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Are You Okay With a (Slightly) Older Girlfriend?

vol. 1



WAS ACTUALLY 27...



※She's the same person as the high schooler in the above picture.

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CHARACTERS
"You're not the princess of otaku, you're the princess of pushing thirty."
"Don't be a stranger. We're close friends, aren't we, Momo?"
"...So, you found a girl you like? Drop dead."
"Why were you dressed as a highschool girl?"
"Let's play lots of games together!"
"We're not even a whole 12 years apart! It's only 11 years and 10 months!"
"Let's have a date like students would."
SHIRAI YUKI
KANAO HARUKA
URANO IZUMI
MOMOTA KAORU
ORIHARA HIME
ROOMWEAR
WORK OUTFIT
HIGH SCHOOL UNIFORM
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The Girl I Fell For Is Really 27?!

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Prologue

In my opinion, there're way too many princesses who fall in love at first sight. Cinderella, Snow White, the Little Mermaid, Thumbelina, Sleeping Beauty, even Juliet: the majority of famous princesses fall in love right away.

They suddenly fall in love, become completely infatuated, and get all excited thinking "This must be destiny!" Then, without so much as a single date, they accept the prince's marriage proposal. Seriously, do they only care about looks? Or is it the position of "prince"? Is the lesson here that an attractive person with money and power is the best?

It's not just the princesses either. Princes are just as bad. Just from looking at the princess's face, they fall head over heels like "What a beautiful girl, I shall make her my wife!" and propose without any kind of courtship. Among the offenders is some guy who fell in love after looking at a girl's face while she was asleep. Good grief, is it all just about the girl's face too? Is the lesson here that all a girl amounts to are her face and her youth?

In any case, these are basically just speed marriages. They walk down the aisle at super speed and everything is wrapped up with an "and they lived happily ever after." Even a tragic fate like Romeo and Juliet's only took about two weeks.

Nowadays you'll see stories in the harem romantic comedy genre catch flak because it's inconceivable that any of the heroines could fall for the main character, but personally I think that criticism should be levied more at classical literature. I just don't get it. I don't get why the princess and prince fall for each other. "Love at first sight" is a crappy excuse to just conveniently wrap everything up.

...Or, well, all that's how I felt before, anyway. Now, ever since I met her, my whole way of thinking has taken a 180. My world was turned upside down. Love at first sight does exist. I now empathize with the princesses and princes of the world. Come to think of it, an English mystery writer once said that "The only

true love is love at first sight," and now I think that guy might just have a point. Because on that day, at that moment, I fell in love at first sight.

Actually... maybe I just want to make the whole thing into love at first sight. Now that I've actually fallen in love, maybe I want my love to be love at first sight. I want to think that because I've fallen in love, maybe the first time we met truly was something special. I want to feel like maybe it was destiny. Maybe I want everything about our story to be sacred. I can't deny the possibility that my brain is tweaking the narrative to make it so.

Come to think of it, maybe these mental gymnastics themselves are what "love at first sight" really means.

You might say it's a form of self-hypnosis that comes from having love on the brain. It's not that you fall in love when you first look at someone: after you've come to like and eventually fall in love with someone, your brain conveniently restructures your memories so that, when you look back, you'll be able to say, "I knew from the moment we met that we were destined to be together." It's entirely possible that "love at first sight" is nothing more than these distortions and rewrites to your memories. Or something like that.

Anyway, I think I've monologued long enough to hide my embarrassment now. It's about time we get to the point. It all starts with how we met. When I look back, now that everything has been laid bare, I can't help wanting to laugh at how funny, novel, strange, and just like a fairy tale the whole thing was.

Chapter 1: Once Upon a Time There Lived a Very Pretty Princess

It was an early Monday morning. I let out a small sigh inside the crowded train I take to school. The time of day was smack dab in the middle of rush hour for workers and students. By the time the train reaches my station, the cars get so crowded that you're not able to sit down or even grab onto a ceiling handle. Now, for those living in the metropolitan area, not being able to even get a handle might not seem like a big deal, but for someone from a northern provincial city like myself, a train is something that you sit down in.

Normally, I board two trains earlier than this one, sit in a seat and enjoy a nice, relaxing morning commute. On Mondays I buy a copy of Jump from the convenience store in front of the station, read it on the train, and, after arriving early to my classroom, I leisurely reread the comments section and previews for next week; it is my Ultimate Routine. However, thanks to the terribly simple reason of me oversleeping, this tradition was tragically smashed to pieces.

I knew I shouldn't have stayed up reading manga and should have just gone straight to bed. Why is it that so many manga apps lately update at around midnight? Though I know in my head that it would be best to read them when I wake up in the morning, I just can't help myself and end up staying up all night. Staying up all night reading manga apps, oversleeping, and getting depressed because I missed my chance to read Shonen Jump: this is daily life in May for me, high school first-year Momota Kaoru.

In the midst of having my stamina and liveliness erased by my lack of Jump and the crowded surroundings, the train came to a stop at the next station. The doors opened and even more passengers huddled into the train, forcing me farther into the back. I somehow managed to secure my own space near the door on the train's opposite side.

In that moment, I saw her. In that moment, I was entranced by that lone high school girl.

“.....”

My heart was suddenly overwhelmed by how cute and pretty she was as I watched her gaze out the train window dressed in her blue blazer. Her skin was pure white, and her features were beautifully proportioned. Her face had a lingering youthfulness to it, while her long eyelashes and lightly painted lips emphasized how womanly she was. Her long, glossy black hair gave off an air of tidiness, but it was still styled on the ends like you’d expect from a typical high school girl. Awash in that stifling heat peculiar to crowded trains, she appeared to me like a mirage, glowing with a faint, cool light.

I snapped back to my senses and, slightly flustered, I cast my gaze outside the train.

Oh no, I’m totally staring at her too much...

But she was so pretty I couldn’t help staring. She was so cute. And... so BIG. There they sat, underneath her blazer, pushing up her thinly knit sweater: two rolling hills with the ability to drive a man insane with one look. So abundant... hanging so heavy... the kind of terrifyingly beautiful breasts whose very existence feels like a crime, breasts that make you want to sue someone. And then there were her legs, covered by her black stockings underneath her pleated skirt, perfectly sized, neither too thin nor too fat—wait, hold up. Why was I focusing so much on her sexy parts? It’s way too early for me to be this horny.

In any case... something was strange. Her blazer was from Tourin Girls’ High School. Around here, that’s a pretty famous school for rich girls. However, this train was heading in the opposite direction of Tourin. In fact, she was the only person on the train wearing that school’s uniform. If she got on by accident, she should be getting off somewhere soon... Maybe she forgot something? Feeling like something was off, I looked at her again. Yeah, something definitely felt off. It’s not that I was staring at her again because I was horny. And I definitely was not thinking I wanted to get lucky and see her heavy melons bouncing in rhythm with the train.

Without moving my head, I took a look at her with my peripheral vision, and it was then that I realized that her face was completely pale. Also, I could tell it

wasn’t because she was sick. The reality was that her well-proportioned face was stiff from fear. Her tightened lip shivered slightly, and her hand was clutching her pleat skirt so hard it made an unsightly wrinkle.

It wasn’t long before I saw the reason for this. It was a train molester.

I was witnessing the sight of a train molestation happening in real time. The high school girl’s rear was being groped by a hand that had blended into the crowd, the hand of the man who was standing behind her. He was wearing glasses and looked like a white-collar businessman. From a glance, he had an earnest appearance and didn’t look like the kind of person who would do this kind of thing. That said, his hand moved freely, and his face was completely calm. His other hand was handling his smartphone so as to distract from the former. He looked like he was totally used to doing this.

Are you serious? Just what are you trying to pull this early in the morning? Wait, haven’t I heard before that train molestations happen surprisingly often in the morning?

In the face of the defenseless girl being encroached upon by his despicable hand, I felt something like righteous indignation well up from the pit of my stomach. However, having never been in a situation like this before, my mind went blank.

Wh-What should I do...?

I couldn’t just ignore the situation unfolding before my eyes. More than anything, I couldn’t just leave her. I wanted to save her.

But what should I do...? If I just cause a ruckus without thinking, it won’t do her any good.

Just when I was thinking that I should calmly take a picture to get evidence of the crime, our eyes met. The moment she looked at me, her eyes filled with tears, my plans went out the window. Before I could think, my body moved.

“Hey!” I said as I forced my way through the crowd and grabbed the hand of the businessman.

“Wait, what?!” he said, his voice almost a shriek.

I desperately suppressed my fear and did my best to look intimidating. Honestly, I was really scared. Just thinking about the possibility of this man flying into a rage made me feel like my legs might start shaking. The reality is that I'm a hardworking honor student (no after school activities, to be fair) aiming for perfect attendance, but I was doing my best to keep this guy in check by acting like a delinquent. I squeezed his arm and roughly raised it into the air. Luckily, he was slim and shorter than me.

"Wh-What's wrong with you?! What are you doing all of a sudden...?"

"Don't play dumb. This entire time you've been—"

It was at that moment that the girl's face caught my eye. With her face twisted in fear and shock, she still seemed on the verge of crying.

Aw man, I did it now. I shouldn't have acted so carelessly. Because I made such a scene, I was getting curious looks from all sides.

"What's happening?"

"He said it was a train molester."

"Train molester?! For real?!"

"That's hilarious."

"Who is it? Who did it?"

"It might be a misunderstanding, though? Lately it seems like false accusations of train molestation are on the rise."

"I can't stand women who think that every time someone touches them on a train they're being molested."

The inside of the train car was overflowing with curious looks and voices. There were even some people taking out their smartphones and pointing them in our direction.

At this rate, by catching the train molester I'll have gotten her caught up in and shamed by all of this. Crap. What should I do? What should I do?! After feverishly thinking it over, I had my answer.

"Th-This entire time you've been touching my ass!" I yelled.

Both the perpetrator and the actual victim looked at me in shock. An awkward atmosphere permeated the surroundings, and before long the sound of laughter slipping out could be heard.

“What, you’re joking. A guy got molested?”

“Isn’t that called reverse molesting?”

“Naw, it’s not called that when a dude touches another dude.”

“That’s hilarious.”

“Well, love has no boundaries.”

An intense feeling of embarrassment was welling up in me. However, now wasn’t the time to back down! *I’m pushing on!*

“S-Seriously man... Don’t be getting all horny this early in the damn morning. Even if my ass is so cute that it just makes you wanna grab it!”

“What are you going on about? I don’t like gu—ow!”

I grabbed his arm forcefully to prevent any kind of counterargument.

I’m begging you, old guy who looks like a businessman. You’d rather be mistaken for a touchy old man than a full-blown train molester, right?! I don’t want to make things worse! I’ll let you off the hook, so just read the damn room!

Thanks to my frantic eye contact, or perhaps the scary look on my face, the old man went completely silent.

“Good. Don’t ever try that crap again!” I said firmly, returning to where I was originally standing and glaring out the window. I didn’t have the courage to look behind me. The train car was abuzz with everyone talking about me.

When the train stopped at the next station, the old man practically ran away as he got off the train. Unfortunately, it wasn’t my stop yet. I really, really wanted to get off, but if I did I’d be late for school, so for the sake of my perfect attendance I stayed on. Because the perpetrator had left, everyone’s attention was focused on me. One after the other, they played the telephone game until suddenly the original message became “Him, over there. That’s the boy who, like, molested someone it seems like.” The masses sure can be scary...

In the end, for the ten minutes it took me to reach my station, I became the talk of the town inside the train car. It really sucked having so many people whisper about me, but no one seemed to realize it was actually the girl who had been the molester's target. Thank goodness for that, at least.

When I reached the last stop, I practically ran away from the train as I got off, and half-ran through the ticket gate.

Aw man... What happens if this whole thing becomes a rumor and spreads around? I'm pretty sure there were a bunch of guys from my school on that train. What if some idiot without any common sense uploaded a picture to Instagram or something like that?! Ugh, my high school life is over...

Just as it seemed I was about to be crushed by despair, as I finally brought myself back to a walking pace I heard, "Wa-Wait! Please wait!" I stopped walking, turned around, and saw that it was the girl from the train running towards me.

"Thank goodness. I made it."

She had her hands on her knees and was trying to catch her breath. Because she was doubled over, her large breasts—which I totally wasn't paying attention to—were emphasized even more than before. Whoa. Getting a good look again from the front, I could see they truly were huge... and she really was cute. Her hair was smooth, and her facial features were pronounced. Her makeup was subtle: it complemented her natural beauty without seeming too thick anywhere. Her school uniform on the whole seemed a size too small, but it accentuated her curvy figure. Just calling her a pretty girl didn't do her justice, as she seemed to be more than just some pretty girl you'd see at school. Maybe you'd call it charm; maybe you'd call it sex appeal; whatever it was exactly, she gave off a mature air that high school girls around here just didn't have.

"Um... Thank you so much for earlier!" she said before catching her breath and bowing deeply.


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“I was so scared, and I didn’t know what to do... but thanks to you, I was saved. Thank you... and I’m so sorry for causing you trouble...”

“Ah, well, it’s no big deal,” I said hesitantly. Being thanked and apologized to so politely made me feel ashamed too.

“I didn’t really do anything special. I mean... I’m sorry too. I feel like it would have been best to turn that guy over to the conductor or one of the station attendants.”

Really, that probably would have been the best thing to do. To make sure that the punishment fit the crime, that the molester was given a proper sentence by his peers, his crimes should have been brought to trial and judged by the law. However, my selfish decision spared him such a punishment.

“No! Please don’t apologize!” With a strong voice, she firmly denied my apology.

“To keep me from being shamed, you put yourself in harm’s way, right?”

“...Yeah.”

“I’m sorry. Because of me, you had to go through all of that.”

“D-Don’t worry about it. It’s something I did on my own.”

“...Thank you. I’m really glad that you saved me.”

She smiled cheerfully, her eyes squinting with tears. I felt too embarrassed, so I turned to face away.

“Oh no. It’s already so late,” she said while looking at the clock on the side of the station building, seeming panicked. The clock read that it was already past 8 a.m., and both of us needed to get on our way to our respective schools.

After we part ways here, we’ll probably never meet again...

I found myself overcome with an unavoidable feeling of loss. I wanted to talk to her more. I wanted to see her again.

What should I do...?

Is this an appropriate situation to ask for her contact info? It couldn’t be, right? It would be awkward for her. With this timing, it’d be like I was coercing

her into doing it. I might as well be saying "I saved you from that molester, so the least you can do is tell me your phone number." Even if she didn't want to, she seems like the kind of person who would tell me out of sheer gratitude, which makes it that much harder to ask. Even still...

Just as I was really overthinking it, unable to move even a step forward...

"E-Excuse me," she said, cracking into a falsetto from how nervous she was. When I looked at her, I could see that her white cheeks had turned red.

"If it's alright with you... can you give me your contact info?"

She murmured that last part, and I was blinking from how stunned I was.

"Umm... well, I want to thank you properly for today sometime, b-but if it's any trouble, please don't worry—"

"It's no trouble at all! I'll gladly give it to you!"

We both took out our cellphones and exchanged our Line usernames.

"Momota Kaoru, -kun... is that right?" she said while looking at her phone screen.

"Yes," I said, nodding my head in confirmation while looking at my own screen. It seemed like she and I were both the type to use our real names when using Line, so I finally got to know her name.

"Orihara, Hime, -san?"

"Yes," she nodded shyly.

"Hehe... it's kind of embarrassing, right? 'Hime,' like how you'd call a princess... When you're little it's okay, but when you get to be my age it's—"

"No," I said, without really knowing why.

"I think it's perfect."

Orihara-san's face became red in an instant. I probably looked the same way. I was so embarrassed that I felt like I was gonna lose it.

"Come on... don't say that, it's embarrassing...

"...Th-Thank you Momota-kun."

Spilling out those words, Orihara-san seemed both happy and embarrassed as she smiled. Her smile was so bright, I felt a pain like my chest was being bound up. At the time, I still didn't understand what that pain meant.

❤

"...So, you found a girl you like? Drop dead."

My friend Urano Izumi's response was as harsh as I'd expected. It was lunchtime, and just like always, I was eating lunch with Ura in an empty classroom. Aside from us, no one was there. It was about a month after entering high school, and our classroom during lunch was devolving into a space for the more outgoing and social students. Unable to adapt to that kind of environment, I chose to come to this empty classroom at the end of the school building and have lunch with a friend who was easy to get along with.

"I didn't say anything about liking her. Just... I'm kinda interested in her. All I'm saying is that there is a possibility that maybe I like her—"

"A guy big and tall like you talking like a girl is creepy. And you're a traitor."

"Traitor? What are you talking about, what exactly have I betrayed?"

"I thought that at least Momo would never betray me..."

From behind Ura's long bangs I could see his eyes boiling with hate, cursing me.

"I thought we would proudly walk the path of the introvert together, unfazed by the deceit-filled illusions of things like 'youth' and 'romance.'"

"The hell is the path of the introvert?"

"Remember, Momo! Back in middle school, during crappy events like Christmas and Valentine's Day, we used to curse the world together, right? The idiots dancing to the tune of corporations and their marketing of the holidays were the targets of our laughter as we drank delicious champagne!"

"Ura, stop digging up such cringey memories. I've moved on from that since middle school. Now that I'm in high school, I actually want to get a girlfriend.

"...Also, we never drank champagne, that was just some kid-friendly stuff. I've had enough cursing the world while drinking fake booze on Christmas, thank

you very much.”

“Bah. In the end you’re just a foolish commoner drowning in the foolish idea of romance. Get away from me, you idiot. Go get an STD and die.”

Ura turned his face away as he pouted and put the straw from his vegetable juice into his mouth. I sighed. Urano Izumi: his stature was short, and his build dainty. If you got a good look at him, you could see his face was well put together. However, this was all ruined by his unkempt hair and his lifeless eyes that resembled a dead fish. Occasionally his dark eyes would light up, but that was usually when he was engaging in some schadenfreude towards the more outgoing crowd. We’ve been inseparable since elementary school. Along with another friend of ours, we hung out a lot as a trio.

When Urano Izumi, aka Ura, was little, he was the type of bright and cheerful kid who would normally become the leader of his class. However, after a middle school career that was a hell resembling heaven, he descended into being one of the most antisocial antisocials.

“In the first place, what’s with the whole ‘you saved her when she was getting molested on the train’ thing? Is this a manga or something?”

“I’m sorry, okay? That’s just what happened.”

“Anyway, that Tourin girl was wearing an already proportionately short skirt and showing herself off, right? She’s a slut I tell you, a slut. A confirmed easy lay. With an outfit like that, it was only natural that a train molester—”

“HEY.”

My voice was so low I even surprised myself. Hearing Orihara-san being insulted like that made me lose my temper to some extent. I was probably glaring at him too.

Ura let out a shriek as he almost fell from his chair.

“Wh-What’s going on... v-violence?! Are you resorting to v-violence?! Putting your hands on me means that you admit that you can’t beat me with your words! I win! Argument refuted!”

“Relax, I’m not gonna do anything.”

Basically, this guy is pretty timid. Around people he's close to he talks a lot of trash and acts arrogant, but in reality he's shy and kind of a wimp. In his class, he's always loitering by himself with nothing to do. However, when I go to the neighboring class to visit him he's like, "Wh-What are you doing here, you bastard?" and runs up to me with a big smile. I mean, he's cute.

"...Anyway, what are you gonna do, Momo?" Ura asked, having regained his composure and returning to his seat.

"Are you going to date that girl?"

"No, you're getting ahead of yourself. We've only just exchanged contact info."

"So, what are you going to do?"

"Dude... that's what I'm asking you for advice about."

Thanks to good fortune, I was able to get her contact info. However... with no experience in romance, I had no idea what I should do next. Should I contact her as soon as possible? Should I wait for her to contact me?

"I see. In that case, let me give you a piece of advice—you're asking the wrong guy."

"I know that."

Just like me... no, even more so than me, his social life is dead. There's no way he knows anything about the strategies or subtleties of romance. After all, all of his romantic experiences are two-dimensional.

"For that type of advice, go ask Kana."

"Yeah, I thought the same, but... if I asked him for help, he'd probably give me advice that's too high-level, you know?"

"You're right. He'd probably say something like 'What? How about just contacting her?'"

"So, before that, I figured I'd get you to listen to me since you're low-level."

"Oh, I get it... Wait, who are you calling low-level?!" said Ura lightly, playing the straight man before his face became pensive.

“Well, I don’t really get it, but wouldn’t it be best to wait? You did save her, and she did say that she wants to thank you, right? In that case, she’ll definitely get in touch with you when the time is right for her.”

“That’s true, but isn’t it more manly to get in touch with her first? I was thinking that maybe it’d be a good idea to at least send a greeting first.”

“Okay, why don’t you?”

“B-But... becoming too greedy is no good either. I definitely don’t want to use the fact that I saved her from a train molester to try something like taking the lead.”

“...God, you’re tiresome. So this is the creature known as a virgin,” he said like he despised me.

Dude, you’re a virgin too... On the Christmas of our second or third year of middle school, I remember we got all excited forming that dumb “Virgins for Life Alliance.”

“Momo, you’re getting way too worked up from just exchanging names on Line. As we speak, that woman is probably already over it. She’s probably thinking to herself, ‘Geez, I said I was gonna thank that guy just to be nice, but it’s such a hassle. I’m just gonna ignore him.’”

At that very moment, my smartphone, which I had placed on the desk, vibrated to let me know I got a message on Line. I quickly snatched my phone off the table. It displayed the sender of the message as... Orihara Hime.

“Good afternoon. I’m sorry to disturb you during lunchtime,” the message began, in a manner surprisingly stiff for a high schooler. She politely repeated her gratitude from that morning then got to the point of the message.

“I’d like to thank you for this morning, so, if it isn’t any trouble, may I meet you tomorrow after school?”

While reading that sentence, I probably had the goofiest look on my face. And Ura, with a sour look on his face, clicked his tongue and said “Drop dead.”

We agreed to meet up at the plaza in front of the station building the next

day. Not wanting to be late, I showed up thirty minutes early. I watched the passersby coming and going along the dusk-soaked street as I awaited her arrival.

It was pathetic how nervous I was. I compulsively checked my phone, time and time again. I even used the glass door in the station building entrance as a mirror to fix myself up and straighten my hair which, dammit, I just couldn't seem to get right. *I knew I should have gone to a hair salon.*

After twenty-five minutes—five minutes before our actual meeting time—Orihara-san showed up, and just like yesterday, she was wearing her Tourin school blazer. She jogged over as soon as she saw me.

"Sorry, Momota-kun. Did I keep you waiting?"

"N-No, I got here just now."

I went with the standard line for this situation. Truth is, I was waiting a long time. I arrived thirty minutes early, and before then I went to the bookstore and video game store to kill time. When you're like me and you don't have any clubs to go to after school, meeting up at 5:30 p.m. is an awkward limbo: it's too soon to stop at home first, but it's still a long time to wait after classes. Naturally, I ended up just loitering around the station in the meantime.

"Sorry for calling you here at such a weird time. Today I had a... student council meeting and some stuff to do."

"That's okay. Please don't worry about it."

"Okay."

The conversation died right there, and I cursed my lack of communication skills. I couldn't think of a single smart thing to say. After a short silence where we both searched for a topic of conversation, Orihara-san laughed awkwardly.

"Haha... I'm kind of nervous."

"Me too."

"We just met yesterday."

"Yeah."

“For realz!”

“...What?”

I found myself staring in surprise at Orihara-san, who was giving me a great big thumbs up.

“Huh? Did I do it wrong? Don’t high school girls say ‘for realz’ these days? You attach ‘for realz’ to something and that establishes communication... right? Or was it ‘for realsies’?”

Orihara-san’s face turned bright red as she became bewildered. It was like the punchline to her number one joke didn’t land and she was being overwhelmed by shame.

“‘For realz’? Well, there’re certainly people who say that, but not anyone I know...”

I don’t have a lot of cheerful friends, so I don’t really use it. Honestly, I didn’t know what it meant. Seriously, what does ‘for realz’ mean?

“Hey, just forget I said that. That didn’t count! None of it counted!” yelled Orihara-san with a bright red face. She then moved the conversation away from her slip up by letting out a cough.

“Okay, let’s go somewhere else,” she announced.

Orihara-san led me on a walk a few minutes away from the station until we arrived at a playground by an underpass with no signs of life. It was a lonely looking playground with just a bench and a sandbox. I heard that my high school tennis club comes here to use the wall for practice, but no one was around this late in the day, when the sun was well on its way down. Orihara-san tucked in her skirt and sat down on the bench, illuminated by the faint light of the street. After thinking hard about how close I should sit to her, I decided to leave enough space for one more person to fit between us and sat down.

“Once again, thank you so much for what you did yesterday.”

She adjusted her seating posture and continued:

“So, to thank you...”

Orihara-san took out a cutely designed lunch box from the tote bag she was

carrying.

“I... I made you a box lunch.”

“A box lunch?”

“Are you maybe not hungry? If you can’t eat, I’ll eat it myself, so please don’t force yourself...”

“No, I’m really, really happy! I was actually just thinking about how hungry I am!”

Receiving a girl’s homemade box lunch, now this was a first. There isn’t a man alive who wouldn’t be happy about this. To think I’d get to experience something this wonderful in my lifetime... what a time to be alive...

“Ahh... I’m glad you like it.”

Orihara-san placed a hand on her chest and seemed relieved as she let out a sigh.

“I thought a lot about how I could show my gratitude. Even if I gave you something, I don’t know what boys like. Besides, I’m... I’m just a high school girl, so I don’t have any money! I’m a high school girl, so of course I don’t have any money!”

She started rambling at high speed. And she was desperately emphasizing having no money and being a high school girl.

“I’m really a high school girl, so I have absolutely no money. I was raised being told that ‘If you’re born in the Year of the Snake, you don’t have to worry about money,’ but that’s totally wrong.”

“Year of the Snake?”

“Yes, that’s right... huh? Do people not say ‘If you’re born in the Year of the Snake, you don’t have to worry about money’? I used to be told that a lot by my grandma.”

“No, I do know that phrase. I’ve been told that too.”

I’m told that just about as much as “If you’re born in the Year of the Boar, you should just plunge forward without hesitation.” When you actually stop to think

about it, there's a lot about that saying that you could pick at, but I digress.

"You've also been told that. So, does that mean..."

"Yeah, I was also born in the Year of the Snake."

"O-Oh, is that so?"

"It's quite a coincidence. I guess that means that we're the same age."

"Huh..."

"If we were both born in the Year of the Snake, that means you and I are both in our first year of high school, right?"

"Th-That's right... that's correct. I have a feeling that's right. I'm a first-year high school student. A high school girl, in her first year of high school..."

Her unnatural way of saying it made her sound like she had just memorized a new backstory for herself. Well, even when you have two Snakes, if one was born early enough in the year, there's a possibility that one would be a grade above the other, but it looked like I was right about us being in the same year.

"We're in the same year, huh. I kind of thought that you were my senior. You have a very mature mood about you—"

"No I don't?!"

She suddenly raised her voice and her face got close... so close.

"Do I look old after all?! I don't look like a high school girl?! Am I pushing it?!"

"What...? Um, no...?"

For some reason, she seemed deadly serious. I guess saying 'You look mature' to high school girls these days is a no-go. I meant it as a compliment, though...

"No, you don't look old at all! I just meant that since you're so composed and polite, I thought you seemed mature."

"Oh... well, that's fine then."

Orihara-san seemed to be relieved from the bottom of her heart as she silently exhaled.

"Is there something on your mind?"

“I-It’s nothing. Hey, stop worrying about the little stuff and just eat already.”

Urged on by the impatience in her voice, I opened the box lunch and my eyes went wide. Packed inside of that square box were sandwiches, karaage, rolled omelettes, bacon-wrapped asparagus, and cherry tomatoes. Rich in color, it was the kind of lineup that makes your mouth water.

“Thank you for the meal.”

After briefly bringing my hands together, I decided to make my first bite the karaage. I grabbed the cute pin garnishing it and shoved the lump of meat into my mouth. Delicious!

Even though it had cooled since she made it, it was still delicious. It was properly seasoned, and the batter wasn’t soggy. Every time I bit into it, meat juices squirted out. Then I went for the sandwich. Yep, it was good too. The ingredients for the sandwich were ham, cheese, and lettuce, and the bread had margarine spread on it. The rolled omelette was clearly on the sweet side of the “should omelettes be sweet or savory” debate, but that’s just the way I like it. Yeah, that’s right, rolled omelettes are best made sweet. If you can still call it a side dish, it’s probably not sweet enough, in my opinion.

“H-How is it?” Orihara-san asked, having gotten worried by how I was so focused on eating my meal. *Oh no. It’s so good I kept eating without saying anything.*

“It’s very delicious.”

“Really? I’m glad.”

Orihara-san broke into a smile.

“This is my first time eating a boxed lunch this delicious. Orihara-san, you’re really good at cooking.”

“No, not at all, you’re flattering me too much. This is really nothing special. It’s ’cause I’ve lived alone for such a long time, so I make my own lunch every morning to save money. Even if I didn’t want to, I’d naturally get good at—”

“You’ve lived alone for a long time...? Orihara-san, you’re a first-year in high school, right?”

I feel like living on your own when you enter high school is relatively common, but could it be that she's been living by herself since middle school?

"Um, you see, um... m-my family situation is complicated!"

I see. Her family situation is complicated. In that case, there's not much else to say about that. It's likely best I don't prod any further.

With the conversation stopped for the moment, I finished the rest of the box lunch.

"Thank you for the meal. It really was good."

"You're welcome. Hehe. It's nice having a boy eat my cooking so heartily."

After Orihara-san had a good laugh, she nervously steepled her fingers.

"The truth is, I was a little nervous, you know? This is the first time a man who isn't in my family has eaten my cooking..."

"Is that so? That's kind of an honor. It really was good. So good it makes me want to eat it every day—"

I caught myself and shut my mouth, but I was too late. Orihara-san's cheeks turned red. *Aw man, why did I say something so cliché?!*

"I mean, I don't mean anything too deep by that. It's just that it was that good!"

"I got it! I got it, so you don't have to say any more!"

We both waved our hands feverishly. After catching her breath, Orihara-san said, "Thank you. I'd be happy to have someone like you eat my food every day, Momota-kun," and smiled cheerfully. It seemed like something an adult would say for politeness's sake, but it made my heart beat fast.

Suddenly, her expression became dark.

"It gets kind of lonely making food for just yourself."

Her smile was fleeting. The sun had already gone down, and the moonlight that followed illuminated Orihara-san and her lonely smile. In that moment, she seemed so fragile that she might fall apart at the slightest touch. And yet, contradictory though it may be, it made me want to hold her tight all the more.

On our way back to the station, we shared some light banter.

“So, Momota-kun, your birth month is September. Since half of your last name means ‘peaches,’ you’d think you were born in the spring.”

“Sadly enough for me, it’s just luck if your last name fits your birthday. You’d think at least my first name would fit, though...”

“Haha. I guess ‘sweet fragrance’ puts you right back in spring, huh?”

“Meanwhile, you were born in December, right, Orihara-san? I guess I’m a little older than you.”

“Y-Yeah... I guess it works out like that...”

While bantering, we walked side by side. To make at least a minimal show of manliness, I held the tote bag that contained her lunch box.

Things seemed to go pretty well, but I was having a slight problem. I completely missed the opportunity to stop using honorific speech with her. When we first met, I totally thought she was my senior, and even though I know now that we’re about the same age, it’s hard to just stop. It’d be fine if she said “You can speak casually with me,” but for some reason... it just feels right this way.

In no time at all, we reached the station.

“So, I guess we part ways here?”

“Um... shall I escort you home? It’s gotten pretty dark.”

A suggestion made from the goodness of my heart—is not what that was. It’s true I was worried about her, but the number one reason I said it was that I wanted to be with her more. Even if it was just one minute longer—

“Thank you. But I’m okay. My house is close to here.”

“Is that so...?”

“Yeah. So, I’ll just be going.”

“Okay... Hey.”

“Yes?”

“I’ll see you next time.”

There had to have been a ton of better lines to use. However, for someone like me with no experience in romance, even after using all of my courage that one line was the best I could muster. Orihara-san momentarily looked confused, but she smiled kindly and said:

“Yeah, I’ll see you later.”

From deep inside my chest welled up an indescribable joy. Even if it was just something said to be polite, even if it was a “See you later” that meant “If I have time I will,” I was happy to be told something that made it sound like we would meet again.

Orihara-san lightly waved goodbye and disappeared into the crowd of people. I watched her go, my face slightly red.

“...Well, guess I should go home,” I said to myself as I headed towards the platform for the train to take me home. It was like I awoke from a dream. Someone as pretty as Orihara-san made a boxed lunch just for me? It seemed like a dream, but it was definitely reality. I mean, I had the tote bag and lunch box to prove it.

“Wait...”

Oh no, I forgot to give it back. What should I do? Should I hurry and run after her? Wait, no, in this type of situation isn’t it more polite to wash it before giving it back? But she said she makes her lunch every morning, so she was probably planning on using it tomorrow... At any rate, it’d be best to go after her and just make sure.

I spun on my heel and went back the way I came, searching for Orihara-san. *I’m pretty sure I saw her walking in the direction of the coin lockers... Oh, there she is.* From the inside of the crowd I could see Orihara-san from behind.

“Or—”

I started to call her name, but I panicked and stopped because she was just about to go into the women’s restroom. Probably not the right time to call out to someone. For the time being, I figured I’d wait for her. I was pretty close, so I decided to put some distance between me and the restroom and wait.

However, even after ten minutes Orihara-san still didn't come out of the bathroom. A suit-wearing woman who seemed like an office worker, a lady and her young daughter, a girl from my school; a lot of girls went in and out, but among them there wasn't a single person wearing a uniform from Tourin Girls' School.

Another ten minutes passed and she still hadn't come out. *Did I miss her?* As you'd expect, there was a limit to just how long I was willing to observe the entrance to the girls' restroom and I was just about to hit it, so I sent a message to Orihara-san. I thanked her for today and told her about how she forgot her lunch box. A reply soon followed, and from the message it seemed that she had already left the station.

Which means... I guess I missed seeing her exit the girls' restroom? I mean, it wasn't like I was focusing the entire time I was looking, and it wouldn't be unusual if I just didn't realize...

Still, there was something that didn't sit well with me and felt off... but all of that was blown away by the next message.

"Sorry to cause you trouble. Would it be alright if I had you return it the next time we hang out?"

It seems like—without having to work for it—I got a promise to hang out again. It was almost scary how well things were going.

❤

"It looks like you've been up to some pretty interesting things while I haven't been around. Still, I'm happy; it looks like spring has finally sprung for you, Momo."

My friend Kanao Haruka's response was eloquent, as expected. We were in the usual empty classroom eating lunch. Lately, Kana had been eating lunch with his new girlfriend, but today it looks like he decided to come eat with me and Ura.

"Don't be a stranger. Why didn't you tell me as soon as you got a crush on her? We're close friends, aren't we, Momo?"

So he said, being supportive with that smooth smile of his. Even if he did want

to help, it didn't seem like this guy who can naturally pick up girls on the street and me with no romantic experience could fundamentally have anything to talk about. The difference in our experience was so vast, it made it seem like his advice wasn't going to actually be advice.

"As your friend, I'll do my best to assist. After all, if Momo has a girlfriend, then I'm happy as well. If it goes well, let's go on a double date."

"Hey Kana, don't drag Momo onto that hellish path overflowing with love addicts. Momo and I will love no one, be loved by no one, and proudly walk the path of the introvert."

"Seems like your path is the one that's hellish," Kana interjected as he giggled at me and Ura.

Kanao Haruka, a good looking guy with even facial features and a slender build. His hair was dyed blond, and it was so smooth it was irritating. His eyes were clear, and his looks overflowed with a sense of coolness. He was social and could get along with men and women of all ages. It's said that even though only about a month had gone by since school started, he had already exchanged contact info with seventy percent of the school's first-year students. He's a pretty boy who had gone beyond being a womanizer and was at the level of a con man. Just like Urano Izumi, he was one of my childhood friends.

When Kanao Haruka, aka Kana, was a kid, he had been relatively gloomy and reserved and was always reading a book by himself in class. However, after a middle school career that was a heaven resembling hell, he became one of the most extroverted extroverts.

"If Momo fell in love at first sight with this Hime girl, she must be cute, right? Do you have a picture?"

"No, I don't. And you're being too familiar calling her by her first name."

Not even I had used Orihara-san's first name yet. That's just like an extrovert to do. What nerve, suddenly calling a girl by her first name!

"Okay, what about her Instagram?"

"She said she doesn't use any social media 'cause she doesn't understand things like that."

“That’s pretty rare for a high school girl these days.”

I’ll give him that. Nowadays even a borderline introvert like me has an Instagram account. Though I just randomly look at other people’s pictures without uploading anything of my own...


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“So, did you make a promise to have another date, Momo?”

“Not yet. For the time being... I figured I’d wait about a week to let her contact me first.”

“Look, Momo.”

Kana sighed and said, “The only ones who can get away with that passive stuff are handsome guys like me, you know?”

...Don’t call yourself handsome.

“‘If you just wait around, women will approach you on their own...’ that type of thing is improbable unless you’re a really handsome guy—no, even if you’re handsome, that’s impossible. From a woman’s point of view, a guy who is only passive has no appeal. Okay, Momo? All women are princesses. They are the type of creature who, no matter how old they are, still wish to be led by a prince.”

“I-I see...”

“Princesses? Bah. This is exactly why these creatures called women are so annoying.”

I was actually impressed with Kana’s analysis, while Ura became fed up and started speaking ill of women. Kana continued:

“A long time ago, Momo said ‘I don’t understand why the princess falls in love with the prince in these stories.’ The reason, however, is that every one of those princes took action. Even if they only fell in love with the princesses’ appearances, they still properly conveyed their love.”

That... might be true. Conveying your love and putting your feelings into words... that’s probably the most important thing. I was just desperately trying to make excuses for being passive and had no right to look down on those princes.

“What? But, in the end, the reason that they get together is that the prince is handsome and rich, right? I’m telling you, if a broke ugly guy does his best to ‘take action,’ he’ll just be treated like a stalker.”

After spouting off his sarcastic yet sound argument and ruining the mood, Ura

reached for my smartphone which I had placed on the table.

“Momo, give me your cell phone. If you’re planning to approach this girl, I’ll think of something to write to her.”

“H-Hey, knock it off.”

“In this situation, I wonder if being direct is the best approach? Perhaps saying something like ‘Hello. I like you’ would do the trick?”

“That’s too direct!”

“‘I fell in love with you at first sight. Yes, sight. Which means that I only fell in love with what’s outside, and don’t value anything that’s within.’”

“That’s just an insult!”

“‘On the condition that we get to have sex, please go out with me.’”

“You’re making it sound like a proposal to be bang buddies!”

“What’s wrong? All kinds of men and women start dating with the expectation that they’ll have sex, right? Am I wrong?”

“In this world there’s this thing called etiquette!”

“Bah. After all, you just wanna bang her, right? You’re just confusing being in love with lust, right? I won’t let you say that after only three days you’ve fallen in love with what’s inside as well.”

“That’s... damn it, just give me back my phone.”

As we argued and fought over my phone, it suddenly vibrated. I quickly snatched my smartphone from Ura and looked at the screen. It was a Line message from Orihara-san. What it said was... I couldn’t believe it.

“Wh-What’s wrong, Momo? ...Your face is looking creepy.”

“Is it from Hime-chan?”

I relayed the message to Ura and Kana. As always, the message started with a formal greeting, and touched upon how I was holding onto her lunchbox. She said she wanted to make some time to see me so I could return her lunchbox. Everything was fine until this point. I expected this much. However, the last sentence made me lose it.

“Since we’re going to the trouble of meeting up anyway, and only if it’s okay with you, would you go on a date with me next Sunday?”

What—wait, what? I’m so happy my mind’s gone blank. By staying passive, I seem to have opportunities pop up one after the other. And things just keep getting better.

Perplexed by this blessing I didn’t even pray for, my two irreplaceable friends gave me the kindest words.

“Drop dead.”

“Don’t get tricked into buying a vase or anything, okay?”

❤

By Sunday, I figured I had to do something about my clothes. When I entered high school I was determined to try to be more fashionable, but I still hadn’t done anything during the month since school started. Who would have thought that the day my fashion sense would be tested would come so soon?

I thought I would ask Kana or my sister to coordinate my whole outfit for my date, but—whether by luck or misfortune—that wouldn’t be required.

“Good morning, Momota-kun!”

Today, Orihara-san was the one who arrived early to our meeting spot. Returning her greeting, I walked my way over to where she was. Or really, what started as a walk naturally turned into a half jog.

Today was the promised Sunday. The time was 10 a.m. and the meeting spot was the same as last time, the plaza in front of the station. I was even wearing the same thing as before: both me and Orihara-san were wearing our school uniforms.

“Um... I don’t mind or anything, but why did you want us to wear our school uniforms today?”

It was Orihara-san’s request that we both come in our uniforms today. I had no objections, especially since it saved me the trouble of worrying about what to wear. Still though, it was regrettable that I didn’t get to see Orihara-san in her everyday clothes.

Orihara-san gave a smile and clutched the edge of her skirt with both hands.

“No reason in particular... I just wanted to have a date while wearing school uniforms.”

Date. There was no way I wouldn’t feel embarrassed after picking up on that word. *So this really is a date.*

“Alright, shall we go, Momota-kun?”

“Sure... where should we go?”

“I haven’t really decided... let’s just wander around.”

“Wander around?”

“Yes, wander around.”

With a beaming smile, Orihara-san said, “Let’s have a date like students would.”

First off was lunch. The two of us entered a hamburger chain restaurant inside the station.

“Wow, it’s been such a long time since I’ve come to a place like this,” Orihara-san said with her eyes sparkling.

I often come here with my friends, but for someone like her who goes to a famous girls’ high school, it seems like coming to a chain restaurant like this must be a rare occasion.

Inside the restaurant were many students our own age. There were even some people there who looked at Orihara-san and whispered “That girl from Tourin is cute,” making me feel a bit of pride.

Together we ordered off the set menu, and at Orihara-san’s request we split the cost between us. We sat in a booth in the back and engaged in light conversation while eating our reasonably priced hamburgers.

“So, you actually play video games, Orihara-san?”

“I do. A lot, actually! On my days off I probably won’t step foot outside and spend the whole day playing them.”

“What are you playing now?”

“I’m playing a lot of different ones, but I think the one I play most is Smash Bros.”

“Oh, I play that too.”

“Really?! Smash Bros is so fun, right? No matter how old you get, it’s still good! I’ve been playing it since the 64. I’d play it so much the analog stick in the middle of the controller would get all worn out—”

“...Sixty-four? What was ‘the sixty-four’ again?”

“What... oh! That’s right, high schoolers these days don’t know about the 64. You see, I... um... had an older sister, so there was a 64 in our house... So, Momota-kun, was your first Smash Bros game on the ’Cube?”

“C-Cube...? No, the first one I played was on the Wii.”

“Y-You started from the Wii...?!”

For some reason, Orihara-san looked like she just got punched in the gut as her face filled with despair.

After eating, we started talking about going to karaoke... however...

“...Let’s not go after all.”

“Y-Yeah.”

We came all the way to the storefront of the karaoke place, but both of us were unable to take another step before we gave up. As expected, karaoke was too difficult for us. Having to sing in front of each other was already embarrassing enough as it was, and I had a feeling being together in that tiny karaoke box would be pretty awkward. Even though we ended up not going to karaoke, it got us talking about music.

“Orihara-san, what kind of music do you like?”

“Um, I don’t really have a particular genre that I like. I listen to anything. I listen to what I feel like at the time, so what I’m hooked on changes.”

“Ah, I’m kind of like that too. A lot of times I’ll listen to the themes for dramas and anime and get hooked on those songs’ genres. From there I’ll make my ‘Best of’ playlist.”

“Oh. I do that too.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I’ll make my own ‘Best of’ playlist for every situation. I’ve been doing it for a while, come to think of it... Back in middle school I made a ton of MDs with playlists for stuff like, ‘When I’m Sad’ or ‘Study Time’ and so on...”

“...MD? What’s that?”

“What...? You don’t know MiniDiscs?! Then, what do you listen to music on...? Momota-kun, what was your very first music player...?”

“Just an iPod.”

“...Y-You started in the iPod generation?!”

For some reason, Orihara-san looked like she just had her entrails cut out as her face filled with anguish.

Next we stepped into the bookstore. I had a feeling that we didn’t really have much in common when it came to talking about games and music, but for some reason when it came to manga we were totally in sync.

“Momota-kun, you read a lot of older manga, huh?”

“Well, there just happens to be a lot of opportunities to notice them. Also, I’ll see on manga apps that they’re being re-serialized, develop an interest and buy the digital version, then read them at manga cafés, that sort of thing.”

“I see.”

“Not only that, but also there’s a lot of manga that are still going whose publication began before we were born... also, lately there’re ones that get turned into anime.”

“That’s true. Lately in the anime industry a lot of past works are being remade.”

“It also seems like One Piece has been going since before we were born; actually, my dad bought the manga and we’ve read it together since I was in elementary school.”

“...Oh, your dad. B-By the way, how old is your dad?”

“Um, he’s 23 years older than me, so... I think he’s 38 this year?”

“38?!”

“Yeah... a-are you okay?”

“Y-Yes, it’s n-nothing...”

For some reason, Orihara-san’s eyes went wide and she seemed like she was going to faint.

At around 3 p.m. we headed to the Round One close to the station. If we’re talking about the standard date spot for students around here, then it would have to be Round One, after all.

Today being Sunday meant that it was totally crowded on the inside of the building. There were people with their families, groups that appeared to be students, and young couples. The interior was boisterous with people’s conversations and the music playing in the background.

“Wow, it’s amazing.”

Orihara-san’s eyes lit up as she looked out from the second floor’s reception desk to the play area.

“Could it be that this is your first time coming to Round One?”

“The truth is, y-yeah.”

Unable to conceal her excitement, she gave a small nod.

“It’s like... the me at high school isn’t anything like that. I’ve always been interested, but I don’t have any friends to come with me,” she muttered with a clouded expression. She then looked at me as if she were expecting something.

“Momota-kun, do you come here often?”

“Yeah, now and again.”

“In that case...”

She then grabbed her school uniform’s sleeves tightly and said, “Teach me how to have fun here today, Momota-kun.”

That gesture and those words were more than enough to shoot me through

the heart like Cupid's arrow.

Even if I say that I'm going to teach her, there isn't really a proper way to have fun at an amusement park. You should just do whatever you like.

Bowling, batting cages, mini basketball, darts, ping pong, badminton, segways, the video game arcade, and so on—we enjoyed as many attractions as time permitted. Just like students would, we enjoyed a wholesome low-budget date.

"Ahh... now that was fun. It's been a while since I've cut loose and moved around so much."

Orihara-san let out a long stretch as we waited for the elevator on the fifth floor.

"But now that I think about it... Momota-kun, you're not very athletic, are you?"

"Agh..."

"At the batting cages you couldn't touch a single ball. What's more, you kept missing when we played badminton and ping pong. And your dribble when you play basketball made you look like a senile old man—Oh. S-Sorry! I wasn't trying to make fun of you."

Perhaps Orihara-san picked up on how I was starting to get depressed, because she became flustered and added, "I mean, um, you looked c-cute!"

"...That doesn't cheer me up."

"I didn't mean to speak b-badly of you. I'm just surprised... Momota-kun, you're so tall and muscular that I thought you must play sports."

"...I've been bad at sports pretty much for forever."

For the longest time, because I'm so tall, I've had a lot of experience with people arbitrarily expecting me to be good at sports and then getting disappointed in me. Seriously, a lot of experience. When I entered high school, I had invitations to join the basketball club and the volleyball club. When they wouldn't give up, I reluctantly participated in trial practices... After that, neither ever invited me again.

“I have muscles because sometimes I help out with my dad’s work... but anyway, you’re not very athletic either, Orihara-san.”

“Ah...”

“After my turn at the cages you stepped up all smug-like and said, ‘Let a lady show you how it’s done,’ and then, just like me, you didn’t hit a single ball.”

“W-Wrong! I was able to touch one ball! I heard it go ‘tick’!”

“That’s the same thing!”

“No, it means I’m a little bit better!”

“...Pfft.”

“Hahaha.”

We both burst out laughing at how silly it all sounded. The elevator arrived, and we descended to the first floor. *This really is fun. I wonder if you’d call moments like this “happiness”?*

It seems like we have a good mood going. If I ask now, it seems like I can totally set up another date. I’ve let her completely take the lead up until now. Today is the day I’m going to personally take things to the next stage. Today I’m going to graduate from being passive.

We got off the elevator, and as we headed across the Arcade Corner to the exit, in my head I was desperately going over the invitation to our next date that I thought up yesterday. And just as I was about to say it—

“—?! H-Hide!”

Just as I noticed Orihara-san’s body flinch, she grabbed my hand.

“Wait, what?”

“The chair... a person I know from school is here! Please! Hide with me!”

Orihara-san grabbed my hand in a panic and pulled me over into the shadows between the purikura machines. The space between both machines was quite narrow, so our bodies firmly pressed against each other.

“!!!”

“Sorry, Momota-kun. Are you okay?”

“Y-Yes.”

Truth was, I was far from okay. This was bad... for various reasons. We were both pressed facing towards one another, so Orihara-san’s abundant chest was totally touching me. Her two mounds were being squashed flat. They were soft, yet rich in bounciness. Even through her blazer, their destructive power was outstanding.

“...What’ll I do if they see us?!”

Perhaps because she was so flustered, Orihara-san was completely focused on the movements of her acquaintance and didn’t notice how close we were to one another. Carelessly and without reserve, her ample breasts were being pushed up against me, and I could feel her warm breath against my neck. *Oh no, this isn’t good...*

“Ugh... Momota-kun, go deeper... ahn... you’re so b-big...”

Lewd! Orihara-san, that’s way too lewd!

My brain knows she means that because I’m so tall she wants me to go deeper into the shadows, but that’s not how it sounds!

“Phew... Good. It looks like they headed over to the karaoke booths.”

Orihara-san let out a sigh of relief as she looked out into the aisle.

“What a relief... that was a close ca—oh no!”

After the danger had passed, Orihara-san calmed down and finally realized the situation we were in. She jumped out from between the purikura machines in a panic.

“I’m sorry, Momota-kun... I mean, I didn’t mean to push them against you.”

It’s absolutely no problem. In fact, I wish you’d push them against me more—is something that I definitely can’t say. It took all I had to avert my eyes and just tell her “...N-No problem.”

I was prepared for her to yell “Kya~! Pervert!” and slap me in the face but, surprisingly, she apologized to *me*. I wonder, could she be an angel? Or maybe

even a goddess?

“Though when you stop and think about it, there wasn’t really a reason for both of us to hide. You could have just hidden inside the purikura booth all by yourself, Orihara-san.”

“Oh yeah... I got so flustered that I didn’t think of that...”

Orihara-san gave me an embarrassed grin and then gazed at the purikura machine with a kind of nostalgic look in her eyes.

“Hey, Momota-kun. If it’s alright, can you take a purikura with me?”

“A purikura?”

“I’ve... never actually taken one. Have you, Momota-kun?”

“Only, like, a long time ago, when I was forced to take one with my big sister.”

It was when I was in elementary school. I had heard that purikura was really popular about ten years before that, especially among middle and high school girls at the time. However, thanks to smartphones becoming so commonplace, that wasn’t so much the case now.

“Let’s take one, as a memory of today.”

Urged on by Orihara-san, we passed through the purikura’s white curtain.

“Wow... H-How do we do this?”

“I’m pretty sure that you put the money in here.”

“Wh-Wh-What?! What are all these different frame designs? Which one do we choose?!”

“It’s probably okay if we just choose whatever, right?”

“Oh no, Momota-kun! The timer is running out!”

“It’s okay if the timer runs out. It’ll just move on to the next screen... I think.”

While not really knowing what to do, we stumbled our way through the photo session. The voice of the purikura machine was overly hyper as it gave us instructions one after another, like “Next, let’s give each other a big hug!”, “Smoosh your faces together and get close!”, and so on, all of which totally

didn’t fit the mood. Trying our best, we gave each other some space and stood next to one another while awkwardly doing peace signs.

“Did it take the picture?”

“Yeah, and over here we can add doodles to it.”

“Doodles...? I-I don’t really get it, so you do it, Momota-kun!”

“N-No way, I don’t know anything about this type of thing!”

Again, while not really knowing what to do, we stumbled our way through adding doodles. Since we only added our names and the day’s date, our final work was pretty orthodox.

After about a minute, our finished pictures came out from the side of the purikura machine. We used the scissors at a nearby table to split the pictures between us.

“Oh wow, it’s really purikura! My very first purikura!”

The way Orihara-san’s eyes lit up was like looking at a kid who just got a present from Santa.

“Thank you for listening to my request, Momota-kun.”

As she said that, she hugged the purikura to her chest. The way she looked right now gave off a faint atmosphere of tranquility.

“I’ll remember this day for the rest of my life.”

“...”

For some reason, I felt a great pain in my chest. She was smiling. She looked truly happy, and she was smiling. I, on the other hand, looked like I was desperately trying to hold back tears. Doing my best to force a smile, I held them back. I felt lonely, fleeting, and frail. Despite all that, I made up my mind and with a bitter smile—

“...Eh, Momota-kun?”

Before I realized it, I was grasping her hand that was holding onto the purikura. I felt like if I didn’t, she’d go somewhere. Even though she was so close, she suddenly seemed like a faint existence that would disappear at any

moment. The purikura of us unexpectedly dropped from her hand.

“I love you, Orihara-san.”

I didn’t prepare myself. With neither thought nor reason I entrusted myself to impulse and instinct, and put my feelings to words. I was immediately assaulted by intense regret and feelings of embarrassment. My heart was beating so loudly that I couldn’t believe it, and my whole body began to shake; I felt like my blood was flowing backwards.

Even I didn’t understand it. However—I couldn’t help feeling this impatient. If I let this moment go, it seemed like I would never be able to see her again. This person in front of me, Orihara Hime, would be lost to eternity. That feeling of loss drove my thoughts mad.

“Wh... ah.”

Orihara-san’s eyes were wide and she was dumbfounded. I could feel her shaking from her thin wrist as I was grasping it. She looked like she was afraid, and I started to feel guilty. Still, I couldn’t turn back. I suppressed my fear and nervousness, and mustered up words from the depths of my heart. *This is going to be my very first profession of love.*

“I... I love you, Orihara-san. Probably ever since the very first time I saw you.”

I likely didn’t need the “probably.” But these were my true feelings and my honest thoughts. I didn’t know if it was love at first sight, but right now there was a part of me saying “I want to make it love at first sight.” I wanted to honestly believe, perhaps to a fault, that everything had been destiny, and that the two of us were meant to meet and actually did. And I wanted to take that belief and convert it into courage.

“It’s been less than a week since we first met... you might be thinking ‘What is this guy saying?’...But, I love you. I love you so much I just can’t help it. Ever since I met you... you’re the only thing I’ve been thinking about.”

I remembered what my friend Ura said.

“You just wanna bang her, right?”

“I won’t let you say that after only three days you’ve fallen in love with what’s

inside as well."

Absolutely, looks are a big thing. I totally love how Orihara-san looks. Whether it's her face or her body, both are totally my type. And if I said I didn't want to have sex with her, I'd be lying. If someone criticized me by saying I'm just a virgin confusing lust for love, I wouldn't have a comeback. But that's not the case. It's not just about lust.

We've only met a few times, but the time I'm with her is just so fun that I can't help myself. I don't want to lose this or let it go. I want to make these moments of happiness into something everlasting. Even if it all started from lust, in just this moment I want to be able to call this raging feeling "love."

"I don't think we know anything about each other yet. However, from here on out, I want to know more, little by little. I want to know about you, and I want you to know about me. Orihara-san... I want to be together with you more."

I want to be together more.

I want to know her more.

I want her to know more about me.

By knowing more, and being known more, I want to fall even deeper in love.

This was the first time I'd ever felt this way.

Kana said that there's nothing appealing about a guy who is only passive, and that all princes take action. In that case, I have to take the initiative.

If even a nice, handsome prince has to actively make a move when he wants to get the princess, then there's no way that anything will change for a virgin like me if I stay passive. If I don't muster up my courage and put these feelings into words, the world won't change.

"I love you, Orihara-san. Please go out with me."

I said it. I was so nervous and excited my head felt like it was going to reach its boiling point, but somehow I put my feelings into words. It seemed like my heartbeat wouldn't calm down.

The time it took her to respond felt freakishly long. Unable to stand the silence that seemed to last forever, I raised my face full of fear, and the first

thing that caught my eye was—

“...”

Tears. Orihara-san was crying. With an expression like her soul had left her body, she silently shed her tears. I reflexively let go of her hand that I had been holding on to the entire time.

“O-Orihara-san...?”

She hid her face with both hands as she began to sob. However, her hands weren’t enough to stop the overflowing tears, and they began to streak down her cheeks.


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“...S... orry.”

In between sobs she spoke to me, and I listened bewildered.

“I’m sorry.”

I felt like everything stopped. Time, my breath, my heart, the world, everything.

Still, in spite of all this, my mind and my thoughts were strangely calm.

“I’m sorry,” that’s probably the standard way to refuse someone’s confession. Even if you think you didn’t do anything wrong, and even if you have no emotional attachment to the person who expressed affection towards you, saying “I’m sorry” for politeness’s sake is a kind of etiquette in this country.

However—

“I’m sorry... I’m so, sorry... S-Sorry.”

It seemed like Orihara-san was repeating “I’m sorry” over and over again like some kind of chant. Repeatedly being apologized to while she cried like a flood didn’t seem like politeness for politeness’s sake. She was honestly apologizing from the bottom of her heart.

After saying “I’m sorry” over and over again, and without wiping away her tears, she left like she was running away. And all I could do was just stand there. The purikura she had dropped to her feet was still there. In the picture we looked so innocently happy, and even though it had just happened a few minutes ago, it felt like it had happened in a different world.

I don’t understand. I don’t understand at all. The only thing that I could say was that, for the first time in my life, I confessed my love. And for the first time in my life, my heart was broken.

Chapter 2: The Princess Had a Secret

The next day was Monday, but I forgot to buy a copy of Jump and didn't realize until after school. *How many years has it been since I forgot to buy Jump on the day it came out?*

"Hahaha, that's a shame, Momo."

In spite of the kind words coming from his mouth, Ura couldn't help but laugh as he over-familiarly slapped my shoulders while I was draped over a desk like an amoeba. We were hanging out in an empty classroom along with Kana, discussing what happened during the date.

"Looks like Momo has the blood of an elite introvert running through his veins, just like me. Even if you get obsessed with romance, your proud introvert blood just won't let you get away with having one."

I'd normally play the straight man and interject something like "What the hell is an elite introvert?" but today I didn't feel like saying anything. I'd been like this since I got home the day before. It felt like a hole had been popped out of my chest.

"That said though, that Orihara chick is one bad lady. She willingly asks you out, but when you tell her you have feelings for her she says 'I'm sorry'? Just how wishy-washy can you be? I'm just saying, if there wasn't any chance, she shouldn't have acted all nice from the beginning. She was probably just getting off on feeling all attractive because she had a guy in her pocket. That sucks, Momo. Getting caught by a shitty woman thirsty for attentio— H-Heeey?!"

By the time I realized it, I was picking Ura up by the collar of his shirt.

"Yeep!"

"Oh... sorry."

After seeing his abnormally scared face, I sighed and let him go. A teary-eyed Ura ran to hide behind Kana's back with lightning speed.

“B-Bastard! Y-You wanna fight?! If you wanna fight, I’ll get mad! And when I get mad I’m real crazy! When I get mad I don’t remember anything, but I become a cold-blooded killing machine! I can use whatever’s nearby me, even stationery, to accurately stab the human body’s vital points.”

“You seem to remember a lot of things.”

Kana calmly took a jab at Ura’s comment while he lightly stroked his head.

“You’re in the wrong for that one, Ura. What you said was absolutely too insensitive.”

“E-Even you, Kana...”

Ura shrank as he became depressed.

“I was just... mad at that woman who played with Momo’s innocence.”

“I know you were trying to cheer up Momo in your own way. But love isn’t that simple.”

Kana turned his cool eyes towards my direction.

“You worked hard, Momo. It even looks like you pushed yourself.”

“...Yeah.”

His words of appreciation cut to the bone. Truth was, he was so cool it pissed me off. *Sigh, I wonder if I should just date Kana. I’m sick of women. I hear that he has a girlfriend right now, but I wouldn’t mind being his side piece*—or so I started to think, before I hopped off that idiotic train of thought and lifted my face. I leaned in my seat, looked up at the ceiling, and let out a deep sigh.

“Agh... damn. I feel like crap...”

It had all just happened, so there was no way I was gonna be already recovered. Honestly, I wanted to skip school, but for the sake of my perfect attendance I dragged myself there. Besides, rather than being home alone, I wanted someone to listen to me complain. I wanted to vent out all these hard-to-process thoughts to my good friends.

“...It’s not like I calculated my chances of success. There was just a part of me that thought maybe I could do it. I mean, she was the one who invited me, and

what's more, she seemed like she was having fun when we were together..."

I thought I had a chance, but I wonder if that was just me being conceited. I wonder if it was just me being a virgin not used to girls and misinterpreting her being polite for having a good time.

"Really... what was all that?"

What was *all that? What was this week? What is Momota Kaoru to Orihara Hime?*

"Hey, Momo. That girl's name is Orihara Hime, right?" Kana suddenly inquired with a serious look on his face.

"Y-Yeah. What about it?"

"I felt bad about doing it, but... I personally looked into her a little bit. I was curious about what kind of girl you'd fallen for, so I asked a couple of friends I have at Tourin about what kind of person she is."

"You were doing that this whole time?"

"They said she doesn't go there...

"She's not there, Momo. It seems like there's no student in the Tourin first-year class named Orihara Hime."

"What...? Not there? Wh-What do you mean?"

"It means just that. I asked five or so different people but nobody knows about her. Even after they searched for her they couldn't find her. Orihara Hime is not among the students at Tourin."

"..."

I don't get it. Doesn't exist? What does that mean?

"...Does that mean her name is fake?"

"I think that's possible. But I suspect another possibility. Could it be that that girl wasn't a student at Tourin at all?"

"What? What are you saying? Orihara-san was wearing a Tourin uniform—"

"You've only seen her uniform, right? It's not like you've seen her school ID or

seen her going to Tourin. You haven't seen her together with friends from Tourin either. Momo, what reason do you have to think that she's a student from Tourin, aside from her uniform?"

"..."

No words came out. When I thought it over, all I had was her uniform. There wasn't anything aside from the uniform to prove that she was a student of Tourin.

The Orihara-san that I know is always wearing a school uniform. Even during our date on Sunday. Almost as if she were showing off. Almost as if—almost as if she were making a display out of being a high school girl going to Tourin.

"Hmm. I thought she was kind of suspicious from the very beginning," Ura chimed in with a docile look on his face.

"A week ago when you almost arrived late to school, you said you saved that girl when she met that molester, but... there's no way a girl who goes to Tourin would be riding the same morning train as you."

That... is also something that I had my doubts about. I just arbitrarily decided that she probably forgot something and didn't think any further about it.

"Momo, could it be that... you're so desperate that you saw an illusion of a girl who doesn't exist?"

"Th-There's no way that could happen."

Ura was being way past rude, but I wasn't able to make a strong comeback. I could feel myself go pale as an indescribable feeling of uneasiness rose from my feet and gradually enveloped my body.

"If she wasn't an illusion... then who did you fall in love with?"

I couldn't answer. Orihara-san—Orihara Hime-san. Just who was the girl that I fell in love with? Was she really some kind of ghost or spirit? I suddenly felt like I had become uncertain of everything that happened this past week. If you told me "It was all a dream," I would probably believe you without thinking.

As my terrifying feelings started to grip me tighter and tighter, my pocket vibrating brought me back to reality.

I looked at the screen—I felt both surprise and relief at the same time. It was a message from Orihara-san. The surprise came from the fact that she contacted me; the relief came from the confirmation that her existence wasn't a dream.

There wasn't the usual formal greeting. The message felt unnaturally distant and got straight to business.

"I apologize for suddenly going home yesterday. If you have any time, I would like you to meet me. I would like to explain everything then."

❤

The appointed place was a casual dining restaurant close to the station. I arrived early, sat in a nonsmoking seat in the back and just ordered a refillable drink. Looking out the window, I could see that the sun had already started to set. Students returning home from club activities rode their bikes on the asphalt that was basking in the evening sun. After about five minutes, Orihara-san showed up.

"G-Good evening."

"...Yeah."

The greeting I somehow managed to squeeze out was an indifferent reply. Orihara-san's face was glum as she hung her head. Her makeup seemed heavier than usual. Her outfit... was the Tourin uniform I had seen time and time again. Even though this person wasn't supposed to be a student of Tourin Girls' High School—

She pressed the button on the table and also only ordered a refillable drink. When the restaurant staff left, a hellish awkwardness followed... God, was it hard to take.

Seriously, what is this situation? Why do I have to be alone with and come face to face with the person who dumped me the day after they gave me my very first heartbreak in my entire life?

Honestly, I wanted to turn down her invitation so much. However, there was no way that I wouldn't come. There was no way that I wouldn't hear her out. I wanted to know.

Just who is the woman that I fell in love with—

“...First off, I’ll say this.”

The one to break the silence was Orihara-san. She spoke indifferently, with a low voice as if she were suppressing her feelings.

“Because I don’t want you to have any kind of weird hope, I’ll say this clearly. I... can’t date you. If I gave you the wrong idea by calling you here today, I’m sorry.”

“...Sure.”

This sucks. She’s just beating a dead horse. It wasn’t as if I didn’t have a little hope, but being told that is heavier than I imagined.

“Today, the reason I had you meet me is... Momota-kun, I wanted to tell you the truth.”

“The truth?”

“This whole time, there’s been something I’ve been hiding... no, that’s not right. Not hiding, I’ve been lying to you this entire time.”

Orihara-san had a face like she was in pain as she continued.

“If we parted ways like this, I felt like it would be too dishonest, so... now that I’m ending this, please let me explain everything.”

Orihara-san told me to “please wait here a little while,” got up from her seat, and exited the family restaurant.

Hiding? Lying? What could it be? I mean, she just got here, so why did she leave the restaurant? My mind felt like it was going to be buried underneath these endless questions, but I obeyed her words and drank my coffee as I waited for her.

When I had finished my second cup of coffee, a lady wearing a suit made her way towards me. She seemed like an office worker. Her black hair was bundled up from behind, and she wore thick-framed glasses. Her pumps clicked on the floor as she walked between the tables of the restaurant. I thought that she was making her way to the restroom, but she stopped by my seat. Without saying a word, she sat opposite me, in the seat where Orihara-san had been.

“...Wha? U-Um, I’m sorry, I have a friend who’s coming soon.”

“N-Nice to meet you, Momota Kaoru-kun.”

Ignoring my perplexion, the lady spoke in a voice that made me feel like she was nervous and awkward. And as soon as I heard her... my mind fell into disarray.

That was—that was her *voice.*

Again, I stared straight at the lady. Her hair, her clothes, everything about her looked like a different person. However, if you looked carefully, her face was exactly the same. It was her.

“My name is Orihara Hime... My age is t-twenty-seven.”

What could I even say? The high school girl I fell in love with... was actually twenty-seven years old.


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Chapter 3: Yes, the Princess Was Pushing Thirty

“Harumi Seikatsu Co. Ltd.

Marketing Division

Chief of Direct Marketing

Orihara Hime”

The business card I was handed had a pompous title written on it.

Harumi Seikatsu, huh? Even I know about them. They’re that company whose commercials I see online and on TV all the time selling cosmetics and supplements. I think their main headquarters is in Tokyo, but there should be a branch office around here...

In addition to the business card, she also showed me her employee ID and driver’s license.

“...With this, do you understand now?” the suited-up Orihara-san said with a somewhat embarrassed face. All I could do was nod. After being shown absolute evidence like her business card and license, there was no room to doubt her. Orihara-san was not a high school student. She was an adult, a member of society, an employee at a company, and twenty-seven years old.

“For lying to you and saying I’m a high school girl... I really am sorry.”

“I-It’s okay.”

Even if I was being politely apologized to, I wasn’t emotionally prepared to accept her apology. My mind and my heart were overwhelmed, and I didn’t know what to do.

Orihara-san posed a question to me as I sat there unable to say anything.

“D-Did you really not realize...?”

“What?”

“That I wasn’t a high school girl.”

“...No.”

“Not at all? Not even a little? You were completely unaware? It didn’t seem like I was forcing it?”

“...N-No, not at all.”

“RReally. Hmmm, I see.”

Orihara-san's face broke slightly into a smile. She appeared to be doing her best to maintain a calm expression, but it seemed she was unable to contain her happiness.

"No. I mean... there was no way I would realize, right? Who would have thought that despite their age, a grown adult was shamelessly walking around town dressed as a high school girl—oh."

By the time I realized my slip of the tongue it was too late. Orihara-san was slumped over the table like she had just been mortally wounded. Her face looked like she was writhing in pain on the verge of death. The words "Kill me" were practically written all over her face.

"S-Sorry."

"...No, it's fine. I know what I did was pretty cringeworthy... Seriously, why did it turn out like this?"

Orihara-san slowly began to lift her head back up as she muttered with a touch of self-deprecation. Once again I looked at her.

Truthfully, it feels so out of place. To me, she just looks like a high school girl who's simply wearing a business suit. But that's not true. It's wrong. Am I only thinking like that because she was wearing a school blazer the first time I saw her?

The adult woman in front of me wearing a suit is the real Orihara Hime. This is the real her.

"...So it was a lie, all of it."

The words spilled from my lips like a sigh. I wasn't trying to criticize her, but Orihara-san bit down on her lip like it hurt.

"You going to Tourin, us being the same age..."

"...That's right. I'm truly sorry."

"Your birthday, and being born in the Year of the Snake?"

"Th-That part's true."

Orihara-san quickly interjected this last part. It seemed like she was telling the

truth about her birthday and zodiac sign.

She was born in the Year of the Snake like I was—which means...

“...Oh, I see. We’re twelve years apart in age.”

Twenty-seven years old and fifteen years old, a difference of twelve years.

“We’re not even a whole twelve years apart! It’s only eleven years and ten months!”

Orihara-san yelled at me in a loud voice as if that was the one thing she couldn’t let go. However, embarrassed at herself for becoming so serious, she added in a small voice, “...Well, it is basically twelve years...”

I’m fifteen years old, and I was born at the end of September, so if Orihara-san is twenty-seven years old and born at the beginning of December... our difference in age really does seem to be eleven years and ten months. It’s just a little short of being twelve years. Still, it’s pretty much twelve years.

“Um... may I ask a basic question?”

“G-Go ahead.”

“Why were you dressed as a high school girl?”

“...Adults are complicated.”

In regards to my question that cut to the heart of the matter, Orihara-san diverted her eyes and spoke uncomfortably.

Ah, I see. I guess that’s what she’s into, huh...

“W-Well, everyone has their own hobbies.”

“What... No!”

I was trying to accept what she said and gloss over it, but she shook her head furiously.

“It’s not like I wanted to do it, okay!”

“Huh? Dressing up like a high schooler and marching around town isn’t your hobby?”

“No! Aww, geez, I’ll give you the whole story, so listen!”

After shooting me a desperate look, she began to talk while seeming pretty embarrassed.

“Um... I wonder where I should start. First off... my attending Tourin is actually true. It’s just that it happened about ten years ago.”

Ten years ago. This person went to high school ten years ago—were smartphones even a thing back then? All the way back when purikura was in its heyday?

“I have a friend from high school who I’m still close with. Her name is Yuki-chan... On the day before I met you, I went to hang out at Yuki-chan’s house and we drank.”

She “drank,” as in alcohol, probably. Orihara-san is twenty-seven years old and at the age where it was okay for her to consume alcohol.

“It had been such a long time since we last saw one another, so we just kept talking and drinking... By the time we realized it, we were both pretty drunk.”

In that drunken state, her friend Yuki apparently said, “Hime, you have such a baby face. You could probably pass for a high schooler even now, yeah?”

“...After that, Yuki-chan brought out her uniform from high school. Since I was really drunk, I was like ‘Sure, why don’t I try it on...’”

So the uniform that Orihara-san wore wasn’t hers, but a friend’s. That would explain the reason why it seemed a size too small for her. I understand. This person called Yuki was, how should I say... probably not as bountiful as Orihara-san.

“In the spur of the moment, I wore the uniform and did up my hair and makeup like a high school student... I don’t have much memory after that. When I realized it was morning, the time was past the point I’d normally be leaving my house. I rushed out of Yuki-chan’s place in a panic, thinking ‘If I go home now and change into my suit, I’ll just barely make it to my job.’ So I dashed to the nearest station and slipped onto the train—and that’s where I finally noticed my appearance...”

Orihara-san covered her face with both hands and was in agony from embarrassment. It came through loud and clear how she was so regretful that

she wanted to punch her past self.

“Really... I was so embarrassed I thought I was going to die. In my head I was shouting ‘This kind of humiliation play is too high-level for me!’ to myself the entire time...”

It seemed like she felt so embarrassed she had given up on having any sense of shame about it. She stared off into space and let out an empty laugh at her own joke.

A twenty-seven-year-old woman, looking like a high school girl, in a crowded train... Yup, that’s a full combo. As a guy I can only imagine, but that’s some next-level embarrassment.

“It was already hell, but to think that something even worse would come along to add to my misery...” she said with a touch of self-mockery.

I didn’t even have to ask—she was talking about the train molester.

“The train molester was scary on his own, but... not knowing what I’d do if my real age got exposed was just as scary. If I raised my voice and asked for help, I could have probably ended that molester in the eyes of society, but if I did that it would have been a double KO... Haha, hahaha. It seems like something that’d be snatched up on the evening news, right? Something like ‘A Train Molesting Incident On the *bleep* Line! The Victim Was a Twenty-seven-year-old Businesswoman Cosplaying as a High Schooler?’”

“Oh...”

To think there was so much backstory to it all. Orihara-san was in a double bind. She had to pick between stopping the crime being committed by the train molester or letting her high school girl cosplay get exposed to everyone around her. Even if she was able to stop the train molester, after that she probably would have been asked to present her ID by the station staff or the police. If she was unlucky, the story could have even reached her company. That... that would be the kind of embarrassment that would make you want to die a little.

“I really didn’t know what to do, and all I could do was freeze up. The one who saved me from that crisis was you, Momota-kun.”

“...”

“Once again, I want to say my thanks... reeeaallly, thank you so much. Thanks to you, I avoided committing social suicide...”

It was a really earnest thanks. It felt like she was truly giving me thanks from the bottom of her heart.

“I’m really glad that you were the one to save me, Momota-kun. If you hadn’t been there... I probably would have left this town by now.”

“You’re exaggerating... I just happened to see it. Even if I hadn’t been there, some other person would have probably saved you.”

“No, you’re wrong,” Orihara-san responded kindly, yet with a passionate look.

“It is because it was you. It was thanks to you trying to protect me, even though you were the one who would be embarrassed, that I was saved. And I was even able to keep the fact that I was a twenty-seven-year-old cosplaying as a high school student from being exposed.”

In hindsight, it appears that my choice at the time was, in a way, the best course of action. If we turned the molester over to the station staff after that mess, even more trouble would be waiting for her.

“It’s because you were a kind boy who sympathizes with women...”

“...”

Honestly, that day’s dramatic rescue isn’t really a pleasant memory. It was unplanned and haphazard, and even if you were being nice you couldn’t really call it a smart solution. I was the laughingstock of everyone around me and I felt ashamed. I kind of regret how uncool I was—

“You were really cool, Momota-kun.”

“Orihara-san...”

I felt like I was going to be sucked in by her slightly red cheeks and sensual smile. For a few seconds we locked eyes with one another. However, we gradually became embarrassed and turned our faces away at the same time.

“I-In any case, it’s thanks to you that I was saved,” she said in a flustered voice to get the conversation back on track.

“I really wanted to thank you, so after I got off the train I ran after you and called out to you... I don’t have to explain the rest, right? After that, as you know, I met you while cosplaying as a high school girl.”

“...”

“It was tough, you know? On the day I made that boxed lunch, I had to hurry after work to the station, change in the women’s restroom and put my stuff in a coin locker,” she said jokingly as she let out a giggle.

Oh, so that’s what it was. Orihara-san in a suit—I thought I had seen it somewhere before, but now I finally knew the cause of this déjà vu. When I was waiting for Orihara-san in front of the women’s restroom to give her back her lunch box, I saw a woman wearing a suit who looked like an office worker come out. I didn’t realize it then, but that office worker was Orihara-san. From a high school girl to an office lady... Orihara Hime transformed from her temporary form to her true one.

“It was embarrassing walking around town cosplaying as a high schooler, but... it was a tiny bit fun.”

“...Oh. So it is a hobby after all.”

“No, it’s not! I meant that it was fun being with you, Momota-kun...”

She suddenly yelled her denial but her voice gradually tapered off. Also, her face quickly became red.

“...It was fun being with me?”

“Th-That’s right! Is there something wrong with that?!” she yelled, lashing out a bit.

I felt like I was going to laugh unintentionally. This person really is Orihara-san after all. Her clothes and hairstyle had changed, but her expression and mannerisms were left unchanged. She’s the very person I fell in love with. However...

In contrast to how calm I had become, Orihara-san’s expression became dark.

“...It was fun. It felt like I became young again and returned to my high school days. It was like a dream—but I have to put an end to it.

“The magic is already broken.”

Her face no longer laughing, Orihara-san announced this with a sense of determination in her voice. Lacking warmth, she was expressionless like a doll.

“Well... that’s how it is.”

As her gruff words forcefully brought the conversation to its end, she pulled her wallet out of her bag. Then she pulled out a ten thousand yen bill and placed it on the table.

“I’m going to pay for this. I’m an adult.”

“What...”

“Go ahead and order anything you like. As for the change... please take it as an apology for deceiving you.”

Bluntly declaring this, Orihara-san stood up from her seat and quickly left.

“...Huh? P-Please wait!—Oh. S-Sorry.”

I almost bumped into a waiter carrying food as I hurried to pursue her. If I chased after her that would be a dine and dash, so I used the ten thousand yen she gave me to pay the bill. While I was dealing with all of that, she had already left. Clenching the change in my fist, I flew out of the restaurant.

“Wait... Please wait, Orihara-san! Orihara-san!”

I raced across the street light-illuminated asphalt, chasing after her. After calling out to her a few times, she finally stopped for me and turned around.

“...What?”

Her face and voice were uncomfortably cold.

“‘What’? ...We were still talking, right?”

“What more do we have to talk about?” Orihara-san asked, her glare piercing through me.

“Could it be—you’re not going to say you still like me, are you?”

It was a voice tinged with sadness, and she smiled sarcastically with self-mockery.

“That’s...”

Looking at me choking on my words, the self-deprecation and self-torment that was warping her beauty became even worse.

“I get it... I get it, okay? The one you said you loved was the high school version of me—the high schooler attending the all-girls school, Orihara Hime, right? She’s different... she’s completely different from who I really am. The one you love isn’t the twenty-seven-year-old me.”

“...”

“The girl you fell in love with doesn’t exist.”

I remembered the girl I fell in love with. The high school girl who I believed was the same age as me without even questioning it, the girl named Orihara Hime.

“If you knew that I was twenty-seven, you wouldn’t have approached me in the first place right? You wouldn’t have been interested, right? That’s right... that’s natural. For a high schooler like you, I’m already an old lady. You do realize I’m closer to your dad’s age than I am yours, right?”

“Orihara-san...”

“Sorry. I really didn’t mean to lash out at you like that. After all, I’m the one in the wrong.”

Words escaped me. My head still couldn’t process it all. My confusion wasn’t subsiding. My mind was in shambles. Even still, I couldn’t just say nothing.

“Are we... over?”

I didn’t want to end it. I didn’t want to lose it. Putting aside all reason, that feeling was raging inside of me.

“It’s over. The only thing to do is end it... I mean, the worlds that fifteen-year-old you and twenty-seven-year-old me live in are completely different.”

“That’s... It’s just twelve years.”

“‘Just?’”

Orihara-san seemed like she was about to cry, but she spoke in a stern voice.

“You don’t understand. You don’t understand at all, Momota-kun. You totally don’t understand what type of age twenty-seven years old is...”

Her pupils filled with a deep sadness, and she declared to me the despair of being twenty-seven years old:

“Twenty-seven years old—it’s the same age as Anago-san!”

My eyes went wide. It was as if an attack came from an angle I hadn’t predicted and my thoughts froze.

“Anago-san...You mean that Anago-san? From *Sazae-san*?”

“Yes. The coworker of Masao-san, Anago-san. According to official info, he’s twenty-seven years old.”

For real? With that presence and that voice, Anago-san is twenty-seven years old? No matter how you slice it, he looks like he’s around forty.

“...You see, when you become an adult, you steadily become older than the characters you idolized as a child. I passed over the teenage Jump main characters like Naruto, Ichigo, and Luffy, and before I knew it I became more of an adult than Nube. I was somehow able to handle the despair that came with getting older than Jump main characters, but... when I learned that Anago-san is twenty-seven years old, as you’d expect it was a huge shock.”

“...”

“Momota-kun, could you date Anago-san?”

No. I couldn’t date Anago-san. How can you ask me that with such a serious face?

“You see, it’s impossible right?”

“You see,” my ass! God, what should I do? Should I make some kind of joke? Is this a serious scene or a comedy scene?

Ignoring my indecisiveness, Orihara-san continued the conversation by herself.

“There’s no way that you, who started playing video games on the Wii, and I, who diligently blew into my Super Nintendo cartridges, could understand one

another... Anyway, I bet you were one of those kids, right? The first Game Boy you played wasn't the long Advance, it was the folding SP, wasn't it?"

"...I never played the Advance. The first portable games I played were on the DS."

"You started on the DS?!"

Orihara-san's eyes went wide and she started to stagger. She was just about to pass out.

"...Y-You understand now? There's you, from the DS generation, and me, who devoted my adolescence to Mega Man Battle Network; our worlds are just too different. So please. Just forget about me already."

She said that and turned her back to me. However, I just couldn't watch her leave.

"W-Wait—"

"Cooome on! You still don't get it?!"

I didn't want to give up. I tried to stop her, but suddenly she let about an exasperated yell. When she turned around, her face had a look on it like she was absolutely fed up. It was an expression I had never seen before.

"Can't you tell I'm trying to be nice? For real, can you just read the mood and go home?" she said in a biting tone.

"I don't think anything of you. Your reaction was interesting, so I just pretended to be a high schooler and made fun of you. I'm a grown woman. From the very start, I never had any interest in a high schooler who's never earned any money themselves. Don't misunderstand me just because I was a little nice to you."

Her contemptuous words came one after the other. She gave a wicked smile and proceeded to sully our memories.

"I mean, confessing to someone at Round One is unbelievable. That's so lame. I'm an adult woman, so you need to put more thought into the mood. For example, renting out an entire theme park and bringing me a bouquet of flowers in front of the castle, that's how you really do a confession. Adult

women only go for men who consider—”

“...Why are you saying those things?”

My heart wasn’t hurt by her words.

“Why are you lying?”

What really hurt was that she was being forced to say such things.

“It’s...it’s no—”

“If it’s not a lie, then why did you cry?”

Orihara-san swallowed her breath.

“When I confessed to you, why did you cry like that?”

She seemed so apologetic, like she was repenting her sins from the bottom of her heart.

Now I understood the meaning of those tears. At that moment, Orihara-san truly hated herself. She felt so guilty for making me fall in love.

“Please don’t force yourself to act like you’re a bad person. I know that you’re not like that.”

“...You don’t know anything about me.”

“I do... because you’re the person I fell in love with.”

Only a week had passed since we first met, so I didn’t know a lot about her—but I did know that Orihara-san wasn’t a bad woman who enjoyed tricking people. Of that much I was sure.

I understood loud and clear just how much it pained her heart that she deceived me. It was easy to tell that she was just forcing herself to act like a bad person—it was obvious that she was trying to get me to hate her, and I just couldn’t be silent about that. I understood that was her kindness. However, I wasn’t enough of a child that I could be fooled by that lie—and I wasn’t enough of an adult to let myself be fooled by that lie. I’m neither an adult nor a child: what I am is somewhere in between, a fifteen-year-old high school student.

“Orihara-sa—”

My words stopped. She had started to cry. The world had grown dark with the arrival of night; awash in the glow of the street lamps, Orihara-san shed her tears quietly. This marked the second time I had seen her face in tears.

“Stop... Stop it, Momota-kun... I’m begging you, please don’t get in my head any more than this.”

I did it again. I made her cry. The person I fell in love with, the person I wanted to protect, was crying because of me. Why did it turn out like this?

Orihara-san was crying her eyes out and sniffling, but in spite of this, she looked straight at me.

“...Please, Momota-kun. Forget about this weird old lady. Find someone your own age and fall in love like normal. It’s okay. Someone like you will be able to get a cute girlfriend in no time. So... bye-bye.”

She smiled as she said that. Even though her face was a mess with tears, she gave me a huge smile. Stifling all her sadness and pain like that, it was like she was a saint. Kindly and proudly, she was praying for my happy future with a beautiful smile. She turned her back to me and disappeared from my sight.

I couldn’t move, though. It was like someone sewed my feet to the ground, and I couldn’t move. No matter how coldly I was treated, no matter how abused I was, I thought I would still go after her. But after being shown that smile, there was nothing I could do anymore.

I looked up at the sky and desperately fought back tears. The moon in the night sky was so beautiful it pissed me off.

❤

“Twenty-seven years old... that’s, like... an old hag.”

As you might expect, the person in the empty classroom making an enemy of women over twenty-five across the globe was none other than Ura. His dead-fish eyes were wide with surprise. Kana, who was standing right next to him, had the same look on his face.

“That’s quite the shock. I totally thought she would just be a student from a different school walking around in a Tourin uniform, but to think that she’s an

office worker from Harumi Seikatsu...” Kana said, staring at the purikura he had in his hand.

It was the purikura Orihara-san and I had taken together. Since I picked up the copy Orihara-san dropped, I had sadly come into possession of both copies.

“When you look at this, she really doesn’t look like she’s twenty-seven years old. She just looks like a normal... no, a really cute high school girl. Even if you take away the fact that this is a purikura, she’s definitely got a baby face.”

“Bah. Women can change into anything they want with makeup, after all. It’s scary.”

After airing his biting cynicism, Ura looked at me and laughed. “Still, you dodged a bullet, Momo.”

“Eh...?”

“You were in danger of dating an old hag with a whole zodiac cycle on you. I’m just glad that she was a sensible adult. If it were some trashy woman who likes to toy with innocent young men, who knows what would have happened to you?”

“Dodged a bullet...” that’s one way of looking at it. That’s probably the normal way to think about it.

If our roles were reversed—if it were a fifteen-year-old girl and a twenty-seven-year-old man in a romantic relationship—whether you like it or not, it would seem like a crime. No matter if it was pure love, it’d be unlikely that society would understand. Even with the roles changed, essentially it’d be the same thing. An adult lady and an underage boy being in an adult relationship would be, legally speaking, sexual misconduct.

Maybe if I were in Ura’s shoes I’d say the same thing. If I were to find out that my friend fell in love with a girl they met in town, found out they were a twenty-seven-year-old adult, and in spite of that confessed and suffered an honorable defeat—I’d also probably say “You dodged a bullet.” After all, in the unlikely event they started dating, it’d be impossible to fathom just how difficult it would be.

If it were the old me, I’d probably say just that. If it were the me that hadn’t

met her yet, that is...

"It seems like you still have a lot of regrets, Momo," Kana said with eyes that saw right through me. "It seems like you still haven't given up on Hime-cha—Oh, we can't really call her Hime-chan anymore. Let me rephrase that. It seems like you still haven't given up on Orihara-san at all."

"What? Wait, are you serious, Momo? She's twenty-seven. Pushing thirty. The big three-oh. If this were a high school romcom, she'd be that one teacher whose only thing is going on and on like 'I'm still young! Somebody marry me~'"

Seriously, what's with Ura and making an enemy out of huge demographics? There's a world full of cute teacher heroines, dude.

"...It's not like I'm unable to get over it. It's just, my mind still isn't able to process all of it."

It's all felt so surreal. It's like I've been floating, and even after everything I can't keep my feet on the ground. Everything was supposed to have ended yesterday... our relationship was supposed to have completely ended, but it's like I'm still not able to accept it.

"Momo. You won't often find me saying things with 100% good intentions, but in all seriousness: it'd be for the best if you gave up on her."

Kana dispensed with his nice smile, and his face became unusually serious. "You should forget about her as soon as you can. Think of it like you had a bad dream—or even a good one, just hurry up and come back to reality."

"..."

"I'm not just saying this for your sake, Momo. For Orihara-san's sake as well, I think you should hurry up and forget about her and find someone else."

Kana continued trying to persuade me in his matter-of-fact voice. "Twenty-seven years old is the age where you're in your sixth year at a company if you started working out of college... a full-blown adult. Kurt Cobain and Jimi Hendrix had already lived their entire lives and taken the world by storm by that age, you know?"

"...I don't see the point of comparing her to legendary musicians."

“My point is, the world she’s living in is fundamentally different from the one kids like us live in. If you were to date, I don’t think it would do any good for either of you. I mean, that’s the age when you start to think about getting married and having kids. It’s not something that you should approach halfheartedly.”

“Getting married.” “Having kids.” It felt like I was hearing some language from a faraway land. I had a faint understanding of what those things meant, but they were still things that were way off for me that I hadn’t even started thinking about.

“Anyway, her being twelve years older than you makes it inconceivable. It’s not like her looks are going to stay the same. The old hag energy’s gonna seep out sometime, dude,” Ura said as he began to speak once more. “Right now, Orihara definitely looks young and cute, but she’ll get old way before you do. I don’t know how long you plan on dating her, but when you turn twenty, she’ll be thirty-two, and when you turn thirty, she’ll be forty-two... you’ll never close the age gap. Momo, right now you’ve got love on the brain, so you’re probably thinking ‘As long as we have love, the age difference doesn’t matter!’ but one day when your passion is gone, what are you going to think of a woman who’s twelve years older than you?”

Ura and Kana’s tones were unusually stern... and I was grateful for it. Encouraging someone’s romance is easy. Saying irresponsible stuff like “It’ll definitely work out!” and “That girl definitely likes you too!” is truly simple. But these guys were seriously thinking about me. They were worrying about my wellbeing and were prepared to be hated by me for doing so.

“...Thanks, you two. It’s just like you guys say. You guys really opened my eyes on this.”

As I said this, their faces relaxed into an expression of relief.

“Okay Momo, today we’re going all out and partying. We’re gonna spend all our time playing games. We’ll play mobile games, console games, card games, board games, we’ll do it all!”

“Maybe instead of going all out you should just try going out... Momo, in this situation you should focus on meeting someone new. Let’s have a mixer. I’ll

even invite some girls who actually go to Tourin.”

“Screw that. Momo is gonna play games with me.”

“What are you going on about? Momo and I are going to have a mixer.”

“Games.”

“Mixer.”

“...Chill out, you guys.” I sighed as I put their quarrel in check.

“I’ll... take a pass on that mixer. I’m not really in the mood. For now, let’s just play some games.”

❤

“Orihara-san, Orihara-san... Chief Orihara!”

“Huh? Um, what can I do for you?”

I realized I was being called, so I quickly raised my head. My junior Komatsu-san was looking at my face worriedly.

“Are you okay? You were kind of spacing out...”

“S-Sorry. It’s nothing, I’m alright.”

“These are the documents you requested. I’ve organized them, so please have a look. Also, if you’re not feeling well, please say so, okay? Lately you haven’t been looking so well, Orihara-san.”

“S-Sure. Thank you for worrying about me.”

Komatsu-san returned to her desk. Her brown hair was set in a light perm, and she was wearing a trendy, mostly white business-casual outfit. *If I’m not mistaken, she turned twenty-three this year. Compared to me, who wears a suit because I don’t want to deal with coordinating my outfit everyday... she seems to be brimming with youth. If I were a man, I’d fall for a girl like that, I think. Her youth is radiant. This twenty-three-year-old girl’s youth is so radiant I feel like I could get dizzy just by looking at her. Compared to that, fifteen years old is practically the sun itself. If you got close enough to touch it, your mind and body would burn up and melt away—*

“...”

I raised my face and once again looked out over the office. We were in a three-story building facing the highway. You could enjoy a bit of a view if you looked out the glass windows, but when you work here for five years, you get pretty sick of it. Tables with computers on them were lined up with chairs that were apple green for some reason. My many coworkers were hurriedly attending to their tasks. Perhaps because it was a workplace with so many women, there were a lot of trendy accessories, and the entire office was enveloped in a cheery atmosphere. *This is my workplace. This is my reality.*

I had been assigned to the marketing division two years ago, and since then I'd become the chief of one of our teams. When you say "chief" it sounds like a big deal, but in the end it was just middle management. What's more, it was pretty low-level middle management.

There wasn't anyone who wanted to do it, so I became the chief. It was the kind of crappy position where your salary didn't really increase, but the responsibility and workload sure did.

The office I saw through my glasses was the same as it had always been. However, nowadays it somehow seemed to be a little less bright.

"..."

It had been a week since I last met Momota-kun. Since then, same as always, I'd been going to work. I couldn't take off just because I was depressed from some romance trouble. At least, that's what my head was telling me.

The truth of the matter was that I totally hadn't been able to get over it. Even during work I was often zoning out, and like earlier I'd had people worry about my health a few times.

"...I've got to pull myself together," I said in a small voice so no one could hear. I chugged down my lukewarm coffee and focused on my computer screen. *I'm going to throw myself into my work.*

I have no right to be hurt or depressed. I'm the one who's at fault. My thoughtless actions hurt a boy. It's unforgivable, and something I'll regret for the rest of my life. The dream is over. The magic is broken. From here on out, it will only be reality.

I went out to eat for my lunch break. People at my company spent their lunchtime in many different ways. You'd have some who ate boxed lunches they prepared, while others would go out to eat. As you'd expect from a business district, there were a lot of restaurants around, and lately delivery services like Uber Eats had become popular with the women in the office.

For my wallet and my health's sake I normally made my own lunch, but today I had promised to meet someone. I entered a café close to my company whose selling points were their chic atmosphere and vegetable pasta. As I looked over the restaurant's lunchtime crowd—

"Hime! Over here!"

A beautiful woman with black hair called my name from the back of the restaurant. I felt my cheeks go red and half-jogged my way to the table where I sat opposite her.

"Yuki-chan, don't yell out my first name like that!"

"Oh, I'm sorry. I totally wasn't thinking."

She sincerely apologized, though her expression didn't really change. Her bright hair was smooth and long, and her skin was as white as fresh snow. Her features were beautiful like a finely crafted doll, and her dignified appearance reminded me of a rose. She looked as chic as she did in high school, and you wouldn't have thought she was a mother of one just by looking at her.

Iguchi Yuki, or rather, Shirai Yuki now that she'd gotten married. After graduating college she worked as a bank employee, but she quit once she got married and became a stay-at-home wife. She was one of my friends who I'd been very close to since high school. Thanks to her unparalleled beauty, she'd been popular with both boys and girls since she was a student. She was the polar opposite of someone with such a plain existence as myself, but because of many bizarre circumstances we still met on a regular basis.

"You still have a complex about your name, huh?"

"Of course... I mean, it's only gotten worse as the years go by."

You can only get away with a name like Hime when you're in your teens. Someone being called that when they're around 30 is just... you know?

“I guess it would. I mean, nowadays you’re not the princess of otaku, you’re the princess of pushing thirty. Doesn’t quite have the same ring to it, huh?”

“...I’m sorry Yuki-chan. That’s not that funny.”

“Ah, what a shame.”

Her beauty gave her an atmosphere of being unapproachable, but surprisingly enough she did things like crack lame jokes. It was easy to misunderstand her because of her looks, but on the inside she was unexpectedly humorous.

“At this rate I’ll be a ‘princess’ even when I become an old lady. You realize that at the old folks’ home I’m going to be told ‘Princess, your food’s ready’? It’s depressing.”

“I sympathize with you. Your parents should have given it more thought when they gave you your name.”

Yuki-chan let out a wearied sigh.

“Lately I’ve been participating in my local mothers’ support group, and I can’t get over how many kids have such odd names. I wonder if those parents are mistaking their kids for a pet or something. They have a fundamental lack of imagination. They just can’t picture their children becoming adults and then senior citizens.”

Her words were lined with thorns, but I agreed as someone with a complex about her name. However... there was one thing that I wanted to say.

“Yuki-chan, now that you mention it, where’s your son today?”

“I left Macaron with my mom. Sometimes you have to let them meet their grandchildren, you know?”

“...Is that so?”

Macaron was the name of Yuki-chan’s child. I’d met him a few times, and he had just turned one year old. *He’s such a cutie. The way he goes “Ma ma” while he toddles around is so precious, and I’ve taken a ton of videos and photos. That kid is so cute I could watch him all day... but his name is Macaron. This might be rude, but isn’t that just an actual pet name?*

“Come to think of it... Macaron-kun is a pretty eccentric name.”

“Yes. I pushed it to the limit. So much so that I want to congratulate myself for coming up with such a unique and stylish name.”

I don’t think it’s “pushing it to the limit” so much as it is “pitching a ball so hard you go past home plate and throw it right into the stands,” but it’s better not to say anything. Yuki-chan has always been like this.

She was smart enough to get into the highest-ranking university in Tohoku, but something was fatally off. During her high school days her grades were always the top of her class, and she easily got into the number one college in Tohoku. After her graduation, she entered into a regular position at one of Japan’s major banks. However, after only one year she resigned due to marriage, and since then she’d been a stay-at-home wife.

When looking at it from the outside, her marriage and her resignation were unbelievably swift decisions, and at the time I was really worried. However, seeing how she’d been such a good stay-at-home mom, I realized my concern was baseless.

“Haah...”

“What’re you sighing for?”

“It’s just... I was just thinking about how you’re doing so well. You’re married, have a kid, it’s like... you’re proper.”

After you turn twenty-seven, your friends get married one after another. Many of them have kids. I even know some people who’ve already been divorced and are living as single mothers.

“Compared to that, just what am I doing with my life...”

“Yeah, that’s what I’m saying.”

Without comforting me in my time of grief, Yuki-chan immediately agreed with me.

“You’re pretending to be a high school girl and deceiving a fifteen-year-old boy. Seriously, what are you doing? At your age, don’t you think that’s shameful? Don’t you feel like apologizing to your parents?”

“H-Half of it was your fault, Yuki-chan!”

That day—having stopped breastfeeding and with alcohol no longer off-limits—Yuki-chan drank at a pretty high pace. It seemed her husband told her “Take a break from being a mom and housewife once in a while and relax” and took their son with him to his parents’ house. I accompanied Yuki-chan while she enjoyed her booze and her day off to the fullest, so even though I wasn’t that good with alcohol I ended up drinking heavily... and following that was the start of all this craziness.

“You’ve already told Momota Kaoru-kun or whatever that you’re breaking up, right?”

“...Yes.”

Our orders were finally served to us. It was the pasta of the day listed on the restaurant’s signboard. As I ate my pasta with abundantly mixed baby sardines and cabbage, I explained our whole situation to Yuki-chan.

“So in the end you told him everything.”

After I finished, Yuki-chan looked straight at me with an emotionless expression that I couldn’t read.

“Good job, Hime. It must have been hard for you.”

“Yuki-chan...”

“—is not what I’m going to say to you.”

Her look turned sharp like knives made of ice. It felt like the room temperature had fallen all at once, and I became rigid like a frog being stared down by a snake.

“I told you time and time again to stop being involved with him right away because it would become something you can’t undo, right?”

“...”

I consulted with Yuki-chan from the very first day I met Momota-kun. *What should I do Yuki-chan?! On the high school girl train there was a molester and a cool boy helped but I was a high school girl!* was how awkward the phone call ended up because of how disheveled I was.

“You’re in the wrong with everything about this, Hime. I think repaying him

was fine, but you shouldn’t have gone on a date with him. Not to mention you were the one to invite him... there’s a limit to just how foolish you can be.”

I couldn’t respond. The reason for our date, my lunch box that Momota-kun was still holding on to—the truth is that I had realized it from the beginning. I knew that he was still holding it, but I pretended that I forgot. As I walked alongside him, in my heart I wished that he wouldn’t realize. I wished for it like I was praying. Just like Cinderella and her glass slipper, I thought that if I forgot it then there would be an excuse to meet again.

“It was obviously going to turn out this way. Any man who went out on a date with you in high school girl cosplay would definitely fall for you.”

“...Th-That’s not true.”

“You’ve never had any experience with being popular or with guys in general, so it’s no surprise that you’re not aware of how attractive you are. After all, when you were a student you were a plain-looking otaku with braided hair, plus you were fat.”

“I wasn’t fat! I just had a really stable center of gravity!”


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Desperately protesting was futile. Like Yuki-chan said, my high school self was plain, an otaku, always wearing braided hair, and... a little chubby. These days you'd call me an introvert, perhaps? I was always in the corner of the classroom reading a book (that was actually a video game strategy guide). I had friends who were girls, but I ended my three-year high school career without once talking to a guy.

It was a depressing youth spent devoting myself to playing video games at home. I thought love was something completely beyond me, so I gave up on it—but that's not to say I was apathetic towards it. Honestly, I was interested. I admired the student couples I saw walking around town. I always wished I could fall in love.

"When you started that diet for your coming-of-age ceremony, I thought it wasn't gonna work, but you managed to follow through."

"Thanks to you."

Yuki-chan helped a lot with my diet before my coming-of-age ceremony. Even now, I was still somehow maintaining my shape.

"You've flattened your stomach and gotten some pretty nice curves, but those breasts of yours didn't get any smaller. Honestly, I'm jealous. What's the deal with those criminal-level boobs?"

"Kn-Knock it off already."

She was glaring straight at my boobs, so I panicked and hid them. Though she was right, the only things that didn't get smaller were my breasts. It was truly a mystery.

"Momota-kun was shown that chest at point-blank range, right? Of course he'd fall in love! If you dressed in a high school uniform and shook those boobs in the face of any teenage boy, they wouldn't be able to resist," Yuki-chan declares.

I wonder if she's right. If I'm being honest... I got the feeling that Momota-kun was frequently looking at my breasts. Well... very frequently.

"Admit it, Hime. You tricked a fifteen-year-old boy. You played with his heart

with your womanly charms.”

Her harsh words shot through my chest.

“You used Momota-kun to wipe away your regrets from when you were a student. In order to redo your plain and boring youth, you used his innocence.”

“Th-That’s not—”

I wanted to say ‘That’s not true!’ but I couldn’t. *Yuki-chan is probably right. That date on Sunday was everything I wanted to do in high school but couldn’t. The two of us dressed in our school uniforms going out, wandered around town, ate hamburgers at a cheap chain restaurant, hung out at Round One, took purikura...*

It really was fun. It was like I was reliving my youth, and it really was a good time. So yes—it was all for my own self-satisfaction. I was only thinking about myself.

“But... but, I couldn’t help it—I fell in love with him.” I said it like I was making an excuse for myself. *My first love... is a forbidden one. Forbidden, like Romeo and Juliet.* “So... even if it was just for a little bit, I wanted to be together. I wanted to try being like a couple... I thought I’d go on just one date, properly break up, and then never see him again.”

I wanted a day I could remember for the rest of my life. If it was a first love that wasn’t meant to be, I at least wanted a memory. Even if it was just once, I wanted to walk around town together. I wanted to try having a date like students. I thought if I could just do that, I wouldn’t have any regrets. I decided I’d take my feelings and seal them away deep in my heart, and desperately hide them until they faded away. That’s what I decided, but—

“That’s what you decided, and then that date was supposed to be your first and last, but you ended up getting passionately confessed to. For your present-day guy, Momota-kun is pretty assertive and manly. It only makes sense that you would fall for someone like that!”

I had no response to her cutting sarcasm.

“I love you, Orihara-san.”

I was honestly happy. I felt like I was in heaven. The person I fell in love with was in love with me. He even put that feeling into words. I thought that there wasn't any greater happiness in this world. However, what I ended up feeling even deeper than that was the sadness, the pain, and the guilt of it all that seemed like it would crush my heart.

"...It's like you say, Yuki-chan. I played with Momota-kun and hurt him. I was so concerned with myself that I didn't think about him. I should have done as you said and got out of his sight as soon as possible..."

If I had done that, then Momota-kun wouldn't have been jerked around. I left a deep scar on the heart of a boy who was so kind and so mature—

As I tried hard to hold back the tears that were about to come, Yuki-chan got up without saying anything, sat next to me, and hugged me tightly.

"Eh, wh-what are you doing Yuki-chan?"

"There, there. It's okay."

Just as soon as she started hugging me she started talking to me like a baby. As she whispered to me in a sweeter voice than I could have ever imagined her making, she wrapped her arms around me and patted my head.

"There, there. Did the baby have a tough time?"

"...What are you saying? I'm not Macaron, you know?"

"Right now you're just like a baby. There, there. It'll be okay. All your boo-boos will go away."

Wrapped in her warm kindness, my tears began to come.

"...W-Waaah."

Without worrying about those around us, Yuki spoke to me in baby talk, and I wept in her arms. Even though I was twenty-seven years old, I was crying like a baby.

When my tears finally stopped, I started to worry about the gazes of people around us, so we hurried out of the café. Yuki seemed completely unfazed, but I couldn't handle it. *Geez, I probably can't come back to this cafe for a while.*

I parted ways with Yuki and went back to my office. *Okay, from the afternoon on I'm going to get motivated and do my best! Making the documents for the end of the month planning meeting, market research concerning our new products, adjusting the schedules with our customers, properly dividing work amongst my team members... oh, and next week Ota-san will come back from childcare leave, so I have to make a manual for her. I have a lot of work to do. If I can become buried in work like this, I wonder if I can forget about Momota-kun one day.*

"..."

Thanks to Yuki I felt a little better, but I was still depressed. Bound by regret and guilt, my gait was heavy. A phrase I'd been told a lot recently crossed my mind.

"Do you think a prince on a white horse is just going to show up one day?"

Being twenty-seven and single without making any effort to get a boyfriend, I was told this a lot by my parents and friends. "In reality, there is no prince. Unless you make an effort yourself, you'll definitely never find a boyfriend or someone to get married to." It's just them being sarcastic.

You know what, everyone? A prince did show up. Without me making any effort, he appeared, dashingly saved me, and what's more, he told me he loved me. Kind, cool, and manly, he's the best prince. But, unfortunately, he's twelve years younger than me.

Oh, Momota-kun... Why do you have to be fifteen? Why do I have to be twenty-seven? If I were a fifteen-year-old high schooler, or if you were a twenty-seven-year-old adult, could we have been able to become a couple? Could we have lived out the kind of fairy tale that ends with, "And the two of them lived happily ever after"?

Oh no, I'm about to cry again. Lately I'd been crying way too much. Every night the past week I'd drank and cried aloud by myself till morning, but in spite of such a self-indulgent lifestyle my tears still hadn't dried.

I opened my bag to pull out a handkerchief—and then I realized. My phone had been on silent this whole time and had a message. For the first time in a week, it was a message from Momota-kun.

❤

The fact there was little overtime at my company was a plus. As long as there wasn't a big meeting, there wasn't any special business to attend to, and no one caused a fiasco, usually I could go home at a set time. My friends often told me "I'm jealous" or "That's a good company," but if being able to go home on time is enough to be called "a good company," I wonder if this country is really okay.

I left the office and went to the appointed location. My conflicting feelings of wanting to rush without letting a moment go to waste and wanting to not meet at all if I could help it were entangled. As a result, I kept awkwardly changing between a power walk and a snail's pace.

The place I arrived at was a few minutes away from the train station, a park underneath the overpass. It was a lonely looking playground with just a bench and a sandbox. It was where he ate the lunch I made for him the day after we met.

The sun had gone down before I knew it, and gradually the interspersed street lights became the park's only source of light. On the other side of the park, in the dusk, I could see Momota-kun. As soon as I caught sight of him sitting on the bench, I felt a sharp pain in my chest. Even though I understood I didn't have any right to feel this way, it felt so painful that it was like my chest was going to tear apart.

I bit my lip and told myself to get a grip. *I have to be resolute. I can't show any signs of regret. I have to act like an adult woman who has already moved on and is moving forward.* After psyching myself up, I took a few deep breaths, stood up straight, and strode forward. I quickly arrived at the bench, and I sat down on the opposite side without being asked.

"Good evening," I said indifferently in my coldest voice.

"Orihara-san... good evening. Long time no see."

As Momota-kun looked at me, he had a mixed expression of happiness and awkwardness.

"I didn't think you'd come. Thank you very much for coming."

"It's nothing. You said if I didn't you'd always be waiting, so I couldn't help but

come.”

I did my best to stifle my emotions and speak calmly.

“So, what is this ‘business’ you were talking about?”

“It’s about money.”

I was stupefied by an answer I would have never expected.

“At the restaurant, you know how you left me 10,000 yen?”

“Oh, that’s what you mean.”

Could it be that the reason he called me out here today was to return the money? Knowing how upstanding Momota-kun is, that’s possible, but it’s a bit of a letdown.

I was a little disappointed—and I was surprised at the fact I felt disappointed. *As embarrassing and pitiful as it is, it seems like I’m still expecting something of this kid. Even though it shouldn’t be possible. Even though there shouldn’t be anything between the two of us.*

“I told you that was compensation for damages, didn’t I? You don’t have to pay me back, so just use it to buy something you like.”

“Yeah, I did buy something I like. So I thought I should let you know.”

“...Is that so?”

How unexpected. Just when I totally thought that he was going to return the money, it turns out he already used it.

“With that money, I bought a game.”

“A game...?”

“I’ve been playing it this entire week.”

“I-Is that so?”

I don’t mind. It’s up to him how he used the money I gave him. It totally doesn’t matter one bit that I was so depressed that I wasn’t able to play my beloved games, but Momota-kun was having fun playing all by himself—

“This is the game I’ve been playing this whole time.”

I paused my selfishly angry thought to take a look at what Momota-kun pulled out of his blazer—and I had to catch my breath. *N-No waaaay!* I was shocked, and a flower of nostalgia bloomed in my chest. Boasting a superior portability that allows its small size to easily fit into even the pocket of a school uniform, it was...

“A Game Boy Advance SP!”

What Momota-kun showed me was an outdated game console whose production had stopped a long time ago. It was hardware that was sold as an ‘advanced’ piece of high-end equipment. At the time, the frontlight on its LCD screen was revolutionary, as it allowed you to comfortably play games even in the dark. Also, it was fully rechargeable. I have fond memories of thinking “What?! I don’t need to buy AA batteries anymore?!”

It was a high-spec, high-design piece of hardware, but the DS coming out a year after it made it feel like it quickly disappeared from the marketplace.

“Wh-What’s the deal with this? Why do you have something so nostalgic...?”

“I bought it because I wanted to try Mega Man Battle Network.”

He flipped open the SP, turned on the power, and I heard an incredibly nostalgic melody. *Oh no. It’s so nostalgic I feel like I’m going to cry. Wow! It’s the Game Boy Advance startup screen! Thanks to the SP’s frontlight, even outside in the dark like this the screen is totally visible...*

“This whole week I played it so much I barely slept at all, and I actually cleared the game. It really is a lot of fun! At first I didn’t expect much because it’s such an old game, but I got really addicted. The unique 9 grid vs 9 grid field and the battle chips system was totally fun. Also, the story was really awesome. Even though it starts out just being about an elementary schooler solving some small crimes, it gradually changes into this story that engulfs the whole world... Who would have thought that Mega Man’s real identity was (SPOILERS)?”

He really seemed to be happy and having fun as he spoke. *I totally get it. Yep yep, Battle Network is so fun. It’s my childhood!*

“I only knew about Mega Man from Smash Bros, but he shows up in these types of games too, huh.”

“Oh, the Mega Man in Smash Bros is actually the original, so that’s a little different. You see, Battle Network is actually more of an alternate universe type of story—hold up.”

I got so caught up in nostalgia I became excited and started to talk about it myself, but somehow I managed to regain control and get the conversion back on track.

“Why Momota-kun? Why do you own this old game...”

“I wanted to try the game that you were hooked on. I searched around a lot of second-hand stores and somehow managed to gather 1 through 6, so I plan on playing them in order.”

“...Wh-Why? Why would you do that?”

“Because I want to get closer to you, Orihara-san,” Momota-kun said as he closed his SP... but the SP wasn’t like the DS, so even when he closed it it didn’t go into sleep mode, so the music kept playing. Flustered, Momota-kun flipped off the power switch. *That’s the DS generation for you.*

“Um... Orihara-san, you said that our worlds were different because you dedicated your adolescence to Mega Man Battle Network. In that case, I thought that if I played the same game, then maybe I’d be able to understand your feelings—even if it’s only just a little, I thought I’d be able to better understand your world.”

“What...?”

He tried to understand me? He tried to get closer to me? All for a terrible woman like me who deceived and hurt him—

“Orihara-san.”

His lips quivered slightly from nervousness... However, he had a look of determination.

“I love you after all, Orihara-san.”

He took my breath away. The feelings I was holding in the bottom of my heart reared their head, and the lid I had firmly shut on them was getting smashed in.

“What are you saying...? I properly turned you down, right? This conversation

was over, wasn't it?"

"Yes, but I can't give you up."

"Are you s-stupid or something? There's no way we could date... our ages are 12 years apart, you know?"

Stop. Stop it Momota-kun. If you look at me anymore, I'm going to—

"...Momota-kun. Settle down and listen, okay?"

Suppressing my feelings and instincts, I focused only on speaking rationally.

"Right now you're just over-excited. If you start dating me with that kind of temporary emotion, you will definitely regret it. You only fell in love with me because you thought I was a high school girl your age. The real me is a 27-year-old adult. Soon I'm going to turn 30 and become an old lady."

I kept going while enduring the pain in my chest.

"E-Even if we dated... there's no way that an adult and a student could work out. Our thoughts and values are completely different, so we'd only disagree with one another."

It hurts. My chest hurt so much I couldn't endure it. Listing all those reasons to refuse the love of the person I love was like mutilating my own heart. *But I have to say it. For the sake of his future, I have to say it.*

"Please, Momota-kun. Don't sacrifice your youth for someone like me. It's your once-in-a-lifetime high school career, so you shouldn't spend it being jerked around by me. It's best if you fall in love like a student while you still are one..."

"...Yes, that's right. Probably."

Momota-kun laughed feebly.

"My friends told me to stop chasing you, and that I should completely forget about you."

"Right? So just—"

"However, that woke me up. I realized... I didn't have enough resolve."

"Resolve?"

“The two of us dating... probably isn’t very normal. So naturally, there would be people who won’t approve of us. Even my good friends object, so who knows what kind of prejudice and slander we’d receive from people we don’t know... I didn’t have enough resolve to protect you from a world that would push that kind of ‘normal’ on us.”

Having said that much, Momota-kun stood up. In his eyes I saw a heat like the sun, and my heart was getting scorched. “Orihara-san—please let me redo my confession.”

“Redo...?”

“The confession I made before wasn’t a lie, but... after all, those were words I said to the high school girl Orihara-san. So this time, please let me say I love you to the 27-year-old you—the real you.”

At that moment something lit up beyond my eyesight. A bunch of orange-colored lights rose up from the darkness.

“Ah... idiots. Those guys are doing it too soon...”

Momota-kun murmured something in a flustered voice, but I couldn’t take my eyes off the lights. The pale glow was coming from the sandbox.

The countless sparkling lights weren’t flat, but put together in a three-dimensional shape. Since the sun had set and it was dark I didn’t realize it at first, but there was something in the sandbox. The pointy silhouette illuminated by the warm glow was—

“A castle...?”

Standing in the sandbox was a castle about one meter tall. A small, small castle made of sand.

“It’s supposed to be a castle. I had my friends help and made it before you arrived. Um... please don’t get too close to it. Honestly, the quality is kind of meh, and this is probably the best distance to look at it.”

“Pretty...”

I let slip a gasp of admiration. It looked like it was Christmas lights that were giving off the orange light along the castle’s outer wall. The light leaking from

the castle window lit up the night. Wrapped in that warm glow, the sand castle stood out against its background of the dark night. It was a magical and mysterious sight. *It's like a dream; it's as if I stepped foot into a fairy tale—*

"I'm glad that you like it."

"...Yes. It's so pretty. But, why—"

I took my eyes off the sand castle to look at Momota-kun, and I was so surprised I was speechless. It happened while I had my attention stolen by that magical sight. Without me noticing, Momota-kun produced a bouquet of flowers. He looked slightly embarrassed as he held a bouquet of bright red roses.

"Wha—... eh? Wh-What is this? What is this...? What's going on?"

I don't know what's going on anymore. One surprise is coming after another and I'm beginning to feel faint. I'm drunk. I feel like I'm getting totally wasted on this whole dreamlike situation—

"You said so yourself, Orihara-san. I have to think more about the mood if I'm confessing my love."

I did. I did say that. But.

"You're kidding... right?"

"For example, renting out an entire theme park and bringing me a bouquet of flowers in front of a castle." It can't be. It just can't. Did he take that seriously? It was just something I made up in a desperate attempt to make him give up on me.

"...Sorry. I don't have the money to reserve an entire theme park... Right now the best I can do is this cheap castle," he says apologetically.

"If you say that you have no interest in a fifteen-year-old who has yet to become a member of society, then I'll give up. If you say that you don't want to waste your time dating someone like me who has no money or status... It'd be frustrating, but I will step aside."

However, he took one step forward.

"My youth, my future, if you're worried about that—well, it's none of your

business.”

“N-None of my business... I’m just sorry for...”

I lied and seduced him, and because of that I made his life go crazy. Yet with his youthful face, Momota-kun gave me a broad smile.

“My heart is already going crazy. If you feel bad about it, please do something about it.”

He bent his leg, got down on one knee, and knelt before me all in one motion while I was still sitting on the bench. The scent of flowers tickled the inside of my nose. With the magically sparkling sand castle to his back, this boy with his flower bouquet looked up at me. His eyes were completely unclouded and contained an intense heat like the sun.

“I love you, Orihara-san. I love the real you, the twenty-seven-year-old you.”

“Momota-kun...”

Oh no... I’m going to drown. From my toes to the top of my head, I was deeply submerged in this dream world. My armor of reason was being scorched by a boiling heat like the sun, and it began to melt and fall away. My feelings were going crazy and wrenching off the lid that was supposed to be suppressing them... My heart was completely naked.

“I... don’t have money and power like a prince. My face isn’t particularly good looking. However, at the least, I will work to make my heart like that of a prince.”

While still kneeling, Momota-kun offered up his bouquet.

“Please become my princess.”


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‘Princess.’ I always hated how my name meant that. I only enjoyed it up until I was about five years old. I was teased a lot for it when I entered elementary school. When I was plain, fat, and in my prime as an introvert in middle school and high school, I would make fun of myself every time I looked in a mirror by going, “Just what about me is a ‘princess’?”

After becoming an adult, even though I was only going to work and playing video games, time flew by so quickly it was scary, and as I got older my name complex got worse.

I’m way past the age where I’d dream about becoming a princess, but my name is something I have to carry with me for the rest of my life. *I hate my name. However. However. However—*

“...That’s not fair.”

The words spilled out of my lips.

“It’s not fair, it’s not fair, Momota-kun... Why are you trying so hard for someone like me? If you keep doing that I’ll...”

I lost control of my emotions, and my tears spilled out with them. *Lately, I really have been crying too much. In the two weeks since I’ve met him, just how much have I cried?* However, the tears I was shedding now were different from all the other times.

“...Do you really understand?” I said amidst sobs.

“I’m... twenty-seven years old, you know?”

“I know.”

“I’m already an old lady.”

“Twenty-seven years old is not an old lady.”

“I... really am not a good woman, you know? I’m not girly at all. I’m not very fashionable, and what’s more, even now I hate having to coordinate my outfit, so I wear my suit to work every day. On my days off... I’m the kind of woman who stays inside and plays video games all day.”

“Not a problem. Let’s play together.”

“As for cooking, what I gave you before was only because I was really motivated, okay? It’s not like I’m trying that hard every day, and there’re a lot of times where I just eat cup ramen...”

“I don’t mind something like that.”

“...Momota-kun, you... look at my breasts a lot.”

“Um... well, you see, um, that’s—”

“...I mean, these boobs are probably going to start sagging soon, you know?”

“Th-Then I’ll enjoy them until they sag! And when they start sagging, I’ll enjoy that too!”

“...Psht. Hahaha. What are you even saying?”

I spat out a laugh and wiped my eyes. But no matter how much I wiped them, the tears wouldn’t stop. When you get to my age, you have an understanding of what it means to cry. When your superior gets really mad at you for making a mistake. When your beloved grandfather passes away. Also... when you have to break up with a fifteen-year-old. You’re so sad that your tears won’t stop flowing, but even then you’ve acquired somewhat of an understanding of how to control your tears and your feelings.

However, at that moment I didn’t know how. *I don’t know what to do at a time like this. Just what are you supposed to do when you’re so happy you can’t stop crying? I’m at such a loss, I feel like I’m going to lose it...*

“...Are you sure? Are you really really sure that you want to be with me? Even though I’m almost thirty, will you make me your girlfriend?”

“Yes!”

His response without hesitation shot me through the heart. *Oh no—I’m done for. I no longer have anything to conceal me. There’s nothing left to stop me.* Shackles, armor, lids, they’d all been melted away. The only thing moving me was my feelings just laid bare.

I slowly stood up. I gathered my courage, and to answer his step forward, I took one step forward as well. I bent over slightly and took the outstretched bouquet.

My name is Orihara Hime. I'm a company employee. My hobby is video games. My age... is twenty-seven years old. Today, I got my first boyfriend. He's twelve years younger than me, but he's the coolest, and he's my prince.

❤

"What? You're going to date Orihara after all? Bah. That's lame."

"Now don't sulk, this is a happy occasion. Be nice and give him your blessing."

In the empty classroom at lunchtime, Kana chided a grumpy-looking Ura and looked at me.

"Congratulations, Momo. I'm proud of you."

"Yeah."

"Good grief. Seems us looking out for you only ended up lighting a fire under you. Well, I figured it'd turn out this way one way or the other."

He shrugged his shoulders with a wry smile.

"Kana, Ura, thank you. It's all thanks to you guys."

I gave thanks from the bottom of my heart; Kana gave me a beaming smile while Ura snorted.

"Geez. What a slave driver, making me play around in the sand at my age."

"Yeah right. Ura, you're the one who had the most fun building that sand castle. You worked so hard for Momo."

"Wh—th-that's not true, idiot! It's just that I like precision work, and I couldn't stand how awkward you guys were! Th-That's the truth!"

I got a lot of help from Kana and Ura when I built that sandcastle. I brought the Christmas tree lights from home. *During the daytime it looked pretty shoddy, but at night it ended up not looking so bad, so I'm happy.*

"If you two hadn't been there, it definitely wouldn't have gone so well... though your timing with the lights was a little too fast."

"We couldn't help it. It was so dark we couldn't see your signal."

"...I think that timing for the lights was actually best, Momo. If we went with

your original plan of waiting until after you said ‘I’ll put a spell on you,’ reciting your poem, and then snapping your fingers... I really think it would have bombed.”

Really? Huh... I thought that would look cool. I worked really hard on the poem too...

“Well, after we hit the switch on the lights, Ura and I went straight home, so we don’t know just how poetic you got after that.”

“Is that what happened?”

“Yes. We thought that the result of your confession... was something that should belong to just you and Orihara-san.”

“Hmph. I thought about recording it or whatever, but I figured I’d respect your privacy.”

“...Seriously, thank you.”

I really am blessed to have friends as great as these two.

“Even still, I felt like I was watching something super romantic from the sidelines. You and Orihara-san haven’t even known each other for two weeks, right?” Kana smiled with a touch of sarcasm.

“It’s just like Romeo and Juliet. Even the part about the forbidden love.”

“...Shut up.”

I didn’t have a real comeback, because he was right. Since that day—since meeting Orihara-san cosplaying as a high school girl on the train—it had only been two weeks. It felt like an unrequited love that went on for a long time, but we hadn’t even known each other for a month.

A long time ago, when I found out that Romeo and Juliet’s whole affair was only a little bit over two weeks long, I was like *what the hell?* However, I guess I can’t make fun of Romeo and Juliet anymore, can I? I’ve realized that it doesn’t matter how much time has passed when it comes to love.

“...Hey, Momo,” Kana suddenly said with a serious face.

“You’re probably really happy now that you’ve finally gotten to date the

person of your dreams... but from here on out is where it gets really tough, you know?”

“...”

“When it comes to love in the real world, the epilogue is the longest part.”

“I know.”

It doesn’t end with dating. It doesn’t end like a romcom where two people finally get together, time jumps forward, they get married, and it’s the final episode. Neither is it like a fairy tale where it wraps up with “And they both lived happily ever after.” This is where it begins. It all starts from now.

A fifteen-year-old and a twenty-seven-year-old dating definitely isn’t normal. From here on out I can’t even imagine the types of obstacles we’ll encounter. It’s my intention to be resolved, but the resolve of a kid like me might not mean much. Despite that, for the time being, I want to be happy and focus on enjoying this.

As I was losing myself thinking about the miracle of my love being requited, I found myself looking out the window. *Out there is the company that Orihara-san works at. Right now, she’s probably eating lunch. I wonder what kind of lunch she made today. Or maybe she’s enjoying lunch with her friend Yuki-san.* As I thought about these things, I pulled my smartphone from my pocket and took off the cover.

❤

“Orihara-san... what are you smiling about?”

As I was eating my lunch in the office rest area, I was called to by a passing Komatsu-san who had a slightly repulsed look on her face.

“Eh? W-Was I smiling that much?”

“Yes, a lot.”

“O-Oh...”

“You’re just staring at your smartphone cover... is it that interesting?”

“N-N-No, it’s nothing! It’s just that I was thinking, ‘It sure is a nice cover!’”

Even for me, that was a pretty weak lie. Komatsu-san had a puzzled look on her face, but she didn't pursue it any further. She then bought a drink from the vending machine and left.

I let out a deep sigh. *I have to get it together. I have to hide my relationship with Momota-kun from those around me. If it became public knowledge that I'm dating a fifteen-year-old high school student, there's no telling just how much I'd be frowned upon by society—more than anything though, it would cause trouble for Momota-kun.*

We're both in love with one another, but we have to keep our dating a secret. I can't get too overjoyed and let down my guard to people around me. Still...

"...Heh heh."

It's the day after we just started dating, so of course I can't help being overjoyed! I can't even count how many times I took off my cell phone cover and gazed at it. On the inside of my cover, where it touches the phone, I stuck the purikura that me and Momota-kun took when I was dressed as a high school girl.

Apparently, Momota-kun held onto the one I dropped that entire time, and yesterday we placed them on the insides of our phone covers. *I love how lovey-dovey it is. I'm so happy... It's embarrassing because it seems like something a middle schooler would do, but I don't even care. For someone like me who's fallen in love and gotten a boyfriend for the first time in their life, my love experience is on par with a middle schooler, after all.*

Momota Kaoru-kun. My boyfriend who's twelve years younger than me.

When I suggested putting the purikura on the inside of our cell phone covers, I said:

"When I was a student, there were a lot of girls who put purikura of their boyfriends on the inside cover of their phone's battery case. How about you, Momota-kun?"

"...Sorry. I've never used a flip phone."

"...Y-You're from the smartphone generation?!"

The worlds we live in are so different that occasionally I'm given tastes of shock like that—still, he managed to overcome those barriers and grabbed hold of my heart. *From here on out I don't know what's going to happen, but for now I want to enjoy this miracle.*

I found myself looking out the window. *Out there is the school that Momota-kun goes to. I wonder what kind of lunch he's eating today? Is he together with his friends Ura and Kana? Maybe I could make a lunch for him sometime?*

As I thought about these things, I wondered about how great it would be if he was thinking about me as well.

Chapter 4: They Both Will Walk Together

It was an early Saturday morning, and I was having a dilemma while sitting on my bed. *I feel like if I call at the exact promised time then that would be kind of annoying, but being too late or too early is out of the question. So, let's do it about a minute after then*—is what I thought I would do, but I realized it was three minutes past the promised time of 6 a.m., so I pressed my smartphone's call button in a panic. Before the first ring could even finish, she answered.

"H-Hello?"

Her voice was faintly high-pitched and sounded so cute. *Getting to hear such a cute voice in the morning; today is starting out great.*

"Good morning, Momota-kun."

"Good morning, Orihara-san. You answered really quickly."

"Eh... Y-You think so?"

"Could it be that you were already awake?"

"...Yes, actually. I woke up about 30 minutes ago."

"That's so early."

Orihara-san asked me to give her a wake-up call last night. I woke up 10 minutes early so I wouldn't oversleep, but it looked like she was the one who was the early riser.

"When I thought about how Momota-kun was going to wake me up... I got nervous."

"The morning call didn't really matter then, huh?"

"Th-That's not true!"

She refuted my half-joke in a panicked voice.

"If I didn't know that you were going to give me a phone call, I think I would have gotten careless and overslept. Besides..."

“Besides?”

“...I’m g-glad. Because I get to hear your voice in the morning.”

She sounded so embarrassed she could die, and hearing her I got so embarrassed I thought I could die. *Like, I mean... what is this? What is this situation? Is it okay for me to be getting these kinds of feels this early in the morning?*

I felt like I was going to go crazy from this indescribable embarrassment, so I tried changing the subject.

“Y-You have work today, right?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Having to go to work even on a Saturday sounds rough.”

“Yeah, it happens sometimes. But tonight I’m going to go drinking with Yuki-chan, so I have that to look forward to to get me through work!”

“Oh yeah, I remember you told me that.”

“And today you’re going to hang out with Kana-kun?”

“Yeah. I think we’re going to go shopping or something at the station building.”

I want to keep talking, but she probably still has to get ready, so I’d better hang up the phone.

“Well, I should be going.”

“Yeah. See you later.”

“Okay. Later.”

A few seconds of awkward silence later.

“...H-Hang up, Momota-kun!”

“You too, Orihara-san!”

“But... I don’t like being the one to hang up first... You go.”

“I don’t want to do it either.”

“Okay... together on the count of three, then?”

“G-Gotcha.”

“Here I go? One, two...”

“Three.”

Yet another few seconds of awkward silence later...

“You didn’t hang up at all!”

“Neither did you, Momota-kun!”

“This time’s for real.”

“Y-Yeah. It’s almost time to go.”

“One, two.”

“Three.”

With that, the phone call really did end. *This time I properly hung up, but I don’t know if she did. I mean you probably would the second time, right? Though I wonder if we should have done it again. I’d feel bad if Orihara-san hadn’t hung up when I did... What’s the correct etiquette for this situation?*

I let out a deep sigh and lay down on my bed. I was tired. Really tired. Of course it wasn’t that I was unhappy. It’s like... I was so happy that I was really feeling fatigued.

This is the third day of us dating. When we find a chance we phone and text each other, but I’m still not used to it. I get nervous from every casual text and it’s exhausting me mentally. I’m really tired, stressed, and emotional, which makes me happy all the more—

“Man... girlfriends are no joke.”

That was the best I could do with my poor vocabulary. As my head felt like it was going to reach its boiling point, I left my room and headed to the bathroom. I washed my face, brushed my teeth, and as I was using wax to fix my hair—

“What are you humming for? You’re kinda freaking me out.”

My older sister had come into the bathroom and started speaking to me through her reflection in the mirror.

“You sure are in a good mood so early in the morning.”

“Eh? Was I really humming?”

“You were. You were all like ‘hm hm, hmhm.’”

Really? I totally didn’t realize it. I got too excited from my phone call with Orihara-san and started acting out of character.

“Hey, I’m gonna use the mirror, so scoot.”

As my sister said this, she pushed me aside and stood in front of the mirror.

“What the hell? I was just about to get my hair the way I wanted it.”

“Why bother? No matter how much you mess with it, it still won’t make a difference.”

“I mean, I figured it’d be worth a shot, since I know how much work your makeup puts in for you...”

“Hah? What’s that?”

“...Nothing.”

She stared me down with her terrifying eyes, so I lowered my head while quickly taking a step back. Thus, in the blink of an eye, the bathroom was taken over by our home’s only daughter. I had no choice but to back off with a contemptuous look as my sister began to curl her hair with a warmed-up hair iron.

Momota Kaede, my big sister by four years. She goes to a college close by and is looking for—or should I say, thinking about starting to look for—a job. She has a tyrannical and does-as-she-pleases type of personality that I fear may be genetic.

She had long slitted eyes and plain features, but when she puts on some mascara, curls her hair, and applies a bunch of different makeup, she transforms into your everyday college student. The reason her makeup goes so well is probably because she has such unremarkable features, though she would

get mad if I said that.

“Hey, Kaoru.”

With a practiced hand she curled her hair and called out to me as I was about to leave.

“Did you find a girl you like or something?”

“...!”

My surprise completely showed in my demeanor.

“Wh-Why are you asking me something like that?”

“It’s just that lately you’ve suddenly been worrying about your hair and clothes and stuff. I see, I see, looks like you’re finally at that age, huh?”

“...Leave me alone.”

It was really embarrassing and pretty rough getting made fun of for something like this by a family member.

“Is the reason you’ve suddenly become so enthusiastic about helping Dad with work that you’ve got your eyes on some girl? He was so happy too. He was all, ‘Has Kaoru finally decided to be my successor?’”

“Being a high school student comes with a lot of expenses... that don’t have to do with women.”

I mean it actually completely does have to do with a woman.

“If you like, how about your big sis gives you some love advice?”

“You’re the last person I’d take advice from.”

I pushed off my big sister who was getting way too chummy and wrapping her arm around my shoulder.

“Hahaha. Well, if you get lucky and get a girlfriend, introduce her to me. Your big sis will take good care of her.”

As I felt my big sister’s laughter at my back, I closed the door to the bathroom behind me and let out a small sigh.

“‘If you get a girlfriend, introduce her to me,’ huh?”

Truth is I already have one. That introduction's gonna be a ways off, though. Orihara-san and I both want some time to prepare emotionally.

"I mean..."

I wonder how she'd react if she knew her little brother's first girlfriend was older than her, and twenty-seven years old at that?

❤

"Hey, Momo. This looks good, doesn't it? Try it on."

I was in a men's clothing store with Kana in the station building. He picked up a light jacket and handed it to me. Listening to Kana, I took off my jacket and tried it on. He nodded and appeared satisfied.

"Yep. That's nice. Jackets do look good on you, after all."

"I wonder. Don't you think it looks kind of plain?"

"It's not plain, it's chic. It's mature and looks good, I think."

"Hmmm... since I'm going to buy a whole outfit, I wanted to try on something like those cool kinda dirty clothes you've got on."

"...Dirty? This outfit is supposed to look grunge."

I wanted to compliment him, but it was clear on his face that my comment shocked him a little. Kana's outfit was a slightly oversized knit sweater and damaged jeans. It was a really vintage outfit, but it paired oddly well with Kana's air of pleasantness, and it gave off a nice look of unbalance. It was the kind of getup where you could tell he was trendy with just one look. Moving on from my failed attempt at a compliment, Kana gave a sigh and continued.

"This type of outfit only looks good on a handsome guy like me, so you should give up on it, Momo."

The fact that Kana can boldly call himself "handsome" without sounding detestable is amazing.

"You're tall and have broad shoulders, so I think it'd be best if you went for a more adult look. You have to think about what you're wearing when you're walking around with Orihara-san, after all."

I was caught off guard by his nonchalant comment.

“I don’t know what type of clothes she wears, so I can’t say too much. But I’ll be sure to choose some clothes for you that won’t embarrass her when you’re walking together.”

“...You’ve been thinking that far ahead?”

“Of course. When it comes to fashion, you have to be conscious of the person you’re with.”

He said it so matter-of-factly. Also, I get the feeling that the difference in our romantic experience is being thrust at me... When buying date clothes, I figured you just have to get something kind of trendy and you’re done, but... that’s right, you have to think about the person you’re with when you’re choosing. I was so caught up thinking about myself that I wasn’t thinking about that.

“Well, I said that like a know-it-all, but... even I still don’t have experience dating an adult. My oldest was a college student. I’ll give it my best shot and try to come up with something, but I’m not that confident, so don’t get your hopes too high, okay?”

“Don’t be so modest. You’re really helping out just by giving me advice like this.”

“I’m glad to hear you say that. Anyway, when is your date?”

“We still haven’t...”

“Huh?”

“We still haven’t... decided, like, when and where we’re going to have it.”

“...You came to buy clothes for a date you haven’t even planned yet?”

“Sh-Shut up. It doesn’t matter, right?”

“No, you’re right... it doesn’t matter. It’s just so pure how you’re getting so into this... Hahaha.”

He tried to keep it together, but in the end he couldn’t hold back his laughter.

“Hey now, don’t make fun of me, Mr. Popular. It’s my first time and I’m desperate.”

“Hahaha. Sorry, sorry, don’t get mad.”

“...How do you invite someone out on a date, anyway?” I inquired in the midst of my embarrassment. Hearing this, Kana was taken aback.

“How? You should just ask her, right? Like, to a movie, or dinner, or something. You two are already going out, so there’s nothing holding you back, right?”

“You say that, but I think about it a lot. She’s not a student like me who has a lot of free time; she’s an adult who works every day. Besides... when we do go on a date, we have to make it a place where we won’t run into anyone we know.”

Adult and student. A twenty-seven-year-old and a fifteen-year-old. We formally started dating, but unfortunately our relationship wasn’t one where we could just be bold and proudly walk outside together. *I can’t let it get out to my school or her company.*

“Maybe you’re overthinking it? If you did end up running into someone you know, you could just say ‘This is my friend’ or ‘It’s my relative.’ I’d think there’d be a ton of ways you could talk your way out of it.”

“Hmm. I guess so.”

“Although, holding hands, walking arm in arm, or just showing off how lovey-dovey you are is out of the question.”

“...”

He’s right. I mean that’s not the only reason I want to go on a date... Well, I’m lying. I do want to do that type of stuff that couples do. She is my first girlfriend after all.

“Having to hide from people while you’re dating, it’s kind of like you’re committing adultery.”

“...Come on, cut it out.”

Even if he was just poking fun at me, I didn’t have a strong comeback. I didn’t think we were doing something bad like adultery. However, there were always these feelings of guilty pleasure and anxiousness stuck inside my heart.

After parting ways with Kana and getting home, I received an invitation to play video games from Ura. “Let’s go hunting!” was what he said.

“You spent 10,000 yen on clothes? That’s so stupid. How could you be so wasteful with your money? Do you have any idea just how many gacha rolls you could do with 10,000 yen?”

“Gacha is what’s a waste.”

I mean, this kind of thing is up to the individual’s sense of value, so it’s probably useless arguing about it.

Even though we were playing together, it wasn’t like one of us was going to the other’s house. We were voice chatting while we were both playing the game at home.

“Gah, dammit! It didn’t drop any gems.”

“Oh, hey, I got another one.”

“Crap! Why only you?! We’re going to keep hunting until I get a drop!”

I responded “Roger” to his bellowing, and we gave the same quest another go. *Come to think of it, I wonder if Orihara-san is also playing this game? Considering her age, could it be that she started with the series’ first title on the PS2? First title... I started playing from 4, so that’s a world beyond my imagination. If I remember correctly, 1 doesn’t have my favorite weapon, the Switch Axe—*

“Hey, Momo!”

“Ah.”

I zoned out and aimlessly kept attacking, and before I realized it my character’s health dropped to zero. I could see my hunter being carted back to camp on the screen.

“You bastard, don’t just zone out like that!”

“Sorry, I got careless.”

“Geez. Were you thinking about Orihara?”

“H-How did you know?!”

“...So I was right,” Ura muttered, flabbergasted.

Oh no. I’ve dug my own grave.

“Good grief. Not only Kana, but now even you’ve turned into a worthless, lovesick fool. What’s more, it’s your first girlfriend. No matter what you do or who you do it with, you’re only thinking of her. I guess this means you’re in heat 24-7, 365. Blegh. Drop dead.”

“Hey come on, I said I was sorry. I’m heading back so just hold on.”

“...Hey, Momo.”

While bathing in Ura’s verbal abuse I was frantically preparing my hunter to head out again. Then suddenly Ura, in a very small voice, murmured:

“It’s not like I’m against you dating Orihara, you know. But... you know... it’s...”

His voice was so low I could barely hear it.

“Even if you have a girlfriend, make sure you still play with me, okay?”

“What? What did you say? Your voice is too low. I couldn’t hear anything.”

“Bah. I didn’t say anything.”

“Haha. Yeah, I know. I’m still going to play with you, so you don’t have to worry.”

“What...?! You could hear me! Idiot! Die!”

We kept going on hunts after that, but before the item we were looking for dropped, it was time for my part-time job, so I had to stop playing with Ura. I say part-time job, but I was basically just helping out my dad. For generations—well, not really all that long ago, since my grandfather started it—my family has been running a chiropractic clinic. My father is the second-generation owner.

The actual shop is next to my house. The ones who run it are my dad and two other employees, and though it’s not too large, we have a lot of returning customers, so business is going well. Last year we renewed the interior and exterior of the shop, and recently we got some new ultrasonic equipment. I

started actually helping out back when I got into high school, but lately I've been putting more effort into working.

If I'm being honest, it's because I wanted money. Dating is expensive, and in order to enjoy it to the fullest I wanted more cash. Probably any high school boy with a girlfriend would think the same thing, but in my case, my girlfriend is twelve years older than me. She works at a famous company and is a twenty-seven-year-old office worker. Naturally, I haven't asked her anything about how much she makes or how much is in her savings, so I don't know the specifics, but it wouldn't be unusual if she has a bit tucked away.

If I'm going to date a girlfriend like that—if I want to stand on equal footing with her, then no matter how much money I make it won't be enough. After only dating three days I was probably getting ahead of myself, but a vague sense of uneasiness and impatience drove me to manual labor.

I feel a little bit sorry for my old man who's happily thinking to himself, "My son has finally decided to take up the family business." However, it's not like I'm actually lying, so please forgive me, Dad.

After ending my part time job and eating a slightly late dinner, I returned to my room at around 8 p.m.—when suddenly I got a call to my smartphone from Orihara-san.

I wonder what's up. Did something happen? Well, even if it isn't anything special, I'm still glad she called. We are dating after all!

Could it be she's gonna tell me "I wanted to hear your voice"? Haha. Yeah, right. As if.

Well, it'd be mean to keep her waiting, so I should probably pick up soon. Good grief. Truth is, I'd like a little more time to myself, you know? Being a boyfriend and having a girlfriend sure is exhausting.

"Hello. What's wrong, honey?"

I jovially said that, but almost immediately I was overcome by an intense feeling of regret and embarrassment. *Geez... what am saying?! Even for me that's too gross. No matter how you look at it, I got way too cocky. I mean, with a face and personality like mine?*

“...”

The line was silent. *Oh god, did I mess up?! Is she creeped out?!* The shame and awkwardness were so great that a weird sweat started to burst from my whole body. However, in the next moment I was given a shock so great that it made me draw it all back in.

“Ah, I see, you’re more of that kind of guy than I expected, Hime’s boyfriend.”

The voice that finally came over the line was one that I had never heard before. It was peaceful and quiet with a touch of coldness. Also, it wasn’t Orihara-san.

“Eh... Wh-What?!”

In a panic, I checked the screen of my phone, and sure enough it said, “Orihara Hime.”

“From what I’d heard I thought you’d be a bit more straitlaced and innocent.”

“U-Um... with... whom am I speaking?”

“I’m Shirai Yuki. Orihara Hime’s friend.”

“You’re Yuki-san?”

“Oh, so you know about me?”

“I’ve heard about you a couple times from Orihara-san.”

Apparently, she’s been Orihara-san’s friend since high school, and she’s a beautiful wife and mother. *Come to think of it, wasn’t Orihara-san supposed to go out drinking with Yuki-san tonight?*

“So... Yuki-san, why do you have Orihara-san’s phone?”

“Well, you see the reason I’m calling you from your ‘Honey’s’ smartphone...”

“?!”

Her joking was going to make me faint from anguish. *I’ve really done it! The hell is this awkward situation?! Is this divine punishment for me getting too full of myself?!*

“Hey, are you listening? Listen properly, because I’m going to explain... I’m

gonna tell you all about why I'm holding onto your Honey Dearest's phone."

"...I'm sorry. Please, seriously, have mercy... you're killing me."

"Now now, don't die on me yet." Yuki-san playfully laughed.

"Your name is Momota-kun right? Is it possible for you to come here? The truth is... Hime is in a bit of a pinch."

❤

After another day of hard work, I finally finished everything and headed directly to the pub Yuki-chan and I agreed to meet at.

"Yuki-chan, cheers!"

"Cheers."

In our reserved private booth in the back of the restaurant, we brought together our glasses and made a toast. I was drinking Cassis Orange. At company drinking parties I usually read the room and order beer like everyone else, but to tell the truth I don't really like the taste. I'm not really good with sake or shochu either, so I like alcohol that tastes sweet like juice.

In the seat across from me Yuki-chan was just drinking beer from a stein. She's the type to start with beer and from there move onto enjoying shochu and sake. She's a heavy drinker, and it's a mystery how no matter how much she drinks, her snow white skin never turns red.

"Hime, you had work today too, right? It must have been tough."

"No, it was nothing. How about you, was Macaron-kun okay?"

"My husband is looking after him today."

"Ah, that's nice."

Yuki-chan's husband helps out a lot with raising Macaron, and even though she's a stay-at-home mom, Yuki-chan is able to regularly take time off.

There's probably some people who would say "I can't believe she's leaving her child at home to go drink," but those opinions will most likely change with the times, just like many families' home environments. Plus, it's really not something for someone else to criticize. I was really happy to be able to drink

with Yuki like this, so in my heart I was always thankful that she had such an understanding husband.

About the time she switched from beer to shochu, Yuki-chan asked me:

“So Hime, how’s it been?”

“How has what been?”

“That’s obvious, isn’t it? Your boyfriend.”

She spoke without changing her expression, and I felt like my cheeks that had already been getting warm from the alcohol got even warmer.

“What’s it like, having your very first boyfriend?”

“I-It’s nothing special. It’s totally normal!”

“Really? You haven’t been getting overly excited and doing anything weird, have you?”

“I haven’t, p-probably...”

“You haven’t been saying anything really annoying like ‘I don’t want to hang up first so you do it,’ or ‘Let’s both do it on the count of three,’ have you?”

“Th-There’s no way I’d say something like that. Th-Those types of girls are such a pain, you know...”

I totally said it though. Just this morning I said it a lot. Also, on the second time when we counted to three, Momota-kun hung up and I didn’t. I ended up feeling a little lonely even though it was my idea...

“Oh yeah, Hime. Do you have a picture of Momota-kun?”

“No. We’ve only been dating three days, so I haven’t had an opportunity to...”

As I was saying that, I remembered. *I do have a single picture, the purikura that we took together. Showing it is kind of, uh... I guess it might be okay if it’s Yuki-chan?* After hesitating to show it, I took off my cell phone case and gave it to her. Right now it was our only photo together.

“...Hime, you talked about how it was really embarrassing to parade around town cosplaying as a high school girl, but then you intentionally took a picture like this?” Yuki-chan said, looking slightly taken aback.

Oh god. I shouldn't have shown her, after all.

"What's more, you've got it stuck inside your phone case so you can look at it anytime you want. Could it be that you've totally awakened to—"

"I haven't awakened to anything! I don't want to look at my cosplay, I want to look at Momota-kun—"

Realizing what I was saying, I quickly closed my mouth, but it was too late.

"Oh my, talk about head over heels." Yuki-chan made fun of me with a wry smile.

God... how embarrassing.

Yuki-chan seemed like she was hesitant to speak and was searching for words while she looked at the purikura.

"Hmm... Even though I was the one who told you to show me, I'm having a hard time figuring out what to say. He's not handsome, but he's not ugly. He has the kind of face that's hard to comment on."

Her review was deadly honest. *In this type of situation, just be diplomatic and throw out a random compliment. That's all I'm asking.*

"Besides that... Hime, the position of your peace sign is low."

"What?"

The position of my peace sign is low? She gave me back my case, and I took another look at the purikura. Momota-kun was slightly bent forward, and next to him I was doing a peace sign in my high school girl cosplay. At the time I was really nervous, but I thought I may as well strike a cute pose since we were already doing it, and that peace sign was the best I could come up with. The position of it... was certainly a little low. It was on my torso and slightly to the side.

"It's low, but what's the matter?"

"Did you know? There's a theory about the creature known as woman—supposedly as they get older, the position of their peace sign gets lower and lower."

“...Huh?”

“In their teenage years, when they’re full of passion and energy, they put their peace signs right next to their faces... but as they go through their twenties and thirties, they try to take people’s attention away from their faces, and subconsciously place their peace signs in a position away from there.”

“...!”

I was at a loss for words. I took another look at the purikura and stared. *It’s so low...!*

Wait, yeah, I think I’ve seen this before! I feel like whenever my mom or aunt did a peace sign it was in this position! On their torso and slightly to the side!

“This is definitely the peace sign of an old lady.”

“A-An old lady’s peace sign?!”

“You have such a baby face that the high school girl cosplay doesn’t seem out of place, but your age shows in your natural mannerisms. It’s sad, really.”

“...”

I felt dazed from how big the shock was. *You’re kidding right...? When did I start subconsciously, naturally, with no hesitation start doing an old lady peace sign...?*

Speaking of, Momota-kun’s peace sign is so high! Without any hesitation, it’s just, right there next to his face! Is this a feat of youth?!

“D-Do you think that Momota-kun... thought anything about it? Something like, ‘Gross, this woman’s peace sign is so low. She acts so old’?”

“Who knows? Well, even if he did notice it, he couldn’t really point it out as a guy—no, as a human. A woman in her late twenties cosplaying as a high school girl, doing an old lady peace sign, and taking a purikura is so cringey you can’t say anything. Like, the very existence of such a person is some kind of humiliation play.”

Direct hit. Like a puppet who had just had its strings cut, I fell forward and hit my forehead hard on the table. However, more than my forehead, my mind was in extreme pain. *I could just disappear.*

With my supposedly humiliation play-level existence, I reached to the edge of the table and pressed the call button. When the waiter came, I showed them the menu and pointed to my order.

“...Give me this sake whose name sounds like a final boss.”

“Hey, Hime. Are you able to drink sake?”

“...It’s fine. Today I’m drinking. Drinking to forget it all.”

“You’re a total lightweight though...”

“It’s fine! I’m gonna drink!”

When my order came, I poured it to the brim of the sake cup and drank it all in one gulp. I can’t remember anything that happened after that.

❤

Not sure anyone besides me cares, but let me pause for a sec and explain what’s up with Orihara-san’s glasses. Apparently, she doesn’t actually need them.

“Yeah, my eyesight never gets any worse. I guess playing tons of video games all these years made my eyes stronger?”

I honestly couldn’t tell whether she was joking or not with that one.

Point is, her eyesight for both eyes is 20/10, and the glasses she wears are actually fake. She worries about her baby face, so she uses them to try and look a bit more mature. Apparently she only wears them during work and usually just takes them off at her locker when she gets ready to go home.

That’s why it was no surprise that when I saw her at the pub with her suit on, her glasses were off. Her glasses weren’t the only thing about her that was off though.

“Oh~ it’s Momota-kun~! Yoo-hoo!”

Riding to the pub on my bike took about twenty minutes. I told the person up front that I was here to pick up a friend, and they let me in. After they showed me to the girls’ private booth, I came upon Orihara-san, who started to chat me up while obviously sloshed.

“Hey, sit down Momota-kun. Sit right here! Sit right next to me!”

“Um, I...”

“Aww, come on, Momota-kun~ pull up a chair!”

She made me take a seat. *This is bad. You’re totally wasted, Orihara-san.* Her face was bright red and her eyes looked heavy, but she was oddly hyper.

Orihara-san, is this what you’re like when you’re drunk?

“Ehehe~ it’s Momota-kun, it’s Momota-kun... eheheh~”

She dragged her seat over and started to snuggle against me with a drunken smile. Our shoulders touched, and suddenly she was really close. *Hold up hold up hold up, we haven’t even held hands yet!*

While I was getting flustered by the unusually friendly Orihara-san, the woman sitting in the opposite seat smiled at me like she was trying not to laugh. “I’m sorry for calling you out here at this hour.”

This person seemed to be Yuki-san. Just like I’d heard, she was super pretty, and she definitely didn’t look like she had a kid. In contrast to the bright-red Orihara-san, her skin was white as snow.

“Your family didn’t say anything about you going out this late?” Yuki-san asked.

“No. My family is pretty forgiving when it comes to that sort of thing.”

My parents were apparently really strict with my sister, but I guess they weren’t worried about making me follow a curfew because I’m a guy. I just said I was heading out for a bit, Dad said ‘okay,’ and that’s all it took.

“Grrr, Momota-kun! Why are you only talking to Yuki-chan?! You’re cheating on me, you cheater!”

Orihara-san pouted and puffed out her cheeks. About thirty percent of me thought it was cute that she was so jealous, while the remaining seventy percent thought it was just kind of annoying.

“Geez, I might just blow my lid!” Orihara-san said, clearly very upset.

What should I do? I can’t take watching this anymore.

“You’ve fallen in love with Yuki-chan because she’s beautiful, haven’t you~?”

“That’s not true.”

“Really? Okay, who’s cuter, Yuki-chan or me?”

This extremely bothersome question was thrown at me as Orihara-san glared with scornful eyes. I took a quick glance over at Yuki-san who, with her eyes and a hand gesture, said *Don’t worry about me.*

“O-Of course it’s you, Orihara-san.”

“Really?! Really for real?!”

“Yes.”

“Do you love me? Do you really really love me?”

“Yes.”

“Ehehe~. Me too... I like you too. I love you, Momota-kun~”

After confessing her love with a sweet smile, she fell forward and grabbed onto me. I managed to catch her by reflex, but she slid down my body until her head rested on my thigh.

“Huh, wai—... Orihara-san?”

She didn’t answer; she’d already fallen asleep. Her breathing sounded cute as she slept.

“...It looks like Orihara-san fell asleep.”

“I’ll bet. That girl falls fast asleep when she gets drunk.” Yuki-san spoke like she was comforting a child as she brought her sake cup to her lips.

“Does Orihara-san always get like this when she’s drunk?”

“Well, normally she won’t get this drunk because she knows she’s a lightweight and she holds back. But today she messed with some sake she wasn’t used to.”

“Why did she do that?”

“I, uh, kind of overdid it when I was making fun of her.”

She laughed a little and brought the cup to her lips again. *This lady sure can*

hold her liquor...

I looked down and saw Orihara-san's cute face on top of my thigh, fast asleep. She didn't seem like she'd wake up anytime soon, but she kept squirming around and it tickled a little. Her face was on my thigh—in other words, close to my nether regions... *Calm down. Don't think about it. If you think any more about it, you'll go past the point of no return.*

Yuki-san suddenly spoke up like she had remembered something. "By the way, I haven't introduced myself yet, have I? I'm Shirai Yuki. I've been friends with Hime since high school."

"...Pleased to meet you. I'm Momota Kaoru. I have... had the pleasure of dating Orihara-san since three days ago."

For some reason, my greeting was as formal as it would have been if I were meeting my girlfriend's father. Yuki-san laughed cheerfully and took another drink.

"I'm sorry to ask, but could you take Hime home? I'll tell you Hime's address, so take a taxi. I'll pay for it."

She already told me over the phone that Orihara-san is drunk and that she wants me to take her home. Well, I guess this counts as boyfriend work. Something like this wouldn't happen if my girlfriend were in high school though...

"...Is it okay if I learn Orihara-san's address without her permission?"

"It's fine. You're her boyfriend, after all."

"Well, if you're sure..."

"I mean, I could take her, but... well, I just wanted an excuse."

"An excuse...?"

"I mean an excuse to call you here. I wanted to meet the prince who won over the Princess of Pushing Thirty."

After she got her licks in, she stared at me with intense curiosity.

"Who would've thought the two of you would actually start dating? I was

shocked when Hime called and told me about it."

Orihara-san said Yuki-san has been giving her advice this entire time. She probably has a good grasp of our situation.

"I told Hime that she should give up on you."

"You did?"

"Of course I did! There's no way I could support her being in love with a minor."

Her frank words made my heart ache. "...So, are you opposed to us dating?"

"Who knows?" She dodged my timid question.

"It's not like I don't have any thoughts on the matter, but I'm not going to butt in after the fact. It's not like my own love life has been all perfect romances I can brag about. In the end, I think the most important thing is how you both feel. Besides, what can you say to people who are already in love?"

She gulped down her drink and stared off into the distance. She then placed her empty cup on the table and looked straight at me.

"Take care of Hime. That girl's a good friend of mine. If you make her cry or anything like that, I'll friggin' stab you."

"...Okay."

I nodded firmly and Yuki-san smiled in satisfaction.

"Man, life sure is strange sometimes, isn't it? I can't believe this whole crazy situation started with my school uniform."

I guess Yuki-san's uniform was basically the quest-giving item that started Orihara-san's and my story arc... it's not really the kind of item I want to hold on to though.

"Um, actually, I've kind of been wondering this whole time. When you were drinking with Orihara-san, why did you have your high school uniform anyway?"

If they were drinking in the house she grew up in that would be one thing, but I heard that her current house was built a year ago. Why did she have her high school uniform in her new house with her child and husband?

“That’s...”

Until now she was calm and indifferent, but for the first time since we’d met Yuki-san hesitated to speak.

“The thing is... it would infringe on the privacy of my husband’s and my nightly affairs, so I really don’t want to explain.”

“Is that so...?”

You’ve pretty much explained the whole thing! I figured it out instantly! God, I shouldn’t have asked. I didn’t want to hear all that.

“When your husband is twelve years older than you, you have to take a lot of things into consideration. Like, lately he’s been having trouble in that area... Besides, after I had our child, I feel like he’s treating me less like a woman and more like a mother.”

“No, that’s fine! You really don’t have to explain specifics!”

“You don’t have to worry! We never went all the way when I was wearing that uniform, so please relax. I wore it thinking ‘You don’t know if you don’t try,’ but my husband was put off so I took it off right away. It didn’t seem to be his thing.”

“You really don’t have to say anything! I don’t want to hear about it!”

Shirai Yuki, Orihara-san’s friend. How should I put it? She’s a lady who possessed an indescribable fierceness. *Her husband must have it rough*, I thought as I mentally distanced myself from what I’d just heard.

❤

I can’t drink much, but I recover relatively quickly. Even though it only takes a couple sips of alcohol for me to get drunk and sleepy, if you give me an hour I’ll pretty much sober up. You might say my capacity for alcohol is low, but my metabolism is high; if you were to compare it to a video game, then it’d be like I have a small health bar, but I also have HP regen. Or something like that, I guess.

“—-san.”

My body was swaying and I felt totally out of it. I had this strange feeling like I

was hovering in mid-air, as though my feet weren't touching the ground. Despite that, my body was oddly warm, and not just because of the alcohol. It was the kind of warmth you'd feel when someone gently wraps their arms around you—

"I said, 'Orihara-san!'"

"...Wha—?"

I opened my eyes and saw a worried Momota-kun looking down at me.

"Thank goodness, you finally woke up."

"Momota-kun...? Why... Wh-What?! What's going on?!"

I finally became aware of my situation. My body was suspended in mid-air. Momota-kun had passed his arms under my shoulders and knees and held up my body. That's the reason it didn't feel like my feet were touching the ground.


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Is this what people call a “bridal carry”?!

“Wh-Why?! Why am I being carried by you?!”

“Wait, hold on... don’t squirm! I’ll put you down.”

He slowly and gently lowered me to the ground. *I’m kind of sad he put me down... No! That’s not the issue right now. I need to figure out what’s going on.*

I looked around, and I saw that we’re actually in the hallway in front of my apartment. It’s unit 303 on the third floor of the apartment building Maison Heim Heights. It’s a studio apartment for 60,000 yen a month. I’d been living here ever since I started my job five years ago.

“What’s going on here? Why are you in front of my apartment, Momota-kun...?”

“...You don’t remember anything?” he asked, sounding a little exasperated.

“Um... I distinctly remember up until the point I was drinking at the pub with Yuki-chan.”

I clearly remembered falling into despair after I had my old lady peace sign pointed out to me. *Why do I have to remember that...? I’d be happier if I didn’t.* After that, I tried to drown my sorrows by drinking a sake with a name that sounded like the last boss from a video game. From that point on I basically had no memory.

“Yuki-san called me. She said you were totally blitzed, so she wanted me to come pick you up.”

“So that’s what happened...”

“I had her tell me your address, and we took a taxi from the pub to here, but you wouldn’t wake up after we arrived, so... I didn’t have any choice but to carry you here.”

He seemed embarrassed telling me all that, but that was nothing compared to how embarrassed I felt. *On top of getting dead drunk, I was carried home... Just how much of a mess could I be?!*

“I’m sorry for bridal carrying you.”

“N-No, it’s fine... Actually, I’m sorry! I was heavy, wasn’t I?!”

“No, I wouldn’t say you were heavy.”

...‘wouldn’t say you were heavy’? What does that mean? Not ‘heavy,’ but still a decent load? Geez, why did things turn out like this? It’s not like I hate it, but the fact that he bridal carried me before we’ve even held hands gives me some really complicated feelings...

“I’m glad you woke up. We were kind of stuck out here since I don’t have a key to your place. I didn’t want to fish through your things to find one, either.”

“I’m so sorry, I’ve caused you so much trouble. Hey, why don’t you come on in and have something to drink?”

I can’t just cause all this trouble and be like ‘Okay, bye!’ I have to show some hospitality and make up for my blunder. I hurriedly pulled out my key and put it into the lock, but suddenly my hand stopped. I had just remembered: my room was an absolute disaster.

“S-Sorry, can you wait a minute? I’m just going to clean my room.”

It’s not that it’s really dirty... I think. I clean it regularly. Still, it’s not in a state that I want to show my boyfriend. I’m pretty sure the video games I was playing yesterday are scattered on the floor, and my underwear is still hung out to dry... Ah, wait, it’s my plain beige granny panties! I mean, it’s not like it’d be better if it were sexy underwear, but I can’t show him my granny panties no matter what!

“Wait for five... no, ten minutes. I’ll be done—”

I put my hand on the doorknob in a hurry, but my field of vision abruptly swayed. Suddenly I was dizzy and had a headache. My feet got tangled up and I lost my balance, but Momota-kun supported my shoulders.

“Please take it easy. You still haven’t gotten any of that alcohol out of your system, you know?”

“...Yeah. It seems that way.”

I’m perfectly conscious, but my head is still dizzy. Also, I’m really really tired. If I could, I’d just lay down here and go to sleep.

“I’m worried, so I’ll carry you to your bed.”

“N-No! Everything’s all over the place, so if I don’t clean up, um... well, you know.”

“...I get it.”

In response to my frantic appeal, Momota-kun gave a small sigh and nodded.

“I’ll go home without going inside your apartment, so please don’t force yourself to clean and just go straight to bed, okay? Understood?”

“...I understand.” I responded to him formally, as if he were the one older than me.

“I’m sorry, Momota-kun... I’ve really been a mess tonight.”

Geez, what am I doing? Just how pitiful can I be? I’m already twenty-seven years old, what the hell am I doing?

“I don’t always get this drunk, you know? I usually drink in proper moderation. Today I just accidentally drank too much, that’s all.”

“I understand. Besides, it wasn’t a big deal, so please don’t worry,” he said with a cheery smile.

Momota-kun really is kind. But right now that kindness is making my heart ache. The more splendid he is, the more pitiful I become.

I thought for a second, and I realized there was something I still had yet to ask him. “Um... hey. When I was drunk, did I say anything weird?”

“...Not really.”

“Why did you look away?!”

I did say something! I goofed up after all!

“Tell me, Momota-kun! What did I say?! What kind of bombshell did I drop?!”

“I told you i-it’s fine. You didn’t say anything terrible. It’s just...”

‘It’s just’? ‘It’s just’ what? What did I screw up?!

“...I was happy,” Momota-kun said, embarrassed.

Happy?

“Before, at the pub, you—you told me ‘I love you’ for the first time.”

“...What?”

“I think you said it because you were drunk and over-excited, but... well, even so, I was happy.”

“...”

I was at a loss for words. It wasn’t because I said ‘I love you’ while I was drunk; I was shocked by the fact that I hadn’t said it until then.

I hadn’t said “I love you” yet.

I thought the words so much in my heart that I totally believed I had said it sometime. *But thinking back on it, I probably haven’t actually expressed those feelings. Even though Momota-kun properly confessed his feelings to me...*

He built up the courage to put his feelings for me into words. I should have been more appreciative of just how much that proper expression of “I love you” made me happy and chased away my deep-rooted insecurities.

“Okay, I’m going home now. Please don’t overdo it and get some proper rest.”

“W-Wait!”

Just as he was about to leave, I grabbed onto Momota-kun’s sleeve and called to stop him.

“I love you, Momota-kun... I truly love you, so...”

I said it. I properly gave form to my feelings.

At first, Momota-kun’s face looked dumbfounded, but after that he quickly turned red.

“H-Huh? Why are you saying that now?”

“It’s just... I don’t like it. The first time I said ‘I love you’ I was drunk, and on top of that I don’t even remember saying it. So I want you to ignore what happened in the pub and make this ‘I love you’ our first one... if that’s okay.”

“...Hahaha.”

“Wh-What are you laughing about?!”

“No, it’s just... I was just thinking about how cute that was.”

“Gah, I don’t care anymore! I’m not counting this ‘I love you’ either!”

“Ah! I’m sorry. I won’t laugh anymore.”

“At any rate, that one just now was our first. You got it?!”

“Yes. Understood.”

Even though he said he wouldn’t, Momota-kun laughed a little. I ended up laughing too.

We told each other good night and ended our farewell. He told me to go straight to bed, but I leaned against the hallway’s handrail and gazed at Momota-kun until I couldn’t see him anymore.

“Oh... my face is warm.”

My whole body was flush, and the reasons were crystal clear: obviously there was the alcohol, but... also the fact that I loved my boyfriend so much. A lot happened today, and I suddenly became tired. However, somehow it seemed like tonight I would sleep well.

Hime



ORIHARA HIME

27 YEARS OLD

Height: 156 cm
Birthday: December 3rd
Blood Type: B

Favorite Food:

Anything and
everything donburi

Weak Point:

Flick input

(Still isn't able to do it, since she grew up typing on flip phones.)

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Chapter 5: Their First Sleepover

Honestly, there was one regret I had from that day when Orihara-san got drunk and I took her home. Frankly, I had wanted to go inside her apartment. I tried to show off and play the gentleman by saying “Today I’ll go home,” but on the inside I was really curious.

Just what kind of apartment is Orihara-san living in? I want to know. I really want to know. Is it a girly kind of room, or a game addict’s kind of room? Is it true that girls’ rooms smell nice like they say in manga? ...Even though she’s a girl, I wonder if she’s hiding any porn books... Don’t they call those types of things “Ladies’ Comics”? My curiosity knew no bounds.

I think the best choice was not forcing Orihara-san to let me in and just going home, but... I really did want to go inside. If I went inside her apartment, I thought that there’d be, you know... a lot of happy and embarrassing moments for us to share.

A few days passed as I stewed in my regrets. But then, in a way beyond my expectations—in a way beyond anything I could have ever possibly imagined—an opportunity to go to her apartment presented itself.

“What?! Momota-kun, you’ve played *Kirby Super Star*?!”

It happened on a Thursday night, during one of the phone calls we always make whenever we have a spare moment. Orihara-san had puzzlingly latched onto a random comment I made.

“H-How?! How have you ever been able to play it?! That’s a game for the SNES, you know? The one where you blow into the cartridges before you play, you know? Your generation doesn’t know about it, right?!”

“I don’t know about the SNES version, but there was a remake of it for the DS. That’s the one I played.”

“Oh... yeah, that’s right. Now that you mention it, I remember that remake! I played it too! The DS version is great, you never just randomly lose your save

data.”

“...The SNES version is different?”

“Umm... yeah. But sometimes it’s a good thing. Since your save data will suddenly disappear, you can be like ‘Okay, I guess I’ll just play the game over from the beginning’ and enjoy the game over and over again.”

I don’t really understand that feeling. I guess this is what you’d call a “generational gap.”

“Momota-kun, we should play *Kirby Super Star* together sometime!” Orihara-san said, really excited. “Actually, I recently bought the SNES Classic Edition! Do you know about it? It has a bunch of SNES games built into it, so you can play them all just by getting a single console!”

“Oh yeah, I’ve heard about that. I’ve seen people calling it ‘flypaper for the older generation.’”

I realized my mistake as soon as I’d said it.

“...Yeah, that’s right. I’m one of those older people who walked right into the trap.”

Sure enough, you could hear how depressed she became over the phone’s receiver.

“Anyway! Let’s play some games together, Momota-kun!”

Wow, just as I was thinking of what to say to make her feel better, she recovered on her own. Just how much does she want to play video games?

“Let’s do it together at my house.”

“At your house?”

“Yeah! On top of apologizing for the other night, please let me show you some hospitality. This time I’ll get everything ready so that it’s okay for you to come inside, Momota-kun.”

“If that’s the case, then I’d be happy to come over.”

“Yay!”

I can hear how she’s actually happy. I’m the one who wants to say “Yay!”

honestly. The two of us playing video games at Orihara-san's house seems so fun!

"When it comes to two people playing games together, you really can't beat sharing one screen and being shoulder-to-shoulder, after all. Nowadays games have online play and matchmaking that let you play with your friends while you're all at home, but for someone from my generation that kind of thing feels so distant."

Honestly, I feel what she's saying even from my younger perspective. I play games with Ura a lot, but we've been playing over the internet more and more lately. Nowadays it's like, "Let's play some games dude" followed by "Sure, I'll call you when I get home." People don't really go over to their friends' houses to play games that much anymore.

"So, Momota-kun. When do you want to hang out?"

"I'm good anytime."

"Okay, then tomorrow! Let's do it tomorrow!"

"Tomorrow... that's pretty sudden. Tomorrow I have school and you have work."

"We can just meet up in the evening!"

"I'm okay with that, but... we won't really have a lot of time."

"You should stay the night!" she said, unfazed and excited.

What? Stay over?

"Since the day after tomorrow is Saturday, it's okay if you stay over, right? Oh, wait, are you the type who doesn't like sleeping away from home?"

"Um, no... That's not really an issue, but..."

"Really? I'm glad! Okay, then tomorrow it is! That's a promise!"

That's the way the phone call ended. I sat down on my bed and couldn't move for a while. *C-Calm down*.

Calm down. Let's calm down. I should calmly analyze the situation. First, Orihara-san and I are dating. Yes, we're dating. We are a couple, and we are

together. My super cute girlfriend is Orihara Hime. Just now, that girlfriend invited me to her home. Not to her parents' home, the home she is living in by herself. Furthermore... she said it was okay if I stayed over. In other words, is this "that" kind of situation?

"This is absolutely 'that' kind of situation," Kana declared without any hesitation.

I wasn't making any progress just thinking about it by myself, so I got in touch with my friend who knew the most about the relationships of men and women.

"Do you really think so?"

"Of course I do. Whenever you hear that a man and a woman who are dating 'spent the night together,' you think that they did that stuff, don't you? What else could it possibly mean?"

"...Yeah, but, there's a possibility that Orihara-san genuinely just wants to play games."

"No, there isn't," Kana asserted. "Well, I've never met Orihara-san, so it's not like I have any proof, but... if a girlfriend invites her boyfriend over to her house and tells him to stay over, nine times out of ten it means she's okay with that kind of thing."

"..."

"If Orihara-san were a teenager, there would be a possibility she just wants to play video games, but she's twenty-seven years old, right? She's already a grown woman. I'd like to think that she understands these types of unspoken rules between men and women."

She's an adult woman, twelve years older than me. She has twelve more years of life experience. I've never specifically asked, but... she might have also had a boyfriend in the past.

If she has had a boyfriend before, it would be odd if she didn't realize what she was implying. Which means, in other words—that phone call really was that kind of invitation after all...?

“...B-But she and I haven’t even been dating one month, dude. I mean, I feel like it’s too soon for that type of thing.”

“Really? If you both consent to it, I think it’s just fine. If you ask me, just because you’re doing it earlier than other people might doesn’t mean your feelings for each other aren’t real.”

“...Hmm.”

“I have to say, I am jealous. Your girlfriend lives by herself. When you’re a couple in high school who want to do that sort of thing, you normally have a hard time finding a place to do it. You can’t do it at home because your family is there. Hotels cost money, and on top of that you can’t go inside hotels wearing your school uniform. I’ve also had a lot of trouble with—”

As the conversation gradually became more graphic, I listened absentmindedly while I ran a simulation of tomorrow night through my head. Excitement and unease rushed through my body, and I felt an uncomfortable sweat break out all across my skin.

“Momo. In closing, let me say this: no matter what you do, use protection.”

❤

“Hey, Yuki-chan, listen! Tomorrow night, I’m going to play video games with Momota-kun! We’re going to play *Kirby Super Star*! Momota-kun said that he’s played it before! Also, he’s going to stay the night! The two of us are going to play games all night long! Oh wow, I’m so excited! I haven’t stayed up all night playing games with someone since elementary school! Is it okay for me to be this happy? Boyfriends are awesome!”

It was after I had finished my phone call with Momota-kun. In my state of boundless enthusiasm, I made a phone call to Yuki-san. I really had to let someone know just how excited I was. I wondered if it’d be a bother, but apparently Macaron had just gone to bed, so she answered the phone.

“I’m so looking forward to it. I was glad I bought the Classic, but I didn’t have anyone to play it with. The SNES is something you should play together, after all! All right, we’re going to do it till the sun comes up! We’re going to get all the treasures in ‘The Great Cave Offensive’!”

“...”

Yuki-chan didn’t say anything. She was silent the entire time.

“What’s wrong? Why aren’t you saying anything? ...Oh, could it be that you wanted to play the Classic with me, Yuki-chan? S-Sorry... You don’t really play video games, so I didn’t invite you. If you wanted to play, all you had to do was tell me—”

“...Hime. Do you understand what you’ve done?”

Yuki-chan’s voice was unusually heavy, and she sounded like she was really pushed to her wit’s end.

“What? Did I do something?”

“What do you plan on doing tomorrow night with Momota-kun?”

“Play games.”

“Yes, well, starting off with video games isn’t a bad idea. Then, what are you going to do after that? It seems like he’ll stay the night, so what are you going to do when it gets late?”

“Play games.”

What else would we do aside from play games? Is Yuki-chan some kind of idiot?

“...Hold up. I’m going to lower the difficulty of this girl talk to a level you can understand.”

She’s being so ambiguous. Just what is she trying to say?

“Hime. Do you know how babies are made? When a wonderful thing happens with a man’s and a woman’s equipment, inside of the woman’s body a baby—”

“Why are you bringing this up?!”

“Oh, sorry. I brought the difficulty down a little too low. I’ll raise it a little.”

It seemed like she was trying to make some fine adjustments. *I feel like it’s really rare to see her this bewildered.*

“Look here, Hime. You and Momota-kun are dating, right?”

“Yeah, but...”

“You two are going out. You’re dating. There’re a lot of issues like your age difference and social position, but essentially, you’re both in a normal relationship. You understand that much, yes?”

She deliberately and politely confirmed the obvious. *Hmm. I don’t get it. Just what is she trying to say?*

“Hime. Calm down and try to think about it carefully. If a man and a woman in a relationship spend the night together, even you should understand what that means, right?”

“...”

I tried thinking about it carefully like I was told. I cooled off my brain that was about to boil over from my passion for games and thought it over. I thought and I thought—and finally, I realized the gravity of the situation.

“Whaaaaaaaaaaat?!” I screamed despite it being nighttime.

Sorry, neighbors!

“You finally got it, huh?”

“Yes, um, wait... what?! It’s ‘th-that’ kind of thing?!”

“Yes, it’s ‘that kind of thing.’”

“In other words, um... ‘you-know-what’?”

“Yes, it means you’ll have intercourse.”

“D-Don’t just say ‘intercourse’ like it’s nothing!”

“I thought you might think it’s more polite than calling it ‘sex.’”

“It’s not polite at all! If anything, it sounds dirtier that way!”

“...Well, saying ‘you-know-what’ over and over again is too cringey for me, so cut me a little slack, will you?”

My mind fell into a panic. *Oh nooooo! Why, why, why?! Why did it end up like this?!*

“Hold on. Just hold on... so I basically invited Momota-kun over for sex?!”

“If you think about it objectively, yes.”

“N-No! I didn’t mean to do that at all! I just wanted to play games together, and only thought that because the next day is a day off, he might as well spend the night...”

“Even if that wasn’t what you intended, if you asked basically anyone what’s gonna happen when a man and a woman who’re dating spend a night alone together, they’d tell you that couple are going to get intimate that evening.”

C-Certainly. That’s true. Even with no romantic experience, after living twenty-seven years I was able to understand basic romantic social norms. But today that basic knowledge didn’t manage to come to mind at all. I was so happy knowing I’m going to be able to play video games with Momota-kun that I didn’t think about anything else.

I was filled with an intense feeling of shame. *What have I done?! It’s as if I told Momota-kun, “Tomorrow night, let’s do it!” I was so assertive! I was so excited! I’m so embarrassed! I’m a pervert!*

“Wh-What should I do, Yuki-chan?”

“‘What should I do?’ You two are going to ‘do it till the sun comes up’ aren’t you? That’s what you told me earlier, right?”

“Don’t make fun of me! I’m in really, really big trouble!”

“Big trouble or no trouble, I don’t think there’s anything left for you to do except do it.”

“No way... That type of thing is still too soon for us.”

“You’ve been dating for almost two weeks, right? If there’s ever a good time, I’d say this is it. Surely even someone like you has thought about doing this kind of thing before, right?”

“Wha...”

If I said I wasn’t thinking about it, I’d be lying. I have embarrassing fantasies that I can’t tell anyone else all the time. However, I can’t help it! It’s my first boyfriend! I finally got one after twenty-seven years on this earth! Of course I’d think about a lot of dirty stuff!

“Hime, I know you’re thinking about a lot of dirty things—but Momota-kun is thinking ten times that.”

“‘Ten times’?! That much?!”

“There’s no doubt about it. You can’t underestimate the sex drive of a teenage boy. They’re like monkeys.”

“Ten times”... Is that referring to rate? Level? Both? If Momota-kun is thinking about dirty things at ten times my rate and ten times my level... he’s a total pervert!

“Considering you invited him to spend the night, Momota-kun is definitely under the false impression that you invited him over for sex. Right now, he’s probably so aroused that he can’t focus on anything else.”

“No way—wait. Um... it’s not like I don’t want to do it with Momota-kun, it’s just so sudden, I’m not mentally prepared...”

It serves me right, though. Man, why did I say tomorrow? Everything is Kirby Super Star*’s fault. The fact that it’s a beloved masterpiece that transcends generations is where the real problem lies.*

“Well... If you were to say no, I’m sure Momota-kun wouldn’t force the issue. He’s nice and really does seem like he cherishes you.”

“Th-That’s true. If I explain that it’s all a mistake—”

“However, Hime,” Yuki-chan said in a serious tone.

“It’d be one thing if a teenage girl did it, but if a twenty-seven-year-old woman invited a man over to her house and said, ‘No, that’s not what I meant’ right as things were heating up—well, if I were that guy, let’s just say I’d be flipping out.”

“...”

I truly had no idea what to do. As I sat there dumbfounded, I could hear a baby crying over the phone.

“Oh, sorry. It sounds like Macaron woke up.”

“W-Wait, Yuki-chan! What should I do?! Don’t leave me!”

“You planted the seeds, Hime. Reap what you’ve sown.”

“Egh...”

“Who knows, depending on how you play your cards, tomorrow you might be the one having a seed planted in them.”

“This isn’t the time for jokes!”

“Well, as someone who’s been around the block once or twice, let me give you one piece of advice: no matter what, use protection.”

❤

I blinked, and suddenly it was time for the big night. *It’s all happening so fast, I’m not emotionally prepared at all. I had my hands full getting ready for the sleepover and, uh... family planning*.

“...Let’s calm down.”

I stood in front of Maison Heim Heights Apartment 303. I momentarily pulled back the hand I was going to push the doorbell with and took a deep breath. *Let’s calmly think about this, one more time. Kana said all that, but... it’s Orihara-san we’re talking about. She’s a little different from your normal twenty-seven-year-old, or should I say, she’s a little bit of an airhead and has a few immature tendencies. I wouldn’t be surprised at all if she wasn’t thinking about doing any adult stuff and genuinely wanted to play video games.*

Yeah, that’s probably what it was. I was at my wit’s end cramming all night for nothing. I even made that embarrassing trip to the pharmacy, but no use complaining. We don’t need to rush things. We should just go at our own pace.

Having calmly thought it over and regained my composure, I once again reached my hand to the doorbell. This time I pushed it and Orihara-san opened the door.

“W-Welcome.”

“...”

I was speechless as my thoughts evaporated and my body completely ceased to function. I felt my soul leaving my body as I stood shocked in the entranceway.

“G-Good evening. I was waiting for you.”

She gave me a normal greeting, but I wasn’t able to do the same; I was too busy trying to force my nearly departed soul back into my body. Once I regained control of my senses, I hurried inside the apartment and closed the door behind me in a panic. I wanted to close it as soon as possible because I didn’t want anyone to see Orihara-san while she looked like this.

“Wh-Why are you dressed like that, Orihara-san?”

The outfit that Orihara-san was wearing as she welcomed me in was see-through. At a glance, it looked like a frilly, black camisole... and the fabric was so thin that it barely hid anything. I had a full view of the underwear she was wearing underneath. *Is this what you’d call a ‘babydoll’?*

“Wh-What? Is s-something wrong?” Orihara-san’s face was bright red and she sounded incredibly stiff.

“No, um, it’s just that...”

“I-I always wear this when I’m at home.”

Her acting was terrible. *She always wears this...? As if! Just who is she trying to fool?*

The Orihara-san standing in front of me was overwhelmingly voluptuous and attractive. With how thin the babydoll’s fabric was, the curves of her body that were normally hidden were now in full view. Her body was like a siren song that could drive any man on the planet crazy. The delicate contours of her pale neck, her slender shoulders, and her subtly defined collarbone left a dainty impression from the chest up; nonetheless, you could hardly say the same for the colossal breasts that were jutting out just below. They had tremendous volume, and the cleavage between them was unbelievably deep. With even the slightest of movements they swayed to and fro immodestly.


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Of course, it wasn't just her breasts that were attractive. Her lower body, with the sensual curves of her waist and the plumpness of her thighs, was so wonderful that it's difficult to put into words—point is, everything about her body was first-rate, and that downright diabolical body was drawing my eyes in like a magnet.

"O-Okay, Momota-kun! Please don't hesitate to come in," Orihara-san said in a shrill voice while her face was comically red.

She walked down the hallway to her room. Since she turned her back to me, I caught sight of the beautiful line of her back and got to see her underwear from behind— *It's a thong.*

"..."

I had a sudden urge to crush my own eyes and burn this image into my retinas as the last thing I would ever see in my whole life, but I was somehow able to resist. At that moment, I was sure of it. *The theory of "Orihara-san just wants to play video games" has been completely debunked. I'm not so stupid that I could have all this laid out in front of me and not realize what's going on. There was no way that this outfit that made her look like lust incarnate was just loungewear. Right now, I am definitely being seduced.*

Orihara-san is totally raring to go! All that's left is for me to brace myself to cross the finish line.

❤

Ooooh nooooo! Th-This is so embarrassing! I could feel on my back—well, mostly on my butt—a red-hot gaze as I did my best to fake being calm. On the inside I thought I was going to die from embarrassment.

I'm going to die. I'm really going to die. Momota-kun is looking at me so hard! He's just staring! Is everything okay?! I haven't messed up?! He isn't cringing?! He isn't thinking, "What is this woman doing at her age?" If I turn around, he's still going to be there and won't have gone home, right?! He's looking at me so much because... he's interested in my body... which means, everything is fine? I w-w-wonder if he likes it...?

After I got off the phone with Yuki-chan the night before, I got on the internet

in a panic, did a lot of research, and made a lot of purchases. *Time's up, I'm at my wit's end, and I don't really know what I'm doing anymore... but I can't go back now. Having shown off this outfit, I'm already at the point of no return. All that's left is to go all the way...!*

"W-Well, please come in."

After passing through the short hallway, the two of us finally entered my room. *What should I do...? I'm already feeling dazed. I feel like I've used up all my mental strength just walking from the entrance to my room. It's like wearing this comically see-through babydoll is sapping away my dignity. Is it a cursed item or something?*

"So, this is your room, Orihara-san... It's cute. I mean, it looks so girly."

"R-Really?"

My response was calm, but I lightly clenched my fists. *Phew, I did it, he complimented me.* Normally, my room has video game controllers and strategy guides strewn all over the floor and isn't girly at all, but yesterday I bought a lot of things girls these days would probably decorate their room with, like some nice indirect lighting and aromatherapeutic oil.

"For now, have a seat." I urged him to sit down on a cushion, and I took a seat next to him.

"O-Okay."

Alright. The main event starts now. Now I just have to make sure everything goes according to the plan I spent all last night simulating!

"Momota-kun, go take a shower."

"This soon?!"

Huh? Did I say something wrong?

"Wh-What's wrong Momota-kun? You really don't have to hesitate."

"No, no, no—this is weird! Why do I have to take a shower three seconds after entering the room?!"

He was making total sense. However, I couldn't give in just yet. *I mustn't*

deviate from my plan.

"F-For the time being, just go shower! I got you a towel and everything!"

"But... um, the truth is..." Momota-kun was flustered and spoke hesitantly.

"I... took a shower at home."

He took a shower at home?! You cleaned your body before you came to your girlfriend's house? Just how bad do you want to do it, Momota-kun?! He's really excited for this! I mean, yeah, I suppose he would be. Oh, actually, his shampoo smells pretty nice, doesn't it?

"Never mind that, just get in there! It's not like showering again is going to hurt you. Make sure you wash yourself all over!"

"S-Sure..."

By forcing him, I managed to successfully get Momota-kun to go to the bathroom. *All right. It's time for the next phase of the plan.*

❤

I took off all my clothes in the changing room, and then I entered the bathroom. I borrowed the towel prepared for me and wrapped it around my waist. *This'll be my second shower of the day.* The bathroom was completely normal, but when I thought about how Orihara-san bathes and washes her body in here every day... an indescribable feeling welled up inside of me.

"...Guess I'll shower, just to be thorough."

Even though I washed myself way too much at home, I'll properly wash my whole body once again. I mean, I did sweat a lot after seeing how hot Orihara-san looked in that babydoll.

Um, how does this go again? I think I read that you'll get laughed at if you go as far as washing your head? And you start off by gargling with antiseptic mouthwash and then warm the lotion bottle up in the bathwater—wait, no, that's wrong. That's what happens when you're in a brothel. Of course, I've never been to one, but yesterday on the internet I studied that type of thing as well... What the hell was I studying that for?

Unable to think straight, I reached my hand out for the nearby body wash—

and that's when it happened. I heard the door being pulled open behind me, and what was waiting for me when I turned around was a goddess wearing only a bath towel.

❤

Naturally, I'm not the only one who's nervous. Ever since I opened the door to the apartment, I was made painfully aware of just how nervous Momota-kun is... Well, I think me wearing that ridiculous babydoll was one of the reasons for that, but... that's probably not the only reason. Like me, he's thinking all about that *kind of stuff. He's fantasizing about the adult activities that we'll do and feeling like he'll be crushed by the tension and anxiety of it all. If what Yuki-chan said is true and a teenage boy really is ten times hornier than I am—right now Momota-kun is probably suffering ten times as much as me. It's likely his tension and anxiety are ten times that of what I'm feeling. In that case, I have to do something about it. I have to take the lead, because I'm an adult and I'm twelve years older than him—*

"O-Orihara-san?!"

It was easy getting naked. I was pretty much nude in that outfit to begin with. I took off the babydoll and my underwear, wrapped a bath towel around me, and opened the door to the bathroom... and that's when I saw Momota-kun naked. He was sitting on a stool in the bathroom with only a towel placed on his thighs. His important parts were barely hidden, but pretty much everything else was on full display.

My brain instantly felt like it was going to reach boiling point. The last time I'd ever seen a man naked was when I was a little kid, and it was either my dad or my grandpa.

"I'll w-wash your back." I felt like I could faint at any moment, but I concealed my embarrassment and offered to help him get clean. I was doing my best to act like an adult woman.

"Wh—...? N-No, it's fine! I'll do it myself..."

"Y-You don't have to be shy."

"It's not about being shy..."

“Never mind that, just show me your back!”

Momota-kun hesitated at first, but at my firm insistence he went quiet and turned his back to me.

I gulped. In front of me was the big, wide back of a boy. I extended a shaking hand to the bottle of body wash. I squirted out the white liquid and rubbed it into a lather in my hands. Then I ran my hands over his back.

“Hey... Wh— You’re using your hands?!”

“You d-didn’t know, Momota-kun? In this type of situation, washing directly with your hands is normal.”

Probably. At least, that’s what I read on the internet. “Guys like it when you touch them directly” it said. However, since I’m not using a towel, the body soap isn’t really foaming up, and I’m just spreading slimy white liquid over his back. I could feel how warm his body was through my palms, and my heart was racing at an alarming rate. On top of that—

“...”

Momota-kun is staring at me really hard through the mirror in front of him... He probably thinks that because it’s through the mirror I can’t tell, but he’s so obvious. I could feel his burning gaze pierce my body through my towel. I felt dizzy as my body became hot, but at the same time I felt a pleasant tingling sensation. I was so embarrassed I could die, but... I was a little happy. *My body is making Momota-kun nervous—*

“O-Okay. I’m done with your back.”

“F-Finally...”

“Now it’s time for the front.”

“What?!”

Momota-kun went from breathing a sigh of relief to yelling in horror.

“Come on. I’ll wash your front, so face this way.”

“No, no! The front is definitely a problem!”

“It’s f-fine! I’ll do everything! You don’t have to worry about anything

Momota-kun, so leave it all to me!”

The truth was it wasn’t fine. I was so embarrassed I felt like my head was going to explode. However, I struggled to laugh, made a false show of courage, and did my best to smile erotically. *I have to do this right. I have to properly take the lead.*

“There’s no need to be embarrassed, okay? When you’re dating, this type of thing is normal. So, hurry up and—”

“—Orihara-san.”

Momota-kun turned around. Instead of through the mirror, our gazes met directly.

“Are you... forcing yourself to do this?”

His eyes were totally different from the ones that were filled with desire just a moment ago. Now he seemed like he was only staring because he was worried about me.

“Wh—... N-No, I’m not forcing myself to do anything.”

“But you’ve been shaking this whole time, from your hands to your voice.”

“That’s not true! I’m totally fine.”

I firmly denied it while extending my hand to the towel hiding Momota-kun’s lower half. I tried to pull it off, but right before I could my hand was stopped.

“P-Please stop.”

“I said leave everything to me! I’m fine with this! I mean, I’m used to it. I didn’t say it before, but I have a lot of experience with this kind of thing. I’ve had tons of men eating out of the palm of my hand because of my technique!”

Of course, that’s a lie.

“Actually, just about a month ago I washed a man.”

This was kind of true. Well, the person I washed was Macaron-kun. When I went over to hang out at Yuki-chan’s house, I put him in the tub and washed his body. Macaron-kun was so adorable. His little wee-wee was so small and cute, it was like a flower bud.

“Orihara-san...”

Momota-kun looked at me nervously. I continued to be stubborn and avoided his eyes.

“Momota-kun, you don’t have to worry about anything! I’m really experienced, so if you just leave it to me—kyaa!”

As we were both pulling on the towel, my foot slipped on some body soap that had fallen onto the floor.

“Watch ou—”

Momota-kun quickly reached out his hand to catch me.

“Are you okay? Did you hurt your—?!”

“I’m fine, tha—?!”

We realized it simultaneously. The towel that had been concealing Momota-kun’s lower half and the towel I had wrapped around me had both fallen off from the impact, and there was no longer anything hiding our bodies. We were facing each other at close range while we were as naked as the day we were born. *I should be ready. I should be completely ready to show off my junk and look at his, but—*

“Ah... aah...”

I was feeling the embarrassment of being seen naked by a guy for the first time and the shock of looking directly at his nether regions. Also, I caught sight of his fiercely engorged manhood, standing tall like a symbol of his youth. It wasn’t some cute thing adorably dangling off his lower body like a one-year-old boy’s. This was a dangerous weapon made of flesh, exposed and standing tall like it were meant to pierce the heavens. Seeing this, the willpower I had only barely been managing to muster the entire time crumbled in an instant.

“Kyaaaaaa!”

As soon as I saw it, I pushed him away with all my might. His large body fell over in the bathroom and the back of his head hit the opposite wall hard.

“Ah! Ow...”

“Ah...”

Suddenly, I could feel the blood drain from my face. My body that had been feeling dizzyingly hot instantly became cold. I felt my vision begin to fade to black. As soon as I had done it, I ran out of the bathroom. Without putting my clothes and underwear back on, I all but flew out of the changing room as well. I jumped on my bed and hid myself by wrapping myself up in my futon. I knew that there probably wasn’t a point in hiding in a place like this, but I couldn’t help myself. My world became pitch-black and suffocating, and all I could do was feel ashamed.

I blew it. I failed, failed, totally failed. This whole thing has been one massive blunder. I thought I was prepared and thought I’d carefully planned it all out, but the moment things deviated I panicked. Even though I pranced around in that babydoll, washed his back, and showed how much I was in the mood—in the end I totally rejected him. Even though I acted like I was a seductive older lady, at the last minute I screamed and pushed him away. No matter how you look at it, I’m horrible.

I didn’t do it right at all. Even though I’m older, even though I was supposed to have my act together, I didn’t do it right at all. It’s my fault that everything got this way today. I’m so embarrassed and ashamed of myself. I’m pathetic. I want to disappear—

“Orihara-san...”

After a little while, I heard Momota-kun’s voice. It sounded like he had come out of the bathroom. I felt him come close and I firmly clenched the futon around me. *I’m so embarrassed and sorry that I can’t face him—*

“...I’m sorry. Your head hurts, right...?”

“I’m okay. All I did was bump my head a little...”

“—It’s my first time,” I said without facing him and still wrapped up in my futon. “You see, I’ve... never dated a boy until now. Momota-kun, you’re the first boyfriend I’ve ever had. Before, I said that I’m experienced and used to it... but that’s all a lie. In twenty-seven years, I’ve never had a boyfriend once. So... I don’t have that type of experience either.”

Like a dam bursting, the truth spilled out.

“When I invited you over yesterday, I wasn’t thinking anything deep about it. I just thought it would be fun if we played a lot of games together and just said ‘You should stay over.’ I totally didn’t understand what it meant for a man and a woman to spend the night together in the same room... I only understood it when Yuki-chan finally told me. I’m such an idiot, right...?”

The self-hatred kept pouring out of me. *I’m so embarrassed that I made so many mistakes and acted so disgracefully. I’m so sorry I raised his expectations when I can’t actually do anything to meet them.*

“I d-didn’t want you to think I was inexperienced or feel disappointed... so I studied a lot of things and tried my best but... I couldn’t do anything right at all.”

This is the worst outcome I can think of. Even after being so proactive and trying to take the lead like an adult, just seeing my partner’s privates made me scream and push him away.

“... I’m so embarrassing and weird, right? I’m already twenty-seven years old, but I have zero experience. I’m sorry for being so clueless when it comes to romance...”

Even though I’m twelve years older than him, I can’t satisfy the person who’s dating me.

“Please, don’t hate me...”

I regretted it almost as soon as I said it. *I’m so pathetic. Even after all that, I’m still only thinking of myself.*

After a few seconds of silence, Momota-kun said “...Orihara-san, please come out,” and grabbed the futon.

“Wh-...N-No.”

“Please come out. Please show me your face.”

“No way... I’m...”

“Orihara-san.”

“Mmm...”

I gave up and timidly poked my head out of the futon. *He’ll probably get mad at me. He probably hates me. He’ll probably dump me.*

I prepared myself and slowly opened my eyes that I had firmly shut in my uneasiness.

“You know there’s no way I would hate you for something like that, right?” His smile was as calm and peaceful as sunlight.

“What...? Momota-kun, you’re not mad?”

“Mad? What would I be mad for?”

“I mean, I... didn’t think about it when I told you to stay over... Also, I totally couldn’t do anything right, and then I pushed you...”

“I’m not worried about that.”

“You’re lying...”

“No, I’m not.”

“You are. I mean, you... wanted to do it right?”

He was startled by my question and stiffened up.

“No... n-not really...”

“You took a shower before you came over.”

“That’s because...”

“Just a moment ago... you got really big...”

“What?! No, that was just a normal bodily function that happens regardless of my own will, so...”

He was really flustered, but he took a deep breath.

“...I mean, I did want to do it. That’s obvious, isn’t it?” he said awkwardly.

“I’ve been aroused since I was invited over. Today, when you wore that babydoll and that towel, you were so cute and pretty that I felt like I could die from how horny I was. If I’m being honest... even now I want to tear off that futon and go to town on you.”

“...”

“But I don’t want you to force yourself to do anything.”

“I’m not f-forcing...”

“You really were, right?”

I don’t have a reply. I worked hard to put on an act the best I knew how to, but I totally couldn’t keep it up.

“...I-It’s not that I don’t like you, Momota-kun. It’s just that it’s my first time, I don’t have any experience, I was nervous, and I got scared...”

“I get it. I mean, it’s my first time too. I was probably just as nervous and scared as you were, Orihara-san.”

“Really?”

“I thought about how since I’m the guy I have to properly take the lead and all that.”

“...”

Momota-kun was worried about the same things I was. He thought “Because I’m the guy” and I thought “Because I’m older,” but we were both thinking “I have to get my act together.” We were so hung up on those thoughts that, in the end, we were both just spinning our wheels.

“But Orihara-san, have you really not dated anyone until now?”

“Yeah...”

“That’s surprising. You seem like you’d be popular.”

“I’m d-definitely not popular. I was so plain and gloomy when I was a student. Then when I became an office worker, my workplace ended up being a total henhouse, so I haven’t had any opportunities to meet guys there. Plus, on my days off all I do is play video games anyway...”

As I explained my situation out loud, I gradually became sadder, and out of insecurity I asked, “Wh-What do you think?”

“What?”

“It’s w-weird right... being twenty-seven and having zero romantic experience.”

“I don’t think it’s weird. Everyone is different after all. So, ‘what do I think?’ Well, I mean, I’m honored.”

Momota-kun screwed up his face and awkwardly laughed. “I’m really honored that I’m your first boyfriend.”

Seeing his warm smile, I suddenly felt much better. My insecurities and fears as a woman, my vanity and pride as an adult... his words and smile gently unwound my heart that had been tied up in those tiresome feelings.

“Um... how about we forget about adult stuff for today?” Momota-kun said. “Let’s take those mature types of things and save them for when we’re both emotionally prepared. Today, let’s just go with what you wanted to do in the first place and play video games together.”

“...Is that okay?”

“Of course. I’ll be with you all night.”

Without making a face, he smiled kindly at me. I could feel tears starting to form, and I couldn’t control my emotions. My feelings were overflowing from the bottom of my heart, and my chest felt like it was going to tear apart.

I love you. Momota-kun, I love you. I really love you. I’m so glad that you’re my first boyfriend—

“...Yeah. Let’s do it! Let’s play lots of games together! I have so many I want to play with yo—”

“Whoa! Orihara-san, you’re naked!”

I suddenly remembered. In my excitement I cast off my futon and jumped out of bed, but I was still naked. *We just talked about a lot of really serious things, but the entire time I was completely nude...!* In a panic, I returned to my futon.

“D-Did you look?”

“...I did, yes.”

“Geez... Momota-kun, you dummy.”

“It’s not my fault... Also, I had the same thing happen to me earlier, so now we’re even.”

“I only looked once, but you’ve looked twice, Momota-kun.”

“Okay... do you want to look again?”

“No!”

After that, I had Momota-kun wait in the hallway while I cheerfully put on some clothes. What I changed into wasn’t a babydoll or a thong, but my normal underwear and my normal loungewear.

❤

It seems that a comfortable-looking sweater and well-worn jeans are Orihara-san’s loungewear of choice.

“Hahaha... sorry for such a frumpy outfit. The real me always dresses like this when I’m at home.”

Orihara-san sounded sorry for changing but, on the inside, I was clenching my fist in a victory pose. *Nice. This frumpy look is so good. I love how unguarded and laid-back normal loungewear looks.*

“I’ll bring you something to drink. Momota-kun, do you put anything in your coffee?”

“I like it black.”

With the Dolce Gusto coffee machine in the kitchen, Orihara-san brewed coffee for the two of us. She placed two mugs in front of me as I sat on a cushion.

“Your Dolce Gusto sure does brew coffee fast.”

“It’s easy to use and take care of. Plus the taste is great. By the way, this is decaf, so it’s okay to drink at night.”

“Decaf... that’s coffee without caffeine in it right?”

“Yeah. Those times while Yuki-chan was pregnant and really wanted to drink coffee she used to drink this. People who are pregnant or breastfeeding are supposed to hold off on caffeine as much as possible, apparently. Since I was

drinking decaf when I was hanging out with Yuki-chan, I ended up getting hooked on it myself."

"Wow, Dolce Gustos can make decaf too. That's cool."

"Yeah, Gu-chan is amazing."

"Gu-chan?"

As I said it back to her, I could see that she regretted saying it.

"You see... Gu-chan is the name of my Dolce Gusto. You know, because of Gusto. Gu-chan. You get it, right?" she said, embarrassed.

As I looked again at the Dolce Gusto in the kitchen, I could see black and white eyes made of felt stuck to it. *I wonder if she made those by hand. Also, it kind of looks like she was trying to make it look like a penguin.*

Eventually, my silence was too much for her to take. "Is there something wrong with giving it a name?!" she yelled.

"I didn't say anything, did I?"

"You were thinking 'Women who live by themselves sure are lonely' weren't you?! Well, yeah, that's right! I do get lonely! Sometimes I even talk to him!"

"I wasn't thinking anything."

Well, honestly, I was thinking a little about how lonely it must be. That and how cute it was.

Honestly, I found this conversation relaxing. When I came to my girlfriend's apartment, the thing I was probably hoping for the most was, unexpectedly, these normal kinds of moments. Of course I was hoping for some erotic stuff too, but I was extremely happy getting to know a brand-new side of Orihara-san.

"Momota-kun, you're definitely making fun of me, right? I mean, you're smiling."

"No, I'm not. Hey, let's play some video games."

"Hmm..."

She seemed a little unsatisfied, but unable to resist her desire to play games,

Orihara-san brought out the console she had put away.

“Okay, let’s get started. I’m not going to let you get any sleep tonight, Momota-kun!”

“Go easy on me.”

After Orihara-san set up the console she came over and sat next to me. Suddenly she asked, “Huh? Momota-kun, did you drop something?”

I looked down, and right next to me something had fallen on the ground. Before I could even think, Orihara-san reached out and grabbed it. As expected of an adult woman, she realized what it was in an instant, and her face became red like she had come to a boil.

“This is...”

“Th-That’s not what it is! Um, I mean, it is but...”

Oh man, I’ve done it now! When? When did it fall out?! Crap. This sucks, we’d just moved on from all that adult stuff... It was a mistake to put it in my pants pocket so that I could pull it out quickly when the time came. Did it pop out by chance maybe? Is there a hole in my pants? With deep regret I put my hand into my pocket—

“...Huh?”

It’s there. Inside of my pocket I can definitely feel a packed condom. I prepared two in case I needed a spare, but I confirmed that both were inside. Not really understanding what was going on, I looked at what Orihara-san was holding. When I looked at it closely, I could see that it was a different brand than the one I bought.

“...I’m sorry. This is the one I bought,” Orihara-san said, speaking in a faint voice and seeming like she was going to die from embarrassment.

The mood became incredibly awkward. The silence was all too painful, but I somehow thought up something to say.

“Um... I mean, th-thank you for taking that into consideration.”

“Y-Yes. Well... you have to protect yourself, you know... Um, t-today it doesn’t seem like we’ll need it, so I’ll just go put it away somewhere, okay!” Orihara

said in a shrill, panicked voice as she stood up. However, she was in such a hurry she stepped on the hem of her pants, lost her balance, and fell onto the bed. The shock made the bed's pillow move from its place—and everything hidden underneath was exposed. *I see. So that's where it came from.*

"Orihara-san..."

I couldn't just ignore it. Hidden underneath the pillow were a ton of rubbers. The number was well over ten. "...Just how many times were you planning on doing it?"

"Th-That's not it! I didn't know your size, so I bought a lot of different ones! Also, I thought having a lot on hand would be less stressful, so I placed them underneath the pillow so they would be easy to access... A-Anyway, that's not it!" Orihara-san protested with tears in her eyes.

We just couldn't seem to move on from the adult stuff.

Yet finally, after all that, we started playing video games together. However, we were only able to actually play for about an hour. Orihara-san was cocky and said that she wasn't going to let me get any sleep tonight, but she was the one who fell asleep first.

She probably didn't get enough sleep. Just like me, she was probably fantasizing and making a lot of preparations since the night before, and now her mind and body are worn out. The decaf coffee didn't seem to work as a pick-me-up either.

I could hear her breathe softly as she slept right next to me. Looking at her defenseless face, strangely, I didn't become aroused or anything like that. I only thought about how heartwarming this all was, and how my heart was at peace.

I fell asleep as I looked at her face, and the two of us slept soundly until morning. In a lot of ways, our first sleepover was a big mess where not a single thing went as planned. Still, in hindsight, it was a very special time that just the two of us shared together.


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Chapter 6: And They Both Lived Happily Ever After

A few days after our hectic sleepover, I received a message from Momota-kun while eating lunch in my office break area.

“Is it okay if I meet you after work?”

Before I could respond, another message came.

“If you’re busy, please don’t worry about it.”

I could tell that he was being really reserved from the contents of his message. I replied, “We can. I think I’ll be able to get off work at five. What’s wrong? Did something happen?”

His response came instantly.

“No, nothing’s wrong...”

Huh? Nothing’s wrong? Even though nothing’s wrong he’s going to come see me? Hmm, I wonder why? He’s coming to see me even though he doesn’t have a reason, it’s almost as if he’s really dying to see me—

Oh, that’s it! He’s dying to see me!

“...Hehehe.”

You want to see me that bad, Momota-kun? Are you having withdrawal because you miss me so much? Wow, do you love me that much?

Ahh, this is great. Boyfriends are great. Well, since we’re dating, it’s okay if we go meet each other without a reason. Though, “I missed you” is as good a reason as any. Ahh, I love him. I love you, Momota-kun.

Alright, what should I say to him? Maybe I’ll play a little hard to get and show him the types of love games that adults play! ...Yeah, let’s not do that. I can only foresee failure, and I learned my lesson when I forced myself to act sexy at our sleepover.

I decided to let go of my pride and my bravado and simply reply to him from

my heart, “Thank you❤ I wanted to see you too so that makes me so happy❤ Sigh, I wish I could just skip out on the rest of work and rush to your side, my darling❤”

...Okay, maybe that’s a little too from the heart! I might have thrown away my decency there along with my pride and my bravado. Wow, this is bad. Even I’m cringing from it. I lovey-dovey’d too much and now it’s just gross. There are so many hearts that my love just seems shallow. I have to be more careful about putting just the right amount of sour in my sweet-and-sour. Though if I did send it, I wonder what kind of reaction Momota-kun would have... No, no, no I’m definitely not going to send this. Even a middle school girl who’s head over heels in love wouldn’t send something this cringeworthy. I’d rather run a lap around my office building naked than send this—

“...Are you okay, Chief Orihara?” Komatsu-san suddenly asked.

“Wha—?!”

I thought I was going to have a heart attack, and I struggled to hold onto my phone that I had almost dropped in my surprise. When I raised my head, I could see Komatsu-san standing in front of the vending machines.

“K-Komatsu-san... how long have you been there?”

“For a while.”

For a while?! She watched me riding that emotional rollercoaster, smartphone in hand?!

“Um, Chief Orihara... Please don’t take on your work all by yourself. I might not be of much assistance, but I’ll help you.”

She’s worrying that I’m overworking myself. How emotionally unstable did I have to look for her to be this nice to me?

“I-I’m okay... I was just getting really into a mobile game.”

“Ah, I see.”

After Komatsu-san left, I let out a deep breath. *That was dangerous. Whenever I think about Momota-kun I retreat into my own world. Okay, time to get my brain into work-mode. And I’m going to send a more mature, restrained*

message using my common sense, instead of that ditzy mess I wrote. Or so I thought, until I looked down at my phone and my heart sank into my stomach.

❤

It would have been unwise to meet in front of Orihara-san's office building, so we chose to meet in front of a convenience store close by. She came just past five o'clock. Since it was just after work, she had her hair tied up, and she was wearing her suit without her glasses. I could see a look of deep, deep despair on her face. She was surrounded by a dark cloud, and her cheeks were stained a bright red.

"...So, I want to explain again that there's a complicated, bizarre, strange, and mysterious reason for that message... it's also possible that it was work of a ghost—"

"I-It's okay... I'll just pretend I didn't see it."

I struggled to cheer up Orihara-san from her embarrassment. *That weapons-grade lovey-dovey message... She probably wrote it without any intention of actually sending it, but accidentally did. Though, even if it was a mistake... the fact that she even wrote a draft of something like that is pretty embarrassing. Was she that happy she got to see me? Man, does she love me that much?*

We walked with that awkward atmosphere for some time until I spoke.

"It's been a while since I've walked outside with you like this huh, Orihara-san?"

"That's right."

"If we run into anyone either of us know, go with the plan we discussed before."

Orihara-san nodded her head in confirmation. "I'll say that you're my nephew." *This place is close to both my school and Orihara-san's company, so it's good to be careful, just in case. Well, if we were really being careful, we wouldn't meet outside like this, but... well, them's the breaks. We really want to see each other.*

"And I'll say that you're my auntie. Oh... and by auntie I don't mean some old

lady, I just meant it as you're an aunt from my family."

"...Momota-kun, I wasn't really worried about it, so I didn't need the explanation. If anything, you being so polite about it made it hurt me more," said a depressed Orihara-san. *It looks like me trying to be considerate ended up having the opposite effect.*

We walked beside one another through the town bathed in the setting sun. We weren't holding hands or getting any closer than was necessary. Rather, as we pretended to be aunt and nephew, we maintained a moderate distance between one another.

"One day, it'd be great to be able to just walk around town normally with one another," Orihara-san said.

"...Yeah, it would."

Orihara-san smiled. However, behind that smile I could see a slight loneliness, and I felt a small pain in my chest like I was being pricked by a needle. That pain urged me to speak.

"Um, Orihara-san... would you like to go somewhere this weekend?"

"'Somewhere'?"

"Anywhere is fine, just... somewhere where no one we know will be there. If it's someplace like that, we won't have to worry about being seen..."

I thought it would be great if we could hold hands, walk arm in arm, and other couple stuff. While hiding those less pure motivations beneath some innocent words, I invited her on a date for the first time, and...

"S-Sure, okay," Orihara-san said.

She said yes.

"I'm happy you suggested it, because... I was also thinking that I would like to go somewhere together," Orihara-san said with an embarrassed grin. *Oh man, this girl is just too cute.*

"Is there anywhere that you'd like to go?"

"I'm fine going anywhere. Is there someplace you'd like to go, Momota-kun?"

“I don’t really have anywhere I’d like to go, either...”

“Okay, let’s have a strategy meeting.”

“Let’s do it. Oh, yeah, Orihara-san, have you eaten?”

“No, not yet.”

“In that case, let’s go eat somewhere. Today it’ll be my treat.”

“What? No, I couldn’t.”

“Please, don’t be shy. I just got paid for my part-time job. When I stayed over, you went all out and made me breakfast, didn’t you? So today I want to pay you back.”

Actually, that was my purpose for meeting her today. I wanted to use my earnings from my part-time job to treat Orihara-san and do something manly even though I’m younger.

Orihara-san hesitated, but in the end, she said, “...If you insist, I guess I’ll let you treat me.”

I felt elated; I was flying high thanks to the promise of a first date. “Is there anything that you’d like to eat? Feel free to say anything.”

“Um, well. I’d like... I’d like to go for beef bowls.” With a smile, she gave a suggestion that brought me crashing back to Earth.

The next day, I was hanging out with Kana and Ura in the empty classroom. When I told them what she said, Kana immediately understood the situation and let out a heavy sigh. “I mean, even if you tell a woman to say anything, of course she’s going to hold back.”

On the other hand, Ura didn’t seem to realize what was going on even though he heard the same explanation. “What? I don’t get it. Momo said it’s his treat. Orihara wanted a beef bowl, so the two of them had beef bowls, right? What’s the problem?”

“The problem is Orihara-san purposely chose a reasonably priced option because was worried about Momo’s wallet. She probably couldn’t bring herself to make her younger, student boyfriend treat her.”

“Hmm, maybe I’m missing something, but it seems like he lucked out to me. He ended up not having to spend a lot of money.”

“I mean, he did sort of luck out. As an adult lady and as an older girlfriend, Orihara-san was exemplary in behaving with overwhelming consideration.”

Kana looked at me with an inquiring eye. “However, you didn’t like it, did you, Momo?”

“...It’s not like I didn’t like it. Just, I feel bad for not being a good provider.”

I should have come to terms with this before we started dating. My girlfriend is an adult, and I’m a student. I only pay tax when I buy something at the store, and I’m totally dependent on my family. What I get paid for my part-time job doesn’t even really amount to much. I only wanted her to be happy, but that was probably just for my own self-satisfaction and actually patronizing towards her.

“Being a good provider? You’re a student, so what’s the point of worrying about that?” Kana said.

“Aren’t you overthinking it? Orihara probably wasn’t thinking that deeply about it and just wanted a beef bowl,” Ura chimed in.

“No, Ura. There’s no way—”

“...Well, I think there’s a strong possibility of that,” I said.

Kana blinked his eyes in surprise. “Really? Orihara-san is like that?”

“Yeah. She’s a lot like that.”

It hasn’t been long since we started dating, but I’ve started to understand Orihara-san’s personality, or should I say, her peculiarities. Even though she’s so cute, she has low self-esteem and a bit of a complex about her age and her lack of romantic experience, and she often worries about trivial things... and then there are times where she shockingly won’t be thinking anything at all. Therefore, the possibility that she just wanted a beef bowl is there. It really seems that way. Actually, I’m starting to think that there’s a high probability that that was the case.

“Well, we can only imagine what Orihara-san was really thinking about, so

there's no point in us thinking about it," Kana said. "Moreover, that's not the real problem."

❤

"No, Yuki-chan! It's not like I was worrying about Momota-kun's wallet! I just wanted a beef bowl, so that's just what I said!"

"Of course you did, just like I thought you would."

It was lunchtime at my office. I was concerned about how Momota-kun looked a little down when we ate beef bowls together the night before, so I called Yuki-chan for advice. We could usually talk if I called during Macaron-kun's afternoon nap.

"Hime, you sure do love eating beef bowls." Yuki-chan replied bluntly to my plea for advice.

"Wh-What's wrong with that?! It's quick, cheap, and delicious!"

"And you've never told Momota-kun your favorite food?"

"...When he asked before, I thought saying 'I love anything and everything donburi' wouldn't seem girly, so I went with 'I like fluffy pancakes.'"

"You sure do pick some weird times to try and look girly," said a dumbfounded Yuki-chan. "It's funny though. You were only saying your favorite food without thinking about it, but it looked like you were choosing to be considerate of his wallet."

"Consider his wallet...? Is that something every woman on the planet cares about?"

"Good women care. If their significant other says, 'I'll treat you,' then a good woman will choose something just right that's cheap enough to not hurt their wallet and expensive enough to fill their ego. Also, she'll act as if it's what she really wants to eat. Being easy to treat is one of the requirements of being a good woman."

A-Amazing... Good women are amazing. Do they really put so much mental energy into strategizing for a single dinner? It's like they're creatures living in a different dimension than I am.

“So that’s what Momota-kun was worried about. I totally thought he was mad that I ordered an egg with my large-size beef bowl. Like he was thinking, ‘You’re gonna get an egg with your meal because someone else is paying for it? What a shameless woman.’”

“Hime... From now on, if something happens you call me right away, okay? You trying to solve things by yourself will be completely futile,” Yuki-chan said kindly with a hint of rudeness.

“I’m glad I asked you for advice. Now if I just explain to Momota-kun that it’s a misunderstanding...”

“That’s right. If you explain to him, I’m sure he’ll understand. However, that won’t solve the real problem.”

❤

“The real problem here is that Momo is feeling inferior to Orihara-san because of their difference in financial strength and social standing. The issue isn’t that he doesn’t have money, it’s that Momo’s lack of money is giving him an inferiority complex,” Kana said. “Momo wanted to be manly for her, so this probably came as a shock for him, but... if he worries and puts himself down every time something like this happens, then even Orihara-san will be annoyed, I think.”

“I’m not putting myself down...”

Ura decided to chime in. “Momo’s just worrying too much about stupid stuff. Orihara-san knows you’re a student and she’s still dating you, right? She never expected you to have any money to begin with, so don’t try to act like you have any. She has way more than you do, so really you should be the one getting treated.”

“Ura has a valid point,” Kana agreed with Ura for once. “It’d probably be best to just be yourself. No matter how much you try to look cool, you’re a student for at least three more years, Momo. In terms of money, Orihara-san will have the advantage for a while.”

“...”

“In this day and age, it’s not unusual to find married couples where the wife is

the breadwinner. There are even guys who are practically their girlfriends' pets. It really doesn't matter whether it's the man or the woman holding the financial advantage, as long as both of you are okay with it."

"'Both of us,' huh...?"

"That's right. In the end, the issue is how you deal with it together. If both parties can agree, then even big problems can be made small. And if both of you don't agree, then even small problems can become big."

"..."

What can I say? I imagined our relationship problems would be more extreme. Something like a rival in love appearing, or having our relationship found out by someone and getting threatened by them. Maybe Orihara-san would be proposed to by some rich and handsome guy and I'd have to fight him for her heart. Or even worse, maybe the train molester I fought off would become Orihara-san's boss or something like that.

Even if it meant facing such grandiose and dramatic obstacles, I made up my mind to fight them when I decided to date Orihara-san. However, there won't be such cliché enemies. Exciting, movie-esque adversity that deepens our love for one another when we've overcome it doesn't really exist. Far from it, I'm here overthinking a single beef bowl. I'm being bogged down by my out-of-date values and vanity thinking that "If the man isn't the one with the money, it's disgraceful."

There is no enemy that I have to defeat. Everything is a matter of my own heart.

"...I wonder what came over me. I didn't know that I was such a small-minded person," I said with a heavy sigh, and Kana gave me a fleeting smile. He looked straight at me with his deep shining eyes, eyes that somehow seemed to be looking far into the distance while still peering into my soul, and he said, "That's what it means to be truly in love."

❤

"This time you asked for beef bowls without thinking about it, but you couldn't make a student like Momota-kun treat you to an expensive dinner

anyway, right?" Yuki-chan said. "I thought you'd face this obstacle one day. A gap in financial power and different financial sense are among the top three reasons that people break up."

"I don't really care about the difference in our financial statuses."

"Even if you don't care, Momota-kun does. The more upstanding he is, the more he's probably going to obsess over it. This is what it means to be out of sync: even though you do something for the sake of one another, in the end no one benefits."

"..."

"My husband and I also have twelve years between us, but it's easier having the man be the one who's older. Because he had financial power and social status appropriate for his age, he naturally covered all expenses for our dates and marriage. We've never once argued over that type of thing."

"...Why do I have to be twelve years older than him, I wonder."

The "if only" scenarios I should have hidden in the bottom of my heart once again started to rear their heads. *If only he had been born twelve years earlier. If only I had been born twelve years later.*

"If only we were the same age... I wonder if we could have become more of a normal couple."

"There's no such thing as a normal couple in this entire world," Yuki-chan said harshly yet supportively. "Humans can draw a perfect sphere inside of their minds, but in reality, a perfect sphere can't exist. A normal couple is just like that. Even though each and every couple has some imperfections, couples do their best while carrying their sadness and happiness, and each partner takes the other's hand as they walk forward together."

"..."

"It might sound cliché, but in the end, you guys have to work out how you'll deal with these things yourselves," Yuki-chan said. "Sadly, love has no correct answers."

❤

There's one thing I finally understand about the truth of romance after getting my first girlfriend and experiencing the so-called mingling of the sexes. Well, it probably sounds like I don't know what I'm talking about since I'm a virgin who hasn't even been dating their first girlfriend for a month, but there's something I've confirmed.

It's that, for better or for worse, you can only talk about love subjectively. For example, if you're talking about someone else's love, you can say as much as you like with a level head. You can look over it objectively and talk about the risks and rewards as much as you want. The reason you can do it is because it's not you. Since you're just a third party, you calculate what's going on in the relationship from a clear point of view.

Before I met my girlfriend, I don't know how many times I talked about love like a smart aleck. If an uproar about a performer's affair or an idol's steamy romance was being shown on TV, I would act like I was being philosophical about it and think, "They're acting so stupid" or "They should think about their position."

Whenever I read a manga or anime romcom, I would coldly judge the story and think "These two are obviously in love with each other, so they should just hurry up and confess already." I've also gotten mad at indecisive main characters and said, "No way they'd have all this done to them without realizing what's going on. This main character is beyond dumb."

I've even looked at stories from a shrewder, more meta perspective and thought, "Right when it seemed like the heroine was about to confess, the story ended up leading into the next volume. I guess it looked like the series would sell well, so the editor probably doesn't want to end it, and the story will probably be padded so it lasts longer. A romcom ends as soon as the protagonist starts dating someone, after all."

If you're a third party, bystander, or viewer, you can be as level-headed as you like. However, when you become the person in question, it's laughable just how much you can't keep calm. With the slightest thing you become indecisive and worry, you endlessly think about things that you have no control over, and a wrong guess will have you utterly lost, wandering this way and that. To someone looking from the sidelines it probably looks hilarious. For instance,

what if I were the main character of a romcom? A reader looking at my love life like it were a story could look at everything from on high and say “You should have done this” as they deduce the correct choice.

But because I’m the person living that love life, I can’t be objective. I can’t look down at the story. I can’t change my point of view, and I am forever in the first-person perspective. I’ll never be given the ability to read the heart of another. *It’s unbearable how I can only speak subjectively—*

“Okay, then we’ll meet at ten o’clock,” I said.

“Okay. I understand,” Orihara-san replied.

“See you tomorrow.”

“Yeah. Goodnight.”

With that our phone call ended. It was a phone call to confirm our plans for tomorrow, but it felt a little fake. There was a strange feeling of distance between us, as if we were separated by a margin as thin as a hair. It’s been like this since the day before yesterday when we ate beef bowls. It’s not like we were fighting or anything. However, that’s probably why it was so awkward.

Tomorrow is our big first date. The plan is to meet up at a slightly far away station that we don’t normally use, in a place where no one we know will be, and enjoy our day off together.

“...”

I opened the closet in my room and looked inside. I looked at the thing that normally shouldn’t be in my room and fortified my resolve. I decided to do something tomorrow for our date. To an outsider, it no doubt seems foolish. If you think about it from the level-headed perspective of a bystander, it will probably be a futile act, and it will be hard to tell if it has any meaning. However, it’s my decision and my story.

❤

The time we agreed on was ten o’clock, but thinking that I wanted to be early, I had arrived at the station where we were supposed to meet thirty minutes beforehand. I got off the train and headed to the ticket gate. I was really

worried about looks from people around me, and not because it was a station I'd never used before. I was incredibly anxious wondering whether I was getting strange glances or if I was naturally blending into the crowd.

As I worried about everyone looking at me, I passed through the ticket gate. When I texted her, I found out that Orihara-san had already arrived as well. My heart was racing. I let out a deep breath and prepared myself. *Relax, Momota Kaoru. There's no going back now. You can only go with the flow.*

I exited out into the station's plaza, and there in the middle of a multicolored flower bed was a floral clock. We were supposed to meet in front of this floral clock, and Orihara-san was already there. Thirty minutes before our scheduled meeting time, our eyes met. Also—

"Wha—?!"

"Huh?!"

The moment we looked at one another, we were both shocked. Orihara-san's eyes were wide, and she looked flabbergasted. I probably had the same look on my face, as it wasn't your average kind of shock.

"W-Wait... wait a second, please..." I managed to say as I tried to calm myself down. "Why are you wearing that school uniform again?"

She was wearing a shirt with a blue blazer and a brown sweater. She also had on a pleated skirt and loafers. The ends of her hair were styled like a young girl's would be. The Orihara-san in front of me was dressed like she was before, in the high school girl cosplay that was the reason we met in the first place.

"Wh-What about you, Momota-kun?" She made the same perplexed voice as me. "Why are you wearing a suit?"

I was wearing a dark brown suit with a chic necktie and leather shoes. Also, my hair was combed back with wax. Right now, I was doing my best to look tall and mature.

"I, um, borrowed this from my dad."

Well, it was more like I borrowed it without asking. He said that lately he's gotten too fat to wear it, so it's probably okay. It was bound to be passed down

to me anyway.

Last night I did my best practicing how to tie my tie. I've never closed the collar on my school uniform, and I had a hard time with the tie. *Four-in-hand knots, Windsor knots, I totally don't get it at all.*

"Not that, I mean, why are you so dressed up...?"

"Because... I thought that if I was in a suit then I'd look good walking next to you."

"..."

"I also thought that if I was dressed like an adult I could treat you without you having to worry about it."

When I thought everything over, I realized that the day that I treated Orihara-san to beef bowls, I was wearing my school uniform. *An adult woman in a suit having her dinner paid for her by a kid in a school uniform would naturally get some strange looks. It was inconsiderate of me.*

So I thought I would wear a suit on our date. I abandoned the outfit that Kana had coordinated for me and pulled out my dad's suit. I don't know if it was the right choice, but... even though it might have looked really silly from the outside, it was the answer that I reached after seriously thinking about it. In spite of my consideration, however...

"Orihara-san... why are you in high school girl cosplay again?"

"B-Because... I thought that it would be more natural if I was dressed like this when I'm with you, Momota-kun," she said, still confused and teary-eyed. "And, um... as for getting those beef bowls the other day, it wasn't that I was restraining myself, you know? I really, from the heart, just wanted a beef bowl..."

"I knew it."

"...You did?"

"Well, I had a feeling. You looked like you were really enjoying it when you ate."

"Being found out like that is kind of embarrassing... A-Anyway, I thought that

if you said you were going to treat me today, I wouldn't hold back and I'd let you treat me to something reasonable... I figured that wearing this high school girl uniform and pretending to be a student couple would be the easiest way to let you do that.

"...Why'd you have to go and show up in a suit, Momota-kun?"

"That's my line. Why'd you go and cosplay as a high schooler again?"

"And here I thought up a whole plan for a student date!"

"Well, I thought of a lot of stuff and planned for an adult date!"

We both spoke firmly and glared at one another. However, after a few seconds—

"...Pssh."

"Hahaha."

We both laughed. It was so silly, and it was all we could do. Also, we were just so happy.

"Hahaha. Wow, we're always like this, huh?"

"We are."

We really are always like this. We try to be considerate of each other, but before we know it we become wrapped up in ourselves, fret over it, go nowhere, fall out of sync, and then end up having something weird happen. *It's always like this—*

"But it's fun."

"...Yeah," I nodded, knowing what she meant.

This is fun. Really fun. Ever since I've met Orihara-san, every day I feel like I'm going to burst from having so much fun. I love her so much that sometimes I hate myself—but somehow, I'll come back to loving her and myself.

"What shall we do today? You're wearing a uniform, so it doesn't seem like we can go to the place I was thinking of."

"Hmm. I don't really think we can go to the place I was thinking of either while you're wearing that suit."

“For now, let’s walk around.”

“Yeah.”

“So, um...”

While doing my best to make it look natural, I gathered up my courage and took her hand. I could feel how warm she was. She straightened up like she was shocked, but she didn’t pull away and squeezed my hand back.

Since the both of us were inexperienced, we struggled at first with the position of our fingers, but we somehow made it look nice.

“Th-This is the first time we’ve held hands, huh?”

“That’s right... Even though we’ve already seen each other naked.”

“D-Don’t remind me, okay?!”

It’s been a little under three weeks since we started dating, and we’ve finally held hands. I don’t know if it’s late or too soon—well, I get the feeling it’s late... considering that my girlfriend is an adult, this is probably kind of a slow pace. But still, I think it’s best that we go this way, at our own pace.

“Momota-kun, you look surprisingly good in a business suit.”

“Really? It feels like this suit doesn’t look good on me.”

“You’re tall, so it really suits you.”

“Thank you. You too... that uniform looks g-good on you. You really look like how a high school girl these days would look...”

“Hahaha... I’m not exactly happy about that.”

After an awkward smile, she let out a small sigh. “I wonder what we look like to the people around us?”

“Who knows?”

“An older brother and his little sister in high school?”

“No way. It’d be weird if a brother and sister held hands. Well, somewhere in the world there probably are those kinds of siblings.”

“Maybe it looks like a forbidden relationship between a cram school teacher

and his student?”

“Perhaps people think we’re having a compensated date?”

“Or... maybe everyone already knows that we’re a weird couple made up of a high school boy in a business suit and an old lady pushing thirty in high school girl cosplay...” Orihara-san said and made herself depressed. However, she soon raised her face and said, “Well, it doesn’t matter.” Her smile was beaming, and she looked truly happy.

“That’s right.”

At that moment, I truly didn’t care what society thinks or what the world thinks; I only thought about how this moment together was more precious than anything.

We held each other’s hands and walked along. A business suit-wearing high school boy and a twenty-seven-year-old woman in high school girl cosplay. From the outside we must have looked like a strange and mismatched couple. Thanks to a mistake that could have come right out of some old fairytale, our first date ended up like this. From here on out we’ll probably make mistakes like this time and again. We’ll make tons of mistakes and probably sometimes even hurt one another. However, it will definitely be okay because it’s us. I have no basis for it, but that’s what I think.

Orihara-san—Orihara Hime-san, twenty-seven years old. She’s slightly older, but she’s my super cute girlfriend.


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Afterword

When I myself came of age a long time ago, in terms of age and social standing I was an “adult,” but if you asked me when I definitely turned into an adult, I can’t really say. Before I knew it I had somehow already become one, or perhaps it would be more apt to say I just slid into it, or maybe I’m really still just a child after all.

Well, from the beginning the line between adult and child is probably off. After all, long ago both men and women were treated like adults when they were fifteen years old, and nowadays the age of adulthood is being lowered from twenty to eighteen. And when you look at the medium of light novels, it seems that even though its content is aimed at “middle and high schoolers” on paper, the people who buy light novels the most are adults. So how about it: are you, the person reading this afterword, an “adult” or a “child”?

And with that, I am Kota Nozomi. This is an age gap romcom where the main heroine is around her thirties. “An embarrassed twenty-seven-year-old wearing a high school girl uniform is pretty awesome, right?” is the concept from which this work began. I have absolutely no grand intention of making waves in a light novel industry that’s dominated by teenage heroines; this is just my preference.

Actually, I wrote this with my preference completely exposed. Ever since my debut I’ve made a racket about how it’s a subject I really, really want to write about, so getting to release it to the world like this fills me with deep emotions. I kept fighting with the editorial department at GA like:

“Let me write about a heroine who’s pushing thirty!”

“...If she’s a sub-heroine it’s okay.”

“If that’s the case there’s no point! I want to write her as the main heroine!”

My project finally went through, but... before I knew it, I was pushing thirty. Now I have the annoying dilemma of wanting to write about an older heroine who’s younger than me. However, I’ll awaken my inner fifteen-year-old and do

my best to write this story.

So, with that, I have some people to thank.

To my supervisor Nakamizo, thank you so much for your help once again. I am truly grateful to you for pushing this project through.

To Nanasemeruchi, thank you for the wonderful illustrations. I have no words aside from “Awesome!” You struck a fine balance with Orihara’s design: she definitely looks like she could be a high schooler, but she still gives off the air of a twenty-seven-year-old woman, and I can’t get enough of it.

To my wife’s friend Ms. F, whom I interviewed for this novel for all the latest on being a woman in the workplace, I am sincerely grateful for your assistance.

To everyone who has picked up and read this book, I give the greatest thanks. Let’s meet in the second volume.

—Kota Nozomi

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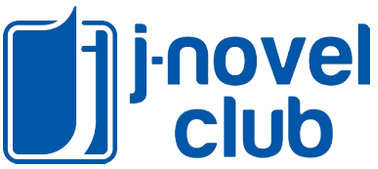
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Are You Okay With a Slightly Older Girlfriend? Volume 1

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