7th Date

You Were Experienced, I Was Not:

OUR DATING STORY



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Artist / magako

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Prologue

Three years ago, at the end of both March and my second year of high school, it had been my birthday. Cherry blossom petals had been falling in a flurry. As we'd stood on the bank of the Arakawa River, Runa had said to me, bashfully...

"I wanna have sex...if it's with you."

The warm, amorous tone of her voice and the rosiness of her cheeks had reminded me of cherry blossoms. Her lowered eyelashes had cast shadows over her pink skin...

"This is the first time I've felt this way in my whole life..."

The number of times she'd blinked when she'd said it, and the exact moments when she had... All of that was burned into the back of my retinas in great detail. It was like a scene in a movie I'd rewatched over and over.

Yet even now, I still reached out for my memory of the past—the memory of those madly boisterous days of my youth.

***

On our way back from the riverbank, my mind had been adrift.

"I wanna have sex...if it's with you."

The only things swirling around in my head were the words Runa had just said to me. My heart had been pounding for a long time. The way it kept beating at a high pace was putting me into a prolonged state of calm excitement, as though a light fever had become my normal body temperature.

I'd been holding Runa's right hand with my left, worrying that she might pick up on my excitement from my left hand. The thought made me feel bashful.

With red faces, Runa and I both maintained the silence. We returned to the vicinity of Station A and then walked through the

nearby shopping district.

Something in the area caught my eye, making my heart skip a beat.

Hotel "The Earth"
Rest: 9,000 yen
Stay: 16,500 yen

That was what was written on the hotel's flashy sign.

I looked at Runa involuntarily, and our eyes met. The fact she then awkwardly averted hers told me she'd been looking at the sign too.

"Th-That's pretty expensive..." I said, trying not to be too obvious. I figured that it would've been worse to say nothing at all in this situation.

"Nine thousand for just a rest..." Runa replied.

"Yeah... Maybe it's because it's next to the station?"

Well, great, I thought to myself. Spending the night at that inn in Enoshima had been much cheaper. I didn't have that much money on me.

"Your grandma is home today...right?" I asked, well aware that the flow of our conversation was putting my ulterior motives out in the open.

Runa nodded apologetically. "Yeah... My dad's there too."

"R-Right..."

Runa's father was a salesman, so his days off were irregular. That meant he was sometimes home on weekdays.

However, when I gave it more thought, perhaps this turn of events was actually convenient for us. I recalled what Sekiya-san had once told me, after our school trip, when I'd asked him rather directly about his night with Yamana-san.

"Is it hard the first time?"

"Who knows...? It was my first time with a girl who'd never done it before. You wouldn't want to force things if your girlfriend's in pain, right? Especially since mine is still a minor."

"You even care about that, huh."

"Well, you know. Soliciting minors is *a crime and all."*

After we'd parted ways, I'd looked up what Japanese law said on the subject. Specifically, "inko-jorei"—the ordinance on sexual misconduct.

"No one is allowed to engage in indecent sexual acts with minors."

What does "indecent" mean...?

Who does "no one" apply to...?

Did that apply to me? I was a minor too. Could I not have loving sex with Runa, who was also a minor like me?

It didn't make sense, so I went digging further and came upon a site that explained things in more detail.

Basically, even two minors having sex could be against the law. However, it didn't apply to those who were engaged to be married or those who were "in a serious relationship equivalent to being engaged."

The part about a "serious relationship equivalent to being engaged" had made me rack my brains. I intended to marry Runa eventually, and I believed that she had the same thing in mind.

But given what the law said, could we prove it? As hard as it was to imagine, if, for some inexplicable reason, a cop were to burst into the room while we were doing it in a hotel and accused us of breaking the law, wouldn't we need an adult to prove that our relationship was serious?

That meant that, before we did something like that, I figured we ought to tell Runa's father about our plans to marry.

"So... What now?" Runa asked reservedly once we reached the station.

I want to have sex.

I could tell that my face said as much. And it was clear to me that

Runa felt the same way. And that was precisely why I said...

"I'll walk you home."

Obviously, I couldn't just say, "I want to ask your father for permission to have sex with you," so I gave myself an excuse to go to her house.

"Huh...? O-Okay." An unconcealed look of dejection appeared on Runa's face. She must've thought I was ending our date already.

That's not how it is, Runa. Just wait for it.

As we walked through the usual peaceful residential area, I was secretly burning with resolve.

When we arrived at her house, Runa put her hand on the gate without a word and turned toward me.

"Ah, wait a moment, Runa."

"Oh...?" She cocked her head as she looked at me.

"Sir, I'm giving serious consideration to my future with Runa-san."

When I simulated the situation in my mind, saying the words I intended to say, my mental version of Runa's father sighed and gave the following reply.

"So what? You're still in high school. You can say things like that all you like. How do you plan to make my daughter happy? I want to hear how exactly you envision it."

In that mental exchange, I was left speechless. In a few days, I'd be a high school senior. I was going to have to study with all I had and greatly improve my grades, doing whatever I could to get within range of being accepted into Houo University. And even if my efforts were to pay off and I got in, I'd still only be a university student.

All this time, Runa's father had been working a full-time job, earning money, and raising his daughter. I felt like nothing I could say to him would be convincing in the slightest.

Besides, the last time I'd seen him had been on New Year's, after my and Runa's first shrine visit of the year. Back then, I'd barged in on them and asked him to hold off on letting his future wife move in.

Recalling that I'd won that argument, I felt like it was going to be my turn to take a beating. The thought of it made me tremble.

"What is it, Ryuto?"

Runa's voice brought me back to my senses.

"Well, uh, I mean..."

Now what...? Cold sweat formed on my skin as I considered what to do next, but I noticed that my phone was vibrating in my pocket.

"Oh...?"

Pretty much all my friends were introverts like me, so I almost never got calls without advance warning. It kept ringing, so I couldn't ignore it. I pulled it out and looked at the screen.

"Dad...?"

The call was from *my* father, of course. That was unusual too, because even in my family, everyone was an introvert.

"It's your father? You should take it, it might be important," Runa said considerately.

"R-Right." I tapped the button to answer the call.

"Hey, have you heard? Things are bad." My father sounded restless. It was unusual for him as he was the quiet, taciturn type. "Your mother will be having surgery for cancer."

My vision turned pure white. "Huh...?"

My father then told me when my mother would be admitted into the hospital and went over some other details, but barely any of it registered as I stood there in a daze before cutting the call.

"Ryuto..." Runa looked at me with sympathetic eyes. She must've heard what my father had said, as she'd been standing nearby.

"I'm sorry, Runa..." I replied. My mouth felt dry.

Runa gazed straight at me and nodded, a look of understanding on her face. "That's okay. You should hurry home and be with your mom."

"Yeah... Thanks."

I turned around and walked away, putting Runa's house behind me. As I walked to the station, hanging my head, I recalled the memories of my mother from when I'd been a kid, and before I knew it, my vision had grown blurry.

Naturally, the regret of not having done the deed with Runa was

far from my mind at this point.

However, when I got home and stepped into the living room, it was anticlimactic. My mother was acting normally. The kitchen faced the living room, and as she stood in there, getting ready to start making dinner, she looked just the same as always.

"Oh, welcome back," she said, looking surprised. "I didn't think you'd be home so soon. Weren't you on a date?"

"Dad called... Said you have cancer..."

My mother frowned. "Oh, great, he even called you? Well, I guess he probably didn't know you were on a date." She wiped her hands and came out of the kitchen into the living room, where I was standing. "It's not cancer. It's what's called 'cervical dysplasia'—an abnormality that's a precursor to cervical cancer. A surgeon is going to cut it out before it turns into cancer. We found it on my yearly checkup."

"So...it's nothing major?" I asked.

"For now, no. Though apparently, sometimes it can progress unexpectedly quickly, and by the time you have surgery, it's already turned into cancer and they can't remove all of it." Seeing a look of concern appear on my face once again, my mother switched to a cheerful tone. "But really, the doctor said it's usually fine for women my age and at this stage of dysplasia, so don't make such a face."

I hadn't been aware of what expression I'd been making, but it couldn't have been a pleasant one. People had always told me I'd taken after my mother, so the prospect of my face becoming a memento of her was filling me with a mix of heart-wrenching emotions.

She smiled cheerfully as though to dispel my gloom. "You're such a gentle boy. You remind me of your father."

I remained silent.

"He got all flustered, thinking it's his fault," my mother then added with a slightly bashful smile.

At first, I didn't understand what she meant, but then I recalled hearing that cervical cancer was caused by an STD. That must've been what my mother was talking about.

While I hadn't had much interest in how my parents had met, I remembered that they'd been in the same class in college. My father had been my mother's first boyfriend too.

"There's vaccines now to prevent it, though. I wish there'd been one when I was young—then it wouldn't have come to this."

"Huh..."

"Don't 'huh' me."

I'd given a half-hearted reply, given the mildly awkward nature of the topic, but my mother had taken issue with it.

"It's not somebody else's problem. Boys can be vaccinated against HPV too," she added.

"Eh?"

"Don't 'eh?' me either. Sheesh, you need to be more aware of these things," she said in exasperation.

Feeling ill at ease, I left the living room.

"HPV vaccine...?" I uttered to myself, looking it up on my phone in my room.

What I found was as follows: The human papillomavirus—the cause of cervical cancer—was transmitted through sex. And to effectively prevent it, both women *and* men needed to be vaccinated against it.

Q. Can it be transmitted when wearing a condom?
A. Condoms can help prevent it, but the human papillomavirus can be transmitted through hands too.

"Well, damn..."

This meant there was always a risk.

"He got all flustered, thinking it's his fault."

My mother couldn't have gotten it from anyone other than my father, for sure. Runa had dated other guys before me, so even if she were to get cervical cancer in the future, it wouldn't necessarily be my fault. But if our relationship was going to become sexual, there would be no guarantee that I wouldn't be the source of infection.

"There's vaccines now to prevent it, though."

If sex could potentially put your loved one at risk of dying, and if you could do something to lower that risk to whatever extent possible... Perhaps it was worth considering.

I lay down on the bed and sighed deeply. There were even *more* things to do now before I could have sex with Runa. Was I just overthinking it?

Still, the more I treasured Runa, the more difficult it became for me to simply come onto her like in an eromanga.

"This is such a pain..."

I felt fed up with my personality. Sometimes I'd even wanted to become a whole different person. It would've felt so great if I could've followed my instincts, had sex with Runa, and we could've fully expressed our love for each other.

But alas, I could only dream about such things. Back then, at the very least.

I sighed deeply once more, at which point my phone vibrated—there was a message from Runa.

`How's your mother?`

Oh. She'd been worried too—probably ever since the end of our date.

"You're such a gentle boy. You remind me of your father."

I couldn't really tell if I was gentle or not, but Runa certainly was.

Since my mother's situation had turned out to be less serious than expected, I got up and called Runa to explain.

"I see... So if the surgery goes well, there won't be anything to worry about anymore?" Runa asked, her voice becoming somewhat more cheerful after my explanation.

"Yeah. Sorry I made you worried."

"No, don't apologize. I'm sure your family was more shocked than me."

"Thanks..."

Runa was really a kind person.

"Hey, Ryuto..." she suddenly began, seeming to find it difficult to say what she wanted to. "I know what I said earlier today, but..."

What she said?

"I wanna have sex...if it's with you."

Was she talking about that?

"We don't have to do it right away, right?" she asked.

"Huh...?"

"From what Nicole told me, when Sekiya-san first got into that kind of relationship with someone, he couldn't study for months. His grades tanked. She said that was why he didn't want to advance their relationship until he got into college."

Her words made me recall what Sekiya-san had told me too.

"I was in rabbit mode for about half a year with the girl I first slept with."

"Besides, I can just see how things would go. If we did it once, we'd end up heading over to each other's houses or to love hotels whenever we had time and going at it like rabbits for about three months. And when I finally got back to my senses and restored my humanity, my exams would already be over. And in more ways than one."

"I don't want you to become like that..." Runa said. "You're going to cram school and are gonna study hard for your university entrance exams, so it's like I'd be getting in the way of that... I've been thinking that I shouldn't have said what I said."

"I-I'd be fine...probably."

At the very least, I saw myself as being more rational than Sekiya-san.

"But it would be your first time, right? How can you know how it'll go until you try it? And then if you do try it and become like that, it'd be too late..."

Don't worry, it's not like that. So let's have sex right now!

Only I couldn't have the confidence to say that because I had all that stuff about the law and HPV vaccines on my mind. And looking back on it now, when I had to prepare to study in earnest, it hadn't felt like the right time to deal with those issues.

“Don’t worry about me,” Runa said. “My feelings toward you won’t change...including how I want to do it with you.” The way she added that last part in a quiet, slightly shy voice had been so cute that I felt the urge to embrace her—unfortunately, this was only a phone call. “I’ll wait. For you to get into Houo.”

“Okay. Thanks, Runa.” With her being *this* understanding and *this* supportive of me, I couldn’t bring myself to say anything else. “I’ll study hard for those exams.”

And once I hung up...

“Dang iiiiiiiittttttttt!!!”

I opened one of my cram school textbooks and started writing in my notebook, my pen spurred on by my overabundant sex drive.

***

That brings us back to the present.

It was spring, and I’d just started my third year as a university student.

“And that’s how it is,” I said, wrapping up the story I’d been telling Kujibayashi-kun.

We were in a café in Tokyo Tower with a good view of the scenery below. He was sitting across the table from me.

“But then when I finally got into Houo, Runa had new twin sisters, a full-time job, and became super busy. On the rare occasions that we get to see each other these days, one of us will get called away by our families or to work, or the mood just isn’t right to do it at that point... And that’s just how it’s been.”

“Hm,” let out Kujibayashi-kun, who’d been listening with his arms folded. “So, it’s *Too Much of Spring*.”

“Huh?”

“A novel by Mishima Yukio. It’s about the peaceful ennui of a relationship that lasted too long. The title itself was in vogue for a time.”

“Oh, I see...”

Somehow it felt like an accurate description of our current situation, which was unnerving. I thought about giving it a read

sometime.

"Still, I now see what has you so merry today."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"That trip you're taking this summer, to Okinawa... It will be your first time lying with a woman, will it not?"

"Y-Yeah." I nodded timidly. "D-Did I really look so excited?"



"You would do well to look in a mirror. Because in it, you would find a repulsive face, brimming with lust."

"C'mon, that's uncalled for!"

"Thine words mean nothing to me. Not when I know what awaits thou in Okinawa," he said.

"W-Well..."

Frankly, I really did want to have sex, and that hadn't changed since the day I'd started dating Runa. The opportunity was finally about to present itself. It would've been more strange *not* to be excited.

This summer, in Okinawa, Runa and I...will have sex for the first time!

"I'm so jealous... 'Tis most aggravating..." muttered Kujibayashi-kun as he looked at me.

"Okay, but wait, I'm still a 'virgin fiend' too, for now..."

I said that to smooth things over, but it was crushing to have to remind myself of that fact.

That's right... I'm a virgin... Even after all this time...

"Even I think it's weird... We've been dating since high school, and I'm about to start my third year of university..." I said in self-deprecation.

Kujibayashi-kun stared at me with a serious look on his face. "The happy normies of this world may find it odd indeed."

I remained silent, letting him continue.

"But even so, that is only relevant in the material world." When he finally looked me in the eye again, his face had become far too serious for the topic. "In all likelihood, you two are, in fact, right in the middle of attracting the indistinct together, as your names would imply."

His words made me remember what he'd once said about my and Runa's names.

"A moon and a dragon, is it...? Quite the pairing."

"Both are something indistinct. A moon shines faintly without showing its outlines. A dragon is a fictional creature, and therefore

its true form is unknown. That is why when you combine those two kanji, you get the kanji for 'indistinct.'"

Runa and I...are attracting the indistinct together?

"What is 'the indistinct'?" I asked.

"You are so considerate of each other that you find it difficult to act. It ties both of you down. If you only look at the matters in front of you, then yes, you are still a virgin fiend like yours truly, and perhaps it is not an exaggeration to say your relationship has seen no development at all. But inside of you two, *it* most certainly exists."

He was speaking in riddles. They left me confused, and it probably showed on my face.

One corner of Kujibayashi-kun's lips lifted, and he hung his head. "As for what 'it' is... It would be too impudent for a staunch fiend such as myself to put it into words."

He looked bashful, and I figured it was difficult for him to say it with me staring at him. I averted my eyes.

By coincidence, the crowd around us had just dispersed. The large window, evenly partitioned with lattice, offered a panoramic view of Tokyo and the blue sky above. It was beautiful enough to take my breath away.

"I do believe some call it 'love,' dare I say."

I was still trembling from the unexpectedly captivating view when Kujibayashi-kun's words reached my ears.

Chapter 1

Runa called me on a Sunday morning.

"Sorry, Ryuto!" she said animatedly.

My third year of university had just started, and Golden Week was right around the corner. We'd planned to go on a date for the first time in a good while. I'd figured it was best to do something more relaxing so Runa didn't get worn out, so we'd been talking about going to see a movie—something we hadn't done in some time.

Since Runa worked in the clothing industry, Golden Week was a busy season for her. She'd be putting in a lot of hours during the holiday, but she had gotten the Sunday before it off in exchange.

"Remember how I said Haruna and Haruka both caught colds last week? They got better right away, but then my grandma got it, and Dad and Misuzu-san have been feverish since yesterday too."

"I see..."

Unfortunate as it was, nothing could be done here. I started to think about spending the week playing multiplayer games on my computer. I hadn't done that in a while either.

"So is it okay if I bring Haruka and Haruna on our date today?"

"Huh...?"

Her words caught me completely off guard.

Thus, we ended up going on a date as four, as Runa brought her sisters along on sudden notice.

"Hi, Ryuto!"

I boarded the train at Station K and met up with Runa on it. She stood in a space marked in pink on the floor with the pictogram of a stroller in the corner of the car, and her hands rested on the handle of a stroller.

As it was an outbound train on a Sunday morning, it was nearly full of people going on outings.

"Look, it's Ryuto!" said Runa, facing the stroller.

It was a double stroller with two seats side by side. The girls in it were being noisy.

"Hi..." I said.

It wasn't my first time seeing the twins—I'd said hi to them several times before when visiting Runa's place. But since I didn't have small children around me on a daily basis, their presence made me a little nervous.

"Aro!"

"Sneh!"

One looked at me and smiled while the other was staring out the window. Apparently being twins didn't, in fact, mean that they were always in sync.

They'd been born in June during my first year of university, which meant they were now a year and ten months old. It still wasn't really feasible to communicate with them by talking.

"Good girl, Haruna! You *should* say 'hello.' And you're right, Haruka, there *is* a snail."

Apparently, Runa could understand what the twins had said. And actually, I couldn't even tell which was which. I was amazed that Runa could tell the difference.

The two girls in the stroller wore matching boots and two-piece outfits but still looked very much like toddlers. Their hair reached their shoulders and was a little thin, but even at a glance, their cute faces and large eyes made it clear that they were girls. If I had to say who they resembled the most in Runa's family, I'd probably say Kurose-san.

"Telling them apart is easy right now! The one with scratches under her eye is Haruna. Looks like she got herself yesterday before I clipped her nails."

"Huh..."

Now that she mentioned it, the one who'd said hello to me did have small red marks under her left eye.

"If you look closely, their faces are a bit different too. They're fraternal twins like me and Maria, but they really look a lot like each other. They even get colds at the same time and recover together

too.”

“Speaking of which, are *you* feeling okay?”

“Yep, still in good shape for now!” Runa nodded vigorously. Then, something seemed to occur to her. “What, were you thinking about the whole ‘idiots don’t catch colds’ thing?”

“What? O-Of course not!”

Her question rattled me—the thought had never crossed my mind.

Looking at me, Runa pouted. “It’s fine, I’m well aware of it myself! Man, I can’t imagine myself being good at studying... Can I really keep up...?”

In order to fulfill her dream of becoming a nursery school teacher, Runa had decided to go to a technical school. She had been too late to get into one in April, so she was preparing to get into a school that began enrollment in October. Because of that, she was in talks with her company about stepping down from her assistant manager position in September and becoming a contractor instead.

That said, the idea of studying and working simultaneously seemed to bring Runa her fair share of worries.

“Don’t worry. And you’re not an idiot,” I said.

Runa’s eyes lit up. “Wait, really? You really mean it?”

“Yeah.”

“It kinda makes me happy to hear you say that! Since you’re so smart and all.”

“That’s not true.”

Runa smiled innocently, and I smiled bashfully in return.

“When I got into university, I realized that there’s no shortage of people smarter than me,” I added.

The academic level of Houo University’s student body was at the top among private universities. Many people who’d aimed for a national university as their first choice—places like Tokyo University, for example—had ended up there. Seeing how intelligent some of the other students were had made me realize I wasn’t all that smart after all.

“And besides, I’d say being able to study or not has a lot to do with your personality,” I said.

"Whatcha mean?"

"I have this friend, Kujibayashi-kun..."

"Ah, I know him! He's the guy you're always talking about. The one who says stuff like 'your stoolie'?" Runa looked proud of herself for remembering.

"Yeah, except it's 'yours truly,'" I replied with a smile. "He's smart, but he also works really hard. He said that when he becomes curious about something, he remembers it and has to look it up later or it will bug him. Maybe it's hereditary since his father is a college professor, but it's also part of his personality."

"Ehh, I'm not like that at all! I start thinking about other things right away and forget about whatever it was!"

"It's the same for me," I said, smiling at Runa's honest reaction. "Looking up things on a regular basis is probably what separates knowledgeable people from the rest. Though, of course, it's also important to have a good memory so you don't forget what you've looked up."

"Wow..." uttered Runa, sounding genuinely impressed.

Even as we talked, her eyes were on the twins. As always, she was doing a good job filling in for their parents.

"You remember things you're interested in too, don't you? Like the names of cosmetics and all... Like, what was that lip thing called again? Tinton?"

"Oh, tint?"

"Yeah, that."

I always forgot things like that no matter how many times she'd told me. It was probably because I had no interest in cosmetics whatsoever.

"People like Kujibayashi-kun, who are interested in learning in general, are best suited for academic pursuits, but I'd say that anyone can look up and remember things that they're interested in," I added.

For example, at one point, I'd been able to recognize dozens of KEN Kids and rattle off their names just by seeing their skins in Yourcraft.

"And as a matter of fact, you can use all those fashion terms

naturally since you're interested in it. And you've managed to achieve something in that sphere, haven't you?"

"I guess...?"

Runa smiled humbly, but I knew it was anything but easy to become an assistant manager in your twenties and even be offered a manager position in Fukuoka—even if she'd rejected it.

"So with that in mind, now that you've realized you want to be a nursery school teacher and you want to work hard for it, I'm sure you'll be fine. I feel like you're suited for studying for a goal like that."

"Ryuto..." Runa looked down at the twins in the stroller, her eyes wavering. Then she looked up at me. "You really are smart. And you have a great personality too."

Her bashful smile made my heart skip a beat.

"You always say things in a way that helps me understand." Then, something seemed to have occurred to her. "You might be a great teacher."

Her words made me recall things that Kurose-san and Umino-sensei had said to me.

"You'd probably make a good teacher or something."

"You're pretty suited to be a teacher, wouldn't you say?"

"Huh... I guess maybe I really am..." I said.

"What, you think so too?"

"Nah... It's just something I get a lot."

Runa's eyes widened. "Then it's *gotta* be your thing, right? Or maybe you don't wanna be one?"

"Well... It's not that I don't want to..." I mulled over my feelings as I replied carefully. "I can talk in private to people I trust, like you, but schoolteachers have to deal with many students at once all by themselves, you know? And considering my personality, I was thinking my heart might not be able to take it."

"Ah... I guess since you're so kind and all. Thinking back on it, lots of teachers at our school didn't really care. It was like stuff was just whatever to them."

"Exactly. They were probably like that because it was the only way they could go on. You have to be pragmatic to some degree

when there's too much stuff to do. I'd imagine that those who can't do that end up quitting," I said.

"Ah... But then what kind of job would be good for you? Since you can help people with the mental side of things, maybe a psychiatrist?"

"I'd have to be in a medical program, so that's not happening..."

"Mmm... This is hard..." Runa folded her arms and tilted her head in thought.

Just then...

"Hey, look at that mom! Isn't she super cute? She's sooo gyaru."

Looking where the voice came from, I saw two girls sitting nearby and looking at Runa. They seemed to be high school students.

"Wow, you're right. I wish I could get her Instagram!"

"Man, I really love families like that. The young dad there looks kind too."

"I know, right? I wanna get married when I'm twenty or so too..."

"To Yu-kun?"

"What? No way. I mean, like, just the other day..."

At that point, their conversation moved onto a different topic and I stopped listening in.

Runa blushed slightly as her mouth twitched. I could tell she'd overheard the girls' conversation too.

"This is kinda embarrassing..." she said bashfully, cheeks still pink. "I guess we do look like a married couple like this."

"Y-Yeah..." I replied, flustered. "I-Is it because we have little children with us?"

Runa giggled.

We had yet to even have sex, so the thought was extremely embarrassing. Either way, this made me aware of how we appeared to other people. I hadn't given the matter much thought when we'd suddenly agreed to go on a date while bringing children along. Runa's parents had had a shotgun wedding as soon as they'd graduated from high school, though, so maybe it wasn't so strange to find married couples around twenty years old who already had children of this age.

But wait, does this mean that people are seeing me as a father

with his wife and twin daughters...?

All right... I'll be the best dad I can today!

As I made that resolution, we reached our date spot for the day—Koshigaya LakeTown, a shopping mall in Saitama prefecture. As I didn't own a car, we could only get here by public transit. The mall was located next to a station and was big enough that children could play around freely.

We rode the elevator, watching people ride the long escalator up to the entrance on the second floor. When we got out, we found ourselves in the large shopping mall with a wide aisle in front of us. There were separate paths leading in and out.

Since it was a weekend, even a place as spacious as this was full of family groups and young people.

Taking the entrance path, I observed the fathers with their families for a while, hoping to pick up some tips on how to act.

"An an aan!" cried out Haruna-chan, pointing at a cart passing by.

It was a children's cart with Anpanman on the front—a pastry-headed superhero from children's books. Carts like these were common in shopping malls. There were other carts around with various characters on them, so there must've been a rental place somewhere.

"Yep, that's Anpanman," replied Runa.

"Nannan! Nannan too!"

"Eh? But you're already in the stroller with Kan-chan."

It seemed Haruna-chan wanted to ride a cart.

"An an an! An an aan!"

Haruna-chan then started to scream. Haruka-chan looked uneasy seeing her sister act like that. Passersby looked at Haruna-chan, wondering what the commotion was all about.

"Fine... You want Anpanman, right? Sorry, Ryuto, I'll bring a cart over, so would you mind pushing this?" said Runa.

"S-Sure..."

Runa left me with the stroller and ran on ahead but quickly returned with a cart. Incidentally, Haruna-chan cried all the while.

"H-Hey look, your big sister brought you Anpanman." I finally had

something to say to Haruna-chan after having been stuck pushing the stroller.

"An an an!" she cheered and stopped crying.

Haruna-chan moved over from the stroller to the cart, and from that point, I managed the stroller while Runa pushed the cart.

Case closed...or so I thought.

"Kantan too! Kantan too!"

This time, it was Haruka who started making a fuss after seeing her sister riding the cart next to her.

"You too? It's not gonna work; there's nobody to push another cart," said Runa.

Runa gave me an awkward smile that said, *I hate when this happens...*

"Kantan! Kantan wants Toramon!"

"You want Doraemon? Like I said, though, we can't."

The carts could only hold one child, and if the twins were to ride different ones, we wouldn't have anyone else to push the stroller.

"Kantan too! Kantan too! Uwaah!"

Before long, Haruka-chan started sobbing. She was gathering looks from people around us, just like when Haruna-chan was crying earlier.

Haruna-chan, meanwhile, was enjoying herself, making happy noises as she turned the steering wheel of the Anpanman cart left and right.

"I can just push the stroller with one hand and the cart with the other," I offered.

Runa's eyes lit up. "What? Really?!"

All right, time to show everyone what this dad-for-a-day is capable of!

At least that was the plan...

However, I ran out of strength after going less than ten meters.

"Sorry, I can't do this after all..." I said.

"I kinda figured. This stroller weighs ten kilos, after all," said Runa with a faint smile. "Okay, I'll leave the stroller with someone. I'll bring over a cart with Doraemon first, though, so could you wait for me here?"

"O-Okay..."

And so Runa brought over a Doraemon cart, Haruka-chan stopped crying and got on it, and then Runa left with the empty stroller.

I moved over to the side of the walkway, parked the carts side by side, and watched over the twins.

"An an an!"

"Toramon!"

They were having fun like that for a while. A while, yes... A mere two or three minutes, to be exact.

Haruna-chan looked at me and spoke in an irritated voice. "Buun! Buun!" She was pointing forward with her hand.

"'Buun'...? Are you telling me to push...?"

I supposed that being stopped ruined the fun of riding a cart for her.

"Okay, here goes. Buun..." I said, not used to using a soft voice like this, and pushed Haruna-chan's cart a little.

She laughed, sounding satisfied.

"Wow...!" I said.

I had finally managed to do something dad-like today. Moved by the fact, I kept pushing Haruna-chan's cart for a while. At which point...

"Kantan too! Buun! Buun!" Haruka-chan, who'd been left behind, started shouting all of a sudden.

"O-Okay...!"

I parked Haruna-chan's cart on the side of the walkway and hurried over to Haruka-chan's cart.

This time, however, Haruna-chan started making a huge fuss. "Buun! Nannan! Buun!"

Moving one led to a stream of complaints from the other.

"Kantan too!"

"Nannan too!"

"I got you! I got you too!"

Man, I want to split myself into two!

I was consumed by pushing one cart after the other, strongly wishing for something I'd never sought even at the height of my

chuunibyou days.

"Ah, there you are. Sorry for the wait!" Runa had finally come back.

"Runa!" My voice was practically a whine.

Runa looked like even more of a goddess in my eyes than usual at that moment.

"Sorry, sorry! I thought this might happen. Thanks."

Runa seemed to have grasped the situation in an instant. Smiling awkwardly, she went over to the parked Doraemon cart and started pushing it.

This calmed down both Haruka-chan and Haruna-chan, and we could now proceed through the mall as planned.

Walking side by side with Runa while pushing carts with children really made it feel like we were a young married couple. It made me restless. If we were to get married in the future and have children, would this be how we'd go shopping on our days off...? The thought was exciting.

Runa looked at my feet. "Ryuto, aren't your sneakers kinda old?" she asked.

"Ah, yeah. I was thinking I should get new ones."

I was wearing the kind of sneakers you were meant to replace after wearing them out. Since I'd bought them half a year ago, they were already pretty battered.

"Well then, I'll choose new ones for you! ♡ There's an ABC-Mart in here, so let's stop by later."

"Oh, okay... Thanks."

"Can you pick out some sandals for me too while we're at it?"

"Sure, if that's what you want."

"Hooray! Okay, let's wait for them to fall asleep first. ♡"

Seeing Runa wink made my pulse rise. This was such a "married couple with children" conversation...

Feeling moved, I did my best to support my one-day family.

We headed to a paid play area on the third floor. It had slides made out of a soft material, as well as a ball pit. It was a place for children to have fun while their parents watched.

It was like a war zone. Being the weekend, the place was packed to the gills with children and parents. If you were to look away for even a moment, you'd lose sight of your child. Children old enough to walk around on their own were constantly running around to various toys and equipment that caught their interest. Runa and I had split up to follow the twins around, and neither of us got even a moment's rest until the sixty-minute time limit that Runa had decided on was up.

"Man, I'm exhausted..." I said, letting the truth slip after we'd gotten out of there.

"Same... I'm glad you were there, though! If I was by myself, I couldn't have handled it without splitting into two." Runa said the same thing I'd thought when pushing the carts earlier and smiled. "Now, let's go eat lunch! Kan-chan, Nan-chan, what do you want?"

"Noonies!"

"Nooooonies!"

"Okay then, udon it is!"

We put the children back on the carts and headed to a food court.

"I guess they're not on weaning food anymore?" I asked.

"They're moving away from it little by little. There's still not much they can eat."

The food court here on the third floor was more spacious than a decently sized buffet area. As it was lunchtime, it was full of customers who were in a vicious struggle to find empty tables.

"Are you leaving? Oh, thank you! Don't worry! Please take your time! Oh, I'll wipe the table down myself! It's okay! Thank you!"

While I stood there fidgeting in my usual introverted fashion, Runa spoke to a family who'd just finished eating and were cleaning up their trays. She managed to secure their table for us. Something told me we'd be like this even after getting married.

"Ryuto, you can go ahead and get lunch."

"What about you?"

"I'm gonna have udon, same as these two. They'll probably leave a lot," Runa replied with an awkward smile while securing the twins down in kids' chairs.

Eating turned out to be quite the ordeal too. Neither of the children could eat on their own yet, so we portioned out some udon for them. Runa fed Haruna-chan while I fed Haruka-chan.

"Wawa."

"Okay, here's a sippy cup with water."

"No! Wawa!"

"That one's mine, Nan-chan. You'll spill it if you drink from a paper cup, so drink from yours, okay?"

"Wawa!"

"Whoa!"

"Oh, come on! Why'd you spill it, Haruka?!"

"I'll get something to clean it up..." I said.

"Thanks. There are some towels over there!"

Once we managed to get through lunch, a terrible fuss was waiting for us.

"Choco!"

"I don't have any. And Nan-chan, didn't your mama say you can't have chocolate yet?" Runa countered.

"Choco!"

"You too, Haruka? You just said you were all done a moment ago, you know."

"Sh-Should I go get some...?" I offered.

"No, they're just being like this because they're sleepy. They always take a nap after lunch."

"O-Oh, okay..."

"Sorry, can you look after them for a moment? I'll go get the stroller back." Runa then hurriedly left the table.

I had to deflect the twins' complaints for ten minutes before she came back. She deftly put them into the stroller and breezily headed over to the walkway.

It took her a while to get back, though.

"Hey..." Runa said once she returned to the food court forty minutes later. She looked so haggard you'd think she'd aged five years since I'd last seen her under an hour ago.

The twins were now asleep in the stroller. Lifting the cover a bit and looking inside, I saw that even while sleeping, Haruka-chan looked like she was reaching out for the handlebar with both hands as if trying to get up. It looked like the aftermath of a battle.

"Good job out there..." I said, handing Runa a cup.

"Oh hey, bubble tea!"

Runa's eyes lit up in an instant. I'd found a bubble tea place in the food court while I'd been waiting for her and bought two.

"Thanks! Man, this is great! My exhaustion's just gone!"

Runa's face looked rejuvenated in an instant and became adorned with her usual smile.

"Guess it was rough..." I said.

"It actually went better than usual, believe it or not. If one has a hard time falling asleep and keeps being loud, they'll wake up the other one. Sometimes they both just keep crying loudly until I get them home."

"Wow..."

Since I'd been with her since morning, I could more or less imagine the hell she was living in.

Now that the lunchtime peak was over, there were a few empty tables here and there at the food court. This area had glass walls, and there seemed to be tables out on the terrace too. Dazzling light shone in, and the weather was perfect for a calm spring date. Runa and I sat facing each other at a table for four with the stroller parked next to it. It was the first time we managed to talk without any urgency today.

"Raising twins seems like a real pain..." I said.

"Yeah. One child is hard enough, so when there's two? Seriously." Runa cracked a smile. "Still, Haruka and Haruna should grow up seeing the outside world just like children who aren't twins, right? Misuzu-san isn't really able to go out and take trains, so I'm taking them out whenever I can, even if I have to do it alone."

"I see... It's really admirable of you."

I wanted to salute Runa for having made that a part of her daily life for nearly two years now. It explained why she hadn't been able to find many opportunities to be with me.

“Then again, when I’m alone, it’s hard to keep track of them all the time. Sometimes they’ll be nasty to someone, and that someone will get angry at them, and then they’ll get depressed.” Sucking up a tapioca pearl through her straw, Runa gave me a mildly awkward smile.

“Well... You should probably go easy on them there. They’re kids and all.”

“But we can’t just tell them that, you know?” While keeping a calm smile on her face, Runa lowered her eyes to her bubble tea. “Kids make a lot of noise and don’t stay still except when they’re asleep. In places where adults want to lead quiet lives, they’re nothing but a nuisance. So it makes sense to me that in Japan nowadays, somewhere that’s utterly filled with adults, there’s not a lot of places for children.”

With her eyes still on the bubble tea, Runa spoke calmly. Her smile didn’t leave her face.

“So if kids take one step out of the house, you have to teach them how to behave, make sure they don’t get lost, protect them from weirdos... Parents out there are probably always feeling the strain. Even inside the house, you have to always be careful so they don’t get into something dangerous. I wanna make it so that parents can forget their worries about their kids and rest—however little I can. I want them to be able to live their lives at their own pace again, just like before their children were born, even if it’s only for a moment.”

At that point, Runa looked up and gazed at me. Her eyes shone with a dignified light of resolve.

“I want them to genuinely believe that they can leave things to Runa-sensei at nursery school and it’ll be fine. I wanna be the kind of teacher who’ll let parents focus on work or family affairs while their kids are at nursery school.”

“Runa...”

She had so much on her own plate every day, but she still thought this way. She was determined to get the future she wanted. Her ambitiousness filled me with reverence for her, even though she was my girlfriend.

I met her gaze. “If it’s you, I’m sure you’ll make it happen,” I said sincerely.

She smiled bashfully and averted her eyes. “To do that, I have to study children and childcare a whole lot. I know Haruna and Haruka more or less, but there’s all kinds of children out there.” Runa looked at me again. “Thanks for today, Ryuto.” She smiled and blushed a little. “It made me realize all over again that you’ll definitely make a good dad.”

“Eh? Really...?”

Hearing Runa say that filled me with happiness.

“Yeah. I wonder if I’ll make a good mom too...?” Cutely resting her chin in her hands, she gazed at me with blushing cheeks.

“You already are,” I told her.

Runa pouted a little. “What’s that supposed to mean? Are you saying that’s how old I look?”

“N-No! I mean... I kinda... I *really* admire you.” Choosing my words carefully, I laid out my honest feelings. “You understand the girls and look after them so well... At this point, it’s like you’re less of a big sister and more of a mother to them. It’s amazing, since you’re the same age as me.”

Runa lifted her chin from her hands and smiled. “Aha. I guess that’s how it ends up when you’re too far apart in age from your siblings.” As she looked at the two girls sleeping peacefully in the stroller, a gentle expression appeared on her face. “You know I have an older sister too, right? She’s seven years older than me and Maria, so by the time I was aware of things around me, she was already pretty grown-up and had everything together. She could do everything for herself, and for me too. I depended on her way too much.”

“Huh.”

The only one in Runa’s family I’d yet to meet was her older sister. Since she lived with her boyfriend outside of Tokyo and rarely visited her family home, apparently even Runa barely ever saw her.

“She was like an extra mother to me,” said Runa. “Twins are more work than children born one at a time, and she covered for my mom when my mom couldn’t deal with everything herself. I’m still really

grateful for it." As she spoke, the look on her face made it clear how deeply she cared for her older sister. "I want you to meet her sometime. I'm really proud of her."

"Yeah, I really want to meet her too."

"Oh, but you'd better not fall for her!" she warned. "I know she's got bigger boobs than me, but still!"

"What?! O-Of course I wouldn't!"

What makes her think I care that much about breasts?

"Just kidding," she said with a smile. "Ever since these girls were born, I've been thinking about my older sister a lot, wondering if this is how she felt when taking care of us." As she looked at the stroller again, a gentle expression appeared on her face. "I wanna give them the same amount of love that she gave us." With that, Runa looked at me and smiled a bit awkwardly. "Our moms may be different...but they're still sisters to me."

She's really grown up, I thought to myself. I wished that I could show Runa the way she was now to her from Christmas Eve of our second year of high school. That was when she'd cried after seeing her father show up with Misuzu-san. *Your father will give you a new family and new happiness. So you're okay*—that was what I wanted to say to her old self.

"Besides, when you see them sleeping like this? They're so cute," said Runa.

As she gazed at the sleeping twins, her profile looked divine to me—like the deeply affectionate face of the Virgin Mary.

I was once again filled with love for Runa.

***

While the twins were asleep, Runa and I quickly but calmly did our shopping around the mall. Once the girls woke up, we started making our way back to the station.

The twins were behaving themselves in the stroller—perhaps they'd had a good nap and were in good moods.

"Oh hey, there's a strawberry festival," said Runa as we walked down a walkway. There was a poster on the wall. "Looks like it's at a

fountain here. I wish I was there... I love strawberries. ♡”

“Do you want to go now?”

Runa shook her head, a faint smile on her face. “Nah, it’s fine. I’m tired after everything.”

I was tired too, so I was glad she’d turned down my offer.

“I wanna go pick strawberries sometime. I’ve never done that, though there’s no real reason I haven’t,” she said.

“Oh. Same—I’ve never gone either.”

“Oh hey! That’s another ‘first’ we get to have together,” Runa said, smiling happily.

Even if we hadn’t made any specific plans, I was already looking forward to it.

“Where can you go pick strawberries? Do you have to go far?”

“Come to think of it, I saw a sign at the LakeTown station earlier about strawberry picking,” I said. “And I saw on TV that Koshigaya has a lot of farmers who grow strawberries.”

“Oh, I see! I wonder if that’s why they’re holding the festival.”

“Maybe.”

As we had this somewhat trivial conversation, we walked slowly to the station. It was like we were relishing our last taste of being a married couple with children.

I looked at Runa while pushing the stroller. At first, I’d had a hard time figuring out how to move it well, but I’d grown pretty used to it in just half a day. Now, even I could push it around on a flat enough surface like in a mall.

“Now that I look at you, you really look like a dad, Ryuto,” Runa teased.

“Really? So I’m finally looking like I know what I’m doing?”

“Yep. ♡ Thanks for today, Ryuto-Papa.” After saying that in a joking manner, Runa’s expression turned serious all of a sudden. “But really, thanks, Ryuto.”

And just as she gave me a sincere smile...

“Ryuto!” came a voice from the stroller. Haruka-chan had turned around and was looking at me.

Seeing that, Haruna-chan pointed at me too. “Ryuto, Ryuto!”

“Ryuto!”

"Wow!" Runa brought her hands together in surprise and looked at me. "They still have a hard time saying people's names properly, so this is unexpected."

"Really? I did it, then!"

Completely exhausting myself for half a day hadn't been for nothing.

"Ryuto!"

"Ryuto!"

The twins kept saying my name as if competing with each other. Their angelic, smiling faces were soothing to look at, and I could feel my heart melt.

Ah, so this is it right here, I thought to myself. No matter how much work it was to raise children, moments like these were what helped people keep at it.

"Aha ha, they're all over you already," said Runa with a happy smile.

We were now close to the entrance of LakeTown and were navigating the crowds on a skyway with glass on both sides of us.

Runa's profile was lit with orange light from the sunset. As I watched her, I imagined the household we'd have one day, and my chest grew hot enough that it'd overpower the evening sun.

***

We were now in front of Runa's house.

"Thanks so much for today," she said.

I'd lost track of how many times she'd thanked me today.

"Sorry our date went like it did, even though we don't get to go on them often," she added.

"It's fine. I made friends with the twins, and it was fun for me too."

The girls were still in a good mood. At the moment, they were eating cookies and having some sort of staring contest.

"All right, so..." I began, letting go of the stroller to get ready to make my way back to the station.

"Ah, wait." Stopping me, Runa took a few steps toward me.

After quickly looking both ways down the road, she swiftly lowered the canopy of the stroller and brought her face close to mine. At that point, I realized what she was going for, so I closed my eyes for a moment, and we shared a kiss. It was a short one, lasting only half a second or so.

"Okay, see you," said Runa after pulling her face away. She had narrowed her eyebrows a bit.

Flushed cheeks, moistened eyes, and a pained expression... Her face made me recall the summer from three years ago.

***

During the summer of my last year of high school, I had been swamped with studying. There *were* times when I was unproductive because I couldn't focus, but I was still at cram school from morning to evening. Even when I didn't have classes, I was holed up in the study room.

In the midst of all that, there were only two days when I managed to make summerlike memories.

That summer, Runa once again got about two weeks off work and went to stay with her great-grandmother in Chiba. Kurose-san went with her. And for the last weekend she was there, me and the rest of our airsoft group visited Runa. The summer festival was taking place that weekend too.

"Ryutooo!"

After we had lunch at Mao-san's beach hut, Luna Marine, the other two guys and I were taking it easy when Runa, who'd gone with Yamana-san and Tanikita-san to play at the beach, came back.

"I saw some crabs near those rocks. Let's go watch them together," she said.

"Huh? Okay..." I replied.

Why crabs? Did I ever say I like crabs? I do *like eating them, I guess...*

With those thoughts on my mind, I got up from my seat.

"Seriously? Crabs?" For some reason, Icchi expressed interest in what Runa'd said. He looked at Nisshi next to him. "You coming?" he

asked him, starting to get up.

"Nah, and you shouldn't either," Nisshi said coldly as he grabbed Icchi's arm to stop him.

I felt sorry for making them be considerate of us.

When we got to the rocks, Runa had a faint sparkle in her eyes.

"We're finally alone together," she said.

She'd brought me to the shallows where the water was up to our knees. Many of the rocks here were far taller than people, making it shady and hiding us from view. The shallows at the beach and near the beach hut had more people there, but here, it was just us. And like Runa had said, it felt like we were finally alone together.

"And you'll already be leaving tomorrow already..." Runa said melancholily.

"Yeah... I've got classes and all."

"Right..."

Hanging her head, Runa took my arms and pressed herself against them.

"W-Wait, Runa..."

I was flustered, being in a pose like I was embracing her from behind.

Her voluptuous, swimsuit-clad body was already too stimulating for the eyes. Touching her smooth skin and her supple hips and breasts like this was going to make my swim trunks take on a different shape.

"Just a bit longer..." Runa said coyly, leaning back into me even more.

"S-Stop..."

Despite Runa's slim figure, her butt was full and round. She wriggled it seductively next to my hips. Feeling it through the thin fabric of my swimsuit was too much.

"Ah. ♡" Runa immediately noticed the change in blood flow happening within me. She turned around and started pressing her hips against me again, from the front this time.

I had been completely defeated. With her playing around with me like that, grinding against my torso, there was nothing I could do.

“Did this make you horny?” she asked.

“Of course it did...” My voice sounded pathetic, and I was sure my face must’ve been red as a tomato too.

“Heh heh. You’re so cute.” Runa seemed to be enjoying herself. Still pressing against me, she wrapped her arms around my waist and smiled happily. “Look—the crabs are watching.”

She motioned toward the rocks. Looking over, I could see small crabs the same color as the stones leaning halfway out of the crevices between them.

Runa, however, was still grinding against me.

“R-Runa...” I pulled my hips away in a hurry. “I... I can’t take much more of this...”

“Ehh?” Though she sounded discontent, Runa moved her arms and hips away from me. Suddenly, a mischievous look appeared on her face, and she looked at me with upturned eyes. “I guess teasing you like this is actually pretty fun. ♡”

“Sheesh...”

When would I ever be able to win against her? Such a day might never come. But oddly enough, I realized I was actually okay with that.

“Hey,” Runa said in a coy tone, prompting me to look at her again. Standing in front of me and facing my way, her eyes were closed, and her chin was lifted slightly.

Seeing her bright cherry-colored lips, I knew what she wanted from me. I briefly sealed her lips with mine. It frustrated me that this was the extent of what I could do right now, and Runa seemed to feel the same way. When she moved her face away from mine, there was a pained look on hers.

“Oh well...” she said. Making a sigh that sounded like the trembling of a heart, Runa looked up at the sky. “Can’t spring come any sooner...?”

Her voice disappeared into the blue summer sky. It dazzled to the point of irony.

***

It had been three years since then, yet I was still causing Runa to make that kind of face. Thinking about it made me feel a bit guilty, but the fire in me immediately washed it away.

It won't be long now.

The thought of it put a spring in my step as I headed to Station A.

I just had to wait until August. There was nothing I was looking forward to as much as our upcoming summer trip to Okinawa.

Chapter 2

After Golden Week ended, I got an email from someone unexpected.

From: Kamonohashi-sensei
There's a drinking party for people in the industry next week. Wanna come?
There won't be any editors there other than my old one, but some famous manga artists and illustrators will be coming. It might be fun for an otaku.

I hadn't seen Kamonohashi-sensei since that meeting at a restaurant with Fujinami-san. That day, he'd asked for my email so he could invite me to outings in the future, but I hadn't thought he'd ever follow up on that.

I sent a reply, asking if he really wanted me to come. A response came right away.

From: Kamonohashi-sensei
Of course!
If I don't bring someone young every now and then, they're gonna see me as an old nuisance and stop inviting me lol
You can bring a friend if you want. Especially if it's a girl lol

"Hmm..."

The email had come at the end of my shift at the editing department. Staring at the screen, I wondered what to do. I *did* have a mild interest in it, but honestly, it was scary to go alone.

Though having said that...

"Is something wrong, Kashima-kun?" Kurose-san asked me.

I must've been looking glum.

"It's nothing..." I replied, but then I realized this wasn't something I needed to keep secret.

Kurose-san's shift was over too. We left together, and I told her about the email.

At night, the road in front of Iidabashi Station was full of people on their way home from work. Kurose-san and I would sometimes have dinner together, but it was far from an everyday thing. Today, we were just heading to the station.

"Huh, that's nice. Why not go?" she asked, eyes sparkling. "If you actually become an editor at some publisher, you might not get many opportunities to talk to people outside your company and the artists and writers you edit for. You should expand your network while you still can. That's why I wish I could've gone to that meeting with Kamonohashi-sensei too..."

Fujinami-san had told her about the meeting I'd gone to a few days after the fact, and Kurose-san had been extremely bitter about it. I'd thought she was the shy type like me, if anything, but that had made me realize that when it came to work, she was ambitious. Perhaps that was how badly she wanted to become an editor.

"Then... Do you want to come too? He said I can bring a friend."

"I do!" she immediately replied.

"I haven't even told you *when* yet..."

"I said I'll go. Even if I have plans, I'll move them to another day."

"O-Okay then... I'll send you a copy of the mail later."

Thus, it was decided that I'd go with Kurose-san to what would be my first industry meetup.

***

It was held in Shinjuku, on the fifth floor of a building within walking range of the station that was full of restaurants. Our meeting place was an ordinary chain izakaya. After I introduced myself as "Numata" at the entrance—whoever's name that may have

been—a waiter led me to a large room in the back.

The four long tables in the space already had about twenty people seated at them. At a glance, there were only thirty to forty seats in the room, so the scale of the event was smaller than expected. Since they'd even invited a nobody like me, I'd assumed there'd be hundreds of people here.

Kamonohashi-sensei had yet to arrive. Kurose-san and I stood next to the door, fidgeting.

"Nice to meet you. Here's my card," a man said as he presented his business card to us.

The card said he was a manga artist and an illustrator. I liked manga, but I couldn't remember manga artists' names if they weren't as big as Kamonohashi-sensei.

I bowed several times while accepting it, saying, "Ah, I'm sorry, I'm just a university student working part-time at an editing department, so I don't have my own business cards..."

The event started as pretty much a business card exchange party. Kurose-san and I felt embarrassed as we received one after another.

Once enough people had arrived and the card exchanges had ended, the person who appeared to be the organizer addressed everyone. He was the first person who'd given us their business card tonight.

"Everyone, please take a seat. I'd like to propose a toast," he said.

Still fidgeting, Kurose-san and I sat next to each other in some nearby empty seats.

As for Kamonohashi-sensei, he showed up right after everyone had sat down and the toast was held.

"Sorry, everyone. Got stuck in traffic," he said with a smile. He was calm and collected as he took one of the unoccupied seats. When he saw me, he raised his hand a bit.

So yeah—we were surrounded by complete strangers.

A man sitting across the table from us spoke up. "You said you work at an editing department? Which one?" he asked.

According to his business card, he was a manga artist by the name of Sato Naoki. He looked to be in his early thirties. He was

good-looking with fair skin, and a shapely face. Sato-san came across as being a city-type. He seemed tall too, judging by how high he sat. I had kind of assumed most people here would more or less be introverts (not that I was one to talk), but the way he spoke with a constant smile on his face made him radiate an adultlike composure. This may have been my own prejudice, but his black, center-parted hairstyle—which was said to only suit good-looking guys—suggested that he had a lot of self-confidence.

It was safe to say I didn't have any friends like him.

"We work for *Crown Magazine* at Iidabashi Publishing," replied Kurose-san.

"Huh..." Sato-san widened his eyes. "There was this one Cromag editor back in the day; does 'Kinoshita' ring any bells?"

"No... I don't think there is anybody by that name right now."

"Oh, really? What about Utsumi-san? The assistant to the editor-in-chief."

"I'm not sure... The current assistant is Suzuki-san."

"Huh..." He tilted his head in confusion. "Has it really been that long? That was when my work got an anime, so that was only about five years ago..."

When Kurose-san heard him say that, she looked astonished. "A work of yours was adapted into an anime?"

"Yeah. Two of them—my first one and one from five years ago," he explained.

"Wow, that's amazing!"

"It really is," I added.

Sato-san's eyes didn't stray from Kurose-san at this point, but as I had nothing else to do, I felt like saying something there.

"What were the titles?" asked Kurose-san.

"Well, there's..."

I'd never heard of either of the titles he mentioned. They sounded like harem rom-coms with lots of girls.

"You don't know them? My first work even got a second season..."

"I'm sorry for my ignorance. I'll look into them sometime."

Kurose-san gave a humble reply, but I didn't like the guy's self-

important air. Then again, I supposed that a manga artist with two anime adaptations *was* much more important than a university student working part-time in an editing department.

Sato-san was smiling even more now—maybe the alcohol had kicked in. "You said your name's Kurose-san, right? You're really cute," he said.

"Eh? O-Oh, thank you."

"Like seriously cute. I do feel like you're missing something, though."

"Huh? What would that be?" Kurose-san asked in earnest.

Sato-san grinned. "Hmm... Sex appeal, I guess?"

"What...? How would I get that?"

"I dunno. Have your boyfriend bang you a lot, maybe?"

While Sato-san grinned, Kurose-san's expression froze up.

Of course she'd recoil at that. *What's up with this guy, saying stuff like that to someone he's only just met?*

"I don't have one..." Kurose-san replied stiffly.

"Really? How long's it been?" asked Sato-san.

"I've never had one."

"Whaaat, really? You're not kidding?" he said, still grinning at her.

The person sitting directly across from Kurose-san got up, perhaps feeling they couldn't be part of this conversation with how focused Sato-san was on her. Since Sato-san had been sitting directly across from me, he took this opportunity to move over to the freed-up seat.

"So anyway, Kurose-san," he began.

"Y-Yes?" Looking a little put off, Kurose-san nonetheless maintained her composure in a way that wouldn't be considered rude.

And as he kept grinning and talking to her while I drank my cola highball, staring at the empty seat across from me...

"Hey there. How's the party?"

Kamonohashi-sensei sat in the aforementioned seat, bringing a beer mug with him. He was a big man, and his chair creaked under his weight.

"Kamonohashi-sensei... Thank you for inviting us today."

“Sure. Having fun?” he asked.

“Yes...”

I still hadn’t really figured out how to have fun here, but that was the only way I could reply.

At that point, Sato-san noticed that Kamonohashi-sensei had sat next to him and broke off the conversation with Kurose-san.

Sato-san turned to face him. “It’s been a while, Kamonohashi-sensei,” he said.

Kamonohashi-sensei looked at him. “Ah, Sato-kun. When did we last see each other?”

“At this year’s New Year’s party at Otowa Publishing.”

“Right. Your editor’s Hayashida-kun, correct?”

“Yes.”

“So, how are sales?”

“I manage, thanks to everyone’s help.”

“Come on, what’s all the gloom for?!” Kamonohashi-sensei asked. “Say you’ve sold a hundred million copies or something!”

“Well, things aren’t that rosy...”

In a complete change of face from how Sato-san had been acting toward us, he sat with his knees together and behaved himself. He was forcing a smile. Maybe any young manga artist would act like this in front of Kamonohashi-sensei, but his swift change of attitude made me cringe.

Still talking to Sato-san, Kamonohashi-sensei looked at me and said, “This guy works part-time at Cromag’s editing department.”

“Yes, so these two said. Are you acquainted? I spoke with him a moment ago.”

Man... I don’t think I can come to like Sato-san after all.

“And this young lady must be your friend Kurose-san, right?” Kamonohashi-sensei asked.

“Yes, that’s her.” I nodded, and Kurose-san bowed slightly from next to me.

Staring intently at her, Kamonohashi-sensei took a swig from his mug. “I see, I see... Gotta say, she’s really pretty. At first, I thought you were a voice actress or an idol. But then again, I can’t get it up to anyone other than middle-aged women with big bellies these

days. Gah hah hah!”

All of us—meaning Kurose-san, Sato-san, and I—could only smile politely at his open sexual harassment that was behind the times. Then again, this was the kind of man Kamonohashi-sensei was.

“Besides, my bladder’s gotten really small recently. Whoa...” He put down his mug and got up, but his legs wobbled—maybe because of the alcohol. “Ohh...”

“Are you okay?” I asked, standing up too. I lent him my shoulder and escorted him to the bathroom.

“Sorry about that. I’ve grown so weak to both the bottle and women. Can’t do anything at all these days.”

I recalled reading on Wikipedia the other day that he was sixty-two. Though he still looked plenty energetic, he must’ve felt weaker than he’d been in his youth.

When we returned from the bathroom, other people had taken our seats, so he and I sat down at a different table and ordered new drinks. Kurose-san and Sato-san were still sitting across from each other where we’d left them and were having a private conversation.

The party ended after roughly three hours. I never learned who’d organized it or what the criteria had been for attendees.

For the second half of the event, I’d sat next to Kamonohashi-sensei, saying hi to various manga artists every now and then. Compared to newcomers who’d only just had their debuts or those who focused on the doujin market, I’d found I had to be more careful with artists whose works I’d heard of but had never read. These people were famous in the industry—their works had anime adaptations, and they had many fans. It felt rude to make them talk to an ordinary university student who barely knew anything.

In the end, I’d found myself just sitting there, listening to Kamonohashi-sensei bragging about this and that with a mix of self-deprecation as he talked to young manga artists. He was acting the same way as he had during the previous meeting with him that I’d attended.

I reflected on the fact that I hadn’t read enough manga despite working in the industry—even if it was only a part-time job.

When everyone paid their dues and gathered at the door to start heading out, I noticed that Kurose-san was still talking to Sato-san.

He really was tall, now that I saw him standing up. He was near Sekiya-san's height. With his light stoop and his lanky figure, he looked totally like the type of guy who women would be into, so seeing him having a fun conversation with Kurose-san kind of put me on guard every time.

Wondering what they were talking about, I mixed in with the crowd and nonchalantly approached them, trying to avoid being noticed. I strained my ears to listen in. They were holding their phones—it looked like they were exchanging contact information.

"Thanks. I'll message you," said Sato-san and put away his phone. His gaze fell to Kurose-san's hands as she held on to her phone. "By the way, you don't do your nails?"

"Huh?" Kurose-san looked a little surprised. Perhaps she'd rarely had guys ask her about something like that. "Well... My sister asks me the same thing, I guess."

Runa *did* like flashy nails.

"I have weak nails and can't use false ones. I feel like they're not suited for regular nail care either."

"Huh..."

Despite being the one who'd asked her, Sato-san didn't sound very interested in Kurose-san's reply. "Still, if you care for them more, I think it'll make you even more attractive." Suddenly, he bent down and brought his face close to her ear. "Don't let your cuteness go to waste."

As she watched him quietly say that with a smile on his handsome face, Kurose-san blushed.

What?! She was so put off by him until just a moment ago—when did the distance between them shrink so much?

While this made me confused, it also fueled my irritation at the man named Sato Naoki.

What's with this guy?! Is he really a manga artist?! Aren't all of those introverts?!

That thought might've been rude for someone working in a manga editing department, but the way he was acting was such a

far cry from the mental image I'd had of male manga artists.

Still, the way he'd approached Kurose-san had hardly been slick and mature, so I suspected he was an otaku who'd had issues growing up.

"Sato-san is an interesting man, wouldn't you say?" Kurose-san said all of a sudden.

We'd left the izakaya and were walking through the nighttime shopping district to the station together.

"Huh... You really think so...?" I asked.

"Yeah. He's hot but a little weird. He said he was lame as a student and wasn't popular with girls at all. So now, he draws rom-com manga for boys to vent all that."

"I see..."

I supposed that somewhat explained the twisted vibe he'd given off.

"But his works were made into anime, and he's popular too. He told me a lot about the industry."

"Huh..."

So their conversation was unexpectedly serious?

When I thought about it, Kurose-san always ended up as a romantic object of interest for guys because of her looks—in ways both good and bad. They'd come on to her in pushy ways or keep their distance and spread rumors about her. Unlike Runa, who would go up and chat to anyone the same way, Kurose-san was the shy type—there'd been an overwhelmingly high number of guys in our class who could only act in either of those two ways toward her.

Perhaps guys like Sato-san, people who could talk to her normally and tell her about an industry she was interested in, were of great value to her.

"Thanks for inviting me today, Kashima-kun." Kurose-san's smile was so cute that it made my heart skip a beat for the first time in a good while. "I'm glad I could come." She brought a hand to her mouth, smiling and looking absent-minded.

Seeing her like that, I couldn't shake off the feeling that

something was about to begin.

***

When I showed up to the editing department for work the next day and saw Kurose-san, her hair looked different. She'd had it tied up at the back of her head in a ponytail.

"You don't change your hairstyle a lot," I said. It was so different that even I noticed.

She smiled happily. "Sato-san said he likes ponytails."



That threw me off, as I hadn't expected his name to come up.

"Huh? R-Really?"

Kurose-san was in a good mood. "I'm going to have dinner with him after work today."

"What? You mean, *alone* with him...?"

"Well, I don't know... If he doesn't bring anyone, then yeah, I guess?"

It's only been a day. You work way too fast, Sato Naoki.

"O-Okay... Say hi to Sato-san for me..."

It wasn't like I wanted to say hi to him, but I couldn't think of anything else to say at that moment.

"Okay, see you later, Kashima-kun!"

When our working hours came to an end, Kurose-san immediately packed up and left the editing department ahead of me. It was unusual because until today, she'd always waited for me so we could leave together.

"Yeah, see you..." I replied.

As she disappeared from sight, her ponytail swayed much like how a happy dog would wag its tail. Watching it, I couldn't shake off an uneasy feeling.

Fujinami-san had been slow in getting ready to leave work today. He had just ended a call and put his phone down on his desk.

I called out to him. "Fujinami-san, do you have a moment?"

"Ah, Kashima-kun. What's up?"

He didn't seem to be in a hurry, so I came to the conclusion that making some small talk was okay.

"Do you know a manga artist by the name of Sato Naoki? He said he had an editor from Cromag before..."

"Ah, the author of *Imokore*?"

That was the abbreviated title of Sato-san's hit work that had been adapted into an anime five years ago.

"Yes, him."

"What about him?" asked Fujinami-san.

I scanned our surroundings. It was seven in the evening, and there were still employees at roughly every fourth desk—there

weren't all that many people here. It felt like it'd be okay to talk about personal matters in this situation.

"Well, it's just...I talked to him at a drinking party yesterday. Kamonohashi-sensei invited me to go," I said.

"Huh, there was a party? Nobody invited me..."

"Oh, they said they didn't invite any active editors."

Seeing me get flustered, Fujinami-san smiled. "Yeah, I figured. So, what about him?" he asked.

"I was just wondering what kind of person he is, and if he might do some work for Cromag..."

"Oh, I see you're getting passionate about work. You want to bring Sato-san to us? You're suited to be an editor after all, huh?" he asked teasingly. When he saw me look a bit anxious again as I started looking for what to say in response, he continued speaking. "But anyway, to be real with you..." Fujinami-san looked around us and greatly lowered his tone. "I've heard from someone who's worked here longer than me that he's...trouble when it comes to..."

Cutting himself off there, Fujinami-san lifted his pinky finger. That was a gesture meaning "women"—I'd previously seen Yamana-san use it at one point too. I guessed she wasn't the only one who still used it nowadays.

"There used to be a girl in our department who was an editor for Sato-san." With that, Fujinami-san pulled over a chair from a nearby unoccupied desk and beckoned me to sit down.

Now that we were sitting right next to each other and could talk in secret, Fujinami-san lowered his voice even more, switching to a complete whisper.

"This is just between you and me, okay? Apparently, they would meet up over drinks to discuss work, and afterward, Sato-san would invite her to a hotel. She got fed up with that, and the assistant to the editor-in-chief took over for her. But then, Sato-san stopped sending in storyboards, saying that because he'd worked out the plot with his previous editor, he couldn't draw if he had to work with someone else. And sure, if he was exceptionally talented, the assistant would've bowed to him and begged him to keep drawing somehow, but that wasn't really the case. His works are kind of

samey, you could say... When he made his debut, stories like that were popular and he got to ride that wave, but now, they feel kind of dated. They're just classic harem rom-coms, you know? And sure, the girls are cute, but they suffer from same-face syndrome. Of course, there are people into that, and I'm sure there's some demand for that sort of thing no matter what year it is, but at any rate, it's not something we want in Cromag. So in the end, we decided to cut ties with Sato-san."

I sighed—this was a rather unpleasant inside story. Perhaps my hunch had been correct.

"But really, this is just between you and me. I only told you about this because you might become an editor in the future," Fujinami-san added.

I hadn't decided on my future yet, but Fujinami-san's expectations for me made me genuinely happy, so I bowed like a good boy.

"Um, how common are people like Sato-san?" I asked.

"Not at all. Pretty rare, I'd say. I don't know anyone else like him," replied Fujinami-san with a smile. His voice sounded more normal too. "Then again, I hear he got married and had a kid after that, so he's probably settled down by now."

That caught me by surprise. "What? Are you still talking about Sato-san?"

Fujinami-san looked surprised by my reaction. "Yeah? At least, I'm pretty sure that's what I heard..." A distant look appeared in his eyes as if he weren't completely certain.

Well, this got kinda ambiguous.

"Okay. Thank you," I said, getting up and returning the chair to its original place.

"Thank *you* for listening," replied Fujinami-san with a pleasant smile. At times like this, he was like a different person compared to how he was during proofreading.

Leaving the building and walking through Iidabashi at night, I sighed.

Even if Sato-san couldn't behave himself around women—or if he

was married and had children—I wouldn't mind if all he wanted to do was simply be friends with Kurose-san.

"Don't let your cuteness go to waste."

I remembered the self-satisfied expression on his face as he looked at her.

"I'm glad I could come."

And that look on Kurose-san's face too.

"They're not going to be just friends..."

I couldn't be sure that my hunch was correct, given that I was an introvert with no romantic experience with anyone other than Runa, but that was the only conclusion I could come to after having watched them from nearby that day.

I had to wonder how much Kurose-san knew.

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With no regard for my concerns, Kurose-san was still in a good mood the next day when she came to work.

Once our shifts were over and we left the building, she immediately asked, "Hey, do you want to eat together somewhere today?"

"Sure, I guess..."

I figured she wanted to tell me about something. Perhaps this was convenient—I'd been curious about the thing with Sato-san too...

"Where do you usually eat out with Runa?" Kurose-san asked while waiting for her beer.

We'd gone to our usual cozy izakaya.

"Huh? Well... It depends, but I guess we often go to coffee places? Runa likes those. We go to family restaurants too."

"I see..." Kurose-san didn't seem very interested in my answer despite asking the question herself. "Sato-san took me to a restaurant in a high-rise yesterday." Her hands were next to her mouth and her eyes were lowered as she spoke. "We sat side by side at a window counter and ate while looking out into the night all

along... It was wonderful."

Kurose-san's cheeks were rosy. She looked like a completely different person from the girl I'd seen knock back mug after mug in this exact same izakaya, banging them on the table as she did.

Her question for me had been nothing but a lead-up to this. I could tell that this was what she'd wanted to talk about.

"Wasn't a place like that expensive?" I asked.

"I guess. Sato-san paid for me, though. I don't know when he took care of the bill. When I took out my wallet, he said he'd paid already. Maybe he did it when I was in the bathroom?"

"Huh..."

I'd never done something like that. Judging by the way Kurose-san was acting, maybe pretentious moves like that made girls happy. Then again, in my and Runa's case, Runa had a full-time job and earned more than me. It would probably have been pathetic if I tried it since it'd be clear as day that I was pushing myself over the limit. It wasn't worth trying.

"So anyway, we were on the sidewalk, and a car was coming up from behind us. Sato-san said, 'Watch out,' and moved so he was closer to the road."

While I thought things through, Kurose-san kept talking about her crush. That's right—that's exactly what this was. She wasn't touching the beer she'd ordered at all. Instead, she kept talking with a dreamy smile on her face.

Given the situation, I didn't know if I should be drinking my own lemon sour. This was the place we usually went to for drinks, so at some point, the waiters almost completely stopped putting the beer mugs on my side of the table by mistake.

"That's adults for you, I guess. Sato-san said he's thirty-two. It's been ten years since he published his first work, and he's got two anime adaptations under his belt too. It's so amazing..."

Kurose-san was enraptured. It didn't seem like she knew that Sato-san was married.

Should I tell her now, before it's too late? But what if Fujinami-san was just wrong...?

My hand hovered near my lemon sour—I still wasn't sure if I

should reach all the way for it or not. The reasons for my indecision had now grown by one as there was something else I couldn't make up my mind on.

"I've never been around a guy who's called me cute every time we saw each other before," said Kurose-san as if talking to herself.

Surprised, I pulled back my hand and stared at her. "Really?" I asked.

She'd be a stunning beauty in anyone's eyes—I'd assumed she would've heard things like that countless times throughout her life. I even remembered how all our classmates had praised her looks when she'd transferred to our school.

"I get it a lot from girls," she said. "Especially the old lady who lives nearby." Smiling a little, Kurose-san lowered her gaze to the table. "Not the boys, though... Especially not when there's nobody else around."

"Huh..." I said, surprised.

Kurose-san looked up at me all of a sudden. "Even you said it to me just once, I guess."

"I did?"

"When I asked you why you fell in love with me in our first year of middle school, you said it was because I was cute."

Her words made an old memory resurface.

"Right..."

If I remembered correctly, it had been during the autumn of our second year of high school. My friendship with her had created a rift in my relationship with Runa, and I'd resolved to quit being friends with Kurose-san.

"Can I ask you one last thing? What made you fall in love with me in our first year of middle school?"

"You were cute."

"That made me happy. Even though you said it when you decided to stop being friends with me." An awkward smile appeared on Kurose-san's face, and she lowered her eyes again. "Sato-san has already beaten every other guy in terms of how many times he's called me cute."

Well, yeah. Normal guys wouldn't be able to say that.

“He keeps saying I’m cute, patting my head... Nobody’s ever done that to me in my life.”

A guy wouldn’t normally be able to do that. At the very least, not me or Kujibayashi-kun. Probably not Fujinami-san either. After all, Kurose-san was exceptionally beautiful. Just her being in front of him would make a guy nervous. She also had the brains to be attending Risshuin University.

Kurose-san was perfect as a woman and would be out of any guy’s league. It felt like saying “you’re cute” to her face—words you’d use with a child—was simply rude. A guy like Sato Naoki could do that—a man significantly older than her who was tall, attractive, was recognized by the masses for his work, and who maybe even already had a family of his own. Nobody else could possibly bring himself to act that way toward Kurose-san.

“I thought I’d be scared of a guy touching me, but when he patted my head... If it was him, I...”

“H-Hey, slow down, Kurose-san.” I hurried to stop her, as she was getting too excited all by herself. “Do you think Sato-san might be married? I heard that from someone, but maybe I got it wrong.”

Regardless of whether I liked his personality or not, I couldn’t support Kurose-san’s feelings if we didn’t make this clear.

She went silent all of a sudden. This told me that she probably knew something.

“He did say he has a girl...” she said with a pained look on her face. Her expression said she was dealing with something that made her uncomfortable. “I know about her. He has her on his lock screen. Her name is Aoi—she’s two.”

“Oh, okay...”

So he’s not hiding that, huh.

I couldn’t tell if it was honorable or sly of him, but it was slightly relieving to hear.

“But then...don’t you think this is getting pretty bad?”

“What is?” replied Kurose-san, still looking miffed.

“I mean... You’re falling in love with him, aren’t you?”

More like she was probably *already* smitten.

“But he said he doesn’t see his wife as a woman anymore,”

Kurose-san countered, seeming more stubborn than I'd expected.

"No 'buts'," I said, growing disconcerted. "You realize he's married, right? That's *really* important. If he really doesn't see his wife as a member of the opposite sex, don't you think he should leave her before dating other women?"

My argument was too sound. Kurose-san went silent for a moment.

"It's not really like that," she said eventually.

"Huh?"

"I know our feelings aren't the same. I know my love is one-sided."

Her words made me recall something she'd said to me once.

"I decide who I fall for and who I continue to like. My feelings are mine to do with as I please, wouldn't you agree?"

"I'll keep liking you as much as I want. That's all."

I'd forgotten she had this stubborn side to her.

"Okay..." I said.

So just like how she kept loving me in high school while I dated Runa, she once again wants to lose herself in a hopeless love?

But it wouldn't have been as bad if being hopeless was the only problem here. What I was worried about was that Sato-san was probably a different kind of guy from me.

"You know..." Once again, Kurose-san looked like a maiden in love. She must've taken the end of that awkward moment as a cue to go on. "He said he's swamped with work and plans to hole himself up at a hotel. That's amazing, right? Like, that's a popular manga artist for you. His work environment is fully digital, so he can send drafts to his assistant from anywhere."

"Huh..."

So there were still people who'd put themselves up at hotels in this day and age? That was something I'd only expect from novelists in the distant past.

"He even told me to come see him. Jokingly, of course."

"You're not going, right...?" I asked nervously.

Kurose-san chuckled, finding it funny. "No. I don't even know where he's staying." Averting her eyes somewhat awkwardly, her

gaze landed on her mug. “Oh, my beer’s already here.” It’d been sitting on the table for about eight minutes—its foam was all gone. She picked it up and forced a smile for me. “Let’s drink. Cheers!”

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After that evening, some time passed. While I was curious about what was going on with Kurose-san, I went about my daily life as normal.

Since I was now working at the editing department four days a week—all weekdays—I saw Kurose-san practically every day outside of weekends. Wednesdays were exceptions, and one Wednesday, I received a message from her.

Maria: Sato-san invited me to go eat at the hotel he’s staying at once he’s finished his draft

“What?!” I quietly let out after casually checking my phone during a lecture.

It was late May, and as always, the May blues were running rampant throughout the university. There weren’t many students in the lecture hall, so it was unlikely anyone had heard me.

As it was the end of the fifth period, it was almost six in the evening, but it was still bright outside. The summer solstice was a month away.

Maria: I asked a girl I know what she thought and she said he definitely just wants sex, so I shouldn’t go. What do you think, though?

I gulped after reading her messages.

Ryuto: What hotel is that, by the way?

After I sent my reply, Kurose-san responded right away. She was

supposed to be at the editing department, but it looked like she couldn't focus on work right now.

Maria: It's not some weird one
Maria: It's this

I clicked on the URL and ended up on the website of a prestigious high-class hotel—I seemed to remember that weddings were held there.

He's been drawing in a place like that? His wealth was incredible. I supposed that was what it meant when two of your works had been turned into anime.

Was I just overthinking things here? Was I just linking everything to sex because I was a virgin?

He invited a girl to a meal at the hotel he was staying in... Wouldn't he invite her up to his room after that? And it was hard to imagine things not coming to *that* at that point... After all, he was the kind of guy who had invited his own editors to hotels. Even if he was married now, I couldn't imagine that he'd suddenly become more sensible.

Ryuto: I agree with that girl you asked...

After I sent the message, there was no reply for a while. Growing concerned, I sent another one.

Ryuto: Are you planning to go?

If I had to guess, she wanted to but couldn't make up her mind because she wasn't sure of his real intentions. That was probably why she'd asked her friend and had messaged me about it too.

She loved Sato-san and wanted to have sex with him, but she didn't want to be merely someone he had an affair with. If he was serious about her and considering getting divorced, then she was prepared to enter an illicit love affair—perhaps that was how Kurose-

san felt.

The fifth period of classes ended, and she'd yet to reply.

I grew impatient for some reason and kept staring at my phone every now and then as I walked quickly to the station. I mixed into the crowd of office workers on their way there from work.

Then, I got a message from somebody else instead.

Runa: Gratz on getting through classes!
Runa: I just got home myself

Runa didn't have work today. She'd said she had to go to a salon for herself, then Yamana-san's nail salon, and then pick up her sisters from nursery school before coming home.

"Runa..."

Should I tell her about Kurose-san? It feels like a good idea.

I didn't know if Kurose-san had talked to her about Sato-san, but given the circumstances, I was okay with potentially straining the two sisters' friendship again with this. I couldn't see how I could stop Kurose-san by myself.

With that in mind, I was about to call Runa. However, I suddenly received some new messages.

Maria: I'm thinking of going
Maria: I have faith in him

This startled me.

Ryuto: Wait, think about it
Ryuto: I didn't tell you before, but word is that Sato-san was a huge womanizer before getting married
Ryuto: He's definitely not serious about you!

I instantly sent an emotional reply, and Kurose-san responded right away.

Maria: That was before he married, no?
Maria: He’s hot, so I get that he sleeps around a bit
Maria: I’ve made up my mind, so leave me alone!
Maria: I thought you’d support me in this

Her messages took me aback. She’d been that one who’d asked for advice, and now she was telling me to leave her alone? What was I supposed to do with this hazy feeling?

Somehow, it began to feel stupid for me to worry about her. If this was how she was going to be, then I didn’t care anymore. If Sato-san used her for sex, she’d be the one to suffer for it.

I put my phone back in my pocket. I was about to head to the station when...

“Kashima-dono,” came a voice from behind me.

I turned around to find Kujibayashi-kun standing there.

“Oh? What’s up?” I asked.

“I partook of a dinner in front of the station and was bound for the university. My intent was to visit the library.” After giving that brief reply, Kujibayashi-kun regarded me with suspicion. “And what of thee, pray tell? The fierce look on thy visage made me hesitate to hail thee.”

“Oh...”

So this was why he’d called out to me from behind. Perhaps I’d been so mentally absorbed that I hadn’t noticed that I’d walked past him on his way from the station.

“There’s some stuff going on with Kurose-san...” I replied.

“With Lady Kurose?” repeated Kujibayashi-kun, sounding interested. He seemed to still have a thing for her.

“Yeah. So...”

It wasn’t the kind of topic to discuss on a busy road where people on their way from work continued to file past. We went to a nearby fast-food restaurant instead.

“...and that’s how it is,” I said, finishing my concise explanation to Kujibayashi-kun.

We were sitting at the counter right next to the register, facing the street.

Kujibayashi-kun had let his head hang as he listened to my story from start to finish.

"And since she said that, I've been feeling like just letting her do as she likes," I added.

Even after I was done talking, Kujibayashi-kun silently stared at his vanilla milkshake for a while. That was unusual for a smart guy like him.

Then again, this self-proclaimed virgin fiend had spent six years in an all boys' school. The romantic matters of married people were probably in a whole different dimension for him—though the same went for me. Perhaps he didn't know what to say.

As I watched the condensation on his milkshake's paper cup drip onto the table, I gradually regained my composure.

It had made me angry that Kurose-san had told me to leave her alone, but either way, there was nothing I could do at this point. In the end, deciding how to deal with Sato-san was up to her.

I looked at my phone for no particular reason. It was past 6:30 now, and her shift would soon be over. Once she stepped out of the editing department, she would surely head to the hotel where Sato-san would be waiting for her. And while she'd be happy to see the one she loved, she'd be feeling a hint of nervousness too.

All I could hope for was that, as an adult, Sato-san had the bare minimum of decency in him. With that thought on my mind, I was about to change the topic, but Kujibayashi-kun finally spoke up.

"Can this Sato fellow bring Lady Kurose happiness?" he asked. His eyes were still on his milkshake.

"Him? Nah, no way. He's married," I replied instantly, recalling what he'd been like at the drinking party.

"And yet perhaps Lady Kurose would disagree with that assessment."

"Huh?"

"One cannot believe what one cannot see. Including the future."

I looked on, wondering what Kujibayashi-kun was talking about. Still staring at his milkshake, he went on, speaking haltingly.

"There may be a discrepancy in the future you see and the future Lady Kurose sees," he offered.

"But wait. He has a wife and a child, and he's still making a pass at a girl much younger than him. Of course he's trash. Plus, he previously went for his editor too, even if he was single back then."

"Does Lady Kurose know of this?"

"No..."

Even if I were to tell her now, it felt like it would be too weak an argument to convince someone blinded by love. I went silent with that thought on my mind, but Kujibayashi-kun went on.

"I may be a virgin fiend, but even I am familiar with the blooming of love within. I have also experienced it vicariously many a time through literature. This emotion is deeply rooted in one's nature. It does not go away so easily simply because one is married," he explained.

"Hm...?"

What does he mean by that? Don't tell me he's trying to defend Sato-san...?

"However," Kujibayashi-kun continued, "one must go about expressing such an emotion in a different way. Were this Sato truly smitten with Lady Kurose, then he must conceive of ways to bring her happiness in spite of his married status."

"Wouldn't that, at the very least, not involve inviting her to the hotel he's staying in?"

Kujibayashi-kun nodded. "Indeed, and thus his love is a false one. Alas, Lady Kurose sees not that fact as of yet."

He was probably right. Sato-san had made sure to only show himself to her in a good light too.

"Kashima-dono."

"Hm?"

Kujibayashi-kun unexpectedly called my name, and I looked at him.

He shook his head a few times, appearing hesitant, and then spoke with a look of resolve on his face.

"Would you...stop Lady Kurose?"

"Huh?"

I looked at him, taken by surprise. He looked at me too before immediately lowering his eyes to the table.

"She is a tenderhearted damsel. She endured it when yours truly bored her for two hours, all while indicating that she was listening."

He must've been talking about when they'd first met each other. He'd given her a two-hour lecture on Mori Ogai.

"It is difficult to imagine that a maiden as kind as her could simply turn down the man she seeks in both mind and body."

Perhaps.

"I thought I'd be scared of a guy touching me, but when he patted my head... If it was him, I..."

I'd never seen her make such a face. Well, perhaps that wasn't quite true. Maybe she'd done the same back then, that time when she'd approached me in the gym storage room... It had been dark, though—I hadn't managed to get a good look.

"She has not left my mind since then."

Kujibayashi-kun's words brought me back to the present. I looked up at him to see him staring at his milkshake with a serious expression on his face.

"Her beauty is akin to that of the wonders of nature. And her smile... They are burned into my heart. For a maiden as lovely and kind as her, I wish eternal happiness. Alas..."

I could sense the sincerity in every word he said. Perhaps his feelings toward her were too heavy, given that they'd only met once, but I felt like I could relate.

"As yours truly is not even a friend to her, there is nothing I can do. So I must ask this of you, to he who is our mutual friend: Please, stop Lady Kurose." After looking me in the eye, Kujibayashi-kun looked down again. "Before she sacrifices her own happiness to grant the wish of the man she loves."

With that, he lifted his vanilla milkshake, the paper cup now soggy and dripping with moisture, and sipped from it. He looked slightly awkward.

***

"Hey, Runa. There's something I want to talk to you about... I know it's sudden, but can I see you now? I'd like to meet you in Mejiro."

After having parted from Kujibayashi-kun in front of the fast-food place, I called Runa.

"Huh? Did something happen?" Runa asked. I could hear the twins chattering in the background, as always. "It's unusual for you to say something like that. But sure, Misuzu-san is home anyway. I'm on my way!" She then hung up.

After that, I called someone else while I walked to the station.

"Hello? Who might this be?"

"I'm sorry for the sudden call. This is Kashima. Are you free to talk right now?"

"Oh! What's up?"

Even on the phone, Kamonohashi-sensei sounded jovial. I was glad I'd remembered that he'd given me his phone number when we'd exchanged email addresses.

"There's something I wanted to ask... Sato Naoki-san is married, right?"

"Him? Yeah. I think it's been five years or so? I don't remember. I think he said she was a college girl or a nurse or a stewardess he met at a mixer...? I don't remember, but anyway, she's a pretty girl younger than him."

"I heard he has a child too. Is that true?"

"Yeah. A girl, I think? One time, we were drinking, and he said she'd been born the day before. I paid for his drinks that day!"

There was no longer any doubt that Sato Naoki was a married man with a child.

"Why do you ask?" said Kamonohashi-sensei.

At that point, I briefly told him about what had happened between Sato-san and Kurose-san, starting from that drinking party we'd attended. I reached the station in the middle of it, and as I couldn't hang up in order to get on a train, I took a taxi instead. There would've been no point if I hadn't gotten to the hotel ahead of Kurose-san, so I had to take the hit to my wallet.

“For real? That’s messed up!” Kamonohashi-sensei said loudly after hearing me out. It was otherwise quiet on his end of the line, so he was probably at home or at work. “You know, I hate good-looking guys like him! I don’t like his alias either. ‘Sato Naoki’—he just writes his real name in katakana instead of kanji. Between this and him being popular in real life, he’s gotten so confident he thinks he can just lay things as is in the world of fiction! I mean, look at me. I’m ‘kamonohashi’—that’s a platypus! I’m so insecure I can’t even give myself a human name!” He laughed heartily at that, making it even more clear that he was somewhere private.

I decided it was about time I cut to the chase. “Do you know any manga artists who are friends with Sato-san?”

“Hm, let’s see... I guess there’s Yuki-kun and Tsukikage-kun, who started in the same magazine. I used to see them hang out a lot back in the day.”

“Would it be possible to have them send something that would prove how close Sato-san is with his family, and his wife in particular? Pictures, LINE screenshots, that sort of thing... And as recent as possible.”

“Huh? What’s a ‘screenshot’? Oh, you mean images?”

“Well, yes...”

“All right, got it! I’m using a dumbphone, but anyway, I’ll say something and have them send something over!”

“I’m sorry, I know this is hard to ask nowadays because it’s personal information...” I said.

“Don’t worry about it! You’re gonna show it to her and make her open her eyes, right?”

“Yes,” I said after a pause.

That’s a manga artist with nationwide popularity for you, I guess. He could tell what I was going for.

“Well, in that case, leave it to me! Nobody can turn me down in this industry! When there’s an overwhelmingly just cause like that at stake, you gotta abuse your authority to the max!”

“Thank you...”

“Don’t worry about it!” he said. “It’ll feel great to see Mr. Good Looks get what he deserves!”

After ending the call with Kamonohashi-sensei, I sighed in the back seat of the taxi.

"One cannot believe what one cannot see. Including the future."

"There may be a discrepancy in the future you see and the future Lady Kurose sees."

When Kujibayashi-kun had said that, I'd realized I had to show her Sato-san's feelings in a tangible way—through something the eye could see. I didn't know if my plan was going to work or not, but for now, all I could do was put faith in Kamonohashi-sensei's connections and virtue.

***

I got to the hotel's grandiose covered driveway at roughly fifteen minutes past seven. I'd had the driver take the expressway, so the fare had added up to a painful 5,000 yen. I had no doubt I'd arrived before Kurose-san, however. Since she'd been at the editing department until seven, she couldn't have gotten here yet even if she'd taken a taxi as well.

I didn't know where she would be meeting up with Sato-san, so I decided to wait for her in the lobby facing the main entrance.

I sank into a shiny armchair with high-quality upholstery and timidly rested my feet on the soft carpet with a Persian-like design. I couldn't even focus on my phone—I kept staring at the entrance.

After a while, the automatic doors opened, and someone I knew stepped inside.

"Ryuto!"

Surprisingly, Runa had gotten here ahead of Kurose-san. She waved and walked over to me before sitting down in the armchair across from mine.

"I took a taxi too! The station was too far from my house," she said and started looking around.

The only people in the lobby were those waiting to check in and men in suits who seemed to be discussing business.

"Where's Maria?" Runa asked.

"She's not here yet."

“What, really? Isn’t Iidabashi Publishing super close to this hotel? The taxi app said it would take twelve minutes.”

“Well... Maybe she took the train or a bus...”

After my conversation with Kamonohashi-sensei, I’d messaged Runa and briefly explained the situation. She’d been surprised—she hadn’t known anything about the connection between Kurose-san and Sato Naoki.

“Oh, Maria...” began Runa, looking downcast. “She’s finally fallen in love with someone, and things turned out this way...”

“Yeah...”

Runa must’ve wanted to support her sister’s romantic endeavors. The look on her face indicated that she had some mixed feelings.

And as the two of us sat there with a cloud of sadness overhead...

“Ah...” Runa’s head jerked up when she looked at the entrance. “Maria!”

Runa stood up. Following her line of sight, I saw Kurose-san standing at the entrance, petrified. She stared at us, seeming surprised beyond words.

She looked at me and Runa in turn and then glared at me as realization set in. “Why...? Did you tell Runa? About Sato-san.”

Runa started walking toward Kurose-san. “He did, Maria. Was that bad?” she asked. “I thought we were at a point where you and I could talk about anything. Did you think it would make me worry if I knew? So then you realize that what you’re doing would make me worry?”

As Runa held her dark-haired sister’s hands, Kurose-san kept biting her lip and averting her eyes.

I found the stares around us unsettling. I walked over to the two of them. “It’s too quiet here, so let’s talk outside.”

***

We left the hotel lobby and went to the garden nearby. It was spacious enough for a stroll—you wouldn’t normally expect a hotel to have a proper Japanese-style garden, but this one did. It brought

the one we'd visited in Kyoto on our school trip to mind.

There were people actually walking around here, but we were here to talk and had no time to appreciate the scenery. The three of us sat down on a bench instead.

It was already dark by now, and the paths of the garden were illuminated by gentle lights here and there. The trees swayed gently under the cold wind of an early summer night, and their leaves brushed against each other lightly.

"Maria..." Runa, who sat in the middle of us, fully turned toward Kurose-san and gazed at her with concern. "Do you love Sato-san that much?"

Hanging her head, Kurose-san didn't reply. After a while, she nodded slightly.

"He's staying here, right?" asked Runa, at which point Kurose-san silently nodded again. "If you eat at the restaurant and he invites you to his room for a drink, what will you do?"

Kurose-san said nothing.

"Would you go?" Runa prodded, at which point Kurose-san nodded. Runa furrowed her eyebrows. "Maria... Do you realize what that means?"

"So *what* if I go to his room? That doesn't have to lead to anything, does it? What if we actually just have some drinks and that's it?"

That was the first thing she'd said since we'd gone outside.

"Well, sure..." replied Runa.

Runa went quiet, so I spoke up instead.

"But if someone takes a photo of you entering his room, that alone could be enough to prove that Sato-san is having an affair with you, even if you really only drank and did nothing else. His wife might sue you for compensation."

Kurose-san didn't reply for a while. Eventually, she said, "As long as the two of us know the truth, that's good enough for me. I can pay for any damages after I get a full-time job."

"Maria..." There was a pained look on Runa's face.

Somehow, I felt like I understood Kurose-san's feelings. She loved Sato-san and just wanted to be with him. Perhaps she hadn't

resolved herself to becoming his mistress.

Sato-san almost certainly had different plans for her, however.

"I understand how you feel, but what if he asks for more? Can you turn him down and leave the room?" asked Runa.

"I have faith that he's not the type to do that."

"He is," I replied with mild irritation.

"And how do you know that?" Kurose-san looked annoyed too.

"I just do, as a guy," I said emotionally.

Kurose-san and Runa each held their breath as they looked at me. Neither said anything further.

"Kurose-san," I continued, "I don't think having faith in someone is the same as abandoning rational thought and simply saying that you believe in them."

At that point, you'd simply be projecting your ideals onto the other person. And it wasn't like Kurose-san and Sato-san had already built up a relationship deeply founded on trust, given how quickly and suddenly things had progressed between them.

Once again, Kurose-san had nothing to say in response.

Then, Runa spoke up. "I think that to have faith in someone is to be okay with being betrayed by that person," she said, staring at her hands resting on her knees. "If Ryuto betrayed me...I would be okay with it. It'd be something I could live with."

Runa...

I stared at her. She didn't look at me—instead, Runa kept gazing at her sister with a serious look in her eye.

"Have you prepared yourself for that? Would you have no regrets if he betrayed you?" asked Runa.

Kurose-san kept hanging her head and didn't reply.

Runa went on. "Could you face reality and accept that it was all your fault, instead of saying things like 'I didn't think he was that kinda guy' or 'I shouldn't have gone with him'?"

At that point, Kurose-san looked up. "But...I love him! I love him, so I want to have faith in him and to do as he wants."

In response to that, Runa hesitantly said, "You sound just like me before I started dating Ryuto."

This time, I was at a loss for words along with Kurose-san.

“Strictly speaking, I wanted to have faith in my boyfriends... To believe in the love of guys I barely knew yet, and so I’d give them my everything... I regret that. I’ll regret it forever.” Saying that as if she were half talking to herself, Runa lowered her eyes. “That regret... It’ll probably stay with me my whole life.” Then, she lifted her head and looked at Kurose-san. “I don’t want you to go through the same thing.” Her lips turned up into a pained smile. “Didn’t you used to treasure yourself more?”

Kurose-san’s face contorted, and she held her clenched fists against her knees. “You wouldn’t understand.” She struggled to get her words out and sounded like she was about to cry. “I’ve had someone I didn’t love go after my body, but I’ve never had someone that I loved accept it when I offered it.”

I recalled that time Kurose-san had run into a molester, along with when she’d tried to seduce me in the gym storage room.

“I love Sato-san. So if he wants me... Even if all he wants is my body... I’d be happy to give it to him...” A tear left her eye and streamed down her cheek. “He’s the first person I’ve fallen in love with who wants me.”

“Maria...”

With a sorrowful look on her face, Runa took Kurose-san’s hand. She was about to say something when...

Bzzzzzt. Bzzzzzt...

Vibrations could be heard coming from Runa’s handbag. She pulled her phone out.

“My manager again? Come on! What does she want at a time like this?!” Runa got up from the bench in a huff and brought her phone to her ear. “Good evening! ...What?! Seriously?!”

Runa walked away from the bench while continuing to talk. She went far enough that we could still see her but not hear her conversation.

Left alone with Kurose-san, I recalled what she’d just said.

“I’ve had someone I didn’t love go after my body, but I’ve never had someone that I love accept it when I offered it.”

She must’ve been talking about our encounter in the gym storage room.

It occurred to me that Kurose-san kept having warped experiences with guys. She'd suddenly asked me to have sex with her even though she had no experience herself. And then she'd run into that molester that time, leading her to become androphobic.

Setting the thing with the molester aside for a moment—what if because I'd rejected her, I'd injured her sexual self-esteem, and that had led to her current reckless behavior? If that was the case, then I felt like I needed to tell her the truth.

"Kurose-san, I..."

It was convenient that Runa had left us alone. I couldn't say this in front of her.

"The reason I held back wasn't because I wanted your first time to be with someone like Sato-san. That time, in the gym storage room..."

Kurose-san stared at my eyes. I was aware of her doing so, but I still kept my gaze on the leaves of the trees in the garden. They were rustling in the evening wind.

"Even I..." I continued.

When our eyes met for a moment, the look on Kurose-san's face was suffocatingly serious. Her eyes wavered, however, and she looked ready to cry at any moment.

I wanted to do it.

Kurose-san must've been able to tell what I was thinking, even if I wasn't saying it out loud. She lowered her gaze and didn't move a muscle.

"Kashima-kun..."

Kurose-san was extremely beautiful *and* had been my first love. When she'd approached me without a hint of shame or decency, I had wavered—both in mind and body.

"But I had another girl that I loved... I couldn't make you happy, and that's why I didn't accept your offer," I said while watching Runa talk on the phone in the distance. "Didn't you ask me to set you up with one of my friends because you wanted to find a guy who was at least that decent?"

She hung her head and didn't say a word. I could no longer tell what she was thinking. Had I managed to persuade her?

I checked my phone, but nothing had come in yet.

"To tell you the truth, at first, I felt like letting you do as you like if you wanted to go to him so badly," I admitted.

Kurose-san glanced up at me.

"I came here with Runa because of what Kujibayashi-kun said to me."

At that point, she lifted her head. "The Mori Ogai guy?"

I smiled a little. "Yeah, him."

The air had felt unfittingly tense for a garden in the evening, but now, it had relaxed somewhat.

"He said you were kind enough to listen to his dull chatter to the end, so you might be unable to turn down a bad guy too. He asked me to stop you."

Kurose-san lowered her eyes a little and pressed her lips together.

"He's a good person," I continued. "You might not be able to see him as a love interest or a potential boyfriend...but I want you to become friends with someone like Kujibayashi-kun. You told me before that you're scared of men—there's nothing all that macho about him."

Looking over to the hotel, I saw lights on in a few of the guest rooms. Perhaps Sato-san was in one of them, waiting for Kurose-san with a dirty look on his face.

"At the very least, what you're doing right now isn't something that a girl who claims to be scared of men would do. Please think this through."

It was so common for women to get involved with married men who weren't serious about them and get hurt as a result. That kind of thing didn't even make waves on social media anymore. I didn't want Runa's sister to appear in such a trite story.

"Didn't you call me your brother?"

The look on Kurose-san's face suggested that she'd just remembered that.

"I don't want to let my future sister go to him, knowing it would cause her pain."

Her eyes wavered like the water's surface. When she blinked, a drop of moisture escaped.

At that point, my phone vibrated, and I checked its screen—I had an email from Kamonohashi-sensei. I hurried to unlock the phone and open what he'd sent.

From: Kamonohashi-sensei
Rejoice, I got you something big lol

That was all he'd written. I opened the email's attachment, and it turned out to be a screenshot from a LINE chat.

The first thing that caught my eye was a photo of Sato-san being affectionate with a beautiful woman. She looked to be still in her mid-twenties. She wore a casual tank top that accentuated her short hair and thin neck. The woman's ample chest and cleavage unconsciously drew your eyes in. Sato-san was pulling her close to him with his arm under her heavy-looking breasts like he was propping them up. Judging by the angle, this was probably a selfie he'd taken.

Under the image were chat messages. They were very recent, dating from the middle of Golden Week this past May.

The name of the chatroom was "Sato Naoki." The first message was his, and the whole thing was a conversation between him and somebody else—probably one of those manga artists he was friends with that Kamonohashi-sensei had mentioned.

Ain't nothing like a wife with melons
Thanks. This'll get me through the night
Don't fap to a guy's wife lol
Second kid soon?
After I start another series. Just bought a house and all
Keep it up, dad. Man I want a gf too
Wanna do another mixer, then? Real talk though, wife wants our girl to go to a private school. Shit's rough tbh

And I guess you probably can’t do other girls now that you’re married
lol nah I’ve got that handled, it ain’t gonna stop me. Man, can I get another anime...? C’mon you stupid moepiggies, you know my heroines are cute, get squealing and show some support

I was at a loss for words. *Wow.*

What Kamonohashi-sensei had sent was so much better than I’d hoped. This was the kind of screenshot that could crush a love of a hundred years as well as the respect one could have for a manga artist. If Kurose-san was so blinded by love that she stayed infatuated with him even after seeing this, then things would’ve been truly hopeless.

“Kurose-san,” I began. Maybe it was a little cruel, but I showed her the screenshot I had on my phone. “Look at this.”

“Huh? What *is* this...?”

When she first looked at it, she was confused. However, she seemed to understand what she was seeing right away. If she had talked to him on LINE, then she must’ve been familiar with the landscape that was on his avatar.

“*This* is what he’s like.”

Kurose-san didn’t reply. Her lips trembled slightly as her eyes remained glued to the screen.

I had no way of knowing what he’d been telling her about his wife, but judging from the screenshot, his marriage was clearly a happy one.

“Are you okay...?” I asked. While I’d been the one who’d shown it to her, I’d grown worried after seeing how much it had shocked her.

At that point, Runa returned. “Sorry about that! The manager forgot about an event again, but thankfully, it looks like it’s gonna work out!”

Runa was still just as animated as when she’d been on the phone, but when she noticed the serious mood, a slightly awkward look came over her face.

After glancing at me and Kurose-san in turn, Runa looked nervous. “So... Any developments?”

Kurose-san met her gaze and smiled at her like someone who’d put something behind them. “Hey, how about we all go get a bite to eat? My evening just freed up.”

Runa was confused. “Huh? You mean...?”

Still smiling, Kurose-san added, “I won’t see him anymore. I’ll block him on LINE too.”

As Kurose-san said that, she took out her phone. She then blocked Sato-san and deleted their chat as we watched.

***

After that, we took a bus to Mejiro Station and had dinner in a restaurant there. It was a fancy place with a focus on organic foods, but it was considerably more casual than the hotel we’d just left. The prices were more reasonable too.

“Let’s drink! I really need some beer in me right now,” Kurose-san immediately said once we sat down at a four-seat table.

The restaurant had white walls and a cheerful atmosphere.

“M-Maria, don’t go overboard...” Runa hurriedly warned her. She knew what Kurose-san was like when she was drunk.

She and Kurose-san sat next to each other on wooden chairs, and I sat across from Runa.

“Let’s kick things off with a beer and fried chicken. You guys can order whatever,” said Kurose-san after glancing at the menu. She might’ve still been sober, but her eyes were glazing over already.

“What’s with that Sato Naoki guy? I seriously can’t believe it!”

An hour after we’d started drinking, Kurose-san was completely plastered—as expected. She had begun rambling with a beer glass in her hand.

“The stuff he said to me was completely different! He’s still going at it with his wife?! What was all that crap about not seeing her as a woman anymore, huh?! He even told me he might split up with her!”

“Wow, what a jerk! That’s the kind of bull he’s been feeding

you?!” replied Runa, matching her sister’s level of energy. “What a bastard! They should get rid of guys like that to improve society!”

“I know, right?! Cut! Just cut, I say!”

“Yeah! And we both know *what!”*

“There’s only one thing! I won’t say it out loud, though!”

“C-Calm down, you two...!”

The topic was unfitting for the classy restaurant. Minding the tables around us, I quietly chided the girls. Then again, there were plenty of other groups here, and the average table had four girls at it. Everyone else’s surprisingly loud conversations worked to our advantage.

“Well, regardless of whether he’s having sex with her or not, it’s still a fact that he’s married...”

After I said that, Kurose-san’s spirits fell. “Yeah... You don’t even have to think hard about it... Of course it is...” Kurose-san heaved a large sigh—her vigor from a moment ago was gone. “Aren’t there any nice, single guys left anywhere...?”

Runa looked at her with sympathy in her eyes. “What kind of guy do you want?”

Kurose-san rested her cheek in her hand and pouted. “Someone like Sato.”

“What? Hold on, I really don’t recommend a guy like that, even if he’s single!” countered Runa.

“Exactly. He would cheat on you,” I added.

Kurose-san made a face like an unruly child. “Well, he’s the only example I can think of right now...”

Giving her sister a pained look, Runa took a sip from her own glass. She’d ordered a nonalcoholic lemonade—she’d probably wanted to be ready to deal with things once Kurose-san’d had too much.

“Do you have any guy friends other than Ryuto?” Runa asked all of a sudden.

Kurose-san slowly shook her head. “No.”

“Then you should start trying to make some male friends instead. It might be better in your case if you get used to guys first before getting into a romantic relationship.”

Kurose-san glanced at her and released another light sigh. “Look at these lovebirds. You’re both saying the same thing...”

“Huh?” Runa looked at me with surprise. It made sense—she didn’t know about the conversation we’d had on the bench since she’d been on the phone.

With no regard for her sister, Kurose-san turned her eyes to me and continued. “That guy, the Mori Ogai one... Kujibayashi-san, was it?”

“Yeah.”

“Would you mind inviting him to dinner? Us three and him. I want to try talking in a group.”

The manner in which she said that wasn’t offhand at all. I could tell from her smile that she had her eyes set on the future.

“Okay... I can do that,” I replied.

“Hey, that’s a great idea! I wanted to meet the ‘your stoolie’ guy too!” said Runa.

“It’s ‘yours truly,’ but yeah,” I said with a smile, then looked at Kurose-san.

Directing her eyes to me and then to Runa in turn, Kurose-san had a peaceful smile on her face. “You know...” she began, her cheeks slightly flushed from the beer. She had a nostalgic expression on her face. “When we’re like this, it reminds me of that time we made pamphlets together.”

“Ah... Now that you mention it...” A look of realization appeared on Runa’s face. “This might be the first time the three of us have had a proper conversation since those days.”

I recalled how, during our second year of high school, we’d all ended up in the pamphlet-making subcommittee for the cultural festival. At the time, Runa’s relationship with Kurose-san had still been strained, and we’d joined the subcommittee to try to close the distance between them.

That, however, had resulted in Kurose-san and me rapidly growing closer by virtue of having many things in common, such as our general interests and the fact we’d been going to the same cram school. All of that had endangered my relationship with Runa. As a result, I’d ended my friendship with Kurose-san, and after that, we’d

been nothing more than classmates, even when Runa had been around, until after we'd graduated.

"Yeah, well, that didn't really go as planned..." said Runa with a mixed smile on her face.

A similar smile came over Kurose-san's lips. "The cultural festival in our third year was fun, though," she said.

"Ah, yeah, it was!" Runa clapped her hands, looking cheerful.

I recalled that autumn...

***

In our third year of high school, we had merely been guests at our school's cultural festival. My classmates were focused on getting into humanities departments at our colleges of choice, so we didn't have to prepare anything for the festival. We weren't required to show up to either day of the event, so some people from our class didn't show up to school at all.

Meanwhile, the students in Class E, which included Yamana-san and Tanikita-san, were focused on getting full-time jobs or going to technical schools. They didn't need to study for college entrance exams, so they'd been the only third-year class doing something for the festival.

Incidentally, Runa had yet to make up her mind on her future by the time she'd submitted her career aspiration survey, and that had been one of the reasons she'd been put into the other humanities-focused class. There were two of them overall. Nisshi and I were in one, while Runa had been placed in the other. The students in hers had slightly worse grades. Well...maybe "slightly" wasn't quite right, but you get the picture.

Class E decided to run a themed café for the festival—sort of like a maid café, but not quite. And, believe it or not, they went with a bunny-girl theme. Tanikita-san was at the center of that project—she prepared outfits for the girls. As for the guys and the decor, she settled on them being video-game-themed, like Luida's Bar. It was pretty impressive.

But what surprised me the most about the whole thing...

“Ryuto! Whatcha think?!”

...was the fact that Runa was one of the bunny girls. Apparently, there was a special rule that allowed third-years from other classes to participate in Class E’s project as long as they weren’t planning to go to college.

On the first day of the festival, Runa had told me to meet her at Class E’s café and hadn’t said anything else. She’d welcomed me at the entrance of the classroom.

“R-Runa...?!” I replied, amazed.

Her bunny girl outfit was perfect. It was the orthodox set that included ears, a tail, a bowtie, cufflinks, and a tight bunny suit. Her breasts threatened to spill out of the suit’s M-shaped neckline, and her long legs, clad in thin black stockings, stretched out from the bottom of the high-cut suit.

I heard later on that, unsurprisingly, fishnet stockings had of course been banned by their teacher on the grounds of being too sexual. But even so, this outfit was stimulating enough for guys in high school.

“Oh, Kashima Ryuto. You’re here,” said Yamana-san.

“Show him in, Runy!”

Yamana-san and Tanikita-san appeared from the back in their own bunny outfits, but I was too shocked by the sight of Runa to care.

I entered the classroom and took a seat. Runa brought me a menu.

“I’ll have a cola...” I said without giving it much thought. I also didn’t know where I should be looking in this situation.

Runa bent over and brought her face to my ear. “Hey, Ryuto,” she said.

I was startled as her ample cleavage suddenly came close to me. In this outfit, it was much more visible than in her school uniform, and possibly even more compared to her in a swimsuit. My heart wouldn’t stop pounding, partially due to the fact that I spotted a mole on her chest that I previously didn’t know about.

“They say there’s...‘paff-paff’ on the secret menu...” Runa said slowly and suggestively. She then straightened herself out and tilted

her head toward me. “Do you want it...?”

“What?!”

P-Paff-paff?!

“Y-Yes?!”

What is that supposed to be?! Is it really okay to offer a thing like that at a school festival?! And besides, what would she do if someone besides me ordered it?!

In the midst of my confusion, Runa giggled. “Okay, one paff-paff coming up!”

After she flashed me a bewitching smile, I watched with bated breath as she disappeared into the staff area behind the folding screen.

A few minutes later, a cola and two miniature strawberry parfaits appeared before me. My mood fell considerably.

“Ummm...”

Runa sat across from me and kept smiling, seeming to enjoy my reaction.

“Wouldn’t this be more like a ‘parf-parf,’ then...?” I asked.

“Heh heh. It is.” She smiled with amusement. “Ordering this makes me sit with you, though.”

I supposed that wasn’t all that bad, even if it wasn’t exactly what I’d expected.

“What did you think it was? Perv. ♡”

I had nothing to say back to her.

Yes, yes, I’m a pervert...

As I hung my head, Runa giggled. When I looked up, I found her gazing at me with a smile.

“The real one will have to wait,” she said.

“What...?”

What did she just say?

The real one? The real paff-paff? What even is *this paff-paff? Is it what I think it is?!*

While I got all embarrassed, Runa picked up a plastic spoon. “C’mon, let’s dig in,” she said. “Say ‘ah.’ ♡”

As a spoonful of Runa’s paff-paff...or rather, parfait, entered my

mouth, I was more taken in by the bittersweet feeling that was spreading through my chest than the strawberry ice cream melting on my tongue.

A sports festival was held at the same time as the cultural one. Even now as a third-year, Runa performed really well in the footrace and the relay race. But there was one major difference from the previous year's event...

"Go Runa! Maria!"

Their mother waved from the stands. Runa and Kurose-san, who'd been waiting in line for their turns, looked at each other and smiled.

"Thanks, Mom!"

"I'll do my best!"

They held hands and waved to their mother with their free ones. Then, they looked at each other again and smiled happily.

That was what I'd wanted to see from them.

I was moved by the sight as I watched from my seat in my class's designated area.

***

It had been three years since then. Runa and Kurose-san walked through the night holding each other's hand, just like back then. We were heading along the main street to Mejiro Station.

It was nine in the evening, so rush hour was already over. There weren't too many people walking around in front of the station.

"With your looks, you'll be fine, Maria," Runa said reassuringly, gesturing their linked hands in an exaggerated manner. "There's not a guy in this world who wouldn't fall in love with you. Even Ryuto would probably have gone out with you if it wasn't for me."

I couldn't deny it so easily. But I also felt that there was no need to say it. My gut told me that my relationship with Runa had already passed the point where we had to mind such things.



"So it'll be fine next time. Things will work out with the next guy you fall in love with, I'm sure," added Runa.

Kurose-san could probably sense the unspoken too. A slightly sad smile appeared on her face.

"Thanks," she replied. "I'm glad you came today." Then, she looked past Runa to me. "Thank you too." Next, she faced forward, and said, "I'll do my best."

When I looked up at the sky, it was a little clouded over, as if covered by a white mist. A round, waxing half-moon was spreading its light all around. It was a pure light—it even felt somewhat holy.

"I'll do my best and live a respectable life," Kurose-san added as she looked up at the sky. A tear trickled down her cheek.

"Right..."

"You can do it, Maria," said Runa, and she took my hand with her free one.

With Runa in the middle, the three of us held hands as we walked past the roundabout in front of Mejiro Station.

You can do it, Kurose-san. I admire your decision. Not just any girl in your position could've made that choice. You're dignified. I want you to become happier than anyone else.

I gripped Runa's hand, hoping that this wish of mine would reach Kurose-san through her.

Chapter 3

June came, bringing with it Runa's birthday.

"Hooray! We get to pick strawberries!" she exclaimed, looking at the rows of greenhouses. There were paths cutting between them.

It was 11 a.m. on a Sunday in late June. The weather forecast had said it would be slightly cloudy today, but there wouldn't be rain.

We had taken the Tobu Isesaki Line to a nearby station and then got a taxi to come to Koshigaya to pick strawberries.

"They said this year's strawberry-picking season ends today," I said.

"Wow, we sure cut it close!"

"Yeah. I'm glad we made it in time. They let us come because there's still strawberries left, but on an ordinary year, it would already be over by now."

It had all begun with that conversation we'd had on our date to LakeTown.

"I wanna go pick strawberries sometime. I've never done that, though there's no real reason I haven't."

Until today, we hadn't gone on any dates since then. Runa's birthday fell on a weekday this year, so we'd decided to go on a birthday date ahead of time. I'd recalled what she'd said and put in a reservation to go strawberry-picking. Many farms had stopped offering it by the end of May, so it had been pretty difficult to find a place that still had spots available.

Even when I'd finally found this place, the farmer had told me over the phone that there weren't many strawberries left and asked if we still wanted to come. Maybe it was because the season was coming to an end, but even as our appointment was about to start, I couldn't see any other customers around.

After paying at the reception area located in a small tent next to a plastic greenhouse, we received some small white plastic

containers. They were about the size of containers you'd get in those DIY candy kits.

"This one's for the tops, and this one's for condensed milk," explained the man at reception.

I noticed tubes of condensed milk being sold at the register.

"Strawberries are sweet these days, so the vast majority of customers don't use it. Mainly older people buy it."

This farmer has integrity. He's not just here to sell things, I thought to myself.

He was also the one who led us to a plastic greenhouse. He was lean, middle-aged, and even though it was only June, he was already tanned—he matched my mental image of a farmer.

"You're supposed to get thirty minutes, but it's the last day. Feel free to eat as much as you like. You're the only ones here today, and I'm sure you'll be full in an hour, anyway," he said.

"Wow, really?! Great!" Faced with unexpected generosity, Runa exclaimed in innocent delight.

As I'd thought, we really were the only customers here today.

"We'll eat a whole lot!" added Runa.

"Look around and find some good ones," replied the farmer.

We bowed to him and set out on our quest to pick strawberries.

"Wow, it's hot in here!" said Runa.

When we stepped inside the greenhouse, the humid heat instantly filled our clothes. What made it even harder to bear was the fact it was currently the middle of the already hot and humid rainy season, and when it didn't rain, the temperatures sometimes reached thirty degrees Celsius. Forget staying an hour—I doubted we could last even thirty minutes here.

"There really aren't a lot left..." said Runa.

"Yeah..."

At a glance, the inside of the greenhouse was predominantly green. Even when we found strawberries, they were small and didn't look very tasty.

"Ah, there's one!" Runa exclaimed.

There were plants being grown in boxes in orderly rows, organized by type of strawberry. Each row had an upper tier of

boxes and a lower one. The former was on an adult's eye level, while the latter was below your knees.

Runa crouched down and reached out for a strawberry on a lower tier.

"Look!" she said.

"Wow!"

She'd found a large, fully red one. The kind you'd expect to be sold.

"Amazing," I added.

"We might find more good ones in this part."

Indeed, I could see a few large, red strawberries nearby. The one Runa had just plucked was the best among them.

She grinned at me. "Say 'aah.'"

"Huh? You're giving it to me?"

"Yeah. You like strawberries, don't you? You always pick stuff with strawberries on top when you get desserts and such."

"Ah, yeah, I guess I do."

I shouldn't have expected any less. Looks like she already knows all there is to know about me.

"I know you like them too, though. Are you sure?"

"Yeah. It looks delicious, so I want you to have it. ♡"

It was weird to argue back and forth over one berry when we'd come to pick a bunch of them. Either way, I bent over and let Runa feed me the strawberry.

"Is it good?" she asked.

"Yeah."

"I'll have one for myself too!" Runa took the second biggest and reddest strawberry nearby and put it in her mouth. "Yep, it's so tasty! ♡" She smiled in satisfaction, her cheeks stuffed.



Still crouching down, Runa smiled all of a sudden and looked up at me. "You know... I always want to give you the best stuff. I'm okay with having the second-best myself. Nothing makes me happy as much as doing things that make *you* happy."

I was moved. "Runa..."

She lowered her eyes, looking pleased. "You're the first one who's made me feel this way... And I'm sure you'll be the last." Then, she looked up at me. "So you better live a long time."

"Huh...?" I was confused by the sudden topic change. "What're you talking about?"

"I mean, if you die before me, I'll be lonely for the rest of my life," Runa said with a pout.

"But, like, you'd better live long too—for the same reason," I countered. It was embarrassing for me to say something so out of character.

Runa smiled happily at that. "Heh heh, yeah, I guess." She hopped up to her feet. "Well then, I'd better eat lots of strawberries and be healthy! Get those vitamins and all. ♡"

Thus, we walked between the rows, looking for edible strawberries. Each area had a nameplate stating the variety of strawberries growing there.

"Ah, this one says 'Kaorino,'" Runa said when getting to a new section. "I wonder what makes it different from the 'Tochiotome' I just looked at?"

I immediately assumed a self-satisfied expression. "Kaorino is a child of Tochiotome."

Since we rarely went on dates, and this one was special in that it was for Runa's birthday, I'd gone the extra mile and spent several days researching strawberries ahead of time. This was my cue to demonstrate that knowledge.

"Technically, Kaorino strawberries are cultivated from Nyoho, Aiberry, Toyonoka, Hokowase, Akihime, Akasha no Mitsuko, Tochiotome, and Santigo varieties. Their notable features are their somewhat hard flesh, juiciness, refreshing sweetness, and limited sourness. But above all, just like the word 'kaori' in its name

suggests, they're fragrant. That comes from having ample amounts of linalool—an aromatic compound. It synergizes with the fruit's sweetness, providing that classic feel of fresh strawberry flesh. Oh, by the way, did you know that the part of the strawberries that we're eating is technically the accessory fruit? The true fruits are the pips dotting the surface of it. As for the part that we eat, when the pistil in the strawberry flower is pollinated, it enlarges to hold the seeds, and... Ah!"

Noticing the blank look on Runa's face, I came back to my senses and stopped myself.

"S-Sorry... I studied up so I could answer if you asked, but I didn't mean to talk for that long..."

I should've just given out bits of information here and there. But after all the effort I had put into looking things up, I couldn't stop myself. It was as though a switch had been flipped inside me.

Runa was amused and laughed. "You know, this reminds me of that time with bubble tea. That was a birthday date too."

"Now that you mention it..."

She was right. Thinking about that time was nostalgic. The fact that I was doing the same thing four years later was a little embarrassing.

"Hey, Ryuto," Runa began in a soft voice, catching me by surprise and prompting me to look at her. She gazed at me with a blush on her cheeks and a smile on her lips. "How many birthday dates do you think we have left?"

"Huh...?"

I'd never thought about it.

I did the math. "Assuming I live eighty years, which is the life expectancy for men... About sixty?" I replied.

Runa giggled for some reason. Then, she clasped her hands behind her back and looked up at the ceiling of the greenhouse. "Only sixty, huh...? Life sure is short."

"I-Is it?"

Sixty years was an enormous amount of time. It was longer than I could imagine.

"Ryutooo..." Runa said coyly.

I looked at her again. “Yeah?”

She gave me a slightly pained smile. “Let’s both live to a hundred, okay?”

“Huh?”

“That would add another twenty.” The look on her face had become serious. “Let’s be together in the next life too, okay?”

“N-Next life?!”

Her words surprised me for a moment—I’d never seen this coming. But she wasn’t the only one who wanted us to be together forever.

“Y-Yeah... Of course.”

“Can you promise me? No backing out of it, okay?” Runa presented her pinky finger to me.

I realized she wanted to do a pinky promise and extended my own too. “Sure...”

I didn’t know what I was even promising here—living to a hundred and being with her again in my next life weren’t things I could control. Nobody could tell how things would actually go—not me, not Runa.

However... I loved her with every fiber of my being. I wanted to be with her so much that one life wasn’t going to be enough. *That* I didn’t mind swearing on.

“By the way, do you know what strawberries mean in the language of flowers?” I asked, recalling some more trivia I’d learned over the course of my research.

“Nope. What?” Keeping her pinky in the same waiting position, Runa looked at me with curiosity.

“It means ‘happy household’ and ‘love and respect.’”

“Oh, I see...” Runa smiled softly. “Those things are nice.”

“Yeah...”

They described what I wanted to establish with Runa and the way I felt toward her. I was inept as ever for not being able to say it directly.

But despite that, Runa had said she wanted to be with me in the next life too.

In that hot and humid greenhouse, with even the container for condensed milk now full of strawberry tops and with the strawberries themselves watching over us, Runa and I made a pinky promise.

***

"I sure ate a lot!" said Runa, looking up.

Our time going strawberry picking had come to an end, and we were on our way home.

"At first, I thought there was no limit to how many strawberries somebody could eat, but yeah, there's no way anything else is going in me now," she added.

"Well, fruit is mostly water, so you'll probably get hungry again right away."

We'd taken a taxi from the station earlier today, but we weren't crunched for time now that we were on our way back. We'd decided to walk instead.

It was slightly cloudy and the sunlight wasn't too strong, so walking along the gentle slope of the riverbank at noon was rather pleasant. This river wasn't as big as the Arakawa River, so its bank was low and flat.

"I'm not hungry for lunch yet, though..." said Runa.

"Yeah, same. I wonder what we should do..."

Our plan had been to pick strawberries, have a light bite to eat, and then kill some time by shopping or something like that. Later, we'd have dinner in Shinjuku.

Runa had work tomorrow morning, and I had university classes.

I recalled something I'd said to Kujibayashi-kun before.

"But then when I finally got into Houo, Runa had new twin sisters, a full-time job, and became super busy. On the rare occasions that we get to see each other these days, one of us will get called away by our families or to work, or the mood just isn't right to do it at that point... And that's just how it's been."

What I'd said then was true, but those hadn't been the only

reasons. After all, right now, we were pretty much free until later when we'd head to the restaurant for our dinner reservation. It was certainly possible to go to Shinjuku early, visit an area I'd heard about in Kabukicho with love hotels, and "rest" there until dinner.

If we wanted to do it, we could've just found two or three hours for it at any point until now.

"So, it's Too Much of Spring*."*

In the end, that was how it was.

We'd left the frantic period of our relationship behind a long time ago. Since we'd gone all these years without doing it, we couldn't tell when we were supposed to go for it now or how to bring things to that development.

We'd both reached the age when we wouldn't break the law by having sex, even without the approval of Runa's father, and I'd gotten the HPV vaccine during my first year of university. Incidentally, my mother's surgery had been successful, and it hadn't progressed past the dysplasia stage. She was doing just fine at the moment.

Nothing stood between us now.

However, over these past two years, Runa hadn't done anything to develop our relationship further in that way either. That was precisely why I'd been happy that she'd suggested going to Okinawa in the summer.

I didn't need to get impatient now. Runa and I would do the deed there.

"I can't wait to go to Okinawa..." Runa said. Her timing was perfect.

"Me too."

Perhaps she'd been thinking the same thing.

"I'm gonna ask Nicole to give me some really awesome nails before we go. ♡ Like, something that just screams that we're at a resort! Maybe I should have them match my bikini again too!"

Ever since Yamana-san had become a professional nail artist, Runa had been going to her salon near Station A every month to get her nails done.

"Oh, by the way... They recently started doing men's nails too,

but they don’t have enough sample shots to post online, so Nicole wants you to come by! Said she’ll give you a onetime fifty percent discount as a special deal if you let her take before and after shots!”

“What? Y-You want me to have my nails done?”

I looked at Runa’s long, tapered, sparkling nails. *Yeah, no. Count me out...*

She giggled. “It’s just nail care. They’ll clean up your cuticles, polish the surface of your nails, and file them down. A guy looks much better with clean nails!”

“‘Cuticles’...? ‘File’...?”

I didn’t really understand what she was talking about, but it sounded like I wasn’t going to end up with flashy nails by the end of it.

“Okay... I’ll think about it,” I said.

“Great! I’ll tell Nicole, then! Oh man, what kinda nails should I get for Okinawa...? ♡” Runa didn’t miss a beat and went back to being excited about our trip. “Oh, right! I brought a guidebook! Let’s look at it later. ♡”

“What, really? I’ve brought one too.”

I took it out of my messenger bag and showed it to her.

“What?! That’s the same one I got! That’s hilarious!” Runa took out a book with the same cover from her shoulder bag. “See?”

“Wow, you’re right.”

“Man, what a crazy coincidence! They were selling so many different ones!”

“I was looking for something that had a lot of information but would still fit into my bag. That’s why I went with this one,” I explained.

“Same for me!”

Getting excited about this unexpected coincidence, Runa and I looked at each other and smiled as we walked along.

“One for each of us, huh?” she said.

“They’re like our textbooks.”

“Exactly!” Runa smiled and wrapped her arms around mine. “Guess we understand each other well. ♡”

“Y-Yeah,” I replied after hesitating a bit. I was feeling a bit

embarrassed.

She blushed and smiled at me again. "Okay, wanna go to a café and start planning stuff?"

"Sure..."

And so, we got on a train and headed to Shinjuku. After getting to a café, we discussed our upcoming trip and pored over our matching guidebooks until evening, chatting a bit as we did.

***

Runa looked out the window. "Wow, look at this view!" she exclaimed.

We'd just arrived at the restaurant for our dinner reservation. It was on the twenty-somethingth floor of a high-rise about a ten-minute walk away from the west exit of Shinjuku Station. It was seven in the evening, so it was still bright outside. The windowed walls provided a good view of the city center.

We were led to a table by one of those windows.

"What *is* this place?! How'd you find it, Ryuto?! Have you been here before?!" Runa asked excitedly.

"I haven't. I just saw it on the internet..."

In reality, ever since Kurose-san had told me about the restaurant Sato-san had taken her to, the idea had gotten stuck in the back of my mind. I'd looked up restaurants with a good view of the city at night, even though it would normally be out of character for me to go somewhere like this.

While the restaurant was on a high floor, it wasn't all that expensive. Also, the design was very Japanese: from the cuisine, to the paper-covered lights, to having to take off your shoes at the entrance, and to the tables being sunken kotatsu. As a result, it didn't feel all that pretentious. Even I'd managed to work up the courage to make a reservation here.

"What? Are you going to propose to me?" Runa asked jokingly with a smile.

"Nah, I just wanted to go to a place like this once in a while," I replied, embarrassed.

Once we started eating, the scenery outside gradually darkened. The city below us began to shine like a jewelry box.

Runa was spellbound. “It’s beautiful...” she said.

Seeing her like that made me slightly grateful to Sato-san. I wasn’t sure how I felt about that fact.

Our meal continued, and when we got to dessert...

“Oh, wow, a birthday cake!” Runa said all of a sudden, gesturing to it with her eyes.

There was a waitress carrying a whole cake nearby. Its candles were lit.

“Is it someone’s birthday? It’s close to mine!” Her eyes sparkled as if she were thrilled for someone else whom she’d never even met.

“Probably. It did say they do birthday specials here...” I replied, realizing what was probably going on. I was trying to avoid making it too obvious.

“They do, huh...? That’s nice...”

The waitress with the cake walked over to us and stopped. “Happy birthday, Runa-san,” she said with a smile.

Runa looked utterly astonished. “What?! Me?!” She didn’t seem to have expected this in the slightest. “Wow, thank you!” Feeling deeply moved, Runa brought her hands together in gratitude.

Once the waitress left, Runa turned to me in surprise. “Ryuto, what happened?! You’ve never done something like this before!”

I smiled bashfully. “I’m improving too,” I replied.

The truth was that when I’d found this place online, I’d noticed that they did special things for birthdays and simply asked for that. Setting it up was so easy—I had to assume that people often went to atmospheric places like this for anniversaries and similar occasions.

“It’s a bit early, but happy birthday, Runa.”

She smiled a bit modestly. “Heh heh, thank you.”

I averted my eyes and looked at the lights outside. As it got later, the lights were becoming more radiant in the darkness of the night.

“Man, I guess I’ll be older than you for a while again,” said Runa.

“I guess so.”

Does this bother her every year? How cute.

"Then again, men don't live as long on average," I added. "I like that you're the older one of us. It means we'll get to be together for longer."

Runa giggled, perhaps recalling what we'd talked about while picking strawberries earlier.

"Well, we'll live to a hundred, so it's just a small difference. Only nine months. ♡"

"R-Right."

I didn't really get it, but my words seemed to have cheered her up, so I was glad I'd said them.

"Now let's go to town on this cake!" Runa exclaimed.

"Yeah."

Thus, we began eating the now cut-up cake. The waitress had returned earlier to slice it in half before leaving again.

It was a small white shortcake, just big enough for two people. There were strawberries on top.

"The strawberries we had earlier were good," Runa began, putting one of them in her mouth, "but the ones you buy taste better."

"They do, yeah," I replied with an awkward smile. We *had* found some good strawberries, but it had taken a lot of effort. "If we'd gone at the right time, we might've been able to find better ones."

"Yeah! Let's go in spring next year!" Runa said excitedly. Then, she lowered her eyes to her plate. "But man, patissiers sure make great cakes. No matter how hard I look at it, it just seems like magic. I could never make one like this."

"The cakes you've made for me are always great, though."

I recalled the most recent cake she'd made for me—the one with decorated cookies for my twentieth birthday. It had left a pretty strong impression on me as it wasn't one you could easily find in stores.

"Really? Thanks!" Runa smiled happily. "I'll do my best next time, then!" She shook her fists around in excitement. "What kind should I make...? I've made so many already in...how long has it been now?" Runa began counting on her fingers. "I started baking when you had

your birthday in our second year of high school, so... Ah! I'm pretty proud of the one I made for Christmas in our third year. I was still working at Champs De Fleurs at the time, so I used some spare ingredients from work on it."

"Oh. It *did* look like something made by a professional."

"What? You really remember it?"

"S-Sure I do. I took a picture of it too." I flipped through the images on my phone and showed Runa the one with the cake. "See?"

"Wow, you weren't kidding!"

To be honest, I had pretty much no memory of how it had tasted. What I remembered vividly was the slight bitterness of the bright red strawberry on top.

"Was it good?" Runa asked.

"Yeah," I replied after a pause.

"I'm glad!" She smiled in relief and then brought her fork to her mouth. "This one's great too!"

The piece of cake on my plate had a strawberry on it. I speared the fruit with my fork and brought it to my mouth. "It is, yeah," I said while chewing.

I'd experienced this same bittersweet taste while going through a similarly bitter time.

***

Back in my third year of high school, that Christmas Eve couldn't have been any worse.

That day, I got back the results of my mock exams from cram school—and I'd gotten another E on Houo's exams. That wasn't good.

Those mock exams had been the last ones before the real thing. The grade for my backup option—Risshuin University—had gone up and was now a C, but since it wasn't even an A, it felt presumptuous to even call it a backup option.

Basically, this was the extent of my academic skills. I could feel that my grades were improving little by little, but I had nowhere

near enough time to achieve what I had been striving for.

The thought of becoming a ronin and waiting until the next year appeared in my head. But at the same time, so did the things Sekiya-san had once said to me.

"Trust me—there's not a single good thing about becoming a ronin."

"It must be nice to be in your second year of high school. You can still aim for anywhere you want. If only someone had told me that back then..."

Sekiya-san had warned me about this and had given me advice at every opportunity. If, despite that, I still couldn't raise my grades in time, then it was fully my fault for procrastinating too much.

I wanted to turn back time. If I'd been studying as hard as I was now since the spring of my third year, or maybe even earlier than that, then maybe...

There was no point in thinking about that, though. And right now, I didn't even have time to regret the past. It wasn't like my entrance exams were already over. I could regret things after I failed.

With all that on my mind, all I could do was deal with what was in front of me.

Every day was both short and long. I couldn't tell how many days it would take until I could fully memorize the thick glossary on world history and my English vocabulary notebook. Even when it seemed like I'd memorized something, I would forget it over time.

I was anxious. But in the end, all I could do was whatever little I could, wherever I could—whether it was solving a problem here or learning a word there.

I forced myself to keep calm and focus on whatever I currently had in front of me. Maintaining this level of concentration was nerve-racking by itself.

When Christmas Eve came around, I was still right in the middle of that dark tunnel—and Runa appeared before me.

"Huh...?" I found her in front of me on my way home. "Runa...?"

"Ryuto!"

We hadn't talked about meeting up. All we'd done was say Merry

Christmas to each other on LINE.

Runa got up from the chair for visitors in the lobby. She had a cake box in her hand.

"Wh-What's up?" I asked. I checked my phone to see if she'd called or messaged me, but there was nothing.

"Surpriiise! I wanted to give you a Christmas cake. It's homemade! ♡"

"Oh, uh... Thanks." Since I hadn't even prepared myself for a conversation, I couldn't think straight. I struggled to figure out what to say. "It must've been hard to bring such a big one here..."

I hadn't seen the box's contents yet, but judging by the size of it, it must've been a full-sized cake and not cupcakes.

"It's okay, I'm not busy with anything anyway. This is one of the few things I can do for you..."

I was too anxious about my mock exam results to reply. When I thought about it later, I realized that I should've said, "It's not like that. You're the reason I can work so hard."

A man wearing a coat came in from the front door and headed to the elevator without giving us so much as a glance. It was already past ten in the evening, and there weren't many people to be seen in my apartment building's common area—maybe everyone was celebrating Christmas at home.

After a period of silence—my fault—Runa spoke up as if unable to endure the awkwardness anymore. "You're...planning on studying at home tonight, right?"

Our eyes met as she looked at me with those upturned eyes of hers.

She wore a thick, warm minidress under her down jacket. I seemed to recall her wearing something similar for Christmas the year before.



In retrospect, perhaps she'd come there because she'd wanted to do at least *something* with her boyfriend for Christmas. Back then, however, I hadn't had the presence of mind to think about anything at all other than my grades.

"Yeah..." was all I could say with a gloomy look on my face.

"Right..." Runa hung her head. Her lips were undoubtedly curled up into a smile, but the way her bangs fell didn't allow me to see if her eyes were smiling too. "Do your best, then!" She then looked up and had her usual cheerful expression on her face.

"Right. Thanks..." I replied, my voice devoid of energy. "Ah, I'll walk you to the station."

"That's okay! It's not that far from here, unlike from my station to my place. There aren't any scary roads on the way either. And I'll take a cab home from Station A."

"Huh...? Oh... Is that okay?"

It was true that compared to the distance between Runa's house and Station A, you could get from here to Station K in half the time, and all of the roads leading to it were big and had plenty of foot traffic.

"You should hurry home and go back to work! I'm glad I came since I got to see you!" she said cheerfully. After that, she waved at me and headed out.

"Thanks... See you..." I replied.

"Later! I'll message you once I get home!"

I limply waved and watched her walk through the automatic door at the entrance—she waved energetically at me all the while.

I got home, took off my coat, washed my hands, and did some other stuff. After I went to my room, I reached out for the cake box that I'd left on my desk.

Inside was a whole cake covered in white cream and with strawberries on top. It was decorated with various Christmas-themed things, like Santa and a tree. There was also a chocolate plate that read "Merry Xmas."

It felt like a waste to eat it right away, so I took a photo—it didn't turn out very well because the only light in my room was a

fluorescent lamp. Then, I grabbed one of the strawberries and popped it into my mouth.

I recalled how Runa had just been. It was clear that I was making her put up with the way things were.

But I had bigger matters to worry about. Even now, I was on edge as I sat there. I was in a state of constant restlessness like there was a drum beating somewhere within me on upbeats.

The strawberry tasted bitter. It was covered in cream from the cake and was supposed to be so sweet, and yet...

Then, my phone vibrated on my desk. When I checked the screen, I saw that I had a message from Runa.

Runa: It's you we're talking about, so I know you've got this!
Runa: I believe in you! Go for it!

"Runa..."

Before I knew it, I was clenching the phone in my hand. My chest grew hot and numb, and there was a prickling sensation deep in my nose.

Perhaps I really *had* acted a bit strange that day. And yet, she hadn't uttered a word of complaint and had cheered me on instead. I was grateful for it, and it made me love her all the more.

I wanted to treasure her forever. Because if I didn't, divine punishment would certainly be coming for me.

With that on my mind, I blinked many times, turned on my desk lamp, sat down, and took a textbook out of my black daypack. The bag was visibly worn by now.

***

Even now, I remembered the taste of the strawberries I'd eaten that day—along with the memory of the lowest point in my life and the gratitude I'd felt toward Runa.

After we had finished the cake, I handed Runa a small bag. "Here, this is for you," I said.

Inside it was a rectangular box small enough to hold with one hand.

"Oh, thanks!" Runa said. She took out the box, stared closely at it, and proceeded to undo the crosswise ribbon. "What is it? Some kind of accessory? A necklace, maybe?"

I avoided Runa's probing gaze and simply smiled at her.

"Oh, a pencil...?"

"Yeah."

What Runa had taken out of the box was a white mechanical pencil with gilded edges.

"It has my name on it! How cute!" she exclaimed.

Her name had been engraved on the side of the pencil in gold. The color matched the other metallic parts on it. This pencil had been easy to order online, so I'd asked for it to be made with the name "Luna," which Runa often used on social media. It had been expensive for a mechanical pencil, and as if to validate its price of roughly 5,000 yen, it sparkled like an accessory.

"I was thinking a ballpoint pen might work better as a present...but you'd probably have more use for this when studying," I said.

"Huh?"

"I want you to do your best in the fall when you go to school to get your certification," I replied, wondering if I should've gone with jewelry or a trinket like I typically would. "You cheered me on when I was preparing for my entrance exams...so now, I want to support your dream the same way."

I recalled how moved I'd been when she'd told me about her passion for her goals at LakeTown. This time, it was my turn to support her.

I wanted her to know about my resolve.

"Ryuto..." Runa stared at me while holding the pencil.

The lights in the night outside had grown even brighter and more beautiful than earlier.

There was also something I'd never told her about.

"And besides. I don't know if you remember..." I began, "but it was what made me fall in love with you in the first place."

"What? A pencil?" Runa asked in surprise.

I nodded, a little hesitantly. "At the beginning of our second year of high school, you forgot to write your name on the parent-teacher conference form. I sat in the front row then, and you came up to me and asked to borrow a pencil."

"Go on."

"I gave it to you, and you said thanks with a smile."

"And then?" she asked.

Runa quickly responded to each thing I said to get me to say more. All I could do was smile awkwardly.

"Well... That's it," I admitted.

"What?! Which part of that made you fall in love with me?!"

"It's kind of silly, right?" I said. Even I found it funny. "It's just that I'd always thought you were cute."

It made me nostalgic to remember how I'd felt back then. She'd been "Shirakawa-san" to me—a girl, out of my reach, whom I'd simply admired. Back then, it would've been unthinkable for me to be having a meal with her like this.

"I didn't think you'd speak to a total introvert like me... It made me happy." Recalling how I'd felt at the time made a smile appear on my face all on its own. "It felt like a waste to use the pencil I lent you, and for a while, I didn't. Actually, I still have it."

"No way!"

It wasn't for some gross reason like it having her fingerprints on it. It just kind of felt like a memento of our relationship. I didn't want to break or lose it, so it had become somewhat like a piece of work, enshrined in the pen holder on my desk, never to be used.

"Even I think it's weird, though," I said in self-deprecation.

"Not at all," Runa replied, shaking her head. "That just says how important our first encounter was to you, right?" She held her new white pencil to her chest and smiled. "I'll take good care of this pencil, just like how you've taken good care of the one I borrowed from you."

"Thank you," I replied, feeling deeply moved.

Runa grinned at me. "I should be the one thanking you," she said, giggling. "If I'd never borrowed that pencil from you, we would've been complete strangers right now, you know?"

"Probably...?"

Had that been the case, what would I have done when Icchi had ordered me to confess to the girl I liked? I might have had a crush on Runa, but I'd never talked to her even once. I probably couldn't have worked up the courage to confess to her on my own.

"Wait!" Runa said all of a sudden. She looked out the window and narrowed her eyes like she was thinking about something. "I think I remember that," she said quietly. "I still didn't know many of my classmates...but it was a pain to go all the way to my desk in the back, so I decided to borrow something I could write with from someone nearby... And then I saw the guy sitting in front of the teacher's podium. Our eyes met, so I asked him." Runa told the story slowly, as if she were recalling every action step by step. Her eyes remained fixed on a single point all along. "He got flustered and gave it to me right away, so I figured he was a gentle guy." Then, she looked at me. "So that was *you* back then!"

I was moved beyond words—I'd always assumed she didn't remember that time. She had rediscovered this memory of me from when I'd been a nobody to her, and for that, I was grateful.

"Fate sure works in strange ways," Runa began in a melancholic tone. "Relationships grow from a string of small coincidences, and big miracles like this one can happen. At this point, I can't even imagine what I'd be like if I never met you." Then, she grinned mischievously. "I'm so glad I forgot to write my name on that form back then!" The innocent look that came over her face was exactly as it had been back in high school. "All right! Now I can focus on studying real hard!"

"I'm rooting for you," I said sincerely.

"Thank you, Ryuto." Runa looked at me with sincere affection. "Even when I turn twenty-one soon, I'll still love you."

The smile the still-twenty-year-old Runa gave me was so

supremely dazzling and beautiful—I wished I could take a picture of it together with the night scenery that stretched out behind her.

Chapter 4

July arrived, and so did my university exams. As always, some of them were challenging and others less so, but I felt like I'd done well enough in all of them.

Once a university student finished their exams, summer break began. Mine had already started, but I had to pay a visit to the student affairs office and had arranged to meet up with a friend on the way.

I found Nisshi at the ticket gates at the station closest to my school.

"Hey, Nisshi," I said.

"'Sup. It's been a while."

We hadn't seen each other since the thing with Icchi and Chamotaro-san, so it had been approximately four months since we'd last hung out.

"How are things with Yamana-san?" I asked.

"All right, I guess."

We walked side by side to the university, talking on the way.

Sekiya-san had gone to Hokkaido for school, and he and Yamana-san had broken up. Immediately after that, she had started dating Nisshi. He'd told me about it over LINE before, so this was my first time hearing it directly from his mouth.

"Do you see each other often?" I asked.

"Yeah; not much has changed on that front. Even before we got together, we'd go out to eat once or twice a week."

"Really?"

His attitude was somewhat surprising. Nisshi'd had a one-sided crush on Yamana-san since high school, so I'd assumed he'd be more excited now that his feelings had been returned.

Then again, he was a bit of a show-off, so maybe he was just

hiding his excitement from me.

"Hasn't Shirakawa-san told you about us?" he asked.

"Huh? Well..." I thought back on my recent conversations with Runa. "I don't think she really mentioned it..."

"Seriously?" Nisshi looked surprised. "So Nicole doesn't even talk about me to Shirakawa-san...?"

"Nah, there's no way she doesn't." I laughed it off.

While the two of them didn't talk on the phone practically every night like they'd done in high school, they were still best friends.

"I haven't gotten to see Runa much since getting into university, and when we do see each other, there's so much to talk about that she probably just forgets to bring it up. Just like how I've been forgetting to ask her about it," I said.

"Well, I guess that's fair. You probably don't have time to talk about other people. Glad to hear you two are still going strong," he said. There was a hint of jealousy in his voice—it made me nervous.

"But, like, it's only been, what, three months since you started dating Yamana-san in April? Aren't you two in the most fun part of it now?"

I'd never dated anyone other than Runa, so I couldn't know for sure, but it felt like I'd heard something of that sort before.

"Well, I guess it's fun for me. I've always loved her and all," Nisshi replied, but he sounded in low spirits.

No matter how I looked at it, he didn't seem to be just putting on airs here. But somehow, I couldn't ask him about it, so I decided to change the subject for the time being.

"By the way, how's your job? You still work at the same place?" I asked.

"Yeah, sure do."

Nisshi had been working in the kitchen of a family restaurant since his first year in university. He didn't work many shifts—only three a week—but I was impressed by how long he'd stuck with it.

"It's easy for me since I'm in the kitchen and don't have to deal with any customers. I just take a plate with a salad out of the fridge, unwrap it, dress it a bit, and that's it."

"That honestly sounds pretty dystopian..."

"That's why it takes so little time," he said.

"Guess you guys work hard to keep the prices from rising."

"What about you? You still got that job at the cram school?" he asked me.

"Just on Saturdays. My main job now is at Iidabashi Publishing, in the editing department."

"Oh yeah, you did mention that. And Kurose-san works there too, right?"

As we chatted, we reached the campus of Houo University.

After the four of us—meaning Nisshi, Runa, Yamana-san, and I—had gone for a drive in February, Nisshi and I had been staying in touch more. I'd wanted to see him in person sooner, in part to ask about his relationship with Yamana-san, but our schedules had never quite aligned due to school and work.

That mismatch in timing had gone on until today when we were both done with classes and exams. I happened to have time to see him before my shift at the editing department. I'd offered to go meet him after finishing my business at my school, but Nisshi had said he wanted to see Houo, so we'd agreed to have lunch there.

"Wow, this place is huge," he said in surprise upon seeing a building that had come into view right after we'd passed through the school's main gate. "This one looks pretty new."

"Yeah. Though there's also a lot of old ones in the back."

"Huh. I guess you wouldn't normally go see colleges and universities other than your own."

"It's the same for me. You should show me around Seimei University sometime."

"Sure, no problem. I don't really make the most of its facilities, though."

We continued chatting as we entered the campus.

"There's three cafeterias here. Which one do you want to go to?"

"Three?! Wow... Which one do you recommend?"

"Well..."

The one I often went to with Kujibayashi-kun was the kind of place you'd expect sporty people to go to, so it might not have been the best idea to show it to Nisshi. He'd definitely come here looking

to see something with a strong "Houo" feel to it. The dining hall below it was an ordinary consumers' co-op you could find anywhere. Which left...

"I know which one you'll like," I said.

"All right, lead the way."

Thus, Nisshi and I went to a cafeteria I'd only ever visited a couple of times.

That cafeteria was located on the fourth floor of the building in front of the main gate. The area was still new and had a clean feel to it, so it was popular with girls. At the same time, that made it hard for total introverts with barely any friends, like me, to approach it.

Unlike Kujibayashi-kun, whose outfits were about as crazy as what Icchi often wore, Nisshi dressed pretty fashionably these days. It felt like I was bringing an extroverted friend along with me, which let me carry myself with more confidence than usual.

The cafeteria's glass walls provided excellent natural light inside. Stepping into the cafeteria, we sat at a table as far away from other people as possible.

Nisshi had ordered a lunch set and sat down with his tray. "All these Houo folks sure look smart," he said while looking around.

As exams were coming to an end, there weren't as many people here as you'd normally see at lunch. There were still some students studying alone here and there—they must've still had more tests to take. There were also many more girls around than guys on the whole.

"Gotta say, though, it's hard to relax in a place like this," said Nisshi.

"Do you want to watch something from KEN?"

That'd been what we'd often done on lunch breaks back in high school.

Nisshi looked shocked by my suggestion. "Dude, don't even bring that up! You realize that once you go to college, you can only watch KEN secretly in private, right?! Especially if we're talking about a cafeteria full of girls! I better not hear you mention him again

today!”

“What?!”

Is it really that bad?

I was curious about Nisshi’s opinion of watching KEN these days, but perhaps not knowing about that was already a sign that I’d left the front ranks of his fans. It was really sad to think about.

Either way, my idea of watching videos had been shot down, so we simply made small talk over lunch.

“By the way, what about Icchi?” I asked. “I haven’t seen him much among active Kids recently. Have you stayed in touch?”

“Nah. No, wait, I did call him once.”

“Hm?”

“It was to tell him that I started dating Nicole,” Nisshi said. “Apparently Tanikita-san was there, though, and that’s how he already knew about us. They kept giggling the whole time and it pissed me off, so I hung up right away.”

“I see...”

I felt like I hadn’t gotten in touch with Icchi even once since the thing with Chamotaro-san.

“I wonder what he’s up to these days...” Nisshi said.

“I hope he’s doing well.”

“I’m sure he is. We’re good enough friends that I’m sure I’ll get invited to his funeral if he dies.”

I laughed at his dark joke and continued eating my meal. I was having pork and mustard spinach pasta today.

“You know...” Nisshi began, carrying a bite of omurice with demi-glace on it to his mouth, “Tanikita-san is cute, but she’s a pain to deal with. She’s totally the type to dominate her boyfriend.”

“Well, there are people who’d be happy with that. That probably includes Icchi,” I replied.

“Are you talking about their bedroom life?”

The sudden dirty joke shook me up. “What?! N-No...!”

“What about you, anyway?”

“Huh? What are you talking about, exactly...? Our power dynamic?”

Nisshi smiled in a meaningful way. “That and the other thing, I

guess.” Then, he shot me a grin.

“You know it’s daytime, right...?”

I’d yet to tell Nisshi that Runa and I hadn’t had sex yet, so this topic was somewhat awkward.

“What about you and Yamana-san?” I asked. “If you want to know my situation, tell me yours first.”

Nisshi looked visibly perturbed by my counterattack. “There’s nothing to tell, really.”

“Huh...?”

He didn’t look me in the eye and faced the window instead. He had the same strange look on his face that had appeared whenever the subject of him and Yamana-san had come up, starting with our conversation in front of the station earlier.

Are things not going well between them? It’s only been three months.

Just as I thought that...

“I’m not sure she even sees me as a guy,” Nisshi said all of a sudden, hanging his head. “I didn’t think our relationship would see this little development in three months.”

So they haven’t done the kinds of things that couples do?

I myself was still a virgin after four years of dating, and I thought it was okay so long as the parties involved didn’t have a problem with it. I could tell from the look on Nisshi’s face that he wasn’t satisfied with his current situation, however.

“Have you...done nothing at all?” I asked delicately.

Nisshi glanced at me. “We hold hands. But that’s it,” he said, sounding disgruntled.

“I see...”

“Even when we walk around Odaiba at night, things don’t feel any different from when we go on dates in the daytime.”

“Right...”

I wasn’t good at that sort of thing myself—it felt like I always let Runa take the lead. Frustratingly, I couldn’t give him any advice here.

“The mood just never becomes how it should be, even though I’m doing my best... It’s like *she’s* not letting it change...”

Perhaps he didn’t actually want to say this to anyone, not even to me.

Nisshi continued to look irritated. “Like, we’ll hold hands, and she’ll talk about how my hand is smaller than hers and generally tease me like that.”

“Huh...”

All I could do was give one-word replies to show that I was listening.

I recalled how Sekiya-san had looked while holding a cup at that ramen place. Sure enough, he was tall and had big, masculine hands. I seemed to remember that although they were slender, they were also brawny and sinewy—probably because he’d played ping-pong back in the day.



I looked at Nisshi's hands as he sat across from me. His right hand, the one holding the spoon, was much smaller than Sekiya-san's. It still had some childlike roundness to it.

"I've gone all this time looking at Nicole when she was still with her ex," Nisshi said. The pain in his expression was intensifying.

I remembered seeing that expression before. When we'd been on our school trip in Kyoto, he'd watched Yamana-san and Sekiya-san embrace each other. After that, he'd walked for a long time, and then he'd had the same kind of face at the end of it.

"The faces she showed him, and the ones I see... They're completely different."

I knew how Yamana-san looked when she was with Nisshi, and I knew how she'd been with Sekiya-san.

"Still, I've always felt that when she was with you, she was being her real self," I told him.

Nisshi looked at me and gave me a small, happy smile. But the dejection returned to his face right away. "I do feel like I'm asking for too much here. I should be grateful that she's agreed to date such a total introvert at all." His smile turned into one of self-deprecation. "And besides, we were friends for so long... It's hard for everything to just up and change now that we're a couple. It hasn't been long since she broke up with her ex either. And I get all that, it's just..."

Nisshi rested his chin on the hand which held the spoon and directed his eyes at the window. Outside, the vivid green ginkgo trees swayed in the wind.

Watching the sight with narrowed eyes, Nisshi quietly said, "We're a couple now... Is it really too much to ask for things to be different from when we were friends?"

***

"Oh, welcome!"

I was inside a multitenant building in the shopping district near Station A. After I took the elevator to the fifth floor and rang the intercom of what visually resembled a regular apartment, Yamana-

san opened the door and greeted me energetically. The atmosphere of the place was rather different from that of the izakaya she'd used to work at, but the way she carried herself was still the same.

"Come in, come in. Take a seat over there."

Yamana-san pointed at the back of the room. There were two long, narrow tables, and in front of each of them were plush chairs that looked like small sofas.

I went to the chair Yamana-san had indicated and sat down timidly.

The room was cozy. It was about the size of an apartment meant for one person—one with a single bedroom and a combined dining room and kitchen. It felt barren because there were so few things inside, but the white walls and furniture made it also feel very clean.

"This place feels pretty private," I said.

"I know, right?" Yamana-san smiled and sat down across from me on the other side of the table. Unlike the chairs for clients, her seat was just a simple stool without a back. "A girl in a higher year at my school started this place and worked here all by herself. For safety reasons, she only had female clients. When I came in in April, she decided that when we're both here, it's okay to serve men too. And there's a new nail technician coming in autumn."

Yamana-san prepared things quickly as she spoke. At the center of the table was some sort of a box with a thin fluorescent lamp attached. She moved it to the side and put something that looked like a pen holder in front of her. It was filled with brushes of some sort.

"Give me your hand, I'll disinfect it."

"Oh, okay..."

This was the first time I'd touched the hand of a girl other than Runa outside of folk dances. Even though I was well acquainted with Yamana-san, it still made me a little nervous.

One at a time, she laid my hands over her own and quickly wiped them with what looked like cotton wool. Then, she took a picture with her phone to use as a sample shot.

"That girl you mentioned—she's not here?" I asked.

It was a small room, so I didn't need to look around to know

there was nobody else present.

"Yeah, I told her to take a lunch break since you're a friend."

"Oh."

It felt a little awkward to hear Yamana-san call me a friend. The thought that she'd accepted me as both her best friend's boyfriend and as a friend of her own made me happy.

"I had lunch with Nisshi at my university the other day," I said.

After hearing him talk about his relationship with Yamana-san, I'd recalled Runa having mentioned Yamana-san's nail salon and the offer so she could take sample shots. I'd talked to Runa about it and made a reservation for 1 p.m. on a weekday the following week. I'd be going to work at the editing department right afterward.

"I've heard, yeah. Houo University, isn't it? He said the place was so highbrow it upset his stomach."

"He just ate too much—simple as that."

After eating his omurice, Nisshi had ordered a parfait and a no-bake cheesecake. He'd eaten it all and said that he physically couldn't eat any more afterward.

"I'm glad you guys are still friends," Yamana-san said while filing my nails.

As she removed as much of the white part as she could, my nails were looking neater by the minute. I could see that she really was a pro at this.

"Ren says he can't get in touch with Icchi. That he doesn't *want* to," Yamana-san said with a smirk. "After all, those two are off in their own little world right now."

"Icchi and Tanikita-san?"

"Yeah. Akari's totally off the rails. She's all over him. If you look at her Instagram and TikTok, she's super cringe there too. Wanna see?"

If anything, it was clear that Yamana-san couldn't wait to show me. Her hands had stopped working before I even agreed to look. She then stuck a hand into a pocket of her apron, pulled out her phone, and turned it my way.

The most recent post on Tanikita-san's TikTok was a short video of her and Icchi singing something together with twinkle effects

around their faces. Judging by the thumbnails on her page, there was an endless stream of videos like that.

"Wow. She's posted a video of herself with Icchi practically every day," I said.

"Yep. What's with her? Are they living together? It's scary how carried away she is." Smiling in mild annoyance, Yamana-san took the phone back from me and resumed the nail care.

"So *you* aren't getting carried away?"

"Me and Ren? Of course not," she replied. Her hands continued to work, and she had a faint smile on her face. "We were never like that to begin with."

"But now that you're a couple, shouldn't things be...a bit different?" I asked. Since I'd never been in a relationship like theirs, there wasn't much confidence in my tone.

Yamana-san glanced at me without stopping her hands and smiled. "Looks like Ren wants them to be." Her eyes returned to my hands. "It's funny to me, though. I just can't."

"Really?"

"Well yeah, obviously." Yamana-san smiled. "What I always liked about being with Ren was that I could be myself." Her eyes were on my hands, but at the same time, it felt like they were looking at something far away. "When I dated senpai, I always thought about how I wanted him to see me as cute and a good girl. I kept a lot of stuff on the inside. Ren says I don't need to do that with him. After all, I've never been like that with him even once, and he fell in love with me anyway."

"I see..."

Again, that was the only reply I could give. It didn't sit right with me after seeing how Nisshi had acted, but perhaps in Yamana-san's mind, her relationship with him was absolutely great.

And if Nisshi wasn't satisfied with it...then perhaps he was the one who'd have to let go of this love. With that in mind, I couldn't say any more on this topic to Yamana-san.

"By the way, how did you and Sekiya-san start dating?" I asked instead.

I'd heard he'd been her senior in the ping-pong club in middle

school—she'd been the manager. Neither of them had ever told me the details of how their feelings had become mutual and they'd gotten together, however.

It felt like Yamana-san's relationship with Sekiya-san had been special to her. I was curious about it, even though it was from far in the past.

"What? Why do you ask that now?"

"Oh, it's okay if you don't want to talk about it..." I said.

"Nah, it's fine." Yamana-san was still quickly proceeding with the nail care process as she spoke. "Well... It's hard to describe it in a few words. We gradually grew closer after being in the same club for a year, and when he graduated, we used that opportunity to start dating."

"Which one of you confessed first?"

"Hmm... Senpai, I think? He said something of the sort on Valentine's Day, and we grew closer after that."

"Huh."

I recalled the photo that Sekiya-san had once shown me of him in middle school. He wasn't good-looking at all, but he'd still been able to make a move on Yamana-san when he had to. *Guess I should've expected no less from him.*

Yamana-san seemed to have finished my nails at some point while we talked.

"What kind of scents do you like?" she asked at the end.

"I don't know."

She rubbed a citrusy hand cream on my hands, and the whole thing was over.

"Wow, this is amazing!" I said, raising my hands to eye level and staring at my nails. "They're shining..."

Every fingernail was smooth and had been trimmed to the same length as the others. They weren't wet, but they still reflected the light from the fluorescent lamp. The thin skin at the bottom of the nail that often created hangnails had been cleanly removed, and it felt like my nails had become longer.

My fingers didn't feel like they were my own.

I felt like I understood now how Runa felt. When your nails

looked this good, you couldn’t help but look at them. It raised your spirits. It felt like I’d become a narcissist.

“We’re entering an age where men must take care of their nails too. Especially if they have a girlfriend,” said Yamana-san. “Your hands and fingers are what your partner touches the most, so keeping them clean is part of being considerate.”

My hands were resting on the table, and as she spoke, she took some pictures of them with her phone.

Yamana-san grinned at me. “You guys will finally do it in Okinawa, right?” she asked quietly, even though we were alone.

It startled me a little. “Y-Yeah...”

Runa, you told Yamana-san about it...?

“That *is* the plan, I guess...” I added, my face burning up.

Yamana-san continued, smirking. “Why don’t you come again before the trip? I’ll give you another special fifty percent discount. ♡”

She winked at me mischievously.

***

August arrived, and now temperatures were above thirty-five degrees every day.

“Damn, it’s hot...” I groaned as I walked under the burning noontime sun.

The reason I’d gone out at such a time despite not having work or a date was to see a certain someone.

“Hey, Ryuto.”

As Sekiya-san passed through the ticket gates of Shim-Misato Station and saw me, he raised his hand.

“You’ve got a tan. That’s unexpected,” I said.

“I went to the beach with a friend from middle school on Sunday.”



Sekiya-san's face was rather tanned. The same went for his arms, which stretched out from the short sleeves of his shirt.

"That must've been nice," I said.

"We were just screwing around. There weren't any girls there." Despite the way he'd put it, it sounded like he'd had a good time.

It occurred to me that I'd only ever known him as a guy who was studying to get into a university. I'd never seen him have fun somewhere, not even on summer break. He'd spent his time at cram school from morning to evening, so there'd never been an opportunity for him to get a tan.

"You didn't hit on any girls?"

"Of course not. I was with my old ping-pong clubmates, so all of them were introverts."

"Isn't that rude to people in ping-pong clubs across Japan...?" I asked.

"Try going to a ping-pong tournament sometime. They're full of nerds."

"Aha ha..."

I'd meant to defend his sport of choice, but that'd only made him speak worse about it. All I could do was laugh at this point.

"How long will you be here for?" I asked as we walked down a pedestrian walkway toward our destination.

"Just over a week, I guess. I'm going back there next week. Gotta study for tests that come right after my days off."

"Huh... I guess medical school is tough."

"Well, I knew that from the start. Things are much easier compared to when I was a ronin. I can put in the effort now," Sekiya-san said in a matter-of-fact tone. Then, he hung his head, as if hiding it from the sunlight. "I could actually stay here for another week, but there's nothing for me to do after I see you and my friends who live here. And living alone is more comfortable for me than living with my parents."

I knew a thing or two about his family situation, but his tone suggested that there was more to it.

If Sekiya-san were still dating Yamana-san, this summer break would surely have become the happiest two weeks that they'd ever

had together. I also remembered what Nisshi was currently dealing with—it was giving me mixed feelings on the matter.

"Oh, yeah. When I got into medical school, Dad started being nice to me. He invited me for a drink, so we're going out for sushi tonight."

"Oh, that's nice. Not the conveyor-belt kind, right?"

"Heh, no way. It's in Ginza. It would be hilarious if there was a conveyor belt, though. That'd mean my dad's sense of humor is just too good."

Sekiya-san sounded happy. He seemed to have a love-hate relationship with his father, but it was clear he still respected him as a doctor.

"So, why are we here today?" I asked, pointing at the massive blue-and-yellow sign once we'd reached our destination.

The place we'd come to needed no introduction: It was IKEA, the world-renowned furniture maker.

"There's no IKEA in Hokkaido. You know how my classes started right after I moved? I haven't gotten any furniture yet. All the students live near school, and sometimes my friends come over—I can't have them drinking chuhai cans while sitting on the floor forever, you know? I wanted to get a table and stuff over summer break. I spent some time looking online and figured that I do like IKEA's furniture after all, both how it looks and the value for money. I gotta go see it in person, though—it'd suck if I ordered something online and it turned out to be different from how I imagined it."

"I can understand that, I guess."

I, too, did my research when making big purchases. I also didn't like the negotiations you might have to go through when returning things, so I was the careful type—the same went for Sekiya-san.

We reached the store as we chatted and entered. We took the escalator at the entrance up to the second floor, following the map displayed inside the store.

The entire second floor was both a sales floor and a showroom. The sofas, tables, and other furniture were separated by type of design, grouping items that matched each other together. There were also small, stylishly furnished rooms located here and there.

As we followed the route, we came to a place where you could see all types of furniture that you'd need in a house. I often saw these stores on TV, but it was my first time visiting one.

"But why did you ask me to come along?" I asked.

"Well, can *you* imagine going to a place like this by yourself?"

I looked around us again. There were families and couples all over. Some of the latter had an unbearably sweet aura around them—coming to a store like this meant they were probably at the height of their relationship and were checking out furniture for when they'd start living together.

"Why not ask one of your female friends to come with you?"

"That wouldn't work. None of them would agree to it. Coming somewhere like here would mean something else," he argued.

"You have a point..."

"And besides, all my friends in this area already have full-time jobs. The Bon Festival is too far away, and today's a weekday. Everyone's busy at work."

"Oh..."

That sort of explained why he'd asked *me* to come.

"Do you have a new girlfriend yet?" I asked. "Find anyone in Hokkaido?"

Sekiya-san smiled in a meaningful way. "Don't worry, there are some who'd probably agree to go out with me."

His confident attitude irked me a little.

"I'm not worried. We're talking about you, after all," I replied.

"It's just..."

At that point, we had to stop because the path we were taking was filled with people blocking the way. Having nothing better to do, Sekiya-san grabbed a freezer bag from a shelf that we just happened to be next to.

"I'm stopping at friends for the time being," he said. "It might be a while before I can properly date someone."

I listened while looking at the colorful freezer bag samples.

"Right now, I'm a medical student who will be a doctor in the future. That's pretty much set in stone unless I *really* screw up. And that's also probably why I'm so popular."

I wished that I could call myself popular too—it was probably jealousy born out of being a humanities student, as we weren't popular with girls. I stayed silent and tried to pick up on what Sekiya-san really wanted to say here.

"The kind of love I had with Yamana... I might not be able to experience it again for as long as I live." He looked uncharacteristically crushed as he said that. "Yamana, she..." Sekiya-san said her name in a contemplative way and returned the freezer bag to the shelf. "She was the first girl who fell in love with me, and that was back when I was still a nobody. She was probably the last one too."

At that point, the area ahead of us began to clear up, and we started walking slowly again.

"It's not that I regret it... That was the only thing I could do back then... Plus, I'm sure she's already happy with her next boyfriend... It's probably better this way..." he muttered and looked down at the floor. "Though I wonder why I couldn't treasure her more when she was so big in my life."

Despite what he'd said, I couldn't see anything but burning remorse written on his face.

"Isn't that what people call 'regret'?" I asked.

I couldn't keep myself from getting to the heart of the matter with Sekiya-san. That was because no matter what I said, he always brushed things off with a joke.

That was why...

"Oh, huh..."

...when I saw the embarrassed smile on his face, I felt awkward too, like I'd done something I shouldn't have.

I quickly grabbed a nearby plush toy. "Oh, hey, look how cute this is," I said.

We happened to be in an area showing off children's room designs. There were numerous toys on display around us. The one I'd grabbed was a rather large shark plush.

"Want some company while you're living alone?" I suggested.

I felt like I'd seen this shark toy a few times before. There were more of them than of the other toys here, so it must've been the

store's recommendation to customers.

I wanted Sekiya-san to laugh it off and tell me not to make fun of him, but he showed interest instead.

"Maybe... I wanted a pillow anyway. Might as well get this thing instead."

"Ehh, isn't that an awful way to use it?"

"Actually, this one's better."

Sekiya-san picked a different toy up off the shelf. It was similar to the shark but a bit smaller—a dolphin.

"You like dolphins?" I asked.

"Not in particular. I like how monotone it is, though."

Unlike the blue shark with its pink mouth, the dolphin had calmer colors—gray and white. It certainly wouldn't seem out of place in the apartment of a guy who lived alone.

"I'm gonna hug it every night when I sleep. In place of a girlfriend," he added.

"That's fine too, I guess..."

"That was a joke. You were supposed to laugh."

"It's kinda sad, actually..." I jokingly pretended to be holding back tears and looked at Sekiya-san again. "Anyway, are you still getting that table?"

At some point, we'd reached the end of the second floor, and there was a restaurant area ahead of us.

"Oh, you're right. I got caught up in the conversation."

With that, we turned around and made our way back to the area with living room furniture. After checking out various tables, Sekiya-san chose a white side table. He also bought a bookshelf, a TV stand, and some smaller items on the first floor. After picking up the furniture he wanted from the warehouse area, he paid for it all at the entrance.

Once Sekiya-san filled out the delivery form, today's shopping was over and we went back to the restaurant area on the second floor. It was now past three.

"You getting anything?" asked Sekiya-san.

"Yeah. I had a late breakfast, so I just got hungry now."

"I know the feeling. I ate around ten myself."

There were probably many students who started waking up later than usual during their summer breaks.

"It's my treat since you agreed to come with me. Get whatever you want."

"Oh, thanks."

I had a shift at the cram school that evening, so I wanted to eat something filling. I ordered a set of meatballs and mashed potatoes.

During summer break, cram school held summer courses. I went to work at different hours depending on the schedules of the students I worked with.

Sekiya-san got himself a large chocolate cake and a glass of something to drink from the self-service area.

"Is that enough for you?" I asked.

"Yeah. I've got stationary sushi after this. Gotta go on an empty stomach."

"Oh, right."

We paid at the register and sat down at a table.

It was past lunchtime, so the restaurant wasn't all that full. The area was furnished and illuminated by IKEA, giving it a simplistic and stylish Northern European design. It was about as big as the dining hall at my university—or maybe even bigger—and was lined with white tables and chairs.

We sat by the window at a table for four, across from each other, and ate in silence for a while.

The meatballs were great. There was red jam with small seeds in it next to the meatballs. It confused me at first, but when I tried it, the salty-sweetness was addicting. The mashed potatoes were creamy and delicious. I guessed that I should've expected even the food to be good at a world-class furniture store.

Sekiya-san wordlessly ate his chocolate cake while looking out the window. Seeing him like that, I recalled what Yamana-san had told me the other day when I'd asked which one of them had confessed.

"Hmm... Senpai, I think? He said something of the sort on Valentine's Day, and we grew closer after that."

"By the way... Before you first started dating Yamana-san for two

weeks back in the day, which one of you confessed first?" I asked, wanting to see if he'd say the same thing.

Sekiya-san looked at me. "What brought that on?"

"I'm just curious."

"Well... Probably Yamana?"

"Huh?" The surprise made me stop my hand, leaving my fork hovering in midair between my fingers. "Yamana-san said it was you."

"What? Really?" This time, it was his turn to be surprised. "Well, I dunno... How did we even start dating? I'm pretty sure it was her who started it..." said Sekiya-san as if trying to recall the past. "She gave me five chocolates on Valentine's Day, and she didn't do that for anyone else."

"Five? That's amazing."

"I know, right?"

"Like, nice chocolate?"

"Nah, it was wrapped and homemade."

"What? Isn't that the kind that people give out to everyone?"

"But she only gave everyone else one each while I got five. That's practically a confession, you know?"

When Sekiya-san said unexpectedly pure things like that, I could sense the introvert in him—it made me happy. Perhaps even now, deep inside, he was an introverted virgin like me, and that might've been why I liked him.

"Are you a big chocolate fan?" I asked.

"Huh?"

"I mean, you're eating chocolate cake right now."

"Oh... Well, it's not bad, I guess... I just felt like it today."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Anyway," he began, returning the conversation to the previous topic, "I don't think either of us ever confessed properly."

"Really?"

Could relationships even start that way? It was unbelievable to me, like it was something from the world of adults.

"I mean, if you're able to sense things to the same extent as the average person, shouldn't you more or less be able to tell if

whoever's in front of you loves you? So even if neither of you confesses, the mood just dictates that you should start dating," he explained. "And at that point, does it even matter who confessed and who didn't? If you have the kind of relationship where your feelings aren't noticed until you make a clear-cut confession, there's no way you weren't going to get shot down anyway."

Recalling what'd happened with Icchi at the cultural festival during our second year of high school, I felt like Sekiya-san might've actually had a point. Then again, things had eventually worked out for those two, at least.

And this concerned me too...

"That's exactly what I did, though. She and I weren't even friends when I confessed to her," I said.

"Seriously...?" Sekiya-san groaned in an exaggerated way and folded his arms. "That's pretty weird, not gonna lie. She's weird for accepting, and you're weird for thinking it was gonna work."

"I was just doing it as punishment."

"'As punishment'? Really? What is this, a manga?" Poking fun at me, he pointed his fork at me. "Just don't tell your future kids about how you two met, okay? You don't want them to grow up thinking that sort of thing works. You two are pretty special, and in more ways than one."

"I wouldn't tell them about it," I replied, puffing my cheeks in embarrassment. "Anyway, so your answer is that Yamana-san made a move on you on Valentine's Day?"

Sekiya-san averted his eyes somewhat. "Yeah, I guess so."

"I'll ask Yamana-san what she thinks about that one of these days."

That seemed to fluster him. "Wait, don't do that. It's just sad to talk about that now." He smiled in self-deprecation. "She dumped me, you know? She's totally still hurting. No need to rub any more salt into that wound."

Sekiya-san's attitude was always somewhat joking and detached no matter what, so sometimes, I couldn't be sure if he meant what he said. But this time, I could somehow tell—this was the one thing he was fully serious about.

"I'm sorry." I bowed lightly.

Sekiya-san gave me a calm, sidelong glance. He smiled faintly. "Say hi to Yamana for me," he said and then stabbed his fork into the last bite of chocolate cake on his plate. He shoved it between his thin lips.

"See ya! Thanks for coming," said Sekiya-san.

"Thank *you* for treating me."

"No problem. I'll let you know when I come back again at the end of the year."

We parted at a train station where we both needed to transfer to different lines. I got onto another train to go home by myself.

About half of the seats were taken. Sitting in an open spot, I began to stare absentmindedly out the window at the evening scenery.

Sekiya-san and I had almost always met up in Ikebukuro in our cram school days, so going out somewhere together was a fresh experience. Other than that time we'd gone to see him off when he'd left for Hokkaido, there'd only been two double dates we'd gone on—to an aquarium and to MagicalSea.

It'd been fun watching that dolphin show at the aquarium.

And then it hit me.

"You like dolphins?"

"Not in particular. I like how monotone it is, though."

"Dolphins..."

Had that been why he'd picked it? His first date with Yamana-san had been at an aquarium. Had the dolphin show left an impression on him?

"And the chocolate..."

"Are you a big chocolate fan?"

"Well, it's not bad, I guess... I just felt like it today."

"She gave me five chocolates on Valentine's Day, and she didn't do that for anyone else."

I recalled how his eyes had sparkled when he'd said that. He'd been like a teenager.

Sekiya-san had really loved Yamana-san. So much so that he

couldn’t even think of dating other girls three or four months after their relationship had ended. So much so that he unconsciously collected things that symbolized their memories together.

Not that there was any point in thinking about it now. It was all over. Yamana-san had chosen Nisshi instead of him, and she was satisfied with her chosen path. Though the same couldn’t exactly be said for Nisshi...

I sighed. Why did everyone’s relationships always go wrong somewhere?

It was painful to think about these things, so I decided to stop.

Speaking of Valentine’s Day...

Instead, I recalled that day from my third year in high school.

***

Valentine’s Day had fallen on the day just before the entrance exams for Houo University’s humanities department.

As I hadn’t done well on the common test for university admissions, my only chance of getting into an elite university was through their regular entrance exams. When working through past exam questions, I focused on ones from Houo University. As I continued studying over the last few weeks before the actual exam, I kept telling myself it would go just as planned.

February came, and so did the regular entrance exams for the elite universities in the Tokyo metropolitan area.

Except for days when I had exams, I studied at home instead of going to the study room at my cram school. I wanted to avoid catching anything and getting sick. I even kept my mask on during exams.

That day, I was studying in my room at home like usual. There was no use panicking at this point. Doing anything new would only make me uneasy, so I kept rechecking my vocabulary notebook and other things I needed to memorize. I would also solve problems for a second or third time if I’d previously made mistakes in them.

In the middle of that, someone knocked on the door of my room.

“Ryuto, Runa-chan is here,” said my mother.

“Huh...?”

I checked my phone—it was after four in the afternoon. There was nothing from Runa either.

I changed out of the crappy pants I wore at home into jeans and left my room, still confused.

“She’s at the entrance below,” said my mother at the front door.

I put on a mask out of habit, got outside, and took the elevator to the first floor.



"Ryuto!"

Runa had been sitting on a chair in the lobby. When she saw me, she sprang up. She was wearing a mask too, as well as a warm coat and long boots. There was a paper bag in her hands.

"Wh-What's up?" I asked, really not understanding the situation.

Runa smiled. "It's Valentine's Day, so I brought you some chocolate."

"Oh..." It was only then that I remembered that the entrance exam fell on the day after Valentine's Day. "Right..."

"Here you go."

Runa handed me the simple paper bag as if pushing it into my hands.

"Thanks..."

"Open it when you get upstairs. Oh, but don't eat it until after your exam tomorrow!"

"What? Why?"

"Well, it's homemade." Runa lowered her eyebrows apologetically. "I tried to keep things clean, but I'm not a pro. It would be bad if there ended up being germs or viruses on it and you got a cold or an upset stomach..."

"Runa..."

She even considers things like that?

"Okay. Thank you."

"No problem. And I should be thanking you—for letting me see you when you're so busy." Runa then took a step back.

Is she leaving already...? A part of me wished she would stay for longer.

"Do your best," she told me. "I'm really rooting for you."

"Right... Thanks." I waved at her.

"Okay, see you..." She turned around, but just as she got near the front door, she said, "Ah!" and came back.

Runa stopped before me, took my hands, and stood high on tiptoes. Her face approached mine, and I felt the rough touch of my nonwoven mask on my lips.

She'd kissed me through our masks. As I stood dumbfounded at the sudden turn of events, Runa once again walked to the entrance,

turned around, and smiled radiantly.

"Go get 'em, Ryuto!" she cheered excitedly. She'd sounded like a cheerleader. Runa then waved again and walked away.

When I got back upstairs, the first thing I did was take the paper bag to my room and open it. Inside was a round chocolate cake with a message on it written in thin white icing.

Do your best
Love you ♡

I could feel my face heating up. I was glad I hadn't just carelessly taken this to the fridge. This had to be kept in a place where it wouldn't stand out.

"Runa..."

I was filled with love for her—it was intense. Going against her instructions, I helped myself to a bite of the chocolate cake. It was sweet.

All of a sudden, I felt like my ability to think had gotten a tremendous boost. Maybe it was the sugar.

Not wanting to waste this opportunity, I snuck to the fridge while avoiding my mother, returned to my room, and worked my hardest to study for my exams.

After it was all over, it was hard to say whether I'd passed my exams or not. My first thought was that I had, but as time passed, I grew more and more nervous.

Before I got my results for Houo, I heard back from other universities. I'd passed some and failed others. After consulting my parents, I paid the enrollment fee for one of them, just in case, while waiting for my results for Houo.

Nine days later, Houo's results were announced. Those had been the longest nine days in my life, and I had spent them in a state of constant terror.

The exam results were to be posted online at 10 a.m. I couldn't sit still that day. I met up with Runa at a café in front of a train station so we could check the results together.

We sat at counter seats, facing the wall. I held my breath with my phone in hand, an untouched cup of coffee before me. I went to the university's home page, logged in to my account, and was greeted with information about the exams for the department I'd applied to. When the appointed hour came, a confirmation button appeared. Pressing it would let you know if you passed or failed.

Even when the clock struck ten and we could access the results, I

just couldn't bring myself to press that button.

"Sorry, I can't do this," I said. "You do it."

Runa got flustered as I put my phone in her hands. "What?! Me?!"

"Yeah... I feel like you're luckier than me."

Whether I'd passed or failed had already been determined, and I didn't really think that luck had anything to do with where my efforts had taken me. But if Runa was any luckier than me, I wanted to take advantage of that.

"O-Okay... I'm pressing it, then..."

"What?! Already?!"

"Huh? I shouldn't?!"

"Wait, let me prepare myself...!"

We repeated that exchange several times.

"Whatever, I'm pressing it! There's no way you didn't pass. There!" Runa said, having lost her patience. She tapped on my phone's screen with an exaggerated motion.

The page seemed to have finished loading. When Runa looked at the screen, the expression on her face underwent a transformation. Her eyes opened wide, and tears welled up in them.

Seeing Runa start crying without a word, I said, "Wait, so which is it?! Show me...!"

Prepared to see that I'd failed, I looked at the screen. That was why, for a moment, I couldn't believe that the word written there in a large font was "Passed."

"Huh...?"

"Ryuto... Congratulations..." Runa said, struggling to get her voice out through her tears. "You worked so hard... It's amazing... *You're* amazing..."

Hearing her say it while sobbing almost moved me to tears too. "It's thanks to you..." I said.

I truly couldn't have made it here without Runa's support.

She stared at me with moist eyes. "Really? Is it because I pressed the button?"

"Yeah. I'm sure it would've said I failed if I pressed it." After answering Runa's joke with my own, my face turned serious. "Thank

you, Runa. For always being by my side.”

Tears welled up in Runa’s eyes again. The love I felt for her was overwhelming.

There, in that café that morning, with plenty of adults around who were about to head off to work, I gently embraced Runa. “I love you,” I said quietly into her ear. I couldn’t say such things normally, but that was how overcome with emotion I was.

“I love you too.”

When we pulled away from each other, I saw tears spilling from her eyes once more.

Smiling at me, Runa said through her tears, “You did such a good job, Ryuto... Really...!”

Spring had finally come, and I was sure that my spring with Runa was about to come too.

At our high school graduation ceremony, we exchanged parts of our uniforms—her ribbon and my tie—and entered the part of our lives where we would never wear school uniforms again.

A few days after graduation, it was White Day—March 14. Runa and I had spent the preceding days discussing what we’d do that day. Some ideas we’d had were watching a movie and having dinner together afterward, or going to a café for limited-edition drinks.

It was almost lunchtime. I’d gotten dressed and was waiting for the right time to leave when I got a call from Runa.

“Hey, Ryuto, there’s a problem over here... Misuzu-san’s been saying that her stomach’s been hurting since morning, and there was blood just now. But she’s only seven months along.”

“What?!”

I had no idea what to do about this.

Last year, when Misuzu-san had gotten pregnant, she’d moved into the Shirakawa residence. Runa was getting along great with her and kept updating me about her pregnancy in detail. That said, I wasn’t knowledgeable about the female body and the mystery of reproduction, so honestly, none of it had made any sense to me.

“I called the hospital, and they got angry and told us to come immediately. Dad’s at work, and my grandma said she’s dropping

what she's doing and coming home, but I'm the only one here right now. Do you mind if I take a taxi to the hospital with Misuzu-san?"

"Oh, that's okay..."

"Sorry about our date."

"Don't worry about it."

It couldn't be helped, especially if her children's lives might've been at stake.

Thus, Runa took Misuzu-san to the hospital.

She kept me updated on the situation. Misuzu-san was going through threatened premature labor and was urgently admitted to the hospital. Runa went home to get Misuzu-san's things for her, and she still had to explain what was going on to her father and grandmother.

By the time Runa was finished with everything and got home, it was almost 9 p.m. I waited for her to be done and paid her a visit.

"Here, your present for White Day," I said, handing her a paper bag at the entrance to her house. Inside were the chocolate candies I'd meant to give her on our date today. "I wanted to choose something more permanent for you when we were out together today, so I went with candies for this..."

"Wow, thanks! I'm happy with these! Oh, huh, I just remembered I've barely eaten anything since breakfast today."

Runa's voice was energetic, but her exhaustion showed on her face. Even in the dim light of her porch, I could see that her makeup was a mess around her eyes. Given how much she always cared about her appearance, that was proof that today had been just that hectic for her.

"Wanna come in? My grandma's home, though."

"Nah, I'll pass. You're tired, right? Take it easy."

"Yeah... Thanks..." Runa smiled in relief. "Can I make it up to you sometime?"

"Sure. It's no rush."

With that, I left her house.

From that day on, Runa's life suddenly became extremely busy.

Misuzu-san was discharged from the hospital after a few days and

was ordered to stay in bed at all times except to eat and to go to the bathroom. She remained on bed rest until the final month of her pregnancy.

Runa had to fill in and pick up Misuzu-san's share of chores. As Misuzu-san couldn't take baths either, Runa also had to clean her hair with dry shampoo, wash her up in her bed, and otherwise take care of her. Runa did all of this voluntarily.

Even when we saw each other, she would sometimes leave early, saying she needed to make food for Misuzu-san soon.

As that went on, I became a university student, and Runa got a full-time job.

Each of us had our own spring.

***

I've been thinking about my third year of high school a lot recently, huh.

Unlike the second year when Runa and I had just started dating and everything looked radiant... Honestly, I didn't have that many good memories of that third year.

I'd set my sights on a goal that'd been too high, suffered many setbacks, and spent my days studying without knowing if it would ever pay off. It had almost broken me.

But on the rare occasions my heart had sparkled like a jewel, they had always been when Runa had been by my side.

She'd eagerly desired me with eyes burning like the sun at the height of summer. Together with Kurose-san, she'd waved to her mother with a radiant smile on her face under the autumn sky. Runa had suppressed her feelings and done her best to support me over the winter, putting up with so much. And when the cherry blossoms had bloomed for me, she'd celebrated it with me with tears of joy before starting down a new path in her own life.

All of these were memories of days gone by, but each of these Runas was still there in the present one. They lived on in my

memory too. But compared to all the Runas of the past, I loved the one in front of me, with her beautiful smile, most of all.

"Hurry up, Ryuto!" said Runa, waving at me from the cobalt-blue shore.

That's right—we were on our long-awaited trip to Okinawa at last.

Chapter 5

We'd arrived in Okinawa at nearly 10 a.m. The bargain-price package tour we'd booked had us boarding a 7 a.m. flight, so Runa and I had taken the first train of the day to Narita Airport while rubbing our sleepy eyes.

We'd slept a little on the plane, and after landing at Naha Airport, we'd taken a rental car that we'd booked ahead of time to go sightseeing around Okinawa with me behind the wheel.

"Wow, this is great! The water's so clean here!"

The first place we visited was the so-called Umikaji Terrace. It was a resort mall located on a small island by the name of Senagajima not far from Naha Airport.

Runa had exclaimed that upon turning around to look at the sea as we ascended the stairs of the resort.

"It's amazing!" she added. "It's like we're not even in Japan!"

Umikaji Terrace was an open-air mall located alongside a curved road that ran along the sea. Stores and cafés were in a set of white buildings that sloped uphill. The guidebook had called it the "Japanese Amalfi," and indeed, the rows of white buildings facing the blue sea made it look like a resort on the Mediterranean Sea.

"I've been so hyped for this—it's even better than I thought it would be!" Runa was so excited that she couldn't stop taking selfies. "Wow, and it looks this good unedited?! That's crazy!"

It was the end of August, and the skies were clear, so the Okinawan waters were the same cobalt blue as in the photos in the guidebook.

It was hot under the blazing sun, but the constant breeze felt good as it dried the sweat on our skin.

"Let's take one together, Ryuto. ♡"

Runa beckoned me over, and we took a selfie together with the

sea in the background.

The beach's white sand gradually faded into the shoals, and the deep blue of the water came together with the blue of the sky.

Runa's fragrance tickled my nostrils along with the breeze. It was the scent of her hair and perfume.

It had been a while since the last time she'd made my heart beat as fast as it had back in high school. After all, tonight, we would...

"Oh look, a cat!" a nearby tourist exclaimed, making us turn to the source of the voice. Sure enough, a brown tabby cat was sprawled out on the terrace in front of a café.

Umikaji Terrace was like a field of shops and cafés built on a hillside. The area got a lot of sunshine. Bathing in the refreshing sunlight of morning here in the south, the cat appeared to be enjoying itself, stretching out with closed eyes.

"Wow, it's so cute!" Runa said. She loved cats. She then approached it and crouched down next to it.

The cat seemed to be used to humans. It opened one eye, glanced at Runa, and then closed it again as if it were too much of a bother.

"What a nice cat..." Runa added, gently petting its back in the direction of its fur.

Her fair, delicate hand gently caressed the small animal. The sight kind of turned me on—I wanted her to do that to me too.

Would she do it if I asked...?

"Hey, Ryuto, come pet it too! This cat's real nice!"

Her voice brought me back to reality.

"Huh?!" I'd said it loudly in my surprise, and the cat got up.

"Oh..." Runa sounded disappointed as she watched the cat run off the terrace. "I just came over and it's already gone..."

"What?!"

She just came?! Here?!

At that point, I realized I was way too horny. It was embarrassing—I wasn't in middle school anymore.

"Ryuto...?"

Suddenly, I noticed that Runa had gotten up. She was staring at me with a puzzled look on her face.

Her sudden approach rattled me. “Whoa!”

“What’s the matter?”

“I-It’s nothing!” I replied, flustered. I started walking as if everything were normal. “Man, I’m hungry! Do you want to eat something?”

“Sure! I wonder what I should get?” Runa’s eyes immediately began to shine, and she took the lead and walked ahead of me.

I watched her from behind as we walked through a white passage with southern ornamental plants and a deep blue sky in the background. Her long white legs stretched out from her denim shorts—the sight made my pulse race, and I placed a hand over my heart to calm myself.

Runa and I toured the various cafés of Umikaji Terrace.

“Wow, this cheese pull is awesome!” Runa exclaimed.

“Guess that’s why it’s called ‘sata andagi with stretchy cheese.’”

“It’s just sooooo long! Quick, take a pic!”

“They have strawberry smoothies? Looks delish!”

“We really have to try those.”

“Yep! ♡ I’m gonna go with the one with ice cream on top!”

“This gelato is great! How’s the purple yam milk?”

“It’s great too.”

“My mango milk is great too! ♡ Want some?”

“Your mango milk...”

“Wait, are you thinking something dirty?”

“N-No, I’m not!”

“Heh heh, I’m not sure I believe you.”

Sometimes, Runa would pick up on the naughty things that ran through my head.

After having our fill of the blue sea and the resort mall with the sea breeze blowing around us, we made our way back to the car.

Next, we headed to Kokusai-dori Street. It was *the* place to see when visiting Okinawa, so of course we had to go.

"Wow! There's so many people!" exclaimed Runa.

"Well yeah, it's summer break."

"So, what's there to do here?"

"Huh? You eat, pick up gifts to give people back home..."

"We're already full, though," she said.

"Yeah, and it's too early to buy gifts since we just got here..."

Walking down the big street lined with palm trees on both sides and looking at the rows of all kinds of shops and cafés was fun. It felt like we were in a tropical country. But since there were a lot of people there and we didn't really find a place we wanted to visit, we returned to the parking lot after just a casual stroll.

After that, we made our way to a place called Mihama Town Resort American Village. It took less than an hour to get there from Kokusai-dori, even after a small traffic jam. Our hotel reservation was at a hotel in the center of Okinawa, and this was a sightseeing stop along the way there as we headed north from the airport, which was in the southern part of the island.

Mihama Town Resort American Village was a shopping area that was apparently modeled after cities on the American West Coast. It was located in Chatan, a town on the west coast of Okinawa. We arrived after 4 p.m., and you could see the sun starting to set over the sea.

We were walking on a coastal road lined with palm trees.

"Wow, this is great!" Runa exclaimed as she looked around.

The evening sun shone from between the clouds rising from the horizon. The water was even clearer here than at Umikaji Terrace. The clouds reflected the sunlight and glowed a faint pink. The pastel colors made it all feel fancy.

Turning around to look at the town, we could see colorful, American-style buildings peeking out from behind the palm trees. The buildings were bright primary colors like red, yellow, and green.

For a while, we walked around, holding hands and observing this exotic scenery. Eventually, we went into a seaside café. After waiting in line for a while, we were led to a table on the wooden terrace with a view of the sea.

“Wow, this place is amazing! ♡” exclaimed Runa after sitting down. She brought her hands together as she looked at the sea.

The setting sun made the water close to the horizon shine like scales.

Sitting at a white plastic table on a white wooden floor reminded me a bit of Mao-san’s beach hut, Luna Marine. Mao-san often went abroad, so perhaps he’d created a space of his own that was similar to this.

“Imagine drinking cocktails or something in this kind of place...” Runa said while looking at the menu.

“You can, though.”

“Oh, right. But I guess *you* can’t. I’ll go with something nonalcoholic too.”

“No, seriously, go ahead, if you want,” I insisted.

“Really? Guess I’ll get this cute one, then.”

Thus, we got our drinks—a cocktail for Runa and fruit tea for me, both served in mason jars. Runa’s drink was lavishly topped with cream and a garnish of strawberries and blueberries.

“It’s super cute!” Runa was focused on taking pictures of her drink. She did different things, like positioning it so that the sea was behind it or putting her face next to the glass. “Whoa!” she suddenly said while messing with her phone. “Nicole says I’m posting too much on Instagram today! Says I’m killing her since she wants to go to Okinawa too.”

“Why doesn’t she?” I asked. “She could go with Nisshi.”

“Aha ha, yeah, that’s true,” Runa said, laughing in a carefree way. “Maybe it’s hard for her to get days off? She’s in her first year on the job, unlike me.”

Runa’s employment situation would change in September, so she was currently using up her paid vacation days. She could actually be away for longer, but since that would’ve put a strain on other employees, she’d limited her vacation to three nights.

“Maybe she’ll be able to go on a proper vacation once a new nail technician starts in autumn,” said Runa.

“I hope so...”

Runa was acting completely normal, which made me want to ask

something.

"Does Yamana-san say that things are going well between her and Nisshi?"

"Huh? Yeah. Why wouldn't they be?" Runa looked puzzled. "Nicole never mentions any problems in their relationship... Things are great between them as always, aren't they?"

"R-Right... I guess so."

It seemed that Nisshi really was the only one unsatisfied with their current situation.

Runa and I had dinner under the evening sun while chatting. We'd only had snacks and light meals since the morning, so this was our first time today sitting down properly to eat. Per Runa's wishes, we had salads and American sirloin steaks. By the time we were done, the sun had almost set.

"Wow, it's so beautiful..." Runa said.

The red-hot sphere in the sky resembled the core of a sparkler. It was gradually swallowed up by the silver horizon until it was no more. The sky, which had been dyed crimson by its light, lost its color in an instant.

"It's gone..." said Runa, looking at me with a somewhat sad smile.

"It was beautiful at the end."

Runa sighed deeply... "Yeah. I'm glad I got to watch it with you."

Suddenly, I remembered our school trip from our second year of high school.

"No matter what we end up like as adults... I hope we can always be together while looking at something so wonderful."

It was moving to think that Runa still felt the same way as back then.

"I want us to be together forever..." Runa said pensively. She smiled as she gazed at the sea in the distance, which the sun had sunk behind. "Just thinking that one day, in the distant future, I might have to watch the sunset by myself? It makes me wanna cry." Her eyes shook like the surface of the water. "I don't wanna lose you... Not ever..."

I recalled what she'd said when we'd gone strawberry picking.

"If you die before me, I'll be lonely for the rest of my life."

"Let's both live to a hundred, okay?"

"Let's be together in the next life too, okay?"

"Runa..."

She looked at me and forced a smile. "Aha, sorry. I'm being too clingy again..." Her smile became a cheerful one. "Still, that's another 'first' we got to do together. Coming to Okinawa, I mean."

"Yeah..."

"It's my first time going on an overnight trip with my boyfriend," she said. "Wait, I guess it's the second time if we count Enoshima?"

"Well, that was an accident, anyway."

Runa was still hung up on our "firsts." And that was probably because...

"I wanted to believe in the love of guys I barely knew yet, and so I'd give them my everything... I regret that. I'll regret it forever. That regret... It'll probably stay with me my whole life."

That was what she'd said to Kurose-san a while ago.

It made me happy that Runa cared so much about me. However...it was about time I set her free from that kind of thinking.

"It doesn't matter if something isn't our first time," I said.

Runa looked taken aback.

"Just coming here with you... Just being with you like this—it's enough to make me happy," I told her.

The color of the sea grew deeper by the minute. There was no trace left of the cobalt blue color it'd been this morning.

Nothing in this world could last forever.

Even if I'd been Runa's first guy, it surely wouldn't be something that still made me happy ten or twenty years into the future.

"I don't want you to worry about anything anymore. Not the past, and not the distant future either."

I knew Runa was looking at me, but my gaze stayed fixed on my plate. It'd originally had a steak on it, but now, just a few French fries, which had come as a garnish, remained.

"If I were to die here today...then I'd die happy. Because I got to be with you."

Though...dying before having my first sexual experience would

probably cause me to linger in this world out of regret. I'd wander the waters of Okinawa as a literal "virgin fiend."

It was a bit funny to think about. I looked at Runa with a small smile on my face.

She was gazing at me, and her face told me that she was on the verge of tears.

What sort of coincidence was this...?

"What do you *plan to do after you graduate?"*

"Well... I'm a bit of an empty shell right now. I've already reached my high school goal."

"What goal is that?"

"To fall in love with somebody who loves me back, and who I can see myself being together forever with."

Four years ago, Runa and I had talked about the future. We'd been at Luna Marine, by the sea, at sunset. I never would've thought we'd be having a similar conversation in a similar place four years down the line.

"From now on, let's treasure the present, where we can be together," I told her.

Falling in love brought its own troubles with it. It was wonderful to think that someone was the one for you and to have your hearts connect. But treasuring your loved one too much led to worries—what would happen if they were to disappear? What if they were gone from this world all of a sudden? Those were the kinds of things you now had to worry about.

Perhaps there'd be no end to that anxiousness for as long as you lived. But it would be a waste to let it overwhelm you and cast a shadow on the life you did have.

"Ryuto..." Runa smiled softly, trying to hold her tears back. "You're right," she said quietly, sounding like her words came straight from the heart. "I'm a sports car, after all."

We were the only ones who knew the meaning of those words.

"I'll live in the moment. I'll live for the sake of living. Just like I've done until now."

A seventeen-year-old Runa's voice echoed in my head.

"Yeah, exactly," I replied.

We'd spent a long time building up our relationship, after all.

Everything we'd been through up to this point had brought our relationship to where it was now.

Treasuring our present also meant treasuring our future together.

So even if we couldn't live to a hundred, or if there was no such thing as a next life, and a day eventually came when we could no longer be together...

Eternity must've been there inside us at that very moment.

***

Dinner came to an end. Now that it was completely dark outside, the American Village was shining with neon lights. We got back on the road and left it behind.

"Man, I wanna sleep so bad..." Runa said from the passenger seat.

I'd been driving for less than five minutes by this point, following the GPS's directions to the hotel where we'd be staying.

"Me too..."

Apparently, we'd get to the hotel in thirty minutes if we didn't hit traffic. However, the calming vibrations of the hybrid car had me sensing danger.

"I don't know, I might fall asleep too if you do..." I added.

"What?! Please don't!" Runa exclaimed with a shocked expression. "What you said earlier's gonna be a flag! All that stuff about dying today!"

"It would really suck if that was a flag!"

"Give me a moment, I'll try my best to fight off the sleep."

"Well, that's not working out, is it?!"

"Waaah! I guess that didn't fly!"

Runa was speaking a lot, but her eyes were almost shut.

I felt like I'd nod off immediately if I closed my eyes. Even so, our weirdly lively conversation was helping us combat our sleepiness.

“I wanna sleep so bad! I woke up at 3 a.m., you know?!” Runa exclaimed.

“So did I... And I’ve been going to bed at two all the time recently. It was hard to fall asleep, so I barely got any rest.”

“Isn’t it crazy how long we’ve been up for?”

“We did get a bit of sleep in the plane, but still...”

“So what do we do?” she asked. “Wanna nap in some convenience store’s parking lot?”

“I don’t know if that’s such a good idea...”

It wouldn’t be a problem if I woke up in thirty minutes, but judging by how exhausted I was, it probably wouldn’t end there. I also wanted to spend the night at the hotel with Runa. I desperately roused myself and kept my grip on the steering wheel.

“We’d be late for check-in, so let’s keep going,” I said.

“Man, I’m sleepy... I shouldn’t have gotten that cocktail...”

“Let’s pick up some energy drinks or coffee at a convenience store, I guess...”

“Chewing gum too!”

Somehow or other, I managed to avoid falling asleep at the wheel, and we got to the hotel where we’d made a reservation.

“We’re finally here...”

I was barely conscious, so I hardly understood a word of what the staff said when we checked in.

After we opened the door to our room, we put down our things and fell on the bed together.

And what do you know—we slept until morning just like that.

***

“Ryuto!”

I woke up to the sensation of a damp hand caressing my cheek. The sight of Runa’s voluptuous chest right in front of me woke me right up in an instant.

“Whoa!”

I was in a bright room filled with the morning sunlight, lying on one half of the "twin bed"—it was really two single beds placed next to each other without a gap between them.

Runa was wearing a swimsuit. There was a bath towel around her waist—maybe she'd been in the water.

"I thought you were a mermaid..."

"What's that supposed to mean? Is it a compliment?"

Runa smiled bashfully and removed her bath towel. She held her hand to her cheek—her nails had the same tropical flower pattern that her bikini bottom had. It seemed like Yamana-san had gone all out.

"The weather's clear, and the pool feels great!" Runa said, leaving the room through the sliding glass door.

Outside our room was a courtyard with a swimming pool. The guest rooms were in two-story buildings surrounding said pool. This was probably only possible because the hotel wasn't all that big.

"You should hurry and come too!"

Runa waved at me with the cobalt blue pool behind her. The leaves of the subtropical plants growing in the vicinity stirred with the wind as if to match her movements.

"W-Wait...!" I said, flustered.

I'd only just woken up and hadn't taken a shower the day before. I wasn't ready at all.

I felt like I'd had a concerning dream—maybe because of the conversation we'd had yesterday. In it, Runa had disappeared...

In reality, however, there she was in front of me, smiling.

The Runa of the past and the Runa of the future were both here, inside of her.

And...

"Damn it..." I said.

Next time, I will *do it with her.*

***

We played in the pool for almost an hour, starting at 6 a.m. Then, we had breakfast at a buffet at the hotel restaurant. After that, we went back to our room, got dressed, and went out for the day.

Our plan was to go to Churaumi Aquarium, which was about an hour away from the hotel by car.

The roads in the center of Okinawa were better than those in its southwestern part, and our ride was a pleasant one. However, when we got close to the aquarium, the number of cars increased all of a sudden, and we were forced to slow down significantly.

"So this is the traffic jam this place is famous for..." I said.

The aquarium had opened at 8:30 a.m., and it was nine now. This might've been rush hour traffic for this area.

"I guess we should've come earlier... I woke up at five, but I didn't think we had to hurry so much." With regret written on her face, Runa picked up her latte from the cup holder and drank from it. "So... Yesterday..." Runa awkwardly began as the air grew somewhat stagnant. "Did you...fall asleep right away too?"

"Huh? Yeah..."

I had no memory of anything after when I'd flopped onto the bed. I'd flown and then driven a car while short on sleep, so I'd been exhausted—then again, considering how I couldn't get a wink of sleep that night back in Enoshima, perhaps it had to do with my age.

"Oh, okay... I guess that's...good...?" Runa blushed a little. "Let's get back to the hotel early today... Yeah?" she said with upturned eyes.

Since we were stuck in traffic, I'd been looking over at her. Her words shook me up and made my eyes wander.

"Y-Yeah..." I replied in a weird voice like something was stuck in my throat. "Let's do that..."

I didn't want to come off as being too horny, so I faked calmness. But in my chest, my heart was pounding.

All the windows in the car were closed to keep things cool inside. With us being so close together, I was worried that Runa might pick up on my agitation right away.

"Oh, they moved."

The car in front of us suddenly pulled forward a lot, so I hurriedly

removed my foot from the brake.

As I cast a casual sideways glance at the passenger seat, I saw that Runa's cheeks were slightly flushed pink. I wondered what was going through her mind.

The Churaumi Aquarium was located on a raised area next to the sea. The entrance was on the third floor. You would go down while looking at the various aquarium exhibits, and when you left through the exit on the first floor, you'd have a good view of the sea before you.

We went in and proceeded along the route. The first aquarium we saw was very Okinawan, with tropical fish and coral reefs.

One of the tanks was round and low to the ground. Little children were crowding around it.

"Oh hey, garden eels!" Runa exclaimed, her eyes lighting up like she was a child too. She went up to the tank and peered at it from behind the kids.

"It's unusual for garden eels to get their own aquarium," I said.

"I know, right? They're so cute..."

Along with typical garden eels with orange and white stripes, there were others that were whitish with black spots. Some were upright and swayed sideways. Others moved their heads swiftly, being cautious of their surroundings. Some eels kept going in and out of the white sand. Different specimens acted differently, and I felt like I could watch them forever. No wonder they were popular with kids.

"Wow..." Runa let out, watching the eels with rapt attention. "Going in and out like that probably feels good."

"What...?" I said, finding what she said strange.

"Oh...!" Runa immediately turned beet red as she seemed to have had a realization about what she'd said. "I-It's not like that! It's just, they must live comfortably in the sea and all..."

"Y-Yeah, I know that's what you meant..."

I didn't want to press Runa on the matter since there were lots of children around. And anyway, I was being too horny.

"Jeez, you're such an idiot!" Runa said.

“I didn’t force you to say that...”

“Well, it’s what came to my mind...!” Turning red as a tomato, Runa grabbed my hand and started walking.

Her hand was hot.

The day before the trip, I’d gone to Yamana-san’s salon for another nail care treatment, so I was perfectly prepared. My head was filled with thoughts about tonight, but I tried to act as naturally as I could as we explored the aquarium.

We came upon an area with sharks. There was a panel on the wall outlining how sharks could be incubated in an artificial womb. You could look through a window to see shark embryos currently being incubated.

Curious, I read the panel. While I was doing that, a boy who must’ve been in primary or middle school neared us and looked up at the panel too.

“Hey, Dad! What’s a ‘womb’?”

Startled, Runa and I exchanged glances.

“Huh? Well, how to put it...” said his father, coming up from behind us. He read the panel, looking composed, and began to explain things to his son. “It’s a place in a mother’s stomach where babies grow. An artificial womb is one that’s been created to be like the real thing.”

“Oh, huh...” the boy said—he didn’t sound interested. “Oh look, fish!” he then exclaimed and ran to a different aquarium.

Left standing in front of the panel, Runa and I fidgeted in silence.

Things stayed that way for us throughout our whole visit to the aquarium. When we were done with the indoor exhibits and were looking at sea turtles outside...

“Oh look, this turtle is sticking its head out so much. I didn’t know it could stretch that far,” I said.

“What?!” Runa’s reaction seemed exaggerated. “The turtle’s head?! Stretch?!”

“Th-That’s not what I meant, okay?! I didn’t mean it in a weird way!” I replied, totally flustered. But it was true that the Japanese word for “glans penis” was composed of the kanji for “turtle” and

“head.”

At the end of our visit, when we were looking for presents for people back home...

“Oh hey, this thing’s cute! Is it a whale?” Runa asked, picking up a blue mammal plush and showing it to me.

“Isn’t that a whale shark? A whale would have a blowhole to squirt water out of.”

This made Runa blush. “Squirt...?!”

“That’s not how I meant it!”

Today, it felt like both of us were middle schoolers. Then again, middle schoolers seemed to be more mature these days...so maybe we were like primary school students, if anything.

***

After finishing our tour of the aquarium, we had a light lunch at a restaurant and went back to the car. It was 2 p.m.

“We’re going to Kouri Island next...right?” Runa asked.

“Yeah...”

Our plan was to go to Kouri Island after visiting the aquarium. It was forty minutes away by car. The island was past the Kouri Ohashi Bridge, which was roughly two kilometers long. The guidebook mentioned that the bridge was a major landmark, providing a scenic road to cross the water.

“Oh, it’s coming up now.”

We hadn’t run into any traffic, so in the time predicted by the GPS, we got to where we could see the Kouri Ohashi Bridge.

“So beautiful...” said Runa.

The exhilarating feeling of driving while being surrounded on either side by an ocean view reminded me of the Aqua Line, where Nisshi had previously driven us. However, what made the sea here in Okinawa special was its cobalt blue color.

“It’s amazing!” Runa said. Despite the excitement in her voice, she looked distracted as she stared outside the window.

After a few minutes, we reached the end of the scenic road, and

we arrived on Kouri Island.

"So, what do you want to do?" I asked.

"Huh?"

"Do you want to go somewhere here?"

Apparently, this island had the kinds of cafés that Runa would likely be into. There was also a beach from which you could see heart-shaped rocks that made it famous as a "love island."

"Well..." Runa thought it over for a moment before shaking her head. "Nah."

"Oh, okay..." I readjusted my grip on the steering wheel several times—my sweat had made it slippery. "So...we'll circle around it and go back to the hotel?"

Runa blushed slightly and weakly nodded. "Yeah..."

***

The time had finally come.

We'd had an early dinner at the hotel, but I hadn't managed to eat half as much as I normally would. Part of it was because it hadn't been so long since lunch, but there was also the fact that I was both nervous and excited. I couldn't really remember what the food had tasted like or what we'd talked about.

After returning to our room, we watched TV for thirty minutes or so. None of what was on the screen really entered our heads.

Runa spoke first, giving me a jolt. "So, is it time to take baths?" she asked.

"Y-Yeah. Do you want to go first...?"

"O-Okay..." Runa nodded awkwardly and disappeared into the bathroom.

Thirty minutes passed—I had no idea what to do with myself. It was just 7 p.m., and the sky was still faintly illuminated.

"Sorry for the wait," Runa said, hesitantly stepping out of the bathroom.

I then went in to take a shower.

And then, at long last...

The curtains had been open when I'd gone into the bathroom, but now they were closed. The TV was now off.

Runa was sitting on the bed, looking at her phone while fiddling with her hair—it was straight instead of curled.

"Ah, Ryuto. Welcome back..."

Runa immediately averted her eyes once she spotted me. I thought she might've been embarrassed because she wasn't wearing makeup, but I suspected there was a bigger reason for it.

"Yeah..." I replied, not knowing what to say. Making small talk didn't feel like the right call here either.

Our room had come with pajamas, so we were both wearing them. They were long, unisex polo sleep shirts with a button at the chest.

I sat down next to Runa. There was an odd distance between us, large enough for another person to sit there.

Our hotel room was neither spacious nor cramped. It had a bed, a small table, and two chairs. All the furniture was brown, and just like the rest of the hotel, the design of the pieces made you think of a resort in Southeast Asia.

It was so quiet that we could hear the faint sound of the rotating fan on the ceiling.

Oh boy. What should I say to start things here...?

I timidly looked beside me, at which point I noticed...

"...Hic..."

Runa was holding a hand to her face—she was crying.

"Eh...?" I let out in surprise.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to..." Runa looked at me and wiped her tears. "It's just a bit scary..."

"Huh...?"

What is? Sex? It's not like it's her first time, though...

As I sat there, confused, Runa went on. "I really don't want to lose you," she said. She was speaking quietly, and her face creased up in pain. "It's my first time in a relationship with someone like this... Over these four years, I've loved you so much..."

Fresh tears welled up in Runa's eyes as she got the words out. I

hurriedly got a tissue from the table and gave it to her.

"Thanks... I feel like you couldn't possibly love me more than you do, but still... What if it's *because* we haven't had sex?"

"What...? *That's* what's bothering you...?" I asked.

"Yeah." Runa nodded. "I know in my head that it's not true and you're not like that, but still..."

"Runa..."

Did she think this way because of her previous relationships?

"I've always had this worry somewhere deep inside... That's why even when your exams were over and we were both busy, I couldn't so easily say, 'Let's do it'..."

"Runa..."

So that's *what's been on her mind.*

I felt like this cleared up the inexplicable strain in our relationship that'd been hanging around since I'd gotten into university.

"But...this time, I've made up my mind." Suddenly, Runa lowered the tissue from her face and looked at me. Her eyes were dry and full of resolve. "I'll become one with you. I have faith that you're not the type to grow cold to me just because we've had sex."

I nodded deeply even before she was done speaking. "Of course. I love you regardless of whether we have sex or not."

"Right..."

When I saw Runa nod back with a small smile on her face, it made me recall something. I'd seen this expression on her face not long ago—that time she'd been trying to persuade Kurose-san.

"I think that to have faith in someone is to be okay with being betrayed by that person. If Ryuto betrayed me...I'd be okay with it. It'd be something I could live with."

Was this what had made her say that? Perhaps, as she'd been making up her mind to have sex with me in Okinawa, she'd been fighting her uneasiness all by herself all this time...and maybe that was the conclusion she'd come to.

Runa suddenly gave me a different kind of smile. "So...I'm all yours tonight."

She was showing me that affectionate smile that I loved so much.

"Runa..."

I was filled with love for my girlfriend, and I pulled her toward me.

The first time I'd embraced her had been in Enoshima, in that inn. I was feeling the same warmth now as I had back then, and arousal was spreading through me the same way. But now that four years had passed, I felt something else too.

Runa had always accepted me, no matter what I'd been like at the time. She'd shown me so many different faces as well.

I'd witnessed her love her new family. I'd been watching her chase her dream once she finally found it. I'd seen her innocent faces, her sad faces. She'd shown all the sides of her true self to me.

I had faith in her too. I respected her from the bottom of my heart.

I wanted to treasure Runa—both the one of the past and the one of the future. The times we'd spent together and the times we'd had to be apart. And the long time when we'd probably get to be together—or perhaps I'd end up making her lonely.

My heart had been with her at all these times. I'd known the right words to describe this feeling for so long, and I'd held on to that phrase all along. Now, it finally felt like it was the time to bring it out.

"Runa."

After briefly calling out her name, I pushed her down.

"You...mean the world to me."

It had come out a little awkward, but I'd managed to say it while looking her in the eye.

"Ryuto..." Runa opened her eyes wide and glittering tears came pouring out of them. "Me too..." She wrapped her arms around my neck and pulled me toward her. "You mean the world to me too..."

The words she said quietly into my ear were numbing.

"Thanks..." Runa went on. "I'm not anxious about anything anymore."

She pulled away a little, and as we stared at each other, she smiled happily.

“Runa...”

Both my body and mind were on fire. But just as I was about to go in for a kiss, as my instincts were telling me, I noticed something strange about her behavior. I stopped.

Runa had an odd look on her face. If I had to describe it somehow, it was like something was stuck in her teeth, and she couldn’t get it out.

“Hmm?” Runa tilted her head.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

She looked at me with a start. “Sorry, can I go to the bathroom?”

“Huh? Sure...”

Now? Well, I guess you can’t ignore the call of nature...

Thus, I was left restlessly waiting for her on the bed. Runa stepped out of the bathroom at one point to get something from her belongings in the corner of the room before going back in again. I couldn’t understand why.

And after a few minutes of waiting...

Runa left the bathroom again, looking dejected.

“It’s come...” she said.

“Huh?”

“My period...”

Her words left me speechless for a moment.

“What?!” I exclaimed.

No way! Why did it have to be now?!

“So... What does that mean?” I asked.

“Hm?”

“I mean, is it impossible to do it when you’re on your period?” I was too ignorant about the female body, so I couldn’t keep myself from asking.

“Well...” A troubled look appeared on her face. “I don’t think it’s impossible...but stuff would get dirty, and my stomach hurts, so... I guess I don’t feel like doing it, given the circumstances...” Quietly, she added, “It sucks that this happened right before our first time, which we’d remember forever...”

It took me quite a while to manage a reply. “Oh, okay...” I said eventually.

Disappointed didn't even begin to describe how I felt. All my strength had left me. I felt like a slug who'd been covered in salt, like I could dissolve onto the bed.

Seeing me like that, Runa hurriedly asked, "D-Do you wanna do it anyway?"

"Huh?"

"We're gonna turn into a weird couple at this rate... We've been dating for four years already... But then again, it would be pretty weird to have your first time with blood everywhere... And we'd cause trouble for the staff..."

Runa raised her hands to her head in anguish. Then, just as quickly, she brought them on her lap and hung her head dispiritedly.

"At this point, I can't talk about our relationship to any of my friends besides Nicole... It feels like nobody would understand us."

She was probably right. I hadn't told Icchi and Nisshi about our situation either.

"You two are pretty special, and in more ways than one."

There'd been what Sekiya-san had said too.

"We *can* do it today, if you're okay with it..." I began. I was ready to go whenever, after all. "But if you're even slightly uncomfortable with it, we can do it another time..."

"Really...? Are you okay with that?" Runa asked with a worried look.

I nodded hesitantly. "Yeah... Sure, our relationship might be different from some people's idea of how couples should be or what they should do..."

Maybe not having sex on this trip would make us an even weirder couple. However...

"But what I want..." I began, "is for our relationship to be built on real love—something that's irreplaceable."

"Ryuto..."

I realized there was something I'd never mentioned to Runa before. "There's this thing Kujibayashi-kun said to me once..." I began. "The kanji for 'moon' and 'dragon' in our names both refer to something indistinct. Apparently, that's why combining those two kanji gets you the word 'indistinct.'"

"What...? Really?" Runa opened her eyes wide in curiosity and reached out for her phone, which she'd been charging beside the bed. "Wow, you're right! That really *is* a thing! That's crazy!" She then looked up from her phone and at me. "It doesn't seem to be a very good meaning, though, you know? Doesn't this mean that, like, we're both kinda not all there?"

"That's what I thought too, at first." It made me smile how Runa had the same reaction as me. "But he said we're in the middle of attracting the indistinct together," I explained.

"What do you mean by that?" Runa asked, tilting her head.

I'd expected her to ask that too. "He said it's what people call love."

"Love..." The word slipped from Runa's lips. Then, tears welled up in her eyes again. "I see..." A tear flicked off her lower eyelashes. Her expression was somewhere between crying and smiling as she hugged me. "Yeah. What else could our relationship be if not love?"

I felt Runa's warmth against my chest. It fueled my lust, but it also stirred the most gentle feeling in the world inside me.

"I guess at some point, we came to love each other for real!" Runa said.

I thought back to the day I'd confessed to her.

"So, like, if I feel like having sex with you...I should just tell you, right?"

"Y'know, maybe when it gets to that point, the flimsy feeling our relationship is built on might end up being love."

It had been four years since that day.

Here in Okinawa—a place far away from Tokyo—we realized that, at some point, we'd found what we'd once sought. Something that indistinct and shapeless, but so gentle and warm.

***

After that, we got changed and went to the hotel's bar.

We sat at a table on the terrace illuminated by orange lights. A

lukewarm, nighttime breeze carried the scent of trees to us as we drank colorful cocktails. It really felt like we were at a resort in Southeast Asia. There weren't any other customers around—maybe many people had come to stay here with their families.

"I knew I should've gone to a hospital and gotten on the pill..." Runa said with a sigh. She drooped her shoulders. "I couldn't make up my mind about it, and my periods aren't regular. It can come at the earliest on the twenty-fifth, and when it's late, it can even come after the thirtieth. It's hard to predict it."

"Huh... Sounds like a pain."

"They've been late recently, so I thought it would be okay on this trip... Why did it have to come on the twenty-fifth now of all times?" she whined.

I didn't know what to say in response, so I could only listen silently. The Awamori cocktail I was drinking was very strong, so my head was a bit fuzzy.

"In high school, me and four other girls would go swimming sometimes, but it was really hard to find a time that would work for all of us. I get that someone else can be on her period when you wanna go, but it's just not as exciting to plan around it and go on another day, you know?"

No, I wouldn't know... I smiled awkwardly and averted my eyes.

"Girls have it rough. We just have to act normal because we happened to be born with these bodies," she said.

The male body came with its own set of troubles, but they were probably on a different level. It didn't feel appropriate to try and make that argument here, so I just listened quietly.

"But..." Runa began, looking down with a smile on her lips. She caressed her stomach as though she were pregnant. "It's a place that can raise life created by you and your special someone... When I consider how those frustrations are necessary for that to happen, it makes me want to treasure my body, including the hardships it brings with it."

"Runa..."

"I'm able to think this way because we love each other and because you give serious thought to our future together." Runa

smiled, gazing at me. Her glistening eyes made me think of lights at night.

The hotel was on an elevated area, and from where we were on the second floor, we had a good view of the beautiful city lights. If Shinjuku at night was like a chandelier, the gentle evening lights here were like starlight.

"My mind and body are my own, and I can say no to things I don't wanna do... It should've been obvious, but I never learned that until I started dating you..." Runa said. Her eyes were on the night scenery, but the look on her face was cloudy and worried. "I guess maybe you could say that I never considered that girls had any say in the matter when it came to that sort of thing." She nodded slightly as if satisfied with her train of thought. Then, she turned to me and gave me a bashful smile—she looked sincerely happy. "Thanks, Ryuto. For teaching me how to treasure myself. I feel like I've come to like myself more since I started dating you." Runa then brought a hand to her chest. "I'm so proud of myself for making someone as amazing as you fall in love with me. I feel that way from the bottom of my heart."

"Huh..." Hearing all this was enough for me today. "Well, how about we go back to our room and head to bed?" I suggested.

At some point, it had become almost 9 p.m. It felt a bit too early to go to sleep, but it would let us get up earlier tomorrow and see more of Okinawa. I was trying to stay positive.

"No. Let's go back to our room, but we won't go to sleep yet."

Looking at Runa, I saw her pout.

"Otherwise, it's gonna end up the same as Enoshima," she added.

"Huh?"

My hands had been resting on the table. Runa placed hers on top of mine.

"You know, Ryuto..." she said, lowering her voice. "Even I'm improving."

"Huh...?"

I knew she was parodying what I'd said to her at that restaurant overlooking the city at night, but I didn't know what she meant by that.

Runa stared at the light blue cocktail in her hand. “I never told you...but I’ve been practicing all this time.”

“Practicing...what?”

“With that bottle of Oronamin C...”

I still had no idea what she was talking about, but I *did* recall that she’d collected empty bottles of Oronamin C back in the day.

“At first, my teeth kept bumping into it, making a clattering sound... But I’ve been doing it every night, so now, I completely know how to go about it.” Runa’s smile came across as bold. “I’m pretty confident in my skills.”

At this point, I fully understood what this was about. My body heated up.

Runa parted her lips in a seductive way. “I’m sure I can satisfy you with this place alone.”

She pointed at her mouth—her glistening, red tongue peeked from it.

Epilogue

When we returned to our room, Runa sat down on the bed and started to take off her clothes. She began with her tropical flower-patterned dress, picking up the hem and pulling it up and over her head.

"R-Runa?"

"I mean, you're not gonna get turned on if I'm wearing clothes, right?" she said, placing the dress down on the bed.

Although she'd done something so bold, once she was left in just her underwear, she wrapped her arms around herself as if embarrassed. She looked at me with upturned eyes and flushed cheeks.

"I finally got to show it to you," she said, seeming both bashful and satisfied.

Runa's lingerie was light blue. Her bra and panties matched, and both had a flashy, intricate lace pattern. The amount of exposed skin she had now was hardly different from when she wore a bikini...so why did it feel so naughty? Her voluptuous chest, the lines between her waist and hips, the bent legs as she sat on the bed, the bashful look in her eye—all of it was bewitching.

"Did you know I always wear my cutest underwear when I see you? I bet you didn't."

"Huh? N-No, I had no clue..." My pounding heart made even my voice tremble.

"Ever since I started wanting to have sex with you, when I'd go buy new bras and panties, I always thought about which ones you'd like." Runa was speaking both bashfully and happily while averting her eyes from me. "Though...the first set I bought is so worn that I've been wearing them normally for a while now." Runa smiled awkwardly. "I guess that's just how long we've been dating..."

"Yeah..."

It had been almost three and a half years since that day we'd walked under the cherry blossoms together.

"Wanna touch?" Runa asked.

"Huh?"



“You can touch me if you want.” She smiled as she looked at me with those upturned eyes, causing my pulse to rise even further.

“Wait, is it really okay?”

Though I’d come this far, it started feeling like I’d be extremely shameless if I took her up on this.

“I mean, even if you do it for me... I can’t make you feel good in return...” I said.

“That’s okay.” Runa smiled sweetly. “Girls can feel good just from seeing their loved one having a good time.” She took my hand, placed it on her chest, and closed her eyes. “At least that’s how it is for me.”

I felt the suppleness and warmth of her chest directly against my hand, as well as the warmth of Runa’s hand enveloping mine.

“I fantasized about your ecstatic face many times,” she said. “I kept practicing because I wanted to see it.”

Smiling, Runa let go of my hand. I moved mine as well.

Runa got off the bed. I sat down, and she knelt on the floor before me.

“So...” she quietly began, looking up at me with a seductive smile. “Let me make you feel good a whole lot tonight.”

“Runa...”

The center of my body grew hot. If my force of will were any weaker, I might’ve climaxed just from this.

“Ryuto...”

Blushing from desire, Runa reached out for my pants zipper. But at that point...

Bzzt! Bzzt! Bzzt!

Both of our phones began to vibrate at the same time from the bedside. We’d left them there to charge as soon as we’d come back to the room.

“Huh?! What’s all that about?!” said Runa.

“It better not be an earthquake warning...”

Our phones were vibrating, but there was no sound of a siren.

Runa and I exchanged glances. Both phones were still going off.

“Let’s see what it is, I guess...” I said.

It was a shame to be interrupted, given that I’d fully prepared myself already, but what was there to do?

On my phone, I saw that I was getting a call from Icchi.

“Icchi...?” I said out loud.

What was this all about? It wasn’t like him to just call someone he hadn’t stayed in close touch with instead of sending messages first.

“Akari’s on mine,” Runa said after looking at her phone. “So...should we answer?”

I nodded hesitantly. “Yeah... I guess I’m curious.”

I probably wouldn’t be able to focus on whatever Runa and I would do after this if we simply ignored the calls.

“Hello...?”

“Kasshiii!!!”

The moment I pressed the answer button, Icchi shouted into my ear, not waiting for me to say anything first.

“Runyyy!!!”

I could hear Tanikita-san’s voice from Runa’s phone too.

“Wh-What is it, Icchi?”

“What’s wrong, Akari?”

As we both asked them that, flustered, the two people on the other end said, in unison...

“It’s bad, Kasshi! My girlfriend’s pregnant!”

“It’s bad, Runy! I’m pregnant!”

“What...?” Runa and I both let out. We were surprised for a moment and exchanged glances. Then, we both said, “Whaaaaaaaaaat?!”

There we were, in the center of Okinawa, shouting into our phones.



Afterword

For whatever reason, the seasons in the story and the times of year I've been writing it have been in alignment recently. That means it's the very height of summer right now!

Writing those winter flashbacks during the hottest time of the year made the heat feel less oppressive to me, even though I was burning with jealousy for Ryuto. Like, when I wrote the scene where he learns he'd gotten into university, I thought to myself, "Well yeah, you had such a cute girlfriend supporting you—it must've been easy to focus on studying!"

Speaking of getting into universities, I made a surprising discovery when I looked into the way my alma mater informs applicants if they passed or failed. When I took my own entrance exams, it was all analog—they would put up a list on campus with entrant numbers of those who passed, and you had to come and look for your number. Apparently, they don't put up those lists anymore! I guess people nowadays can't take pictures of themselves pointing at their number on the list to commemorate getting into college... I guess it's not such a big deal, but it did shock me a bit.

And speaking of scenes having to do with taking university entrance exams, Runa's mask was cute—I was happy to get to see it drawn. Cute girls are cute, even when wearing masks! Though the *really* cute ones look better without them. If you can only see a girl's eyes, they can't look cuter than average, you could say... You know what I mean, right? I felt that way when looking at Runa too—it made me realize all over again just how adorable she is.

Anyway, every character had become an adult in the previous volume, so I focused on writing their present circumstances in a dramatic fashion in that one. I'm glad I got to write flashbacks of Ryuto's high school days in this volume instead. This one also focuses more on his relationship with Runa. Did you like how this

volume went?

A poem by Giniro Natsuo includes the following line: “May our relationship last forever for reasons only we understand.” I like that poem a lot.

I think it might resonate with people who’ve been with someone who made them feel the following: “What I feel for that person is probably different from what they feel for me. It must be. And yet, for some reason, we’re still together. This reason exists in both our hearts. It doesn’t matter what it is—love, friendship, or whatever else—as long as it keeps us together.”

Acquaintances, friends, lovers, family members... There aren’t that many everyday words to describe people’s relationships. But the reality is that relationships are more diverse than these, and my friends’ ideas of how couples should be don’t necessarily apply to me or the characters in my works. It should be obvious, but we’re prone to forgetting that and starting to worry. That’s important, and I wanted to make sure to remind everyone of that in this work.

Now then, since I wrote about going to Okinawa in volume 6, I figured I had to actually do it myself—and so I did, in spring. It was my second time going there. The last time I’d gone was roughly twenty years ago.

As I walked around Umikaji Terrace and the American Village, I thought to myself that Runa would enjoy those places. I’d planned my tour of the island with a guidebook, looking for places that Runa would likely enjoy. My folder with photos is full of things that don’t suit someone my age, like selfies of me eating sata andagi and doing a cheese pull and wearing a swimsuit at the beach. It was all material for the story...!

While my youth was at the same time as the peak of Amuro Namie’s popularity, I was never a gyaru—though I did wear loose socks. Ever since I started writing *Kimizero*, I’ve been learning about gyaru fashion and the lifestyle in order to better understand them, so these days, I might be the most gyaru I’ve ever been. Who knows—maybe I’ll be a full-on gyaru by the time I hit sixty?

As always, thank you, magako-sama, for all the wonderful

illustrations! And thank you, Matsubayashi-sama, for your editing!

And at last, the time has come!

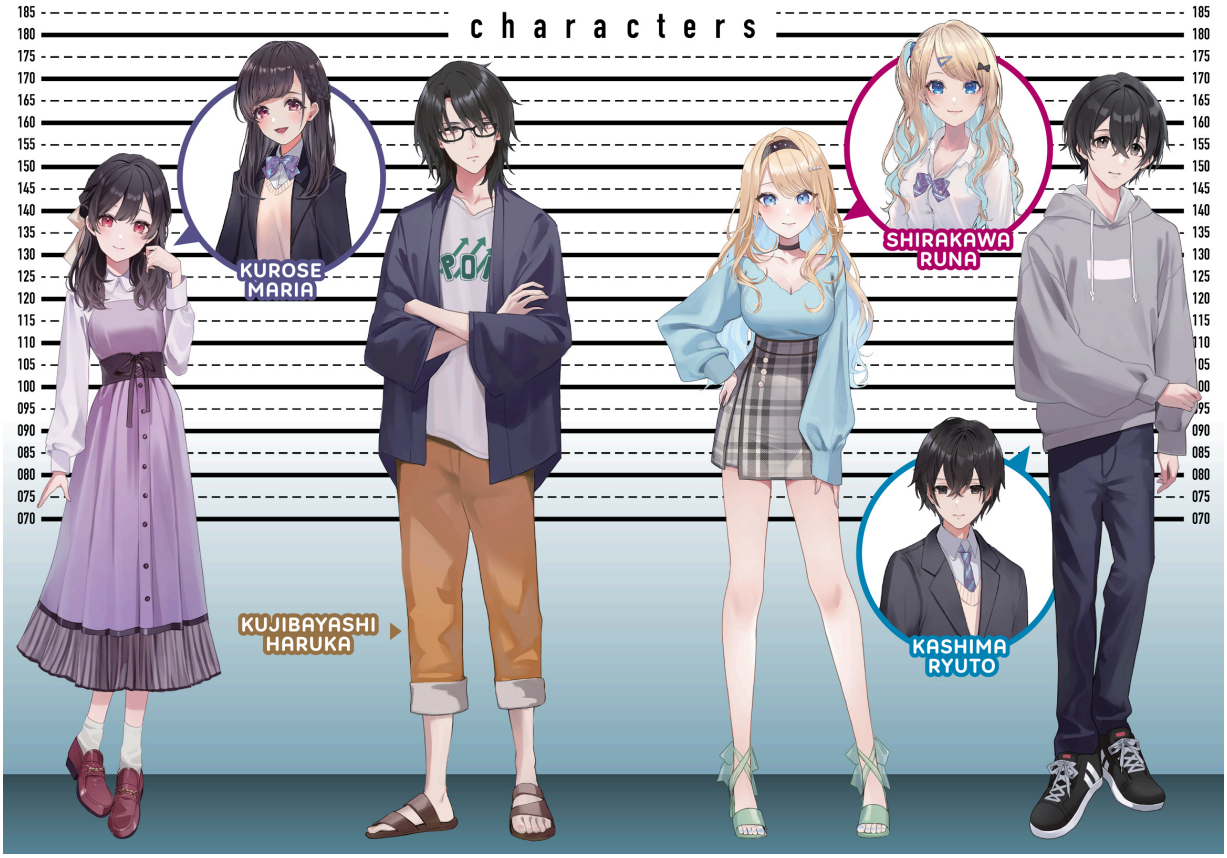
The *Kimizero* anime will start airing on Friday, October 6! The names of the main characters' voice actors have already been published, and it's quite the lineup... They all did great on their auditions, so I don't think anyone will be disappointed!

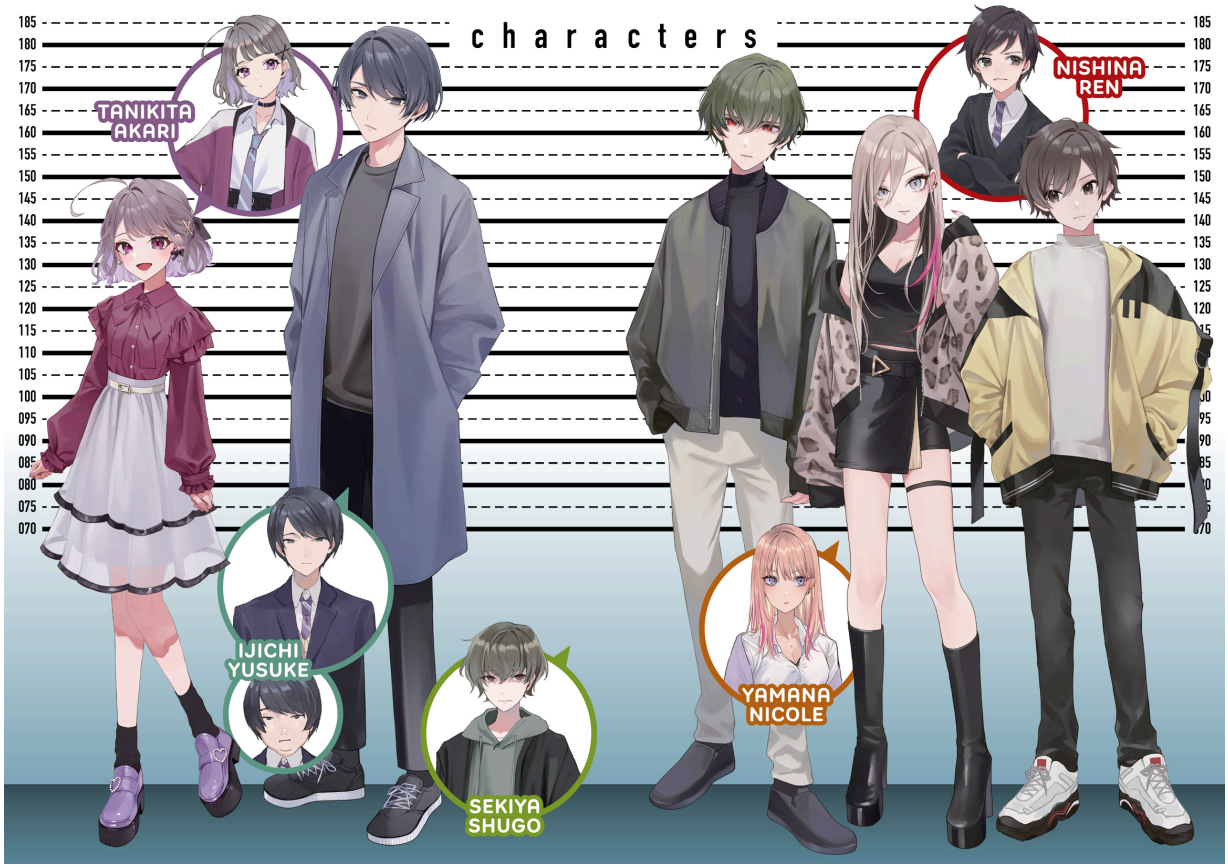
You can check when and what channel it'll be airing on the official website and on X (Twitter). I'm really looking forward to it too!

Well then, may we see each other again in volume 8!

August 2023, Makiko Nagaoka


7th Date
You Were Experienced, I Was Not:
OUR DATING STORY


characters
KUROSE MARIA
KUJIBAYASHI HARUKA
SHIRAKAWA RUNA
KASHIMA RYUTO


characters
TANIKITA AKARI
NISHINA REN
IJICHI YUSUKE
SEKIYA SHUGO
YAMANA NICOLE


Her cleavage was more visible than in her swimsuit. My heart wouldn't stop pounding, in part from the fact that I found a mole on it that I previously didn't know about.
The fishnet stockings had of course been banned on the grounds of being too sexual, but this outfit was stimulating enough for guys in high school.


She'd looked at me with passionate eyes burning like the sun at the height of summer. She'd waved her hand under the autumn sky. She'd suppressed her own feelings and supported me in winter. And when the cherry blossoms had bloomed for me, she'd celebrated with me.
All of these were memories of days gone by, but each of these Runas was still there in the present one. But compared to all the Runas of the past, I loved the one in front of me, with her beautiful smile, most of all.

7th Date

You Were Experienced, I Was Not:

OUR DATING STORY

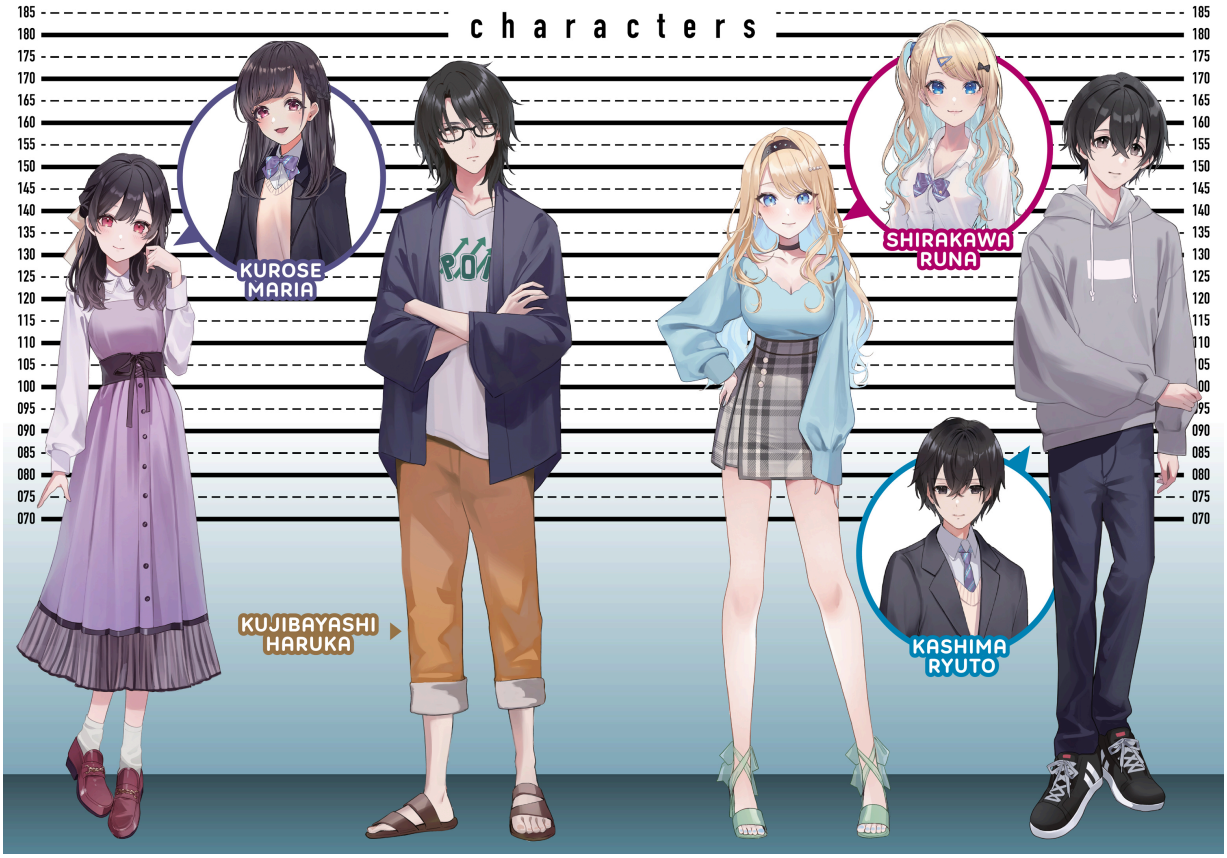


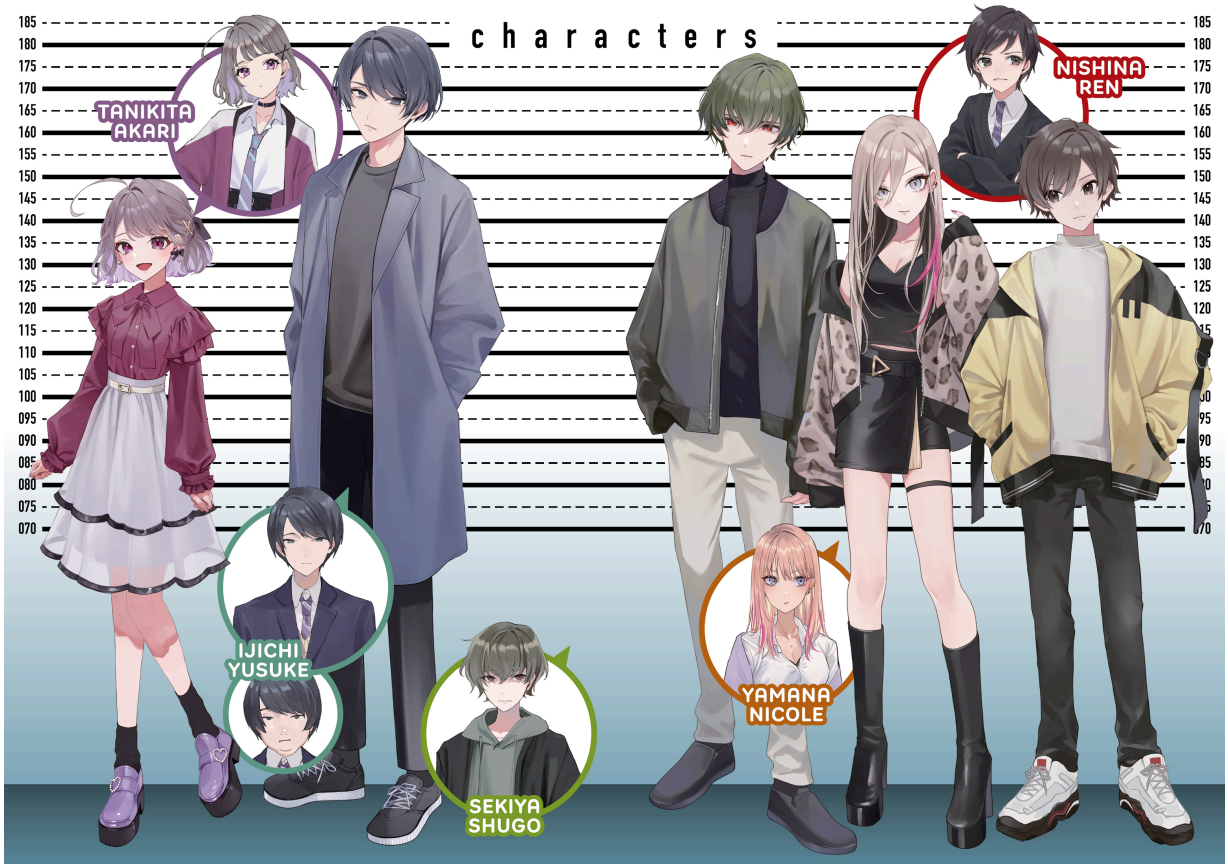
Makiko Nagaoka

Artist / magako



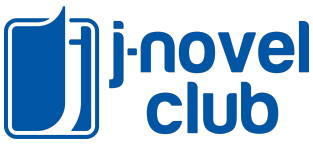

7th Date
You Were Experienced, I Was Not:
OUR DATING STORY


characters
KUROSE MARIA
KUJIBAYASHI HARUKA
SHIRAKAWA RUNA
KASHIMA RYUTO


characters
TANIKITA AKARI
NISHINA REN
IJICHI YUSUKE
SEKIYA SHUGO
YAMANA NICOLE


Her cleavage was more visible than in her swimsuit. My heart wouldn't stop pounding, in part from the fact that I found a mole on it that I previously didn't know about.
The fishnet stockings had of course been banned on the grounds of being too sexual, but this outfit was stimulating enough for guys in high school.


She'd looked at me with passionate eyes burning like the sun at the height of summer. She'd waved her hand under the autumn sky. She'd suppressed her own feelings and supported me in winter. And when the cherry blossoms had bloomed for me, she'd celebrated with me.
All of these were memories of days gone by, but each of these Runas was still there in the present one. But compared to all the Runas of the past, I loved the one in front of me, with her beautiful smile, most of all.



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You Were Experienced, I Was Not: Our Dating Story 7th Date by Makiko Nagaoka

Translated by Adam Edited by T. Burke

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