

Strawberry Panic

VOLUME 1

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LOS ANGELES

STRAWBERRY PANIC VOL. 1

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*F*lutter flutter...

All around them, cherry blossoms scattered to the ground. In the middle of a cherry-colored mist, a larger figure and a smaller figure stood close together atop a hill, surrounded by thick, old cherry trees. Standing atop the gently rolling hill of bright green, the two figures looked like they were floating in a thin, cherry-colored cloud.

“The time has finally come to say goodbye, hasn’t it?”

“Oneesama, I...still...”

Fwooo. A gentle breeze blew. It scattered the cherry blossoms again.

Flutter flutter...

“I still want to stay with you, Oneesama.”

The larger figure leaned toward the smaller figure in admonishment. She gently pressed her finger to the other’s lips. “You shouldn’t say things like that.”

The smaller figure—the younger girl—wiped at her tears with a handkerchief. “Y-you’re right... I’m sorry...” She’d been crying so much the handkerchief was already soaked, but she didn’t care. In a daze, she rubbed her eyes with it.

The larger figure reached out her hand and softly, gently, halted the other girl’s hand.

Twitch. The smaller girl’s shoulders shook horribly.

“You shouldn’t rub your eyes so much,” the older girl said. “You’re just as much of a crybaby as ever, aren’t you? Your eyes will get puffy.” She lovingly, gently traced the girl’s eyelids with her finger.

The young girl shook so violently, she almost seemed to convulse.

Fwooo. A cherry-colored cloud enveloped them again. A halo-like aura surrounded them—mostly white, but with a single, faint drop of peach.

The older girl gazed at the younger. The school uniform suited her well, which made it seem even more like the time for her to transform into a grown woman had arrived. She felt an intense longing. *Ah, I can’t take it any more.* She opened both arms wide and went to embrace the smaller figure, but suddenly she stopped herself. *I shouldn’t. If I did...there would be regrets. I shouldn’t hold her any more. It’s time for us to say goodbye.*

She forced her arms under control, and instead of around the girl, gently placed them on her shoulders.

“Listen, my darling little daisy. The two of us have been so happy until now, right? You were my darling angel. Really. Please understand, okay? I adore you so much, it’s really hard for ME to be apart, too. Goodbye.”

At that last, the girl’s face snapped up. Her stream of tears stopped without a sound, her face as sad as it could be. Her oneesama, who was so beautiful, so sublime, she almost seemed to melt into the cherry-colored cloud that floated in the blue sky, slowly and silently shook her head.

Then her oneesama gave a casual smile. “You

know the kind of person I am, right?”

“Y-yes...” The girl knew, but still...it was only to be expected. A new flood of tears streamed down her cheeks.

“Come on, don’t cry like that any more.” Once again, the older girl gently wiped them away with her finger.

Nothing but sobbing came from the younger girl; she was choked by tears.

“What am I going to do? When I see you crying like that, it feels like it’ll make me sad, too,” said the girl’s oneesama—seventeen-year-old Hanazono Shizuma—her hands resting gently on the girl’s back. In her own way, she was mourning the fact she had to part with the innocent girl.

Ah, you are my treasure, as beautiful as a delicate daisy. I wish this moment could last forever and ever. The flow of time is cruel. In the end, it’s come to this again: We have to part. I thought for sure you would be the one who could tie down my wandering heart.

As Shizuma looked at the high, clear blue sky, her thoughts drifted back in time.

I wonder how many times something like this

has happened since I came to St. Miator.

*

St. Miator Girls’ Academy was known all over the world as a first-class girls’ school. It accommodated the kind of refined girls who seemed to have all but disappeared from ordinary society—well brought up, beautiful in appearance and very wise, yet with noble hearts. Shy and innocent, they had respect for their elders and pure hearts filled with love for God.

It’s hopeless trying to tell me not to let my eyes wander.

Shizuma had attended this school since kindergarten, and since the day she’d entered middle school had attracted the attention of the entire school.

Even in a school like Miator, which was filled with girls from prominent families, being the eldest daughter of the head of such a large, well-established business conglomerate with so many ties to prominent political and economic circles was enough to get the other students’ attention. On top of that, Shizuma was, with no exaggeration, a handsome, talented girl

who excelled both academically and athletically.

She had long, shiny, gently waving hair and pale, almost transparent skin, like porcelain. She was tall, with long, slender legs.

Shizuma was on the track team, specializing in the high jump. During the sports festival, she competed in the relay. And in the national practice exam, she was always in the top one hundred. Her high-bridged nose and sharp chin gave her a look of intelligence, her large eyes, fringed by long eyelashes, always shone and she brimmed with confidence. Anyone who saw her thought she looked like a bisque doll.

Smart, beautiful, athletic and talented—ever since she was a little girl, people had told her she was like a rose blossom.

Upperclassmen showered her with invitations to tea and underclassmen shot her admiring glances. It happened so often she didn't even feel uncomfortable about it. Shizuma never turned down those invitations—no matter who did the asking, she always answered with a smile. It was all a part of her glorious school life. Even if the other girls' admiration grew and turned into love, Shizuma didn't think it particularly strange. She enjoyed being surrounded

by a bunch of sweet, beautiful damsels, and she certainly didn't dislike playing at romance when she was invited somewhere.

Sometimes Shizuma would fall in love—a mysterious feeling that only appeared when she was with her damsels, during the little games she would play with them. That thick, sweet, gentle, peach-like aroma that only floated in the air between two girls; an emotion that went beyond simple affection or impatience and made them wish they could touch each other's soft white skin forever.

Once this emotion had been born in her heart, it shifted intensely, and she found herself driven to control her partner.

I'm not going to leave your side for an instant. I want to be connected to you forever. You're so precious to me I won't let you lay eyes on anyone but me.

Blessed with talent and usually able to control everything, it was the first time in Shizuma's life she felt emotions she couldn't control, like an unruly, galloping horse. At some point, Shizuma had abandoned herself to the sensation.

Once she became an upperclassman, Shizuma

started to change her “favorite” frequently. She thought she might have become numb to the feeling altogether. No, she knew that wasn’t it. At what point had it started to fall apart? No matter whom she was with or what she did, it always came down to the same thing.

Deep in her heart, there was a void she just couldn’t fill.

It could be because of *her*... For a moment, small cracks formed in Shizuma’s heart. Whenever memories of that autumn began to surface, Shizuma pushed them down and sealed them away.

She had a feeling that somewhere out there, there must be someone who could fill that void.

*

Shizuma was silent.

The girl noticed the quiet, and before she even realized it, lifted her head. There were no more tears in her eyes. In their place was a determined expression.

“I’m sorry, Shizuma-oneesama. I cried in front of you even though I know you hate it when people

cry.” Her cheeks were soaked with tears, but somehow she managed to smile.

“Shizuma-oneesama, to me you are like a beautiful dream. Like what I feel when I look at these cherry blossoms.” As she pointed toward the sky, a single fluttering cherry-blossom petal came to rest on the girl’s fingertip. “I will be okay. Please, do not worry yourself. Just having the honor of being a companion to someone like you was a dream come true for me, Shizuma-oneesama. Thank you for letting me live my dream—I feel as if I could die happy right now.”

The girl gently kissed the flower petal and smiled. “I’ve been so happy, this month that I’ve spent with you, Shizuma-oneesama. That’s enough for me. I’m so happy—almost happier than someone like me has a right to be.” Her voice shook toward the end of the little speech. *Fwooo*. The wind was cold against her tear-soaked cheeks.

“Thank you. You’re such a good girl.” Shizuma couldn’t hold herself back. *One last time*. She took the girl’s wet cheeks gently in her hands and gazed steadily at her face. The image of Shizuma’s face reflected in the girl’s damp, dark eyes grew larger and

larger. Soon the only thing reflected was Shizuma's eyes. The other girl slowly closed hers.

The two figures floating in the cherry-colored cloud became one.

Rustle.

Before long, the rustling of Shizuma's skirt could be heard.

"Please, go before me, Oneesama."

Shizuma gazed at the girl's face worriedly. With her hands folded in front of her chest, the girl closed her eyes and accepted Shizuma's scrutiny.

"I would like to stay here a little longer and look at the cherry blossoms. I will use them to help me remember my dear Shizuma-oneesama." She slowly opened her eyes and gave a bright smile. "This is our final goodbye. But please do not worry, Shizuma-oneesama. Starting tomorrow, I will go back to being a regular underclassman. It's just, at the end, I wanted to—" A single tear fell from the girl's eyes. "My memories...the memories in my heart...even if I lose everything else, I will always carry them with me. You don't mind that, do you? I will treasure this for my entire life."

Feeling a slight twinge of pain in her chest, Shizuma smiled at her. "Yes, of course."

Then she turned her back on the girl and, without a single glance back, left her on the hill alone.

"My beloved, you will always be my one and only little daisy."

Swssshh. The breeze grew stronger and the snowstorm of cherry blossoms veiled Shizuma from the girl's sight as she walked away.

The sight of scattering cherry blossoms made everything there seem more beautiful.

They would only last but a week.

*

Sparkle sparkle.

Along the fence by the pale, dry path, clusters of white double bridal wreath¹ flowers blew about. The sunlight pierced through them, making them appear to shine.

"*Woowow*, what cute flowers!" As the girl shouted for joy, she reached out an impulsive hand to one of the young double bridal wreath bushes planted along the long fence.

The flowered branches, touched by the girl's delicate fingers, seemed to flutter happily as they scattered their small petals, which gathered on the ground by her feet.

“It's like a warm snow is falling.”

Swssshhh. A small whirl of wind stirred.

Rustle rustle rustle...

The double bridal wreath branches, bent with the weight of countless small white flowers, swayed in the breeze.

A shining white petal snow fell on the ground all around. The girl had no idea the adorable flowers had an equally pleasant name, but it was a bright, beautiful sight.

The girl, Aoi Nagisa, who was already in a cheerful mood, walking to her new school, felt it was a very good omen. She had a feeling a lot of fun things waited for her. She'd heard the school was for really high-class girls, so she was a little nervous, but...

Yeah, I'm sure it'll be all right.

Georgous weather, a cheerful mood—that's what a new semester is all about.

Her brand-new school uniform, which she'd tried on for the first time this morning, was very cute,

but also kind of mature. She'd thought it might not look good on her. Now those worries were a distant memory, because the uniform looked great on her.

Right?

*

That morning, when Nagisa had stood in front of the full-length mirror to see how she looked in her new uniform, the image that had looked back at her appeared to be a completely different person.

Her ponytail was tied more securely than usual; the brightly-colored bundle of hair that fanned out behind her was pulled up too tightly—probably because she'd put too much energy into tying it up.

The charcoal gray one-piece dress, made out of thin, high-quality wool, with an off-white petticoat that peeked from under the long button-down skirt, had a classic style. The delicate lace collar and the short tie in the school's color, dark green, gave it a formal look. Nagisa's growth had begun to spurt only about six months ago, but when she put on the uniform, she unexpectedly found she looked almost mature.

My face looks childish for a fifteen-year-old,

and I can't do anything about that, but at least my usual cheerful smile is as perfect as ever today, if I do say so myself!

She tried smiling at herself in the mirror—and saw a smile that was still innocent and childlike. A smile that looked like it belonged to a child that knew only the taste of sugary-sweet candy and nothing of heart-wrenching love.

People are always telling me I look like a child, but... Umm, I wonder if it's because of these big, round, droopy eyes?!

Nagisa put a finger on the corner of each eye and tried lifting them up a little. *Whoa, that looks weird!*

She burst into laughter, but she had a feeling the uniform really looked better on her than she thought.

I guess it's true after all—when you enter high school, you grow up before you even realize it. Ha ha! Nagisa, aren't you being just a little cheeky?

Even though no one else was around, Nagisa smiled embarrassedly at the mirror.

*

Right. I feel like I can do anything today, Nagisa

thought as she watched the wild dance of the double bridal wreath flowers shining in the sunlight. Her first time wearing the uniform, her first time going to this school—from now on, Nagisa would be going to a school for really high-class girls. She might not quite fit in there, but still...

These adorable flowers came out to greet me! It must mean the girls at school won't hate me. How should I put it...a gift from God?

The weather was gorgeous this morning, the sun shone down on her, the little white flowers were so beautiful and adorable—and she didn't know why, but for some reason, she was in an amazingly cheerful mood.

Nagisa didn't know much about God, but she had a feeling that such a wonderful day as this was a gift from God to cheer her on. It felt as if He were telling her, "Do your best! If you make a little mistake or slip up a little, I will help you. So don't worry about the little things; just do the very best you can."

Yeah, that must be it! Today's the day I start out. God must be cheering me on! I have a feeling good things are going to happen!

Gently stroking the delicate white lace collar,

Nagisa flung herself into an energetic spin. Her long skirt puffed out like a parachute. Flustered, she pressed it down again.

Oh no! Someone will see my underwear! I don't have time to be playing around like this—I'll be in big trouble if I'm late! Today's the first day of school and it's important. I went through all the trouble of getting up early, but I was so nervous after checking my uniform I had to drink cup after cup of tea to calm down, and now I only have ten minutes left! I have to hurry.

When Nagisa had put on the uniform she'd so longed for, she had taken a step forward in her life. It was the uniform of the venerable St. Miator Girls' Academy, which every single girl desperately wanted to attend.

The petticoat fluttered and floated in time to Nagisa's bouncy steps. She looked at the hem of her skirt dancing in the air—until she'd stepped into this uniform, Nagisa had never worn such a long skirt before—and thought, *I guess I have to walk a little more lady-like from now on.*

That is how Nagisa started on her way to St.

Miator Girls' Academy on the day that marked the beginning of her school life.

*

When Shizuma reached the bottom of the hill, she looked back toward the top.

Astraea Hill. A convent, established here a long time ago, had served as the mother institution for St. Miator Girls' Academy since the school was built.

Two sister schools, St. Spica Girls' Institute and St. Lulim Girls' School, had since been built in the adjacent area. The three Astraea Schools, each with its own unique characteristics, were widely known throughout society as elite girls' schools. Teeming with the lush green of springtime, the hill rose out of the ground as if it wanted to pierce the high, blue sky.

Shizuma gazed up the hill. *Will she be able to go home alone? I hope she's not crying any more, but... No, I'm sure she's not.*

She shook her head. The fact that her relationships never lasted more than a month, no matter

what girl she went out with, was entirely her own fault. She simply didn't have the ability to worry about the girl who was probably crying over her. Even Shizuma couldn't say exactly what the root of the problem was. Though she loved each one of them...the passion never lasted long.

It would have been simple enough to keep the relationship going even though the passion had disappeared, but she didn't want to do that. She didn't want to betray the other girl's honest feelings. She didn't want to hurt her.

Shizuma always wanted to love her partner as much as her partner loved her.

As she thought about all of this, a sharp pain ran through her chest again. *I don't want to hurt her. I want to love my partner just as much as she loves me. But what about her?*

Somewhere in Shizuma's heart, the question burned.

Yes, what about her? What about the girl I treated like that and had to leave... Could it be I feel guilty? Or could it be...I'm getting too old for this?

Shizuma forced herself to laugh, trying to fool

herself into thinking it was a ridiculous idea. Suddenly her skin felt a little cooler.

Is this what they mean by crazy weather in spring? The wind seems like it's gotten stronger.

The white violets that bloomed on Astraea Hill bent in the wind.

I have to hurry back to the Strawberry Dorms. With a slight shrug of her shoulders, Shizuma went around the hill and walked along a path that headed in the opposite direction.

Rustle... She walked defiantly into the wind, which occasionally gusted at her. On the other side of the hill was the unconventional dorm Shizuma lived in.

I hope no one finds out I've broken up with her, at least for a little while...

Normally Shizuma would go directly to the salon. Since it was the last day of spring break, it was sure to be filled with students enjoying tea and snacks. A huge crowd of Shizuma's fans, who paid careful attention to her every move, would be there.

So Shizuma's absence today most likely had not gone unnoticed.

Because the schools and dorms both had strict

rules regarding relationships between upper- and underclassmen, and Shizuma was going to be in the highest grade beginning this spring, it was rare for an underclassman to get close to her. An appearance by Shizuma at the salon was one of the few opportunities the underclassmen had to see her. It was almost like getting to meet a star.

Even though they knew all Shizuma's recent relationships had lasted only a month, there was still no end to the number of girls who admired her and wanted to be by her side. This was because all the girls Shizuma had loved said it had made them happier than anything else. It made them cry tears of joy, and they all said it was a memory they would put away in the most important place in their hearts for the rest of their lives.

And Shizuma used her overwhelming presence to reign over the other girls. There were many who would have loved to throw themselves into Shizuma's embrace and be held by Shizuma's long arms. She was more dignified than any man, smart, forceful yet beautiful...and endlessly greedy, the kind of girl who tried to control her partner.

This was Shizuma, the girl they all longed for.



I hope the girl I just broke up with doesn't get hurt by any gossip going around the salon.

Shizuma's feelings turned a little dark. With a sigh, she looked at her feet; she had stopped without even realizing it.

A girl's voice called out ahead of her. "Excuse me! Is this the way to the Strawberry Dorms?"

When Shizuma looked up, she saw a girl wearing a St. Miator uniform, carrying a big Boston bag. Shizuma didn't recognize her.

"Who might you be?"

"I'm a fourth-year transfer student! I'm going to start living in the dormitory today."

Shizuma took another good look at her. *Heh heh. She has a cute ponytail. Well, well, it looks like we're getting another super-cheerful girl to add to the crowd.*

Lured by the girl's bright, sunny smile, Shizuma found herself grinning.

Ah, if I go back to the Strawberry Dorms with this girl, maybe it will distract them from starting any other rumors about me. Because once everyone gets this new bit of news, they'll just have to jump on it.

Shizuma was more than a little relieved. "I'd be happy to lead you there. Please, come with me."

Shizuma gracefully extended her beautiful white hand, as if leading a dance.