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東雲侑子は短編小説をあいしている

「……何読んでんの？」  
「本」

「そんなもん分かってるって……  
タイトルとか作者とか、  
そういう事だろ、聞いてるのは」  
「短編集」

「短編集……。短い話が  
いっぱい入ってるやつ？」  
「そう」  
「ふうん……。俺は読むなら  
長い話の方が  
いいけど」

「……どうかした？」  
「三並君でも、そう思うんだね」  
「何が？」  
「長いお話の方がいい、って」

三並英太

eita minami

東雲侑子

yuko shinonome



"..... What are you reading?"

"A book."

"That much I know..... But wouldn't the typical answer be things like the title or the author of the book?"

"Short stories collection."

"Short stories collection..... like a compilation of them?"

"Right."

"I see..... Personally, I prefer reading slightly longer stories ."

"..... Anything wrong?"

"So Minami-kun thinks that way as well."

"You're referring to?"

"The fact that you prefer longer stories."



有美  
arumi

三並景介  
keisuke minami

有美さんと初めて出会った時俺はまだ小学生だった。当時、景介は高校生だったが、その頃から既に有美さんはうちに入入りしていた。無論、景介の彼女として、だ。

けれどガキだった俺にはそのへんの事に対する理解が著しく欠けていた。気が付けば俺は有美さんに恋をしていて、後はまあ、言わずもがなだ。ある日、ふとした瞬間に、真実を悟った。

それ以来、俺は有美さんが苦手だ。正確に言えば、幼い故とは言え有美さんに恋心を抱いていた間抜けな自分を思い出すのが、か。

思えばあの頃から、何かに冷めてしまった気がする。

一所懸命になつたつてどうにもならない事がある。そんな悟つたような事を思つてしまう程度には、あの頃の俺は、一途に有美さんの事を好きだった。

I was in elementary when I first met Arumi-san. Keisuke was in high-school then, and Arumi-san had begun her frequent visits to our house. As Keisuke's girlfriend, of course.

But I was still a kid then, so I didn't understand things like that. Before I knew it, I was already in love with Arumi-san. As for what happened next, I don't think I need to go in depth about that.

One day, at a certain instant, I suddenly understood the reality around me.

And from then onwards, I was afraid of Arumi-san.

Or more specifically, I'm afraid of facing my stupidity, for falling in love with Arumi-san even though I was just a kid.

Come to think about it, that was probably the time when a part of my soul turned cold.

There are things you can't change no matter how hard you try — that was the painful lesson I've learned from being madly in love with Arumi-san.



「んん………？」

「おお………？」

何だこれ。  
自分が見ているものが今ひとつ現実感がない。しかし、雑誌に掲載された無表情な西園幽子は明らかに東雲だ。東雲侑子だ。

我ながら間抜けな声が漏れてしま  
う。しかしそれを恥ずかしいと思う間  
もなく、俺は視線を上げ、俺に背を向  
けてパソコンをいじっている東雲と、  
手元の雑誌のページとを数度、見比べ  
ていた。  
俺が開いた雑誌のページには、西園  
幽子という作家らしい女の、写真が  
掲載されていた。そしてその西園幽子  
というのはどう見ても、東雲であった。

"Hmm.....?"

A dumb noise leaked out of my mouth. That was a little embarrassing. I lifted my head and compared a page of the magazine to Shinonome, whose back was facing me as she worked on the computer, several times.

On the opened page was the picture of what looked like a female writer named Nishizono Yūko. However, no matter how you look at this, Nishizono Yūko looks just like Shinonome.

"Ohh.....?"

What's this?

It all seems unreal to me. However, the expressionless Nishizono Yūko on the magazine was obviously Shinonome. She's Shinonome Yuuko.



東雲とどうなりたいって言うのだから。

俺は一体、

What exactly..... am I expecting from Shinonome?

# *Chapter 1*

*Romiemarigana was born on the planet Grando, one of the many planets in a planetary system far from the solar system. Grando was a beautiful planet with plenty of natural resources, similar to how Earth was back in her heyday. There were not many natural disasters or dangerous creatures, so the humans did not need an advanced civilization live comfortably. They would simply do some hunting or gather some wild fruits whenever they felt hungry. When their stomachs were filled, they would band up with their fellow mates and shout merrily at the top of their lungs as though they were singing. Amid this primitive lifestyle, Romiemarigana was the only one who felt differently from the rest of the group.*

*She always felt that life should not be just about filling up one's stomach.*

*Nishizono Yūko  
<Romiemarigana's Expanding World>*

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Once school was over, most students began preparing themselves for the club activities.

Everyone is in some sort of club, since it is the rule set by the school.

And the reason for the rule is because Ousei Private High School - that's my school - was established not too long ago. To buff up the public's awareness of our school, they have insisted that all students had to participate actively in club activities. It's an open secret since our principal did talk passionately about the issue during the opening ceremony.

All thanks to that 'culture' of ours, a large majority of the students do participate actively in their activities. This is especially so for the sports clubs, where they'll train for just about everyday. I've even heard things like how there are students who are accepted into this school as athletic scholars.

A few guys in class were changing into their football or baseball jerseys. I've heard how there's an overwhelming number of members in the baseball and football clubs, to the point where there's no room for the first years in the clubs' rooms. As a result, they are forced to change their clothes in the classrooms instead.

I then remembered it's the same for the softball and lacrosse clubs as well. Moreover, these two clubs are for girls only.

But of course, there's no way the girls will openly change their attire in the classroom. They'd do so quickly in the ladies' room before returning back to class.

So all I did is to remain in my seat and stare at the girls.

They were chattering among themselves since they were done with changing, and everyone seemed pretty happy. Not just the girls, but the dudes from the baseball and football clubs were talking while they changed into their jerseys as well.

I was the only odd one out.

The only person to daze off expressionlessly.

None of my middle-school friends were here in this school. For the past two months since I enrolled here, I never interacted much with my classmates either. Time flew by just like that.

It's not like I am in any position to complain, since it's my decision to be by my lonesome. Still, I couldn't help but feel uncomfortable about this.

The only thing stopping me from leaving the classroom was because the entrance of the classroom and the corridor were filled with students preparing for their club activities. It's a pain in the rear to walk through the crowds.

The crowd should start clearing up in five minutes. I directed my attention towards the corner of the classroom.

To Shinonome Yuuko's seat.

Shinonome's reading, as usual. Ever since that chat at the counter, I would strike up a conversation with Shinonome occasionally.

At the very least, that beats wasting my time doing nothing. With that thought in mind, I stood up and walked towards Shinonome.

However, her gaze was still stuck to her book.

"..... What are you reading?"

I had nothing concrete to talk about, so I started the conversation with what first came to my mind.

Shinonome continued reading without even looking once at me.

"A book."

That was her reply.

"That much I know..... But wouldn't the typical answer be things like the title or the author of the book?"

I gave a wry laugh in response to her emotionless answer. I then sat on the empty seat next to her.

"Since Minami-kun does not read, I doubt you will know what I am reading anyway."

Answered Shinonome.

True. I doubt I'll know about the title or author if it's not from the famous authors in Japanese textbooks. The possibility is practically zero.

"Well, yeah..... But at the very least, you can tell me the synopsis or things like that, right?"

I was actually not too interested in that either. All I had in mind was to kill time by chatting with Shinonome. That was what pushed me to pop the question.

And so Shinonome answered with,

"Short stories collection."

"Short stories collection..... like a compilation of them?"

"Right."

"Are they interesting?"

"Mmm."

To be honest, I am not even sure if you can count that as a conversation. But this is a better than spacing off by myself.

"So you were reading a short stories collection back then as well?"

I asked what came to my mind. Back when I was doing my shift at the counter, Shinonome placed the book on the table briefly while she leaved her post for a short time. That was when I saw the title of the book. I couldn't recall the title or author, but I do remember seeing the words 'short story collection'.

"You are right."

Murmured Shinonome.

"Do you enjoy reading short stories?"

That question made Shinonome pull her eyes away from her book for the very first time. She lifted her eyes towards the ceiling, as if she was pondering for an answer.

"Hmm. I see.....?"

For some reason unknown to me, Shinonome did not reply with the usual stock answers she gives whenever I asked her questions like that. I guess book lovers will have their own personal reasons for things like that.

"Well..... Personally, I prefer reading slightly longer stories ."

It's not like I read much, so that answer was based on the impressions I had when I was reading in elementary school. I was an avid reader back then, and the thing which always came to my mind was—

If only the story was a little longer.

As the book was really interesting, I wanted to immerse myself in that delightful world forever. But now, I doubt whether I really had that in mind back then.

I was mumbling to myself when I noticed Shinonome staring at me.

"..... Anything wrong?"

For some reason, it seemed like Shinonome was holding her words back. That's quite unlike her, considering her usual emotionless responses whenever she was spoken to.

"So Minami-kun thinks that way as well."

That was what Shinonome said in the end.

"You're referring to?"

"The fact that you prefer longer stories."

"Yeah. Since you'll be reading anyway, don't you think it's more efficient if the stories are..... longer?"

It was only when I was done with my reply that I realized — crap.

Shinonome probably prefers short stories to the longer ones. She's probably unhappy with my reply when I said how long stories are better.

However, I was not planning to apologize for my words.

"And typically long stories sell more, right? It's rare to have short stories be a best-seller."

That was when I realized I was actually sort of provoking Shinonome with my words. However, I was curious how Shinonome would react, given her flat expressions and the lack of display of her emotions. Ever since our conversation at the counter, my interest in Shinonome has increased a little.

Shinonome pursed her lips unhappily in a "∧" shape and stared at me. This display of emotion is something incredibly rare for Shinonome.

"That is not how I look at it."

With that said, she lowered her head and resumed reading her book. She did not look at me after that.

It's as if she were saying: It'll be a waste of time if we continued the conversation.

And it's pretty pointless to rebut her further.

Generally speaking, it's wrong of me to voice out my opinion towards Shinonome, considering the fact that I am not someone who reads. Moreover, it's not my intention to piss Shinonome off.

"I see..... w-well, I don't read much..... so I doubt my views matter anyway."

I scanned the classroom after murmuring a half-hearted response. There weren't many people around, so that means I can finally head for home.

"See you."

I bid Shinonome goodbye, though her attention was still fixed on her book. I then returned back to my seat and prepared my bag.

What a strange girl. I thought she would come up with an emotional retort, so her tepid response was somewhat unexpected.

However, that icy response of hers only served to pique my interest in her even more.

Perhaps it's because I am not too good with people who give in their all.

After all, I think I am pretty much apathetic towards everything.

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When I was about to reach home, I was greeted by the scent of spices.

It smelled like it was coming from my house, and I was a little dejected as a result.

"Curry huh....."

I don't hate curry, but I don't like it either.

The problem lies in the cook.

The smell of the spices became more pungent as I stepped into the doorway.

"I'm back."

I whispered softly so that no one would hear it, and took off my shoes. But just as I expected, Arumi-san walked out from the kitchen towards me with her pair of slippers flopping against the ground.

"Eita, where's your 'I'm back'?"

I frowned upon hearing that.

"I said it already....."

An excuse from me, but it didn't look like Arumi-san would accept that. She pouted.

"Eh..... But I heard nothing. Do it again?"

I couldn't help but to sigh. Then again, it's not like I'm itching to

start a squabble at the doorway, so I gave in.

"I'm back."

I did just as she had requested. Arumi-san flashed a smile and nodded her head hard.

"Mmm! Welcome home!"

As I walked weakly into the house, I gave a clear signal with my hands to stop Arumi-san from taking my bag away from me. I then turned around and noticed there were only my and Arumi-san's shoes at the doorway. Puzzled by what I saw, I asked,

"..... Eh? Where's my brother?"

Upon hearing that, Arumi-san shrugged.

"He said he's going to the book store. I guess he'll be back soon?"

So he's out to get his books, and in doing so, he left an outsider in our house to do the cooking? What a conceited person he is. However, Arumi-san will probably burst into tears if she heard that from me, so I guess it's better to keep those thoughts within me.

As she walked side-by-side with me into the living room, Arumi-san put on a huge smile and said,

"Tonight's dinner is....."

"Curry."

I finished her sentence before she did. Arumi-san was incredibly surprised by that.

"Eh? How do you know?"

"Well, there's the smell....."

"Ah, right..... You surprised me for a moment. I thought you were psychic."

"No way that's possible....."

As I made my way up towards my room on the second floor, Arumi-san shouted in my direction.

"Remember to place your uniform properly on the hanger! Don't just throw it around! Also, no snacks! We'll have dinner once

Keisuke is back!"

I'm not too pleased with how Arumi-san is calling my brother directly by his name..... but there's no need for her to know my views on that either.

When I reached my room, the first thing I did was to throw my coat onto my bed. However, I remembered what Arumi-san said earlier. I ended up hanging the uniform onto the hanger even though it was a chore.

I'd be in for another round of nagging if she happens to step into my room and see my uniform hanging untidily on the hanger.

I then took out the books from my bag and replaced them with textbooks for lessons which I'll be having the following day. There's no homework which requires my urgent attention right now.

I then killed time by rolling on my bed in boredom as I waited for dinner. That was when I thought it will be great if I can do some reading, just like how Shinonome always does. I mean, it's not like I've any hobbies.

However, there're no books in my room. It'll be shameful if I ended up reading my textbooks as a result.

Since I had my mind set on reading something, I made my way out of my room.

My and my brother's room are both located on the second floor, and along with that is my father's study room as well — though its owner is currently away.

Both my parents are overseas right now. Due to his work, my father is required to travel to America. My mother ended up travelling together with him as well.

If we're talking about just anyone else, it'll probably be my father moving alone to America.

However, my mother is someone who sticks with my father all the time, despite the fact that she's forty-ish, close to fifty.

"I'll be going along with Papa, is that okay? It's only for three years anyway."

And she left before we could even give our consent.

Just from hearing all that, you'd probably think she's a really carefree and uninhibited mom. However, the bulk of the reason

why she did that was because of Keisuke.

Keisuke, who's five years older than me, is someone who is way more mature than his age. In fact, there are times where he is actually a much more serious and practical 'adult' than my father is.

"With Kei-chan around, Mama's at ease."

That's the way it is.

"Moreover, Arumi-chan is around too, so you two can ask her to help out with the housework from time to time."

The other reason is because Keisuke's girlfriend, Arumi-san, is close enough to walk in and out of our house like family. She has been dating Keisuke since their high-school years, and everyone has already treated her as part of the family since a year ago.

I opened up the door to father's study room in order to find a book to kill time.

Keisuke may own a large collection of books in his room, but he'll grumble if I enter his room without a good reason. And I don't like doing that either.

I switched on the lights in the room and searched for the bookshelf which was located at the corner of the study room.

I originally thought my father would own some sort of novel, but that was just naive of me. All he possesses are high-level documentations related to science. Not too much of a surprise, since it is related to the occupation of my father.

Even so, they should do for killing time. So I picked up a book by random and began flipping through the pages, but that ended up with me putting the book back into its original position just as quickly.

Can't do it. I couldn't get any of the content into my head. It's tiring to even read those incredibly difficult crosswise writings.

"I give up....."

As I was mumbling to myself, I could hear some creaking sounds from the direction of the door. That's coming from the stairs. From the pace of the footsteps, it should be Keisuke.

When I walked out of the room, I bumped into Keisuke, who was making his way up the stairs.

He caught sight of me walking out of the room, so he tilted his head and asked,

"What are you doing?"

"It's nothing..... I'm just wondering if I can find a book to read."

Keisuke lifted his hand and shifted his spectacles in response to my answer.

"Book.....? You want to read a book?"

He knew about my lack of interest in reading in the recent years, so he was a little surprised by my answer.

"Yeah..... but they're all difficult to understand, so that killed my interest."

Just as I was walking past Keisuke while giving him an explanation—

"Eita."

My name was called. Turning my head around, Keisuke had his

hand on the handle of his room's door. He then said,

"How about borrowing my books?"

I wanted to decline his offer, but it would be quite unnatural to do so.

"Ah..... Urm..... thank you."

Keisuke lifted his chin a little and urged me to enter his room.

Three large bookshelves were standing side by side in the dark room filled with the smell of cigarettes. Each of them was filled to the brim with books. As for the remaining books, they were placed randomly at just about everywhere. It's difficult to find a spot where I can stand on.

Arumi-san would grumble about it occasionally when she was doing the housework.

"This is just atrocious."

It's practically like a devil's den.

"What do you want to read?"

Taking away the bag off his shoulders and tossing it onto the bed, Keisuke lit up a cigarette and began to smoke. He started the habit just last year, but he's a pretty heavy smoker now. He seemed to be smoking all the time — aside from sleeping and eating.

"Well, anything will do as long as it can kill time."

Just as I was done saying that, something came to my mind—

"Things like short stories collections?"

I added that on immediately. That's because Shinonome Yuuko came to mind.

"Short stories collections..... huh."

With a mumble, Keisuke began digging through the books which were stacked up like a pile of Jenga. In my eyes, it looked like Keisuke was searching randomly. However, Keisuke's someone who can efficiently get hold of the position of the books. He drew out a book nimbly from the middle area and tossed it to me.

"How about starting with this?"

It's a book titled as <Nine Stories>. I knew who the author J.D. Salinger is, but I've never actually read his books before.

I nodded slightly before walking out of his room. The moment I stepped out of his room, it felt like my surroundings had freshened up immediately. I never thought I'd stay in his room for such a long period of time.

Back in my room, I laid onto my bed and began flipping through the book which I had just borrowed from Keisuke. Before I was even done with a single page of the book, Arumi-san's voice came from the floor below me.

"Eita! It's time for dinner!"

I was plunged into gloominess from her voice once more. It's not anyone's fault though. I am well aware of that.

Keisuke's book ended up as a decoration on my desk before I could even start on the stories. When we were done with dinner, I had cleanly forgotten about the book — it was straight to bed for me.

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The following day, while doing my usual thing where I'd space out in my seat in order to wait for the crowd to clear, I noticed Shinonome was not reading — instead, she was packing up and preparing to leave. I'm not too sure if it's because she had the same reasons as me, but Shinonome would always spend her time reading after school for some time.

It's quite rare of her to be in a rush.

I was wondering if it was time for her shift duty at the library.

On the days of her shift, Shinonome would head directly to the library after the classes were over. However, since Shinonome and I shared the same shifts, there're not many occasions where she'll have to go to the library but not me. I even checked the date to make sure, and it was Tuesday alright.

As I watched Shinonome squeeze past the students who were jamming up the door, I came to this conclusion: Shinonome's human after all, so there'll be days where she'd have something on as well.

I then stayed in the classroom for a little while longer. However, it's quite boring to wait for time to pass without doing anything. I

then remembered the reason why I borrowed the book from Keisuke — it was for times like this.

It was a pity though, since the book was left on my desk at home. It's not like I can read it if I don't have it with me.

I thought to myself: Let's bring the book along tomorrow. And since the crowd was thinning out, I left the classroom.

It takes about ten minutes to walk from Ousei High School to the nearest train station.

The train station is located at a slightly remote area, but the shopping streets around it will gradually be filled with life when the high school students are done with their classes, or later when the working adults are off from their work.

Typically speaking, I'd walk through the shopping streets while on my way to the train station. Should there be a large crowd, I'd take a detour and use the alleys where there were less people around. But as there aren't many people on the streets for today, I walked straight into the shopping streets.

Halfway through, a wobbly bicycle brushed past me with just a tiny distance to spare. I could not help but to turn around and

look at the bicycle.

"That was close....."

While mumbling to myself, I realized there was a coffee house right before me.

Since the wall of the coffee house was filled with large glass windows, I could easily see the interior of the shop from where I was.

There was nothing particular about the interiors of the shop. And since it was just an ordinary coffee house, it shouldn't have concerned me that much.

But the reason I was that fixated, to the point where I had stopped in my tracks, was because I saw Shinonome through the glass.

Shinonome, who was still in her uniform, was having tea with a young man whom I am unfamiliar with.

He was too young to be her father, and it did not seem like he's her brother as well.

But if we're talking about her boyfriend.....

Now that's possible.

Shinonome might be a slightly sombre person, but she does look pretty good. It's not surprising for her to have a boyfriend.

\*Sigh\*

I couldn't help but to heave a sigh.

I'd be a stalker if I continue to stare at her like this. Moreover, it's not my intention to intervene with Shinonome's privacy and her life. I turned around and resumed making my way towards the station.

"Shinonome huh....."

It's not impossible. But still, something did not feel quite right.

We're talking about Shinonome, someone who's reading all the time; even when you're speaking to her, she'd hardly pry her eyes off her book. It feels unreal to imagine her going on a lovey-dovey date with her boyfriend.

Actually, I was simply shaken by the fact that Shinonome was meeting a man.

And since I had difficulty accepting the chanced discovery, my mind was occupied by the very incident.

But it's not because I'm in love with Shinonome though. Rather, it's because it feels like Shinonome is in some ways very similar to me. There is Shinonome, who would read her books with a rather bored expression while not expressing an ounce of happiness. Then there's me, who is unmotivated in just about everything there is. We do share some sort of similarity between us.

But if Shinonome can have a boyfriend with the way she is, then that means the guy might have possessed a 'certain something' which can spark her passion.

Come to think of it, the point on how Shinonome is a girl who is interested in nothing but her books was just my pure speculation.

"Oh well."

With my apathetic personality, it's more likely that I am the one who's receiving negative attention instead. I remembered how I was mumbling to myself on the train one day, and I was met with

the shocked stare of a middle-aged lady who was sitting next to me. I responded by coughing dryly and pretending to fall asleep.

When I reached home, Arumi-san was nowhere to be seen.

Keisuke was smoking while sipping on a cup of coffee in the living room.

"Where's Arumi-san?"

Keisuke extinguished the shortened cigarette with the ashtray.

"She won't be coming as she is having dinner with her club."

"Then what should we do with ours?"

For breakfast, we'd normally just toast a bread ourselves or something, but dinner's quite different from that. Arumi-san would take care of it if she's around, but the two of us will have to settle it ourselves when she's not. It's pretty rare for Arumi-san not to come over to our house, so we'd just make an impromptu decision whenever she's not around.

"Do you want to do the cooking, or would you prefer to get some takeaway?"

Seemed like the thought of him cooking had never crossed Keisuke's mind. Generally speaking, he is not someone who is particular about eating, so I won't be surprised if he says, 'I don't mind skipping dinner if you're not cooking'.

"I guess I'm cooking....."

After I had accepted the task unwillingly, Keisuke fished out a wallet from the pocket of the shirt which he had hung on a chair and passed it to me. Our parents would wire the cash for living expenditures to a bank account which they had fully entrusted to Keisuke.

"..... So any special requests?"

It was just something which I asked casually, and Keisuke's reply was just as I had expected — it was indifferent.

"Anything will do."

"Got it."

I gave a shrug and left the house. If only he had called me or dropped me a message earlier, I would have purchased

everything while I was on my way home.

I was in elementary when I first met Arumi-san. Keisuke was in high-school then, and Arumi-san had begun her frequent visits to our house. As Keisuke's girlfriend, of course.

But I was still a kid then, so I didn't understand things like that.

Before I knew it, I was already in love with Arumi-san. As for what happened next, I don't think I need to go in depth about that.

One day, at a certain instant, I suddenly understood the reality around me.

And from then onwards, I was afraid of Arumi-san.

Or more specifically, I'm afraid of facing my stupidity, for falling in love with Arumi-san even though I was just a kid.

Come to think about it, that was probably the time when a part of my soul turned cold.

There are things you can't change no matter how hard you try — that was the painful lesson I've learned from being madly in love with Arumi-san.

"What a pain....."

I grumbled while tossing the ingredients for dinner into the basket.

Back home, Keisuke and I ate the dinner I prepared in silence.

Keisuke's not a person who will express his thoughts on the meal.

I am not craving for his praise, but it would be great if he can say something at the very least. It's all Keisuke's fault for being incredible in just about everything he does. As his younger brother, I'd just feel inferior compared to him. Even if I am to put the case on Arumi-san aside for now, I think Keisuke will probably just dampen my soul in some other areas as well.

I do hate how I am thinking more and more pessimistically as time goes by.

As I washed the plates, I had decided to push the blame for all that had happened onto Shinonome.

The fact that she has a boyfriend was something which dealt a huge blow to me.

But it's not because I loved her. Rather, I actually hoped she was an aloof person.

However, that was just my wishful thinking. It's not like I actually wanted Shinonome to say things like "I don't need a boyfriend", nor do I want to say things like "I hope you don't get a boyfriend".

I wonder what expressions she will put on if I were to say things like that to her.

There was a brief snicker after I tried imagining the scene.

That alone was enough to lift my melancholic mood a little. Humans are strange creatures after all. While thinking about stuff like that, I washed away the bubbles off the plates. I then rubbed my finger on the surface of the plates, which produced a clean squeaking sound.

That made me smile once more.

I do enjoy washing the dishes, something quite unexpected considering my apathetic self.

## *Chapter 2*

*During the period known as 'winter' on Earth, it is nigh impossible to gather plants or hunt animals for food. Therefore, the people of Grando would agglomerate in a tiny cave and huddle for warmth, trying their best to survive the season with as little movement as possible. The younger and more robust ones are tasked to gather the minimum amount of food required to survive.*

*One day, it was Romiemarigana's turn to garner food. Wearing simple winter clothing made of plush pounded hide, she wandered into the mountains in her pursuit for fruits or edible barks for her fellow mates.*

*What exactly am I living for?*

*As she pondered on that question like she would usually do, she pressed forward to search for food for her companions.*

*That was when she encountered a man.*

*Nishizono Yūko*

*<Romiemarigana's Expanding World>*

\*\*\*

Wednesdays are my shift days at the counter, so I head straight to the library after school.

While the library committee members are still making their way to the library, Shiina-san, the librarian, would handle the borrowing and returning of books by herself. Still, as the librarian, she has other duties as well.

"I'll leave the rest in your care."

When I reached the library, Shiina-san walked into the small room behind the counter and began working on her job — probably <Books Info>. She could have done it with word processing software, but Shiina-san insists on doing it by hand, and that includes the frame and stuff like that. There are more efficient options available to her, but I'm not in a position to say anything since that's what she loves to do.

Looks like the borrowing counter was gathering more traffic yet again. As usual, Shinonome had her face buried in a book while I was working non-stop. I managed to take a quick glance at the book Shinonome was reading when I took a quick toilet break. It seemed to be different from the book she was reading yesterday — the size of the words and the quality of the paper were not quite the same.

There's the possibility of our conversation veering in the same direction as it did yesterday if I were to ask her about the book she

was reading, so I stopped myself from doing so.

But if I could start a conversation with Shinonome, then the top topic on my mind would be her relationship with the man I saw at the shopping street yesterday. Although I wasn't harping on it as much when I woke up today, there's no guarantee I won't bring up the subject by accident. I wonder how Shinonome would react if she knew I saw her in that sort of situation.

Fast forward to around five o'clock, and there were not many people left in the library. Shiina-san rushed out of the small room suddenly and ran out of the library while muttering to herself.

What happened? A student walked up to the borrowing counter just then, so I missed the opportunity to ask Shiina-san or Shinonome about it.

A few minutes later, Shiina-san returned with what looked like a really heavy cardboard box in her arms. She may be slightly older than us, but she has a really tiny stature. I could watch on no longer, so I walked out of the counter and took the box away from her hands.

"Thank you. It's really tiring to walk all the way here from the staff room....."

Even though she was about to hit her thirties, there was a really youthful smile on Shiina-san's face while she grumbled. According to Ikehara, a fellow library committee member, Shiina-san was incredibly popular among a group of boys in school.

The cardboard box I had taken from Shiina-san's hands was heavy as hell. The delivery order pasted on the box suggested it was an urgent delivery.

"What's in this box?"

I directed the question to the librarian as I moved along. Shiina-san scratched her cheeks in embarrassment.

"Books for the library..... I had forgotten to specify the place of delivery, so it was sent to the staff room instead."

I nodded my head after knowing the reason behind her hasty dash out of the library.

I carried the box of books into the small room where Shiina-san creates her <Books Info>. Thinking that my job was done, I made to the exit. However, Shiina-san stopped me in my tracks.

"Ah, wait. I have a favor to ask from you."

Before I could even give her an answer, Shiina-san stuck her head out of the room and—

"Yuuko-chan, please come into the room."

For some unknown reason, Shiina-san called Shinonome over.

So the both of us stood side by side without a clue on what's going

on. Shiina-san opened up the box and peered at the books inside.

"Please help me to stick barcodes onto the books."



I have never done that before, so I was not quite sure what I should do.

"Haa."

There was no reason for me to decline the job, so I nodded my head hesitantly.

"Youko-chan knows what to do, so I'll be counting on you two. Please try to remember how it's done, Minami-kun. I'll take over the counters."

With that said, Shiina-san left the room. It's pretty obvious that Shinonome and I were the only people remaining in this room.

Just as I was at a loss as to what to do, Shinonome began taking the books out of the box in silence. She had already started working by herself.

"You've done this before?"

I popped the question. As she continued to retrieve the books from the box, Shinonome replied.

"Yes."

But I don't remember being assigned to the task on the days where I was on shift together with Shinonome.

"When?"

"I signed up for the committee a week earlier than Minami-kun did. It was then when I did it."

"Ah, I see."

Though there's the strange rule where we have to participate in a co-curricular activity, we're given a one month buffer period from April to May to decide on which clubs we'll be joining. In other words, we have a month where we do not have to participate in any of the activities.

For those who had already decided on the club which they would be joining, or students who were quick to take action, they would already begin participating in the activities during April. But as for me, after knowing the existence of the library committee, I chose to live a carefree life in April with the excuse that "I'm having a hard time deciding on what to join".

Perhaps that's the reason why I missed the chance to work together with Shinonome.

Shinonome stopped taking the books out of the box and stood up as though she had remembered something. She walked quietly towards the computer in a corner of the room. As I watched her through the corner of my eyes, Shinonome checked the records in the computer for books that were already saved in the database. With the Dewey decimal numbers listed on top, she then proceeded to print out the bar-codes with some sort of program.

So she's actually really adept at this task. Then again, there's no way we could continue on our task if we do not have the bar-codes to begin with in the first place.

Since Shinonome had not designated any tasks for me, I could only resume on what she had stopped halfway, which was to take the books out of the box.

I took out the books one at a time and began to place them neatly on the table. But that was pretty much done in a flash, so I was not too sure what I should be doing next. It's too much of a pain to take the initiative and ask "What's next for me?", so I chose to stare at the books instead.

One of them was a magazine named <Yotaka>. Never seen it before, but from the text printed on the cover, it looked like some sort of literary magazine.

As the rest of the books were all lengthy novels, I reached out my hand and gave the magazine a quick flip. A magazine will probably have some sort of exclusive columns or interviews, and that should be enough for me to kill time till Shinonome issues her next order.

The top article was titled as <The World in the Eyes of Nishizono Yūko>. As the author is not someone whom I had heard of before, I almost flipped the page in a flash so as to look for some other articles which would interest me more — but then my hands stopped just about as quickly.

"Hmm.....?"

A dumb noise leaked out of my mouth. That was a little embarrassing. I lifted my head and compared the page of the magazine to Shinonome, whose back was facing me as she worked on the computer, several times.

On the opened page was the picture of what looked like a female writer named Nishizono Yūko. However, no matter how you look at this, Nishizono Yūko looks just like Shinonome.

"Ohh.....?"

What's this?

It all seems unreal to me. However, the expressionless Nishizono Yūko on the magazine was obviously Shinonome. She's Shinonome Yuuko.

Upon hearing the weird noises made by me for a second time, Shinonome realized something was amiss and turned around to look at me.

"What's wrong.....?"

She asked. I hid the magazine in my hand in reflex. I had no idea why I did that, but it somehow felt like it's not something which she should see. Or perhaps I did not want Shinonome to realize I knew.

"Ah.....!"

Shinonome gave a shriek when she saw the magazine in my hand. That sort of flustered reaction was something you'd not quite expect from her.

Shinonome then rushed to my side, picked up the magazine which I had hidden beneath the desk and blocked the article with the cover.

"..... You saw?"

I tilted my head in response.

"W-What?"

"The photo."

There was no way I could feign ignorance with those straightforward lines from her. Actually, it's not like I have any reason to pretend otherwise, so I answered with:

"Ah, urm..... there's someone who looks just like Shinonome."

Upon hearing that, Shinonome heaved a sigh.

"She does not just look like me..... that is me in the picture."

"Nishizono Yūko?"

"Please do not use that name..... it's really embarrassing....."

Muttered Shinonome with her head lowered.

"Eh? So what's going on? Are you an author, Shinonome?"

"I guess....."

"Is that something to be embarrassed about? Though I'm not in any position to be saying that."

Shouldn't that be something to be proud of instead? There is this distant relative of mine whom I have never seen before, who has written a book as well. My mother purchased the book and praised her to high heavens.

Shinonome answered with her head low.

"Please don't..... tell anyone in school about it....."

"But still, it's just a matter of time when someone finds out about this, especially when your photo is published on a magazine."

Shinonome heaved a long sigh and stared in melancholy towards the direction of the door.

"That's the reason why I told Shiina-san not to purchase <Yotaka>....."

I followed her gaze as well.

"Huh? Shiina-san knew?"

"She's someone who loves to read as well..... since she will find out about it sooner or later, I figured I might as well tell her....."

"I see....."

I began to sort out the information in my head.

In short, the "Nishizono Yūko" author who appeared on the magazine is none other than Shinonome herself. Shinonome does not want anyone to know about this, but Shiina-san knew about it already..... Hmm, guess that's about it.

"Nishizono Yūko."

As soon as I finished saying that, I was greeted with a harsh stare from Shinonome.

"I told you not to use that name already."

"Even so..... that's you, isn't it?"

"You are not wrong about that....."

"But..... why Nishizono?"

"There is no..... special meaning behind that....."

"Let me guess: you chose "west" (\*Nishi) because of the "east" character in your name?" [TLNote: the 東 character in 東雲 (Shinonome) is the kanji for east, while the 西 character in 西園 (Nishizono) is the kanji for west]

That was just a random reason that appeared in my mind, but Shinonome nodded her head in a rather straightforward fashion.

"..... Right."

I expected her to deny my answer, so it actually felt rather awkward.

"Urm..... n-nothing wrong with that, I guess? It's a rather simple reason."

I put on an affable smile as Shinonome took a quick glance in my direction. She then laid the book onto the table.

"In any case, not a word to anyone else. Okay?"

At that very moment, I actually wanted to joke around and reject her with a "No". Generally speaking, my interest in Shinonome was just due to my curiosity, but for some reason unknown to me, the childish feelings of "wanting to bully the girl whom I like" just appeared in my heart all of the sudden.

But that would make it look like I'm in love with Shinonome, so I quickly regained my senses and did a 180 with my intentions.

"Mmm, I won't say a word if that's what Shinonome wants."

I ended up giving her a rather inconsequential answer.

After a soft thanks from her, we resumed on what we were supposed to be doing in the room — which was pasting barcodes onto the books.

The <Yotaka> magazine with Shinonome's pictures in it was not affixed with a barcode.

After we were done with all the books but <Yotaka>, Shinonome picked the magazine up and told me she was planning to see Shiina-san.

"You can leave if you want, Minami-kun."

I did just that. Perhaps Shinonome was planning to complain to Shiina-san or something. However, it feels like Shiina-san is quite an airhead, so I'm not too sure if Shiina-san will know what's going on even if Shinonome complained.

As I walked absentmindedly on the street which leads to the station, I caught sight of a bookstore.

There was a sudden urge to buy the magazine, but I shot down the idea instead. There's no way I'd buy a pretty expensive magazine just for the few pages of article inside.

And somehow, I think there's a copy of the magazine in my house anyway.

After all, it's Keisuke, the bookworm who will buy just about every literary magazine there is to offer.

\*\*\*

Dinner consists of meat and potato stew, poached spinach and risotto with dashimaki tamago.

Everything was made by the skilled Arumi-san. As usual, Keisuke was eating the dishes in silence. Arumi-san did not ask Keisuke for his opinions on the dishes.

"Are the dishes delicious, Eita?"

Instead, I was the one asked.

"Mmm....."

Arumi-san fixed her gaze on my face when she heard my answer.

"Not just 'mmm'. I'll be much happier if you can say it explicitly."

"It's delicious."

"Mmm! Thank you!"

I knew very well the reason why Arumi-san insisted on talking

with me. There was once when she got Keisuke to ask a few questions in her stead.

"Do you hate Arumi?"

That was the period of time when I was slowly becoming aware of the relationship between Arumi-san and Keisuke. I used to be really close to Arumi-san, but I began to distance myself away from her when I came to realize the situation. Arumi-san was feeling rather uneasy about it.

"That's not..... really it."

"You should be nicer to her then. She really wants to get along with you."

Those words are totally meant for you, who is the embodiment of indifference — I wanted to say that so badly. It's not like they are a particularly intimate couple or something, but Arumi-san is somehow not the least bit worried about her relationship with Keisuke, which was something I found to be incredibly surprising. They had long built a trust between themselves, leaving no space for me to fit in.

"..... Alright."

That was the conversation which happened two years ago.

After we were done with dinner, Keisuke returned to his room immediately. When she was done with the dishes, Arumi-san said

to me,

"I'll be going home tonight. Don't stay up too late, Eita."

Arumi-san left me a very motherly advise and left for home.

I returned to my room once more. Upon seeing the <Nine Stories> placed on the desk, I was reminded of Shinonome.

And so I walked towards his room, knocked on the door and entered without even waiting for his reply.

Keisuke was reading a thick book while smoking a cigarette.

"..... What?"

I scanned the room.

"Urm..... do you have the magazine <Yotaka>?"

"You're done with the book you borrowed?"

"Just halfway through..... my Japanese teacher recommended us the magazine, so I thought I'll have a look."

I had no intention of revealing the stuff about Shinonome. The reason I did that was not because of my promise to her, but because I did not want to divulge my private affairs to Keisuke.

Keisuke pointed at a stack of books in a corner of the room and

said,

"<Yotaka> is probably somewhere in there."

Somewhere near the pile of books was a very familiar cover image, which should be the latest volume of the magazine. I picked it up.

"Take it then."

With that said, Keisuke's vision returned to his book once more, but not before saying, "Remember to return it".

I returned to my room immediately after getting my hands on the book and began flipping through the exclusive article found in <Yotaka>. Seemed like an interview, and the interviewee (aka Shinonome) would answer the questions under the alias 'Nishizono Yūko'.

*— What is your motivation for being a writer?*

*Nishizono: No particular reason, I just became one somehow.*

*— You are currently working on short stories, so any interest in lengthier novels in the future?*

*Nishizono: I have not thought that far. Not at the current moment anyway.*

You can just feel how cold she is through the article. You don't even get to see stuff like *\*laughs\** in the interview. And since I knew Shinonome in person, I can just imagine the scene right away.

It was something I failed to notice in the library, but they published one of Nishizono Yūko's work after the article. It was a short story titled as <The Feeble Resistances of the Aquarium Children>.

When I was done reading it, I could not quite put my finger on it.

I felt nothing about the story; it was neither interesting nor boring. The plot moved in a linear fashion. It felt rather mechanical, though that's actually very Shinonome. Perhaps I may have a different impression of the story if I am someone who reads often, but as someone who barely reads, I think it's an accomplishment for me to even finish the story.

Upon searching the name 'Nishizono Yūko' on the internet, I came to know that she first appeared in the scene two years ago for winning the <Yotaka Newcomer Literary Award>. Since she's the same age as me, that means Shinonome started off as a writer when she was just in her second year in middle school. That must be something rather impressive.

There's the possibility that Keisuke knows a lot more about Nishizono Yūko. What are his views on that story? Is it good or not? He would probably share his opinions if I asked.

I wanted to discuss it with him, but I ended up not doing so.

Regardless of Keisuke's opinions, it will not change the fact that Nishizono Yūko is actually Shinonome, much less the fact that she is my classmate.

I have nothing to do with who she is going out with.

We are nothing more than just classmates, and it was by coincidence that we are library committee members as well.

It's just that for some reason unknown to me, I was shaken by the scene of her relationship with a man. A melancholic feeling in my heart was about to tear my mind apart.

As a book-lover, Shinonome was not satisfied with just reading alone. She began dabbling with writing, which turned out to be well received.

It just feels like I was left behind.

Seriously, she's supposed to be just like me, someone who's uninterested in just about everything — what a willful outburst of exasperation from me.

Come to think about it, that was just the impression I have on Shinonome. She was already a writer before I knew her, so I was in no position to say things like her leaving me behind. Shinonome was on a different level right from the start.

My feelings right now are really similar to back when I realized

Arumi-san's relationship with Keisuke.

Wreaking my brain in an attempt to figure a way to get Arumi-san to notice me, only to realize that the two were already in a relationship. There was nothing I could do to change that fact. But I was unaware of what was going on, so I ended up wasting all my efforts while giving my all to accomplish something.

It was a huge blow for me, so I ended up living my life in a bit of a tantrum while avoiding Arumi-san. And now, I am experiencing the same feelings once more in Shinonome, though it is has totally nothing to do with love.

This won't do — with that in mind, I sat up from my bed.

I have been too melancholic recently, with my mind harping on insignificant things all the time. I may be someone who chose to live the life of a failure by choosing to be apathetic towards just about everything, but I should still think more positively all the same.

I picked up <Yotaka> and got off my bed.

After stuffing the magazine into my bag, I left the room and headed for the bath.

I'll get Shinonome to sign on the magazine tomorrow — I thought to myself. It may result in Shinonome disliking me, but that's not too bad either.

While soaking myself in hot water, I realized I was actually very conscious of Shinonome.

And I feel really happy when I see Shinonome's unhappy expression.

Perhaps it's because Shinonome only shows that expression to me.

\*\*\*

The plan I had yesterday was dashed — Shinonome left the classroom immediately when classes were over. And since I had to keep it a secret, the only time I could ask her for a signature was after school. It was rather deflating.

At other times like this, she would be reading her books leisurely instead. But today happened to be different.

And when I realized the reason for Shinonome's early departure might be because of an appointment with the guy whom I saw last time, the emotions I felt were indescribable.

With the way I'm guessing Shinonome's each and every movement, it feels as if I'm a stalker.

I had a feeling I might see Shinonome going on a date in the cafe yet again if I were to leave for home just like that (though she might not be there in the first place), so I had no choice but to burn my time in the classroom as usual.

After confirming there was no one left in the classroom, I took out <Yotaka> and began reading it.

I had planned for Shinonome to sign on the page where her photograph was on. That was not just to make her angry, but also to tease Keisuke a little. It's pretty rare of Keisuke to revisit a book for a second time, so he would probably toss it into the pile of books without flipping through the pages again.

If that happens, the magazine which was thrown into a corner will have Shinonome's signature in it. But no one will know.

It may be five to ten years before Keisuke comes to know of its existence. There is also the chance where he disposes it without ever knowing. Even if he does notice it, it is unlikely for him to say anything about it. In fact, he might not realize it was my prank.

That will be great.

It's rather somber for me to be saying this; even though it's a prank which nobody may come to know about, there's still some meaning in it for me.

After allowing my thoughts to run wild for a while, it was time for me to head home.

It had been more than an hour since Shinonome left the classroom.

That should be enough for me not to see her, right?

With that thought in mind, I began to make my way home.

But from what happened next, everything I did actually made things worse.

Since I was aiming to avoid Shinonome, I should have avoided the shopping street.

That's because while passing the same cafe, I happened to bump into two people walking out of the door. They were none other than Shinonome and the young man.

I was trying to drag the time, but it ended up with me looking like I was waiting to pounce on them instead. That was awkward.



"Ah....."

Shinonome and I gave a cry at about the same time. Upon seeing that, the man beside Shinonome stared at us with a perplexed expression.

"Urm..... you two know each other?"

The man questioned Shinonome.

Shinonome nodded slightly and replied,

"He is my classmate....."

"Ahh, I see."

As he said that, a troubled expression appeared on the man's face. From that expression, it felt like he was thinking, "I never thought we'll be seen at a place like this". He seemed like he was around the age of twenty-five. Given his age, it's probably really awkward to be seen by the classmate of his high-school girlfriend.

As for me, I had no idea how I should go about facing them as well.

In the first place, I'm in a bad mood just from seeing them together. Moreover, I had deliberately wasted my time to avoid bumping into them, but that just made things even worse.

"Urm..... who is he? Your brother?"

I popped the question in deliberation after deciding it would be impossible for that to be the case. Moreover, there was also the huge age difference between the two. Shinonome shook her head.

"He is my editor."

However, the one to wear a surprised expression upon hearing the answer was actually the 'editor' himself.

"Eh? Is it okay to tell? Didn't you want me to keep this a secret?"

"Minami-kun knows about it."

Shinonome was not the least bit hesitant with her reply. That was met with an exclamation from the man.

"I see, so there's someone who knows....."

As he said that, he began fishing around the inner pocket of his coat and pulled out a name card holder. He then picked a card out and passed it to me.

"Then I'll introduce myself."

On the card were the words [*Yotaka Editorial Department Aikawa Youji*].

"Should you be working on a novel, feel free to contact me any time and I'll take a look at it. We are currently focusing our attention on uncovering talented youths."

He is probably wasting his efforts, considering the fact that I have not written a novel in my life — I thought to myself. But there was no point in correcting him, so I silently accepted his name card with a nod.

"Also, I hope you can convince Yuuko-chan to work on a long novel. It seems like she is lacking inspiration at the moment, so help her out if you can."

Is that the occupational habits of an editor, or is it unique for Aikawa's case? I never thought I'd hear a request like that, considering he had just met me for the very first time. Honestly speaking, I'm not too good at dealing with people like him.

"Right."

Aikawa flashed a wry smile when he saw my expressionless face. He then turned his head towards Shinonome.

"Well then, I have another appointment with a different author, so please continue to work on the draft."

Shinonome bowed in the direction of Aikawa, who was waving his hand. I followed suit.

With me rooted on the spot, I thought to myself: so he's her editor.

The possibility is there, considering Shinonome's job as an author. The reason why it never came to my mind was because there were

no editors among the people I knew.

Shinonome heaved a quiet sigh when Aikawa disappeared from our sight.

"That's really impressive."

Upon hearing my comment, Shinonome tilted her head and asked,

"What's impressive?"

"Well, just the fact that you have an editor."

"It's nothing much really. That is quite common."

"No way that's common..... How many high-school students do you know of who actually have an editor with them?"

"..... Mmm, right. However, the editor was assigned to me even though I am not that great of an author."

"No, the fact that you are an author is impressive enough."

"Really.....? Aren't there authors everywhere?"

Shinonome was as expressionless as ever. I could not tell if that was her being humble, or just the way she is.

For some unknown reason, I felt incredibly relieved when I knew that the man was her editor and not her boyfriend.

In order to prevent her from reading my mind, I began flipping through my bag with her watching, took out <Yotaka> and handed it to her.

For a brief moment, Shinonome showed an expression of aversion. She stared at me.

"..... What is this?"

I flashed a wry smile in response.

"Can I have your autograph?"

That was my answer. Shinonome looked at me in silence before tilting her head slightly. That was when I realized it's probably a habit of hers to tilt her head like that. I had been seeing her do that quite often in recent times.

"Why are you asking for my autograph?"

"Ah, nothing special really..... I just find it interesting."

"You actually bought that magazine?"

"My elder brother loves reading, so I borrowed it from him."

"You told your brother about me?"

"Nah. I promised you not to, didn't I?"

"However, he will notice it should I sign the magazine, no?"

So I ended up explaining to Shinonome about Keisuke's reading habits, like how he would not read a book for the second time, so he would probably just throw the magazine in a corner of the room when I returned it to him. I also explained to her how getting her to sign on Keisuke's magazine was all just a prank of mine.

That might actually be very rude of me.

From her perspective, it might sound like her signature was not what I really wanted.

However, Shinonome was not angry at me. She actually laughed instead.

"What a strange guy."

She said.

"But Minami-kun, do you have a marker pen with you?"

It hit me only when she reminded me. I have the stationary in the bag I required for lessons, but those were nothing more than just pens. The photographed page was printed on glossy paper, so it would be hard to sign it with anything other than a marker pen.

"Ah, you're right....."

"You should have it prepared if you were asking for a signature."

"Don't you have one with you, Shinonome?"

"Of course not..... I do have gel pens with me, but those will probably smudge."

"Then how about next time? I'll have a marker pen prepared."

Shinonome tilted her head once more when she heard my request.

"..... Since you are so insistent, sure."

There were people walking out of the cafe, so we ended our conversation abruptly and gave way to them. Shinonome then began walking in the direction of the station in silence. I stuffed the magazine into my bag and followed her footsteps.

Seems like Shinonome travels by train as well. As we passed through the gates at the same time, I realized the train she was taking would head in the opposite direction as mine.

"Goodbye."

Shinonome bade me goodbye. I nodded my head and was about to make my way to the platform, but I was stopped by Shinonome's call.

"Minami-kun."

I turned around. After staring at me for a while, Shinonome continued.

"About the signature."

I was expecting her to say things like, "Let's call it off".

"Oh..... It's okay if you don't want to do it....."

Shinonome shook her head when she heard that.

"That's not it. I will sign the magazine."

"Ah, really? I'll bring the magazine on Friday then."

"However, can you listen to a request of mine?"

That was a rather surprising question from her, so there was no way I could hide my puzzlement. Moreover, it was actually initiated by Shinonome. Since I was the one who asked a favor from her, there is no reason for me to reject the request.

"Ah, mmm, sure..... So what's it about?"

What's important was her request. However, Shinonome did not answer me.

"I will bring it up again on that day."

"Urm..... okay."

Shinonome then left me in my puzzled state and turned away from my direction.

"See you tomorrow."

I watched Shinonome in silence as she walked away after that line of hers.

The image of that mischievous smile as she left remained stuck in my mind for a long time.

## Chapter 3

*The man brought Romiemarigana to a bizarre, silver house.*

*Though she could not smell anything with her nose, the house was somehow filled with a scent that set her mind at ease.*

*The man provided Romiemarigana with food she had never seen before. They were uncomfortably sweet, but they more than appeased her hunger.*

*Who is this man? — Romiemarigana thought to herself.*

*She has never met anyone outside of her tribe. However, they did know that in the world they named "Grando", there existed other tribes as well. Her fellow tribe-mate Pegii-Iliziya used to boast about his encounter with another tribe and how they drove him away.*

*That made her think all other tribes were a source of danger to hers.*

*However, the man before her was incredibly cordial.*

*Nishizono Yūko*

*<Romiemarigana's Expanding World>*

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On Friday, there wasn't much interaction between me and Shinonome when I reached school.

She was doing her normal thing where she would read non-stop without even looking at me once. For a while, it felt like the talk we had yesterday was all just a lie. Come to think of it, though I was asking for Shinonome's autograph, it was her stand to keep her identity as an author a secret. She probably won't touch on the topic while there are other students around us.

As I rested my chin on my hands and listened to the boring history lessons, I began recalling the conversation I had with Shinonome yesterday.

*"However, can you listen to a request of mine?"*

What will that request be?

*"There's this bag that I always wanted."*

There's no way she'll say that, obviously. It doesn't feel like she's a materialistic person. Moreover, with her novels published in the magazines, she should be receiving quite a bit of royalties from them. She's probably much richer than I am.

Still, I have zero idea what Shinonome would want from me. I have no idea how tiring it is for an author to sign an autograph, but there's no way she'd go to the extremes and say things like

"The sight of you is revolting, so just die" — I hope.

The lessons continued on without anything noteworthy happening, and soon lessons were over for the day.

I ignored the students who were preparing themselves for their co-curricular activities, packed up my stuff in a jiffy and stood up to prepare to leave. I could very well wait for the crowd to clear instead of rushing if there's nothing waiting for me, but today's not the day to do so. Shiina-san would handle the counters by herself while waiting for the committee members to show up at the library, but I'm sorry to say that Shiina-san's not really somebody you can count on. She'd forget to scan the barcode due to a brief lapse of concentration. Then she'd get flustered when she realized her mistake, resulting in things like being repeatedly unable to scan the barcode. So actually, she's would cause a long line to form before the counter.

As I inadvertently turned my head, I realized Shinonome was standing as well.

It wouldn't be great to just head to the library by myself, so I matched my pace with Shinonome's and left the classroom with her. I couldn't chat with her due to the other students around us. When we reached the staircase to the highest floor where the library was located, I, after making sure no one else was around, finally broke the silence.

"Oh yeah, I've read it already. Shinonome's story."

Upon hearing that, Shinonome stopped in her tracks to look at me.

"Eh?"

I wasn't expecting any happy emotions from her. In fact, I thought I would be receiving some sort of cold response like "Oh" or "Thank you". It was me who was flustered instead.

"Ah..... what's wrong? Should I have not read that?"

"That's..... not what I meant."

Shinonome then resumed her steps, so I followed suit.

"Urm, to be honest, I don't quite understand the story."

"Mmm, I get that a lot."

"But still, it's really incredible. You have a story that's published."

"Really.....?"

I remembered the editor I met yesterday - Aikawa Youji. He was hoping I could convince Shinonome to work on a long story.

"All Shinonome has written up 'til now are short stories?"

"Yes, just short stories."

I then remembered our earlier conversation about short and long

stories. I hesitated for a moment, wondering if I should avoid the topic.

Upon hearing that my preference was long stories, Shinonome ended the conversation rather unhappily. Should I bring the topic up now, there's the chance I'll get on her bad side.

After much pondering, I chose to start things off with:

"Shinonome, do you love short stories?"

Once again, Shinonome stopped in her tracks. I followed suit.

We happened to stop at the stair landing, which made the scene look as if there were a guy who chose to confess to a girl at a location where there'll be no one around. How very awkward.

"Rather than saying that I love them....."

Shinonome finally spoke, but she tilted her head halfway into her sentence.

"There're actually plenty of reasons behind it....."

"Lots of reasons?"

Shinonome didn't address my doubt. Instead, she continued to look at me as she said,

"Minami-kun had once said that you prefer long stories, am I

right?"

I was deliberately avoiding the topic, but Shinonome chose to bring it up anyway.

"I did say that before, but..... you know? I was asking about Shinonome's love for short stories—"

Shinonome extended her two hands towards me, as though she were trying to cut me off. Upon seeing me with my mouth shut, she lowered her head and said,

"Urm..... you may find what I'm about to say weird, but do you mind listening to me anyway?"

I nodded my head.

"Has Minami-kun ever wondered if you're actually living the life of the main protagonist?"

That was quite a weird question coming from her, so it was my turn to tilt my head in bewilderment this time.

"The main protagonist.....? Me.....?"

Shinonome ignored my questions and continued.

"Actually, I think everyone has imagined themselves as one at least once. Imagining themselves as the protagonist in a huge epic story, encountering all sorts of situations, meeting and separating

with all kinds of people — and the story would continue on and on like that. To put it into perspective, it would be very much like a huge tome of an epic."

That was not all Shinonome had to say.

"However, that's not what I think. Human beings are insignificantly tiny. Going back to the analogy I made earlier, it would only fill up about fifty to sixty pages worth of content — the length of a short story."

What Shinonome just said were some really philosophical stuff; stuff miles away from what an ordinary person like myself would have in his mind. Since I couldn't outright agree or disagree with her, my best course of action was to nod my head hazily in response.

"Minami-kun mentioned this before, haven't you? That short stories do not sell as well as long stories do."

"U-Urm....."

"I think you are right. Long stories take up a majority of the bestsellers, and that must be because most people prefer reading longer stories. On the other hand, that means that short stories are lacking in content, or perhaps the characters are not that interesting to the audience."

"Is that..... so?"

"Though I'm not too sure if this is true..... but I do wonder if it has something to do with what I said earlier. Everyone hopes to be the main protagonist of some epic, but that's not how things are in reality..... that's probably the reason why people yearn for a lengthy story. They resort to thick novels to do things they could not have done in real life."

I did understand what Shinonome was trying to say, but not to the point where I could agree conclusively. So all I did was stand and continue listening to her.

That was the first time I saw Shinonome being so conversational.

"Therefore, I wanted to show everyone how wonderful the idea that 'life's like a short story' is, and let more people experience that feeling. Short stories are indeed brief, but there are plenty of stories you would want to read again and again. We may not be living a life worthy of an epic, but we still can appreciate it thanks to its interesting snippets found everywhere."

I could finally begin to understand what Shinonome was trying to convey. Well, barely.

"So that's the reason why you write short stories?"

I watched in surprise as Shinonome gave a hard nod.

This once again made me realize how difficult it was to write a novel. So you pretty much have to attain some sort of twisted enlightenment before you can decide on the length of the story

you'll be working on. As someone who has never once thought of writing a book, understanding her reasons is no walk in the park.

"That's just..... incredible."

I gave a perfunctory reply. Shinonome resumed her pace in silence with her head lowered.

If only she had said things like:

"I write because of the money."

Or—

"Long stories are too troublesome."

Or stuff like that. I would've accepted those explanations easily. Then I could have responded with things like: "Ahh, I see" or "you're actually right".

However, Shinonome's 'reasons' were mind-boggling. They sounded more like preaching you'd hear from a zen monk.

While I was musing to myself, we reached the library. As expected, Shiina-san had entered into a state of fluster during my brief conversation with Shinonome.

"Ah! Hurry up, you two! Quickly!"

Shiina-san waved her hands immediately after catching sight of us.

After taking a detour past the snaking queue and reaching the counter, we began working on the borrowing and returning of the books.

Standing behind us was Shiina-san, who heaved a huge, exaggerated sigh—

"Ah, thank goodness..... I don't know what I'd do if you two don't show up."

She grumbled. Honestly, I'm quite doubtful whether there's another librarian in this world who can't even handle the tiny crowd before us.

When we were done with the queue of students before us, Shiina-san told us she has to continue her work on <Books Info>, as usual. So she disappeared into the small room.

Come to think of it, you can't exactly call taking a whole week to work on some small publication efficient, even if it is done by hand. Should that be done by another person, he'll probably take half the time required to finish it all by hand.

And as usual, most of the students in the library are there to borrow books, so Shinonome's sitting beside me reading. The cover of the book was no different from the ones she read before, but ever since I came to know of her true identity and listen to that mind-boggling speech of hers, she somehow looked really elegant while she's reading. Intriguing.

As the number of visitors began to die down, I remembered the thing I had planned for today. And so, I reached for my bag which was placed in a corner and fished out the magazine.

"Shinonome..... this."

Shinonome stared at me blankly as I passed her the magazine and a marker pen, which was followed by a wry smile.

"..... So you still remember. I thought everything you did yesterday was at a spur of the moment."

Bulls eye. I then replied with,

"Mmm, you're actually right..... but this isn't something you'd see everyday. I mean, how often can you get your classmate to do an autograph for you?"

"Rather than calling it an autograph, it's more like me writing my name on the magazine. Are you okay with that?"

"Of course, it's not like it matters. An autograph's an autograph, yeah?"

With that said, Shinonome slowly flipped open the magazine. I stopped her in a hurry when I realized she was planning to sign on the back of the cover.

"Please hold on. It would be much better if you can sign on the page where your photo is."

Shinonome showed me what was probably the most repulsed expression she could possibly muster.

"Eh?"

"Come on, it'll look way more like an autograph that way."

With a displeased expression, Shinonome scribbled a tiny 'Nishizono Yūko' on the page. It looked more like a note than an autograph though, no thanks to the minuscule size of the words. However, it's not like I'm in any position to complain about that.

"Done."

After confirming that the ink was all dried up, Shinonome closed the magazine and returned it to me.

"Mmm, thanks."

When I received the magazine from her, I remembered Shinonome's 'request'.

"Right, what's your request, Shinonome?"

Upon hearing my question, Shinonome lowered her head and replied,

"Let's leave that for later."

"Later?"

"Mmm, later. When we're going home."

I had no choice but to agree since that was what she wanted. Still, it's not like there's anyone around us, so there's no need for her to worry about being heard by someone else.

"Ah, okay....."

Shinonome stole a glance at me as I was sitting down.

"Are you okay..... with reaching home a little late?"

"Sure....."

"Alright."

Shinonome said no further.

As most of the students were at the counter to borrow books, I had no time to think about anything else other than work.

But whenever I was done with work and resting, I couldn't help but think.

What on earth is she about to ask from me?

My heart was hit by a pang of uneasiness. As for Shinonome, she paid not the slightest amount of attention to me and continued to

read her book. I had no clue what she had in her mind.

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Even though it had been more than a month since I became a library committee member, this is the first time I'm walking home together with Shinonome. It was normal for us to leave without waiting for the other. We weren't that close to being with, so there was no reason to.

Even if we were to leave the library together, I would deliberately change the route I take home. I mean, you'd have to find a topic to converse on if we head home together, or else we would be in for an awkward situation. A situation which I hate. Moreover, it's a pain in the rear to find a topic to break the silence as well.

Still, there are exceptions to everything, and today happened to be the day when I cannot avoid walking home together with Shinonome. Ultimately, I was the one who asked Shinonome for an autograph, so I'm obliged to respond to her 'request' the moment she agreed to mine. Problem is, our main protagonist Shinonome hasn't filled me up on that 'request' yet.

"In any case, please follow me to the station."

That was what she said.

Just as expected, a long, awkward silence lingered between us while we made our way there.

Just as I was pondering on whether it would be better to keep the status quo or if I should initiate a casual conversation, Shinonome spoke.

"I've told you earlier..... about the reasons why I write short stories....."

"Ah, yeah. So?"

"Aikawa-san..... he's the editor by the way..... he said he prefers me working on a longer story."

I nodded. That was what he said to me on our very first encounter, so that should be true.

"I had already told him my thoughts on this matter..... but he said it'll be better for me to write a long novel. It won't be too late to revert to short stories when I have gained more popularity."

"Is that so....."

"To be honest, aside from the reasons I mentioned to Minami-kun earlier, there's another reason why I'm not willing to write long stories—"

We reached the entrance to the shopping street just as she was saying that. Halfway through her sentence, she turned around to look at me and asked,

"..... Would you mind if we head to the cafe?"

That was the question.

"Sure..... but just a second."

I fished out my wallet to check if I had enough cash on me. Shinonome gave a tiny laugh when she saw that.

"I'll pay for you."

"That's not necessary. How can I have you do that?"

"It's fine, since I'm the one who's making the request. Moreover, it's not like I'm penniless with the royalties I received."

Despite all her words, I took a glance into my wallet anyway. But there wasn't even a thousand yen note to be found inside. There were some loose change here and there, but just barely. Should I have known earlier, I would have taken some money from Keisuke under the pretext of cash for my takeaway dinner. Generally speaking, I'm not a huge eater, nor do I indulge in any hobbies. I'm used to not having much money on me.

"Thanks..... for the offer then."

I felt really useless to be treated by a girl. It would have been better if she were a lady who's older than me, but this is a classmate we're talking about.

"You don't have to mind, really."

As she said that, Shinonome put on a smile yet again.

With our conversation grinding to a halt, Shinonome led the way and brought me to a cafe. It was the cafe where I met Shinonome and her editor. This was my first time visiting the cafe. The gaps between the tables were really spacious, so it was indeed a conducive place to have a discussion.

We were led to a corner seat by the waiter. Shinonome ordered a cup of hot coffee.

"What about you, Minami-kun?"

"Ah..... I'll have the same thing."

I was planning not to order anything, but that'd feel really awkward as well, so I ended up with that answer.

Shinonome said not a single word while we were waiting for our coffee.

We're getting nowhere with the way things are, so I was preparing to start a conversation. However, the cellphone in my pocket vibrated just then. I took out the phone and realized it was a message from Arumi-san.

"We'll be having sukiyaki tonight, so come home as soon as you can."

I'm not a huge fan of sukiyaki..... while thinking of that—

"I may be slightly late, so you and Keisuke start without me."

I typed that into the phone. The reply came in less than thirty seconds.

"Is that a date? Are you on a date?"

I chose to ignore the message and slipped the phone into my pocket.

Perfect timing. The waiter came with our coffee. Shinonome added a spoonful of sugar into her coffee, while I added nothing into mine.

"So, where were we?"

Asked Shinonome as she stirred her coffee.

"On how there's another reason why Shinonome doesn't want to work on a long story."

Shinonome nodded when I was done with that statement.

"Right, that."

"So that means other than wanting your readers to understand more about the beauty of short stories, there's something else to it?"

"Mmm."

I repeated the stuff I heard back at the stairs - thank goodness I heard nothing wrong - and urged Shinonome to go on. Shinonome puffed at her coffee once and took a sip before continuing.

"Without the relevant knowledge or experience, it's incredibly difficult to work on a long story....."

I was mentally prepared for some sort of weird reason from her, but what Shinonome just said was surprisingly ordinary. Something which I felt I could understand.

"Urm..... and so?"

"However, I am barely sixteen, and I possess no unique experiences in me..... To be honest, it's very difficult to come up with something satisfactory."

"So that's why you write short stories instead? But why can't you just expand the short stories to something much longer?"

"That will not work. A short story is fundamentally different from its counterpart."

"I see....."

I don't quite understand everything, but it should be true since it

came from the mouth of Shinonome, who's an author. Still, I don't quite feel that has anything to do with Shinonome's 'request'.



"So, about that request of mine....."

"Mmm."

"I've been thinking — about trying my hands on a long story..... The points brought up by Aikawa-san were reasonable as well. Since I'm an author whose works are already published in the market, I should try working on a long story at the very least."

"Oh..... That's not bad."

Considering her displeasure on our previous discussion on the different types of stories, it was surprising for Shinonome to come up with a decision like that. Still, it's not like I could stop her from writing one. It must be for the best that her editor urged her to write one.

"So I was thinking of seeking Minami-kun's assistance in gathering materials....."

Shinonome was having some difficulty saying that.

"Ah, so that's how it is."

Finally, I could understand what she's trying to convey. I nodded to show my approval.

"Sure, if that's all there is to it."

Shinonome stared at me in surprise when she heard my answer. I

was expecting her to be happy, but that didn't seem to be the case. As always, I couldn't read her emotions just from her expressions alone.

"Is it really..... fine with you?"

"I'm more than willing to help you out if that's all there is."

Shinonome sipped on her coffee and heaved a sigh of relieve.

She then lowered her head and said,

"Aikawa-san said it'll be better to look into romance for long stories."

Though I wasn't too familiar with books, I could more or less accept that idea when I thought of how Arumi-san read romance novels despite being uninterested in reading. I guess it's way easier to sell romance novels.

"Romance huh..... that's pretty good."

"But I have never fallen in love before..... so I don't quite understand....."

Ah, so that's how it is — I thought to myself. To a bystander, Shinonome has an aura like she's not the type to fall in love.

I told Shinonome it would be fine not to obsess over writing a romance novel, but Shinonome shook her head.

"I would like to work on the genre since I'm challenging myself anyway."

"The genre you're referring to..... is romance, right?"

With her cup in hand, Shinonome nodded.

"But you've never fallen in love before, have you?"

"That's why I need your help."

I could almost see where our conversation was headed. My movements froze just as I was sending the cup of coffee to my mouth.

"What sort of help?"

"With things..... to do with love....."

"H-How should I go about doing it?"

"U-Urm..... well....."

That was when Shinonome cleared her throat and looked straight at me.

"Please go out with me."

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Just as I had expected, Keisuke and Arumi-san still didn't have their dinner when I reached home.

"It's so late already, Eita..... you feeling hungry?"

Asked Arumi-san with a pout. As for Keisuke, he was nonchalantly reading the papers in the living room.

"I did send you a mail telling you two to go ahead on without me, didn't I?"

I grumbled. As she hurriedly prepared the table, Arumi-san said,

"Because the food will taste better if everyone's eating together, won't it?"

That thought was probably due to her losing both her parents when she was young. Keisuke and I have never experienced anything like that. Even when our parents went overseas, we brothers would eat in silence without any pangs of loneliness or unease.

After ushering me to my seat, Arumi-san began taking the bowls out while looking at me with a grin.

"W-What?"

"It was a date, wasn't it?"

I was rendered speechless as her question triggered the memories of Shinonome's request.

"I-It's nothing like that....."

And in actual fact, it wasn't. I think.

I panicked when I heard Shinonome asking me out. No has ever asked me out in my whole life, and the fact that it was Shinonome who did shook me even harder. However, Shinonome said,

"Not in the real sense..... we just need to pretend to be a couple. Like going somewhere on a date..... things like that. There are places where it's too inconvenient for me to go alone, and I'll never understand how a date would feel like if I don't experience it with someone else....."

That's how it is.

To be honest, it's nothing more than research gathering.

The price I have to pay for the 'autograph' is to become Shinonome's pretend boyfriend. That's all there is to it.

Still, I could hardly contain my embarrassed nervousness when Arumi-san called it a 'date'.

"That fluster of yours is really suspicious..... so? I won't laugh at you, so do tell."

You're practically laughing at me with the way you're speaking to me, no? I held back the retort. It's not unlike Arumi-san to be an airhead.

"It really isn't a date."

After insisting my stand with a feigned composure, Arumi-san dropped the issue.

She then called out to Keisuke to join us for dinner.

Even while we were eating, Arumi-san does most of the talking. Keisuke's silent by nature, and I'm already used to the way he is. Therefore, it's not a habit of mine to start a conversation.

I stood up when I was done with my meal. Arumi-san, who was beside me clearing the table, said to me,

"Eita, be sure to tell onee-chan about it if you really have a girlfriend, okay?"

"Yeah yeah."

I was disheartened by her way of speech.

Arumi-san would always address herself as 'onee-chan'.

The reason, I'm pretty sure of. Since Arumi-san is Keisuke's girlfriend, she'll become my sister-in-law sooner or later if their

relationship continues as it is. And with that, there's no doubt she'll truly become my 'onee-chan'.

But as of now, I'm finding it difficult to do what she just said.

I don't want to call you 'onee-chan'.

What an airhead.

I used to think that Keisuke and Arumi-san were pretending not to realize my feelings despite knowing my crush on Arumi-san.

But as we mingled together longer, I noticed—

The two of them didn't notice my feelings at all. That's incredibly dense of them, and just about the only similarity they share.

Back in my room and on my bed, I took out my cellphone in an attempt to erase the melancholy inside me.

What I was staring at was the number of Shinonome, stored fresh in my phone just not too long ago.

*"In any case..... how about we exchange our numbers and mail addresses?"*

I did as she suggested. Still, in a situation like that, I should have been more aware, and instead, took the initiative to ask for her number and mail address, right?

If we're actually going out for real, I might have gone all out.

But sadly, that is an 'if'.

Ultimately, my mission is to 'assist Shinonome in her gathering of materials'. As a result, I had agreed to be her pretend boyfriend and do things that lovers would do. Moreover, I am absolutely clueless about what it's like to 'be like a pair of lovers'.

"I don't get it at all....."

I grumbled subconsciously.

I dwell on the subject again and again. Shouldn't the editor's job to assist the authors in their research? That Aikawa dude happens to be in his twenties as well, so it's not like he's unsuitable to be her pretend boyfriend if he wanted to. And since he's way richer than I am, he should have gone out with a girl or two before.

I have no such experience.

Shinonome mentioned she has never fallen in love before. I'm not too different from that either.

My first love is Arumi-san, a love which never bore fruit. Needless to say, I have zero experience when it comes to dating.

I shook my head when I realized my thoughts were racing towards a rather dangerous direction.

I'm trying my hardest not to think too much into things, but it's really unnerving for me since she's always around the house. The fact that she's an airhead just makes things worse. I'm not someone you'd call pure, but it's depressing nevertheless.

Still, the awkwardness could have been much worse than the way things are now.

It's rather rude to Shinonome, but I chose to text her then in order to take my mind off the matter. I was soon at a loss over what I should write.

"It seems like things are taking a rather strange turn, but I'll do my best to assist you."

It was a message I came up with after much hesitation, but it only served to unsettle me even further instead.

"Good night."

And so I added that in.

I was then reminded of Shinonome's autograph, so I walked to Keisuke's room to return the magazine to him.

There was no one in the room. Keisuke's probably taking a bath or something. I put the magazine in the pile of books it was originally in. I received Shinonome's text when I got back to my room.

"Thank you. Goodnight."

A message with no cute pictures, no smileys, nothing. It was indeed very Shinonome. Arumi-san's messages, or the occasional ones sent by my mother — all of them had smileys in them.

However, how on earth should I go about helping Shinonome with the way she is?

The autograph which I had asked from her on a whim has resulted in a rather intriguing development.

I shut down my cellphone, stood up and stretched myself.

I then opened the windows of my room. As my skin came into contact with the moisture of the plum-rain season air, I took a deep breath in.

Keisuke should cut down on the cigarettes. Seriously.

It's so freaking hard to breathe the moment I step into his room.

I felt much better after a few deep breaths, so I shut the windows.

Then came the voice of Arumi-san through the door calling me to take a bath, which caused me to sink into a melancholic mood once more.

She'll probably be staying overnight today. That's usually the case on the weekends.

And she'll once again appear before my eyes in that defenseless, after-bath look.

Sigh, what an airhead she is.

While walking briskly towards the bathroom, I suddenly imagined Shinonome bathing. A wry smile appeared on my face. I find it really weird to be thinking about such things at a time like this, but the Shinonome in my imagination looked pretty damn good.

Her skin was as smooth as a baby's — but of course, I have never seen it before. Definitely not.

## Chapter 4

*When she came back to her senses, the silver house was hovering in the air with a rumbling colossal force.*

*Romiemarigana screamed a few times in fear, but the man comforted her. Despite their language barrier, Romiemarigana knew the man was trying to calm her down.*

*Romiemarigana thought to herself:*

*What an inconceivable person he was. Romiemarigana went into a tranquil state when she heard his voice.*

*With that, Romiemarigana left Grando, the planet she was born and raised in.*

*It would be long before she came to know the name of her planet (and for that matter, the concept of a planet itself).*

*As she rested her gaze on the black sea beyond the window of the silver house,*

*This might be the reason why she was born into the world.*

*Not just to eat or to survive, but for that 'certain something' which was slumbering in the depths of the black ocean.*

*There was also the strange man who managed to calm her down.*

*A gargantuan hope encased her heart gently, overwhelming her  
unease.*

*Nishizono Yūko*

*<Romiemarigana's Expanding World>*

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Every Wednesday or Friday.

Shinonome and I would head home when we were finished with our shift duty at the counters. There were occasions where we would head straight to the station and part ways, but for the most part we would take a detour and visit the cafe — the cafe where we talked about our 'date'.

"Can we actually say we're dating with the way we are now?"

That was what I said one day while swirling the near-empty coffee cup about. As Shinonome was reading her book, her reaction was to lift her eyes upward slightly.

"..... What?"

"Can an occasional visit to the cafe be considered as material gathering?"

Shinonome shut her book with a \*pa\*. Shinonome would be reading even if we are at a cafe, so all I could do was to stare at her as she read and voice my thoughts aloud once in a while. That's almost no different from the things I did to kill time at the library counter.

If you're looking for any changes outside of what I had said, I am exchanging messages with Shinonome at home. However, the contents were not the least bit lovey-dovey — just stuff which I can

live without.

"What should we do then?"

While looking at Shinonome mumbling her question with her head tilted, I sent a cube of ice into my mouth and crushed it into pieces.

"I don't really know how to answer that question of yours though....."

"What are your views on how 'dating' should be like, Minami-kun?"

"I'm not too sure of the answer to that either....."

There's no way I can answer something as conceptual as that. I was only voicing the murky question I had in my mind.

"Let's see, a typical couple's probably quite unlike how we are."

"How should a typical couple be like?"

"Urm....."

Must I spell everything out — I wondered to myself. But then again, Shinonome's not someone you'd call ordinary. Ordinary people don't ask to pretend to be a couple just so to gather materials.

Therefore, the hapless me was left with no other option but to speak.

"For example..... a couple will watch movies together, or go on a date during the weekends - things like that? I'm not too sure myself."

I listed the impressions I had in my mind. Shinonome tilted her head once again, as though thinking about something. And then?

"Let us do just that."

She said.

"Like going on a date during the weekends?"

I sought confirmation from her. Shinonome nodded.

"Are you free tomorrow, Minami-kun?"

"Tomorrow?"

That was pretty much out of the blue, but it's not like I had anything planned. I spent most of my weekends loitering around my house.

"I have nothing on."

"Can we meet tomorrow then?"

"S-Sure..... where?"

"Where would be a good place?"

She was firing a volley of questions, but I answered anyway.

"Like watching a movie or something....."

I wasn't dying to watch a movie, but that was the only thing I could think of.

"Okay."

With that, Shinonome returned to her book once more, which probably signaled the end of the conversation. I heaved a gentle, hapless sigh.

Honestly speaking, I'm not too sure about this myself.

If it was Shinonome who suggested the movie, I would have been more than willing to accompany her since I am currently her boyfriend; if it was me who wanted to go, I would have made the suggestion right from the get go. It's surprising that our conversation ended up that way.

Is this what dating is like?

I never dated a girl before, so I wasn't too sure myself.

But based on my impressions, shouldn't one be way happier and ecstatic than this? It's pretty pointless to be a 'couple' if that's not the case.

Though come to think of it, Shinonome and I ended up as a 'couple' only due to some extraordinary circumstances. There's nothing much I can do.

Love was not in the equation when we ended up as a couple.

It was all so that Shinonome could gather materials for her novel. There was no joy when we became a pair.

I sent another cube of ice into my grinding teeth while thinking about things like that. Shinonome was reading in silence.

With all that said, how is her impression of me?

I doubt she hates me, or else we would not end up the way we are.

But I don't think she loves me either.

I wondered to myself as I stared blankly at Shinonome.

How are my feelings towards her then?

I am not too certain about that either.

I don't dislike her. I find her 'interesting' due to a chance encounter, and that feeling hasn't changed.

But I am not sure if that's love.

Shinonome did mention she 'never loved anyone before'.

That's not the case for me though. I loved Arumi-san, so I have experienced the crazy emotions from being in love with another person.

In other words, my feelings for Shinonome were nowhere near those I used to have for Arumi-san.

While I was thinking in silence, Shinonome gave a tiny sneeze. It sounded very similar to the cries of a tiny animal like that of a hamster or a hedgehog, which I found to be cute. I laughed in reflex.

Shinonome noticed. She stared at me in embarrassment.

"..... Why did you laugh?"

"Nah, it's nothing."

I actually thought Shinonome was actually cute, but there's no way I'd tell her my feelings. Then again, it's not like Shinonome and I were a real 'couple'. There's no need for me to wreak my brain over how we're looking at each other.

Shinonome lifted her head to look at the clock hung in the cafe. Its arms were ushering us to head home.

"It is about time we leave."

I nodded and picked up the bill.

"Allow me to pay for it."

I ignored Shinonome's request and walked straight towards the cashier. Shinonome caught up to me as she wanted to foot the bill, but I turned around and said to her,

"Typically speaking, the girl should not be paying for this."

I had come to the cafe with Shinonome several times already, and she would pay for me every time. I could not do much against it as I didn't have much cash on me. Moreover, Shinonome would always brush it off with, "I am the one who suggested coming here".

Time and time again, she had emphasized on how it was right for her to be the one who pays, and I accepted it without much of a fuss.

However, because of the way things are working out now, I'm struck by an inferiority complex. It should be okay to treat her once in a while as well. Luckily for me, I had taken some cash from Keisuke earlier so that I could purchase some ingredients for dinner.

"Let us go Dutch."

I declined the thousand yen bill which Shinonome was stuffing insistently in my direction.

"You have already paid for the earlier drinks, so allow me to foot

the bill just this once. In the future, let's go Dutch, shall we? This way, neither of us will feel awkward."

"Ah, mmm....."

Nothing was said as we made our way towards the station.

And with that, we split up at the platforms. While on the train, I received a message from Shinonome.

"Thank you very much for the coffee and the treat."

What a formal message. I couldn't help but to shrug my shoulders.

Is that her being polite, or did she just send it as a formality — I didn't mail her anything like that during the times she paid for my drink, so I replied her immediately.

"Thanks for paying for my drinks as well. What's the plan for tomorrow?"

"I shall leave it to Minami-kun to decide. Are you alright with that?"

"Okay. I'll text you again."

What an intriguing relationship we're in — I thought to myself.

\*\*\*

As I walked home from the station nearest to us, I made a detour to the supermarket to get some stuff. When I returned home, Arumi-san was around for some reason unknown to me. She was not supposed to be around today, and that was why I was planning to make dinner in the first place.

Arumi-san, who was welcoming me at the passageway, popped the question with a huge smile on her face.

"What will we be having for dinner, Eita?"

"Stew..... but why are you here today, Arumi-san? I heard you won't be coming."

There was a displeased expression on Arumi-san's face when she heard that from me.

"What's wrong with that? You sound like you're not happy with having me around."

"That's not what I meant."

"I had something on, but it was canceled. Then I heard Eita will be making dinner tonight, so here I am filled with much expectation."

"Oh, I see....."

At times like this, I didn't really care what her reasons were. The fact was that Arumi-san was around.

"Do you need any help?"

Asked Arumi-san while walking behind me.

"Not really."

All you need to do for stew is to cut the ingredients and toss everything into a pot. It's not like I needed any help with that.

"How about I accompany you while you're cooking."

"Mmm..... please do."

So it ended up with Arumi-san and me cooking in the kitchen. I could have rejected her offer, but I had more than stew in my mind. Moreover, she wouldn't be happy if I insisted on doing things alone.

When we were done cooking, Keisuke joined us for dinner. Despite Keisuke's silence, Arumi-san would always talk to him whenever the opportunity arose during the meal. Keisuke would reply with phrases like "Mmm" and "I see", which reminds me very much of my father.

My father's an uptight techie, while my mother's an outgoing person who's nice to just about everyone she meets. They met each other during their college days. Even though I am their son, I felt their personalities were so different I couldn't spot any similarities between them.

But from my mother's point of view (and it's something which she can proclaim out loud), she is deeply in love with my father. Just like the way Arumi-san is when speaking with Keisuke, my mother's the same when it comes to dealing with my father as well.

"The stew's delicious, Eita."

I snapped back to my senses with that statement and tilted my head.

"Really? But don't expect me to cook it all the time."

"Oops, so you noticed."

Arumi-san giggled. I doubt she actually had that intention in the first place. I knew very well how much she enjoyed cooking (though a large portion of it might be because it was for Keisuke's sake).

"That's because I love the stew made by Arumi-san."

It came out of my mouth without much of a thought. Arumi-san looked at me with widened eyes. A smile then appeared on her face.

"Wow, that made me happy! Really happy!"



While exclaiming that with an air of innocence, Arumi-san looked in Keisuke's direction several times. It's as though she was waiting for Keisuke to voice his thoughts as well.

But Keisuke said nothing, only glancing at me briefly.

Just as I was about to clear the table when we were done with the meal, Arumi-san stopped me.

"It's okay, just leave the dishes to me! You should rest in your room, Eita!"

With that said, she began washing the dishes while humming to a tune. It seems like my words earlier had made her really pleased.

Since she made the offer, I accepted it and made my way upstairs. However, I stopped in my tracks when I realized just how weird it was for me to say something like that to Arumi-san.

Why did I say things like that in all honesty?

Ignoring the period of time when I was clueless about Arumi-san's relationship with Keisuke, ever since I knew, I would never say anything to Arumi-san if it would involve the word 'love'. Even though I'm not explicitly saying to Arumi-san that I love her, it would still be embarrassing to use that word when speaking to her.

But a few minutes ago, I managed to say it without much of a thought. It was done naturally without hesitation.

Does that mean my wounds are gradually healing?

Can time heal..... everything?

I cracked my neck and returned back to my room. The blinking lights from the phone on the desk indicated that I had a message waiting for me. I flipped open the clamshell phone — it was a message from Shinonome.

"What are the plans for tomorrow?"

I totally forgot because of dinner. I hastily switched on the computer to check out the ongoing movies. That was a quick process, but I couldn't figure out which movies were good. I could have scoured through several review sites as a reference, but that would be too much of a hassle. Moreover, it would probably mean making Shinonome wait even longer. Therefore, I needed an option which could get me the information I required much quicker.

I hesitated for a while before walking out of my room.

When I entered Keisuke's room, he moved his eyes away from his book and up towards me. He then asked,

"What's up?"

It was rare of Keisuke not to be smoking, but the room was filled with the smell of tobacco all the same.

"I would like to seek your opinion on something."

The reason Keisuke lifted his head was probably because he never expected me to say stuff like that. When it comes to Arumi-san or other things, there will always be a sense of inferiority within me whenever I face Keisuke. That's the reason why I seldom sought help from him.

He was probably wondering what I'd be doing next after the incident when I borrowed books from him.

"That is quite sudden. How can I help you?"

Keisuke shut his book and put a cigarette in his mouth. Perhaps he thought it would be a long conversation.

"Nothing of huge importance, really....."

Keisuke lit up the cigarette when he saw me scratching my head. He then puffed out a slithering, snake-like strand of smoke which rose into the air.

"So what's it about?"

It may look like he's urging me to speak my mind, but judging from Keisuke's personality, that's probably not what he really had in mind. Then again, that personality of his is one of the main reasons why I find it difficult to ask a favor from him.

"Are there any good movies showing in the cinema now?"

I wanted to get things over and done with, so I replied to him immediately. Keisuke looked at me with a surprised expression on his face.

"..... Movies?"

"Y-Yeah....."

It's not like I can do anything even if he is thinking on how silly it is for me to ask him about stuff like that.

"You want to watch a movie?"

"Mmm, yeah."

Not only is Keisuke a bookworm, he is very much into movies as well. There's a huge TV in his room, and accompanying it is a pile of DVDs much like his books.

"The currently screening movies are....."

While muttering that in annoyance, Keisuke began working on the desktop PC. He said a few titles while scanning the screen, which I noted in my memory.

"Alright then. Thank you."

Keisuke stopped me just as I was about to leave the room.

"Something happened to you?"

Considering how apathetic I was towards just about everything, Keisuke's probably a little suspicious about why I have been entering his room frequently these days with weird questions for him.

"No, it's nothing....."

"I see. Alright then."

As I opened the door, I had the urge to say, "Don't tell Arumi-san about this." I was worried about her earlier harassment and her question, "So do you have a girlfriend already?" Should she smell something fishy from this, I'd have to face her relentless inquiries.

"..... What's wrong?"

Asked Keisuke hesitantly while resting his hand on the knob.

"Nah, it's nothing."

With that said, I left the room.

In the first place, it would be strange to ask him to keep it secret. If I made the wrong move, he might actually reveal it to Arumi-san instead. For things like these, it's unlikely Keisuke would tell Arumi-san if I kept silent.

Back in my room, I searched the internet for the movies Keisuke

recommended and picked the safest one out of the lot. After checking out schedules, I worked back on the time when Shinonome and I should meet.

I then texted Shinonome the time and place to meet.

"Got it. See you tomorrow. Good night."

It was the usual cold reply from her, but there was this sense of accomplishment within me. I laid down on my bed.

"Is this..... a date?"

I muttered to myself subconsciously. It didn't feel quite real to me due to the typical response from Shinonome. But then again, judging from the activities which we will be having tomorrow, it is definitely a date.

I am crystal clear on the fact that we are not actually 'dating', but the word 'date' is enough to send my heart racing.

I got up spontaneously, opened my wardrobe and thought about my attire for tomorrow.

My father and Keisuke aren't crazy about leaving the house, so it's rare for us to go on an outdoor trip together as a family. As a result I don't care much about 'outdoor clothes'. It hasn't reached the point where there's nothing I can wear whenever I go out, but there's much left for consideration on whether my clothes are suitable for the date tomorrow.

After much thought, I decided to screw it all and chose whatever pleased me.

There was someone knocking on my door. When I opened the door, Arumi-san was there wiping her hands with her apron.

"Eita, would you like to have a bath now? There's no one in the bathroom right now."

Whatever works for me, but then I realized it will be great to call the night early in preparation for the date. I usually sleep till noon on most Saturdays, but I have to get up in the morning for tomorrow.

"I'll go first then."

A soft smile appeared on Arumi-san's face when she heard my answer.

"Mmm. The towel is placed at the usual place."

"Got it."

I grabbed some clothes and made my way to the bathroom. Then I suddenly realized how mentally stable I was today. I managed to remain calm even after seeing Arumi-san's smile.

That smile of hers used to be a source of pain for me in the past.

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I arrived at the station ten minutes before the meeting time.

To be honest, I had never waited for anyone for the past few years, so waiting for someone was a pretty restless experience for me. Moreover, the fact that it was a 'date' made it even more nerve-wrecking.

Standing before the ticketing gates was me in a very safe set of casual attire. I was feeling out of place though. The youngsters around me were all dressed fashionably — you could easily tell some of them put a lot of thought into their clothes.

I then wondered about the attire which Shinonome will show up in.

I had seen Shinonome in casual once. It was from the magazine that published 'Nishizono Yūko' — the picture of Shinonome was one where she was in a casual attire. If my memories are right, it was a white dress with some simple, elegant embroidery, paired with a cardigan.

That was the reason which made me think that 'Nishizono Yūko' was 'someone who looked very much like Shinonome Yuuko'. I had only seen Shinonome in her uniform, so I wasn't dead sure if the author in casual was none other than the person herself.

As I directed my eyes to the stairs opposite of the gates leading to the platform, I could see a crowd making their way up. They were probably passengers who just got off the train which had come

from the direction of Shinonome's station. I had no idea where exactly she was staying, but from one of our earlier pleasantries, I do know the nearest station from her house.

Shinonome was strolling slowly at the back of the crowd, as if she was trying to avoid them altogether. Her attire was the carbon copy of what I saw in the magazine, though she was carrying a small handbag before her chest.

Shinonome gave a small bow when she saw me. I thought that she was a little too rigid towards someone of the same age.

When she finally walked past the gate and to my side, Shinonome tilted her head and asked,

"..... Did you wait long?"

I shook my head.

"Nope, not at all."

"Let's go." With that, Shinonome and I began to move.

"That's the same clothes as those in the magazine."

Upon hearing that, Shinonome froze in her tracks and stared at her clothes. She then moved her gaze to me.

"So you do remember....."

"Yeah, cause that's the only time I've seen Shinonome in casual."

"To be honest, this is the only casual attire I own....."

Said Shinonome shyly as she lowered her head.



"Nothing to be ashamed of. I'm not too far off from your situation."

Even I know it's normal for girls to own an incredible amount of clothes. My father would enter a state of exasperation whenever my mother buys yet another set of new clothes; whenever Arumisan comes over, it is unlikely for me to notice things like, "Oh, I've seen her in that before." It's possible she wore the same clothes more than once, but not frequently enough for me to notice.

Therefore, I can more or less understand how it might be embarrassing for Shinonome not to own much clothes. Some may find it strange for a girl to have as few clothes as she did.

But that wasn't a big deal to me. Rather, it actually felt really 'Shinonome-esque'.

We continued to make our way towards the cinema.

"Ah, as for the movie we'll be watching later....."

I realized I haven't told Shinonome about my choice of movie, so I filled her in as we walked. Shinonome broke into a smile when she heard the title of the movie.

"I actually want to watch this movie as well."

Great to hear that from her.

"It feels like Shinonome's into those deep movies, so I had a hard

time deciding which movie to watch."

Quite a few of the movies recommended by Keisuke were very documentary in nature. Even as I searched for their synopsis on the internet, I would always end up thinking, "So what on earth is it about?" I was pondering if Shinonome would be pleased by those types of movies.

However, I soon noticed we are actually going on a date. I realigned my thoughts and decided that since we are dating as a simulated couple, it is best to go for a safe choice instead. The type of movie a typical couple would choose.

"I do watch typical movies as well, you know?"

Said Shinonome. But since she mentioned the words 'as well', that means she does do abstruse stuff too.

"Well, so yeah. It's a date, so shouldn't it be like this? Typical movies are much more suitable, yeah?"

My voice rose a pitch or two from the embarrassment of saying the word 'date'. It was the same for Shinonome too — she flinched briefly when she heard me.

I gave a dry cough and was silent for a brief moment.

This is quite painful, to be honest.

How on earth did we end up in a relationship like this? How did

everything start? Was it me? From the moment when I asked for her autograph? That seemed to be the answer if all the knots were undone.

We arrived at the cinema without saying a word more.

Thanks to some earlier planning and the fact that the movie we were about to watch was not in the initial week of release, we managed to get our hands on a showtime not too far from now. Despite my offer to pay for everything, Shinonome's refusal meant we each paid for our own tickets.

"Ah, what about your drinks?"

I asked Shinonome before entering the cinema. Shinonome tilted her head and replied to my question with her own.

"Anything will do..... What about you, Minami-kun?"

I shook my head.

"I'm fine with anything too."

"Since we both have nothing in mind, let us forgo it."

"Right."

Both of us stepped into the theater. It's not to the point where we were the only ones there, but the theater was sparsely filled. That was the reason why we managed to get our hands on a pair of

middle seats.

After a few trailers, it was finally time for the main movie.

As it was a foreign film with subtitles, I was forced to focus on the screen lest I miss the contents of the show. That was especially so in the beginning due to the heavy amount of conversations, so there was no chance for me to cast my eyes elsewhere.

When we entered the action parts of the film, I was in a slight state of discomfort from having to stay in the same posture for too long. I rested my back against the chair and pushed it down a little, trying to cause as little of a disturbance as possible.

That was when Shinonome caught my eyes.

Though we had been sitting next to each other for a while, that was the first time I observed Shinonome in great detail.

We were so close.

We do sit side by side during shifts in the library and when we frequent the cafe — still, this is the closest I've ever been to Shinonome.

Shinonome was staring at the screen in all seriousness (though I'm not too sure if that's the appropriate word to use). Her emotionless expression was no different from the usual, but this was the first time I saw Shinonome being engrossed in something other than books.

And it just so happens that the movie had moved to a risqué, romantic scene — as though someone had deliberately changed it. The foreign couple began kissing passionately as they were about to part unwillingly. There was no way I could have prepared myself for that, but Shinonome continued watching in earnest.

Damn that Keisuke — I cursed silently. I would have avoided movies with scenes like these if I can, but it's my fault for not telling him my criteria in the first place.

I was acting suspiciously. That was when Shinonome turned her attention to me, her head tilted in bewilderment. She then moved her face slowly towards mine.

"Anything wrong?"

"No..... It's nothing."

I answered, but Shinonome continued to stare at me with a baffled expression. Thankfully, the actors were now conversing; the risqué scene had come to an end. Shinonome redirected her eyes to the screen. As for me, I focused on the film as if nothing happened.

But my heart was still a mess.

..... This is very problematic.

The reason was because I had suddenly realized—

Just how unexpectedly cute Shinonome was.

She is very beautiful to begin with; her facial features were flawless. I've thought of her as 'cute' on several occasions, but those feelings were more like the ones I'd harbor towards dogs and cats.

However, this 'cute' was obviously different.

Perhaps it was because of how close Shinonome's face was to mine; or maybe it's due to how dark the theater is; it could have also been caused by the risqué scene of the foreign actors.

Regardless, it did not change the fact that I was thoroughly shaken by these feelings of mine.

I was unable to regain my calm even when the movie ended.

After the movie, we went to the cafe and chatted. We parted ways after that.

"I'm really happy today, so thank you. See you next time then."

That was what Shinonome said before she left.

It was still the same emotionless expression on her face, so I had no idea if she was being honest. But with those words of hers, I guess those nervous feelings of mine were well worth it.

For some unknown reason, I was devastatingly tired while I took

the train home by myself. I was then reminded of the 'See you next time' which Shinonome said, which to me suggests that everything won't end with just this solitary date. Then again, it's not like our relationship would suddenly collapse when the day is over.

If that's the case, how long will this relationship last?

"So what exactly is our relationship now?"

With no answer in mind, I could only feel a sense of uneasiness within me.

## Chapter 5

*The man's name was Eason.*

*At first Romiemarigana couldn't comprehend a single word he said. She only learned his name after the man pointed to himself and repeated "Eason" slowly over and over again.*

*Upon realizing she understood his intentions, the man directed his finger towards her instead.*

*"Romiemarigana," she replied.*

*In their language, 'romie' stood for beauty, and 'marigana' for forests. From her understanding, her mother entered labor in the midst of the forests while they were in their most beautiful season, and hence her name.*

*She hoped Eason could understand this story behind her name.*

*However, she could not get her point across to Eason despite her best efforts to convey it in her language, and that depressed her greatly.*

*Nishizono Yūko*

*<Romiemarigana's Expanding World>*

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It was a week after my date with Shinonome. When I reached home from school, I was immediately greeted by a flurry of footsteps as Arumi-san came to the door to greet me. She seemed much busier than usual — I thought to myself while removing my shoes. Arumi-san suddenly shouted.

"Eita! You have a girlfriend, don't you!?"

She said that just as I was breathing in, and that caused me to cough quite a bit.

"What? Why the sudden question?"

I turned around and asked. Arumi-san was peering at me suspiciously with her arms crossed and her cheeks puffed. She was visibly disappointed.

"I heard it from Keisuke."

"Eh?"

"You asked him about the movies, didn't you?"

That goddamn idiot — I cursed to myself. I never expected him to tell Arumi-san..... It wasn't like I asked him to keep it a secret, but I never thought he would tell her.

"Ah, it's nothing. I was craving for a movie....."

Arumi-san's hazy gaze refused to let me go.

"..... Alone?"

"Mmm, yeah."

"You liar!"

She retorted immediately.

"I'll never believe that Eita, a person who has never once watched a DVD before, would go to the movies alone. Come on, spill the beans. Who did you go with? Tell onee-chan about it!"

It feels like Arumi-san's an old geezer hounding a young lady or something. I heaved a sigh of exasperation.

"What's wrong with watching a movie alone? Sometimes you'd just feel like doing that....."

I gave up trying to explain. It would have been easier if she were my real girlfriend, but my relationship with Shinonome was a rather intriguing one. I was in no mood to listen to Arumi-san's incessant chatter either.

I set my shoes down neatly and walked past Arumi-san as if I had shoved her aside. However, Arumi-san stuck close to my back like a puppy.

"Eh..... Why are you trying to hide it?"

"Nah, who's hiding?"

"But you are in a relationship, aren't you?"

Asked Arumi-san as she moved in front of me with a head tilt and smile.

"Nope."

Arumi-san's shoulders stooped in disappointment.

"That's boring....."

I was about to retort with: it's not like I was born into this world just for your entertainment. But rather than voice my displeasure, the smarter move is to keep it within me.

"Still, Eita, do introduce me to your girlfriend if you ever have one."

I heaved my shoulders in exasperation to the persistent Arumi-san.

"If I ever get one."

"Ehehe. Okay then!"

With that, Arumi-san trotted to the kitchen. What an airhead she is. Sigh, considering the fact that she never noticed my feelings for

her, it's something to be expected.

I trudged back to my room with those thoughts in mind.

My phone vibrated when I finished taking off my uniform. Looks like a text from Shinonome. There were no more 'dates' ever since that day. Moreover, there was no difference in the way we interacted in school. I guess the only minor change was the fact that Shinonome began texting me much more frequently. When we first started out, Shinonome would hardly text me except to reply to my messages.

"How about a trip somewhere?"

An unusual invitation from her. Despite the hesitation within me, I replied with:

"Sure."

"Are you okay with next Sunday?"

"No problem, but where?"

"I'm thinking about a theme park....."

I couldn't help but shout "Ehh~" in surprise.

The theme park?

It is indeed a prime location for a 'date'. Still, it feels like

something's off when it's Shinonome who suggests it. It's just so far off from what's 'ordinary' to Shinonome.

I was too lazy to get off my bed, so I searched for information on nearby theme parks on my phone. Once I had compiled a few candidates, I was poised to send them to Shinonome.

"I would prefer one with a Ferris wheel..... Does Minami-kun have anything in mind?"

This feels more and more like a date. It's troubling.

After some research, I only found one theme park nearby with a Ferris wheel. After telling Shinonome about it, she replied, "That works." Our text messaging came to a stop once we had decided on the date and place to meet.

I set my phone aside and spaced out for a while.

Theme parks. The Ferris wheel.

Arumi-san once took me to a theme park when I was still young, and it so happens to be the same one chosen this time 'round. That was back when I was still naive and silly; just a child who did not notice her relationship with Keisuke.

And yet, it turned out to be the very theme park Shinonome wants to go to.

I cracked my neck in frustration when I thought about it.

I expected Shinonome would say things like "theme parks are boring", but the message I got was "I would love to go to a theme park" instead. That in itself is surprising enough for me, but the fact that she's someone who didn't know where to go to on a date is all the more shocking.

Then again, she's Shinonome, so she might have used some method to get information about dating.

Arumi-san came over and asked me to head down for dinner, so I left my room.

While we were having dinner, Arumi-san was talking to the silent Keisuke as usual. As for Keisuke, he'd reply with the typical "Huh" and "Mmm."

As I watched their interactions, I realized Shinonome was quite similar to Keisuke.

Generally speaking, Shinonome's not the type to initiate a conversation on her own.

If that's the case, would it be better to keep talking to Shinonome like how Arumi-san does? Even if I cannot see any special reaction from her, we can probably maintain our relationship like the couple before me if I were relentless in striking conversation with Shinonome.

What are my expectations about my relationship with Shinonome

anyway?

We're just a pretend couple who got together so that Shinonome could gather material for her work. From my point of view, the length of our relationship is of no importance. In fact, I'd have a troublesome chore off my back if we're able to end this facade smoothly.

So why on earth am I trying to prolong our relationship instead?

"Eita, anything wrong?"

Arumi-san stared into my face when she noticed me spacing out.

"Ah, nah. It's nothing....."

I hastily replied and resumed on my meal. As she looked at me suspiciously, Arumi-san popped the question which came to her mind:

"Eita, do you have someone you like in school?"

I almost spewed the miso soup out of my mouth.

"What? Why the sudden question....."

"I was wondering if you'd like to talk with me."

I have no desire to — I thought to myself. Still, I heaved a sigh and replied.

"I've none, so there's not much to talk about."

"Not even one? Or how about someone you're interested in? Onee-chan's really interested in your love story, Eita."

For a brief moment, the mischievous personality within me was tempted to tell her about Shinonome. I wonder how Arumi-san will react should she come to know about my author classmate, and how we're pretending to be 'dating' in order to gather materials for her novels.

She'd probably disapprove and say, "This is a really weird relationship."

Or will she actually exclaim in awe instead?

I ended up scrapping the plan anyway.

"I'll fill you in if that person ever shows up."

It seemed like we're dwelling on this topic quite often recently. Did Arumi-san see some sort of change in me?

Somehow, it feels as if I've been together with Arumi-san for a really long time now. Compared to the silent Keisuke or my father, it's true that Arumi-san is much more like 'family' to me.

When we were done with dinner, I stood beside Arumi-san as she washed the dishes.

"Allow me to do the dishes once in a while."

Arumi-san was quite hesitant about it at first, but she finally acceded to my request.

"Sure. I'll be counting on you then."

However, Arumi-san would turn her attention to me once in a while from the sofa, as though she wasn't at ease with anyone other than herself washing the dishes.

"You really don't need my help?"

"No problem."

"Eita, are you angry?"

"Not at all. Why the question?"

"Eita has been really gentle recently."

I washed the soap bubbles off my hand and turned around to face Arumi-san.

"..... Gentle?"

"You used to be really snobbish..... I feel uneasy seeing the way you are now."

I understand what Arumi-san was getting at. I was deliberately keeping my distance away from Arumi-san, to the point where Keisuke had to intervene.

But her words made me realize that that wasn't the case these recent days.

Moreover, I've been responding to her words in earnest.

"Really? Are you sure you're not imagining things?"

Though I very well know the reason behind those changes, I'd have to reveal my love for her if I explained everything. I resumed washing the dishes with that perfunctory reply as Arumi-san watched on worriedly.

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Sunday. After meeting up at the station, the two of us took the train to the theme park.

Shinonome was wearing the same outfit as she did when we went for the movie.

She did mention she didn't own any other casual clothes, but I wasn't expecting it in the literal sense. Then again, contrary to my thoughts, that might actually be the case.

Not to mention, my outfit wasn't too far off from what I wore back then, so I was in no position to talk.

We sat shoulder to shoulder on the seats, the theme park as our destination. We're actually much closer than we were in the cinema—

There's no avoiding physical contact no matter how hard I try. I could feel the warmth of Shinonome's thigh through my jeans, which came as a huge surprise. This was probably just my own preconception, but I expected Shinonome's body to be a lot colder.

"..... Why the sudden urge to visit the theme park?"

I struck a conversation with Shinonome so as to forget about the warmth of her body. Shinonome said nothing, only to dig out a book from her handbag. I initially thought she ignored my question and was planning to read, but she showed me the book instead.

"They talked about it in the book."

The book, which lacked a dust jacket, was a romance novel by a female author. The reason I recognized it straight away was because I saw Arumi-san reading it before.

"..... Shinonome reads things like this as well?"

I was murmuring stuff like "The combination of Shinonome and romance novels just doesn't click", but Shinonome shook her head gently instead.

"I don't read them much, but I thought it would be a good chance to..... so I tried it out."

In other words, it's all for her 'material gathering'.

"The story talked about a scene at a theme park, which made me realize I have never visited one before."

"Hmm."

It was an answer to be expected from her. She's not someone who would think things like, "How about going to the theme park when I have a boyfriend."

But I was really surprised that she never visited one before.

It would be understandable if she was from the countryside where there are no theme parks around, but the area we live in has quite a few nearby. It should be normal for parents to bring their children to one when they were young. That applies even to my family, despite the fact that we hardly go out on trips.

"Have you been to one before, Minami-kun?"

I wasn't sure how I should answer that sudden question of hers.

"Urm, what?"

"Have you been to a theme park?"

"Mmm, yeah. When I was still a kid."

My parents took me to one when I was about five to six years old. The next trip came when I was in elementary school, and it was Keisuke and Arumi-san who brought me there.

"..... Were you happy?"

I was quite troubled by that question of hers.

"Urm, I guess I probably was....."

To be perfectly honest, I have close to no memories about the trip together with my parents. But considering my age then, I should have been really happy, especially since my parents hardly took me on trips.

However, the reason for my stutters was due to my other memory.

Come to think of it, that was actually a date between Keisuke and Arumi-san, and I was the third wheel. Arumi-san, being the nice person she is, showed no signs of unhappiness when my mother forced me into her care. That was the reason why she brought me to the theme park.

Back then, I was a gargantuan idiot who failed to notice the relationship between Keisuke and Arumi-san, so I naively enjoyed myself at the theme park. I might have even thought of it as a date between me and Arumi-san.

It was a memory I cannot describe in words.

Somehow, it felt like I was deliberately stirring up painful memories within me. Depressing, really.

So that Shinonome wouldn't notice the feelings within me, I turned and stared at the scenery in a daze. Shinonome did the same.

Upon arrival, we paid for the tickets and went in.

Shinonome insisted on paying for everything, but I rejected her offer and paid for my entrance fee.

As it was a weekend, the theme park was filled with families and couples. It felt a little uncomfortable to know that I was part of the group as well.

After going through the ticketing gates, I turned around to face Shinonome.

"Urm..... any attractions you have in mind?"

Shinonome did mention she never went to a theme park before; moreover, it should be expected of me to be her guide and escort. Still, it's not like I've been to one often, so I was hoping to fulfill whatever desire Shinonome may have instead.

Shinonome tilted her head and said,

"Let me see..... Any suggestions?"

"How about the amusement rides....."

"Let's go with that then?"

"Sure."

After the end of an extremely blasé conversation, we began making our way to one of the hottest attractions in the theme park — the roller coaster. A snaking queue could be seen at the entrance to the ride. The sign indicated that the wait would be about thirty minutes.

"What should we do.....? Should we wait?"

Personally, my interest in the roller coaster wasn't to the point where I was willing to wait thirty minutes for it. However, Shinonome nodded, so we moved to the end of the queue.

Time ticks by, the two of us shrouded by silence.

I was trying to come up with a conversation topic, and that was when I remembered I had visited this place together with Arumi-san once. And so I spoke.

"My elder brother brought me here once."

My memories were actually fixed around Arumi-san, but it would be a pain in the rear to explain to Shinonome about her.

"Oh right, you did mention before you have an elder brother."

I then realized I haven't heard anything about her family.

"Do you have any siblings, Shinonome?"

Shinonome shook her head in response.

"Wow, that's nice. I've always been envious of an only child."

A curious expression appeared on Shinonome's face when she heard my comment.

"..... Why so?"

"My brother's adept at just about everything, be it in studies or in sports. He didn't cause much trouble to my parents. With a brother like him around, it's inevitable that I'll be compared to him in some way or other, isn't it? And so, rather than to be the failure of the two brothers, it's way better to be the only child."

The words just won't stop once they start to flow, but I guess I have always wanted to rant about it to someone anyway. There's no way I can speak to Keisuke nor Arumi-san about this, much less my parents.

I have no friends who close enough to discuss things like that.

Shinonome stared at me, her eyes scanning me from top to bottom several times. It seemed like it's some sort of subconscious

action she does while thinking of something to say.

"It may sound cheesy to you..... but I'm really envious of those who have siblings."

Just like what Shinonome said, it's something to be expected — it's an answer which most people (the single child anyway) would give. This is when people with siblings would chip in with, "Yeah, I get you."

However, Shinonome followed it up with this:

"It may be a pain to be compared to others, but if you are to put it in another perspective, that means you have something worth comparing, isn't that so?"

I had no response to that. Shinonome did the unexpected and continued on without me urging her to.

"Moreover, one is able to gauge where he stands only when he is compared to others, don't you agree? Whether you are on par or not simply translates to how good or bad your position is..... I'm really envious of how you can more or less get a picture of your current situation. If I'm unable to compare myself to others, I will never know what I should do with myself."

"Urm....."

In the end, the only thing I could offer was a muffled moan. Though Shinonome started things off with the phrase "It may

sound cheesy to you", the reason which accompanied her answer was anything but that. I was quite disheartened by her point of view, so I ended the conversation with, "Yeah, you're right indeed."

The phrase "one is able to gauge where he stands" as said by Shinonome did feel like something you'd expect to hear from an author. That might actually be the case. Still, Shinonome should more or less be able to realize how peculiar she is if she's envious of things like that.

"I'm sorry for saying something strange."

Apologized Shinonome with a smile. The queue moved, and we followed suit.

"Shinonome's thought process is quite interesting though."

I muttered while walking forward. Shinonome responded by tilting her head, as usual.

"Is that so?"

"Yeah. Feels very much like how an author would think."

Shinonome stared at me blankly when she heard my raw, honest thoughts. She then lowered her head.

"I see....."

A faint murmur. I thought she was just being shy, but to my

surprise, Shinonome seemed to be a little dejected. I was concerned with what I saw.

The queue moved forward once more as we were having our conversation. It was finally our turn for the ride. Not long after Shinonome and I were in our seats, a staff came over to lower a silver bar to our chest. It's a simple metal bar designed to ensure our safety. When that was done, Shinonome began looking around all of the sudden.

"..... What's wrong?"

Shinonome stared at the bar before her chest when she heard my question.

"This..... is it?"

"Yeah."

"Eh? But from what I saw on television, shouldn't it be something that's black and pressing down from your shoulders—"

I could roughly figure out what Shinonome was describing, so I nodded and interrupted her.

"There are those as well, but this roller coaster is an older model."

Shinonome flinched when she heard the word 'older'.

"O-Old.....?"

"I mean, this roller coaster was around when I was just in kindergarten."

From the movement of Shinonome's throat, I could easily tell Shinonome had gulped.

She was visibly frightened. I could have assured her that everything will be fine, but I chose not to. I'd probably never get to see Shinonome in a frightened state ever again.

The bell rang, and the roller coaster began inching forward.

I could hear what sounded like the frightened shrieks of young women behind me. Looking towards Shinonome, her eyes were shut tight and her hands were gripping onto the metal bar harder than before.

I found her to be really pitiful, so—

"Relax. You won't fall off."

I tried to reassure her, but Shinonome shook her head weakly.

"I have acrophobia....."

Rattling sounds could be heard as the roller coaster climbed up the track at an angle. We would reach the top a few seconds later, followed by the acceleration due to gravity and the incredible speeds with which the roller coaster would shoot through the

tracks.

From the corner of my eyes, I could see Shinonome looking at me, so I turned to look at her.

"Minami-kun..... I'm sorry, but....."

"Huh? What's wrong?"

"Can I..... hold your hand?"

"Eh? Ah, yeah....."

Before I could even respond, Shinonome had already moved swiftly and took my hand. Her palm was clammy.

As the roller coaster shot off, Shinonome gripped onto my hand. I returned her grip immediately. The tourists around us were all screaming either in excitement or in fear, but Shinonome and I made not a single sound.

Whenever the roller coaster rumbled up and down, Shinonome would tighten her hands as if she were trying to tie them onto me. It almost felt like I was holding onto the pulse of some incredibly tiny and fragile animal in my hand.

Though of course, that was no pulse but Shinonome's hand instead.

The hand of a girl who's the same age as me. I became nervous when I realized that.

Thank goodness Shinonome's palm was clammy — she probably wouldn't have noticed my sweating palm.

My heart was thumping wildly. It wasn't due to the sharp bends of the roller coaster, but because of my nervousness from holding Shinonome's hand.

When the roller coaster finally returned back to the starting point, the staff went around to disengage the safety bar. The rest of the passengers got off the ride smoothly, but Shinonome was dazed for a short while. She then regained her senses and stood up.

Our hands were still tightly entwined.

Realizing that, Shinonome said in a fluster,

"Ah..... Sorry....."

She released my hand, and we stood up.

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We continued to wander around, riding attractions which we deemed not too crazy. To be honest, I'm not too keen on slow rides, but Shinonome said she couldn't handle any more rides similar to the roller coaster. Therefore, I had no choice but to go along with her. She was the one who wanted to visit the theme park, so I guess it's my duty to follow her desires.

We chatted about insignificant things while we were playing on the rides.

Although, we didn't hold hands like we did on the roller coaster, and we never mentioned it in our conversations. It was as if none of it happened.

"..... Are you bored, Minami-kun?"

Asked Shinonome all of a sudden while we were resting on a bench.

"Nope, not at all."

That was my answer.

"Instead, I was actually worried if you're bored."

"I'm not."

Though she said that, her expression was not a happy one. That's precisely why I'm worried — but I didn't turn my thoughts into words.

"Well, that's great. I'm really enjoying myself."

I realized I was feeling really irritated while I was saying that. I wasn't too sure why I did, and that doubt resulted in yet another flustered feeling within me. With the way I was feeling, my tone sounded slightly harsh. Shinonome lowered her head slightly —

perhaps she had somehow sensed the feelings I was experiencing.

"Urm....."

An awkward silence. I wondered about what I should do in a situation like this.

Even though it's just a simulation, it's still a 'date' after all. It's unbecoming of me to suddenly flare up against Shinonome. I should hide my feelings so as not to make her unhappy.

Located opposite of the bench was a small shop selling ice-cream, drinks and souvenirs.

"How about we take a look there?"

I said while standing up. Shinonome, who was still sitting down, looked at me with her head tilted. She probably didn't understand what I was saying.

"Let's go."

I hesitated briefly before offering my hand to Shinonome.

Shinonome hesitated for a moment as well before timidly accepting my hand . As I held onto her hand tightly, I could feel from my palm that Shinonome's body was stiff.

"Let's take a look over there."

I had nothing concrete in mind. I just did it because I wanted Shinonome to be happy. Without waiting for her answer, I began walking towards the store while still holding onto Shinonome's hand.

Shinonome followed me in silence.

Her hand felt soft as ever.

The fluster I experienced earlier was somehow soothed by this. I could sort of figure out the reason behind those irks of mine.

It was probably because I wanted to continue holding her hand.

I hastened my pace a little so that Shinonome wouldn't notice my feelings. Shinonome followed my pace without saying a word.

As for the souvenirs in the store, they were all items you could find anywhere. There were dragon-shaped key-chains, plushies of characters, etc. That was something to be expected, considering that this theme park has no unique mascot of its own.

I was uninterested in what I saw, and even though I was the one who brought Shinonome here, I was thinking about giving up and leaving right away. However, Shinonome, with her hand still in mine, stopped all of a sudden. I turned back to look at her.

"..... Yes?"

Shinonome was probably surprised by how I moved my face

towards her, so she moved a step backwards.

"Ah, it's nothing..... I just find this cute....."

I took a close look at the accessory in Shinonome's hand. It was a dangle of a super-deformed monkey with huge eyes.

"..... That's cute?"

I blurted it out mindlessly. Shinonome responded hesitantly at a speed never seen from her.

"Eh?"

Her voice was up a pitch.

"Ah, sorry. It does look cute....."

I agreed with her immediately, but that was an obvious lie. Shinonome looked at me unhappily.

Just as she was about to return the dangle back onto the rack, I stopped her hand and said,

"Why don't you buy it if you find it cute?"

"But Minami-kun..... doesn't really like it, do you?"

"Nah, I'm okay with it. What matters is that you like it."

I then remembered there was no accessory on Shinonome's cell phone.

"There's no accessory on your cell phone, is there? This dangle looks good, so..... h-how about I buy it for you?"

I then explained that it's to make it up to her for failing my duty to make her happy and doing the exact opposite instead.

Shinonome held onto the dangle with her head lowered and remained in that position for a while. She finally said,

"Please..... buy this for me....."

I was rather surprised by that decision of hers.

"Does Minami-kun not..... want to buy it for me?"

"Eh, no, that's not it....."

Whenever it comes to payment, Shinonome would insist on giving it. It was unexpected of her to say things like that. Then again, I was the one who suggested buying it for her, so I'm in no position to back off now. I took the dangle from Shinonome, released her hand and walked towards the counter.

I began searching for my wallet after placing the dangle on the counter. As I was doing so, Shinonome caught up from behind with the same dangle and put it on the counter as well.

"..... Huh?"

I looked at Shinonome in confusion. Shinonome smiled.

"I'll be buying this."

You like the dangle that much? Despite my surprise, both of us paid for one accessory each. We ended up with two weird monkey dangles.

When we walked out of the store, I passed the paper bag with the two dangles to Shinonome. Shinonome opened the paper bag on the spot.

She took out one of the dangles and passed it to me.

"Here, this is for Minami-kun."

"What?"

"Minami-kun doesn't own any phone accessory as well, right?"

"Ah, yeah....."

I couldn't reject her offer due to my confusion — there was nothing I could do other than to meekly accept the dangle from Shinonome.

"Do remember to attach it to your phone."

Said Shinonome cheekily with a mischievous smile and a tilt of her head. That slightly intriguing smile on display was something which I had never seen from her before; it took my breath away.

"O-Okay....."

I should be happy about this, right.....? Did she give this to me out of goodwill, or is she deliberately teasing me because I doubted its cuteness earlier? Without any concrete answer, I had no idea what I should do.

We continued to tour the theme park even as the sun set into the horizon. We went along with Shinonome's plan and proceed to ride the Ferris wheel. I had explained to Shinonome earlier about how the Ferris wheel was not one of the hot attractions in the theme park, so we can always leave it for last and ride on it before we go home.

We moved into the two meters squared cabin and sat down. The door closed and the cabin slowly ascended into the air.

Nothing was said between us. Shinonome and I sat face to face and looked into the scenery beyond the windows.

It's space with no one around, just Shinonome and me. I couldn't help but become nervous when I realized that. I then remembered the dangle which was kept in my pocket, so I began fixing it on my cell phone.

When she saw what I was doing, Shinonome hung the dangle on

her phone as well.

Both of us were done with our tasks at about the same time — we showed off the results by jiggling the dangles to each other. Shinonome smiled.

"It *is* cute, isn't it?"



I couldn't quite agree with her, but I shall say nothing more if that was what Shinonome thought.

"Perhaps."

I replied.

The cabin reached the peak of the Ferris wheel. Something came to Shinonome's mind, so she said,

"..... I have a question."

"Yes?"

"Can I....."

"Mmm."

"Can I..... visit Minami-kun's house next time?"

I looked at Shinonome in bewilderment.

"I have never visited the house of my classmates before..... so if Minami-kun is okay with it....."

To be honest, I have never invited any of my classmates to my house either. I own no gaming consoles nor manga, so there's nothing much to do even if I am to invite them over. That's the reason why I never tried.

"Eh, urm..... well....."

That obviously resulted in me stuttering as I found myself at a loss as to what to do. Shinonome looked at my reaction in desolation. She finally turned her face away and muttered softly,

"It's alright if you're not fine with it..... I'm sorry."

That was when the rays of the setting sun shone through the windows, dyeing Shinonome's profile with a shade of orange.

The languid expression Shinonome had should have been no different from what I typically see on her face. But for some strange reason, and I'm not sure if it was the rays of the setting sun or the emotions I was experiencing at that moment; either way, that profile of hers looked especially stunning.

"No, that's not it. Sure....."

"Really?"

"There's nothing in my house though, so if you're okay with that....."

Shinonome smiled and said,

"Thank you."

If that is all it takes to make her happy, I'm fine with it as well. Shinonome then added,

"I was thinking of writing a scene where the character goes to her friend's house to play, but I lack such an experience..... I'm really appreciative of your help this time."

Shinonome then resumed viewing the scenery outside of the cabin.

I was slightly dejected as I stared at Shinonome's profile.

I spent the whole day holding hands with Shinonome, so I thought there was some psychological connection between us. However, in Shinonome's eyes, everything we had done was all for her 'work'. I had forgotten about that cleanly.

The word 'friend' that Shinonome said earlier was ringing in my ears.

Seriously, Shinonome didn't have a single clue.

But still, the most clueless person is me.

What exactly..... am I expecting from Shinonome?

## Chapter 6

*Gradually, Romiemarigana grasped the language Eason used.*

*She could communicate with him despite her stutters. Soon, the silver home they traveled in (she later learned it was called a 'spaceship') arrived on a planet.*

*A group of people including Eason's friends was waiting for them.*

*Eason's friends observed Romiemarigana in curiosity. To Romiemarigana though, only Eason deserved her trust.*

*She could not understand why that was so.*

*Even if another a man had the same looks and clothes, Romiemarigana couldn't trust him. Only Eason's voice could set her mind at ease.*

*And so, she and Eason began living together in a small house.*

*However, she could not accept what happened there.*

*Nishizono Yūko  
<Romiemarigana's Expanding World>*

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It happened on Wednesday, a week after Shinonome and I visited the theme park.

Shinonome applied for leave on that day, informing our homeroom teacher she had caught a cold. I texted her when classes were over, but there was no response — perhaps she was sleeping or something. She's only a mortal, so it's reasonable for her to be in a daze from her cold.

I wanted to pay her a visit, but I didn't know her address. Moreover, she will most likely be troubled by that. As there was still no reply from her—

"Sorry for interrupting your rest. Please take care."

The simple message was all I could do.

Now the problem was the library shift at the counter. It's necessary that two people work together, so I wonder how things will be later on. The job is definitely not something which can be handled alone, so I guess it will be better if I inform the librarian beforehand?

I made my way to the library during lunch break, entering the librarian's room which belonged to Shiina-san. She was eating out of her tiny, intricate home-made bento.

"Oh my, Minami-kun. What a surprise. What brings you here?"

As someone who only appeared at the library during his shifts, she never expected me to show up during lunch. Shiina-san clipped her chopsticks repeatedly while staring at me.

"Well, Shinonome filed for sick leave today..... so what should we do?"

Hearing that, Shiina-san clipped her chopsticks once more.

"Ah..... I was informed about that....."

Shiina-san said. As I was thinking about how impressive it is for the librarian to be informed on the absences of the students as well, Shiina-san picked up the egg at the corner of her bento-box and popped it into her mouth. Looks like she wasn't planning to postpone her lunch till after our conversation was finished.

When she was done chewing and swallowing the egg, Shiina-san said,

"Hmm, since it's a job for two, why don't you find a replacement?"

"A replacement?"

"She will probably feel bad if we replace her with a senior, so why don't you ask Ikehara-kun for assistance?"

"Oh....."

It seems like she's not too interested about this, and her actions more or less proved that. Shiina-san wasn't too concerned about this and began working on her meal. Looks like the conversation was over.

"I'll give it a shot."

I bowed. Shiina-san replied with a muffled "Mmm" as she chewed her food.

I sighed and left the library.

Ikehara is one of the few first-year library committee members I had spoken to before, but we're not particularly close. We sat next to each other during the meetings, so we've conversed a few times.

Still, we don't interact much since we're from different classes. It sucks to be forced to ask him a favor.

I walked to Ikehara's class to search for him. There he was laying on the table — he was probably resting after his lunch. His hair was messed up all the time, so it wasn't hard to recognize him despite not seeing his face.

"Ikehara."

I walked to his side and called him. Ikehara sat up slowly while rubbing his eyes.

"Mmm.....?"

"Urm, I have a favor to ask."

Ikehara looked at me in a daze. He then rubbed his eyes repeatedly before saying,

"Oh my, it's Minami..... what a surprise. What's up?"

That's yet another "what a surprise". Oh well, I have no one but myself to blame for not interacting with others. It can't be helped.

"It's about the shift duty for today. Shinonome's on sick leave, so I hope you can fill in for her."

Ikehara yawned. This guy looks sleepy most of the time — he'd sleep during meetings as well. He's one of the few committee members who's not 'too serious'. The reason Ikehara talked to me occasionally is probably because he realized we shared similar reasons for joining the committee.

"Urm..... I don't really mind..... but can Shinonome go in my stead for my next duty?"

"I'm not too sure..... how about asking her?"

"Hmm, yeah..... Hmm. I got it. So I just have to show up today, right?"

"Yup, thanks."

With nothing left to say, I left the classroom. Thank goodness he agreed to it readily, because I was too lazy to try to convince him.

There was nothing from Shinonome even as our classes came to an end. Just how long is she going to sleep? Perhaps she's feeling really horrible right now? I had no idea how things are in reality, but judging from appearances, she didn't seem like someone who's very healthy.

Ikehara was already there when I reached the library, and was working on the chores at the counter. After a brief exchange of gazes, I slipped into the counter as well.

There were lots of people in the library, but the amount of people borrowing or returning books had fallen drastically. It might be because the finals were just around the corner.

It was way more boring than usual.

Ikehara was sitting where Shinonome was supposed to be, staring at the screen of his cellphone blankly as he tapped his fingers hastily on the screen. He's probably busy with a puzzle game.

I followed suit in reflex and fished out my phone.

There was a text message which I had missed. I opened it. It was from Shinonome.

"I was sleeping all this time. Sorry for the late reply. The fever has toned down a little, but I think I may be applying for sick leave

tomorrow as well."

It's the same emotionless words, but at the very least, she's not about to die any time soon. Relieved, I began typing my reply.

"Ikehara's covering in your absence, so can you do his next duty to make it up?"

Shinonome's reply was instant.

"Sure. Please thank him for me."

That's a job done — I turned around to look at Ikehara, only to find him looking in my direction. His vision was clearly directed not towards me, but to my cellphone instead. To be more precise, the dangle hanging from my phone — the weird monkey we bought at the theme park.

"Isn't..... that the same as the one Shinonome-san has?"

He fired the question without warning.

"Eh?"

I exclaimed in surprise. That action of mine sparked his suspicion. His eyes were wandering between me and the dangle repeatedly.

"Eh? So? Is that what I think it is?"

"Huh, what do you mean by that? Oh, Shinonome has the same

thing as well, right? The same dangle."

That was me trying to brush it off. Ikehara tilted his head in bewilderment.

"I happened to bump into Shinonome-san yesterday on my way home. She was making a call. The dangle caught my attention due to how strange it looked. It was exactly the same as this."

"Eh, really..... Well, it's just a coincidence. One in a million. You know, pure chance....."

Due to the unexpected situation, I was unable to conjure up a more convincing lie. Ikehara heaved a sigh and said,

"Oh boy..... You suck at lying, don't you?"

I was speechless.

"Not that it matters..... Hmm, I see..... So you two are dating?"

So that's what Ikehara sees.

"Nah, we're not exactly dating....."

I said that because it was the truth, but Ikehara snorted and retorted with,

"There's no way the dangles would be the same if you're not dating each other!"

I'm not too sure if that was true, but perhaps it really is.

"Really?"

"Yeah, typically speaking. What other reason is there to do so if you're not a couple? You two are dangling the same weird monkey, yeah? It's not like it's a fashion statement."

So the monkey does look weird — I thought to myself and stopped short of exclaiming it out loud. Now's not the time to be doing that though.

"Urm....."

I can't explain to him my relationship with Shinonome. If I did, I'd reveal that Shinonome's an author. Shinonome wanted me to keep it a secret. But without letting him into the secret, it will be unreasonable to force him to accept the fact that we are 'just pretending to be a couple'.

"So? There's no need to hide. It's not like it matters."

"Well no, but I hope you can keep it to yourself....."

"Why?"

I had no real answer to that question of his. I was stumped.

"Well, it is rather embarrassing....."

"Ah, so that's why."

Before I could tell him to keep his mouth zipped, we were interrupted by a student who wanted to borrow a book. I was then bombarded by Ikehara's questions, but I could only respond with vague answers since I could not come up with anything better.

The day was spent being hounded by Ikehara about the topic. The following day, Shinonome did just as she had said in her message and took another day's leave.

Friday came. The moment Shinonome stepped into the classroom, there was an obvious group of students staring repeatedly between her and me. I couldn't help but heave a silent sigh.

Ikehara's a god damn idiot.

It spread way faster than I had expected.

Shinonome walked alone to her seat. As for me, I put on a smile and looked at her from the side of my eyes.

Upon seeing this, a few classmates stared at me with grins in their eyes.

What a bunch of gossipmongers — I cursed in silence and heaved yet another sigh.

If only we were a real couple, then I wouldn't mind the gossip.

But that's obviously something I can't say out loud.

Shinonome and I didn't interact much during classes.

\*\*\*

When I reached home that day, I was greeted by Arumi-san in an apron.

"You're back, Eita. Would you like to have dinner or a bath?"

My response to the very wife-like question from Arumi-san was:

"..... Sleep."

I then walked straight to my room. Arumi-san watched me leave with a stunned and dazed expression.

Without bothering to remove my uniform, I dropped straight onto bed.

"Hai....."

There was a knock on the door just as I was heaving a sigh of exasperation.

"..... What?"

My body remained still, my voice was the only reaction. On the other side of the door was Arumi-san's voice.

"Eita..... did something happen? Are you alright?"

I was planning to reply with the usual "nothing", but I unknowingly—

"You could say something happened, or you can say nothing did."

A very zen answer.

But that is the truth. Shinonome and I are embroiled in rumors, but none of the contents are real. Therefore, you could say that things are swinging both ways. It's incredibly troublesome.

"Would you like to have a chat with me?"

Arumi-san's voice sounded really dejected.

"Urm....."

Speaking with her about this will not bring about any changes to the situation. The problem lies with Shinonome and me, and I doubt the views of a third party will be of much use for my consideration.

"Eita, am I not dependable?"

The voice beyond the door was close to crying. That's the way

Arumi-san is all the time. She always thinks of me as a cold and lonely person who lives without giving much of a heck to this world — she has no idea of the pain I am suffering inside.

"That's not it."

I replied.

"It's not Arumi-san's fault. It's something else altogether."

Perhaps I am a guy who's destined to stumble around in circles when it comes to girls. They may not have the intention of putting me in that situation, but I'll be spinning around stupidly by myself nonetheless.

"Okay then..... Do feel free to discuss with me anything you think you can share, alright?"

"Mmm....."

Surprisingly, I wasn't the least bit irritated when I heard what Arumi-san said. Despite my failure in suppressing my feelings of irritation towards Arumi-san in the past, I'm now able to listen to her tranquilly and respond in a calm manner.

"Thanks."

I said that naturally.

"I'll call you when dinner's ready."

Arumi-san's voice was noticeably perkier.

After making sure that Arumi-san was a considerable distance away, I sat up and grabbed the cellphone from my pocket. Dangling from the phone was a weird monkey with its infuriating smile.

So you're the one who's messing me up.

Actually no, that should be your master instead.

I began working on the text message while imagining Shinonome teasing the monkey as its trainer.

"When do you plan to visit my house, Shinonome?"

After sending the text, I returned to rolling about in bed.

Fine, I'm a monkey too. Shinonome's the master, while I'm the monkey working hard for her. Since the master mentioned that she would like to visit my house, I will have to make the necessary arrangements. This may spark off a new wave of rumors, but what must be done has to be done.

My master replied straight away.

"How about..... next weekend?"

"Alright. Next Saturday it is."

I replied instantly and put my cellphone away. Just as I was wondering what I should do next, Arumi-san informed me that dinner was ready.

I stood up and walked towards the dining room. Keisuke was there reading the newspaper with a nonchalant expression, as usual.

As I was chewing the cabbage roll, I said to Keisuke,

"Urm, can I invite a friend over next Saturday?"

Upon hearing that, Keisuke closed the newspaper in a snap and stared at me with surprise.

"..... A friend?"

His expressions were totally saying, 'so you do have friends?' Can't blame him, since I have never once invited a friend over.

"Mmm....."

Arumi-san's gaze zoomed in on me, who was munching on the cabbage roll, right away.

"A girl? Is your friend a girl?"

I couldn't quite understand the reason behind her joy, but there's no reason for me to lie to her. So I nodded while working on the

food in my mouth.

"Whoa! So it's true! Then I have to prepare a feast for that!"

I was a little irritated, to be honest. Should I leave her alone while she's high like that, she may actually prepare sekihan on that very day. [TL Note: Japanese red bean rice commonly served during celebratory events, to the point of it being virtually synonymous with 'celebration']

"Don't have to. Just the normal fares will do."

"Girlfriend? Is she your girlfriend?"

That question again. A tough question to answer. I didn't really want to.

"Urm....."

I cracked my neck. For some reason, Arumi-san was nodding repeatedly as she exclaimed,

"Don't worry! I understand! So that's what it is! There's an awkward distance between you two! Just leave it to me! Oneechan will do her best in assisting you!"

"No no no, you just have to treat her normally! We're not at that stage just yet!"

"There you go again. Why else is she coming over if that's not the

case?"

"Urm....."

My head is in a mess from trying to explain everything to her.

It's strange of me to invite her to my house all of the sudden without any explanation. We're talking about the weekends, days where both Keisuke and Arumi-san will be around. Things will get messy if I have to explain everything on that very day when they meet.

"In any case, you'll just have to treat her as a normal guest. No, seriously. There's no need to go all out."

Arumi-san's shoulders drooped exaggeratedly when she heard my request. However, she regained her spirits just as quickly, looked between me and Keisuke repeatedly and asked,

"Will it be better if we are to leave you two alone? How about Keisuke and I leave the house?"

"No, it's better for you two to be around....."

What Shinonome probably wanted was to 'visit a friend's house', which means it should be better if the family members are around. Probably.

Upon hearing my words, Arumi-san gave a "Uhh" and mumbled,

"The bitter-sweet feelings of love..... How nice....."

Is she a screw loose? Keisuke looked disinterested and directed his attention back to the papers.

To be honest, I'm not too keen on the idea of Shinonome using my house as a reference when Arumi-san and Keisuke are around. Moreover, my parents aren't here.

I then realized I have never once told Shinonome about my family circumstances. In any case, it would be better to inform her beforehand.

While thinking of that, I stuffed the last cabbage roll into my mouth.

\*\*\*

Wednesday of the following week, after we were done with our duties at the counter, Shinonome and I made our way to the cafe.

Shinonome didn't open her book even after she was seated. That's probably because I had informed her beforehand I had something to say. She was looking at me in anticipation, very much like how a puppy would.

We ordered some coffee. Nothing was said until they were served to us. Shinonome remained silent. When the waiter came over and placed the cups of coffee on the table, I finally spoke.

"It's about my family."

Shinonome blinked a few times when she heard that. She probably was not expecting that from me.

"Well, you're coming over on Saturday, aren't you?"

"Ah..... Mmm."

"So I thought I should inform you beforehand. My parents aren't around."

I was worried she would interpret it wrongly and thought that my parents are dead, so I explained how my father was dispatched to America due to his work, and my mother followed along.

"..... So there's no one else at home?"

Asked Shinonome with her head tilted after she had listened to my explanation. I responded loudly with,

"My elder brother's around! It's not like we'll be alone in the house!"

It should be worrying for Shinonome if she came over and realized I was the only person at home. And that applies for me as well. I have never once encountered such a situation, so I wouldn't know what to do.

I was then reminded of something else and continued.

"Oh right. There's my brother's girlfriend too."

Shinonome tilted her head in the other direction. Despite the lack of words, I could see from her actions she was asking me why I had brought that up.

I thus had to explain to her Arumi-san's frequent visits to my house. She would nod in response while listening to me. When I was done, Shinonome finally said softly,

"That's so nice."

"..... Really?"

"I feel like I can write a story with just that."

It feels strangely real if it's Shinonome who's saying that as an author. If I fill her in about my feelings for Arumi-san, then wouldn't that allow her to write a melancholic story? But I have absolutely no plans to do that. It would be troubling if her attention's directed to that. Moreover, it's something of the past already, so I'm not too sure if I should tell her anyway.

"It's not interesting at all."

I said bluntly. Shinonome was dejected when she heard that.

Somehow, I'm acting cold to her yet again.

Ever since the trip to the theme park, for some reasons unknown

to me, my heart pricks a little whenever I'm interacting with Shinonome. That won't happen if I'm not seeing her, but I'm helpless whenever I meet her.

"..... Sorry."

Shinonome took out her cellphone from her bag. It was vibrating furiously in silent mode.

"May I take the call?"

I nodded in silence. Shinonome turned her head away apologetically and pressed the phone against her ear.

There was the occasional mention of the word 'draft' by Shinonome — I could easily tell she was speaking to her editor just from her attitude. Every time she speaks, the dangle on her phone would sway about as though it were bored.

Looks like the conversation won't be ending any time soon. I took out my phone in boredom to stare at it. There's the exact same dangle hanging from it.

That's quite a snobbish expression — I thought to myself. I really couldn't understand how anyone could find this thing cute.

As I looked up, I realized Shinonome was already done with the call. She was looking at me. When she saw the dangle on my phone, she smiled and said,

"I thought you already took it off."

"It's hanging there nicely..... You gave it to me, after all."

The hint of helplessness in my voice was clear as day. Shinonome probably did notice my feelings. because she was nudging the dangle on her phone dejectedly with her finger. It actually felt like she was teasing the monkey.

I couldn't help but to picture myself as the monkey once more.

Is Shinonome just playing me in her palms? Though she said everything was for her research, could that have been a lie? Perhaps it was all for the sake of watching me get flustered for her own amusement?

There was a long, awkward silence between Shinonome and me.

Shinonome placed her phone into her bag, then added some sugar into her coffee.

"Ah!"

A sudden exclamation from me. Shinonome, who was stirring the coffee with a teaspoon, froze in shock.

"..... Yes?"

Inquired Shinonome, lowering her head and peeking at me.

The exclamation of mine was due to me remembering the incident involving Ikehara a few days ago. I wasn't sure if I should tell her about it though.

"Anything wrong?"

Asked Shinonome worriedly. Answering with "Nothing" will make it look like I'm hiding things from her, which may result in her being even more worried instead.

"It's nothing..... Back when Shinonome was on sick leave, I mentioned how Ikehara stood in for you, right?"

"Mmm."

"That was when Ikehara noticed we have the same dangle..... then, well, rumors about us began spreading the very next day."

"Rumors?"

Shinonome's expression told me she genuinely had no idea what I was talking about.

"Rumors about how Shinonome and I are dating....."

The regret I felt was instant. I should not have said that. I knew very well how bad it will be for my mental health regardless of Shinonome's response.

Shinonome's eyes were floating about — I couldn't see through the

thoughts in her mind. She finally stared at me with her head tilted and asked,

"Are you..... troubled by that?"

"Eh? What?"

"Is Minami-kun disturbed by rumors like that?"

I wonder if there's anyone brave enough to say "no" after hearing a question like that.

"Ah, nope. I don't really mind....."

"Really? Thank goodness....."

"What about Shinonome?"

The conversation should have ended with me, but I chose to chip in with a question of my own. Shinonome's eyes widened with surprise in an instant.

"Eh..... I do not..... mind....."

She then lowered her head right after. I don't understand what that meant.

What does she mean she 'doesn't mind'? Is it because she couldn't care less about baseless rumors? Or that it doesn't matter since the person's me? I could have apologized candidly with "Really? Sorry

about that," if she replied with "I find it troubling."

I was about to incur psychological damage if the conversation continued, so I changed the topic instead.

"Speaking of which, have you begun working on the long story already?"

"Not the actual novel..... but I'm starting on the abstract....."

"The abstract?"

"It's sort of like a gist, if you will. First, I will have to show it to the editor. Then comes the modification before finally starting on the real story. However, it's common for short stories to do away with an abstract."

"I see....."

Our conversation didn't continue as planned, since there wasn't much to talk about if she hasn't even started on it yet. There's the abstract which I could delve into, but to be honest, I have no inkling about the professional world. I wasn't sure I could keep the conversation going.

I lifted my head to look at the clock hanging on the wall. It has only been thirty minutes — we would normally last an hour here.

"..... It's about time."

I suggested. Shinonome nodded faintly and stood up.

We paid for our own drinks and walked to the station together, as usual. Nothing was said between us.

At the station, as we were about to go our own ways, Shinonome turned around briefly to look at me. It seemed like she had something to say, but she shook her head instead.

"Sorry..... It's nothing. See you tomorrow."

"Alright."

I lifted my hand and turned away from her. As I walked up the stairs which led to the platform, I could see Shinonome standing on the opposite side. She was reading, unaware I was on the opposite platform.

When I stepped onto the platform, the train going in the opposite direction arrived, sandwiching itself between Shinonome and me. When it left the station, Shinonome was nowhere to be seen as well. A sense of loneliness hit me.



Finally, my train arrived.

As the train rattled along its path, I leaned against the window while standing. Gazing at the scenery beyond the windows, I was more or less coming to terms with my feelings.

Like how I was strangely irritated when I'm with Shinonome, or the way I was behaving calmly around Arumi-san recently.

I could sort of understand what that was all about, but a part of me was unwilling to accept it. I was held back by a whole lot of issues — the slight embarrassment, how troublesome it felt, and also this strange pride of mine.

I'm not quite sure if what I'm saying is appropriate, but it's a shame — to be honest, I'm at the point where I'm forced to admit this.

I'm actually in love with Shinonome.

## Chapter 7

*For Romiemarigana, everyday was dull. Very dull.*

*Moreover, Romiemarigana realized that her sole support, Eason, had only brought her there under the context of 'investigation'.*

*He didn't show any traces of love or affection towards her.*

*In his quest to satisfy his curiosity, Eason asked her all sorts of questions and performed detailed checks on her body.*

*Despite her disappointment, Romiemarigana never thought of leaving Eason's side. "This is fine," she thought to herself. So long as she can 'satisfy' Eason - even if there was neither love nor lust - there would be meaning in being around.*

*Therefore, she could hold on even if other people showered her with curious looks or disdainful laughter.*

*Although she was cooped up in a small house, it was the world to her.*

*Nishizono Yūko*

*<Romiemarigana's Expanding World>*

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It was Saturday. Arumi-san, who had stayed over last night, started her morning by cleaning up the house and cooking. Not only that, when I walked into the living room half-awake in my pajamas due to all racket—

"Eita! How long are you planning to keep those clothes on!? That won't do! You have to dress better!"

She ended up scolding me. Shinonome will arrive in the afternoon, so there's still plenty of time. However, Arumi-san refused all of my protests and shoved me into the bathroom.

"Get yourself cleaned up! What about your clothes? Have you decided on what to wear? Is everything alright?"

I've got to hand it to Arumi-san.

"Normal clothes should do just fine, Arumi-san. It's not like this is a special occasion."

Although I said that, Arumi-san stubbornly rejected my views all the same.

"Of course it is! Eita's bringing his girlfriend home! I wonder what sort of girl she is? Onee-chan's getting all excited!"

I heaved a deep sigh. I did my best to deny it, but Arumi-san got it into her head that Shinonome was my girlfriend. I had no

opportunity to rebut her. At the very least, I should remind her not to harass Shinonome too much. However, everything will be for naught if she doesn't calm herself down first.

Arumi-san nodded in satisfaction when she saw me washing my face. Then her cross-hairs turned towards Keisuke. She shouted towards the second floor.

"Keisuke! It's about time you wake up as well!"

She wasn't relaxed at all. Just this once, I felt nothing but pity towards Keisuke — as someone who normally sleeps into the afternoon, it must be silly to be woken up for something like this.

When I returned to the living room with a change of clothes, Arumi-san was in the kitchen cooking. I took a quick peek out of curiosity, and realized immediately that she was doing beef stew. Compared to her usual dishes, the vast difference in this stew's smell and colors suggested she probably began preparing it last night.

"I've been stewing this for eight hours since yesterday."

Said Arumi-san happily. Looking closer, I could see dark circles beneath her eyes. It did seem like she has been preparing the stew all night without sleep. I couldn't help but shrug in exasperation at how crazy that was.

"Ah, is she okay with meat?"

Asked Arumi-san worriedly all of a sudden.

"No problem, she's not—"

That was when I realized I never once had lunch or dinner with Shinonome. The movie was in the afternoon and we parted before dinner. We did eat together when we were at the theme park, but those were just sandwiches without meat in them.

The possibility of Shinonome disliking meat is not zero, but it's way too late to be worrying about things like that now.

"Oh right, when are you planning to serve that?"

Before I knew it, it was my turn to pose the questions to Arumi-san. Arumi-san replied with a perplexed expression on her face,

"Eh? Dinner. Why did you ask?"

Shinonome will be arriving in the afternoon. Still, it will be at least four hours till dinner-time, and that is a very optimistic estimation.

"Are we having dinner together?"

"Why the averse expression?"

With absolutely nothing at home, how on earth am I supposed to spend four hours with Shinonome? Should we kill time with cards? Keisuke, Arumi-san, Shinonome and I playing a game of Sevens? I'd prefer not to think about that. My original plan was to chat

with her about trivialities for an hour or two before sending her home, but Arumi-san would probably stop me from doing so. Assuming that Shinonome agrees to it anyway.

"Nah, it's nothing."

To be honest, just thinking about what's about to happen is depressing enough. As I sat on the sofa in the living room just about to switch on the television, Arumi-san turned her attention to the situation on the second floor.

"Sorry to trouble you, Eita, but please wake Keisuke up. I went to his room earlier, but he just refused to wake up."

Keisuke's weekly routine involves him reading all the way until the morning during weekends, so it's possible that he's only slept three or four hours right now. It's just cruel to wake him up.

"He'll wake up pretty soon, I think? It's not like it matters if he continues to sleep....."

Knowing very well that Keisuke's hard to deal with when he wakes up, I came up with an excuse in my attempt to tactfully avoid the task, but Arumi-san had a different plan in mind.

"That won't do! Keisuke will space out for two full hours after waking up! It would be rude to your girlfriend if he doesn't act properly."

"Eh?"

"Keisuke and I are your acting guardians since your parents aren't around! We will have to present ourselves properly! Now, get going!"

Seems like there's no more room for discussion. I stood up grudgingly and walked to the second floor.

There was no response from the room when I rapped the door. When I opened the door carefully, it was just as I expected — Keisuke was in bed, curled up in his blanket.

"Arumi-san will throw a fit, so get up already."

I shook his body in an attempt to wake him up, but Keisuke was showing no signs of waking up. This is creating a lot of pressure on me — Arumi-san will nag at me should I return to the living room without doing anything.

With no other option in hand, I decided to kill time in Keisuke's room until he woke up. To pass time, I began searching through a pile of books, and in it was the <YOTAKA> magazine which Shinonome autographed. There were more recent magazines stacked on top of it. As I carefully flipped through the books located below while trying my best not to topple the stack, I found a few copies of <YOTAKA> which were dated earlier than the one I borrowed before.

I began browsing through the covers, my eyes focused squarely on the names and the contents. Only the ones with Shinonome's

works interested me. After a brief selection, I brought the stack of magazines to Keisuke's PC desk, sat on the chair and began reading the oldest volume. The magazine featured Shinonome's debut work, <The Distressed Eyes of Sanni Yaka>.

Yet another story which I fail to comprehend.

Just like the other stories Shinonome wrote, it wasn't set in the modern day world. Do you classify this as science fiction or fantasy? The story wasn't classified as it was published in a literary magazine, but to me, it feels way off from both genres.

In the next story and the one after that, everything was the same. All stories were set in fictitious worlds. None of them were futuristic worlds, neither was there any mentioning of terms like Japan or America.

While reading them, I began recalling what Shinonome had said.

One requires the necessary knowledge or experience to write a long story. Knowing very well what her weaknesses were, she ended up writing about fictitious worlds instead.

The other similarity in her stories was that there were no elements of romance. Even when there was a male and female character, no love blossomed between the two. All the casts portrayed their role mechanically — at least that's what it felt like for me. However, since her stories weren't based on the world we live in, one can probably interpret it as 'that's probably the kind of atmosphere she's trying to portray'.

With that interpretation in mind, Shinonome's stories may have been 'pretty decent' in that regard. However, as someone who barely reads, I'm not really in any position to judge.

Just as I finished with all the magazines I picked out (or more specifically, Shinonome's stories inside them), Keisuke's body stirred amid his rhythmic breaths. With the blanket still hanging on his body, Keisuke seemed to ignore my presence as he picked up his glasses from the PC desk before putting them on clumsily. He then finally turned to look at me.

".... What are you doing?"

I shut the magazine.

"Arumi-san asked me to wake you up, but you never did, so I stayed here waiting. She'd chase me up here again if I returned downstairs alone."

"..... Right."

Keisuke combed his messy bed hair upwards with his fingers and got off his bed with an irritated look on his face. Nothing was said when he saw the magazine I was reading; he walked out of his room, probably to wash up or something. Feeling all relieved for finally accomplishing my mission, I placed the magazines back onto the pile and left his room.

Back in my room, there was a message from Shinonome on my

cellphone.

"Morning. Is it okay to arrive at two in the afternoon? Am I really not bothering your family?"

"Nope, not a problem. Give me a message when you get on train, okay? I'll pick you up at the station."

"Understood. Let's keep in contact."

I told her the station closest to my house. There won't be any hassle of switching lines, and it will also minimize the chance of her getting lost. Nevertheless, I kept the cellphone in my pants pocket even as I moved to the living room, just in case she needed to contact me in an emergency.

Keisuke was reading the newspaper with a cigarette in his mouth, his bed hair still messy and untouched. Arumi-san earlier insisted that I was to change my clothes, but she was silent when it came to Keisuke, and instead was preparing breakfast in the kitchen. Perhaps she knew from experience that it'll be pointless to expect anything from Keisuke when he had just woken up. She will probably leave him as is for about two hours.

The only thing left is a quick breakfast before contacting Shinonome and waiting for her at the station — just as I was thinking about such things, I suddenly noticed.....

"Ah."

Keisuke shot a quick glance at me, but said nothing and returned to his newspaper. Perhaps it was because his brain wasn't functioning at full capacity yet. Thankfully, he didn't ask me what that was for.

As I was standing up, Arumi-san asked from the kitchen,

"Where are you going, Eita? Breakfast is ready."

"I'll be back in a jiffy. I have a call to make."

With that said, I moved to my room and dug out my phone. I found Shinonome's number in my contacts list and pressed the dial button.

About three rings later, Shinonome's voice came through.

"..... Hello?"

"Ah, sorry for the sudden call. I would like to speak to you."

"Regarding?"

"You're coming to my house today, right? Due to various reasons, the situation has somehow turned into my girlfriend visiting my house....."

There was no response from Shinonome when she heard that statement. Only silence.

"Our relationship is pretty complicated, so they may not understand everything even when they hear our explanation. Therefore, I'd be really grateful if you can cooperate with me and present yourself as my girlfriend."

Shinonome was still silent. Given how early it was, perhaps she's still not fully awake? It kind of feels like Shinonome is someone who suffers from low blood pressure, so she may very well be similar to Keisuke when it comes to the morning. He will hardly respond to a conversation.

"My brother's girlfriend is a little..... you know. She may end up harassing you endlessly, so can you please put up with her? I'll do my best to save you in that situation."

Shinonome finally replied with a tiny voice,

"..... Mmm, got it."

Her voice was monotonous, as usual — perhaps she did just wake up. If that's the case, I should hang up since I'm done with everything I wanted to say—

"Well then, see you later....."

Just as I was about to disconnect the call, I directed a sudden question towards Shinonome.

"Oh right, Shinonome. Do you eat beef stew?"

"..... Beef stew?"

"Right. My brother's girlfriend stayed up all night preparing it for our dinner. So if you're fine with it..... and if time allows, why don't you join us for dinner?"

"Well..... Mmm, I'm fine with that. Thank you."

"Nah, it's not like I did anything."

"Well then, see you later."

"Mmm."

When the sound of the disconnected tone came through, I heaved a huge sigh of relief as if I had just completed some major work. Oh boy, this is quite a bit of stress for me. The root of all my problems lies in the fact that they fail to understand our relationship. It would have been easier for me if she really were my girlfriend.

There was a sense of disappointment when the thought came to my mind.

Although I want it to happen, it never will.

On the other side of the door was the 'slightly..... you know' Arumi-san calling me out. Seems like breakfast was ready.

I heaved yet another sigh and walked out of the room.

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Time ticked by once breakfast was over.

Keisuke did just as Arumi-san had predicted: two hours after waking up, he finally combed his hair and changed his clothes to show himself in a 'presentable' manner. As for Arumi-san, she remained busy as ever, sweeping the floor in one moment and checking the condition of the stew in another. Only when she was finally done with everything did she sit leisurely on the sofa to watch television.

"Let's have a simple lunch, shall we? I'd prefer if we can have our dinner early."

We went along with Arumi-san's suggestion and had udon for lunch. After that, just as I was about to look for more things to do, Shinonome's message came.

"I am on the train now. I should be there in about thirty minutes."

I stood up after reading her text. Arumi-san turned her head immediately.

"Ah! Is she on her way? Are you picking her up?"

"Ah..... Urm, yeah."

"Got it! I'll prepare some tea!"

With that, Arumi-san made herself busy yet again. As for Keisuke, he continued reading.

The sun was shining brightly, the temperature was warm enough that I broke into sweat. I stayed in the shade as much as I could while walking to the station. It takes fifteen minutes at most to reach the station even if I'm strolling, so it should end up with me waiting for her for a while.

Upon reaching the station, I leaned myself against the pillar at the ticketing gates. The train from Shinonome's direction arrived right at the exact same moment. Looking past the ticketing gates, I scanned the passengers who were getting off the train, but couldn't see Shinonome among them. Judging from the time, Shinonome's train should be the next one, so I continued to space out.

Ten minutes later, another train arrived. However, Shinonome was still nowhere to be seen. Bewildered, I checked the time on my cellphone. It's precisely thirty minutes after her text, while the next train will be here in ten minutes.

Shinonome was never late. In fact, she would always arrive early. I was a little worried.

Could something have happened to her? And then—

"Did she return home already...."

A murmur. Did she actually change her mind? Was she pissed about what I said this morning? Could she have ditched me for a reason like that? I couldn't help but to think about stuff like that.

If that was the case, the norm should be to contact the other person. However, we're talking about Shinonome here. I could sort of understand whatever course of action she chooses to take.

"You haven't arrived yet?"

I was planning to send that message, but I dropped the thought. It's unsightly to press her like that. She did text "in about thirty minutes", not within thirty nor exactly thirty. Meaning to say, there's some leeway — well, typically speaking. I hope.

I didn't want to irritate her by losing my patience and texting her.

To be honest, I don't want Shinonome to dislike me. I doubt she likes me in the first place, so all the more reason not to get into her bad books.

My only option was to wait for Shinonome at the station like a loyal dog.

While thinking about stuff like that, a train arrived at the opposite platform. I never paid any special attention to it since I wasn't expecting Shinonome to come from that direction.

But I was wrong. Shinonome was one of the many passengers who were getting off that train. She was at the rear of the pack when

she stepped out, but quite unexpectedly, she walked hastily to the front and out of the ticketing gates. I was honestly surprised.

"I was expecting you to take the train from the opposite direction."

I remarked as Shinonome walked towards me. She turned around to take a look at the platform before lowering her head apologetically.

"I missed the stop as I was reading....."

"Ah, I see."

"Sorry for being late."

"Nah, it's okay. I didn't wait for too long."

That was my answer so as not to let her realize how uneasy I was feeling due to her being late.

The two of us began walking home. Even though I chose to stay in the shade as much as I could, sweat still poured from my temple due to the heat, which I wiped off with my hand. Worried about the smell of sweat, I chose to keep my distance away from Shinonome.

On the other hand, Shinonome was walking expressionlessly. Despite her wearing a cardigan (the one she usually wears) while I was wearing just a T-shirt, there was not a drop of sweat on her body.

"You don't sweat?"

Come to think of it, I seldom see Shinonome sweat, so I popped the question as we walked.

"Eh.....? Why the sudden question?"

"I don't remember seeing you sweat. Today's pretty hot, isn't it?"

"It is not like I don't sweat....."

With that, Shinonome tilted her head slightly and reached for my hands all of the sudden. She then opened my gently clenched fist and held my hands. I could feel a slight moisture on her palm.

"..... See?"

"Ah, yeah....."

That reminded me of how Shinonome's hand was all clammy when we were on the roller coaster at the theme park. She's probably trying to say it's the way her body works.

When we were done with our conversation, Shinonome hesitantly released my hand, but I responded with a firm grip instead. I could tell from the corner of my eye that Shinonome was staring at me. I didn't look her in the eye, however. It would be incredibly embarrassing to have eye contact with her right now.

Shinonome allowed herself to be led silently by my hand. I said nothing either. Somehow, it felt like I'd be forced to let her go if we were to speak.

And so, we arrived before my house without speaking a word.

It felt like Arumi-san would tease me should she see us holding hands, so I let her hand go when we were at the door. Shinonome avoided looking at me and spoke,

"I'm feeling..... slightly nervous....."

With my hand on the door knob, I turned my head around and said,

"Relax, it'll be alright. My brother hardly speaks, though his girlfriend can be quite talkative. I'll help you out."

"Mmm....."

I then turned my back towards the stuttering Shinonome and turned the knob. Arumi-san appeared before me in a flash, which surprised me a tiny bit.

"Welcome!"

Yelled Arumi-san when she sees me. She then swiftly placed two pairs of slippers on the floor. Looks like she's ready to receive us at any moment. I've got to hand it to her; she's way more into this than I had imagined. I turned around and said to Shinonome,

"Come on in."

From the way Shinonome walked stiffly through the doors, you can easily see just how nervous she was. Arumi-san nodded gently.

She was grinning while observing Shinonome.

Arumi-san's probably one of the reasons why Shinonome's acting all nervous like this — I thought to myself as I followed behind Shinonome. Therefore, I whispered in Arumi-san's ears.

"Just wait over there for now."

Arumi-san's not too pleased with my request, but she did as I said anyway and moved to the living room.

I urged Shinonome to put on the slippers while wearing my own, but Shinonome remain rooted to the ground. Her eyes were fixed dazedly in the direction of Arumi-san.

"..... What's wrong?"

I asked. Shinonome replied softly with,

"She's so beautiful."

"Is she?"

I tilted my head, not affirming what she just said.

It was only when I invited her once more did Shinonome step onto the aisle.

Keisuke was sitting next to the living room table reading while smoking. When Arumi-san requested him to stop smoking, he extinguished the cigarette disinterestedly using the ashtray beside him. I never thought Keisuke would be sensible enough to know not to smoke next to a guest who's a minor.

Keisuke puffed a white breath - probably to purge the remaining smoke in his lungs - as he looked at Shinonome, who was standing behind me. That was when Keisuke narrowed his eyes slightly. Keisuke's not exactly a fierce-looking guy, but it does look as though he is peering into someone whenever he narrows his eyes. Shinonome fearfully stepped back from his gaze.

"What's wrong?"

I asked in Shinonome's stead.

Keisuke continued staring at me — or actually, he was looking at Shinonome.

"You....."

I flinched when I heard Keisuke's deep voice.

Why didn't I think of that — I thought to myself.

"..... are Nishizono Yūko, aren't you?"

Asked Keisuke.

Just as I thought. This is to be expected though. Keisuke's a bookworm, a man who reads <YOTAKA> thoroughly every month. Of course, he would have seen the magazine with Shinonome's picture. Not to mention, Keisuke has excellent memory.

"Ah....."

Exclaimed Shinonome.

"Urm..... what's wrong? Did something happen?"

Arumi-san, who was preparing tea in the kitchen, came out when she sensed something was amiss.

"N-Nothing. Just continue what you're doing."

The reason I said that was because things would get even more complicated if Arumi-san was involved. Arumi-san looked at Keisuke and Shinonome repeatedly, then mumbled,

"Why are you leaving me out of this?"

"Nah, I'll fill you in later..... Shinonome, please have a seat. It never came to me that this might happen, so I'm sorry."

In my attempt at damage control, I had Shinonome take a seat in

a slightly forceful manner and insisted that Arumi-san return to the kitchen.

When I was seated, Arumi-san walked over with a tray placed with cups and a teapot.

"..... Which do you prefer, red tea or coffee?"

Shinonome replied nervously to Arumi-san's question.

"Ah. Coffee..... please....."

While Arumi-san was preparing the coffee, I thought hard on how I should go about explaining this.

In any case, the cat's already out of the bag. I have no other option but to reveal the fact that Shinonome's a writer. Still, I have to get Shinonome's approval.

"Can I tell them you're actually a writer?"

I leaned towards her ears and whispered. Shinonome gave a hard nod.

Arumi-san came to the table when she was done preparing the drinks. So I cleared my throat and began my explanation - not forgetting to introduce Shinonome to them as well - about how she's actually a writer.

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After hearing the truth about Shinonome, Arumi-san was actually the one to be all excited instead of Keisuke, repeating phrases like "That's incredible!" and "Wow....." several times. On the other hand, Keisuke seemed to lack interest once he confirmed the fact that 'Shinonome = Nishizono Yūko'. He spoke not another word.

When we were done with the cakes and coffee, everything that had to be done was done. Somehow, once our conversation was over, it felt like Arumi-san was about to get all gossipy and shower Shinonome with questions (more specifically, her relationship with me). I did prep Shinonome about how Arumi-san has mistaken us to be a couple, but I honestly don't feel like Shinonome has the necessary acting skills to fend off Arumi-san's attacks.

"Well then..... May I address you as 'Yuuko'?"

When Arumi-san made her request, that was the moment when I thought to myself — it has begun.

"Ah, sure....."

I knew their conversation won't be heading anywhere great, so I stood up all of the sudden and looked in the direction of Keisuke.

"Ah, right. I was thinking of showing her your room."

Everyone had their eyes focused on me. As for me, my eyes were on Shinonome.

"My brother's really into books as well, so he treasures his collection a lot. I thought it should be interesting for you to visit his room. You do like books, don't you?"

"M-Mmm....."

When I saw Shinonome nodding hesitantly, I turned towards Keisuke.

"So are we allowed to enter your room to have a look? I promise we won't make a mess."

"Do as you please..... Just don't topple the piles of books."

"Roger that."

With him granting permission, everything's up to me now. I made Shinonome stand and led her up the stairs to the second floor. Shinonome was looking all confused and lost.

A mixture of different smells greeted us when I opened the door of Keisuke's room.

"The room reeks of smoke. My brother's a heavy smoker."

I informed Shinonome before inviting her in.

After stepping into the room, Shinonome began surveying Keisuke's 'den.

"Wow....."

Shinonome gave off a very uncharacteristic, emotion-filled exclamation.

"Impressive, isn't it? It may not look like it, but this is the remaining half to what he used to own last year, the other half he cleared away."

She was barely listening to my introductions though; her eyes were fixed intently onto the stacks of books. That's a bookworm for you. Keisuke's room must look like a treasure trove in her eyes — that much I know despite not liking books all that much.

Way back when he was still young, Keisuke was already forking out more than half of his allowances on books — and there were occasions where he would even ask for his allowance in advance. I'm not too sure about the details myself, but it seemed like Keisuke had spent tens of thousands of yen to get his hands on rare books via online auctions.

"Wow, there is even <Eréndira>....."

Murmured Shinonome while caressing a book which was located at the top of one of the many piles of books.



"Huh?"

I walked towards her, not having the slightest clue what she was talking about. Shinonome turned around and said with a bright smile,

"<Eréndira>. It is my most favourite novella."

The title of the book which Shinonome was caressing did indeed spell 'Eréndira'. It was written by Márquez, a name which I had never heard of before. I had no clue if the author's someone famous or not. I could chat with her a little if we're speaking of authors like Akutagawa Ryuunosuke or Dazai Osamu (authors who appear in Japanese lessons), but I'm totally clueless when it comes to foreign writers. The knowledge I possessed was no different than those of a typical person.

"..... Is it interesting?"

I detested myself a little for having only that question in mind. Shinonome tilted her head and answered,

"It feels like it's way more than just being interesting or not..... It's realistic despite being fiction, and is humorous while depressing at the same time....."

Quite a tongue-twisting response, but from the way she described it, she must have loved this book a lot. And yet, I was unable to voice my opinion on 'something which Shinonome likes'.

All of a sudden, the tightly shut door was opened. Keisuke's face appeared between the opening gap. He said nothing as he randomly placed the book in his hand onto one of the nearby stacks of books. He then looked briefly at Shinonome.

"..... So you like Márquez?"

Asked Keisuke. Shinonome tilted her head and replied,

"Yes."

"I can sense that. I did read your works after all."

Shinonome blushed and lowered her head bashfully, probably due to her embarrassment from having her works read by someone. Keisuke walked towards the PC desk to flip through some of the more recent books placed on top of a stack, drew one of them out and walked back towards the door.

"Ah, wait....."

Shinonome called Keisuke gingerly just as he placed his hand on the knob. Keisuke turned his head backwards lazily.

"What's your opinion..... about my works?"

The question from Shinonome came out of the blue. Keisuke narrowed his eyes and swept his hair upwards with his hand.

"They feel pretty raw."

"I see....."

"But that doesn't mean I hate them."

"T-Thank you very much....."

Keisuke responded to the bowing Shinonome with a "Mmm" before walking out of the door.

While watching them talking to each other, it felt like I was the only one left out of the circle.

It was surprising for me to see Shinonome that proactive in getting the opinion of others. But then again, Shinonome might have for a very long time yearned for someone who she can discuss books or novels with. Sadly, I'm not the one who can do that. Shinonome should know that already.

So I thought — Shinonome might be attracted to Keisuke already.

He's way smarter, calmer and more mature than me, and he loves books as well..... Keisuke possesses a lot of strengths which I lacked. It wouldn't be surprising if Shinonome's attracted to him.

"Wanna leave?"

I asked her softly, so as not to have her realize the growing disappointment within me.

"Ah, mmm."

Shinonome followed hastily in my steps as I walked briskly.

"My brother's pretty weird, huh?"

I said with my head turned towards Shinonome as we walked down the stairs. Half of me actually meant what I said, though the other half of me was hoping Shinonome would agree with me with a "Yes".

"Is that so.....?"

Shinonome's reply came after a moment of hesitance.

"I personally think he is an exceptional elder brother....."

I stopped dead in my tracks. Shinonome's body bumped into mine, which caused me to stumble forward. I was close to falling off the stairs, but Shinonome caught my hand in the nick of time.

"..... Anything wrong?"

Shinonome tilted her head while looking at me with my head turned towards her.

"It's nothing."

With that reply, I shook her hand off and resumed my descent down the stairs.

While listening to the creaking sounds from the stairs, I thought to myself — I'm an idiot.

The answer to the deliberate question of mine was the one which I least wanted to hear. I was pissed off with the way I acted.

"Exceptional..... Well, you're right."

I murmured in a voice which wouldn't reach Shinonome.

I knew that for a long time already. Put me and Keisuke side by side, and everyone will choose Keisuke.

The despair that I'm feeling now's way worse than those I experienced with Arumi-san. The main reason must be because it's Shinonome we're talking about. Shinonome - a classmate, a girl who on the surface is my girlfriend - thinks that Keisuke is 'exceptional'. That's something I absolutely hate and cannot accept.

Perhaps it was just her being polite — I tried convincing myself several times. I knew very well she's not one to put a person down when his younger brother was standing right before her.

But I still didn't want to hear it.

When we returned to the living room, Arumi-san was sitting there in anticipation as she began bombarding Shinonome with loads of question, but I had no intention of stopping her. I was saved by Arumi-san's bubbling personality. There were occasions when

Shinonome would look at me with concern, but I tried my hardest not to speak a word. All I did was to listen to the conversation between Shinonome and Arumi-san, joined in occasionally by Keisuke, who was smoking and reading a book behind the two girls.

Dinner time came, so Arumi-san served the beef stew which she had begun preparing since yesterday night. Shinonome smiled and said that the stew was delicious, but it actually tasted bland to me.

"Eita, is it good?"

When I heard Arumi-san's question, my reply was a simple,

"Mmm."

That took me nearly all of my strength to reply.

Seriously..... what the heck am I doing?

## Chapter 8

*One day, Romiemarigana successfully sneaked out of Eason's room. She was careful not to get caught, or they would bring her back to the room. She began exploring the building.*

*Finally, she found Eason. Despite her urge to run towards him, Romiemarigana suppressed it and hid herself in a corner to look at him.*

*Just then, a woman appeared before Eason. Romiemarigana did not know the woman's name — she observed the two speaking intimately. From her happy expressions and her feminine charms, it was obvious to anyone that she loved Eason.*

*Not just the woman, Eason looked delighted as well.*

*Romiemarigana could only watch in silence.*

*At the same time, it felt as if there were a sound coming from within her body.*

*It was the sound of her world gradually shattering into pieces. A heartbreaking sound indeed.*

*Nishizono Yūko*

*<Romiemarigana's Expanding World>*

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From that day on, Shinonome and I hardly spoke to each other for about a week.

It might be due to the approaching exam dates. My grades aren't exactly stellar, so I'll fail rather spectacularly if I don't put any effort into studying. Should that happen, I'll have to take the make-up exams.

We do have to continue our shift during the exam periods, but Shinonome and I never really spoke at the library either. As for those cold text messages of hers, I chose to reply with equally stiff answers.

On the day when the exams were all over, while we were at the classroom, Shinonome walked towards me and called me by my name — something she has never done before.

"Minami-kun."

"..... Huh?"

"Are you free today?"

Due to the stares of our classmates, this isn't exactly the place for me to speak coldly to Shinonome.

"Mmm."

I stood up after a brief reply. Seeing me get up, Shinonome returned to her seat and picked up her bag. I was already done packing up, so I grabbed my bag and walked out of the classroom together with Shinonome.

Shinonome was all quiet, so I chose not to speak as well. We walked silently on our way towards the station.

Shinonome stopped in her tracks when we reached the shopping street.

"Are you free..... tomorrow?"

Tomorrow's Friday, but school will be taking a break as we were done with the exams. Of course, there's no need to perform our librarian duties as well.

"Yeah, I probably am."

For a brief moment, I wanted to tell her I'll be busy. In the end though, I replied to her honestly. I guess I hesitate whenever it comes to lying.

"Are you interested..... in meeting up tomorrow?"

Shinonome followed up with a rather hesitant question. Similar to how she approached me and initiated a conversation earlier, Shinonome coming up with a request is just an incredibly rare event.

"I guess....."

I couldn't answer her with an honest "Sure." Deep inside me, I was actually a little happy that Shinonome made a move first.

"Well then..... As for the time, I will message you the details later."

With that, Shinonome resumed walking. I stopped her immediately.

"Where will we be going?"

Shinonome's response was to move her eyes away from mine. With her head lowered, a mischievous smile appeared.

"It's a secret."

My eyes were locked on Shinonome for a while, who continued walking after her reply. I then snapped back to reality and caught up to her with a quick jog.

"I'm sorry for not speaking to you recently."

I said to Shinonome when I caught up to her side.

"So were you really..... avoiding me?"

"Yeah..... A little."

"..... Did I do anything..... wrong?"

It's hard to explain things to her clearly. I guess she did do something, in the sense that her actions caused me to be restless and uneasy. I'm not blaming her though; that was just me getting all worked up on my part.

"Not at all."

I murmured. After a moment of hesitation, I added,

"I was just feeling down for a bit."

"I see....."

That was when Shinonome stopped walking. From the faint ringtone that was coming from inside her bag, it seemed like there was an incoming call.

I stood stiffly at the side, looking at Shinonome while she spoke on the phone. From the few familiar terms which I faintly caught, the call should be from her editor. It felt like something similar had happened before. That was when I wondered — how was it going for Shinonome's novels?

The last time I asked, Shinonome mentioned she was doing a draft or something, so that probably means there should be some sort of progress, right? As I made up my mind to ask her about that after she was done with the call, Shinonome hung up the phone and kept it in her bag.

"Sorry, Minami-kun..... My editor happens to be around, so I want to discuss a few things with him."

Shinonome apologized before I could even speak. It's not like I could hound Shinonome about her novel.

"Ah, I see..... Guess this is where we part then."

"Mmm..... I will text you tonight on the plans for tomorrow."

"Got it."

"Well, see you then."

I looked on as Shinonome walked along the shopping street with dainty steps and into the coffee house. Hey, we could have walked together — I thought to myself. However, I stopped myself immediately just as my legs were about to move.

If Shinonome and her editor were seated next to the windows, that would mean I'll be walking past them right before their eyes. That would feel really awkward, so I changed direction and entered a small alleyway just before the shopping street.

"What on earth am I doing?"

I muttered subconsciously.

It was all just me getting toyed around with by Shinonome. The roller-coaster of emotions I'm experiencing, or the fact that I was

walking sneakily in some alleyway.

It never felt like this back when I was in love with Arumi-san.

I was way too naive back then, so all I did was to dance around her. I would never get angry at her, nor would I feel any embarrassment.

So that means I'm more mature than I used to be, resulting to all these various emotions which I haven't experienced before.

I wasn't quite sure if that's a good thing or not.

What exactly should I be doing?

If I love Shinonome— If I love her, I should be satisfied just by being next to her regardless of the situation, instead of getting angry with her, right?

So I just have to get Shinonome to love me, right? To look at me happily and say,

"I love you."

Do I want her to say that? But if that's the case, then Shinonome won't be Shinonome anymore. The Shinonome Yuuko I love is someone who's slightly different from others; a girl whose thoughts I cannot read. Since this is Shinonome we're talking about, does this mean I'm doomed to have her toy with me around with my mixed emotions for all eternity?

The phone in my pocket was vibrating. It was a message from Arumi-san.

"Keisuke and I will be going to our university gathering, so I'm sorry, but Eita will have to have dinner by yourself. I have prepared some food in the fridge, so you just have to heat them up. The rice should be ready by the time you reach home."

"Hmm....." If that's the case, they probably won't be back home early tonight. Stuff like this happens occasionally, and they would always return home late. To be honest, I'm quite suspicious about the whole 'gathering' thing, but I'm not in the mood to reach the bottom of such things.

Before, when I received messages like this, it always felt like I would die from sadness. But now, I'm incredibly calm.

"Got it. Have fun."

And I can even reply her with stuff like this.

That just shows how much I have grown. Come to think about it, I more or less have Shinonome to thank for that.

Back at home, I stared blankly at the TV. After a while, I grew bored of the shows that were airing, so I made my way to Keisuke's room instead. As I looked at his room with all the messily placed books lying all around, I picked up Shinonome's favourite <Eréndira> once more.

I flipped through the book briefly, but it was way more difficult than I have imagined.

I felt a little guilty to take yet another book when I haven't even started on <Nine Stories> which I had borrowed from Keisuke, However, what I wanted to read right now was not a "short stories compilation", but Shinonome's favourite book.

I laid on my bed and began working on the first chapter of <Eréndira>.

Just as I had expected, I couldn't understand it. Similar to the short stories written by Shinonome, the only thing appearing in my mind were a series of blurry images. Still, having known that this is Shinonome's favourite novel, I pressed on.

I had no idea if the story is fiction or based on facts, but it somehow feels similar to Shinonome.

An unfathomable girl who is a little disconnected with the rest of the world, someone whose thoughts I can never understand.

Then there's me, who has fallen in love with Shinonome.

This feels like the sort of story you can expect to find in a short stories compilation, isn't it? Though it's nowhere near grandiose enough to be woven into a novel, but there should be enough to give birth to a rather intriguing story, right? I chuckled to myself on my bed.

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The place to meet, as designated by Shinonome, was a station built into a giant shopping complex. Most of the time, I'm the one who would arrive earlier, but Shinonome was already there waiting for me when I walked out of the ticketing gates.

"You're very early."

Reason I said that was because I arrived ten minutes ahead of the agreed time.

"I left home slightly earlier today..... because there is something I wanted to see."

While explaining, she turned her head towards the direction of the shopping complex. One can find plenty of bookshops in the mega-complex which had just opened up a year ago, so she's probably referring to them. I replied nonchalantly with a "Right."

"Well then, where are we heading for today?"

I directed the question towards Shinonome, as she had not mentioned about our destination in any of her mails yesterday. Shinonome lifted her eyes bashfully and answered,

"Urm..... If you can accompany me while I am shopping....."

"Shopping? Sure. Books?"

I then thought to myself — she probably wanted to buy a ton of books, so she's looking for someone to help her with the bags as she won't be able to carry them all herself. I mean, speaking of 'Shinonome' and 'shopping' hand in hand, the only thing which came to my mind was books.

However, Shinonome shrunk a little as she shook her head slowly.

"No..... I am thinking of buying clothes....."

"Klo...thes?"

For a brief moment, I frowned as I tried to work out what Shinonome was trying to say. However, what she meant soon dawned on me.

"Oh, so you're referring to clothes. You wanna buy clothes huh..... not bad."

Even I find that response to be really silly.

"I am not too familiar with fashion, so I was thinking..... of getting Minami-kun to help me with the selection....."

"Eh? Picking your clothes..... but I'm totally clueless about fashion as well....."

To be honest, she was putting a great deal of pressure on me. But Shinonome was urging me with, "Come on, let's go," so we began

shopping.

So it seems like the 'something I wanted to see' Shinonome was referring to were clothes. That probably meant she had some ideas in mind. I followed Shinonome, visiting a few stores. All of them were selling female clothing, so it's natural for all the customers to be girls.

There were a handful of guys around, but all of them looked like they were there to 'accompany their girlfriend'. That made me feel out of place.

"..... So which store do you prefer?"

Shinonome popped the question out of the blue when we were done browsing a few stores.

"Eh?"

The reason for that weird response of mine was because Shinonome had never once sought my opinion while she was browsing the stores. It didn't feel like she had mentioned anything along the lines of "This looks pretty nice" or "Which one is better". All Shinonome did was to pick a few clothes up and placing them back on the rack before moving on to the next store.

I thought she was not pleased with the designs, so I said nothing while following her footsteps.

"Though you're seeking my opinion..... but I'm not too sure which

store's better."

Upon hearing my answer, Shinonome tilted her head with a troubled look.

"..... Urm, how did you buy the dress you're wearing now?"

I asked Shinonome out of curiosity. Shinonome, fidgeting, answered with,

"Well..... The magazine request for a photo-shoot..... so I bought them online."

"Ah....."

I understand the situation now.

Shinonome doesn't possess the experience of 'buying clothes from a store'. Either that, or she didn't spend much thought on the clothes whenever she bought them. That is just the sort of person she is.

As for me, I'm not someone who is particularly fussy with what he wear, so in a sense I'm kind of similar to her. All that mattered to me was that the clothes fit, and maybe I would pay some attention to whether they looked decent on me. There are times where I couldn't be bothered and end up seeking the store assistants for their opinions.

"OK, I got it. Let's walk through the stores once more."

I grabbed the hand of the hesitant Shinonome and headed straight to the stores which we had visited earlier. I may not be an expert when it comes to fashion, but I should be a tad bit better than Shinonome; at the very least, I know what to do while shopping for clothes.

"What sort of clothes do you have in mind? Summer wear?"

We were in that time of the year where the stores were transitioning into the summer fashion, so it was easy to find summer wear at just about everywhere. However, Shinonome shook her head.

"Well..... I am interested in more mature styles."

That was kind of vague. Similar to Shinonome, I'm no expert when it comes to fashion. At times like this, it is best to go out of the way and engage an expert.

"..... Pardon me~"

The female store assistant who was observing us at a distance away approached us with a professional smile on her face. Shinonome moved herself warily behind my back.

"Do you require my assistance~?"

Asked the assistant. I turned around and pointed at Shinonome behind me.

"Yeah..... She's looking for something that's more towards the mature side. Do you have any recommendations?"

Upon hearing my request, the assistant fixed her eyes on Shinonome.

"Let's see..... How about going for a set~?"

"What do you think?"

Shinonome remained silent, her only response was tilting her head.

"Please wait for a moment, I will select a few pieces for you to try on."

After a while, the assistant returned with a few clothes in hand.

"These are the more recent styles. The colors are on the dark side, so they should look more mature on you~"

The only one interacting with the assistant, who was speaking with a drag at the end of her sentences, was me. There was no "Mmm" or "OK" from Shinonome. Shinonome took the clothes passed to her and compared it over her body shyly, before looking at me with a helpless expression.

"I..... am not too sure, so please pick for me, Minami-kun....."

Even if you ask me, I'm not too sure about stuff like this as well — but I swallowed my words, reason being that she's depending on

me right now. It doesn't feel that bad to be in such a situation.

"Why don't you try them?"

"Eh?"

"Try them on! She can, right?"

The female assistant answered with a smile.

"Definitely! The changing room is empty~"

The assistant pushed the confused Shinonome towards the changing room.

"In any case, why don't you try one of the sets for now? It will be much easier for me to provide my thoughts."

upon she heard my explanation, Shinonome finally relented.

"Okay....."

It was an answer which sounded like she was on the brink of tears. Shinonome stepped into the changing room and pulled the curtain. A chair was placed before the changing room, making it look like some sort of 'waiting seat'. There's no point wandering around the store filled with only female customers, so I sat myself on the chair.

There were two changing rooms situated side-by-side. The other

room was not used, so the curtain was left opened.

As for the curtain which was drawn shut, that's where Shinonome was in — and I could hear the rustling sounds of clothing coming from within. I drew a deep breath.

Shinonome's changing on the other side of the curtain right now. I couldn't keep still as my imagination ran wild; I was shaking my leg subconsciously. A bystander would probably think of me as a boyfriend who was irritated with his girlfriend shopping, hoping everything would be done in a flash so that he could leave.

Then came another rustling sound from the curtain, followed by the sound of a piece of clothing falling onto the ground.

Was that her skirt? My thoughts run wild once more. I took another deep breath.

Shit, this can't do. My mind's slowly drifting towards the endless world of perverseness, despite me being in a place as stylish as this. If there's any psychic nearby reading my thoughts, he would definitely see me as a pervert.

Come on, hurry up and be done changing, Shinonome. I can barely hold on much longer — and I mean that in a lot of different ways.

While I was busy with my thoughts, I heard Shinonome clearing her throat from behind the curtain. She then asked softly,

"Urm..... Is Minami-kun around?"

"Y-Yeah..... Anything wrong?"

"I-I am done changing....."

"Ah, really? And?"

"Is it..... weird.....?"

Despite her question, Shinonome remained hidden behind the curtain. There was no way I'd know.

"Well..... I wouldn't know if you don't show yourself."

The curtained moved slightly when I gave her my answer. Shinonome's face appeared through the small opening.

"Promise me you won't laugh..... even if it looks weird."

"I probably won't....."

"If you cannot promise me that, then it would be better if I don't show you. I don't think it suits me that much....."

I stood up in a hurry when Shinonome was about to draw the curtains shut.

"I won't, I promise I won't laugh at you."

Shinonome pressed her fingers against the curtain and pulled it open as if she had given it all up. She then stood before me while remaining in that position.



Wearing a sheer white blouse and black skirt, Shinonome achieved her aim of looking more 'mature' than she usually does; just as she wanted. The gleam of her fair skin lit up my eyes.

"H-How is it.....?"

Asked Shinonome nervously. My voice went a pitch higher than normal.

"Eh? Ah, pretty good. Yeah."

Shinonome's eyes were filled with surprise.

"Is that really..... what you think?"

"Mmm, yeah. They really do look good."

Despite my reassurance, Shinonome continued looking at me suspiciously for a brief while before putting on a smile.

"Mmm, alright. I will buy this set then."

"Eh? But there are others, no?"

"There are..... but this will do."

Hearing our conversation, as the female assistant who picked the clothes walked towards us.

"What do you think~?"

Shinonome ignored me, who was struggling with an answer, and said without hesitation,

"I will take this."

"Really? Thank you very much for your patronage~"

Shinonome continued speaking to the assistant, who was talking to us without any emotion in her voice,

"Also..... Can I wear this set right away?"

The female assistant looked at Shinonome in surprise when she heard her request.

The same applied to me as well. Upon noticing my gaze, Shinonome flashed me a shy smile.

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We then made our way to the cafe.

"I would like to discuss something with you."

Said Shinonome. I guess anything can happen in this world. As we made our way to a nearby cafe, Shinonome carried the bag containing the clothes she wore just moments ago as though she were hugging a teddy bear or something. Knowing very well what the bag was holding, I knew it was nothing heavy, so I said,

"Allow me to take that for you."

Ignoring Shinonome's protest, I took the bag away from her hands. Shinonome thanked me softly. However, I'm not too confident I did that purely out of goodwill.

Part of the reason was me not wanting others to see me as someone who 'nonchalantly allows his girlfriend to carry something that huge'.

We found a slightly old cafe. While we were waiting for our items to be served to us, Shinonome's attention shifted to the clothes she was wearing.

"Do I really not look weird?"

I assured her with "Not in the slightest", but then I wondered about her sudden desire to buy a set of new clothes; moreover, her emphasis was on more mature styles.

The reason I didn't ask was because I was afraid of her answer.

A possibility came to my mind.

Could it be—

It was just a guess, but could it be for Keisuke? Once the suspicion appeared in my mind, I could no longer shake the thought away.

Shinonome visited my house, resulting in her falling for Keisuke, As such, she would do anything to close the gap between her and an older Keisuke — that explains the sudden actions taken by Shinonome.

I know very well it was all just my paranoia, but I can never shake away the inferiority complex I hold towards Keisuke, so there was no way I could avoid thinking the way I did.

Before long, Shinonome was already asking me about my family. And she was picking up pace.

"Does Arumi-san visit Minami-kun's house often?"

"Ah, yeah..... She has been coming ever since my brother's in high school. It's been five years, I think."

"So that means she has been going out with your brother ever since then?"

"Yeah. Makes me wonder what's so great about my elder brother for them to be steady for that long."

I blurted my true feelings accidentally. Shinonome tilted her head when she heard that.

"Really? Your elder brother is an exceptional person. I think they are a great pair."

Sigh.

I tried my best not to heave a sigh, picking up my nearly-empty coffee cup instead. There wasn't much coffee remaining inside, but there's no way I could hide the frustration within me if I didn't distract myself with something to do.

I don't want to listen to words like that.

I don't want to admit the fact that Keisuke is 'exceptional'.

"I wish..... I can become someone like Arumi-san."

Murmured Shinonome softly.

There was a loud 'thud' when I rested the cup onto the setter.

"Ah, sorry....."

I apologized to Shinonome and lowered my head. From the way she was cowering, it seemed like she was frightened by the sudden sound.

Someone like Arumi-san huh — I thought to myself.

So she likes Keisuke that much, huh?

Despite us shopping for Shinonome's clothes and coming to the cafe - basically behaving exactly like how a pair of lovers would - it just seemed like we were separated by an invisible wall or something. A wall which I couldn't overcome, no matter what

actions I take. No matter how hard I tried to scale up the wall, Shinonome's words would always be there on the other side to shove me down.

"Urm....."

Shinonome finally spoke with an apologetic voice,

"I am currently working on a scene in the novel..... As such, there is a place where I would like to visit, so..... do you mind accompanying me?"

"..... Sure, no problem. I mean, that's the reason we were 'going out' in the first place, right?"

Given the way she made her request, there was no way I could reject her. That has always been the sort of relationship between Shinonome and I. I'm just Shinonome's pretend boyfriend for the sake of her novel — that fact was yet again forced onto me.

Shinonome was looking at the window behind me. The sun was setting. That was when I realized how long we had been out.

"Let's go."

Said Shinonome as she stood up.

"Right now?"

I asked. It's already too late for us to head somewhere else. I did go

out with Shinonome several times before this, but most of the time, we would split up at about dinner time. The daylight lasts slightly longer since it's summer time, but it would be better if we save this for another day, right?

"Now is the perfect time."

The tone of that sentence was weird, considering it came from Shinonome. It sounded like she was pushing me, so I stood up as well.

Shinonome mentioned nothing about where we will be heading next.

I followed Shinonome in silence. We were gradually heading towards the alleys; it looked like Shinonome wanted to move away from the hustle of the city. I just couldn't see any place nearby we could visit. There are no gardens, no cinemas, much less a theme park. There were only stores with flashy billboards or drinks pavilions with hanging red lanterns.

"Where are we going?"

I asked, unable to hold back any longer. Shinonome stopped and turn around to look at me.

"It's just right ahead."

Replied Shinonome. Looking at the path before me, I failed to think of any place which Shinonome might be heading to.

I followed Shinonome in silence as Shinonome resumed her steps. For some weird reason, I recalled the fantasy scene I read in a novel yesterday — I was worried about getting thrown into some bizarre universe without me realizing it.

Looking up, the cloudy sky was dyed red by the setting sun. It probably was just me, but the air felt kind of wet. It's not going to rain, is it? Come to think of it, the weather forecast for the morning news predicted a light shower in the evening. I didn't pay it much attention back then as I had expected us to part by dinner time.

Shinonome was showing no signs of stopping. My head was hung low while we were walking, but I decided to look up just then. I failed to realize this earlier, but we were surrounded by buildings which even I could tell were those so called 'love hotels'. As it was still relatively early, the neon lights weren't lit up just yet, but you can be sure their colourful flashes will pop out all over soon enough.

Just as I was wondering how on earth did we end up walking to a place as awkward as this, Shinonome suddenly stopped in her tracks.

"Well....."

As she turned her head around, her expression was one which I had never seen from her; it was a complicated expression mixed with feelings, with a touch of melancholy and shyness.

"Urm, well....."

Shinonome scanned the 'love hotels' around us.

"I would like to visit one of these."

It took me a few seconds to register her words.

"..... Eh?"

I understood what she meant, but I couldn't digest it.

"..... What, did you just say?"

I asked in reflex. Shinonome lowered her head and repeated her sentence.

"I would like to visit one of these....."

"Here....."

I took another look at our surroundings in an attempt to find out if there was any other place that Shinonome could have meant with her words. However, no matter how hard I look, the only buildings that were around us were 'hotels'. And they were no ordinary hotels.

"..... We..... can't?"

Shinonome's voice was trembling slightly.

"No, it's not like we can't....."

"I-I have never entered any of these places, but I am dying to know what's inside..... so....."

True. I had never stepped into one either. Though I understood what sort of place it is.

"But..... urm..... really?"

"I honestly..... just wanted to take a look inside..... but I can't go in alone..... so....."

"No no no, that's not what I meant....."

I knew very well what Shinonome was saying — this is just part of her 'material gathering'. She mentioned that when we were leaving the cafe, so it's not that strange if she wanted to see this place with her very own eyes, especially if we're talking about Shinonome.

Still, this isn't really the right thing to do, isn't it?

"Let's forget about this if you don't like it....."

"It's not a problem of me liking it or not."

"If it's about money..... I can be the one paying for it."

"That's not the issue either....."

Shinonome grabbed my hand just as it was about to scratch my head. I took in a deep breath; her hand felt slightly clammy.

"Just a quick look at what's inside, then we'll leave....."

Shinonome walked determinedly towards the 'hotel'. With my hand in hers, I followed her footsteps meekly. The shady hotels around us were pulling in customers rather aggressively. A few men in bow ties were looking at us with enthusiasm; they probably found our conversation to be rather amusing.

There was a old soap opera I watched where a scene was about a woman rejecting the man's invitation to stay at a hotel. Shouldn't that be how things usually go? What we have here though is the total opposite. That's probably the reason why they were looking at us with laughter in their eyes, right?

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As we passed through the entrance of the nearest hotel, which was shrouded by some trees, we were greeted by a rather glamorous space. Just as we were standing there wondering what we should do next, a couple in suits walked out of the elevator arm in arm. As they passed us, I could hear the woman whispering to the man, "Not bad, they look so innocent." I lowered my head in embarrassment.

"So, what should we do now....."

Asked Shinonome as she held my hand. I had no idea what our next step should be, but since this is a hotel, there should then be a check-in counter somewhere, shouldn't there? I took a look around us and realized there was something located next to the entrance which seemed kind of like what I was searching for. However, there was no one manning the place. The counter was roughly an elbow's length, and had an opening which sort of looked like a peeping hole.

We walked towards the counter. Next to the counter was an enormous board; pasted on it were the pictures of the rooms and their respective numbers. Some of the pictures were lit up by lights behind them, while others were not. Next to the pictures were buttons, which were lit up in the same condition as the photos beside them.

"Please press the button of the room you are interested in."

A voice boomed suddenly from the back of the counter — it seemed like there was someone on the other side of the wall. That was when I understood; at places like this, things can be done without any face-to-face interaction.

"..... W-What now?"

This time round, it was my turn to throw the same question at Shinonome.

The unlit rooms probably indicate that they were 'in use'. For the ones which were still lit up, the interiors looked more or less the same — or so it seems from the photos anyway. The price were not too different as well.

"..... Minami-kun, you choose."

Shinonome replied softly, so I pressed a button closest to the edge with hesitation. The light on the board went off, and a piece of paper was dropped to the opening below. I picked it up; the room number was printed on it.

"Please head straight to your room."

Came the voice from the counter yet again. How on earth did he see us — I thought to myself. Perhaps there are cameras installed somewhere? In any case, it wouldn't do for us to stand around and do nothing.

"L-Let's go....."

With my initial resistance outside of the hotel blown out of the water, I pulled Shinonome by her hand and walked towards the elevator. Shinonome responded with a firm grip.

Once we were in the elevator, I pressed the button leading to level 3 (since our room number was 307). As the elevator ascended in silence, Shinonome heaved a loud sigh and said,

"I am so nervous....."

"Me too....."

I murmured and gave a wry laugh — I felt relieved all of the sudden. As the lift finally came to a stop, we resumed our way towards the room.

We were holding hands the whole time.

Led by the flashing lights, we stepped into the room which was located the deepest in. We first removed our shoes at what looked to be the entryway before taking a nervous look at the interiors of the room.

"It's so..... ordinary....."

I was expecting a more gaudy interior, but upon stepping into the actual room, I realized they chose to take on a more simplistic style.

"Yeah....."

Shinonome scanned the room and nodded.

I noticed I was still holding onto Shinonome's hand, so I let go of it gradually. My palm was wet, though I wasn't sure if it was due to Shinonome's perspiration or mine.

In the room was an LCD TV of unknown dimension, a two-person sofa which was facing the TV and a small glass table. At the corner

of the room was a large bed. When I saw the two pillows placed on the bed, I directed my gaze away from how real everything seemed to be.

I sat onto the sofa and looked towards Shinonome. She remained rooted on her spot, looking around her aimlessly with a hapless expression on her face.

"I-In any case..... why don't you take a seat?"

I suggested, patting the seat next to me. Shinonome walked towards me in silence and did as I said. That movement of hers and the way the air flowed in the room caused a faint scent to whiff up my nose. Ah, it was the scent of shampoo.

My arms were spread wide apart, resting on the back of the sofa — my left hand was so close to Shinonome, I could basically touch her with the slightest movement.

Should I just hold her by her shoulders at a place like this?

Just as I was about to move my hand, Shinonome reached for the remote which was placed on the table. She then pointed it towards the TV and pressed the switch.

What was showing on the ridiculously huge screen was a naked couple entwined together. From the way it was filmed, it was obvious we were not watching a scene from a soap opera, but full fledged porn. I had no idea why they chose to air the show out of the blue, but one thing's for sure: a rather risqué scene was

repeating again and again before our very eyes.

Shinonome was totally frozen in the pose of pointing the remote towards the TV.

I hurriedly snatched the remote away from Shinonome's hand and pressed the button frantically to turn the TV off.

"That got me..... the TV turned on and....."

I forced a smile as I spoke. However, Shinonome's eyes remain glued to the screen.

"Right, since we are here to gather some materials, shouldn't we check out what the bathroom is like? Yeah?"

I stood up from the sofa and walked towards the bathroom. Shinonome was still sitting on the sofa, but with the way things are right now, it'll be mental torture to have Shinonome next to me. This works just fine with me.

Pushing the glass door aside, the bathroom looked way smaller but more exquisite than I had imagined. Just as I was thinking that there was nothing out of the ordinary to be found in the bathroom, a strange-looking chair came to view when I lowered my eyes.

"Whoa....."

I exclaimed in reflex.

It was a..... really perverted chair. I possessed the relevant knowledge since I had seen it in manga and on the internet, but I had no idea it actually existed.

"..... Anything wrong?"

A sudden voice came from behind me. Turning my head back, Shinonome was walking towards the bathroom. I shut the glass door in haste.

"N-Nothing. It was just an ordinary bathroom. Really ordinary."

Shinonome tilted her head in suspicion, but she pursued the issue no further.

Just as I was about to invite Shinonome back to the sofa, Shinonome stopped walking and began looking around. There should be nothing weird around us, so what now? Shinonome asked,

"Can you hear something?"

"What?"

"A sound."

"..... A sound?"

My attention was focused to my ears, but I couldn't pick up any

strange sounds. The most I could hear was faint music coming from the cable TV located outside our room.

"Is there a window somewhere?"

As she said that, Shinonome stepped forward. I followed suit.

The window next to the bed was hidden by blinds which looked strikingly similar to the walls.

Upon opening the blinds, I understood what Shinonome meant by 'sound'. Just to make sure, Shinonome unlatched the window and opened it slowly.

It was raining.

It was close to precipitating just a moment ago, but now it was raining way heavier than expected. Since it's currently in the evening, the rain may stop soon enough. However, when I popped my head out of the window to look at the sky, I could see the thundering clouds enveloping above us. It looks like the rain won't be stopping anytime soon.

Both of us didn't bring any umbrella along; moreover, the station is of a considerable distance away from the hotel. We would end up soaking wet should we leave the hotel right now.

Shinonome shut the windows and pulled down the blinds.

She then turned around to look at me, who was getting all

disappointed due to the rain. With a tilt of her head, she said,

"It looks like we have no choice but to stay here..... till the rain stops."

That caused me to draw a deep breath.

The rain won't be stopping in just five to ten minutes time. An hour if we're lucky, but it may be much longer if we're not. It looks like we don't have much of an option.

In other words, Shinonome and I will have to spend our time together in this room.

Alone.

Shinonome walked to my side and sat gently onto the bed. The springs of the bed creaked from her movement. When she heard that, Shinonome began bouncing herself on the bed.

"..... This bed is really old."

An innocent smile appeared on her face as she said that. The rare childish expression and behavior from Shinonome made her look incredibly cute.

I stood next to the window and swallowed a few gulps while Shinonome continued bouncing on the bed with a laugh. I finally decided to make my move and stood before Shinonome. At the moment Shinonome realized my presence and looked at me—

"Ah....."

I pressed Shinonome down, sprawling on the bed as though I were a blanket. The springs of the bed creaked once more.

"M-Minami..... kun.....?"

There was fear in Shinonome's whimper. I couldn't bring myself to look at her. My hands were pressing down on hers, my breathing ragged.

Shinonome attempted to escape from my grasp, but I strengthened my grip to stop her from doing so. My ears were filled with the repeated gulps of my throat, my heart was racing in an incredible speed. The deep thumps continued to reverberate in my body. "Shi..... Shinonome!"

My tongue was tied when I called out her name. I had no idea what I should be doing right now.

Shinonome said nothing, only to heave painfully twice. From my hands, I could feel Shinonome's pulse increasing — was it due to fear or nervousness? I couldn't tell.

My mind was filled with many thoughts, all sticky and gooey like lumps of paint swirling together. Can I? I can, right? I mean, we came all the way here. We are 'going out', and isn't this all for the sake of Shinonome's novel? I don't think Shinonome will reject me. She would probably take it all in silence even if she doesn't like me.

Bouts of question and answer sessions were playing in my mind. I ended up moving closer and closer to Shinonome's face. What should I do? What are the things which I have to do? I don't have the slightest clue; the only thing I felt was my desire to kiss Shinonome.



A surprised expression appeared on Shinonome's face when she realized my intent. She bit her lips gently. As I closed in, she shut her eyes as though she were about to get splashed by an incoming bucket of water.

So can I or can't I?

I pondered to myself as I remained in a position where my face was only a few millimeters above her lips.

Can I? Really? Why? Because she likes me?

We are doing this for our 'material gathering' — that's what Shinonome would probably say. She cares nothing about what I think; even if it's something she hates, will she take it just for the sake of 'experience' and her novel?

I stared at Shinonome. Her body was totally stiff and petrified. With her eyes closed shut, she looked just like a child who was about to cry.

I moved my head slowly, pulled my neck to the side and plonked my face past Shinonome's cheeks onto the bed.

Just reject me if you don't like it.

I heaved a sigh while thinking that.

"Minami-kun....."

Shinonome called out to me next to my ear with a hoarse voice.

I didn't answer her. Instead, I was rattling on and on in my mind as if I was mumbling a curse.

If you hate it that much; if you're so afraid that you have to bite your lips, if it hurts you to be doing such things with me, you can simply tell me as it is. How will I possibly know what you're thinking if you choose to remain silent? There's no way I can remain in a zen-state when we're all alone in this room.

With that, I slowly moved my body away from Shinonome.

Shinonome sat up and looked at me in surprise. I sat beside her and heaved a sigh.

"..... Sorry."

I'm fully aware that Shinonome had no such intentions in mind. The reason we came here wasn't because she 'wanted to do that', rather, it was simply out of curiosity. The reason she chose me to play pretend couple was simply out of coincidence because I stumbled upon her true identity as an author. These were the conclusions I reached no matter how I look at it.

"I went..... overboard with my actions."

I added on with an awkward laughter.

The reason I went out with Shinonome wasn't to harm her, but to

help her out with her 'material gathering'. I cannot ruin Shinonome just because of my feelings and desires.

The only option was to defuse the awkward atmosphere and the various feelings in a joking manner.

"Sorry..... I won't do it again."

I apologized once again. I was unable to look straight at Shinonome, but it felt like she was shaking her head. The only thing I could do was to lower my head in silence, aghast at myself for not being able to exercise self-control.

Shinonome said nothing, so I could only feel her gaze. It felt like her gaze was reproaching me. I was afraid of confirming that fact, afraid of seeing Shinonome's expressions which were on the other end of her gaze. I lowered my head to avoid her.

"Let's..... stop."

That was what Shinonome finally said.

"Thanks to Minami-kun, I went to lots of places..... so you don't have to force yourself any further. I'm sorry."

"I wasn't..... forcing myself."

"But....."

Shinonome was unable to continue her words. Perhaps she was

thinking of how to phrase her sentence in a way which won't hurt me.

"Sigh, whatever. With the material on hand, you should be able to come up with a novel, right? I had fun as well, so let's end everything with this, okay?"

I brought up the suggestion faster than Shinonome did. I didn't want her to say anything that could hurt me, so the least I could do was to end the relationship myself.

Silence fell between us once more, but I said not a word more.

Finally, Shinonome murmured,

"Mmm..... I understand. Thank you very much for all this time."

We then waited for the rain to stop without saying anything else. The rain ended surprisingly quick, as though it were urging us to head home immediately. That pissed me off.

The fee for the room was split between us. After depositing the cash into the billing machine located at the side of the entrance, it thanked us with a mechanical "Thank you for your patronage."

That pissed me off even more.

It felt like it was thanking us for not doing anything and leaving the room in pristine condition.

After leaving the hotel, Shinonome and I walked towards the station together. We then parted and boarded our respective trains without speaking a word.

When I reached home, the sky was clear with the moon peeking out from behind a cloud — everything felt unreal.

"This is fine."

A scene which symbolizes a happy ending, leaving only me to wallow in pain.