

BEACH Princess ビーチプリンセス

BEACH PRINCESS

Beach Princess Vol. 1

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Rays of sunlight pierced through the epipelagic zone of life-teeming warm ocean waters. Like fingers, the rays reached for the ocean depths. A sudden sparkling streak of orange, peach, and blue briskly zipped by like a shooting star. The figure effortlessly darted through the sea life with vigor and grace but never disturbed their peace. It was as though the figure's dance was revered, familiar, and welcomed amongst the watery kingdom's inhabitants.

The figure's mid-length strawberry-blonde colored hair followed each of her darting movements like orange echoes, and the bright scales of her cerulean caudal peduncle glittered like blue-colored stars in the deep of the night. Her playful energy beckoned the attention of a nearby dolphin pod who swiftly joined her dance. They entered her elegant display and circled around her like spiraling torpedoes. Altogether their trail streams looked like helical calligraphy.

She picked up speed and the dolphins broke away from her like parts of a rocket entering space. Briskly, she headed toward the ocean's surface. She looked like an angel returning to heaven as the waters lightened with her ascent. An unconfined grin ran across her face as everything faded to white with her crescendo.

“Finally!” Nami Ryohara exclaimed as she popped out the front doors of her school building, greeting the warm sunny day.

Her strawberry-blonde-colored hair playfully bounced about as the gray skirt of her school uniform floated above her porcelain-like knees during her leap.

A large and sudden force landed atop Nami’s back and pushed her forward. Nami found herself slightly hunched over not a moment after she landed.

“Hurray! It’s been quite the term but we made it!” Chiyo Kanetsuri cried out as she playfully glomped atop Nami’s shoulders, leaving her lightly ruffled up.

The two besties had just finished the first part of their junior year at Umibe High and summer break was here. The two live in the town of Umibe. It’s a small fishing and port town on the southernmost side of a Japanese island. The island lies south of mainland Japan.

“So, what are your plans for break? Are you still going to work at the Umibe Oyogi Shojo pageant?”

“Yes!” Nami giggled as she quietly adjusted her glasses ambidextrously by the temples. “It’s been the only thing on my mind for the past few weeks.”

Chiyo laughed, “Wow Nami, you’re way too obsessed with those beach pageants but I really love that about you.”

Chiyo stepped off of Nami with a striking and enchantingly warm smile. At an impressive height of one hundred and seventy-five centimeters (5’9” ft.), Chiyo’s slender figure stood about three-fifths of a head taller than Nami’s petite one hundred and sixty-two centimeters (5’4” ft.) frame. She boasted confidence as

strong as her long jet-black hair, hair that reached the bottom of her shoulder blades.

The childhood friends were two sides of beauty's crystalline coin. Nami was the personification of cuteness. She had round and soft features that made her appear like a master doll-maker's meticulously hand-crafted doll. Chiyo was the embodiment of beauty. It was as if the gods carefully carved her defined features out of marble. Nami was a rare beauty while Chiyo was conventionally beautiful. When it came to looks, the best friends were titans—two big fish in a small pond. They were fish that would be sizable in any body of water.

Nami was momentarily awed at Chiyo's captivating and radiant smile for a split second.

"What about you Chiyo? What do you plan to do for the break?" Nami asked this as she looked away. She quietly continued gathering herself from her friend's glomp attack.

Chiyo looked up thoughtfully.

"Mmm....my family plans on visiting my grandparents later on in the summer. But I'm definitely shopping, relaxing, and hanging out with my boyfriend until then." Just then, a devilish expression slithered across her face as her eyes slyly peered over towards her friend.

"Speaking of 'boyfriends,' do you think you'll find one this summer?" Chiyo jeered with folded arms while she leaned sideways toward Nami.

"Oh no!" Nami squeaked, turning red hot. She quickly looked away with her fingers fidgeting about and said, "U-Umibe is a small town. I-I would've probably had a boyfriend already!"

Chiyo let out a hearty laugh. "You're too cute!"

She pulled her friend to her side with her right arm. “You never know what magic the summer brings,” she said with a wink.

“Maybe you’re right.” Nami giggled meekly as she looked down. She welcomed Chiyo’s warm embrace without protest.

With high spirits, the two faded into the clamor and bustling ambiance of their fellow classmates as they left the school grounds. The sounds of musical chirps and washing waves slowly overtook those of excited chatter and cheery laughter.



The girls soon found themselves walking across the Umibe Boardwalk in silence. Their conversation dimmed into the town’s soundscape. The Umibe Boardwalk made up a considerable portion of the town’s southern edge and lay southwest of the high school. It was a wide and artery-like boardwalk compared to the tranquil yet flitting town’s veiny streets and pathways. The boardwalk route wasn't the most efficient way back home from the high school, but it was a path that many in the town had walked for generations.

Absorbed in her phone, Chiyo swiped, tapped, and scrolled through and between her messaging and social media apps. Meanwhile, Nami was in herself and lost in her thought. Both girls moseyed on as their bodies operated as if on autopilot.

Nami turned her head towards the ocean as the two carried on. Suddenly she stopped walking and faced the beach as if it called her name. Chiyo obliviously walked on for a bit as she scrolled

through Pictagram. She hadn't walked more than twenty feet when she couldn't feel Nami's presence around her.

"Nami?"

Bewildered, Chiyo started to look around to find her friend.

"Na—" she stopped herself when she saw her friend after she turned around.

Chiyo watched Nami briefly. Nami's bob cut strawberry-blond hair danced like a flame in the breeze. She gave the beach her full attention. Chiyo could barely see Nami's expression but she knew Nami was deeply enjoying the moment. Chiyo locked her phone with a click as she let out a brief and amused sigh. She then headed towards her friend.

Nami's eyes sparkled as she beheld the view with all of her senses. The sun was brightly shining as white and blue clouds painted the sky. Warm air wrapped around her body like weightless bed sheets. The air's scent was fresh yet kissed with a touch of salt. The ocean's countless facet-like waves glistened like a precious blue diamond. Each ebb and flow pushed and pulled on her soul. Summer days like this breathed new life into Nami.

"Oii! Nami!" Chiyo yelled as she closed in on her friend. She stopped right next to Nami where she could clearly make out her glowing expression.

"Aren't we heading home? You have all summer break to enjoy the beach."

"Yes, but it looks so beautiful." Nami was beaming. "Actually, I won't let my first day of summer pass without getting some ocean action." She said as she gave Chiyo a mischievous wink.

A sudden reddish-orange blur flashed before Chiyo's eyes as Nami hopped the wooden fence of the boardwalk and ran down

the sand dune towards the shore. Chiyo was taken aback by the abrupt movement.

“Nami! What are you doing!?” Chiyo shouted with delightful confusion, only to be answered by cheerful laughter.

Chiyo cautiously followed, slowly heading down the sandy slope and onto the beach. Nami carelessly threw off her backpack as she ran across the beach. Slowing down, she took off her socks and shoes when she neared the ocean. She then headed into the shallow waters with a bouncy skipping prance.

“Hey! You’re going to mess these up!” Chiyo announced with a frown after she picked up one of Nami’s socks.

Nami laughed, playfully jumped, and stomped about like a child in a rain puddle as Chiyo shook the sand off the sock. Chiyo watched Nami play around and smiled to herself. She admires and looks up to Nami in many ways despite being a few months older.

“So, are you ever going to participate in a swimsuit competition again Nami?”

“I don’t think so...it’d be nice but it’s not really me anymore. It was just a thing I did once.”

“I’ve told you this many times but I think it’d be amazing to see you take the stage again. Not only do you love the ocean but you’re gorgeous. It just makes sense.” Chiyo said as she picked up the other sock and shook it off.

“Stunning? Beautiful?” Nami let out a little giggle. “I don’t know...I’m not all that.”

“You’re so beautiful in more ways than you know Nami. Honestly, you’re a big reason why I do modeling.”

Nami's heart skipped a beat when she heard this. She stopped splashing around and looked at Chiyo, feeling a bit flustered.

"N-no way, are you joking?"

Chiyo picked up both of Nami's shoes and started knocking them together.

"I wouldn't joke around about something like that Nami. You know me better than that. Obviously, the choice is yours but I really think you should get back into it. I can see you becoming the Umibe Oyogi Shojo."

"You know...maybe I'll try out for the pageant next year or during university." Nami giggled and performed an elegant pirouette. Water trailed from her foot like sparkling magic from a wand. She ended her performance with a dainty curtsy. "I'll become a princess that you'll be proud of."

"Ohh! Your majesty!" Chiyo's eyes sparkled as she vigorously clapped for her friend's performance, holding Nami's items under her right arm.

They both laughed as Nami slowly walked out of the delicate waves towards Chiyo.

"Thank you for cleaning my things," Nami said with a hint of embarrassment as she received her items.

"Don't mention it." Chiyo said with a smile as she waved off any offense with her right hand.

The two quietly chatted as they returned to the boardwalk. On the way, Chiyo picked up Nami's book bag and then proceeded to shake and knock off the sand. Nami held her shoes in one hand and her socks in the other. She didn't put them on to prevent her shoes and socks from getting dirty after Chiyo had just cleaned them.

Chiyo noticed something in the distance as they headed up one of the boardwalk's wooden staircases.

“Hey look! Do you think they're setting up for the pageant?” Chiyo pointed to their left and the two of them stopped walking up the stairs to watch.

“Yes, that's the Umibe Oyogi Shojo.”

Staff wearing plain white t-shirts with the Umibe Oyogi Shojo logo on the back were setting up large pole tents towards the center of the beach.

“Shouldn't you be over there helping your fellow staffers?” Chiyo teased.

“No, no.” Nami giggled. “Students aren't expected to help with setting up and we're treated more like volunteers or part-timers. Also, they started setting up while we were in school, remember?”

“Haha right, right.”

“I'm heading in later this week to help with minor set-ups and contestant sign-ups.”

One of the pageant staffers somehow noticed that the girls were watching from a distance and greeted them with a wave. Nami and Chiyo waved back with a laugh, then continued up the stairs and onto the boardwalk.

“Okay, wait here. I'll buy some water to wash off your feet.”

“Oh! You really don't have to do that!” Nami protested. “I'd feel bad if you spent money on me.”

“It's no problem! I made some decent cash from that photoshoot two weeks ago. A bottle of water is nothing at all. I'll be back in a flash!”

Chiyo darted off toward the edge of the town to one of the nearby convenience stores, leaving her backpack behind. She was so fast that Nami couldn't muster up any more words to stop her. Nami let out a smiling sigh and turned to the ocean to admire the setting. *It really is a gorgeous view.* She thought before losing herself in the moment.

“Oiii!”

Chiyo called out as she ran back, waving the water bottle in the air. Her left hand held a twin ice-pop. It didn't take longer than four minutes for Chiyo to buy the items and come back.

“Was buying the water actually just an excuse to get something to eat?”

“Maaaybe.” Chiyo said with a playful grin as she handed Nami the bottle. She watched for a bit as Nami rinsed off her feet with the water before opening her phone.

Nami almost finished tightening her last shoe when Chiyo locked her phone and placed it in her pocket.

“Ready?”

“Yes!” Nami stood up. “Are you sure you should be eating all of that sugar? What if you break out?”

“Eh...I don't have another shoot for a few weeks.” Chiyo began to pull on the wrapper with both hands. “Not only do I have a superb super-secret Korean-inspired skincare routine but I can cover any blemishes with makeup.” She ripped the wrapper open and pushed the ice-pop through from the bottom. Chiyo then held a twin ice-pop stick in each hand.

“Plus, it's the first day of summer vacation and I want to celebrate.” Chiyo broke the ice-pop in half with a snap and held out the smaller piece to Nami.

“Here! Take it!”

“Oh no, I couldn’t! You already bought the water for me!”

“Haha, I said it’s not a problem so just take it! It’s the first day of summer and we have to celebrate! If you really feel bad then you can pay me back from one of your paychecks.”

“Hee-hee alright then, thank you!” Nami graciously accepted the gift.

“I propose a toast!” Chiyo shouted with a bright expression. “To summer!”

“To summer!”

“Cheers!” They said aloud in harmonious unison. They raised their ice pops and tapped them together with merry laughter. Chiyo picked up her book bag and the two headed towards the town’s center.

They arrived at Nami’s house which lies a few blocks from the town’s center. Chiyo’s house was located deeper into the town.

“You know, I might come visit you while you’re working at the pageant.”

“Really? Why?”

“Just something to do, and it’d be nice to spend some time with you.”

“Hee-hee, well I look forward to it but I might have you help me sign people up.”

“Bleh! Don’t count on it haha! I’ll text you later tonight.”

“Okay! Bye Chiyo!”

“Bye-bye!”

Chiyo walked away with a wave. She continued deeper into the town as she dove back into her phone, slowly disappearing into the town.

The Ryohara home was a two-story house that had a modern and Western-influenced style. The quaint home maintained a homely feel despite previous renovations, and it fitted nicely among the mix of traditional and modern homes that made up the town. An open-ended cement fence that housed the mailbox and address plate surrounded the premises, beautifully framing the property.

“I’m home!” Nami called out as she opened the front door.

A familiar smell made up of comfortable scent notes permeated throughout the house. It was a pleasantly sweet and meaty aroma cultivated by years of cooking, environmental elements, and natural body scents.

“Welcome home sweetie!” A warm voice replied from her left, beyond the living room from the kitchen. “How was school?”

“It went by so fast! I could hardly pay attention because I was so excited!”

A woman appeared from the other opening of the living room creating a direct line of sight between her and Nami. She wore a white apron over her t-shirt and jeans and was wiping off a freshly rinsed silicone serving spoon.

“But you did pay attention?” The question was stern in tone but playful.

“Haha yes Mama! I paid attention, took notes, and wrote down what I have to do for my summer assignments.”

“Good! I’m happy to hear that.” Nami’s mother said with approval.

Mizu Ryohara was a bit taller than Nami at one hundred and sixty-five centimeters (5’5” ft.). She wore her fiery strawberry-blond hair up and in a neat bun at the back. The front of her

hair had bangs and side-swept hair that framed her delicate face. She was bustier than her daughter, and her petite frame was fuller due to aging and a relaxed lifestyle. Nami was practically the spitting image of her mother. Those unfamiliar with the Ryohara family might mistake the two for sisters.

“When are you working at the Umibe Oyogi Shoji competition? Do you start tomorrow?”

“No, I’m starting later this week. Mrs. Hayashi said I can have some time off to enjoy the first few days of break.”

“Oh, that was very thoughtful of her. I hope you thanked her.”

“Of course Mama!”

Mrs. Ryohara returned to the kitchen. Seeing this, Nami cheerfully ran up the stairs to her room.



*\*Brrm-brrm Brrrrrrrm\* \*Brrm-brrm Brrrrrrrm\**

Vibrations of a phone resonated throughout a light blue room. Each wall of the room was speckled with sea-related paraphernalia. A bureau on the opposite end of the room displayed several school awards, a sash, and a dolphin trophy.

*\*Brrm-brrm Brrrrrrrm\* \*Brrm-brrm Brrrrrrrm\**

Singing from outside birds, and other outside ambiance were drowned out by the phone’s persistent and pervasive vibrating. The room was well-lit despite the window’s thin shades’ best efforts.

“Mmm..mmm...”

Rustling was heard as Nami reluctantly turned over in her bed. She sluggishly reached her left arm over to her dresser and tapped the red “X” button on her phone to turn off her alarm.

*\*Thwump!\**

Her arm fell next to her as she stared into space.

“Ohh!” Nami gasped, her eyes now wide and filled with life.

Today was the day—her first day working at the Umibe Oyogi Shojo pageant. Nami pushed herself up, threw off her blanket, jumped out of bed, and flew into the bathroom. She took a shower and brushed her teeth in what seemed like a matter of minutes. Now back in her room, Nami slipped into her pleated skirt and popped on her official Umibe Oyogi Shojo t-shirt, both were ironed and ready from the previous night.

After she put on light makeup, Nami grabbed her messenger bag, swiftly ran downstairs, and turned right to enter the living room.

*\*Wham!\**

“Ack!” Nami yelped.

She had hit something in her rush—something hard. A slender arm quickly extended out towards her as she fell backward from the collision.

*\*Thock!\**

Nami’s body came to a sudden and complete stop. For a moment she felt like she was frozen in time, like an insect the instant it’s caught in a spider-web. However, it was a statue-like hand instead of steel-like silk that kept her suspended in space.

“Whoa, are you okay? I’m really sorry about that.”

The words were soft-spoken and kind, and the voice behind them was strong, wood-like, and reassuring.

“Hee-hee! Yes, I’m okay Papa! I’m sorry for rushing!”

Nami was effortlessly pulled into a standing position and there she got a proper look at her father.

Kaito Ryohara was fairly tall with a height of one hundred and eighty-one centimeters (5’11” ft.). His slender body hid harden muscles, a body sculpted by twenty years in the Japanese Navy. Nami looked nothing like her father who had sharp and narrow features with short black hair. The only things she inherited from him were blindness (glasses), gentleness, and love of the ocean.

“Sorry, sorry!”

“Why are you in a rush?” Mr. Ryohara asked with a calm smile as Nami zipped around him to get to the kitchen. “It’s eight forty-six and the event doesn’t start until ten.”

“I know, but I’d like some time to enjoy myself and help set up.”

“Good morning!” Mrs. Ryohara said as Nami entered the kitchen.

“Good morning Mama!”

Nami sat down at the kitchen table to greet the hearty breakfast that her mother laid out for her. The combined savory aroma of crisp toast and a fluffy bacon omelet filled her nose.

“Thanks for the food!”

Mrs. Ryohara watched as her daughter scarfed down her food in a stunningly neat and quiet fashion.

“Nami.”

Nami quickly swallowed the bit of omelet she was chewing to squeeze out a reply.

“Yes Mama?”

“What do you like about the swimsuit pageants?”

“Hmm...there’s a lot of things I like about them. I love that they take place outside and on the beach. It gives cute girls the chance to showcase their talents and their unique body types. And the swimsuits and costumes are usually so cute and amazing!”

“Well, how come you never continued to participate after that one pageant since you enjoy them?”

“The Umibe Iruka Musume pageant was a blast, but I couldn’t imagine doing all of those things to prepare every year. I feel like it’s a lot of work.”

“—And money!” chimed Mr. Ryohara as he stepped into the kitchen’s entranceway. “Thanks for that.”

“Tch! Kaito!” Mrs. Ryohara snapped with a half-hearted frown. It only took a few seconds of Mr. Ryohara and Nami’s chuckles to break her angry facade.

“Why do you ask Mama?” She continued on eating.

Mrs. Ryohara sighed with a smile and placed her right hand on her cheek.

“You’re growing up to be such a beautiful young woman, and you remind me of a lot of myself. Maybe I’m being selfish but I’d love to see you on a stage again.”

“Hee-hee! I had a similar conversation with Chiyo a few days ago. Maybe I’ll participate in university.”

“Oh I would love that!”

Nami finished the glass of milk that accompanied her meal. She got up from the table and picked up her bag to head out.

“Breakfast was delicious Mama! Thank you!”

Nami darted by her father and went into the foyer to put on her shoes.

“Do you want a ride since you’re in a rush?”

“No thank you, Papa! I feel like walking today.”

“Okay then.”

“Be careful Nami!” Mrs. Ryohara called out, joining her husband’s side.

“I will Mama, thank you!” She unlocked and opened the front door.

“Bye Papa! Bye Mama!”

“Bye Nami!”

“See you later!”

The two of them watched as their daughter went out the door. If Nami could see their faces, she would’ve seen their proud expressions.

*\*Ka-den!\**

A bright summer morning welcomed Nami as she closed the front door. Warm air wrapped around and enveloped her in complete comfort. Pleasant scents from the surrounding vegetation flavored the fresh air that entered her body. The singing birds and chirping cicadas, once impeded by phone vibrations and household noises, now controlled the soundscape.

Nami couldn’t control the wide smile on her face as the thought of pageant work combined with the essence of nature welled up jubilant feelings inside of her. She hopped off her doorstep and started her brisk stroll to the beach.



“Thanks for registering for the Umibe Oyogi Shojo! Take care and good luck!” Nami said as she filed a completed registry paper in a basket with the others.

“Thanks! See ya!”

The sun was high in the sky as it lightly toasted the Umibe beach. Its heat wasn't sweltering but it made the air hotter than it was in the morning. Breezes and seldom passing clouds helped keep the temperature at cool and comfortable levels.

“Nami dear, have you taken a break yet?”

“No, not yet Mrs. Hayashi.”

Kishiko Hayashi was the Umibe Oyogi Shojo's show runner. She was an older woman in her late forties and had worked in the industry for over eighteen years. Nami met her two years ago when she first started working at the pageants. The two have grown close but not past the point of acquaintances.

“It's so hot so please be mindful of your health. Other people can cover for you, so let me know when you're ready to take one.”

“Yes ma'am!”

Nami spent the last few hours registering girls and promoting the event. She felt a break wasn't necessary since most of her shift consisted of sitting down and filing paperwork under a pole tent. Her whole shift had been slow and easygoing because not many teenage girls were clamoring to join the pageant as Umibe is a small town.

Chatter and laughter were heard from a distance. Nami looked up and saw three teenage girls coming her way. She put down her phone and sat up a little more as they approached.

The girl leading the pack was tall but probably just a little shorter than Chiyo. She had long dark purple hair swept to the right side of her head. She wore sunglasses, an expensive white off-shoulder “Ala Mode” branded t-shirt tied at the waist, and dark blue shorts with fringed bottoms.

Nami could see that this girl was cut above the rest when it came to beauty. Her face had sharp and slim features akin to a J-pop idol’s. Slight curves adorned her slim body. Her flat stomach was enchantingly framed and enhanced by the grooves of her linea semilunaris.

The other two girls were not as tall and just under the eye level of the girl in front. Both of them were stylish but their clothing was more reserved than the purple hair girl’s.

“Welcome ladies! How may I help you today?”

“Are you stupid? I’m obviously here to register,” said the purple-haired girl after putting up her sunglasses. “I mean look at me—I know you’re wearing glasses but you can’t be that blind.”

She smirked while the two girls behind her snickered. Nami was taken aback but not visibly shaken. Almost everybody in Umibe was well-behaved. Generations of a close-knit community helped to cultivate that environment. Every town has its colorful characters and troublemakers but this kind of behavior was atypical.

“Oh...here you go.”

Nami picked up and placed one of the registry papers and a pen in front of the girl with purple hair. The purple-haired girl leaned over and started filling out her information. A hint of fruity and sweet notes tickled Nami’s nose.

*She smells good and looks great. Nami thought. Perhaps she’s not so bad.*

“What’s your name?” Nami put on her warmest smile.

The purple-haired girl stopped writing. Her eyes flashed to look at Nami. Her dagger-like glare was menacing and unfriendly—like a hiding tiger focused on its prey.

“Huh?”

Her tone was aggressive and cold. There was no attempt to hide her irritation.

“What’s...your name?” Nami’s smile was now a little disheveled.

“Seriously? You don’t know who she is?” The sand-colored-haired girl on their left asked. An obnoxiously exaggerated and airy elongated gasp rang out from the brown-haired girl on their right.

“She’s Reina Kiyomizu, the reigning Miss Young Nagisa, and two-time winner of the Nagisa Next Wave pageant!” The sand-colored-haired girl announced. “She’s the ‘Pearl of Nagisa.’”

Nagisa is a small city located on the north side of the island. The city’s location provided it with direct trade routes to mainland Japan, fostering its growth as a settlement. It’s the biggest settlement on the island.

“Reina has over seventeen thousand followers on Pictagram and fifty thousand on TikTic. How do you not know any of this?” The reddish-brown-haired girl chimed in.

Reina stood up after hearing these things. She had a pompous sneer smeared across her face as she looked down at Nami.

“Heh, I’m not surprised a bumpkin from a backwater town doesn’t know who I am.”

“Why are you signing up to participate in a *backwater town’s* event?”

There was a subtle hint of agitation in Nami's voice. She was growing irritated. Her eyes narrowed into a glare and her eyebrows were now slightly furrowed. Still, she tried her best to maintain her composure.

"I want another accolade for my resume and I figured this would be an easy win before the next Nagisa Next Wave pageant. I'm padding my stats, you wouldn't understand."

The three girls giggled as Reina continued filling out the registration form as Nami watched in silence.

"Okay, we're done here."

Reina stood up without handing the paper or the pen to Nami.

"Thank you for registering for the Umibe Oyogi Shojo. Good luck." Nami said unenthusiastically and she picked up the paper and pen.

"Won't need it. Later." Reina said as the girls left the table.

Nami was livid and seething with disdain. She glared as they walked about twenty-five feet before stopping to talk amongst themselves. *Why were they so mean?*

A sudden darkness overcame Nami and she couldn't see. Two hands wrapped around her eyes from behind.

"Ah!" She gasped.

"Guess who!?"

"Chiyo!?" Nami took Chiyo's hands away from her face and turned to face her friend. Her mood improved in an instant.

"What are you doing here?"

"I told you I was going to see you!"

"I didn't think you'd visit on my first day of sign-ups! Thanks for stopping by, really!"

"Haha, how's work? Is it as exciting as you thought it'd be?"

“Yes, I’m loving it so far!”

Chiyo stepped out from behind the staff-only section of the tent and sat on the corner of the table.

“Good. I thought I saw some girls giving you trouble. Speaking of which…” Chiyo pointed with a quick and slight head tilt. “Who were those pieces of work?”

Reina and her friends were in the same spot but now talking to a pageant staffer.

“Oh, that’s Reina Kiyomizu, the ‘*Pearl of Nagisa*,’ and her stooges.” Nami said in a slightly mocking tone. “They’re the worst people I’ve ever met!” She started to get worked up again. “Ah, so that’s Reina. We’re in the same talent agency and I’ve heard about her in industry circles. She’s pretty popular in Nagisa and the local fashion scene.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, but she’s apparently having trouble marketing herself and getting partnership deals.”

“Probably because of her ugly attitude!”

“Nami!”

The two girls burst into laughter.

“What do you mean you don’t know, huh!?” A voice shouted. The deafening shout cut through the peace of the beach and cut their laughter short.

Nami and Chiyo looked in the shout’s direction to see where the voice was coming from, but they had a good idea of its origin.

Reina and her friends had taken on an aggressive stance against the female pageant staffer. What seemed like a casual group conversation turned into a tense situation.

“Does anyone know anything around here!?” Reina exclaimed furiously.

*Enough!* Nami aggressively stood up, went around the table, and stormed toward the gang of girls without saying a word. She was like a little hurricane on its way to devastate an area. Chiyo was caught off-guard by this, but her shock quickly turned into delight. She got up and followed her friend wearing a delinquent smirk. Drama was brewing and she didn’t want to miss this rare side of Nami.

“Hey! What is your problem!?”

Reina and her friends turned to Nami’s direction in momentary confusion.

“Well if it isn’t the bumpkin. My problem is that no one in this backwater town knows anything.”

“That doesn’t give you a reason to shout like a moron.”

“A moron? You must be talking about yourself you backwater pipsqueak.”

“Oii! Seriously, what’s your problem?” Chiyo snapped as she walked up next to Nami.

“Chiyo Kanetsuri!? Well, this is a surprise! I knew you were from Umibe but I didn’t think you’d be here.”

“Yeah I’m here to support my friend, and you’re being a grade-A jerk.”

“Wait, you’re actually friends with this nobody?”

“*Best* friends. And this ‘*nobody*’ is the main reason I’m a model.”

“Tch. What is she? A photographer, a model, or some sort of publicist?”

“She’s a beauty queen, a pageant winner.”

The statement bothered Nami but she gave no visible tell. It's true she's a beauty queen, yet Chiyo's tone and wording made it seem as though she's an active pageant competitor. However, she gladly accepted Chiyo's honoring statement without protest if it meant shutting down Reina.

"Really? You're a beauty queen? Haha, I guess they'll let anyone win a pageant in this town!"

"Oii, she's actually amazing and a better beauty queen than you!"

"She's a pageant winner and I don't even recognize her. What's your name?"

"Na—"

"Nami Ryohara."

Nami was cut off by a calm yet firm male voice. The girls turned to see a teenage boy standing near them.

"She's Nami Ryohara. Winner of the Umibe Iruka Musume."

"Who's he? Another friend of yours?" Reina asked looking at Chiyo and Nami.

"I don't think so." Nami said as Chiyo shrugged. They were just as perplexed as Reina and her friends. The teen boy appeared to be around the same age as them but they've never seen him before.

"Sorry to interrupt. My name is Yuto Soramoto. I'm a photographer."

There was an expensive-looking camera hanging off Yuto's right shoulder from a strap. A pageant press pass hung from his neck so he seemed to be telling the truth.

"Ugh! Who cares!?" Reina shouted. "I've never even heard of the Umibe Iruka Musume."

“It’s a junior pageant. Ms. Ryohara won it seven years ago.”  
Yuto said calmly.

“A junior pageant!? Hah! You won against children! You can’t even call yourself a beauty queen!” Reina and her friends broke into laughter.

The tables had turned and Nami’s gamble on Chiyo’s boast backfired. Nami felt hot as a wave of dread rushed down her back. She was filled with embarrassment and tears began to well up in her eyes.

“Yeah, Nami won a competition seven years ago, but she can run circles around you! If you two were to go head-to-head in a pageant then I’d bet on Nami! Every! Time!” Chiyo boasted.

“Hah! Really now? I’d love to see that!”

“Fine...”

The word left Nami’s lips quietly, sounding more like a noise than a word.

“Huh? Hahaha!”

“Fine.”

Her response was now a firm mutter.

“What are you say—”

“I said ‘Fine!’ You think you’re so cool and so beautiful but you’re not! You’re nothing but a mannerless and haughty fool! Let’s do this!” Nami exclaimed as more tears gathered in her eyes.

This caught Chiyo unawares since she hadn’t seen Nami get this worked up in a long time. She was speechless yet filled with pride. Nami’s fiery passion was invigorating, and Chiyo couldn’t control the grin from spreading across her face.

“Let’s do what, pipsqueak?” Reina was more serious now and mildly irritated.

“Let’s see who’ll win the Umibe Oyogi Shojo!”

“Oh please, you don’t ever stand a chance against me.”

“You’re just scared you’d lose,” Chiyo said, still smirking.

“Huh? Scared I’d lose? To this nobody?”

Reina then looked right at Nami and their eyes met. Nami’s tear-filled eyes would usually be hilarious to her but this was different. She didn’t like the defiant look Nami had. Reina was convinced that Nami really thought she could win, and the very idea infuriated her.

“Okay, I’ll take you on but let’s make things more interesting.”

“How?” Chiyo asked with pursuant intrigue.

“If I lose then I’ll quit pageants and modeling.”

“Ha! Sounds good to me!” Chiyo laughed. “And what if you win?”

“If I win then Pipsqueak has to be my indefinite servant.”

“Hey! That’s not fair!”

“Pageants and modeling are my livelihoods. A life for a life. Or —”

An eerie sneer crawled over Reina’s face. Her expression was dark and ominous.

“ —Is it that you really don’t think this loser can beat me?”

Silenced, Chiyo looked over to Nami. She was confident that Nami *could* beat Reina, but there was always a chance she could lose.

She watched as Nami stared back at Reina. Reina has great respect for Nami. It’s a similar admiration a younger sister has for an older one. However, the situation’s optics and Chiyo’s height

made Nami look vulnerable. She looked like a small dog posturing against a lion from Chiyo's perspective.

"Nami, let's just—"

"I accept!"

Nami boldly announced her confirmation with a tensed body and clenched fists.

"That's a good girl! You're in for a long summer pipsqueak."

"Ladies, ladies!" Mrs. Hayashi yelled as she and another staffer hustled to their location. "What's going on here?"

"Oh, nothing. We were just leaving. Sorry for any inconvenience." Reina's voice was sweet but her words felt vapid. Reina and her friends bowed with faux meekness before walking away. Their demure facade broke when they were just a few feet away—laughing at the situation and Nami's apparent demise.

"Nami dear, are you okay?" Mrs. Hayashi asked.

Nami realized that her face may have been red and that she still had tears in her eyes. Wiping away the tears, she replied, "Yes Mrs. Hayashi, I'm fine."

"Okay good." Mrs. Hayashi was relieved. "You can take your break now or go home if you'd like."

"Actually..." Nami began to fix her glasses. "I think I'm going to quit working for the pageant."

"Why!? You were looking forward to this event! Did those girls do something to you!?"

"No, no. I'd like to participate."

"Participate in the pageant!? Nami, I don't believe that's possible. You're working for the pageant."

"Please, Mrs. Hayashi! I want to try at least! This is important!."

Mrs. Hayashi stared at Nami for a moment with a concerned look. Her little determined expression wore on and softened Mrs. Hayashi's heart. She then let out an audible sigh.

"It should be fine since you don't know the judges. I'll talk to the pageant board. If they allow it then they'll probably ask you to take a pay cut for today, or forfeit your check."

"Yay! Oh thank you, thank you Mrs. Hayashi!"

"No promises!" Mrs. Hayashi said in a serious tone.

"Yes, no promises!"

"I'll text you the board's decision."

"Okay!"

Mrs. Hayashi smiled and then clapped her hands once.

"Okay everyone back to work! Izumi, please take over registrations."

"Yes ma'am!"

At this, all the pageant staff continued working and preparing for the pageant. Nami and Chiyo stood speechless. They were still trying to process everything that had just occurred. A whirlwind of emotions stirred within them and they didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

Adding to the complexity of the situation was this mysterious stranger, Yuto. The staff left the two girls alone with him. Nothing about his appearance or body language suggested he was a threat or a weirdo. However, his knowledge about Nami was weird and had her concerned. *Who is he and how does he know about me?*