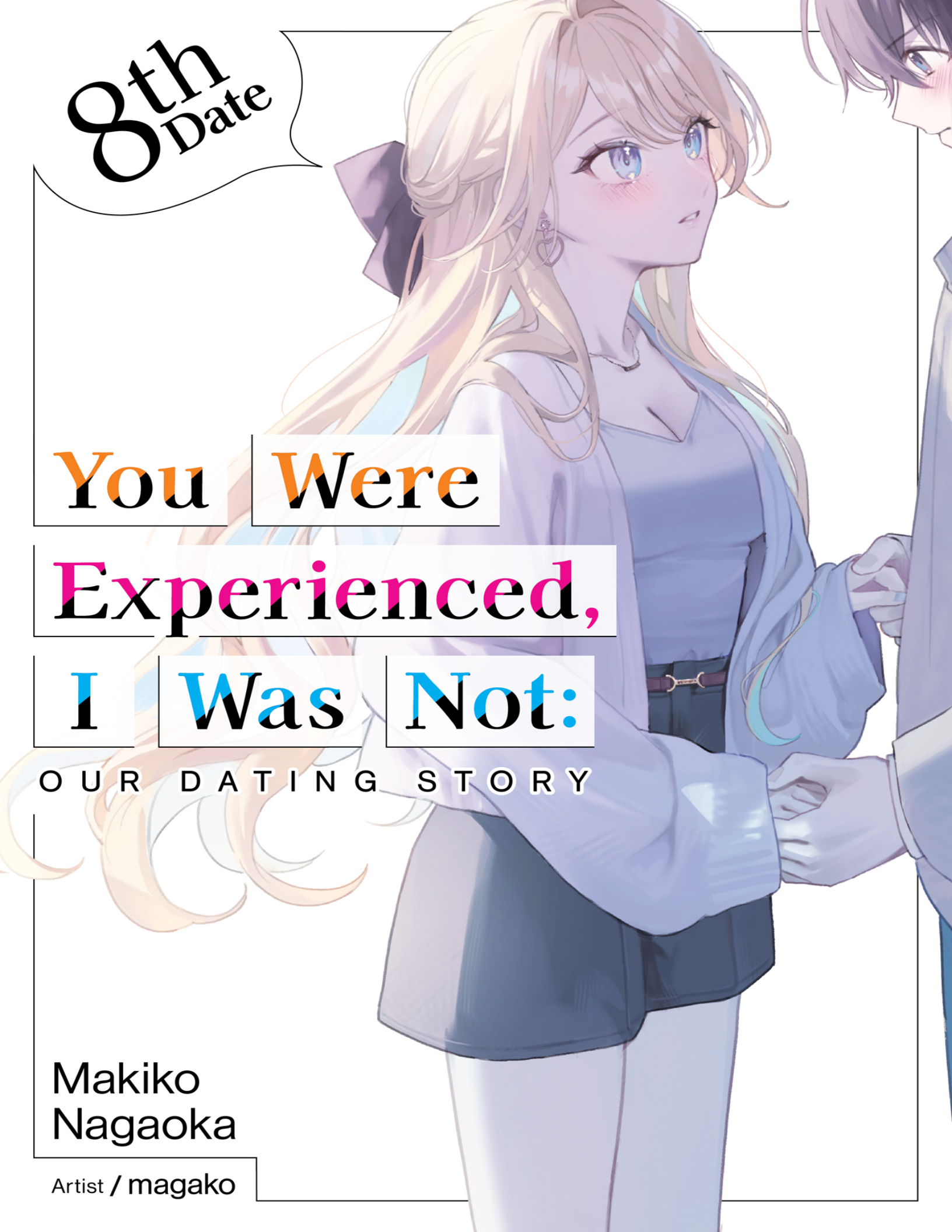


You Were Experienced, I Was Not:

OUR DATING STORY

Makiko Nagaoka

Artist / magako



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Prologue

Runa held her phone to her ear. “P-Pregnant?! You’re *pregnant*?!” she shouted.

This was our second night in Okinawa. She’d just gotten a sudden call from Tanikita-san, and at the exact same time, I’d gotten one from Icchi. We had also just been about to do something naughty—Runa had only her bra and panties on.

“Tell me, Kasshi, what am I supposed to do?!” Icchi’s voice sounded grave on my phone. “I’m still in my third year of school; I can’t get a first-class architect license unless I graduate! And there’s gonna be all those hospital bills... How am I gonna live through this?!”

“Wait, you guys want to have a baby?!” I asked in surprise, as inhumane as the question might have been.

“I don’t know! Heck, it might not even be for real!”

“What? You didn’t go to the doctor?”

“The pregnancy test said so! Akari said her period was late, so I got one of those at a drug store. It came up positive, so just to be sure, I bought three more, all from different brands. They all said positive too!”

I went silent for a moment.

Meanwhile, I could hear Tanikita-san’s voice coming from nearby. “I had to squeeze out enough pee for three of those things—my bladder doesn’t have a drop left in it!”

“Wait, what’re you talking about?” Runa asked. It seemed like she hadn’t heard what Icchi had said.

“Anyway, aren’t you guys together? I’m here with Runa, so can we all just be on one call?” I asked.

“Wait, Akari, are you talking to Shirakawa-san?!” Icchi yelled.

“Huh? And you’re on with Kashima-kun?!” replied Tanikita-san.

It had finally hit them that they were both on the phone.

Apparently, they'd panicked after seeing the test results.

Thus, Tanikita-san and Runa ended their call. Runa and I sat on opposite sides of the bed with my phone lying between us on speaker mode so all four of us could talk.

Incidentally, when Runa had hung up, she'd put on the hotel-provided pajamas.

Sure, I was curious about Icchi's situation, but my mood was in the dumpster since my sexual encounter with Runa was being postponed. Now, I was even more upset about Runa's period coming. Had it not been for that, we could've been all over each other right about now, maybe even ignoring these phone calls.

Once again, I haven't managed to lose my virginity... How many times has it been already? Is God so dead set on not letting me climb the ladder of adulthood?

It's just cruel at this point! It cost us time and money to get here, and things were going perfectly. Sightseeing was fun, and it's not like having sex was the ultimate goal here... Okay, fine, it was. For me, at least...

Man, I wanted to touch Runa so bad... To hold her so close that there'd be no room between us at all. Maybe take a bath together, and spend quality time with her until I was satisfied...



I knew it wasn't necessarily as big of a deal as it seemed in the moment, but the timing of it hurt so much. My grief knew no bounds. I wanted to turn back time. Had I known that tonight would turn out like this, I would've gone for it yesterday, ignoring how sleepy I'd been—I would've even put toothpaste in my eyes to wake myself up if I had to.

Feeling empty inside, save for an overwhelming amount of sheer regret, I continued to listen in a daze.

"I guess if all four showed positive...that means you probably really are pregnant..." said Runa with a serious look on her face.

"We can't be sure yet, right...?" Icchi sounded like he was trying to stubbornly cling to a last shred of hope. His voice trembled. "You know that whole thing about false pregnancies...?"

"It may not be very convincing coming from a humanities major like me, but I'm pretty sure somebody's imagination can't produce the chemicals that would yield a positive result on a pregnancy test..." Perhaps my reply was too levelheaded, but that was how dejected I was at the time.

Icchi was persistent. "You can't know that! The human imagination is a powerful thing!"

"But you guys didn't want children, did you?" I asked. Judging by their panicked state, it was hard to believe they wanted children badly enough to imagine Tanikita-san being pregnant.

"By the way... Did you guys use protection...?" Runa asked hesitantly.

I remembered that back in high school, Icchi would say that even total introverts should always have a condom on hand, just in case.

"We did... But one time, it tore while inside..." he replied.

"That's why I asked if it was really gonna be okay!" snapped Tanikita-san. "Because it looked like it could tear—but you told me it was fine!"

A fierce and graphic debate began to unfold on the other end of the line.

"Well, that's why I've been carrying around my own box since then! So we didn't have to use the ones at the hotel!"

"It's too late now that the tests are positive! It's gotta be from

that time!”

“*You* were the one who said you wanted to go for another round just before that!”

“What?! You were totally raring to go too! You should’ve just said you couldn’t go for more because we were out of L-sized condoms, and the rest were too small!”

“You’re my first girlfriend! How was I supposed to know it would rip while we were going at it just because it was a bit small?! Even *you* said it was probably fine! If you were so worried, why didn’t you take one of those pills?!”

“Why is this on *me* now?! This happened because you didn’t think about the size of your thing, and somehow *I’m* to blame?! You can only get the morning-after pill at a clinic, you know?! Do you have any idea how crowded women’s clinics are in the city?!”

Left out of the conversation, Runa and I exchanged blank looks.

Incidentally, the first and last time I’d seen Icchi naked had been on a school trip in our first year of high school when we’d had to stay the night somewhere. He’d still been overweight back then and had a lot of fat in that area—I hadn’t noticed that he’d been that big.

“Guys, calm down...” I said. “Like Icchi said, these were just tests from the store, so you can’t know for sure. Why don’t you go to a hospital together tomorrow?”

“I have work tomorrow,” Tanikita-san replied glumly.

“By the way, did you go looking for a job after we graduated from high school?” Runa asked. It seemed like she’d only remembered to ask now. “You don’t post about work on Instagram, so I was curious. I’m sure you’ve been busy with Ijichi-kun, but you haven’t stayed in touch with us since then. Maria said she doesn’t know either.”

“I didn’t. One of my seniors at my technical school does image consulting. I manage her appointments, write materials for her, deal with clients—stuff like that.”

“So it’s like a part-time job?”

“Yep. But she’s currently mega popular on Instagram, and she’s booked out a year ahead and sees a ton of clients every day. She’s real busy,” Tanikita-san explained. “I learn a lot watching her work with all kinds of people. It’s fun.”

"Huh... That does sound like something you'd be into."

"Sorry, what's 'image consulting'?" I asked quietly enough so that only Runa could hear.

"Image consultants can tell you about your personal colors and body type, right?" Runa replied.

That prompted a supplementary explanation from Tanikita-san. "Yeah. The girl I work for also has certificates in makeup and etiquette. She calls herself an 'all-around assistant, making women's everyday lives more radiant.'"

"S-Sorry, what's this about 'personal colors' and 'body types'...?" I asked again, apologetically.

Runa shot me an awkward smile—my reaction seemed to be within her expectations. "Basically, she can tell people what colors suit them, as well as what kind of clothing shapes are good and the overall feel, I guess?"

"Yep. Also, a lot of people—especially women—have this mental image of how they want to look. More often than not, the types of clothes and accessories that suit their figures and features don't match their tastes. At times like that, an assistant like her works with them closely to find a compromise between what fits them and what they like—find some common ground, I guess. And once they've found that direction, they can go shopping with her and she'll pick out an outfit for them. It's kinda like what stylists do, and it looks fun. I never knew a job like that existed. I hope I can do image counseling for others one day too, so for now, I watch that girl work every day and learn from her."

As Tanikita-san talked about this, she sounded so lively, even over the phone. It was clear she liked her current job. As an old friend of hers, I felt relieved, especially since she'd had a sugar daddy at one point.

"Then again, if I'm pregnant and have a kid, I'll have to give up on that too..." she added, her voice turning gloomy all of a sudden.

"Um, Akari..." Runa began hesitantly. "If you really are pregnant...do you want to have the baby?"

It was the same question I'd asked earlier.

"It's not that I *want* to... It's more like abortion isn't an option..."

Her voice was dark, as though it came from the depths of despair. “I mean, I love Yusuke. I wanna be with him forever, and I want kids someday too...”

Since all I really knew about these two was how they’d been in high school, I couldn’t hide my surprise. The same seemed to be true for Runa. After both our eyes wandered the room wildly, our gazes eventually met for a moment. It was funny, despite the situation.

“It’s just, now isn’t the best time...” Tanikita-san said. She was in low spirits, and the stifling mood returned as she spoke. “I finally found my dream job, I get paid to do what I like, and I feel fulfilled every day... There’s still so many things I wanna do while I’m young—go on trips with friends, go on thrill rides, have afternoon tea in fancy cafés...” It was clear from how she sounded that she was crying. “Runy... If I go to the hospital and find out I really have a baby inside me, what should I do...?”

Her sobbing seemed to have affected Runa—she now had tears welling up in her eyes too. She stared at the phone with sorrow all over her face. “Akari...” she uttered.

Icchi had been silent for a while, but he must’ve been still there with Tanikita-san. I tried to imagine how he must’ve felt.

***

In the end, no solutions were reached, but at least we learned about our friends’ situation over the phone. We suggested they go to an OB/GYN next weekend and said that we’d come along.

Runa and I were quiet for some time after we got off the phone with them.

“Pregnancy, huh...” Runa let out. She was still sitting on the bed, lost in thought. “I guess there’s always a risk of getting pregnant no matter how thorough you are with contraception, and even if you have sex just once, the chances aren’t zero...”

“Yeah...”

My reply didn’t seem to have registered with Runa—she kept hanging her head.

"I really never thought very hard about these things before going out with you..." She sighed. "Maybe you *shouldn't* have sex until you not only want children with your partner, but you're ready to actually have them right now..."

Hold on a second...

"I'll be starting technical school next month so I can chase my dream of becoming a nursery school teacher... But if I got pregnant now...that would really put me in a bind."

That went without saying. But I had to consider the meaning of her bringing that up now.

As I sat confused, Runa looked up at me and spoke with a look of unease on her face. "You know, we've come this far... Think we might as well get married first while we're at it?"

The mention of marriage made my heart skip a beat.

"Wouldn't it bring both of us peace of mind if we only started doing it after building the proper foundation for living together? When getting pregnant wouldn't be a problem?" she asked.

Peace of mind? Maybe. But I didn't want to agree to her proposal so easily. After all, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that the main reason we'd come here, to Okinawa, was to have sex.

While we'd had to put off going all the way because Runa had suddenly started her period, she'd offered to use her mouth instead, but now it sounded like that wouldn't be happening either...

Huh? Am I getting blueballed again? And this time it's gonna last all the way until we get married?!

I can't take that... But I'm pretty sure that's where things are headed... Is this for real? This isn't a joke?

Come on! At least do it with your mouth! Or even with your hands! Please! I beg you!

Whatever happened to the mood we just had going?!

Tell me you're kidding, Runa!

I was filled with a myriad of emotions, and as I pleaded and roared within my mind...

"What do you think, Ryuto?"

When she looked at me with such anxious eyes, the only thing I could say was...

“Yeah... I...agree...”

Chapter 1

Thus, our four-day vacation in Okinawa came to an end.

Even on the night of the third day, Runa had Tanikita-san and Icchi on her mind. The mood wasn't right, so I went to sleep beside her, still horny.

We returned the rental car, went to Naha Airport, and browsed gift shops while waiting for our flight. As you'd expect from an airport at a major tourist destination, the shopping area was spacious and partitioned into multiple sections.

While I made a show of choosing souvenirs, my mind wasn't processing what was in front of my eyes. Instead, it was, of course, stuck on the disappointing outcome of our trip.

The main reason I hadn't asked Runa two days ago to at least use her mouth was that I hadn't wanted her to see me as a pathetic guy who hadn't known when to give up.

It occurred to me, however, that I wasn't good at being open about sexual matters with Runa in the first place. It was a complex of mine, arising from my overwhelming lack of experience compared to hers. Also, it probably had something to do with my all-too-firm oath to respect Runa's wishes—the very oath I'd made when we'd started dating. Talking to her about sex would obviously make me want it, and that was why I'd been avoiding the topic all this time.

"Hey, those look delicious!"

Looking where that voice had come from, I found Runa. We'd been going around to shops separately, but now, she stood next to me. Her eyes were fixed on the thing I'd been looking at myself.

My mind wasn't really here, so it wasn't like I'd been paying much attention to the merchandise. That said, in front of me was a shelf with pouches of shelf-stable curry.

"This Churaumi Sakimori Curry looks great, and it says they only

sell it in this airport!" Runa said. "By the way, what does 'Sakimori' mean?"

"I think it's an old Japanese word referring to the soldiers who defended Kyushu."

"Oh, I see! And it's just like you to know these things! Man, you're so smart!"

Runa gazed at me with sparkling eyes. I wished she'd stop praising me so loudly, in case I had gotten it wrong.

Then again, the packaging says "Maritime Self-Defense Forces Original Recipe." Considering the connection to soldiers, I probably got it right.

"Hey, let's grab a few!" Runa added, putting a few pouches into her shopping basket. "Kitty loves curry, and I wanna get her some! She and I are meeting up soon."

"Oh. Sounds like it's been a while."

"Sure has! I'm so hyped!"

Kitty—as in Shirakawa Kitty—was Runa's older sister. Apparently, her name had come from a character that their mother liked when she'd gotten pregnant while she'd been in high school. She worked as a beautician in Yokosuka, in Kanagawa Prefecture. She lived there too, so Runa only saw her a few times a year. They'd get together for meals here and there.

"How old is she again?"

"Well, she's seven years older than me, so...twenty-eight, I guess."

"I see."

When their parents had gotten divorced, Kitty-san had chosen to remain a Shirakawa like their father, but since she'd already been in her third year of high school at the time, she'd left the house right after graduation. Nowadays, she almost never visited home.

As for why she'd gone so far from her family home, she'd moved to live together with her boyfriend at the time somewhere near his workplace. They'd broken up later on, but at that point, Kitty-san had already grown familiar with the area and had found a job there.

Incidentally, she lived with a different boyfriend now.

"How long has she been with her current boyfriend?"

"Hmm, she said it's been almost three years. Maybe they'll get married soon," Runa replied with a smile.

Her words gave me a start.

"You know, we've come this far... Think we might as well get married first while we're at it?"

Marriage.

It was surely still a distant prospect for the two of us.

I'd imagined our married life together many times, of course, but I'd always assumed it wouldn't happen until I'd at least graduated, found a job, and been a little successful in my career.

But if my first experience was going to be tied to marriage, then that changed things. I wanted to get married right now.

Okay, *right now* wasn't exactly reasonable. I mean, what I wanted to do right now wasn't to get married, but to have sex...but the thing with Tanikita-san had made Runa nervous as a fellow girl. I could understand that. I couldn't just have things my way and ignore her feelings!

These thoughts had been going back and forth in my mind all throughout the second half of our trip, and I'd been unable to rest.

"What about you, Ryuto? You're not getting anything?" Runa asked, looking at my empty basket.

"What? Oh, nah, I'll get something. Something simple for my family and coworkers, I guess..."

"Then how about those?"

Runa pointed at a stand next to the store's entrance. Sitting there was a large pile of boxes labeled "Chinsuko." I couldn't help but notice how that word was similar to one of the Japanese words for "penis." I cringed at myself for how badly my subconscious had been taken over by thoughts of sex ever since that unfortunate night.

***

"Thanks for the gift, Kashima-kun. They were delicious."

Kurose-san had said that to me in front of the elevator at work. It

was my first day back at the editing department since my trip, and we'd just left work together.

In the end, I'd decided that Chinsuko would've been too simple. I had gone with Beni-imo tarts instead for the editing department. I'd left them at an empty desk for everyone to enjoy.

"How was Okinawa?" she asked. I sensed curiosity in Kurose-san's eyes.

"It was fun," I said, doing my best to say it calmly as we entered the elevator.

"Huh..."

We weren't alone in here, so although Kurose-san didn't seem satisfied with my reply, she didn't press the subject. I didn't know how much she'd heard from Runa about our relationship, though she probably knew about it to some degree, so this topic was awkward for me.

"Oh right," she began, seeming to have remembered something as we stepped outside the building. "So when are we meeting up for that meal?"

"What?"

"Did you forget? You were going to set me up with that Mori Ogai enthusiast," she said.

"Ah!"

I finally remembered. After Kurose-san had rapidly grown closer to the good-looking, married manga artist Sato Naoki and then given up on him, she and I had talked about her getting to know Kujibayashi-kun.

"He's a good person. 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."

"It might be better in your case if you get used to guys first before getting into a romantic relationship."

After I and Runa had said those things to Kurose-san respectively, she'd warmed up to the idea of talking to Kujibayashi-kun.

"Would you mind inviting him to dinner? Us three and him. I want to try talking in a group."

She had, indeed, asked me to do that. But back then, I'd

assumed she'd only agreed out of desperation following her romantic disappointment. Evidently, she *was* actually interested in meeting up with Kujibayashi-kun.

In that case...

"Sorry, I forgot. I'll talk to him about it right away."

Kurose-san smiled at me. "Thanks. You do that."

Today, there was no trace of the sorrow I'd seen on her face that night when she'd looked up at the sky with tears flowing from her eyes. She was looking ahead and making progress.

It gave me a bit of courage as I stepped into the crowds of people heading home from work.

***

It was 10 p.m. on Saturday, and I was about to head home after my shift at the cram school was over. When I checked my phone in the waiting room, I saw I had a missed call from Runa.

I called her as I walked to the station. "Runa? What's up?" I asked.

"Oh, sorry, Ryuto... I'm just busy here... Ah!"

Her shriek was followed by the sound of something clattering. I could also hear the cries of another woman.

"Huh? Wh-What's going on?! Are you okay?!" I said.

"Sorry, there's just something I wanted to ask you real quick, but now's not a good time!"

"Ask me? Ask me what?!"

"Ah! Wait! Stop, Kitty!"

At that point, she hung up. I tried calling her back right away, but she didn't answer.

"What's going on over there...?"

Remembering the commotion I'd heard on the other end of the line, I was beside myself with worry.

Runa had called her older sister's name. If Kitty-san had something to do with this, Kurose-san might know what was going on. I wasted no time in calling her.

She picked up right away. "Hello? Kashima-kun?"

"Sorry for the sudden call," I said.

"It's okay. What's up?"

"Runa called me while I was working at the cram school, but when I called her back, she seemed busy with something... And it sounded like Kitty-san was there, so I thought you might know..."

"Oh, yeah. I hear she got dumped by her boyfriend."

"What? The one she was living with?"

"Yeah," she said. "He just walked out on her all of a sudden... It was really shocking for her, and it sounded like she shouldn't be left alone right now. I hear she almost jumped from the balcony..."

"What?!"

"Runa called me too. I wanted to go help, but Grandma isn't feeling well tonight... Grandpa's the same as always, so I can't head out. Mom can't either."

"Oh..."

Runa's shriek still resounded in my mind. She must've been anxious and nervous dealing with Kitty-san all by herself, not knowing what the latter might do. That might've been what she'd wanted to ask me about as well.

"Does she live in Yokosuka?"

"What?" Kurose-san sounded surprised. "Are you thinking of going there?"

"Yeah. I'm worried about Runa..."

I *was* tired, having just spent several hours standing and using my head to the fullest at work, but doing that would be better than simply going home and being concerned about Runa.

"Thanks, Kashima-kun. Runa's one lucky girl," Kurose-san said in a gentle tone.

After she told me where Kitty-san lived, I proceeded to the station. I boarded a train bound for central Tokyo, which didn't have many people on it by now.

***

After a long train ride to cross Tokyo, I got off at the station closest to the address I'd gotten from Kurose-san. I typed said

address into a map app and walked through the night all alone.

The last train of the day would soon depart, so everyone heading to the station now was surely going home. It was the weekend, and a relaxed mood hung in the air. It didn't look like I'd get to go home tonight, though, and I hurried through unfamiliar streets, following the route displayed on the map.

Once I was far enough from the station and walking through a residential area with little foot traffic, I reached the apartment building I was bound for. It was on the small side and five stories tall. Judging by its walls, it was pretty old too.

I knew that my destination sat on the third floor, but there was no nameplate to confirm it. However, as I walked through the corridor, I could tell which door it was without even checking the apartment number—a woman was crying loudly enough that I could hear her from outside.

I rang the doorbell, but no reply came. Instead of waiting, I twisted the knob—the door was unlocked. It was rude to just go in, but it was an emergency, so I opened it.

"Runa?" I called out so that my entrance wouldn't startle anyone.

When Runa saw me, she freaked out, like she'd seen a ghost. "Ryuto?! What?! No way!"

She was sitting on the floor. This was a narrow, single-room apartment with the kind of layout that let you see almost the whole place from the entrance. Next to Runa was a woman with her head down on the table—I could only see her back.

"What gives, Ryuto?! How'd you know where I was?!" Runa went on.

"I asked Kurose-san. I was worried about you, so..."

"Ryuto...!" Runa's eyes teared up. "Thank you..." She then addressed the woman next to her. "Hey, Kitty, Ryuto's here."

"Ryuto...?"

"You know, my boyfriend..."

"Boyfriend..." When Kitty-san uttered that word, still facing away from me, she began to cry loudly. "Waaaaaaaaaahhh! Rai-kuuun!"

"Oh, s-sorry!" said Runa with a look that suggested she'd screwed up. She quickly patted Kitty-san's back in broad strokes. Runa was

wearing the smile of someone in a pinch.

"Apologies for barging in... Nice to meet you... I'm Kashima Ryuto. Sorry it's so sudden... I don't know if it helps, but I did bring something..."

I put down a white plastic bag on the table. It was a visiting gift with a few rice balls and bottles of tea and such that I'd gotten at the convenience store by the station.

"Oh, thanks, Ryuto! We needed some food, so this is perfect!" said Runa. Her eyes sparkled. "You hear that, Kitty? He got us rice balls. Let's have some, hmm? You haven't had anything to eat since morning, have you?"

"Waaah!"

Wailing with her head still on the table and facing down, the woman stuck a hand into the bag. She pulled out one rice ball, opened it up, wrapped it in nori, and carried it to her mouth—all without looking or even changing the position of her head.

"Wow, that's impressive, Kitty..." Runa said in amazement.

Fortunately, Kitty-san seemed bent on keeping on living after all.

The five rice balls I brought disappeared very quickly as the girls ate two each and I had one. I was glad I'd stopped for noodles at a stall before getting on the train.

"Are you feeling any better? Being hungry really does make things worse, doesn't it?" said Runa as though admonishing a child.

After drinking some tea from a bottle, Kitty-san nodded lightly.

"Thanks, Ryuto-kun..."

When Runa's older sister finally lifted her face, I could tell she was beautiful, even with swollen eyes and without makeup.

I'd known what she looked like since Runa would sometimes show me photos of her. But now that I had met her in person, I couldn't help but notice the sheer size of her chest—it was huge. Her cleavage peeked out from above the zipper of her hoodie. It was hard not to look.

Her shoulder-length hair was dyed a fancy color, fitting for a beautician. I didn't know what you'd call that style, but it felt like something popular with young women.

Her features slightly resembled those of Runa and Kurose-san,

but since she had an overall gyaru image, she seemed closer to Runa.

But man, those things are huge...

I averted my eyes in a hurry and looked around the room. I'd had other things on my mind when I'd come in, but now that I had a better look, there were surprisingly few things here for a fairly small single-room apartment.

"When I came home from work last night, most of Rai-kun's stuff was gone... He blocked me on LINE too..." Kitty-san began with tears in her eyes. She must've sensed the question on my mind.

She went on with Runa supplementing her explanation. Here's what I got out of all of it:

Kitty-san's boyfriend, Rai-kun, had left all of a sudden without any prior notice. She and Runa had had a prior agreement to meet up the following day—that is, today. But at that point, hanging out had been out of the question, so when she'd told Runa what had happened, Runa had come here and found Kitty-san being a crying mess. Since Runa hadn't had work today, she'd decided to stay with her sister the whole day out of concern.

As for Rai-kun, well, he sure was something—a twenty-three-year-old guy, meaning he was younger than Kitty-san, in his fourth year of college. He was also a self-proclaimed singer and songwriter. That was all Kitty-san said about him.



Basically, he was unemployed.

Apparently, he wrote songs and sometimes sang them on the streets, like in front of train stations. Whatever income he made was the tips he got in the process, but he would make almost nothing each time he went out. Most of the living expenses had come out of Kitty-san's pocket.

"My jobs don't last very long either... I worked reception at a brothel, was on staff at a hostess club, and I worked in the office at a host club... They'd kick me out after a few weeks every time..." Kitty-san said.

"I-Isn't your choice of workplaces a bit too specific...? What about more ordinary places, like cafés...?" I asked.

"She's nocturnal, so it has to be a nighttime job," Runa explained.

"Doesn't that just mean she should fix her lifestyle...?" I asked.

"Apparently, her boyfriend would only make progress at songwriting at night."

So much for that. It really sounded like said boyfriend was a deadbeat.

"Kitty here is like a beanbag chair," Runa went on. "You know how they're so comfy that even if you have stuff to do, you just end up wasting the whole day sitting around on it? That's basically her. All of her boyfriends have been like this guy too. Kitty takes care of everything, including money, so they just stop doing anything."

Runa pretty much never criticized other people, but she *could* sometimes be harsh when it came to her family members.

"But I wanted him to achieve his dreams," Kitty-san said. "He wouldn't work, even if I just left him to his own devices, so I thought I had to take care of him."

Kitty-san's chicken-or-the-egg type of objection prompted a sigh from Runa.

"I guess you've always been kind. I remember how, up until me and Maria were in our fifth year of elementary school, you'd help us bathe every day—wipe us dry, apply body lotion, dry our hair with a dryer... You'd also clean our ears and check our teeth after we brushed them..." Runa said.

"I wonder if Rai-kun didn't like being treated like a child like

that...”

“Wait, you did those things for your boyfriend too?!” I asked in surprise.

Kitty-san nodded. “Well, wouldn’t you want to do whatever you can for someone you love?”

I was struck speechless. A beauty with massive jugs like her had treated this guy like royalty and supported him financially—what had he been unsatisfied with? Oddly enough, however, I felt like those things might’ve been exactly why he’d left her.

At that point, Kitty-san seemed to remember him and started crying once more. “Waaah! Rai-kuuun!”

Runa started patting her on the back again. “Okay, okay. Why don’t you try to get some rest now? You haven’t slept since yesterday, have you? It’ll be bad for your health if you don’t lie down.”

“Waaah...!”

Still crying, Kitty-san did as she was told and tottered to the bed by the wall.

The bed was obviously a single. I had to wonder where her boyfriend had been sleeping all this time.

“It’s too big for just me!” Kitty-san complained through her tears.

Seriously...? They slept together in that *bed...?*

It should also be noted that this apartment was clearly meant for a single tenant and wasn’t fit for two adults living together. Though I could imagine it was the best they could afford, given that Kitty-san must’ve been paying the rent entirely out of her own pocket.

“All right, all right, I’ll lie down with you,” said Runa and got into the bed.

She nudged Kitty-san toward the wall. While looking for a position in which she wouldn’t fall out of bed, she sat up about halfway and caressed her sister’s back.

Kitty-san’s sobbing continued for a while, but eventually her closed eyes stopped producing new tears and her breathing became rhythmical.

“Looks like she’s asleep... She must’ve been tired,” said Runa. She turned toward me. Her expression was full of affection, like a mother

who'd just put her child to sleep. "Thanks so much, Ryuto. And sorry for all the trouble. I'm planning to stay here tonight—what about you?"

"If it's okay with you, I'd like to stay over too."

I'd come all the way out here, and her sister wasn't quite in the clear yet either.

"Then we should get to bed too. You haven't brought anything for spending the night, have you?"

"I didn't... It's okay, though. It's just one night."

So I guess we're all sleeping together in this tiny room tonight... Then again, it makes sense, considering we need to keep an eye on Kitty-san.

"I bought an extra toothbrush on my way here since I figured Maria could use it. You can use it if you like."

"Thanks."

I took the new toothbrush from Runa and brushed my teeth with it, then headed to the bathroom. The small sink there held a plastic cup with two toothbrushes in it—a black one and a white one. One had probably belonged to the boyfriend. I supposed he'd chosen to leave a used toothbrush behind.

"Sorry, which cup can I rinse with?" I asked after returning to the living room where Runa was likewise brushing her teeth.

"Let's see..." she began, getting up. "Just use whatever. There should be one around here..."

Runa opened a hanging cupboard in the kitchen area that had a few mugs in it. The mugs were all in pairs that had the same design in different colors.

Seeing the vestiges of Kitty-san and her boyfriend's life together all around the place made me feel a bit restless.

Speaking of cohabitation... Would that be the first step to me and Runa getting married? Would we put our toothbrushes side by side and buy matching mugs...?

It was awkward to think about. Seeing a real-life example in the form of the mugs before me made my mental image all too vivid.

Runa and I grabbed a pair of mugs in different colors. As I stood absentmindedly before the sink, I heard an "Owie, Yuwo" from Runa

behind me—it was probably supposed to be "Sorry, Ryuto."

I stepped away from the sink to make room. Runa rinsed out her mouth with the mug and spat out into the sink.

As I watched the toothpaste water, cloudy and viscous, drain from the sink, it felt like a facet of daily life together that I hadn't gotten to experience at the hotel. I felt my heartbeat start to quicken.

If we started living together, and then got married...would our everyday lives be like this...?

As I thought about that...

"Waaah, Rai-kun!" came Kitty-san's voice all of a sudden.

Looking over, I saw that she'd suddenly sat right up in bed. She was unsteadily trying to get out of it.

"I can't go on like this..." she said. "What am I supposed to do without you...?"

Appearing to be half asleep, Kitty-san began walking around on unsteady feet like a zombie. Her eyes were closed.

"A-Are you okay, Kitty?!" Runa exclaimed.

As we watched Kitty-san, she came into the kitchen area and opened the fridge. She took out a silver and pale blue 500-milliliter can with the word "STRONG" written on it. It was a high-ABV chuhai.

With her eyes still shut, she opened it with the pull tab and brought the can to her lips. As she drank, the can gradually became perpendicular to her face.

"Phah..."

After somehow downing a 500-milliliter can in one go, she threw it in the sink. The light sound of aluminum told me it was empty.

As Runa and I stood there dumbfounded, Kitty-san tottered back to bed and fell asleep just like that.

"Hey, wasn't that one high in alcohol content? Will she be okay?" I asked nervously.

Runa stood there in a daze but forced a smile. "I dunno... She had a bunch of them at lunchtime, though, so I think she can hold her drink well..."

"O-Okay..."

Kitty-san must've still been a minor back when she'd lived with Runa and their parents, so maybe Runa didn't have a good grasp of how well Kitty-san could drink.

"Hey, Ryuto..." Runa began once she saw her sister fall asleep again. "I was anxious earlier to be looking after her all by myself, so I'm really glad you came. Thanks."

As we stood right next to each other in the space between the bathroom and the kitchen, Runa smiled at me.

"I guess you had it rough here alone," I said.

"Yeah... But it's for my dear sister, so..."

I recalled how Runa had taken care of the twins at the shopping mall.

"She was like an extra mother to me. 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."

I guess she really is precious to Runa... I thought.

Runa looked at me all of a sudden. "Have I ever told you about Chi-chan?"

"Yeah. The cat stuffed animal, right?"

I recalled that it had been one of Runa's favorite toys from when she'd been little. Though since I'd heard the story in high school, I couldn't even remember who exactly had told me about it—Runa or Kurose-san.

"Yep. Maria got her from our aunt when we were little, but she didn't play with her, so I asked, and she gave her to me. After a while, she asked for her back and I refused, so we had a fight."

"Right."

That matched what I remembered about it.

"The thing is, I actually meant to give her back that time. Our aunt bought her for Maria in the first place, so, what can you do, you know? But I put ribbons on her and dressed her up... After I played with her so much, it was hard to let go. I cried by myself because I wanted to keep her. Kitty saw all that and said I should just say no to Maria." Runa had a nostalgic smile on her face as she recalled the past. "And that's what I did. I said no." She smiled a

little more. “Kitty talked to Maria about it too. Said she only wanted Chi-chan because I was playing with her, and not because she liked the toy herself. That’s what allowed us to make up.”

So that’s how it was...

I felt like I’d caught a glimpse of how important Kitty-san had been to Runa and Kurose-san as children.

“I learned a valuable lesson from Kitty about how important it is to express your feelings. It may temporarily hurt the other person, but if you don’t do it, you’ll be the one hurting forever.”

Her words got me thinking.

Hm, maybe... But if putting up with something would lead to resolving things peacefully, isn’t keeping things to yourself also an option?

“Still, we couldn’t do anything about the sad stuff in Kitty’s life, so I think she had to put up with things all along. She looked after us ever since she was in primary school, and then Mom and Dad got a divorce... Unlike me and Maria, she was forced to just accept that and be understanding about it.” Runa hung her head, looking dispirited. “We only realized it when she left the house. She moved out as soon as she graduated.”

I listened intently as Runa went on.

“At first, I thought she found somewhere she could be a child. After all, in our house, she always had to fill in for Mom. It was only later that I found out she acted like a mother even with her boyfriends.”

“I see...”

As I finally managed to say something in reply, Runa’s glum look was replaced with a smile. “Maria and I often talk about how we should pamper our sister from now on. So this is really no biggie.”

“Runa...”

I thought back on how Runa had gotten into bed with Kitty-san earlier and the affection she’d had in her eyes. So *this* was why Runa was so devoted to her. She must’ve been grateful and loved Kitty-san for forcing herself to become an adult in order to look after the young Runa and Kurose-san. She’d had to grow up, too, to get through their parents’ divorce. It made me love and respect Runa

even more.

"I admire that," I said. "If there's anything I can do, just let me know."

Runa made an awkward smile. "Really?"

"Yeah."

"I'm grateful that you came, and it's reassuring to have you here for the night... It doesn't feel right to ask for anything more, but... Can I ask you for one thing?"

"Sure."

As I wondered what it was, Runa looked apologetic. "Do you have any plans for tomorrow?"

"Not really."

"I'm working all day tomorrow, starting in the morning. Maria will be coming here in the evening, but until then...could you look after Kitty?"

"What?! You mean just me?!"

Runa looked even more sorry. "It's okay if that's too much to ask... But you see how she still is... I'm just nervous about what she might do."

This situation was definitely serious if she'd tried to jump from the balcony. We were on the third floor in this apartment, so maybe she would've only gotten away with some injuries, but it was concerning nonetheless.

Runa had arranged her shifts at the clothing store to be in the evening and on weekends while she was going to technical school. The idea of staying with her sister all by myself was awkward and made me nervous, but if it would let Runa concentrate on her work...

"Okay, sure," I said.

"Thank you... Sorry to make you waste your Sunday." Runa made an apologetic face.

"That's okay. I did say you could ask for anything."

"Thanks..."

"Well, it's about time we got to bed, don't you think?"

The analog clock on the TV stand showed that it was almost midnight. Runa had been stuck dealing with her sister's grief the

whole day with no chance to relax, and tomorrow, she'd have to be on her feet at work starting from the morning. I was concerned for her health.

"Right," she replied.

We put some sheets down next to Kitty-san's bed and lay down side by side. The room was pretty cramped, so we'd had to move the table, but the TV stand was still right next to me.

We shared a single blanket, putting it down sideways. Runa used a remote to turn off the lights.

The situation felt strange. Runa's sister was here, so we weren't alone. She was asleep, though. And yet it didn't mean we could get up to any funny business.

As I lay there with my eyes closed, the thoughts in my head wouldn't let me rest.

"Can I hold your hand?" came Runa's voice, making me open my eyes. She'd turned her head my way and was looking at me.

"Sure."

I reached out, and we smoothly linked hands. I'd lost count of how many times we'd held hands by now. How long had I had to resist the impulse to seek the warmth that lay beyond? I recalled that night we'd spent at the inn in Enoshima.

"Hey, isn't it like that time in Enoshima, at the inn?"

Runa's voice gave me a start.

"I was just thinking the same thing."

She smiled at me. "Ryuto, I'm sorry about what happened in Okinawa."

"Huh?"

"The news that Akari got pregnant was really shocking... I had all kinds of thoughts in my head and wasn't really in the mood to do stuff..." Runa turned to face the ceiling and spoke slowly. "When we got back, I realized you probably wanted to do naughty things, since you're a guy."

"Well, yeah, of course. But that's okay. How you feel is the most important thing to me."

I kept my reply short, hoping to end the conversation before Kitty-san woke up. It would've been embarrassing if she heard us.

Runa lowered her eyebrows as she looked at me. “C’mon. You’re just too kind. And you came here today too... I never expected you to.” She seemed to ponder something for a moment. “Hey, Ryuto, you know what?”

“Hm?”

“I want you to place as much importance on your own feelings as you do mine.”

The sincerity on her face was so clear that I could make it out in the dark. It moved me.

“I’m serious,” she went on. “I really love you.”

Runa’s bashful smile and quiet words made my heart pound.

“Right... Thanks,” I replied.

I felt the warmth of her hand on mine. But because I valued that feeling so much, I couldn’t be open with Runa about my desires. And even if I *could*, it wouldn’t be somewhere other people could hear us.

Making this choice might have been a little painful, but I believed it was the best one I could make.

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“See ya later, Kitty. I gotta go to work, but Ryuto will stay with you. Don’t cause trouble for him, okay? Maria will come in the evening.”

“Mmm...”

Morning came, and it was time for Runa to go to work. Kitty-san was still in bed and under a blanket when Runa called out to her.

“Well, I’ll be going,” she told me and headed to the entrance.

I went to the entrance to see her off. With her back to me, Runa lifted one leg at a time, skillfully maintaining her balance as she put on her high heels. Beyond her, a plastic umbrella hung off the door handle, and women’s shoes were lined up closely together. Somehow, the sight made me think of my future with Runa, making my heart race.

“Okay, see ya,” she said.

“Take care.”

The exchange made me feel bashful somehow. Runa smiled awkwardly back at me.

“You know, it’s almost like we’re living together,” she said.

“Yeah.”

It was too awkward. I smiled as I averted my eyes from her. So when she made a sound and I turned to look at her again, my heart skipped a beat.

Runa’s eyes were closed, and she was leaning toward me. Her lips were puckered and aimed my way.

Wait... Is this a...g-goodbye kiss?!

I checked behind me—Kitty-san’s head was still buried under the blanket. It looked as though she and the bed were a single entity.

Relieved, I moved my face close to Runa’s. The idea of kissing her goodbye in a place that belonged to someone else—even if it was her sister—was thrilling and felt like a guilty pleasure. My heart pounded as our lips slowly touched.

At that moment, Runa pursed hers, and the sound of a kiss came from where our lips made contact.



I couldn’t resist checking behind me again. To my relief, Kitty-san hadn’t moved.

Runa giggled bashfully when our eyes met. “See ya. ♡” Her voice was sweet and quiet.

She opened the door. Her sweet scent lingered, tickling my nostrils.

“Take care...” I said.

“Later, Ryuto!”

As Runa waved her hand with a smile, she gradually disappeared from sight. My view of her first became rectangular, then grew even narrower... It was eventually cut off with the click of the door closing.

I stood there for a while, my eyes resting on the metal door. I grinned as I savored the lingering warmth on my lips.

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For the next few hours, Kitty-san slept like the dead.

She might have been Runa’s sister, but the idea of a young woman being fast asleep nearby made me restless. I found somewhere to sit so that she was out of my field of vision and started reading manga on my phone.

A listless groan came from the bed. “Nngh...”

Looking over, I saw a hand sticking out from under the covers, moving around as if searching for something.

“...er...”

“Huh?”

“Water...”

Oh.

“Here you go,” I said.

I had purchased a bottle of mineral water yesterday, and I was about to place it in the hand stretching out from the bed, but...

“Rai-kun?!” Instead of grabbing the bottle, Kitty-san’s hand latched onto mine. “Rai-kuuun!” All of a sudden, she flung off the blanket and got out of bed. “Why did you leave so suddenly, Rai-kun?! I was so lonelyyy!”

I fell backward in surprise, and Kitty-san leaped at me. She clung to me, burying her head against my chest and nuzzling into it.

"You better not leave me again! Ever!"

"W-Wait, Kitty-san! I'm not Rai-kun!" I said, flustered by the softness pressing against the pit of my stomach.

Kitty-san froze. "Huh...?" She relaxed her grip and looked up at me.

"I'm Ryuto... Runa's boyfriend..." I explained with an awkward smile.

Kitty-san stared at me from up close. From this angle, she looked even more similar to Runa than before.

"Oh... Aha ha. Sorry... You're right." Having come to her senses, she let out an awkward, sad laugh. "When I heard a guy's voice, I thought Rai-kun came back."

Her soft arms and chest pulled away from me, and I felt like I could finally catch a break.

Runa had the figure of a model and was generally slim except in the places that counted, but Kitty-san was voluptuous all over. I was genuinely curious what kind of guy would walk out on a woman so devoted and attractive.

"Thanks for the water."

Kitty-san picked up the bottle I'd dropped on the floor and drank from it. The air was still awkward, so I'd assumed she'd only have a sip, but she drank two thirds of the bottle in one go. She sure was a funny one.

"Where did you meet your boyfriend?" I asked.

It would make things less awkward if we had something to talk about.

A sad smile appeared on Kitty-san's face. "He was a customer at the salon I worked at. When he first came in, he didn't ask for anyone specific, so I ended up being in charge of him. He'd ask for me on later visits."

He's unemployed but goes to beauty salons...? As for me, I always got cheap haircuts.

Kitty-san seemed to pick up on the question on my mind. "He said he wanted to always look well-kept since he was a street

musician. When he joked about how he was always stuck eating beans for dinner, it kinda made my heart race... I'd just broken up with my previous boyfriend, so before I knew it, I invited him over..."

I was at a loss for words. Was it really okay to pick up boyfriends the same way one would a stray cat? Of course, it was partially on the guy for taking her up on the offer, but when said offer was coming from a beauty with breasts as massive as hers, I could more or less understand.

"They always dump me..." Kitty-san said all of a sudden, as though talking to herself. Her downcast eyes wavered—it was like tears could spill from them at any second. "I don't mind if my boyfriend is a deadbeat. Even if he can't do anything for himself, I'll just take care of it for him... That's how I start dating these guys. All I want is for them to be with me... Do they get so fed up with me that even that becomes too much to ask?"

Unable to add anything, I could only look at Kitty-san as her eyes grew moist.

"I'm lonely," she said. "I'm always looking for someone who'd be with me. Like family."

Thinking of the Shirakawa family's circumstances made it even harder for me to say much.

Kitty-san looked at me and smiled. "I thought Runa's relationships were going the same way, but it looks like that's not the case anymore. It must be thanks to you."

"I didn't really do anything..." I hung my head out of bashfulness. "Runa... Runa-san is a wonderful woman. She's too good for someone like me..."

"Is that really so?"

Looking up, I saw Kitty-san giving me a slightly awkward smile.

"You go to Houo, don't you?" she asked. "If anything, I have to wonder if Runa's really good enough for you."

"She's the one I want. It *has* to be her."

Kitty-san's smile turned into a fond one. "Man, I'm jealous of her..." Her voice then took on a sad tone, and she hung her head. "I thought it had to be Rai-kun for me too... I still think that way even now." Her smile morphed into a self-deprecating one. "But he got

fed up with me...”

Being inexperienced and younger than her, I didn’t know what to say in regards to Kitty-san’s relationship with her boyfriend. She seemed to pick up on that as she suddenly looked up and smiled at me politely.

“Take care of Runa, Ryuto-kun. I’m sure it *has* to be you for her too.”

Caught by surprise, the only way I could react was with a nod.

Kitty-san looked at me warmly. “Our family... We couldn’t give her enough happiness. I want you to fill in for that.”

“I’ll do my best.”

I nodded deeply and earnestly, but Kitty-san seemed to find it funny.

“No need to get so worked up,” she said.

“What?”

“If you try too hard, you’ll end up like me,” she said. As I was lost for words once more, Kitty-san averted her eyes from me and spoke further in a calm tone. “Happiness isn’t something that one party works hard to create. I think it comes when both parties walk toward each other.”

Beyond the walls of this apartment, I could hear a door closing somewhere. Surrounded by the kind of silence where one could hear the neighbors, I let Kitty-san’s words turn over in my mind for a while.

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Evening came, and the entrance door opened all of a sudden. Kurose-san had arrived. It was only then that I realized we hadn’t locked the door when Runa had left for work.

“Ah, you really are here,” she said once our eyes met—hers widened slightly in surprise. A smile followed soon after. “It feels kinda strange to run into you here.”

“I-I guess so.”

I was flustered for some inexplicable reason—it was kind of awkward and embarrassing, as I didn’t consider her and me to be

particularly close friends.

"She had two strong chuhais, one after another, about an hour ago. After that, she fell asleep," I said.

At first, Kitty-san had been talking calmly. But all of a sudden, she'd started crying again and had become unmanageable, calling for her "Rai-kun" like she was having a fit. In the blink of an eye, she'd slammed down those drinks with tears in her eyes, ended up wasted, and plopped herself into bed. There hadn't been anything I could do.

"I see..." A look of mild resignation appeared on Kurose-san's face as she looked over at her sister in the bed. "Oh, Kitty..."

Despite everything, I felt like the expression on her face was filled with love.

I recalled what Runa had said before.

"Maria and I often talk about how we should pamper our sister from now on."

Kurose-san tended to be a little cold toward her family members, but she probably felt the same way about Kitty-san that Runa did.

"Sorry for causing so much trouble for you, Kashima-kun. You had to go so far to come here. Be careful on your way home."

"Right, thanks."

I started to get ready to leave, but Kurose-san called out to stop me.

"Oh yeah... What about that dinner you mentioned?" she asked.

"I told Kujibayashi-kun about it, and he said he's ready whenever. He looked happy, I think."

"Huh. Okay. Then let's do it before one of us changes their mind," she said. "I'm ready whenever too. Though I might be busy with all this here—I mean with Kitty, for a while."

"Okay."

"Let's figure it out on LINE or at work later."

"Sure."

We waved to each other, and I left Kitty-san's apartment.

It was nearly 5 p.m. on this September day. It was still bright outside, but mood-wise, it was already evening in the city. My Sunday had come to an end.

It felt somewhat strange to think that I'd just spent more than half a day with someone I hardly knew, and in such an oppressively small apartment without even taking a step outside.

Relying on my memory and the foot traffic in the area, I made my way to the station while remembering what Kitty-san had said while she'd been sober.

"Happiness isn't something that one party works hard to create. I think it comes when both parties walk toward each other."

I thought it over.

Even from that perspective, Runa and I are happy.

We are *happy...right?*

The only thing that bothered me was the total lack of any indication that I'd be having my first sexual experience anytime soon. But to say we had a problem just because of that would make it sound like I was just after her body... And yet some part of me strongly objected to simply dropping the subject.

Of course I didn't only want sex. We'd been dating for four years, and I'd been patiently waiting for it. I was sure even God would press a label on my forehead that read "Guy who wants more than just sex." What the hell kinda sticker would that be, huh?

Even Icchi and Tanikita-san had reached that point in their relationship after dating for just half a year. It was normal for couples our age, right? Putting the matter of pregnancy aside, at least...

"You know, we've come this far... Think we might as well get married first while we're at it?"

"Get married first"? I thought. *You've got to be kidding me!*

It wasn't like I was opposed to the idea of marrying Runa. I just couldn't wait until marriage. I didn't want to wait any longer than I already had. Like, hadn't it been long enough already?

This was how I truly felt. *But why couldn't I say it right away back then? Was I being too passive? Even though we've already been dating for four years?*

No, that wasn't it. I wasn't "being reserved." I just knew that if I had said it, Runa would've surely prioritized my wishes over hers.

One reason I couldn't say anything was, of course, my lack of

confidence as a man.

But was that really it, though? Even if Runa had significantly more dating experience than I, it felt like that wasn't the only reason.

Not to brag, but just like Kitty-san had said earlier, I'd always been more successful academically than Runa. It was probably safe to say I could hope for an above-average salary in the future too.

However, at the end of the day, I was still a student who had yet to earn anything other than academic credit in my field.

Runa, on the other hand, had already been working a full-time job and had been recognized for her efforts. She was an adult who was already standing on her own two feet. And now, she'd found what she actually wanted to do and was making an effort to make that dream a reality.

And me? The time when I'd be job-hunting was drawing closer and closer, and I still had no idea what kind of position I wanted. I'd get to find anything that appealed to me.

No matter how much time passed, Runa was always one step ahead of me.

When we started dating, you were experienced, and I was not.

Ever since that day, I'd had a complex about the differences between her and me. It had just changed shape along the way.

With the way things were at the moment, I couldn't tell Runa my honest feelings. I wanted to grab hold of something definite as soon as I could. It didn't matter if it was just some minor bit of potential that was dormant within me—I needed *something.*

Without something definite, I'd forever remain the kind of boyfriend who was constantly afraid of what his girlfriend might think—like a dog waiting for its master to feed it.

I hated the thought of that. I needed to find *something,* and soon.

Impatience spurred me on as I walked toward the station. Crowds flocked from residential roads to the main street.

It felt like everyone here was like me, restless about something in their lives. I'd never found the presence of complete strangers so

reassuring before.

Chapter 1.5: A Long Phone Call Between Runa and Nicole

"Hey, Nicole!"

"Hey, Runa! How's school?"

"I'm swamped every day! I've never studied this hard in my life!"

"Wow, that's amazing!"

"You studied at nail school too, right?"

"Well, sure, but I was into that from the start. I also knew a lot of it already, so it wasn't that much of a pain."

"There's so much I need to study, but I don't think it's annoying either! That's what surprises me."

"Speaking of surprises, isn't it crazy that Akari got pregnant? Really gave me a shock."

"Yeah... Some of my old classmates from primary and middle school are already married with kids, but that's not the same... It shocked me too."

"Akari said she called you first because you're so experienced. She thought you could give her some advice. It's pretty late for that, though, if she's already pregnant!"

"She was confused. I was as well."

"Ah. I guess it's also a concern for you, since you have a boyfriend."

"When I heard what happened, I thought, 'Yeah, I guess there's always a chance, even if you practice safe sex...' I figured it was better not to rush things too, and I said as much to Ryuto."

"If you worry about stuff like that, why get in a car if there's a chance you'll get into an accident? Or fly somewhere, for that matter. This is Akari and her boyfriend we're talking about—they probably got carried away and didn't play it safe. There's not much of a risk if you do it right."

"Yeah, exactly. I realized later that that's the case."

"But that probably killed the mood on your trip, didn't it?"

"Yeah... I talked to Maria about it and she was like, 'You can't be serious.' She said I'm just overthinking it."

"For real, yeah. I read on Instagram that ninety percent of things people are worried about don't become reality."

"I feel bad for Ryuto..."

"Hm?"

"I'm sure he was already disappointed because I got my period all of a sudden. I was disappointed too... So I offered to use my mouth instead, and that's when Akari called..."

"Wow, that's some shitty timing! It's just like her."

"After that, I just didn't feel like it on the rest of the trip."

"Man, poor guy. He must've been really upset that whole time."

"You think so...?"

"Of course he was. He's a guy."

"But how can you know if he didn't say anything? As a girl, I don't want sex that badly."

"Wouldn't he think that if he asks, you'll force yourself to do it even if you don't feel like it? Like when you started dating."

"But I think our relationship has reached the point where that would be okay, you know? Or, like, will he be hiding his feelings and holding back forever, even after we become husband and wife? Do you think that's a healthy relationship?"

"Well..."

"I want him to be more selfish with me. He's kind, so I feel like he's always putting my wishes over what *he* wants to do..."

"Yeah, well, he's the polar opposite of your exes, that's for sure."

"That was so long ago that I barely remember any of them."

"Aha ha, I know, right? Girls get right over things, after all."

"Maybe I'm getting ahead of myself, but in my mind, Ryuto is my first and last boyfriend."

"Well, yeah, that's fair when you've been together that long."

"And so, just like he respects my feelings, I want to respect his. I wish he'd just say it."

"I wonder why guys hide their feelings so much..."

"Was it the same with Sekiya-san and Nishina-kun?"

"Well... Sort of. I've been friends with Ren all this time, so I more or less know what's on his mind. But yeah, he keeps some things to himself. Especially when it comes to things he doesn't like about me."

"That's why I always ask Ryuto what he thinks after saying what I think. But he always just goes, 'Yeah...' Like, I gotta wonder if he really means it."

"Maybe he thinks you're putting pressure on him?"

"I'd never do that! I genuinely want to know how he feels!"

"Aha ha."

"I asked him at Kitty's place too, but he didn't admit anything..."

"I see..."

"I want him to be more selfish! Like, even when I'm thinking that maybe we shouldn't do it, I want him to be all pushy! He should put his arms around me and say he wants to do it right then and there!"

"Aha ha! You watch too many soap operas."

"I mean, shouldn't it be up to *both* of us to talk it out and decide if we'll do it or not? Why would his telling me how he feels mean that he doesn't respect my feelings?"

"Well, you know. Isn't it the power dynamic you started with?"

"You mean like I'm dominating him?!"

"No! Like, you were the most popular girl in class, and he was plain. Maybe he feels inferior."

"What does that have to do with anything?! Plus, we graduated from high school so long ago now."

"Well, sure, but still."

"I want us to be able to discuss our feelings, talk things out, and make decisions together on all kinds of things."

"Right."

"I just want us to decide on things together. I don't want a relationship where I just say that I want or don't want to do something and Ryuto goes along with it."

"Well, even I admit that would be ideal."

"See?"

"It's not easy, though. People don't want to get hurt, and they

don’t want to hurt their loved ones either.”

“Whatcha mean?”

“At the very least, I know I’m controlling Ren. I don’t feel like being intimate with him as boyfriend and girlfriend yet, so I’m unconsciously always putting pressure on him so that kind of mood never happens.”

“You can’t just be honest and tell him you’re not ready for it yet?”

“Nope. I’d be hurting him. That’s what it means to tell someone the truth.”

“But...”

“The reason you want to be able to be truthful with Ryuto is because you’ve built up enough trust, right? So even if you don’t see eye to eye on something that’s not too important, you can get over it without causing any pain to each other?”

“If you put it that way, yeah, I guess that’s right.”

“I’m jealous of that. Me and Ren, if we start telling each other how we really feel now? I’m sure that’ll be the end for us.”

After getting off the phone, Runa felt blank for a while. She took her accessory case from its stand and opened it. She touched the moonstone ring and earrings inside and sighed quietly.

Chapter 2

My third summer as a university student came to an end, and I was still a virgin. At the start of summer break, I hadn't even considered this would be a possibility. I'd yet to come to terms with it at all, but there was no stopping the passage of time.

Soon after classes started again, the four of us—meaning Kujibayashi-kun, Kurose-san, Runa, and I—met up for dinner. It happened at the end of September, at 8 p.m. on a Sunday.

It had taken a while to schedule it since Runa was extremely busy—she had work, needed to study, and had to help look after her little sisters. The rest of us had needed to find a time where our schedules lined up with the rare openings in hers.

Anyway, we were all going to an izakaya near the eastern exit of Ikebukuro Station. Kurose-san had reserved a table online for us.

Kujibayashi-kun didn't want to head there by himself, so we all planned to meet up near the Ikefukuro statue in the underground part of the station. I got there five minutes before the appointed time and found Runa and Kurose-san already there.

"Ah, Ryuto! The manager said I could leave a bit early."

"Hey, Runa."

Wondering when Kujibayashi-kun would arrive, I was about to check my phone when I felt someone's presence behind me. I turned around and saw the guy himself, standing closely behind me as though he were my shadow.

"Whoa, you startled me," I said.

"Ah, is that the 'your stoolie' guy?!" Runa asked.

"'Yours truly,' but yeah."

Runa and I were going through our usual exchange.

"Anyway, this is my friend from university, Kujibayashi-kun," I said.

"Ryuto told me about you! I'm Runa, his girlfriend! Nice to meet

you!”

“I guess this is your second time meeting him, Kurose-san. He’s a literature student like you, so I hope you guys can get along.”

“It’s a pleasure,” said Kurose-san.

She and Runa directed their smiles at Kujibayashi-kun, but as for the guy himself, he’d yet to say a word. All he managed was a slight bow, keeping his eyes down for the most part. The sight of it made me slightly nervous, but we all began to make our way to the station’s exit and headed toward the izakaya.

Kurose-san was leading the way, so she and Runa walked ahead of us, chatting.

“Have the twins started behaving themselves recently?” Kurose-san asked.

“I guess so, at least compared to before. They’re not babies anymore, so it’s relieving that they don’t go crying for no reason these days.”

“They’re, what...two years and three months old now? Time sure flies.”

“I know, right?” Runa said. “I’m sure in the future I’ll look back on this time and think about how hard it was, but thinking about how it used to be now, I feel things are becoming a bit easier with every month.”

“I see, I see.”

“Kitty said that yeah, it does get easier at first, but then the terrible twos come and things get rough again. Though I don’t really know for sure since we were the youngest in our family.”

“I didn’t manage to have a proper conversation with Kitty at all... She was just drunk and grumbling the whole time...” Kurose-san complained.

“Ah... Well, she’s had her ups and downs. Ever since she became an adult, she’s been acting more childlike and dependent around you than with me... Still, I’m glad she managed to get her life back on track.”

A week had passed since my encounter with Kitty-san. She’d stopped skipping work and was no longer drowning her woes in alcohol and being a menace to herself. I was really glad things had

worked out.

"Yeah. It was a rough week. Between me, you, Mom, and Aunt Tae, we were taking turns watching her twenty-four seven," replied Kurose-san.

"For real! We even had to ask Ryuto to watch her. Thanks so much for that."

"It was a big help."

At that point, the two of them turned their heads my way. I smiled awkwardly, remembering the time they were talking about.

"Well, I'm glad I could be of service..." I said.

For the most part, all I'd done was watch her. If that had brought them relief, then that strange experience hadn't been meaningless.

As we talked, Kujibayashi-kun walked some distance behind me, hanging his head. It was dinnertime and we were on the sidewalk next to the station, so it wasn't strange that there were groups of people cutting between the three of us and Kujibayashi-kun. However, it completely made it look like he wasn't with us.

"K-Kujibayashi-kun!" said Runa, doubling back and going over to him. "Why are you hanging back so much?"

"'Tis not my place to be a party to the discourse of maidens."

"You should still stay close. It's weird otherwise."

"What is most weird here is that a virgin fiend such as yours truly should accompany glamorous ladies such as yourselves," he said. "It no doubt looks most peculiar to those in our vicinity."

"People have no way of knowing who's a virgin and who isn't!"

"Dost thou not see it? For I can see it without fail."

"Then take off that weird scouter or whatever!" Runa said.

In the meantime, we reached the izakaya. It was located on the sixth floor of a building not far from the station. The interior design was Japanese, and the place was illuminated with the kind of gentle light that made you think of paper lanterns. The walls on each side of us were lined with private tables surrounded by white domes, designed like snow huts. We were led to one of them.

"Wow, this is great! I'm surprised you found this place, Maria," said Runa. Her eyes sparkled as she looked around the dome from inside.

There was no door, and nothing blocked our view of the rest of the izakaya, so the area was really semiprivate at best. Even so, being surrounded on three sides made this space feel sufficiently isolated.

"I like looking for fancy restaurants on Instagram. I have a lot in my bookmarks."

The girls sat next to each other as they chatted, and Kujibayashi-kun and I sat across from them. When eating out as a group of multiple men and women, were we destined to always choose where to sit as if we were meeting potential spouses? Maybe it was in our nature as reserved Japanese people.

"Cheers!" exclaimed Runa once our drinks arrived, signaling the start of the event. "Wow, this is great!"

"It really is," said Kurose-san.

As the two sisters got excited over the goma tofu that had been served as an appetizer, Runa looked over to Kujibayashi-kun. "So, Kujibayashi-kun, you and Maria have the same major? Just at different schools?"

Kujibayashi-kun remained silent, so I answered in his place.

"Yeah. They're both studying Japanese literature," I said. "He wants to go on to graduate school and study Mori Ogai."

"Wow, that's amazing! Mori Ogai... I feel like I've heard the name before!" Runa said. "Who is he, though?!"

"A famous writer from the Meiji era. He wrote 'The Dancing Girl,' which was in our textbooks in high school."

"Hm, I don't remember... I wiped my memory of high school classes once I graduated."

I chuckled and addressed Kurose-san next. "What about you? You're taking seminars in modern literature, right? What will your graduation thesis be about?"

"Natsume Soseki," she replied.

"Ah, I know that one! Didn't he write a story about a cat? There aren't any bad people among cat-lovers, so he must've been a good person... Wait, am I mixing things up?"

Runa's innocence prompted a smile from me and Kurose-san.

"Yeah, he wrote *I Am a Cat*," I replied.

"Speaking of cats, Runa, do you know about the cat café in Namja Town over there?" said Kurose-san.

"What? I've never heard of it! I'd love to see it!"

"They're probably already closed for today, but how about paying it a visit next time you're in Ikebukuro?"

"I absolutely will! You know a lot, Maria!"

"I went there with Akari a bunch of times in high school. Her favorite idols were doing collabs there or something," Kurose-san explained.

"Oh, I see!"

"I always meant to tell you about it since I know you like cats, but I kept forgetting."

"Thanks! Ah, speaking of cats, there was an extremely cute one in Okinawa! It was at this place called Umikaji Terrace..."

Runa unlocked her phone and started showing pictures to Kurose-san. These sisters were great friends, so they'd probably never run out of topics to talk about. Knowing that things used to be awkward between them, I couldn't help watching with a smile on my face.

But as I looked over to Kujibayashi-kun, I saw him eating in silence. He was drinking oolong tea tonight, so there was no hope he'd get drunk and open up. And I sure didn't think he was about to join the girls' conversation anytime soon, considering the way he was sitting there with a hunched back and minding his own business.

At that point, though, Runa's attention shifted to him.

"By the way, you've got a pretty unusual name, Kujibayashi-kun. I would've never known how to read it if Ryuto didn't tell me! It totally looks like it should be read 'Kujirin'!"

The comedian in me quipped, *You can read the hard part, but you got the easy part wrong?!* Unfortunately, I wasn't a good comedian out loud, so I kept it to myself.

Runa had some peculiar ideas of how to read kanji—she'd first read my surname as "Kuwashima" back in the day—so this wasn't much of a surprise.

Kujibayashi-kun stopped eating and began acting weird, raising

and lowering his eyes over and over. He didn't seem to know how to respond.

"Hey, can I call you Kujirin?" Runa added.

"Huh...?"

That was the first thing he'd said today.

His eyes moved around erratically behind his black-rimmed glasses. Then, in apparent resignation, he said, "Sure, if you want..."

The fact that he'd dropped the bookish talk meant he was pretty restless. I knew that much from our previous interactions.

"Yay! Thanks, Kujirin!"

Kujibayashi-kun blushed. While I was impressed by what Runa had said, I was kind of in two minds about it.

My girlfriend was actively breaking the ice with another guy right in front of me. Even if he was my friend, it didn't entirely sit right with me. Though even I thought I was being too narrow-minded.

To distract myself, I drank what was left of my highball in one go and ordered another.

Dinner continued in the same fashion—it was mainly Runa who was starting conversations with the rest of us. Thanks to that, there wasn't much silence at least, but the point of us being here was to get Kujibayashi-kun and Kurose-san to talk directly to each other. There was no sign of that happening anytime soon.

On top of that, Kujibayashi-kun was quick to hide in his shell unless someone was talking to him at a given moment, so we weren't even having conversations that included all four of us.

I had to go to the bathroom less than an hour after we'd arrived, in part because I'd been drinking too much. I got up and told everyone where I was going. For some reason, Kujibayashi-kun got up too.

"Huh? Why are *you* getting up?" I asked.

"Nature calls for me as well..."

"Do you want to go first, then? There might be only one stall. I'll wait here."

I was about to sit back down, but he grabbed me firmly by the elbow and shook his head. He had a hell of a look on his face.

Evidently, he wanted to go together.

At that point, I finally realized what his deal was. It wasn't that he wanted to go to the bathroom—instead, he knew he couldn't endure being left alone with two girls in this semisecluded area.

We were far past the age of going to the bathroom together, even if it was unintentional, but the men's room was only made for one. It wasn't really a problem as we simply took turns going in. I finished my business first and waited by the door.

"So, like, why not try talking to Kurose-san while you have the chance?" I asked. "You like her, don't you?"

I could tell how he felt, so I knew it was a tall order. Even though I was an introverted virgin just like him, I'd been dating Runa for a long time. I was getting pretty close to being an ordinary guy on the mental side of things. It was hard to watch him today.

"But she undoubtedly finds it dreadful to so much as share a table with a virgin fiend such as myself..."

"If she did, she wouldn't have asked for us to go out like this tonight. You realize *she's* the one who asked to set this up, right? She wants to be friends with you."

My insistence made Kujibayashi-kun blush in silence. Just how pure was this guy?

"But she is so lovely. And I am just some..."

"Like Runa said, she can't see it!"

"But *I* can..." he said.

"Then take that weird scouter off!" Those words coming out of my mouth made something occur to me. "Oh yeah, why don't you take those glasses off?"

Kujibayashi-kun looked puzzled. "Explain thyself, brother."

"You're really nearsighted, right? I was thinking that if you take off your glasses, you won't be able to see if Kurose-san is beautiful or not. That would make it easier for you to talk to her."

He was baffled by my suggestion, but as he didn't have any better ideas, he did as he'd been told and put his glasses away in his pocket.

"I cannot venture forth for lack of clear eyesight. May I borrow your shoulder till we arrive, good sir?"

"Wait, it's *that* bad? What kind of prescription do you have? 20/40?"

"The last time I had an exam, my left eye was 0.02..."

"It goes that low?!"

As someone who'd never had vision problems, this was astonishing. I couldn't imagine what things must've looked like from his perspective right now.

Either way, I lent him my shoulder, and we returned to the semi-isolated table.

Runa's eyes widened when she saw us. "Kujirin?!" she exclaimed. "What happened to your glasses?"

"He dropped them and they broke," I explained.

"Are you okay? And wow, I didn't realize you were so handsome!" Runa excitedly patted Kurose-san on the shoulder. "You think so too, don't you, Maria?!"

Kurose-san seemed to pick up on the hidden meaning in the look Runa was giving her. She smiled a bit awkwardly. "It's not about the looks."

Even so, I could tell from her expression that Kurose-san liked how he looked without his glasses.


POP

The absence of glasses also had an effect on Kujibayashi-kun himself. While he had previously lowered his eyes when asked a question, he could look at Kurose-san naturally now.

Having said that, Runa was still the one starting conversations. On top of that, she kept praising his looks over and over, which came to bother me more and more...

When I went to the bathroom a second time, Kujibayashi-kun didn't come with me. He seemed to have grown pretty used to Runa and must've decided it was better to stay with the girls than accompany me to the bathroom again—it would've been unnatural.

I took my time doing my business, and when I opened the door, I found Runa standing right outside in the narrow passage by the bathrooms.

"Ah, Ryuto!"

She approached me as though she'd been waiting for me. I checked behind me to make sure, and just as I remembered, there was a separate women's bathroom too. It wasn't like she'd been waiting to go in there.

"I was just thinking we should leave them alone for a while, and that's why I'm here," Runa said quietly. She tilted her head and looked at me. "What's wrong, Ryuto? I noticed it earlier, but you seem kinda down."

"Nothing really..." I didn't intend to say anything more, but I was feeling tipsy, which spurred me to go on. "I was just thinking how friendly you were being with Kujibayashi-kun... You gave him a nickname and you called him handsome..."

"Huh?" Runa widened her eyes in surprise. "Wait, you're jealous?"

I couldn't reply—it was awkward.

Joy appeared on Runa's face. "Wow, I'm happy to hear that! So you still get jealous on my account!"

Well yeah. Unlike me, Kujibayashi-kun had pretty much decided on his future path. He was also diligent and attractive. But it was too embarrassing to say I was feeling inferior to a friend tonight.

"But you know, with his glasses off? He's got clear-cut eyes, a tall nose, and his face has a nice shape. You noticed too, right?"

I had, and that was one of the things bothering me. I knew that, objectively, I wasn't all that handsome, so when my girlfriend so openly admired another guy, even if he was my friend... Actually, his being my friend might've been the problem here. It was my first time watching Runa saying that another guy was attractive in front of me, so this emotion was new to me.

There was no way I could say any of that, of course.

Runa stared at me for a while. "Someone like you is more attractive to me, though."

"What?!"

"Why does that surprise you? It's one thing to find a celebrity handsome and another to like someone romantically. Nobody looks as good in your eyes as the person you love, you know?"

I was happy to hear that if she was telling the truth, but I was ashamed of my small-mindedness that had made her say it in the first place.

"I'm not complimenting him just because—I want Maria to come to like him as a guy," she explained. "You know how girls take an interest in guys that other girls compliment?"

I remembered having heard something to that effect at some point. Yamana-san or Tanikita-san had most likely said it. Since I hadn't talked *that* much, even to them—to say nothing of any other girls—it had probably been one of them.

"And besides, of course I'd be friendly with him. He's your precious friend. As your girlfriend, I wanna be on good terms with him too."

I wasn't a social butterfly like Runa, so it was hard for me to relate to that way of thinking, but I could understand it in theory at least.

"He might become friends with Maria, and maybe they'll even start dating... I know it's too early to say, but he might eventually become our brother-in-law."

"Yeah, that's *way* too early to say."

"Is it?" she asked.

"I mean, they're not even close to going out yet."

If Kujibayashi-kun were to hear this conversation... He was so

pure that the pressure of what we were saying might crush him.

At that point, someone came to use the bathroom, so Runa and I went back to our table. To our surprise, Kujibayashi-kun was being talkative with Kurose-san.

"Say, were you aware that Soseki and Ogai dwelt in the same abode in Sendagi, only at different times?"

For a moment, I thought it was a side effect of removing his glasses, but then it hit me—this was the same as that time he'd lectured Kurose-san on Mori Ogai for two hours. He must've freaked out at the thought of being suddenly left alone with Kurose-san after Runa and I had left, so he'd decided to lay out as much of his knowledge as he could.

"The space we're in is designed after a kamakura—a snow hut—and Soseki was one of the 'Kamakura Writers,'" he went on.

"Who are those...?" asked Kurose-san.

"Prominent writers who are related to Kamakura. Soseki went there to receive medical care for both himself and his wife. He later visited it several more times."

"Oh, by Kamakura, you mean the city."

It looked like Kurose-san was barely keeping up with him.

"The northern part of Kamakura appears in *The Gate*—one of the novels in Soseki's first trilogy. And at the beginning of *Kokoro,* the most famous work from the second trilogy, Sensei and the narrator meet on a beach in Kamakura."

"I see..."

At that point, Runa joined the conversation. "What're you guys talking about? Actually, what language are you speaking?"

Kurose-san looked relieved. "Come on, Runa," she said. "*The Gate* is one thing, but *Kokoro* was in our Modern Japanese textbooks in high school, you know?"

"Really? I guess I kinda remember reading it... Did that really happen there, though?"

"'Tis no surprise," said Kujibayashi-kun, who seemed more comfortable talking to Runa than to Kurose-san. "High school textbooks focus primarily on the final part of *Kokoro*—'Sensei's Testament.' The beginning of the novel is oftentimes omitted."

"Wow, it's amazing how much you know!"

Runa's skillful back-channeling spurred Kujibayashi-kun on. His exposition showed no signs of stopping anytime soon.

"And so, Soseki..."

Kurose-san's eyes were devoid of light at this point, so I stopped making any interjections. I waited for an opportunity to salvage the situation.

"So, uh, it's about time we make our last order—you guys want anything?"

My question successfully forced Kujibayashi-kun's lecture to come to an end at last.

"Ah, I could go for some dessert! What about you, Maria?" said Runa.

"Hm, this matcha cake looks nice."

"It really does! Wow, they even have monaka! Guess the Japanese decor here isn't just for show!"

Runa and Kurose-san looked at the menu and talked excitedly about what desserts to order.

Unbelievably, Kujibayashi-kun entered their conversation of his own accord. "Speaking of monaka..." he began. "Soseki had a sweet tooth, and monaka was one of his adored dishes."

"Oh, really?" In her good nature, Runa looked up from the menu and replied without giving it much thought.

"He was particularly keen on the monaka from 'Kuya,' a shop with a long history located in Ginza. The establishment is brought up in the aforementioned *I Am a Cat* as well..."

"Wow!"

Dude, stop it already! We're not in some TV program about trivia!

I cried on the inside. I wanted to support my friend's romantic endeavors, but this was turning into a total disaster. Even I would've cringed at him if I were a girl. Hell, I didn't even need to be a girl for that—I was pretty put off, even as a guy and as his close friend. Kurose-san had said he'd told her about Mori Ogai for two hours when they'd first met, and I was beginning to see that she hadn't been exaggerating.

He'd been silent for so long at first, but once a topic he knew a

lot about came up, there was no stopping him. It drove me to tears, like I was looking at myself back in the day.

I also wished that he would notice the strained look on Kurose-san's face.

But just when I was about to say something to try and stop him, something touched my knee. I tried to evade it on reflex, but it gave chase and wouldn't leave me alone.

I took a peek under the table and saw that Runa's toes were on me. She'd taken off one of her sandals and was nudging my knee with her bare foot. When our eyes met, Runa gave me a mischievous grin—she knew exactly what she was doing.

She continued skillfully moving her toes and touching me. It tickled and it almost made me laugh, but Runa held her index finger to her mouth and signaled with her eyes toward Kurose-san and Kujibayashi-kun. Apparently, she wanted me to stay quiet while they talked.

"There is a famous anecdote about one of Soseki's favorites—strawberry jam. He encountered it when studying in the United Kingdom..."

Kujibayashi-kun was the only one speaking, but he was looking directly at Kurose-san. She kept nodding back at him, seeming to be listening closely.

In the meantime, my knee was at the mercy of Runa's toes.

What did I do to deserve this kind of punishment...? Actually, I'm not even sure if it's a punishment or a reward.

Seeing that I stopped resisting, Runa's toes moved up to my thighs.

H-Hold on right there, isn't this a bit much...?

Flustered, I listened to Kujibayashi-kun to divert my attention from where Runa's toes were touching me.

"...Having said that, I was no doubt preaching to the choir all along. You are an expert on Soseki, are you not?"

Kurose-san hung her head at his question, looking dispirited. When I followed her lead and lowered my head too, I could see Runa's foot beneath the table. Her vibrant red toenails contrasted with her fair skin.

"That's not true," replied Kurose-san. "I barely knew any of the things you said today. Looks like I haven't done enough research..."

"Incidentally, may I ask what it is in relation to Soseki that your graduation thesis shall be about?" asked Kujibayashi-kun.

"I want to write about my theory that, in *Kokoro,* Okusan and the narrator marry after Sensei's death... But I didn't even remember that *Kokoro's* first scene takes place in Kamakura..."

As Runa's toes continued to creep up my thighs toward my crotch, I couldn't contain a moan. I coughed to hide it.

"Hmm..." Kujibayashi-kun said. "Then have you examined Ishihara Chiaki's work?"

"What?"

"Are you not familiar with it?" Kujibayashi-kun asked. "Then what preexisting works are you using as references for your thesis?"

"Huh...? You mean somebody researched the same topic? It's simply what I felt after reading *Kokoro,* so I wanted to write why..."

"Then you would be merely writing your thoughts on the book. A work that does not rely on preexisting research cannot qualify as a thesis."

Kujibayashi-kun's blunt statement made Kurose-san visibly anxious. Meanwhile, what I was anxious about was my and Runa's folly under the table coming to light.

"B-But I'm just a student," Kurose-san countered. "I'm not aiming for graduate school, and I don't have the smarts for it either... I could never go toe-to-toe with a scholar who has published their research... If you look hard enough, everything's been done by somebody before, so how can someone even write a thesis?"

"Not quite," Kujibayashi-kun replied firmly.

Runa's big toe was drawing a circle on my thigh, near my crotch. It was turning me on, and I had to make an effort to keep my arousal in check.

"There is meaning in you writing it," Kujibayashi-kun went on. "No two people are the same in this world, so even if you were to write about the same topic and use the same references as another, your thesis and theirs shall differ in both your thought processes and the conclusions."

At that, Kurose-san hung her head again. “I’ll give it a read. Ishihara Chiaki-san, was it...?”

“He is the only author that comes to my mind, but there may be others I am unaware of. Allow me to reiterate that I am no expert on Soseki.”

Looking up, I saw that Runa was still staring at me with an impish smile.

Why are you so lewd?! We’re with two other people!

While I noticed Kurose-san lower her head silently in the corner of my vision, I grew horny as I let Runa, with her bewitching smile, walk all over me.

***

Our meetup came to an end, and we split up at the ticket gates at the station. That said, only Kujibayashi-kun was leaving as the rest of us would be heading in the same direction.

“What did you think of him?” I asked hesitantly in the mildly crowded train.

“Well...” Kurose-san seemed a bit down. It might have had something to do with the fact she’d only had two beers today, which was unusual for her. “That’s a Houo student for you, I guess... I thought the same thing last time too... I couldn’t even keep up with him...”

“That’s not true,” I replied in a hurry. “He doesn’t normally talk about complicated stuff like that—he talks about dumb stuff all the time! Like he’ll say how some place serves great ramen, or how he accidentally said ‘with extreme garlic’ and got even more garlic in his food than if he’d said ‘with extra garlic’ like normal.”

I didn’t think that would be enough to get the point across, but those really were the kinds of things he and I usually talked about. I didn’t know why he kept doing this in front of Kurose-san. Okay, I *did* know why, and the reason was exactly what frustrated me.

Even I wouldn’t have become friends with him if he’d talked about Mori Ogai for two hours the first time we’d met.

“Anyway, thanks for today, you two. See you later,” Kurose-san

said in low spirits.

We parted at Station A. We'd normally be getting off at the same station, but I got off partway to walk Runa home.

Things were still noisy at this hour by the station, and there were drunken people hanging about. I took Runa's hand.

"So, Runa, about what you did there..." I began with a forced smile on my face.

She looked at me with an impish grin—the same expression as earlier. "Did it feel good?" she asked.

I went silent out of embarrassment, at which point Runa nudged me on the shoulder with her forehead.

"You were getting jealous, so... I just showed you, in front of them, that you're my number one, you know?"

She looked at me with upturned eyes, which made me remember the sensation of her toes moving seductively across my thighs.

"Runa..."

I recalled when we'd gone to look at cherry blossoms at the end of our second year of high school. That day, we'd come across a love hotel near Station A. If my memory served correctly, a "rest" had been about ten thousand yen. I still thought that price was expensive, and it might've cost even more now, but even so, it wasn't beyond my means these days.

But all this time, the right mood to invite each other to do that sort of thing had never come up. It wasn't in the culture of our relationship, if you will. I didn't know how to broach the subject.

I wanted to do it. But I couldn't say it. And the reason was because I'd said back in the day that I'd wait until Runa wanted to do it, and I didn't have the self-confidence to express my desires if it meant going back on that promise.

It was just so pathetic. Had we done it in Okinawa, maybe things would've been different now. The thought of it filled me with regret for that missed opportunity.

I couldn't be one to talk about Kujibayashi-kun, considering what I was still like.

In the meantime, we put the shopping district farther and farther behind us and made it to a residential area where no one was

walking around.

It seemed I'd once again have to disperse the heat lingering within me from the earlier episode all by myself. Resigning myself to that fate, I made small talk.

"How's Kitty-san these days?"

"What? Oh..." Runa looked taken by surprise at first, then smiled to keep up appearances. "She's back to normal for now. Though she still cries every time I call her, so she's far from making a full recovery..." She began to stare at the asphalt at her feet. "What a jerk, seriously. Why are guys like this?"

The frustration in her tone gave me a start. For a moment, I thought she was talking about me.

"If he wasn't happy with something, he should've said so," Runa went on. "Why couldn't he at least give her *some* reason he wanted to break up? Instead, he just went and left without a word and blocked her on LINE. Not a shred of consideration for someone he loved once."

"Yeah..."

What she had followed that up with clearly hadn't been about me, so I just nodded stiffly.

"Kitty seems to still miss him, but I'm totally pissed at him. I'm still mad about it every day," Runa said in a low tone.

The pure anger in her voice was palpable. This must've been because it concerned a family member—and her beloved older sister, of all people. When we passed a streetlight and it illuminated her face, she looked angrier than I'd ever seen her since high school. The time that came to mind was Valentine's Day in our second year there, when she'd wrongfully assumed that Kurose-san had given me chocolate. She really did only get angry when her family was involved.

"I wonder why her boyfriend left her..." Runa uttered. "Kitty could move on if she at least knew that. And as much as I want to give him a piece of my mind in her place, I don't even know where he is."

"Yeah... If he had a job, we could've tried looking for him there at least... It would probably be impossible to find him unless we hired a detective or something."

I only said that as a generic, noncommittal reply. Runa, however, froze in place, as if struck by a revelation.

She looked at me and said, “That’s it!”

“What?!”

As we stood there in the dark, Runa said, with fire in her eyes, “Thanks, Ryuto! I’ll do whatever it takes to find Kitty’s boyfriend!”

Chapter 2.5: A Private Conversation Between Akari-chan and Mia

In a fashion mall in Tokyo, two girls sat at a table across from each other in a café.

After spending some time in silence, one of them looked up.

"Akari-chan."

The voice made the other girl look up too. "Yeah?"

"So what are you going to do? Will you have the baby?"

Akari-chan hung her head again, and the silence returned.

There was a photo on the table along with the girls' drinks. The image was grainy and mostly dark, but in the center was a whitish, comma-shaped object.

"I will," replied Akari-chan without looking up. "What other option is there, now that I've seen this?" Her eyes were on the image, and she was visibly deep in thought. "When they told me where its heart is...it kinda got to me... Like, when I think that it's already a human being, I..." At that point, Akari-chan cast her eyes downward and covered her mouth, as if overcome with emotion. "I'm nervous about my future with Yusuke, and I'm scared to death of giving birth...but I can't make this little thing disappear..."

"I see."

The other girl—Kurose Maria, or Mia, as Akari called her—smiled. Her handbag had been sandwiched between her and the back of her chair—she pulled a handkerchief out of it and passed it to Akari-chan.

"Thanks..." Akari-chan groaned. She held the fabric to her eyes.

"Have you guys told your parents yet?"

"Not yet... I don't think mine will be a problem, but Yusuke said

his folks are strict, so they'll probably give him hell... Still, we've agreed to go on our next day off. Putting it off won't stop the baby from growing..."

Akari-chan lowered the handkerchief from her face and looked at her still-flat stomach.

"It's amazing, though. Until recently, I never imagined that you'd be the first of my friends to get married," Mia said with a smile.

Akari-chan looked up at that. Her eyes were red. "Me neither. I was dead sure it would be Runy." She smiled too, then clapped as if to dispel the mood. "By the way, what about you? Any guys in your life?"

Mia smiled uncomfortably. "No, not in mine... Actually, something did happen, just before the summer."

"Wait, what?! That's the first I'm hearing about it!"

"Well yeah, we haven't seen each other in a while... But really, it's not even worth mentioning."

"C'mon, tell me!"

Seeing Akari-chan's excitement, Mia gave in. "There was a guy I liked," she began, reluctantly, "but I couldn't date him."

"What do you mean you couldn't date him?! Wait... Was he having an affair?!"

"H-Hey, cut it out!" said Mia, minding the people in the café. "We didn't do anything, and yes, he had a wife and child. That's why I gave up."

"So he tricked you?! He approached you acting like he was single?!"

"No, he was open about it from the start. It was just me being stupid." Mia weakly laughed at herself.

"That's not true," Akari-chan replied firmly. "You're the smartest girl among my friends."

Her words made a slightly happy smile appear on Mia's face. "Thanks."

"I'm serious. I'm pretty sure you'd never get pregnant by accident like me."

Mia hung her head with a faint smile. "I'm jealous of you, though." A look of yearning appeared on her face. "I think, deep

down...I wanted an accident like that to happen." She spoke haltingly as Akari-chan looked on. "Even if it was an accident, or a mistake... Even if he had a wife and child...I wanted him to make love to me anyway." Knowing that her words would shock Akari-chan, Mia kept her out of her field of vision. "That's my idea of love."

Concern appeared on Akari-chan's face as her friend smiled sadly. "Mia..." Then, she forced a cheerful expression. "So, is there anyone else? Even just a friend!"

"Well..."

After thinking for a moment, Mia said, with reluctance, "I wouldn't call him a friend, but there's a guy I've had two dinners with."

"What?! Who is it?! Where's he from?!"

Mia smiled awkwardly. "Kashima-kun set me up with his friend from his university. The second time we met was just the other day—we went out to eat together with Kashima-kun and Runa, as four."

"Wow, that's crazy! So he's a Houo guy."

"Yeah..."

"So, is he hot?"

"He's...not bad, I guess..."

"Hey, that's great! So when are you guys going on a date next?"

"Well... That's probably not happening."

"What? Why?"

"He doesn't seem very interested in me, you could say... Both times we met, we only talked about our majors... I can't really tell what kind of person he is."

Akari-chan looked surprised at that. "Is it even possible for a guy to *not* be into you?! That's as rare as a Japanese person who doesn't like karaage!"

"Yeah, well... Look at our LINE chat."

Mia took out her phone and held it out to Akari-chan. The latter looked astonished after she stared at the screen for a moment.

"Wait, is this for real?!"

"It is."

"Wow..."

Akari-chan grimaced as if she were looking at some pest. "Yeah,

you'd do well to steer clear of this one." Then, her expression switched to one of puzzlement. "How did Kashima-kun become friends with someone like this? He's really nice, and his friends from high school are nice too, even if they look plain. And Yusuke—I didn't know it until we started dating, but he actually has a pretty good sense of humor. Nikki says Nishina-kun is fun to talk to as well."

Mia nodded in clear agreement. "Yeah... So there's probably *something* good about him..." She cocked her head in confusion as he took her phone back. Its screen had just gone dark. "I just don't know what it is yet..."

Chapter 3

October came, and it grew too cold for short sleeves. The second semester at my university was in full swing, and I was back to juggling my classes and work.

One Sunday evening, Runa and I took the train to an unfamiliar city.

"Hey, I found Kitty's boyfriend! Or rather, the detective did! Said he does delivery for a Chinese restaurant his relatives run in Atsugi!"

Runa had called and told me about that the other day.

"I'm not gonna stop until I get to tell him to tell Kitty why he broke up with her, apologize, and thank her for everything. I want him to say things that'll let her move on. She cared for him so much."

"Have you told her that you know where he is?"

"No. I did it on my own, and considering the current state of things, it might be better if she never finds out."

"Okay..."

"I'll go have a word with him."

"What?!"

"Maria said I shouldn't hire a detective without Kitty's approval, and going to see her boyfriend might even be dangerous... But I just can't let the matter slide. I have things I need to say on Kitty's behalf."

"So you've made up your mind."

"Yeah. That's why I spent so much to hire a detective. It would be a waste not to go."

"Okay. Then I'll come with you."

"What?! You will?"

"Well, yeah, I'm worried about you."

"Ryuto... Thank you..."

It took nerves of steel to dump a girl who'd been taking care of you for three years so easily, and that was the kind of guy we were dealing with here.

He might get in a frenzy even if I were present. The thought of it was scary, but it was better than letting Runa go alone and worrying about it. That was why I'd decided to go with her.

Kitty-san's boyfriend's name was Hanada Raion. He was twenty-three years old.

Runa had heard from Kitty-san that he was from Atsugi. Between that and the fact that he'd posted his primary and middle schools on social media, it had been relatively easy for a professional to find him. That'd meant that the detective's fee had ended up being lower than the initial estimate too.

While we were on the train, Runa told me what the detective had reported to her.

Raion-san's parents had gotten divorced during his childhood, and his father had died right after. After he'd graduated from high school, his mother had remarried and had another child. She was now living with her new family.

Raion-san was currently staying with his uncle on his mother's side. Said uncle managed a no-frills Chinese restaurant he'd inherited from his parents. Raion-san was helping out there at the moment, primarily doing deliveries.

"Sounds like he's been through some family trouble..." I said as we headed to the Chinese place.

"That doesn't excuse throwing away your girlfriend like a worn sock," Runa replied firmly. Her eyes were pointed straight ahead.

She clearly couldn't put up with someone hurting her beloved older sister.

"She's gotten depressed when her boyfriends dumped her before, sure...but this was the first time she got so out of hand like that. I mean, she even tried to jump from the balcony." Runa bit her lip—that last part must've been the most shocking part of it to her. "She must've really trusted her boyfriend a lot. And he betrayed that. That's what the most unforgivable part of all this is to me. She loved

him and was so thoughtful...”

Even back when we had been in high school, Runa had displayed extraordinary initiative when it came to those close to her, such as when she’d stopped Sekiya-san after she’d run into him on the street. At that time, she had asked him to get back together with Yamana-san.

I hadn’t expected her to actually hire a detective to help her sister, but since the idea had come from me and we were already on our way to where the detective told us to go, I had no choice but to prepare myself for what might come.

We arrived at sunset.

The Chinese restaurant was about twenty minutes from the station on foot. It was located on a shopping street in a residential area. Of all the stores and restaurants around us, only the convenience stores and realtors’ offices seemed to have some life in them.

Our destination, the restaurant, looked like the oldest place around. The curtain at the entrance had “Rairaiken” written on it in faded red, and the restaurant’s crude, bulky sliding door was made out of frosted glass. Appearance-wise, this was the most stereotypical cheap Chinese restaurant you could think of. It was the kind you’d expect to see in a soap opera.

We waited next to a utility pole near the building for a while. Eventually, a moped came from the direction of the main road and stopped near the restaurant. With its age-worn silver box hanging off the back, it was the sort of moped you’d also probably find in popular retro soap operas.

A slim man got off and proceeded into the restaurant without removing his helmet.

I had been spacing out, but Runa pulled my arm.

“That’s it! That’s him! Did you notice?!” she asked.

“What?!”

“That’s Kitty’s boyfriend! He looks like the photo!”

“Oh, uh, okay...”

I was surprised she’d managed to identify him despite the

helmet.

After that, our suspect made a few round trips on his moped.

"That should be the last delivery," Runa said when he left again at 7:18. "Their website says they're open until eight."

"All right..."

When the moped returned after 8 p.m., Runa approached it. I nervously followed her.

"Excuse me!" Runa called out in a tone that wasn't very friendly.

The man in the helmet dismounted from his bike. "Yes?"

"I'm Shirakawa Kitty's sister."

The man went silent. I couldn't tell what kind of face he was making through his helmet, but evidently, he was shaken up by Runa's self-introduction.

"I want to talk to you about my sister," she added.

He didn't say anything for a bit, but eventually, he looked around and said, "Could you wait thirty minutes or so?"

"Sure. You know the family restaurant to the left over there on the main road? I'll wait there."

"Okay."

"You'd better show up, or I'll come here again," Runa said threateningly, shooting the helmeted man a glare.

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He came to the appointed place thirty minutes later, as promised.

It was dinnertime, and Runa and I were hungry, so we'd been having something to eat. Raion-san approached our table at just the right time, as though he'd been waiting for us to finish our meals.

Without a word, he nodded in greeting and sat down. Runa and I had been sitting at a four-person table with bench seats. She and I sat on one side, and Raion-san sat across from us toward the middle of the bench.

He was slim and looked to be slightly shorter than me. His hairstyle was a mushroom cut—one I saw people with pretty often. However, his hair had grown out so much that it had started covering his eyes, which made me think Kitty-san had been the last

one to work on it. Perhaps it was the hairstyle that made him look much younger than me.

Between all that and his fair, even, and androgynous-looking face, he seemed feeble. His oversized sweatshirt, black pants, and sneakers made him look like a completely ordinary young guy. Not that I wore anything that made me stand out either.

Since he claimed to be a musician and had had his girlfriend provide for him, I'd just assumed he'd be gaudy, but judging by how awkwardly silent he was being, he seemed to be more sensitive and introverted than the average person.

"I'm Shirakawa Kitty's younger sister, Shirakawa Runa. And this is my boyfriend..."

"I'm Kashima Ryuto."

Once we finished introducing ourselves, the man nodded weakly.

"I'm Hanada Raion," he said.

Runa shot him a glare. "You can grab a drink if you like in the self-service area. I'll pay."

Raion-san shook his head. "No thanks."

"Do you wanna order something else, then?"

"Just water. I don't have much money."

Runa sighed. "I'll pay, so at least get something to drink."

"Thank you..."

Raion-san left the table and returned with a cup of some kind of green juice that resembled aojiru. I didn't know the self-service area had anything like it.

"What is that?" I asked, unable to contain my curiosity.

Raion-san glanced at me. "It's half cola, half melon soda. I've always liked this stuff."

"Oh, I see..."

I recalled having tried it at one point. Still, it worried me that he'd gone for that despite the serious mood and that he wasn't even paying for it himself. Maybe he was lacking in common sense.

Once he sat down and took a sip from his drink, Runa got to the point. "Why did you dump Kitty?"

Raion-san looked taken aback. "I-I didn't!" he said in a fluster. Then, noticing Runa's unrelenting gaze, he slowly lowered his eyes.

“It’s just...I felt like being in that place was ruining me...”

“Ruining you? In what way?”

As Runa stared at him, Raion-san hung his head like a child being scolded. “I’m turning twenty-four this year. Some of my old classmates are already married or even have children, and yet here I am, still stuck, being a self-proclaimed singer-songwriter... I knew that I couldn’t go on like that forever.”

So he *had* been aware of it.

“But Kitty-chan supported my dream... She always rooted for me and said I could do it... She had to be on her feet at work all day and always came back exhausted, but she still showed concern for me and took care of me... Even though I didn’t do anything... I just felt bad about it.”



"And so you ran away from Kitty?" Runa asked.

"'Ran away'..." Sadness appeared on Raion-san's face. "Yeah, I guess that's what I did." Runa opened her mouth to speak, but before she got the chance, he added, "But I'm going to come back for her!"

"Come back? When?" Runa asked with a stern look on her face.

Raion-san lowered his eyes. "After I can do it for three months..." he said. "I've never held a job for three months before... I wanted to mature and go back to her as the kind of man who can protect her."

"Why couldn't you say all that to Kitty before leaving? You even blocked her on LINE... She thinks you dumped her."

Raion-san grimaced in pain. "It was the only way. If I told her that much, she'd say I don't need to change... And then I'd totally take advantage of her kindness again, and nothing would change in my life. I just know it."

Recalling how Kitty-san had been and the things she'd said, I suspected that he was right.

"I've been going through this pathetic cycle so many times as Kitty-chan watched—I'd start a job, she would support me, but the job wouldn't suit me and I'd quit right away... I'm way past the point of 'third time's the charm,' and if I failed at a job again, I'd just be disappointing her even more. At this point, nothing I can say on the matter can carry any weight... I realized I needed to actually last long enough at some job before I had the right to talk to her again."

Raion-san had been talking haltingly while keeping his eyes low, but at this point, he raised his head and looked at me and Runa in turn.

"I'm working at my uncle's restaurant at the moment... It's that Chinese place you saw earlier. For now, I'm just a part-timer doing deliveries, but both of my cousins—my uncle's daughters—are working in Tokyo. They have zero interest in taking over the store. So my uncle said that if I show that I'm serious about my work, he'd teach me how to cook the things he serves at the restaurant so I can take over. I *am* a licensed chef, so... Of course, you might be wondering why I aspired to be a singer and songwriter despite that... It was my mother who told me to go to cooking school, but

music has always been my hobby, so I couldn't give up on it... Sorry, I know I'm not a good talker... Did all that make sense?"

"More or less," I replied.

And besides, I could kind of see that he wasn't a bad person. He might even have been as pure as a child—enough so that he'd get himself an eccentric drink despite the situation.

Anger gradually dissipated from Runa's face too—perhaps she was coming to the same conclusion. Her expression was replaced with one not unlike a mother worrying about her child.

"How long have you been working there now?" she asked.

"I started right after leaving Kitty-chan's place, so...a month and a half? I'm halfway to my goal."

"Do you think you'll be able to keep it up for another month and a half?" I asked, noting inwardly that it would still be a problem if he couldn't keep the job after getting to the three-month mark.

Raion-san nodded. "It's hard for me to deal with it when people get angry at me, so I'd always get right out of there when my coworkers and superiors scolded me... My uncle and aunt are real nice, though... I don't have much common sense when it comes to the world of adults, so I might act rude sometimes, and my uncle and aunt help me with that. They tell me what people might think if I do this or that and what I should do instead. I'm really grateful to them."

For the first time, something resembling a smile appeared on his face. I could tell he was on good terms with his uncle and aunt.

Runa was relentless, however. "What if Kitty gets a new boyfriend before those three months are up?"

Raion-san's expression darkened again. "When I left, I prepared myself for the possibility that I'd never see her again... I'd accept that. It would be the result of my own actions."

So he understands that much, huh. Looks like he really isn't as hopeless as I'd imagined him to be.

"But even so, I couldn't let things go on as they were," he added. "This was the only way I could change. Kitty-chan was just too nice, and while I was staying in that apartment, I couldn't think of the future at all."

Being a fellow guy and being able to recall Kitty-san's voluptuous, hoodie-clad figure, I could really understand how Raion-san felt. Not that I could say as much in front of Runa.

"So...you've given up on singing and writing songs?" I asked.

The Chinese place looked fairly busy, so if he became serious about inheriting it, he probably wouldn't have much time to make music.

Raion-san looked down a little. "I'll give up on it once things go into full swing at work. But before then, I want to make a song. I'll put my everything into it—and sing it when I go back to Kitty-chan."

"Have you written it already?" I asked.

"I have the melody down...but I'm having a really hard time with the lyrics." Raion-san smiled in self-deprecation. "As you might've already noticed, I'm really bad at telling people my thoughts and feelings. I aspired to be a singer and songwriter because I hoped to convey those things through songs...but when it comes to Kitty-chan, there're too many things I want to say to her, so I'm struggling to put all of them into the lyrics..."

"You're not bad at saying what you think and feel, Hanada-san," said Runa. "I've more or less understood everything you've been saying."

"I think that's because you asked me questions. When I need to say things without anyone asking? That's really hard."

His reply made me realize something—the difficulty of saying things without being asked was something I had been dealing with in regard to Runa myself lately.

"But if you manage to keep working for three months, please go see Kitty. Don't put it off any longer at that point," said Runa with a pleading look. "It hurt her so much, since you left without saying anything..."

A pained look appeared on Raion-san's face. "I'm sorry about that... But I have enough on my plate every day these days." He went silent for a moment. Then, he continued. "I'm giving proper thought to my future with Kitty-chan," he said, gazing at the table with earnest eyes. "If I take over that restaurant, it would be great if she could help out with things there like my aunt does now. But if

she wants to keep working as a beautician, there're a lot of vacant commercial spaces around here, so she could open a beauty salon nearby. Though I'd have to earn the money for that through the restaurant."

I hadn't expected him to be thinking that far ahead, so I couldn't think of what to say in response. I could tell from the expression on Runa's face that the same was true for her.

"I left without saying any of this to Kitty-chan because... Well, I don't have confidence in myself yet."

What he said gave me a start—I'd been thinking along the same lines myself recently.

"So once I've worked the same job for three months, I'll have been reborn. And at that point, I want to put all my feelings in a song and sing it to her." Raion-san spoke in a way that could even be described as honest to a fault as Runa and I listened intently. "Kitty-chan deserves to become happier than anyone. She's such a good woman. I thought that I was different from her exes, that I was someone who'd actually make her happy... But objectively speaking, I was just some guy she was being a provider for... Every time I thought about how I'm inferior to those guys who had jobs, I felt so miserable..."

Again, his words gave me a start. To see yourself as being different from your girlfriend's exes—that had been one of the first things I'd done when I'd started dating Runa.

"But I've never achieved anything, so there was nothing I could say... All I could do was leave without a word."

"I understand how you feel now," Runa said.

"Is it hard to write lyrics?" I asked.

"Well... As I said earlier, I've always been better at coming up with the instrumentals than the lyrics. And at the moment, I'm working from morning to night. I'm exhausted by the end of the day, so every evening, I just chill and go to bed... Maybe I'd be more motivated if there was someone I could ask for advice, though."

"I see..." Runa replied with chagrin. It must've been frustrating since she wanted him to hurry up and propose to Kitty-san.

As for me, I was frustrated for my own reasons.

"I thought that I was different from her exes."

Despite thinking that way, Raion-san hadn't been able to give concrete form to that feeling and had ended up leaving Kitty-san and hurting her. It somewhat reminded me of my own situation.

"I'm different from her exes."

I'd thought that myself four years ago when Runa had brought me to her room. And in order to prove it with my actions, I'd decided not to take Runa up on her offer to have sex. I'd committed myself to thoroughly respecting Runa's wishes when it came to our physical relationship.

But as a result, I was suffering now.

I wanted to have sex with her, but I didn't know how to make it happen. I was scared to just say something. What if doing so would be trampling all over her feelings? And if an accident happened, I wasn't in a position where I could take responsibility right now. Was it really okay for someone in my situation to ask her to have sex?

These thoughts kept swirling in my head. I was in anguish, and in the end, it left me unable to do anything.

Before I knew it, I said, "Let's write those lyrics. I'll help, if you want."

Maybe I thought that by helping Raion-san, I'd be helping myself too.

"What?"

"Ryuto...?"

Raion-san and Runa looked at me with astonishment in their eyes.

"I may not look like it, but I work at a publishing company in their editing department," I said. "I'm just a part-timer doing mostly menial tasks...but as someone who watches editors work, I might be able to give you some advice."

I was more or less bluffing since I barely got involved in the actual editing process at all, but I wanted to give Raion-san some peace of mind.

My own enthusiasm surprised me. But this matter concerned me too. After all...

"When I need to say things without anyone asking? That's really

hard.”

“I left without saying any of this to Kitty-chan because... Well, I don’t have confidence in myself yet.”

“I thought that I was different from her exes.”

I had these kinds of feelings too. That was why I wanted Raion-san to overcome these obstacles and become the kind of man who could return to Kitty-san and propose to her. As a guy in the same situation, I wanted it to work out for him.

“Really...? Thank you so much! You’re a huge help!” said Raion-san. It was like a savior had appeared before him.

I nodded enthusiastically.

There was no reason to believe we’d succeed. However...

“I’d say you’d make a good editor.”

Fujinami-san said that to me on a daily basis, like some sort of magic spell. Maybe it was giving me some unfounded confidence.

“I just want you to write the best song you can and keep your head high when you go to Kitty-san in a month and a half,” I said.

“Thank you! Let’s do our best!” Raion-san said with earnestness in his eyes. He bowed deeply.

***

We’d left the family restaurant and were walking to where we’d be parting ways.

“By the way, how did you know where I was?” asked Raion-san all of a sudden. “I don’t think I ever gave Kitty-chan the name of my uncle’s restaurant.”

Runa and I exchanged glances and desperately put some impromptu acting skills to work.

“A-A friend of mine lives in this area and I saw you by chance when I came to visit her!” Runa said.

“Ah, yeah, I remember you mentioning that. And you knew what Raion-san looked like because Kitty-san showed you photos of him, right?” I added.

“E-Exactly!”

Raion-san’s eyes opened wide—I hadn’t noticed his double

eyelids until then. “Wow, that’s an amazing coincidence,” he said.

The fact that he didn’t seem to be doubting us in the slightest revealed that he really was a pure and sincere guy. Before meeting him, I’d been wondering why Kitty-san had been providing for such a deadbeat, but now, I could see that there were some good things about him too.

Kitty-san also gave off a somewhat childlike and innocent vibe, so maybe they were a good match.

“Well, thanks for spotting me earlier. I’ll go get started on those lyrics right away,” said Raion-san. He turned the corner, heading for the shopping district.

Runa and I headed for the station, walking in silence for a while.

“I’m glad Raion-san turned out to be a better person than we thought.”

“I’m happy we learned that Kitty-san wasn’t thoughtlessly dumped.”

I kept wondering how I should start the conversation here, but I came to the conclusion that it was best to wait for Runa to speak first.

When I’d checked the time just before we’d left the family restaurant, it had been half past nine. The last train of the day had yet to leave. It might have been impossible for me to walk Runa home, but she could take a taxi.

Since we’d just had dinner, there was nothing else to do in this area. All that was left for us to do was to take a train and cross Tokyo again. Even if we took one now, it would probably be tomorrow by the time we’d get home. And Runa had work in the morning.

So, leaving this area was the only option. That was the only conclusion I came to, no matter how much I thought about it.

I wondered what was on Runa’s mind as she walked silently next to me. And just as I thought that, she turned toward me and our eyes met.

“Thanks, Ryuto,” she said with a gentle smile. “I’m glad you were there with me.” The look on her face then darkened somewhat.

“That’s how I’ve always felt these past four years.” She faced forward and nodded as if ascertaining her feelings. “I’m fortunate just to have you by my side, and I know I should be grateful for it. At least, I used to think that way.”

“Runa...?”

I couldn’t tell where she was going with this.

Runa smiled at me reassuringly. “I know very well by now what kind of person you are. And that there won’t be any surprises at this point.” Her face stiffened when she said that second part, but she maintained her smile and continued. “But I still love you and want to be with you forever.”

I was happy to hear that.

“At first, I thought that if one of us wanted the other to do something, they should just say it. But if I wanted you to surprise me and simply asked you to do that, whatever you did as a result wouldn’t be a surprise at all at that point, would it?”

“I guess not...”

“In soap operas, they make guys say a lot of stuff that girls wanna hear from their boyfriends...but it doesn’t work so easily in the real world.”

“Wait, Runa, did I do something...?” I asked.

Or was there something I *hadn’t* done? This was making me nervous.

Runa looked surprised and shook her head. “Oh, no, sorry. I guess that was all just me talking to myself. To convince myself and all. I’m bad at thinking, so I needed to sort out the stuff in my head.” She smiled at me considerately. “Let’s just say that I’m grateful.”

We were already right next to the station.

***

Several days after we’d gone and talked to Raion-san, I still hadn’t figured out what Runa had meant that day.

It wasn’t like we’d had a fight or things had gotten awkward. We’d talked normally during the long train ride home. I’d just been

left wondering what that comment of hers had meant as I went about my everyday life. At times like these, I wished that I could ask Sekiya-san for advice, but he wouldn't be back until spring break. And this wasn't something that warranted me calling or messaging him.

It then occurred to me that I didn't have anyone else I could talk to about Runa. If anything, it was more often that people talked to *me* about the girls in their lives than the other way around—like how Icchi had called me while I was in Okinawa.

The only friends I had were passive guys like me, and within my circle of friends, I was often seen as someone who could give advice because I'd been in a relationship for a long time.

The least proactive guy among them—pretty much final-boss-tier—was Kujibayashi-kun.

"How have things been going with Kurose-san since then?"

One day, we were having lunch at the usual cafeteria that served delicious pork cutlet curry. Kujibayashi-kun was sitting across the table from me, and I decided to bring up that topic. I was sure he himself wasn't looking for relationship advice, so this was purely just me being a busybody.

Having said that, I was the one who'd set him up with Kurose-san, and neither of them was used to dealing with the opposite sex. It just felt like a good idea to keep an eye on how things were going between them. Since I knew both of them well and they'd gotten to the point where they'd talked a few times, I didn't want them to simply drift apart without ever realizing each other's good sides.

I was also convinced that them drifting apart was guaranteed if I stopped getting involved.

"What do you mean?" asked Kujibayashi-kun. His hand that held a bite of pork cutlet curry halted, and there was a glint of wariness in his eyes behind his glasses.

"Have you guys been talking on LINE?"

"Upon my arrival home, I received a message of gratitude from her and sent a reply."

"Okay."

Maybe everything was fine, then. But remembering how Kujibayashi-kun had been at that izakaya, I suddenly got worried.

"Hey, if it's okay with you, would you mind showing me your LINE chat with her?" I asked.

"If you wish."

Kujibayashi-kun took his phone out of his pocket, navigated to their conversation, and handed me the phone.

Their latest messages were displayed on the screen. They were dated the day after we'd gone out to eat together.

Maria: Thanks for making the time for me yesterday. I learned a lot. I have to start studying as hard as you do.
Kujibayashi Haruku: If you feel that you "have to" study, then perhaps you ought not to. University is not part of mandatory education.
Maria: That's certainly true...

I couldn't believe my eyes.

"What, uh... What *is* this, Kujibayashi-kun?!"

"Hm?"

"Why would you say something like that?!"

Or rather, how can you even say something like that to a girl you like?!

"Do you hate her?!" I added.

Kujibayashi-kun looked confused. "Why would one even reply to someone they hate?"

"Yeah, no," I said. "She's not seeing things the same way you are here!"

Kurose-san's reply was pretty clearly projecting her self-reproach and irritation. Kujibayashi-kun was a Japanese literature major and didn't have problems when it came to reading comprehension—how couldn't he see what was going on here?

"Don't tell me you plan to just leave things like this," I said

anxiously.

Even if it *had* already been almost a month since that exchange.

"What is there to continue? Did she not end the conversation?"

"Well, yeah, her ending it was the only option after what you said."

Not wanting to be cornered with more sound but hurtful arguments, Kurose-san had shut both the conversation and her heart.

"Why so?" he asked. "She merely feels *compelled* to study because she has yet to encounter the kind of problem that would make her *want* to study. If she wished for my help in searching for it, I would not object to putting in the effort. Her ending the conversation there was but her indolence and naught else."

I couldn't immediately come up with a reply. I more or less understood what Kujibayashi-kun was trying to say, and academically speaking, he was probably right. But personal relationships between ordinary people didn't work that way.

And even if that was what he had wanted to say, his way of expressing it had been just too inept.

"What kind of relationship do you want to have with Kurose-san? Do you want to be a teacher and a student? Or do you want to be a couple?"

Kujibayashi-kun pursed his lips and went silent.

"If you have even the slightest desire to become better friends with her, or more than friends, then you should say something to smooth things over. At this rate, she'll never message you again," I explained.

Kujibayashi-kun hung his head and looked at the chat on his phone screen.

"Now that you mention it, I cannot deny that I was inconsiderate in my wording. Education is all I have, and perhaps the thought of being able to help her by applying my strengths made me go too far."

As his friend, I knew that he was a good person, and I could understand how he felt. He was just way too socially awkward.

"What am I to send her after all this time?" he asked.

"Huh? Hm, well... It's been a while, so it's probably better not to touch on what you were talking about before... Bring up a new topic and say 'How are things recently?' or something..."

"Yours truly does not say things of that sort."

"I guess not..."

Sure, I didn't have time to come up with a good example, but that suggestion really was terrible.

"Anyway, come up with something yourself," I said. "It can be anything, as long as it's something you guys can talk about for a while."

Kujibayashi-kun looked like he'd just been confronted with the most difficult problem in his life.

"Also, if she sends something that you can't figure out how to reply to immediately, you can send her a sticker to buy time."

I'd learned that technique from Runa. Admittedly, when I'd started going to university, our digital communication had switched over to Instagram DMs, so I'd been away from LINE culture for a while. But back in high school, Runa had frequently used Mabbit stickers. I'd bought them too and used them sometimes, which Runa had liked. It made me nostalgic to remember that.

"Kurose-san often uses Chiikyawa stickers."

In high school, Kurose-san and I had used LINE for online messaging, and we'd eventually blocked each other. After becoming friends again, we were using LINE once more. These days, we mainly talked about work, but occasionally she'd send me stickers of Chiikyawa.

Chiikyawa was a character that had popped up on social media a few years ago. There had been a popular manga about the heroics of these cute, animal-inspired characters that just made you want to protect them. Recently, its popularity had grown, and the general public had embraced the franchise.

"Do you have any stickers?" I asked.

"There is a brown bear, a white rabbit, a human with a round, white face, a human with disheveled golden hair..."

"Those are all free default ones!"

I didn't know what those characters even were.

"Anyway, why not buy some in this case? Kurose-san might like it if she sees you use the same stickers as her."

Judging by the look on Kujibayashi-kun's face, it was clear as day that he didn't like the idea.

"Doth thou imply I purchase this 'Chiikyawa,' perchance?"

"Well, yeah, that's not too much to ask, is it...?"

I could tell how he felt, though. When I'd bought those Mabbit stickers, I too had felt psychologically averse to the idea, like I'd been losing to something.

"If she uses those stickers, she probably likes the character," I reasoned. "And if you're going to buy stickers anyway, she'll probably like those more than others."

Kujibayashi-kun began doing something on his phone in silence.

I looked past him and out the window. This cafeteria was linked to the consumers' co-op on the first floor, and we could see it through the window in the well of the building.

A group of guys and girls—probably commerce or economics majors, and very much the types that led satisfying lives—were having a friendly conversation at a table. If people like them saw us, they might find our conversation incredibly primitive.

Look at me, dissing myself again...

"150 yen..." uttered Kujibayashi-kun. He must've been looking at LINE's coin purchase screen. "With 150 yen, I could print fifteen pages of a book from a library..."

"At that point, why not borrow the book and use a printer at home? Should save you some money."

"Some important books in libraries are not available for borrowing."

"Oh..."

Evidently, I wasn't serious enough about my studies since I didn't even know that. If I suggested that he take pictures with his phone, he'd probably find some counterargument to that too, so I didn't even mention it.

Kujibayashi-kun had gone to a prestigious private school that combined middle and high school classes, so his family must've been richer than mine. But he was rather thrifty nonetheless, which may

have had something to do with his apparent life plan—he was a university student living with his parents and not having any part-time jobs. He planned to go to graduate school and do the same thing then.

"Well, I won't force you... I'm just saying that's one way to handle the situation when you're not confident that you can say the right things."

I finished my meal and was about to get up with my tray, but...

"Kashima-dono," Kujibayashi-kun said quietly as he stared at his phone. "How am I to employ this 'Chiikyawa' in a conversation...?"

***

I showed Kujibayashi-kun my old LINE chats with Runa, demonstrating the use of stickers in real conversation. Once we parted ways, I went about my day, going to my classes and work. After I came home, I got a message from Raion-san.

Raion: I finished the lyrics for the intro. Would you mind giving it a listen and letting me know what you think?

It was followed by a link to a video of him. In the video, he sat on a chair in a tatami room—probably at his uncle's place—and played a guitar while singing.

"In my dreams... I call your name...over and over..." His eyes were lowered toward the guitar as he sang in a voice filled with emotion. "I'll never...let go again... Don't wanna let go...ever..."

Whenever I heard guys sing self-written love songs such as this one, I always had to wonder how much of it came from the heart.

Sure, if someone gave me a questionnaire that read "I don't want to ever let go of my girlfriend" and presented the choices of "Yes," "No," and "Neither," I would probably tick the first option, but I wouldn't go saying it to people unless someone asked me. The idea of singing it so sonorously was too embarrassing to even consider.

Anyway, the reason I couldn't help thinking these things now was

that, frankly, Raion-san's song was clichéd.

He had a good voice, though, which I hadn't noticed when we'd talked. While he wasn't *exceptionally* good at singing, he was still pretty solid, so at the very least, it wasn't painful to press replay and listen to him sing it a couple more times.

Either way, it was only his voice that I found good. The lyrics and the instrumentals were your typical love song fare that felt like you'd heard it all before at some point. Since I wasn't knowledgeable about music, I couldn't give any further impressions like an expert might've been able to do.

As it was just the intro, the video ended right away. It was hard to reply through messages, so we got on a video call.

"Hello, Raion-san."

"Hello, Ryuto-san!"

On the other end of the screen, Raion-san's eyes were sparkling—maybe he thought I was going to praise him. He assumed a low posture in greeting as though he were younger than me, which wasn't the case. This was making it harder for me to give my honest impressions.

"Let me begin by saying that I've never written any songs and don't know much about music, so I really admire people like you who can actually make it."

"Oh, it's nothing so special."

"So this is really just going to be the opinion of a total amateur..."

I chose my words carefully. It wasn't easy.

"I'd say it's...pretty common? Like...it's not *bad,* but I found it rather innocuous..." I admitted.

Raion-san didn't look as discouraged as I'd expected him to be. "Yeah, I guess so..." He slightly lowered his eyes and spoke in a meek tone. "I thought the same thing myself, which is why I couldn't come up with any lyrics to put with it... That's why I wanted to ask you for advice."

It was only now that I remembered that this was about him getting advice from me. Back in that family restaurant, I'd empathized with Raion-san and offered to help purely out of enthusiasm. How could I help him with songwriting, though?

There I was, starting to freak out after we'd hit such an obvious wall right away.

"Well, uhh..."

What am I supposed to do...? I had no experience writing songs, and I didn't even listen to things that were currently popular. No ideas came to my mind.

"What kind of song do you want to make?" I asked in desperation.

"Well... I guess I want to fill it with my feelings for Kitty-chan... Even if other people don't get it, I want it to strike a chord with her."

"Oh..." Not that his telling me that would suddenly give me any clues on how to help. "Well, I don't know... What can I say here...?"

"Any ideas?"

"Hmm..."

We talked for around twenty minutes after that, but in the end, I couldn't provide any half-decent ideas or suggestions. Our call just sort of ended.

***

Some time passed after that, and the matter of Raion-san's lyrics remained unresolved.

"Kashima-kun, Kurose-san, are you guys free tonight? Dinner's on me."

Proofreading had just come to an end, and things were chill at the editing department. Fujinami-san invited us out for dinner. He did so once a month on average when he had time, such as after the end of a proofreading period.

"Thank you! I'm available!" I replied.

Kurose-san didn't seem to be busy either, so the three of us left together after work wrapped up.

Fujinami-san took us to a café in a commercial building by the station. The place was fancy—it had glass walls, and the tables and the counter were all made from a material with a natural wood-grain texture and color. Maybe he'd chosen this place because Kurose-san

was with us. It would've been ironic if so, considering that she and I always went to an ordinary izakaya.

The three of us saw each other on a regular basis outside of weekends, so there wasn't anything special to talk about. Instead, we discussed some trending topics and popular manga for a while, and then Fujinami-san got up to use the restroom.

"Kashima-kun," Kurose-san began in a quiet voice.

The two of us had been left sitting across from each other at a four-person table next to a glass wall.

"Can you take a look at this for a second?"

Kurose-san slid me her phone. Its screen was on.

"What?"

Displayed on the screen was a LINE chatroom.

Kujibayashi Haruku: Hairy Otter and the Hoarder of the Rocks

"What...?" I repeated myself.

I quickly glanced at the previous messages before that one, but the last one before this was Kurose-san's "That's certainly true..."

There was nothing else. Naturally, Kurose-san hadn't sent anything either.

Kurose-san stared at me. Her eyebrows were deeply furrowed. "What do you think this means? He sent it two hours ago..."

"I-I don't know... Maybe he thought he was writing himself a note...?"

I didn't believe it myself, but I wanted to. Because otherwise, this just made no sense at all.

"Even if he thought that, isn't it too weird? What even *is* this? Some kind of a joke? An answer to a one-liner quiz show?"

"Well... Maybe he made a mistake writing down the title of a book he wanted to read?"

"That's way too many mistakes. And they clearly follow a pattern."

"Aha ha..." I could only laugh.

Suddenly, the chat we were looking at slid down. Kurose-san hadn't touched it, and neither had I. That meant we were watching Kujibayashi-kun sending things in real time. And those "things" were stickers.

"Chiikyawa...?" uttered Kurose-san.

There was a stream of Chiikyawa stickers on the screen. Seven, at a glance. Many of them looked worried or flustered, almost as if they were asking for a reply.

"Oh, shoot, they're all marked as 'read'! Now I'm scared!" exclaimed Kurose-san.

At that point, Fujinami-san came back and sat next to me like he had been before. "What's wrong?"


Hairy Otter and the Hoarder of the Rocks
19 : 12
19 : 12

“Fujinami-san, can you tell what this means?” I asked, taking Kurose-san’s phone and showing him the “Hairy Otter and the Hoarder of the Rocks” message.

“The hell? That’s hilarious,” said Fujinami-san with a laugh that reminded me of a high school girl’s. “That’s obviously a parody of a Harry Potter book title. You know how otters have pockets where they often put rocks?” He then even proceeded to analyze it like an editor.

“You really know your stuff...” I said.

“Well, yeah. Whole generations grew up on Harry Potter. I loved those books as a kid too.”

“I see...”

I might have been just a part-timer, but it was embarrassing to be unaware of things like that despite having worked in an editing department.

“So what is this? Who’s it from?” he asked. “They have a good sense of humor.”

“It’s just some guy I know...” replied Kurose-san.

“Oh, huh. Are you sure he’s just ‘some guy’...? Wait, I guess it’s not good to ask things like that. Never mind.” Evidently, even when alcohol made him unusually merry, Fujinami-san still remembered the compliance requirements we had nowadays. He sighed. “But man, it’s nice to be young.”

“You’re still in your twenties too, though,” I replied.

“Nah. I’ve lost the kind of radiant youth that you guys have... That’s what it means to have a full-time job.” Making an awkward smile, Fujinami-san gulped down some of his lemon sour. “I don’t have the energy for romance either. Work comes first now, so I have neither the mental nor the physical energy to look for new encounters in my free time.”

“Is being an editor that taxing?” asked Kurose-san. Since she was striving to become an editor herself, she was probably interested in the work-life balance of the job.

“Yeah... Especially when you’re doing a lot of things of your own accord, like I am these days,” Fujinami-san replied without hesitation and then put down his glass on the table. “Though maybe it’s just

because I don’t have anything to protect other than myself. Since I don’t have other responsibilities, I end up spending too much time on work.”

As it was 7 p.m. on a weekday, there were a lot of men and women in suits in this café. Fujinami-san, in his sweatshirt and jeans, looked like a very unconstrained adult in contrast.

“Then again, I get to use my money and time the way I like, and I get to move wherever I want every two years. Being single might be fitting for someone like me who doesn’t want to be tied down. When I look at people with families, it feels like it’s not entirely up to them how they live their lives,” he explained. “Sure, I work too much, but I like my work, and it’s fulfilling.”

If Fujinami-san could feel that way working as an editor, then he must’ve been a very good one. This reminded me of the frustration I felt about not being able to give Raion-san any good advice the other day.

“Um, Fujinami-san, what skills would you say an editor needs?” I asked.

Fujinami-san raised an eyebrow in interest. “So you’ve finally made up your mind to become an editor? Want me to hire you?”

“Hey, that’s no fair!” Kurose-san complained. She was visibly upset. Being drunk made her express her emotions more directly than usual. “If you have the power to do that, make *me* an editor first!”

Fujinami-san laughed. “Look how popular I am all of a sudden. It really is authority that makes a man!”

Laughing the matter off, he never answered my question.

***

The next day, before I headed to the editing department, I asked Kujibayashi-kun to meet up so we could chat. I’d be done with classes after the third class period, and he was free during the fourth and would be at the library. I asked to meet him in the campus courtyard.

The courtyard was rectangular, leading students to the various

buildings of the university that were set up along the edges of the campus. Students without classes right now were hanging out or walking around.

Among them, I spotted Kujibayashi-kun. He sat on a stone bench encircling a thick-trunked tree at the center of the courtyard and was reading a book.

"Uhh, Kujibayashi-kun?"

As I called out to him, Kujibayashi-kun raised his head from what appeared to be a research book.

Normally, these benches would be occupied by some cheerful types, but at the moment, there were just a few lone students here, all sitting some distance from each other. Things were quiet in the vicinity.

"Yesterday, someone at work took me and Kurose-san out to dinner... That's when I happened to see what you sent her on LINE..." It was hard to say this, but I had to. "That was *bad*..."

Kujibayashi-kun looked a little grim but remained silent. He closed the book in his hands.

"Firstly, what even is this 'Hairy Otter'?" I asked.

Kujibayashi-kun replied without looking up. "It took me several days to come up with something clever. I'm quite proud of the result."

"You're proud of *that?!* Dude, you're not submitting something to some kind of show! There's no need to make a display of how original you are when you're sending a girl a message on LINE."

"But if I was going to send something anyway, I wanted to make her laugh," he reasoned.

The purity of his intentions left me speechless. It hurt, knowing the stiff look that'd been on Kurose-san's face when she'd shown me her phone.

"Also, that spam of stickers was something else..."

"'Twas but an imitation of your girlfriend's mannerisms."

"Oh, I see..."

It was true that Runa had spammed stickers every now and then in our LINE chats, usually when she was excited about something.

If anything, the reason I'd shown Kujibayashi-kun those chats

had been to make him see my boring, uninspired messages so he'd realize that normal things were good enough...as sad as that was to admit.

"Well, Runa's a girl, and on top of that, she's got great communication skills. People like us would get burned if we tried to do what she does."

Compared to Runa spamming Mabbits, it left a completely different impression when Kujibayashi-kun sent a ton of Chiikyawas.

"I wonder if Kurose-san managed to get any sleep last night..." I added, sympathizing with her once more. I felt especially sorry since I had been the one who'd suggested the whole thing to Kujibayashi-kun in the first place. Kurose-san was already scared of men, and this might've created a whole new type of fear for her.

"So, did she reply...?" I asked.

"She did not. The messages are simply marked as 'read.'"

"Right, of course..." I half smiled and sat next to him. "You should send something to smooth things over. Again. And the sooner you do it, the better."

Kujibayashi-kun stayed silent.

"Let's think of something together this time," I suggested. "I'm sure you'd feel awkward actually *saying* things you'd want to send Kurose-san out loud, so try sending them to me first."

"Ehh...?"

For a moment, Kujibayashi-kun looked extremely displeased with the idea. But then, he seemed to reconsider it. He put his book in his bag and took out his phone from a pocket in his jeans.

"So, what wouldst thou have me write?"

"So you're up for it?" I asked.

"It would appear that yours truly has blundered rather severely. If there is a path that may guarantee success, then I would gladly travel it."

"Oh, wow."

Kujibayashi-kun was stubborn and had strong fixations when it came to things he was knowledgeable about, such as the matters of learning. But in areas where he was a layman, he was surprisingly docile.

That's right—he really *was* a pure guy. In both a good and a bad sense. Up until now, only the latter had been on display, but I hoped that Kurose-san would get to see the former too.

"Right. Let's see..." I said, looking at the disaster on his phone screen once more.

As I felt my face growing stiff, I had to ask myself whether there was really anything Kujibayashi-kun could say at this point that would be guaranteed to patch things up.

Chapter 3.5: A Long Phone Call Between Runa and Nicole

"By the way... Nicole?"

"Hm?"

"I know you mentioned it the other day, but how are things with Nishina-kun?"

"Same as always. Nothing's changed since last time."

"Wait, can I ask you something serious?"

"You don't need permission. We're best friends."

"Well, sure, but, like, we're not in high school anymore! Gotta be a little thoughtful and all, right? And we're on the phone!"

"Aha ha, I guess we don't get to see each other every day like we used to. Back in the day, we did both that and then would talk on the phone every night—now *that* was abnormal."

"I know, right?! How'd we even find that much stuff to talk about?!"

"Hey, I could still do that now, I just don't have the time for it. It comes with having a job."

"Oh yeah, me too! I could probably talk to you all day! Like, we could go to a hot spring and chat until morning!"

"I like the sound of that. Let's line up our vacations sometime!"

"For sure! Oh, but if I get to take enough days off in a row for a trip like that, maybe I should go with Ryuto first..."

"Ah..."

"Like, to make up for Okinawa..."

"Frankly, if the whole point is to have sex, one night should be enough. Why not just go somewhere on a weekend? Ah, but I guess you work mornings on Saturdays and Sundays..."

"Sometimes I get Saturdays off. Like once a month or so."

"Then that settles it, right?"

"But on Saturdays, Ryuto works at the cram school the whole day. He's there until late at night."

"Oh... Things really *don't* line up, I guess..."

"There's just never a good time... Like even the other day, when we went to talk to Kitty's boyfriend."

"Oh yeah, you wrote to me about that. I gotta say, you sure can take the initiative. Just like you did that time with senpai."

"Well, yeah! How could I forgive a guy who made my sister cry so much?!"

"Anyway, I'm glad that worked out. How are the lyrics coming along?"

"Well, Ryuto's helping with that... But I dunno, though. It sounds like he doesn't really know how to help. He showed me the video, saying he wanted a woman's opinion, but honestly, I didn't really know what to say either... Heh heh."

"Really? Shall the great poet Nicole-sama take a look?"

"What?! Oh, that sounds great, actually! Also, now that I think about it, Maria and Ryuto both work for a publisher—maybe, at this point, we should all get together and brainstorm!"

"Damn, that sounds pretty chaotic. I love it."

"It sounds fun, though! Let's try setting something up!"

"Hey, you're just in it for fun, aren't you?"

"That's not true! I just want Hanada-san to finish his song so he can go back to Kitty, no matter what it takes!"

"So? What happened when you two went to talk to her boyfriend?"

"Huh? Oh, right! When we were about to head back home, I kinda made a really big move on Ryuto in a roundabout way. It was crazy!"

"Whaaat?"

"But...it was too roundabout, and he didn't get it! So I just ended up being annoying and talking too much! I wanna die!"

"Isn't that fine, though? Just tell him you wanna do it so he knows the door's open."

"Hell naw! That would be the same as if *I* made a move on him! I want *him* to do it, like I said the other day!"

“Yeah, yeah, you’re a pure maiden and all.”

“You get it, though, right?!”

“I do. I would’ve been happy too if senpai asked to have sex with me. We girls like it when guys want us, after all.”

“Yeah... Wait, what about Nishina-kun? Actually, that’s what I meant to ask you from the start!”

“Aha ha, we have too much stuff to talk about!”

“So, what about you guys...? Don’t tell me you haven’t done it yet.”

“Nope. We haven’t kissed either.”

“What?! You’ve still only held hands?!”

“Yep.”

“I see... I guess that’s very...pure?”

“Yeah, well.”

“So, like, even if Nishina-kun made a move on you, you’d be totally against it? I know you said the other day that you’re keeping the mood from becoming romantic.”

“Well... It would be fine, I guess. He’s my boyfriend and all, so even I think it would be natural for things to go that way.”

“So then...?”

“But, like, would Ren be okay with it? I mean, not that I’d be happy with it either...”

“What do you mean?”

“Like, when I was with senpai, I got wet just from going on dates like normal, no matter if I was thinking about having sex or not.”

“Wow, you just came out and said it!”

“You get what I mean, though, right?”

“Yeah... I guess I was like that at the end of our second year of high school.”

“See? At some point, you start getting like that when you’re with the guy you like, you know? But I haven’t felt like that with Ren yet, though.”

“Do you think it’s something that will eventually happen if you wait?”

“I dunno. I’ve never liked anyone besides senpai.”

“You do like Nishina-kun, though, right?”

"Sure I do. I've liked him all this time. Ever since we became friends."

"Wait... But are you talking about liking him as a friend instead of as a boyfriend?"

"I...dunno."

"What?! You don't even know *that?!*"

"I mean, even if I liked him as a friend at first, it's pretty common for friends to become lovers, you know?"

"Yeah, so I hear."

"So I was thinking that if we keep dating, there might come a day when I'll love Ren like I loved senpai. Take things slow and all."

"I see... Still, though..."

"Hm?"

"Poor Nishina-kun... Who knows how long it'll take for you to get to that point."

"Yeah... Every time I see him, I feel bad."

"Nicole..."

"Still, though. If I take things to the next stage while still feeling this way, wouldn't it be like I was just letting him do me?"

"Ah! Yeah, definitely don't do that! You'd regret it!"

"Are you talking from experience?"

"Yeah... It kinda eats away at you. Back then, I thought it was normal, that it was just part of love. I know better now."

"Are guys not like that? I hear they can have sex with girls they're not in love with, so maybe not..."

"It's strange, yeah."

"Man, being a girl is such a pain! Even I wish I didn't have to deal with this."

"Me too. I never thought it could be so annoying."

"You two keep missing every chance, almost like you're doing it on purpose."

"Exactly."

"And that's how he still has no experience."

"Yeah..."

"Knowing that, how can you expect things to go like in a shojo manga? It's just not gonna happen."

"I know. I *very* much do. But *still*."

"Why are you talking like that?"

"I. Just. *Really.* Want *Ryuto* to *make a move* on *me.*"

"Aha ha! What kind of an act is that?"

"It doesn't have to be like in a shojo manga. I don't mind if he's awkward about it—I just want him to say how he feels. I don't want him to hold back on my account. I don't care if he ends up looking pathetic, I just want him to lay everything out."

"Runa..."

"I'm prepared to accept it all."

Chapter 4

One evening well into November, I was sitting in my room, looking at my laptop and the five-person video call on its screen.

"I'm sorry to get you all involved..." said Raion-san. On his end, he was sitting in a Japanese-style room.

"It's no problem at all! Think of us all as your cheering squad!" Runa said. "Maria's been worried about Kitty all this time too."

Kurose-san lowered her head. "Nice to meet you. I'm Maria, Runa and Kitty's sister." I could see that her room behind her was tidy.

"N-Nice to meet you too!" Raion-san said in a feeble voice. He lowered his head as well.

"Maria works at the same editing department as Ryuto. I'm sure she'll be able to help!"

"Hey, don't go setting expectations like that, Runa."

"Why not? Anyway, over there is my best friend Nicole."

Runa was pointing to the lower right corner of her screen, but everyone's positions were different on my end. To me, Yamana-san was to the side of Runa.

"Hi! I'm something of a poet and I thought writing lyrics sounded interesting, so I wanted to observe."

Despite claiming to be a mere onlooker so openly, Yamana-san was speaking formally compared to her usual manner.

"Thank you, everyone... I look forward to working with you all," said Raion-san.

Thus began the meeting to write some lyrics for the song he was writing for Kitty-san.

Apparently, a call between Runa and Yamana-san had led to this. She'd then talked to the rest of this group about me trying to help Raion-san.

“You really haven’t progressed past the intro?” asked Runa.

“Not really... Though there are some parts that are partially done...” replied Raion-san. “Still, I feel like what I have won’t resonate with Kitty-chan at all, so I was thinking of throwing it all out—including the intro.”

Runa was flustered at that. “What?! Don’t do that! How would you finish it in a month?!” she asked. “Nicole, how long would it take to write lyrics for a song?”

“Huh? How would I know? I guess a professional could probably do it in a day... You don’t technically need to write too many words, after all.”

“I agree,” chimed in Kurose-san. “Unlike manga, writing words alone is simple. I heard from an editor that a quick author can finish a paperback novel in a week.”

“What?! That’s crazy! A whole book in a week?!” Runa exclaimed.

“That’s only in the case of particularly quick ones, however, and even they aren’t always able to write at that pace.”

I wondered where Kurose-san had learned these things. Unlike me, she must’ve been doing research for the sake of her future job, asking Fujinami-san and other editors about things. It was worthy of respect.

“So then we’re waaay ahead of schedule, huh? Since we have a month,” Runa said.

“Why don’t we agree on a deadline first?” Kurose-san said. “Editors say they always set a deadline, regardless of the manuscript.”

“Ah, okay! Then...”

“We’ve got a month, right? It’s just in time for Christmas!” said Yamana-san.

“What?! Already?!”

I was surprised too and checked the calendar on my phone.

To be precise, Christmas was a month and a few days away. I hadn’t realized it was already this time of the year.

“Wait, then why not plan to go sing it to your girlfriend on Christmas Eve? That’d be hella romantic!” Yamana-san suggested excitedly. She was unexpectedly pure.

"Hey, that's a great idea! You should totally do that, Hanada-san!" added Runa.

"Huh? But...I can't ask Kitty-chan to meet me somewhere after I walked out on her..."

"I'll bring her to you! I can be like, 'Let's get together for a meal for Christmas!'"

"It should work better if I do it instead," suggested Kurose-san. "She'd probably sulk if you invited her and say you should forget about her and spend time with Kashima-kun instead."

"Good point. Okay, then I'll leave that to you... So where should Raion-san be singing?"

"Why not make it somewhere with beautiful lights?" said Yamana-san.

"Sounds good... Oh wait! Hanada-san, you're a street musician, right? There're usually a lot of light displays in front of stations. Do you know of any good places?"

"Oh, actually..." replied Raion-san, recalling something. "There's an open space in front of Yokosuka-chuo Station. They light up a big tree there in winter, which is like a Christmas tree. A lot of people hold street performances there."

"Oh, okay! Let's go with that!"

And so, we'd quickly decided on the date and the place.

"That leaves coming up with the lyrics..." Runa added.

Having returned to the original task, we all went silent for a moment.

"Um..." began Raion-san. "What kind of things would make women happy if they heard it from their boyfriends...?"

"Oh, I've got some good ones!" Runa looked the happiest at that question. "Things like, 'I wanna hold you,' or 'I want you,' or 'I want your everything'!"

Yamana-san couldn't hold back a laugh. "Runa! Your desires are leaking out!"

"I see..." Raion-san was writing things down on a piece of paper on his table.

As for me... I didn't know where to look on the screen, so my eyes wandered around the room as I processed what I'd just heard.

What was *that...? If those things are what Runa wants to hear from her boyfriend...and* I'm *her boyfriend...then does that mean everything she just said are things she wants* me *to say?! Is that what's going on?!*

"I wanna hold you."

"I want you."

"I want your everything."

I tried saying those things in my mind. Even imagining it was too much to handle.

Yeah, no.

What's up with that "I wanna hold you" line, anyway? In what kind of situation am I supposed to say that? Why wouldn't I just hug her without saying anything? If that's even possible in a given situation. And if it's not, then what's the point in saying it?

"Then, there's the standard 'you're cute' and 'you're beautiful,' I guess," added Yamana-san.

"What about 'I love you'?" asked Runa.

"That too. I'd wanna hear it every day."

"What about the 'aishiteru' kind of 'I love you'?"

"I might not want to hear that too often. If I heard that every day, it wouldn't sound sincere."

"I know, right?!"

As Runa and Yamana-san went back and forth excitedly, Raion-san kept jotting things down.

"So... Is there anything you *don't* want to hear?" he asked.

"Hm, I dunno..."

While Runa put her thinking cap on, Yamana-san got even more fired up.

"I've got one! That whole 'You're my number one' thing! Like, who's number two?! It pisses me off so much!"

"Is that something you heard from Sekiya-san?" asked Runa.

"Yeah! He always said that when I got jealous! Damn it, just remembering it makes me angry!"

"Ah..." Runa cracked a smile. "Then what do you wish he said instead?"

"I would've forgiven him if he said 'You're the only one'! 'Cause

that means there's nobody else, and that's how it should be!"

Runa nodded a few times. "Ah, I get that."

Wait, I've never said anything like that to her...

"There's this thing Ryuto said to me when we started going out that really made me happy," Runa began with a look of joy. "He said he never dated anyone before and didn't have any good female friends, and so it wasn't like he was gonna go to someone else if I didn't let him do it."

I seemed to recall having said something to that effect. It felt like everyone on the screen turned to look at me once she said that, though, which was really embarrassing.

"When I realized I was already unconditionally special to him...it made me so happy..." Runa continued. Her cheeks were rosy, and she looked so joyful. "I think it's important to say things that make the other party feel special... Oh, sorry! I guess that had nothing to do with lyrics."

"That's not true. It was educational," replied Raion-san in an overserious manner, still taking notes. Then, he stopped writing and looked up. "I have to say, though, that guy who said, 'You're number one'? I understand how he must've felt... Guys just care about winning and rankings." Smiling faintly, Raion-san looked off at nothing in particular. "Since *we* want to be number one, we assume that girls would be happy to hear they're our number one too. We don't say it out of malice." He went on as though talking to himself. "We'd obviously want to win against our girlfriends' exes—but also their male acquaintances, friends, and all men around the world. A guy wants to be his girlfriend's number one."

Yamana-san lifted her head with an expression that showed she understood. She had a fancy café as a fake background behind her, but in that moment, I could just barely see the back of the chair she was leaning on. "I guess that explains it somewhat... It's starting to make sense now." She pouted a little. "If he'd explained it to me, it wouldn't have pissed me off so much... Like, why not just say it?"

"Guys wouldn't say something so pathetic. I'd never have said it either, if not for this situation," explained Raion-san with an awkward smile. "But on the other hand, if a guy hears 'You're the only one'

from a girl, he'd find it clingy no matter how much he loves her."

"What?!"

"Why?!"

Runa and Yamana-san expressed their astonishment in unison.

"Well... Girls are supposed to have other things in their lives, like work, hobbies, and all... Her saying that is like she's throwing all that away and focusing entirely on you. That's kinda...suffocating, you know? It feels really liberating when you break up with a girl like that." A look of realization then appeared on his face. "Oh, no, I'm not talking about Kitty-chan! I'm thinking of something from a long time ago." He lowered his eyes as if thinking back on the past. "But I guess girls are just saying things they want to hear themselves too... I never knew that until now."

Kurose-san had been silent for a long time, but she spoke up at that point. "So, 'Guys want to be number one; girls want to be the only one.'"

"Wow, Maria! Are you aiming to be a songwriter instead of an editor?!" Runa said excitedly.

"Man, I was just thinking of the same line!" added Yamana-san just as enthusiastically.

"It's like 'Sekai ni Hitotsu Dake no Hana,'" said Raion-san.

"Hey, we had that song in our music textbooks in primary school!" said Runa.

"It's a nice song," added Yamana-san.

"There's also a song called 'Lion Heart' from the same group. That's actually where my name comes from," said Raion-san. "It was popular when my mom was pregnant. Apparently, when she found out I was going to be a boy, she chose that name because she wanted me to protect my loved ones like I had the heart of a lion."

"Wow, that's great! What a nice story," Runa said in high spirits.

"I think so too, but back in the day, it made me embarrassed. I mean, it's one of those 'kira-kira' names," replied Raion-san with a half smile. "I told Kitty-chan about it when we first met. And since we were in the same boat, we really hit it off."

"Yeah, she's got one hell of a kira-kira name! Mom regretted it and let Dad decide our names instead."

“But Mom was the one who chose the kanji, so our names are in that style too,” added Kurose-san.

“Yeah, but I like my name!”

“I like mine too.”

For a while, I listened to the sisters’ friendly conversation with a smile on my face, but then I remembered the reason we’d gathered today. I had to speak up. “Uhh, we should get back to the lyrics. I guess that’s it for the things girls want to hear from their boyfriends?”

“Wait, Maria hasn’t said anything yet!” Runa pointed out. “What about you, Maria? Is there anything you’d want or wouldn’t want to hear from your boyfriend?”

“I’ve never had one, so I’ve no idea,” replied Kurose-san without missing a beat.

“Oh, okay. Then...what about things you’d wanna hear from a guy you like?”

“‘Please go out with me,’ obviously.”

“Right...”

“What about things you’d wanna hear from a guy who might become your boyfriend in the future? Does anything come to mind?” asked Yamana-san.

“Anything that’s not just flattery,” replied Kurose-san after thinking for a moment. “Things like ‘you’re cute’ or ‘I like you’ are too common—why would they make me fall for someone I didn’t already like?”

Judging by the looks on the other two girls’ faces, it didn’t seem like they could relate.

“So, I’d rather hear things that indirectly show me what kind of person he is and what’s really on his mind. Things that would tell me more about him.”

I, on the other hand, knew how happy she’d looked when Sato Naoki had called her cute. What she’d just said meant that she must’ve already liked him at that point.

Unlike Runa, Kurose-san probably couldn’t date anyone whom she didn’t already have feelings for. That was why she wanted guys to display their special charms and make her fall in love with them

first.

Sato Naoki'd had such charms. That was why it'd been so effective when he'd called Kurose-san cute.

It felt like Kurose-san had developed this view on love after having been called cute like it was a greeting for ages. She'd received countless confessions of love as well.

Because she had such a developed ego, I was okay with her not falling in love with Kujibayashi-kun—but I *did* want them to become friends, at least. They were both my friends and were probably similar to me in some ways. And since they had that much in common, it *should've* helped them understand each other better at some point.

After going through all that in my head, I returned my attention to the ongoing meeting.

"I guess that's it, then... Did that help, Raion-san?" I asked.

"It did. I'll do my best." Raion-san nodded with a look of enthusiasm on his face. "Thank you all so much for taking the time today."

His honesty and good manners really were his charms. He'd probably been courteous and expressed his gratitude to his girlfriend on a regular basis too. Though I guessed that hadn't stopped him from running away without being able to say the important things.

After watching him and also hearing what Runa had said, I reflected on my own actions somewhat.

"Runa," I called out as the conference was coming to an end. "Can we talk in private after this?"

"Huh?" Runa looked taken aback. "Uh, sure, I guess..."

"Then how about the rest of us leave first?" said Kurose-san.

"Yeah, let's do that. See ya," added Yamana-san.

Being thoughtful, the two of them left the conference.

"Again, thank you so much," Raion-san repeated, and he left too.

Thus, it was just Runa and me left on-screen.

"So... What's up, Ryuto?" Runa asked, looking restless for some reason.

"Right. Uhh..." Her restlessness spread to me too, and it seemed like it had gotten amplified somewhere along the way. "I guess

we've been dating for four and a half years now..."

"Ah, yeah. It's gonna be that long when we hit Christmas."

"Yeah..." Recalling what Runa had just said, I summoned my courage. "Um, you're my first girlfriend...and you've been special to me from the start..."

I couldn't look her in the eye even through the screen. This part of me had never changed.

"You're still really special to me."

I managed to say it.

"Ryuto..." A smile appeared on Runa's face. It looked like her eyes were watering a bit, but I couldn't be sure because of the video quality.

"You're my number one, Ryuto," she said, putting her hand on her chest over her fluffy hoodie. "It means you're the most handsome, the most amazing guy, and the one I love the most!"

"Runa..."

My plan had been to say something that would make her happy, but here I was on the receiving end of that instead.

As I thought about what else to say, I remembered what Runa had mentioned earlier.

"I wanna hold you."

"I want you."

"I want your everything."

I considered it. *Yeah, I don't know... It would take a* lot *for me to say any of those things... But still...*

"In soap operas, they make guys say a lot of stuff that girls wanna hear from their boyfriends...but it doesn't work so easily in the real world."

I remembered the unclear words Runa had left me with that day. They'd been hanging out in the back of my mind ever since.

During this video call, I'd realized that if Runa had something she wanted to hear from me, it must've been lines like those. It had been a hint from her.

In which case, I wanted to grant her wish.

"I, uhh... I always...want to...hold you."

I was at my limit. As I just barely managed to get those words

out, my heart was racing enough to make me feel out of breath.

"Ryuto..." Runa's voice was filled with emotion. "C'mon, why does it have to be over a video call...?" She sounded impatient. "I wanna hold you too... Ryutooo..." Runa brought her face close to the screen. "And be with you until morning..."

My heart pounded as she breathed that last part out, even though a screen was separating us.

"Runa..."

"Can you say it again the next time we see each other?"

I was about to say yes, but then, it hit me. Right now, there was physical distance between us, so that line had been nothing more than words. But if I were to say it to Runa in person, where would that take us...? And actually, if it weren't going to take us you-know-where, then I would prefer not to say it at all.

Still...

"You know, we've come this far... Think we might as well get married first while we're at it?"

Given what Runa had said then, I didn't know if it was okay to tell her something like this. After all, I'd resolved to respect her wishes, unlike what her exes had done.

In the end, I came back to our lingering unresolved problem.

"Mm..."

That vague answer was the only one I could muster, given everything I had on my mind.

Runa smiled at me sweetly. I wondered what she'd thought about how I'd replied.

"I don't wanna get off of here yet..." she said. "Hey, wanna do a neochi call?"

"Huh...? A what...?"

What even is *that?*

"It's when you both go to sleep while on the phone."

"Can you even fall asleep that way...?"

What if I grind my teeth or snore...? I considered not falling asleep tonight.

"I dunno. When I'm on a call with Nicole, sometimes one of us will nod off, but then the other one will just cut the call."

That was obviously what would happen unless you had a prior agreement to keep it going.

"So, uh, is this something that couples do...?"

"I see it a lot on social media. Like how a girl will say how happy she is after doing a neochi call with her boyfriend."

"Huh..."

Our social media feeds were evidently pretty different in nature, though I knew that already. There was no way Runa's feed had any of that stuff about KEN Kids exposing each other.

"Anyway, let's do it, ♡" she said.

"O-Okay..."

Thus, we somehow went from a video call about song lyrics to a neochi call. We switched to a voice-only LINE call so our screens would stay off and not get in the way of sleeping.

"Are you in bed, Ryuto?"

"What?! We're going to bed?!"

"How can we fall asleep unless we talk while lying down?"

"You have a point..."

I did as told and got into bed.

"Ryuto? Are you lying down already?"

It really made my heart race to have Runa's voice come from next to my ear while I was in bed.

"Yeah..." I replied, shaken up.

Runa giggled. "You know... I guess it's because we're in bed, but doesn't this feel kinda sexual?"

"What?!"

"It doesn't? Is it just me?" she said, her voice both teasing and sulky.

I could only raise the white flag. "It does..."

Runa giggled happily. "Yay! So you're horny too. And what does such a horny Ryuto-kun wanna do to me?" she asked in an excited voice. "As for me..." I heard the rustling of fabric, as if Runa were moving her legs around. "I wanna kiss a whole lot!"

R-Runa?! What's with you...? Are you drunk?! But wait, she was clearly sober on the call earlier, so... Is this just natural eroticism that's been brought out by the extremely relaxing environment of a

bed when you're about to go to sleep?!

"Ryuto... Mwah."

I heard the smacking of Runa's lips right next to my ear. The thought of kissing over the phone raised my pulse.

"You do it too, Ryuto."

"What?!"

While it was embarrassing, I did as told and placed my lips against the phone.

"There, I did it."

"Ehh? There's no way for me to know if there's no sound!" Runa complained. "Do it so I can hear it."

"I-I can't do that, sorry."

"Whaaat?!"

I felt bad that she sounded so displeased.

"Man... I wish you were next to me right now..." she said. "I'm hugging Chi-chan right now. Like she's you. ♡"

"Y-You're what?!"

"Ryutooo... Squeeeze!"

Rustle. Apparently, Runa really was hugging it.

"Why don't you hug something too, Ryuto?"

"Huh? O-Okay..."

That being said, I didn't have any plush toys or dakimakura on my bed. My only option was to hug my blanket.

"Are you hugging something?" came Runa's voice.

"Y-Yeah..."

"Say my name."

Her sweet voice felt ticklish against my ear.

"R-Runa..."

"Ryutooo..." Letting out a seductive sigh, Runa hugged what must've been Chi-chan. "This feels so reassuring... It's like I'm in your arms..."

Her words made the blanket in my hands feel like it was Runa herself. My body was heating up.

Runa's voice became even sweeter. "Hey, say you love me."

"I-I love you."

"Whisper it to me."

I couldn’t resist such a coy request.

“I...love...you...”

“Nngh...” Runa moaned as if relishing in my confession of love. “I love you too...”

It felt like her whisper brushed against my ear, which sent a pleasant shiver through my body.

This was crazy. Now I understood why couples were so into these neochi calls.

“Man... That was so satisfying, I’m getting sleepy...” Runa was starting to talk more slowly. “Ryutooo...”



I could hear a rustling sound—it seemed like she was tightening her grip.

"Love you... ♡"

Runa's sweet, ticklish voice felt like it was caressing the soft hairs of my ear.

Eventually, the only thing I could hear on the other end of the line was deep, rhythmic breathing.

"Runa...?"

There was no response.

Leaving the call on, all I could hear was the rustling of fabric and the occasional moan.

She was way too defenseless. And sure, she could be this relaxed because she was in her bed, since it was one hundred percent her private territory...but it was also like she was doing a livestream.

The situation was unbearably sexy, even if I couldn't see anything.

"I can't sleep..."

With aching, bloodshot eyes, I stared at the ceiling while holding the phone to my ear.

***

"Thanks for the other day, Kurose-san."

When I next saw Kurose-san at the editing department, I thanked her for participating in the video call two days ago.

"I should be thanking you. Let me know if there's anything else I can help with."

I hadn't expected *her* to thank *me* instead.

"So, how are the lyrics coming along?" she asked.

"Well..."

Raion-san had been filled with motivation two days ago, but he hadn't reported on his progress since.

"Who knows...?"

Honestly, I was irritated with myself. I'd accepted the task, and yet here I was, pretty much just sitting idly by. Time was gradually running out, and I kept getting more and more anxious.

“Oh yeah, Kashima-kun,” began Kurose-san. “It’s been a while since we last drank together. Are you free tonight?”

“Huh?”

“Izakayas are going to get crowded in December. Consider it a mini year-end party.”

I hadn’t realized that December was only a few days away.

“Oh, sure,” I replied.

“See you after work, then.”

Kurose-san left with a smile, making me wonder if something good had happened.

***

“Cheers!”

After we’d gotten out of work, we were bringing our glasses together at our usual izakaya.

It wasn’t the weekend yet, but this place was already full of office workers who’d taken off their jackets and loosened their ties. Maybe the season of year-end parties had already begun.

“That’s another day of work behind us,” began Kurose-san after taking a gulp from her first mug of beer. “How long has it been already? Half a year? Since you’ve started working there too, you’ve been a huge help. Thanks for that.”

“Well, the feeling is mutual...”

It was too embarrassing to properly put my gratitude into words, but I took a pause from drinking my highball to lower my head.

I really felt like I’d expanded my horizons thanks to my job at the editing department. I was glad to be friends with Kurose-san again, and I had gotten on good terms with some amazing people, like Kamonohashi-sensei.

“I’m glad you invited me to apply back then.”

Kurose-san smiled fondly. “Now that I think about it, you’re the only guy I can casually invite somewhere, like how I brought you here.”

“How are things with Kujibayashi-kun? You guys talking on LINE?”

Kurose-san nodded as if recalling it. “Ah, yeah.” Her bag was in

the cubby under the table—she reached into it and pulled her phone out. “Take a look.”

She showed me their chat. There were a ton of “Message deleted” notices at the top—both the Hairy Otter message and the sticker spam were gone. After that was the following exchange:

Kujibayashi Haruku: I’m sorry.
Kujibayashi Haruku: It was my first time writing to a woman outside of my family, and I didn’t know what to do. I put on a shameful display.
Kujibayashi Haruku: I’ll clear the logs.
Kujibayashi Haruku: Please forgive my previous rude behavior.
Maria: It’s totally fine, but thanks.
Kujibayashi Haruku: How was your day?
Kujibayashi Haruku: Mine was ordinary.
Kujibayashi Haruku: The French toast I got at a convenience store was delicious.
Maria: Mine was ordinary too.
Maria: It’s soothing to see the red leaves around campus.
Kujibayashi Haruku: It’s the season of red leaves at my campus too.
Kujibayashi Haruku: But there are many ginkgo trees too. It’s unbearable to smell their nuts every year.
Maria: I like them.
Maria: Though I’ve only had them in chawanmushi.
Kujibayashi Haruku: I like eating them too.
Kujibayashi Haruku: The ryotei my family goes to serves them in the form of crackers. We’ve been going to that restaurant since I was a child.
Kujibayashi Haruku: They’re delicious.
Maria: I’ve never been to a fancy invite-only place

like that.
Maria: You must come from a good family.
Kujibayashi Haruku: I found it boring as a child since waiting for meals would take so much time.
Kujibayashi Haruku: But that environment may be nice for a relaxed conversation.
Maria: That sounds nice. I'd like to go sometime.
Kujibayashi Haruku: Adults eventually get an opportunity to go.
Kujibayashi Haruku: Where do you normally eat out?
Maria: I tend to go with other girls, so we usually end up at cafés or sweets shops.
Kujibayashi Haruku: What do you like to eat?
Maria: I like anything sweet.
Maria: But right now, I feel like having French toast.
Kujibayashi Haruku: What a coincidence.
Kujibayashi Haruku: I had some today too.
Maria: What you said made me want some.

Kujibayashi-kun had sent a surprised Chiikyawa sticker after that, and the conversation had ended there.

I let out a nervous laugh. Every single part of this conversation was all too familiar to me. After all, everything Kujibayashi-kun had sent had come from me.

He'd sent me screenshots of each of Kurose-san's messages along with how he'd wanted to reply. I'd made some edits, and if he'd been okay with my changes, he'd simply sent that to her. When he'd had objections, we'd gone through another round of edits. That incredibly annoying process had been the foundation of the aforementioned conversation.

"She said she wants to go to a ryotei! That's your chance to invite her!"

"'Tis no place for a young man and woman."

"She said she wants to have French toast! At least invite her now!"

"I only get that at convenience stores. I don't know any restaurants that offer it."

"I'll look into it! We can even ask Runa!"

"I'd rather not overreach."

"Why not?!"

"I don't want to be rejected."

"With how the conversation's going, she won't turn you down!"

"You never know with women."

I laughed nervously again, remembering how awkward my exchange with Kujibayashi-kun had been.

He'd had two whole opportunities to ask her out, but he'd passed up both of them. Then again, maybe this frustratingly slow pace was just his style.

"Looking much better," I said.

Kurose-san cocked her head. "He almost sounded like a whole different person. You didn't edit his messages, did you?"

"What?! O-Of course not!" Startled, I ended up raising my voice.

"Yeah, I guess you wouldn't go that far," replied Kurose-san with a smile. "Guys don't seem to do that. That's a girl thing."

"You'll edit messages for each other?"

"More like... We'll send each other screenshots of what guys send us and ask each other if he's all right in the head."

"Eh...?"

Wow, that's scary...

As my face went stiff, Kurose-san smiled. "I don't do it, though. But I'm friends with some girls who met guys through dating apps—they keep posting screenshots of their DMs in our group chat."

"I see..."

It was comforting to know that Kujibayashi-kun's messages hadn't been made public, but man, girls sure were scary. No wonder he was afraid of them.

"He's not actually a bad person. He was just overexcited at first," I explained. "Can you see that better now?"

"I guess so."

The smile on Kurose-san's face made me feel relieved.

"Would you mind replying to him on LINE again sometime?"

"Sure, if he sends something," she said. "Maybe he won't."

"I'm pretty sure he will..."

Because I'll tell him to.

"There aren't any guys who'd message me when they didn't want anything from me, and I never saw a point in talking to someone I'm not dating before." Kurose-san smiled gently. "But this kind of back-and-forth? It's kind of fun."

***

December came.

One day, in my three-person group chat with Icchi and Nisshi, Icchi said he had something to talk about. I figured it was probably about Tanikita-san's pregnancy.

I hadn't heard from him since Runa and I had gone to Okinawa, but as Runa had told me later, Tanikita-san's pregnancy had been confirmed. Nisshi had probably heard about it from Yamana-san too.

The mood was a little heavy, but the three of us agreed to meet up for the first time since that thing with Chamotaro-san.

We met at Station O at lunchtime on a Sunday and headed for a family restaurant serving Chinese food. It was fifteen minutes away on foot and was a place we'd sometimes go to back when we had been in high school.

Ever since he'd lost weight, Icchi hadn't been eating as much, but today, he ordered a large helping of fried rice and ramen. He wolfed them down astonishingly quickly. Icchi then got himself a drink at the self-service area, sat across the table from me and Nisshi, and spoke up with a grave look on his face.

"Akari and I are getting married."

Nisshi and I exchanged glances.

"Um... Congratulations?" said Nisshi.

"If that's in order..." I added.

Normally, this would be a happy announcement, but Icchi had the cast of death on his face. I'd noticed how dejected he'd looked since the moment we'd met up today, so it was unexpected to hear such a normally happy thing out of him.

"Thanks..." said Icchi, his voice trailing off.

"So, uh... When's the wedding?" I asked.

"There won't be one... It's not the time for that. Akari's been getting morning sickness..."

"Oh, I see."

I knew my question had been too carefree, but I didn't know what else to ask in the moment.

Nisshi got to the heart of the matter. "Can you afford it? You still have at least another year before you graduate, right?" he asked.

"Yeah, about that..." Icchi bit his lip. "I quit school."

"What?!" Nisshi and I let out in sync.

"Dad gave me hell. Mom at least stopped him from disowning me, but he said I had no right to continue studying after doing something so outrageous. Told me to get a job right away to support my wife and child..."

Nisshi and I were lost for words.

"I'm now working at a construction site under an alumnus from school."

"What kind of work do you do there...?" I asked hesitantly. I just couldn't picture him working at a place like that.

"Ordinary construction work. I'm a blue-collar worker now."

Wow... The total introvert I used to know, who never held anything heavier than a controller in his life, is working a blue-collar job...

As surprising as that was, it explained his huge appetite.

"I get yelled at every day, barely get any rest, and come home dead tired. And at home, Akari's dying from morning sickness," he said.

"Oh, you're already living together...?"

"More like, I got kicked out of the house."

"What?!" Nisshi and I exclaimed in unison again.

"I'm living in Akari's family home now with her folks."

“Whaaat?!”

We were in sync yet again. Nisshi and I just couldn’t keep up with this stream of shocking revelations.

“I guess you have to be careful not to upset anyone there...” I said.

Icchi nodded. “I feel bad for my mother-in-law. My clothes get completely covered in dirt, and she’s the one who washes them.”

“Oh...”

“To make things worse, Akari’s parents lashed out at mine. Our families hate each other now.”

“Damn...”

“My dad actually offered to pay for an abortion,” he said. “He wanted me to finish school as if nothing happened, but as Akari wants to have the baby, he told me to go live with her and do as I like. Just totally messing up his son’s life like that.”

I couldn’t find any words to say. This situation felt like something that happened in a whole different kind of world from the one I lived in. The same seemed to be true for Nisshi, and all that the two of us could do was listen in silence.

“Anyway, I don’t get to rest at home or outside... It’s hell every day...”

I couldn’t begin to imagine how bad things were for him these days.

“Practice safe sex, guys... That’s all from me...” Icchi said as if struggling to get the words out.

Nisshi laughed in self-deprecation. “Yeah, safe sex... I haven’t even reached that part yet.”

“What?” I let out.

“Wait, don’t tell me you *still* haven’t done it with Yamana-san...” added Icchi, at which point Nisshi nodded.

Really...? I definitely wasn’t one to talk, but they’d started dating in the spring—it was already winter.

“Kasshi, do you know how far Nicole went with her ex?” asked Nisshi.

“Huh?”

“You know how she was his first girlfriend? They kinda weren’t

dating in full force, so I was wondering if they ever went all the way. You're friends with her ex, right? Did he ever mention it?"

I searched my memory. "Well... I guess I've never heard anything definitive..."

Back on our school trip, I'd heard in the girls' room that they hadn't managed to go all the way, but I didn't know if they'd done it at any point after that. At first, they'd planned to hold off until Sekiya-san had gotten into college, but he'd been a ronin for way too long. I had no idea if anything had happened later on. And once he'd gotten into college, they'd broken up right away.

Even when he and I talked, I wouldn't ask him something so personal. He would've had to bring it up himself.

"Well, it's Sekiya-san we're talking about, so I doubt he'd hold back for so many years, like me," I said. It was sad to force a smile here.

"What?!"

This time, it was Nisshi and Icchi whose reactions were in sync.

"You held back that long?"

"When did you first do it with Shirakawa-san?"

Wait... Oh, I guess I never told them.

"Well, we actually haven't done it yet..."

I figured it wasn't something to hide, but Icchi and Nisshi looked astonished at my confession.

"YOU HAVEN'T DONE IT YET?!?!?!" The pair's shouts resounded through the restaurant.

Nearby customers looked at us, and it felt like even the waiter robot that had been moving between tables stopped for a moment in shock.

"H-Hey, c'mon, guys. No need to shout like that."

"Y-You can't be serious, Kasshi... You two started dating in our second year of high school. It's been...one, two, three...*four* years!"

"Does your religion ban sex before marriage?!"

I was flustered, but my friends looked too shocked for me to focus on that.

"Well, uh... There *were* a few opportunities for us to...but I guess we passed up every single one of them..."

As I spoke, I recalled my recent predicament with Runa—it made me feel miserable. The two didn't let up, however.

"You realize we're talking about Shirakawa-san, right?! How is it possible that you guys have been dating for four whole years and aren't having sex?!"

"What're you holding off for?! You *know* how many guys she's slept with, right? Why not just go for it already?!"

Well, I know what you guys mean, but still...

"Yes, I'm a wuss..." I said.

"You really are! Just go to her right this instant!"

"Like, seriously! What's in that head of yours?! Are you sure you even have the man bits?!"

"Go graduate already! Make it your graduation day!"



“If you’re a wuss, then act like one! Prostrate yourself before her and ask to do her!”

“O-Okay, guys, enough about me!” At this point, I was just getting sad, so I somewhat forcefully put an end to the topic. “We were talking about Nisshi, right? Anyway, I would assume that Yamana-san and Sekiya-san did it somewhere along the line.”

Icchi looked like he still wanted to talk about me, but Nisshi turned visibly dispirited.

“Yeah, I guess so...” Nisshi hung his head and let out a long sigh. “I guess it’s because it’s me... Maybe she can’t feel that way toward me...”

“By the way, Icchi, how did you and Tanikita-san start having sex?” I asked.

Nisshi was feeling down and I didn’t want the conversation to steer back to me, so I redirected it to Icchi. I figured it was okay to ask him that sort of thing—after all, things had been going so great for him at one point that he was going to be a dad soon.

“Huh?” For a moment, Icchi looked at a loss, but then he seemed to remember how it had started and made a stupid face. “Well, what can I say? Akari was all over me...” He was grinning madly. “We did it at a hotel the day we started dating...”

Nisshi and I couldn’t hold back our shock. “What?!”

So... Right after the thing with Chamotaro and them kissing in public, they went all the way the very same day...?

Nisshi was really heating up too. “What the hell?! I can’t believe you!” he yelled. “Tell me you fell for some kind of blackmail scheme! Just die already!”

“Yeah, well, see where that got me...” Icchi said. It seemed like he was returning to his senses and was going back to looking dispirited. “You guys are the lucky ones...” His voice was emotional—I could tell he wholeheartedly believed what he said. “Me? I’m in the graveyard of my life... Right at the first circle of hell...”

As Icchi covered his face, we were once again at a loss for words.

“Hm?” He took out his phone from his pants pocket and stared at the screen for a moment. Then he lifted his head and looked at us. “Sorry guys, I gotta bounce.”

"What's wrong?"

"Akari's not feeling well. It's Sunday, but when she called the hospital, they said to come for a checkup if she's worried. I gotta give her a lift."

"Wow..."

"That sounds rough... Take care."

"Thanks. Well, see ya."

Like a true student of the sciences, Icchi did the mental math to determine how much of the bill was his, put down some money, and left. Nisshi and I were dumbfounded for a while.

"Guess we should be going too."

"Yeah."

This kind of reminded me of the thing that'd happened with Chamotaro-san. Though back then, I couldn't possibly have imagined that Icchi would end up like this.

We strolled down the road leading to the station. It was early afternoon. On our left was a long concrete wall that separated the train tracks from the roadway. I stared at it as I walked on the wide sidewalk together with Nisshi. There was little conversation between us. Because there was so much room on the sidewalk, bicycles would sometimes pass right by us. It was dangerous, and I wished they'd stop.

Suddenly, Nisshi spoke up. "I think I'll say something to Nicole."

"Huh?"

"Christmas is coming up soon. When we see each other on Christmas Eve, I'm gonna ask to spend the night together." Nisshi wasn't looking at me. He kept his hands in the pockets of his pants as he walked. "It's almost funny how little of a mood there is between us... It's no different from when we were friends. But hey, it'll be a special day, so I can at least try asking, right? I'm her boyfriend, after all."

I nodded, since I knew what he was talking about. "Yeah, you're right."

"I know, okay? I know she probably doesn't want me to say it. She's the one dispersing any romance, making us be just friends."

Nisshi bit his lip. “It’s just... This is painful for me now. So even if she rejects me...then I’d be okay going back to being total strangers after that.” I could see the light of resolve in his eyes.

“So you’re going through with it.”

“I’ve made up my mind, yeah. We’re going out, after all.”

Those words gave me a start.

“It’s not right if I’m the only one putting up with things forever, don’t you think?” Nisshi added.

He was right.

Even if Runa didn’t want to have sex until we got married, it shouldn’t be wrong for me to say that I didn’t feel the same way.

“Happiness isn’t something that one party works hard to create. I think it comes when both parties walk toward each other.”

Remembering what Kitty-san had said reinforced that thought.

“Good luck,” I said.

Nisshi looked at me at last and smiled. “Same goes for you.”

It felt like he’d seen through me, which made me feel awkward. I smiled back at him without a word.

We split up, and when I got off at Station K, my phone vibrated—I was getting a call from Kamonohashi-sensei.

“Hello?”

I’d just passed through the ticket gates, so I answered the call while heading for the quiet park next to the station.

“How’re you doing?” asked Kamonohashi-sensei in his usual cheerful voice. “And how’re things with Kurose-san after all that? Is Sato-kun still making passes at her?”

“I think that’s really over with. Thank you so much again for your help that time.”

“Don’t worry about it. It was fun in its own way.”

The conversation broke off for a moment there. I grew nervous, not knowing what I should say to a manga artist of national recognition on the phone.

Actually...Kamonohashi-sensei seemed to take good care of the people close to him, but would he really call me just to find out how things had gone with Kurose-san after the whole thing?

And just as I thought that...

"Say..." he began. "It sounds like Fujinami-kun is quitting Iidabashi Publishing. You know anything about that?"

"What?!"

I couldn't keep my voice down out of astonishment. A few pigeons at the park flew away.

"What do you mean?!" I went on.

"Well, all of a sudden, he said he'll stop editing this year. I asked where the publisher is sending him next, and it kinda sounded like he's just quitting. He invited me out to eat together one last time, and we've already agreed on the date. Maybe that's when he's gonna break the news, but it's scary, you know?! Meeting people makes me anxious enough. I wish he'd just tell me already. Have you heard anything?"

I was overcome with surprise. "Huh...? No, not a thing..." I replied.

Fujinami-san had called his work fun and fulfilling, so this felt like a bolt out of the blue.

Kamonohashi-sensei continued speaking. "I thought he was gonna keep climbing the ranks, so I never saw this coming. You gotta assume there's some kinda problem, or maybe a scandal, right? Though it's fine if it's not like that, I guess."

"I don't think it is like that. I really haven't heard anything."

If something of that sort had happened and were to become a hot topic at the editing department, surely it would've even reached a part-timer like me. And even if it hadn't, I was confident I'd hear about it from Kurose-san as she talked to other editors.

"Well, okay... It's too bad, though. I thought we were gonna work on something together one of these days."

Kamonohashi-sensei sounded genuinely disappointed. He wasn't drawing any manga at present, but maybe he really *did* want to work if Fujinami-san was going to be his editor.

While this fueled my respect for Fujinami-san, it also brought back the question I'd asked him the other day that he'd never answered. And Raion-san's lyrics still weren't progressing.

"Um, Kamonohashi-sensei?"

"Hm?"

"Maybe this isn't the best time to ask, but...what skills would you say are required of an editor?"

"What? How would I know?! Ask an editor!"

So much for my resolve in asking.

"Yes, but I'd like to hear the perspective of a manga artist too."

Raion-san's lyrics were becoming a real problem, so, unusually for me, I didn't back down.

"Well... That's a tough one," he said. "Manga artists are highly individualistic. We all have different personalities and draw different things. For artists writing hard-boiled stuff, an editor more familiar with guns would be good, you know?"

That's not what I meant...

"Still, if it's possible, I think editors should like their artists. I try to like my editors too."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

I reached a bench at the park and sat down. Kids were running around on a circular grass clearing below, which was past a wide set of stairs.

"If a guy rips through your work like it's utter junk, you'd be more inclined to listen if you like and trust him, wouldn't you? I particularly got a lot of complaints from editors in my youth. But I listened to them because I could feel their love for my work and for me. Had it not been for that relationship, it would've been the same as random people talking trash online, you know? Well, I guess it's really not!"

Kamonohashi-sensei laughed for a moment.

"I know plenty of manga artists whose favorite editor is their wife. After all, we don't draw for critics—we draw for ordinary people who like manga and books. That's how it should be, normally. So you should say how you feel about the work from the perspective of an ordinary reader and without mincing words. That's where having a relationship built on trust becomes the most critical—it makes it so that the artist actually listens to what you say. Anyway, if I were to edit for someone, I'd first try to learn about them—read their past

works, casually ask them about their background and their private life... Knowing them better will make you like them. Though sometimes it does the opposite... And at that point, well, just be pragmatic and treat it as work! Gah ha!”

I felt like the reason I couldn’t give good advice to Raion-san lay within what Kamonohashi-san had just said.

For example, recently, I had given Kujibayashi-kun advice on how to message Kurose-san on LINE. And not to brag, but I was pretty sure that had gone much better than the thing with Raion-san.

Kujibayashi-kun and I had been friends for almost three years now. I knew his good points well, so even when he said things that didn’t make much sense, I was able to put up with it and try to pick up on what he really meant. He could probably sense that too, and did as I said in places where he could make concessions.

But as for Raion-san, I felt like I couldn’t come up with any advice for him because I didn’t know much about him.

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That night, Raion-san and I chatted over a video call.

“How are the lyrics coming along?” I asked.

Raion-san looked awkward. “Well... I was motivated right after that call the other day, but I work during the day, so I get sleepy at night...”

I could only laugh at such a shameless admission of total failure. Perhaps I had to hold his hand just as much as I’d done for Kujibayashi-kun.

And as part of that...

“When did you first want to be a singer and songwriter?”

Raion-san looked surprised by my question. “Well...” He stared at nothing in particular. “I graduated from high school, my mother got remarried, and going home wasn’t so easy anymore... I wondered what I should do, and that’s when I thought of becoming a singer and songwriter.” A nostalgic smile appeared on his face. “As a kid, I wasn’t good at studying, sports, or anything, really. The only time my mother praised me was when I sang, so I came to like singing.”

Raion-san chuckled as he recalled the past. “I sang random nonsense about stuff around me while I helped with the chores, like a dishwashing song and a laundry song. I’d use tunes I’d heard somewhere before. It made me happy to see my mother listen with a smile as I sang all sorts of songs.” Then, his expression clouded over. “So, at some point, I started to dream about making someone happy with my singing again... And that’s what got me here, where I’m being a burden on you and many others... I’m really sorry.” He lowered his head. “I can’t even finish a song for the girl I love without relying on other people so much... I’m pretty sure I have no talent.”

“That’s not true,” I said. “If you ask me, writing songs on your own is amazing enough.”

Raion-san smiled uncomfortably. “There was this other street musician I knew who got a CD out. He said he’d met popular singers and songwriters who made enough money to last them a lifetime, and he told me that they weren’t ordinary people like you and me. No matter what state they were in—whether they were happy enough to dance, or if they were hurting so badly that they might just keel over and die—words and melodies constantly flowed out of those people like a river. They were like monsters who’d die from their brains clotting up if they didn’t put everything into music. And those people had been like that from the moment they’d been born.” After saying that in a matter-of-fact tone, Raion-san quietly added, “I’m not like that.”

“I wouldn’t really...” I tried to deny it, but I found myself trailing off.

“But even though I’m nothing special, Kitty-chan praised my singing, just like my mother used to. It made me so happy... I couldn’t find the resolve to give it up...” Raion-san sounded both joyful and dejected. “Somewhere at the back of my mind, I’ve always had the idea of working at my uncle’s place. My mother must’ve also wanted me to work there, which was probably why she’d suggested I go to cooking school... But there wasn’t anything that would lead to it... Basically, Kitty-chan’s support was why I couldn’t give up singing, but she’s also what motivated me to face

reality.”

Raion-san paused for a moment, but then he went on, as if having changed his mind.

“Anyway, I want the last song I write to be the kind that would sincerely please Kitty-chan, even if it sounds ordinary to everyone else... But the thought of that puts so much pressure on me to write good lyrics, and the words just won’t come out...”

His words gave me an idea. Perhaps I’d be able to help after all.

In contrast to the flash of inspiration I’d just gotten, the look on Raion-san’s face kept growing darker.

“But if I can’t come up with anything after so much time, it might be impossible after all. Maybe I should just give up and go apologize to her, no matter how pathetic it would be...”

“Don’t say that. Let’s try one more time,” I said firmly, hoping to reassure him. “Can you tell me about some of your memories with Kitty-san?”

“Huh?” Raion-san looked surprised at that.

“I just realized something. What this song probably lacks is specificity,” I explained. “If you want it to resonate with Kitty-san, and Kitty-san alone, instead of it becoming a generic love song, I’d say you should sing about things from your life together. Specific things instead of using abstract concepts.”

I was glad I’d asked him to tell me about himself. I eagerly continued to talk about my idea.

“Choose some memories of the two of you and write them into the lyrics. I’ll help you decide which ones to use and how to structure them.”

The look on Raion-san’s face was grave. “That’s pretty difficult...” he said.

“It’s not. You just told me that as a child, you’d sing about things around you and your mother praised your singing, remember?”

“Oh...”

“You also once mentioned how you and Kitty-san hit it off because of your kira-kira names when you first met. Tell me about more times like that. Let’s write lyrics from those situations, together.”

Raion-san gave me an exaggerated nod. “Very well. Thank you again.”

That day marked the start of our work on the lyrics.

And so, Raion-san’s final song as a singer-songwriter was completed the day before Christmas Eve.

Chapter 4.5: A Private Conversation Between Akari-chan and Mia

Akari-chan and Mia had once again met up for drinks at a café located in a fashion mall in Tokyo. The two girls were sitting across a table from each other.

Akari-chan's face was pale, and she was covering her mouth with a hand towel.

"Ugh..."

"Are you okay?" asked Mia, placing a hand on Akari-chan's shoulder in worry. "We could've just put this off until you're feeling better..."

Akari-chan shook her head. "It's fine. I wanted to see you..." she said, removing the hand towel from her mouth. "I had to quit my job already because my morning sickness is real bad... When I'm at home, I'm just vomiting all day. It feels horrible."

Mia looked at her in concern. "Well, if you say you're fine..."

"It is. I'm the type of person who feels sick when I'm hungry. I'll still feel like throwing up even if I eat, but I won't actually get sick."

"That's a thing?" Mia's smile was humorless.

Akari-chan forced a smile too. "I went to submit our marriage papers the other day. On Good Spouses Day."

"Congratulations."

Mia smiled genuinely this time, but Akari-chan forced another one.

"It's funny," Akari-chan began. "Yusuke works himself to exhaustion every day and only comes home to sleep, and I have no energy the whole day. Gotta wonder how we're supposed to be good spouses."

“Have you bought rings?”

“Not yet. We’re planning to get them at some point, but since Yusuke has no money yet, that’s out of the question for now. And we can’t rely on his parents at all. We’re currently scrambling to save up just to have the baby.”

“I see.” Mia slowly lowered her gaze. “But wow... You’re already a wife and a mother.”

“Still doesn’t feel that way, though. I just have a huge stomach and terrible morning sickness. At this point, come what may, I guess.”

Maintaining her forced expression, Akari-chan patted her stomach. It wasn’t all that big yet—it was just large enough to make it look like she’d eaten too much a few minutes ago.

She looked at Mia, seeming to feel better for the time being. “How are things on your end? Any developments with that guy from Houo?”

“Him? We chat on LINE. Every few days.”

“Wait, really?! What kinda miracle happened since last time?!”

“Do you want to take a look?” With that, Mia picked up her phone from the table and held it out to Akari-chan.

“You bet I do! Wow, this is actually a normal conversation. What you showed me last time was so crazy, though.”

“Yeah.” Smiling awkwardly, Mia took her phone back and looked at its screen. “I feel like Kashima-kun is giving him advice on how to write these.”

“What, really? Why?”

“I can’t explain it very well...but it just kind of feels like he’s the one talking. But there’s also quite a lot of parts that aren’t him...” A natural smile appeared on Mia’s face as she silently reread the conversation on her phone. “And that’s probably his friend’s real self. I don’t mind, so I’m going along with it.”

“Huh... I can imagine Kashima-kun being very caring, but would he really go so far as to give advice to another guy every time he needs to send something on LINE? Like, especially with how often you’ve been talking.”

Mia lowered her eyes. “Yeah, I guess maybe this doesn’t have

anything to do with Kashima-kun...” She put on a self-deprecating smile as if admitting she’d been overthinking things. “But I feel like I now understand why they’re friends.” Smiling gently, she added, as if talking to herself, “Even I’m starting to think that guy’s all right.”

Chapter 5

It was finally Christmas Eve.

As Runa and I waited at the open space in front of Yokosuka-chuo Station, Christmas Eve of our second year of high school was on my mind.

"I wonder if Kitty will like it..." Runa said anxiously.

Taking her hand, I nodded. "It'll be fine."

"Ryuto..." Runa firmly returned my grip. "Thanks. I'm sorry... I'm always getting you involved in my family problems. It was like that in high school too."

"I was just remembering that time."

Christmas Eve fell on a Sunday this year, and the station was seeing a lot of foot traffic. It wasn't particularly cold today, but now that evening was arriving, there was a wintry chill in the air. People pulled their coats tighter around them as they walked. Since Runa and I were standing in place, we warmed up by huddling together instead.

It was 5 p.m., and as the sun set and our surroundings grew dark, the decorative lights came on.

As Raion-san had said, the open space by the station had a big tree that was two or three stories tall. Its trunk and branches were decorated with blue lights as though it were a Christmas tree.

Next to it, Raion-san began his street performance.

"Please give a listen to 'Christmas Eve.'"

He kicked things off with a popular Christmas song. The vast majority of people didn't stop for him, but as his choice of song fit the season, there were a couple of people who listened while waiting.

Raion-san had permission from the police to use the area, and since he was just singing while playing guitar, he didn't occupy enough space to interfere with the flow of traffic.

Runa had been looking anxious for a while. Seeing her like that made me notice once again that she'd become an adult.

In our second year of high school, Runa had planned a Christmas Eve dinner that would bring her parents back together. But her father had brought Misuzu-san there, which had wrecked Runa's plan hard enough that she'd ended up with a fever. That day, there hadn't been a cloud on Runa's face until she'd seen her father's new partner. She'd had complete faith in the dinner's success.

But now that she'd experienced failure, she knew that sometimes one's feelings couldn't reach the other person. Yet she still wished for it as her cold hand gripped mine.

"Thank you," said Raion-san as he finished up a song. "This last number is one I wrote for my beloved."

I scanned the crowd and found Kurose-san and Kitty-san standing a few meters away from us. The latter was using the former to prop herself up and was looking at Raion-san with disbelief written on her face.

"Please give a listen to...'Kitten and Lion.'"

Raion-san began playing the intro on the guitar. It was a tune I must've heard dozens of times already.

This song had been born for this moment alone. Raion-san and I had put our heart and soul into it over the past two weeks.

It might have sounded like a generic, unremarkable love song to other people, but there was only one person in the whole world that it needed to resonate with—Kitty-san.

With that wish on my mind, I listened to the song that I'd already heard enough to get sick of.

I remember the day we met.
You were a kitten as light as three apples.
I was a gentle king of beasts.
"That's not a human name," we both laughed.
I thanked the miracle that brought us together.

I remember the day we first fought.
You had an umbrella you'd held dear.

I lost it on a rainy day.
I bought a new one for you.
But you cried and said it had to be the old one.
I understand now how you felt.
I'm sorry about back then.
Because it has to be you for me as well.

Flower-patterned mugs.
Silver key rings.
Converse sneakers.
Our matching things multiplied,
And so did the love for you in my heart.
Whenever I close my eyes, I remember your smile,
When you said we might as well get the same things,
And bought two of each.

But I was weak.
I couldn't grow, and I couldn't stand it.
Wishing for it with all my being,
I turned my back on your smile.
But in the end,
I realized,
That no matter the distance between us,
I still love you so much.

I still don't have it in me to say,
That I was born to protect you.
But I know I can be by your side, so much you'll get tired of me.
So let this timid heart of a lion,
Protect that kitten face of yours.
Because from now on,
I'll never let go of you again.

The song ended, and sparse clapping could be heard. When I'd looked at Runa during the song, there'd been tears in her eyes. Kitty-san was crying too—she was covering her face with both hands

while Kurose-san supported her.

"Kitty-chan," said Raion-san, facing her.

He put his guitar in the case on the ground nearby and proceeded to walk toward her.

"I'm sorry for leaving all of a sudden. I've been working at my uncle's place these past three months...and this is what I spent the money on." He took a small box out of his pocket and knelt before Kitty-san. He opened it. "Will you marry me?"

I couldn't see it from where we were standing, but there must've been a ring in there.

The sudden, dramatic development caused more passersby to stop and watch than the performance had.

With tears still pouring out of her eyes, Kitty-san gazed at Raion-san and said, "Yes...!"



***

After that, all five of us—Kitty-san, Raion-san, Kurose-san, Runa, and I—went to Kitty-san's place.

We sat at the table in front of the TV stand in that cramped one-room apartment, and Kitty-san told her boyfriend how she'd felt over the past three months.

"We were together all this time, and I had no idea what was on your mind..." she said. "You should've just told me everything... Do you have any idea how sad I was...?"

"I'm sorry," replied Raion-san, looking awkward. "Sometimes, when you looked at social media, you'd mention that someone got married. At some point, it all began to sound like you were putting pressure on me... It made me anxious to do something, but I couldn't act on that feeling... You're older than me, you're kind, you provided for me, and you took care of me every day... It felt like being here was turning me into a deadbeat, and I realized that my only option was to get out."

Kitty-san sobbed convulsively as she listened.

"But from now on, we'll always be together."

After Raion-san said that, Kitty-san raised her face.

On her left ring finger was the ring Raion-san had given her earlier. It was shining.

"You mean it?" she asked. "You really, really mean it?"

"I really, really mean it," Raion-san replied firmly.

Kitty-san's tears finally stopped, and joy spread through her face instead. "I love you, Rai-kun!"

"Whoa!"

As Kitty-san threw her arms around him and pressed her ample chest against him, he looked bothered by the rest of us being here.

"K-Kitty-chan?! Stop, we're not alone..."

"No! I'm not gonna stop! When are we registering our marriage?!" She pulled away from Raion-san and stared at him with sparkling eyes.

"Huh?"

Amid his confusion, Kitty-san clapped her hands. “Oh, right! We should visit Mom and Dad right away!” She grabbed her bag and got up.

“What, right now?!” asked Runa in surprise.

“Yep! I hear it’s best not to put these things off!”

“We might not be able to get back home tonight!” Raion-san protested.

“Well, so what? We could just stay somewhere for the night! It’s Christmas Eve and all.”

“A-Are you sure about this, Kitty-chan?! I’m not dressed for it!” said Raion-san in a fluster. He was wearing his usual casual clothes.

“It’s fiiine! We’re talking about my parents here. There’s no way they’re gonna care about that!”

Kitty-san’s fashionable looks made it sound oddly convincing.

And so, the two of them got ready in a hurry and headed out.

“See ya, everyone, and thanks! I’m gonna be happy! ♡”

“Thank you, everyone!” said Raion-san.

He kept bowing to us over and over while Kitty-san was waving her hand, radiating happiness, until the door closed.

“Are they really gonna be okay...?” Runa asked. There was worry in her eyes.

I smiled reassuringly. “I’m sure they will be.”

It was a groundless statement, but that was how I felt.

Kitty-san liked looking after people, loved deeply, and freely expressed her emotions. That feminine side of hers was part of her appeal, but she also made you worried about what she might do. She was impulsive and a little childlike.

Raion-san, at first glance, looked like your average wimpy guy of today’s younger generation, but he was so sincere and his heart was so pure that you felt the urge to extend a helping hand to him. He was also able to look at things objectively and think far ahead before acting.

They were a really good match. I was sure they’d be able to support each other well into the future. And now that Raion-san had actually started working and could be confident in himself as a man, his heart of a gentle lion would surely make him protect his “kitten.”

I couldn’t help but feel moved as I sat there. And then, the door reopened—Raion-san had returned, alone.

“Did you forget something?” asked Runa.

“No... I mean, yes.” He sat in the seiza position before me. “Ryuto-san.”

“Yes?”

“Thank you so much!”

He lowered his head to the point of prostrating himself. It flustered me. I reached out to get him to get up on an impulse.

“Hey, stop that,” I said.

Raion-san took my hands and lifted his head. He stared at me with moist eyes, as if he were about to start crying at any moment. “I couldn’t have finished that song on my own. It was all thanks to you. I’m sure you’ll make a good editor.”

“Raion-san...”

Now *I* was the one feeling emotional. I was at a loss for words.

“And I’m sorry,” he continued. “I spent too much money and can’t repay you in any way. I wish I’d put some aside.”

“Don’t worry about it.” I returned his grip. “What you said is enough to make me glad I helped.”

Raion-san deeply nodded without a word once more, then got up. “Really, thank you so much.”

With that, he left for good.

Now that it was only three of us in the apartment, it felt slightly bigger.

“Well, I should be going too.” Kurose-san got up from the bed, holding her coat and bag. “I’m meeting a friend from my university who lives in Yokohama for dinner at seven.”

“What?! Is it a guy?!” Runa asked in excitement.

Kurose-san smiled awkwardly. “It’s a girl, of course. Who else do you think would invite me out on a day like this?”

She took her time to get ready and left.

Now alone together in this small one-room apartment, Runa and I exchanged looks. It was 6 p.m.

“What should *we* do...? We could get something to eat... I guess

I’m hungry,” said Runa.

“I guess I didn’t think about what to do after all that...” I replied.

Since we hadn’t known how things would go with Kitty-san and Raion-san, it had been difficult to plan ahead. Kurose-san was smart to have made plans anyway.

“We could go out to eat somewhere, but all the good places must be fully booked by now,” Runa said.

“Yeah, since it’s Christmas Eve...”

“Well, I guess here will have to do? What should I make for dinner...?”

“Huh? Oh... Is that okay? But thank you, though.”

I much preferred Runa’s home cooking to us eating in a restaurant full of couples. That would make me mind the eyes around us.

“A’ight, I’m gonna go make something.” Runa put on an apron that must’ve belonged to Kitty-san and opened the fridge. “There’re eggs, sausages...precooked rice... Hmm...” She looked at me. “Ryuto, would you rather have fried rice or omurice?”

“Huh? Fried rice, I guess.”

“Are you sure? Isn’t omurice more Christmassy?”

“Well, if you put it that way.”

I’d simply chosen fried rice because I’d wanted to eat that more. That was just how men were, you know? Though maybe it was just me. And it might’ve had something to do with the image of Icchi shoveling fried rice into his mouth still being at the back of my mind.

“Well, if you want fried rice, I’ll make that.” Runa smiled and looked into the fridge again. “Oh hey, there’s minced onions! You really did choose correctly. ♡”

Thus, fried rice was the main dish of our Christmas dinner.

***

The two plates on the small table that held our fried rice were, predictably, a matching pair that only differed in color. The bits of light-brown egg stuck to the rice looked delicious and roused my appetite.

“Want something to drink? Though there’s only this, since it’s Kitty’s place.” Runa took out a strong chuhai from the fridge and showed it to me.

“Nah, I’ll pass. Is there any oolong tea or something?”

After witnessing Kitty-san downing those things in one go and getting sloshed, the idea of drinking them myself was kind of scary.

“There’s a bottle of green tea. It’s room temperature, though,” Runa said.

“That works. It’s winter, anyway.”

The elements of our dinner were slightly mismatched, but I couldn’t be more grateful.

“Well, here goes...” I said and dug in. “Yeah, this is great.”

“Glad to hear it! None of the flavors are too strong, are they?”

“This is perfect, actually.”

“Really? I’ll keep that in mind!”

With that, Runa carried her spoon to her mouth. It too matched my own, with the only difference being the color.

We were alone in a cramped one-room apartment.

Kitty-san had lived here with Raion-san, and there were traces of that everywhere, making it feel almost like I was living together with Runa... How could I *not* be conscious of it?

I grew restless and couldn’t focus my thoughts. The more sated my stomach was, the more I could feel a different desire on the rise —the one that had been bothering me ever since that night in Okinawa.

“Thanks for the meal,” I said, putting down my spoon.

Runa looked surprised. “Wait, you’re already done? Did you have enough?”

“I did. The food was just that delicious.”

“Oh...? That’s good to hear. ♡” Runa smiled happily. “Oh, Ryuto?”

When Runa called my name, I looked beside me and found that matching spoon floating next to my mouth.

“‘Ah.’ ♡”

I opened my mouth as instructed. The spoon bumped into my

teeth, somehow causing a prickly sensation deep in my nose.

I was happy. I was already so pleased with what I had...but I couldn't help wanting even more happiness.

I didn't want to hurt Runa. I wanted to make her happy too. But holding back had become unbearably painful.

"What?! What's wrong, Ryuto...?"

Runa was surprised. She couldn't hide how confused she was that I had suddenly begun to cry without a word.

Even *I* didn't know why I was crying.

"Runa..."

As pathetic as it was to admit, I hadn't made anything out of myself yet. Like always, Runa was a few steps ahead of me.

But now, I felt like I was close to latching on to something. This feeling came from what I'd heard from Raion-san and Kujibayashi-kun, as well as what I'd learned from watching Fujinami-san and listening to Kamonohashi-sensei.

From now on, I wanted to use that feeling as a guide. I would surely become a man who could make Runa happy.

And that meant there was something I had to say to her.

My tears had come from thinking about all these things.

"Happiness isn't something that one party works hard to create. I think it comes when both parties walk toward each other."

"I've made up my mind, yeah. We're going out, after all. It's not right if I'm the only one putting up with things forever, don't you think?"

It felt like those words from Kitty-san and Nisshi were giving me a gentle push on the back.

"I'm thinking of becoming an editor."

It had been far from a shocking realization. The idea had gradually formed in me while I'd advised Kujibayashi-kun how to proceed with his LINE chats and had written lyrics together with Raion-san.

"I'm going to put in the work to get there. Though I still need to think about the exact steps I need to take..."

Runa watched me intently with a serious look on her face.

I continued. “Of course, I’m thinking about what comes after that too, and I know I’m in the period of my life where I need to build the foundation for us to be together forever... And if anything happens, I’m prepared to make whatever sacrifice necessary and take full responsibility, like Icchi... But still.” Unable to look at Runa, I kept staring at my empty plate—all of my fried rice was gone. “I just really love you...” At that point, I forced myself to look at Runa’s face. “And I want to do it...” It felt like I was wringing the voice out of the back of my throat. “I’m sorry, I can’t hold back anymore...”

As Runa stared at me, her eyes grew teary. “Ryuto...” Her voice was overflowing with emotions. “I’m so happy to hear you say that...” she said. She lowered her eyes and covered her mouth.

I hadn’t expected that response from her.

“I didn’t think you’d say it... It’s like I’m dreaming...” Runa went on.

“Huh...?” I stared closely at her face. “But Runa, didn’t you say that after coming this far, we might as well get married first...?”

“I thought so, rationally. But despite that, I’ve always wanted to become one with you. And most importantly...” Runa blushed. “I wanted you to want me. That time at the end of our second year of high school, and in Okinawa, it’s like I was always the one pushing for it... It was a little embarrassing, as a girl.”

“Runa...”

I hadn’t the slightest idea.

The reason I hadn’t made a move on Runa was that the day we’d started dating, I’d promised I’d wait until she wanted to have sex. And at the end of our second year of high school, she’d said she wanted it, but we’d missed that first opportunity due to various reasons. Then, I’d had to study for my entrance exams, and once that had come to an end, Runa’s new sisters had been born, and we’d barely had time for each other anymore.

“All this time, I wanted to do it,” I said. “Ever since that day you invited me into your house and offered to take a shower.”

Runa’s hands lowered from her mouth, and I gripped them firmly. They were hot.

“The truth is, I’ve been holding back like crazy. All this time, I’ve been having sex with you inside my mind every day.”

Runa’s eyes wavered as she watched me. I could tell that she was both happy and feeling bashful.

“I always held back when we were alone together. It was really painful that night in Enoshima... And on Christmas Eve in our second year of high school, if you didn’t have a fever, I probably couldn’t have restrained myself either... Then there was the school trip, and that time we went to look at cherry blossoms... It was always so hard to endure it.”

“Ryuto...” At last, tears spilled from Runa’s eyes, and she squeezed my hands just as tightly. “I’m so glad to hear that...” She then released my hands and embraced me. “Ryuto...”

I’d been sitting cross-legged, and Runa took off her apron and sat on my lap, as though it wasn’t enough for just our chests to be touching.

Her hot breath hit the nape of my neck.

“Your scent...” Runa said.

She took in a few more breaths, her exhalations tickling the fine hairs on my neck.

“Runa...” With a smile on my lips, I tightened my arms that were wrapped around her.

“Ngh... It’s hard to breathe...”

“Oh, sorry...” I quickly relaxed my grip.

I got paranoid, wondering if she looked down on me. I was a virgin who didn’t know how much strength to use when holding a girl.

“You don’t get it.” Runa gripped me even tighter. “I want you to make it even harder for me to breathe.”

She was probably giving it all she could, but as she was a girl, her arms were soft, and she wasn’t very strong. Her holding me tightly was entirely pleasant.

“Runa...”

I drew her close again, this time being careful not to apply too much strength. Our chests were glued to each other, and Runa’s soft breasts shifted in the space between us like a cushion would. Pulling

her closer to me squished them more, and I could feel our ribs touching below them. They immediately restored their shape when I loosened my arms slightly, and it was like they were trying to push me away. The sensation was erotic, and I was getting hooked—I kept tightening and loosening my arms around Runa over and over.

"Ryuto..." Runa's breaths against the nape of my neck became shallow, growing even hotter.

"Runa..."

We pulled apart slightly and stared at each other at close proximity. Then, we drew our lips together as if pulled by a magnetic force.

After a few awkward kisses, Runa brought her mouth to my ear.

"Open your mouth," she whispered.

My ear burned.

I knew I must've been making a stupid face, but Runa looked incredibly sexy as her face neared mine. Her lips were parted slightly. I hoped that I was the only one in the whole world who'd ever see her looking like this.

Her tongue moved around inside my mouth. After I struggled to wrap my tongue around hers, Runa slowly pulled away, and her mouth neared my ear again.

"Just relax..."

I did as I was told, enjoying the intoxicating sensation of our hot, wet tongues melting together as they moved around inside my mouth.

It was incredible. I wanted to feel Runa more.

She was still sitting in my lap, and her butt kept growing hotter against my thighs. She moved her hips so as to grind against me.

"Runa..."

Going crazy from arousal, I slid my hand into the neckline of Runa's dress.

Today, she had been wearing a white knit dress that hung off her shoulders and reached her thighs. Its large, V-shaped opening provided a clear view of her cleavage and collarbones. Underneath her dress, I could see what looked like a camisole, if I was remembering the right term.

When I tried to slide the dress down Runa's shoulders, she smiled. "It'll get stretched out, so pull it up."

"Oh, uh, sorry!"

I should've realized that stretching it would make it too big for her. I was embarrassed that I'd forgotten myself so much in the act, along with my lack of experience in undressing a girl.

While Runa had been sitting in my lap and moving around, her dress had ridden up. The fabric had covered her thighs before, but now, they were mostly exposed.

I lifted the bottom hem of her dress. This wasn't my first time seeing Runa in her underwear, but when her white panties came into view, the heat between my legs felt like a fire had started there.

Now left in only her white panties and black camisole top, Runa smoothly wrapped her arms around me as if to block my view.

"I'll undress you too," she whispered in my ear. Then, she slipped her hands into the space between my sweater and my undershirt.

Once I was topless, something occurred to me. "Oh, uh... Do you want to take a bath first?" I asked.

Runa didn't seem to have expected that. She smiled at me with upturned eyes. "What do *you* want to do?"

Her bright lipstick had worn off over the course of us making out, leaving her lips a gentle pink. Their blurred contours, as though they were swollen from the moisture, were downright sexy.

"We didn't have PE today, so I'm probably not sweaty." Runa smiled in an amused but suggestive way.

It made me remember what I'd heard in her room four and a half years ago.

"So you're the type who doesn't need to shower first?"

"We had PE today, so I might be sweaty. It's embarrassing..."

After saying that, she'd proceeded to undo the ribbon of her uniform and reached for her shirt's buttons. The sight of it had been so shocking that it was still burned into my retinas.

I'd always thought that maybe I was the only one for whom that experience had been anything special. It made me happy that Runa also remembered what she'd said that day.

"I don't want to bother," I replied, my mind feverish.

Runa smiled. “You got it. ♡”

Her graceful arms coiled around my neck like snakes. But suddenly, they were gone.

“I’m gonna go lock the door.”

Runa got up and went to the entrance. The sound of the lock clicking was followed by the jingling of a chain.

“Now, even if Kitty and Raion-san change their minds and come back, they won’t be able to get in!” said Runa with a smile after returning to where I was. She proceeded to sit on my lap again. As I buried my face in her camisole-clad chest, she laughed like I was tickling her. “You’re like a baby, Ryuto. It’s so cute. ♡” She smiled as I relentlessly pressed my head against her, and she hugged my head. “Take it off already...” she said, giggling.

“R-Right...”

I clumsily pulled it up and over her head. I could now see her bra, which was the same shade of white as her panties. Now that she was left in white lingerie on the top and the bottom, she looked holy, like a goddess from Greek mythology or something.

I reached around to her back to remove the bra that was propping up her round, heavy-looking bosom.

“Huh...?” I tried to unhook it just by feeling around for it, but wasn’t having much success. “Uhh...”

It was embarrassing that it was so obvious that I wasn’t used to this. I was fumbling badly enough to get flustered.

Runa giggled again, raised herself a bit, and turned her back toward me. “Here you go. ♡”

Her back was slender and beautiful with curves near her waist. I stared at her, captivated, and successfully unhooked her bra.

“Runa...?” I called out—she was taking her time turning back around.

She looked over her shoulder, only moving her face toward me. “It’s embarrassing...” she said, blushing.

The way she did that lit a fire in me, and I moved so I was in front of her. Now that her bra was no longer being held by its hooks and shoulder straps, Runa was propping it up with her hands.

She giggled once our eyes met. “I was going to show it to you

four and a half years ago, you know...” Runa said with a bashful smile. “It wouldn’t have been embarrassing at all back then.”

“Why is it embarrassing now?” I asked, half out of pure curiosity.

Runa smiled. “Because I now love you for real.”

She coyly wrapped her arms around my neck again and moved her bra away with a slight motion. Our chests now bare, Runa softly pressed hers against mine as though trying to make them stick together.

I’d never known a sensation this pleasant even existed.

“Ryutooo...” called Runa’s sweet voice from next to my ear.

From my heart to the corners of my brain, Runa was filling me to the brim. I loved her the way she was in every memory that I had of her. If we’d had sex back in high school when I’d first visited her house, my feelings for her would surely have never reached such heights.

It wasn’t enough that just our chests were touching. I reached out for hers.

“Ngh...” Runa shut her eyes as she moaned.

Feeling the heaviness of her breast in my hand, I began to trace the center of it with my thumb. Runa moaned again, arching her back and moving her hips. The touch of her butt, warm and slightly sweaty, felt good against my boner.

“Ryuto...” Runa reached toward the zipper of my pants. “Your turn to take stuff off,” she said, breathing heavily.

She unzipped my pants, and I slid them off myself.

“Take these off too,” said Runa as she touched my underwear. She was still wearing hers.

Thus, I was the first one to end up in my birthday suit.

“D-Don’t look too much, Runa...”

She was staring hard at me, so I covered it with my hands out of embarrassment.

Runa looked at me with a seductive smile and those upturned eyes of hers. “If I can’t see it, I can’t give it head pats, can I?”

Give it head pats...? She wants to do that...? It’s embarrassing... Though it’s hot too.

No, but really, it’s too embarrassing. And she must’ve seen other

guys'...

As I stared at the floor, feeling inferior, Runa brought her lips to my ear and quietly said, "It's the most handsome one in the world. ♡"

"Runa..."

It moved me and aroused me even more, all at the same time.

"Give me a second..." I said. I lifted my hips a bit as I got a condom out.

"Looking for one of these?" Runa said, handing me one.

"Wait, you have them too?"

I could tell the condom she was holding wasn't mine because it was different from the one I'd been carrying around all the time.

A gentle smile appeared on Runa's face. "I've had this on me since forever. I wanted to be ready no matter when you decided to make a move on me."

"Runa..."

"Oh, but hold on a sec." She smiled meaningfully at me. "Would you like a taste of what I didn't get to do in Okinawa? You can see the results of my practice..."

With that, she tucked the hair hanging by one side of her face behind her ear and buried her face between my legs.

***

Until now, I'd imagined hundreds, no, *thousands* of times, how it would feel to be inside Runa. But the ecstatic pleasure of the real thing far exceeded my expectations.

She was tender with me as though caressing a precious treasure, and I finished while inside her over and over.

Honestly, I wasn't confident that I managed to satisfy her. But she *did* seem to enjoy it from start to finish, and her moans were continuously sweet. She also stayed abundantly wet throughout as her crevice flooded with nectar.

Runa's naked body was truly gorgeous. Her curves were smooth like those of Venus in the paintings. She was soft all over, her youthful skin silky against my fingers.

Of course, I'd already known that much, more or less. But it had been four and a half years since I'd confessed to Runa and she'd brought me to her house while nobody had been home. And today, on Christmas Eve, in an unplanned turn of events in her sister's small one-room apartment, I knew Runa in full for the first time.

***

After we had cuddled for long enough, we went to take a bath together.

The apartment had a small, modular bathroom with a bathtub so compact that we couldn't stretch our legs out side by side. After filling the tub with hot water, we got in and sat next to each other, resting our knees on the edges of the tub.

"I love how we barely fit in this thing," said Runa with a laugh.

The water only reached up to our lower chests.

Runa had washed her long hair earlier, and now it sat gathered and pinned up with a hair clip. Even now, with her wet straggling hair sticking to the white nape of her neck and her face free of makeup, she still looked beautiful.



"This is like a crouched burial," I said.

"What's that?"

"An ancient burial method. You didn't learn about that in history class?"

"Wow, look at this university graduate making fun of me! Uggghhh!"

"Aha ha. But I haven't graduated yet either."

"Well... There's at least one thing you've graduated from today, hmm?"

Runa stared at me with a suggestive smile. The pleasant, bashful feeling inside me made me avert my eyes.

"I... I *guess* so. Yeah."

"Aha. Why're you talking like that? You're just like me."

"Like you? What do you mean?"

"I sometimes do that kinda thing with Nicole."

"Ah, then yeah, maybe that's it."

"What's it?"

"You're rubbing off on me," I explained, having internally made sense of the matter. "You know how people and their friends and family will start speaking and writing in similar ways?"

"Ah, that makes sense... I guess we've grown similar."

"We're only getting started on that front," I replied. "Because we'll be together forever."

I grew worried that what I said was somewhat corny, so I looked at Runa, wanting her to say something back. And that was when I noticed something off about her.

"What's wrong...?" I asked.

Tears were spilling from Runa's eyes. For a moment, I thought it was just water or sweat since we were in the bath, but the way her eyes and nose were red made it clear.

Runa sniffled. "This is my first time hearing something like that from a guy after doing it," she said, hanging her head. "They'd all say sweet and passionate things before...but you're the first that I've had so much fun talking to after the fact." Runa looked absorbed in thought as she recalled the past. "They'd just say that guys get tired after finishing and wouldn't even talk to me... I couldn't even get

them to look me in the eye...”

I wondered what I found so attractive about her sorrowful eyes. We’d just made love to each other so passionately, and yet I once again felt the urge to embrace her.

“All this time, I thought that all guys were just like that, so I assumed you’d be that way too. But you’re different in *everything*. I never met a guy like you before.” Runa stared intently at me. “Why are you like that? How are you so kind?”

I wiped her tears on her cheek, spreading out the moisture because my hands were wet. Then, with a bashful smile, I replied, “Because we love each other for real.”

As we sat side by side in the cramped bathtub in that crouched burial pose, the two of us hugged each other once again. Runa cried a little more in my arms.

Chapter 5.5: A Long Phone Call Between Runa and Nicole

"And so Ryuto and I finally did it!"

"Congrats! But damn, that sure took a while."

"No kidding! It was practically my first time! Though I guess that's a cheeky thing to say, heh heh..."

"Heh."

"It's just... I'm really glad."

"What, are you talking about your first time?"

"No! Like, I've been going out with Ryuto for so long, and my memories of dating other guys kept getting overwritten so often. I kinda felt like they were practically all gone."

"Right."

"But it turns out there still were some, since I never got down to business with Ryuto before."

"Makes sense."

"I feel like those got overwritten too when I did it with him."

"Uh-huh."

"That's what I'm so happy about. If we do it a lot from now on, my memories of sex should all become just happy times with Ryuto."

"I guess so."

"But man, it was *so* embarrassing, even though we've been dating for four years! I imagined his thing a lot, but it was my first time actually seeing it."

"How was it? Compared to your imagination."

"Well, it was so much..."

"C'mon, out with it."

"So much more handsome. ♡"

"Wow, I feel stupid for asking!"

"I knew *he* wasn't experienced, but I was a total amateur

myself... We kinda took our sweet time with everything. Heh heh."

"Sounds like you two are a good match."

"Yep. ♡"

"Ugh, this happy aura of yours is killing me!"

"C'mon, is that all the congratulations I'm gonna get?!"

"I *am* congratulating you. Deep inside."

"Say it!"

"Congratulations. Seriously. I'm glad things worked out for you two."

"Heh heh, thanks."

"I'm so glad... I mean it..."

"Nicole...?"

"I want you to be happy... And for you to fill in for me on that..."

"Wait, are you...crying...?"

"Congratulations..."

"Huh...? Thanks..."

"I'm so happy for you...Runa..."

"Nicole...?"

"Man, I don't know what I should do with myself anymore..."

"Nicole? Wait, what's wrong? Did something happen?"

On the other end of the line, Nicole continued to cry without answering Runa's question. As Runa held her phone to her ear, her best friend's behavior left her entirely confused.

Epilogue

When I showed up to work at the editing department the next day, my mind wasn't entirely there.

Fujinami-san called out to me. "Kashima-kun, what do you say to having lunch together today?"

"What? Sure..."

Since my school's winter break had started, I'd been taking on morning shifts. Kurose-san, on the other hand, still usually came in the evenings. She wasn't here yet today.

Fujinami-san and I went to have lunch at 1 p.m.—just the two of us. We went to a fancy place that served curry with a narrow entrance but with a refined ambience. Fujinami-san took the lead, and we sat across from each other at a two-person table by the wall with stools as high as those near the counter. The only customers besides us were three people sitting at the counter. There were empty seats between them.

"You may have already heard this from somebody..." Fujinami-san began after a sip of water while we waited for our curry, "but I'm leaving the company at the end of the month."

It didn't come as a surprise since I'd heard about it from Kamonohashi-sensei on the phone. This place was a little too neat for two guys to have lunch—Fujinami-san had probably chosen to take me here to bring up this very topic.

"Why...?" I asked timidly.

"I'm starting a company with some folks. We've been doing things behind the scenes until now, but the amount of work has grown to the point where my current position has become inconvenient." Fujinami-san spoke without a hint of hesitation. "We want to publish things overseas. I don't mean translating existing manga and light novels, but creating new properties outside of

Japan while using Japanese otaku entertainment as the model. Basically, we want to do things like support creators in other places, work with Japanese people who already have overseas connections, and things like that. Anyway, the goal is to then translate those works into Japanese and reimport them here. We hope to start a new trend in Japanese otaku culture with this. Kind of like what happened with webtoons."

"Huh..." It all sounded so grand and ambitious that I just couldn't come up with a better reply on the spot.

"You're in your third year of school, right? I'll still be busy getting things up and running next year, but we should be ready to hit the ground running the year after. So..." Fujinami-san made a brief dramatic pause. "If you graduate, I'd like to hire you on as an editor. What do you say?"

I couldn't immediately come up with a reply.

Watching me, Fujinami-san lowered his voice. "Trust me, even if you stick with your current job, you don't have a high chance of getting hired full-time at Iidabashi Publishing. And even if some other publisher hires you, there's no guarantee you'll get to be an editor there either. A lot of aspiring editors get hired but end up stuck working in sales and management permanently."

I remained silent.

"I think you're suited to become an editor, so I'd really like to bring you with us."

Wait...

"Bring me with you? You mean, overseas?" I asked.

"Some of our work will be handled in Japan, but for the most part, yes. Especially for a while after we get started."

Huh... So my full-time job would immediately take me out of Japan... What should I do about Runa?

"Is it your girlfriend you're worried about?" asked Fujinami-san as I stayed quiet.

He knew that I was dating Kurose-san's older twin sister.

"Just marry her and bring her with you!" he said.

"What?!"

"We haven't made a final decision on where we'll operate out of

yet, but we're looking at somewhere in Southeast Asia. It's cheap there, and you can live like a celebrity with a personal maid—my partners' wives can't wait!"

I was totally flustered. "But wait, you want me to get married so quickly?!"

Fujinami-san had a cheerful look on his face, indicating that he clearly knew it was none of his business. "If that's too sudden, why don't you two try moving in together sometime soon? Isn't it normal for people to start living together while they're still in college these days?"

"Living together...?!"

Living together...?!

The suggestion was so crazy that I couldn't react to it in any other way, even inside my mind.

"Yeah," he said. "Get prepared for married life. Doesn't sound so bad, does it?"

"That's not the problem here... She wants to work in childcare..."

"She can babysit for Japanese families in the area. I'm sure they'd rather entrust things to a fellow countrywoman."

I was at a loss for words. Fujinami-san was solving one problem right after another. *I guess that's what it means to be a capable editor.*

Come to think of it, KEN is currently living in Southeast Asia... If I move there, I might run into him...

It came to me as a surprise how my mind had already taken the flight abroad.

At that point, our curry arrived. Fujinami-san dug into his meal right away while speaking as quickly as if he were talking about ordinary work to a coworker.

"I'll send you more information about the company and give you periodic updates on how close we are to getting started. I hope you'll seriously consider it. Also, let's add each other on LINE."

***

That evening, Runa and I were on a video call for the first time in

a while. It was only the next day, so we must've both been feeling sweet and innocent like we were back in high school.

"Heh heh, Merry Christmas!" Runa said.

"Oh, right. It kind of felt like Christmas was already over."

"Yeah, same. Yesterday was too amazing."

"It was for me too."

Runa giggled. "What were you up to before we got on here, Ryuto?"

"Hm? Just thinking about you."

"Wow, I'm so happy to hear that! I was thinking about you too. ♡"

After this sickeningly sweet exchange went on for a while, I brought something up.

"Hey, Runa... What do you think about the idea of living together?"

"What? I'd love to!"

I'd said it like a general idea, but Runa really sank her teeth into it.

"The twins here have already gotten past the hardest times and all. Misuzu-san is feeling better too, so they can probably manage without me," she said. "And you know how we both live with our parents? It's honestly pretty inconvenient that we have nowhere to spend quality time together."

"Well... That's true..."

"If we lived together, we could be as intimate as we wanted, for as long as we wanted."

As much as we want?! For as long as we want?!

Could this be our endless intimacy arc?!

The tremendous impact of what Runa had said instantly filled my head with dirty thoughts.

"R-Right... So..." My mind was floating in the clouds, and my thoughts were happy to an excessive degree. But perhaps the same was true for Runa. "Do you...want to go for it?" I asked, a little reserved.

Runa replied with a broad smile. "Absolutely! Yay! ♡ We're gonna live together!"

She'd agreed to it as easily as if I'd suggested we go shopping together. But then, she lowered the tone of her voice.

"I kinda feel bad, though, being the only one who gets to be so happy..." she suddenly said.

"Huh? What's wrong?"

"It looks like something's up with Nicole... Have you heard anything from Nishina-kun?"

"Not really..."

At that point, I remembered the resolution Nisshi had made.

"When we see each other on Christmas Eve, I'm gonna ask to spend the night together."

Could it be that whatever had happened to Yamana-san had something to do with that?

Since she'd started thinking about her best friend, Runa was in low spirits for the rest of the call. We hung up soon after.

Immediately after we ended the call, my phone vibrated again. At first, I assumed Runa had forgotten to say something, but the call was from Nisshi.

"Nisshi? Hello?"

"Kasshi." Nisshi's voice was surprisingly gloomy. "What am I supposed to do...?"

"Huh? What happened?"

"I spent last night with Nicole."

That meant his feelings had reached Yamana-san after all.

"Oh... That's great," I said.

"It's just..."

"Hm?"

Because of his serious tone, I didn't know how I should've been replying to him.

"Can you keep a secret?"

"Sure."

Nisshi took his time before speaking again. I thought the connection might've been bad—I was about to pull my phone away from my ear when he finally said something.

"It was her first time."

I didn’t understand what he meant at first.

“What...?”

First time? What *was her first time...? He’s not implying what I think, is he?*

“She cried so much after it was over... And not like, crying in happiness... Like, she was actually really sad. And then she said ‘Senpai’ in her sleep...”

So it really was like that...?

It’s extremely hard to believe, though. Sekiya-san and Yamana-san broke up without ever having sex...?

“When I think how *he* might still be the one in her heart,” Nisshi continued, “it just feels so incredibly hopeless. Even though we became one... Makes me wonder if this is really what I wanted.”

“Nisshi...”

I didn’t know what to say as I listened to my friend’s lamentation.

Eventually, he went silent for a moment. “Sorry about the weird call. Forget everything I said.”

“Okay.”

And that was how our call ended.

Lying on my bed, now alone and without being connected to anyone, I thought back on how sexy and cute Runa had been the night before. I looked forward to—hopefully—starting to live together from now on...

“I wonder if Nisshi will be okay...”

But I couldn’t help but wonder what was on my friend’s mind. I couldn’t just forget the matter right away, no matter how much he wanted me to.

Afterword

Thank you for reading volume 8 of *Kimizero*!

Here in *Kimizero*'s college life arc, one of the themes is partnerships. I'd say that Ryuto and Runa's relationship transformed and progressed in this volume.

I hope you're having a good time reading about how these two radically different people develop a relationship full of trust and love while dealing with the problems in their lives.

While writing this story, I think about how one could live with another person who's different both in body and desires. All people are uneven by nature, with their own bumps and crevices. My holes are filled by what sticks out in somebody else, and hopefully, the parts of me that stick out can fill somebody else's holes. I'm not making a dirty joke here...

It would appear that people around me see me as being relatively normal for a writer, but there are actually many things I'm abnormally bad at—the kinds of things that ordinary people do on a daily basis without any difficulty. I actually avoid those things and have family members and people I'm close with do them for me. Their help lets me lead a normal life, and I'm very grateful for it.

In a similar fashion, I'm bad at managing my work schedule and doing paperwork, but my editor goes through the trouble of drawing up a schedule for me and sending me frequent reminders. That helps a whole lot. All I can do is write, so I'm sincerely grateful to people who can supply my work with visual appeal and bring it to other media.

Thank you, magako-sama, for embellishing this volume with beautiful illustrations as always! Even in the draft, Kitty looked so perfect that I couldn't help but smile.

I'm also extremely grateful to my editor, Matsubayashi-sama, as well as my new editor, Kobayashi-sama, whom I've been working

with since the short story collection!

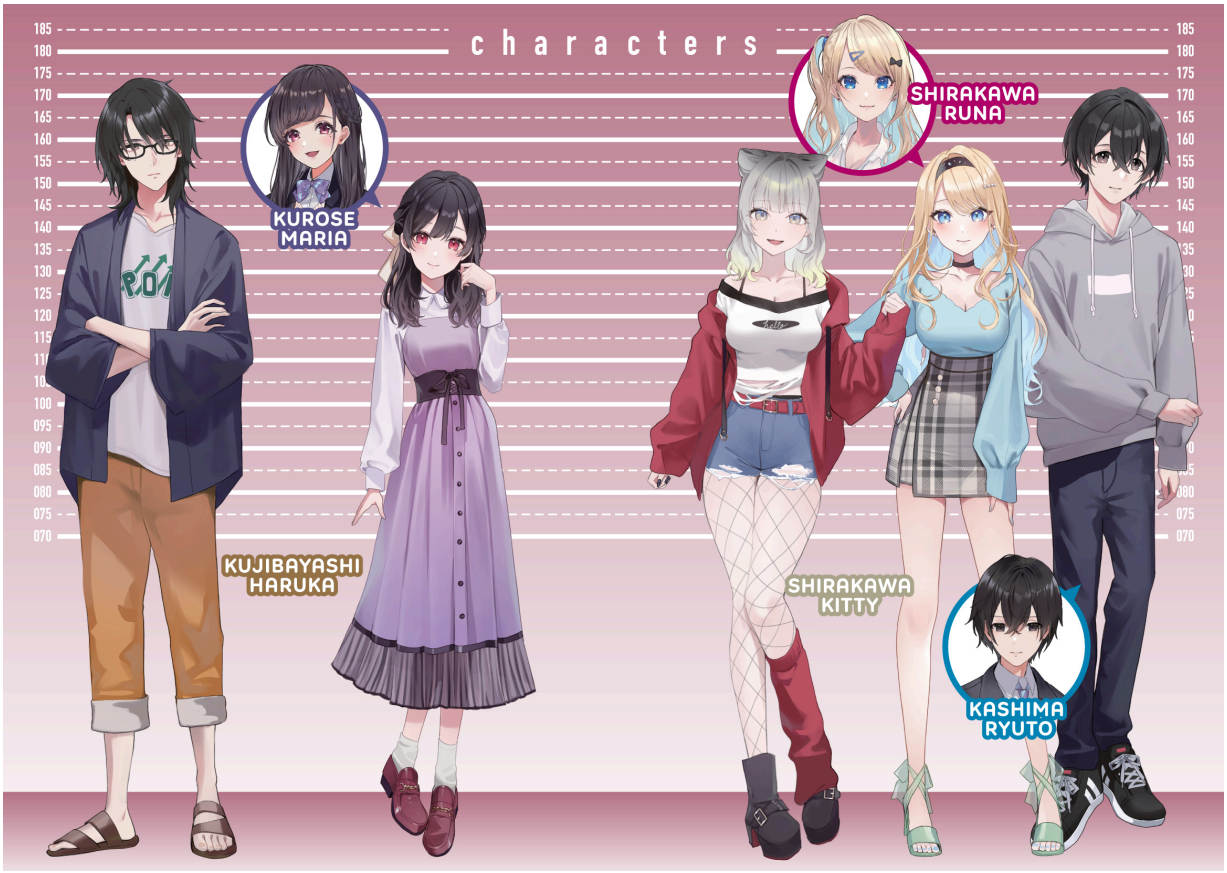
That collection, which is already available in Japan, is full of fun tales primarily from the cast's third year of high school. It would make me happy if you read it together with volume 8!

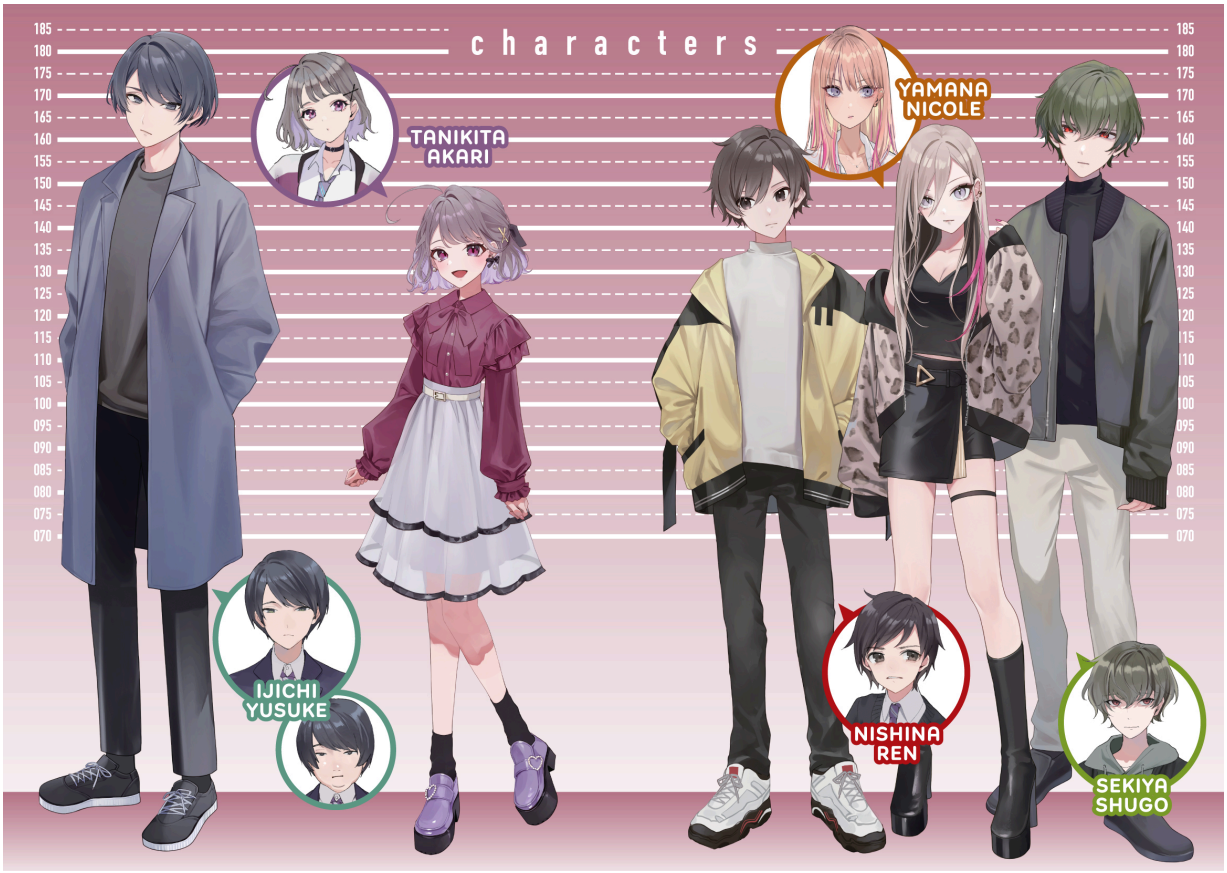
Also, while this is nothing new, *Kimizero* is getting turned into a musical this summer! There's a lot of information waiting to be published, so make sure to keep an eye on our official website and X! It would make me happy if as many people as possible saw it!

Well then, may we meet again in volume 9!

April 2024, Makiko Nagaoka


You Were Experienced, I Was Not:
OUR DATING STORY
8th Date


characters
185
180
175
170
165
160
155
150
145
140
135
130
125
120
115
100
095
090
085
080
075
070
KUROSE
MARIA
KUJIBAYASHI
HARUKA
SHIRAKAWA
RUNA
SHIRAKAWA
KITTY
KASHIMA
RYUTO


characters
TANIKITA AKARI
YAMANA NICOLE
IJICHI YUSUKE
NISHINA REN
SEKIYA SHUGO

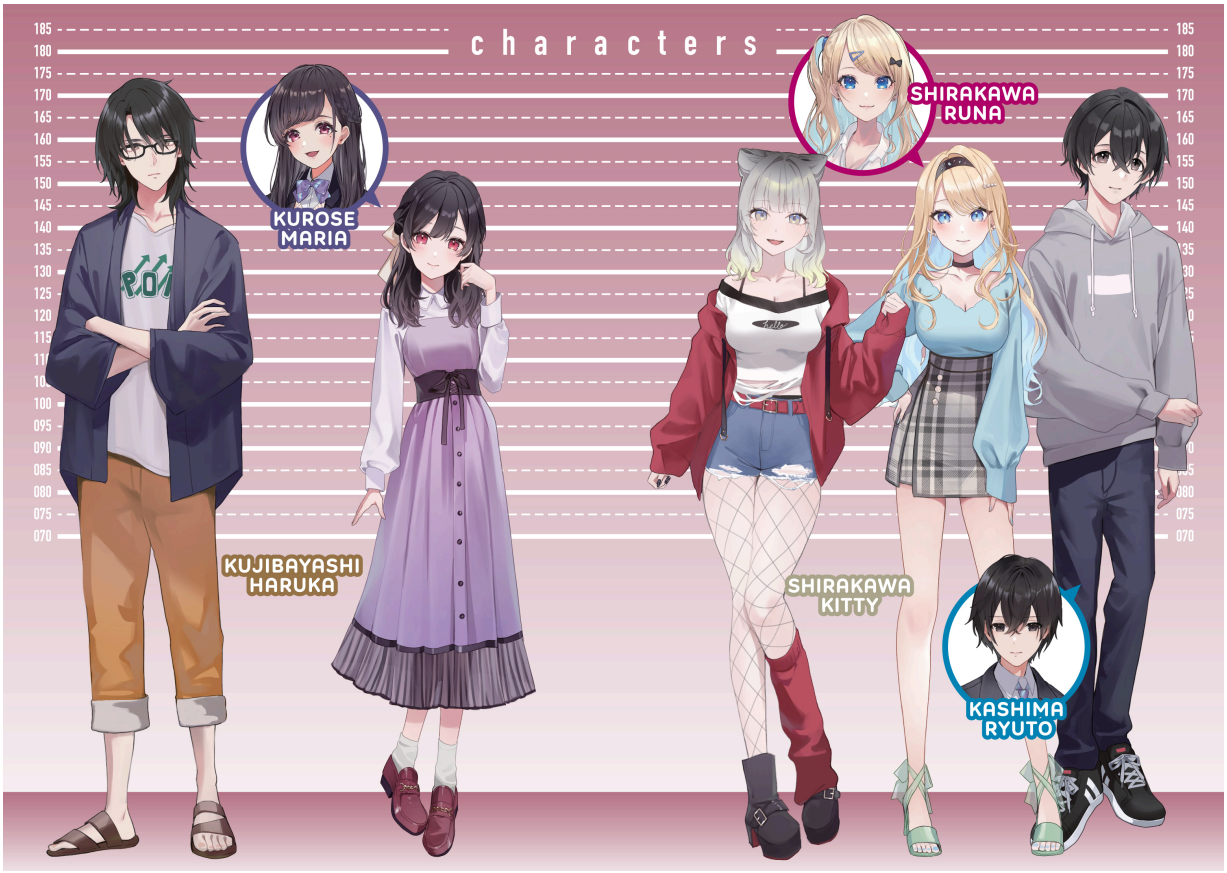

I was anxious that my and
Runa's folly under the table
would come to light.
Why are you so lewd?! We're
with two other people!

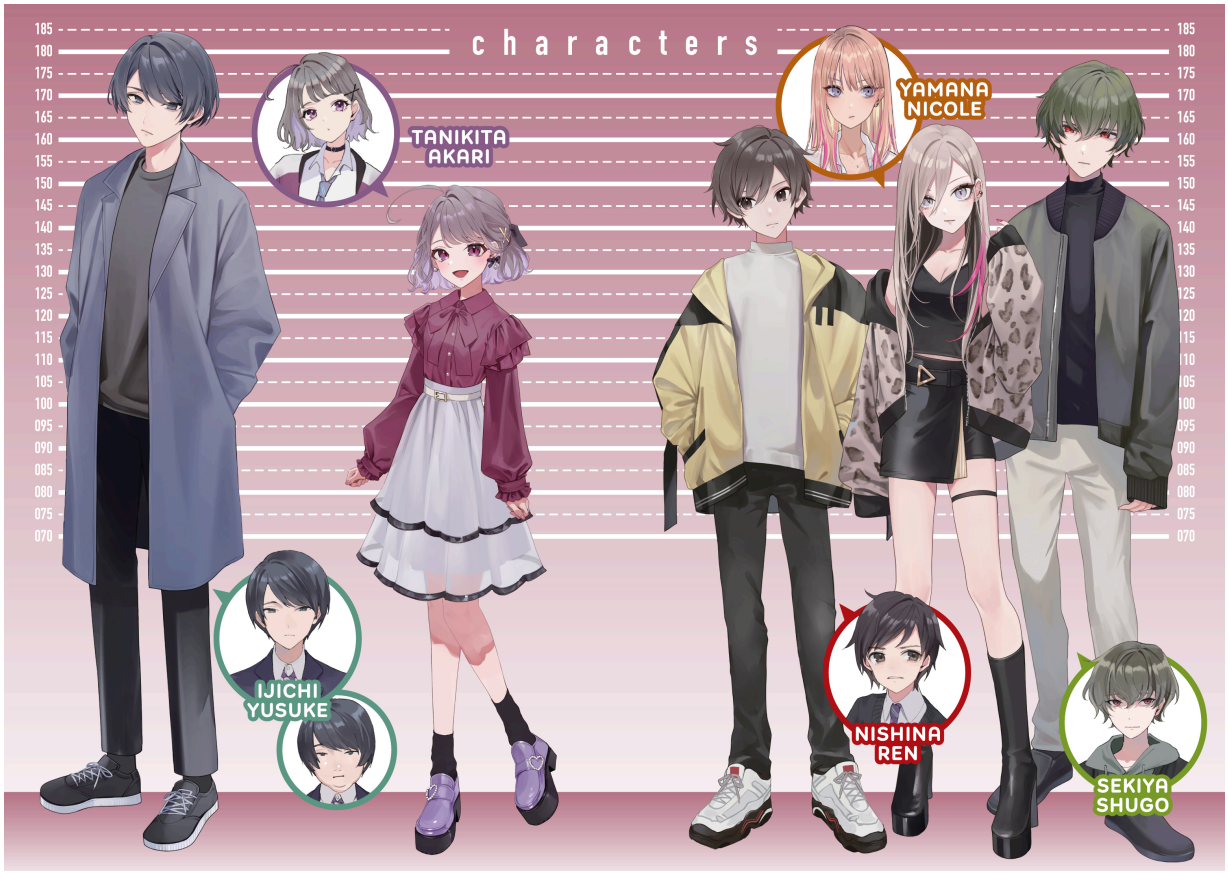

"What do *you*
want to do?"


8th Date
You Were Experienced, I Was Not:
OUR DATING STORY
Makiko Nagaoka
Artist / magako



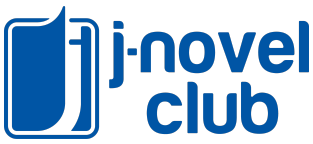

You Were Experienced, I Was Not:
OUR DATING STORY
8th Date


characters
KUROSE MARIA
KUJIBAYASHI HARUKA
SHIRAKAWA RUNA
SHIRAKAWA KITTY
KASHIMA RYUTO


characters
TANIKITA AKARI
YAMANA NICOLE
IJICHI YUSUKE
NISHINA REN
SEKIYA SHUGO


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"What do *you*
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