



*The Mosaic
Confessions*
Book One

By Mei Hachimoku
Illustrations by KUKKA

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*The
Mimosa
Confessions*





USHIO TSUKINOKI

SAKUMA KAMIKI

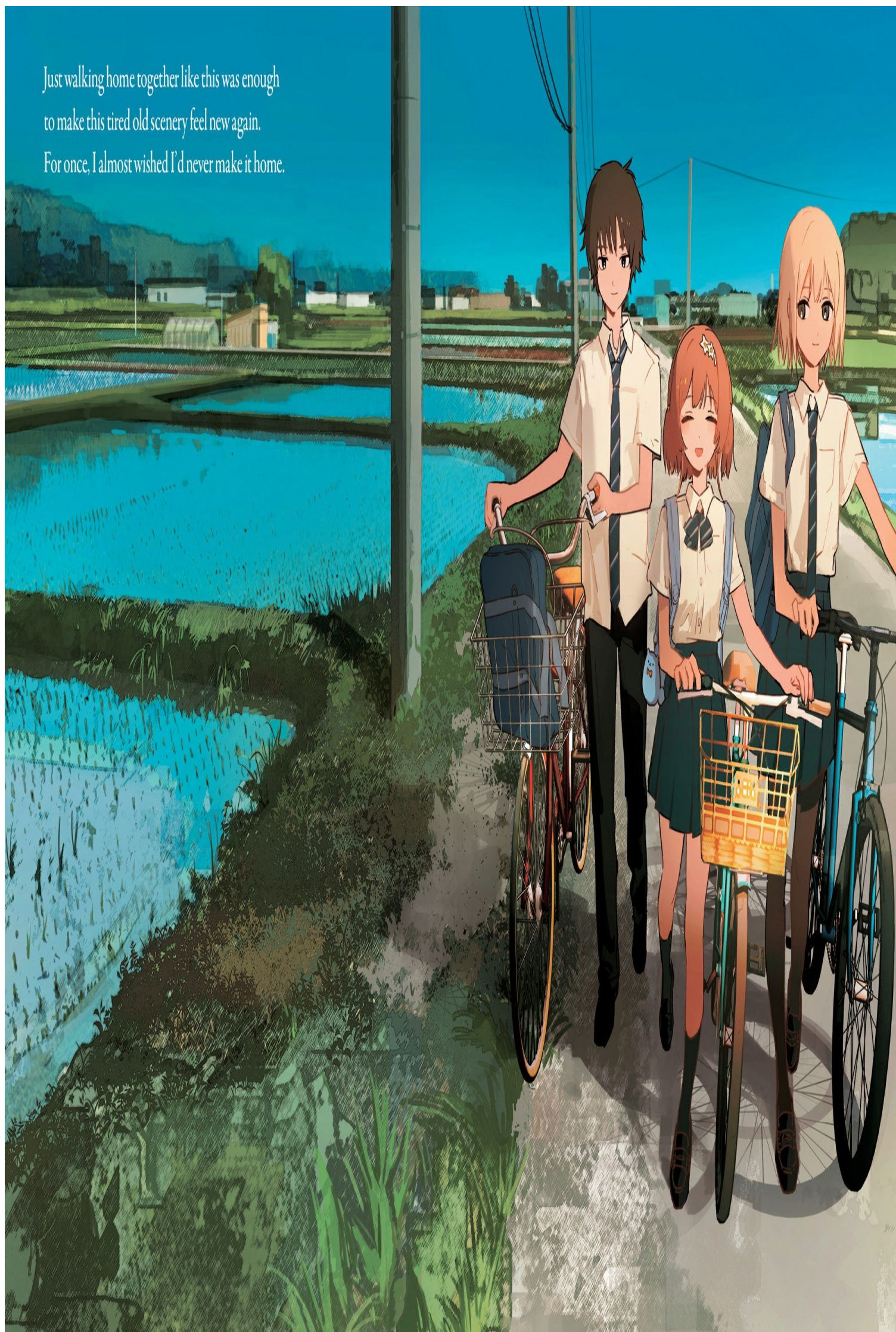
ARISA NISHIZONO

TOKA SHIINA

PIN MASHIMA

NATSUKI HOSHIHARA

Just walking home together like this was enough
to make this tired old scenery feel new again.
For once, I almost wished I'd never make it home.



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Things Fall Apart

MIMOSA NO KOKUHAKU Vol. 1

by Mei HACHIMOKU

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Illustrations by KUKKA

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The Kimosa Confessions

Book One

WRITTEN BY

Mei Hachimoku

ILLUSTRATIONS BY

KUKKA

TRANSLATION BY

Evan Ward



Seven Seas Entertainment

Characters

SAKUMA KAMIKI

The protagonist.
A high school sophomore.
Has very few friends.

USHIO TSUKINOKI

Sakuma's childhood friend.
Now one of the most
popular kids in class.

NATSUKI HOSHIHARA

Friendly girl with a
whole lot of pep. Beloved
by the entire class.

ARISA NISHIZONO

Queen of the class.
Callous girl with a
caustic tongue.

RIN MASHIMA

Softball player who
marches to the beat
of her own drum.

TOKA SHIINA

Sharp-witted girl.
Plays for the school
wind ensemble.

ITSUKU SERA

A recent transfer
student from
Tokyo.

mimosa

/mi'mou.sə/, n.

(not to be confused with the genus *Mimosa*)

Common name for *Acacia dealbata*, a species of fast-growing evergreen tree in the legume family Fabaceae, widely known for its fragrant golden blooms.

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/mɪ'mɒs.ə/, n.

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CHAPTER ONE

Blame God



Chapter One:

Blame God

“LISTEN UP, EVERYONE,” said Ms. Iyo. “There’s something very important we need to talk about.”

Almost immediately, the classroom’s usual morning hustle and bustle fell silent. Ms. Iyo was a young teacher with an openhearted demeanor—always smiling and well liked by all for treating students like they were her friends and not just a group of unruly kids she’d been tasked with babysitting. So for a teacher like her to walk into homeroom with a no-nonsense look on her face and an “important” announcement was more than enough to make everyone shut up and listen.

I tried to imagine what it could possibly be. There was a soberness to her expression that told me she wasn’t about to share that she was getting married, or that she’d be transferring to another school, or that another cigarette butt had been found in the boys’ bathroom. Then, like an epiphany, a thought popped into my head—one scant possibility that seemed as if it might just fit the look on her face. Part of me hoped I was right, while another part would almost rather I was completely mistaken.

“Okay,” she said, turning toward the classroom door. “Come on in.”

The sliding door rattled open, and a new student walked into class.

Behind me, someone gasped. I could tell my fellow classmates were all completely dumbfounded. Granted, I couldn’t believe my eyes at first either—but strangely enough, I was slowly coming to terms.

Guess we’re not just pretending it never happened after all.

Flash back to ten days prior.

It was mid-June. Spring had long since come and gone, but the true heat of summer had only just reared its ugly head. I walked out the front door at the

usual time, and already I could feel the muggy midmorning air grease my skin as I straddled my bike and kicked off to start my commute. I assumed last night's rain had something to do with the increased humidity; the smell of leftover puddles simmering on the asphalt filled the air. Overhead, the scattered remains of ash-gray clouds, now withered and spent, dotted the cerulean sky like tiny motes of dust.

After breaking away from my neighborhood and passing the rows of cookie-cutter apartment buildings, I emerged into acres upon acres of cultivated farmland. The submerged rice plants swayed in the gentle breeze, their long blades waving at me as I whizzed down the single lane of pavement that cut straight through the paddy fields. The strong scent of muck and meadow flooded my nostrils, carried on each wisp of wind that brushed my face while I pedaled past.

Tsubakioka was a no-name, backwater country town. Its seldom-serviced roads carried little other than elderly drivers—self-declared by the four-leaf clover decal on their half-size pickups—and the local news rarely contained anything other than obituaries. The once-charming little downtown had been shuttered and depressed for so long that it could almost qualify as an abandoned historical site. The only new construction of note in years had been a headquarters for in-home caregivers.

While I wondered idly to myself how long it would be before there was no one left in this town but senior citizens, one of the aforementioned pickup trucks went speeding right past me and splashed an impressive torrent of muddy water and poetic irony in my direction. I winced, but with no shoulder for me to veer onto, I could do little but watch helplessly as the mud splattered all across my bike and lower body. Panicking, I squeezed my brake handles as fast as I could.

I sized up the damage—my entire right pant leg was drenched from the thigh down. Thankfully, there didn't seem to be much in the way of dirt that might stain, but there was no way all this water was going to dry off naturally by the time I made it to school. I watched as the offending truck driver sped away, as if feigning obliviousness.

I let out a sigh despite myself—then, from behind me, I heard the screech of

brakes and the scrub of tires against the pavement. I turned around to see that another schoolboy on a bicycle, wearing the same uniform as mine, had stopped to gawk at my misfortune. It was one of my classmates, Hasumi; he wore a look of empathetic distress on his face as he gazed out from beneath his frizzy, unkempt bangs.

“Dude... Kamiki,” he said.

“What is it?” I replied.

“You’re, like...*soaked*, man.”

“Yeah, thanks. I noticed. You say that like you didn’t see the whole thing happen.”

I had to wonder if he was only acting incredulous to make me feel worse. Either way, I really didn’t feel like walking onto campus looking like I’d wet myself in spectacular fashion. Hoping to buy myself a little extra time to dry off, I opted to walk my bike the rest of the way to school. A few steps later, Hasumi apparently decided to do the same, as he rolled his bike up to walk alongside me.

“Man, what a lame way to start the day,” he said. “Pretty funny, though, I gotta say.”

“It’s *not* funny. Trade pants with me if you want to laugh. I swear, they really need to hurry up and fix these potholes.”

“Pfft, c’mon. You know that’s not gonna happen. Pretty sure they haven’t touched these roads since we were in elementary school. Wouldn’t get my hopes up if I were you.”

“Yeah, I know... Just part of living in the goddamn sticks, I guess.”

I couldn’t help but throw a curse in there for good measure; I’d never liked my hometown. Not one bit. Tsubakioka was about as boringly rural as a town could get, and it couldn’t even commit to being *that* properly. Sure, there was plenty of farmland, but there was also an AEON Mall nearby, plus a pretty respectable business district near the local train station. In many ways, though, this half-baked ruralness was more infuriating than growing up in the unabashed middle of nowhere. At least then the inconvenience of being far from civilization would

be made up for by clean air, beautiful scenery, and an abundance of nature that I could be proud to live amid. But Tsubakioka was just miles and miles of paddy fields and farmland—a far cry from the great outdoors. The air quality certainly wasn't great, and there was still too much light pollution to even enjoy a sky full of stars at night. It was just dreary and dull, the sort of place that makes one feel unlucky and inferior for having been born into it. Which was why I intended to leave this town for good as soon as I graduated from high school.

Just as I concluded this mental review of the many grievances I held toward my hometown, we reached the end of the long road through the rice fields, and I could see the old, gray school building just up ahead—our very own Tsubakioka High.

Hasumi and I walked through the main entrance together. My pants still felt cold against my skin, but the wetness had at least dried to the point that it wasn't obvious anymore. It felt just as muggy inside the poorly ventilated building as it did outside—and the high concentration of students and resultant commotion certainly didn't help. Virtually all of them had switched over to their short-sleeved summer uniforms by this point.

Everyone seemed to be in a bit of a rush, perhaps because the bell for morning homeroom period was about to ring. I needed to hurry up and get to class too. But when I made my way over to the shoe cubbies for Class 2-A, I spotted a familiar light-haired boy and let out an audible *ack*. Taking care so as not to be noticed by this particular student, I quietly reached for my indoor shoes—only to watch helplessly in despair as they both slipped from my grasp and clattered loudly to the ground. The boy instantly looked in my direction, and we made eye contact.

“Morning, Sakuma,” he said, his husky voice lingering in my ears as he greeted me with a smile cool and refreshing enough to thwart even this sweltering humidity.

This was Ushio Tsukinoki, a half-Japanese, half-Russian student regarded as one of the most attractive boys in school (though more in the pretty-boy sense than the hunky dreamboat sense). He absolutely had the looks to have been a

model or an actor, had he not been unfortunate enough to have been born in a backwater town like this. On top of that, he was the star athlete on the school's track and field team, good enough to compete in larger regional meets, and an outstanding student to boot. By all accounts, he was the very picture of an ideal high schooler—and perhaps most impressive of all, none of these things seemed to give him a swelled head. He was a humble, good-natured boy who was friendly to everyone. Personally, I didn't much like being around him.

"O-oh, hey," I said. "Morning."

"Wait, hang on. Your pants look a little wet... Did you take a nasty tumble on the way here or something?"

"No, I just got splashed by some idiot truck driver driving through a puddle..."

"Oh, wow. That's pretty rough. Why not change into your gym pants, then? You'll catch a cold if you don't take those things off."

"Thanks, but I'll be okay. They'll dry off soon enough."

"You sure? Well, if you say so."

Over Ushio's shoulder, I could see a girl halfway down the hall waving in our general direction. With her bleached blonde hair tied up in two long pigtails, and her skirt short enough to ruffle some faculty feathers, she certainly stood out from the crowd.

"What are you doing, Ushio?! Hurry up—we're gonna be late!" she shouted. This was Arisa Nishizono, a rather gaudy girl who apparently thought the school dress code was merely a suggestion, judging from how loosely she adhered to it. I didn't much like being around her either, albeit for entirely different reasons.

"Okay, I'm coming!" Ushio shouted over his shoulder, then turned back to me. "Well, Sakuma... Guess I'll talk to you later, then."

He hurried down the hall toward Arisa, and the two of them proceeded to link up with a few other students who'd apparently been waiting on Ushio as well. I watched in silence a moment as they all laughed and made lighthearted chitchat on their way to class.

“So, hey—Kamiki,” said a voice from behind me. Startled, I spun around to see that it was only Hasumi, who had only just finished changing into his indoor shoes. “Correct me if I’m wrong, man, but don’t you and Tsukinoki go, like...*way* back?”

“I mean, yeah... We were pretty close back in the day. What about it?”

“Oh, nothin’. Just cool to see you guys are still such good friends, is all. I mean, you’re like two entirely different genres of person now, y’know?”

“*Genres*? What the hell is *that* supposed to mean? And we’re really not that close anymore, FYI... Kinda can’t stand being around the guy, if I’m being honest.”

“Oh yeah? Why’s that?”

“It’s nothing against him, I just... I dunno. It’s like anytime I talk to him, I feel like such a loser in comparison...”

“Damn. That’s some complex you got there, my man. I’d get that checked out if I were you—unless you wanna be a loner your whole life, that is.”

“Aw, shut up. You’re no social butterfly yourself.”

“No, but I’ve got more friends than *you*, at least.”

Urgh. He was right about that. I knew Hasumi had a decent number of friends in the school table tennis club (who, I assumed, were the kids from other classes I often saw him eating lunch with). I, meanwhile, was not involved in any extracurricular activities whatsoever, so I didn’t have any grounds to make a witty comeback here.

“Well, not that I can’t see where you’re coming from, to be fair,” Hasumi added—kindly throwing my dignity a bone. “I mean, I’d probably feel like a loser too if I was being compared to *Tsukinoki* all the time. That kid’s so talented, I feel like he’s gotta be from a different *planet* or something.”

“Right?” I said. “Yeah, trust me—if you’d been his friend all your life, I guarantee you’d be more sympathetic to my struggle.”

With our indoor shoes on, Hasumi and I made our way to Classroom 2-A.

“All right, everyone! Let’s all take our seats now.”

With that, Ms. Iyo took her place at the lectern on the raised podium, and morning homeroom period began. As always, she wore a smart pair of women’s slacks, a finely tailored dress shirt with nary a wrinkle to be seen, and her long, black hair tied up in the back. She was the very picture of professionalism—and her perfect teeth and beaming smile only served to complete the ensemble.

“Okay, we’ve got a few housekeeping notes to start things off today. First of all, it seems there’s been a distinct uptick in the number of students visiting the nurse’s office due to stomach problems. The humidity this time of year may be partially to blame, as it does cause food to spoil more quickly, so those of you who bring your own lunches should be extra vigilant. Thankfully, like many of you, I get my lunches at the school store, so I don’t have to worry about that. Oh, but not because I can’t be bothered to make my own lunches at home, mind you! I just—”

As I let Ms. Iyo’s words go in one ear and out the other, I cast a sidelong glance over at Ushio, who was sitting up straight and listening attentively to our teacher’s little spiel—unlike most of the class (myself included), who were slouched over and present in body alone. Looking at him right now, towering over the rest of us with his elegant posture, he really did give off a strange air of superiority—almost like he was from a whole different planet, as Hasumi put it.

Looking at him now, it was hard to believe we’d been such good friends up through elementary school. *Best* friends, one might even say. We hung out virtually every day, spending the night at each other’s houses and everything. At the time, I naturally assumed we’d be friends for life.

But things didn’t pan out that way.

After we got to junior high, I started actively avoiding Ushio. He was the ever-popular star athlete with good looks. And then there was me: just a shy, plain-looking scrub of a guy with no real skills to speak of whatsoever. The older we got, the more the disparity in our respective talents—or lack thereof—became clear. Consequently, I started to feel embarrassed just by virtue of being seen around him. That wasn’t the only reason I started avoiding Ushio, though. That only *really* started after a particular incident during our second year of junior

high.

There was a girl I liked at the time, one I'd actually gotten pretty close with. She was always coming over to talk to me between classes, and we'd even walk home together after school sometimes. After a while, I felt pretty confident that she liked me too, so I bit the bullet and confessed my feelings to her.

"I'm sorry... You're really sweet, but Ushio-kun's the one I... I..."

She didn't even have to finish her sentence. I knew right then and there what she was trying to say—and why she made an effort to get close to me in the first place. They say love can make a person blind, and while I always thought that was just one of those shallow, antiquated mantras old people loved to spout at the younger generation to sound wiser and more experienced, it certainly held true in this case. Had I been more rational, I would have figured it out far, far sooner from the way she was always asking about what TV shows Ushio liked to watch, what video games he already owned, et cetera. After getting home that night, I couldn't bring myself to do anything other than wallow in my own misery; that had been the first time in my life I'd ever tried asking someone out, so the shock and disappointment of rejection stung all the worse.

From that day forward, not only did I (obviously) never speak to that girl again, but I also found myself having an awfully hard time talking to Ushio anymore—or even looking him in the eye. Of course, I knew he'd done nothing wrong. The girl hadn't intended to hurt me either, even if she had ulterior motives. The only one who'd truly betrayed me was myself—by deluding myself into thinking I had a chance—and that hurt the most. With no other guilty party to blame, all I could do was tumble deeper and deeper into a spiraling pit of self-loathing. I started turning Ushio down every single time he invited me to hang out, or team up in gym class, or do group projects together. It didn't take long at all after that for him to start spending far more of his time with his louder and more outgoing friends, while I became that kid who just sat in a corner of the classroom reading books all the time.

Since there weren't many high schools in our general vicinity, it was no surprise that we ended up applying for and advancing to the same one. Even then, nothing really changed. He was still the most popular kid in class, while I

was just some extra—Rando Student #1. This suited me just fine, though; at least now I knew how to stay in my lane.

Bit of a random aside, but I did hear that the girl who turned me down went on to ask Ushio out just a few days later, only to get promptly shot down herself. This revelation did rub salt in the wound a little bit, but I stopped caring soon enough. She and I never exchanged another word after the day I asked her out, so I had no idea what she was up to now or even what high school she was going to, for that matter.

“...which is why you *definitely* never want to get food poisoning from chicken, if you can help it... Wait, hang on. I just realized—is Natsuki not here with us today?”

This sudden break in Ms. Iyo’s rambling snapped me back to my senses. I turned my gaze from Ushio over to Hoshihara’s seat, only to find that it was indeed unoccupied. Just as Ms. Iyo wondered aloud if perhaps she was simply running late, the classroom door swung wide open, and in barged one last student.

“Phew! Made it just in time!”

Her loosely permed hair swayed softly from the change in momentum as she screeched to a stop. This was the previously assumed absentee, one Natsuki Hoshihara, and it seemed she’d sprinted all the way here, judging by her labored breathing.

After catching her breath for a moment, she turned to Ms. Iyo and offered a sheepish little smile. “Good morning, Ms. Iyo-chan!” she said.

“Yes, morning,” replied Ms. Iyo. “Glad you could join us. Almost had to write you up a tardy slip. Did you sleep in or something?”

“Yeah, so the thing is, I actually took a nap on the train and ended up missing my stop... That was a real fun surprise to wake up to, lemme tell ya.”

“‘Fun’ is probably not the word I’d use to describe it. Come on, Natsuki. You’ve gotta be a bit more careful than that.”

“Will do, sorry!”



With that, Hoshihara marched over to her desk as our fellow classmates snickered in the background. Like Ushio, she was one of the most popular kids in class. Whereas he was more of a natural-born leader type, always pulling the rest of the class along to follow after him, she was more like the beloved comic relief character whom everyone could get a laugh out of and poke fun at from time to time. She was a bit of a ditz, true, but a sweetheart all the same. She had a ton of friends and a knack for putting smiles on other people's faces. To a complete social outcast like me, though, she may as well have existed in a totally different universe. In fact, as far as I could recall, she and I had never even exchanged so much as a simple greeting.

No sooner did Hoshihara reach her seat than Ms. Iyo realized the bell was about to ring and scrambled to wrap up our morning homeroom period as quickly as she could.

With the first period of the day over, we had just a few minutes to get to the science room before second-period chemistry was set to begin. All around me, my fellow classmates were gathering up their textbooks and writing implements and rising from their desks one by one. Right as I started getting ready to leave myself, I couldn't help but overhear a conversation being had by a group of five or six chatty students standing in the middle of the classroom.

"Oh, *goddamn it*. I left my textbook at home again," said the girl at the center of the group. Sure enough, it was Nishizono—and she was, as usual, more than happy to make her displeasure known.

As she clicked her tongue with chagrin, Hoshihara offered a solution with a nervous smile. "W-well, we're in the same group, so you can just read off of mine!"

"You sure? Awww, thanks, Natsuki! You're a lifesaver!"

Hoshihara bashfully scratched her cheek, walked over to her desk, bent down, and took a peek inside. She reached in and pulled out her textbooks one by one, but none of them were the chemistry book I assumed she was searching for. Eventually, she lifted her head and coughed out an awkward chuckle.

“Er, sorry... Looks like I forgot mine too... Eh heh heh.”

“You moron,” said Nishizono, rolling her eyes. For once, I couldn’t help but crack a smile at her derision; the comedic timing was just too good.

“Wow, looks like we’ve got *two* space cadets with us today,” quipped one of the boys in the group, willfully adding fuel to the fire. “Man, that is too good.”

“Um, excuse you?” Nishizono fired back with a piercing glare. “I don’t see what’s so funny here.”

“Y-yeah, you’re right. M-my bad,” the boy said, instantly recoiling at her sharp tone. I couldn’t blame him for backpedaling. Her needlessly harsh personality was one of the main reasons I always tried to steer clear of her. She wasn’t even big or tall like your average bully—in fact, she was slightly shorter than even Hoshihara—but from an intimidation standpoint, she was easily the scariest kid in class. As I looked around to see how all the rest of my classmates were shrinking in their desks so as not to draw her ire, Ushio—who’d been watching quietly in the background—stepped up to the plate.

“Okay, how about this: you two can just read off of mine for today,” he said. “We’ll have to move our seats a little bit, but that shouldn’t be a problem, right?”

The two girls beamed at this suggestion.

“That’s our Ushio! Knew I could count on you!” said Nishizono.

“Wow, thanks, Ushio-kun!” said Hoshihara.

“Yeah, yeah. Just try not to forget them again, okay?” Ushio teased, and the two girls chorused an “Okaaay” (though their tone was less than convincing). Watching this little exchange take place, I felt a strange discomfort brewing in my heart, and I rose from my seat in an attempt to shake it off. I grabbed my pencil case and shoved it and my chemistry textbook under one arm, then promptly made my way out of the classroom.

If only I could be like them, I thought to myself as a wistful wave of envy rippled through my chest. When I looked at Ushio, always surrounded by friends and being fawned over by girls, and then back at me, heading by myself up to the science room like a loner, I couldn’t help but wonder when this

disparity between him and me began, despite us being such good friends as kids. Maybe it was some innate inability or a failing on my part to keep up. I knew it was pointless to overanalyze things like that in retrospect, so I tried to shrug off this negative train of thought.

At that moment, a student burst out of the door to the classroom I was walking past and crashed right into my shoulder. Before I could even say, “Whoa,” my aluminum pencil case slipped out from under my arm and spilled all its contents across the hallway floor with a loud, metallic clang.

“Whoops, my bad!” said the hit-and-run artist before dashing off down the hall, leaving me to kneel down and pick up all my scattered pens, rulers, and whatnot myself.

“Don’t apologize if you’re not gonna help...” I grumbled under my breath. I might have even said it to his face, but he was long gone by now. This was about as embarrassing as it got: me on my hands and knees gathering up stationery like loose change while everyone else in the corridor rubbernecked on the way to their next class. Each and every laugh I heard echoing down the hall felt directed at me, and my face grew hot with rage.

Goddamn it. This sucks. I reached out to grab an eraser that had rolled a few feet in front of me, only for someone else to snatch it up before I could get to it. I lifted my head to see who’d beat me to it: Ushio, standing over me with his own pencil case and chemistry textbook tucked under his right arm.

“Here, I’ll help,” he said.

“Th-thanks, I owe you one,” I replied.

Ushio leaned down in front of me and started picking up some of my runaway pens. I glanced up at him and saw a sort of nonchalance to his expression—like this was just business as usual to him, not embarrassing in the slightest. He probably would have been just as cool and collected even if *he* had been the one to spill his pencil case all over the floor. He was just a good guy like that—to the point that I honestly felt bad making him waste his time on me.

“Shouldn’t you catch up with Nishizono and Hoshihara?” I asked, unable to bear the awkward silence.

“Hm? What do you mean?” he replied.

“I mean, you just offered to sit and share your textbook with them, didn’t you?”

“Oh, yeah. No, Arisa’s on day duty today, so she has to wait until everyone else leaves to lock up the classroom. Natsuki’s hanging back with her too.”

“Ah... Gotcha...”

“Here you go.”

Ushio handed me the eraser and pens he’d helped gather up, and I gratefully placed them back in my pencil case. Everything seemed to be accounted for.

“Thanks for the help. I appreciate it,” I said, then promptly turned on my heel to leave. But I didn’t get far before Ushio called after me.

“Hey, w-wait up!” he said. “We’re going to the same place, you know... You don’t have to walk there all by yourself.”

That was a fair observation to make. Even if I *did* feel a little awkward walking shoulder to shoulder down the hall with Ushio, I’d feel bad turning down this invitation after he went out of his way to help me through an embarrassing situation.

“Good point,” I said. “Okay, let’s go.”

Ushio nodded emphatically, and the two of us headed up to the science room. I couldn’t help but feel a little on edge the whole way, but I thankfully managed to navigate the inevitable small talk pretty smoothly (mostly because Ushio did all the talking, so it didn’t require more than the simplest possible responses on my part).

“But yeah, I think Misao’s started to enter her rebellious teen phase a little bit,” he said as we were climbing the stairs. “Feels like she’s been a lot more temperamental lately.”

Misao was Ushio’s younger sister. She would be in her last year of junior high now, if I remembered right. In my memories, she’d always been a polite little girl—very dainty, very light complexion. She played with Ushio and me pretty often when we were younger, but I hadn’t seen her in quite some time. I’d been

wondering how she was doing lately, and I hoped she'd been well.

"Always yelling at me to hurry up and take a bath so she can—Sakuma? Are you listening?"

Whoops. Guess I kinda got lost in my thoughts for a second there.

"Er, yeah, sorry. You were talking about Misao-chan. Yeah, I can't really picture her as a rebellious teenager at all, if I'm being honest."

"Huh, really? Well, I guess she *is* pretty well behaved around other people. But yeah, no—when we're at home, she definitely won't hesitate to get in your face and tell you what's what."

"Wow. I never would've guessed."

"Wanna come over and say hi one of these days? You're always welcome."

"Huh?!" I did a double take at Ushio as we continued walking, but he didn't seem to be joking around. "Oh, no, no, no—that's okay. I mean, she's probably busy studying for her high school entrance exams, right? Don't wanna be a bother."

"Pretty sure she wouldn't mind at all."

"Y-you don't think...?"

I was really struggling to gauge how to take this particular invitation. I wasn't used to being invited over to other people's houses these days, but maybe for someone with as many friends as Ushio, those casual invitations were second nature.

"Well, I'm pretty sure this is her first-choice school anyway, so you'll probably end up seeing her around campus next year whether you like it or not," he added.

"Huh, yeah... Hope she gets in."

"Same," Ushio said, nodding.

We were almost to the science room; it wasn't even a three-minute walk from our classroom, yet today it felt quite a bit longer than usual. Just when we were a stone's throw from the door, a couple of boys from our class—both

members of what I would consider the “cool kids” clique—emerged into the hallway, and one of them looked in our direction.

“Oh, hey,” he called. “There you are, Ushio. C’mon, we’re headed down to the vending machine.”

As the two boys approached, Ushio stopped in his tracks to wait for them. I walked a few more steps, then turned back to look over my shoulder.

“All right. Guess I’ll catch you later, then,” I said, and Ushio furrowed his brow.

“Wait, why don’t you come too?”

“Nah, that’s okay. I’d feel pretty out of place hanging with those guys, no offense.”

“But—”

“Really, it’s fine. Don’t worry about it.”

I waved Ushio goodbye before he could get in another word, then walked off toward the science room at a brisk pace. Halfway down the hall, I passed by the two boys who’d called out to Ushio, but neither of them turned to look at me. It was as if only Ushio registered in their perception—like I wasn’t even there. While this definitely didn’t help my inferiority complex, it didn’t ultimately bother me too much. Besides, this was for the best; Ushio probably didn’t want to be seen hanging out with a loser like me, so if anything, I was doing him a favor.

Classes were over for the day. The clock read 4 p.m. as our math teacher walked out the door, and immediately voices rang out across the classroom—some distressed at the thought of having to stay another couple hours for club activities, others excitedly looking to see if anyone was interested in going to karaoke tonight. And then there was me. I had no plans or responsibilities for the rest of the day, so all I had to do was gather up my stuff and head home. As I walked out of the classroom and down the hall, I passed by several groups of students all dressed in sports uniforms or track jerseys.

Tsubakioka High was considered one of the more competitive schools in our general area as far as sports teams went. It was best known for its highly accomplished track and field team, but its baseball and volleyball teams were no slouches either. Every year, they performed quite well at the regional level. That said, I never really had much interest in being involved in any extracurricular activities. I *was* on the tennis team back in junior high for a while, but I really hated the internal team hierarchy and inherent competitiveness of it all, so I quit after my first year. That experience soured my interest in extracurricular activities so much that even now, in my second year of high school, I still hadn't ever given any other clubs or sports teams a shot.

I descended the stairwell and made my way to the school's main entrance, where I found all the other clubless students gathering to go home. Once I'd changed back into my street shoes, I headed out to retrieve my bike from the bike lot. I was displeased to find that the harsh summer sun hadn't yet begun to noticeably abate, despite it being four in the afternoon.

I walked along the perimeter of the building to the bike lot, straddled my bike, and lazily pedaled my way off campus. Beyond the front gate, I went up a gear and cut my way through the muggy, lukewarm breeze. I rode through town until a red light at a four-way intersection forced me to stop. I looked around absentmindedly while I waited for the signal to turn.

As I watched a swarm of impatient-looking bats circle the paddy fields, I had a sudden realization—and felt a sinking in my gut. I touched my right pocket, then my left, but both were empty. I'd left my phone in my desk back at school.

“Ugh... Great, just what I needed...”

I slumped against my handlebars in defeat. I'd already come quite a ways from campus, too. Today *really* wasn't my lucky day (even if I only had my own negligence to blame this time). But there was nothing for it; I'd just have to head back. It was Friday, so there was no school tomorrow, and I really didn't want to be without a phone until Monday. All I could do was swallow my tears and turn my bike around.

I walked alone down the empty hallway. It was a little bit dusky in this part of

the school at this time of day, when far less natural light reached this far in through the exterior windows. It was now going on five o'clock, so I was probably the only person left on school grounds who wasn't engaged in extracurriculars. The halls were quiet; if I listened close, I could hear the soccer team calling out to each other and the kendo team doing their routine sparring shouts—but even these loud voices felt muted and indistinct, as if they'd been filtered through a thick, sound-dampening membrane before reaching my ears.

I climbed the stairwell and made my way down the hall to Classroom 2-A. The door was still halfway open, and the sun pouring in through the classroom windows flared out to form a rectangular shadow of light on the hallway floor. Shielding my eyes from the intense glare, I walked into the room and headed straight for my desk.

Before I could get there, I realized I was not, in fact, the only one in the room. There was a girl sitting at a desk by the window—one Natsuki Hoshihara, leaning her head against the wall and staring out the window with a listless, almost melancholy expression on her face. With her head inclined, I could see the back of her neck exposed as her permed locks hung lazily to one side. The light shone through her hair, making it practically glimmer in the late afternoon sun. I couldn't help but be struck by the unexpected sight of this always-peppy girl looking so pensive and somber; it was almost unimaginable to me. But I wouldn't get to stare for long, as she soon noticed my presence (albeit belatedly).

“Duh-HYAAAGH?!”

She jumped up several inches in her chair and let out a high-pitched squeal. It was such an extreme overreaction that I couldn't help but let out a startled shriek myself.

“S-sorry!” I cried, scrambling to explain. “Wasn't trying to scare you! I just didn't realize you were in here, and then by the time I did, I felt like it would be weird to say something, and... Yeah. My bad.”

“Phew, you startled me...” she said, letting out a sigh of relief. “I literally didn't even realize there was someone else in here. Boy, uh... That was quite the little sound effect I made just now, wasn't it? Aha ha...”

She didn't seem mad, thankfully. If anything, she sounded a little embarrassed.

"So, what brings you here, Kamiki-kun?" she asked.

This took me a little by surprise; I certainly didn't expect her to remember my name. "Forgot my cell phone. Just came back to grab it, that's all."

"Ohhh, gotcha. Yeah, can't go without *that* all weekend."

I nodded in agreement, then went over to my desk—middle seat, back row. I reached inside, and my fingers settled on something hard and rectangular—not the phone I was looking for but a novel I'd been reading. I decided I'd bring it home as well to finish over the weekend, then set it on top of my desk. Seeing this, Hoshihara got up and walked over in my direction.

"What book is that?" she asked.

Another mild surprise—I didn't expect her to have any interest in books—but I removed the protective dust jacket I'd put on it and showed her the cover regardless.

"Oh, yeah..." I said. "It's a pretty popular series, actually. Been going on for a while now, too. It's—"

"Ooh, hey! *Of Moon and Men*! Good taste!"

Well, damn. This was the third surprise in a row. I had not expected her to already be familiar. *Of Moon and Men* was a popular series of fantasy novels, and I was currently reading through the third book. Set in an alternate world, it was the story of a boy and a girl from warring kingdoms who get shipwrecked together on a deserted island and have to learn to set aside their differences in order to survive, then slowly grow closer over the course of the series. Although it was quite dense with lore and worldbuilding, the prose was awfully breezy, and I'd made a habit of buying each new entry as soon as it was released.

"I've been reading these too," said Hoshihara. "They're pretty good, huh?"

"Yeah, definitely. Wow, would *not* have pegged you for a reader, Hoshihara."

"Hey! Are you saying you think I'm stupid or something?!"

It was only after she pouted her lips and got all up in my face that I realized I'd

said something potentially quite offensive. Panicking, I scrambled to apologize—though, in all honesty, it was her sudden proximity that was making me sweat more than anything.

“M-my bad, I didn’t mean it as a judgment on your intelligence or anything like that. Just that it doesn’t seem like the sort of thing a girl like you would be into... Er, I mean...!”

Crap. Something told me I was only making things worse now. Sure enough, Hoshihara leaned in even closer and glared up at me from below. As I felt a cold sweat trickle down my neck, I frantically tried to cobble together some possible explanation that could exhume me from this grave I’d dug for myself, but then...

“Well, you’re not wrong, I guess,” she said, pulling away. “I know I probably don’t look like your average bookworm—I wouldn’t really call myself one, either. I mean, I read a lot of manga, but that’s about it... Anyway, yeah, back in junior high, I wrote a book report on *Of Moon and Men*, actually. Just chose it randomly because it was one of the options available. Wasn’t all that interested when I first picked it up, but I ended up really loving it, surprisingly... It’s, like, the one series of books I try to keep up on.”

Aha. That makes sense...I suppose. It was quite the coincidence, then, that I happened to be reading through one of the few sets of novels she considered herself a fan of. At the same time, if she enjoyed these books so much, I couldn’t help but feel like she was missing out by not expanding her horizons beyond a single series.

“Why don’t you try reading some other books, then?” I asked.

“Huh?” she said.

“The author has another novel that’s pretty great too, you know. It’s called *The Echidna’s Dream*—another one that kind of uses war as a central theme, though it’s a one-off, standalone novel, unlike *Of Moon and Men*. It has more of a sci-fi edge to it as opposed to pure fantasy, so I’m not sure if that’s your thing, but yeah. It’s also got some semi-philosophical segments that I think are written in a really nice, digestible way, as well as some bits of dark humor here and there that really help soften the overall vibe. So it’s not a slog or a stressful read by any means, it’s more like—”

At this point, I realized I was rambling at a million miles per hour, which made me feel extremely self-conscious. I kicked myself for getting carried away; surely this sounded like nothing more than an obnoxious nerd rant to her.

But she defied my expectations yet again: her eyes lit up, gleaming with curiosity. “Wow, Kamiki-kun! You could be, like...a book reviewer or something!”

“Y-you think...?” I stuttered, relieved to know I hadn’t creeped her out. If anything, she seemed rather engaged.

“Yeah, I mean, I’ve been wanting to read more, too. There’s just so much out there to choose from, y’know...? Oh, hey! I’ve got an idea!” Hoshihara pulled her flip phone out from her pocket and whipped it open. “Here, let’s trade contact info! That way, you can give me any other book recs you might have!”

Wow. I couldn’t even remember the last time I’d traded contact info with someone. I could probably count on one hand the number of times I’d been asked to do so in my entire high school career.

“O-okay, yeah. Sure thing,” I said, trying my best to conceal my nervousness, lest I reveal what an uncommon occurrence this was for me. I reached into my desk again, and this time I found my mark right away. I pulled out my cell phone, flipped it open, clicked my way over to the contacts menu, and...

“Uhhh... How do you do the wireless info exchange thing, again?” I asked.

“What, you don’t know?”

“Just forgot, is all. I really don’t give my number out all that often, sorry.”

“Wow, really? But then...how do you even make friends?”

Believe me, I wish I knew. I ask that question every day.

“Ha ha. Yeah, I dunno, really...” I said, laughing it off. “Guess I just don’t have that many friends to begin with, ha ha...”

It was only after these words left my lips that I realized I probably shouldn’t have said them. Indirectly calling myself a loser just made it sound like I was fishing for reassurances, which no doubt put Hoshihara in a bit of an awkward spot as someone who hardly knew me. Yet she just let out a quick,

noncommittal “huh” and reached for my phone.

“Here, lemme see real quick.”

“Y-yeah, okay,” I said, handing it over. Hoshihara started clicking and clacking away with all the thumb dexterity one might expect of a popular teenage girl.

“There, you’re all set!”

She handed me back my phone, and I looked down at the screen to see that a new entry had been added to my meager address book:

It was just written there in a simple, unadorned font like every other entry on the list, yet there was something about this specific combination of letters that made them almost shimmer on the screen. When I looked up again, I saw the owner of this name smiling back at me with a sweet, unabashed grin.

“Looks like *you* just made another friend! Congrats, Kamiki-kun!” Hoshihara gently clapped her hands together twice to celebrate the occasion.

“Heh... Y-yeah, th-thanks,” I said, stammering awkwardly. Whether due to generalized shyness or embarrassment, I could feel my cheeks growing flushed, and a fuzzy feeling welled up in my chest. I turned away in the hopes that she wouldn’t pick up on my discomposure, but thankfully she either didn’t notice or was too polite to comment. Instead, she walked back to her own desk and retrieved her backpack. Then, slipping her arms beneath the shoulder straps as she made her way toward the door, she turned back again to wave goodbye.

“Okay, think I’m gonna head home, then,” she said. “See ya later.”

“Yeah, see ya later...” I replied, echoing her words without even thinking.

The classroom fell quiet once more. Even long after Hoshihara was gone, that strange, fuzzy feeling in my chest refused to abate. In fact, I could actually feel my pulse quickening even more, until eventually my heart was beating so hard and fast, I could almost hear it. I couldn’t get Hoshihara’s smile out of my head; all of the words we’d exchanged just kept playing again and again in my mind on repeat. As the realization set in that she and I had actually found something we had in common, and that her number was now safely recorded in my cell phone, my body temperature continued to rise. I could talk to her again any time I wanted—and the thought sent a numbing chill of elation coursing through my entire body from toe to tip. My head was spinning with thoughts, and every one of them was of her. I found myself wanting to cry out as loud as I could for no reason whatsoever.

Oh god.

I clutched at my chest in vain, hoping it might calm my racing heart. This was a sensation I knew; I’d felt it before, if only once. In another corner of the

building, the wind ensemble began to play—a booming orchestral number that sounded like the start of some grand adventure. From outside, I could hear the cheers and shouts of the school baseball team building to a fever pitch, before momentarily falling flat—and then came the telltale *ping* of metal colliding with cork and rubber.

I was pretty sure I'd just fallen in love.

The whole way home, it felt like I was soaring through the wind—standing tall on my pedals, never once touching the seat. As soon as I made it back, I headed straight for my room and practically dove into bed. My heart was still fluttering like crazy. I pulled my cell phone out of my pocket and opened my address book. Seeing the name “Natsuki Hoshihara” slotted in amongst the others, I felt a goofy smile creep up onto my face, and my body shivered in euphoria.

“Congrats, Kamiki-kun!”

Her voice still rang in my ears as her radiant smile flashed through my mind. Burying my head in my pillow, I squealed and gleefully kicked my legs against the mattress, drawing loud creaks from my bedframe. Even this did little to calm me down, and with no other outlet for my pent-up excitement, I started pacing in circles around my bedroom. It wasn't long before there came a pounding on the wall from the room next door.

“Would you shut up and die already?!” came the disgruntled voice of my sister, Ayaka. Although I thought it a bit harsh for a girl in her second year of junior high to wish *death* upon me over a little bit of noise, I agreed that I needed to calm down—so I sat on the edge of my bed and took deep breaths, one after another, until eventually I felt like I'd regained my composure.

Hoshihara... Natsuki Hoshihara. A peppy, energetic girl whom I'd only been in the same class with since the start of sophomore year. Up until today, I only ever thought of her as just another cute and cheery girl, but now that I'd actually gotten to talk to her one-on-one, I saw that my preconceptions clearly weren't giving her enough credit. There was something irresistibly endearing about her goofy, sheepish smiles and over-the-top reactions. How had I not realized just how attractive these things were, considering we'd been in the

same class for months now? I was actually looking *forward* to going to school. Imagine that.

Oh, wait. That's right. I was supposed to shoot her a message with some book recommendations, wasn't I? She said she wasn't much of a reader overall, so I guess I should try to pick things with lower page counts just in case she doesn't like them, or—

I punched myself in the forehead.

"No... Calm down, you idiot," I said, rubbing my brow as I shook my head.

She'd only given me her contact info. What was I getting so ahead of myself for? Sure, it might have been a big deal for me, but was I really stupid enough to think it was a big deal for a popular girl like her?

Had I learned *nothing* from what happened last time in junior high? Clearly I was letting my feelings blind me to the reality of the situation again—only seeing what I wanted to see in her, and only interpreting her words and actions in the way that had the most positive implications for me. I needed to start thinking rationally. Objectively.

I mean, think about it—this was a cute girl who was extremely friendly and very sweet. Did I really think I was the first guy in the whole school to have noticed? Surely there were plenty of other guys who had their eye on Hoshihara. Not that I'd ever heard of any relationship drama involving her, but it certainly wouldn't have surprised me to find out she had a boyfriend. Even if she didn't, it was entirely possible that she already had a crush on some other guy, just like the girl I fell for back in junior high.

Had I already forgotten the lessons that mess taught me? Never mistake kindness or a sweet smile for affection; everyone always has their own endgame they're working toward—and usually, in the long run, it doesn't involve you.

...Okay. I could feel my common sense returning to me. For now, the best policy was to play it safe—assume she'd merely gotten excited that I was reading her favorite books, and that she'd only shared her contact info because she got caught up in the heat of the moment. Under no circumstances should I interpret that gesture as anything more—or, god forbid, get carried away and

try to ask her out. I swore to myself, right then and there, that I would not make the same mistake twice.

But just as I finally began to regain my composure, I felt my cell phone vibrate from where I'd placed it on the bed. I picked it up and flipped it open to find that I had one new message. It was from Hoshihara.

Hey, just wanted to let you know I went ahead and bought that book you recommended—The Echidna's Dream! Might take me a while to get through it, just 'cause I'm a slow reader, but I'll definitely let you know what I think when I'm done!

The message was accompanied by a photo of a hand holding up the cover of said book, taken in what appeared to be her bedroom. *No way.* Had she really gone out and bought it the very same day I'd recommended it to her?! My previous emotional headspace came roaring back with a vengeance. All bets were off now. I jumped back on my stomach into bed and kicked my legs against the mattress even harder.

Right on cue, there came another banging on the wall.

"Drop! Dead!"

I still thought that was a bit much.

Hoshihara and I exchanged a few messages back and forth after that, but then the conversation reached a natural end. I was amazed how much mental energy it took just to compose a decent message—and how agonizing it was having to wait for a response! There were several times when, as I sat counting every minute and every second between replies, I'd think of a cleverer response, or a better way of wording things, and kick myself for only having come up with it in hindsight. Even so, I couldn't complain; I was so elated, my hands were still trembling with excitement long after I hit send on my final reply. It was so bad that Ayaka picked up on it at dinnertime, asking why I was "grinning like such a creep." But she was always saying things like that about me, so I didn't pay it

any mind.

Although it was already eight o'clock at night, the exhilarating emotional high had yet to subside. I caught myself fidgeting nervously, unable to sit still or calm down. And so, worried I'd only get yelled at by Ayaka again if I started pacing around the house, I decided I might as well go for a walk instead. I told my parents I was heading out for a bit, then slipped on my shoes and went to get some fresh air.

It was cool and pleasant outside at this time of night, far from the sweltering humidity of this afternoon. There was a gentle, constant breeze blowing through the streets, and the sounds of summer insects tickled my eardrums. I started walking—first through my neighborhood, then down along the highway, before turning and walking all the way to the big river, and finally down along its elevated embankment.

I remembered when the river's floodplain had been a prime spot for viewing fireflies when I was younger—though now it had been converted into a prime spot for unlawful dumping. Large pieces of furniture and discarded appliances littered the riverside, and there was nary a firefly to be seen. And yet, I had to admit, there was a bit of a modern artistry to the rusty bicycles, the broken brown-box TV sets, and weed-infested sofas—all left to rot and decay out here under the stars.

I looked up at the sky; it was a half-moon night, though bright enough that I could make out the contours of the darkened half as well. The stars were out, glimmering from behind a thin veil of fast-moving clouds. It was a nice night for a walk—and the cool breeze against my face was enough to make me naturally want to quicken my pace. Before I knew it, I found myself awfully far from home. I pulled out my cell phone to check the time and found that it was already well past nine o'clock.

It's getting late, I thought. I'd better start heading home.

"...Hm?"

Right when I was about to turn back, I heard a strange noise coming from somewhere nearby. It sounded like someone hiccupping, almost—a series of quick, punctuated breaths with considerably longer periods of silence in

between.

I stopped and took a look around. Just down the hill from the embankment, on the side heading back toward the highway, there was a small park. And in that park, I spied the silhouette of someone sitting on one of the benches. Their back was turned to me, and their head hung low, so I couldn't see their face—though I could at least tell, thanks to a nearby streetlamp, that they were wearing a standard schoolgirl's uniform. *Probably a girl around my age, then.*

By this point, I figured I had a solid idea as to what the sound was. She had to be going through a pretty rough time right now, or else why would she be out there crying alone on a bench in the dark? At the same time, this certainly didn't seem like the sort of situation in which the help of a random passerby like myself was necessary, much less desired, and the last thing I wanted was to make her think I was some shady character offering help with ulterior motives. The best course of action, it seemed, was for me to ignore her and head back home... But for whatever reason, I couldn't bring myself to.

Upon closer inspection, I saw that her sailor-style uniform looked to be the same as that of Tsubakioka Junior High—the school Ayaka was attending, and my own alma mater as well. This thought made me feel a strange sense of kinship with her, and although I knew it wasn't my duty as an alumna to watch over every student who came after me, I still found myself suddenly curious about what the problem was and wanting to help.

After a few more moments' hesitation, I descended the embankment and made my way over toward the park. I circled around to the entrance and finally got a good look at the girl from the front—though she still had her face buried in her hands, so I couldn't make out her expression. But one thing did immediately stick out to me: her brightly colored hair.

Perhaps it was just the light from the park's streetlamp playing tricks on me, but it almost appeared to be the sort of naturally transparent, palish blonde that would typically imply non-Japanese descent. Assuming that was the case, then it could only be—

Nah. That doesn't even make any sense, I thought, laughing to myself.

Cautiously, I moved a little bit closer. With each step, I closed the distance

between myself and the bench, and I gradually got a better look at the girl—and eventually I noticed something odd about her attire. It was ill-fitting, as though she was wearing a uniform that was several sizes too small. The fabric looked to be stretched extremely tight around the shoulders, and the hem of the blouse was so short that you could see her midriff from the navel on down. And for whatever reason, she wasn't wearing any shoes or even socks. It suggested that she'd walked all the way out here on her bare feet.

The closer I got, the more my heart pounded again, though this was not the pleasant, fluttering excitement I'd felt earlier. This was more uncomfortable—that sort of awkward, anxious feeling you get at first when faced with something wholly different from what you've known before. Something you can't quite wrap your head around. And yet, I couldn't just walk away now. I had to know for sure.

About two, maybe three meters away from the bench, the bottom of my shoe scraped loudly against the pavement—and the person sitting on the bench jerked their head up. As the familiar bob of ash-blond locks billowed outward from the momentum, then drifted back down, I knew that I could feign ignorance no longer. Because I did, undeniably, know exactly who this person was.

“...Ushio?”

After all, we were once best friends.

Ushio had been born with naturally silver-blond hair, which he got from his Russian mother—and it was so bright, it was almost translucent. As far as I knew, he was the only person in all of Tsubakioka with hair like that. His mother had passed away when we were in elementary school, and his little sister, Misao, inherited their father's thick, black hair. Obviously, with the right combination of bleach and hair dye, I assumed anyone could artificially achieve Ushio's hair color, so I didn't want to jump to conclusions at first—but now that I'd seen his face, I could say without a shadow of a doubt that the person sitting in front of me was indeed my old friend Ushio.

Ushio looked at me like a deer in headlights: startled, but unable to move or

make a sound. He just sat there trembling, his already-pale skin now looking white as a sheet. I could tell from the swollen redness around them that he had indeed been sobbing his eyes out. Now his ash-gray irises simply stared back at me, wavering in disbelief.



Why was he crying? I wondered. It seemed reasonable to assume it had something to do with the outfit he was wearing—though I couldn't even hazard a guess as to *why* he was dressed like a girl at the moment. Had he always been into cross-dressing or something, and simply did a good job of hiding it? Maybe that was the case. But now that I'd seen him like this, I couldn't very well pretend I hadn't. I had to say something.

"U-Ushio...? Is that you?" I asked tentatively. "Wh-why are you dressed like that?"

His eyes shot wide open so fast, I thought they might pop out of their sockets. His mouth flapped open and closed, but no words came out. I'd never seen him so flustered and disconcerted before.

He tried to stammer out an excuse. "S-Sakuma, no, I—I can explain, I just—"

The crack in his usually calm, husky voice made it painfully obvious just how distraught he was. He was struggling to even string a series of words together, and before long all that came out of his gaping mouth were labored breaths. With every attempt to offer an explanation, the intervals between each breath grew shorter, and soon he was literally gasping for air, face contorting in agony as he clutched at his chest.

Oh god... He's hyperventilating!

"Ushio! A-are you okay?!" I cried.

Not a moment later, he pitched forward—and then he puked. I could only watch, stunned, as he loudly spilled his guts out onto the park pavement, forming a large puddle of fluids and half-digested food. Even after his body had wrung every last drop of bile from his stomach, he continued dry heaving for quite a while. When the purging eventually stopped, I could see a long, shiny trail of saliva extending from his mouth to the ground, illuminated by the nearby streetlamp.

Despite having witnessed it, I couldn't believe my eyes: my childhood best friend, one of the coolest, smartest, and most attractive guys in class, had just puked his guts out in front of me while wearing a girl's uniform. Even after the vomiting stopped, I couldn't bring myself to say a word—mainly because I had

no earthly idea what the right thing to say in this situation might be. Ushio, meanwhile, just kept limply hanging his head for a while, as though his soul had just exited his body. Then, after a long and awkward silence, he rose unsteadily to his feet and took off like a bullet from a gun. As he passed by me, I caught a quick glimpse of his face. He was crying yet again.

And so I was left there, alone in the empty park, with only the clear and resonant singing of the nightly insects to keep me company. I couldn't shake the feeling that somehow, I'd just inadvertently made a huge mistake—one I could never take back.

As soon as I made it back home, I went and lay down flat on my bed. It still didn't feel real—it felt so *unreal*, in fact, that I had to wonder if perhaps I was just having a weird dream. Every time I thought back on what had happened in that park tonight, I got this strange aftertaste in my mouth—something akin to guilt. As if I'd seen something I was not supposed to see. I knew it wasn't really my fault for having randomly been in the same place at the same time, but it still felt weirdly like my responsibility regardless. Like if I hadn't set foot in that park that day, Ushio wouldn't have started hyperventilating, and he wouldn't have had to puke his guts out.

I pulled out my cell phone, opened the address book, and scrolled down to the entry for Ushio Tsukinoki. Come to think of it, he was the very first contact I'd ever added back in our first year of high school. He'd just walked up to me while I was fiddling with my cell phone one day and offered to exchange numbers.

If I really wanted to, I could text him right now and ask what was going on, or offer to lend him an ear if he needed one. But I didn't know if drawing attention to it was the right thing to do in the first place. Something told me Ushio hadn't wanted to be seen like that, in women's clothing. In which case, it might very well be best to just forget what I'd witnessed tonight and never bring it up again.

"...Yeah, maybe that's for the best," I mumbled to my ceiling.

I was suddenly reminded of something I'd read in a book a long time ago: "*If*

lightning strikes on a mountain in the middle of nowhere, and no one's around for miles and miles, does the thunder even make a sound?" The answer, the book posited, was no—because no one heard it, so that sound may as well have never happened.

If there existed no trace of a given event—whether in recorded media or living memory—then it really was possible to pretend as if something never happened. It was the same line of logic behind claims like “it’s not cheating if you don’t get caught.” There was no doubt in my mind that Ushio probably wished our little encounter tonight had not occurred, so the best thing I could do for him right now was to wipe it completely from my memory and hope he could do the same. Then, neither of us would have to acknowledge the cross-dressing or the puking ever again.

So, I decided then and there that when I saw him at school on Monday, I would play it off like everything was totally normal. I wouldn’t treat him any differently whatsoever. He’d go back to being one of the most popular guys in class, and I’d resume my role as a social outcast. That was clearly the best play here—for him and me both.

My mind was made up.

Unfortunately, Ushio didn’t end up coming to school on Monday. The teacher told us he’d called in sick with the flu. And although a few of my classmates did express concern for him (or, alternatively, crack jokes about him being a wimp), no one was talking about it anymore by the time second period rolled around. This led me to believe that I was the only one in class who knew anything about (what I presumed to be) the real reason for his absence. I couldn’t say I blamed him for needing a day off to recover from an embarrassing moment like that. I prayed that was all this was, and that he’d come waltzing through the classroom door tomorrow like nothing had ever happened.

But Ushio didn’t come to school the next day either.

Or the day after that.

Or even the day after that...

As the days went on, more and more of my classmates expressed genuine concern for Ushio—especially those who were in his close circle. Each morning, as soon as they found out he was absent yet again, they'd start flashing each other concerned looks, wondering aloud what had happened to him, if perhaps he'd come down with something far worse than the flu, noting how he hadn't been coming to track practice either. During one of these group conversations, I overheard that no one had even been able to get in touch with Ushio, not even among his closest friends. Apparently, they'd gone to try and visit him at his house on at least one occasion, but they were turned away. I couldn't blame them for being apprehensive—even *I* was at a loss as to what to do now.

Should I send him a message? Call him? Go stop by his house?

I was worried about him, obviously. When I imagined the possibility of him simply dropping out of school and never showing his face here again, my stomach sank. I started kicking myself for ever stepping out the door to go for a walk that night.

But the days came and went, and still I had no clue what to do about it.

Until eventually, near the tail end of June, after Ushio had been absent more than ten days, Ms. Iyo opened our morning homeroom period by announcing that there was “something very important” we needed to talk about.

“Come on in,” said Ms. Iyo.

Her voice rang out in the hushed classroom. All of my fellow classmates held their breath as they watched the sliding door rattle open—and then a new student walked in.

The classroom was abuzz immediately. From every corner came baffled cries of “Huh?” and “Wait, what the...?!” as some students stared in wide-eyed shock, while others furrowed their brows and frowned with abject disgust, and still others grinned uncomfortably as if they weren't sure whether it was intended as a joke. From my seat at the back of the classroom, I could see all

the varied reactions this student's entrance was getting—but only I knew, deep down, what to expect before they even walked in the door. Still, I couldn't help but gulp and stare in speechless surprise like all the rest of them.

The student now standing up on the podium was Ushio Tsukinoki. Only today, he was wearing a standard-issue Tsubakioka High girls' uniform.

To be completely honest, with his fair complexion and slender build, it actually looked quite natural on him—far more so than the ill-fitting uniform he'd been wearing in the park that night. My eyes were naturally drawn to the pair of classy black tights extending from beneath his skirt. Considering he was already quite the pretty-boy, I really might have taken him for a girl had I not known any better.

Obviously, my fellow classmates and I *did* know better. After all, he got changed with the rest of us guys before gym class, and he was on the boys' track and field team. It seemed I wasn't the only one who felt pretty disoriented by the sight, unsure how to react. But in the end, it was Ushio himself who broke the awkward silence:

"I'm sorry for not responding to any of your messages or phone calls while I was away," he began, expressionless and monotone, as though he were reciting a speech he'd rehearsed in advance. Unlike his appearance, his voice was unchanged. "I'm sure this will probably come as a shock to you all, but the truth is, I've been questioning my gender for a long time now. And last week, I talked it over with my family, and I decided I'm going to try living my life as a girl from now on. I hope you'll all understand and accept me regardless."

As soon as Ushio finished speaking, an uneasy quiet fell over the classroom once more. Eventually, one of the guys sitting near the front of the room (who was always running his mouth and saying stupid things) raised his hand.

"Uh, so like... Does that mean you've actually been a girl this whole time?" he asked. "Should I have been calling you Ushio—*chan* instead of Ushio-kun? My bad, dude."

This flippantly insincere question broke the silence and got a few light chuckles from the peanut gallery.

Ushio gave a slight frown but attempted a genuine answer. "...Sure, you can interpret it that way if you like. But no, I'm not that picky about terms of address. You can keep calling me 'Ushio-kun' if you like."

"Okay, but what if you need to take a leak? You just gonna use the girls' bathroom from now on?"

"Well, uh..."

Ushio faltered at this, then awkwardly bit his lip and lowered his gaze as another boy in class opened his mouth to ask a question in a carefree, lethargic voice.

"So hey, like... You're just messing with us, right? Because, like, no offense, it's starting to get a liiiiittle uncomfortable in here, so it's kinda hard to tell. Like, I can respect the dedication to the bit and all, but c'mon, man." The boy turned to his fellow classmates in search of agreement. "I'm not the only one who almost fell for it, am I?"

"Yeah, totally threw *me* for a loop too."

"Nah, I knew it was a joke all along."

"Does look weirdly good on him, though."

One by one, the boys surrounding the original speaker added their voices to the choir of commentators on Ushio's unexpected transformation—and all of them seemed to be saying the same thing: "Okay, very funny. But you should probably drop the bit now." There was no perceptible malice in their manner; if anything, it seemed like they were trying to give Ushio an easy out. As if they were trying to keep the most popular kid in class from embarrassing himself any further.

Ushio shook his head. "It's not a joke," he said in a firm yet quiet voice. This left his friends at a loss for words, and silence descended on the class again. "It's not a joke at all." He repeated himself, slow and sure, his expression earnest.

The air in the room seemed to freeze over.

I could hear the lecture being given in the classroom next door.

“All right, folks! I think we can leave it at that!” said Ms. Iyo—who’d been carefully observing from the sidelines—clapping her hands twice as she resumed her post. “Go ahead and take your seat, then, Ushio! I’ve got a class to teach here. Hope you’re all ready for the kanji quiz today!”

Despite her cheery tone, this clearly came as an unwelcome reminder, as my classmates all groaned and begrudgingly pulled out their Japanese textbooks. Ushio gave a slight bow to Ms. Iyo, then headed to his desk. It felt like the sudden calm before a storm.

As soon as first period was over, quite a few of my classmates rushed over to Ushio, crowding his desk. They assailed him with all manner of presumptuous, brazen questions: Had he bought that uniform himself? Had he always wished he could be a girl? Was he wearing women’s underwear right now? Ushio, clearly a little uncomfortable, mostly shrugged these off with vague, noncommittal answers.

“Hey, bud. Strange times we live in, huh?” someone said to me. I turned to see Hasumi, who stood by my desk as he watched the commotion swirling around Ushio.

“Yeah, no kidding,” I said. “Still can’t believe it myself.”

“You mean you never saw any hints of that sorta thing in the past?”

“No, not at all. I mean, he’s always had somewhat feminine facial features, and I remember thinking he *looked* kinda girly even as a kid... But no, he’s always been a boy in my mind, and that’s how he’s always presented himself at school and whatnot.”

“Any chance he’s secretly been a girl all along and you just didn’t know?”

“No, dude. Of course not... Well, I don’t think so.”

“Wait, so you’re *not* sure after all?”

Thinking back on it, I supposed I hadn’t technically received visual

confirmation one way or the other. Even when we stayed at each other's houses when we were kids, we bathed separately, and Ushio *did* always sit out on pool days back in elementary school. If I recalled correctly, he was excused from participating due to a chronic skin condition or something, so I'd never once seen him in a swimsuit.

W-wait a minute. What if he has secretly been a girl this entire time?

But then I remembered, no—we used to go to the bathroom together back in early elementary school, and I could swear I remembered a few times we'd stood side by side using the urinals together. Not that I'd peeked over the divider or anything, but that obviously wouldn't be possible to begin with if he'd been born the opposite sex...right?

Ugh, great... Now I'm second-guessing my own memories.

"Nah, you're prolly right, though," said Hasumi. "He's gotta be a dude."

"What makes you so sure?" I asked.

"I mean, think about it, man. It's not like they'd let him compete in regionals and whatnot if he was falsifying his gender, would they?"

Oh. Right, good point. Given that there were unavoidable differences in terms of average physical strength between the sexes, it would make sense that non-co-ed sports teams and whatnot would have processes and regulations in place to prevent people from keeping their biological sex a secret. Also, I knew that track and field uniforms were generally pretty formfitting, so it wouldn't be easy to conceal regardless.

"Gotcha... Yeah," I said. "So I guess you could say he's—or *she's*, rather—a boy on the outside, but a girl on the inside."

"Yeah. Gotta say, though—it kinda adds up for me."

"Wait, huh? What do you mean by that?"

This assertion caught me off guard.

"Consider it for a sec, dude. Doesn't it seem a little weird that a guy like Tsukinoki, who's always been super popular with the ladies, has never once had a girlfriend? Kinda makes me wonder if he's been contemplating this change for

a long time.”

“Ohhh... Yeah, I see what you mean...”

I had to admit, I was pretty impressed with these logical inferences Hasumi was making; first the thing about regional track meets, and now this. He had a point. As attractive and popular as Ushio was, I’d never once heard a whisper of any relationship drama involving him. I’d always assumed it was simply because he had ridiculously high standards, or had his eyes set on someone in particular who wasn’t interested, but it was possible that he simply had no interest in women to begin with. Not that being a girl meant one could *only* be attracted to boys, of course, but it was certainly a reasonable explanation.

I glanced at Ushio, who was still getting bombarded with questions like a celebrity at a press conference and starting to look exhausted by it all.

“I’m going to try living my life as a girl from now on.”

Ushio’s words echoed through my brain like a recording on repeat. I thought of the look in his—*her* eyes as she stood up there on the podium; there was a braveness in them that felt deeper than simple determination. She was no longer the sobbing, inconsolable mess I’d seen in the park that night. I wondered what had inspired this newfound resolve.

“All right, what the hell is going on?!”

An angry shout erupted from someone nearby, and my heart nearly jumped out of my chest. Ushio and I—and the whole class, really—flicked our gazes to the doorway, where a tall boy with dark, tanned skin stood. As I recalled, his name was Fusuke Noi, and he was a member of the track team. I only knew this because I remembered seeing him onstage with Ushio during a school assembly, receiving some sort of award. He barged into the classroom and stomped over to Ushio’s desk.

“Hey, Ushio. Are you just screwing off now, or what?!”

The boy was seething. My fellow classmates and I held our tongues and watched the altercation play out with uneasy anticipation.

“That wasn’t my intention, no,” Ushio said calmly, remaining in her seat as she gazed up at Noi glowering down at her.

“Then why the hell haven’t you been coming to practice, huh? ’Cause apparently that stuff about you catching the flu was a big fat lie. We’ve got regional preliminaries coming up, you know... Do you just not even give a damn about that?”

“I already quit the team.”

“Scuse me?”

Murmurs broke out across the classroom. Clearly it wasn’t just Noi who was surprised to hear that Ushio, who’d gone to regionals even as a freshman, had quit the track team. Even a guy like me, who knew next to nothing about sports team etiquette, recognized what a big deal this was. A successful athlete quitting the team halfway through their high school career was akin to snatching one of the crowning achievements of your adolescence—not to mention all the social status and respect it earned you—and throwing all that time and effort down the drain.

Obviously, Ushio knew what she was doing here. She gazed up at Noi with a genuinely apologetic look on her face. “I’m sorry for not talking to you about it first,” she said. “But I’ve made my decision. I handed in my resignation notice first thing this morning. Too late to change my mind now.”

“All right, *now* you’re just trying to piss me off.”

Noi grabbed Ushio by the collar and yanked her up out of her chair. The girl sitting in the next desk over let out a shriek, and one of the guys scrambled to his feet to step in, but Ushio casually raised a hand for him to stand down. There was a calm to Ushio’s expression as she stared at Noi—as though she was resigned to her fate.

“Go ahead and hit me if you want, Fusuke.”

“...I’m just gonna ask you one last thing,” said Noi. “And I want an honest answer. Heard something about you sayin’ you wanted to be a girl from now on? Was that a joke, or is that true? And did you really quit the track team?”

The whole class was on tenterhooks. You could cut the tension with a knife.

Then came Ushio’s reply. “Yeah. It’s true. And I did.”

“All right. Think we’re done here, then,” said Noi, releasing his grip.

Ushio gently sat back down and smoothed out her ruffled collar.

“Guess I was wrong about you,” Noi said as he turned his back on Ushio, then quietly left the classroom. For a short while after that, nobody said a word.

Halfway through second period, I had a minor realization. It seemed not just Ms. Iyo but all of the faculty members had been made aware in advance of Ushio’s intent to live her life as a girl from now on. If they hadn’t, surely they would have said something at least when they saw her wearing that uniform today—but none of them batted an eye.

My best guess was that Ushio and her family had let the school know beforehand, and the teachers had been notified not to comment on it. *Jeez, talk about being thoroughly prepared.* Ushio certainly seemed serious about making this transition.

“Man, I really don’t get it, though...”

I was now thinking aloud, albeit in a whispered voice that I assumed no one could hear. It seemed like such a waste to me for someone who—as a guy—had been blessed with brains, charm, and good looks, not to mention athletic prowess and popularity with the ladies, to become a girl. But I knew that for Ushio, none of that stuff probably mattered one bit by comparison.

“Yeah, I just don’t get it, I guess,” I mumbled again.

“Hm? What’s that, Kamiki-kun? Is this one too hard for you?”

Aw, crap! Somehow, my English teacher had heard my musings from all the way at the other end of the classroom. *Was I that much louder than I realized? Yikes.*

“N-no, sorry,” I said. “Don’t mind me. I’m okay.”

“Are you sure? Well, okay then.”

A few of my classmates turned and shot me quizzical glances. *C-come on, Sakuma. Get it together, you idiot.* I really needed to pay better attention. It wasn’t just English; I hadn’t been able to absorb any of the lesson material from

first-period Japanese class, either. Unless I wanted to fail the upcoming end-of-quarter exams, I needed to stop thinking unnecessary thoughts and focus on the lecture of the hour.

Something dawned on me then: next period was gym class.

After the bell rang and the English teacher left the classroom, I watched Ushio carefully out of the corner of my eye. At our school, boys would get changed here in the classroom, whereas girls went down to the locker room. More than half of my female classmates had already left. I wondered what Ushio would do.

Realistically speaking, I assumed she would still get changed with us boys, at least for now. At the same time, if she truly wanted to live her life as a girl, she'd probably *want* to get changed with the other girls...wouldn't she? Apparently, I wasn't the only one curious to see what she would do, as I caught several of my other classmates stealing glances at Ushio as they chatted among their friends. In the end, Ushio stood up and, with her school-issued tracksuit under one arm, exited the classroom.

"Wait, seriously?" someone muttered, and I was thinking the exact same thing. A few of the guys, many of whom were only half-changed, poked their heads out the door. I joined the pack.

However, Ushio walked down the hall in the opposite direction of the girls' locker room, past the stairwell, and then entered the nearby multipurpose room—an empty space that no one else, boy or girl, was using at the moment. This would serve as Ushio's personal locker room, apparently.

Seeing this, the other guys around me sighed—some in relief, others in disappointment—and made a few predictably disrespectful comments as they went back to changing right then and there. Realizing I'd fallen into the trap of being a rubbernecker just like them, I felt a little disgusted with myself and promptly withdrew from the crowd of onlookers. Upon returning to my seat, I overheard a conversation nearby.

"So hey," said one of the guys. "You think he's really serious, or what?"

"Gotta be, dude," said another. "No way he'd go this far for a one-off joke."

“Yeah, I guess... Plus, all the teachers knew about it. I just can’t believe it.”

“I mean, I always thought he acted kinda girly, to be fair... Can’t say I’m all that surprised to find out he’s into cross-dressing.”

“Yeah, same. Speaking of—you think this means he likes dudes too, or no?”

“What? Nah, c’mon, man. Get real.”

“Well, but think about it, dude. He said he’s been questioning his gender for a long time, right? Like, he thinks he’s a woman on the inside. So then, wouldn’t it stand to reason that he’s probably attracted to men too?”

“I guess, now that you mention it... Then how do you think he must’ve felt getting changed in here with a buncha half-naked guys up until now?”

“Prolly thought he was the luckiest guy in the world.”

“Sounds about right, yeah.”

Like hell it does, you idiots.

I wanted to cover my ears to block out their stupid conversation, but I didn’t. As inane and contemptible as their theorizing was, I couldn’t help but eavesdrop. It was like that feeling you get when you see something truly awful but can’t bring yourself to look away—even when you know it’ll only put you in a terrible mood. Hearing them ridicule Ushio filled me with righteous indignation and disgust with myself for not standing up and saying anything, but also that weird sense of relief you get upon hearing people talk smack about someone other than yourself. This strange haze of jumbled emotions slowly expanded, billowing up until my whole chest was filled with a jet-black cloud of discomfort.

“Though if he was into dudes, I guess that’d make him a you-know-what.”

“No, I don’t know what. C’mon, just say the word, dude.”

“Oh, please. Like you don’t know what I mean. It’d make him a tra—”

Finally, reason won out. I shot to my feet, grabbed my gym clothes, and stormed out of the classroom. From there, I headed down to the gymnasium alone. *These people are all despicable—do they think they’re still in elementary school, or what?*

As I grumbled internally, I remembered an incident from many years prior.

It happened back when I was in the second or third grade. On the way to my elementary school each day, I walked past an old, run-down, one-story house where two older men lived together. As I recalled, one of them had thinning hair, and the other was slightly plump. The two of them would always be out in the yard doing radio calisthenics each morning as we walked to school, and as such they came to have a bit of a reputation among the kids from my block—but not a good one. Here in Tsubakioka, they were branded as outcasts—sexual deviants, even.

The adults in town all warned us to stay away from them, so kids would either avert their eyes or point and laugh. That was the norm for us backwater hicks, and at the time, I never once even questioned it. Whenever I heard stories about the older kids getting plucky and throwing empty cans on their lawn or egging their windows, my only reaction was one of vague, fearful awe.

Those men had long since moved away by now, it seemed, but the old, ramshackle house still remained. And now, I was old enough to understand that they had most certainly not been “deviants” by any stretch of the imagination—they’d simply been unlucky enough to choose to live in what had to be one of the most prejudiced, least inclusive communities in the country, quick to judge anyone who was even slightly different from themselves. Not that *everyone* here was a total prick, and I didn’t consider myself to be some pure saint of open-mindedness either... But I knew who the real villains were here, and it wasn’t those two men, nor was it Ushio.

It was this whole goddamn town, this whole backward-ass community.

In gym class that day, the boys played volleyball and the girls played badminton. Ushio did not participate in either. Although she’d changed into her gym uniform, she simply sat on the sidelines, silently working on some sort of paperwork. Occasionally I’d cast a furtive glance in her direction, but I never once caught her looking up.

When gym was over, there was barely enough time to make it back up to the classroom and get changed before the break ended. Then, after a thankfully

uneventful fourth-period math class, the bell rang and lunch hour was upon us. Most days, this also served as the cue for five or six of our classmates to immediately rise from their seats and gather around Ushio's desk, but today not a single person went anywhere close. I could tell from the general vibe of the room that everyone had decided to treat her like a leper. It was a strange feeling; not even two weeks ago, the thought of Ushio spending an entire lunch hour alone would have been unthinkable to me.

"You're still thinkin' about Tsukinoki, aren'tcha?" said Hasumi as he brought his lunch over. He borrowed the chair from the next desk up to sit across from me.

"I mean, it's kinda hard not to, given the circumstances..." I admitted.

"Yeah, some friends those guys are, right? Abandoning the poor kid the literal instant they sense any danger of being seen as weird or uncool." His voice dripped with disdain as he opened his bento box and grabbed his chopsticks.

He was right, of course. I wanted to nod my head in agreement, but then I realized that I technically qualified as a "friend" who'd abandoned Ushio as well, and long before any of these other kids did. I had no right to judge them, and that was a hard pill to swallow. Hoping to wash the bitter taste out of my mouth, I reached down to pull out my own lunch. But just then, a lone student *did* actually get up and walk over to Ushio's desk.

"Look, Hasumi," I said. "Guess Ushio's got one good friend after all."

Hasumi stopped mid-bite and whirled to see what I had seen: Hoshihara standing by Ushio's desk.

"Hey, wanna come eat lunch at our table?" Hoshihara asked with a mild-mannered smile, holding up her bento box—which was wrapped in a cute, patterned table napkin. After all the ridicule Ushio had suffered today, this was a sight for sore eyes, and it warmed my heart. That was Hoshihara for you: always willing to be a friend to those who needed one, regardless of what anyone else might think. I genuinely admired that indiscriminate kindness of hers.

"All right... I think I'll take you up on that, yeah," Ushio replied, sounding pleasantly surprised as she rose from her seat with bento box in hand.

And so, after following Hoshihara across the classroom, Ushio sat down at the so-called lunch table (which was really just four desks pushed together), where three other girls were already sitting: Arisa Nishizono, a short-haired girl with light brown skin named Mashima, and a long-haired girl with a cool demeanor named Shiina. Together, they were the four main members of the illustrious Nishizono clique. As Ushio gingerly removed the lid from her bento box, Mashima was the first to address her.

“So hey, I heard you quit the track team. Is that true?” she asked, gesturing at Ushio with the half-eaten melon bun she held in one hand. Apparently, this was still a bit of a sore subject for Ushio, as her expression went slightly stiff.

“...Yeah, I did.”

“Well, you should *definitely* join the girls’ softball team, then. Feel like you’d be our pinch hitter, like, right off the bat.”

Ushio’s eyes went wide. I was pretty taken aback by this as well. I had no idea Mashima was such a laid-back, open-minded person. I suddenly felt bad for having preconceptions about her based solely on her proximity to Nishizono up until now.

“Oh, wait,” she went on. “I guess maybe they wouldn’t let you play in tournaments, though? I dunno. I mean, it’s not like we have to undergo physical exams, so we could probably sneak you in, I guess...?”

“Marine. Chill,” said Shiina, interrupting her friend before she got too carried away. (Marine was a nickname, incidentally—last name Mashima, first name Rin. I thought it was pretty cute and clever.)

“Whaaat? Ah, c’mon. You *know* Ushio would be a natural. Heck, she used to compete in all sorts of sprints at the track and field events, right? Yeah, no—she’d be a base-stealing machine!”

Ushio chuckled at this, though she clearly felt a bit awkward. “I appreciate the sentiment...but I don’t think I’ll be doing any sports from now on, sorry.”

“Aw, maaan. That’s too bad.”

“Anyway,” Shiina butted in. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but are you wearing a little bit of makeup, Ushio?”

“Oh, uh, yeah... My stepmom said I probably should, so I let her put on just a tiny amount.”

“Hey, nothing wrong with that. Doesn’t look bad on you at all. Neither does the uniform, honestly.”

“Rwight?!” Hoshihara chimed in, mouth full of rice. “I wash finking the shame fing!”

“Nakki, *please*,” Mashima chided her. “You’re spitting all over the place.”

Hoshihara acquiesced and took a swig from her plastic bottle of tea. I watched her throat bob as she glugged it down, and then she pulled the mouth of the bottle away from her lips and let out a satisfied sigh.

“Shii-chan’s right, though!” Hoshihara went on. “I mean, you’re super slender, you’ve got perfect skin—it really is a good look for you, Ushio-kun! Heck, you look better in a skirt than *me*, honestly!”

“Ha ha... Thanks,” said Ushio. “Though I definitely wouldn’t go that far.”

“No, I’m serious! I’m just some random girl over here!”

Despite Hoshihara laying it on a bit thick, Ushio seemed rather touched by the sentiment, judging from the way her expression softened. While the actual content of their conversation was a bit unusual, I had to admit that from where I was sitting, it really did look like a group of four ordinary, attractive high school girls sitting together and making lighthearted conversation over lunch. It was a quaint, picturesque scene to behold—a heartwarming slice of life.

I couldn’t help but think, *Wow. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe she’ll be accepted after all.*

After how poorly morning homeroom went, followed by the rough encounter with Noi, I was a little worried that awkward tension in the air would be the new normal. It seemed that maybe I’d been overthinking it. After all, if even the most popular girls in class were willing to accept her, then surely everyone else would be soon to—

“Don’t you think, Arisa?” Hoshihara went on. “Doesn’t she look great?!”

I realized I’d forgotten one very important member of the group: Arisa

Nishizono, probably the most feared student in our entire class, boy or girl. Domineering, arrogant, and extremely competitive to boot. What's more, she had the skills to back up her overconfident personality. Despite her bleached hair, constant napping during lectures, and unwillingness to follow directions, even the teachers couldn't give her much flak when she was one of the top-performing students in our entire grade. While she was often overshadowed by Ushio in that regard, her academic achievements were nothing to sneeze at.

Would the self-righteous queen of the class accept Ushio's new identity without issue? That remained to be seen, and until we knew for sure, it was hard to claim that the worst was truly over. But now that Hoshihara had thrown the ball into Nishizono's court, I could only watch the latter with anxious anticipation as her chopsticks stilled and she languidly looked up from her meal.

"Mm? Sorry, what's up?" she asked. "I wasn't listening."

"Ugh, pay attention, will ya?!" said Hoshihara. "We were just talking about how great Ushio-kun looks in her new uniform. Doesn't she?"

"Oh, right... Ushio."

Nishizono looked over at Ushio with almost dubious eyes, as if sizing her up. The conversation that had been going on since Ushio joined the group screeched to a halt as the other four waited to hear Nishizono's response. Then, after an uncomfortably long pause, it finally came:

"Yeah, looks pretty good."

Hoshihara grinned from ear to ear. Even Ushio's lips curled into the faintest of smiles—evidently, this came as something of a relief to hear.

"See, I *knew* you'd agree!" said Hoshihara.

"But, like, Ushio's also just really good-looking in general, so that doesn't surprise me," Nishizono went on. "Honestly, if you went a little bit harder on the makeup, I think it'd look even better."

"Ooh, yeah! We should try that!" Hoshihara nodded.

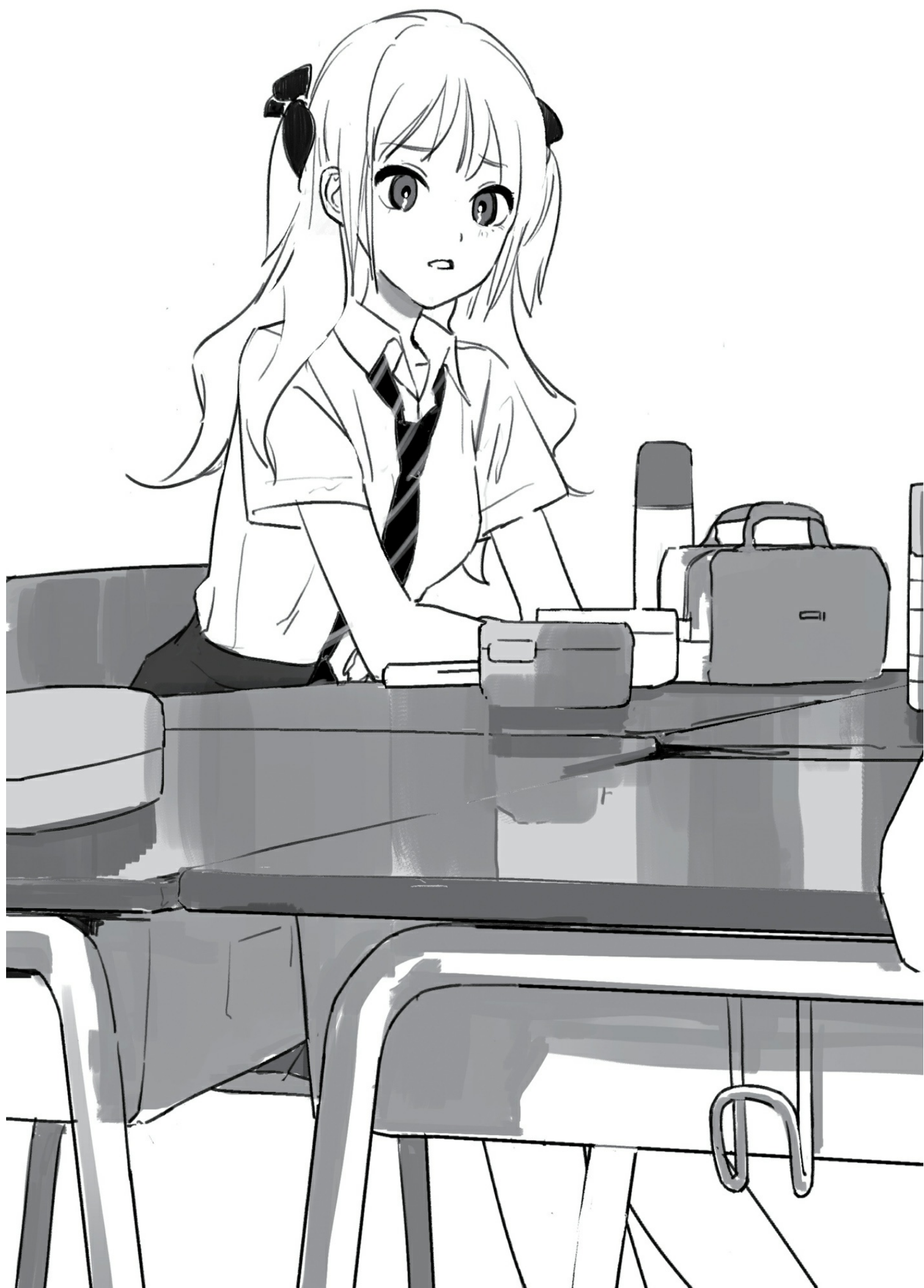
"And I guess I might suggest some different outfits too... Something a little less formfitting so your natural physique doesn't stand out as much."

“Ahh, gotcha... Yeah, can’t do much about that with school uniforms, but that’s a pretty good idea for casual wear, I’d say! Wow, you’re really thinking this through!”

“Hey, Ushio. Tell me something.”

“Hm? What’s that?” Ushio asked the nonchalant Nishizono.

“How long until you drop this whole cross-dressing thing?”



Hoshihara's sunny expression froze in place. The sudden tension was palpable; I could feel it in the air. The soft smile vanished from Ushio's face.

"...I'm not going to," she said.

"Why not?"

"Because I've decided this is who I want to be from now on."

"What does that even mean? You've been a boy your whole life, haven't you? And it's not like it was ever a problem before, so why not just stay that way?"

"Because I can't. And it *was* a problem—I just didn't realize it. I've been living my life wrong this whole time. But now I want to live it right."

"*Right?* You call *this* 'right'? Pretending to be a girl trapped in a boy's body or whatever? Because to me, that sounds about as objectively 'wrong' as wrong gets."

"You just don't—"

"Don't say I don't get it. I'm right, and you know it. And I'm not saying you can't ever wear girls' clothes, either, for the record. If you wanna throw on a skirt and some tights from time to time, go right ahead. But you should only ever do that sort of thing as a joke, or in the privacy of your own home. Don't go walking around town like that, for god's sake—no one wants to see that. I mean, read the room. Can't you see how awkward you're making things for everyone? You've been a boy your whole life, and now you expect us all to drop everything and treat you like a girl? That's just selfish. *And* irresponsible."

Nishizono paused to let out a short, disappointed sigh, then relaxed her expression—like a parent trying to gently explain to a child why what they did was wrong.

"So please," she went on, "do us all a favor and go back to the old you by tomorrow. If you drag this out for days, people are going to start thinking you're serious about this. And you wouldn't want everyone to give you weird looks wherever you go, would you? Just drop it, all right? Stop now while you can still play it off as a joke."

"Arisa," said Ushio, addressing the other girl by name in a lower, flatter voice

than usual. She fixed Nishizono with a steadfast gaze that could've passed as a glare. "The old Ushio Tsukinoki doesn't exist anymore. So do *me* a favor and forget about him."

As soon as Nishizono heard those words, you could almost see the reddish shades of revulsion and resentment paint their way across her face. She now looked at Ushio as if she were staring at a revolting pile of filth, or her mortal enemy.

"Okay, I've gotta go. This is grossing me out now," Nishizono said, grabbing her lunch as she rose from her seat. "Oh, and I was just being polite when I said you looked good in that. Don't think I actually meant it or anything."

And so, after spitting one last insult, Nishizono turned her back and sat down at a different table with another group of girls, whereupon she immediately joined in the conversation as though nothing had happened. The class resumed its usual lunchtime laughter and chatter; only around Ushio's table did a gloomy awkwardness linger in the air.

Classes were over for the day, which meant school was no longer in session. I spied Ushio quietly gathering her things to head home, which made sense. Now that she'd quit the track team, there was no reason for her to stay after school. For once, not a single person dared offer to walk home with her.

I thought back on what had happened just a few hours prior.

Shortly after Nishizono excused herself during lunch, Hoshihara valiantly struggled to resuscitate the conversation and liven things up again. But her efforts were in vain, and the awkward tension hung over their table all the way up until the bell rang. Then, once fifth period got out, not even Hoshihara tried to approach Ushio during the break. The most popular kid in class had officially become a loner. When I tried to imagine how Ushio must have felt about everything, all I could feel was pain—like my stomach was being tied up in knots. She hadn't even done anything to deserve this treatment. Granted, I could understand how such a drastic change might take a little getting used to, but no one had the right to judge Ushio for who she was—let alone ridicule her.

...Damn it. I'm getting pissed off again.

It wasn't my classmates I was angry with at this point, though. I was mostly just frustrated with myself for being too much of a coldhearted coward to reach out to Ushio or even say a word. Sure, I felt bad for her on the inside, but that was nothing more than cheap sympathy if I wasn't willing to act on it.

Now that I thought about it, I wondered if perhaps I was partially to blame for Ushio's sudden and unexpected transition. Maybe our encounter in the park that night forced her hand. If I hadn't seen her like that, perhaps she would have taken her time and found a more comfortable, less dramatic way of revealing this secret to everyone. Obviously, this was pure conjecture on my part—but assuming it was even a slight possibility, I felt like I had an obligation to make it up to her somehow.

I got up, slung my bookbag around my neck, and headed over to where Ushio sat. She noticed me coming before I reached her desk—as did the rest of the students still in the classroom. All eyes were on me as I stood there in front of her desk, resisting the urge to chicken out. I tried to put on the most natural-looking smile I could muster.

“Hey, so, uh... If you want, w-we could... I mean, w-wanna walk home together?”

I was extremely unaccustomed to making these sorts of casual invitations, so I stumbled over my words. Ushio blinked a few times, confused—but then her face relaxed into a gentle smile, and she nodded.

“Sure,” she said. “Let's go home.”

With her bookbag over her shoulder, Ushio rose from her seat, and the two of us exited the classroom together. I could feel every set of eyes in the building watching us as we went—but I didn't even think of looking back.

The air outside carried traces of humidity, as was typical of June. Ushio and I walked side by side, pushing our bikes down the narrow, paved road that cut straight through the paddy fields. This was a narrower, more roundabout road than the straight shot we usually took to school, but a far nicer one to walk home on with company, as there were seldom any passing cars to interrupt the conversation.

While we walked, I stole glances at Ushio out of the corner of my eye. She had double eyelids and a high-bridged nose. Her silver-blond hair swayed gently with every step. Her long lashes pointed downward as she kept her eyes fixed on the ground. As I lowered my gaze a bit, I couldn't help but stop for a moment at the slight protrusion of her Adam's apple—perhaps the only part of her current appearance that I struggled to see as anything but masculine, but that was plain old biology's fault. Still, she had an extremely fair complexion, and her black tights accentuated the natural curves of her legs in such a way that I was even tempted to call it alluring. For someone who'd only just become a woman, she really did look the part.

"...You're staring pretty hard, Sakuma," she said.

"Huh? Oh! M-my bad!" I apologized in a fluster. Embarrassment surged in my chest as she caught me shamelessly sizing her up—especially since she could probably surmise that I'd been rudely evaluating her from a femininity standpoint.

"You think I look weird, don't you?" she asked anxiously, lowering her gaze.

"No, not at all!" I said. "You could totally pass for a girl, if you ask me. Like, seriously, it doesn't look weird at all—I mean it."

"R-really? Well, if you say so..."

A wave of relief washed over me. After her day of being judged by just about every single kid in school, I didn't want to drag her down any further.

"You sure had a rough day, huh?" I said. "Sucks that you had to go through all that on your first day back..."

"Yeah... It was pretty tiring, if I'm being honest. Didn't even feel this exhausted after that time I ran a marathon."

"Well, at least you'll be able to get a good night's sleep."

Ushio chuckled weakly. This was the first time in years I'd heard her lower the facade and admit to being anything less than A-OK. I supposed that was a testament to just how brutal a day she'd had, which only made me feel worse for her.

“Take it easy for the rest of the day, all right?”

“Yeah, that’s the plan,” she replied, nodding.

Then came a break in the conversation.

Unbidden, an image of Ushio sitting on that park bench ten days ago flashed into the back of my mind. I wondered what had happened that night; I had *been* wondering for the past week and a half. But I wouldn’t allow myself to ask even now, because deep down, I still felt the best course of action was for both of us to just forget about it.

While I fumbled internally for another conversation topic, I glanced out across the rice fields. I watched a gray heron tread slowly and softly through the mud, pecking at bugs here and there as it went. Eventually, it stretched out its broad wings and took flight. Watching it go, I spotted two vapor trails lingering in the blue skies overhead.

“Been a long time since we walked home together like this,” I said, not really thinking about the words as they slipped from my mouth.

“It sure has,” said Ushio, lifting her gaze to stare off into the distance. “I don’t even remember when we stopped, exactly. Sometime in junior high, was it?”

“Yeah. Because we were both on different sports teams, for one... But then, yeah, we kinda let other stuff get in the way, too.”

This “other stuff” was all on me, of course, and I felt pretty guilty for painting my pettiness as a mutual failing on both of our parts. But Ushio didn’t seem to pay it any mind.

“Things sure have changed a lot in the past few years...” she softly observed. “Honestly, I kind of wish we could have stayed in elementary school forever.”

“Really? Me, I can’t *wait* to graduate high school and get the hell out of this backwater town.”

“Yeah, you’ve been saying that ever since we were little.”

“I mean, can you blame me? This town’s just one big prison slowly sinking into a massive rice field. Hang around too long, and you’ll just get dragged down into the muck like the rest of these mud-slurping swamp-lurkers.”

“Ha ha. What kind of metaphor is that?”

It was nice to hear her laugh, even if I’d only said it half in jest.

As we approached the end of the road, an apartment complex came into view. Outside, five or six girls who looked to be students from Tsubakioka Junior High were chattering blithely. When Ushio saw this, her expression clouded over once again, and she let out a small sigh.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“What do you mean?” she replied, startled.

“I mean, you just sighed like you’ve got something on your mind.”

“Oh, you heard that...? Sorry. Just reminded me of my sister, I guess.”

“Something happen between you two?”

“Yeah, she’s been refusing to talk to me lately.”

Wow, really? I found it hard to picture this behavior from Misao, but then again, Ushio *had* mentioned her going through a rebellious teen phase... I wondered if Ushio’s transition had anything to do with it.

“Do you...mind if I ask why?”

For a brief instant, I could have sworn I saw something sweep across Ushio’s face. But the moment passed too quickly for me to say for sure.

“Sure thing. I mean, it’s not a fun subject for me, but I was thinking I’d probably tell you eventually anyway.”

“Wait. You were?”

“Yeah. It’s about what happened ten days ago.”

I nearly did a double take. Was she really going to tell me what had happened that night? I’d been intentionally avoiding the subject out of consideration for her...but in no way had that dampened my curiosity. I held my breath and waited for more; Ushio slowed her pace, a sign that this was going to be quite a long story.

“It all started after I got home from practice that day.”

By the time I walked in the front door, I think it was about seven o'clock at night, and Misao was the only one in the house. My dad is always coming home really late from work, so I didn't pay that much mind, but it was strange to see that Yuki-san wasn't around at that hour. So I asked my sister where Yuki-san was—oh, right, sorry. That's my stepmom, by the way. Yeah, the one my dad got remarried to when we were in junior high.

Anyway, when I asked Misao, she told me to look on the desk, and I saw there was a note there—the one I mentioned earlier. It was from Yuki-san, just saying that she'd be home late that night because she had to go out for drinks with coworkers, and that dinner was already in the fridge, so we could just heat that up whenever we got hungry... I guess she just came home to make dinner, and then headed back out. So I figured, okay, might as well just go take a shower, which I did. When I got back out, I saw that Misao had changed clothes and was getting ready to head out the door.

I asked her where she was going, and she said she was running over to the nearby diner for a little study session with friends. By then, I think it was about eight o'clock at night—pretty late for a junior high girl to go running around town by herself, so I said maybe she should just study by herself at home tonight. But she wasn't having any of it.

“Oh, shut up. I'll be back before ten. Don't worry about it,” she said, then rushed out the door. I know—doesn't sound like her at all, does it? Especially with how sweet she always was to me when we were younger... But yeah, like I said, I think she's just going through a rebellious phase.

After that, I had the house all to myself. I ate dinner, did some stretches, and then I had nothing else to really do. No homework, so I just watched TV for a while. And as I was just kind of flipping channels, I saw this special feature about some really cool high schools from all across the country. And then there was this part where this one girl was, like...playing guitar in her schoolgirl uniform, singing some anime song.

And for whatever reason, I don't know... I just got really sad watching that, thinking like: what makes her so different from me, you know? I mean, the

answer is “a lot of things,” obviously, but it still really bummed me out.

Then I had a thought. Or more like an impulse, I guess I should say.

I wanted to see whether a schoolgirl uniform would look good on me. I’d never felt such an urge before, and it was hard to resist. I ran upstairs, heart pounding like crazy, and let myself into my sister’s room for the first time in I don’t know how many years. Her uniform was right there hanging on the wall, so I didn’t even have to look for it.

For a moment, I just kind of stared at it. My better judgment tried to talk me out of it. But then the scales tipped the other direction, and I reached out and pulled it off the hanger. It was really small on me...but I still managed to slip into it. I even got the skirt hook to clasp and everything. I didn’t do the neckerchief, though, since I wasn’t sure how to tie it.

Anyway, then I looked at myself in the mirror, and I honestly thought, “Hey, that doesn’t look half bad.” I think I got a rush of adrenaline or dopamine or some sort of brain chemicals from that—and it kind of made me feel bold enough to want to see what I’d look like in a pair of stockings while I was at it. Looking back, I probably wasn’t really thinking straight by this point, but I at least still knew better than to go rifling through my sister’s dresser. She probably wouldn’t want me looking in there...but then again, she probably wouldn’t want me sneaking into her room and putting her uniform on either, so I guess I’m kind of a hypocrite there.

After thinking it over a little, I was pretty sure I remembered seeing a pair of her stockings down in the living room, freshly washed and folded from the laundry. So I exited her room, headed down the stairs, and—oh, right. I don’t know if you remember the layout of my house that well, but the stairway up to the second floor is, like, right past the entryway into the house, so you have to go through there in order to get to the living room from upstairs.

But yeah, so, uh...Misao came home.

I was totally caught off guard. It hadn’t even been thirty minutes since she left the house. For something like a minute, we both just stood there, frozen, unable to say a word. Eventually, she said something like “What the hell? Why are you wearing my uniform?” And I had no explanation to give her. No possible

excuse that would justify trying on my little sister's clothing. So I just kind of stood there in silence, until eventually Misao got, well... Let's just say pretty indignant. And she just kept going—I don't know where in the world she learned to dole out such devastating verbal abuse, but I sure had a hard time believing the kinds of words that were coming out of her mouth.

And so I just...ran away, I guess. Right out the front door, without even putting shoes on. As I kept on running, I started feeling even more miserable, which only made me run faster...and I didn't stop until I reached that park. And you already know what happened there, of course.

But anyway, after that, I went home, and both my dad and Yuki-san were there, and we had a little bit of an emergency family meeting. Talked a lot of things over, decided where to go from here, and agreed that I should take some time off school. And, well...Misao hasn't spoken to or acknowledged me since. Though she'll definitely give me dirty looks from time to time. Not that I blame her, given that it's all my fault...

So yeah. Long story, I guess, but that's about the size of it.

Ushio sighed and took a moment to catch her breath. Meanwhile, my head was swirling with all sorts of thoughts. I'd been mentally prepared for it to be pretty heavy...but it was honestly worse than I expected, and I wasn't sure how to react. I definitely couldn't let her know that, though. I assumed she was only revealing all of this to me so frankly because she wanted to come to terms with what had happened and leave it all in the past rather than continue to dwell on it. Maybe she was even hoping I'd laugh it off, who knows.

But I didn't laugh. In the end, all I could say was "Man, that sounds rough" and nothing more. It felt like there was nothing I could say that wouldn't feel like a cheap or superficial reassurance. I still felt compelled to say something more meaningful, and so I just stood there, mouth hanging halfway open like an idiot, trying and failing to think of a better response.

"Aw, jeez," Ushio said with a self-deprecating laugh. "Well, this sucks. Here I thought talking about it might make me feel better, but I think it might have made things worse."

She came to a stop, and I realized we were already to the residential part of town. This three-way intersection was where her route home split off from mine.



“Sorry for being such a downer,” she told me. “Especially after you were nice enough to invite me to walk home together.”

“No, it’s fine. Don’t worry about it. Besides, I’m the one who asked...”

“It’s okay, yeah. Like I said, I was planning to tell you someday regardless.” Ushio gave a faint smile. It looked pretty cordial, even genuine, but I knew it had to be fake.

“...You don’t have to force it, all right?”

“Don’t worry. I’m not,” she replied. Then she took a few steps forward. “Hey, Sakuma?”

She cast her gaze back in my direction, but I honestly couldn’t tell if she was looking at me or some imagined focal point far off in the distance.

“Do you think I’m really the one who has it wrong here? Or should I just blame it on—”

Ushio stopped mid-sentence, then scoffed through her nose.

“Sorry, forget I said that. Thanks for walking home with me today. Bye now.”

She hopped on her bike, slipped her stockinged feet into the pedals, and rode away. I just stood there for a while, right in the middle of that three-way intersection, watching her as she went.

I couldn’t get that sad, lonesome look on Ushio’s face as we parted out of my mind. I wondered if there was any combination of words I could have said to avoid that sorry outcome. Even after getting home, changing, and collapsing onto my bed, I still couldn’t stop thinking about it. I spent probably about an hour racking my brain over it, but I failed to come up with even a single decent response. Not that finding one now would have changed anything—it was far too late for that. I just couldn’t help but wonder.

Ushio had been the only thing on my mind all day, I realized. How had a person whom I’d written off as being from a totally different planet until just recently grown to occupy such a prominent slice of real estate in my brain? I really couldn’t say.

I gazed up at the ceiling and let out a melancholy sigh—when all of a sudden, the door to my room swung open. It was Ayaka, dressed in her iconic, ugly school sweatsuit courtesy of Tsubakioka Junior High. I jolted upright at the intrusion.

“Hey. Let me borrow your electronic dictionary,” she demanded.

“How many times do I have to tell you not to barge in here like that? You’ve really gotta learn how to knock first.”

“Nah. Don’t wanna.”

And why the hell not? Was it really so much to ask to knock two or three times before entering? One of these days, she was going to walk in and see something *neither* of us wanted her to see—I just knew it. I considered blowing up at her to try to drive the point home...but held off. Anytime I yelled at her, she’d immediately fire back and start mercilessly attacking all of my sore spots, one shortcoming at a time. With her judgy, almond-shaped eyes and her bobbed hair cut to a razor-sharp rim above her shoulders, she was about as edgy as little sisters came. I was powerless to oppose her.

“Ugh. Fine, whatever. Pretty sure it’s one of these drawers...”

I stood up from my bed and headed over to my desk, then opened each drawer from top to bottom in search of my pocket-sized electronic dictionary.

“...Hey, Ayaka,” I said as I rummaged around, suddenly curious. “What would *you* do if a friend ever divulged a pretty major secret to you?”

“Wait. Since when do you have friends?”

“Wow, that was uncalled for. And not even the point. I’m asking what you would do in that situation.”

“I mean, it would depend on the secret, I guess. You find that dictionary yet?”

“Hey, don’t rush me... Oh, wait.”

Just then, my fingers hit upon their target in the third drawer of my under-desk filing cabinet.

“Is that it? Give it here,” said Ayaka, holding out an expectant palm. But I would not hand over my one piece of leverage so easily.

“Slow down. You need to answer my question first. *Then* you’ll get what you came for.”

“What? I don’t have time to play games with you.”

“C’mon, please?” I begged, placing my hands together.

“Ugh...” she groaned. “What kind of secret are we talking about here? Like, something embarrassing? Or did they do something bad?”

“Er, I guess it’s like...the sort of secret you don’t want everyone finding out?”

“Isn’t that literally every secret?”

She had a point there. But what genre of secret would “got caught wearing my little sister’s school uniform” fall under? *Hm...*

“Maybe more of an embarrassing secret, I guess?”

“Well, then I’d probably try to reassure them, like, ‘Oh, don’t worry about it! That happens to everyone from time to time!’ or whatever.”

“Mmm, I don’t think that’s strictly true in this case... Not sure that’d work.”

“Agh, this is getting obnoxious... Fine. Why don’t you just tell them one of *your* secrets? Then you’d be even.”

“I don’t think that’s the play either... Or, wait. Is it...?”

I wasn’t sure, but before I had time to dwell on it, Ayaka snatched the electronic dictionary out of my hands.

“Okay, think I’ve given you enough to work with,” she said. “Bye.”

And with that, she excused herself from the conversation (and my bedroom) as I stood there mulling over her advice. *Trading one secret for another to get “even,” huh?* The logic there was fairly tenuous, I thought, but it might just work.

“Hmmm... What’s a secret I could share...?” I pondered aloud.

I cast a side-eyed glance over to my bookshelf—or, more specifically, toward what I had hidden behind it.

No, I could never... That’d be way too embarrassing... Hrmmm, but then

again...

I hemmed and hawed as the scales tipped back and forth in my mind. After thinking it over a while, I decided to just brace myself for the worst and go for it. It was not something I was excited to share, by any means—but it wouldn't be a very embarrassing secret otherwise, now would it?

All right, yeah, whatever. Let's just show her and get it over with.

But just as I made up my mind, my phone vibrated on my desk. It was an incoming call. I reached down to grab it, wondering who on earth might be calling me at this hour—only to see that it was Hoshihara.

“Whuh?!”

I sputtered in surprise. A phone call from a *girl*? This was such a rare and unexpected occurrence that I flew into a panic. *Wh-what do I do...? Wait, what am I talking about?! Just pick up the phone, you idiot!* Trembling, I pressed the answer button.

“Y-yes, hello?” I said.

“Hey! It's Hoshihara! Sorry for the sudden phone call. Are you busy right now?”

Even over the phone, her voice was chipper and bright. I got that fuzzy feeling in my chest again, and the corners of my lips curled up into a cheesy grin.

“No, not at all. I'm totally, one hundred percent free, actually. Why, what's up?”

“Really? Phew, thank goodness. So hey—I finished reading that book you recommended to me, actually! But I kinda suck at writing up my thoughts via text, so I figured I'd just give you a call and tell you over the phone!”

“O-oh yeah? Sure, either way is fine with me. Whatever works for y—”

Just then, there came a loud banging on the wall. *Aw, crap. Ayaka's pissed.* Not wanting to risk having a “shut up” or “drop dead” get picked up over the phone, I hurriedly evacuated my room, shuffled down the stairs, put on my slippers, and stepped out the back door. *Okay, should be safe now.*

“Hello? Kamiki-kun, are you still there?”

“Yeah, I’m here, sorry. Just had to move to another spot. My little sister gets miffed when I take phone calls in my room.”

“Ooh, I didn’t know you had a sister! That’s neat, ha ha. I’m an only child, so I always kinda wished I had siblings.”

“Trust me, you don’t want ’em. Feels like she can’t go a single day without calling me gross or obnoxious or whatever.”

“Whoa, really?”

“Yeah. Sometimes she’ll even start throwing stuff at me.”

“Whaaat?! Okay, yeah, that does sound pretty bad...”

I was exaggerating a bit, given that there was only one time in recent memory I could remember this happening. I’d accidentally eaten her ice cream, and all she’d thrown was a tissue box, so at least she was rational enough to choose something that wouldn’t break or hurt me.

“I think I’m still pretty jealous overall. Because, like, both my parents work, right? So whenever I get home from school, there’s no one but me for hours. It’s pretty lonely, if I’m being honest.”

I could imagine that. I’d probably feel pretty alone at home too without my sister, terror though she was. I wondered if perhaps these feelings of isolation were partially to blame for how open and unreserved Hoshihara was in making an effort to be friends with anyone and everyone.

“Oh, sorry! Kinda went on a bummer of a tangent there! What was I saying again?! Oh yeah, so about the book...”

Hoshihara proceeded to gush to me at length about the novel I’d recommended to her, *The Echidna’s Dream*. I’d been a bit worried as to whether she would enjoy it, given some of its slightly more obtuse aspects, but it seemed she’d liked it just fine. She went through just about every scene in the book in order, giving me her candid impressions about each one. What really surprised me, though, was what a careful reader she was, even noting little things like “That was the same necklace as the one at the start of the book, wasn’t it?” or “I wonder if he was just parroting his grandpa’s words there,” and picking up on all of the foreshadowing. Her in-depth analysis made her sound

like a much more avid reader than she previously claimed to be.

“Anyway, yeah! You should give me some other good book recommendations sometime! I’ll totally check ‘em out!”

“Sure, I don’t mind at all. Can write up a list or something and text it to you.”

“Awesome, thanks! Y’know, you’re the only one I can talk about this sort of thing with, Kamiki-kun...”

I could tell from her tone that she hadn’t meant this in a particularly sappy or sentimental way, but it sent me over the moon regardless. Wistfully, I tried to remember if there was any way to record a phone call after the fact.

“Well, I’m pretty much free all the time, so you’re welcome to call or text me whenever you want,” I said. “Because, I mean...you’re the only one I can talk to about this stuff too, so...”

Oh god. It was only as these words were leaving my mouth that I realized just how badly I was embarrassing myself, but by then it was far too late to turn back.

“Gotcha! Okay, sounds good!”

Phew. It seemed she hadn’t heard that last part; I couldn’t imagine her as the type of girl to let something like that go completely unacknowledged. As a wave of relief washed over me, I heard the town’s six o’clock chime ringing off in the distance. I looked up and saw that the evening sky overhead was burning redder by the minute.

“All right, well... Guess I’ll message you again soon.”

“Cool, yeah... Oh, wait—hang on a sec.”

“Hm?”

“Was it just my imagination, or did I see you walking home with Ushio-kun after school today?”

I was totally blindsided by this drastic change in topic.

“Yeah, that was me... Why do you ask?”

“Just curious, I guess. Never seen you two hang out together before, is all.”

“Yeah. We don’t anymore, really, but I guess I was just a little worried about her... Oh, sorry—I should probably clarify: Ushio and I used to be best friends.”

“Wait, seriously?!”

I pulled my phone away from my ear as her voice peaked and blew out the tiny speaker. I certainly hadn’t expected her to be *that* surprised.

“Yep, we were really close back in the day. Hardly speak at all nowadays, for reasons I won’t get into, but yeah... Couldn’t help but feel a little concerned, given the circumstances, so I figured I’d just say screw it and offer to walk home with her.”

“Gotcha... Wow, you’re a really good friend, Kamiki-kun.”

“Nah, I wouldn’t say I’m—”

“No, really! I think that’s pretty big of you! Honestly, I was kind of in the same boat, like... Wasn’t really sure how to approach Ushio-kun myself today, even though we used to talk all the time, so I just kinda went for it. But after Arisa sort of went off on her, I felt really bad since I was the one who invited her over there, so I just couldn’t find it in myself to try reaching out again after that... Man, friendships are hard.”

This was quite the unexpected take coming from a girl who’d always seemed like such a natural-born socializer to me; the Natsuki Hoshihara I knew was beloved by all for her uncanny ability to make friends with anyone. But it seemed I might need to revise this impression, as even a girl like her struggled with human interactions sometimes.

“...Yeah, I kinda felt the same way—not really sure how I was supposed to interact with her and whatnot. The thing is, not engaging someone just because you’re not really sure what to do, well... It’s definitely the easy way out of an awkward situation, but nothing’s ever gonna come of it, y’know? And I guess for me, I felt like I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if I kept sitting idly by, so I figured now was as good a time as any to bury the hatchet and try to reconnect with her a little bit.” I took a deep breath before continuing. “Not that you should take friendship advice from a guy like me.”

“...No, I appreciate it. Like I said, you seem like a really good friend.”

“Y-you think so?” It was hard not to feel good about a compliment like that.

“Y’know, I think I’m feeling a little bit better about things now, actually. Thanks, Kamiki-kun! I’m glad we had the chance to talk.”

“Hey, don’t mention it. And same here—thanks for sharing your book review with me. Really enjoyed hearing your impressions.”

“Anytime, anytime! Welp, guess I’ll be checking my inbox for those other recommendations of yours. Talk to you later, then!”

“Yeah, talk to you later.”

After that, she hung up.

I stood there for a moment, stretching out beneath the gorgeous amber twilight. It wasn’t just the skies that looked prettier than usual; everything felt a bit more vivid after talking to Hoshihara. It was all I wanted to do now—and part of me was already hard at work thinking up things I could tell her next. But deep down, that other inner voice of mine was still warning me not to get too attached. I wondered which one I should listen to. I really couldn’t say, but for the time being, I didn’t care to overthink it. For now, I just wanted to bask in the afterglow and enjoy it while it lasted.

“All right. Let’s head back inside.”

I needed to pick out a few books I could recommend to Hoshihara. I also needed to grab that little secret I was planning to share with Ushio tomorrow.

The next morning, I left the house earlier than usual. The skies overhead were clear and blue as I pedaled my way through town over to Tsubakioka High. After walking inside and changing into my indoor shoes, I took a peek inside Ushio’s shoe cubby—empty. Not here yet. I stood off to one side of the entryway, leaning against the wall as I lay in wait.

There was something I wanted to give her. And so I waited.

The main entryway was still fairly quiet at this hour, but in another ten minutes or so, a veritable horde of students would come streaming in through those double doors, and once those floodgates were open, it was hard to even

hear yourself think. I dearly hoped Ushio would beat the rush—but after five minutes, then ten, she still hadn't shown. Even after the mad scramble died down, there was no sign of her. Typically she'd already be getting settled in the classroom by now. I wondered if quitting the track team had thrown her sleep schedule out of whack.

"Hey, whatcha doin'?"

"Whoa!" I exclaimed, startled by the proximity of this sudden greeting—but it was only Hasumi. He'd always been scarily good at sneaking up on people, I'd noticed. "Jeez, don't scare me like that... And nothing much. Just waiting for Ushio."

"What, Tsukinoki again? Damn, that ain't like you at all."

"Yeah, well. She's not showing up, in any case. Wonder if she slept in."

"...Wouldn't hold my breath if I were you, dude."

He made this ominous prediction like it was nothing. I furrowed my brow.

"And just what do you mean by that?" I asked.

"I mean, everyone's treating the poor kid like a goddamn leper. Especially after those nasty encounters with Noi and Nishizono yesterday. If that happened to me, you bet your ass I wouldn't feel like coming to school the next day. Or ever again."

"Oh, come on... Don't say that..."

As much as I wanted to believe he was wrong, Hasumi's comment wasn't without a kernel of logic. If anything, it seemed the likeliest explanation. All those negative interactions yesterday surely must have taken their toll on Ushio's mental state. I'd seen evidence of this myself, as it was probably the only reason I witnessed that rare moment of vulnerability from her during our walk home yesterday. Even *that* conversation ended on a pretty awkward note. If I were Ushio, I'd probably be too depressed to show my face at school.

"Anyway, I'm just spitballing here. You'd know better than me, I guess, what with you two being friends and all. If you wanna wait for Tsukinoki, you go right ahead."

“Yeah, I mean, that was the plan... At least until the warning bell rings.”

That said, I was starting to get a little bit anxious. Not that Ushio staying home was any skin off *my* back, per se, but I’d feel pretty bad if she stopped coming to school for yet another extended period. I considered giving her a call to check in—and that was when Hoshihara walked into the building. She quickly spotted us and trotted over.

“Well, if it isn’t Kamiki-kun and Hasumi-kun! Mornin’, you two!” She greeted us with her cheery, infectious smile. I couldn’t help but crack a grin myself.

“Yeah, hey. Morning.”

“Morning, Hoshihara-san,” said Hasumi.

“Aw, shoot!” said Hoshihara, looking up at the clock on the wall nearby. “Sorry, I didn’t do my math homework last night, so I was gonna try to squeeze it in before the bell rings! I’ll see you guys up there, though! Bye!”

There was almost an audible *fwoosh* as she dashed away up the stairs, leaving nothing but a faintly sweet fragrance in her wake. Math class was first period today; I wondered if there was any chance of her finishing the assignment in time.

“All right, man,” said Hasumi. “Think I’m gonna head out too.”

“Sure, no worries.” I watched as he headed up the stairs as well.

I glanced up at the clock; there were now less than five minutes left before homeroom began. I knew I should probably get going myself. After all, it wasn’t as if I had to give Ushio this shameful secret of mine first thing in the morning—worst-case scenario, I could always swing by her place on the way home from school.

And so, realizing it was probably a lost cause, I turned and started walking toward the stairwell. At that very moment, I caught a glimpse of silver-blond hair in my peripheral vision. *Oh, thank god.* I was relieved to see that she had indeed come to school today. What’s more, she was still wearing her girls’ uniform, despite all the weird looks, cruel treatment, and general ostracism that came along with that decision. She clearly had no intention of straying from this new course she’d chosen in life, regardless of how people might judge

her. I couldn't help but admire the confidence in her step as she strode right past them all.

I headed back in her direction and gave a little wave. She seemed a bit surprised to see me, but she changed shoes and walked over to me all the same.

"Morning," she said. "What's up? Waiting for someone?"

She seemed just a little bit under the weather. There were faint bags under her eyes, and her voice was heavy with lethargy. I assumed she was still feeling the exhaustion from yesterday.

"Yeah," I said. "Been waiting for you to show up, actually. Got something for ya."

"For me?"

I nodded, reached into my bookbag, and pulled out a thick stack of more than a hundred sheets of A4-sized paper. I handed it to Ushio.

"What's this?"

"An amateur novel I wrote back in junior high."

"A novel?" she said, perplexed, as she looked down at the manuscript she now held in her hands. "Er, okay, let's see here... *Record of Ragna*—"

"Hey, hey, hey! No need to read it out loud. Just shove it in your bag for now and you can read it at home. Well, not that you *have* to read it, obviously."

"Um... Sorry?"

"C'mon, let's walk and talk. We're gonna be late for class."

The two of us started off toward the stairs at a brisk pace.

"Why are you giving me this all of a sudden? Are you looking for feedback on it or something?"

"No, honestly, I don't even want to hear your thoughts. It's, like, *really* bad..."

"Then why did you give it to me?" she asked again, clearly a bit vexed.

I figured I should probably just tell her straight. "Because it's something I've

kept secret for a long time.”

“Okay... Why’s that?”

“Well, I’ve never told anyone this before, but for a while I really wanted to be a novelist when I grew up. So badly, in fact, that I wrote a whole book in junior high and submitted it to the Rookie of the Year competition. But I didn’t even make it through the preliminary round, and the feedback I got from the judges’ panel was *really* brutal. After that, I couldn’t see my own writing as anything other than total garbage, and it made me pretty embarrassed that I’d ever thought I had what it took to be an author... That’s why I’ve never told anyone about it.”

Ushio gave a tentative nod.

“Yesterday,” I went on, “you told me something pretty personal about yourself. Something I can only assume you didn’t want to ever have to tell anyone about. I figured maybe I could soften that embarrassment a little by telling you an embarrassing secret of my own, and that novel was the first thing that came to mind. Now we’re even, in a way.”

It had all been Ayaka’s idea, really—though now that I thought about it, I realized there was a minor problem with this plan: what in the world did Ushio stand to gain from this knowledge? What did she care whether I’d tried and failed to become a novelist? What was she supposed to say other than “Uh, okay”? And more than anything: in what universe did handing her something that even *I* admitted was absolute trash make us “even” in any sense of the word? If anything, it probably felt like I was just using her as a garbage disposal to dump some old emotional baggage onto.

Great. Now I’m getting cold feet. Is she going to be upset with me for this...? I glanced over to gauge her expression, and she let out an exasperated sigh.

“Your brain sure does work in interesting ways sometimes, Sakuma.”

“Um... Should I take that as a compliment?”

“Mm-hmm. I’m not sure how you could hear a story like the one I told you yesterday and immediately go, ‘Wow, that’s about as embarrassing as that terrible novel I wrote that one time!’ That’s pretty amusing.”

“Er, sorry. I wasn’t trying to, like...downplay what happened to you.”

“I know. I’m not upset or anything, don’t worry. Just feeling kind of silly for taking things so seriously.” She gave a soft little smile. “Thanks, Sakuma. I’ll be sure to give your novel a very thorough read.”

“Yeah, uh, sure thing. I mean, no need to be *that* thorough, obviously...”

Had my plan worked out all right in the end? It seemed like maybe it had; it got a smile out of Ushio, at the very least. If it helped to cheer her up even a little bit, I supposed that was good enough—couldn’t ask for much more. Funnily enough, it felt a little bit like a weight had been lifted off of my chest as well.

The bell rang right as we reached the classroom, so Ushio and I hurried to our seats.

The situation in class that day wasn’t any different from the day before. None of the other students dared to reach out to Ushio, and she made no attempt to break from her isolation. Aside from a single time the teacher called on her, which forced her to speak up for a moment, it was almost like she wasn’t even there. I thought about calling out to her a few separate times between classes, but never actually went through with it. Trying to do so here in the middle of the classroom would mean subjecting myself to the judgmental gazes of all of my classmates, and as someone who generally tried to keep as low a profile as possible, I was extremely reluctant to draw attention to myself in that way. Not that I had any obligation to speak to her, obviously—I just felt kind of coldhearted and antsy watching her sit there in silence all by herself.

This anxiety carried through all the way into lunch hour, when I was clearing off my desk and happened to see Hoshihara stand up with her bento box and walk over to where Ushio sat. Was she really planning to invite her to have lunch with them again, even after how hostile things got the day before? *Guess that’s Hoshihara for you.* I couldn’t help but admire her for that—even if it *did* make me feel pretty pathetic in comparison. The moment Hoshihara got to Ushio’s desk and held up her lunch, though, things immediately took a turn for the worse.

“Hey!” she said. “If you want, you can come—”

“Natsuki,” a cold, unfeeling voice cut in.

It was Nishizono. Natsuki warily turned to face her where she stood near the door, surrounded by several other girls, including Mashima and Shiina. All of them were awkwardly averting their eyes. Whether or not Nishizono realized Hoshihara was in the middle of a conversation with Ushio, I was fairly certain she didn’t care.

“We were gonna go eat in the cafeteria today,” Nishizono went on. “You’re coming, right?”

Her tone was calm but forceful—like she was making a statement, not asking a question, and would not take no for an answer. Hoshihara looked back and forth between her and Ushio a few times. Seeing this, Ushio gestured lightly toward the door with her chin, as if to say, “Go eat with your friends.” For a moment, I could see Hoshihara fretfully squeezing her bento box. But then, as if to shake it off, she whirled around to face Nishizono head-on.

“I think I’ll...st-stay and have lunch here today, actually. Eh heh heh...” Her laughter sounded extremely forced. One of Nishizono’s eyebrows twitched almost imperceptibly at this mild resistance. Presumably, she had not expected to be turned down. Her eyes narrowed, and she glared at Hoshihara.

“Fine. Suit yourself, I guess,” she said, then exited the classroom.

I’d been expecting her to lash out a bit more, but she’d actually given up rather easily. And yet, there was something ominous about this retreat that was even more terrifying than her usual combativeness. It seemed Hoshihara felt it too; she still looked rather on edge as she sat down across from Ushio.

“You sure about this?” Ushio asked her, concerned.

“Totally sure! It’s fine!” Hoshihara responded cheerily, though I could tell she was only putting on a brave face. Even after the two of them started eating, she remained visibly unnerved. Taking Ushio’s side might very well have put Hoshihara at odds with Nishizono. If it really came down to that...what was I to do? Or, more to the point, was there even anything I *could* do?

Once school let out for the day, the tension in the classroom relaxed quite a

bit. As I got ready to head home, I cast a sidelong glance over at Ushio—and since she'd been doing the same to me, our eyes locked. She quickly looked away, shoved her textbooks in her bag, then got up and left the classroom.

Guess we're not walking home together today.

I felt a strange mixture of disappointment and relief at this. I hung my relatively empty bookbag over my shoulder and quietly exited the room. When I got down to the building's main entryway, I found Ushio leaning against the wall, just as I had been this morning. *Huh. Figured she would've gone home by now.*

Feeling it would be weird to walk past and pretend not to notice her, I called out, "What's up?"

Ushio looked over, face taut. "Um, nothing. Don't worry about it."

"Oh. Well, okay then."

"...I'm gonna head home."

She turned her back to me, and before I could even wonder what in the world that was about, it hit me: she'd been waiting for me, hadn't she?

"Ushio!" I said, and she spun back around. The explicit invitation still felt awkward on my tongue, but I strung the words together regardless. "Do you... wanna walk home together? If you don't have other plans, I mean."

Ushio's eyes widened briefly, but she gave a decisive nod. "Oh, okay. Yeah, sounds good to me."

I wasn't sure if she was just playing coy or what, but it sure felt like I'd just been made to go through the motions solely so that she wouldn't have to admit anything outright. Whatever it was, the two of us headed for the shoe cubbies, changed back into our street shoes, and made to leave through the main entrance.

"Wait!" someone shouted after us.

I turned around to see that it was Hoshihara. *Did one of us forget something in the classroom? Is she coming to deliver it?*

She hurried over, still in her indoor shoes, and made a timid proposal: "Hey,

um... Do you mind if I walk home with you too?"

Wait, seriously?! I nearly cried out. Imagine that—a guy like me, walking home with a girl like her. I did my best to stifle my elation and play it cool.

"S-sure thing. The more the merrier. Right, Ushio?"

"Definitely. Time always flies by with you around, Natsuki."

Hoshihara's face lit up like a firework—she was an *extremely* easy one to read. "Okay, then let's go!" she said, then walked outside to join us, still in her indoor shoes. Even these little scatterbrained moments of hers were extremely adorable to me now. *Oh god, I realized. I've got it bad, don't I?*

The three of us walked side by side, with Hoshihara in the middle, down the same narrow road through the paddy fields that Ushio and I had taken yesterday. Hoshihara lived a bit farther away, so she'd usually take the train to the station closest to our school, then ride her bike the rest of the way. This was a fairly common commute for students at Tsubakioka High, given that it wasn't right near any stations, and Hoshihara readily bemoaned just how inconvenient this was.

"By the way," she said, changing tack, "I heard you two have been friends for a pretty long time?"

"We have, yeah." I nodded, then turned to Ushio. "Probably since, what—elementary school, I'd say?"

"No, earlier than that," Ushio said. "I'm pretty sure we met in kindergarten. But it wasn't until elementary school that we started really hanging out a lot."

"Whoa..." Hoshihara sounded awed. "So you've known each other for over a decade now, huh? What were you each like back in elementary school?"

This was a pretty broad question. I tried my best to dig through my memories.

"Mmm... I don't think I was all that different from how I am now, honestly," I said. "Just a plain old boring kid, really."

"Huh?" Ushio gaped at me, disbelieving. "That's not true at all. You were like the leader of our little group of troublemakers back then."

“Wait, I was?”

“Yeah. You’d pick fights with bullies or sneak out onto the school roof and get yelled at by the teacher... You really stood out from the crowd. Don’t you remember any of that?”

“Ohhh, I guess now that you mention it, I kinda do...”

This blast from the past was a little embarrassing, actually—though in fairness, I only got in a verbal argument with one bully a single time, and the only reason I managed to “sneak out” onto the school roof was that the door was unlocked. It wasn’t as if I was some huge delinquent or anything.

“You’ve really changed, Sakuma... Though you’re still the same in a lot of ways, too,” Ushio said with a serene, humble expression.

“Hrm, okay,” said Hoshihara. Tilting her head curiously, she pressed, “What were *you* like in elementary school, Ushio-kun?”

“If anything, *I* was the boring, quiet one. Wasn’t very strong mentally or physically, so I’d always cry over the littlest things.”

This, I remembered. The old Ushio was far meeker than she eventually came to be, with that transition probably beginning around fourth or fifth grade.

“Wow, yeah... I can’t even picture that, just knowing how you are now,” said Hoshihara.

“Well, I’m glad you can’t, honestly,” Ushio said, smiling bashfully. “I put in a lot of time and effort to change into the person I am now.”

“Huh... I had no idea...”

I felt similarly surprised to hear this—for whatever reason, I’d always been under the impression that Ushio was naturally charismatic—but it sort of made sense when I thought back on what a soft-spoken kid she’d been back in the day. I wondered *why* I had jumped to that conclusion, though—maybe it was just easier, both for the sake of simplicity and my own self-esteem, to chalk things up to raw talent.

“...So hey, there’s something I’ve been kinda wondering about since yesterday,” said Hoshihara, her face turning markedly serious. She was silent for

a moment, then inhaled slowly and said, “Are you gonna try to start talking more like a girl too from now on? Like, using a higher register and all that? Or are you just gonna keep using your normal voice?”

I stared blankly over at her. She was right—I hadn’t paid it any mind, since it wasn’t unheard of for girls to have lower voices, but it *was* something Ushio could potentially think about changing if she was really intent on leaving as much of her old self behind as possible and doing a complete identity overhaul.

“...Feels kind of noncommittal, doesn’t it?” said Ushio, with a sour, pensive look on her face.

“Oh, I’m not saying you have to change it or anything! Or even that you should! Whatever feels most natural to you is the right call, I’d say—I was just curious, is all...”

As Hoshihara backpedaled, Ushio just shook her head softly and donned a calm, gentle expression. “Well,” she said, “I just feel like my voice is a little too low and raspy for me to switch to using a higher register all of a sudden. It’d sound a bit weird, I think. I did try doing some vocal exercises for a while to see if I could change my voice, but it wasn’t really working... It’s fine, though. I just decided to focus more of that energy into my appearance instead.” She smiled, but it wasn’t very convincing.

Hoshihara looked at her with concern, then said, “Well, not like it matters! There are *plenty* of beloved voice actresses with voices as deep or deeper than yours, Ushio-kun! So yeah, I don’t think it sounds weird at all. But...” She paused. “I guess the real question is: which would *you* prefer?”

Ushio pursed her lips at this question, seemingly uncomfortable. The conversation stalled, and the three of us were silent for a while. Hoshihara and I waited patiently for Ushio’s answer; it didn’t seem like the sort of question that would go unanswered in perpetuity, even if it might take a while for her to make up her mind. Eventually, Ushio seemed to resign herself to honesty.

“There is a part of me that wants to try that, yes,” she confessed. “But I don’t feel ready to commit to it just yet. I’m a little bit scared of...changing too much too fast, if that makes sense.”

“Gotcha,” Hoshihara said quietly.

I could understand Ushio's hesitation; it probably took a whole lot of mental fortitude just to muster up the courage to wear girls' clothing already. The thought of changing yet another major aspect of her identity on top of that—her manner of speaking and tone of voice—was probably a stressful one indeed. I tried to come up with a reasonable suggestion or word of advice to try to reassure her a bit, but Hoshihara beat me to the punch.

“Okay, then how 'bout this?!” Hoshihara raised her voice excitedly, perhaps trying to shake off the gloomy atmosphere. “What if you started using a more girlish voice and stuff just around us?! Then you'd have a chance to get used to it in a comfortable environment, and you'd start naturally sounding a lot more feminine before you know it! I bet you anything!”

Her face lit up as though she'd just had the greatest epiphany in the world. I certainly wouldn't have any objections to this idea—but the real question was whether Ushio was on board with it.

“Well... Okay, sure. Maybe I'll give that a try.” Ushio was clearly hesitant, but she nodded happily at the sentiment regardless.

“Great, great!” said Hoshihara, smiling from ear to ear. “Okay then, why don't you go ahead and give it a try?!”

“What, right *now*?”

“Yeah!” Hoshihara nodded emphatically, but I couldn't help but feel like this was a little too sudden to be comfortable, and sure enough...

“*H-hey, guys...*” Ushio stammered, her voice cracking as she attempted to try on this new higher register while Hoshihara looked on with eager, supportive eyes. But then: “Yeah, sorry. I think I'm just going to stick with my normal voice for now.”

Hoshihara rattled off a series of apologies. “G-gotcha, okay! Yeah, no, my bad! Didn't mean to force you into it or anything!”

“Yeah, no need to rush it,” I chimed in, attempting to take some of the pressure off. “Feel free to go at your own pace.”

“Y-yeah! Yeah, exactly!” said Hoshihara, nodding repeatedly.

Ushio beamed, seemingly in agreement. Just as the conversation had wrapped itself up nicely, we reached the crossroads at the end of the route through the paddy fields (only a few dozen meters from the three-way intersection where Ushio and I had parted).

Hoshihara came to a stop. “All right, I’ve gotta go this way to get to the station,” she said, turning to grin at us one last time. “It was a ton of fun talking to you guys today! Let’s walk home together again tomorrow, yeah?”

For a split second, I was in ecstasy. *What a wonderful string of words: “Let’s walk home together again tomorrow.”*

“Yeah, sure thing,” I said. “Was definitely a lot of fun.”

“See you later, Natsuki,” said Ushio.

“Okay, bye, guys!” Hoshihara hopped up onto her bicycle seat and kicked off the asphalt...before promptly doing a U-turn and coming back. *What could it be now?* “Oh yeah, I totally forgot! Sorry, one last thing—can I ask a favor...?”

A favor? Ushio and I looked at one another.

Hoshihara jumped off her bicycle, whirled to Ushio, and said, “Actually, I was wondering, um... Do you mind if I call you Ushio-chan from now on instead of Ushio-kun?”

For a split second, Ushio looked dumbfounded. Then she coughed out a laugh and nodded. “Sure,” she said. “You can call me whatever you like.”

“Hooray! Okay then...Ushio-chan. Ha ha, wow, that feels so cool! All right, goodbye for real now, Ushio-chan. And you too, Kamiki-kun!”

With that, she swirled back around and headed for home. It felt like a weight had been lifted from my shoulders—like that awkward, gloomy atmosphere from when Ushio and I parted ways yesterday had been nothing more than a figment of my imagination. I couldn’t wait for the three of us to walk home together again.

“Mmkay, guess we’d better get going too,” I said, striding forth.

But Ushio didn’t follow. Wondering why, I stopped again and turned around. She was just standing there, stock-still, staring back at me.

“What, um... What would *you* think if I started talking more like a girl, Sakuma?” she asked abruptly. Her face was earnest. I could tell my answer here was important.

I looked her over again. Her short, silver-blond hair looked silky-soft enough that your fingers would just pass right through no matter how brusquely you tried to tousle it. Her double eyelids were lined with long lashes. Even if she *weren't* wearing a skirt and stockings, if I were looking at her as a stranger and someone told me she was a girl, I'd probably believe them. Frankly, I didn't think it'd sound weird at all for her to start using more feminine speech patterns and mannerisms.

“I think that'd be totally fine,” I said, telling her straight.

“Gotcha... Okay, thanks. Er, sorry for the weird question,” said Ushio, suddenly bashful. Her sweet smile was girly enough to make me forget she'd ever been a boy.

It was now the morning of Ushio's third school day since her transition to being a girl. The skies were clear and blue; before leaving the house in the morning, I heard the weatherman on TV claim a zero percent chance of rain. As someone who rode his bike to school, this was always a welcome forecast. By the time I arrived at school, there were only about ten minutes left before first period was set to begin. This was a little bit later than usual for me, courtesy of a few unlucky red lights in a row.

As I walked up the stairs and down the hall, I noticed that a small crowd of students from other classes had gathered around the door to Classroom 2-A. They were peeking inside and murmuring to each other in hushed voices. I had a bad feeling about this. I picked up the pace and entered the classroom from the rear door, whereupon I found that nearly all of my classmates were staring fixedly at something near the front of the room. I traced their collective gaze to its mutual focal point—and then I saw it.

“What the...?”

On the blackboard were written a few choice words in giant letters.

USHIO TSUKINOKI IS A ****

PERVERT

CREEP

I was speechless. A sharp chill shot down the back of my neck, and my body started quaking with anger and confusion. *Just who the hell wrote this?*

I looked around the classroom and spotted Hoshihara looking as if she were about to cry. When we made eye contact, she bit her lip and looked down at the ground. All of our other classmates were either whispering to their friends or struggling to contain their laughter. I couldn't stand to look at them. Simply gauging their expressions wouldn't help me find the perpetrators anyway.

Thankfully, Ushio had not arrived at class yet—I had to do something about this before she did. *But what?* My legs wobbled. *Calm down, Sakuma.* For starters, I needed to erase this ill-intentioned graffiti from the blackboard.

I set my bag down at my seat, took a deep breath to gather my resolve, then stormed up through the aisle between the desks toward the front of the room. But about halfway there, someone slid their leg out from under their desk and, having no time to react, I tripped over it and fell to the floor on my hands and knees.

“Ouch!”

“Wow, loser. Watch where you're going next time.”

Still on all fours, I turned to look up at the person who'd addressed me: a girl in a short skirt with bleached blonde hair. Arisa Nishizono gazed down at me in amusement, resting her elbows on her desk and her cheeks in her palms. *Yeah, says the girl who tripped me,* I nearly said, but I stopped just as the words reached the top of my throat. Why would Nishizono go out of her way to target me? Was she trying to stop me from erasing the graffiti?

Wait a minute. I flashed back to what had happened two days prior—that

awkward lunchtime encounter in which Nishizono butted heads with Ushio. I still remembered that hateful look in her eyes.

I stood up and looked down at her. “Hold on a sec,” I said. “That writing on the blackboard... Don’t tell me...”

“Don’t tell you what?” said Nishizono. “Are you trying to say you think it was me? Because it wasn’t. Don’t make accusations when you don’t have a shred of evidence.”

“Oh yeah? Then why did you trip me just now?”

“I was just stretching out because I felt like it. *You’re* the one who wasn’t paying attention and tripped. Why are you getting all butthurt about this?”

I didn’t believe for a second that her timing had been purely coincidental. I knew she had been trying to trip me—but she was right that I had no proof. And as I stood there, unable to make a smooth rebuttal, Nishizono’s lips curled into a twisted little smirk. As if she’d just had a truly devious idea.

“Wait. Are you two, like, a *thing* now?”

“Um, what?”

“You walked home with Ushio from school yesterday, didn’t you? And the day before that... C’mon, no need to hide it. You’ve got a little crush on him, don’t you?”

A snicker rose up from somewhere in the classroom. The whispering voices grated on my eardrums. All the blood in my body rushed into my head.

“Shut the hell up! Of *course* not!” I shouted, louder than I expected.

For a split second, Nishizono’s face went stiff. Then she immediately went back to staring daggers at me. As we both remained there, staring each other down, my gaze was snagged by some movement near the classroom door. My focus broken, I turned to look—and saw that it was Ushio. *How long has she been standing there? And more importantly, did she hear all of that?*

She walked up to the teacher’s podium, grabbed the blackboard eraser, and wiped away the insults scrawled in chalk. Leaving Nishizono behind, I hurried up to the front of the classroom too. But Ushio just kept scrubbing away, refusing

to even look in my direction. She was trembling a bit, and her pallor was concerning.

“Here, Ushio,” I said. “Let me help.”

“...It’s fine.”

“Huh?”

“You don’t have to help. And don’t talk to me anymore.”

I was speechless. Gutted. Of all the things I might have expected to come out of her mouth, this certainly wasn’t one of them. And so, unable to help but too embarrassed to walk back to my seat in shame, I just stood there on the podium, waiting for Ushio to finish erasing the graffiti. Once the entire blackboard was clean, she tossed the eraser aside like a piece of trash and returned to her seat. Finally, the bell rang, and Ms. Iyo walked into the classroom. She looked at me, standing there on the podium, and her brow creased in puzzlement.

“Did something happen?”

Not a single student—myself and Ushio included—told the teacher of the cruel words that had been written on the blackboard that morning. But I couldn’t stop thinking about what had happened. Even after class began for the day, I couldn’t absorb any of the lecture. The words just slid across the surface of my brain, never committing themselves to memory. All of my mental resources were being funneled into deciphering the underlying intent behind what Ushio had said.

Now that I’d had a chance to regain my composure a bit, I felt like I had at least somewhat of an idea as to why she’d told me not to speak to her anymore. It probably wasn’t that she *actually* found me obnoxious. If anything, she was probably trying to look out for me, and she was trying to put some distance between the two of us so I wouldn’t get caught in the crossfire of Nishizono’s wrath as well. Ushio didn’t *really* hate me or anything like that, so I didn’t have to take her words at face value. I tried my very best to convince myself that was all it was.

“Man, Ushio sat out during gym class *again* today.”

“You think I could get excused too if I started wearing a girls’ uniform?”

“Might be worth a shot, honestly.”

“I’m kidding, dude. Wouldn’t be caught dead looking like that.”

“Okay, serious question: would you ever date someone like that?”

“Oh, no way, man. Not a chance in hell.”

“Yeah, same. Still a dude underneath, even if he does kinda pass...”

Like clockwork, every time there came a break between classes, I was guaranteed to hear at least one offensive conversation at Ushio’s expense. I’d been hoping they’d die down a bit after the first day, but if anything, it felt like they were actually *increasing* in frequency as of today. Perhaps the writing on the blackboard this morning had put the notion into everyone’s heads that it was perfectly fine to make fun of her, and there’d be no repercussions whatsoever. Yet even today, Hoshihara still went out of her way to invite Ushio to have lunch together. She really was a fair shake more mature than the rest of us.

Whenever I saw her reach out to Ushio, I couldn’t help but feel a little bit guilty myself—and it was almost enough to frustrate me into trying to do something similar. But when I thought back on Ushio’s words this morning, I withered at the idea of being rejected or told to leave her alone again.

I couldn’t go on like this.

...I’ll say something after school, I thought to myself. Once classes got out for the day, I would invite her to walk home together again. All I wanted to do was forget about the graffiti this morning and have a nice, lighthearted conversation with her on the way home. I was all but certain that this was what Ushio secretly wanted too.

This certainty would soon pop like a balloon. The moment the final bell rang, Ushio rushed out of the classroom faster than anyone else. I had a sneaking

suspicion she was trying to ensure I didn't get a chance to talk to her. Still, I followed after her, wondering if perhaps she might just be planning to wait for me downstairs by the main entrance like she had the day before—but even this tiny sliver of hope was dashed, as she was long gone by the time I got there, and her indoor shoes were already in her shoe cubby.

“Man, why's she running away?” I grumbled.

Had she really grown to detest me overnight? The thought filled me with a confused mixture of anger and dread. How could she treat me like this right after I'd gone out of my comfort zone to trust her with that horrendously embarrassing novel of mine? It felt like a rather callous change of tune, to be honest.

Whatever. I'll just go home alone. But just as I went to change back into my street shoes, Hoshihara came jogging down the hallway from behind me.

“W-wait, where's Ushio-chan?” she asked. I found it mildly interesting that she was already using Ushio-*chan* consistently, even when Ushio wasn't around.

“Already gone,” I said, shaking my head. “Couldn't catch her in time.”

“Oh, jeez... Dang it.” Hoshihara's face fell. I had to admit, seeing how genuinely crestfallen she looked to have missed her, I couldn't help but feel that old jealousy toward Ushio rear its ugly head.

“Let's just leave her be. She probably doesn't feel like talking to anyone right now.”

“Yeah, you're probably right...”

Hoshihara trudged over to the shoe cubbies, looking more dejected than a wet puppy. She changed from her indoor shoes back into her loafers and clacked each heel against the ground a few times to nudge her ankles in. Then she looked at me.

“Are you not going home yet?” she asked.

“Huh?” I said, momentarily confused. “Oh, no, uh... I am. One sec.”

I changed shoes and followed Hoshihara out to the bike lot. After retrieving our respective bicycles, we pushed them off campus by the handlebars.

The hot sun beat down on the small road through the paddy fields. The three of us had taken this road home together yesterday, but today Hoshihara and I trod it alone. I couldn't help but wonder if she'd only settled for walking home with me so as not to seem rude for leaving me behind. It was hard for me to tell what was going through her head right now, dampening the excitement of what would otherwise have been a dream scenario. If anything, it felt extremely awkward. Hoshihara just kept looking down at the ground without a word. For a long while, only the soft clicking of our rotating bike chains filled the silence between us. Eventually, I started feeling sick to my stomach.

"Listen, um..." I began, unable to bear the silence a moment longer. "Don't worry about Ushio. I'm sure it's not that she didn't want to walk home with us or anything. I think everyone just needs some alone time now and then. And she had a pretty rough morning today, so I don't blame her. But she'll be fine—the three of us can walk home together again tomorrow, I promise."

Hoshihara nodded weakly. It was the bare minimum response.

"So hey—how do you think you did on that quiz the other day?" I asked, refusing to give up. "The one we did in Modern Japanese, I mean. Me, I'm honestly feeling pretty confident. Feels like when you read enough books for pleasure, your language skills naturally level up, y'know what I mean...?"

She did not even acknowledge me with a nod this time.

Man, what gives? Please, just say something already... Or did I screw up somehow? Maybe when she said, "Are you not going home yet?" she was just politely asking if I was staying behind for some reason, and not actually offering to walk home together. Did I read that wrong? Oh, goddamn it. Great, now I'm getting all self-conscious... Man, this has to be the longest walk home of all time. Also, why are we walking? Why aren't we riding our bikes? We should be. But it's too late for me to suggest that now—she'll think I'm saying I want to leave and get this over with. Then again, that's technically the truth.

While I was racking my brain to come up with some possible conversation topic to break the silence, I heard a tiny sniffing sound from beside me. I looked over and did a double take. Hoshihara was crying.

"Whoa! Uh, hey... Wh-wh-what's wrong? Are you okay?" I asked, stammering.

“Sorry...” she said, wiping her tears. “I was just thinking about this morning again.”

“You mean...that writing on the blackboard?”

She nodded. “When I first walked into class and saw all that stuff written up there, I knew I should go erase it—but I couldn’t summon up the courage, so I didn’t do anything... I just stood there and looked at it. I bet Ushio-chan’s upset with me... She probably wishes I stood up for her and erased it, but she’s too nice to say anything.”

“I mean...that’s possible, I guess. But I’d say you’re doing a pretty good job of being her friend overall. I mean, you’re always going out of your way to be considerate of her and eat lunch with her and stuff...”

“I’d say that at first, I was doing those things to be considerate of her, yeah. But now it’s a little different.”

“Huh?”

“Well, since I turned Arisa down at lunch yesterday, she won’t even talk to me... I’d probably end up eating lunch all by myself if I didn’t eat with Ushio-chan. In that sense, I’m spending time with her for my own sake now too.”

I hadn’t realized Hoshihara had also been ostracized—perhaps because I was too preoccupied thinking about Ushio. Not that I hadn’t sensed a general air of confrontation and strife between Hoshihara and Nishizono since yesterday, but I didn’t think she was being actively *ignored*. That must have felt pretty awful.

“Well...I still think you deserve credit for taking Ushio’s side and standing up for her. Most people wouldn’t risk their own reputations for the sake of someone else. I’m sure Ushio sees that.”

“I dunno...”

“Trust me, you’re talking to the guy who used to be her best friend. I guarantee she really appreciates it,” I said, flashing her a cheesy grin. This, at last, managed to elicit the slightest of smiles from Hoshihara.

“...Thanks. You’re very sweet, Kamiki-kun.”

“Nah. I’m nothing compared to you.”

“Jeez, is it Compliment Natsuki Day?! You’re gonna make me blush, ha ha!”

She started fanning her face with one hand, and I spotted the bright-red tips of her ears through the swishing gaps in her hair. I almost let out a wistful sigh of relief; I felt pretty nauseous from the awkwardness for a minute there, but now we were hitting it off. I almost wanted to latch on to this opportunity and follow it through to its logical conclusion.

Hoshihara stopped dead in her tracks, so I did too. I looked her in the eye.

“What’s up?” I asked, trying to gauge her expression. Her face was flushed red as she turned to me, looking as if she wished to make some sort of appeal.

“Um... Kamiki-kun? Can I talk to you about something?” she asked.

“S-sure, what is it?” I could feel my heart quaking in my chest. For whatever reason, I was getting that sinking feeling again.

“Okay, but I just want to preface by saying that, um...I’d like it if you could keep this just between you and me.”

“Y-yeah, sure. No problem.”

Saliva pooled inside my mouth. Nervously, I gulped it down, just as a strong breeze blew in from the east. The green blades of the freshly planted rice crops swayed lazily in their watery beds. When the wind died down, Hoshihara took a deep breath and said:

“I used to have a really big crush on Ushio-kun.”

My sinking feeling was right on the money. All of a sudden, it was like I could feel my consciousness falling down into a bottomless abyss, leaving my body standing there empty on the pavement. Reality grew more and more distant by the second as my mind tumbled further and further down. I braced for it to burst into a million pieces—but then it didn’t. Just before I fell fully into despair, I regained my footing on a sliver of hope.

“You...used to?” I ventured.

“Yeah, for a long time. Basically up until the day she announced her transition... B-b-but I’m pretty sure those feelings were one-sided.”

Her face was now beet-red as she lowered her gaze. I could almost see steam rising from her head.

“What about now?”

“Now, I’m...I’m not sure,” she said.

“Not sure? Not sure, meaning...what, exactly?”

“Uhhh... Shoot, how do I even put this...?”

Her eyes flitted left and right as she struggled to find the words. And when she finally did open her mouth to speak, she staggered on her feet, like she’d come down with a sudden bout of dizziness.

“H-hey, are you okay?” I asked.

“Sorry, it’s just...really hot today...”

On closer inspection, I could see that her skin was glazed with a thin layer of sweat. A few strands of her bangs clung to her forehead. It was probably just standing out here under the hot sun with no shade for so long that made her feel faint—though the subject matter probably wasn’t helping either.

“Let’s go find somewhere to cool off,” I said.

“Okay...”

I hopped up onto my bike, and Hoshihara languidly did the same.

One-sided feelings, huh...?

I stifled a sigh and started pedaling.

If we rode our bikes for about fifteen minutes, we could reach the commercial district outside the station—pretty much the only place in town where there were plenty of diners and fast-food restaurants to choose from. But given Hoshihara’s current state, I wanted to get her out of the sun as soon as possible, so instead we headed to the considerably closer downtown shopping district. After passing by storefront after shuttered storefront, all of which had

suffered a severe loss of business due to the opening of the nearby AEON Mall, we stumbled upon a cozy little café.

The door jingled as we entered, and we took a small table at the far end. We sat down facing each other and ordered drinks. Hoshihara's face was still pretty red, but the sweating had abated. Eventually, a kind old lady with a hunched posture brought out my iced coffee and Hoshihara's orange juice. She drank half of her glass in one gulp, then exhaled loudly in satisfaction.

"Feeling a little better now?" I asked, and she smiled apologetically.

"Aha ha, yeah... Sorry about that. Got a little dizzy there."

"It's okay. Anyway, about what you were saying earlier..."

"Right, yeah. Guess I'll just tell you the whole story."

I added some milk and sugar syrup to my iced coffee, then stirred the drink with my straw. I nodded to indicate I was ready and listening.

"Okay," she began. "So just for the record, I'm gonna call her Ushio-kun and refer to her as a boy when talking about my feelings for the person I knew her as back then, but yeah... As I was telling you earlier, I had a bit of a crush on Ushio-kun... Keyword 'had.' But I mean, he was always *really* popular with all of the girls at school, so I knew I didn't have much of a chance, just statistically. I tried my best to get over him."

The ice in my glass crackled and clinked.

"So when Ushio-kun—or Ushio-chan, rather—announced that she was planning to live her life as a girl from now on, I guess I was...kind of relieved, almost? Like, phew, now I have the perfect excuse to let these feelings go. But then when I started talking to her more and more, I just... I dunno, I kinda felt like... Ugh, this is *really* hard to say."

I took a sip of my iced coffee.

"I guess I just have this strong urge to, like...hold her tight in my embrace."

The coffee shot down my windpipe, and I choked. I reached frantically for a napkin and clapped it over my mouth as I nearly hacked up a lung.

"A-are you okay?!"

I coughed a few more times and tried to clear my throat. “Ahem! So, uh... Are you saying you still have feelings for her?” I asked.

“Mmm, I dunno about *that*...”

“Well, when you say you want to embrace her, do you mean it in the same way you’d want to hug a guy you like? Or, like, as one of your girl friends?”

“L-Look, I don’t know, okay?! That’s why I’m trying to get your advice here!”

I had to admit, it did not feel great to be yelled at by your crush when you were already being forced to listen to them talk about their unrequited feelings for someone else. Still, it was hard to say no to Hoshihara, so I folded my arms and did my best to mull over this conundrum of hers as sincerely as I could.

She said she wanted to *embrace* Ushio. Meaning this was an active desire she felt. But what emotions or situations might lead someone to want to embrace someone else? Purely out of carnal desire? No, that couldn’t be—not in Hoshihara’s case, anyway. Or so I wanted to believe. But what other reasons were there? Wanting to cuddle something innocent and precious, like a baby or a small, defenseless animal? What might *that* imply?

“Okay, so this is just a hypothesis,” I said, “but I think it’s possible that what you’re feeling is a maternal instinct, or some similar natural desire to protect her.”

“Maternal instinct...?”

“Right. As in you feel sorry for Ushio and the way she’s being treated, and all you want to do is keep her safe from the rest of the world.”

“And is that...different from love, do you think?”

“Oof. Now *that’s* a tough one.”

My selfish inclination was to say that yes, it was purely a product of her inborn sympathetic nature and thus had nothing to do with romantic love. If that were true, it would mean she no longer had feelings for Ushio, and I wouldn’t have to worry about competing for her affection. But the guilt I felt at the thought of telling her this purely for my own benefit forced me to shake my head and shrug my shoulders instead.

“I think you’re the only one who can answer that.”

“Hmm...” She stared down at the table for a while, lost in thought. “All right. Guess I’ll think it over a bit more, then.”

“Sounds like a plan. Nothing good ever comes from rushing these things just for the sake of finding resolution a little bit faster, I say.”

This was a rather poignant piece of advice, if I did say so myself. I still had about a third of my iced coffee remaining, though, so I figured I’d probe a little bit deeper into her feelings for Ushio.

“So what made you fall for Ushio in the first place?”

“Well, a lot of things, really... There wasn’t any, like, any particular moment or anything. I guess he was just always really kind, so I felt naturally drawn to him as we kept talking more and more... Oh, and I loved watching him run. He always looked so dreamy, out there on the track...”

Her face turned bright red, and the corners of her lips stretched into a soft smile. She certainly looked the part of a young girl in love; I immediately regretted asking.

She enjoyed watching Ushio run, huh? Wonder if that means she used to sit in on track practice or watch from afar... No, wait! What about that day she and I exchanged contact info, when I caught her in the classroom after school, looking out the window? Could it be that she was trying to watch Ushio? Ugh, man... Wish I hadn’t realized that possibility.

I downed the rest of my iced coffee in one gulp in an attempt to drown my newfound sorrows. Despite the milk and syrup, it tasted a whole lot more bitter now.

“You’ve been good friends with Ushio-chan since you were kids, right, Kamiki-kun?”

Less “since” and more “when,” I thought, but I couldn’t be bothered to get into that again just to correct her, so I just nodded and said basically yes.

“Then you must know her better than anyone, right?”

“I don’t know about that. Maybe if you were asking me about her elementary

school days, I could share some more anecdotes or whatever.”

“Anecdotes? Like what?”

“W-well, like, uh... Let’s see here...” I folded my arms and tried to trace my memories back that far. “Oh yeah, so if you ever asked her ‘Hey, can you speak Russian?’ she’d give you the *dirtiest* look imaginable, ha ha.”

“Whaaat?! Huh, interesting!”

Hoshihara’s eyes sparkled as she listened with rapt attention—then, all of a sudden, she pulled out her phone and started clacking away on its tiny keyboard. I assumed she was probably taking notes to remember this little taboo. *Well, she’s certainly enthusiastic*, I thought to myself, somewhat snidely. There came a loud *bonnng* from the old clock on the wall. It was already six o’clock.

“Guess we should probably get going,” I said.

Hoshihara shut her phone and looked up. “Yeah, probably,” she said. “Thanks for hearing me out, though.”

“Sure thing. Don’t mention it.”

“You really are the only person I can talk to about these things, Kamiki-kun,” she said with a cute little giggle. I really wasn’t sure whether to be happy about this or not.

It started raining the morning after my heart-to-heart with Hoshihara. This was practically a death sentence for those of us who biked to school; attempting the ride while encased in a raincoat meant you’d be steamed like a head of broccoli by the time you got to school—hair clinging flat to your forehead, sweat-soaked shirt glued to your skin like a wetsuit. All in all a very bad time. And that was exactly the sort of day it was today.

Students stopped in front of the entryway to shake off their umbrellas and fold up their jackets. I stood off to one end of the crowd, patting down my own raincoat to dry it off as best I could. Just then, another student with an umbrella—a girl, judging by her skirt—jogged up to join me under the covered entryway.

As she put away her umbrella, I let out a tiny gasp of surprise. It was Ushio. She was considerably less wet than I was; her hair still looked smooth and dry, and there wasn't a drop of sweat on her.

When I thought back on the blackboard incident yesterday, not to mention my conversation with Hoshihara, I felt a whirlpool of emotions swirling in my chest. Would it be better not to engage her at all, or should I at least offer a standard greeting? After a bit of hesitation, I settled on the latter.

"M-morning," I said, faltering. Ushio looked over at me and recoiled in surprise. Apparently, she hadn't even noticed it was me she was standing beside.

"O-oh, Sakuma... Yeah, hey. Morning," she said stiffly.

"Didn't ride your bike today?" I asked in an attempt at small talk, figuring I might as well make the most of the chance encounter.

"Nope. I didn't...really feel like getting wet. So I asked to get dropped off."

"Ah, gotcha. Man, wish I could get driven to school on rainy days too. Really sucks getting all wet and feeling like you just stepped out of a sauna."

"...Yeah."

Ushio was clearly not feeling very energetic today—yet neither did she seem calm or tired. She was glancing nervously around the area, as if worried there might be someone watching. She folded up her umbrella and clicked it into the metal fittings, then tried to scurry off into the building—but I called after her before she could get away.

"Hey! Do you think the three of us could walk home together again today? Pretty sure Hoshihara would really like that."

Ushio turned back to look at me. "I'm getting picked up after school too," she said.

"Oh. Fair enough, then."

"...Sakuma."

I braced myself at this sudden address, assuming from the pitying look in her eyes that I was not going to like what came out of her mouth next.

“You don’t have to force yourself to talk to me,” she said. “I know you don’t want people getting the wrong idea just because you’re hanging out with me.”

For a moment, my words caught in my throat. A moment later, I felt a sharp but subtle pain shoot through my chest, like the swift sting of a paper cut.

“I’m not forcing—”

“I don’t want to make your life any harder,” she interjected. She flashed me the most blatantly forced smile I’d ever seen, then walked off through the entryway without even giving me a chance to respond. I *despised* myself for not denying it instantly.

A gloomy air of discomfort and melancholy lingered throughout the entire day—and it wasn’t just because of the rain. It had a lot to do with Arisa Nishizono’s behavior.

“Um, excuse me?” she asked loudly during gym class. “How come Tsukinoki-san never has to participate anymore?”

“Don’t worry about Tsukinoki,” said the gym teacher, clearly uncomfortable.

“Why can’t the rest of us just skip class like that?” Nishizono pressed. Her vitriol was so blatantly targeted and impossible to ignore that Ushio had little choice but to hang her head and wait for the unwanted attention to end. She went on to dole out even *more* harassment at any opportunity during breaks between classes.

“So hey, do we still not have an answer on the panties question? One of you guys should go check.”

“Isn’t it a violation of school rules for a boy to wear a girl’s uniform anyway? Honestly, it’s a threat to moral standards and public decency, if you ask me.”

“He probably gets off to a bunch of weird, horny manga and stuff. You know—like the ones where it’s all about two guys getting it on. Yeugh. What a *freak*.”

At first, these rude remarks of Nishizono’s were met by little more than skittish nods and uncomfortable laughter. But as time went on, more and more people began to drop all pretense and showed no restraint in expressing similar

sentiments.

I was fairly certain that Nishizono was the only one in class who truly had a bone to pick with Ushio, and the others were simply playing along with the “joke” because it was the easiest way to make light of an awkward situation and “keep the party rolling.” It saddened me that so many of our classmates would sooner hop on the bandwagon and make fun of someone than allow the conversation to go quiet, even for an instant. But I’d known kids like that even back in junior high—it was like they were deathly allergic to silence.

Not that I couldn’t understand the compulsion. No one *liked* awkward silences. If there was an easy target they could turn into conversation fodder, I could see why they might be tempted to get a little cruel at someone else’s expense, even if they didn’t really mean it. But that didn’t mean I approved—complicity was still complicity, after all.

Interestingly, however, I noticed that Mashima and Shiina—the two other core members of Nishizono’s little clique, who’d been supportive of Ushio that first day—were decidedly not taking part in any of the bullying, though they didn’t make any moves to stand up to Nishizono either. They simply bit their lips and held their tongues, visibly uncomfortable as they watched the verbal carnage unfold. I hadn’t even seen them exchange a single word with *Hoshihara* recently, let alone Ushio.

The situation in class was deteriorating slowly but surely. By the time classes got out for the day, I was left in a singularly disheartened mood. I didn’t even feel up to walking home with Hoshihara again, so I just rode my bike home by myself.

The rainy days dragged on.

Nishizono’s targeted harassment of Ushio only continued to escalate. It had transcended the realm of loud verbal abuse and entered into the territory of physical attacks, including knocking pencils and textbooks off of Ushio’s desk whenever she walked by it. At one point, Nishizono even spilled an entire carton of milk tea down Ushio’s back.

For her part, Ushio just kept silent and suffered through the abuse. She would

simply pretend not to hear any cruel words and pick up any spilled school supplies. It was clear that being ignored was only infuriating Nishizono, which seemed to embolden her further.

Even Hoshihara, despite still offering to have lunch with Ushio every day, seemed powerless to stop the rampant bullying. She would just start tearing up, but never dare to stand up and pick a fight. Not that I was really one to judge—she was doing far more to help than I was. But I *wanted* to do something about the situation, if I could.

I knew that if all this kept up, Ushio might never be able to feel comfortable at school again—yet at the same time, part of me felt (perhaps callously) like this was ultimately none of my business. And I had to remember that Ushio was still Ushio, regardless of gender. The ever-capable honor student—attractive, smart, personable. It was entirely possible she was intentionally keeping a low profile for now so as not to make waves, but in reality, she had already cooked up a plan in her head for how to upend this tricky situation in some way Hoshihara or I would never even think of, then come out on top again as her old, infinitely popular self.

This didn't seem beyond the realm of possibility, though I knew it might just be wishful thinking on my part. I also had to admit that what Hoshihara had told me at the café made me feel somewhat less inclined to intervene. The knowledge that she had feelings for Ushio *did* complicate things for me and diluted my sympathy a fair bit—even though I knew that made me an asshole.

But sometimes conflicting feelings were hard to reconcile.

A weekend passed, and then it was Monday. It had been exactly one week since Ushio began openly living her life as a girl. The rainy weather that carried on through Sunday had let up at last, and the skies were bright and blue again.

When third-period gym class got out, I and the other boys returned to Classroom 2-A, changed out of our gym clothes and back into our school uniforms, then took our seats and got ready for fourth period to begin. Shortly thereafter, the girls who'd been changing in the locker room came flooding through the doors to join us.

By the time the bell rang, Ushio still had not returned. I recalled seeing her hand in her daily report to the gym teacher and exit the gymnasium, so I wasn't sure what might be taking her so long. It was only after the middle-aged math teacher had entered the class, stepped up onto the podium, set his coursebook up on the lectern, scratched his five-o'clock shadow, and grabbed a stick of chalk that the classroom door slid open.

There was Ushio, standing in the doorway. At first, I didn't notice anything was off—but then I realized she was only half-changed back into her uniform. She was still wearing her gym pants instead of her skirt, but she had her uniform shirt on top. Her face looked pale and haggard, and her breathing was somewhat labored.

"Sorry for being late," she said.

The math teacher looked at her—then down at her gym pants. He raised a puzzled eyebrow, but did not ask, and simply let her off with a small warning before asking her to take her seat. All eyes were on Ushio as she walked over to her desk and sat down.

Did something happen?

No one said a word about it during the lecture, but I was sure virtually all of my classmates were wondering the same thing. Sure enough, once class got out, the teacher left the room, and lunch break began, the room erupted into murmurs—as if all of the questions that had been bubbling up in everyone's minds finally boiled over.

"What do you think happened?"

"Did he spill something on his skirt?"

"Someone should go up there and ask."

"Yeah, great plan. How 'bout *you* do it, wise guy?"

Speculation and jeering abounded from every corner of the classroom as Ushio and Hoshihara simply sat down and attempted to eat lunch together like normal. Hoshihara was also clearly curious about what had happened, but she explicitly avoided alluding to it, apparently unsure whether it was a touchy subject.

The door suddenly rattled open with a loud crash. Arisa Nishizono stepped into the classroom with the triumphant stride of an emperor returning victorious from a long campaign. She waltzed up onto the podium and held up her spoils of war in her right hand to show the class.

“Hey, guys, I just stumbled across this—anyone recognize it?” she asked.

It was at this point that I—and probably the vast majority of the class—realized exactly what was going on here.

Dangling from Nishizono’s grasp was the skirt from a girls’ uniform.

“Think it probably belongs to someone from this class,” she went on. “Anyone feel like coming forward?”

She swung the skirt around in circles, a sadistic smile on her face all the while. It almost went without saying that it had to be Ushio’s, based solely on the way Nishizono treated her over the past week. My best guess was that Nishizono lied about needing to go to the bathroom during gym class or something, then snuck her way into the multipurpose room that Ushio used for changing and stole the skirt from there. All she’d need to do was go there and unlock one of the windows in advance so she could let herself in even after Ushio locked up. It would be all too easy.

Either way, the broad strokes of what happened were pretty obvious, as was the owner of said skirt. Yet no student rose to denounce Nishizono’s actions. They knew she’d just shrug off and deny any accusations they might make of her. Worse yet, they’d probably get caught in the crossfire of her wrath themselves. This was likely the only reason Nishizono felt bold enough to commit such a shameless and audacious crime: she knew she could get away with it.

I clenched my fists. Her vile and cowardly tactics made me want to puke. But I couldn’t bring myself to do a thing. No matter how fast my heart raced, I couldn’t summon the nerve to rise up from my chair. I looked over at Ushio, who stared down at the ground as if trying to withstand the humiliation. I could

see her shoulders trembling. It looked like she was desperately trying to hold something in that was trying its damndest to get out.

“Hey. This is yours, isn’t it?” Arisa asked, descending from the podium and walking over to Ushio’s desk. She tilted her head to get a better look at Ushio’s lowered face. “Come on. Just take a quick peek and tell me if it’s yours or not. Shouldn’t be that hard, right? Look. It’s right here.”

Ushio slowly lifted her pallid face to look up at her intimidator. “Yes,” she said, nodding. “It’s my—”

“Wait, no. This *can’t* be yours, can it?” Nishizono coldly cut in with all the mercy and tact of an axe murderer. “I mean, you’re a *boy*, after all. Why would *you* ever need a skirt?”

Nishizono let the skirt fall to the ground and stomped on it, grinding her heel into the floor as though scraping gum off the bottom of her shoe. Ushio shot to her feet with a gasp. She glared down at Nishizono with fury-tinged eyes from her slightly higher vantage point. There weren’t even thirty centimeters between the two of them—certainly within punching distance, if either one decided this would come to blows. But Nishizono did not seem intimidated.

“What? You gonna throw a fit?” said Nishizono.

“...I’d like you to move your foot now, please,” said Ushio.

“Why should I?”

Ushio bit her lip hard and—in a drastic about-face—let the rage drain from her gaze as her expression softened, and she looked at Nishizono with pleading eyes.

“Because that skirt...belongs to me. It’s the first piece of women’s clothing I ever owned, so it...holds a lot of meaning for me.”

“Just how attached can you be to a stupid skirt? You think if you dress like a girl long enough, you’ll magically turn into one or something? You’re *disgusting*,” Nishizono spat with revulsion. “You know you’ll never be a real girl. I mean, don’t you own a mirror? You might be able to pass in the face department, just barely, but I’m pretty sure there are a few key differences between boys and girls that you’ll never be able to fake. Isn’t that right?”

Ushio scowled at this foulest of slander, but she kept her mouth firmly shut. This reaction seemed to strike a nerve with Nishizono, as she now looked at Ushio with feral, bloodthirsty eyes like a wolf ready to bite.

“Answer me! I *know* you’ve still got one down there!” she shouted, and then—to the disbelief of myself and everyone else in class—she reached out a hand and grasped Ushio by the crotch. All at once, every hair on Ushio’s head stood on end.

“Stop!” she cried out, shoving Nishizono away as hard as she could. Nishizono fell backward, crashing hard as she took a desk and chair with her down to the ground. The eerie silence that followed made it feel like the whole room had frozen over, and we were all standing speechless at the scene of a murder—the only sound being Ushio’s heavy breathing. Her expression bore the twin shades of loathing and regret.

Nishizono was now shaking, but neither in rage nor because she was about to cry. Instead, the first noise to escape her lips, which peeked out from beneath the shadow of her overhanging bangs, was that of simple, artless laughter. And then, like a broken record, the chuckling refused to stop, instead erupting into a deranged cackle. She staggered to her feet and ran her fingers through her disheveled bangs—which she then pulled back to reveal a truly twisted smile plastered across her face.

“Well, look at you, actually getting rough with me for once... Good! Keep it up! Fight back and be a man! Because that’s what you are!”

“N-no, I didn’t... I was just...” Ushio stammered in a heartrending whimper, shaking her head as though she couldn’t believe what she’d done. Eventually, it seemed she couldn’t stand to be here any longer, as she scooped her skirt up off the ground and ran out of the classroom as fast as she could. It was only then that I came back to my senses.

What had I even been *doing* just now? Nothing—that’s what. I did nothing at all. I sat back and watched as Ushio was verbally and physically assaulted in front of the entire class. A wave of regret washed over my entire body.

Even though I knew it was already too late to rise up in her defense, I stood up from my desk and sprinted down the hall after Ushio. As I ran, I kicked

myself for being such a worthless piece of trash. I was a garbage friend and a dumbass to boot. What was I thinking, trying to tell myself Ushio had it all under control? I was merely looking for an excuse to do nothing for fear of reprisal from Nishizono and rejection from our peers. I was only concerned with my own self-preservation, and meanwhile, Ushio had gone out of her way to make sure I didn't get caught in the crossfire of the harassment she was facing. She'd been such a good friend, and I had effectively left her to die. Even though *she* needed a friend right now more than anyone.

"Damn it...!"

I wished I could go back in time five minutes and punch myself. But I would not make the same mistake again.

I chased Ushio down the stairwell, through the corridor, and outside despite wearing my indoor shoes—until eventually, she came to a stop behind the gym. I was panting and out of breath by the time I cornered her, and I slowed my sprint to a walk as I approached her. I felt pretty good about myself for being able to keep up with the one-time star of the track team. I chalked it up to fight-or-flight response or whatever that burst of adrenaline thing was called. There was no one else around behind the gym, but I could still hear the distant tumult of students chattering in the school building.

"Ushio," I said.

Her shoulders twitched before she turned around to reveal her face. She was crying profusely. Big, fat teardrops streamed down her cheeks. And try as she might to stop the flow, they just came flooding back each time she tried to wipe them away. I felt a bitter pain in my chest; I hadn't wanted to have to see her like this a second time.

"I'm sorry, Ushio... I should have done something. I've been so preoccupied thinking about myself that I've just been pretending not to see how horribly Nishizono's been treating you... And I know there's no excuse for that. But I want to be better from now on."

I took one step closer.

"I won't avert my eyes anymore. Anything that's within my power to do, I want to do for you. I want to be there for you. I don't care whether you're a boy

or girl—gender has nothing to do with it. You’re my best friend, and that’s all that matters.”

I could feel my face flush with heat as I spoke. It felt like I was getting drunk off my own sudden burst of sincerity, and I couldn’t help but cringe a bit at my preachy little speech. Nevertheless, I was speaking from the heart.

Hearing this, Ushio let out guttural moans between her fits of sobs and sniffles—until finally, the dam burst, and she broke down completely.

“It’s not all that matters, though...” she said, shaking her head inconsolably.

“Wh-why not?” I said, startled by this unexpected riposte.

“Because...”

With tears in her eyes, she looked straight into mine.

“Because I like you, Sakuma.”

For a moment, my mind went blank, unable to process what I’d just been told. She stared at me in earnest, maybe to gauge my reaction—but then she seemed to lose hope, as she turned away with eyes downcast and ran off. It was like she’d just given up on something.

I just stood there and watched her go. I knew that if I were to chase after her—assuming I could even catch her—the words would only get caught in my throat again. My emotions were still too scrambled and disparate for me to think straight, let alone speak.

But I did know one thing for sure.

She was not just saying she “liked” me as a friend.

Ushio went home early that day. For the rest of the afternoon, a very uncomfortable atmosphere hung over the classroom. Perhaps the most notable change was that I didn’t hear a single mention of Ushio pass through anybody’s lips. Even the folks who’d been ruthlessly making fun of her at every

opportunity were now avoiding the subject like she never existed.

Even Nishizono was among them—though she didn't seem at all repentant for what she had done. Perhaps she was simply pacified for the moment now that the object of her ire was gone, but she would start loudly spouting hate again as soon as Ushio came back.

Eventually, school let out for the day. I packed up my things and exited the classroom. All throughout the afternoon lectures, I hadn't been able to stop thinking about what Ushio said during lunch. Honestly, I was still feeling pretty rattled by it. I assumed anyone would be, after being confessed to by a longtime friend whom you'd considered to be the same gender as you up until very recently.

Ushio was not a boy anymore, of course. But she also hadn't been born a girl. And as a fairly average heterosexual male who was attracted exclusively to the opposite sex, I did find the disparity between sex and gender somewhat hard to reconcile in terms of attraction. It wasn't that I didn't like Ushio, obviously—I readily admitted that she was actually pretty cute and looked good in girls' clothes and whatnot. But as for whether I could ever look at her the same way I looked at any other girl, I just wasn't sure. My gut feeling was telling me no—that I could never be in a relationship with her.

I couldn't accept Ushio's confession in the way she intended it. But I couldn't bring myself to give her a straight-up “no” either.

I mean, she already had it pretty rough. Imagine coming out and telling everyone in school a secret you'd held close to your chest for a very long time and immediately facing prejudice and getting bullied for it—and then, when you're at your very lowest point, you confess your feelings to the person you like, and the answer is a hard no... It hurt my heart to even think about. I'd probably want to die if that ever happened to me.

I knew Ushio deserved a straight answer from me, but I just didn't have it in me to cruelly shut her down. Not with everything else she was going through. I had to figure out how I was going to deal with her from now on—because I

would have to face her, regardless of how awkward things might be in light of this revelation. After all, I'd already decided I wasn't going to let fear control me any longer. That much was definitely not going to change.

"Come on... Get it together, Sakuma..." I said, trying to pump myself up a bit as I walked out the school's main entrance.

Still, what were the odds that Ushio would have feelings for me, while Hoshihara had feelings for Ushio, while I had feelings for Hoshihara? It was an actual, perfect love triangle—you could literally draw it out with arrows, and it'd look a bit like those recycling symbols. Never thought I'd find myself caught in one of those in real life. The world was full of strange surprises indeed.

As I reflected on my present circumstances from an oddly detached perspective, I arrived at the bike lot. I undid the lock on my bike and went to pull it out by the handlebars—but the pedals got caught on the next bike over, knocking it to the ground. This resulted in a domino effect that caused a third bike to then fall over, followed by the next bike after that, and so on, and so forth...

"Aw, crap..." I muttered.

In the end, my little mishap toppled a total of eight bikes. I knew I couldn't just leave them like this, though, so I knelt down and started lifting them back up one by one. Luckily, a good Samaritan was nearby to help me out, and she started working toward me from the opposite end.

"There, up ya go," said Hoshihara, lifting the bicycle furthest from me.

"Hey, thanks. I owe you one."

"Don't mention it. Gotta pick 'em all up anyway, since my bike got caught in the middle."

"O-oh, did it? My bad."

We collaborated to raise the remaining downed bicycles, and once the last one was standing upright again, Hoshihara looked at me with earnest eyes.

"So hey, um... Mind if we walk home together?" she asked.

We walked down the road between the paddy fields, neither of us saying anything of import. This was thrice now we'd walked home together like this, and while I certainly wasn't on edge or overly excited about it by this point, it still didn't feel entirely natural. Though I assumed this mild awkwardness had less to do with familiarity and more to do with Hoshihara's current taciturn demeanor. She seemed pretty down at the moment, and I imagined it had to do with what had happened during lunch.

"...Ushio-chan sure had a rough day, huh?" she mumbled with eyes downcast, and my suspicions were confirmed.

"Yeah," was all I could say.

"When she ran out of the classroom during lunch, you chased after her pretty quick... Figured you probably caught up to her—am I right?"

"Yeah, I did, somehow. We talked a little bit behind the gym."

"Oh? What did you say to her?"

"Just let her know she's one of my best friends, and that I'd make sure to act more like one of hers from now on. That's all."

I could not, of course, divulge that she'd confessed to having feelings for me. That was not the sort of thing I felt I was at liberty to share—least of all with someone who'd confided in me about having feelings for Ushio herself.

"Gotcha... So you guys *did* have a chance to talk things out, then."

"I wouldn't go quite that far, honestly. Wasn't really much of a conversation."

"...You know, I've been kinda thinking things over since lunch," she said. Then, after a brief but pregnant pause, she went on, "I feel like I owe Ushio-chan an apology. For being such a pacifist and only watching from the sidelines until now. But I've decided that, yeah, I'm gonna stop caring what anyone else thinks and be her friend regardless."

As she said these words, she was staring straight ahead, down the road. The fire of determination burned bright in her eyes. This made me happy to hear—to know that she and I felt the same. We would both do our very best to help Ushio out of this mess, as opposed to wallowing in our own regret over

mistakes we'd already made. I knew I had a good friend and role model in Hoshihara—a glowing beacon I could rely on.

“Sounds good,” I said. “I’ll help too.”

“Thanks, Kamiki-kun. Actually, there *is* one thing I’d like your help with right away, if you don’t mind... I was kind of hoping you could come somewhere with me. Though I’d need you to show me the way, obviously.”

“Show you the way? To where? Like, right now?”

She nodded somewhat bashfully. “Yeah, um... I wanted to visit Ushio-chan’s house, actually.”

Hoshihara and I coasted to a stop outside a stately, two-story home in a corner of one of Tsubakioka’s residential neighborhoods. This was Ushio’s house. I could sense Hoshihara’s strong desire to be a better friend from now on, but I certainly hadn’t expected her to want to stop by Ushio’s house right away. If anything, it made me feel like a *worse* friend for only planning to get my act together starting tomorrow.

We parked our bikes in front of the house and grabbed our bags from their respective baskets. I couldn’t even remember how many years it had been since I was last at Ushio’s house. I was starting to get a little nervous, especially in light of her recent confession. It was definitely going to be awkward, but I *assumed* she wouldn’t bring it up or press me for an answer with Hoshihara present... Still, I couldn’t help but worry.

“All right,” I said. “I’m gonna ring the doorbell.”

“O-okay...!” said Hoshihara, evidently even more nervous than I was. Her face looked strained, her shoulders stiff. *Just where did all that confidence of hers run off to?*

“Y-you all good?”

“Aha ha... Yeah, just feeling a little antsy. Never been over to a guy’s house before... Uh, not that Ushio-chan’s a guy, obviously! That was just a figure of speech! I meant ‘to the house of someone I like,’ y’know?!”

“R-right.”

She really didn’t need to backpedal so much. I more or less knew she hadn’t fully reconciled her preexisting feelings for Ushio as a member of the opposite sex with her recent transition. This seemed pretty normal to me, though; internalizing change wasn’t always as easy as flipping a switch. I pressed the button off to the side of the front door, and not ten seconds later, a woman’s voice came over the intercom.

“Yes, hello? Who is it?”

“Oh, uh, hi,” I said. “It’s Kamiki. I’m one of Ushio’s... Sorry, Ushio-san’s friends. I’m here with one of our other classmates too, Hoshihara. We were a little worried about how Ushio-san was doing, so we decided we’d stop by.”

“...Okay, one second.”

The speaker cut off abruptly. A short while later, the front door opened to reveal a dark-haired woman in her early thirties or so. She was tall and quite slender, so she managed to look quite stylish even in her casual at-home attire: a loose-fitting white T-shirt and jeans. She was definitely a looker; even Hoshihara couldn’t help but let out a vaguely reverent sigh of admiration from beside me. I assumed this was the stepmom Ushio had mentioned—Yuki.

“Sorry for the wait, you guys,” she said. “You must be Sakuma-kun, I take it?”

“Oh, yes. That’s me,” I replied, curious as to how she knew my first name despite this being our first meeting. Maybe Ushio had told her just now.

She put on a friendly smile. “Yeah, I recognize you from some old photo albums. You and Ushio go back quite a ways, don’t you? Thanks for swinging by to check up on her.”

“No, no. Don’t mention it...” I said, reflexively looking away. It was true that we’d come to visit out of concern, but it didn’t feel right being thanked for that.

“Well, come on in, then.”

Hoshihara and I dipped into a bow before stepping into the mudroom. The implacable, lived-in scent of another person’s house filled my nostrils almost immediately. That muted potpourri of smells—of Ushio and her family simply

existing within these walls—permeated the house. It was almost a nostalgic scent for me, considering the number of times I'd come over here to play as a child. I slipped off my shoes and went to step up onto the raised hardwood floor of the main house, but I was quickly stopped in my tracks.

“Oh, before you come in—there's something I'd like to ask the two of you, if you don't mind,” said Yuki. Hoshihara and I exchanged a fleeting glance. Finding no reason to refuse, we nodded, and Yuki gave an awkward smile. “Ushio's not...being bullied at school or anything, is she?”

I felt a sudden weight in the pit of my stomach. *How are we supposed to answer this? Should we just tell her the truth, or assure her there've been no issues whatsoever?* I assumed the latter was what Yuki was hoping to hear, but I really didn't feel comfortable lying. She was probably only asking because she already had a pretty good hunch, so the likelihood of being caught in a lie was high.

Before I could make up my mind, Hoshihara took charge and answered for me. “Ushio-chan's...been getting harassed by one of our classmates in particular, yes.” She'd opted to go the honesty route, and I felt a little bad making her answer such an awkward question. But now that the cat was out of the bag, I saw no reason to beat around the bush, so I nodded to corroborate what she'd just said.

Yuki slumped her shoulders and awkwardly scratched her head. “Gotcha...” she said, dragging the word out into a sigh. “Yeah, I kind of figured as much, given the circumstances. Man, these things are tough. Especially when you're a kid.”

“D-don't worry!” Hoshihara assured her. “We're not gonna let that happen any longer! Kamiki-kun and I have already decided to go the extra mile to stand up for Ushio-chan from now on!”

“Is that right?”

Hoshihara and I nodded repeatedly, like bobbleheads. Yuki crossed her arms and sized us up a moment before smiling faintly.

“All right, guess I'll leave it to you two for now, then. Take care of her for me.”

“We will,” Hoshihara and I said in unison.

“Now, c’mon in,” Yuki said, and the two of us stepped up into the house proper. “By the way, Sakuma-kun—remind me, have you been to our house before?”

“Ah, yes. Quite a few times, back in the day.”

“Then I take it you remember where Ushio’s room is?”

“Uhhh... Right up the stairs, first door, wasn’t it?”

“Yep, you got it. Heck, you probably know this house better than I do.”

“Oh, no. Not at all...”

This was one of those awkward interactions with a friend’s parent where I didn’t know how to respond—though I did notice Hoshihara side-eyeing me throughout this exchange. There was a hint of envy in her gaze, but surely she couldn’t actually be jealous that I’d been over here a lot as a kid...right?

“Whoops, sorry for holding you guys up,” said Yuki. “Feel free to head upstairs.”

We bowed politely for the second time, then made our way up to Ushio’s bedroom. Just then, I heard the front door open behind me. Turning to look, I saw a young girl clad in a sailor-style uniform. She was fair-skinned and slim, and she had her black hair in a bob cut. This was Ushio’s younger sister, Misao. Yuki welcomed her home, but Misao didn’t respond, instead keeping her dubious eyes trained on us, the unexpected visitors.

“...Sakuma-san?” she said. “What are you doing here?”

“Yeah, hey there,” I said. “Just wanted to talk to Ushio for a bit. Long time no see, by the way.”

“I guess, yeah.” This was a rather curt reply. It seemed we were not the most welcome guests in Misao’s eyes. She shut the door and took her shoes off, then stepped up onto the wood floor before stopping suddenly and turning back to face me. “That reminds me, Sakuma-san—could you do me a favor and tell my brother to stop cross-dressing, please? It’s really grossing me out.”

I had to admit, the candid, unabashed brutality of this request threw me. It

seemed she had no qualms expressing her disapproval for Ushio's newfound identity and lifestyle. Ushio *did* mention that her sister had been refusing to speak to her recently, but it seemed their relationship was even worse than I thought.

"Hey, come on, now!" Yuki scolded her stepdaughter as I stood there, fumbling for a reply. "You know better than to talk like that. And Ushio's your *sister* now, not your brother..."

"Oh, shut up," said Misao. "You're not my mom."

And with that final cutting remark, she walked off and disappeared down the hallway. I felt that this one little interaction had given me a fairly telling glimpse into the complicated family dynamic in the Tsukinoki household as of late.

"Er, sorry you had to see that." Yuki awkwardly laughed it off. "Go on. You two should head upstairs. Wouldn't want Ushio to start worrying about what's taking you so long."

Reluctant though we were after what we'd just seen, Hoshihara and I obliged and ascended the staircase. I felt pretty terrible for Yuki, but I knew there was nothing we could do, so we opted not to stick our noses in their family business for the time being.

We reached the second floor, and the door to Ushio's room was right where I remembered it. For a split second, it felt uncannily like I'd been transported back in time to a random weekend visit back in elementary school. If Hoshihara weren't here with me, I might even have liked to stand there and savor the hallucination a little bit longer.

I knocked on the door. Ushio called back from within, and so I opened it.



“...Hey, guys,” she said, greeting us despondently from where she sat on her bed in a hoodie and workout shorts. She looked at us with a gaze that suggested some amount of displeasure or vexation at our showing up unannounced. For a moment, I caught a glimpse of that same look in her eyes that she’d given me after that confession during lunch today, and it very nearly made me lose my nerve—but I bottled up those emotions and stepped into the bedroom regardless.

“Hey, we’re comin’ in,” I said.

“S-sorry to intrude,” Hoshihara added nervously.

Ushio’s room hadn’t changed much from how I remembered it. It was a neat and tidy space, with a variety of popular shonen manga lining its large bookshelves. The spines of each volume were in mint condition, which suggested she didn’t do a whole lot of rereading. Either that or she handled them very delicately.

“Just have a seat wherever,” Ushio said. I set my bookbag down to the side of her bed and took a seat on the floor as instructed. Hoshihara plopped down beside me. “Were you guys talking about something downstairs? I noticed it took a while for you to get up here from when I heard the doorbell ring.”

“Yeah,” I replied, taking the lead since Hoshihara still seemed a bit jumpy. “We, uh...talked a little bit with Yuki-san, and then with Misao-chan.”

“Oh, gotcha. So you talked to Misao, huh...?”

Ushio didn’t say another word after that, gazing listlessly off at nothing in particular. The conversation had died. I gave Hoshihara the signal with my eyes, urging her to say what she’d brought us here for. She gulped, then looked up at Ushio.

“Erm, hey, Ushio-chan... I actually wanted to apologize.”

“Apologize? For what?”

“I...feel bad that I didn’t do anything to help during lunch today. I know that must’ve been...really hard for you, and I kinda just sat there and watched it happen... But from now on, I won’t stand idly by and tolerate stuff like that. I

promise. That's really all I came here to say—just wanted you to know that.”

Ushio nodded along in silence as Hoshihara haltingly delivered this little speech. Her expression as she listened close was still pretty hard to place. I couldn't tell whether she was touched by what Hoshihara was saying or she simply wanted to give the appearance of listening intently.

“You're very kind, Natsuki,” Ushio said matter-of-factly, her mild-mannered smile making it seem as though the sentiments being expressed had nothing to do with her.

“Definitely felt my patience being tested at school today, yeah... Honestly made me kind of never want to go back there again.”

“Wha—?!” Hoshihara gasped.

“Like, maybe I should just transfer to another school. Start over somewhere completely new, where no one knows me or my history, and I can just live my life as a girl without being judged. Been thinking that might be an appealing option for me lately.”

“N-no, you can't!”

“Oh, really? Why not?”

There was the sound of rustling linens as Ushio slid off her bed and walked over to sit down directly beside Hoshihara. She peered through her lashes into the other girl's eyes, their shoulders practically touching. There was a hint of a lazy smile painted on her lips—and for whatever reason, there was something almost seductive about her manner as she closed the distance between them in this way, to the point that I couldn't help but wonder if Ushio was planning to *kiss* her, even.

Hoshihara (understandably) froze up and went bright red from ear to ear. The tension was palpable even from where I was sitting, and I started to sweat a little bit. No, perhaps I was experiencing something closer to goosebumps. Obviously, I knew she probably wouldn't *actually* do anything, but it was still making me nervous to watch. Either way, I couldn't exactly intervene, so I just had to sit there and watch.

Then, unexpectedly, Ushio turned her gaze away from Hoshihara and onto

me, and an oddly disappointed expression crossed her face. She then stood up and moved to sit on the opposite side of the low table in the center of the room, facing us.

“Sorry, Natsuki. I was just messing with you. I’m not going to transfer out, don’t worry. And I won’t stop coming to school, either.”

“O-o-o-okay, good, yeah!” Hoshihara stammered. “Phew, I’m glad... Gotta admit, you had me going for a minute there. Aha ha...”

I likewise loosed a breathy chuckle of relief. I truly hoped Ushio would refrain from “jokes” like that going forward—I was really on pins and needles there for a minute.

There came a knock on the door, and Ushio gave permission to enter, so in walked Yuki carrying a tray of refreshments.

“Feel free to have some of these if you’d like,” she said, setting the tray of cream puffs and three glasses of apple juice down on the low table. I couldn’t help but think that one would *never* get offered such fancy Western confectionery as a guest in *my* house. As soon as Yuki walked back out the door, Ushio grabbed a cream puff and started eating.

“You two should have some,” she told us.

“Well, since you’re offering...” I said.

“D-don’t mind if I do!” said Hoshihara.

And so the three of us sat there eating cream puffs in silence. I didn’t know what else to say. It was an odd, odd moment in time. Ushio was the first to finish hers, and when she got up to throw the little wrapping paper in the garbage, I noticed something.

“Hey, Ushio,” I said. “You’ve got some cream on your nose.”

“Huh?” She reached up to check. The cream confirmed, she *immediately* scrambled for a nearby tissue box and scrubbed it off. I couldn’t help but chuckle at how momentarily frantic this minor revelation made her.

“Not like you to be such a messy eater,” I teased.

“O-oh, shut up. That can happen to literally anyone.”

She glared at me, pouting—a hint of embarrassment on her cheeks. She was usually very cautious to avoid even minor bouts of “uncoolness,” though. I wondered if perhaps she’d simply let her guard down in the comfort of her own bedroom. This was probably the first time I’d seen her get flustered over a tiny mistake like that since elementary school.

I popped what little remained of my own cream puff into my mouth and turned to my side as I began to chew. Hoshihara had hers in hand, but she was less focused on eating than looking all around Ushio’s bedroom.

“You sure don’t have a lot of stuff in your room, do you?” she observed. I’d always had this thought too—especially now that Ushio was a teenager—though I hadn’t paid it much mind. Maybe there was a reason for it, though.

“Yeah, I get that a lot,” Ushio said, chuckling awkwardly as she scratched her cheek. “Never been a very materialistic person, I don’t think, even back when I was really little.”

“Oh, wow. That’s really interesting. Because, me, I feel like I’m *always* thinking about the next thing I wanna get, so my room’s constantly filling up with more and more stuff. Until inevitably my mom starts yelling at me to clean up my room and get rid of some.”

“Ha ha. That *does* sound like something you’d do, yeah.”

It really did, I agreed. Not to make any rude assumptions, but I could sort of imagine Hoshihara’s room being pretty cluttered and messy—cute mascot plushies and cushions strewn around all over the place. As I smiled at the mental image, Hoshihara suddenly let out a tiny gasp of surprise and delight, then jumped up and walked over to the bookcase. I assumed she’d spotted something that piqued her interest.

“Wait. Is this your elementary school yearbook?” she asked, pointing to a red, bound volume on the bottom shelf of the bookcase. She was right on the money—it was indeed the yearbook from our graduating year at West Tsubakioka Elementary School.

“It is, yeah,” said Ushio. “Wanna take a look?”

“Are you kidding?! Heck yeah, I do!” Hoshihara quickly pulled the yearbook

off the shelf, laid it open on the table, and started flipping through the pages. “Let’s see... Tsukinoki, Tsukinoki... Aha! Here you are! Oh my god, you were so cuuute!”

She was ecstatic. I leaned over to look at the page of individual student portraits, alphabetically arranged, and I quickly found Ushio’s face. It wasn’t hard, given that there weren’t any other kids with blonde hair. It was a photo of her back when she and I were in the sixth grade—and to be honest, she actually looked quite a bit like a girl even back then. Her eyes were big, and she had longer hair than a typical elementary-school boy. She rarely if ever got it cut *that* short.

“So when did you first start feeling like you were really meant to be a girl?” I asked, voicing the question that naturally popped into my head.

“Hard to say,” said Ushio, shaking her head. “I think those feelings have always been there, at least as far back as I can remember, so I’m not sure there was a specific moment.”

“Huh. Okay, interesting.”

“Though if you want to know when I first *realized* there was something different about me compared to all the other kids, I’d say it was probably around third grade.”

This made sense to me. As I recalled, that was around the time the school started separating students by gender for group activities, changing before gym, and the like. Ushio took a sip of her apple juice and looked up at the ceiling, lost in reverie.

“I remember when our class decided to perform ‘Cinderella’ for the school arts festival, and we were all trying to decide who would play what roles: Prince Charming, Cinderella, the fairy godmother, the evil stepsisters... For whatever reason, I really wanted to play Cinderella. So when the teacher asked for anyone who wanted to put their name in for the role to speak up, I raised my hand.”

I nodded in silence. I noticed that Hoshihara had set the yearbook aside and was listening intently as well.

“And I just remember the teacher laughing at me, saying, ‘Don’t you mean Prince Charming, Tsukinoki-kun?’ Then the whole class started laughing. I started laughing along with them, just to sort of go with the flow, I guess. But I remember that being a pretty jarring moment of realization for me. Like, ‘Oh, okay. Guess it’s weird for me to want to play the princess part.’ I think from that point on, I started really trying to act more like a ‘boy’—both because I didn’t want to get laughed at again and because I didn’t want to make my mother worry that something was wrong with me.”

Ushio’s biological mother had been terminally ill from the time we were little kids. I’d gone to visit her with Ushio at the hospital she resided in a few times. We’d talk about things we were doing in school—basic childhood chatter—and she’d listen attentively with a pleasant, motherly smile on her face. But it sounded like part of the reason Ushio had boxed away her doubts and proudly played the role of the brash and boyish son for so long was because she didn’t want to put any unnecessary mental burden on her mother. I couldn’t even imagine what kind of inner turmoil and anxiety that must have caused her.

“Man... Sounds like you must’ve had a pretty rough time of it growing up, then,” Hoshihara whispered into the silence.

“Oh, it wasn’t all that bad,” said Ushio, donning a reassuring smile. “At least, it didn’t *feel* like I was suffering or anything. I really didn’t mind getting grouped in with the boys, and it’s not like all my tastes and hobbies lean traditionally feminine, even if I did always wish I could be a girl. Not like there aren’t tomboys and girls who prefer wearing slacks to skirts, after all. You know what I mean?”

Ushio paused a moment, her expression darkening.

“Though I will say that I really wasn’t a fan of having to get changed with the boys or use the boys’ bathroom... What with the whole culture of ‘going to take a leak’ in the urinals together and everything.”

A jolt of shock ran through me. I had invited Ushio to take a leak with me on several occasions back in early elementary school. Whether she specifically remembered those instances or not, I wasn’t sure...but I felt like I should apologize regardless, just to be safe.

“...Yeah, sorry about that,” I said.

“Oh, you remembered,” said Ushio. “No, it’s okay. I don’t hold it against you or anyone else, really. It’s just a thing, and you couldn’t have known.”

So she did remember. Phew, glad I apologized, then. I let out a quiet sigh of relief, then thought of another question that had been weighing on my mind.

“Hey, so, Ushio—” I began, but I stopped short, realizing belatedly that the question I had in mind was probably going to be a pretty awkward one for her to answer. I rebuked myself internally for not thinking of this *before* I opened my mouth.

“Yeah, what is it?” she asked.

“Er, sorry. It’s nothing important.”

“No, come on. Just finish your thought. It’ll bother me otherwise.”

I’d successfully dug my own grave. I had a feeling there’d be an awkward tension between us if I refused to elaborate now, so I figured I’d just swallow my embarrassment and say what I was originally going to say.

“Um, well... I guess I was just kinda wondering which bathroom you’ve been using at school recently...”

I remembered one of my classmates bringing this up the very first day Ushio came out as a girl—and her looking very clearly distraught by the question. Right now, sitting across from me, she still looked rather uncomfortable being forced to address the topic. But unlike last time, it seemed she meant to answer.

“I haven’t been.”

“Huh?!” Hoshihara and I exclaimed in tandem.

“W-wait,” said Hoshihara, putting her hands on the floor and leaning forward toward Ushio. “S-so you’ve just been holding it in all day?”

“...Yeah, pretty much,” said Ushio. “I mean, the teacher *did* tell me I could use the faculty restroom if I wanted to, but I didn’t feel right doing that...”

“Y-you can’t do that, though! It’s not healthy!”

“Right, I get that... But it’s not like I really ever had to go to the bathroom at school very often to begin with, so it’s not a huge inconvenience.”

“But...” Hoshihara furrowed her brow with concern.

I was pretty concerned myself. Granted, it wasn’t *that* hard to sort of train your body not to have to go to the bathroom during school hours, but it certainly wasn’t good to hold it in when you really *did* have to go—and everyone had times like that. This was a pretty serious issue, I thought. At the same time, I didn’t feel comfortable trying to advise or admonish someone about their bathroom habits, since that was an extremely private subject for most people. As I sat there ruminating how to offer any solutions without it coming across as intrusive, Hoshihara hesitantly took charge.

“O-okay, then how about this?” she said. “What if I went with you whenever you needed to go?”

I could almost feel a gigantic, cartoonish interrobang appear over my head. While I assumed Hoshihara didn’t mean she’d actually go *in* the bathroom together with her, it was still a pretty bold offer to make, given that Ushio had already shared her discomfort in that regard. But Ushio didn’t seem all that taken aback.

“No, it’s okay. I don’t need a chaperone like a little kid who just watched a horror movie...” she said, sounding ever-so-slightly insulted but mostly amused by the notion. Hoshihara picked up on this and turned her gaze to the floor, retroactively cringing at her own suggestion. “I appreciate the offer and the sentiment, though. Seriously. I’ll try not to hold it in going forward if I can help it.”

Ushio smiled gently, and Hoshihara jerked her head up and beamed right back.

“Okay, good! Yeah, sounds like a plan!” she said.

Well then. Guess all’s well that ends well...right? I knew it probably wasn’t going to be quite that simple. Still, if this conversation did anything to help Ushio feel like she could exist a bit more comfortably at school, then I was glad to have brought it up. I downed the rest of my apple juice and looked up at the wall clock. It was already past five.

“We should get going here pretty soon,” I suggested.

“Yeah... You’re probably right.” Hoshihara sounded a little forlorn as she got up and returned the yearbook to the shelf.

“I’ll walk you downstairs,” said Ushio.

Hoshihara and I stood up, grabbed our things, and headed down the stairs to put our shoes back on in the entryway. Before we left, Hoshihara turned back and looked at Ushio with solemn, entreating eyes.

“Come to school tomorrow, okay? I want the three of us to walk home together again.”

Ushio smiled. “Okay,” she said softly, with a little nod.

I said goodbye and thanked her for the hospitality, then walked out the front door with Hoshihara in tow. It was still glaringly bright outside, the sun beating harshly down on the pavement like a petulant child determined to make themselves known. We raised the kickstands on our bikes, which we’d left standing out in front of the house, and resumed our homeward journey.

“Phew... Really glad we did that,” said Hoshihara, with the sort of satisfied sigh that always accompanied the feeling of a job well done.

“Yeah, agreed. She did seem a little down in the dumps, but it sounds like she’ll still come back to school tomorrow, which is good.”

“Yep. Gotta be a better friend starting tomorrow. If Arisa tries *anything*, I’m gonna give her a piece of my mind, just you watch!”

I was amused by the sudden burst of confidence, though I had to admit the mere mention of that name *did* put a nasty feeling in the pit of my stomach.

“Right, Nishizono... If only there was something we could do about her.”

“No kidding... She’s like the top dog, head honcho of all the folks who’ve been giving Ushio-chan a hard time. If we could just convince her to stop, I bet the whole class would lay off too. But she’s a pretty tough nut to crack, I’ve gotta say.”

Tough. That was definitely one word you could use to describe her. It would be awfully hard to get through to her, especially since she wasn’t one to mince

words when it came to her convictions. I wasn't sure we could talk her down.

"Wonder if she has any weaknesses we could exploit," I mused.

"Arisa? Mmm... Well, I think she can't handle spicy food, for one?"

"And how does that help us? I'm talking secrets—dirty laundry, y'know?"

"Hm, let me think..." A pensive expression appeared on her face as she pondered this a moment. "Well...she *did* have a crush on Ushio-chan too, I suppose."

Even with the long, dramatic pause beforehand, this revelation caught me completely off guard. This was most definitely the first I'd heard of this.

"I think that might be part of the reason she's been bullying Ushio-chan so hard. Like, to try to scare her back into being a boy again or something..."

I wanted to say that surely even *she* wouldn't be so immature as to think that was a good idea, but I honestly couldn't rule out the possibility. Plus, I could understand the relative shock that might accompany the revelation that a member of the opposite sex you had a crush on was now the same gender as you. While many people would probably see this as reason enough to drop their feelings for said person and move on, it made sense that some would find it harder to give up, wanting to try to convince the person to reconsider. It seemed that in Nishizono's case, "convincing" took the form of bullying.

Though I certainly couldn't condone her methods, I could at least understand why she might have a hard time accepting Ushio's transition a little bit better in light of this. But she was going *way* too far, and her recent behavior was totally unacceptable regardless of how heartbroken she might feel.

"Yeah, I guess that might qualify as a weakness, in a sense," I said. "The thing is, I'm not sure I could ever bring myself to use that knowledge against her."

"Me neither," said Hoshihara. "Don't really even wanna bring it up..."

No matter how horrible Nishizono might be, I didn't feel right using someone's intimate feelings against them for the sake of blackmail. For now, I thought it best to tuck this little tidbit away in a corner of my brain.

We came to the T-shaped intersection.

“All right, this is my turn,” I said.

“Okay,” Hoshihara replied. “See you tomorrow, then.”

“Yep, see you tomorrow.”

I hopped on my bike and rode off. But I only got about ten meters down the road before I felt my cell phone buzz in my pocket. It was a new message. I brought my bike to a stop and pulled out my phone; ever since I’d traded contact info with Hoshihara, I’d made an unconscious habit of checking my messages as soon as they arrived. I flipped open my phone.

“Hey, sorry. There’s something I want to tell you. Could you come back real quick?”

It was from Ushio.

In all honesty, I felt pretty uneasy about heading back to Ushio’s house all by myself. I could only imagine that the thing she “wanted to tell me” had something to do with her confession during lunch today, and I still hadn’t thought up a proper response to that. I didn’t know what I would do if she pressed me for one right there on the spot; the thought alone made my stomach lurch. But I’d already viewed the message, so I couldn’t very well ignore it now.

I sent a simple “Sure thing” in reply and pulled a U-turn. Pedaling slowly, I tried to think of ways in which I could postpone giving her an answer if need be—but I couldn’t think of any good excuses whatsoever. Before long, I was back in front of Ushio’s house, totally unprepared for whatever conversation we were about to have.

“Man, what do I do?” I muttered to myself as I got off my bike, grabbed my bag, and walked up to the door. But right as I stood there hesitating to ring the doorbell, the front door opened by itself, and out came Yuki with some reusable shopping bag hanging over her shoulder. I assumed she was on her way out to run some errands.

“Wait, Sakuma-kun?” she said. “What’s up?”

“Yeah, hello again. Nothing much. Ushio just called me back...”

“Oh, gotcha. Well, she’s still in her room, so you can head on up there.”

She left the door open for me as she walked out. There was no turning back now. I bowed slightly to her and headed into the house. After removing my shoes, I walked up the stairs, took one deep breath outside of Ushio’s room, and knocked on the door. Hearing her reply that it was okay to enter, I twisted the knob and walked in.

“Sorry for calling you back all of a sudden,” she said from her place on the bed, right where she’d been sitting when Hoshihara and I walked in last time. She seemed calm and collected, with no clear aim or intent perceptible in her expression.

“Don’t worry about it. So...what did you want to tell me?” I asked, affecting an air of serenity despite the cold sweat trickling down my back and the rapid palpitations of my heart. Ushio didn’t say a word at first, opting to simply stare at me instead. Then she let out a tiny laugh through her nose, alleviating some of the tension.

“Why don’t you have a seat?” she suggested.

“Huh? Oh, right. Yeah, uh, will do.”

“You seem pretty nervous, Sakuma,” Ushio said, sounding somewhat surprised as I set my bag on the floor and knelt down on the carpet. “Take it easy. I’m not going to say anything that’ll make things harder for you, don’t worry.”

“Y-you’re not?”

Realizing that kneeling in a formal seating posture was probably a bit much, I eased into a more casual position. Ushio got up from her bed, walked over to her desk, and pulled out a drawer. Then, with her back to me, she said:

“I read that novel of yours.”

“Huh?”

“The one you wrote back in junior high.”

It took me a few moments to process what she’d said and recall that I’d lent

her that old amateur novel of mine. My mind was too caught up with her earlier confession that I hadn't even considered that as a possible topic of discussion. Ushio pulled the thick stack of manuscript paper out of her drawer and brought it over to me. I accepted it with both hands, and she took a seat in her swivel desk chair.

"Just figured I'd give you my general impressions," she said, scratching her cheek in embarrassment.

"And that's why you called me back here?"

She nodded, and a wave of relief washed over me. I didn't know *what* I was going to do if she wanted to talk more about her feelings for me. But as the relief wore off, I felt another antsy, itchy feeling start to bubble up inside my chest—and this one I knew quite well. It was anticipation. Ushio had read my novel and was about to tell me her thoughts on it. This was a first for me: having someone I knew not just read my writing but also tell me how they felt about it. It was entirely likely it wouldn't be a very positive review, but I still felt eager and restless at the thought of having my work appraised.

"Oh, you actually read that, huh?" I said, heart pounding like crazy. "So then, uh... How was it?"

"Well, I'm not sure how to put this..." she began, averting her eyes—possibly in discomfort. "I guess for starters, I'll just say I'm really impressed you were able to write so much in the first place. I think the longest piece of writing I've ever done, original or otherwise, would probably only fill five or six pages like this. But as for the story itself, well..." She cast a sidelong glance in my direction before continuing. "I guess maybe it just wasn't for me..."

I felt some sort of convulsion in the back of my throat. This was, for all intents and purposes, just a milder way of saying "It wasn't good" without hurting my feelings.

"G-gotcha, so it wasn't really your speed, then..." I said, trying my best to keep my face from twitching. "Can I ask what about it didn't really click with you?"

"...Well, for one thing, I didn't really get the mechanic where the whole world ends if his girl-next-door childhood friend dies. I know you included some cursory explanation about it being related to quantum mechanics or something,

but I think it just didn't land for me... Though maybe that was just a matter of reading comprehension on my part. Also, I noticed you introduced a bunch of minor characters all at once partway through the story, and things got kind of muddled from there. It's pretty hard to keep track of six new cast members unless you stagger out their introductions—and on top of that, some of them only appeared in that one scene and then never again for the remainder of the story. Oh yeah, and another pretty minor thing..."

Ushio went on for several more minutes, logically dismantling every prose defect, lore discrepancy, and characterization inconsistency she could recall throughout the entire book. I stopped listening after a while—or, more accurately, I couldn't stand to *keep* listening to all her criticisms. Granted, I knew full well that my story was pretty amateur and uninteresting. But actually having to sit there and listen to someone you know pointing out each and every flaw with surgical precision was far more painful than I ever could have imagined. The worst part was that I *agreed* with all of her constructive criticisms, so I couldn't even offer a counterargument or opposing authorial viewpoint. I deeply regretted asking her to elaborate on what parts she didn't like.

"...but yeah, I think that about sums it up," she finished. "Er, Sakuma? Are you okay?"

"Huh?" I said. "Oh, yeah... Sorry, I think I'm just feeling a little deflated now..."

"Wha—?!" Ushio gasped, panicking. "O-oh god, I'm sorry! I went too far, didn't I? Well, it's not like I'm a professional literary critic, so take everything I say with a grain of salt."

"No, it's fine. I wouldn't want you to lie and say you loved it just to make me feel better or anything, either... Thanks for giving me your honest impressions. I really appreciate it."

In actuality, I could feel my heart breaking in real time, but I knew nothing good would come of admitting she'd hurt my feelings. Ushio stared down at the manuscript where it lay on my lap, looking as if she wanted to say something else but couldn't figure out what. Maybe she was scouring her memories for any tiny piece of the story she enjoyed that she could praise me for and was

coming up woefully empty.

An uncomfortable silence filled the room, and I found myself amusedly thinking that maybe it would have been better if she *had* pressed me for an answer to her confession after all. I needed to go home ASAP before I let things get any more awkward between us. I took my burnable waste—sorry, amateur novel—and went to shove it into my bookbag.

A sharp pain shot through my index finger.

“Ow!”

I jerked my right hand back to check the damage; a red bead of blood had formed on the tip of my finger and was growing by the second. It seemed I’d given myself a pretty nasty papercut.

“What’s wrong?” asked Ushio, leaning over to take a look.

“Nothing, just cut my finger on one of the pages,” I said. “If you could hand me a tissue or something to wipe it off with, I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

“Hang on a second,” she said, standing up from her chair and producing a box of adhesive bandages from her desk. She pulled one out and offered it to me. “Here, use this.”

“Oh, cool... Thanks.”

I dabbed the blood off with a tissue and then took the bandage from her. I peeled open the packaging and tried to apply it to the underside of my index finger with the opposite hand, but I discovered it was awfully difficult to align the wound with the padded area with only two fingers. Ushio must have seen me struggling with this, as she snatched the bandage from me and told me to sit still. She sat down beside me and gently wrapped the bandage around my finger.



“Okay, you’re all set,” she said, nodding with satisfaction at her delicate handiwork.

“Wow,” I said. “That was kinda girly just now.” The words just kind of slipped out.

Ushio’s eyes went wide.

It was only then that I realized I might have said something offensive, and I started stressing out about it. *Maybe I shouldn’t have tacked on the “kinda” there... Ugh, yeah, that’s gotta be it. I mean, that implies I don’t think of her as very girly at all most of the time, or else why would I feel the need to point it out? And what the hell does the way in which you apply a bandage have anything to do with being a boy or a girl?*

“Er, sorry, I was just, uh—”

As I scrambled to come up with an explanation, I noticed a change in Ushio’s demeanor. She was looking slightly down and to the side, gently biting her lip at the corner. It was a yearnful sort of expression. Her earlobes were faintly flushed, and her gray eyes were wavering. How was I meant to interpret this reaction?

It looked almost like she was trying to restrain herself from smiling, or crying, or getting upset—but which of the three, I had no clue. I could always *ask* what the matter was and find out right away, but assuming she was upset with me, I really didn’t want to go prodding her about it.

As I sat there, confused and unable to discern her true emotions, Ushio reached up to fidget with her bangs. “Um... Th-thanks?”

At first, I wondered why she’d said this with an upward inflection, but not a moment later, I recognized what I was hearing: she was feeling *bashful* about me calling her girly. For a moment, I felt relieved to know that she wasn’t angry with me, but then I found myself feeling oddly discombobulated. A whole host of conflicting emotions swirled through my mind, leaving me with an ultimately very peculiar sensation that was neither wholly pleasant nor unpleasant. Was I simply happy that she’d thanked me for the comment? Was I feeling startled by the unexpected reaction? Was I feeling a little flustered by Ushio’s increased

girliness? Perhaps all three had something to do with it.

But the biggest emotion I felt was none of these—it was one I couldn't quite articulate. It was akin to a feeling of emptiness, like a cold wind blowing through a gaping hole in my chest. Was I disheartened? Was I feeling discouraged about something? And if so, what?

Suddenly, I heard the sound of the front door being unlocked and opened from downstairs. It seemed Yuki had returned home from her errands.

"I'd better get going," I said, then once again moved to slide my manuscript into my bookbag—this time without cutting myself—before standing up.

"Hm? Oh... Yeah, okay," said Ushio, rising from the floor as well. By the time our eyes met, she'd regained her usual coolheaded demeanor. But as I picked up my bag and went to leave the room, she called out for me to wait—and when I turned around, I saw that she was looking somewhat anxious and insecure once again. "If you ever write another novel, I hope you'll let me read that one too. I don't care what genre."

"Yeah, sure thing," I said. "Not sure I'll ever get the urge to write again...but if I do, I'll try to shoot for a more positive review next time, heh."

"I already said I was sorry!" Ushio said, her composure crumbling at this jest.

We said goodbye, and I descended the stairway. After tugging my shoes on and heading outside, I was immediately enveloped by the hot, muggy summer evening. A beautiful gradient was painted across the western sky as the sun sank down into the horizon. I got on my bike and pedaled off toward home.

Carving my way through the wind, I exhumed that confusing feeling I'd gotten back in Ushio's bedroom to give it a closer look. And this time, it was almost anticlimactic how quickly I realized what the true cause of that vexation was.

There was a thought I felt disheartened by, and guilty for even having:

If only Ushio had been *born* a girl, this would all be so simple.

She was attractive. She had a great personality. She was a good friend whom I

had a ton of history with, and she liked me. And if she weren't biologically male, I very well might have fallen for her right then and there when she wrapped that bandage around my finger. But despite being her friend and supporting her transition, I just couldn't mentally bridge that gap between what she'd been born as and what she identified as. And that was a really, really depressing realization to me.

All I could do was lament the sad reality of it all. I deplored whatever divine creator had seen fit to put Ushio in a body she didn't belong in. If only her sex and gender were aligned, there'd be no reason for her to have to struggle so hard to come to terms with her identity. Or worse—to try to convince herself that it was an illness or mental deficiency, and she just needed to “let it go.”

If only she'd been born a girl, I might have even... Well, there was no point in thinking about it, really. I lifted myself up off the seat of my bike and pedaled faster. As hard as I could.

That night, I had a dream. I'd come down with the flu, and Ushio had come over to my house to take care of me. In this dream, Ushio was a girl like any other—she had a more feminine fragrance about her and a chest that curved beneath the confines of her shirt. I remembered feeling happy to know that she was genuinely worried about me.

“Hey, Sakuma,” she said, sitting down on the bed where I lay. A sweet smile crept up onto her face—the coquettish kind only a true vixen could make when she knew she had her prey exactly where she wanted him, and so did he. “Look at me. *Really* look at me.”

And with that, she started taking off her uniform—first tossing her blouse to the floor, then her bra—exposing her pale, naked torso to the open air. Her cold, slender hands picked up one of my arms and gently guided my hand up to touch her breasts. There was a tangible softness there, and a warmth, and a heartbeat—which only made my own heart pound faster. When she tilted her head as if asking me to give my impressions, the strands of hair that had been hanging over her ear lost out to gravity, slipped loose, and came dangling down. And then I woke up.

All I could do was let out a deep, heavy sigh. I couldn't tell whether I'd been relieved in the dream or disappointed, but my heart was still racing even after I awoke. Something was clearly wrong with me; I *never* had dreams like that.

I peeled my back up off the mattress and sat up in bed. Through the gap in the window curtains, I could see the morning light seeping through. I held up my right hand to shield my eyes from the glare. The bandage that Ushio had wrapped around my index finger had fallen off when I got out of the bath the night before. It was still a little painful to apply pressure to the wound, but it had already closed up nicely. Such was the power of youth, I supposed.

I got up out of bed. It was time to get ready for school.

Summer's specter was beginning to grow more and more corporeal. Throughout my entire commute, I begrudged the morning sun for growing harsher by the day, but I quickly forgave it as soon as I entered the air-conditioned halls of Tsubakioka High. After changing shoes in the entryway, I slipped into the morning hustle and bustle and made my way up to Classroom 2-A.

Upon my arrival, the first thing I did was glance over at Ushio's desk. She was already there with her first-period English textbook and notebook open on her desk, tapping idly on her phone. Turning my gaze to the side, I saw Nishizono engaged in some early morning chitchat with a few of her usual hangers-on. Hoshihara had not arrived yet, it seemed. I psyched myself up, tightened my core, and walked over to Ushio's desk. As soon as she noticed me standing beside her, I wished her a good morning in the most natural tone of voice I could muster, one clear and loud enough to resound throughout the entire classroom.

Several of our classmates (Nishizono included) whirled to look. The general atmosphere of the classroom didn't shift very much at all, but I *did* get the impression that the people looking over this way picked up on my intent to ally myself with Ushio as a friend, which was more than good enough for now.

Ushio, for her part, slackened the corners of her lips and wished me a good morning in return. For a moment, the version of her I'd seen in my dreams that

night flashed into my mind, and I couldn't help but bring my eyes down to her chest to make sure I wasn't still asleep. But there were no prominent breasts there in the waking world. Obviously. *Man, what the hell am I even doing?*

"Sakuma?" asked Ushio, tilting her head to one side. I shook my head softly and swept the aforementioned dream under a rug in the back of my mind.

"Sorry, it's nothing," I said. "Did you get enough rest last night?"

"Yeah. Slept like a log for, like, nine hours."

"Nice. Hopefully you won't start nodding off during class, then."

"Well, yeah. I never come to school unrested. I'm not *you*, silly."

She giggled and gave a modest smile. In that instant, I got a weird, fuzzy feeling in my chest. I felt a mote of the slightest warmth growing somewhere deep inside me—but it was an almost uncomfortable, itchy sensation, like a mosquito bite I couldn't scratch.

"I-I'm gonna go set my stuff down," I said.

"Hm? Oh, okay."

I passed her desk as I made my way to the back row and laid my bag down at my own. The fuzzy feeling in my chest quickly abated. *What was that just now?* In a way, it almost resembled the extreme emotional high I got whenever I had the chance to talk to Hoshihara, if only a little bit... But no, it couldn't be that.

Speaking of Hoshihara, she'd entered the classroom just moments after I sat down and got out my textbook and pencil case. She quickly sought out Ushio and wished her a good morning in her usual loud and bubbly manner. Again, everyone in class turned to look. Hoshihara seemed ever so slightly on edge; I sensed a hint of trepidation in her eyes, but it was not enough to shake her newfound intent to stay firm and not let herself be swayed by her peers.

Hoshihara walked right up to Ushio's desk as she returned the greeting, and the two began making morning small talk, noting how hot it was getting and whatnot. It seemed Hoshihara was already putting the plan she'd told me about on our walk home yesterday into action—and it reminded me that I needed to start walking the walk myself. I stood up and walked over to join in their

discussion; along the way, my wandering eyes met Nishizono's judgmental glare, but I quickly looked away.

From then on, Hoshihara and I would go over and chat it up with Ushio during every break period. It didn't matter *what* we talked about, just that we weren't letting her be ostracized and alone anymore. We also wanted to be around her as much as possible to dissuade Nishizono from feeling like she could mess with Ushio without any repercussions (she did still make a handful of attempts to talk smack about us, of course, but we collectively ignored it every time). It was plain to see that she was none too pleased with this new state of affairs. At first, she simply clicked her tongue with vexation when she realized we weren't going to acknowledge her, but after a while, she started taking out her frustration on her so-called friends—ordering them to go buy her a soda, interrupting their jokes and anecdotes to tell them just how unfunny they were, and so on, and so forth. And, no doubt as a direct result of this, I could feel the general temperament of the class begin to change in regard to her.

I first *really* noticed it during the break between third and fourth periods. I'd just finished doing my business in the bathroom and was washing my hands when two other boys from my class came in, chattering loudly as they entered their respective stalls. Unwilling to put their conversation on hold even as they relieved themselves, it seemed, I could hear every word of their exchange from my place at the sink.

"I dunno, man. Think she's gone a *little* too far this time," said one of them. Given the day's circumstances, it was easy to guess which "she" he was referring to.

"Who, Nishizono?" said the other. "Yeah, dude. Totally agree. Couldn't *believe* that stunt she pulled yesterday."

"I know, right? Like, just leave it be at this point. Getting a little obnoxious, if you ask me. I mean, who cares?"

"You think maybe she's just jealous or something?"

"What, because she thinks Tsukinoki's prettier than her or something? Now *that* would be rich. Talk about a plot twist, am I right?"

The two boys laughed it up for a while before immediately moving on to another topic of discussion, apparently quite satisfied with this punchline. Still, I sensed from their tones that they were beginning to develop a more critical animosity toward Nishizono based on her recent behavior—and they probably weren't the only ones. Surely no one with a conscience would have thought it was perfectly acceptable for her to steal Ushio's skirt yesterday and then try to humiliate her with it. Everyone knew she was completely out of line, and while I wasn't the type to get a kick from watching an enemy's fall from grace, I had to admit this was a pretty good sign for us. If Nishizono turned enough of her classmates against her, she might just be convinced to stop harassing Ushio in order to win back some friends. I could only hope this trend would continue, and hopefully without any major incidents.

Fourth period ended, and lunch hour began. Hoshihara grabbed her lunch and made her way over to Ushio's desk like always. Nishizono was usually pretty docile while consuming her own lunch, so I didn't feel like I needed to be especially wary of Ushio at the moment. I stayed at my own desk and opened my bento box. Shortly thereafter, Hasumi pulled up a chair to join me like always.

"You're not gonna spend lunch with Tsukinoki too?" he asked.

"Nah. Not like the three of us have that much to talk about, anyway. Besides, if I ate lunch with Ushio, who would eat lunch with you, huh?"

"I mean, I could very easily go sit with some of my other friends..." said Hasumi, his expression stiffening at the implied condescension in my voice.

"Oh... Well, fair enough, I guess."

And here I thought I was being a thoughtful friend. So much for that.

Hasumi cracked open his own bento box and got to eating. "Anyway," he said between bites as he shoveled rice up into his mouth, "seems like you're being awful buddy-buddy with Tsukinoki today. You just feel bad about the stuff with Nishizono from yesterday or what?"

"More or less. I mean, some other stuff happened too, but mostly I'm just a

little worried about her, yeah.”

“Huh. Kinda surprising, not gonna lie. I mean, considering how you used to avoid her like the plague and all.”

“Yeah, well. A lot has changed since then.”

Things were totally different now. It was kind of crazy when I really sat down and thought about it: first, an old guy friend of mine and I have a falling out, then said guy becomes a girl, then said girl confesses to having a crush on me. It would be pretty hard for things to stay the way they’d been after a series of events like that. *Who even knows what might happen next, at this rate*, I thought to myself as I plunged my chopsticks into some veggies in a little side compartment.

And then came the sound of something clattering to the ground.

“Wha—?! Arisa!”

Hoshihara’s voice echoed through the classroom. I looked over to where she and Ushio were sitting and saw Nishizono standing there beside them with her arms folded.

“Th-that was... That was just cruel!” said Hoshihara, her voice trembling. “How could you even *do* such a thing?”

Ushio, meanwhile, was just sitting there looking crestfallen with her eyes downcast. I sat up in my chair to get a better view of the situation and saw an upside-down bento box lying on the floor at Nishizono’s feet. *Ushio’s* bento box.

“Oh, please,” said Nishizono. “It’s not like I did it on purpose. I just accidentally bumped into it, that’s all.”

This testimony alone was enough to give me a pretty good idea of what had transpired. Presumably, she’d reached out to swipe Ushio’s lunch off the table as she was walking by, and she hadn’t made much of an attempt to conceal that it was completely intentional. I could tell from the way Hoshihara was reacting that there was no room for doubt in that regard.

I nearly popped a blood vessel. I felt like I *needed* to get angry—to start hurling harsh words at Nishizono until she apologized. I wanted to stand up for Ushio, like I’d decided I would yesterday—but then I faltered. What if there was even a *tiny* chance that it had been accidental? Furthermore, how would getting angry about it help the situation? Wouldn’t it just make things more complicated? All sorts of minor uncertainties made me ultimately put a lid on my simmering rage. Yet still, the words burned in my throat.

“More importantly, why are *you* being so defensive of Ushio nowadays, Natsuki?” Nishizono asked, wearing her displeasure on her sleeve.

“What do you mean, ‘why’? Because Ushio-chan’s my friend, obviously.”

“I’m sorry, did you say Ushio-chan?!” Nishizono belted out a high-pitched burst of condescending laughter. Then, after chuckling derisively to herself a while, she let out a sigh. Her expression froze over as she declared, “That’s disgusting. You must be more stupid than I thought if you think it’s healthy to enable his delusions like that. No matter what you do, Ushio’s always going to be a boy. Or what, is he gonna get actual surgery done soon? Just chop it right off? Because unless you go *that* far, it’s just cross-dressing at the end of the day. You’re having fun. Playing make-believe.”

“You think this is ‘fun’ for me?” said Ushio, distress painted all across her face as she lifted her head to glare up at Nishizono. “And those things you’re suggesting... They’re not nearly as simple and easy to do as you think they are.”

“Oh, is that right?” Nishizono replied, looking down on Ushio with disdain. “Well, not like it matters to me. But let me give *you* a word of advice, Natsuki, since I guess we’re still technically friends: no matter how much Ushio might be able to make himself *look* like a girl, you should still never make yourself vulnerable around him.”

Hoshihara furrowed her brow dubiously.

Nishizono cracked a hideous grin and went on, “I mean, he *is* a guy, after all. You let your guard down for a second, and he’ll totally try to get in your pants and have his way with you. I guarantee it.”

“What the—?!”

Hoshihara's cheeks went bright red at the blatant sexual implications of this assertion. This was not only a clear and highly disrespectful affront to the both of them but also an attempt to completely invalidate Ushio's lifestyle choices. I still couldn't believe how quick Nishizono could be to turn on two people who had been among her closest friends until recently. The rage that had been simmering in the pit of my stomach reached a furious boil that threatened to pop my self-restraint.

And then it did.

"You need to knock it off," I said.

Nishizono spun around to face me, naked animosity in her icy stare. "I'm sorry? Were you talking to me? Your voice was so puny and pathetic that I couldn't quite hear."

I rose from my seat on shaky legs and glared at her. "I said you need to knock it off. Have those two done anything to bother you? No. You're just lashing out at them because *you* can't accept the new Ushio."

"Excuse me? This has nothing to do with you. And yes, they *have* been bothering me, for your information. I don't appreciate Ushio derailing our studies and ruining what was a good learning atmosphere for the entire class just because he wants to play the victim so that everyone will pat him on the ass and tell him he's special. Frankly, it pisses me off."

"That's all a matter of how *you* feel about it, though. Ushio's not doing anything to disturb anyone. She just wants to have a normal life and go to school like anyone else."

"Yeah, and I'm saying his idea of a 'normal' life is deeply disruptive and disgusting to the rest of us. I didn't ask or want to know about his weird fetishes or sexual orientation—but now *I'm* the one being inappropriate for speaking out about it? Give me a break. I mean, how self-centered can you be? If you never want people to judge you or be faced with opposing viewpoints, you should keep those things to yourself. You can't just come out here in public and make your private life my problem. If I'm expected to just 'accept' him as valid, then *you* need to accept *my* feeling of discomfort as equally valid, too. Why is Ushio the only one who gets special treatment here? Talk about double

standards. And you act like I'm the one discriminating here."

"You're in no position to talk about discrimination. And what 'opposing viewpoints' are you even talking about? All you're doing is hurling insults. I mean, think about what you're saying. You really think it's acceptable to treat the people you disagree with like *they're* invalid just because *you* don't understand them? That's not an 'equally valid' opinion. That's just you being stupid."

I could have sworn I heard a sound like glass cracking coming from Nishizono.

"I knew it," she said. "You *do* have a thing for Ushio, don't you?"

"Excuse me? What the hell are you—"

"That's why you're getting so riled up about this, isn't it? You just can't stand to hear a single bad thing said about your precious widdle Ushio-chan, can you? Yeugh! You're gonna make me puke. If you wanna play the white knight, go do it somewhere else so I don't have to be subjected to it."

I could already hear the steam billowing up inside my head. This was bad—if I let myself lose my temper now, I'd be playing right into Nishizono's hand. And so I quelled my inner rage and let out a snort.

"Yeah, okay," I said. "Just start making baseless claims that have nothing to do with what we're debating the moment you realize you've lost. What are you, five?"

"Oh yeah? If they're so baseless, then why don't you just say I'm wrong, huh? Should be easy to tell us all exactly how you feel about Ushio, in that case."

"That's not what we're—"

"Stop changing the subject and just answer the damn question."

God. Damn it. I couldn't stand how good she was at pushing my buttons with these childish instigation tactics. Now here I was, standing there with all eyes on me as everyone in class waited to hear my answer—including Hoshihara and Ushio. Trying to shrug it off was *not* the right play here.

I knew the safe answer; I could just say I didn't like her like that. But for Ushio, that would also function as my answer to her confession: a decisive no. Even if

that was the best play in terms of this current argument with Nishizono, I knew the harder I denied it, the more it would probably hurt Ushio's feelings. On the flip side, if I said I *did* like her like that, then—no. This wasn't the time to be choosing my answers based on how I imagined they'd be received by those around me. I needed to just man up and say how I really felt. That was the only correct option here.

"Come on," said Nishizono. "Out with it."

"I don't..."

"Sorry? What's that?"

"I don't know, all right?! I don't *know* if I have feelings for her!" I was practically shouting. "I mean, yeah, she's certainly cute, and I honestly *do* kinda get butterflies when I talk to her. Obviously, I like her as a friend, and I want to do everything I can for her because I don't want to see her get hurt. But as for whether I like her on a deeper level...I just don't know, sorry."

"Oh, please. Stop being such a fence-sitter, already."

"Believe me, I wish I could, but I don't have all the answers yet! It's not like I can pin down exactly how I feel about anyone and everything on command, all right?! And besides, if you really wanna make assertions about *my* feelings for Ushio, then I could insinuate a few things about *yours* too, but I highly doubt you wanna go there!"

I regretted this final zinger the moment it left my lips. While she'd certainly started it, I knew it was in poor taste to bring up secondhand gossip about her, and in doing so I'd now stooped to her level. I could see Nishizono's face turning bright red with anger in real time. As she ground her teeth, I braced myself for some sort of retaliation—though I wasn't expecting her to reach for the stainless-steel thermos sitting on Ushio's desk. Right when she held it aloft and cocked her arm back as if to throw it at me, Ushio shot to her feet and grabbed Nishizono by the arm to restrain her.

"You can't do that, Arisa!" said Ushio, struggling with her.

"Let go!" Arisa writhed. "Don't *touch* me, you sicko!"

She couldn't break free from Ushio's grasp. The difference in physical strength

was plain to see, yet still Arisa refused to give in. She flailed her arms around like a woman gone mad—until eventually, the metal thermos hit Ushio right in the face. Immediately, Nishizono let out a tiny gasp and dropped it, letting it fall to the floor with a loud clang.

“Owww...”

This was more than enough to make Ushio relinquish her grip and squat down on the spot, holding both hands up to her face in a futile attempt to stop the thick streams of blood flowing out from both her nostrils.

“A-are you okay?!” asked Hoshihara, jumping into action. She pulled out a handkerchief from her pocket and knelt to press it gently against Ushio’s nose. The cloth bloomed scarlet as it absorbed the steady flow of blood—though from the way Nishizono’s face drained to white, you’d almost think she was the one bleeding.

“No, I-I didn’t mean to do that...” Nishizono protested in a trembling voice. She had to know there wasn’t a soul in the classroom who would believe that. In fact, just about all of our classmates were now glaring daggers at her, their gazes cold as ice. And only then, when she was finally alone in her hate, did it seem like *maybe* she’d finally realized her wrongs, as she reached out a hand toward Ushio in what appeared to be a gesture of genuine concern.

At that very moment, a woman’s voice rang out through the hushed classroom. “Hey, what’s going on?”

I spun toward the door and saw Ms. Iyo standing there—her usual friendly smile nowhere to be found and a grave expression in its place.

“I heard there was a fight,” she said.

It seemed someone had tipped her off to the commotion—just in time to witness the bloody aftermath, but not to prevent it. *Why couldn’t she have shown up five minutes ago?*

When Ms. Iyo finally stepped into the classroom and saw Ushio crouching low to the ground, her eyes went wide. “What happened here?” she asked.

“Nishizono-san hit Tsukinoki-kun in the face with that metal thermos,” answered a nearby classmate—one of the girls who’d previously been a

member of Nishizono's posse, in fact.

This apparent betrayal seemed to shake Nishizono, as her lips began to tremble in shock. "Wha...? No, I was just..."

Ms. Iyo shot her a quick glance, then looked to Ushio, huddled over the floor. "Is that true, Ushio?"

But Ushio shook her head, still pressing Hoshihara's handkerchief to her nose. "No... It was just an accident."

Had she wanted to, Ushio could have easily placed the blame on Nishizono, and no one in class would have argued. Yet she hadn't done that. Even now, after all the abuse, she was still trying to be a decent person to Nishizono.

Which made me wonder, what if Ushio had known all along that Nishizono harbored feelings for her? Did she feel some amount of guilt, then, for making the decision to stop being a boy and live her life as a girl from now on? Did she feel like she'd led Nishizono on, in a way? I could almost understand why she might have felt like she had to endure the abuse, in that case.

Granted, I had no evidence to support this deduction, but the thought alone was enough to depress me. *No one should ever feel like they have to put up with such harassment and deprecation just because they want to make a change in their life—just because they want to be true to themselves.*

Ms. Iyo looked at Ushio again, her expression serious and concerned. Then she apparently noticed the overturned bento box on the floor and made a deduction of her own; tinges of anger and compassion began to dance across her face. "And what about this, Ushio?" Ms. Iyo asked, kneeling down beside her. "Am I to believe that this just 'accidentally' fell down as well?"

The fallen bento box had been no accident; Nishizono had deliberately knocked it over, and everyone knew it. Ushio hesitated a moment, then nodded. I couldn't tell if Ms. Iyo bought this answer, but she rose back to her feet regardless.

"...Someone please take Tsukinoki-san down to the nurse's room," she said. "Nishizono-san, you're coming with me."

"Wait, no... But I—"

“I said you’re coming with me!”

Nishizono recoiled at her furious tone. Even I was a little taken aback; I’d never seen Ms. Iyo get angry before. I watched as she stormed out of the classroom with Nishizono following obediently after her like a scolded dog with its tail between its legs. Her earlier high-and-mighty arrogance was nowhere to be seen. I even caught a glimpse of what looked like tears in her eyes. And yet, as horrible as I thought she was, I derived no satisfaction from witnessing her comeuppance.

“C’mon. Let’s get you down to the nurse’s office,” said Hoshihara, escorting Ushio out of the classroom. As soon as the two of them were gone, the uneasy air in the room lightened up quite a bit. I wondered if this might be the last of Nishizono’s petty feud with Ushio. With any luck, it would be—though I couldn’t help but feel like I’d gotten caught up in it at the very end, only to immediately get left behind. I glanced down at the overturned bento box on the floor, where the three girls had been standing a moment ago, and I couldn’t help but feel a strange kind of sympathy for this humble plastic container full of rice that everyone else seemed to have forgotten. Feeling a sense of kinship budding between us, I got down on my hands and knees and started cleaning the poor thing up.

Not long after that, Ushio returned from the nurse’s room. She was able to rejoin the class for our fifth-period lecture as normal. Her nosebleed had stopped by then—and judging from the lack of plugs in her nostrils or gauze on the wound, I assumed the injury hadn’t been as bad as it looked.

Nishizono, however, did not return to class. Once school got out, one of our classmates spread the word that she’d been “informally suspended.” According to her, an anonymous student had reported Nishizono’s behavior to Ms. Iyo after the skirt debacle yesterday, so she was already on thin ice—but the punishment only got handed down after today’s incident at lunch. I naturally couldn’t speak to the accuracy of this account, but it certainly sounded believable. The punishment seemed fair; I couldn’t exactly pity Nishizono in this instance, but I wasn’t going to completely begrudge her either. All I could hope was that this whole mess might finally inspire a bit of self-reflection and reform

in her.

I started packing up my things to head home. As I did, I noticed a group of four or five guys huddled in a corner of the classroom, whispering to one another as they smirked and scowled, casting furtive glances in Ushio's direction. They were definitely plotting something, I thought—and sure enough, they eventually made their way over to her desk as a unit. One of the boys—Utajima, if I recalled correctly—was the first to address her as they approached. He wore a smug, satisfied grin on his face.

“Hey there, Ushio,” he said. “You sure had quite the day today, huh? Didn't break your nose or anything, didja?”

This may have been the first time I'd seen another boy in class (aside from me) go out of his way to address Ushio. She seemed a little taken aback by this, but she quickly regained her usual guarded demeanor.

“I'm fine, thank you,” she said.

“C'mon, no need to be so stiff. Hey, if you're not doing anything after this, you wanna come get Mickey D's with us?”

Ushio's eyes went wide at this unexpected invitation. Mine did too.

“Just kinda realized we really didn't know the first thing about you and your situation, is all,” said Utajima, scratching his head as though he were embarrassed. “So I guess I just figured, uh, y'know. Might be nice to talk things over and hear what you have to say over some French fries or somethin'. Though if you're not interested, that's totally cool too.”

W-wait a minute... Are they actually trying to make amends? By all accounts, this was the very definition of healthy communication: trying to talk things out and get the other person's perspective when you didn't understand something. I could feel a warmth building in my chest. Ushio smiled at him, seemingly flattered by the sentiment, but shook her head gently.

“Sorry, but I actually do have other plans,” she said. “Thank you very much for inviting me, though.”

“Hrm? Oh, okay then. Don't mention it. Maybe next time.”

And with that, Utajima and his retinue took their leave. Ushio slung her bag over her shoulder and stood up from her desk right as Hoshihara finished packing up her own stuff and came trotting over. The two of them exchanged a few words, then made their way in my direction. I stood up to greet them.

“Ready to go home?” asked Ushio.

“Yeah,” I said, nodding.

On our way out of the classroom, I noticed that none of our fellow classmates were giving us strange looks anymore.

It felt like it had been quite a while since the three of us walked home together. The sound of our bicycle chains revolving in unison was somewhat soothing to my ear.

“We’ve just gotta make it through this month, and then it’ll be summer vacation at last!” said Hoshihara. “Can’t wait!”

She’d been pretty down the past few days, but today she seemed warm and bright enough to outshine the hot summer sun. Her expression betrayed a hint of relief, probably because she felt confident that Nishizono wouldn’t bully Ushio anymore after what happened at lunch. I was in similarly high spirits for that reason, even if I realized it was probably a bit overly optimistic.

“Yeah, for sure,” I said. “Just gotta make it through our end-of-semester exams...”

Hoshihara let out a little shriek of horror at this reminder. “Oh god... I haven’t studied at all! This is so not good... If I fail, I won’t even really *get* a summer vacation with all the supplementary courses I’ll have to take...”

“You’ll be fine. I haven’t studied either.”

“Yeah, easy for *you* to say. Not very reassuring coming from someone who’s already got way better grades than me as it is. Believe me, I wish I could just roll in to an exam without studying.”

She was now staring daggers at me, and my only recourse was to chuckle awkwardly and shrug my shoulders. Ushio smiled at this exchange from the

sidelines, apparently amused by our rapport.

“Oh yeah,” said Hoshihara, remembering her. “How’s your nose feeling, Ushio-chan? That was a *lot* of blood comin’ out at first. I was kinda panicking a little bit.”

“It’s not that bad,” replied Ushio. “I mean, it still hurts when I put pressure on it, but it doesn’t sound like she broke any bones or anything.”

“Really? Well, I sure hope it heals up quick, then...”

Ushio nodded bashfully, clearly appreciating the sentiment but feeling a bit awkward about the whole situation regardless. *Come to think of it, in spite of all the harassment, she hasn’t said a single negative word about Nishizono this whole time, has she?* I couldn’t help but be amazed at her genuine good nature. Either that, or maybe she really did feel bad for not being able to answer Nishizono’s unrequited feelings and felt it was the least she could do to suffer through the abuse. Either way, Ushio was definitely too kind for her own good.

“So, hey... There’s something I wanted to tell you both,” said Ushio, stopping dead in her tracks to broach a more serious subject. Hoshihara and I stopped in turn, bracing ourselves as we turned to face her. “Um... Sakuma? Natsuki? I just wanted to say I really appreciate you both always coming over and talking to me, or getting angry on my behalf... It really means a lot. Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it,” I said, smiling broadly in relief that it wasn’t anything more dire than that. “We’re your friends. I think that much is to be expected.”

“You bet!” said Hoshihara. “We’ve always got your back! You just keep doing you!”

“...Yeah, okay,” said Ushio. “Thanks.”

She relaxed her serious expression and replied as though she didn’t know what she’d done to deserve us—but there was genuine warmth in her voice, and genuine happiness on her face, and it was enough to make me feel pretty warm and happy inside too. Vaguely, I found myself thinking that I was glad to be here—that we really felt like friends. These were genuine human relationships I’d built up and become a part of through nothing but sincerity, goodwill, and consideration. There was nothing superficial or surface-level

about them, and that alone was enough to make me feel intensely grateful.

We resumed our homeward saunter.

“Speaking of getting angry,” said Hoshihara, “you *really* went all-out during lunch today, Kamiki-kun. Don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone talk back to Arisa like that.”

“Aha ha... Yeah, sorry I lost my cool like that. Kinda embarrassing.”

“No, no! I meant that as a compliment! You were super cool back there!”

“R-really?”

My voice cracked. *Well, shoot... There’s my confidence boost of the week, I guess. Pretty sure some random stranger could come tackle me and send me tumbling down into the rice fields right now, and I’d probably just shrug it off and tell ’em not to worry about it. Hell, I might just jump in there myself for the heck of it.* I was glad I’d mustered up the courage to call Nishizono out earlier today. That decision had certainly paid off in the end.

“No doubt the vibes in class will start to mellow out now,” Hoshihara went on. “And I’m guessing Arisa’s starting to realize she’s in the wrong, too.”

“Yeah, hope so,” I replied noncommittally. We stepped out from the road between the paddy fields and made our way to the usual intersection.

“Welp, catch you two later!” Hoshihara said. “Gonna start studying hard tomorrow!”

I resisted the urge to make a quip about how she could always start studying tonight as Ushio and I waved goodbye to her. She hopped on her bike and rode off, standing upright on her pedals as she disappeared around the corner and out of sight.

All right. Now that we’d parted ways with Hoshihara and it was just the two of us, there was something I knew I needed to discuss with Ushio. I’d been mentally preparing myself for it ever since the whole debacle at lunch today, and wasn’t going to let myself avoid the issue any longer.

“Ushio,” I said, stopping her as she started to walk off. She turned around to face me in silence, her expression curiously calm. Perhaps she’d been waiting

for me to bring this up of my own volition. I swallowed, then wiped the sweat from my palms onto my slacks. “About those feelings you mentioned the other day.”

“Yeah?” she said.

“I figured I owe you an answer... But to be honest, it’s pretty much exactly like I said to Nishizono in class today. I really *do* think you’re cute, and I really *do* get butterflies around you sometimes. But I’m just not sure yet whether those feelings mean that I like you the same way you like me... So I’d like a little more time to think about it. I promise I’ll give you a straight answer soon, though.”

“Gotcha.” Her voice betrayed no hidden meaning. It was the sort of “gotcha” one might say in response to a mildly amusing but ultimately forgettable anecdote. She then added, “It’s fine. Don’t worry about it.”

This response left me bewildered. What did she mean by “it’s fine”? That she didn’t mind waiting for a proper answer? Or to just forget the whole thing entirely? I assumed that confessing those feelings had been a fairly big deal for her, so I wanted to believe it probably wasn’t the latter, yet that was the sort of impression I got from her tone—one of casual indifference. The sort of tone you might use to politely convey your lack of interest to a friend inviting you to go bowling or do karaoke—not that I’d ever been invited to do either. Still, I needed to discern exactly what she meant, and the only way to know for sure was to ask her outright, much as I hated to do so.

“Er, sorry, Ushio,” I said. “What exactly do you—”

“You know, there’s something I wanted to ask you too, Sakuma,” she cut in. Then, after a brief pause, and without waiting for my answer, she pressed on.

“You have a crush on Natsuki, don’t you?”

I was totally speechless.

It felt like someone had suddenly grabbed hold of my heart in the softest, most vulnerable place—the one I’d tried my hardest to keep hidden—and was

squeezing it tight. I could neither confirm nor deny; I didn't know what response to give. But my seizing up was apparently all the answer Ushio needed, as she smiled amusedly.

"Ah, so I was right."

"Wh-what do you mean? I didn't say anything."

"You didn't have to. I can tell just by looking at you. You think I've never seen the face of a person in love before?"

It felt like Ushio didn't want to let me say a word.

"She's a cute one, though, isn't she? So sweet, so honest... I can totally see why you'd fall for her. Oh, and I'm not just saying that to make you feel bad. If anything, I'm rooting for you. If there's any way I can help, just say the word. So please, just forget I ever said I liked you, okay?"

She was speaking eerily fast, as though she were being rushed to meet a time limit by some unseen teleprompter. Either that or she was just running her mouth on reflex as a defense mechanism to hide some other emotion, one that might peek its head out if she stopped even for a moment.

"Besides, I only meant that I liked you as a friend, anyway. You're the one who misunderstood and got the wrong idea. I mean, come on—obviously you wouldn't want to be confessed to by a boy. Like, how gross is that, right? I know *that* much, at least. I mean, really—I do. So, like, uhm, I guess I just... I dunno, like..."

Ushio was stammering now, and a single stream of tears trickled down her cheek. She reached up to wipe them away, then looked at her wet finger and let out a self-deprecating laugh.

"Ha ha... I'm so pathetic," said Ushio. "Why do I have to be such a crybaby? It's not like I didn't...already know the answer..."

"Ushio..." I moved to approach her, but she shook her head and cast her gaze down at the ground.

"It's fine... Really, I'll be okay..."

She shoved her hands in her skirt pockets—to find something with which to

wipe her tears, most likely. Not three seconds later, she pulled a handkerchief from her right pocket and nearly used it to dab her eyes before her hands froze, just inches from her face. It was the same handkerchief she'd borrowed from Hoshihara earlier that day, and it was stained dark red with blood. I assumed she'd shoved it in her pocket so that she could wash it at home before returning it. And yet, I couldn't tell whether it was the bloodstains on the handkerchief that dissuaded her from using it or the thought that it belonged to Hoshihara, given the circumstances. Immediately, I was disgusted with myself for even pondering such a thing.

Ushio smiled weakly and slowly lifted her head.

“Guess I'll never be a match for a real girl, will I?”



She wore a smile thinner than the last layer of frost on the ground at the end of winter, on the cusp of spring. When I imagined just how much resignation, how much heartache and despair must be lurking beneath that gentlest of gazes, I felt a tightness in my chest. I couldn't find a single right word to say.

Off in the distance, I could hear cicadas crying.

Summer had finally settled in, and it was here to stay.

CHAPTER TWO

Things Fall Apart



Chapter Two: Things Fall Apart

I AWOKE TO THE SOUND of cicadas crying. As soon as I lifted my eyelids, the sun's harsh rays assailed my retinas. My face felt hot, bathed in the morning light pouring in through the curtains.

Still lying down, I reached over to my cell phone, which lay beside my pillow, and flipped it open. It was July 3rd, and the time was 6:40 a.m. I hopped out of bed and pulled the curtains wide open. The vast blue sky out the window looked like it had been daubed with a thousand coats of the deepest, thickest paint.

By the time I arrived at Tsubakioka High that morning, the sweat down my back made my dress shirt cling to my skin like an industrial-grade adhesive. The thought that we weren't even *close* to the hottest part of the day yet depressed me deeply.

When I walked into the classroom, I saw quite a few students fanning themselves with their desk pads or workbooks. Hoshihara was among them, beckoning the nonexistent breeze toward her chest as she glared down at the opened textbook on her desk. She let out a great big yawn—and made eye contact with me at that exact moment. Right away, she clamped her gaping mouth shut and greeted me with a little wave, clearly self-conscious. *God, she's so cute*, I thought to myself, relishing the early-morning dopamine rush. I waved back, then headed to the back of the classroom to sit at my own desk.

I gazed up at the empty desk toward the front of the class. Nishizono was still informally suspended. According to Hoshihara, she wasn't allowed to start coming back to school until exams began in another week. It was a pretty brutal suspension timeline, even if it *was* just deserts. I unpacked my bag and arranged its contents on my desk, then looked up to see another student walk into class—one who seemed all too cool and collected in spite of the heat.

It was Ushio. Everyone was used to seeing her in girls' clothing at this point, so no one batted an eye. She was still a bit of an outcast, granted, but no one dared talk smack about her anymore, not even behind her back. She set her bag down at her desk, then walked straight over to stand in front of mine.

"Morning, Sakuma," she said.

"Yeah, hey," I replied. "Morning."

Everything was back to normal with her again. Unnervingly so.

Lectures flew by faster than ever now that we were approaching exam season. But as I watched the world history teacher clack his stick of chalk across the blackboard, I found that I had no focus whatsoever; my mind was somewhere else completely.

"You have a crush on Natsuki, don't you?"

Ushio's words from two days prior were still ringing in my ears. In the end, I hadn't been able to formulate any sort of reasonable response, and the two of us just went our separate ways home. I'd been absolutely dreading having to face her at school the next day, pulling my hair out trying to think of some way to salvage the situation...but then when I got to school, I found that she seemed to be surprisingly composed. We had lunch together with Hoshihara as always, and then the three of us walked home together the same as usual, even cracking a few jokes along the way.

At first, I thought she had to be faking it and just pretending to be chipper. Most people did not bounce back *that* quickly from a rejection, after all—which was technically what happened. I assumed based on her tears the previous afternoon that she *had* taken it pretty hard. Yet judging from our subsequent conversations, she appeared to have made a full emotional recovery in record time. I sensed no hidden awkwardness or heartbreak in her demeanor. It was so bizarre to me that I was starting to wonder if maybe she really *had* only meant that she "liked" me as a friend.

Maybe it was for the best for me to assume that, whether it was true or not. Then I wouldn't have to stress myself out over her confession anymore, and

could believe her when she said she supported me in my feelings for Hoshihara. If I really *did* take Ushio's words at face value, I could come out of this mess in about as favorable a position as one could ask for. But that was exactly what made me so anxious about it.

I heaved a sigh of dismay.

"Yes, Kamiki?" said the world history teacher. "I assume you're sighing because this is all too easy for you? Why don't you give us the answer to this one, then?"

"Huh?!"

I did a double take. I wasn't expecting to get called on; it felt like this same thing had happened not too long ago. The teacher was tapping his stick of chalk on the empty space in one of the sentences he'd written up on the blackboard, demanding I tell him what word fit in the blank. But I had no earthly idea.

"Sorry... I don't know," I admitted.

"Well, you should. And I suggest you start taking this seriously if you don't want to fail the upcoming exams."

This scolding was deserved; the teacher had a point. There was only a week left before our end-of-semester exams. I snapped out of my little daydream and started copying down what was written on the blackboard.

It was lunch hour, and just like always, I was eating with Hasumi while Hoshihara ate hers with Ushio. As we dug our chopsticks into our respective bento boxes, we made idle chitchat about nothing in particular.

"Y'know, I gotta say, man," said Hasumi, while chewing through a big bite of his rolled omelet. "I'm kinda getting used to Tsukinoki being a cross-dresser now, myself."

"She's *not* a cross-dresser," I said, pointing at him with the tips of my chopsticks.

"Wait, she's not?"

"No. Cross-dressers are just men who like to wear women's clothes for the

enjoyment of it. Ushio's not just doing it because she enjoys it—she actually considers herself a girl on the inside. So it's not the same thing at all, really."

"Huh... Ya don't say."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothin', I just find it kinda interesting to hear you take this stuff so seriously and whatnot."

"I always take things seriously."

"Huh... Ya don't say."

"Okay, stop with that. You're starting to piss me off now." I stabbed my chopsticks into one of my meatballs.

"Well, not like it really matters or anythin'," said Hasumi. "But I do hope Tsukinoki can settle into this new identity of hers comfortably and all that. Especially with all the stuff that'll be comin' up in the fall."

"I mean, no, it really *does* matter. But what kind of stuff do you mean?"

"Y'know, just events and stuff. Like the culture festival or the sports festival."

"Oh, right," I said, stuffing the meatball into my mouth.

Those *were* coming up—and then in winter, we'd have our class field trip. Obviously, gender didn't matter so much for the culture festival, but there were definitely events on the horizon that were at least somewhat segregated by gender. I wondered how Ushio (or the faculty) would handle those situations; it was definitely tricky.

Just then, a male student I didn't recognize poked his head inside the classroom, then stepped inside and did a more thorough scan of the room. He was tall and slender, and he wore a vaguely self-satisfied grin on his face. He looked to me like the sort of guy who was confident but cocksure—attractive, and he knew it. He had quite the mature, laid-back demeanor about him...but something about it struck me as shady. He almost gave off similar vibes as a college-age party boy or a very successful salesman.

"Who's that guy?" I whispered to Hasumi, leaning in closer. "A senior?"

“What, you don’t know?” he replied. “That’s Sera from Class D. You know, the guy who transferred in from Tokyo, remember?”

“Oh, *that’s* him?”

Itsuku Sera was a Tokyoite who’d transferred to Tsubakioka High at the start of the school year. I’d heard rumors that he got in a fight on the day of the opening ceremony, so he hadn’t been coming to school much. I assumed from those anecdotes that he’d been some sort of ruffian troublemaker, but now that I saw him firsthand, he looked like a much softer type of guy.

“Aha! There she is,” said Sera, eyes going wide as he fixed his gaze on one particular point. “Hey, you—chick with the silver hair. Got somethin’ I wanna talk to you about. Could you come with me for a sec?”

I almost dropped my chopsticks. There was only one student here at Tsubakioka High with hair that color, and it was Ushio. Was he *knowingly* calling Ushio a “chick” in light of her new identity, or had he just made the assumption based on appearance alone? Given that this was a transfer student who (evidently) almost never came to school, there was certainly a chance he’d never encountered Ushio pre-transition. A majority of my classmates must’ve been wondering the same thing, considering the animated murmurs that broke out across the room.

“Uh... Hate to break it to you, but Tsukinoki’s a dude, my friend,” said a snickering boy sitting near the door where Sera stood.

“Wait. Who’s Tsukinoki?” asked Sera, staring blankly at the other boy.

“The ‘chick’ with the silver hair.”

“...Wait, for real? That’s a dude?”

“Yup.”

Sera turned his gaze back on Ushio and sized her up in disbelief. It seemed he really *didn’t* know her backstory. Ushio, meanwhile, just seemed annoyed.

“Can I help you?” she asked.

Sera did a double take, placing one hand on his forehead as he stared up at the ceiling. Apparently, her distinctive husky voice had told him everything he

needed to know. He stayed like that a while before suddenly bringing his gaze back down, staring at her decisively as if he'd broken through some mental barrier.

"Well, whatever. That's fine," he said.

...Sorry? What's "fine," exactly?

Sera strutted into the classroom, right up to Ushio's desk. Hoshihara—who'd been eating lunch with Ushio this entire time—watched warily as he approached.

"Uhhh, Tsukinoki, right?" said Sera. "And what's your first name?"

"...Ushio."

"Cool, cool. So like I was saying, Ushio—got somethin' important I wanna tell you. Mind coming with me for a sec?"

"I'm in the middle of eating right now. Can it wait until later?"

"It'll only take a second, I swear. C'mon, please?" Sera clapped his hands together like a seedy beggar.

Ushio let out a heavy sigh, assured Hoshihara she'd be right back, then rose from her seat and followed Sera out of the classroom. I wondered what this "something" he needed to tell her could possibly be, if it was really so important that it warranted interrupting her lunch hour. Maybe he was a professional photographer and she'd caught his eye, so he wanted to ask her to model as the subject for his next shoot or something. Given that whatever it was didn't seem dependent on sex or gender for him, this felt like a viable option, and I was impressed with myself for having thought of it.

For a minute there, I was all but positive he was planning to ask her out, but it only took about two seconds' thought to realize it couldn't possibly be that. It just wasn't realistic.

I stood corrected.

"Say whaaaat?!"

I was utterly flabbergasted—as was Hoshihara, who walked beside me as the three of us made our way home from school that day. We’d been itching all afternoon for Ushio to tell us what Sera wanted with her, but Ushio had simply said “I’ll tell you later” every time we asked. And only now, on our way home together, did Ushio finally break the news that she’d been propositioned—or, to quote her exactly: “So Sera asked me out.” I was in disbelief.

Wait a minute... Ushio got asked out? By Sera? What?!

“Y-you mean he asked you out, like...on a date, specifically?” I asked for confirmation, and Ushio nodded her head.

“Yeah,” she replied. “He said he wants me to go out with him.”

There was no room for misinterpretation, then.

Wait, no. He can’t be serious, right? Assuming Sera was your average straight male, then there was no way his intentions here were pure and genuine—I thought, but quickly realized I couldn’t say. To imply no guy would ever want to date Ushio was akin to denying her identity as a woman completely.

“S-s-s-so then, wh-what did you say?” Hoshihara asked, trying and failing to conceal her discomposure.

“I told him I would,” Ushio said nonchalantly, and Hoshihara and I looked at each other, mouths agape, until she added, “But only on one condition.”

“And what’s that?” Hoshihara and I asked in unison.

“I said I wouldn’t mind going out with him if he manages to rank first in our grade on the upcoming end-of-semester exams.”

First in the whole grade. I didn’t know what Sera’s academics were like, so I didn’t know whether this was a high or low bar to meet. But the fact that she didn’t turn him down point-blank meant that Ushio *was* keeping the option of dating Sera open in her mind, at least to some extent.

“And...how do you feel about that?” Hoshihara asked timidly.

“About what?” asked Ushio.

“You know... Going out with Sera-kun.”

Ushio mulled it over for a moment. “Not sure, honestly. But getting first in our entire grade is no easy feat. I guess I just figured that if he really pushes himself and studies hard enough to get there, that’d say a lot about how serious he is about me. So I wouldn’t mind going out with him, in that case.”

“Gotcha...”

Hoshihara did not seem satisfied with this answer—and I could definitely relate. She probably had even more conflicting feelings about this than I did, as someone who’d had a crush on Ushio herself.

“Do you even know anything about him, Ushio?” I asked, realizing that it was possible she knew who he was even if *he* obviously knew very little about her.

“Nope. Just that he’s the new transfer student from Tokyo. Hadn’t ever talked to him before, since he apparently hasn’t been coming to school very often. Oh, but that reminds me—we *did* actually make eye contact this morning before school. Didn’t exchange any words or anything, but according to Sera, that’s when he fell for me.”

“So he claims it was love at first sight, then, basically?”

“Sounds that way.”

“Hrm.”

I thought about this for a while. This guy had apparently fallen for Ushio before they ever exchanged a single word—before he even knew her name or background. And even after he learned more, those feelings didn’t change. In a way, I had to admire his sincerity there. Even if he seemed pretty frivolous and superficial overall, maybe he really *was* a genuine person on the inside. For Ushio, he might even be the perfect type of guy—someone for whom biological sex didn’t even enter the equation. *In that case, maybe I should even cheer him on. He’s certainly more mature and suitable to go out with her than I am, that’s for sure. And probably more than Hoshihara, for that matter.*

Yet for whatever reason, something didn’t sit right with me about the situation. I just couldn’t quite put my finger on what.

After saying goodbye to Hoshihara at the intersection, Ushio and I carried on a bit farther, then went our separate ways. I hopped on my bike and headed for home. In the end, Ushio seemed rather composed about the whole Sera thing, while Hoshihara seemed anything but. I found myself landing somewhere in the middle.

When I was only about five meters from my front door, my cell phone vibrated. Not just a text message—a phone call. I hit the brakes and pulled it out of my pocket; it was Hoshihara calling. I wondered what she could possibly want so soon after we’d parted ways for the afternoon. Heart racing, I answered the phone. For whatever reason, I found phone calls far more nerve-racking than talking in person.

“H-hello?” I said.

“Hey, it’s me. Sorry for calling out of the blue. Just kinda wanted to talk to you about something... Was wondering if you had time to meet up right now?”

“Oh, yeah! Sure thing,” I replied without a second thought. If anything, I was so eager that I nearly cut her off.

“Awesome, thanks! Could you meet me in front of Tsubakioka Station, then? I’ll be waiting outside!”

“Okay, got it. I’ll head on over there.”

“Cool, see you in a bit!”

With that, she hung up. I slid my cell phone back into my pocket and let out a sigh as my elevated heart rate fell back to its normal pace. She “wanted to talk to me about something,” apparently—and as happy as I was to get some one-on-one time with her, I didn’t have a very good feeling about the subject matter. I would have loved nothing more than to be proven wrong and find out she just wanted to gush to me about some random novel I’d recommended to her, but my gut was telling me I wouldn’t be so lucky.

I made it to our meeting spot in about ten minutes by bike. The area outside Tsubakioka Station was typically all but deserted during midafternoon, yet it was currently packed with junior and senior high schoolers heading home in the

after-school rush. I watched as they flooded out from the ticket gate, made their way over to the bike lot, and jumped on their bikes to go home. Below the station's little external clock tower, I spied Hoshihara straddling her own bike, resting her elbows on its handlebars as she played idly on her phone. I pushed my bike over to greet her.

"Hey, Hoshihara," I called out to her, and she quickly looked up.

"Oh, Kamiki-kun!" She flashed me a cheery smile. "Thanks for coming. Wow, you got here fast."

"Yeah, no worries. I live pretty close by."

I resisted the urge to melt in her presence. Much as I enjoyed the thought of us meeting up after school in public, this was not a date. I had to remind myself quite a few times that we were probably not going to have the sort of conversation I would've liked, lest I lose my composure.

"Well, no point in just standing around, I guess!" she said. "Why don't we go have a seat at a diner or something?"

"Sure, sounds good to me."

She rode off on her bike, and I pedaled after her. In only a few minutes, we arrived at the local Joyfull, not far from the station. The family restaurant was fairly crowded inside, and I even spotted a few other students from Tsubakioka High—though none from our grade. After being seated by the host in the nonsmoking area, we both ordered fountain drinks to start. I got a cola, and Hoshihara ordered a melon soda. Only after our drinks were brought out did she dive into the topic at hand.

"So yeah, as I kinda mentioned over the phone..." Hoshihara timidly began, staring down at the table. I nodded for her to continue. "Well, I just wanted to talk to you about Sera-kun, basically."

"Oh?" I said, a little taken by surprise. I was expecting it to be more about Ushio.

"Yeah. You know, given the whole reveal about him asking Ushio-chan out and all that... To be honest, when she first brought that up, I was a little bit, uh..." Hoshihara stole a quick glance up at me. I wasn't sure what that look was

meant to convey, but it was pretty damn cute. At length, she begrudgingly finished her thought. “I guess I just really don’t feel comfortable with the idea of the two of them dating, is all I’m trying to say.”

“Right. I totally get that, what with you having some pretty confusing feelings about Ushio yourself.”

“W-well, yeah, I mean, that’s part of it! But actually...that’s not the main reason I’m bringing this up with you.”

It’s not? Then what is? And what’s with all this lead-up?

Hoshihara cleared her throat before continuing. “I’ve heard some things about Sera-kun,” she said. “And they’re not good things.”

“Are we talking, like...reputation? Stuff about his character?”

Hoshihara nodded. I wondered if she was referring to the anecdote about him getting in a fight the very first day of school.

“Actually, the day he first transferred in...” she said as if reading my mind. “Well, you remember how we each had to introduce ourselves to the rest of the class after the opening ceremony that first day, right? Apparently, they did the same thing over in Class D, and I hear that Sera-kun’s introduction kinda ruffled a few feathers.”

“Oh, is *that* why he got himself in trouble that day?”

“Wait. You already know about this?”

“No, just heard that he’d gotten in a fight, that’s all. Sorry. Keep going.”

Hoshihara took a sip of her melon soda. “It wasn’t an all-out *fight*-fight, per se, but apparently he was talking like he was out for one. Saying some really offensive things, trying to push people’s buttons and whatnot—just making a terrible first impression, then acting like he’d done nothing wrong. And that just poured more fuel on the fire, I guess.”

“Sheesh. Just what the heck did he even say?”

Hoshihara hesitated a moment before answering. “Like, ‘Wow, sure is nothing but uncultured, inbred hicks out here, huh? Guess that’s par for the course when you grow up in the sticks’... Stuff like that. You get the idea.”

“Oh, wow... Damn, okay.”

I couldn't argue with the assertion that most people out here were pretty uncultured. Hell, I was in full agreement. But the rest of what he said was pretty indefensible; I didn't know many people pacifistic enough to take that sitting down. He absolutely deserved to be put in his place for that.

“Yeah, that's pretty bad, all right,” I said.

“And it's not just that, either,” said Hoshihara. “Personally, I'm a lot more bothered by the rumors I've heard about him being, um... Well, a womanizer, basically. They say he'll ask out pretty much any girl who catches his eye, just to try his luck.”

“Jeez...”

I wasn't generally one to take rumors without a grain of salt, but I had to admit that this anecdote tracked for me. And now that she mentioned it, that smug grin on his face at lunch *did* have that classic “womanizer” vibe to it. Plus, I had the impression that guys from the big city were a lot more likely to be “playboys” who fooled around with a lot of different partners than folks out here.

Okay, no. Now I'm the one being prejudiced. It was extremely petty to judge a person's character based purely on hearsay, let alone where they grew up. That was the exact kind of closed-mindedness that I loathed about so many of the people I'd been surrounded by my whole life, just living out here in the countryside. I didn't want to be one of them. I took a long, drawn-out sip of my cola and tried to shake these thoughts from my head.

“Obviously, I know they're just rumors,” Hoshihara went on, her expression brooding. “I can't claim to know who Sera-kun *really* is as a person...and yet, I still don't want him dating our friend. I guess that makes me kind of a bad person, huh?”

“What? No, not at all.” It seemed she was struggling with the same inner conflict as me—not wanting to judge too quickly, but unable to drop all preconceptions entirely. “Honestly, the fact that you can self-examine like that at *all* makes you a better person than most, in my opinion. And there's nothing wrong with being protective of a good friend or not wanting them to get

involved with someone who has a bad rep.”

“...You don’t think?”

“Not at all. And besides, I don’t think we have anything to worry about. Like Ushio said, it’s no walk in the park to rank first in our whole grade.”

“But I heard Sera-kun’s actually really smart, though...”

“Wait. Seriously?”

“Yeah. One of my friends in Class D was telling me he passed the entrance exam to transfer in without even studying. He was bragging about that at one point, apparently.”

“W-well, damn.”

“Also, you remember those midterms we had back in May? She told me he got perfect scores in both Japanese *and* English. But I guess he skipped out partway through the day, so he still ended up ranking pretty average for our grade overall.”

I didn’t know how hard the transfer exams were, but I definitely knew how impressive it was to get full marks on two separate midterm exams. Japanese, especially, was a notoriously difficult one to ace—even *I* only got a 92 on that test, and it was my best subject. With those achievements under his belt, I wouldn’t be surprised if Sera felt like Ushio’s challenge was well within his reach. I guess the only question was: how serious was he about wanting to date her, really?

“Ugh, what are we gonna do?” Hoshihara sighed, her shoulders slumping.

“H-hey, c’mon. No need to get so down about it. It’s not like it’s set in stone that he’s *definitely* gonna come in first or anything. I mean, heck—who says it couldn’t be you or me? And then he’d have no choice but to give up.”

I’d only said this as a bit of tongue-in-cheek encouragement, but Hoshihara’s face lit up as though I’d just had the greatest idea in the history of mankind. Her eyes shimmered as she leaned over the table toward me.

“You’re so right!” she said. “One of *us* just needs to get first in our grade! Then we won’t have anything to worry about!”

“Wh-whoa, slow down, kid. Weren’t you listening? It’s no mean feat to beat out literally every other student in our grade.”

“But if we just put our minds to it and study real hard...!”

“Maybe if we had more than a week left, yeah. I mean, how well did you rank on our *last* end-of-semester exams?”

This question, apparently, was enough to make Hoshihara snap back to reality. She quit her overeager leaning, settled back into her seat, and hung her head.

“I was 176th,” she confessed.

Ouch. This was worse than I expected. There were only a few more than 200 students in the sophomore class.

“What about you?” she asked.

“Me? I was, uh...23rd, if I remember right?”

“Hey, that’s not bad at all! You could totally pull it off!”

She slammed both hands against the table as her eyes lit up again with a vengeance. This conversation was proving to be quite the emotional roller coaster for her. She wasn’t wrong that it was at least within the realm of possibility. I’d been a pretty consistently good studier throughout my high school years, mostly because I was determined to get into a decent college and leave Tsubakioka for good. But even so...

“Not sure about that,” I said. “Coming in first would be pretty damn tough. I’ve never even made it into the single digits before.”

“I’ll do whatever I can to help out! Come on, you’ve got to! Not just for me, but for Ushio-chan, too! Please, please, please?!”

“I dunno, man...”

“If you come in first, I’ll do literally anything you ask me to!”

“Huh?”

“Just tell me what I gotta do! I’ll give you my everything!”

“Huh?! ”

Did she really just say what I think she said? Anything I ask? Give me her everything? All of a sudden, a vision of Hoshihara flashed into the back of my mind—red in the face, bashfully tugging at her necktie to loosen it as she explained it was the least she could do after all that effort I put in, and then— I immediately knew what I had to do.

“All right,” I said. “I’ll come in first, no matter what it takes.”

“Hooray!” Hoshihara cheered, raising both arms high into the air.

Immediately, I regretted how easily she’d suckered me into doing this. I wanted to bang my delusional head against the table.

Outside, the sun had begun its descent in the western sky.

“Let’s study our butts off!” said Hoshihara. She climbed onto her bike and gave me a little wave, and then we said our goodbyes outside the restaurant. I waited until she disappeared around the corner, then pedaled off in the opposite direction.

“Man, *now* what do I do?”

I groaned as I zoomed down the sidewalk. Not that there was much I really could do except cram as much study material into my head as my brain could take over the next week. I’d already been having trouble studying lately due to my mind being too preoccupied with Ushio. And now I was probably going to be losing even more sleep. *Great. Just what I needed.* I let out a wistful sigh.

Well, it wasn’t a huge deal. Even if I didn’t end up ranking first, it wasn’t like there’d be some grave punishment in store for me. I could just do my best, and if I happened to succeed, there’d apparently be some sort of favor from Hoshihara in it for me. When I framed it like that, it was actually kind of motivating, even. *All right. Let’s do this thing.*

I got stopped at a crosswalk and lowered my feet from the pedals down onto the sidewalk. Just then, I felt my cell phone buzz. I pulled it out and checked the screen—one new message from my sister Ayaka. Just six letters: “yogurt.” Apparently, she hadn’t realized we’d advanced beyond the age of telegrams, and there was no need to be *that* concise. But I knew her well enough to

interpret this as a request for me to bring some yogurt home with me; I was used to being treated like her gofer every once in a while. It was pretty irritating, but I knew ignoring it would only result in an even bigger headache later, so I resigned myself to swinging by a nearby mini-mart before heading home. I just needed to make sure she didn't weasel her way out of reimbursing me.

I turned my bike around, all the while lamenting how easily manipulated I was by my little sister. I knew the closest mini-mart to where I was now (and also the shortest detour) was the one attached to Tsubakioka Station. I rode over there, parked my bike, and walked against the flow of workers on their homeward commute. When I reached the store at last, I bought a tub of plain yogurt.

Mission accomplished, I exited the mini-mart—whereupon I caught a glimpse of a face I recognized. It was a tall boy in a Tsubakioka High uniform: Sera, funnily enough. Beside him stood a girl from another school with braids in her hair. I assumed the two were friends, judging from their laughter and overall friendly vibes. But then their conversation stopped, and Sera put his arms around the girl's shoulders. And before I even had time to process what was happening...

He kissed her casually on the lips, like it was nothing at all.

I was dumbfounded. And I was livid. How shameless did you have to be to go making out in the middle of a crowded public space? And wait a minute. Hadn't Sera *just* asked Ushio out earlier today? I watched as the girl he'd been kissing pulled away from him, then ran off in a daze through the ticket gate. Sera, meanwhile, started ambling my way with an extremely satisfied grin on his face. For a moment, I assumed he'd caught me spying on him, and my heart skipped a beat—but he walked right past me into the mini-mart, evidently none the wiser. *Phew. That was a close one.* Though come to think of it, he probably didn't even recognize me as one of Ushio's classmates.

Still, I knew what I'd seen just now. Hoshihara's words echoed in my ears:

"They say he'll ask out pretty much any girl who catches his eye."

It seemed the rumors about him being a womanizer were true. Yet as I stood there cemented to the spot, unable to move on from this troubling revelation, Sera came waltzing back out of the mini-mart.

"Oh, uh... Hey. You there," I called out as he started walking away from the station. Apparently, he heard me and realized I was addressing him, as he immediately stopped in his tracks and swirled around.

"Hm? Need somethin'?" he asked.

"Er, not exactly, but..."

"Hang on. You're from Tsubakioka High, aren'tcha? Don't tell me—are we in the same class?"

"No. No, we're actually not."

Sera put on a sociable smile and sized me up—though not in a dubious way, just one of raw interest. I figured I should just cut to the chase and ask him outright.

"Who was that girl just now?" I asked.

"Oh, you saw that?" he said. "Well, use your noggin, bud. Who do ya *think* she was, if I was kissing her?"

"Your...your girlfriend?"

"Bingo. She's a grade below us, actually. Pretty cute. Super innocent."

He sounded quite pleased with this relationship. I couldn't sense any hint of a guilty conscience in his voice. Normally, I would have withdrawn here, but since he didn't seem wary of my intentions whatsoever, I thought I'd try probing a little further.

"So you're going out with her," I said, "but you still asked Ushio out?"

"Ahh, you knew about that? Damn. News travels fast."

"Well, no... Ushio's just a friend of mine, that's all."

"Really, now? Well, to answer your question, then yes. I did ask Ushio out, and I *am* dating that other girl too."

I was a little unnerved by his extremely lackadaisical attitude. One would think he'd be a little more shaken when caught in the act of being an unfaithful partner—yet the nonchalant way in which he was replying made me feel like I was the one who had it wrong here.

“So, wait... You're not actually planning to date Ushio, then?” I asked.

“No, I totally am,” said Sera. “I mean, sure, I was a little taken by surprise to find out she was really a dude, but I figured, hey, that might be an interesting thing to try. All about new experiences—don't mind experimenting. I mean, she *did* set a condition I've gotta meet, but it shouldn't be all that hard.”

Ranking first in our entire grade on the end-of-semester exams didn't seem “all that hard” to him? I wasn't sure if he was just overconfident or what. Maybe those rumors about him being an honor student were true after all.

Hold up. That's not the issue here.

“So let me get this straight,” I said. “You're already dating a girl from another school, but...you want to date Ushio too? How is that not two-timing?”

“Oh, no. It is,” he said. “But I mean, who cares, right?”

“Uh, a lot of people would care, I think. That's just infidelity.”

“Infidelity, he says!” He roared out the word as though it were hilarious. His lips curled into a smirk as he stifled a chuckle in his throat.

“Wh-what's so funny?” I asked.

“Sorry, sorry. Just think it's interesting, that's all. But y'know, if I like 'em both the same amount, and I have time for both, what's the big deal? As long as you don't go runnin' your mouth, it's not like they'll ever find out they're not the only one. I'll do my very best to make sure they never get hurt, and I'll make 'em both feel equally special. Is that still cheating in your eyes? Me, I'm not so sure.”

This was pure sophistry. But I didn't have a good counterargument at the moment. Maybe with a little more time to think about it, I could point out the logical fallacy there, but right now, I was too livid and appalled to come up with a good rebuttal on the spot. And as I stood there grasping for words, Sera

apparently grew tired of waiting for a response and let out a loud, lazy sigh.

“Welp, I’m gonna head out,” he said. “See ya around.”

“Y-yeah, all right...” I replied, but he’d already started walking away from the station like he hadn’t expected any sort of cogent response from me. As I watched him shuffle off without a care, I felt a bitter, loathsome feeling welling up inside of me. “Man, what the hell is that guy’s deal...?”

I’d certainly never had the displeasure of interacting with someone of his ilk before. And yet, I didn’t sense ill will or pretension from his careless attitude. I felt like I was dealing with a child whose view of the world was as simple as it was alien—and utterly inscrutable. I couldn’t get a good read on him whatsoever.

I did know one thing for sure, though.

He and I were not going to get along.

I let out a long, sleep-deprived yawn as I made my way to class the next morning. After making it home the previous night, I tossed the yogurt in the fridge and hunted down Ayaka to get reimbursed for doing her grunt work. Then I drafted up a basic study schedule for the week leading up to the end-of-semester exams before diving right in and hitting the books. I’d managed to hit my study quota for the night, but I had to stay up far later than I was planning to in order to get it done. And that was just the first day. Something told me this was not going to be an enjoyable week for me.

I walked into Class 2-A. Ushio hadn’t arrived at school yet, but Hoshihara was there, engaged in early morning chitchat with Mashima and Shiina. I found this a little unusual, given that the two of them were both loyal members of the Nishizono clique who’d (at least up until recently) taken their leader’s side and thus put some distance between themselves and Hoshihara. But now here they were, chuckling it up like good friends again. It seemed less to me like they’d actually needed to “make amends” and more just that there was no reason to worry about faction warfare now that Nishizono was suspended. Personally, I didn’t really care as long as Hoshihara was enjoying herself.

I headed back to my seat, thinking I might try to catch a few additional winks before first period started—but just as I went to lay face down on my desk, I saw Ushio walk into class through my peripheral vision. And, for some unfathomable reason, Sera was right beside her. The two entered the classroom as if they were a unit. I reflexively lifted my head; Sera was not a member of Class A, so what the heck was he here for? And why was he with Ushio?

“So I was flipping through the local channels, right?” said Sera, as if in the middle of some anecdote. “And they were showing reruns of *Kiteretsu Daihyakka*, of all things! Legit could *not* believe my eyes!”

“They don’t play those on TV anymore in Tokyo?” asked Ushio.

“What, are you kidding? Not even! I literally shouted at my TV, like, ‘What is this, the 1980s?!’ Just in total disbelief.”

“Huh. I mean, I dunno. I think it’s a pretty good show, at least.”

Wait. They’re just chatting normally, like friends?

Granted, Ushio didn’t seem all *that* interested, but she wasn’t giving him the cold shoulder or anything. She was at least engaging. Even after she made it to her desk and sat down, she continued nodding along to Sera’s little spiel as he stood there right beside her. Everyone else in class was staring at this uninvited guest with suspicious eyes, but he seemed totally indifferent to their judgmental gazes and kept loudly chattering away. Eventually, a lone girl dared to address the pair: Hoshihara. There was an uneasiness to her slow, tentative gait as she approached them.

“M-morning,” she said. “And hello to you too, Sera-kun...”

“Morning, Natsuki,” said Ushio.

“So you’re Natsuki-chan, huh?” said Sera. “Hey there. I’m Itsuku Sera—written with the kanji for ‘tenderness,’ ‘world,’ and ‘good.’ You can just remember it as ‘the tender love that’ll bring good to the world,’ mmkay? Nice to meetcha.”

Hoshihara’s face twitched as she forced a smile and politely echoed the sentiment, though the wariness and revulsion were obvious in her voice. “You

two sure seem to be getting along well,” she went on. “Gotta admit, I’m a little surprised. Hadn’t even seen you *talk* to Ushio-chan until—”

“Wait, you call her Ushio-chan?!” Sera interrupted. “Oh my god, that’s so good! Maybe I should call her that too.”

I could see Hoshihara’s smile growing more strained by the second.

Ushio forced out an awkward laugh and shook her head. “No, it’s fine. You can just call me Ushio—no honorifics.”

“Wait, why not? Ooh, don’t tell me: are you embarrassed?”

“If *you* called me Ushio-chan, it’d feel like you were making fun of me.”

“Ha ha! C’mon, you know that’s not true! But I guess if you insist, I don’t mind stickin’ with just Ushio, either.”

Hoshihara’s expression softened a bit, seemingly in relief. “Aha ha... Jeez, Sera-kun. Didn’t you just meet Ushio-chan yesterday? Pretty impressive that you’re already on a first-name basis. Moving kinda fast, if you ask me!”

“Well, yeah,” said Sera. “I mean, she already promised to go out with me.”

Hoshihara froze in place, as did the rest of us. It was like a record-scratch moment. All of the early morning chitchat in the classroom fell away—before the murmurs and gossip rose back up to a clamor.

“Hang on. They’re dating?!”

“Did he just say they’re going out?”

“Hold it, who’s dating?”

“Tsukinoki and *Sera*, of all people?”

It seemed even Ushio couldn’t turn a blind eye to this ostentatious claim, as she glared up at Sera with a razor-sharp gaze. “Don’t say it like it’s a sure thing,” she warned.

“Right, I’ve gotta get the highest score on our final exams first,” said Sera. “Don’t worry, I know. Luckily for you, I’m a pretty good student. You can rest assured that I’ll make it happen.”

“I wasn’t—” Ushio began, but got cut off by the warning bell.

“Whoops, look at the time. Guess I’d better get back to my own classroom. See ya later, Ushio.”

And with that, Sera strutted out of the classroom like a movie star walking away from the resultant explosion of the absolute drama bomb he’d just dropped. Sure enough, the buzz and speculation only increased in his wake. Ushio pressed a hand against her forehead as though she had a migraine, and Hoshihara just stood there, dumbfounded. And me—I shuddered. Sera had just made clear to our entire class his intention of pursuing Ushio and that he had no qualms about letting them know.

I had to admit, I felt a hint of dread at the notion. Shouldn’t he be a *bit* more considerate about making a big scene of things, given Ushio’s circumstances? She was not just your average girl—hell, more than half of our classmates still seemed to see and treat her as a boy. Yet here came this random city slicker with a cocky swagger trying to date her and making no secret of it, despite the negative attention it was sure to garner from everyone else around. Did he not care one bit how people saw either of them? Surely he’d be the talk of the entire class at lunch today, and I had no doubt people would be laughing and judging him for it whenever they saw him walking down the hall.

Actually, on second thought...could it be that I was the one with the flawed perspective here? After all, it wasn’t as if Sera was acting this way out of hate or prejudice toward Ushio, or her identity, or her lifestyle. He’d simply fallen for her at first sight, as he claimed, and asked her out. Nothing else even seemed to be a factor for him. Sure, he was a pretty frivolous guy in general, but at least he was accepting her for who she was. Shouldn’t I be swallowing my preconceptions and giving him kudos for his maturity about this?

But then I remembered that no, he was still already dating a girl from another school. I just couldn’t condone someone actively planning to be a two-timer, regardless of the circumstances. Sure, he’d claimed he liked them both “equally,” but that was a pretty flimsy excuse that didn’t hold water, in my view. Any cheater could say that.

So, was Sera the messed-up one here after all? Or was it me?

The bell for morning homeroom rang before I settled this conundrum.

Every break period from then on, Sera would swing by our classroom to chat it up with Ushio, then make himself scarce when the warning bell rang—rinse and repeat. He even came by during lunch hour, bento box dangling carelessly from one hand, and ate with Ushio at her desk. Hoshihara was there too, of course, but she didn't really participate in the discussion—or more accurately, Sera was talking Ushio's ear off too incessantly for her to get a word in edgewise. She just sat there with a sullen look on her face from start to finish.

I'd been right about Sera becoming an object of ridicule for his open advances on Ushio. Every time he walked into the room, at least a few snickers broke out among my fellow classmates. What I hadn't expected, though, was for Sera to absorb it all without a hint of anger, discouragement, or embarrassment. In fact, he'd even go out of his way to engage with the people laughing at his expense in a somewhat jokey, friendly manner to try to spin it into something that painted him in a positive light.

For example, when someone said "Two dudes, man... That's just gross," he'd poke back with "Hey, don't knock it till you try it, bud." When another person said "You can pretend all you want, bro—she'll never have the hardware you're looking for," he'd play dumb and say "Sorry? What hardware is that? Why don't you spell it out for me?"

While he did make some remarks that grossed me out a little bit, he was holding his own about as well as one could expect under the circumstances. By the time lunch hour rolled around, he'd practically installed himself as an honorary member of Class A. His humor and personality had earned him the favor of most of my fellow classmates with impressive speed; even if Nishizono's absence likely had something to do with his expedited acceptance, there was certainly no one badmouthing him anymore. It was almost scary to me that he'd managed this dramatic social turnaround in only half a day. Sure enough, when school got out, he came by yet again.

"Hey, Ushio," he said. "Let's head home, yeah?"

He accosted her right as the three of us—Ushio, Hoshihara and I—were leaving the classroom. But it seemed Sera only had eyes for Ushio, as he called

out to her exclusively.

“Think you could show me how to get to the station real quick?” he asked her. “Still don’t really know my way around these parts.”

Hoshihara scrunched up her face, visibly annoyed. “Um... Shouldn’t you be spending your time studying for those tests rather than going out and playing around after school?”

“Jeez, really? You’re quite the goody-two-shoes, aren’tcha, Natsuki-chan?”

“No, I wouldn’t say that... I just think maybe you’re not being very considerate of Ushio-chan... Isn’t that right?” Hoshihara signaled Ushio with her eyes. She was quite clearly trying to give her an easy out.

“I don’t mind, really,” said Ushio, apparently quite willing to accept Sera’s invitation. Hoshihara’s jaw practically hit the floor.

“O-okay, then I’ll come too!” she said, changing tack.

“No, that’s okay. You should go home with Sakuma.” Ushio looked over at me. Was she trying to do me a favor here, perhaps? Obviously she knew I had a crush on Hoshihara. Maybe she was doing this to give us some alone time together. If so, I appreciated the consideration, but I honestly would rather she just went home with us.

“C’mon, Ushio,” said Sera, dragging her off by the arm. “Let’s go already.”

“See you, guys,” said Ushio, heading down the stairs with Sera and leaving Hoshihara and I standing awkwardly outside the classroom. I slowly turned to my side.

“Well, uh... Shall we, then?”

“Ughhh! What the heck was *that* about?!”

We were heading home the same way as usual when Hoshihara let out this mortal cry of bitterness and lament. Scattered beads of sweat began to form on my skin as we pushed our bikes beneath the hot summer sun.

“Look,” she went on, “I’m not gonna knock the guy for wanting to spend so

much time with her. They can be friends all they want! I'm happy for them! But he's trying to hog Ushio-chan all to himself, I just know it! I mean, did he not see us there?! Does he not realize she has other friends who want to spend time with her too?!"

"Yeah, I getcha," I said, scratching my head awkwardly as I tried to talk her down. "But c'mon—don't let him get under your skin."

"What, are you not annoyed by this at all, Kamiki-kun?!"

"I mean..."

Honestly, I wasn't sure. I didn't like Sera very much, but I couldn't quite pin down how I felt about him trying to get close to Ushio, assuming she was okay with it.

"Well, *I* sure am!" said Hoshihara. "We *cannot* let those two start dating, that's for sure! He's got my creep-o-meter swinging in the red zone!"

"Oh, you have one of those?" I couldn't help but chuckle at this abstract turn of phrase.

Hoshihara let out a sigh; it seemed that venting about it had helped her calm down a bit. "Anyway, yeah. That's why we need *you* to come in first, so that he can't!"

Aha. And now we've come full circle, right back to where we started.

"Yeah, sure. Just leave it to me," I said. "No promises, but I'll do my best."

Even I could hear the obvious lack of confidence in my voice. I wondered how much extra study time I could realistically fit in without burning out.

"Sorry about all this," Hoshihara said suddenly.

"Huh? What do you mean?" I asked.

"I mean, I'm just putting all of the pressure on you here, y'know?"

"True, yeah."

"Okay, wow! That was fast! You could at least *pretend* you wanna deny it!"

This was the first time I'd ever caught myself getting a little annoyed with Hoshihara. We both knew I was the one who'd be doing a majority of the work,

if I was really going to aim for first in our grade. But I'd agreed to do this knowing that, so obviously I wasn't going to complain about it. Plus, she'd already promised to do something for me in exchange if I pulled it off, so it wasn't as if I didn't have my own motives for doing so, even if they weren't exactly the noblest.

Hoshihara hung her head again, looking totally dejected. "Y'know, I mean it, though. I *really* don't want the two of them to start dating. There's just something about Sera-kun that just... I don't know. It gives me a really squicky feeling."

"You mean like a kind of visceral disgust, or...?"

"That feels like a pretty harsh way of wording it, but... Mmm, I dunno how to explain it." Hoshihara hummed as she mulled it over. Then, after a short while, she said, "Well, you know that thing you do with watermelons?"

"W-watermelons? You're gonna have to be a little more specific."

"You know—like, you tap on 'em or slap 'em, and you listen to the sound they make, right? Based on that sound, you can pretty much tell whether it's gonna be a good watermelon or not. Know what I mean?"

"Yeah, I guess I've heard that before... But what about it?"

"I feel like you can kind of do the same thing with people, in a way. As in, you can 'tap' on them with words, or pointed questions, or what have you. Based on the 'sound,' or reaction you get back, you can usually get a pretty good read on their personality."

I wasn't sure why she'd needed the watermelon analogy—it seemed pretty intuitive to say that you could gauge a person's relative goodness based on your interactions with them—but I knew more or less what she was getting at.

"But see, when it comes to Sera-kun," she went on, "I just feel like no matter where you try to tap, it always seems like the sound that comes back is from a totally different part of the melon—or, like, a little speaker somewhere off to the side of the melon stand, if that makes sense. And it feels a little bit unsettling, like... Sorry, I don't even know where I'm going with this anymore."

"No, I think I get what you're saying," I said. "It's like you can't get a good

read on him no matter what you do, basically. It's a little uncanny."

"Yeah, that's pretty much it. And I dunno about you, but I don't like those types of people one bit."

While I didn't have a perfect grasp of Hoshihara's personality, I did feel like it was pretty rare for her to express outward distaste for another person. I took it as an indication of just how many red flags she saw in him.

"Why not just say that to Ushio, then?" I asked. "I'm sure if you explained your feelings about him to her, she'd try to be more on guard around him too."

"What? No way, I could never. I mean, maybe if he was a *really* obviously bad person, but in this case, it's more just that he rubs me the wrong way."

"But you're talking to *me* about it right now."

"Well, yeah, because you're... I dunno. You're like one of the only people I can confide in, I guess."

Now *this* I was genuinely delighted to hear. I felt like that had to put me at least one rung above an ordinary friend in her mind. I did a mental fist pump.

"But anyway, back on topic: how's the studying going so far?"

Aha. I had a feeling she'd be curious about that.

"Oh, right," I said. "Going fine so far, I suppose. Does kinda feel like there's not enough time left to cover everything I've gotta cover, though."

"Anything you're really struggling with? Like, a worst subject or whatever?"

"If I had to say, I guess I'm not so great at math, maybe? I'm definitely more of a liberal arts guy, so I've always had a harder time with math and science."

"Gotcha, okay. Anything *other* than math?"

"Mmm, probably anything where it's just a lot of memorization of, like...dates and facts and whatnot. But I know there's really nothing you can do for that type of thing except try to cram until you've got it down pat."

"Okay, got it," said Hoshihara, nodding sagely. "I'll poke around and see what I can do to help. If anything else starts giving you grief, just let me know. I want to be of assistance to you in any way I can."

“Thanks. I really appreciate it.”

I wondered just how much she meant this blanket statement, but I certainly wasn't about to be a creep and ask “Wait. *Any way?*” or whatever. Whatever the case, tomorrow was Saturday, and I didn't have any plans—so I figured I'd spend the whole weekend studying.

Monday rolled around before I knew it. The weekend really did pass in what felt like the blink of an eye. Even though I did nothing but study, I didn't feel all that pleased with my progress. I'd spent virtually all of my time cramming English and world history terms into my noggin, but I'd hardly even cracked open my math textbook. I knew that in order to get first in our grade, I'd have to get at *least* 90 percent in every subject—but something told me that at this rate, no matter how hard I studied, an 80 average was probably my upper limit. Which might still get me into the top ten, perhaps, but surely nowhere near number one.

The end-of-semester exams started on Thursday, so three days from now. They would continue through Friday and Saturday as well. Then, after a one-day weekend on Sunday, we'd return to our normal, period-based class structure for a bit. By the time we got our tests back, we'd be staring summer vacation right in the face. There were only a few days of grueling studying left, so I just had to hold out and make them count.

I walked in the main entrance of Tsubakioka High and quickly spotted Ushio standing in front of her shoe cubby (her brightly colored hair made her easy to pick out from the crowd). She was alone today, thankfully. I watched as she bent down to pick up her street shoes after slipping them off and, after returning upright, draped a loose lock of hair back over her ear with one finger.

I couldn't help but be struck by how girly she looked throughout this entire process—and also how strange it was that there were stereotypically gendered mannerisms to be found even in the littlest of things, like how we removed our shoes. I couldn't remember, exactly, if this was how Ushio had always taken her shoes off or if this was a deliberate change she'd made to her behavior now that she was openly living her life as a girl. And as I stood there contemplating

this, she noticed my presence and turned to face me with a broad smile.

“Oh, Sakuma,” she said. “Good morning.”

“Hey,” I replied.

I walked over to the cubbies and quickly changed shoes, and then the two of us headed up to Class 2-A together.

“Did you not get much sleep last night?” Ushio asked abruptly.

“Sorry?” I said. “Why do you ask?”

“Well, you’ve got dark circles under your eyes, for one.”

“Oh... Sorry, yeah. I was up pretty late studying last night.”

“Wow. Since when have *you* been the type to study for exams?”

“Yeah, I’m not, it’s just, y’know... Haven’t really been able to focus much during class lately. Figured I’d compensate by studying on my own time.”

“You don’t say... Huh. Interesting.”

Obviously, I wasn’t about to admit that I was studying specifically to thwart Sera by trying to rank first in our grade myself. I knew that would only lead to a much more sensitive discussion, and since Hoshihara didn’t feel comfortable expressing her disapproval of Sera to Ushio, I figured it was probably best for me to keep my mouth shut too.

“By the way, how did things go on Friday?” she asked. “Did you and Natsuki have a chance to talk on the way home?”

“Oh, yeah. It went pretty all right, I’d say. Wasn’t awkward or anything.”

“Cool, cool. Well, I’m happy for you,” she said, nodding with satisfaction.

“How ’bout you? I know you and Sera headed over to the station.”

“Yeah. We just kinda walked around for a while before eventually settling on a café. We sat down and ordered some pastries, and then we both went home from there.”

Sounds a lot like a date, I thought. I pictured Ushio and Sera walking side by side down the street through the middle of town. To an outside observer, they

must have looked like a perfectly ordinary and attractive teenage couple. Maybe even a pretty good match for each other, going by looks alone.

“What kind of vibe do you get from Sera, anyway?” I asked.

“What do you mean by ‘vibe’?”

“Like, is he a good person, a bad person, et cetera?”

Ushio rubbed her chin and contemplated this as we ascended the stairs. Only when we reached the second-floor landing did she lift her head, having settled on her answer.

“I’d say he’s a pretty weird guy. But in an interesting way, I suppose,” she said. This was not the easiest appraisal for me to interpret, but maybe she just didn’t have a very good read on his character yet herself. Facing forward down the hall, she indifferently continued, “Sometimes, when we interact, I feel like I’m talking to a little kid, and other times, it feels like he’s much more mature. He’s not as black and white as other people. I don’t think you could really categorize him as ‘good’ or ‘bad,’ per se. And yet...”

“And yet?” I echoed.

Ushio’s expression clouded over a moment—and then she shot me a look. “I think it might be a good idea for you to stay away from him, Sakuma,” she said, her tone solemn.

“Wait. What do you—”

“Ushio!” cried a voice from behind us, cutting me off before I could finish my sentence. I didn’t even have to turn around to know who it was. *Great, speak of the devil.* Sera rushed up beside us and threw one arm around Ushio’s shoulders. She quickly rejected this bit of unwarranted physical contact.

“Stop,” she said, wriggling free. “It’s hot enough as it is.”

“Aw, don’t be like that,” said Sera. “A little PDA ain’t gonna kill ya!”

“I can’t walk with you hanging off of me. Move over.”

“Aw, c’mon! You know you love it!”

“Okay, no. Quit leaning on me. You’re heavy.”

Man, it's way too early for this, was all I could think in my sleep-deprived state. At the same time, something about this situation was causing a strange, almost staticky sensation to spread throughout my chest—a murky cloud of conflicting emotions I could only call a “funk.” I wasn’t sure if it was the flippant public display of affection (reciprocated or not) that I felt repelled by, or if I was annoyed at Sera for not even acknowledging my existence, or if maybe I secretly *wished* I could be a part of this weird, awkward rapport for whatever reason and felt left out... But in any event, it wasn’t a feeling I enjoyed.

I lengthened my stride, leaving the two of them behind as I speedwalked the rest of the way to the classroom, set my bag down at my desk, sat down, and pulled out my English textbook. I had better things to be doing with my spare time, and any moment spent *not* studying was a moment wasted.

Eventually, Ushio and Sera walked into class and were met with jeers of amusement from the peanut gallery—like “Oh, look who’s back again!” or “Boy, he sure isn’t giving up, is he?”—along with some scattered snickers. Yet by this point, it felt more like candid sitcom banter than an actual indication that Sera was unwelcome here. In fact, when Ushio sat down at her desk, one of the boys in class approached the pair to greet them with a friendly quip.

“Wow, you two sure seem to be hitting it off pretty well,” he said. “Y’know, Sera, at this rate, I feel like you should just transfer into Class A and get it over with.”

“Ooh, hey! Not a bad idea,” said Sera. “I’ll try talking to the teacher about it.”

“Oho! You hear that, Ushio? Now you’ll be able to keep an eye on him and see just how much he’s willing to commit, huh?!”

“Uh, no thanks. I think I’m happy with the way things are now,” said Ushio.

I was a little taken aback by this exchange, mostly because it just went to show how quickly and thoroughly Sera had ingratiated himself with virtually everyone in Class A, despite being initially treated like a freak for his interest in Ushio. Even Ushio was being actively included in these little exchanges now—and handling them quite well with quips of her own, I thought—which was a major step forward compared to the ostracization she’d been facing previously. Sure, a few of the boys in class extended an olive branch to her on occasion

before, but overall it still felt like she'd been treated like the class leper up until now. And in the end, all it took was the influence of a guy like Sera to make everyone start engaging her like a valid human being again. Part of me felt that if the two of them really did end up dating after all of this buildup, Ushio might even be able to reclaim her previous position of popularity among our classmates that she'd enjoyed prior to her transition.

And yet, something about this whole situation still didn't sit right with me. It was probably wishful thinking to assume she'd become the most popular kid in class again as a result of this—but the mere thought of that happening filled me with some pretty conflicted emotions, to be totally honest. And yes, I knew it wasn't *my* feelings that mattered here, as long as Ushio was happy, but I couldn't help it.

Ugh... I don't get it, man. Just what the hell am I so worried about?

The rest of the school day was mostly uneventful, and now classes were done for the day. Hoshihara quickly packed up her things and headed over to Ushio's desk—maybe in the hopes that she could get a commitment to walk home together before Sera showed up. But to my surprise, the two of them only exchanged a few words before Ushio got up and left the classroom by herself. Hoshihara simply hung her head for a while, dejected, then plodded out of the room. I packed up my stuff and chased after her.

"Hey, what's wrong?" I called out to her down the corridor.

"Oh... Hey, Kamiki-kun," she said, still looking pretty depressed as she turned to face me. "Sounds like Ushio-chan's already got plans to go home with Sera-kun today..."

"Aw, shoot... Are you kidding me?"

It seemed our enemy had preempted us yet again. Though I had to admit, I found it a little harsh that Ushio would keep deliberately choosing Sera over us. Surely she had to realize that Hoshihara was really hoping the three of us could walk home together as well.

Maybe my little theory about her doing this to force Hoshihara to spend some

time with me one-on-one was right after all. But if that was the case, her plan had backfired. Sure, maybe that'd work once or twice, but obviously things were going to get awkward after a while if Ushio just kept removing herself from the equation forever. After all, she'd kind of been the one who helped bridge the gap between me and Hoshihara in the first place as our mutual friend. That being said, I also didn't feel right just stomping my way over and telling Ushio I wanted her to come home with *us* today instead. It wasn't like she didn't have the right to choose whom she spent her time with. Maybe she was starting to feel a little uncomfortable being around the two of us, given what she knew about our respective feelings, and her own...though the thought put a lump in the pit of my stomach.

"So what do we do now?" I asked.

"I mean...I don't think there's much we *can* do, as much as I hate to admit it."

"Yeah, I guess not..."

"Maybe we should walk home separately from now on?"

This was exactly the suggestion I'd been dreading. Personally, I still wanted every opportunity to grow closer to her that I could get, even if things were a bit awkward right now. At the same time, I recognized that it was pretty abnormal for a boy and girl who weren't even dating to walk home from school together every single day. And I figured Hoshihara was probably worried about the kinds of assumptions people would make about us if things kept going like this for much longer.

"Sure, that makes sense," I said, trying my damndest not to let my disappointment show as I nodded in agreement. More than anything, I didn't want to cause any problems for her. *Well, at least we can still walk down to the entryway together*, I thought to myself as we made our way through the crowded halls.

"So do you have any plans tonight, Kamiki-kun?" she asked.

"Nope, afraid not," I said. "Unless studying my ass off counts, I guess..."

"Yeah, I figured. Actually, I was kinda thinking we could maybe hold a little group study session for you, if you think that'd help. Wanna meet up at the

Joyfull near the station again at like, I dunno, six-ish?”

Just when I thought my spirits couldn't get any lower, they shot right back up to cloud nine. Hoshihara wanted to plan a study session, just for *me*? What more could a guy even ask for? But I knew I should probably keep my true feelings close to the chest, so I resisted the urge to let out a cry of joy and instead offered only a pleasant smile.

“Hey, yeah. I'd really appreciate that,” I said. “So you're gonna tutor me, then?”

“What? Oh, no, no, no. You're *way* too smart for *me* to teach you anything,” she said, laughing as though I'd just asked the most ridiculous question in the world. Then what was even the point of having a study session? She quickly enlightened me: “Luckily for you, I also have friends who are a lot smarter than me. You'll be in good hands, don't worry.”

Oh. So it *wasn't* going to be just a one-on-one thing, then. That made sense—not much of a group study session when it was only two people, after all. Like a balloon with a tiny hole in it, my mood deflated in real time. I felt stupid for getting my hopes up.

“So who else will you be inviting to this study session?” I asked.

“Ha ha, well, I guess you'll just have to show up and find out, now, won't you?” Hoshihara teased.

Honestly, I didn't really care who it was; I knew the vibes were going to be different from a one-on-one hangout regardless, so there was no name she could say that would rev my enthusiasm back up at this point. Though I *did* hope it was someone I knew, at the very least. By the time this conversation was over, we were already at the entryway.

“Okay, guess I'll see you tonight, then!” Hoshihara said with a smile as she finished changing shoes, then trotted off out the double doors.

It was three after six when I rolled up to the aforementioned chain restaurant on my bike. Study session or not, I really didn't think it was appropriate to show up to an after-school hangout in my uniform, so I'd changed into a T-shirt and

some chinos. With my tote bag full of reference materials and writing implements over my shoulder, I headed into the diner.

“Table for one?” asked the host, but I explained that I was meeting people, then scanned the floor to see if I could spot Hoshihara anywhere. It was still a little early for the dinner rush, but the place was pretty packed regardless. Many of the booths were already filled with other groups of students around my age, and others were occupied by families with kids.

After looking around a bit, I heard a voice call out to me from a booth near the back of the nonsmoking section. It was Hoshihara, sitting turned around in her aisle seat as she waved one hand to beckon me back there. I raised a hand in return, then made my way over to the rectangular, four-person window table she was sitting at.

Hoshihara had also changed into more casual clothes; she wore a thin cardigan over a plain camisole. I realized that this was the first time I’d seen her in anything other than her school uniform. It almost felt like I was getting to see a different side of her, which was nice.

But beyond that, my eyes were drawn to the two girls sitting across from her in the booth. These two were both still wearing their Tsubakioka High uniforms. One of them had light-brown skin and a short, boyish haircut, whereas the other had long, elegant black hair. I knew these girls—they were Mashima and Shiina.

“Hey, what’s up? Kamiki, right? Thanks for comin’ out!” said the former.

“Evening, Kamiki-kun,” said the latter.



I'd never talked to either one of them before, so I couldn't help but seize up like a frog in a staredown with a hungry snake. I should have known she'd be inviting one or more of her other female friends, but I was not at all used to being the only guy in an otherwise all-girl hangout, so I was already feeling pretty out of my element.

"Yes, um... Hello..." I said softly, floundering so hard for a greeting that even I couldn't help but laugh at my own awkwardness. I sounded like a mousy old woman. Hoshihara scooted over and clapped the empty seat beside her.

"Here! Have a seat!" she said.

"Y-yeah, okay. Thanks."

I sat down next to her in the booth as instructed. It seemed the three of them had already gotten drinks at the self-service station before I arrived, judging from the empty glasses placed in front of each girl. I assumed Mashima and Shiina were still in their uniforms because they'd only just gotten done with their after-school activities (softball and wind ensemble, respectively), and had come straight here. I knew that despite it being exam season, many of the sports teams were also practicing hard for regionals, and the music clubs had band competitions coming up as well. Honestly, I felt kind of bad that Hoshihara had dragged them out here just for this during such a hectic time of year. But as I sat there, trying my best to wrap my head around the situation and their circumstances, I heard a little *Pfft* from the other side of the table—Mashima was laughing at me.

"Jeez, Kamiki," she said. "No need to be so tense. Loosen up a little, why don'tcha? But I guess I get it, though. I mean, who *wouldn't* be a little nervous, sitting here surrounded by a buncha cute girls, y'know? Am I right, or am I right?"

"Wha...? No, I was just, uh..."

As I sat there fumbling for words, Shiina elbowed Mashima from the side. "Hey, knock it off. We're not here to poke fun. We've got important business to discuss today."

"Yeah, yeah... Whatever," said Mashima, shrugging her off.

Important business? I thought we were just having a group study session.
Before I could even open my mouth to ask about this peculiar phrasing, Shiina turned to address me first.

“Natsuki gave us the rundown. She asked you to score the highest in our grade so that Sera-kun can’t, correct? So you’ve been studying like your life depends on it.”

“Yeah, more or less,” I said.

It sounded like Hoshihara had given them an honest explanation. Though I assumed she’d left out the part about her own feelings for Ushio.

“Tell me, Kamiki-kun,” Shiina went on. “How do *you* feel about the notion of Tsukinoki-kun and Sera-kun dating?” Her particular use of the “-kun” honorific made her sound more like a wizened adult discussing the youth—boy or girl—than someone chatting about her fellow classmates.

“What do you mean?” I said, playing dumb. “I don’t really have a strong opinion. Just doing this as a favor to Hoshihara, mainly...”

“You’re just doing as you’re told, then?” Shiina narrowed her eyes. “That seems like an awfully fickle justification for interfering with the love lives of two autonomous human beings, if you ask me.”

This caught me off guard; I hadn’t expected this to turn into an interrogation about my motives, but I couldn’t deny that my reasons for not wanting the two of them to start dating were pretty half-baked. I looked over at Hoshihara, hoping for some sort of guidance on how to respond, and she thankfully threw me a lifeline.

“Don’t grill him so hard, Shii-chan,” she said, smiling sheepishly. “I’m the one who roped him into this...”

“Sorry, Natsuki,” said Shiina. “But I need to make sure he truly has the willpower to succeed here. I can’t teach someone who can’t even think for themselves.”

“Oh, come on... It’s not *that* serious, right?”

As Hoshihara protested, Mashima sipped loudly on the straw in her empty

glass. “Y’know, Shiina,” she said, “I think you can prolly cut him some slack on that one. I mean, at least he’s on board and willing, right?”

“You stay out of this, Marine,” said Shiina.

“Fiiine.”

“Ahem.” Shiina cleared her throat. “Again, I just want to know what you think about all of this, Kamiki-kun. From what you’ve told us so far, it doesn’t sound like you’re a person who exhibits much agency as an individual. And to be brutally honest, I’m not sure I’m comfortable assisting someone I can’t get any sort of read on whatsoever.”

She’d made her position abundantly clear—and honestly, I thought it was a pretty fair point. Even though she and I were in the same class, I was almost certain this was the first time we’d actually spoken to one another. Even with Hoshihara vouching for me, I could totally understand someone not wanting to offer free tutoring services to a person they knew nothing about. That being said...it *did* feel like she was talking down to me a bit too much, given that I wasn’t even the one who’d requested her services. I obviously wasn’t going to say that out loud, though. And I was still grateful to her for taking the time out of her day after band practice during exam week to help, so I figured I could give her a more honest answer, as long as I kept the details to a minimum.

“Well...I don’t really trust Sera,” I said. “I think he’s pretty shady, to tell you the truth. Still, I do wonder if dating a guy like him might be a good experience for Ushio in some ways... So I’m a little on the fence as to whether I’m completely opposed to them going out. But since Hoshihara asked me to do this, I’m opting to lean on the side of disapproval...I guess you could say.”

I tried my best to eloquently explain my thoughts, albeit haltingly. But it seemed my answer wasn’t to Shiina’s satisfaction, as she furrowed her brow.

“That’s a bit noncommittal, don’t you think?” she asked.

“Maybe. But it’s the truth. What’s *your* take on all of this, then?”

She took a moment to think this over. “Personally, I didn’t have a problem with the two of them going out, in theory.”

“Wait, huh?!” Hoshihara exclaimed. “Y-you didn’t...?”

“Granted, I’m not the biggest fan of Sera-kun either, but I do believe his feelings for Tsukinoki-kun are legitimate. If they weren’t, he wouldn’t be coming to visit her in class just to chat at every opportunity throughout the day. And, well...given that they’re both the same biological sex, and how Sera-kun reacted to that information, I think we can rule out the possibility that his motivations are purely physical.”

“I dunno...” Mashima chimed in. “Think you might be making a pretty big assumption there.”

“Well, let’s assume they’re not for the time being. That’s the impression I get, and while I can also tell that Tsukinoki-kun is keeping Sera-kun at arm’s length at the moment, I can also see a future in which she lowers her guard and lets him in, as it were. And I thought that if that were to happen, I could honestly see the two of them making a pretty good couple. But when Natsuki asked me to help with this and explained her feelings, my thinking changed. She has never once approached me and confessed that she has a bad feeling about someone before, so I want to trust her gut feeling there—even if her reasons might be a little vague—and offer whatever assistance I can. But I also know that Natsuki can be a bit easily influenced, or even manipulated at times...so I was planning to reserve my final decision until I got a gauge on *your* character first, as the other person she was planning this covert intervention with. There, that’s my take.”

“...What the hell?” I said, more than a little insulted. I’d thought I was agreeing to a study session, not an interview. Not to mention: “How does that make you any different from me? You call *me* noncommittal for letting Hoshihara’s opinion of Sera color my own, more nuanced thoughts about him and push them in one direction over the other, but *you* actually approved of their relationship and *then* did a total one-eighty based solely on this ‘gut feeling’ of hers... That’s almost *worse*, if you ask me.”

“She and I have been close friends and classmates since freshman year. So I could tell just how important this was to her, relative to everything else I’ve seen from her before. Unlike you, I actually give a damn about my friends.”

This last remark crossed the line. I was officially ready to snap.

“Oh, you do, huh?” I said. “Y’know, that’s pretty rich, coming from the girl who just sat there and twiddled her thumbs while Nishizono bullied another member of your so-called ‘friend group’ for *weeks*. But hey—pot, meet kettle, I guess.”

Shiina’s snooty, unruffled expression finally flushed with emotion, and she glared at me with a gaze sharper than any knife. Immediately, I regretted my words. *Crap, that was way too far, wasn’t it? I’d better apologize*, I thought to myself—but just as I was about to, I felt a twinge of doubt as to whether I really should.

While I’d spat some pretty harsh words just now, I also knew this criticism of her was fully deserved. I could still picture her sitting there, awkwardly pursing her lips as Nishizono ridiculed Ushio like she was nothing more than a sideshow attraction...and the thought *did* still genuinely enrage me.

Even so, now was not the time to be antagonizing her. Hoshihara had called Shiina out here explicitly for my benefit, and I was the one in need of her help. So again, I opened my mouth to apologize—when all of a sudden, Mashima plucked an ice cube from her glass and (for some reason I could not fathom) reached over and dropped it down the back of Shiina’s neck, right into her clothes.

“Eeeek!” Shiina shrieked in distress as she made a futile attempt to wriggle free from the uncomfortable sensation. This arched-back posture accentuated her chest in such a way that I felt obligated to avert my eyes for the sake of decency—though not before sitting there in a baffled daze for a moment or two. After struggling for quite a while in this position to remove the icy invader, she punched Mashima in the shoulder with a trembling fist. “You...you *idiot*, Marine! We’re having a serious discussion here! Save your stupid pranks for some other time!”

But Mashima simply chuckled with a devilish smirk, utterly unrepentant. “Aw, what’s the matter? Just thought things were getting a little heated and figured you could use a little help cooling off, that’s all.”

She then pressed the “call waiter” button embedded in the table. Shiina continued chewing her out until the exact moment the waiter arrived, at which

point she begrudgingly held her tongue.

“Lemme get one extra-large order of French fries,” Mashima said. “Oh, and did you wanna order anything, Kamiki?”

“Oh, uh, yeah... I’ll just take a fountain drink, thanks.”

The waiter read our orders back to us, then returned to the kitchen.

“Really, Marine?” said Shiina. “First you completely derail our discussion, and then you just casually order a big plate of fries...?”

“Yeah, yeah, I heard ya. You can quit being such a stick-in-the-mud any time now. Besides, Kamiki’s on the same team as us, isn’t he? No need to be so salty toward him just because you’re overprotective.”

“Excuse you? I’m not ‘salty’...”

“Nahhh, you totally are! I saw how shell-shocked you were when Nakki first came up and asked you to help tutor him! You were like, ‘Wait. Since when is she such good friends with this guy I hardly know?’ Trust me, it was written all over your face!”

“N-no, I was just...” Shiina couldn’t seem to maintain eye contact. It appeared Mashima was right on the money.

“Well, not that I don’t get how ya feel, of course. But right now, let’s just try to cooperate on this for Nakki’s sake, all right?”

Shiina bit her lip with chagrin, but gave a reluctant nod in the end. I felt pretty touched by this show of friendship, despite me clearly being the one who was out of place in the group. Mashima had effectively defused the hostile tension of our discussion in no time flat. Perhaps she was a more attentive and considerate person than her chilled-out, flakey demeanor had led me to believe.

“Oh, and Kamiki,” said Mashima, facing me with a stern expression. “I can tell you right now that Shiina already feels really terrible about watching from the sidelines during the whole Ushio situation. So could you maybe not give her any extra grief for that? Gotta say, I feel pretty bad about it myself.”

“Yeah, all right,” I said, then turned to Shiina. “And, um...sorry. I shouldn’t

have lost my cool like that. My bad.”

“...It’s fine,” said Shiina. “I was the one who made it personal, anyway. I suppose I owe you an apology too.”

Shiina and I had officially made an awkward truce. Hoshihara let out a sigh of relief, and Mashima flashed a cheesy grin.

“So hey, Kamiki!” said the latter. “You ordered that fountain drink—why don’t you go get yourself a little somethin’ from the drink bar?”

“Yeah. Guess I probably should...”

“Oh, I’ll go with you!” said Hoshihara, following after me with her empty glass in hand as I rose from my seat in the booth. We then made our way over to the drink bar, and as soon as we got there, Hoshihara let out another long, heavy sigh.

“Man, you guys really had me on pins and needles back there,” she said. “For a minute, I totally thought you two were about to fight.”

“Sorry about that, yeah... Not sure how things would’ve played out if Mashima hadn’t stepped in to clear the air.”

“Yeah, Marine’s a really good egg. Good conflict resolution skills—I think being vice captain of the girls’ softball team has something to do with that. Plus, she’s known Shii-chan since they were little.”

“Oh, wow. You don’t say.”

That would certainly explain why they seemed so inseparable. I filled my glass with cola at the soda dispenser, and Hoshihara poured herself some apple juice. The two of us then headed back to our booth—where there were now two mysterious sheet protectors lying on the tabletop. I let Hoshihara slide into the booth first before taking my seat beside her.

“What are these?” I asked.

“Oh, these...?” said Mashima, sliding the papers out from one of the plastic sleeves. “This, my friend, is a set of actual test questions from last year’s exams. A senior pal of mine let me borrow theirs.”

“Whoa, dang!”

This was much appreciated. My entire life, I'd been the type to just study by myself at home without any outside help, so I'd never even thought to ask for prior exam questions before. This was an invaluable asset to a loner like me.

Next, Shiina pulled some papers out from the other sheet protector. "And these are some final exam prep worksheets I got at cram school," she said. "They're just photocopies, so you can take them home with you as well."

Wow. I found it interesting to think that she'd gone to the trouble in advance, given how hard she was grilling me a minute ago. But I couldn't complain.

"Thanks," I said. "I really owe you one."

"It's no big deal, really," Shiina replied. "Just be sure to make good use of them."

I nodded. Honestly, I was a little bit touched; I hadn't expected either of them to go to such lengths just to help me out. It just went to show how much they valued Hoshihara as a friend—and as a result, I had no excuse not to succeed now. I had to get first in our grade, come hell or high water. I gratefully accepted the plastic sleeves containing both of their offerings. As I sat there skimming through the previous exam questions, our waiter brought out the French fries Mashima had ordered.

"Feel free to have some, you guys," she said. "Guessing you haven't had dinner yet, right, Kamiki? Go for it."

"Oh, no... I haven't, actually. Thanks, don't mind if I do..."

I grabbed some chopsticks from the tray at the side of the table and plucked a French fry. I popped it into my mouth, and immediately, that irresistible mix of salt and frying oil tickled my tongue. It was the unmistakable flavor of a well-made French fry—the kind that always left you reaching for more.

Mashima gave me a dubious look. "Hang on. Are you the type of person who eats potato chips with chopsticks too?"

"Huh? No. Who does that?"

"Then why the heck are you using 'em on French fries, huh? C'mon, don't be a prude! Just dig in with your bare hands like a friggin' animal!"

“Well, I just didn’t want to get any grease stains on the worksheets...”

“Oh, is *that* why?! Dang. And here I thought you were just some total neat freak!”

Mashima started cackling, apparently enjoying herself quite a bit.

“*You* should try following his example, Marine,” said Shiina, giving her the side-eye. “That last volume of manga I lent you had crumbs all over the pages by the time you gave it back to me.”

“Wait, really? I was being extra careful not to eat like a slob, though.”

“Well, you shouldn’t be eating snacks while reading other people’s books in the first place. You’re lucky I’m not the sort of person who’d make a fuss over stuff like that...”

“Okay, fiiine. Point taken...” Mashima said, her tone unconvincing.

Hoshihara chuckled at this little exchange, and I couldn’t help but crack a smile myself. Any awkward tension between the four of us had completely dissipated by this point. In fact, I even felt pretty comfortable sitting here with this group of girls now. Then again, maybe that was to be expected; I was pretty sure the average guy my age would be quite pleased to find himself in a situation like this.

Just as I was reflecting on my good fortune, I heard a voice go “Ack!” from somewhere behind me. I looked over my shoulder to see a girl wearing hot pants and an off-the-shoulder top standing in the middle of the restaurant. This showy outfit was completed by a stylish baseball cap perched loosely over two bleached blonde pigtails.

It was Arisa Nishizono.

My face went rigid with shock, like someone had just dumped a bucket of cold water over my head.

“What the hell is *he* doing here?” Nishizono asked, a look of open disgust painted all across her face. At least the feeling was mutual.

“Oh, hey! ’Bout time you showed up!” said Hoshihara, turning and half-rising

in her seat to greet Nishizono. “We’ve already gotten started! Come on over and grab a seat!”

“Huh?!” Nishizono and I blurted in tandem.

Wait, she was invited here? Since when did she and Hoshihara make up?

Nishizono screwed up her face in revulsion and pointed at me. “Natsuki... Don’t tell me *he’s* the one you want me to tutor,” she said.

“You got it!” said Hoshihara.

“Okay, bye.”

“What?! N-no, wait!”

As Nishizono turned on her heel to leave, Hoshihara scrambled to stop her—sidling over me before I could even move to let her out of the booth. As she shimmied her way over my legs, I became keenly aware of her proximity—the softness of the backs of her thighs against my knees, her sweet fragrance tickling my nose—and all I could do was seize up and lean as far back as I could into the cushioned booth seat to let her through. After successfully making it out, she grabbed Nishizono by the shoulders.

“Wait, Arisa! At least hear me out!” Hoshihara loudly cried out—and suddenly, all eyes in the restaurant were on the two of them. Apparently not wanting to cause a scene, Nishizono relented and asked for Shiina to scoot in a little bit, then sat down beside her. Things looked pretty tight on that side of the booth, but I couldn’t tell if the grumpy look on Nishizono’s face was due to the discomfort, or if that was simply her default expression. Shiina was trying to be considerate and take up as little space as possible, while Mashima kept munching away on French fries, laughing awkwardly. Hoshihara sat back down beside me at last, seemingly satisfied that Nishizono wasn’t going to run off.

“Okay. So here’s the thing...” Hoshihara proceeded to give Nishizono the basic rundown on everything that had happened lately: Sera asking Ushio out. Ushio saying yes, on the condition that he ranked first in our grade on the end-of-semester exams. Hoshihara and I conspiring for me to come in first instead to prevent that from happening.

But this long-winded explanation did little to convince Nishizono.

“And?” she said bluntly, agitated.

“Uh, well...” Hoshihara forced a smile. “I guess I just figured that if anyone knew how to study for a big test, it’d be you—so if we could just get your help, then we’d be *really* setting ourselves up for success...”

Hoshihara was obviously flattering her, but it was warranted. It was easy to forget sometimes that despite Nishizono’s rough exterior, she was actually one of the best students in school. But even if she *did* have some secret studying method that would guarantee I aced the exams, this was a clear lapse in judgment on Hoshihara’s part. She’d picked the wrong girl. Something told me Nishizono wouldn’t be too keen on helping me after that incident in the classroom the other day that got her suspended.

“...Look, Natsuki,” said Nishizono. “I know I gave you the cold shoulder for a while there, and I do feel bad about that. Which is why I said yes when you called and asked me to help with this on the phone yesterday. But this is way more than I agreed to. Why would you ask me to tutor *him*, of all people?”

She drummed her fingers against the table, as if demanding an answer.

“Well, because you’ve got the best grades out of all of my friends...” Hoshihara timidly explained. “And I figured maybe it’d be a good excuse for you two to make up...”

“I beg your pardon?” said Nishizono, looking rather appalled by this suggestion. “Pretty sure you have to actually be friends with someone in the first place in order to ‘make up’ with them. There’s no point in me getting involved with this loser I have nothing in common with, and I’m *not* about to say sorry and try to be friends with him just because we got into one little heated argument.”

“But—”

“No buts. I don’t know what you were expecting, but I’m *not* apologizing, no matter what you say. Also, why the hell are *you* such good friends with this chump all of a sudden? I’ve been wondering about that for a while now. You definitely never mentioned him until a couple of weeks ago, that’s for sure.”

Hoshihara shot me a momentary glance, then turned back to Nishizono.

“Kamiki-kun’s a really nice guy. I can talk to him about literally anything.”

“Oh really, now...? You’re just *such* a nice guy, huh?” said Nishizono, shifting her focus onto me. “Then *surely* you’re not just doing this little favor to make Natsuki feel indebted to you so she’ll feel obligated to say yes when you ask her out later, riiight?”

“O-of course not. Don’t be ridiculous,” I said, hoping she couldn’t hear my heart skip a beat. She wasn’t *completely* wrong, much as I tried to deny it.

“Ha. Yeah, right. You boys only ever want one thing. You pretend like you’re doing things for her purely out of the kindness of your heart, when in reality, you’re just thinking with your dick. I guarantee he’s picturing you with your clothes off *right* now, Natsuki.”

“L-Like hell I am!”

How the hell could she even *say* such vulgar things with a straight face...? *Damn it.* I could feel my temperature rising. Warily, I glanced over at Hoshihara—and our eyes met. Immediately, she looked away and hunched over, eyes downcast, practically making herself shrink. *Goddamn it.* It felt like Nishizono was doing literally everything she could to make things awkward between us.

“Y’know...you’re a real piece of work,” I said. “After all that horrible stuff you did at school, you still don’t even feel an ounce of remorse, do you?”

“Uh, no? Not really?” said Nishizono. “I mean, yeah, I guess I went a little overboard once or twice, but I don’t take back any of the things I said. Because I didn’t say anything wrong.”

Now she was *really* asking for it. Just where the hell did this unwarranted self-importance and self-righteousness come from? I was beyond simply pissed off at this point; more than anything, I was just appalled. But I wasn’t about to just step back and be the bigger person. This wasn’t like when things got heated with Shiina earlier; *this* girl needed to be put in her place before her swelled head got even bigger.

“Oh, really?” I said. “So you genuinely think you were in the right to call Ushio a disgusting freak and all those other horrible things you said to her?”

“I was just speaking my mind,” Nishizono snapped back. “What can I say? I’m

an honest person. If something seems morally repugnant to me, then I tell it like it is.”

“That’s no excuse for spewing insults and hurtful language. If you don’t like something, you can just ignore it.”

“Hard to ignore something when you’re forced to sit in the same classroom with it. And what’s so wrong with letting a person know that something they’ve *chosen* to do is grossing me out? It’s not like I’m insulting them for something they can’t change, like saying they’re too short, or their face is butt-ugly. It might be tough love, but Ushio needs to hear it. I’ve only got his best interests in mind.”

“Oh, quit lying. You don’t give a damn about her and you know it. All you care about is trying to scare her back into the person *you* wish she was through verbal abuse.”

“Hey, hey, hey! Simmer down, you two!” Mashima butted in.

“Come on, everyone,” said Shiina. “Let’s all just take a minute to calm down. Arisa, why don’t you order something to drink?”

“You two stay out of this,” Nishizono said, barking it out like an order. Mashima and Shiina both recoiled, ceding the table to her as she leaned forward in her seat, arms folded, to bring her face ever so slightly closer to mine. There was an eerie coldness in her eyes. “So let me guess—you think *you’ve* got Ushio’s best interests in mind, then? By only ever telling him exactly what he wants to hear? That won’t do him any good in the long run, you know. I mean, do you have *any* idea who the *real* Ushio is?”

“...What are you trying to say?” I asked, taking the bait.

“Ushio was about as popular as any guy can ever hope to get. Girls would flock to him without him ever having to lift a finger, and you bet your ass there’s not a girl in school who would’ve said no if he ever felt like asking them out. If he’d only stayed a boy, he would’ve had it made—his whole life laid out for him. A *good* life. But the moment he decided to be a girl, he threw all those blessings and privileges right out the window. And all that awaits him now if he keeps going down this road is a life of hardship and pain, where everyone keeps their distance and laughs at him for being a freak. And here you are telling me

you *want* that for him?”

I couldn't help but flinch a bit at the intensity of her gaze. I swallowed hard. “This ‘good life’ you’re describing would have been nothing but agony for Ushio. I only want for her what she wants for herself, because I respect her free will as an individual, regardless of what anyone else might say.”

“Don’t give me that motivational poster bullcrap,” said Nishizono. “The only thing you ‘respect’ is this image of yourself you’ve invented, where you’re being a really good friend to Ushio by telling him he’s so right and valid, when everyone with a functional brain can tell this is just a phase he needs to snap out of. And I find it hilarious that you mention ‘free will as an individual’ like this is some absolute identity of his, when people change their minds about things all the time! He’s only been like this for a few weeks! For all you know, the moment he meets a really cute girl, or has to go out and find a job in the real world, he might immediately regret that he ever stopped being a boy and realize this *wasn’t* the right decision for him after all. Just you wait.”

“I mean...yes, people do change their minds and have regrets about their decisions from time to time. But that’s just a part of life. Chances are, even if she did go back to being a boy, she’d have regrets about *that* eventually too. Obviously, you can’t know which choices you’ll end up regretting a few years down the line until it happens.”

“But you can usually make a pretty good educated guess, right? Like, obviously we all know that Ushio’s gonna have a much harder time in life if he stays on the path he’s headed down—same goes for anyone who leads a lifestyle different from the ones our society is built around. And let’s just be honest here: it’s a lot easier to change your mind than it is to change your biological sex. So even if you *don’t* completely identify with your so-called ‘assigned gender,’ I think it’s a whole lot smarter and healthier to just try to adjust your mindset to match the body you were born in rather than try to change it. Especially when you’re someone like Ushio, who was blessed with all the talents and good looks a boy could ask for. Or, what—are you telling me you know for a *fact* that he’ll never change his mind about wanting to be a girl in the future? Can you *really* say that for sure?”

I found myself at a loss for words. Even though I was sitting down, it felt like I

was standing on unsteady legs. I could feel sweat forming on my palms. The voices all around me were starting to sound louder and louder, and I wasn't sure how much more I could take. And only now did the flames of indignation truly ignite in Nishizono's eyes.

"If you don't have an answer to that," she said, "then do us all a favor and shut the hell up forever, you goddamn hypocrite."

"Arisa," Hoshihara interjected.

Nishizono slowly turned her gaze to face her, the animosity still burning brightly in her eyes. "What is it, Natsuki?"

"We get it, all right?" said Hoshihara, keeping her gaze trained firmly on Nishizono despite her body's trembling. "You don't have to start hurling insults at Kamiki-kun..."

The slightest hint of disappointment spread across Nishizono's face. "You actually agree with this idiot, don't you, Natsuki?"

"Don't get me wrong, I do get where you're coming from. I do think it's pretty smart to think about the long term too—not that I'd expect any less from you. But in this case...I think you just need to realize that this decision was the product of a *lot* of thought and consideration on Ushio-chan's part, and it took a whole *lot* of courage...so I don't think any of us have the right to say we know what the best decision for her is more than she does. And, well...I think it's a pretty incredible thing to actually start working toward being the version of yourself you really want to be. I want to support her in that."

A heavy silence hung over the table for a good while after that. Nishizono didn't even blink—she just kept her icy gaze trained firmly on Hoshihara, as though she were holding a knife to the other girl's throat. Yet Hoshihara refused to look away. She just sat there, upright and stiff as a board, perhaps prepared to endure the pain.

It was Nishizono who first broke the silence. "...I see," she said. Then, as if returning the knife to its sheath, she lowered her gaze and rose from her seat. Expressionless, she turned to face Hoshihara. "You're my friend, Natsuki, so I won't say any more than I already have. But *you*, Kamiki..."

This was the first time Nishizono had ever uttered my name.

She looked at me with stern, unfeeling eyes and said, “I will *never* condone what you’re doing. Period.”

And with that, she turned her back to me and left. Only after the door to the restaurant closed behind her did Hoshihara take a gasp of breath like she’d just surfaced from a dive into a deep body of water.

“God, that was scary...” she said, letting out a sigh of relief as her upper body fell flat against the table. Mashima and Shiina looked similarly exhausted now that the sheer tension of Nishizono’s presence had finally been relieved. I couldn’t blame them; for a while there, I was finding it pretty hard to breathe myself. Mashima laid back against the seat, while Shiina rubbed her temples.

The tempest in my heart had yet to subside. Nishizono’s words were reverberating inside my skull—and even though she’d long since left the building, my body still felt like it was in fight-or-flight mode and refused to calm down, despite there being no threat in sight.

Hoshihara looked up at me. “Are you all right, Kamiki-kun?” she asked. “You don’t look so good.”

“Oh, sorry. I’m fine,” I said, snapping out of it. “And thanks for having my back just now, by the way. I really appreciate that.”

“Hey, don’t mention it. And, um...try not to take anything Arisa said too personally, okay? She’s just kinda like that.”

“Yeah, I know... Thanks.” I nodded, but in all honesty, I was finding it awfully hard to shake this off. It felt like the very core of my being was wobbling unsteadily—like a tooth about to come loose and fall out. It seemed Hoshihara picked up on this, as she looked over at me with concern.

“She’s definitely got her own thoughts and feelings about things, and they just so happened to clash with ours this time around. I don’t think anything you said just now was wrong or objectionable at all. I really wouldn’t worry about it if I were you.”

This reassurance *did* lighten the load on my heart just a bit. But then I couldn’t help but wonder if *she* was just telling me what I wanted to hear now, like

Nishizono said I was doing to Ushio, and that made it hard to take Hoshihara's words at face value.

"But boy, I gotta say—that was pretty badass of you to go head-to-head with Arisa in her full-on mean-girl mode," said Mashima, flashing a sheepish smile. I assumed she, too, was just trying to make me feel better. "And yeah, like Nakki said, I wouldn't worry too hard about whether what you're doing is wrong or right. I mean, what's that thing we learned about in econ class the other day? The invisible hand? You know, the thing about how everyone benefits when people act in their own self-interest. So yeah, I think you should just focus on doing what *you* wanna do. I'm sure that'll be best for Ushio and probably the rest of us as well. Am I right, or am I right?" She turned to Shiina for validation.

"Hm? Oh, yes... Agreed."

"What's the matter? You don't sound too convinced."

"No, it's not that, I just..." Shiina looked at me, then at Hoshihara—then cast her eyes down at the table. "I was just thinking about what a strong-willed person Arisa is. Whenever she makes up her mind about something, it's like she's ready to die on that hill. Won't budge an inch regardless of what anyone says. And to be honest, I kind of admire that single-mindedness of hers. Obviously, I don't fully endorse her point of view or anything like that, and I'm still going to help Kamiki-kun out with this... But I don't think we should just shrug off what she was saying, either. There was some validity there."

"Yeah, of course," I replied with a self-admonishing nod. I knew Hoshihara and Mashima probably agreed with what Shiina was saying too, even if they wouldn't admit it outright. They must've recognized that there was a sound line of reasoning to Nishizono's argument, whether they agreed with it or not.

Suddenly, I wanted nothing more than to lie down flat, right here in the booth—and not just because it would mean resting my head in Hoshihara's lap. There were no ulterior motives behind it; I was just overcome with exhaustion. That had been an awful lot of mental stimulation and ideological debating in an awfully short period of time, and my brain felt like it was overheating just trying to process it all.

Then, out of nowhere, Hoshihara clapped her hands together—instantly

bringing the whole group right back to attention and snapping us out of our mutual haze. The three of us looked over at her.

“All right, let’s get the study session started!”

From there, we finally began our original objective for the evening: helping me study for the upcoming exams. The process was pretty basic overall: whenever I hit something I didn’t quite understand, I’d speak up, and the other three would do their best to explain it to me. Shiina mainly helped out with anything math-related. Her instruction style was a bit harsh for my tastes, but she still did a pretty good job of helping me quash any uncertainties I encountered. Mashima, meanwhile, told me more or less what questions and concepts I should expect on each of the exams—apparently, she could predict these sorts of things with startling accuracy based on the personalities of the teachers for their respective subjects, plus little hints they’d given during lectures. There were admittedly some minor issues and squabbles throughout this process, but in the end, I came away from the study session feeling like it had been highly beneficial.

We agreed to call it a night just a few minutes before eight. After settling up and exiting the restaurant, the four of us went our separate ways. I hopped on my bike and pedaled toward home. It was already completely dark outside.

Even after leaving the diner, Nishizono’s words continued to echo in my mind, like an obnoxious song or commercial jingle that had slipped through my ears and burrowed into my brain. The more I listened to her arguments on repeat, the more I felt that for every one that was fundamentally sound, there was another that was nothing more than selfish and irrational. Where did I really stand in all this? Who was I? Hoshihara, Mashima, Shiina, and Nishizono—each had their own points of view and clearly formed opinions. And then there was me, suspended in limbo—tangled in the threads of my own indecision. The thought made me feel pathetic and embarrassed.

I recalled Mashima’s words: *“I think you should just focus on doing what you wanna do.”*

What I wanted to do. But what did I want for myself at the end of the day?

And what was I really hoping to get out of this? As I contemplated these questions while riding my bike, a boy and girl around my age came walking down the sidewalk toward me—arm in arm, chatting animatedly. I assumed they were a couple. The boy wore a Tsubakioka High uniform, while the girl was in street clothes. Only when I was just a few meters away from them did I realize that it was Sera—and a girl I didn't recognize.

A few moments after I passed them by, I hit the brakes and looked back over my shoulder. My eyes hadn't deceived me: that tall, lanky stature and slightly longer-than-average hair—it was definitely Sera. Then who was this new girl he was with? She most definitely wasn't the same girl I'd seen him kiss outside the station a while back. That girl had long braids, and this one's hair barely reached her shoulders.

A disquieting apprehension filled my chest, followed by a sense of duty—a *need* to discern just what exactly Sera's relationship with this girl was. I couldn't contain my curiosity, so I hopped off my bike and pushed it on foot as I tailed them from afar. It seemed they were none the wiser, as neither turned back to look at me even once. Eventually, they walked into Tsubakioka Station, so I parked my bike on the shoulder of the road and followed them in. This was technically not an acceptable place to park one's bike, but I knew I'd probably lose sight of them in the time it took me to swing by the bike lot.

Despite the evening rush hour having passed, there were still quite a few people pouring through the ticket gate. The pair came to a stop in front of it and turned to face each other. Their conversation ground to a halt, and they simply gazed at one another wordlessly for a moment. There was a different air about them compared to everyone else around—like they were standing in a little pocket of reality cut off from the rest of the world, right there in the middle of the crowd.

I was struck by a powerful sense of *déjà vu*. And sure enough...

Sera leaned in and kissed the girl, right smack-dab on the lips. It was a passionate one this time, too—lasting no less than ten seconds.

When he finally pulled away, the girl had a dazed expression on her face. She smiled as she stumbled off through the ticket gate on unsteady feet. Sera turned around and walked back in my direction, the same shallow smirk as always plastered across his face. As he came closer, the two of us made eye contact for a moment—but he quickly averted his gaze as if I were a total stranger and walked right on past me.

“Hey,” I called after him. But Sera didn’t even turn around. So I chased after him and reached out a hand to grab him by the shoulder and yank him back. Finally, he turned around—or more specifically, *I* turned him around.

“What’s up?” he replied, still refusing to relinquish his smile. He didn’t seem like he was wearing it just to laugh things off as a defense mechanism, nor did he seem to be amused or intimidated by this sudden show of assertiveness from me. My best guess was that for Sera, this smirk was something of a poker face.

“You mind telling me what *that* was about?” I asked.

“Sorry? Not sure what you mean.”

“You kissed that girl just now, didn’t you?”

“Yeah. I did,” he readily admitted. “What about it?”

From his tone, it didn’t even sound like he was being defiant; it was more like he genuinely didn’t see what the problem was.

“Aren’t you already dating another girl?” I said. “And didn’t you already ask Ushio out on top of that?”

“I mean, yeah... Wait, how do you know—oh!” Sera’s eyes widened a bit. “Riiight, you’re that kid I talked to outside the mini-mart. Heh. Fancy running into you here again.” For some inexplicable reason, he curled his lips up into a cheery smile.

“Drop the act,” I snapped. “You can’t just grin your way out of this one. Are you actually trying to date Ushio or not? At first, I thought you were just two-timing her, but now I see you’re three-timing her... Or, hell—you probably have even *more* girlfriends too, don’t you? How deep does this rabbit hole go, huh? Do *any* of them know about each other?”

“Er, yeah, so I guess I can explain if you want. But why don’t we find a café or somethin’ to sit down in first? Might as well take a load off, right?”

“Just answer me already.”

It was only at this point that I realized just how angry I was right now. I was *not* about to sit down and break bread with this asshole. My instincts were telling me that if I ceded even an inch of the moral high ground to him, he’d try to take a mile.

“But you’re kinda makin’ a scene right now, bud,” said Sera. “Plus, we’re blocking traffic, so there’s a good chance a station worker might interrupt our convo and tell us to beat it anyway. And you wouldn’t want that, now, wouldja?”

I didn’t like it, but he had a point there. I *was* concerned about causing a public disturbance—but I also didn’t want to do exactly as this guy said. So I split the difference and pointed to a nearby bench just beside the ticket window. Sera nodded, then walked over and took a seat there. He crossed his legs and stacked his hands on one knee. He was still acting totally nonchalant about all of this. I did not join him on the bench, opting instead to stand directly in front of him, looking down.

“Well?” I said. “I’m waiting.”

“Sorry, what did you ask again? Whether I actually want to date Ushio or not?” said Sera, looking up at me from below. “Well, yeah. Of course I do. Kinda embarrassing to keep having to say it over and over, but I really, really like her, all right?”

“But you feel that way about a lot of girls, it seems.”

“Sure. I love that girl you saw just now, and that other girl you saw me with a while back, just as much as I love Ushio. If I didn’t, I wouldn’t still be dating them. Like, duh, right? Really don’t see what’s so weird about that.”

His lackadaisical attitude was starting to get on my nerves again.

“And *I* don’t see how *you* can think that’s perfectly normal,” I told him. “You can’t just date several girls at once and expect me to believe that you...I-love them all equally, all right? It’s not sustainable—something’s gotta give sooner

or later. Besides, I know you only asked Ushio out on the spur of the moment. What's to say you won't decide to dump her just as fast? If you're only looking to use her for a while, then break her heart, you should just take back your little confession and leave her be."

"You really do care a whole lot about Ushio, don'tcha?" said Sera. "If I didn't know any better, I'd think you were her legal guardian or somethin'."

"We're just friends. And I've known her for a really long time."

Sera's eyebrows twitched upward at this. "Oh, I get it now," he said. "You must be Sakuma, right? Yeah, Ushio's told me about you. Said you were quite the rascal back in elementary school, heh."

"That has nothing to do with what we're talking about right now. Now tell me: what's it gonna be?"

"Sorry, but I'm not taking anything back," Sera said decisively. "To me, it sounds like maybe you've gotten yourself trapped in the classic monogamy mindset that says everybody can only love one other person at a time. Which is why you refuse to accept that anyone could ever be in love with multiple people, like I am. Am I right?"

"Who or how many people you develop feelings for is your own prerogative," I said. "When it comes to actually dating them, that's a different story. I mean, imagine if Ushio found out you were dating several other girls aside from her... I don't think I need to explain to you how she'd feel about that."

"But see, I—"

"And don't give me some bullcrap about how you're 'gonna make sure she never finds out' or whatever. I've already caught you red-handed with two other girls, so that's not exactly a convincing argument."

"No, let me finish. I was *saying* that she already knows—because I told her."

"...I beg your pardon?" My eyes went wide.

"It's like you said—I kinda got the feeling she'd find out sooner or later, so I decided to just tell her straight-up yesterday. Told her I was dating other women too, explained the situation, and asked if she had a problem with that."

She said she appreciated my honesty and was totally cool with it. And that our little deal for her to go out with me if I rank first in our grade on the exams is still a go.”

I felt dizzy. “You’re lying.”

“Nope, it’s the truth. Don’t believe me? Why don’t I call her up right now and we can ask? Or, hell, you could do it yourself, if you really wanna.”

His manner of speaking and the smug grin on his face were about as shady as could be—but something told me he was telling the truth. And just thinking logically, it seemed pretty pointless for him to bother lying about something I could so easily debunk. Even so, I didn’t want to believe it. My brain rejected this explanation, and my ears didn’t want to hear it.

“Well, even then...it’s still not okay,” I said. “Even if she knows about it and gave you permission, it’s still infidelity, from a moral standpoint—and that’s not acceptable.”

Sera snorted out a laugh. “Not acceptable to who? *You*? I thought you said you two were just friends? What right do you have to say what is and isn’t acceptable when it comes to her relationships? Now *that’s* what I call weird.”

“Yeah, and what about the other girls you’re dating, huh? Something tells me you haven’t explained all of this to *them* yet.”

“Nope, I sure haven’t. But that has literally nothing to do with you. Hell, I’d argue that even in Ushio’s case, our relationship is none of your business. I’m only sitting here explaining this to you now as a simple good faith gesture, since you’re her friend and all.”



“Good faith gesture? L-Listen, you...” My voice trembled. My mouth was dry, and my tongue felt numb—I couldn’t get my words out properly.

“Well, I *do* get where you’re coming from, to be fair,” Sera went on. “Words like ‘infidelity’ and ‘two-timing’ don’t have very good connotations in our society. But if you ask me, that’s the weirdest part of all. Like, we’re taught from a very young age that we should try to make as many friends as possible, and that it’s a virtue to get along with everyone and love your neighbor and whatnot. Yet as soon as you start talking about dating and marriage, that massive group of people suddenly has to get funneled down to just one person. And even if you can’t make up your mind and end up falling in love with two or more people who all fully consent to it, there’ll always be people like *you* who come along and try to pass judgment, acting like it’s some morally effed-up thing to feel bad about. That’s pretty damn ridiculous, if you ask me. I’m just a new-age romantic, honestly—stuck living in a world that refuses to accept my lifestyle as valid.”

“...Romantic, my ass. Your argument’s as shallow as your personality. There’s just no way you’ll ever convince me you’re actually in l-love with three people at once, with none of them ever getting the short end of the stick.”

“I dunno what else to tell ya, bud. Not like there’s any way for me to prove to you how much I love ‘em individually, y’know? I mean, you’ve seen me with Ushio at school, right? So I’m sure you recognize how much effort I’m willing to put into a relationship.”

“That’s just because...you’re trying to butter her up so that she’ll like you.”

“Yeah, and? I don’t see what’s so wrong about that. You put in the effort to win someone over through continued positive interaction, hoping to get back a corresponding amount of affection in exchange. It’s a perfectly fair, perfectly healthy exchange. Everyone wins, and it doesn’t hurt anyone—except for maybe guys like you, who are just jealous of other people’s success.”

“No! Trust me, I’d never be jealous of a guy like *you*. I just care a lot about Ushio, that’s all...”

“Yeah, and so do I. But not just Ushio. I care about Reika-chan, and Ami-chan, and Sora-chan too... Heck, I’d take a bullet for any one of ‘em.”

I didn't know who these people were, but I could assume based on context that these were probably the names of Sera's other girlfriends... *Wait*.

"...Hang on," I said. "Did you say *four* names just now?"

"Yeah? They're the four girls I'm in love with. Reika-chan's already graduated from high school and works part-time. Ami-chan's a freshman who lives in the next town over, and she loves going café-hopping. Sora-chan's still in junior high, but she's studying hard to get accepted into Tsubakioka High as we speak. Ushio's... Well, I guess you already know enough about Ushio."

"Hang on... You're out here preying on *junior high schoolers*, even?"

"I don't really like your word choice. I'm not 'preying on' anyone. I'm dating her just like I would date any other girl, treating her with total respect. Love her from the bottom of my heart."

I was starting to feel like I might puke. My head was swirling like crazy. My teeth were chattering even though it wasn't cold at all, and my hands were sweating profusely. I licked my dry, cracked lips and—with all the revulsion in my heart—said only:

"...You're disgusting."

Sera didn't appear to be angry or sad about this judgment. He didn't seem fazed at all, in fact—judging from the burst of laughter that bellowed out from his throat.

"Yeesh!" said Sera. "That's a little harsh, don'tcha think? Y'know, you really shouldn't judge other people just because your little closed-minded brain can't understand them."

And he just kept laughing as though this really were the most amusing thing in the world. All I could do was stand there in silence. I felt like no matter what I said at this point, it would just make *me* seem pathetic and futile if I let him provoke me into continuing with this conversation any further. Eventually, though, he did grow tired of laughing at whatever he found so funny.

He wiped the tears from the corners of his eyes as he looked up at me with a great big grin on his face and said through his snickers, "So? Got anything else you wanna say to me, big guy?"

In the end, I'd just walked away without another word, unable to even think of a suitable comeback. My brain still felt like a pile of mush for a long time afterward, and even after I made it back home, I couldn't think straight for a while. As I lay there wrapped up in my thin comforter, listening to my own heartbeat reverberate through my pillow, a dark desire quietly began to burn within me.

I would not let Sera get first in our grade. Not just for Ushio's sake—but because my own pride now demanded it. More than anything, I just didn't want to lose.

Not to *him*.

It was Wednesday at last—the day before our end-of-semester exams were set to begin. As soon as fourth period got out, I grabbed my printout and headed over to the staff room. I knew it was technically off-limits to students during the exam period, but it wasn't so strictly forbidden that you couldn't knock and call out to the teacher you had business with from the doorway. I let the teacher nearest the entrance know that I needed to give something to Ms. Iyo, and he went and let her know. Shortly after, she came trotting out from the back of the room, her long ponytail swaying to and fro.

"Here's my post-graduation plan," I said, handing her the printout. "Sorry I took so long to submit it."

It wasn't that I was unsure what I wanted to do with my life after high school. I was just so preoccupied studying for the exams that I genuinely forgot to turn it in. Ms. Iyo accepted the questionnaire, gave it a quick once-over, and gave a satisfied nod.

"Yep," she said. "This seems like a pretty respectable path. But honestly, I think you could shoot for a slightly better college, even. And it seems like you've been taking your studies a lot more seriously lately, so I'm sure your grades will only go up from here."

I paused to stifle a yawn. "...Hm? Oh, yeah... Good point."

“You seem a little tired,” Ms. Iyo said, forcing a smile. She wasn’t wrong.

On Monday—after the study session with Hoshihara and my encounter with Sera—I resolved to increase studying hours even more. For the past two nights, I’d been glued to my desk until four in the morning, at which point I would sleep like a log until seven. This meant I’d been running on just three hours of sleep, which was obviously not enough—so yes, I was feeling a smidge tired, to put it lightly.

It was a necessary evil to prevent Sera from getting first in our grade, though. Which may have been exactly the motivation I needed to stop being a fence-sitter and start being a go-getter, funnily enough. Not that I had any intention of being grateful to Sera for inspiring that change in me, not even for a nanosecond.

“By the way,” said Ms. Iyo, changing the subject when I failed to give a proper response, “how are things going with you and Ushio? Pretty well, I hope?”

“Sorry?”

“You two are pretty close, aren’t you? I’ve seen you together an awful lot lately.”

“Oh, right... Yeah, I dunno, really. We’ve definitely started talking pretty regularly again, after her transition and everything, but I dunno if I’d say we’re *that* close...”

To be honest, it was a little hard to say one way or the other. Sure, we probably looked like great friends to an outside observer, but I wouldn’t say we were really communicating like good friends should, for instance. I kind of got the impression that Ushio was still keeping a lot of her true feelings close to her chest, and here I was, conducting this secret operation behind her back to ensure she didn’t date this other guy. It felt like a bit of a stretch to claim that we were actually close friends at the end of the day.

Ms. Iyo gave an awkward chuckle. “Yeah, I figured it might be a little bit complicated. But I get it. Seventeen’s a pretty rough age, after all.”

“I’m only sixteen,” I told her.

“Oh, spare me the technicality. Girls don’t like boys who have to correct them

all the time, you know.”

I didn't come here for relationship advice, lady, I thought to myself.

Ms. Iyo folded her arms and looked at me more seriously. “Well, I’d still say you’re doing a pretty good job. Thanks to you and Natsuki, Ushio’s finally starting to smile again. Honestly, we really need to have a better support system in place for people like her, but alas. Lots of stubborn old coots here, I’m afraid...”

She said this last part in a hushed voice so that the other teachers in the room wouldn’t hear. Even at such a low volume, I detected the heartache in her voice. I couldn’t imagine the sorts of battles she’d had to fight to afford Ushio even the most basic of accommodations.

“...Sounds like you’ve got your work cut out for you,” I said.

“You can say that again. I’ve already got my hands full prepping for exams, and summer homework, and all sorts of different sports and club events and whatnot, but now I’ve got a whole new can of worms to deal with, having to always go to bat for one of my students just to make sure she’s getting the support she needs. It’s backbreaking work, I tell ya. If I didn’t love it so much, I’d have quit a *long* time ago.”

She let out a little sigh, and her eyes crinkled as she donned a wistful expression.

“...Ushio’s such a good-natured kid compared to so many teens nowadays. So unimaginably gifted, yet still as humble as they come, and always thinking of others. But I also know that’s exactly the type of person who always keeps their own personal struggles bottled up inside where no one else can see them, so I’d been trying to pay special attention to that... Never would have guessed those struggles were gender-related, though. People really are tough to read, aren’t they?”

“Yeah... That’s for sure,” I said softly.

We just stood there in silence for a little while after that—until Ms. Iyo slapped her forehead at some sudden recollection. “Aw, shoot! My noodles! We’ve been talking so long, I completely lost track of time!”

“Wait. You’re having instant noodles for lunch?” I asked.

“Yes, and?”

“Awfully Spartan of you.”

“Oh, hush up. I used to make my own lunches every day, you know. I don’t think you understand just how much work it is getting up early every single morning just to—”

“Your noodles are gonna get soggy.”

“Wow, I feel like you’re totally just brushing me off now...but whatever. Fine, I’ll go back to my work. You keep doing what you’re doing, Kamiki—just don’t overdo it.”

“I won’t, thanks.”

I walked out of the staff room and back down the corridor. The second-floor hallway of the special-purpose building was utterly deserted, but the clamor of students from the main school building next door could still be heard. During my walk, I thought again about how hard Ms. Iyo must have it, given what she’d implied about Ushio being a subject of contention among the faculty as well. I could probably guess who a few of the “stubborn old coots” she mentioned might be—and while I couldn’t imagine exactly what kind of quarreling had taken place, I was pretty certain they weren’t making things easy for Ms. Iyo. I hoped she wouldn’t work herself into an early grave from all the stress.

I took a left around the corner to make my way across the skybridge back into the main building—and found myself bumping right into Ushio. We both vocalized our mild surprise at this chance encounter, stopping dead in our tracks. She was alone at the moment, and as my mouth hung open, waiting for my brain to deliver its next words, I happened to notice that she was *also* holding a printout in her hand.

“You submitting your post-graduation plan too?” I asked.

“Uh-huh,” she said. “Is that what you just did?”

“Yeah. On my way back now.”

“Gotcha. Dang, too bad we couldn’t go together. If only I hadn’t gotten held

up by Sera before I could leave the classroom.”

Sera. My mood tanked upon hearing her casually mention him like he was such a close friend. I thought back on my encounter with him two days prior. I still hadn’t asked Ushio to confirm that he’d really told her about him seeing other girls, and if she’d really told him she didn’t mind. Mainly because I was afraid I might have to accept that it was true.

“Well, see you around,” she said, turning to walk down the hall.

“Wait, Ushio,” I called out, almost reflexively, before she could take another step. She acquiesced, stopping to wait for my next words with a curious look on her face. I just stood there looking her in the eye, honestly a little disoriented by my own actions.

“What’s up?” she asked, a hint of concern in her voice.

“...Sera’s not a good dude, you know. He’s already dating several other girls.”

The words left my mouth of their own accord, ignoring all forethought and pretext. But I didn’t feel like I’d misspoken. Far from it; I was left feeling satisfied, like I’d said exactly what I came here to say. Yet somehow, Ushio didn’t seem fazed at all.

“I know.”

A rush of pain shot through my head like blunt force trauma. I refused to believe it. I prayed there’d still been some misunderstanding here.

“Wait, so then...did you actually tell him you’d still go out with him, as long as he meets your condition?” I asked.

“Yes, I did. Why, did he tell you that himself?”

I nodded—though it was hard, with how shaken I felt.

It was exactly as Sera had said: even though the jury was still out on whether they’d end up dating, Ushio was indeed aware of Sera’s infidelity, and she was expressly okay with it. For whatever reason, the word “complicit” popped into my mind, and I couldn’t look straight at her anymore. It felt like the image of her character I’d kept on a pedestal in my mind had been vandalized—defaced. But when I turned my head away, Ushio took a step closer and tried to look me

in the face. From between the gaps in her bangs, her ash-gray eyes looked earnest and imploring.

“And what did you think of that, Sakuma?” she asked.

“What do I think?” I said. “I think you need to stay the hell away from that guy. He’s not right in the head. I mean, who the hell goes around asking out other girls when they’re already dating someone? Anyone with half a brain can tell that’s not okay.”

“Yeah, that’s pretty much how I felt about it when he first told me. But the thing about Sera is, well... I can tell from the way he treats me and looks out for me that he cares about me quite a bit. I guess I decided I’d just turn a blind eye to the ‘other girlfriends’ thing.”

“And you’re just...okay with that?”

“Sure. You may be right about him not being a very good person overall—but at least he’s upfront with me about his intentions, and he treats me like a human being, so I don’t have to overthink things around him. That’s better than nothing.”

I clenched my fists. “Listen to yourself. Is that really the bar? Why would you bother going out with someone you don’t even like? That’s just a waste of time. Besides, you know he’s just gonna lose interest and start chatting up some other girl in no time. You should just say no while you still have the chance.”

“I don’t really care if he loses interest in me. Honestly...I feel like the relationship experience would do me some good, whether it lasts or not.”

“But—”

“Why are you getting so angry about this, Sakuma?”

This calm, collected observation shut me right up. *I’m not angry*, I wanted to say—but I knew this unpleasant emotion lurking in my chest all too well, and the only word for it was anger.

But *why* was I angry? I didn’t know. Or maybe I *did* know, deep down, but my subconscious was beating around the bush—trying desperately not to convert this feeling into words. I traced the corners of my mind like a lost child groping

his way along the wall down a dark, foreboding hallway. What was I *really* trying to do right now? What was the outcome I was hoping for here? Wielding these questions like a pickax, I tried to excavate my truest, basest of feelings. Until at last, I struck a vein, and arrived at the core of the issue.

“I just...don’t want to let him have you,” I said.

It was possessiveness, plain and simple. Ushio and I went way back. Even though we’d had a falling out for a few years, she was still one of my best friends. I didn’t want to see this random scrub swoop in and snatch her away. That was ultimately all this was about. I didn’t know if there were any romantic feelings mixed in there or not, but I *did* know the thought of Sera and Ushio hitting it off didn’t sit well with me. This simple fact was undeniable.

My face was so red with embarrassment that I felt like it was about to ignite. I wanted to run away and pretend this conversation never happened. Ushio pressed her lips together tightly and clutched at the front of her shirt. Then she brought her teary-eyed, impassioned gaze up to meet mine.

“Okay,” she said. “What if I promised not to go out with Sera? What would you...do differently then?”

I swallowed hard.

“I mean, I’d...”

No more words came.

I heard the sound of Ushio’s post-graduation plan crinkling slightly in her grasp. If it hadn’t been so quiet in this particular hallway, I probably wouldn’t have heard it. But in that tiny, nigh-imperceptible sound, I sensed an unfathomable disappointment.

“...You don’t have to feed me a line. I already know you like Natsuki,” Ushio said, smiling so softly and sweetly that it pained my chest. She gently cast her gaze down at the ground. “Sorry. I really need to go turn this in. I’ll see you later.”

With that, she breezed past me toward the staff room, not even giving me a chance to respond.

“Ushio,” I said, calling after her. She stopped but didn’t turn around. “I’m...I’m just gonna do what I can for now.”

“...Whatever makes you happy, I guess,” she said, then continued walking down the hall. I watched her walk away, with what looked to me like slumped shoulders, for a while before heading back to the classroom. Tomorrow, our exams would finally begin.

Thursday had arrived, the first day of final exams. I made sure to get to school a bit earlier than usual. I stifled a yawn as I walked into class, where everyone else seemed to be extremely on edge. Most of my classmates were already in their seats with textbooks open, many of them getting in some last-minute study sessions with their friends—testing each other on English vocab and whatnot.

I noticed Ushio and Hoshihara among them, with the latter standing beside the desk of the former as they did one last review of the test material together. I turned my head a little further and saw Mashima, Shiina, and the ever-conspicuous Nishizono, back at school now that her informal suspension was over. She glared at her textbook with a sour look on her face—but not paying Ushio any mind, I noticed. I assumed there’d be no more harassment there from her, after all that had happened.

I sat down at my desk and opened my notebook, trying my best to cram just a few more English vocab words that seemed likely to appear on the exam. Right then, I heard someone walk up beside me. I looked up and saw that it was Hasumi.

“Someone’s fired up to take this test, I see,” he said, his face as placid as always.

“You’ve got that right,” I replied. “Definitely never studied this hard for a test before. Trying to shoot for a hundred percent, if possible.”

“Lemme guess—you just wanna stick it to Sera, don’tcha?”

“No, man. It’s not about that...”

It was totally about that, but I sure as hell wasn’t going to admit it.

“Well, not like it matters to me anyway,” Hasumi said apathetically as he shrugged his shoulders. For whatever reason, this sort of rubbed me the wrong way.

“Y’know, man... No offense, but sometimes, I can’t tell if you just literally have no interest in other people.”

“Sure I do. Probably more than most, to be honest. But I also don’t have much desire to get personally involved with other people’s drama, y’know?”

“Look but don’t touch, huh? Guess you’re more of a people-watcher, then.”

“Yeah, maybe. I just kinda like being a fly on the wall. An invisible eavesdropper who can receive transmissions but can’t send any himself.”

“You make it sound like you wanna be a voyeuristic ghost or something...”

“I mean, can you blame me? Human relationships are messy, man. Who wants to get deeply involved with a buncha different people?”

I nodded sagely. This seemed like the perfect summation of Hasumi’s personal philosophy. He was right, though—human relationships *were* messy. I’d learned that all too well over the past few days. Anytime you got involved with people, all sorts of complex emotions came into play, and things could get real confusing real quick.

Until that fateful day—when Hoshihara and I traded contact info after school, and then I ran into Ushio wearing her sister’s uniform in the park that night—I’d never really had to stress myself out so hard about other people, and who liked or hated whom. In a way, life had been a lot easier and simpler back then—just as a student going about his life, with no drama to worry about. And yet...I’d never once caught myself thinking that I wished I could go back to those days. Not even for a moment.

The warning bell rang, and the English teacher came walking into class, instructing us to clear out the insides of our desks as everyone returned to their own seats. Then he handed stacks of upside-down exams to the students sitting in the front row, warning everyone not to turn them over until he gave the signal. Once all of the exam material had been passed out, the classroom fell silent. It was so quiet that even the littlest of sounds—a pencil rolling across a

desk, someone clearing their throat, a chair creaking—echoed loudly through the room. Then at last, the first-period bell rang.

“All right,” he said. “You may begin.”

I ran my mechanical pencil across the page, swiftly yet methodically making my way through each question. English was all about memorization, at least in my mind. I wanted to fill in as many answers as I could while my memory was still fresh.

I got off to a pretty good start—so much so that it was kind of exhilarating. I didn’t need much time to think at all for each question, so it felt like my hand was moving faster than my eyes could even read them. It actually felt pretty fun, although maybe my lack of sleep was warping my emotions somewhat. I could feel myself getting excited as the corners of my mouth curled up, and the tip of my lead tapped out a staccato rhythm against my desk through the paper.

In less than fifteen minutes, I made it all the way to the long-form reading comprehension section. There hadn’t been a single question that had stumped me so far, but I knew I’d have to slow it down and put some thought into my answers for this more involved portion of the test. As I traced the tip of my pencil along each sentence, I translated them in my head in real time. I wouldn’t say I was reading fluently, *per se*, but I definitely managed to grasp the overall meaning of the passage.

It was an account of some old factory worker explaining how the automobile plant he was working at started making a large number of production and manufacturing mistakes, so they implemented a ton of checks and balances to prevent those errors from happening again. But then they ended up putting so much weight and importance on these quality assurance procedures that it put too much pressure on the workers in charge of said procedures, which led to an increase in production mistakes due to human error.

The key takeaways of the passage seemed to be that mistakes were bound to happen no matter what you did, and that while it was important to mitigate them as much as you could, there was such a thing as being so overly prepared that it only invited even more accidents. The story itself was pretty mundane,

and certainly nothing to write home about, but the simple act of translating it for myself made it feel weirdly more compelling and significant. I wondered if it was for the same reason that an objectively mediocre meal always seemed to taste a whole lot better when you cooked it for yourself.

I filled in the blank spaces on the answer sheet, including bits of my own personal interpretation in my answers. I felt that I understood the passage quite well, so none of the questions were particularly difficult to answer. When every blank was filled, I set my pencil down, satisfied to see that there hadn't been a single question I hadn't understood. *Could I actually get a perfect score on this, maybe?* I could feel my confidence surging in my chest. I spent the rest of the allotted time until the bell rang reviewing my answers, just to be safe.

The next exams after that were chemistry and classic literature, both of which I also finished quite easily and with time to spare. Again, I wasn't sure if I'd actually aced them or not, but I was pretty certain I'd at least scored higher than a 90 on both. They were practically identical in structure to the previous year's exams, and a lot of the questions were similar as well. I owed Mashima big-time for that.

There were only three subjects scheduled for today, which meant I'd successfully made it through the first day of exams. All that was left now was to head home and study hard for tomorrow's tests. I noticed the overall vibe of the classroom was one of defeat; most of my classmates seemed mentally exhausted, and a fair few were even laid out flat across their desks, sighing in misery and lament.

"Goddamn it..."

"I'm so screwed, man."

"Ugh, I didn't know *any* of that stuff."

"Hey, what'd you put for that one question?"

Such were the voices of the broken and the battered all around me.

"Congrats on making it through day one, Kamiki-kun," said Hoshihara, carving a path through the bodies as she came over to commend my efforts. I could feel

my depleted stamina being replenished ever so slightly.

“Hey, you too,” I told her. “How do you think you did?”

“Yeahhh, so about that... Aha ha ha ha...”

Her hollow, uneasy laughter told me everything I needed to know. It was not the laugh of a victor, that much was for sure—so I decided not to pry any further.

“Anyway, forget about me,” she said, pivoting. “What about you?”

“Oh, I’d say I did pretty well. Think I just about aced all three subjects today.”

“Hey, awesome! That’s a really good sign, I’d say.”

Her smile was genuine this time, and her enthusiasm made me feel pretty happy, too. Then I realized that her happiness was at the thought of Sera not being able to get first in our grade, and not actually related to me, Sakuma Kamiki, or my achievements, and that made me feel pretty empty inside. Even so, I *also* shared in her desire to prevent Sera from going out with Ushio, so I figured I should just stop overthinking it and be happy with her for the time being.

“Tomorrow’s math, right?” she said. “Think you’ll be ready for it?”

“Yeah, I’ll be fine. Pretty sure I’ve got a handle on most of it, thanks to that study session a few days ago.”

“Nice, nice. Let’s finish strong, then!”

But Hoshihara’s rousing cheer was overpowered by another, much louder voice walking in the classroom door.

“Good work today, everybody!”

I looked over, and sure enough, it was Sera—though this was the first time he’d stopped by our classroom today, come to think of it. I watched him make his way down the aisle toward Ushio’s desk, commiserating with and congratulating my other classmates for making it through the first day of exams. Eventually, we made eye contact.

“Oh, hey,” he said. “If it isn’t Sakuma. Huh, I didn’t know you and Ushio were

in the same class.”

Had he *really* not noticed until now?

Sera changed course and came over to talk to me instead. None of my classmates seemed to think anything of this, given Sera’s propensity for chatting up and being friendly with literally anyone.

“Grats on finishing the tests today,” he said. “Stick of gum?”

“No, I’m fine, thanks...”

“Huh? Why not? It’s pretty good gum.” He pulled a stick from his pocket, unwrapped it from the foil, and popped it in his mouth. After chewing it a few times, he turned to face Hoshihara instead. “So how’d *you* do on the tests, Natsuki-chan?”

“Oh, yeah... I don’t think I did so hot, honestly,” she said, laughing awkwardly.

“Really? Huh. Want me to tutor you, then?” he casually suggested.

I did a double take. Obviously, this could *not* be allowed to occur.

“S-so how’d *you* do, Sera?” I asked before Hoshihara could even answer. I knew she’d probably just turn him down politely even without my help, but I didn’t want to take any chances with him trying to coax her into anything. Sera’s eyes widened a bit at this unexpected interruption, but his carefree smile resurfaced soon enough.

“Aw, it was a piece of cake,” he said. “But I mean, of course it was, right? I’m shootin’ for the number-one spot, y’know! And I always get what I set my mind to!”

“...You sound awfully sure of yourself.”

“Well, yeah. Went to a pretty prestigious high school before transferring here, after all. Anyway, you keep workin’ at it, Sakuma. Who knows—if you’re lucky, you might even come in second place.”

And with that last snide remark, Sera turned and walked over to Ushio’s desk. I didn’t enjoy the feeling I was left with in his wake—like I was being totally underestimated.

“You can do it, Kamiki-kun...” Hoshihara said, her voice a quiet whisper but full of strength regardless. I nodded adamantly in response. My will to beat Sera was reignited, and my exhausted brain was jump-started with a jolt of energy once more. As soon as I got home, I would hit the books yet again. Tomorrow was the big one: math. I needed to memorize those formulas once and for all so I could walk in fully prepared tomorrow morning. It was time to show that punk what I could really do.

Sadly, despite my intense burst of motivation, I awoke the next morning in pretty bad shape for taking exams. Perhaps it was that very burst of motivation the night before that was to blame—I’d stayed up late having a staring contest with my textbook before eventually passing out at my desk. As a result, my body felt heavier than lead, and each and every one of my muscles ached.

But it wasn’t just that. I also had a massive headache, and my throat was sore. And when I went downstairs on wobbly legs to take my temperature, it came back as 38.7 degrees Celsius. I’d officially caught myself a summer cold. Under normal circumstances, I would have just called in sick and taken the day off school, but I had to power through today and tomorrow, at the very least.

Or, wait... Can I take the day off, actually? I forgot what the procedure was if you happened to be sick on the day of a major test. Would they just let me take the exams by myself once I got over it? If so, then I might actually like to stay home today. My body felt heavy and sore, and I’d prefer to be in peak condition given what was at stake.

After hemming and hawing a while, I phoned the school. While I wasn’t sure if there’d be any faculty members in the office at this hour, one of the freshman teachers thankfully picked up. They explained to me the concept of “estimated marks.” If you were absent the day of the final exam for a given subject, your exam score would be derived from the average of all of your tests in that class up to that point—though depending on whether you had a doctor’s note, or your overall transcripts, you might not even qualify for that much. Put simply, if I took today off, there was no way I’d get a 90 or above on the math exam. If it was based solely on my prior math tests, I’d probably only get a 50 or 60. And I probably wouldn’t do much hotter on the other subjects, either.

Those numbers were simply unacceptable—they'd completely disqualify me from ranking first in our grade. I hung up the phone, downed some cold medicine, and got ready to go to school.

I hoped getting some fresh air in my lungs might make me start to feel at least a little bit better, but unfortunately life was not so convenient. In fact, by the time I made it to school, I was completely out of breath, to the point that even making my way up the stairs was a bit of a struggle. I shambled my way into the classroom and found my chair, the sounds of the early morning hustle and bustle blaring like a loudspeaker directly into my brain. I pulled out my math textbook and tried flipping through the pages a little, but my headache and general languidness made it impossible to absorb even a single practice problem.

Could I really focus on the exam in this condition? The anxiety was starting to twist my stomach in knots—and to make matters worse, I was starting to feel nauseous, too. Maybe I should have gone without breakfast after all. Why did I have to go and catch a cold *now*, of all times? Or perhaps that question answered itself: I'd been so stressed out and sleep-deprived trying to study for these exams the past several days that I'd pushed my body way past its usual capacity, probably weakening my immune system in the process, and that negligence had manifested itself in the form of a cold. In which case, I only had myself to blame for this—but it was too late to regret it now. I just needed to psych myself up and focus on math, so that...

"...-kun? Hello, Kamiki-kun?"

I jerked my head up with a gasp. Hoshihara was standing right beside my desk, looking down at me with concern.

"A-are you okay?" she asked. "You kinda looked like a zombie for a minute there."

"Oh..." I said. "Yeah, sorry. Feeling a little under the weather..."

"Wait, you are? Did you take your temperature?"

"Yeah, I did. Earlier this morning."

Predictably, she asked what my temperature was, and when I confessed that it was 38 degrees, her eyes shot wide open.

“Okay, yeah, no,” she said. “You should really be at home resting.”

“Sorry, no can do. I’ll lose way too many points on the exam.”

“I know, but...”

“I’ll be fine, don’t worry. Just gotta power through. Besides, tomorrow’s the last day, right? I’m sure I can make it until—”

Before I could finish, my nose started running. I snorted, inhaling the snot back into my nostrils. It seemed my cold was only going to keep getting worse—not that I couldn’t have guessed as much after taking my temperature. Hoshihara furrowed her eyebrows upward with genuine worry.

“...Are you sure you’re not overdoing it, Kamiki-kun?”

“Nah, I’m fine... Ha ha ha,” I said, trying to shrug off her concerns.

Immediately, her expression turned from worried to determined as she told me to wait a second and rushed back to her desk. She dug around inside her bookbag to retrieve a couple of things, then brought them back over to me and dropped the items into my hands: three pocket tissues and an individually wrapped Milky-brand candy drop.

“Here, take these,” she said. “Not sure they’ll get you very far...but still better than nothing at all, I figured.”

I felt a pang of warmth in my heart. “Thanks, Hoshihara. I don’t carry tissues around with me, so it’s much appreciated. And thanks for the candy, too.”

Right after I got done thanking her, though, her expression went somber, and her gaze dropped to the ground.

“Sorry... Really wish I could do more, especially since it was me who put you up to this... But seriously, if it gets too hard to keep going, I want you to stop and rest. Your health is more important than any of this stupid drama.”

“Hoshihara...”

Damn, she’s gonna make me start crying. I wasn’t emotionally equipped to

handle such sweet words in my time of weakness. Even if that sweetness had more to do with her appreciation of what I was doing for her in regards to Ushio than anything, that didn't detract from how happy it made me feel. And right now, that alone was good enough for me. I tried my best to repay her kindness with a smile.

"I'll be fine," I said. "And it's not just for Ushio, or because you asked me to. I want to come in first for *me*, too. So I'm gonna see this through to the end, no matter what."

"...All right," she said. "Then I'll get out of your hair and look forward to seeing those results. But I mean it when I say you better not overdo it!"

She smiled back at me, then returned to her desk.

All right. Time to do this thing.

The final exam of the day—world history—was over. And as soon as I handed my answer sheet to the person sitting in front of me, I crumpled in an exhausted heap like one of those collapsible puppet toys.

G-god, my head is killing me... That cold medicine isn't working at all...

My back was slick with sweat, yet freezing cold despite the summer cicadas chirping in the heat outside. My runny nose had gotten worse too; if it hadn't been for those tissues Hoshihara had lent me, I'd have been stuck sniffing throughout the entire day. My throat was also getting more and more swollen, to the point that even swallowing was a painful experience. As such, I wasn't really in the mood to do much talking—so when Hoshihara came over to ask how I was doing, I kept the conversation to just a few brief sentences, then packed up to leave. All I wanted to do right now was hurry up and get home. Right as I lifted my heavy hips from my chair, however, I made eye contact with Ushio, who looked as though she had something she wanted to say to me. But right now, I didn't have the energy to talk to her or even ponder what that gaze of hers might mean, so I just ignored it and made my way out of the classroom.

Final exams, day three. Despite making a point of going to bed early

yesterday, my condition showed no sign of improving. If anything, my fever had worsened. My skin was greased with sweat, and my vision was blurry from the excess moisture that was practically being flushed from my eyeballs. I hadn't been this sick in years. I looked so bad that even my bratty little sister Ayaka seemed concerned, asking if I was seriously planning on going to school today as I was getting ready.

Of course I was going—it was the last day of exams, after all. As long as I could make it through today, I could take the whole rest of the semester off if I really wanted to. I was prepared to give it everything I had and make one last push. I downed some more cold medicine even though I knew it probably wouldn't help, then slid on my shoes and headed out the door. Immediately, I was assailed by the merciless glare and heat. My eyes were stinging from the inside out, and my body felt so abruptly heavy that it was as if the harsh rays of sunlight washing over me had manifested as real, solid beams that actively weighed me down.

I wished I could ask for a ride to school, but my parents left for work well before Ayaka and I left the house, so I had no choice but to tough it out. I dragged my bicycle out from where it was parked near the front door and set off in the direction of school. The pedals felt heavy under my feet. My mind was hazy. Something told me that if I were to stop pedaling, I'd just fall over sideways right there in the middle of the street, bike and all. But I wrung out every last bit of stamina I could muster and somehow made it to the gates of Tsubakioka High regardless. I trudged through the entryway, up the stairs, and into class. After I made it to my desk, I sort of zoned out for a little while, until eventually I was snapped out of it by a sudden clattering sound. The person sitting in front of me had dropped their mechanical pencil on the floor. Our physics teacher walked over and picked it up for them so that they wouldn't have to take their eyes off their own desk.

Wait a minute. The test's already started...?

I jolted upright in my chair—right as my memories came jolting back to me as

well. In an instant, I remembered the teacher coming into class, handing out the tests, and the bell ringing to mark the start of the exam. I felt a cold sweat trickle down from my scalp.

Oh god, oh god, oh god. In my fatigue, I'd let my mind wander off into another dimension, and now the physics exam had already begun. I looked down at my desk; my answer sheet was completely blank. I looked over at the clock; it had already been fifteen minutes since the test started. My memories of that time were so indistinct, though, that I wondered if I'd nodded off for a while with my eyes open.

I hurriedly scribbled my name down and got to work on the exam, the grip of my mechanical pencil growing slippery with sweat. Just reading the text of the long-form scenario problems felt painful when my ability to focus was so spent after two near-all-nighters. My brain kept clicking off momentarily in the middle of reading a sentence, and then I'd lose my place in the passage. It was extremely frustrating, not even being able to get the question into my skull to consider it. In my impatience, I was writing more forcefully than usual, and my pencil lead kept snapping.

Only ten minutes remained before the end of the test, and I hadn't even finished half of it. I slapped my cheeks with both hands. I kept filling in my answers, one after another, without even stopping to blink. With my nose clogged, I started breathing heavily out my mouth like some deranged wild animal.

Only one minute left. I filled in my answer to the final question right as the bell rang. I passed my answer sheet forward and collapsed on my desk.

Ugh. I feel disgusting.

This was the sentiment that kept repeating in my head over and over throughout the day, which I noticed as I was filling in my answers for the geography exam the next period. The headache and nausea refused to abate. My test papers kept clinging to my arm from the sweat. I could almost taste the toast and banana I'd had for breakfast churning and revolving in my gut. I felt

sick to my stomach. My mind just kept repeating the same sentiment over and over with different words. I felt faint. Queasy. Disgusting.

“You’re disgusting.”

All of a sudden, I could hear Nishizono’s voice ringing in my ears. Why was I remembering *that* whole debacle right now? After all, there was a big difference between using the word “disgusting” to describe a gross feeling or thing and using it like she had—that is, to paint Ushio as some sort of freak, or sick in the head for wearing a skirt.

It was a pretty messed-up thing to say, honestly. I mean, what was so disgusting about wanting to present yourself as who you really were inside? It wasn’t like she even looked bad in it, either—she totally passed for a girl in spite of the body and voice she’d been born with. And she wasn’t hurting anyone, so it wasn’t as if she were morally repugnant either. Clearly, Nishizono either needed to get her eyes checked or try meeting someone like Sera to update her frame of reference.

Now *there* was someone who *actually* deserved to be morally rebuked. The guy was already dating several girls at once, including a junior high schooler, and now he was trying to get his grubby little paws on Ushio as well. He was practically the dictionary definition of a sleazebag. I couldn’t comprehend how Nishizono could possibly call someone like *Ushio* “disgusting” when people like *Sera* existed.

Or, wait a minute. Didn’t I literally call Sera disgusting to his face, the same way Nishizono did to Ushio? Is it possible that Nishizono feels the same way about her as I do about him?

After the geography exam was done, there was a brief break period before the next exam began. This would be our *final* final—and the subject was contemporary Japanese. Once I made it through this, my long, grueling journey would finally reach its end. Yet I couldn’t get that strange uncertainty from the previous hour off my mind. It had stuck to my brain and spread its roots like mold, forcing its way into my every thought no matter how hard I tried to

forget. And I knew the only way to exterminate these invasive thoughts was to find a satisfactory answer to my primary question. I tried my best to think it through with my fever-ridden brain.

Were Nishizono and I “disgusted” in the same way by Ushio and Sera, respectively? No, surely not. Nishizono had just been spouting verbal abuse based on nothing but her own selfish opinion, whereas I was merely making an honest personal and moral judgment of his character, which meant the key difference between the two of us was...was...uhhh...

No key distinction came to mind. Was being under the weather making it harder for my brain to work properly? No, it couldn't be *that* hard to pin down. Anyone with half a brain could see that she and I were nothing alike. There had to be *something* to distinguish her judgmental behavior from mine. I just needed to figure out what... Or was I really no better than her?

“You really think it’s acceptable to treat the people you disagree with like they’re invalid just because you don’t understand them? That’s not an ‘equally valid’ opinion. That’s just you being stupid.”

“Y’know, you really shouldn’t judge other people just because your little closed-minded brain can’t understand them.”

The words I'd said to Nishizono during that debacle, and the words Sera had said to me just the other day, played back to me in my mind—and although there was a difference in severity, the amount of overlap in both sentiment and wording was a little unsettling. In both situations, one person had thought ill of another without much objective basis to cast judgment, aside from their own moral code. Was there any difference, then, between me and Nishizono?

...No. We were effectively the same.

We were both being forced to confront something we couldn't relate to or comprehend, and we both had a viscerally negative reaction to said thing. Put another way, our feelings of disgust were nothing more than a representation of our own personal biases or prejudices. Or, no—in Nishizono's case, there was

a twisted kind of wishful thinking and consideration at work too, as she herself admitted she wanted Ushio to go back to being a boy, and that she didn't want her to have to suffer or face discrimination her whole life as a result of this decision. In that sense, her reaction may have actually been *less* hate-based than mine.

So what did that make me? Just another prejudiced, closed-minded hick like everyone else in this town?

What the hell, man... So I'm just as bad as them in the end?

I didn't want to admit it. I *really* didn't want to admit it—but I knew I had to. If I couldn't even acknowledge my own shortcomings, that was when I'd know it was *really* too late for me. *Damn it.* I was suddenly feeling very ashamed of myself. And why now? Why did I have to have this realization in the middle of our last exam, of all possible times? Right, no—I needed to snap out of it and get back to work. And yet... *Ugh. Damn it...* My brain felt like it was filled with a mushy stew of sickness and regret. I couldn't believe myself. How had I been just as shallow as the people I'd been judging all along?

In my defense, when you felt disgusted by something or someone, it was pretty damn hard to shake that feeling. So of course I hadn't felt inclined to try to understand Sera as a person. There was no particular malice or reasoning behind my distaste for him—I just didn't like him as a person, and I couldn't get behind his choices and actions, plain and simple. Everyone probably had at least one person like that in their lives, and while it certainly wasn't very kind or mature to tell people to their face that you found them disgusting, you couldn't really help the feeling itself when someone really rubbed you the wrong way. If that made me petty, then so be it—but I just didn't like the guy. And I did *not* want him going out with Ushio. Simple as that.

The bell rang. Our end-of-semester exams were over.

With exams over and done with, and school out for the rest of the day, I decided to stop by our local internal medicine clinic in the afternoon. As I suspected, the doctor told me I really shouldn't have pushed myself to go to

school—gave me a whole spiel about how overdoing it like that could be the death of me, if I wasn't careful. When I related this to my family, my parents told me they were glad I didn't end up kicking the bucket, in that case, and my sister Ayaka told me I was a total moron. I appreciated the variety in reactions to my apparently poor decisions.

I spent the rest of the evening in my room, feeling like a vacant husk of a human being. I'd used up every last bit of my energy finishing those exams, and now I couldn't even muster up the strength to lift myself out of bed. And yet, when I got a phone call from Hoshihara later that night, I still somehow managed to jump to my feet in an instant.

"Hey! Congrats on being done! You made it through, Kamiki-kun! I can't believe it! You looked pretty dead by the end there. I was super worried about you!"

"Ha ha... Yeah, it definitely felt that way. Thought I might *actually* keel over and die for a while. I don't even remember what I wrote down for those last few tests."

"J-jeez, was it really that dicey?"

"I was essentially running on fumes at the end, yeah. So...apologies in advance if I don't end up beating Sera."

"Oh, no! It's fine!" She scrambled to reassure me despite this disclaimer. *"Honestly, I wasn't expecting you to push yourself that hard. I feel pretty bad for asking you to do all this, in retrospect... Is there anything you wanted me to do for you, then?"*

My heart rate skyrocketed at this sudden and unexpected query. I could think of a million and one things I wanted her to do for me, of course. But, after much strenuous internal debate, I settled on the safest possible option.

"If we could..."

"Uh-huh?"

"If we could talk about that last book series I recommended to you a while back, I guess I'd kinda like that... Assuming you had a chance to start it, that is."

“Wait, is that all you want? Well, heck, that’s easy-peasy! Though just to warn you, I’ve only managed to read about half of volume one so far, but...”

We proceeded to have a nice, long talk about books, starting with her giving her impressions on the first half of the aforementioned volume. This then segued into a more rambling discussion about what other books we really liked, which ones we wanted to read in the future, and so on, and so forth. I was pretty bummed that I couldn’t talk at length as much as I would have liked to due to my sore throat, but it was still a really, really nice time. Enough to make me feel like the effort I put in was worth it.

The next few days came and went, and though each sunrise felt hotter than the last, I thankfully made a full recovery from my cold, at least. By that point, my near-death experience during the exams felt far enough in the past that I could look back on it and laugh already.

Today was the end-of-semester ceremony at Tsubakioka High. Every student in every grade was forced to stand in neat little rows in the sweltering gymnasium and listen as the school principal pontificated at length about something or other—though personally, I wasn’t paying much attention to his speech. My mind was too preoccupied thinking about the exam score rankings.

We’d already gotten all of our exams handed back to us—and I’d somehow managed to get above 90 percent on every one of them. I was pretty certain this guaranteed me a spot in the single-digit rankings for our grade. The real question was how Sera had done on his exams. He’d probably tell me if I asked, but I was too afraid of his cumulative score being better than mine to do so. That said, even if he *did* score better than me, that didn’t necessarily mean he got first place either. There could always be a couple more students who scored better than both of us.

Regardless, today was the day we were finally going to find out.

“...And on that note, I believe I can call this ceremony to a close,” said the principal, and the assembly was over. Next, we would return to our classrooms and be handed our report cards in addition to our individual exam results sheets. It was at this point that we would discover our rank relative to the other

students in our grade.

My heart started pounding. I knew things would be all right as long as Sera didn't come in first, but frankly, after all the effort I put in, I was really hoping I'd been the one to claim that spot. At the vice principal's signal, it was now us sophomores' turn to file out of the gymnasium. The doors were quite narrow relative to the number of students trying to leave, so the area surrounding the entrance got quite crowded even with the staggered excusals. I felt someone bump into my shoulder, and they hastened to apologize before even looking my way.

"Oh, sorry, I—"

It was Ushio, and she apparently didn't even realize it was me she'd bumped into, judging from the surprise on her face. Right away, she averted her gaze and hurried onward without me. This left me in a pretty melancholy mood.

Ushio had been avoiding me ever since the exams concluded. She was still talking to Sera and Hoshihara like normal, but she had very deliberately put some distance between herself and me. I had a pretty good guess as to why. Presumably, she was still feeling awkward about that conversation in which I'd told her I "didn't want to let Sera have her" and whatnot. To be honest, I felt a little uncomfortable about it as well. It had become yet another source of anxiety for me in addition to the exam scores. I knew I had to do *something* to clear the air, but I wasn't coming up with any good solutions.

All told, I was feeling pretty down in the dumps for someone who was going to be on summer vacation starting tomorrow.

Ms. Iyo showed up shortly after we made it back to the classroom. My classmates, who'd been chatting among themselves obediently, returned to their desks, more than ready to get our final homeroom period for spring semester over and done with.

"All right, everyone! Who's ready for summer vacation?!" Ms. Iyo shouted excitedly from the podium. "Boy, it sure has been a crazy few months, hasn't it? What do *you* guys think—would you say it was great? Or was it rough? Just kidding. I know it's not easy to pick a single word to describe the whole

semester! But I assume you're all really looking forward to some hard-earned time off, am I right? Just be warned that the break's gonna fly by at the speed of light, so do your best not to waste it. Go make some really great memories out there. Now then! Without further ado..."

She clapped her palms down against the two stacks of papers sitting on the lectern. Anyone with eyes could guess that these were our semester report cards and the results sheets for our final exams.

"It's the moment you've all been waiting for! I'm gonna pass these out one by one, so come up here when I call your name!"

All at once, the silent classroom stirred to life. Murmurs of anticipation and anxiety broke out from every corner as she started making her way down the list of students. I was only the eighth student alphabetically, so my turn came around in no time.

"Sakuma Kamiki?" she called.

I rose from my chair and walked up to the lectern.

Ms. Iyo looked me in the eye and greeted me with a great big smile.

"You sure gave 110 percent this time around," she said. "Nice work."

She handed me my report card and my face-down results sheet. I accepted them meekly and returned to my desk. My heart was pounding like crazy. I took a deep breath, let it out, then flipped the results sheet over.

"...Huh?"

I looked at the "Rank in Grade" row and saw the number: 1/214

I rubbed my eyes, but the numbers didn't change. I hadn't been given the wrong results sheet by accident, either. There was my name and student number, right there. It felt like some sort of mistake, but it wasn't.

Wait. So I actually came in first? But that's... Oh my god, I really did it. Holy crap!

Even after the teacher finished handing out the results sheets and moved on with her spiel, I was still in utter disbelief. She was saying words, but they were just going in one ear and out the other. All I could really hear was the sound of

my own heart beating. My body quaked with excitement. My legs felt shaky, too. It didn't feel real.

"All rise!" ordered the class representative, and I stood up to give my final bow of the semester with the rest of the class. In my dazed state, I was lagging slightly behind everyone else. After Ms. Iyo left the classroom, my fellow classmates began to celebrate the long-awaited arrival of summer vacation, some hanging around to make plans as others headed to their after-school activities. Hoshihara came straight over to my desk with a tentative look of anticipation on her face.

"Kamiki-kun!" she said. "How'd it go...?"

I looked up at her, my expression stiff. "...I got first in our grade," I said—and only after the words left my lips did I finally start to believe it myself. A sense of pride welled up inside of me.

Hoshihara covered her mouth with both hands in disbelief, and then started stamping her feet with giddy excitement. "What?! Oh my god, no way! You actually did it?! That's *incredible*, Kamiki-kun!"

"Yeah, I can't believe it either, aha ha..." I said bashfully.

The childlike glee in Hoshihara's voice caused some of our other classmates to turn and look, curious as to what all the fuss was about. Before I knew it, the news of my achievement had spread throughout the classroom like wildfire.

"Wait, Kamiki got first?"

"Whoa..."

"Since when has *he* been so smart?"

"Guess that means Sera dropped the ball."

"Man... I was kinda pulling for him, not gonna lie."

"Yeah, same."

The general sentiment seemed to be one of mild surprise, tinged with a hint of disappointment from some. It was only at this point that I registered something that should have been obvious: yes, me coming in first meant that Sera had failed.

“Sorry, guys! Wasn’t able to pull it off after all!”

Speak of the devil.

Sera came waltzing into the classroom, a tone of overdramatic lament in his voice that belied the smug grin on his face. He was met by greetings of “Don’t worry about it, bro,” or “You’ll get ’em next time!” I could tell from the overall vibe of the class that most people had been hoping he’d succeed in his quest to win Ushio over—though I also presumed they weren’t all that emotionally invested in his plight. They just enjoyed the spectacle of his performative existence and the juicy drama and gossip it produced.

He came to a stop near the lectern and, for whatever reason, turned to face me and walked over to my desk. Was it not Ushio he’d come to see? Not that I minded, though—there was something I needed to tell him anyway.

“Hey there, Sakuma. Natsuki-chan. How’d you two do on the exams?” he asked.

“Me personally, not so hot...” said Hoshihara, shoulders hunched in. “Kamiki-kun did *really* well, though! He got first in our entire grade!”

She spoke so proudly of my victory that you’d think it was one of her own. But I did appreciate her breaking the news to him on my behalf, since I wasn’t exactly the most boastful person in general. I also knew I’d feel a little embarrassed having to broach that subject, even to the guy I’d been trying so hard to beat. Especially since I’d been expecting him to be at least a *little* bitter about it, given the circumstances—but it seemed even this major loss was not enough to break Sera’s poker face.

“Whoaaa!” he said. “Dang, that’s crazy. If I knew you were such a good student, I would’ve asked you to tutor me beforehand! Heh heh...”

Once again, he completely defied my comprehension and expectations, clapping me on the shoulder as if congratulating a good friend. This threw me off quite a bit. I *really* still had no idea what this guy’s deal was.

“Hey, Sera,” I said.

“Yeah?” he replied.

“Just wanted to apologize for calling you disgusting the other day.”

This was the “something” I’d been wanting to tell him. I did not mean this as an endorsement of his nontraditional love life, of course—I still felt like it was pretty weird to have multiple girlfriends in general, and I didn’t personally condone him trying to court Ushio on top of that. But it was wrong for me to imply that he was some freak of nature or invalidate his humanity just because of our differences. Which was why I felt the need to apologize. It was just the right thing to do, plain and simple.

“Sorry...? When was this?” Sera asked, maintaining his smile as he tilted his head curiously. It seemed he really didn’t remember that interaction—which I could believe, given that quite a few days had passed since then. I’d been putting off apologizing as long as possible. Regardless, this was about the reaction I expected.

“Well, if you don’t remember, then don’t worry about it,” I said. “So...what rank did *you* get on the exams, then?”

“Oh, me?” he said. “Mmmm, lemme check...”

He crammed a hand into his pocket and pulled out a tiny, folded-up sheet of paper. I could only assume this was his results sheet. He set it on my desk and then looked at me, signaling for me to see for myself. I wished he would spare me the tedium and just say it out loud, but I acquiesced and unfolded the paper. Immediately, my eyes looked to the ranking field: “34/214.” Sera had ranked...thirty-fourth in our grade.

“Wait, huh?” I blurted, unable to contain my befuddlement.

Thirty-fourth. Maybe not that bad overall—it still put him in the top 20 percent of our grade—but for someone who’d loudly bragged about how easy it would be for him to take first place, and who apparently also had very solid academics, the number felt pretty hard to even wrap my head around. Hoshihara leaned in from beside me to take a peek, she was instantly just as baffled as I was. I glanced up at Sera, hoping for some sort of reasonable explanation, but he just shrugged and bashfully scratched his cheek.

“Yeah, I dunno,” he said. “Just got kinda bored by the end there, I guess.”

“Pardon?” I said.

“Spent most of the last couple tests just doodling comics on the question sheets.”

“...Come again?”

What had he just said? He’d been drawing *comics* instead of actually doing the exams? But why? Was boredom really even an excuse? No, no, no. That would be utterly ridiculous. He wouldn’t slack off on such an important test—not when Ushio was on the line. Right?

Oh, wait a minute. I think I see what’s going on here.

That was just an excuse. He didn’t want to admit he’d been defeated fair and square—and not even come close, for that matter—so he was just trying to play it off like he was too cool to care. Sure, I’d heard rumors about him being insanely smart, but it seemed in actuality, he wasn’t some incredible student after all. He hadn’t even managed to breach the single digits despite probably studying quite a bit. The easiest way to swallow that embarrassment was to claim he just got “bored” with the exams and hadn’t bothered putting in any actual amount of effort. I couldn’t help but laugh at this realization, relieved to know he’d never been a real threat after all. What a silly little ploy. I almost pitied him for resorting to such a childish defense mechanism.

At the same time, this explanation didn’t feel quite right to me. A voice in the back of my head was telling me not to underestimate him just yet. I took another look at his results sheet, this time reading on *past* the row with his rank relative to the rest of the kids in our grade, making my way down as I examined his individual test scores for each subject one by one.

My eyes shot wide open. He’d gotten almost full marks on every exam except for two: geography and contemporary Japanese—the “last couple tests,” as Sera had put it, on the last day of exams. On both of these, his scores were utterly abysmal.

Holy hell. Is this guy for real?

Had he *actually* gotten bored and started doodling instead?

“You’ve gotta be kidding me...” I said as a sudden flash of anger shot up my

scalp. I stood up and glared at Sera. “I knew it. You were never really serious about Ushio at all, were you?”

“Nah, that ain’t it,” said Sera. “Just wasn’t quite feelin’ it this time around, y’know? Couldn’t really get my head in the game. But no, I’m dead serious about her, for real. Might not have won this time around, but I’m not giving up on her that easily. Besides, it’s not like some silly test scores are the only measure of how strongly I feel about a person.”

He was just speaking nonsense now, and I couldn’t help but be overcome with an indescribable rage. Yet I also felt some other feeling, deep down inside of me, rapidly beginning to cool off and abate. I was *finally* starting to feel like I had somewhat of an understanding of Sera’s character. He was nothing more than your average trickster who loved messing with people to get a rise out of them. It wasn’t societal expectations or even self-interest that guided his decisions—it was much simpler than that. All he truly cared about was satisfying his own curiosity and amusement.

I couldn’t deal with this guy. He was a lost cause I couldn’t trust as far as I could throw him. Why in the world had I bothered apologizing to a prick like this?

“You really are the lowest of the low... You know that, right?” I said.

“Hey, whoa,” said Sera. “What’s with the insults all of a sudden? I’m the sincerest, most honest, most upstanding fella you’ll ever meet.”

“Oh, please. Upstanding, my ass. You’re not even—”

“K-Kamiki-kun...” said Hoshihara, grabbing me by the arm. I looked over at her as I stood there, unable to contain my indignation. She was looking around skittishly, concerned about the amount of attention we were drawing to ourselves. I hadn’t even realized it until now, but all eyes remaining in the classroom were watching me and Sera with rapt attention. There was a glint of that same drama-hungry curiosity in those eyes.

At once, I felt like an idiot for losing my temper and making a scene of things. Almost immediately, my fury withered, leaving only simple, quiet loathing in its wake. I took a soft, deep breath and glared at Sera once again.

“I really can’t stand you,” I spat. “You’re exactly the type of person I hate.”

“Aw, that’s too bad. ‘Cause I actually like you pretty darn well, I’d say,” said Sera, chuckling like this really was all just one big joke to him. Seeing this utter lack of both remorse and ill will, even Hoshihara couldn’t help but stare at him with contempt. After a brief pause, though, Sera finally relented, raising both hands slightly in surrender. “All right, all right! I hear ya. I lost, so I’ll get outta your hair. Don’t wanna make you guys dislike me any more than you already do.”

I was pretty sure I spoke for both myself and Hoshihara when I said that it would be hard for him to lower our opinions of him any further. Nevertheless, he still waved “buh-bye” at us like we were all good friends on perfectly good terms as he made his way out of the classroom, leaving his crinkled results sheet on my desk. He really was cut from a bad cloth; I had no clue what must’ve happened to him in childhood to make him turn out this way, but I almost felt bad for the guy, in a weird way. I hoped I’d never have to interact with him ever again—and that he would never try to interact with Ushio or Hoshihara again either. Now that the tense vibes in the classroom had more or less receded, I turned to Hoshihara and scratched the back of my neck awkwardly.

“Hey, um... Thanks for stopping me back there,” I said. “Think you kinda helped me snap back to my senses.”

“Y-yeah, don’t mention it,” said Hoshihara. “But, um...”

She was now looking around the classroom, seemingly a little on edge. I assumed it was just because there were still a lot of eyes on us, but quickly figured out what the real cause for her uneasiness was.

“Wait a minute,” I said. “Where’s Ushio?”

I couldn’t see her anywhere. *Uh-oh. D-don’t tell me...*

“Tsukinoki already ducked out to go home, dude,” said Hasumi—who, I was startled to discover, was standing right behind me. Just how long had he been looming there? I was curious and a little weirded out, but I didn’t have time for that right now.

This was bad; I'd let Sera distract me for too long. Not that I could blame Ushio for not wanting to stick around and listen to the two of us arguing like children.

"Th-thanks for the tip, Hasumi," I said. "Think I'd better go, then—sorry."

Hasumi gave a decisive nod of understanding as Hoshihara and I promptly packed up our things. We hurried out of the classroom and down the stairs toward the main entrance. Upon stepping out into the first-floor hallway, I caught a glimpse of Ushio from behind.

"Oh, there she is!" Hoshihara exclaimed. "Hey, Ushio-chan!"

When she heard her name, Ushio's shoulders twitched, and she spun around. Then, after a moment's hesitation, she dashed off as fast as she could.

Wait... She ran away?!

Hoshihara and I looked at one another. Her expression turned serious.

"W-we've gotta go after her!" she said.

"R-right!"

We were in total agreement there: going home without Ushio was not an option. And so the two of us gave chase, but we lost sight of her after rounding a corner. As we passed by the main entrance, I checked Ushio's shoe cubby and saw that her street shoes were still there, which meant she had to be somewhere in the school.

We agreed to split up; I would search the special-purpose building, and Hoshihara would check the cafeteria and the library. I ran down the halls, going down the list of every possible location in the building Ushio might have gone. The second floor housed the staff room, while the third floor was primarily meeting rooms for various culture clubs. Beyond that, there was the rooftop, but the door was always locked, so it wasn't typically possible to get outside. Even so, I couldn't imagine Ushio running down one of the other two floors' hallways as her first choice to escape from prying eyes, given that both were still likely to be filled with people after hours, so I ran up the stairwell to the top instead. My inkling was right—I found Ushio standing on the upper landing near the door that led out onto the roof. She'd chunked her school bag down on the

floor and was crouched down in the shape of a ball, head between her knees, with her back to me.

As I ascended the last few steps of the final flight of stairs, I took a moment to catch my breath, then said, “Ushio.”

After a short pause, she rose to her feet. Then, turning around, she stared down at me with a cold, unfeeling expression. There was more hostility in her gaze than I’d been expecting, and it stopped me dead in my tracks. But I had no intention of backing down, so I continued my advance, slowly making my way up the last few stairs until she and I were facing one another on equal ground.

“Ushio, come on,” I said. “Let’s walk home toge—”

“I heard you got first in our grade. I know you’ve never been *that* smart, Sakuma. And I remember how sick you were on those exam days. Yet you still got first in spite of all that. I take it you must’ve pushed yourself pretty hard studying, then, right?” She raised her voice at me. “So tell me: why did you put in all that effort? What was it all for?”

Disoriented though I was, I tried to give an honest answer. “To stop Sera from winning that bet you made with him.”

“And why did you feel so strongly about that?” Ushio asked.

“I mean...because he’s not a good person. Not sure if you overheard us talking in the classroom just now, but it’s pretty obvious he was never actually serious about you. He talked a big game about getting first in our grade, then ended up coming in thirty-fourth because he literally stopped caring. Wish I’d known how quickly he’d lose interest from the start—then I wouldn’t have had to go through all that trouble, but oh well...”

When I was finished speaking, Ushio let out an exaggerated sigh and mussed up her hair with both hands in frustration. “I don’t wanna talk about Sera,” she said. “I really don’t care, okay?”

“D-don’t care...?” I said. “But he basically just admitted he was only messing around with you from the get-go!”

“Yeah. You think I didn’t know that? I could tell from the way he talked to me that he was just killing time, and he wasn’t actually interested in me as a

person.”

My shoulders went slack, and my bookbag slid off and fell to the floor. “Then why didn’t you tell me that last time...?” I asked. “Why did you make it sound like you wouldn’t mind going out with him?”

“Well, I mean...because I was... Ugh! God, why can’t you just get the picture, already?!”

Ushio was now laying her anger bare and lashing out at me. All I could do was stand there confused, unable to trace the logical throughline behind this drastic change in emotions.

“I mean, I’m *trying* to get the picture...” I said. “But you’re not making it very easy for me here. So why don’t you just tell me exactly what it is you want to say?”

“Is it really that hard?! Get a clue, you idiot!”

“Some of us aren’t as naturally intuitive as you, all right?! So unless you want me to stand here and play twenty questions, I suggest you spell it out for me!”

“I just... I just didn’t know how to get over you, okay?!”

My ears started ringing, and I felt like I’d taken a massive body blow right in the gut. It was as if this cutting string of words had pierced right through my chest and wrapped itself around my lungs, constricting them. And now it was getting too difficult to breathe.

“I wasn’t ready to just give up on you, Sakuma...” she went on. “But I knew I couldn’t keep having feelings for you, either. It was starting to get exhausting... so I wanted to find someone, some way to help me start forgetting about you. I didn’t care who or what, as long as they could distract me enough to help me move on. But then you just *had* to go and do this, didn’t you...?”

Her ashen eyes shimmered. Then, all of a sudden, she reached out with both hands, grabbed me by the collar, shoving me up against the wall. I let out a shallow grunt as a jolt of pain shot through my back. Her hands trembled as she held me there, still gripping at the fabric of my shirt.

“What are you even trying to do here, Sakuma? Did you want to snatch away

first place from Sera so that *you* could go out with me instead? It couldn't be that, right? You were probably just trying to show off to Natsuki, weren't you? Because you have a crush on her, and you wanted to prove to her that you could pull it off if you really put your mind to it. That's all this was to you, right? So just say it, already—say you're not interested in me like that. Say this had nothing to do with me whatsoever. I can't handle these mixed signals you're giving me anymore. It's making me *miserable*, Sakuma..."

I could hear her voice slowly growing quieter and quieter, almost threatening to disappear completely. The anger that had been burning in her pupils had been extinguished, and now her eyes wavered weakly, welling up with tears.

"Just tell me you don't have feelings for me and get it over with. I'm *begging* you. I know it sucks. You think I've never had to let someone down before? I've lost a *lot* of good friends like that. Been forced to break the hearts of girls I hardly even knew... It's never fun—it's just something you have to do. But then there are cowards like you, who just keep dragging it out, and leading people on, and letting them get the wrong idea..."

"Ushio..."

I brought my right hand up and gently laid it on top of Ushio's trembling left. It was pale, slender, and cold. Her bony fingers felt fragile to the touch—and for whatever reason, this filled me with a strange sadness. I brought my gaze up, tracing it along her arm's span all the way to her slim neck. Her delicate features. Her mouth pursed tightly shut. Her cheeks flushed red, and her gray eyes glimmering in the light pouring in through the window. There was a radiance like an aureole around her head—as if the sun had woven itself into each and every strand of her silver-blond hair.

She really was cute. Pretty. Beautiful, even.

But I knew what I had to do.

"...All right."

I didn't want to make Ushio suffer any more than she already had. It was time

to put a definitive label on my feelings. I couldn't keep responding to her repeated statements of affection with indecisiveness. And if I was really being honest with myself, I'd already made up my mind by the first time I told her I wasn't sure—that I needed more time. I was so desperate to find a way in which I could twist and tangle my emotions into something they weren't, just so that no one would have to get hurt. But there was no perfect solution here. Something had to give.

"I'm sorry, Ushio," I said, and she bit her lip to brace herself against the pain. My chest felt tight. I knew this was going to hurt her—maybe even reduce her to a whimpering mess. But I had to give her an excuse to let these feelings die and move on. I owed her that much, at least, as the person she'd fallen for.

"You're right. I do have feelings for Hoshihara...and I can't reciprocate yours."

Ushio hung her head down low and gripped my collar even tighter. I could feel all the pain, all the grief, pressing right up against my chest.

"But listen to me, Ushio," I went on, though she kept her face pointed down at the floor. "This doesn't mean you and I can't still be close or anything like that. I'm going to keep interacting with you like always, even if it might be pretty damn awkward at first. Even if you tell me to get lost, I won't listen. I'm gonna keep myself planted firmly in your life whether you like it or not. Because, I mean, you *are* my best friend, after all."

Ushio choked out a little whimper. She was now doing her very best to stifle her tears as she hung there, clinging to the collar of my shirt. I reached my own hand up and placed it on top of her head, running my fingers through her hair to comfort her. There was nothing awkwardly intimate about this motion to me—it just felt like the right thing to do, given our relative proximity and the situation, so I did it.

I breathed a long sigh out through my teeth, quietly so that Ushio couldn't hear, then brought my gaze up from her head. Through the small window embedded in the door, I could see a perfect rectangular slice of cerulean carved out from the vast summer sky. Not long after that, Ushio's sobbing began to

abate.

“...Sorry, Sakuma.”

“It’s fine. Don’t worry about it.”

She lifted her head, looking up at me with eyes that still held a twinge of longing as they stared directly into mine. Her flushed cheeks. Her hot breath. Her tear-soaked lashes. I felt a heavy *thunk* in my heart, and I gulped. I felt uncomfortably warm, like I could feel the blood coursing through every vein in my body. Anticipation and fear continued to grow in equal measure, both emotions vying for total control over my mind as my body went stiff—like an animal seizing up in the face of an apex predator.

Then, in what was both an eternity and an instant, I caught a whiff of something. Not through my nose, but with every pore, every receptor, and every primal instinct embedded in every cell of my entire body. Something like pheromones—an intoxicating scent that I could only describe as “woman.” And not a moment later...

Ushio grabbed my chest and pulled me in by the fabric of my shirt.

And then she pressed her lips against mine.

And just like that, she’d stolen my first kiss.



...Huh?

Wait. Hang on.

What just happened?

Ushio quickly pulled her face away. Her eyes went wide, and her lips began to tremble as if even *she* couldn't believe what she'd just done.

"Oh god... Sakuma, I... I didn't mean to, I just—"

Right then, I heard the telltale squeak of rubber against linoleum echo through the stairwell. Ushio and I both turned to look—and saw Hoshihara standing there on the third-floor landing, just one short flight of stairs below us.

"I couldn't find you downstairs," she said, "so I came up here looking for you... Um, were you two just...k-kissing...? I... Wait... Huh?"

Hoshihara was in a daze.

I was right there with her.

Something told me Ushio was too.

And as we all stood there, in this mutual state of utter confusion, I heard a sound. The sound of something softly crumbling—or beginning to fall apart. From where, I couldn't say. Maybe I was hearing things. Maybe it was all inside my head.

But something, somewhere, was about to give.

Afterword

THIS AFTERWORD will allude to major events throughout the story, so please hold off on reading it until you've already finished the book.

They say you only run your fastest when you're running away from something, and I have to admit, I find this a pretty relatable sentiment. It was also the principle by which the original concept for *The Mimosa Confessions* came about—a random idea I threw my editor's way when I was struggling to iron out the plot of a different story. From there, the idea snowballed at a frightening pace, ultimately resulting in the book you hold in your hands today. I'd be lying if I said the process was *totally* smooth and without issue, but it was certainly a whole lot cleaner than the previous two books I've written.

This novel tells a story that centers around a set of tightly interwoven character relationships that all begin to change in some pretty major ways due to a couple of subsequent confessions made by its central character, Ushio Tsukinoki.

What would *you* do if your best guy friend came to school dressed as a girl one day? Or if a long-term friend of the same sex confessed they were in love with you? Or if the girl you had a crush on already had feelings for your best friend? Answering these hypothetical “if” questions one by one—as best I could, while putting myself in each character's shoes—was more or less the way in which this story was sewn. How would this character or that character react when faced with this scenario, and what would they think? Honestly, I wanted to find the answers for myself more than anything.

Also, I'm sure that many readers will probably have noticed that there are a few key categorical words I intentionally avoided using while writing this novel, and I'm guessing at least some of you will be curious as to why. There are a few different reasons, honestly, but the biggest one was that I didn't want to put this story or any of its characters into boxes by assigning them specific labels, if

that makes sense. I wanted the story to feel relatable to the widest possible audience, and so I deliberately wrote it to be open to individual interpretation in some regards. Though to be clear, this is also a principle by which I try to write all of my books—not just this one.

I dearly hope that with *The Mimosa Confessions*, I've managed to provide at least a somewhat enjoyable story for you all—and hopefully a little food for thought as well.

With that said, I'll now move on to acknowledgments.

To my editor, Hamada-sama: I was trying to remember what I wrote to you in my last afterword, so I pulled that volume off the shelf and saw that I said “Something tells me we'll have another uphill battle on our hands with this next book.” I'm glad it didn't end up being all that difficult... Right? It wasn't *that* bad, was it? I hope I can continue to count on your guidance and encouragement for many years to come. I've still got a lot of novels left in me, after all!

To KUKKA-sensei: I can't thank you enough for blessing yet another of my books with your wonderful illustrations. Every time you send me some new artwork, I feel like a child on Christmas Day, waking up to open a present left at my bedside. I can only tip my hat to your meticulous attention to detail in all of your work, even down to the tiniest of things. I'll continue striving to write stories worthy of your skills. I hope we can continue to work together in the future.

And to all of you, my dear readers: I never could have made it this far in my writing career had it not been for your overwhelming support. I plan to keep on writing books for as long as I still have stories left to tell, so I hope you'll continue to watch over me warmly and always look forward to whatever it is I cook up next.

And on that note, I leave you. Until we meet again.

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