

You

'I think I'm going to help out Natsuki.'

Natsuki sticks out to me in no small part than for how passionate she is about the things she enjoys. Despite her seeming so apprehensive about my joining the Literature Club, I'd say she's made just as much of an effort to get to know me as I have with her, likely more than she would care to admit. There seems to be much more warmth to her than the cold exterior she wears in the classroom. Plus, baking does sound more appealing than any of the other projects.

Natsuki

'Ha! I win.'

Monika

'I guess you do.'

Yuri

'It wasn't a contest, Natsuki, unless you wanted it to be.'

Natsuki

'What do you mean by that?'

Yuri

'A contest for his affection.'

Natsuki

'WHAT?! NO!'

Natsuki

'That's not what I meant!'

Natsuki

'You're just jealous he chose to help me.'

Monika

'It's always best to let Natsuki win anyway. You know how much she hates to get beaten ;)'

You

'I really didn't see it like that. Honestly, I wish I could help all of you, but Natsuki is trying to feed everyone with delicious cupcakes.'

Yuri

'My apologies. I hope I didn't upset you.'

Yuri

'Either of you.'

You

'It's okay, there's plenty of me to go around.'

You

'Lol. Jk.'

Sayori

'No need to fight over him, he's just trying to help.'

Sayori

'I'm just glad that you could warm up so well to the club ^-^.'

Monika

'A little too well, from the look of it.'

You

'Hey, now, I'm everyone's friend, right?'

Sayori

'Yeah!'

Yuri

'I'm sorry if I was rude just then. I'm sorry Natsuki.'

Natsuki

'It's okay, I guess.'

Natsuki

'But let me make one thing clear.'

Natsuki

'I wasn't fighting over him! It's not like I care who he helps out.'

You

'Right.'

Monika

'But didn't you say that you were the best and didn't need any help?'

Natsuki

'I am the best!'

Natsuki

'But even the best chefs need an assistant.'

You

'So that's what I'm doing?'

Natsuki

'Yep! You better have on your best apron when I get there.'

You

'Wait, you're coming here? To my place?'

Natsuki

'Duh!'

You

'Why not at your place, where everything already is?'

Natsuki

'You can't come over here.'

You

'Why not?'

Monika

'Yeah. Why not, Natsuki?'

Natsuki

'Because it's a mess.'

Natsuki

'It's a messy job and I don't want you making mistakes in my kitchen.'

You

'Great. Thanks.'

Natsuki

'No problem! I'll go ahead and pack.'

Sayori

'Have fun you two!'

I sigh and turn back from the street corner. Not expecting to have had one of the club members over to my own house for the day, my mind comes to how presentable it is at the moment. My bedroom is okay, but even my most optimistic expectations of today don't include Natsuki seeing my room. My living room is decent, though as basic as it is, I don't know how bad it could get beyond some dusty surfaces. My kitchen is the room of focus, apparently. I've always kept my kitchen clean, at least clean to my standards. I don't recall leaving any dirty dishes in the sink, but I doubt I'll have what she needs to make all those cupcakes. I sigh and figure that it's best not to argue with Natsuki. As difficult as she can be, I'm excited to still get some time with her. Maybe I can get her to open up a little warmer.

I turn into the driveway back up to my house when my phone vibrates in my pocket. I turn it on to find a private conversation initiated by Natsuki.

Natsuki

'Hey, don't get the wrong impression about me coming over or anything. I just need your help with the cupcakes.'

You

'I wasn't thinking anything more.'

Natsuki

'Good. Now, where do you live?'

I give Natsuki my address.

Natsuki

'Wow, you really are close to Sayori, aren't you?'

You

'Yep.'

Natsuki

'Well, I hope you don't mind me inviting myself over. It's got to get done and I can't have you over at my house.'

You

'I'll admit, it's a little sudden, but it's fine.'

Natsuki

'Good.'

Natsuki

'I'll be over in an hour. Make sure you have eggs, milk, flour, and butter. I'll bring over the rest.'

You

'Okay.'

I walk back into my house. I stop off first at the kitchen for a soda. I check the refrigerator and pantry for her requested ingredients. While I don't have much, I do have what she needs, and that's good enough for me. I drink my soda and assess the room. The sink is empty, but a little grimey. I take a sponge and some soap and clean away the thin splotches of muck. I take the hour to spot clean the rest of the kitchen. I wipe down the counters with a sanitizer cloth. I place the dried dishes back into their respective cupboards. I sweep and mop the tile floor. The stovetop and microwave get wiped down. I find myself detailing the kitchen more than I ever had before, for any company.

A little less than an hour later, I hear an abrasive knock at my door. I throw my cleaning supplies back in their cabinets and closets and rush to answer the door. Foregoing peering through the peephole first, I throw open the door. Before me stands Natsuki. She's red faced and breathing heavily. One hand grasps onto a rolling supply case while the other shoulder hoists a bag that appears to be as big as she, and somehow heavier.

"Whoa, that looks heavy," I say, reaching for her bag. "Here, let me help." Natsuki jerks away.

"I got it," Natsuki says with a strain to her voice. "Just... get out of my way." I barely have enough time to step aside before Natsuki comes charging into my living room. She parks the rolling case next to my couch and lets the bag drop onto the cushions. Natsuki sighs and rubs her shoulder.

"That was heavy," I say. "Did you walk that all the way here?"

"Impressed?" Natsuki says with a smirk.

"A little, yeah," I say. Natsuki huffs and crosses her arms.

"Only a little?" she asks. "I'm stronger than I look."

"I'm sure," I say. "I just don't want you to hurt yourself."

"Hmph, don't worry about me," Natsuki prides on. "You'd be surprised how much I can take. I'm tough like that."

"Of course," I say. I look back at Natsuki in a long pause. She's wearing a cute little tank top. An adorable kitten plays with a ball of yarn on the front. Below, she wears ruffled pink skirt. Her legs

from below are pale and slender. A pair of fashionable, pink boat shoes slip over her feet without socks.

“Do you have the stuff I asked about?” Natsuki asks.

“Yep, it’s all there in the kitchen,” I say. I reach for her bag. “Here, let’s get everything situated.” Natsuki grabs for her bag and clutches it tightly.

“I said I got it,” Natsuki said. She hoists the heavy bag back up over her shoulder. I see her knees buckle a little.

“I’m sorry, I just thought I’d help,” I say. Natsuki stops and looks back at me. Her wide eyes are heavily dilated.

“I... you can... fine, take it,” Natsuki says. She hands me the bag. Lifting it in both hands, I’m just as surprised she was able to stand there wearing it, let alone walk all the way here with it, but I dare not question Natsuki’s strength again. She huffs, thrusting the bag into my hands. She grabs her case. I lead her to the freshly cleaned kitchen and lay her bag gently atop the counter. She parks her rolling case by the refrigerator.

“Is everything okay?” I ask daringly. “I hope I didn’t upset you at all.” Natsuki pauses before looking back at me.

“S-sorry,” she says, her eyes falling to the floor. “You didn’t upset me. I’m just used to doing things myself, you know? It’s how it’s always been. I was raised to not expect help from anyone, so I’m sorry if this is a little weird for me...”

“Hey, it’s no big deal,” I say. Natsuki looks up.

“Really?”

“Really,” I say. “I want to make you as comfortable as I can, Natsuki. Even if you’d me to stay out of your way completely, that’s fine with me. I’m just glad that I get to spend time with you.” Natsuki looks onward, her eyes shifting between both of mine.

“Well...” Natsuki begins. “I’d still like to teach you and thing or two about baking. So, you know, you don’t have to be totally on the other side of the room all day.”

“Thanks,” I say. “That means a lot.” Natsuki crosses her arms and looks around the kitchen.

“You have... a nice house,” she says. “You always keep the kitchen this clean?” I chuckle and rub my head.

“Well, not always,” I say. “I just wanted to make sure it was clean for you, even if you did give me such short notice.” Natsuki smiled warmly.

“Thank you,” Natsuki says. “And thanks for letting me come over. I wanted you to help me today, but I can’t have you over at my house.”

“Because you’d rather get my kitchen dirty,” I say with a smirk. Natsuki doesn’t smile back.

“Th-that’s right,” Natsuki says dryly, looking away.

“Fair enough,” I say. “Should we get started?”

“I guess, if you’re in such a hurry,” Natsuki says.

“Or we don’t have to...” I say.

“Well, I did just have a pretty long walk,” Natsuki says. “Can’t a girl rest first before getting to work? Jeez...”

“Of course,” I say. “Sorry if I rushed you. Come on, let’s go sit down for a while.” I lead Natsuki back to the couch. She sits with modest poise. “Please, make yourself comfortable. I’m going to make us some tea. What would you like to snack on?” Natsuki looks up at me with wide, unblinking eyes.

“S-snack?” Natsuki asks, as if hearing the word for the first time.

“Yeah,” I say. “I have fruits like bananas and apples. I have some crackers and cookies and...”

“That’s okay with you?” Natsuki asks. I stop listing foods to catch her stare.

“Of course,” I say. “You must be hungry after that walk and I can’t expect you to wait for the cupcakes to be done to eat.”

“A-are you sure?”

“Yes.” I laugh. Natsuki clearly isn’t joking.

“An apple,” Natsuki says softly. She eases herself into the couch. “Please...”

“Okay,” I say. I start to leave.

“And can you preheat the oven to three-fifty?” Natsuki calls out.

“Got it,” I say. “One apple. Oven at three-fifty. Be right back.” I make my way to the kitchen to start the tea kettle and grab Natsuki an apple from my fruit bowl. I twist the knob on the stove to prep the oven. I also fix her a glass of ice water. I bring the apple and water back into the living room. I sit the glass on a coaster on the coffee table in front of the couch and hand Natsuki the apple. “Here you go.” Natsuki takes the apple timidly in both hands. She leans in to take a bite, but turns away.

“Can you... can you not watch me eat?” Natsuki asks.

“Sure,” I say, turning the other way. Facing away from her, I hear Natuski taking small nibbles mixed with giant bites of the crispy treat. She says nothing as she eats. I try not to interrupt her with conversation. Merely listening to her devour the apple, I can tell that she must be just starved.

“Thank you,” Natsuki says. I turn back toward her. She wipes her mouth with her forearm. The apple core dangles in her hand, picked clean in a time that could have been a world record.

“Wow, you were...” I start to say, but Natsuki’s glaring expression stops me. “Um, would you like more? I have more food. I can bring you something or feel free to help yourself.” Natsuki sits the apple core down on the coffee table.

“Thanks, but I shouldn’t,” Natsuki says. “My dad is cooking tonight and I don’t want to spoil my appetite.” Natsuki sinks back into the couch.

“Okay, well still, you’re free to take whatever you want,” I say. “You’re my guest after all.” Natsuki smiles back at me.

“Thank you,” she says. Natsuki reaches down and rubs her ankle with her hand.

“Of course,” I say. Natsuki winces. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” Natsuki says. “My feet just really hurt from the walk.”

“I’m sorry,” I say. I plan my next words, and their tone, carefully. “If you’d like... I can rub them.” Natsuki looks back at me questioningly. “You know, it might help you feel better?”

“You want to rub my feet?” Natsuki asks. Her tone is disgusted, as I’ve known her to sound when confronted with anything out of the ordinary. A tint of pink, one almost matching that of her hair, rushes to her cheeks.

“Y-yeah,” I say. “Maybe I can help you relax a little before we get started. Just a suggestion.” I pause. Natsuki looks away, then down to her feet.

“Well, if you insist...” Natsuki says. She hesitantly places her feet in my lap, her shoes still on. I reach down, my hands shaking slightly. Natsuki sits with her back against the arm rest, arms folded in front of her. She looks away. I start to slowly untie her shoelaces. “I just better not hear you complain if they smell or anything.”

“I’m sure they don’t,” I say. Natsuki keeps her head turned. With both shoes untied, I slip one off slowly. Natsuki’s bare foot falls into my lap. It’s as small and frail as the rest of her body. Its size is adorable, almost infantile in shade. The top is pale and looks silky soft, leading up to five tiny toes. She wears a bright pink nail polish. I gaze on as I slip off the other shoe. Her soles blush a light red, painted no doubt from the walk. A warmth radiates from them. It coats my hands like the embrace of a heater on a cool day. Their odor soon follows. The walk without socks had certainly made Natsuki’s tiny feet sweat and their scent is immediately noticeable. It’s strong, yet sweet. Warm and comforting. Delicate to the touch and probably very, very ticklish. Natsuki looks over at me looking down at them.

“Why are you just staring at them like that?” Natsuki asked. I quickly regain myself before she starts drawing obvious conclusions.

“N-no reason,” I say. “I’ve just never seen your feet before.”

“So?” Natsuki barks.

“It’s just that... they’re pretty,” I say. Natsuki’s brows fall as she stares at me.

“‘Pretty’?”

“Y-yeah,” I say, reminding myself to avoid the word, or any synonym of, ‘cute’. Natsuki’s face brightens a bit with color.

“Thanks, I guess,” Natsuki says. “I mean, if you have a thing for feet, you might be a little weird, but... thank you.” Natsuki wiggled her toes slightly in my lap. I reached down and placed my hands across the tops of her feet. Looking away, Natsuki flinched and jerked her legs in.

“What’s the matter?” I ask. “Is Natsuki a little ticklish?”

“N-no!” Natsuki snaps back. “I just... I’m not used to being touched there, that’s all.” She puts her feet back into my lap.

“I’ll be gentle,” I say. I place my hands back onto the tops of her feet. Natsuki sucks a quick breath in through clenched teeth, but soon sinks into my touch. I rub my hands across the tops of her feet, confirming them being as soft as they look. I gently press my thumbs against her arches. Natsuki clenches again, this time with a small smirk come to her face. I say nothing as to allow her the moment to find ease in me touching her feet. Her soles are warm and musky,

clean and smooth. Their scent, easily reaching me from a natural distance, is pungent, but still attractive. I push my thumbs into her small, bare soles and proceed to rub. I see Natsuki relax a bit, only to tense back up again as she began to emit playful giggles. "Is that okay?"

"Y-yeah," Natsuki says. Her face is flushed. Her head hangs low.

"It doesn't hurt?" I ask. Natsuki shakes her head.

"No, it doesn't hurt," Natsuki says. "It actually feels... nice."

"Good," I say. "Just let me know if I'm hurting you." Natsuki looks up to me. An expression of shock slowly melts away into one of struggled complacency.

"O-okay," Natsuki says. The girl began to sink back against the arm of the couch. She keeps her eyes on me while I softly massage her tiny feet with pressed thumbs and circular motions. "No one's ever... given me a massage before... or even touched me like this... sorry if I seem a little strangely about it."

"No problem," I say. "Does it still feel nice?" Natsuki nods.

"It does," Natsuki says. "It feels incredible. Thank you." I can tell that Natsuki isn't the type of person to convey vulnerability. As such, I happily accept her candid remark as understatement.

"Well, then," I start, "if it's helping you feel better, I'm honored to be the first." Natsuki giggled and looked away. Her rose pink hair covered her face. I sense that the conversation may be becoming too intimate for Natsuki's comfort, so I try to change the subject. "So, I finished the third volume of Parfait Girls."

"Oh really?" Natsuki perked up. "What did you think?" Truth be told, the series isn't my taste. A little too girly for my liking, but it's clear that it holds a special place with Natsuki, so I dare not say anything that might upset her.

"It's good," I say. "It's really cute."

"What did you think of the ending?" Natsuki pried.

"It was good," I say, lacking more extensive compliments to give it. "I was glad to see the main character being able to bake alongside her friends again."

"Really?"

"Yeah," I say. "It's a little petty that they were all fighting over who got to be partnered up with this one guy, but it's endearing I guess." Natsuki looks away and smirks.

“Well, that doesn’t last long,” she says. “Not to give too much away, but they’re always fighting over him.”

“Oh yeah?” I ask. “Who does he end up with?”

“I’m not going to tell you that!” Natsuki said. “I wouldn’t spoil it for you if you’re enjoying it. I’d rather you read it through and find out for yourself.”

“Okay, I’m fine with that,” I say. I stare down to her feet. They’re nestled in my lap like sleepy white kittens. My thumbs push into her soft soles with a tender, yet forceful touch. Their warmth envelopes my hands like a friendly hug.

“I do really like the fifth through seventh volume where he is much more focused on Kitu-san,” said Natsuki. “She’s the cutest and they’re the best together, in my opinion.”

“Ah, I can see that,” I say. Natsuki looks back at me.

“You agree?” Natsuki asks.

“Well, yeah,” I say, “Kitu is really cute. If I was the protagonist, I’d probably choose her too.” Natsuki looks away.

“Well, duh,” Natsuki says. “It’s obvious that they should be together. It’s just not obvious to everyone, for some reason.” Deep into the massage, I steady my hands to make sure I’m actually helping Natsuki relax. I watch her sink deeper into the couch. Her soles are pillowy soft and so inviting. Delicately, I stroke a single finger against her arch and gauge her reaction. “Eeek!!” Natsuki shrieks. Her body straightens. Her arms unfold. Her hands clench the sides of the couch. Natsuki’s legs retract. Her eyes shoot open. “Did you just...?”

“I... I’m sorry,” I say. “I just wanted to see if you were ticklish...” Natsuki pauses, letting my explanation sink in.

“You wanted... to tickle me?” Natsuki asked. I look down. A hot wave of shame and defeat comes to my face as I ready myself for the belittlement.

“J...just a little,” I say. Natsuki looks away again.

“I’m not going to pretend that’s not a little weird or anything...” said Natsuki. Her statement trails. She crosses her arms once again. Natsuki slides her tiny feet back across the couch and into my lap. “I’m... not used to being tickled either...”

“Sorry I surprised you like that,” I say. “I guess that wasn’t cool of me.”

“Well, no, not really...” Natsuki says. “You’re just lucky that I’m not one of those girls that hates being tickled or anything.” I pause a second. Her comment slides from the side of her mouth and catches me off guard. A glimmer of elation sets in as I lower my hands back down to her feet. She jumps a little when I touch down against their silky softness, a truly very sensitive area for her.

“In that case...” I start, still testing Natsuki’s waters. I place the tip of my index finger against her plush her and slowly drag it upward. Natsuki clenches, but not as dramatically as before. Her hands make fists. Her face scrunches as she fights back giggles. Her leg jerks back a little on impact, only to rest in place against my lap. As my finger reaches the ball of her foot, it caresses back downward just as slowly.

“Pphhhhehehehe...heeheehehehe...” Natsuki starts to giggle. Her laugh is childlike, like a dainty bell. Her foot squirms in my lap, hiding bashfully behind the other. I switch to a light, slow scribbling of the same finger. Natsuki’s toes scrunch, cascading adorable wrinkles all down her warm sole as pink as her hair. I expect Natsuki to berate me any moment about me tickling her, but she surprisingly tolerates it.

“You have a really pretty laugh, Natsuki,” I say. “You should let me hear it.” With that, I add more fingers. I scribble my short nails across her soles, moving spot to spot. My other hand cups the top of her foot for stability. Natsuki starts to laugh harder. She muffles it, however, but putting her hands up in front of her mouth.

“Aahahahahahahahaha! Sshhhhuutt upphahahahahahaha!” Natsuki laughs. Her legs squirm, but keep both feet in place. Her body twists against the couch. Her cheeks become brushed with lively color. Her eyes dart back and forth between looking at me, looking at my hands with her feet, and closing all together. I press my scratching fingertip into the plush pressure point of her arch. Natsuki squeals and squeaks fluttering laughs.

“Aww, you’re so much fun to tickle,” I tease. I gently stroke both sets of fingers against both of Natsuki’s precious feet. She drops her hands down to the seat, squeezing the cushion. Natsuki sinks her head farther into her shoulders. She tosses and squeals with toyish laughter. Her feet squirm in my loose grasp yet never pull away. I refrain from pushing her too much at once, hoping to not upset Natsuki or ruin this rare moment. The small girl emits mousey squeals of laughter that remind me of how Sayori would laugh when I used to tickle her.

“Hahahahahahahahahahaha!! Sssttttaaahhhahahahahahppp!!” Natsuki says. I can’t help but question the legitimacy in her request when she has all the opportunity to pull her feet away from me, not that I’d want her to, but I wouldn’t fight back against it. Her face brightens with more color, a delicate rose shade. I glance down at her tiny, clenching toes, bubbly and pink like little berries.

“Forgive me for saying this, but you do have really cute toes,” I say. I stop tickling and gently pinch the tip of her middle toe on her left foot. Natsuki shoots up and squeaks.

“I... I’m really... my toes are really, really ticklish... maybe...” Natsuki says nervously. Her eyes lock onto my finger and thumb softly grasping the digit. “Please... not my toes...” I pause. Her eyes rise to fall onto mine. They’re wide. Her pupils are heavily dilated. I smirk and wiggle the toe back and forth playfully.

“You’re a tough girl,” I say. “I’m sure you can take a little tickling, can’t you?” Natsuki lips quiver in a wavering, anxious grin.

“Y... yeah...” Natsuki says, feigning her usual air of confidence. “I can... handle anything.”

“Well then...” I say. I hold her foot up by cupping her heel. Natsuki watches me with a close eye; cynical, yet intrigued. I softly reach over and brush her big toe with the pad of my finger. She squeaks again. It’s plush and warm, just as the rest of her soles. Her toes glow a precious pink hue, nearly impossible to not find charming. I lightly scribble my over her soft, humid toe. Natsuki’s apparent nervousness retracts into soft squeaks. Her neck pulls into defensive shoulders. One hand raises to cover her mouth as she giggles. Her other foot’s toes curl in lieu of curling those in my hand.

“Eeeeeeeekkkkkhahahahahahahahaha!!! Oooohhhhhh godddhahahahahahahahaha!!!” Natsuki squeals a slew of light giggles. My shallow nail only lightly scratches against her toe, nothing substantial, but more than enough to get Natuski laughing. I refrain from commenting how adorable her laugh is. I would hate to spoil the moment by harping on Natsuki’s insecurities.

“You do have the prettiest little toes,” I dare to say. I gamble on my taunting tone coming off as more teasing than serious, despite what I said being the absolute truth. Natsuki’s other hand grasps onto the cushion beneath her while she covers her mouth. I laugh along with her. My fingers tickle faster, adding more and more to the precious row of pinkened berries.

“Ahahahahahahahahahahaaaa!!! Weeehehehheirdoo! Hahahahahah!!!” Natsuki squeaks. Her other leg tosses and bends in response to Natsuki keeping her other as still as she can. I tickle and tease across her toes with feathery touches. Five of my fingers trace casual strokes across the adorable row. Natsuki’s upper body clenches and sinks further into the couch. Her cheeks glow a bright rose tint. Her smile and laugh is innocent and childlike, an angelic display of purity from someone so defensively aggressive.

“Aww, but I’m just playing with you,” I say teasingly. “Coochi, coochi, coo...” Natsuki shakes her head back and forth. Her toes squirm and curl in front of my face while she manages to keep her foot delicately planted in my palm. I twiddle my fingers around her bubbly, pastel toes, slipping them into the humid crease beneath. I stroke the shallow stems and flick underneath

the pads. Natsuki shrieks. She curls and loosens her body to the rhythmic fluctuation of her ticklish laughter.

“EEEEEEKKKKKahahahahahahahaha!!! Sssttaahahahahahahahappp!!” Natsuki shouts. I call her bluff, noticing how the girl has every opportunity to retract her foot and consciously chooses not to. I giggle along with her. My stubby nails caress the pads as soft as rose petals. Natsuki bangs against the seat with one tiny fist. Her face darkens with struggled laughter. I find myself enchanted, almost hypnotized by how her foot squirms in my hand.

“I can’t get over how ticklish you are,” I say. Natsuki shakes her head. She squeals and squeaks fluttering laughter. Her warm toes dance against my fingers. I scribble faster still reaching around to the silky top of her foot. As one of my fingers parts two of her toes to slip in between, Natsuki explodes with laughter.

“EEEEEEKKKKHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!!

SSSTTTTAAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHPPP!!” Natsuki squealed behind both hands clapped over her mouth. I scribbled a single nail in the pale, sensitive crevasse. I move from one dividing space to another, each causing Natsuki to scream her tiny lungs empty. I reach the space in between her tiniest two toes and lightly skitter my nail.

“NNNNNNNAAAAHA!!!

HA!!!” Natsuki lurches in her seat. I laugh at her adorable, exaggerated reactions as I move my fingers to scribble against the supple stems beneath. The tiny digits clench around my fingers, merely sealing them in where they can tickle the most. I scratch against her short stems. I wedge my wiggling finger in between her toes. I dance them along the soft, plush pads. Natsuki squirms against the couch, screaming precious, flighty laughter into her palms. Her pink hair tosses back and forth. Her other foot presses against my leg, trying to pull the other one away. I give a few extra tickles before I let the ticklish foot fall from my hand.

Natsuki collects herself. Her face is bright red. She looks back at me with a grin, before coughing and switching back to her defensive scowl. “You really are ticklish,” I say. Natsuki’s chest rises and falls as she catches her breath.

“Yeah, well...” Natsuki begins, “that’s what I said... but you apparently didn’t listen.”

“You do have a really pretty laugh,” I say. Natsuki’s brows furrow. I can tell she’s not used to being complimented.

“Whatever,” she says, glancing away. “Thanks, I guess.” She sits back against the couch. Her legs are bent up, feet resting against the cushion. She raises her arms and places her hands behind her head.

Ding!

The call of the oven reaching temperature turns my attention to the screeching kettle on the stove. I jump up off the couch and race to the burner. With a nearby oven mitt, I carefully place the roaring kettle on another eye. I sigh, "That was close," I say. I turn to see Natsuki standing in the walkway to the kitchen. Her bare feet against the linoleum floor look so small and fragile. She smirks back at me.

"Are you always this forgetful?" Natsuki asks. I laugh it off.

"Heehee, sometimes," I say. Natsuki looks back at me. An air of confusion comes to her face, followed by unsolicited frustration.

"Well, you should be more careful next time," Natsuki says. "I don't need you burning the house down while I'm here."

"Agreed, I'll just wait for you to leave to burn the house down," I say. A brief chuckle escapes through closed lips. Natsuki looks away and scratches her nose.

"Don't be silly," Natsuki says. "Come on, let's get started."

Natsuki begins rummaging through her bags. She pulls out trays, rolls of foil, cupcake wrappers, and weird looking bags with oddly shaped silver cones. Half of the big bag seems to be just icing. She has to stand on her tiptoes to reach everything inside. I dare not comment on how adorable she looks doing it. I briefly float the idea of offering her a chair to stand on, but strong, self sufficient Natsuki seems to have everything under control.

She lays out most everything from both bags across the counters. Everything she brought with her takes up nearly all free space inside my kitchen. With everything out, she turns to me. "Could you get the things I asked for?" Natsuki says.

"Sure thing," I say. I reach into the pantry for my bag of flour and the refrigerator for the milk, eggs, and butter. I bring each over to her. "Will this be enough or do we need more?"

"This... this should work," Natsuki says. The small girl takes a large bowl out of her rolling bag and proceeds to wash it in my sink. I merely stand back as I watch her work. She's so fluid with her process, as if she was an actual professional baker. She works so diligently and swiftly. I try to just stand out of her way.

With the bowl clean, she pulls it over next to the milk, butter, and eggs. Using a set of measuring cups and spoons she brought with her, she begins to portion out ingredients and pour them into the bowl. As a silence envelopes the room, Natsuki turns back to me. "Could you help me out with this? That's kind of why I'm here."

“S-sure,” I say. “What can I do?” Natsuki scoffs and looks around.

“Come here,” she says. I walk over to her. “I need you to pour two cups of flour into the bowl.”

“Two cups, got it,” I say. I scoop out two cups of flour from the bag and dump it in. White powder clouds into the air around us.

“Careful,” Natsuki says.

“Sorry.” The mixture in the bowl is clumpy and uneven. I look back to her. “Now what?”

“You stir it, dummy,” Natsuki says. She hands me a whisk. I place the bulb wired end into the mixture and start to stir. I scrape the sides and gently run the whisk in circles inside the batter.

“You got to do it harder than that. Really beat it.” I stir faster and harder. The batter begins to smooth out, but small lumps still float to the top. Natsuki sighs and grabs the bowl from me.

“Give it. I’ll show you.” Natsuki takes the whisk and starts to beat the batter. Her whole arm goes into stirring the whisk from end to end in long strides. It looks difficult for someone of her petite build, but Natsuki ravishes the bowl of cake batter into a fine blend. “There.” Natsuki breathes deep and wipes her forehead.

“Wow, that was really impressive,” I say. Natsuki’s brows cock in my direction, but she peers away and smiles.

“That’s how a real pro makes batter,” Natsuki says. She removes the whisk from the bowl. Yellowish batter drips from the wires. She looks up to me. “You want to taste it?”

“Sure,” I say. I bring the whisk up to my face and take a lick. “Mmm, that’s good.” Natsuki giggles.

“Just wait until their baked and covered with frosting,” she says. I take another lick of the whisk. And then another. And then another. Natsuki watches me with wide eyes. As I take what I anticipate to be my last taste of her delicious batter, Natsuki leans in on her tiptoes and takes a lick from the other side. Our eyes meet. Her body practically presses up against mine. I slowly lower the whisk and laugh nervously.

“Sorry, I was kind of hogging it a little,” I say. Natsuki smirks.

“A little’?” Natsuki teases. She looks down. “It’s fine.” Her hand wraps around mine as she pulls the whisk away from me. Her cheeks practically glow, but I credit that to the heat of the kitchen. Natsuki puts the whisk in the sink. “We’ll be making another batch after this one. Let’s get them ready for the oven. Take that cupcake tray and start putting in wrappers.” I look over to the counter to see a stack of color cupcake wrappers sitting next to a tray. I start on the chores she gave me. When finished, I bring the tray over to her and she pours scoops of batter into each

with one of the measuring cups. With each wrapper filled, we sit the tray on top of the oven and begin on the next batch.

Natsuki lets me blend the next batch of batter together. Towards the end, as I have trouble getting out all the finer pieces of clumped flour, she guides my hand in a vigorous swirling motion. The intensity in which she mixes batter is nothing short of a workout. With the next batch done, we pour the batter into another wrapped cupcake tray. After, we do a third and a fourth tray. When all four trays are full, Natsuki and I lean back against the counter. She drinks all of the water I brought her earlier. I have to pour myself a glass and her a refill.

“Wow, that’s a lot of work,” I say. My clothes have batter and flour buried into them. Natsuki’s clothes are also somewhat stained. I look over to her.

“I usually do this by myself,” said Natsuki. She places the trays into the oven and sets the timer. Natsuki returns to stand next to me, clutching her drink. “That’s how good I am.” She looks down, thumbs twiddling across the condensed glass of water. “Still, it’s good to have help. I’m... glad you chose me.”

“No problem,” I say. “I’m happy to help anytime.” I notice a spot on the side of her cheek. “Hey, Natsuki, you have a little batter on your face.” Natsuki freezes and reaches to wipe it off. She viciously scrubs all over her cheeks, yet somehow still manages to miss it.

“Oh my god, is it gone?” Natsuki asks. “Where is it? Did I get it?”

“Hey, relax,” I say, standing before her. I hold her arms to keep her from panicking over such a small detail. “It’s still there. Let me get it.” I reach up and glide my finger across her cheek. Her face is burning. Her large eyes are locked onto mine. I show her the small amount of batter that must have splashed up onto her face. “Got it.” I laugh as I lick it off of my finger. “Mmm, still just as good.” Natsuki says nothing. Her lips part as her mouth opens slightly.

“I... I...” Natsuki starts to speak. She pushes me away and wipes the spot with her hand.

“Gross! You actually licked someone that you wiped from my face?”

“It was just batter,” I say. “It was good.” Natsuki crosses her arms and looks away. “Is everything okay?” Natsuki pauses.

“I... I’m... I’m sorry... for freaking out just then,” Natsuki says quietly. “I just... I have a thing about food on my face. I can’t come home looking like that...”

“Hey, no problem,” I say. “Before you leave, we’ll get you all cleaned up.” Natsuki looks down at her clothes and sighs.

“That... that would be best,” Natsuki says. She pauses before turning back to me. “So, while we wait for the cupcakes to bake, we can prepare the icing.” Natsuki pulls out a bag of grain sugar

and confectioners sugar. She takes the bowl, still sticky with batter leftover, and washes it in the sink.

“You make your own icing?” I ask.

“Of course,” Natsuki says. “I make everything from scratch.”

“That’s pretty amazing,” I say.

“I know,” Natsuki says. She dries the clean bowl off with a paper towel. She then proceeds to wash the measuring utensils and whisk.

“I can wash something,” I say. Natsuki scoffs.

“Good for you,” she says.

“No, I mean, you’re doing all this baking work,” I say. “Let me help by washing whatever you need.” Natsuki stops.

“Um, okay,” says Natsuki. “If you insist.” Natsuki steps away from the sink with the dirty measuring cups and spoons still inside. I scrub them all clean with soap and water. Afterward, I dry them off with a new paper towel and set them on the counter.

“There.”

“Good,” Natsuki says. She brings the measuring tools over to the bowl next to the icing ingredients. She uses the tools to pour in some milk, powdered sugar, butter, and a couple drops of her own vanilla. Natsuki blends the mixture together once again with the whisk. “Get out some baking bags.”

“‘Baking bags’?” I ask.

“On the end of the counter over there,” Natsuki says. “Clear bags. Shaped like long triangles. A hole at the small end. Jeez, you’re hopeless.” I find the clear bags that she asks for and bring them to her. “Thanks. And those silver cones.” She gestures to another side of the counter where six silver cones, cut with elaborate shapes, sit upright. I grab all and return to her. She takes a basic circular decorator and drops it into the bag so that the small end of the funnel pokes out from the hole in the pointy end of the bag. Natsuki then takes a rubber spatula to the icing and proceeds to guide it into one bag.

“Wow, so that’s how you get the icing so neat?” I ask.

“Yep,” Natsuki says with a proud grin. “Here, I’ll show you.” Natsuki picks up the bag with the white icing. She bunches it so that all the icing is concentrated in a large bulb. Natsuki quickly presses the open tip against my cheek and squeezes. Only a little icing gets on me before I stumble away.

“Hey!” I shout. “What’s that for?” Natsuki laughs.

“Relax, it’s no big deal,” Natsuki says. She puts down the bag and walks up to me. She takes a finger and wipes the icing from my face before popping the finger into her mouth. “Mmm...”

“Real funny,” I say, laughing. I reach for the bowl and swipe my finger into the icing. I start to point the finger toward her face. Natsuki squeals and backs away, blocking my arm with both of her hands.

“No!” Natsuki laughs. Her tiny frame quickly dashes away from me. I chase her around the kitchen. We laugh as she continues to avoid me.

“Come here!” I say. I catch up to Natsuki and block her against a wall. She pushes my arm away. I grab a hold of one wrist, then the other, with my free hand. Pushing Natsuki against the wall, I hold both of her arms up above her head. She tugs a little before giving in when she realizes I’m no longer trying to smear the cream on her face. She looks up to me.

“Let me go...” Natsuki says. I hold the iced finger up to her face. “No! Don’t...” I bring it up to her lips.

“Didn’t you say you liked it?” I ask. “Here.” With the icing hovering outside of her lips, Natsuki’s eyes fall into mine. She no longer struggles. I hold her wrists firmly, keeping her arms comfortably above her head. Natsuki blushes a deep red. Her eyes are wide and mostly engulfed by pupil. She leans her head slightly forward and parts her lips. Her lips wrap around my finger, sucking the icing from them. “See? I’m not such a bad guy, right?” I pull my finger out from her mouth.

“N... no...” Natsuki says. “You’re... okay, I guess. Now, let me go...”

““Okay?” I ask. I push my free hand against her exposed armpit, scribbling my fingers into the sensitive area. Natsuki squeals and tries to lower her arms.

“Eeeeeekkkkhhahahahahahahahaha!! Quit ittthahahahahahahahaha!!” Natsuki laughs. Her body squirms against the wall. She attempts to pull her arms down for protection, but I manage to hold them up over her head. My fingers scribble over the warm, plush mounds of her stretched armpits. I smile, leaned up so close to Natsuki and her adorable laughter.

“Aww, but I’m having so much fun tickling you,” I tease. I switch my scribbling fingers over to the other armpit. Natsuki leans the opposite way, trying feebly to avoid the tickles. She squeaks and giggles, shaking her head. Her spring pink hair gets thrown back and forth. The delicate girl goes up on her toes to try and lower her arms, but sinks back down when it offers her no protection.

“Hahahahahahahahahahahahahah!! You’reeheheh suuuch a jeeehhehrrkkkhhahahahahahahahahahah!!” Natsuki laughs uncontrollably. Her body slides against the wall, slithering in jerking motions side to side. Her pits are humid and slick with sweat, even through her shirt. The heat of the kitchen only adds to the amount of perspiration building on her skin.

“Name calling is not going to help you,” I say playfully. My hand drops down to her ribs. Lightly clawing and pinching, my fingers grasp around her ribs, keeping a considerable distance from anywhere that would uncomfortably be invasive. Natsuki shrieks again, her knees buckling only to further stretch out her midsection, as I continue to tickle her.

“Nnnnnaaaaahahahahahahahahahahahah!! Ssssttaahahahahahahahapp it!!” Natsuki squeals. Her laughter is precious, almost baby-like in rhythm. Her windy laugh is just yet another thing that makes Natsuki as adorable as she detests being. Her cheeks maintain a rosy glow. Her eyes water at the edges. Her smile lacks the desperation of actual tickle torture, but rather of delightful enjoyment. It doesn’t seem as forced as her laughter. Her smile alone is beautiful enough at which to gaze, and it leaves me wondering why I’ve seen so little of it.

“Aww, someone’s ticklish all over…” I tease. I bring my hand to the other side, kneading gingerly at her ribs. Natsuki tries to squirm away again. Her ticklishness in the area falls from that of her armpits. She’s able to look back at me with shimmering eyes. Hanging out one-on-one with Natsuki has brought out a side of her that I had never seen. Normally, in the classroom, she’s distant while also attempting to engage a closeness. Here, she’s more open. She seems more comfortable. More friendly, if you can believe it. It’s nice. There’s something about Natsuki’s teasing that’s alluring. Or maybe I’m just blinded by how pretty she is when she seems happy.

“Eeeeeekkkhhahahahahahahahahahah!! Ohhhmygoddhahahahahahahahahahah!!” Natsuki screams as my squeezing fingers come down to her slender side. It kneads into the sensitive pocket, causing Natsuki to squeal and dance in my hold. Her thin lips spread in a wide smile. I only spend several seconds at a time in each spot, hoping to not exhaust the extent of her comfort. Still, the moment lingers in a dreamy haze. Her candy laugh is so enchanting. Her smile and blushing expression is nothing short of captivating.

“So sorry about this,” I say with a disingenuous smile. “I hope you don’t mind me tickling you. It’s just so much fun!” My fingers trail down to her tight, little belly. Natsuki throws her head back and screams as my nails skitter over the thin cotton clothed surface of her tummy.

“AAAAHHHHHHhahahahahahahahahahaha!!! I hhhahahahaaate youuuuhahahahahahahahahahaha!!” Natsuki laughs. I run my hand over her belly, grazing with quick, light tickles. Feathery touches are all Natsuki needs to squeak with mousy laughter. Her legs twist and dance in place. Her hips swivel against the wall. I find her shallow navel and wiggle a finger inside of it. Natsuki’s chest heaves a fleet of laughter much deeper than that of her chiming giggle. I dig at her bellybutton, watching her exaggerated reactions with piqued intrigue.

When I see Natsuki’s expressions become strained, and hear her voice cracking with desperation, I pull back. I remove my tickling hand from her belly. I slowly lower her arms with a warm grip still on both of her hands. Natsuki leans against the wall, head back as she catches her breath. Her hands still hold onto mine in front of her. A smile rests across her face, one that’s as entertained as it is fatigued. I chuckle nervously.

“S-sorry about that,” I say, trying to laugh it off. Natsuki looks up to me. Her thumbs caress my hand in hers. The timer on the oven dings. She looks over and brushes my hand away.

“Ugh, you’re such a weirdo,” she says, walking up to the oven. She opens the door and checks on the cupcakes. Natsuki grabs an oven mitt from the counter and takes out each pan one at a time. She sets the pans on the counter and tosses the mitt to the side.

“Are they done?” I ask.

“Yeah, but they’ll need to cool before we can frost them,” Natsuki replies.

“Oh, okay,” I reply. Natsuki turns back to me with crossed arms. She smirks and shakes her head.

“So... do you, like, tickle every girl that comes over here?” Natsuki asks. The question sneaks up and surprises me.

“Uhhh, I don’t really have many girls coming over here,” I say slowly. Natsuki laughs.

“Do you have, like, a thing for tickling, or something?” Natsuki asks. I stumble back. The question corners me into an issue that I’ve never really shared with anyone. I suppose with how much I’ve tickled Natsuki today that she would have caught on, but this didn’t make being posed with the question any easier.

“Wha...? I... I mean...” I start to speak, tripping over my words. As hard as it is, honesty is the best policy. I want Natsuki to know I respect her enough to come clean. She deserves an explanation. I speak softly, nervously scratching my head. “I... kind of...” Natsuki throws her head back in taunting laughter.

"I knew it!" Natsuki says. "You're just some pervert who likes to tickle girls."

"I'm not... a pervert," I try to defend.

"You admitted it," Natsuki argues. "You have some sexual thing for tickling."

"It's not that big of a deal," I say, raising my voice. I lower my head and breath deeply. "Please don't... say anything."

"Oh, I'm gonna tell everyone," Natsuki says.

"No, please..." I say. I swallow to maintain sincerity. I laugh in the hopes that she isn't serious, and that this is one of her little empty threats. Her tone is still playful, but the trick continues past the point of being teasing. I chuckle and play along, hoping that another game of hers is all it is. "Please. I'm serious, don't tell anyone. I'll do anything. I'll never tickle you again. I'm sorry if what I did upset you." Natsuki looked back at me with a puzzled expression. Her eyes lit up. A devious smile came to her face.

"A...anything?" Natsuki asks.

"Whatever you want," I say with a smile.

"Hmmm," Natsuki hums. She turns around and hops her seat up onto the kitchen counter. Her feet dangle and kick playfully back and forth. "Okay, but you'll really have to prove that you don't want me to tell."

"Okay," I say. Natsuki giggles.

"Remember: you said 'anything'," Natsuki says. Her hands cross over her knees, fingers intertwined. She points to the floor beneath where she sits on top of the counter. "Get on your knee." I follow the small girl's orders, going down on one knee. I look up. Natsuki crosses one leg over the other to keep me from peeping where I know I shouldn't be anyway.

"Okay," I say again. Natsuki pauses. She smirks and bites her lip as she looks down to me. Her bare foot dangles in front of my face. Her delicate, pink shaded toes point in my direction. I watch them wiggle and tease. Her feet are pristine and pure, yet being this close reemphasizes a distinct scent that surrounds them.

"Okay..." Natsuki says, lingering on the silence. She seems as if she's trying to find the most careful of words with which to command me. "Now, I don't want you to think any more of this, okay? It's not like I... like you... or want you to do this or anything. This is just the price you have to pay for my silence. Got it?"

"Yeah, sure," I say passively. She watches me as her foot, swaying back and forth, has capture over my eyes.

"i want you to... kiss my foot," Natsuki says. My heart stops. I look back up to her.

"R...really?" I stammer.

"I said don't think this is because I want you to," Natsuki says defensively. "I just think that... this is an effective way of showing me how much my silence means to you, Mr. Tickle Fetish." Natsuki chuckles behind closed lips. "Now, take my foot. But no tickling!" Instinctively, I reach up and cup my hand beneath her foot. It's still so warm and moist with sweat, though still clean from the near spotless floor. I look over it. So immaculate in presentation, both of Natsuki's feet appear as if neither had ever seen a speck of dirt in her life. She wiggles her toes in my hand. I bring it closer up to my face. Discreetly, I suck in a quiet breath through my nose. The odor is strong, musky and pungent, but pleasantly so, like an oddly scented exotic flower. I close my eye. I guide her foot closer to my face as I lean in. My lips touch down with a kiss atop her foot. The skin is silky soft like a rose petal. My kiss lasts several still seconds before moving to another spot. And then another. And another.

"Wow, you're really into it," Natsuki says. She giggles. I look up to see the contentment on her face both relaxed and heavily focused. I hold her foot in my hand with the softest of grasps. I spread tiny, pecking kisses all over the top. I slowly make my way down to her toes. I can hear Natsuki breathing heavily and letting free scattered giggles. I brush my lips down against the top of each toe individually.

"And, um... get the bottom," Natsuki says with a wavering voice. I smile and snicker. Without hesitation, I angle her foot up to graze my lips across her flushed, pink sole. My kisses last longer each. The bottom of her foot is warm and supple against my lips. Pillowly soft and plush, her sole presses against my kisses. Natsuki breathes even heavier. She starts to giggle more and more until her light laughter comes out in a steady stream with each kiss. I breathe in deep. The scent is most substantial up against her sole, an aroma that may have been putrid to some, but enrapturing to me. I feel her eyes on me as my kisses travel all over her sole. My lips meet the undersides of each of her toes, causing her to struggle in keeping her ticklish foot still. I kiss over the ball of her foot, down the creamy arch, and ending at the silky, moist heel. I try to hide my enthusiasm, to pretend that Natsuki didn't just give me an opportunity that I'd see as a gift I wouldn't be lucky enough to get in my wildest dreams. When I feel that I have kissed every inch of her foot, reluctantly, I pull away. A hot rush comes to my cheek. I open my eyes, afraid to look up to see Natsuki's disgusted expression that would stain our friendship, or a look of confusion for which I would have to further explain myself.

I look up to Natsuki sitting above me. Her cheeks wear the same shade that I'm sure mine do as well. The look she gave down to me was calming. I expected her to freak out, to call me a name

and show how disgusted she is. Instead, she sits, lips parted in heavy breaths, staring down at me with complacent, wide eyes.

“G...good,” she says, regaining composure and swallowing to clear a lump in her throat. “But you’re not done.” I stifle a smile.

“What?” I ask with a single laugh.

“Y... yeah,” Natsuki says, bashfully. “Now you have to... um... lick it.” She says the last words under her breath.

“What was that?” I ask. Natsuki glances back at me. She holds her head up high, taking the role of commander.

“You have to... lick my foot,” Natsuki says. She flexes her foot so that her sole is facing me, heel balanced in my palm. Her arms cross.

“You want me to lick your foot?” I ask with a faux cynicism hiding my own buried enthusiasm. Natsuki scoffs.

“Only if you don’t want me to tell everyone that you have a thing for tickling... and feet, apparently...” Natsuki says. She watches me closely.

“As you wish,” I say. I cup her foot tenderly with both hands, using one to support her heel and the other to guide it closer. I bring my mouth up to Natsuki’s heel. I give her another gentle kiss before parting my lips. I close my eyes once again. My tongue emerges and presses up against her heel. I hear Natsuki inhale sharply. Her heel against my tongue is balmy and slick, the same steamy humidity that carried the scent of her foot, brushing softly against my face. I give only a small lick, retracting my tongue to absorb the flavor. I give another small lick, and then another around the sides. The taste is salty and savory. A hint of bitter gives Natsuki’s foot an exotic flavor. It ensnares me, beckons me to continue.

“Mmmmmheeheeheeheeee....” Natsuki giggles. I peek up to see her gripping the edge of the counter. My tongue slowly glides upward. I sink more abrasive, lasting licks into the plush dip of her arch. Natsuki breathes heavier, as do I with deep breaths in through my nose. I see her shoulders rise with each bursting giggle. I smile as I hear Natsuki’s sweet laugh.

Having licked every spot of her sole thus far, I move up to the ball of her foot. It’s supple pink hue reflects the playful purity of its flavor. Natsuki continues to giggle. Her seat squirms against the countertop. Her toes softly brush against my cheek. I give tiny, quick licks that make her laugh and long, dragging licks that make her moan behind tightly closed lips. I can only hope that she’s enjoying this as much as I am. I bathe her foot with my tongue, cleaning all the sweat

from her sole. It's something that I have always wanted to do, and I know it's something that I could happily do every day with Natsuki, if she wanted me to.

I stop at the base of her toes. I look up. Her face is bright red. Her hands shake in gripping the counter edge. Her small chest heaves up and down. She looks back at me, her tough-girl exterior dismantled. "I... I didn't say you were done..." Natsuki says. She wiggles her toes in my face. She doesn't have to say another word. I smile.

"Right," I exhale airily. With her bare foot still in my hands, I guide my face back toward it. I see Natsuki brace herself. I let my lips slip into the crevasse beneath her toes and part. My tongue eases out to begin gently stroking Natsuki's tiny toe stems. She squeaks and grips the counter harder. Natsuki winces through another series of giggles.

"Hhheehhehehehehehh.... Mmmmmmmhahahahahahaha..." Natsuki laughs. My tongue runs up the stem of one toes at a time, savoring every taste. I graze over each plum pad. Natsuki's toes move tenderly across my tongue and lips, like little gracious kisses. I lick in between each of her toes slowly. Natsuki's hands reach up to cover her mouth as she laughs harder. Her foot twitches in my hands, wanting to pull away, but Natsuki forces it in place. My tongue slips around each toe. I lick underneath, flick my tongue against each pad, and coat every inch in wet strokes.

I pause as I finish licking all over all five toes. Natsuki drops her hands and brushes her hair to the side. She looks down to me. "W-well... that was..." I catch her by surprise by wrapping my lips around several of her toes at once. I immediately start to suck and run my tongue across them in my mouth. Natsuki gasps. Her head falls back as her hands grip the edge of the counter once again. "Oooohhhhhhhhhhehehehehee.... Mmmmmmm..." I needfully encase two and three tiny toes at a time. My lips slide up and down them. My tongue presses against them in my mouth. I lose control. It's simply too good an opportunity to pass up on. I suck each plump, pink digit at least once more before drawing back. I look down at her petite foot, glossed with my saliva. Hesitantly, I look back up at Natsuki.

"S... sorry..." I say. Natsuki looks back at me. Her eyes are wide. Her cheeks burn. Her mouth is open, panting deep breaths. "I didn't... that didn't upset you, did it?" Natsuki pauses and swallows.

"Um... no," Natsuki says. "No, it felt..." Natsuki's face darkens with color. Her eyes wilt. She looks away, pulling her foot back in. She shivers. I see strain on her face. Her eyes clamp shut. Her lip quivers.

"Natsuki..." I start.

"Just..."

“Natsuki, what’s wrong?” I say, standing to meet her eye level.

“Don’t look at me,” she says. Her voice breaks. Her hand raises to her mouth. Tears form at the corners of her eyes. I look down, as instructed.

“I’m... I’m really sorry,” I say. “I guess I got a little carried away. I never wanted to make you uncomfortable...”

“That’s... that’s not it,” Natsuki says. I look up. I start to speak, but refrain as I see her gathering her words. “You just... You’re just always so nice to me and I’m so terrible to you!” My breath staggers.

“What?” I ask. “You’re not terrible to me.”

“I am,” Natsuki says. Her voice cracks. Her eyes open. They’re bloodshot and watery. “I’m so mean to you and you’re so nice to me all the time. I even made you do this because... I just... I don’t deserve it.”

“‘Don’t deserve’ what?”

“Anything,” Natsuki says. “I don’t deserve you being so nice to me. I don’t deserve you playing with me. I don’t deserve anything.”

“Where do you get that?” I ask, my heart aching at her unwarranted self-depreciation. “Who says that you don’t deserve anything?” Natsuki looks away. She snuffles and wipes her face.

“I’m not used to this,” Natsuki says. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry,” I say. “You haven’t done anything wrong. I just don’t understand how you feel this way.”

“It’s just what I’m told, okay?” Natsuki snaps.

“By who?” I ask. Natsuki glances over at the clock.

“I... I have to be home by five,” she says. “I can’t be late.”

“We have time, don’t worry,” I say, looking back to the cooled cupcakes. I turn back to her.

“Look, whoever is telling you this, they have no idea. They don’t know how cool and insightful and intelligent you are. You’re exciting and beautiful and you deserve the best from everyone. And if it means that I have to be your punching bag to hang out with you, then give me your best shot.” I smile back at Natsuki. She only looks back at me with unblinking eyes and a lost

expression of mindful struggle. Her hands clench into fists. Her eyes shut tight once again. Her shoulders hunch.

“Uuuuaaahh!” Natsuki gives a small scream. “And then you have to go and say these things and it hurts so much because I know you mean them, but I don’t know why!”

“I’m sorry,” I say. Natsuki’s head drops. I stand closer to her, stroking her arm.

“You’re just so clueless,” Natsuki says. “I don’t see how you can’t see... I don’t get how you don’t get...”

“What?” I ask. Natsuki takes several long breaths through her nose. She calms enough to unclench. Natsuki looks up to me with marbled eyes, shifting back and forth between mine.

“You’re going to make me say it...”

“‘Say’ what?” I ask. Natsuki puts her tiny hands on my shoulders.

“God, you are so clueless!” Natsuki says loudly. “Do I really have to say it?”

“What?” I ask, matching her volume.

“Ahhhh!” Natsuki groans aloud in frustration. She leans forward and pulls me into her. Her lips collide with mine. In an instant, another hot rush courses through me. Caught off guard, I freeze for a moment before leaning into Natsuki’s kiss. Her lips are thin and frail against mine. Her kiss is sudden and abrasive, though still with a tender charm of inexperience. I clutch her arm in my hand, softly pulling her in.

Natsuki pulls out of the kiss just as sudden as she initiated it. She looks back at me with impatient eyes darting back and forth. I stare down at her. My heart flutters. All of my senses seemed to multiply in awareness. The beautiful girl stares back at me waiting for a response. Her face is pure and cherubic. Worry sets in her oceanic eyes. In an instant, I wrap my hand around the back of her neck, throw my other arm around her waist, and pull her back in for another kiss. This time, I lead. Our lips meet. Our mouths part. Our tongues caress. She moans into the deeper kiss, grabbing my shirt collar and pulling me into her. Natsuki eagerly reciprocates the intensity. I let out all the feelings that I’ve had for her since the first day of the club. I give into how she made me feel when I got to tickle her and lick her foot. My hand slides up to her head, my fingers running through her hair. We both pant heavily through our noses. Her natural scent is delicate and alluring. We find ourselves lost in the kiss that lasts many glorious minutes.

When we pull away, we can only look at each other in awe by what we had done. I can’t help but smile. A smile begins to come to Natsuki’s face as well before melting into another teary

mold. I look her in the eye. "You deserve to be happy. No matter what, you deserve to be happy."

"You mean it?" she asks, sniffing.

"I do," I say. "Say it. Say 'I deserve to be happy'." Natsuki smiles.

"I deserve..."

"To be happy," I say when Natsuki pauses.

"To be happy," Natsuki repeats.

"Good," I say. "Now all together."

"I deserve to be happy," Natsuki says with brimming confidence. As she repeats the phrase, I am overwhelmed by the look of pure happiness that comes to her face. She stops and looks back at me. "No one's ever told me that before."

"Well, that's a shame," I say. Natsuki looks down.

"You... make me happy," Natsuki says.

"You make me happy too," I say. I pull the small girl in for a hug. She sniffles and cries into my chest. I stand and support her, wrapping her comfortably in my arms and letting her get out all that she needs.

"I'm not going to tell anyone about the tickling thing," Natsuki says. I laugh.

"I trust you," I say.

"I really like it when you play with me," Natsuki says.

"I like playing with you too," I say. Natsuki soon stops crying. She hugs me tight as she faces the clock.

"I don't want to go home," she says.

"We still have time," I say. "No need to rush."

"No, I mean... I don't want to go home today," Natsuki says.

“Well, I’d have you stay over as long as you’d want,” I say. “You’re always welcome over. If ever you wanted to work on a poem or hang out or to just...”

“Get away?” Natsuki asks. She looks up at me.

“Of course,” I say. “If you ever need to get away, get out of the house for a little bit, you’re always welcome here.”

“You mean it?” Natsuki asks.

“Anytime,” I say. “I can’t guarantee that I won’t tickle you though.” I quickly reach down and squeeze Natsuki’s sides. She squeals. Her body tightens.

“Aaaaaahhhhhh!! Hahahahahahahahahahaha!!” Natsuki laughs. She squirms in my arms, falling into my body. Natsuki twists back and forth against the counter. Her legs kick and cross. Her arms fold and press against her body. I only tickle her briefly, just to give her a friendly jolt awake. I drop my hands. Natsuki still laughs residual giggles as she brushes her hair out of her face. “I’d... like that too.” My hand drifts down to hers. I lightly take her hand in mine, only for her to hold onto mine with a needful grip. She looks up at me. “Can you... not tell anyone about this?”

“Ashamed of me?” I ask.

“No, no!” Natsuki blurts. “It’s just that... I don’t want this getting back to my dad. He’s not the most understanding guy.”

“I understand,” I say. “I only want to make you comfortable.” Natsuki leans into me.

“Thanks,” she says. I stand there, stroking her arm and holding her up. Natsuki sighs with content and pushes away from me. “We should probably work on these cupcake though. We still have a lot of work to do.” I laugh and nod. My dimpled cheeks blush. I rub my head as I think about how we just spent our time together in the kitchen when we should have been helping the club.

“Let’s do it,” I say. Natsuki pushes herself to the edge of the counter. I wrap my arms around her waist and lift her up.

“Hey!” she yells. I set her down on her bare feet. I laugh.

“Sorry, didn’t want you to get hurt or break your neck or anything,” I say. Natsuki narrows her eyes. She smirks. Her smile is genuine and beckoning. Infectious. I grab her around her hips and pull her into me. Cupping her cheek, I guide my way in for another kiss. The kiss is softer than the last. It lasts about half as long. I pull away and find myself completely enamored by

how breathtaking Natsuki's smile is. I brush her hair and gaze into her eyes. "You're so cute."  
Her pink sliver lips purse. She narrows her eyes. She steps back and crosses her arms.

"I'm not cute!" Natsuki replied. I stifled a laugh at just how wrong she was.