
Author • Yuishi
Artist • Kagachisaku
volume 2
An Introvert's
HOOKUP HICCUPS:
This GYARU Is Head Over Heels for Me!


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Prologue: A Slight Change in Us

It was the day after my successful first date with Nanami-san *and* my unexpected meeting with her parents—the day that marked a whole week of us dating. It was on that day, after school, that I got called into my teacher's office.

I didn't get called in because of poor grades or bad behavior; I got called in because of my relationship with Nanami-san.

Of course, I was a little taken aback at first, this being the first time I'd been sent for like this, but I was even more surprised by the fact that a student could be called in for their dating life.

Did even teachers keep up with the latest gossip? No, that couldn't be it. My teacher's face was serious.

Once we were alone together, he hesitated for a moment and then leaned in to address me.

"Misumai, I just wanted a quick word with you. You're not...being bullied by Barato, are you?"

"Excuse me?"

I couldn't help my dumbfounded response. What he'd said was just too unbelievable. How in the world had he gotten the idea that I was being bullied by Nanami-san?

No, wait. I guess to the people around us—especially to the adults—the fact that Nanami-san and I were spending time together could only mean that she must be bullying me somehow. That was how strange it was for us to be seen together. The fact wasn't really news to me, but it did sting a little to have it thrust in my face like this.

Nonetheless, I maintained my composure as I denied the possibility. "Nanami-san and I are in a very healthy romantic relationship, with no bullying of any kind. Dating isn't against school rules, is it?"

Well, I was *trying* to maintain my composure, but my words came out kinda uncontrollably, making it seem like I was trying to argue. *Wait, dating* isn't *against school rules, is it?*

Oh shoot, I'd said that all confidently without even knowing what the rules even were. But then, who actually looked up stuff like that? I figured that the best they could do was to prohibit sexual misconduct. My relationship with Nanami-san wasn't improper, and it certainly wasn't sexual either. Then again, maybe it *was* improper in a way, not that I could share that with the teacher.

"Is that so?" my teacher asked, unable to hide his suspicion. It seemed that no matter what I said, he just couldn't believe that she and I were actually dating. That...I couldn't blame him for. But I insisted that there was absolutely no bullying involved.

In fact, in the second half of our conversation, I spent more energy trying to convince him that Nanami-san and I were actually going out than I did trying to deny any bullying accusations. It was beyond embarrassing having to sit there telling him about all the things she and I were doing as a couple. *Why in the world am I having such a TMI moment with my teacher?* I wondered, but despite my misgivings about sharing all those lovey-dovey details, I was desperate not to accept such slander against either of us.

After all my efforts, the teacher sighed with relief. "I see, so that's what it was. My apologies for the offensive question."

With that, he bowed to me deeply.

I wasn't at all accustomed to having an adult apologize to me, so I ended up getting more flustered. At the same time, I couldn't help feeling dissatisfied—I mean, if my words alone were enough to convince him that Nanami-san wasn't bullying me, then I wished he hadn't thought to suspect she was in the first place.

It seemed the teacher had noticed my look of mild frustration, because he smiled wryly and took a moment to explain. "You see, some of the other teachers became rather concerned after your episode in the nurse's office. They thought that perhaps you were pretending to date in order to hide something."

“Oh... Is that right?”

“I realize that it was just a rumor, but since someone raised that possibility, I had no choice but to follow up on it.”

Since the circumstances were somewhat peculiar, rumors like that were to be expected. At least I finally understood why he’d called me in here to ask about bullying.

“And you know, maybe I shouldn’t say this, but...” The teacher hesitated for even longer this time, but he spoke to me sincerely. “The two of you are, um...quite different types of people, you know? And you didn’t seem to interact much before all this, so I guess I worried that you started associating with one another for an unsavory reason.”

He may have chosen his words carefully, but I really felt he was saying all this in good faith. We were, after all, “The Gyaru” and “The Introvert,” who truly hadn’t so much as spoken to one another before any of this had happened. It was only natural for the teachers to find that peculiar. But this also meant we couldn’t have them finding out the *actual* truth.

We’re actually only dating because of a dare.

It was sad that they were more likely to believe that truth than that we were going out for real, but we absolutely couldn’t let them find out. *There’s no reason to tell them, so I might as well keep my mouth shut. Silence is golden, after all.*

Even so, the fact that someone would consider Nanami-san bullying me felt like an insult to her.

“Nanami-san is truly kind and sweet. I’m lucky to be going out with her.”

The teacher’s eyes widened at my sudden remark.

“I even got to meet her parents after our date yesterday. There’s nothing sketchy going on between us, so please don’t worry.”

My tone was much more forceful than I’d intended; the teacher blinked a few times in astonishment. Yeeeah, there was definitely no need for me to keep talking about how great our relationship was, but I just couldn’t help myself.

Perhaps because he'd never seen me act this way, the teacher grinned a little.

"It seems she's been a good influence on you," he said, finally reassured about the circumstances behind our relationship. "Despite the way she presents herself, Barato's attitude in class is excellent, and her grades are even better than yours. I know she's not the type to get mixed up with unsavory things like bullying, but as your homeroom teacher, I just had to ask. Once again, I apologize."

He bowed to me a second time. *I guess being a teacher is harder than it looks.* Still, his incessant apologies unnerved me a little, making me feel somewhat guilty myself, so I apologized back for having been so direct.

And with our exchange of apologies, my meeting with my teacher came to a close. However, as I was leaving, the teacher called to me one last time.

"To think you'd go from being so reserved to speaking your mind so easily! It probably wouldn't hurt to have Barato tutor you with classwork too. Her grades are top-notch, you know."

Had I really changed that much? I didn't feel any different. Still, I had no idea Nanami-san's grades were that good. Maybe I really *should* ask her to tutor me.

I bowed to the teacher as I left his office and headed back toward the classroom. Would Nanami-san even still be there? I'd told her to go on ahead without me, but she'd said she'd wait so that we could go home together. My "short" diversion had taken longer than I'd expected, so I picked up the pace so as not to keep her waiting any longer than necessary.

When I finally reached the classroom, I took a moment to steady my breath and reached for the door handle. But just as I was about to open the door, I heard voices coming from inside. I froze, overcome by a mild sense of déjà vu. The only difference was that the door had been open last time, while this time, it was closed.

"I *so* didn't expect you to go for a total introvert like Misumai. I mean, for real, did you just pick his name out of a hat or something?"

"Did you know that the guys Nanami rejected before are now on this weird 'introvert' kick because they think that's somehow more popular with girls?

Seriously, guys are so dumb.”

“But don’t the guys who were always introverts seem way cuter? But come on, why *are* you dating Misumai? Does he have cash to blow or something?”

The voices I heard were all female—but none of them belonged to Otofuke-san or Kamoenai-san. Were these more of Nanami-san’s gyaru friends? I didn’t recognize any of them, but all the girls seemed to know me. Their teasing comments came one after another, including many that made fun of Nanami-san.

I guess that’s just how it goes. I mean, she’s going out with me*, so of course they’d say stuff like that.*

We were as far as a couple could get from being a good match. I already knew that, but hearing it like this, it was obvious. That’s why I felt kinda sorry for Nanami-san, but...I couldn’t hear her objecting. The girls continued, speaking their minds without interruption.

They weren’t insulting either of us *per se*, but they were quite eager to compare me with guys Nanami-san had rejected in the past. And all the while, I just stood there, frozen outside the door, listening. Everything they said was true.

I wasn’t tall.

I wasn’t good-looking.

I wasn’t rich, and I wasn’t particularly good at sports or academics.

I could only be described by all the things I lacked.

The girls weren’t trying to insult me—they were just curious about why she’d chosen *me*—but even so, I couldn’t help feeling just a little bit bummed. Besides, what did Nanami-san think of all this?

I quickly gave up trying to guess and resolved to head into the classroom when I heard Nanami-san speak up for the first time.

“Well, all I can say is that compared to all of the guys who asked me out, Yoshin is hands down the best.”

I felt a shiver run up my spine.

The girls all laughed, oblivious to Nanami-san's slight transformation, but she simply ignored them and carried on.

"That's why I confessed to him. I guess compared to Yoshin, those guys are all so...*ordinary*."

Hearing Nanami-san's assertion that left no room for debate, the other girls grew silent for a moment...and then burst out laughing. Their laughter alone implied the utter ridiculousness of thinking that I was better than those other guys. Yeah, even *I* wanted to tell Nanami-san that that was a touch too far...

"And besides..."

Nanami-san continued chatting with the girls, her tone completely different from before. Earlier, too, her voice had sounded deeper and more serene than I remembered it, but now it was like the voice of an entirely different person.

Her words carried a kind of allure and sexiness that made everyone in the classroom grow silent. This wasn't like the silence that had preceded their laughter earlier. No, this was a silence that came from them being completely captivated by Nanami-san.

I couldn't resist cracking the door open to peek inside. The opening was such that I could just catch a glimpse of Nanami-san's face—which bore a look that I'd never seen before.

Re-crossing her legs, Nanami-san began to explain. "When Yoshin takes his shirt off...he has an amazing body."

Nanami-san?! I just about choked on air, but Nanami-san didn't stop there. No one could stop her.

"So much so that, once you've been held by him, you can't possibly think about anyone else holding you. Don't you think guys like that are hot?"

Her expression was just as sensual as her voice. With that bewitching smile on her face, she looked so irresistible, I couldn't take my eyes off her.

The girls around her had likely never seen Nanami-san like this before either. They sat there in silence, with bated breaths. Some of them, swallowing hard and blushing, looked as if they, too, were as in awe of her as I was. She looked

so beautiful in that moment that words couldn't have possibly described her.

Yes, she was undeniably alluring, but... *Nanami-san, why are you telling them such a bare-faced lie?* I'd only shown her a glimpse of my upper body, and even that had been completely unintentional. Plus, I'd only hugged her to comfort her, not in order to do anything more like she was implying. *And even then you were all red and embarrassed about it, Nanami-san! I mean, you weren't the only one...*

In that moment, I felt like I'd glimpsed a very scary side of women. But perhaps I could also interpret it as an angry response to the other girls saying all that stuff about me. By now, the room had grown pretty quiet, so I took that as my cue to head inside.

I made extra noise as I opened the classroom door, calling out to Nanami-san as I entered. "Sorry to keep you waiting, Nanami-san. We're all finished up, so shall we get going?"

"Yoshin!" Nanami-san exclaimed, greeting me like her usual, bubbly self. "Jeez, took you long enough. I waited for you for sooo long, will you treat me to some ice cream as a reward? I think I want a monaka one." Her expression had blossomed into her usual, bright smile, as if I'd only imagined her sensuality a moment ago. She got up and hopped over to my side, pouting a bit as she took my hand.

Nanami-san, you're teasing the girls too much. Now they're looking at me *funny too...*

"I'll see you all later, girls. Bye!"

"Oh, um, thanks for keeping Nanami-san company while she waited for me. See you around, everyone."

Nanami-san and I took each other's hand and said our farewells as we left the girls behind. Our fingers immediately intertwined, as if we were showing off just how intimate we were. Nanami-san had initiated it so unexpectedly that I had a hard time keeping my cool.

"See you guys tomorrow..." the girls mumbled in a daze, waving after us as they watched us leave.

After we'd walked some distance from the classroom, I turned to Nanami-san and whispered, "So, why were you saying such nice things about me earlier?"

"Oh, you were listening?" Nanami-san stuck her tongue out at me and smiled like a little girl who'd been caught mid-prank. There wasn't a hint of the allure around her that had radiated from her moments earlier—she truly looked like an innocent child.

Where in the world did she learn to look like that?

"It's just that no one else seems to get how awesome you are! That's why I thought I'd give them a little hint of your various charms. You really should be praising me a little more for going through all that trouble."

She swung around our linked hands in a large semicircle, looking at me with a sidelong glance.

"All right, I get it. Thank you. But I really don't know what various 'charms' you could have possibly shared. Besides, I really only need you to know any of that stuff."

It was true that she'd stood up for me, which I felt it was important to thank her for. Even so, her valiant efforts probably weren't going to change other people's evaluations of me. *More importantly, there won't be any weird rumors going around now, right?* Though I supposed the only thing that mattered was that I could be with Nanami-san.

All of a sudden, I noticed that our surroundings had grown silent. Wait, why wasn't Nanami-san saying anything? She was looking down at her feet, her cheeks flushed.

"Seriously, why are you always like that? How can you say something like that so casually?"

I had to stop and think for a moment to figure out what she was referring to. *Oh, right. I get it.* I hadn't thought much of it, but I guess it *was* a cheesy thing to say. It seemed I was more easily influenced by others than I thought.

We fell silent as our eyes met, but soon we were both laughing. Nanami-san squeezed my hand. It tickled a bit, but the warmth of her hand was soothing.

When I looked at our hands, linked like those of lovers, I couldn't help recalling our date from yesterday. I'd taken her hand, and today, she'd taken mine. Now that I thought about it, I was pretty impressed that I was able to do that at all.

Nanami-san seemed to be in an excellent mood as she hummed a little song about ice cream. She really did seem like an innocent child.

After that first date, our relationship seemed the same as ever, but it had also changed slightly. I couldn't really decide if that change was for better or for worse. Actually, it might be for the worse, given how much my heart was pounding, but I wanted more than anything to believe it was for the better.

"Speaking of which, where did you, um, learn to act all sexy like you did earlier? I was really surprised," I said.

"Oh, that? It's no big deal. I was just channeling my mom."

"Have you seen her look like that before?"

"Well, you know, now and then. Actually I was hoping you'd come back sooner, 'cause I was getting kind of embarrassed." Nanami-san blushed and smiled shyly. It was true—all the girls *had* been in awe of her.

"In that case, I'll present you with an ice cream as a reward."

"Yay! Let's split it!"

Seeing her get so excited about ice cream made me smile. Her joy really made my small gesture worth it. Of course, I wasn't thinking a gift of ice cream would be enough to thank her for all she was doing for me, but even if it was just a drop in the bucket, I wanted to do something to show her how I felt. I wanted to grasp every opportunity I had to do that.

Chapter 1: An Unexpected Meeting

It had been three days since my date with Nanami-san had gone off without a hitch. Well, perhaps there had been a few hitches, but I was pretty sure it had gone well nonetheless.

I had been called into the teacher's office the next day, but nothing really major had happened since then. All things considered, we should have been enjoying our days of peace, but that wasn't how things were developing.

Not that I could honestly say that things *weren't* peaceful. No news was good news, and things really were quite calm. But the small change I'd felt the day after our date couldn't just be my imagination. How can I put it...? It seemed that, well... Nanami-san seemed way more assertive, so to speak. Maybe I *was* just imagining things, but it certainly *felt* like her behavior had changed since our date.

First, there was the way we held hands on our way to school. Before now, we had just held hands normally, my hand cupping hers and vice versa, but after our date, we'd begun only holding hands in the way that lovers do—you know, the one where you intertwine your fingers.

I know I'd done that when I'd gone to her house too—in front of her parents, no less—but who could've imagined that Nanami-san would start doing it of her own accord and *all the time*? She sure was setting the bar high for someone like me. I mean, just because I'd done it once didn't mean holding hands with her like that would become any easier. But even with my hesitation, Nanami-san would tilt her head and follow up with another blow.

"Do you...hate it?"

"Not at all."



My response had been immediate, with zero hesitation. Of course I didn't dislike it! If I had any reason to hesitate, I would've rejected the very idea of holding hands like that in the first place. It was just that...the psychological bar presented to me was an entirely different issue.

A man's heart is complex and delicate, indeed... No, maybe I was just a wuss. In the end, I'd ended up holding hands with her despite my inner turmoil, but I still wondered if I'd ever get used to it.

I knew Nanami-san had changed, but I also felt like I was changing too. But was all this change a good thing? What kind of results would these changes bring about? It was no use thinking about it now, but what was happening to us felt both scary and surprisingly comfortable.

As for the looks from the other students as we made our way to school... I dare say they needed no explanation at this point.

The changes weren't limited to just the way we held hands. My bento now included dessert. It wasn't store-bought either—it was handmade specially by Nanami-san.

When I told her I felt bad about having her make me both lunch *and* a sweet treat, she had told me not to worry about it because making the dessert was something she'd been doing with her mom.

When I'd made a face like I didn't quite understand, she'd explained that her mom wasn't much of a morning person, so it was Nanami-san's job to make breakfast and prepare the family's lunches in the morning. Apparently, this used to be her dad's job, but nowadays he, along with her younger sister, mostly just lent Nanami-san a hand. All the other housework was then done by Nanami-san's mother, who was a full-time housewife.

And that, Nanami-san had explained, was how housework was divided up among her family. That was why Nanami-san had told me not to worry about the whole dessert thing—because apparently Tomoko-san did the prepwork while Nanami-san was at school, and when she got home, the two would make it together.

But although she'd explained it to me like it was no big deal, I couldn't help

myself worrying.

“I do it because I like it,” Nanami-san had said with a smile—but boy, I really did have to step it up for our next date. If only I could decide where to take her...

Finally was the last change—perhaps the biggest change of all. It was a little embarrassing to think about, perhaps because it could all be my own imagination or self-consciousness, but...

I realize this preamble is getting a bit long, so let me just get to the point. It hadn’t actually happened yet, but Nanami-san...seemed to be trying to kiss me on the cheek.

I mean, really. Maybe it *was* just my imagination. But it just seemed like there had been very, very little physical distance between us lately, and whenever the mood got kind of romantic, she would look at me all expectantly. Slowly, she’d lean in closer, and I wouldn’t be able to move. But in the end, she’d just turn all red and freeze. Then she’d just sit there, her eyes glued to my cheek. The fact that her attention didn’t seem to be focused on my lips was very Nanami-san, but that’s beside the point.

Please stop! This is too embarrassing... No, wait. I don’t really *want her to stop. But her continuing on like this is...* That was the cycle of complicated emotions that I’d been going through lately. Given the sudden shift in Nanami-san’s behavior, I could almost hear her leveling up before my eyes—accompanied by the appropriate sound effects from a certain tokusatsu work.

“...So that’s how it’s been lately. What do you think, Shibetsu-senpai?”

“You sure have some gall asking me that, knowing that Nanami-san flat-out rejected me. It’s to be respected, I suppose...”

It was lunch break, and on this rare occasion, I was hanging out with Shibetsu-senpai. Since I’d come to see him, I thought it was a good opportunity to seek his advice. Nanami-san was currently with Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san—most likely gossiping about any developments in our relationship.

“Though, since you’ve given me such a wonderful gift, I suppose I have no choice but to help out...”

Shibetsu-senpai was holding—very preciously, I might add—a clear cellophane bag filled with sweets. They were sweets handmade by Nanami-san—cookies for today's dessert. I'd come to see Shibetsu-senpai in order to share some with him.

I know it wasn't quite the dish I'd promised him, but even knowing I lacked the generosity to match his, I still wanted to keep Nanami-san's cooking my own special privilege. So, as a compromise, I'd suggested giving sweets to him instead, and he'd gladly agreed.

When I'd brought the idea up with Nanami-san, she hadn't seemed to mind at all. In fact, she had also accepted, and quite willingly, at that.

"*You're right. We have to thank senpai for helping make you look so cool. Yeah, it's important to thank people*," she'd said, smiling and clenching a fist of determination.

I'd been so certain that she would resist the idea, I was taken aback by her response. But even that couldn't have readied me for what she'd said next.

"*And...being considerate toward your surroundings is important for when I become a wife...*"

I was pretty sure she'd only said that to herself. But no matter how quiet that mumble had been, the words had traveled straight to my ears. It seemed I wasn't destined to be the protagonist who struggled to hear things...

My cheeks flushed the moment I heard her. *I have no idea how I'm supposed to respond... Please, someone, help me...*

Since I couldn't very well pretend I hadn't heard her, I said, "I'm a lucky guy for having such a thoughtful wife"—to which she responded by blushing and slapping me on the back multiple times.

I wanted to believe I'd made the right choice, at least. Even the pain in my back where she'd slapped me had felt reassuring. And no, I was not a masochist.

With that settled, Nanami-san had baked a few extra cookies for Shibetsu-senpai. She really was speedy when it came to things like this.

And here I was, having presented the cookies to him.

At first, Nanami-san had offered to give them to our upperclassman herself, but that was when a side of me that even I hadn't known about had surfaced. I'd told her that I didn't want her giving handmade treats to a guy other than me. I never thought I could conjure up such an embarrassing display of possessiveness.

I know I should be more generous, but considering the other side of me that had no interest in sharing Nanami-san's cooking, I never knew that I was such a jealous type.

I'd been kind of scared that she might be turned off by my jealousy, but Nanami-san had just blushed and conceded—and so, here we were.

Narrowing his eyes, Shibetsu-senpai sighed and responded in an exasperated manner. "You asked me what I think, but you're enjoying all this, aren't you? I don't see what the problem is."

In fact, it wasn't that he did so in an exasperated manner—he *was* exasperated.

"I am kind of enjoying it, but I'm not sure how I'm supposed to respond..."

"Hmm...neither do I!"

Well, that was quite the declaration.

Senpai was fiddling with the bag of cookies I'd given him, but rather than eating them, he continued speaking. Even with the preface that this was just his personal opinion, he answered my question with sincerity. "Based on what you've told me, it seems like you're starting to panic 'cause Barato-kun's making shot after shot. She's pulling further and further ahead, which is making you anxious, and that anxiety is wiping out your composure."

He'd translated the situation into basketball-speak, but for the most part, he was correct. Right now, I was receiving so much from Nanami-san that I wasn't sure if I'd be able to repay her. This wasn't a relationship on an equal footing. I was taking so much, my heart was starting to ache.

Shibetsu-senpai seemed to have seen right through me. When he next spoke,

his voice was a bit more gentle. “It’s especially at times like these that you have to remain calm and take your time with your next shot. The more anxious you feel, the more composed you must aim to be.”

“More...composed?”

“That’s right. That’s how you make an upset possible.”

So we’re still talking about basketball, huh?

But he was right about the fact that I’d been behaving a little bit off lately. Nanami-san and I weren’t playing a game of basketball. This was really just my one-sided challenge. It was the biggest challenge of my life—to get Nanami-san to like me.

Despite that, I felt like I was only taking from Nanami-san, and I was starting to panic at the thought that there was no way she’d come to like me if I kept this up.

Yeah, it was a good thing I brought this up with Shibetsu-senpai. Talking to him made me feel a little calmer—until he dropped a bombshell, that is.

“That’s why you should be the one to kiss her. On the cheek will do, but on the lips would be just as good.”

I felt a burst out of dry, empty laughter escape me. *Wow, that was such a classic move. I didn’t realize people actually did that when they were surprised.*

“What are you saying, senpai?!”

“I just figured that if you’re aiming for an upset, that would be the only way to do it.”

He says it like it’s no big deal. This is why good-looking guys are so hard to talk to! I wouldn’t be in this dilemma if I could do that in the first place. I was completely flustered and useless just *thinking* about a kiss—doing it in real life would be damn near impossible.

That was when I realized that Shibetsu-senpai was still fiddling with the cookies. *What’s going on? Is he not going to eat them?*

“By the way, Misumai-kun, can I ask you something this time?”

“Um, sure, go ahead. If it’s something I can answer.”

“What should I do with these cookies? I want to eat them, but I also want to treasure them.”

“Please eat them. If you want to keep them, why not just take a photo?”

Shibetsu-senpai looked at me as if I’d blown his mind, and then proceeded to take photos of the star-shaped cookies. I, too, had taken photos of my cookies before eating them.

I looked at him out of the corner of my eye as I sat there scrolling through the photos. The cookies that *I’d* gotten from Nanami-san had been shaped like hearts. *Nanami-san always does stuff like this with zero hesitation. Jeez, it makes me so happy.*

Shibetsu-senpai soon finished taking his photos and began eating the cookies and getting deeply emotional. “Aren’t you eating too, Misumai-kun? Would you like half of mine?”

“Oh, no. I’ve already had some. Those are all for you.”

“Is that right? Then I don’t mind if I do.”

I smiled at my upperclassman for being so thoughtful, but then I remembered something. *Whatever happened to senpai finding his next love? He’s so bowled over seeing the cookies Nanami-san made him, does that mean he’s not completely over her yet? No, that couldn’t be it. But...maybe I should check, just in case.*

“So...how’s your search for love going, senpai?”

“Ah, love. About that: I’ve given up looking,” he said bluntly through a mouthful of cookies.

Huh? What happened?

Seeing the suspicion on my face, my upperclassman smiled reassuringly, sporting a cookie crumb on one corner of his mouth. Even that didn’t detract from his dashing good looks. Life was so unfair.

“Oh, I’ve no lingering feelings for Barato-kun, so don’t you worry yourself,” he said. “I’ve decided to focus on basketball for the time being.”

“Huh? What happened?”

“I realized when I lost that match to you that I’m not ready to think about things like love and relationships.” He tossed another piece of cookie into his mouth and looked up at the sky with a faraway gaze.

Um, no, we can’t say you actually lost that game. The result was mostly down to me pulling cheap tricks.

“My dream is to become a professional basketball player,” he said. I’m pretty sure the fire in his eyes wasn’t an illusion. “But in playing against you, I realized I still lacked the devotion and diligence to achieve that. So...love is on hold, for now.”

As I watched him speak so passionately, I came to a sudden realization.

So that’s *why the girls in his class glared at me when I came to give him the cookies! That was seriously scary! Senpai, I only won because I damn near cheated. There’s really no need for you to be so stoic about this.*

But seeing him like this also made me somewhat envious. This guy’s heart and soul belonged solely to basketball. There was nothing I felt so passionate about, so I felt genuine respect for him.

Things were a little different now, though. I’d been able to find something I could be passionate about. But if the upperclassmen girls were upset with me for making Shibetsu-senpai uninterested in dating, that might cause problems for Nanami-san too. Shibetsu-senpai was pretty popular, and I didn’t know what kind of revenge they could concoct, so I thought it best to try to remedy the situation a little.

“That’s no way to think, senpai,” I said sharply.

Shibetsu-senpai returned my remark with a suspicious look, the cookie in his hand frozen inches from his mouth. There were quite a lot of cookies, but he was prepared to go through them all. He remained still, awaiting my next words.

I took a slow, deep breath and opened my mouth with a serious expression on my face. “We become stronger when we have something to protect. That’s why I believe you should strive for both love and basketball.”

“What do you mean, Misumai-kun? Go on.”

All right, he took the bait. Maybe I can pull this off.

“Let’s imagine it’s the final quarter of the game. You’re exhausted, but it’s gonna take just one more shot to turn everything around.”

Shibetsu-senpai closed his eyes, picturing the scene. *Whoa, is he actually starting to sweat? His mind must be completely absorbed in the game.*

“At that moment, if you heard your girlfriend cheering for you from the stands, don’t you think that that would give you the strength you needed, right then and there?”

Shibetsu-senpai was mumbling something while fumbling with his hands. His body assumed the same posture as the day when he showed me all those free throws. And, after demonstrating an absolutely splendid form, he slowly opened his eyes.

“Hmm... I see. Perhaps you are right...”

Shibetsu-senpai remained still, as if ruminating on the situation he’d imagined. I gave him one last nudge.

“Of course, there’s no need to force yourself to be with someone, but I don’t think there’s any reason for you *not* to be with someone either. If you like someone, I don’t want you to miss out on the opportunity.”

My upperclassman listened to my words in earnest. His expression made me feel a bit guilty, but this really was how I felt.

“You’re right,” he finally said, nodding a few times. “I felt like that situation really did give me strength. In that case, there’s no need to force myself to find someone, but if I do come across someone I like...I hope you’ll let me come to you for advice.”

For better or for worse, he was very simpleminded... At least with this, both Nanami-san and I wouldn’t be subject to any retaliation from our female upperclassmen.

But that wasn’t all. Senpai and I had met under strange circumstances, but he was actually a very good person. I really did want him to be happy. That was

why I didn't want him to get hung up on his loss against me and miss the chance to fall in love with someone.

I knew what I'd said had been very self-centered, given that I'd taken Nanami-san from him, in a way. *But being asked for advice by senpai himself seems like way too hard of a task for me. Even so, I'll do my best to offer support.*

"It's funny, though," Shibetsu-senpai said thoughtfully. "You said the exact same thing as the manager of our team. Maybe I'm making other people worry about me."

"Your manager? Is she a girl by any chance?"

"Yeah. She's a tall, quiet, and kind girl who looks out for me. I hope she meets someone nice as well."

Um, how should I put this...? Let's just say I felt relieved that he might be able to find his next love sooner than we thought.

After that, I parted ways with my upperclassman and went back to meet up with Nanami-san. She was already back in the classroom, chatting with Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san.

"Nanami-san, I gave the cookies to senpai. He seemed really happy. Thanks again for doing that."

"O-Oh, yeah? Good. Yeah, really, that's good."

As she looked up at me, I noticed her face was red, and Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san were grinning. "Did you two say something weird to Nanami-san, by any chance?"

"Huh? I don't think we said anything weird, did we? Though we did ask her one or two things," Otofuke-san said.

"Oh, yeah we did! Enjoy your walk after school, 'kay?" Kamoenai-san added.

Kamoenai-san, you definitely said *something to Nanami-san, didn't you?*

Our lunch break ended just as I was trying to ask for details, so I would have to wait for another time to interrogate her. In the end, though, school finished before I could learn what they'd talked about, but as we were leaving, Nanami-san spoke up.

“Hey, Yoshin, would you...come grocery shopping with me today? My mom asked me to pick up stuff for dinner...”

“Oh, yeah, of course. Should we go to the mall we went to the other day?” I’d heard that Nanami-san’s mother usually picked up ingredients for dinner during school hours, but maybe she’d been busy today.

“Uh, yeah, and, um...do you want to get boba together too?”

“Boba? You mean those...round, bubbly things?”

“Yeah. You’ve never had it before, right? There’s a boba place in the mall. The hype around it has kinda died down, so we probably don’t have to wait in line for too long.”

So this *is what those two were grinning about...*

There was such a contrast between Nanami-san’s appearance and the way she kept stealing glances at me while bashfully fidgeting, that I couldn’t help feeling overwhelmed by how adorable she was. It was such a cute, modest request, there was no way I couldn’t honor it.

“Sure, let’s go for it. If it’s something you want to do, I’m happy to do anything at all.”

She smiled at me brightly, looking a mix of happy and relieved.

Gosh, I’d be happy to fulfill requests like this anytime... Nanami-san really is the cutest. All right, I’m gonna treat her to boba. That’s something a boyfriend should do.

But just as I was thinking such grandiose thoughts...

“And let’s, um, get different flavors, and, uh... Let’s trade a bit, okay?”

For a moment, I didn’t quite understand what she’d said, but when I finally did, my face turned a deep crimson.

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After school, we made our way to the mall—the same one we’d visited on our movie date and bought our ingredients from for our gyoza dinner. This time, we were at a completely unfamiliar place inside—though to be specific, I was the

newbie of the two of us.

The shop before us was clearly going all out on their aesthetic, with rows and rows of colorful little descriptions of its trendy products.

“Come to think of it, I’ve never had boba before,” I said to Nanami-san.

“Really? I thought that might be the case.”

“Yeah. I didn’t feel like getting in line back when it was really popular, and it wasn’t like I had anyone to come get it with.”

“Then it’s your first time! I’m really glad to be your first.”

“Nanami-san, that sounds a bit...”

...questionable. I wasn’t sure if she knew what she was really saying, but since she was blushing, it felt even more awkward.

You should probably think before you speak, Nanami-san. Then again, maybe I’m the one over*thinking it.* Nanami-san was looking at me quizzically. *No, she wasn’t thinking about what she’s saying. It was a total accident. Well then, I should just drop it.*

After having picked up ingredients for dinner, the two of us were standing in front of a boba shop, or whatever you’re supposed to call it.

The lines had been unforgivable back when boba had been all the rage, but now you only had to wait a little bit to order. Even so, the fact that you still had to wait at all suggested that, even though it was no longer the latest thing, boba had become a part of everyday culture. Still, just a little while ago, I couldn’t have even imagined coming to drink it myself.

Earlier, I’d told Nanami-san that I didn’t feel like lining up for it, but to be honest, I didn’t feel like drinking it even if I *didn’t* have to line up. What would I have done if Nanami-san and I had been going out when boba was super popular? It probably wouldn’t have felt like a chore to me, to be honest. In fact, I could imagine myself even *enjoying* standing in line with Nanami-san there—not that there was any point imagining it.

Still, I’m sure some couples really enjoyed the time they spent waiting in line together. In that sense, I was grateful that the boba shop was still around even

after the boom. Just me being able to think that way was a surprising change.

Since I'd never had boba before, I went for the standard milk tea version. I wasn't quite sure how I was supposed to ask for it, so Nanami-san helped me out. I felt kind of out of place here, but Nanami-san seemed to be having a good time.

Nanami-san herself ordered something called an orange tea. Its vivid orange color really was stunning to look at. Even the boba inside was deep orange instead of black, bobbing about like small jewels at the bottom of the cup. It really did look like something girls would be drawn to.

As a side note, I paid for both of our drinks. Nanami-san wasn't happy with the idea, but when I told her that I'd already paid for them, she had no choice but to accept. Given that she was making me bento and desserts every day, I wished she would let me at least return the favor. That being said, even her reluctance was a part of her charm.

I took another look at Nanami-san holding her orange tea. Its beautiful, transparent orange color matched Nanami-san to a T. I had to admit it was different from the idea I'd had of boba, but the image before me looked as beautiful as a painting. I can only curse myself for being unable to find the right words, but I don't think it's an overstatement to say that the image was one that deserved to be captured and forever preserved.

"Nanami-san, can I take a picture?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah. Sure, go ahead." She proceeded to hold the boba drink out closer to me.

I pointed my phone at Nanami-san and took a full-body shot, capturing the boba drink in her hand and the beautiful smile on her face. It was a great photo—the perfect background for my phone.

"Huh?" she said suddenly.

"Hm?" I responded.

Nanami-san, who'd seemed stunned for a moment, came closer to look at the photo and then let out a yelp of surprise. "What the...?! I thought you were just taking a photo of the boba! Why'd you get me in it?! I had no idea, so I didn't

even pose or anything! I don't look cute at all!"

Um, I did mean I wanted to take a picture of you, but... Maybe, since I took pictures of her bento all the time, she had assumed I'd wanted to take a photo like that this time too. In that case, maybe I *had* ended up misleading her somehow, even if I hadn't meant to.

It seemed Nanami-san wasn't a fan of the photo I'd taken. I looked into my phone, pouting a little. I liked this photo a lot because she looked so natural, without any kind of put on expression or gesture.

"But look," I said, "the orange really suits you. Beautiful, no?"

"B-Beautiful? You mean the boba?"

"I mean you."

Nanami-san's cheeks flushed red at the words that had popped out of my mouth. I felt my cheeks getting hot as well. *Seriously, what am I saying?*

"I thought I'd make this the background for my phone, y'know?" I said, flustered by my own words. "I kinda realized that, even though we're going out, I don't have any pictures of you. Don't worry, you look really cute and really natural."

Nanami-san fell silent and looked down at the ground.

I honestly thought the photo captured all of Nanami-san's best features. That's not to praise my own skills as a photographer or anything; I'm talking about the model herself. I couldn't make it my lock screen, because then my parents would see it, so I'd just have to set it as my wallpaper.

"Jeez... Then I'm gonna take a picture of you too and set it as my background! But you're right. Why haven't I taken any photos before now? I wasn't even thinking. Anyway, strike a pose, Yoshin!" Nanami-san commanded, albeit confusedly.

I couldn't possibly strike any worthwhile pose... In the end, I settled for holding the boba in one hand and standing there like a normal person.

Nanami-san blinked at me, utterly unconvinced.

Yup, that's a no-go.

“Yoshin, can you, um, do something a bit more interesting? Here, make a little peace sign!”

“Huh? A Peace sign? L-Like this?”

I smiled uncomfortably, holding up two fingers of my cup-free hand. I was pretty sure I looked like a total idiot.

Yeah, Nanami-san was smiling painfully too. I must have looked awfully weird. Stepping so far out of my comfort zone like this just wasn’t for me. But then her expression twisted into the smile of someone who’d thought of some wicked prank.

As I stood there questioning her expression, Nanami-san stepped up to me and stopped at my side.

Huh? What happened to the photo?

Nanami-san paid me no mind and instead turned to face in the same direction I was looking. She then brought her face close to mine—close enough for our cheeks to touch. Actually, our cheeks *did* touch, and I could feel the softness of her skin on mine. I had no time to react as she extended her hand. She positioned herself, and I heard the camera shutter click.

“Huh?!”

“All right, I got it! I got a picture of us both!”

Seeing Nanami-san all excited about her photo, I was finally able to move. The movement was sudden, like a character in a game jerking into motion after posing for a long time. I inadvertently turned my face toward the excited Nanami-san, completely forgetting the fact that her face was right next to mine.

I’d meant to turn my whole face and body toward her in order to look at her, but I hadn’t even thought about what would happen if I did. And as a result... Um, this is hard to admit, but my lips touched Nanami-san’s cheek lightly—just slightly, but they definitely made contact with her cheek.



I thought I heard the sound of my lips touching something very soft. I immediately pulled back, but the soft sensation of her cheek remained there.

“Huh?”

Nanami-san looked at me, unsure of what had happened. Then, slowly, she raised her hand to press it against cheek. “Um... Uh...” she murmured, staring at me with her hand in place.

I looked back at her, unable to say anything either.

Oddly enough, at that moment, I realized that I’d ended up kissing her on the cheek. It was just as Shibetsu-senpai had said.

Senpai, how was I supposed to know that your words were a red flag for what could actually happen between me and Nanami-san? No, wait. Maybe I should be thanking you instead. Thank you for planting in me the seed of this wonderful accident.

All jokes aside, though—what was I supposed to do now?

The air around us felt both awkward and warm at the same time. Neither of us spoke, and for a while, we simply stared at each other in silence.

With the background noise of the mall buzzing in our ears, Nanami-san looked at me suggestively. She took a step closer—just one step—when a familiar voice cut through the buzz.

“Yoshin? What a coincidence. And who is this young lady?”

A chill ran through my body. The voice was so unexpected, it made my mind snap back to reality. But I knew that voice. It was a woman’s voice—a voice that I heard almost every day. And aside from Nanami-san, there were only two people who called me by my first name. This was the voice of one of them.

Yup, it was my mother’s voice.

“Mom? And dad’s here too?”

“Huh? Your parents?!”

When I turned my head with a slow motion that would often be accompanied by the creak of a rusted toy, I saw my parents standing there: my mom, Shinobu

Misumai, and my dad, Akira Misumai. They were holding hands and carrying shopping bags.

Wait a minute... Mom, dad, what are you doing?

My mom must have noticed the direction of my gaze, because she lifted the hand linked to my dad's and made a gesture to show me. "What, this?"

How am I supposed to react to that, mom?

"We just happened to get off work around the same time, so we decided to go on a little shopping date. We do it once in a while. You didn't know?"

I'd had no idea. I'd never heard about it, and even if they *had* told me, I wouldn't have known how to react.

"Isn't it natural to hold hands with the person you like? Oh, and by the way, we're having ginger pork for dinner."

"Honey, I don't know if we should be saying things like this to our son."

As usual, my mom was maintaining her straightforward gaze while unhesitantly expressing her love for her husband. My dad, on the other hand, held his head in his hand that still held the shopping bag.

My mom was a "kudere": the kind of person who seems cool on the surface but is very generous in their affections with the people they like. Not that I want to categorize my mom into pop culture tropes, but if I had to, she'd be that.

She always looked calm on the surface while telling my dad how much she loved him. The two were also very touchy-feely at home. My dad always wholeheartedly received my mom's romantic gestures, but it seemed that today, given that they were out in public, he was actually a little embarrassed. That might also have been because I'd seen them holding hands. That was also the reason I didn't leave my room that much. When the two of them were home, they were usually hanging out together. I didn't want to intrude.

"So, Yoshin." Still maintaining her piercing gaze, my mom lifted her shopping bag hand and pointed straight at me. "Who's this young lady you were kissing on the cheek? If you were kissing her without her permission, I'm afraid I'm going to have to teach you a lesson."

Dang, you saw that? How am I supposed to get through this?

Actually, now that I thought about it, there was no need to lie to them about anything. I was just kind of embarrassed because I'd never gone out with a girl before, and they knew that. Now that we were all here, I figured there was no choice but to suck it up and let them know that I was dating Nanami-san. To hell with being ashamed of it.

"Actually—"

"That's not it!" Nanami-san suddenly cried, still holding her boba as she bowed to my parents. "He didn't kiss me without permission, I swear! I'm, um... I'm Nanami Barato, and I'm dating Yoshin-kun!"

My mother tilted her head. She tilted it so much that I thought her neck might break. "I see. Are you one of those rental girlfriends? I thought high schoolers were too young to sign up."

Why in the world do you know about stuff like that, mom?!

In any case, my mom didn't seem to understand what Nanami-san was saying, as she was uncharacteristically perplexed. That wasn't surprising, considering I, of all people, had gotten myself a girlfriend, not to mention one that looked like a total gyaru. If I had been in her position, I probably wouldn't have believed it either. It was almost as unbelievable as hearing that my mom or my dad had had an affair.

"I'm for real! I'm Yoshin-kun's actual girlfriend!"

Desperate to have my mom believe her, Nanami-san copied my mother and held up my hand, fingers interlocking, to show it off to her. When my mom saw this, she dropped her shopping bags with a loud thud. She must have been *really* shocked. I didn't often see my mother act like this.

My dad, on the other hand, was looking at my and Nanami-san's hands and nodding as though impressed.

"Um, real?" said mom. "Yoshin's girlfriend? We, uh... We shouldn't be standing around here like this. Maybe there's a café somewhere. Oh, but you both already have drinks, so maybe we can't take them in. What should we do? Um, well, uh... Let's see..."

My usually cool-headed mom was, on this rare occasion, visibly perplexed. Her sentences were nearly incoherent. I hadn't expected me having a girlfriend to come as *that* much of a shock. I don't think I'd ever seen my mom so shaken. Well, I guess I knew how she felt. It wasn't like I'd ever had anything to do with girls.

"Take it easy, dear," dad said. "I think there's a food court nearby, so let's talk there. Would the two of you be okay with that?"

In complete contrast to my mom, my dad was surprisingly calm, albeit the shaking hands. Maybe he was only able to be that way because my mom was so out of it.

"Y-You're right. I got a little carried away. I'm sorry. Would that be okay with you both?" asked mom, who seemed to have regained some of her composure after dad's intervention.

Nanami-san and I both nodded in silence. We had no reason to say no, and even if we did, I would only be interrogated when I got home anyway. Having Nanami-san here would make things move along way more smoothly, or so I hoped.

Nanami-san and I had only been trying to enjoy our boba together, but now look what had happened. I felt bad for Nanami-san, who'd invited me.

"Nanami-san, are you okay? It's totally okay if you want to say no. I can just explain things to them when we get home."

Truth be told, I really would've appreciated her being there when I told them, but if she didn't want that, I couldn't force her. But Nanami-san shook her head at my suggestion, her eyes filled with determination.

"No, I'll go with you," she said. "It was the perfect timing, anyway."

"Perfect timing for what?"

Nanami-san hesitated for a moment and then turned to me with a serious expression. "The thing I wanted to ask you today was whether you'd let me introduce myself to your parents next weekend."

The determination in her eyes had become even bolder.

Wait a minute. What did you just say? Introduce yourself*... Nanami-san, you were thinking about something like that?* I admit I was surprised to hear that. At the same time, something clicked in my head—*so* this *was what Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san were grinning about.* They'd probably already heard from Nanami-san that she wanted to meet my parents. Dang it, I felt like I'd been had.

"Actually, I wanted to dress a little nicer so that I could make a better impression. I totally didn't expect to meet them here today."

Nanami-san looked at her uniform and smiled awkwardly. It was altered to suit her typical gyaru style, with her skirt rolled up and more skin showing than the dress code really allowed. She seemed to be worried that her outfit had given my parents a bad impression, but what she said next ended up concerning me more.

"I guess it can't be helped... It must be karma."

She said it in only a soft, soft whisper, perhaps not intending for me to hear. Even so, my hearing was pretty good. I clearly heard what she said—her words that expressed both regret and repentance as her expression was tinged with sadness.

Karma. *She was probably talking about the dare.*

I could only pretend that I hadn't heard her, and to help calm her down. I squeezed her hand to reassure her and smiled softly. "It's totally fine. They'll see how nice you are regardless of what you're wearing. They're my parents, so you have nothing to worry about."

"Yoshin..."

"Besides, even if they do say something because we're kids, they're probably not gonna stop us from dating."

"Yeah...thanks."

That's right. Nanami-san was a good person regardless of what she wore, and I trusted my parents to be the kinds of people who wouldn't judge a person by something so shallow. Everything was going to be fine, right? They'd been shocked and all, but...

I trust you, mom and dad.

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Once the four of us had made our way over to the food court, we picked a table toward the edge, where only a few people were sitting around. Nanami-san and I still had our drinks, while my mom and dad bought themselves bottled teas.

As if to calm themselves, the two of them gulped down half the bottles and then let out simultaneous sighs. Then, with their nerves put somewhat at ease, they looked at us—or rather, they looked at Nanami-san.

“Please allow me to introduce myself properly. I’m Yoshin’s mother, Shinobu Misumai. It’s nice to meet you, Barato-san.”

“And I’m his dad, Akira Misumai. It’s a pleasure, Barato-san.”

“The pleasure’s all mine. Please, call me Nanami!”

My parents bowed, and Nanami-san, who seemed a little nervous, followed. Unsure what to say, I just sat there, watching them in silence.

However, when I saw my parents, I opened my eyes wide in shock. Both my mom and my dad had tears welling up in the corners of their eyes.

“What’s wrong?! Why are you both crying?!” I exclaimed.

Despite my shock, my parents didn’t even bother to hide their tears before speaking up again.

“I mean, we’d always thought our son had no interest in dating, but here he is, dating such a lovely young lady. It’s like a dream,” my mom said.

“Yeah, we’ve never really spoken about it, but I never thought I’d see a scene like this. It’s the pinnacle of happiness for a father,” my dad added.

It seemed that, despite our concerns, my parents had both accepted Nanami-san the moment she’d introduced herself. That was great on its own, but I wished they’d stop mentioning my lack of a dating history. I mean, seriously. That said, I realized this really *was* the first time they’d seen me with a girl.

“In any case, weren’t you guys a bit too quick to believe we were going out? I

mean, it's a lot better than you doubting us, but..."

Even though they did believe us, their reaction had been far too dramatic. How little did they think of me for them to be so happy that I had a girlfriend?

"What are you talking about?" mom asked. "She wasn't angry with you when you kissed her on the cheek; you two were holding hands like lovers; and even now, you're holding her hand in secret, trying to reassure her. How could you two *not* be dating?"

Nanami-san and I jumped in surprise. How the hell did mom know that we were holding hands under the table? She had probably seen through the gap between the tables when she'd bowed to Nanami-san earlier. My mom sure was sharp.

But she was right—I guess it was less likely for someone *not* to believe that we were going out, given the stuff they'd seen. I mean, the kiss was just an accident, so I wished they wouldn't bring it up. I especially didn't need to hear about it from my parents.

Whether they knew how I felt or not, my parents' attention seemed to be focused only on Nanami-san.

"Barato-san... No, Nanami-san, I know our son has many faults, but I do hope you'll look after him," my mom said to her.

"I know I'm biased as a parent, but I think our son's second to none when it comes to kindness and sincerity. Please, do stay good friends with him," my dad chimed in.

Again, my mom and dad bowed in unison to Nanami-san.

Nanami-san seemed flustered, unable to figure out how to respond, but after taking a very deep breath, she smiled. It was that same kind smile of hers I loved.

"Of course. Yoshin-kun is a wonderful person."

I turned to look at her. Even now, I just couldn't get used to being praised in such a straightforward manner. I was a little embarrassed.

"He's very kind, and he always eats the lunches I make for him and tells me

that they're delicious. Even without all that, he spends loads of time with me. That alone makes me feel happy and fulfilled."

"Lunches, you say?"

Oh, shoot. I'd been keeping Nanami-san and I's relationship a secret, so of course I'd kept the bento thing a secret too.

Yikes, my mom's gaze was piercing right through me. That was a look she gave when she'd locked on to a target. It was a look of anger.

Well, of course she'd be angry. I'd brought this one upon myself. I instantly gave in and decided to tell them everything.

That Nanami-san made me bento every day.

That I'd put the lunch money my parents gave me toward our dates.

That our dates were a way for me to thank Nanami-san for cooking for me.

That I'd met Nanami-san's parents after our first date.

So yeah, I basically told them everything.

"I hope you're prepared for a lecture when we get home, Yoshin," my mom said.

"Understood."

Hearing my mother's thunderous voice, Nanami-san jumped in to defend me. "It was all on me, I swear! I wanted to do it, so please don't be angry with Yoshin-kun."

As I sat there, moved by her angelic kindness, I noticed that my mom seemed even more moved than I was.

"Nanami-san, you're such a nice girl. You're almost too good for this son of ours. Yoshin, you'd better not let Nanami-san go at all costs. If you make her sad or cheat on her, I'll be on her side, whether you're my son or not."

"I'd never do that. I even promised her parents I'd protect her and never hurt her. Nanami-san is the most attractive girl there is, so of course I'd never cheat or betray her."

"Good. As long as you're committed, then you have your mother's support,"

mom said.

I was glad she already approved of Nanami-san. In fact, it seemed as though she were more interested in supporting my girlfriend than in supporting me.

Relieved, I looked over at Nanami-san and saw her blushing. What's more, dad was telling her something in a whisper.

"Shinobu— Uh, my wife and Yoshin have very similar personalities. Once they've set their mind on something, they're more committed than anyone else. They have a very straightforward way of expressing their emotions," he told her.

"I... I think I have an idea what you mean."

Huh? I'm like my mom? I had no idea. And how did Nanami-san know that?

"Don't worry, you'll get used to it sooner or later," he said.

"You think so? He's always making my heart race..."

"Well, I admit that I'm not entirely used to it either. More often than not, Shinobu has the upper hand."

"I know the feeling."

"I guess it's not a bad feeling though. Oh, and of course, as a father, I'm rooting for you both."

My dad and Nanami-san were giving off a weird sense of solidarity, laughing together as though they'd found a comrade of similar circumstances. I was glad the two of them were getting along so well, but did I really have to believe I was similar to mom? Did I say embarrassing things like she did? I was gonna have to be careful from now on.

Anyway, I hadn't realized my dad wasn't used to my mom's way of showing affection. Though I guess I do always see him looking like he was getting knocked off his feet by my mom. And they were always so lovey-dovey together.

Nanami-san, you look like you're totally convinced by what dad's saying, but I feel like you're always the one making my *heart race. Why are you agreeing with him so much? I guess we're gonna have to talk about that at some point.*

“Speaking of which, Yoshin, if you really do like Nanami-san, then surely you can tell us what you like so much about her? I can list dozens of things I like about your father.”

“I’ll tell you all the things I like about Nanami-san, no problem, but please let’s not do it here, mom. We’re out in public. There are other people around,” I said, trying to rein my mother in.

“Hmm, you’re right. I got a little carried away. I apologize.”

With her finally under control, we decided to end things there.

Wow, I’m so glad that everything turned out fine. We’d only come to get boba, but things had taken quite the unexpected turn. I told myself I’d have to make it up to Nanami-san sometime.

“Well then, shall we give Nanami-san a lift home? We’d love to say hello to your parents as well, Nanami-san,” said dad.

“Oh, no, please don’t worry about that,” Nanami-san responded.

“We can’t have that. Even if we didn’t know, we’ve been very rude not to thank them for everything.”

My dad stood up and took out his car keys. He’d probably said all that with the ulterior motive of admonishing me. He glanced at me and smiled. I’d never thought about it, but I guess my parents thought I hadn’t been thoughtful enough. I supposed he was right in a way.

As I stood up, still reflecting on my actions, I looked over toward Nanami-san and my mom to find them exchanging contact information. I know I’d exchanged contact info with Genichiro-san too, but was this normal? Was this, like, the normal thing to do? I was too afraid to ask them who had asked to do so first. It was totally a different culture from mine.

My mom, oblivious to my inner thoughts, was looking at Nanami-san with a kindly gaze. “Nanami-san, I know this is a lot to ask, but I do hope you’ll take good care of our son. If anything happens, please don’t hesitate to let us know. We’ll be there for you.”

“Thank you, Shinobu-san. I’ll be in your care as well. And please leave Yoshin-

kun's lunches to me!" Nanami-san straightened her posture and tapped her fist against the center of her chest. It seemed she was getting pumped up about all the bento to come.

"If you're up for it," mom added, "I'll send you some photos of Yoshin when he was little. If you have any requests, do let me know."

"I would *love* that!"

What kind of creepy deal are these two making?! Dammit, should I ask Genichiro-san for old photos of Nanami-san? No, I don't think I have the guts. Besides, I'm not even sure how to ask. He might even get upset.

Unbeknownst to my frustrations, my mom and Nanami-san were hugging each other as though they'd come to some kind of an understanding. Seriously, I'd barely taken my eyes off of them, and now they were hugging.

My dad and I watched them and smiled, then left the table to throw away the trash.

I guess it was good that they were getting along. Maybe I was in denial, but I should just leave it at that.

"But Yoshin," dad said as he was dealing with the trash, "even if Nanami-san *is* preparing lunch for you, what are you going to do about tomorrow night onward?"

Tomorrow night? What does he mean? Is he talking about dinner?

"What do you mean? Is something going on?" I asked.

"We were going to talk with you about it once we got home, but both your mother and I are going to be off on fairly long business trips starting tomorrow."

Every now and then, my parents went off on considerably long business trips. *It must be tough being an adult. Thanks for all the hard work.*

"Wow, that's pretty sudden. How long will you be gone?" I asked.

"About a month or so. You'll be home alone during that time. Maybe it's a good opportunity for you to learn to cook for yourself."

It was rare for dad to say something like that. Not so long ago, I probably would've brushed it off as too much trouble, but now...

"You're right. I can't just eat toast and cup noodles every day. Maybe I will give it a go."

When Nanami-san and I had cooked together that time she'd come to my house, it had turned out surprisingly fun, although that *was* probably because I'd been cooking with Nanami-san. But dad was right in that them going away was a good opportunity to learn a thing or two. That way, in the future, I'd be able to return the favor to Nanami-san. Perhaps bringing each other dishes for lunch would even be fun, despite the difficulty.

Yeah, that's a good idea. My next goal should be to learn how to cook. I'd already managed to clear Shibetsu-senpai's kissing goal, even if that had been a total fluke.

Just then, I realized Nanami-san was standing behind me. My dad and I spun around in surprise. Mom was just as alarmed by Nanami-san's speedy approach.

"I'm sorry, but I overheard... Did you say the two of you aren't going to be at home starting tomorrow?" Nanami-san asked.

My dad seemed a bit taken aback by Nanami-san's forceful questioning, but even so, he managed to respond. "Oh, uh, right. My wife and I are going to be away for a while, so I'm afraid Yoshin will have to take care of himself during that time."

"Is that right?" Nanami-san held her hand to her lips, seemingly considering my dad's response. From time to time, she'd look at me sideways, but she remained silent while deep in thought. She seemed to be having a hard time putting her thoughts into words, because several times she would begin to speak before immediately closing her mouth.

My dad and I, as well as my mother who'd made her way over, patiently watched her.

After another minute of so, Nanami-san made a fist and, as though to encourage herself, mumbled a small "okay!" She then turned to my parents to

address them.

“Um, while the two of you are away...” Nanami-san paused, taking a deep breath. Then, as if to express the air that she’d inhaled, she said her next words very clearly. “While the two of you are away, would it be all right if I visited Yoshin-kun at your house and cooked dinner for him?”

Huh? I froze. *That’s what you were thinking?*

Both mom and dad were equally stiff, taken aback by her suggestion. It seemed Nanami-san was getting a little bit out of control.

Interlude: Her Feelings

It had been a week since Yoshin and I had started dating, and so far, it had been pretty smooth sailing. Even if everything *had* started with a dare, this past week had been really fun for me. This was my first time going out with someone, so I'd had a little trouble here and there, but even so, I was enjoying myself the whole time.

Of course, it hadn't *all* been fun and games.

That day, after our first date, I'd had a chat with mom and made up my mind—I would try my best to like Yoshin even more and get him to like me more too. I knew I was being selfish, dishonest, and cowardly, but I wanted to at least make an honest effort in my relationship with him.

That was what I'd decided that day, but right now, I was alone.

Well, I wasn't *alone* alone, since I was with my friends, but I couldn't help but feel that way when they were saying all these mean things about Yoshin.

When I looked objectively at the scene unfolding before me, I had to take a moment to reflect. *Did I used to say things like this too?*

None of my friends meant any harm. They were probably just going with the flow, since it was fun to joke around about this sort of thing, but still, I wished he'd get back soon.

Yoshin had been called all by himself into the teacher's office. I wondered if something had happened and figured I'd have to ask him later.

I'd chosen to wait for him because I liked walking home together, but then everyone had huddled around to ask me what was going on. It was fun to chat with them and all, but the comments targeting Yoshin were kinda getting to me. I know I used to say the same sort of things in the past myself, but still, I couldn't help how I felt.

I thought that maybe—just maybe—I should try to improve their image of Yoshin a bit. It's not like I wanted him to get *too* popular, but I at least wanted

them to know how cool he was.

Still, if I told them in the way I always said things, they'd probably think I was just kidding around. But then I realized—if I talked the way my mom had talked that one time, it might work. She'd sounded captivating. If I could do that too, I'd be able to change the way I came off. I just had to try to sound a little more provocative.

Am I getting the smile right? What about my voice?

The moment I said it—everyone grew silent.

Huh? What happened? What's with the change in mood? Why had everyone gone quiet? I hadn't said anything weird, had I?

At that moment, Yoshin had returned to the classroom, so we'd ended up leaving together. I never really did figure out what had happened. Well, if people understood how cool Yoshin was, that was enough to make me happy. I just hoped that all that talk wouldn't make him popular with the girls.

As I stood there recalling what had happened in the classroom, Yoshin interrupted my thoughts.

"So which flavor do you want, Nanami-san?"

Oh, that's right. He's treating me to ice cream.

"Let's go for one of the monaka ice creams. Oh, this new red bean-flavored one looks yummy!"

"Okay, then I'll go get this one."

Yoshin made his way to the checkout with the monaka ice cream in hand, while I stood next to him watching excitedly. It wasn't the ice cream I was happy about. I was happy about something else.

"Here you go," Yoshin said as he handed me the ice cream.

"Thanks! Here, let's split it."

All this time, I'd been looking forward to splitting the ice cream with him.

He took his half from me bashfully, and we ate together as we walked home. The ice cream tasted a hundred times better than when I usually had it.

When he'd asked me to make extra dessert for Shibetsu-senpai, I'd thought it was really sweet of him—so much so that, at the time, I'd ended up mumbling something about becoming a good hostess when I became Yoshin's wife. I thought I'd gotten away with it at first, but as it turned out, he'd totally heard me, and I'd ended up slapping him on the back out of embarrassment.

Fortunately for me, Yoshin had been happy about what I'd said, and I'd been able to thank Shibetsu-senpai for helping out Yoshin with our first date. All things considered, maybe my sense of discomfort around guys had eased a bit.

Yoshin had given me a lot. Every day, I was surprised at the changes in me. Everything made me so happy, and I wished these days of happiness would never come to an end. And in the midst of these days of happiness, I was planning to ask Yoshin for one thing. Although I knew it was a selfish request, I wanted him to let me meet his parents.

Yoshin had ended up meeting *my* parents due to a combination of various coincidences, but in the end, my family had all accepted him. That was why I wanted to meet his parents too.

I had no idea whether they'd accept me. First I just wanted to meet them, and I wanted to be able to apologize to them with all my heart. That, too, was an important step for me.

When I'd talked with Hatsumi and Ayumi about it, they'd told me to go for it.

"*You're gonna go introduce yourself as a potential bride, huh?*" they'd asked teasingly.

That's not it! I just want to meet them and introduce myself as his girlfriend!

The two of them had smiled at me as I'd shouted back at them, but this was their own way of encouraging me. I didn't tell them about the conversation I'd had with my mom, though. Now I was keeping a secret even from the two of them, but it was my own problem, so I couldn't help it.

I was going to get even closer to Yoshin, and I wanted him to feel closer to me too. I was probably feeling a little anxious too, which was why I was gonna ask Yoshin to let me meet his parents, or so I thought.

But I never would've guessed that I would get to meet them *before* I'd even

brought it up with him—especially not while Yoshin was kissing me on the cheek, even if that was an accident. I can't stress how unexpected *that* was.

The place where his lips had touched still felt all hot and tingly. He'd totally caught me totally off guard when I hadn't at all been mentally prepared for a kiss. And it was when I was subconsciously taking a step toward him to make my request that I saw them.

Yoshin's parents were holding hands and acting all lovey-dovey. I didn't think I'd seen even my parents holding hands before.

As it turned out, they were both really kind people. I was scared of his mother, Shinobu-san, at first, but she was very pretty and spoke in a way similar to Yoshin. She expressed her love for her husband calmly, simply, and with zero hesitation, making me envious of her ability to be so straightforward. She was the very definition of what it was to be both cool and beautiful—the exact opposite personality type to my own mom.

Would Yoshin be happy if I wore glasses and acted more like Shinobu-san, or would he not?

Before parting ways, Yoshin's mother and I exchanged contact info, and she offered to send me pictures of Yoshin when he was a kid. I was glad that it seemed like we'd get along.

But then I overheard Yoshin talking to his father.

Wait, are they saying his parents aren't gonna be home? Won't that be lonely for Yoshin? As soon as I thought that, I steeled my nerves and proposed an idea to them—an idea that seemed to shock everyone except for me.

Chapter 2: A Little Courage and Just the Right Words

“Oh my. I don’t think that would do.”

Upon our arrival back from our shopping trip, we came face-to-face with Nanami-san’s mother and her words of disapproval. I mean, that was the expected response, wasn’t it? I wasn’t the least bit surprised, but Nanami-san was pouting in disagreement. Even my parents had expressed reluctance at Nanami-san’s request.

Both sets of parents had arrived at the conclusion that, although it had already happened once, it wouldn’t be appropriate for two high schoolers to continue meeting up at home every single night for so long. As for the one time that it had already happened, I was going to get a real talking-to from my parents—but that was another story.

Even so, Nanami-san had hung on and even managed to move the conversation on to getting the okay as long as both our parents gave their permission. Nanami-san was quite the negotiator. I wouldn’t have been able to do that.

But as you’ve already heard, Tomoko-san hadn’t given her permission.

That was the story up until now.

“But, mom, you said you’d support us!”

“That’s got nothing to do with this,” Tomoko-san said. She was smiling, but in a way that let you know that she wouldn’t be changing her mind. Arguing was probably a bad idea. “I said I’d support you, but of course I wouldn’t allow two high school students to be alone together every evening.”

Nanami-san was still pouting with dissatisfaction, but I had to admit that I, too, agreed with Tomoko-san. Though, to be clear, that wasn’t because I didn’t want to spend time with Nanami-san.

Of course, I was grateful for Nanami-san’s suggestion. Not only would I have been able to spend every evening with her, but I’d have also gotten to enjoy her

cooking. I couldn't think of anything that would make me happier. The problem was that it would be *every* evening. I was pretty sure I wouldn't be able to handle being alone with her every night—mainly in terms of maintaining my sanity.

Even during that one evening we'd spent together, I'd almost ended up hugging her from behind. But this would be every night—*every night*. I knew I'd end up making a grave error at some point. There was no way in hell I would be willing to risk that. I just couldn't be the one to hurt Nanami-san.

I was starting to feel like Nanami-san was getting used to being around me. Plus, even my teacher had said she was a positive influence on me. I wasn't about to let my actions soil her reputation.

As a side note, only after having spoken to my parents about it had Tomoko-san expressed her disapproval.

At first, my parents had seemed a little taken aback by Genichiro-san, but now the three of them were chatting and laughing, so it seemed my parents, too, were pretty adaptable when it came to unexpected situations. That meant that Tomoko-san alone was the target of persuasion. Maybe that power dynamic was common across many households.

"I'm happy to support you as long as you stick to the proper boundaries of a high school-appropriate relationship. But you're right; maybe we should clear things up a bit first." Tomoko-san tilted her head and she looked over at my parents. "You mentioned that both of you will be out of town because of a business trip, is that correct? For about a month, you said?"

"That's right. My wife and I will be working in different locations for about a month, and we'll only be able to make it home when we can catch a break," my dad replied.

"This is the first time in a while that we've had to go away for so long," my mom added. "In the past, my husband and I never had to go away at the same time, but even then, I'm sure we've made Yoshin feel quite lonely with one of us away."

She really didn't need to take this so seriously. Of course, at first, there were moments when I had felt lonely, but on the whole, I would just stay home and

play games anyway. Now that I was in high school, even that loneliness was all but gone, so there really was nothing to feel so bad about. They were working in order to provide for me, so I had nothing but gratitude for my parents—not that I had the gall to say that to them directly.

Next, Tomoko-san shifted her gaze to Nanami-san. It seemed as if she were smiling a bit more than a moment ago. “And you want to cook dinner for Yoshin-kun. Is that right, Nanami?”

“Yeah, because Yoshin can’t cook... I mean, I shouldn’t be fudging this.” Nanami-san shook her head once and then brought her hands to her chest, turning a serious expression to her mother. “I just want to cook for Yoshin. I want him to eat more and more of the food I make. That’s how I feel.”

Nanami-san’s been thinking about that?

All the adults in the room let out a sigh of admiration. I couldn’t bear the look my parents were giving me, so I told myself to forget about that look for now. Still, I really appreciated Nanami-san’s generosity, and I felt myself wavering on the issue.

With my hesitation and my gratitude at war with each other, I was about to give Nanami-san some backup when Tomoko-san finally turned her gaze to me. “And you would like to take this opportunity to learn how to cook. Is that right, Yoshin-kun?”

Her question to me echoed what I’d told my dad earlier, so I answered instinctively. “Yes, I’d like to learn how to cook, and I’d like to be able to cook for Nanami-san too, so, um...”

That was when I remembered the looks I’d received earlier.

My realization came too late. I’d forgotten that my parents were there and accidentally blurted out the truth. My mom and dad’s grins were even broader than before and were...not looking at me. Wait a minute...

They were looking at me, deeply moved, with tears in their eyes. These looks were different from the teasing ones they’d been shooting me earlier.

“Having a girlfriend really changes you,” my mom said softly.

“I never imagined that Yoshin could become so mature,” my dad added.

This was *so* embarrassing.

I never thought they’d be so moved by something as insignificant as me wanting to learn to cook. Their teasing grins had been more manageable than these ones. When I looked up, I saw that even Nanami-san was looking at me with deep emotion in her eyes.

Yeah, I would’ve been a lot happier if we’d had this exchange when it was just the two of us. As things were, this was too embarrassing, and it was my own fault.

Tomoko-san nodded in satisfaction, then clapped once as if to shift the mood around us. The refreshing sound echoed throughout the room, and everyone’s eyes focused on her.

“Then why don’t we do this?” Tomoko-san smiled, pointing her index finger. She seemed to be enjoying herself. “While the pair of you are away, why don’t we have Yoshin-kun come eat dinner at our house? He can cook with Nanami when he’s over.”

Tomoko-san’s idea incorporated both Nanami-san’s and my requests. It fulfilled Nanami-san’s desire to have me eat more of her cooking, and my desire to learn how to cook. Nanami-san’s eyes sparkled at her mother’s suggestion, but was this really okay?

While I couldn’t help but be troubled, I saw that my parents, too, had looks of concern on their faces.

“I don’t think we should be troubling you that much,” my dad said.

“I agree, that’s too much,” my mom added.

My parents’ reaction was completely natural. Even though Nanami-san was my girlfriend, asking her and her family to do so much for me felt wrong. I’d been thinking the exact same thing, but then Tomoko-san bowled us all over.

“Oh, it’s completely fine! Besides, won’t it be good practice for their future life as newlyweds?”

My parents stared at Tomoko-san with a look of sheer bewilderment.

“Pardon? Newlyweds?”

“Oh, perhaps you haven’t heard from Yoshin-kun yet.”

Tomoko-san was smiling as if she were having the time of her life. She looked like a child who could barely contain herself with the happy news she was about to share.

When I saw that innocent smile of hers, I felt a chill run up my spine. But before I could stop her, Tomoko-san was telling my parents all about my apparent marriage proposal. She even added gestures and started reenacting the scene with Genichiro-san. Even if I asked her to, there was no way she would stop.

Genichiro-san, I’m pretty sure my voice was nowhere near as seductive as that. Please don’t exaggerate what I said. And why are you so good at acting, anyway? You’re definitely not an ordinary office worker, are you?

Good lord, at the very least, please don’t do this when the individuals in question are in the room! Even Nanami-san is turning red.

I wanted to run so far away, but there was no way to escape. And so, the farcical reenactment continued.

When the performance finally ended, my parents, especially my dad, were grinning like crazy. My mom looked as cool as a cucumber, but her eyes betrayed her amusement.

Get me out of here!

“If that’s the case, then we’d be really grateful if you’d look after him. Of course, we’ll pay for the added cost of his food.”

It seemed my parents were now in allegiance with Tomoko-san, as they were bowing to Nanami-san’s parents. Nanami-san’s parents, too, bowed in return.

Dazed, I could only watch the scene. I felt as though my soul had left my body.

“You shouldn’t worry, since we’ll all be family eventually. Though, I suppose if I were in your position, I’d feel like I should pay as well, so I’ll accept your offer with gratitude.”

I was relieved that we could finally bring this debacle to a close, but as it

turned out, it wasn't over yet. Genichiro-san just wouldn't leave it alone.

"When you return from your business trip, let's all enjoy a meal prepared by the happy young couple," he said to my parents.

Who in the world are you talking about, Genichiro-san?!

I could feel my soul returning to my body. I knew I had to say something, but what? If I denied proposing, then we'd open up a whole can of worms about me not wanting to marry Nanami-san. But if I didn't deny it, they'd start planning our married lives together.

All things considered, I decided it best for me to keep silent.

From there, our parents began discussing things by themselves. They started by talking about food costs and then moved on to talking about the work they all did; and then they split into two conversations—one between the two mothers and one between the two fathers. It was territory that Nanami-san and I couldn't step into. As a result, she and I ended up just sitting there.

As I was wondering what to do, Nanami-san came up with a shocking idea.

"Should we head up to my room, Yoshin?" she asked.

"Huh?"

"Mom, dad, we're gonna go to my room. Let us know when you're done chatting!"

While I was speechless from shock, Nanami-san proceeded to take my hand and tow me toward her room. Tomoko-san and Genichiro-san gave us the okay and waved us off.

How are you both cool with this?! Your daughter is taking a guy to her room!

If they were going to allow this, what had been the point of their earlier discussions about high schoolers being alone together? Were they just showing me that they trusted me not to do anything funny? I mean, not that I *could* do anything like that. Both our parents were there. Heck, I couldn't do anything even if they *weren't* there.

Now that I thought about it more calmly, the situation seemed much different. Perhaps I'd been more flustered than I'd realized.

The door to Nanami-san's room had a little sign that said "Nanami" on it in hiragana. It was a heart-shaped wooden sign that looked to be handmade.

"Ah, I made that in art class back when I was in elementary school. I would take it off, but my mom said it's cute, so she wants me to leave it there."

Looking a bit bashful, Nanami-san invited me inside.

For the first time in my life, I was about to enter a girl's room. *How should I enter?* With my heart pounding, I stepped inside.

There was a voice-over playing in my head, narrating that historic step. The accompanying background music felt excessively grand.

And the first girl's room I stepped inside—Nanami-san's room—was very cute. It was very cute indeed, like night and day compared to my own room. I'd thought it might be a messy, gyaru-type room, but then I had no idea what a gyaru-type room even looked like.

Nanami-san's room, with its white color palette, evoked a very relaxing atmosphere. I didn't look around too much because I thought it would be rude, but the room was organized and had a pleasant scent. Did all girls' rooms smell this good? It was my first time, so I had no idea.

As I stood there, not knowing what to do with myself in this unfamiliar land, Nanami-san called out to me.

"Come sit over here, Yoshin," she said, pulling out a thin, pink floor cushion.

No, wait. This was no ordinary floor cushion. It was pale pink, lacy, and very puffy. That is, it was totally different from the thin floor cushions that I was used to sitting on in my room.

I sat down on the cushion she'd set out, but Nanami-san didn't take out one for herself. Was she going to sit on her desk chair? That would give us quite a height difference, putting her skirt right in my line of sight, making it difficult for me to figure out where to look. But just then, Nanami-san quietly sat down a little bit away from me, and...

"Whee!"

"Nanami-san?!"

I usually sat cross-legged on the floor, but this time I was sitting on my heels because I was nervous. Taking advantage, Nanami-san had proceeded to plop her head down on one of my thighs.

I didn't even have time to react.

She'd laid her head in my lap.

Wait, *she'd* laid her head in *my* lap?! I never imagined there'd come a day when a girl would be resting her head in my lap. *Isn't it usually the guy who lays his head in a girl's lap?*



Overcome with anxiety, I began to feel Nanami-san's warmth spreading across my legs.

"Gosh, you really do work out. Your thigh feels really firm, kinda like a firm memory foam pillow."

Suddenly, Nanami-san ran her hand along my knee and thigh, smiling up at me as if she were enjoying the sensation.

What are you doing, Nanami-san?!

With my thigh being groped so freely, a strange sensation began crawling up my spine. It wasn't an uncomfortable feeling; in fact, it felt rather pleasant. But...

Um, Nanami-san, all this touching is doing weird things to me. Bear it, Yoshin... You have to bear it. Think of something else!

Whether or not she knew of the conundrum I was facing, Nanami-san was smiling at me softly. Then, taking her hand off of my thigh, she reached up toward my face. The warmth of her palm traveled to my cheek.

As I stared at her, unsure of how I should react, she whispered to me in a soft, beautiful voice. "Hey, Yoshin, I know you'll feel lonely with your parents being away from tomorrow on. But if you and I get to spend more time together and if you're gonna eat dinner at my house, you won't feel so sad, right?"

That's when I finally understood—Nanami-san was acting this way because she wanted to comfort me. The eyes looking up at me were incredibly kind, and I felt the corners of my mouth curl up.

She had probably felt too shy to let me put my head in her lap, so she'd ended up doing this instead. Wasn't that kind of embarrassing too? I felt like she hadn't quite resolved the embarrassment issue, but I was still really grateful for her thoughtfulness. Just the fact that she'd been thinking about me made me feel all warm inside.

"In the past, I might have felt lonely, but I'm okay now. I like playing games in my room."

Nanami-san's smile brightened. Maybe she thought I was just trying to put on

a tough front. Or maybe she thought something else. Either way, the warmth of her hand felt incredibly good.

“Oh, yeah? I think I’d feel kind of lonely. Hey, what kind of games are you playing right now, by the way?”

“Right now, I mostly play social games online. I do it on my computer while chatting on my phone. I’m part of a team, so we usually play as a group.”

“I didn’t even know you could play social games on your computer. Hmm, I see. I’ve never played them before. I’d like to try it out sometime. Do you think we could play together?”

Play a game together, huh? Peach-san is starting to come around, so maybe it’ll be okay. I should try asking the team when I get home. Baron-san did say it’d be nice if we could all play together, so he probably wouldn’t mind, but I should ask everyone else, just in case.

“I’m pretty sure we have an opening on our team. I’ll ask everyone next time.”

“Thanks. That’d be great.”

My conversation with Nanami-san, who remained resting her head in my lap, progressed peacefully. From time to time, she would move her legs in order to shift her position, and I couldn’t help glancing in that direction. When I thought about it, I remembered that we were both still in our school uniforms, which meant that her skirt was still rolled up super short. Each time she moved, Nanami-san would look up at me and smile, as if to say, “Something catch your eye?” My heart wouldn’t stop thumping.

Our conversation gradually slowed, and when silence finally settled between us, Nanami-san mumbled something.

“My cheek...”

“Huh?”

“You kissed me on my cheek. Your parents must have seen too.”

She was talking about the incident at the boba shop. I thought back to what had happened and blushed.

“Sorry, I must’ve surprised you. It was an accident, really.”

Nanami-san shook her head, the movement softly tickling my thighs.

“I was surprised, but it made me happy since you were the one who kissed me.” Nanami-san gazed up at me with a dreamy look in her eyes. She put a hand to her cheek where my lips had touched it and then reached up toward my cheek again. “But actually, I wanted to be the one to do it first.”

And with that, I felt like someone had hit me around the head with a blunt object. *Keep it together, Yoshin...*

No matter what adorable thing she said to me, both of our parents were downstairs. If I tried anything weird, I’d be taken out of the game immediately, and they’d lose any and all trust I’d built up in them. That didn’t mean I would try something if the parentals *weren’t* around, but... I was allowed to stroke her hair at the very least, right?

I slowly reached for her hair, asking her with my gaze if I could touch it. Nanami-san nodded without a word, and at that same moment, I placed my hand on her head. Her soft, smooth hair slipped between my fingers. It felt like silk, and the sensation was addictive.

Feeling my fingers run through her hair, Nanami-san looked up at me through narrowed eyes. She and I gazed at one another in silence, but just then, we heard Tomoko-san calling us.

“Nanami, we’re done chatting! It’s time to say good night, so why don’t the two of you come out!”

Ah, yeah, that’s the way it goes, isn’t it? Moments like this are always interrupted.

The timing was so impeccable that it felt like they had been watching us. I wasn’t disappointed, though. Nanami-san seemed just as unsurprised. She smiled regretfully and got up from my lap. I felt a little sad with the comfortable weight of her head now gone. What remained was the sensation I’d felt while stroking her hair.

We made our way to the front door, where our parents were waiting, and the Barato family saw us off.

“I’ll see you again tomorrow, Yoshin. It’ll be teaching you how to cook.”

“Yeah, I’m looking forward to it too.”

Nanami-san smiled happily, not betraying any of the earlier atmosphere between the two of us. I smiled back. If anyone found out, I didn’t know what they would say to us, but... That’s right, starting tomorrow, I’d be coming home to Nanami-san’s house after school. That almost felt like...

“It’s like a commuter marriage, isn’t it?”

Tomoko-san had voiced the very thing that I’d been thinking but couldn’t bring myself to say. Nanami-san and I turned red.

And so, that day, the Misumais and the Baratos began a relationship between families.

◇◇◇

The first thing I did after getting home from our “family” meeting was to report back to my teammates. I had hoped to ask for advice from Baron-san and co. about what to do moving forward, but...

Baron: Um, Canyon-kun, what more could you even ask me? I’ve taught all there is to teach. Besides, I’m pretty sure you’re already certified boyfriend material.

Maybe it was just my imagination, but I felt like I could see Baron-san holding his head in his hands.

Peach: What I wanna know is how you can make both your families get along so well, in such a short period of time.

Peach-san seemed just as exasperated.

I’d never met either one of them in real life, but from their text messages alone, I could sense surprise, dismay, and other similar emotions—but I didn’t know how to respond.

Canyon: But I feel like I’m even more clueless than before...

This was the honest to god truth. After all, things between Nanami-san and me had hurried along so fast now that this was now a whole-family affair.

Canyon: Baron-san, you're married, right? Can't you give me a few pointers on what I should say to her parents? This is too much for one high schooler to handle.

Baron: Seriously, high schoolers don't usually have those kinds of concerns. I don't know what I could possibly say to you.

I felt like I'd met a dead-end.

Peach: Oh, by the way, Canyon-san, didn't you get in trouble at all?

Canyon: Heaps.

It was true—after we had gotten home and had dinner, both of my parents had scolded me for a good long while. They'd scolded me longer and harder than ever before, so much so that I felt like there'd be no end to it.

It was to be expected, really.

Truth be told, the two of them had both had a feeling that something was going on with me, but they'd assumed that I'd just made a new friend or something. The idea of me getting a girlfriend blew their minds.

Everything up till then had been fine. They hadn't been mad at me for keeping the fact that I had a girlfriend a secret. That, too, was no surprise. They were angry with me because I hadn't told them anything about the alternate use of my lunch money and having caused trouble to Nanami-san's family. Of course they'd be mad. I couldn't argue with that.

I'd just kind of accepted the fact that I'd get yelled at. My parents, though, had been half angry and half ecstatic, so I couldn't help feeling a bit confused.

Once I'd been released from my parents' scolding, I'd come straight to my room to talk to Baron-san.

Baron: If there's anything I can tell you, maybe it'd be to get on her dad's good side. He already likes you, though, so what's the point? It's not like you can gift him alcohol, at your age...

Baron-san was racking his brain for suggestions. I nearly cried, I was so grateful, but in the end, we couldn't come up with anything that seemed right.

Baron: I guess you just have to slowly build up their trust in you. I mean, you're just a high schooler, so there's no need to worry, if you know what I'm saying.

Canyon: Slow and steady is best, huh? Right. I'll work on it.

With that, it was settled: I'd have to build up my relationship with her family a little bit at a time. Still, I wondered what Baron-san had done to get his in-laws' approval. Even if I couldn't try it yet, I keep it in mind for the future.

Canyon: What did you do to get your father-in-law to like you, Baron-san?

Baron: In my case, her dad really likes to drink, so I did my best to join him whenever I could. I'm a bit of a lightweight, but I wanted to marry my wife, so I did my best to build up my tolerance. It's kind of an old-fashioned approach, to be honest.

Drinking, huh? That really was a strategy I couldn't try until later. I wondered if Genichiro-san liked to drink.

But the attitude of wanting to do one's best out of the desire to marry one's partner was one that I felt I should try to emulate. Perhaps in the end, how much effort you were willing to make depended on how much you cared about your partner. Besides, it was *way* too early to be talking about marriage. What was important was that I did my best, right?

Just who am I making excuses to? I wondered. *But yeah, I should go all out, starting tomorrow. That can't possibly be a bad thing.*

Suddenly, I got another message from Peach-san.

Peach: By the way, Canyon-san, do you tell your girlfriend that you like her? Every day, I mean.

Ever since the day Nanami-san and I went on our date, Peach-san had stopped with all the negative comments about Nanami-san. In fact, she even seemed to be encouraging us. *People change their minds, I guess.*

Canyon: Do I tell her I like her? Um, it's kind of embarrassing, so I don't tell her that often. Wait, maybe I've never said it at all, now that I think about it.

I knew that after our first date, I'd ended up mumbling to myself that I really liked her, but now that someone had pointed it out, I realized I'd never said it to Nanami-san directly. No matter how much I thought back to the last several days, I didn't have a memory of saying it. No, wait. Maybe I had said it once, but I certainly wasn't telling her every day. That was for certain.

As time went on, I was getting gradually more and more used to telling her that she was cute or that she looked nice in her outfit. But to say that I liked her—and to say it *out loud*—was too embarrassing to think about. Honestly, I just couldn't bring myself to say it. Even today, when the mood had gotten all romantic, I hadn't been able to tell her. Besides, I don't think the thought had entered my mind in the first place.

When she saw my response, Peach-san burst into a fit of disapproval.

Peach: That's no good at all! Guys always think their partners know how they feel even if they don't say anything, but girls don't have a clue unless you tell them! You have to tell her that you like her!

No, wait. I'm not like all those other guys who think the girl will know they like her. I'm just too much of a wuss. I'm sorry.

Baron: Whoa, Peach-chan, you're being awfully helpful, aren't you? I'm surprised, but I can't say I'm not glad.

I admit I had to agree with him. *What's going on with you, Peach-san? You're being super assertive.* She actually seemed to be helping me out—or was it that she was helping Nanami-san? I wondered what had triggered her change of heart.

It was no wonder Baron-san was so surprised. I felt the same. It was of course a good thing that Peach-san was now in support of my relationship, but I was curious as to why she'd changed her mind.

Canyon: It's nice to get a woman's perspective for once. Out of curiosity, is that coming from your personal experience?

Peach: No, but that's how it goes in shojo manga. Besides, I would want the person I like to tell me he likes me.

Baron-san was plucking his advice for me from the internet, while it seemed Peach-san was taking hers from shojo manga, though I guess it included her own ideas as well. Perhaps I'd gained another dependable ally.

Peach: You see it all the time in manga—the male character acts all cold toward the female lead, and then while the girl is trying to figure out what's going on, a handsome rival tries to swoop in and steal her. Like, both parties can't be honest with each other, and that kind of thing.

Baron: Ah, I think I've heard something like that before too—that men and women express their love differently, or something like that.

Stories like that exist? I didn't read shojo manga. Even if I did pick up the occasional love story, they more often than not had male protagonists. In those stories, the male protagonists often got swayed by various female characters, so it was eye-opening to hear things from a female perspective. *Maybe I should try reading a shojo manga next time.*

I refrained from adding to the conversation and instead watched the back-and-forth between my two friends. Peach-san was the more vocal of the two.

Peach: Canyon-san, if you can't say it out loud, you could start with sending her a message. Even something short would do. Please tell her how you feel about her. Otherwise, girls start feeling insecure. If the two of you don't end up happy together, I'm gonna be really upset.

I couldn't tell if what Peach-san was saying was common practice, but she seemed sincere and genuinely concerned for Nanami-san. They were just words on a screen, but that was the feeling I got from them.

Though I still didn't know what had made her change her mind, I decided to take her words to heart.

Baron: Sorry, Canyon-kun. I'm gonna step away for a bit. I suddenly got this urge to tell my wife something. It's no big deal—I'll be right back. Yeah, nothing's going on here.

With that, Baron-san's messages fell silent. Had Peach-san's message made him feel uneasy? He said stuff like "it's no big deal" and "nothing's going on," but he had probably gone to remind his wife how he felt about her.

Wow, Peach-san's so formidable, she can even sway adults. But has Baron-san really not been telling his wife how much he likes her? Like... Like, huh?

For the record, the relationship between Nanami-san and me had started on a dare, but now, I liked her so much that that didn't even matter. That was the truth. Even I was aware of it. *But what about her?*

Today, Nanami-san had rested her head in my lap, and, although I hadn't actually told Baron-san about it yet, my lips had touched her cheek. She hadn't expressed any discomfort about it, at least.

Did she still feel that this relationship was all for a dare? Was she only going out with me because she had no choice? Somehow, I didn't think that was the case anymore. At least, that's what I wanted to believe.

After seeing her interactions with my parents, and then seeing her interactions with her own parents, I thought that it was about time I became more aware of things. I couldn't continue being thick-headed forever. We'd passed the point when I could still use that as an excuse.

I think it's okay to think I like her, and maybe it's okay to think she likes me too.

I couldn't say it with conviction. Maybe I was being too full of myself. That doubt was an endless spiral. But if I *didn't* act with that in mind, I felt like I might make some crucial error. That was how I felt, anyway.

So from now on, I have to act as though Nanami-san likes me a little bit too.

Of course, that didn't change the fact that I would continue making an effort

to have her like me. I mean, if I decided that she liked me, and I stopped trying, that would be really rude. If anything, I had to make more of an effort to show her through my actions.

Nevertheless, talking through things like this really did help me to assess the situation more calmly. Hearing out others was really important; their objective assessments helped me take a look at myself, and for that I was grateful.

Canyon: Thanks, Peach-san. I...

I clenched my hand into a tight fist, and as if to show my determination—and to encourage myself—I raised it to my chest.

Canyon: Telling her over the phone is still too hard for me, so I'll start by letting her know by text.

Peach: It's very like you not to choose the phone option here, but good luck, all the same.

To be honest, as soon as I made my decision, I hesitated for a moment. At least Peach-san seemed supportive.

Canyon: But what made you change your mind, Peach-san? You were so negative about all this before.

Peach-san remained silent for a moment, but it was only for a moment.

Peach: It's a girl's secret. But I suppose, if I had to say, hearing about you two made me realize that I have to move on too.

That was a very mature response indeed. Peach-san was pretty awesome. She had to be way younger than I was, but it sounded like she was already doing a great job moving on from something.

In fact, I'm pretty sure she was a middle schooler. Maybe she'd once been bullied by gyaru, or something. If, by hearing about me and Nanami-san, she was able to see that not all gyaru were like the ones she knew, then we'd

achieved something—not that I had any idea what other gyaru were like.

I gave my thanks to Peach-san and logged out of the chat. Baron-san still hadn't returned, but if he saw the chat log, he would be up to speed.

Now and from here on out, it was time for me to walk the walk. I opened my messaging app to text Nanami-san before my determination withered away.

I hadn't received any messages from Nanami-san, by the looks of it. Maybe she was already asleep or talking with her family again.

For a moment, a thought flashed through my mind: if she were asleep, then maybe I shouldn't be bothering her. But I waved the thought away. Worst comes to worst, she'd just see the message tomorrow.

I shook my head, shaking away my excuses. *Well then, let's start by making a draft. But what should I say?*

Yoshin: I had fun today. I look forward to seeing you tomorrow. I really like you.

Why does it sound so stiff?! And doesn't the "I really like you" part sound like an afterthought? How do I fix this?! Not being particularly clued up on writing, I couldn't help feeling lost.

I could type in the game chat no problem, but when it came to messaging Nanami-san, I felt instantly lost.

As I stood there typing, deleting, and re-writing, I committed a fatal error.

"Oh shoot!"

By the time I realized, it was too late.

Of all the things I could've done, I'd somehow managed to hit send on a message with no preface, no body, no conclusion. It was just one simple phrase: "I really like you." I had been using the phrase as the base to add and delete various other sentences to, and somehow, my sausage fingers had slipped.

Isn't sending off a message like that with zero context the worst move I could've made? Wouldn't she get scared or creeped out?

No, that couldn't possibly be true, but in my panicked state, I couldn't even

think straight. I instantly lost every shred of my composure.

Calm down. There's still time before she sees it. I just have to delete the message before...

She saw it. The message was marked as read.

You're too fast, Nanami-san! Today of all days... Though I guess you're always fast at checking your messages.

But something seemed different. Usually, she responded right away, but today, didn't respond right away. No, she was taking her time.

As I was sitting there in my anxious state, my phone did something highly peculiar. It rang. Nanami-san was *calling* me.

Am I in trouble?

When I picked up the phone, the first thing I heard was her stuttering like crazy, accompanied by a loud thud. The message hadn't weirded her out; in fact, it seemed to have launched her into a panic.

"Wh-Wh-Where did that come from, Yoshin?! Did something happen?!"

But perhaps because Nanami-san sounded a lot more flustered than I was, I ended up feeling a lot calmer. I'd at least be able to speak normally.

"Thanks so much for earlier, Nanami-san."

"Oh, you're welcome... Hey, that's not the problem here! What in the world, Yoshin?! Why are you suddenly sending me something like that out of the blue?! I freaked out so much, I fell off of my bed!"

"What? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, since I'm pretty sure I've gone into shock! Where did that come from all of a sudden?"

That explains the thud. I'm glad you weren't hurt, but I'm sorry I surprised you.

In contrast to my desire to apologize, Nanami-san insisted on hearing an explanation. I guess that was to be expected.

"Did you, uh, not like it?" I asked.

“It’s not that I didn’t like it, but it surprised the hell out of me!”

Nanami-san sounded slightly angry, but that seemed less to do with what I’d said and more to do with the fact that I’d surprised her. As for me, I was filled with relief at hearing she didn’t dislike it. I guess she really was just shocked.

“It’s kind of a long story... Well, I guess it’s not that long of a story.”

“What’s not that long of a story?”

“I mean, I’ve never told you straight-up that I like you, right? So I thought I should at least say it in a text or something.”

“That makes me so, so happy. It really does, but what made you suddenly decide to do that?”

Of course she was going to ask that. She’s so sharp, this Nanami-san. I, uh... What should I do?

I guess telling her I’d arrived at that conclusion myself wasn’t convincing. Maybe this was the right moment to tell her that my teammates from my game—primarily Baron-san and Peach-san—had been giving me dating advice this whole time. I felt a little guilty not telling her that my lack of sheer incompetence had been down to said advice.

Continuing to deceive or lie to her would be easy nonetheless, but it probably wasn’t the right thing to do. Even Genichiro-san had told me lying was no good. Since our whole relationship was based on a lie, I guess it was too late now, but I still decided to come clean with Nanami-san by telling her the whole story.

“Actually, since I’d never gone out with a girl before, I’ve been getting a lot of help from the in-game teammates I told you about.”

“Help?”

I couldn’t tell her the specifics. I couldn’t tell her I’d asked them how to respond to Nanami-san’s confession after secretly finding out it was a dare.

Lying was bad, but since I couldn’t tell her the whole truth, I’d chosen to sidestep that question. Yes, I know how contradictory that sounds.

Feeling guilty, I recounted the conversation that had led to me sending her the message. Maybe one day there would come a time when I’d be able to tell

her everything, so we could laugh about it together.

"...and then today, they told me it was really important for me to tell you regularly that I like you. It made me realize that I hadn't said it to you before."

"Was it a girl who told you that?" Nanami-san asked.

"The telling you I like you part came from a girl, but most of the advice comes from a married guy."

"Ah, I see. So that's what it was. Maybe that's why you seemed so used to doing things."

For a moment, she'd sounded troubled, but that had quickly passed in favor of understanding. *Did I really seem like I knew what I was doing?* I wonder if I'd let her down by not coming up with those ideas myself. If so, I'd brought that upon myself.

"I'm sorry I kept it from you. I guess I found it hard to bring it up. Are you mad at me?"

"Hmm... No, I guess it's the opposite. I mean, I've been getting a lot of tips and things from Hatsumi and Ayumi. To be honest, I'm relieved to hear all this experience wasn't from past girlfriends, and I'm also kinda happy that you've been making all this effort for me."

Hearing Nanami-san's kind words, I felt my heart grow lighter. *I'm glad I told her.*

Even over the phone, I felt the air between us relax. There was a momentary silence between us, and then Nanami-san whispered something.

"Hey, can you, uh, say it to me now?"

"Huh?"

Excuse me? Now? What? She wants me to say it now? Can't I pretend like I didn't hear anything?

As if to prevent me from wriggling my way out of the situation, Nanami-san pursued the matter further.

"Right now, tell me on the phone. Pleeease? Pretty please?"

She said it almost as if she were asking to be spoiled—in a flirtatious voice, as though trying to get me to pet her. A wave of dizziness came over me, and I nearly dropped my phone, but I stood my ground. Nanami-san really was crafty.

No, no, no. The whole point of me sending that text was so I didn't have to say it out loud.

I hadn't expected her to ask me to say it, but it was probably a request that I couldn't refuse. If I didn't say it, I'd mess everything up, wouldn't I? Okay then.

"Can you give me a minute?" I asked.

"Of course. I can give you as much time as you need."

With Nanami-san still on the line, I ran out of my room, paying no mind to my parents, who were taken aback by my sudden appearance. I ran to the fridge and took out a one-liter bottle of water and drank half its contents in one gulp. My throat, which had been parched out of nervousness, began to moisten up.

Then, rushing back to my room with all my momentum, I took a deep breath. Retaining this momentum was key.



I slammed the bottle down and grabbed my phone with enough force to smack my ear with it. *Don't kill this momentum!*

"Nanami-san, um, uh... Oh jeez..."

I couldn't do it. Not even my momentum could carry me through. But Nanami-san was still expectantly waiting for me on the other end of the line.

Be brave, Yoshin. You can do it.

"I... I really like you."

Not a trace of my earlier momentum was left. My voice was soft, and it was quivering so much that it sounded almost pathetic.

"Yeah, I really like you too," she answered.

Nanami-san happily accepted my words, and hearing her response, I became happy too. I became happy, but...

What's with this itch spreading across my back?! Do all the cool and handsome guys in this world say things like this so smoothly?! Handsome guys were so impressive. I was pretty sure I'd never get used to this.

"All righty then, Yoshin! I'm turning in. Good night!" Nanami-san said, blurting out the words in a panic.

"Oh, yeah... Good night."

With that, she hung up the phone.

I tipped more water down my throat, which had become parched yet again. But rather than feeling calm, I felt quite the opposite. My heart was beating faster, and my eyes were wide in shock. My mind was racing, and I just couldn't sit still.

The reason was clear: the unexpected had happened. I never thought Nanami-san would tell me she liked me back. *Will I be able to sleep tonight?*

"Oh, I should probably let the group know how it went."

By now, they might all be asleep, but I started up my game and checked the chat log anyway. To my surprise, everyone seemed to be there, and they were even taking bets on whether I'd been able to text her. Those with their money

on me *not* being able to say it were in the majority. Dang it.

Canyon: Thanks, Peach-san. I told her somehow. I didn't expect her to call me, but I was even able to say it to her on the phone too.

With that message, the majority lost their bet. *Ha ha ha, take that, jerks!*

Peach: I'm glad to hear it. Or rather, you're fast as always. I didn't think you'd tell her so soon.

Canyon: I guess I got caught up in the moment...

Peach: Just what kind of moment was that?

I couldn't find the words to respond.

Baron-san still hadn't returned yet, but I'd thanked Peach-san, so I decided to head off to bed.

Just as I was thinking that, Peach-san followed up with another bombshell.

Peach: I guess the next thing you'll have to work on is to tell her that you love her, right? Your girlfriend's gonna be thrilled!

Could it be that Peach-san was even more demanding than Baron-san?

Canyon: Wait, that's asking for too much! I'm not ready!

Peach: Take it easy, Canyon-san. I'm not saying you have to do it immediately. Besides, I imagine you're gonna want to tell her at some point, aren't you?

I had to pause to imagine the scene. Just telling her I liked her had drained every scrap of my energy. But telling her I love her? How would that go down? Just thinking about it made me break out in a cold sweat. But...

Canyon: You're right. I do want to tell her someday.

Peach: You're so proactive. How sweet! But please, go at your own pace, and don't overdo it. I'm rooting for you!

While I was really happy that Peach-san was encouraging me like this, her expectations scared me. She wouldn't raise the bar to anything more drastic in the future, would she?

Baron: I'm baaack. Wow, you really shouldn't do anything you're not cut out to do. My wife totally got me.

As I was sitting there shuddering at Peach-san's possible future demands, Baron-san entered the chat rather mournfully.

Canyon: What happened, Baron-san?

Baron: I messaged my wife telling her I loved her, but then she sent this back: "Oh, I know. I love you too, dear. Did something happen? You're not usually this sweet. Do you miss me all of a sudden? Don't worry, I'll comfort you when I get home." What a counterattack.

And with perfect timing, a real-life example of "I love you" was presented itself. Peach-san and I both sent him messages thanking him for the saccharine treat.

From the looks of things, Baron-san and his wife made a perfect couple. My parents and Nanami-san's parents were the same way. I hoped that, one day, Nanami-san and I would be able to be like that too.

Interlude: The Day He Told Me He Liked Me

A lot had happened that day.

I guess days where nothing happened were getting fewer and farther between lately, but that didn't make the day any less full of surprises. I'd met Yoshin's parents, I'd exchanged contact info with his mother, and, starting the day after, Yoshin would be joining us for dinner at our house. I was over the moon about being able to spend more time with him. Still, even *I* had to admit that asking to go to his house had been stepping over the mark a bit. Lesson learned.

But hey, I'd managed to introduce myself to Yoshin's parents and even got to know them a little bit. They were both such kind people. We were going to keep running into each other from here on out, right? I certainly hoped so.

Oh, I almost forgot. I have to set that photo as my wallpaper. I pulled up the photo I'd taken earlier that day—the photo of Yoshin and me. It had to be our first picture together, ever.

Tee-hee, Yoshin looks all surprised. Okay, here we go. Wallpaper...done. Hm? A message from Yoshin?

Wh-What is this?! Wait, seriously?! Where did this come from?! What?! Did I do something to deserve this?! Wha— Ouch!

Even as I lay there on the floor, having fallen off my bed in shock, I couldn't take my eyes off of the message from Yoshin.

A lot had happened that day—many things that had filled me with joy. But with the day almost over, I'd thought that would be it. Who'd have guessed there'd be one last surprise?

Sure, it was just a text, but Yoshin had told me he really liked me. That was all it said. There was no preface or anything—just that one simple message.

Completely flabbergasted, I called him immediately, and like a child, I begged him to say it out loud. Why did I push my luck?

When I thought about it later, I realized what a self-indulgent request that was. But as a result of that selfishness...

“Nanami-san, um, uh... Oh jeez... I... I really like you.”

He spoke those words even though he wasn’t used to saying them at all, giving me the biggest shock of the day. The second biggest, of course, had been his lips touching my cheek. The knock I’d taken falling off my bed paled in comparison.

Oh my gawd! I was trying not to think about the kiss because it was too embarrassing, but now I can’t get it out of my head! If it hadn’t been an accident, would that *have been the biggest shock of the day? Or would the two incidents have tied for first? Hmm... Let’s get back on track here.*

Yoshin had told me he liked me. I was doing my best to act like it was no big deal, but all I could bring myself to say was that I liked him too. I just couldn’t think straight. All the blood was rushing to my face, making it feel all hot. Even when I tried to steady my breathing, it wouldn’t cool down. It was a good thing Yoshin couldn’t see me, but I couldn’t help but wonder how he looked right about now.

I looked down at my phone screen and saw the photo of us together—the picture we’d taken that day. Right after we’d taken that photo, his lips had touched my cheek...

Dang it, no! Just remembering it was making me feel embarrassed. I had to stop if I wanted to get any sleep. *I should just head off to bed like this, in my state of happiness... Hey, wait a minute. Was today really the first time Yoshin told me he liked me?*

That was when it finally hit me.

That’s right... Even Yoshin had mentioned it. I just hadn’t registered it because I’d been too giddy at the time.

And it was also my first time telling him that I liked him since the confession. Wow. I guess I’d been more excited than I’d thought.

I’d somehow assumed we’d told each other already, but today really was the first time we’d said it aloud. Now I felt like I wanted to make today some kind of

anniversary. What should I call it? Our “Like” Anniversary?

Yeeeah, I don’t think so. We’d sound a little unhinged.

But thank you, Yoshin’s teammates, I thought, even though I didn’t know their names nor what they looked like*. Thanks to you listening to him and giving him advice, I was able to experience so much joy today.* Feeling nothing but gratitude, I resolved to thank them directly when we got to play together. *Oh, but maybe they wouldn’t like me doing something like that. I should ask Yoshin if it’d be okay.*

As I lay there, steeped in emotions, I suddenly heard two very familiar-sounding voices drifting into my room.

“Oh my, is that right? I didn’t expect that.”

“Wow, onee-chan, you’re blushing so hard.”

I slowly, *slowly* turned my head toward the direction of the voices. I’d broken out in a cold sweat. And there, poking their heads around the cracked door, were my mom and little sister, Saya.

Huh? What are you two doing?!

“Hey! Can’t you knock? Why the hell are you spying on me?!”

In response to my protest, the two merely sighed and looked at each other, their eyebrows furrowed as though they couldn’t believe what they were seeing. *Wait, why are you acting like* I’ve *done something wrong?*

“Well, dear, we heard a strange noise coming from your room, so we came to see if you were okay. But then we saw that you were in the middle of an intimate conversation with Yoshin-kun. Of course we couldn’t speak up,” my mom said.

“We did knock, you know?” my sister added. “Didn’t you hear? Though I guess if that’s the face you were making while you were talking to my future brother-in-law, you for sure wouldn’t have heard. I really envy you guys.”

Excuse me, Saya, but can you please stop calling him your “future brother-in-law”? It’s far too early for that.

Maybe calling him that wasn’t the biggest of deals. I just couldn’t help but

smile every time I heard it. That was also why I couldn't bring myself to get angry, even though they'd been secretly watching me this whole time.

Once they had verified I wasn't actually angry, they both entered my room. Apparently, it was already time to question me about this latest incident.

As it turned out, though, they weren't the only ones worked up, as I ended up sharing a *bit* too much with them. I somehow ended up spilling that Yoshin had told me he liked me.

"Whoa, are you serious?! Let me see!" chirped the excited Saya, but of course I refused to show her.

I mean, it was only one line, so there was really no point. Plus if I did show her that, she would start saying all sorts of things about my new wallpaper.

The whole time, my mom kept silent and sat there smiling cheerily. "Say, Nanami," she eventually said, "this time, Yoshin-kun was the one who told you he liked you, right?"

"Um, yeah. That's right," I replied.

"You know, that's actually quite a big deal. It's quite rare for a man to grab the bull by the horns and say that he likes you."

"Is that true?"

My mom nodded several times, showing just how delighted she was. She then put one hand on her cheek and smiled dreamily as if remembering something. "It really is. Even after your father and I started dating, I had to tell him so many times before he told me he liked me back."

As mom sat there, her eyes half closed and her lips curled up, I was reminded again of the woman she was. I felt like I'd glimpsed a hidden, more determined side of her, but I thought better than to inquire.

Still, her story made me realize that Yoshin had been the one to take the initiative, even if he had been prompted by his friends to do so.

"I think it's really important for you to properly respond to his feelings. Don't you, Nanami?" my mom asked.

Feeling all warm and fuzzy inside, I replied to my mom reflexively, without

really thinking. “Respond to his feelings? I know. I did just tell him I liked him back.”

By then, it was already too late. *Shoot. I put my foot in it.*

Remembering my conversation with Yoshin earlier, I felt my cheeks heat up again. Why did I have to keep doing this?

You both heard me, didn’t you?! Don’t just sit there grinning. Say something!

“Oh, of course,” my mom said. “That’s very important too. I’m so relieved that things are going so well between you. Oh, but I’m not quite ready to be a grandma, so don’t rush into things, okay? Behave yourself like good little high schoolers. That’s why I thought I’d give you these.”

“Yeah,” Saya added. “I don’t really wanna be an auntie when I’m still in middle school, though I really don’t think there’s anything to worry about with you and that future brother-in-law of mine. You both seem a little behind the curve.”

“Wh-What do you mean, grandkids?!” I cried. “I told you we haven’t even kissed yet— Wait, what are these?”

Contrary to my expectations, mom was handing me two slips of paper.

“Tickets?” I asked.

Given the context, I’d been sure she was going to hand me something completely different. In contrast, these were a bit of an anticlimax. I’d thought she was gonna hand me, uh, you know...

“Oh my. Were you expecting something else?” my mom asked with a wicked grin.

I blushed, while Saya tilted her head quizzically.

Instead of answering, I looked at the tickets my mom had handed me. They were for the aquarium, where we all used to visit as a family. I had fond memories of the place.

“Wow, I remember going here. It was really pretty inside, and they had dolphin shows and places where you could pet the animals and stuff. When did you get these?”

“I just wanted to get you a little something, you know? You should take them and ask Yoshin-kun out on a date.”

The offer was so sudden, I let out an absurd cry. Saya, meanwhile, started squealing with excitement. She was being kind of loud, but...yeah, I kind of wanted to squeal too.

Why, all of a sudden?

“Aquarium dates are great,” mom said. “It’s kind of dark inside, but the water glows through the glass, making the ambience all fantastic and a little bit mysterious.”

“Wow, really?” I couldn’t help asking.

“Oh, sure. Zoo dates are nice too, but if you’ve just started dating, I’d for sure recommend the aquarium.”

“Are you speaking from experience with dad?”

Somewhat exasperated, Saya and I looked at mom as she sat there talking as if in a daydream. I had my reservations about listening to more stories about my parents, but mom just nodded shyly, her hand pressed to her cheek again, paying no attention to Saya and me.

I had to admit that my mom—as she sat there reminiscing about her dating life with my dad—looked rather beautiful. It was then that I realized that, for her, the aquarium was more than just a place of family memories; it was also a place of memories as a couple with my dad.

And now she wanted Yoshin and me to go together. That had to mean something. That she wanted a place of so many fond memories for her and dad to become a place of fond memories for Yoshin and me too make me feel kind of emotional—perhaps even moved.

While I sat there feeling touched, mom continued talking. I guess she had a lot she wanted to share with us.

“Oh, this really takes me back. Your father and I held hands in the dim light as we walked around looking at the fish together. Your father just kept fidgeting so much it was frustrating, but he was also so adorable...”

I could very easily picture the scene. My dad seemed like a tough guy, but he was actually pretty shy. My mom must have taken the lead, since my dad would have been way too embarrassed.

“In fact, he was too cute, so I pulled him into a corner and practically stole his first kiss from him. He turned so red, I just wanted to eat him up. Aaah, what great memories...”

With that, Saya and I looked at each other and blushed. We’d completely let our guards down.

Mom, you’re super aggressive! What are you thinking?!

“You mean like...on his cheek, right?”

“Oh, of course not. It was on the lips.” Mom pointed to her lips and smiled like she always did. My eyes became glued to her index finger.

The gesture was slightly different to the one she’d shown me before, but it provided cuteness and sexiness in equal measure. *I’m gonna copy it and show Yoshin next time.*

With that, I looked at the tickets again. To think that Yoshin and I would be going on a date where my mom and dad had had their first kiss...

Hey, wait a minute. If it’s the place where my parents had their first kiss, then...

Suddenly, I had a bad feeling about this.

“Motheeer...can it beee?” I looked at my mom, turning my head slowly like a rusted toy.

My mom, on the other hand, seemed not at all bothered by my reaction. In fact, she was smiling and seemed to be enjoying the situation, aware that I’d finally caught on. That big grin on her face was almost irritating.

“Nanami, while you’re on your aquarium date, you should give Yoshin-kun a kiss!”

“I knew it!”

Saya, who had been one step behind, resumed squealing in accompaniment

to my outburst. She even asked me to take a photo, but of course I couldn't do that!

I mean, it would be nice to have as a keepsake, but that's not normal, right? I mean, how am I supposed to take a photo anyway? Do I ask the staff working at the aquarium? Like, "We're gonna kiss now, so can you take a picture of us?" That would just creep the hell out of them!

"One more thing, Nanami," my mom said. "When you go on your next date, you should link arms with Yoshin-kun when you're walking around."

"Link arms?"

Come to think of it, Yoshin and I hadn't walked around with our arms linked before. But why for this date, all of a sudden?

Sensing my bewilderment, my mom raised her index finger to explain to me and Saya. "Of course it's nice to hold hands, but when you link arms, you *have* to be close to each other. You feel much more intimate too."

"More intimate..." I mumbled.

"I don't know how anyone else feels, but I for one really like hugging your father. It makes me feel safe."

And here we go again. *But linking arms, huh? Linking arms...*

Thinking that that meant I'd have to be the one to initiate the move, I looked down at my own body. In my field of vision was my own chest. *Linking arms would mean that...these...were gonna press up against...*

"Don't worry. I'm sure Yoshin-kun will be thrilled. You can just think of this as a good opportunity to make the most of your arsenal!"

Both mom and Saya gave me a very confident thumbs-up. That was easy for them to say; they had no idea what was running through my mind.

Just then, my phone pinged, letting me know I had another message. When I looked to see who it was, I found it was a message from Yoshin—who'd already wished me a good night.

Huh? Was something up? I wondered.

Yoshin: I know things got kind of funny earlier, but I really like you, Nanami-san. No one made me say that. I can't wait to see you tomorrow.

The moment I saw Yoshin's message, something within me caught fire. Even though I'd acted like a spoiled brat, even though he'd been really embarrassed, he had done everything he could to tell me how he genuinely felt.

How could *anyone* see this message and not feel moved? That sure was how I felt.

The flame inside me was now burning so furiously, I had to suppress the urge to call him back on the spot. Instead, I sent him a message and turned back to my mom, alight with newfound determination.

"Mom, I'm gonna do my best on that aquarium date!"

"Goodness, you sure seem motivated. Is it thanks to a message from Yoshin-kun?"

"Yup!"

"Well then, I know I got a little ahead of myself there, but for now, you can forget all that."

All of a sudden, my mom had decided to do a total U-turn. Even so, I remained silent and continued listening to what she had to say.

"You can just put all that to the back of your mind and focus on having a great time. If you do that, I'm sure everything will go perfectly. It'd be a shame if you got so caught up in all the things you felt you had to do, that you couldn't have fun."

"Yeah... Thanks, mom."

Still determined, I clenched my fist and told myself that I'd invite Yoshin out and have a great time. And this time, I would kiss him! At least, I wanted to, but would I actually be able to?

"Oh, but just because you get all excited doesn't mean you can stay out until morning. Make sure you both come home that day. The date of a high school student ends when they arrive back home safe."

“Mom, you didn’t need to say that!” I exclaimed, but we all laughed together.

Yeah, just listening to my mom had made me all fired up. I was more ready than ever to ask Yoshin out on a date!

As a total sidenote, my dad had been drinking all by his lonesome while the three of us had been chatting. Apparently, he’d also come up to check up on me after hearing the noise from my room, but when he’d seen me talking on the phone with Yoshin, he’d felt such a mix of emotions—joy and the complicated feelings of being a father—that he couldn’t help pouring himself a drink.

My mom snuggled up to him to console him. This was just a feeling, but I thought I understood how my mom felt. I hoped that, one day, Yoshin and I would be able to be like that too.

Chapter 3: Nanami-sensei's Cooking Class

It wasn't often that both my parents went away on business trips at the same time. At least, it hadn't been a thing at all when I was younger.

I think it had happened around twice during middle school, but back then, I'd been excited at the thought of having time to myself without worrying about my parents' watchful gaze. And now that I was in high school, this would probably be the third time. I could quite literally count the number of times on one hand.

Despite both my parents being away at the same time, the change I was experiencing now was bigger than anything I'd experienced in the past. Or perhaps it was better to describe it as an *incident*, one more momentous than anything else in the past. Needless to say, the cause of all this incident was the fact that I now had the wonderful Nanami-san as my girlfriend.

Until now, "walking home from school with my girlfriend" had meant, of course, that we'd be together partway and then eventually go our separate ways to head back to our respective homes. That was a pretty normal way for any guy to walk home with their girlfriend.

But to be able to stay together all the way home to the *same house* probably wasn't all that common. Even someone like me—a newbie when it came to dating—knew that. I hadn't even dreamed I'd be able to do it myself.

"I'm home!"

"Um... Thank you for having me."

Technically I had "walked home" with Nanami-san, but since this wasn't exactly my house, that was the best I could say.

"Oh that won't do, Yoshin-kun. You're home too, so..."

Having run in her slippers to the front door, Tomoko-san tilted her head and smiled at me. I looked blankly at her encouraging smile for a moment, then finally realized her intentions and corrected myself.

“I’m, uh, home.”

“Welcome back, both of you. Nicely done. When you walk in, of course you have to say ‘I’m home’ too, don’t you think?” Tomoko-san patted my head in approval.

Um, that’s a bit much, I thought, but I didn’t dare refuse her gesture. Instead, I forced myself to stand still for a minute.

Even if I did often say “welcome back” to my parents, it’d been a long time since I’d last said “I’m home.” My parents both worked, so there’d never really been a need to declare my presence when I arrived back there. If no one was going to respond, it was better not to say it in the first place. *Maybe that’s why I wasn’t used to saying it. I guess I did just feel lonely...* No wonder Nanami-san had felt like she needed to comfort me that time.

Whether they knew that or not, both Nanami-san and Tomoko-san looked at me and smiled. Having them welcome me back like this felt kind of embarrassing, even if I was happy.

Embarrassed by Tomoko-san’s head-patting, I tried to divert their attention to something else.

“Is Saya-chan not home yet?”

The diversion was a resounding success, as Tomoko-san finally pulled her hand away from my head. “Oh, Saya will probably be back a little later because of practice. She’s on the dance team, you see.”

“Wow, the dance team. It’s pretty impressive that she can dance. How cool.”

Unsurprisingly, my visits to Nanami-san’s house also meant I’d got to meet Saya-chan once or twice. At first, I’d been worried she didn’t like me all that much, but it seemed my worries were unfounded. She talked to me pretty normally. Her gaze was somewhat sharp, but like Nanami-san, she was a really nice person.

But the dance team, huh? It was pretty impressive that she was on the dance team in middle school. I sucked at dance whenever we had to do it in class, so I was really impressed. In fact, I was so bad, I’d been absolutely mortified to have to do it in high school classes too.

Speaking of which, I wonder if Nanami-san's a good dancer. Maybe I should ask her next time... Huh? Wait, why is she pouting?

With my hands full, I headed to the kitchen and placed the groceries we'd purchased on the counter. We weren't going to cook right away, so I had to put some things in the fridge, but Nanami-san was puffing out her cheeks.

"What's wrong, Nanami-san?"

"Nothing..."

Um, that sure didn't sound like nothing. Had I said something weird? I didn't remember saying anything weird...

"Yoshin, I'm gonna go change. Can you come to my room in ten—no, twenty minutes, okay?"

"Oh, yeah. Sure thing."

Once we'd finished loading food in the fridge, Nanami-san left for her room. Since I couldn't be in the room with her while she changed, I was left hanging around in the kitchen.

"Dear me, that Nanami. Here you go, Yoshin-kun. These should do." Tomoko-san said, handing me an armful of clothes. They were hand-me-downs from Genichiro-san. The Baratos were really good at keeping things in good condition.

The clothes Genichiro-san used to wear before he got all buff fit me perfectly, so I was borrowing them for the time being. Both Genichiro-san and Tomoko-san had said I could keep them, but for now I'd just agreed to borrow them as needed.

Since we'd be cooking later, I changed from my school uniform into the pants and long-sleeved shirt I'd borrowed, and then after precisely twenty minutes, I headed to Nanami-san's room. I knocked three times and entered once Nanami-san responded.

Nanami-san, too, had changed. She was wearing a long-sleeved shirt in a subdued color. On the bottom, however, she was wearing the shortest of shorts, which generously exposed her beautiful legs. I didn't know where to

look.

“Hnnh!”

That was all Nanami-san said as she beckoned me to come closer. She was patting a cushion next to her, and once I plopped myself down, she put her head in my lap again.

Was she trying to make this a regular thing? Either way, it was pretty calming, so I had no complaints. One day, I would like to have her let me rest my head in her lap too, though whether I’d have enough guts to do it was another story.

From her expression, I could tell she was still miffed about something, but it seemed her mood had recovered enough for her to use my lap as a pillow.

What was I supposed to do now? Just thinking of patting her head all of a sudden only made me nervous, not to mention that it would probably just surprise Nanami-san. *Yeah, I’ll save that for some other time*, I thought.

Since I was too chicken to touch a girl’s head so casually, I decided it best to let her use my lap as she pleased and instead asked her a question.

“Nanami-san, is something up? Did I say something weird?”

“Jeez, can’t you tell? I mean, I know I’m being pretty childish, but I guess I’d be happier if you just knew...”

Childish? About what? I began to think back on everything that had happened since we’d walked through the door. *Was it that Tomoko-san patted my head? No, if anything, Nanami-san would just make fun of me for it. That couldn’t be it.*

Other than that, we’d just talked about the fact that Saya-chan wasn’t home yet because she had practice. *Was it because I said that it was cool Saya-chan was on the dance team? No, Nanami-san was the type to be happy for her little sister. She would never sulk about that.*

Still, I was pretty sure Nanami-san had started pouting right after we’d talked about Saya-chan. Saya-chan was... *Saya-chan? Saya...-chan?*

“Are you sulking because I called your sister Saya-chan?”

Nanami-san blushed at my question and nodded without turning to look at

me.

What is this adorable jealousy?

Some people might say that sulking about something like this was annoying because there's no way they could have known unless they'd been explicitly told, but all I could think about was how adorable Nanami-san was being.

Honestly, I didn't know how to respond. I couldn't very well call Nanami-san's younger sister 'Saya-san,' and I couldn't call her just by her name, given that I wasn't even ready to do that with Nanami-san yet. Plus, that would probably make her angrier. I'd arrived at the decision to call her 'Saya-chan' after giving it more than enough thought, but I guess Nanami-san wasn't too happy about it.

Nanami-san still wasn't saying anything. I was pretty sure by now that I'd made her uneasy, or rather, displeased. This was no good.

Left with no other option, I—even while unsure that it would have any effect—brought my mouth closer to Nanami-san's ear and whispered, "Nanami-chan, will you forgive me?"

As soon as I said it, Nanami-san jumped out of her skin. She did so with so much force—like a spring-loaded toy of some sort—that she headbutted me directly in the chin.

Just because she'd hit my mouth, didn't mean this was a kiss. It hurt. Like, *really* hurt. *Oh god, did I break a tooth?*

"What... What even was that?! I... I can't even... My heart's beating like crazy..."

"Ouch... Nanami-san, are you okay?

"Oh, I'm sorry, Yoshin," Nanami-san said, pressing a hand to her chest as she blushed. "Did it hurt? I was just so surprised to be called something different out of the blue like that... I don't think my heart can take this..."

I hadn't realized this would shock her *that* much. I guess I should have thought things through a bit better... My bad.

"Maybe I shouldn't call you that, huh?"

"No, no! I want you to do it sometimes! Please, could you say it just one more

time?!”

“What?! Again?”

“You don’t want to?” Nanami-san brought herself eye level to me and tilted her head.

Now that was just unfair. She was doing that knowing full well that I couldn’t resist. Dammit. I was a pushover for being so easily convinced just because of a simple move like that.

I called her “Nanami-chan” once more. She was so happy that she kept jumping up and down on her bed. Saying it on request was pretty embarrassing for me, really.

I called her the same thing several more times until she seemed completely satisfied.

“It’s so nice to be called something different! It makes me feel all excited!”

By then, I was completely red with embarrassment, but Nanami-san was in a more superb mood than ever. *I’m glad you’re enjoying yourself, Nanami-san.*

My train of thought was interrupted by her next question.

“Now I kinda want to call you something different too. Can you think of anything good, like a name you want to be called?” she asked.

Won’t it be too difficult to change it up for me?

Nanami-san always called me “Yoshin,” so there weren’t many ways to go from there. I for one couldn’t think of anything.

As I sat there scratching my cheek as if to cover up my confoundment, Nanami-san came closer again to look into my eyes.

“Hey, what were you called when you were little?” she asked.

“Huh? Oh, um, my family called me Yo-kun or Yo-chan.”

“Oh really?”

Shoot, the power of her stare had compelled me to answer her. I’d been totally caught off guard. This couldn’t be happening...

Without taking her eyes off me, Nanami-san drew a beautiful arc with her lips. I had a bad feeling about this.

That said, I'd only told her what I used to be called as a kid. What could go wrong?

As I was thinking that—the optimist that I was—Nanami-san brought her lips closer to my ear, and, as if to get me back for earlier, she whispered, "Yo-chan?"

My face instantly went up in flames. It truly was in an instant. *What the hell happened? What was that?!*

The sound of her calling me, the way it melted sweetly in my ears, was unlike anything I'd ever heard before. She'd said it with a rising tone at the end, as if she were asking a question, but I felt as if there were even a little heart emoji floating there too. I couldn't see it or anything. I just felt as if it were there.

When I looked back at Nanami-san, who was sitting there with a triumphant look, she seemed to me a little embarrassed too. At least, her cheeks slowly reddening gave me that impression.

It took every ounce of my strength to finally say something.

"This is something, isn't it?"

Nanami-san was right. This *was* completely mind-blowing. We would have to hold off on this one a little.

"Seriously. I feel like my head's gonna explode if I do it too often."

It seemed Nanami-san agreed with me. Thus, our little game of changing up how we addressed each other came to a close. We couldn't take it anymore. It was too embarrassing.

"All right! I've completely recovered! Shall we make dinner, Yoshin?!"

"Yeah. Let's..."

With Nanami-san back to her usual self and me now exhausted after feeling like she'd played me in the palm of her hand, we left Nanami-san's room and found Tomoko-san waiting for us. We were so surprised that we just stood there, wide-eyed and speechless.

“I came to get you since it’s time to start prepping dinner, but I guess everything’s okay, isn’t it? ‘Nanami-chan’ and ‘Yo-chan,’ was it?” she asked with a broad smile.

“You were listening?!”

Both Nanami-san and I snapped back to reality.

“Goodness, it wasn’t that I was eavesdropping. I just happened to overhear you! Oho, now I want to call your father ‘Gen-chan’ too! It’s been such a long time! I wonder if he’ll be surprised if I call him that today.”

“Mom!”

Practically chasing her mother, an angry but smiling Nanami-san made her way to the kitchen.

So Tomoko-san heard us, huh? Genichiro-san’s gonna be in for a surprise when he gets home tonight. Staring off into space, I, too, slowly made my way to the kitchen. I prayed that the story wouldn’t make its way to my parents, but it was probably no use. Tomoko-san would definitely tell them. *What would be the best way to fend off my parents’ questioning when the time came?*

As I was mulling things over, I heard a voice from the direction of the front door.

“I’m home!”

It was Genichiro-san. Was it already that late? I guess we had gone shopping and made a few other stops on our way back. We’d have to get a move on with dinner.

“Welcome home, Gen-chan! Thank you for working so hard for us today!”

“Yeah, it was a bit tiring today... Um, dear? Should you, uh, be calling me that?”

Tomoko-san had already made her move. *Aren’t you a bit too quick off the mark?* I could hear the bewilderment in Genichiro-san’s voice.

“Oh, you’re just going to call me ‘dear’? That’s so sad, Gen-chan... I must be so old that you don’t want to call me like you used to...”

Though she was playing around, Tomoko-san sounded genuinely disappointed. Could it be that she was envious of us? If that were the case, then she should have at least given Genichiro-san a moment to prepare himself. This had been all too sudden.

For a brief moment, the voices at the front door trailed off, and I knew that Genichiro-san had fallen silent. I could neither move or peek in their direction. I simply waited in silence.

Before long, I heard Genichiro-san's quiet but gentle voice.

"Tomo-chan...I'm home. Even now, you're as lovely as you've always been, Tomo-chan."

"Gen-chan!"

Tomoko-san sounded utterly moved by his words. I heard suggestive sounds coming from their direction. Was it okay for me to move now?

I started to make my way toward the kitchen when I heard another familiar voice.

"Hey, you two, can you stop making out in front of your daughter? What's with you all of a sudden?"

It was Saya-chan. It seemed she'd gotten home at the same time. She must have been forced to bear witness to the whole thing...

"Oh my, you're home too, Saya! Oho, I'll tell you why later. Look forward to it!"

"Yeesh! I'm gonna get a boyfriend too! I'm getting myself the handsomest and sweetest boyfriend!"

Infuriated by Tomoko-san's teasing, Saya-chan resolved to get a boyfriend as well. That was totally fine and all, but... *Tomoko-san,* please *don't tell Saya-chan about this.*

◇◇◇

I didn't know how many high school guys these days knew how to cook, but unfortunately, I wasn't one of them. Or rather, I knew how; I just didn't do it. I'd cooked a few times for home ec classes at school, but that was about it. That

was basically the same as saying I couldn't.

I lived at home, so my mom—and sometimes my dad—did the cooking, while I ate whatever they put on the table. Because of that, I'd never really tried it myself. There was just no need.

Of course I appreciated my parents feeding me every day, but for me, cooking had always been something others did for me. I couldn't argue if anyone said I was spoiled, but I couldn't exactly help it either.

Even on the days my parents were out, I could order takeout, eat out, make some cup noodles, or stop by the convenience store. There were so many ways to feed myself, cooking hadn't really been necessary. Besides, if it were going to be such a hassle, skipping a meal once in a while wouldn't hurt. It's not like I'd die or anything.

Or at least that's what I'd thought—up till now, that is. And the reason for that change of heart was my girlfriend, who was standing in front of me.

"All right, Yoshin-kun. Can you tell us what we're making today?"

"So, uh, the main dish will be mapo tofu, which we'll serve with tomato, cabbage, and tuna salad; sautéed lotus root and carrots; and onion miso soup, right?"

"Yup, you got it. Let's get started."

Nanami-san was standing in front me, wearing an apron and a bright smile. Until a minute ago, she'd been wearing shorts that showed off her legs, but she'd changed into full-length pants because we were going to be cooking. The long pants would definitely look better with an apron; plus, keeping her legs covered was safer while cooking.

Nanami-san's apron was pale pink, whereas I'd borrowed a blue one. Though the colors were different, the design was the same, so I couldn't help noticing we looked like a matching couple. I was doing my best not to think about it so that I could concentrate on cooking, but Nanami-san's mother and little sister had other ideas.

"Those matching aprons really do make you look like newlyweds," Tomoko-san said, watching us warmly.

“As in, they already *are* newlyweds. Hey, onii-chan, I like my mapo tofu super spicy,” Saya-chan added, watching us lazily through half-closed eyes.

“Mom, Saya, no teasing, please,” Nanami-san said. “We’re using knives here, so please take this seriously.”

“Oh, don’t worry. We know,” said Tomoko-san.

“I’m not teasing at all. I’m being totally serious,” said Saya-chan.

Neither of the two seemed fazed by Nanami-san’s protests. Seeing as how her cheeks were slightly red, though, it seemed the comment about us being newlyweds hadn’t slipped by her.

“But is this really okay, Nanami-san?” I asked, gazing down at the rectangular packet in front of me. It was the sauce packet for the mapo tofu we were going to be cooking. It was an instant mix of sorts, where all you had to do was add tofu and ground meat, and you’d have authentic Chinese food.

“Hm? Is something missing? I thought we’d bought everything we needed.”

“Oh, no. It’s just that, when you said we were making mapo tofu, I kind of imagined us using, like, chili bean paste, chicken stock, rice wine, and stuff like that.”

I didn’t actually know anything about cooking; I was just listing off ingredients I’d learned about through manga and browsing the internet. I’d looked things up in advance hoping I’d be able to come off as being somewhat competent, but...

Nanami-san was looking at me with overly kind eyes. It was a look that I’d seen before. I’m pretty sure it was the same way my parents used to look at me when I’d tried to say something too mature for my age.

Ah, I must have said something weird.

Nanami-san continued looking at me and gestured to raise her glasses to her eyes—even though she wasn’t wearing glasses—and then slowly opened her mouth. As she spoke, her tone was more eloquent than usual. “Yoshin-kun, you’re still a novice when it comes to cooking. Rather than having you try something authentic and fail, thus leading you to believe that cooking is difficult

or not enjoyable, I would like you to try something easy first to see how fun cooking can be."

"I see..."

I didn't know what was happening, but it seemed we were doing some kind of playacting. I mean, I knew we'd been having random little monologues here and there, but Nanami-san was speaking gently, as if to convince or advise a child. *What's going on, Nanami-san? Don't tell me you change personalities when you cook.*

"The more of a beginner someone is, the more difficult things they want to try—but then they fail. That's why we should start out easy to show you how much fun we can have. Now, let's get started!"

Ah, so that was it. With me learning from her like this, Nanami-san was pretending to be the teacher. That's why she'd gone all "cooking instructor" on me at the beginning. *She's so into it! Well, she* is *adorable, so I guess it's fine. Does this mean I should play along with her?*

"Of course, Nanami-sensei. I'm all ears."

"Leave it to me."

As I bowed to her with my posture straighter than it had ever been, even at school, Nanami-san nodded with a satisfied expression. That look of hers was particularly cute, but I thought it best to keep that to myself until we'd finished cooking.

"Yeah, I guess when onee-chan is making bento for you, she does look like she's having fun."

"Saya?!"

At that, I couldn't help but smile. *No, behave, Yoshin. It's dangerous. I have to concentrate on cooking. We're messing with fire and knives, here. If I'm careless, someone'll get hurt.* I may have been a beginner, but I knew that much, at least.

Amid all that, Tomoko-san—who had been pointing her phone at us for a bit—giggled at us. "Oh, Yoshin-kun, you know that stuff about wanting to try something difficult and failing? Nanami's talking about herself. Back when

Nanami was in elementary school, she tried to make something really difficult. When it didn't go well, she got very upset."

Nanami-san froze in place, her smug expression froze with her.

"I even have a photo, so I'll show it to you later, okay?" Tomoko-san said.

"If you wouldn't mind," I replied.

I did think that act was pretty specific, but I guess it was based on her own experience...

Still frozen, Nanami-san's face turned red while Tomoko-san continued taking pictures. I'd have to ask her later to show me those photos too.

"Jeez! Mom, Saya, can you *please* quiet down?! Let's start with the sautéed veg, okay, Yoshin? First, we've gotta peel them."

It seemed the playacting (was that what I should call it?) was over; Nanami-san was back to her usual self. She picked up a knife to peel the vegetables, while I used the vegetable peeler. I felt slightly pathetic having to use one, but since I had absolutely zero cooking skills, I had to suck it up. I mean, even with a peeler, I was having a tough time. It was no different from playing a game, really: we all had to start somewhere. *I guess I'll just have to do my best with this peeler...*

"Hey, onii-chan, peelers aren't all that dangerous, so can I ask you a question?"

"What is it, Saya—um, Saya-san?"

At that, Saya-chan burst out laughing. *Wait, did I say something funny?*

"Why are you suddenly using 'san'? I feel like I've been sucker punched. This is too hilarious!"

Saya-chan was quaking with laughter. I had no idea this kind of thing could make a middle school girl laugh. Is this funny? *Is this what they call a generation gap?*

"Nanami-san didn't like it so much when I used 'chan' earlier, so I thought I'd change it up a bit."

“Wow, onee-chan’s being such a girl. That’s a pretty adorable way to get jealous. I know she’s my sister and all, but that’s way too pure of heart, isn’t it?”

Saya-chan seemed to share my sentiments, but she sounded almost dumbfounded. Nanami-san continued chopping in silence, but her ears had turned slightly red.

Oh shoot. I replied without thinking, but maybe I should’ve kept my mouth shut. But how was I supposed to skirt around a question like that? The more I thought about it, the more it seemed I’d had no choice but to answer honestly.

“It’s fine. You can call me ‘Saya-chan.’ It’s weird and kinda creepy to be called ‘Saya-san’ by someone older than me. Not that I think you’re creepy, onii-chan.”

I stole a glance in Nanami-san’s direction. She sighed and smiled in defeat. “It’s okay if you call her that. It’s not like you’re gonna change somehow just because you do.”

“Then, now that we have her approval, I wanted to ask if you’d mind if I told people you were my brother-in-law,” Saya-chan said.

I opened my eyes wide in confusion. Nanami-san had stopped her chopping and was tilting her head, just as confused.

“I wouldn’t mind, but, uh, why?” I asked.

Saya-chan smiled teasingly. “I mean, you two are gonna get married, right? I just thought that maybe you didn’t want to feel like you couldn’t escape the situation.”

I could tell without looking that Nanami-san was blushing again. Saya-chan, on the other hand, was grinning and having the time of her life, but I didn’t feel any ill will coming from her.

“Onee-chan was never good with guys, so I thought maybe you were starting to feel kind of frustrated by her being all clingy and not letting you do things.”

Things like that were way too mature coming from a middle schooler. That said, her comment seemed less mocking and more like she was trying to get a read on me.

Nanami-san herself seemed at a loss for words, but I could tell she was looking at me kind of anxiously. Was Saya-chan testing me somehow? Either way, I decided to tell Saya-chan the truth.

“I know Nanami-san’s uncomfortable around guys, but I don’t see a need to force anything on her.”

“Really? But all the guys in my class are always talking boobs this, butts that.”

“Well, maybe that can’t be helped when you’re a teenager. I know I’m one too, but I want to respect Nanami-san’s feelings, so I don’t really see anything wrong with not doing stuff.”

That was how I truly felt.

Saya-chan sighed softly, apparently impressed. “I think I get why onee-chan confessed to you,” she said.

It seemed she’d interpreted my words favorably, but actually, Nanami-san had only confessed to me because of a dare. That’s why I wanted to be good to Nanami-san. That much was true, at least.

When I shifted my gaze toward her, I saw that she’d finished chopping up all the vegetables while I’d been struggling with a single carrot and was now staring at me, deeply moved.

Wow... I mean, I knew I’d been chatting with Saya-chan, but she really had finished all that while I’d been battling that carrot. The thinly sliced vegetables looked uniform in thickness. At least to my untrained eyes, the knife cuts looked precise.

And here I was, struggling with a peeler. *But hey, cut me some slack; it’s surprisingly hard to find the right amount of force. Plus the carrot keeps rolling around...*

“Oh, Yoshin. That’s no good,” Nanami-san said. She put her own knife away and moved behind me, unable to watch my futile battle.

“If you’re not used to a peeler, it’s better to put the carrot on the cutting board. It can be dangerous to hold it in your hand. You want to hold it like this.”

Nanami-san took my hands from behind and showed me how to use the

peeler. Because she was resting her hand on mine, correcting both my posture *and* the way I held the instrument, she ended up pressing her body directly up against mine. I knew it was neither the time nor the place, but I felt a pleasant pressure against my back.

Oh man. I have to concentrate on cooking.

"See. This way you don't have to work too hard, and it's not as dangerous, 'kay?"

With the warmth of her hand on mine, I was able to peel the carrot without any of the struggles I'd faced earlier. Yeah, this definitely felt a lot more stable and required way less strength. But it was no good. I couldn't stop thinking about my back. *Nanami-san, aren't you standing a bit too close?*

During the time it took for me to finish peeling the carrot, Nanami-san gave me her undivided attention, not once separating herself from my back. "Great job, Yoshin! See, it's not so hard after all, right?"

"Yeah, I still have to be careful because there's a blade involved, but once I get the hang of it, I think I'll be all right."

"Then shall we try slicing the carrot next?"

Taking a step away from me, Nanami-san motioned toward the knife she'd been using.

Oh, the pleasant pressure is gone... No, shoo those thoughts away. You're cooking now. You're using a knife. It's dangerous. Cutting with a knife sure makes me nervous. But this, too, is practice. I have to step up my game.

"Okay, got it. How should I cut it?"

"Hmm, we always cut them into thin strips, but that's kind of hard, so why don't we try slicing them like the lotus root?"

I took the knife Nanami-san gave me. I can't explain it, but all of a sudden, I felt like I was cooking for real. The peeler earlier had made me feel like I was putting models together or something—but just the mention of the knife made my whole body tighten a bit.

"Oh, Yoshin, before you start, I should tell you to make little paws with your

hands.”

I was so surprised, I let out a dumb yelp. Nanami-san seemed to interpret that as me not understanding what she’d said.

“Cat paws, like this,” Nanami-san said, curling her hands into paw-like fists. “And you want to pull one of your legs back like this.” She took a half step back with her right foot and moved her wrists in little inviting motions, making her look very cat-like indeed. With both of her hands curled up that way, that likeness seemed to double.

When I thought about it, I realized she didn’t really need to do that with both of her hands. And so, when I imitated her stance, I only did so with one of my hands. *Yeah, I think I’ve got it pretty close.*

To be doubly sure I was doing right, I looked over at Nanami-san, who returned my look with a nod and a smile. She then brought one of her own paws up next to her face and wiggled it at the wrist. “Hmm, maybe it’s not quite right,” she said thoughtfully.

Nanami-san stepped behind me again and, taking my hand, corrected the positioning of my waist and legs. Then, pressing up against me once more, she took the knife and pulled it gently.

Oh, so that’s how you do it, I thought, when all of a sudden my concentration was interrupted by a very reasonable question.

“Onee-chan, aren’t you pushing your boobs up against him too much?”

“Huh?!” Surprised, Nanami-san jumped away from me. I guess she really *hadn’t* thought about what she was doing.

But I, too, became flustered by Saya-chan’s question. My hand slipped, and the tip of the knife knocked against the carrot. I couldn’t maintain my cat paw either.

“Ouch!”

The movement of the knife left a tiny cut on my middle finger. I’d cried out in surprise, but the cut itself wasn’t a big deal at all.

“Oh dear, oh dear,” said Tomoko-san, who had been capturing the whole

scene. She hurriedly put down her phone and stood up.

A tiny drop of blood had escaped the tip of my finger. It hurt a little, but the cut wasn't that deep. It wasn't bleeding too much either. Even so, this wasn't sanitary. I had to stop the bleeding somehow.

I put the knife down on the cutting board and looked up to search for something to press against the cut, only to see Tomoko-san holding a first aid kit. But just as I was about to ask for a Band-Aid, Nanami-san surprised the hell out of me.

"Yoshin?! Are you okay?!"

In an instant, Nanami-san had taken my hand and put my injured finger into her mouth. She did it so quickly, I didn't even have time to resist. Though, even if I could have resisted, would I have done so?

Before we knew it, Tomoko-san—who, until a moment ago, had been holding the first aid kit—was pointing her phone at us again. It was then that my mind snapped back into my body.

Huuuh?! Wh-What are you doing, Nanami-san?!



I was confused.

It seemed Nanami-san had shocked herself as well, because she opened her eyes wide as she held my finger in her mouth. Her cheeks flushed as she looked down at it, and I felt the warmth of her mouth on my fingertip as a wet sound rang in my ears.

“Hm...mmm...mmmph!”

Nanami-san looked up at me and tried to say something, but she couldn’t quite articulate it. But every time she tried to speak, her tongue brushed delicately over my finger. Shivers traveled up my spine to match the movement of her tongue. This was dangerous.

“Oh dear, of dear. Here’s the first aid kit, dear. I think he’ll be much happier if you patch it up for him, don’t you?” Tomoko-san asked, handing the kit to Nanami-san while still holding her phone.

As if on cue, Nanami-san finally let my finger out of her mouth.

“Sorry, I panicked, and I wasn’t thinking.”

“Oh, yeah, um, right. Thank you?”

Why did I just thank her?

“That’s not it!” Nanami-san yelled out of nowhere. “You were hurt, so I did it without thinking. I was trying to help, but then I tried to talk, and every time I licked your finger, you reacted so much, so I enjoyed myself way too much!”

“Calm down, Nanami-san. You really don’t need to say anything. That is, you’re saying a little too much, if you get me,” I said.

With that, Nanami-san’s cheeks turned crimson. She finally seemed to calm down, though, because she slowly opened the first aid kit. Her cheeks were still glowing, but she took out an antiseptic and a Band-Aid, and began to treat my cut.

I could still feel the sensation of Nanami-san’s lips on my index finger. The warmth of my cheeks wasn’t subsiding either.

“A-Anyway, it’s dangerous to say weird things like that when we’re handling a

knife, Saya!” Nanami-san cried, as if to divert attention from her embarrassment.

The girl in question had turned blue from fear and was staring at Nanami-san, wide-eyed. “I’m sorry. I didn’t think you’d get hurt. I’m so sorry!”

Saya-chan had such a pained expression on her face, I felt sad just looking at her. In fact, she was actually quivering as tears welled up in her eyes.

“It was just a small cut this time, but if it were a serious injury?!”

“I’m sorry, onee-chan. I’m sorry, Misumai-san.”

Nanami-san was angry, making Saya-chan shrink even smaller. This was my first time seeing Nanami-san like this. She was angry on my behalf, right? I was really grateful, but...

“Saya-chan seems sorry, Nanami-san. Now that you’ve treated the cut, I’m totally fine.”

“But it must have hurt, Yoshin.”

“Just a tiny bit. This is nothing,” I said, waving my hand in front of the two of them. In all seriousness, it was just a small cut—they were overreacting, really.

Saya-chan really did seem sorry, and I didn’t want to see Nanami-san so worked up over nothing. Besides...

“I love seeing you smile, so even if she did wrong, I’d love it if you could forgive her.”

Nanami-san fell silent at my request. Even I knew it was an unfair way to phrase things, but forgiveness was important.

Nanami-san thought for a moment. Then, sighing, she turned toward Saya-chan. “I overreacted too. I’m sorry, Saya.”

“No, it was my fault. I’m sorry, onee-chan. Again, I’m sorry, Misumai-san. And thank you.”

I laughed lightly. “You can keep calling me ‘onii-chan.’ I don’t mind at all.”

At least things had been easily settled. Nanami-san and Saya-chan were both smiling again, albeit a little awkwardly.

Now that we'd reset the mood, it was time to get back to cooking. Just then, though, we noticed Tomoko-san, who had been silent up until then. She still had her phone pointed at us. At first I'd thought she was taking photos, but I didn't hear the shutter going off.

"Um, Tomoko-san, you've had your phone pointed at us this whole time, but what exactly are you doing?"

"Oh, this? I'm recording a video of you and Nanami working hard together. It's for making my report to Shinobu-san and Akira-san, and maybe even for the video we'll play at your wedding."

"What?! Mom?!"

Ah. I knew it. She really had been recording us.

"But really, Yoshin-kun, I'm sorry about all that. I have to apologize as well."

"It's totally fine. It's no big deal."

"You know, you'll make a wonderful husband and father. The way you handled things with Saya was very mature."

She got that on camera too, huh? Wow, that *I might want her to delete.*

Nanami-san's objections grew louder, but Tomoko-san seemed to be enjoying teasing us.

"Well, I guess this will become a great memory too," I muttered, looking down at the finger Nanami-san had bandaged for me.

◇◇◇

"Wow, I ate waaay too much."

Who was it that first said that lying down immediately after eating would turn you into a cow? And why was it a cow, specifically?

I looked over at Nanami-san, who was sprawled out on her bed. Yeah, it was pretty unlikely that *she* would become a cow.

Even so, Tomoko-san sure was something else. I never thought she'd show everyone our cooking footage. Thanks to that, though, Nanami-san and I had been able to escape to Nanami-san's room. Her family were probably getting a

kick out of watching those videos right about now. Just thinking about it exhausted me.

Even though we'd been in the process of fleeing, Nanami-san had managed to change into her shorts somehow and was now getting comfortable on her bed. She'd sure made quick work of it. I was now having a hard time knowing where to look.

"It really was tasty, right?" she asked.

"Yeah. it was a bit on the spicy side but delicious all the same," I said in agreement.

The mapo tofu we'd made had been pretty tasty, even though it had been a little too spicy for me. We hadn't done anything special in making it, having used the sauce packet and all, so mapo tofu must really taste like that.

Nanami-san sat up slowly, parting her slightly red lips to stick her tongue out at me. "My tongue's still a bit tingly. Does it look red?"

She slid her tongue skillfully up, down, left, and then right, trying to get me to take a look. *Just a little while ago, that tongue and my finger had— No, no, my head's running away with itself again. That was just part of treating the cut— forget about it.*

"I think it looks fine."

"Isn't yours tingly too? Let me see," Nanami-san said, leaning closer to my lips. When she'd gotten almost close enough to touch me, she pulled back a bit as if waiting for something.

Do I, uh, have to stick my tongue out too?

Nanami-san was sitting on her bed, swinging her legs briskly back and forth, her hands clasped together between them. Apparently, she was going to wait until she got what she wanted, so I surrendered and stuck my tongue out to show her.

"See? It's fine, right?"

Nanami-san happily leaned in again to examine it. It wasn't like she was going to touch it. She was just going to look, so why did it feel so embarrassing?

Eventually, the satisfied Nanami-san stepped away from me and lay back down on her bed. “Your tongue isn’t red at all. It looked totally normal,” she said with a lighthearted laugh.

I, on the other hand, had to hold my mouth to fight my embarrassment. I sat down on the cushion and, feeling a bit sheepish, averted my eyes.

“Hey, Yoshin, why don’t you come over here and lie down too?”

“I don’t think that’d be a good idea.”

Kicking her feet, Nanami-san looked up at the ceiling and laughed cheerfully. “Oooh, I see. You’re gonna make a move on me if we lie down together, huh?”

“That’s too much of a leap. Even Confucius said boys and girls shouldn’t sit together after they’re seven.”

“Wow, where’d you get that from?”

“I think I picked it up from an anime or something.”

Nanami-san seemed satisfied by my response, but I sensed something odd about her demeanor. Was it me, or was she a touch more excited than usual?

Usually when we were alone, our time together was pretty chill. Nanami-san would often snuggle close to me, but she was still usually calmer than she was now. Today, though, Nanami-san was inviting me to bed—I mean, not in a weird way. It was just to lie down next to her, but she definitely seemed different from usual.

Soon, a silence settled between us, and only the sound of Nanami-san’s kicking feet filled the room. It wasn’t an awkward silence, but a gentle one—or at least it felt that way to me.

“Hey, Yoshin...” Nanami-san started, but just then, there was a quiet knock on the door. Nanami-san swallowed the words and, frowning a bit, got up to check who the visitor was. It was Saya-chan.

“What’s up, Saya?”

Although Nanami-san sounded surprised, her voice was gentle. It was pretty obvious that Saya-chan was still down in the dumps.

“I just wanted to apologize again,” she said weakly. “I’m sorry I made you get hurt.”

“Saya, Yoshin already forgave you, and I’m not mad anymore either,” Nanami-san said, patting her little sister’s head. I wondered if I should say something too, but inserting myself into a moment between the two sisters seemed uncalled for.

“Here. These are for you two. I brought tea too,” Saya-chan said.

“But aren’t they the chocolates you were saving for yourself? You don’t have to give them to us.”

“I know, but I want you to have them.”

“All right. Then Yoshin and I will savor them. Thanks, Saya.”

With that, Saya-chan turned to leave, but before walking away, she looked back at me. “I’m sorry, onii-chan.”

Hearing her call me that again, I smiled. “Really, there’s nothing to worry about.”

Saya-chan smiled in the same beautiful way as her sister always did, and then she left.

“Well then, do you wanna try the treats Saya brought us?” Nanami-san asked.

“Yeah, let’s. We’ll have to thank her later.”

The tray in Nanami-san’s hands held a tea set along with a small plate of gem-like chocolates. I stood up hurriedly to take the heavy tray from her and set it down on the table before we treated ourselves to Saya-chan’s gift.

I took a piece of chocolate and popped it in my mouth. It melted slowly, spreading its sweet, bitter flavor. I then took a sip of the warm tea that Saya-chan had prepared for us. The sweetness of the chocolate and the rich fragrance of the tea blended together, filling me with a warm happiness.

“This is delicious. Isn’t it really expensive?” I asked, surprised by the unfamiliar taste, but Nanami-san responded like it was no big deal.

“I’m not really sure. I think it’s from abroad, though. I think Saya gave us her

own secret stash.”

Abroad... That must mean they were pretty hard to get hold of. Why had she offered them to us?

“She should have had them with us,” I said.

“She probably didn’t feel comfortable, since she meant it as an apology. I think these are only half of what she kept, though, so it should be okay.”

Then I guess it wasn’t that bad, huh? Even so, I felt kind of bad for her.

As I was going back and forth in my head, Nanami-san tapped my nose. “Don’t you want to eat these alone with me? Would you prefer it if Saya were here?”

Isn’t asking me like that kind of unfair?

When I shook my head slowly in response, Nanami-san looked at me happily, smiling.

After that, time passed smoothly, and we sat next to each other in silence. It was a peaceful silence. We snuggled up to each other and felt warmth where our bodies touched. As I started to doze off from the comfort of that warmth, Nanami-san broke the silence.

“Yoshin, do you like fish?”

“What?” I tilted my head confusedly. Was this just small talk? She sounded way too serious for that though. “I do. Are we talking about having fish for dinner tomorrow?”

“I see, so you do you like fish...” she muttered, as if dwelling on my response. Since she’d sounded so serious, I’d answered her earnestly, but it seemed there was more to it than that.

I decided to broaden the topic, hoping to prompt her into saying more. “When my mom has time, she sometimes makes us fish braised in sweet sauce. It tastes amazing. Maybe I only think that because we don’t have it that often, though.”

It wasn’t the kind of dish you’d expect a high schooler to like, but it really was very tasty. I guess that’s what they call the taste of home.

“Then shall we try making braised fish tomorrow? Do you want it with soy sauce? Or if it’s with miso, we can try mackerel or something,” Nanami-san said.

“Mackerel in miso sounds really good. But isn’t that kind of hard to make?”

“Not really, though I used to think that too, so I don’t blame you.”

Braising fish sounded like a task way more than I could handle, but Nanami-san talked about it as if it were nothing.

“Wow, you can make Japanese food too, huh? That’s really impressive.”

Nanami-san slowly got up from the floor and lay down on her bed. There, she turned to me and smiled. It was a toothy smile, like that of a child causing mischief, but the fullness of her chest was emphasized by her position. Lying there like that, she displayed a charm that encompassed both innocence and sensuality.

Whether or not she knew how taken I was with her in that moment, she tilted her head and asked, “I’ll make a good wife one day, won’t I?”

Her statement was both undeniable and clearly meant to fluster me. I did my best to take in her question calmly and to reply to it calmly as well.

“You’ll also make a great mother.”

I knew those words had dripped out of my own mouth, but I felt like I might have missed the mark. Why the hell did I have to go in the “mother” direction?

“See?! You say things like that so easily. Jeez, it’s not fair!” Nanami-san exclaimed, apparently upset at my response. She started rolling around on her bed, her cheeks slightly puffed out.

“You said it first, Nanami-san.”

“No, that’s not what I meant! What I wanted to say was, um, so...”

Still rolling back and forth on her bed, Nanami-san hesitated and looked up at me. She didn’t seem nervous, but she still seemed hesitant to say whatever it was she wanted to say. I waited patiently for her to speak.

Eventually she whispered, “I wasn’t talking about eating. Actually, I wanted to ask about going to look at them. That is, do you like going to see fish and other

sea creatures and stuff?”

Ah, so we weren’t talking about dinner.

Until then, I’d thought about fish mainly in terms of whether I liked eating them or not, rather than whether I liked looking at them. With that in mind, I answered her honestly. “I’ve never really thought about it, but I guess I wouldn’t dislike it. It could be fun.”

This was just a guess, but was she perhaps making a suggestion for our next date? I’d love to go with her either way. Was there somewhere we could go?

As I was sitting there thinking about places we could go to to see fish, Nanami-san spoke up. Although she’d been lying down a moment ago, she’d suddenly sat up and thrust her hands out toward me.

“Really? Oh, that’s a relief. Then, I, um... I have these!”

I didn’t even know when she’d got hold of them, but she was holding two tickets in her hands.

“Tickets? How did you come across those?” I asked.

“My mom got them. Two tickets to the aquarium: one for you and one for me.”

Ah, the aquarium—of course! I hadn’t even thought of it. She must have asked that fish question in order to bring up the tickets. Could I take this to mean she was asking me out on a date?

“Damn it. I’m really sorry I didn’t catch on till now,” I said, perhaps too politely.

Nanami-san giggled quietly. At least she didn’t seem angry—not that she was that kind of a person.

“Nah, that was a really roundabout way for me to ask. To be honest, I was nervous.”

“Really? You seemed pretty normal to me.”

“Yeah. Actually, I’m *still* really nervous.”

“Well, you don’t look it. Since you already have those tickets, though, shall we

—”

“Wait just a sec!”

Nanami-san held up her hands to stop me. Surprised by the interruption, I felt my next words catch in my throat.

“Let me say it,” she declared.

“Got it,” I said, nodding quietly at her serious gaze. “I’ll wait as long as you need.” I straightened my posture and waited.

Nanami-san took a few deep breaths as she held the tickets. Then, suddenly, she looked at me sharply, like a soldier going into battle. If she weren’t holding those tickets, I would’ve sworn she was about to yell at me for something.

“So, um, you see... Maybe... Give me a sec.”

“As long as you need.”

I was about to chuckle, but I stopped myself. If I did anything that suggested I was making fun of her, she would have an even more difficult time speaking. I realized then just how nervous she was, and I also realized that the reason for her nervousness was the same as mine had been.

After taking a few more deep breaths, Nanami-san looked straight at me and, blushing, asked in one breath, “Will you go on an aquarium date with me next weekend?!”

“I’d be happy to,” I replied, with the biggest smile I could muster. I was thrilled that she’d want to ask me out at all.

Hearing my response, Nanami-san let out a loud groan and fell backwards on her bed. I got up and walked over to her, sitting down next to her despite my embarrassment.

Once again, silence settled between us. It was a gentle, kind silence that wrapped us in a feeling like we’d accomplished something. When I looked at Nanami-san on her bed, I saw that she had a content smile on her face that suggested a pleasant kind of fatigue.

“Gosh, it really is nerve-racking to ask someone out on a date,” she said.

I nodded several times. It was true; it really was nerve-racking, and the resulting mental exhaustion was no joke either.

“But you were fine with our shopping dates after school,” I pointed out.

“Those were just a part of going home,” she murmured.

Seeing Nanami-san so exhausted was so heartwarming, I couldn’t help but let out a chuckle. Nanami-san turned her head to look at me.

Maybe I shouldn’t have laughed at all, but Nanami-san seemed unaffected. “You’re really amazing, Yoshin,” she said, sounding impressed. “Thanks for asking me out on a date.”

She was probably talking about when I’d asked her out on our movie date. It wasn’t anything to be thanked for. I’d just asked her out on the spur of the moment.

“Then thank *you* for asking me out on a date, even when you were so nervous.”

“You’re welcome. Let’s have fun, yeah? There are so many things I wanna do.”

Things she wants to do? Like what?

“Anyway, should we try going this Saturday? Oh, wait. That’s tomorrow, isn’t it?” I said.

“Hmm... Yeah, it’s not like I have anything going on, so tomorrow should be fine.”

Just then, as we were chatting about tomorrow’s plans, Nanami-san’s phone pinged. It seemed she’d received a text—and then another.

“It’s still going off. Should you check it?” I asked.

“It’s fine. I’m enjoying my time with you. I can just reply later.”

But the notifications continued. Was there some kind of emergency?

Growing impatient, Nanami-san picked up the phone and glared at the screen, but when she started reading, her eyes opened wide.

“What?” she said, looking back and forth between me and the phone. What

was it?

“Sorry, Yoshin... Can we go on our date the day after tomorrow instead?”

“Huh? Oh, of course. Is something wrong?”

“Um, kind of.”

Nanami-san gave me an apologetic look. I couldn’t help but wonder who the messages were from.

Chapter 4: Our Aquarium Date

“My, my, so *you’re* Nanami-chan’s boyfriend! It’s so nice to meet you—I’m Toru. I’m *so* delighted to be your hairstylist today!”

“Uh, it’s nice to meet you, Toru-san. I’m Yoshin Misumai.”

“It’s such a pleasure, Yoshin-kun,” Toru-san responded with delight.

For the first time in my life, I was at a hair salon.

I’d heard of them, but I never really knew if they actually existed. It seemed they weren’t just urban legends after all. Behind me, grinning at me while I was sitting there, imagining hair salons as the stuff of legends, was the person who was going to cut my hair.

His name was Toru-san. Or should I say “she”? I could tell by his body and voice that he was a man, but he spoke in a feminine way, and his mannerisms were soft and gentle. There was absolutely no ruggedness from his gait or his small gestures, and even through our brief interaction, I could see that his movements were beautiful.

I figured Toru-san was the “big sister” type—a guy who spoke and behaved in ways that emphasized their feminine qualities. I’d been a little taken aback at first because I didn’t know anyone like that, but I could tell right away he was very good-looking; his subtle makeup suited him to a T. He could be described as either a beautiful man or a beautiful woman—though according to Nanami-san, he was married and had a wife.

This hair salon was the one Nanami-san frequented, as well as where Otofuke-san worked her part-time job. I was here today to get my hair cut.

For someone who usually went for cheap one-thousand-yen haircuts with no shampoo or shave, this was a totally unknown world. The salon smelled strange from the moment I entered. Its smell was mysterious and unfamiliar to me—perhaps it was the scent of conditioner—and I’d been immediately overcome by a strange feeling, similar to when I’d first walked into Nanami-san’s room. I

felt tremendously out of place here and could neither calm down nor sit still. I just felt like I shouldn't be here.

All this salon stuff had started with an incident in Nanami-san's room the night before. After we'd finished up dinner at the Baratos' house, Nanami-san and I had chatted in her room, and then she asked me out on a date—a discussion that I'd thought marked the end of my evening.

But then Nanami-san had received a message from Otofuke-san. Nanami-san had been terribly apologetic, so at first I couldn't guess who'd sent it. I was glad it was only Otofuke-san, but the real problem was that message—at least, it was a problem for me.

"Hmm, tomorrow, huh? Gosh, I don't know. But it *is* a good opportunity. I kinda wanna see it..." Nanami-san mumbled, her head in my lap as she engaged in a staring contest with her phone.

We'd already floated the idea of going on our date on Saturday, but if that wasn't going to be possible, I had to let her know that that was okay. After all, we could just go on our date on Sunday.

If we're not going on our date on Saturday, what should I do? Should I spend the day playing games? I'd begun to wonder, when Nanami-san had addressed me.

"Yoshin, do you think you can come with me tomorrow?"

"Huh?"

I'd assumed the content of the message concerned only Nanami-san, so I hadn't been expecting a question like that. Given that I'd been contemplating what I might do the next day, I couldn't exactly say no. Before, I would've simply prioritized my game. Boy, I sure did change fast. Oh well—it was for the better.

"Of course. What's going on?" I'd asked her.

Hesitating slightly, Nanami-san had showed me her phone to reveal the message from Otofuke-san.

Hatsumi: Hey, are you free tomorrow? My work is looking for a hair model, and I was wondering if

we could ask Misumai. Toru-san said he'd be the one doing the haircut.

A hair model? What in the world is that? I'd never heard of it—not from the super cheap barbershops I usually went to, anyway. I'd never even heard the term "model"... Nah, that would be a lie.

"Hatsumi works part-time at the hair salon where I go to get my hair cut. Toru-san is usually the stylist I ask to cut my hair. He's really nice, I swear."

Hair salon... Another unfamiliar term. Is that like a beauty salon? I'm pretty sure it's not a barbershop. Certainly not the cheap kind.

But if this person cut Nanami-san's hair and was really nice as she'd said, then I had no reason to say no. However...

"I'm more worried about someone like me going to a 'hair salon'? Beauty salon? Are you sure I wouldn't be out of place?"

That was the bigger issue. Wouldn't they reject me, someone who knew nothing about haircuts and all matters related to it?

This would be fractionally less terrifying than when I hadn't had any clothes to go to buy clothes, but still, there isn't really a dress code for getting a haircut, is there?

"You've nothing to worry about! Toru-san's really nice! And he's really good at what he does! Besides, your hair's getting kind of long, don't you think?"

In response to her comment, I had pinched a strand of my hair. My hair *had* been getting longer and kind of annoying. But a beauty salon, huh? This was going to be one hell of a hurdle.

With Nanami-san's head still in my lap, I had crossed my arms and thought hard. True, this wasn't a big deal for other people, but for me it had been a conundrum.

As I thought, Nanami-san had moved away from me and was now hiding her face behind the aquarium tickets. From there, she had tilted her head and whispered, "I know this is me being selfish, but I'd really love to go on an aquarium date with you on Sunday, after you've gotten your hair cut and you look all handsome."

“I’d be thrilled to be the hair model,” I’d declared immediately.

One hell of a hurdle? I’d completely pulverized that hurdle—crushed it to smithereens. I hadn’t even bothered jumping over or ramming right through it; I’d simply tossed it aside.

I’d been pretty sure that no man had the option of saying no in the face of such an adorable request. At least, I hadn’t had the option. Whether or not I would actually look handsome was a whole other story, but if Nanami-san wanted me to do it, I was happy to chop my hair off. Heck, I’d even be happy to get it buzzed off. Well...maybe not that.

Anyway, after all that, we had somehow found ourselves here.

If this were my usual budget barber, I wouldn’t be at all nervous, unlike today. That nervousness might have had something to do with the fact that the person cutting my hair was super handsome, though.

As a side note, Otofuke-san was in the middle of her shift. While she was waiting for me to get my hair cut, Nanami-san would hang out with Kamoenai-san.

“But really, to think that the person who ended up capturing Nanami-chan’s heart was just an ordinary laddie like you,” Toru-san said.

“I’m sorry I’m not cool.”

“Oh, no. That’s not it at all. I’m sorry if I said something misleading. I’m *overjoyed* and actually quite relieved,” Toru-san muttered emotionally, as he continued fiddling with my hair.

If this was the place Nanami-san usually got her hair cut, did that mean this guy knew about her past? As in, had Toru-san also been worried about Nanami-san? I was actually pretty grateful.

“Have you known Nanami-san for a long time, Toru-san?” I asked.

“Oh, sure I have. Those three have been coming here since they were in middle school. Hatsumi-chan and Ayumi-chan got used to me relatively quickly, but Nanami-chan was pretty nervous even with me at first.”

Nanami-san wasn’t comfortable around guys. Maybe asking an older sister

type like Toru-san to be Nanami-san's stylist had been a display of consideration on the part of Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san. Or was I overthinking it?

"So I hope you're happy to leave everything up to me today. Since you're gonna be our hair model, I'll be taking photos of you at the end, but I won't show your face, so you won't have anything to worry about, 'kay?"

"Sure. I know nothing about hairstyles or anything like that. Oh, but can I make one request?"

There was one thing I wanted to ask of Toru-san, even if it was a bit cheeky of me. Hey, just asking was courageous for me. Toru-san didn't make a fuss—he just smiled and waited for me to hear what I had to say.

"I'm going on an aquarium date with Nanami-san tomorrow. So, um, can you make me look cool enough so that I'm not ashamed to stand next to her?"

I couldn't do anything about the material he was working with. I wasn't exactly a handsome guy. Still, if I worked on myself a little, I could at least be the kind of guy who could stand by her side unashamed. No, I *wanted* to be that kind of guy.

I'd expected my request to be all too inappropriate, but Toru-san's reaction threw me for a loop.

"Oh my... Oh my, oh my, my, my!" Starting from a whisper, Toru-san gradually raised his voice as he looked back and forth between Nanami-san and me. "A date, you say? Today is the day before your date?! How *marvelous*! A young man who comes to a hair salon for his girlfriend, even though he's not used to it... It's all too *delicious*!"

Toru-san was definitely overreacting, raising both his hands above his head as his eyes gleamed with excitement. Heck, his whole body nearly let out a beam of light. *Whoa, he's really worked up! Is it just me, or is he dazzling right now?!*

I was in shock, but the other clients and salon staff didn't seem fazed at all. In fact, I heard whispers like, "Oh, the owner's on fire," and "That kid's really got Toru-san going." Wow, the people were already used to this, weren't they?

Toru-san was quite the character. Or was it just that people around Nanami-san tended to have really distinct personalities? Wait, Toru-chan was the owner

of the salon? I guess that wasn't the part I should be concerned with.

Even Nanami-san and Kamoenai-san were sitting on a sofa in the distance, looking over at us with a kind of dumbfounded expression on their faces.

I turned once again to see Toru-san's eyes in the mirror. It might have been my imagination, but I was pretty sure I saw flames in them: the roaring passion of his soul... Yeah, I must have imagined it.

"I'll give you a makeover with all my body and heart and soul, no holds barred! Be prepared to look *fabulous*, Yoshin-kun!"

What kind of a beauty salon requires preparation? Wait, were beauty salons usually like this? Was this normal? That can't possibly be. This *had* to be a special situation.

There was no way I could say anything in response to the blazing Toru-san, so I just sat there completely at his mercy. Even if I did speak up, I was pretty sure my fate was sealed anyway.

There stood an adult who, as a professional hairstylist, was pouring his body and soul into my and my hair. This haircut was something a world apart from the usual haircuts I got, and I was already beginning to understand why salons were so expensive. He hadn't done anything yet, but I was getting chills. *Please go easy on me.*

After my hair had been thoroughly shampooed, Toru-san took his scissors to it. He used not just one pair, but several of various sizes. At times he even used clippers. My hair was growing shorter and shorter before my eyes. It was as if I were watching a video on fast-forward. My hair, which had grown so long that it was actually getting annoying, was being cleaned up in an instant.

The cutting process was incredibly elegant and graceful. I was entirely fascinated by Toru-san's technique. It was as if he were creating a work of art out of my head.

After he'd finished cutting, my hair was washed a second time. I thought that would be the end of it, but I was wrong.

"Now then, let's get to work on some styling. I'll be adding a touch of hair wax. Have you ever used wax before?" Toru-san whispered as he was finishing

up.

“No, never.”

“Then how about I show you how to use it so you can try it out on your date tomorrow?”

Wondering why he was whispering, I glanced in the mirror. Toru-san’s shoulders were rising and falling in pace with his breathing.

Why are you going all out for this?!

Still, using wax really was new ground for me. From what I remembered, my dad didn’t use it either, so to me, it felt like a foreign substance. In fact, I was pretty sure that the only kind of wax my dad ever used was the one for his car. Did he even have wax for his hair? At this point, I was too embarrassed to consider asking.

“You’re slim but still pretty buff, so I tried out a little something on the shorter side. If we throw in some hair wax to give your hair some lift, it’ll make for a refreshing take on your look, wouldn’t you say?”

He ran a small amount of product through my hair and carefully explained how to apply it. Apparently, you were supposed to dry your hair properly and then apply it to bits of your hair at a time to make those bits stand up.

As he worked, Toru-san’s motions were precise, and even though he was messing with my hair, I felt no discomfort at all. Apparently, he was using a paste-type wax, which he explained would be more suitable for my hair. *So there are different types of hair wax, huh? I never knew that.*

And there in the mirror sat me, with my hair chopped and styled like never before. I couldn’t quite put my finger on it, but something about my reflection felt...off.

Maybe this was supposed to be the moment where I was supposed to be all, *“Is this my true form?”* and get all emotional, but—though I felt bad toward Toru-san—I couldn’t help feeling like something was off. It was as if the me in the mirror wasn’t me at all.

Maybe it was because my hair alone was set so perfectly, even though the

facial features were still all me. I really did look refreshed and clean-cut, but I had a hard time imagining myself as handsome and praising myself.

“Sooo, what do you think? This is how it turned out, but I’d say it suits you really well.”

“Do you really think so?”

“Oh? Is it not to your liking?”

“It’s not that. It’s just...I’ve never used hair wax or anything like that, so it feels kinda strange. It’s like it’s not me, and I can’t get used to the feeling... No, wait. That’s not really what I’m trying to say.”

I wanted to thank him for fixing my hair and making it so that I wouldn’t feel out of place standing next to Nanami-san, but I just couldn’t put those thoughts into words. I didn’t want to disagree with Toru-san, or to doubt his skills. It was pretty rude of me, really.

No, maybe that thought itself was a little bit arrogant. After all, everything was a first for me—the beauty salon, the hair wax—so of course I wouldn’t be able to say anything smart or thoughtful. There was only one thing for me to do—I had to tell Toru-san honestly how I felt, without overthinking it.

“Thanks. I’m really happy.”

“I’m glad. Oh, and by the way...” Toru-san put his finger to his lips and wink. The gesture was so becoming of him that it made even my heart skip a beat. “There’s no need to worry, all right? You look like a catch. I mean, of course you do! You’re *my* creation! Besides, you’re the boy that Nanami-chan chose, so you should have more confidence in yourself.”

Somehow, Toru-san had seen right through me. I couldn’t help but smile. Nanami-san had chosen me, huh? I couldn’t very well tell Toru-san about the situation, but what he’d said did sting a bit. Was it even okay for me to have a *little* bit of confidence?

“Then that’s a wrap! You’re all set!” He patted me on the shoulder and gave it a squeeze, as if trying to get me to relax. I felt lighter, like a weight had been lifted.

I stood up from the chair and, accompanied by Toru-san, made my way over to Nanami-san, who'd been waiting for quite some time. I felt nervous about what she'd think about my new look.

"Thanks for waiting, Nanami-san. Um, what do you think?"

In the waiting area of the salon sat Nanami-san and Kamoenai-san, along with Otofuke-san, who was probably on her break. Apparently, all three of them were waiting to see my new hairdo.

To my surprise, it wasn't Nanami-san who reacted first, but her two friends.

"Oh hey, that looks pretty good," Otofuke-san said. "Not bad, huh? It suits you. Leave it to Toru-san to fix you up. He's a real role model."

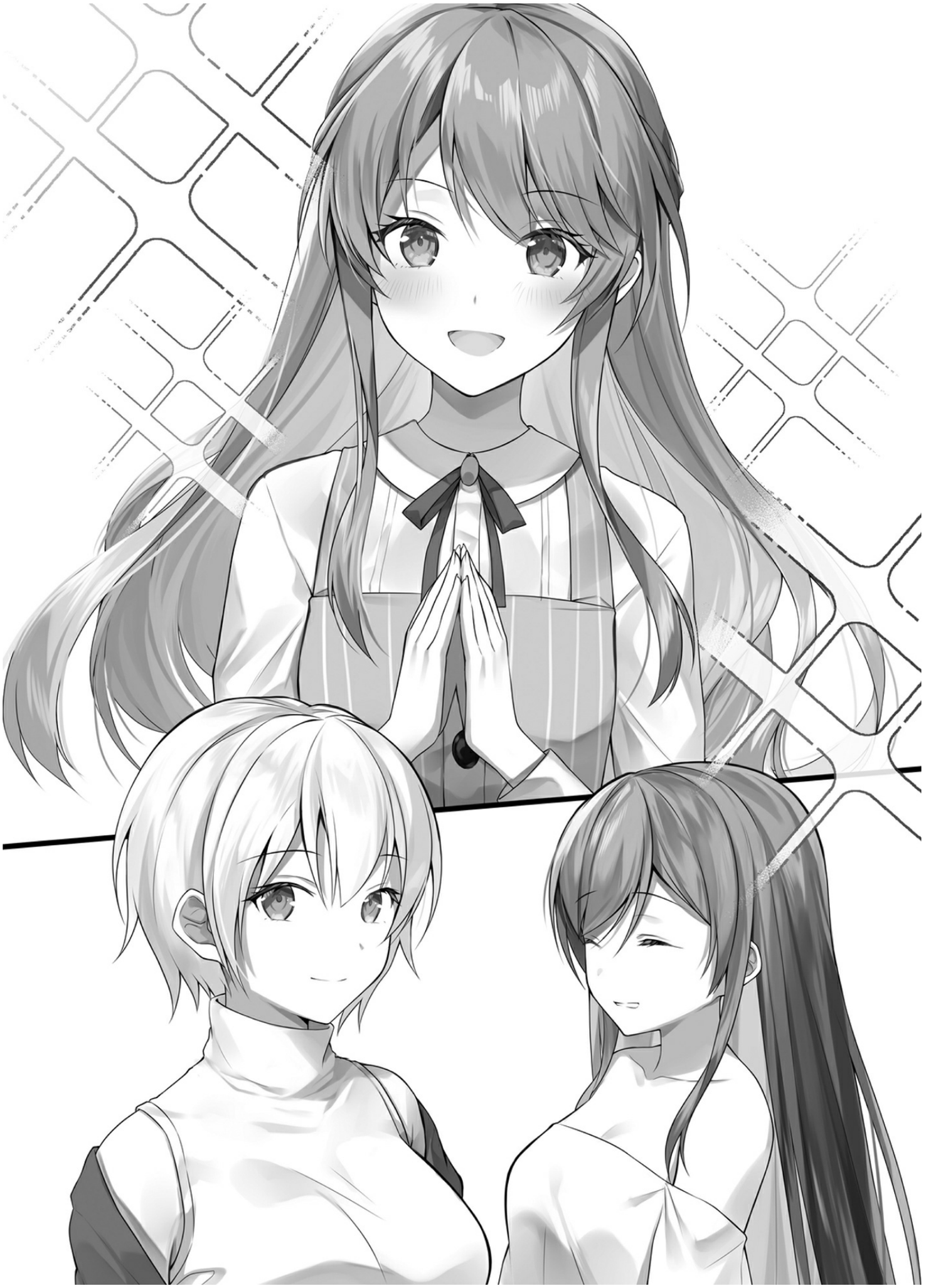
"Yeah, you look all nice and refreshed," Kamoenai-san added. "Hm. I was hoping for the 'dud to stud' kind of transformation you see in manga, but even with a haircut, you're still the same old Misumai. You look good though."

Excuse me?

Obviously, the whole "dud to stud" thing wouldn't actually happen. Even if it did, that would be because the guy was already hot to begin with. If an ordinary guy gets a haircut, the most that happens is they go from ordinary guy to ordinary guy with their hair cut. In fact, it was almost a relief to hear that, but...

"Wow, Yoshin, you look so handsome," Nanami-san suddenly whispered, and with that, it was everyone else's turn to fall silent.

She was blushing, her hands clasped together in front of her chest as she stared at me, her eyes sparkling. *Wait, I know I got my hair cut, Nanami-san, but I'm still just the same me...*



Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san stared at her, their eyes wide. Only Toru-san was nodding, seemingly satisfied by Nanami-san's reaction.

"Um, Nanami-san?"

Caught off guard by her unexpected response, I could only extend my hand toward her.

Nanami-san began mumbling, more to herself than to us. "Oh no. What am I gonna do? If Yoshin looks *this* good, people are totally gonna fall for him at school. And I even said that stupid thing the other day. Now what am I gonna do?"

There was absolutely no need for her to worry so much. Even Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san had said I looked the same as before.

It was a little embarrassing to have her compliment me so much. We could hear everything she was saying, and now Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san were looking at me and smiling big creepy grins. I was flattered and all, but I also wanted to run away.

"Thank you so much, Toru-san!" Nanami exclaimed, looking up at the hair connoisseur. "I'm so grateful that you made Yoshin look so handsome!"

"It's my pleasure to satisfy my customers!" he responded.

Then Nanami-san turned to me and made the cutest request: "Yoshin, I don't want you to let anyone else see that new look but me. I'd appreciate it if you only look like that when we're on our date."

"Uh, yes," I managed to say.

Toru-san was smiling warmly at Nanami-san. It seemed everything was going according to his plan. "Of course a girl in love would think her boyfriend looks super handsome when he styles his hair a bit. Yup, this was a job well done, if I do say so myself!" He pumped his fist and flashed us a satisfied smile.

Oh, I see. Toru-san really had fulfilled my request, however vague it had been. Nanami-san's reaction definitely proved it. No one else's opinion mattered. Nanami-san's reaction meant everything to me.

"Don't worry, Nanami-san. I'll only do my hair like this in front of you. Only, I'll

be doing it myself for tomorrow's date, so I might not do such a good job."

"Thanks. Oh, is it okay if we take a picture of us like this?"

"Oho ho," Toru-san chuckled, immediately stepping in. "Let me do the honors, Nanami-chan. Here, scooch together, you two."

Nanami-san and I gave our phones to Toru-san and had him take pictures of us holding hands with each other. Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san looked on and nodded as if they both understood something.

"I get it now. If you like a guy, of course you'll think that he looks hot after a haircut," Otofuke-san said, clearly thinking back to her shojo manga.

"Jeez, I wonder if I felt like that once too," Kamoenai-san lamented. "I feel like Nanami's leaving me behind. I can't lose like this!" Kamoenai-san lamented.

After that, I got a few photos taken of myself as Toru-san's hair model. I knew I'd promised to do it and all, but that didn't make it any less embarrassing.

As we were headed out, Toru-san handed me his business card and a tub of the hair wax he'd used. It was a brand new, unopened tub. Thinking that this wasn't a part of the modeling gig, I tried to pay for it, but Toru-san refused to accept the payment. He said that it was a gift from him, to ensure that the date with Nanami-san would be a success, so I decided to accept his kindness.

"Yoshin-kun, if you ever have any questions about hairstyles and things, don't hesitate to call me. I'd be happy to help."

"Thanks, Toru-san. I really appreciate it."

Backed by another ally, I felt my heart grow warm. To have so many people I could rely on wasn't something I could have even imagined before. I'd been helped by so many people lately. It was only right to return the favor.

"If you're thinking of ways to return the favor, you can let me do all the hairstyling at your wedding. There's nothing like a loyal customer!" Toru-san announced. Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san whistled at Toru-san's remark, while Nanami-san and I blushed in unison.

Why was it that people around me were able to get in my head like that? Was it just a difference in life experience? And why was it that the adults around us

were always trying to marry us off?!

There was no one to answer my questions.

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Three figures—Hatsumi Otofuke, Ayumi Kamoenai, and Toru, the owner of the hair salon—looked on as the couple held hands and went on their merry way.

Toru smiled broadly at his own handiwork, happy to put a smile on the face of the girl he considered his younger sister. “Look at the two lovebirds, holding hands all happy like that. Aren’t they a joy? It really was worth the effort.”

The two young girls bowed to him.

“Thank you for listening to our request, Toru-san,” Hatsumi said.

“Yeah, thank you, Toru-san,” Ayumi added.

Looking down at them, Toru smiled bitterly. These two girls, too, were like his younger sisters, so he’d rather they wouldn’t bow to him. But what frustrated him more was what the two girls had asked of him.

“Are you two sure that was okay? We’re not even looking for hair models right now. Why didn’t you just tell them the haircut was a gift from you both?” he asked, wondering why they’d chosen to hide such a generous gift.

The two girls understood what he meant, but they’d already decided to keep the answer a secret.

“It’s totally fine. We have our own reasons,” Hatsumi said.

“That’s right, because *reasons*!” Ayumi insisted.

Seeing their slightly clouded smiles, Toru felt a slight pang in his chest. He felt both a sense of loneliness and a little joy in knowing that the two had grown up enough to have secrets of their own. He didn’t know what they were keeping from him, but he made a conscious decision not to pry.

“Oh, is that so? Well, I guess I’ll just give a little gift of my own.”

The two girls’ eyes widened. Toru winked at them cheekily and put a hand on each of their heads.

“This one’s on the house, girls.”

Toru, too, genuinely wanted to support Nanami and Yoshin. That was why, this time, he wanted to make it a gift from the three of them.

“Toru-san, that’s...”

“That’s *so* not okay! We’ll pay!”

Waving his hand at the girls at the clamoring girls, Toru silently shook his head. Both Hatsumi and Ayumi knew Toru well enough to know that it was impossible to change his mind once he was like this. Toru beamed at the girls he held dear.

“Oho, just stop by again some time. It was nice seeing you—both of you.”

Not knowing what to say, the two girls smiled broadly and thanked Toru-san once more.

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“Hmm, is this right? I really can’t tell, but I don’t *think* it looks terrible.”

It was the morning after our trip to the hair salon, and I was back at home, struggling in front of the mirror. The reason goes without saying: I couldn’t get my hair to look the way it had yesterday. Professionals really did have skills that ordinary folks could only dream of. Of course, it was no use comparing myself to a professional, but at least for today’s date, I wanted to be able to set my hair well enough to have Nanami-san tell me I looked good.

For now, though, I compared the photo from yesterday to my reflection in the mirror and told myself it wasn’t a complete fail—I just had no idea if Nanami-san would agree.

“Oh, are you going on a date with Nanami-san today? Where are you two going?” my dad asked.

“Make sure the two of you have fun,” my mom added.

Both my parents were home temporarily from their business trips. It seemed they’d decided to offer me a word of support as I was struggling. Having my parents see me like this was beyond embarrassing, but I had no choice—I didn’t have a mirror in my room. *Maybe I should invest in one*, I thought. I didn’t like

the thought of having to go through this every time I had a date planned.

My parents had got back last night, and so we'd visited the Baratos' house for dinner. That considered, yesterday had not only been the day of my first visit to a beauty salon, but my first time having cooked dinner for my parents.

My mom had been so impressed by my new haircut that she had thanked Nanami-san. I wished she hadn't done that, though. It had been embarrassing—not that she'd have stopped even if I'd told her.

Since my parents would be heading off again this evening, I wouldn't be seeing them again for a while, so I decided to let them in on the details.

"Nanami-san asked me out on a date to the aquarium today, so I'm trying to do my hair. Does it look weird?" I asked them.

"Well, I'm sure it's difficult to get it perfect on the first try, but it certainly doesn't look weird. I think it looks fine," dad said.

"That's true. Even if it isn't as pristine as yesterday, it looks pretty good, so you have nothing to worry about," mom added.

Thanks for giving it to me straight, I thought. Still, they were complimenting me in the best way they knew how. They had both seen yesterday's hairdo, so they probably couldn't help comparing—but if neither of them thought it looked weird, I'd probably be fine.

All right, let's get going.

Just then, my dad frowned at me. "By the way, Yoshin, did you buy clothes again? I haven't seen these ones before."

"Oh, these? Actually, Nanami-san's dad gave them to me. He said they're some of his old clothes, or something. They're in good condition, aren't they?"

I was wearing a white shirt and a blue jacket...called a bomber jacket, I think? And I was wearing chinos on the bottom. Since Genichiro-san had started working out, he couldn't fit into them anymore, so he'd asked me to get some use out of them instead.

I really was grateful and had taken the clothes, since the Baratos had told me they were only going to be thrown away otherwise, but I couldn't help feeling

like I was being pulled further and further into the family. Maybe they'd only *said* that they were going to throw the clothes away, without any real intentions of doing so. It was too late to back out now, though—not that I had a problem with getting more involved with them.

"Hmm. If that's the case, then we should've said thanks to them. The next time something like that happens, Yoshin, please be sure to let me and your mother know," dad said.

"Let's give them a call later and thank them," mom suggested. "And the next time we visit, we can take them a small thank-you gift."

Now that they mentioned it, I realized they were right. I hadn't even thought about it. I should've at least told my parents. *I'll keep that in mind for next time.*

After that, they began talking about parental topics and forgot all about my clothes and hair. Perhaps I'd prepped well enough. *So can I go now?*

"Okay, I'm heading out," I called.

"Stay safe. And remember to have fun!," dad said.

"We'll see you again next week, Yoshin. Are you picking up Nanami-san at her house today too?" my mom asked.

"No, today's gonna be a bit different," I said. I paused for a moment as I looked back at my parents. I felt embarrassed talking about things like this with them, but I had to get used to it. Even if I tried to hide it, they were going to find out through the parental network anyway, so I might as well tell them myself.

"We're going to meet up somewhere, as per Nanami-san's request," I said.

Meet up, huh? Had I ever done something like that in my life? At least, I'd never once met up with a girl before. I guess I technically *had* if I counted meeting up to go to school. But today, as Nanami-san had requested, we were going to meet up somewhere before our date.

Before our movie date, I'd gone to pick her up at her house, largely to avoid Nanami-san getting hit on. For our aquarium date, though, Nanami-san had said she wanted to meet me there.

To be honest, I felt anxious as hell, but Nanami-san had said she wanted to

experience something that other couples did. I supposed she was enamored of the idea. I couldn't very well say no once I'd heard that, so I had accepted her proposal. However, I had specified one condition: that I would arrive at our meeting place first.

I thought that the main problem was someone as lovely as Nanami-san waiting alone by herself, without being able to leave. There was no way she wouldn't get hit on. However, if she just had to walk here, there was way less chance of that happening...probably. Well, maybe there was still a chance, but Nanami-san could handle the odd cat-caller of two. That's what she'd told me, anyway.

There probably were people who would hit on her, but I also wanted to grant Nanami-san her request. After struggling with these two contradictory feelings, this was the conclusion I reached: that I was going to get to our meeting spot before her to wait for her, in order to dramatically decrease the likelihood of her getting hit on.

I know I came to that concession myself, but still, I'm worried.

As a side note, our meeting spot was right by the aquarium. We'd thought about meeting up at the mall or something, but then we would just be doing the same as usual, so we'd instead decided to change things up a little.

Is it just me, or does Nanami-san seem more excited than usual? I wondered during my travels.

Before I knew it, I'd arrived at our meeting spot. We were meeting up at ten, but I'd managed to get there thirty minutes early. As expected, Nanami-san still hadn't arrived.

Good, I got here before her. Will she be here soon? Nanami-san... Nanami-san's coming.

I didn't know why, but when I stopped to think again, I started feeling incredibly nervous. The tips of my fingers felt cold, and my heart was pounding furiously. I thought I'd leveled up after all the experience I'd been getting, but apparently, I still couldn't hold my nerve. I felt like I was the most nervous I'd ever been.

Does Nanami-san feel like this when she waits for me in the mornings? Waiting is just so nerve-racking.

Giving up on trying to make the heart palpitations go away, I sucked them up and waited. I didn't dislike waiting, though. As I did so, I thought about the smile she'd grace me with when she saw me, and wondered what kind of hairstyle she would have chosen today. My time waiting was accompanied by a happy feeling—though that probably had something to do with knowing for sure she was coming.

Nanami-san wasn't the type to arrive late, so I wouldn't have to daydream for long. Still, even if she kept me here, the wait felt comfortable.

Right on the dot, I heard her. "Thanks for waiting, Yoshin!"

Feeling immediate joy, I turned toward the sound of her voice, unable to stop myself smiling. As she quickened her pace, I saw that her outfit today was similar to what she wore at school—a typical gyaru look, if I ever saw one.

Her top had a wide neckline that showed off her shoulders and a lot of skin. Perhaps it was what they call an off-the shoulder style. On the bottom, she was wearing a skirt that was on the shorter side, one with an elaborate design on it. Nanami-san was also wearing pantyhose, which I'd never seen her wear at school. Perhaps because of the shortness of the skirt, her figure was more accentuated than usual.

At that moment I felt sincerely glad that I'd arrived at our meeting spot first. Seriously, who knows what would've happened if I hadn't?

Still, wasn't she showing a bit too much skin up top? I mean, I was perfectly happy, being a guy and all, but if I were a woman, I probably would've wondered whether she was cold or something. The outfit was pretty revealing, and she even had her hair half up in a bun. From her neck to her shoulders and down toward her cleavage, Nanami-san was fully exposed.

A pair of earrings decorated her ears, and she had a ribbon around her neck... No, wait. I believe they call those things like that "chokers." As in, she was wearing a choker, which, combined with her outfit, signaled she was going all out.

Even when she was wearing her school uniform, I could see the area around her cleavage, but with her wearing an outfit *this* revealing, my heart just about leaped out of my chest. I felt like I couldn't form words in a normal fashion. *You've got to calm down, Yoshin!*

But seriously, the more I looked at her, the more I couldn't help but think that if Nanami-san had arrived here first looking like that, someone *definitely* would've come up to hit on her. There might have even been a whole line of people ready to give it a shot. That was how attractive she was—that outfit of hers was dangerous.

Maybe people hit on her while she was on her way here. Oh, crap. Now I'm worried. I'm really happy to see her, but...

That was when I noticed a peculiar lurker in a stiff black suit, standing in the distance. The man sure was suspicious. He was wearing sunglasses, and his muscular body looked ready to burst from his outfit. No matter how I looked at the guy, I could tell he wasn't an ordinary businessman. In fact, he looked like he could have only one very particular occupation. Even so, I felt relieved the moment I saw him—though I guess I felt uneasy in a different sense.

It was Genichiro-san. *Um, sir, what are you doing?*

He had probably followed his daughter because he was worried about her. At least with him following her around as her own personal bodyguard guaranteed her safety. If I could have asked one thing, though, it would have been that he'd told me beforehand.

When Genichiro-san saw that Nanami-san had reached me, he flashed me a thumbs-up. I responded in kind. Satisfied with my reply, he raised one corner of his lips in a cool smile. He then turned on his heel and, waving to me with his back turned, strolled lazily away.

He was too cool. It was like a scene from a movie.

Still, since he'd been following Nanami-san in that outfit, hadn't he been stopped for questioning? There I was, worrying again.

"Yoshin? What's wrong?" Nanami-san asked.

Oops, my bad. Nanami-san had arrived, but I was thinking about Genichiro-

san. What kind of situation had a guy thinking about their girlfriend's father instead of the girlfriend? Judging from Nanami-san's reaction, she probably hadn't even noticed Genichiro-san following her.

"Oh, nothing. You went with that outfit today, huh? You look nice," I said.

"I wanted to look nice, since I was the one who asked you out. What do you think? Do I look cute? Sexy?" she asked teasingly.

"You look cute. The outfit is kind of revealing, though, so I'm a bit worried. I mean, I can see your shoulders and stuff, you know?"

I hadn't been sure whether to say it, but I'd ended up pointing it out anyway. *Shoot, was that sexual harassment?*

I thought she'd immediately use her hands to cover them up, but instead,she leaned forward and flashed me a smile.

"I'm showing you," she said.

"What do you mean, you're showing me?!" I exclaimed.

I mean, she was quite obviously *showing me* in that outfit, but I couldn't help parroting back what she'd said. Nanami-san's grin was larger than ever.

"Hee hee, I'm glad you think it's cute. Showing this much is pretty normal, though. And if it's you, I'm okay showing even more."

"No, I'm not worried about me. I'm more concerned about other people looking," I said.

"Being looked at by anyone aside from the person I like is like being looked at by animals. I don't care about them at all," Nanami-san said, taking my hand. "Shall we get going, then?"

Despite her reassurance, I couldn't help worrying about something else: was she really okay? Was it really possible that Nanami-san, who was so uncomfortable with men, wouldn't be bothered by people looking at her? I hoped she wasn't trying too hard...

Actually, no. I shouldn't think things like that. Instead, I should be willing to protect her.

When I squeezed her hand a bit, Nanami-san looked at me, her eyes widening.

“As long as you don’t overdo it, Nanami-san,” I said, smiling to reassure her.

Nanami-san looked surprised at first, then immediately smiled and said, “Don’t worry, Yoshin. You’re such a worrywart. But thank you.”

When I saw that smile, I was reassured that she wasn’t just putting up a front. Maybe I *had* been needlessly worried.

Taking another look at her outfit, I saw that she was carrying a large bag about the same size as the one she took to school. I, on the other hand, wasn’t carrying anything. I sure as hell couldn’t make her carry it.

“I’ll carry that, Nanami-san, if it’s okay with you. My hands are free, and it looks kinda heavy,” I said.

“It’s not *that* heavy, but I guess you’re right. It’d be great if you would.” Nanami-san let go of my hand and handed me her bag. When I took it, I understood what she meant—it wasn’t the heaviest bag ever, but I see how it would become tiring for a girl to carry it around for the whole date.

Bag in one hand, I stretched out my other hand, offering it to Nanami-san to hold.

Nanami-san looked down at my hand and hesitated.

Wait, she’s usually quick to take my hand. Did I do something weird? Did I do something she didn’t like? I was puzzled by the unfamiliar response—so puzzled, in fact, that I began to panic, thinking that I’d done something wrong.

“Um, right,” Nanami-san muttered. She nodded, taking a slow step toward me, but she still didn’t take my hand.

A chill ran down my spine. *Weren’t things going well until just a moment ago? Did I totally do something I wasn’t supposed to?*

As I stood there, confused by Nanami-san’s actions, she reached out her hand, which passed over mine. She reached toward my elbow and, pressing her upper body against me, linked her arm with mine.

Huh?

My feeling of confusion vanished in an instant, as if I'd only imagined it. In fact, it seemed my ability to think had somehow vanished along with it.

Nanami-san's other hand was also on my arm as she pressed against me. In fact, my arm was practically sandwiched between the large twin mounds on her chest. I couldn't tell whether the heartbeat I felt through her hands was mine or hers. The only thing I knew was that our arms were linked.

"Let's enjoy today's date, okay?" she asked brightly.

"Uh, yeah. I mean, um, of course, Nanami-san."

Why are you linking arms with me, Nanami-san?! I inwardly exclaimed once my thoughts finally returned. My thoughts had returned, but it seemed I was also back to my sea of confusion.

"Oh, and I forgot to say—you look really cool today. You even did your hair and everything. Yeah, you look super cool. I feel like I've fallen for you all over again."

"Uh, th-thanks, Nanami-san."

What Nanami-san said as she intertwined her arm with mine didn't enter my brain at all. Well, it *did* enter my brain, but I wasn't in a state to be able to process it. I was completely thrown off by her arm hooked through mine. In fact, I was only able to focus on the parts of myself that touched hers. This was all because her breasts were touching my arm. There was no helping my current state. It was a tragic saga of being male.

I was able to thank her for her compliment, but what was I supposed to do next?

"Um, thanks. I'm glad you noticed, but, um, Nanami-san, why are we linking arms today?" I asked.

That was all I managed to say. In fact, I'd ended up thanking her twice, but at least I'd been able to ask her what I wanted to ask.

Nanami-san anxiously furrowed her eyebrows.

Oh no. I didn't mean to make her make that face. I was just so totally confused, and I wanted to ask her how we'd gotten there.

“Do you not like it?” she asked.

“No, it’s absolutely not that. It’s just that, um, your... Your chest is touching my arm, and, uh...”

It was no use trying to play dumb, so I just told her exactly how I felt. If saying so made her feel uncomfortable, I’d simply apologize—but her reaction wasn’t at all what I’d expected.

Nanami-san blushed and smiled faintly. Then, slowly, she brought her face close to my ear, and, in a voice tinged with sensuality, she whispered, “That’s on purpose.”

You’re doing it on purpose?! Why would you do that, Nanami-san?!

I’d seen scenes like this in manga, but the destructive force of the act in real life was too much for me to handle. Did Nanami-san really know what she was doing?

“Hold up, Nanami-san. Did something happen?! You’re being really proactive today! Are you sure you’re all right?!” I exclaimed, unable to contain myself. I mean, what was going on with her today? What was this about?

“Oh? Nothing happened, silly. Come on now, we’ve got an aquarium to get to. Let’s go!” she said.

“What?! Nanami-san, wait! Don’t squeeze so...!”

Nanami-san began to drag me toward the aquarium, her arm still linked with mine. It was my first time walking while linking arms with someone, so it was kind of difficult to do. Still, seeing the joyful expression on Nanami-san’s face made me feel like I had no choice but to make an effort and just get used to it.

Upon closer inspection, I saw that Nanami-san seemed totally normal on the outside, without even a flush to her cheeks; her ears, however, were bright red. *How does she manage to control stuff like that?* I couldn’t help but wonder. She didn’t need to force herself like this, but since she looked like she was having so much fun, I simply squeezed her hand with mine.

That was how my first ever aquarium date began—with a massive shock, straight from the get-go.

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The lighting inside the aquarium was extremely dim, perhaps because of the fish, but it was still easy enough to walk. The latter maybe had something to do with the luminosity of the water through the glass. I didn't know the specifics, so those were my speculations. Whatever the reasons for it, the atmosphere inside was somehow calming.

Because of the dim light, it was probably standard practice for people to hold hands or link arms so as not to lose each other. Kids tended to get excited, so if they were allowed to run free, they'd probably get lost.

Once inside the building, Nanami-san and I let go of each other's arms and switched to holding hands. It wasn't so much that we felt walking like that in the semidarkness was dangerous, especially when we weren't used to doing so. If that were the only reason, we probably would've continued walking the way we were. The main reason was simply that Nanami-san had reached her max level of embarrassment. The redness that had begun on her ears had spread throughout her face.

It had happened just a bit ago, at the aquarium entrance. The tickets that Nanami-san had were meant specifically for couples. When she'd handed them to the woman at the ticket counter, the woman had smiled at us and said, "Are the two of you on a date? How lovely. I'm envious."

She had probably only meant it politely since she was working, but at that moment, Nanami-san had registered the gaze of the third party. I think she really had been putting a bit too much pressure on herself. As her sky-high excitement instantly plummeted, she stepped quietly away from me.

I kept it a secret from her that I felt kind of sad when the warmth of her body left me.

"Y-Yes!" Nanami-san stuttered. "Um, he's my b-boyfriend! We've been dating for two weeks!"

The woman at the counter had bowed to me, as if apologizing for saying too much. She probably hadn't expected such a flustered reaction—especially when Nanami-san looked like someone used to receiving questions like that.

It's okay, I'd wanted to say. *This is how Nanami-san normally operates. Going from bold action to sheer self-destruction might even be described as her specialty. Of course, that's only one of the things that's so adorable about her.*

Obviously, I couldn't say that to the receptionist, so we ended up trapped in a scenario fraught with panic and apologies. The only saving grace was that there was no one in line behind us.

"It's our first date at the aquarium, so do you have any recommendations?" I asked as the woman handed me the pamphlets. I wanted to change the mood and put Nanami-san more at ease.

Hearing my question, Nanami-san regained her composure a bit, and the woman at the counter seemed visibly relieved. With a smile on her face, the woman pointed out the classic dolphin and penguin shows. They also had more hands-on spaces where you could pet creatures like turtles and fish, as well as a tunnel where larger creatures like whale sharks and stingrays swam around you.

That was when I finally remembered—I'd been to this aquarium before. I was pretty sure I came here once during my earlier years at elementary school. *I suppose you really don't remember things like this...or do people usually remember?*

Still, the place seemed to have changed a lot since then. I didn't remember seeing any whale sharks, but I had fond memories of seeing the otters. I asked the woman about them, but apparently the otters were gone. That was too bad, given that they were the only thing I remembered, but if so much really had changed, it'd make for a whole new experience. Plus, this time, Nanami-san was here with me.

"Please enjoy your visit," the woman at the counter said. I thanked her and then held my hand out to Nanami-san.

Nanami-san, who had been fidgeting, looked back and forth between my hand and my face. I'd offered her my hand because I'd assumed she might feel embarrassed about linking arms. Smiling as usual, I asked, "Shall we go, then?"

It seemed she had calmed down a bit, because she took my hand gently. "Let's," she said. She smiled her usual smile and squeezed my hand.

Yeah, holding hands with her feels right, I thought as we entered the building. Linking arms when we weren't used to it seemed dangerous to me. Plus, we might be able to relax and enjoy our visit more this way.

"I think I feel calmer like this," I said. "I really like holding hands with you. We can slowly get used to linking arms, if you want."

"Jeez, I was doing my best not to get embarrassed about it," Nanami-san admitted.

So she really had been pushing herself. In that case, maybe I had something to thank the woman at the counter for. I felt that dating was supposed to be about enjoying yourselves without forcing yourself to do anything—not that I knew for sure, since I had so little experience, but that was my best guess.

And so, that was how we got to where we were—with Nanami-san tilting her head in wonder as she looked at the fish.

"I really liked feeling so close to you when we were linking arms, so I do wanna do it again," she said. "I don't know why, but I feel safe with you today."

"Safe with me?" I asked.

I, too, tilted my head, but more so in confusion. I hadn't changed anything, save for my hair.

"Yeah, I don't know what it is. I mean, I like you every day, but today you just seem even more reassuring, or even sort of nostalgic," she said.

"That's the first time anyone's ever said something like that to me."

Inside the dimly lit building, there were many visitors, including families, friends, and couples. They all seemed to be enjoying themselves in their own way. In the midst of that crowd, Nanami-san continued tilting her head, seemingly turning over the mysterious sense of safety she felt with me. She'd told me she liked me like it was nothing, but as I stood there trying to discern the reason, I thought of one possibility.

"Could it be the clothes I'm wearing?" I asked.

Nanami-san frowned. "Your clothes? They look good on you, but what's so special about them?"

“Actually, I got them from Genichiro-san. He said he used to wear them.”

“My dad’s? Oh yeah, come to think of it, I think I have seen them before. I see, so they were my dad’s clothes, huh?” She looked at me as if remembering a fond memory, her eyes half closed. Then she squeezed my hand a bit and, shifting her body so as to look up at me from below, smiled shyly at me and asked, “In that case, should I call you ‘dad’ for today?”

“What?!” I exclaimed. “I don’t even have a kid yet, but you wanna call me ‘dad’ already? Then I’d have to call you ‘mom’ too. Uh, I mean...”

I immediately fell silent. Yeah, that was a slip of the tongue. Nanami-san hadn’t said it in that way, but I’d interpreted her question to mean that we were going to address each other as a married couple.

Now we were both silent, having turned so red that it was visible even in the semidarkness.

Let’s move on to a different topic, shall we?

“A-Anyway, let’s have fun today, Nanami-san!” I exclaimed, trying to distract us both from the awkwardness.

“Y-Yeah, let’s!” she replied.

We collected ourselves and began walking through the aquarium.

We were both excited to see all the colorful fish swimming in such a dreamlike atmosphere. I guess we were acting giddy because we wanted to be rid of the embarrassing vibe from a moment ago, but we were also just having fun.

Truth be told, though, I was looking more at Nanami-san than I was at the fish. She looked even more beautiful than usual, illuminated by the shifting light shining from the glass.

“Is this just sand in here? Oh, no! They’re spotted garden eels! I guess this whole tank is for eels. I never knew there were so many different colors,” she was saying.

“I think this is my first time seeing one,” I said. “Oh, look at those two over there. Don’t they look like they’re fighting? They’re looking at each other with

their mouths open like they're yelling at each other."

"You're right! They're small, but they're really expressive. I wonder if the different colors are male and female."

"Yeah, I wonder... Oh, it says here. I guess they're different species. Wow, I thought they were all the same," I said.

Nanami-san continued staring intently into the tank. I wondered if she liked small, cute creatures like these. They did look cute, swaying like that. They were fun to watch.

Overcome with a desire to take a photo of Nanami-san as she enjoyed herself, I turned my phone toward her. "Nanami-san, look over here."

Realizing what I was up to, Nanami-san brought her face closer to the tank and posed for me. Despite the lack of light, I looked for the best angle that would perfectly capture both Nanami-san and the garden eel.

"Okay, say cheese," I said.

"Cheese!"

I went ahead and pressed the shutter button on my phone. *Yup, that's a cute photo. I should show it to her.*

"What do you think?" I asked.

"Oh my gosh, the garden eel's so cute! You're so good at taking pictures, Yoshin. Can you send it to me later?"

I personally thought Nanami-san was the cute one, but I was glad she seemed satisfied with the picture.

Then Nanami-san turned her camera app on me. To be honest, I didn't think we needed any pictures of me, but since Nanami-san begged me, I had to fight my embarrassment and let her take it.

As Nanami-san and I continued around the aquarium, old memories slowly began to surface. Given that the last time I, much like Nanami-san, had come to the aquarium was when I was a kid, I gave myself permission to fully enjoy being there, watching almost with a childlike innocence as Nanami-san skipped around.

Nanami-san, who was surprised by how fast penguins could swim.

Nanami-san, who watched with glittering eyes the many jellyfish that floated and shimmered before her.

Nanami-san, who opened her mouth wide in shock at the giant school of gleaming, silver fish—mackerel, perhaps—and clapped at their intensity.

Nanami-san, who caught sight of the sea anemone and clown fish and turned to me to ask if they were cute.

Nanami-san, who, at the petting area, poked at the starfish and sea urchins to enjoy the sensation.

I was seeing everything through Nanami-san.

Every time she saw something new, she would spin around to exclaim, “That’s so cute!” and each time I would have to resist the urge to shout, “You’re the one who’s cute!” But it seemed she’d noticed me looking at her.

“Are you having fun, Yoshin?”

“Yeah. It’s super fun,” I answered sincerely.

Aquarium dates were the best. I mean, our movie date was the best too. I guess as long as I was with Nanami-san, everything was the best.

It was still before noon, and we hadn’t seen everything yet, but I already knew our visit was worth it. I’d already been able to see all kinds of expressions from Nanami-san and taken loads of pictures of her. Of course, Nanami-san had taken pictures of me, as well.

At that moment, we were taking a break, sitting next to one another while scrolling through each other’s phones. As we were talking about exchanging photos with each other later, however, I realized there was a problem. Well, it wasn’t *exactly* a problem, but rather something we’d forgotten about. No, really—it was a super trivial matter, so it wasn’t really an issue at all. That said...

We didn’t get any pictures of the two of us together!

Nanami-san and I had been having so much fun, getting excited, taking pictures of each other, but that was it. Neither one of us were experienced with dating, so we hadn’t thought of taking a picture of us together. Talk about a

major misstep.

Still, since I'd realized before we left, maybe we still had a chance. It seemed Nanami-san was thinking the same thing, because she was stealing glances at me.

"Looks like we forgot to take one together," I said after a slight pause.

"You realized too, huh? Yeah, we totally forgot. Gosh."

Happy that I'd noticed the same thing, Nanami-san giggled and stretched. As her arms rose above her head, her top rose slightly with them, almost revealing her belly over her skirt. I nearly reached out to cover it, but I refrained in case I ended up touching her.

"From now on, we should aim to take more pictures together," I suggested.

She smiled warmly in response. "Yeah, for sure."

But how were we supposed to take pictures of both of us? What did other couples do in situations like these? There were lots of people around, so maybe they asked someone to take the picture for them. The idea made me a little nervous, but if it was for Nanami-san, I'd be happy to ask. Maybe I could grab a staff member or something.

Just as I steeled my resolve, there was an announcement over the PA system—the dolphin show was starting soon.

"Oh, the dolphin show. Shall we go?" I asked Nanami-san.

"Yeah, I wanna see it!" she instantly replied. "But I think my mom was saying you should sit toward the back, or else you get splashed with water."

"Ah, I see. We should be careful, then."

"Yup. Oh, this is gonna be so much fun!"

For now, I'd have to put the photos on hold.

As we made our way from the petting area, though, we heard the voice of a young girl crying loudly.

"Mooommy!"

Nanami-san and I looked toward the source of the voice, where we saw a girl

who looked to be about kindergarten age, standing all by herself, crying.

The girl was sniffling loudly and tottering around with unsure steps. She was most likely lost.

Perhaps because of the dolphin show announcement, most people had left the petting area, meaning there were very few people around. And, unfortunately, there didn't seem to be any staff members around either.

"Hey, Nanami-san, that girl looks like she's lost. Shall we look for her mom with her?"

I'd said it almost reflexively, even though we were in the middle of our date. I don't think I could have done such a thing just a couple of weeks ago. Indifferently and without emotion, I probably would have left the lost little girl alone.

"I was thinking that too. I'm totally with you; we can't just leave her here. There's another showing this afternoon, so let's go help her first!"

Nanami-san didn't bat an eye at my idea. She simply supported it, like it was the most obvious thing to do. That was one of the things I really admired about her. My own change, now knowing that doing things for others wouldn't make me feel bad, was probably all thanks to her.

As we walked toward the girl, Nanami-san smiled at me. "You really are kind, Yoshin. I think you'll make a great dad."

"If that's the case, then you'll definitely make a great mom," I answered.

As if echoing our conversation from earlier, we looked at each other and laughed.

Anyway, now wasn't the time for that. Before we shared any more moments together, we had to help the little girl. We approached her slowly, taking care not to startle her.

"Hello there. Why are you crying? Can we help you at all?" I asked.

"Did you get separated from your mommy? Don't worry, we'll help you look for her," Nanami-san added, reassuring her.

Surprised by our sudden appearance, the little girl stopped crying and opened

her eyes wide to look at us. Nanami-san and I spoke to her as gently as we could, but even then, the girl looked spooked. Maybe we'd been a little too abrupt.

As I hesitated, Nanami-san crouched down next to the girl so that she could be at eye level with her. Then, to help calm her down, Nanami-san smiled softly.

Though the girl had seemed shocked at first, Nanami-san's smile put her at ease. She stopped crying and, tilting her head slightly, looked at us, her face brightening with a curious expression.

"Onee-chan, onii-chan, who are you?" she asked.

Thank goodness, she hadn't called me "oji-chan," as if addressing some middle-aged man. If she had, I would've been crushed.

"My name is Nanami. You can call me Nanami onee-chan. This is Yoshin onii-chan. Can you tell us your name too?" Nanami-san asked.

"Nanami onee-chan, Yoshin onii-chan, my name is Yuki."

"Yuki-chan, huh? That's a pretty name. It's nice to meet you," Nanami-san said, extending her hand toward the girl.

Reassured by Nanami-san's eye contact, Yuki-chan timidly reached out. Nanami-san smiled again and, as if to further reassure her, waited until Yuki-chan's hand touched hers. She was making sure to let Yuki-chan take the lead.

It wasn't until Yuki-chan finally took Nanami-san's hand—with some amount of shyness still—that Nanami-san gently wrapped her hand around the girl's. Every tender action was to help her calm down.

"Yuki-chan, why don't we sit down for a little bit and chat? You must be tired. Do you think we can walk over to that chair there?" Nanami-san asked.

"Yeah, I think so," Yuki-chan replied.

Nanami-san stood up slowly, still clutching Yuki-chan's hand, and walked with her while matching her small steps. All the while, she was careful not to walk ahead or pull on her hand.

As we proceeded toward the chairs set up in the petting area, Yuki-chan looked up at me. "Onii-chan," she said, her expression anxious as she

tentatively reached out to me.

Um, does she want me to hold her other hand? When I looked at Nanami-san for confirmation, she nodded, so I slowly took Yuki-chan's hand—though I was just as timid as Yuki-chan had been a moment ago.

Yuki-chan's hand was small and adorable, a child's hand completely different from Nanami-san's. To help put her at ease, I did my best to hold her hand gently.

Am I doing it as well as Nanami-san is? And how did no one else notice a crying little girl? I'm sure a staff member would have eventually found her, but even then, I was glad we'd noticed her.

Nanami-san, Yuki-chan, and I—standing in that order—walked slowly toward the chairs, all of us walking at Yuki-chan's pace. Once we'd arrived, Nanami-san lifted the girl up gently and helped her to sit down, crouching back down in front of her.

She seemed to be trying her best to keep at eye level with Yuki-chan. Was that the trick to reassuring her? I couldn't help but wonder.

Yuki-chan still seemed a little bit restless, so I decided to fetch her a drink from the vending machine nearby. It might have been a plan for the simpleminded, but I thought offering her a drink she liked might help to calm her down.

"Do you want some juice, Yuki-chan? I think there's apple juice and orange juice. Which one do you like better?" I asked.

"Orange juice. Thank you, onii-chan," she said.

What a polite girl, I thought, heading over to the machine. I bought a box of orange juice there and then handed it to Yuki-chan. She inserted the straw into the box and slowly began to drink. Her little face was still stained with tears, but she seemed to have calmed down somewhat.

"She told me she lost her mom in the dark. She kept walking and ended up here, which was okay while there were people around, but then everyone left and she felt lonely," Nanami-san told me. It seemed that in the short amount of time I'd spent buying juice, she'd asked what had happened. Nanami-san sure

was reliable.

“Ah, I see. In that case, we’ll have to do our best to find her mom fast,” I replied.

At least now we understood the situation. Yuki-chan’s mom was probably looking around frantically for her. Maybe she was even talking to the aquarium staff, in which case we should tell them about Yuki-chan. *Does the pamphlet have info about where to go when a kid gets lost? Maybe we should go ask.*

I looked down at Yuki-chan, making sure she was okay, before heading off. However, before I could leave, she met my eyes and mumbled sadly, “Daddy had to work today, so I came with mommy.”

Nanami-san and I listened without interrupting.

“I told daddy I didn’t like him anymore. I was being bad. Mommy, daddy...” Yuki-chan’s voice shook as she spoke, her eyes welling with tears.

Just as I was about to tell Yuki-chan that she wasn’t being bad, Nanami-san moved to give her a hug. It was a soft, almost motherly embrace.

“It’s okay, Yuki-chan,” she said. “Your daddy is working to look after you and your mommy. Even if you said you didn’t like him, if you apologize, he’ll forgive you. You do like your daddy, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I like daddy. I like my mommy and my daddy. Will daddy really forgive me?”

“Of course he will. I fight with my daddy too, but we always make up, so it’ll be okay. Your daddy loves you too, Yuki-chan.”

Yuki-chan smiled with relief, tears still spilling down her cheeks. All I could do was stand there and watch the two of them.

Nanami-san was truly incredible. There was no way I could’ve helped a little kid calm down like this. All jokes aside, she was going to be a great mother one day.

Once Nanami-san had made sure Yuki-chan was calm, Nanami-san stepped away, and the two girls smiled at each other. Yuki-chan’s eyes were still full of tears, so I took out my handkerchief and gently wiped them away.

Tears dried, Yuki-chan hopped off of her chair and bowed in an adorable way. “Thank you so much, onii-chan and onee-chan,” she said. She was a polite girl.

Nanami-san seemed absolutely taken by just how cute Yuki-chan was, almost like she was holding back the urge to squeeze her.

With puzzled eyes, Yuki-chan looked up at Nanami-san, timidly reaching her hands out toward us again. And, like before, Nanami-san and I took one hand each.

As we started walking, looking for Yuki-chan’s mother, Yuki-chan looked up at Nanami-san and said admiringly, “Onee-chan, your boobies are bigger than mommy’s.” She then turned to me. “Do you like her boobies too, onii-chan?”

Wow, she sure dropped a bomb there. How am I supposed to respond? This has to be one of those innocent questions that only children can ask.

But wait a minute. What does she mean by “too”? Is her father the kind of person who says things like that as a joke? Isn’t that being a bad influence on her?

As I struggled to find the right response, Yuki-chan mumbled, almost to herself, “I like mommy’s boobies. When she hugs me, they feel soft and they smell good. I really like them.”

Oooh, that’s what she meant.

As I apologized in my mind to Yuki-chan’s father—even though I’d never even met him—I continued wondering what to say. Meanwhile, Nanami-san was blushing but looking at me expectantly. I couldn’t mess up my response here. I had to choose my words very, very carefully.

“I like everything about Nanami onee-chan,” I finally said, “not just her boobies. You like everything about your mommy too, right? Not just her boobies. It’s just like that.”

“Yeah, I like everything about mommy too. We’re the same, aren’t we?” Yuki-chan asked.

The idea that she and I were the same seemed to settle Yuki-chan completely. She looked at me, her face bright with an adorable smile. Nanami-san, too,

seemed satisfied, as she sent me a wink. I guess I'd managed to get my answer right after all.

Even so, saying "boobies" in public was super embarrassing. Plus I'd said it multiple times just now. Embarrassment aside, though, having Nanami-san wink at me for the first time made saying it worthwhile.

After that, we managed to find the aquarium staff and explained the situation. It seemed they, too, had been looking for Yuki-chan, as they immediately led us to where her mother was waiting. They had asked her mother to wait in the staff room, in order to prevent her and Yuki-chan from missing each other or getting into an accident somehow. She must have been beside herself with worry.

The moment we stepped into the staff room, Yuki-chan's parents saw their little girl safe and sound. With tears in their eyes, they called out her name... *Wait a minute. "Parents"?*

"Yuki-chan!" the mother exclaimed.

"Yuki!" the father shouted.

"Mommy! And...daddy?!" Yuki-chan said, hardly believing her eyes. That's right—both Yuki-chan's mother and father were waiting in the staff room. I thought Yuki-chan's father hadn't come with them.

Yuki-chan and her parents ran toward each other and embraced, overjoyed at their reunion. After hugging for a while, Yuki-chan spoke first. "Daddy, I'm sorry I said I didn't like you. I love you, daddy," she said, apologizing to her father.

"I'm sorry too," the father said. "I didn't keep my promise to you. I love you, Yuki. I'm so glad you're safe."

"Onee-chan and onii-chan were with me," Yuki-chan told him.

Nanami-san and I had been trying to leave now that the family was safely reunited, but when Yuki-chan's parents saw us, they immediately came up to us.

"Thank you so much for finding Yuki," the mother said. "I don't know how I can possibly repay you. This is all because I took my eyes off of her."

“Yes, thank you,” the father added. “After rushing to finish my work and finally managing to join my wife, she told me Yuki was missing. It’s all my fault!”

Both parents bowed deeply as they thanked us. The father must have been working pretty hard to keep his promise to Yuki-chan. At least they were able to make up in the end. *Everything turned out okay—right, Yuki-chan?*

With the two adults still bowing to us and Yuki-chan copying them, Nanami-san and I didn’t know what to do.

“Words really aren’t enough,” the mother continued. “If you haven’t had lunch yet, can we at least treat you?”

“Oh, no. That’s really not necessary,” I said. We really hadn’t done anything special, I thought it best to decline.

Just then, Nanami-san spoke up, sharing with them what she hadn’t shared even with me. “Oh, that’s kind of you, but we’re okay. We’ve actually brought bento for lunch. Now you’re all together, please enjoy your time as a family, just the three of you.”

Her words caught me by surprise.

I see, so the large bag Nanami-san was carrying was filled with bento. How lucky am I to be able to eat Nanami-san’s bento even on a day we’re off school? Wow, I can hardly wait. Nanami-san must have thought of making them to surprise me. Man, I should’ve thought of something to surprise her with too. My bad.

We went back and forth with Yuki-chan’s parents as they insisted on thanking us somehow, but we continued to firmly decline. I, too, wanted them to be able to spend time together as a family, since it was the weekend.

In the end, Yuki-chan added her own request. “Onii-chan, onee-chan, thank you so much,” she said while looking down at her feet. “Um, if you don’t mind, will you take a picture with me?”

Is she looking down because she thought we’d say no? Or is she just bashful?

When we said yes, Yuki-chan smiled happily. We then all left the room as the staff, too, thanked Nanami-san and me for our help.

We decided to take our photo over by the penguins, which were Yuki-chan's favorite animals. With four different phones—Yuki-chan's parents', Nanami-san's, and mine—we took photos of Yuki-chan sandwiched between Nanami-san and me.

"Thank you, onii-chan and onee-chan! Bye-bye!" Yuki-chan said as she waved at us energetically. As if we had only imagined her downhearted state from earlier, Yuki-chan had become a spirited little girl. Of course, that must have been her usual self. She and her parents, who continued to bow to us, then went on their way to enjoy the aquarium—though since we were still in the aquarium too, there was a chance we might run into them again.

Nanami-san and I continued to wave at them until they were completely out of our sight. Once we'd stopped waving, I looked down at the photo of the three of us. What was this feeling? It seemed like...

"Doesn't this photo make it look like you and I have a daughter?" Nanami-san asked before I could voice the thought. "This is gonna be a really great memory, huh?" She didn't look embarrassed or as though she were making fun. In fact, the smile on her face was full of motherly affection. I couldn't take my eyes off of her.

And, in that moment, my stomach let out the loudest of growls—a growl so loud that the people around us must have heard it. As I stood there blushing, Nanami-san quivered, trying to suppress her laughter.

I guess it *was* just about lunchtime; I just hadn't even realized it. That must have been why Yuki-chan's parents had suggested treating us to lunch. I'm glad we'd already parted ways with them—if my stomach had made that sound as we were saying our goodbyes, things could've ended poorly.

"Are you hungry? Shall we have lunch?" Nanami-san asked, stifling a laugh.

"Yeah, let's," I said in a meek voice, my face still hot. *Ugh, how embarrassing.*

But when we looked at each other, everything became way funnier, and we both started to laugh. We then began to walk in the opposite direction from Yuki-chan and her family.

"I didn't realize you'd gone through the trouble of making lunch for us,

Nanami-san," I said.

"Yeah, this aquarium gets a lot of families, so you're allowed to bring your own bento. They even have indoor and outdoor spaces where you can eat," she replied.

She sure had done her research. I never knew you needed to look up things like that when you were going on a date. I felt like I'd learned something new.

"If you'd told me, I could've helped," I said.

"I wanted to make it in secret and surprise you!" she replied. "We haven't done anything like that recently, right? I thought you'd be happy."

"Yeah, I'm super surprised, but I'm also really happy. Thanks."

What she'd said was true: preparing thoughtful surprises for your partner was important. In that sense, Nanami-san's bento was the best kind of surprise she could have given me. She did things not to please herself, but to make others happy, always thinking about how they would feel. With this gesture alone, I felt like the hurdle for my next surprise for her had gotten infinitely higher.

With the new knowledge that the bag I was carrying contained Nanami-san's homemade bento, I fought off the urge to dig in right then and there. "Where should we sit?" I asked instead. "It's warm today, and the weather's nice, so it might be fun to eat outside."

"I was just thinking that. I brought a picnic blanket too, just in case."

Not one to let anyone down, Nanami-san had come prepared. At this point I couldn't help reproaching myself for being caught up with my hair and failing to make any proper date plans.

Actually, no. I'd have time to reflect later. Right now, I had to enjoy my time with Nanami-san.

Using our pamphlet as a guide, we left through the exit that led to the park. As we stepped out, we were greeted by a cloudless sky and a pleasant breeze that caressed our cheeks. Families and couples with their picnic blankets were sitting on the lush grass, happily scarfing their lunches. Further ahead were wooden tables and chairs, but barely anyone was using them.

“Wow, it’s pretty nice out here,” I commented. “Shall we sit around here, on your picnic blanket?”

“Yeah, that’d be great,” Nanami-san replied.

The weather was so nice, I couldn’t help being grateful for it. What a stunning place to eat lunch.

Once we found a suitable spot, I pulled the picnic blanket out from Nanami-san’s bag and laid it out on the grass. It was decorated with little stars and was the perfect size for the two of us. Of course, I’d asked for Nanami-san’s permission to open her bag, but I’d still felt nervous about doing it.

With us both seated, Nanami-san took out several bento boxes and, with a little “ta-da!” opened them up. Inside were colorful sandwiches with various fillings, omelets, wiener sausages, deep-fried shrimp, boiled vegetables, and a salad of lettuce and cherry tomatoes. Everything was bright and beautiful, and there was more than enough there to feed the two of us. The bento pretty much captured happiness in food form.

But wasn’t this a little too extravagant? Were we celebrating something?

“Wow. Wasn’t making all this a lot of work? This is way more food than the bento you make for school, and it all looks amazing,” I said.

“I can’t make anything elaborate during the week, so I might have gone a little overboard. Today Saya and even my mom got up to help me.”

I thought that our usual bento was plenty elaborate, so to hear that this was even more so meant I had to eat it with much more mindfulness and care.

At any rate, I started off by taking my usual bento photos. If possible, though, I also wanted to take a photo together with Nanami-san. Just as I thought that, a voice caught my attention. “Can I take a photo for you?” someone asked.

When we turned to see who it was, we were met by the sight of the staff member we’d met while helping Yuki-chan. It seemed they’d seen us while making their rounds and stopped by to say hello.

“That would be great. Thank you so much,” I said.

“It’s my pleasure,” the staff member replied.

Nanami-san and I gave them our phones and proceeded to sit next to each other on the picnic blanket. Once comfy, Nanami-san slipped her arm through mine and pressed her body against me. She was as close as she was this morning—no, even closer this time.

“Okay, great. Here we go. Say cheese!”

I was a little surprised for a moment, but seeing how happy Nanami-san looked, I couldn’t help but feel the same way. I think Nanami-san and I both had genuine smiles on our faces as the staff member took photos of us.

Once they were finished, the staff member thanked us again for our help, and then continued on with their rounds. As they left, they let us know that if we ever wanted someone to take a photo of us, we could always ask the staff. Apparently, that was how other people got their photos taken as well. At least I knew now. Maybe we could do that next time.

The photos the staff member had taken of us beautifully captured not only Nanami-san and me, but also the bento Nanami-san had made. *Oh I see, that’s why she came so close to me. I guess that makes sense.* I would’ve been happy if she’d just wanted to be close to me, but that was probably asking for too much.

“Well then, thanks for the food,” I said as always, putting my palms together.

“Bon appétit,” Nanami-san replied in kind.

Maybe I’ll start with a sandwich, I thought. *There’s tuna and cucumber, egg salad, ham and cheese, tomato and lettuce...and what are these red and black ones?*

“Oh, that one’s strawberry jam, and that one’s chocolate cream. I thought we could use some sweet ones too,” Nanami-san explained.

“Oh, I see. And which ones did you make, Nanami-san?”

“Me? I made the tuna sandwiches and the egg salad sandwiches.”

“Then maybe I’ll start with the egg salad one,” I said, picking one up. Its surface was golden; the bread had been toasted. There was a crispiness to the surface when I bit into it. Next came the taste of egg and mayo, rounded out by a slight tang that made my tongue tingle. The salad had to contain a hint of

mustard, giving it a kick and bringing out the flavor of the egg.

Before I could comment on how delicious it was, Nanami-san handed me the lid of a thermos. “Try this too. It’s onion soup,” she said. The soup poured into the lid-turned-cup gave off a sumptuous aroma. The cup was warm, making the soup seem like it was freshly made. The thermos had worked wonders.

After finishing off the last bite of my sandwich, I took a sip of the soup. The gentle taste of the consommé and the onion spread throughout my mouth, softening the spiciness of the mustard that had turned my tongue slightly numb. The soup was delicious and filled me not only with warmth, but with happiness.

“You even made soup for us,” I murmured.

“Yeah, I thought it’d go well with the sandwiches. Oh, I’ll have some soup too,” she said.

When I handed her the cup, Nanami-san took it and put it straight to her lips. *Wait, isn’t this an indirect...*

“What’s the big deal about an indirect kiss at this point? You don’t care, do you?” she asked.

“Of course I care. I mean, you care too, don’t you? You’re even blushing a little,” I retorted.

“Don’t say things like that—not even if you notice! Jeez.”

That might have been a leading question on my part, but it seemed she really did care about the indirect kiss. I felt like I was able to get back at her a little bit for her being so forward, but today’s Nanami-san wasn’t acting her usual self.

“In that case—here, I’ll feed you. It’s been a while, huh? Here, say ‘aah.’”

With her chopsticks, Nanami-san picked up a piece of omelet and brought it toward my mouth. Usually in a situation like this, she would get all embarrassed about the “kiss” and go back to eating her meal, so I hadn’t expected her to continue going on the offensive.

But I, too, had gained experience. I wasn’t going to be fazed by a simple “say ‘aah.’”

Come to think of it, this is only her third time feeding me like this. That's very many times, when you think about it. Yeah, there's no way I'm going to be used to this.

Wallowing in nostalgia, I filled my mouth with the omelet Nanami-san held before me. She looked at me and smiled with satisfaction. I, however, wasn't going to take this lying down.

With my chopsticks, I picked up a piece of omelet and brought it toward Nanami-san's mouth.

"Huh?"

"Here, Nanami-san. Say 'aah,'" I said.

Although Nanami-san had made the omelet, it was my first time feeding her. I'd actually wanted to do it with food I'd cooked myself, but Nanami-san was being so forward today. If I didn't retaliate at least a little, I'd be bulldozed over, too overwhelmed. I knew this wasn't a competition, but the man in me had felt a fire light inside of him. And so, I'd done what I thought I had to.

The thing that I'd had to do turned out to be a lot more embarrassing than I'd thought. I couldn't believe Nanami-san had been doing this to me all this time. She really was impressive.

Nanami-san hesitated for a moment, but then, suddenly, she flashed me a relaxed smile and used her mouth to take the offered omelet. "Mmm, it's good, as expected! Isn't this your first time feeding me like this?"

"Um, yeah, I think so. I mean, it's your cooking, so of course it's tasty."

Hmm. Nanami-san seemed like her usual self. I'd thought she might turn more red, but maybe she was used to stuff like this by now.

"When you get better at cooking, maybe we can make each other bento," she suggested. "Doesn't that sound fun? It'd be fun to make them together."

"True. I'll work on it," I said.

After that, Nanami-san continued chatting happily about our future.

Oh, I get it. With that one gesture in mind, Nanami-san must have imagined all that. That's why instead of getting embarrassed, she seemed kind of happy

about it. Making bento for each other, huh?

Having just now thought of a similar idea, I was tickled to think that we were on the same wavelength. *But we won't be able to make bento together unless we're together in the morning, right? Together in the morning. That would mean...*

Nanami-san didn't seem to have caught on to the implication of what she'd said, so I decided to keep that to myself.

After that, we continued feeding each other... Yeah, right. Actually, we chatted about our plans for the afternoon as we slowly ate our bento together. Since we didn't have a time limit like we did for lunchtime at school, time was passing at a more relaxed pace. The sun felt warm and toasty, and the gentle breeze relaxed us as it caressed our cheeks. Was there a happier feeling than this?

Even though Nanami-san had made us a lot of food, it disappeared at an astonishing pace. Maybe that was because we were talking throughout the meal; maybe it was because time flies when you're having fun.

Before long, the only morsels left were one jam sandwich and one of the chocolate cream ones. *We'd eaten a ton*. The remaining sandwiches were sweet, so I'd left them till last, thinking they were best for dessert. I was glad that we had one left of each.

"Which one do you want, Nanami-san?"

"I think I'd like the strawberry one. What about you?"

"Perfect. I was just thinking I wanted the chocolate one."

"The chocolate one, huh? Got it. Here you go."

Nanami-san took the chocolate sandwich and offered it to me, but when I tried to take it, she pulled her hand away. She then flashed me a devilish grin and brought the sandwich toward me for the second time.

I see, so she wants the last "aah," huh?

Eating a sandwich directly from her hand was an amazing thought. It was on a totally different level from eating an omelet from a pair of chopsticks.

“You know I’m gonna do the same to you after this, right, Nanami-san?”

“And you know I’d love that,” she teased.

Despite declaring my intention to retaliate, Nanami-san had seen it coming. Well, there went my escape route—not that I had any chance of escape to begin with. I felt like this was the biggest test of my courage of the day.

Minding her fingers, I bit into the sandwich she held out to me. The sweetness of the chocolate and the aroma of crushed peanuts filled my mouth.

As I continued to eat the sandwich from her hand, my lips brushed against her fingers. Nanami-san cried out softly, but she didn’t pull her fingers away. I continued on, eating the sandwich from her hand until not one bite of sandwich remained.

“Gosh, you almost ate my finger, huh?” she said, laughing.

“I wouldn’t do that,” I replied. “Here, Nanami-san. It’s the last one.”

I held the last sandwich out toward her and watched it decrease in size as she took small bite after small bite. Maybe I wasn’t holding it too well, though, because the jam seeped out from between the bread and got all over my fingers. Then, right after she’d finished eating, Nanami-san licked the jam off.

“Nanami-san?!” I exclaimed, unable to say much else.

She giggled. “You had jam on you, you know?”

Smiling shyly, Nanami-san licked her lips as well. She looked so sensual at that moment that my heart started beating faster than ever before.

“Where did that come from? You about gave me a heart attack, for crying out loud.”

“It was bothering me, so I couldn’t help it. It doesn’t hurt to do that once in a while, right?”

I’d instantly turned red from shock, and she was blushing too, but she was speaking like everything was normal. As if to prove her unconcern, she brought her index finger up to her lips.

Tomoko-san didn’t teach her that, did she? I wondered, overwhelmed by the

progress in Nanami-san's forwardness.

As we carried on this way, we finally emptied the bento boxes.

"Thanks for the meal. Everything was delicious," I said, bringing my palms together to express my gratitude.

"You're very welcome," she said.

This, too, was our usual exchange.

Nanami-san laughed happily. "Wow, we sure ate a lot. I was worried we might have leftovers, but I guess there was nothing to worry about."

"Yeah, we really did. I'm surprised I was able to eat so much."

Having cleaned off our bento, we proceeded to put away the bento boxes and relax on the picnic blanket, completely stuffed. That, combined with the warmth and the sense of security I felt from having Nanami-san beside me, made me feel rather sleepy. I even started to yawn.

This must have been the first time I'd yawned while I was with Nanami-san. I thought I was being rude to her by seeming like I was bored. Even so, I couldn't help it—I felt so comfortable.

"Yoshin? Are you sleepy because you're full? You're like a little kid. Here, lie down," she said, beckoning to me while gently patting her thighs.

Um, am I supposed to take this as the opposite of our usual roles?

"But aren't we out in public?" I asked.

"Isn't that why it's okay?" she responded, answering my question with another question. I could only give a nod in response.

It was true that I'd wanted her to let me do this. Plus I was pretty sure I couldn't resist the temptation of the comfort that awaited me.

I shuffled closer and lay down on my back, my head resting on her thighs. It was my first time using Nanami-san's lap as a pillow.

"Does it feel okay? I'm wearing tights today. They're not irritating, are they?" she asked.

"Did you, by any chance, wear tights in preparation for this?"

“It’d be a little embarrassing letting you do this with my bare legs. Plus I thought this might be warmer for you.”

“It’s great. They really don’t bother me at all. It’s the best, Nanami-san.”

I didn’t mean that Nanami-san’s thighs were the best; the best thing about lying there was Nanami-san’s thoughtfulness. I hoped what I’d said had come across okay. Before, she had described my lap as a firm memory foam pillow. If that was the case, then Nanami-san’s lap was more like a soft, high-end down pillow. It felt so good.

I was so sleepy, my mind was clouding over. I felt like I was going to end up saying something weird.

“You can take a nap. I’ll wake you up,” she whispered, patting my head as I started to drift off.

That day... No, for a while now, I felt like I’d been taking more than I’d been giving when it came to Nanami-san. I felt pretty bad about that.

“Today I wanted to express my thanks to you,” she said, as if she sensed what I was feeling. “I have so much to thank you for, so please—don’t worry about anything.”

But I haven’t done anything for her to thank me for... Even though I thought that, my mind was starting to shut down, given the comfortable state I was in.

“Thank you, Yoshin. I like you. I really, really do.”

Feeling relieved of all my worries, I sank into a state of slumber.

Whether I was able to articulate a “Me too,” in return and whether those words reached her... I wasn’t able to tell.

◇◇◇

I was dreaming.

It must have been a lucid dream—the kind where I could tell I was dreaming. The reason I knew was because Nanami-san was standing in front of me. It was Nanami-san from that memorable day—when she’d turned completely red and confessed to me as part of a dare.

I was dreaming of the very start of our relationship.

Back then, I'd never imagined I would one day rest my head in her lap and dream a dream like this. Things sure had changed—both for her and for me.

What would have happened if I'd said no to her back then? Would I have just continued the same as always, when I'd spend my every day walking to and from school and playing games? Sure, that would've been fun in its own right, but compared to the days we spent together now, there was no contest.

Would Nanami-san have started going out with some other guy and gone on dates with him instead of me? Just thinking about it made me feel sick.

"I...I-I-like...you, so, um, will you...go out...with me?"

Before me was the same situation, the same expression, the same words. The only difference was that no bucket full of dirty water came falling from above, so my reply wasn't taking place in the nurse's office. And, because it was a dream, the whole situation was playing out in a much more favorable fashion.

I smiled as I gave her my response. "*I... I like you too, Nanami-san*."

When she heard my response, the Nanami-san in my dream smiled. It was just like the way she'd smiled the first time.

And that was when I woke up.

"Oh, Yoshin, are you awake?"

When I opened my eyes slowly, I saw Nanami-san—the real-life Nanami-san. She was gazing down with a soft, gentle smile.

"Good morning, Nanami-san," I replied, still kind of groggy. "Was I out for long?"

"Uh, maybe like an hour or so. I forgot to keep track, since I was watching you sleep and stuff."

An hour?! I was asleep for that long?

Panicking, I sat up from Nanami-san's lap. "I'm sorry, Nanami-san. I must've been heavy. Do your legs hurt? Are you okay?"

"I'm totally fine. See, look," she said, gesturing toward the cushion she was

sitting on. For a moment, I wondered if she'd brought it in her bag, but apparently one of the staff members had lent it to her.

Huh? Is she telling me the staff saw me sleeping with my head in her lap?

"And look—I got so many pictures!"

Smiling brightly, Nanami-san showed me her phone. She had taken numerous photos of me sleeping with my head in her lap. There was Nanami-san holding up a peace sign, with my head in her lap and Nanami-san stroking my cheek, also with my head in her lap. There were many more too—of her stroking my hair, resting her hand on my chest, holding me tight...

Wow, how embarrassing. In every single photo I have a super goofy look on my face. In fact, I resented myself for not waking up as she was doing all that to me—especially when she'd been holding me like that.

However, as she was flipping through the photos, I noticed someone aside from me and Nanami-san. It was...

"Wait, is that Yuki-chan?" I asked.

"Yeah, she and her parents just had lunch, so they'd come outside to take a little walk," she said.

Yuki-chan was resting her head in Nanami-san's lap alongside me; then there was another of Nanami-san hugging her tight. There were so many photos that made the three of us look like a young family.

"Don't tell me Yuki-chan's parents took all these photos of us."

"Yeah, they took a bunch, saying that it was to thank us for earlier."

Wow, I didn't even notice. They should've woken me up so I could say hi.

Still, they were all adorable photos. Yuki-chan, too, was smiling, so much so that you couldn't have guessed how much she'd been crying before.

As I continued scrolling, I came across the two final photos—one of Yuki-chan kissing Nanami-san on the cheek and the other of her kissing me on *my* cheek.

"Yuki-chan is so mature for her age," Nanami-san said. "She kissed both of us goodbye before she left. Having a daughter like her must be fun."

Seeing Nanami-san smile so adoringly, I felt regret welling up inside of me for not having woken up. It's not like I had a Lolita complex or anything like that—it just seemed like a tremendous loss not being able to witness such a heartwarming scene in action. Plus I missed out on the chance to say hello to Yuki-chan's parents.

Just as I was coming to accept the fact that what was done was done, I finally realized that Yuki-chan and her family were no longer present.

"Did they already go somewhere else?" I asked.

"Yeah, they were gonna go see the dolphin show," Nanami-san said.

Oh, I see. A dolphin show must seem really exciting for a kid... Hey, wait a minute. Dolphin show? Oh, crap. Did I oversleep and make us miss the show?!

"Hold on, weren't you looking forward to the dolphin show too? You should've woken me up!" I said.

"But you were sleeping so comfortably, I felt bad waking you up. Oh, come on, don't look like that!" Nanami-san squeezed my cheeks to pacify me as I turned blue from panic. "Besides..." she continued, but before saying anything more, she shifted around so that *her* head was on *my* lap. It was the same position we usually took in her room. "We came to the aquarium; we had lunch; we relaxed; and, to top it all off, being able to promise we'll come back again to enjoy the show next time is pretty nice too, don't you think?"

"Are you, by chance, trying to make me feel better?"

"That's not it at all. This is how I actually feel. We'll make another promise, come back to this aquarium, and talk about how we couldn't see the show the first time. We're both gonna laugh about it."

Nanami-san giggled as if she were enjoying the situation, while I stroked Nanami-san's hair, not saying a word. The smooth, silky texture of her hair tickled my fingertips. When she saw me, Nanami-san laughed even more happily.

"I think that...even if we mess up or we end up taking some kind of detour or even if we fight, I want us to have the kind of relationship where we can turn even that into a nice memory."

Her speech grew softer toward the end as she began to doze off in my lap. As uncharacteristic as it was for me, hearing her say that made me so happy that I nearly cried. Stroking her hair as her eyes fluttered closed, I whispered, “Shall we stay like this a bit longer?”

“Yeah... My legs fell asleep a little, so we’ll switch.”

With that final remark, Nanami-san fell asleep.

She must have been really tired. After all, she had made all that bento for us. Her sleeping face, which I was seeing for the first time, was adorable—so completely different from my own idiotic face in the photos. Watching her certainly did make it easy to forget the passing of time. In fact, I couldn’t think of anything better.

As I sat there enjoying the view, I stealthily snapped a photo. Nanami-san had taken pictures of me, so this was okay, right? If she got mad, I could just delete it later.

My current wallpaper was the photo I’d taken of Nanami-san back when we’d gone to get boba, so I wondered if I should use the new photo for my lock screen.

Oh, this photo... I thought, looking down at the selfie set as my current lock screen. *Come to think of it, we took this together.* It was then that I realized that a selfie was one of the ways we could take a picture of the two of us. *But doing that every time is kind of embarrassing. Having someone else take it for us that time was better. Or would it be the same either way? Nah, I’m used to taking selfies, so having the staff do it is way better.*

I then took my jacket off—slowly, so as not to wake Nanami-san—and draped it over her so she wouldn’t get cold. It was a warm and sunny day, but since she was wearing clothes that exposed her shoulders, there was a chance she could get chilly. Doing so *definitely* wasn’t because I would otherwise stare at the exposed parts of her body, and it one thousand percent wasn’t because I wouldn’t know where else to look.

Still, perhaps I’d done the right thing, because Nanami-san grasped the jacket and mumbled, “Oh, Yoshin, you can’t hug me here. Gosh, you’re such a baby... Tee hee.”

Wait, I've never done anything like that, right?! What the hell is she dreaming about? I mean, I guess I'm glad it seems like a good dream, but she isn't gonna say anything weird in her sleep, is she, like, about the dare or something else I'm not supposed to hear about? Even if she did, I'd just have to pretend I didn't hear it.

And then, after I'd gotten my fill of watching Nanami-san's sleeping face for about thirty minutes, she finally woke up.

"Oh, Yoshin, I guess I fell asleep too, huh? Mmm... Oh, is this your jacket?"

"Rise and shine, Nanami-san. Shall we go somewhere? What do you wanna see?"

She mumbled an unintelligible noise before answering, "Mmm... I think I wanna see a whale shark."

Rubbing her eyes, Nanami-san, with a sleepy look on her face, glanced down at the jacket draped over her. She squeezed the jacket tightly and blushed. "This must be the reason I dreamt you were holding me."

Having just woken up, Nanami-san probably thought that I couldn't hear her mumbling to herself, but even so, her words reached my ears. *So that's what she was dreaming about. I should pretend I didn't hear her. It's not good to embarrass her too much.*

"We ended up taking it easy, huh? It's already so late. Time sure flies when you're having fun." Nanami-san stretched, twisting around a little, but since her skirt was on the shorter side... No, there's no need to say any more.

"Well, I guess we both ended up falling asleep. Shall we go see the whale sharks as our last stop, then?" I suggested.

"Yeah. Let's go, let's go!"

I stood up and offered Nanami-san my hand, but when she took it, I pulled a little too hard and she fell right into my arms. As I lost my footing, I tried to support her, but at that moment she leaned in closer and whispered in my ear.

"Did you see?" she asked.



That alone made my heart skip a beat. So it *was* true that women were sensitive to others' gazes.

I feigned ignorance as Nanami-san flashed me a toothy grin, and began putting away the last of our belongings. At least she was enjoying herself.

I felt a mysterious sense of sadness and regret once we'd finished cleaning everything up, but I reached my hand out toward Nanami-san next to me. Unlike a moment ago, I took her hand as she smiled gently at me, and we started walking once again.

In that short amount of time, I realized girls could have a wide range of expressions—childish smiles, sexy smiles, and even smiles full of affection—and every single one of them was probably genuine.

As we walked, we came across tanks with sea turtles and jellyfish floating inside, so we enjoyed the view as we made our way toward our destination: a giant tank in the shape of a tunnel, with oversized fish swimming inside. As soon as we arrived, we were overwhelmed by the view.

"Wow, there are so many giant fish," Nanami-san said, gazing around in wonder.

"Yeah, it's pretty incredible. It's way more than I imagined."

The dimly lit aquarium was illuminated by the pale-blue light from the tunnel-shaped tank. We saw not only large fish inside, but also schools of smaller fish, crabs, and sea creatures that we couldn't even name. It almost felt as if we were walking on the bottom of the ocean.

"Oh, look, look! There are dolphins! We may have missed the show, but they're super cute even when they're just swimming! And the manta rays are so big! What's that one? There's a cute ugly one swimming over there!"

Apparently overwhelmed, I came back to my senses when I heard Nanami-san's excited squeals. She was looking from creature to creature as enthusiastically as a little kid

"It's like we're at the bottom of the sea. It's so pretty!" she exclaimed.

"Yeah, it really is," I replied.

Even so charged with excitement, Nanami-san—bathed in the blue light—looked incredibly beautiful. I couldn't take my eyes off her. When she noticed me staring, she began to pout.

"Hey, Yoshin, don't just look at me! Make sure you look at the fish too, okay? Hey, let's look for the whale shark! Oh, wait. Is that one?!"

"Huh? Where? Oh, that? Wow, it's really big. Oh, look, it's coming this way! Do you want a picture?" I asked.

"Can you take one?! Yes, please!"

The moment we saw the whale shark, our excitement went through the roof. We even got the perfect shot of Nanami-san and the whale shark swimming by. I thought that maybe we were being too loud as we made our way through the tunnel, but other people around us seemed pretty excited too, so we were probably all right.

After that, we took several photos of me next to a dolphin and Nanami-san with a manta ray. When one of the staff members saw us having so much fun, they took a photo of the two of us with a shark that had swam in our direction.

In complete contrast to the relaxed atmosphere earlier, we ended up enjoying the last bit of our aquarium stay as if we were little kids again. We took loads of pictures as we continued having an incredible time. Then, just as we were wishing our visit would last forever, the tunnel ended—and we arrived at the aquarium exit. It seemed the end of the tunnel also marked the end of our trip.

I felt a tinge of sadness knowing that our aquarium date was coming to a close. It seemed that Nanami-san, too, felt the same way.

"Oh, man. I guess it's over, huh?" Nanami-san murmured sadly. I couldn't help feeling sad too.

"Yeah, but let's come again sometime. Next time, we can watch the dolphin show together." I smiled to try to blow away our mutual sadness, and Nanami-san smiled back at me.

I wasn't pushing myself too hard—of course we could come back here. Besides, I wanted to end our date with our mutual feeling of excitement intact. Precisely because the date had been so much fun, it'd be a waste for us not to

enjoy it until the very end.

When I looked back at the exit, I realized the gift shop was close by. That was when I had an idea.

I pointed to the restroom right next to the gift shop. “Nanami-san, since we’re at the exit, I think I’m gonna go to the restroom real quick.”

“Oh, right. Maybe I’ll go fix my makeup then. I’ll be right back,” she said, before heading toward the women’s restroom.

I, myself, walked into the men’s restroom—or at least, I pretended to do so. Once inside, I immediately walked back out and returned to the gift shop, where I began looking around for a present to give to Nanami-san.

I’ve received way too much from her today.

She’d walked so close to me, made us bento, and even let me lie with my head in her lap, resulting in an excess of kindness all directed toward me. This was not good. This was not good at all.

That was why I felt very strongly about wanting to give her something in return, even if I couldn’t get anything terribly expensive. Still, at the very least, I wanted to buy her a memento and let her know how I felt. That was what had led me to rummaging around the gift shop.

Just as I finally bought what I thought seemed suitable and returned to the front of the gift shop, Nanami-san came out of the women’s restroom. I’d made it just in time.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Yoshin,” she said.

“Not at all.” I replied, hiding the bad behind my back. *In fact, you were so fast, I barely had enough time to pay. Now, when to give her the gift... This isn’t quite the right time.*

Just then, Nanami-san noticed the gift shop.

“Oh, look! Shall we get something for mom and everyone? We could even get a souvenir for the two of us, if you’d like.”

That’s right—this was the kind of person Nanami-san was. Of course she’d say that. She was so sweet, she remembered others even during our date.

And so, despite the awkward timing, I handed her the bag in my hand. “Nanami-san, I wanted to thank you for today, so...this is for you.”

“Huh?”

Despite her surprise, Nanami-san took from me the bag I handed her.

“Oh. This...” she murmured, taking out a pink dolphin cell phone charm and a small whale shark plushie.

I’d bought two matching cell phone charms; I showed Nanami-san the blue one I’d purchased for myself. I’d wanted to wrap the gifts up nicely and give them to her, but, well, let’s just say that this kind of misstep was very characteristic of me. That’s my excuse, anyway.

“You gave me so much today, so I wanted to give back a little. I hope you like it,” I said.

“They match? I... I’m so happy, but today was supposed to be my day to thank *you*. Now *I’ll* just end up getting too much.” Squeezing her two gifts happily, she looked at me and began to tear up.

How could she possibly think that *she* was getting too much? That definitely wasn’t the case.

“Come on, you know that’s not true. Please, take them. I’m just sorry I can’t really cook for us.”

Nanami-san shook her head silently in response. As long as she was happy, getting her the gifts had been worth the effort.

But even as she seemed about to cry, she paused to think for a moment. She then smiled that sensual smile I’d seen once before. It was the smile she’d had that one time back in the classroom.

“I still think I’ve received too much, so...here’s your change.”

“Huh?”

It was only for a moment.

Before she’d even finished speaking, she’d hopped over to me lightly and pressed her soft lips against my cheek. In that moment, I felt like all the nerves

in my body were concentrated on that softness pressed against me. You know, as in...

She kissed me.

Once the kiss was over, Nanami-san brought her lips over to my ear and whispered, “I was actually envious of Yuki-chan, because she kissed you like it was no big deal, but I’ve finally been able to kiss you too.”

When she moved away from me, she smiled her flower-like smile and took my hand. I no longer felt the sensuality from a moment earlier. This smile was more age-appropriate—much more girl-like.

“Shall we look for souvenirs for everyone else then? How about key chains?” she asked.

“Um, sure,” I responded weakly.

My cheek still felt hot where her lips had touched it, and the softness of her lips lingered there. I’d barely managed to squeeze out my assent.

Thus, our aquarium date came to a close, with me getting the best kind of change imaginable—that’s what I thought back then, at least.

Chapter 5: An Unexpected Continuation

Although our date was now over, Nanami-san and I were going back to her house together. I was happy our usual walk home allowed us to spend more time together. We were holding hands like always; the only difference was that this time we weren't both holding grocery bags in our free hands.

Since Nanami-san and I were going on a date today, Tomoko-san had offered to make dinner for everyone. I was looking forward to enjoying her cooking.

"The aquarium was super fun, wasn't it?" Nanami-san asked.

"Yeah, too bad about the dolphin show, though. Let's definitely go back," I replied.

"Already asking me out on another date, huh? You sure have gotten bold."

I squeezed her hand in response.

We were almost at her house. To keep her family from teasing us, we usually let go of each other's hands before we went inside, but today, we must have still been a bit excited, as we ended up walking in while still holding hands.

"We're home!" Nanami-san called out.

"We're home," I said a little more awkwardly. I still wasn't used to saying something like that with the expectation that someone was there when I walked in. As I was thinking that, though, we were greeted by two unexpected characters.

"Oh, hey, you guys are home! Dang, holding hands and everything—you two sure are in love."

"Welcome home, you two,"

Standing before us were Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san, who had welcomed us home respectively. Nanami-san and I were both so caught off guard, we stopped in our tracks. Nanami-san couldn't help staring, she was so shocked.

"Hey, that's a cute outfit, Nanami," Otofuke-san said. "Boy, your waist sure is

small. I'm jealous."

"You're super thin too, Hatsumi," Kamoenai-san retorted. "Plus you have a nice six-pack going. I'd kill for abs like those."

"Aw, thanks." Otofuke-san patted the smaller Kamoenai-san on the head. The two of them were so relaxed, it was as though they were at their own house.

"How come you're here?!" Nanami-san exclaimed. She had finally come to her senses and was now pointing at them while trying to articulate her thoughts. In fact, she was so surprised that she was squeezing my hand tighter than ever.

Her two friends, on the other hand, congratulated each other with a high five, smiling like kids who'd just pulled off a successful prank.

"Surprise, successful!" Otofuke-san cried.

"Yaaay!" Kamoenai-san cheered.

In total contrast to the happy twosome, Nanami-san and I remained utterly confused. Just then, from behind the two girls, Tomoko-san and Saya-chan appeared.

"Oh, you're both home!" Tomoko-san said. "We asked the two of them to come for a little visit."

"Hatsu-nee and Ayu-nee were both waiting for you guys. All four of us made dinner together, so you have a lot to look forward to!" Saya-chan chimed in. She was breathing through her nostrils and making fists in front of her chest, as if pumping herself up before a fight.

Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san, however, were blushing and seemed slightly embarrassed. Tomoko-san was looking at the two of them warmly.

Wait, what in the world is going on? I wondered. Nanami-san and I just looked at each other quizzically. When I tried to ask her with my gaze whether she knew about this, she shook her head to indicate that she, too, hadn't a clue what was going on. I was a little surprised that she understood what I was trying to ask without me having to say it, but I was also surprised that she didn't know about anything either.

“Now, I feel a little bad about this, Yoshin-kun, but...” Tomoko-san said before trailing off.

“Is something wrong?” I asked.

“Would you mind staying over at our house this evening? Oh, don’t worry about a place to sleep. I’ll set up a futon in Nanami’s room.”

“Excuse me?!” I shouted.

“Mom?!” Nanami-san exclaimed.

Having been hit with that particular bombshell, Nanami-san and I let go of each other’s hands in mutual shock.

Wait, stay over? Here? What could that possibly mean?

Nanami-san looked just as confused; I could practically see the question marks floating around in her head. *Yeah, same here.*

As we stood there in shock, Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san came to our assistance and explained the situation.

“Gen-san isn’t here today,” Otofuke-san said.

“He got invited by an old friend to go out drinking,” Kamoenai-san added.

Gen-san... Do they mean Genichiro-san? Wait, is it normal to call your friend’s father that way?

Although entirely bewildered by the unfamiliar practice, I realized they were right—Genichiro-san wasn’t there. Usually when Nanami-san’s family greeted us at the door, everyone home was present. I hadn’t noticed, given how confused I was.

But how did that lead to me sleeping over?

“Dad said that since he can’t take you home, you should just stay over tonight,” Saya-chan explained.

“But I can just walk home. That way, I wouldn’t need to stay over, no?”

“Walking around late at night can be dangerous,” Tomoko-san said matter-of-factly. “Plus, us girls would feel a lot safer with another man in the house.”

Is that how it is? Even so, there's still one problem.

"But we have school tomorrow, so I'll need my uniform and stuff," I said.

"Oh, don't you worry about that. We have an extra set right here," Tomoko-san replied.

Excuse me?

As I stood there, completely stunned, Tomoko-san whipped my uniform jacket out of nowhere. Next to her stood Saya-chan with a look of triumph on her face, holding the set of school supplies that I needed for tomorrow.

As my mind raced to catch up, Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san placed their hands on my shoulders. Their expressions seemed to convey the utmost sympathy.

"Give up, Misumai. When Tomoko-san says something like this, it means that she's already set up the whole thing and put it in motion," Otofuke-san said.

"Yeah, she really makes sure there's no escape for you, so there's no point in fighting back," Kamoenai-san added.

What's with that "every battle is won before it's ever fought" kind of attitude? Are we warriors or something? However, in terms of not having an escape, I understood that Tomoko-san had made sure to cover all her bases. Given that even my school uniform was here, there really was only one outcome to this situation.

But even then, I had to ask one more thing.

"Have you already talked to my parents?"

"Of course. I already have their permission. They were the ones that brought me your uniform and school supplies," Tomoko-san replied cheerfully, as if stating the obvious.

At that, I couldn't help but hang my head. I was going to have a word with my parents later.

"Oh, come on, what have you got to be down about?" Otofuke-san asked. "Being able to stay at your girlfriend's house *and* having permission from both sets of parents? That's a pretty sweet deal."

“That’s right,” Kamoenai-san added. “I’m so envious. I’m not even allowed to stay over with my boyfriend, so you should be thrilled.”

“That’s because you screwed up that one time,” Otofuke-san pointed out.

“Excuse me? But how are you supposed to stop yourself when you’re with the person you like?” Kamoenai-san asked, pouting.

I was too scared to ask what Kamoenai-san had done, but the two girls did have a point: if I was allowed to spend more time with Nanami-san today, then it’d be a waste not to fully enjoy it.

“But *please* let me sleep in a different room.”

“Well, if you say so,” came Tomoko-san’s response. “I was only joking that I’d set up your futon in Nanami’s room, although I don’t mind as long as you’re able to keep things appropriate for high schoolers.”

So she was only joking, huh? No, of course I’m not disappointed. I feel relieved, in fact, because I’m not sure if I would *be able to keep myself from doing something. Regardless, I’ll be able to stay with Nanami-san for the rest of today.*

Just then, I realized that I hadn’t heard Nanami-san’s voice throughout this whole ordeal.

“Nanami-san?” I said out loud, turning to look at her, only to discover that she’d turned bright red and crumpled to the floor.

Although I was initially shocked that no one was attending to her, I soon realized that she was mumbling things to herself. When I brought my ear closer to her mouth to hear what she was saying...

“Staying over? As in, like, a sleepover? We’re sleeping in the same room? Wait, we’re having a sleepover together? We’re sleeping in the same bed?”

Whoa, she wasn’t listening to the conversation at all.

I supposed everyone else prioritized their discussion with me because they knew she was going to be like this. No one seemed to be reaching her.

“Nanami-san...” I said, putting my hand on her shoulder.

“Bock-uh?!” Nanami-san exclaimed, as she gave a chicken-like shriek and

leaped up. “Y-Yoshin, which side of the bed do you want to sleep on?!”

“Okay, let’s calm down a bit, Nanami-san. First, I want you to breathe deeply, and then I want you to listen carefully to what I’m about to tell you.”

I hugged her shoulders while breathing deeply, trying to calm her down. Seeing me, Nanami-san also took a few deep breaths to gradually calm herself.

“How are you doing?” I asked her.

“Um, sorry about that. My mind was just a complete mess there. So, uh, what’s going on?”

Now that she was slightly calmer, I explained what I’d discussed with Tomoko-san and the others. Nanami-san still seemed to burst into a fluster every now and then, but each time she took deep breaths to calm herself.

“I see. Oh, wow. So I get to spend more time with you even after this then,” she said, once I’d finished. Those words made me happier than anything I could have imagined. I hadn’t thought of it that way until someone pointed it out to me, but Nanami-san was already seeing the silver lining.

We looked into each other’s eyes and smiled shyly. But then...

“Uh, hey, guys. Do you wanna actually come into the house now?” Otofuke-san asked, bringing us back to reality. *Right, we’re still in the hallway. I’d totally forgotten.*

Embarrassed by her remark, we took off our shoes and entered the house, to be greeted by a warm “Welcome home!” Nanami-san and I smiled and thanked them in response. I’m not sure if we could call this next portion of our day a date too, but I was incredibly happy that our time together wasn’t ending quite yet.

As I was deep in thought, Saya-chan flashed me a teasing smile. “You’ve got quite the harem going, huh, onii-chan?”

Nanami-san raised her voice in anger, but I couldn’t help tilting my head. “Harem?” I asked.

It seemed Saya-chan hadn’t expected my reaction, as she continued as if I knew what she was talking about. “Sure it is. You know, you’re the only guy,

surrounded by a bunch of girls. Isn't that what all guys dream about?"

Where did you pick up things like that? Besides, there's no way this is a harem. I mean...

"Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san both have boyfriends, and Tomoko-san is married to Genichiro-san. I'm only dating Nanami-san, so doesn't that mean it's *not* a harem?"

"Whoa, you're giving an actual, serious response," she replied, slightly taken aback.

"Come to think of it, aren't you the only one here who isn't dating someone?"

To be fair, I didn't mean anything bad by what I'd said. I'd simply been describing the situation. Even so, my thoughtless words seemed to cut Saya-chan pretty deeply. She slowly crumpled to the ground, pressing both her hands to the floor. Her sequence of movements, carried out in slow motion, was very smooth indeed.

Oh, no, wait. This is no time to be admiring the action!

"Oh, damn," Otofuke-san muttered.

"He's said it now," Kamoenai-san whispered beside her.

By the time I realized what I'd done, it was too late. Otofuke-san and Kamoenai were both smiling smugly, while Tomoko-san simply stood there with her usual smile.

"Oh, come on, you shouldn't tease him like that! Why are you so bothered by his comment anyway?" Nanami-san chimed in. Even she was looking down at Saya-chan, her lips frozen in a somewhat perturbed smile.

That was kinda horrible of me, I thought. But just as I braced myself to apologize, Saya-chan leaped up off the floor.

"I'm gonna get a boyfriend too—you'll see! Someone who's not gonna lose to onii-chan!" With that, Saya-chan began wailing at the top of her lungs. She pointed at me as if declaring war and then ran out of the room. We all heard her run up the stairs and slam the door, so she must have returned to the safety of her room.

Yeah, I'll definitely apologize later, I thought.

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"Yoshin-kun, dear, would you like black tea or green tea?" Tomoko-san asked.

"Oh, uh, green, please."

"You got it. Shall we have a little chocolate on the side, then?"

You guessed it—I was alone with Tomoko-san. Saya-chan was holed up in her room, while Nanami-san and the others had all gone off to do their own thing. There was a legitimate reason for the three girls leaving us together. As in, uh... Well, it's difficult to say...

"Let's have a little chat until the girls finish bathing. How about it, Yoshin-kun?" Tomoko-san said, handing me some chocolates and a cup of warm green tea. It was as if she'd read my mind. Yup, the three of them—Nanami-san, Otofuke-san, and Kamoenai-san—had gone to take a bath together.

It had all happened in an instant.

When Saya-chan had retreated to her room, with Nanami-san and I still trying to decide what to do, Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san had grabbed hold of Nanami-san's hands.

"All righty, Nanami, we're gonna go for a bath! It's time for some girl talk!" Otofuke-san had said.

"Yaaay! Girl talk, girl talk," Kamoenai-san had added.

"Huh? What do you mean, we're gonna take a bath?! Hey, wait, you're too strong, Hatsumi!" Nanami-san had cried.

And, with Nanami-san's protests echoing down the hall, the trio had trotted off to the bathroom. Honestly, I hadn't even had a chance to speak up.

After that, the only ones left had been me, reaching out for thin air, and Tomoko-san.

"Oh my, did you want to join them as well?" she'd asked. "I'm afraid our bathroom is too small for that."

"That's not it at all," I'd immediately replied.

“Oh, really now? Then would you like to have tea with me until they come back? Ah, whoops, that makes it sound like I’m hitting on you.”

“I don’t know about that, but if it’s okay with you, I’d love to join you,” I’d said, trying to rein her in.

Being alone with your girlfriend’s mom wasn’t normal. I mean, what was I even supposed to talk about? I wished I could confer with Baron-san in times like these, but I couldn’t very well pull out my phone in front of Tomoko-san. I’d have to get through this on my own.

“There’s no need for you to be so on guard,” Tomoko-san said. “I heard you often talk with my husband while he drives you home, so I was just a little envious.”

I must have been more tense than I’d realized. When she’d pointed it out to me, I’d felt myself jump in my seat.

“I’m sorry you have to be left alone with a middle-aged woman,” she said.

“No, not at all. I wouldn’t even doubt it if you told me you and Nanami-san were sisters.”

At first Tomoko-san seemed surprised, but then that surprise melted away into a gentle smile. Her expression was so similar to Nanami-san’s that my heart skipped a beat. Tomoko-san really was youthful. I couldn’t help but wonder if Nanami-san, too, was going to be like this when she grew up.

To calm myself, I brought my green tea to my lips. Its reassuring warmth and slight bitterness spread throughout my mouth as I drank.

“How did you enjoy your date today?” Tomoko-san asked.

“It was fun. We got to have the bento together, and...”

I began telling Tomoko-san this and that about the date. Of course, I only shared the harmless parts, but she seemed enthralled either way. I found myself doing most of the talking, with her adding a comment here and then and nodding from time to time. But just as I was thinking she was enjoying listening, tears suddenly started falling down Tomoko-san’s cheeks.

Those tears, accompanied by her smile, left me speechless. I started

panicking, thinking I'd said something wrong—but that didn't seem to be the case.

"I'm glad. I'm so glad," she said. Tomoko-san was happy—so happy, in fact, that she was crying tears of joy.

I, however, was caught off guard seeing an adult woman cry right in front of me. As I sat there not knowing what to do, Tomoko-san wiped away her tears with the tips of her fingers. She then spoke in a soft voice, as if to reassure me.

"I'm so sorry. I just couldn't help myself. I'm just so happy that Nanami was able to enjoy going on a date with such a fine young man."

Her reaction was pretty similar to Genichiro-san's from before, which is why I understood that, to Nanami-san's parents, seeing her dating me so happily was a blessing. Maybe my parents felt the same way too.

Come to think of it, Nanami-san had said she'd got the tickets to the aquarium from Tomoko-san.

"I know it's a bit late, but thanks for the aquarium tickets. We really did have a great time today," I said. As I was bowing, I heard Tomoko-san laugh—the kind of soft laughter that almost resembled a sigh. What she said next came as a shock.

"Oh, of course. Actually, those weren't really from me—they were from Hatsumi-chan and Ayumi-chan."

Say what? The tickets were from Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san?

I looked up in surprise to Tomoko-san covering her mouth, her eyes open wide. I was immediately perplexed at the unexpected change of expression.

"Whoopsie, I wasn't supposed to say that." After a brief silence, Tomoko-san stuck out her tongue and sighed. I guess she was supposed to have kept that piece of information to herself.

But what did it mean the tickets had come from them? I'd thought the meddling would have stopped with the dare. I mean, why would they even bother? Now that I thought about it, that haircut *had* been kind of an odd request.

As I sat there wondering about their true intentions, Tomoko-san spoke up again. “Those two are really rooting for you and Nanami.”

They’re rooting for us? Is that true? I mean, I was glad and all, but was I really supposed to take that at face value?

“The girls told me to keep it a secret, so please don’t tell Nanami, okay?”

“Of course.”

Tomoko-san brought her index finger to her lips in a cute gesture. I guess it was pretty clear that I couldn’t tell Nanami-san and that I couldn’t ask the two of them either—whether they *actually* supported our relationship, I mean.

Not quite able to make up my mind, I brought my tea to my lips once again. It was still warm and calmed me down somewhat. Tomoko-san took a sip of her own, and the two of us sighed in relief.

“Yoshin-kun, as you know, Nanami used to be very uncomfortable around men.” Tomoko-san spoke softly, as if she were talking to herself. I already knew Nanami-san’s situation—she’d told me herself after we’d started going out.

Tomoko-san continued. “Nanami dresses the way that she does to give herself courage, but she’s actually very sensitive and gets hurt easily. She’s a normal girl.”

Nanami-san had told me that she liked wearing clothes that weren’t all that flashy too. Come to think of it, I’d never asked her why she dressed like a gyaru. *So that was the reason, huh?*

“I think so too,” I finally said.

I agreed with what Tomoko-san had said—Nanami-san was a normal, sensitive girl. It was *because* she was sensitive that she had become unable to be around guys, and that discomfort probably hadn’t been completely wiped away, even now. I did think she had opened up to me somewhat, though that might just have been wishful thinking.

Her liking me sure would be nice, but either way, I had to act with the assumption that she actually did. Still, I had no proof to back up that assumption, and I was always a skeptic—I couldn’t change that.

At least I knew one thing to be true: if by going out with me, she could feel more comfortable, I'd be doing some good—even if she didn't actually like me.

"Nanami-san is an important person to me. That won't change no matter what happens," I declared, trying to display my determination. Maybe this wasn't something you normally did in front of your girlfriend's mom—but I just felt I had to do it.

Tomoko-san blinked a few times and looked surprised again. Then her eyebrows tilted slightly as she looked at me apologetically. I couldn't quite make sense of the expression.

"An important person... I'm so glad that someone would say that about her. It means as much as if someone said it about me," Tomoko-san said.

Tomoko-san's words and expression didn't match up. She'd said she was happy, but her expression was one of sorrow. There was something odd about her response, but I couldn't quite figure out what that was.

"Yoshin-kun, will you stay with Nanami from now on? Even if you two fight, will you make up and stay with her?"

I thought back on my date with Nanami-san, replaying her words in my head.

"I spoke about something similar with Nanami-san earlier," I said. "She said that even if we make mistakes, or take detours, or fight, she wants to have the kind of relationship where we can look back on it someday and laugh."

As much as I said that, I also thought to myself, *Nanami-san is lying to me. And I'm lying to her. Do I really have to keep lying to her like this to make our relationship work?*

I wanted to be honest with Nanami-san, and I wanted to be with her in spite of that.

Tomoko-san listened in silence, her gaze serious. I hadn't had such a serious conversation with anyone before, not even Genichiro-san.

"I feel that way too—that no matter what happens, I want to overcome it and stay by Nanami-san's side," I said.

Tomoko-san looked at me for a moment, seeming relieved at my response.

“Thank you, Yoshin-kun,” she replied. She exhaled, then finished the remainder of her tea.

But why had Tomoko-san brought this up? It was as though she knew that Nanami-san was going to get hurt in the near future.

I felt slightly strange about our conversation. There was absolutely no problem on my part, though, given that I already knew I wanted to stay with Nanami-san. Was it possible that Tomoko-san, too, had had a hand in the whole dare thing?

“Would you like more tea?” Tomoko-san asked, extending her hand as I sat there deep in thought. It was then that I realized the tea in my cup had grown cold. I finished what little there was left and offered her my cup.

“Yes, please.”

Tomoko-san took it from me and went to the kitchen. I watched her as she walked away.

Yeah, I’m probably overthinking it. Tomoko-san didn’t even know I existed until she met me. She probably just said all that out of love and concern as a mother—someone who had been watching Nanami-san for a very long time.

Aw, man, now I really wanna see Nanami-san’s face all of a sudden.

In all seriousness, though, I’d heard that women take long baths, but this bath was really, really long. I felt like I’d been talking with Tomoko-san for a pretty long time now, but thanks to that, I’d been able to not only renew my resolve about my feelings for Nanami-san, but also grow closer with Tomoko-san as well.

Just as I was wallowing in my emotions, Tomoko-san spoke up. “Did you two kiss on your date today?”

Weren’t we having a really nice conversation until a moment ago?! Why are you probing me like this all of a sudden?!

“Uh, no comment,” I mumbled.

“Oh, goodness. I’d told Nanami to kiss you today. Did she not do it? That silly girl.”

So you *put her up to that?! I was wondering why Nanami-san was so bold today, but now the mystery was solved.* The serious mood from a moment ago had vanished in an instant, and Tomoko-san was back to her usual smiling self as she handed me my tea. Had I been drinking the tea when she'd asked about the kiss, I was pretty sure I would have spewed it all over the place.

At that moment, I heard the voice I'd been wanting to hear.

"Oh, hey, is it just the two of you? What were you talking about?"

When I glanced in the direction of the voice, I saw Nanami-san standing there, fresh out of the bath. Her skin, refreshed and rosy, looked sexier than ever; I just couldn't stop staring at her. She was wearing a short-sleeved shirt that revealed her shoulders a bit. For bottoms, she was wearing denim shorts that looked kind of like hot pants. The overall look was pretty casual, perhaps because she'd just stepped out of the bath. I found myself in a conundrum of being taken by her but also not knowing where to look.

"Yoshin-kun was just telling me that the two of you kissed. Well done, Nanami! Your mother is so proud."

"What were you two talking about? The kiss was just on the cheek... Oh!"

Tomoko-san and I had been talking, but we hadn't quite made it that far; Tomoko-san had just asked a leading question that Nanami-san had totally fallen for. I stuck to my policy of remaining silent.

Nanami-san, too, seemed to realize her mistake. She clapped her hands over her mouth and glared at Tomoko-san, but Tomoko-san kept her cool and acted like she'd done nothing wrong.

"On the cheek, was it? Well, I'm glad that things are going so well between you. So, tell me, who kissed whom?"

"I'm not gonna tell you! Jeez!" Nanami-san shouted, puffing up her cheeks out in anger—but one hand came up from behind and grabbed her shoulder, while another prodded one of her puffed-out cheeks.

"What's this, Nanami?" Otofuke-san said. "You said in the bath that it was a secret, so here I was, trying to think of a way to get you to fess up."

“A peck on the cheek, huh? That’s *so* cute,” Kamoenai-san added.

The two of them had followed Nanami-san into the room. They, too, were wearing extremely casual clothes. I knew it was rude of me to stare, but Otofuke-san was wearing a tank top and baggy sweatpants. Kamoenai-san was wearing a loose-fitting dress that I assumed was a type of nightgown. Both outfits fit the individual perfectly—Otofuke-san’s revealed a lot of skin but highlighted her healthy glow, while Kamoenai-san’s hinted at her childlike innocence.

I looked again at all three of them as they began chattering, but I focused mostly on Nanami-san. *Yeah, Nanami-san is definitely the prettiest of them all.*

She must have noticed me watching her, because she left the group and came over to join me, narrowing her eyes. “What’s up? Were you looking at them because they’re so cute?” she asked.

Seeing Nanami-san’s adorable display of jealousy, Tomoko-san and I looked at each other and chuckled. Nanami-san was getting all pouty; I couldn’t help thinking how endearing it was. Tomoko-san must have felt the same way.

Seeing me and her mother starting to laugh, Nanami-san tilted her head. Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san looked at us blankly. I decided to say how I honestly felt, loud enough for all three of them to hear.

“I couldn’t help staring at you, Nanami-san. You’re cute.”

Nanami-san now looked back at me blankly, unable to process my words, but then her face began to grow redder and redder. Her two friends whistled with teasing looks on their faces, while Tomoko-san smiled with satisfaction.

I knew I was feeling a little worked up, but had saying that in front of everyone been too bold of me?

“Wh-Wh-What?!” Nanami-san repeated the same sound over and over, unable to fully respond. She really was too cute; I had to laugh.

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“Well then...”

I was now in the room they’d shown me to. Nanami-san wasn’t there, and

neither was Tomoko-san. I was completely alone.

It seemed this was the Barato family's study, one they didn't use very frequently. The floor had tatami mats, and there were only a few bookshelves. The room also seemed to serve as a guest room, as there was a futon inside.

Following our earlier conversation, we'd eaten a meal that Tomoko-san had prepared for us. After that, I'd taken a bath, and then returned to the living area to chat more with everyone before I'd been shown to this room.

Nanami-san was in her own room with Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san. They were probably still in the middle of talking about all the things girls talk about when they're together. Nanami-san had said that they were going to discuss the kiss we'd mentioned earlier. They'd actually even invited me to join them, but I'd politely declined. The idea of an introvert like me joining a group of giggling girls just seemed like too tall of an order.

Instead, Nanami-san and I promised that, after they'd finished chatting, she and I would get to chat a little bit in the room I'd be sleeping in. Tomoko-san had already given her the okay. In fact, she'd encouraged the idea.

Canyon: ...And that's where we're at now.

Baron: Hold on. I'm not really following here.

The only thing to do while I waited was to report back to Baron-san on today's date. I had been intending to do it at home, but I'd somehow ended up here instead.

Baron-san seemed completely bewildered, and Peach-san hadn't responded at all. I was pretty sure she was there, but it was rare for her not to say anything.

Baron: So, uh, can you run that by me one more time?

Canyon: Sure. So, simply put, after our date, I've ended up staying over at my girlfriend's house.

Baron: Yeah, I still don't get it.

Just as I was trying to process Baron-san's reply, a message came through from Peach-san.

Peach: You sure are bold, Canyon-san. As in, you move too fast.

Now it was my turn to ask them to hold on. I hadn't made a single move, so they couldn't possibly say I moved too fast. I just didn't have the guts. If I did, things between Nanami-san and me would have progressed way further. In fact, I probably wouldn't have been chosen as the object of the dare in the first place.

Canyon: No way. I mean, there are other people here. It's just that I'm the only guy.

Baron: Wait, do you have a harem now?

Canyon: Of course not. Everyone else has boyfriends. I guess her little sister doesn't have a boyfriend, but she's only in middle school.

Peach: You're...in a love triangle with the little sister?

Canyon: Absolutely not! Her little sister does want a boyfriend, but she's looking for anyone else but me.

How did you arrive at that conclusion? Did you read a manga like that somewhere? Peach-san's interest seemed to have been piqued, but there would be no such turn of events.

I felt like they were teasing me, but none of this related to what I wanted to ask. What I wanted to ask them was...

Canyon: So, what should I do now?

Baron: Why don't you share a bed with her?

Peach: Let's have you sleep beside her.

Both of them replied at the same time—almost as lightly as if they were telling me to go for a walk around the neighborhood. But I couldn't do that. I mean...I couldn't do that. Come on, now. I couldn't sleep in the same bed as her

while her family and friends were under the same roof.

Baron: But I thought it was okay as long as you kept things appropriate for high schoolers.

Peach: It'll be fine as long as you can keep yourself from doing things! Sleeping side by side... How nice.

I felt like I had to have a nice, long talk with Peach-san one of these days. Wasn't she only in middle school? Did she even know what "doing things" meant?

Our other team members were now chanting for me to sleep beside Nanami-san too. It seemed I wasn't going to get any decent answers anymore.

The chat became a chaotic mess for a while, but eventually, Baron-san spoke up.

Baron: You're going to chat with your girlfriend later, right, Canyon-san? What are you gonna do if she invites you instead? Are you gonna turn her down? That seems rude, doesn't it?

His question sure was troublesome, because on the surface he had a point, but there was no way such a thing would happen.

Or at least, so I thought at the time.

Canyon: The whole thing started because she isn't good with guys, so there's no way she'd even suggest such a thing. We'll chat some, and then we'll sleep in different rooms, and that'll be that.

Baron: Well, that's too bad, though I sure hope you can suppress your desires while you chitchat.

That was a pretty ominous thing for him to say. But wait—he was right. My sense for these things had become numb, but wasn't it bad for a guy and a girl to be together in the same room all by ourselves before sleeping? I only realized once Baron-san mentioned it. What they say is true: when placed under abnormal and impossible situations, people make questionable decisions.

Oh, shoot. This is bad. I'm starting to get nervous. And as if to add another blow, Peach-san sent another message.

Peach: Canyon-san, if your girlfriend invites you to sleep with her, please respond kindly. It takes a girl a lot of courage to ask something like that.

Well, jeez, when you say it like that, how was I supposed to refuse? I was becoming even more nervous, but Nanami-san shouldn't be there for another half hour or so, so I could try to calm myself down by then. But at that moment...

"Yoshiiin! I'm here!"

The door burst open without so much as a knock, and in walked Nanami-san —more excited and way earlier than we'd agreed. I was so startled that I nearly flew out of my seat. I turned my whole body to look toward the door.

"Nanami-san, what's going on all of a— Whoa, huh?"

"I came for our chat! How fun!" she said, giggling, but I couldn't find the words to reply.

Nanami-san had been wearing her pajamas earlier, a very pretty set in pink. Now, though, she was wearing a thin blue camisole and a pair of shorts. Her outfit showed a *lot* of skin. Plus the camisole was *really* thin, and though it wasn't see-through, it showed the lines of her body very clearly.

What happened?! She was wearing normal pajamas earlier!

As I remained at a loss for words, Nanami-san began inching on all fours toward me, like some kind of predator.

"Yoshiiin, your girlfriend is here. Aren't you happy? You're happy, right?"

What in the... Hey, wait. This smell... Why does Nanami-san smell like alcohol?

Suddenly, my confusion was interrupted as Otofuke-san burst into the room —wearing identical clothes to Nanami-san.

"Hey, Nanami! Misumai, are you all right?!" she shouted.

"Nanami, you move too fast," Kamoenai-san whined, not far behind her.

I had to spin around to avert my gaze. I only caught the slightest glimpse, but Otofuke-san was wearing a red camisole, while Kamoenai-san was wearing a

yellow one.

Why are they wearing matching tops?

“Sorry, Misumai,” Otofuke-san said. “We totally didn’t realize, but Nanami went and ate some whiskey bonbons.”

“And she just insisted on coming here,” Kamoenai-san added. “We didn’t even have time to stop her, hee hee.”

“Um, I understand, but why are you all dressed like that?” I asked.

“Ayumi brought them. She wanted Nanami to wear it as her lucky outfit tonight,” Otofuke-san replied.

“Isn’t it sexy? We all match,” added Kamoenai-san.

Their voices rang in my ears awfully clearly. So Kamoenai-san was the one who brought the clothes. I wasn’t sure whether I should be angry with her or compliment her for a job well done. *I suppose getting angry is a little much, though. Well that was an easy decision.*

“Is Nanami-san a lightweight when it comes to alcohol?” I asked. I had to forget about the clothes for now—there was a more important matter to deal with.

“Seems like it,” Otofuke-san replied. “We never knew either. It was in the chocolates we found.”

Oh, *those* chocolates—the ones from abroad. They must have had alcohol in them, and Nanami-san had eaten them without knowing.

“Hey, don’t talk to Hatsumi and Ayumi! Talk to me. Come on,” Nanami-san said. She put her arms around my neck and leaned on me from behind. Through the thin fabric of her camisole, I felt her warmth and two soft mounds pressing against my back.

“C-Calm down, Nanami-san. Please, just calm down,” I implored.

“I am *so* calm. Come on, let’s have our chat. Come on, look this way.”

Talking with the cutesy intonation that was more familiar coming from Kamoenai-san, Nanami-san swayed her body from side to side while still being

attached to me. With every movement, I felt a problematic pressure on my back.

“Whoa, whoa!” I yelped, turning to the two sober girls. “Otofuke-san, Kamoenai-san, help me out here! What am I supposed to do?!”

My pleading seemed to upset Nanami-san, because she put even more force into her movements. The two friends didn’t answer; silence filled the room.

“I guess we’ll just let the young lovers be,” Otofuke-san finally said.

“We’ll be on our way now. Oh, I’ll bring some water for her later,” Kamoenai-san added.

Excuse me? What did they just say?

With Nanami-san plastered to my back, I couldn’t turn around, so I couldn’t see what the two of them were doing. Still, I did hear the door creak.

Don’t tell me...

As the sound of the door closing reached my ears, I realized my fears had come true. *Those two just ran off! Wait, was I supposed to take this to mean that they were being considerate? I don’t even know anymore.*

“Yoshiiin, we’re all alone now.”

Nanami-san whispered those words directly in my ear, sending a shiver up my spine. As her breath caressed my skin, a pleasant tingle spread through my body.

Shoot, shoot, shoot. My mind was filled with alarm bells.

“Today’s date was loads of fun, huh?” Nanami-san whispered, softly but clearly. She showed no sign of detaching herself.

“Y-Yeah. A lot happened, but it really was fun.”

“It was fun... It really was.”

Nanami-san was now swaying and humming a tune. Although she’d come to chat, she didn’t seem to have much to say. She was just snuggling into my back.

I recalled our little lunch break during our date, but the difference now was my heart was beating like crazy. In fact, compared to earlier today, everything—

from her clothes to the entire situation—was different. But as long as everyone was around, I absolutely couldn't do anything weird—not that I would ever do anything weird to Nanami-san while she was drunk.

My body remained frozen. I felt like someone had injected liquid metal into my joints to prevent them from moving, but at least this way, I wouldn't do anything stupid. However, just as I thought I'd found some peace of mind, Nanami-san's hand reached for mine.

"So warm," she mumbled, rubbing the back of my hand. That alone was enough to make my anxiety shoot through the roof, but then, with her opposite hand, she started touching my stomach.

I became deadly still. I was just letting her do whatever she wanted with me, like a fish on a chopping block.

"N-Nanami-san...?"

"I thought this when you undressed that time, but you have an amazing body," she said, giggling some more. "You feel all rugged, like my dad."



This was the same thing she'd told her female classmates that one day in the classroom, only this time, I didn't feel any of that bewitching sexiness from her. In fact, I felt a sense of childlike innocence.

In contrast to Nanami-san's words, though, her actions were nothing but trouble. She continued to rub my stomach.

Still, it seemed she really had returned to a childlike state. She was just rubbing me and holding my hand, without any interest in doing anything more. If she *had* been interested, that would have been a huge problem.

Nanami-san continued her movement until I noticed her gradually slowing down. I couldn't help but think she was just preparing to make her move the moment she stopped.

And then the moment came.

Her hand stopped, and the load increased on my back. I realized then that she had rested her entire weight on me. I could feel Nanami-san's heartbeat and the warmth she exuded. A faint heartbeat and gentle breathing...

Gentle breathing?

"Nanami-san?" I whispered, finally able to move my body. As I craned my neck, I felt she let go of my hand and nearly slid off my back. I hurriedly rushed to catch her. At that moment, just before she fell, the strap of her camisole slipped off her shoulder.

Wow, this is not *something I should be seeing right now.*

I gingerly returned the strap to where it belonged, doing my best not to look at or touch her skin. My arms were quivering from nervousness. When I glanced up after finally managing to fix her clothing, I saw that her eyes were closed, and she was sleeping peacefully.

"She fell asleep, huh?"

Come to think of it, she'd made so much food for our bento that day and then gone on an eventful date. She must have used up a lot of energy. On top of all that, she'd eaten something she wasn't used to eating. It was no surprise her fatigue had gotten the better of her.

We'd agreed to chat, but it seemed that wasn't going to happen.

I put her head in my lap as gently as I could. *How many times have we done this today?* Nanami-san looked just as restful there. It was almost like a replay of our post-lunch nap, but this time, I didn't know what to do next.

I was still gazing at her face when Nanami-san—dressed only in her camisole and shorts—let out a soft sneeze.

Of course. She's showing so much skin. She must be cold.

"Nanami-san, you must be super tired. Let's go to bed," I said, deciding to wake her up though I felt bad doing so. I knew I wasn't strong enough to carry her to her room while she slept. I mean, I could lift her up or hold her, but trying to move her to a different room that way seemed dangerous. Instead, I decided it was best to have her walk to her room herself.

But Nanami-san managed to surpass my expectations even then. She mumbled, "Mmm, yeah... I'll go to bed..." and then got up on all fours and began to move. I thought for sure that she was going to stand up, but instead she crawled behind me and slipped into the futon I was supposed to sleep in.

I couldn't stop her; I could only watch. To be honest, I was frozen with shock.

Um, Nanami-san, are you still half asleep? When I approached her slowly, my gaze met her. She looked back at me as if in a trance. Noticing my gaze, she peeled back a corner of the covers and reached out toward me.

"Did you sober up a little?" I asked her.

Nanami-san stared at me silently. I couldn't tell from her expression whether she was awake, half-asleep, or drunk. I gazed at her hand for a moment, but then I finally gave in and took it.

Nanami-san smiled, seeming satisfied, and gave it a light squeeze. Her hand grazed across my fingers one by one, as if trying to confirm something, before she intertwined her fingers with mine. With my hand held tight, she pulled me gently toward her.

It truly was very gently—enough for me to register that she was pulling me. I could've resisted, of course—ordinarily the meager force wouldn't even have

been enough to make my body move.

But for some reason, I couldn't resist the force of her pull, so I ended up tumbling down beside her. We lay together, facing each other on the futon.

Nanami-san moved her lips slightly. We were so close, yet I couldn't hear anything. After she formed her barely audible words, she smiled, quietly and beautifully. Then, still holding my hand, Nanami-san closed her eyes. I heard her regular breaths as she drifted off back asleep.

Whoa, that was a close one. She closed her eyes, so I thought she wanted me to kiss her or something, but I was wrong. I was wrong, right?

The strong grip she'd had on my hand had loosened after she fell asleep. I could easily slide my hand out anytime—but I wanted to stay like that for just a little while longer.

"I wonder what she was trying to say," I said softly.

Nanami-san didn't answer me, of course. She was asleep. She was sleeping soundly, not even talking in her sleep.

Today was all sorts of fun, wasn't it? Thanks for that, I said in my heart. *Well, I guess that's it for tonight.*

Careful not to wake her, I slowly untangled my fingers from hers. A part of me didn't want to, but of course we couldn't sleep together like this. *Man, what a shame.*

I wondered if Tomoko-san was still awake. If she'd gone to bed already, I could just stay up all night playing games. I had my phone, so hanging out on the living room couch wouldn't be a bad call. *Yeah, let's just do that.*

I readjusted the futon and made sure Nanami-san was fully covered, thinking that should at least keep her warm. Slightly relieved, I got up and started to leave the room, but seeing her asleep, I thought of one thing—just one thing—that I wanted to do. It was a small desire that welled up inside me.

I felt cowardly for doing this while she was asleep, but I couldn't possibly muster up the courage to do it while she was awake.

A strange calmness came over me. Maybe my heart had tired itself out

beating like crazy earlier and wasn't able to move anymore. Yeah, yeah, I know that's not possible, but I sure felt like it was.

"Good night, Nanami-san."

There was no response from her. She was sleeping with an adorable look on her face, which was totally fine. I'd only said it to make sure she was asleep. When I touched her hair gently, it flowed softly through my fingers.

Finally convinced she was asleep, I brought my face slowly toward hers. I moved as slowly as I could, so as not to wake her. The distance between us gradually decreased, and...

I touched my lips against her forehead.

It wasn't an accident, like it was the last time I kissed her. This time, it was out of my own free will that I, um, kissed her on her forehead as she slept.

Oh, jeez. Just saying I kissed her was embarrassing on its own. There really was no way I could do the same while she was awake. These were the only circumstances in which I could do something like this.

But the fact that Nanami-san wasn't reacting at all was actually freaking me out.

Was it really okay for me to do that? I couldn't help asking myself. *No, no, don't wuss out now.* I didn't know whether I'd done right or not, but a kiss was the most I could do now. *On the lips? Of course I couldn't do that. That'd be impossible.*

"I wonder if I'll be able to do it when she's awake one day," I muttered to myself. Maybe that, too, was cowardly of me.



Even as I was second-guessing myself, I decided to leave the room and let Nanami-san continue sleeping peacefully.

Then I saw three familiar faces.

Three women were peeking around the door—though I didn't know when it had opened. They were all pointing their phones toward me as my eyes locked on them.

"May I ask what exactly the three of you are doing?" I said.

Three heads were all lined up in a row, each with a different kind of smile. I'm sure there was a song like that that was popular once.

"I'm just trying to capture the growth of my future son-in-law," Tomoko-san said.

"You looked like you were doing something fun, so I thought I'd watch," Otofuke-san said.

"I didn't think it'd be right to interrupt!" Kamoenai-san said.

As if on cue, all three of them turned their phones to show me what they'd captured. Since they'd been snooping through the opening of the door, they had captured the scene at various strange angles, meaning none of the women had got the perfect shot. They had, however, caught me as I'd been lowering my face to meet Nanami-san's forehead.

Not as a photo, but as a video.

"Oh, jeez," I muttered.

As I looked at them, the women giggled among themselves. *I'm so glad you're all having fun.*

Interlude: At the Baratos' House

While Yoshin and Nanami were out on their date, three women gathered at the Baratos' house. There was a grand total of three women present: Nanami's mother, Tomoko, and Nanami's two friends, Hatsumi Otofuke and Ayumi Kamoenai.

The two friends were sitting across from the mother. In contrast to the smile on Tomoko's face, however, the smiles on both Hatsumi's and Ayumi's faces seemed tight and more than slightly forced. Their expressions indicated with clarity just how much they feared the woman in front of them.

"Now, Hatsumi-chan, Ayumi-chan, can you please explain to me how this dare came about?"

Although Tomoko spoke with an elegant smile, her words were nonetheless accompanied by the kind of pressure that left the two girls no choice but to talk. How could a regular smile from a housewife instill so much fear?

The two girls kept their strained smiles plastered on their faces as they slowly sipped their tea. Their parched throats wouldn't have allowed them to utter any words otherwise.

Despite the unfathomable pressure, Hatsumi spoke up first. Anyone who knew her would have been surprised by just how timid she sounded. "Well, you see, Tomoko-san, we, uh, had our reasons, aha ha..."

"Oh no. Are you angry with us, Tomoko-san?" Ayumi asked in as light a tone as she could manage.

But even as they responded as though to get a feel for the situation, they both already knew she was upset. The moment they'd started talking, the oppressive atmosphere she was emitting increased exponentially. As someone who did martial arts, Hatsumi knew that that kind of force wasn't the aura of just any housewife. She swallowed hard as the blood drained from her face.

Hatsumi had known the Barato family since she'd started elementary school;

Ayumi had known them since middle school. Because of that, they had built up enough of a relationship with Tomoko to know from her smile alone that she was angry.

Tomoko was their friend Nanami's dear, sweet mother—someone who was ordinarily easygoing, someone the girls could talk to like a friend. That's the kind of person Tomoko was, and why both Hatsumi and Ayumi had exchanged their contact info with her. They even talked to her about things they couldn't talk about with their own parents.

This, however, was the first time they'd been invited to the Baratos' house, knowing that they were going to be scolded.

Running away wasn't an option.

Tomoko's anger was still in its initial stages. As long as she was smiling, there was a chance for them to get out of this alive. In order to do that, the two girls decided to start off by apologizing.

At that moment, however, Tomoko's oppressive aura vanished like a wisp of smoke—as if it hadn't even been there in the first place. Liberated from the intimidation, the girls saw only the usual Tomoko, smiling at them like she always did.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to scare you. I just thought this was the perfect opportunity to hear your side of the story," she said.

"I see," Hatsumi replied, as both girls sighed with relief—relief that only lasted for a moment.

"So, why is it that you made Nanami— I mean, why did you choose Yoshin-kun to be the boy that Nanami confessed to for her dare?" Tomoko asked.

Pierced by her sharp gaze, the two girls froze at the question.

Tomoko really only wanted to ask one thing, which didn't necessarily concern the dare at all. She just wanted to know why the two of them had chosen Yoshin. Her curiosity had led her to sending a message to the two of them without telling her daughter.

The two girls sighed in unison. Since they'd been invited here while Nanami

was out on her date, Tomoko must have already known everything. Having known her for a long time, they knew she was sharp, but this went beyond even their expectations.

Hatsumi and Ayumi looked at each other and nodded. They knew they had to explain everything to Tomoko.

“We understand,” Hatsumi said. “You probably have it all figured out by now, but us choosing Misumai was no coincidence.”

Ayumi nodded. “It’s totally true. We thought that if we chose him, we’d be able to leave Nanami in his hands. We sort of bet on it.”

Now it was Tomoko’s turn to be surprised. Although their answer was one she’d expected, learning that she was right surprised her.

“You’re saying that long before all this you’d been looking into whom to make Nanami confess to?” Tomoko asked.

“Well, to be precise, Misumai was just the first of the potential candidates, and that first one turned out to be a great match for Nanami,” Hatsumi replied.

The two girls took out their cell phones and opened an app. It was a plain address book app like on so many phones—except these two girls weren’t using the app in a way that normal high school girls might.

When the pair showed their phones to Tomoko, she saw that the apps displayed quite a number of male names, each one accompanied by a rough profile of the individual.

“Oh my. You two are acting like a couple of little detectives,” Tomoko said. Even witnessing what the two had been up to, Tomoko didn’t seem fazed at all. In fact, she seemed to have figured everything out in advance. She sighed as if resigned to the situation.

The two girls, who had been hoping that they might be able to surprise Tomoko a little, saw her reaction and smiled wryly.

“We’ve been friends with Nanami all through high school,” Hatsumi explained, “but after this, we each have our different dreams to pursue. We won’t be able to be with her after we graduate.”

Ayumi looked troubled. “It’s true. We were super worried about what would happen to Nanami when she went off to university. I know we’re being kind of overprotective, but we were nervous about whether we’d be able to let her go by herself.”

It was now Tomoko’s lips that curled into a wry smile—the idea of them being more overprotective than her, Nanami’s mother, must have amused her. Without waiting for her response, the two girls continued.

“That’s why we tapped into our girls’ network to see what kind of guys were out there,” Hatsumi said. “We were looking for someone from our grade, who’d be able to protect Nanami in our place.”

That was why Hatsumi and Ayumi had behaved the way they had—to get themselves to the top of the school caste system. They had made lots of friends so that they could be at the center of class activities, but had been careful not to get wrapped up in things like bullying. Even while digging up dirt on guys from other classes, they’d done so in the form of “girl talk” to avoid seeming suspicious. They had started carrying out these tasks as soon as they’d entered high school.

Even the gyaru fashion had been a part of the plan. It *was* cute and they *were* interested in it, but they’d thought it to be a vital tool to help them—and Nanami—move up the caste system. That was why they’d made even Nanami, who wasn’t good with guys, dress like a gyaru along with them. They wouldn’t have forced her if she’d resisted, but, fortunately for them, Nanami enjoyed dressing that way too—plus she looked great in it.

And finally, after much research and scrutiny, they had decided that among the guys in their grade, the guy most suitable for Nanami was Yoshin Misumai. It wasn’t just that people saw him as being uninterested in girls; he seemed to reject them altogether. The two girls thought that this made him the perfect fit for helping Nanami become more used to guys.

There was just one thing they hadn’t counted on.

“We didn’t expect Misumai to be so proactive or to be the type who’d do anything for her,” Hatsumi said. “It was totally a nice surprise. And here we’d thought we’d picked the quietest guy around.”

“Yeah, seriously,” Ayumi agreed. “We thought he was quiet and that he’d be perfect for Nanami, but who knew she’d totally fall for him? Gawd, we can’t thank Misumai enough.”

In a sense, the two had been able to accomplish what they’d set out to do, but researching every single guy in their grade must have been quite the task—a task they’d mentioned as if it were no big deal. But in the end, they’d done it all for Nanami.

“I understand that you two went through all that trouble, but why would you do so much for her?” Tomoko asked. She sighed and smiled at them, both dumbfounded and grateful. Their response, though, was a simple one.

“That’s easy—we love Nanami,” Hatsumi replied.

“Yep, yep. And besides, it’s kind of thanks to Nanami that we were both able to go out with our current boyfriends,” Ayumi said.

Because of the gratitude they felt toward her, everything they did was fueled by their desire to see Nanami happy.

One of the things they hadn’t counted on once they started to wear gyaru fashion was the fact that Nanami would become so popular in high school. Guys around them frequently confessed to her. But even Nanami didn’t know that her friends had been secretly on standby during all of those confessions, ready to jump out if anything weird happened.

The two friends now believed that the role of making Nanami happy had been successfully handed down to Yoshin—that their role had successfully come to an end. Of course they would help if the couple encountered any problems, but the girls believed that everything would be fine from here on out—that they could trust the introverted, yet very proactive, classmate of theirs.

“I see. Thank you, both of you, for thinking so much about our daughter,” Tomoko said.

The girls hadn’t noticed her move closer to them, but she was now at just the right distance away to lean in and offer them both a gentle hug. Tomoko’s embrace was soft and warm, and it somehow even smelled comforting. The girls were overcome with relief at the thought that they’d been forgiven.

However, that sense of relief only lasted for a moment.

“Of course, you still have to take responsibility for what you did.”

Tomoko’s words rang in their ears. Even though they felt warm from the hug, shivers ran down their spines.

“How do you suppose I know about the dare?” Tomoko asked them.

As the two contemplated the question, Tomoko continued. “Nanami didn’t tell me, but she was acting strangely. When I asked her about it, it turned out my hunch was right.”

Still trapped in Tomoko’s embrace, the two girls shuddered. Gazing at her without even being able to turn their heads, they wondered at the woman’s intuition. But what Tomoko said next made them shudder even harder.

“Nanami decided to tell Yoshin-kun the truth on their one-month anniversary.”

Even though the two girls felt their hearts starting to freeze, they continued listening in silence. They couldn’t say anything. Even though countless thoughts came and went to and from their minds, they understood that they no longer had any right to stop their friend.

“Everything will be fine—since it’s Yoshin-kun we’re talking about, he’ll accept her nonetheless. But, no matter how things turn out, I want the two of you to apologize to Yoshin-kun.”

The girls simply couldn’t refuse those words—those quiet words, those words as deep as the ocean. Moreover, they agreed.

“You’re right,” Hatsumi said. “Of course. We can never thank him enough for what he’s done. We’ll apologize.”

“We totally get it,” Ayumi agreed. “I mean, I’m sure they’ll love each other no matter what happens, and Nanami is a good girl. But yeah, we have to take responsibility for what we did too.”

Even if the dare had been for Nanami’s sake, the girls understood the severity of their action and had felt guilty about it for a while now.

Still, their top priority was Nanami, and that was precisely why they were

ready to take on all the blame if the situation called for it. That much was true. But even their resolution wavered when they heard what Tomoko said next.

"And of course, if things *don't* work out, I'll be sure to tell both of your boyfriends about what the two of you did."

The two girls' gasped in unison. Each one imagined the scene where their respective boyfriend found out about what they'd done. They turned pale from fear. Seeing them, Tomoko donned a satisfied expression and stepped away.

"He's gonna be angry with me...definitely angry. He's gonna be so mad. Is he gonna hate me? No, no, it's not what you think. It was all for Nanami! I'm sorry. I'm sorry..."

"No, no, no! He's gonna be so mad! He's definitely gonna say no dates and no hugs and no kisses! I'm so sorry! I don't want that! I know it's my fault, but I still don't want that! I'm so sorry, onii-chan! Please forgive me!"

Hatsumi and Ayumi were distraught. If their classmates saw them now, they probably wouldn't have believed what they were seeing.

Hatsumi was quiet, while Ayumi was screaming. Although their approaches were polar opposites of each other's, they both feared having their boyfriends be angry with them.

And with that, the two ended up on the same boat—their fates to be determined by the outcome of Nanami's upcoming confession.

Looks like we have another example of being at the mercy of the one you love, thought Tomoko, smiling as she watched the girls. She knew, of course, that they had done what they'd done in order to help her daughter, but she felt satisfied knowing she was able to teach them a little lesson for deceiving Yoshin.

Although Tomoko hadn't realized it at the time, what she'd said to them had come from her already seeing Yoshin as her future son-in-law. Her actions now were entirely based on her prioritizing the happiness of Nanami and Yoshin as a couple. If that hadn't been the case, she probably wouldn't have threatened the two girls—whom she'd known for a long time—in the way that she had.

"All right, you two. If you've thought long and hard about what you've done,

it's time to stop being so hard on yourselves. Now we just have to watch over them, like we always have."

The sound of Tomoko clapping her hands brought the two girls back to reality. They both looked at her before hanging their heads. *We'll never get the better of this woman*, they thought at the same time.

"Understood, ma'am. Oh, and thank you for giving her the tickets," Hatsumi said.

"No problem at all. It was easy. But why didn't you give them to her yourselves?" Tomoko asked.

"'Cause she would've felt bad taking it if they came from us. That's why it was better if you gave them to her. I mean, it's not like we had to pay for them anyway."

They should've just let Nanami thank them, Tomoko thought, as she smiled another wry smile. At the same time, she was happy that the two girls were also rooting for the couple.

"Oh," Hatsumi suddenly said as if she'd remembered something, "I was wondering—did you say something to Nanami when you gave her the tickets? She was acting all weird about going."

"I only told her to kiss him while they were on their date," Tomoko replied, shrugging her shoulders.

"Wait, seriously?! I wanna hear what happened!" Ayumi exclaimed.

"In that case, would you like to stay here for the rest of the day? You'll be able to ask them as soon as they're home."

The two girls tilted their heads quizzically. They didn't understand why Nanami *and* Yoshin would be coming home to the Baratos' house.

"Oh, haven't you heard? Yoshin-kun eats dinner at our house now."

Surprised at the news, Hatsumi and Ayumi looked at each other.

What?! I had no idea! Dude, doesn't this mean he's in this family's clutches now?!

Grrr, I'm so jealous... He's already been accepted into her family!

Hatsumi and Ayumi's respective thoughts were a mix of both happiness and loneliness. They felt that their friend—whom they'd been protecting and leading by the hand until now—was quickly outpacing them when it came to dating.

No, it was fair to say she in fact had already left them far behind. Who knew how many steps she'd skipped? The two girls felt a tinge of envy.

Despite the complex feelings swirling inside of them, they at least felt relief that their dare had led their friend to happiness. For now, they could only vow to pump her for all the details when she returned home from her date.

Chapter 5.5: Steamy Gossip

“Hey, Nanami, is it just me, or did your boobs get bigger? Does Misumai massage them for you or something?”

“Wooow, you’re finally doing something so shameful. You’re all grown up now, Nanami.”

“He does *not* massage them! And why do you sound all happy, Ayumi?!”

Taking a bath feels so good at the end of a long day. Today, however, bath time was slightly different. For the first time in a long time, I was taking a bath together with my friends, Hatsumi and Ayumi. Had we really not done this since we were in middle school?

Now that we were high schoolers, the family bath felt a little cramped with all three of us in it.

“Gosh, I’m *so* jealous how fit you are, Hatsumi,” Ayumi said. “Your waist is tiny, and you even have a six-pack.”

“I’ll have to be careful, ’cause I don’t want it defined much more than this. Anyway, aren’t you getting a little plump there, Ayumi?”

“Hmm, I don’t think so. I’ve been snacking a lot lately, but I’m pretty sure I still weigh the same.”

Wearing our birthday suits, we were all sitting in the tub while commenting on each other’s bodies. I was just as envious of Hatsumi’s great figure. While she’d mentioned Ayumi having a little belly going, I was actually worried about that myself. Food tasted so good when I was eating with Yoshin, so I always ended up eating more than I should.

“Maybe both Ayumi and I should go on a diet,” I muttered.

Ayumi frowned. “Huh? Nanami, you don’t need to lose weight. Gawd, I wished all my pudge went to my boobs like yours does.”

“Stop that,” Hatsumi snapped, as she saw Ayumi lifting up her own breasts.

I was pretty sure my boobs hadn't gotten bigger. I mean, my bra still fit the same as always. Ayumi said she was envious of me for some reason, but I was more envious of the two of them. I guess the grass is always greener on the other side.

Since it wasn't possible to fit all three of us in the tub at once, Ayumi and Hatsumi were relaxing in it first, while I was getting washed up nearby.

"So, how was the date? Did you manage to kiss him?" Hatsumi asked.

"Did ya kiss him? You did, right? Did you get your first kiss?"

I was totally stunned. *How do they even know?!* As I stared at them, my eyes open wide, Hatsumi started grinning. Ayumi had her innocent smile on as always, but she seemed to be enjoying herself a bit more than usual.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I responded. I knew it was no use arguing after such a long pause, but I did my best to collect myself and flash them my most convincing smile. I didn't know why, but I felt a chill run down my spine. Maybe that was because the warm shower wasn't hitting me on the back. *Or maybe I just imagined it. Yeah, that must be it.*

"Oh, you don't have to pretend. We heard everything from Tomoko-san," Hatsumi said.

"Yeah, we heard she told you to kiss him today."

Mooom! What are you telling people?! You can't say things like that to these two! Is this the whole reason they're over here today? Did they come because they wanted to hear all the gossip? Gawd, they should be spending their time going on dates with their own boyfriends. Why do they have to hear all about what I'm doing with mine?

"Aaand? Fess up, girl."

"Did you two kiss? Was there tongue action?"

"T-Tongue?!"

How could I possibly do something like that?! Oh, Hatsumi just socked Ayumi. It actually hurts when she does that. She hits you where her fist is hardest, so it really makes your head ring.

Hatsumi started scolding Ayumi, who was holding her head. I encouraged Hatsumi to scold her more.

“You’re too explicit, Ayumi,” Hatsumi barked. “There’s no way a beginner like Nanami could do that.”

“Not cool, Hatsumi! That hurt.”

Hatsumi got out of the tub even as Ayumi mumbled her complaints. I took Hatsumi’s place, glad that the topic of conversation had changed.

“So? How far did you get? Did ya kiss him?” Ayumi asked.

I take that back; it hasn’t changed. They hadn’t forgotten, and they remained just as determined to find out more. So, I brought my index finger to my lips and said simply, “It’s a secret.”

It was true that I had kissed Yoshin, but trying to recall it calmly and share it with the two of them was just too embarrassing.

“Oh, come on, tell us,” Hatsumi pleaded.

“Yeah, what’s the big deal? Tell us!”

“A secret is a secret,” I said.

They continued pressing me for an answer, but I stubbornly refused. Things continued like this for a while, but eventually I said to them, “Enough. What’s with the two of you? It’s Sunday. You should be out with your boyfriends.”

They both fell silent at once. *Whoa, did I say something wrong?*

“What happened?” I asked, unable to help my concern.

“He’s not home today. He has a match or something,” Hatsumi said.

“Me too. Onii-chan’s out of town, and I can’t see him for a while,” Ayumi agreed.

They both heaved a deep sigh—then started looking at me again as if they wanted me to tell them more about my date so that they could fill their own romance voids. Even so, I still refused. It seemed they eventually realized my mind was made up, because they finally gave up.

“Well, I guess I’m just glad things seem to be going well for you guys,”

Hatsumi said, giving in.

“Has it already been two weeks? Wow, time sure passes fast.”

“Seriously? It’s already been two weeks, huh?”

We all fell silent. It was already halfway to the promised one-month mark. Were Yoshin and I developing our relationship as steadily as we should be? Hatsumi and Ayumi made it sound like we were, but I wasn’t so sure.

It was then that Ayumi turned to me with an earnest expression and said, “Hey, Nanami, I wanna give you some advice.”

It was rare for Ayumi to so pointedly share her opinion with me. She always looked like she was having fun, and was hardly ever serious like this. Apparently, Hatsumi was just as surprised as I was, but she listened in all seriousness.

“Whether it’s kissing or having sex,” Ayumi said, “if you ever want to do it, you should go for it. Don’t hold back, okay?”

“What the hell are you saying with such a straight face?!” Hatsumi yelled. I, too, was stunned by the sudden advice, but Ayumi looked entirely serious. Her expression hadn’t wavered at all.

“I have a feeling Misumai is kind of like my onii-chan, so it’ll be difficult to get anywhere beyond kissing with him,” she said. She lifted her hand out of the tub and touched her lips.

“Beyond kissing?” This is already too much for me.

“A girl wants to do stuff too, you know? But if he won’t do anything, then the only thing she can do is to ask him herself, right?”

As Ayumi caressed her lips with her fingers, she wore a sensual expression I’d never seen before. *Was this a look that she only showed her boyfriend?* I wondered. *I see where she’s coming from, though. Making moves myself is important too.*

As I sat there impressed by Ayumi’s advice, Hatsumi narrowed her eyes in exasperation. “Uh, excuse me? Your boyfriend is a legal adult. Isn’t he gonna be arrested if he does anything with you? That’s nothing but social death.”

“Oh, you say the same thing he does, but if I’m fine with it, then it’s fine, right? So just grope them a little!” Ayumi shouted.

Grope what, exactly?! I regretted taking Ayumi seriously for even one moment. She was already back to her usual self.

“So yeah, today let’s put on those seductive outfits I brought with me and talk girl to girl in your room! We can figure out how to have Misumai totally dancing in the palm of your hand!”

“Don’t tell me you brought those outfits...” Hatsumi muttered.

“Yup. I’ve got some for the two of you too so that we can all match! They’re all the same, but different colors.”

Judging from the look on Hatsumi’s face, whatever Ayumi had brought wasn’t anything good. *No wait, more importantly...*

“But I wanna go chat with Yoshin tonight,” I said.

“Oh, come ooon,” Ayumi moaned. “We’ll let you go real quick. But if you wear what I’ve brought us, Misumai will be totes happy too!”

“I’m not so sure about that. It might not be such a good idea,” Hatsumi muttered.

What kind of an outfit would have Hatsumi—who usually wore super skimpy stuff—hesitating? I actually kind of wanted Yoshin to see me wearing it, whatever it was. Was that bad?

But at this point, I still had no idea that I would still have Ayumi’s advice in my head and that I, wearing the outfit in question, would do something so outrageous to Yoshin. In fact, I wouldn’t even find out about it until the next morning...



Afterword

For those of you who have been reading along since the first volume: it's been a while. For those of you who joined us with this second volume: it's nice to meet you. I'm Yuishi. It has been so cold recently that it's snowing even in Tokyo. I hope that everyone is doing well. It's the transition between seasons, so please do take care of your health. I, for one, ended up getting quite sick.

As luck would have it, I was able to release this second volume. This is all thanks to you. After the first volume was released, I was lucky enough to read some of the reviews online. I couldn't be more grateful for them.

I'm not very good at searching the internet, so I'm pretty certain I haven't been able to read all of the reviews. I nonetheless want to take this moment to thank everyone for their kind words. Even if I do manage to find them, I often struggle with whether I should reply—so I often end up not doing so, but I do appreciate everyone's comments. If you'd like to post any of your thoughts with the hashtag #ギャル告白 (#HookupHiccups), it may make it easier for me to find them.

From volume one, if it's not too much trouble, I'd like to do my best to thank each person individually. Of course, I received comments from some people that the series wasn't quite for them, but even then, they also mentioned that the series would nonetheless be an appropriate fit for the appropriate reader. I felt then that I was really blessed with wonderful readers. Before the novel was published, I worried that all feedback would be negative criticism, so I am glad for the way things turned out.

Enough about volume one, though. From here on, I'd like to talk about volume two. To give you a little backstory, when I first wrote the manuscript for the second volume, I stuffed so much into it that it reached nearly ten thousand characters. From there, I streamlined, edited, and finalized the various developments in the manuscript to make it what it is now. Did you enjoy it? If you were able to enjoy it even a little bit, that's enough to make me happy.

Since some readers may start with the afterword, I'll refrain from spoiling any of the details. I included newly written content in the first volume, but the second volume has even more. Because of that, some of the developments differ from those in the web novel version.

There are some stories that you can only read in the web novel format, while other stories you can only read in the novel form. I hope that you are able to enjoy both. The basic story is that our two main characters spend their time fawning over each other, and that remains the same. I hope that you'll continue to watch over our two characters until the end, whether or not future developments and the ultimate conclusion play out the same as in the web novel.

Now, since this time I still have room in the afterword, I'd like to share a little background about how this work was born—though by "background," I don't mean anything terribly complicated. It all started when someone I was close to at the time invited me to write a romance. At the time, many of the works in the real-life romance genre on the Naro site were "everyone gets what they deserve in the end" kind of stories. There was also a pushback to that, where people wanted to write works with the opposite story line, and that was the movement I had been invited to join. And the result of me brainstorming what I should write was the work you see before you.

I realize I completely ignored all the trending tropes when I wrote this, but it's funny to think that the overly sweet nature of this work might actually be a reflection of the state of web novels at the time. I personally think that web novels offer a lot of freedom. You can write with the trend, or you can go against it. It's a culture where we can encourage each other as writers and sharpen our craft. Lately, I haven't been writing anything new, so I've been completely out of touch with the current trends. But for now, I want to give my everything to this series.

Lastly, I know I included this in my profile, but I actually had my birthday in January and finally turned 40 years old. This second volume is the best birthday present I could have imagined.

They say that your forties are the years of "fuwaku." I had thought that "fuwaku" meant "not to be misled," but I saw recently that it actually means

“not to be bound by stereotypes.” It must mean that one must continue learning in life, even at this age. I want to take these words to heart and continue writing works that aren’t bound by stereotypes. Thank you in advance for all of your support.

To my editor, Kobayashi-san, I know I cause many problems for you with all my typos. Thank you for your help.

Kagachisaku-sensei, I am again overwhelmed by your wonderful illustrations for volume 2. I hope that all of our readers, too, will enjoy just how amazing your art is.

As mentioned on the obi accompanying the print version of this novel, plans to publish a manga based on this title, with Nagomi Kanna-sensei at the helm, are currently in progress. I, myself, am looking forward to the manga as one of its future readers.

And finally, I want to express my utmost gratitude to all the readers who picked up this book. I look forward to seeing you with the next volume—volume 3.

Yuishi

February 2022


“I still think I’ve received too much, so...here’s your change.”
“Huh?”
Before she’d even finished speaking, she’d hopped over to me lightly and pressed her soft lips against my cheek. In that moment, I felt like all the nerves in my body were concentrated on that softness pressed against me.


From her expression, I could tell she was still miffed about something, but it seemed her mood had recovered enough for her to use my lap as a pillow.
"Nanami-san, is something up? Did I say something weird?"
"Jeez, can't you tell? I mean, I know I'm being pretty childish, but I guess I'd be happier if you just knew..."
"Hnnh!"
That was all Nanami-san said as she beckoned me to come closer. She was patting a cushion next to her, and once I plopped myself down, she put her head in my lap again.
Was she trying to make this a regular thing? Either way, it was pretty calming, so I had no complaints.



The door burst open without so much as a knock, and in walked Nanami-san—more excited and way earlier than we’d agreed.

Bonus Short Stories

Sharing Our Firsts

After my very first haircut at a salon, Nanami-san and I were strolling through the neighborhood, holding hands. She must have been in a very good mood, as she was even humming a little song.

“You look so handsome today, Yoshin. You’ve got the whole ‘fresh and clean’ look going on,” she said.

“‘Fresh and clean,’ huh? That sounds like the furthest from the truth,” I replied.

“That’s not true! You have to have more self-confidence!”

“Even Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san said I looked the same as usual.”

Without really realizing it, I was saying negative things again, perhaps because I wasn’t used to all this. Seeing me acting that way, Nanami-san pouted slightly. She looked up into my eyes and, still pouting, muttered, “Come on, believe in yourself. You look handsome to me. Isn’t that enough?”

That’s an unfair way of putting it, I thought. There was no way a comment like that from her *wouldn’t* be enough to change my perspective. I raised my hand as if in defeat and smiled at her slightly. “It’s hard to believe in myself so suddenly, but if you think I look good, that’s more than enough for me.”

“Excellent!” Nanami-san’s pout transformed into a radiant smile. She was right—I shouldn’t be saying things like that, especially when we were spending time together.

Still, it really was the first time anyone had described me as looking fresh and clean. The comment was making me feel self-conscious about my new haircut. Plus, my head was feeling the breeze a little more than usual. *Why does it feel like this?* I wondered. *Is it because of the wax?* I touched my hair with the tips of my fingers and was surprised at how stiff it felt.

“Wow, I never knew hair could feel so hard,” I muttered to myself. Surprised and intrigued by the new sensation, I started playing with my hair. The texture was strange—my hair definitely felt stiff, but I could also feel the softness underneath the layer of wax.

“Yoshin, if you keep messing with your hair like that, you’re gonna mess it up. Does it really feel that stiff? Can I feel?”

“Oh, yeah. Sure.”

Nanami-san let go of my hand, then reached up to ever so slightly touch my hair. I know you’re not supposed to feel anything through your hair, but it still somehow tickled where she touched me.

She continued touching my hair gently, as if caressing it or trying to confirm its texture. I tried to make it easier for her by taking smaller steps, but then I paused to wonder what exactly we were doing. We were out in public and everything. The people passing us by didn’t seem to mind though, so maybe it wasn’t a big deal.

After she’d gotten her fill of touching my hair, Nanami-san moved her hand away and murmured something. Perhaps it was just my imagination, but her cheeks seemed rosier than usual. “I think this is the first time I’ve ever touched a boy’s hair like this.”

“And it’s my first time having my hair touched by a girl.”

Back when Nanami-san had let me lie with my head in her lap, her hand had brushed my hair lightly, but this must have been the first time she’d touched it so thoroughly. Even if this had happened before, I certainly didn’t remember it.

I ran my fingers along the strands of hair Nanami-san had touched. They were stiffened with wax, but I felt a little funny thinking that Nanami-san had been touching them.

Oh, wait a minute...

“Do you think the wax will wash out with water?” I asked. It was all well and good that I’d put wax *in* my hair, but I’d totally forgotten to ask how to get it *out*. Was it really okay for me to take a bath like this?

“What? Oh, right. I guess you’ve never used wax before, huh? If it’s the same for girls and guys, water won’t get the job done,” she said.

“Oh, really? Then should I wash it out with warm water?”

“If you don’t wash it out completely, your hair’s gonna get damaged. Do you want me to do it for you when we get home?”

Nanami-san reached out to touch my hair once more, and then she proceeded to stroke my cheek lightly. Her gentle caress made my heart skip a beat. It seemed really uncool to ask my girlfriend to do this for me, but...

“If it’s not too much trouble, I’d really appreciate that.”

“You’ve got it! I’ll do it gently and thoroughly and really take my time with it, yeah?” She smiled at me softly, brushing a finger against her lips, almost as if she were trying to seduce me. When she did things like that, I found it hard to believe she’d just touched a guy’s hair for the first time in her life. *Wait, she said it was her first time, but...*

“Haven’t you ever touched your dad’s hair?” I asked her.

“Dad doesn’t count. When I think about it, though, I don’t really remember touching his hair either. It was more his beard.”

“His beard, huh?”

That made sense to me. Back when I was a little kid, I’d liked touching my dad’s beard too—not that I did that kind of thing anymore.

Nanami-san lifted a lock of her own hair and, after playing with it for a bit, brought it toward me. “You wanna touch my hair too? It’s soft,” she said.

“I touched it a ton yesterday, so I know. It was nice to touch.”

“Oh, wow, a compliment. Come on, then! Give it another go.”

“You really wanna get me to touch your hair, huh? It’d be bad if I couldn’t get enough of it, especially when we’re out in public. Maybe it’s best we save it for later.”

“I regret to inform you that we have completely sold out of hair-touching tickets.”

“They were limited edition?!”

And with that, we both burst out laughing. I reached my hand out toward Nanami-san, and she took it slowly, holding it gently with hers.

“What shall we do now?” I asked.

“I guess we finished up earlier than we thought. It’s kind of a weird time to really go anywhere else though.”

We had our aquarium date planned for tomorrow, but we hadn’t decided on anything for today except for me getting my hair cut. Maybe we should’ve thought of something—though it was fun just to walk aimlessly like this together. We were in a neighborhood we didn’t usually come to, so the scenery felt new and fresh.

“Hey, Yoshin, what did you used to do on the weekends, before we started going out?”

“Me? Just played games, I guess. Even if I did go somewhere, it was only to the convenience store to buy food.” I turned to her. “What did you used to do, Nanami-san?”

“Hmm, I guess I mostly hung out with Hatsumi and Ayumi. Or sometimes we’d go do karaoke with the other girls, or go out to buy sweets and stuff.”

Karaoke, huh? Come to think of it, she was invited to karaoke that day too. Wait, the one who invited her back then was a guy, wasn’t it?

“When you, um, go do karaoke, are there guys there too?” I asked.

“Oh, yeah, sometimes. I’ve had people ask me to sing duets with them and stuff.”

You have?! Wait, calm down, Yoshin. It’s all in the past. It’s no surprise that Nanami-san has done stuff like that. It’s perfectly normal for guys and girls to sing karaoke together...or is it?

I had no clue, given that I’d never been before.

“What, are you worried about it or something?” Nanami-san asked, reading my mind. She was grinning at me knowingly, covering her mouth with her hand.

“No, I’m not worried or anything like that, but...”

“But?”

“Okay, yes, I *am* worried—not that it helps at all, since that stuff’s all over and done with. But I’m still worried, and maybe even a bit jealous. I can’t help it.”

It was silly of me to feel that way, really. I mean, it wasn’t as if she were talking about her ex-boyfriend or anything like that. But still, I couldn’t help it. I wasn’t mature enough to handle stuff like this.

When I told Nanami-san how I felt, her smile grew even larger. I couldn’t help laughing a little at just how happy she looked.

“Jeez, Yoshin, you’re such a worrywart! Don’t worry, I’ve never sung a duet with anyone.”

“Really?” I replied, feeling relieved. I was so simple-minded.

“Would it have bothered you if I had sung with another boy?” she asked lightheartedly.

“Of course.”

My response was immediate. Apparently, she hadn’t expected it, as her eyes went wide in surprise.

“I know it happened before we started dating, but hearing about you maybe singing with some other guy made me feel kind of—no, *really* jealous,” I said softly, looking away. I never thought the day would come when I’d be jealous over something like this.

Nanami-san’s expression saddened. “I’m sorry. Did I make you feel bad?”

“No, it was just me getting all jealous. Sorry if I made you feel awkward.”

Nanami-san quickly shook her head and squeezed my hand. The pressure she applied felt oddly comfortable. “No, it’s my fault. I was just so happy that you’d be jealous over me that I took it too far.”

“You were happy?”

“I mean, doesn’t it mean you really like me?”

Is that what that meant? Is that really it? I’d always thought being jealous was

a bad thing, but maybe being a *little* jealous was okay.

“Though me getting jealous might be because I’ve never gone to karaoke myself,” I added.

“Oh my goodness! You’ve seriously never been?”

“Nope—not even once.”

Nanami-san looked at me like she couldn’t believe her ears. I guess everyone goes to karaoke with their friends nowadays, but I’d never been before—not that that was anything to brag about. I always assumed it was kind of noisy, and I didn’t have any friends to go with, anyway—and that was all fine by me. If I was going to sing, I could just do it in my room while blasting music from my computer.

Just as I was pooh-poohing the idea of karaoke, Nanami-san made an unexpected suggestion.

“Then how about we go now?”

“What?!”

Who knew I’d be invited to karaoke at a moment like this?

“I’ve never been before. Are you sure it’d be okay?” I asked.

“What are you worried about, exactly? Well, I guess today is gonna be your very first time at a hair salon *and* your very first time doing karaoke!”

Going to karaoke for the first time with Nanami-san, huh? That did sound like fun.

“I’m so happy that I get to experience all these firsts with you, Yoshin,” Nanami-san said, smiling next to me. That smile of hers was like the smile of a saint—full of compassion. I couldn’t help but stare.

Seeing as she was having so much fun already, did I even have the option to say no? No, of course not. At least, *I* couldn’t bring myself to say no. Besides...

“You have such a lovely voice, Nanami-san. I bet you sing well too. I guess I do want to hear you sing,” I said under my breath. She must have heard me though, because her cheeks immediately flushed. *Wait, did I say something*

embarrassing?

“N-Never mind my singing! I want to hear you sing! I bet you’re really cool!” she exclaimed.

“Huh?! Wait, I’ve never even been to karaoke before, so don’t get your hopes up!”

“It’s the feeling you put into it that counts! Now let’s go!”

As if to hide her embarrassment, Nanami-san tugged on my arm. I didn’t know any karaoke places nearby, but we seemed to be heading for somewhere she knew.

Just how many firsts would I experience that day alone? As long as I was with Nanami-san, everything was fresh and exciting. I was one hundred percent sure the aquarium date tomorrow would also be full of firsts. If I could have just one wish granted, I wanted to be able to continue experiencing all kinds of firsts together with Nanami-san.

That was what I was so uncharacteristically thinking as Nanami-san held my hand and led the way.

On a side note, Nanami-san was super good at singing. She had a beautiful voice, and I was totally in awe. We weren’t there for that long, so we only sang a few songs, but she and I promised to go on a karaoke date again so that next time, we could sing even more songs together.

The Reason for Splitting the Ice Cream (Melon Books)

“Ice cream, ice cream, cold and sweet ice cream! Tasty ice cream...”

Singing a weird little song, Nanami-san smiled happily and gazed at the ice cream in her hand. Just seeing her like that made me feel happy too, and I couldn’t help smiling with her.

“Monaka ice cream is good, right? It’s too bad the monaka part kind of flakes off, but the whole thing’s pretty tasty, and the shape’s super cute.” Nanami-san opened the packaging, split the monaka cleanly in half, and handed me one of

the pieces.

“I could’ve gotten you a more expensive one. Are you sure this one’s okay?” I asked.

“I want this one. It’s easy to split.”

“You don’t have to be so considerate.”

“No, I mean I can’t eat a whole one. Otherwise I’ll get fat. Jeez, don’t make a girl say something like that.”

It seemed I wasn’t being sensitive enough, but I had to wonder at what she’d said. Nanami-san wasn’t fat at all, and she certainly didn’t look like she needed to go on a diet. She was worrying way too much over nothing.

Noticing the questioning look on my face, Nanami-san blushed a little. “Ever since I started eating lunch with you, I’ve been eating way more than I used to. I can’t help it—eating with you makes me happy.”

Is that really what it is? I continued tilting my head, not quite convinced. Nanami-san—who seemed to have lost her patience—took my hand in hers.

“Look! My belly’s gotten softer than it was before.”

“Huh?”

She tugged my hand closer to her stomach. Without any chance to react, my hand landed on top of her shirt, as if it had been sucked in. Her belly below was soft and warm, and a very pleasant sensation spread throughout my palm. The warmth seemed to travel throughout my body too, because I started sweating profusely.

“Don’t you think?” she insisted.

“No, um, Nanami-san...”

Nanami-san just looked at me, not having caught on to what she was doing. Now it was her turn to tilt her head in wonder.

“I can’t say I’m aware of what it felt like before, and I’m not entirely sure whether I should be touching a girl’s stomach so casually,” I said, barely managing to squeeze out my words. I was too flustered to say anything

considerate, and for some reason, I sounded awkwardly polite. Thankfully, though, Nanami-san seemed to realize what she'd done.

"Oh!" She let go of my hand, but as she did so, I flinched. To put it bluntly, I ended up rubbing her belly. "Eek?! What are you doing, Yoshin?!"

"Sorry! I really couldn't help it!"

"You pervert! I'm gonna grope your belly in return!"

"That's not fair! We're out in public!"

Still holding our ice cream, Nanami-san and I found ourselves in a playful wrestling match. No, maybe that's a misleading way of putting it. There wasn't anything sexual about it; we were just trying to get the best of each other. Wait, just who was I making excuses for, anyway?

When she was finally out of breath, Nanami-san stopped for a breather.

"Jeez, one of these days I'm definitely gonna touch your belly. Directly," she added.

"Directly?! But I only touched yours over your clothes!"

Nanami-san's look of indignation changed into a devilish grin as she looked at me. "What's this? Don't tell me you want to touch my belly directly too."

Seeing that smile of hers, I couldn't say anything in response. *If I say I do, will she really let me? No, Yoshin, that wouldn't fly*.

"Let's finish our ice cream before it melts," I said instead.

"You just changed the subject!" she cried. "But you're right, my hand's getting all sticky."

Even as she was pouting, Nanami-san brought the ice cream to her mouth and smiled happily. Her expression brought me a sense of relief.

At the time, I hadn't thought much at all about why she'd seemed so excited that day.

A Lively Bento-Making Session (Animate)

Making bento for my boyfriend. Doing something like that would've been unimaginable for me just a little while ago, but now it was just a part of my daily routine.

Since it was the weekend, Yoshin and I didn't have school. I wouldn't ordinarily make bento on such a day, but today was a little different. Today was a special day, after all—we were going on a date that I'd asked him out on. That was why I wanted to make the bento special too.

"I picked up all the ingredients you asked for. What are you planning on making?" mom asked.

The kitchen counter was covered with all the ingredients mom had bought for me. Someone who cooked a lot would know the answer just by looking at those ingredients, but she'd asked me anyway. Perhaps I'd asked her to buy too much. Still, the amount of food laid out before us seemed to sufficiently indicate my current level of excitement.

"Let's see... I'm making sandwiches and the sweet omelet that Yoshin likes. I'm gonna turn the wieners into little octopuses, and then I'm gonna boil the carrots and broccoli..."

"Is that all? What about the main dish?" she asked.

"Hee hee, the main dish is gonna be the shrimp you got me! I'm gonna fry them!" I said excitedly, taking out the shrimp I'd left in the fridge until the last minute. In our house, we always had deep-fried shrimp when there was something to celebrate.

"Oh, the celebration staple!"

Saya frowned. "Huh? Are you celebrating something today? And don't guys usually prefer fried chicken instead? Not that I know anything about that kinda thing."

I had contemplated making fried chicken too—it was in the first bento I'd ever made for him, after all. This time, though, I'd gone with the fried shrimp, which was just as memorable. I hadn't made shrimp for Yoshin since his basketball match against Shibetsu-senpai. *Yoshin was so cool, protecting me back then*, I thought.

“Hey, Earth to onee-chan. Can you snap out of it so you can tell me what you want me to do?”

Hearing Saya’s voice, I snapped back to reality. I coughed once, trying to play it cool. Then I turned to the two of them. “A-Anyway, I’m making a lot, so thanks for helping out.”

“Got it. Yeah, it looks like you really are gonna make a lot of food,” said Saya.

“My, my. Understood, dear,” mom added.

And so, we started making the bento. *Come to think of it, isn’t this the first time the three of us are making bento together?* I thought. When mom had taught us how to cook, she’d taught me and Saya separately. Today mom was already awake, while dad was still asleep. It was refreshing to have their roles reversed for once.

Our bento-making session proceeded without a hitch until Saya asked, “Hey, onee-chan, why don’t you just have onii-chan treat you to lunch for your date? Isn’t that how guys prove their worth as men?”

“Saya, where in the world do you hear something like that?” I asked, as mom and I turned to look at her in exasperation.

Saya, who was mashing the potatoes for the sandwich filling, looked back at us, not understanding what I meant. “I mean, I don’t really know these things, but my friend was saying she has to occasionally let her boyfriend treat her so that he can feed his ego.”

Ugh, you’re in middle school, right? I’ve never even heard Hatsumi or Ayumi say something like that. I don’t think my other friends have either...or have they?

“I don’t need to do anything like that for Yoshin,” I said.

“But didn’t he treat you to ice cream the other day?” Saya insisted.

“That’s totally different. Wait, how do you know that?!”

At that, I was even more surprised. Now it was Saya’s turn to look at me in exasperation. *Wait a minute, why’s mom looking at me that way too?*

“You were totally gushing over you guys splitting an ice cream the other day,

remember?” Saya asked.

I *did* remember. She was right—I’d been so happy and had had so much fun eating ice cream with Yoshin that I’d told mom and Saya about it during our post-bath chat. Wow, even if I had been all excited at the time, it was still embarrassing to listen to.

“Well, as long as you’re not putting too much strain on yourself, I guess it’s fine.”

Oh, I see. Saya was just worried about me in her own way. Maybe other people feel like I’m doing too much for him.

“I’m okay. I’m doing this because I want to. Hearing him say it tastes good makes me feel all happy. Plus I’m realizing just how good it feels making bento for someone I like.”

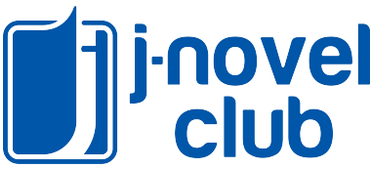
Of course, I was putting in extra effort to get Yoshin to like me more, but what I said was also the truth. That’s why I felt pretty capable of anything.

Saya nodded slowly before flashing me a mischievous grin. “I see. Well, as long as you’re happy, that’s all that matters. But even though you’ve finally gotten a boyfriend, I’m worried onii-chan is gonna think you’re too much and decide to leave you.”

To think I was touched for a moment there! Still, am I really being too much? Maybe I should ask Yoshin...

As I was starting to overthink things, I saw mom bump Saya on the shoulder. It seemed my little sister was going to get a talking-to later.

And that was how our lively morning went.



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An Introvert’s Hookup Hiccups: This Gyaru Is Head Over Heels for Me! Volume 2

by Yuishi

Translated by Satoko Kakihara Edited by Stephanie Buck

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