

Idol Ni Naru No Wo Akirametara, Kouhai Datta Geneki Idol Ni Tsukamatta Hanashi

JP: アイドルになるのを諦めたら、後輩だった現役アイドルに捕まった話

EN: I Gave Up On My Idol Dreams, But My Kouhai Who Became An Idol Caught Me

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(T/N: If there's any mistake in spelling / grammar, feel free to point it out. Also if you enjoyed the series please give the author a follow and leave the ratings on their Kakuyomu. Long live Yuri!)

Synopsis

"It's Senpai's fault for trying to run away, you know?"

Nozomi Moroboshi is an 18-year-old girl aiming to become an idol. Despite pouring her heart and soul into practicing for her final audition, she unfortunately fails.

Approaching the despondent Nozomi is Lulu Itokawa, her former kouhai from their performing arts school. Faced with her kouhai—who is now flourishing as the top idol, Lua Ryuguji—the broken-hearted Nozomi tries to sever their relationship, but...

The messy life together of a pure protagonist who can't be honest and a kouhai with "heavy love" begins now!

1. Episode 1: Last Chance

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight—

"Alright, stretch those arms! Be conscious all the way to your fingertips, and keep your turns sharp!"

Following the instructor's directions, I move my body with the sensation of controlling every limb down to the tips to match the count.

It's a sequence I've repeated countless times, yet I don't let my guard down, dancing through to the very end. I don't have time left. To seize this final chance, I'll do everything I can. That's all there is to it.



"Thank you very much!"

"Right, good work. Get home safely."

The lesson ends, and everyone tosses out their thanks before scurrying off. But I can't leave yet. I have to do some independent practice to ensure I face the big day in the best possible condition.

"Are you continuing today too, Moroboshi-san?"

"Yes."

"Alright, make sure to lock up then."

"I will. Thank you for your hard work."

Once the instructor leaves and I'm alone in the studio, I continue dancing in silence. Checking my reflection in the mirror, I polish every single movement. Not yet, I can do more. Encouraging myself in my heart, I continued to dance alone today.



After tidying up and cleaning, I leave the studio. I make sure to lock up and step outside, only to find the surroundings completely dark. In the dead of winter, my exhaled breath turns into a cloudy white mist.

"I need to get home soon."

The moment I muttered that to myself, I felt a tap-tap on my shoulder from behind. Normally, I might have been paralyzed with fear, but unfortunately, I knew exactly who would do this.

I only knew one person who would play such a trick. Only her—the one who loves mischief.

"Se-n-pa-i!"

"Lulu."

(I knew it.)

The one who spoke to me was a lovely girl who charms everyone who sees her. She's my kouhai from the performing arts school and the "Super Idol" of the moment.

She's wearing a hood and glasses to avoid being recognized, but up close, her cuteness is impossible to hide.

"Sigh, I tell you this every time, but what would you do if something happened to you out this late?"

"But Senpai is out walking too."

"You need to be more aware of your status as an idol."

"Ehhh—"

"Seriously, you really need to be careful."

"Okaaaay."

(Though as I say that, am I not just as guilty for looking forward to this?)

Walking home alone on a dark, cold night really gets to your heart. The bright lights of the buildings I occasionally see make my heart feel even colder. On days Lulu doesn't come, I find myself disappointed—to that extent, I had started waiting for her.

"Weren't you busy today?"

"I only filmed one program, so I wouldn't say it was that bad."

"Haha, I'd love to be able to say a line like that."

"You'll be able to say it soon, Senpai. When was your next audition again?"

"This coming Sunday. That's the final audition."

I'm already 18. If you're aiming to be an idol, it's about the age where you're reaching the limit. If I can't get results at this audition, I'll have to give up on my dream. The dream of being an idol that I've admired since I was a child—I want to make that dream come true.

"Honestly, Senpai should have become an idol already."

"How long are you going to keep saying that?"

"Because..."

"No 'buts' or 'because.' That's a story from the past."

"Ah—wait for me!"

I walk ahead, leaving behind the grumbling girl. There's no point in rehashing what's over. If we're going to talk, I'd rather talk about the future. A future where I'm standing side-by-side with you on the same program—that's the kind of talk I want.

I thought I was moving forward with high spirits, but it seemed Lulu, who has known me for a long time, saw right through me. Wondering if something happened when she didn't catch up, I turned around to find her asking with a serious face.

"Senpai, are you anxious?"

"..."

This cute yet irritating kouhai has a strange intuition. She probably realized that I was trembling from something other than the cold. Perhaps her inability to ignore things once she notices them is the reason everyone loves her.

(I guess there's no point in pretending.)

"Well, yeah. It's my last chance."

I've done everything I could; I can say that with confidence. But I'm aiming for a world where that alone isn't enough. Of course I'm scared. Everything I've done up until now might go to waste—it really is the final chance.

"Then, shall I cast a spell on you?"

"Hmm, sure. I think I'll ask for one."

This was a game we've played since long ago. Lulu pulled a 5-yen coin on a string from her pocket and began to swing it slowly. It was a mock hypnosis, a "good luck spell" game Lulu started after being influenced by something she saw on TV. Even so, I was so backed into a corner that I wanted to cling to even something silly like that.

"Alright, here we go. Senpai will absolutely not be nervous during the real thing. You will be able to pour out everything you've done and give your best performance."

"...Yeah."

When Lulu says it like this, strangely enough, I naturally start to believe it myself. It would be an exaggeration to say the anxiety vanished, but I felt like I could at least give it my all.

"There, now you'll be fine."

"Thanks. I feel a bit better."

"Hehe, you're very welcome."

I'm sure the hypnosis isn't actually working, but what matters is my state of mind. I don't want to waste the feelings of Lulu, who played along with such a silly thing.

(I will definitely pass.)

Doing this, we found ourselves at the station before I knew it. Lulu said she was taking a taxi home from here for safety reasons, so she had completely timed her departure to match my walk home. I should wrap this up quickly so Lulu can get home.

"Well, I guess I'll head out here."

"Ah, Senpai. Can I say one last thing?"

"What is it?"

"I might be a bit busy from now on and might not be able to come here."

"Oh, was it for a movie shoot?"

"Yes, the filming is running behind, so it looks like I'll be quite busy. I just wanted to let you know."

"...I see. I'll do my best so I can give you good news."

"Yes, I'm looking forward to it! Well then, see ya!"

I wonder if I managed to keep smiling until the end as she ran off with a grin. Once Lulu was completely out of sight, I covered my face with both hands. Perhaps because I had expected it, the tears didn't fall.

(She's so far away.)

I hate myself for thinking like this about her when she purely admires me. I want to be a "good Senpai" to her forever, but I hate the self that can't be that way.

(But if that's the case, I just have to get closer.)

If I'm despairing at the distance of the stars I can see, I just have to go grab them myself. I will go grab that star. I renewed my resolve once again.

2. Episode 2: Shattered Dream

Today is the day of the final audition. There are 15 people left. Due to the age limit, my rivals are all younger girls—some full of confidence, some trembling with anxiety. Only 7 will be chosen from here to form a new idol group.

(Ah, that person is...!)

Among the judges in front of me, there was a face I recognized. A shrewd producer who has created many hit groups. If I catch his eye, I should definitely be able to pass. This is my last chance; I will definitely seize it.

"Next is Nozomi Moroboshi-san. Please give your performance."

"Yes!"

(I'm not nervous.)

All that's left is to give it my all.



"Thank you very much!"

I give a deep, deep bow and leave the room with the other candidates. This screening is quite speedy; the results are coming out today, and the future schedule will be decided. It seems the judges will discuss and decide in that room where we performed.

(To be honest, I felt like I nailed it.)

I was able to see the performances of the other girls, and I think I did quite well compared to them. The judges' reactions were good, too. So, surely...

How long had I been waiting? The door to the room slowly opened, and a woman stepped out. The woman, who looked serious and wore glasses, glanced at us waiting outside and began to speak.

"The screening is over. Those whose names are called, please enter the room."

Then, the woman who seemed like a manager began to call out names matter-of-factly. The girls whose names were called let out cries of joy and entered the room with glowing faces. My name hasn't been called yet.

(It's okay, it should be okay.)

I shut my eyes tight and wait for that moment. Clasp my hands together, I could only pray.

"That is all. For those remaining here, it is unfortunate, but you have failed this time. Please exit through that door."

The names of the seven were finished, and only the failing girls were left behind. Everyone looked dejected as they trudged away from the spot. Some even started crying, and a gloomy atmosphere blanketed the area. And...

(My name... wasn't called.)

Reality hadn't caught up with me yet. The sound disappeared from the world; I didn't even know if I was standing or sitting. I couldn't fully process the sudden end of my dream.

Leaving me unable to move from the shock, time flowed on. I don't know how many minutes passed, but suddenly the door in front of me clicked open, and my world came to an instantaneous end. It was that producer who stepped out.

"U-Um, excuse me!"

"Ah—you, from earlier."

My body moved instinctively. I know I shouldn't really do this. But I couldn't help but ask. Even to an observer, a girl who was worse at dancing than me had passed, so I desperately wanted to know the reason.

"Yes, I'm Moroboshi. Um, may I ask the reason why I failed?"

"The reason, huh. You were good at dancing. And your singing, yeah, well, it wasn't bad."

"Then, then—!"

"But, you know, your image was just different from what I had in mind."

"Eh?"

"You're quite tall and slender, right? But your singing voice is the 'cute' type, so the image is a bit off... hmm, it just wasn't it."

(Image?)

"Also, these days, narrative is important for an idol. Do you understand? It's fine if your dance and song are bad at first. By continuing together with the fans, that idol grows. We have the fans create a narrative that they raised that girl."

"..."

"Well, we didn't have luck this time, but honestly, your singing and dancing were, yeah, good. I think there are plenty of other groups that would take you, so don't be too discouraged. See ya."

The producer said that, patted my shoulder, and left. Having been patted on the shoulder, I could only stand there again.

I know. I'm lucky to have been told the reason for failing so politely. But if that's the case, then what was I supposed to do? What should I have done to become an idol? Someone tell me. Hey, tell me!

I don't remember how I got home that day.



"Are you sure? With Moroboshi-san's skills, I think you'd have a chance even if you moved to a general agency. Not as an idol, but as a singer or an artist."

"I'm sorry. It's a promise to my mother."

Chasing the dream was until age 18, until high school graduation. If I didn't make it by then, I'd give up cleanly. That was the promise between my mother and me. Although, I was the one who suggested it.

My mother raised me all by herself. I had been attending the training school by being selfish; I can't cause her any more hardship.

(Besides, if I didn't do this, I'd probably just keep dragging it out forever.)

I'm sure this was for the best. Rather than chasing a dream that will never come true, I should live with my feet on the ground. After a night had passed, I was finally able to think that way.

"I see. But if you change your mind, come back anytime. I'm truly grateful to you. So, I look forward to seeing you again."

"Yes. Thank you for everything."

Giving a final bow, I left the studio I had attended for over ten years. It was the first time I had left while it was still this bright out. And I would likely never come here again. I wonder if this dull pain in my chest will someday become nourishment that comforts me.

(Contacting Lulu... I guess I won't.)

A day has passed since then, but I still haven't even told Lulu that I failed. I don't know how to tell Lulu, who had such high expectations. Lulu was also busy, or perhaps she was being considerate and didn't force the issue, so I had been indulging in that.

(But maybe I don't need to tell her.)

She said she was busy with a movie shoot right now. For all her playfulness, she's a kind girl. It would be bad to make her worry. She'll probably hear the result from the instructor later. That's fine; it's fine if she just forgets about someone like me.

(Because I'll never see Lulu again.)

I'm just an ordinary person, and she's a top idol of the moment; we live in different worlds. We just happened to be at the same training school; originally, we weren't even supposed to cross paths. So this is just returning to the original state. It's nothing to be sad about.

(I should just think that I had a good dream.)

A vivid dream that didn't fade for over ten years. Since she will show me the continuation of the dream on the screen, it's about time I woke up.

3. Episode 3: Graduation

"Today is finally graduation day, huh."

The school I was used to attending showed a different face just for today. Flower decorations were placed everywhere, and the expressions of the students passing by seemed somewhat restless. The standing sign sitting grandly there forced me to be conscious of the fact that today was a special day.

(I don't remember anything about this past month.)

The days since I quit the training school went by in a flash. I had continued running and training for no real reason, but that was about all I had done. Since my life had always been a back-and-forth between high school and the school, I didn't know what to do with myself now.

(I wonder what everyone else is doing.)

I didn't know what counted as "youth," even though I was supposed to be a participant in it. I never hung out with friends after school. If I had time for that, I went to practice. I never ate lunch with anyone. My spare time was used for research. I was desperate to grab my dream no matter what.

When you exclude others like that, inevitably, people stop approaching you. Now, having lost even my dream, nothing was left for me. Before I could learn what youth was like, I had already sacrificed it to my dream.

(Ah, so that person was the student council president.)

Watching a male student I didn't know climb onto the stage, I felt a dry impression. As the graduation ceremony proceeded solemnly, while other classmates were crying or cheering, I couldn't feel anything. I didn't have the right to feel anything.

(What was my life even about?)

My mother said I should go, so I just chose a school that was easy to commute to from the house and the training school. In truth, I wanted to practice even while I was at school. Maybe that was what went wrong.

Eventually, news that I was aiming to be an idol leaked from somewhere, and I became increasingly isolated. I wasn't bullied, but people stopped talking to me. They probably thought it was foolish for a high schooler to be doing that; in fact, they were right.

That said, I wasn't that close with my fellow students at the training school either. That training school was apparently a course started as a hobby by the CEO, and in exchange for being cheaper than others, there wasn't particularly much passion.

Perhaps affected by that atmosphere, most of the girls weren't seriously aiming to be idols; they were just intoxicated by the idea of themselves "aiming to be an idol." So, I tried my hardest because I didn't want to be like that—or so I thought.

(But in the end, I was the same, wasn't I?)

Spending my youth on a dream that wouldn't come true. Being intoxicated by the "me" who was working hard. Thinking somewhere in my heart that "I'm different from you guys"—that's why I'm so alone right now.

Not a single tear fell at the closing words of the valedictory speech.



The graduation ceremony ended without incident, and my high school life finally came to a close. While other classmates were making their own memories, I slipped away from the spot secretly. It was lucky that my mother went home early for today's preparations.

(What should I do now?)

While walking home alone on the school route I'd never walk again, I was thinking. First, I'll look for a part-time job. I have plenty of physical strength, and I should have some tolerance for unreasonable things. If I find a good place and work hard, I might eventually become a full-time employee.

(Once I have some leeway in my life, then...)

Right, maybe I could try falling in love. Until now, I thought love was a waste of time, and I thought it was stupid to get a boyfriend while trying to become an idol, but now it doesn't really matter. They say the world looks different when you're in love, so isn't that quite a good idea?

Dating someone, getting married, having children—building that kind of ordinary happiness. It's what everyone does normally; there's no way I can't do it. The more I think about it, the better the plan seems.

If there's one problem, it's that I've never liked anyone. Whether it was the popular handsome guy at school or the heartthrob actor the world fusses over, I could understand that they were "cool," but it never connected to the emotion of "love." So, if anything, that's my only worry.

(Why is her face popping up at a time like this?)

She's got nothing to do with this anymore; didn't I decide to forget? ...It doesn't have to be someone I already like; you often hear about falling in love while dating, and besides, I'm sure I'll find plenty of people I can come to like from now on. So there's nothing to worry about.

Saying "I used to aim to be an idol" makes for a good story, doesn't it? If I sing well at karaoke, I might be quite popular. If that happens, marriage will surely follow quickly.

(What do you know, this seems like it could actually be fun.)

Someone once said that failing to achieve a dream doesn't make you unhappy. I hadn't thought about what to do if I didn't become an idol, but that kind of life might not be so bad. That's right, my life is wide open!

"Senpai!"

Was it punishment for thinking about such a happy future? Her voice—the one I didn't want to hear most right now—pierced straight through my body without any restraint.

4. Episode 4: Monologue

The person who stood there was the one who shouldn't have been there. A person who radiates a light that can't be extinguished, no matter how much she hides it. No matter where she is or what she's doing, she steals the eyes of everyone around her—she was there, like a vivid shooting star.

It would have been better to watch her from a distance. If I had, only the beauty of the trailing tail would have remained.

(But I got too close.)

I didn't know she was a shooting star. But if you get too close, you'll collide. That's only natural. A mere nobody who isn't a star or anything else has no choice but to wait to be shattered.

"Senpai!"

The brilliant meteor had now become a meteorite, hurtling toward me.



"Why haven't you been replying to my messages?"

Lulu asked me that, looking more uneasy than angry. I hadn't contacted Lulu once since then. Even when she reached out because she lost her patience, I ignored her without replying. Because I thought that if I did that, she would forget me—that she *could* forget me.

"Did I ever tell you which high school I attend?"

"Don't dodge the question! Why didn't you contact me!"

"...Because I thought you were busy. I didn't want to be a bother to you."

(I want to believe that wasn't a lie.)

"I see. But Lulu would have preferred it if you contacted me."

"Then, I'll do that from next time."

Even though there wouldn't be a next time, this mouth could say those words so fluently. Quickly, I want her to leave this place quickly. I want her to disappear from before my eyes; with that single-minded thought, I spun my words.

"I heard you quit the school, Senpai."

"Yeah."

"What do you plan to do now?"

"What do you mean? I'm going to work."

"Wor—then what about being an idol?"

"I have no choice but to give up, obviously. I've done this much and didn't get anywhere."

"Eh?"

(To think she's even cute when she looks dumbfounded...)

If that's a requirement for being an idol, it's impossible for me. So this is fine. This is fine, so please don't involve yourself with me any further. You don't need to remember me anymore, so don't come near me anymore.

"Th-Then, Senpai, why don't you come to my house?"

"Huh?"

"You see, Lulu is away from home a lot, so I was thinking it would be nice to have someone do the housework. But it has to be someone I can trust, right? So, if it's okay with you, Senpai, how about it? Of course, I'll pay you well."

Lulu means no harm. That's why she can casually propose something like this, and in fact, if it actually happened, she'd surely be delighted. Because Lulu thinks this relationship will continue forever.

(Even though it has actually already ended.)

"Listen, Lulu. We shouldn't see each other anymore."

"Huh?"

"I've already quit the school. Which means I'm just an ordinary person. Even so, it's weird for you, an idol, to keep coming to see me forever."

"That doesn't matter—"

"Lulu, you need to be more aware that you're a top idol. Even now, what would you do if you were attacked out here in such a defenseless outfit?"

Of course, this is nothing more than a sophistry. But Lulu won't be convinced otherwise. Taking advantage of her strong sense of responsibility, I push her away.

(Stop it, please.)

Please, please, Lulu. Please let me remain as your kind Senpai. Let me be tucked away in a beautiful memory. Lulu, I don't want to be hated by you.

"If you understand, go home already. You have many fans waiting for you."

"N-No. Lulu wants to be with Senpai more—"

"Don't say such unreasonable things."

"But..."

"Why can't you listen to me? I'm saying it's better if we don't meet anymore!"

"Wh-Why so suddenly? You weren't saying things like this before. Ah, was the talk from just now bad? If so, I'll apologize, so Senpai. Please, Senpai!"

"..."

Lulu grabbed my arm as if clinging to it. I'm sure she's captivated many people with those upturned eyes, like those of a small animal. But I was already at my limit.

"Senpai!"

"Just stop it already!"

"Sen...pai?"

(Once the dam broke, there was no way to fix it.)

"I said, just stop it... You're doing much better than someone like me. Just because I entered the school a few months earlier doesn't give me the right to be called 'Senpai' by you."

"That's not true."

"You're looking down on me like that, aren't you? Is it fun being with me? Does it satisfy you to see someone more miserable than yourself? Do you think, '*I shouldn't end up like this*' or '*I'm glad I didn't turn out like her*'?"

"No, I didn't mean—"

"Yeah, I know, I know! I know better than anyone that you aren't that kind of person. That's why it's painful to be with you! I hate my ugly self for wondering 'why' when I'm working hard too!"

"..."

(Ah, I said it. Everything, all of it.)

However, I also felt a tiny bit refreshed. Thinking that this was the end of everything, for just this moment, I could feel clear-headed. I was happy that I could finally tell Lulu the truth.

(I'm sure it'll be a good lesson for Lulu, too.)

Ugly people like this will approach her even more from now on; it'll be good if she can learn to see through them before that happens. So that Lulu won't face even scarier things in the future, I will properly become the villain.

(I wonder if the arm I shook off hurt.)

I hope it doesn't affect her next job. I'm worried about her mental state, too. She must have been shocked to some extent. This girl used to be a crybaby long ago. I wonder if there's a reliable adult by her side.

(I want to be allowed to worry at least that much, because I am this girl's Senpai.)

"See? Now you understand, right? This is my true nature, the real me. I'm not the 'good Senpai' you think I am. If you understand that, go home already. And don't ever come again. Goodbye Lulu—no, Ryuguji-san."

(I wanted to be a good Senpai until the end.)

I wanted to remain the kind of reliable Senpai that Lulu could someday say, "*I am who I am today thanks to that Senpai,*" about.

But if I can't do that, at least I'll leave something for her. Because I think that is surely the final role given to me, who is a nobody.

"Senpai, wait!"

Shaking off her attempt to follow, I move forward. If I get to a place with lots of foot traffic, she won't be able to follow, so I'll go that far. I can be sad after that.

"Please wait, Senpai! Look at me!"

(Guh, she's unexpectedly strong.)

Even though I want to run away quickly, I can't shake off the arm she's grabbed, and my feet stop. Why? After all that I said, why do you still bother with someone like me?

(It can't be helped; I have no choice but to turn around once.)

"I said there's nothing left to talk about—"

"Please space out, Senpai."

"Huh?"

(Hypnosis?)

Just as I thought there was no way that would work, I was suddenly hit by a sense of exhaustion. Every time the 5-yen coin she had pulled out swung, my thoughts were stolen away, one by one.

(Wait, at this rate...)

I couldn't maintain my center of gravity, and even as I slumped against Lulu, I couldn't move.

"It's Senpai's fault, you know? Because you said you wouldn't see Lulu anymore. I won't forgive that now."

Inside my fading vision and thinning consciousness, only Lulu's voice echoed clearly in my head.

5. Episode 5: Hazy

(T/N: This chapter contains SA)

I was dreaming. Or rather, I was remembering a memory. A memory from a long time ago. Back when I had just started singing and dancing and wasn't very good, but I could clearly see my progress and was becoming more and more absorbed in practice.

A kouhai entered the training school. She was timid and introverted, but cuter than anyone else—that was the kind of girl she was. I wanted to talk to her, but I decided against it.

Because I thought nothing good would come from being involved with me. At that time, I was already drifting apart at the school, and it was my custom to practice alone in silence.

The turning point was when I accidentally witnessed her being surrounded by other students. I don't remember the details, but I remember she was being showered with verbal abuse.

They probably didn't like her because she was cute and working so hard. They were people who were only good at attacking in groups.

—*"What are you doing!"*

When I let out a shout, the students scattered and ran away looking awkward. Since then, I had a strong will and didn't yield to their harassment, so she must have been a convenient new target.

—*"Are you okay?"*

—*"..."*

I didn't know much about her, but I often saw her working hard. I was sure she was seriously aiming to be an idol. That was also something the others disliked, but it wasn't like that for me.

—*"Don't pay any mind to people like them. Let's practice instead. You're actually doing quite well."*

I piled on words because I wanted to reassure her. I might have been excited about the possibility of finally having a companion. Because being alone is scary after all.

She and I gradually started talking more and more. Since I had started earlier and was a year older, I was mostly the one teaching, but she had good sense, so there were many things I could learn from her too.

When I found out she was making her idol debut, I was as happy as if it were my own. At that time, due to circumstances, I couldn't be nearby, but I was happy that her effort and cuteness were finally recognized.

We're a bit far apart now, but I'm always cheering for her. Because she is my precious kouhai.



(Wait, what am I doing right now?)

It's as if a mist is over my head; my thoughts won't settle. I couldn't remember at all what I had been doing until now or how I was doing. Intermittently, I heard the sound of water strangely lingering in my ears and a woman's voice that sounded somewhat like a scream. Feeling somewhat breathless, I finally realized that it was my own voice.

"Nngh, ah, augh."

"Oh? Did you come back to your senses, Senpai?"

Upon being told that, I realized for the first time Lulu's presence in front of me. I was naked, I tried to cover myself instinctively and move my hands, but I couldn't, only hearing a nasty metallic clank. The moment my consciousness rose, a strange sensation came again, obstructing clear thought.

(Ha, what on earth... is happening...)

"Ah, please don't struggle. It might leave a mark."

"Nnya, wha, what... are you... doing..."

Looking down, not only me, but Lulu was also naked, and my arms and legs seemed to be tied to something. She was on top of me, and it seemed she was doing something down below. Every time Lulu's hand touched me, I was hit by a sensation I didn't understand, and I couldn't stop my body from jumping.

(Wh-Why is this happening...)

"Aha, I don't know what you're saying, Senpai. You have to say it clearly. Ah, it's fine if you just 'come' instead, though."

(What... do you mean?)

Before I could ask back, Lulu heated up. Her finger movements grew faster, and though I wanted her to stop, my hips rose on their own, and I couldn't escape. I was scared as I felt something rising up more and more.

"Lulu, Luluu."

"It's okay, Senpai. Don't worry and just come."

The moment I heard Lulu's voice, something snapped inside my head.

"Nngghh—!"

"Hehe, your legs stretched out straight again; you're really cute, Senpai."

Saying that, Lulu finally stopped touching me. Even so, I still felt fluffy and restless. That extraordinary sensation that turned the inside of my head white and scorched it. It was gradually returning, but I still felt like a sense of wrongness remained somewhere.

"Haa, haa, stop... what is... this..."

"Eeeh, you're going to make Lulu say it? You're so naughty, Senpai."

I don't know why it turned out like this, why Lulu is doing this—I don't know a single thing. Unstructured thoughts, unrefined breathing, a body carrying heat. Even so, as I gradually understood the situation, my heart was filled with a single emotion.

"Ah-ah, did you cry? A crying Senpai is cute too, but it's Senpai's fault, you know?"

Lulu said this after wiping away my tears as if scooping them up, while wearing a gentle smile.

"It's because Senpai said you'd never see Lulu again that I had to do this, you know? Lulu wanted to nurture our love more carefully and politely with Senpai."

More and more, strength was poured into Lulu's voice. The anger at the bottom hit me directly. Even so, not even half of those words entered me; only pure regret dominated me.

"Sob... hic... my... Lulu has... been defiled."

"Hmm?"

"Because I... didn't pro-protect you. Because I wasn't with you."

(Even though I knew things like this happened.)

Even though I knew that in the entertainment world Lulu went into, there is not only light but darkness. Lulu is a kind girl, so she'd be preyed upon—that's why I had to protect her, and yet—

"Because I let you go alone, that's why Lulu was... aaaaaah!"

"..."

(I didn't make it in time.)

Lulu has been tainted. Because I was treading water in a place like this. That's why something like this, something like this—

"Even at a time like this, Senpai is... Um, please rest assured, Senpai. It's okay."

"Nngh?"

"I haven't let anyone touch Lulu's body. It's still pure."

"Really?"

"Yes, it's still clean so I can offer it to Senpai. That's why I'm turning down gravure shoots and things like that."

Lulu's face, blurred by tears, didn't look like she was lying.

(Thank goodness. I see, she was okay.)

Come to think of it, Lulu was a "pure" type idol, wasn't she? So I'm sure the agency or someone protected that for her. Then that's good, truly go—

(Wait, then right now...)

"So, please feel at ease and feel good, Senpai. Lulu will watch over you."

"Ah, nnggh!"

My consciousness was stolen away again by the movements that suddenly resumed. When Lulu moved, my voice leaked out on its own, and my body jumped. Even if I tried to escape, I couldn't because my hands and feet were tied; after that, I continued to dance just as Lulu wished.

6. Episode 6: The Morning After

(My body hurts all over.)

Muscle pain like I haven't felt in a long time is happening in various places. Did I do some unfamiliar movement? I can't really remember what happened yesterday. Why am I here, and where even is "here"?

While I was questioning those things, the door at the back suddenly opened, and someone walked in.

"Ah, Senpai, you're awake."

The moment I saw Lulu's face, the memories of yesterday were triggered like a flashback. That's right, yesterday I... by Lulu... No wonder I thought it was an unfamiliar room. In the first place, I had never been here.

"D-Don't come near me!"

"Eh?"

(Why does she look surprised?)

Lulu is the one who did something that deserves rejection, and yet when she takes that reaction, it makes me feel like I'm the one who did something wrong. But I have to say it properly, it won't be good for Lulu either.

"Do you understand what you did?"

"Senpai..."

"Listen, even between women, that's a crime. Do you understand?"

I'm even hesitant to remember that time. Now my hands and feet are released and I'm a free person, but I feel like the places where the locks were are stinging slightly. It was good that I wasn't naked by the time I woke up, but I don't want to think about how I was made to wear these clothes.

(It's pointless to scold her blindly, huh.)

First is the motive. I must know the reason why Lulu committed such a barbaric act.

"Why did you do this?"

"...Because Senpai said you wouldn't see Lulu anymore."

(Hah? For that reason?)

Because she got anxious? I don't get it at all. If everyone did this every time they felt anxious, the world would be at its end. But she doesn't seem to be lying; it's probably her true feeling.

(Wait, so that's what it is.)

It's not uncommon for children who became famous at a young age to take perverse actions. Especially a distorted world like the entertainment industry; it wouldn't be strange for anything to happen. Lulu must have just been stained by those strange customs.

(No, even so, that doesn't become a reason to do this at all!)

"Sigh... So, was this time the first?"

"The first?"

"I'm asking if I'm the first one you've done that kind of thing to. Have you done it to anyone else?"

"There's no way I'd do it to anyone but Senpai."

The phrasing is concerning, but if I believe what Lulu says, she's a first-time offender... No, even for a first-time offender, she did something pretty extreme, didn't she?

I don't know anything about the law, but this is probably at the level where you'd get real prison time in one shot.

(But to think Lulu would do such a thing.)

Even though I experienced it myself, there was a part of me that still couldn't fully believe it. The reason I can talk to Lulu calmly like this even after what she did is probably because I haven't fully processed it yet. The Lulu until now and the Lulu from that time are too different; they aren't matching up inside me.

(Well, so, I'll treat this time as a momentary lapse in judgment.)

"Sigh, well, fine. I'll turn a blind eye just this once. Never do this kind of thing again, and don't ever appear before me again."

"—Are you leaving?"

"Of course."

There are no windows or clocks in this room, so I don't know the exact time, but I feel like about a day has passed. I was supposed to go home right after the graduation ceremony, but I haven't returned at all.

It wouldn't be strange if my mother has reported me to the police by now. I need to contact her or something quickly.

As I tried to stand up, Lulu spoke as if to hold me back.

"Please wait."

"What is it? Is there still something else?"

"Senpai. What do you think that is?"

Lulu pointed to the back of the room. There sat a camera on a tripod, looking utterly inorganic. Based on the camera's angle, the place being filmed was this bed.

"Hah, you were filming? That's in bad taste."

"I didn't film it for that kind of purpose, though. Do you want to see?"

While saying that, Lulu operated something, and a video started playing from a laptop placed on a nearby desk. What was shown was me exposing myself in a pathetic state of lewdness, and Lulu on top of me.

"I get it, please stop it. —And? What of it? Are you going to threaten me with that?"

"Yes, that's exactly right. The moment Senpai leaves this room, I will release this video to the whole world."

"...Guh."

I bite my lower lip at Lulu's words. It's not the threat that's scary; it was sad that such words came from Lulu.

(Why couldn't I have looked after her more?)

It was incredibly sad that my precious kouhai had fallen into such villainy. If I had cared for her more by her side, maybe it wouldn't have come to this.

(But there's no way to change what has already happened.)

The only thing I can do is to stop Lulu from piling up more sins.

"Hah, you're an idiot. If you do that, you won't be safe either, you know? You're a world-famous idol, and I'm just an ordinary high sch—not even that, since I graduated. Anyway, the damage you'd take compared to a mere ordinary person like me is on a different scale."

Lulu's face was clearly visible in that video. If that leaked, Lulu's idol life would end. You shouldn't be so stupid that you don't understand that.

"Yes. If that video goes out, Lulu is finished due to massive contract penalties and damages. I think I'd never be able to see the light of day again."

"Then—"

"But, I will release it."

"Why?! If you understand that much, then just don't release it!"

"Because a life without Senpai has no meaning."

(Hah? What is with this girl?)

Does she have a destruction wish or something? Everything she's been saying makes no sense; what has really happened to you, Lulu?

"If you want to leave, go ahead, Senpai. Lulu won't stop you. Because once you leave the room, I'll just release this video."

"Fine. Do as you like. You probably want me to feel sympathy, but think about what you've done. No matter what you do, I'm leaving. So don't try any pointless tricks."

"Go ahead."

"I'm really leaving, okay?"

Lulu didn't try to stop me. She didn't try to stop me; she just looked at me straight. Only those eyes looked as clear as they did in the past.

(If she really releases it, then I don't care anymore.)

In the first place, I'm the victim. Why do I have to think about this perpetrator? Even though I said I'd act like this didn't happen, what more does she want?

Praying that Lulu hadn't become someone truly beyond help, I placed my hand on the doorknob.

7. Episode 7: Motives

[Lulu's POV]

(I really do love Senpai.)

I can feel my face breaking into a grin on its own. In the end, Senpai didn't turn the knob; she came back to me. Even though I had predicted it, the fact that I was able to reconfirm it made me so happy.

"I thought you would do that, Senpai."

"You're wrong. It's not like I care what happens to you, I just thought it would make life difficult for me if something like *that* leaked out. Don't get the wrong idea."

(Senpai is a terrible liar.)

Perhaps to hide her embarrassment, whenever Senpai does something kind, she always says something that sounds like an excuse. And yet, because of the guilt of telling a lie, she makes such an awkward, pained face.

(If you're going to make a face like that, you shouldn't lie in the first place.)

Though, I love that side of her that isn't honest with herself, too.

"So, what are we doing now? Just so you know, it's impossible for us to just never leave this room."

"I suppose you're right."

(Now then, what should we actually do?)

I had been under the impression that our feelings were mutual. The fact that she fell under hypnosis so easily was because Senpai trusted Lulu. Besides, at the very end, she was seeking Lulu out so passionately.

(Though she seems to have conveniently forgotten about that part.)

Well, it'll happen eventually anyway. I suppose I can enjoy this ambiguous relationship for a little while longer.

"Then, how about we live together?"

"Live together?"

"Yes."

Senpai is soft. In reality, it's strange for her to even take this kind of attitude with someone like Lulu. If she hates it, she needs to reject me more seriously. If she doesn't, other fools might start getting the wrong idea just like I did.

(That's why I can't take my eyes off her.)

If I don't keep her where I can see her, I'll be so worried I won't be able to stand it. From now on, Lulu will provide everything for Senpai, so Senpai can just stay here. No—she *should* stay here.

"Good grief, I guess it can't be helped."

Senpai shook her head as if to say *"give me a break."* See, that's the thing about her. Senpai hasn't changed at all. Not when Lulu was weak, not after Lulu became an idol, and not even after what happened yesterday. That is both Senpai's strength and her flaw.

(She probably thinks Lulu will get bored of this after a week.)

Senpai has always been oblivious to people's likes and dislikes. She has likely never truly loved someone from the bottom of her heart. In the end, she never understood the real reason why the other schoolmates hated her. That's why she probably thinks this whole thing is just a whim on Lulu's part.

(Well, for now, that's fine.)

Bit by bit, I'll just make her dependent on Lulu. I'll make it so she can't live without Lulu. Because Lulu already can't go on without Senpai, so Senpai must feel the same.

"But even if we live together, I hate this room. You have another room somewhere, right? And also, nothing like *that* ever again. If you do it again, I'm leaving for real next time."

"I understand."

"That's about it for now. So, do you have my smartphone?"

"...What are you going to do with it?"

"I'm just going to contact my mother; she's probably worried. I also have to go back home once. I need to bring a lot of things."

"Then, Lulu will go with you. From now on, please don't go out when you aren't with Lulu, okay?"

"What? You think I'm going to run away?"

(No, I'm just afraid of leaving you alone.)

Senpai is far too defenseless. If someone this cute walks around alone, she'll be attacked in an instant. That's why Lulu has to protect her properly.

"Sigh, fine, whatever. Let's just get going."

"Then please wait a moment. I have to open this."

"Huh? Is it locked?"

When I touched the panel below, a quiet *click* echoed after the "vroom" of the authentication sound. A door I had custom-ordered when I moved into this apartment—it only responds to Lulu's fingerprint and can be locked from either side.

(I didn't know if it would ever be necessary, but I'm glad I had it prepared.)

"If I couldn't get out anyway, then what happened earlier was pointless."

"..."

Insurance is necessary just in case. That question was merely to test Senpai. There's no way I'd let anyone else see my cute Senpai in such a disheveled state. To begin with, that was something meant for Lulu to enjoy alone later.

"What would you have done if I had tried to leave the room earlier?"

"In that case..."

(In that case, well, I'd have had no choice but to make it so you couldn't think of anything else, right?)

I can still vividly remember how Senpai looked yesterday. Her moist, soft limbs, that cute panting voice tickling my ears, those eyes staring at Lulu as if pleading. I felt sorry for her, so I eventually undid the locks, but even then, she gave herself to Lulu without running away.

(Since she says that was her first time, Senpai is truly a femme fatale.)

She has a talent for it, or something... I think if we had continued like that, she definitely would have become dependent on Lulu. However, that is truly a last resort. I want to avoid doing things against Senpai's will as much as possible. So, I'll save that until the time comes.

"Well, it doesn't matter, does it?"

"It does matter, I'm curious."

"There, the unlock is complete. Let's go, Senpai. I'll help carry your luggage."

"Hey. And also, delete that video. What if it leaks out by some fluke?"

"Ah, that room isn't connected to the internet, so as long as it stays in there, it'll be fine."

"...Well, I guess that's okay then."

(I was the one who said it, but... is it okay?!)

I knew it; I can't leave Senpai alone. At this rate, she'll be easily deceived and defiled by some bad adult. Lulu really does have to stay by her side and protect her.

Looking at my defenseless Senpai, who wasn't on guard at all despite what happened, I renewed my resolve once more.

8. Episode 8: The Beginning

"Hehe, this is the first time I've been to Senpai's house."

"We've never met outside of school, so of course it is."

"I have to greet my mother-in-law, too."

"The nuance of that was a bit weird just now."

(How did it even end up like this...?)

Looking at Lulu walking carefree beside me, I reflect on it alone. It's turned into something I don't quite understand. Why do I need to live with Lulu... *Sigh*, when I think about what's going to happen after this, my heart feels even heavier.

Still, Lulu didn't slow her walking pace, so since our hands were linked, I had no choice but to go along with her.



(We've finally arrived.)

There's no escaping now.

"This is my house. I'm going to go talk to my mother, so wait here for a bit."

"Okaay~"

(Ugh, I'm not looking forward to this.)

When I contacted her earlier, my mom gave me a harsh scolding. If I could have contacted her, I would have. I've never stayed out all night before. I wonder how long it's been since my mom was that angry with me.

This is all Lulu's fault. Seriously, I need to get mad at her properly later.

(Phew... once I've gathered my resolve, I'll open it.)

Alright... no, not yet. I'll wait just a little longer. Yeah, it's fine... actually, I'll wait a bit more. Yes, just a tiny bit more.

(Ah, crap, it opened.)

"Nozomi!"

"Mom, um, oof."

I was prepared to be scolded. That's why I was on guard, but I couldn't deal with this. Because I never imagined she would hug me.

(She's warm.)

The two hands wrapped around my back were soft, yet had a certain strength. My mom, whom I always thought was so much bigger than me... but at some point, I had grown taller than her, and so I was the one who had to protect her, but even so, my mom was still my mom.

"I was so worried..."

"I'm sorry for not contacting you."

"From now on, make sure you contact me properly."

"Yeah, I will."

My mother's body was trembling as she held me. So, to let her know that I was here, I continued to hold her tightly.

"Are you okay now?"

"Yes. —So, is she the girl you mentioned on the phone?"

"Eh?"

When I whipped around, Lulu was standing there with a beaming smile. Noticing my gaze, she even waved her hand at me. She really is a kouhai who doesn't listen to a word people say.

(I told her to wait.)

"Nice to meet you, I am Lulu Itokawa."

"...I am Nozomi's mother."

"Ah, well, well, it's not great to talk out here, so why don't we go inside? That's okay, right, Mom?"



"So, Mom. Like I mentioned a bit on the phone earlier, is it okay if I go stay at this girl's place for a while?"

After preparing drinks for everyone in the living room, I broached the subject. I knew from experience that there's no point in putting these things off; it's better to be blunt.

"That's quite sudden, isn't it?"

"Yeah, is it no good?"

"Nozomi, you're already 18, so it's not like it's forbidden, but what happened?"

"Well, things happened."

There's no way I can tell my mom that I had my "first time" stolen by this girl, was then threatened, and now have to live with her. I'm hoping she'll just let it slide without asking anything, but...

"I see. If Lulu-chan is okay with it, I suppose it's fine."

"Of course, I'd be delighted."

(Wait, would it have been better if my mom had said no?)

Then Lulu would have surely given up. ...Well, whatever, in that case things would just go back to the way they were.

"Then, Lulu. I'll be right back, so wait in the living room. Make sure you don't do anything strange. Mom, could you keep Lulu company for a bit?"

Leaving my mom and Lulu behind, I head to my room to pack. My room after a long time away—I wondered if I'd feel something upon returning, but I couldn't really feel anything much. Because in this room, in my room... there was nothing.

(Just like the current me.)

Empty, hollow, a void—worthless.

(I've left those two waiting, I should pack quickly.)

Even if I say I'm bringing things, it's not a huge amount. Various items for daily care and about three changes of clothes should be enough. I'll also bring my pillow just in case. It's not like I'm going to live at Lulu's house forever, anyway.

(Lulu will probably get bored after two or three days anyway.)

It was my fault for trying to settle everything all at once. Because I suddenly said I was leaving, Lulu just got anxious and did that kind of thing. I should have just gradually increased the distance between us.

To begin with, it was common for us not to meet for a month, so if we stay together for a few days, that anxiety should subside.

(After that, we can just stop seeing each other gradually.)

Even if I don't think about it, once I start working, my schedule won't align with Lulu's. If that happens, distance will naturally form. If I move things toward a kind of natural fading out, it won't get complicated like this again.

(I'll just think of it as playing at a friend's house for a few days during the last spring break.)

Thinking of it that way made me feel much more at ease. Hmm, that's most of my luggage. I just need to grab my toothbrush, toner, and other things from the bathroom. Just as I was about to leave the room, I heard the sound of someone's footsteps coming toward the room.

"What's wrong, Mom? Oh, did Lulu do something?"

"Nozomi, have you decided to aim to be an idol again?"

"Eh, why would you think that?"

"Living with Lulu-chan... doesn't that mean that's what's happening? Lulu-chan is that girl you've talked about for a long time, right?"

I had talked to my mom about Lulu since a long time ago. Because I only ever had school-related topics to talk about. My mom is oblivious to general news and trends, but through that connection, she knows Lulu became an idol.

That's probably why she made such a strange misunderstanding. That I would become Lulu's apprentice and aim to be an idol—such an impossible misunderstanding.

"No, no, it's nothing like that. I've been telling you for a while now that I've already given up on being an idol."

"Listen, Nozomi, you don't have to worry about money. So tell me the truth."

"I've been saying it this whole time, I've already given up. Ah, I have to go soon, Lulu is waiting."

"You were aiming for it so desperately. Hey, is this really okay?"

"Listen, Mom."

"I don't want to see you while you've lost all your spirit. So—"

"So I said it's already fine!"

A moment of silence enveloped the two of us, mother and daughter. I've done it—I feel like I've become worse at suppressing my emotions since I met Lulu yesterday.

"Nozomi..."

"Sorry. But, it's really not like that. The reason I'm going to Lulu's house is because Lulu seems to have become mentally unstable, so I'm going to support her. I'll come back as soon as she's settled down."

(So please stop, don't corner me any further.)

"When I come back, I'll look for a place to work and I'll put money into the house. So don't worry, Mom."

"...I see. I'm sorry."

"I'm the one who's sorry... for suddenly shouting. And for leaving so suddenly."



"Lulu, can you leave now? Then let's go."

"Yes! Oh, I'll carry your bags."

"It's fine. —Well, Mom. I'm off."

"Yes, take care. Have a safe trip."

Carrying a lingering, bitter aftertaste, I left my home behind.

9. Episode 9: Falling Tears

This place is... ah, right, Lulu's house. I was a bit confused by the unfamiliar ceiling. I'm still not quite used to it.

(Well, it's not like I particularly need to get used to it.)

It's not like I'll be here forever. Oops, is it already this time? I stayed up pretty late yesterday cleaning the room and checking my luggage. The quality of the bed must be good; I slept quite well. Even though I haven't been able to sleep deeply lately.

(Has Lulu already gone to work?)

Leaving the room I was assigned and going to the living room, I found a note on the table. It said she has a shoot starting early this morning, so I should just spend my time as I like. I heard yesterday that I could eat or use anything in the house, so I'll have some cereal for breakfast.



(How do I put it, I'm bored.)

I have even less to do than usual. What did I used to do? ...Nothing, really.

Since there was a large TV right in front of me, I turned it on to kill some time. As I watched the programs drift by, I realized a familiar face had appeared.

『It's the talked-about idol, Lua Ryuguji-san.』

『Nice to meet you.』

Lua Ryuguji... the stage name Lulu was given because they wanted something with an impact. Apparently, the program is doing a feature on idols who are the talk of the town.

(She really is keeping herself busy.)

Watching Lulu answer the interview, that was my honest thought. Seeing the serious, "public face" Lulu, without her usual aloof vibe, was fresh... and it brought me a bit of anxiety. Am I truly noticing Lulu's real feelings? I felt once again that Lulu has moved so very far away.

Lulu entered the school about six months after I did. That school didn't put much effort into the idol training course, but they at least provided a studio, so the two of us would watch videos of professional dancers and practice for as long as time allowed.

It's unthinkable now, but Lulu used to be the shy type. She was so timid she couldn't even call for help when being bullied, and I arbitrarily convinced myself that I had to stay by her side and protect her.

(That time might have been the most fun.)

The two of us talked about our dreams, laughed like idiots, and innocently believed in the illusion of eternity.

『Now, let's have Ryuguji-san perform a song. Ryuguji-san, please get ready.』

『Yes.』

(Lulu is going to sing.)

The screen goes dark for the standby. When it switches back to the studio, Lulu's cool profile is shown full-screen. I found myself standing up naturally.

『♪~♪~♪』

Music and Lulu's singing voice flow from the TV. It's not a new song, but one of Lulu's standard tracks... one I've heard many times. Lulu sings and dances to the rhythm; watching her, I sang and danced the same way. I've heard it so many times, watched it over and over... my throat and my body remember it.

Without thinking about anything, I just moved my body recklessly.

『Ryuguji-san, thank you for the performance~!』

『Thank you very much.』

"Haah, haah..."

The program changes, and Lulu's figure disappears from the TV. In that instant, the strength leaves my body like a cut string, and I collapse. The impact of the "thud" disappears into the walls. Come to think of it, Lulu did say every room was soundproofed.

(To think my breathing would get this ragged from just this much.)

My stamina really has dropped. Because I've been away from practice for so long.

"Haha... what am I doing?"

Doing this doesn't mean anything anymore. I flip over and spread my limbs out like a star. Even so, I couldn't gain a single bit of a sense of liberation.

"Why now, of all times... Stop, please stop."

Tears overflow and won't stop. I didn't know how to stop them. I didn't want to move my arms to wipe the tears, so I desperately looked upward so that they at least wouldn't spill onto the floor.

Ah, I can't become an idol. I felt like I finally understood that.



"Senpai, Senpai~"

I can hear Lulu's voice in my ear. I felt like she was calling me.

(Then it's a dream.)

That's fine then; I don't want to wake up anymore. I want to be kept within this pleasant slumber. However, reality would not allow that. My shoulder was shaken, and I was forcibly pulled back to reality. When I opened my eyes, the first thing I saw was Lulu.

(She's cuter seeing her live like this than seeing her on TV.)

"Senpai, if you sleep in a place like this, you'll catch a cold, you know?"

"...I suppose so."

Told by Lulu, I stood up immediately. If Lulu is here, it must be night already.

(I fell asleep after that?)

Falling asleep from crying too much... what kind of child am I? But apparently, Lulu hasn't noticed that I was crying. It was good that I must have been tossing and turning, hiding my face with my arm.

"It makes me so happy that Senpai is here when I get home... ugh."

(Why am I hugging Lulu?)

Even though it's something I did, I didn't know the reason. But I didn't feel like letting go either.

(She's thin, and she's so small.)

It feels like she might easily break if I put a little strength into it. She's so small and thin, yet Lulu is here. It was mysterious.

"Fufu, what's the matter? Did you get anxious, Senpai?"

(If I killed Lulu here, I wonder what would happen.)

A defenseless body, not wary of anything. I'm sure I could do it if I wanted to. If I killed Lulu, and then I died too. Just how much easier would things become?

(I didn't want to think about anything anymore.)

I wonder if Lulu will become a legend. Or will she be a topic for just a moment and then be forgotten immediately? Either way, I understood clearly that my figure would not be there.

(As I thought, I can't stay with Lulu.)

Being with Lulu disturbs my heart this much. It's enough already; I'm tired. I don't need to feel anything anymore, I just want to live peacefully.

"...Sorry."

"It's okay, no matter what Senpai does to me. Please hug Lulu anytime you want to hug her."

"No, it's fine now."

"Wha— why?! Look, it's okay to hug me more."

(Lulu is cute.)

I don't even feel like being jealous. I should probably thank God for the happiness of being able to meet Lulu. No, I don't even know about that. Because if I hadn't met Lulu, I wouldn't have thought these things.

"Eh? Well, this is fine too, but..."

When I stroked her head, Lulu leaned her body in as if nestling against my hand.

"Ehehe, Senpai. Lulu worked hard today too. Please praise me."

"Yes, it seems so. I think you're working very hard."

(What will come of being praised by me?)

You've realized I'm a hopeless person too, haven't you, Lulu? Even so, why do you still bother with me? Please just forget me, I beg you. I'm not necessary for Lulu's future.

"Nhehe, *mufufufu*."

As if to erase myself from Lulu's memories, I continued to stroke Lulu's head.

10. Episode 10: Mission

(This is taking a long time.)

Even though I'm just stroking her head, my arm is getting tired from doing it for this long. Since Lulu won't say anything, I've lost track of when to stop. I've enjoyed the sensation of her silky hair more than enough, so I'll put an end to it.

"Okay, that's it for now."

"Ehh~ please stroke me more, Senpai."

"When I say it's over, it's over. More importantly, I'm hungry. If it's okay with you, Lulu, shall we have dinner soon? Or did you already eat?"

"That's true. Lulu was thinking of eating with Senpai too, so I'll get it ready."

(It seems I managed to divert the conversation well.)

The fact that I'm hungry isn't a lie, and it was a good way to gloss things over. Now then, I'll wash my face while Lulu is in the kitchen. I have to wash away the tear tracks before she finds out.



"What is this?"

After washing my face and returning from the sink, a shocking sight spread out before me.

"What do you mean 'what,' Senpai? You're so mean. You ate it yesterday too. It'll be ready in three minutes, so please wait a bit."

Lulu said that with a full smile. But my face must have been twitching. Because on the dining table, there was cup ramen—the kind familiar from TV commercials.

(Two days in a row, it's this?)

I'd felt a bit of a mismatch since yesterday. There weren't many ingredients in the fridge, and I didn't see any washed dishes. But yesterday there was no time, and I just thought she'd forgotten to buy ingredients.

(Don't tell me, she always eats nothing but this?)

"H-hey, Lulu. Do you always eat nothing but cup ramen like this?"

"Ah, would you have preferred soba or udon?"

"That's not what I mean. I'm asking if you always eat nothing but things like these instant noodles."

At my question, Lulu answered with a nonchalant face, without even thinking deeply.

"That's right, it's usually this when I'm at home. Because it's convenient; you just boil water and it's done. Ah, but it's okay because I take supplements for any missing nutrition. I take care of my skin too, look, do you want to touch?"

"That's not the issue here."

(Really, why is this girl)

Could it be that the reason she's that thin is because of this? I hate it... an idol with instant noodles hidden behind her ephemerality.

No matter how busy she is or how little time she has, a diet like this will eventually hit its limit. I can't leave her like this. I have to do something quickly.

"Ah, three minutes are up. Senpai, let's eat."

"...I suppose so."

(It's already late today.)

It would be fine if it were just me, but it wouldn't be good if something happened to Lulu going out in the middle of the night. It can't be helped, I'll endure with this today.

"Lulu, do you have time tomorrow?"

"I have a site visit starting from the afternoon tomorrow, so if it's just the morning..."

"Then we're going shopping tomorrow morning."

"I don't mind, but was there something you needed?"

(Really, this girl)

I felt keenly that I have to do something.



"Phew~, that was refreshing."

Since I'd left the sweat from the morning as it was, it was a truly pleasant bath. Besides, the bath was larger than the one at my own house, so it was good to have plenty of space. I've been thinking this since yesterday, but tower apartments are amazing.

Even so, why was there such a fuss over just taking a bath? I only told her to go in first because she must be tired from work. She wouldn't listen, saying I was a guest so I should go in first. Well, in the end, I silenced the grumbling Lulu and made her go in first.

(Wait, where is it?)

After getting out of the bath, I tried to start the washing machine, but I couldn't find the detergent anywhere. I want to start it soon because yesterday's clothes are still there. ...It can't be helped, I'll call Lulu.

"Lulu~, I want to do the laundry, but where is the detergent?"

"Ah, detergent, detergent? I think there was some I got during a CM shoot somewhere..."

(Hm?)

"Ah, found it. Is this okay?"

"...How do you usually handle the laundry?"

"Ah, I don't do laundry."

"Hah? Then what do you do about your clothes?"

"I just toss them aside after wearing them once. Also, there are costume staff during shoots and things."

"Haah..."

(Are all idols like this?)

No, that's not it. Lulu is just especially slovenly.

"By the way, the room was unusually dusty; don't tell me you don't clean either?"

"...Ahaha, well..."

"It's not 'ahaha,' good grief."

(Was the part about wanting me to do housework actually true?)

No cooking, no laundry, no cleaning. In this day and age, I'm not going to talk about 'girl power,' but if you're living alone, life is going to be difficult if you can't at least do that much. I understand being busy, but even so, there's a limit.

(I guess my role is to teach her housework completely.)

"We're going to be living together from now on, right?"

"Yes, but did something happen?"

"In that case, I'd like to share the housework, but what do you think?"

"Ah, then laundry! Lulu will do the laundry!"

"...I suppose so, since Lulu will generally be coming home later, it might be better to have you do it."

(Besides, it's just running the washing machine, so it should be easy to get started with.)

I'll start with simple things like this and have her gradually learn the others. It's the same as dance lessons. The first hurdle should be as low as possible. I'll teach Lulu bit by bit.



"Put things like this in a net so they don't lose their shape. Also, either wash dark-colored clothes separately or put them in a net so the color doesn't bleed. For now, I have some of my spares today, so we'll use those, but eventually we have to buy some for you too."

"Y-Yes."

"And the detergent goes up to about this line, and for the course... it looks like you can do it by pressing this button. Got it?"

"Yes."

Closing the lid and clicking the button, the washing machine makes a loud clunking sound and starts moving. Since you can specify the course with just one press of a button, even Lulu should be able to do this.

"Ah, what a waste."

"A waste?"

"N-No, it's nothing,ahaha."

"What is it all of a sudden? ...Ah, the detergent? Well, it's true it might be better to match it to the amount of laundry, but you probably won't know at first, so just the same amount is fine every time."

"Ah, yes, I'll do that."

"Well, if you run it during the night, I'll hang it up in the morning."

"I understand."

(Is that okay for the laundry?)

I took a breath while listening to the vigorous sounds emitted by the washing machine. Hah, at this rate, I wonder how long it will take to teach her all the housework. It was a night that made me worry about the future.

11. Episode 11: Sweet Dream

The next morning, we decided to get up early and head to the local supermarket together. I didn't necessarily need to trouble Lulu for just shopping, but apparently I'm not allowed to go out alone, so I had Lulu accompany me like this.

(It's not like I'm going to run away.)

"Going shopping together, it's like we're a newlywed couple, Senpai."

"Even if I were to concede a hundred steps, we only look like sisters."

"Ehh, that's not true."

I walk while peeling off Lulu, who keeps trying to cling to me. It's just shopping, so what is so fun about it? I felt like I couldn't keep up with Lulu, whose energy was high from the morning.

(In the first place, your face isn't even visible.)

Even when going to the nearby supermarket, Lulu wears a hat. Apparently, wearing sunglasses or a mask would conversely make her look suspicious. It must mean she's become that famous, but to think you can't relax even at a time like this...

"As I said before, you have the money, right?"

"Yes! Should we just buy out that entire supermarket while we're at it?"

"You don't need to do that."

"It's a joke, a joke. But please don't hold back. If there's something you want, please buy it in droves."

"...I'll do that."

"Nfufu, please do exactly that!"

(How uncool of me.)

Shopping with my kouhai's money. Even though it includes meals for Lulu, this makes me nothing more than a "himo" (leech). It's not much different from the bad adults who take advantage of Lulu's kindness to suck sweet nectar. But the reality is that I don't have much money. So for now, there's nothing I can do.

(I'll pay her back once I start working someday.)

"Ah, wait a second, Senpai~"

While thinking those things, I quickened my pace.



(I guess I'll just put in whatever catches my eye.)

There weren't even eggs in the fridge. I'll think about the menu later; first, there's no point talking if I don't stock up on ingredients. And so, while putting vegetables and meat into the basket one after another, I threw a question that had suddenly occurred to me at Lulu.

"Do you have any foods you dislike? Come to think of it, did you say bell peppers before?"

"Did you read the magazine?"

"I did, for the most part."

I hadn't been to her lives due to time constraints, but I basically checked all the magazines and programs Lulu appeared in. I had stopped looking after I failed the auditions, but I saw everything until then. I could say with confidence that I was Lulu's number one fan.

(I wonder how it is now.)

"Bell peppers are actually fine. Look, isn't it better to say that than to have nothing, because it's kind of childish and nice? Besides, with bell peppers, there's a social trend where it's okay to say you hate them."

"...I see."

(I've heard a nasty part of the entertainment world.)

"So, you don't have any likes or dislikes then."

"Ah, well."

"You do?"

"...I might dislike carrots a little. That earthiness, or the strange sweetness is a bit much. B-But if Senpai makes them, I'll eat them."

"I see. I'll be careful."

(I'm glad I asked.)

Carrots are used in quite a lot of dishes, so I have to adjust the menu accordingly.

"...Aren't you going to say something like 'you shouldn't be a picky eater'?"

"Food preferences can't be helped. You can make up the nutrition with other vegetables, so it's nothing to worry about. It helps that you told me beforehand."

Carotene can be supplemented with spinach, and fiber exists in other vegetables too. If you eat a balanced diet, having one or two dislikes isn't a major problem.

"Senpai, you really are..."

"Did you say something?"

"No, it's nothing."

"I see, that's fine then."

(I don't really get it, but if it's nothing, then okay.)

While lightly brushing off Lulu, who was trying to hug me again, I continued with the shopping.



"Okay, this should last about a week."

I put the ingredients I bought into the fridge and settle down. When I bought them, I thought they might not fit, but I suppose that's Lulu's fridge for you. I wish the one at my house had this much capacity.

(Well, luxury is something that ruins a person.)

"Then that means starting tonight, I can eat Senpai's home cooking, right?"

"Yes, I'll make it."

Actually, I wanted to make it starting from lunch, but I gave up because it didn't look like I'd make it in time for Lulu's departure. Instead, I bought some random side dishes and we ate those. Still, it should be healthier than instant food.

"Yay! I'm looking forward to it."

"For now, let's have lunch. You don't have time, do you?"

"That's true."



""Itadakimasu.""

After properly putting our hands together and giving the greeting, we start eating. Both of us emphasize that sort of thing, and that made me somewhat happy. While sitting around the dining table together, I asked Lulu something I'd been curious about.

"Lulu, when did you start living alone?"

"Since my first year of high school, so about two years ago?"

(And yet you have this lifestyle?)

Wouldn't it have been better to live alone after learning a bit more about housework at home? It's true I feel like Lulu started to break through around then. So maybe she had no choice but to do so for safety reasons, but couldn't something more have been done?

"Even if you're busy, you could have just ordered delivery. Why do you rely on things like instant noodles? You have the money for that much, don't you?"

"I did that at first, but somehow my face got leaked to the delivery people before I knew it, and things got really troublesome."

"...Sorry, I made you remember something unpleasant."

"Ah, not at all, I don't care about it anymore, so it's okay. Besides, I moved from that house, and the security here is even better than before. But well, because of that sort of thing, I've stopped with deliveries. Look, you can do things like doorstep delivery if it's not something you need to eat right away."

(When you become an idol, there are troubles like that too.)

A feeling of apology overflows for having asked without any consideration. I should have been able to imagine that much.

(That's right, the new part-time job I start—delivery work might be good.)

Since there's an image of a labor shortage, I should be able to find one quickly, and if I'm the one in charge of Lulu's deliveries, it won't lead to unnecessary trouble. That way, she can eat warm food even after I'm gone... wait, what am I thinking?

(I already decided I won't be involved with Lulu anymore.)

For that reason, I have to have Lulu become able to do housework.

"I'll make dinner tonight, but you have to become able to make it yourself someday too, okay?"

"Ehh~ if Senpai makes it, I prefer Senpai's."

"Don't complain. I won't be... forever."

"Forever?"

(Oh no.)

It's better not to say anything that would stimulate Lulu right now. It would be a problem if she did something like that again, so, um, what should I do...

"...I won't be healthy forever, you know? If I catch a cold or something, I wonder who will make me things like rice porridge?"

"Mm! That's true. I'll work hard so I can nurse you back to health, Senpai."

"Yes, please do."

(It seems I managed to gloss it over somehow.)

Lulu's mental state is still unstable right now, so I have to be firm. While watching the Lulu who was burning with determination, I too braced myself.

12. Episode 12: Natural

[Lulu's POV]

(Ahhh, I'm late.)

Even though it can't be helped since many people are involved, for the shoot to be extended this much... it's really the worst. This never happened before. ...No, that's wrong. It was just that before, I didn't care what happened, so it didn't bother me.

(Senpai is probably already asleep.)

She said before that she sleeps by 11 PM. The fact that she's an early riser is wonderful, but right now I resent it just a little. Even though we're living in the same house, I can't see Senpai's face. Besides, it's frustrating beyond help that the monumental day I first eat Senpai's home cooking turned out like this.

Because I was discouraged in that way, I was surprised by Senpai, who was inside when I entered the living room.

"Welcome home, Lulu."

"Eh? W-Why?"

"What do you mean 'why'? Am I not allowed to be here?"

"But, it's already your bedtime..."

"It's lonely if there isn't even a 'welcome home' when we're living together, isn't it?"

Senpai says it nonchalantly as if it's nothing. Without even knowing how much Lulu was saved by those words.

(Senpai always gives Lulu the words she wants.)

The previous dissatisfaction and fatigue blow away somewhere far off, and only joy governs my body. How happy it is to have Senpai at home when I return. My judgment at that time was not wrong after all.

"Look, what do you say?"

"I—I'm home."

"Yes, welcome home."

(I like this about Senpai.)

She can do things that please people as if it's natural. She isn't seeking anything in return; she just thinks that doing so is a matter of course. That's why Lulu feels she wants to be that way too.

"So, do you want to take a bath first? Or eat?"

"Ah, then I want Senpai."

"Huh? What does that mean?"

(So it's possible she doesn't know this one.)

Rather, it would have been bad if she *did* know. *Dangerous, dangerous...* my desire was coming out too much. I can't rush; I have to proceed carefully and slowly. It's okay, because there's plenty of time.

"I—I was wondering which one Senpai thinks is better."

"I see. ...Well, your body must be cold, so a bath might be better first. I'll warm up the food, so go in first."

"Thank you very much."

When Lulu said her thanks, Senpai gave a cute yawn—"fuwaaa." It's rare to see Senpai looking sleepy like this. While feeling happy that I could see a rare side of Senpai, I felt sorry for making her stay up this late into the night.

"Are you sleepy?"

"A little. I'll probably be asleep by the time you get out, but please forgive me."

"Yes, rather, thank you for staying up."

"Then, good night."

"Ah, wait a moment."

"Nn?"

(The response with insufficient words is cute.)

It's destructively cute, to the point I want to record it as a video. No, no, I have to talk about my business quickly.

"Tomorrow, do you want to go see a movie?"

"Mm, I don't mind."

"It's a promise, then."

"Yes. Now, go on in."

"Oka~y."

(Yay, a movie theater date with Senpai.)

I head straight to the bathroom in a humming mood. I've always done nothing but rehearsals and lessons with Senpai, so it's the first time we're going out together. I wonder what kind of clothes I should wear. It's been a long time since I looked forward to tomorrow this much.



When I got out of the bath, food with steam rising from it was placed on the living room table. It looked as if the dishes that had never been used were proudly fulfilling their role. Senpai seems much more like the master of this room than Lulu does.

(I wonder how long it's been since I had a meal like this.)

Has it been since I left home? Because it's been a daily life of nothing but instant noodles and supplements. It's not that I hated instant noodles. They were done quickly, warm, and delicious... but even so, there was no warmth there.

I want to tell the Lulu of that time, who lived her days looking forward only to the exchanges with the Senpai she could meet occasionally. That there is a meal that warms the heart this much.

"Itadakimasu."

(Delicious)

I'm confident I could enjoy eating anything Senpai made. But regardless of that, this dish was delicious. A taste that was refined yet simple... I can tell at a glance it's a well-balanced meal, perhaps because she's also particular about the appearance. Senpai must have served cooking to someone other than herself until now as well.

(Every time I get to know Senpai, I fall for her more deeply.)

Senpai doesn't know. How much Lulu is being saved by Senpai. Senpai hasn't noticed that the things she does for Lulu as if they're a matter of course are special things that other people can't do.

Senpai said before that the reason she didn't have friends at school was because she was disliked, but I think the reality was a bit different.

(She must have been too dazzling.)

They didn't want to get in the way of Senpai, who always tried to be noble, or perhaps it was because they'd notice their own pettiness if they were with Senpai.

Because they didn't have the confidence to stand alongside Senpai, no one tried to approach her. That must be why there were no people around Senpai.

(But Lulu is different.)

Lulu knows well how amazing Senpai is. That's why Lulu wants to catch up to Senpai. Because I don't want to let the kind Senpai, who has been working hard all alone, be alone in the true sense. Because I watched Senpai working hard up close, because I want to keep watching, Lulu has worked hard this far.

(She seems a bit tired now, though.)

I'm sure that's fine. Senpai has already worked hard enough; no one will complain even if she rests a little, I won't *let* them complain. So that she doesn't have to be hurt anymore, she can just rest inside Lulu's cage.

Self-interest is mixed in too, but it's not a lie that it's also for Senpai. Because this world is too ugly and too dirty for the forever-pure Senpai to live in. That's why Lulu will protect her. So that Senpai can remain beautiful.

(And if I'm lucky, I want her to fall in love with Lulu, too.)

Just as Lulu had Senpai do for her, Lulu also wants to give back to Senpai. In that process, it would be nice if she came to like Lulu too. Since we'll be together from now on.

I have to make Senpai like Lulu more on tomorrow's date. While drinking the warm miso soup, Lulu thoroughly refined her plans for tomorrow.

13. Episode 13: At the Movie Theater

"You're unusually fired up."

Watching Lulu, who was so geared up you could almost hear her rough "huff-puff" breathing, I muttered that. Even though she worked late yesterday, she's energetic. I wonder if this is the difference of one year.

"Because it's a date with Senpai."

"A date, huh."

At those words, my gaze moved downward. There were mine and Lulu's hands, firmly intertwined. It was what they call a "koibito-tsunagi" (lover's grip). She'd grabbed it while I was caught off guard, and after that, I couldn't refuse when she pleaded with me not to let go.

(Well, I can let her have her way for one day.)

It's rare for Lulu to say she wants to go out somewhere with me—rather, it had never happened until now. Because our relationship had been finalized inside that school. That wasn't necessarily the reason, but I myself was feeling a bit of anticipation for this outing.

"In that case, can I expect an escort?"

"Of course. Leave it to me!"

While thinking Lulu, who thumped her chest, was endearing, I headed toward our destination with her.



"So this is what a movie theater is like."

Inside the movie theater, which I was entering for the first time, the air was completely different from outside. It was crowded with people wherever I looked, and the sound of voices buzzing together was restless. But there was no bad atmosphere anywhere; both the people standing in line and the people who had presumably finished watching a movie were all equally smiling.

"Have you never been before?"

"Yes, because I wasn't very interested."

I realize after saying it. That they were words I didn't need to say. Doesn't this make it sound like I'm coming along reluctantly? Even though Lulu went to the trouble of bringing me, what am I doing making the atmosphere subtle?

(I have to correct it quickly.)

"That—"

"Then we have to enjoy it to the fullest today!"

"...Yes, I suppose so."

(You really are a good girl.)

Even faster than my apology, Lulu said that with a smile. The atmosphere that had been about to turn dark recovers in an instant. To think she'd shower me with smiles even after I took such a curt attitude... I purely thought that this is what a natural-born idol is.

"When you say movie theater, it has to be popcorn. Senpai, what flavor would you like? Ah, but is it better if you don't eat this sort of thing?"

"As long as I'm careful with my diet normally, that much is nothing. I don't really know, so please choose what you like, Lulu."

"Then I'll go with a half-and-half of caramel and salt. It's a good deal because you can enjoy two flavors. Look, let's get in line, Senpai."

"Ah, wait."



(I never knew it was fun even while standing in line.)

If I'm waiting while talking with Lulu, the time in line passed in a flash. Even though I thought waiting time was just a waste, being with Lulu makes even that change into a happy time. That was also a bit scary.

(I have to make sure I don't take this as a matter of course.)

So that the eventual parting won't be painful. I'll think of it as seeing a dream. A dream Lulu is showing me in exchange for the youth I spent. If it's a dream, I must eventually wake up. But for now, I want to be immersed in it just a little longer.



We successfully bought the popcorn and soft drinks, and now all that was left was to wait for the movie to start. Only then did I realize that I didn't know what movie we were watching.

"So, what kind of movie are we seeing today?"

"Fufu, please wait a moment. I think it'll be shown soon, ah, this is it, this is the one!"

The moment the advertisement switched on the screen, Lulu raised her voice and pointed. Apparently, we are watching this movie. And I knew this movie.

A classic love story about a girl who loses her memory in an accident and her boyfriend, who become lovers once again while regaining her memories. It's a movie that was widely advertised, to the point that even I, who usually only watches the news on TV, knew about it.

(But that wasn't the reason I knew it.)

On the screen in front of me was Lulu's figure running along the beach with a famous actor. A calm part of my heart said that's why she came so fully protected today. Did Lulu want to show me this today?

Lulu had started dipping her toes into acting as well as being an idol about a year ago. A path of acting that began with bit parts in dramas. And this was Lulu's first starring role; that's why I knew this movie.

(Was it already being released?)

"Ah, looks like we can go in soon. Senpai, let's go!"

"...Yes. I'm coming now."

As if being hurried by the impatient Lulu, I followed after her. The inside of my heart was unexpectedly calm, and at the very least, I didn't feel like I wanted to go home right away.

If things hadn't turned out like this, I wonder if I would have come to see this movie. Right now, I just wanted to know that.

14. Episode 14: Where We Are Headed

Immediately after the movie ended, Lulu led me into a nearby coffee shop. The interior had a calm atmosphere, and with light music playing, it was the perfect place to discuss our impressions of the film. However, I didn't have the composure to worry about things like that right now.

"U-Um, you see, Senpai... that kiss scene back there wasn't actually a real kiss, it just looked that way because of the angle, and Lulu hasn't ever kissed anyone yet. So Lulu is..."

Lulu was saying something or other very quickly, but it didn't enter my head at all. My heart hadn't returned from inside that movie yet. I understood clearly now that this exact state is what people mean when they say their excitement has yet to cool.

"U-Umm, Senpai, are you listening?"

"It was amazing."

"Heh?"

Perhaps it had something to do with the fact that it was my first time watching a movie in a theater. I hadn't expected the sense of presence to be this different. It felt as if I were right there on the scene. I feel like I understand now why so many people make the trip to the cinema. But that wasn't all.

(It was Lulu's acting.)

The anxiety of having no memories, the distrust toward a lover she didn't know, the budding love as she found herself drawn to that lover once more despite the memory loss, the conflict over whether it was okay to be loved while still missing the memories of the person she once loved, the joy when she finally remembered, and the love that overlapped once again.

The emotions of the heroine in each and every moment were conveyed directly through Lulu's acting. By the time they were finally united, I was so emotionally invested that I unintentionally moved to tears. That was unmistakably Lulu's true ability, and that was exactly why my heart was trembling like this.

"Thank you for bringing me here today."

I wanted to say something, but I didn't know what to say, and these were the only words I could squeeze out. No matter what I said, it felt insufficient; even now, I was so overwhelmed that spinning words was difficult, yet I simply wanted to convey my moved state.

Of course, the script of the movie itself and the acting of the other performers were good. But Lulu's performance seemed to stand in a league of its own to a degree that words couldn't fully describe, and that kept my chest throbbing even now.

"It's Lulu who should be thanking you. I'm glad you said that... Lulu thought for sure..."

"For sure?"

"Since you hadn't said anything for a while, I thought maybe it wasn't very interesting."

"I'm sorry. Lulu's acting was so masterful that I was left speechless."

"Was that it?"

From then on, I sent nothing but words of praise Lulu's way. That scene was great, that expression right there was perfect, and then...

I thought that was the least I could do in return for Lulu, who had moved me this much. It was much later that my excitement finally subsided.



"I'm sorry, I got a bit too carried away by myself, didn't I?"

"That's not true. Lulu is happy when Senpai praises her."

"When did you learn to act like that?"

"Actually, at the same time I started high school, I was allowed to attend a specialized school. I studied acting there alongside my idol work, and that's how I got the offer for this movie."

(In just two years?)

I don't know much about acting in detail, but it shouldn't be something that simple. If so, it must surely be a natural gift. I was reminded once again that the girl in front of me, Lulu Itokawa, was born to be a star.

"Will you continue your acting career from now on, Lulu?"

"That's the plan. I'm hoping to gradually increase my work outside of being an idol."

Lulu spoke in a light tone, but with a serious look in her eyes. A sincere determination was hidden behind it. I found myself catching my breath at that aura before I even realized it.

(That's right, we can't stay young forever.)

Being an idol isn't a profession one can continue forever. No matter how popular an idol is, shadows begin to fall as time passes. That's why Lulu was looking beyond that. To the future after she could no longer be an idol.

(Lulu is always looking forward.)

Without drowning in the "now," she continues to move toward the future she wants to seize. Unchanged from those school days when she was a nobody, Lulu has always been looking ahead. Why had I forgotten that?

(Yeah, I should start looking forward too.)

"I'm sure you'll be fine, Lulu."

"Hearing Senpai say that gives me confidence."

Come to think of it, it was the same back then. Lulu guided my heart when it was about to break. Seeing Lulu desperately moving forward allowed me to stand up again as well. Yes, Lulu was always the support for my heart.

(I'll stop waiting for Lulu to be the one to speak up like I have until now.)

In order to end this stagnant relationship, I will be the one to move. Because I believe that will lead to starting my own clock, which has stopped.

"Hey, Lulu. Is there anything troubling you?"

"Troubling me?"

"Yes, it doesn't matter how trivial it is, please tell me."

"Thank you. But I don't really have anything right now. After all, I'm with Senpai."

"...I see. But if anything happens, tell me anytime. I want to be of help to you, Lulu."

"I understand. Then I'll consult you when that time comes."

(She won't tell me now, then.)

Well, I suppose it can't be helped if I suddenly say something like this. From now on, I'll look at Lulu more properly and truly learn what she is worrying about and what I should do for her. And then, I'll end this relationship without any lingering regrets.

"It's already this late. Shall we head out soon?"

Before I knew it, the sun outside was beginning to set, and the clear sky was starting to be dyed in madder red. Had we been here for hours already? Time with Lulu always seems to pass by so quickly.

"Yes. Oh, Lulu will pay."

"Lulu, you've been the only one paying for a while now."

"But—"

"This is a date, right? Let me act a little cool, too."

"...Then, please."



On the way home with Lulu, feeling a soft sensation against my left hand, a thought occurred to me.

(I wonder if there is someone Lulu shows that kind of face to.)

I couldn't read anything from her profile as she walked happily, but Lulu is an adolescent girl... it wouldn't be strange at all if she had someone like that. Maybe the reason her acting was so good was because she was projecting herself onto it.

"Is something wrong?"

"It's nothing."

(Was I looking too much?)

I looked forward and reconsidered so as not to be noticed by Lulu. Since she's working as an idol now, she probably can't be open about it, but maybe she already has someone special. Could it be that having to hide that is causing Lulu stress?

(I wonder why, as I think about it, my chest feels a little...)

...Well, I'm sure Lulu would tell me, and it's not good to make groundless suspicions. I just need to become a Senpai she can rely on again, enough to be told her secrets. By thinking that, I erased the sense of unease lingering in my chest.

15. Episode 15: Witness

After finishing my date with Lulu for the day and falling asleep in a fluffy bed, my eyes suddenly snapped open. Intuitively, it didn't feel like morning yet; when I checked the time on my smartphone, it was still 1:00 AM.

(Why did I wake up?)

With a head that wasn't quite spinning right yet, I let my thoughts wander aimlessly. It was rare for me to wake up in the middle of the night like this. When was the last time...? Right, it was back then. Back when I had fallen into the depths of despair, I couldn't sleep well because of the sadness and regret.

(Back then, I was able to recover thanks to Lulu, too.)

Because Lulu was by my side, because she showed me how hard she was working, I was able to work hard too. Nothing else remained, but that much was certain. And yet, to think that things would turn out like this by Lulu's side now.

Sleep is just as important a factor as food. That's why I can't overlook an irregularity like this. It would probably be somewhat better to just go back to sleep, but I couldn't allow the cause to remain a mystery.

(Maybe it's because my activity level has been low lately.)

That was the first thing that came to mind. Since I'm not moving my body as vigorously as I used to, perhaps my body isn't fully exhausted.

But then again, it's strange that this hasn't happened once since I quit the school until now. Besides, I went out today; compared to yesterday, you could say I moved around quite a bit. If so, it's only natural to think there's another reason.

(If there's something that comes to mind, it must be about Lulu after all.)

It's been three days since I came to Lulu's house. I thought Lulu would be getting bored by now, but there's no sign of that. As for me, one way or another, I've grown accustomed to this life. I've already finished thinking about the menu for the day after tomorrow.

(In the end, I never did find out what Lulu's anxiety was, either.)

Asking her directly probably wasn't a good move, but it feels a bit bad that I haven't found a single clue up to this day. We've let things slide into a casual state, but doing something like *that* just because she might not be able to see me isn't the act of a sane mind. Something pushed Lulu that far. I have to resolve it.

(At this rate, I don't think I'll be able to fall asleep.)

I'm curiously wide awake now. Perhaps the light from my phone earlier wasn't good for me. If I drink some water, calm my nerves, and lie down, maybe I'll gradually be able to sleep.

Lulu leaves for work early tomorrow, too. Before, I couldn't even say "have a good day," and I want to prepare breakfast for her. I need to sleep early for tomorrow's sake.



"Phew..."

After drinking some water and taking a breath, my heart felt considerably cleared. As I thought, the anxiety unique to the night must have been eating away at me. Worrying about things I can't

change only leads further into a slump. There's still a bit of time; I just need to steadily provide Lulu with mental care without rushing.

(Alright, now that I know that, let's get to bed quickly.)

Tomorrow—well, it's already today—I have to wake up early and prepare breakfast. Then, on my way back to the room from the kitchen, I heard a strange voice.

"...enpai... Sen..."

(Am I being called?)

It's a very muffled voice, but I managed to catch only the word "Senpai." There's only me and Lulu in this house; by process of elimination, the owner of the voice must be Lulu. What business could she have this late at night?

(Is she talking in her sleep, or did something happen?)

If a bug had appeared, she'd probably let out a louder scream, and judging by the volume and tone of the voice, it doesn't seem like a particularly desperate situation. Besides, if it's sleep-talking, I've heard it's not good to respond, so it might be safer to ignore it.

(But what if she's being tormented by a nightmare?)

With the recurring stress, she might be calling for me unconsciously. She might be haunted by unpleasant memories and seeking help from me. If that's the case, I should probably wake her up once.

(I'll go check quietly.)

I'll check Lulu's face, and if she looks like she's suffering from a nightmare, I'll wake her. If it's nothing, then that's fine. Lulu has an early start tomorrow, so she needs to sleep while she can. I began to walk quietly so as not to wake her.

(Huh? It's not coming from Lulu's room.)

As I approached the direction of the voice without making a sound, I soon realized that the source wasn't Lulu's bedroom, but *that* room. Yes, the room where I was tied up by Lulu.

(What is she doing in a place like this?)

To be honest, my memories of that time are already hazy, and I don't remember much. Even while I was being restrained by Lulu, I felt somewhat light-headed, and I couldn't clearly recall

what happened afterward. It's likely related to the fact that I simply don't want to remember. Thanks to that, I'm glad I can still continue this relationship with Lulu like this.

(The door is open.)

When I reached the front of the room in the darkness, I noticed that the door was ajar. I thought it was defenseless, but I suppose this is normal inside a home. Well, if that's the case, it's convenient for me. I peered into the room through the crack in the door, making sure not to be noticed by Lulu inside.

16. Episode 16: Confession

Bzzz, bzzz... Bzzz, bzzz...

The mechanical sound of the alarm rattled my brain. I immediately cut off the unpleasant stimulus to my waking head and forced my body up. Perhaps because I had been sleeping lightly, I managed to get up, but my mood was the absolute worst.

(I have to... get breakfast ready.)

Ignoring the throbbing pain in my head, I hopped out of bed and changed out of my pajamas. I didn't have much time to spare. After a quick face wash, I headed to the kitchen.



(This should be enough, I think.)

Since I was short on time, I couldn't make anything elaborate, but this should be balanced enough. While checking to see if any nutrients were missing, I started making the final item—the tamagoyaki—when I heard the pitter-patter of footsteps approaching from behind.

"Good morning, Senpai!"

"...Morning, Lulu."

(I wonder if my voice is shaking.)

Even though it's something I always do, once my mental equilibrium crumbles, I suddenly can't do things right. I fell into a sensation of not knowing how my usual self acted. Using the fact that

I was standing in front of the stove as an excuse not to turn around, I heard a strange voice from behind me.

"Nfufu... nfufu..."

"What is it?"

"I was just thinking how happy I am to have Senpai here when I wake up... and the sound just slipped out."

"...Stop saying silly things and go wash your face. Then we'll eat."

"Okay~!"

the heat blooming in my face was surely because of the stove.



(This is awkward.)

During breakfast across from Lulu, I couldn't look her properly in the face because of what I had seen last night. I kept my gaze lowered, trying to maintain my composure by focusing on eating, but I naturally became taciturn.

"Mm, this is delicious!"

"I see. That's good."

"This tamagoyaki is sweet and amazing!"

"I'm glad it's to your liking."

I could only give blunt replies to Lulu's over-the-top reactions; acting like that, it was only natural that Lulu would get suspicious.

"Um... are you mad about something?"

"Not particularly. I'm not mad. ...I'm just a little tired."

"Really? But, somehow—"

"Hey, Lulu, are you okay on time?"

"Ah!"

I forcibly diverted Lulu's attention and managed to avoid disaster. Watching Lulu scarf down her food in a rush, I resolved to be back to normal by the time she returned.

"Well, I'm off then, Senpai!"

"Take care."

I saw Lulu off at the entrance and let out a long sigh. Finally, she was gone. I felt bad for Lulu, but I couldn't stop myself from thinking that.



For a while after seeing Lulu off, I was able to distract myself with cleaning and doing the dishes. However, housework doesn't last forever. Once everything was finished, the scene from last night dominated my mind again.

(What Lulu was doing was definitely...)

It was dim so I couldn't see clearly, but I feel like I learned about it in health class. I think it was called... masturbation? Or something like that. I remember the teacher saying it was normal not just for boys, but for girls too.

(W-well, Lulu is a girl in puberty after all.)

It's not a bad thing, and since it's her own home, she should do as she pleases. Yes, it was my fault for peeping.

(She had her eyes closed and looked so good.)

Whenever I let my guard down, the scene from that moment would immediately flicker into my mind. Even if I shook my head violently to try and banish the memory, once it was seared in, it wasn't something that could be easily erased.

Since nothing actually happened, I should have just looked away immediately and gone back to my room. If I had, I wouldn't be agonizing like this. But I couldn't do it. Even though I thought I had to leave quickly, for some reason I was drawn in and couldn't move from the spot.

Moving around restlessly, eyes closed with a desperate expression, whispering "Senpai , Senpai" in a sweet voice... seeing Lulu like that, I was stuck there as if paralyzed, not even

closing my eyes, watching her intently. It was because of that guilt that I couldn't talk to Lulu properly.

(It's better to stay quiet, right?)

Lulu would be embarrassed if she knew she have been seen, and if I stay quiet, nothing changes. But that is also an extremely insincere way to handle it. I would be telling lies to hide my own misdeed. No matter which way it goes, there's no good outcome. How can I settle this smoothly?

Even after brooding over it, I couldn't find an answer, so for the time being, I decided to go with the policy of not telling Lulu.



Once everything was done and I was relaxing on the living room sofa, Lulu came and sat next to me after getting out of the bath. My heart gave a loud thud, but I maintained a nonchalant face so Lulu wouldn't find out.

"Um, Senpai."

"...What is it?"

"Did something happen today?"

"N-no, nothing at all."

(Crap, she's suspicious.)

Of course she is. If I saw someone acting this suspiciously, I'd think the same. But this is technically for Lulu's sake too. That's why I can't let her find out. Even though I feigned ignorance, Lulu didn't seem convinced yet.

"Senpai, you haven't looked at Lulu properly at all today."

"That's not true."

"Then, please look this way."

"Fine."

(I won't let her look down on me.)

Thinking it would be no trouble at all, I turned back toward Lulu, only to be startled by how much closer her face was than I expected. Her cheeks, flushed from the bath, reminded me of last night, and being stared at intently by that cute face, I reflexively turned away in embarrassment.

"See! You just went *pyoi*, your face just went *pyoi* somewhere else!"

"T-this is just... I'm just in that kind of mood!"

"Why won't you tell me? Is it something you can't tell Lulu?!"

"No, it's not that."

"Senpai, why won't you tell me...?"

"...Alright, I'll tell you. I'll tell you, so calm down."

(I can't win when she makes that face.)

It would be better if she got angry, but I'm just weak when Lulu casts her eyes down sadly like this. I find myself wanting to do anything if it means Lulu won't have to be sad.

(I really think it's better not to say it, though.)

But at this point, Lulu won't be satisfied unless I say it. To endure the embarrassment, I took one long, deep breath before deciding to speak.

"U-um, so, about last night..."

"Last night? Did something happen?"

"You don't remember? That... um..."

"Geez, what is it? Please say it clearly."

(Ugh, fine, I don't care anymore!)

"I saw Lulu doing... *that*... all by yourself!"

"Eh?"

When I let it all out in a burst of confession, Lulu made a blank face for a moment, then, perhaps as the meaning sank in, her face—already flushed from the bath—turned an even deeper shade of bright red.

17. Episode 17: Reversal

[Lulu's POV]

I definitely heard the words Senpai shouted at me, but I couldn't comprehend them at all. Or rather, my brain was flatly refusing to understand. I knew that if I did, my psyche would shatter.

"Eh—ah, um, what do you mean by that?"

"I mean, well... last night, I saw you, Lulu... you were by yourself... doing, um, lewd things."

Senpai's face was beet-red as she fidgeted with her fingers. So cute... No, wait! Now is not the time for that. Well, it's not that it doesn't matter, but there's something way more important here.

(What did Senpai just say?)

Last night. Lulu. Alone. Doing it. ...Huh? That means she saw me doing it by myself while thinking about her? ...Wait, isn't that incredibly bad?

Does that mean she knows I've been taking her freshly worn underwear every night? Does she know I was masturbating while listening to those cute sounds she makes? Ah, ahh, ahhh, what do I do, what do I do, what do I do?!

"I-I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to look! It was an accident!"

"Ababababa..."

This is bad; she definitely hates me now. If Senpai hates me, how am I supposed to go on living?

"I-It's okay, Lulu. It's a bit rich coming from the person who saw you, but that sort of thing is perfectly normal. It's fine, really. Lots of girls do that, so don't worry."

Even though she must be shocked that her kouhai is such a pervert, she's still saying such kind things to me. But Senpai, if *this* is normal, then I'm scared for the world. Though, of course, if you said you wanted *my* underwear, I'd strip it off and give it to you right this second.

(What am I even saying?)

This absurd situation is making my thoughts go haywire. Calm down. I need to think about how to break through this situation. ...But how? Is it even possible at this point?

...At this stage, it can't be helped if she hates me. I have to consider the worst-case scenario. The worst-case scenario is Senpai running away. Because of this, she might claim a breach of contract and disappear.

(I absolutely cannot let that happen.)

That's it! Before she can run away, why don't I just make her fall for me for real this time? I'll make her feel so good she won't be able to live without me. Hehe, it's simple. I mostly figured out her sensitive spots last time, and with my current technique, I can definitely do it.

"Heh... hehehe."

"Lulu? Wh-What's wrong, Lulu?"

Senpai is making a bewildered face, but I'll ignore her for a moment. To make sure she can't resist, I need to go get the handcuffs first. Just as I started to stand up—

"Wait, Lulu!"

"Hauu!"

Senpai pulled my arm, throwing me off balance, and I tumbled onto the sofa. I closed my eyes, bracing for impact, but then I felt two distinct, soft sensations against my back. Senpai was hugging me from behind.

"Lulu, calm down. It's okay. You don't have to be that embarrassed. It's not a strange thing to do."

"Nnh..."

She quickly wrapped her arms around my stomach, pinning me. However, she wasn't using much strength. I could have escaped if I wanted to. But hearing her voice right in my ear made the strength drain out of me; I couldn't resist.

"I'm truly sorry for looking without permission. But you shouldn't worry yourself over it. I'll act like I didn't see anything. So Lulu... please don't make such a scary face."

(Was I making such a scary face?)

Hearing Senpai's gentle voice made me realize how frayed my mind had become. That's right... hurting Senpai by ignoring her will isn't what I truly want. I decided before that such things should be a last resort.

If Senpai hadn't stopped me, I might have done something I'd regret. I'm glad I stopped. Leaning back into her, I felt that from the bottom of my heart.



"Senpai, I'm okay now."

I tapped Senpai's arm to let her know I was fine. My heart had calmed down significantly, but now I was reaching a different kind of limit.

"Ah, sorry. Are you hurt anywhere?"

"I'm fine."

The moment she let go, I quickly sat back down a short distance away. If I looked at her face right now, I felt like I might lose control. I tried to think about unrelated things to settle my nerves.

(For now, I guess I managed to save my skin by a hair?)

From the look of things, even if she "saw," she didn't see everything. I had the room dark last night to heighten my other senses, so it's not surprising she couldn't see well.

Surely, she wouldn't be this kind to someone who was using her underwear as "material"... probably. ...Then again, Senpai is so ignorant there's a chance she didn't even understand what was happening. Either way, I can assume I've avoided the worst.

(Phew, thank goodness.)

I guess being lazy was my undoing. I should have closed the door properly. That door is an auto-lock, so if it closes, you need fingerprint authentication to open it, which is a pain. Still, leaving it wide open was a mistake.

(But it's because this is too much of a tease!)

Senpai's policy is not to wear a bra before bed, so after her bath, she wanders around in thin pajamas. Those breasts—visible yet not—drive me crazy. Even just now, feeling the raw sensation of them against me, it took everything I had not to make a move!

"Hey, Lulu. Are you mad?"

"Eh?"

While I was memorizing that sensation and planning to close the door properly tonight, Senpai asked me something strange. It was so unexpected I blurted out a question in return.

(Mad? Me?)

"Well, you've been silent for a while... I really do feel bad for looking."

"I'm not exactly mad... actually, yes. I am. I'm furious. Lulu is absolutely livid right now."

(I don't think she did anything wrong, but it'll be more convenient if I go along with this.)

When I gave that answer, Senpai's expression clouded over, and she spoke in a weak voice.

"I... see."

"Yes. Exactly. I'm 'geki-oko' mad."

"...Then, what can I do to make you forgive me?"

(Eh?)

In that instant, my brain had the greatest flash of inspiration in history.

"Then... I'll forgive you if Senpai shows me, too."

"Eh? Show you... what you were doing yesterday?"

"I mean, it's not fair if only Lulu gets seen, right?"

"No, but—"

"Didn't you just say I don't have to be embarrassed? Was that a lie?"

I knew this was total nonsense. But the logic that should have stopped this reckless behavior had flown out the window; I was desperate to grab this sudden opportunity.

"...But, I've never done it before, so I don't know how."

(How can she be this cute?)

I desperately suppressed the urge to reach out. If I made a move now, everything would be ruined. Maintaining a "gentlemanly" facade, I spoke.

"Then Lulu will teach you. Okay?"

"...Alright. You'll cheer up if I do, right?"

"Yes! Of course!"

(YES!)

If I did a fist pump right in front of her, it would be too vulgar, so I kept it in my head. I don't know how it ended up like this, but after a total reversal from the worst-case scenario, I couldn't help but celebrate this unexpected stroke of luck.

18. Episode 18: Beginner

(How did it end up like this again?)

Sitting on my bed, I recall the chain of events. I apologized for looking without permission, then Lulu got mad, then she said she wouldn't forgive me unless I showed her too.

(Thinking about it calmly, the logic is baffling.)

In what world does "I saw you, so you see me" make things even? Besides, looking at Lulu's huddled form sitting on the floor in front of me, I highly doubt she's actually angry. Well, there's no doubt I was the one who was rude first, so I suppose I need to do penance.

(It can't be helped. For the sake of my shy kouhai, I'll step up.)

"Alright, I'm starting."

"Are you going to do it with your clothes on?"

"Eh? But Lulu was doing it that way too."

(Getting shut down right at the start.)

Just when I'd finally braced myself, my resolve was faltering. I mean, aren't we doing this with clothes on? Lulu was doing it that way yesterday. So I thought I'd do the same, but was that wrong?

"Ah, yes. You're right."

"Oh, good. ...You're making a strange face, but this is fine, right?"

"Yes. I just thought I wanted to punch my past self, so it's okay."

"That doesn't sound 'okay' at all..."

Lulu is acting completely weird today. Well, I suppose anyone would react like that after being seen in an embarrassing state. Since I'm about to do it too, I'd appreciate it if she'd pull herself together.

(So, what do I do now?)

I've sat down on the bed, but I don't know the next step. I could try to mimic what I saw, but doing it randomly feels scary. I guess I have to ask Lulu.

"Sorry, Lulu. What should I do next?"

"Ah... well, first, why don't you put your hand inside through the front gap and rub your breasts?"

"...If you say so."

(She tells me to rub them, but there's not much to rub.)

Compared to Lulu, my chest is quite meager. You can tell she has them even from a distance, but mine are small enough that the lines disappear if I wear slightly oversized clothes. What's the point in rubbing these?

That said, I should follow the expert's advice. I try rubbing them as instructed, but as expected, nothing happens. Of course. What's fun about rubbing your own chest?

"Ah! You can't rub them that hard!"

"Then how am I supposed to do it?"

"More gently... like, put your heart into it."

"I don't know what that means."

I try rubbing with less force, but the result is the same. This situation is starting to feel ridiculous. I'm starting to get suspicious that Lulu is fundamentally wrong about this. Seeing me like that, Lulu makes a suggestion.

"Then... can Lulu show you an example?"

"An example?"

"I-It means I'll show you how I touch them by actually doing it."

(So Lulu is going to rub my breasts.)

Well, I hear some friends touch each other like that, so I guess it's fine. It doesn't look like we're getting anywhere, and if it's useless even when Lulu does it, it'll be a good excuse to stop.

"Alright, go ahead."

"Th-then, excuse me."

Lulu stood up and came right next to me. Then, looking hesitant, she reached for my chest.

(Well, I'm sure nothing will change.)

"Nnh."

"I-I'm sorry!"

"I-It's okay. I was just surprised because your hand was colder than I expected."

"I-I'll continue."

(What is this?)

It's completely different from when I did it myself. Is it because someone else is doing it? Her delicate movements, handling me like I was a precious treasure, felt... lewd, somehow. Starting from where she touched me, I felt my body getting hotter and hotter from the inside.

"You rub gently like this, slowly moving inward from the outside. Look, Senpai, try doing the same."

"Like... this?"

"You're good at this, Senpai."

I move my fingers as Lulu tells me. But the sensation of Lulu's hand from the other side is so ticklish I can't move properly. Something is clearly different between Lulu and me.

"And occasionally, like this..."

"Hyyu!"

"Flicking them like that makes it feel even better."

The sudden stimulation makes my voice jump. Plus, hearing Lulu's voice right in my ear makes me feel strange. Like I'm doing something bad.

"Also, giving them a little squeeze like this is good too."

"Nnh, aah... I-I get it. That's enough, really."

"Understood. Then keep going with your left hand, okay?"

If I let Lulu keep toying with me like this, I'm going to go crazy. I wanted her to move away for a second so I could catch my breath. Just as I was about to sigh with relief that she'd pulled back, she suddenly took my right arm.

"I'm going to borrow this for a bit, okay?"

"Eh?"

I had a bad feeling, but my light-headed brain couldn't resist.

"W-Wait, right there is... nyaa."

"It's dangerous, so Senpai, please don't move your fingers."

Even though it's my own hand, I don't know what's going to happen next because Lulu is controlling it. I should be scared, but it's frustrating that it feels good, and eventually, I lost the ability to think about that at all.

"This is a delicate place, so in the beginning, you have to trace it very gently."

"Nnh... fwaa."

"Once you're used to it, go a bit further... oh, is it almost time?"

Lulu's words aren't sinking in. Heat dominates my body, and something is welling up from deep within. I want to stop, but Lulu doesn't release my right hand; instead, she speeds up the pace.

"T-This is bad, Lulu. Something... somethi-nya is coming!"

"Senpai, don't be afraid. It's okay, just 'go' properly."

Immediately after Lulu spoke, a massive wave of stimulation hit, and I couldn't hold back.

"Nnh... ngh... uuuu."

(It's this again.)

The sensation of reaching the peak and then the sound cutting out for a moment. It was the same feeling as that time. ...I didn't know. I didn't know this was what "feeling good" meant. The moment I realized that, a wave of shame washed over me.

(I... in front of Lulu... like this.)

"Good work."

"Haa... fuuu..."

I couldn't look Lulu in the face, but for a different reason than before. I didn't think it would be this... this embarrassing. I wonder if I made a weird face just now. What if she's disillusioned? Those thoughts surfaced and popped like bubbles. I think I understand why Lulu was mad now.

"S-Senpai, you aren't mad, are you?"

"Why would I be mad?"

"Y-You're right."

"And... you'll forgive me now, right?"

"Yes, of course."

Actually, I'm the one who needs to be forgiven. After showing her such a pathetic side. While I was feeling indignant inside, Lulu said something while acting restless.

"Then, since it's late, wh-why don't you change and go to sleep for today?"

(Hm, what's this all of a sudden?)

I was momentarily suspicious of the abrupt suggestion, but checking the clock, it was already past 11:00 PM. Plus, even though I don't want to think I "leaked," it's true my panties are wet and uncomfortable from what just happened.

"True. I'll do that."

I actually wanted to take a shower, but my physical sluggishness won out. I'll follow Lulu's advice and just change for tonight, then shower tomorrow morning.

19. Episode 19: Careless

"Sigh... I'm a bit depressed this morning."

After what happened, how am I supposed to face Lulu? While making breakfast in the now-familiar kitchen of Lulu's house, my mind was entirely occupied by that one thought.

I couldn't sleep well last night. Even when I tried to forget everything and drift off, Lulu's scent nearby got in the way. That sweet fragrance forced me to remember what she did to me.

(I'm going to be dwelling on this for a while.)

I thought to myself as I seasoned the fried bacon.



"Still, she's late."

Even though I've finished making breakfast, Lulu hasn't come out yet. I'm almost at the point where I'll have to reheat it. She has work scheduled for this morning, and she's usually up by this time. I wonder what's wrong.

(Did she stay up late?)

If I wait any longer, she'll be late for her schedule. So, I went to Lulu's room to wake her up. It's the room next door, so it wasn't exactly a long walk. When I knocked, there was no reply, not even a sound. It didn't seem like she was in the middle of changing.

"Lulu~, I'm coming in, okay?"

When I entered the room, sure enough, Lulu was still breathing softly under the covers. Honestly, what would happen to her if I wasn't here? I wonder if she was always late before I came. I half-sighed as I spoke to her.

"Lulu, wake up."

"Nnh... Senpai... why are you... here?"

"Never mind 'why.' It's time. Come on, you have to get ready."

Lulu answered sleepily, her face still beet-red. Is she still embarrassed? I suppose it can't be helped, but we're in the same boat now, so I wish she'd just forget it... Wait, no. This isn't that kind of redness.

"Hold on. Lulu, how do you feel?"

"Fee-ling?"

I hurried to put my hand on her forehead, and as I feared, she was burning up.

(So the reason she was slurring her words was the fever.)

"You have a terrible fever. To get like this in one day... Did you sleep with your stomach exposed or something?"

"Ah... yesterday was... a bit..."

Lulu looked away guiltily. I knew she'd done something weird. Really. She doesn't have the strongest constitution, so she needs to be careful.

(No coughing or throat swelling, and her voice isn't nasal.)

It seems like it's just a fever rather than a full-blown cold. Thinking about it calmly, it didn't seem too serious, which was a relief. Still, there's no doubt she needs rest. I'll have her stay home today.

"Sigh... you should rest today. We need to call it in quickly."

"I can't do that."

I was taken aback by her unexpectedly strong refusal. I didn't think she was this stubborn.

"Wh-Why not? What if it gets worse?"

"If Lulu takes the day off, it will cause trouble for everyone else."

"But..."

My words trailed off. No, I had to shut my mouth when I saw her eyes. Her level of resolve was different; she made me realize that. I finally understood that I didn't know Lulu at all.

"Senpai, I'm sorry... I think there's medicine on the second shelf from the top in the back cabinet. Could you bring it?"

"...Alright."

When I pulled the shelf Lulu pointed out, I found a massive amount of medicine. Cold medicine, cough suppressants, fever reducers, even pain relief patches. Maybe her body has gotten a bit stronger than before, but she must still fall ill quite often. The open boxes of medicine told the story.

"Is this it?"

"Yes, that's fine. Thank you."

"Wait a moment, I'll bring some water right away."

I went to the kitchen, filled a cup, and rushed back. In that time, Lulu had sat up, looking hot despite it being March. She was sweating from the fever.

She looked miserable, but her will was firm. She swallowed the medicine and was already making moves to get out of bed and change.

"I'll take the cup."

"Thank you. Sorry, it looks like I won't be able to eat breakfast today."

"...Don't worry about it. You can eat at lunch."

"I'm really sorry."



Lulu left just as she said she would, without eating breakfast. Perhaps the medicine had kicked in, as her complexion was slightly better than when she first woke up, but I couldn't bring myself to give her a cheerful "have a good day."

The moment the front door closed, I slumped to the floor. The thread that had kept me acting strong so as not to burden Lulu had snapped.

(Those eyes are burned into my mind.)

Maybe I had been looking down on the work of an idol. I was just admiring the sparkling exterior and wasn't looking at the essence.

An idol's work involves many people. No, maybe every job is like that. Many people cooperate to move things forward; you can't easily ruin that just for your own convenience. I hadn't understood that at all.

Everyone has days when they feel off. But if you take a day off every time that happens, you'll lose trust in an instant. For someone as busy as Lulu, I'm sure that's even more true.

How much effort does it take to realign a shifted schedule? If that keeps happening, no one will want to hire even the most popular idol.

(And yet, I...)

I can't forgive myself for so easily telling her to rest. I should have known how seriously Lulu takes being an idol. Just because I was worried, I told her to rest without thinking. Without knowing what was hidden behind that.

The breakfast I ate alone for the first time in a while was incredibly tasteless.

20. Episode 20: What I Can Do

I was alone in the quiet room, waiting only for that sound.

Click.

(She's finally home.)

"Welco— wait!"

(I made it in time.)

The moment the door closed, Lulu collapsed, and I caught her just in the nick of time. It was a close call. I hurriedly brushed away the dark thought of what would have happened if I hadn't been here.

"I'm taking you to your room. Can you take off your shoes?"

"I'm sorry..."

"Never mind that. Come on."

I carried Lulu, who gave a weak reply, in my arms. I could feel her abnormal heat through her clothes. She must have gotten worse because she pushed herself to go. *I told you so*—if only I could have scolded her like that.

I had Lulu open her door and carefully laid her on the bed. I was about to go get some water since she must be thirsty, but then I felt something near my waist. Lulu was grabbing the hem of my shirt to keep me there.

"Senpai... you were about to leave the house today, weren't you? Did you think about running away?"

"There's no way I'd leave you like this and run away. I was just going to wait in front of the apartment."

She must be talking about when I went outside during the day to wait for her. I figured she'd come back in a taxi, so I wanted to accompany her from the entrance to the room. But that was just a thought; I couldn't do it. Even from the inside, the front door wouldn't open.

(You don't have to do that; I'm not going anywhere.)

"You can't. Running away from Lulu... Senpai should just stay at Lulu's house forever."

"If you're going to say that, then don't make me worry so much."

People tend to think dark thoughts when they're unwell. Being alone makes you even more anxious. At least she's still able to joke around.

"Now, be a good girl and sleep. Just let me know if you need anything."

"Senpai... I want to take a bath."

"No, it's dangerous today. I'll wipe your body down, so just bear with that."

"Ehh..."

"No complaining. I'll bring a warm towel, so wait a bit."

"Okay..."

I went to the sink and brought a towel and a basin of hot water. When I returned to the room, Lulu was fidgeting on the bed. It seemed she was struggling to take off her clothes because of the sweat.

"Uguuu... I can't... get it off."

"Yes, yes, wait a moment. Come on, hands up."

"Hehe... hands up."

Once I managed to get the sweat-soaked clothes off, I saw her full state. Drenched in sweat, skin burning hot—she must have felt miserable all day. Yet, being Lulu, she probably didn't let her smile slip so that others wouldn't find out.

(How much is she carrying on this tiny body?)

I could only imagine.

"Senpaaaii? I'm cold."

"Ah, sorry. I'll wipe you down right away."

Bad, bad. It would be a disaster if she caught a proper cold because of me. To make sure she didn't feel cold any longer, I hurriedly wrung out the towel and began wiping her body.

"Hey, Lulu... what did you do until now?"

"What do you mean by 'until now'?"

"I mean when I wasn't here. You were living alone, right?"

I'd heard Lulu had a weak constitution since we were kids. Before she became an idol, she'd missed school due to poor health more than once or twice, so this didn't seem like the first time.

"Nothing special. I just took medicine and rested quietly at home."

"...I see."

(She says it like it was nothing, but it must have been hard.)

While I was waiting for Lulu to come back, I felt so lonely. Dark thoughts of her not coming back crossed my mind many times. That was because I was alone. Lulu must have felt the same.

(You should have just relied on me.)

I thought it, but didn't say it. I realized I had no right to say such a thing.

I'd been so obsessed with myself that I might have ignored Lulu even if she was seeking help. No, that's not it. Because I had no room in my heart, Lulu couldn't rely on me. That's why she's been fighting alone all this time.

Regret swirled within me, and to brush it away, I kept wiping Lulu's body.



"Thank... you. I feel much better now."

"That's good."

Once I'd mostly finished wiping her and she was changed, she looked a bit better. We can't let our guard down, but she might wake up perfectly fine tomorrow.

(I guess that depends on whether she can rest quietly.)

"Lulu, what's your schedule for tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow is just a lesson, so I decided to skip it."

"...I see. If you can, you should."

I couldn't ask if it was my fault. I was afraid she'd say "Yes, it is." Maybe I'm being overprotective. Even though she's a respectable adult earning her own living, I'm worrying just because she's my kouhai. Is my worrying just becoming a nuisance?

"Senpai, are you mad about something?"

"Listen, stop assuming I'm mad just because I'm quiet. I'm not mad."

"But you had a dark look on your face."

"...Stupid. If my kouhai is sick, of course I'm going to look a bit dark."

"Ah... I'm sorry."

"If you're going to apologize, then just get better quickly."

(No, surely this is how it should be.)

If worrying is all I can do, then I should worry. Everyone is anxious when they're alone. Lulu is amazing. If Lulu says she's fine and shows a strong front, other people probably won't worry about her. So I'll do it instead. I'll look at her as just my kouhai, just a normal girl. That's what I, who was once her Senpai, can do.

(Now that I've decided, there's no more hesitation.)

"Did you eat anything for lunch?"

"A little bit of jelly."

"I see. Then you should eat a bit more. I made some porridge, so eat at least a little."

"If Senpai feeds me, I'll eat."

"Fine. I'll bring it right away, so wait there."

"Eh?"

Leaving a somehow-surprised Lulu behind, I left the room. I thought she might not have an appetite, but I'm glad I made it just in case. I don't know if she can finish it, but I'll bring a full bowl. If you don't eat, you can't win. I hope she can get at least a little nutrition from this.



Good, she ate the whole thing. She complained about the feeding being "mechanical and boring," which I didn't quite get, but judging by that appetite, she'll be fine. She's taken her medicine and is settled now; if she's careful tomorrow, she should be back to full strength soon.

"Senpaaaii, are you listening?"

"Lulu, you should really go to sleep soon."

"B-But Lulu wants to be with Senpai more..."

"We can talk tomorrow, right?"

Her eyes are getting glassy and her speech is slurring. It's a bit earlier than usual, but it's time for bed. When I stroked her head and reasoned with her as she shook her head "no," she reluctantly obeyed.

"Then, Senpai... please hold my hand."

"Yes, yes. I'll hold it until you fall asleep."

"It's a promise, okay?"

"I know. Here."

I wrapped my right hand gently around hers to ease her suspicious eyes. I think she started to look more peaceful. I wish she'd rely on me this honestly all the time.

"Senpai, thank you for today."

"It's fine. Now, goodnight."

"Goodnight..."

Lulu quietly closed her eyes, and her breathing gradually changed to a steady rhythm. It seems she fell asleep easily. Feeling relieved as I felt that rhythm, I too eventually let go of my consciousness and drifted off into the world of dreams.

21. Episode 21: Old Stories

"Yeah, looks like you're okay now."

After finishing breakfast, I checked her temperature, and it was 35.6°C. It feels a bit low, but apparently Lulu's baseline is naturally low, so this is normal for her. That just goes to show how abnormal her fever was yesterday.

As far as I can tell, she doesn't have any sluggishness or joint pain, and she ate breakfast normally, so it's safe to say she's recovered. Of course, we need to be careful about the fever returning, but it's a fact that we have some breathing room now.

"Then I can spend the whole day relaxing with Senpai!"

"What are you talking about?"

"Eh? Did you have something to do?"

I looked at a feigning Lulu with a serious face.

"You have lesson videos and stuff, right? You have to do what you can at home."

"Well, that's true, but..."

"I'll keep a proper eye on you so you don't collapse again."

If you asked if this was my way of making amends, I could only say yes. But I believe doing this is the right thing.



In Lulu's house, besides her room and mine, there's a training room. As the name suggests, it's equipped with various exercise machines, but the first thing you notice when you enter is the massive mirror. One entire wall is covered in mirrors, so you can see every movement of your body. Apparently, she had it custom-made for practicing at home.

(As expected of a top idol, she's rich.)

"Whew... warming up together like this... hah... it feels like we're back in the old days."

"Yeah... though you used to be so stiff back then."

"I've been doing the stretches Senpai told me to do every single day without fail!"

We exchanged light banter as we helped each other stretch. Just as Lulu said, it really felt nostalgic. Just for now, just in this room, it was like we were back to being who we were then.

Ever since Lulu became an idol, the chances for us to practice together at that studio decreased, and I don't think we've done it once in the past year. Since I could only see her progress on a screen, I was happy to see her dance in person after so long. I was looking forward to seeing how much she'd improved.

"I think we're warmed up enough. Lulu, how do you feel?"

"Perfect."

(It doesn't look like she's lying.)

But that's only for now. Lulu tends to overdo it, so I have to keep a close watch.

"So, do you know what was planned for today's lesson?"

"Ah... I guess it's okay to show Senpai. Wait a moment."

Lulu left the room and came back with a laptop. After some clicks, a video started playing on the screen.

"This is the dance for the next new song. We're scheduled to film the MV soon, so I need to start memorizing it."

(I see, a dance.)

A person who looked like a dance trainer was dancing to a song I'd never heard before. If it's dance practice, I might be able to be of a little help. ...No, probably not. Lulu is a professional; she doesn't need advice from me.

"I see. Then you can practice alone, right? I'll just watch to make sure you don't push yourself."

"Understood."



(Hm? Did something happen?)

After practicing for a while, Lulu started repeating the same section over and over. It's normal to focus on one part, but she was tilting her head in confusion every time she finished, so I couldn't help but speak up.

"Hmm... something's not right..."

"What's wrong, Lulu?"

"Ah, Senpai. Well, as I'm dancing, there's a part that just doesn't feel right. I don't know if this is correct."

"Hmm, I see. Hey, is this the only angle you have for the video? Any from a different side?"

"That's the thing; I don't have any. What I'm looking at now is like a demo. I was supposed to have the instructor teach me the details today."

(So that's how it was.)

It definitely looks a bit ambiguous from just this angle. But I suppose she can't just ask the choreographer right away.

(Is there anything... I can do?)

"I see. Well, it's been an hour, so let's take a break. Here, I brought some sports drink."

"Ah, thank you."

Once I confirmed Lulu was sitting down, I stood in front of the mirror. It's okay; I've already got the rhythm in my head, and I've memorized most of the movements. It might not be much to look at, but I might be able to give her some kind of hint. And so, I began to dance.



"Haa... whew. Something like this?"

(I tried dancing it through once, but this is tough.)

Partly because it had been a while, my body wasn't keeping up at all. My axis was wobbling during that turn, and my finger movements lacked sharpness. *Ah, so I've become this unable to move*, my head thought, but paradoxically, my heart felt strangely clear.

"...Senpai, you really are amazing. To be able to dance it so quickly..."

"I've still got a long way to go. I can only do it while watching, and mine is just a copy of the model."

"That's not true at all. But I see... so you twist your arm once before bringing it in there."

(It looks like I was of some help.)

It was worth showing off my clumsy dance. I was about to go back to taking a break, thinking Lulu would be fine on her own now, when she threw a question at me.

"Um, Senpai. How can you learn to dance that quickly?"

"Hmm... instead of just looking at the movement vaguely, I might be consciously looking at the direction of the joints. I look at the choreography with a feeling of X-raying the dancer's limbs down to the bone to see how they achieve that sequence without it feeling off, and then I absorb it into myself."

"I see..."

"But that's just my way, so I think Lulu's way is fine. I like your dancing because I can always tell it's *yours*."

"Eh?"

(Lulu's dance has a charm that no one else has.)

Whenever she dances, Lulu's world unfolds. That might not be a good thing for a "dancer," but Lulu is an "idol." It's a unique personality born of overwhelming sense that no one can imitate. So it doesn't matter if it's not exactly like the model; as long as Lulu can bring out her own dance, I'm sure that's enough.

"Haa. But I really can't do it like I used to. My stamina isn't holding up."

"Is that so? I thought you were dancing quite well."

"Thanks. So, did you find your answer?"

"Yes. Thank you."

With this, I guess it'll be fine as long as I make sure Lulu doesn't overdo it.



"L-Let's call it a day for now."

"Yes. Thank you for staying with me."

"No, it's not something you need to thank me for."

(I ended up dancing the whole day too.)

I intended to stop after once, but Lulu kept begging me to dance again and again. Thanks to that, various parts of my body are already starting to scream. Tomorrow is definitely going to be

muscle pain day. The fact that Lulu, who was moving much more intensely than me, seems perfectly fine hits my pride a bit.

"Nfufu."

"What is it, all of a sudden?"

"No, it's just that Senpai has a good look on her face."

"Eh?"

"How should I put it... you look lively, or rather, overflowing with vitality."

"...I see."

I knew it even without Lulu telling me. Because there I was in the mirror, with a cloudless smile on my face.

"I guess I really do love dancing."

Lying spread-eagled on the floor while still drenched in sweat, I laughed at myself. I've known I loved dancing since ten years ago. And yet, when I realized I couldn't be an idol, I desperately pushed it away. I tightly shut the lid so I'd never have to see it again. Even though doing that would never heal the wound in my heart.

(I'm so stupid.)

Thinking about it, the reason I tried to avoid Lulu was probably the same thing. I wanted to pretend the entire past never happened along with her. By doing that, I was trying to protect myself. Now that I understand, it was such a trivial reason.

(I'm really so stupid.)

"Hey Lulu, can I use this place too from now on?"

"Of course! Please use it as much as you like."

"Thank you."

Even if this life has to end someday, I'll keep meeting Lulu properly after that. I'll listen to her complaints about work, give her advice on her worries, and we'll go out to eat delicious things together. We'll laugh over old stories, cry together when something sad happens, and...

And then, new relationships will be born for both Lulu and me, we'll gradually get more distance, the number of times we meet will decrease, and eventually, we'll become the past. Even so, I'll make sure to remember that Lulu was always a part of me.

22. Episode 22: Jealousy

The day after dancing with Lulu, I was hit by the expected muscle pain. I used to be fine with that much exercise... Anyway, I was now doing training while groaning in pain.

"Twenty-eight... twenty-nine... thirty... haa... haa."

(I want to dance like I used to, soon.)

I want to regain my stamina bit by bit and dance like I did then—no, even better than then. For that reason alone, I whipped my sluggish body and threw myself into training once more.

I already know there's no meaning in doing this. I've given up on becoming an idol, and I've realized that I probably wasn't suited for it anyway. So right now, I just wanted to dance.

(I guess I never needed a meaning.)

I had been too trapped by "meaning." When I was aiming to be an idol, I always felt like I was being chased by something. My tendency to dance exactly like the model was a sign of that; I probably felt there had to be a "correct" answer. In the days of struggling as if trying to grasp a cloud without being able to see an inch ahead, I wanted an unwavering correctness.

That itself probably isn't wrong. The problem was that I left the axis of that correctness to other people. Because I was afraid to affirm myself and left the judgment to someone else, I couldn't become Lulu.

(That's why I love Lulu's dancing.)

Lulu wasn't dancing for someone else; she was dancing the dance *she* wanted to show. That's why she possesses such a vivid, eye-catching charisma. I might have always admired Lulu for being able to stay true to herself.



"Whew~"

It had been a while since I'd had a good sweat. Recently, I hadn't even been able to go on my daily runs, so I'll continue training here properly starting today.

As I put away the equipment I'd used, I realized once again how much I love moving my body. Partly because moving is simply fun, but also because if I get completely exhausted, I don't have time to think about unpleasant things. I can now accept even that negative reason as being "me."

"I'll take a shower before... making dinner."

I thought earlier that I didn't need a meaning. But the world doesn't only turn on pretty words, and somewhere in my heart, *I still wanted to be rewarded. I hope that in the future, I can get a job where I can put this to use.* With those thoughts, I finished my training for the day.



We finished dinner, and during our free time, I was sitting on the living room sofa watching TV. It looked like it would take a bit more time to get used to this massive screen.

"I'm out of the bath."

"Okay."

I gave a half-hearted reply to Lulu. The TV show I was watching was just getting to a good part.

"Hm, hm."

"Senpai, is this fun to watch?"

"Well, yeah."

The show currently on was a so-called music program, where various artists were performing. Of course, there were idol groups among them, and it had just been their turn.

(Idols really are great.)

Before, I had avoided watching idol programs—or basically any TV—to focus on my practice. Before I knew it, idols I liked had already retired, and I'd felt disappointed. Being able to watch TV freely might be one of the few good things about my current situation.

"They're all such cute girls. Well, they're idols, so I guess that's a given."

When I think about everything up till now, an indescribable sense of loneliness washes over me, but it's not as strong as it used to be. Being able to watch a show like this head-on might be proof that I've cut ties with my lingering regrets. Just as I was thinking that, the TV screen suddenly went black, and my blank face was reflected in it.

"Eh? Wait a sec!"

I whipped around to see Lulu standing there with the remote. It was obvious, but it looked like she had turned off the TV.

"What are you doing?"

"There's no need for you to watch this."

"Lulu?"

Rather than anger at the show being turned off, I was more bewildered by her attitude.

"Senpai has Lulu, doesn't she? If Senpai wants to see something, I'll sing or dance or do even more than that. So you don't need to watch that stuff."

"...No, but there are groups and stuff too..."

Lulu is basically a solo act, so you can't see perfectly synced teamwork unless it's other girls, right? I tried to plead my case, but Lulu's response didn't change.

"Senpai should only look at Lulu. Got it?"

(Why all of a sudden?)

I mean, I know she's a top idol, but that's one thing; I want to see other girls too. Before I could voice my protest, I noticed Lulu's eyes looked familiar. They were the same eyes I'd always seen in the mirror—eyes burning with the obsession of jealousy.

(Ah, I see.)

Lulu is fighting and sharpening her skills against the idols who were on that show. She might even know them personally. I guess it doesn't feel good to have someone praise your rivals right in front of you. It's not right of me to neglect Lulu just because I'm the only one who stepped out of that race.

"Sorry. I was insensitive."

"Senpai doesn't understand anything."

"No, I do. My bad. What can I do to make you feel better?"

"...Then, stroke my head."

"Yes, yes. Come over here."

I beckoned Lulu, who was still standing there, to the sofa. She waddled over awkwardly as if to emphasize her bad mood, which was quite cute. Lulu lay down with her head on my lap. Even so, the fact that she was facing away was probably her way of showing she was still mad.

"I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking about your feelings."

"...Lulu said a bit too much too. You can watch shows if Lulu is in them."

"You're not yielding on that, huh."

"Senpai, stroke it properly."

"Yes, yes."

I gently stroked her head as she told me. As I enjoyed the feeling of her silky hair flowing through my fingers, her atmosphere gradually softened. Good, it looks like she forgave me.

(Even so, Lulu gets jealous too.)

I didn't really have that image of her, so I was surprised. I didn't think Lulu could harbor ill feelings toward people. For now, I'll stop mentioning other idols in front of her. I'd learned another lesson.

23. Episode 23: Audible Voices

"Nnh... Senpai... Senpaaaii..."

(It's that voice again.)

A sweet girl's voice, almost like a scream, echoing from the back of the room. Since yesterday, right before bed, I've started hearing Lulu's seductive, sweet voice. It's so exaggerated that I want to ask if she even intends to keep it a secret; it almost sounds like she's letting me hear it on purpose.

(Since I hear this voice, it means she's definitely...)

No, of course, this is Lulu's house, so she can do whatever she wants. She can, but the problem is actually with me—hearing this voice makes me feel strange for some reason.

I end up remembering what Lulu did to me that time, and my lower abdomen starts to throb and ache. It subsides if I curl up, but the restless feeling just keeps accumulating. I want her to keep it down a bit, but how am I supposed to say that?

If I go talk to her directly, it'll be a repeat of that other time, and it would be pitiful to tell her I can hear her in the first place. But if I just leave it like this, it's too much poison for my ears; I feel like I'm going to lose it.

"Nnh... aah!"

(If I hear it tomorrow too, I'll finally say something.)

With that thought, I reached a temporary conclusion and managed to fall asleep by covering my ears today.



Ring, ring... ring, ring...

"Oops."

I had seen Lulu off and mostly finished the daytime housework when my phone, which rarely rings, suddenly went off. Looking at the screen, the caller was my mother.

(Well, I have to answer.)

"What is it all of a sudden, Mom? Do you need something?"

『Do I need a reason to call my daughter?』

"No, it's not that, but..."

(It's just as awkward as I expected.)

Since our parting was what it was, talking like this makes me a bit nervous. I feel like it would have been easier to talk face-to-face. Still, now that I've overcome my lingering regrets, I shouldn't end up raising my voice like before.

『How have you been lately, Nozomi?』

"Even if you ask how... I'm just normal. How about you, Mom? Are you okay without me?"

A safe report on our current situations. Even if it was awkward, I wanted to confirm that at least. I was the one in charge of making breakfast and dinner in place of my busy mother. I was worried she wouldn't be able to manage after I left.

『You don't need to worry that much. I snack on things while tasting dishes for the shop, and I'm managing the leftovers well.』

"I see."

(That's a little bit annoying.)

But well, it's good if it's nothing. She's my mother, after all; she's different from Lulu. I wouldn't say I wasted my time worrying, but maybe it wasn't that necessary. Besides, Mom was talking in her usual tone, so I started to feel silly for being so guarded.

『Are you being a nuisance to Lulu-chan?』

"I told you I'm not. If anything, I'm being helpful."

『Really?』

"Why are you doubting me? Listen, Lulu was eating basically nothing but processed food until I came, you know? Plus, she can't clean or do laundry; honestly, I'm shocked she was able to live alone at all."

『Is that so?』

"Yeah. So I'm doing it all for her now. Well, I'm thinking I'll have to have her learn eventually, though."

(Actually, I'm not too worried about that.)

Lulu is basically a girl who can do anything if she tries. It's just that she usually thinks it's a hassle and doesn't do it; I'm sure she could cook or clean if she wanted to. I just need to get her motivated.

Because I was thinking so optimistically, my mother's next words made my breath catch.

『So, around when are you going to be coming home?』

"..."

(Right, thinking about it, of course she'd ask.)

I knew this would have to end someday, but having someone else say it made it feel real all at once. It's been over a week since I came here. According to the original plan, I should have already returned home. If Lulu can't bring herself to say it, I have to be the one to end it.

"...It might take a little longer."

『I see. Well, as long as Lulu-chan is okay with it, that's fine. I just wondered what you were thinking about the future.』

"Yeah, you're right."

That's right; I have to live for the future. Even if the story ends where I couldn't become an idol, my life doesn't end. I will live my life as it continues. It's the same for Lulu. Lulu, who became an idol, will walk the life of an idol. That's the correct path.

『But I'm glad. You sound like you're doing well.』

"Eh?"

『Your voice sounds much firmer than when you left the house.』

"Yeah. I'm okay now."

『I see. You can think about the future whenever you want, so just take it slow for a bit longer. Anyway, give my regards to Lulu-chan.』

"Ah, wait—"

My mother said her piece and quickly hung up. I realized just now that my slightly impatient side probably comes from her.

When the call ended and I was alone, the room suddenly became quiet and lonely. The distant walls took away the faint sounds I made. This house really is too large for one person to live in.

(The future, huh.)

This life isn't forever. Just a tiny dream during spring break. I've gotten completely used to it, but we'll eventually have to return to our daily lives. I can't keep clinging to Lulu forever.

(Actually, there's no meaning in this life anymore.)

I had been pushing the responsibility onto Lulu, but this distorted communal life originally started because *I* rejected Lulu. Now that I've decided to keep meeting her even after this life ends, she no longer needs to keep me locked up here.

I could just come over on a holiday to teach her how to do housework. If I just put in a little effort to fill her loneliness and anxiety, that would be the end of it.

(But... just a little longer.)

Yes, I want this life to continue for just a little longer. I can't clearly say why, but I find myself foolishly wishing for it.

24. Episode 24: Persuasion

In the end, that seductive, alluring voice rang out again last night, leading me astray. It's just a feeling, but I even get the sense it's getting louder than before.

Because that voice wouldn't leave my head, I felt too embarrassed to even look Lulu in the eye this morning; just seeing her off drained me of unnecessary stamina.

(I just have to say it.)

I feel a bit sorry for her, but keeping quiet about the current situation is far worse. Believing that, I mustered my courage and spoke to Lulu.

"Lulu, do you have a minute?"

"Yes, what is it?"

Lulu answered, looking puzzled. Breaking this peaceful moment filled me with guilt. Even so, for the sake of my own peace of mind—and for Lulu's honor—I couldn't back down.

"So, about lately... at night. I can, well, hear your voice."

"....."

Her face became unreadable. Whether she was angry or embarrassed, Lulu remained silent and didn't seem intent on saying a word. It made my heart ache a little, but I couldn't let things remain vague. Seizing the moment while Lulu was quiet, I pressed on.

"I'm not saying you have to stop, of course—"

"Did you watch?"

"Eh, watc—? No, no, I didn't watch! I didn't!"

"You really didn't watch?"

"Yeah. So don't worry."

I made sure not to make the same mistake twice; no matter how curious I got, I never went to look. So, I thought I had at least protected Lulu's dignity. And yet, for some reason, Lulu looked somewhat dissatisfied upon hearing those words.

"Why didn't you come to watch!?"

"Wh—No, wait, isn't that weird!?"

"Because... no, I'm sorry. I got a little carried away."

"Oh, uh, yeah. I'm fine, though."

(She said something pretty strange just now, but is she okay?)

She seems like she doesn't want to be questioned, so I won't bring it up. But man, she must be really tired, Lulu. Well, there's no point in dragging this conversation out; let's settle this quickly.

"Getting back to the point, I just want Lulu to lower her voice a bit more. I mean, if you just shut the door, that would probably be enough—"

"In the first place, what's so bad about my voice being heard?"

"Huh? I mean, because, you'd be embarrassed if I heard you, right, Lulu?"

"Lulu isn't embarrassed at all."

"Eh, wait."

"After all, Senpai, you only told me because you thought Lulu would be embarrassed, right? Thank you for your concern. But since Lulu isn't embarrassed, then there's no problem, right?"

"Ah, well, maybe so?"

(She might actually have a point?)

If Lulu is going to be so brazen as to say she isn't embarrassed, I don't really have a leg to stand on. However, that's a problem. If I have to keep listening to that from now on, I'm going to go crazy eventually.

"...Because when I hear your voice, Lulu, I start to feel weird."

"Mmm-hmm."

"What is it?"

"No, nothing. But if that's the case, you should just let it out. Just like Lulu taught you."

"There's no way I'm doing something like that."

"Eh?"

(Crap, my true feelings slipped out.)

"Ah, no, that's not it. I didn't mean to reject you at all, Lulu."

While making pathetic excuses, my gaze drifted further and further down. No, but it can't be helped, right? I mean, that's usually something boys do, isn't it? The teacher said it's normal for girls to do it too, but the fact that they have to go out of their way to say that means it's weird after all.

(I-I hope I didn't hurt her feelings, Lulu.)

I timidly looked up to check her expression. But, surprisingly, Lulu looked perfectly fine; if anything, she even started giving me advice.

"Senpai, that's such a waste."

"A waste?"

"I mean, if you do 'that,' you can become pretty."

"What are you talking about? There's no way."

I dismissed it as a ridiculous story, but Lulu kept her serious expression.

(The silence is making me really anxious.)

I tried to plead with my eyes that she was surely joking, but there was no response. While I was internally panicked by the lack of sense, Lulu began to lecture me with a deadly serious face.

"They often say a maiden in love is beautiful, but that actually makes quite a bit of sense. It's not just a conceptual thing like your awareness changing when you're in love; there are actual physical changes, like various hormones being secreted. Thanks to that, your skin becomes smooth and your hair gets a nice sheen."

"Well, I might have heard that before."

"And doing it by yourself has a similar, or even better, effect. Dopamine and adrenaline are released, so, see?"

"...You're right."

"Do you understand now? That's why Lulu does it."

"I see."

(I had no idea.)

I didn't know it had those kinds of effects, and I never even tried to find out. Is this difference in awareness the gap between me and Lulu? I thought I had been making the greatest effort possible until now, but maybe there was still more I could do.

"Don't you want to become even more, much more beautiful, Senpai?"

Lulu's invitation, delivered with a sweet smile, somehow sounded like a devil's whisper. It was a vague anxiety, a feeling that I might be doing something irreversible. Even so, I couldn't resist the magic of those words.

"...What should I do?"

"Then let's go to the room, Senpai. Lulu will teach you all about it, very thoroughly."

And so, Lulu took my hand and dragged me along, urging me to be quick.

25. Episode 25: Desire

[Lulu's POV]

I pulled Senpai into her room. This was the second time I'd been inside. My heart was pounding like a hammer at the thought of what was to come, but the excessive excitement had gone full circle and left my head feeling strangely calm.

(It hasn't changed.)

The room looked almost exactly as it did when I first set it up for her. I'd told her I'd get her anything she wanted, but she never asked for a single thing.

Apparently, she's naturally lacking in worldly desires; she only buys practical items. Come to think of it, she used to talk about nothing but idols back then; she probably had no interest in anything else.

(I'd hate it if she started collecting other idols' merch, so maybe this is for the best.)

I'd give her any of my merch she wanted, but I can't really imagine her wanting it. We'll probably end up sleeping in the same room eventually anyway, so there's no point overthinking it. Besides, right now, I need to focus on what comes next.

"So, are we doing it like before?"

"That's the plan."

(I'm so happy I feel like I might get a nosebleed.)

I'd wanted this, but it was going so well I still couldn't believe it. It was a good thing I masturbated right before she went to sleep, betting on the chance she'd see me like last time.

Well, I couldn't show her the *real* thing, so that was an act, but it seems I successfully baited her. It went differently than I expected, but all's well that ends well.

"Now, Senpai. First, please take off your clothes."

"Last time you did it with your clothes on."

"That was... well, that was the 'trial version.' This is the real thing."

"I see. That makes sense."

It was a flimsy excuse even to my own ears, yet Senpai didn't show a hint of suspicion. She's so pure it's actually worrying. It might be a sign of her trust in me, but more likely, she's just incredibly sheltered.

While I was lost in thought, Senpai matter-of-factly stripped, gradually revealing her beautiful body. Smooth skin without a single blemish, and a perfect proportion that showed the results of her daily efforts. There was a finished beauty there that I couldn't help but stare at.

(Ah, panties.)

I really wanted her to take her underwear off too, but I guess that can wait. Having finished undressing without a moment's hesitation, Senpai checked in with me as an afterthought.

"This is really going to be effective, right?"

"I wouldn't lie to you. So don't worry."

"If you say so."

I wasn't lying—though there might have been a bit of exaggeration. My conscience pricked me a little seeing how easily she believed me. Then again, Senpai is partly to blame for being so gullible. She's always lecturing me on common sense, yet she knows nothing about how the world works.

If she'd actually entered the entertainment industry, she would have been chewed up and spat out instantly. Yes, this is a lesson for her—teaching her not to trust people so lightly. I finished making excuses to my internal jury and moved to the next step.

"Okay, lie down on the bed, and let's start with the chest again. Try doing it yourself while remembering what I did. Oh, and if you feel anything, let me know."

"Understood."

Senpai gave a short reply, lay down, and began to massage her breasts right in front of me. She closed her eyes, likely recalling my movements; I could see her cheeks flushing almost immediately.

(Honestly, Senpai's body is way too sensitive.)

Maybe it's because she has so little body fat, but her ability to adapt to pleasure this quickly can only be called a talent. Still, the spring air must be chilly while naked; I need to make her climax quickly to warm her up.

"I-I think... it's feeling kind of restless around my stomach?"

"Shall we start working on the lower half, then?"

"Y-yeah."

Senpai reached down, but I stopped her. Since she's still inexperienced, she might hurt herself, and besides, leaving it like this would be too much of a tease. My rational brakes had completely snapped.

"Ah, keep massaging your chest with both hands."

"What? Then I won't have enough arms."

"Exactly. So, I'll take care of this part."

"Wait, ah, h-ngh!"

(She's already this wet.)

Contrary to her mind, Senpai's body is incredibly lewd. It would be a disaster if anyone else found out. If she'd gone into show business, she might have been deflowered somewhere beyond my reach. Thinking that she's still here, pure and unsullied, thanks to those talentless scouts makes me feel a sense of gratitude.

"Ngh, ahh!"

"Hang in there, Senpai."

She twisted her body desperately, trying to let the pleasure escape, yet she didn't stop her hands as I'd instructed. Seeing her so earnest captured my heart all over again; I decided then that I had to have her, no matter what.

"Ngh, Lulu, s-something... something's coming again!"

(Oh, hearing her say that is so cute.)

I was curious to see what kind of face she'd make if I backed off now, but since it was her first time, I decided to let her finish properly. As I sped up, Senpai's moans became fragmented until she finally reached the end. Her body tightened, then her whole frame spasmed for a moment, and her voice cut off. Her melted expression and her gasping breath—she was more precious and cuter than anyone else in the world.

"Haah... haah... haah..."

"Senpai, what just happened is called 'coming.'"

"Coming?"

"Yes. You felt like your mind went blank, right? That's what it is."

"I-I don't care what it's called, but that's the end of it, right?"

Flushed and out of breath, Senpai asked me as if pleading. But I wasn't satisfied yet. After all, barely five minutes had passed. So, I looked at her with the most innocent face I could muster.

"What are you saying? There's no way we're stopping after just one time."

"Eh? But last time..."

"Like I said, that was the trial version. Let's see... we should go for five times. At least five."

"F-five? That many?"

Senpai's eyes went wide with shock; that previous climax must have been quite an impact. The faint sheen of sweat on her skin brought out her sex appeal to the max.

Honestly, I wanted to say "until you pass out," but that would be too much of a strain on her body. Judging by her stamina, five times was probably the limit, but maybe I was getting a bit too carried away. I had become greedy, even though the current situation was already an unexpected stroke of luck.

A little time passed, and Senpai didn't say anything. It was still a feast for the eyes, but I figured I couldn't hope for more. Just as I thought I'd overstepped and was about to take it back, Senpai spoke up first.

"I... I understand. Five times, then. I'm counting on you."

(Ngh~!)

I wanted to praise myself for not screaming out loud. Why does Senpai captivate me so much? She's such a femme fatale that I almost suspect she's doing it on purpose. If this were actually her seductive technique, I'd be dancing right in the palm of her hand.

(But the reality is, she's just innocent.)

That's why I have to protect her. I have to take responsibility and look after this pure, innocent Senpai.

"Understood. Let's do our best together!"

"Yes."

For now, though, I'll focus on making her feel as good as possible. I want her to get completely addicted to me. After all, the night has only just begun.

26. Episode 26: Gratitude

The moment I woke up, I felt like something was different. It felt as if a weight had been lifted, or like my body was lighter.

"Ugh."

When I tried to sit up, my lower back throbbed with a dull pain. Muscles I don't usually use were aching. That's when I finally remembered yesterday. My own pathetic behavior.

(I really exposed a disgraceful side of myself.)

Lulu comforted me, saying that's just how it is, but it was still a shock. Also, Lulu was the one who cleaned up, wasn't she? I couldn't move for a while after that. Lulu wiped my body down by hand and even changed the sheets that had become a mess. Thanks to that, there wasn't a trace left in the room, to the point where the event almost felt like a dream.

If it weren't for the pain lingering in my body, I would have doubted it was real. Part of me wished it *had* been a dream.

(Wait, this is bad.)

Is it really this late already? I don't have time to lounge around. It'll be a bit awkward to face Lulu, but I need to make her breakfast quickly.

◆◇◆◇◆◇

"Senpai..."

"Lulu, good morning. You're up early today."

"Yes, good morning."

I dressed quickly and headed to the kitchen, only to find Lulu already there. Seeing her standing there in an apron, it seemed she had made breakfast. It smelled like fried eggs—certainly a good sign—but something bothered me.

(Why does she look so scared?)

The moment she saw me, Lulu's expression stiffened for a split second. It was the kind of reaction someone has when they expect to be scolded. She immediately covered it with a smile, but I wouldn't miss it even if anyone else would. However, I didn't know why, so I couldn't bring myself to ask.

"Were you making breakfast?"

"Yes. It's not as fancy as Senpai's though."

"The fact that Lulu made it at all is amazing. And, sorry. I woke up late."

"Oh, that's totally fine, but..."

(She's definitely hiding something.)

The hesitation I felt before meeting Lulu was now entirely replaced by worry for her. It was painful not knowing what was making her anxious. For example, what if she had some second thoughts after seeing my disgraceful state yesterday? ...That seemed possible.

"Um, excuse me."

"What is it? I need to wash my face."

"...Uh, are you okay?"

"What do Senpai mean 'okay'? Oh, Lulu's back hurts a little, but I'm fine."

"I see. That's good then."

(A noncommittal response.)

A fog remained in my heart, wondering if something had happened yesterday, but there was no time in the morning. I decided to think about it after seeing Lulu off. With that thought, I left Lulu and headed to the washroom.



"Thanks for the food. It was delicious. Ah, I'll do the dishes, so Lulu go get ready."

"Then I'll leave it to you Senpai."

"Yeah."

The breakfast Lulu made was delicious, no flattery needed. It seems she really can cook normally; she just hadn't been doing it. The only problem is time. She seems to have a little breathing room today, but the fact that the busy Lulu usually has no time for cooking or housework is still the main obstacle.

"Sorry about yesterday. For making Lulu stay up so late."

"No, not at all! ...If anything, same here."

"Same here?"

"N-nothing!"

(Lulu is acting strange.)

Well, even if I pressed her here, she'd probably just play dumb, so it's a waste of time. I can't help her if she doesn't ask for help, and I don't have much room to spare myself right now. I'll just tell her what I need to say.

"Hey, Lulu, you do... the kind of thing we did yesterday by yourself too, right?"

"Well, yes."

"Then, should I help you out too?"

"Huh?"

"Because Lulu can't do it properly alone, right? You need someone to help you."

"Hm? Oh, o-oh... right, yes. Exactly."

(What's with that reaction?)

Wasn't Lulu the one who said it? That it's impossible to get the proper effect alone. So I just thought it was my turn.

"So, I thought maybe I could help. You know, since Lulu helped me yesterday, I wanted to return the favor?"

"Ha-wha?"

(She doesn't look very happy.)

It's like it hasn't clicked, or she's shocked by an unexpected suggestion. Come to think of it, that makes sense. If a beginner like me tries to do it, I probably won't be good at it and might just be a bother to Lulu. I wanted to be useful to her, but maybe I'm overstepping.

"Sorry, I guess I can't do it. I've never done it before, after all."

"Ah, no, it's not that! Uh, yes. Then, could I ask Senpai to do it tonight?"

"Is it okay?"

"Yes. Please."

(Did I make her feel obligated?)

Well, it can't be helped. I'll just have to do my best to make it up to her tonight.

"W-well, Lulu's going now. I have to get to work."

"Yeah, sorry for holding you up. Do your best today too."

"Yes. I'm off!"

"Take care."

Having made the promise, I saw Lulu off today as I always do.

27. Episode 27: The Future

"Phew. I guess I'll call it a day for now."

Finishing the training I've newly added to my daily routine, I take a breath right where I am. I feel like pushing myself a bit more, but since I have that... *thing* with Lulu tonight, I should keep it light.

(Still, Lulu really does have great taste.)

I think to myself again as I carefully wipe down the equipment drenched with sweat. For someone aiming to be an idol, training isn't about bulking up muscle.

It's strictly for building the core strength and stamina necessary for dancing and singing. Everything here is exactly what's needed for an idol's physique; I should be able to train very efficiently.

A pointless thought suddenly crossed my mind: would anything have changed if I'd had something like this from the start? Even if it wasn't professional equipment, if I had at least known what kind of training was effective...

(The early days were just a continuous cycle of trial and error.)

When I first started aiming to be an idol, I didn't know what to do. Of course, I could look up methods for muscle training or flexibility. But I didn't know which specific muscles were necessary for dancing and singing.

So, even if I understood which exercise worked which muscle, it didn't mean much, and I didn't realize that finding a workout suited to my own body was a crucial factor.

(Thanks to that, though, I ended up becoming quite knowledgeable about anatomy.)

It's a fact that I took a massive detour. If I were at a major training school, they probably would have taught me, but I had to find my own way alone.

It's not like I have lingering regrets, and I'm not mourning the past at this point. But if there had been some kind of signpost like that, maybe some of my anxiety back then could have been wiped away. That silly delusion strangely wouldn't leave my head.



I take a quick shower, refreshing and resetting both my body and mind. I still have a little time before I need to make dinner. It's the time of day when Lulu hasn't come home yet; maybe I'll relax for a bit.

"Haaa~"

As I sink into the living room sofa, a sigh escapes naturally. Sinking deep into the cushions, a distinct scent tickles my nose. Lulu is one of the notes in that scent, reminding me that this is, after all, Lulu's house.

(I feel like I don't really need to be so stubborn anymore.)

Perhaps thanks to exposing myself in such a pathetic state yesterday, I've become able to think with a sense of clarity. Well, if I think seriously about yesterday, I'll die of embarrassment, so I'm trying not to think about it *too* properly.

The beginning was distorted, but to put it simply, this situation is just living in the same house—a simple room share. ...No, that's an exaggeration. Thinking calmly, this is basically light house arrest.

(Well, let's just call it a room share. Yeah.)

(If that's the case, isn't it fine to just stay like this?)

I kept thinking I had to go home quickly, but surprisingly, it's started to feel like living here permanently might be okay. My mom seems fine even if I don't go back, and if anything, I'm more worried about Lulu if I were to leave.

(Because this house is too big.)

Of course, there's a world of difference between Lulu's income and mine, but Lulu would probably forgive me if I handled the housework.

Even when she's feeling unwell like before, just having someone in the house should change her state of mind. Yeah, I just thought of it on a whim, but it's not bad—actually, I think it's pretty good.

Of course, this depends on Lulu. I'd be in trouble if I wasn't allowed to go out alone to work a part-time job, and I don't know if Lulu will agree to these terms. But if we can clear that, it's a fairly realistic compromise.

(I'll have a talk with Lulu soon.)

Just as I reached that conclusion, the time came. It's about time to start preparing dinner.



(Somehow, Lulu was incredibly talkative today.)

Ever since she got home, she's been unusually chatty. Because of that, I haven't had a chance to bring up the subject. Now that dinner is over and things have finally settled down, can I do it?

I paused my hands while doing the dishes and spoke to Lulu, who was mysteriously sitting in a formal *seiza* style on the sofa.

"Hey, Lulu."

"Au— Ah, u-um, L-Lulu going to take a bath now!"

"Oh, yeah. Go ahead?"

The moment I answered, Lulu scurried off to her room as if fleeing the scene. Left dumbfounded, I ended up not saying anything at all. Reflecting on that panicked behavior, I wondered if something had happened to her, and I arrived at the answer immediately.

(No wonder she was so quiet during dinner.)

She's probably nervous thinking about what comes next. Come to think of it, that's only natural. I was beyond embarrassed myself, and I did nothing but expose my unsightly side. Lulu should get to know how I felt yesterday.

(Well, if that's the case, it might be cruel to talk about the future at this timing.)

It's not a conversation that *has* to happen today. I can just tell Lulu when she's calmed down again.

(Still, she was panicking way too much.)

Thinking back on it makes me chuckle. It was my first time seeing that side of the always-composed Lulu, who doesn't even get nervous at auditions, and for some reason, it felt refreshing. A desire to tease her a little popping off in my head, but that would probably be too pitiful.

I mean, considering Lulu is a top idol and that cute, it's not like this would be her first time having someone help her with this, so why would she... The moment I said that in my heart, I felt a sensation like my brain suddenly went cold.

(What was that? I just felt a really nasty sensation.)

I know, this is just like a massage, it's nothing like *that* at all. But for some reason, thinking that other people might have touched Lulu's body makes me incredibly irritated. Just thinking that someone might have seen Lulu in such a defenseless state made my heart stir uncontrollably.

(I shouldn't be thinking things like this.)

Lulu would be troubled if I got angry over every little thing that's part of a routine. I have to do it properly today. So that Lulu can become even cuter, I have to do it right. ...At the very least, I'll do it better than anyone else. By making that vow, I managed to successfully calm the waves in my heart.

28. Episode 28: Airhead

"I'm out of the bath."

"Ah, okay."

"Can Lulu sit next to you, Senpai?"

"Yeah."

(What is this? I can't find the words.)

Maybe Lulu's nervousness had rubbed off on me, because having a normal conversation felt difficult. Even meeting her eyes felt embarrassing, so I looked away, feigning indifference. Still, when Lulu's hair brushed softly against her shoulder, my consciousness was pulled toward her whether I liked it or not.

(A sweet... scent.)

Lulu always smells somehow nice after a bath. We're supposed to be using the same shampoo and products, yet for some reason, only Lulu gives off this sweet fragrance. If there were a perfume that smelled like Lulu, it would surely be a bestseller.

"Senpai, can I talk to you for a second?"

"Yeah? When are you launching it?"

"Launching what?"

"Ah, sorry, I was talking to myself. What is it?"

"Um, well... let's not do 'that' today after all."

Perhaps it was punishment for my silly delusions, but it felt like reality had suddenly been thrust upon me. I didn't even need to ask what "that" was. Within my resignation, a surge of various emotions overflowed, and I couldn't say a word.

I understood the reason. It's because I'm inexperienced. I'm just a beginner who only had Lulu do it for me for the first time yesterday. I could accept that. But that alone wasn't enough to put these feelings to rest.

(If I'm no good, who else are you having do it?)

Lulu is an idol; even putting that aside, I know next to nothing about her social circle. Has Lulu been having someone other than me help her until now? Is she showing that disheveled appearance—like I had yesterday—to someone else?

Ugly emotions I thought I'd submerged came swirling back to the surface. Even though I tried to suppress them, I didn't know how to handle it.

"Why?"

I intended to say I understood, but my mouth wouldn't listen. I didn't even have the right to interfere, yet I found myself wanting to know the circumstances. This certainly wasn't out of "kindness" as a senpai; it was something much darker.

"Ah, no, no particular reason. Lulu just thought it might be too much of a bother for you, Senpai."

(That's a lie.)

If Lulu really thought that, she would have turned me down from the start. So, this was just a made-up excuse she used because she thought I would back down if she said it.

(Who is that lie for?)

"...Is it because I'm bad at it?"

"Eh?"

"I've never done it before, so I'm sure I'm clumsy. Is that why Lulu calling it off?"

"Senpai?"

Lulu showed a faint expression of fear. I know—I know this is wrong. I shouldn't go any further. I have to stop. And yet, it seems my sense of reason is in poor condition today.

"Are you going to have someone else do it?"

"Hah?"

"Are you going to ask someone other than me?"

(What kind of displaced anger is this?)

Lulu is an idol, so of course she must be doing this regularly. For an outsider like me to nitpick about it is something I shouldn't do. Since she's working as a professional idol, the fact that an amateur like me was helping in the first place was presumptuous.

I should apologize. Just as I thought that, Lulu, looking somewhat exasperated, spoke with a straight face.

"No... there's no way Lulu would ask anyone else."

"...Eh? But, wait, eh?"

(She doesn't look like she's lying.)

But then, something feels off. Huh? What was the "off" part again?

"Haaah... Senpai, what exactly do you think of me?"

(Ah. I feel like I was just explicitly looked down upon with exasperation.)

"B-but, isn't there, like, a professional staff for this?"

"Pff—fufu, hufufu!"

"This isn't the time to laugh."

"I'm sorry, it was just a little funny."

I didn't quite understand, but it seemed I had been saying something strange without realizing it. To the confused me, Lulu spoke as if gently reasoning with a child.

"I have no intention of showing anyone but you, Senpai, so please rest assured."

"I... see."

So, I had many things I wanted to ask—like why she knew the procedure so well, or what was with that "experienced" act she was putting on—but the first thing I thought was only this:

"Then why did Lulu try to call it off?"

"Because it was embarrassing, simply put. It was actually the first time for Lulu to have someone else do it to me, too."

"I see."

(So I was just overthinking it.)

Jumping to conclusions by myself, spinning my wheels alone... what on earth am I doing? But with those words from Lulu, the dark emotions from moments ago vanished without a trace, almost surprisingly so.

(What was that feeling even about?)

"But, I'm 'un-canceling' it. Lulu didn't think you felt this strongly about it, Senpai. I'll brace myself too."

"No, I mean, if Lulu don't want to do it, I'm not forcing you..."

"No, Lulu want *you* to do it, Senpai. May I ask this favor of you?"

(What incredible resolve.)

Even though it must be embarrassing, Lulu can work hard to reach greater heights as an idol? No, perhaps it's also proof of how much she trusts me. In that case, I should respond to Lulu's resolve.

"I understand. I'll do my best too, so leave it to me."



The reverse of yesterday: this time, I was the one leading Lulu by the hand into her room. Lulu's room feels... well, very "girly." The accessories are unified in shades close to pink, and everything in sight is adorable. I wonder if the difference between us starts in these small details.

"Okay, I'm taking my clothes off now."

"Right."

(Crap.)

Even though I'm going to end up seeing anyway, I thought it would be awkward to stare while she was undressing, so I turned around. But that might have been a mistake. Because I lost my sense of sight, the rustling sound of cloth sliding against skin became much more vivid, making me feel like I was doing something wrong in a different way.

(Ugh, please finish quickly.)

"I'm done undressing, so you can turn around now."

"O-okay."

The moment I turned around as Lulu told me to, my breath stopped. I was pulled into Lulu's world and forgot how to breathe. My eyes were stolen. As if I'd been fixed in place, I couldn't move from where I stood.

I knew from doing it myself—how much effort was required to maintain that slenderness around the waist. A beautiful body without a single scratch or blemish; that skin elasticity wasn't just due to youth.

Her bashful gesture of hiding her chest with her hands was strangely alluring, making even me—a member of the same sex—feel a sudden throb in my heart.

Before me was a scene that had lost all sense of reality, like looking at a single painting.

"Um, Senpai? If you stare that intently, it's... kind of embarrassing for Lulu too..."

"S-sorry."

"No, I mean, if it's you, Senpai, Lulu don't mind you looking... actually, I'd want you to look more, but it's a bit lonely when you're silent."

"No, let's just... get on with it quickly."

(Oh no, I'm starting to get nervous all of a sudden.)

Alone in a room with a naked beautiful girl. When you put it into words, some very bad imaginations come to mind. Lulu is still a minor, right? Isn't this violating some kind of law?

(I-it's okay. Lulu and I are both girls, and this is just like a massage.)

I tried to make excuses in my head, but it only seemed to make it feel more suspicious. Wait, i-it's okay, right? I feel like I'm making another irreversible choice, but it's fine... right?

While I was spiraling into internal self-preservation, I caught sight of Lulu trembling out of the corner of my eye.

(She's shaking.)

That's right. The one who is truly anxious is Lulu. This is no time for me to be wavering. As her senpai, I have to guide her properly.

"L-let's start before Lulu catch a cold!"

"Yes! Y-you're right S-Senpai!"

29. Episode 29: Retribution

[Lulu's POV]

(This is way more embarrassing than I imagined.)

Lying here naked while Senpai is right in front of me... I've always been confident in my body, but it took a lot of courage to strip down myself.

(The least Senpai could do is get naked too.)

While I was thinking that and waiting for her, Senpai stared at Lulu with a puzzled expression.

"Aren't we starting?"

"Eh?"

"You're going to start with your chest, right?"

"...Oh, right."

(Safe! I'm glad I didn't ask her to repeat that.)

Since I'd just said that on a whim earlier, I didn't really remember it. No matter how dense Senpai is, it wouldn't be strange for her to notice if I showed a slip-up like that. I have to be careful. ...Wait, does this mean I have to masturbate right in front of her?

(I-it can't be helped. I guess I have to do it.)

I brought my hands to my breasts and began to knead them little by little.



"Fu... nnggh..."

(She's so serious, honestly.)

Senpai is watching Lulu masturbate with such an earnest expression. She really thinks of this as nothing more than a method to become cute. Thinking that makes me a little worried, but well, dyeing an ignorant Senpai in "Lulu's colors" isn't a bad idea either.

(Nnggh, I think this is enough.)

I thought I wouldn't be able to feel good because I was nervous, but on the contrary, I feel like I'm getting there faster than usual. Being watched by her actually seems to be a turn-on.

"Senpai... I'm ready."

"Th-then, I'm going to touch you, okay?"

"Please."

Senpai leans in toward Lulu as I lie there. My heartbeat transmits through my hands as I knead my chest. Just the thought of offering my first time to Senpai makes the excitement unstoppable. The brief moment before she actually touched me felt so agonizingly long it could have been an eternity.

(H-here it comes.)

Just the gentle touch of her hand slowly stroking around *there* almost makes me come. The mere fact that Senpai is touching Lulu's "down there" makes me so happy.

(That said, I'm not expecting much in the way of technique.)

It's her first time, after all; it'll probably even hurt a little. But I don't care what Senpai does to me. If she suddenly couldn't hold back because of how cute Lulu is and just attacked me, that would be fine too.

(Senpai wouldn't do that, though.)

It'll probably just end with some over-gentle caressing that isn't even stimulating. Well, that's why I'll just fake an orgasm at some point to make her satisfied. Or so I thought...

"Nngh... a-already?"

"Already? Ah, was it too soon? I thought it was okay since Lulu were wet..."

"No, it's fine, but..."

(I-I can't believe she's inserting her fingers so soon.)

I did tell Senpai yesterday that it's okay to go in if I'm wet, but I didn't think she'd actually do it already. Does she have no mercy because she lacks knowledge? W-well, it's not a problem. See, with this child's play technique...

(W-wait? That's weird.)

"Ah... ahh!"

"Does it hurt?"

"I-I'm... fine."

"Good. Then I'll keep going."

For a while now, she's been accurately stimulating the spots where I feel it most. It's a sensation similar to when I'm doing it by myself. But since I'm not the one doing it, I can't predict the next move, which makes it hit even harder. Gradually, I can no longer hold back my voice.

(O-oh, I see.)

Senpai probably remembered what I did to her. Since my technique was something I learned using my own body, it feels like this when it's mimicked back at me. I don't know why, but I'm so happy. Not just because she remembered, but because it makes me feel like I really did make her feel good.

But at this rate...

"Nngh.. ahh!"

After a particularly massive wave of pleasure, my thoughts cut out for a second. My legs straightened out unconsciously as I tried to let out the unbearable pleasure.

(I-I already come.)

I might be done for at this rate. Just being in this situation makes me happy enough, but because Senpai's technique was unexpectedly good, I was made to climax far too easily. There are only five times total... next time, I have to endure a bit more.

(Wait, why?)

"S-Senpai?"

"S-sorry, I'll try harder."

"N-no, nnggh...!"

(W-why won't you stop?!)

I just come, so my body is still sensitive. I want her to let me rest, but Senpai's hand won't stop. Because I've become even more sensitive to pleasure than before, my voice bounces in time with her thrusting rhythm. I can't suppress it anymore.

(No way... does she not realize I climaxed?)

Senpai's expression is the picture of seriousness. I can tell she's working desperately hard to make me feel good. Because I saw that face, it makes my heart throb even more "down there," and I end up swallowing her fingers deeper and deeper.

(Th-this is bad.)

To begin with, Senpai's fingers are longer than mine. That means she's poking further back than usual, and pleasure is attacking me from a deeper place. I really should run away, but I don't want to get in her way, and my judgment has gone fuzzy.

"Ugh... nnggh."

(I come again.)

I've never gone at such a fast pace, even when doing it myself. And yet, there's no sign of Senpai's fingers stopping. If anything, her momentum seems to be growing more fierce. I can't come down from the peak. It's okay for now since it's still relatively light, but this being the case from now on is bad. I have to stop her quickly.

(Wait, hold on, not there.)

"Not there... right now, not there... aaaahhh!"

The moment she gave me a little pinch, pleasure rushed in all at once. My excessive experimentation to make Senpai feel good is backfiring. Because of all the messing around I did, I've become so prone to pleasure that I'm in no position to judge her.

"Sen-Senpai... wait, once, just once... nnh... h-heeee..."

"Thank goodness, you finally managed to come once. Okay, four more times to go."

"Th-uuh... nhiii!"

(She really didn't realize.)

What's more, even though I told her I come, she won't stop. On the contrary, did she think what she's been doing is okay now? She's continuing the exact same thing as before. Just the accidental flick against me caused by my squirming is enough to make me peak. The pleasure keeps accumulating without fading away.

(I-I have to stop this, or I'm seriously going to break.)

"Senpa... wai... h-heeee..."

"What's wrong? Come on, you mustn't stop your hands, okay?"

"Ngh... no... ah... ahh!"

The hands I had managed to bring down were put back on my breasts by Senpai. All the while, the stimulation continues at a steady rhythm. My voice, my body... they are slipping away from my control. But since this is what Lulu did to Senpai, I can't resist.

"Gah... aah... aaaah."

"Look, your hands are stopping."

"Ah... sorr... sowwy..."

(Is she really this stoic even at a time like this?)

Is she mad about what Lulu did? Is she getting her revenge? But Lulu stopped as soon as Senpai come. To make sure I didn't put a burden on her. So... so...!

"Ugh... aahn!"

No, that's not it. Senpai just genuinely hasn't noticed. She truly wants to make me feel good, and that's why she's so relentless. Plus, her powers of observation are too good. Even though

she doesn't notice when I climax, she's gone and remembered all of Lulu's sensitive spots and thrusts only at those.

(Oh no... my hips are... lifting...)

I need to escape, but my hips are lifting on their own, as if pressing against Senpai's hand. As a result of my own actions, that "part" is tightening, and my consciousness almost vanishes again.

"Gah... n-ngha... iiiih!"

"Lulu, you have to tell me when you come, okay?"

(Th-this is also what Lulu told Senpai.)

I only wanted to see Senpai's cute side, but it's all coming back to me. Because I never thought it would turn out like this. Uhh... it's... it's embarrassing, but I have to say it. If I don't, Lulu is really... g-going to break.

"I... I come... Se-Senpai. S-so...!"

"Okay. Then, three more times, right?"

"Ahh? ...H-nn... ah... ahh!"

(Th-this... three more times?)

Will Lulu still be Lulu when this is over? Even that anxiety is blown away in the next moment, as I become unable to think about anything at all. The night had only just begun.

30. Episode 30: Manifestation

"Nya, ah..."

I wonder how many minutes have passed since we started. Lulu's sweet voice had been echoing through the room for a while now, and I felt like I was going to lose my mind. I tried my best to push it out of my head, continuing mindlessly so as not to think of anything.

"I-I come, Senpai. That's the fi... the fifth time..."

"The fifth? Oh, right. It was five times, wasn't it."

“So, please... pull it out, pull it out already!”

Watching Lulu plead, a strange emotion bubbled up within me. Something was screaming from the depths of my heart for more, and more. That mean-spirited desire to keep watching Lulu in this cute, unusual state gradually took control of me.

“.....”

“Se... Senpai...”

(What am I doing?)

Lulu’s pained cry finally snapped me back to my senses. Even though she was suffering like this, what was I doing just now? I was terrified of myself for almost doing something so cruel. I shook my head violently to drive away those horrible thoughts. That’s right, I have to make Lulu comfortable quickly.

“Sorry, I’m pulling it out now.”

“Wait, ngh, nhaa!”

“Sorry, are you okay?”

“I’m, I’m okay...”

(Her speech is slurred.)

It seems it took a considerable toll on her body. I remember that feeling myself. Even so... no, that doesn't matter now. I should do what needs to be done first.

“Um, ah, I have to wipe you down, don't I.”

I know very well that you can't move immediately after it's over. That’s why I had decided that this time, I would do for Lulu what she had done for me. It was fine; I had prepared warm towels in advance so there wouldn't be a mess afterward.

“Lulu, you can just relax, okay?”

“Wa-Wait, right now, th-there is...”

(Goodness, it’s soaking wet.)

I didn't notice while I was doing it, but taking a step back and looking closely, even the sheets are drenched. At this rate, Lulu might catch a cold. She's sweating a lot, too, so once I'm done wiping her body, I'll have to bring her some water.

"Ngh, ahh..."

"Oh, that's strange. Even though I'm wiping it..."

"Se-Senpai, please do the sh-sheets first! Th-ngh, that spot... is enough already."

(Right, there's no point unless I change the sheets first.)

"Where are the sheets?"

"Haa, haa. There are spares in the bottom drawer, so please... use those."

Following the instructions of the panting Lulu, I worked briskly. While I was moving my body, I felt like I could forget the scene before my eyes. I moved with single-minded devotion, as if to forget everything up until now—and that strange version of myself from moments ago.



Once the cleanup was mostly finished, only the thick scent of Lulu permeating the air served as proof of what we had just done. By that time, Lulu had calmed down a little. Also, I had her put some clothes on. Staying naked would chill her body, and besides, it was a distraction for my eyes.

"Good work."

"Yes, thank you as well, Senpai."

Right after something like that, it was obvious an awkward atmosphere would settle between us. That's why I was acting as if I didn't care as much as possible, but Lulu's behavior was strange.

(Lulu won't meet my eyes.)

She wouldn't even try to look at my face. Even though she was so concerned about me yesterday, I wonder if she's just embarrassed now that it's about herself. Or is there some other reason?

"Hey, Lulu. By any chance... was I bad at it?"

(That was the only thing I could think of.)

“No, th-that’s not it at all Senpai. ...If anything, you were good, or rather...”

“But, you seem really exhausted, Lulu.”

“That’s, um... the effect! Yes, the effect was just too strong.”

“The effect?”

“Yes. It just means you were far too good at it, Senpai. Anyway, you didn't do anything wrong, Senpai, so please don't worry about it.”

There were some parts that didn't quite sit right with me. Judging by Lulu's expression, something unexpected must have happened after all. But even if I questioned her further, Lulu would probably stubbornly refuse to talk. If she did that, I wouldn't even be able to explain myself. ...But in that case, I can just make up for it from now on.

“Then, Lulu. Can I keep helping you from now on?”

(Having tried it, I realized. I absolutely don't want to let anyone else do this.)

That voice of Lulu's that tickled my ears, sounding so coquettish and spoiled. Those round eyes staring at me as if clinging to me. Her hips jumping in time with my fingers, her beautiful body gradually becoming sweaty and sensual. Every part of it was enough to lead a person astray.

If anyone—even a saint—saw her in that disheveled state, they wouldn't be able to suppress their reason. That would surely be the same for a man or a woman. That's why, to protect Lulu, I have to be the one to do it.

(Lulu is pure, so she'll be easily deceived.)

Someone might tell her they'll "help" her just to trick her, and she might end up having her purity defiled. ...I can't even fully trust myself, but I should still be better than anyone else.

“Is it okay for me to ask that of you, Senpai?”

“Yeah. In exchange, you mustn't ask anyone else, okay? Otherwise, Lulu, you'll be in danger.”

I made sure to drive the point home, but Lulu's response was stiff.

“...Yes, I suppose so.”

“What's with that response? I'm worried about you.”

"It's just that asking anyone else is out of the question."

(I wonder why she's so confident.)

You never know what the future holds. What if someone much better than me shows up? Well, fine, if she says that much, she probably isn't thinking about it for now. I just have to get better at it before Lulu changes her mind.

"Then, I have to work hard tomorrow too."

"Eh?"

"What is it? It's better to do it every day, isn't it?"

"No, doing this every day would... well, Lulu would die, so to speak..."

"Huh? Was it that dangerous?"

"No, it's not like that, but... Ah, that's it! I said the effect was too strong, right? So doing it every day would have the opposite effect."

"Is that how it works?"

"Yes, that's how it works. So, let's do it every other day. Besides, tomorrow is your turn, isn't it, Senpai?"

"Eh, no, I'm fine now."

"Wh-Why is that?!"

"Because..."

"Because what?"

(Because it's embarrassing.)

"Senpai, you were worried about whether you did a good job just now, weren't you? You can just learn from Lulu."

"...True, I understand."

(It can't be helped.)

It's only natural to learn everything from someone with experience. Once I've finished learning various things from Lulu, I can just refuse again then. I just have to endure until then.

"Oh, Senpai. Why don't we sleep together today?"

"In this room?"

I feel like this room, filled with Lulu's scent, is somehow bad for me. The reason I've been thinking strange things is probably because of this smell. If I don't leave this place as soon as possible, something crazy might happen.

"I see. But, is my room okay?"

"Lulu doesn't particularly mind."

"Alright. Then, I'll be waiting in my room, so come over when you're ready, Lulu."

The heat in my cheeks and the feelings in my chest are all just illusions caused by the magic of this room. And so, to deny them, I left Lulu behind and fled from the room.

31. Episode 31: Realization

(I've realized it.)

The trigger was undoubtedly what happened yesterday. Seeing Lulu different from her usual self moved my heart beyond help. The secret that had been hidden deep, deep down has finally surfaced.

"Lulu have the whole day off tomorrow."

"Is that so?"

Lulu speaks in high spirits while eating the omurice I made. She talks volubly while expertly polishing it off. More than anything, I'm glad it was to her liking.

(I wish I hadn't realized it.)

Because once something comes to the surface, it can never be submerged again. Because if I put it into words—if she finds out—everything will change.

"That means I can spend the entire day with you, Senpai."

"I suppose so."

I give Lulu a hollow reply as she speaks dreamily, wondering what could possibly be so fun. If I didn't, I had no confidence I could maintain my composure. Honestly, the fact that I can even look her in the eye while talking is a miracle.

(It's going to end.)

Everything will be over. No, that's wrong; I have to bring everything to a clean, total end. Because there's no way we can continue like this.

"There's a cafe I've been wanting to go to with you, Senpai"

"Yes."

(Because I am Lulu's Senpai.)

Because I want to remain her kind Senpai forever. I've always pretended not to see it. Because it's strange, because it's distorted. I applied layer after layer of other feelings to keep the lid shut.

My heart of affection as her Senpai, my heart of friendship as a peer close in age, and my heart of jealousy as someone who also aimed to be an idol. If all of those were peeled away, what would be left?

"Lulu can finally go out with you again, Senpai. I've been looking for so many other places too. Hehe, I'm so excited."

"..."

Seeing Lulu so happy, a smile escapes me in spite of myself. To think she's looking forward to going out with me that much... she really is a cute kouhai.



(While Lulu was away, I thought about it all day.)

I thought maybe it was an illusion—that I just got the wrong idea because our skin touched. That I was just led astray by Lulu's sweet voice. I concluded that it was a temporary lapse in judgment, a fantasy created by my brain, and that things would go back to normal with time.

But the moment I saw Lulu's face when she returned, I knew, whether I wanted to or not. When I went to greet her as she said "I'm home" with a beaming smile, I understood. I was *made* to understand.

(Ah, I love Lulu.)

"Senpai, are you listening?"

"Yeah, I'm listening, I'm listening."

"Well, as long as you are."

(But I can't help it, can I?)

Because there was no one else around me. At first, I thought I would always have to work hard alone. But then Lulu came along halfway through, and before I knew it, it became the norm; Lulu was the only one who consistently adored me. Lulu was the only one who stayed by my side.

That destructive smile, that friendly and kind personality, those vivid eyes that look to me with expectation—and above all, Lulu's earnest hard work up until now—I've been captivated by it all at close range.

(It's impossible not to fall in love.)

Her ever-changing expressions are adorable. The way she notices my gaze and turns a smile toward me is precious. The fact that she's looking forward to playing with me is cute. Her rich, honest heart that finds joy in the smallest things is lovely.

"Is there anywhere you want to go, Senpai?"

"Let's see, I wonder."

I know how hard she's been working. The single-minded way she always tries to do her best is cool. The way she's somewhat fluffy yet has a solid core is wonderful. I love how admirable she is, always looking up to me as her Senpai.

(Well, of course.)

If I didn't love her, this kind of life wouldn't continue. No matter how precious a kouhai she is, if someone did those things to me at the start, it would be natural to hate them. And yet, the fact that I'm living with Lulu today without any particular grievances should have told me everything.

"Let's eat out for dinner, too. Let's go somewhere with a beautiful night view!"

"Yes, let's do that."

A girl as cute as Lulu laughs without a care in front of me. To know it's not a fake smile like the ones she shows on TV—how happy that makes me. Even though she must be tired after working all day, she's a kind, considerate girl who talks cheerfully without letting it show.

(Is she an angel? No, she is an angel.)

A heavenly messenger sent by God for my sake. If that's the case, I can accept it. Because she is so cute, so lovely I feel like I might burst. Lulu's just so unbearably precious.

(Then it can't be helped.)

It's only natural for a mere human like me to be led astray. She charms people, draws them in, catches them, and never lets go. Once you've fallen, you can never wake up again. Lulu is like a devilish angel, and she is an idol.

"Hehe, I can't decide what to do first."

"Yes, you're right."

(That is exactly why I shall vow.)

As Lulu laughs happily, I vow once more. That I will absolutely never tell her how I feel.

32. Episode 32: Finale

"Alright, that should do about it."

I closed the lid of my suitcase and gave it a firm pat. I didn't bring much to begin with; things like my toner and other miscellaneous items would probably get used the next time I come to stay, so it's fine to leave them here.

Looking around one last time just to be sure, I saw a room that felt quite bleak, yet unchanged from the usual. My room—the kind of place that looks the same whether my personal belongings are in it or not. And yet, it really was *my* room.

(Thinking about it, it feels like I've been here a long time.)

In reality, it's only been about ten days, but it feels more like a month. Well, ten days is plenty long, I suppose. A lot happened in this house... like last night, for instance...

(Sigh, last night was truly a disaster.)

Vivid memories that I can't possibly forget, even though I don't want to remember them. My brain is so dominated by them that it's almost frustrating how my memories of Lulu are being overwritten by this. One look at the bed, and it all comes flashing back with startling clarity.



"Um, Lulu, about today... maybe we should..."

As the time for my promise with Lulu drew near, I was about to suggest we call it off. Now that I'm harboring these "impure" feelings, the act takes on a different meaning. That's why I thought we should stop for today, but...

"Yes! I'll do my best!"

"No, I mean..."

"Come on, Senpai, let's go already!"

"Wait a sec..."

"Hu-rry-u-p, let's go, okay?"

"...Alright, I get it, stop pushing. I'm coming."

I couldn't win against Lulu's persistence—or that smile. I really should have refused. ...Well, I guess it can't be helped today, but I absolutely must stop doing this to "Tomorrow's Lulu."

(Because that would be tainting her.)

After inviting her into the room, I headed straight for the bed. If we're going to do it anyway, it's better to get it over with quickly. After finishing undressing with a detached, empty mind, I made one request of Lulu.

"Hey, Lulu. Today... can I cover my face with a towel or something?"

"Why?"

"I-it doesn't matter why."

It might be a bit late for that, considering I'm already exposed and naked. But now that I've realized these feelings, it was actually more embarrassing to have her see my defenseless, disheveled expression.

"But, no."

"W-why not?"

"What do you mean 'why'? You won't be able to breathe properly. What if something happens?"

"But..."

While I was hesitating, Lulu kept getting closer and closer, and I had no way to stop her.

"Besides, I have to watch closely."

"Ah, wait..."

"Whether this spot is good, or that spot is good."

"Ngh... ah..."

"Whether to pluck strongly, or stroke gently."

"Nnghu... hngh..."

"If Senpai don't watch how Lulu does it, you won't be able to learn, right?"

(Th-theres no way I can watch that!)

Of course, I couldn't actually voice that complaint; I just kept letting out shameless sounds while Lulu had her way with me. Now that I've realized I love her, the sensations were completely different from the last time. Everything she did made me happy, every place she touched felt hot, and I found myself seeking Lulu out of pure instinct.



(See? Just thinking back on it for a moment leads to this.)

My face is hot, my body is hot. If Lulu walked in front of me right now, I don't have the confidence to look her in the eye. It's unfair how Lulu can act so casual after doing all that.

(Honestly, there's no way I can "learn" while being put through that.)

It's practically a miracle that I didn't accidentally blurt out that I love her. To prevent an accident like that, I really have to end things here.

"Senpaaaaai, are you ready?"

(Oh, is it that time already?)

It seems quite a bit of time had passed while I was lost in thought.

"Yes, yes, I'm coming!"

I quickly switched gears so as not to keep Lulu waiting and left the room.



"Senp— what's with all that luggage?"

"Oh, this? I'll explain everything."

When I got to the living room, Lulu was already there, looking completely prepared. She seemed surprised to see my suitcase. If I don't explain this well, things are going to get complicated. I watched Lulu's reaction and chose my words carefully.

"Listen, Lulu. Let's end this lifestyle today."

"Hmm? Hehe. Where is this coming from all of a sudden?"

(Well, persuading her from here is going to be exhausting.)

I took a short breath, taking care not to speak too fast.

"When we head out this morning, let me stop by my place first to drop off my bags. Then, after we hang out, let's just part ways there."

"Does that mean... Senpai aren't coming back to this house?"

"That's right. Tonight, I'm going back to my own home."

(Because that's what I should do.)

The moment I developed these impure feelings, this lifestyle had to end. I want to remain the reliable senpai Lulu looks up to. That's why I have to end it now.

(If I tell her how I feel, it will only trouble her.)

I'm Lulu's senpai, and on top of that, we're the same sex. If I suddenly said something, she'd be bewildered, and it might interfere with her work. Lulu is a kind girl, so she probably wouldn't reject me harshly, but you can't fake your way out of biological revulsion.

(Besides, Lulu is an idol.)

Even if, by some miracle, Lulu could feel that way about me, dating is out of the question. Lulu is at a crucial point in her idol career right now. If there's the shadow of a man... well, not a man, but a partner... the fans will leave. So either way, I shouldn't tell her.

(I say all that, but in the end, that's not it.)

In the end, I'm just terrified of Lulu hating me. I'm desperately, unbearably afraid of being hated by the only kouhai who looks up to me. If that's the case, then this is fine. If I maintain the proper distance, I can endure it. That's why I want to remain a respectable senpai.

"Even if this living arrangement ends, I'll still come to see you, and I'll come to stay over sometimes, okay?"

"Is that so?"

"Right? So, let's end this."

"Lulu understand."

"Eh?"

"I said, Lulu understand."

(H-huh?)

That's strange. I didn't think she would agree so easily. I mean, it's good that it went well, but I feel... deflated. I had fully expected Lulu to try and stop me, so I'm a bit surprised.

"I-is it okay?"

"You thought about it hard and came to this conclusion, didn't you, Senpai?"

"Well, yeah. I just thought things wouldn't be good for either of us if we kept going like this."

"If that's the case, it can't be helped."

For a moment—just a split second—Lulu's eyes looked sad. She quickly looked down and hid it, but I don't think I'll ever forget that look.

(I'll make sure to come and see her.)

So she doesn't feel anxious, so she doesn't feel lonely, and so she knows she can always rely on me if something happens.

"Like I said earlier, even if this ends, we can see each other right away. Whenever you call. I mean, our schedules might not always line up, but if you tell me in advance, I'll definitely make time."

"..."

"W-well then, shall we go?"

"Sorry, Senpai. I need to make some slight adjustments to the plan... would you like to have some tea before we go?"

"Tea? I don't mind, but are you okay for time?"

I mean, it's not even noon yet, but if we stop by my house, it'll take a decent amount of time. I was worried about that, but Lulu didn't seem to care; instead, she gave a bright smile.

"Yes, it's fine now."

33. Episode 33: Punishment

(Nn, huh?)

The ceiling and walls felt unfamiliar, yet somehow I had seen them before. That's right, this was the room Lulu first brought me to. ...My memories of getting here are hazy. When exactly did I get into this bed?

I'm pretty sure I fell asleep after drinking tea. I suddenly got so sleepy, and Lulu told me it was okay to sleep, so I just let go. I guess Lulu must have carried me here.

(Wait, what time is it now?!)

Even though it's Lulu's precious day off, what am I doing sleeping so carefree? I need to get up right away and go on our last outing together. Just as I tried to climb out of bed, a jarring, metallic *clink* echoed from down by my feet.

"Clink?"

I whipped the duvet aside to check, and found something attached to my left leg. It was so gentle I hadn't noticed it until I looked, yet once I knew it was there, it commanded a heavy presence.

(A shackle?)

While I was desperately trying to process the situation, the room door suddenly swung open.

"Ah, Senpai. Are you awake?"

"Lulu..."

(Something... feels scary.)

Lulu's expression was the same as always, wearing her usual smile. But because it was so "usual," it didn't fit this bizarre situation at all; I felt a sense of madness lurking somewhere. I questioned her, trying to deny the suspicion growing inside me.

"What is this?"

Upon being asked, Lulu's smile didn't waver. She answered like a mother reasoning with a child throwing a tantrum.

"Well, it couldn't be helped, could it? Because you were trying to run away, Senpai, this was the only way."

"The only way, you say..."

(I did wonder if this might happen.)

Knowing how prone to anxiety Lulu is, I thought that if I declared an end to things, it might turn out like this... but for it to actually happen...

"Why, Lulu? You said you understood."

"Fufu, Lulu is the one who wants to ask that. Why would you try to make it an 'end'? I'm sorry I couldn't let you go outside, but even so, I thought you were having a fun time, Senpai."

“That’s...”

I faltered, unable to say it was because I love her. Seeing me like that, Lulu spoke with a hint of disappointment.

“Ah, you don't have to say it. The reason doesn't matter anymore. The point is, as long as I don't let you out of here, it's fine.”

“Hey, Lulu. Think about this again. It's not like I'm leaving you. Even if I go out of here, I'll come to see you whenever I can.”

“Then, it's fine like this too, right?”

“No, it's clearly not. Common sense-wise.”

“Nfu... fufu.”

Lulu burst out laughing as if she couldn't help herself. I gave her a suspicious look. This wasn't the right atmosphere for that.

“What's so funny?”

“No, it's just... I didn't expect to be lectured on common sense by *you*, Senpai.”

“Huh?”

“It's okay, Senpai. You might hate it at first, but you'll be able to accept it soon. No—Lulu will work hard so that you *can* accept it.”

“...I don't understand you at all.”

It felt like a conversation was happening, yet it wasn't. In Lulu's mind, this was already a settled matter, and she seemed to have no intention of changing it no matter what.

(Sigh, how did things turn out like this?)

Maybe the way I phrased it was bad. I selfishly thought Lulu was okay now, but maybe she still needed a lot more care. Even so, that doesn't make this excusable.

Sigh. Well, what's happened has happened. Just as I started thinking about how to persuade Lulu next, I was struck by a threat that humanity cannot escape.

(Nn, ah, this is bad.)

“...Lulu, I get it. I get it, so can you just take this off once?”

“What’s wrong?”

“I... I need to go to the bathroom.”

“Oh, is that so?”

“So, I want you to take this off just once.”

“Fufufu.”

“Hey, don’t just laugh. I really, d-don’t have much time. Please, Lulu.”

“Are you going to have an accident? Lulu doesn’t mind if you do. I’ll make sure to clean it up for you, Senpai”

“Don’t say something so stupid. I’m going to get really angry, okay?”

(Ugh, every little vibration rattles my stomach.)

This is bad, bad, it all came at once. I can’t hold it like this.

“Lulu, please, hurry!”

“...I suppose it can’t be helped. Well then, I’m going to tie you up, so could you put both hands behind your back? Once you do that, I’ll go get the key.”

“Okay, I get it, just hurry, please.”

Doing exactly as Lulu said, I put both hands behind my back. Then, Lulu pulled out a rope from somewhere and tied my arms securely. I don’t know where she learned how to tie knots, but it didn’t feel like I could slip out of them easily.

“Is it too tight?”

“It’s fine, just get the key quickly!”

When I barked that at her, Lulu reluctantly brought the key and removed the shackle. All that was left was to go to the bathroom. While enduring a nearly-at-limit urge to go, I walked, led by Lulu.

(I feel somewhat like a criminal.)

I haven't done anything wrong, so why do I have to be treated like this? If I complain, she might put me back in the room, so I keep it suppressed in my heart for now.

Lulu even opened the bathroom door for me, and I finally felt a moment of relief. It looks like I'll make it in time. Thank goodness, I won't have to experience something like wetting myself in front of my kouhai—and the person I like, at that.

"Now, will you untie me?"

"Why?"

"What do you mean 'why'? I can't do it like this, can I?"

I can't use the facilities while tied behind my back. It was obvious, so I couldn't understand why she was questioning it.

"Come on, hurry up."

"Saying that... you're planning to run away, aren't you, Senpai?"

"I won't, and besides, I couldn't even if I wanted to. Not in a place like this."

(This is bad, I'm seriously at my limit.)

If we keep going back and forth like this, I definitely won't make it. On the verge of tears, I clung to Lulu.

"Wait, really, I'm begging you, Lulu."

"It's okay, Lulu will help you."

"Hah—no, wait a second."

"Now, please don't struggle. I'm going to pull down your panties now."

"Don't joke arou—hey, it's really bad."

(Urgh, I can't resist.)

If I struggle now, something truly terrible will happen, so I couldn't move recklessly. Combined with being tied behind my back, I remained defenseless as Lulu flipped up my skirt and pulled off my panties.

“...Thanks. Now please, leave.”

“Fufu.”

“Hey, please. It’s already coming out. So just leave already!”

“I’m worried if I’m not watching properly. Besides, if Lulu isn’t holding your skirt, it’ll get dirty, won’t it?”

“I don’t care about that anymore, just hurry! It’s really coming out!”

Even though there was no way I could go while Lulu was watching, my body had already finished its preparations against my will. As I endured with every ounce of my being, Lulu leaned down slightly, brought her face close to my ear, and whispered.

“Senpai, it’s okay to let it out.”

“Ah. Wa—no, don’t... don’t look...!”

34. Episode 34: A Brilliant Idea

"Hic... nnggh..."

"Senpai, please stop crying soon. You were very cute, after all."

"Sob... I don't get you at all. Isn't this a bit too cruel?"

I protest with a tearful voice to Lulu as she strokes my head, whispering "there, there." After what happened, Lulu even ended up handling the "aftercare," and my dignity as a senpai—or rather, my dignity as a human being—is in total tatters.

"It's your fault, Senpai. Because you tried to leave Lulu."

She's been trying to justify herself with these nonsensical reasons for a while now; honestly, what has happened to Lulu's sense of ethics? Good grief. But I suppose just lying here crying is only going to make me look pathetic.

"Haa... fine, I get it. Just let go for a second."

"Ah."

I tried to switch gears quickly to at least preserve some modicum of senpai dignity—except I couldn't. No matter what I do, that previous scene flickers through my mind. ...Sigh, I can't stop sighing. What's done is done, and I know there's no point in dwelling on it, but I don't think I'll be able to forget this for a long time.

"Don't you ever do that again."

"...Hehe."

"Hey, you really won't, right?"

"...Senpai, aren't you hungry?"

(She's blatantly changing the subject.)

She isn't planning on doing it again, is she? ...That ominous smile was scary, but since I didn't want to talk about this topic any further either, I had no choice but to go along with her.

"Ah... yeah, I guess so. I might be feeling a bit hungry."

In fact, it was already past noon, so it wasn't exactly a lie. When I answered, Lulu flashed a sudden, innocent smile just like she used to.

"Great, I made something earlier. I'll go get it now."

With that, she left the room. So she *can* cook after all. Doesn't that mean she's perfectly fine even without me?

...Well, whatever. More importantly, there's the matter of this shackle. She quite naturally put it back on me when we returned to the room. If I'm chained to the bed, I won't be able to run even if I try. I should take it off while Lulu's gone.

(Urgh, this is tight.)

I don't feel much pressure, but it's firmly fixed. The side attached to the bed is also tightly secured, and even when I try to lift the bed leg to slide it off, it's far too heavy.

(I have to hurry or Lulu will be back.)

While I was struggling desperately to remove it, the *click* of the door sounded—the signal that my time was up.

"..."

"Lulu, um, this is..."

As I scrambled to make an excuse, Lulu spoke with a calm demeanor.

"It's useless even if you try to escape. Even if that shackle comes off, this door won't open without Lulu's fingerprint. Well, I don't think you can get the shackle off anyway, though."

"...I see."

"Well, it's fine. Even if you have that attitude at first. Eventually, you won't be able to live without Lulu."

"..."

When I didn't respond, Lulu placed the tray she was holding onto a nearby table with a soft *clack* and pulled the table over to the side of the bed.

(Meat sauce pasta, huh.)

Since there was only one plate on the tray, I wondered if Lulu had already eaten. For now, I waited to receive the fork, but Lulu deliberately started twirling the spaghetti herself.

"Here, say 'ahh'."

"Wait, Lulu? My hands aren't exactly tied, so you can just hand it to me normally."

"Ahh."

"...A-Ahh."

(It's delicious.)

The noodles are boiled just right, and the sauce clings to them perfectly. But really, she could just let me have the fork. This makes it feel like I'm being tamed like a pet.

"Hey, I'll eat it myself."

"Ahh."

(Haa, I guess I have no choice but to indulge in her.)

Faced with Lulu's "take no for an answer" attitude, I gave up on resisting and focused solely on chewing what was being fed to me.



Lunch was over, and I sat on the bed in the closed room with nothing to do. Lulu, for her part, simply watched over me from nearby and didn't try to do anything else.

"Lulu... are you having fun?"

"I am. Just being able to look at you is enough, Senpai."

The problem was that those words sounded entirely sincere. Things can't go on like this forever. Even though I thought it might be a bit reckless, I decided to try and persuade Lulu.

"Hey, Lulu. Let's rethink this, okay? Doing something like this won't lead to anything, right?"

"Hehe, is that so?"

"It is. And if you do this and get caught, what then? You've finally gotten on track as an idol and right now is your most important time."

"Are you still saying things like that?"

That was my biggest concern. Even if she's a woman, living with someone else—especially a commoner—isn't supposed to be great for an idol's image. And since she's doing something that borders on kidnapping, if she gets caught, it's "game over" instantly.

(I absolutely want to avoid that.)

I don't want to hold Lulu back.

"I won't leave even if you don't do something so forceful."

"Is that a lie too? You were trying to leave the house, weren't you, Senpai?"

"That was... because I thought there was a more appropriate sense of distance."

"This is the best distance."

"Is it? Maybe there are things you'll realize if we try being apart for a bit?"

Our discussion was going in circles. We both refused to budge, believing we were right. As I racked my brain for a way to make Lulu reconsider, she looked at me with an anxious gaze and asked:

"Do you really want to be away from Lulu that much, Senpai?"

"Eh, no, well, it's not exactly like that..."

I couldn't properly deny it. That's because, to some extent, it was the truth. If I stay with her like this, I'll eventually let my inner feelings slip. Before that happens, I want to keep them suppressed by putting some distance between us.

"I understand, Senpai. Lulu is going to ravish you now."

"Why did it turn into that?!"

"It's okay. You have the aptitude for it, Senpai. I'm sure you'll get used to it soon."

"Aptitude for what?!"

(W-Wait, has she started saying something really dangerous?)

"Hehe, enough already. I'll just turn you into a mess until you can't think of anything but Lulu."

"W-Wait, Lulu. Let's calm down and talk a bit more, okay?"

"I should have done this from the start. I should have bound your limbs and adored you forever and ever. If I had, I could have made you fall for me much sooner."

This is bad, bad, bad. She's serious; Lulu is seriously trying to ravish me. I mean, I don't quite understand the logic of "ravishing" between two women, but I'll probably have something like that previous thing done to me again.

"Lulu, wait, hold on."

"If Senpai don't like it, feel free to kick Lulu away."

"I could never do something like that!"

"Then please stay still. Don't worry, I'll be gentle."

(It's no use, she won't stop.)

What should I do, what should I do? ...I'm in trouble because I can't bring myself to truly reject her. Because there's a part of me somewhere that wishes to be touched by Lulu, I can't truly push her away. Lulu keeps getting closer and closer, and finally, I've reached the point where I can't back up any further.

(Th-Then, at least...!)

"A-At least let me take a bath!"

When I shouted that with my eyes squeezed shut, Lulu's movements came to a dead stop.

"...Lulu wouldn't mind even if we stayed like this, though."

(Yes! She took the bait.)

This will buy me a little time. I just need to come up with a good plan in the meantime.

"But / mind! Please? Is that okay?"

"If you're okay with that, Senpai, then I guess it's fine..."

"Then let's do that. Okay?"

"I understand. Then, I have some things to prepare, so please wait a moment."

"Things to prepare?"

(She could have just let me out of the room normally.)

I thought that, but I couldn't risk her changing her mind by speaking up. While I waited for Lulu to return to the room, I desperately searched for a way to talk her out of this.

35. Episode 35: Insanity

In the end, no convenient stroke of genius came to me before Lulu returned; the time limit was drawing closer second by second. I knew staying like this was bad, but I couldn't stop it. Perhaps because I had so much time to sit and imagine it, the waiting actually made the anticipation feel even more embarrassing.

While I was lost in these thoughts, Lulu returned holding something unfamiliar in her hand.

"What's that?"

"A blindfold."

"I mean, I can pretty much see that, but..."

Lulu replied instantly without a hint of hesitation, making me wonder if I was the one being weird. What the hell, a blindfold? Why do I have to wear something like that just to take a bath?

(It's not like I'm going to run away or anything.)

"...Fine, I get it. I'll put it on, alright?"

"I appreciate you being so cooperative, Senpai"

If she wasn't going to listen to anything I said, it was best to just accept it myself before she changed her mind. That was probably the best way to handle Lulu when she went off the rails. Swallowing the various complaints I wanted to voice, I obeyed her.

Lulu instructed me to sit on the bed, then stood before me and slipped the blindfold over my head. As I waited with my eyes closed, a cold *click* echoed, and in that instant, the world changed.

(It's dark. I can't see anything.)

My vision was cut off; not a single speck of light made it through. Usually, even when you close your eyes, some light leaks in, but this was a total blackness without even a glimmer. I don't know if "high-performance" is the right word for a blindfold, but this one certainly did its job perfectly.

(This might be... a little scary.)

I had underestimated the blindfold. I didn't know that the absence of light could be this frightening. Suddenly, anxiety washed over me. Feeling as though I had nothing to lean on, I spoke in a trembling voice.

"Hey, Lulu. You're right here, aren't you?"

"Yes, I'm right here."

As she said that, she gently took my hand. A small, soft, girl's hand. Just feeling her body heat made my heart begin to settle. Even though Lulu was the reason I was in this mess to begin with, the fact that her hand brought me peace made me realize I'd been quite thoroughly corrupted.

"Ah."

"I'm going to take the shackles off now."

The moment her hand left mine to undo the locks on my legs, a small sound escaped my lips. Even though I knew in my head she was close by, I couldn't help but feel lonely. Desperate for some tangible proof of her presence, I placed my hand over Lulu's as she inserted the key.

"There. Now, shall we head to the bathroom?"

"...Okay."

I gripped Lulu's hand tightly, huddling close to her as if stealing her body heat, and walked with her to the bathroom.



"Phew~"

"Does it feel good, Senpai?"

"Yeah. You have a talent for massage, Lulu."

"Only for you, though."

Exchanging light banter, I surrendered my body to her. Even without me doing anything, the sensation of my skin being polished was becoming addictive. Perhaps my senses were heightened because of the blindfold, as it felt ticklish at times, but more than that, I felt the fatigue leaving my body.

Given the fuss we had even just taking my clothes off, I wondered how this would go, but to think such a pleasant scene was waiting once we got started. I felt like a fool for being so guarded.

(Well, considering I'm wearing a blindfold, I guess "pleasant" isn't exactly the word for it.)

From an outsider's perspective, this was undoubtedly a bizarre sight. Nevertheless, nothing strange like I had imagined was happening; I had grown used to being blindfolded, and things were proceeding quite peacefully.

I was surprised when Lulu started washing me with her bare hands, but the pressure was just right and healing—and more than anything, I was happy to feel directly that she was right there with me.

Once the washing was mostly done, Lulu gently rinsed the suds away with the shower. If I had seen Lulu naked here, I surely would have been more than a little flustered, so the blindfold might actually have been a good thing after all.

(Well, I'm all refreshed, so it's about time to get out.)

I felt like I was forgetting something, but just as I tried to stand up to head out, I felt two things—soft yet firm—against my back.

"Lu-Lulu? You're touching me, so, h-hey, move back."

"Fufu, it's alright."

"What is? I mean, we're done, right? Let's get out already."

"What are you saying? We aren't finished yet."

(No, we've washed everything already.)

I mean, we did my arms, my legs, my stomach, my back... we even did my chest. And she said we'd do my hair next time because of the blindfold. There isn't anywhere else to wash...

Wait, no way? The moment that thought occurred to me, a stimulus shot through my brain, and my thoughts were swept away in an instant.

"Wait, I'll do that part myself!"

"But I said I would wash you, Senpai."

"Nnh..."

Held from behind as if in an embrace, Lulu's voice was inevitably whispered right into my ear, shaking my heart even further.

"Now, please don't struggle. You might get hurt."

"Ngh... hhh..."

(Wh-who are you to talk?!)

I wanted to complain about exactly whose fault this was, but it was true that if things stayed like this, Lulu might get hurt. Thinking that, I found myself unable to resist at all, left entirely at Lulu's mercy. I felt like my head was going to explode.

"Lu... hhh... Lulu. Haaah... that place is, it's dirty, so—"

"That's why I have to wash it, right? Ah, sweat might have collected here too, so I better wash it just in case."

"There isn't... enough to... collect...!"

Using forced excuses, Lulu reached her hand toward the upper areas too. But there was nothing I could do.

"Nnh, hff, ah..."

"Surely you aren't starting to feel good just from being washed, Senpai?"

"I-I'm not!"

"I thought so. After all, I'm just washing you normally."

"Lulu, enough... I said that part is clean now."

"But since Senpai said it was dirty, I have to wash it thoroughly."

"Nyaah... e-enough... nnnngh!"

A momentary feeling of weightlessness; my legs snapped upward. But a moment later, I was hit by a wave of pleasure. It didn't seem like I could make any more excuses.

"Ah, you might have gotten a bit lightheaded. Let's skip soaking in the tub for today."

"Ah... i-is it over?"

"Yes, let's head out."



Once we left the bathroom without soaking in the tub, the moisture was carefully wiped away with a bath towel. I clung to Lulu, barely able to stand, unable to resist. Even if I could have, I don't think I would have.

Because my head felt so light and fluffy—I was happy. I might have become a pervert. Even though Lulu had done those things to me, I was translating it in my head as her being that obsessed with me, and I was actually feeling glad about it.

(Ah, I want to see Lulu's face.)

"Luluuu, take this off."

"Why?"

"I want to see your face."

For some reason, I thought I heard her catch her breath. There was a short silence, and just as I thought she'd said no, a sudden *clack* sounded and my vision cleared. Right before my eyes was the person I loved more than anyone.

"Fufu, I finally got to see you, Senpai"

"Mm..."

In that instant, Lulu scooped me up in her arms and started walking.

"Wait, Lulu? I don't have my clothes on yet—"

"It's dangerous, so please don't move!"

I fell silent at Lulu's desperate tone. And so, Lulu kicked the door open roughly, and once we finally returned to that room, she laid me gently on the bed. While I was surprised by Lulu's sudden change in demeanor, she climbed on top of me while still naked herself.

(Ah, so this was the thing I'd forgotten.)

While I was thinking that idly, Lulu—breathing heavily before my eyes—spoke as if squeezing the words from the back of her throat.

"Senpai, why are you so..."

I couldn't bear to look at her pained expression, so I steeled myself to let Lulu have her way for now.

"Hey, Lulu. At least... be gentle, okay?"

"Ngh... Senpai, you really are...!"

I gently wrapped my arms around Lulu.

36. Episode 36: Black and White

[Lulu's POV]

I softly reach out toward her peaceful sleeping face. As I gently and slowly stroke her so as not to wake her, Senpai smiles like a young child. Senpai is always so dependable, so it's rare to see her looking this vulnerable. I could watch her forever, and I absolutely never wanted to show this side of her to anyone else.

While savoring the softness of her plump cheek, my gaze is drawn toward a single point. To those lips—soft and lustrous—whose pure, bell-like voice tickles my heart whenever they open.

Truthfully, I wanted to steal those lips away, driven by irritation and desire. If someone else is going to beat me to it, then Lulu should be the one to do it, even by force. Because I want everything of Senpai to be Lulu's, and everything of Lulu to be Senpai's.

(But, I couldn't do it.)

It might be a bit late for that, considering how much we've already shared our bodies. But a first kiss is special after all, and I want to do it only after our hearts are truly connected. Such pure, almost arrogant maidenly feelings bound my actions.

"Lulu?"

"..."

Perhaps her head isn't quite clear yet; Senpai peered at me with vacant, unfocused eyes. Startled, I reflexively stopped my hand, but Senpai nuzzled her face against me as if to say she was dissatisfied with that. Then, she closed her eyes again, looking comfortable.

(Why...)

I thought I knew Senpai well, but right now, I didn't understand her at all. Why does she still show this kind of attitude toward Lulu? After everything that was done to her, isn't she afraid? I didn't have the courage to ask Senpai, who was sleeping peacefully right in front of me, what she was thinking.



"Mmm, oh. ...Lulu? Why are you here?"

(Ah, she woke up.)

Senpai blinked her large eyes, signaling the end of this blissful time. Her expression shifted from that fluffy, “girl-like look” back into her usual dignified self. It feels a bit regrettable, but since both versions of her have their own merits, I suppose it’s still a blissful time regardless. Just as I reached that conclusion, Senpai slowly sat up. Just as she was when she was born.

"Ah."

"Nn! ...Th-That's right, I forgot."

Realizing immediately that she wasn't wearing anything right now, Senpai hid her modest breasts with the sheet and gave a bashful, shy smile.

That gesture was so adorable that it stirred my lust uncontrollably. Why does she destroy Lulu's brain so precisely? I could only think she was doing it on purpose.

(As expected, doing this in the morning would be bad.)

I managed to resist the urge to lay a hand on her by remembering the sound of Senpai's voice from yesterday, and calmly exchanged greetings.

"Good morning, Senpai."

"Good morning, Lulu. —Hey, what time is it now?"

(That's the first thing you ask?)

My mood shifted from pleasant to feeling like I'd been doused with cold water. Surely there's something else, something more important to say.

She could denounce Lulu for yesterday; I was out of control enough that even I knew it. She could get angry and tell me to take off the shackles; it was an unreasonable way to treat her. She could be anxious about how long this would last; Lulu is doing things that warrant that. But no matter how much time passes, Senpai doesn't change.

(To you, Senpai, what exactly is Lulu?)

"...It's not even 6:00 yet."

"I see."

As Senpai answered tersely, an indescribable haze accumulated in my heart. It's not that I want to be rejected by her. If she came to like me, I'd obviously be happy. How wonderful that would be.

But if she hates me, she hates me; I'll work hard to make her like me, and no matter how much she rejects me, I'll eventually make it so she can't live without Lulu. That's why I'm scared that I don't understand Senpai's feelings right now. If I don't know where I stand within her, I can't do anything.

To Senpai, is Lulu still just a kouhai, or have I fallen to the level of a cruel, atrocious piece of human trash? I want to hear Senpai's true feelings, but deep in my heart, a shallow humanity is hidden—the part that doesn't want to be hated by her—and so Lulu's mouth remains shut.

"Hey, Lulu."

"...What is it."

"Um, make sure you go to work properly, okay?"

"..."

(Even at this point, this person is still...)

A tone of voice that was purely worried about me. That's exactly why my heart is stirred up even more. If this were a pretext to kick me out because she didn't want to be with Lulu, that might have been better. But that wasn't it. Senpai is just purely concerned for Lulu.

(Why won't you become more emotional?)

Senpai won't even come to hate Lulu. Is Lulu's existence that insignificant to her? A dark thought crossed my mind and occupied a corner of my head. Perhaps interpreting Lulu's silence in her own way, Senpai continued to try and persuade me.

"Because I'll be waiting right here. If Lulu worried, you can even leave these shackles on me."

"...What will you do about the toilet and things like that?"

"I'll endure it; I can handle that much. I'll be fine even if I don't eat for half a day, okay?"

Senpai is so kind it makes me want to cry. Because of that, Lulu had no choice but to use the key I had prepared to remove the shackles.

"Eh, is it okay?"

Ignoring Senpai's words, I proceeded to remove the lock. I had intended to do so from the start, even if Senpai hadn't said anything. I can't quit my job yet if I'm going to support Senpai. It's reluctant, but I can't have Senpai being inconvenienced while Lulu isn't by her side.

"Senpai, the door is open. You can return to your previous room."

"A-Ah, thank you."

"..."

There's no reason for her to thank me. And yet, Senpai politely gives her thanks. I love that side of her from the bottom of my heart, but for some reason, she felt distant right now.

I thought Senpai would dash out of the room the moment she was free, but she didn't; she stayed in the room and spoke to Lulu.

"Tonight, when you come home, let's have a proper talk."

"...Understood."

Is what awaits me a death sentence? This morning's breakfast had no taste.



The day ended with me being on edge about what we would talk about, and I sat at the living room table facing Senpai. I've prepared various things, but I can't shake the anxiety. I couldn't help but feel that if Senpai told me to my face that she hated me, I wouldn't be able to recover.

While holding back my hands, which wanted to cover my ears given the chance, I wait for the moment Senpai speaks. Is it an illusion that she's blushing and fidgeting bashfully? The way she gives herself a small "Yosh!" to psych herself up is adorable. To Lulu, who was lost in escapism, Senpai suddenly spoke up.

"Listen without being surprised, okay? I... I like Lulu."

The words slipped through my ears, and the inside of my head was blank.

37. Episode 37: Confession

With that one sentence, the room fell into a sudden, heavy silence. The quiet dominated the space, and a stinging sense of regret began to bubble up from the depths of my stomach. Swallowing the weakness born from that stillness, I waited for Lulu's response.

I stared straight at her, never once averting my eyes. It seemed Lulu hadn't quite processed the situation yet... she remained frozen, unable to move. I couldn't blame her; I was fully aware that I'd just delivered a massive shock. So, I didn't rush her. I waited for her to make the first move.

"I'm sorry. I didn't quite catch that. What did you just say?"

After a long silence, Lulu finally opened her mouth to ask for a redo. To be honest, it had taken a mountain of courage just to say it once, and I didn't want to experience that feeling again. The fear that I might be destroying everything we had flickered through my mind, and even now, I wanted to take it all back and pretend it never happened.

(Maybe Lulu was giving me an out.)

Lulu was a kind girl, so perhaps she was offering me a final chance, letting me pretend she hadn't heard so we could go back to the way things were. If that was the case, pushing this any further would just be for my own self-satisfaction, wouldn't it?

(No, I have to settle this.)

It might truly be better for both of us if I stayed silent. Once the words were out, our relationship would change forever, for better or worse. I knew how happy I would be if I could just hide these feelings and keep living with Lulu like this. But I felt that doing so would be dishonest and cowardly.

(That's not the person I want to be.)

I was scared, and if things didn't go well, I was certain I'd regret it. But I knew I'd regret it far more if I didn't say anything here. I placed a hand over my heart to calm myself and took a single, deep breath. Then, I conveyed the heat dwelling in the depths of my soul to Lulu, exactly as it was, without a single lie.

"That's why... I'm in love with you, Lulu."

"Hauu?!"

Lulu let out a strange cry and collapsed backward against the backrest of her chair. She was clutching her chest... did she hurt herself? Or was the shock of being told such a thing just that intense?

(I can't let myself get flustered here.)

I'm Lulu's senpai, after all. No matter what happens, I have to keep it together.

"You might find it disgusting, or—"

"No, absolutely not, I mean, yes!"

Lulu cut me off mid-sentence with her denial, leaving me speechless. Inwardly, I realized once again that she really was a kind girl. Even though she must have been confused herself, she was still looking out for my feelings. That was one of her many charms.

"Um, Senpai."

"Y-Yes?"

Lulu took a breath, preparing to say something. Seeing her posture, my body stiffened without me even realizing it. While I braced myself for what was coming, she said the last thing I expected.

"Are you... feeling okay in the head?"

"Huh?"

A dumbfounded sound escaped my lips. I felt the tension from moments ago dissolve as if it had never been there. While I struggled to figure out how to respond, Lulu looked down and put a hand to her forehead.

"I mean, no, wait... after having *that* done to you, why? ...Wait, could it be that my technique was so amazing that I actually seduced you, Senpai?"

Lulu was muttering to herself in a low voice. I didn't quite follow all of it, but I had a feeling she was being incredibly rude. She did say "after having that done," didn't she? So Lulu *did* realize that what she'd done wasn't okay. It was a relief to know she still had a shred of a moral compass left.

(Though I suppose that doesn't count for much since she actually did it.)

Besides, what kind of person questions someone's sanity right after they confess their love? It broke the tension, sure, but the mood was completely shot. Well, I suppose this was more like "us" anyway.

"I didn't quite catch what you were rambling about, but if you knew better, then stop doing it. It was embarrassing."

“About that... I’m sorry.”

“Are you really reflecting on your actions? Honestly.”

Just remembering it made my face turn red with embarrassment. And what made it worse was the fact that right now, I probably couldn't resist Lulu. No matter what she did to me, I'd likely forgive her. I had to keep her in check before she caught on to that.

I wondered if it was strange to be lecturing the person I liked, but Lulu was also my kouhai. I had to say what needed to be said so she wouldn't stray from the right path... and now that I'd realized I loved her, that feeling had only grown stronger.

While I was thinking that, Lulu seemed to finish her self-reflection, as she looked up with a face full of curiosity to ask for a reason.

“Then, why did you fall for me, Senpai?”

“Hmm, rather than falling for you, it's more like I realized I already loved you.”

“Y-You *did*?! Does that mean you don't love me now?!”

“Eh?”

I recoiled at the sheer intensity of her question. What was making her act like this? Usually, isn't it the person who confessed who's supposed to be more panicked? Why was Lulu the one losing her cool?

“I still love you now. ...Probably.”

“What do you mean, 'probably'?! What's that supposed to mean?!”

“Why don't you ask your own heart about that?”

“Urgh.”

Perhaps she finally felt a sense of guilt, as Lulu let out a pained groan. I didn't like seeing the person I loved in pain, but I had no intention of throwing her a lifeline here. I believed Lulu needed to properly reflect on what she'd done.

It was true that if that incident hadn't happened, I might never have started seeing Lulu in that light. However, I kept that to myself, sensing that telling her would only make her get cocky.

“B-But you still love me now, right? Senpai?”

“Well, if I didn't, I wouldn't be sitting here talking to you like this, would I?”

That was my answer. If anyone other than Lulu had done those things to me, I would have despised them and pushed them away. I wondered if Lulu understood that the only reason I was barely holding my ground was because she was my cute kouhai... and the only person I'd ever loved.

I shot her a dubious look, but Lulu had already retreated into her own world, so it didn't seem to have any effect. Then again, since I was the one still in love with her despite everything, I wasn't really in a position to talk.

(Come to think of it, she hasn't given me an answer.)

We were talking normally like we always did, so I hadn't focused on it, but what was the status of my confession? It was far too embarrassing to ask directly, so I hoped Lulu would say something herself. Just as I thought that, Lulu seemed to make up her mind. She turned back toward me and...

“T-Then...”

With those words, she leaned across the table and closed her eyes.

38. Episode 38: Discovery

(What? What am I supposed to do?)

A strange silence filled the air the moment Lulu leaned toward me. She still had her eyes squeezed shut, as if waiting for something. As for me, I was completely frozen, paralyzed by the sheer confusion of Lulu suddenly acting so bizarrely.

Perhaps she grew tired of waiting; she tilted her head cutely and cast a sidelong glance my way. Realizing this was my only opening, I finally spoke up.

“What are you doing?”

When I asked for an explanation, Lulu looked a bit disappointed. She huffed, “Geez, why can't you take a hint?” before puffing out her cheeks and retreating to her original spot. I was still in the dark about what she had been looking for, but the guilt of letting her down weighed heavily on my chest.

“I'm sorry... I really don't get it yet, but what was I supposed to do?”

“...Why didn't you kiss me?”

“Uh, I'm sorry, what exactly do you mean by that?”

I blurted the question out in genuine shock. I truly didn't understand her logic, but in Lulu's head, did all of this actually make sense? As I stared at her with a dubious expression, Lulu began to speak, her eyes pleading with me to understand.

“I mean, we finally found out that our feelings for each other are mutual, right? Isn't that why you confessed to me? That's why I thought a kiss—”

“Wait, wait a second.”

“Is something wrong?”

I had to cut her off; I'd just heard a word I couldn't possibly ignore. What did she just say? Our feelings are *mutual*? Does that mean—

“Lulu, did you actually... like me?”

“...Senpai?”

(Ah, crap.)

The moment those words escaped my lips, Lulu's gaze turned lukewarm and heavy with a damp intensity. This was a bad sign. I had to come up with an excuse, fast.

“N-No, I mean, I *thought* that might be the case, but it's bad to just assume things, right?”

“...”

I'd certainly considered the possibility that her abnormal obsession with me was rooted in affection. Ever since I realized I loved Lulu, I had even prayed for it to be true. But precisely because I believed it *wasn't* true, I'd kept those prayers to myself. I couldn't bring myself to believe, right then and there, that Lulu actually loved me back.

“Did I not say it?”

“Mmm, at the very least, I don't remember hearing it.”

“I can't believe it didn't get across. —Did you really think I'd do those kinds of things with someone I didn't love?”

Lulu's shoulders slumped, her disappointment visible. Part of me wanted to comfort her, but if she was going to put it like that, I had a bone to pick with her too.

"I get what you're saying, but you wouldn't normally think someone would do those things to a person they actually *liked*, would you?"

I mean, the things Lulu had done to me until now were borderline criminal—actually, no, they were just straight-up crimes, weren't they?

If it had been to protect me or something, I might have understood, but it wasn't. So, while I knew she was fond of me, I never connected those actions to "love."

(Though I suppose I'm just as bad for still being in love with a girl like that.)

Once I provided a somewhat logical reason for my ignorance, the ominous atmosphere seemed to soften slightly as Lulu appeared to accept it. Then, in a sulky voice, she spoke.

"...It's because you didn't notice, Senpai."

"..."

"I've loved you for a long, long time, Senpai."

"That..."

"Ever since that day you protected me. You looked out for me, stayed by my side, supported me... and when you found out I'd become an idol, you were as happy as if it had happened to you. Do you have any idea how happy it made me that you never changed how you treated me?"

"Lulu..."

"And yet, you kept feigning that I was just a 'kouhai,' and in the end, you even tried to distance yourself from me. There was no way I could forgive that."

"Lulu?"

"At first, I intended to close the distance between us much more slowly. I thought I could just make you conscious of me little by little. But you tried to run away, Senpai, so..."

"So you did... that?"

"I thought if I made you feel really, really good, you might come to love me."

“Sigh...”

I was on the verge of being moved, and then she went and ruined the whole thing at the very end. What kind of logic is that? Does she actually think someone would be happy to be made to love her that way?

...I'm starting to get worried about whether it's really okay for me to keep loving Lulu.

And yet, hearing this, there was a part of me that felt happy. It was proof of just how much she loved me. Because of that, I couldn't bring myself to scold her any further.

“Fine, whatever. As long as you're reflecting on it.”

“I am. —By the way, Senpai, why were you trying to leave yesterday?”

(Oh, there goes the mood again.)

The relaxed air tightened once more, growing heavy with tension. I had a premonition that if I gave the wrong answer, she might spiral out of control again.

39. Episode 39: Real Talk

“Answer me, Senpai... Why were you trying to run away again, even though you love me?”

The darkness that had almost vanished came swirling back, casting a shadow over the room. I swallowed hard... My next words would determine if we regressed to square one; I had to choose them carefully.

“...I just thought that staying by your side while hiding these feelings would be a burden to you.”

“Then it's fine for us to keep living together, right? Since we know our feelings are mutual now.”

The suspicious smirk vanished, replaced by an innocent, bright smile as Lulu spoke cheerfully. It was an incredibly sweet invitation, and truthfully, I wanted to nod my head without a second thought. But was that really the right choice? I just couldn't convince myself it was.

“Does that mean... I still won't be able to go outside?”

“It's fine as long as you're with me. But I'd be worried if you were alone, Senpai, so I'm sorry about that... If there's anything you want, I'll buy it all for you.”

"If we're going to live together, I really should go out and work."

"You don't need to do that... I'll provide for you."

(No, that's not right.)

Anxiety mounted within me, though I didn't fully understand why. Even as I remained unclear on why exactly I wanted to refuse, I felt like I couldn't let things stay this way. I scrambled for an excuse.

"But then I'd just be a freeloader."

"You'd be a stay-at-home wife. After all, you'll take care of the house for me, won't you? Or do you think all the stay-at-home wives in the world are just freeloaders, Senpai?"

"I don't think that, but..."

She certainly had a way with words. Put it that way, it did make a certain kind of sense... However, that wasn't the core of the issue, so I continued to resist.

"W-What if we get caught? What about your job as an idol?"

"Even if we're caught, nothing will happen. *'Room-sharing with a close Senpai'* makes for a great story. No one will ever know the reality of it."

"We can't even... g-get married, you know? Do you realize that?"

"That's just a matter of the legal system. We can just consider ourselves married in our own hearts... And if it comes down to it, we can just go abroad to get married."

"..."

(Dammit, how can I persuade her?)

I'd even reached for the "forbidden" topic of marriage, yet Lulu didn't waver for a second. Compared to me, who had only started realizing my feelings a few days ago, Lulu must have made up her mind a long time ago. That's why she was so unshakable... If this was how it was going to be, I almost wished she hated me. Because if she didn't—

"I understand, Senpai."

"Eh?"

"You're worried about becoming a burden to me, aren't you?"

“...You knew?”

“How much time do you think I spend watching you, Senpai?”

“I guess you’re right.”

(To have Lulu point it out to me... how pathetic.)

She was right... That was what I was afraid of. I was terrified that I would become a weight around her neck, that I would hold her back. If I could, I would want to spend every moment with the person I love—with Lulu... But I hated the idea of causing her trouble.

(Lulu is an idol.)

In her world, you never know what might lead to a scandal or a drop in popularity. It’s a world where it’s best to leave no openings... My mere presence by her side was a risk, that’s why I couldn’t be with her.

...Was that really all?

(No, that’s not it.)

I genuinely didn’t want to get in her way, that much was true. But that wasn’t the only reason... Like Lulu said, living with me might not be that big of a deal, and even if there were risks, they could be managed. Yet I had subconsciously excluded that option. Why?

Forgetting for a moment that Lulu was right in front of me, I peered into the depths of my own heart. Why couldn’t I stay with Lulu? The ugly, weak true feelings I had kept suppressed gave me the answer.

(I see... In reality, I’m just terrified of Lulu hating me.)

Once I understood it, it seemed like nothing at all. It was a common, inescapable truth of lovesickness... And I had used Lulu as a shield to cover up that truth, that insecurity.

If I told Lulu, she’d probably just laugh it off. She’d say there was no way she could ever hate me... But nobody knows the future, and because I wanted to pin the responsibility on Lulu, I lied and said it was “for her sake.” I’m a cowardly, unfair person.

(I’m just a mediocre person with no special talents.)

Lulu's world is small right now, so she admires someone like me, but as her world expands, she'll eventually see through me and abandon me. If I stay by her side, I'll eventually be forced to face that reality... In the end, I was just scared of Lulu hating me.

"Ah."

My hand, which had been shaking unconsciously, was suddenly enveloped by Lulu's. She had moved to my side without me noticing. Her hand was small and graceful, yet it had the firm strength of a hard worker.

(It was so warm.)

"Please don't worry, Senpai... You could never be a burden. Do you have any idea how much better my life has become since you came here?"

"That's... anyone could have done that..."

"No, it *has* to be you, Senpai... To be honest, I don't even need you to do the housework. Just you being here, just having you in the house, gives me the strength to work hard. I can't live without you anymore, Senpai."

"..."

The vulnerability Lulu shared struck my heart with incredible force. It reached deep inside and captured the "me" that had been trying to unfairly run away... But even without words, I think I'd already decided not to run anymore.

Because I couldn't tear my eyes away from those clear eyes looking back at me. Those dazzling eyes that refused to know defeat and charged straight toward hope... I think I'd lost my heart to those eyes a long time ago.

(Yeah, you're right.)

All that's left is for me to find my courage. Once I step forward, there's no turning back, but that's fine... Looking forward is the one thing I'm good at.

Scared of being abandoned? Then I'll just have to work hard and become someone worthy of her expectations. It's a simple enough story... That's how I've always lived my life, after all.

(My answer is decided.)

I won't run anymore... I'll move forward to make up for all the time I kept her waiting. If I'm with Lulu, I'm sure we can overcome any anxiety or fear... And more than anything, I want to keep being with her. That's probably the only reason I need.

(Thank you, Lulu... For meeting me.)

Lulu, who had been waiting for my resolve, finally... spoke.

“So, Senpai... Please, become my bride.”

40. Episode 40: Report

“Okay, Lulu, wait here for a bit... I’ll come get you in a second.”

“Understood.”

Leaving Lulu behind, I stepped inside first. My home, after so long... it had an indescribably nostalgic scent. As I was soaking in the sentiment, my mother poked her head out from the back almost immediately... Yes, I had something to discuss with her today, which is why I’d come back home with Lulu.

“I’m home.”

“Welcome back, Nozomi.”

“Lulu’s here with me... Is it okay if she comes in?”

“Of course... Go call her in already.”

“Okay.”

I’d already given her a heads-up via text... But these kinds of face-to-face interactions are important. “Even among close friends, there must be etiquette.” Yeah, that’s a phrase I definitely want Lulu to learn. With that thought in mind, I headed back outside to get her.



The glass placed before me began to sweat... It was a drink my mother had prepared for us, looking somewhat cheerful. Glancing to my side, I noticed that Lulu, who usually seemed immune to nerves, was looking a bit stiff. It was unexpected, and seeing her like that helped me relax.

(Right. I'm the one who has to do this.)

To be blunt, this was a complete "reporting after the fact." Even if my mother opposed us, I had no intention of changing my path. Still, it would obviously be better to have her blessing. So, I had to handle this conversation well.

"So, what brings you here today? Are you moving back in?"

"No... Actually, I wanted to talk about that."

"Hmm?"

"I... want to keep living with Lulu. Is that... okay?"

I squeezed out the request while gauging her reaction. I was inwardly trembling, wondering what kind of response I'd get, when—

"Sure, that's fine."

"Eh?"

The response was so casual it made me jump. W-Wait? I didn't think she'd oppose it, but I didn't expect it to be this easy, either. Does Mom actually understand what I'm saying? Because if she doesn't, this reaction is totally weird, right?

"I-Is it really okay? I'm saying I'm leaving the house."

"What? Did you want me to stop you?"

"No, it's not that, but..."

(Why is she so calm about this?)

Your daughter is telling you she's moving out, you know? Shouldn't there be at least a *little* bit of conflict or something? I was happy she'd approved, but I couldn't bring myself to be purely happy about it.

"What's with that face?"

"It's just... you're being way too casual about it."

"I'm just not surprised because I had a feeling it would turn out like this."

"..."

“Besides, the two of you discussed it and decided, right? Then there’s no need for me to butt in.”

“Well, I guess, but...”

(Still, you could at least act worried, couldn't you?)

Honestly, Mom just doesn't understand a daughter's complex heart. As I sat there sulking inwardly, Mom apparently got bored of dealing with me and shifted her target to Lulu.

“Have you told your parents, Lulu-chan?”

“Yes... I've already received their permission.”

“I see... Then there's nothing to worry about.”

Actually, it turns out Lulu had already spoken to her parents back when she was still keeping me confined. Of course, she hadn't mentioned the whole "kidnapping" thing, but thanks to that, there hadn't been any issues so far.

“Honestly, how long are you going to keep pouting?”

“I'm not pouting. —Are you *really* sure? I won't be able to make dinner for you anymore.”

“*Sigh*... Who do you think you're talking to? I'm your mother. Don't worry about me; you just do what you want, Nozomi.”

“...Okay.”

As my mother smiled gently, I felt the irritation from moments ago vanish as if it had never existed. I realized once again that I really can't win against her.



“So, was that all you had to say?”

As the conversation wound down and I was absentmindedly sipping my tea, Mom asked that pointed question. I did my best to keep my face calm and my voice from trembling as I answered.

“...Yeah.”

“Hmm.”

(This is for the best.)

In the end, we decided not to tell my mother that we were dating. I felt a bit bad about keeping it a secret, but we'd decided that it would be cruel to force her to carry that secret for us. Now, all that was left was to see if she'd see through us, but...

“Alright. I understand.”

Apparently, my worries were unfounded. Well, even if she found out, it probably wouldn't be the end of the world. My mother can keep a secret, and I don't think she has any particular prejudice against same-sex relationships.

But I couldn't know for sure. People's opinions can change when it's their own family involved rather than a stranger... Besides, as an only daughter, I still felt a slight sense of guilt about not being able to give her grandchildren.

(I want to tell her someday, but...)

While I still haven't fully sorted out my own feelings, now isn't the time. Having reached that conclusion, I'd asked Lulu to help me keep it under wraps for today.

“Well, we should probably get go—”

“Then we have to celebrate today... You're staying for dinner, right?”

“Eh?”

Just as I thought we were done and about to head back, Mom said something strange.

“We were actually thinking of heading out now.”

“Is that okay?”

“Lulu?”

“Of course it is.”

(Why are you so into this?)

It wasn't like we had plans afterward, but we just confirmed our mutual feelings, you know? I wanted to be alone with Lulu for as long as possible.

“Aren't you busy?”

“I'm fine... Now, Nozomi... Go to the butcher and buy some good meat. We're having sukiyaki tonight.”

With that, Mom pulled out her wallet and shoved it toward me. Apparently, the decision for us to eat here was final.

“Ugh, we could just have whatever's in the fridge.”

“Stop complaining... Just go, quickly.”

“*Sigh*... Fine, I get it.”

(Oh well, I guess it's fine.)

It was true that I was happy to see my mother again. I could be with Lulu anytime... I didn't know when I'd be back here again, so I figured I could indulge her just for today.

“Fine, I'm going... But don't say anything weird to Lulu, okay?”

“Yes, yes, off you go.”

Giving my mother one last warning just in case, I stepped out alone into the spring streets.

41. Episode 41: Distant Memories

[Lulu's POV]

(Well, now. Let's see how this goes.)

With Senpai gone, it was just the two of us in the living room. Her mother, having gracefully ushered her daughter out, turned toward me with a gentle smile.

“Would you like something to eat? Some sweets, perhaps?”

“No, please don't trouble yourself.”

“...Ah, I suppose that was a bit tactless of me.”

“Not at all. So... was there something you wanted to discuss?”

(What is she going to say to me?)

I could feel my own heart hammering. I'd never felt this nervous, not even during my first live performance. What if she tells me she doesn't approve of us? Would Senpai choose me if it came down to it? As if seeing right through my anxiety, her mother spoke in a calm, steady voice.

"There's no need to be so guarded. I know we won't have many chances to meet like this in the future, so I just wanted to say this to you properly, at least once."

"I see."

As I waited, still unsure of what was coming, she suddenly bowed her head deep before me.

"Thank you for meeting Nozomi."

"P-please, raise your head! If anything, I'm the one who's been saved by Senpai so many times."

I was used to older people bowing to me in a professional setting, but this felt entirely different—and incredibly awkward. As I flustered about, trying to get her to look up, Senpai's mother continued at her own pace. Something about her manner reminded me so much of Senpai that I felt my tension bleed away just a little.

"I was right to ask you back then."

The last time I visited Senpai's house, I'd spoken with her mother briefly. It was only a word or two, but as I was leaving, she had said one thing to me: "Please look after Nozomi."

"I'm just so happy I can see that bright, clear expression on her face again."

"That's because Senpai worked hard on her own..."

"Yes, I'm sure that's part of it. But it really is thanks to you. It would have been difficult for her alone... and she doesn't exactly rely on me."

(What does she mean by that?)

My confusion must have been written all over my face. Her mother gave me a look of pure kindness and made a suggestion.

"I suppose... would you mind listening to an old woman's story about the past for a moment?"

“Of course.”

There was still no sign of Senpai returning.



After brewing a fresh pot of tea to replace the one that had gone cold, her mother let out a quiet sigh. In the stillness of the living room, she began to speak in a low voice.

“You know that her dream almost came true once, right?”

“...Yes.”

Senpai’s dream—to debut as an idol. Normally, it would have been fulfilled. She had passed the auditions, plans were moving forward steadily, and she was only one step away from her major debut.

“It was truly a tragedy.”

The path to stardom that had seemed so smooth for Senpai was blocked by a completely unforeseen disaster. It was discovered that the producer was involved in a relationship with one of the other members. As a result, the group collapsed before they could even debut. With no talk of a restart, Senpai’s dream was severed right then and there.

(This is a story I only heard much later.)

At that time, my own debut offer had come a little late. I was so happy that we’d be debuting around the same time. We were both so busy that we couldn’t see each other, and by the time I learned what had happened, I had already made my debut as an idol.

There’s no such thing as “what ifs,” but I often wonder what I would have done if I’d known before it happened. A tiny, bitter shard of regret still lingers in my heart.

The fact that I became an idol alone, leaving Senpai behind. But if I had given up on becoming an idol for that reason, Senpai would never have forgiven me. So, I try to tell myself that it was for the best.

(But what of it?)

Senpai was supposed to be working hard, refusing to be crushed by that trial. Even when she found out I was the only one debuting, she celebrated as if it were her own success. With that

same unchanging smile, she kept practicing without wavering, telling me she'd work hard so she could become an idol again too.

That was why I couldn't hide my confusion at the words that followed.

"Watching Nozomi during that time... it was heartbreaking."

"Eh?"

"She couldn't even force food down. She was wasting away more and more each day. No matter what I said to her, there was nothing I could do."

"Th-that can't be... Because Senpai was always..."

Agitation surged through me as I heard a side of Senpai I never knew. It couldn't be true. Because even then, she was always smiling.

(Was she... only smiling for my sake?)

Was she forcing herself just so I wouldn't worry? When she heard that I—that I alone—was becoming an idol, what was she actually thinking? The horrible thought that my very existence might have been hurting her began to dominate my mind.

I didn't want to hear any more, yet I had no choice but to listen. I sat there with my eyes cast down, feeling like a criminal.

"But then, one day, she suddenly started smiling again. She started eating properly, and began putting every ounce of effort into her dream once more."

"Is... is that so?"

(I see... Senpai really is incredible, after all.)

Senpai had managed to stand up on her own. That's why she was able to smile like that. I don't know if I could have recovered if I were in her shoes. Ah, she's so strong.

(And I knew nothing.)

When I went to practice for the first time in a while, Senpai happened to be there too. I thought she looked a bit thinner, but I just assumed she was busy. When we danced together, she smiled for me, so I just selfishly convinced myself that everything was fine.

(While Senpai was in that state, was I just smiling like a clueless idiot right beside her?)

My heart felt like it was tearing apart. I didn't know anything—but I *could* have noticed. And yet, I didn't pay any attention to how she was really doing; I just celebrated my own success with total insensitivity. How much must she have suffered because of me?

(Do I really have the right to be by her side?)

Just as a shadow fell over my heart, an unexpected word flew my way.

"It was thanks to you."

"Eh? Me?"

"Yes. She told me. She said, '*Lulu is working so hard, so I have to work hard too. I don't have time to be moping around.*'"

"—That happened?"

"Nozomi talks about you all the time. What you taught her, what you did together, how your day went... she looks so truly happy when she does. Because you were right there working hard, she was able to stand up again. That's why I absolutely had to thank you. Thank you for always being there for her."

"....."

"Fufu, why are you crying? I'm the one who feels like crying out of gratitude here."

"Because—"

(It's been weighing on me all this time.)

I was always afraid that, deep down, Senpai might actually hate me. That she might be jealous of the fact that I became an idol without any of the struggle she faced. If that were true, then all my efforts would have been worthless. I was too terrified to ask.

(But I was wrong.)

Senpai stood up on her own. And if I was able to be even a tiny bit of help in that process, there is no joy that could ever surpass it. *Oh, thank god...* I'm so glad I worked hard until now. In this moment, that was the only thing that mattered.

42. Episode 42: Determination

"Feeling better now?"

"My apologies... I'm sorry you had to see me in such an unsightly state."

(To think I'd get so overwhelmed that I'd burst into tears...)

And in front of Senpai's mother, no less. Sigh, what on earth am I doing?

"It's quite alright. Honestly, I'm happy I got to see the real you. You're more than welcome to cry even more. —Wait, that sounds a bit strange, doesn't it?"

"Hehe, I suppose it does."

We looked at each other and shared a laugh. The awkward tension from a moment ago vanished in an instant. As I laughed, I thought of Senpai.

(It really makes sense now.)

I felt like I finally understood why Senpai has the personality she does. She's so warm... I'd been with her so much lately that I'd forgotten, but I could feel the loneliness I'd carried for so long gradually melting away.

Once our laughter died down, her mother returned to a more serious tone.

"But I'm truly glad. I'm glad you were by her side."

"I hope that's the case."

"I'm certain she's glad you were there, too. ...It was the same this time. Unlike back then, she's unfortunately learned how to deceive her own feelings. I could only watch from the sidelines as she kept everything bottled up, slowly growing weaker without telling a soul."

Now that she mentioned it, Senpai did seem like she was at her breaking point back then. She even said things she normally wouldn't say. Though, for my part, I was so anxious that she might leave me that I couldn't focus on anything else.

"I've done my best to raise her on my own until now. But I think she sensed how desperate I was. She started doing everything herself. All I could do was make her strong."

"That's..."

"Tell me, Lulu-chan. You're actually dating Nozomi, aren't you?"

"..."

My breath hitched.

That sudden way of cutting straight to the point—she really is like Senpai. Despite that out-of-place thought, my mind raced as I tried to figure out how to navigate the situation. However, the tension was broken a second later.

"Sorry, she told you not to say anything, didn't she?"

"...I haven't said anything myself."

I wasn't sure if there was any point to it anymore, but I maintained my facade of ignorance for the time being. Personally, I didn't think it would be a problem to tell her. We hadn't known each other long, but I could tell her mother truly cherished her. So, even if I did admit it, nothing bad would happen.

But if Senpai isn't emotionally ready yet, then I shouldn't be the one to say it. ...Even so, she really does understand Senpai perfectly. Must be a mother's intuition. I'm almost jealous.

"Well, it doesn't matter. She'll tell me herself when she's ready. Regardless, I just wanted to say that thanks to you, Lulu-chan, Nozomi was able to move forward."

"Do you really think so? I'm always leaning on Senpai, I haven't really..."

"It's alright. Even if you don't realize it yourself, you are giving her something. After all, you're able to cry for her sake. Besides, she has a much better look on her face now than when she first left home."

(Ah...)

The expression she wore as she whispered those gentle words was that of a mother. That's when I realized—it was presumptuous of me to even feel jealous. A family, a mother... that's just how they are. I wonder if I can become like that for Senpai too.

"Please look after her from now on. She might not look it, but she can be quite scatterbrained."

"I am already well aware of that."

"Hehe, I see..."

That's exactly why she got caught by a wicked woman like me. I'll have to keep a close watch to make sure she never gets caught by someone like that again.

"It's reassuring to have you here... I'm counting on you to take care of Nozomi."

"Yes, ma'am."



After that, her mother showed me Senpai's photo albums and told me stories about her past until Senpai finally returned. It seemed she had gone all the way to a butcher shop quite far away.

"I'm home~ Hey, Mom. You didn't say anything weird to Lulu, did you?"

"Of course not, right?"

"Right."

"Well, okay then. I'll put the meat I bought in the fridge."

"Thank you..."

(I see...)

I thought the atmosphere felt a little different than usual, but this was it. Senpai acts somewhat childishly here.

"Lulu, is something wrong?"

"No... Welcome back, Senpai. Good job today."

"Seriously... She's so pushy with her daughter."

"Hehe."

Her mother lamented that Senpai wouldn't rely on her, but from an outsider's perspective, I don't think that's true. After all, the usually composed Senpai is acting so relaxed here.

(I'm probably not there yet.)

To Senpai, I'm likely still someone she needs to protect. As the older one, she probably feels she has to lead me.

It will take a little more time before Senpai starts to truly rely on me. But one day, I'll get there. Just as she protected me, I want to be able to protect her.

My resolve was firm once again. My determination to walk beside Senpai for the rest of my life. She is strong, but I can't just spoil myself with her strength. I want to be someone who can support her when things get hard.

(I'm so glad I came here and talked to her today.)

From the bottom of my heart, that's how I felt about this day.

43. Episode 43: Wish

Several weeks have passed since Lulu and I finally shared our true feelings with one another. Lulu has started high school, and between her work and her studies, she is so busy that I think she might have collapsed long ago if I hadn't been here to handle the housework.

I try my best to keep an eye on her physical condition, but she's the type of girl who pushes herself to the limit, so I have to be careful. Or so I thought...

(But why is she still so energetic at night?)

It's a mystery where she finds that kind of stamina. By the time we're finished, my breathing and my body are always the only ones left in disarray. I mean, the truth is that I also... no, well, that's not really the point.

(Right... I'm just worried about Lulu's health.)

I had considered cutting back on the frequency if Lulu started feeling unwell, but according to her, she actually feels worse if we *don't* do it. Because of that, we've been leading a somewhat decadent lifestyle almost every single day. I wonder what's to be done about this.

(Oops, I've lost my focus.)

Glancing at the clock, I realized I'd been concentrating for quite a while. Lulu just told me yesterday not to overdo it, so I decided to take a break. Just as I let out a big stretch, Lulu appeared in the corner of my vision.

"Nngh, ah—you startled me! ...Geez, you could have at least said something."

"I called out to you quite a few times, you know?"

"Really? Sorry, I didn't notice."

"It's fine. Lulu got to see Senpai's dignified profile, so it was a plus for me."

"...There you go again."

I know it's just light banter. But the reason my face gets this red must be because it's coming from the person I love. Happiness overflows from the smallest things, and I had to fight desperately to keep a grin off my face.

"How is the progress?"

"Mm~, it's getting there, I guess."

As Lulu became busier and my time alone increased, I started writing a blog. The content covers everything necessary to become an idol, training methods, tips for dancing and vocalizing, skincare, beauty, and everything else I can think of. I came up with the idea for this blog as a job I could do while staying at home.

(I think being a full-time housewife would have been fine, just like Lulu said.)

But I still wanted to do something. Besides, I would have too much time on my hands with just the daily chores, so I managed to persuade Lulu to let me do this. Writing the articles is hard work, but the sense of accomplishment when I finish one is indescribable.

(It might be a bit of a lie to say I'm doing it for the money.)

I just wanted to validate the "me" from back then. Through this blog, I want to sublimate my own experiences into something meaningful. That is my undeniable, true feeling, and so I have nothing but gratitude for Lulu for going along with this selfishness of mine.

"Don't push yourself too hard, okay?"

"I know, I'll be careful."

I said that earlier, but my desire to be of use to Lulu is also a true feeling, so I've been churning out all sorts of articles right now to try and increase my readership even a little bit.

Well, as Lulu said, it would defeat the purpose if I ruined my health by doing it. Lulu's support comes first, and it's best to dedicate my spare time to the blog.

"By the way, does this pen name, 'Stargazer,' have a specific origin?"

As I was thinking about that, Lulu suddenly pointed at the screen and asked. Come to think of it, I don't think I've ever told her.

"Ah, well, you see, my name is Nozomi Moroboshi, right? So, taking 'Star' (Hoshi) and 'Gaze' (Nozomu), you get Stargazer."

"I see. It's true that 'Nozomu' can also mean to look out at something."

"Exactly."

(Well, that's not the only reason, though.)

The reason I chose Stargazer as my pen name is because I felt that it represented my life.

I have spent my whole life gazing at a star... at Lulu, the idol. I yearned for her, reached out desperately, and yet I could never reach. I learned firsthand just how vast the distance is to a far-off star. Because I am that kind of person, I believe now that there is something I can pass on to others.



"Well then, Senpai, it's about time..."

Lulu whispered into my ear as if acting spoiled, stroking my stomach. Just that was enough to make my body temperature soar, and I found myself anticipating what was to come. I am made to realize that I can no longer live without Lulu.

"Don't Lulu get tired of this every single day?"

"...Are *you* tired of it, Senpai?"

My meager attempt at resistance was ended by that single question. Her meltingly sweet voice tickled my instincts and refused to let me go. I suppose this is what they call the weakness of being in love. Today, again, I will likely suffer a helpless defeat at Lulu's hands.

"...I'm not exactly tired of it, but..."

I knew what my future looked like. And still, the best I could do was say it while looking away.

"Then that's good. Here we go."

"Whoa, wait! I can do it by myself!"

"Fufu, please don't struggle, Senpai."

"Sigh, honestly..."

(Is it because she has tomorrow off? That's probably why she's in such high spirits.)

I wonder how long this will continue, but the version of me that looks forward to it is surely just like Lulu.



A life spent constantly wishing for the stars... and now, that star is right by my side. It's not the future I had imagined, but even so, I can feel from the bottom of my heart that this is how things were meant to be.

I don't know what will happen from here on out, surely hardships will come our way. But as long as I am with Lulu, we can overcome them. Because I am holding Lulu's hand, and Lulu is holding mine.

(I hope I can be with Lulu forever.)

Wishing that to the stars watching over us from high above, the two of us fell asleep together again today.

~FIN