like we were planning on eating sheep from the zoo.

"I feel like that means something a little different," I said. "If you don't keep certain things separate, you're gonna end up not being able to eat meat anymore."

"Hmm, I could become a vegetarian," she replied. "I mean, when they're so cute, you can't help getting attached to them."

"Just so you know, I worked really hard to make fried chicken today."

Nanami looked down to address the sheep that she was still petting. "I'm sorry," she said. "I don't think I'll be able to give up meat after all. At the very least, I'll enjoy every last bit of it and be really thankful."

I felt like she should really be apologizing to one of the chickens. But deep-fried mutton, huh? Maybe I should try making that next time.

After that, we paused on petting the sheep. A part of me didn't want to, but unless I made the decision to do so, all we'd manage to do that day was pet

sheep. It was time to move on and see the other offerings inside the petting zoo.

There were other animals aside from those walking around the perimeter. Monkeys and guinea pigs were being kept in glass enclosures, so we weren't able to pet them. That was too bad, but it seemed they were kept inside for their own well-being, so it couldn't be helped. We were still able to look at them through the glass and take loads of pictures.

The animals on the outside of the pens and cages seemed very used to humans. For instance, there was a squirrel that, rather than running away, situated itself on top of a tree stump as if to let me take a photo of it. Since we were dealing with animals that moved around, it was difficult to take a picture of both me and Nanami together, but we were able to take some photos of each other at the end.

"Hey, isn't that duck acting kind of...weird?" Nanami asked.

"Huh?"

I only realized when she mentioned it, but one of the ducks was snuggling up to me. At the same time, a different duck started holding Nanami's hand and fingers in its beak as if to pretend to bite her, and bumping into her body from time to time as though playing with her.

We couldn't be mean toward the two ducks, but since Nanami was having trouble shaking off the duck that was play-biting her, I tried to pull it away. The duck then proceeded to attack me with unexpected force, as though he were attacking a romantic rival. It actually kind of hurt.

When we were at a loss for what to do, one of the zookeepers noticed the issue and swiftly pulled the duck off of Nanami. It was impressive work.

"I'm so sorry!" the zookeeper said. "It looks like these two ducks have taken quite a liking to you both. This is how ducks court each other. I apologize if they made you feel uncomfortable."

"They were *courting* us?"

I could understand the duck that had approached me, but the form of courtship elected by the duck that had targeted Nanami seemed rather violent.

I supposed it was an animal, though, so we couldn't do much about it.

The two ducks being held by the zookeeper seemed to be acting out a bit, but I linked my arm with Nanami's and said to the ducks, "I'm sorry, but Nanami and I are going out, so we can't reciprocate your feelings."

"Do you think they understand what you're saying?" Nanami asked, embarrassed. "I mean, not that what you're saying doesn't make me happy, but..."

I'm pretty sure the ducks *couldn't* understand what I'd said, but when they saw me and Nanami standing close to each other, they all of a sudden stopped struggling in the zookeeper's arms. The zookeeper seemed slightly taken aback by the ducks' change in behavior.

"Look, I think they understood!" I said, turning to Nanami.

"Well, I guess that's cool, but now even the zookeeper's weirded out," Nanami muttered.

"My, aren't you two close? I envy you. I hope you both enjoy your day here today," the zookeeper said to us. With our arms still linked, we watched as they walked off.

Now that we'd had a chance to pet a bunch of animals and take pictures of them, it was probably time to start making our way to other parts of the zoo. Just as I was thinking that, though, we heard a different zookeeper call out from behind a fenced-off area of sheep. "We'll now be shearing our little sheep friend! Please come by if you'd like to watch!"

My eyes lit up at the announcement. This was it—the thing you had to get lucky to see. I'd already given up, thinking we weren't going to catch it today. Once I heard they were about to start, though, my level of excitement went through the roof.

"Yoshin, is this the thing you mentioned earlier?" Nanami asked. "Shearing sheep, huh? I guess I've never seen it before."

When my gaze met Nanami's, I snapped back to reality. My bad. I'd gotten all excited, but maybe this was boring for her.

“Sorry, I got all carried away. Would you be cool with checking it out? I’ve always wanted to see this,” I told her.

“Of course! It’s really fun to see your eyes sparkling like a little kid’s. And besides, it’s pretty rare for you to say you want to do something.”

“Is it? I haven’t really thought about it, but maybe you’re right.”

“It totally is! That’s why I’m so happy about today. Come on, then. I wanna see it too, so let’s go over there!”

Arm in arm, we made our way over to the sheep-shearing demonstration. There were a few families with small children there, but Nanami and I were the only couple. Behind the sheep, a male zookeeper wearing a work uniform was sitting quietly, waiting for the demonstration to begin.

“Let’s get started then!” one of the zookeepers said.

As a female staff member explained the process of shearing a sheep, the male zookeeper deftly went about the job. The sheep remained calm, looking almost like it felt relaxed. According to the staff’s explanation, domesticated sheep could get heatstroke if they didn’t have their wool sheared. That was why it was necessary for the zookeepers to shear a sheep’s fleece in order to keep them cool. During the hotter months, they would sometimes have to adjust the shearing schedule. That was why we were so lucky to be able to see this.

As they clipped the sheep’s hooves and sheared its fleece, the sheep gradually became groomed, as if it were some important minister somewhere. Soon, the job was done, and the sheep looked completely refreshed, but it all of a sudden lost its cool. Not even listening to the zookeeper trying to stop it, it began to walk toward us—or, more precisely, toward me.

“Huh? What?!”

I was so busy absentmindedly watching the sheep that I ended up getting headbutted at full force. Even the sheep seemed surprised by the collision though; it stopped in its tracks and, looking confused, stumbled to a halt. I wasn’t in much pain or anything, but I ended up falling over backwards from the impact. The sheep, on the other hand, just stood there looking down at me.

As I lay there, looking up at the sky, I heard voices of concern, laughter, and

shouts from little kids who seemed to want the sheep to come toward them too. I couldn't help laughing as well.

"Yoshin, are you okay?! How did that even happen?!" Nanami was shouting.

"I'm fine, I'm fine!" I called back. "Actually, Nanami, can you get a photo of this? It's too funny to pass up."

Nanami, panicked, was extending her hand to me, but instead of taking it, I'd asked her to take a picture. Nanami obliged, though she was smiling awkwardly as she took it.

After that, the zookeepers apologized profusely for what had happened. I understood that they had to, given the situation, but I really didn't mind. Apparently, it was fairly normal for sheep to suddenly start wandering off, but it was quite rare for them to run right into people like that. I was glad to have gotten such a rare experience, but I was also relieved that I was the one who'd been headbutted, not Nanami. Plus I'd even managed to get an awesome photo—of me lying flat on my back and a freshly sheared sheep looking down at me. It wasn't the kind of photo you could get every day.

"We are so very sorry about this. At the very least, we'd like for you to take this."

As the zookeepers continued to apologize, they handed us a packet of white wool, which they said they'd sheared last year and bleached. Although they ordinarily chose a middle schooler or someone younger to receive it, they gave both Nanami and me two packets each as an apology.

"Thanks," I said. "We'll make good use of it."

Nanami looked excited at the thought. "It's so white and so pretty! I wonder if we can make something," she said to me.

"It's not a ton, but maybe we can make something small."

"Yeah." Nanami looked at me with amusement in her eyes—or was it exasperation? "But seriously, something always happens when I go on a date with you."

Ah, yeah, that was true. You wouldn't ordinarily have sheep run into you. I

shrugged helplessly. “As long as you’re having fun, I’m happy.”

Her exasperated exasperation crumbled, and she looked at me with a smile on her face. “Jeez, Yoshin, how long are you going to lie on the ground like that? Get up already, and let’s go check out something else. Here, give me your hand.”

“Yeah, I should get up, shouldn’t I? Wait, Nanami, you’re not thinking of pulling me up, are you? I’m pretty sure that’s impossible,” I mumbled in response to her extended hand. Nanami didn’t take her hand back though; instead, she brought it closer toward me.

“Well, I thought maybe I could. How hard can it be?” she asked.

“You really wanna try it?” I asked.

“Yep!” she exclaimed.

Apparently, this wasn’t going to end until I took her hand. So I did.

“Okay, here we... Whoa!” she yelped.

For a moment, I felt like I was being pulled up—but only for a moment.

“Ugh... Okay, yeah, I guess not. Now you’re on the ground with me. Wait, are you hurt at all?” I asked.

“Damn it, I thought I could do it. I...I guess lying on top of you in public like this is pretty embarrassing.”

“If you think so, it’d be great if you could, um, move. There are kids watching,” I murmured.

Nanami sat up immediately and glanced at the kids around us. They were all looking at us excitedly; some were even sitting on top of each other, trying to recreate the scene. *I’m terribly sorry, parents.*

Nanami and I stood up in a panic and left the petting zoo behind, waving at the children awkwardly. There might have been a slight incident, but getting rammed by a sheep was an invaluable experience. I mean, it certainly made for a great memory. Even though I’d fallen over, it was more because I’d lost my balance, so it wasn’t a big deal. If I’d hit my head or if I felt a lot of pain in my stomach from the impact, it’d be a different story, but I felt no such discomfort.

I was probably pretty lucky that the sheep had only just taken off and hadn't really built up speed yet. In fact, the sheep that had run into me had probably looked even more surprised than I had. To top it off, we'd even received souvenirs that we wouldn't ordinarily have gotten. It seemed our small misfortune had turned into fortune after all.

"In any case, what should we do with the wool we got?" I wondered out loud.

In each of our hands, we carried two clear bags of wool. Sheared and bleached last year, the wool was a beautiful white. I was grateful that they'd given it to us, but I was having a tough time coming up with ways to use it.

"Since we each got two bags, how about we keep one as a souvenir and use the other to make an accessory or something?"

When Nanami suggested that, I froze for a moment. I'd been working on an "accessory" for her for the past few days. I hadn't told anyone, and since I'd hidden it away when Nanami had visited my house, there was no way she could have found out about it. Still, I felt nervous at the word.

"I wonder what kinds of accessories you can make with wool," I said, trying not to let my anxiety show.

"Hmm... With this much, I think we could make some pom-pom earrings or something. They'd be really cute."

"Oh really? Have you made some before?"

"Nah. I've only seen them."

She hasn't, huh? She looked cute as she shook her head in response, but I felt mildly disappointed by her reply. Nanami seemed amused by my reaction though. Laughing, she linked arms with me again and pressed her body up against mine. "How about we try making them together, then? We can do it next time we hang out."

"Earrings, huh? But I don't have my ears pierced," I said.

"Oh, right. You really don't have them pierced, do you?"

When Nanami spoke, she softly pinched my earlobe. I'd never been interested in fashion, so it was no surprise that I wouldn't have gotten my ears

pierced.

“Sometimes in shojo manga a haircut or something reveals a guy’s pierced ears,” Nanami said, “but I guess it’s more like you that your ears aren’t pierced.”

Not noticing that I was frozen in surprise—or rather, ignoring that she *had* noticed—Nanami continued twiddling my earlobe. Pinching it, bending it, kneading it with her fingertips... Every time she shifted her fingers, odd shivers ran up my spine.

“Nanami, can you maybe spare me further damage?” I pleaded.

“Oh? Are your earlobes your weak spot?” she asked. She continued playing with my earlobe, grinning like a child who’d discovered a new toy. I smiled in resignation, letting her do as she wanted, until she suddenly removed her fingers.

“Why don’t you get your ears pierced, then? Like mine, see?”

Nanami removed one of her earrings, wiggling her earlobe at me as if to show off the piercing.

“You know I’m gonna try to touch it if you keep showing me,” I said.

“My earlobes aren’t my weakness, so I’ll be fine. And see, getting your ears pierced is no big deal, right?”

Through her earlobe was a small hole that looked like it had always been there. Before then, I’d not had any reason to get my ears pierced, and I’d always imagined it would hurt. For girls, though, it seemed perfectly normal.

Just as I’d warned, I slowly reached for her ear. A strange tension ran through my body. Maybe Nanami felt the same way, because although she was smiling, that smile looked strained. My fingertips gently touched her earlobe, and just like she’d done to me, I pinched it softly. People often say that you should knead bread dough to about the texture of your earlobe. Seeing as I’d never made bread before, I had to wonder if her earlobe was a good indicator for the texture.

“Oh...”

When I pinched her earlobe a little, Nanami let out a soft whimper. The softness of her earlobe was distinct from mine, and the small point where she'd had her ear pierced felt odd against my fingertips. I continued playing with her earlobe with my fingers.

I see, so this is what a pierced earlobe feels like. I thought maybe pinching it would hurt, but it actually didn't seem that way at all. The hole wasn't terribly large either; it was actually quite small and cute. Maybe her ears were pretty small too.

"Hey, Yoshin, w-wait..."

Nanami pressed her arms against my chest as if trying to push me away. I came to my senses when I felt the pressure and glimpsed Nanami's scarlet face.

"Wait, I thought you didn't mind having your ears touched," I said.

"I thought so too, but... I mean, I was fine when Hatsumi and Ayumi touched them, but I guess I was wrong."

I'd only touched them in the first place because she'd told me she'd be fine, but seeing her so embarrassed, I started feeling embarrassed too. I took my fingers away from her ear and tried to switch up the mood.

"Okay, let's go see some elephants!" I declared. "If you're talking ears, you're talking elephants!"

"Huh? Aren't elephants all about the trunks?"

"Oh, come on, the world's most famous elephant flies with its ears. So if you're gonna talk ears, elephants are the only answer."

"Oooh, that. Wow, Yoshin, I'm impressed you remember such an old movie."

With that, Nanami—with her cheeks still flushed—and I headed over to the area featuring elephants and walked inside together. There was an elephant pattern on the door, and the long, dim hallway felt like it was on a slight incline.

"This place is pretty fancy, huh?" I said.

"Yeah, all the green makes me feel like we're walking through a forest. Oooh, it'll be so cool to see some elephants!"

Nanami had a bounce in her step as she walked. She was tugging on my arm slightly and walking a half step ahead of me. Walking through this corridor really did seem to gradually increase our excitement. It was strange to think we were about to encounter real, live elephants.

When we finally opened the heavy double door, light filtered through as if to welcome us. We had arrived at what appeared to be an exhibition space, with descriptions of the various elephants that had lived in the zoo over the years, as well as a video about elephants in general. As I stood there wondering whether we were supposed to see the elephants themselves from a different place, Nanami turned to look in the opposite direction and began shouting excitedly.

“Yoshin, look! Elephants! See, there are two of them! Aw, I wonder if they’re a mommy and baby. They’re playing together!”

The side opposite from the one I’d been looking at was encased in glass, and visitors could look down to see the elephants below. Their enclosure was pretty spacious, but the elephants all seemed pretty active, sticking together and putting their trunks on each other’s neck.

From where I was standing, I could see a small elephant and another elephant with a star-shaped scar on its behind. The two had their faces close together and looked to be playing with each other.

“They’re bigger than I was expecting, though maybe that’s normal, since they’re elephants,” I said.

“So cute... They have their faces all close to each other.”

We continued watching the elephants as they frolicked on the other side of the glass. As we stood there, though, I noticed a space in a different part of the room where apparently you could sit to enjoy the view. Families with children were taking advantage of the seating as they watched the elephants.

“Nanami, it looks like there’s a place we can sit down and watch. Do you wanna check it out?”

“Oh, really? I was thinking of taking a little break, so it’d be great to be able to sit down.”

She sounded like she was trying to let me take a break from standing too,

which was sweet of her, but when we got to the seating area, we ended up not wanting to sit down. The area only had glass up to around our chests, which allowed us to look over at the elephants with almost nothing separating us from them.

Wow, this is amazing. I thought they were pretty awesome even through the glass, but they're really something else when you're looking right at them. I can even hear them playing with each other, so it feels like I'm standing super close.

In the end, rather than sitting down, we opted to stand as close to the elephants as we could. They would press their faces close together and push each other, and when the small one would start to run off, the other one would chase after it.

The families around us took photos of the elephants and laughed as they watched them play. Nanami seemed just as absorbed in the excitement.

"Yoshin, Yoshin, let's take some photos! If we take a selfie together, we can probably get the elephants in too! Come on, scoot in closer!"

That was just the tip of the iceberg of her excitement, though I had to admit I was pretty excited too. The intensity of seeing the elephants up close, combined with their adorable nature, was indescribable. And then, just as we were about to take another selfie...

"Paaaaaarraaaaaaanh!"

An elephant cried out loudly. I was so shocked, I nearly dropped my phone. The kids around us seemed to be surprised as well; they all started chattering loudly and imitating the elephant's cry.

"Whoa, that scared me..."

"Yeah, that was super loud."

Although I'd nearly dropped my phone, it was funny to see the two elephants still playing together, not even realizing just how much they'd surprised people. I wondered if elephants made loud noises when they got excited or something.

"I guess elephants don't actually say, 'Toot,'" I muttered.

"Aha ha, yeah, it didn't sound like 'toot' at all, huh? I feel like hearing them

toot would be a lot cuter, but they sound a lot tougher in real life,” Nanami said, laughing.

Tough... Yeah, it really did sound like a tough cry. I’d felt the air tremble. It was pretty impressive.

We proceeded to take a few more pictures in front of the elephants. I’d gotten pretty used to taking selfies now, so I was able to get a shot with the both of us as well as the elephants, all in one image.

After watching them for some time, I realized there was another elephant toward the back. That elephant wasn’t approaching the other two and instead was eating from a bundle of hay that hung from the ceiling. Maybe it was near their lunchtime. Come to think of it, I realized I was getting hungry too.

Just then, I noticed the two elephants that had been playing draw closer together. The smaller elephant was pressing its face against the stomach of the larger elephant. *What’s it doing?* I wondered.

“Oh, they *are* mommy and baby!” Nanami exclaimed. “Look! The baby elephant’s drinking the mommy’s milk!”

As we both watched the mother elephant nurse the baby elephant, Nanami started taking pictures. It certainly wasn’t something you saw every day. I also took a photo of the rare sight, capturing Nanami in the picture as she smiled down at the elephants.

“I wonder if there’ll be a day when I’ll nurse my own baby like that,” she whispered.

After she’d finished taking photos, Nanami moved away from the glass and sat down. I silently sat down next to her, and we both continued watching them from there. Then, out of nowhere, we put our hands over each other’s. I intentionally refrained from responding to her comment, and Nanami didn’t say anything more about it either. We just took each other’s hand and, unlike before, watched the elephants in silence.

The people around us, excited about the elephants, continued to make a lot of noise, but neither of us heard any of it.

“I think...” I started.

“Yes?”

“I think you’d make a great mom,” I said.

Nanami paused for a moment. “Thanks.”

If I were the one next to her when it happened, then I couldn’t be happier. For now, though, I refrained from saying so. I’d actually said the same thing to her before, but now that a month had passed, I felt like the significance of it had changed.

Once they’d finished their midday meal, the elephants began playing again. The two that had been playing in the sand earlier joined together with the elephant that was eating hay and headed toward the watering hole. I stood up to follow them.

“Shall we head downstairs?” I asked. “The elephants have gone down to the water, and they say that if you’re lucky, you’ll be able to see them in there.”

“Really? Wow, did you do a lot of research before coming here?” Nanami asked.

“Kind of. I wanted to show you a bunch of interesting stuff today. I’m not sure if we can hit up everything, but let’s do the best we can.”

When I extended my hand out toward her, she took it, smiling softly and letting me help her up. We then headed down to the first floor, where we were greeted by a large elephant statue. It was so impressive that for a moment we were both surprised, thinking a real elephant had appeared in front of us.

It seemed that visitors were allowed to touch this statue and that it had the exact same feel as an actual elephant. We couldn’t touch a real elephant, so we decided to touch the statue instead. It felt slightly moist to the touch, and it had a strange texture of roughness as well, maybe because of all the fine lines on its skin.

There were also loads of model elephants embedded into the ceiling, as well as touch screens that controlled a media center, but we decided to forgo those for now. We instead decided to hurry to where we’d be able to see the real elephants.

We made it just in time to catch the elephants bathing. There were two elephants bathing at the same time, looking as though they were sitting in a bathtub together. The scene reminded me of when Nanami and I had visited the aquarium, but seeing elephants in the water felt oddly mysterious. They even had their trunks underwater, looking like they were a natural part of aquatic life.

“I never knew elephants spent so much time in the water. Mommy and baby bathing together... That’s so cool,” Nanami murmured.

“They do look really comfortable, don’t they? Seeing them in there makes me wanna go to the hot springs again.”

“You’re talking about the hot springs even when we’re at the zoo? Jeez, Yoshin, does this mean that you wanna go in with me?” Nanami asked.

“Would you do that?” I asked in return.

“Hmm, maybe in my bathing suit. Wait, seriously?! You’re too used to things now! You don’t even react! It’s so not fair that I’m the only one feeling embarrassed!”

I actually was starting to get used to Nanami’s teasing comments. I’d started to realize that she only said things like that when she was trying to tease me. That was why I was more used to it—or rather, I was now able to pretend I was used to it and respond accordingly. My heart was still beating super fast though.

Bathing together, in any sense whatsoever, was completely out of the question. *In a bathing suit, even?* The idea alone of taking a bath with a girl was so overwhelming that it didn’t even matter what she was wearing.

As we chatted, one of the elephants emerged from the water and began using its trunk to spray itself with sand. *What a shame*, I thought, given that they’d just washed. Maybe that was their usual practice though.

We continued watching the elephants for some time, but suddenly I heard a soft, adorable rumble that was different from the elephant’s cry from earlier. It was the sound of Nanami’s stomach.

“Did you hear it?” she asked.

“Yup, I did. Loud and clear,” I replied.

Just like when the elephants had been having their meal, it was now our lunchtime. It made perfect sense that we’d be hungry as well. Even knowing that I shouldn’t laugh at her, I couldn’t help chortling a bit as she held her hands to her stomach.

“In that case, maybe we should have lunch now,” I suggested. “We’ve already had a pretty good time seeing the elephants.”

“Jeez, you can’t laugh at me like that. You’re supposed to pretend you didn’t hear it!” Nanami yelled in protest.

With that decided, we made our way to the exit. At the last set of doors, we came upon an area where an elephant was putting its feet and ears out to have them washed by the zookeeper. It appeared that it was a space dedicated to having the elephants train for activities.

“Hey, look over there. Don’t those two sticking their trunks out and shaking them look like they’re waving goodbye?” Nanami asked.

The mommy and baby elephants from earlier were poking their trunks out from their enclosure, swinging them from side to side. The children standing around the exit were watching them excitedly, waving their hands and yelling out their goodbyes.

To be more realistic, the elephants were in the middle of poking their feet out and having them washed by the zookeepers. Their trunks were probably swinging left to right because of that. That said, this wasn’t the time or the place for me to say that out loud. If anything, it would be better for me to say something that would be in line with the kind of joy and fantasy we’d been able to experience there.

“Those elephants really do offer great customer service,” I said.

“Aha ha, how cute! Then we should wave goodbye to them too!”

Following Nanami’s lead, I waved my hand at the elephants and whispered a soft goodbye. The moment Nanami and I turned away, one of them cried out loudly as if to bid us farewell. It must have been because it felt good to have its feet washed, or maybe because of something else related to the washing. Even

so, Nanami and I left with joy in our hearts, feeling like the elephant had bid us farewell.



Following an adorable growl from Nanami's stomach, I brought her to the observatory rest house so that we could eat our lunch there together. The place was called that because it stood adjacent to the area with the monkeys; visitors could look out of the windows and watch them play. Once inside, I found myself slumped over one of the tables.

"You don't have to feel so bad about it, Yoshin."

Someone was patting me gently on the head, their gesture full of tenderness. It was Nanami, of course. Moved by her kindness, I looked up at her.

"Oh, yeah. Thanks, Nanami. I know it's nothing to feel bad about, but I just can't get over my own stupidity," I said.

There were several seats set up by the windows, where you could relax while watching the monkeys. There were other tables set up as well, but the rest house was relatively small.

We'd come up to the second floor, where we'd been lucky enough to find two window seats side by side. Through the spotless windows, we could watch the monkeys as they fooled around below.

If that were the only thing going on, I'd have been happy about how our date was going, and there'd have been nothing to be sad about. The cause for my gloom, though, was the bento boxes I'd brought, which were sitting right in front of me. Although my bento didn't taste quite as good as Nanami's cooking, I'd at least been *a little* confident in how it had turned out. However...

"Of course this would happen if you got mowed down by a sheep," I muttered, looking down at the bento spread out before me.

That's right—I'd been hit by a runaway sheep and fallen down, or rather, had been completely bowled over. Of course that meant that the bag I'd been keeping the bento boxes in had been turned upside down as well.

"Aw man, I worked so hard to try and make it look nice. This sucks," I said.

After we'd grabbed the two free spots by the window, I'd opened up the bento box to surprise Nanami with the lunch I'd prepared—only to find that this had happened. The food I'd arranged so nicely had gotten all mixed up, with veggies now sitting on top of the main dishes and a bunch of things smushed up on one side of the box. Although the food wasn't completely scrambled, it certainly didn't look appetizing.

"Like, look at this. The omelets had actually turned out kinda nice," I said, staring morosely at pieces of an omelet that had *once* looked pretty well-made. Now it was all broken and squished. When I'd first flipped the omelet out of the pan, it had looked almost impressive—in my opinion, anyway.

Nanami, meanwhile, was trying to console me as I looked down at my disaster. "But it still tastes the same!" she said, picking up a piece of omelet and putting it in her mouth. "Mmm... Wow, Yoshin, it's really good."

My heart, which was already on its way to feeling better, recovered even more upon me hearing her assessment. "If you think so, then I'm glad. But man, I'd gotten up early to make it and pack it and everything. I feel like I can't follow through on anything."

"What time did you get up to make all this?" she asked.

"It was my first time making it, and I wasn't sure how it was gonna go, so I got up at five just to be on the safe side," I confessed. "I had a really tough time too. I dunno why I always have to be so uncool."

"That does sound rough, but if it's your first time, it can't be helped. Besides, the fact that you're the kind of boyfriend that makes bento for us makes you really cool! Plus this fried chicken is delicious!"

Nanami smiled as she took a bite of fried chicken—even though the batter had peeled off. Hearing her say that made me really happy. *I can't be sitting here being all depressed, forcing her to try to make me feel better. I have to perk up a bit.*

Having mentally recovered somewhat, I asked Nanami something that had crossed my mind earlier. "This is kind of out of nowhere, but are you okay with eating while watching animals? I know I've already gotten us seats by the windows, so it's totally dumb of me to ask you this now, but I wanted to make

sure.”

“Hm? Where’d this come from all of a sudden? Are you the type that gets uncomfortable? Eating while looking at animals, I mean.”

“No, I’m totally fine,” I said quickly. “I just remembered that my parents are the type who don’t enjoy it, so I thought I should ask.”

When I ate with my parents, occasionally a TV show that featured animals would come on. When it did, my parents usually changed the channel. It wasn’t like I really wanted to watch shows about animals or like I was terribly interested in TV in the first place, so I usually just watched whatever happened to be on without complaining.

One time, though, I’d decided to ask my parents why they changed the channel, and they’d told me that they didn’t like seeing animals during mealtimes. Also, there could be somewhat shocking scenes in shows like that, and they felt uncomfortable with the idea of having something of the sort show up while they were eating.

“I didn’t realize your parents were like that,” Nanami replied. “I would’ve thought they didn’t mind that sort of stuff. Oh, and for the record, I’m totally fine with it.”

“Okay, good. Yeah, if you’d told me now that stuff like that made you uncomfortable, I was gonna have to come up with a way to apologize.”

“You’re so dramatic,” Nanami muttered, staring at me with a rare look of exasperation on her face. I wasn’t kidding though. She seemed to sense my seriousness, because she smiled awkwardly and put her own bag on the table.

“In that case, maybe I should apologize too. We can call it even,” she said. She then opened her bag and took out a small, white container. Through the partially see-through sides of that truly, truly small container, I saw something yellow inside.

“Is that...?” I murmured in disbelief.

She opened the lid of the container to reveal the very thing on my mind—beautiful golden pieces of omelet made by Nanami. It was my favorite dish and looked just as perfect as the very first time I’d laid eyes on it.

“I’m sorry. I knew you were going to make us lunch today, but I made some too because I really wanted to feed you.” She stuck her tongue out and smiled at me without a hint of remorse. There was absolutely no need for her to be remorseful though; her gesture filled me with nothing but happiness.

“That’s not something to apologize for,” I said sincerely. “In fact, it makes me happy. I love the omelets you make. Thank you for doing this.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. That’s why you shouldn’t apologize for anything either. Here, I’ll feed you some. This feels almost nostalgic, doesn’t it? Wasn’t the first thing I ever fed you a piece of fried chicken?”

Nanami picked up a perfect piece of omelet and brought it toward me. The two ends of the soft omelet, unable to resist the force of gravity, drooped down to form an arch. The outside was firm and beautifully golden, but it was obvious just by looking at it that the inside was fluffy and partially runny. Seeing it like this, I realized just how pretty the food that Nanami cooked really was.

There were people around us, of course, so we weren’t alone. But that didn’t stop her from bringing the chopsticks closer. I could hear children chattering excitedly around us. One of them was causing their parents embarrassment by saying, “Mommy, daddy, look! There’s an onee-chan and onii-chan being lovey-dovey, just like you!” For now, it was probably best to accept Nanami’s kindness by eating the omelet she was offering—before more people felt the ripple effect of what we were doing.

When I let the food at the end of her chopsticks enter my mouth—like I’d done that day nearly a month ago—the familiar flavor of Nanami’s handmade omelet spread across my tongue. The layers of egg melted in my mouth, filling it with sweetness. No matter how many times I experienced it, it gave me a reliable sense of happiness.

“Damn, you really are so much better at cooking than I am,” I said. “I’ve been trying to learn how to make it like this, but I just haven’t been able to.”

Nanami giggled. “I mean, given how much longer I’ve been cooking, I’d be pretty bummed if you became as good as me so fast. And your omelet too. Come on now,” she said, opening her mouth and pointing inside. She seemed to be expressing that she wanted me to feed her too. Like a baby bird anticipating

food, she closed her eyes and waited for me.

I didn't know what it was, but seeing inside a girl's mouth made me extremely nervous. *No, wait. She's not doing it to make me feel like this. I have to hurry up and feed her too.*

Picking up a piece that was in relatively better shape compared to the others, I placed it gingerly into her mouth as though I were handling a delicate piece of glasswork. When she noticed I'd given it to her, she closed her mouth and chewed slowly. She looked so blissful, I felt a sense of relief.



“Yup, your omelet is tasty too. But seriously, it’s amazing that you’ve become this good at cooking in less than a month. You’ve worked so hard,” she said.

“Well, that’s because I have a great teacher.”

“Hee hee, I guess you’re right! I’m super proud of just how much my cooking class has helped improve my student’s cooking skills!”

“They do say that food is love. So, Nanami-sensei, I can say confidently that I put a whole lot of love into this food.” I’d only said that jokingly, assuming that Nanami would immediately reply with a wisecrack of her own, but actually, she remained silent.

“Huh?” I looked at her, wondering what was wrong, only to find that her face had turned completely red. *Whoa, if you’re gonna get that embarrassed, you’re gonna make me feel like that too.*

“You packed it full of love, huh? Heh heh, it actually makes me really happy to hear that.” She smiled and brought the tips of her fingers together, making me blush myself. Silence settled between us again, but it was soon broken by the shriek of an animal nearby.

“Wow!” Nanami shouted. “Oh my gosh, look! There’s a monkey coming up to the glass!”

“Maybe it’s feeding time. I didn’t expect to get to see them so close.”

“Hey, Monkey-san! Are you enjoying your lunch? I’m enjoying my lunch too!”

Soon, more monkeys were eating their own food just on the other side of the glass. One was squealing and single-mindedly bringing food to its mouth, while another was holding an apple and dashing back and forth. There were all kinds of monkeys doing all kinds of things.

Nanami tilted her head and held a rice ball out to a monkey. Perhaps enticed by her action, the monkey also tilted its head and brought the apple it was holding up to its mouth.

The kids sitting by the window also became excited by the appearance of the monkeys. The monkeys seemed to be used to humans though—or maybe they were trained—because they simply continued eating their food on their own

side of the glass.

Overcome by the illusion that we were having lunch with the animals, I began to feel more at peace. The silence that had fallen between Nanami and me was now completely gone. We returned to chatting and looking out at the group of monkeys as we continued eating lunch.

“Come to think of it, did you plan today’s lunch, Yoshin?” Nanami asked while we were watching the monkeys play.

“Huh? What do you mean?” I didn’t understand what she meant, so I’d ended up returning her question with one of my own. *Did I plan it?* I wasn’t terribly conscious of what I’d made, but... I tilted my head, unsure what she was asking. Nanami, on the other hand, pointed to the bento I’d prepared.

“Fried chicken, omelet, three kinds of rice balls, lettuce, tomato... There’s more in here than I made, but it’s the exact same items as in the first bento I ever made for you, isn’t it?” she asked.

“Oh...”

It was then that I realized what she meant. It was a selection of items that had popped into my head quite naturally, without me even thinking about Nanami’s bento. However...

“Now that you mention it, you’re totally right. The first bento you made for me had all this stuff in it, didn’t it?”

“You didn’t do it on purpose?”

“Not at all. I guess I did it without thinking.”

She laughed. “I see. That’s kind of nice too.”

It wasn’t that my dad and mom didn’t make me bento. I had fond memories of those occasions too, and I was truly grateful for them, but if you asked me what the most memorable bento I’d ever had was, I would probably say it was the first one Nanami had made for me. It was less that I’d forgotten it—it was more all in my subconscious, and now that we’d talked about it, I probably wasn’t ever going to forget.

“But your bento from that time tasted way better. I wonder how long it’ll take

for me to be able to make something that tastes that good,” I said.

“You think so? But I like the food you make. And besides, don’t you think we’ll be able to enjoy more things if we both cook differently instead of both of us making food that tastes exactly the same?”

“You always think so positively... Either way, I’m going to have to keep learning from you, so I’ll thank you in advance for your time and energy.”

“Yup! I can’t wait to cook with you more.”

It was another promise between us. I wondered how many more promises we’d make by the end of the day. We’d made one about the earrings and now this one about cooking together. I was sure we’d make more and more, and I had to do my best to keep all of them.

As we continued eating and chatting about anything and everything, our bento boxes soon became empty. Although the food wasn’t much to look at, the taste wasn’t that bad at all. Thanks to Nanami’s kindness and understanding, I’d managed to enjoy our lunch together without worrying about what it looked like.

Once I’d put away the bento boxes, Nanami took out a different container—one with pretty packaging. I was briefly confused by the extra box until I noticed a sweet, toasty scent coming from inside it.

“It’s dessert!” Nanami informed me. “I made chocolate brownies. It’d be nice to watch the monkeys for a bit longer too, so let’s relax a bit more.”

Nanami is truly such a thoughtful girlfriend, I thought. I have to be a boyfriend worthy of her.

“Well, since our water bottles are empty, I’ll run and get some tea. Is black tea okay with you?” I said.

“Hmm, since the brownies are kind of sweet, can you get me one without sugar?” she asked.

“Got it. Hang on just a second, okay?”

As Nanami got the brownies ready, I went to a vending machine near the rest house and bought a sugarless black tea. When I got back, I handed it to her, and

we enjoyed our brownies while passing the time watching the monkeys play.

Based on my past memories, I'd assumed that this zoo was relatively small. I'd thought we'd be able to see all the animals fairly quickly and that we'd be off to our second destination of the day fairly early on. A part of me had even thought that I'd need to find another place to visit just to allow us to spend more time together, but as it turned out, that wasn't the case at all. The zoo was tremendous fun.

The night before, I'd looked up a bunch of things, marking two spots that I definitely wanted to check out. If I included the monkeys that we'd gotten to see during lunch, that made three spots. We'd spent half a day visiting just three places! And there were still so many more I wanted us to see.

While I was surprised at just how much there was to do and how leisurely we could enjoy seeing animals, I was also surprised by the sheer grandeur of the place. I know I'm phrasing these things in a long-winded way, but the truth was simple: the zoo was fun because I was together with Nanami. If I were by myself, I would have had no one to share my excitement about the animals with, and I would have been finished looking around in no time.

In fact, even if this place were nothing more than an empty field of grass, I'd still have fun if I were with Nanami. We could relax together, walk around, or laze around and nap in that field. So, if we were going to talk rediscovery, it would have to be about me rediscovering just how fun it was to spend time together with Nanami. I, the ultimate loner and homebody, had changed so much in a month. I didn't know if I'd been changed by something or if I'd changed myself. Either way, the change itself wasn't at all unpleasant.

Getting back to it, we were still looking out at the monkeys from the rest house.

"Look there! Those monkeys are grooming each other! How cute. I wonder if they're lovers. Or maybe they're friends!" Nanami exclaimed.

"Well, they're monkeys, so maybe they see each other as members of the same troop. I wonder if monkeys have the concept of lovers. And how do you tell apart males and females in the first place? From the back, I can't tell at all."

"Hmm, maybe they tell by their body type. Like, maybe that buff one over

there is a boy and that round one over there is a girl.”

“Uh, I can’t really tell the difference. Wait, can you tell? I’m gonna look up how to tell them apart.”

We’d ended up spending a lot of time just looking at the monkeys. *Maybe once I’ve looked this up, we should start making our way to the next spot.* As I was fiddling with my phone, I came across a method of telling them apart, but it was a slightly difficult method for me to share with Nanami. Yeah, I couldn’t tell her that. It *was* an easy way to tell them apart, but I hesitated to say it out loud.

“Well then, uh, now that we’ve taken a good break, shall we move on?” I suggested.

“Hey, what’s going on all of a sudden? Oooh, I get it—did you look up something dodgy?”

Nanami smiled at me and tilted her head to look into my phone. In my panic, I’d kept the article I’d read open, and Nanami ended up getting a good look at it. It was a page about the easiest way to tell the sex of monkeys. The moment she saw the explanation, Nanami’s face turned red.

“Ah...aha ha... R-Right. That would be the easiest way to tell them apart. Yeah, uh... Why did you have to look up *that* page, of all things?!” she shouted.

“Wait, let me explain!” I cried, raising both hands in surrender. “I had no intention of sexual harassment! And, I mean, it *is* the most surefire way to tell. Yeah, uh, sorry.”

There was no need for me to go into specifics, because indeed, it was easy to tell apart males and females if they were fully grown adults. All you had to do was look in one very specific spot. That was what the article that I’d found said. That was all it was. It wasn’t my fault or anything...or so I thought.

But when Nanami saw the article, she blushed so much, I felt really bad. I should have at least closed the page before suggesting we move on. I genuinely didn’t mean to bring up anything that might make her uncomfortable.

Even if I hadn’t intended it, I was worried. But as she stood up from her chair, Nanami—now puffing out her cheeks slightly—mumbled, “Well, I guess if you were the kind of person to force me to look at stuff like that, I wouldn’t like you

in the first place.”

At that, I couldn't help blushing myself. She seemed to have assumed the scrape of the chair on the ground when she got up would drown out her words, but unfortunately, I heard everything clearly. Wasn't it in times like these that protagonists who struggled to hear things made use of their unique characteristic? I wondered what it would take for me to be like that. For now, though, I was glad I'd been able to hear what she'd said.

After she'd gotten up, Nanami looked down at me confusedly because I was still sitting down. I shook my head slightly so that she wouldn't see the red in my cheeks, then stood up as well.

“Shall we go then? What do you want to see next, Nanami?”

“Hmm, let's see. It might be difficult to see everything in the time we have, right? Don't we have to visit the shrine after this?”

I had suggested that we go to visit a shrine once we were done at the zoo. Although it was fairly close, trying to see everything before heading over there did seem to be pushing it. Ordinarily, I would have suggested visiting the shrine on a different day and just concentrating on the zoo, but today, I really wanted to make a stop at the shrine.

“Then maybe we should go check out some of their spotlighted animals. What do you think of polar bears?” I asked, pointing to the spot at the very edge of the zoo.

“Oh, cool! Polar bears! That way we'd be able to see other animals along the way too. Let's do that,” Nanami said in agreement.

The polar bear facility seemed like the largest enclosure the zoo had to offer, and we'd be able to check out several other animals on our way there. Since it was at the very edge of the zoo, if we took a different path on the way back, we'd be able to see even more animals than as well.

“Shall we head there, then?” I asked.

“Yeah! Let's go!”

We linked arms as we exited the rest house and headed straight for the

building where the polar bears were kept. Along the way, we saw signs for guided tours and other events, which made us consider doing those as well. We seemed to have screwed up our timing, though, because none were being held on that day. It seemed that some places in the zoo could only be visited on some of those tours.

“A guided tour, huh? I wonder what kinds of things you get to see,” I said.

“You probably get to see animals in their natural habitats. If you’re about to get attacked in the forest, I’ll protect you!” Nanami said, raising her right arm to show her determination.

“Wait, shouldn’t it be the other way around? I should be the one protecting you, Nanami. I can’t back down on that one.” Plus I was pretty sure a tour at the zoo wouldn’t get anywhere near so dangerous.

“Hee hee, I see. You’re gonna protect me, huh? That’s pretty cool.”

Hugging my arm tightly, Nanami flashed me a beaming smile. Of course—if it meant protecting this smile, I would do whatever it took. I felt like I could do anything. I wondered if she’d said what she’d said just to make me say that.

For today, though, it seemed we would run into no such incidents. It truly was turning out to be a peaceful date. Between the rest house and the polar bear enclosure, we ended up seeing a wide variety of other animals. I’d assumed that monkeys only lived in the space adjacent to the rest house, but we saw more of them along the way. Some had beautiful black-and-white fur that made me think they might be penguins instead, and others had brilliantly shiny fur that looked almost golden.

We also saw Yezo sika deer rubbing their bodies against each other, as well as wolves, which you don’t get to see every day, that stared sharply at us. The habitats of the deer and the wolves were right next to each other, and the contrast between the two was pretty astounding. I’d heard that Japanese wolves were extinct in the wild, so the wolves at this zoo must have been a variant from abroad. They looked so dignified as they watched us watching them.

Next to the place where we were headed to was a smaller enclosure where the brown bears were kept. Wondering if it was on purpose that the two

species of bear were living next to each other, I watched the brown bears in the middle of their midday nap. It was the afternoon, so maybe they had finished their meal and decided to get some sleep.

“I thought bears were supposed to be super scary, but they actually look really cute,” Nanami said.

“Maybe all vicious animals end up looking cute when they’re in a zoo. If they were out in the middle of town though, we’d probably all be in a panic.”

“That’s true. But it’s so sweet. Look at it sleeping.”

As we made our way along, Nanami and I stopped in front of various animals, chatted, took photos of each other, and asked other people to take photos for us too. We even had someone get a photo of us with the brown bear in the background. We thanked the person who’d taken the photo for us and took a photo of their group as well. We did that several times as we made our way to the edge of the zoo.

After an eventful stroll, we finally arrived at the facility that housed the polar bears.

“Wow, it’s really huge. Doesn’t it seem even bigger than the place with the elephants?” Nanami asked.

“Yeah, maybe. There are supposed to be polar bears and seals here,” I told her.

“Oh, really? That seems like a strange combo. Won’t the seals get eaten?”

“I read that the polar bears’ main source of food is the seals.”

At that, Nanami’s eyes grew wide. Yeah, that would be a pretty surprising thing to hear. I’d been really surprised too when I’d first looked it up. It seemed unthinkable to have two animals that had a predatory relationship on display in the same space.

“Is that, like, supposed to be educational in some way? Wouldn’t kids be traumatized?” Nanami asked.

“Oh, don’t worry. It’s nothing like that. You’ll see what I mean once we go inside.”

I took the anxious Nanami by the hand, and we entered the polar bear facility. It was a white building with two floors, and I continued to lead her as we climbed the stairs to the upper level. When we got there, we saw a polar bear walking around slowly below. The inside of the enclosure also had a staircase, and there was a large pool filled with water on the lower level. There wasn't a single seal in sight.

"Oh, the seals aren't here with them," Nanami said with a sigh.

"If they were, they'd end up as the polar bear's lunch. I guess it's kinda hard for natural enemies to get along like we see in picture books."

"Then where are the seals?" Nanami asked tentatively.

"We'll find out when we go back downstairs. Since the polar bear's going down too, let's follow him."

I smiled at Nanami as she looked at me with a confused look on her face. Then we walked slowly down the staircase and arrived at the lower level. It was dark inside, but the lighting along the wall and the beautiful blue light filtering through the water illuminated the space. Nanami looked at the scene before her.

"This..."

That word alone was enough for me to understand what she was trying to convey. It was true: this place looked a lot like the underwater tunnel we'd walked through on our first date.

"Isn't it cool that we get to see something like the tunnel at the aquarium here too? Come on. Let's try walking through it," I said.

"Sure! That time it was fish, but today it's a tunnel with polar bears. Oh, wait. Is that a seal?"

It was then that Nanami spotted a seal swimming over the tunnel. There were about four of them, swimming freely in the water. They were absolutely adorable.

Just as Nanami spotted the seal, we heard a loud splash coming from somewhere nearby. When we turned toward the source of the sound, we saw a

polar bear sinking its large body into the water. The polar bear moved with incredible speed—which was unexpected from its large body—and swam straight toward the seals.

“Wait, he’s so fast. Aren’t the seals in danger?!” Nanami yelled in panic, seeing the giant polar bear pass overhead. She watched nervously as the scene unfolded, but the polar bear didn’t make it to the seals. Instead, it turned around gracefully, tapped its feet on the glass, and swam back to where it had come from.

“Huh? I’m glad the seals are okay, but why?” Nanami murmured.

“The pool is separated by fortified glass. There’s no way the polar bear’s gonna get to the seals,” I explained.

“Did you know about that?” she asked.

“I found out when I looked it up yesterday. I guess they can’t possibly put the two together without having some kind of precaution in place.”

Nanami, who’d been totally shocked, puffed out her cheeks and began hitting me with her fists. She didn’t put much force into the blows, so they gave me a rather comfortable massage.

“Jeez, I can’t believe you! You could’ve told me about it!” she yelled.

“I thought it’d be more interesting if I didn’t tell you! Wasn’t it at least a *little* exciting?” I asked.

In response, Nanami continued hitting me and yelling, “Seriously?!” Throughout our exchange, the polar bear continued swimming leisurely through the tunnel, giving us a show. When it was swimming above us, we could look up at the polar bear’s stomach, and when it was to our side, we could see the pads on its large paws that were almost too cute for its huge body.

The polar bear swam around and around, but it couldn’t touch the seals. On the other side of the glass, the seals kept swimming away from the polar bear as though they didn’t know that. We felt like we were watching wild animals play the world’s safest game of tag.

The sight was pretty impressive, and we were also able to peacefully enjoy

seeing the polar bear swim around. The families around us also seemed to be enjoying themselves, and we stood there savoring the experience along with them.

Suddenly, Nanami whispered, "I know it's not the same kind of 'like,' but I wonder how it feels to be separated by glass and never be able to touch the person you like." Her remark sounded slightly sad and lonesome, but she immediately seemed to collect herself and affixed a smile to her face. She'd probably said it subconsciously. Even she seemed surprised at herself.

"This place reminds me of our aquarium date," I said. "That was when we met Yuki-chan, wasn't it? I feel like we're retracing our steps."

The smile on Nanami's face suggested she'd regained her composure, but I was still concerned about what she'd said. That was what had made me say the words that I hadn't been able to say before. Then I continued.

"If you and I were ever separated by a piece of glass, I'd do anything to break through it. So, don't worry. I'll make sure we can touch each other again."

Nanami opened her eyes wide in surprise. I turned red, realizing how corny the statement was. Still, I didn't dare look away from her. My cheeks grew hot, and I could feel my forehead starting to sweat. Even then, I continued looking into Nanami's eyes.

Finally, Nanami returned my smile, showing me one seemingly full of joy. "If that ever happens, I'll try to break the glass too so that we'll be able to touch each other even sooner." She brought her shoulder closer to mine until both our shoulders touched and I couldn't help but smile.

"I wonder what kind of a room would have glass in the middle though," she mumbled, leaning in closer. "Maybe it'd be kind of like this tank, huh?"

It was just a hypothetical, so I hadn't really imagined the specifics, and I certainly hadn't expected her to wonder something like that. *Should we really be imagining that kind of situation?*

"Hmm, I feel like things like that only happen in horror films," I said. "Like, you can see each other, but you can't touch each other, and you can't help the other person even if you wanted to."

“I don’t think I like that at all. Glass, huh? We’ll have to start thinking about how to break it.”

“Uh, that kind of thing probably won’t happen in real life. Rooms where you can’t get out until you do something are pretty common on the internet, but... Never mind, forget I said that.”

I caught myself before I said too much. I knew I’d stopped midsentence, but given the mistake I’d make back at the rest house, I hesitated to say more. Unfortunately, though, I wasn’t going to get away with it. Ever on the alert for such things, Nanami pressed me to continue.

“Rooms where you can’t get out until you do something? What kind of something? Wait, huh? What’s this all about?” she asked in a rush.

“You really don’t have to worry about it. Just forget I said anything. And you don’t have to look up anything either. Absolutely don’t. Yeah, let’s stop talking about this already.”

“Is it something pervy?”

I’d tried to cut the conversation short, but my strategy had already backfired. Nanami seemed to have caught on to what I was talking about. *Dammit.*

“Uh, yeah, they tend to be, so no looking into it, okay?”

With her suspicions confirmed, we both fell silent. Our eyes briefly met, and we caught each other blushing slightly. Then Nanami drew a deep breath and said, “Let’s go see a movie soon. Not a horror film but a fun one.”

“Got it. Yeah, let’s go watch a movie again sometime.”

With both of us very blatantly changing the subject, we returned to observing the polar bears. The tunnel was much longer than we’d expected. While we were walking through it, we saw the bears swimming about. It looked almost like they were performing for the humans below. The humans themselves were letting out exclamations of joy and awe. When two polar bears were swimming at the same time, the scene was a sight to behold.

“This is amazing,” Nanami whispered. “Seeing them like this is super intense, but then the pads on their paws look so cute. It’s like they’re trying to show

them to us. They sure do practice great customer service.”

“But their claws are scary when you actually look at them. I mean, they’re bears. It’s crazy to think they use those to kill seals. It really makes you think,” I replied.

“Hmm, it’s interesting that we pay attention to different things. I look at the pads, and you look at the claws. I guess boys like looking at dangerous things like that, huh?”

“Ah, maybe you’re right. Paw pads... I wonder if polar bear paw pads are squishy too. I always think of cats when I imagine them. Wait, are bears part of the cat family?”

“I’m good with anything as long as it’s cute. Even if they were a type of cat, we can’t go around touching polar bear paw pads. This is probably as close as we’ll get.”

Nanami approached the tunnel cautiously and placed her fingers on the glass, opposite of where a polar bear was pressing its paw up against it. Of course she couldn’t feel anything through the glass, but from afar, it really looked as though she were touching its pads. Although the encounter between Nanami and the bear was brief, I was able to capture the moment perfectly on video.

“I wonder if that’s the exit coming up. It’s a pretty long tunnel,” I said.

“Yeah, I wonder how long it actually was. Oh, there’s a white light up ahead.”

The white light of the exit stood out against the blue glow of the tunnel. Once we finally emerged, it was as though we had somehow stepped out of the water and onto the ground. We both breathed in and out with slow, deep breaths. It seemed that Nanami had also felt like she was surfacing. We both turned to each other and smiled.

Because the inside of the tunnel had been kind of chilly, the warmth of the sun outside probably contributed to that illusion. The feeling of our bodies slowly heating back up was pleasant.

“That was so much fun!” Nanami exclaimed. “The polar bears were so cute.”

“Yeah, they really were. Should we get moving again? We can take a different

route back to the exit and check out some of the other animals along the way,” I suggested.

“Yeah, let’s do that. That way we can see even more animals before we take off.”

We looked back toward the building that housed the polar bears, then checked our map for a different route from the one we’d taken before. Since we’d already taken the path on the upper half of the map, we decided that on the way back we’d take the path on the lower half of the map. With our plan sorted, we started walking.

There were tons more animals on the new route. Although we didn’t have time to stop and look at all of them, we did come across some penguins and tropical birds, as well as a facility that housed reptiles.

“How are you with reptiles, Nanami?” I asked.

“I don’t think I can handle snakes and things all that well. I prefer cute and fluffy animals. Or maybe I just haven’t had a chance to learn to appreciate them.”

“I’ve heard that even reptiles seem cute once you get used to them. Maybe we can take a look next time.”

“Yeah, let’s do it the next time we come.”

With that, we added yet another promise to the list. No matter how many promises we piled on ourselves, we’d probably never feel like we were being suffocated. But in order to keep those promises, we—no, *I* needed to make sure we made it to the second destination of our date today.

As we walked around, still holding hands, we took in the sights of the zoo with its wide variety of animals. In the area that housed various waterbirds, we saw ducks gliding gracefully on the surface of the water, as well as bright-red birds perched on nearby tree branches. We also saw a penguin waddling around, its body swaying from side to side.

“Is that a different kind of penguin from the ones we saw at the aquarium? It seems more laid-back,” Nanami said.

“Maybe it’s because it’s on land. They were crazy fast when they were swimming.”

Come to think of it, we had seen penguins at the aquarium. It was nice to be unexpectedly reminded of that previous date and to be able to reminisce about it. The penguin here was walking slowly, making soft *pat, pat, pat* sounds with its feet. Recalling the memories of that recent date, we continued making our way through the zoo.

We came upon an area with animals from Asia, like sun bears and tigers; an area with animals from Africa, like hippopotamuses and lions; and even an area with giraffes and ostrich. It was great looking at all the animals we didn’t normally get the chance to see.

“I didn’t know tigers were an animal from Asia. I just assumed they were from Africa, like lions,” I admitted.

“Oh, I thought that too! I wonder why I had that image in my head. Maybe it’s because of stuff I’ve seen on TV. Or maybe it’s because they’re both like big cats.”

“Ah, that’s possible. Maybe since they’re both felines, we assumed they must live in the same place.”

“If we make this a memory of our date, we’ll probably never forget it!”

As we steadily updated our knowledge about animals, we turned our gaze to more of the exhibits. However, regardless of how we tried to keep moving, we ended up taking multiple mini detours, itching to satisfy our curiosity about the animals we were learning about.

Even though I knew the shrine wasn’t going anywhere, we couldn’t spend too much time at the zoo—visitors could only access the shrine’s hall of worship during certain hours of the day. I had thought I’d researched and prepped well for the occasion, so us spending so long there was totally unexpected. While a part of me understood that this was the gap between idealism and reality, I found myself actually enjoying the change of plans. If we missed the hours for worship, though, it would defeat the purpose of planning to visit the shrine.

I stealthily checked the time on my phone. *Yeah, we still have over an hour, I*

thought, *so we should be okay*. It was then that we discovered a gift shop.

“Since we’re here, should we pick something out?” I asked. “We got matching phone charms at the aquarium, remember?”

“Oh, that’s right! I wonder if they have a polar bear charm. Let’s both get one!”

“You want another phone charm? Isn’t your phone gonna be weighed down by them?”

“Oh, who cares? It’s kind of fun to watch them multiply.”

We looked for polar bear charms at the gift shop, but unfortunately there weren’t any. Nanami immediately donned a look of dejection. Seeing her like that, I looked even harder—and, in one corner of the shop, found some key chains of various stuffed animals wearing T-shirts. The one in particular that caught my eye was a tiny polar bear wearing a T-shirt with an illustration of a polar bear’s face. Several other adorable creatures also hung in that corner of the shop.

“Take a look at these, Nanami. How about getting matching key chains instead?”

In addition to polar bears, there were also gorillas, lions, elephants, and crocodiles, all wearing similar T-shirts. *Yeah, any one of these would be really cute*, I thought.

I picked out one of the polar bears. It seemed surprisingly well-made. Even if I put it on my schoolbag, it didn’t seem like it would get in the way. It probably wouldn’t tear off too easily either.

As I stood there examining the key chain, Nanami picked one out too. “How about you get the polar bear one, Yoshin?” she asked. “I’ll get this one, and then we can trade.”

The key chain in her hand was a tiny sheep. She smiled bashfully as she held out the key chain of my favorite animal.

“You’re okay with a polar bear? We won’t match,” I pointed out.

“Matching is nice, but I figure giving each other the animal we like would be

nice too.”

I see. That does make a lot of sense.

“In that case, I’d love to,” I said.

“Okay, then let’s do that.”

We both headed to the checkout and then traded our key chains—I got the sheep, and she got the polar bear. We held our key chains in our fingertips and smiled at each other.

“I feel like our animals are the opposite of what you’d expect considering our genders. The sheep you got seems a lot more cutesy than a polar bear,” she remarked.

“You think? I don’t think that’s a bad thing. And your polar bear is plenty cute.”

We both put our key chains away in a safe place. We could have strapped them to our bags right then and there, but it felt more appropriate to save the fun for later.

There was still some time before we had to leave, so I started looking around for something else to buy. That was when I noticed they also sold snacks. Glazed buns seemed to be their specialty.

We’d already eaten lunch, but I must have gotten hungry after all that walking. *And if they say it’s their specialty, that means I should buy one, right?*

“Hey, Nanami, they have glazed buns over there. Do you wanna try one?”

“Glazed buns? I don’t think I’ve had one since elementary school. They look tasty, but wow, they’re big! Just one’s as long as my forearm! Are you gonna eat that all by yourself?” she asked.

“Uh, that might be a bit much. How about we share one?”

“I bet you’d spoil your dinner if you ate the whole thing. So yeah, let’s buy one and share.” Nanami smiled wryly as a mother might. It might have just been me, but I felt like I’d heard my mom say the exact same thing to me once, a long time ago. I felt slightly embarrassed, as if I’d been admonished by my mother herself.

We bought one glazed bun to split between the two of us, accepting a loaf of bread that was too big to fit in its own wrapping. Thirty centimeters of glazed bun was pretty intense, and what she'd said was true: if I tried to eat it all by myself, I most definitely wouldn't be able to manage dinner.

Glazed bun in hand, we left the gift shop and bit into our bread. As we walked, though, I recalled something odd the vendor had said to us.

"If you're going to walk and eat, please be careful."

I wondered if we weren't allowed to eat while walking around the zoo, but that didn't seem to be the case. What else could they be talking about?

The glazed bun was piping hot. We each bit into it from a separate side and tore pieces off to feed the other. We'd managed to eat more than a third of the bun before we made it to the exit, so I was beginning to think we'd be able to finish it before we arrived at the shrine. It was when I'd let my guard down, though, that I finally learned what the vendor had meant. As we were eating, I caught sight of a black mass flying straight toward Nanami. Of course, Nanami hadn't noticed the flying object coming at her from behind. I didn't know what it was—the *thing* approaching her at incredible speed—but I knew that it would strike her unless I did something.

"Nanami, look out!" I cried, using both hands to pull her toward me. I'd been holding the bread, but since I'd grabbed on to Nanami instead, it fell slowly to the ground.

"Yoshin?!"

Not knowing what was happening, Nanami yelped but let me pull her toward me. The black mass that I'd thought was headed straight for Nanami turned sharply, darting instead toward the glazed bun that I'd let go of. More black masses flew down from the sky and swarmed the bread I'd dropped on the ground. On closer inspection, the black masses were crows. Only then did I realize that there were "Caution: Crows" signs posted at various points of the zoo.

You were certainly allowed to walk and eat, but it seemed that it took a lot of vigilance. That was an oversight on my part; I should have been more careful. That said, shouldn't the vendor have been more specific and told us to watch

out for crows? No, it was my bad. They'd probably thought we already knew.

The bread we just bought is now food for the crows. Wait, even the wrapper's gone! Do crows eat wax paper too? I guess there's no limit to how omnivorous they are. In any case, I guess I should just be glad that Nanami wasn't attacked head-on.

Just then, I heard a voice coming from within my arms.

"Um, hey, Yoshin? I'm happy and all, but this is a little embarrassing."

Oh, that's right—I'm still holding on to Nanami. As I felt the heat from her body pass through to me, I became aware of the warmth and softness I was hugging tightly. Nanami was standing in my arms, her cheeks bright red and her eyes wide-open.



She seemed confused still, not having caught on to what was happening around us. I must have been imagining it, but it almost looked like her eyes were spinning in circles like in a cartoon.

“Oh, s-sorry. A crow swooped in, so I thought it was dangerous. Are you hurt at all?” I asked.

“Oh, no. I was scared, but I didn’t get hurt. I feel nice and safe, like always,” she said.

“Man, those crows got our bread. I had no idea they’d dive at us like that.”

“Yeah, we totally let our guard down. What a shame. But I guess I’m pretty happy that you hugged me to protect me.”

I felt somewhat awkward having embraced her like that in public. People around us seemed to be looking at us unnecessarily warmly, but I was going to pretend that was just my imagination. I stepped slowly away from her, making sure to do so gently. Then I took her hand once again.

“Well, now that that’s behind us, shall we head to the shrine?” I asked, but Nanami looked at me with a toothy grin.

“Your face is all red,” she said.

“So’s yours,” I managed to reply.

“It’d be impossible not to turn red when you hug me all tightly and tenderly like that!”

Tightly and tenderly? Isn’t that an oxymoron? I thought.

Nanami didn’t even bother to hide the redness in her cheeks. Instead, she smiled at me and suddenly squeezed me back. It was my turn to open my eyes wide in shock.

“Nanami?”

“It’s a thank you. For protecting me. Thanks, Yoshin!”

As she was loosening her fleeting hug, she kissed me lightly on the cheek—so briefly that no one around us could have possibly noticed it. Though it lasted for only a moment, my cheek clearly registered that it had made brief contact with

her lips. As if to keep that sensation from escaping, I subconsciously pressed my palm to my cheek.

“All righty—let’s head to the next place on the list!” Nanami said, extending her hand to me with a smile still on her face. I smiled back at her awkwardly and took her hand. Although we’d run into a little trouble at the end, we left the zoo behind while holding hands tightly.

We continued walking and eventually came to a park. The shrine we were headed to was about fifteen minutes away by foot, and it was on the same grounds as the park. The park itself was abundant with tons of naturally occurring trees. Just by walking through it, we were able to enjoy a stroll in a space filled with nature in its purest form. When a warm and gentle breeze blew, the rustling of the leaves tickled our ears. I’d once heard that trees emitted a phytoncidal substance that was really good for the human body. The scent of the forest itself was supposed to help humans relax.

“This kind of reminds me of the park we took a walk in to enjoy the cherry blossoms,” Nanami said. “Though I guess right now the place is much more green. There are so many different kinds of trees.”

“Yeah, there’s so much variety—some growing diagonally, others growing straight. I wonder if all the leaves turn golden in the autumn, or if in the winter everything turns completely white.”

“It must be really nice to come for a walk then too,” she whispered.

We continued strolling along, our hands entwined, surrounded by brown trees that grew diagonally, snow-white birch, and trees with branches that twisted and turned like the arms of living creatures. I had only been thinking of the park as the path to reach the shrine, but the park itself was worth a look on its own. I had to admit I’d underestimated it. Judging by the map, it appeared that we’d arrive at the shrine just by walking straight. However...

“Should we take a little detour along the way? It looks like there’s a pond over there,” I said.

Wanting to take in a bit more of the scenery, we walked over to the edge of a pond. There, we saw what appeared to be multiple trees growing very close together. In actuality, though, it was one very thick trunk with many branches

growing out of it, reaching up toward the sky.

What kind of a tree was it? There were similar trees growing nearby. Their thickness and the irregular ways in which the branches spread out were nothing short of astounding. The trees looked like something straight out of a fantasy novel. I wondered how old they were, since even I could guess that these trees wouldn't become this impressive in just a few years. In fact, they appeared almost so powerful that they bordered on being scary.

"These trees would look really scary at night. It's almost like they'll start rustling and moving around. If they were in a horror movie, those branches would definitely try to tear your arms off," Nanami declared.

"Is there a horror film like that? I haven't really seen that many."

"I'm not so good with scary movies either. Shall we watch one together soon? We can see which one of us will end up clinging on to the other first."

"What kind of a challenge is that? I don't know. I'm really bad with horror. I might just end up holding on to you. Is that okay?"

"You already hugged me back there, so what are you checking with me for all of a sudden?" She laughed lightly, making me remember the warmth of her body. Back then, I'd hugged her without thinking, but if I were to do that at home...well, we'd be alone. It would be just the two of us, holding each other, watching a scary movie.

"I'm not sure if I'd be able to stay rational," I mumbled in as soft a voice as possible. Nanami still seemed to hear me though. Blushing slightly at my remark, she smiled suggestively. Then, leaning slightly forward, she gazed up into my eyes.

"I wonder what you're like when you're no longer rational."

I was taken aback—left speechless, even—by her comment. *When I'm no longer rational, huh?* She wasn't the only one who wondered what would happen. I didn't have any memories of acting based solely on my emotions. Would I be tempted to push Nanami down to the floor, or would I be able to hold on to reason?

"I guess I won't be able to say until it happens. And then? How would you like

me to be, Nanami?” I asked.

She inhaled sharply for a moment but quickly regained her composure and smiled even more broadly. “I guess I’ll leave that up to your imagination,” she responded. She was smiling as though she wasn’t at all flustered, but it seemed she hadn’t expected such a response from me; she was unable to look me in the eye. Even though I wondered why she’d say something like that if she was only going to self-destruct, I also felt a sense of peace, knowing that this was just how Nanami was.

Chatting about nonsense like that, we soon made it to the edge of the pond. The view there was so magnificent it took our breaths away. The weather that day was perfect, and because there were so few clouds in the sky, the sunlight illuminated the ground and transformed the pond into a mirror. There were no trash or leaves floating on the water’s surface, and with no birds swimming either, the surface of the pond was perfectly still. Thus a beautiful scene of symmetry was spread out before us, with the pond reflecting the surrounding trees.

Even Nanami and I were a part of that symmetrical scene. It was as if the upside-down version of us, reflected in the water, was looking right back at the real version of us on land.

“Wow. It’s so pretty.”

That was all Nanami seemed able to say. I, too, was totally speechless as I gazed in awe at the scene. The water, reflecting the trees and leaves around us, looked like it had been dyed green. I couldn’t help but wonder whether it would also reflect the trees as they turned red and yellow in the autumn.

I looked at the two of us on the surface of the water. It was so fantastic, I thought if I just touched it, we would be sucked into some sort of mirror world like you see in movies.

“Yoshin, be careful!”

When I heard those words, I came back to my senses. Actually, no. It wasn’t just the words. Nanami was holding on to me because I’d stepped too close to the water. I could feel her soft touch against my back. The realization made me feel more than slightly embarrassed.

“Oh, wow. Totally sorry. It was just so beautiful, I couldn’t help it. It’s stunning, isn’t it?” I said.

“It really is beautiful, so I get how you feel. But please don’t go falling into the pond while we’re on our date. It’s fine if you’re just gonna get wet, but don’t make me all worried,” Nanami pleaded.

“It’s just that you were so beautiful reflected in the water, I couldn’t take my eyes off you.”

“Then you should look at the real me instead! Jeez, you’re so good at saying stuff like that now. I’m worried you’re gonna turn into a real playboy.”

“Oh, you don’t have to worry about that. You’re the only person I’d say things like this to.”

Besides, even if I did say stuff like that to someone other than Nanami, they’d either look at me all confused or accuse me of sexual harassment. I might have been dating Nanami, but I wasn’t exactly good-looking. Besides, the only reason Nanami herself was dating me was because... No, this wasn’t the time to be thinking about that. It was a little too late for that now.

Instead of overthinking things, I pointed my phone camera toward the surface of the water. I took a step closer to Nanami, putting my hand around her shoulders and drawing her toward me so that I could capture the reflection of the two of us together. In the photo, we were both smiling.

“It would be fun to come back to this park in the autumn and winter, don’t you think? We could probably enjoy the flowers here, and it might be cool to come with our families too. We’ll have lots to look forward to,” I said.

“Hey, don’t just take photos on your own phone! I wanna take some too, so don’t move. Come on, get closer!”

I was satisfied with the one good photo of us upside down, but of course Nanami would want to take one too. I scooted closer to her again, worried that I hadn’t been considerate enough. However...

“Uh...”

“What’s wrong, Yoshin?”

“I kinda did it on impulse before, but when I think a bit more about it, doing this is kind of embarrassing.”

“Why would you say that now?!”

But despite my discomfort and Nanami’s protest, I managed to pull her toward me. Thus, she also managed to capture a photo of the two of us together.

It really was important to keep things moving. I became even more embarrassed when my brain honed in on the fact that I was hugging her shoulder, so my face was redder in this photo than the one before.

“Now we’ve gotten some nice photos, should we head to the shrine?” I asked.

“Sounds good! But this park makes me feel like there’s lots to see here too.”

As it turned out, she was totally right. On our way to the shrine, not only did we see more trees, but also various animals.

“Oh, there’s a squirrel! Wow, it’s poking its head out of a hole in that tree. How cute! Oh, and there’s another one. It’s over there, eating something on a stump!”

“Squirrels are cute too, huh? And there’s a really colorful bird over there. It’s hanging out with a more plain-looking bird though. I wonder if they’re a couple,” I said.

“Oh, you’re right. Wow, it is really colorful! But the one it’s walking with does look kind of plain. I wonder which one’s the male.”

As we were looking in wonder at the unknown birds, we heard someone call out to us from nearby.

“Oh, that would be a pair of mandarin ducks. The colorful one is the male, and the plain one is the female.”

When we turned toward the source of the voice, we found an elderly couple sitting on a bench made out of a tree stump. They both had binoculars in their hands, which suggested they were bird-watching.

“Ah, I do apologize,” the elderly man said. “I certainly had no intention of meddling. I often come here with my wife to watch the birds. The two of you

must be on a date, I take it.”

“It’s lovely to see the two of you holding hands,” his wife added. “It takes us back to when we were young, and we couldn’t help saying hello. I’m so sorry if we bothered you.”

The couple bowed to us in apology, but since we felt nothing but gratitude, we expressed our thanks. *So those are mandarin ducks. I’ve never seen one before*, I thought.

Nanami approached the couple and sat down next to them on a stump. Swinging her feet slightly, she appeared to be mustering up the courage to ask them something. *What could it be?*

After taking a moment to make up her mind, Nanami finally looked up with determination in her eyes and asked the couple one simple question: “May I ask how long the two of you have been married?”

“Let me see... I daresay it must be over fifty years. And how long have the two of you been a couple?” the old man asked.

“It’ll be almost a month for us,” I replied, sitting down with Nanami. The couple looked at us as if surprised.

“My, is that so?” the old woman said. “You two look like you’ve been together for many years now, so we simply assumed.”

“It’s true! You two seemed as close to each other as man and wife. Aha ha ha!”

The old woman was looking at us curiously with her hand on her cheek while the old man laughed heartily. Did it really seem like we’d been dating that long? Hearing that made me pretty happy, given that we’d only recently started going out.

“Wow, fifty years,” Nanami murmured. “That’s such a long time. You’ve been together for more than twice the amount of time my mom and dad have been together. How lovely.”

Nanami seemed happy about their remark, but more than that, she seemed moved by just how long the elderly couple had been together. She brought her

palms together in awe, making the couple laugh bashfully.

After that, we thanked the couple one more time and then began making our way toward the shrine again. However, just before we left, the couple gave us a piece of advice.

“If you lovely youngsters plan on staying together for a long time, always remember to respect each other,” the old woman said.

“In this world, we give some, and we take some,” the old man added. “That goes for married couples as well. Never take love for granted, and always hold each other precious in your hearts. I hope you’re willing to take this advice from a couple of meddlesome grandparents.”

Nanami and I both bowed again and smiled at the couple. They smiled fondly back at us and then returned to watching the birds.

Coming from two people who had been together for such a long time, those words held a persuasive power that made them even more convincing than the kinds of things our own parents told us. Then again, that might also have had something to do with the fact that I never really talked with my parents about stuff like that. Nanami seemed energized by our encounter and was swinging around our tightly clasped hands in large semicircles.

“What a lovely couple they were,” she said.

“Yeah. Being able to grow old together and stay so happy together like that truly is amazing.”

“I wonder if that’s the kind of couple you call ‘a pair of mandarin ducks.’ Them being the ones who told us about the real-life mandarin ducks we saw kinda feels kind of like fate.”

“I guess I have heard that before. A pair of mandarin ducks... Fifty years, huh?”

Even as I said it out loud, I couldn’t quite conceive the weight of the number. Even so, I understood instinctively—given just how much their words resonated in my heart—that the husband and wife made a beautiful couple.

I hope that we can be like them too, I thought. I hope that we can be together

for a long time. Now and always. I didn't say those words aloud, but...

"Yoshin...wouldn't it be nice if we could stay together forever, just like that couple?"

It was as if Nanami had seen right through me. *Wait, I didn't say anything out loud, did I?* She sure had impeccable timing.

"I was just thinking that. I want to be with you too, Nanami," I said sincerely.

"I see. I'm glad."

Nanami seemed relieved, though she turned to me with a somewhat clouded smile on her face. It was the kind of sad smile that suggested that she was happy yet deeply concerned. With our hands still linked, I was overcome by the sensation that her emotions were flowing right into my body.

"Hey, um, Yoshin...there's something I have to tell you."

Just as Nanami started to say something, the torii gate that marked the entrance to the shrine came into view. The magnificent gate was illuminated by the red light of the sun, standing tall as if to protect the path to the main hall where the gods were enshrined. Seeing the beauty of the gate bathed in light, both Nanami and I were left speechless. Nanami had been on the verge of saying something, but she was now at a loss for words. Her expression immediately changed to one of brightness.

"Wow, what an amazing torii gate. I feel like we took a pretty good detour, but we ended up making it to the shrine before we even realized it, huh? Well then, should we walk through it together, Yoshin?"

The Nanami standing there was the same Nanami as always. *What was it that she was about to say?* I'd missed the timing to ask her that, but I hurriedly stopped her as she was about to pull my hand and walk through the gate.

"Hang on, Nanami. Let's walk through it separately," I told her.

She stopped and tilted her head in confusion. "Why? Isn't there a benefit to us walking through it together or something?"

"There is, kind of, but it's actually for if we *don't* walk through it together," I explained.

“But what’s so good about that? What kind of benefit is it?” she asked.

Feigning slight mysteriousness, I solemnly explained what I’d learned while researching the shrine.

“This torii gate is actually called ‘the torii for cutting ties.’ That’s why you and I aren’t supposed to walk through it together,” I said.

The torii for cutting ties. That was what the beautiful gate standing before us was called. This shrine had several torii gates, but this one specifically was apparently the second one on the path that led to the main hall. It was also the only one associated with the act of cutting ties.

Anyone looking at this beautifully illuminated gate would find it hard to believe it had anything to do with cutting ties. In fact, when you think about it, cutting ties felt more like a divine punishment of some sort than a benefit. I had to admit that I, too, had misunderstood when I’d first looked it up. And right now, before my very eyes, Nanami was experiencing that same misunderstanding.

“C-Cutting ties? Yoshin, do you not like me anymore? Did you bring me here today because you wanted to break up with me? If that’s true, then...”

Her smile had now disappeared completely, and her face was filled with sadness. Meanwhile, she fidgeted anxiously like she wanted to say something. I had to admit the complete lack of consideration on my part. I’d had no intention of making her look so sad.

“Wait, wait. Sorry, I should’ve been clearer. Of course you’d misunderstand. That’s not what I mean.”

I’d meant to tell her that the reason we couldn’t walk through together was because that would mean us cutting ties with each other. To Nanami, though, it seemed that the “cutting ties” part had too much of an impact, causing her to forget that I’d told her we shouldn’t walk through it together.

“Huh? That isn’t what you meant?” she asked cautiously.

When I told her that it absolutely was not, the unease on her face gave way to relief. Still, her expression didn’t seem entirely uplifted, so I continued explaining in order to reassure her.

“If I’d meant to cut ties with you, I would have just let us walk through the gate together without telling you anything. The reason I didn’t do that is because I *don’t* want to cut ties with you.”

“Oh, yeah. That makes sense, I guess.” Nanami nodded several times as if satisfied with my response. Hopefully, she felt a bit more at ease.

“But then why did you go through the trouble of bringing me to this gate in the first place? I was seriously nervous for a minute there. If there are other gates, then couldn’t we just enter through one of those?” she asked, puffing her cheeks out slightly.

She had every right to ask that question. There were several other entrances to the shrine, and when I’d looked them up, I’d even come across one torii that was supposed to bring you good fortune financially. However, there *was* a reason I’d chosen this gate specifically.

“I didn’t bring us here just because it’s the closest entrance to the main hall. I chose it because cutting ties can be kind of beneficial sometimes.”

“You think that’s beneficial?”

That’s right—I’d chosen for us to enter through here because cutting ties didn’t necessarily have to be a bad thing. Tilting her head, Nanami waited for me to continue my explanation.

“This torii is kind of mysterious because here ‘cutting ties’ has two meanings: cutting good ties and cutting bad ties. That’s why I thought it’d be important for us to pass through this particular gate, one at a time, so that each one of us could be rid of our bad ties.”

“So we’re not here not to cut ties with each other, but with any bad ties we both have.”

“Exactly. So, like, cutting ties with illness, cutting ties with bad luck, or cutting ties with people who might try to break us up in the future. I thought that if we walked through the gate one at a time, we’d be able to protect ourselves from bad things like those.”

“I’d assumed that ‘cutting ties’ only implied something bad, but I guess you’re right that it could be interpreted that way too.”

I'd actually also read that couples that wanted to break up would walk through here, but I made sure to keep that to myself. Now that she seemed convinced, there was no need to share unnecessary details.

"That's right. I wanted us to walk through this gate so that we'd be able to stay together even longer."

"If that's the case, then you should have said so first! I was seriously starting to panic, you know!"

"Sorry, sorry. I thought I'd explained it when I said that we shouldn't walk through it together. Will you forgive me?"

"Well, maybe I'll forgive you if you treat me to ice cream on the way home."

The worry now completely gone from her face, Nanami was beaming again. In fact, she seemed so relieved that she was now able to start pushing my buttons again.

Honestly, buying her ice cream was a small price to pay for making her look so worried. In fact, I was willing to take her to a nice ice cream parlor to treat her to a fancy parfait.

To be completely clear, the explanation I'd given Nanami was only one of the reasons I wanted to walk through the torii gate. There was another important reason—one that I had a difficult time sharing with her.

It was about our relationship.

I know this is old news by now, but the relationship between us had started with a lie. But even though we'd started dating because of a false confession, I believed, from the bottom of my heart, that she and I now shared a strong, healthy bond. I believed that even as I was standing there, but I still couldn't shake the fact that our relationship was based on untruth. That was why, by going through the torii, I wanted to dispel the negative aspect of the false confession.

If I were the protagonist of some story, I'm sure I would have walked bravely through the torii with her and said, "I don't believe in stuff like that, and even if it were true, I know we'd be able to ride out the storm together." Unfortunately for me, I didn't have such courage. To be totally precise, it wasn't that I

completely believed in the story about the torii, but even so, I was trying to get my hands on as much good luck as possible.

After this date, on our one-month anniversary, I was going to confess my feelings to her. There was no reason for me to add to my own anxiety. In fact, I wanted to intentionally do things that seemed helpful. That was the most I could do for myself at that point. If I told Nanami this, though, that would mean admitting that I knew her confession had been false. That was why I was going to keep this to myself for now.

“Then who should go first, Yoshin? Should I go?”

As I stood there thinking, Nanami tugged gingerly at the hem of my shirt. The action was childlike and showed how anxious she was feeling. Despite being in such a sacred place, I was flooded by a desire to hug her tight, but I just barely held myself back.

“No. I’ll go first. After I walk under it, wait a bit, and then walk through yourself, okay? That way just the bad ties will be severed.”

“Okay, I’ll watch. Good luck!”

She clenched her hands in front of her chest as though to encourage me. *Um, I’m pretty sure you don’t have to go that far. I’m just walking through a gate, after all.*

That was what I was thinking at first, but I did start to feel a little nervous. We weren’t going to walk under the torii gate together, so there was no way our good ties would be cut too, right? *Please, gods, let me have faith in you, even if just for now.*

Praying to myself, I slowly approached the gate and walked through it, accompanied by my nerves. Nothing happened. Nothing happened at all. There were no angry crows like before. Nothing. I just stepped right through the torii, no problem at all.

“See? Nothing to it,” I said.

“Yoshin, you look kinda pale. But, yeah, I get it. I guess it’s my turn now.”

Having turned around on the other side of the gate, I watched Nanami as she

began to follow me. I mean, I'd made it through it just fine, so unless something changed, Nanami would be perfectly fine.

Still, watching Nanami made me feel really nervous. *Nothing's gonna happen, right?* Nanami seemed nervous too, because she was walking unnaturally slowly as she passed through the gate. It was a matter of seconds, not even minutes, and yet a strange tension surrounded the both of us.

Finally, as Nanami completed her walk through the torii gate, the whole affair came to a close without any incident. We both sighed with relief, then looked at each other, smiling broadly.

"Nothing happened, huh? Well, you said that if we went through it separately, there shouldn't be a problem, right? But I was still so nervous!"

Nanami sighed again and then turned to run toward me. She had already passed through the gate, and we were both well within the grounds of the shrine. Our bad ties must have been cut. At least, I believed that they had been. *I think, probably...*

I was totally lost in thought.

"Eeek!"

"Nanami?!"

Nanami, who had been running toward me, screamed as she seemingly tripped and fell toward me. She literally flew in my direction, with both her feet leaving the ground.

Panicking, I took a step toward her and caught her as she collapsed. I'd only moved to support her, but we ended up clinging to each other head-on.

"Nanami, are you okay?" I asked. "Where did that come from? Did you trip on something? Was it one of the steps?"

"No, the steps were before the gate, so it wasn't that. I just felt like my foot hit something, and I tripped."

"You tripped on the ground?"

"No, it felt like something solid was there all of a sudden, and I bumped into it."

Since we'd planned on visiting the zoo that day and doing a lot of walking, Nanami was wearing sneakers. Her outfit was easy to move in as well, so it was hard to believe that she'd tripped on flat ground. Besides, she was saying she'd bumped into something.

Still holding each other, we both turned to look at the spot where Nanami said she'd tripped, but all that was there was the plain old ground. Nowhere did we see the solid thing that Nanami had described having run into.

As we remained locked in our embrace, we looked at each other. We were standing so close, the tips of our noses almost touched. Unable to help it, we burst out laughing.

"Maybe the gods were trying to tell us that our tie-cutting adventure was a success and that we could take it easy now," Nanami suggested.

"So they tripped you and made you fall into my arms?" I replied, laughing.

"Isn't it more fun to think that the gods are rooting for us? I'm just gonna believe they're endorsing our relationship."

This torii gate might have been called "the torii for cutting ties," but there were also gods enshrined here that helped with creating and maintaining ties. Nanami couldn't have known about that, but she was beaming at me happily as she made her suggestion. Thinking that way certainly was a lot more fun.

"In that case, we'll have to thank those gods too. Shall we head over to the main shrine for a visit, then?" I suggested.

"Yeah! We'll have to thank them loads."

Our bodies still attached, we turned toward the main hall. It was then we finally noticed that, on this side of the torii gate, the path that stretched out before us was lined with several different types of cherry trees in full bloom. We were thus greeted with a flowery path that was just as beautiful as the one we'd walked down while viewing the cherry blossoms while on that trip with our families. As if to celebrate our arrival, the pink flower petals danced like snowflakes on the breeze.

"It's beautiful," I whispered. "Today's date has been a great way to relive our memories of our past dates while also giving us tons of new memories to

treasure. I'm so glad we came."

"Yoshin, you're talking like our date's almost over. We're still here, you know? Come on, let's go pray at the main hall."

"I guess you're right. Shall we, then?"

I took a step away from Nanami and then stretched my hand out toward her. She seemed slightly surprised by my gesture, but she took it nonetheless and smiled.

Now holding hands, we started off along the path of fluttering cherry blossom petals and headed toward the main hall. As we walked, we could see the shrine up ahead. The weather was nice; the breeze was gentle; and the temperature was comfortably warm. With the girl most dear to me by my side, I walked leisurely along with her, holding her hand, down a path where cherry blossom petals danced around us. I couldn't imagine a more blissful moment than this.

The closer we got to the main hall, the more my nervousness built. Although this shrine had such a disturbing torii, I'd read that this place was extremely famous for fulfilling wishes about romantic relationships. That seemed to be the main goal of many visiting this shrine, anyway. However, most couples usually entered the shrine grounds by passing through gates *other* than the torii for cutting ties.

Even knowing that, though, I'd still chosen to have us walk through that specific torii. With our bad ties severed, all that was left to do was for me to pray for my feelings to be reciprocated...and for my confession to go well.

Given that we were already dating, it might seem odd to hope for her to reciprocate my feelings. With our relationship being what it was, though, I felt it was natural for me to feel like this. That was why I was prepared to do whatever it would take in order to make my wish a reality. I was even willing to believe in superstitions that I wouldn't normally have given the time of day. I was willing to do whatever I could to bring me luck.

Now, the main building of the shrine stood before us, reflecting the gentle sunlight. The light, which filled our field of vision, seemed to be celebrating our arrival.

Am I reading too much into this? I wondered. *Either way, dear gods, even if all this amounts to nothing, I'm praying to you from the bottom of my heart. Please let things between me and Nanami continue, and please let them keep going well. I can't ask this enough.*

Still holding hands, Nanami and I strolled down the path as flower petals danced all around us. We chatted idly about nothing in particular and smiled at each other as we walked. All we were doing was walking along, yet it felt like the happiest of times.

We weren't alone, of course—other people were walking around us. Some were heading to the main hall like us, while others were walking in the opposite direction, presumably setting off home after their visit to the shrine. They were also smiling, and every one of their smiles was a happy one. I had a feeling that the expressions on our faces were similarly happy.

"Isn't it curious?" Nanami asked out of the blue. "It's just a regular path with cherry blossoms, but just because we're in a shrine, it feels really magical."

"I know, right? Especially since we can see the main hall from here. I read that this shrine has lots of powers associated with it. Maybe that's another reason it feels so magical."

"Oh, wow. I wasn't expecting you to believe in things like that. I always thought guys were more...realistic, I guess, or that they didn't really believe in things like that."

"I've started to believe a little more just recently. That's why I'm trying to follow proper etiquette while we walk."

"Etiquette? But we're just walking normally. How are we doing things according to etiquette?" Nanami asked, tilting her head in question. At that moment, I was walking along the edge of the path while holding hands with Nanami. This was the way of doing things according to shrine etiquette. At least, I was pretty sure it was.

"Yeah, the middle of the path is supposed to be reserved for the gods. Humans are supposed to walk along the sides so that they don't get in their way," I said.

“Oh, I see. Is that why you walked along the edge of the path when you went through the gate too? I just copied you back there.”

I nodded in response to Nanami’s question. Earlier, when I’d walked under the torii gate, I’d bowed once before walking along the side of the path beneath it. Nanami had followed suit, bowing before stepping into the shrine grounds.

“It’s not like I could look up everything though,” I said. “I just figured it’d be better to follow the rules if I was gonna pray for something. If it’s the thought that counts, then small gestures should be important too.”

“I’m sure that’s true, but you’re really into this whole thing, huh? I wonder what you’re planning on praying to the gods about.”

For a moment, I found myself at a loss for words. I was going to wish for Nanami to reciprocate my feelings, of course—but since we were already dating, it would feel strange saying that out loud. Still, I wondered if I should just tell her honestly.

“I’m praying for our future, I guess. I looked up a lot of things so that I could properly pray for us to stay together,” I finally responded. It was partially a lie, but the wanting to stay with her part was the truth. That said, putting those feelings into words was more embarrassing than I’d thought. I felt my cheeks turn red as I was swallowed by mortification.

I looked away from Nanami, scratching at my cheek with my finger, but she looked straight at me and met my gaze.

“If that’s the case,” she said, taking a step closer, “tell me all the things you learned about proper etiquette. If we both do it together, it should work twice as well.”

Although I was the one who’d brought her to the shrine, I hadn’t once asked her what she would be praying for. A part of me was afraid to find out. Seeing her smile, though, I felt somewhat relieved.

“You’re right. If we do it together, it’ll work twice as well,” I said.

Maybe she was just trying to be nice, but, feeling grateful for her consideration, I started to share everything I’d learned about giving worship and prayers at a shrine. Nanami listened intently until I’d finished my

explanation.

“Wow, there are so many things I didn’t know,” she remarked. “I’m impressed you managed to remember all that stuff.”

“Well, because I wanted us to stay together, you know?”

She blushed at my response and then let go of my hand to link her arm with mine.

“Let’s stick together from here on out. I want to stay with you too, Yoshin,” Nanami whispered as she wrapped her arm around mine—almost as though she were pleading with me. Hearing that, I couldn’t be happier with the thought that she was actually speaking the truth, that she and I in fact felt the same way.

As we carried on walking and chatting like that, we eventually arrived at the main building. Since it was the weekend, we were surrounded by other people who were also visiting the shrine, each of them praying to the gods in their own way.

After completing the purification ritual necessary for approaching the hall of worship, Nanami and I—albeit a little nervously—began to take the necessary measures for offering our prayers. While doing the best we could to remember the etiquette, we made sure to put our hearts and souls into every step.

We quietly inserted coins into the offering box, making sure not to violently toss them in. Then we each rang the bell hanging from above. At every turn, we reminded ourselves that we had come to pray to the gods. We bowed twice, then clapped our hands twice. This was the moment when we were supposed to make our wish.

Although this might seem contradictory, it was supposedly important during that moment not to make a wish selfishly, but to instead show that you were in fact making a pledge to the gods. You were also supposed to imagine your wish being fulfilled. After that, you were meant to vow that you would do everything in your power to make that image come true.

You weren’t just supposed to wish to ask the gods to make things happen for you. If you only made demands, there was no way they were going to grant

them. I mean, it made sense; if I were one of the gods, I wouldn't want to do anything for someone who asked for things if they weren't willing to work hard for it. That said, if it were Nanami asking, I'd make all her wishes come true... Wait, no. That's not the point.

Bringing my thoughts back to where they belonged, I reinforced my vow.

On our one-month anniversary, I'm going to tell Nanami how I feel about her. I don't know if she'll accept me or reject me, but I've tried my best up till now to get her to like me. If my confession goes well, I'll most definitely make her happy, or, failing that, I'll continue to make the effort to ensure that she and I will be happy together.

If my confession doesn't go well...then I suppose I'll only wish for her happiness and willingly step away without putting up a fuss. I'm sure I'll be in shock and have lingering feelings if she rejects me, but even then, I'll put her happiness above all else. That's why, gods, I would really appreciate it if you could just give me a little bit of a boost. I know it's my own efforts that'll make my wish come true, but if you can just watch over me to see that things turn out well, that would mean the world to me. I promise you that I, too, will do everything I can.

In my mind, I pictured my wish coming true, and then I took one final bow. When I raised my head, I saw that Nanami had finished praying at around the same moment. I stole a glance at her and found that she was gazing seriously at the shrine.



I wonder what she wished for.

Her face, as she looked on intently, was illuminated by the gentle sunlight. Although this was possibly the most beautiful expression I'd seen her make, I refrained from whipping out my cell phone to take a photo. After all, we were in front of the gods—plus I wanted to store that beautiful image of her in my memory only.

At that moment, Nanami seemed to notice me looking at her, because her serious expression turned into a bright smile. I smiled back, then extended my hand out toward her.

As her smile beamed even more, I took her hand, and we stepped away from the shrine together. I turned to look at her face briefly, but I couldn't guess from her expression what she'd wished for.

Did my— Did our wishes reach the gods?

"What did you wish for, Yoshin?" Nanami asked, almost as if to confirm something. She was still smiling, but the seriousness she'd had on her face earlier was now clouding her expression.

"The thing I told you I'd wish for—that you and I will always be together. I told the gods I was going to work hard and asked them to watch over us."

"I see..."

"What about you? What did you wish for, Nanami?" I dared to ask.

Still smiling, Nanami furrowed her brow. "The same as you. I asked the gods to watch over us so that you and I can stay together."

To me, the smile on her face looked a bit lonely. I squeezed her hand in an attempt to put her at ease. Then, tugging on it, I began to lead us away from the hall.

"Hey, where are we going? Oh, are you gonna draw an omikuji fortune or something?" Nanami asked.

"That's not a bad idea, but there's somewhere I wanna take you to first," I replied as I continued walking in the opposite direction from where the slips of paper for fortune-telling were sold. Though she looked a little confused,

Nanami followed along.

I led her to a small path that ran along the side of the building. No one else was around. In fact, there were probably more people who didn't know of the path's existence than there were people who did.

"What are you doing, bringing me somewhere with no one around? Are you gonna try to do something naughty?" Nanami said teasingly, suggesting that she was returning to her usual self. To me, though, her voice still sounded like it was tinged with sadness, so I chose to say what I had to say in as reassuring a tone as possible. And, no, I didn't have the guts to do anything naughty. We were outdoors, for goodness' sake! For the time being, I just did my best to make sure neither one of us got all worked up.

"There's something I want to show you. It's just over there," I told her.

"Something you want to show me?"

We continued down the empty path. Nanami seemed a little anxious about what was ahead, but presumably out of trust in me, she followed me in silence. When we came to the end of the path, we found ourselves in an open space with a gate stopping us from going any farther. Overgrown with trees, the space was empty aside from us. The place was secluded and somewhat lonely.

"There's nothing here. You really are trying something," Nanami joked as she twisted her body suggestively.

"No, no, I'm really not!" I exclaimed, shooting her a look of exasperation. "Look over there. This is what I wanted to show you." I pointed to a spot just ahead of us. There, hidden in the shadow of a tree, was a lion-dog statue.

"They call this the illusory lion-dog. Not many people know about it, since it's pretty far away from the main building. If you get to see it, though, it's supposed to bring you good luck," I explained.

I led Nanami by the hand toward the lion-dog statue and had her touch it.

"Good luck... Now I get to have good luck, huh? I guess we really are lucky to be able to find a lion-dog in such an odd place. How did you know about it, Yoshin?"

“I just happened to find out about it when I was looking stuff up. Do you feel better at all?” I said.

“Feel better? I’m fine. Did I not look okay? If I didn’t, it must have been because I’d been praying so hard. I guess I was a little worried about being able to stay with you.”

“I see. In that case...”

Seeing her like that—looking lonely still and yet doing her best to smile and put on a brave face—I made a resolution: to do what I hadn’t been able to do voluntarily until then. I placed my hand on Nanami’s cheek as she continued touching the statue. Then, bringing my face slowly closer to hers...I kissed her on the cheek.

It wasn’t an accident like before. It wasn’t while she was sleeping. I was doing it of my own free will. Slowly, with my hand on her face, I had touched my lips to her cheek.

It was the kiss I’d been postponing because I couldn’t gather up the courage. And even though I still hadn’t been able to bring myself to kiss her on the lips, I felt my heart beating faster and faster from doing something for the very first time.

When I took my lips away, Nanami held her cheek and looked at me, teary-eyed. “Yoshin...”

As a sudden wave of embarrassment washed over me, I began to speak way too quickly. “I know we prayed to the gods, but we...you and I will always be together, so there’s no need for you to worry about whether we’ll be able to stay together like this. I’ll work hard too. I’ll be braver.”

Nanami simply remained standing there, holding the place where I’d kissed her, just like I’d done once in the past. She didn’t seem to dislike what I’d done, which was the one saving grace of the situation. However, I couldn’t tell from her expression whether she was happy about it. Now it was my turn to be concerned.

“Nanami?”

She was looking down at the ground, her hand still pressed to her cheek.

When I looked at her more closely, I saw that she was quivering, and I became even more nervous. *What if she didn't like it?* I began to wonder. Just as I was about to regret my rash decision, a shock ran through my body.

Nanami had leaped into my arms to embrace me.

I didn't fall over from the force of it or anything, but I was taken aback by the sudden impact. And, that impact aside, I also felt the distinct sensation of Nanami's lips on my cheek. She kissed me as she hugged me, beaming all the while.

"Yoshin... You finally kissed me! I know it was just on my cheek, but I'm so, so happy!"

Her smile was as brilliant as the sun, with no hint of the loneliness or anxiety it had displayed earlier. She kissed me on the cheek once more. With that undeniable second sensation, I felt my cheeks inevitably begin to flush.

"I'm not brave enough to kiss you on the lips yet, but I'd made up my mind to at least kiss you on the cheek today. Did it make you happy?" I asked.

"Is that why you brought me somewhere where no one was around? Jeez, Yoshin, you really are shy. Oh, do you wanna do something naughty too while we're at it?"

"No way! How do you go from zero to sixty like that?!"

"But you're the one who kissed me! Of course I'd be excited!"

"I mean, I guess I could have kissed you on the way home, but you just looked so sad that I thought it had to be right here and now. Do you feel any better?"

"I sure do! I feel so much better! I'd feel even better if you kissed me on the lips, but I'd probably pass out if you did that. For now, this is more than enough." Nanami finally let go of me, turned her cheek to me once again, and then added, "I've kissed you twice, but you've only kissed me once. Hmm, doesn't that seem a little unfair?"

What kind of reaction is this?!

Honestly, though, if I could make her feel better just by doing this, then it was a small price to pay—aside from the embarrassment, that is. Smiling bitterly in

defeat, I leaned in and kissed her on the cheek once more.

Nanami continued squealing in delight after that. Seeing her, I couldn't help smiling from all the joy bubbling up inside me.

"Well then, should we wrap it up here too?" I asked. "We can even grab some fortune slips before we head out. I heard that the romance-related fortunes here are supposed to be dead-on."

"Wait, seriously?! I wanna do it! If we do it now, we're gonna get super good luck!"

"They don't seem to sell love charms here though. Apparently, they're at a different part of the shrine."

"Then let's stop by there too before we head home. In fact, let's stop by all sorts of places on our way home today!"

Once Nanami had excitedly linked her arm with mine, we slowly made our way back to the main building to read our fortune slips. It was almost time to end our date and head home, but Nanami and I busily chatted about what we'd get up to after we left the shrine, doing our best to enjoy our date today until the very end.

Seeing her so happy about the fact that I'd kissed her—and just on the cheek, even—made me really glad that I'd mustered up the courage in the first place.

As the second day of our last date before our one-month anniversary came to an ending that was quite satisfactory for the both of us, the curtain fell on the date that could very well be our last.

Interlude: The Two of Us after Our Last Date

After the conclusion of our last date, I was left all alone in my room. Until just a little while ago, I'd been having dinner with Nanami. To be more precise, we'd had dinner at the Baratos' house with Genichiro-san and company, after which he had driven me home as usual. They'd suggested we eat there that night, most likely because Tomoko-san wanted to pump us for details.

As expected, we'd been met with a barrage of questions.

Starting with asking about our thoughts about my cooking, Nanami's family had asked us all sorts of questions—about how the date went, if we had finally kissed, et cetera, et cetera. Each one of them was brimming with curiosity. It had been a long time since I'd last been grilled like that, so although I had a tough time answering some of the questions, I had to admit I also enjoyed it.

As a side note, the fact that I'd kissed Nanami on the cheek was spilled by none other than Nanami herself. I had avoided giving a clear response to the question, but instead Nanami had let it slip—though she seemed to have spilled it simply because she was itching to share it with someone. I mean, the whole time she was talking about it, she couldn't seem to stop smiling. That definitely wasn't the smile of someone who had been forced into talking. Needless to say, I would have run out of the room if I'd been given the chance.

Tomoko-san and Genichiro-san had been grinning the whole time Nanami talked. Saya-chan, on the other hand, had been pretty exasperated; she'd reacted with a simple exclamation of "Shouldn't it be on the mouth by now?!"

In any case, after having dinner at the Baratos' house, I now found myself back at home, alone in my room. Feeling a tinge of loneliness, almost as if the liveliness from earlier had been but a figment of my imagination, I was now staring at something I'd placed on my desk.

It was the last purchase I'd made while on that day's date—a purchase not from the zoo but from the shrine. It was the fortune slip detailing my romantic relationship, along with the love charm for bringing luck—the latter of which I'd

purchased without telling Nanami.

I'd picked up the fortune slip at the first shrine we'd gone to and then bought the love charm at a different shrine a little ways away from the main hall. I'd only found out later, but apparently, that second shrine was much more powerful when it came to fortunes and charms related to love. I supposed I hadn't done enough research.

I picked up the love charm from my desk and removed the strap from the cardboard. The small, green charm fit in the palm of my hand. I gripped it in a loosely held fist and adjusted myself into a position as if I were in prayer.

Earlier that day, I'd bought the charm in a hurry because there'd been a brief moment when Nanami and I had ended up doing separate things. I was going to confess to her soon, after all, so I'd decided I wanted to do everything I could to prepare for it. I didn't think praying to the gods for a positive outcome was a bad thing.

"I'm not usually the type to do stuff like this," I muttered to myself in my room. I then placed the charm inside my school bag. I'd considered attaching it to the outside of the bag, but since that might cause some misunderstandings, I'd decided to put it *inside* my bag instead.

As for the fortune, although I'd purchased it, I'd brought it home without opening it. I'd thought about opening it up to read what it said right then and there, but Nanami and I had talked about it and ultimately decided we should both take our fortunes home. We'd agreed that we'd both open them once we were alone and then talk later about what each fortune said. Although I didn't know whether the fortunes would be good or bad, Nanami had seemed completely certain that they'd be good. She'd looked so excited, her eyes had glinted as she spoke, and I couldn't help feeling pleasantly embarrassed.

Well then, maybe it's about time to—

Just as I was thinking about finally opening the fortune slip, my phone rang. It was Nanami. I hadn't opened my fortune yet, but maybe she'd already opened hers. I decided to wait on opening the fortune and picked up the phone call from Nanami instead.



After the conclusion of our last date—just before our one-month anniversary—I was all alone in my room. Until just a little while ago, my family and I had been continuing to chat about how the day's date had gone.

It had been pretty funny watching Yoshin be interrogated to such an extent and yet still have to answer more questions. Then again, I knew I'd gotten a little carried away myself and spilled a few too many details.

However, just as I'd been starting to think that was going to be too late for me to call Yoshin, I'd gotten into a fight with Saya. Well, maybe it hadn't been so much a fight as it had been Saya putting her own foot in her mouth. In any case, we'd ended up having an argument.

"Hey, onee-chan, how is it that you can get so worked up from just a kiss on the cheek? Why aren't you guys at least kissing on the lips? Today's date was the perfect chance for a first kiss!" she'd exclaimed.

"What was I supposed to do?" I'd retorted. "Yoshin's really shy about stuff like that. It's a huge deal that he even kissed me on the cheek."

"I feel like you and onii-chan aren't so much shy as you are losers."

"Oh, shush. You're one to talk. You haven't even been kissed on the cheek yet."

"Excuse me? I've kissed someone before! Unlike you, I've already had my first kiss!"

Yeah, she'd clearly been lying. Given the way our conversation had been going, I knew she'd lied just to save face. When dad had heard her, though, things had taken a turn for the worse, because all of a sudden, Saya had become the target of the interrogation.

Oh, come on, dad. You know it's a total lie, I'd thought. Both flustered and mildly enraged, dad had already been beside himself. Mom, on the other hand, had caught on immediately, but she'd nonetheless enjoyed the situation. The three of them had eventually left my room, chatting excitedly among themselves.

On the way out, mom had whispered in my ear, "You're going to call Yoshin-kun now, aren't you? Tell him we say hello." Even Saya had winked at me as

she'd walked out the door. Had she said all that on purpose, just to wrap up our little debriefing session? In any case, I'd ended up being left alone in my room.

I'd also thought about it when I was talking with my family, but on today's date, Yoshin and I really had gotten to revisit all the fun memories that he and I had shared so far. At the same time, I'd been able to reaffirm just how much I'd come to like him.

Earlier that day, when I'd told Yoshin that I wanted us to stay together, I'd truly meant it. That was my most sincere desire. I felt guilty for having said that under the circumstances, but it definitely hadn't been a lie.

I carefully placed the items I'd purchased at the shrine that day on my desk. There was the fortune slip I'd gotten with Yoshin, along with the charm for bringing good luck to romantic relationships—the one I'd bought during one of the stops we'd made while exploring on our way home. I'd bought the good luck charm in secret when I'd left to use the restroom. It was a small, cute charm in a pink color. I carefully removed it from its cardboard.

On our one-month anniversary, I was going to confess everything to Yoshin—the fact that I'd lied, the fact that our relationship had begun because of a dare...everything he still didn't know. I had no idea what he'd choose to do after that, but no matter what he decided, I had every intention of respecting his decision.

But, if on the off chance he forgave me and chose to stay with me, then I knew that nothing would make me happier. That was also why I'd made my promise and wish to the gods at the shrine.

"I pray that after I confess everything to him, he won't be hurt and that he'll be able to find happiness one day. For that, I would do anything. Please, bless him so that he meets someone nice. That's all I ask."

This, too, was something I sincerely wished for, even though I truly wanted to be with him too. I placed the pink charm in the palm of my hand. It was tiny and looked adorable. Written in the center were words that indicated its efficacy for achieving love.

I'd bought the charm hoping it would help the love I felt for Yoshin come to fruition. However, looking down at it made me realize just how much I was

contradicting myself. This whole time, I'd been telling myself that I'd leave the decision up to Yoshin, that I would do whatever it took, and that I wanted nothing more than for him to be happy—and yet I also wanted him to choose me.

“If on that one in a million chance he does forgive me and chooses me, I'll owe you all my thanks,” I said, repeating my earlier prayer and rounding off my two contradictory wishes.

Rather than continuing to lie to Yoshin, I wanted to tell him everything. Even if that led to him leaving me, I wanted to wish for his happiness. That was all that was on my mind.

But I *didn't* want him to leave me. I wanted him to stay with me. I wanted to stay with him forever and do all sorts of things with him. I knew I was trying to have my cake and eat it too, and I hated myself for having such contradictory feelings. If I were as mature as Yoshin was, would I be so worried over this, or was even that a sign that I was just unable to acknowledge my own faults?

“It was fun, wasn't it, Yoshin? This past month just flew by. I used to think I wouldn't be able to go out with anyone for a whole month, and now, all I want is to stay with you.”

Yoshin had really changed me. Now I couldn't imagine a life without him. After I'd poured all my wishes into the charm, I placed it in my school bag. *Please be happy.* That was all I wished for.

Next, I picked up the fortune slip that I'd yet to open. There was a reason I hadn't opened it when I'd first received it: Yoshin had told me that the love-related fortunes from that shrine tended to be spot-on. Not having the courage to open the fortune even though we'd each gotten one, I'd suggested to him that we both go home first and report our fortunes back to each other later. Although it had partly been an excuse to be able to call him later, I didn't know what I would have done if my apparently spot-on fortune was a bad one. I would have probably started crying right there and then, even though we'd been in the middle of our date. If that were the case, then it would have been better to open it alone and to cry alone too. After that, I could just tell Yoshin that the fortune was a good one, and that would be that.

I glanced down at the fortune. I was incredibly nervous, even though I was only opening a slip of paper. When was the last time I'd felt this nervous? Maybe it was the time I'd been waiting to hear about the results of my high school entrance exam. The time I'd confessed to Yoshin on the dare had involved a very different kind of nervousness.

With trembling hands, I opened the plastic around the fortune slip. Even though it was regular plastic, the wrapper felt heavy against my fingers, and I couldn't open it properly. *Come on, Nanami—you can't give up now.*

Picturing Yoshin's smile in my mind, I tried to work up my courage again. When I thought about Yoshin smiling, I felt myself getting stronger. My fingers that had felt like lead before moved much more smoothly this time.

From the plastic, I pulled out another casing made of orange cloth. Inside was the paper fortune, which I slowly began to open. This slip would mainly tell of my fortune in romance, but I couldn't bring myself to read that yet. Instead, I started by looking at the column that indicated my overall fortune.

"Slight fortune, huh? I guess that isn't good or bad."

Was I right in thinking that it went in the order of great fortune, fair fortune, fortune, slight fortune, uncertain fortune, and bad fortune? I wondered if I should be glad that I hadn't received bad fortune. Or, given that these slips were for romantic relationships, maybe they didn't have ones that said "bad fortune" to begin with. Still, in terms of fortune, it seemed that mine was on the lower end. Unable to keep myself from feeling disappointed, I started looking at the more detailed explanation of my luck.

"Wait, this means..."

The moment I saw it, a tear fell down my cheek—not from sadness but from joy. The fortune there said the following: "Two people brought together by the gods" and "Their love has yet to begin."

Some people might say that it was just a fortune, but for me, there were no words that could have made me happier and feel more reassured. I hadn't even imagined I would cry out of happiness rather than sadness.

"Is it really okay for me to think it'll turn out all right?"



Wiping away my tears, I tried to steady my breathing. I knew our fateful day was approaching, but I somehow felt more relaxed. I knew the fortune was just for comfort, but I still felt like I'd been given hope. All of a sudden, I found myself desperate to hear Yoshin's voice, so I picked up the phone and called. I'd originally promised to call him anyway, but I hadn't thought I'd be able to call him in such an elated mood.

Yoshin picked up soon after the second ring.

"Hello, Nanami?" he said.

"Hello, Yoshin? Today's date was so much fun, wasn't it? And, get this: the love fortune I got was really good!"

"Oh, you already opened it. I actually haven't opened mine yet. What did yours say?"

"Well..."

Apparently Yoshin was still yet to open his own fortune slip, but, feeling so overjoyed, I had to tell him about mine first. He listened to me patiently while I summarized my fortune to him.

With our date having ended, the day I would finally confess the truth was just around the corner. Still talking with him, I glanced at the fortune again and thanked the gods.

At this moment, I am truly, truly happy. Thank you so much. That's why, no matter what happens, I won't regret anything.

That night, I ended up getting so excited talking about the date that we stayed on the phone for much longer than usual. It wasn't until the next day that I finally remembered that I hadn't asked him about his fortune at all.

Chapter 4: The Truth Comes Out

I woke quietly, all by myself. Although it was a little earlier than usual, I saw the same old ceiling above me. At least I hadn't woken up in a state. I felt like I'd had a really nice dream, but I couldn't quite remember it. Wondering if maybe I hadn't been dreaming in the first place, I slowly got out of bed.

A dream... I was suddenly overtaken by anxiety that maybe everything until now had been a dream, so I looked quietly toward my desk. There, safe and sound, was the gift I'd finished making yesterday, along with the fortune I'd gotten when Nanami and I had been on our date at the shrine. Seeing them, I was finally convinced that this was, in fact, reality.

Come to think of it, after the date, Nanami had called me to tell me about her fortune and talk about how much fun we'd had on our date. We'd gotten so carried away that we'd ended up chatting late into the night. Still, to say that Nanami and I were "two people brought together by the gods" seemed pretty over the top—or rather, kind of embarrassing, regardless of how happy it made me. Even remembering what she'd said, I still felt that way. If that really were the case, that the gods really had brought us together, then I really hoped things would turn out all right.

I glanced at the fortune slip on my desk, recalling that I hadn't opened mine yet. Even yesterday, I'd been so caught up in making my gift for Nanami that I'd ended up putting it off. I'd totally break down and laugh if Nanami got a good fortune and I got a bad one.

Next to the fortune was the shiny gift I'd prepared for when I confessed my feelings to Nanami on our anniversary. Just as I'd been feeling relieved by the fact that I'd finished it in time, the sunlight had fallen upon the metal, and the gift had caught my eye. It was almost as if the gift were urging me to open the fortune now that everything was over. I knew I was just imagining it, but I picked up the fortune anyway.

I flipped the fortune slip over in my hand, fiddling with it a bit. Even though I

wanted to open it, I couldn't muster up the courage to do so. Was it because today was the day I was going to tell Nanami how I felt? If, today of all days, I learned my fortune was bad, then there was no way I could keep myself from feeling down. Yeah, that's right—today was the day that I was going to confess my feelings to Nanami and tell how I truly felt about her.

Today was our one-month anniversary. It was probably a good thing that I was alone in the house. That way, I could think to myself in peace. Had my mom and dad been here, I probably wouldn't have been able to stay calm at all.

Still holding the fortune slip, I sat down on the bed. The creak of the bedsprings echoed softly through the room. Just how much was I going to hesitate about opening such a small piece of paper? Looking at it, I recalled everything that had happened this past month.

A month ago, Nanami had confessed her feelings for me. It'd been a dare, but, having my own ulterior motives, I had still agreed to go out with her. I could now say with conviction that my decision back then hadn't been a mistake, and I had nothing but gratitude for Baron-san, who had given me the reassurance I'd needed.

Since then, Nanami and I had gone on so many dates. We'd watched a movie, visited the aquarium, and gone on a trip for the first time in what had felt like years. My parents were clearly way too happy about the relationship. *If things don't go well between us, mom and dad are gonna be pretty bummed too. I guess I wouldn't be able to see her family again either. It'd be weird for me to keep seeing them if she and I broke up. That sucks, given just how good they've been to me.*

My head was spinning as though sucked into the vortex of that one negative thought. Maybe I was already getting nervous. Like a can of soda that had accidentally been shaken, more and more anxious feelings bubbled up within me, seemingly with no end. *Though I guess that's kind of an odd metaphor.*

I shook my head in an attempt to dispel my uneasy thoughts. Even though I'd woken up feeling pretty good, the whole day would be ruined if I started thinking like that.

I mean, things will probably be okay—no, they'll definitely be okay! I had to

believe that things would turn out all right. Even though a month might not be that long, I had to believe in the relationship Nanami and I had built during that time. If even that belief wasn't enough, I would never be able to like another girl ever again. I was sure of it.

But sure or unsure, with so little experience in dating, I wasn't exactly confident. I suppose the closer something is to you, the more anxious you feel about it. Even if others saw the situation as nothing to worry about, that might not be true for the people involved. I was probably in that very situation right now. I couldn't tell if I was being optimistic or pessimistic, but being alone allowed too many thoughts to swim around in my head.

As I was racking my brain for a solution, my belly gave off an impressive growl. I hadn't eaten anything yet, so the sound made me feel even hungrier. It was probably time I had breakfast.

Come to think of it, it was because of Nanami that I'd started cooking. No matter what I did, no matter what I thought, I always came back to Nanami. I smiled, realizing just how much she had become a part of my life.

But first, breakfast. I had to eat something to recuperate the energy I needed to face the day. If I could do that, all my negative thoughts should be left behind. *Before I head down, though, I should probably open my fortune.*

With my mind made up, I slowly opened the fortune I'd received. My heart pounding, I pulled out the slip of paper. On that slip of paper, it said...



Exactly one month since Nanami had confessed her feelings for me, she and I made our way to a certain memorable place on campus after school—the place where everything had started.

“Yoshin, do you remember this spot?” Nanami asked. “This is where it all began for us. It sure brings back memories, right?”

“Yeah, coming back here really does feel nostalgic. This was where you confessed to me, wasn't it?”

That was right—we were back behind the school building, in the spot where Nanami had confessed to me on her dare. Since it had only been a month,

saying it felt nostalgic might seem slightly odd, but the place was almost unrecognizable.

We weren't here because I'd chosen this spot as the place to tell her my feelings; I wasn't even the one who'd brought us here. For some reason, Nanami had led me to this spot—the place where she'd made her confession.

It had all started yesterday, when Nanami had suddenly challenged me to a game of cards after school. Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san had been there too. Given that we would all be going home together and I'd had no reason to say no, all four of us had ended up playing.

It was then that it had occurred to me that playing cards after school was like a reenactment of that fateful day. I'd thought that it was the confession behind the school that had started it all, but actually, our relationship had begun back when I'd witnessed the three of them playing cards after school that day.

Nanami confessed to me because she lost the game that day. That means this all started with the after-school card game. Does that mean us being here has some kind of significance too? Are they going to do something again?

Perhaps because I was so lost in my thoughts, by the time I realized it, both Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san had paired their cards and exited the game. The only two left playing were me and Nanami.

Wait, how are these two so good at Old Maid? They didn't miss on a single turn! Were they cheating? The two of them were so good that I couldn't help questioning their methods. In any case, Nanami and I had ended up playing one-on-one. When we'd turned to face each other, she had suddenly said to me, "Once we've settled this, whoever loses gets a dare."

A dare... I hadn't missed the pained expression on her face when she'd said that. Still, I'd decided to accept the proposal. It really did feel like we were reenacting that day. I'd had no idea what she'd had in mind, but I was sure it must have been *something*, and if I won, it wouldn't matter anyway. Based on what I knew, Nanami wasn't terribly good at games like these. Her face pretty much revealed what she was thinking.

But despite me sitting there thinking that, I'd ended up losing rather quickly.

Uh, that's odd, I'd thought. I was doing pretty well until partway through the game. It seemed Nanami wasn't the only one whose face revealed all their thoughts.

The dare she set for me, with some relief on her face, was quite simple: "Will you talk with me after school tomorrow?" It was the same thing she'd said to me before she'd confessed to me. And now...there we were. I'd been thinking of inviting her to this very same location myself, so my answer had been a no brainer.

"This place has changed a bit, hasn't it?" I remarked. I didn't move from where I was standing, because—as part of the dare—Nanami had asked me to stand in the exact same spot as that day. Nanami herself, just like she'd done on that day, moved closer to the school building. Still walking, she looked up and pointed toward the window from which the bucket had once fallen.

"Yeah, I guess the school made some changes after you got hurt. Do you see that window up there?"

The window she was pointing to had been modified so that it could no longer be opened. From now on, students too lazy to walk out of the school building wouldn't be able to toss dirty water out the window. In addition, the various pieces of scrap that had been scattered around the area had been removed. It seemed that rather than putting them here, the school had moved them to an area students couldn't access.

I'd been told that the area was now monitored more frequently by teachers walking around campus and that more careful inspections and maintenance were being carried out behind the school building. I felt bad that my injury had created so much more work for the teachers. However, despite the small changes, this place was still the place where Nanami had confessed to me. There was no mistaking that. I felt odd, as though I were standing in a place that I should know but didn't really recognize anymore.

"I wonder who dropped the bucket that time," I murmured.

"I heard a rumor that it might have been one of the seniors. Apparently, the class was written on the bucket. The school doesn't seem to want to make a big deal out of it though, so I don't think they're really looking for the culprit."

“Wow, that’s hard to believe when I got injured. I guess with seniors it’s for the best though, since it might affect them getting into college and stuff.”

“You’re not upset? No ‘You dropped a bucket on my head, so at least admit to what you did!’? I mean, they should at least look for the person who did it. I’d help,” Nanami said.

I’d forgotten because she mostly hung out with me these days, but Nanami had all sorts of friends. If we put our minds to it, we would probably be able to figure out who’d dropped the bucket that day. However...

“It’s fine. Nothing terribly bad happened. And besides...”

“Besides what?” Nanami asked.

“If I think of it as the price I had to pay to go out with you, then it was no biggie,” I said.

“There you go, saying stuff like that again. Seriously,” she mumbled.

I mean, I was pretty sure whoever it was hadn’t meant to do it. Plus, it had happened a month ago. If we made a false accusation, things could get even worse. I’d basically forgotten that a culprit even existed.

Nanami sighed and took several more steps away from me. Once she’d put about the same distance between us as we’d had that day, she stopped and turned toward me. We were recreating the scene from that day.

There was a tinge of loneliness in Nanami’s expression, but her smile hinted at a kind of resoluteness. It was a gentle smile in which I saw no uncertainty.

“Is the dare over now? Did you just want to test me on how well I remembered that day?” I joked.

“Of course not. The dare hasn’t even started yet. Yoshin, will you promise me that you’ll stay there and listen until I’ve completely finished telling you what I need to?” she asked.

“If that’s what you want, then yes, of course. So all I have to do is stay quiet and listen to what you have to say, without interrupting you, yes?”

“Yeah. I’d be really grateful if you’d listen until the end. I have to tell you my story...”

My secret...

To my ear, those were the words she'd whispered at the end. Maybe I'd imagined it. What was Nanami's secret? Wasn't this supposed to be a dare for me? What was she going to tell me?

Today was our one-month anniversary. In other words, it was the end of the minimum amount of time required for Nanami to complete her dare. That was why I was going to confess my feelings to her. Before I could do that, though, maybe she was going to break up with me.

Shoot, maybe I agreed too fast. I wanted at least to be able to tell her how I feel before she dumped me. Even if we're gonna break up, I at least wanted to tell her that.

However, having already agreed, I was prepared to listen until the end. At the very least, I was going to keep that promise to her. Confessing to her after being dumped would be pretty lame; maybe putting up a bit of a fight would be worth it.

"Say, Yoshin, do you know what day today is?" Nanami asked.

"I know you told me to listen in silence, but I'm assuming I can answer, right?"

"Of course. If you don't, I won't be able to continue."

"Today is exactly a month since you confessed to me and we started going out, right? I would've remembered even if you didn't bring me here. I was even thinking of celebrating the occasion with you," I said.

Hearing my response, Nanami smiled happily, albeit faintly, but that smile was slightly different from the usual smile of hers I adored. It almost looked sorrowful, as though she was glad that I remembered, but that the fact also made her sad.

"I'm really happy you remember it, Yoshin," she said. "You're right. Today is exactly one month since the day we started going out. And you know..."

There, Nanami paused for a moment and inhaled deeply. As she did, she reminded me of how she'd stumbled through her confession that day.

If she is breaking up with me, shouldn't she be able to get through it a bit

more smoothly? I thought. As I stood there wondering, Nanami appeared to calm down a little, having taken a few deep breaths. She then smiled at me again.

“Today... Today is...”

With her forlorn smile still on her face, she told me the truth.

“Today is exactly one month since I made a false confession to you on a dare.”

Silence filled the space between us. The wind seemed to whistle around us, and the rustling of the leaves on the trees echoed like the sound of falling rain.

“What?” I whispered. I couldn’t understand what she was trying to say. Or, even if I did understand, that was the only word that fell out of my mouth.

Where is she going with this?

Nanami’s somber smile remained unchanged. “I’m sorry to tell you something like this all of a sudden. You must be shocked and really angry with me, but will you hear me out?” she asked.

She seemed to have misconstrued my “What?” as a reaction of anger. Regardless, I felt I should at least let her continue and silently nodded my head. She thanked me, but I still didn’t think she understood my initial reaction.

Why? Why is she telling me that?

Didn’t the girls say at the beginning that even if Nanami were to break up with me, she wouldn’t mention anything about the dare, and that Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san wouldn’t say anything either? That was why, up until today, I’d acted like I didn’t know anything about it. I’d been pretending as if that were the case.

But she’d nullified all that herself. I didn’t understand her intentions at all.

“We played cards yesterday, right?” Nanami-san continued. “It was fun, playing like that with all four of us. Well, no, what I mean to say is, um, a month ago, the three of us were playing a card game like that.”

Yes, I know.

“I lost the game, you see, and the person who lost had to do a dare. The thing they dared me to do was to confess to a guy I didn’t even really talk to.”

I know that too.

“And the guy they chose for me to confess to...was you, Yoshin.”

All this... I already know all this too. But Nanami doesn't know that I know.

Still, I didn't understand why she was telling me this now. I just couldn't figure it out. She and her friends had talked about keeping it all a secret so that they wouldn't end up hurting the guy even when it came time for her to break up with him. I was pretty certain that Nanami wasn't the type of girl who could hurt another person like that.

“You're kind, Yoshin, and you're really a great guy. Even now, you're holding back your anger and hearing me out.”

I was listening to Nanami's explanation in silence, just as I'd promised. However, I couldn't hide my confused expression. Nanami seemed to have taken my reaction to mean that I was suppressing my anger. I wasn't angry at all, of course; I was just perplexed because I didn't know why she was telling me about it.

Even so, Nanami continued to confess. She continued, painfully, putting what I already knew into words.

“You just happened to be the guy Hatsumi and Ayumi picked, but the confession could've been to anyone. They chose you because you seemed like the kind of quiet guy that someone like me—someone who wasn't good with guys—could go out with.”

“Is that so?” I mumbled.

“Yes. I'm the worst, right? I ignored your feelings and toyed with you, deceived you and lied to you. That's what I did. And you're the one who got mixed up in my horrible actions. You're a victim.”

Listening to her talk as though she were trying to anger me on purpose, I found myself becoming strangely calm. But even if I was calm, what was I supposed to tell her? Not knowing what she wanted, I didn't know what to say.

“Nanami...”

When I said her name, Nanami bowed her head deeply. Then, looking up, she

said, “I’m sorry, Yoshin. I know that an apology doesn’t fix anything, but please let me apologize anyway. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

Her voice shook as she bowed to me once again. It was then that I felt as if Nanami’s emotions finally got through to me. The reason she’d been smiling until now was because she was trying not to let herself cry in front of me. She probably thought that if she cried, I would forgive her no matter what—that I’d be forced to forgive her. That was why she’d been smiling so sadly. She was trying not to cry in front of me.

Even now, the spot on the ground below her head wasn’t wet with tears. If she looked up, though, I’d probably see that she wasn’t smiling anymore. She was trying desperately to keep herself from crying while still apologizing to me.

“That’s what I have to say—terrible, gross, awful me. Thank you for listening without saying anything,” she said, keeping her head bowed. Perhaps she was sure I was going to scream at her. But I...

Before saying anything, I took one final deep breath in order to calm myself.

“I’m sorry, Nanami,” I finally said. “I made you share something really painful. Thank you for telling me the truth.”

Nanami’s head shot up. Perhaps she hadn’t expected me to say that; she seemed totally shocked and confused.

“Why... Why are you apologizing? I’m the one who did something terrible! There’s nothing for you to apologize for, and I don’t deserve you thanking me either.”

Nanami’s calm demeanor from earlier had completely disappeared. She seemed so utterly distraught that I instinctively reached out for her.

When she saw my hands move toward her, she choked on her words and stood in silence. I continued to speak.

“Will you listen to my story too? There’s something I need to tell you.”

Yes. Nanami had gathered up all her courage to tell me the truth. Now it was my turn. If I didn’t tell her my side of things, we would never be able to have a relationship on an equal footing, just like she’d told me that time. Although her

expression remained one of confusion, she nodded at me in silence.

I was a fool. What had I been thinking, worrying about her breaking up with me? I'd completely forgotten about all the incredible memories she and I had made together this past month. I hadn't given any thought at all to what she would tell me or what she might be agonizing over the most. I'd only been thinking about myself.

I'd failed as a boyfriend. How dare I think about telling her how I felt about her? That was why it was my turn now.

I'd had no intention of telling her this. I'd planned on simply confessing my feelings to her and leaving it at that. But, while this was an unexpected turn of events, I knew that if I was ever going to tell her, it had to be now. If I missed this chance, I'd never get the same opportunity again.

"A month ago," I said, "I went back to the classroom after school because I'd left something behind. When I got there, three girls were already in there, playing cards inside. They were saying that the girl who lost would have to confess to a guy on a dare."

"What?"

Nanami's eyes widened. She couldn't have possibly seen this one coming. With her mouth half-open, she stared at me in confusion.

"That's right, Nanami. I was there in the classroom that day, even though it was a complete coincidence."

I could hear Nanami audibly gasp. She probably had so many questions, but she remained silent, still listening to my story.

"After that, I went home and talked to some friends of mine. I told them I'd been confessed to on a dare and asked them what I should do. What do you think happened next?"

"Um, I'm not sure. What happened?" she asked.

"We decided that I should accept the false confession, then get the girl who made that false confession to fall in love with me. Then, after a month, I could decide what to do. I could make the girl like me and then break up with her, or I

could continue going out with her. That was what we decided,” I told her.

Nanami continued listening to me in silence, staring me straight in the eyes.

“After that, I kept getting advice from my friends so that I could do things that would get you to like me. I suppose you already know all that though, huh? Still, you’ve got the premise all wrong. From the very start, I was acting on the knowledge that your confession to me was false.”

I could see tears beginning to well up in her eyes. Of course. My confession would have no doubt come as a shock. Perhaps she was even starting to hate me for it, but I continued nonetheless.

“You said earlier that you acted in a way that toyed with someone else’s feelings,” I said.

“Yeah, I did. I did, but...”

“I did the same thing. I knew that your confession was a lie, but I did loads of things just so you’d like me for real. I was toying with your emotions. And that’s my side of the story.”

When she heard the last of my confession, Nanami began to cry. She covered her face with both her hands.

“I’m sorry, Nanami,” I said. “You’d worked up the courage to tell me everything, but I just stood there, pretending not to know anything.”

“No... No, Yoshin. What I did and what you did are two completely different things!” she shouted, tears continuing to stream down her cheeks. “If only I hadn’t done such a terrible thing, then you wouldn’t have had to go out of your way to worry about any of that. You wouldn’t have had to make all this effort. You wouldn’t have needed to do anything like this. It’s all my fault!”

I wanted to tell her that that wasn’t true, but I knew that it was probably no use telling her that now. She earnestly believed that it was all her fault. Still, I didn’t think that what she’d done and what I’d done were terribly different. In fact, given that I’d known all along and taken advantage of that, I was probably more in the wrong.

If we continued like this, Nanami might end up getting even more hurt. That

was what I couldn't stand about this. An awful feeling began to bubble up inside of me—the same feeling I'd gotten that day when I'd witnessed Nanami about to get splashed with dirty water. That was why, having told her the truth, I decided to ask her a question. The lie told at the very beginning had complicated our relationship, so all we had to do was simplify it.

"If I ask you an honest question, will you give me an honest answer?" I asked.

"Uh, yeah, if it's something I can answer. I mean, yes, I'll answer anything. I won't lie anymore. I'll answer honestly, so ask me anything."

In an attempt to reassure her, I smiled the biggest smile I could muster. "Do you hate me now? I'm asking because, well, I really like you. In the last month, I've honestly, sincerely grown to like you so much, and that hasn't changed, not one bit."

I'd done it. I'd told her how I truly felt. I was probably still too inexperienced to judge, but I felt like this was the most difficult thing anyone could possibly do. There was no guarantee that the other person would accept your feelings. In fact, not only might they not accept them, but also they might ridicule you or even cruelly reject you. There must have been so many people who couldn't tell the truth for fear of rejection. They might end up breaking up with each other, missing out on important opportunities, or losing someone really important to them.

Today, Nanami and I had finally told each other the truths we'd been keeping to ourselves for so long, and I, too, feared that she might reject me. Just the thought made my whole body shake. Precisely because of that, though, I had to tell her honestly that I liked her.

Our relationship had started with a lie, but the past month that we'd spent together definitely hadn't been. I could no longer imagine a life without her. That was how much I liked her and how important she'd become for me—more important than anyone or anything. That was just how I felt.

I had to tell her all that as straightforwardly and honestly as possible. Her false confession, my secret, her guilt, my guilt... We'd overthought all those things, but actually, the matter wasn't complicated at all. This was just about whether we liked each other or not, so I'd turned our discussion into something

as simple as that. I wasn't all that smart, so doing so was about as much as I could handle.

Although Nanami appeared taken aback for a moment, she didn't display any hesitation or uncertainty. She responded with her own words of sincerity.

"I like you. I like you so much!" she exclaimed, letting her emotions get the best of her. "I would never hate you. I couldn't! I like you so much. I really do! But... But..."

"Then that's all I need to hear," I said, stopping her as she began to protest. "I really like you, and you really like me. That's more than enough. As long as I know that, I can do anything." I flashed her a satisfied smile.

I'm so glad, I thought. She'd told me she liked me. I hadn't been rejected. That alone gave me an unbelievable sense of security. I felt invincible.

Apparently unconvinced, Nanami still looked confused. Maybe she was bewildered by my train of thought. Even though there was no need for her to make such a face, she continued crying with a pained expression. I didn't want her to look like that. After all, we both liked each other. What could still be wrong?

"Nanami, this whole month has been so much fun, hasn't it? It really has. At least for me—and I'm not even exaggerating—it was the best, most fun month of my life."

"What?"

Nanami looked at me, tears still streaming down her face. She seemed unable to follow the sudden change of subject. Nonetheless, I ignored her confusion and continued talking.

"The day after you confessed to me, right out of the blue, you made me a bento. I never imagined you'd feed it to me too. Since then, you've been making me your handmade bento every day. Even though lunch was never something I used to get excited about, after I met you, it became the best part of going to school."

"I...I really liked making bento for you too. It made me so happy."

I had thought that school lunches were only there to fill your stomach, but Nanami's bento had changed everything. Plus, discovering just how difficult it was to make bento by hand had been an invaluable lesson. Nanami had given me a completely new perspective on something I'd once taken for granted.

"We went on a date every week too. On our first date, I didn't have any clothes to wear, so I asked Shibetsu-senpai for advice. Speaking of which, it was all because of you that I was able to become friends with him."

"I remember back when you had to play basketball against him too. I was so shocked," she murmured.

I never thought I'd become friends with an athlete—with someone who was practically from another planet, in my opinion. Now, though, senpai was one of the few important friends I had. The fact that my world had gotten just a little bit bigger was again thanks to Nanami.

"We went to the movies, had dinner at my house, and even went on a trip with both of our families," I said. "Heck, I definitely wasn't expecting to meet your parents after we'd been dating for only a week."

"Yeah, I was pretty surprised too. And you said that thing in front of my dad."

Just remembering my near marriage proposal made me turn red in the face, but at least doing so had allowed me to get to know Nanami better. That was another way in which our relationship was able to grow.

As we recalled more and more treasured memories, Nanami's smile gradually returned. It still held a hint of awkwardness, but at least her tears had subsided.

Meanwhile, I continued talking about various events from the past month. Meeting a lost little girl at the aquarium. Cooking together. Staying over at her house for the first time and sleeping with her—though that hadn't involved anything weird, since it had just been us quite literally sleeping next to each other. The memory of seeing her face next to mine when I woke up still made my heart pound.

We'd gone on a hot springs trip, chatted a ton, visited a theme park, gone to the zoo, prayed at a shrine... We'd experienced so many "firsts," ran into heaps of trouble, and made all sorts of mistakes, but we'd laughed with each other

and grown from the experiences. There were still so many things we had to see and so many places we'd promised we'd visit together in the future.

As we continued talking, we recalled more and more of those promises. We shared all the various memories from the past month and all the promises we'd made to each other. By remembering them, Nanami seemed to regain her composure. Her expression looked much more relaxed than before.

"To be honest, I was prepared to back off if you ended up disliking me," I confessed.

Nanami seemed slightly puzzled at my remark, but her smile remained intact. She really must have calmed down.

"I knew that it wasn't a real confession," I said, "so if our relationship this past month was a lie too, and you were actually hating every minute of going out with me, then I would have ended our relationship right here. I thought I had to be willing to choose that option and step back so that you could be happy."

But Nanami shook her head. "I came prepared today too. I was gonna tell you my confession was a lie, and if you hated me for it and decided to break up with me, I was going to accept that," she said. Her words were filled with a heartbreaking resolve.

Me? Break up with Nanami? You've gotta be kidding me. There's no way I could do that.

"I lied to you and hurt you. I thought I didn't deserve to be with you after doing something as unforgivable as that. That's why I was willing to do anything if it meant that you'd be happy."

"Should you really be saying that you're willing to do *anything*? I mean, what were you gonna do if I asked you to do something sexy?"

"Um, I guess if you got angry and asked me for my body, then I would've been okay with you doing whatever you wanted with me. If that was going to make you feel better, then that would've been a small price to pay."

"I would never ask you for anything like that, even if I were angry," I said, slightly shocked. "You know that it took me a whole month just to kiss you on the cheek. Just how prepared did you come today, anyway?"

Ever so slightly returning to our usual selves, we looked at each other and snickered. I understood just how prepared she'd been, but I did my best to laugh away the pain she'd felt.

Once we'd giggled with each other for a few moments, I smiled at her again. "So, am I right in thinking that the memories we made this past month, all the happy moments that felt like the happiest moments of my life, weren't all lies? Is it okay for me to think you were happy being with me and that I was happy being with you?"

As though my words had broken some kind of spell, Nanami suddenly moved from her spot and started running toward me. It was as if she couldn't hold in her emotions anymore, so much so that they were propelling her into action. It was almost like me the last time we were here—the only difference being that there was no falling bucket. I braced myself to be able to catch her, and when she finally leaped into my arms, I hugged her as tightly as I could.

"They weren't lies. They weren't lies at all! This might have all started with a lie, but all the love I poured into your bento, all the joy I got from our dates, all the affection I felt when I kissed you, and the happiness I felt when you kissed me... All of those things were true! I was so happy being with you, Yoshin!"

Oh, thank the gods. Honestly, thank every single one of them.

Our relationship had started with a lie, and in a way, we'd been lying to each other ever since. But what we'd felt for each other this past month hadn't been a lie at all. Knowing that was enough.

I still had something left to do though. This was the real deal. No more lies.

"Thank you, Nanami. I was happy this past month too. I truly feel that way, from the bottom of my heart. Thank you."

After tightening the arms I'd wrapped around her, I released my hold on her for a moment.

"Yoshin?"

Once my hands had left her, I stepped back to put some distance between the two of us. Not knowing my intentions, Nanami looked slightly uneasy. I kept smiling so that she wouldn't become so worried, but my heart was pounding

like crazy.

“Actually, today, there was something else I was gonna do. I guess it’s a good thing we came to the back of the school building,” I said.

I took out the cloth package that I’d been keeping in the pocket of my school uniform. Then, wiping the smile off my face and trying my best to put on a dignified expression, I turned to Nanami with the most serious look I could muster.

“Nanami Barato-san,” I said, looking into her eyes.

I felt somehow embarrassed attaching an honorific to her name, but I did it anyway, as if trying to recreate that moment. I guess back then, though, I could only get myself to address her by her last name only. Well, those were just details.

“I like you, Nanami-san. I like you a lot. Would you be willing to go out with me again? Because, if possible, I would like to be with you forever,” I said, slowly extending my hand toward her.

Nanami glanced at my hand, then looked me in the eyes with a serious expression. “I lied to you, Yoshin. Are you still willing to forgive me?” she asked.

“I mean, it’s not so much about forgiving you, since I already knew. But if I had to give an answer, then of course I forgive you. I forgive you for everything. Are you willing to forgive me for knowing everything and yet not saying anything this whole time?”

“Of course I do. I don’t know if I even have the right to forgive you, but there’s no way I *wouldn’t* forgive you.”

“Then I guess there’s nothing standing in our way,” I said. “I want to ask you again. Nanami-san, will you go out with me?”

Nanami’s cheeks flushed a deep red the moment she heard my question. Then she took the hand I’d extended toward her. “If you’re willing to be with someone like me, then I’d be happy to be your girlfriend.”

With that, Nanami flashed me the brightest smile she’d shown me all day. It was that smile of hers that I loved, the one that reminded me of a blooming

flower. My happiness in seeing it, combined with the warmth of her hand as it gripped mine... Everything was filled with joy, and I felt like all our efforts had paid off.

“Nanami... I thought we weren’t allowed to say ‘someone like me,’” I said.

She blinked at me as she held my hand; then she burst out laughing. “I can’t believe you remembered that! You’re right though. Saying ‘someone like me’ is strictly prohibited.”

“Well, yeah. I remember everything about you,” I replied.

“Then let me correct myself. Yoshin, I would be more than happy to go out with you. I look forward to being with you forever.”

Our relationship might have started with a lie, but we’d built a true relationship between the two of us. Now, we were finally able to be together for real. That was the most amazing thing. I felt like Nanami and I had managed to arrive at the future we’d both hoped for.

“Then, to mark this new beginning in our relationship and to commemorate our one-month anniversary, will you accept this?” I asked, handing her the package wrapped in fabric. I’d wrapped it myself, so it wasn’t much to look at. Still, Nanami took it in her hands and slowly unwrapped it.

“Is this a necklace? I can’t accept something so expensive,” she said.

“Oh, don’t worry about that. I made it myself. I’m sorry it didn’t come out very well, but it’d be nice if you’d put it on,” I said.

“You made it yourself?!” she exclaimed.

The pendant at the end of the necklace was a dolphin—or what barely passed as a dolphin—encased in a transparent sphere. The dolphin in the center and the surrounding sphere were different shades of orange because I thought the color would look nice on her. I’d also added a pink flower petal to the inside of the sphere. I’d started making it ages ago, back when I’d decided to give her an anniversary gift, though I was a little embarrassed by the imperfections.

“Is this a cherry blossom petal?” Nanami asked.

“Yeah, I tried putting in a petal that I picked up when we went to see the

cherry blossoms.”

I’d made the necklace as a compilation of the various memories we’d shared together. She held it tightly to her chest as her eyes filled with tears. Unlike the tears of sadness from earlier, these tears seemed to be of joy.

“Hey, Yoshin, since you’ve gone through all this trouble of making me this, do you think you could put it on me?” she asked.

“Oh, yeah, you’re right. Since I’ve gone through the trouble...” I said, but she stopped me as I was about to step behind her and handed me the necklace.

“Maybe it’s better if you stand in front of me while you do it,” she said. “That way you can see how it hangs.”

It was true that by doing it from the front, I’d be able to decide on a good position that struck the right balance. I took the necklace from Nanami and, after struggling a second, managed to put it on her. The necklace itself didn’t look too great, since it was the first thing I’d ever made of that ilk, but it still looked great on Nanami. I wondered if that counted as singing my own praises too much.

It felt kind of embarrassing to try to put it on her from the front though. We were standing so close to each other. Just as I finally managed to finish putting the necklace on her and was pulling my hands away from Nanami’s neck, it happened. In the brief moment that I was stepping away...

Nanami’s lips touched mine.

Her eyes were closed but mine weren’t.

She wrapped her hands around my neck. In absolute shock, I let her do whatever she wanted to do with me. Her lips were warm and soft, and her face was right in front of mine.



It took a moment for me to register what was happening. Once I did, though, I moved to softly embrace her.

We were kissing for the very first time.

After taking her time to kiss me, Nanami pulled her face away from mine. Then, leaning closer and blushing in embarrassment, she whispered, “My present to you for our one-month anniversary is our first kiss. I didn’t get you anything, so this is the best I can do. I’m sorry I didn’t have anything ready.”

“No, this is the best surprise present ever. It really puts my present to shame.”

I was so red that I could barely bring myself to look at her, so I was grateful we were hugging each other instead. In fact, neither one of us could look at the other, and we couldn’t bring ourselves to say anything either. That said, we also couldn’t bear to part from one another, which meant that we were just standing there, locked in a tight embrace. I didn’t know what to do next; my head was barely functioning.

As we stood there holding on to each other, we suddenly heard someone’s voice.

“Well, well, well. If it isn’t the young man and young lady who visited me a while back. What, did I catch you two in the middle of a rendezvous? Oh dear, my apologies for the interruption. I was in the middle of making my rounds, since I’m relatively unoccupied compared to the teachers.”

It was the school nurse that had taken care of me on that fateful day. Nanami and I were shocked by the nurse’s sudden appearance, but she just smiled and waved her hand as if to wave away our worries.

“There’s no need to get all worked up. I got to see something very sweet. Ah, to be young. So you two are still together, huh? Is that a long time? Maybe it’s not. Regardless, love’s quite the stormy sea, isn’t it?”

“Um, ma’am, isn’t this when you’re supposed to accuse us of engaging in inappropriate conduct?” I managed to ask.

“Hm? What’s inappropriate about a kiss? Two people who genuinely love

each other are kissing. There's nothing wrong with that, is there? It's very high school-appropriate, so there's no problem. Congratulations to the both of you. Now, get on with it," she declared.

I'd thought this back in the nurse's office too, but she really was a strange teacher. Not only did she not find fault with us kissing, but she was also congratulating us. If any other teacher had stumbled upon us, they probably would have been yelling at us by now—though I'd be lying if I said I didn't feel relieved by the way she was acting with us.

"The kind of acts that we label misconduct are those in which you fail to use stuff like this. That said, maybe high schoolers don't even get a pass even if they use it nowadays," she said, tossing something toward us. I caught the thin object in one of my hands. It was a condom packet. *What the—?!*

"Ma'am?!" I nearly screamed.

"I've told you before, but it's very important to be educated properly about sexual health. In my mind, it's inappropriate to *not* use contraceptives. If you do, then it's totally fine, depending on the frequency. Maybe it's against school rules though. In any case, even that stuff isn't one hundred percent foolproof, so if you can't take responsibility for the consequences, it's best not to do it at all. You two better keep this in mind: if you do it, you can make babies."

And with that fine monologue, the nurse disappeared just as quickly as she had appeared, though not without waving goodbye. As she walked away, her words seemed to echo in the air with the help of the Doppler effect.

"Truly, it seems everyone is in a lovey-dovey mood lately," she was saying. "Even my husband's been telling me he loves me. Like I didn't know already. Maybe I should be the one to tell him once in a while..."

After she left, Nanami and I were left alone, still locked in our embrace.

"She really is an odd one," Nanami said, "but I guess it was good that she was the one who saw us and not someone else."

"True, though I still don't think we'll be using this," I muttered, putting the condom away in my pocket. Nanami appeared to think for a moment and then turned to me.

“I love you, Yoshin,” she said.

I looked at her with my eyes wide, shocked by her sudden remark. She’d already told me she liked me a lot, but this was the first time she’d told me that she loved me.

“N-Nanami, is something wrong? Where’d that come from?” I asked.

“Earlier, the teacher said that if you love each other, then it’s okay to kiss. That’s why I wanted to tell you that I love you,” she explained.

“Ah, I see. Yeah, you’re right.”

Still wrapped up in our embrace, we looked at each other for a while. Then I made up my mind too. “I love you, Nanami,” I said.

“Yeah, I love you too!”

Nanami had been the one to do it last time, but this time, I gathered up my courage and kissed her. She let me, without saying a word.

This was how we forgave one another and reaffirmed our feelings. Thus, today marked a new beginning for our continuing relationship.

Epilogue: I'm Head over Heels for the Gyarū

"I see, so that's what you chose to do, huh? It's just as I expected—though in situations like these, we really don't need anything unexpected happening. I'm relieved, you know. In fact, I feel like I might cry."

On the weekend after the day we'd confessed to one another, Nanami and I were sitting in my room, reporting back to Baron-san and Peach-san. We'd ended up making them wait a bit to hear about it, but we had decided to tell them once everything had calmed down.

Hearing Baron-san's cool and collected voice coming from my phone, Nanami and I both blushed with embarrassment.

"Didn't I tell you that you and Canyon-san would definitely end up happy together? I could pretty much guarantee it," Peach-san said.

"You talked about stuff like that together?" I asked.

"We chatted quite a bit! Didn't we, Peach-chan?" Nanami responded.

Even Peach-san's voice coming through the phone seemed colored with a shade of joy. Today, the four of us were on a voice chat together for the first time. Nanami had suggested that we use it to give them a full report. Of course, I'd had no idea that she and Peach had been chatting from time to time by themselves.

"Still, I had no idea that all of you knew all along. I feel like I caused everyone so much trouble," Nanami muttered.

"Oh, not at all," Baron-san responded. "We also feel bad that we didn't tell you, but we're certainly glad everything turned out for the best."

The fact that the four of us were able to enjoy such a peaceful moment like this felt strangely sweet. I was just sitting there on my bed, watching Nanami next to me. She had her body attached to mine, as though she were giving me a permanent hug. The softness and warmth of her body offered me a comfortable sense of happiness.

Of course, we were only doing this because we were on voice chat, not a video call. But then, I guess we couldn't help being in this kind of position. The two of us couldn't sit on a single chair together, which meant the only place we could both sit for a long period of time without getting tired was on my bed. In that sense, it couldn't be helped. That said, I did have to wonder...

Is this a test of my self-control?

The moment I thought that, I pictured that *thing* that the school nurse had given me the other day, and I shook my head violently in order to get the image out of my head. It was still far too early for us to use that kind of thing, and besides, we were currently on a call. *Just forget about it for now, man.*

"In any case, you're both officially and truly together now. Has anything changed between the two of you? Like, maybe you've both become more affectionate with each other?" Baron-san asked.

"Changed?" I repeated.

"Speaking of, we definitely kiss more frequently now," Nanami declared, "but Canyon-kun gets embarrassed and refuses to kiss me himself. Instead, he only kisses me on the cheek. I'm pretty sure that the only time he kissed me on the lips was on our anniversary!"

"Why would you tell them that?!" I shouted.

With that, Peach-san began squealing. It seemed this was the first time she was hearing about the kiss, because she began requesting to hear details.

Nanami, on the other hand, was fiddling with the necklace I'd given her as she turned to me and grinned. Her cheeks were red, indicating that she was asking in a roundabout way, despite her obvious embarrassment.

I mean, come on. I was caught in the moment that time. Kissing her on a regular basis would be way too much. I'd have to get pretty worked up in order to do that...

As a compromise, I put my arm around her shoulder and pulled her closer toward me on the bed. At least I'd gotten used to things enough to be able to do something like that.

“I guess there really hasn’t been too much of a change,” I said. “She’s right next to me on the bed right now, but that’s pretty normal for us, I guess.”

My statement was followed by silence on the other end of the line. *Huh? Why is everyone suddenly going quiet?* Nanami’s face, along with her neck and ears, were completely red. Her eyes were wide in shock too.

Just as I was beginning to think the silence might never end, I heard Peach-san mutter, “Adult... This is an adult relationship. W-Wait, aren’t things moving a bit too fast?”

“Uh, sorry. I think maybe this is still all a bit too shocking for Peach-chan, so it’d be best if you didn’t mention things like that to us. In fact, if that’s what you guys are doing, we should really talk some other time.”

I thought back on my statement for a moment. *“She’s right next to me on the bed.” Wait, that seems to suggest...*

“No, no, no! That’s a complete misunderstanding! I mean, I know it was my fault, but still, we’re just sitting on the bed talking! We’ve only ever kissed! Our relationship is still totally pure!” I thought I’d just been speaking the truth, but my statement had definitely been misconstrued. The thought hadn’t even crossed my mind.

“It’s really rare for you to pull something like this,” Nanami murmured next to me. Her face was still bright red.

Yeah, I’m so sorry, I thought. I’d probably just gotten carried away, since there was no longer anything holding our relationship back.

“Oh, I see. Though I guess that’s perfectly normal for high schoolers. In fact, I was just talking with my wife the other day, and she told me she’d just given a high school couple a lesson in sex education. What a funny coincidence, huh?”

Huh? That sounds oddly familiar. Is it really a coincidence?

“Can I just tell you really quick though? Recently, for the first time in a really long time, my wife told me she loved me! She always gets so embarrassed and rarely says things like that, but she finally showed me her sweet side for a change!”

“Wow, congratulations, Baron-san!” Peach-san said. “That sounds so nice. It makes me sad though that I’m the only one here who’s not going out with anyone.”

“Don’t you worry. Soon, you’ll meet someone nice. I guarantee it.”

Peach-san seemed entirely caught up in Baron-san’s story—which somehow reminded me of one I’d heard somewhere before. *Hmm, I probably shouldn’t think too much about it.*

As the two continued talking, Nanami leaned in and whispered to me in a voice that was too soft to be picked up by the phone—a voice sweeter than any I’d ever heard before.

“I’m up for it anytime.”

As soon as her words tickled my ears, I spun around to look at her, but Nanami had already turned away from me. She was back to glowing red again, but when she slowly looked back at me, she smiled bashfully.

I sighed and softly patted her head. “You don’t have to force yourself. We can take it at our own pace,” I told her.

“Thanks. Yeah... I love you,” she said.

“I love you too.”

Nanami seemed to find my touch to be comforting. With her eyes half closed, she leaned over and gave me a hug. I continued stroking her hair, but then...

“Well, well. Did you hear that, Peach-chan? They love each other, apparently. They really have made a lot of progress, haven’t they? They have no need to hide it from us now.”

“You’re absolutely right, Baron-san. What do they say in situations like this one? That people with thriving love lives should go explode somewhere? Or explode happily ever after? Or get married and then explode?”

“Peach-chan?! Where did you learn phrases like that?!” Nanami exclaimed.

Shoot, I forgot we were on voice chat. More importantly, what kind of act is that, Baron-san? Even Peach-chan is getting all into it.

I was thinking that I'd let my guard down because I was so used to chatting with them by text. Nanami, though, looked at me and stuck her tongue out as I continued stroking her hair.

She totally did it on purpose...

After that, the four of us continued giving updates and chatting about anything and everything. Baron-san was getting ahead of himself, giving us important pieces of advice about married life. Nanami was listening so as not to miss a word, utterly convinced by everything he was sharing. In the midst of such a conversation, Peach-san suddenly asked me and Nanami a question.

"Come to think of it, I heard about Shichimi-chan's fortune, but I never heard about Canyon-san's fortune. What did it say?"

"Oh, I wanna know too! I never asked you about it! What did it say?" Nanami asked.

Oh, the fortune slip. Things had gotten so hectic, I'd completely forgotten about it. I got up from the bed and returned with my wallet in hand. Nanami sidled up close to me once I'd sat back down.

"You keep it in your wallet?" she asked.

"Yeah, because it was a good one. Here, check it out," I said as I held the slip out to her.

"Whoa, you got great fortune! That's so cool. But wait a minute..."

"Shichimi-chan? What does it say?" Peach-san asked.

I didn't feel comfortable reading it out myself, but Nanami seemed happy to share the details.

"Um, it says... 'The two who have discovered true love will never be able to part.' Oh, wow."

Happy tears welled up in Nanami's eyes. I patted her head once again as she came close to crying. High on her emotions, Nanami embraced me and quietly shed tears of joy.

Although it wasn't because of the fortune alone, I had no intention of choosing to break up with Nanami. The next time we went to that shrine on a

date, I'd have to thank all the gods for the way things had turned out.

"True love, huh? You get that a lot in otome games and shojo manga, but it really is nice and romantic," Peach-san said.

"It is, isn't it? By any chance, does that fortune slip also tell you to never have an affair or something like that? I got one before I married my wife, but mine said something similar to that."

In contrast to Peach-san, who was sounding all dreamy, Baron-san seemed rather serious. In fact, the fortune had said "Adultery will bring terrible luck."

"Huh, so it does," I said. "You and I must've gotten the same fortune then."

"Yeah. That fortune I got was really what made me marry my wife, so I can guarantee that you two will get married one day too! Invite us to the wedding! We can have an offline get-together slash wedding reception!" he said excitedly.

"It's still too early to talk about getting married. We're only in high school," I replied, laughing.

"Oh, it's fine. My wife and I started dating in high school too, so we can be your precedent."

I couldn't argue with that. Nanami was still in my arms, looking up at me. Her eyes were full of expectation.

"You're right. In that case, when Nanami and I get married, we'll definitely invite everyone to our wedding," I said.

"Awesome. It might also be fun to have a separate gathering offline before that though. I mean, now that you two have cleared things up between you, your future has infinite possibilities. Congratulations to you both. I really mean that."

"I agree. Canyon-san, Shichimi-chan—congratulations," Peach-san added.

Nanami and I responded with our own words of thanks, which we were only too happy to offer.

"Oh, but isn't it about time you two headed out? Where are you going on your date today?"

It was then that Nanami and I realized it was time to go. We hadn't realized we'd been chatting with them for so long.

"We're going to watch a movie. That was what we did for our very first date, so we figured it was a good way for us to restart our relationship," I replied.

"I see," Baron-san said. "Then have fun, you two. And when you have a chance, let's get back to playing our game together."

"Have fun. And please take care too," Peach-san added.

"Thank you, Baron-san, Peach-chan. We'll chat again soon," Nanami said. "Oh, I should go fix my makeup. I cried a little bit, and I want to say hello to my future mother-in-law too."

Wait, you're already thinking of my mom as your future mother-in-law? What? How did this happen so fast?

Leaving my shocked self behind, Nanami quickly exited the room. Similarly, Peach-san left the chat. In the end, Baron-san and I were the only ones still on the line. Just as I was about to hang up, Baron-san suddenly asked, "Can you tell me one last thing? You were confessed to on a dare, but how do you feel about things now?"

I had to stop and think about how to respond to his question. I'd managed to make it this far with Nanami because I'd gotten advice from Baron-san. That is, Nanami and I were where we were today because Baron-san had told me to do my best to make her smitten with me.

After thinking for several moments, I finally knew what my reply to him should be. "Well, if I had to try and explain how I feel now..."

I gave an honest response. When he heard it, Baron-san seemed satisfied too. Given all the things he and I had talked about, I felt like it was a pretty good answer. I told him...

"I'm completely head over heels for the gyaru who confessed to me."

Afterword

Thank you for deciding to read this fourth volume. What did you think of everything that happened? If the story was able to meet all your expectations, then I couldn't be any happier.

Have you also had a chance to read Nagomi Kanna-sensei's manga version of this series? It's a wonderful piece of work, so I do hope that you'll have a chance to read it if you haven't already.

I was able to bring you this volume thanks to all the people who've purchased the earlier installments. Thank you so much. I have nothing but words of gratitude for Kagachisaku-sensei and Kobayashi-sama, who put so much work into this volume, just as they did for the previous volumes. Thanks to them, volume four turned out as wonderful as it did.

I must confess, I made the story so long that I only have half a page for the afterword. Although I still have more to say, I'm afraid I'll have to save it for another occasion. Still, I do have one thing I must share here.

We're getting a fifth volume! I'm just as surprised as you are. See you in volume five.

Yuishi

September 2022



“Jeez, what took you so long?!
I can’t believe you’d make your
girlfriend wait like this.”

Nanami crossed her arms and
made a show of puffing out her
cheeks and turning away from me.




“You’re right. Today is **exactly one month** since the day we started going out. And you know...”

There, Nanami paused for a moment and inhaled deeply. As she did, she reminded me how she’d stumbled through her confession that day.

“Today... Today is...”

With her forlorn smile still on her face, she told me the truth.

“Today is exactly one month since I made **a false confession to you on a dare.**”



It wasn't an accident like it had been before. It wasn't while she was sleeping. I was doing it of my own free will. Slowly, with my hand on her face, I touched my lips to her cheek.

“Yoshin...”

“I know we prayed to the gods, but...you and I will always be together, so there's no need for you to worry about whether we'll be able to stay together like this.”

Bonus Short Story

I Hope That from This Day Forward

If you asked me whether something changed after Nanami and I had ended our false relationship and started anew, I would have to say no. Then again, only a week had passed. Today, to mark our new beginning, we were going on yet another movie date. It was the perfect opportunity for a fresh start.

“It’s been a while since our last movie date, huh? Hasn’t it been like a month?” Nanami asked.

“Yeah, it’s been since our first date. We watched a superhero movie, didn’t we?”

We were slowly making our way toward the movie theater, holding hands as we walked. The theater was the same one that Nanami and I had visited on our very first date. It wasn’t somewhere I’d frequented before then—not that I’d frequented *anywhere* before, seeing as how I never used to go out at all.

Today, I was feeling an unrivaled sense of joy that Nanami and I were returning to our special place in the same shopping mall we visited so often.

“I’m pretty impressed you remember,” Nanami said with a smile.

“Oh, come on, it was our first date! Even I’d remember that. Wait, are you saying you don’t remember?”

“Of course I remember! I was super nervous back then. It was my first time watching a movie alone with a guy.”

Considering Nanami’s circumstances, it was only natural that our date together had been her first time doing something like that. At the time, I never would have guessed she wasn’t used to hanging out with guys. I suppose that was what made me a good match for her, given that I wasn’t used to hanging out with girls either.

Come to think of it, we’d come a long way. I mean, when I really stopped to

think about it, I was impressed that the two of us had even made it this far. If I'd told myself a month ago that I'd get a girlfriend or that I'd enjoy going out with her, I probably wouldn't have believed it. Even now, I could only half believe it. If someone told me to redo all the things I'd done this past month, would I be able to?

Looking at Nanami as she walked beside me with a smile on her face, I recalled everything I'd done, from getting confessed to, to asking her out on a date. I didn't know why, but for some reason, I felt even less capable of doing those things now that the dare was over.

They do say that every encounter in life is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, I thought, but maybe the actions we take are once-in-a-lifetime too. Actually, no. That can't be the right way to put it. I have no idea how to describe this feeling. Well, in any case, there are some things we can't bring ourselves to do once we think them through with a clear head. Everything I've done this past month would fall under that. I guess it's pretty important to make a move before it's too late.

I couldn't help thinking back to a month ago, to the very beginning of our relationship. Maybe it was because we were going on another movie date or because our anniversary was finally behind us and I was now feeling much more relaxed. On the other hand, if Nanami had ended up breaking up with me, I probably wouldn't have been able to stand remembering it at all. I'd tried playing it cool by claiming I would have been okay with her breaking up with me or that I would have been able to walk away for her sake. However, if she *had* actually done it, I probably would've been depressed for months. At least, that's how I felt.

When I'd first looked at it like that, I'd begun to realize just how precious our current situation was. In fact, I hadn't been able to stop feeling that way lately.

"So, what should we watch today?"

Nanami's question brought me back to reality. *Whoops—taking a trip down memory lane isn't exactly a bad thing, but I have to try to enjoy the here and now.*

"Hmm, I wonder. The sequel to that movie we watched before doesn't seem

to be out yet,” I said.

“We did talk about watching that together, didn’t we? Let’s watch it together next year then.”

Neither of us had come with any preconceived idea of what we wanted to watch, which was what made this date so different from our last. Since there wasn’t anything specific we wanted to see, we’d decided that we could chat about it and decide on our way to the theater. We also both wanted to try discussing it and making a decision together for a change, which was a new experience for the both of us. Talking about it en route to the theater was in and of itself a whole lot of fun.

Just then, Nanami mumbled, “Let’s not do horror though, since that’d be scary.” As she said it, her face twitched and lost its color as though she were remembering something. I felt her hand trembling a little in mine.

“Come to think of it, you said you weren’t that good with horror.”

Although she’d only mentioned it on our date last week, I remembered the conversation quite well. Nanami seemed pleased that I remembered. She giggled, her face returning to its usual color as she pointed her index finger in the air.

“I wouldn’t mind doing that challenge, though, where we watch a scary movie together and see which one of us has to grab hold of the other first,” she said.

I suppose we did talk about that too, I thought. I wondered why she’d suggest such a thing when she didn’t like scary movies. Maybe she was taking “till death do us part” too literally by having us experience something that could scare us both to death. I mean, I’d already told her I wasn’t that good with horror films either.

“Let’s not do that while we’re out though,” I said in the end.

“Oh? Does that mean it’s okay if we’re at home?” she asked, flashing me a toothy grin and poking me in the side. *I’m glad to see you’re having fun...*

Either way, if we were both bad with horror, then what was the point of seeing who would grab on to the other first? We would probably both end up squeezing the heck out of each other. *Besides, aren’t horror films usually...hm?*

I tried to remember the scary movies I'd seen in the past, but I couldn't seem to recall any. Then it clicked—it wasn't that I couldn't remember, but rather that...

"I've never seen a horror film before."

It was true. The more I thought about it, the clearer it became that I had no memory of watching a horror film in my life. I didn't even remember seeing one at home as a kid. I didn't really go out to watch movies in the first place. Even if I did, I went by myself by default. And, if I did go by myself, I tended to watch anime films that piqued my interest. It seemed, therefore, that horror films had never had the chance at sneaking their way into my life.

"What? Never? You've never seen a single scary movie in your life?" Nanami asked. Her former smile had turned into a look of slack-jawed astonishment. For a moment, I had the urge to see how she'd react if I stuck my finger in her open mouth, but I somehow managed to suppress it.

"Yeah, not once," I said.

"How is that even possible?!" she exclaimed.

Was it that surprising? I couldn't help it if that were the case.

In the face of my silence, Nanami, too, fell silent. With her hand on her chin, she began mumbling to herself, deep in thought. Then, suddenly, she raised her head and, with a very serious expression on her face, opened her mouth to speak. It was an expression that hinted at both resolution and desperation. *Uh, I have a bad feeling about this...*

I swallowed hard, wondering what she was going to say. The sound of me gulping reverberated through my head so loudly that I wondered if Nanami could hear it too. However, the moment the sound subsided, she spoke up.

"Then do you wanna try watching a scary movie today?"

Time stopped between Nanami and me, and my feet came to a halt. Nanami also stopped in her tracks, and she watched me with bated breath. I was the one that broke the silence.

"Wait, how did you come to *that* conclusion?" I barely managed to ask. It was

now my turn to feel my face twitch. Her unexpected proposal utterly confused me.

“I mean, how can you know if you’re good with scary movies unless you’ve actually seen one?” she asked.

“But why would you put yourself through that?!”

Nanami seemed entirely serious, but I couldn’t help shaking my head at her self-sabotaging idea. This was supposed to be our first date after our anniversary. Shouldn’t we be watching a more pleasant movie?

For some reason, though, Nanami was insisting we watch something scary together. She was so adamant that I nearly gave in, but I somehow managed to hold my ground. Still, since Nanami was acting so stubborn, I couldn’t help questioning her thought process.

“Why do you wanna watch a scary movie so much?” I asked. “You already said you don’t like horror that much.”

“Well, it’d be your first, right? I thought it’d be better for you to watch it on the big screen.”

“And the *actual* reason is...?” I said, narrowing my eyes at her.

Nanami very blatantly averted her gaze as a bead of sweat rolled down her cheek. “I kind of wanted to see you get scared but have to try to keep your cool because we’re in a movie theater,” she muttered.

Oh man, it was an even more outrageous reason than I’d thought. I mean, why would she want to see me get scared?

Casting me a sidelong glance, Nanami added, “I wanted to spoil and comfort you after we finished watching the movie.”

Wait, isn’t that even worse?

I wanted to punch myself for thinking, even for a moment, that being spoiled by her was an attractive idea. I mean, there were people around, for goodness’ sake! That said, getting spoiled at home probably wasn’t a good idea either...

“Why would you think of something like that?” I murmured, holding my head in my hands to shake off my own thoughts. Nanami seemed to think that I was

exasperated by her behavior and began to look a little panicked.

“Well, you know, it’s just that when I was little, my mom and dad used to comfort me whenever I saw a scary movie or a creepy scene. That’s why I thought it’d be better if I were close to you,” she explained.

“Really? I didn’t know you were *that* bad with scary stuff,” I said.

“Yeah. I’d get so scared that I wouldn’t be able to sleep at night, so I’d sleep together with Saya or with my parents instead.”

“Sleep together...”

With that simple phrase, I remembered the first night I’d spent together with Nanami. She seemed to be recalling the same thing, because her cheeks flushed as she looked at me. When our eyes met, we quickly looked away from one another. Sleeping with Nanami because I got so scared would be such a cliché... No, wait. I wasn’t going to stay over at her house today or anything.

I looked away without thinking, but memories from the night I’d spent with her swirled around in my head. And, now of all times, the item I’d received from the school nurse popped into my head.

Where did I put that thing, anyway...? Wait, wait, wait—hold it! Don’t even think about that! I flapped my hands wildly over my head, trying to waft away the thoughts floating around in my brain.

“Um, what are you doing?” Nanami asked.

“Nothing at all!”

Clearly suspicious of my behavior, Nanami tilted her head. *What’s that phenomenon where the more you try not to think about something, the clearer it becomes in your mind?*

“All right! Nanami, we’re gonna watch a horror film today!” I shouted.

“Whoa, that scared me! What’s gotten into you all of a sudden?” she asked.

I needed shock therapy. I needed to shock my brain so that these inappropriate thoughts would completely disappear. Otherwise, I’d be plagued by all sorts of distractions during our date.

Still, Nanami seemed excited by my proposal. I really couldn't understand her. Maybe she wasn't that bad with scary movies after all.

"Are you sure you're okay with this? We were looking forward to this date, but now we're gonna watch a horror film," I said.

"Oh, it's all good. I figure I should be okay if I'm with you. Besides, the main reason I wanna go is..."

Nanami was fidgeting, her voice full of hesitation. *Maybe she really does dislike horror*, I thought to myself. She looked up at me as she continued fidgeting.

"I wanted to share all your firsts with you no matter what."

As soon as she finished, she grabbed hold of my hand and began running in embarrassment. As I was dragged along, I asked myself, *Will I manage to get rid of these inappropriate thoughts?*



After the movie was over, we stopped by a nearby café. I would imagine that normal people would sit down and exchange their thoughts about a movie they'd just watched. That was probably how a typical date would go. We, on the other hand, didn't feel one bit at ease enough to sit there casually trading our opinions. Or, more specifically, Nanami didn't.

"Why? Why did it turn out like that?"

That was what Nanami kept repeating as she slumped over the table of the café, her face completely drained of color. She'd been unsteady on her feet even when we'd made our way from the movie theater, so I'd had to support her as we walked. Her eyes remained wide with fright and seemed slightly unfocused. Even her breaths came in short, shallow spurts. I'd ordered us iced teas in the hopes that a drink might help calm her down, but they were still yet to arrive.

"Are you okay, Nanami?" I asked.

"I'm no-kay..."

She's no-kay, apparently. Right. Well, to explain how things got to this, in

short...

“Why... Why... Why are you doing just fine, Yoshin?”

She'd asked me why three times. Actually, I wanted to know the same thing. I'd watched a scary movie for the first time in my life, but I'd come out relatively unscathed.

Nanami and I had ended up settling on something that just happened to be playing: a horror film from overseas. It had some fantasy elements to it, and although the mood throughout was somewhat dark, the visuals were pretty stunning. The music had a mournful quality. Fortunately, it featured very little guts and gore.

At first, I'd felt kind of overwhelmed by the whole atmosphere of the film, but the more I'd watched, the more I'd gotten sucked into the world it was building. By the time I'd realized it, my fascination with the story had beat out my fear. That said, perhaps the reason I'd managed to stay cool was because Nanami had been sitting next to me scared out of her wits. In any case, the story had been a really interesting one.

The whole time, Nanami had kept a hold of my sleeve, occasionally grabbing on to me when she jumped or getting teary-eyed when she tried not to scream out loud. Her expressions alone had been quite the show. I now understood perfectly well what she'd been talking about beforehand. What a discovery!

“Well, it was a pretty interesting movie,” I said in the end.

“Jeez, it was so scary. Seeing you acting all normal makes me feel like I've been duped,” she replied, continuing to writhe on the table.

When the iced teas I'd ordered were delivered to our table, Nanami sat up and quietly brought the drink to her lips. Sucking the amber-colored liquid up through the straw, she gulped it down with tiny motions of her throat.

The taste of it must have calmed her down. Sighing, she turned and glared at me through narrowed eyes. I smiled at her slightly and proceeded to drink my iced tea as well.

“Now that I think about it, maybe I have a tolerance for scary movies because I sometimes play horror games. I mean, I'm not the biggest fan of games like

those, but I still want to play them.”

“Ugh, I’ve been totally deceived. I never even thought about video games,” Nanami lamented.

It was true. Just because I didn’t like horror films didn’t mean I didn’t play horror games. I also enjoyed looking up urban legends. I supposed people’s tastes weren’t always straightforward. Still, I hadn’t expected to be as fine as I was. Maybe things would have been different if I’d watched some as a kid.

“You were right though. You never know until you watch it,” I admitted.

“I ended up getting scarred for life though.”

Seeing Nanami’s strained smile, I couldn’t help but smile awkwardly back at her. I felt like I hadn’t seen her shoot herself in the foot like this in a good while. With things being the way they were, I began to consider what we should do to change up the mood, but suddenly, Nanami apologized.

“I’m sorry, Yoshin. This was supposed to be a date for us to get a fresh start, but that’s all messed up because of me.”

It was true that maybe this wasn’t quite the way we wanted the date to go, but still...

“There’s no need to apologize. I mean, there are still so many things we don’t know about each other, and this whole horror film thing is something I didn’t even know about myself.”

Nanami raised her head and looked at me. I smiled at her and continued.

“It’s almost like in the month we’ve spent together so far, we were so focused on getting the other person to like us. But when I think that we’ll be able to just be ourselves around each other from now on, I feel like we’ll be able to have even more fun.”

I wasn’t sure if that had come out terribly well, but that was how I truly felt. Like I’d said, up till now, we had both been acting in ways to make ourselves seem most likable. We’d been making so much effort to keep from messing up and to show the other party our good side alone. Of course that was important too, but if we had to do that all the time, something in us would give out. And if

we hit a limit on our ability to be on our best behavior, our relationship would only fall apart in the end.

But from now on, things would be different. We already knew that we both liked each other. What was going to be important for us moving forward was to build a relationship in which we could continue to like each other while being our plain, old selves. To show one another our uncool sides, our weird sides, and even our slightly unpleasant sides, and to still continue liking one another... That was the kind of relationship I wanted to have with Nanami.

Even though I couldn't phrase it elegantly, I tried to explain all that to her. Seriously, I wanted to kick myself for not being able to articulate things better. I wished I were smarter.

"Yeah, you're right," Nanami said, nodding quietly at my comment despite my lack of eloquence. Maybe she understood what I was trying to say, despite my awkward way of putting it.

"That's why I'm glad we had today's movie date," I said. "You were so cute during the movie, and I even learned something new about myself."

"You have kind of a sadistic side to yourself, don't you? Maybe this is another side of you that I never knew before."

Nanami flashed me a sharp look, but when I shrugged a little in return, she burst out laughing. Her cheeks now regaining their color, Nanami continued laughing.

"Well, it was still nice to be able to be with you when you experienced one of your firsts. But I swear the next time we watch a scary movie, I'm not gonna mess up like this!"

"Why haven't you given up on watching them yet? We don't need to do that again, do we?"

"Because it's not fair that you didn't grab on to me once the entire time! I want you to get so scared that you have to hang on to me!"

Given that I'd been just fine during our earlier movie, I was pretty certain that the scenario she was envisioning would never happen. I'd had my suspicions, but Nanami seemed to have a pretty competitive side. Perhaps this was a new

discovery too. It made me slightly—no, *very* worried, though I had to admit this side of her was still fun. Thinking of what we might do on our future dates, I suddenly had an idea to propose to Nanami. It was something that linked back to what Nanami had said before the movie.

“Then from now on, should I spoil and comfort my girlfriend whenever she gets frightened after watching a scary movie?”

Nanami blinked once, then smiled happily as she burst out laughing. I couldn’t help laughing along, given how lame the suggestion had sounded. Once we’d both finished laughing, we continued our date.

Continued... That’s right, we were going to encounter all sorts of things moving forward, but even then, our relationship would continue. We could still stay together. I felt like that was the greatest happiness of all.

I hope that from this day forward, Nanami and I will always be together.



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An Introvert's Hookup Hiccups: This Gyarū Is Head Over Heels for Me! Volume 4

by Yuishi

Translated by Satoko Kakiyama Edited by Stephanie Buck

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