

Kazuki Amamiya

ill. Gin

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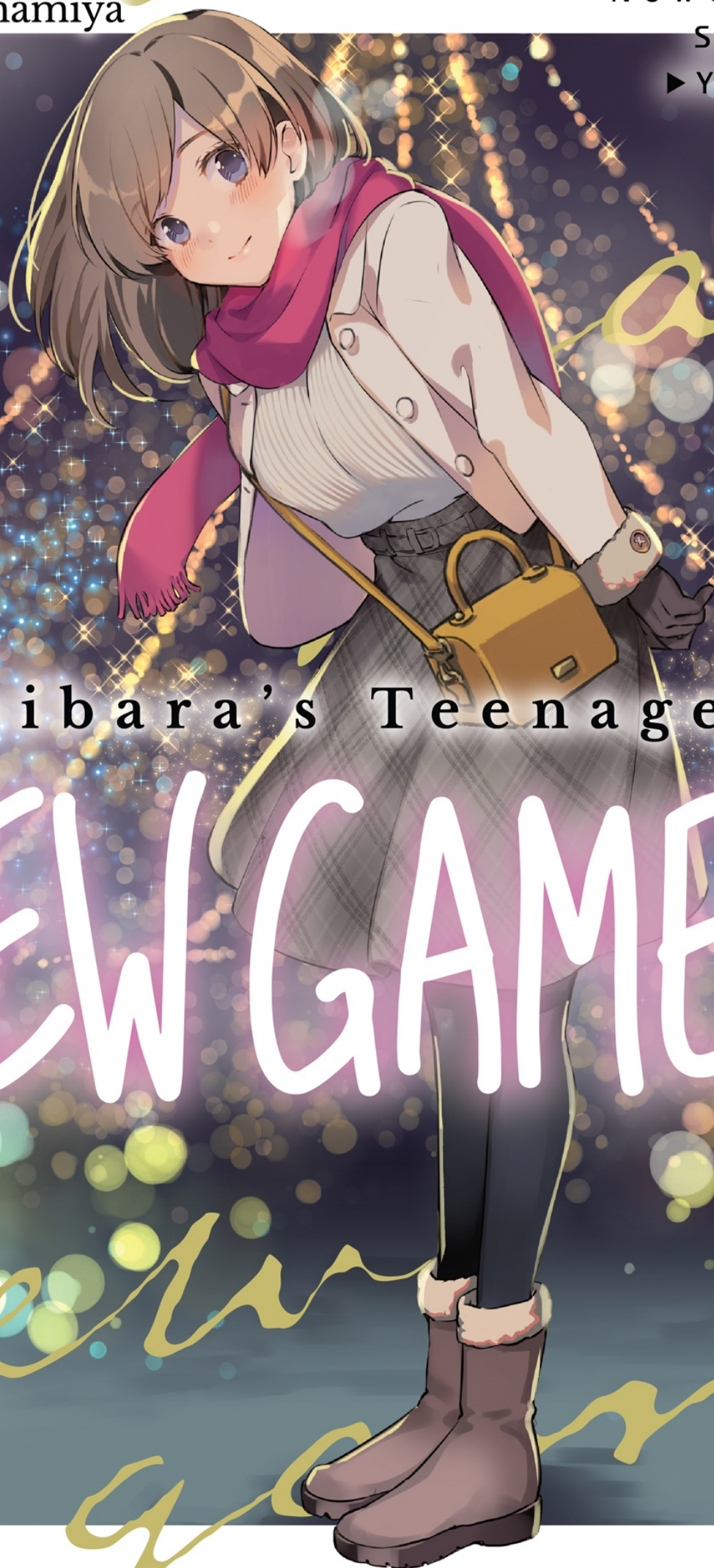
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7

Haibara's Teenage

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## Prologue: The Place I Belong

I didn't remember how long I'd been sitting there, but the next thing I knew, I was drenched in the rain. Drops of water seeped through the gaps of the trees, battering me. It took a while to realize that the cold had sucked all the warmth from my body.

I didn't have the willpower to move. However, staying on the ground was pointless. I lifted my heavy hips and stood up. I set off in the opposite direction Natsuki had gone and turned back the way I came.

*It'll be fine. Natsuki will be able to find Miori.* Strangely enough, I had absolute confidence in him. *It's meaningless for me to chase after him now. Above all, I don't even have the right to see Miori.*

I followed the animal trail that furtively slithered along the mountain and forest until I reached a wide road. *I must stand out, seeing that I'm soaking wet...but I couldn't care less. Where should I go now?*

*I can't go home anymore. I'll only feel worse when I step through the door. Having said that, there isn't anywhere else to return to. My feet won't move, because I have no place to go. There's nowhere I belong in this world. I thought I'd found the sole place for me, but I'm not worthy of it.*

*I hurt Miori. I'm the worst type of person, who only thinks about himself. At this rate, if I stay with everyone, I'll only ruin our relationship just like I did today.*

I was standing there motionless when my smartphone vibrated in my pocket. It was a RINE notification. The "Natsuki's Fam" group chat had come to life. Apparently, Miori was safe and sound. Natsuki had managed to persuade and rescue her.

*That's good. I believed Natsuki could do it.* Underneath that thought was a feeling that ate away at me like a shadow. *Why am I not the one who's there?*

There was no need to keep up appearances at this point. This dark emotion



was nothing but jealousy. I envied Natsuki for having a special bond of trust with Miori. That was why I'd chased after him. I had wanted to stop him and go in his place. Such thoughts were running through my mind, but none of them included any concern for Miori's well-being.

*"All you've been talking about is yourself."*

Just as Natsuki had pointed out, I had only been thinking about myself. Nothing had changed from the past. I only ever took action for myself, and other people were merely tools. I had been disgusted with the way I was, so I had tried to change my way of thinking. *Apparently, one's true nature can't be changed.*

Now that everyone knew Miori was safe, they were all sending messages.

*"We were worried about you!"*

*"I'm glad you're safe!"*

*"Ahhh, what a relief!"*

*"Welcome back."*

In response to those warm words, Miori replied, *"I'm sorry for making you guys worry."*

*I'm a member of the group, so I should say something too... But do I have anything decent to say to her?* I lost sight of the words filling the group chat and slipped my wet phone back into my pocket. I gazed up at the cloudy sky.

Suddenly, a passerby stopped in front of me. Recognition flashed across my face.

He was dressed in a uniform from Kakiwari High, a school near Ryomei. He wore his high-collared black gakuran jacket with all the buttons open, revealing a red shirt underneath. This guy, dressed in such flashy colors, was even bigger than Tatsuya. He had short blond hair and a fierce face. To be frank, he looked like a delinquent.

*"Koya..."* I hadn't said that name in a long time.

He snorted in response. He had been my friend in the past. Although he was a year older than me, we had been close enough that I didn't need to be polite to

him. We hadn't been in touch for a while though.

"Reita, didn't think I'd see you out here. What's with the dumb look on your face?"

"It's got nothing to do with you."

"Not gonna answer, huh? Ah well. Whatever, this is perfect timing."

"Perfect...timing?" Unsure what he meant by that, I furrowed my brows.

"You go to Ryomei now, right? Same school as my little sister."

Though I casually called him by his given name, Koya was a year older than me and in his second year of high school. And his younger sister was in the class next to mine, class 1-1.

"What about it?" I asked warily. I had a bad feeling. Given the timing and how there was an ongoing missing person search, it was obvious what he was going to say.

Koya took out his phone and showed me a picture. "This chick goes to the same school as you, and she's in the same grade as you. Apparently, she's missing. Know anything?"

It was a photo of a girl with her black hair tied back into a ponytail. Of course I knew her; at least, I knew her better than most. Even though our relationship was smeared with lies, we had dated in the past.

"There's no way you don't know who she is, yeah? I know you're a well-connected guy."

"Yeah, I know her. I know she's missing too."

"My li'l sister's worried about her, so all my buds are helping me search for her. We've got eyewitness testimony that she's been seen around here... Does that dumb look have to do with that?"

"She's worried?" *What nonsense is he spouting? Your sister isn't someone who'd worry about other people. She's just like me.*

"Cat got your tongue? Looks to me like you know something, huh?"

*I know Miori is safe. While I would never tell him where she is, I'm not against*



*letting him know she's safe... But Koya will definitely tell his sister anything I say.* Thinking that, I felt my willingness to answer rapidly fade.

"Even if I did know anything, I wouldn't tell you," I replied.

He frowned. "What'd you say?" he growled, his voice low enough to shake the ground.

I knew I'd angered him. "If you really want to know, then try making me spit it out. Just like you used to," I said. The goading tone didn't sound like my own.

Encountering Koya had drawn out my unruly side that had lain dormant. But I didn't care. Nothing mattered anymore. I had no regard for whatever happened to me next. Right now, all I wanted was to dump these irksome feelings somewhere.

# Chapter 1: A Violent Affair

“Shiratori-kun has been suspended for a week due to violent behavior.”

Our teacher had dropped a shocking announcement.

“Huh?” It took me a while to process what those words meant. That statement was so far removed from my image of Reita that I couldn’t connect it to him.

The classroom suddenly burst into an uproar. Surprise, curiosity, disappointment, concern—all sorts of emotions were running wild. Meanwhile, Hikari—whose seat was next to mine—sat, eyes wide, in a motionless daze.

I was in the same stupor as her. Uta, Tatsuya, and Nanase must’ve reacted the same way too.

“Pipe down. Homeroom is still ongoing,” our teacher yelled angrily, hushing the commotion. Even so, there was a palpable restlessness in the air of the classroom.

“Wh-What do you think happened?” Hikari whispered.

I shook my head. “I don’t know.”

*I really have no clue. I still don’t believe what our teacher said. Reita is a gentle person. He’s not someone who’d use violence on others. I’ve never even seen him get angry before. He’s always calm and makes levelheaded decisions. That’s the Shiratori Reita that I know.*

*That Reita, entangled in violence? And punished with a suspension? This must be a mistake. I’m certain there’s a reason behind all this. Reita would never say the things he did in the video that’s spreading on Minsta either.*

Memories of the day Miori had gone missing suddenly flashed through my mind. I had bumped into Reita in the mountains then.

*“I know Miori loves you. If you find her, she won’t have eyes for anyone but you. I’d hate that... I have to be the one who helps her!”*



*Reita was definitely acting weird that day.*

*“Even if it’s only temporary, I’m Miori’s boyfriend. It’s my job to find her!”*

*He would never say that if he were in his right mind. He wouldn’t prioritize himself in a situation where we didn’t even know whether Miori was alive or not.*

*“All you’ve been talking about is yourself.”*

At that time, he had acted like he was being cornered by something. Reita, who was always more observant than anyone else, had seemed like a completely different person.

I had coldly and bluntly told him off because I thought he’d realize that. Also, my number one priority had been finding Miori. I hadn’t had the time to care about Reita.

*“Was it...my fault?” I muttered. At that moment, I realized Reita was also another ordinary high school student, but Miori was all I could think about. After helping her, I should’ve worried about him.*

Tatsuya raised his hand and asked, “What happened?”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t tell you kids the particulars.” Our homeroom teacher shook their head.

“Why not?” he pressed.

“I understand you’re worried about your friend, but those are the rules.” There was an implicit *“Ask him yourself if you want to know,”* hidden beneath those words. A teacher was not allowed to speak more than this. Understanding that, Tatsuya fell silent.

After the morning assembly ended, our homeroom teacher left the room. All at once, the class erupted into a tumult far louder than normal.

The usual crew assembled around my desk: Tatsuya, Uta, Nanase, and Hikari from the seat over. Their expressions weren’t very bright. We drew attention gathered there like that. It was honestly uncomfortable. We were a group that stood out on normal days, but the gazes focused on us were of a different nature than usual.

“Stop staring. Talk about lunch or something.” Tatsuya shooed our classmates away like he was waving off a dog. His intimidation worked, and the air became slightly more breathable.

*Always the brute-force approach with him. He scattered everyone with just his presence. What is this, a battle manga?*

“Hey, Uta. Have you heard anything from Reita?” Tatsuya asked. She must’ve sent him a message immediately after the morning assembly.

“No... He hasn’t even read it yet.” Uta gazed at her RINE chat with a worried look.

“I thought it was odd that he hadn’t said anything in the group chat... I can’t believe he was suspended,” Hikari murmured as she stared at Reita’s seat.

“I wonder what happened,” Nanase said.

Despite the clamor around us, we fell into silence. I hadn’t told them about the Minsta video that Yamano had sent me yet. However, we only had three minutes until our first period started. If I shared new information with them now, they would only become more confused. It was a dismal situation, but we couldn’t skip class either. That would only draw even more negative attention to our group.

“Let’s meet up during lunch break. I want to piece together the info we’ve got,” I said. They all nodded. *Normally...Reita would be the one making the closing summary.*

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Although the atmosphere in the classroom was different from usual, we made it through our morning classes. I never really paid attention to our lessons in the first place, but the classes felt extremely long today.

Lunch finally arrived, but if the usual crew were to congregate in the classroom, we would be too conspicuous. I messaged our meetup spot to everyone over RINE. This time we would get together in the corner of the cafeteria. Our goal was to share information, but we still needed to eat lunch. A full belly is important in any situation, after all.



As I made my way to the cafeteria, I sensed people stealing glances at me. Their gazes certainly felt different from usual, and the air was abuzz. However, it wasn't as bad as inside the classroom. Once I left the first-year hallway, the staring ceased.

*Oh well, nothing we can do about it. Reita is the star of our grade, and even if there are people who don't know who he is, they'd be pretty curious about him when they heard a student in the same grade as them was suspended because of violence. It only makes sense that people would gawk at me since I'm known to be good friends with him.*

I bought my lunch ticket at the machine and gave it to a cafeteria granny in exchange for a yakitori don. I was the first to take a seat at the area I'd designated on RINE. Before long, Hikari, Uta, Nanase, and Tatsuya arrived in that order.

"Miorin and Seri said they're coming too," Uta said from the seat to my right as she stared at her phone.

*Looks like she's been in contact with those two from the class over.*

"Aight, let's eat first, then talk," Tatsuya said with a frown. He began devouring his large katsu don.

Tatsuya, Uta, and I were eating school food today, while Nanase and Hikari had brought their own lunch boxes. There were a lot of second and third-years in the cafeteria. Because of that, no one really paid attention to us.

The topic of Reita's suspension had spread quite a lot among the first-years, but that wasn't the case for the grades above us. I was glad to have a break from the uncomfortable stares I'd been getting all morning.

Everyone ate in silence as Tatsuya had suggested, and we focused on scarfing down our food. Uta was noticeably quiet. I'd never had such a tasteless meal before. When I finished my yakitori don, Miori and Serika appeared at the cafeteria entrance.

"Miorin, Seri! Over here!" Uta waved, alerting them to our location.

"Guys..." Miori approached us with a worried look on her face.

The smile I had thought we'd restored had been lost once again, and that saddened me. *Miori probably feels responsible for this.*

"Is it true that Reita-kun was involved in a fight?" she asked.

We all exchanged looks, but no one answered her. No one knew the truth.

"We don't know... But we do know a little bit, which is why we've gathered," I said.

"Okay," Serika said, "let's start sharing what we know." Even now, her tone was placid, and I found it reassuring. "I want to show you guys this video first. I'm sure some of you have already seen it, though."

She pulled up the video that had been circulating on Minsta. It showed a rowdy-looking group gathered in a back alley. Reita was one of the boys there, and the footage appeared to have been shot from hiding.

*I was agonizing over how to bring this video up, but it looks like Serika knew about it too. Yamano must've sent it to her at the same time she messaged me.*

"Reita-san, what happened to your latest girl?"

*"We broke up. We were only dating because I threatened her, anyway, so no regrets here."*

It was a short video, lasting just a few seconds, and that was the only part of the conversation that was audible. It had been filmed at night so the lighting was dim, but the person in the frame was undoubtedly Reita. His face, voice, stature, and the aura he gave off were those of the Reita I knew.



However, the words coming out of his mouth were unlike the usual Reita.

“What...is this?” Uta said incredulously.

“He doesn’t actually believe that. What the hell is he thinking?” Tatsuya spat out, his expression twisting into a frown.

I agreed with Tatsuya. On the day Miori disappeared, I had spoken to Reita. At the time, he’d been acting strangely, but his feelings for her were the root cause.

*Reita definitely loves Miori. Besides, it’s not true he threatened her into dating, and I doubt he has no more lingering attachment to her. Reita is clearly lying in this video.*

“Miori, is this true?” Serika asked.

I was startled by how direct her question was. *Serika really doesn’t hold back. It’s just like her. Well, she’s the closest one to Miori here.*

“Of course it’s not true.” Miori had been wordlessly replaying the video over and over, but she stopped and slowly shook her head. “I went out with Reita-kun because I wanted to. We might have dated under the condition that I could still have feelings for Natsuki...but I wasn’t threatened. Of course not.”

She paused for a moment to ruminate over something. “It’s a hunch, but...Reita-kun is probably trying to portray that condition as a threat. No matter how I look at it, I think he’s blatantly trying to paint himself the villain here.”

“This video is spreading on Minsta right now, and bad rumors about Reita are flying around left and right. His alleged suspension because of violent behavior has given them credibility, so I don’t think we’ll be able to stop the rumors from growing out of control,” I said, summarizing the current situation.

Everyone’s expression darkened further.

“The video looks quite forced. It appears to be Shiratori-kun’s doing,” Nanase said with a sigh.

“Nanase...?” I said quizzically.



“In the first place, don’t you think it’s much too unnatural for someone to take a video like this? The angle indicates that it was taken from hiding...but if you consider it logically, you can hear his voice clearly, so it was filmed at a distance where he’d obviously notice. We’re talking about Shiratori-kun here; his observation skills miss nothing.”

*Yeah, of course. I’m of the same opinion.* “Nanase, are you saying Reita staged this video himself?”

“That’s the only possibility from my perspective,” she replied.

“B-But, why would Rei do this on purpose...?” Uta trailed off and then suddenly gasped, covering her mouth with her hands.

“I think...he did this to completely dispel all the bad rumors about Miori-chan. Instead of resolving the misunderstanding, he’s spreading more rumors... By publishing this video, Reita-kun can essentially overwrite the rumors and transform Miori into his victim,” Hikari muttered as though she were organizing her thoughts.

Rather than participating in the discussion, it was more like she was absorbed in her own world. She didn’t even realize she was talking to herself. This was probably what she was like when she wrote her novels.

“I see,” I murmured. Hikari’s deduction could sufficiently explain Reita’s objective, and was the most plausible theory so far.

“No...” Miori was struck speechless.

“If that’s his goal, then why would Rei deliberately do things this way?” Uta asked us, unconvinced.

*His motive, huh? I think...I have an idea why.* “Reita... Is this your way of atoning?” I unconsciously clenched my fist. *Do you really think sacrificing yourself would help Miori?*

“Natsuki, calm down.” A deep voice pulled me out of my sea of thoughts, bringing me back to reality. “You know something else, don’t you? Spit it out.”

I hesitated a little. *Is it okay to tell other people about the conversation I had with Reita that day? Well, we’re in a dire situation. I shouldn’t keep quiet about*

it. "On the day I was searching for Miori, I ran into Reita."

I described the exchange I'd had with him in the rain, leaving nothing out. Miori's expression visibly clouded over with each word.

"After that, I went to search for Miori. To be honest, I was so worried about her that I didn't care about Reita. I was convinced that he would be fine because he's a strong guy."

When I finished recounting everything, Serika looked at everyone and asked, "Has anyone seen Reita since then?"

They all looked at one another, but no one spoke up. A pall of silence fell over the table. We were halfway through lunch break, and there were fewer people in the cafeteria.

*It's my fault... This wouldn't have happened if I had shown any kind of concern for Reita. I should've considered how weird it was that Reita didn't make a peep afterwards. I didn't reach out to him first because I was trying to be considerate. I thought anything I said would just have the opposite effect, but that backfired on me.*

"Nevertheless, even if the video was a hoax, it seems he truly was involved in some sort of violent altercation. After all, he was suspended. I'd first like to know what on earth happened," Nanase said.

*She's right, but we don't have any information on that end. The easiest thing to do in times like this would be to hear it straight from the horse's mouth, but if we could do that, then we wouldn't be so worried to begin with.*

Having nothing to lose, Tatsuya called Reita, but after numerous rings, he said, "Figures, he's not picking up. The bastard," and hung up.

*I had an inkling when he didn't respond in our group chat, but it looks like he doesn't want to talk to us... Does that mean he doesn't want to hang out with us anymore?*

"It's my fault... It's all because I took advantage of Reita-kun," Miori murmured, distraught.

Serika patted her back. "Don't say that. It's not your fault. It's not anyone's,

really.” While she reassured Miori, she flicked her gaze to me. “Natsuki, you too. You were firm with Reita because you thought you were in the right, yeah?”

“Huh? Y-Yeah... That’s what I thought at the time, anyway,” I said weakly.

“Then you don’t need to regret it. Natsuki, I don’t think you were wrong either. What you should be thinking about now is how we can bring Reita back to us. Right?” Serika forcibly simplified the conversation.

*She’s right, though. Moping around won’t solve anything.*

“To do that, we need to figure out what happened to Reita-kun,” Hikari said.

I nodded. *If we don’t know why he’s giving us the cold shoulder, we won’t know how to bring him back.*

“First off, we should all gather as much information as we can.” Just as I finished saying that, the end-of-lunch bell rang.

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The afternoon classes had begun. Our math teacher, Murakami-sensei, dispassionately listed formulas on the blackboard. I was looking at my phone under my desk. Frankly, I wasn’t in the mood to pay attention to class.

I reexamined the Minsta video of Reita. The poster had used an assumed name; the only information on their profile was that they were a student at Ryomei.

*They’ve got a decent number of followers that are Ryomei students, and the fact that the video even spread in the first place suggests that this account has been active for a long time. So did they delete their old posts or something? Because I can’t find them. There’s no personal information on here that would help identify who they are.*

*If Reita really did stage this video, that would make the owner of this account his accomplice. I want to talk to whoever it is...but it’s going to be hard. Reita’s network is way too vast. And that’s exactly why this incident’s caused such a huge commotion.*

“At any rate, is Shiratori-kun okay?”

“Why worry about him? The guy got into a fight.”

“We don’t know the details, so we can’t really defend him right now.”

“I don’t think he’s the sort of guy who’d do something like that. He’s normally such a nice person.”

During our breaks between classes, I kept my ears open and eavesdropped on other kids’ conversations. As expected, there were a lot of people talking about Reita. He interacted with our classmates frequently, so no one was speaking ill of him. However, students from other classes spoke of him less favorably.

“This is such a letdown. Shiratori-kun is so hot.”

“Resorting to violence makes him a brute! Ha ha ha! Wait, won’t this affect the soccer team?”

“True. I feel bad for the soccer team. They got dragged into a mess because of one idiot.”

“Eh, I hated that guy from the get-go. He looked sketchy to me.”

“Didn’t he hit Motomiya-san and force her to obey him?”

“Ugh, that’s awful. Unbelievable!”

Mixed in were malicious lies that I couldn’t bear to listen to, but it would’ve only had the opposite effect if I’d interjected. Either way, the gossip didn’t give us any new information.

*Time to organize what we’ve got. There are several factors at play proliferating the rumors about Reita. The first is, obviously, Shiratori Reita is like the leader of our year. Second, it’s pretty much a continuation to the rumors about Miori. Third, the video is enough evidence to denounce him as the bad guy. Fourth, it’s a fact that he’s been suspended due to violence.*

*With all those factors combined, it’s inevitable that the rumors have spread explosively. Miori’s bad rep has been instantly repainted. If Reita set all this in motion, then how much of it is developing the way he wants? I don’t think he’d go as far as to get violent for this, though.*

I was brooding over the matter when Hikari poked my shoulder from the seat over. *What is it?* I looked up. Her mouth was frantically opening and closing like



a fish. At that moment, I sensed someone else behind me, and quickly hid my phone under my desk. It was a close call, but Murakami-sensei walked past me without noticing a thing.

We'd reached the problem-solving part of class, and he was making rounds to ensure that the students were diligently working.

*Th-That was close...* I exhaled in relief.

Hikari gave me a side-eye, silently asking, *"What were you doing?"*

*She seems more flustered than I am, so I feel guilty. Hey, even if Murakami-sensei caught me using my phone and confiscated it, you have three strikes until you get in actual trouble.*

After the fourth time, he would force students to cancel their phone contract. I was very familiar with his tactics, because during my first round of high school, my phone had been confiscated twice and he'd threatened to do just that. For the record, I was either playing a social game or reading web novels back then. Take your classes seriously.

\*\*\*

*After school.*

"We're not getting anywhere like this. Let's go straight to Reita's place," Tatsuya said.

*I saw that one coming. That's the only thing I could think of too. "I'm down, but don't you have practice?"*

"Don't sweat it. I can take a day off."

Tatsuya had secured a spot as a starter on the basketball team, so even a single day of practice was crucial. It showed just how important this Reita affair was to him. After we watched the others take off for their club activities, Tatsuya exited our classroom, and I followed after him.

Something suddenly came to mind and he asked, "Come to think of it, is it okay for you to leave Hoshimiya behind?"

"She has literature club today. Besides, it's better if it's just us two anyway."

A beat passed. “Yeah, true. We shouldn’t barge in with too many people.”

During our lunch break, we had made a group chat consisting of me, Tatsuya, Hikari, Uta, Nanase, Miori, and Serika. I had mentioned there that Tatsuya and I would visit Reita’s house, and though Serika and Nanase were free today, they’d replied with “You got it,” and “Please do.” They were probably trying to be mindful of bringing a big crowd along too.

We had been quiet as we headed to Reita’s house, but Tatsuya suddenly broke the silence. “To tell the truth, I’ve kinda got an idea what’s going on.”

“You do?”

“In your eyes, it looks like he’s lost sight of himself, right?”

“Oh yeah... I figured his feelings for Miori grew out of hand.”

“I don’t think you’re wrong there, but...there might be a different reason he’s emotionally burned-out... I’ve got a guess, and I bet Uta does too,” Tatsuya said in a low, flat tone. It seemed like he was suppressing a complicated hodgepodge of emotions.

“What are you trying to say?” I asked.

“It’ll be faster if you see it. You’ll probably get it once we’re there.” With that, he fell silent once more.

*I’m usually slow on the uptake, but even I can understand what he’s implying. If I’ll get it once we’re there, that means the root of the problem is at Reita’s home.*

“We’re here,” Tatsuya said, and came to a stop.

We’d walked about twenty minutes from the school, deep into the residential area. In front of us was a four-story building that appeared considerably worn out. It wasn’t well-kept by any standard. *Reita lives here? Not gonna lie...this is unexpected.*

We went up to the second floor, and the first door we saw had a nameplate with “Shiratori” written on it.

“All right, let’s do this.” Tatsuya took a deep breath before he rang the doorbell. He hesitated for a moment, and then resolutely pushed the button.

*Tatsuya's kinda acting weird. Is he nervous?*

I could hear clattering and indiscernible noises from inside. Then, with a loud bang, the door flew open.

“Who’re you guys? You’re not the deliveryman.”

A man in a stained white shirt and shorts appeared before us. He was overweight, and his hair was unkempt. His stubble had been left unshaven, and—to be blunt—he looked kinda grimy. Also, he reeked of alcohol, which made me reflexively grimace. On a closer look, I noticed his face was red too. He must’ve been in the middle of drinking. Agewise, he seemed old enough to be Reita’s father, but I honestly couldn’t see it.

“Hello, it’s been a while. I’m Reita’s friend, Nagiura,” Tatsuya said after a pause.

However, judging from Tatsuya’s attitude, this man was indeed Reita’s father.

“Huh? Come to think of it, I’ve seen you before.” He looked at our faces and scratched his head in an annoyed manner. From his crude demeanor and tone, I could tell we clearly weren’t welcome. “If you’re looking for that brat, he’s not here. So hurry on home,” he said as he picked his ear, and then began to close the door.

*Did he just say...“that brat”? The way he referred to Reita bothers me, but now’s not the time for that. His son is suspended, but he’s not at home? “P-Please wait! Do you know where he would be, then?!”*

My question seemed to set him off, because he shot a terrifying glare at me. “How would I know?! Who cares—hurry up and scram! Get going if you don’t want a beating!” He yelled so loud that his voice echoed through the corridor, and I unwittingly shrank in fear. I couldn’t say anything more, and with a snort, Reita’s father shut the door this time.

“He hasn’t changed. Actually, I think he’s gotten even worse.” Tatsuya’s eyes narrowed.

I finally understood what he had meant when he said it’d be faster to see it myself. Reita’s father was a type of adult that didn’t exist around me. Because of that, I was all the more shaken.

“Let’s go. Reita’s not home, so we’ve got no more business being here,” he said.

I followed after Tatsuya, moving away from the front door. I’d caught a quick peek into the apartment when the door had swung open; the hallway was overflowing with things. There were numerous sake bottles rolling around, and clothes scattered on the floor. It didn’t look like they were leading a decent life.

“That man was Reita’s father, right?” I asked.

“Yep. Related by blood and all. Unexpected, yeah?”

*“Well, yeah...” I thought Reita was raised by an affluent family. He’s kind to everyone and has elegant mannerisms that make it seem like he received a sophisticated upbringing.*

“The Reita you know now was created by using his dad as the perfect example of what not to be like.”

“I see.”

Thinking back, I realized Reita had never talked about his family in our day-to-day conversations. Actually, he rarely talked about himself at all. He was a better listener than anyone else, and always kept conversations going by encouraging others to speak. Because of that, I knew even less about Reita than I had realized.

“It gets dark faster nowadays.” Tatsuya stopped in front of a vending machine a short walk away from Reita’s home. “Let’s drink something hot.”

I looked up—the sun was just about to hide behind the mountains. The sky had been dyed a stunning orange hue. It was already quite cold, but once night fell, the chill would worsen.

“It’s totally winter already. Time sure does fly.” A puff of white breath left Tatsuya’s mouth as he bought a hot lemon tea.

I bought my usual canned coffee, but when I picked it up, it was too hot. “Hot, hot...” I juggled the can in my hands, waiting for it to cool off.

Tatsuya continued speaking with a serious expression. “You can probably imagine what kind of environment Reita grew up in.”



“What happened to his mom? He doesn’t have any siblings, right?”

“He’s an only child. Apparently, his mom disappeared one day. Reita told me before.”

*Disappeared. I know what the word means, but it just doesn’t feel real. Still, living with that man would make her want to run away. If that’s what happened, it makes me wonder why she married him in the first place. No... That’s not what I should be concerned about now.*

“I figured it wasn’t something I should tell everyone.”

I nodded in agreement to Tatsuya’s consideration for our friend. *That’s thoughtful in the right way.*

“Anyway, we know Reita didn’t go home now. This means his home situation was definitely one of the factors that cornered him. He stopped talking about his family when we started high school, so I got the wrong impression that things were better... His old man’s clearly gotten worse. Now that I think about it, I feel like Reita’s been unsettled lately,” Tatsuya said, his voice thick with regret.

My canned coffee had cooled from being tossed in the air, so I lifted the tab. It was the same brand as always, but for some reason, it tasted more bitter today.

“Still, it’s bad news that he isn’t home when he’s suspended,” I said.

“No doubt.”

*If the school finds out, Reita might not get off with just an extension of his suspension. He may not want to stay at home, but this is too risky. I hope I’m wrong, but what if he doesn’t care about school anymore? If that’s the case, the situation is getting all the more pressing.*

“I skipped out on practice today, so I’ve got time. Wanna search for him?” Tatsuya asked.

“Do you have any idea where he might be?”

“Not really. That guy could be anywhere.”

*Yeah... True that. He doesn’t have any hobbies that’d make it obvious either.*

Together Tatsuya and I checked out the parks and shopping complexes around Reita's neighborhood, but we didn't find him. It seemed like an impossible task when we didn't have any clues. Meanwhile, it continued to grow dark outside.

"No choice, let's call it a day here," Tatsuya said.

"Yeah." *We can't find him in the darkness.*

Just then, my phone rang, so I took it out—Hikari was calling me. *Is she wondering how our house visit to Reita's went?*

"Hello?" I answered.

"Oh, Natsuki-kun? Is Tatsuya-kun with you?" she asked rapidly. She sounded frantic.

"Yeah. We dropped by Reita's place, but he wasn't home. So—"

"H-He's here. Reita-kun's here." Uncharacteristically, Hikari spoke over me.

I was so shocked that it took me a few seconds to process. "Wh... What? Is Reita there with you?"

Tatsuya couldn't hear Hikari, but he reacted to me. "What?!" he exclaimed.

Of course we were surprised. We had spent over two hours searching for Reita, and here Hikari was telling us that she had found our wanted man as soon as her club had finished.

"Y-Yeah... I happened to see him on my way home, so I'm secretly tailing him."

"Tailing him?" I asked. "Why? If you spotted him, then why not call out to him?"

"I was going to, but he was with some scary-looking people, so..."

*It's rare for Hikari to beat around the bush like this. Reita must be with some real frightening people.* As I thought that, the Minsta video flashed through my mind. "Is he with the same crew as the one in that video?"

"Now that you mention it, they might look similar? It's dark, so I can't get a good look, though..."

“Hikari, where are you? We’ll head over there now.”

“O-Okay. I’m a short walk away from Takasaki Station’s east exit. There aren’t a lot of people around here, so it’ll be hard for me to follow him much longer... They might spot me soon. I’m scared.”

“Got it. Hang tight there. Actually, it’ll take some time for us to get there, so I think you should head home first. Your safety is more important.” *The night is wearing on. She said no one else is around, so it’s too dangerous to let her keep tailing them. Reita aside, I can’t trust the rest of the people with him.*

“Natsuki-kun, what are you going to do?”

“I’ll chase after them with Tatsuya. Can you give me the direction they’re heading in?”

“Okay. They look like delinquents, so be careful.” Hikari sent me her position using a map application. It came with a message that said, “Walk along the railroad tracks from here.”

The location was far from where Tatsuya and I were now. Including the train ride, it would take us around thirty minutes to get there.

“Where are they?” Tatsuya asked.

“Near Takasaki Station. She said she happened to spot him.”

“I see. Let’s hurry.” He had quickly grasped the situation from the call.

The two of us broke into a run. When we reached Maebashi Station, we rode the Ryomo Line to Takasaki Station. It was late, so there weren’t a lot of people aboard. I took a seat next to Tatsuya. Although I felt impatient, that wouldn’t make the train move any faster. I took deep breaths and calmed myself.

“He was hanging out with a nasty-looking bunch, wasn’t he?” Tatsuya asked.

Based on what I heard from Hikari, I nodded my head. “Apparently, yeah.”

“Knew it,” he muttered. “It’s probably the same group from our middle school. We had a pretty big delinquent gang. I heard they all went on to Kakiwari High School, though... It figures he’s with the same kids again.”

Kakiwari High School—though it was in the same vicinity as Ryomei High, its

academic scores were quite different. Compared to Ryomei, which was ranked high in the prefecture, Kakiwari was fighting for the lowest ranking. The aura of the students who attended that school was significantly different too. To put it bluntly, there were a lot of delinquents there. That was why Ryomei students steered clear of them.

“Was Reita close with them?” I asked. *I can’t imagine that, though.*

“He was pretty chummy with them for a time. But he cut ties.”

*Cut ties, huh? But Reita is with them right now.* The train pulled into Takasaki Station while my mind was still jumbled up. We entered the location Hikari had shared with us into our navigation app and set off right away.

“Oh, Natsuki-kun! Over here.”

I heard Hikari’s voice coming from an empty alley. I glanced that way to see her waving as she ran over to us.

“Hikari?! I told you to go home!” I said.

“I... I know, but...I’m worried about Reita-kun too.”

On a closer inspection, I saw that she was shaking nervously. Despite that, she was so concerned about our friend that she had chosen to stay.

“Sorry,” I said, realizing I’d been too harsh.

“Don’t be. I know you’re worried about me.” She shook her head. “They walked along the railroad tracks. I think they’re hanging out under the overpass up ahead.”

*She even identified where they’d be? That helps a ton, but that’s way too reckless!* I turned in the direction she pointed, but it was pitch-black, and I couldn’t see a thing.

“I hear laughing. Let’s go,” Tatsuya said.

“T-Tatsuya?” I questioned.

“You can hear it, yeah? They’re there.”

*No, I don’t hear a thing... His hearing’s like an animal.*

I stuck to Tatsuya, and gradually the sound of boys’ laughter grew louder and



louder. *Not gonna lie, I'm reluctant to continue onward. Actually, I'm scared of coming face-to-face with them. I've never interacted with any so-called delinquents in my entire life. I mean come on, normal people usually don't have anything to do with punks like them...*

Hikari followed us, clinging to my sleeve as she hid behind me.

"Hikari," I began.

"I'm going too. Reita-kun is my friend."

"All right," I said after much hesitation.

Before long, we arrived at a lit area beneath the train overpass, where a group of people were gathered. There were about ten kids in total, and they appeared around our age.

"Huh? Who're you guys?"

Their visage alone made me want to turn tail and run. Dyed blond hair, ear piercings, flashy clothes, disheveled uniforms, jangling necklaces and chains—there were even kids flagrantly smoking despite being minors. *It's bad for your health, so you better quit!*

And finally...

"Reita."

In the center of that group, Reita was leaning against a pole with both hands jammed in his pockets. When he saw us, his eyes narrowed slightly.

"Wazzat? Are ya Reita's friends?" The blond boy who had been the first to glare at us mellowed out and shouted at Reita, "Hey, these guys're wearing Ryomei uniforms!"

Tatsuya exhaled slowly. "You guys never change," he said, exasperated.

"Huh? What're you say— Wait, aren't you Nagiura?!" the blond yelled in surprise when he saw Tatsuya. It was dark so he hadn't gotten a good look at our faces until we came closer.

"What?!"

"For real?"

“Talk about a blast from the past!”

The other kids exclaimed in astonishment as well. However, a few of them asked, “Who’s that?” and cocked their heads in confusion. That handful must have attended a different middle school.

“Took you long enough to notice,” Tatsuya snapped.

*At any rate, Tatsuya’s clearly in a terrible mood. He’s always been a surly guy, but I haven’t seen him this hostile since our quarrel at the beginning of the school year.*

“I-It was dark and I couldn’t see well,” the blond boy replied, flustered.

*He seems a bit nervous; maybe he and Tatsuya have some history. Anyway, it’s great how reliable Tatsuya is. I haven’t said a single thing yet. Delinquents are the natural enemies of introverts like me... But Hikari is behind me, so I can’t let them see how shook I am. The least I can do is keep my head high. No matter what happens, I’ll protect Hikari!*

*I’m serious. I’ve been working out daily, so I should be pretty strong in case this turns into a fight. I’ve got a decent build too. Well, I doubt I have any knack for combat, though...*

“Nagiura, huh? Long time no see,” said a large boy with a deep voice who was sitting on top of a wooden crate in the very back of the group. He had short black hair and an intimidating glint in his eyes. His steellike muscles were evident even underneath his clothes. He gave off a daunting boss aura, and he was definitely beefier than me.

“Hasegawa-senpai,” Tatsuya said, addressing the boy as his upperclassman, “why are you with Reita?”

“You should be asking Shiratori, not me,” he replied.

Tatsuya’s gaze slid over to Reita. “True. All right, Reita, what are you doing? Why are you with these losers?” He glared daggers at his friend.

“L-Losers?” The blond boy pointed at himself with a dry smile. I felt a bit sorry for him; he didn’t seem too bad.

“As you can see, I’m hanging out with my friends from middle school. Is there

an issue?" Reita answered, his face devoid of expression. The air he gave off was clearly different from usual. He was rejecting us.

"Sure, fine. Even if that's what's up, then why haven't you replied to us? You don't even pick up calls."

"Oops, sorry. Didn't notice," Reita replied aloofly. He was obviously lying.

"You bastard!" Tatsuya instinctively leaned forward, about to charge.

"Oh? You wanna go?" One of the delinquents in front of Reita cracked his knuckles.

*This is bad.* I quickly grabbed Tatsuya's shoulder. "Calm down. We didn't come here to fight."

"You think I can stay calm?! Do you get what he's saying?!" Tatsuya shouted.

"Don't let it get to you, chill. Hikari is with us too."

That cooled him down somewhat, and he clammed up. *We should've sent Hikari home first. I was trying to respect her wishes, though. The situation isn't too out of hand yet, but it's precarious. I'd better say something.*

"Reita. On that day, after we split up"—I hesitated for a moment—"what happened?"

A chilling silence fell upon us, freezing the area. I didn't know how many seconds or minutes had passed before Reita finally opened his mouth. "Sorry... I've got nothing to say to you guys."

*Figures, he's not going to explain anything.* "I hope this isn't true, but... Even after your suspension ends, are you not coming back to school?"

He didn't answer my question. His silence was all the answer I needed.

"Reita-kun. Why did you spread that video around? What's your goal?" Hikari asked from behind me, her expression resolute.

"I'm not sure what you're referring to."

"Don't play dumb. We all know you didn't mean a word of it."

Reita had no reply in the face of Hikari's confidence.

“The heck? Cat’s out of the bag already,” the blond boy said listlessly.

“Toshiya. Can you shut up please?” Reita glared at him.

“M-My bad,” the blond boy replied fearfully.

*That reaction confirms our theory that Reita fabricated the video. On a closer look, that blond kid was in it.*

“Are you trying to sacrifice yourself to help Miori-chan?” Hikari asked, her expression serious. Compared to Reita, she was unequivocally furious. However, her hand clutching my sleeve was still trembling. She was hiding her fear.

Reita avoided meeting her gaze. “My selfish actions hurt Miori, after all. It’s the least I can do to atone.”

“You think Miori’ll be happy if you make yourself a scapegoat?” I asked.

“At least it’s better than her bad rep sticking around. She’ll keep going to school after this. Even if you override my bad rep, it doesn’t matter to me.”

“Because you’re not gonna attend school anymore?”

“That’s right. I won’t be seeing you guys.” There was a dark look in his eyes, as though he’d given up on everything in this world. It overwhelmed me.

“Spell it out for us. How’d you reach that conclusion?”

“Dude, what happened? What’s this about violent behavior?” Tatsuya chimed in.

“There’s nothing to explain; it’s exactly what it sounds like. I got into a fight, and the police detained me. That’s all.” Reita’s expression was deadpan the whole time. His gentle smile was nowhere to be seen.

“And I’m asking how that happened!” Tatsuya yelled.

“As I said earlier, I have nothing to say to you guys.”

“You little... If you’re gonna screw around, I’ll drag you home by force!”

Tatsuya ripped free from my grasp and stepped forward. However, a large boy blocked his way.

“Nagiura, if you’re gonna mess with my pal, then I’ll tussle with you.”

In the face of a giant, over two meters tall and exuding an intense pressure, even Tatsuya took a step back. I hadn’t noticed how huge the boy was since he’d been sitting on a crate, but he seemed even larger now.

“Pal? That’s funny when you guys cut ties once,” Tatsuya goaded him.

“I don’t cut ties. No matter what path they take, once a friend, always a friend,” the large boy he’d called Hasegawa-senpai calmly replied to Tatsuya. He looked down on him, exuding an air of confidence. “Sorry, but could you run along home?”

The atmosphere was on a knife-edge.

“I can’t go back to you guys anymore. I don’t have the right to,” Reita said, his tone cold as ice. He was utterly unapproachable and completely shutting us out. I couldn’t get a word in. “Well then, goodbye.”

Reita and the hoodlums walked off to move to a different spot, leaving the three of us standing there motionless. His parting words had relayed his intent to never see us again.

“That fucking shithead...” Tatsuya clenched his fist, holding back his rage.

*Hindsight is twenty-twenty, but I’m glad Hikari is here. If she wasn’t, Tatsuya wouldn’t have controlled himself, and it might’ve turned into a brawl. I don’t want us to get suspended too.*

“Based on how he was acting, I don’t think he’s coming back,” Hikari said with a mixed expression as she gazed in the direction Reita had gone.

“What the hell happened with him? This is too out of nowhere—I don’t get anything at all,” Tatsuya growled.

“I wonder what’s the right thing to do,” I whispered. *I’m genuinely at a loss. We need to come up with some kind of plan.*

That day, after we calmed Tatsuya’s ire, we quietly went home.

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The next day was Saturday, the weekend. I didn’t have work or band practice

today; I was completely free.

When I woke up, my room was freezing cold. I struggled to slip out from beneath my blanket. In times like this, the only way I'd get out of bed was by turning on the heater and waiting until my room warmed up.

Fortunately, I had the day off from school, so I could take my time. On weekdays, I crawled out in the morning with my teeth chattering. I didn't want to be late, after all.

*I heard it's going to be even colder next week. Now that's terrifying... I hate the cold. I'm more of a hot-temperature guy myself. I like summer more than winter. If I were to tell mom that, she'd say, "It must be because I named you Natsuki. 'Natsu' means summer, after all" with a smug smile.*

Though I had the urge to remain wrapped up in my blanket, my room had warmed up, so I resolutely tore my covers off. I couldn't slack off on my daily workout, after all. If I skipped a single day, my ideal physique would slip through my fingers. It's important to train diligently every day to gain muscles.

After I finished my daily dose of push-ups, sit-ups, and squats, I went for a jog in the neighborhood. I worked up a good sweat, showered, and took a breather. I made a cup of coffee before returning to my room. My phone screen was flashing from on top of my bed where I'd left it. It was a RINE message from Miori.

**Miori:** How did yesterday go?

I agonized over how to respond. *How should I explain what happened? A bad response might hurt her. What now?* I'd nearly escaped from reality through my daily routine, but now it felt like I'd been suddenly yanked back into the real world. A gloomy mood had enveloped me, when I got a call from Miori.

"Mm... Hey," I said.

"Morning... If you're gonna leave me on read, at least reply," she said.

"I was thinking about what to say. It's hard to explain."

"That's what I figured, so I called you. You're not doing anything anyway,

right?”

“Hey, I’m a busy guy. I’ve got my workout. Besides, shouldn’t you be at practice?”

“It starts in the afternoon today. The boys’ basketball team and badminton club are using the court this morning.” Miori paused and then sighed. “Reita-kun’s in hot water, so I’m not sure if I should be leisurely attending practice, seeing how I’m involved in all this... But I’ve been enough of a bother to the girls, so I can’t take any more days off either.”

She had missed almost a week’s worth of practice. Not to mention, she had skipped a day without receiving permission and even gone missing. Her teammates must’ve been markedly worried.

“Are you okay?” I asked. Just when I thought she’d gotten back on her feet, she was met with our current situation. Knowing Miori, she definitely thought this was all her fault, and she must’ve been quite anxious.

“I’m fine now. Don’t worry.” She delivered the words in a deliberate tone so I wouldn’t have any room for concern. I could always see through her strong fronts. However, I pretended not to notice. “So, how’d it go yesterday?” she urged. It was unusual for her to be so agitated.

“Well... Miori, have you heard anything from Reita?” I asked.

“I sent him a bunch of messages, and I even called him, but nothing.”

*If he’s not responding to Miori, then he’s really made up his mind. That “goodbye” was meant for all of us.* “I’ll get to the point, then. We found Reita. He was with a group of delinquents from Kakiwari High School.”

I gave her the rundown of our conversation with Reita yesterday. After I finished, Miori remained silent for a while.

“I knew it... It’s my fault,” she eventually managed to wring out of her throat. “I used Reita-kun and then rejected him. I knew I’d hurt him, but I had my hands full with my own emotions. I didn’t think about him at all...”

She was getting swept up by feelings of self-reproach, so I interrupted her. “No, it’s my fault. I’m the one who argued with him during such a dire situation



and drove him into a corner.”

*At the time, I was only worried about Miori, and my mind wasn't working well. In the end, I haven't changed from the past. I don't pay attention to my surroundings, which is why I hurt my friends like this.*

“I'm the reason behind that fight, though,” Miori protested, stubbornly laying claim to the blame.

*“At the very least, Reita doesn't think so.” If anything, it's the opposite. Reita feels indebted to Miori too. He thinks all the nasty gossip about her is because of him.* “He said he wanted atonement. That's why he chose to do this.”

“Atonement...”

*Besides that, there's still so much we don't know.*

“I want to talk to Reita-kun face-to-face. I want to properly apologize to him. I don't want to leave things as is and part ways,” she said through sobs. “He might not want that, though.”

For some reason, I felt a hole open up in my chest. Until this point, my relationships with those around me had almost collapsed multiple times. Despite that, I'd never felt the way I did now, and that was surely because Reita had been there for me. Because he was supporting me from the background, I'd thought my actions had led me to a resolution each time.

*He gently watched over us dumbasses from one step behind. He always seemed the most emotionally mature out of us...but I never imagined he'd leave. Shiratori Reita has always been my—Haibara Natsuki's—ideal.*

*But that was merely an idealization I projected onto him. I don't know the real Shiratori Reita. I've realized that mistake over these past few days.*

Silence lingered between us. I'd shared all the information I had with her. Seeing that I couldn't think of a way to overcome the issue, I had nothing else to say. And it obviously wasn't the right mood to start chatting about something unrelated either.

“Thanks. I should start getting ready for practice,” she said after several minutes, and hung up.

I hadn't noticed, but my coffee was cold now. I bit the bullet and downed the lukewarm liquid to wet my parched throat before organizing my cluttered thoughts.

*Under these circumstances, my goal is to bring Reita back to us. To do that, I need to figure out why he decided to distance himself and resolve whatever it is.*

*He broke up with someone he wholeheartedly loves, got into trouble with his friends, and he doesn't have a place at home—given his situation, he's definitely in a tough spot mentally. On top of that, I don't know the particulars, but he got into a fight... Knowing Reita's personality, I bet he's blaming himself.*

"Even so..."

*Is Reita not going to attend school anymore and just hang out with that group of delinquents? If so, he must be extremely desperate. Is he going to throw away his school friends, soccer teammates, his future, and everything else? Does he feel so cornered that he can't even think rationally?*

"Why, Reita? If you don't tell us—if you don't depend on us—we won't know what to do." The words fell from my lips and melted into the air, disappearing without a trace.

My mind was running in circles. Based on how Reita had been acting yesterday, time wouldn't be the solution to whatever the issue was. I was putting my thoughts in order as I stared at the ceiling when my phone rang.

It was a RINE message from Tatsuya.

**Tatsuya:** You free tonight? I wanna talk about Reita

**Natsuki:** I'm free. Sounds good

I didn't have plans to hang out with Hikari today either. Nor was I in the mood to invite her out.

**Tatsuya:** I'll send you the time and location later. Uta'll be with me too

His concise texts indicated he must've been taking a break during basketball

practice. I sent him a sticker that meant “Okay,” but it was left unread.

I didn’t have anything to do, yet I couldn’t calm down. I randomly opened my DM with Reita. The message I’d sent him after finding out he was suspended from school was still left unread.

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I practiced guitar to distract myself until it finally became evening. I couldn’t concentrate well, so I didn’t exactly play that great, but such is life.

I glanced at the clock—it was an hour before our appointment. *About time to head out.*

When I opened the front door, the sky was already pitch-black. The frigid wind brushed against my skin. It was very cold today, but I was fully prepared, wrapped up in a coat and scarf. I was even wearing a HeatTech top and bottom underneath, so I was a bit toasty. *Maybe I overdressed...*

I was sweating foolishly on the train over to Maebashi Station. I entered the family restaurant Tatsuya had given me, where he was already waiting with Uta.

“Natsu, over here.”

Uta and Tatsuya sat across from each other at a table. I stopped to think for a second before sitting next to Tatsuya.

*Hey, considering their sizes, it’s more spacious next to Uta, but sitting next to Tatsuya seems safer... I think.* Recently, I was trying to be more considerate in these small ways.

Tatsuya handed me a tablet used for inputting orders. “Let’s talk while we eat. We already ordered our food.”

I selected a set meal with a cheesy hamburger steak and some rice. I wasn’t one to drink much juice, but I also ordered the drink bar option. Having drink bar access was a good excuse for overstaying at a family restaurant. We hadn’t explicitly decided to hang around for a long time, though, so it was just a precaution.

“So, what’d you want to talk about?” I asked.

“I’m sure you’ve got a lot of questions,” Tatsuya replied.

“Yeah. I know Reita even less than I thought.”

I had finished organizing my thoughts on the way here. It had struck me that I didn't know who Shiratori Reita was at all. I wanted to take this chance to hear what I could from the two people who had gone to the same middle school as him.

Yesterday, after Reita had left, it was too late to get more details from Tatsuya. He had understood that, which was why he'd set up a space to discuss today.

“It's not something I should be telling other people, but Rei had a wild streak in the past.” Uta began to speak as she stirred her melon soda with a straw. “It started around our second year in middle school and ended in our third year. He suddenly became a truant and started hanging out with an infamous delinquent gang in our school. Everyone was scared and stayed away from him.”

“Is that the group we met yesterday?” I asked Tatsuya.

“Yeah. I didn't recognize maybe three of them, but more than half of those guys used to be part of Mizumi Middle School's delinquent gang.”

I recalled the group of boys from yesterday. There were a few hooliganesque kids at Ryomei, but they didn't hold a candle to actual high school dropouts and the infamous delinquents from Kakiwari High School.

*Not gonna lie, but I was super scared. If Tatsuya weren't there, I would've run away. Even after I saw it with my own eyes, it's hard to believe that Reita was with them. It's so far removed from my image of him.*

“That guy can get along with anyone. He was the liaison between that delinquent gang and the ordinary students who were scared of them. Still, he maintained a certain distance from the gang, and no one ever thought that *the* Reita would hang out with a bunch of hoodlums...including me,” Tatsuya said as though he'd read my disbelief.

“What happened back then?”

“I've heard about his home situation. His mom ran away, his dad's violent, and it was too tough on their finances for him to continue soccer... All of that

pushed him over the edge mentally,” he replied before adding, “I heard about all that afterwards, though.”

*This is a heavy topic. I'm hesitant to even speak up. I can imagine how dreadful that sort of environment would be. However, I can't empathize with Reita's feelings in the truest sense, because I was blessed with a happy family environment even during my gray teen years.*

“Rei was like a different person then, and stopped smiling.” Uta stared far into the distance, as though she were looking into the past.

“Reita was just like that yesterday. His expression was cold, and all he did was push us away,” Tatsuya said.

“Then... How did Reita return to his usual self back then?” I asked. *If we know that, maybe it'll give us a starting point.*

“No clue. He suddenly snapped back to normal and severed ties with that gang. We figured it had to do with family stuff and didn't push the subject.” Tatsuya sighed. “The only thing he told me is what I just told you.”

*“I...see.” No matter how close they are, there's always a line. It's hard to ask your friends about family matters. Looks like Tatsuya has a tactful side after all.*

“Are you thinking something rude?” Tatsuya shot me a sharp look.

*H-How'd he know?!* I whistled nonchalantly in an attempt to evade his question.

Uta disregarded me and piped up. “We were just happy that Rei had returned to his usual self.”

*And that's how Reita's violent streak was left as nothing more than a stain on his past that no one wanted to bring up. After hearing about his family's situation, it's certainly difficult to touch on.*

“In the first place,” Tatsuya began, “Reita's always been a secretive guy. He's a good listener, but never talks about himself.”

“Yeah. Rei *does* tend to do that.” Uta nodded multiple times in agreement.

“He's still like that. He doesn't ask us for help, so we never know when something happens. What are we even friends for, then? Or are we nothing to

him?”

*I found myself agreeing with Tatsuya’s indignation. A relationship where you don’t ask for help in times of need isn’t what you’d call true friendship. Maybe to Reita, the group he’s with now are the ones he considers his real friends. Maybe he hung around us simply because we were in the same class.*

“If that’s true, it’s so sad,” Uta murmured.

*I like Reita. I enjoy hanging out with him. I can’t explain it, but I feel comfortable around him. Just talking about the stupidest things every day makes the world seem vibrant and full of color. To me, Reita is my precious friend. Those feelings haven’t changed, even after he’s pushed us away.*

“But Tatsu, I think you have a habit of not asking people for help too,” Uta pointed out, giving him the side-eye.

“Urgh.” He grabbed his chest like he’d taken heavy damage.

*Well, I can think of several times that’s happened. He’s also the type to fret all by himself.*

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Our dinner arrived, so we took a break to chow down and energize up. When I finished eating and caught my breath, I asked the question that had been on my mind since yesterday.

“Tatsuya. You called that big guy Hasegawa-senpai, right?”

“Hm? Yeah, he’s a year older than us. Since his time at Mizumi Middle, Hasegawa-senpai has always been the top dog.”

“Is he...related to Hasegawa from the class next door?”

Tatsuya and Uta looked at each other and simultaneously spoke up.

“He’s her big bro.”

“He’s her older brother.”

*I had a feeling that was the case since they have the same family name. I see.*

Tatsuya, puzzled as to why I’d asked him that, cocked his head to the side.

“What about it?”

“Well, Hasegawa was involved in spreading those rumors about Miori. I thought she might be connected here too.”

Tatsuya swished some cola around in his mouth and swallowed it. “That’s a good point,” he said, convinced.

“She’s been out sick for a while. Her reputation’s taken a hit because people found out she was exaggerating the rumors about Miorin, and she’s probably feeling cornered mentally,” Uta said with a concerned look.

*I didn’t know that. I’m not up-to-date with the status in other classes. Hasegawa is the one who propagated Miori’s bad rep, but part of me can sympathize with her. There was a seed of truth at the heart of the gossip after all.*

“I know her contact info, so I’ll try asking her,” Uta said as she pulled her phone out from her bag and began tapping on the screen.

“You’re friends with her?” Tatsuya asked.

Uta smiled wryly. “No, not really... Not as long as she doesn’t get along with Miorin.”

*But she’s still willing to reach out to her because she wants Reita to come back.*

“I’m not sure how to phrase this... I don’t want it to feel like I’m interrogating her,” Uta muttered as she fiddled with her phone, expression stern.

“Hey, she might already know that Reita’s hanging out with her bro,” Tatsuya remarked.

“If she does, she might also know where Reita is now,” I said.

Our side conversation was quickly interrupted by a surprised “Huh?!” Uta gawked at her phone screen, eyes wide as saucers. “She replied already, and...she says she wants to talk.”

*I was hoping she might know something, but this is an unexpected turn of events.* “Does the way she phrased it mean she wants to talk in person?”

“Probably...” Uta nodded, perplexed.



“What does Hasegawa want to talk to *us* about?” Tatsuya growled and then crossed his arms. But no matter how much he racked his brain, he couldn’t figure it out.

*Well, we do want more information, no matter how scant. We don’t have a reason to decline.* Putting first things first, we decided to pick a time and a place to meet up with Hasegawa tomorrow.

“Sorry, but I have a practice game that I can’t miss tomorrow. I’ll leave this to you guys. ‘Sides, she probably doesn’t want us to swarm her over this. She and I don’t get along, so it’s better if I’m not there anyway,” Tatsuya said.

“I’m not on friendly terms with her either, though,” Uta grumbled.

“By that logic, I haven’t even held a conversation with her, so...”

We shot each other looks as we discussed our plan of action.

*I want more info, but this will definitely be awkward...* “I mean it. It’s better if I’m not there. She said she wants to talk to Uta. Tatsuya went to the same middle school as her, so let’s count him out, but Hasegawa would definitely hate it if I were there when we’ve never even talked before.”

“I already told her that you’ll be there too,” Uta said.

“Why?!”

“She said, ‘Okay.’”

“Hasegawa, you weren’t supposed to agree to that!”

“Aw, come on, I figure it’ll be less awkward with three of us there. Ha ha ha...” she said, trying to laugh it off.

*If Uta’s this reluctant to talk to Hasegawa, they must really not see eye to eye.*

And so, it was decided that Uta and I would meet up with Hasegawa.



## First Interlude

When I was a child, I was blessed.

My dad managed a start-up company that was decently successful and steadily expanding. Our family had sufficient savings as well. Therefore, I grew up in a well-off household, raised by my mom who was a full-time housewife.

We had money to spare, so my dad was mentally stable and got along well with my mom. He was busy on weekdays and often wouldn't come home until the middle of the night, but he'd take me to all sorts of places on the weekend.

My dad was a kind man. He always wore a friendly, gentle smile, and yet still commanded a bold attitude, overflowing with confidence—he was idolized by many. Back then, there was strength in his eyes.

I respected him.

The turning point came when I began my second year of middle school. I had just secured a spot as a starter on the soccer team, and I was enjoying my club activities.

I didn't know the details of what had transpired. All I knew was that the company my father managed had gone bankrupt. When I heard that, I couldn't wrap my head around the gravity of the situation. *Money will be tight from now on*, was the most that went through my mind. However, as the days and months rolled by, I was forced to understand: my dad's company going bankrupt was a fatal blow that would cause my family to fall apart.

Our savings evaporated, and my father—burdened with debt—became mentally exhausted. His eyes, which had once brimmed with vigor, clouded over, and he spent his days drinking alcohol to run away from reality.

My mom was angry at him for that. She had always been a hot-tempered person, but my old dad had been composed and could skillfully handle her outbursts. But he was different now. Every time I came home, the two of them would be fighting. Those fights often didn't end in a mere verbal spat. It wasn't

just one or two broken plates either. Our house fell into ruins. Eventually, I grew to hate coming home.

I would go to school, finish practice, and then kick a ball around in the park. I did whatever I could to spend as little time at home as possible. I had to sleep there, but besides that, I spent all my time kicking a ball outside. My parents were so distressed that they didn't care where I was.

"Huh? Isn't that Shiratori?"

Every day, I kicked my ball at the park until late into the night, and that was how I coincidentally encountered Hasegawa Koya's delinquent gang. They were an infamous bunch at our school, and I didn't want to have anything to do with them.

However, I often acted as a mediator between them and the ordinary students. As long as we attended the same school, the occasional conversation was inevitable. Some frightened students had asked me for help, and I hesitated to decline.

I reluctantly became their go-between, and over time, those delinquents started saying hi to me. As a result, my initial impression of them changed. Though they regularly caused trouble, I found that they weren't such a bad bunch when I talked to them.

"Practicing soccer this late? You're so passionate."

"Teach us some tricks. We've got time to kill."

"Okay, sure."

I agreed to their request. I had nothing better to do, and playing with others made for better practice. From then on, Koya and his boys would come play with me in the park at night.

Meanwhile, my home situation rapidly worsened. Spending time outside was my solace. *Please let this be over soon*, I constantly wished. And one day, my wish was granted.

When I woke up one morning, my mom was gone. Her room was completely empty. Before I knew it, all of her belongings had vanished. She couldn't have

moved everything out in one night. She must've been making preparations for some time. That was how my mom absconded and I lost all contact with her. My dad didn't say a word and simply continued to drown himself in booze.

The arguments and yelling that I had despised disappeared in a single night.

As though he had given up on something, my dad sold the single-family home we'd lived in. We moved to an old apartment in the neighborhood. Our former house was too big for the two of us, so I didn't have any particular complaints in regards to the move itself.

"What will we do now?" I timidly asked.

"There's nothing else but to look for a job," he replied. Ironically, my mom's departure was what finally activated his sense of crisis.

Our problem now was our lack of money. Most of what we made from selling the house went down the drain to repay our debt. We couldn't afford the soccer team fees, so I was forced to quit.

I'd had a vague feeling that might happen. My practice clothes and shoes were already in tatters, but I couldn't ask for new ones. That was how bad off we were.

Although I understood the situation, it didn't change how awful I felt. I loved soccer. I had secured a spot as a starter and risen up to a position where my team called me their ace. It was supposed to be the brightest time of my life, but the rug was ripped out from under me.

There were so many things I wanted to say. However, my dad had begun to do grunt work at a local construction company, and when I saw him, I couldn't complain.

Playing soccer in the park at night with Koya and his gang became my only source of comfort. I had quit the soccer team, so I'd abruptly lost that connection with my close friends. At the time, I didn't care about anything at all. I gave up on everything in the world and ran away from reality.

I went with the flow and started hanging out with Koya's gang. I was comfortable there. At the very least, it was better than spending nights at home.

Now that I had quit the soccer team, there was no reason for me to have second thoughts about getting into fights. When the gang got into disputes, I tagged along with Koya, and little by little, I began to join in. No matter what it was, I saw myself as a prodigy. I learned a few tips from Koya and then swiftly became a force to be reckoned with.

At school, I felt people's perceptions of me change. They were obviously keeping their distance, but not even that mattered. There was nothing left that I wanted to do.

Even during those days, my objective side sat somewhere in the corner of my heart. *Nothing will change if you do all these stupid things. You need to recognize that this is your new reality. We have to start over one step at a time.* Though I knew that, I couldn't help but cling to the comfort I had now.

One night when my dad returned home late, out of the blue, he told me, "I've saved up some money. You can rejoin your club again."

My dad, having turned away from alcohol, had finally remembered me.

"I'm sorry for putting you through all this pain."

It felt too late to hear those words, and I was at a loss. The soccer team no longer had a place ready for me. I couldn't turn my reputation around at school either. I was already a member of a delinquent gang; my only choice was to continue living out my life with all hopes abandoned.

When I didn't know what to do, Hasegawa Koya told me something.

"Let's duke it out. If you lose to me, go back to the soccer team."

## Chapter 2: The Boy Called a Prodigy

*Sunday.*

I was on the clock from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. at Café Mares today. Uta and Hasegawa had chosen my workplace as their rendezvous point, so our meeting time was at 3:30 p.m. In other words, those two would be calling for me after my shift ended.

*At any rate, I've got to give work my A game first.*

The assistant manager, Nanase, and Mei were on the same shift as me today. After the lunch rush had ended and we could catch our breath, I explained the present state of affairs to Nanase and Mei.

"I see. I more or less understand the situation."

"Wh-When did this all happen... The rumors about Shiratori-kun have made it all the way to my class too, but I thought there must've been some kind of mistake." It was Mei's first time hearing about the issue, so he was extremely surprised.

"Reita comes first. Stopping the rumors from spreading would be great too, though," I said.

"I... I can't do much, but I'll help however I can!" He was enthusiastic, but considering how much clout he had, it wasn't particularly heartening.

"I appreciate the sentiment, but the rumors aren't going to die down just by correcting people." *If it were that easy, they'd already be gone by now. We haven't been simply sitting back and watching either. All of us have been trying to dispel the misunderstandings through our connections.*

I put those thoughts aside and turned my gaze to Nanase. "Are you going to join our talk at 3:30?"

She placed her hand on her chin and thought for a moment before shaking her head. "No. Hasegawa-san will be ill at ease if there are too many people."



*That's true. We're already talking about some hard to swallow stuff. "But you'd be saving my butt if you were there..."*

"Could you refrain from dragging me in because you feel awkward being alone with Uta?" she said with a sigh. She'd hit the nail on the head.

*Well, strictly speaking, Hasegawa will be there too. But on paper, it's more like Uta and I are meeting with her. It's been a while since I rejected Uta, but we haven't really chatted just the two of us since then.*

"It feels like...I'm wronging Hikari..."

"Needless to say, you fully explained what's happening today to her, right?" Nanase asked.

I nodded. "Of course I did." I called Hikari often, so I shared everything in detail with her.

"Then it's fine. Uta has gotten over it too. The two of you are supposed to be friends now—keep up that namby-pamby attitude and you'll make her sad."

Her logic stabbed holes into my mentality. *I don't have any rebuttal. Nanase's phrasing was merciless, but she's pretty much spot-on...* I washed dishes with teary eyes.

Nanase giggled lightly. "Haibara-kun... After the incident with Motomiya-san, haven't you become a bit too self-conscious?"

"Ugh!" *Excuse me. I really wish you'd stop piling on extra damage for no good reason. I know. I'm telling you, I am fully aware! I shouldn't fret and just treat them like normal, right?*

"Th-The woes of a popular man!" Mei looked at me with twinkling eyes for some reason.

*Please stop.*

Paying my quiet sobbing no heed, Nanase glanced out the window. I followed her gaze—the weather looked like it would begin to rain at any moment now.

Seeing that, she muttered, "If he's not at home, then I wonder what he's doing now."

She didn't say who, but I knew she was referring to Reita. *I'm worried too. Is he sleeping somewhere random? Or is he hopping between his friends' houses? Well, it's also possible he just wasn't home when Tatsuya and I visited; he might be there now... I'd like to believe that.*

"It's so shocking that the Shiratori-kun I've come to know is behaving this way." Nanase's eyes narrowed as though she were staring far into the distance. "Perhaps people who are exceedingly observant of their surroundings tend to overlook themselves."

Her soft murmurs blended with the sound of the rain and faded away.

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The café's door chime rang, announcing a customer's entrance. Uta was wearing a miniskirt even in the cold; she waved when she spotted me. It was 3:10, twenty minutes before our appointment.

"Heyo, Natsu!"

"Welcome. I'm off now, so sit over there."

I led her to a table in the back where we would be able to talk privately and then changed out of my uniform in the break room. I then returned to the table where Uta sat. She was in the middle of a conversation with Nanase.

"Oh, Natsu!"

"Haibara-kun, what would you like to drink?"

"Coffee... Wait, aren't you done with your shift too?"

"I can at least bring your drink over. The assistant manager will be brewing it anyway," Nanase said, and then she returned to the counter.

I grabbed the seat across from Uta. She took a sip of her hot caffe latte. Silence stretched out between us for a while. However, rather than feeling awkward, she simply seemed to lack any energy. She had been the same yesterday. The pluck in her voice was gone, and she was reticent.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"S-Sorry. Just pondering a little." Her eyes widened with surprise. "Do I look

down?”

“Well, you seem different from usual.”

“It’s because Miorin and Rei went off to who knows where. It makes me sad for some reason... Well, I forgave Miorin because she apologized tons, though.” Uta let out a hollow laugh. We’d been encountering problem after problem, so she must’ve been mentally drained. “I want us all to return to normal soon... I hope we can go back.”

Just as she finished saying that, the door chime rang. I flicked my gaze in that direction to see Hasegawa Yoko looking around the shop. When she spotted us, a conflicted look spread across her face. She approached, mixed feelings and all.

“Hello...” she said listlessly.

“Good morning... Er, too late for that. Thanks for today, Yoko-chan,” Uta replied with a forced smile.

*Talk about a stuffy atmosphere. She did say they weren’t chummy even though they went to the same middle school, though.*

“Don’t thank me,” she said with a dark expression. “I figured it was something I had to talk to you all about.”

“First off, do you want a drink?” I said, passing her the menu.

“I’ll have a hot chocolate,” she replied.

I relayed her order to Kirishima-san—who’d taken over after Nanase ended her shift—and then returned my attention to Hasegawa. By the way, when Hasegawa came in, Uta had moved seats next to me.

*I’ve never spoken to Hasegawa before, so I’ll leave the talking to Uta... Should I at least introduce myself? But I don’t think this is the time for that. We know one another’s names anyway, and I’m pretty sure she doesn’t think too favorably of me.*

Since they weren’t on good terms, Uta skipped the small talk and went straight for the main question at hand. “So, what’d you want to tell us?”

“Well, um, I’ll start from the beginning. It’s a long story, so bear with me,” Hasegawa began with a frown. “To be clear, it’s all my fault that things ended

up like this.”

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(Hasegawa Yoko)

*“Die! You bitch! Someone like you should just disappear!”*

It was the day I had told Miori that.

*“What are you doing?”*

Hoshimiya-san had heard my impulsive remark. I felt the blood quickly drain from my body. Realizing what I’d just said, I regretted it immediately. And that wasn’t all I had done. It was freezing outside, and yet I had dumped water all over Miori. From an onlooker’s point of view, it must’ve seemed like I was bullying her. No, it *was* full-fledged bullying.

My mind, which had been seething with rage only seconds ago, instantly cooled down.

*Why am I doing this?*

Anger had clouded my vision, and I had been convinced that my actions were righteous. But what was I doing now? Who would think my actions were just after seeing what I’d done? I finally realized how reckless I had been.

I loved Reita-kun. That was why, from the very beginning, I didn’t like Miori for dating him. Still, I wanted to respect his decision. Besides, I wasn’t chosen, so it wasn’t my place to meddle. I even tried to change my mindset and cheer them on.

However, no matter how I looked at it, Miori didn’t like Reita-kun—she was into Haibara-kun. It was plain as day upon closer observation. After all, she brightened up the most when she talked about Haibara-kun.

*In that case, why is she going out with Reita-kun?*

My displeasure significantly deepened then, and my desire to support their relationship immediately vanished. Around that time, I heard that story from Minase-san—the one where Miori hugged Haibara-kun in the park at night.

At the end of the day, Miori’s first choice was Haibara-kun, and she was just

stringing Reita-kun along. That notion really irritated me. I loved Reita-kun so much, but he wasn't interested in me at all. And he couldn't take his eyes off of Miori, who was only messing around with him.

*If he knew what she was really like, he'd change his mind.*

So I spread negative rumors about Miori. Though I weaved in lies and exaggeration, the core was based on the true story I had heard from Minase-san. I predicted it would be hard for her to deny them that way.

The rumors spread just as I had planned. Reita-kun was the only one that didn't match my expectations.

*"I trust Miori over a mere rumor."*

Reita-kun brought Minase-san over to his side, scrupulously pulled some strings, and repainted the rumors about Miori. I honestly hadn't thought he would go so far for her when she had betrayed him. What I had been hoping for...was for Reita-kun to break up with Miori after experiencing the shock of her betrayal.

But his feelings for her weren't so light. As a result, I became the one backed into a corner. People learned I was the culprit behind the rumors, and my position worsened. Reita-kun determined that I was his enemy, and protected Miori.

Now that I think about it, I was reaping what I had sowed. I had unquestionably gone too far. It took the current situation unfolding for me to finally realize that. Once Hoshimiya-san reported me to the school, I would have to face suspension.

My mind went blank, and I fled the scene. I kept running and running, and the next thing I knew, I was home. While I was caught up in thoughts of self-preservation, Miori had gone missing.

Don't get me wrong; I wasn't worried about her. I was just scared that the blame would fall on me. If Miori killed herself, when the authorities investigated the cause, it wasn't hard to predict that Hoshimiya-san would mention my name. I didn't think Miori actually would, but I wanted to make sure she was safe.

“Nii-san, can you help me look for someone?”

At times like this, my brother was the only one I could rely on. He was the only one who, no matter the circumstance, would always be on my side. My brother—Hasegawa Koya—was a year older than me and a second-year at Kakiwari High School. He was the head honcho of an infamous delinquent gang in the area. Though he was feared because of his strength, he was kind to me and the rest of our family.

“Your friend is missing? Leave it to me.”

My brother got the wrong idea, but I didn’t see any reason to clear up his misunderstanding. At my request, he began searching for Miori. He had a mob of underlings at his command, so he could use human wave tactics. He would have a higher chance of finding her than if I searched around blindly. I sent him a picture of Miori along with her profile, and left the rest to him.

That night, I got a call from my brother. I didn’t learn about Miori’s well-being; instead, I was informed that my brother had been arrested by the police. Furthermore, for some reason, he was with Reita-kun.

I had no idea what on earth had happened, but I hurried to the police station. When I arrived, they had just been released with a minor offense. Their faces were bruised. I suspected there were more marks elsewhere, just covered by their clothes.

“N-Nii-san, what happened?!” I asked.

“Nothing much. It was just a fight.”

My brother and Reita-kun were supposedly good friends. There was a period of time when they had always been together. In the first place, I had fallen in love with Reita because I’d met him through my brother.

It had been around when Reita-kun was out of control. His eyes full of despair had slowly drawn me in.

“Anyway, sorry about that. I couldn’t find Motomiya.”

My brother was always a man of few words, and all he offered me was a simple apology. How had he ended up in a fight with Reita-kun in the process of

searching for Miori? I didn't understand, but he didn't explain anything more even when I asked.

"Reita-kun."

"If you're planning to ask me about Miori, she's fine."

I was confused, but Reita-kun clued me in. He didn't divulge why they had fought, but instead he told me what I wanted to know most.

"Natsuki found her, so you don't need to worry."

"I wasn't worried about her. But, it's good she's safe." I was relieved...although I didn't have the right to feel that way. I was the perp who had driven her to such extremes, after all. "I'm sorry, Reita-kun. It's my fault." I gave him a deep bow.

He looked somewhat surprised, and then languidly shook his head. "You don't need to apologize to me. If we trace this back to the beginning, all of it's on me anyway."

The light in his eyes was gone. They were filled with darkness, just like they had been back then. But this time, I wasn't attracted to that darkness. Instead, I was sad that the light had dimmed once more.

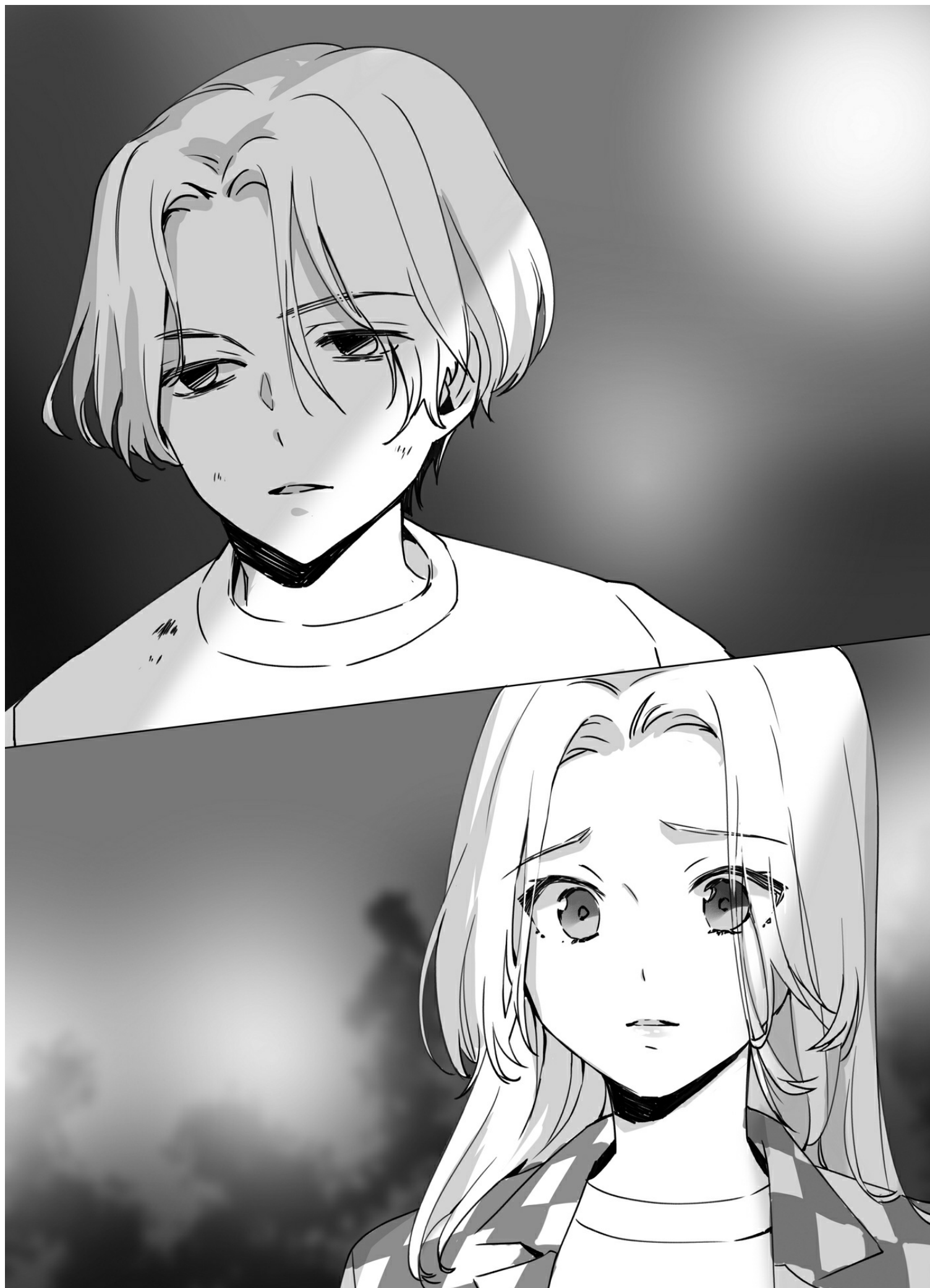
"Reita-kun. Um... What happened?"

Feeling drawn to his darkness had only been the initial spark. It had made me wonder why he looked so sorrowful. It made me want to clear away the darkness from his heart.

That was why when I saw that the light in Reita-kun's eyes had returned—when his smile had returned—I had truly been overjoyed. *So he can smile like that too*, I had thought, relieved. That was the moment I realized I loved him.

"Reita-kun, you have the same look in your eyes as back then."

"Because I understand just how awful of a human being I am." His forlorn tone was heartbreaking. As though he could see right through the smoldering affection in my heart, he continued to speak. "You don't have to care about me. I'm not the kind of person you think I am." With that, he disappeared into the city night with my brother.





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(Haibara Natsuki)

I had to admit, I wasn't in a good mood after hearing Hasegawa's story. She had been the one to drive Miori into a corner, but all she'd thought about was protecting herself. However, the fact that she had told us her unvarnished thoughts showed that she was trying to be as honest as possible. I could gather from the way she spoke that she was feeling remorseful.

"I'm sorry I don't know the crucial parts...but this is everything I know." Thirsty after telling such a long story, Hasegawa took a sip of her hot chocolate. However, her drink had already cooled down, and she made a disgruntled expression.

"For the police to get involved in their fight... It must've been huge, right?" Uta looked at me, her mouth hung wide-open.

*If they had bruises on their faces, it must've been a dramatic brawl.*

"They were let off after some questioning at the police station since both of them were to blame, but our school wouldn't let them go unpunished," Hasegawa said.

"And that's how Reita got suspended," I finished. *Based on her story, I'm guessing Hasegawa's older brother and Reita got into a fistfight. That must be the violent behavior in question. Not that we know why, though...*

"But isn't Yoko-chan's brother with Rei now?" Uta asked me. I nodded. After about three seconds of silence, she tilted her head to the side. "Why?"

"Hmm... My brother can be impulsive... Maybe they had some kind of misunderstanding."

They sat there, brows furrowed, as they speculated.

I gave them a sidelong glance and then said, "Just checking, but all that happened on the day Miori went missing, right?"

"Yes. I found out they were arrested by the police around 7 p.m. that day."

*So Hasegawa's brother was looking for Miori when he ran into Reita. It only*

*makes sense he would ask Reita if he knew where she was since they go to the same school. And Reita would question why Hasegawa's brother was searching for Miori.*

*If we put the events in chronological order, Reita probably bumped into Hasegawa's brother after his conversation in the mountains with me. I let the group chat know about an hour later that Miori was safe, so Reita should've known that she was fine... Did they have some sort of mix-up that resulted in a fight?*

"In the end, we're not going to get anywhere unless we talk to Reita again," I said after organizing my thoughts. *I'd like to talk to him alone when the others aren't around.*

"Please. I want the old Reita-kun to come back," Hasegawa said.

*She thinks that if anyone can do it, it's us. That's why she's here.* "We feel the same, but... Do you know where he is?"

"Um, I'd guess he's at one of the gang members' houses... Other possibilities are..."

She listed other places her brother frequented, like the underpass near the station, arcades, an abandoned hospital, and behind the convenience store near Kakiwari High School. I had been to one of those locations myself.

"Our best chance to talk to Reita is...at an arcade, then," I remarked. *It'll be crowded and loud. It's a chaotic place, so there will be a lot of places to hide too. If we wait until the other guys are focused on playing games, maybe we can secretly pull Reita aside.*

"But there are a lot of possible places... What should we do?" I asked.

"Should we pick one and wait for him? That doesn't sound very realistic," Uta said.

"There's no guarantee he'll come too."

Hasegawa chimed in then. "I can at least ask my brother where *he* is. They might not always be together, though."

*I see. They're siblings, so checking in on where he is would be easy.* "Can you

handle that?”

She nodded, took out her phone, and called her brother. “Hello? Where are you right now? Oh, um, I was just worried... Yeah...” The call lasted for around ten seconds, and then she hung up. “He’s at an arcade right now. This might be your chance to talk to Reita-kun.”

Uta and I exchanged looks and then stood up.

“Thanks, Hasegawa. We’ll check it out.”

“I’m going too. If I distract my brother, maybe you can get Reita-kun alone,” she said.

“That’d be great, but... You sure? You don’t have to go that far.” *She’d be going against what her brother wants. Based on how Hasegawa’s brother acted when we encountered him at the underpass, he wasn’t happy about us trying to bring Reita back. I get the feeling he’s respecting Reita’s intent to push us away.*

“It’s fine,” she said with a nod. “The way Reita-kun is acting now... I don’t want to sit back and watch.”

It was hard for me to accept what Hasegawa had done in the past. Nevertheless, her love for Reita was genuine. *She lost control of her feelings and hurt Miori, though... Then again, I hurt Miori too, so I don’t have the right to criticize her. The one thing I want to say to her is...*

“You better apologize to Miori.”

Hasegawa nodded earnestly. “Yeah, I will. I’ll go to school on Monday and apologize to her.”

*Then it’ll be up to Miori whether to forgive her or not. I should focus on getting Reita back.* “Uta, let’s go.”

“Yeah. Let’s get Rei back!” She smiled, but her cheer seemed forced.

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Though it was already pitch-black outside, the arcade was brightly lit. They closed at midnight, so we still had plenty of time. There was a group of people gathered near the entrance too.

This arcade had lawless vibes. There were a lot of thuggish-looking people here besides the gang from Kakiwari High. Because of that, regular folks rarely frequented; they usually went to the arcade inside the mall.

I stopped a short distance away from the entrance and looked behind me. Then, I locked eyes with the two trailing after me, their expressions stony, and we nodded at one another. *Even I feel a little spooked, and I'm a guy. The girls must have it even worse.*

"Right, I'll go in first. Once I find my brother and his crew, I'll strike up a conversation and distract them," Hasegawa said.

"We'll keep an eye on the situation and try to lure Reita away." *It's a simple plan, but it's all we've got. In the end, we'll never know what's going on if we don't go inside.*

We waited a minute after Hasegawa had entered the arcade before heading inside. The background music and game noises were deafening. There were more people than I'd expected, probably because it was the weekend.

Uta and I tried our best to stay behind cover and out of people's line of sight as we searched for Reita. We didn't see him on the first floor, so we went up to the second. There, near the fighting game machines, we spotted a bunch of familiar-looking faces. They appeared to be in the middle of playing matches within their group.

"Natsu, there he is."

"I see him."

Reita and Hasegawa's brother were talking not far from the underlings. It was an opportune position for us.

"Nii-san." Hasegawa knew that too, and went up to her brother.

"Yoko? Why are you here?"

"Because I heard you were here."

"I told you not to go out at night alone. Why'd you come all this way?"

Hasegawa's brother seemed quite surprised to see his little sister appear out of the blue.

“I need you for something. It’s loud here; follow me.” Hasegawa grabbed her shocked brother by the arm and dragged him away. Her gaze met ours for a split second. “*You guys got the rest,*” signaled her eyes.

Then, Reita was temporarily left alone, and he pulled his phone out of his pocket. Uta and I approached him while he was looking at the screen. When he heard our footsteps, he raised his head and spotted us.

“We need to talk. Come with us,” I said.

Depending on his next move, I was ready to drag him out by force, but Reita sighed. “I see. So that’s what this is about. You don’t know when to give up.”

“Obviously, a bit late for you to notice that.”

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We led Reita out of the arcade and stopped in front of some nearby vending machines.

“If you try to run away, I’ll catch you!” Uta said, standing behind him. We were positioned so Reita was sandwiched between us.

He smiled dryly. “If I were going to run, I wouldn’t have followed you two here.”

*Actually, I think it’s physically impossible for Uta to stop Reita, given how tiny she is...* I pulled out my wallet and inserted a thousand-yen bill into the vending machine. “Want a drink?”

“Are you treating me?” he asked.

“Yeah. As thanks for coming out to talk with us.”

“In that case, I’ll take a hot coffee.”

“I want hot lemon tea! It’s cold!”

Somehow, I ended up paying for Uta’s drink too. *I guess this is fine.* Including my own coffee, I bought three drinks and tossed the other two theirs. My breath was white. The warm can felt pleasant against my chilled hands.

The light leaking out from the arcade and interspersed street lamps illuminated the darkness. Reita and I were about three meters apart, so the

lighting made it a bit difficult to see his face.

“Have you been going home?” I asked.

“No, I’m crashing at my friends’ places. I’m looking for a part-time job right now.”

“Why won’t you go home? Did something happen with your dad?”

“Based on your attitude, did you meet my dad?” Reita shot back with a question of his own. He didn’t need to hear my answer, though; he had seen right through me. “What did he say about my whereabouts?”

A beat passed. “He called you a brat and said you weren’t home. That’s all.”

“That’s the sort of person he is. You’ve met him, so you understand, right? I don’t want to go home,” he said dispassionately. I got the feeling that the way he spoke now was closer to his true nature.

“What are you going to do about school? What about the soccer team?”

“I’m quitting. Once my suspension is over, I think I’ll hand in my withdrawal form.”

It felt like the temperature outside had plummeted.

“Rei, why? Let’s all graduate together,” Uta said in a doleful tone.

He looked down. “I don’t have the right to.”

“What are you talking about? What ‘right’? What does that even mean?”

Despite her questioning, Reita didn’t reply. He didn’t want to answer. The air around him screamed that he didn’t want us to pry. But I charged in anyway.

“What happened? Tell us. We’re friends, aren’t we?” I said. *Come on, Reita. You’re the one who told me those words.*

*“It’s just...we’re friends, right? I wanted to know what’s got you so worried.”*

*What you said back then has really sustained me. So if you’re worried about something now, I want to be there for you this time.*

“I don’t have the right to remain friends with you guys.” Reita’s eyes were lowered. He refused my efforts to break down his wall. “You were right about

me. Even when my friend...when the person I love was in danger, I only thought about myself. I'm the lowest of the low. Someone like me shouldn't be with you guys."

*That's how Reita has been beating himself up.* "I was wrong to say that then. I wasn't thinking about your feelings, and I went too far," I said.

"You don't need to apologize. You were completely in the right. That's just the kind of person I boil down to in the end. Even if I had found Miori before you did... I wouldn't have been able to save her." Reita continued on in a self-deprecating tone. "Miori came home...because you went to rescue her."

*He sounds absolutely confident about that, but hypotheticals are pointless. I didn't really do anything. All I did was reject Miori's confession.*

"If anything, I should be grateful. What you said made me realize my true nature."

"Then why did you fight with Hasegawa's brother? Is it the same reason you didn't tell him where Miori was? Your so-called violent behavior was a result of you trying to protect her, wasn't it?"

"I'm surprised. I didn't tell Yoko anything, but you still managed to figure that out. Still, you're mistaken about the most crucial part. I wasn't trying to protect Miori. I just wanted to take my anger out on Koya. That's why we fought—I started it."

*Koya? That must be Hasegawa's older brother. It looks like my conjecture was mostly right.* "Take your anger out?" I knitted my brows, unable to comprehend those words.

"That day, after our talk, I ran into Koya on my way home. Yoko asked him to search for Miori. I knew she was safe thanks to your message, but I didn't tell him that. It wasn't because I didn't trust him; we're old friends, after all. It's just, in the moment, I wasn't calm enough to converse with anyone... So I told Koya this."

Reita paused before reciting what he had said. "'For starters, your sister is the reason Miori disappeared. So I don't want to tell you...' That's what I said. I was just lashing out," he told us derisively. "I shouldn't have said that. I was the root

cause behind it all. As a result, Koya got angry since he trusts his sister, and demanded I take it back. But I didn't back down. That's how we ended up in a fistfight. And I didn't go easy on him either. I even felt glad because I was so pissed."

"And then the police stepped in, huh."

"Dumb story, isn't it? But it was the perfect send-off for my old way of life. Someone like me shouldn't hang around you guys. I don't belong in the same world as you all."

*What kind of stupid shit is he saying? You were the one at the center of that dazzling light.* "Reita, that's my line."

"Natsuki... I don't want to hear that from you." His gaze was dark and cloudy.

While Reita and I glared at each other, Uta spoke up. "Rei... Would you rather be with those guys than us?"

"Yeah. I feel at ease around Koya and the boys. It's a bit too bright where you guys are."

"Even if you feel that way, I want to keep hanging out with you...with everyone." Her usual pep was gone, and it sounded like her voice was on the verge of fading away.

"I told you already. I don't have that right. If I stay with you guys, your cozy little group will fall apart. That's the type of person Shiratori Reita is. Above all," he continued, "Miori must resent me. I'm the main reason she was driven to do that. I don't know what she's said, but I doubt she wants me anywhere near her."

*And that's his end conclusion, huh? Reita's guilt towards Miori is what's cornered him.* "Reita, your true feelings are out. Still, have you had a real talk with Miori since then?"

"I haven't, not once."

"Then you wouldn't know how she feels. She tried multiple times to reach out to you. You know that, though, don't you? She's worried about you!" I yelled.

Reita's eyes shook ever so slightly. He looked up at the night sky and let out a



long sigh. “Natsuki, can I ask you something?”

“What?”

“Miori confessed to you, right? What did you say?” He had predicted what sort of exchange she and I had when we were deep in the mountains.

“I turned her down. There’s someone I already have my heart set on.” I repeated the words I had told Miori that day.

Reita’s gaze sharpened. “You’re full of lies.”

I instantly knew what he was referring to. How could I not? “I’m not lying. I really did tell her that.” Though I knew what he actually meant, I pretended not to. I had resolved to stick to this stance, after all.

“If you had at least been honest with me, maybe I would’ve felt like coming back. But it’s too late now. As long as these feelings won’t disappear, I don’t want to be around Miori.”

Just as he finished saying that, Hasegawa came out from the arcade. Her brother, Koya, and his underlings were with her too. The whole gang scowled at us.

*Looks like they found out we lured Reita outside.* Hasegawa’s brother had her by the scruff of her neck. She shot me an apologetic look. *Time’s up, huh.*

“You again? You really want Reita back, don’t you?” Hasegawa’s brother took up a protective stance near Reita and glared at us.

“I just wanted to talk to him,” I said.

“Then quit trying to pull tricks on us. It’s honestly annoying.”

“So I should’ve been up-front and asked?”

“If that’s what Reita wants, we won’t butt in. It’s a different story if he doesn’t, though.”

“Why go so far?” I asked after a pause.

“Because he’s our friend.”

*Their bond is strong. I heard they used to be close, but I didn’t think their connection ran this deep.*

“Who are you guys to Reita?” he asked.

“We’re friends. At the very least, I think of him as one,” I replied.

“I don’t know the details, but...can you really claim that when he’s pushed you away?”

I didn’t have a rebuttal.

“Never mind them, Koya. Let’s go back in.” Reita turned away from us and thumped Hasegawa’s brother on the shoulder.

“I’m only going to ask you once, Reita. Are you sure you’re okay with this?” Hasegawa’s brother asked, as though reconfirming something.

Reita looked over his shoulder, gave Uta and me a quick glance, and then immediately averted his eyes. “Yeah. They...aren’t my friends anymore,” he stated in a cold tone, then went back inside the arcade.

“Natsu, what you guys just talked about...” Uta’s voice trailed off from where she stood next to me. “No, never mind.”

I wasn’t so dense that I couldn’t figure out what she wanted to ask. I wouldn’t be able to answer honestly even if she got the question out, though, so I didn’t say anything.

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*The next day, Monday.*

Reita’s suspension was one week, until Wednesday. Talk about him had died down over the weekend. However, the empty desk in the classroom seemed to stick out a lot.

The gloomy air in the room likely wasn’t just my imagination. Our friend group usually held the spotlight, but we were being awfully quiet, which was affecting the other kids. It was all because Reita wasn’t here.

I had reported yesterday’s events to the group chat. Everyone had read it, but no one had responded. No one knew what to say.

I couldn’t concentrate on our lessons, and I idled the morning away until lunchtime arrived. Even though we’d made no progress, my stomach still got

hungry. *Should I eat in the cafeteria or hit up the school store? What to do... Hey, it sounds kinda noisy in here.*

“Natsuki-kun, can I have a sec?” Hikari asked, interrupting my growing suspicions about the abnormal atmosphere in our classroom.

“Did something happen?”

“Yeah. Can you open Minsta?”

I complied and opened the social media app. “Don’t tell me: Did Reita post something again?”

“No, it was Miori-chan this time.”

The first thing that popped up on my screen when I opened the app was a lengthy written post by Miori. She had what was called a “real account” that only followed friends, so she didn’t have that many mutual followers. Despite that, her post had a considerable number of likes and comments.

*Everything written here is the truth.*

Miori’s post was a detailed account of everything that had occurred up until now.

*Reita-kun and I used to date, but I was in love with someone else. I loved Haibara Natsuki-kun from class two. That’s why when Reita-kun confessed to me, I was going to turn him down. However, he said, “you can continue loving Natsuki,” and suggested we date anyway. “I’ll work hard to make you look my way,” he said.*

*My crush was already dating someone else, and I wanted to get rid of my feelings for him. Because of that, I found Reita-kun’s proposition very attractive. If I fell in love with him, I thought I would definitely be freed from this pain.*

*However, I couldn’t discard those feelings so easily, and I betrayed Reita-kun. Some time ago, there was a rumor going around that I hugged Natsuki-kun—that was true. I hurt Reita-kun by doing that, but he defended me anyway, and overwrote my bad rep. The story became that I didn’t mean to hug Natsuki-kun, I just tripped and he caught me.*

*Thanks to Reita-kun, I escaped from the gossip, though not completely. He must've felt responsible for that. It was my fault for dating him half-heartedly, yet he thought he was the one to blame for my suffering, because he suggested we date with strings attached.*

*The video about Reita-kun that's going around on Minsta right now was fabricated by him. He posted it to completely reset my bad rep and direct all the nasty gossip at himself.*

*I think he's doing this to atone. But I'm the one who committed a sin. I don't want to be protected by a lie like that. I'm the one in the wrong, I should be the one being attacked. That's why I'm posting this all here.*

*I'm sorry. Please believe in Reita-kun.*

Her post divulged everything, including Reita's attempt to cover up the truth. She had published it to restore his reputation at school.

"Miori...wrote this?" *It's a testimony from a related party. It'll have an effect, without a doubt. In exchange, Reita's plan to protect Miori's reputation is moot now.*

"To be honest...Serika-chan and I knew she would post this today," Hikari admitted apologetically. "I tried to stop her. The rumors have lost steam, so there was no need to bring it up again. Reita-kun's plan would come to nothing too."

*Hikari must've kept it from me because Miori swore her to secrecy. If I found out about it, I would definitely stop her. I really don't think this was a good idea.* "This isn't something that can be solved just by telling the truth."

"I agree with you there. But she probably hated the situation. She didn't want to be protected with a lie."

Hikari and I talked as we stepped into the hallway. The area around the neighboring class was astir. When I peeked into their classroom, Miori was surrounded by the girls of her class.

"Hey, is this true?"

“If this is real, then isn’t it crazy?! Wow, the drama!”

“I knew it! This means Reita-kun is a good guy, right? That’s what I thought!”

“Yeesh, sounds like a lot happened... Miori, I get how you feel.”

It didn’t seem like she was getting lambasted. It was more like she was being barraged with questions from girls brimming with curiosity. *Miori looks uncomfortable, though... Well, this is the result of the choice she made.*

“I think she wanted to take responsibility for her actions,” Hikari murmured as she watched Miori. “Before this, she wanted to respect Reita-kun’s feelings because he protected her, but he tried to overshadow the gossip by making himself look bad, and she wasn’t having that.”

*And that’s why she wrote everything down... I doubt her post will fix Reita’s bad rep. The kids who get along with Miori will believe her, though.*

*It’s still a fact that he was suspended due to violence, and it’s unlikely students who have no relation to Miori will believe her. Like Hikari feared, Miori’s breathing life back into a rumor that had mostly died down. That might end up reflecting negatively on both Miori and Reita.*

*This is a matter of how Miori feels. She’d rather accept whatever outcome from speaking the truth than be protected by Reita’s self-sacrifice.*

“Miori-chan looks like a weight’s been lifted off her shoulders.” Hikari’s mouth softened, her gaze focused on our friend.

“H-Hold on! One question at a time! I’ll answer all of them, okay?” Miori exclaimed.

*She may look uncomfortable, but her eyes have determination in them now.*  
“Yeah.”

“So, shall we eat lunch?” Hikari asked.

Loitering around here wouldn’t help anyone. Besides, when Hikari and I were together, we attracted a lot of attention whether we liked it or not. I led her somewhere that we could eat alone.

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Hikari and I went onto the roof.

“No one’s here,” she remarked.

“People come up here sometimes in the spring and fall, but it’s usually empty in the summer and winter.” *There aren’t a lot of kids who’d choose to eat outside when it’s too hot or cold.*

It was windless today, so it was relatively warm. Hikari and I sat side by side with our backs against the railing. I had bread I’d bought from the school store, and she had brought a bento.

*I feel like it’s been a long while since I spent alone time with Hikari like this. I say that, but we do chat on the phone a lot.*

“I’ll make you a bento next time,” she said.

“What? No, it’s okay! Cooking for two takes a lot of work.”

“I’m already cooking anyway. There’s not much difference between making food for one or two. Unless...” Hikari peered at my face. “You don’t want it?”

“I do! I really want to eat your cooking.”

“Good.” She nodded, satisfied.

*A homemade lunch, cooked by my girlfriend? Of course I’d want to eat that! It dominates the upper tier of my Rainbow-Colored Event Ranking (by my investigation).* I eyed Hikari’s colorful lunch as I ate my yakisoba bread.

“My mom made this, though,” she said when she noticed my stare, and smiled wryly.

“Hikari, can you cook?” I asked. *I got the feeling she couldn’t when she came over to my house with Miori the other day.*

“I’m practicing!” she exclaimed, one cheek puffing up slightly.

*My girlfriend is cute as always.*

“Come to think of it, Natsuki-kun, why don’t you make your own lunch?”

“I run and work out in the morning, so I don’t have time to cook.”

“It’s very like you to prioritize those things.”

*Also, it's just plain annoying to prep a bento. I don't dislike cooking, but I don't want to do it in the morning. And in the first place, putting together a bento is more cramming frozen foods into a box rather than cooking... It usually devolves into something like that.*

*For the record, my mom isn't a morning person, so she's never made me a bento before. She gives me lunch money, though, so no complaints here. Every person has their strengths and weaknesses. Still, when I see lunches like Hikari's, I do feel a bit envious.*

Hikari made an expression that looked like a light bulb went off in her head, picked up a slice of tamagoyaki with her chopsticks, and held it out to me. "You want a bite? Here, 'ahhh.'"

"Huh? No, not really. That's not why I was staring..."

"It's fine, eat up."

"Mmf."

Hikari shoved the egg into my mouth. It was sweet and delicious.





“D-Don’t force food into my mouth,” I protested. “It was tasty, though!”

She giggled. “Feel a little better now?”

“What?” It took me a few seconds to understand her question. *I’m making her worry.* When I realized that, guilt welled up inside of me.

“You’ve been looking somber. I was concerned.”

“Sorry, Hikari...”

“Don’t be. I understand why.” She shook her head before continuing on. “But in return, tell me what you’re thinking. Rather than brooding alone, you might feel better sharing your thoughts... I want you to rely on me too.”

I wasn’t so thickheaded that I couldn’t pick up the hidden emotion behind her words. *She must have her opinions on what I’ve been doing. Whenever I’m at a loss, I always go to Miori for help... Not like I can depend on Miori right now, though.*

“Thanks, Hikari.” Anyhow, I had someone who wanted to support me. It genuinely made me happy. I put my jumbled-up thoughts into words and specified the problem at hand. “Reita plans to quit school once his suspension ends. So we need to change his mind.”

“Yeah.”

“We can’t ignore him. Right now, he’s disregarding what we’ve gone through together, and averting his eyes from reality. Throwing away his future is all he can see. It’s Reita’s life. It’s up to him to decide, but...I don’t think this is what he really wants.” *Because Reita isn’t smiling. He doesn’t look like he’s enjoying himself at all.* “But even though we tried to persuade him head-on, our feelings didn’t reach him.”

“Yeah.” Hikari encouraged me to continue, despite my incoherent rambling.

“What should I do?” In the end, that was all it came down to. Now that I had failed to convince him face-to-face, I didn’t know what to do next. “I want Reita to come back, but if he doesn’t want that—”

“You don’t need to overthink this.” Hikari smiled; it was uncharacteristic of her to interrupt me. “Listen, all you can do is tell him how you feel, right?”

*That's... Hikari's right. It's my second round of high school, but in the end, that's really all I can do.*

"A lot has happened, but every time, we could go back to normal because... No, we became an even closer group, because you kept us together."

*Tell him how I feel. Stick to my guns. That's all I've ever done whenever I run into trouble.*

"Natsuki-kun, what do you want to do?"

I reflected on my feelings. *I want to bring Reita back... Why? Because I want to be with you, Reita. I have fun when I hang out with you. And I believe we can share that sentiment.* "He said we weren't friends anymore. And he's right: our relationship is about to vanish without any discussion. Maybe you can't call us friends."

"Yeah."

"In that case, this time, I'll become bona fide friends with him."

*I need him to be part of the rainbow-colored youth I'm aiming for.* Once I'd organized my thoughts, I immediately knew what I wanted. Relief washed over me, and I looked up. A vast, cloudless blue stretched above. *You know, I feel like I haven't looked at the sky in a long time. I guess I've been hanging my head without realizing it.*

"I think I know how Reita-kun feels," Hikari murmured as she peered up at the sky with me. "When you become aware of your shameful side, you can't help feeling disappointed in yourself. You think... 'Is it okay for me to be here?' Because everyone else is... Because you, Natsuki-kun, are too dazzling. Excessively so."

"Everyone says the same thing. I can try so hard because all of you are so dazzling."

"And we find your efforts to be dazzling."

*Does that mean things would be better if I hadn't tried too hard? Maybe everyone would've been happier if I hadn't redone my youth.*

"But, you know..." Hikari gently caressed my hair. "Because we've got you, we

can also try our best. Little by little, we're changing our bad parts... We're each doing what we can to become someone we can be proud of. It'll definitely be more fun if we're all growing up together. I'm sure of it—the world is full of color. So..."

Hikari smiled. It was beautiful, like a blooming flower.

"I think Reita-kun actually feels the same way. We just need a chance to get through to him."

"And how do we make that chance?" I asked.

"Won't that depend on your passion?"

*Hikari's take is too high-handed and straightforward. I already tried to persuade him twice and failed. It's unlikely that such a simple plan will yield results. However, did I truly convey my feelings to Reita during those attempts? Didn't I merely try to sway him with sensible arguments?*

*You were wrong, Haibara Natsuki. Those acts were meaningless.*

"I'll uncover Reita's true feelings and convey mine."

*Let's be honest: I was a little scared. I didn't want Reita to hate me. That's why I couldn't knock down his walls when he pushed me away. But...I can't call what we have a bond if this is enough to break it.*

*I believe in Reita. It may be invisible to the eye, but I believe in the relationship we've built. If he's going to say we're not friends, then all we have to do is become real friends this time.*

Seeing the newfound resolve in my eyes, Hikari smacked my back. "If anyone can do it, it's you. You're the best man for the job when it comes to doing embarrassing stuff."

"Hikari?" The fact that she thought of me that way hurt just a teeny bit.

"Why are you getting depressed? I was praising you."

"Because it didn't sound like it..." I said, pouting.

She wrapped her hands around mine and lifted them up. "You know, I love that part about you."

*Hikari understands me very well. I'd rather not admit it, but that is my strong point.*

*"Do what you always do—proceed naively onward, okay?"*

*I'm glad I asked Hikari for advice. Her smile and encouraging words always spur me on.*

## Second Interlude

“Miori...”

“Reita-kun. You never picked up when I tried to call you, but now you’re calling me out of nowhere? Did you have a change of heart? You know we’re worried about you, right? Me and everyone else.”

“What about you? What was that post about?”

“There’s nothing deeper to it. I just told the entire truth.”

“What you did will only bring more negative attention to you.”

“I know, but I don’t care... I don’t want to be protected by you sacrificing yourself for me. I’ll take responsibility for my crimes. Telling lie after lie... I know I’ll regret it in the future.”

“You’re better off deleting that right now. There’s still time; it hasn’t gained much traction yet. And you have no crime to take responsibility for to begin with. The nasty gossip about you was all my fault. I’m the one who pressured you into a contractual relationship. I knew you were in love with Natsuki too. I also knew from the start that there was a risk of those sorts of rumors spreading, but I didn’t tell you... I’m to blame. So I’m going to take responsibility for that crime.”

“You’re wrong. Don’t think that everything is your fault. I chose to date you. You can’t blame yourself for that too... If you do, you’re looking down on me.”

“That’s not what I’m trying to do. My love is what drove you into a corner.”

“So you published that video to atone for it? You wanted to sacrifice yourself and make it so I could breathe a little easier? I don’t want that. Back then, I couldn’t control my feelings and drove myself into a corner. I did that, Reita-kun. It’s not your fault.”

“And I’m telling you that I’m the one who planted the seed!”

“Reita-kun, you’ve been wrong all along. As I’ve said multiple times already, I

went out with you of my own volition... You know, when you told me you loved me, I was happy.”

“...”

“I accepted your confession because, even though I loved Natsuki, I thought I’d fall for you eventually. Despite that, I betrayed you. Which is why I’m the one who should apologize. I’m sorry for manipulating you. If anything, you should be mad at me for cheating on you.”

“Miori...you’re so obstinate.”

“I could say the same about you. You’re surprisingly stubborn.”

“Fine. I’ll respect your decision. I won’t interfere anymore.”

“Hey, Reita-kun. Is that your way of saying goodbye?”

“Hmm, who knows.”

“Don’t play dumb. I heard about your conversation with Natsuki and the others... Your suspension ends tomorrow, right? Come back to school. Let’s have fun with everyone again.”

“If I’m near you, I’ll only hurt you again.”

“Losing you would hurt even more.”

“Miori.”

“What?”

“It was a short relationship, but thanks. I’m praying for your happiness from the bottom of my heart.”

“Reita-kun? Wait a second! Reita-kun!”

## Chapter 3: Youth

Even after his suspension ended, Reita didn't come back to school. Due to Miori's Minsta post, for better or for worse, there was even more attention on our group.

*It's kinda awkward, but nothing we can do about it. One of the side effects of having a rainbow-colored youth is being subjected to scrutiny when something happens. In my first round, even when I bungled something, people would just go, "Who even are you?" No one knew who I was, so everyone would immediately forget it happened. How sad.*

Setting my lonely past life aside, I had already devised an idea to bring Reita back. When lunch break came around, everyone gathered in the cafeteria. I was unveiling the secret plan I'd thought up yesterday.

Oddly enough, they all gave me a blank look.

Serika spoke up for everyone and asked, "What's that?"

"A challenge letter. As it says right there." I had placed an envelope onto the table. Written on it in huge brush pen letters were the words "Challenge Letter." The messy handwriting was part of the package.

Serika wordlessly opened the envelope and pulled out a piece of paper folded into thirds. "To Shiratori Reita. I challenge you to a duel. Come to the riverbed area south of the school alone. I'll send you the date and time later over RINE. The loser must do whatever the winner says," she articulately read, broadcasting the contents of my letter aloud.

*I'll have Hasegawa hand this to her brother. They're a gang of delinquents, so he'll gleefully give it to Reita for sure.*

Everyone silently exchanged looks, perhaps blown away by my flawless scheme. Eventually, Miori spoke up. "Are you an idiot?"

"Indeed. This is so exceedingly stupid that I don't know what to say," Nanase said in agreement.

Tatsuya followed up with “Natsuki, you need to go easier on the jokes.”

“Ah ha ha ha ha! What era are you from?” Uta added.

“I... I tried to stop him,” Hikari stammered. “I doubt Reita-kun would be tempted by this...”

They were all against it. In fact, some of them thought my plan was a joke.

“Buck up, Natsuki. I like your idea.” Serika consoled me, her eyes gleaming for some reason.

“What are you going to do after you give this to Reita? Have a slugfest down by the river?” Tatsuya asked.

“That sounds like something out of a manga about delinquents...” Miori said. “It’s not very realistic. Do you think you’ll come to understand each other by exchanging blows because you’re boys? We wouldn’t be struggling this much if things were that easy, though.”

“In the first place, Shiratori-kun was suspended because of violence. And you want to invite him to another fight?” Nanase pointed out.

“Honestly, I feel like Rei wouldn’t show up even if this letter reached him!” Uta added.

*Everyone’s being so mean. Shut up! I kinda knew all of that! Those were my concerns too!*

“B-But guys! If anyone can find success through an embarrassing plan like this, it’s Natsuki-kun!” Hikari said, trying to support me with an iffy counterpoint.

Serika nodded and gave me a thumbs-up. “I’m in favor. A fight by the river? That’s totally rocking! Super great!”

*Getting Serika’s approval makes me apprehensive instead...*

Tatsuya was unable to hold himself back, chuckles spilling out of his mouth. “You know, this is really like you, Natsuki. Sounds pretty good to me—let’s try it. It’ll be a stroke of luck if we bait Reita with such a dumb plan. He might actually show up.” He had suddenly flipped to the supportive side.



“You think so? Rei doesn’t want to see us anymore. I feel like he’d throw it away after you handed it to him, and that’d be the end of that. I don’t think this plan is going anywhere,” Uta pointed out, remaining uncharacteristically coolheaded.

*She’s right. Maybe my plan is futile.* “I read a manga about delinquents yesterday, and the idea just sorta hit me,” I admitted.

“That’s what I figured.” Miori gave me a hard look.

“We just need to come up with a reason that’ll compel Reita to go when he reads this letter, right?” Serika stared at my messy handwriting with a serious expression.

“Yeah, that was the plan...but how?” I asked.

“I’ve got the perfect idea. Natsuki, pen me.”

I pulled the brush pen I had used to write the challenge letter out of my breast pocket and handed it to Serika. She snatched it from my hand and began to write on my letter, effortlessly but in surprisingly neat handwriting.

“Perfect,” she said.

Everyone peered at the piece of paper to see what she had added.

*“I have Motomiya Miori. If you run away, she’ll take a beating in your place.”*

“What, no, that’s ridiculous,” I quipped reflexively. “There’s no way Reita would fall for that!”

“Dude, this is on the same level as your challenge letter,” Tatsuya said.

*That’s not true! My plan was a teeny bit better than holding someone hostage!*

“Hey, why am I the one getting beat up now?!” Miori complained.

“We need to sacrifice you for the plan. May you rest in peace.” Serika put her hands together in prayer.



“This might actually be a decent approach, surprisingly,” Nanase said thoughtfully, her face earnest. “Were someone claiming that Motomiya-san will get beat up if he runs away, even if Shiratori-kun knows that there’s a ninety-nine percent chance that it’s a trick...I have a hunch he would still have no choice but to come.”

Having heard Nanase’s stance, the rest of us shared a glance.

“That’s just how much he loves Miori-chan.” Hikari nodded.

Miori’s lips curled up into an ineffable, bitter smile.

“However...” Nanase turned to me. “Even if he goes along with your plan and shows up, what will you do? You’ve already tried and failed to persuade him twice. Surely you don’t expect to reach mutual understanding with him by throwing a few punches.”

“That’s obvious.” I locked eyes with Serika, and we gave each other a thumbs-up. “I expect exactly that.”

*When it comes to men understanding one another, it’s gotta be a battle by the riverbed with the setting sun as our backdrop.*

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When I entrusted my challenge letter to Hasegawa, she gave me a look that screamed, “*Are you insane?*”

*I’m completely sane and very serious. So please stop looking at me like you regret asking me for help. It’ll be fine! It’ll go better than you expect! For sure!*

Hasegawa would deliver the letter to her brother today, so I designated tomorrow evening as the date of our showdown. Once she confirmed she’d given the letter to him, I would send Reita a RINE message.

“If you were going to message him on RINE anyway, then why not just text him the entire challenge letter?” she said in a frigid tone.

*When it comes to stuff like this, setting the atmosphere is crucial!*

“Natsuki-kun simply wanted to do it this way,” Hikari answered with a wry smile.

“Nuh-uh, challenge letters have to be on paper. This is definitely way more hardcore!” Serika looked at me. “Right?”

I nodded fervently. *I knew it: Serika’s the only one who gets me. I’m against the trend of digitizing everything!*

“He’s just that type of person,” Hikari said.

“Hoshimiya-san, I see you’ve got it hard too,” Hasegawa said.

While Serika and I bobbed our heads at each other, Hikari and Hasegawa also shared a knowing nod.

Having done what we came here to do, we all returned to our respective classrooms since it was right before the end of lunchtime. All we had left to do was wait for the big day.

“By the way,” Tatsuya said. “Can you even win against Reita? He’s a strong fighter, you know.”

“Huh?” *It would’ve been hopeless if I were the same as my first round, but I’ve got my carefully nurtured muscles. I’ve never fought anyone before, but I think I could do pretty well...*

“He’s a natural at everything he does. He picked up fighting quickly too. Hasegawa’s older brother is the leader of the delinquent gang around here, but rumor has it Reita is just as formidable as him.”

*Wait... Reita’s as strong as that giant guy with muscles of steel?* “Are you serious?”

“Very serious. I got into a minor tussle with Reita in middle school, but he ended me instantly.” Tatsuya dropped that bomb with a solemn expression.

*He took Tatsuya down instantly? Tatsuya, the guy brawnier than me?* “I wish you had mentioned that sooner.”

“Sorry. You seemed so confident.”

*I was confident about the contents of the plan, not about my fighting skills!* I’d been thrown into turmoil.

“I-It’ll be okay! Natsuki-kun works out every day!” Hikari said, frantically trying

to cheer me up.

My confidence was rapidly disintegrating, but it was too late to change the plan now. I had already given Hasegawa the challenge letter. *I have to follow through... I'm not afraid or anything, got it?*

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After I spent the night researching fighting tips on the internet, the next day came. I was distracted throughout our lessons, and soon it was after school. The nerves suddenly hit me then. The time I had given Reita was 5:30 p.m. I would be late if I didn't make my way to the river immediately.

"M-My stomach hurts..." I muttered, holding my belly.

Tatsuya mercilessly pushed my back. "Why're you losing your spine now? Get moving already."

"Natsuki-kun... Don't get hurt," Hikari said.

"I promise nothing. That might be an unreasonable request."

"Don't forget that your main goal is to have a heart-to-heart with him, okay?" she reminded me.

*I'm glad you're worried, but how this plays out depends on Reita's mood. I have no idea what's going to happen until I get there.*

"Do your best, in moderation."

"Yeah, please don't drag the police into this again!"

With words of encouragement(?) from Nanase and Uta, I took a deep breath and switched gears. "All right, let's go," I said.

"Yeah," Miori replied with a nod.

This time, only four of us—Tatsuya, Miori, Serika, and I—would head over to the river. Hikari, Nanase, and Uta had club activities and lessons to attend, so they couldn't come.

"It's better if the girls don't go anyway," Tatsuya had said, and I'd agreed too.

The bottom line was that I had sent out an invitation for a fight. It wasn't the type of thing that girls would want to watch.

The three girls had said, “We might jump in and try to stop you guys,” and agreed to sit this one out.

Miori was also a girl, but I needed her to come since she was acting as my hostage. Meanwhile, Serika had refused to listen and declared, “I’m definitely going!” Hence, we let her do what she wanted.

Tatsuya was coming to act as the referee, as well as the emergency responder. He had basketball practice today but had said, “I don’t feel well today, so I’m taking the day off,” all while looking the same as usual. He was clearly feigning illness, but I appreciated it.

Miori had practice too, but Uta had said, “I’ll give them a convincing explanation!” She would handle coming up with an excuse for Miori.

*Thanks for missing a day to be a hostage...*

When we left the school, the sky was already dyed sunset red. The four of us walked side by side towards the riverbed. It would take around ten minutes to get there on foot. The spot we were using was one that Nanase had chosen because it would have the least people around. After all, we would get into big trouble if someone saw us and called the police.

We followed the GPS to the location Nanase had sent and soon arrived. We passed through a thick grove of trees to reach the riverbed. From outside, its visibility was quite obstructed. The opposite shore was much the same, so there was little risk of being seen by other people. If anything, maybe someone could barely pick us out from atop a bridge that was a bit far off. Even if they could, though, we’d just look like specks in the distance.

*I’m starting to worry that Reita won’t be able to find this place because it’s too well hidden. I shared the map location over RINE, but it’s still left unread...*

“Natsuki. What’s with the pose?” Miori shot me a judgmental stare from where she sat on the stairs we’d used to come down here.

“It’s only polite to wait like this,” I said. All I was doing was standing in the center of the dry area of the riverbed with my arms crossed in an imposing way. I was setting the atmosphere. It was my philosophy that youth vibes dwelled in the small details.

“Natsuki, you got this! Fight on!” For reasons unknown to me, Serika had donned a hachimaki headband and was holding a plastic megaphone.

“Serika. We’ll attract attention if you’re loud, so stop smacking that thing,” I pointed out with a straight face. She looked a bit dejected after that. *Oh, come on!*

Tatsuya glanced at his watch and said, “It’s almost time.”

I also looked down at my phone. It was five minutes before my appointment with Reita. A chilly gust swept through the air. It was freezing outside.

*The sun is gradually setting, but I think it’ll stay light out for a little while longer. Please. There aren’t any streetlamps around here, so if night falls, I won’t be able to see a thing... I feel like I’ve got the wrong season. Maybe this isn’t the sort of event that’s supposed to take place in the winter.*

Complaining would get me nowhere, though. I did some warm-up exercises to heat up my body. Then, I heard the sound of footsteps trampling on dead leaves coming from the direction of the stairs we’d gone down.

I didn’t need to ask to know who it was. Reita appeared from behind the thick brush, pushing branches aside. He had actually shown up.

He looked around and then sighed. “Could you stop sending me ludicrous letters, Natsuki?”

“You let a ludicrous letter bait you out here? You really are a nice guy, Reita,” I replied.

“I’m guessing this was either your or Serika’s idea. Actually, maybe both.”

“H-How’d you know?”

“You two are the only ones who’d think of such a ridiculous plan.” Reita sighed a second time. He seemed exasperated. “So what do you want? Don’t tell me you actually want to have a fistfight with me?”

“Yep, that’s what I want. It looks like words aren’t enough to reach your heart.”

Reita quizzically furrowed his brows. “And you think you can beat me?”

I could feel the absolute air of confidence in his sharp gaze. *Don't let him scare you. You can't reach Reita's heart if you avert your eyes now.* "Don't underestimate me. I work out every day." *Act tough, even if it's a bluff.* I grinned and cracked my knuckles.

"I'll explain the rules. Face strikes are illegal because they're too visible. Everything else is on the table, but I'll intervene if things get life-threatening. I'll make the call as to who wins and loses. Say 'I give up' when you surrender... That's about it. Any questions?" Tatsuya dispassionately explained the rules.

"So you're acting as the ref, Tatsuya," Reita remarked.

"What else can I do? That dumbass over there suggested he duke it out with you." Tatsuya pointed at me and shrugged.

"Reita. As I wrote in my challenge letter, whoever loses has to listen to the winner," I said.

"Fine with me. I only have one demand—stay out of my life from now on." His cold words chilled the air around us even more.

*I definitely can't lose now. Not that I was planning to lose to begin with.* "All right. But if I win... You have to be real friends with me this time." *We'll ask each other for help when something is troubling us... We'll be friends like that.*

Reita blinked in surprise. "That request is very you, Natsuki."

*An introvert like me won't let go of the few friends he has so easily!* "You aren't going to refuse, right? If you do, I'll cry," I whined in a voice oozing confidence. *Wait, that isn't what I imagined I'd say.*

"Sure, I don't care. I'm going to win anyway."

I'd gotten Reita to accept my terms, so relief washed over me for a brief moment. *Getting him swept up in my plan is a success. All that's left...is to see whether I can actually beat him. Everything hangs on that.*

"All right then, ready?"

I put around five meters between us and then faced him. I dropped my hips low and raised my fists, imitating what I'd seen in manga and anime. Reita also put up a relaxed guard. Unlike me, his movements were smooth.



Our gazes met. I felt cold sweat trickle down my back. He didn't seem to have any openings. *Reita looks bigger than normal, even though I'm supposed to be the taller one... Still, I've formulated some tactics.*

"Begin!"

As soon as Tatsuya gave us the starting signal, I rushed at Reita. He was the more experienced one here, so if I let him take the reins, I would lose. Victory goes to whoever makes the first move, not only in fights, but in everything. I had no doubt that a surprise attack would throw him off.

I vigorously lunged at Reita and threw my right fist at his torso. Though I couldn't aim at his face, I wasn't going to hold back elsewhere. Our talk could wait until after my victory.

The moment Reita caught my fist with his left hand, I swung my left at him. He kicked off the ground and twisted his body away from my blow. *You're not getting away!* I threw my leg out, but Reita dodged backwards.

*He evaded every single one of my attacks?! And he didn't even break a sweat. I wanted to use my first move to launch a fierce attack that would get him on the ropes.*

"You're fast, but as expected, you've never been in a fight before. Isn't that right, Natsuki?"

"Shut up. Of course I haven't! No regular high schooler would've fought anyone before."

"You're right about that... Which means you can't beat me." Reita stepped in towards me.

I instantly dropped my hips and put my guard up. However, he defied my expectations so easily that I might as well have been putty in his hands. He had initially acted like he was throwing a punch, but he suddenly dropped down and whipped his leg at me. He drew a graceful arc in the air and struck my right leg.

My stance crumbled. I quickly placed my hand on the ground to help me back up, giving rise to a fatal opening. The next thing I knew, Reita's leg was flashing before my eyes. I hastily put my arms up in a cross to block it, but I was sent flying.

“Natsuki?!” Miori screamed.

*Owww... I'm okay, though. No need to kick up a fuss.* I had rolled a few times and dispersed some of the impact, but my arms were stinging.

“I’m only getting started, Reita.”

My uniform was covered in sand, but I had a spare at home. I didn’t care if this one ended up in tatters.

Reita watched me stand up with narrowed eyes. “You couldn’t tell the sheer difference in our skills from that exchange?”

“If I were going to give up after just this much, I wouldn’t have sent you a challenge letter in the first place!”

I attacked Reita again, kicking off the ground as hard as I could. I leaped at him with my entire body’s weight behind a dropkick, but he avoided it easily. He waited until the moment I landed and planted his fist in my stomach. I couldn’t dodge it.

His blow made an audible thud and felt heavy against my gut. *Ow.* My face twisted in pain. Still, I swung my own fist at him too. Reita, however, repelled it in an effortless display of his skills. My arm was deflected upwards, leaving my torso ripe for the picking.

“Crap!” I exclaimed.

“Too slow,” he said.

Reita slammed into me and sent me flying. My world went spinning. He had jammed his elbow into my body, and my abdomen screamed in pain. The next thing I knew, I was looking up at the twilight-colored sky.

*Guess I’m pancaked on the ground... My plan to tank some damage in return for blasting him back harder was a bust. My prospects are looking grim, huh.*

“Not yet...” I strained my knees and stood back up.

Reita watched me with an exasperated look. “No matter how many times you come at me, it’s pointless.”

“You’re not the one who gets to decide that! I am!” I made a grab for Reita. If

I couldn't beat him at hand-to-hand combat, I would try grappling.

As though he were ridiculing my shallow thought process, he threw me off-balance with an osoto gari leg sweep. He pulled my clothes, and I went spinning. While I was unable to resist the momentum, he lifted me with his back.

"Gwah?!"

It was a clean shoulder throw. My vision did a three-sixty, and I went from being turned over his back to getting slammed to the ground. My breathing was ragged, like my lungs had been grabbed and shaken. Maybe it wouldn't have hurt so bad if we were on mats, but the damage I'd taken from hitting the dirt was an order of magnitude higher.

Even so, I couldn't stay down. It would've been the end of the road if Reita had put me in some kind of joint lock, but he was still underestimating me.

"You're getting up again? That one must've hurt quite a lot, though."

"Not gonna work, Reita. You won't be able to take me down if you use half-hearted techniques."

My assessment clearly hit the mark, because his lips twisted down ever so slightly. It was the obvious conclusion if anyone thought about it for a second. If Reita were serious, I wouldn't have been able to get up again. It didn't matter how much I exercised; he could've taken me out with the very first kick.

"Do you not want to hurt me that badly?" I asked. He had clearly eased up midway through that shoulder throw just now too.

"Of course I don't. I wouldn't hold back against a delinquent, but you're just a regular student."

"If you keep underestimating me like that, you'll never win!" *I didn't want to use this tactic if I could avoid it...but I can't beat him with a frontal assault.* When I was close enough to Reita, I grabbed the sand in my pocket and flung it at him.

"What the—?!" Taken by surprise, he instantly covered his face with his arm.

*Face strikes are illegal, but no one said throwing sand at your face was! I*

landed a roundhouse kick as hard as I could into Reita's torso. A dull thud burst through the air. He'd managed to react in time and had barely put up his guard.

"You want to win against me this badly?"

"I don't think I can beat you head-on after all. I didn't break any rules either."

"Do you throw sand at someone you want to be friends with?"

"Good point," I said after a pause. *He won that argument... Whatever, we're not debating right now!* I willed out a rebuttal. "Becoming friends takes priority! I'll worry about the rest later!"

Even if I had to use cowardly tricks, winning came first and foremost. I approached Reita once more and threw the handful of sand in my other pocket at him.

"Sorry, but..." However, Reita didn't dodge the sand and ran straight at me instead. "Now that I know about that move, I just need to fight while taking it into account."

Although he had one eye shut and had taken the sand to his face, it didn't matter at this distance. He grabbed my collar, slipped his leg behind mine, and tripped me. I fell to the ground in one fluid motion. He then jammed his knee into me and kept me pinned down.

"That's checkmate. It doesn't matter how badly you don't want to surrender if you can't move." Reita stared down at me with his cold eyes at point-blank range.

"You don't want to be around us that badly?" I tried to push up as the question left my lips, but I couldn't move. Though I was more muscular than him, he'd put me in a position where I couldn't exert my strength well.

"I've told you multiple times already. I don't have the right to be with you guys."

"Right, right'... Whatever. Stop shitting me, Reita."

"What?"

"Who cares about that? Say what you want to do. If you hate us now...then I'll have to back down and accept that. But"—I continued speaking while pressed

to the ground—“if you’re distancing yourself for some other reason, I’ll never let up. And I’ll try even harder if it’s for some dumb reason like needing some right to. Admit how you really feel, Reita. What do you want?!”

His face crumpled. I felt his grip loosen and didn’t miss the opportunity to retaliate. I twisted my body hard, grabbed Reita’s shirt, and threw him off me.

“Quit struggling!” he yelled.

I rolled away and stood back up once more. Reita also got back on his feet as he dusted the sand off his clothes.

“Reita, I want to be with you.” I had to be honest about my feelings if I was to demand the same from him. “I have the most fun when I talk to you and Tatsuya about the stupidest things. I feel crazy comfortable around you. I still believe that we share that feeling.”

I didn’t need to fumble around for reasons—there were just so many. Reita replied with silence. He probably didn’t want to lie.

“Come on, Reita. Your advice has always helped me. You’ve always been there for me, so I want to help when something’s eating away at you.” *And I think now is one of those times.* “I won’t allow you to agonize alone, take responsibility for some ridiculous crime, or distance yourself without any discussion. Talk to me, Reita. If there’s something you want to say, then lay it on me!” I yelled, not resisting the emotions, so strong that it felt like they were on the brink of overflowing.

“What do you...know about me?!” he roared.

“I don’t know anything, which is why I’m telling you to spit it out!”

I threw my fist at him, but he easily caught it. I looked into Reita’s eyes from up close. We glared at each other.

“I realized that I don’t know anything about your past. So I’m not going to claim that I understand how you feel. But I want to learn more about you, little by little.”

“Hearing about my past isn’t anything enjoyable. That’s why I hardly ever tell anyone about it.”

“So you’ve been brooding over it all by yourself?! And you plan to keep doing that forever?!” I threw my whole weight into my fist and tried to push him back. The momentum sent him flying.

“Urgh!” Reita’s movements had slowed. It was proof that he was hesitating.

“If it’s something you don’t *want* to talk about, then fine. Wanting to learn about you is my ego talking. Everyone has stuff they want to hide. That’s not what I want to say...”

We were fighting while yelling at each other, so it took me some time to find the right words. But in the end, all I needed to do was vocalize my feelings. It wasn’t a difficult task.

“All I want to say is... We’re friends, so rely on me!”

“You’re still...insisting *I’m* your friend?”

“I told you already. If you say we’re not friends, then we just need to become real friends this time!” I got a feeling that I was spewing some really embarrassing lines, but I didn’t care. I meant every word, after all.

“Even if...I’m not the immaculate person you imagine me to be?” he asked in a faint whisper that he’d barely managed to wring out.

“I know you’re not,” I said. “You’re a normal high school student. Sure you’re a little more brilliant and pretentious, but you’re a normal high schooler. And that’s fine. As long as we have fun together, that’s all that matters. Don’t think about complicated things like having some ‘right.’”

It was our altercation in the mountains that had made me realize that.

“Come back, Reita. Let’s live it up with everyone again,” I urged him.

He shook his head. “I can’t, not now. Not when I can’t give up on Miori. If I’m near her...I’m sure I’ll bring her unhappiness. And not just Miori either. I’ll ruin it for all of you guys. Our group might fall apart because of me... It’s better I’m not around. Everyone will be happier that way.” Reita listed excuse after excuse. It wasn’t like him to be so feeble.

“You just keep mumbling and grumbling... I’ve been trying to tell you to say what you really feel!” My fist struck Reita right in the chest with a thump. It was

my first attack that had actually made solid contact.

He clenched his chest in pain and fell to his knees. “Obviously...I want to go back to you guys too!”

I had finally heard how he truly felt. I’d gone this far to drag those thoughts out of him.

“I have fun hanging out with you guys too! I wish we could all be together forever! But I’m the one who messed it all up!” Reita shouted, his expression contorting with anguish. “That’s why I can’t come back! I told you!”

“You’re saying you can’t come back because you assume everything’s your fault...but that’s all right. I’ll make a reason for you to return. And I’ll do it by beating you!”

Without any hesitation, I curled my fingers into a fist. I stamped my foot loudly into the ground, stepping in with all my might.

“Because I need you for the rainbow-colored youth I’m aiming for!”

While he was discomposed, I landed a straight right into his face. He took the blow full force and went flying to the ground, rolling a few times.





“Oops.” I looked at Tatsuya. He was shooting me an extremely cold stare.

Silence lingered in the air. *Shit...* My mind, which had just been so fired up with passion, rapidly cooled off.

“Uhhh... Natsuki broke the rules, so I guess he loses?” Tatsuya said.

*Right. We agreed at the start that hitting the face is illegal.*

“What were you thinking?” he asked.

“Well, um... I just kinda went overboard...” *You have to throw a punch to the face during these sorts of conversations! It’s a no-brainer... Sorry. I was influenced by a light novel I like. You shouldn’t hit people in the face with flair. Yes, sir.*

An extremely awkward atmosphere settled over the two of us and Reita, who was flopped on the ground. Even Serika was giving me a “What the heck is this guy doing?” look. Her gaze stung. Miori and Hasegawa were whispering to each other; they were definitely trash-talking me.

*When did Hasegawa show up? Who knows, but she and Miori seem to be having a friendly chat. Did they make up? Well hey, that’s not a bad thing. More importantly, what should I do?*

Reita spoke up then. “Tatsuya.”

“What?” he replied.

“I give up. I lose,” Reita declared, still lying on his back.

“You sure? I can pronounce Natsuki the loser for foul play.”

“We agreed face strikes were illegal, but we never said you’d lose for doing it.”

*Isn’t he just splitting hairs?* Though the thought came to my mind, I was in no position to point that out. Literally.

“So you’re fine with it if I win?” I asked.

“Yeah. You win this one,” Reita replied.

“Hell yeah! I won! Cool, that means you’ll be my friend forever!”

“Wipe that smile off your face. You only won out of the kindness of Reita’s heart,” Tatsuya said.

*You’re very right.*

“Why is Natsuki *always* such a sloppy mess,” Serika said.

“He was looking cool during the middle bit too... Oh, don’t tell Natsuki I said that,” Miori added.

I could faintly hear the girls talking to one another in low voices. *Excuse me, Miori-san, I can hear you just fine. I feel mortified, so please stop it.*

“I-I’m beat...” I plopped down on the ground with a thud. The moment it hit me that the conflict was finally over, my body immediately felt like lead. Adrenaline had kept me going during the fight, but now I ached everywhere.

“Your plan was way too reckless.” Reita slowly sat up and looked over at me. Even though he had received a blow straight to the face, he didn’t seem to have taken major damage. He must’ve expertly deflected most of the impact.

*I thought he flew way too far... Compared to him, I don’t think I can stand again. Oof, this hurts. The pain is too much. I seriously can’t anymore. Who said we’d resolve this through a fight, anyway? Whoever thought that up is a dumbass...! Nevertheless, with the way it wrapped up, I can’t tell who was the victor.*

“What was your plan if your words hadn’t shaken me up?” Reita asked.

“In that case, I was going to pull out my second cowardly plan.”

“Second one? Did you have something else besides the sand strat?”

“Yeah. If things really went south, I was going to have Tatsuya back me up. He was the ace up my sleeve.”

Reita’s eyes rounded in surprise. “Are you serious?”

“Dead serious. I never said we had to fight one-on-one.” I had intended to use that technicality to team up with Tatsuya and deliver Reita a beatdown. *I really didn’t want to resort to that, though. It paints a bad look no matter how you slice it.*

“I’m not crazy about the idea, but us against Reita would be a close match,” Tatsuya said with a shrug.

“I think you’re overestimating me a lot,” Reita said. “I’d be helpless if two big guys like you came at me at the same time... I see, so I would’ve lost sooner or later.” He nodded in understanding.

*I have to question him for accepting my logic. I fear he’ll get swindled in the future.*

Tatsuya and Reita sat down next to me (I still couldn’t move) and gazed up at the crimson sky.

“Apparently...my mom is getting remarried,” Reita began. He was doing just as I’d hoped: divulging what I wanted to know and relying on me. “I don’t really mind. It’s already been two years since my mom ran off. A short while ago, she suddenly reached out to my dad and requested he sign the divorce papers. So she could remarry.”

He spoke in hesitant, scattered strings of words, probably because he wasn’t used to talking about himself. He had also left out a large portion of background information. I had heard a smidge of it from Tatsuya, though.

“Since then, my dad’s gone back to drinking again. He never said anything, but I think he wanted to rebuild our family one day. He was shocked when he realized that hope would never come true... He wasn’t that together to begin with, but after my mom ran off, he found a job at the construction company in his hometown and has been working hard. I’ve been taking care of the housework to help out.”

I was missing bits and pieces of information, but I quietly listened to Reita speak.

“But...since my mom got remarried, my dad has lost the drive to work. He’s covered it up by telling his company that he’s ill, but...he’ll be fired if he keeps skipping work. We’re already barely scraping by month to month, and...now it’s even worse. So I thought I should at least earn my own money. That’s why I said I’m looking for a part-time job.”

Family and money matters—it was hard to throw out a lighthearted response

to either topic. I understood why Reita hadn't opened up to anyone else about his problems until now. All this time, he must've been brooding by himself.

"My dad's personality changes when he's drunk. And whenever things get tough, he inevitably escapes through alcohol. I tried to stop him from drinking, but... Given the circumstances, you know?" Reita sighed. "I know it didn't all turn out this way because I have bad parents. I owe them for raising me too. I understand he's shocked about my mom getting married again, and I tried to support him as much as I could, but...I was worn-out."

*It might be because my initial impression of his parents skews too negatively, but having to support parents like that would be extremely straining. Reita may be a beast when it comes to the art of consideration, but I can sympathize with him feeling drained after going through all that.*

"It was right around then when I learned about the rumors surrounding Miori."

I looked away from Reita for a moment to glance in the direction of the riverbed entrance. Miori and Hasegawa sat next to each other on the stairs about twenty meters away. They weren't close enough to overhear our conversation.

Drawn by my gaze, Reita also turned his eyes in their direction and continued. "Honestly, I was shocked. I thought I had some clue about things. At the time, I hadn't truly noticed it...but I must've felt fairly cornered. I only ever relaxed when I was with Miori. I could beaver away because she was by my side. That's what I thought, so when I learned about that rumor...I intuitively knew it was true."

"Miori wasn't in the wrong," Reita added. "I was to blame. I knew that dating me had made her feel constrained. On top of that, I'd practically sweet-talked her into a contractual relationship. It was my first time feeling this way about someone, so I couldn't give up on her. I couldn't control myself..." His tone was filled with regret and self-castigation. "As a result, my bad premonition came true. Miori was the one driven all the way to the edge."

He recited the story like he was gouging out the wounds in his heart. However, neither I nor Tatsuya interjected. We were the ones who had wanted

this, after all.

“I pulled out every trick in my book to improve Miori’s reputation... But—I’m ashamed to admit it—I panicked that I was responsible for bringing this on her, and I became shortsighted. I pretended I was fine, but I think I was hurt over being dumped by her... I ended up redirecting all the hate people were giving Miori to Yoko, and I didn’t consider how Miori might feel about that. I quarreled with my dad because he was constantly drinking, and then I ran away from home. By the time I heard Miori had gone missing, I had already lost a place to return to, and I didn’t know what to do.”

Individual factors had piled up one after another, leading Reita down a bad road. Just listening to his story distressed me. *Why didn’t I try to get to know him sooner?* I was filled with regret. I should’ve shown him more concern.

“I thought I *had* to find her. And at the same time, a strange conviction struck me.” Reita flicked his eyes to where I was pancaked on the ground. “I knew that you would find her.” He looked like he was beholding something beautiful. “Maybe that confidence was why I was more caught up in my own business than worrying about Miori. I know it’s contradictory, though. I wanted to stop you and go to her myself.”

I recalled the conversation Reita and I had had during our search for Miori.

“You didn’t want to let Natsuki get to wherever Motomiya was, right?” Tatsuya asked.

Reita nodded. “I can try to embellish it all I like, but that was how I genuinely felt. If I let Natsuki go, I would never beat him at anything for the rest of my life. I was terrified of that. And the terror overshadowed my concern for Miori.”

Back then, the only thing on my mind was saving Miori. I had also been shortsighted. It had never even struck me that Reita might be thinking such things. Composure wasn’t something I could afford, and so I had panicked. I’d been wholeheartedly scared. Merely imagining that I might lose Miori made me tremble.

“That’s why...after our exchange, I ended up realizing that I couldn’t win.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because, you love Miori, right?”

I couldn't respond. Tatsuya didn't say anything either.

Reita's lips softened into a small smile. “And I'm sure your feelings for her long surpass what I feel for her.”

Before I realized it, the sky had been dyed by the night. The entire expanse above was dotted by twinkling stars, without a single cloud in sight.

“After that, it was just as you heard. Once I knew what an awful person I was, feeling disappointed in myself, I wandered around aimlessly until I bumped into Koya. He was out looking for Miori at Yoko's request, and we got into a fight.”

“How did only that part of the story escalate so quickly?” I asked.

“We were close in the past, but he's still Yoko's older brother, and she's the one who ruined Miori's reputation. Plus, Yoko had asked him to find Miori. I figured they didn't want her for any respectable reason, so I refused to help him. That's how it happened.”

“Ha. You must've turned him down with that cold tone of yours,” Tatsuya said, sounding amused.

“Yeah... I was in a bad mood, after all.”

“That must've rubbed him the wrong way.”

*Or maybe when he saw Reita acting different from usual, Hasegawa's older brother suspected he had a lead. I get the impression that guys like him would resort to drastic measures in situations like that (just my bias).*

“After we fought and cooled our heads, I explained the circumstances and resolved the misunderstanding. But we were stupid and got arrested by the police. My dad was furious he had to apologize to them, I couldn't go home, and I got suspended. I didn't think I had the right to be with you guys again... And there you have it.” Reita paused before adding in a mocking tone, “Aren't I a moron?”

If I had heard this story a little while ago, I might not have believed it. However, I now understood who the real Shiratori Reita was.

“Dude, how'd you end up hanging out with those guys, anyway?” Tatsuya

asked.

“Despite their appearances, they’re pretty nice. They just look scary. They accepted me into their group without asking any questions, even though I appeared out of the blue... Actually, they probably had the wrong idea.”

“Wrong idea?”

“Got your heart broken, yeah? I won’t pry... You can stay here until your heart heals,” Reita said, mimicking a voice I didn’t recognize. “They said that while bobbing their heads, with tears streaming down their faces. It wasn’t totally wrong, so I didn’t correct them.”

Tatsuya burst into laughter at that. “Hey, that was Sanada, wasn’t it?”

“You can tell? He’s always quick to jump to the wrong conclusion.”

*They’re talking about someone who went to the same middle school...*  
Watching the two of them get excited about a shared past I didn’t know about made me feel a bit left out.

“You met him at the underpass. He was the blond boy standing in the very front,” Reita explained to me.

“Oh, that guy.” I had a hazy recollection of him. *Not gonna lie, Hasegawa’s brother was so overpowering that I don’t really remember any of the other guys’ faces.*

“They’re not a bad bunch. The only reason we stopped hanging out in the past was because I chose to continue playing soccer. They didn’t want to cause me any trouble, so they distanced themselves.”

“Aren’t you speaking too highly of them? They’re just a bunch of dumbasses. I don’t like them. They bother other people, and they don’t think about their futures,” Tatsuya said.

“That’s unexpected coming from you, Tatsuya. I can’t believe *you’re* talking about bothering other people, or thinking about your future.”

“Hey, Reita. You wanna go? We can start round two right now.” Tatsuya cracked his knuckles in response to Reita’s sharp words.

“Say what you like, but you definitely weren’t thinking about the future right

after you entered Ryomei,” I pointed out.

Tatsuya considered that for a moment and then nodded. “That’s...true...”

“Ha ha! You’ve changed quite a lot,” Reita said.

We had met in the spring, and now it was already winter. People changed bit by bit. And as they did, their relationships changed too. With the passage of time, nothing can stay the same forever. So I hoped that change would be a good one for us.

“What will you do about your dad?” I asked.

“I haven’t thought about that yet. I guess...I’ll have to start from square one and talk to him. He and I both have problems. We need to face each other and work out a solution,” Reita said somberly as he straightened up. “I’ll be fine. Natsuki gave me a solid punch and snapped me out of it. I’m done running away.”

He grinned; it was a gesture to assuage our worries. It had been a long time since I’d seen him smile.

“What about soccer? Can you stay with the team?” Tatsuya asked.

“No idea. I don’t even know if we’re financially stable enough for me to keep playing... Besides, I was suspended because I got into a fight. I’m not sure if they’ll even want me anymore.”

*Regardless of what happened, there’s no doubt the soccer team’s reputation has been dragged through the mud. Reita will be in no position to object if they force him to quit the team. My heart isn’t happy about it, but my head understands the logic. It doesn’t matter to the soccer team what Reita goes through.*

*I can’t help him with anything, not with his dad or with the soccer team. Not everything in real life can be solved by doing your best. Some problems won’t go away no matter how much you struggle. And some of them are out of my realm. I can’t be like the heroes in manga and anime.*

“Reita, you can bounce ideas around with me. And if you want any help, you can ask me for anything.” *Still, I can help a friend in need.* I stood up and held



out my hand towards Reita.

“I’ll take you up on that, Natsuki.” He grabbed my hand and rose to his feet.

“Hey! Let’s have a rock-skipping contest!” Next thing I knew, Tatsuya was standing a ways away, near the edge of the river.

“Why rock skipping all of a sudden?” I questioned.

Reita smiled sardonically and shrugged. “It’s Tatsuya—he probably wanted to when he saw the river.”

It was dark out, and I couldn’t see the ground very well. We should’ve started heading home, but Tatsuya faced the river and threw a rock. I could barely make out its shape as it splashed across the water’s surface.

“Hell yeah! That’s five times! Hey, it’s your turn next,” he said.

“Tatsuya, you’re so energetic.” *My body hurts all over. I can’t chuck a rock...*

“What, you running away?” he jeered.

“That’s bold of you, Tatsuya. They used to call me the rock-skipping king, so you better not underestimate me,” Reita said with a snort, brimming with confidence.

“Rock-skipping king? You definitely got that title in middle school,” I quipped.

“Natsuki, stop griping and pick your rock. It won’t skip if it’s not flat,” Tatsuya said.

“You want me to fumble around in the dark searching for a suitable rock to skip?” *Come on, that’s too stupid. To begin with, rock skipping isn’t an activity for high schoolers. But... Oh well, days like this aren’t too bad sometimes.* Such thoughts ran through my head as I watched the two of them throw rocks into the river and taunt each other.

*Note: The rock-skipping contest ended with a score of seven skips for Reita, Tatsuya with six, and me bringing up the rear with four. Dammit!*

## Third Interlude

I was so anxious about the plan that I ended up going to the riverbed myself. When I arrived, Miori was sitting at the bottom of the stairs, and for some reason, she had me take a seat next to her. I was on pins and needles as I watched the two boys fight.

“Boys are so dumb,” Miori said, breaking the silence between us.

I gave her a sidelong glance. She wore a conflicted expression as she stared at the riverbed. At the end of her gaze were three boys, lying on the ground after the fight had ended. They peered up at the night sky, conversing about something.

“You know... I wouldn’t have expected to hear that from you,” I replied.

“Really?” Miori tilted her head with a puzzled look.

“If anything, you strike me as the type to consort with boys.”

“Oh... True, I guess I used to be like that.”

“And you’re different now?”

“Yeah, I could never go along with their current level of idiocy.” Though her words were cold, her tone was warm. “I was anxious that someone would get hurt, but... Look at them! They look happier after throwing some punches, *and* they’ve reconciled too. I’m so done with them.” She sighed. “Stupid of me to be seriously worried about them.”

*A fight between the boy she’s in love with and the boy she used to date. Not to mention, she’s a hostage, although in name only. Miori must have mixed feelings about this. I mean, the situation’s way too chaotic... I wonder how she feels right now.* Judging by the way she watched the boys as though she were looking at a dazzling light, I couldn’t even begin to imagine what was going through her head.

The three boys’ laughter rang through the air from where they lay on the

ground. It sounded like they were having a fun laugh together. Though it was too dark for me to see their faces, as long as Reita-kun's smile had returned, I would be wholeheartedly content. Not that I was in any position to wish for that, though.

"Hey, Miori..." I mustered up the courage to say her name.

"What's up?" She regarded me with an oddly tender gaze.

I didn't know how she could make such an expression when the person who had maliciously put her in a nasty spot at school was sitting right next to her. I wasn't sure what I should start with. In the end, the only words I could utter were this: "I'm sorry."

Any attempt to explain my actions would only be an excuse. I didn't think she would forgive me. If she asked me whether I'd apologized to make myself feel better, I wouldn't have been able to deny it. No matter how remorseful I felt, the crime I had committed wouldn't disappear.

But contrary to my expectations, Miori smiled and replied, "It's okay. I forgive you."

"Why? You shouldn't forgive me so readily after everything I did."

"No, it's okay. After all, you apologized to me. I can tell you mean it too. Besides, that rumor was my fault anyway."

*You're wrong. I spread a twisted version of the truth with evil intentions. Then I said mean things and dumped freezing cold water on you—I have no excuse.*

Miori should've known all that, but she repeated herself once more. "It's okay," she said. "Hasegawa, do you love Reita-kun?"

"Yes," I answered.

"Then it's a given you'd feel angry that I dated him half-heartedly and manipulated him."

"Sure, but I did something no one should ever do."

Miori jabbed me lightly in the shoulder.

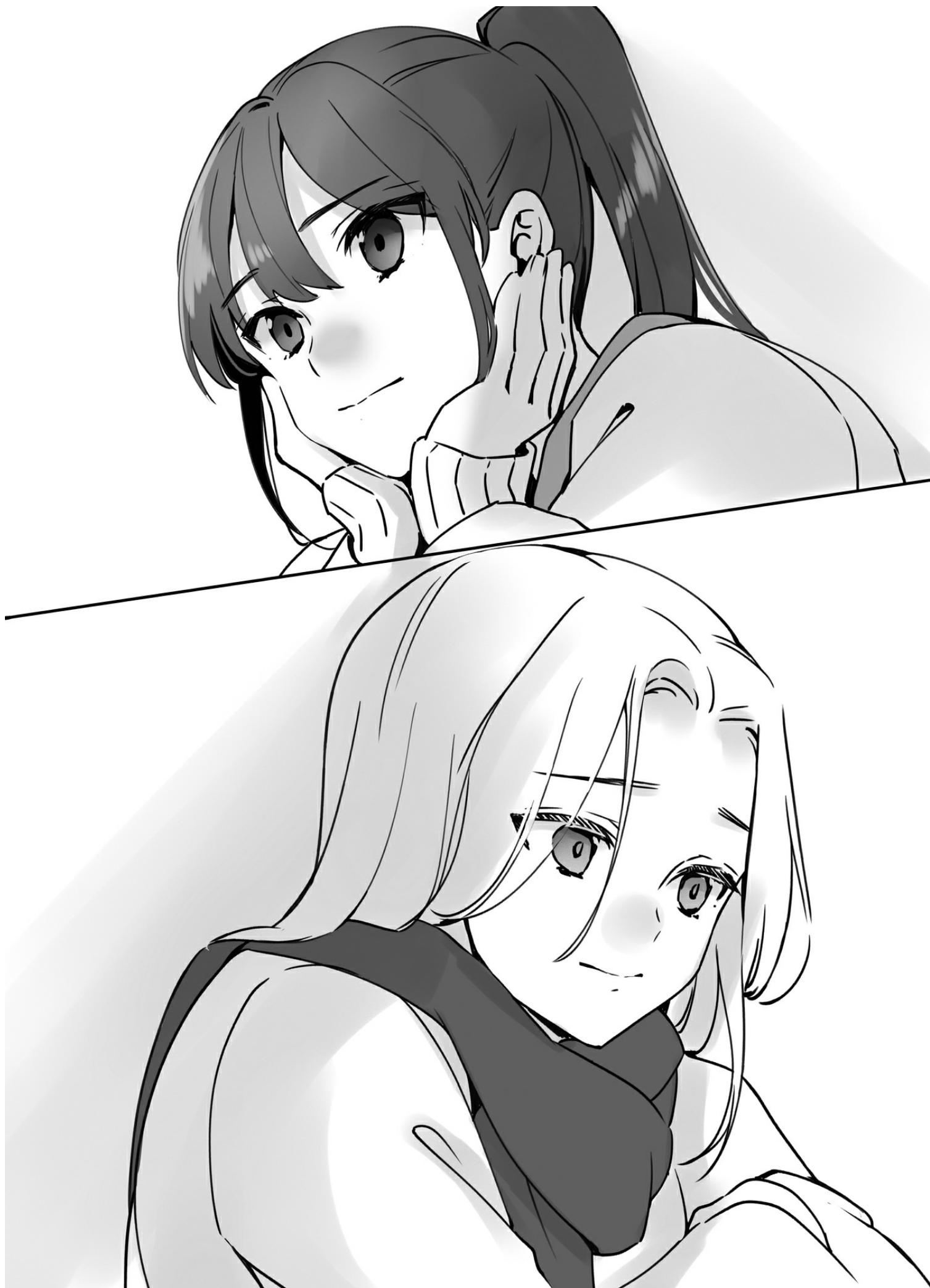
"Ow!"

“We’re even with this.”

*I’m no match for her. She’s being compassionate to someone like me because she doesn’t want me to beat myself up too much.*

“I know what it’s like to let guilt drive you over the edge. You should still reflect on what you did...but don’t torment yourself too much. I’d hate to lose a classmate.” The weight behind her words owed to the fact that it had been a recent experience for her.

“Right... Thank you.” Though I agreed with her, I couldn’t grant one part of Miori’s request. I had already reported my wrongdoing to the school. I would likely receive my punishment tomorrow.



Perhaps I would take Reita-kun's place as the suspended student. Considering how grave my crime had been, I might even be expelled or have to make a visit to the police. But I deserved that much, so I didn't care.

"Done talking?" Someone descended the stairs. I couldn't make out her face in the dark, but it was Hondo Serika's voice.

*Come to think of it, they mentioned Serika would be here, but I didn't see her... Was she giving us space so we could talk?*

"Serika, what were you doing?" Miori asked.

"Watching Natsuki and Reita fight gave me an idea for a killer song, so I drafted it up," she replied.

*I was completely off the mark. She's as enigmatic as ever.*

"Welp, looks like everything's wrapped up." Serika glanced at Reita-kun and the boys, and then swept her gaze over us. I had a feeling that if I asked her what "everything" encompassed, she wouldn't answer. *She really is enigmatic.*

"What are they doing?" Miori said, straining her eyes.

I turned towards the riverbed too. The boys had gotten up at some point and were now throwing something into the water. I could see faint ripples forming on the surface of the river.

"Are they skipping rocks?" I asked.

"What? That seems fun. I want to do it too!"

Serika began to run towards the boys, but Miori stopped her. "No, you're not supposed to join in. We're going home."

"You sure? Shouldn't we say something?"

"I'm sure. At times like this, it's best to leave the boys alone."

Miori had a point. Although they were only silhouettes in the darkness, their laughter reached our ears. The three of them were having the time of their lives. A smile inadvertently crept across my face as I watched them absentmindedly.

*It's baffling how they can be so excited when they're simply skipping rocks...*

*Still, I'm happy to see Reita-kun like that. Even if my love is never returned, I can be satisfied with just this.*

"What are you doing, Hasegawa?" called a voice from behind me.

Miori and Serika were looking in my direction. It was as if they were waiting for me.

"We're going home!"

The next thing I knew, my hand was being pulled along. Miori, grinning mischievously, looked like the moon shining in the night.

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After the rock-skipping contest with Natsuki and Tatsuya, it was late into the night, so we dispersed. I was walking home, determined to have a proper conversation with my father, without running away.

"Reita," someone said from behind me.

I turned around. "Oh, Koya." He held a can of coffee in each hand, and tossed one to me. "Don't tell me you were watching."

"Yep. Let's chat for a bit there." He pointed to the park up ahead.

I followed him obediently, and we sat down on a bench.

"That was a funny fight," Koya mused as he lifted the tab of his coffee can.

"What was funny about it? It was an awful display of skill," I said.

"It's not every day I get to see you shaken up so much."

*I can't argue. I didn't even think I would lose to Natsuki. It's true I pulled my punches so I wouldn't hurt him, but it's also true that he took advantage of my moment of weakness to land a solid blow.*

"Still, I didn't expect him to send a challenge letter. You don't see that much these days."

*If Koya doesn't see challenge letters much, the tradition must really be out of fashion...* "Natsuki's the kind of guy to pull stupid shenanigans like that with all seriousness."

“And who was the one who got bogged down by his stupid shenanigans?”

“I know. I lost.”

The feelings I’d kept hidden had been exposed by Natsuki’s earnestness. I couldn’t help but want to return to everyone once again. The moment those feelings welled up inside me, my defeat had been sealed.

“What a throwback. It’s just like the duel we had in middle school,” I remarked. When I had been debating whether I should rejoin the soccer team or not, Koya had suddenly challenged me to a fight.

“I couldn’t watch all your waffling. I figured it’d be faster to force you back. You couldn’t hide that you wanted to return when you were agonizing over it in the first place.”

My hesitance had shown in our duel. In the end, I’d lost to Koya because of that. I had been ejected from his gang and forced back to the soccer team. But I had been happy with it. It was hard to go back to the team after withdrawing once, but I had still wanted to play soccer with all my teammates.

“Koya, I’m grateful to you.” Strangely enough, my current situation resembled that one. Natsuki was light-years weaker than Koya, but he’d struck me with his words.

“Are you going back?”

“Yeah.” Though Koya didn’t specify where, I knew what he meant. “Thank you. You took me in when I had nowhere to go. You saved me.” I wasn’t thanking him for only the recent events, but also for what he had done for me in middle school. He gave me a place to belong when I was in trouble.

“We’re friends. Of course we help each other.” He thumped my back. Getting hit by his large hands hurt.

Koya took those who, for a variety of reasons, didn’t have a place to go under his wing and fostered a relationship where they all helped one another. Furthermore, once you were recognized as one of their own, the way they treated you didn’t change even after you left.

His gang had been formed by kids who were drawn to the way Koya operated.



For better or for worse, he could lead such a ragtag bunch because of his charisma.

“You fit in where you’re at now,” Koya said, indirectly implying that he and I were cut from different cloth.

I liked being friends with Koya and the boys. But I felt somewhat out of place with them. There were a handful of insignificant reasons, like our values, personalities, and mannerisms. Koya must’ve sensed my slight discomfort.

“But don’t forget: You can come back anytime. I don’t turn anyone away.”

“Yeah. Let’s hang out again.”

We downed the rest of our coffee and stood up. Koya turned away from me, raised his hand goodbye, and walked away.

## Chapter 4: Everyday Life Restored

Reita's suspension had ended, so he returned to school the next day. In his place, Hasegawa got suspended, but she was back after a day. Apparently, she had confessed everything she did to a teacher. *Huh, she turned herself in. She must actually feel bad.*

Hasegawa got off lightly with a one-day suspension because Miori spoke up for her. *Honestly, Miori is way too big a softy, as per usual. I think Hasegawa could've used a few more days of punishment. I don't really like her, after all...*

Because of the kerfuffle, there was quite an uproar surrounding us for about a week after Reita and Hasegawa came back, but things had more or less settled down now. Though there were still unsettling rumors flying around, we had always been an influential group. After we worked hard to gradually dispel the misunderstandings, there weren't any students who would publicly bad-mouth us. I didn't know how everyone truly felt on the inside, though.

At the very least, our classmates had been relieved to see Reita back. He was a popular guy, after all. It was also thanks to Miori posting the truth on Minsta. People were dubious at first, but once Reita came back, he endeavored to regain everyone's trust. He was certainly skilled at doing that.

On the other hand, in the class next door, Miori and Hasegawa had become friends for some reason, and started hanging out. Because of that, the separate girl cliques of their class were consolidating into one group.

*I have no idea what happened, but... Eh, it's a very Miori move. I think she's slowly reverting back to her normal self.*

"So, do you think you can go back to the soccer team?" I asked.

It was lunch break. Reita and I were on our way back to the classroom from the cafeteria.

"I'll manage. I can't thank everyone enough for forgiving me." Reita's tone oozed happiness.

*He really does love soccer.* “Good for you. What about the fees, did that work out too?”

“For now, yes... That night, I talked to my dad, and he started working again. I’m not really sure why, but when I told him I was also going through emotional shock due to being rejected by my girlfriend, he muttered something nonsensical along the lines of ‘I can’t lose to my own son.’ He’s full of motivation these days. He’s beyond my comprehension.” Reita smiled wryly. “But I don’t want to depend solely on my dad. I decided I should at least earn my own pocket money. So I started a part-time job... I only work two shifts every week at most, though. Soccer is my first and foremost priority, after all.”

*He has a lot on his plate, but it looks like things are going well for the time being.* “Where are you working?”

“I looked around, but there weren’t a lot of places that could accommodate my schedule. I ended up going with a karaoke place that Koya referred me to. You know, the one we went to in the spring.”

“Oh, that place,” I said. “Wait, does Hasegawa’s brother work there too?”

“Yeah. I heard the customers are often scared of him.”

*Well of course they would be... Is that place okay? Won’t they lose customers?*

Reita gleaned my questions from my face and added, “He can instantly shut up rowdy guests, so he’s handy to have around.”

“I see...” *So you can use him that way, huh. He’s like a bouncer.* “Are you going to keep hanging out with those guys?”

“I think so, in moderation. We’ve reconnected, and they’re not bad people. Sure, a lot of them are short-tempered, but I’m confident I can keep them in check. I’ll be sure not to cause any trouble for the soccer team.” He shot me a confident smile, one that suited him very well.

“Oh, Natsuki-kun! Reita-kun!” Hikari waved when she saw us enter the classroom. The usual crew had gathered around the seats near the window, chatting.

“What are you guys talking about?” I asked.

“We’re talking about how it’s almost winter break!” Uta answered, full of cheer.

*Oh yeah, we’re almost halfway through December. Winter break starts on the twenty-third.*

“Which means finals are right around the corner too,” Tatsuya said calmly.

“Ugh, Tatsu, why do you have to be such a wet blanket?!” Uta cried, flailing her whole body.

I was glad to see Uta back to her usual energetic self. It had only been a few days ago when she’d been eerily quiet, like an entirely different person.

“I have to; I’m worried about your grades,” he said.

“Don’t get all high and mighty just because your grades have gone up a little!”

*Man, it feels like we’ve got our everyday life back. How long has it been since we chatted in such a bright mood? The others must feel the same way, because they seem just as excited as me. It’s fun.*

“Sorry, but you and I aren’t in the same realm anymore. Do you understand? *Wakaru?*” Tatsuya taunted Uta in both English and Japanese.

“Grah!” she screamed.

Bantering aside, Tatsuya was right. He was actually near the top of our grade. In comparison, Uta was hovering around the bottom of the barrel, barely above literal last place.

“He’s right, though. Finals are next week. You better study hard,” Nanase said despondently, her eyes on the wall calendar posted in the back of the classroom.

“Reita, are you going to be okay? You’ve been scrambling around, what with everything that’s been going on,” I said.

“Don’t worry; I’ve been reviewing the lessons and prep material. Even if I didn’t, I could still score eighty points,” he replied.

*Oh, right. He’s fundamentally a prodigy.*

“Natsuki... Well, we’re not especially worried about you. You’re the top

student of the grade, after all.”

“Not sure about that. I’ve been slacking on my studies lately.” *Frankly, all I’ve been doing is exercising, working at Café Mares, and practicing the guitar. I mean, studying isn’t particularly fun...and I have the general gist of things.* “Hey, I can still rank within the top ten, probably.”

“Oh? You aren’t confident you can get the top score? In that case, perhaps I’ll help myself to first place this time. Humph,” Nanase said, goading me.

“But it’s not like you get any perks for staying in first place,” I said.

“Where’s your competitive spirit? Show some drive.” She poked me in the chest.

*Nanase’s rank is the closest to mine. She’s usually floating between second and ninth place.*

“Hey! I’ve been reviewing lately too!” Uta said sulkily.

*Now that she mentions it, Uta hasn’t been kicking up a fuss about forgetting to do her homework recently.* “Reeeally?”

“I’m positive I won’t fail any subjects! After all, I can’t play basketball if I fail!”

*It looks like everyone has grown up in one way or another. At the beginning of spring, Uta used to say, “I don’t know what I don’t know,” but now she’s actually studying... Ah, this old man is feeling touched.*

“By the way, Hikari, why did you clam up?” Nanase asked in a frightfully cold voice.

A certain someone’s shoulders began to tremble noticeably. I was, of course, referring to Hoshimiya Hikari-san, who was shrinking next to me.

“Um, I’m... I’m confident in Japanese!” Hikari answered, trying to cover up her panic.

“It would be an issue if an aspiring writer didn’t have confidence in her Japanese. What about the other subjects?” Nanase asked pointedly.

“W-World history and Japanese history will be okay... As for the rest...I don’t have...the slightest...”

“Hikari... Are you aware that your grades are falling?”

“Urgh...”

*Nanase is Hikari’s mom through and through. This is business as usual, what a classic scene. Though, Hikari’s grades have clearly been dropping...ever since she started dating me. Ah, well, uh... Yeah, it happens.*

“Haibara-kun. Do something about this nympho. It’s your obligation,” Nanase said.

“I-I’m not a horndog! I had a deadline for my novel... I’m just a little uncertain, that’s all. Yeah! I’ll start studying today. It’ll work out! For sure!” Hikari said as though she were trying to persuade herself, and nodded several times.

“I’ve been thinking this more frequently these days, but Hikari didn’t use to be this derpy, right?” I asked.

“You’re the one who made her that way,” Nanase replied immediately.

*No need to lay the blame on me so hard!*

“Huh?! You’ve been thinking that?!” Hikari cried out in shock.

*Crap, it just slipped out... I thought. Reita held his stomach as he cracked up. This guy... I just don’t get what tickles his funny bone sometimes. He claims stuff like, “I’m a prodigy, so my sensibilities might be different from regular people’s.” I’m gonna send him flying!*

My inner thoughts aside, Nanase continued to lecture Hikari with a serious expression. “If your grades drop too much, your dad might lose his temper.”

“Urgh... I know...”

*Yeah, that’s probably true. In the first place, didn’t Hikari promise her dad that she would raise her grades in exchange for him allowing her to pursue her dream of becoming an author? Forget about keeping the promise—she’s running in the complete opposite direction right now.*

“Want to have a study session, Hikari?” I asked. Writing novels wasn’t the only task that was eating up her time; I was also one of the distracting factors, so as Nanase said, I should take responsibility. I couldn’t let myself stand in the way of Hikari’s dream, after all.

“Yes, please.” Understanding her situation, she hung her head apologetically. And so, with five days left until finals, Hikari and I began studying together.

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Hikari and I met up after school.

“By the way, you’ll make the deadline for the novel contest, right?” I asked.

“Yeah. I submitted it a few days ago, so now it’s time to buckle down for our finals.” Hikari seemed motivated after reflecting on Nanase’s lecture.

*“Where should we go?” At first I thought the library would work, but I need to teach her the material. We should pick a place where it’s okay to be a little noisy.*

“Hmm... How about the café?” Her suggestion was the café we had visited over the summer. It was a shop on a backstreet of Takasaki with a pleasant atmosphere that was popular among those in the know.

“Welcome.”

“Hello, sir!” Hikari greeted the café owner, a seemingly middle-aged man, and then headed to a table near the window at her own discretion. She was a longtime customer who didn’t need to be guided to her seat, after all.

“This is where I always write my novels. I think I concentrate best here,” she explained.

*The coffee here is to die for, so I like this place. It’s on par with Café Mares.*  
“All right, what should we start with?”

“Don’t you have your own studying to do? How about you review your own stuff, and if I run into a part I don’t understand, I’ll ask you for help. Does that work?”

*“Sure thing.” I don’t mind doing more, but Hikari must feel bad being on the receiving end. She’s only requesting the bare minimum assistance. Oh well, I can take it easier that way, so I’m down.*

Hikari pulled out her notebook as soon as we ordered our coffee.

“Can I ask you something?” I began.

“Yeees?”

“What do you think is the actual reason your grades dropped?”

“Urgh...” She turned away sheepishly. “Our second semester midterms...overlapped with the deadline for a novel contest I wanted to enter...”

In our first semester, Hikari had ranked 49th during our midterms, and 67th on our finals. Our grade had about 240 kids, so she was in the top half of our year. However, her rank had plummeted to 151st place for our second semester’s midterms. She had only been slightly above Uta.

“But I still made sure to set time aside for my studies...”

“Then why?” I pressed.

Betraying her deep shame, Hikari’s cheeks flared scarlet. “It was right after we started going out... The next thing I knew, you were all I could think about. I’d look at our past RINE chats, toss my phone onto my bed...pick it up again... I’d go through that routine repeatedly, and I couldn’t focus on studying at all.”

That was about what I’d expected, but hearing it firsthand dealt a far more destructive blow. My cheeks felt hot. I didn’t need to look in the mirror to know that my face had turned bright red.

“R-Really...?” I mumbled.

“R-Really...” she parroted.

We sank into awkward silence. *Hey! We didn’t come here to flirt! Our goal today is to study! Stop acting like a pair of stupid lovebirds!*

Hikari took a deep breath, calmed her flushing cheeks, and said with a serious expression, “I know. I really do. I can’t tell papa that I’m going to keep pursuing my dream when my grades are dropping instead of rising. But I’m greedy, so...I want to give my dream, studying, and romance my all. I don’t want to give up on anything. That’s why I need to solve this issue, or else...”

“Did Sei-san say anything after he saw your midterm results?”

“No. He hasn’t mentioned it yet. But I’m sure he’ll say something if my grades stay low. And even if he doesn’t...I don’t want to be someone who goes back on



her promises. That's why I've got to give this my all," Hikari asserted once more, as though to convince herself.

*She must have it tough. Not only is she trying to keep up her writing and studies, she's also juggling her love life with me. When I lay it all out like that, I feel bad for burdening her too much.* "Hey, um, sorry..."

"Oh, I'm sorry! Natsuki-kun, it's not your fault! It's mine for having my head in the clouds. I'm the only person who'd say all this in earnest, huh? Ha ha ha..." she said apologetically as she fanned her face.

*To be honest, I'd be lying if I said I wasn't happy. I mean, Hikari was thinking about me that much.* "I'm the same... There are times when you're all I can think about and I can't focus on studying."

"R-Really? You do it too?"

"Yeah. But I still manage to keep my grades top of the class. So let's search for a way to overcome this challenge together."

*My girlfriend says she's going to do her best to face this problem. If that's what she wants, as her boyfriend, it's my duty to support her.*

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That being said, a concrete plan wouldn't come to us in the matter of moments, so we started by busying our hands. Despite my concern for Hikari, I proceeded with my own studies. She seemed to be in the zone at first, but after an hour had passed, she was visibly losing focus. Suddenly, she looked up, and her eyes locked with mine.

"Did you run into something you don't understand?" I asked.

"I'm okay for now, but I lost focus..." Hikari raised her arms high and stretched. It highlighted a part of her body that I felt like I shouldn't ogle too much, and I instinctively averted my gaze. "What do you do when that happens?"

"Hmm. I take a short break. I'll listen to music, check RINE... Oh, but if I grab a manga off my bookshelf, I can't stop reading, so I advise against that. I end up finishing the whole series, and then it's morning all of a sudden."

“Oh, I get that. Though, it’s novels in my case; next thing I know, I’ve finished the whole book!”

*I can imagine. I was amazed by how focused she was. Hikari tends to get absorbed in whatever she does. I’m sure she becomes even more engrossed when it’s something she’s actually interested in.*

Hikari spaced out at my face as such thoughts ran through my head.

“Wh-What is it?” I asked.

“Mm, recharging?”

“Recharging? Recharging what?”

“Natsuki-kun minerals.” Embarrassed by what came out of her own mouth, she covered her face.

*Ummm... Could you not say stuff if you’re going to feel shy about it? I’m taking damage over here too, you know? Again, we came here to study! This isn’t a date!*

“S-Sorry... I zoned out for a sec.”

*If you said that because you zoned out, doesn’t that mean you meant it? Oh, forget it. Let’s not think about it too deeply. It’s too much for me to handle!*

“O-Okay! Break’s over!” Hikari said in a flustered tone and then gripped her mechanical pencil once more.

She was currently reviewing math, her worst subject. Japanese, naturally, was her forte; she was relatively decent at the history subjects, and she wasn’t bad at English either. However, STEM subjects like math and physics were her Achilles’ heel.

When we became second-years, we would be able to choose between the humanities or sciences track. Hikari would likely take humanities, but she still needed to have a solid foundation in the basics. College entrance exams tested mathematics even if you were trying to get into a humanities department.

I’d gone to a STEM university after high school, so I wasn’t very familiar with testing into a humanities program, but it would still be beneficial to have a strong grasp on as many subjects as possible. Besides, the current goal was to

raise her grades.

“Hrrrgh...” Hikari growled, her face grim as she cradled her head.

“Need help?”

“I-I’m so close to understanding this!” Ultimately, she threw in the towel and flipped her textbook around to show me what she was stuck on. “Um, it’s this part...” She paused abruptly. “Actually... Could I sit over there? It’ll be easier if we’re next to each other.”

I thought for a moment. *Easier if we’re next to each other? Yeah, she’s right. I came here to tutor her, so I should make the environment as receptive to learning as possible. No objections here.*

*Right, the logic checks out perfectly. By no means am I doing this because I’m happier to have Hikari sit next to me. There’s absolutely no issue!*

I slid over and patted the spot beside me. “Come here.”

*Am I...gross or what? Think about it: “come here” is something only hot guys can get away with saying. I’m sorry for getting on my high horse.* I instantly fell into depression.

Hikari sat next to me with a little “Hup.”

Our arms brushed against each other. The place where we’d touched felt awfully tingly. *Hold on... Isn’t she too close? Sure, we’re next to each other, but I feel like we could use a teeny bit more personal space... Oh, it’s because she’s asking me for help.*

Compared to me, who was panicking on the inside, Hikari jabbed her pencil at the question she was struggling with. “Problem two. I looked at the solution, but I still don’t understand how they got this answer.”

“Ah, they didn’t show a calculation between these steps. So, here you...”

Getting tripped up by a textbook that omits steps or formulas is a common occurrence. I broke down the problem for Hikari from the beginning. *The authors of these books should seriously stop cutting corners just because they have a limited number of pages!*

“...and that’s how you get this. Does that make sense?” I looked at Hikari after

I'd finished my explanation.

For some reason, she was staring at me instead of her notebook. "Oh..."

Our faces were so close that our noses almost touched. Our eyes locked. I couldn't help being drawn in by her face—she was so beautiful it almost seemed like she was actually a sculpture.

"S-Sorry! Um, thanks!" she said, hastily averting her eyes.

*That was an adorable gesture...but did she pay attention to what I said?* "Hikari?" I shot her a listless gaze.

"S-Sorry... I couldn't help staring at your face..." She slapped her cheeks, trying to pump herself up.

"If you can't concentrate when I'm around, we should call off any future study sessions." Though her cuteness made my face want to melt into a silly smile, I made an effort to keep my tone frigid.

She paused in thought for a few seconds and then shook her head. "I think I focus better when you're here."

*Are you serious?* I wanted to say, but I let her continue.

"Because I feel more secure when you're next to me."

*Taken from another angle, that means she feels insecure when I'm not with her. Looking back on my actions, I can think of a lot of reasons she'd feel that way. If she can't concentrate on studying because of that unease...does that mean it's my fault?* "Sorry."

"I... I told you! It's not your fault!" She shook her head vigorously, but I still felt the need to reflect on myself.

*I'm her boyfriend—I need to act in a way that'll make her feel secure.* "Hey, Hikari?"

"Y-Yes? What's wrong?"

"Hold out your hand for a sec."

Hikari seemed puzzled, but she obeyed and lifted her hand. I wrapped my hands around hers. Taken aback, she froze.

“N-N-N-Natsuki-kun?”

“It’ll be all right.” I looked her in the eyes and enunciated each word clearly and carefully so that they would reach her. “I’ll be by your side forever. So please don’t worry.”

Considering the time, place, and occasion, I couldn’t hug her. So instead, I trusted that holding her hand would convey my feelings to her. Hikari blinked a few times and then giggled.

“Could you not laugh?” *I’ll have you know I was being super serious!*

“S-Sorry...but it’s because I’m happy.” She squeezed me back as though she were confirming the feel of my hand. “Yeah... I believe you. And, um... I’m sorry for being an annoying girlfriend.”



“What are you saying? It’s cuter if you’re a little annoying,” I responded wholeheartedly.

Hikari’s eyes narrowed with reproach. “So you agree that I’m being annoying.”

“Weeell... You might be acting a tiny bit annoying.” Normally I would never say this to her even if I had thought it, but I deliberately told her how I felt.

She laughed, gently let go of my hands, and grasped her pencil once more. “You know, I think I can really work hard now.”

True to her fired-up words, Hikari displayed an astounding level of concentration. It lasted not only that day, but the next day, the day after that, and all the following days. As I had thought, once her switch was flipped, she could keep it up for ages.

In the end, the flirting we did under the pretext of studying was limited to the first day. Though studying was all we did for the remaining days, I was on cloud nine simply spending time with Hikari.

She maintained that level of concentration, and we plunged into our finals. The difficulty was so-so; my answers were nearly perfect. All the studying I did with Hikari had inadvertently raised my own academic proficiency.

“How did it go?” I asked her after our tests.

A satisfied smile spread across her face. “I think I did pretty well! It’s all thanks to you!”

The rest of our group gathered around our desks one after another. I was relieved to see that none of them looked down in the dumps.

“Evidently, you successfully fulfilled your role.” Nanase smiled at me.

“Hope so, but we won’t know for sure until the results are out,” I replied.

“Hikari wouldn’t make that expression if she weren’t exceptionally confident.”

*Really now? Figures Nanase would know her better than me.* “How do you guys think you did?”

The first to reply was Uta, who wore a smug expression that brimmed with

confidence. “Perfectly! I definitely didn’t fail!”

“Uta, you’re the only one who would use the word perfect to mean that,” Reita ruthlessly pointed out with a shrug. “It was about the same as usual for me. What about you, Tatsuya?”

“Who knows. I can’t say anything until the scores are out.”

“Ah! Tatsu only gets vague like this when he definitely crushed something!”

“Shut up. Natsuki, what about you?”

*He blatantly threw the ball to me...* “Eh, probably got first place.”

“That may not be the case this time.” Nanase smiled boldly.

*She looks pretty confident.* “I can’t wait to see the results, then.”

After that short back-and-forth, we dispersed for the day. Though school ended in the morning since it was a testing day, the sporty trio jumped right back into their club activities. Nanase also disappeared to her piano lessons, leaving Hikari and me behind.

The literature club didn’t meet that often from the get-go, after all. They wouldn’t restart their activities until tomorrow. I didn’t have work scheduled today, and band practice with Serika and the others resumed tomorrow. In short, both of us were completely free today.

“Well... See you later,” Hikari said, staring at me with twinkling eyes.

*Don’t you think you’re being too obvious that you want me to invite you out?*

“Wanna grab lunch?”

“Yeah!”

The two of us began walking out. Freed from finals, Hikari skipped while humming a little tune.

“You’re in a good mood,” I remarked.

“Of course I am! I’ve been liberated from studying!”

“If you plan on keeping your promise to Sei-san, you better continue studying consistently.”



Her cheeks puffed up into a pout. “Ugh, I know! But I can take it easy just for today,” she complained.

*That’s fair, but when someone as attractive as Hikari is overtly elated like this, she stands out a lot. This is specifically an issue because I feel a lot of dark gazes being directed at me. We better leave the school fast, or else...*

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Hikari and I left the school and headed to the station. After deliberating over where we should eat lunch, we decided to go to the McD’s in front of the station. Just because finals had ended, that didn’t mean we had the funds to splurge. *We’re still high schoolers, after all. Chatting at McD’s suits us just fine.*

I ordered a Big Mac meal while Hikari had a bacon and lettuce burger meal, and then we secured a table for two. It was the middle of the day on a weekday, so the restaurant was relatively empty and comfortable to hang out in.

“This is tasty!” Hikari ate her hamburger with such a huge smile that it put a grin on my face too.

*McD’s burgers are consistently delicious. When I was in college, there was a period of time when my weekday meal rotation was McD’s, Matsuya, ramen, Hidakaya, and McD’s again. Start with McD’s and finish with McD’s. Although, one thing led to another, and I got into cooking and stopped eating fast food in the end.*

“We’re done with tests, and winter break is right around the corner!”

“Yeah,” I replied. Today was December twentieth. Winter break would begin in three days, on the twenty-third.

“Which means... It’s almost Christmas, huh.”

Hikari’s casual comment made my mind go completely blank. Why? Because I had totally forgotten about that holiday.

“I’d like to spend it with you, Natsuki-kun...” She made such an adorable remark while she sent glances my way, her cheeks rosy.

I, on the other hand, was shocked that I had completely forgotten such an

important youth event. *Between the Miori case, Reita mess, and my study sessions with Hikari, there's been one thing after another taking up all of my brain space. I didn't think about what was coming up on the calendar...*

*A Christmas date with your girlfriend is said to contain a super high concentration of vitamin youth (according to me); it's at the top of the top! There's no point in my Rainbow-Colored Youth Plan if I forget about this event!*

"Natsuki-kun...?" Hikari questioned apprehensively.

I rushed to react. "Y-Yeah! I don't have any plans either! Let's spend it together!"

She showed me a relieved smile. *Hikari seems excited too, so I better make a plan pronto.*

"Natsuki-kun, is there anything you want to do?"

"Sorry... I haven't thought about it yet," I admitted downheartedly.

"That's nothing to apologize for," she said in a comforting tone.

*What do people even do on a Christmas date? It's a special day, so I'd like for it to stand apart from our normal dates... But what does that entail? I already bend over backwards when I plan our regular dates, so even if this one is supposed to be special, I'm honestly not sure what to do. I want to make Hikari happy, but I sorely lack experience.*

"I'll brainstorm too, okay?" she said.

Our talk about Christmas ended there. We spent the rest of our time chatting about unrelated things, and then left McD's.

"Want to do a little shopping?" I suggested, but Hikari seemed sleepy, so we split ways. *She's been studying nonstop day after day; of course she'd be exhausted. There's no helping it.*

*Now the issue at hand is the plan for our Christmas date. Hikari's going to think about it too, but relying on her would make me pathetic as a man. Although I still have four days left, that also means I only have four days left. Think about it: I still need to make reservations—I've got a feeling that I'm already screwed. Christmas is the one day in December that's guaranteed to*

*book up fast. Well, lamenting over it isn't going to do anything. I'll just have to put my thinking cap on now. In times like this, I used to ask Miori for help, but...*

"No, I need to think on my own."

*There are some things that never change; there are some things that do change. Among those, there are some things that must change. And surely this is one of those things.*

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*The day before winter break, December twenty-second.*

We all got our test results back, and the rankings were posted in the hallway. Obviously, the first to come into my sight was the top rank.

1st—Haibara Natsuki

2nd—Nanase Yuino

I had won by only a two-point difference. *That was closer than I thought. I probably would've lost if I hadn't spent all that time studying with Hikari.*

Nanase uncharacteristically put her frustrations on full display. "Tch... Kill me."

"Sounds like something a princess knight would say," I retorted without thinking.

She tilted her head in confusion. "What does that mean?"



*I never would've imagined there'd be a person who'd say that line outside of a book...* I scanned down the poster. Only the top fifty students were publicized. My friends had landed the following ranks.

12th—Motomiya Miori

15th—Nagiura Tatsuya

19th—Shiratori Reita

26th—Hoshimiya Hikari

35th—Hondo Serika

44th—Shinohara Mei

*Holy smokes, Tatsuya's rank is crazy high! And compared to our last exams, Hikari overtook more than a hundred people! She said she did pretty well, but I didn't think she'd break into the top thirty. I have a feeling she didn't stop after our study sessions; she must've hit the books hard at home too.*

"Welp, that seems about right," Reita murmured, calm to the bitter end.

"Ah! That's me! I'm up there!" Hikari exclaimed with open delight.

The contrast between both of their attitudes was huge.

"Fifteenth place, huh..." Tatsuya scratched his head, his expression indecipherable.

*Looks like he's got his sights set high.*

They weren't present, but Miori's, Serika's, and Mei's names were listed as well. *Miori's grades have always been excellent, but Serika and Mei are up there too. I'm glad there's a low risk of our band practice being suspended because of supplementary lessons. I dunno about Yamano, though.*

"Everyone's gotten smarter..." I murmured.

Uta, the lone member of our group who wasn't in the top fifty, seemed conflicted.

“111th place!”

We finally found out how Uta had performed later when our homeroom teacher returned her test papers and announced our remaining classmates’ ranks. She’d placed lower than the rest of us, but she was above average. Of course, she wasn’t in danger of failing either.

“Uta, you’ve grown too,” I remarked.

“Not at all compared to Tatsu and Hikarin, though,” she replied.

The air of our entire classroom was restless because winter break would begin tomorrow.

“It’s almost Christmas, huh?” The comment spilled out of her mouth by accident. An expression shouting, “Crap,” flashed across her face for a split second before she replaced it with a smile. “Meh, we’ve got practice anyway! I can’t believe they don’t give us a break on Christmas!”

I smiled back so her efforts wouldn’t go to waste. “That’s rough. Do your best—I’m rooting for you.” I knew Uta was pouring all her zeal into basketball right now, so I meant every word from the bottom of my heart.

“Thanks,” she responded hesitantly. “What are you going to do? Having a date with Hikarin?”

I had no intention of lying to her and replied with honesty. “Yeah, that’s the plan.”

She slapped my back with a loud smack. “Then you better do your best too! Don’t disappoint her!”

“I know already. I thought of a plan while discussing it with Hikari.”

*I won’t claim it’s perfect, but I’m pretty confident... I rejected all sorts of feelings and swore to make Hikari happy. So even if I’m inexperienced, I’ll put in every effort. I’ll fulfill my duties as her boyfriend with everything I’ve got.*

*All so she’ll be glad she fell in love with me.*

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*The twenty-third.*

I had band practice on the first day of winter break. Serika kept frowning slightly because Mei and I were fidgeting nonstop. *I'm sorry!*

"Mei, what are you doing for Christmas?" I asked.

"I considered all sorts of options, but isn't it too crowded during Christmas? My girlfriend and I don't like walking in crowds, so we decided to have a pleasant, relaxing day at my home," he replied.

"Ah, that sounds nice."

"Right?! I ordered pizza and cake for us in advance!"

*It's a house date with a special holiday vibe to it. This way, they can canoodle all they like without worrying about other people watching them, which is nice.*

"Oooh, Shinohara-senpai... How far are you planning to go?" Yamano cut in, smirking mischievously.

"H-How far? I'll have you know that I'm not planning anything in particular!"

"Reeeally? You don't plan on doing anything? Are you suuure about that? What if your girlfriend musters up the courage and comes on to you? She might think you're a lousy guy if you don't respond, you know?"

"W-Well, I..." Mei's face went bright red, and he turned to stone, likely from imagining that situation playing out.

"Just kidding! That was a joke. Everyone moves at their own pace." Yamano pulled the reins in, realizing she'd gone too far with her teasing. Instead, she turned her attention to me. "Senpai, what about you? Going out tomorrow? Or the day after?"

"We're going out tomorrow. Hikari's spending the day after with her family." *So in more precise terms, we're actually having a Christmas Eve date.*

"What's your plan?" she asked.

"We came up with a bunch of ideas, but we settled on checking out the Christmas lights."

During the winter season, the Gunma Flower Park set up a light display. There were other places that hosted their own too, but the Flower Park had the

biggest one within the prefecture. Above all, it wasn't too far from where we lived. It was located at the foot of a mountain so it would be difficult to get to, but the trip would be worth it. My parents had taken me there when I was a child, and even though that was a distant memory now, I still remembered the lights being breathtakingly beautiful.

"Hoo? Sounds nice! That'll be Minstaworthy!"

"I believe Hikari likes that sort of stuff," I said.

"But isn't that kinda far away? Plus it'll be freezing!"

"Can't do a thing about the cold. It'll be chilly no matter where we go. We'll have to stay indoors if it's too unbearable."

"Well, that's part of why we chose to have an at-home date," Mei added.

"It's Christmas—it's the perfect time for a longer trip," I said defensively. *Hikari had a positive reaction when I suggested the Christmas lights. I don't think she was faking it. I already reserved a place for dinner, and I have a present ready too. I've completed all the preliminary tasks that I could do in advance. All that's left is to carry out the plan tomorrow.*

"Enjoy yourselves," Serika said.

"Roger that. What about you, Serika, any plans?" I asked.

"I'm going to practice with Saya. Same as usual."

Yamano smacked her ride cymbal. "While you two are obsessing over romance, we'll be improving!"

"Sorry. I'll be here on the twenty-fifth to make up for it," I said.

"You better! I won't let you off if you oversleep after having a passionate night!"

I karate chopped Yamano in the head to silence her before she could make any more inane statements. "You think relationships progress that easily?" I muttered. *We haven't even kissed yet! Hikari has a curfew too, so there's no chance we spend a passionate night together. None at all, got it? Unfortunately. Oh no, I'm not disappointed about that in the slightest bit, okay? No, I'm not putting up a tough front.*



“Anywho, this is a topic change, but everything was solved, right?” Yamano asked. She didn’t specify, but I knew she was talking about what had happened with Miori and Reita. “From an outsider’s POV, the situation’s so complicated that I can’t tell left from right, but all of a sudden it feels like it’s back to good. And apparently Miori-senpai and Hasegawa-senpai are friends now.”

“I don’t know why they’re friends now either, but everything was indeed settled,” I replied. *I believe Reita’s still carrying something on his shoulders that’s unresolved, if I were to give the full picture, but that’s info other people don’t need to know.*

“I’ve always thought the two of them could have chemistry. Both of them are very outspoken,” Serika said in reference to Miori and Hasegawa.

“Give it to me straight, Serika. What do you think about those two?” I asked.

“It’s better they get along than be at each other’s throats.”

*Well of course it is. Serika must especially be sick of sitting in a tense class atmosphere.*

“So Hondo-san can have a reasonable opinion too,” Mei remarked with pure honesty.

“Don’t you think you’re being rude?!” I quipped.

Serika wordlessly pressed her fists against Mei’s temples and began grinding them against him.

“Ow, ow! Uncle!” he cried.

“You reap what you sow. Serika-senpai is surprisingly sensitive, you know?” Yamano said.

*That’s definitely not true, I thought, but I decided to keep my mouth shut. That looks painful.*

Serika clapped her hands. “Okay, no playing around. Let’s resume practice.”

She left Mei—who was clutching his temples in pain—in her wake. *Talk about brutal.*

\*\*\*

And so came December twenty-fourth, Christmas Eve. I hadn't slept much the night before. I was acting like a kid worked up for a school field trip, but I couldn't help myself. I was a mix of excited and anxious. In a word, I was nervous.

*I don't get nervous for our normal dates anymore, but special days like this are different. I can't mess up. Urgh, my stomach hurts...*

I had picked out my clothes yesterday so I wouldn't be indecisive the day of. Since we would be looking at the holiday lights outside, I had prioritized warmth above all and took the hit to being fashionable.

I wore a HeatTech shirt under a down jacket and topped it off with a scarf. I was a little too toasty right now, but it had to be done. I double-checked my belongings: smartphone, wallet, key case, portable battery, hand warmers, and Hikari's present. *All right, everything's here. Better head out now.*

"Oh! Onii-chan, going on a date?"

"Yeah. Tell mom I don't need dinner."

"Good luck! You better treat Hoshimiya-senpai well!"

With my younger sister cheering me on, I left the house.

*It's cold.* My breath was white. The sole part of my face that was exposed to the air was freezing. The high for today was supposed to be six degrees Celsius. It was bone-chilling weather, but the forecast had predicted a clear day.

We'd agreed to meet at 1 p.m., after we'd both eaten lunch at home. I received a message from Hikari that said, "I'm on my way!"

"I just left too," I replied.

The train swayed back and forth for thirty minutes, and then I was out through the ticket gates. She was already waiting for me; I didn't even need to search for her. Hoshimiya Hikari was the most eye-catching, beautiful girl at the station.

"Natsuki-kun!" Her face lit up when she spotted me, and then she ran over.

Littered around were some people stealing glances at her. They'd been searching for the right time to approach her, but scattered when they realized

she was waiting on a guy. *I'm glad I came a bit earlier.*

"Hikari, you're here early. You've still got thirty minutes."

"I was so excited that I finished my lunch with papa in five minutes!"

*Man, I feel bad for Sei-san... Plus, if he knows that she left him for a date, I'm scared he's gonna hold a grudge against me over that.*

"You don't need to worry about papa, you know?"

"Let's get going, then," I said after a small pause. The two of us set off. "You said there were several places you wanted to go, right?"

"Yeah! Let me think. It was..." Hikari named a few clothing stores. It was the same list of places she'd mentioned prior, so we would be able to walk the route that I had already planned. "There sure are a lot of people, huh."

"Yeah, it's Christmas Eve, after all."

Left, right—no matter which direction I looked, there were couples everywhere. It was the sort of sight that would've made me reflexively scowl in the past, but when I thought about how I was one of the pairs in that scene now, it gave me mixed feelings.

"Want to...hold hands?" Hikari asked timidly. I nodded and took hers.

"Natsuki-kun, your hand's cold."

"They say people with cold hands have warm hearts."

"Where'd you hear that superstition from?" She giggled.

I squeezed her hand, ascertaining its feel. The heat emanating through her skin warmed me. *I'm sorry my hands are so cold...*

*The plan is to spend the afternoon browsing shopping malls near the station. We should depart for the light display around 4 p.m. It'll take about an hour to get there, so we'll arrive at the park around five. It should be pitch-black outside by then. That would be perfect, since lights aren't much to look at when it's still bright out. If I remember correctly, their business hours are from sunset to 9 p.m.*

"Oh, this is cute!" Hikari exclaimed.

“Why don’t you try it on? Whoa, there’s a line out the fitting room.”

“Well, it *is* Christmas Eve. It’s unavoidable.”

*At any rate, it’s packed here. Simply walking around is a struggle. Figures, window shopping on Christmas Eve is impossible.*

Hikari seemed to pick up on my thoughts, because she leaned against me and smiled. “Let’s learn about things like this step-by-step together.”

I felt a little better. “Yeah, that’s true. We’re both romance newbies, after all,” I murmured.

She nodded. “If anything, I’m the one who suggested we shop until nighttime, so you shouldn’t be beating yourself up. Besides, even if we go off script, isn’t it fine as long as we’re having fun?”

“Okay, then want to go to a café? I’m a little tired.”

“Me too, I’m bushed. Let’s check out the other stores some other time.” She grinned wryly.

*I’ve built up my stamina, and I’m tired—Hikari must be even more exhausted. Navigating a crowd is way more draining than I anticipated... I was so caught up in thinking about the plan I devised that I didn’t pay attention to her condition.*

“Natsuki-kun, you know I enjoy just being with you, right?”

Conversely, Hikari was paying close attention to me. She was concerned for me, and gave my hand a small squeeze; I could tell she meant those words wholeheartedly.

“Don’t overthink just because it’s Christmas Eve. You won’t be able to have fun like that, right? I don’t need a special holiday—I’m plenty happy spending time with you as usual.”

“Hikari...”

“Who am I kidding? Am I reading too deep?”

“No, I appreciate it, really.” *Sometimes Hikari is so good at reading people that it’s scary. Her observation skills and deductive abilities are top-notch. Is that the power of an aspiring author?*

The café was, unsurprisingly, jam-packed, but luckily our wait to be seated wasn't long. I sat across from Hikari and ordered a coffee. She splurged a little and got a parfait.

"I have to refill the energy I lost!" she exclaimed, beaming widely.

"By the way, did you tell Sei-san about your test results?" I asked.

"Yep. He didn't praise me, though. He just said it was passable." She smiled bitterly this time, a spoonful of parfait in her mouth.

*That sounds just like him.*

"Natsuki-kun, what about you? You're always ranked number one; does your dad ever praise you?"

"Nah, my dad works in another city, so he rarely comes home."

"Oh, I see. What about your mom?"

"She used to lay on the praise, but lately her reactions have been weak."

"What? But it's impressive that you've maintained top rank!"

"Apparently it'll go to my head if she praises me too much, so she keeps it in moderation."

"Hmm... I think I get what she means."

"You do?!"

"For someone who usually has low self-esteem, you get weirdly smug when praised."

*Don't you think you're being too harsh there?* "Urgh... I never thought my girlfriend could be so mean..." I said sullenly.

"S-Sorry, sorry!" she apologized frantically. "Some things are best left unsaid, huh."

"That's not much of a follow-up," I said, pouting.

Hikari held out a spoonful of her parfait to my face. "Here, I'll give you some of my parfait. Cheer up!"

*Only a five-year-old would cheer up from eating a bit of dessert...* "I won't fall

for that... You darn self-proclaimed school idol with maxed out self-esteem..."

"Stop bringing up that joke... It's super embarrassing."

Though her face had flushed red, she didn't withdraw her hand, so I took a bite. *Mm. It's sweet but not too sweet, delicious. Wait, wasn't that an indirect kiss?* Hikari didn't seem to mind, and continued eating her parfait with relish. *It's possible she cares on the inside, but she's pretending like she doesn't... Aha, her ears are a little pink. Let's not point that out. She wants to act indifferent, after all.*

Hikari's eyes veered towards the window, and she suddenly said, "Oh. Isn't that Kanata-chan over there?"

I followed her gaze to see Fujiwara and Hino walking together outside. Fujiwara clung tightly to him, her arms wrapped around his. *Whoa, that's some PDA...*

"I knew they were going out, but... W-Wow." A faint blush dusted Hikari's cheeks as she watched them with great curiosity. "So that's what Kanata-chan is like when she's alone with Hino-kun..."

"Unexpected, isn't it? She's normally the levelheaded one that unifies our class." *Sometimes she even lectures Hino for being careless in front of everyone.*

"Did you know about this side of her?"

"I've seen them like this before." *If I remember correctly, that was during the Tanabata festival. Meaning I was with Uta at the time. That was already half a year ago, huh. It feels a little nostalgic.*

"You look like you're thinking about another girl." Hikari studied me closely, not bothering to hide the displeasure in her expression.

*How did you know? Are you psychic?* It wouldn't be good to keep quiet, so I explained myself honestly. "It's not like that. When I saw them before, I was at the Tanabata festival with Uta."

"Ohhh, that time. I tried not to think about it too hard, but I actually felt really conflicted..."

"Conflicted? Why?"

“The boy I was into was going to the Tanabata festival with my friend, just the two of them... I was a ball of nerves. Although, I didn’t want to admit I felt that way about you at the time.” As she recalled the past, Hikari took a sip of her coffee with a faraway look in her eyes. “Natsuki-kun. Back then, you actually liked Uta-chan more than me, didn’t you?”

*She went straight for the throat! I almost spat out my coffee.* “That...might be true. I hadn’t made a decision at the time.”

*Thinking back now, I might have liked Hikari back then. But from her perspective, I agreed to go to the Tanabata festival alone with Uta, so she must’ve been quite shaken. Hikari would’ve known that people would think Uta and I were a couple.*

“But once summer had passed and it became autumn, I got the feeling that you liked me more. That’s why you chose me.” Hikari spoke in a matter-of-fact tone, as though she were merely stating the truth.

*She’s not wrong. I did choose her—Hoshimiya Hikari—after all.*

“But Natsuki-kun... I only recently noticed. There’s another immense presence inside your heart.”

The air shifted. The formerly sweet romantic atmosphere chilled over. Hikari was like a great detective who would appear in a mystery novel. And I felt like a criminal whose crimes were being exposed.

“Those affections are greater than what you feel for me... Natsuki-kun, you love Miori-chan.”

Each word came out with such conviction that I couldn’t respond. I had resolved to stick to this lie, but I also wanted to be honest and faithful to Hikari. Silence was the only choice I could make.

“I know. You can’t admit it.” She gave me a forlorn smile. I hadn’t wanted to make her feel that way. The moment I put that expression on her face, I had lost the right to be her boyfriend. “Sorry... I didn’t plan to bring this up today.”

I had been vaguely aware of this. Hikari excelled at understanding people’s inner workings, and I had been causing her anxiety. Not to be vain, but I was the person Hikari observed the closest. In that case, it would’ve been stranger if she

hadn't picked up on my true feelings. However, she had pretended not to see it. I had prayed she wouldn't notice.

"It's just, Natsuki-kun, I wanted you to know something."

"What?"

"I wanted you to know how much I love the person named Haibara Natsuki."

I blinked at her—I didn't understand the intent behind her words.

She smiled. "It's okay. It doesn't matter if there are other girls you like. After all, I'm your girlfriend right now. I don't intend to relinquish this spot...because I'm at my happiest here."

That was a powerful statement. She must have been thinking about it ever since she'd realized what lay deep within my heart. And that was the answer Hikari had provided.

"So you don't need to say anything now. I just wanted to make my stance clear." She reached her hand across the table and tapped my chest with her fist. "Just you wait. It's only a matter of time before I make sure I'm the only one in your heart."

*I'm no match for her...and I also feel pathetic for not being able to control my feelings. No matter how hard I try to steer them with logic, my feelings won't lie. That's why I need to do the lying, but that'll only lead to my lie being exposed. By Reita and by Hikari too. But no matter what, I must not let Miori find out.*

"We should get going. It's starting to get dark outside," Hikari said.

We did as she suggested and left the café. I paid the bill. She insisted we split it, but I convinced her to let me act cool for today. *I'm already uncool, though...*

Now that it was evening, there were even more people. We weaved through the congested station and boarded a train. As though her somber aura from moments ago was a figment of my imagination, Hikari chatted about silly things. I couldn't discern what emotions lay hidden beneath her smile.

*Everyone is so sharp, and yet I'm always the dull one. This may be my second round of life, but it doesn't change my nature.*

We got off at Ogo Station and took a bus to Gunma Flower Park. Practically all



the people on the bus were couples. However, it still wasn't overcrowded.

*Given how hard it is to get to this place, there aren't a lot of people who'd travel by bus. I would take a car if I could. I used to have a driver's license, after all. Though, I'm unlicensed now, so I'm not allowed to drive...*

"It's been a while since I've ridden a bus." Hikari seemed to be enjoying herself the whole time. It was as though she was finding real pleasure in such a cumbersome date.

After five minutes of vibrating on the bus, we exited at our destination. The sky was completely dark by then. Some scattered streetlamps lit up our surroundings. It was even colder now that it was nighttime. The parking lot was teeming with cars. As I'd expected, many people had come here by car. Every now and then, someone would exclaim, "It's cold!"

We bought our tickets and entered the park hand in hand.

"Wow..."

Countless brilliant, sparkling lights filled our vision.

"Let's go! Hurry!" Hikari said—louder than she'd meant to—and tugged my hand.

"Aren't you cold?" I asked.

"I am, but I can handle it if it means I get to see such a gorgeous sight."

"I have hand warmers."

"Then don't mind if I do!" She snatched up a hand warmer and broke the seal.

I tore my eyes away from my excited girlfriend and scanned the park. There was a decent number of people, but it didn't feel crowded since the park was spacious. There were mostly couples walking around, but I spotted a family every once in a while.

"It's so pretty!" Hikari exclaimed.

Our route had been decided in advance. We walked among the lights, our fingers intertwined.

"Yeah... It really is pretty."

There was trendy music playing in the background, and the colors of the lights changed to match its rhythm. The old me lurking in the back of my mind whispered, “They’re just light bulbs,” but I could refute him now. Because Hikari was with me, the view appeared more radiant.

*And that’s why it’s beautiful.*

“Hey, Natsuki-kun.” Hikari pulled on my hand, a stunning smile spread across her face. We were walking on a path beneath illuminated arches. “I’m reeeally happy right now!”

“Yeah, me too.”

We smiled at each other.

Moments later, Hikari stopped at the highest point in the park. “Let’s take a picture!”

*We’ll be able to capture a sweeping view of the lights from here.*

“Actually... I brought a selfie stick!” She fished it out of her bag. She then attached her phone to the selfie stick and drew close to me. “Come on, smile!”

I heard the click of her camera. We’d taken a charming photo of the two of us smiling, with colorful, iridescent lights as our background. She showed me her phone.

*Hikari’s really good at taking photos, huh. “Oooh, you took a nice one.”*

“Yeah, it’s beautiful. Mm-hmm... It’s a nice photo.” She nodded to herself as she gazed at her phone.

After that, we enjoyed looking at light displays in all sorts of shapes as we leisurely strolled around the park. I wanted my time with her to last forever. I wanted to see more magical vistas with Hikari, remaining right by her side. However, the hands of the clock always tick forward. There’s no stopping them. Returning seven years into the past was a miracle that would only happen once. At any rate, it wasn’t a feat I could perform at will.

Before long, we’d made it back to the entrance.

“That was fun.” Hikari let go of my hand, slowly and reluctantly. “So... Shall we head home?”

“Hikari.”

“Wh-What?” She was visibly shaken just by hearing me call her name. “Um, like I said earlier, I’m not about to break up with you—”

I couldn’t stand watching her be so frightened. I wanted to reassure her. I wanted to convey my feelings to her. Haibara Natsuki loves Hoshimiya Hikari. I wanted her to know that was a fact that would not change.

“Mngh?!”

So I pulled Hikari close, and covered her lips with mine. I didn’t care one bit about what other people thought. Hikari was the only person in my sights.



I didn't know whether it had lasted a few seconds or dozens. I eventually parted my lips from hers. I looked at her face up close. She was crying. Tears spilled from her eyes and trickled down her cheeks.

"I love you." In the end, that was the only thing I could think of to convey these overflowing feelings of mine. "I swore I'd make you happy, and I won't break that vow. In the future, even if decades pass... As long as you'll stay by my side, I will make you happy."

That was the best I could say right now. Lying to her was the one thing I didn't want to do.

"Thank you...Natsuki-kun," Hikari said through sobs as she wiped the tears from her eyes with her hand. "I really love you too."

Hikari flew into my arms. I caught her featherweight body and wrapped my arms around her back.

"If you were this scared, you could've avoided asking about it," I said.

"Hic... Well, once I knew my conjecture was a fact, I suddenly became afraid."

"Where'd the Hikari who made such a cool declaration go?"

"I-It's your fault! You suddenly got all taciturn!" she yelled into my chest.

*Fair. That's my bad... I had a lot on my mind... I understand why she would feel anxious, even after making such a confident statement.*

I patted her head, and then I suddenly heard clapping. The applause went on and on. At some point, other couples had congregated around us and were watching from a distance. I even heard a few excited squeals. There were some envious gazes too.

*We've completely turned into a spectacle...* I could feel my face heat up. Hikari, finally realizing our position too, hastily pulled away from me.

"S-Sorry... It's my fault," I said. *Consideration for the time, place, and occasion totally left my mind. Hikari's face is the same shade of red as a boiled octopus! I must look the same. I don't regret my actions, but embarrassment is embarrassment. They say youth is all about the right amount of embarrassment, but I feel like this was too much.*

“W-We’re sorry for causing a scene...”

Hikari and I bowed apologetically and escaped from the ring of people. We had garnered a lot of attention, but they would lose sight of us in this dim lighting. Although it was freezing, Hikari fanned her face. We smiled wryly at each other.

“That’s definitely a new entry in my list of embarrassing moments...” I said.

“Well, I was happy... I’ll never forget that moment.” She rammed her shoulder into me, causing me to stumble.

“Why is it that when I’m trying to act cool, I can never quite stick the landing?”

“I think you should just be yourself. You’re trying to be the butt of a joke, right?”

“No, I have never intentionally tried to be the butt of a joke before!” My eyes widened in shock.

Hikari grabbed her stomach, unable to hold back her laughter. After she’d cackled enough, she looked refreshed. “Okay, shall we go?”

“Yeah, we’ve got dinner reservations, after all.”

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We returned to Takasaki Station and entered the restaurant where I’d made reservations. It was a place I’d been to before in my first life. I remembered the food here being delicious.

“U-Um, doesn’t this restaurant seem sort of pricey?” Hikari asked me.

“Don’t worry about it. Tonight is on me,” I replied.

“Really? As expected of the Master of Part-Time Jobs!”

“That title doesn’t really make me happy...” *It’s a multicourse meal that’s a little too much for high school students, but something like this is fine every once in a while. I work, so it’s not like I’m short on cash. Besides, this place has a nice atmosphere, but it’s not that high-end. Dinner will cost a few thousand yen at most.*

“When I make my debut as a writer, I’ll use my royalties to treat you to a meal, okay?”

“How many years is that going to take?”

“Hey! Mean! Natsuki-kun, you don’t believe in my abilities!”

Our appetizer salads arrived while we were chatting.

“Okay, let’s dig in,” I said.

“Yeah. It looks tasty. Bon appétit!”

Hikari seemed a bit nervous, but her table manners were impeccable. *Her parents must have drilled them into her. If I really think about it, she’s going to be the daughter of a company president—surely she’s accustomed to dining at even nicer places.*

“Natsuki-kun, have you been to this sort of place before?”

“Does it look like it?”

“You seem used to it.”

“I occasionally eat out with my parents.” I shrugged my shoulders. *In reality, I haven’t come to this sort of restaurant enough to be used to it. It takes a lot to visit high-end places like this alone. I could do it because I’m a solo warrior, but I’d run out of money if I frequented restaurants like this.*

After that, we focused on our meal. We savored the dishes that came out one after another. *This restaurant was the correct choice. The food is awesome!*

“Ah! That was delicious!” Hikari exclaimed with delight as she rubbed her stomach.

*Is this a good time?* The Miori in my mind was telling me to do it. “Hikari, here, it’s your Christmas present.” I pulled a package out of my bag and handed it to her.

“Huh? You got me something? Thank you... Can I open it?”

“Of course.”

She opened the box, revealing a necklace inside. “Wow...”

It was a silver chain with a shimmering diamond decorating its center. It had a simple design, but I figured simple would suit her better. Plus, Hikari preferred beautiful things over cute ones. That was why I was certain she would like it. At least, she should have by my predictions. I didn't know how she would actually feel.

"Thank you. I'll treasure it!"

"Do you like it? You don't need to force yourself if you don't..."

"I like anything you choose for me!" she said firmly.

Relief washed over me. I hadn't depended on Miori this time, so I had selected it using my own fashion sense. But there was nothing more unreliable than my own sense of fashion.

"Can I put it on now?" she asked.

"Yeah." I nodded. I wanted to see Hikari wear the necklace I'd chosen for her. I'd spent such a long time in the store agonizing over what to pick. I'd even dragged a salesperson around with me to help choose, so I was quite attached to it.

"How does it look?"

"It looks great on you."

She giggled shyly. "But...this was definitely expensive, wasn't it?"

"I already forgot how much it cost."

"There you go, blatantly lying... Thanks, though. I'll cherish this."

In truth, I had blown two months worth of wages on it. I hadn't intended to choose an expensive gift. It just so happened that the necklace I thought would suit Hikari the best had cost five hefty ten-thousand-yen bills—that's all.

*It's a cheap price to pay if I can see her smile.*



## Final Chapter: Into a New Year

After that day, I spent the rest of my winter break practicing with the band and working. Hikari and I called each other regularly, but our schedules didn't line up, so we couldn't meet. After the twenty-ninth, our band went on break too, and I spent time with my family. The thirtieth was our big end-of-year cleaning day, and then we went to my grandmother's house on the thirty-first.

My family visited my grandmother twice a year, during New Year's and Obon. All of our close relatives gathered at her home, and we held a party at night. My drunk uncle offered me a drink, but I declined to take him up on it, of course. It wouldn't be good to remember the taste of alcohol.

Everyone burrowed under the toasty kotatsu table, where we ate dinner while watching the Kohaku Uta Gassen program on TV. After I greeted the new year with my family, my phone alerted me to happy new year messages on RINE. I replied, "HNY," to them and crawled into my blankets.

The next thing I knew, the clock hands pointed to noon the next day. I had slept half the day away. My grandmother and dad were watching Gunma's annual New Year Ekiden Run in the living room.

"Onii-chan, it's rare for you to sleep in this late," Namika said between bites of ozoni, the go-to New Year mochi soup.

"New Year's is the only time of the year when it feels like you can get away with being slothful," I replied.

"Where'd you get that from? That's funny."

"Anyway, where's mom and everyone else?"

"They went out to see the first sunrise of the year, so they probably went to do their first shrine visit too."

"Why didn't you go?"

"Huh? 'Cause it's cold. And going outside is a pain." With each word, she

snuggled deeper under the kotatsu table.

*Mom pampers her too much. I can't say anything, though—I slept until noon.*

“Natsuki. Do you want lunch?” my grandmother asked from where she sat under the kotatsu.

“That’d be great. I’ll help,” I said.

“What a considerate boy you’ve become! But you sit down now. It’s all right; grandma has time on her hands,” she replied kindly.

“Oh! Grandma, I want to eat too!” declared my younger sister without restraint.

*Yuuup, this is the only scene that won't change, even after seven years have passed...*

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*January fifth.*

My laid-back New Year ended, and school resumed. A languid atmosphere hung around the students who were on their way there.

I was greeted as soon as I entered class 1-2.

“Natsuki-kun! Happy New Year!” Hikari exclaimed enthusiastically.

“Yeah, Happy New Year. It feels like it’s been a while, huh,” I replied.

“We haven’t seen each other for a whole week, after all. Let’s have another great year,” Reita said.

I heard a loud yawn. “Tatsuya, you look really sleepy,” I remarked.

“New Year’s messed up my routine,” he said as he scratched his head.

“I’m sleep-deprived too! I spent yesterday panic-finishing my homework.” Uta was listlessly flopped out on a desk.

“Winter break is shorter than you think. You need to start it earlier,” I chided her.

“Wow, Natsu’s suuuch a model student,” she said.

Our classroom was filled with post-winter-break lethargy. I noticed that

Nanase was staring out the window in a daze. Her glossy, long black hair gently fluttered in the wind.

*Did something happen?*

“Hey, psst. Natsuki-kun.” Hikari tugged on my sleeve. She also kept her eyes on Nanase as she whispered, “Yuino-chan is participating in a piano competition.”

“Really?” I’d heard from Nanase that she was putting a lot of effort into her piano practice lately.

“I got tickets to it. Want to go watch her together?”

“I don’t know a thing about piano, but sure.”

“It’s okay; don’t worry. I’ve heard her play a lot, and she’s really something.” Hikari watched Nanase with an envious gaze. “After all, Yuino-chan used to be known as a child prodigy.”

The seasons turn—my winter, which had turned gray, had regained its color once more. It signaled the end of the first year of my second chance at youth.

## Afterword

The first thing I think of when I hear the word “youth” is not the bittersweet romances I experienced, but the days when I laughed with my friends over the dumbest things. One of my reasons for writing this story was because I wanted to depict that sort of adolescence in a light novel.

Anyway, long time no see. I’m Amamiya Kazuki.

This volume was a tale of Shiratori Reita. Just like volume six, the first half had dreary events, but I think we were able to flip the mood into something more pleasant after the midpoint.

I don’t know if anyone will remember what I wrote in the last volume’s afterword, but I mentioned that I was worried about what to do in the future. My main job had absolutely no relation to writing, and I was only writing on the side; however, I didn’t have enough time. That was the gist of what I wrote.

I’d like to report, as I write this afterword for volume seven, that I have resigned from my main job. Writing novels and scripts is now my sole profession. Thanks to that, I have a little more breathing room in my day-to-day life and can dedicate more time to my writing.

The reason I decided to take the leap and quit my job is because the busy season was worse than usual this year, and I barely had the time to write. It was dizzying how much I had on my plate, and during those days when I couldn’t work on my novel, I reassessed what I wanted to do most.

Before this, I didn’t have it in me to quit my job, because I wasn’t confident I could make a stable living through writing novels and games. However, after continuing to write on the side for seven years, I’ve grown confident in my own abilities, have gradually accumulated more achievements and connections, and now receive commissions from all sorts of places. Along the way, I’ve had to decline many jobs that I wanted to do but couldn’t accept because I was unable to make time in my schedule while also working my main job.

One day, I suddenly realized: At some point, ensuring my life was stable had become my top priority. Over these past seven years, many people have told me that living as an author would be difficult. I thought that was the truth. And honestly, years after my debut novel was published, I still wasn't earning enough to live solely off of my writing. The years kept on passing, and even though I had built a steady source of income—to a certain extent—I had become hung up on that so-called truth.

Is a life spent caring only about stability and not your dreams worth anything? After ruminating over that question, I eventually came to the conclusion that I wanted to live without regrets. After all, I can't redo a past that I regret like Haibara Natsuki did.


Of course I was anxious about this decision, but now I feel more excited than anything. Now that writing is my main profession, I have far more time to work on my stories. Thanks to that, I'm preparing all sorts of content. When it's ready, I'll announce it on my X account, so I hope you'll wait with bated breath.

Now it's time for acknowledgments. To my manager, N-san: once again I seemed to lose all concept of what a deadline is, and I'm really, really sorry about that... Gin-san was once again responsible for the illustrations; thank you for the wonderful artwork as always. Hikari looked oh so cute on their date!

I'd like to give an enormous thank-you to everyone involved in this novel's publication as well. It would be my pleasure as an author if this story resonated with you even a little bit.

Well then, that's all for now. I look forward to seeing you again in the next volume, or in another one of my series.

Aaall right! I'm going to create lots of interesting stories!



“What are you  
going to do  
about school?  
What about the  
soccer team?”

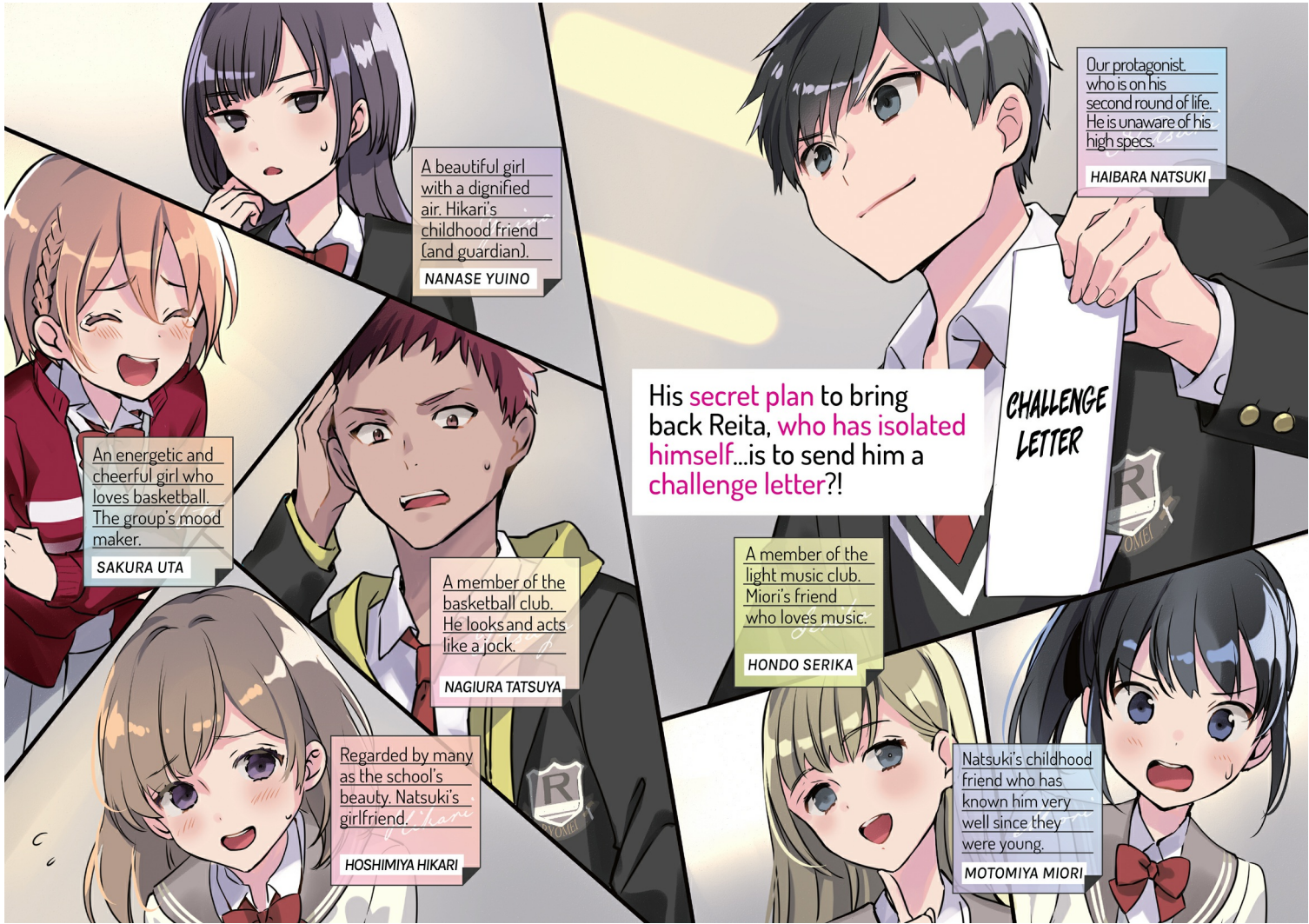
“I’m quitting.  
Once my  
suspension is  
over, I think I’ll  
hand in my  
withdrawal form.”

Haibara’s Teenage

NEW GAME+

It felt like the  
temperature  
outside had  
plummeted.





A beautiful girl with a dignified air. Hikari's childhood friend (and guardian).

NANASE YUINO

An energetic and cheerful girl who loves basketball. The group's mood maker.

SAKURA UTA

A member of the basketball club. He looks and acts like a jock.

NAGIURA TATSUYA

Regarded by many as the school's beauty. Natsuki's girlfriend.

HOSHIMIYA HIKARI

Our protagonist, who is on his second round of life. He is unaware of his high specs.

HAIBARA NATSUKI

His secret plan to bring back Reita, who has isolated himself...is to send him a challenge letter?!

CHALLENGE LETTER

A member of the light music club. Miori's friend who loves music.

HONDO SERIKA

Natsuki's childhood friend who has known him very well since they were young.

MOTOMIYA MIORI





“Come on, smile!”

I heard the click of her camera. We'd taken a charming photo of the two of us smiling, with colorful, iridescent lights as our background.

















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Haibara's Teenage New Game+ Volume 7

by Kazuki Amamiya

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