
Author • Yuishi
Artist • Kagachisaku
volume 10
An Introvert's
HOOKUP HICCUPS:
This GYARU Is Head Over Heels for Me!


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Prologue: An Unfamiliar Smell, a Calming Smell

I've heard that one of the first surprises you experience when you go overseas is how different things smell from the minute you step off the plane. I've also heard, though, that the difference is all in your head.

Which is true, then?

I'd always wondered about that, but given that I had no way of verifying what I'd heard, I'd somehow assumed that the latter was actually more accurate.

That was because, on a day-to-day basis, I had never thought much about what Japan really smelled like. I felt like I had heard someone say once that Japan smelled like pickles and soy sauce, but unless I was sitting at the dining table or something, I couldn't really agree with that impression. That led me to conclude that different countries didn't necessarily smell any different than what I knew my own country to smell like.

Fast forward a few years: I would never have imagined that I would have the opportunity to get to the bottom of it. And on a class trip, no less.

To be honest, though, I'd actually forgotten about the question until now. I only remembered it when I got off the plane—or, to be more specific, when I felt the difference in the air once I'd exited the aircraft.

It smells different here.

In fact, it wasn't just the smell that was different. The wind grazing my cheek, the hot air all around me, the sunlight warming my skin… Everything here was different from what I knew in Japan. And that was when I remembered the theory about smells that I'd heard before.

The feeling of *everything*—not just the smell—being different was probably all in my head, just like the way food tasted depended heavily on smell when you were blindfolded. Still, I was pretty certain that the scent here *was* different. Even though I used to think it wasn't possible for countries to have their own

unique smell, I quickly ended up changing my tune.

Well, maybe I hadn't made any declarations one way or the other, but still.

In any case, I ended up discovering the truth of the matter through personal experience. And it was stuff like this that was probably the main point of going on a class trip at all.

I inhaled slowly, filling my lungs with this different air. The heat of it spread throughout my body, as if I were being set on fire in the depth of my being. It almost seemed as though the heat was welcoming us—and it was at that point that it finally hit me that we had come overseas.

"Wow, we're finally here, huh?" Nanami murmured, voice filled with some kind of emotion that made me think she probably felt the same as I did.

"I thought that getting here would take forever, but now that we're here, I can safely say that it wasn't all that bad," I replied.

"Right? Was it because we were together? You know, I honestly wouldn't have minded being on the plane for a little bit longer," Nanami added.

"Okay, I wouldn't say *that*. My body's all stiff," I groaned.

"Really? Then…shall I give you a massage when we get to the hotel?" she asked.

A massage from Nanami. That was quite an attractive offer indeed. But would we even have time for that? The pamphlet we had made it sound like we were supposed to make quite a few stops today. Even though we'd only just arrived, it was technically the first day of our trip, and I remembered the schedule having quite a few items on it.

But maybe we would have some free time at the hotel, at least. But just when I had finally come up with a response to Nanami's offer, she stepped closer to me for a moment and, standing on her toes, whispered in my ear.

"Of course, you'll have to return the favor."

She quickly moved away from me and nonchalantly set her gaze in a different direction. The fact that her cheeks were faintly red probably wasn't because of the warm temperature.

If she's going to get embarrassed about it, she doesn't have to say it.

Of course I didn't say that out loud. At this point, getting

embarrassed by her own comments was basically Nanami's specialty, and she probably kind of enjoyed it too. *I* was enjoying it, that was for sure. Whatever embarrassment she happened to feel was probably a separate issue.

Her comment now had my head filled with the idea of giving Nanami a massage once we got to the hotel, but that was probably a very minor detail.

Come on, Yoshin, you're on your class trip*. Get excited about visiting new sites or something.*

"A-Anyway, Hawaii sure is hot, huh? It was so cool in Japan, we should probably make sure not to get sick from the temperature change," I blurted out, playing up how hot I felt the weather was, just so Nanami wouldn't guess at the image floating in my brain. Though my comment probably came too late, given that we'd already gotten off the plane and were on our way to our next stop.

"Y-You're right. The climate here sure is different from Japan. But at least it's not humid. That's good," Nanami responded, playing along as I forcibly changed topics. She seemed to be focused on the weather too; she kept repeating how hot it was as she flapped her clothes to cool herself down. Because I was standing right next to her, the flutter of her shirt showed me clear glimpses of her chest, making my cheeks grow even hotter. Nanami was being a bit careless, it seemed.

Maybe it wouldn't have been an issue if she had been wearing a jacket. No, wait, it was precisely *because* it was hot that Nanami had taken her jacket off and tied it around her waist.

But maybe when we're alone I should point it out to her, just so she won't do it later...

"Seriously guys, if it's so hot, stop walking so dang close to each other," someone muttered.

"Huh?"

"What?"

Nanami and I both turned toward the direction that the comment had come from, only to find Hitoshi standing there, exasperated, looking at us with a squint. *Wait, he's by himself? I purposefully didn't say anything to him when I got off the plane, because it looked like he was hitting it off with a girl he had sat close to on the plane. So why is he alone?*

"All the girls ended up going with their boyfriends or their other

friends," Hitoshi said, as if he read my thoughts straight off my face, his shoulders dropping with disappointment. *Ouch. Am I supposed to tell him I'm sorry to hear that?*

Maybe it was because of his own circumstances that Hitoshi was currently shooting resentful daggers at us…and those daggers were specifically directed toward our hands.

That's right: Ever since we'd gotten off the plane, Nanami and I had been holding hands. Thus linked, we were walking very close to each other, enough for our bodies to nearly touch.

"You know, um, having direct contact with my girlfriend doesn't really count," I protested.

"Doesn't count for *what*, exactly?" Hitoshi wailed in response.

I knew my remark didn't make any sense, but I had a feeling Hitoshi knew what I was trying to say anyway. Nanami was laughing now too; it seemed my comment had hit just the right spot.

"Exactly! It doesn't count at all," Nanami joined in, attaching herself to me completely. "So it's not hot, see…?"

Her voice gradually grew softer, though, until we could barely hear her. She even ended up stepping away from me, though only slightly.

A balmy breeze swept through the space that had suddenly emerged between our arms, which had for just a moment been stuck to each other with a thin layer of sweat. Even though I knew the breeze was warm, it also somehow felt cool.

Yeah, it is *warm, isn't it?* Even Hitoshi was telling us not to overdo it if we were feeling that way. Why, then, if it was so darn hot, were Nanami and I so attached to each other?

I felt like it was partially because of the scent of Hawaii. Maybe it was that smell, so different from where we came from and direct proof of how far from home we were, that made us feel—consciously or not—a little anxious, or lonely, or something else sort of negative. And maybe that was why Nanami and I had ended up holding each other's hands without even thinking twice about it: because we wanted a concrete connection that would prevent us from drifting apart.

Or something like that. I wasn't sure, but if I had to put it in words, it was probably something along those lines.

"But honestly, now that we're here, Hawaii does kind of smell

different," Nanami murmured.

"Huh?" I couldn't help saying.

"Like, it smells kind of sweet and hot, maybe even passionate," she concluded, taking in a deep breath. Her remark had me at a loss for words. I had thought earlier that it smelled different here, but I hadn't thought that far about what it actually smelled like.

Passionate, huh? It seemed like a more positive way to think about things than what I had come up with. To say that this scent was passionate would never have occurred to me, given how passionless I tended to be. Still, it made me happy to know that both Nanami and I had settled on the fact that Hawaii did, in fact, smell different to us. Though I guess maybe everyone else felt that way too.

"I was thinking the same thing earlier. This must be the smell of Hawaii, huh?" I said.

"You too?" Nanami perked up. "Don't you think it smells nice? How did it make you feel, Yoshin?"

"I...felt like maybe it was welcoming us," I explained.

"Oh, true! It really does feel like it's so hot because Hawaii is just that excited we're here! I do hope you're right."

I probably shouldn't say this, but given the fact that I'd never actually been welcomed anywhere in my entire life, I was kind of glad that I'd even come up with that idea in the first place. That, too, was probably a result of me having met Nanami; that I was even standing here, on Hawaiian soil, seemed like it was all thanks to Nanami too.

"Thanks, Nanami," I ended up saying.

"What's gotten into you all of a sudden?" Nanami asked after a slight pause.

"I just wanted to thank you for the fact that I'm here right now."

Nanami looked at me with her brows furrowed in confusion. Her expression, though, brightened immediately. The light filtering in through the windows of the terminal illuminated her, making her appear as though she was glowing. Something I said must have delighted her somehow, because she clung to me even more closely than before. It made it difficult for me to walk, but even stumbling with her by my side was fun in its own way.

Still, it really was hot. It wasn't humid, so it wasn't total torture, but we got sweaty just from walking. The parts of our bodies

where Nanami and I were attached were sweating as well, making us stick to each other like glue. It felt strange.

"We just said that *Hawaii* smells different," Nanami began, but then she suddenly brought her face close to mine...and sniffed me.

Whoa, what the?! What are you doing?!

I was so flabbergasted by what she was doing that it nearly made me pull away from her—except Nanami had foreseen my reaction and had tightened her grip on my arm. I couldn't get away from her, which meant that she just continued smelling me.

"N-Nanami?" I squeaked.

"Tee hee, even in Hawaii you smell the same. That's a relief," she muttered.

That's *what you wanted to double-check?!*

It had startled me because she had sniffed me out of nowhere, but I could see how it could be comforting to find out that the person you were with was in some way the same as always. I could, but...

I brought my own hand up to my nose and sniffed it. I mean, no matter how I had tried to see it differently, I couldn't help but automatically worry about my body odor when someone was sniffing me. Yet I couldn't quite make that call about my own smell.

"Don't I stink?" I asked Nanami hesitantly. "I mean, I feel like I've been sweating a lot."

"Hm? Not at all. It's a nice, comforting smell," Nanami replied.

That's good. If Nanami ever told me I smelled bad, I don't think I could recover from that. I'd never really thought about body odor before, but from now on maybe I should*.*

At that point, though, I felt Nanami lean closer into me.

"What's up?" I asked her.

"Oh, I just wondered what *my* smell was like. Does it calm you down, Yoshin?" she asked.

Is she suggesting that I smell her, here and now? Of course she is. But...where? Like, around her neck? But doesn't that make me seem like a creeper? It does, doesn't it?

Nanami's body had a thin layer of sweat and was glistening in an undeniably sexy way. After some hesitation, I gently took Nanami's hand in mine...and brought my face close to her upper

arm.

I thought that the air outside the plane was hot and sweet, but Nanami smelled even sweeter, so much so that it started making me dizzy. Breathing in her sweet, sensuous scent filled me with a sense of giddiness. It was somehow even more comforting than usual, even though it was a scent I smelled all the time.

Wait—now *that* definitely made me sound like a creeper. Though I guess it was too late to worry about that now.

"What do you think?" I heard Nanami ask. "D-Don't tell me..."

Maybe because I hadn't said anything yet, but Nanami sounded slightly anxious. She couldn't even finish her sentence. Of course, it was probably difficult for a girl to ask someone whether she smelled bad or not.

This was no time to analyze the situation, though. I had to put Nanami at ease, and fast.

"You smell really nice," I told her. "Your scent always makes me relax."

"Hee hee, then we feel the same way," she replied.

When she held on to me more tightly, I felt her scent tickle my nostrils again. It really did make me feel safe, and it also made me feel even more strongly that, with her by my side, I would be able to enjoy just about anything. *Is this what it means to be a good match with someone?*

I thought I heard Hitoshi murmuring enviously *They're at it again*. I felt bad, but I decided to pretend not to hear him.

To switch gears, I puffed out my chest ever so slightly. And then, as if to match my great expectations for the class trip before us, I raised my voice and declared, "All right, Nanami. Let's make the best of this class trip!"

"Yeah, let's! Prehoneymoon, here we come!" she joined.

Oh, right. We did say that, didn't we? Wow, it's kind of embarrassing to hear it announced like that... No, wait. We're on a trip. I gotta get hyped.

They said that traveling was the time to rid oneself of shyness. I had nothing to be ashamed of. We were about to embark on a prehoneymoon—that happened to also be a class trip.

"That's right! Let's enjoy our prehoneymoon!"

I admit that I said the word "prehoneymoon" more softly than the rest of the sentence, but I was pretty certain that Nanami still

heard it, because she smiled even more happily. When I raised my fist to pump myself up, Nanami raised her fist as well.

I felt like I could do—and enjoy—anything at all. Bring on the arrows and the bullets! Though this wasn't a war or anything.

Here we go—the start of our amazing class trip!

Chapter 1: Are There Newlyweds in the House?

Hawaii—officially, the State of Hawaii of the United States of America—was a former U.S. territory that had eventually become the fiftieth state. Comprising several islands, Hawaii was a land with a long and rich history.

When I read that, I thought the fact that it was an archipelago made it similar to Japan. Japan, too, was a country made up of numerous islands, including Hokkaido, Honshu, Kyushu, Shikoku, and Okinawa.

Each island had its own culture and language, and what we might encounter as tourists also differed depending on the island we were visiting—though I supposed the same could be said of countries composed of one giant expanse of land as well.

What I meant to say was that the destination for our class trip was the Island of Hawaii. It was the largest of Hawaii's islands, and was said to be filled with the majesty of nature. Given its natural grandeur and long history, it was also the representative island of all of Hawaii.

That was the destination for our trip, but on that Hawaiian island, I…

"Jeez, how embarrassing… I got so worked up only for us to get right back on the plane. I'm so sorry for getting so excited…"

I was filled with shame.

I mean, I was so sure that we'd already arrived at where we were going. I had no clue that we were gonna board another plane right after getting off our first one. Talk about getting off to a rocky start.

We had initially landed on the island of Oahu, and after that we were going to continue on to the island of Hawaii. Declaring the start of our trip already was totally me getting ahead of myself. *This is what you get for doing something you're not used to.*

Boarding another plane obviously wasn't a problem, but realizing we still had some more traveling left to do did put a damper on things.

“Come on, Yoshin. Don’t just sit there all embarrassed—let’s check out the scenery instead! The view is incredible!” Nanami said, gesturing with her hand at her forehead in the way one did when looking at a faraway hill. I mimicked her pose and turned in the direction she was looking.

Nanami was right—this wasn’t something one could easily see in Japan.

Right there was a cloudless blue sky, a beautiful ocean reflecting brilliant sunshine, and a cityscape that was visible in the distance. To top it all off, there was a path unfurling in front of us that seemed to continue forever, surrounded by lush greenery.

What filled my eyes, to put it shortly, was a view of vibrant colors.

I wasn’t one to watch too much TV, but I felt like this was something that I’d only ever seen on TV a long time ago. There wasn’t a view I could see in my daily life, and seeing it now reminded me that I was in a very special place indeed.

“It’s amazing to think that these are all coffee trees,” Nanami said.

“Coffee trees as far as the eye can see, huh?” I remarked.

“I had no idea what to expect from a coffee farm, but it’s a lot bigger than I thought it would be. All that really *is* coffee, right?”

“I think so. I heard it’s three times the size of Tokyo Dome,” I muttered.

Nanami was shocked to hear that. I guess I was surprised too, though I admit I couldn’t quite process what that size really meant.

But as Nanami was saying: We were currently on a coffee farm.

To back up the timeline a bit, we had arrived at the airport on the island of Hawaii and had gone through customs—me struggling with my English the entire time—until finally we had managed to set foot on Hawaiian soil.

All that before we finally, *actually* arrived.

Honestly, getting through customs had been a serious struggle. I was so glad to have it over with. Beforehand I had had this really frightening image of going through customs. All I could imagine was that this, like, scary-looking dude was going to talk to me all official-like and stuff. In actuality, though, there was a lot more joking around than I ever expected.

Since we were all moving through the airport as a large group, I

was with Nanami until just before we reached the customs counter. But apparently the officer saw us, because he seemed to ask us, “Honeymoon?”

At first I didn’t know what he meant, and I nearly answered “Yes” on impulse. That wasn’t right, though, given that we *weren’t* on our honeymoon. My English listening skills weren’t terribly good, but since I could pick up at least that much, I answered “No” and explained that we were on a school trip. In response the customs officer laughed good-naturedly.

Apparently Nanami was asked the same thing, as she told me about it really excitedly.

“Do we look like we’re newlyweds? Maybe we do. I’d be so happy if we did.”

Even though I was surprised by the fact that customs officers joked around, hearing Nanami speak about it did make me realize that I would be happy if we looked to others like newlyweds too.

“Come on, we were all in a big group of students, so of course they knew we were on a class trip.”

That was what Hitoshi had said. His comment was reasonable, but I still couldn’t help but consider what the officer had said. A legitimate stranger had asked us if we were on our honeymoon. If that was the case, I felt like we could wear that badge with pride.

Anyway, to get back on topic.

We were currently on a coffee farm on the island of Hawaii.

The word “farm” suggested that there might be a small field of crops spread out around us, but the reality was actually way bigger than what I’d imagined. I never knew that a coffee farm could be so huge. It almost seemed like all the coffee trees were the island’s very own welcoming committee for us.

I knew that coffee was a plant, but this was my first time actually seeing the trees themselves.

Right now, we were looking down at the coffee farm from a building on a little hilltop. The building seemed to serve as both a café and a souvenir shop, and it was filled with the pleasant smell of coffee. Even for someone like me who didn’t usually drink it, that was enough to make me want to have some.

Would the coffee here taste any different from the kind served in Japan?

“Come to think of it, you don’t really drink coffee, do you?”

Nanami asked. “I’ve never seen you drinking it when we’re together.”

Nanami’s timely remark made me realize that I’d never had coffee while I was with her. Whenever we went to cafés and things, I always ended up ordering juice. Even though coffee was regularly available to me, it just never really matched my lifestyle.

“Yeah, I don’t really think about drinking it. Do you?” I asked Nanami.

“I have it in the morning sometimes. You’ve never seen me have some?” she asked.

Wow, coffee in the morning. I guess my parents drink coffee in the morning too.

Every time I thought of coffee, I always considered it to be a drink for adults. All of a sudden Nanami, too, seemed very grown-up to me. Of course, there were often things about her that made her seem mature, but she appeared even *more* so in this instance.

Nanami must have detected what I was thinking, because she suddenly donned a smug expression.

“Do you tend to drink it black?” I then asked her.

“Um…totally,” she replied.

Hmmm? What was with that slight pause? She was also looking somewhat away from me, a bit of nervousness in her eyes. This *had* to be the reaction of someone who didn’t actually take her coffee black.

I mean, it was fine not to drink it black. So why was she putting on airs right now? I only said it because I thought that people who drank black coffee seemed kind of mature.

Regardless, just as I was thinking that it wasn’t my place to say anything…

“Come on, Nanami. You can barely even drink coffee unless it’s got cream and sugar in it.”

“Seriously! You’ve even said before that coffee only tastes good when it’s sweet!”

Ah, Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san just totally bricked Nanami there. I guess it’s “cream and *sugar” for her, not “cream* or *sugar.” Basically like coffee milk. A fancier way to say it might be café au lait, though I’m not sure if there’s a difference. The two of them must have said it in front of me on purpose, but they’re probably just keen on making fun of Nanami too. Oh, Nanami’s quivering.*

“Oh my *gosh*! Why did you have to say that?!” Nanami shouted, her face bright red. She seemed pretty much ready to pounce on her two friends. But personally, the fact that she couldn’t drink coffee unless it was both milky and sweet was adorable.

“Come on, Nanami. I probably can’t drink coffee unless it’s got sugar or cream in it too, so we’re the same,” I said in a feeble attempt to placate her. It seemed that was enough for Nanami, though, because she quickly calmed down a bit.

Seeing her so flustered, though, sparked a desire in me for a little more mischief.

“Besides, even if they hadn’t said anything, I could’ve figured out from your response earlier that you don’t really drink black coffee,” I added.

“Are you serious?!” she exclaimed.

I said it. Nanami’s cheeks had flushed red again, but for a different reason than when she’d been flustered before. I didn’t need to say anything given that Nanami had cooled down, but I said it anyway, and now Nanami was probably getting all agitated again.

I mean, come on—how can you not *say anything in a moment like this? Or is it just me?* My comment was making Nanami quiver once again; she had both hands pressed to her cheeks.

“Wow, how super embarrassing… I was trying so hard to seem cool in front of you. Drinking coffee black seems like something that a mature woman does,” Nanami muttered.

“Oh, yeah. I totally get that. Drinking black coffee does seem really adult, doesn’t it?” I said in agreement.

“Right? You think so too, don’t you? Being able to drink coffee black just seems so cool.”

“Yeah,” I replied, then paused. Like me, Nanami seemed to think that drinking black coffee was a cool thing to do. It made me happy to discover another instance in which she and I thought the same way. That being said, if I could learn to drink black coffee, would Nanami think that I was cool too?

Maybe the fact that I was thinking that was already pretty uncool, but there was probably nothing wrong with wanting her to think that I was cool. I didn’t need just *anyone* to think that; I only wanted Nanami to see me that way. Maintaining a healthy relationship meant not skimping on daily efforts like those. It was

crucial to start small, be consistent, and work hard at keeping things fresh. There might be moments when I would be too lazy to make that effort, but I still had to remember how important those efforts were overall.

All right. I've made up my mind.

"I'm gonna learn to drink black coffee," I declared.

"What are you saying?" Nanami asked, surprised and exasperated at the same time. *Shoot, I was so resolved there my mouth had a mind of its own.*

"I just want you to think that I'm cool," I confessed.

"Isn't that a totally uncool thing to say though?" Otofuke-san asked without missing a beat. Given that I had thought that earlier myself, I couldn't argue with her one bit. Everyone else here probably thought the same thing, but there was at least one person who *did* disagree.

It was Nanami, of course.

"Not at all! Plus you're already super cool," she declared.

It was actually pretty embarrassing to hear her say that so directly. What was more, she wasn't saying it with her usual, teasing grin; she had the most gentle smile on her face, almost saintly. It was as if she were trying to explain something to a clueless little kid—almost like she was prechewing the words before feeding them to me.

Even *I* started having the delusion that maybe I was as cool as she thought I was.

I figured, though, that the only person who would say that about me was Nanami. Thinking about it that way, I guess I'd already accomplished my goal of having her be the one person who thought I was cool.

"Come on, guys, quit yapping and stay with the group. And watch your step."

Whoops—all the chattering among me, Nanami, and her friends had caused Hitoshi and Shirishizu-san to keep us in check.

The call from Hitoshi marked the beginning of our slow movement as a group from the spot overlooking the coffee farm into the actual field. It really did feel like we were walking into a forest, which got me pretty excited. The point behind this visit was for us to go to a coffee farm and learn its history, but the experience of going somewhere unknown was definitely riling me

up; it was like we were going on an adventure. The feeling doubled because we were somewhere I had little exposure to before.

Apparently the objective of coming here was to learn how coffee was actually sourced, given that in Japan, we rarely had any opportunities to see coffee before it was processed.

I made my way forward, one step at a time, as though even walking was something that was to be enjoyed.

"Wow, the sun's really blazing," I murmured.

"Yeah, really. If only I could change into my bathing suit," Nanami replied.

"That might be a bit much, but I do know what you mean," I said.

"If you're so hot then why don't you two *separate*, for the love of god," someone remarked, as Nanami and I, despite both complaining about how hot we felt, continued to walk while completely attached to each other.

Even though they had a point, parting wasn't an option. Still—it really *was* terribly hot. But it still wasn't a reason for Nanami and me to separate from each other.

We were probably able to bear it because even though it was hot, it was a dry heat. The sun was really glaring down on us. If it had been humid on top of that, even we would've chosen to walk with some distance between us. I couldn't deny the heat, but it's not like we were dripping with sweat. We were sweating, but in a slow and gradual way.

"It's hot, but it sure is better than the heat in Tokyo. I can kind of understand why tourists can't stand the heat in Japan," Hitoshi remarked.

"You've been to Tokyo?" I asked him.

"Just for a gaming event. I like to visit, but I could never see myself living there. Can't stand how hot it gets. I've got mad respect for all Tokyoites," Hitoshi explained, adding with a grin that at least in Tokyo, you didn't need as much sunblock as you did in Hawaii.

I had no idea it got that hot in Tokyo. It seemed scary, but a part of me also wanted to experience what it was like.

Sunblock, huh...?

I brought out my hands before me and gazed down at my

arms. I had the distinct feeling that the sun's rays that were currently toasting our skin were even evaporating the sunscreen we'd applied just a little while ago, rendering it totally useless.

I felt like bread baking in the oven. Or maybe fish getting broiled? That's what it felt like being underneath this sun. I'd gone camping on the beach before, but that honestly didn't even compare to how hot it was now. And to think that it wasn't even summer right now. Wait, was Hawaii hot all year round, and therefore didn't have seasons the way Japan did?

"I'll have to reapply sunscreen later," I murmured to myself.

Maybe I should just go all in and get a tan. Come to think of it, Nanami had mentioned something like that before the trip.

"Hee hee, I'll put it on you later," I heard Nanami say shyly as she looked down at my hands.

I should correct what I said earlier: It was *Nanami* who'd put sunblock on me.

Just so we were clear, we only put sunblock on each other's hands and other parts that were hard for us to reach on our own. We most definitely did not do anything questionable.

"Come on, stop flirting. The tour guide is explaining stuff to us."

Shoot, we got called out again.

When I looked around, I realized that our guide was walking while explaining how the coffee farm operated. Having come to a place like this, I definitely wanted to hear what the guide was telling us.

As I listened to the guide speak, I gazed out at all the trees on the farm. All around us coffee trees swayed in the breeze, their leaves rustling soothingly in the wind. Was this the sound and breath of Mother Nature?

Each time the leaves swayed with the wind, sunlight wove itself through the momentary openings created, casting patterns like a shadow play on the ground. And that wasn't the only sight that struck me either.

I didn't realize it when I was on the hill looking down from above, but there seemed to be different colors mixed in with the sea of green that spread before us. Whenever the leaves swished, flecks of red and yellow jumped out at us.

The farm tour guide explained to us what the yellow, red, and green fruits were. Apparently those were the fruits of the coffee

trees—what was called the “coffee cherry.”

“It’s red and small and cute! I can’t believe this turns into coffee beans,” Nanami said.

“It really does look like cherries…like actual fruits,” I returned.

Nanami’s calling the fruit “cute” made me smile, since it was just the kind of thing that she would say. It really was a mystery how a cute and adorable fruit became the bitter coffee that I was more familiar with.

All we were doing was walking through a farm, but I was getting more and more excited. The other students were also breaking up into smaller groups, looking up at the coffee trees and enjoying the view that was visible in the distance.

I could hear birdcalls; when I looked up I could see them flitting between the trees. The sounds of the wind, the trees, and the birds all melded with our own voices and footsteps. The air felt clean and crisp, and the scent of the damp earth and coffee cherries tickled my nostrils. I remembered coffee being described as a blessing from the earth, and it was this scent that made me a believer in that saying.

It was at that moment that I realized I had reached out to hold Nanami’s hand. Maybe walking through this great expanse of nature with her made me want to hold her hand, regardless of who else was around. I didn’t even think about what I was doing, though I guess it wasn’t a bad thing.

Nanami seemed surprised that I initiated the hand-holding, but she quickly giggled and squeezed my hand in return.

It felt so pleasant—like we were taking a walk, just the two of us, completely relaxed and at ease. Was this what happiness was?

“These two don’t quit…”

We snapped back to reality with that single comment. Otofuke-san and the others were looking at us with envy in their eyes. *Well* this *is embarrassing.*

When Nanami and I both blushed and looked away, Hitoshi took a slight step backward and pointed his phone at us.

“Here, I’ll get a picture of the two of you with the coffee trees in the back. It’ll make for some great memories,” he said as he immediately began walking and taking photos of us. He then turned to the others around him and took several more. We were a little surprised by his sudden action, but we soon got used to it

and began flashing peace signs at him.

When I glanced around, I saw that the other students were also taking photos. Some were chatting with the farm tour guide and taking pictures together as well.

I was impressed by the other students' communication skills, but I also regretted not having taken my English…no, wait, the guide was speaking to us in Japanese.

We had been walking in a large group but began breaking into small groups by the second half of the tour. Even I managed to mingle with some of the other students that I didn't usually talk with.

Maybe this was what going on trips was all about. In addition to my photos with Nanami, I also began to accumulate photos with the other people in my surroundings.

The whole thing was strange.

It was half a date, half a trip. It was different from when we went on our joint family trip, yet it also wasn't quite the same as when we went on that triple date with Otofuke-san and everyone.

Nanami was next to me, just like always—and yet it *wasn't* like always. It wasn't an unpleasant strangeness, though; if anything, the fact that I was actually enjoying it put me at ease.

"Yoshin, are you having fun?" Nanami asked.

"Hm? What do you mean?" I asked, responding to her question with yet another question. Even such a useless response from me, though, elicited lighthearted laughter from Nanami—or maybe my reaction was genuinely funny to her.

"You used to not enjoy group activities like this, you know? I just wondered what it felt like for you to actually come on the class trip," she said.

"Oh, I see."

It was true that the school festival was basically the first time I'd ever done things with my classmates, something I had briefly explained to Nanami. With that in mind, if I had to describe how the current situation was making me feel…

"Yeah, I'm having fun," I answered.

The trip had only just begun, but it was already a lot of fun. *That's right; I'm having* fun. When I put a word to what I had been feeling earlier, it all suddenly made sense. Perhaps I was starting to finally get used to doing things in groups? Maybe, in my own

way, I was growing. This was probably completely normal for other people, but sometimes what seemed “normal” was what was most difficult. Really, I should just comfort myself with knowing I was working toward that “normal.”

“Say, have you two ever had morning coffee together?” Hitoshi suddenly asked me while we were listening to the guide explain to us the history of coffee.

Me and Nanami, having morning coffee together? Now that I think about it, I guess we haven’t done that before.

Nanami, too, turned to me as she contemplated the question. When I gave her a look to confirm that we hadn’t, she nodded in return.

“I don’t think so,” I said.

“Me neither,” Nanami joined in.

Hearing our response, Hitoshi rather calmly—albeit somewhat disappointedly—replied, “I see. That’s unexpected.”

Although I wondered about his odd reaction, what I heard next clarified the situation for me.

“Coffee is the perfect drink for lovers to have together. Even in movies, it’s common to see scenes where a couple shares coffee the morning after a romantic evening together. Please look for it the next time you watch a movie,” the guide explained, adding, “When you all become adults, please treasure the mornings you’ll have with your partner with some Hawaiian coffee.”

Hearing that, some of the more romantic girls in the class squealed with delight.

The guide probably had no other intention with their words but to create a tour experience that might keep high schoolers entertained. Unfortunately, that particular tidbit came at a poor time. Or maybe it came at just the *right* time. After all, I’d heard that more people nowadays preferred to have the foreshadowed thing occur right after it was foreshadowed.

I was talking about Hitoshi’s comment from earlier.

“Hitoshi?” I muttered.

“Hm? Sup, Yoshin?”

“That coffee thing earlier,” I began, my eyes narrowed into a glare and speaking in a voice so low that it surprised even me. Hitoshi, though, was looking at me like nothing was the matter.

“Huh? You didn’t pick up on it?” he asked.

“Misumai-kun, you didn’t realize?” Shirishizu-san popped in.

“I was wondering why you didn’t hesitate to respond,” Otofuke-san also commented.

“Though we all know that you guys haven’t done it yet anyway!” Kamoenai-san concluded.

I wasn’t expecting to have comments coming from so many different directions. Wait, why are Otofuke-san, Kamoenai-san, and even Shirishizu-san on Hitoshi’s side?

“Actually,” Kamoenai-san began, “I don’t think I’ve had morning coffee with onii-chan either.”

“I have, a few times,” Otofuke-san said.

“Oh please, we all know you’re talking about breakfast! Don’t try to make it sound so sexy,” Kamoenai-san said, giggling.

“Can it,” Otofuke-san returned as she blushed, mumbling in protest that she at least *had* coffee in the morning with her boyfriend sometimes. Though given that Soichiro-san was her stepbrother, it made sense that they’d eat breakfast and have coffee together occasionally.

“*I* wanna have morning coffee with Taku-chan… A Hawaii trip is a great opportunity for that, isn’t it? If I go visit him in his room, maybe I’ve got a shot?” murmured a certain female class rep, who seemed to be fired up with quiet determination.

It was Shirishizu-san, obviously. She had her hands curled into fists, and I swore I could see flames dancing behind her. I didn’t think I’d ever seen Shirishizu-san so passionate about anything before.

Well, I guess she was relatively fired up at the school festival too. I guess the target of her passion had just shifted somewhat. She really did seem to be emanating heat from her very being. Her words seemed as passionate as the Hawaiian sun—and wouldn’t you know it, emotions like that could spread among other people too.

Nanami wasn’t immune either, of course.

“I wanna drink morning coffee with Yoshin too,” she muttered.

“Nanami-san…?”

My sudden politeness made Nanami press her hand to her lips. She must have meant the words that she had uttered, though, because she immediately removed her hand and asked, “I mean, don’t you wanna have morning coffee with me too?”

“I do.”

My response was immediate. I would never hesitate or falter in a situation like this—not me, anyway.

Everything went quiet around me. I didn’t even hear anyone making fun of us. I guess it made sense that people would be a little weirded out by folks saying stuff like that on a class trip. Even as I stood there without a single regret, though…

“So *that’s* the world-famous Misumai Instant Reply,” someone said.

“He really *does* respond immediately. Neither overly eager nor a moment too late; he really did match the end of Barato’s sentence impeccably,” another murmured.

“They pulled that off perfectly. I wish I had a boyfriend like that.”

“Is Misumai actually more of a pervert than we thought he was?”

Wait, what’s that last bit I just heard?

When I looked around, I saw people looking at me as if they were somehow impressed with what I’d done—like they’d managed to see something they had been waiting for.

“Nanami, have you, by chance, been telling people stuff about me?” I asked hesitantly.

Nanami turned to me with an awkward smile, and it was such a stilted movement that I could’ve sworn I heard creaking noises coming from her neck. Her smile, too, seemed undeniably forced.

After all, the only person aside from me who knew about my immediate responses was Nanami. Even though I hadn’t been doing it intentionally, it was still embarrassing to have people point it out.

Nanami, though, turned away from me sheepishly and muttered, “I just…happened to be giving advice to a friend, and I just told her that you always answer my questions really fast.”

Just what kind of advice were you giving your friend? Regardless, it seemed people already knew that I replied instantly in certain situations.

I couldn’t back down now. If people already knew, then it simply meant that there was no need for me to hold back in the future.

Right now, we were talking about me and Nanami having morning coffee together.

“I mean, of course I wanna drink it—absolutely, when we have a chance. But do you think we’d be able to do it during the class trip?” I suggested.

“Huh?! Wh-What do you mean? Are you saying…?!”

“You know, because the hotel has a breakfast buffet and stuff.”

I was pretty sure that we had a breakfast buffet, and that coffee was part of the beverage lineup. So it was pretty safe to assume that we’d have plenty of opportunities for morning coffee together during this trip.

Shoot. Nanami’s eyes were sparkling a moment ago, but now that light’s completely gone. That’s freakin’ scary! I mean, they really totally went dark in an instant!

“You’re saying that on purpose, aren’t you?” Nanami said accusingly.

“Uh, I’ve no idea what you’re talking about…”

Nanami only puffed out her cheeks like a child in response, letting me know that she was upset.

I mean, come on—we can’t possibly do anything weird here. And we can at least drink coffee together, right? Or is that not enough?

“Fine. Then let’s definitely have morning coffee together, okay?” Nanami relented. She seemed at least willing to not pursue the matter, though a part of her probably knew it wasn’t an actual possibility. There’s no way we’d be able to do anything like that while on a class trip.

Not that it was the kind of thing we could declare in public, even if we *weren’t* on a class trip.

“But in such a scenario, would the morning coffee be something we’d have to prep the day before?” I said, thinking out loud.

“What do you mean?” Nanami asked, her voice also turning serious. It was a question I only thought of in that moment, but still.

“As in, I was just thinking…like, you and I would wake up together in the morning, right? Would we just take the coffee out of the fridge and drink it?” I pondered.

“No, um…I think we’re supposed to make the coffee *after* we get up,” Nanami suggested.

I wake up with Nanami next to me, and then I’m supposed to make coffee? That sounds pretty difficult to do. Or is that supposed to be

easy?

"If I mess up and make bad coffee, I feel like I'd ruin everything," I muttered.

"Right. I think in that situation good coffee is kind of a requirement," Nanami agreed.

"Then should we have instant coffee instead?" I suggested.

"Is that allowed? I feel like it might have to be actual coffee. What was it like for you, Hatsumi?" Nanami asked, turning to her friend.

"Who, me?!" Otofuke-san blurted, the conversation having turned to her unexpectedly. After taking a moment to calm down, she crossed her arms and began pondering the question.

"Hatsumi doesn't actually know, because it's her parents that make the coffee!" Kamoenai-san chimed in.

"Yeah, that's true, but it somehow pisses me off when you say it like that," Otofuke-san growled. "Anyway, I'm pretty sure it wasn't instant."

I see. In other words, in order for me to properly enjoy morning coffee with Nanami, I must master the art of brewing good coffee. Would I, as one who has pretty much never even had coffee in his life, be able to make good coffee? Coffee good enough to satisfy Nanami? Wait, what am I doing, getting all discouraged? There's a first time for everything. I can get started learning about coffee here and now. For my future…I must accept this challenge.

"Maybe I'll pick up some coffee here as a souvenir," I mumbled to myself—but then it seemed Nanami and everyone else heard it too, because even though I only talked about buying a souvenir, everyone erupted in a round of applause.

Wait, why? Even Nanami was getting all bashful, bringing her palms up to her cheeks. *What are we celebrating, exactly? And why is the tour guide clapping too?*

"Heh heh, it seems Yoshin is taking things to the next level with his girlfriend, and it's all because of me," Hitoshi said, slyly trying to take credit for this recent development. *All you did was ask something that was borderline sexual harassment. The only credit I can give you is for not having asked Nanami. Wait, should I even be giving credit for that?*

"Dude, one wrong step, and you were about to commit sexual harassment," I told him.

“And that’s why I asked you, not Barato,” he rejoined.

“Yeah, if you’d asked that question to Nanami, I probably would’ve punched you,” Otofuke-san said out of nowhere.

“Seriously?!” Hitoshi yelled, panicking at the possibly violent turn that things could have taken. Though I had to agree that maybe a punch would have been a bit much.

Wait, is *it too much? I mean, we’re talking about sexually harassing Nanami here…*

“Yeah. If you’d asked Nanami instead, I probably would’ve ended up punching someone for the first time in my life,” I concluded.

“You too?!” Hitoshi exclaimed.

I didn’t even need to think about it. Of course, I didn’t like violence too much…or at all, really. Even if I didn’t like it, though, the use of force was sometimes necessary to protect the ones you loved. I’d probably be forgiven for it.

If I didn’t have the means to resist, I wouldn’t be able to protect people when I needed to. That was the truth. Nonviolence might be a virtue, but to protect something required the power to do so. Though why I had started to think about this as if I were in the tournament arc of a manga completely escaped me. In any case, I wasn’t sure if I would be able to pull it off when the time ever came, but it didn’t hurt to be prepared for the possibility.

“I guess you’re not really into that sort of stuff, huh?” Hitoshi suddenly asked.

“What sort of stuff?”

“You know, like dirty jokes and whatnot.”

“I mean, I *feel* like I know as much as the next guy,” I mumbled.

I knew stuff that I picked up online, but I had to admit I wasn’t terribly knowledgeable about all this. Twists like what had happened a little while ago were something I probably wouldn’t be able to pick up on at all.

Also, I guess I felt embarrassed, even ashamed, about saying things like that out loud. I wanted to avoid sexually harassing people, after all. Though I’d probably laugh if someone else were cracking dirty jokes.

“Well, then. It seems I now have a new goal for this Hawaii trip,” Hitoshi announced.

“A new goal? What are you…”

“I wanna be able to tell all sorts of dirty jokes with you. Relationships among men are all about obscenities.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” I asked helplessly.

The sun was shining brightly. It was hot, but there was a pleasant breeze at play. The trees were lush, and the pleasant scent of coffee filled the air.

And here was Hitoshi, talking about dirty jokes. During a class trip, to boot.

“It’s not like you dislike them or are uncomfortable with them, right?” Hitoshi asked.

“I would never say them myself, but I think I’m okay hearing them,” I confessed.

“Then it’ll be fine. We’re rooming together anyway, so let’s just have fun!”

“Seriously? I mean, I know we’re in the same room, but…”

While Hitoshi looked like he was already looking forward to things, I found myself grimacing instead.

Despite the look on my face, though, it was also true that I was, uncharacteristically, feeling excited about my very first sleepover event with a guy friend.

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Our first day in Hawaii went by in the blink of an eye.

Since yesterday…wait, was it today, since it was technically the same date? In any case, we’d been on the move nonstop, starting with our flight out of Japan and continuing with our travels within Hawaii.

We arrived at the airport and headed to the coffee farm, and then we stopped at a town with an ocean view for lunch. We also got to hear about the history of the place, after which it was off to a nearby market of some kind to pick up some things. After that, we went back on the bus to our next stop. Given all the different sights we saw, just going from one place to another was enough to make it an overwhelming day. But despite all the travel time it wasn’t boring at all. I’d never been on a package tour before, but I wondered if this was what being a tourist was like—though I guess we *were* supposed to be on a class trip.

Still, what I remembered most from the first day was just how

adorable Nanami was every time she encountered something new.

I got to see Nanami all excited at the coffee farm, Nanami talking about how she wanted us to swim together when she saw the town's ocean view, and Nanami enjoying lunch as she stuffed her little cheeks with delicious food. We also did a bit of shopping together, then made plans for later that evening.

Once we arrived at our hotel, we were greeted by the hotel staff. All of us received a flower ornament…or, a necklace called a lei, I was pretty sure. Of course, Nanami and I each received one too, but…

"Oh? Are you two newlyweds?"

That was the question posed to us by one of the hotel staff members. I had no idea why they asked us that, but of course, all of our classmates got super excited. I really had no idea why they went so crazy, though.

All the attention must have gotten me pretty nervous, because I actually ended up blurting out loud, "N-No, unfortunately…not yet."

Not yet.

Although it consisted of only two words, the phrase held mysterious power.

It was as if the future were already decided, or that the phrase itself was filled with a certain kind of hope. Although there were times the phrase signaled despair.

Because of my response, though, the staff person looked at me and Nanami with a brilliant smile and said, *"In that case, please do visit us again when you tie the knot*," as they placed matching leis around our necks. Hitoshi was even clapping.

Dude, you're wearing the exact same one.

I didn't know why I felt so embarrassed, given that so many of us matched.



After that we stopped by our rooms to drop off our bags, took in the view from our window, then met up again as a group for orientation. Our teachers went over the use of the facilities, curfew, and other things to keep in mind.

Once the “class” part of the class trip was taken care of for the day, we all had dinner together and went over our schedule for the following day. Only then did our free time begin.

We decided to take advantage of that time in our small group to celebrate our first day on the trip.

“Here’s to a great first day—cheers!” Hitoshi said.

“Cheers!” I echoed.

With that simple toast, we clinked the cans of drinks we’d picked up earlier in the day. I gulped mine all in one go. The fizziness of the soda traveled down my throat and seemed to spread throughout my body, disappearing with astonishing quickness.

“Whoa, you really chugged that! What do you wanna drink next?” Hitoshi asked.

“Uh, how about that one over there,” I replied, then took the drink that Hitoshi extended toward me and opened it.

Hitoshi, too, held a new can in one hand as he threw a snack into his mouth with the other. He then took a sip of his juice and exclaimed, “I wished we could’ve hung out in the girls’ room!”

“Seriously, dude? I mean, I guess you could just go now,” I suggested.

“Oh, come on. It’s nice to have guy time occasionally too, right?”

“Well you were the one who brought up the girls’ room,” I muttered with a smirk.

Hitoshi, too, grinned and took another swig of his drink.

The two of us were currently in our shared room, having a two-man party to wrap up the first day. After Nanami and the other girls left, Hitoshi and I thought about what to do and decided to keep hanging out for a bit longer.

I mean, it really did feel like a shame to just go straight to sleep. Getting our fill of carbonated drinks at this time of night also made it feel like we were breaking some kind of a rule—even if saying it that way made us sound like we were kids.

“Still, it was pretty awesome that they mistook you guys for newlyweds,” Hitoshi remarked.

“Yeah, I wonder why. The first time really shocked me when they asked,” I replied.

“Well, I guess it’s because I told them that you two were newlyweds.”

“It was you?!”

Even a little while ago, the others in our small group kept making fun of us, until Nanami finally got so embarrassed that she started chasing Otofuke-san and the others around, yelling, “Enough already!” And yet this guy kept this information to himself until now?!

“Hitoshi, dude…why would you say something like that?” I asked.

“I honestly didn’t think they’d take it seriously,” he confessed.

He did have a point. There was no way the hotel staff *actually* thought we were newlyweds either. Maybe this just meant that Hawaiian people were willing to go along with a good joke.

I should probably not tell him that it made me kind of happy that the hotel staff played along with it.

“So, anyway…what are you supposed to talk about in times like these?” I asked, turning to Hitoshi.

“Why do you ask?”

“It’s just that…I’m embarrassed to say this, but I’ve never really had conversations with other guys that much. So I wasn’t sure what was considered normal,” I mumbled.

“Ah, I see,” Hitoshi said, pausing to think for a moment. I guess I asked Hitoshi because he had a lot of friends, and he seemed used to situations like this.

“I mean, it’s not like us talking now is making you uncomfortable, right?” he asked.

“I guess not? I mean, I’m managing to talk now, I think? I feel like I’ve gotten a lot more used to it recently,” I admitted.

“Then you’re fine. I have a friend who gets pretty keyed up in front of people he doesn’t know, but he’s so bad at talking that when he met my girlfriend once, he went silent for, like, four hours.”

I thought Hitoshi was lying, but he seemed to be telling the truth. With a very bitter expression on his face he continued. “I had no idea what I was supposed to do. And the thing is my girlfriend was pretty shy too, so she didn’t say anything either.

Imagine sitting in silence for four hours…"

Whoa. That really must've been tough for Hitoshi, having to be in the middle of it all. Hey, wait a minute…

"Are you still dating her?" I asked.

"No. This was a long time ago. She told me, 'Hitoshi-kun, you're too outgoing for me'…"

My question must have forced Hitoshi to bring up painful memories; as relaxed as he was before, now he was completely morose. Even as I tried to console him, though, I attempted to get the conversation back on track: What did guys talk about when they hung out together?

"When I think about it, though, I don't actually think I consciously do anything when I'm talking with other guys. We talk about games, or school clubs, or usually girls, I guess," Hitoshi said casually.

Just as I was starting to wonder if that was how things actually went, though, Hitoshi suddenly moved as though he had realized something and wrapped himself up in a blanket. Then, with his body still wrapped up, he poked his head out of his cocoon a bit and asked coyly, "Is there…anyone you like?"

"You know I only have one response to that question," I answered.

Maybe this question was a staple on class trips and sleepovers, but for us, wouldn't this be a pretty limited topic to discuss? Would we even get excited about it?

"Whaaat? Who is it? Spill! Wait, you and Barato seem close to each other all of a sudden. Do you have a thing for her? If you do, you should totally ask her out!" Hitoshi continued nonetheless.

"You're seriously gonna keep this up?" I couldn't help asking.

"Fine, fine—all jokes aside," Hitoshi said as he watched me struggling to answer. He then fully poked his head out of the rolled-up blanket and, shrugging, continued, "I think guys do tend to make fun of each other if one of them likes someone."

Is that…how it goes?

"But now that we're talking about it, it really was kind of a shock that you and Barato started going out. Usually in those kinds of situations there's a little more buildup, or at least a little more time for people to wonder if there was something up with you two," Hitoshi mentioned.

My heart skipped a beat with his pinpoint observation of me and Nanami. I didn't realize that that was what others had thought of us back then. I was simultaneously embarrassed and curious. At that time, I had been desperate to make things go right, constantly wondering to myself whether I was even good enough for Nanami. Of course, the conclusion I had reached was that I needed to stop being so down on myself.

Thanks to Nanami, I was able to stand by her side with pride. And of course, I'd continued putting in the work after we got together in order to feel that way. How, though, did everyone else see us?

"What did *you* think of me and Nanami?" I asked Hitoshi.

"Well, I guess at first I was just surprised at seeing the type of guy Barato liked," he said.

"Nanami's type, huh? I guess that reaction can't be helped."

"Hey, don't get me wrong. I meant that maybe you guys get along so well because you're kind of opposite from each other. Barato never really let guys get too close to her anyway," Hitoshi explained.

I didn't know Hitoshi thought that about me and Nanami. I was kind of embarrassed to hear how we came off at the time, but hearing his honest words also made me happy. Hitoshi, at least, didn't seem to harbor any ill feelings.

"And what did the other guys think?" I asked, with a certain amount of hesitation.

"Well. They were pretty devastated. All hope lost and all that. They resented you and were jealous of you too. And once they went through all the negative feelings they could and considered, for a brief moment, getting rid of you...they saw you two flirting with each other all day and realized how dumb it all was."

They wanted to get rid of me? I guess I should be glad they suppressed their desires, given that no actual harm was done. It seemed I was blessed with good classmates too. Just learning that made this class trip well worth it.

"So, Barato was the one who confessed to you?" Hitoshi asked.

"Oh, yeah. She was the one to ask me out."

"Damn, I'm so jelly. I wished someone would confess to me too," Hitoshi wailed.

"Huh? You mean you've never been..."

“Not once, unfortunately. I’ve confessed to people myself, but no one’s ever confessed to me.”

Wow. That’s really admirable.

Because I had confessed to Nanami myself, I understood just how much of a challenge that could be. If I had confessed and then been rejected, the whole thing would have been completely ruined for me. I would’ve totally given up. And it would probably have taken a very, very long time for me to feel able to confess my feelings to another human being again.

“Are you used to confessing to people?” I asked Hitoshi.

“Are you kidding me? I always get super nervous and feel like my heart’s gonna explode. And if I get rejected, I cry,” came his immediate response.

“I’m amazed that you still confess,” I said.

“I have to get them to notice me first. Confessing is only the start of the battle. We’ll become friends, then she’ll like me, then we’ll go out…and then she’ll dump me.”

Oh no, he’s gotten all depressed again.

He was saying all this lightly, but it didn’t seem like he was lying. I couldn’t be sure, but he probably meant what he said. *Hearing all this is making me start to genuinely respect him.*

“Is there anyone you like right now, then?” I asked Hitoshi.

“Right now? I guess not anyone in particular,” he muttered.

“Then is there, like, a type of girl you like and stuff?”

“A type. Type, huh…?”

Oh, he’s got his arms crossed and is thinking really deeply about this. I guess I wouldn’t know how to answer that question either. I’d probably just say something like, “The girl I like is my type,” or something. I guess that means that Nanami is my type. Wait, is that a weird thing to say?

Hitoshi gave a good amount of consideration to my question, and once he uncrossed his arms, he had a grave, dark expression that wouldn’t look out of place on a grizzled warrior.

When I swallowed hard upon seeing his face, he made his statement in a dignified voice.

“Big boobs.”

“Why, you…”

I take back every single ounce of respect I was beginning to feel. Fine, I get it—I know this kind of response isn’t to be completely

unexpected. But dude, how can your answer about the type of girl you like be "big boobs"? I mean, I like them too, so I can't deny it. But to say that over anything related to personality seems…

"Big boobs?" Hitoshi repeated as he began to tilt his head questioningly.

"Don't say it a second time, and like a question, no less. How do you expect me to react, exactly?" I demanded, not knowing what to say in response. I wasn't expecting him to repeat the same thing. I thought for sure that he would come up with "nice personality" or something. Something, at least, related to a person's *character*.

"But, come on—that stuff is important, isn't it?! I bet you like that nice pair on Barato too! I bet you're having your way with them!" Hitoshi screamed.

"I am *not* having my way with them! And don't you dare bring Nanami into this!" I shouted in response.

"Oh, ho, ho. Then are you trying to tell me that you *don't* like what Barato's got going on?"

"No, I mean…"

I went speechless in response to his sudden accusation. Finally, I said meekly, "I do."

My response must have satisfied Hitoshi, because he suddenly had the biggest grin all over his face. He genuinely looked like he was enjoying the situation. *Dammit, how did I play right into that? I mean, what was I supposed to say?! I can't lie and say that I dislike it, can I?!*

When I turned red from mortification, Hitoshi laughed happily.

"Yup, you *are* easy to talk to," he said. "What we're talking about is the kind of stuff that guys end up talking about, so I think you're managing just fine."

"Huh? Oh, what we were saying earlier? Really?" I asked. "Is it really like this?"

"Yeah! I don't really think this is something you need to worry too much about. All you need is some more practice," he offered.

"Practice at what?" I asked. Now it was my turn to tilt my head.

Hitoshi's smile turned coy, as if he were now hiding some key piece of information. He then pointed an index finger and raised it high in the air—as though he were about to make a very important announcement.

“Telling dirty jokes, of course!” he declared.

That again*?! I know I was the one who asked, but still!*

“Not that I think you have to force yourself to get into that stuff. They’ll pop up if a bunch of guys are talking, but that’s about it,” he continued.

“You think so?” I said, uncertainly.

“Sure. Anyway, if you run into any problems, feel free to let me know. I can help you with anything except money. I can listen to all your relationship problems too. Not that I have a girlfriend, but still,” Hitoshi followed up, flashing a toothy grin.

I couldn’t help smiling. From the bottom of my heart, his friendship felt heartening. Though maybe that sounded redundant.

“You too. If you ever run into anything, I’ll help with anything except money too,” I replied.

“Nice. I’ll count on it.”

Hitoshi raised his fist, so I returned the gesture. Because the beds we were lying on were far apart, there was no way to do an actual fist bump—but I thought I felt a sensation like it, regardless.

“For now, please help me find a girlfriend,” he stated.

“Jeez, asking already?” I replied flatly.

But I don’t know that many girls I can introduce him to. Maybe Nao-senpai? Is there anyone else? Maybe the people that were working as ring girls with Nanami?

When I mentioned that to Hitoshi, he begged me—eyes glaring—to introduce him to them. I was pretty sure that I’d never seen him so intent on something before.

After that, Hitoshi and I continued talking and getting excited about all sorts of silly topics. I’d never had conversations like this with a friend before; I almost felt like I didn’t want to stop talking with him. *So this is what it’s like to have guy time…*

Just as I was thinking that, my phone dinged. The notification was for a message that I had received, but when I saw it, I couldn’t help loudly blurting out, “Huh?”

The message was from Nanami, and it read…

Nanami: Do you wanna sneak out for a little bit and hang out, just the two of us?

What was more, the message had been sent to...
Hitoshi and I exchanged looks without saying a word.

Interlude: My First Naughty Act

“I sent it. I really did. Oh my gosh, I actually *sent* it,” I whispered, even though I was pretty sure that no one was going to hear me.

With my phone gripped in my hands, I was secretly—and quietly—getting all worked up. I felt my chest getting tighter. My heart was pounding, and I got a tingly sensation throughout my body that made me restless.

My trip with Yoshin… Actually, it’s not just the two of us, since it’s a class trip. We had been with everyone else since this morning, which of course was fun in its own way. But we’d only been able to be alone, just the two of us, for a little bit.

That was why…you know, after lights-out? I mean, I knew it was against the rules, but…wouldn’t it be nice, of course, for the two of us to be alone together for as long as possible?

That was why, as we were all hanging out together a little while ago, but when the others weren’t looking…

“She sent it, huh?” Hatsumi muttered.

“Yeah, she totally did!” Ayumi squealed.

“Oh, they’re gonna do it. How lovely,” Kotoha-chan groaned.

“Huh?”

All of a sudden, I was hearing Hatsumi and the two others whispering about me having “sent” something. *Huh? Wait, um, what are they talking about? Is it just a coincidence? For them to be muttering about me having sent something, at the exact same time that I messaged Yoshin? Did something happen, maybe? Wait, they’re all looking at me now.*

Hatsumi seemed in disbelief, Ayumi was grinning like a cat, and Kotoha-chan was staring at me with clear envy. *Um, why are you all staring at me like that?*

“Nanami-chan, to be inviting Misumai-kun out at night… You’re totally gonna do it, aren’t you? Even *I* couldn’t muster up the courage to ask Taku-chan to come see me. Though I at least made him fondle my boobs,” Kotoha-chan declared.

“Wait, Kotoha-chan! We’re *not* gonna do it! We really aren’t! Also, what did you make him do, exactly?! What in the world are you

doing?!” I shouted.

Hatsumi and Ayumi also stared at Kotoha-chan in disbelief at what she’d suddenly revealed.

Kotoha-chan was wearing an off-the-shoulder pajama top that looked kind of sexy, so I couldn’t help glancing at her general chest area. *She made him* fondle *that? I don’t even know how to respond to her smug expression and victory sign. Wait, more importantly…*

“How do you all know that I asked Yoshin to meet up with me?” I asked, bewildered by my friends’ perfectly timed remarks.

It was at that that the three of them looked at me and at once all seemed to twitch.

“You didn’t do it on purpose?” Hatsumi asked cautiously.

Huh? What’s that supposed to mean? Hatsumi then slowly turned her phone screen toward me—very deliberately.

Tilting my head, I looked at her phone and, keeping my head tilted, gradually opened my eyes wider and wider—so much so that I thought my eyeballs were going to pop out.

I was speechless. All I could do was look down at my own phone, then back toward Hatsumi’s, and then back again at mine.

Both phones displayed the same message that I had sent to Yoshin.

How?!

The message was the same no matter how many times I compared the two phone screens. It was my message to Yoshin, asking him to come out and see me. Every single word was identical. I remained confused…until I studied the screen more closely.

“Oh!” I let out.

“You didn’t even realize it, did you?” Hatsumi uttered in disbelief.

Upon closer inspection, I saw that the thread displaying my message included messages not just from me and Yoshin, but also from Hatsumi and everyone else as well.

Wait, this is…

“You sent it to the trip group chat!” Ayumi explained, just as I finally realized what I had done. She was right. Even on my phone, I was now seeing that I had sent the message not in my private chat with Yoshin, but in the chat to the whole group.

Sh-Shoot…I was too caught up in sneaking around, that I ended up sending it to the wrong people. Of course—I tend to chat with Yoshin the most these days, so my conversation with him usually displays at the top. But since coming to Hawaii, I've been chatting more with the entire group. That was why my body moved on its own but didn't choose the conversation with just Yoshin like I thought I did. Wow, I totally screwed up. This is mortifying. Wait, does that mean that right now, on the other end of all this…?

I could've sworn I heard a distinct explosion sound somewhere in my head, as my entire body suddenly began to feel hot. I got so embarrassed that I was once again overcome by the need to move around, though for a different reason from before.

"Still, do people usually make a move on the first day? It's more like an attack than a move, really," Hatsumi remarked.

"Oh, come *on*. If I were here with onii-chan, I'd do the same thing. If anything, I'd probably stay over in his room," Ayumi protested.

"Maybe I should try inviting Taku-chan out to see me too…though I probably shouldn't invite him over to *this* room. I wouldn't want Nanami-chan to walk in right in the middle of things," Kotoha-chan mumbled to herself.

"Hold up, class rep—just what are you planning on doing?" Hatsumi asked in shock.

The three of them continued debating among themselves, completely ignoring me in my panicked state. *Yeah, since I'm rooming with Kotoha-chan, it* would *be awkward if Teshikaga-kun were here when I got back. But Kenbuchi-kun is in Yoshin's room, so I probably can't stay there either… Wait, what am I even talking about? Oh, jeez. What am I supposed to do, seriously? But I should be glad that I messaged the small group and not the entire class. If I'd sent my message to the whole class instead… Wow, I get chills just thinking about it.*

"Still, mother feels so happy that little Nanami is learning all these naughty things, like sneaking out to meet up with her boyfriend late at night," Hatsumi said, pretending to cry.

"Stop it, you're not even my mother. And how could this possibly make you happy?" I countered.

Why is Hatsumi acting so weird? Wait, even Ayumi is copying her. Hold on, it doesn't even make sense for Kotoha-chan to join in too!

“In all seriousness, though, I’m glad that you didn’t just sneak out,” Hatsumi responded.

“Yeah, really. We’d panic if you snuck out without telling us,” Ayumi said.

“True. In the end this was the right mistake to make, Nanami-chan. ‘Klutz’ has a ring to it when it comes to you, doesn’t it,” Kotoha-chan concluded.

“Why are you all being so *mean*?” I couldn’t help saying. I wanted to complain that they were making it sound like my mistake was a good thing. It seemed, though, that that wasn’t their intention.

Hatsumi pointed her index finger and wagged it from left to right. The gesture seemed almost theatrical. Still, I couldn’t understand from that alone what she was trying to tell me.

“Oh, come on. We’d be worried if you disappeared and we didn’t know where you were,” Hatsumi explained.

“Oh…”

She had a valid point. And it’s not like we were in Japan anymore; we were in a whole other country. Had I snuck out without telling anyone anything, it could have led to some serious problems.

“Plus, when it comes to stuff like this, we all need to get our stories straight,” Hatsumi added.

“We do?” I asked.

“Sure. If the teacher comes around to check on us, we have to be able to say that you’re asleep in your room, or be prepared to come up with another alibi of some kind that we can all use,” she explained.

Oh, I see. That’s true too. Gosh, I pretty much never break the rules, so I didn’t even think of something like that.

When I glanced over at Kotoha-chan, she returned my gaze and gave me a thumbs-up, as if to reassure me.

“Leave the rest to me,” she said. “I’ll leverage every bit of trust I’ve gained during my time as class rep to cover for you.”

“Kotoha-chan, I’m so glad I can count on you,” I said dreamily.

“So you can do the same for me when I’m gonna do stuff like that with Taku-chan,” she reminded me.

She seemed totally ready with that response, but she was right that helping her out in return was important. In fact, given that I’d

never done anything like this with my friends before, I couldn't deny that I felt genuinely excited; it was as if I were doing something very, very naughty…though I guess it actually *was* something bad.

"I guess Nanami's growing up too, huh?" Hatsumi murmured with emotion.

"You think this qualifies as growing up?" I asked, uncertain whether I could consider my new venture evidence of growth.

Hatsumi, though, suddenly grabbed hold of my shoulders and exclaimed, "If! If you and Misumai ever end up spending the night together after we get back to Japan, I'll tell your folks that you're staying over at my place!"

"Oh, you can say you're staying at my place too," Ayumi also offered giddily.

"Same here," Kotoha-chan chimed in.

Despite all three of them making the offer, I wasn't sure I'd actually be able to take them up on it once we got back to Japan. Still, I felt like being here was making me feel less inhibited in all sorts of ways.

Would there really be a day when I can ask Hatsumi for this specific favor?

As I sat there pondering the question, the phone in my hand dinged.

"Oh, it's a response from Yoshin," I muttered.

It took a while, but Yoshin replied to me…or, rather, to the whole group. Of course, that meant that Hatsumi and the others could read his response as well.

I had mixed feelings about Yoshin responding to the message I'd sent to the whole group, but I smiled nonetheless when I saw his reply. Hatsumi and the others laughed too when they saw it, unable to help themselves.

"You guys don't waver, even when you're in Hawaii, huh?" Hatsumi joked.

"You two are totally in love," Ayumi joined in. "It's so nice to be on a trip with your boyfriend, huh?"

"Shucks. You're totally rubbing it in," Kotoha-chan griped.

Each of the three looked at me with their own unique expressions—of exasperation, envy, frustration. I had to admit that I, too, felt a small piece of Yoshin's love for me packed into his

message.

I was a little embarrassed by the fact that everyone else read it too, but looking at his reply again, I traced the letters with my fingers while suppressing a smile.

Yoshin: Sounds good. How about we go check out the night sky, just the two of us?

♢ ♢ ♢

Yoshin and I met up in the hotel lobby without any trouble. It reminded me of when we met up for a date some time ago—though I guess what we were doing now wasn't as involved as that. Once I reached the lobby, I spotted Yoshin sitting in a large chair and immediately picked up my pace to run toward him.

"Been waiting a while?" I asked when I reached him.

"No, I just got here," he replied.

Oooh, it totally sounds like we're a couple. Wait, we are *a couple. It's just that you don't actually say things like this in real life too often.*

Was it for my birthday that we last met up like this for a date? After that date we started meeting each other at one of our homes before going out together. *Maybe I wanna meet up again somewhere before going out on our next date. Though maybe this time can technically be considered "meeting up before a date" too.*

I sat down on the large chair across from Yoshin. It was so big that it felt like it was gonna swallow me whole. If someone stood behind this chair they wouldn't even be able to tell someone was sitting in it at all.

"Today was really packed, wasn't it?" Yoshin remarked.

"Seriously," I agreed. "Congrats on getting through the first day in one piece."

Yoshin and I both heaved a deep sigh. The entire day we had essentially been at a school function, so being able to sit together like we normally did was a huge relief.

I took a look around the room and saw other people around us also sitting in chairs. There were students I recognized, along with people who looked like honeymooners chatting among themselves. I felt more at ease seeing that Yoshin and I weren't the only ones there. The giddiness I'd been feeling, thinking that

we were the only ones doing something naughty, faded slightly too.

"I had a lot of fun today, though. I'd never seen a coffee farm before," Yoshin began.

"Me neither! Plus I didn't know that coffee cherries were that sweet. It was pretty cool," I commented.

"Yeah, I was surprised that you could literally *eat* coffee," he continued. "Speaking of being surprised, I wasn't expecting to have meat for two meals in a row—a hamburger lunch *and* a steak dinner."

"What surprised me most was how *much* meat we got. There was no way I could've finished that steak without you helping me," I said.

"I wasn't expecting you to feed me at both lunch *and* dinner," Yoshin muttered.

"Oh, you know. For lunch, I just thought you might've wanted a bite of my food too."

Everyone had the same thing at dinner, but for lunch, we could choose between a hamburger and a loco moco. Yoshin went with the burger, so I got the loco moco. I gave Yoshin some of my food, and Yoshin let me have a bit of his hamburger.

"I didn't think you'd bite into the burger itself," Yoshin said.

"I think being on the trip made me get a little carried away," I said, my hand on my head and a somewhat calculated smile on my face. Yoshin seemed to realize that I was doing it on purpose too, so he just smiled and shook his head. Though I wasn't lying at all when I said that the excitement of the trip made me do it without thinking.

Still, I wanted credit for the fact that I didn't bite into the exact spot that Yoshin had bitten into. I thought I had maintained *some* amount of sense.

We continued to sit there and chat, as though retracing every little thing we did that day. We were sharing with each other all the things we had thought and felt, just like we did when we were back home in Japan.

Come to think of it, what did Yoshin mean when he said he wanted to see the night sky? Maybe it was just a turn of phrase, and he didn't mean anything by it. Or maybe we're gonna go outside after this? Nah, that can't be possible. There isn't anything really by the hotel, and

actually leaving at night is a big no-no. The furthest we might get would be the beach. Or maybe we're gonna see the night sky from his room?

Just as I was thinking that, though, I heard Yoshin say, "Well, then. Shall we get going?"

"Huh? To where?" I asked.

"Hmm. How about…you just follow me."

I took the hand that Yoshin extended toward me and stood up. Doing that totally felt like second nature to us now. I guess it meant that we were getting used to things, but I guess there was a part of me that kind of missed how bashful Yoshin could be when he did stuff like this. Though maybe the same could be said of me too.

We started walking, our hands held together. Along the way, we walked by the other kids from class, who teased us and called out all these suggestions for places to go if we were gonna try to sneak off and be alone.

"You guys are so close even when you're traveling, huh?" someone said.

"How about you try doing stuff separately, at least when you're on a class trip?" another remarked.

"Hey, Misumai! I found a place that might be good if you wanna shack up with your girlfriend. You want details?" someone else asked.

Yoshin just waved at the guys in response, a slightly troubled smile on his face, as if the word choice of that last question wasn't quite appropriate for where they were.

But where exactly is Yoshin going?

As soon as I thought that, I began to feel nervous. The more we walked, the harder my heart pounded. *I mean, it's just that…Yoshin seems to be going in a direction with fewer and fewer people around.*

Yoshin seemed assured of where he was going. Still, despite the fact that we seemed to be headed somewhere inside the hotel, it was getting gradually darker and less populated.

The words I heard earlier replayed themselves in my head.

"I found a place that might be good if you wanna shack up with your girlfriend."

Shack up…shack up where?! What are we gonna do there?! I trust Yoshin, but…no, it's because *I trust Yoshin, that I don't think anything*

will happen. But still, I can't help hoping.

Hope? Is my heart beating this fast because I'm hoping *for something to happen? No, I don't really think that's it either. But if something* were *to happen, I probably wouldn't stop him. I mean, Kotoha-chan said that she made Teshikaga-kun…s-squeeze her chest. Even* I've *asked Yoshin to do that.*

I didn't know if Yoshin knew just how fast my heart was racing, but by the time I realized it, he and I were walking in complete silence.

We were holding hands, with Yoshin walking slightly ahead of me as I followed him a few steps behind. *Where* are *we going, really?*

With both anticipation and worry, along with a childlike excitement, I continued walking after him.

As we walked along the dark corridor, I began to feel a warm breeze around me. *There's AC inside the hotel, so this must be…coming from the outside?*

I could at least tell that Yoshin was headed outdoors, but I still didn't know where he was leading us. I was pretty certain we couldn't go anywhere too crazy, but still.

There was no door or anything at the point where the lights in the corridor ended, so you could just step outside. The moment we passed through the end of the corridor, I felt the evening breeze brush my cheek. Though the wind was a little warm, it still felt nice.

"Is this the poolside?" I asked.

"It's more like a lobby than the poolside area," Yoshin explained. "But you can get down to the pool from there too."

"Oh, you're right. It's so pretty."

The pool was lit up, but there were no other lights around it. There were people hanging out in the pool as well, but just a handful.

Does Yoshin want to go swimming? I didn't bring my bathing suit, though.

"This way, Nanami," he called to me.

"Oh, right," I murmured.

"Apparently the view from here is supposed to be really pretty," Yoshin said, taking my hand as he sat down on a very large chair set up nearby, one that was large enough that it seemed almost

like a bed. When I copied him and sat down on the chair next to his, I saw a view unlike any I'd ever seen before.

"Wow," I couldn't help saying.

The lights from the pool shone down on the ground, and they were also reflected to light up the palm trees around us, swaying in the breeze. The lights cast different shapes as well, from large circles to smaller specks.

Beyond all that, I could see the beach. The shore was lit up as well, and there was complete darkness farther beyond that—all of which must be the ocean. And I knew it to be so because the moon and its reflection shone high in the middle of it all. It almost seemed as though there were two moons. The contrast between light and dark was absolutely gorgeous, and it felt like a real luxury to be able to see both the pool and the ocean at the same time.

"The sunset is supposed to be really pretty in the evenings too," Yoshin said.

"I see. But how did you know about this place?" I asked.

I hadn't expected to be able to enjoy a view like this at all. Our trip pamphlet didn't mention it, and seeing as how there were no other students from our school around, I could bet that no one else in our class knew about this place either.

Yoshin, seeming somewhat embarrassed, said, "I asked the hotel staff if there was anywhere inside the hotel where I could enjoy the view with my girlfriend."

"And they told you about this place, huh? What did they say?" I asked.

"Um, that, this was…the place they recommend to honeymooners. M-Most people over here can speak Japanese! I thought I'd have to talk to them in English, but it turned out all right!"

Yoshin's talking so fast, he must be desperate to change the subject. The fact that he thought to ask the hotel people at all makes me so happy. But, I see—I guess this is a place they recommend to newlyweds, huh? Do they see us that way because of what happened when we checked in? They were probably joking at first, but now they're probably all in on it because of the way we ended up reacting.

"It really is beautiful…but it's kind of bright, so I can't really see any stars," Yoshin remarked.

“Hey, Yoshin… Can I sit next to you?”

“Huh?”

I didn’t wait for him to respond—he was still talking about the view, as if doing so would help me forget what he had said a moment ago. I got up and then sat back down on the chair he was sitting on. In other words, I moved so I was right next to him.

Just as I had thought, this chair was so long that I could fully stretch out my legs. It was even big enough that the two of us could sit together and there’d still be space left over. This chair was probably designed for newlyweds too. I bet people sat next to each other like this and looked up at the night sky or gazed out at the view.

How lovely that we could enjoy this view as well.

“It really *is* gorgeous, isn’t it? Falling asleep here must feel incredible,” I said.

“You’re more beautiful, Nanami,” Yoshin whispered.

“What are you saying?” I said, giggling. “That makes me happy, but I bet you just wanted to say that, right? I mean, look how amazing it is out there. Of course the view is a lot prettier.”

“Not at all. But fine, the view *is* beautiful. And, you know, I just thought…that you’re just as beautiful as the view.”

Just as *beautiful…maybe that makes me happier. I mean, look how pretty the view is. I’m honored that Yoshin thinks I’m pretty enough to be putting up a good fight against this backdrop. Yoshin’s…as handsome as the view too? But I’m not sure if saying that he’s as handsome as the view actually works as a compliment. Oh, who cares. Let’s say it anyway.*

“You’re as handsome as the view too, Yoshin,” I managed to say.

“As handsome as the view? Um, thank you, though,” Yoshin said, smiling bashfully but also clearly happily. He was both handsome *and* cute. To me, it was the best smile of his that I could have asked for.

After that, he and I took in the view in silence, until…

“Hey, Nanami. Is it okay if I touch you a little bit?” Yoshin asked.

“Are you gonna do something pervy?” I asked after a slight pause.

“No, no, no. Why would you even go there?”

Shoot, I ended up saying something super unromantic without thinking. I mean, Yoshin was giving me such a smoldering look that it

made my heart skip a beat, and I couldn't help asking. I even meant it as a confirmation, not as a rejection. Still, we're completely outdoors, and if we can see other people, it means that other people can see us too. That's a bit too much for my first time. No, wait, I'm not saying I'm even ready for my first time right now.

When I softly said "okay" under my breath, Yoshin placed his hand gently on my cheek, a strand of my hair falling on his hand. He stroked my cheek softly. Yoshin's hand was large, kind, but also strong in that uniquely masculine way.

Without any hesitation, I closed my eyes.

The movement of his hand suddenly became awkward and stilted, as if hesitating. After a moment, though, his hand moved away from my face, making my chest swell with anticipation.

Then I heard a soft, wet sound, accompanied by the most gentle of sensations—a short kiss, the mere brushing of lips.

To be able to experience this seemed like something out of a fairy tale, or a dream.

Yoshin slowly moved away, and I opened my eyes hesitantly to match. And there he was, right in front of me, a shy smile on his face.

When I became so overcome with joy that I immediately wanted to feel his lips again…

"Don't let things get out of hand when you're outside, young man and young lady—or was it Otaku-kun and Gyaru-chan? Wait, were those some other kids?"

We heard the voice of a completely separate third party.

In that moment I came to viscerally understand how you could become so shocked you were rendered speechless. Yoshin and I were so surprised that we couldn't say anything, only able to turn in the direction that the voice came from.

And there we saw a familiar face—that of the school nurse, standing there with her entire body drenched in water. Wearing an outrageously sexy bathing suit.

Huh? What is that? How is that thing even holding it all in place? I-Is it…a bikini? Or a one-piece? More importantly, can you even swim in that? If you move even just a little bit, won't things…spill out?

With her body soaked, droplets of water rested on her skin, gradually falling and making the ground around her feet wet.

She usually wore a nursing coat, so I didn't realize that what she

normally wore actually made her appear thinner than she really was. She had a great figure, and the bold swimsuit complemented the curves of her body. With the lights reflecting off of her, she almost appeared to be glowing herself. If I didn't know any better, I might've thought she was a gravure idol.

"Wh-Why are you here, ma'am? And why are you dressed like that?" I stammered.

Shoot, I was in such a state of shock that I didn't even think about how Yoshin would react if he saw a woman looking so sexy. Oh, wait, he's looking the other way so that he can't see her. Thank goodness.

"What do you mean, 'why'? My husband's feeling lonely without me, so I figured I'd wear a swimsuit in the style he likes and send him a selfie or two. But this isn't the best thing for a teenage boy to see, is it? So I snuck out to the pool after curfew, when I figured no one else would be here," the nurse explained. "Though I certainly do wonder why this young man here is staunchly turned in a different direction."

The school nurse added that she didn't care one bit if anyone other than her husband happened to see her. I had my suspicions, but now I knew she was the same type as Ayumi.

"Whoops, I guess that's not something to say in front of the girlfriend though, eh? But why *are* you looking away? Do you feel guilty looking when you're in front of your girlfriend?" she asked Yoshin.

"No, I don't think I'd feel anything seeing someone that wasn't Nanami...but in the event that I *did* feel something, I figured Nanami wouldn't feel terribly good about it," Yoshin replied.

"I feel like I just caught a glimpse of the darkness within you," the nurse said to Yoshin quietly. "I think that's all pretty normal stuff, but I guess it just means you're really loved, doesn't it, young lady?" she added, turning to me as she beamed with her hand on her hip.

But, I see, I thought to myself. *Sending selfies to her husband, huh? Hey, wait a minute...*

"Doesn't that seem really indecent though?" I asked.

"Of course. That's the whole point," the nurse responded without a care. "Just so you know, there's nothing inherently evil about sexy or even indecent things. You just have to make sure not to misuse them. And at the end of the day, men just like stuff

like this."

"If you're talking about me, then I don't really know," Yoshin mumbled.

"Then have the young lady try it for you sometime. Then you'll know," the nurse said, tugging on a string of her bathing suit to stretch and pull it away from her body. Watching her made me very nervous.

Yoshin still wasn't looking at her, which made me feel slightly relieved. If he felt something because of this, I wouldn't really know how to process it.

"It's already past curfew, so make sure you get back to your rooms safely. I'll pretend like I didn't see anything here," the nurse said as she turned on her heel and began to walk away, waving her hand. When I saw her back, though, I was even more shocked. *From the back she's practically naked, just some strings attached to her... I'm so glad Yoshin didn't see this. I'm* super *glad...*

And then it was just me and Yoshin left.

Is it really already past curfew? I know it's always like this, but time sure flies when you're having fun.

"You can look now, Yoshin," I let him know.

"Oh, right. Thanks. Shall we head back now?" he suggested.

Given that we'd been spotted by the teacher, heading back to our rooms was probably a good idea. I stood up first this time and extended my hand out toward Yoshin. The reversal seemed to catch him off guard; he just looked at me. When I flashed a toothy grin, he laughed and took my hand.

Our first day in Hawaii was coming to a close.

Still—"At the end of the day, men just like stuff like this," huh? I wonder if Yoshin feels that way too.

Chapter 2: Floating in a World of Blue

I've never really experienced sleeping with another person. What—you say that I've slept with Nanami? Well, Nanami isn't really "another person."

Okay, fine, strictly speaking, she *is* another human being. But to describe your girlfriend—the person most dear to you—as just "another person" didn't seem like the best thing to do.

Maybe saying that would open the pedantic floodgates and have me inundated with nitpicky questions about how you might characterize your friends or family—or whether anyone aside from yourself might just be "another person."

For now, though, let's just assume that "another person" was anyone other than my family, Nanami, and...the other members of the Barato family. To say it plainly, I'm talking about Hitoshi. Though I do realize that makes it sound pretty bad.

The first friend I'd made in several years—but we hadn't been friends for *that* long. So of course, he was a friend that I'd never gone somewhere to sleep over with.

"Then why don't you just say that you've never slept in the same room with a friend before, and leave it at that?" Hitoshi said.

"Yeah, I know. But don't they both mean the same thing?" I asked.

"You tend to be pretty matter-of-fact about stuff like this, don't you?"

"You think so? Am I really matter-of-fact?"

Maybe this wasn't the most appropriate topic of conversation for two dudes to have over breakfast. *Was* I matter-of-fact? Or rather, maybe it was more accurate to say that I still hadn't managed to figure out just how close he and I were.

"But from the sound of it, you're telling me that you've slept several times with Barato already?" Hitoshi remarked.

"Stop saying such misleading things. We've never had a sexual encounter. Though even if we had, I wouldn't tell you. Plus, even if we *did* sleep together, it was purely us just lying next to each other."

“Ordinarily I wouldn’t believe for a second that you guys have only been sleeping, quote, unquote, ‘next to each other.’”

What do you want me to do? It’s the truth. I personally believe that it’s not right to do anything more than that while I’m still in high school, and that also means I really have to work on my self-control.

Hitoshi was looking at me like he couldn’t believe what he was seeing, but *I* couldn’t believe how people could move things along so lightly. After all, if something were to happen, it would already be too late. I mean, what were you gonna do if…the girl got pregnant when you were both in school?

“And the truth is?” Hitoshi asked.

“I would love it if I could do stuff like that with Nanami!”

Huh?! Dammit, I just totally spoke without thinking. Shoot, Hitoshi’s grinning from ear to ear. I’m pretty sure that the first time in my life I resort to violence will be against this guy.

Hitoshi continued smiling as he picked up a croissant from his plate, tore off a piece, and put it in his mouth. *At least wipe that smirk off your face if you’re gonna eat.*

Instead, Hitoshi got a spoonful of soup and brought it to his mouth, and only then did he finally stop smiling.

“Not gonna lie, I’m relieved that you’re interested in stuff like that. If a high schooler had a girlfriend but had zero sexual desires, I’d be mildly concerned,” Hitoshi commented.

“Concerned? What are you, my parent or something?” I asked.

“I dunno, you seem oddly vulnerable. *Am* I actually worried about you in, like, a parental way? Wait, is *this* paternal love?! Yoshin, look, it’s me, daddy!”

“I already have both a father and a father-in-law, so I’m good,” I replied immediately.

Paying no mind to Hitoshi, who seemed ready to protest, I bit into the mysteriously shaped bread that I’d picked out at the breakfast buffet. It was a rather sweet pastry. I’d heard that bread in countries outside of Japan was pretty dry, but this one wasn’t too different from the ones I had back home. Or did they make the bread at this hotel to match Japanese tastes?

“But, man. I can’t believe the school nurse was pulling such a lovely stunt. I wish I had been there to see it. Dammit, why did I go to a random room and have perverted debates with the other guys last night?” Hitoshi lamented.

“That sounds pretty fun too,” I offered.

Right—I ended up sharing with Hitoshi a little bit of what happened the previous evening.

He pressed me about what Nanami and I had been doing at night, but I wanted to keep the things that happened with her to myself. So, in order to steer the conversation away from that, I ended up talking about the school nurse instead. *I’m sorry, sensei. I feel like I just sacrificed you to some pervy god.*

Hitoshi was looking both woeful and frustrated, though, so I got a little nervous and decided to be somewhat proactive, saying, “Hitoshi, just because I told you about it, don’t you dare try to go and do anything weird with the school nurse.”

“I wouldn’t do that, dude. What do you take me for? Though I admit I did consider sneaking off to the pool later tonight,” he confessed.

“So you totally *are* trying to do something weird,” I sighed. “But you’re right, that was pretty rude of me. I’m sorry.”

“It’s cool, you and I haven’t known each other for that long. I’m sure you can’t help thinking that about me, given my specialization in all things erotic and sexy.”

I’ve never heard of such a specialization before. Hitoshi didn’t seem to mind my earlier remark too much, though, as he dexterously cut through his omelet with a fork and brought a piece up to his mouth.

“Besides, if you go and make an enemy out of the school nurse, you’ll probably end up making an enemy of all the girls in our grade…nay, in the *school*,” he said, putting his fork down on his plate and hugging himself as though he were shivering. He must have imagined the situation, because his face was actually turning pale.

Would it really be that bad? Though I guess the school nurse has *been looking out for me too. But wait, does that mean that I might end up making enemies of all the* guys *too?*

“Oh, *there* you are! Jeez, why aren’t you replying to any of my texts?!” I suddenly heard.

When I turned around, I saw Nanami standing behind me with her cheeks puffed out. She looked kind of angry, but this time she actually seemed *genuinely* angry, which was pretty rare.

Wait, texts*? How could I miss any text messages from Nanami?*

“I don’t think I’ve gotten them,” I murmured.

“Huh?! Are you kidding me?!” she shouted.

Even when I looked at my phone, it didn’t display any messages from Nanami. I hadn’t received any notifications either, which seemed strange to me.

Nanami sat down on an empty chair and pulled out her own phone to confirm. When she saw her messages, she looked up at the ceiling and mumbled sadly, “Dang, my phone’s connection is out.”

“Yikes. I guess the hotel connection isn’t that stable, huh? You wanna use this?” I asked her.

“Yes, please,” she muttered.

At the suggestion of Baron-san, we had rented a pocket Wi-Fi device at the airport.

A lot of sources said that Hawaii had free Wi-Fi that was pretty good, but people who had actually traveled here said that renting a device at the airport guaranteed a more reliable connection. I wasn’t intending to play any games, but I didn’t like the idea of not being able to communicate with Nanami if anything were to happen.

Come to think of it, I haven’t contacted Baron-san and the others at all. Maybe I should try to get in touch with them tonight.

As soon as Nanami got her phone connected to the internet, my phone started buzzing. All her delayed text messages must have finally reached my phone.

Nanami: Hey Yoshin! Are you up? Or are you already at breakfast? Let’s have that morning coffee at daybreak together!

Nanami’s still on that morning coffee bit? And isn’t saying “morning coffee at daybreak” kind of redundant?

As we sat there, though, the server came by to pour coffee into our mugs. They placed a cup in front of Nanami too, pouring her a generous amount of coffee. Steam rose up from the warm drink, with the scent of coffee tickling our nostrils.

I picked up my own mug in my hand and raised it toward Nanami. We couldn’t quite do a toast, so I just raised my cup slightly.

“Good morning, Nanami.”

“Morning, Yoshin,” she replied, lifting her cup slightly and bringing it to her lips. I’d never had coffee in the morning before, but I thought that the coffee here tasted pretty good.

Nanami put her cup down, then smiled shyly.

“I wonder if this means that we’ve had morning coffee together now,” I said teasingly, unable to help myself. Nanami puffed out her cheeks slightly again, but her pout seemed to indicate that she was enjoying the situation. She brought her mug to her lips with a quip about this not quite counting, though.

I thought I heard someone murmur, “Does that mean that you’ve essentially had morning coffee with the entire class?” I was going to go ahead and ignore that comment, though.

But wait—hadn’t that comment come from right next to me?

“Good morning, Shirishizu-san,” I managed to say, more than slightly taken aback by her sudden appearance.

“Good morning, Misumai-kun. And good morning to you as well, Kenbuchi-kun,” Shirishizu-san said.

I didn’t even realize she was sitting next to us. That made perfect sense, though, given that she and Nanami were rooming together—though that made me wonder where Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san were.

“Hatsumi-chan and Ayumi-chan are eating with the other girls,” Shirishizu-san explained.

I see, that made sense too, given that these were four-seater tables. Meanwhile, Shirishizu-san was also sipping her coffee slowly and letting out a soft sigh.

“Still, Yoshin—I’m not sure what to think about the fact that you left your adorable girlfriend behind to go have breakfast with your guy friend,” Nanami spoke up.

“I don’t deny that you’re an adorable girlfriend, but I wanted to let you sleep in a bit more,” I explained.

“Huh? Did you wake up that early?” she asked.

“Um, I might have gotten up a couple of hours ago?”

“That’s super early!” Nanami exclaimed.

I had been intending to sleep in more myself, of course. It was just that I heard Hitoshi stirring in his bed, so I ended up waking up too. I’d figured it was as good a chance as any to have some guy time.

When Nanami glared at him, Hitoshi simply flashed her a peace

sign. It was meant to indicate pacifism, but its use in this situation didn't seem peaceful at all.

"Sorry, Barato. I took the liberty of getting guy time with your hubby," Hitoshi said.

"How *dare* you!" Nanami seethed. "It's bad enough you get to room with Yoshin, but to have you monopolize his time first thing in the morning?! Unforgivable!"

She was getting really fired up. Why was she talking like Hitoshi was her love rival? She really sounded like she was talking to the other party in a love triangle. I was also pretty certain that I'd never heard anyone say "Unforgivable!" in real life before.

The mood around the two was akin to two master fencers staring each other down or two boxers the moment before a fight. Or something like that.

I guess I'll be having breakfast with Nanami tomorrow.

"Misumai-kun—thou hast had a good night's sleep, I hope," Shirishizu-san said out of nowhere.

"Excuse me?!" I blurted out, caught off guard by her unexpected comment. Hitoshi, too, was groaning to himself, saying, "So thou *didst* have a good night's sleep!" All the while Nanami was looking pretty confused, muttering, "Last night? Yeah, I guess we managed to get a good night's sleep?"

Yeah, she doesn't understand what they're trying to say. This one is pretty hard to get if you don't know where it comes from. Actually, how does Shirishizu-san *know about it?*

"You're right that I spent a part of last night with Nanami, but... Shirishizu-san, do you know what that phrase is supposed to imply?" I asked.

"I know, because I heard it from Taku-chan," she explained.

Teshikaga-kun? What exactly are you teaching your childhood friend? I couldn't help feeling reproachful toward my friend who was not here to defend himself.

Nanami was now starting to worry because she couldn't figure out what was going on. *She's so cute. I guess I'll explain to her later what we're talking about...though I wonder if that wouldn't be a form of sexual harassment.*

"I guess I didn't end up helping Nanami-chan in her battle at all," Shirishizu-san murmured.

Oh, I see. So that *was why she said that. Dang it, it totally*

backfired.

"Um, Nanami…we'll definitely come to breakfast together tomorrow. Plus, I can still eat right now, so let's go get some food," I suggested.

"Huh? Are you sure? You won't get too stuffed?" she asked.

"As a high schooler, I can totally go for more. We've got a long day ahead of us too."

"Okay, then let's go get some food!" Nanami said after a brief moment of hesitation. "I thought this before, but breakfast buffets are so much fun! And even more so when it's in Hawaii."

Yeah, Nanami definitely looks better with a smile on her face. Her vengeful expression from earlier isn't bad either, but I definitely prefer her smile. I've managed to make a date for tomorrow morning too. I should've thought of it when I walked her back to her room last night. Lesson learned.

When Nanami and I got up from the table and Shirishizu-san also followed suit, Hitoshi got up from his seat as well. He seemed to also want seconds.

As I glanced at him, I saw him don a look on his face like he was truly enjoying himself. He then whispered in a voice loud enough for only me to hear, "I've heard that making out after a fight feels extra good."

"I have a feeling you and I will need to sit down for a long talk at some point," I said with a sigh.

I had heard about…things after having a fight, but would Nanami and I end up fighting at some point in the future? At the least, I didn't want it to happen while we were on a trip.

"Nanami-chan, apparently making out after fighting feels really good," Shirishizu-san whispered.

"What are you saying, Kotoha-chan?!" Nanami yelled.

Oh, I wonder if Shirishizu-san heard what Hitoshi said. Or was it a coincidence of some kind? Regardless, we sure are talking about some weird stuff this morning…

The second day of our class trip thus began with some rather unexpected conversations.

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The hotel where we were staying was located far away from any

major towns on the island; it would take up to two hours by car just to get there. The nearest grocery store, for example, was a thirty-minute drive away. In other words, there just wasn't anything around us. Once at the hotel, there was nowhere to go and nothing to do. If you did want to do something, you had to call a cab or drive there yourself, which was a bit of a challenge for high schoolers. There were so few things to do at the hotel, in fact, that one had to wonder if the teachers purposefully chose this lodging in order to prevent the students from going out without permission.

In this light, going to see the view from the hotel at night had been a desperate attempt at creating something to do. I had thought about the possibility of going shopping if there were stores around, but there wasn't anything like that at all—though considering our need to stay safe, maybe this actually was the best way to go. We were overseas, after all. We couldn't be too careful.

Last night seemed like a pretty good occasion for us to be reminded of that. Being too scared wasn't good, but neither was it smart for us to take our safety for granted. It was probably important to strike a good balance.

Today, therefore, we were all taking the bus together to get to our destination. This was probably the safest way to get around, after all.

"Wow, I've never been underwater in the ocean, so I can't wait!" Nanami spoke excitedly. "What do you think it'll be like? Do you think we'll be able to see stuff, like at the aquarium? Or do you think it'll be even prettier than that?"

Look how cute she is when she gets excited. How adorable.

Nanami had seemed rather upset after breakfast, but her mood had gradually improved and she'd become her usual cheery self again. We'd packed Tomoko-san's and Genichiro-san's Hawaiian shirts for this trip, by the way, so they may have played a part in making her feel better. I was wearing the Hawaiian shirt that I'd borrowed, too, so maybe that was another reason she was no longer upset.

This seemed to be how we were going to dress for the rest of our time in Hawaii—though the other kids in our class were quick to make fun of us for totally getting into the mood of things, and

for wearing matching outfits while on a class trip.

That was how our day had started, and now, we were all headed to a beginner's scuba diving class. That was why Nanami was getting so excited about being able to go into the ocean.

I was looking forward to it too, despite the fact that I couldn't actually swim. And it seemed that scuba diving wasn't something you could really do back in Japan, but...

"Actually, there are a few places back home where you can go diving too," Otofuke-san said.

"Wait, really? I thought you could only go scuba diving in the tropics," Nanami remarked.

"No, honest. Though I guess it's not *super* close to home. But I went with aniki during a fall trip a few years ago, and it was a lot of fun."

"In the fall? Wasn't the water pretty cold then? Weren't you freezing?" Nanami asked.

"It actually wasn't that bad. I was pretty surprised too," Otofuke-san marveled. "I was super impressed by the whole thing."

It seemed Otofuke-san had already gone scuba diving before. But if she went with Soichiro-san, then it must have been a date, right? That must have been a pretty athletic date, then. I wasn't sure if two high schoolers could manage to do that, but it seemed like a fun idea to try with Nanami one of these days.

"Do you wanna try going on a diving date when we get back to Japan?" I suggested to Nanami.

"Oh, that sounds nice. And what a treat for you, since you'd get to see me in a bathing suit, even when it's cold," she teased.

"I wasn't suggesting... I mean, of course I'd be happy."

"Tee hee! Maybe I should try wearing one that's even sexier," Nanami said, giggling.

"Hey, you adorkables, we weren't even on a date that time," Otofuke-san cut in, only to pause to consider something. "Hey, wait. *Was* that a date? Huh? Was *that* what aniki was thinking...?"

Otofuke-san now turned uncharacteristically red and started mumbling to herself. I could only hear snippets of phrases like, "From back then? Huh? Since when?"

Maybe we had pointed out something we shouldn't have. Still, knowing their relationship now, it would have been hard *not* to think it was a date. We meant no harm.

Otofuke-san was now grinning from ear to ear, though, so I was just going to assume that everything was fine. She was even muttering something about asking Soichiro-san about it next time.

Oh, Nanami's going in to attack.

"Hey, Hatsumi? You're always making fun of me about stuff, but could it be that even though you always seem so cool and unaffected, you too have precious memories like that?" she asked, smirking as though she realized that this was a rare opportunity to tease her friend. Kamoenai-san, too, seemed to be piggybacking on Nanami to get in on the fun.

"Dammit! You're totally taking this opportunity to corner me!" Otofuke-san exclaimed in protest.

They say that three women together can get quite noisy, and it was looking like the three of them were a textbook example of the phrase. *Well, I'm glad that Nanami seems to be having a great time.*

"Have you ever gone diving, Hitoshi?" I asked, now turning to my friend.

"Me? Yeah, back in middle school, I think. It was like a school event, so we went with a group of friends. It was super fun, and there were a ton of girls there and stuff," he explained.

"A bunch of girls, huh? I feel like that would just make me more nervous," I confessed.

"Even then I still couldn't hit it off with anyone. They all friend-zoned me..."

"Hey, don't think too hard about that and get all bummed out. We're about to go *scuba diving*! There are plenty of girls around this time too," I offered.

Oh, he seems better now. He's even talking about how the girls this year are better-looking than the girls from back in middle school. I mean, that's probably true, but he better not be looking too hard at Nanami. Still, even I *think that Hitoshi is a good-looking guy. So why do girls keep on dumping him? He was getting along with girls at the school festival* and *on the plane too, and yet. Well, maybe I should just let him look forward to the girls in bathing suits for now...*

"What about you, Shirishizu-san?" I asked.

"I don't think I have," she replied. "There was a time when Taku-chan and I were talking about wanting to go diving, but then we lost touch."

Shoot, and now I've stepped on a total land mine. Like, the instantly

exploding type. Oh my god, even the air around Shirishizu-san is getting dark. It's so bright out, and the Hawaiian sun is beaming down on us, and yet it's like there's an inverted spotlight of total darkness on her. Even the highlights in her eyes are dimming. All this plus her outfit right now, and it's all just downright scary.

"Well, uh, maybe you can have a do-over this time around, don't you think? If you can go diving together with Teshikaga-kun today?" I suggested.

"You think so?" Shirishizu-san said hesitantly. "Even though we're not even in the same group or class? You really think I can go for it?"

"Um…yeah? Right? I mean, you know, since Teshikaga-kun's a delinquent and all, if you offer to keep an eye on him and talk to the teachers and stuff…"

Oh, the light's slowly returning. Wow, it's her usual narrowed eyes, but they're starting to sparkle. Looks like Shirishizu-san has regained hope.

"Yeah! I'll make full use of the trust I've earned as a class rep and go diving together with Taku-chan! Thank you for the tip, Misumai-kun!"

Although her eyes were half closed and her voice was flat as always, somehow her fervor was passionate enough to reach even where I was sitting. She was fiery enough to give the Hawaiian sun a decent rival. *Did I get her* too *fired up, maybe?*

But if she was this enthusiastic about it, then she should be able to go diving with Teshikaga-kun…probably.

Actually, did Teshikaga-kun even choose diving as his elective in the first place?

For our experiential learning today, we had the option of either going scuba diving or taking a submarine out to sea. Our group ended up choosing the former.

Shoot, if Teshikaga-kun actually chose the submarine ride today, I feel like I'm *gonna get yelled at. I'm just gonna have to pray that Teshikaga-kun will be there.*

"Yoshin!" I then heard Nanami sobbing all of a sudden. "Comfort me!"

"Wait, hasn't it only been a couple minutes? What the hell happened?!" I yelled in confusion as she grabbed me while in tears. *Uh, wait, wait…while I was talking with Hitoshi and Shirishizu-*

san, Nanami and her friends were chatting, just the three of them, right? Why is she suddenly crying? I mean, not that she's actually *crying, but still.*

The smile Nanami had on her face earlier was now gone, replaced by a sad, gloomy expression. Since she came in for a hug, I at least set myself to the task of patting her on the head.

"We're on the bus, you two. For crying out loud, restrain yourselves."

Yikes, and now we've got the teacher totally calling us out. Please *let this one go—at least we weren't causing a ruckus while the tour guide was explaining things to us. I swear, we were listening to the important bits.*

Nanami was still hugging me, though, so despite what the teacher said I decided to keep patting her head until she felt better.

I wonder what happened?

"What did you do, Otofuke-san?" I asked.

"You came straight for me, huh? Though that's not a bad guess," she said, before explaining. "It's just that, uh, I hinted that aniki and I took a *few steps forward* ourselves the other day, and…"

Otofuke-san then looked down at the floor and extended both her hands out toward me, as though signaling that she couldn't bring herself to say any more than that. It was such a girly gesture that it was hard for me to comprehend the usually cool Otofuke-san doing such a thing. In fact, I found the gesture to be less cute and more endearing. *Is that what people mean by gap moe?*

"I'm getting the feeling that Yoshin is experiencing something he's never felt before toward another girl and *not me*."

The sudden voice—one so deep that it sounded like it was reverberating from the depths of the earth—came straight from my chest. As in, it was coming from Nanami, who was still attached to me. For a moment I pretended like nothing was wrong, telling myself that even Nanami's deep voice sounded cute.

Who am I kidding, it's freaking me out! How can she pick up on such subtle emotions?! Is it because she's hugging me super tight right now? Aren't your sensors working a little too *well?*

What was scary was that Nanami was in my arms but lifting her head slightly to look up at me. With a super serious expression. *It's cute, but it's scary…*

It wasn't as though I had done—or was even *intending* to do—anything, and yet I still felt a shiver go up my spine.

"It's okay…it's okay, honest. They're feelings I feel about you too, Nanami," I reassured her. I then gently soothed her even more, to calm her down further as she sat in my arms. I patted her head and rubbed her back, as though I were pacifying a baby.

"Sorry, I was super annoying just now, wasn't I? Jeez," Nanami groaned in self-loathing, suddenly coming to her senses. Her voice was a pitch higher than a moment ago, though still lower than usual.

Even though she was back to her normal self, I kept on stroking her hair.

"Um, Yoshin?" Nanami called out questioningly.

"I don't want you to feel all insecure again, so I shall continue patting your head," I declared.

"Wait Yoshin, it's getting a little embarrassing for me. I'm calm, I'm calm now. Come on, everyone's looking!"

"Oh, Nanami's such a good girl. Such a good girl you are," I cooed.

"Now you're treating me like a baby?!"

Everyone around us was looking at us as if to say "They're at it again," and Nanami was actually getting embarrassed too—but I just kept petting and soothing her.

I didn't think I was treating her like a baby exactly, but until we reached our diving spot, I continued listening to her protests and patting her on the head.

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The Hawaiian ocean was gorgeous. It was clear and blue, glistening in the sunlight, and somehow had a mysterious quality to it.

I thought the ocean we saw when we went camping was really pretty too, but the ocean in Hawaii seemed even more so.

It was so beautiful, in fact, that I almost hesitated to step into it.

I should say this in defense of my own honor, but I didn't feel this way because I couldn't swim and was therefore scared to wade in. I was probably okay going anywhere as long as it wasn't somewhere high up.

After all, scuba diving was different from swimming. Swimming required you to float in the water, but diving required you to, well, *dive*. You didn't need to float; you just needed to sink. For someone who couldn't swim, it was very gratifying to hear that I didn't need to remain afloat.

My understanding of diving consisted not of swimming, but of sinking and moving underwater.

In any case, coming face-to-face with the beautiful ocean made me realize that I was in fact going diving, which then led me to justify my poor swimming skills inside my head.

I wasn't planning to share it with anyone, but just as I was feeling a bit more at ease having made the excuse...

"Ta-da! Here we are!"

"Look here, guys! The gals have arrived!"

The group of girls who had gone off to change had returned, creating a wave of excitement among the male students.

I had suspected this back during the school festival, but the girls in our class seemed to enjoy occasions that put them in the spotlight. They'd been like this during the cosplay café, and they were no different this time either. They were even inviting guys to come to an impromptu bathing suit fashion show that they were planning to do tomorrow at either the beach or the hotel pool.

Either they enjoyed turning things into a party, or they were acting this way because they were excited about being on the class trip.

The guys, of course, were getting all worked up over the appearance of the girls making a splash in their swimsuits—but their shouts of excitement soon turned to cries of disappointment.

The reason for that was clear.

"You're not wearing bathing suits?!"

Yeah, Hitoshi's the one who's most *disappointed. Though he really should've known, given that we're wearing the same thing too.*

The girls who appeared were wearing wet suits designed for scuba diving—and of course, so were the guys who had finished changing beforehand.

That was why the girls hadn't exactly come before us in bathing suits...though maybe a wet suit technically qualified as a swimming suit? It was a *wet* suit, after all.

In any case, the guys who had expected to see some skin all let

out cries of lament.

"They're wearing wet suits, so of course they wouldn't be revealing," I muttered.

"That's not it, man. I was hoping for something like this," Hitoshi countered.

Before I could ask, "Like what?" Hitoshi explained to me very clearly what he had been hoping for. To put it simply, he was expecting the girls to show up with the tops of their wet suits unzipped. We were only going to be doing warm-ups to start, so he thought at least *one* of them might waltz in while wearing their wet suit just on the bottom. But his hopes had met a crushing defeat.

"Oh, come on. They already said that they're gonna do a swimwear fashion show later," I said, trying to console him.

"But I wanted to see them with their wet suits half off too," he sobbed.

It's almost refreshing to see a guy so loyal to his desires.

The girls were all wearing formfitting suits that showed off the curves of their bodies, and the guys were too. Our suits matched, though they were in several different colors.

The design was actually pretty cool, and if someone tried to tell me that we were actually wearing superhero costumes, I would have totally believed them. We were completely covered, from our wrists all the way to our ankles. It wasn't at all a revealing outfit, so none of the girls seemed to be embarrassed about wearing it either.

"What do you think, Yoshin? Do I look okay?" Nanami asked, appearing before me in a fitted suit that incorporated a light blue line as an accent. Hers seemed to be the exact same design as mine, just in a different color.

"Yeah, you look great. You look cute...no, cool?" I stopped to wonder, then finally settled on the more appropriate comment. "Yeah, you look very cute."

"Tee hee, you look good in your suit too. And we kind of match, which I like."

"Matching outfits, huh? Though they *are* the same design, just different colors, so maybe you're right," I agreed.

"I'm so glad that the rental was a cute one," Nanami continued. She must have taken a liking to her suit, because she began

stretching and bending her arm, even striking different poses to show me, like she was modeling the wet suit itself.

If you think about it, though, doesn't it mean that the entire class *is matching? Nanami, matching with someone other than me? No wait, Yoshin. If you start down that path, we won't even be able to wear our uniforms anymore. Haven't I been creeping close to some pretty dangerous thoughts more than usual? I need to reel it in.*

"But a wet suit is actually kind of tight. Like, there's no give *at all*. My chest and hips are really getting squeezed," Nanami said. She asked me whether I thought anything looked weird, all the while running her hands just close enough to her chest to barely not be touching.

Her gesture was making me terribly nervous. I wasn't losing control yet, but it wasn't going to take much longer for me to do so if she kept that up.

"Not at all. It's cute," I eked out.

"Hee hee, thanks. It's a little embarrassing to wear the bathing suit in front of everyone, but a wet suit isn't revealing at all, so it's not a big deal."

"I've actually always wanted to ask, but are you okay with your uniform being revealing?" I asked.

"I guess it's just something I'm already used to. Would I be okay with my bathing suit too once I get used to it?" Nanami murmured.

I'm not so sure I want *you to get used to that.*

I was seeing a wet suit up close for the first time, but it really showed off the outlines of the body, enough to make up for its lack of exposure. This, of course, meant that Nanami's curvy body was on display for the world to see... Okay, that sounded weird, but the suit really did accentuate her curves!

The suit must have been made of some kind of rubber, because even as she moved, her body remained contained and without anything jiggling around. The fact that it kept things in place, though, meant that it somewhat emphasized the size of those soft parts.

It was almost as if in this wet suit her body took on a unique roundness; soft and supple, yet the rubber provided a sense of firm stability. That was the only way to describe it.

Could this actually be a really racy outfit, even though it doesn't

show anything? I can't really seem to judge…but I also can't look away.

As I watched Nanami—and let a smorgasbord of thoughts come to my mind and then disappear just as quickly—I noticed her behavior gradually begin to change.

At first she was moving excitedly, as if she were happy to have me looking at her. Slowly, though, her movements grew smaller. They became smaller and less pronounced, until finally both of her hands… *Wait, huh?*

"Y-Yoshin, you're staring too much. When you look at me like that, even I get embarrassed," she murmured.

"Oh, sorry! I didn't realize…"

"N-No, um, it's not that I dislike it. It's just…your gaze was so intense, and even though I knew you were only looking, it almost felt like you were touching me too," Nanami whispered, blushing and stealing glances at me.

Huh? It's not like the suit has somehow gotten more revealing…and given that she's got her arms wrapped around her body, I should be able to see even less than before…

And yet, Nanami somehow appeared even sexier than a moment ago. Something I hadn't felt before burst into me like a wave, and even I turned scarlet.

Is this what shame feels like? Indeed, the sight that had given me zero problems a moment ago suddenly felt like something I wasn't supposed to be looking at at all.

I see. This has been an important lesson. Modesty is key. I knew it as a conceptual fact, but actually seeing it play out in front of me really does bring it home.

"You're thinking something weird again, aren't you?" Nanami said.

"N-No, not at all," I insisted.

Nanami glared at me while she kept her arms wrapped around her body. I couldn't help laughing a bit at the unusual situation. *What I was thinking isn't anything too weird…is it?*

That was when I realized, though, that the sensation of being stared at didn't just come from Nanami.

I felt like I was being targeted, and that my skin was tingling to alert me of it. So I looked around me to see what was going on. I thought that maybe someone in my class was looking at me, but when I looked around, I saw that not only everyone in my class,

but also all the other participants in the diving lesson—both Japanese and non-Japanese, all wearing their wet suits—were staring at me.

You've gotta be kidding me.

Both Nanami and I were so freaked out by what we realized that we both jumped in the air slightly. Nanami was so confused that she kept looking around, saying, "Huh? Huh?!"

When I surveyed my surroundings once again, I saw that everyone was looking at us as though they were watching a terribly heartwarming scene. *Can someone tell me what's going on here?!*

"Look here, everyone! This is the famous Japanese 'adorkable couple'! Nowadays they're a rare species, even in Japan, so don't miss this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to witness this for yourself! Oh, please do refrain from taking pictures, as they are, just like us, ordinary people. Thank you for your cooperation!"

What the hell is that guy doing?!

Hitoshi seemed to be pulling some kind of publicity stunt, so I rushed to grab a hold of him.

"Hey, man—what do you think you're doing?!" I demanded.

"Well, you see…"

Apparently the people who had gathered for the beginner's lesson had asked Hitoshi about us—specifically, about whether Nanami and I were fighting. When Hitoshi explained it was merely an instance of a Japanese couple flirting with each other, more and more people came and began to observe me and Nanami.

How did that happen? I was confused, but Nanami seemed even more confused than I was. Well, in any case, the first priority was to make sure that Nanami wasn't being harmed in any way.

The moment I started to pay more attention to my surroundings, I heard Hitoshi giving explanations in quite fluent English. *This guy really can do most things pretty effortlessly. That's amazing.*

"All righty, now if we can just get a kiss from the couple for the audience?" Hitoshi requested.

"As if we would, you idiot!" I shouted.

Just as soon as I'd complimented him in my mind, he managed to take things one step too far. I decided at least to do what I could and stand in front of Nanami to shield her from view, but even that

ended up getting everyone riled up.

I wasn't sure if it was because they were the type to come to a tourist attraction like this, or if this was just the nature of the Hawaiian people, but they seemed almost too eager to go along with this kind of a spectacle. It couldn't have been a bad thing, but it was embarrassing to be in the middle of it all.

This observation of me and Nanami would continue for a bit longer, until the guide—or was it the instructor?—for the diving lessons arrived on-site.

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"Wait, so you can't swim?" Nanami asked.

"Huh? Did I not tell you?"

All the people around us had finally stopped looking at me and Nanami…though I honestly wasn't expecting such a thing to happen while we were abroad. The diving seminar that took place afterward went smoothly too. Even the instructor seemed to have singled us out, though, because they kept telling us that we couldn't flirt with each other too much while we were underwater.

Dang it, but we honestly had nothing to do with all that ruckus earlier! Or was it actually our fault for acting like we always did, without being more mindful of our surroundings? It was said that good or bad depended on the context, but I never thought I'd experience that for myself.

All right, no more excuses. At least we were done with the beginner's diving seminar. Now it's time to actually dive.

Nanami seemed taken aback by the fact that I couldn't swim, but I felt like I had told her before, maybe when we went to the beach or the pool. Maybe I hadn't, though. Or even if I had, I might've said something about how I wasn't good at it, not that I couldn't do it at all.

"Well, it's less that I can't swim and more that I haven't really had a lot of experience swimming in general. That's why I don't feel like I can swim properly," I explained. I knew that I was being vague, but even *I* couldn't properly judge whether I could swim or not. I wasn't entirely hopeless in the water, but I also didn't feel like I could comfortably swim in open water. But then, if that was what I meant, I guess it might be worth asking what I *was* good at.

I'd never thought seriously about what my special skills were. At this point, I didn't really think I had any.

"What do you do when we swim for class?" Nanami asked.

"I actually struggle with that a lot. I feel like that's kind of my limit," I replied.

"I see, I had no idea," Nanami said. "We've gone to the beach and the pool and stuff, so I just assumed."

"Well, those times we actually just hung out in the water instead of swimming. I can't swim, but that doesn't mean I'm scared of being in the water," I explained.

Nanami somehow seemed impressed by this new piece of information about me, looking at me with her lips slightly parted...but then she immediately gasped, as though she'd remembered something.

"I'm surprised that you want to go diving. Or did you force yourself because I wanted to go? And maybe all the other times too?" she asked.

"No, not at all. Swimming and diving are different things. At least, I heard they were. And as long as I'm with you, anything is fun."

Although Nanami remained solemn while she splashed around in the water, I really meant what I said. Besides, like I said earlier, I wasn't necessarily afraid of the water. Even during swimming sessions for PE, I managed somehow...though I was extremely slow.

Nanami took a step toward me, as if cheered up by what I had said, and then attached herself to me. *She really shouldn't worry about any of this.*

Right now, Nanami and I were wading around in the shallow part of the water, waiting for our turn to go diving.

It was obvious if you stopped to think about it, actually: Due to the size of the diving seminar, we couldn't all go into the water at the same time. We were to go in groups, with a few of us diving at a time accompanied by one instructor. Of course we couldn't do everyone in our grade...or even our class, all at the same time. If anything were to happen while so many people were in the water, it would be extremely dangerous.

From our group, Otofuke-san, Kamoenai-san, and Hitoshi had gone ahead of us. As for me and Nanami...

“So you chose diving, eh, Taku-chan?” Shirishizu-san was saying.

“Well, ’cause…we said before that maybe we could go together one day. So I thought maybe you’d be here,” Teshikaga-kun replied.

“Why didn’t you tell me beforehand? Then we would’ve known for sure.”

“I mean, it was kinda embarrassing, and I thought…that it might be too late.”

“Jeez, this wimpy delinquent… If I had known you’d be here, I would’ve worn a sexier bathing suit,” Shirishizu-san murmured.

“Wait, Kotoha-san—what are you talking about, exactly? You did *not* pack some crazy swimsuit to Hawaii!”

“I’m not telling you anything, you chicken. Though I’d be more than happy to show you if you wanna see it.”

The two of them were having a conversation that sounded straight out of a rom-com. Shirishizu-san’s facial expression wasn’t much different from usual, but I could tell from her remarks that she was quite delighted by how things were developing.

Teshikaga-kun had actually turned out to be at the diving site, and he even managed to join up with Shirishizu-san without any problems—though it was less that he joined up with her than she dragged him along.

I didn’t think I could ever forget the expression on Shirishizu-san’s face when she brought him over to where we were. I was too scared to even ask how she managed to arrange for him to go diving with her.

“Have you ever gone scuba diving, Teshikaga-kun?” I asked.

“Uh, yes. I was hoping to go diving with Kotoha one day, so I did a lot of prep for it,” he replied.

Shirishizu-san widened her eyes at his response. I was surprised too, but it was probably nothing compared to how shocked she was.

One said that you could never be too prepared, but just how much did Teshikaga-kun prepare while he was apart from Shirishizu-san?

Oh, looks like Shirishizu-san is quivering.

“You were doing all that, and yet you never even *talked* to me?” she murmured.

“It’s just that, you know…guys have a lot to think about,” he

muttered as well.

"And what were you gonna do if someone else showed up and started banging me?!"

"Wait, Kotoha, where did you learn to say things like that? Who taught you? Who's been teaching you stuff like that?!"

Teshikaga-kun looked ready to vomit upon hearing such unholy words coming out of Shirishizu-san's mouth. *Yeah, I guess that* would *be the reaction if the person you liked suddenly said something like that. So, why aren't these two going out yet? No, they* must *be going out. They said that they weren't yet before we came to Hawaii, but…*

"Come on, you two! Hatsumi and the others are back now, so it's almost our turn," Nanami said, stepping in between the two of them. I glanced at the shore and saw the last diving group make their way toward us.

"The water here is so much clearer than in Japan. It was absolutely gorgeous," Otofuke-san stated.

"There were so many different kinds of fish! I wished I could've touched them," Kamoenai-san remarked.

"When I was a kid, I read in a children's book about beauty that pictures couldn't capture," Otofuke-san added. "Did we just see that?"

"The sea turtles were amazing too," Hitoshi joined in. "Seeing them in real life was super cool."

Each person seemed to have their own reaction. They must have seen quite a range of things. Hearing them exchange their thoughts made me even more excited for my turn to dive.

Maybe because the wet suits were heavy, or because it was hot, but everyone was sitting down with the tops of their suits unzipped.

Everyone was wearing bathing suits underneath, but…

"D-Dammit, they're all wearing rash guards under their suits," Hitoshi bemoaned.

"If only diving helped wash your mind as well as your body," Otofuke-san muttered. "All the beautiful things we saw underwater and *that's* what you want to talk about? At least you're consistent."

Yet her incisive comment did nothing to stop Hitoshi from continuing to lament his lot in life. *Yeah, consistency is the one thing*

he's got going for him. Though I think it'd be okay even if he wavered a little, at least in this.

This time, however, there was someone willing to be Hitoshi's savior.

"Heh heh heh, everyone except *me*! What do you think?"

"Huh? Oh…oooh!"

It was Kamoenai-san. Like everyone else, she had the top of her wet suit off—except she wasn't wearing a rash guard underneath her suit. She wore a bikini top instead, providing a generous display of skin.



Wow, what an interesting look, to be wearing a bikini with the top of your wet suit off.

The guys cheered, while the girls sighed in relief as the guys' attention shifted to Kamoenai-san. *Did she wear that to take the pressure off the other girls? Though now she's getting all into posing and stuff for people.*

"Is Kamoenai-san okay? Or is she trying to make her boyfriend jealous or something?" I asked Nanami.

"Nah, Ayumi just doesn't really like wearing rash guards. And she's probably just hyped up after diving," Nanami said, shaking her head. I was relieved that Kamoenai-san didn't have anything questionable in mind. Everyone else seemed to be getting all excited now that Kamoenai-san had appeared, though.

"So, are you wearing a rash guard underneath too?" I asked.

"Yup. You disappointed?"

I asked because I couldn't help myself, but it seemed Nanami, too, was wearing a rash guard. *Disappointed, though?*

"A little bit," I confessed.

"It's good that you're honest," Nanami laughed.

I admit that I was also relieved. The thought of Nanami wearing just a bikini on top like Kamoenai-san when there were so many people around made me a little nervous.

It was half disappointment, half relief, maybe.

"Just for the record, I'm wearing my usual bikini *underneath* my rash guard. Do you wanna see it? You've seen it before, though, so maybe it wouldn't be that interesting..."

"Of course I do," I replied immediately, cutting her off. *I mean, of* course *I wanna see it. How can I not? I don't care how many times I've seen it before.* An unzipped rash guard over a familiar bikini also seemed like a nice touch. A touch of what, I had no idea, but still.

"I'll show you later, when we're alone," Nanami whispered, shyly glancing away from me. *She's...gonna show me later? Here?* That required us to break away from the rest of the group and hide away somewhere, just the two of us. That seemed highly questionable.

As Nanami and I were having our exchange, though, it seemed our turn had finally come up: The instructor called over me, Nanami, Teshikaga-kun, and Shirishizu-san.

The instructor reviewed the equipment with us while we went over how to put everything on. Once we had everything on, though, it felt *heavy*.

"Nanami, are you okay?" I asked.

"Yeah, I'm okay," she replied. "But it is a lot, huh?"

Our weights and oxygen tanks were pretty heavy. We also had to walk a bit first to get to the water, so I worried if Nanami was going to be okay. I had thought about this too when we got our lesson earlier, but I had assumed that we were going to take a boat or something out to sea. I wasn't expecting to dive directly from the shore.

"Okay, shall we head out, then?" the instructor proposed. We all then followed them and headed out to sea. Each step felt very heavy. Most of it was probably because of the weights I was wearing, but there was probably some amount of psychological weight on top of that too. I was looking forward to this, but given what a worrywart I was, I couldn't deny that I also felt a bit of fear—and that made it harder for me to walk. It wasn't totally uncommon for there to be accidents while diving too.

Was I weird for thinking about these things when we were about to head out on our fun scuba diving excursion? As I walked around with those thoughts in my head, Nanami—who was walking alongside me—touched me ever so slightly.

We didn't hold hands because of all the weight we were carrying, but just that slightest touch was enough.

"It'll be totally fine! If we do things properly, everything will be okay," Nanami reassured me, smiling broadly. It was the smile of a mother trying to comfort her child. Just seeing her made the bit of worry I felt slowly disappear.

What was clear from her remark, though, was that Nanami saw right through me.

Am I that *obvious? How embarrassing. I feel kind of pathetic…*

"What are you talking about?" I asked nonchalantly.

"Hm? You just seemed a little anxious. Was I wrong?" she asked.

"No," I muttered.

I tried to put up a tough front, but Nanami had me totally figured out. *Am I that much of an open book? But thanks to Nanami, I'm not feeling as nervous anymore.* All of a sudden my steps felt light, so much so that I nearly forgot about the weight of all the

equipment that was dragging me down just a moment ago.

“Thanks,” I said to Nanami.

“You’re welcome,” she replied, smiling.

And before we knew it, we had reached the edge of the water.

A cloudless blue sky, and a blue ocean to match. The gentle waves ebbed and flowed, lightly soaking our feet. White beach sand was made damp by the ocean, only to be dried instantly by the shining sun.

We walked slowly and stepped into the water, and even though we were in wet suits, we could feel how cold the water was. But the water gradually felt warmer, maybe because of the suits. Once we were waist deep in the ocean, we no longer felt the weight of our equipment either. We then began preparations to dive in according to our instructor’s directions.

“We won’t be able to chat for a little while, huh?” Nanami remarked just before she placed the diving regulator in her mouth. She was right: Since we were going to be underwater, it would be impossible to talk to each other.

I thought it would be nice to be able to chat while we were on our dive, but that wasn’t going to happen. Impossible things were impossible, after all.

When I told Nanami that we could talk all we wanted once we were done to make up for it, she smiled brightly. Since we were about to put on even more equipment, this would be the last smile of hers that I would get to see for a while.

We wore our masks and put the regulators in our mouths. We then quickly reviewed everything we had learned one more time…and then were led by the instructor into the ocean.

Gradually, my body sank into the sea. The water that had only been up to my waist began to cover me completely, but I continued breathing slowly, not panicking. I entered the water even deeper, and once my face slipped under the surface…all sound disappeared.

The sounds of people I had been hearing from the beach, the cries of birds, and the crashing of waves—everything dissolved instantaneously.

It was even more silent than when I had headphones on. There was no sound, but there was also no smell either. Maybe because we were underwater, but everything except the sense of touch

seemed to fade away.

At the same time, though, things in my field of vision also appeared clearer.

The only thing I could hear was the sound of my own breathing. Even though Nanami was next to me, I couldn't hear anything from her—though that was to be expected.

Now I understood how important hand signals were underwater. I knew that in my head, but I felt it even more strongly. Checking on the signals from the instructor, our group continued moving forward.

We were probably still in fairly shallow waters, but even then I was completely submerged. Still, we were somewhere we wouldn't ordinarily go.

The sparkling light from the sun reached the ocean floor, allowing me to still distinguish colors while in the water. And because we were in the shallows, every time we moved, the sand drifted about like smoke.

The water was incredibly clear despite the sand, though, and I spied small animals and fish swimming nearby that I'd never seen before in my life. When the instructor pointed to a reef, I could see small creatures hiding within.

They were striped and looked like strange...shrimp? Maybe. They were of different colors, some with black-and-white stripes, and others red and white.

Creatures in Hawaii had a completely different coloring from those in Japan. *Guess this is what it means to have ecosystems*.

I then realized that Nanami had come up next to me without me noticing. She seemed delighted to get to see a creature that she didn't ordinarily encounter.

"It's so cute and small!"

I couldn't hear her voice, and yet I distinctly felt she said that. When I tried to indicate that I agreed, Nanami must have understood, because she nodded happily.

It must've gotten across to her.

When the shrimplike creature hopped onto the instructor's hand, the instructor then offered the creature to me and Nanami. Once on my hand, the creature walked along my palm as though it were a rock. With each step I could feel the sensation of its legs tingle throughout my palm. *Gosh, this guy's actually kinda cute.*

I looked at Nanami and pointed to the shrimp, wondering if she wanted to hold the creature too. Nanami seemed a little nervous about it at first, but eventually she seemed to make up her mind and reached out for the guy.

With the shrimp now on her palms, Nanami extended her arms out and watched as it walked along her hands, her entire body quivering. She was probably super moved by the experience. I mean, the shrimp really *was* pretty cute. Nanami also kept looking back and forth between me and the shrimp, which was a super adorable reaction on her part as well.

"So cute! Yoshin, it's super cute!"

I thought I could hear Nanami's voice again. Though I guess I was just imagining what she would have said through her actions.

Maybe it was because the water we were in was clear, but even from a distance I could see Nanami's expressions through her goggles. She seemed to be smiling with pure joy, and seeing that made me happy too.

Shirishizu-san had also been handed the creature by the instructor and was now touching it gingerly. I couldn't see the expressions on her and Teshikaga-kun's faces, but they seemed to be having fun nonetheless.

My lack of swimming skills had me worried, but so far, I seemed to be doing all right. I had imagined that I would, but I hadn't been a hundred percent sure.

We spent some time in the shallow area looking around at various things, but once we got used to how diving felt, the instructor indicated that we were going to move on forward, and we followed suit.

We had started in the shallows, where sunlight cut through water like solid columns of light, and now we were gradually making our way toward deeper parts of the ocean, where the light grew more faint. As we moved deeper into the ocean everything became more blue; even distinct colors started to take on a blue tinge. As that tint became deeper, the water seemed to become even more clear. Maybe it was less clear in the shallows because sand tended to get kicked up back there.

From where we were floating now, it seemed like going either up or down would take us a long way. Farther out, the water appeared a dark navy blue—almost black.

When I looked out into that distance, I felt a shiver go up my spine.

It was strange, to know that we were now deep within the blue ocean that we had seen from the beach. Everything around us was that singular color, and even the ground that was visible appeared to adopt a beautiful shade of blue.

My entire being was surrounded by water. I had the feeling that if I panicked even slightly, I would immediately lose track of left or right, up or down.

In this moment I was both afraid of the ocean and in awe of its beauty.

Though we had moved deeper the sunlight still reached where we were, lighting up our surroundings. We had moved to a fairly deep spot, so I was surprised that it was still this bright.

The underwater world I'd seen on TV before had been super dark. That might have been the deep sea, though, where even sunlight couldn't reach. We probably couldn't go that far.

Being underwater like this gave me the illusion of floating in the air. Was this what it felt like to fly? The slight resistance I felt moving through the water only made me feel that way even more.

As we progressed farther, I realized that there were places where distinct colors blended into the blue world we were in. I approached upon the hand signal from the instructor to come closer...and saw that there were myriad schools of fish, of a plethora of colors, swimming in the water.

Because of their pigmentation, the spots where the fishes were swimming appeared to be shimmering against the blue backdrop. They swam in the way flower petals danced in the breeze.

It called to mind a children's book I read when I was small, about a palace under the sea. Did the fish in that book dance this same way? Not that these fish were sea bream or halibut, but still. Nanami, though, floated straight into that school of fish, as though magnetized. The fish shifted to avoid her slightly, but they continued floating around her, making no move to swim away. Nanami, too, appeared to be shimmering in the water.

The entire scene made her appear as though she had become a part of the school of fish.

Is this what mermaids are like?

The beauty of what I was seeing made me fantasize about a

Nanami who was half fish and half bikini-clad human. *A mermaid version of Nanami…would be* very *pretty.*

There was now some distance between us, so it was difficult to see her face. In my eyes, though, Nanami was among the fish with a big smile on her face. It was kind of like a vision I had, but she was probably…no, definitely smiling.

Just as I was thinking that I would be able to tell if I just got closer to her…Nanami came toward me instead. The fish came with her, though probably only by coincidence.

She took my hands next. We moved slowly, floating in place with our hands in each other's, as the fish continued to swim close by.

I could see the instructor taking pictures of us from a little ways away. Nanami used one of her hands to continue holding mine, while flashing a peace sign with the other.

Shirishizu-san and Teshikaga-kun were swimming as a pair too. It seemed that Teshikaga-kun, who had some experience scuba diving, was leading her.

Everyone was so athletic. Nanami's movements in the water were very smooth as well.

As I watched in admiration, Nanami spread her arms open and bent her body sideways at an angle. *Is this…what she's trying to tell me?*

I opened my arms and bent my body as well, trying to create a mirror image of her. When I turned my body in the direction I estimated to be the same as hers, my hands grazed against Nanami's.

I was pretty sure that we'd managed to create a heart shape with our arms.

I couldn't move my body as well as I usually did because of my wet suit, but I probably got it pretty close. Our instructor was getting photos of us in this pose too.

I didn't know that you could take photos underwater. A part of me couldn't help but wonder how they would turn out. Nanami seemed very happy that we'd gotten our photos taken, and I couldn't wait to see them when we got back to shore.

I was also happy that I could sense what Nanami wanted to do just from her actions, even if there were no words exchanged between us.

Looking around, I saw that Shirishizu-san and Teshikaga-kun were also posing in the same way as well. Was this some kind of iconic underwater pose? Teshikaga-kun seemed kind of awkward, though.

After that, we all continued moving through the ocean slowly.

I knew this was cliché, but the ocean was huge and vast—a blue so deep and clear I felt as if it could swallow me whole.

Didn't someone say that the earth was blue when seen from outer space? Being underwater was nearly the polar opposite of being in space, but I could almost say the same thing about being here as out there.

That was how blue and pretty everything was. I knew it was a super ordinary way to describe it, but it was the kind of view that had you grasping for words.

As we continued on underwater, I saw something enter my field of vision that clearly wasn't a fish.

It was larger than a normal fish, was square-shaped, and had a long taillike thing growing out of its body. At first glance, it looked a lot like a kite—its length was a lot longer than my own height. Beside us there was a group of about six of them swimming together. *Are these mantas?* They were moving the edges of their bodies as if they were flapping them somehow, and swimming straight forward almost like weirdly shaped birds.

We stopped where we were and watched while the mantas swam before us.

Next to me was Nanami, and I saw that Shirishizu-san and Teshikaga-kun were a bit farther away. And I...took Nanami's hand very gently.

I was getting used to making my way in the water, so as long as we weren't moving around too much, I could manage these small gestures. Though this was probably my limit.

Nanami glanced at me. She and I then finished seeing off the mantas, growing smaller and smaller in the distance as they swam away.

While we were sending off the mantas, Nanami tugged slightly on my hand. I turned to her and saw her point at a spot away from the mantas. Following the line of her finger led me to see sea turtles. It was my first time seeing them in real life, and I had to admit I had no idea that that was how they swam.

We followed our instructor and approached the turtles. They looked very graceful as they swam, but also quite endearing.

That was when I happened to look up.



The surface of the water spread above us like the sky, and up above us was a giant light—the sun. To be able to look up at the sun as it was reflected in the water felt surreal.

Nanami, too, looked up, and then she and I looked at each other. We were so close, I could see her smiling.

She and I let go of each other's hands and continued swimming forward, side by side. The scenery before us, beautiful on its own, felt even more so now that Nanami was next to me.

What would I see next? What thoughts would I share with Nanami when we returned to shore? I continued moving forward in the water, excited about what was to come.

Interlude: To Undress and Be Undressed

The ocean was so much more beautiful than I ever imagined it to be.

Before our dive, I used to think that the ocean I'd seen in picture books and kids' movies was so pretty. The real thing, though, was infinitely more amazing.

I've heard that people tend to glamorize the past, but for me, the present scenery was more beautiful than anything else.

Creatures I'd never seen before, schools of fish in so many colors, sea turtles I'd only seen on TV... Everything was overflowing with colors.

It was so fun and *so* pretty. The person I loved was next to me too. Being able to immerse myself in this world like this had me nearly overcome with joy. Maybe that was why the present seemed so much lovelier to me than the past.

Especially when the mantas—or rays?—went swimming past us, for some reason I felt so incredibly moved. I never knew that rays were so cute. Wait, what are they actually called?

Then we saw the sea turtles, and then we were surprised by a fairly large fish that came swimming close to us...and then, it was time to return to shore.

Time seemed to move so fast; all of a sudden it seemed that our diving session was over. Still, given that Yoshin and I couldn't chat while we were in the water, I wanted to hear his voice as soon as I could. Diving was pretty and fun, but the fact that we couldn't talk was making me feel kind of lonely. I liked Yoshin's voice. Not that I had a voice fetish or anything, but.

Maybe I was just imagining it, but as soon as I started thinking that I felt lonely... Being in the ocean suddenly felt a little scary.

What scared me was how deep the ocean was—because just before I turned and began making my way back, I happened to turn around.

What I saw was a navy blue ocean that was impossible to see into—water that was so clear, beautiful, and full of life, with all of it steeped in the color of the night. The more I looked the more I

sensed that I was being lured into a place that would never end, no matter how deep I dove, a place where I could keep going forever.

For no reason, I felt like something was stirring inside of me.

I'd heard that the ocean was the mother of all living things. Maybe that was what was giving me this strange desire to return somewhere familiar.

But I couldn't stay here forever. I had to go back.

Without thinking, I gripped Yoshin's hand tight, and the moment I did I could feel myself immediately calm down. The ocean that had scared me for a moment became, once again, the beautiful place that I was seeing earlier. *It's okay... I'm okay.*

Just then, Yoshin peered into my face through our goggles.

I had a feeling I might have worried him there, so I signaled to him that I was okay. I saw him smile, as though he was relieved.

As we turned to head back to the beach, Yoshin pointed somewhere. When I glanced in that direction...

Oh...!

There was a pod of dolphins.

I never thought I'd be able to see *dolphins*. They were all swimming next to each other, occasionally turning in circles, even touching their noses together.

We all stopped in our tracks to gaze at the dolphins. *They're so cute. Dolphins, huh? They remind me of my aquarium date with Yoshin. A little girl got lost that day, and Yoshin got me a present too. Gosh, I didn't think I'd get to see dolphins so close, though. I didn't, but...um, is it just me, or are the dolphins getting bigger...?*

The instructor gave the signal that it was time for us to head back, so even though it was a shame to go, we began to return toward the beach.

I can't believe we got to see dolphins at the very end of our dive. This whole experience has been incredible.

As I made my way back, basking in the afterglow of having experienced something amazing, I felt something approaching me from behind.

It wasn't that I could hear it; it was more that I felt the movement of the water, a strange kind of pressure around me. I thought I was imagining it, but I wasn't. The identity of what was coming closer soon became clear.

It was the pod of dolphins from earlier.

Before I knew it, the dolphins were swimming around us as we neared the beach. *So I didn't just imagine them getting bigger a little while ago?!*

The dolphins were already swimming so close by that I was pretty sure I could reach out and touch them.

Wow, wow! I would've never thought that I'd get to swim with dolphins! The unexpected turn of events was getting me super excited.

It almost felt like we'd become a part of their pod. I wondered what the dolphins thought of us. I couldn't be sure, but they seemed to enjoy swimming around us too.

Out of all of them, though, my eyes caught the sight of the two dolphins swimming closest to us. The other dolphins seemed to be in groups of at least four or five, but the two that were nearest to us were swimming very close to each other, just the two of them.

Are they a couple?

We swam with the dolphins until we neared the shore. *I wonder how far they'll come with us. They can't possibly come all the way to where we'd be able to stand. I've seen videos of people trying to help beached dolphins get back in the ocean. Oh, now I'm getting kind of worried.*

That worry, though, turned out to be for naught.

Just before we reached the shallows where just moments ago we were practicing how to dive, the dolphins that had been swimming alongside us turned and stopped swimming forward.

As they proceeded to spin vertically and horizontally, evening flipping in place, the distance between us and the dolphins began to slowly grow.

Out of all the dolphins, the two that had been closest to us continued swimming with us until the end. *Are they trying to see us off somehow?*

In the end, though, it was time for us to say goodbye to even those two dolphins. Yoshin and I waved to them in unison and bid our farewell.

At that moment, the two dolphins turned...and I thought I heard them crying.

We were underwater, so I didn't think I could actually hear

anything, but I could have sworn that I did. Yoshin also turned and looked at me, so maybe he heard something too.

When he and I waved again, the two dolphins turned away, their fins swaying, and proceeded to swim back into the ocean. It didn't take long for us to lose sight of them.

I wonder if I'll ever get to see them again.

With that lingering feeling, I slowly returned to shore.

♢ ♢ ♢

"I didn't realize it when we were diving, but I guess you use up a lot of energy underwater, huh?" Yoshin said.

"Yeah, I'm totally exhausted," I sighed.

I was tired, but I broke into a smile upon finally being able to hear Yoshin's voice. I should have realized this before, but I hadn't been able to hear his voice at all while we were diving.

The moment I got out of the water my body felt like a pile of rocks. We had swum slowly toward the beach, surfaced...and the moment I stepped out of the ocean, I felt so much weight hit me that at first I didn't know what happened. I knew that we felt lighter in the water because of buoyancy, but I'd never felt it so much as this. Our equipment especially felt heavier than before we went into the ocean. Yoshin let me lean on him when I accidentally stumbled, even though he must have been feeling all the weight too.

"You want some water, Nanami?" he asked, extending a bottle out toward me.

"Oh, thanks," I replied. "Is this an indirect kiss?"

"No, no. It's brand-new. They were passing them out," he explained.

"Darn. I see."

When I looked more closely, I saw that Yoshin had another bottle in his own hand. I had thought that we were going to share one bottle of water, but...

Was it weird to feel this way even though we'd already kissed normally? But even though we had kissed, an indirect kiss could still make my heart flutter.

When I took a sip from the water bottle, I felt the taste of salt—the taste of the ocean—getting washed away from my mouth. The

sticky feeling I had also disappeared.

Water is best in times like this. I feel super refreshed now.

"Man, it's hot. I wanna take this off too," Yoshin remarked, finishing his water and slowly trying to take off his wet suit. Because the type that we were wearing was hard to take off, though, he asked, "Sorry, Nanami. Can you help me with the zipper?"

"Oh, sure. This one?" I said, pinching the fastener on the zipper of Yoshin's wet suit as he turned his back toward me. The moment I moved to unzip his suit, though, my hand froze.

Huh? I'm *gonna do it? I mean, I know I am, but…aren't I technically undressing him? I'm getting nervous.*

It was a wet suit, not regular clothes. Still, that didn't change the fact that I was lowering his zipper.

"Something wrong, Nanami?" Yoshin asked.

"Oh, yeah. No, everything's fine. Totally fine."

I didn't know *what* was fine, exactly, but my response made Yoshin tilt his head. *No, yeah. I'm just undressing him, that's all.*

Once I was slightly calmer, I slowly lowered his zipper. When I caught a glimpse of Yoshin's skin, my heart skipped a beat…no, *many* beats.

Yoshin really does work out. Consistently too, looks like. He's so cut. I'm so jealous. I've never really studied his back before, but it looks so good. His skin is really nice too. And it looks extra sexy because it's wet.

I examined Yoshin's muscles closely as I lowered his zipper. Then I announced, "I unzipped it. I'll help you undress now, okay?"

"Huh? No, wait, Nana—"

Without waiting for his response, I inserted my hands into the opening between the wet suit and his skin and tugged. Yoshin must have given up, because he pulled his arm out of the suit without further resistance.

I pulled out his other arm, lowered his suit slightly, and…finished.

"Yup, as handsome as I expected," I declared.

"You think so?" Yoshin asked suspiciously, his entire body dripping with water. The drops trickling from his bangs must have bothered him, because he moved to sweep his hair up. A part of his forehead became visible, and the sight of his hair styled in an unfamiliar way made my heart beat faster. The peek of his abs

from the partially unzipped wet suit was really sexy too.

"Okay, now my turn!" I said giddily.

"I have to do it too?" he murmured.

I turned around and spread both arms out to my sides to indicate for him to proceed. Yoshin was reluctant at first but, as if defeated, touched my zipper with his fingers.

He then slowly began to unzip my suit.

That unique buzzing sound that came with a moving zipper reverberated throughout my body. *Huh? Wait, I didn't even think about it, but is this the first time he's undressing me like this? I mean, I know it's not clothes, but was there ever a time when Yoshin helped me out of a piece of clothing that had a zipper like this?*

I tried to think back, but the fact that I was being undressed only filled my head with panic. It was thus impossible to remember what had, or hadn't, happened before.

"Nanami? It's unzipped now," Yoshin whispered.

"Hah?!"

He had unzipped my suit without me realizing it. Technically he wasn't whispering, but in my state of confusion, he sounded like he was.

"Y-Yeah, um, right. Th-then, I guess I should get my arms out," I stammered.

"U-Um, shall I help?" he offered.

"Y-Yeah. Can you give me a hand?"

My confusion must have spread to Yoshin, because he was now offering to help me take my wet suit off. I felt like he would never do that under normal circumstances.

Huh? Help me take my suit off?

It was already too late by the time I had come to my senses. Yoshin was very gently, slowly, pulling my hands out of my suit.

Before it was just the zipper, but this time he was taking my arms out of my sleeves. I didn't know whether to panic or to be embarrassed by the fact that he was undressing me.

Is getting undressed by your boyfriend supposed to be this *nerve-racking?*

It was just a wet suit, but given that I was wearing it, it was no different from regular clothes. If anything, the suit was tighter than regular clothes, which made Yoshin have to spend more time with his hands on my body than he might have otherwise.

But it wasn't unpleasant.

I knew I was being undressed, but I didn't feel at all scared or uncomfortable. I felt super embarrassed, but that was all.

If there ever comes a time for Yoshin to undress me like this…

When I imagined it, I felt nervous, but also kind of restless—anticipatory. *When that time comes, will I undress Yoshin too?*

"Nanami, are you okay?" he asked.

"Oh! Um, yeah, totally. Thank you."

"You really are wearing your rash guard, huh?"

"Yuppers. Are you disappointed? And just so you know, I am most *definitely* wearing my bikini under this," I said playfully, flipping my rash guard slightly and showing it to Yoshin, trying to conceal my nervousness. Of course, I made sure that only he could see it.

It was my usual bathing suit, so I wasn't too embarrassed, and I could tell that my bathing suit was totally in place too. I therefore knew that I wasn't doing anything too risky by flashing him a peek, but it seemed to have just the right effect on him.

Yoshin scolded me, saying that it was still the middle of the day.

He was right: It was still daytime, so what in the world was I fantasizing about? If it was gonna turn out like this, I should have been fantasizing at night.

"Still, it was amazing being underwater, wasn't it? I'd never seen the ocean look so beautiful before," Yoshin shared.

"Seriously! We got to see so many different colored fish!" I exclaimed. "What was your favorite part?"

"I think the group of mantas—or are they called rays? Actually, are mantas and rays different things?" he wondered out loud. "What about you, Nanami?"

"For me, it's probably the dolphins we saw at the end. I wasn't expecting to get to see them, or to swim with them, no less."

"Yeah, the dolphins were a real surprise, huh? It was so cool we got to swim alongside them," he agreed.

"Wasn't it super surprising? Weren't the two that were swimming together so adorable? You think there's such a thing as dolphin couples?"

Yoshin and I sat down to exchange our thoughts on our diving experience. The only time we got to share our opinions like this was when we went on our movie dates. It then occurred to me

that maybe the real meat of a movie date was chatting about the movie *after* seeing it. That was how fun it was to talk with Yoshin about our respective thoughts.

Our first scuba diving experience, the beautiful sights we saw, the various sea creatures like sea turtles and dolphins… We had so many topics to discuss that we could never run out of them. I felt like I could talk with him forever.

As we continued chatting, though, I felt someone looking at me. Actually, they weren't looking at me; they seemed to be looking at Yoshin.

Don't misunderstand me; it's not like I have a sixth sense for when someone's looking at Yoshin. It was more like a woman's intuition. Or, rather, I guess I also felt someone looking at me too. But the gaze seemed to be directed away from me at regular intervals, which was why I thought that maybe their main target was Yoshin instead.

When I got curious and looked around, I saw a few of the girls looking in our direction. *They're saying something and getting all excited too. What's going on? Oh, they're coming this way. It's girls from another class, ones I've talked to a few times before too. They're on the gyaru-side…or maybe more like the sexy type.*

"Hey, you're pretty muscular!" one of them said to Yoshin. "Nanami mentioned it a while ago, but I guess she wasn't lying, huh? You've totally got abs and stuff."

"Really? I feel like there are a lot of guys who are like this," Yoshin muttered.

Uhhh, I'm pretty sure that's not true. Even if I look at the other guys, I have a feeling there aren't that many with abs like Yoshin. At least among the guys I'm seeing now.

The girls seemed to have been looking at Yoshin's abs and the muscles on the other parts of his body—and then stealing glances at me as well.

"Do you always get to touch these abs?" another girl asked me. "That's so nice. He's way more muscular than my boyfriend. I'm so jealous."

"I always get super excited when my boyfriend pushes me down," another said. "What about you, Nanami?"

"Um, well…he doesn't really do stuff like that to me," I mumbled.

The girls suddenly sharing what sounded like pretty intimate information made Yoshin and I just smile awkwardly. These girls didn't seem hesitant to talk about stuff like that, so I didn't quite know what to say. Yoshin didn't seem to know how to reply either; he just laughed uncomfortably.

Even though I knew that he didn't usually look this way, I also couldn't help being irked by it somehow. People might think that I was being possessive, but I didn't like him looking at other girls like…

No, this is no good. If I'm too controlling, he wouldn't like it. I would just burden him.

The girls were talking about stuff like this, but they probably didn't mean any harm either. They were just asking things they wanted to know…

"Hey, let me touch your abs a bit! I wanna know what it feels like," said one of the girls.

But just as I was about to jump in and shout *No!*, Yoshin put his hand out. It was a gesture of clear refusal.

"Sorry, I can't let you do that. Nanami is the only one that I let touch me. I absolutely can't let people do something like that when I have a girlfriend," he declared.

Yoshin—now with no trace of the troubled smile he had had on his face earlier—calmly expressed his refusal with a serious expression to accompany his gesture.

The girls seemed taken back. For a minute they just looked back and forth between me and Yoshin.

"Huh? Is it really that big of a deal to touch someone's stomach? Even though they're not boobs? I let people other than my boyfriend touch me all the time," one of them murmured.

"Me too. I did pretty well on my diet, so I had one of the guys in my class check for me. He said that I was skinnier than before," another shared.

"I *make* people touch me, and sometimes I touch other guys too," another girl said. "Pudgy guys are better than muscleheads, I think. They feel good."

Wow, this is quite the culture shock. Wait, they all have other people touch them like that? This new revelation had me in quite a shock.

Yoshin looked pretty surprised too, but he quickly smiled slightly and explained, "These are just my opinions, so I'm sure

there are people who think differently. I just feel that, if I have a girlfriend, then I shouldn't let other girls touch me so indiscriminately."

He also added softly that people might say his thinking was old-fashioned. The girls, though, looked at him with their mouths half open as they crossed their arms. They then looked down at their own stomachs, as though somehow impressed with what they were hearing.

"That's why I can't let you all touch me. I'm sorry," Yoshin finally said, expressing his refusal once more.

The girls, though, apologized to him in unison and said, "No, sorry we said something weird."

I thought that was the end of the discussion, but then the girls suddenly turned toward me, their unexpected movement startling me.

"Sorry, Nanami. We totally weren't thinking," one of the girls said.

"I thought it was totally fine as long as we weren't kissing or having sex. I mean, I don't mind if it's just my underwear."

"I see, I see. So the stomach is a no-go. Maybe I shouldn't let the other guys in the class touch me either."

The girls seemed to have understood what Yoshin was trying to say—though, honestly, the fact that they had a different perspective than we did was probably just due to a difference in life experience. The girls weren't bad people, so they seemed willing to accept opinions that were different from their own. That was what I thought, but...

"Then how about you touch Misumai's abs instead of us, Nanami?" one of them suggested.

"Excuse me?" both Yoshin and I said at the same time. *Wait, how do we reach* that *conclusion? And what do they mean, me instead of them?*

"What do you mean?"

Oh, Yoshin's question is the same as mine. No, I mean, really—how did we get there? When we asked what they meant, though, their suggestion seemed actually rather simple.

"We just wanna hear what you think when you touch his abs," one of the girls explained.

Is that really something to be so blatantly curious about? Seriously?

Wh-What should I do?

"I guess given what I said earlier, I can't tell Nanami that she *can't* touch me," Yoshin mumbled.

Yoshin's seriousness is coming through! But it's kind of embarrassing to touch his abs when everyone is looking. And they're all looking so intently*...*

That was when I grabbed a hold of Yoshin's hand.

"Huh?!" he let out.

"Let's go over there!" I shouted.

I took his hand and dashed off, as if to get away. I was aiming for the rocks in the distance. If we got that far, they probably wouldn't be able to see us.

I ran along the beach, tugging on Yoshin's hand. I felt the heat of the sand through the flip-flops I was wearing. *Thank goodness I'm not barefoot. Plus it's a good thing I'm wearing my rash guard too. My boobs are jiggling, and they're starting to hurt. I guess I just happened to be ready for a little jog.*

Even though I'd started out pulling Yoshin along, he seemed to be running on his own now, so it was no longer necessary for me to lead him.

Yoshin and I ran along the beach, the sparkling waves crashing along the shore beside us. We then hid ourselves behind the rocks we'd reached—though of course we were still outside and therefore completely exposed. At least here, though, we could take our time.

"Jeez...seriously, what is everyone *thinking*?" I said with a huff. "Suggesting I touch you in front of them... There's no way I can do that, with everyone watching..."

Maybe because we ran, but I was slightly out of breath. I breathed in and out with my hand on my chest, trying to catch my breath. Yoshin...didn't seem to be out of breath all that much.

On the other hand, he did have a very perturbed expression on his face—or, rather, he seemed worried about me.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"No, it's just that..." Yoshin trailed off, scratching his cheek sheepishly and smiling awkwardly at me, as though trying to decide whether to say something. Then, he suggested, "Isn't running off to hide behind a rock...worse?"

"Oh!"

I didn’t realize it until he pointed it out. He was right: This totally seemed like he and I had snuck off behind the rocks to do something secret. Though actually, all I was doing was touching his abs and stuff.

But having been made aware of this fact, even doing *that* now seemed embarrassing. Now I was regretting not having done it out in the open a moment ago.

“Since we’re here,” Yoshin began, “do you wanna touch my abs?”

“Then, since we’re here, do you wanna see under my rash guard?” I returned.

We both laughed at our silly exchange.

Whether we actually did what we said, though…was our little secret.

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That night—

After our diving class, we all went to the marketplace and had dinner with our respective groups at our preferred eateries.

The market had a wide variety of stores, including clothing and souvenir shops, so after dinner Yoshin and I walked around to check them out, but…

“Sorry Misumai, we’re gonna steal Nanami for a bit!”

“What? Huh?! Hatsumi, what’s going on? Wait! Yoshin, help!”

I got abducted by Hatsumi and taken to a certain store. There, the girls in the class seemed to be devising a particular plan.

Wait, y’all are doing what, exactly?!

Chapter 3: Our First Secrets

By our third day in Hawaii, I felt just like a local… Okay, maybe not *quite*, but I still managed to wake up feeling pretty refreshed. It could be because I had used so much energy the day before and was completely exhausted by nighttime, but it wasn't as if I had passed out as soon as I crawled into bed.

It felt like a shame to go straight to sleep like I normally did back home, so I ended up talking with Hitoshi, the two of us chatting from our respective beds until we both eventually fell asleep. I couldn't believe I was doing something like that with someone other than Nanami, but maybe the fact that I was staying in the same room as my friend had me more worked up than I realized. He and I had ended up talking a lot about sex and stuff too, so I had to admit at times our chat made me a little uncomfortable. But even then I genuinely enjoyed the conversation.

As a sidenote, Nanami cornered me about it at breakfast. It wasn't quite out of jealousy, but she did make a point to tell me that even while we were in Hawaii, she wanted to chat with me until we both fell asleep. So far it seemed like a challenge just to get the two of us in the same room, but Nanami didn't seem like she was going to give up. If we could manage it, it would be nice—though not in any weird kind of way, of course.

Hmmm. Is there really nothing *we can do?*

No, I should stop. If I tried to do anything myself, I would probably end up causing more harm than good.

In any case, given the fact that I was finally getting accustomed to the hotel bed and pillows, it would be such a shame to have to go back to Japan by the time I really *did* get used to them.

Anyway, on this third day of our trip, I was—we were—at…

"The beach, of all places," I muttered.

"Oh, come on! You aren't looking forward to it even a little?" Hitoshi replied.

"I am, but I'm also kind of worried."

Hitoshi and I…or rather, all the guys in the class had gathered at

the hotel's private beach. Though it was only morning, the sun was already quite bright, forcing us all to squint at each other a bit.

Everyone seemed fidgety and somewhat restless. Oh, who was I kidding? They were all nearly beside themselves in anticipation of what was to come. That made sense, though, given what we were all here for.

Today all the school-related functions were scheduled for the afternoon, meaning we had the morning to ourselves. As a class, we had decided to all go to the beach.

The girls weren't here yet. What did this mean, exactly? It was total déjà vu of our school festival.

"Anyway, man—I thought this yesterday too, but you really work out, huh? You're *ripped*," Hitoshi said.

"It's just my hobby, that's all. I don't even do it as often as I used to," I explained.

"I see. Can I touch your abs?" he asked.

"Sure...no, wait, why?!"

His request came so naturally that I nearly acquiesced, but I stopped myself in the nick of time. His hands would have been all over me if I hadn't caught myself; Hitoshi looked poised and practically ready to go.

"Oh, come *on*. Let me feel it," Hitoshi whined.

"Why would you wanna touch a dude? Go touch some girls," I murmured.

"Well, sure I wanna touch girls, but wouldn't *you* want to touch a magnificent specimen of the male physique? You must understand," he continued.

Actually, not at all.

When I looked around, though, I saw that some of the other guys in the class were trying to touch my body too. *Huh? Is that how it is?*

"It's not about romance or sexuality. It's just that whenever I see an impressive body, I wanna touch it!" Hitoshi exclaimed passionately, paying no mind to my bewilderment. His justification only confused me more, but the other guys all seemed to agree with him.

But...having people touch me*?* Even if they were guys, I wanted to avoid situations where anyone other than Nanami was feeling me up.

Just as I was about to say that, though, the girls appeared.

"Heeey! Sorry to keep you guys waiting!" they shouted.

"Whoooah!" the guys roared.

The glamorous arrival of the girls immediately redirected their attention, as if touching my abs had never crossed their minds. One guy even fell to his knees in tears, gesturing as if in prayer. We were on a sandy beach, though, so he immediately leaped up to save himself from getting burned.

And why were the guys so excited, you may ask? Well, every single girl was wearing a bathing suit. In fact, the majority of the girls were wearing bikinis, which meant that there was a *lot* of skin on display.

"On second thought, I prefer girls, even if I can't touch them!" Hitoshi exclaimed, gesturing toward the girls as if in worship.

"Glad to hear it," I murmured, feeling saved.

Is it just me that thinks the bikinis are excessively *sexy, though? Maybe they all feel comfortable wearing them because we're on a private beach. I mean, is Nanami okay?*

With not even a glance toward where the other girls were getting cheers from the guys, I walked toward Nanami, who was standing a little off to the side. For the record, Otofuke-san and the others were getting all into it and striking poses for their highly appreciative audience.

When Nanami saw me, she raised one of her hands in greeting and ran in my direction.

"Yoshin! What do you think of this suit?" she asked, then added, "Though I guess it's the same as usual."

"Even if it's the same, you look really cute. And honestly I'm kind of relieved," I confessed.

Nanami was wearing her usual bathing suit, though this time she had changed things up a bit: There was a white button-down over her bikini top, and denim shorts over the bottom. Her hair was tied up in a ponytail, and she also had her sunglasses on.

She looks cute. She does, but this is actually…

"I know I said I felt relieved, but actually I've changed my mind," I said. "I think your outfit is making my heart race."

"Really?" Nanami said, seeming a little confused. "But I'm more covered up than when I'm in just the bathing suit."

"I know, but it's just…"

Nanami was right: She *was* more covered up. But exposed skin wasn't the only thing that made a heart race.

Even though I'd seen her in this suit before, the look of her bikini top peeking out from under her shirt combined with how the strings of her bikini bottom crept up past the waistline of her shorts…were way too stimulating.

And her shorts aren't even buttoned up! And now look. She doesn't even realize that her shirt is opening up when she moves, so she's letting lots of things show. Every little gesture is making my heart jump.

"Though I guess your outfit isn't as nerve-racking as the other girls' over there," I admitted.

"Ah ha ha, yeah, they're all into it, huh?" she said.

"It's way too revealing. Even Otofuke-san and them too."

"Really? But they're not wearing stuff totally different from a bikini in terms of how revealing they are."

When I looked at Nanami with a question in my eyes, she proceeded to give me a rather thorough lesson on bathing suits.

I guess when you put it that way, those bathing suits aren't that *revealing…?*

Time for a little explanation on what the girls were doing: They had come to the beach wearing the bathing suits that they had purchased here in Hawaii.

It all started with a minor incident, when several of them started chatting about how a lot of the bathing suits sold in Hawaii looked very cute. Some of the suits were apparently quite revealing as well, unlike the types that were often sold back in Japan.

Then one of them had mentioned wanting to go to the beach wearing a suit they bought in Hawaii, which led some other girls to talk about how the guys of the class might appreciate it if the bathing suit fashion show featured the ones purchased in Hawaii…and so here we were.

I also realized that Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san were wearing bikinis, but not the ones they were wearing when we went to the night pool. Otofuke-san was wearing a black bathing suit, with her chest covered by a black tube top, and yet not *all* parts of her chest were covered up. There were also strings crisscrossing her neck and the area under her chest.

Kamoenai-san was also wearing a suit that revealed the center of her chest and other parts that were usually covered up. The suit was a greenish color, and it, too, was different from the one she wore yesterday.

As for the class rep—even though I'd never seen her in a bathing suit before, I saw that she wasn't wearing a bikini like the others. It wasn't a bikini, but it was a very bold one-piece-like bathing suit. It had an open back, and if you weren't careful, you could easily think that she wasn't wearing anything on the top at all. Did this really qualify as a one-piece suit?



All the other girls were wearing their Hawaiian bathing suits of choice as well, and it was the suits' designs—rather than the actual surface area of skin that was revealed—that distinguished them from pieces one might find in Japan.

Maybe the girls really were more excited than usual because they were on this trip. Or maybe spending the previous day with their bathing suits covered up during the scuba diving session made them want to show off their suits now. I honestly didn't know. But I felt like I could understand the desire they had to show off their brand-new suits. All the guys were complimenting the girls too, almost excessively so. Not that the girls minded at all.

I was watching over this scene from a distance, but…

"You're looking too much," Nanami muttered, pinching my cheeks. She wasn't doing it that hard, but I couldn't help bending forward because of the pull.

Of course, that brought me closer to Nanami's body.

"Are you *that* interested in the bathing suits? If you're gonna look, you should look at mine," she said.

"Whoa, Nanami! Too close, too close! I'm gonna end up touching you!" I let out.

I could feel my face getting hotter—and it wasn't just because of the morning sun.

Totally unruffled by how flustered I was, Nanami continued squeezing my cheeks with a big pout on her face.

I mean, maybe I did look a bit too much. But it wasn't like I was totally captured by them. I had no ulterior motives—none at all.

Nanami probably knew that already, but she probably also couldn't stop herself from feeling frustrated. That, I could definitely understand.

"Take that!" Nanami suddenly shouted, cutting into my thoughts.

As soon as I heard her, my field of vision went dark. Something damp, soft, and cool suddenly covered my face.

Even though I couldn't see anything, I was overwhelmed by a soft and comfortable sensation, a sweet and gentle scent, the sun shining down on my skin, and a light breeze grazing against my skin…

And, most of all, the feel of my body being forced to bend forward at the waist.

I was confused at first, but I quickly realized what had happened. I was feeling Nanami's skin. I'd felt it many times before, so I knew I wasn't wrong. That had to be it: Nanami was now squeezing me to her chest.

Wait, Nanami, what are you doing*?!*

Nanami had contorted me into an embrace. How many times had this, too, happened previously? I was pretty sure that this wasn't the first time that she hugged me tightly against her chest.

I had also initiated hugs before. I'd even hugged Nanami from behind while she was wearing her bathing suit. But I was pretty certain that this was the first time that I had leaped into her arms from the front. Though I wasn't sure if I had leaped in, or if she had pulled me in.

In any case, this was my first time experiencing something like this.

Her cool and damp skin—specifically the two soft and squishy pillows of her chest—sandwiched my cheeks.

Wow. That, unfortunately, was all I could manage to think. *What is this?* My vocabulary wasn't that extensive to begin with, but right now, all I could come up with were short strings of letters like "wow" and "yikes."

"This is your punishment for ogling girls other than me," Nanami declared.

No, this is definitely a reward.

When she tightened her arms around me, I felt as if I were sinking deeper and deeper into her body. I knew that in reality I was only still touching her skin, but still, I felt like I could sink into her...until I got so deep that I could no longer get out.

No, this was no time to be thinking such thoughts. I needed to escape my present reality, actually. But what should I do?

Huh? You think I can just use brute force to get out of the situation? Well, of course I can, but there's something terrible about trying to get out of this myself. I already have a hard time resisting—and it's not like I really have a reason to refuse what she's doing.

I could hear people around us letting out a muffled "Ohhh!" I also had the sense that the two of us were causing yet another misunderstanding, though maybe this wasn't really a misunderstanding at all.

"Maybe I should've worn the bathing suit I bought too," I heard

Nanami mumble. “No, but…wearing it in front of everyone is too scary.”

“Fwah? Foo fwa a faving voot foo?” I asked, despite the fact that I was still pressed up against Nanami’s chest. That of course meant that I ended up moving my lips, grazing them against her skin.

“Eep!” Nanami exclaimed.

Maybe that felt a little too gross for her. It wasn’t that I licked her, but my talking had my lips make wet smacks against her skin.

In her shock, Nanami cried out and let go of me. At least I was freed, but I had to admit that I felt more a sense of loss than of liberty.

“Wh-What is it? What happened, Yoshin?” Nanami asked hesitantly.

She covered her chest with both hands and twisted her body as though trying to hide herself. Unfortunately, even that pose looked sexy to me.

“No, I just heard you say that you bought a bathing suit too,” I explained.

“O-Oh, that. Yeah, I did. It’s kind of revealing, though, so I didn’t wear it,” she murmured.

“I-It is?” I asked, gulping.

“Yeah, um…like, the angles and stuff. It was kind of bold, but I thought it was really cute.”

A revealing bathing suit? Her current bathing suit is plenty revealing already, but she bought one that’s even more so? Like, how*?*

I was curious, but if she didn’t wear it, then I guess I couldn’t see it. Though maybe that was for the best, since I wasn’t quite keen on seeing it in front of other people. Still, just the fact that Nanami bought something like that made my heart beat faster.

At some point in all this, everyone else in our class was already running toward the beach. So Nanami took my hand, smiling, as if to tell me that we should go and join them. Seeing that I wasn’t in a state to respond fully to her yet, though, she stepped in close to me.

“I’ll show it to you in secret, when it’s just the two of us,” she whispered in my ear surreptitiously, then began running toward the beach without waiting for my response.

Partway to the water, though, she turned around and stuck her

tongue out at me, laughing like a mischievous little child.

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Aren't there tons of manga and anime where the characters have a beach episode, splashing water and stuff? I had always wondered whether that really was as fun as it looked.

Wondered. In the past tense.

"Yahaha!" Nanami yelled, spreading out her arms and splashing water on me.

"Jeez!" I let out, the contrast between the brilliant sunshine and the cool water soaking into my skin like night and day.

I scooped up some water and tossed it at Nanami as a counterattack. She yelped but seemed to be enjoying herself.

"Oh my gosh, how could you?!" she demanded playfully.

"You started it!" I laughed.

Nanami splashed water back on me, to which I responded in kind yet again. This was all we were doing, not even bothering to swim in the water. And yet...it was *so much fun*.

What in the world? This really *is* fun. We should've done this the last time we were at a beach. But there was a lot going on then, so it makes sense that we didn't.

As if trying to make up for that fact, Nanami and I both continued splashing each other with seawater.

"Oh...!"

In the midst of it, though, Nanami lost her balance slightly and fell backward. We were at a sandy beach, so it probably didn't hurt, but nonetheless I ran to her, concerned.

When I reached my hand out to her to ask if she was okay, though, she shot out her hand and gripped my wrist.

"Huh?" I muttered.

"Gotcha!" she shouted. She then tugged, pulling me toward her and making me lose my balance.

I saw everything in slow motion. Nanami, sitting, having the time of her life. Our classmates having their own kind of fun all around us. And me...falling with a truly epic splash.

"What are you doing?!" I cried out.

"Ah ha ha! You totally fell for it!"

I immediately tried to get up, but maybe because I did it with

too much gusto, I tottered and fell right back into the water. Nanami and I ended up sitting in the water while facing each other.

Dang, she totally got me! My mind raced, struggling to configure how I might get my revenge, but the moment I actually *looked* at Nanami, all such thoughts flew out the window.

Because the vision of Nanami soaked in water had me at a loss for words.

Sunlight sparkled off the water's surface, making her surroundings glimmer like jewels. And though I knew exactly where the lights and the glitter came from, a part of me was still convinced it was all coming from Nanami herself.

The blazing sunlight, the shirt that had become wet and see-through, her exposed skin... Everything about Nanami in that moment seemed like some kind of a painting.

Nanami must have noticed my stare, because she stuck out her tongue like a child caught in the middle of a prank and flashed me a uniquely Hawaiian shaka.

Seeing her show no sign of remorse, I retaliated with another splash of water while still sitting down.

Now drenched once again, Nanami opened her mouth wide in shock, then laughed loudly and flung some more water back at me.

Even the splash of seawater sparkled. It made Nanami shine even more brilliantly, and I couldn't keep myself from splashing even more water on her.

We continued fervently with our water fight for some time, but of course our hands eventually grew tired. We were, essentially, digging water up out of the ocean. It was pretty much a workout.

When I finally fell backward with water flying all around me, the sunlight coming from above nearly blinded me. Somehow, the sun here seemed closer than when I saw it back home.

Nanami approached me after I fell but stepped back slightly as she got closer—she seemed to think I might try to pull her down. *Jeez, I wouldn't do that.*

"It feels pretty nice when you lie down. Try it," I suggested to her.

"Really? But I'll get sand in my hair," she protested.

Oh, I see. I probably have sand in my hair too, then. I didn't even

think about that.

I took a look around me while still on my back. It seemed like everyone else was enjoying themselves, just like we were.

"Come on! Get wet and get see-through!"

"Wait, Ayumi-chan...?!"

A short distance away, Otofuke-san, Kamoenai-san, and Shirishizu-san were throwing water on each other. I couldn't quite parse what was going on, but it seemed like a two-against-one situation.

Not to be outdone, Shirishizu-san was splashing water back on Kamoenai-san. Being outnumbered, though, she seemed to be fighting an uphill battle. It was then, though, that a certain shadow fell on her from behind.

"Kotoha?! What's with that bathing suit?!" the figure exclaimed.

"Taku-chan, you're *late*! But now it's time to fight back!" Shirishizu-san shouted.

"Wait, Kotoha—I can't keep up. Why are you wearing a bathing suit like that?! I can see your *entire back*!" Teshikaga-kun said, doggedly pursuing the topic.

"You like legs, but I know you like butts too, right? That's why," she replied.

Yikes. Teshikaga-kun turned tomato red, his fetish exposed for all to hear. *I see, so he likes butts, huh?*

Teshikaga-kun stood there for a bit, visibly confused, having stomped over without any context. But the moment Otofuke-san splashed him with a healthy dose of seawater, a switch seemed to have flipped inside of him.

A two-on-two battle quickly ensued, but Kamoenai-san must have realized that going up against Teshikaga-kun would be a challenge; she called for help. Hitoshi soon arrived and the battle flipped again into a three-on-two.

Wow, they're all getting into it. Teshikaga-kun and Shirishizu-san seem to have the upper hand right now, though. I wasn't sure if it was possible to win or lose in a situation like this, but regardless, the two childhood friends seemed to make a perfect team.

Oh, looks like Hitoshi got hit with a ton of water and went down. I didn't realize that was even possible.

"Hey, you two! Don't just stand there watching—back us up!"

Our peaceful time as spectators was cut short by a call for

reinforcements. I looked to Nanami to decide what we should do, and she nodded at me excitedly.

Well. Here we go.

I stood up and took Nanami's hand, then together, we jogged into battle.

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Hanging out at the beach in the morning, and then taking a tour around the entirety of the Island of Hawaii in the afternoon. What a fulfilling day, I thought…until I realized that maybe I'd gotten a bit carried away in the morning.

I wondered how everyone else was doing, but they all seemed to be doing just fine. I didn't think I was the type to have low stamina, but I was pretty tired. Maybe I just wasn't used to having so much fun.

"This is the 'Akaka Falls, which is one of the largest in Hawaii. There are many legends tied to this waterfall…"

Right now, we were at a state park in Hawaii which featured the waterfall our tour guide had just mentioned.

Standing right off the waterfall that seemed to just emerge from the side of a large cliff, today's tour guide was explaining to us the legend of the falls. The waterfall was loud, the force of all that water seeming to shake the air around us. It was much, much louder than the sound of beach waves—it was the kind of sound we couldn't ordinarily hear in everyday life.

I had thought that waterfalls gave off more of a loud, thunderous, booming sound, but actually it was quieter than that. Hearing it was oddly calming.

Our surroundings were thick with Hawaii's vegetation, the air nearly overflowing with the smell of greenery, relaxing and far from unpleasant. The weather was nice, and the light filtering in from the top of the cliff staggered through the trees, almost like a staircase lowering from the sky.

The light of the sun, the sound of the waterfall, the reverberations in the air, the scent of the flora… All five of my senses were engaged in the majesty of nature, and I was thoroughly overwhelmed.

The word "park" made me picture a place much smaller than

this, but this was nothing like the parks I'd ever visited in Japan. It was just on a different scale entirely. In fact, I was pretty confident that I could end up getting lost in this park—really, more like a jungle. There was just so much greenery.

The guide had explained to us earlier about the many plants that grew here. They seemed like species that, in Japan, we'd only be able to see if we went to a museum. Seeing them here, free under the brilliant blue sky, seemed like an unimaginable luxury.

"Yoshin, are you okay?" Nanami asked.

"Oh, um, yeah. I'm okay. Don't worry," I hastily replied.

Nanami was worried about me—and for good reason. It was quite simple, really: Earlier I had looked down into the waterfall and got so scared that I nearly couldn't stay on my feet.

There was a bridge on our way here that shook me up a little too, but I managed to get through it. I had gotten carried away by the time we got to the waterfall, though, and leaned over the railings to look down. That was when the height got to me so bad that I had to have Nanami hold my hand. As an embarrassing sidenote, everyone in the class laughed at me. *Ah, dammit.*

Holding hands with Nanami while looking at the waterfall was really something else. I had to tell myself that and remain positive about the situation.

The tour guide teased me about it a little bit too. He was a young man wearing a very tight-fitting Hawaiian shirt, with a black hat over his short hair and very large ear piercings—they were so large that you could see through them to the other side.

He wasn't exactly what I pictured in my head when I thought of a tour guide, but maybe this was just another example of the kind of freedom you had in Hawaii. But the fact that he had that kind of wild beauty to him was probably what made everything fit him perfectly. The tattoos that peeked out from under his shirt also seemed to appeal to people; I could hear the girls in the class sometimes chattering excitedly about him in muffled voices.

Come to think of it, how does Nanami feel about tattoos?

"Hey, Nanami—are you okay with tattoos?" I asked.

"What's gotten into you all of a sudden? Wait, are you thinking of getting one?" she asked suspiciously.

"No, no. No way. But all the girls seem really into the tour guide, so I wondered if girls thought that tattoos were cool and stuff," I

explained.

Nanami, meanwhile, sighed as though relieved.

I guess the question was misleading. I only asked it out of curiosity, and I really didn't mean anything by it.

"I guess there are people who like guys with tattoos and stuff. It's like the bad boy vibe is attractive, right?" she said. "But I don't think I'm one of them. Guys with tattoos look kind of scary to me."

"Oh, I see. I guess tattoos can give off that kind of impression," I agreed.

In Japan as well as other countries, tattoos emerged out of differing origins. I thought that meant they would hold different connotations too, and though I didn't think I was wrong, I could understand how hard it could be for someone to see them without the preconceptions they held in their minds.

There were so many people in Hawaii who had tattoos. Would it be like that someday in Japan too?

"Besides," Nanami began softly.

"Hm?" I asked.

I didn't hear her continue, so I tilted my head and waited. After several moments, Nanami finished her statement, looking slightly embarrassed.

"If you get a tattoo, we won't be able to go into the hot springs together," she mumbled.

Yeah, that decides it. I'm never getting a tattoo.

Nanami's voice was soft, but I definitely heard what she said. She was right to remind me that in Japan, people with tattoos weren't allowed to enter hot springs.

To ensure that I can enjoy the hot springs with Nanami in peace…

"No, Yoshin…I didn't mean that we'd be in the *same* hot springs," Nanami muttered, with mild exasperation in her eyes. *Wait, did I just say that out loud?* I wondered to myself, but Nanami once again shook her head without me prompting.

"I know what you're thinking, even if you don't say it out loud. I'm your girlfriend, after all," she said.

Is Nanami slowly becoming a telepath? Soon I won't be able to keep anything from her.

Nanami was right, though. There weren't that many mixed bathing hot springs nowadays, and if there were, there would probably be other people there too. It just wouldn't be possible for

us to use it by ourselves.

It's fine, since I wasn't planning to do that in the first place. And we're talking about tattoos here, not going to the hot springs. My sincerest apologies. Though I guess if the opportunity ever comes up, then of course I want to go to the hot springs together with Nanami… No, wait. I've gotta stop. We haven't even had lunch yet. Not that it's okay to think this at night or whatever.

Okay, let's get back on topic here. I mean, if Nanami thought that tattoos were *cool, would I actually get one? No, I can't. I don't like pain. I don't think I can ever do it.*

No, if we're really *getting back on topic, then I need to focus on this waterfall. Not tattoos. The tour guide is sharing an anecdote about the falls; I gotta tune in.*

Apparently there were several different legends related to this waterfall, but the most famous one was about the tears shed by the lover of a man who fell from the cliff.

Reasons for why the man fell seemed to vary, from atonement for a crime committed to falling by pure accident. The interpretation seemed to depend on the storyteller.

Tears, huh? I guess it does kind of look like that. Tears pouring down violently from above… The woman must have loved him very much.

"Hm? Nanami?" I said as I looked at her. Her expression had changed; she looked a little sad now. I hadn't seen her look like that recently, so I couldn't help worrying whether she was okay.

Nanami looked at me, seeming a little embarrassed. She then tightened her grip on my hand and said, "I just imagined how much I'd cry if you ever disappeared. It must be a terrible feeling to have someone you love vanish from your life."

Nanami seemed to have heard the legend of the waterfall and thought of me as the man in the story. I mean, if Nanami ever disappeared like that, I'd probably cry a waterfall's worth of tears too. I wasn't even sure if I would be able to continue living. I knew it made me sound kind of clingy, but if we ever encountered a situation where Nanami were to leave me…I felt like the shock of it would leave me so helpless I couldn't even lift a finger.

No, this is bad. I shouldn't be so pessimistic about this. If I get sad here too, neither one of us will get out of this pit. I've got to be the positive one here and cheer her up.

“Don’t worry, I won’t ever go away!” I yelled, with my chest puffed out.

“Huh?” Nanami uttered, looking slightly taken aback. There was no way for me to back up my statement or make any guarantees about the future; still, I made my declaration. No matter what, I wanted Nanami to know that there was no way I would ever leave her.

I recognized that I tended to be a little too logical sometimes. This time, though, there were no rationalizations with which to convince her; I only had sheer will.

Nanami looked slightly surprised at first, but then she smiled gently, as though feeling relieved.

“You promise?” she asked, tilting her head in an adorable and somewhat calculated manner.

“I promise!” I asserted.

People said that there were no absolutes in this world, but even then, I made my promise. For now, I wanted nothing more than to believe in my own words, however foolish they were. That they *were* a promise, an absolute one. When I stood up tall with resolve, though…

“Well, it seems our couple over there is going to be just fine.”

I looked around to find the tour guide teasing us, and everyone around us chuckling good-naturedly. *Shoot, they must have heard us. Well, from this close, of course they can…*

Are you okay? I tried to inquire wordlessly, turning toward Nanami and being the one to tilt my head this time. When Nanami returned the gesture, the tour guide looked at us and smiled, as though he was seeing something heartwarming.

“According to legend, a man who committed adultery fell into the waterfall out of shame for what he had done. The lover then cried tears of sadness, giving rise to this tale of tragic love. Lots of couples actually come here to swear their faithfulness to each other,” the guide explained. “It seems, though, that *this* couple won’t have to worry about that.”

I see, so the guy that fell was cheating… Nanami heard that and seemed to have very mixed feelings about it.

Yeah, I can definitely say that that won’t be a problem for us. Absolutely not.

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"You're getting married next year? Congratulations!" I said.

"Why, thank you," the tour guide responded, smiling bashfully. Meanwhile, the girls in the class who seemed to have taken a liking to him all let out soft groans of disappointment.

After our stop at the waterfall, we went around to many different sites, learning about the history of Hawaii. We took photos at Waipio Valley, studied sea turtles at Punalu'u Beach, and even got to eat malasadas at a shop we stopped by along the way.

Right now, we were chatting with our tour guide while having our dinner bento on a volcanic plateau in Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park. It felt strange to have bento in a place like this, but since the menu was very similar to a typical Japanese bento, it made it easier to enjoy the meal.

Even I recognized that it was rare for me to chat with others like this, but ever since the tour guide had teased me and Nanami at the falls, I had found myself chatting with him quite a bit.

We talked about our tour guide's upcoming wedding over dinner, as I asked, "Will you be having your ceremony in Hawaii?"

"No, my fiancée is from Japan, so we'll be having our ceremony there," he replied. "Japan is a nice place—plus it's got great ramen. I always eat some when I visit."

I had totally assumed that they would be getting married in Hawaii, but that seemed not to be the case.

"I have a question!" one of the girls called out, raising her hand. "Is your fiancée okay with having the ceremony in Japan?"

"Yes, we're having the wedding in Japan, and then she's planning to move to Hawaii after that. She said that she wants to enjoy one last bit of Japan before she moves," he explained.

The girls in the class seemed taken by the idea of an international marriage; they were all listening to the tour guide with stars in their eyes. They had been filled with disappointment just moments ago, but now they seemed completely revitalized. *Impressive.*

Once we started talking about weddings, the conversation turned completely to the topic of love and relationships. No matter where we were, high schoolers and romance went hand in hand. The girls, therefore, started asking all sorts of questions—what

kind of a person the guide's fiancée was, how often she visited Hawaii, whether the two argued over cultural differences, and many more. The tour guide was kind enough to answer each question sincerely.

"Where did you meet your fiancée?" someone asked.

"Actually, we met in high school," he began.

Oh, wow, high school? Hearing that his marriage was to his high school girlfriend, I found myself becoming more interested. When I stole a glance at Nanami, she happened to be looking at me too, so our eyes met.

A high school romance leading to marriage… Aren't my parents and Nanami's parents examples of that too? Wait, is *that the case for my parents? Wait, I feel like Baron-san and his wife are like that too. Plus I remember the school nurse saying she also started dating her husband when she was in high school. Is it actually pretty common for a relationship in high school to continue all the way till marriage?*

No, maybe not. Everyone else is reacting to the tour guide like it isn't, like that kind of thing is actually surprising. It's probably just a coincidence that I know so many high school sweethearts, even though it's actually uncommon.

The guide, too, said that it was probably pretty rare, given that he had never heard of anyone like that aside from him and his fiancée. *I see, so it* is *rare.*

I thought I saw the tour guide look toward me and Nanami, but maybe it was just my imagination.

"It's not too common, but if there are any couples here who *do* end up getting married, I hope that you'll consider arranging your honeymoon through our travel agency," he said.

At his remark, all eyes turned to me and Nanami. *Oh, so it* wasn't *just my imagination.*

When I looked over at Nanami, she was looking at me again, so our eyes locked. Seeing that, everyone else started egging us on. A number of our classmates said that we would definitely end up getting married, and some went so far as to say that we might even get married while we were still in school.

"Then does anyone wanna bet on when they'll break up?" someone asked, raising a very ominous possibility. I didn't need anyone organizing such a bet. Just as I was about to complain, though…

“Nah, they’re never gonna break up.”

“Yeah, no way.”

“I feel like they’re seriously gonna come back to Hawaii for their honeymoon.”

“They might even have their ceremony here.”

“They rarely fight, and when they do, it’s not even a real fight.”

“They’re definitely gonna share the same plot at the cemetery.”

“I actually feel like they’re both gonna go at the same time.”

“It’s all so predictable that betting doesn’t even make sense.”

I didn’t even know how to begin protesting against the deluge of comments that came our way. Not just marriage, they were talking about me and Nanami sharing a *tombstone*.

Were they trying to praise us to death? No, that didn’t seem to be it. No one seemed to be kidding around. In other words, every single one of them probably believed what they were saying.

“Should we be happy about this?” I asked Nanami hesitantly.

“I’m a little embarrassed, but I guess this makes me kinda happy,” Nanami said sheepishly.

Yeah, as long as Nanami was happy about it, then I had nothing to say. I didn’t, truly, but I also had no clue how to even wrap up this kind of conversation.

As I thought about it, though, everyone around us who had been egging us on until a moment ago suddenly fell silent.

I could feel so many expectant gazes on me. Was I supposed to say something? Even with all the attention, though, I still didn’t know what I was supposed to say. For now, though…

“When the time comes, I’ll be in touch,” I managed to say.

I actually said it to the guide as a way for me to get away from having to deal with the situation with my classmates, and yet everyone ended up getting super excited anyway. It also didn’t help that the tour guide asked, “Do you want to go ahead and put in a reservation now?”

Come on, the view here is great. Why aren’t we focusing on that? Actually, everywhere we look there’s nothing but gray earth, but even that’s pretty breathtaking.

I got so embarrassed that I had to physically turn my back toward everyone. Nanami must have felt similarly too, because she faced the same direction and sat down next to me.

When we did, though, everyone behind us got totally worked

up again…so we ended up making our way to our next destination with our mood still heightened.

We visited a number of sites today, but our next stop was the last one for the day.

As if in step with the almost setting sun, the number of streetlights around us became fewer and fewer. By the time we realized it, the only thing lighting our surroundings were the headlights on the bus we were on. It felt like we had been transported to some country road in Japan. Actually, the lights seemed even more sparse than on a Japanese road. And at our destination there were no lights at all.

Holy crap, this is super dark!

Seriously, I wasn't sure if I'd ever encountered such darkness outdoors. There were neither buildings nor streetlights around us, and maybe because of that, it also felt pretty chilly.

"Nanami, are you cold? Do you wanna wear my jacket?" I asked.

"No no, I'm okay. I've brought mine too," she replied.

Before getting off the bus, both Nanami and I had thrown on the jackets we had brought with us for precisely these kinds of occasions. It still felt cold, though—seemed like the difference between the daytime and nighttime temperatures here was pretty substantial.

We were also currently on a mountain at a relatively high altitude. Today's final destination would be somewhere on this mountain. I wondered if we were already at the peak, but because we had come by car, I couldn't quite get a sense of where we were.

To close our third day in Hawaii, we would be stargazing.

Still, the idea of looking at a starry sky didn't really click with me. We could see stars in Japan, too, so just being in a different location didn't sound like that big of a deal.

That was what I was thinking, but…

"Wow…"

I didn't know if it was me or Nanami that said that. Maybe it was the both of us at the same time, though it seemed more likely that my impoverished vocabulary would lead to me to be the one to have such a reaction.

Above us, the sky was filled with so many stars that for a split second I thought we had floated into space.

The air felt crisp and taut, and the sky above was a deep navy.

Against such a sky were numerous stars shining brilliantly, in colors of red, blue, white, and yellow. The blinking stars appeared like moving objects, and all the stars in the sky combined almost felt like one giant, living creature—or perhaps even the undulating waves of the ocean.

This kind of sky, I bet, brought different things out of different people. Maybe because I didn't usually think about the night sky, but for me I felt a little afraid looking at it, despite how silent and beautiful it was.

This was the first time I saw a starry sky that seemed to suck me in. *This* was the night sky in Hawaii? It was completely different from what I was used to seeing in Japan.

I had heard that the lights from surrounding buildings made it difficult to see the stars, but I never knew that they made such a difference in the sheer *number* of stars I would be able to see.

Everyone else in the class was also looking up at the sky, letting out admiring sighs every now and then. Our tour guides, meanwhile, were using laser pointers to explain the various constellations and also setting up telescopes for us to use. Some of the students were even lying down on the ground to enjoy the view.

Given just how beautiful the sky was, it seemed like a fun idea to lie down and look up at it. It seemed like something out of an anime or a manga.

"Do you wanna check out the telescope too?" I asked Nanami.

"Yeah, why not? Let's go," she replied, reaching out toward me despite the short distance between here and where the telescopes were set up. It was dark, so holding hands was a matter of safety—but we felt like there was also a different reason.

If we weren't holding hands, we felt like we might drift apart.

I knew that wasn't possible, but being here made it feel like such a thing was. It was strange.



After that, we spent time taking turns at the telescope and listening to various explanations from the tour guides.

A little while later, we realized that a confession must have taken place, because a cheer went up from a spot a bit farther away.

Who was it? This ambience really does make it the perfect romantic occasion.

“It seems like the confession must’ve gone well,” I remarked.

“A confession in Hawaii, huh? I wonder who it was,” Nanami returned.

I couldn’t tell who it was given the darkness, but the person must have taken that into account when choosing a faraway spot to execute the confession. Confessing in front of everyone was more than slightly mortifying.

“Oh, a shooting star,” I then found myself saying—because when I looked up, I just so happened to see a star drawing a faint arc. At first I wasn’t sure what I had just seen, but I figured out that it was a shooting star. I had never seen one before. I had always assumed that shooting stars appeared out of nowhere and then quickly disappeared; I never knew that stars that appeared stationary just started moving all of a sudden.

“Huh?! Where, where?!” Nanami exclaimed.

“Look, over there. I wonder if there’ll be another one,” I said.

When I pointed up at the night sky, Nanami attached herself to me and looked up at the stars as well. *The last one moved over there. Does that mean the next one will be somewhere else?*

“Oh…”

“Wow…!”

Not long after, there was another shooting star—two this time, in fact. Seeing the pair of stars, Nanami reacted excitedly, then moved away from me and brought her palms together.

Come to think of it, aren’t your wishes supposed to come true when you wish upon a falling star? I think you’re supposed to make the wish before the star disappears, but maybe if there are this many stars around, it doesn’t matter either way.

I brought my palms together while standing next to Nanami too. Actually, it felt somewhat surreal to be looking up at the night sky in Hawaii with our palms together in prayer like this. Still, I told myself that it was the thought that counted.

I wonder what Nanami is wishing for.

"What did you wish for, Nanami?" I asked.

"Hmmm?" she said softly.

Oh, shoot. I couldn't keep myself from asking.

Nanami, though, just smiled warmly without answering my question. Her nonresponse put me at a loss, but maybe that was okay too.

She then turned toward me and asked, "What did you wish for?" but I gave some vague response…and then we both chuckled. But that was it. Neither Nanami nor I actually said out loud what we wished for.

There were probably going to be more occasions like this in the future. Still, I thought to myself that we would never do anything to hurt each other.

I couldn't see around us because it was too dark, but Nanami and I were close enough to be able to see each other. But that also meant, for us, that the only people we could see were each other.

In such darkness, we drew closer to each other, furtively and quietly…then stole a kiss under the sky filled with stars. I was fairly certain that no one saw us.

Then, the moment we moved apart…

"Hey, you rom-com couple! Get over here! We're taking pictures!"

"Wh-Who are you calling a rom-com couple?! We'll be right there!"

I thought maybe we had been caught, but that seemed not to have been the case. Relieved, I looked over in the direction from which the voice had come and saw that people were getting photos taken with the stars in the background—in pairs, as individuals, and even in a giant group.

"Shall we have our picture taken too?" I asked Nanami.

"Yeah!" she replied.

On that night, under the starry sky, for the very first time ever, Nanami and I kept a secret from each other.

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Today was another tiring day—from having too much fun, or maybe just from doing too much sightseeing. Either way, I was

exhausted, like I had been carrying weights all day long.

"Man, I'm pooped," I murmured, falling onto the bed. I knew that saying that out loud would make me feel it even more, but I just couldn't help myself.

For some time I just groaned in bed, feeling like a middle-aged man or something. My dad sometimes did this when he was tired too. *Come to think of it, I haven't been in touch with my mom and dad at all.*

I hadn't contacted them yet because I worried the time difference would have me trying to talk to them while they were asleep. All I'd done was to let them know that we'd made it safely to Hawaii.

"Maybe I should reach out," I muttered, picking up my phone and messaging them with updates about our stay in Hawaii, along with some pictures. To my surprise, they responded relatively quickly.

Mom: That's wonderful to hear. I hope you all continue to have an amazing time.
Dad: You'll probably be surprised by how cold it is here when you come back, so make sure to dress for it!

Given the time difference, I was pretty sure that they were at work; their replies, therefore, seemed inordinately fast. *Then what are Baron-san and the others up to?*

Just as I was about to boot up my game, I saw a follow-up message from my parents.

Mom: We can't wait to hear all about how much this trip helped progress your relationship with Nanami-san.

Just what did my parents think would happen on a class trip? I mean, it wasn't like there was any clear progress… Well, okay, maybe we did do something a little earlier.

I never thought we'd share a secret kiss under the stars. At least we kept our hands to ourselves after that, so thankfully no one noticed anything. At least, I was pretty sure no one did.

Any more progress seemed like asking for too much. But if we *were* to take another step forward…

I had to physically shoo away the image that popped into my head, waving my hands around like I was swatting a fly. Had this been a manga, my thought bubble would have popped.

To try to switch gears, I checked on the status of Baron-san and the others.

"Well, well! If it isn't Canyon-kun, on his Hawaii trip! Any progress?" Baron-san asked right off the bat.

"Isn't it your honeymoon? Wouldn't it be better for you not to be playing games?" Peach-san joined in.

They both sounded like they had the biggest grins on their faces. It wasn't a stretch at all to assume they were deeply enjoying the situation, and I could hear other members on the line as well. Since the game had a campaign going on, they were having a voice chat as they all went around the game. If this were before, I probably would have joined them as well.

"This is the end of our third day," I said, "so right now I'm in my hotel room."

"Is Shichimi-chan with you too?" Baron-san asked.

"No, I'm by myself right now. My friend who's rooming with me is out too," I explained.

"By yourself, huh? Oh really, now," Peach-san said.

She totally doesn't believe me, but I really am *by myself! Hitoshi literally said to me, "I haven't had enough fun today! I'm gonna go crash another room!" and ran out.*

He really did have so much energy. *That's youth for you.*

"Hold on, there. You're young too, aren't you?" Baron-san remarked.

That's not untrue, and I also admit that Hitoshi said the same thing to me. But since I don't usually go out and have fun like this it's hard for me to keep up. I mean, I'm having a good time, but I'm also exhausted from having so much fun.

I was like one of those little kids who ran around without a care for things like "stamina" or "energy management"—who went full throttle all day long because they didn't know how to pace themselves.

"What are you talking about, Canyon-san? The night is young for a couple in love! You're supposed to do things that'll keep your girlfriend up *all night*!" Peach-san said, seemingly to make fun of me for sounding so exhausted. But Peach-san was also a middle

schooler, and after her remark everyone on voice chat burst into a nervous buzz. After the murmurs died down, though, there was silence…to which Peach-san responded with a bewildered, “Wait, did I say something weird?” I could almost picture her looking around, her eyes darting nervously.

The night might indeed be young here, but I was pretty sure that it was only early evening in Japan. Nevertheless, I started to feel concerned—and probably for the same reason that everyone else on chat did as well.

“Peach-san, have you been going out late?” I asked.

“Of course not! I’m not the kind of middle schooler who would do stuff like that!” she shouted.

“Oh, thank the lord! I was starting to get super nervous!” Baron-san also said with a sigh of relief, joined by everyone else. No, seriously. Peach-san seemed slightly miffed at the suggestion, but given her remark, of course we had all been worried.

As everyone started expressing their concerns to Peach-san, someone knocked on my door.

Hmmm? If it’s Hitoshi, he should have his own key card. Who could it be?

“I’m sorry, someone’s at the door, so I gotta go,” I said.

“Sure thing. You’re on your class trip—don’t think about gaming, and go have fun instead!” Baron-san said, with others echoing similar statements.

“Good luck!” Peach-san said, just before I logged off. Her send-off seemed to have a slightly different nuance from everyone else’s, as though she knew what was about to happen or she had particular expectations. But maybe I was imagining that part.

But I wonder who’s here? Hopefully not a stranger. Maybe I should just take a peek. How does the peephole on this door even work?

When I brought my face closer to the door, though…

“Nanami, what’s wrong?” I yelled, opening the door in a hurry—only to be met with Nanami smiling and waving with a demure hand.

That’s right—it was Nanami standing outside the door. She’d stopped by without any kind of a heads-up, so I was caught off guard. *Wait, I didn’t miss a message from her, did I?*

“Tee hee, I came to hang out. Are you alone?” she asked.

“Um, yeah, I am. Hitoshi went off somewhere,” I said.

“Uh…come on in.”

“Thank you!” Nanami sang, skipping into the room. She was wearing very light clothing, just shorts and a shirt. I couldn’t see any lines from the back. *Is she not wearing underwear? Wait, what the* hell *am I thinking? Calm down, calm down…* I wasn’t expecting to be alone in my room with Nanami, though, so try as I might, my heart wouldn’t stop racing.

“You should’ve told me you were coming,” I managed to say.

“Huh? Oh, uh, right. I guess I didn’t, huh?” she muttered. “You’re right, I probably surprised you by just showing up, huh? Ah ha ha…”

“I mean, of course I’m happy to see you.”

Nanami seemed restless, even slightly suspicious. We’d been alone many times before, but she was acting like this was the first time we’d ever been alone together.

“Is this your bed?” she asked.

“Uh, yeah. But I was—”

“Whee!” Nanami shouted as she dove into my bed, not even bothering to hear me out. I was shocked by her sudden action but also mildly embarrassed.

“Nanami, I…um, I haven’t showered yet, so the bed might smell weird,” I said awkwardly.

“Huh? No, not at all! I like it,” she replied.

“Hey, don’t actually smell it! And shouldn’t it be the other way around?!”

Wait, would that be weird too? Regardless, Nanami brought her face closer to my bed and sniffed. *Jeez, this is super embarrassing. If I knew this was going to happen, I would’ve showered before lying down. Well, too late now. Since Nanami is lying on the bed, though, maybe I’ll sit on this chair over here…*

“Yoshin, over here,” Nanami said, patting the spot beside her. Even I could understand what she was trying to tell me. I mean, there was only one way to interpret that gesture.

But when I tried to sit on the chair instead, Nanami gave an annoyed pout and patted the spot next to her once more, only a bit more loudly this time. *Are you kidding me…?*

I’d just told her that I hadn’t showered, but maybe if I lay down with her for a little bit, that would be enough. But I needed to shower immediately afterward. Was this what cologne was for?

This was perhaps the first time in my life I had ever seriously regretted not caring more about my sweat production.

When I lay down and turned toward Nanami, she giggled happily.

"Don't I smell sweaty?" I asked.

"You're totally fine. I don't think you need to worry about it so much."

"No, but if you ever told me I smelled bad, I'd probably die of shame."

"It's not like you went days without showering or anything. I mean, you *like* taking baths. A day without is probably fine," she said.

But today was kind of hot out... As I thought that, though, I realized something: Wasn't this something that women tended to be more concerned about?

"Aren't you, um, worried about being sweaty too?" I asked.

"Huh? Oh, um...uh, I showered real quick before I came."

"Not fair," I couldn't help mumbling. I mean, knowing that she planned to shower before coming over made this whole surprise thing seem like a trap. *Man, I feel like I've been had.*

Nanami flapped the front of her light top for air. Through her collar, I nearly caught sight of what was underneath, so I looked away slightly.

"You wanna smell?" she asked.

After a moment's hesitation, I returned, "Is that okay?"

"Go for it," she said readily.

Although it seemed slightly perverted, I drew in closer to her and breathed her in. What must have been the smell of bodywash filled my nostrils.

Smells a little sweet. Wait, isn't this the same soap that's in our bathroom? It smells kind of different, though...

"I was feeling kind of nervous, but smelling you calmed me down," Nanami said.

"You were nervous?" I asked.

"Well, I mean, we're totally alone right now. Plus we're in a hotel room...so of course I'd be nervous."

"I'm nervous about this whole situation," I confessed, then muttered, "I really wish I'd showered."

"How about you just shower now? I'll just lie here and wait for

you," she offered.

I felt bad about leaving Nanami by herself, but I decided to do as she suggested. Once I started thinking about how sweaty I was, I couldn't seem to stop.

In any case, showering when I was alone with my girlfriend seemed to imply that we were about to do something like *that*, and once I thought that, I started to get nervous for an entirely different reason. Of course we wouldn't be able to do anything, though, given that Hitoshi was going to come back. There was no way.

But at the moment the word that my parents and Baron-san had used popped into my head: progress. Progress with Nanami.

Progress, here...? No no no, that's impossible. Absolutely not.

But then, what other progress could there be that was fitting for Hawaii? Something we could do, away from our parents' watchful eyes...

I mean, we were lying in bed together just now, but anything more than that seems kind of hard.

Hawaii...Hawaii. Oh, maybe tomorrow...

"Oh, Yoshin," Nanami called out.

"Hm? What's up?" I said, shifting away from any burgeoning ideas and glancing at Nanami.

Nanami raised her upper body, resting her head in the palm of one hand and snapping her fingers with the other. She even winked at me. It seemed like a gesture by some old-timey movie star.

Wait, it's not just the gesture—is she putting on some suaveness here?

"Go ahead and shower first, baby," she said.

"Why are you saying it again in a manly voice?!" I yelled, flustered by her whole performance. I didn't even know Nanami could talk like that, in a deep, beautiful tenor that seemed totally opposite of her usual voice.

I had to admit seeing this side of Nanami made my heart race. Maybe because she was lying on the bed while she said it, but her remark sounded even more suggestive.

"Oh, you know, I just wanted to try saying it once," Nanami said, giggling.

Nanami seemed to be enjoying herself. *Man, I never thought I'd*

be the one to be told *to go shower first. I guess I should just go and do it already.*

Just before I stepped into the bathroom, though, Nanami said to me, “Oh, and fill up the tub, okay?”

“Oh, okay.”

I said yes without thinking, but I had to tilt my head in wonder as I undressed. *Fill up the tub? Why? So the steam will keep the room from drying out?*

It wasn’t long before I found out the true intentions behind Nanami’s words.

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The bathrooms in our hotel were bigger than we had expected. I had thought at first that maybe it would be similar to the small bathrooms one typically had in Japan, with the toilet and the bath right next to each other. Instead, the hotel bathroom had a sink area, as well as a shower and a separate tub. The toilet was positioned far enough away that it wouldn’t get wet from any water from the other fixtures. If you filled the tub, though, the steam would reach the sink area as well, making unused towels feel somewhat damp.

The shower area had a door, but one made of see-through glass. It wasn’t even frosted, so without steam you could very clearly see who was showering.

Right now, the steam from the hot water in the tub made the bathroom somewhat foggy. Right: There was hot water in the bathtub.

“It’s warm, huh?” Nanami murmured.

“Um, uh…yeah, right. It’s warm…”

Nanami sounded relaxed from her spot in the tub. There were movements of color in the hot water, and of course everything was visible because of its transparency. I was trying not to look, but it was impossible. Though I guess it would have been fine even if I *did* look.

After all, Nanami was currently wearing her bathing suit.

I was too, of course. And how we ended up like this—taking a bath together in the same tub—was a rather simple story.

In short, Nanami barged into the bathroom.

To travel back in time a bit…like, literally just ten minutes or so ago, so maybe it was too soon to call it a flashback, per se.

The first thing I did when I entered the bathroom was shower. And while I did, Nanami kept chatting with me about random stuff—the places we went today, the places we still wanted to go…things like that. She must have had nothing else to do.

There was some amount of distance between us, but we solved that problem by opening the bathroom door. That was why I couldn't tell that her voice was getting gradually clearer—that she was coming closer to me.

I also wasn't watching behind me while I was showering.

"Hey, are you the type to soak in the tub every day? Or do you just shower and call it a day?" Nanami asked.

"I do use the tub every day. I don't feel refreshed unless I do," I answered.

"Ah, that makes sense. Today we went to the beach, and we walked around a lot too. You must be tired," she said, then muttered, "Okay, it's almost full."

Although I didn't quite understand what she meant by her last comment, I asked, "You like baths too, right?"

"Yeah, though it's kind of a hassle. But if someone said I smelled bad, I'd feel the same way you do. I'd probably cry so much my eyes would fall out."

Would there ever be a moment where I'd tell Nanami she smelled bad? Can *she even smell bad? I can't really imagine girls smelling bad at all. But I guess if you're human, it's not impossible. I guess if it did happen all you'd need to do was shower. But it just feels way too insensitive to tell someone they smell bad. Yeah, I shouldn't ever say something like that.*

"Hey, Yoshin, do you remember? About us taking a bath together as a reward?" she asked.

"Reward? Oh, right. That was around exam time, huh?"

Back then, we had talked about taking a bath together if I managed to get above average scores in all test subjects. I ended up bombing my math test and so missed out on the reward, though.

I mean, of course we can't do something like that, given that our parents are around. But even still, just the thought of it was a huge motivator for me. Time sure flies, though. And thinking about it now,

summer school was the whole reason we started hanging out with Shirishizu-san too.

"I remember that. It's too bad it didn't end up happening," I replied.

"Yeah, it is too bad," Nanami said slowly. "But Yoshin, if you could take a bath with me, would you want to?"

"Of course I would," I replied immediately. I mean, I wasn't sure if there was any guy out there who *wouldn't* want to take a bath with his girlfriend. And if it was Nanami, then the response was even more obvious.

I also felt that it would be rude toward Nanami if I at all hesitated to reply.

I guess we always said that we would be wearing bathing suits, though. And given that I've gotten to see Nanami in bathing suits a whole lot here in Hawaii—

"Good," I heard Nanami say.

"Huh?"

Her voice sounded rather close. No, it wasn't just "close," it sounded like she was right next to me.

I heard the click of metal and then saw the door to the shower open. Without thinking, I turned around as I stood under the showerhead.

That's right, I *turned around*.

"Tee hee, I came—huh?! Oh my god!"

From the split-second look I got at Nanami's figure, it seemed like she wasn't wearing anything, not even a bathing suit. As she hastily exited the shower, though, rather than watch her go, I was more caught up in covering my own body. Even though I distinctly felt like some blushing maiden, the mortification of being seen like this made my whole body grow hot. I felt even warmer than when I was sunburned.

When I so thoughtlessly turned around, I was—unsurprisingly, given that I was showering—buck naked. I mean, obviously I would be.

D-Did she see me?

The cold, hard fact that she saw me stabbed me like a knife in my gut. I knew that being seen wasn't going to ruin anything, but still, there was a part of me that did feel that *something* had gotten a little worn out. I didn't know if it was an emotional thing or some

other intangible thing, but I just felt this undeniable sense of loss.

Is it just because it's my first time? Will the second time be easier? Just as I was questioning myself, though, Nanami returned to the shower—slowly.

At first glance, she appeared naked too—or maybe not? Dammit, the glass was too fogged up for me to be able to tell.

Nanami then snaked her arm into the shower and muttered, "Um, if you could just put this on…"

She held my swimming trunks in her hand, the same ones I had worn earlier today. I had thought that I might wear them again, so I had hung them up to dry.

I didn't think it was my imagination that Nanami's arm looked bright red. I tried to cover up my lower half as I took the bathing suit from her and found that it was completely dry.

Once I put them on, I mumbled, "Um, I'm good now."

The door to the shower room then slowly opened, and Nanami entered cautiously, as if to match the swing of the door.

I had thought that she wasn't wearing anything, but I was wrong. Nanami *was* wearing something: her brand-new bathing suit.

My mind was in a flurry earlier and had just assumed she wasn't wearing anything. Still, her new suit was of a very bold design. Both the top and the bottom were the same as her usual suit in terms of how revealing they were, but the design itself…

The bottom piece, especially, was…super high-cut, I guess? The groin area was cut in such a way that even though it technically covered everything, it still managed to be dangerously revealing. The backside wasn't fully open, of course, but the piece showed her butt cheeks at about the same angle as the front. All in all, although nothing was fully exposed, the piece was nonetheless highly suggestive.

In other words, Nanami—with her skin slightly tanned, to boot—walked into the shower wearing such a bathing suit. You can probably guess that my level of panic was at an all-time high.



And that was how we arrived…at now.

“Yoshin, you should come over here,” Nanami said.

“No no no, I’m, uh, fine,” I squeaked.

“Well, I guess it’s nice that we can see each other this way.”

Nanami and I were sitting in the same bathtub, facing each other. That’s right, we were facing each other; our bodies weren’t touching or anything. Because if they were, lots of *things* would end up getting pressed up against each other.

Sitting while facing each other was really all I could handle; the fact was I couldn’t even stand up if I wanted to.

And the reason? Please don’t ask.

“Nanami, um…why are we bathing together, exactly?” I asked.

“Hm? Oh, just rewarding you for a bunch of things,” Nanami explained. She then continued, in a softer voice, “Our parents aren’t here, so I figured we could do it in secret.”

“Our parents may not be here, but Hitoshi could come back at any second and see us like this. And what if the others got worried for you and came here looking for you? No matter what, it seems bad.”

“Oh, there’s nothing to worry about,” she said.

Huh? How can she say that so confidently?

“I actually told Kenbuchi-kun that I wanted to be alone with you, and he was all for the idea and agreed to help.”

Seriously? I thought *he seemed super enthusiastic when he left to go hang out elsewhere, but I guess he was just being considerate… Wait, is this being considerate? I still can’t believe that’s what he was trying to do.*

“You mean…until morning?” I asked.

“Um…yeah. I, um…I was intending to go back to my room at some point, but he said that he would sleep in a different room tonight, and that we could do whatever, so…”

Is that even allowed? But on second thought, I guess this is what being on a class trip is all about.

They said that soaking in the bathtub helped to wash away the stress of the day, but in this instance I was totally wired. I was relaxing, and yet I couldn’t relax at all.

Before we knew it we had fallen silent, the quiet between us filling the space of the bathroom. The only sound was the soft echo of water lapping against the tub whenever one of us moved.

Not talking made me feel even more tense. Nanami, too, had been chatty until a bit ago, but now she wasn't saying anything either. Was she feeling restless, just like me? Maybe she was talking so much earlier because she was trying to hide how nervous she was.

Once we stopped talking, it was somehow difficult to strike up a conversation again.

We both sat in the large tub, huddling into ourselves in order to take up as little space as possible. We had our legs folded, trying not to brush up against each other. Moving our legs even the slightest bit caused us to touch the other, and every time we did one of us would let out a soft gasp.

Wh-What exactly are we supposed to do? No, this won't do. This is precisely the time when I need to be proactive and attempt to talk to her. Nanami can't always be the one to take the initiative. Let's do this, Yoshin.

"Nanami, do you wanna come over here?"

What the hell are you saying*, Yoshin?!* That was totally the wrong topic of conversation to choose. I was this close to punching myself. *Honestly,* why *did I just say that?!*

Just like I couldn't swallow what I'd already spit out, though, I couldn't take back the words that I'd already spoken. Maybe it was just that my subconscious desires, previously held back, took advantage of the silence to spill out of my mouth.

Well, I guess there's nothing I can do about it now.

"O-Okay," Nanami whispered, then stood up in the bathtub, water droplets trickling down her skin. I'd seen her wet in the ocean during the day, but in the bath, I felt a completely different emotion rising up within me. Was it just the difference between hot and cold water? As steam wafted all around us, Nanami's skin glistened with moisture, with some spots even repelling water from beading on it.

Nanami then approached me and turned around, lowering her body slowly into the bathtub with her back toward me…until my body and her body were completely attached to each other.

Nanami then asked, with some confusion, "Is something…hard?"

"Uh, right. Can you maybe not worry about that too much? How about you just not worry about that at all. It's fine, everything is

totally fine.” I sighed.

“Um, okay?” Nanami said, her response clearly ending in a question mark. I managed to quickly change the topic, though, and we continued chatting in the tub, just like that.

I think I’m gonna get heatstroke.

Interlude: The Clandestine Reward

Finally, finally… I'm finally going to take a bath with Yoshin!

This was truly a once-in-a-lifetime experience. To be honest, I didn't plan to do such a thing at first, but when I talked with Hatsumi and them and then with Peach-chan too, that was the idea we came up with. Even now I think to myself, *How in the world?*

Though Hatsumi and the other two reminded me time and time again not to take my bathing suit off. As if I would do that. But then, I didn't quite know how to react to Peach-chan, who kept telling me to take it all off. Jeez. Middle schoolers these days scared me.

In any case, I'd go in wearing my bathing suit. After all, it was the brand-new one that I wanted to show Yoshin. All this, including the reveal of my brand-new bathing suit, would be a reward for him.

I guess this all came about because I wasn't entirely convinced that just seeing me in a bathing suit would be enough of a reward. I mean, after everything? I'd worn bathing suits in front of Yoshin so many times, and even just this morning we were both at the beach wearing bathing suits too.

Doesn't it get old after a while?

Of course I couldn't just outright ask Yoshin that. But maybe that was why it was important for me to do something a little extra this time, to make sure that he didn't get tired of the same old, same old.

Extra… That's right, extra.

And probably that little "extra" this time was taking a bath together.

I had Kenbuchi-kun to thank for this—not that I told him Yoshin and I were going to bathe together. When I brought up me being alone with Yoshin for a bit, though, he agreed to help immediately, no questions asked. He told me I could return the favor when the time came, but I wasn't entirely sure if there were any plans for that to happen.

Hatsumi, Ayumi, Kotoha-chan, Peach-chan, Kenbuchi-kun… With so many people helping, Yoshin and I would finally get to experience “bathing together,” something we couldn’t do in Japan.

As in, we *were* experiencing it, in that very moment.

I was super nervous before coming to Yoshin’s room, and I had to think really hard about how to get him into the tub…but everything turned out to be okay. Now that I thought about it, it was kind of a slipshod and haphazard affair, but at least I still had the element of surprise. If it came down to it, I was just going to command him to take a bath with me, but thankfully that wasn’t necessary. I also texted everyone with a message saying, “I’m going in!”

They must have replied by now. I was a little afraid to look.

“Hee hee, it’s warm,” I muttered.

“Y-Yeah, it is,” Yoshin mumbled.

Feeling Yoshin behind me, I leaned backward slightly—because it let me feel his body even more.

The water wasn’t too hot; if anything, it was pretty lukewarm. Given that both of us were sitting in the tub, the temperature was also probably dropping faster than it normally would. Still, it felt warm.

“When did you start thinking about this idea?” Yoshin asked.

“Mm, I wasn’t thinking about it at all actually. It was last minute,” I explained. “I only decided to go for it after I asked everyone for their input.”

“Did you by chance…ask Peach-san too?”

“Yup. Did she mention something?”

Yoshin held his head in his hands and muttered, “She told me ‘good luck.’” He actually looked down while sitting behind me, so his face ended up touching my shoulder.

My heart jumped slightly…or, actually, a lot.

“Come to think of it, wasn’t the last time we were like this at the night pool?” I asked.

“Huh? Oh…yeah, I guess we were in this position back then too, huh?” Yoshin said.

“Well, I feel like that was a little bit different. I think that time…”

I murmured a soft “pardon me” as I took Yoshin’s hands and put them over my shoulders and across my chest. *Yeah, I think this is what we were like that night. I don’t think his hands touched my chest*

back then, actually, but if they're touching it now, maybe it's gotten bigger since then…

"N-Nanami?" Yoshin muttered.

Oh no, Yoshin's starting to panic. Yeah, well, I guess that's to be expected. His hands are brushing up against my boobs. Though if it's him, I don't mind the touch.

"Wasn't it more like this that night?" I suggested.

"No, uh, I have a feeling this is slightly different. Yeah, I mean, it's just that, like this, my hands end up touching your chest," Yoshin protested.

"Oh? Weren't you touching my boobs that night too?" I said nonchalantly.

"I was not! I mean, I didn't touch it, I just…kind of brushed it with my hand a bit."

Ah ha ha, Yoshin is really *flustered. Yeah, well, if he really had touched me then, I'm pretty sure I would've remembered, so I know that didn't actually happen. Still, he probably did touch it at least a little…probably.*

Yoshin saving me that night from those guys trying to pick me up had made such an impression on me that I really couldn't remember much else. In any case, trying to remember everything from that night was probably too difficult.

Still, I want to try to remember everything there is to remember about Yoshin.

"Hey, Nanami—can I move my hands a bit?" Yoshin suddenly asked.

"Huh? You changed your mind about touching—"

"That's not it," Yoshin sighed as he removed his hands from over my shoulders. He then let them slide lower along my body, until his arms wrapped around my stomach, just below my chest. He then clasped his hands together and held me like I was a small child.

Somehow this position is relaxing to me.

Yoshin sighed again, as though from relief. I guess there was no chance of his hands accidentally brushing against my breasts this way. And yet, sitting like this…

"Isn't it *easier* to touch my chest like this?" I asked.

"Huh?!"

I was pretty sure that Yoshin had wrapped his arms around my

stomach so that his hands wouldn't touch my chest, but this way, if he just lifted them ever so slightly...

"You're such a perv," I said, giggling.

"No, that wasn't my intention at all!"

I was so giddy from the happy accident that I couldn't help teasing him, but Yoshin became even more panicked. *Really, though, I'm totally fine with Yoshin touching me. Am I being too forward?*

But there must be times like that too. Whenever Hatsumi and Ayumi get a little carried away and start fussing, they're always talking about how they want their boyfriends to do lots of stuff too. And even Kotoha-chan talked about how she wants Teshikaga-kun to do stuff to her. Even on this trip she's trying to progress things with Teshikaga-kun.

In the end, it was our age and our status as high school students that limited the actions we could take. I had thought that this was a problem unique to Hatsumi and Ayumi, who were dating older boyfriends—but actually, there seemed to be very little difference between their relationships and mine.

Yoshin was fretting, clearly at a loss for what to do. Maybe I went a little too far. Or maybe being on the trip had me more wired than I realized; the moves I was making on Yoshin seemed bolder than usual. *Is this the travel high people were talking about?*

Or maybe I was just tired because it was our third night in Hawaii. Still, maybe it was the mix of fatigue, happiness, *and* excitement from taking a bath together that was making me act this way.

"Hey, Yoshin—can I ask you a question?"

"Wh-What is it?" Yoshin replied, uncertain.

"You wanna touch them, don't you?" I asked.

"T-Touch what?" he stammered.

"My boobs...and other places. There's no one else here. If it's just touching, we can try doing a lot of things right now."

Maybe I was too direct, because I could hear Yoshin breathing and gulping. No, but I mean, of course I wanted to *know*.

There was no one else here right now, not even our parents; it was truly just the two of us. Maybe we couldn't go all the way, but we could at least take *one* step forward.

The first step was always the most important. I just

thought…that we could take that first step today.

I had to admit, though, that a part of me didn't quite agree. It was the part of me that factored in Yoshin's feelings and all the different conflicts we were both facing.

That was why I wanted to just bring it up. If it didn't go anywhere, then I was willing to accept that.

But wait…I wasn't hearing Yoshin deny my suggestion. I just heard him groaning instead. Like, a lot.

I tilted my head in confusion at his uncharacteristic reaction.

"Then," he said after a while, "I'll touch just a little bit."

He said it in such a serious voice—one filled with quiet resolve—that my brain couldn't immediately process what he was saying.

Huh? He's gonna touch me?!

When I lifted myself out of the water slightly and turned around to look at him, Yoshin looked deadly serious. And also bright red.

He's not red because of the bath, is he?

When I saw the expression on his face, though, my brain finally registered what it had initially resisted to comprehend. Yoshin was serious this time. He was seriously going to touch me.

I felt like I'd woken a sleeping dog—not that I'd ever seen a sleeping dog, but still, I knew that my remark had been totally unnecessary.

Unnecessary? Was it? No…that can't be!

"G-Go for it!" I shouted without even realizing it, facing forward once again and attaching myself to Yoshin.

Having turned away from him, I straightened my back in the tub, feeling as though I was actually sitting on my heels.

H-He's really gonna touch me, right? And…he's only *gonna touch me, right?!*

I somehow felt that Yoshin was probably sitting with his back straight too.

He must have detected that I had prepared myself, because he removed his hands from my stomach…and shaped them into cups.

"H-Here I go!" he announced, his nervous voice echoing against the bathroom walls. The sound of his voice seemed to shake my eardrums—at least, it felt that way to me.

"O-Okay!" I exclaimed in response.

Then slowly, slowly, Yoshin's hands began to move higher and

higher. What slow movement it was—subtle, cautious, and precise, as though he had been preparing for this moment for a long time.

He hadn't touched me yet, but a tingling sensation stabbed my skin as if he already had. *He…hasn't touched me yet, has he?*

Yoshin's hands were moving slowly, but they were most certainly getting closer to my chest.

I was probably imagining things, but in that moment, everything looked to me like it was moving in slow motion. I even thought I could trace the drip of every single water droplet in the bathtub.

Every time I told myself that Yoshin's hands would be upon me at any moment, that tingling shot through my chest. Finally, it got to a point where I could no longer withstand the ticklish sensation —the anticipation.

"H-Hold it right there!" I shouted.

"Yes, ma'am!" Yoshin also let out, freezing his hands in place.

His stop was perfectly timed. Yoshin's hands were held in place, in the exact shape of my two breasts.

Yes: I am the one who chickened out.

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Having wussed out in the bath, I sunk into a deep sea of remorse. I mean, really, I had thought that I'd made up my mind, but that hadn't been the case at all. I guess I really hadn't, not in the truest sense of the word.

"It's nothing to feel down about," Yoshin said, trying to console me as he handed me a towel.

"This is how you're always feeling, huh?" I mumbled.

I clearly had no idea what I was getting into. I knew I'd told him before to squeeze a boob or two, but when it was actually about to happen, I couldn't handle it at all.

Except a part of me also thought that this was for the best. It was just a feeling, but if Yoshin really had touched my breasts, there was a possibility that we wouldn't have been able to keep ourselves from going even further.

And *that* would have been pretty awkward. The class trip was going to continue tomorrow, and given that I didn't want things to get weird, it was best that we didn't do anything at the moment. I

had to tell myself that to stay positive.

"Then, how about doing this, at least?" Yoshin said.

"Huh?" I muttered.

Yoshin spread open the towel in his hands and brought it against my body, around my shoulders. It was a light touch, but the towel immediately absorbed the water droplets on my skin.

As I stood still in mild surprise, Yoshin continued by drying my other shoulder, and then my back.

"This is pretty nice," I murmured. It reminded me of how my mom used to dry me after baths when I was a kid. This way Yoshin was touching me through the towel rather than directly on my skin, allaying some of the tension I had felt earlier.

Maybe it was the same with Yoshin too, because he was willing to dry me in places where he wouldn't normally touch me, like my legs, stomach, and even my chest.

Though I guess that was probably because I asked him if he wasn't going to dry my chest too. It seemed like a small ask to me, considering that he was willing to directly touch my chest a few minutes ago. Well, I guess he *was* quivering a bit when he patted me dry.

The towel was really working wonders here.

"Here, I'll get you too," I offered.

"Wait, me too?" Yoshin said, stunned.

Why, of course.

I took the towel I was holding and started drying Yoshin's body. Just like he did, I started with his shoulders, then dried his back, his stomach, and even his chest. *Why isn't it a big deal to touch a man's chest?*

We continued drying each other off, which honestly felt pretty surreal. We quickly realized that it was hard to do it simultaneously, though, so we decided to take turns doing it.

At first we had been chatting as we dried each other, but we slowly grew embarrassed and ended up falling silent.

Having toweled off most of the water, the only parts that remained were the bathing suits. I stole a glance at Yoshin's, and...

"M-Maybe we should just get the rest ourselves, huh?!" I shouted.

"S-Sounds good!" he agreed, maybe a bit too fervently.

We spun around, our backs to each other, and continued wiping

ourselves dry. *Oh shoot, I'd totally forgotten that I have to change out of this wet bathing suit, or else I'm gonna catch cold.*

The towel must have been an American size, it was so big. If I secured it in place, though, it probably wouldn't come undone. Yoshin was looking the other way right now too.

"Yoshin, I'm gonna take my bathing suit off, so don't look this way, okay?" I said.

"Excuse me?!" he yelled.

"It's okay. I'll have a towel wrapped around me. You should take your bathing suit off too or you'll just stay wet," I suggested.

"Oh, right, 'cause it's wet. Right, sure. Yeah…wait, *huh*? Nanami, are you telling me you don't have any underwear with you?"

That's right. Though I do have the pair that I was wearing when I first dropped by the room, so I can just put those on once I'm dry.

Besides, if I had brought my underwear into the bathroom, Yoshin would've seen them, and that would have been too embarrassing. Maybe the thought shouldn't have been as embarrassing as it was, considering that I had just done something arguably more embarrassing, but still.

"Nanami, if you want, I can dry your hair for you," Yoshin offered.

"Huh?"

When I turned to look at him, I saw that he had his towel wrapped around his waist and was holding a hair dryer in his hand. A closer look showed me that he had his long towel knotted just below his six-pack.

The contrast of his slightly tanned skin and abs against the white towel was simply magnificent. The look of him was if he had just been involved in a *certain kind* of affair.

I couldn't keep myself from staring.

Also, the long towel made it look like he was wearing a skirt, which was pretty adorable.

"Oh, if you're not into the idea—"

"Yes, please!"

Of course I'm into the idea! My reply this time came quickly, since my initial pause made him think otherwise. Having him dry my hair was also something I had wanted him to do for me for some time.

Yoshin smiled awkwardly and waved me over as he stood

behind a chair near the sink. When I hopped over and sat down, I saw myself reflected in the mirror, wrapped in my towel. And there was Yoshin, standing behind me. Maybe because only his upper body was reflected in the mirror, but he appeared as though he was naked.

That was when I remembered the scene earlier, the memory I was trying to suppress—when I had first stepped into the bathroom.

Yoshin had been taking a shower then, and he wasn't even wearing his bathing suit. And he had turned around, and…

N-No, I wasn't looking or anything! I ran out of there before I could see anything clearly, so I only caught a glimpse! I mean, I didn't see anything at all! Honest.

"Are you okay, Nanami? Are you cold?" Yoshin asked.

"Oh, no. I'm fine. Thanks for doing this," I managed to say.

When I sat up straight, Yoshin tilted his head as though confused. I couldn't help feeling slightly nervous about the whole situation.

As I sat there wondering what Yoshin was going to do, he first took the towel and soaked up the water from my hair slowly and gently, as though he were massaging it. He did it so softly that I almost couldn't feel it, but I did, and it felt so good that I couldn't help letting a soft moan escape my lips.

With most of the excess moisture patted off my hair, Yoshin applied some hair oil and began using the dryer on low temp.

"Is there anywhere that you'd like me to scratch for you?" Yoshin asked, pretending to play hairstylist. I giggled and replied that my cheek itched, which clearly was nowhere near my hair. But to my shock he actually did scratch my cheek for me, ever so lightly. It actually felt kind of nice.

Yoshin switched from low temp to low speed, and he even used the cool air setting at times. It all felt so relaxing. I was almost certain that it felt more relaxing than when I dried my hair myself.

My hair was long, though, so he seemed to be having a difficult time drying all of it. I almost wished my hair was shorter.

Still, Yoshin drying my hair felt so good; I had zero complaints, and I wanted him to do it again some day. I did, however, have one question that nagged at me now.

"Where did you learn to do this?" I asked.

I mean, men—my dad the prime example—tended to scrub their head really hard with their towel while they used a hair dryer. And because that was what I expected, I didn't think Yoshin would dry my hair so gently.

It just felt so *good*.

"Oh, um…when I was talking with the guys the other day, one of them mentioned that his girlfriend likes it when he dries her hair," he explained. "So I looked it up and practiced a bit on my own."

Yoshin looked so cute as he stood there embarrassed, scratching his cheek, that I could swear my heart literally went pitter-patter. The fact that he had made such an effort for me filled me with indescribable gratitude and joy.

"Then I *must* thank you for doing all that for me," I said coyly.

"Huh? No, I mean, you don't have to worry about that," he replied.

"It's fine, because I really want to!" I exclaimed. "So in thanks…"

Intending to turn around and tell him that I would dry Yoshin's hair for him in return, I leaped up out of the chair. I guess I did so…with a little too much momentum.

"Oh…!"

Maybe it was because I stood up too fast, or maybe it was because I turned too quickly and forcibly. Whatever the reason, the knot on my towel that I'd tied tightly…came undone.

With a soft whoosh, the towel that once wrapped around my body fell to the floor.

The entire moment seemed to unfold before me in slow motion, as silence filled the air around us.

As if gravity had increased a hundredfold just in this hotel bathroom, Yoshin—very, very slowly—turned his head sideways and whispered, "I-I'll take that as your thanks?"

"That's not it!!!"

I was pretty sure I had never screamed so loudly in my life, ever.



Chapter 4: A Ring, a Promise, and a Blessing

Something smells good.

It was sweet like candy, and yet fragrant like a flower; it had a mysterious warmth to it, soothing me from the bottom of my heart.

And with that smell, I slowly emerged from slumber.

In my state of half sleep, I thought to myself how wonderful it must be to fall asleep surrounded by this scent—but I managed to get a hold of my consciousness and not nod off again.

The scent had tickled my curiosity, and I was determined to find out what it was. I soon realized that the smell was coming from right in front of me.

Was it the fact that my eyes were currently closed that my other senses seemed sharper? I slowly opened my eyes anyway, excitement about possibly figuring out the scent winning out over potentially enhanced senses.

Well, I guess I already had a pretty good guess for what that source was; this was just to confirm it.

As my field of vision opened up, the faint light filtering through the curtains brightened the room enough for me to see Nanami's face—and super close-up, to boot.

Now *this* I hadn't expected. I mean, of course I had expected Nanami to be here, but still.

Nanami was breathing softly, still comfortably asleep. *Still, why is Nanami next to me?*

And when I looked more closely at her... *Huh? Is she not wearing anything...?!*

In a panic I bolted up in bed to check on the state of my own clothes. *Oh good, I've still got my clothes on.*

When I turned and looked at Nanami more calmly, I saw that she, too, wasn't actually naked. Maybe because her clothing was fairly light, but looking at her wrapped up in the blanket I had a split-second delusion that she wasn't wearing anything at all.

Yes, Nanami, too, was properly clothed. She wasn't wearing a ton of layers, but she was dressed, and she had a thin blanket over

her.

This was expected, of course, but we didn't actually do anything—even though Nanami was somewhat sparsely clothed. I knew I was being repetitive, mentioning so often that Nanami was clothed lightly, but I was pretty proud of myself for having maintained self-control the night before despite that. I wanted to pat myself on the back, actually.

What did we end up doing last night, anyway? As I studied Nanami's sleeping face, I began to recall what had transpired the night before.

Oh, that's right—last night Nanami and I ended up chatting until we both fell asleep.

Even though it was supposed to be twin-size, the beds in the room were so large that we said it might as well be a double. We laughed, saying that even if the two of us lay down on one, there was still plenty of room left over.

The two of us then plopped down on the bed as though we'd found the perfect excuse to do so—and then, lying in bed together, we started to chat.

I didn't know exactly whom we were making the excuses to, but we kept saying how we really had no choice but to lie next to each other. And then in the end, we had ended up falling asleep.

The only reason we were this close was because we had felt each other's skin—you know, to check whether we'd gotten sunburned at all. Nanami apparently wanted to get a nice, even tan.

And then she asked me if I would like a very tanned, gyaru Nanami-san...

No, no. Let's revisit that memory some other time.

But really, who had fallen asleep first? I thought it was Nanami who fell asleep first, and then I probably saw that and fell asleep soon after as well.

That's right. Just before she faded away, Nanami had muttered, "If it's just a little bit, we can do something sexy..."

And then she promptly fell asleep. And I just lay there, unable to do or say anything.

I mean, how could I, after what happened in the bathtub? And what happened when I dried her hair?

And I had been asking myself too, what exactly did it mean to

do something *a little bit sexy*? I was asking myself exactly what counted as little, when I finally fell asleep.

That was all that my hazy brain could recall.

A part of me felt like I missed out, and then another part of me was relieved that I didn't have to do anything too sneaky. Maybe the relieved part of me won out in the end.

Maybe we were *all* feeling a bit bolder because we were in Hawaii.

Wait, this is no time to be calmly analyzing the situation.

For starters, I looked over at Nanami again. Her eyes were still shut, and she was breathing softly. The sound of it was irresistibly adorable.

How long had it been since I last saw her lying down and sleeping like this?

I had slept alongside Nanami a few times before, but I was pretty sure that this was the first time we had slept so close to each other, intentionally, and on the same bed.

Okay, that sounds really misleading.

But I mean, that time when I slept over at Nanami's house, or when we went on the family trip and ended up with my hand on her belly, or even when we went camping… Weren't there other occasions like this too?

For most of those, we had slept together under very particular circumstances. So this time around really felt like a first for us.

The closest we came to this before was probably when we'd fallen asleep while talking on the phone. If we hadn't done that, I was pretty sure I would've been way more panicked this morning.

I would've panicked, then made a scene, then woken Nanami up.

Her sleeping face looked like that of an angel…or rather, she looked like an angel, sleeping…no, wait, maybe she was more like a sleeping goddess? In any case, Nanami in bed was quite the vision.

Should I kiss her? No, I shouldn't. She'd wake up. It'll be better to do that once she's up. Wait, wait, what am I even thinking?

I thought I was doing things calmly, but maybe I wasn't calm at all. And it was still so early in the morning. Maybe there were still lingering aftereffects from our conversation yesterday.

Maybe because we'd left the AC on, but the room didn't feel that

hot. At least Nanami shouldn't wake up because of the heat.

Come to think of it, where did Hitoshi go? I'm pretty sure that yesterday, Nanami came to hang out here, and so Hitoshi left out of consideration and let us be alone.

The bed next to ours was empty. Hitoshi didn't seem to have returned at all. In other words, Nanami and I were still alone in the room.

Realizing that made my heart skip a beat.

I shifted my weight so that I went from being turned toward Nanami to now lying face up. The ceiling seemed oddly far away.

I glanced at Nanami, but she was still sleeping just as she was a moment ago. *When will she wake up? She's sleeping so peacefully that I feel bad waking her. Maybe I really should kiss her.*

As soon as I thought that, though, Nanami stirred and moaned softly.

The sound flustered me so much I ended up doing a full body jerk away from her, the bed shaking from the sudden movement.

Nanami, too, turned and lay face up like me. Her breasts also rose up, asserting their undeniable presence. *Wow, I had no idea that's how they move…*

Both Nanami and I were wearing very casual clothing, which meant that I could see the outlines of her body very clearly through her clothes. Even though she was dressed, it almost seemed like she was lying naked next to me.

Of course, I couldn't help recalling the image of Nanami from the night before. *No, I can't. Stop it, Yoshin. Get a hold of yourself. You* must *think of something else. You can't erase your memories, but at the very least, do everything within your power not to think about that.*

Uh, come to think of it, what time is it? With the time difference, it must be nighttime in Japan. Maybe I should check out the view outside, just to take my mind off of things.

I could hear birds chirping from outside the window. Inside, all I could hear was the hum of the air-conditioning and Nanami's soft breathing. And maybe my own breathing too.

For the time being I snuck out of bed, taking care not to wake Nanami, and walked over to the window, from which I could take in another beautiful view of the ocean.

I guessed this was what a true ocean view was. The beach

glistened with the morning sun, and I could see a smattering of people jogging along the shoreline. It was impressive how early some people got up out of bed.

Well, the tour guide did mention how Hawaiians tended to start their days pretty early. It seemed perfectly natural to be early risers, though, when the weather was this good and the morning sun was this painfully bright. I wasn't a runner myself, but it seemed like a great environment for people who liked that kind of thing.

When I thought of the majesty of nature, I used to picture mountains and greenery for miles, but here I could take in a panorama of pure blue in a single view.

It was a view I wanted to enjoy together with Nanami. Maybe we could see it together when she woke up.

As I stood there taking in the view from our hotel room, I heard a click come from the door. It didn't sound like the door opening, though; it sounded more like the door being unlocked with a key card.

I watched the door open very slowly. It seemed like the person opening it was doing their best not to make any sound.

Then, from the slight opening that appeared, Hitoshi poked his head in...again, very slowly. I must have made him spend the night in a different room; I felt really bad about that.

When Hitoshi saw me, though, he gestured for me to go over to him. *Isn't he gonna come inside?*

I tilted my head in confusion at his behavior, but I did my best to approach him without making any sound.

Meanwhile, Hitoshi cautiously entered the room and then closed the door softly behind him. Everything he did was in slow motion, as though he were a ninja.

When I drew closer to him, he asked me in a whisper, "Did ya do it?"

"How can that be the first thing you ask me, man...?"

How outrageous. *Dude, seriously?* Still, Hitoshi himself seemed dead serious—so I turned rather serious as well.

"It's important, you idiot!" he whispered vehemently. "If you guys really *did* do it, then I'd have to stay out of the room and kill time until you two pulled yourselves together."

Oh, I see. That is true, isn't it?

Hitoshi, though, added that there was close to zero possibility of that happening. It was kind of annoying that he thought that, but he was also right, so it wasn't like I could disagree.

That must have been why he was decidedly not looking at the bed. *I see; he really is being thoughtful here.*

But I did have to agree with what he was saying; frankly I lacked the courage to really do anything more than what we'd already done.

"And? The truth is?" he continued.

"We didn't do anything, but since Nanami isn't fully dressed, it would be great if you can give us a little bit more time," I whispered.

Hitoshi gave the okay hand sign and left the room again, as slowly as he had entered. He was really agreeable when it came to stuff like this.

He seemed like, honestly, a pretty considerate guy. Sometimes his comments and actions were mildly questionable, but I wanted to be able to learn from this more respectable side of him.

But wait—where had he been this whole time?

By the time I turned to ask him, though, he was already gone. I didn't get to ask him this time, but I guess that was all right too. I could bring it up again next time we spoke.

Well, then—I wished I could let Nanami sleep in more, but it was probably time to wake her up and get prepared for the new day.

I walked back toward the bed and peered into Nanami's sleeping face again. When I did, though, in almost a classically cliché manner, I heard her calling my name in her sleep.

What kind of dream is she having? Maybe I'll ask her after I wake her up. And it's not because I'm somehow jealous of the Yoshin in her dream. Nope.

"Nanami? Good morning, Nanami. It's time for us to wake up. Shall we go get breakfast?" I whispered.

"Hmmm…mmm? Oh, Yoshin is here…but we were just in our bathing suits, and we were…"

*Wait, don't fall back asleep, Nanami. We were doing…*what *in our bathing suits?! Oh no, she's about to go back to dreamland. Wait, what about the bathing suits?! Are we still taking a bath in her dream?*

I nudged her lightly, but Nanami just continued mumbling in

her sleep.

The morning of our fourth day in Hawaii began just like this, with me and Nanami greeting it together in the same room.

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I had said this earlier, but we were already on the fourth day of our class trip. But this day was really the last day of our trip. Though we'd still wake up in Hawaii tomorrow, the only thing left on our itinerary was returning to Japan. Today, then, was the last day for us to do any real sightseeing.

The final day of our class trip.

Thinking that got me a little emotional. I experienced so many things... Okay, to be honest, all I could really think of was what happened the night before.

I guess that left *too* strong of an impression on me.

"Man, I wanna stay in Hawaii longer... I wanna go to Oahu... I wanna make out with Yoshin..."

Whether she knew what was going through my head or not, Nanami was stretched out next to me as if she were melting. She seemed kind of like a Melty Nanami. They said that cats could be all boneless like this, but seeing Nanami now made me think that she might be able to do the same.

"Yeah, I want to—"

"We couldn't even do anything sexy, really," Nanami muttered.

"Okay, how about we watch what we say in public," I sighed.

Nanami wasn't wrong, but saying all this in the open wasn't quite the right move. *Look, people are starting to stare at us now...*

I mean, Nanami had said that we *hadn't* been able to do anything, so really, there was nothing scandalous being said that others might want to hear. Regardless, she seemed to be at the end of her energy somewhat, after days of going around in large groups; she was starting to be dangerously lax about the kinds of things she said while among other people.

We were currently on a bus headed into town, so of course there were people not just from our group but also from our larger class as well.

Up until yesterday our activities were mainly organized tours and whatever else the school had scheduled for us. Today, though,

the majority of the day was set aside for what we wanted to do. You could participate in an optional tour, or you could take a bus that the school had rented and go into town for some more sightseeing. You could also choose to hang back at the hotel to relax.

Apparently there were also groups that were tagging along with teachers who had rented cars for the day. That made sense, given how necessary a car was to get around Hawaii. Some of it seemed calculated, the students wanting the teacher as their cabbie or even to get them to pay for meals—but they also seemed genuinely to want to explore Hawaii with a teacher that they liked.

It must be hard to be a teacher...

Our homeroom teacher also asked us if we wanted to join him going around in a car with a few other students, but we politely declined. He ended up reminding us—very strongly—to be very careful while we were out, especially me and Nanami. Though I had no idea why he would be so worried about us.

Although we theoretically had free time, we still had to tell the teachers in advance what we were planning to do, and we also weren't allowed to do certain things. There was no reason, therefore, for him to worry about us so much.

Oh, maybe he's worried about me and Nanami displaying excessive amounts of affection out in public. I see. We'll be mindful; please don't worry about us so much.

Nanami and I passed the time on the bus chatting about random stuff like that. Remembering my realization about the teacher's concern was pretty funny, though.

"Come on, let's enjoy our last day too. It's our class trip, after all," I said, trying to cheer up Nanami.

"You're right. We have so much we wanna do today," she replied. "Oh, let's go to the pool when we get back to the hotel. We went to the beach, but we haven't gone to the pool yet."

"You're already thinking about what to do *after* we get back to the hotel?" I asked, tickled. "And we already saw the pool at night."

"We only *looked* at the pool then! I wanna go to the pool in my bathing suit!"

I couldn't help but enjoy myself when I saw Nanami having fun. Everyone else, too, was talking excitedly about what they were

going to do for the day.

We'd made rough plans before coming on the trip, but once we'd actually arrived, the list of places we wanted to go to just kept getting longer and longer. If we actually wrote out all the sites we wanted to visit, there was no way we could go to all of them in four days. New destinations just kept popping up. Plus we had a good time just relaxing at the hotel or hanging out at the beach. I guess that was the whole point of a tourist destination, but still.

On top of all that we had only come to the Island of Hawaii. There were whole other islands like Oahu as well, so it now made perfect sense to us that Hawaii was considered a great sightseeing spot.

"It'd be nice to come back again, huh?" Nanami muttered.

"Yeah, it would be nice," I agreed.

"Just the two of us?"

"Yeah, just the two of us."

If that was the case, though, I would have to pick up more hours at my part-time job. If we were to actually make it out here again, it would most likely be for a graduation trip. But that seemed like the kind of thing you could go on with close friends too. That might mean that our graduation trip would be somewhere in Japan, and that we'd make it back to Hawaii once we were in college...?

While I thought about the next time we could possibly come to Hawaii, Nanami approached me and—in a voice only I could hear—whispered in my ear, "We could come back here for our real honeymoon, huh?"

She then pulled away quickly and bashfully smiled, her tanned skin taking on a reddish hue. When I saw her expression, I smiled in agreement, as if I couldn't agree more.

We had talked about this class trip like it was a prehoneymoon. But because a lot of the trip was us going around in large groups, I had forgotten ever mentioning that. It gave me a funny feeling to be reminded of it now.

After a bit more travel time, the bus arrived at the city center. The teacher then reviewed with us the guidelines and our final meeting time, and then finally, he left us to our own devices.

"All righty then, see you two later! Stay safe, all right?!" Hitoshi called out, a slovenly smile on his face, waving at us while he

stepped into a group with Otofuke-san, Kamoenai-san, and some of the other girls from our class.

“You two have fun, okay?”

“Please be careful, master.”

Shirishizu-san and Teshikaga-kun, too, said to us before they began walking side by side toward the beach. They seemed to maintain a delicate sense of distance between them, somewhere between linking arms and holding hands.

“Well then,” I said. “Shall we get going too?”

“Yeah!” Nanami replied eagerly.

Having seen our friends off, Nanami and I began walking in the opposite direction from our friends. We set off on a stroll through town, both of us wearing our sunglasses, the hats we’d bought in Hawaii, and our matching Hawaiian shirts.

Today Nanami was wearing a tube top under her Hawaiian shirt, along with a pair of denim shorts. I was wearing a similar outfit. The reason we wore matching outfits was because, after I woke up Nanami, we changed together... No, wait, that sounded misleading. No, wait, maybe that *was* actually pretty accurate. We didn’t necessarily change right then and there, but we did discuss the idea of wearing matching outfits today—even though everyone else ended up making fun of us for it.

Until yesterday, we’d been wearing the Hawaiian shirts that Nanami’s parents had let us borrow. Today, though, we were wearing the ones that *my* parents had lent to us. To think that my dad and mom wore these—two shirts with the same design, just in different colors—made me a little ticklish.

“Do I look okay?” Nanami asked, smiling at me shyly.

“Yeah, you look great. It’s perfect.”

Nanami still seemed a little embarrassed, but she really did look good in the shirt. I felt like her shirt was a wee bit *too* open, but somehow she managed to look sexy in a wholesome way, though holding hands gave me an unfortunately excellent view of her cleavage.

Actually, Nanami originally had her shirt tied just under her chest, but since that emphasized all the wrong places and looked too sensual, we decided against it. Even though it felt safe here in Hawaii, we were still overseas; we should do our best to avoid trouble. She still looked really sexy, though.



“You really did get a tan, huh?” I remarked.

“Hee hee, yeah! It’s nice and even, right? I’m so glad I asked Nao-chan about how to get a tan,” Nanami replied. “What do you think? Do you like this sexy version of me?”

“Of course I do,” I murmured.

“Tee hee. Look, I’m tanned, but my skin is *super* smooth! Touch!” Nanami said, thrusting her upper arm out at me and trying to get me to touch her skin. Because she seemed not to have any ulterior motives, I gingerly felt her arm.

The skin of her arm, damp with sweat from the heat of the day, seemed to stick to my hand. It felt moist, but it wasn’t actually sticky. It was smooth, almost soft—almost like silk, maybe. *But maybe not.* The touch of her skin felt warm and supple, with a firm squishiness unlike mochi. It also felt different from when I had last touched it.

“What do you think?” Nanami asked.

“You have such nice skin, Nanami. I mean, I always knew that, but…it’s so *nice*,” I managed to respond.

“What are you even saying?” Nanami said, giggling and pulling her arm away—thus leaving the hand that had once had a palmful of Nanami hanging in the air. *I don’t know, it’s just that I’ve suddenly lost all the words to say anything.*

“But if I’m this tanned, should I also lighten my hair a bit? Maybe I’d look better blonde,” Nanami commented.

“Probably, but…isn’t that maybe against school rules? Would it be okay?” I asked.

“I think so. I mean, they don’t say anything about Ayumi’s hair.”

“Oh, true. But I think that you’re pretty just the way you are. Your hair right now looks great with your tan,” I said.

Nanami, though, pursed her lips and mumbled, “I guess.”

I had never even considered the idea of dying my hair to match my tan. I’d never dyed my hair, period. I had nothing but admiration for all the efforts fashionable people made for the sake of their aesthetic. It was something I could never do.

As I thought about that, though, I noticed that Nanami was staring hard at me.

What’s going on? I mean, I knew that I’d gotten pretty tanned on this trip too, but still. In fact, maybe because Nanami had put tanning oil on me too, I felt like I had achieved a pretty even tan

myself. I guess we *had* put it on each other. Still, I was pretty certain that I currently had the best tan of my life.

"You wanna dye your hair too, Yoshin?" Nanami suddenly asked.

"Uh…I feel like I've already been asked something like that before," I muttered.

Nanami took one of my hands with her own, and then touched my arm with her other. Her touch tickled me, but I couldn't refuse the feel of her fingers touching my skin.

Me? Dye my hair? I imagined it for a moment—me, dying my hair to match my newly achieved tan.

"Doesn't that seem a little embarrassing?" I asked.

"Huh? Not at all! I bet you'd look really cool," Nanami insisted.

I had to wonder about that. I was pretty certain that Hitoshi and the others would end up rolling on the floor, laughing. Wouldn't it seem like I was trying too hard?

I'd do it if it was what Nanami wanted, but I wouldn't agree to it immediately. I tried to recall the last time I heard something like this that wasn't before summer break. That's right—Toru-san, the hairstylist at the salon that Nanami went to, had suggested it to me. *Gosh, I'm not sure, though…*

"Do you know? I heard that Japanese people specifically seem to not like getting tanned. People in other countries actually *want* to sunbathe and get their skin all golden," I said.

"Jeez, I can't believe you're so obviously trying to change the subject," Nanami sighed.

"W-Well, we can consider it an assignment for us to continue thinking about the question while we're on our trip. And maybe we can report back to each other after the trip is over," I continued.

"An *assignment*?!" Nanami yelled.

I steadfastly steered the conversation in a different direction, no matter how obvious it seemed. Nanami, though, didn't seem to want to force me into it; after that she didn't pursue the matter further.

She probably hadn't given up on it entirely, though. I figured there were probably many people who didn't think it was a big deal to dye their hair, especially if their girlfriends thought it would look cool. Still, there was nothing I could do about my long-entrenched resistance to the idea. Perhaps I could try something small?

As we continued chatting and walking, we arrived at a certain location.

"I wonder if it's a festival or something?" I said, thinking out loud.

The place had a bunch of stalls...or booths, maybe? The area seemed to feature a wide variety of vendors. There were many people there, with a lot of bustle and activity. There seemed to be many Japanese people as well. It almost felt like this small area was a cutout from a festival in Japan. *Wow, look at all the people coming and going. It looks like it's free to enter too. Wow, it really* is *like a festival. Nanami looks like she's interested too. Maybe we should stop by?*

"You wanna go check it out?" I asked.

"Yeah, let's!" Nanami agreed.

She and I stepped into the area, full of excitement from the joy of truly going with the flow. When we looked more closely, we saw that a sign at the entrance said "market" on it.

Market...like a street market, maybe? I've never been to one, but I've heard that they're great to just wander around in. Is it okay for us to just browse here, though? They wouldn't bar us from looking? No, that can't be possible.

As Nanami and I began walking, we realized that there was more to the market than the side that faced the main street; there were vendors several rows in. It seemed almost like a maze, one where we had to work to find an escape route.

I extended my hand out toward Nanami and said, "So that we don't get separated."

"Sounds good," she replied, taking my hand with a smile on her face. "But there really are a ton of people here, huh?"

Nanami was right—the crowd was pretty impressive. Considering just how many things were on display at the different stalls, I was curious what kinds of things this market had for sale. There were produce, like fruits and vegetables, food items like sausages, juices, and smoothies... I also saw accessories like rings, necklaces, and phone straps, as well as craft items made of wood. Some of the other items were things I couldn't even figure out the uses for.

The variety was impressive, and everything looked handmade.

"Oh, that juice looks tasty," Nanami remarked next.

There was a tall and portly older man with a giant beard selling freshly made fruit juices. He must have been popular; one customer after another visited his stall to buy his drinks.

"Let's try it," I said, then muttered, "I wonder if I can buy it."

Maybe because the man wasn't Japanese, but I felt a bit nervous ordering from him. I did my best to work with what English I knew and every bit of gesture in my arsenal to order two servings of juice.

As I stood there wondering if my English made any sense…the man responded to me in Japanese. Plus he spoke it fluently.

I had to admit I was amazed. *Would I be able to speak English if I were in his position?* People often said to learn by doing; maybe if I lived in Hawaii, I would become more proficient in English too.

He smiled and gestured to us when I took the juices from him, so we also responded in kind. It didn't come naturally to me, but I hoped I got it right.

I handed one of the juices to Nanami and took a sip from my own. A sweet and tart taste spread throughout my mouth, tasting both very refreshing and somehow tropical. The fact that it was ice-cold was also a very welcome factor. Going around the market with Nanami under the hot sun, enjoying our juices… It was truly a lovely time.

Here and there I kept seeing different accessories, noticing how none of them were terribly expensive. A lot of them seemed like several thousand yen…most of them under ten thousand. Of course there were more pricey ones too.

It almost felt like we were going around visiting different jewelry shops. Nanami and I didn't do that terribly often, so it was a new experience for me. We didn't encounter markets like this too much in Japan. Or maybe they had them in Japan too and I just didn't know about them—open-air markets, or even just regular stores.

Nanami had stopped to examine some unique rings, stars in her eyes. The shop attendant, too, was talking to her in Japanese, explaining the different designs unique to Hawaiian culture. The accessories spanned a wide range, from rings and necklaces to earrings and hair clips. Each item seemed to hold a unique significance.

"It's nice to go around looking at accessories like this. I used to

do it a lot with Hatsumi and Ayumi, but I haven't done it in a while," Nanami said.

"Maybe we can do this together sometime," I replied.

"Well, that would be fun for me, but wouldn't it bore you? I mean, I really go around to a lot of different places. And sometimes I'm just looking and don't buy anything."

"I think it'll be okay," I assured her.

All of our past dates had gotten us used to being together. Just because we might go to places only Nanami chose didn't mean I'd suddenly have a hard time staying with her.

I also wanted to confirm something.

Just as Nanami suggested, I had heard the guys in the class talk about how boring it was to accompany their girlfriends on their shopping trips. I wanted to see if I would feel the same. For me, I believed that if I was going shopping with Nanami, then it would already be fun and not at all boring. But I couldn't be sure until I actually tried it.

After hearing my explanation, Nanami looked dumbfounded.

"Don't people usually keep stuff like that to themselves?" she blurted.

"I just didn't want you to worry about stuff like that. Earlier it sounded like you were sort of concerned about it," I explained.

Nanami smiled awkwardly, then squeezed my hand as she whispered, "Jeez." Sure, being considerate to each other was important, but it was pointless if that same consideration meant we were unable to enjoy things because of it.

"Speaking of, maybe looking around at the jewelry here could be like a test run? I mean, I don't feel bored right now," I commented.

"Mmm, I feel like this is kinda different," Nanami said. "But in that case, come shopping with me when we get back to Japan. Let's pinkie...oh, I guess we can't right now."

Since we were holding our cups of juice in our hands, we couldn't quite do a pinkie promise at the moment. Still, it felt nice that there was one more item added to our list of things to do once we returned to Japan.

"Oh, these are super cute," Nanami then said, stopping at another stall that sold rings. They had a wide variety of them on display, all with different designs.

I couldn’t quite judge if they were actually cute, but if that was what Nanami said, then they must be so.

“Aloha! Welcome. Don’t hesitate to try things on,” a young woman said in Japanese, stepping toward us. She had long blond hair and had tattoos both on her left arm and around her navel.

“Your Japanese is so good,” I remarked.

“Thank you! My husband is Japanese,” the woman explained.

“Oh, you have an international marriage. That’s so cool,” Nanami said, before starting to study each of the rings that were laid out on a table. When I stood next to her to look at them myself, I noticed how each ring was different and all looked like they were made by hand.

I had handmade a necklace for Nanami before, but these were clearly done by a professional; each one had a distinct and beautiful design.

“Are these all handmade?” Nanami asked.

“Yup, all done by me. If there’s one you like, I’ll give you a discount. How about you and your husband get a pair?” the woman offered.

H-Husband? No, unfortunately that’s not the case. We’re not married yet… When I told the woman as much, she replied that Japanese people tended to look young, so she had assumed that we were already a married couple.

Nanami, on the other hand, seemed delighted by the woman calling me her husband—and had therefore decided to buy something at this stall. Her eyes had pretty much transformed into little stars.

Still, all these rings are made by hand, huh? Incredible. Almost twenty of them here, and they’re all unique.

I wasn’t sure if “incredible” was the right way to describe it, but that was the only reaction I had to seeing the rings laid out before me. The other stalls were probably similar, though.

Nanami was looking at the selection on the table and trying to decide which one she liked most. Since this seemed a matter of pure preference, I continued looking at the rings on my own without making any comments.

From among the options, though, one of them happened to catch my eye.

The inside of it seemed to be tinted blue—like the color of

Nanami's eyes—and that reason alone made me pick it up.

The touch of cool metal spread through my fingers. Waves had been carved into both the inside and outside of the ring, and its blue tone made it seem like I had a piece of the Hawaiian ocean in my palm.

"You fancy that one?"

I looked up, the woman running the stall now standing right in front of me with a smile on her face. *How did she get there without me even noticing?*

I had picked up the ring because it had caught my attention, but upon looking at it more closely... *Yes—I do, in fact, fancy this one.* The price wasn't too bad either, something I could afford even as a high school student.

"Yes, I do like it," I responded.

"Oh good. That design actually symbolizes eternal love. It comes as a pair, so if you'd like, you can give it as a gift to your girlfriend too," the woman said.

I had no idea it had such a meaning. *Eternal love, huh?* It intrigued me, the idea that something wavelike indicated an endless love. Maybe it was part of the local tradition.

Nanami still seemed to be looking at the various items for sale. I considered getting the rings as a pair and gifting one to Nanami, but since I didn't want to choose a design that she didn't like, I decided it was better to check with her first.

"Hey, Nanami," I said, "I'm thinking of buying this one. What do you think?"

"Huh? You want that one? Let me see," Nanami requested. "Oh, that's cute. Maybe I'll get a matching one."

"It comes as a pair, so I'll get it for you as—"

"Huh? If it's a pair, then I'll pay for it too, so that we can get them together. And then we can give them to each other," she suggested.

I was intending to get it for her as a gift—the both of us getting one for each other hadn't crossed my mind. But maybe that would actually be nicer.

A part of me wanted to pay for both of them, but I also felt like trying to do that when I was still in high school wasn't a very wise move.

"In that case, I'll take you up on the offer," I said.

“I’m not really sure I *offered* anything, though,” Nanami murmured, uncertain.

Even if she was technically not wrong, I *had* been planning to pay for both. The vendor was watching our exchange with a grin of pure delight on her face.

When we checked the sizes of the rings just to be sure, they fit our fingers perfectly. I was gonna be super disappointed if they hadn’t.

The woman wrapped up both rings so that they wouldn’t get scratched and handed me the package. *I’ve gotta make sure not to lose them…* Taking the rings, I placed them carefully in the small bag I had brought with me for the day.

After I had already put them away, it crossed my mind that we could’ve put them on already…but I decided that it was better to exchange them in a more proper place.

We might even end up using them at our next stop.

When we thanked the woman, she said “Mahalo!” and flashed us a shaka sign. Nanami and I returned the gesture.

We ended up spending a lot of time at the market. And though leaving it seemed a shame, we made our way through in order to return to the main road. Once we reached the other side of the street, I was hit with the sight of the ocean, of blue spreading as far as the eye could see.

The air was full of the sweet scent of fruit and the lively voices of all the shoppers at the market. All the while, the palm trees lining the street swayed in the breeze. There were people in their bathing suits on the sidewalk, either going to or coming from the beach.

All in all, this place was brimming with life.

I didn’t notice it until now because I was talking with Nanami until earlier, but just changing my perspective allowed me to appreciate such a different view from what I was used to.

“Going there was such a good idea, wasn’t it?” Nanami commented, as though she’d read my mind. She then took my hand in hers and gazed at the glimmering beach on the other side of the road.

As Nanami described it, our stop was actually unplanned—even though after visiting it we were both feeling like we’d already accomplished our goals for the day.

“Gosh, there are so many people walking around in their swimsuits. Maybe I should’ve worn mine too,” Nanami murmured.

“I’m not so sure about that…since we’re not actually going to the beach right now,” I replied.

“Oh, true. Swimwear wouldn’t really be appropriate.”

Indeed, our true destination was actually still a ways away. It was the kind of place that probably wasn’t the most suited for entering in a bathing suit. Nanami and I resumed our walk, gazing at the scenery all the while.

We had been chatting until a bit ago, but our surroundings were truly beautiful; it also gave us a sense of nostalgia, despite the fact that neither one of us had ever been here before.

There were a number of stores along the street, and the smell of coffee drifted over to us from one of the cafés. By the ocean were a number of locals riding the waves, with families hanging out on the beach.

“Is it hard to learn how to surf?” Nanami remarked.

“I wonder,” I said. “We should’ve tried it, huh?”

“Then how about we try going surfing together the next time we visit?” she suggested.

“Yeah, let’s do that. I have a bunch of other things I wanna try doing too.”

Plans for our next trip to Hawaii tumbled out of our mouths as naturally as anything.

It was hot out, and bright, and the air smelled like coffee and fruit. The ocean was beautiful, and the wind felt good. The fact that we were walking together in a place like this was nothing if not sheer happiness.

I never thought I would feel this way in Hawaii. It really, honestly had become a place that I wanted Nanami and I to visit again—though it wasn’t as if coming back were an *easy* thing to do.

After walking for about fifteen minutes, we arrived at our destination. It was a simple one, but also one that was undeniably beautiful.

“So *this* is the oldest church in Hawaii, huh?” Nanami whispered.

We both looked up at the church. Our eyes were met with a pyramidal steeple, and I was pretty certain that this was the tallest building we had seen on our entire walk here.

That's right, this was our preplanned destination—the oldest church on the Island of Hawaii.

During the tour yesterday, we were fortunate enough to come across a party that was having a wedding on the beach. Because the wedding was being held in public, other people had also stopped by to watch the ceremony.

Because of that it had been kind of hard to tell who was a part of the original ceremony and who wasn't, but regardless, we had watched as the bride in her wedding dress spoke her vows with the groom on the white beach, and as everyone else around them showered them with congratulations.

The newlyweds had their photos taken right there, with the blue ocean as their backdrop. They had looked incredibly happy.

Nanami had seemed surprised that such a wedding was even possible. At the time, I thought, *Did people in Japan even have ceremonies like this?* It really was a beautiful ceremony, was the thing.

Given that even *I* thought that, I could imagine that Nanami felt it even more strongly.

That wasn't necessarily the reason, but I had asked Nanami if she might want to go visit a church today. I asked her last night, while she and I were chatting.

We had a lot of free time today, and given that we were going to the town where the oldest church on the Hawaii Island was to boot, it seemed like the perfect idea.

"I *do* want to go, but… Are you sure? Don't you have anywhere you want to go?" Nanami had asked.

"Nah, you know I don't really have stuff like that," I'd replied.

"Weren't you saying that you wanted to go check out a motorcycle shop with Kenbuchi-kun?" she had pressed.

"Only if we had no other plans."

That was how I managed to convince Nanami, and then I let Hitoshi and the others know about our change in plans. We then made our preparations for today's sightseeing trip.

It turned out, though, that Hitoshi had been invited to come along by some of the other girls in the class, and Shirishizu-san had also been trying to spend more time with Teshikaga-kun. So it turned out that my somewhat sudden proposal for Nanami and I to branch off from the group for the day seemed to be a well-

timed one.

I didn't know that until this morning at breakfast, though. Originally I thought that I should have been more thoughtful toward Hitoshi, who had invited me to go along with him after all—but he had the biggest smile on his face as he told me not to worry about anything.

And so, after all that, Nanami and I found ourselves standing in front of a church.

Even though it was a church, there wasn't a cross or anything on the exterior. I had pictured in my mind a giant cross at the top of the steeple or something.

I knew that it was an old church, but it didn't seem that way at all. The building was simple, but quite stately at the same time. *But am I just thinking this because I know it's a pretty old building?*

"Shall we try going inside?" I suggested.

"Yeah, let's!"

We walked through an archlike gate and entered the interior grounds of the church. Looking more closely at the interiors, I noticed the walls of the church were an interesting color—a mix of black and gray, along with white tinged a pale yellow, all in a seemingly nonuniform pattern that together created a calm, sedate mood. *Is this normal for this kind of architecture?*

"Going into a church together like this feels like a wedding," Nanami said, her voice lively with emotion. Given that the main building of the church was just inside the gate, what she said made sense.

Like a wedding, huh? In that case…

"Do you wanna take my arm to go inside?" I suggested, stopping in my tracks and slowly loosening our entwined hands.

Nanami looked at me and blinked a few times, though she, too, let go of my hand as I spoke.

I then bent my arm slightly so that it would be easier for Nanami to put her arm through it. She and I linked arms from time to time, but for some reason it made me a little nervous to do this in front of a church.

"I would *love* that!" Nanami ultimately shouted, leaping to entangle her arm with mine. Thank goodness I had my feet planted firmly on the ground; otherwise I would've fallen over.

With our arms now linked, Nanami and I walked through the

church grounds, treasuring each step we took. There were palm trees and other tropical plants all around us that we normally wouldn't be able to see in Japan. As a breeze grazed past them they all rustled cheerily.

After our walk, Nanami and I slowly stepped inside the church building together.

No one else seemed to be inside. *It feels like we're in a ceremony just for the two of us.* But just as I thought that, I noticed a bright light shining ahead.

There was a window up ahead that seemed to be made of stained glass. The sunlight coming in through it lit up the room, as though in celebration of us.

Is this the chapel? It was made of wood that gave off a certain warmth, and while it felt old, the entire hall had a very special feel to it.

The altar, benches, columns...even the ceiling seemed to be made of wood. It wasn't quite retro, but it certainly did make me feel like I should act very properly while here.

I wasn't all that religious, but there was something about being in this church that made me stand more upright. At least while inside this hall, I could see myself growing more pious.

Maybe this was what sacred felt like.

I had gone to a shrine with Nanami on a date before, but that had somehow felt different from this. Maybe because back then, the idea of going to worship was exciting to us.

"Just seeing the inside of this place is making me emotional," Nanami murmured.

"Yeah. To think of the decades of weddings that have taken place here..."

Now that I thought about it, this was the first time I had stepped foot inside a chapel. Years ago I attended a relative's wedding, but I was pretty sure that had taken place in a hotel.

Being able to visit a true church like this with Nanami made me so happy.

Actually, I wonder if a church in another country like this is closer to a shrine or a temple in Japan? I don't know much about it, but since a shrine is a place where we worship the gods, maybe a church is more like a shrine.

Since we had gone to a shrine on a previous date, maybe

today's visit was also similar. And perhaps it was those similarities that had me thinking of that specific date—my one-month anniversary date with Nanami.

"We haven't been to a place like this since our one-month anniversary, huh?" Nanami said softly.

"I was just thinking the same thing," I confessed.

"Really? But…I guess that makes sense. It would be hard to forget a date like that, huh?" she said, nodding a few times. She was right, though: That date was probably a turning point for our relationship.

Had I made the decision back then to break up with Nanami or not to forgive her, she wouldn't have been standing next to me right now. Even though the likelihood of me making such a decision was low, in that moment, I technically could have chosen to do anything. I took a moment here to imagine myself choosing to do differently, just to see what that would have been like.

Immediately, a chill ran up my spine. The idea that, if I had, my school life would have been entirely boring also scared me senseless.

Had Nanami and I broken up back then, I would have been living an entirely different life. Or…would I have confessed to her myself after we'd broken up?

It was pointless to think about hypotheticals, but even then, I couldn't stop myself. Maybe the mood of the place was somehow getting to me.

"Yoshin, what's wrong? You look kinda scary," Nanami remarked.

"Oh, yeah…I was just thinking what-ifs," I replied.

"What-ifs?" she repeated.

"I was just thinking what it would have been like if I'd made a decision that didn't lead to this particular future," I began, then explained to Nanami what I had been pondering until then. Nanami, too, stopped to think for a moment…then smiled brightly.

"If you had done that, I might've confessed to you again," she declared.

"Huh? Again?"

"Yeah. Even if you'd dumped me, I would've gone after you…and asked you out one more time. That's why, even if we'd broken up back then…we would've still gotten here."

“I wonder if that makes me a stalker,” Nanami added, laughing mischievously. Thinking about our relationship back then, though, I did begin to think that maybe if we had broken up in that moment, confessing again was still possible. I had confessed to Nanami again back then, but even so…

“I probably would’ve asked you out again too. Even if we’d broken up once…I wouldn’t have been able to forget you, and I would’ve wanted to be with you again,” I said.

Nanami and I just looked at each other and laughed, realizing that we felt the same way. Alone in the church, our soft laughter echoed freely inside the quiet chapel.

Nanami then seemed to have thought of something, because she stepped away from me and approached the chapel podium. She climbed up the few steps swiftly and turned back toward me. She then motioned with her hand for me to come join her, so I walked up to the podium and stood to face Nanami.

With a dramatic throat-clearing to start, Nanami raised one of her hands and spoke in a slightly lowered voice.

“Uh…Yoshin-kun, do you swear to love Nanami-san, in sickness and in health, for richer, for poorer, in good times and in bad, for better, for worse…to love, to cherish, to honor and support…just, do you swear to love me forever?”

Was she pretending to be a priest? Though she started speaking in a husky voice, she must have gotten tired by the end and resumed in her regular tone…and then asked me for my vow.

That last part was all Nanami too. I wasn’t sure how much of the vow was correct, but I already knew my answer regardless.

“Yes, I do,” I declared.

Nanami opened her eyes wide in surprise when I took her hand and replied immediately, with zero hesitation whatsoever—but her expression quickly turned to one of pure joy.

“Are you sure you should be answering so quickly? I’ve come to understand that my love can be a bit burdensome if I’m not too careful with it,” Nanami joked.

“If it’s you, then I’m all for it,” I replied. “Besides, I enjoy lifting weights. Your love would be a very welcome burden for me to lift.”

“A love workout, was it?” Nanami said, giggling. “If that’s the case, though…make sure you lift all of me, okay?”

“Of course. Oh, then I guess it’s my turn now…”

I cleared my throat too and, trying to employ a voice that wasn't my usual one, asked, "Nanami-san, do you swear to love Yoshin, in sickness and in health, for richer, for poorer, in good times and in bad, for better, for worse…uh…to love, to cherish, to honor and support…all the days of your life?"

I had never said anything like this before, but it sure was embarrassing. Still, I somehow managed to stick with it until the end. As I stood there congratulating myself for that small feat, I realized that Nanami hadn't responded yet.

Sh-Shoot, did I mess up or something? But as I asked myself that and hurriedly looked Nanami in the face…I saw that her eyes were welling up with tears.

She seemed to have forgotten completely that she had said those very same words to me just a moment ago; as though she was hearing them for the very first time, she became overjoyed—and leaped into my arms.

"Yes! I do!" she exclaimed.

Her vow was strong and clear, ringing throughout the church. But we weren't swearing before a god; this was a vow for me and Nanami alone. We would keep the vow before the gods for another time in the future. Nanami, in her emotional state, hugged me even more tightly. She had more strength than I knew.

What do people do in a real ceremony after this? Uh…

"Do you want to…exchange rings?" I suggested, racking my brain. I couldn't remember for certain, but I was pretty sure I was right that this was the next step. I then took out the bag that contained the rings we had bought at the market earlier. *Who would have thought we'd use these rings so soon?*

Nanami, her arms still around me, shifted away slightly to look down at the rings that I held in my hand.

"Oh, these are the rings we bought earlier," she murmured, studying them more closely.

The design actually symbolizes eternal love, the woman had said.

"Here you go, Nanami," I said, handing one of the rings to her.

Nanami took it, her eyes half closed as if out of joy. The other ring remained in my hand.

Looking at it again, I saw just how beautiful its simple design was, even without any gemstones or other accents. With a ring in each of our hands, I cleared my throat yet again.

“And now, for the exchange of rings…er, you know what I mean,” I said, jokingly trying to sound like a priest myself. Nanami, too, started giggling—but then her expression quickly turned to one of sincere happiness.

I then took Nanami’s hand and slowly slid the glimmering ring onto her finger—her left index finger.

Nanami was surprised upon seeing that, but rather than respond, she simply looked straight into my eyes.

We stared at each other in silence; the inside of the church was so quiet that I could have sworn, if asked later, that we would have been able to hear the sound of each other’s heartbeats.

The last time I placed a ring on Nanami’s finger it was on her right hand. This time I had placed it on her left hand because it just seemed more appropriate for where we were, being in a church and all.

To speak of it more calmly, it wasn’t as serious as an engagement ring. Still, I wanted to try to strike the right mood.

A proper ring would have to wait until I was financially independent. That was why this time, I placed the finger on her left index finger. I had to save her ring finger until it was the real deal.

This, therefore, was more like a promise we were making to each other. Nanami seemed to understand that as well, because her face was flushed in a soft, blissful pink.

I learned this later, but apparently there was no rule about which finger the engagement ring had to go on. In other words, no matter which finger you put the ring on, it still held the same meaning as an engagement ring.

The other thing I learned…was that the left index finger suggested one was being proactive.

I wasn’t sure if it was because I placed the ring on this particular finger or because Nanami was so moved by what we had done, but she would end up becoming even more proactive after this.

Of course, at this point, there was no way I could have known that.

The time it took for me to place the ring on her hand felt very long. I felt each second and moment, as if time itself were telling me the significance of the ritual we were in the midst of—a very

important ritual for the two of us.

That was probably what an exchange of rings was for, anyway.

I almost felt like I was putting my own heart around her finger. The ring itself came to rest on her finger without getting caught anywhere, and my fingers, too, seemed to reach Nanami without a single snag. That alone made me happy. Like, super happy.

The ring fit her finger as though it had been made only for her. The size, pattern, and everything else about it fit Nanami perfectly.

Against her slightly tanned hand, the silver ring's quiet shine looked just right.

"Wow, that made me super nervous. It's like I can feel you right here," Nanami whispered as she caressed the ring, making me feel like she was actually caressing me instead. The thought also tickled me a bit.

Honestly, Nanami seemed so overjoyed that I couldn't help feeling the same way myself.

"This is the second time you've given me a ring," Nanami commented.

"That's right, I got you a paired ring for your birthday, huh?"

"Hee hee. You remembered?"

"Of course I did. That was the first time I ever gave someone a ring. Plus you still wear it sometimes," I shared.

She did that when we went on dates and stuff. We didn't bring them to Hawaii because we didn't want to lose them, but that was also one of the reasons why I thought to buy rings at the market earlier.

"Then I guess it's my turn now, right?" Nanami said, taking my hand. She then began placing the ring on the index finger of my left hand as well. I had to admit, I suddenly felt nervous.

Was this how Nanami felt, just a moment ago? Nanami's hands were touching mine, and my index finger slowly entered the ring that she was holding.

Once the ring rested on my finger, Nanami let out a breath, a small one through her nose, as though she was finally satisfied with the results of her hard work. Since I didn't usually wear accessories, the ring felt kind of odd on my index finger. The metal felt hard and cool against my skin. Just like Nanami had said earlier, though, it also felt warm, as though she herself somehow dwelled in it.

Exchanging matching rings at a church like this had a very strange feeling—like we'd really gotten engaged.

A real engagement required the involvement of both sets of parents, and I was pretty sure it also involved some complicated steps. I'd never looked up anything like that, so that was only my perception of it, though.

Will there ever come a time when we'll actually *get engaged? Well, I should probably leave future stuff for later.* Nanami and I were both so delighted by the fact that we were able to exchange rings here that we both looked at the rings on our fingers and broke into a smile. Nanami even extended her left hand and studied it closely.

On her birthday, I was pretty certain I had placed the ring on her right hand. That time, too, Nanami had been so happy.

Suddenly, though, Nanami's expression switched from a smile of joy to a slight frown.

"What's wrong?" I asked, seeing the change and instantly panicking that I had done something wrong.

But no, Nanami isn't the type to get in a bad mood because of something insignificant. But if that's so, why does she look like that right now?

Paying no mind to my panic, though, Nanami tilted her head and mumbled, "I feel like you've been doing so much for me lately. It's like…I'm always on the receiving end, and I can't seem to even things out between us."

"No way! What are you talking about? That's not the case at all!" I protested.

Nanami had that expression on her face because she was thinking about me. But I had barely given her anything useful—and Nanami had already given *me* so many things.

Especially last night, Nanami had given me…*shown* me unimaginable things. *Oh shoot, just remembering it is making me feel all funny inside… No no no, we're in a* church *right now! Don't think that stuff here, of all places. Be holy, Yoshin. Control yourself.*

"You've given me all sorts of things too. Do you have any idea how thankful I am?" I asked.

Honestly, she's been so proactive recently that I've been feeling bowled over. Just this morning, too, we'd woken up in the same bed.

Nanami didn't seem convinced, though, as she continued groaning and mumbling to herself. Just as I was about to tell her

that she didn't need to worry about it so much, though, she let out a soft gasp.

And then, as though she'd thought of something, she grinned toothily at me.

"And…what comes *after* the ring exchange?" she asked.

"Huh?" I let out.

After the ring exchange? I don't know all that much about weddings, but I'm pretty sure you exchange your vows, then exchange rings, and after that…oh.

When I glanced back at Nanami, she smiled broadly, certain I had realized what she was trying to say. *Wow, what a stunningly beautiful smile. It's so innocent that I can* almost *believe she's not scheming anything.*

On its own, her smile seemed perfect for the current mood; behind the smile, though, I couldn't help but sense a kind of pressure that seemed totally inappropriate for our current setting.

Are we actually gonna do it? Inside this church?!

"A kiss, then. To seal a promise," Nanami said softly as she took a step toward me and placed her hands on my body. I had no intention of fleeing, but her movements put me on high alert.

I had kissed Nanami many times before, but a change in scenery also led to a change in meaning.

Actually, over this entire class trip, we've only had one proper kiss. As the thought crossed my mind, my eyes gazed at Nanami's lips—her lips that, no matter how many times I kissed them, left me wanting more. Was I allowed to kiss her here? I felt so conflicted, but just then, a question entered my mind.

Why is no one else here?

There had only been me and Nanami in this church this whole time. That was why we were able to look around at a lot of things and even exchange our vows and rings as well.

With the impending kiss having the ironic effect of calming me down, I was able to consider my surroundings more carefully. Of course, at this point, I had no other choice but to have things proceed to their natural conclusion.

Nanami and I kissed before the altar of the church. I didn't know if there was a break in the clouds, but just in that moment, light poured in through the stained glass window.

We kissed, bathed in warm, colorful sunlight. We didn't have

that cliché moment when someone walked in on us right before our kiss. We didn’t, but…the source of the red flag that had been raised in my head a moment ago did make itself clear.



“Oh…?”

“Huh?”

“Hm?”

When we heard someone speaking Japanese, despite the fact that we were in Hawaii, Nanami and I both whipped toward the direction from which the voice came. There stood an elderly man who was looking at us very curiously.

As we stood there frozen, the man tilted his head and asked, “Was the main gate open? I thought we were asking people to refrain from entering the church grounds at the moment.”

“Excuse me?!” Nanami and I gasped at the same time. *Uhhh, the gate was open, wasn’t it? But doesn’t that mean we were basically trespassing?*

“W-We’re *so* sorry. The gate happened to be open, so we thought it was okay to come in!” I shouted.

“Please excuse us! We’ll leave this instant!” Nanami joined in.

As we both apologized profusely, our faces turning pale from guilt and remorse, the man opened his mouth and began laughing so loudly that our anxieties were immediately blown away. Just seeing him laugh made Nanami and me stare at him with our mouths hanging open.

“Oh no, it happens from time to time, so there’s no need to worry. A part of the church *is* open, after all,” the man explained. “And I’m sorry too. I seem to have intruded on a lovers’ rendezvous.”

“Oh, no, this…”

“Um, uh…”

“Don’t be so bashful. The lord will forgive young lovers for their moments of intimacy. You haven’t done anything more than that, have you?” he asked, winking and pointing at us as we held each other in our arms. It was slightly embarrassing to have him point it out, but…

“I feel like people usually *jump apart* in a situation like this,” he continued suggesting.

“Holding each other like this isn’t all that embarrassing in and of itself,” I explained.

“That’s…a pretty good response,” he agreed, then laughed loudly again—he must have thought my reply pretty funny. Now I was actually starting to get embarrassed.

“In that case, let me offer something to our adorable couple from Japan,” the man said.

He then closed his eyes and muttered an unfamiliar phrase, then gestured to us as if in prayer.

I drew my breath at his movement, one that seemed sacred even to me. I had a strong feeling that it was a prayer of blessing.

I couldn’t understand what he said, but that was the impression I got. That was why Nanami and I stepped away from each other without even thinking, then stood tall with our backs straight.

It almost felt like a real wedding.

The prayer wasn’t a terribly long one. I didn’t know if it was an informal or a formal one, but once the man had finished, he opened his eyes and, smiling, said, “May the lord’s grace and blessings be upon you both.”

“Thank you,” Nanami and I said in unison.

The man gestured to us in return, and then he waved at us in dismissal, as if saying he hadn’t done all that much in the first place.

Wait, this place is technically off-limits, right? If that’s the case, it would be bad for us to stay longer. We should probably get going now.

As Nanami and I turned to thank the man once more, though…

“When you two decide to get married in the future, I hope you’ll decide to have your ceremony here,” he said, doing so with such a graceful motion of his hands that, for a moment, neither Nanami nor I initially registered what he said.

Nanami and I had talked about it between the two of us, but having another person mention it made me more painfully aware of the possibility. And when I thought about it, both my cheeks grew hot.

Nanami seemed to feel the same way, so when she and I looked at each other…we both laughed. And then we turned to the man and gave him a resounding “Yes!”

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Well, what could I say. We had answered him so energetically when we were at the church, but when we thought about everything that had happened, it really felt like we had made promises to each other about our future.

The fact that, for the short while until we joined the rest of the group, things between me and Nanami grew slightly awkward...was a story for another time.

Epilogue: Until the Day Comes Again

I came to slowly. Since yesterday was our last night here, we'd all gotten together as a group to hang out and party. Then, after a solid few hours of good fun, I'd ended up falling asleep.

I was pretty sure I'd gone to sleep late, but I still felt pretty rested nonetheless.

This class trip—that which we'd called a "prehoneymoon" before our arrival—was coming to a close. The six-day, four-night trip had gone by in the blink of an eye.

It even felt like a shame to get up, not now when I'd finally gotten used to this hotel bed…

"Morning, there."

Just as these thoughts were floating through my mind, I heard Nanami's voice. *Huh? Were we…sleeping together? Wait, why does my entire body feel so warm?* I felt enveloped in something soft and warm; it even smelled really good.

"Huh?" I blurted out, opening my eyes to find my entire field of vision filled with flesh. When I glanced upward, I found myself held against Nanami's chest. It was as if I were surrounded by Nanami on all sides. *What is happening right now…?*

"Hee hee. Good morning," Nanami said, smiling broadly and stroking my cheek with an expression of utmost bliss on her face. I was reminded of when I was little, and how my mom would touch my cheek just like this.

That was when I opened my eyes wide, my brain finally beginning to function.

"Nanami, what in the—?!"

"Oh…! Don't talk! Not when your face is right there," Nanami moaned.

Shoot, I'm buried in Nanami's chest right now and completely attached to her, so the vibrations…! No, wait: This was no time to be narrating things so calmly.

Nanami must have felt embarrassed, too, because she slowly let go of me.

The cool air from the AC grazed against my clammy skin,

waking me up more fully. Well, I guess I was kind of awake already.

Having let go of me, Nanami propped herself up on her elbows while lying on her stomach, looking at me with another happy grin.

“Morning,” I muttered.

“I was trying to surprise you,” she said. “Did it not work?”

“No, I’m super surprised. So surprised I don’t even know how to react.”

“Tee hee, then it worked! I’d always wanted to sleep with you as my body pillow,” she said, her smile growing even more slovenly. Why she did such a thing…was probably explained in what she had just said: She wanted to try doing something that she couldn’t do once we’d returned to Japan. That was probably all it was.

Was it just me, or had all of Nanami’s inhibitions fallen away during this class trip? Could it be that I opened a door I probably shouldn’t have?

Slightly terrified, I glanced at the bed next to ours.

Oh, Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san are sleeping there. Where’s Hitoshi, then? Oh, he’s on the sofa. I guess he got back last night. Shirishizu-san’s not here, though. Wait, I’m pretty sure that, last night, Shirishizu-san…last night… I tried to recall the events that transpired the evening prior.

Last night, given that it was our last night in Hawaii, we all picked up snacks and drinks and gathered in our room to enjoy ourselves. In other words, we had a party.

Other groups must have been doing something similar, because throughout the night people kept coming to visit our room. We’d all ended up chatting about a bunch of things.

And during all of that, things kind of got out of control.

Hitoshi went and charged into one of the girls’ rooms in the middle of the night. Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san both called up their boyfriends even though they had nothing specific to tell them, and when Teshikaga-kun came to visit, Shirishizu-san disappeared completely.

Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san had dialed video calls, in fact, describing what was happening in the room at that moment. They had even managed to get Soichiro-san to say hi to some of the people in our class who were his fans.

No one drank any alcohol, and yet they were all acting like they were drunk. I didn't even want to think about what they'd actually be like drunk. That was how bad things were.

In the end, our teacher stormed our room.

Well, he didn't necessarily *storm* our room; it was just that he was going around to all the rooms after curfew, and he yelled at us in particular because we were still being so loud. Even that, though, felt like a refreshingly worthwhile experience for me—like I'd let loose for the first time in my life. Even though, maybe, it was a bit *too* loose.

And that was when Nanami jumped into my bed to hide, while Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san hid in Hitoshi's bed. And then, in these exact positions, we just ended up sleeping through the rest of the night. I could have never imagined, before coming on this trip, that I'd spend my last night in Hawaii in the same bed as Nanami, hiding her from the teacher on patrol.

Of course, Nanami and I were curled up in the same bed, while Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san made it appear as though it was Hitoshi who was sleeping in the other bed. And once the teacher left the room, we all stayed in bed chatting…and probably just fell asleep like that.

"Weren't you saying that you were gonna go back to your room?" I finally managed to ask Nanami.

"That's what I was thinking, but then I thought that if I left I might get caught and yelled at anyway. It seemed like a better idea to just stay here," she explained.

"What a nice excuse for us to sleep together, hmm?" I murmured.

"Oh, you could tell? Hee hee, you really were a great body pillow, though," she giggled, then scooched closer so she could reattach herself to me.

Maybe because our body temperatures were pretty high from having just woken up, but the difference between the cool air from the AC and the warmth of Nanami's body gave me a bit of a start. And we were both wearing fairly light pajamas, so it almost felt like we were touching each other directly.

"I can't have my heart racing like this so early," I sighed.

"What? Really? You fell asleep so fast last night, I was convinced you thought sleeping with me was boring," she protested.

“Never! How dare you say such a thing!” I exclaimed.

Nanami was pretending to cry, but her words actually made me want to defend myself. Just yesterday, in fact, jumping into bed together in order to hide Nanami had my heart pounding so hard I thought it’d explode.

It was just that, as exciting as it was, I’d also felt somehow relaxed…or just being with Nanami, even in that way, made me feel safe, though I didn’t quite know how to explain it.

“Did you think I was your mommy when you fell asleep last night?” Nanami suggested.

“Wait, where did you get an idea like that?” I demanded.

“Kotoha-chan mentioned something like that once.”

What is that narrow-eyed class rep teaching my Nanami?! Is this her payback, for Nanami teaching her how to be a gyaru?!

To learn that Shirishizu-san, who had seemed so straitlaced, could say such crazy things… I thought I knew, but I clearly didn’t know *enough*.

“Hey…”

“Huh?” I let out.

Nanami was tugging on the corner of my shirt, then opened her arms wide when she got my attention. She seemed to be inviting me to come closer.

I’d seen her do this before. That time, though, it had been through a screen. Now, she was doing the exact same gesture right in front of me.

“Oh,” I gasped, struck by realization.

That’s right—once we go back to Japan, we really won’t be able to sleep together like this all that much. Hugging on our bed will be impossible…or, if not impossible, very nearly so. Once we leave here, we really won’t be able to touch each other like this.

With that in mind, I reached out.

She quivered a bit the moment my hands touched her, but I slowly pulled her toward me so she could rest against my chest. Nanami pressed herself to me as though she was trying to sink herself into me.

No matter how many times I’d felt it, this specific warmth and softness always made me so nervous. Yet the thing that made me even *more* nervous was what I knew was coming up next.

Ever so slowly, Nanami hugged me in return.

The moment her hands settled on my back—a place she didn't ordinarily touch me—a numbing shock came over me, as if an electric current had run through my entire body.

A comforting and not at all unpleasant sensation radiated outward from Nanami's hands. I shivered, even though I didn't feel cold, and I tightened my arms around Nanami. It was strange; my body grew warmer, and my mind felt hazy, as though dipped in red.

The thought that crossed my mind in that moment was a vague sense of "I guess we won't be able to do anything like this once we're back in Japan, huh?" Yet the thought instilled in me an odd sense of calm.

"Achoo! Oh, shoot..."

That sound, though, made me remember that there were people other than me and Nanami in the room with us. Nanami, too, reacted to the sneeze, her body jolting against mine.

Maybe because of that, but a slight pain ran down my back. It seemed Nanami had been so surprised that she had squeezed it.

Nanami turned around slowly while still lying in my arms. I loosened my embrace and adjusted myself so that I could have my arms around her stomach.

In this new position, I could see that Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san were completely awake and staring at us.

"And what is it you would like to say, exactly?" Nanami asked in a very low voice, glaring at the two of them.

Her friends, though, smiled awkwardly and responded with absolutely no remorse.

"I might've thought something about how early it was to be going at it," Otofuke-san said.

"And I figured you guys weren't gonna go all the way, but I still felt bad saying anything," Kamoenai-san added.

And with that, Nanami leaped on the two of them. Her usual exclamation of "Jeez!" was then followed by the three of them noisily play fighting on the bed.

"Huh?! What's going on?! Are we being attacked?!"

The commotion ended up waking Hitoshi, and then Shirishizu-san, too, joined us in the room. Despite the fact that this was to be our last day, we weren't feeling sentimental at all. We were, on the contrary, quite lively indeed.

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The *true* final day of our class trip.

Transportation was the only thing on our docket for the day. We gave our thanks to the hotel staff, who had done so much to take care of us, and we also thanked our tour guide—and that was when it finally hit me that our trip was really ending.

Though I couldn't quite figure out why they all said to me and Nanami, "Please come back together again someday."

Well, I guess they probably meant just what they said. And so Nanami and I talked, in pseudo seriousness, about actually coming back here together. Fortunately, she seemed extremely willing to do so.

I didn't know when it would be, but no matter what, I would come back to Hawaii again with Nanami.

And now we were at the airport, waiting to board our flight back to Japan. I was sitting with Teshikaga-kun and Hitoshi, feeling the last bit of Hawaiian air on my skin.

"Oh? So, what, you two are going out now?" I asked.

"Um, yes...uh, how can I put it? *Are* we going out...?" Teshikaga-kun muttered. He was scratching his cheek, slightly embarrassed, and seemingly still too reticent to make any kind of declarations. But his expression seemed a happy one.

Hitoshi, who was sitting on Teshikaga-kun's other side, seemed interested in the story as well.

"Just last night, I managed to tell Kotoha that I like her," Teshikaga-kun explained.

"Oh, finally," I returned.

"Congrats!" Hitoshi exclaimed, clapping. When I joined the applause, Teshikaga-kun turned scarlet from the embarrassment. *I see, these two finally...* I couldn't help feeling a little emotional myself.

And yet Teshikaga-kun wasn't continuing the story. Since he still hadn't responded definitively to the bit about going out, Hitoshi and I both tilted our heads.

"You two *are* going out, right?" I asked.

"Probably. Most likely. Definitely. I think," came the answer.

Huh? What's with that wishy-washy response?

Hitoshi, too, had his brows furrowed. I couldn't figure out how

to interpret Teshikaga-kun's reply, so I tilted my head once again.

Teshikaga-kun, on the other hand, had his arms crossed in front of his chest and was groaning.

"Well, so, I told her that I liked her, but before I could ask her out, Kotoha kind of lost control, and we ended up..."

After a moment of silence, Hitoshi asked, "Did ya do it?"

Teshikaga-kun's entire body quivered. Because the chair he was sitting on was attached to ours, both Hitoshi and I felt the reverberation like it was some kind of mini earthquake.

Hitoshi had said it as a joke, but Teshikaga-kun's reaction had him covering his mouth with both hands. Hitoshi's expression basically communicated *Wait,* seriously*?*

I wasn't expecting such a question to come up here and now, and because Teshikaga-kun's reaction was completely unexpected too, I had no idea what to say next.

After a long pause, Teshikaga-kun slowly opened his mouth and said, "We didn't go all the way, but...we, um..."

"Ah, right. Yeah, say no more," I told him.

It seemed Shirishizu-san had gotten a bit carried away, leading them to do things that couldn't be mentioned—but if they had done all that, then it was probably safe to say that they were now dating.

Or was it? Maybe it would be best just to confirm things for sure when they got back to Japan.

When I looked around to see what Shirishizu-san was up to, I saw that she, Nanami, and the other girls were getting excited over something. I could hear them shrieking, so maybe they were in the middle of updating each other too.

"Wow, I guess you guys are moving fast," I sighed. "Stuff like that is a struggle for me."

"No way, you're moving along pretty fast too. How can you even say that when you're already wearing an engagement ring?" Hitoshi remarked, exasperated, looking at the ring that gleamed on my index finger pointedly.

"Truly an impressive feat, master," Teshikaga-kun agreed, his eyes sparkling as he looked at me earnestly.

"No, wait! It's not an engagement ring, though!" I protested, trying to correct the misunderstanding.

Or is *it a misunderstanding?*

“Do you really think it is?” I finally asked, entirely unsure.

“Why are *you* asking this?” Hitoshi replied.

“I mean…I guess I wasn’t *not* considering that, since we exchanged rings at a church and everything. But I wasn’t sure if that didn’t feel like a bit much, given that we were still in high school,” I explained.

“Of course it’s a bit much. It’s *way* too much. What the hell are you saying all of a sudden? I thought Barato was something else, but you’re pretty extra yourself,” Hitoshi declared.

Arg. So that was what people objectively thought of us. Actually hearing it out loud was pretty hard to take, though maybe I had no business feeling that way, considering everything Nanami and I had done.

As I sat there trying to deal with the emotional damage of being read to filth, Hitoshi must have taken pity on me, because he followed up by saying, “But as long as Barato doesn’t mind it, it’s probably okay, right? Do you guys at least talk about it?”

“No, not really. We haven’t talked about it. Is that something couples usually talk about?” I asked.

“Hmmm, I wonder. I feel like there aren’t that many high schoolers who get that far. College students might know more,” Hitoshi said.

I see, college students. Maybe Yu-senpai? But she doesn’t have a boyfriend. Maybe I should try asking Baron-san and them one of these days.

“What about you, Hitoshi? Did you manage to get a girlfriend on this trip?” I asked. “You went to the girls’ room last night too. Any success?”

“Well, I didn’t, but…”

“Kotoha said that you traded socials with a local girl yesterday. What about that?” Teshikaga-kun asked.

I thought Hitoshi was being reluctant somehow, but after Teshikaga-kun’s question he started grinning awkwardly. *Huh? How did I miss something like that?*

Apparently while Nanami and I were at the church the day before, Hitoshi—who had gone sightseeing with a group of girls from the class—had met and become pretty friendly with a girl who was from the local town.

So much so, in fact, that he’d ended up hanging out with her for

the rest of the day.

“Dude, why didn’t you tell me about it? You always ask *me* about stuff like that,” I complained.

“I guess I just couldn’t believe that it really happened, you know? Like, if I said it out loud, it might all turn into a dream or something,” Hitoshi said, sounding uncharacteristically wistful as he unlocked his phone. “We got to know each other a little bit, but I don’t think people actually keep in touch from moments like this. More likely it’ll be another good memory of my time here.”

“I see,” I murmured.

In that moment, Hitoshi appeared more mature than he usually did.

The three of us looked up at the sky simultaneously, as though we did it on cue. In the end, each one of us had our own unique experience from the class trip: I with Nanami, Teshikaga-kun with Shirishizu-san, and Hitoshi, too, with the island of Hawaii.

In those final moments, a question bubbled up within me and escaped my lips.

“Is this what a class trip is like?”

I felt the two others freeze as they remained with their faces lifted toward the ceiling. *Yeah, I don’t know—is this what class trips are really supposed to be like?*

This sounded weird, but…weren’t we a little *too* preoccupied with romance? Or was this normal? Maybe they knew what I was trying to say, though, because the two of them both looked awkwardly away from me.

“We’re supposed to turn in a report about our trip once we get back, aren’t we?” I asked.

“What are we gonna do?” Hitoshi muttered.

“We can’t write it like it actually happened, can we?” I said.

“You should write about how you exchanged rings at a church. They’re gonna think it’s a riot,” Hitoshi suggested.

“Not *everything* should be written down,” I sighed. “But maybe Teshikaga-kun can write about how this trip helped him make up with a childhood friend.”

“I can’t. I’ll probably get suspended,” Teshikaga-kun said flatly.

“What the hell did you do?!” Hitoshi exclaimed.

“Then can you write about what *you* did?” I demanded of Hitoshi. “I don’t know exactly where she’s from, but can you talk

about how you got chummy with a girl you met here?”

“Nooo way, I can’t write all of it,” Hitoshi said.

“What in the world did *you* do?!” I blurted out.

The three of us looked at each other, our expressions stern…and then burst out laughing.

Even when we weren’t together, we all seemed to have gotten into shenanigans anyway.

♢ ♢ ♢

“It’s really over, huh?” Nanami muttered.

“Yeah,” I murmured in response.

We were sitting on the plane, Nanami looking out the window like she still had unfinished business. Thanks to our classmates, she and I were able to sit next to each other on our return flight as well.

Lots of things happened on this class trip, but in the end, I felt like I’d been able to strengthen my feelings for Nanami even more. Though Hitoshi did end up telling me that I was being a bit much.

Though this trip had been deemed a prehoneymoon of sorts, to me it didn’t really end up feeling that way. But since I didn’t know what a normal honeymoon was like, I could only base my judgment on my own imagination.

“Where do you wanna go next time?”

It couldn’t have been because of the lack of prehoneymoon-like elements, but that was the question that naturally popped out of my mouth. It wasn’t a conscious move; it really happened naturally.

Nanami stared at me blankly, then smiled with a bit of unease.

“You really think we’ll come back here?” she asked hesitantly.

Her question probably came from thinking about the future, the practical hurdles, our relationship, and all kinds of other vague anxieties. I couldn’t deny that I felt them as well.

And so while I understood how she felt…I extended my left arm and looked at the ring on my finger.

“I know that words like ‘definitely’ and ‘someday’ actually sound really uncertain. But let’s promise each other anyway—promise that we’ll come back here,” I said.

Nanami then looked at my ring too, and then reached out her

own left hand and placed it on top of mine. Our matching rings, right next to each other, gleamed brightly.

It'll be okay.

Nanami closed her eyes once and then opened them again slowly, before smiling at me with now-sparkling eyes.

"Next time we come, I wanna go to the city and go shopping. There are a bunch of places we didn't get to visit this time, like jam shops and poke bowl stops," she said.

"If that's the case, it'll be good to be able to drive, huh? We can rent a car to drive around and tour Hawaii that way," I replied.

"Oh, how nice!" Nanami said excitedly. "Would a Japanese license work here?"

"Probably? Does our school even let us get our driver's license?" I wondered.

"I thought I heard that you can once you're a senior, but...I wonder, huh?"

"Shall I drive us around the Island of Hawaii then?" I suggested.

"I wanna be able to switch with you when you get tired, so maybe I should get my license too."

"Then how about we look into it, and then go to a driving school together?" I said.

"That's a good idea, learning together. Plus it'll be fun to try going to Oahu and the other islands too, don't you think? I heard that there are lots of places to visit in Oahu!"

Nanami and I continued talking about our next trip to Hawaii on our return flight home.

We were only high schoolers, and we had no guarantees about our promises for the future. Still, the fact that we were talking like this was real. *This* was an absolute promise.

As we walked into the future, the experiences each of us had on this trip would serve to strengthen us. Each one of us had made irreplaceable memories that could never be taken from us.

There was no greater happiness than to be able to share those memories with someone I loved. As long as we had these memories, I felt like we would be able to continue moving forward.

In the here and now, we had promised a next time. And promises were important; they allowed me, at least, to be able to make even more precious memories with Nanami.

As Nanami and I continued sharing and thinking and wondering about our boundless future, our unforgettable class trip came to an end.



Afterword

To those of you picking up volume 10—we haven't seen each other since July. This is Yuishi.

Volume 10...volume 10, folks! That means, obviously, that there are now two digits worth of volumes out for this series!

I mentioned this in the update printed on the flap of the cover, but the release date of this volume marked the third year since my debut as a light novel writer. The fact that the beginning of my third year and the release of the tenth volume coincided is worth celebrating as much as a combined Christmas and New Year. There's something very emotional about it for me.

I can't hold my liquor, but it almost makes me want to make a toast to myself.

It's been three years since volume 1 was released, but I wonder if I've been able to grow and develop since then. If you've been able to enjoy this series, then I will work hard to make sure that you'll be able to continue enjoying it even more.

For those I'm meeting for the first time; those who are continuing with the series; and those who are coming to the novel by way of the comics—I'd be grateful to have your ongoing support.

Many things have happened in the last three years.

My work was published as a book, its translations were released overseas, the comic adaptation began, voice actors gave life to the characters in the form of videos, etc., etc.

I also received fan letters from my readers—something totally overwhelming for me—and I even got some Valentine's Day chocolates addressed to Yoshin, our protagonist.

I've kept everything as precious mementos. I even kept the empty box from the chocolates, and I appreciate it all very, very much. I would like to take this moment to give my most sincere thanks.

Well, now. In volume 10, our characters finally went to Hawaii on their honeymoon...I mean, class trip. How did you enjoy the class trip arc?

For this volume, I wrote one day as one chapter, which reminded me of when I was writing one week as one volume back in volumes 1 through 4. It all felt very nostalgic to me.

The two of them arrived on the first day and were very intimate. They were at the beach on the second day and were very intimate. They went on a tour on the third day and were very intimate. And on the fourth day, well...

I knew I was writing it myself, but the whole time I couldn't stop thinking, "These two just *won't stop* being lovey-dovey, even when they're overseas."

Hawaii, which is the setting of this arc, is actually a place that I've been to about twice in the past, and I wrote this volume remembering those previous trips.

Back then, of course, I never thought I would end up writing about something I experienced myself, but I just so happened to have kept the materials from my trips, making it possible for me to look back on those memories as I wrote.

I wonder if one can still go to the oldest church on the island that appeared in the novel. That was possible back when I visited, but I heard that it was renovated soon after and that entrance into the grounds was being limited because of it.

If I ever have a chance to go again, I would like to see what has changed and make use of that new knowledge in a "Hawaii Revisited" arc. Or maybe we can try using Oahu as the setting next time?

Our couple seems to have taken a step forward in Hawaii, or perhaps not...but I do wonder what awaits the two of them in the future. If you can watch over them as they move forward, that would mean a lot to me.

Though I have a feeling that they'll just continue having intimacy up the wazoo, and though they may face challenges, they'll never have any rivals as they continue with their relationship.

Misunderstanding, miscommunication, friction, infidelity...that's not what this series is about. I decided to reaffirm that through this tenth volume.

Except, to be honest, that makes it really difficult to write this story... Still, as I continue on with my fourth year as a novelist, I'll resolve to do my best to enjoy the process regardless.

I'd like to move on now to expressing my gratitude, as I usually do.

Kagachisaku-sensei, thank you for continuing to provide such wonderful illustrations, from volume 1 all the way through volume 10. It's an honor to have you do the illustrations for all of these volumes.

Nagomi Kanna-sensei, the Nanami in the comic adaptation grows cuter and cuter each time, and it always pushes me to work harder to be able to keep up.

My editor, S-sama. I caused you a lot of trouble with the various delays in my writing for this volume. It was all thanks to your support that I was able to complete it.

The staff in charge of the design and proofreading, the translator and editor teams of the overseas editions, everyone involved in this project...I am grateful every day for your constant support.

And more than anything, the readers of this series. This story was able to get to where it is because of the support you have given.

I thank you for continuing to read this story—thank you so, so very much!

Yuishi, Who Will Continue to Work Hard in the Fourth Year As Well

2024 December


“Take that!
This is your punishment for
ogling girls other than me!”
GETTING A FILL OF HAWAII ON THE CLASS TRIP!


The big reveal of the cute and stylish swimsuits purchased in Hawaii!
THE NOT-SO-ORDINARY SETTING HAS EVERYONE LETTING DOWN THEIR INHIBITIONS!


"Uh...Yoshin-kun, do you swear to love Nanami-san, in sickness and in health... to love, to cherish, to honor and support...just, do you swear to love me forever?"
"Yes, I do."
ALONE IN A CHURCH...?

Bonus Short Stories

Let’s Play in the Pool

On the fourth day of our class trip, after having accomplished our goals—or, accomplished *more* than our goals, actually—Nanami and I joined the others and returned to our hotel.

Although we became quite the topic of conversation on the bus ride home, we finally managed to make it back without any serious happenings.

What happened exactly, you ask?

To explain would require me to offer more details about what happened *after* our time at the church.

When Nanami and I left the church, things got awkward as we made our way back to our meeting spot. It was unbelievable; we barely even spoke to each other.

No matter how close you were to someone, it was still possible to run out of things to talk about.

I used to find moments like these to be pretty painful, but since I had always had trouble thinking of things to say, I was pretty used to long silences.

There were lots of reasons why a conversation might peter out. People got too embarrassed or too tired, or they were even fighting with whoever they were speaking to.

But because Nanami and I had met up with the others in such silence, there was a brief—a very brief moment, really—where everyone mistook us for having had a fight here in Hawaii.

It was also our bad for being not only silent, but also somewhat distant from each other. It really was kind of our fault.

Still, we were only *slightly* more distant from each other than usual. But even so, everyone else seemed to be in shock.

The reason for all that, though, was simply that Nanami and I were too embarrassed to know what to say to each other. It definitely wasn’t because we were fighting. We were even too embarrassed to hold each other’s hands. It felt like we had returned to when we had just started dating. It had been a while

since the last time our hands grazed against each other's and we jerked our hands back instead of intertwining them.

Actually, I was pretty sure that didn't happen even when we'd just started going out. In any case, that was how much of an impact the incident at the church had had on us. I knew that we did it to ourselves, but still.

It really was mysterious, but I couldn't help wondering why, when we became embarrassed, something that had felt completely normal until just a little while ago suddenly became so difficult. Nothing had changed, after all. If anything, things had even progressed *forward*.

But none of these thoughts were of any use.

When I tried to hold Nanami's hand, I felt strangely nervous, my heart pounded, and every time I tried to touch her I ended up pulling away.

Though I guess it was good not to forget such pure and innocent feelings.

Getting back to our original topic of conversation, though, everyone's misunderstanding that Nanami and I had had a fight got cleared up in a matter of seconds.

How, you wonder?

Because when we reunited with our classmates, she and I were both wearing rings that we didn't used to have on our hands before.

I had forgotten about this as well, because I originally intended to have us take off our rings before meeting up with the others. In the end, though, we were still wearing the rings when we regrouped with everyone.

In other words, we met up with the others in our awkward state; they mistook us for having had a fight; a few people noticed the rings on our fingers; and everyone started asking us what actually happened.

Hitoshi, though, asked us, "Did you guys do it?!"

I instinctively replied with an "Of course not!"—except in that moment, both Nanami and I were probably thinking about the bath we took together on the third day.

We really hadn't done *it*, so strictly speaking, I told no lie. Still, I felt like somehow I'd been conditioned to recall that night whenever any talk related to *it* came up.

Thanks to the battery of questions, though, the awkwardness that had hung between me and Nanami completely dissipated.

So, on the bus ride home, she and I managed to return to the way we always were.

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Since there was still light out after we got back to the hotel, it looked like we had a bit of time until sundown. Lying around in my bed sounded like the height of luxury; playing phone games or reading while curled up seemed like *very* viable options.

I'd finally managed to get used to this stiff hotel bed, after all.

But just while I was contemplating my options, I suddenly felt a considerable weight position itself on my back.

"Yo-shin! Let's go play!"

"Gweh!"

Jeez, did I really just make that noise? Seriously, when did Nanami get here? I totally didn't notice.

Nanami seemed as giddy as a school girl, inviting me out for some potential mischief. As she continued sitting on my back, she twisted her waist slightly as if she were turning. Though I wondered what she was doing, I soon realized that her weight was gradually shifting down toward my waist, so I assumed that she was simply repositioning herself.

"N-Nanami, when did you—"

"Surprise accomplished!"

When I turned my head to the side, I found Hitoshi sitting on the other bed, flashing me a peace sign. Around him were also Otofuke-san, Kamoenai-san, Shirishizu-san, and Teshikaga-kun.

Actually, *everyone* was flashing peace signs at me.

Huh? How did I not notice that all these people were in the room?

My own obliviousness embarrassed me, but it seemed they had all snuck in while I was absorbed with my phone. I felt like I'd been had.

"And? What are you doing?" Nanami asked.

"Whoa...?!"

Just as the weight that was sitting around my hips lifted itself up, a soft sensation spread all throughout my back. On top of that, Nanami's face ended up right next to mine, so she was naturally

positioned to whisper into my ear.

Nanami paid no mind to the groan that had escaped my lips and was looking instead at the phone in my hand, the screen displaying the manga that I had been reading.

And it just so happened to be showing…a somewhat sexy scene.

“Oh! Oh, I see.”

That was all Nanami said, but I could’ve sworn a chill ran up my spine. Her words slithered into my brain straight through my ears and then shot throughout my entire body. I got goose bumps and shivered once, all throughout my body.

No, Nanami didn’t necessarily say anything. All she did was let out a single “I see.” Her comment just spooked me, that was all.

Nanami remained silent as she kept looking at the manga on my phone. *What does this silence mean, exactly…?*

“Yoshin, show me the next page,” Nanami finally said.

“Oh, uh, yes, ma’am.”

I did as she said, and we both read the next page that appeared at the swipe of my finger. The slightly sexy scene continued—just as Nanami’s silence did.

While I was occupied in trying to decipher her silence, Nanami shifted her body slightly. The sensation on my back went away, and I also heard her let out a soft groan, as if she were deep in thought.

After several more moments of silence, I felt Nanami’s body return to rest against my back. Then…she whispered into my ear. It actually wasn’t a whisper, but in that moment, it sounded like one.

“Yoshin, do you like stuff like this?” she asked.

“Huh?” I blurted.

“Well, I mean…if I did stuff like this, would you get into the mood more?”

“By stuff like this, you mean…like *this*?” I asked, uncertain.

“I thought maybe you didn’t like me being too forward, but if you’re actually okay with this kinda stuff, I can even try wearing different outfits.”

It was then that I took a moment to reevaluate what we were actually reading together.

The manga’s heroine was wearing very sexy and see-through lingerie while boldly making a move on the protagonist. The

particular scene we were looking at showed the protagonist completely flushed red but still going along with the heroine's actions.

I guess I couldn't tell if he was going along with it or if he just couldn't resist. Regardless, it was that kind of a sexy scene that Nanami and I were reading, with the conveniently placed blur of bright light that was all the rage in manga these days hiding the racy parts. It practically shone off the page.

Nanami…doing this*?*

"Hmm, but I don't own a negligee. Maybe I should buy one…in which case, I should get some underwear to match, right?" she murmured.

"Wait, Nanami, wait. This is a manga. It's fiction," I reminded her.

I don't dislike the idea, obviously. But this kind of thing rarely happens in real life. Besides, where would we even do something like this? And now everyone's pretending to whisper super loud, great. Shirishizu-san, please don't start talking about doing something like this yourself. Teshikaga-kun looks completely panicked. And Hitoshi, don't say you're jealous—you'll get a girlfriend one day who'll do stuff like this for you too! And could you also not make it sound like this is every guy's dream scenario? It's egging Nanami on.

"Then, Yoshin, you *don't* like stuff like this?" Nanami whispered in my ear again.

My body froze at her question. Until then, I had been fidgeting a little with Nanami on my back, but I literally stopped in place, as though posing for a photograph.

I mean, if you're asking whether I like it or not…

"I don't…dislike it," I replied.

My response had Nanami wrapping her arms around my neck and squeezing. I struggled for breath, but having her hug me like that didn't feel bad at all.

Nanami didn't say anything in particular, but her reaction had me somewhat scared that she would end up doing something like it in the near future. I felt that fear, but…I also knew that another part of me was looking forward to it. And then, I got scared again—about how easily I welcomed the idea.

"M-More importantly, you came to do stuff together, right? What should we do?" I said, my volatile emotions motivating me to

change the subject. Nanami had climbed on top of me earlier, asking to go play, so I was pretty sure that I wasn't entirely off base in my suggestion.

Nanami seemed to remember her initial purpose for coming to the room as well, because she let out a soft "that's right" as she loosened her embrace around my neck.

"Hey Yoshin, let's go to the pool," she suggested.

The pool? She mentioned that earlier too, didn't she? She actually meant that, huh? I guess Nanami always means what she says.

There was still plenty of time left in the day, so maybe it was a good idea to head to the pool together. I could easily relax poolside too.

"Are you gonna go back to your room now to get ready?" I asked.

"Hm? About that—hey, look this way a bit," Nanami replied.

Despite her request, I was still lying on my stomach, and Nanami was sitting on top of me. Just as I was trying to figure out how to respond, though, all the warmth, weight, and sensations disappeared from off my back.

"You can look now," Nanami said.

I was a bit puzzled by the way she said that, but given that I was free, I turned in place and lay on my back instead.

And there was Nanami, looking down at me.

She was standing on the bed, still straddling over me. It seemed a bit salacious, but looking up at her from the bottom like this had an entirely different kind of impact.

For the record, Nanami had shorts on the bottom and an oversize shirt on top. The outfit, therefore, was a rather normal one for where we were.

I guess the shirt is a bit bigger than what she usually wears, though.

"Um, okay, I'm looking now...?"

Nanami smiled slightly at how confused I sounded. To be honest, even that smile was only partially visible to me, given that it was blocked in part by her chest.

She then pinched the hem of her shirt—like a young lady pinching the edges of her wide skirt—and sat down very slowly on top of my chest.

The very strange positioning deepened my confusion, but

Nanami proceeded to spread open the shirt that she held in her hands…and covered my face with it.

What in the world are you doing*?! I can totally see your underwear!*

Maybe because Nanami had lifted up her shirt, but her stomach and navel were in perfect view in front of me. If I shifted my gaze even slightly, it would go straight to the area around her chest.

Even as I told myself that that was no good, I couldn't resist the temptation. When I looked up at her chest, though…

Huh? I feel like I've seen this before…

"Your bathing suit?" I muttered.

"Correctamundo! I'm wearing my bathing suit underneath," Nanami said, giggling and showing me the inside of her shirt even more. Maybe she didn't feel embarrassed because she was wearing her swimsuit rather than her underwear, but nonetheless the two of us currently made a pretty questionable picture.

Nanami then slowly lowered her upper body. She drew my face further inside her shirt the way a carnivore gradually tightened its jaws around its prey.

I couldn't resist her. Like a deer in headlights, I lay there utterly paralyzed. *Is this what it feels like to be consumed?* That was the last thought that went through my mind.

"My, how bold."

Lying there fully wrapped up in Nanami's shirt, I couldn't even hazard a guess as to who exactly made that comment.

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"It really is different from how it looked at night," I said, even as I realized my comment wasn't a particularly insightful one.

The pool was lit up in the evening, looking much like the night pool that Nanami and I had visited before. Now, though, we were looking at a normal outdoor pool that was slightly larger than what we were used to back home in Japan.

Still, it managed to have a unique Hawaii-ness to it.

Is it because there weren't as many people here as I expected to be? Or was it because they were selling drinks farther back from the pool area, and that's where everyone was? The people who were lying poolside even had a variety of colorful drinks nearby.

Others were enjoying rainbow-colored shaved ice, and even

sandwiches and breads that had been brought into the pool area from lord knows where. Some of the bread was super huge too.

Was this what made this space feel like Hawaii? The laid-back and free-spirited atmosphere? I definitely liked it.

“Yoshin! Come over here!”

“How did you manage to get there so fast?!” I shouted.

As I stood looking at the pool and letting a million thoughts go through my mind, Nanami had apparently made her way from the spot next to me straight into the pool. When I looked around again, I saw that Otofuke-san and the others were also in the pool with her. They weren’t splashing water on each other like they had at the beach, but they were all playing excitedly. None of them were actually swimming; they were just floating about or hanging off of the side of the pool and stretching out their legs, each enjoying this time in their own way.

Nanami in the pool reminded me of a water nymph. I didn’t think it’d be too absurd to think she could have been one in another life.

I didn’t realize it when I was thinking about the Hawaii-ness of things, but the water was so much more blue than I’d ever seen it, close to a deep cobalt blue. The water was crystal clear, sparkling as it reflected the light of the sun. The best way I could describe it was that it was like pretty jelly with food coloring in it that, upon touching, turned out to be actually transparent. Since it was just light and water, that was to be expected, and yet it still filled me with surprise.

And Nanami was standing in the middle of all that blue. It really seemed perfectly natural to see her—surrounded by a color that wasn’t quite that of the ocean or the deep sea—and think that she was some kind of a fairy.

Nanami must have noticed me looking at her, because she smiled bashfully and said, “Jeez, why are you looking at me so much?”

“Oh, nothing. I was just thinking that you look like a water sprite,” I said without even thinking.

Nanami’s cheeks flushed pink at my remark. I knew I had said it carelessly, but realizing how embarrassing the comment sounded, I turned bright red myself.

To cool the heat in my face, I rushed into the pool with a

sudden leap. The splash of the cool water all around me seemed to put both my mind and body in the right frame of things.

Nanami drifted away from Otofuke-san and the others to make her way slowly toward me.

I could see that Nanami was now in her complete swimming outfit. Earlier she had been wearing her shorts and her oversize shirt, but now she had taken those off.

She was in her usual white bikini.

I wasn't sure why, but seeing her in a familiar outfit put my mind at ease. It was her layered bikini, but it still managed to hide everything properly.

I mean, the new bathing suit she wore in the hotel room hid things too, but…you know. The quality of it was different. The *angles*, to be precise.

I had thought her white bikini was terribly revealing and sexy, but I guess it was true that seeing something more extreme could numb you to anything.

Perhaps Nanami read my mind, because she asked, "Did you prefer the other bathing suit?"

"Um, uh, well…"

She grinned like some mischievous child, but neither her appearance nor her actions could be called childlike.

"I think I prefer that one…when it's just the two of us," I murmured.

I said that, but I was perfectly aware how rare it was for only two people to occupy a swimming pool at any time. Also, I felt like I'd said the exact same thing about her current bikini before as well. If Nanami was going to be wearing a swimsuit in front of everyone else, then maybe I felt more comfortable with it being a cute one-piece than a bikini.

That was what I meant, but Nanami seemed to have interpreted my comment differently.

"I-In that case, I'll wear the other one the next time we take a bath together," she muttered.

Are you kidding me? That's *what you thought of? Though I guess that* is *the only occasion for us to be alone surrounded by water. But now that other bikini is getting treated like an* actual *bathing suit.*

Even as Nanami seemed completely embarrassed, she looked at me with both expectation and resolve in her eyes.

Alas, the fate of that bathing suit seemed to have been completely sealed. There was even the possibility, though, that Nanami would try to wear something *more* outrageous if given the chance.

Should I stop her, or no? Well, no, the possibility of a third, even more outrageous bathing suit is nothing but my own fantasy. Still, the only thing for me to say here is…

"I'll look forward to it."

I said it. I did, but I really had no choice, did I? That was how I genuinely felt. There was no way I could rebuff all my girlfriend's efforts. But I still resolved to stop her with everything I had if I felt like things were going down a dangerous path.

"Hee hee, look forward to it indeed," Nanami said with an innocent smile—though the implications of her remark were anything but. *Is this what people mean by a true gap?*

"Hey, you two lovebirds! You wanna try using this?"

"Huh? Whoa?!"

What was tossed in front of me and Nanami turned out to be a large floatie. When I looked up, I saw Hitoshi, Teshikaga-kun, and Shirishizu-san standing on the poolside holding floaties themselves. They seemed to have rented floaties for all of us. Teshikaga-kun and Shirishizu-san…seemed oddly intimate with each other, but maybe I was imagining things.

The three girls, including Shirishizu-san, were wearing new swimsuits. Teshikaga-kun, therefore, seemed to have a tough time figuring out where he should be looking. Still, the two seemed closer to each other than they did this morning.

Something must have happened between the two of them when they were together. Yeah, that must have been it. Also…

"Teshikaga-kun, is it okay for you not to be hanging out with people from your class?" I asked.

"No problem at all! I barely even have any friends in my class!" he exclaimed.

So it seemed people were still a little afraid of Teshikaga-kun, and that hadn't changed even while on our class trip. Was that really okay? Maybe that was for the better this time, though, given that he got to spend time with Shirishizu-san.

I wondered if this was one of the reasons why I felt like I could relate to Teshikaga-kun. It was strange, since we were such

opposites. He was a handsome guy, too, unlike me.

"Hyaaah!" I suddenly heard someone shout.

"Huh?"

Before I could react, Hitoshi jumped and cannonballed into the pool. A giant splash went up, spraying all of us.

"Dude, don't just jump into the pool like that," I muttered.

"Everyone else is doing it, though," Hitoshi replied nonchalantly.

"Seriously?"

I guess it was possible because the pool was fairly large. The other guests were joking around and jumping into the pool too. *Everyone seems so carefree*, I thought to myself.

Oh, Shirishizu-san tried to jump in too but got stopped by Teshikaga-kun. Of course; if she jumped in wearing what she was wearing, who knew what could happen.

Seeing the two of them, Nanami and I looked at each other and laughed softly.

"Let's get to it!" Nanami then exclaimed, raising both her hands in the air with glee.

"Yeah!" I said in response, raising my own hand as well.

After that, we hung out in the pool until the sun went down.

We splashed around in the water, and when we got tired, we lay down in the poolside area. When we felt chilly, we stepped into the hot tub located to the side of the pool.

Since this was a hotel pool, we were able to bring our phones in, allowing us to take a bunch of pictures of us hanging out like this.

I thought I saw other students at the pool as well, but we were the only ones who stayed to enjoy the pool until the end.

We all had a blast and made the most of our time there, knowing how much we would miss it when we left. At the end, though, we lay down on the giant chairs in the poolside area, gazing out at the sun as it set.

The water, which had appeared blue until a little while ago, now shone orange in the early evening sun. Because there were no clouds, everything else around us reflected the orange light as well.

The sun set slowly, the orange color deepening as it did so. Once the sun sank completely beyond the horizon, things would get dark.

In the midst of that twilight, we watched the sun set.

"Hey, let me get a photo of you guys," Hitoshi offered, taking photos of us and the whole group with his phone and sending them to the group chat. I took photos of Hitoshi, too, in return.

In the end, maybe from the exhaustion of having spent so much time in the pool, we all lay down and found ourselves laughing softly together, somewhat delirious from exertion.

Nanami lay next to me as she smiled softly. Her face, lit up by the sunset, looked so beautiful that I couldn't even put the sight into words.

"It's so beautiful," she said.

"Yeah. Absolutely gorgeous," I whispered.

Nanami was probably talking about the sunset, but my reply included a different meaning as well. Nanami looked into my eyes and smiled once again, very happily.

We all remained silent, watching the sun descend to the horizon.

As the sun illuminated us brightly in the last rays of the day, I was overcome by the feeling that it also somehow signaled the end—and I couldn't help feeling a tinge of sadness. As if to reflect my shifting emotion, the shadows all around us grew deeper as the sun faded.

We all sat there watching the setting sun together, until it disappeared completely.

On the Hotel Bed... (Wholesome)

The hotel room had a bed, of course, and on it was a guy and a girl. The guy lay on the bed, and the girl was on top, straddling him.

"Okay, here I go," she said, to which he replied, "Yeah...go for it."

And with that as the cue, the girl slowly reached out toward the guy's body, and...pressed her hands deep into his flesh.

"Ow ow ow ow ow!" the guy cried.

"Wow...Yoshin, you're *super* stiff. To think that you get like this just by sitting on a plane... Maybe you're playing video games a little too much."

All right, fine, I tried to offer up some unnecessarily sensual expressions at the beginning of this, but all that was happening

was that I was getting a massage from Nanami.

We arrived at our hotel in Hawaii and put our bags in our respective rooms. Since we had a bit of downtime before our next planned event, Nanami was giving me the massage she had promised me earlier.

In reality, Nanami was the one who had said she was going to do this, and I was the one who had given the okay.

This actually wasn't the first time that I was getting a massage from Nanami. We'd had several opportunities like this before. Maybe it was around the time of the school festival? We'd started it as part of our practice for getting used to touching each other.

We usually sat and massaged each other's shoulders and waists. That was all to say that I was pretty used to massages by now, and I didn't feel terribly nervous or resistant about getting one.

I guess the problem...was *where* I was getting the massage.

"Come to think of it, I guess this is the first time we're doing this on a bed, huh?" Nanami murmured.

She was right—this probably *was* the first time we were giving each other a massage on a bed. At the very least, it was definitely the first time for us to be doing so on a *hotel* bed.

"I never thought I'd be fondling your body on a hotel bed like this," Nanami sighed, her voice needlessly suggestive.

"Why do you have to put it that way?" I said in protest.

The fact that she was joking was clear from her happy giggles. I couldn't help laughing a bit myself. *I should probably let it go and just enjoy the...ow ow ow!*

"Does it still hurt? Am I not good at doing this?" Nanami wondered out loud.

"Um, I don't know about that. Maybe this is what it's like to have something feel painful but good at the same time," I muttered.

"Saying that pain feels good makes you sound like a masochist. Though that's probably not what that's supposed to mean."

"Yeah, probably not..."

Nanami continued straddling me as she squeezed my back and shoulders. Her hands felt great, but it wasn't a lie to say that the whole thing was still pretty painful. I once heard that massages were nothing but painful when you were young, so maybe that was what this was all about.

“Man, I’d really like to learn some good techniques,” Nanami murmured.

“There you go again,” I mumbled.

Wait, maybe that’s a normal thing to say. Maybe I’m *the one with the dirty mind here. Oh, we don’t have that much time, so it’s probably time for us to switch.*

“Thanks, Nanami. It feels a lot better. I’ll give you a massage now,” I said.

“Oh, really? Yay! Thank you!” Nanami said, dismounting me and lying on top of the bed—just like that, on her back.

“Huh?” I blurted.

Nanami, though, turned red as she opened up her body toward me slightly, and then she took on an undeniably sensual position as she looked away from me.

She finally whispered, “Be gentle with me.”

“Right. Then how about you lie down on your stomach now,” I stated.

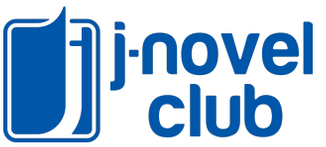
“Jeez! Have a little fun, won’t you?!”

“That’s not gonna change my mind! Come on, it’s time for your massage!” I shouted.

Nanami was pouting at my response, but I went ahead and nudged her onto her belly and began giving her a massage anyway. I did my best to feign calm, trying not to let my voice quiver.

The expression that Nanami had while lying on the bed a moment ago…was the most destructive that I’d ever seen, to be perfectly honest.

Now that she was lying on her stomach, she couldn’t see my face. I proceeded to give Nanami a massage in the brief time we had together, thinking all the while how lucky I was that she couldn’t see me.



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An Introvert's Hookup Hiccups: This Gyaru Is Head Over Heels for Me! Volume 10
by Yuishi

Translated by Satoko Kakihara
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