



# The Kimosa Confessions

Book Two

By Mei Hachimoku  
Illustrations by KUKKA

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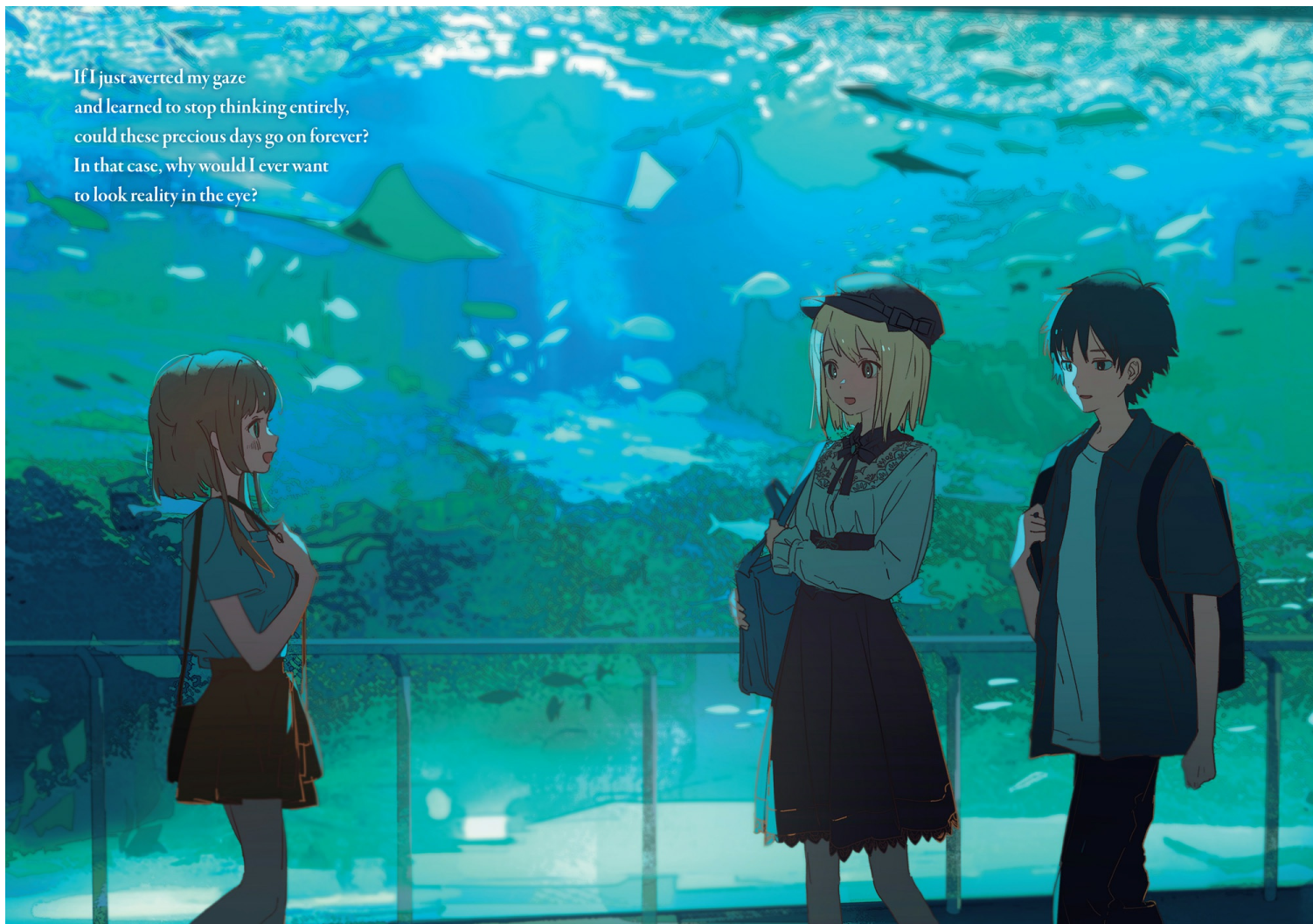








If I just averted my gaze  
and learned to stop thinking entirely,  
could these precious days go on forever?  
In that case, why would I ever want  
to look reality in the eye?



The curtain rose, and the lead actress  
revealed herself onstage. There came a gasp  
from the audience as all eyes in the auditorium  
gathered on a bona fide Juliet, true as any other.







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MIMOSA NO KOKUHAKU Vol. 2

by Mei HACHIMOKU

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Illustrations by KUKKA

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# The Kimosa Confessions

Book Two

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY

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TRANSLATION BY

Evan Ward



*Seven Seas Entertainment*

## Characters

### SAKUMA KAMIKI

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

### USHIO TSUKINOKI

Sakuma's best friend.  
Recently transitioned to  
living her life as a girl.

### NATSUKI HOSHIHARA

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

### ARISA NISHIZONO

Former 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.

### MEIKO TODOROKI

A classmate  
of Sakuma's.  
Huge movie buff.

### 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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## CHAPTER THREE

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# *The Clownfish's Aria*



## Chapter Three:

### The Clownfish's Aria

**T**HE STIFLING SUMMER HEAT seared my lungs as I pedaled my way down the highway beneath a cloudless azure sky. It hadn't even been ten minutes since I walked out the front door, and already my back was slick with sweat. My wet bangs clung to my forehead, and my hands kept slipping on my handlebars, as though they were covered in grease. And the earsplitting cries of cicadas only exacerbated the discomfort index.

"God, it's hot..."

It was August 5th—right in the heart of summer vacation.

Lately I'd been spending most of my days cooped up in my bedroom with the AC running full blast. While that might've explained why it felt like my heat tolerance had lowered so dramatically, today was still blisteringly hot. The three o'clock sun felt like it was glaring down at me with its menacing rays. When I looked over at the road, I could see a shimmering haze rising up off the surface of a car that was sitting at a red light—as if the coalescing heat was boiling off the metal frame like a viscous vapor.

A little ways after passing in front of the station, I arrived at the library. I parked my bike in the bike lot, then grabbed my shoulder bag from the basket. It was pretty heavy from the weight of the books I'd brought (which were almost due for return), and the strap dug mercilessly into my right shoulder.

I walked into the building and let out a sigh of relief as the cool air conditioning soothed my skin. I returned my borrowed books at the counter, then wandered around the building until my sweat dried, navigating the labyrinth of bookshelves without any particular goal in mind. When I got to the literature section, though, I spied the latest novel by one of my favorite authors on display—one that I was planning to buy sooner or later.

*Wow. Surprised they've already got this at the library.*

I debated borrowing it for a moment. These nice, first-edition hardcover copies were pretty pricey to buy brand new, and with my allowance as my only income source, it was definitely hard to justify the expense—even if I was the type of person who preferred to support my favorite authors and buy all their books new so I could keep them forever. What was I to do?

“Kamiki-kun?”

“Bwuh?!”

My heart skipped a beat. I was so startled that for a split second, I almost felt both my feet leave the ground. I spun around to see...very little at eye level, actually, other than the top of the person’s head. But when I lowered my gaze a bit, I was met by two big, round eyes staring right back up at me. There was a hint of bafflement in her youthful countenance. The girl who’d snuck up on me was one Natsuki Hoshihara.

“S-sorry,” she said. “Did I scare you?”

“Oh, no! Not at all! You’re fine, don’t worry about it,” I replied, stumbling over my words. I cleared my throat before continuing, “So, uh... What brings *you* here, Hoshihara?”

“What else? To borrow some books, silly!”

She gave a sheepish smile. *Right, duh. Get a clue, Sakuma.*

This was my first time running into her since closing ceremony day at the end of last semester. Almost two weeks had passed since then, so I was pretty on edge about this sudden and unexpected reunion. But I tried to play it as cool as I could, not wanting her to sense just how nervous I truly was.

“But dang, what are the odds, huh? Do you come here pretty often?” I asked.

“Mmm... I dunno about that. Maybe once every few months or so?”

“Gotcha... Cool, cool. Think I try to come at least once a month, myself.”

“Dang, yeah. You must borrow *way* more books than me, then.”

“Probably, ha ha. I mean, I prefer to buy, but that can get pretty expensive.”

“Oh, no, totally. Can’t blame you there.”



“Ha ha, yeah...”

There came a brief lull in the conversation.

“So, uh... Anything in particular you’re looking for today?”

“Oh, right!” said Hoshihara. “Yes, actually! I was thinking I’d try to check out a few of the books you recommended to me a while back!”

“Ooh, nice. Yeah, those ones are all definite winners, I’d say. Think they should all be up your alley.”

“Cool, yeah. Been really looking forward to reading more.”

“Good to hear... So, have you gone anywhere cool over summer vacation?”

“Nah, I’ve just been cooped up at home, mostly. Think the only real ‘outings’ I’ve had are going out shopping for clothes or whatever with friends...”

“Oh, gotcha.”

“Been kinda wanting to get out and do stuff more often, but yeah...”

“Well, that’s okay... Weather’s been pretty brutal too, after all.”

“Yeah...”

The conversational well had officially run dry.

No, no—surely there had to be *something* more we could talk about, I tried to convince myself. Yet all I could find when I traced my tongue along the insides of my cheeks, scouring them for any words still unsaid, was disbelief at my own sheer inability to maintain even a casual discussion with her. The silence left in its wake was getting awkward, as evidenced by Hoshihara’s wandering, restless gaze as she fiddled with the frayed ends of her hair. She’d gone out of her way to try to strike up a conversation with me, and I’d let those efforts go completely to waste.

Now tormented by impatience and a mild self-loathing, I racked my brain for any possible subject we might be able to relate on or discuss—but the only thing that even remotely fit the bill was that unfortunate incident that happened at school the day before summer vacation, which I knew neither of us had any interest in addressing head-on.

“Okay, guess I should probably let you go,” said Hoshihara at last, finally succumbing to the insufferably awkward vibes. “Besides, it’s poor form to stand around making small talk in the library anyhow.”

“...Yeah, true enough,” I replied, struggling not to let my shoulders slump in disappointment. But I couldn’t very well hold her here against her will as I tried to resuscitate the conversation in vain, nor did I want to make things any more uncomfortable for her than they already were. “Guess I’ll see you around, then.”

“Mm-hmm! Talk to you when I talk to you!”

We exchanged farewells, then Hoshihara turned and continued down the aisle. I couldn’t help but feel like I’d just let a major opportunity go to waste, to the point that I immediately regretted that I hadn’t been just a bit more persistent. But no amount of perseverance could make up for the distinct lack of any reason or conversation topic that would justify me keeping her here any longer. It was no use; for now, I had to admit defeat. My only solace was that I at least had her contact info, and I could text her to follow up if I had a burst of inspiration later. Plus, she was right—it wasn’t polite to loiter around and chitchat in a public library.

Hoping a fresh new story to look forward to might help me bury this worthlessness I was feeling, I plucked the novel I’d been considering off the shelf. At the very least, I wouldn’t be going home empty-handed. But just as I started making my way toward the checkout counter, I heard Hoshihara call after me once again, and I whirled back around at the speed of light.

This momentary resurgence of anticipation quickly turned to anxiety when I saw the stiff, uneasy expression on her face. I immediately knew that whatever words she had lingering on the tip of her tongue wouldn’t lead to a very fun conversation for either of us. Where was this coming from?

“Y-yeah, what’s up?” I asked, but I received only a stilted slew of *ers* and *ums* in response. It seemed my intuition was right—she was clearly not about to reopen the conversation with something lighthearted and fun. All I could do was gulp down my apprehension and await her next words.

There was an agonizingly long pause, and then:

“Actually, forget it!” she said, chuckling awkwardly. “It’s not important, sorry!”

“I-If you say so,” I replied, feeling suddenly despondent as I discerned a hint of strain in her otherwise endearing smile. There was definitely some stiffness to her behavior that betrayed her true feelings, but I wasn’t going to try to force it out of her if she really didn’t want to talk about it.

“Anyway, yeah! See you later!” she reiterated, then promptly disappeared to the other side of the bookshelf.

I turned once again and headed over to the front counter, checked out my book, and then exited the library. As soon as the sweltering heat welcomed me back outside, my sweat glands were yanked back out of their brief reprieve. I retrieved my bike from the bike lot, straddled the metal frame, and started pedaling my way home.

Thinking rationally about it, I realized I *did* have a pretty decent guess as to what Hoshihara had wanted to say at the end there: probably something to do with Ushio. The aforementioned “incident” that happened at the top of the stairwell on the day before summer vacation was probably still gnawing at her brain, same as mine. I’d been trying my very best not to think about it, but I knew deep down that we probably couldn’t avoid the issue forever. As I carefully twisted the lid off that particular bottled memory, I could almost feel the pedals digging deep into my soles.

\*\*\*

On that day—the day before summer vacation—Ushio stole my first kiss right in front of the door leading out onto the rooftop of Tsubakioka High. Having never experienced the sensation before, the main thing that really struck me was just how *close* her face was to mine. Obviously, I knew to expect that to some degree, given the whole lips-touching-lips aspect, but that sheer proximity felt so much more intimate than it had in my imagination that I was pretty taken aback by it regardless.

There’s a lot of information embedded in a face. One look can be all you need to tell how old, or attractive, or healthy a person is, and even the subtleties of their emotions are often written plainly in their expression. It’s also where a



majority of our sensory organs are located, and thus where we receive and interpret all that information.

A kiss, then, is akin to a momentary exchange in which all that sensory information of yours gets traded with that of another. In my case, it was a bit of an information overload (especially given that it was my *first* kiss, and I was sharing it with Ushio, of all people), and enough to short-circuit my brain's processing faculties in all of a single instant.

The softness of her lips, the proximity of her face, the tickle of her hair against the tip of my nose, that tiny whiff of sweat... It all came rushing through my sensory receptors like a flash flood, to the point that I couldn't tell you if our lips had been locked for all of a single second or as long as ten. But in the end, it had been Ushio who pulled away first, swiftly and softly. Then, in the next instant, I watched her eyes go wide.

"Oh god... Sakuma, I... I didn't mean to, I just—"

Immediately, she tried to formulate an excuse, her voice trembling as though she'd belatedly realized she may have just made a terrible mistake of unfathomable proportions. I, meanwhile, was still too dazed to offer even a halfway sensible response. And right then, as if she'd been waiting in the wings to arrive on the scene at the worst possible moment, Hoshihara showed up.

"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?"

She seemed just as dazed as I was—not that I could blame her. I'd been playing the role of confidant for Hoshihara, so I knew she had feelings for Ushio, complicated though they might be. I had to assume that any normal person would feel blindsided to stumble upon such a trusted friend kissing the very person they'd confessed to having feelings for.

The three of us stood there, locked in an emotional stalemate, for what felt like a full minute—but it was Hoshihara who ultimately broke the silence. There was still an obvious hint of tension in her face, and yet she clapped the bottom of her fist into her open palm as if she'd just had some sort of epiphany.

"Oh, I get it!" she exclaimed. "So I guess you guys are, uh...in *that* kind of a relationship now, huh?"

It didn't take a rocket scientist to interpret exactly what she was insinuating. But it was Ushio who moved to deny it before I could even open my mouth.

"N-no, it's not what it looks like, Natsuki!" she said. "You've got it all wrong, I swear! That was just, uh... It was just an accident!"

"O-oh, gotchaaa! Yeah, no worries... Accidents happen, I guess... I mean, um... Yeah!"

Anyone with half a brain could tell she wasn't buying this for a minute.

*Great, now what am I supposed to do?!*

Now that I'd realized the full magnitude of the predicament I was in, I was beginning to feel overwhelmed by a sort of fretful impatience. I could feel sweat running down my back and my heartbeat quickening. My brain was firing on all cylinders trying to come up with a way to clear up this misunderstanding ASAP.

It seemed Hoshihara had come to the false assumption that Ushio and I were dating, so the first order of business was to assure her that wasn't the case. I wondered if she would be convinced if I were to frantically insist that I had no romantic feelings for Ushio whatsoever. Perhaps that strategy would work, but I felt reluctant to deny it so adamantly, lest it only rub salt in the wound for Ushio right after I'd just spurned her. In which case, would it make more sense to just go all-out and pivot to confessing my feelings for Hoshihara right here and now? If I told Hoshihara it was *her* I wanted to go out with, not Ushio, would that—no, that'd only make this even *more* jarring for her. Why would I even *think* that might remedy the situation? *Come on, Sakuma. Think harder, you idiot.* What other options did I have here?

"Anyway!" Hoshihara cut in before I could come up with anything. "Sorry, guys... I think, uh... I think I'm gonna head home! See you two later!"

And with that, she turned to leave without giving either of us a chance to respond. Alarm bells started ringing in my head; I knew I *had* to clear up this misunderstanding before we went our separate ways for summer vacation. Otherwise, it'd surely leave a nasty taste in all of our mouths for the entire duration of the break.

“W-wait up, Hoshihara!” I exclaimed, hurrying after her down the stairs. But in my haste, I missed my footing on the last step, and—unable to catch myself in time—slipped and fell face-first onto the hard linoleum.

“S-Sakuma?!” said Ushio, rushing down the stairs.

“Yeowch...” I groaned, lifting my gaze as I started going a bit lightheaded from the pain. Thankfully, the first thing I saw was Hoshihara, stopped in place, looking up at me from halfway down the next set of stairs. *Nice*. I still had a chance. And so I tried my very best to force a friendly smile (while still lying prone on the floor, mind you), and said, “C’mon... We can at least walk home together, can’t we?”

“Y-yeah, okay. Sure...” Hoshihara was clearly less than enthused at the prospect but caved to peer pressure nonetheless. When Ushio made it down to the landing, she offered me a hand and helped me up. I took a moment to pat the dust off my uniform, and the three of us made our way downstairs together.

I couldn’t recall much in the way of specifics about the walk home after that. I remembered us walking side by side and making casual chitchat as we pushed our bikes down the road like always, but the actual contents of our conversation were almost entirely lost to time at this point, more than two weeks later. I was fairly certain this fuzziness had less to do with the passage of time and more to do with said conversation being utterly devoid of anything substantial or noteworthy. It felt more like we were just flapping our lips to fill the silence.

I did, however, still vividly remember the brief exchange we had just before we parted ways. It was right after we reached the intersection where Hoshihara’s way home separated from ours. We all stopped there for a moment, then Hoshihara took a few steps forward and turned back to face me and Ushio.

“Okay... See you guys later.”

“Natsuki,” said Ushio, calling after her right as she lifted one leg to straddle her bike.

Without turning my head, I cast a sidelong glance over at Ushio. I could sense



a sort of palpable earnestness in her tensed demeanor as I saw beads of sweat on her temples, her hands trembling slightly as they gripped the handlebars of her bike.

“Sakuma...doesn’t like other boys,” she said. “He only likes real girls. So don’t worry. Whatever kind of relationship you were imagining we might have, I can promise you there’s nothing of the sort going on between us.”

To my ears, this sounded as much like a reassurance to clear up Hoshihara’s misunderstanding as it was Ushio drawing a line in the sand for herself to try to sever any lingering feelings for me she may still have been holding on to.

Upon hearing these words, Hoshihara simply furrowed her brow and looked back at Ushio with a somber expression. “It’s all right. Don’t worry about it. I mean, I realize that... Really, I do,” she said. “It’s just, I don’t know... I guess I’m just having trouble thinking straight right now... So yeah, like...”

Her lips trembled as she fumbled for her next words—but no matter how long we waited, it seemed they were forever out of reach. The only sound that ultimately escaped her mouth was that of a long, labored sigh. Then she pursed her lips and looked down at the ground, as if resigning herself to letting whatever feeling it was go forever unexpressed.

“Hoshihara...” I said softly.

At that very moment, she snapped her head up and shouted loudly enough to echo through the whole town, scaring Ushio and me stiff in the process: “Ugh! What the *heck*, you guys?! What are we doing, getting all mopey the day before summer vacation?! We all just need to set this aside and cheer up! Okay?!”

I could tell she was only putting on a brave face here, but I didn’t want to let her consideration go to waste either, so I figured I’d play along.

“Y-yeah, you’re right. No point in overthinking things. We should be spending our mental energy on more important things instead—like trying to plan out all the stuff we’re gonna do over the long break.”

“...Yeah, for sure,” said Ushio, nodding weakly.

“Welp, see you two later, then!”

Hoshihara finally straddled her bike before pedaling off down the street at a jaunty pace. I watched her go until she disappeared around the next corner, then immediately felt the strength drain from my muscles. I was glad we'd managed to say goodbye on relatively positive terms, but I didn't get the sense that we'd really done anything to clear up the misunderstanding whatsoever.

"Sorry," Ushio suddenly blurted out, sounding as though she might break down and cry at any moment. She was hanging her head, so I couldn't make out her expression, but I could hear the guilt and sorrow in her voice all too well.

"It's okay," I replied. "Don't worry about it."

"No, it's *not* okay."

Ushio rejected my reassurances and curled up into a crouch, clutching her head in her hands. Her bike, having lost its support, fell over sideways, the wheels revolving slowly in place as it hit the ground.

"People can't just *do* things like that," she said from behind her arms. My heart twinged at the desperation in her voice. "I don't know what I was thinking, but that wasn't okay. And the worst part is, I can never take it back... Like, how am I even supposed to *live* with myself from now on...?"

"Hey, knock it off," I said, unable to bear the negative emotions any longer. I didn't want to have to hear Ushio spiraling in real time; it only made *me* feel like more of a pathetic loser for having put her in that position to begin with. I lowered my kickstand and squatted down next to Ushio. "Don't be so down on yourself. You're fine. I'm not even thinking about it anymore... Okay, maybe that's a lie. But I'm not *upset* about it or anything... Er, not to imply that I'm *thrilled* about it either, but um..."

I didn't know how I was meant to raise her spirits in this situation. For all the books I'd ever read, I definitely didn't feel like I had the words to make this right in my vocabulary. And yet, I couldn't just leave her like this without saying anything either.

"I..."

I threw out the subject for whatever sentence it was I wanted to say, but no object, nor verbs, nor adjectives seemed eager to follow. What was I supposed

to say? What was the *right* thing to say? As my thoughts veered off course, Ushio slowly lifted her head and gazed at me with blurry, tear-filled eyes. She looked up at me like I was the first light in the morning sky seen from the bottom of a deep, dark hole. I wanted nothing more than to reach out a hand and lift her out of that pit. So I strung together some words.

“I...I want to understand you, Ushio,” I said, then swallowed hard. “You don’t have to force yourself to tell me stuff that’s too hard to say out loud, or anything like that. I’ll try to figure those things out for myself, so that way, you won’t have to say them. But I want you to feel like you can rely on me, as unreliable as I might be... Just, please—don’t beat yourself up so hard. You’re doing fine.”

Ushio bit her bottom lip, then lowered her gaze once more. For a minute, I wondered if my efforts had been totally in vain—but then she reached into her pocket, pulled out a handkerchief, and used it to dab the tears from her eyes.

“Sorry. I’m okay now,” she said, her voice a bit nasal as she rose back to her feet. Her expression was still a little gloomy, but she did seem to have calmed down to some extent. I lifted her bike up off the ground, wheeled it alongside her so she could grip the handlebars, then raised my kickstand as well.

“Come on, let’s go home,” I said. “It’s been a long day. You should get some rest.”

“Yeah, okay...”

We took our time from there, walking slowly and steadily the rest of the way to the T-shaped intersection where my way home split from hers.

From that day on, I made a point of checking in with Ushio regularly via text. The contents of these interactions were ultimately irrelevant, as far as I was concerned. I just wanted to make an effort to preserve the bond we shared over the break and not let her drift further and further away. Things were definitely a little bit awkward at first, but by now we’d more or less returned to the status quo—on the surface, anyway—and were talking normally again.

Even so, anytime I thought back on what happened at the top of the stairwell

that day, I could feel a raging whirlpool of conflicting emotions start swirling in my chest. What would ever possess Ushio to do such a thing? I couldn't come up with a single good reason. And maybe that was why I felt so afraid to find out.

\*\*\*

When I made it home from the library, I grabbed my shoulder bag from the basket of my bike and let myself in through the front door. The stuffy inside of the house carried the familiar earthy scent of the building's wooden architecture. I headed first into the bathroom to towel off my sweat; then to the kitchen, where I drank two tall glasses of iced barley tea; then finally up the stairs to my bedroom, just a few steps down the second-floor hallway. As I opened the door and stepped inside, a pleasant wave of cool air caressed my skin, offering a much-needed reprieve from the sweltering summer heat.

"Welcome home," said Ushio, lifting her reclining head up off the edge of my mattress. She was sitting on the floor with her back against my bed. She wore a pair of paper-thin workout shorts, along with a loose-fitting T-shirt that offered a subtle glimpse of her collarbone. It was the sort of comfy, stay-at-home outfit one might consider suitable for a quick run to the convenience store but not much else. In these clothes, she looked pretty androgynous at first glance, though a closer look would reveal she was actually wearing a thin layer of makeup despite the casual attire. She had a small paperback spread open in her hands.

"Thanks, yeah," I replied. "Sorry, wasn't expecting to be gone so long. Anything happen while I was away?"

"Nope. Just been sitting here, enjoying the peace and quiet."

"Good to hear."

With this rote checkin completed, Ushio went right back to reading, and silence enveloped the room. The only audible sounds were the soft hum of the air conditioning unit and the muffled chirping of the neighborhood cicadas coming from outside. I set my shoulder bag down on top of my desk, then pulled my rolling chair out from underneath and took a seat. Not having anything better to do, I let my eyes wander over to Ushio, then to the book she



was reading, before finally stopping on her hands. As I ran my gaze up along her dainty, porcelain fingers, I noticed that her nails looked almost manicured—as if she'd applied a coat of glossy, transparent nail polish. I watched as she lifted one hand from the book and tucked a stray hair back behind her ear, before apparently noticing my gaze and turning to face me.

“Um, what's up?” she said, tilting her head to one side.

“Er, nothing. Sorry. Guess I just haven't quite gotten used to having you up here in my bedroom all the time, that's all.”

“Oh.” Ushio turned back to her opened book, as though satisfied with this excuse. “Yeah, it still feels a little funny to me sometimes too.”

It had been about a week now since Ushio started coming over to my house every single day. It all began with a text from her, shortly after summer vacation kicked off and we started texting each other on a daily basis. It read: *“I can't handle being at home anymore.”* She didn't say why, but I could hazard a guess.

With a mother to whom she wasn't blood-related, and a younger sister who vehemently opposed her transition, it was reasonable to say that Ushio's family situation was fairly complicated. I could totally understand how she wouldn't be able to feel comfortable in her own home anymore, given the circumstances.

But what could I do about that? I'd sworn to stay involved in her life and keep being her best friend whether she liked it or not, so how could I make good on that promise here? I thought of a few possible options, and then a few minutes later, I replied:

*“Wanna just come over to my place, then?”*

Nearly an hour went by before I got a response. But she took me up on the invitation, and ever since, she'd been coming over to my house on a daily basis. We didn't even do anything in particular—just existed in each other's presence, reading books, playing games, or doing our summer homework. Then, once the town's six o'clock chime rang, she would head home for dinner.

There was a tacit understanding between us, however: we would *not* speak of the kiss incident no matter what. So long as we both adhered to that unspoken

agreement, our time together was soft and tranquil. Even the silence didn't bother me or feel awkward anymore. There was something surprisingly nice about having someone just kick their feet up and relax with you in a more private setting and your own personal space.

"So how are you liking that?" I asked after looking over to find her deeply engrossed in her book yet again. It was a mystery novel I'd recommended to her from my own personal collection.

"Pretty good so far," Ushio replied without even lifting her eyes off the page. "Really great atmosphere."

"I know, right?" I gushed, delighted to have my taste in fiction validated by someone else. "I love the main character in that. How far have you gotten to?"

"I'm on, uh...page 196 right now."

"Oh, cool. That's, like, right after they find the detective's body, then."

"Wait," said Ushio, lifting her head. "He dies?"

"Er..." I stuttered. I felt the blood drain from my face. "I mean, uh... Actually, I can't remember anymore. Maybe it was the *lawyer* who dies, come to think of it...?"

"Don't even bother. It's too late now."

As Ushio shook her head with a disdainful smirk, I fell out of my rolling chair onto my knees and prostrated myself before her. "I'm sorry! I'm really, really sorry. That was extremely thoughtless of me."

"Okay, now you're just overreacting. No need to grovel about it."

"No, no, no! I just ruined one of the best moments of the book for you! You're totally justified to be upset with me for that! I mean, I know I would be if someone ever did that to *me*! So please, let me make it up to you somehow! I can buy you Häagen-Dazs sometime, or—"

"I told you, it's fine," said Ushio, sounding a bit irritated as she placed a bookmark in the paperback and set it in on the low table. "I really don't mind spoilers all that much."

“You...you don’t?”

“Personally, I think it’s seeing the process of how things get from A to B that’s most enjoyable. I think knowing *who* dies is typically far less important than finding out everything that happens leading *up* to them dying. Not that there aren’t exceptions, of course.”

“But doesn’t that take a lot of the surprise out of something that’s meant to be a major plot event, though?”

“I mean, it does, yeah. But I don’t think that makes the story any less interesting or enjoyable.”

“Mmm,” I groaned, folding my arms as I mulled this over.

I couldn’t wrap my head around the idea that enjoyment of a book had nothing to do with the surprise that came with experiencing events for the first time as they unfolded. I could understand what she was saying, mind you; I just couldn’t relate whatsoever.

“Well, okay. Maybe for *some* types of stories, I could understand that. But this is a mystery novel we’re talking about. That’s, like, the *one* genre where a single major spoiler can kill the entire experience, right? Tell me I’m not crazy here.”

“You sure do pick weird hills to die on sometimes, Sakuma.” Ushio sighed, then finally acquiesced: “Okay, fine. You can make it up to me with some ice cream. But I don’t want Häagen-Dazs. Just get me a two-pack of Papico, and I’ll forgive you.”

“You got it. I’ll buy some next time I’m out and about.”

I stood from my kneeling position and sat back down in my chair. Ushio left the book on the table and started fiddling with her cell phone. If I’d broken her focus, then I felt bad about that. Spoilers aside, I definitely didn’t enjoy when people interrupted me while I was in the middle of a good book either... But maybe I was reading too much into it. It wasn’t as if I’d invaded her personal space or anything like that—this *was* my house, after all. I shouldn’t have to walk on eggshells or worry about making too much noise in my own bedroom.

“Oh yeah, by the way...I bumped into Hoshihara at the library,” I said, and for a moment, Ushio stopped typing on her phone.

“How’d that go?” she asked without even looking up at me.

“We just chatted for a bit, then said goodbye. It was a little awkward, admittedly... But she seemed to be doing well, at least.”

“...Gotcha.”

This was not the most enthusiastic response. I figured it was probably best not to delve any deeper into this particular subject. Talking about Hoshihara was sure to make us both reflect on the whole kiss debacle, whether we liked it or not—and neither of us wanted to revisit that at this point. I decided to drop it for now; we could confront the issue head-on at a later date, once the dust had more of a chance to settle.

“Hey, Ushio,” I said.

“Mm?”

“Any particular flavor of Papico you like?”

“...The chocolate one.”

“Roger that.”

There were still several weeks of summer vacation left to go.

\*\*\*

Today, Ushio and I were planning to tackle our summer homework together. Our workbooks and worksheets were spread out across the low table in my bedroom, and we were both scritchng away with our writing implements. The cicadas outside were chirping away, and the TV was playing a live broadcast of the annual high school baseball championship at Koshien, which I’d left on for the hell of it. It was just past two o’clock in the afternoon.

As soon as I solved my first problem, I set my mechanical pencil down and looked up at the TV, which was showing a close-up of the pitcher’s suntanned face. He stared down the player from the other team standing in the batter’s box, then threw the ball right down the middle. It slipped past the other player’s bat and into the catcher’s mitt. Three strikes, three outs. The cheer squad went wild, and the fielding team jogged in for their turn at bat.

Impressed as I was by their ability to play in this heat, I couldn’t help but feel

just a little bit jealous watching these sweat-soaked, dirt-covered athletes vie for the one goal they all had in common, however their individual reasons might differ. To me, their competitive spirits shone more brightly than the sun. Just as I let myself get a teensy bit lost in sentimentality, I heard Ushio suddenly set her pen down.

“Done,” she said, stretching out as she leaned back against my bed.

“With what? English?” I asked.

“No, all of it.”

“Pardon?”

“I’m done with all of my summer homework.”

“Already?! How?!”

This revelation had me in such disbelief, I couldn’t help but raise my voice. I knew for a fact that only a week ago, she and I were progressing through it at about the same rate. And here I was, barely even halfway done.

“I’ve been working on it at home too, to be fair,” she clarified. “Though I still feel like I went through it at a pretty relaxed pace.”

“Man, are you kidding me?” I said. “Wait, hang on. Can I see your answers, then?”

“What? No way. That’d be cheating, silly.”

“Well, at least help me out here, then. I’m totally stuck on math right now.”

“...You got first in our grade, and you’re struggling with *this*?”

“I mean, what do you expect? I crammed like crazy for those exams. Hell, I’ve probably forgotten more than half of that stuff by now.”

“I’m amazed you can admit that like it’s a point of pride... Okay, fiiine. Let me take a look.”

Ushio circled around the table to sit right beside me, and I immediately caught a whiff of her shampoo or something. But underneath the sweet scent, I picked up the slightest hint of sweat—which sent my mind racing back to the kiss all over again. My heart fluttered restlessly, and I could feel my face



growing hot. *No. Stop, you idiot. Don't think about it. You won't even be able to look her in the eye at this rate.* I took a few silent deep breaths and calmed myself back down.

"What part don't you get?" asked Ushio.

"Oh, right, uh... It's this trig function here," I said.

"Okay, so on that one, you need to swap out the variables and then..."

I tried my best to stay focused on the homework and stop thinking unnecessary thoughts. With Ushio's help, I progressed through the math problems at a pretty good clip. She was a really good tutor—so much so that it made the difference in our natural levels of intelligence all too obvious. I might have managed to squeak my way into first place on the end-of-semester exams, but I was still no match for Ushio in terms of brainpower. Not that I minded; I was grateful to have her as my instructor.

"So, Ushio... Where did *you* place in our grade on the final exams?" I asked as I was working away, hoping it might be a decent lead-in to start a discussion.

"Second," she said plainly.

"Wait, no kidding? Damn, that's impressive."

"Yeah, says the guy who came in first."

"No, no, no. I only just *barely* managed that with the help of several other people. You coming in second all by yourself is way more of an achievement, if you ask me."

"...It's really not that special," she said, sounding utterly disinterested.

Maybe coming in second place really *was* no cause for celebration in Ushio's mind. Maybe she'd been shooting for first, and that was her whole plan all along. When I thought about it like that, I almost felt a little bit bad for my achievement.

"Hey. Don't stop writing," she scolded me. "You're not done yet."

"R-right, sorry."

*Sheesh, so harsh.* Then again, that was just a sign of how seriously she wanted

to help me understand the material. I got back to it, scribbling away in silence and stopping occasionally to ask Ushio for help on any tricky sections as I methodically made my way down the worksheet. Finally, a little after four o'clock, my math homework was done.

"Sweet, we did it!" I exclaimed, more than pleased with the results of my labor—even if Ushio deserved most of the credit. Had I been doing this all by myself, I could have been at it the whole rest of the night and *still* probably never finished.

"You got through that pretty quick."

"Yeah, thanks to you! I really owe you one."

"Don't mention it," she said shyly, casting her eyes down.

I sat up and stretched out my back. I felt exhausted, but in a good way. I'd done all the work I'd set aside for today. Now I could relax and take it easy.

"Hey, I know," I said. "Why don't we watch a movie or something? I went out and rented a few yesterday."

In truth, I'd been planning to just veg out and watch these by myself while eating junk food at night, but it'd be more fun to watch them with Ushio, if she was interested. That way, we could share our impressions after.

"I mean, I don't mind," said Ushio. "But isn't it getting a little late for that? It's almost four-thirty."

"Okay, I'll pick one that's less than ninety minutes, then."

I picked my shoulder bag up off the floor from where I'd set it against my desk, then removed the plastic bag from the video rental store I'd shoved inside. From that bag, I slid out the one movie I already knew fit the criteria: a prestige drama that had won some major accolades a few years back. I fed the disc into my DVD player and used the little remote to highlight PLAY on the main menu, but didn't start the film.

"Want anything to drink?" I asked. "Some nice, cold tea or apple juice? Pretty sure we've got milk too."

"Sure. I'll have some apple juice, thanks."

“Cool. Be right back.”

I left my room and headed downstairs into the kitchen, where I found Ayaka drinking a glass of milk near the sink. With her bangs tied up, she looked a little bit like a rhinoceros beetle, and her forehead was on full display. She apparently didn’t have practice, so she’d been home all day.

She lowered the glass from her lips as she noticed my gaze. “What are you staring at, sicko?”

“I wasn’t even.”

I couldn’t believe how casually rude she always was, just spitting venom at her poor brother like this. To her, it seemed verbal abuse came as naturally as breathing. I pulled the apple juice out of the fridge and headed over to the cabinets to grab a pair of cups.

“Here again today?” Ayaka asked.

“Sentences need subjects, Ayaka.”

“Ushio-san, I mean.”

“Thank you. And the answer is yes.”

“Mrrrm,” she murmured with an upward inflection as she finished her milk, then set the empty glass in the sink. “So hey, is it just me, or does Ushio-san seem...different from before?”

“That’s an awfully roundabout way of saying it.”

“Come on, you know what I mean. Why won’t you just tell me what’s up? Are you dodging the question on purpose, or what?”

Ayaka was getting frustrated and combative now. She was right, though. In all honesty, I *was* being intentionally evasive. Not to string her along or anything like that—I just felt a little conflicted as to how much I was at liberty to say regarding Ushio’s gender transition. It was a pretty delicate issue that I knew not everyone would be quick to accept, so I was hesitant to go carelessly running my mouth about it. But judging from Ayaka’s insinuating tone, she already had a pretty good idea what was going on. Ushio had already come out and made that information public herself, so I supposed there wasn’t any real

issue with simply conveying the facts of the situation to my little sister.

“You’re right about things being different,” I said. “And she’s Ushio-*chan* now.”

Ayaka’s eyes went wide, then her expression quickly settled into one of satisfied comprehension. “So the rumors were true.”

Evidently, word of Ushio’s transition had even reached as far as Tsubakioka Junior High. It made enough sense—we did live in the sticks, so word traveled fast, especially when it came to juicy gossip. Not to mention that Ushio had already been something of a local celebrity prior to all of this. I wondered how Ayaka felt about the revelation, as someone who’d spent a ton of time hanging out with the two of us back when we were little. From what I could tell, Ushio had always been like the cool older brother she always wished she had.

I placed two cups on a tray and poured them full of apple juice. Then I grabbed a bag of potato chips we had in the pantry for good measure.

“Why don’t you come up and say hello?” I offered.

“Huh? Why would I?” said Ayaka.

“I mean, no reason in particular... Just figured it’s been a long time and that Ushio would probably be happy to see you too.”

Ayaka lowered her gaze. “No, that’s okay. I feel like I wouldn’t really know how to interact with her now. Like, what if I said something rude, or...?”

I could understand this anxiety. After all, I had to deal with those feelings too at first... Heck, I *still* felt them from time to time.

“You can just treat her like you normally would,” I said. “Same as anyone else.”

Ayaka peered up at me. “You sure?”

“Yeah. You can just be your normal self. Well, minus all the unnecessary name-calling, that is. Don’t call her a creep or a sicko or anything like that.”

“Duh. I only call *you* those things, stupid.”

*Oh, gee... Lucky me...* I couldn’t decide whether I felt depressed, relieved, or

happily honored to know I was the only one who had to put up with her abuse.  
*...Okay, definitely not honored. I think that'd make me a bit of a masochist.*

"Well," said Ayaka, "if I can just be my usual self...then sure, I'll come say hi."

"Sounds good. Let's head upstairs."

I grabbed the tray and headed straight back up to my room before Ayaka had a chance to change her mind. She followed obediently after me, though not before taking a moment to remove her hair tie and adjust her bangs by combing her fingers through them a few times.

"Sorry for the wait," I said, opening the door with one hand.

"No worries," said Ushio, turning toward me. "Thanks for... Wait, Ayaka-chan?"

"H-hey, long time no see," said my sister, poking her head out from behind my shoulder as she walked into the room. She was trying her best to play it cool, but it was plain to see just how stiff and awkward she was.

"Yeah, no kidding!" Ushio responded, her voice bright and cheery. "What are you, in eighth grade now? You've grown up so much since the last time I saw you."

"Thanks, yeah... You too, Ushio-san... You've definitely, um..."

Ayaka gave Ushio a once-over as she trailed off. I knew my sister had a keen eye; she could pick up on all the minor changes to Ushio's demeanor and appearance, including her makeup and whatnot. But she'd stopped short of finishing her sentence, presumably to choose her next words carefully out of consideration for Ushio's feelings.

"You've changed a little bit, too, I see," she finally said.

This appraisal was a bit vague, but the implications were pretty blunt.

"Aha ha... Yeah, you can say that again," Ushio said in turn. "Think that might be the understatement of the century..."

Ushio's head drooped, and she seemed a little uncomfortable. Ayaka noticed this right away, and a wave of mortified guilt washed over her face.



“B-but I like you just as much the way you are now, to be clear!” she said frantically. “I mean, just look how *pretty* you are! Honestly, I’d kill to have an older brother—I mean, older sister like you! Actually, can I trade my stupid brother for you?!”

“Hey,” I said. “Uncalled for.”

“Anyway!” Ayaka said, shoving my protest aside. “I know Sakuma’s not the brightest bulb in the box, but thanks for always being a good friend to him! Okay, you two have fun now! Bye!”

After wrapping up the conversation at a million miles per hour, Ayaka gave a quick dip of her head and fled the room as though it were a crime scene. I set the tray I was carrying on the low table and took a seat on the floor.

Ushio looked over at me and smiled. “Ayaka-chan’s a sweet kid.”

“You wouldn’t be saying that if you knew the sorts of names she’s been calling me lately... But you’re right,” I admitted. “As far as little sisters go, she could definitely be a whole lot worse.”

“Yeah, nice that you guys seem to get along so well...”

There was a hint of deep-seated envy in Ushio’s voice that sent a sharp pain right through my chest. There was a distinct weight to her words and a rawness to the emotions beneath. I’d had a feeling for some time now that her relationship with her sister, Misao, had yet to improve following Ushio’s transition. Regardless, I’d made a distinct point of never prying about it, as I felt she should be allowed to keep her family life private if she so desired. That, and it was not my place as a random high school kid with no pertinent experience to butt in and offer my two cents on such a sensitive subject. As Ushio’s friend, all I could really do for her was try to make her time away from her family as pleasant and enjoyable as possible.

“Maybe we could invite Ayaka to hang out with us next time you’re here,” I said. “The three of us could play a game or something—like old times, y’know. Might be fun.”

“Hey, great idea!” Ushio said enthusiastically. “I’d love that, yeah.”

*Now then. Without further ado, let’s watch this damn movie.*

I clicked the ENTER button on the remote, and the film began to play. As the animated logos of the movie's various distributors flashed onscreen during the opening credits, I popped open the bag of potato chips and placed it between the two of us for easy access.

The film's soft, understated scenes spun a yarn about a group of ordinary humans simply trying to coexist with nature in the middle of a vast, untamed wilderness. It felt very true to life, though. There were no intense action scenes or moments of nail-biting suspense, yet it was hard not to feel drawn in by the meticulously realistic depictions of how these characters went about their everyday lives in this society. I had a feeling I'd picked a winner.

Ushio and I both let ourselves be completely sucked into the film's story, atmosphere, and world—only ever breaking our immersion to reach over and grab another handful of potato chips to munch on from time to time. Eventually, at the halfway point of the film, there came a scene in which the romantic tension between the male and female leads reached a boiling point.

*W-wait a minute... Are they about to...?*

I swallowed nervously. Sure enough, the man and woman started slowly removing each other's clothes, and I could only watch helplessly as they tumbled headfirst into the throes of passion. Things got pretty graphic from there—definitely not the sort of scene you could upload to YouTube. No, this was a full-on sex scene.

*Oh god... Please, anything but this... Wait, did they just...? Sheesh, man!*

I could feel my face growing hot. This was *anything* but a pleasant surprise—no, it was a trap, plain and simple. The sort of intimate lovemaking scene that felt *explicitly* engineered to make things awkward for the whole family when you were all gathered in the living room on a Friday night, flipping through channels to see if there were any good movies on TV.

As I prayed with all my heart for the torture to end soon, I ventured a nervous glance over at Ushio to gauge just how badly she was taking it—and my breath

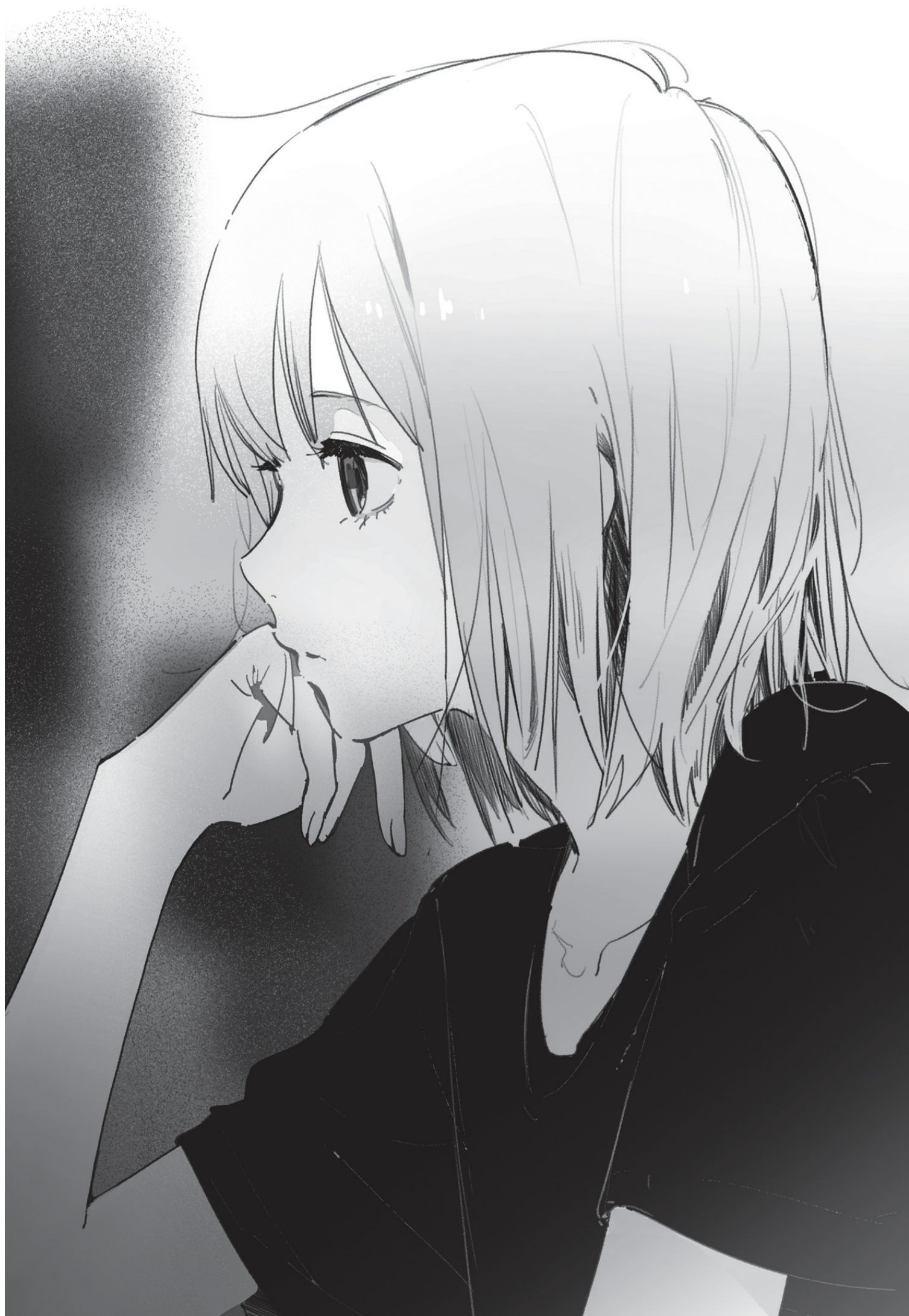
caught in my throat. Her face was not flushed with embarrassment or twisted in disgust. If anything, she just looked bored: head tilted to one side, gazing listlessly at the screen with eyes so cold and empty, you'd think they'd frozen over. It was like her mind had completely checked out.

I was taken aback by her reaction. It was a bit of a strange feeling, I had to admit—like I'd just been given a peek behind the curtain and seen a glimpse of some fundamental part of Ushio as a person.

All of a sudden, the light returned to her eyes. I looked back at the TV and saw that the film had now cut away from the sex scene to something brighter and much more ordinary. Not wanting to be caught staring, I forced myself to keep my eyes on the screen for the remainder of the film. The story definitely picked up from there, ultimately ending in a climactic showdown in which the protagonist was finally able to confront and conquer their trauma and defeat their fated foil. Roll credits.

“Wow. That was pretty good, huh?” said Ushio, turning to face me.





“Mm? Oh, yeah. Definitely,” I agreed. Distracting sex scene aside, I was pretty satisfied with the film and its production values as a whole.

“Gosh, that one scene was so good... The one where the girl steps in to protect the sheep, and—”

Ushio proceeded to gush about some of her favorite moments throughout the film, her face as glowing as her praise. It made me wonder if the bored, listless expression I’d seen during the sex scene was nothing but a figment of my imagination. I did my best to share my major impressions as well, but frankly, there wasn’t a single scene in the movie that left as big an impression on me as that solitary glimpse of Ushio’s face in profile.

*Man... She and I really are completely different, huh?*

I didn’t know where this sudden thought had come from. But there was something about this whole situation that only served to hammer home the sheer magnitude of the disparity between Ushio and me—both as individuals and in terms of our lived experiences. Not that I found this a particularly unpleasant or saddening realization. It was just the way things were, plain and simple, and I could live with that.

Her rave review continued for a while, with me offering my half-hearted impressions of the film here and there. Soon enough, the six o’clock chime rang outside.

“Aw, shoot. Guess it’s time for me to get going.” Ushio packed up her things and rose to her feet. She even tried to take down the tray with our empty drink cups on it, but I told her to just leave it where it was and stood up to walk her downstairs.

“You planning to come over tomorrow as well?” I asked.

“Nope, can’t. I’ve got counseling tomorrow.”

Right, she’d mentioned that she’d been going in for routine counseling sessions since July. According to her, this wasn’t because she felt like she was in need of any mental help in particular but because Yuki, her stepmom, had talked her into it.



“Oh, gotcha,” I replied. “Guess I won’t see you until the day after, then.”

“Probably not, yeah.” She slipped on her sneakers in the entryway, then turned back to me. “Okay. See you later.”

“Yeah, have a good night.”

And with that, Ushio walked out the front door.

The day after tomorrow just so happened to be the one scheduled day when all students had to go in to school for a mid-break check-in over summer vacation, which meant I’d probably get to see not just Ushio but Hoshihara as well. As exciting as that prospect was, I had to admit that my enthusiasm was dampened a bit by the lingering awkwardness hanging over us due to the whole kiss debacle. That, and just not wanting to have to go back to school in general. I swallowed these conflicting feelings for the time being, trying my best to put them out of sight and out of mind as I walked back up the stairs to my bedroom.

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For the first time in almost three weeks, I was riding my bike down that familiar narrow road—the one that cut through the paddy fields on the way to school. The rice plants had flourished to the point that it felt like someone had spread a massive green carpet across the surrounding area, their blades looking long and sharp enough in the morning sunlight that a careless touch could probably draw blood.

To no one’s surprise, it was yet another scorcher. When I recalled that there was no air conditioning in our classroom, I felt a wave of depression crash over me. And the closer I got to Tsubakioka High, the more students I spotted looking just as miserable and despondent as me. I merged into the crowd flowing in through the main gate, then parked my bike in the bike lot.

“Morning!”

“Hey, man! Been a while, huh?!”

“Ooh, did you get a little tan?”

“Dude, I haven’t even *started* my summer homework yet, heh.”

“How’s it hangin’, fellas?!”

Friendly greetings and small talk echoed through the entryway, but I carved my way through the noise until I reached the shoe cubbies. It was there that I spotted a familiar head of chestnut hair tied up in thin, frayed pigtails on either side. They wagged like puppy tails as the girl slipped on her indoor shoes with unsteady feet. It was Natsuki Hoshihara.

Thinking it would be a bit too cold to walk past without saying anything, I made the bold choice to approach and greet her with a “Good morning.” Right then, she turned and stared at me like a deer in headlights, then quickly regained her composure and put on a friendly smile to paper over her obvious surprise.

“Hey, morning!” she said. “Long time no see... Or, well, I guess it hasn’t been *that* long, has it? I mean, we did see each other at the library the other day.”

“That’s true, yeah,” I replied as I changed out of my street shoes as well. From there, the two of us walked up to our classroom together. As we made our way down the hall, we passed through a veritable throng of other students—presumably kids who’d already dropped their stuff off and were now heading to the gymnasium for the first-period assembly. This did make me feel like we should probably get a move on, but I opted to hang back and match Hoshihara’s walking pace instead.

“So tell me, Kamiki-kun...” she said, her tone a bit stiffer than usual. “Have you been in contact with Ushio-chan at all since then?”

She was being purposely vague, but I could only assume she meant “since the last day of school” and not “since we saw each other at the library,” given that neither of us had said a word about Ushio during that brief and awkward interaction.

“Yeah, I have, actually. She’s been spending a lot of time at my house lately.”

“Wait, she has?!” Hoshihara was apparently so blindsided by this revelation that she had to stop dead in her tracks.

I resisted letting out a cartoonish “Oops!” Maybe that part would have been better left unsaid, if only to avoid making Hoshihara feel like we were

intentionally leaving her out.

“Er, sorry. Let me clarify. It’s not like we’ve been hanging out and doing fun stuff without you or anything like that. She’s literally just been chilling at my place to kill time, that’s all... Nothing exciting, or else I promise we’d invite you too.”

“And what does this ‘chilling’ entail, exactly...?”

I was a little taken aback that she felt the need to interrogate me about this particular word choice, but figured I should answer honestly.

“I mean, sometimes we’ll work on our homework together, I guess. Maybe pop in a movie, at most... Nothing crazy.”

“Oh, I see. Interesting.”

There were definitely some unspoken implications behind this curt reply, made further evident by the sudden hint of suspicion in her eyes. Something told me I should probably offer a bit more context to clear up any doubts, but I worried as to whether it was my place to tell her even the vaguest details about Ushio’s family situation.

As I hemmed and hawed, Hoshihara abruptly went on, practically giving me an out: “Got it!” she said with a satisfied nod. “Glad to hear you two are getting along, then.”

There was a touch of supportive acceptance in her mild-mannered smile, but I still got the impression that my silence only served to deepen her misunderstanding of the situation, so I wanted to clear things up. Unfortunately, we were interrupted before I could say another word.

“Morning,” said a voice from behind us.

Hoshihara and I spun around to see Ushio standing right in front of us. There was no hint of an expression on her face as she turned her ash-gray eyes on me, then Hoshihara—but I could still feel some tension in the way she gripped the shoulder strap of her book bag. Perhaps she’d been standing nervously nearby, waiting for the right moment to walk up and say hello.

“Oh, hey! M-morning, Ushio-chan!” Hoshihara replied clumsily.

“Hey there,” I said after a delay—but the time lag between her response and mine didn’t make my greeting feel any more natural than hers.

*Man... This is really uncomfortable.*

And I was pretty sure all three of us felt it. Not that there’d been any real awkwardness when it was only me and Ushio, but once Hoshihara got added into the mix, there was no avoiding the elephant in the room. The three of us simply stood there in the middle of the hallway without saying a word, a few of our fellow students casting glances in our direction as they passed us by.

“W-well, guess we should go drop off our stuff,” I suggested, not wanting to draw any more unwanted attention to ourselves. Plus, we couldn’t be late for the assembly. Ushio and Hoshihara nodded in agreement, and the three of us walked over to the stairwell together. Even then, the stifling atmosphere between us refused to abate. It just kept hanging over us like a suffocating shroud of malaise.

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For once, the school assembly progressed through its agenda at a breakneck pace (for fear of students coming down with heatstroke, I assumed). They quickly went down the ledger celebrating all of the various sports teams’ achievements. Then, after what couldn’t have even been a three-minute speech from the principal, the whole assembly wrapped up in less than an hour, and we were dismissed.

“Yo. What up, Kamiki?”

“Mm?”

On the way back to the classroom from the gym, Hasumi strode up alongside me. I hadn’t seen him since the last day of spring semester, but he looked just as sleepy and lethargic as ever. He sized me up while we walked, then raised an eyebrow.

“You’ve been cooped up inside all break, haven’t you?” he asked.

“Yikes, man. How did you know? That’s super creepy...”

“Easy. You’ve got, like, the opposite of a tan, my dude.”

I compared the skin tone of my arm to Hasumi's. His was definitely darker, but considering that he was in the school's table tennis club, he'd probably been riding his bike to school just about every day over summer vacation. Generally speaking, I didn't consider being more or less tan a point of pride or shame, but I did feel a strange sense of competitiveness when it came to Hasumi and his smart remarks.

"Well," I said, "it's not like I've been holed up indoors the *whole* time, for your information. I still go out to the library and the video rental store and stuff."

"I wouldn't really call those 'fun' outings, bro."

"Oh yeah? Then what cool stuff have *you* been up to this summer, huh? And don't say table tennis—that doesn't count," I added, knowing there was no way he'd been more outgoing than me if we included that little caveat.

"I mean, me and the guys had a nice barbecue the other day. Oh, and I went to a pretty sweet summer festival just before that."

"Huh. You don't say..."

I immediately deflated. Apparently, he'd been making the most of his summer vacation after all. I should've known, as I'd seen signs of this before, but for all his "unassuming background character" vibes, Hasumi actually seemed to be leading quite a full and fulfilling high school career.

"What are you moping about now?" he asked.

"I mean, it's kinda depressing to hear that you've been going out and having a really enjoyable break and stuff, while I've just been sitting around at home..."

"Yeah, and? You jealous?"

"Don't rub it in. You're only making it worse," I said, each plodding footstep feeling heavier than the last as we ascended the stairs to the second floor.

"I dunno, man. I don't think there's anything inherently more enjoyable about going out and doing stuff compared to staying home."

"Really? You don't think?"

"Nah, it's gonna vary from person to person, my man. If you're the type of guy whose favorite thing in the whole wide world is to just read a ton of books

or watch movies in the comfort of your own home, more power to you. I don't think that's a less valid way of enjoying your break at all."

"I mean...fair point, yeah."

He was right, obviously—though it did feel a bit like he was (accurately) calling me a hermit, which was kind of embarrassing. Still, I wanted to take these wise words to heart and stop comparing myself to others.

We arrived at Classroom 2-A shortly thereafter, and a few minutes later, Ms. Iyo waltzed into class. She was wearing a white dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up and a pair of tight-fitting pants, and her long ponytail swayed from side to side with every step she took. I noticed a thick stack of photocopied handouts in her arms as well. She stepped up onto the raised podium and clapped twice to get everyone's attention.

"All right, everyone! Let's all take our seats!" My fellow classmates obediently cut their conversations short and returned to their own desks. She gave the classroom a quick scan, and then her lips curled up with glee. "Great, looks like we're all accounted for! Also, wow, Kidacchi! You've gotten so tan! And Utajima—have you had *another* growth spurt? Ooh, hey! Ushio! Your hair's grown out a little bit! I've gotta say, you guys, getting to see you all grow up in real time is one of the best parts of being a teacher."

And so Ms. Iyo went on offering her personal appraisal of each student in lieu of roll call. I was pretty impressed at how she managed to come up with a unique comment for every single one. Then my turn rolled around:

"And, Kamiki, you... Gosh, you haven't changed one bit!"

I did not take this as a compliment—even if it *was* completely accurate.

When her long-winded roll call was finally over, Ms. Iyo passed out the handouts stacked on her lectern to the students sitting in the front of each row.

"Now, as you all know, the school culture festival is coming up in October. I realize that's still two whole months away, but we do need to start planning for it if we're going to be ready in time. So today, I want to at least figure out what our class is going to do for the event and who our festival committee members are going to be."



I looked down at the sheet of paper on my desk. Printed on it was a blank space in which we could write our preferred class contribution for the culture festival, and below that was a list of acceptable examples, like running a café or putting on a play.

“I’ll be adding up your votes and taking them into consideration,” said Ms. Iyo. “But to be clear, it’ll be us teachers who make the final decision. We can’t have every single class say they want to do a rock band performance and then have the culture festival turn into a music festival, after all! We don’t mind a little bit of overlap, though, so we *will* try to go with your majority vote if possible.” She glanced down at her watch. “Okay, I’ll give you the next ten minutes to deliberate among yourselves. Feel free to talk it over and try to come to a unanimous decision, if that works. Okay, you may begin!”

As soon as she gave the signal, the classroom burst to life with chatter.

“What do we do, guys?”

“Whatever’s easiest, I say...”

“Let’s do a café! One where the girls have to wear maid outfits!”

“We could do a crepe stand or something?”

“I’m *really* good at making takoyaki, just FYI!”

“I wanna play guitar!”

Suggestions were flying to and fro as all of my classmates chimed in. It seemed just about everyone had a different idea in mind. When I was a freshman last year, my class had done a yakisoba booth—though my only responsibility was helping to make the signage for it, so I didn’t have to do all that much the day of. I wondered what my duties might entail this time around.

*Eh. Probably the same as last year*, I figured. Chances were, I’d get assigned some sort of behind-the-scenes work, so I figured I might as well write in something easy that didn’t require a lot of advance preparation—probably a food stand. Maybe hot dogs or something. That seemed easy enough. *Okay, let’s go with that.*

It took me less than a minute to fill in my answer, yet the majority of my

classmates were still having trouble making up their minds. I looked over at Hoshihara, and sure enough, she was floundering with indecision, talking with her friend Shiina about how hard it was to pick only one. The two of them were sitting pretty close to one another, so I'd often see them chatting during break periods.

"Okay, everyone! Time's up!" said Ms. Iyo once ten minutes had passed, and everyone passed their handouts forward. "Great, I'll tally your votes later and let you know what the faculty decides. Just try not to be disappointed if it doesn't end up being your first choice!" She clacked the stack of papers on her lectern to straighten them out. "We have to select our festival committee members too. Before I say anything else, though, is there anyone who'd like to volunteer?"

In stark contrast to the excited yammering from a moment ago, the classroom was almost comically silent this time around.

Ms. Iyo gave a strained grin. "No takers, huh? Well, I'm sorry to say, but we do need to select one guy and one girl from our class before the day is over. So if you can't decide among yourselves, I'll have to start drawing names out of a hat. Sure you're all okay with that?"

The classroom stirred with commotion once more. No one actively *wanted* to be on the festival committee. Who'd volunteer to take on a bunch of extra tedious duties if they could help it? Though Tsubakioka High wasn't the biggest school, we did go pretty all-out for our annual culture festivals, so it was definitely a whole lot of work to organize and prepare for. And since only upperclassmen were eligible to be on the committee, no one in our class had prior experience doing so either. But we *had* all seen last year's committee members running themselves ragged all around campus, scrambling to get everything ready in time. It was not the sort of position one would typically volunteer themselves for purely on a whim—especially not those students who were already busy with extracurricular activities or had part-time jobs.

As the air in the classroom grew ever so slightly tense, I started hearing people turning to their friends and saying, "You do it." But these unwanted nominations were all met with replies ranging from "No way," to "I'm too busy," to "Why don't *you* do it?" In the end, not a single student was willing to

take on the responsibility.

“No one, huh? Well, shucks,” said Ms. Iyo. “Guess I’ll just have to—”

She stopped short as her and everyone else’s attention was suddenly drawn to a slender arm jutting straight up toward the ceiling. Someone had finally raised their hand. Someone I wasn’t expecting.

“You’re volunteering yourself, Natsuki?” Ms. Iyo asked for confirmation.

“Well, uh...I figured I might as well give it a shot, seeing as how nobody else wants to do it,” said Hoshihara, lowering her hand with a sheepish, uncertain smile.

“Hey, that’s the spirit! Okay, sounds like we’ve got our female slot covered!”

Hoshihara’s girl friends offered some various cheers of support, which she responded to with a bashful grin and a single, all-encompassing “Thanks, guys...”

This was pretty out of character for her, I thought. From all I’d seen, Hoshihara had never been the type to take charge and volunteer herself for a leadership role—not that I would say she was unsuited for it. Despite her occasional ditziness, she had plenty of friends and was well liked, so I could certainly see people rallying around her.

“All right, now we just need to pick our male candidate. Who’s it gonna be, guys?”

Murmurs rippled through the classroom once again. For a split second, the thought of volunteering myself alongside Hoshihara occurred to me, but that idea evaporated when I realized that everyone would assume I was only offering to do it *now* because I had a crush on her. Plus, I just wasn’t the sort of person who ever liked to be in charge of things or lead people.

Right when I decided to lie low and see what happened, I caught Ushio looking in my direction, and our eyes locked. She gave a subtle jerk of her chin, a silent signal to raise my hand.

I nearly let out an audible “Huh?” and then shook my head. My inner spinelessness was telling me this was *not* the time or place to throw caution to

the wind and put myself out there. I appreciated Ushio's supportiveness of me pursuing Hoshihara, but I simply lacked the confidence to volunteer.

Ushio frowned with disappointment and faced forward once again. Apparently, my message got through—or so I thought, before she reached for her phone and started fiddling with it under her desk. A few moments later, I felt my own phone vibrate in my pocket. I checked my notifications, and sure enough, I had a new message from Ushio.

*"You should do it. It's the perfect chance for you and Natsuki to get closer."*

My heart wavered. To volunteer, or not to volunteer? Sure, maybe joining the committee would help bridge the gap between me and Hoshihara a little bit. If I was lucky, we might even come out of the experience a whole lot closer. But I also worried about giving our other classmates a read on my intentions, and I wasn't thrilled at the prospect of taking on a bunch of additional work.

Right, that was the *real* thing to consider here: if I joined the committee, I'd probably be very busy come the new semester. I'd no doubt get roped into all sorts of random tasks and meetings and activities, which meant I'd probably have to stay at school pretty late, which would make it very hard for us to even walk home together every day like we did before summer vacation. Yes, it was a chance to get closer to Hoshihara, but I'd probably have a lot less time to spend with Ushio as a result.

*Wait a minute.* Was this literally a matter of me being forced to choose between Hoshihara and Ushio? *No, hang on. It can't be that dire. Let's think this through.*

Surely being on the festival committee wouldn't mean I had to stay late after school every single day, right? I mean, there were people in clubs and on sports teams who joined the festival committee all the time, and they managed to juggle those responsibilities with all their other obligations. Chances were, my average day-to-day schedule wouldn't change all that much, regardless of whether I volunteered or not.

It was at this point that I realized something: I'd been sitting here looking for an excuse *not* to join the committee. These concerns about whether I'd be too busy, or not wanting our other classmates to assume I had ulterior motives...

They all boiled down to me wanting to subject myself to the smallest amount of risk possible. Here I was, a guy who had feelings for Hoshihara, faced with the perfect excuse to get closer to her—and all I could think about was myself.

That wouldn't do. That wouldn't do at all.

I made up my mind.

I cast aside my inhibitions and slowly raised my hand.

"I-I'll do it, if no one else will..." I said, my voice cracking so badly that even I wanted to laugh at how pathetic I sounded. Immediately, all eyes in the classroom were on me. Yeah, this was definitely not a feeling I was used to. It made me feel weirdly antsy, and I couldn't help but flash an awkward smile.

"Hey, that's great!" said Ms. Iyo, her cheer a stark contrast to my distress. "Way to take one for the team, Kamiki! Sounds like we've got both our class's committee members covered, then! Natsuki and Kamiki, I'll give you further instructions at a later date. For now, just be ready to give it your all come September!"

There was no turning back now, but I was pretty sure I'd made the right choice. By becoming a committee member, I'd have far more opportunities to speak with Hoshihara, and I could eventually clear up the haze of awkwardness that lingered between us. I prayed that day would come sooner rather than later.

This was the last thing on the agenda for this short check-in day at school. Ms. Iyo said a few parting remarks, class was officially dismissed, and the vibe in the room immediately relaxed. As I stood up and slung my bag over my shoulder, I noticed Hoshihara and Ushio talking on the other side of the classroom. Only a few seconds later, this interaction concluded, and Hoshihara walked over to me.

My heart swelled with anticipation. I felt like a puppy waiting for its master to come home as I stood there, wondering if she was coming to greet me as a fellow committee member or invite me to walk home together. Sadly, I was wrong on both counts.

"Sorry," she said. "Just wanted to let you know that I already promised to go

home with some other friends today...”

My predictions were totally off base. I wished I hadn’t gotten my hopes up in the first place; it only made the resultant shock of being let down sting all the worse.

“G-gotcha. No worries.”

“Oh, and I look forward to working with you on the festival committee, yeah? Anyway, talk to you later.”

“Yeah... See you around.”

Hoshihara turned her back to me, then wove her way through the rows of desks to link up with her other group of friends. She and these other girls filtered out of the classroom, making loud but lighthearted small talk all the while.

I let out a sigh and hung my head. It wasn’t that I was so attached to the idea of walking home with her today or anything like that, mind you—just that I couldn’t help but wonder if she was deliberately taking some distance from Ushio and me, and that hurt to think about. I wanted to believe I was only being paranoid, but all the negative emotions just kept growing stronger as these lingering questions swirled around inside my chest, making it harder and harder to breathe easy.

“...You gonna be okay?” Ushio asked with concern as she made her way over to me. Apparently, my abject disappointment was written all over my face.

“Yeah, I’ll be fine. Thanks for the encouraging message, by the way. Feels like volunteering was definitely the right decision.”

“I admit, I *did* worry that it might be a little too forward...but I still think it’s the perfect chance for you and Natsuki to get to know each other better.”

“Yeah, agreed. Though who knows whether I’ll blow that opportunity or not...”

“Oh, stop. You’ll do fine. I’m sure of it.”

Ushio smiled softly at me. I gave her a little half-hearted grin in return, and then the two of us exited the classroom together.



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The sun was still beating down outside, so Ushio and I opted to actually ride our bikes home for once in order to spend as little time out in the heat as possible. We didn't really even talk much. Before I knew it, we'd reached the T-shaped intersection where our commutes diverged, and we went our separate ways.

As soon as I made it back to my house, I used my spare key to let myself in, then tugged off my necktie on my way down the hallway so I could immediately throw my uniform and socks in the laundry. From there, I went into the kitchen, where I guzzled down the whole bottle of iced barley tea. Right after that, I boiled up some somen noodles for myself.

"...Yeugh. This tastes like nothing," I said as I slurped the noodles out of the bowl. I knew I should have added some condiments to spice it up.

Once I finished eating, I soaked my bowl and utensils in the sink, then retreated up to my bedroom. After turning the AC unit in my room on full blast, I crawled into bed and heaved a great big sigh. The moment I lay down, I felt suddenly overcome by fatigue; perhaps the fact that I'd just eaten had something to do with it. Thankfully, I had nothing else left to do today, and Ushio wasn't planning to come over either. I closed my tired eyes and slowly relinquished my grip on consciousness.

I was yanked out of a deep and therapeutic sleep by the sound of my phone vibrating. Wearily, I creaked open my eyelids to see the light from the setting sun pouring in through the window. What time was it, even? The room felt a bit chilly, given that I'd set my AC unit about as low as it could go, so I had to pull my cold feet back under the covers. *Wait, I should probably answer the phone.* I lifted my tired body up out of bed and rubbed the sleep out of my eyes before picking my phone up from beside my pillow.

"Yeah, hello...?"

"*Oh, hey, Sakuma. Is this a good time?*" came the husky voice now echoing through my groggy leaden skull. It was Ushio—though I still checked the caller ID on screen just to make sure, for whatever reason. And indeed, my ears

weren't playing tricks on me.

"Uh... Sure, I can talk. What's up?"

*"Wait. Were you sleeping just now?"*

"Yeah, how'd you know?"

*"You just don't sound fully awake yet, that's all. Sorry for interrupting your nap."*

"Nah, it's fine. I shouldn't be sleeping in the middle of the day anyhow. So, what did you want to talk about?"

It was pretty unusual to get an actual phone call from Ushio; until now, we'd always communicated via text.

*"Are you doing anything day after tomorrow?"*

"No, not that I can think of."

*"Oh, good. Because I was thinking I'd ask Natsuki if she wants to go out and do something together, just the three of us."*

"Ah, gotcha... Wait. You, Hoshihara, and who else?"

*"You, obviously. Why else would I be calling you about it? You sure you're not still half-asleep?"*

"If I was, I'm wide awake now."

The three of us all going out to do something together? This was exactly the sort of stereotypical summer vacation outing I'd been yearning for—but it was so unexpected that I was more bewildered than elated.

"Where's this coming from?"

Ushio faltered a moment before responding, *"I just noticed that there's a little bit of tension between you two right now. And obviously, I know that's not your ideal situation, so I wanted to do my part to help you both feel comfortable around each other again. Especially considering I was the one who made things awkward in the first place..."*

This much was true. All judgments aside, Ushio's actions *had* been the primary catalyst for Hoshihara and I drifting apart in recent weeks. I didn't hold

that against Ushio or anything, but it *was* the simple fact of the matter.

*“Sorry if I’m being too presumptuous here,”* said Ushio.

“No, no! You’re totally fine,” I assured her. “I’d love to hang out. I’m down for literally whatever, just tell me when and where.”

*“Okay, cool,”* she said, sounding genuinely relieved. *“Glad to hear it.”*

“What did you have in mind, though?”

*“Yeah, so, I kinda figured we could brainstorm that together over the phone. If you have any ideas, I’m all ears. Anywhere in particular you’d like to go?”*

“Oh, man, uh... Let me think...”

In all honesty, I didn’t really care *where* we went or what we did—be it a day at the beach, a hike way up in the mountains, or anything in between. But considering that both Ushio and Hoshihara would be there, plus our current situation, it was probably a good idea to think things through more carefully.

The beach seemed like a bit much for our current friendship level. Despite it being perhaps the quintessential summer outing, it typically entailed getting in the water, or at least lying out to get some sun—which you would only do with very close friends, considering both activities required swimsuits.

Not that I wasn’t interested to see what Hoshihara might look like in a swimsuit, mind you. But I already knew that I’d totally flounder and be even more awkward if I actually had to interact with her in a bikini or something, and that nervousness outweighed my curiosity. And as for Ushio, well...I wasn’t even sure if she would *want* to wear one or not. Something told me that if I saw her in the right swimsuit, I might get some pretty conflicted feelings there as well, just knowing how slender she was around the waist...

*“Did you come up with anything?”*

“Not yet, sorry,” I said. “Still trying to figure out what sort of swimsuit you’d wear...”

*“Wait, huh?!”*

Ack! There I went, letting my imagination run wild again.

“Er, I mean, not that I was really thinking hard about it or anything! Just a random curious thought, y’know—nothing weird, I swear! Don’t worry about it. In fact, just forget I said anything!”

*“O-okay...? If you say so...”*

I wasn’t sure how in the world I managed to dig myself out of that hole, but I decided I should probably nix the beach idea for the time being. Clearly I wasn’t emotionally mature enough to deal with the accompanying stimuli just yet.

“Um, what about you?” I said, changing tack. “Anywhere *you’d* like to go?”

*“No, not really... Oh, but I think I’d rather go somewhere that’s mostly indoors, if we can help it. What with how hot it’s been lately, you know. Kinda figure Natsuki might prefer something a bit cozier and less physically demanding too, given that she’s a bit of a klutz and all.”*

“Gotcha, okay.”

That *did* narrow things down a bit. What would be fun that we could do indoors? See a movie? Go bowling? Do karaoke? None of these options felt like they fit the bill. It was summer vacation, after all; if possible, I wanted to pick something a *bit* more engaging than whatever you could easily do on your way home from school any old time of year. In which case... *Oh, I know!* An idea popped into my head—one that instantly felt all too perfect, like the sensation you get when a puzzle piece slides snugly into place.

“What if we went to the aquarium?” I said. “The one over in the city.”

I’d seen an article in the newspaper a few months back about how it had just been renovated. I remembered thinking it might be fun to go and check out, but at the time, I didn’t feel like I had any friends I was close enough with to reach out to and invite, so I’d given up on it.

*“Ooh, hey. Now there’s an idea,”* said Ushio. *“That place is pretty popular, isn’t it?”*

“Yeah, and it’s indoors, so it’ll be cool and comfy too. No need to strain ourselves or endure the heat. Plus, I do always enjoy getting to see all the different fish and stuff.”

*“Well, shoot. Sounds like we’ve got a winner, maybe. Okay, let’s go with that for now. I’ll try to reach out to Natsuki later tonight and see if she’s interested.”*

“Cool, yeah. Thanks for doing this.”

*“I’ll get back in touch when it’s time to iron out the details. Talk to you later.”*

“Roger that,” I said, and we both hung up.

I fell backward onto my bed. How many years had it been now since I’d last gone to the aquarium? I was pretty excited for it, and I had my fingers crossed that Hoshihara would be on board as well. I was still a little worried about meeting up to do something fun before we’d had a chance to properly clear the air, but oh well. I figured it would probably be fine.

“Food!” Ayaka called out from downstairs. It was already dinnertime. I turned off my AC and headed down to the living room.

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Two days later, I found myself standing in front of the ticket gate at Tsubakioka Station, waiting for my friends to arrive. It was 9:50 a.m.—well past rush hour, so pedestrian traffic was pretty thin. I was standing inside the station tunnel, so the sun wasn’t hitting me directly, but it was still pretty damn hot. The glare outside was so strong, it made everything look blindingly white.

I checked my phone. It was just about time for the other two to show up, so I took another look around the premises, and sure enough, I spotted a girl in a charcoal newsboy cap heading straight in my direction. She wore a white blouse with a decorative bow around the neck and a high-waisted skirt. It was an almost unnaturally adorable outfit for someone living out here in the rural suburbs, and it made Ushio stand out so much that I couldn’t believe it was her at first glance. To be fair, she had her cap angled so low that it covered her eyes, so it took me a few moments to be certain it was her.

When she finally came to a stop in front of me, though, she lifted the brim ever so slightly. “Sorry,” she said. “You weren’t waiting too long, I hope?”

“Oh, no, not at all,” I replied. “Just got here myself, actually.”

I couldn’t help but take a moment to admire her choice of clothing. It was so

different from her school uniform or the casual clothes she'd wear over to my house that I was honestly struck by just how...*ladylike* she looked. And yes, it was a cute ensemble—but more than anything, I was impressed at how naturally she wore it.

“Wow... Those clothes look really good on you,” I said. “For a second there, I couldn't even tell it was you.”

“R-really?” she said, nervously narrowing her shoulders as she fiddled with the pleats of her skirt. “To be honest, I had a more casual outfit laid out, but Yuki-san kept insisting I wear this instead... Y-you don't think it's too much, then? I feel like it might be a little cutesy for me...”

“Nah, it looks great. And if anyone tried to say otherwise, I'd tell them to go get their eyes checked.”

It was only after the words left my lips that I realized just how much it sounded like a stereotypical suave attempt at flirtation, which made me a little embarrassed. Maybe I was just in rare form today. Not only was Ushio dressed extremely cutely, but this was also the first time in quite a while I'd actually gone out to do something with friends.

“So you like it, then, huh? Okay, cool...” Ushio mumbled like she was trying to convince herself, then averted her gaze. She was feeling bashful, apparently. It was a pretty girly mannerism—one that I realized the old me might have struggled to reconcile with my previous image of her, but now I felt totally comfortable appreciating these things about her and even complimenting her on her outfit. I was kind of glad to feel my inner sensibilities toward her starting to shift and mature in this way.







“Good thing it’s a nice day today,” I said. “Not that it really matters, since we’re going to be indoors most of the time.”

Ushio cleared her throat as if to collect herself and turned her gaze back on me. “Still better than rain, at least. Though I can’t say I’m loving this heat either.” Though she said as much, her face was perfectly cool, with not a stray bead of sweat to be seen.

“Did you get dropped off, then?”

“Hm? No, I rode my bike. Why?”

“I’m just surprised you’re not sweating more, in that case.”

“Ah, yeah. Probably because I’ve got some cold packs on for that exact reason. I *really* hate being sweaty.”

“Oh, huh. I didn’t even notice. Aren’t you supposed to put those things on your forehead or whatever?”

“No, they make sticky ones that you can put all over your body too. Like on the back of your neck, for instance. Look.”

She reached back and pulled her hair up to show me the nape of her neck. I leaned over to take a look, and sure enough, there was a cold pack affixed there, just below her hairline. *Interesting*. This *did* seem like a decent hack for keeping oneself cool. Maybe I’d have to try it myself on one of these upcoming scorchers.

Also, this was neither here nor there, but the back of Ushio’s neck was so flawless, it almost felt like admiring a work of art—pale, slender, and with a soft, porcelain sheen. And while I didn’t know whether she did any tweezing or waxing or whatever, her hairline was impeccably groomed. On top of that, I even caught a slight whiff of her sweet shampoo mixed in with the scent of deodorant. Even though I wasn’t looking with ulterior motives or anything like that, I couldn’t help but just stand there and stare—that is, until the sound of a cell phone vibrating brought me back to my senses. Ushio reached into her skirt pocket and pulled out her phone to answer the call.

“Yes, hello?” she said. “Yeah, I’m standing with Sakuma here outside the

ticket gate... Okay, got it.” She hung up, then turned to me. “Sounds like Natsuki’s almost here.”

“O-oh, cool,” I said, my voice turning pitchy and shrill. I didn’t know what I was getting so wound up about; I really needed to calm down.

Ushio pointed at the ticket gate. “Guess we should head on through, then?”

“Yeah, sounds good.”

Hoshihara would be arriving by train from the station closest to her house, so we were planning to meet up on the platform. We stopped by the ticket window before the gate. I fed a thousand-yen bill into the automated machine, and Ushio charged the fare to her prepaid IC card. Once we’d both finished our transactions, we headed through the gate. After we linked up with Hoshihara, we’d hop on the train and ride it to the station closest to our destination. It would be a little bit of a walk to the aquarium, but we’d probably still make it there before noon. But before I could finish reviewing our basic itinerary in my head, Ushio elbowed me to tell me that the remaining member of our entourage had arrived as she turned to look down the outbound line.

I followed her gaze, and sure enough, Hoshihara was making her way toward us. She wore a solid-color T-shirt tucked into a flowy, drawstring skort. Slung diagonally across her chest was a little purse that whapped against her opposite thigh to the rhythm of her hurried footsteps. As soon as she noticed us, she gave a great big smile and waved. I was convinced she had to be an angel. I had to actively resist the urge to start grinning like an idiot as I lifted my hand to wave back.

“Sorry for the wait, you guys!” she said. “Good to see you, Kamiki-kun! And—wait, Ushio-chan, is that you?!” Her eyes went wide as she looked the other girl over. “Oh my gosh, look how *cute* you are! I can’t believe how good that looks on you!”

“Thanks, Natsuki,” said Ushio. “Though I’d say your outfit’s just as cute.”

“No, no, no! I look like I just rolled outta bed compared to you!”

“I don’t think that’s true at all. You look great.”

“Whaaat? No waaay... You really think so?”

Hoshihara bashfully scratched her head. *God, how can literally all of her little mannerisms be so adorable?* I asked myself internally—and then we made eye contact. She turned her whole body toward me, then leaned in one direction as if striking a little pose.

“Eh heh heh! Well?” she asked. “What do you think?”

I thought her whole existence was so radiant, it almost made her a little hard to look at for long.

“I...I would agree that it looks very nice on you, yes,” I said.

“Sheesh, Kamiki-kun—why are you talking like you’re my *butler* or something?! Ah ha ha!” Her laughter rang in my ears like a bell as she giggled at my inexplicable formality. I was feeling pretty damn shy all of a sudden. “Oh, right! I think the next train’s leaving, like, right now. We should probably get a move on, huh?!”

She trotted off ahead at a sprightly pace, and Ushio and I followed obediently behind. Things were feeling surprisingly convivial thus far; I’d been mentally preparing myself for a bit of awkwardness, but as of now, I couldn’t sense even a hint of it. I was sure Ushio probably felt surprised by it too, given that her whole reason for setting up this little excursion was to clear the air between Hoshihara and the two of us—but maybe we were both just being needlessly paranoid. The thought definitely took a load off my mind, and I was suddenly a lot more excited to be here. All I wanted right now was to forget about all the stuff that had been stressing me out and just focus on having a plain old good time today with my friends.

We hurried onto the train right as the intercom announced that the doors would be closing shortly. The car we picked wasn’t totally packed, but there were a good number of families and junior high kids, so it was still pretty full. Thankfully, the air conditioning was on, so it was nice and cool inside. There came the sound of compressed air rushing out as the doors finally closed, and the train set into motion. We’d be switching over to high-speed rail a couple stations down the line, so the three of us remained standing near the door in the back of the compartment.

“Hey, so tell me,” Hoshihara began, looking Ushio up and down. “Did you

coordinate that whole outfit all by yourself?”

“Not exactly. Yuki-san picked a few things out for me... I just chose the individual pieces I thought I’d be most comfortable in.”

“Wow, you’ve got naturally good fashion sense, then! You honestly look like a model or something... Ooh, hey! I know! Mind if I take some photos?!”

Hoshihara lifted her cell phone up to chest height, smiling giddily as though she’d just come up with a brilliant idea. Not that I could blame her—it *was* the sort of outfit one might want to preserve in photo form. Ushio apparently hadn’t been ready for this request at all, as she looked completely caught off guard. She started looking awkwardly around the train car, twisting uncomfortably from side to side.

Eventually, she said, “Well, as long as it’s just a few, I guess...”

“Yaaay! Thanks!” said Hoshihara. “Okay, lemme get one of you standing just like that real quick, for starters.” She quickly snapped an angled full-body shot. Ushio’s expression was a little bit stiff, but she was still pretty photogenic. “Ooh, nice! That turned out great! Kinda wanna get one without your hat on too, if that’s okay?”

“Fine, fine...” Ushio surrendered to Hoshihara’s pleading gaze and removed her newsboy cap. The friction caused her hair to pull up a bit before flopping back down. Each strand glistened like silk in the light as she shook her head gently to let it fall more naturally into place. It was a lovely sight to behold—in much the same way that a beautiful flower or a sky full of stars might evoke a tender sense of awe and reverence.

“Oh, man! Now *that’s* what I’m talking about!” said Hoshihara, snapping photos at the speed of light. It was at this point that she started requesting specific poses and expressions. “Okay, now stare directly into the camera... Great. Turn your head and gaze out the window like you’re really bored...”

Ushio was a little reluctant to play model for her at first, but she went along with it anyway and *almost* seemed to be enjoying it after a while. Once Hoshihara had taken about ten or so different photos, she finally slipped out of photographer mode. After taking a moment to review her work, she nodded with satisfaction and turned to me.

“I’ll be sure to send these to you later too, Kamiki-kun,” she said.

“Oh, sure. Thanks.”

Hoshihara flashed me a devilish grin, then looked back down at her phone.

*Wait. Huh? What was that little pause for just now?*

She’d lingered on the end of that gaze for what felt like a moment too long—almost like she was trying to tell me something without saying it out loud. Did I have something on my face? I checked my reflection in the train window just in case, but I didn’t see any crumbs or stray hairs or anything. Maybe I was overthinking it.

“Feels like everyone’s staring at us now,” Ushio mumbled with concern. I took a cursory glance around the train car and saw that, yes, a few of our fellow passengers were indeed looking in Ushio’s direction. A group of junior high girls appeared to be gossiping about her without any real intention of hiding it, talking about how delicate her features were and debating whether she was a foreigner or a model or something.

“Well, I guess that’s what you get when you do a whole impromptu photo shoot out in public,” I said.

“Ugh, that’s so embarrassing...” said Ushio, pulling her cap down to cover her eyes.

“Aw, c’mon! Have a little more confidence!” said Hoshihara, attempting to raise her spirits.

The train slowed to a stop as it rolled into the third station since leaving Tsubakioka. This was where we’d be switching lines. We stepped out from our commuter railcar and hopped on the rapid-service train that was waiting on a separate platform. There were a lot more passengers on this one, but given that we’d be riding it for the next forty or fifty minutes to reach our destination, we definitely wanted to find somewhere to sit down this time around.

We made our way down the aisle and luckily found a set of box seats for four that was totally unoccupied. Since Ushio was leading the pack, she went ahead and took one of the window seats—forcing me to decide whether to sit next to her or across from her. I ultimately chose the latter, figuring that it was better



to treat her like a girl than a good friend in this instance and let Hoshihara sit next to her instead. And, although it rarely crossed my mind at this point in time, I knew that Hoshihara had feelings for Ushio, which was all the more reason to let her have this chance to sit next to Ushio—or so I thought. As soon as I sat down, Hoshihara froze up and looked back and forth between me and Ushio in total disbelief.

“Natsuki?” said Ushio, sensing this sudden shift in her demeanor.

Hoshihara did a double take, then turned to me with a strained, awkward smile on her face. “C’mon, Kamiki-kun!” she said, like a reproachful parent. “You know that’s not where you’re supposed to sit!”

I was a little bit flummoxed by this. While I hadn’t been entirely sure myself, I *had* ultimately figured that letting Hoshihara sit next to Ushio was the best option. So for her to actually come out and tell me I was wrong for not sitting next to Ushio myself was a bit of a shocker. Was she really that opposed to the idea of sitting next to one of us? Or did she just feel too embarrassed to sit next to Ushio herself, and she wanted me to eliminate that option? Or maybe—just maybe—she thought she was doing *me* a favor? Was her wanting us to sit together a product of her having the wrong idea about me and Ushio, by chance? I couldn’t say, but regardless, I figured I should just shut up and comply with her instructions for now. Something told me that if I asked the reason why, things could get real awkward real quick.

“Oh, right,” I said. “Sorry, I’ll move over.”

I switched over and sat next to Ushio, playing it off as though it was just a simple oversight on my part. Ushio looked like she wanted to say something; I assumed she felt some sort of way about what Hoshihara was implying. But once the other girl sat down, Ushio pursed her lips and gave up on voicing whatever it was. There was a low hum from beneath us as the train departed the station. Outside the window, the scenery gradually started to pass us by.

“Gosh, it’s such a nice day, though, huh? Wait, do you think they’ve got a dolphin show at this aquarium?” Hoshihara asked, attempting to make idle conversation with us.

“I’m pretty sure they do, yeah,” said Ushio.

“Ooh! Wanna check it out, then?”

“Mmm, maybe. But I really don’t feel like getting wet today...”

“Aw, it’ll be fine as long as we sit in the back! Man, I’d *love* to see some dolphins, though! Ooh, and orcas!”

Ushio continued to offer simple but natural responses to Hoshihara’s excited gushing. All the while, I felt like I was watching the two of them converse from a long, long distance away. It was like, in their heads, nothing had even happened just now. They’d completely switched gears in the blink of an eye. Or was I the one lingering on the subject too long? Maybe it really *had* been nothing unusual from their perspective. All I knew was that I needed to stop overthinking things or I would be mentally exhausted before the day was done. I did my best to stifle my misgivings and join the conversation.

“Woo-hoo! We made it!” Hoshihara exclaimed, raising both arms triumphantly in the air as we arrived at our destination. There was a massive whale statue enshrined in the large, open area outside the main entrance. It had been about a ten-minute walk from the station to the aquarium, and due to its location along the waterfront, the slightest scent of salt and brine hung in the air. With so many on summer vacation, it was peak season for the establishment, so there was a pretty long line of guests leading up to the admittance window. We immediately took our place at the end of the queue, praying it would move quickly so that we could get out of the heat and into the air-conditioned building ASAP. Thankfully, it didn’t take too long for us to buy our tickets and get inside.

I let the cool air caress my skin as I walked in the main entrance and was immediately faced with a massive fish tank that took up the entire opposite wall.

“Whoa, this is *crazy*, you guys!”

Hoshihara trotted off on her own to get a closer look at the fish in the tank—so close, in fact, that her forehead was practically touching the glass. I couldn’t help but smile at the sight as Ushio and I walked up alongside her.

“Wow, yeah... That *is* quite the sight,” I said.

There were fish of all different species swimming around inside the massive tank, which was so vast that I could hardly even see the other side. I could see everything from small sharks to tightly packed schools of sardines to giant stingrays that looked less like they were swimming and more like birds flapping their wings, plus all sorts of other fish and sea creatures I didn’t even know the names of.

“Daaang...” said Hoshihara, entranced.

Right away, I was extremely glad to have come up with the aquarium idea. As I marveled at the vibrant colors of a nearby Japanese parrotfish, a giant bluefin tuna cut across my field of vision. It was moving at such a fast pace, I wondered how it managed to avoid bumping into any of the other fish, not to mention the walls of the tank. Hoshihara followed it with her eyes and audibly marveled at the sight.

“You know the thing about tuna, right?” she asked as she watched it go by.

“Not sure. What thing?” I replied.

“Apparently they can never stop swimming, or else they can’t breathe.”

“Oh yeah. So I’ve heard.”

“You think that means they *literally* never stop swimming from the moment they’re born? Wonder what it’d feel like—going your whole life like that, never being able to stop.”

For a moment, I tried to imagine myself living the life of a tuna.

“Yeah, sounds like it would be pretty inconvenient,” I said. “Imagine you see some cool shiny treasure or whatever on the ocean floor, but you can’t even stop to take a closer look.”

“Oh, man... That’s a really good point, yeah.” There was so much awe in her voice, you would’ve thought I’d just made a very astute and meaningful observation. In reality, I’d just been talking out of my ass, so I felt a little bad that she had taken it so seriously.

“Well, I’m sure it doesn’t feel like much of an inconvenience to *them*, though.

I mean, it's not like they've ever known any different. So to them, it's probably just the norm."

"You don't think they'd get jealous from looking at all the other types of fish that can stop whenever they want?"

"I dunno. Maybe *some* of them do, I guess. But others probably don't even care."

"Yeah, dang... That's weird to think about." Hoshihara's face took on a shade of lonesomeness. Meanwhile, I couldn't believe we were actually having a serious discussion about this.

All of a sudden, I heard someone's stomach growl.

Hoshihara looked at me. "Come on, now, Kamiki-kun..." she said disapprovingly.

"What? That wasn't me."

"Huh? It wasn't?"

The two of us simultaneously turned to look at Ushio, who was staring into the tank—her face bright red. The true culprit was now plain as day.

"...Sorry," she said.

"H-hey, no worries! I was getting pretty hungry too!" said Hoshihara, scrambling to throw her a life raft. "Why don't we eat something first, then?!"

I checked my phone and saw that it was almost noon. "Yeah, we should find somewhere to have lunch real quick." I pulled out the brochure I'd folded up and shoved in my pocket, then scanned the map.

"Pretty sure there's a food court on the second floor," Ushio said before I even had a chance to find it.

"Okay, let's head up there, then!" said Hoshihara, and it was settled. I jammed the brochure back into my pocket, and the three of us made our way upstairs.

Once our respective bellies were full with sandwiches and pasta and the like,

we resumed our tour of the aquarium from where we left off. First we checked out some colorful tropical fish in the freshwater area, then got to feel some starfish in the touch pools... If there was a manual for how to get the most out of your stereotypical aquarium visit, we were no doubt following it to a T—not that it mattered, since it was just plain old fun. What’s more, things felt perfectly normal between me and Hoshihara (and Ushio) again, despite the mild hiccup on the train. I was officially getting my fill of fun and friends to make up for my (thus far) pretty sedentary summer vacation.

*“Attention, all aquarium visitors. At 3:00 p.m., we will be holding a dolphin show at the Aquatic Amphitheater. For those who would like to attend, please be considerate of our other guests as you...”*

The announcement came in over the intercom along with a cheery little jingle as we were taking a breather in one of the lounge areas.

Hoshihara’s eyes lit up. “Oh, shoot! That’s, like, right now! We’ve gotta get over there!” She crammed the remaining half of her vending-machine ice cream bar into her mouth and threw the stick in a nearby trash can. She was *very* passionate about seeing these dolphins. We’d already decided among ourselves that we’d try to see the dolphin show if we could, though—on the condition that we sit in the back so Ushio wouldn’t get wet.

We exited the building and headed for this so-called Aquatic Amphitheater. Immediately, the sun’s harsh rays pierced my eyes, and I could feel a thin layer of sweat starting to form on my back after just a short walk. With how hot it was outside, I’d honestly *volunteer* to sit in the splash zone and let a torrent of water crash down on me, but that was just me personally. But once we reached the venue, I saw that most of the seats near the pool were already taken by guests wearing their museum-provided rain ponchos, so we would have ended up having to sit in the back regardless.

The three of us sat side by side, with Ushio in the middle. A few minutes later, a young woman wearing a wireless headset appeared onstage. Presumably, this was the dolphin trainer.

“How’s it goin’, everybody?!” she said, her voice amplified by the microphone. “Thanks for coming out! Our dolphins and I have a great show in

store for you today, so I hope you'll enjoy! Now, without further ado, allow me to introduce our performers!"

At the trainer's signal, the dolphins poked their heads up out of the water, and the children in the audience cheered. I looked over to see that Hoshihara's eyes were now utterly aglow, and Ushio had cracked a broad smile.

Once the introductions were over, the real performance began—though at the end of the day, it really just boiled down to the dolphins swimming to and fro throughout the large deep pool, jumping through the air, passing through hula hoops on command, and so on. It had been quite a few years since I'd seen a dolphin show, so I didn't mind the simplicity; the nostalgia factor alone was worth the price of admittance.

If I remembered right, the last time had been with my family back when I was still in elementary school, though it was at a different aquarium than this one. At the time, Ayaka was still pretty young, so she was a little intimidated by the dolphins when she saw them for the first time. I could still recall the adorably frightened look on her face back then—which was funny because nowadays it was *her* always trying to intimidate *me*. But as I sat there waxing nostalgic, the show advanced into its audience participation segment.

"All right, I think it's time we did a little ring toss, don't you, folks?!" said the trainer. "But I'm gonna need a little help up here, so do we have any volunteers?"

Four hands shot up among the children sitting in the stands, and the trainer called on them to come join her up onstage. Apparently, there was still room for one more volunteer, as she started looking to see if there were any other takers.

"Anyone else?" she asked. "Come on—you too, grown-ups! Don't be shy now!"

"Ooh! Me, me, me! I'll do it!" Hoshihara shouted out with glee, shooting her hand straight up toward the sky.

*Wait, seriously?* I thought, bewildered.

"Okay, great! Why don't you come on down, young lady?" said the dolphin

trainer, looking straight at us. *Damn. She actually got picked, too.*

Hoshihara jumped to her feet and hurried excitedly down the stairs, around the pool, and up onto the stage. Despite her short stature, she was still more than a head taller than all the other kids onstage (never mind that they were in elementary school), which definitely made her stick out like a sore thumb. But I could tell even from afar that she was radiating pure, unadulterated giddiness, so intense was her desire to play with the dolphins. It was enough for me to feel like I was having fun just watching her.

The trainer handed out little rings to Hoshihara and the kids, and at her command, they each took turns trying to toss them over to their respective dolphins. Hoshihara went last. Holding her ring aloft, she sent it spinning through the air, throwing it much farther than any of the younger kids. She was the first one who managed to get it far enough that the dolphin could catch it around its mouth (nose?)—a pretty impressive feat, even given her distinct advantage. She clapped her hands together and practically jumped for joy. I had to admit, it was giving me a minor case of secondhand embarrassment.

“Man, if I didn’t know any better, I might think she was the youngest kid onstage,” I said teasingly.

“I know, right?” said Ushio. “I’m a little bit envious, honestly.” There was a gloomy undertone to this mumbled afterthought.

“Wait. Did *you* want to go up there too?” I asked.







“No way,” she said, eyes wide. “I didn’t mean it like that. I’m just...jealous of her in a lot of ways, I guess.”

“Oh yeah?”

Ushio turned her gaze back toward the stage, her expression glum as she watched Hoshihara. I could imagine that to someone like Ushio, who was always concerned with what other people might think and how they might look at her, Hoshihara’s shamelessly gleeful demeanor probably shone quite brightly in her eyes.

“Okay, folks! Let’s each give our dolphin friends a little handshake before we go!” said the trainer, and the dolphins all poked their heads up out of the water and swam over to the stage. Hoshihara knelt down like all of the other kids and, seeming both excited and a little unnerved, reached out and touched the dolphin’s extended fin. And with that, the trainer thanked the volunteers and dismissed them from the stage. When Hoshihara made it back up to the stands, she looked like the happiest girl in the world.

“Oh my *gosh*, that was so much fun!” she cried. “I wanna do it again sometime!”

“Nice work up there,” said Ushio.

As Hoshihara took her seat, I noticed her opening and closing her hand, as if still in disbelief that she’d actually gotten to touch a dolphin.

“So what did it feel like, anyway?” I asked, genuinely curious.

Her expression went meek. “Kinda slick and rubbery... Almost like, I dunno... an eggplant?”

“Interesting...”

I made a mental note to check if we had any eggplants at home so I could try to imagine it for myself.

“Well then, folks!” said the trainer. “That concludes our performance today! Thanks so much for coming!”

And with that, the curtain closed on the dolphin show, ending on a high note.

“Wait,” said Hoshihara, tilting her head. “What about the orcas?”

There were never going to be any orcas. I thought she knew.

After returning inside from the Aquatic Amphitheater, we passed through the Penguin Corner, then Jellyfish Cove, before finally arriving at the main ocean life area. There were large, rectangular tanks along the wall, like exhibits at an art gallery, only instead of paintings they were filled with small sea creatures like squid and shrimp. Hoshihara stopped in front of one to take a closer look; I peeked over her shoulder and saw a tiny little eel poking its head up from the sand, then retreating back underneath. It was a chin-anago, a spotted garden eel.

“Wait, hang on. So I know that ‘anago’ means garden eel in Japanese, but where does the ‘chin’ part come from? Is it borrowed from another language?” Hoshihara pondered aloud. I took a look at the description plaque to the side of the tank.

“Uhhh... Says here they’re named for their resemblance to the Japanese Chin, a type of dog,” I explained.

“The...Japanese Chin? That’s a dog breed?”

“Apparently.”

I pulled out my cell phone and did an image search on “Japanese Chin dog,” and it brought back pictures of a very small type of dog that had long, tufty hair like a big mophead. I showed Hoshihara. She looked down at the screen, then we both looked back at the spotted garden eel.

“I don’t see the resemblance,” I said.

“Yeah, no. Me neither,” said Hoshihara.

I couldn’t help but laugh at the ridiculousness of the whole idea, and before long, Hoshihara started snickering too. After watching the eels a little while longer, we moseyed our way down the hall again. Hoshihara was practically jogging between each tank, giddy as a small child to see what each new exhibit contained, while I shuffled after her like some sort of chaperone. Not that I

minded, really; I was having a lot more fun just watching Hoshihara than I was enjoying looking at all the different fish. But just as I cracked a smile at that thought, Ushio walked up alongside me.

“Seems like you two are hitting it off a little,” she said, her voice low enough that Hoshihara definitely couldn’t hear it.

“Y-you think?” I asked. “I mean, yeah, things are definitely feeling a lot less awkward now, but I don’t know if I’d go *that* far...”

“Kind of looked like you two were a couple, actually.”

“A cou—?!” I stopped short, and my face went beet red. “No, no, no! Not even close. Anyone with half a brain could tell she’s *way* too good for me.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure. I think you’d make a pretty good match, honestly.”

“R-really? I’m not so sure about that...”

I was pretty sure she was just telling me what I wanted to hear, but I appreciated the support. The thought nearly put a big goofy smile on my face, but I managed to hold it in.

“I mean, you do want to go out with her at some point, I take it?” asked Ushio, going straight for the jugular.

“Wh-where’s this coming from?”

“What? Am I wrong?”

“I mean, no, not really, but still...”

“Yeah, I figured. Well, Natsuki seems to be in a really good mood, so if you ask me, it’s the perfect opportunity for you to be a little more assertive.”

“...In what way?”

“Why don’t you go ask her out on a date? Like, to the movies or whatever.”

“Huh?!”

*Date?* This word felt so very foreign to my ears—at least in the context of *me* going on one.

“Not happening,” I said. “That’s way too forward. And way too sudden, for

that matter.”

“Oh, come on. It’ll be fine. Here, I’ll let you two talk one-on-one for a little while, then you can just casually float the question when the time is right. As long as you’re cool about it, I really don’t think she’ll say no. And if things start to feel like they’re going south, just shoot me a quick message, and I’ll come straight back. Okay? All right, I’ll be rooting for you—see you in a bit.”

“Wha...?! Hey, wait a minute!”

Before I could even object, Ushio walked off, whispered something in Hoshihara’s ear (to which she nodded, albeit seeming slightly bewildered), then continued down the hall. *Great, just make the decision for me, why don’t you?*

Hoshihara walked over and greeted me with an awkward smile. “Told me to keep an eye on you and make sure you don’t get lost.”

“Oh, for the love of...”

This was far too sudden. Why was Ushio being so unusually pushy about this? Not that I was mad at her for trying to set us up together or anything—I just would have appreciated a little time to prepare myself.

“What do you wanna do?” asked Hoshihara. “She said she’s just gonna go buy herself something to drink real quick, so we should just go on ahead.”

“Guess we might as well, then,” I said, then slowly walked down the corridor. As soon as we were alone, there was a dramatic decrease in how much we spoke to one another. It felt perfectly natural when we were all together, but for whatever reason, I couldn’t find the right words to say quickly enough when it was just the two of us.

We worked our way down into the coral reef section of the aquarium, which was far more dimly lit—which perhaps explained the number of couples I was seeing here and there, taking their sweet time walking through. I felt suddenly overcome by an inexplicable restlessness.

*I’ve gotta figure out something to say.*

I stopped paying attention to the fish and tried to think of something, but I couldn’t come up with any conversation topics that felt remotely natural. As I

racked my brain, Hoshihara came to a sudden stop. In my distracted state, I nearly bumped into her.

She was staring intently into the large tank modeled after a coral reef; presumably she'd spotted some type of fish that caught her eye. I followed her gaze and saw a small, flat fish with vivid yellow scales. I recognized this one—even knew its name.

"Oh, hey. An oriental butterflyfish," I said.

Hoshihara looked at me, somewhat surprised, before turning back to stare into the tank again. "So that's what they're called, huh? Is it because they look like butterflies, or what?"

"I think it might be because of the way they sort of flutter their way through the water. Feel like I remember reading that in a book once."

"Ooh, neat... Ha ha. Glad I can always count on you for a bit of random trivia, Mr. Avid Reader."

I took this as a compliment, which helped calm my nerves. Pathetic as it was, I was pretty weak to flattery.

"Know any other fun fish facts?" she asked.

"Hmmm, let me see..." I tried to recall any other noteworthy tidbits I'd picked up from that book as I gazed into the tank. "Oh, right. So there are certain types of fish that migrate like birds, actually."

Hoshihara bobbed her head up and down, urging me to go on.

"Basically, any sort of fish that moves to another part of the ocean in search of food, or once it reaches a certain point of maturity, we refer to as a migratory fish. The Pacific bluefin tuna is one example. Those things will spend months crossing the entire Pacific Ocean to reach their spawning grounds."

"Dang," said Hoshihara. "Like some kind of pilgrimage, almost."

"But then there are other, *non*—migratory fish that still get swept up by ocean currents and wind up in totally different parts of the ocean. The oriental butterflyfish is one... Oh, and the clownfish too. Unfortunately, most of these fish are pretty poor swimmers, so they end up dying after being unable to



acclimate to wherever it is they end up.”

“Wait. They just die?”

“Yeah. Either because their bodies can’t adapt to the colder water or because they get targeted by predators in their weakened state.”

“...Wow, that’s kinda sad to think about.”

Hoshihara looked at the butterflyfish with pity in her eyes. Then, after a momentary pause in which she might’ve grieved at its expense, she moved on. I followed after her in silence.

“Wait,” she said. “But you said *most* of them die. That means some of them must survive, right? What do you think happens to them?”

“Uh... Well, they probably start reproducing in their new environment and then, over the course of several generations, I assume they’d genetically adapt to be better suited to it. Though to be clear, when I said ‘most,’ that was probably a huge understatement. Getting swept away from your natural habitat to somewhere far away is pretty much a death sentence for virtually all fish. You could maybe equate it to, like, getting in a tragic car accident or something.”

“That bad, huh?” she whispered.

The conversation died there. I glanced at Hoshihara out of the corner of my eye and noticed a hue of sorrow painted across her expression. Her walking pace had slowed a little bit too; I wondered why. Had my choice of anecdote been too morbid for the occasion? As my anxiety started eating away at me, I realized we were fast approaching the exit of the coral reef area. Given that we were totally out of things to talk about, I figured it might be a good time to message Ushio to come back and—

“But, y’know...” Hoshihara began, coming to a sudden stop.

“Know what?” I said, stopping dead in my tracks as well.

“I feel like there’s also gotta be some fish who head out into new and different parts of the ocean of their own free will, and not just because they get swept away by the current. Like, because they find their current environment

too harsh to live in, or they're just curious to see what else is out there..."

"Even when they know they can't swim to save their lives?"

"I don't know. Maybe they just feel like there's somewhere they need to go, some change they need to make—even if it kills them. I feel like there must be *some* fish like that out there too... Ugh, what am I even talking about? Sorry, I'm just rambling now."

She chuckled bashfully, trying to laugh it off, but I was deeply moved by the sentiment. Sure, maybe it wasn't the most realistic interpretation, but it was still a lovely thought. And there was no way anyone could prove she was wrong about it either.

Take dandelions, for instance: they scattered their seeds on the wind—obviously not knowing where they might end up—simply because spreading themselves out far and wide was the best way to prevent their species from going extinct. Perhaps it was a similar hope of prosperity for their offspring or their species that led the most adventurous of butterflyfish and clownfish to head out into the open ocean all on their own too. After all, anytime you wanted to pursue something worth having, you had to incur some amount of risk in exchange. And in the end, it was all up to the individual: would you choose a life of safety and stability in the status quo or be bold and venture out to new horizons?

*"Why don't you go ask her out on a date?"*

Ushio's words were ringing in the back of my head. For once, I decided to muster up my courage and try riding the current out into uncharted waters.

"So hey, um—"

"Listen, Kamiki-kun."

We started talking at the exact same time.

"Oops, sorry! You go first!" said Hoshihara, instantly turning stiff and polite in response to the accidental awkwardness. But this little interruption had knocked the wind out of my sails quite a bit. I couldn't see myself recovering from it and asking her out anywhere *near* as nonchalantly as I'd hoped to.



“Oh, no,” I said. “It wasn’t anything important, really. You go ahead.”

“I mean, my thing wasn’t all that important either...”

“No, really. It’s totally fine. Don’t worry about it.”

“Y-you sure? Well, if you insist...”

Hoshihara cleared her throat with a cute little “Ahem!”

Then she hesitated, stalling with a bunch of *wells* and *ums* and *uhs* and other meaningless verbal fillers, as if trying to buy time and waste mine deliberately. I assumed whatever she wanted to say was more important than she initially let on, given how much trouble she was having bringing herself to say it. But just as I was about to throw her a line, she finally found her voice.

“So basically, um...I just wanted you to know that I’m rooting for you.”

“Wait. Huh?” I said, mouth agape. *Rooting for me? About what?*

“Oh, but don’t worry! I won’t go blabbing about it to anyone! People can be pretty cruel, so I totally get not wanting to be judged for it in the public eye... But I’m sure there’ll come a day when everyone will accept you for who you are. And when that happens, I hope you’ll let me celebrate right alongside you both.”

“Uh-huh...”

I couldn’t even begin to fathom what she was saying, so I replied in the driest, most vacuous manner possible. Hoshihara, on the other hand, looked so relieved that you would’ve thought she’d just been freed from some impalpable gloom that had been hanging over her.

“Phew!” she exclaimed. “I finally got the chance to say it! But boy, I’ve gotta tell ya—I was pretty darn shocked at first, you know! Really wish you two had just come right out and told me from the start.”

“W-wait a minute,” I said. “What are you talking about?”

“Hm? Oh, sorry, sorry. I guess maybe I could have led into that a little bit more smoothly. But I’m talking about you and Ushio-chan, silly!”

*About me and—wait. Oh no.*

“I mean, you two are going out, aren’t you?”

In the next instant, a jolt of comprehension crashed down on me and shot through my head like a lightning bolt, the impact strong enough to clear away every last one of the question marks still lingering in my mind. I’d known for a while now that Hoshihara had some major misconceptions about what happened between me and Ushio, but I hadn’t given it too much thought. Only now, when she was confronting me head-on about it, was I feeling surprisingly flustered about the logical conclusion they pointed to.

“Wait, no,” I said. “No, we’re not. Pretty sure I told you before, but there’s nothing going on between me and Ushio.”

“Yeah, I get it,” she said. “It’s okay if you’re not ready to talk about it.”

“No, I’m serious! We’re *not* dating! You’ve just got the wrong idea!”

Hoshihara jerked back a bit in surprise at me raising my voice.

*Crap, I didn’t mean to lose my cool and freak her out. Gotta calm down.*

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to yell at you. Just wanted to clear up the misunderstanding, that’s all...”

“You mean...you two really *aren’t* dating?”

*Yes, that’s what I’ve been saying this whole time!* I wanted to say, but I resisted the urge and nodded firmly instead.

“Correct. There’s nothing romantic between us whatsoever.”

Hoshihara scrunched her brow in a near wince at this adamant denial. She then looked up at me with a mixture of fear, suspicion, and apprehension in her eyes.

“But then...why did I catch you two kissing?”

*Yes, well. About that.*

Clearly Hoshihara was convinced that kiss hadn’t been just an accident, so this *was* the natural follow-up question, to be sure. One that I wanted to know the answer to as well, but I hadn’t yet found the courage to ask. Mainly because I had this strange, ominous premonition that the moment I put it into words,

some crucial aspect of this friendship I so cherished would begin to crumble and fall apart. I was pretty certain Hoshihara could feel it too—but unlike me, she was steadfast in her desire to know the truth, whatever repercussions it might bring.

She studied me, disappointed by how I stood there holding my tongue. Hesitating. “You really don’t wanna tell me, huh?”

“No, it’s not that. It’s just—”

“What’s up, you guys?” someone said, almost directly into my eardrum.

I turned around to see that Ushio was standing there, right over my shoulder. Conflicting emotions burgeoned in my chest. Was I relieved she’d finally returned to bail me out or annoyed she’d picked such an awkward moment to come back? I couldn’t even tell that much.

Ushio looked back and forth between me and Hoshihara, bewildered. She was clearly struggling to grasp the current vibe of our situation—but then Hoshihara turned to look at her with earnest eyes.

“Ushio-chan,” she said. “Are you...really not going out with Kamiki-kun?”

All at once, I could see the cogs turning in Ushio’s mind as things clicked into place. Then, watching closely, I could see her expression slowly darken.

“I see...” she said with a sigh. “So *that’s* what you’ve been talking about...”

Ushio bit her lip as if bracing for something painful. Surely being forced to remember that she’d been spurned was unpleasant enough, but on top of that, she also considered the whole kiss situation to have been a huge mistake for which she alone bore the blame. I couldn’t imagine what a difficult subject this was for Ushio.

“Listen, um...Hoshihara,” I said, cutting in to shoulder some of Ushio’s mental load. “I don’t know how many times I have to repeat myself, but Ushio and I really aren’t dating. So please...can we just drop the subject once and for all?”

I’d chosen my words very carefully, but the unspoken message was clear: neither of us wanted to talk about what happened that day, so she wasn’t going to get an explanation. I knew Hoshihara was smart enough to read between the

lines here.

“Ngh...”

She dropped her gaze, as though I’d just reprimanded her for some grave offense. Judging from this reaction, it didn’t seem like she was going to dig her heels in about this and demand an answer at all costs. It looked like she was probably going to back off. But just when she opened her mouth—I assumed to apologize—Ushio beat her to the punch.

“It’s fine. I don’t mind telling her,” she said, looking at Hoshihara with an uncharacteristically stern look on her face. “I knew we were going to have to talk about it sooner or later anyway.”

Ushio slowly walked down the corridor. Perhaps she wanted to have this conversation elsewhere. Hoshihara and I followed obediently behind without a word. *You sure about this?* I asked Ushio internally. But she just kept on walking straight ahead, and I couldn’t perceive any other emotions just by staring at her back. When I glanced over at Hoshihara, however, I saw a grim look of anxiety on her face. Her lips were pressed in a thin line, while her brow was furrowed with apprehension. Occasionally, she’d look up as if maybe she wanted to say something, then give up and lower her gaze once more.

I could feel the pressure weighing on my lungs as my breath caught in my throat. How had our day of fun turned into *this*? Well, not that it was anyone’s fault. I knew it was only a matter of time before we’d have to face up and address it, like Ushio said. But for whatever reason...all I’d wanted was for the three of us to enjoy ourselves here at the aquarium, without having to think about any of the uncomfortable stuff. Even if it was just shameless escapism, pure and simple.

Eventually, we arrived at the aquarium’s food court—which was far less crowded now, at four o’clock, than it had been when we first came, closer to noon. We didn’t order any food this time, just made our way to a table at the back of the seating area. Even after we sat down, the silence continued hanging over us for a short while.

“What Sakuma told you is true,” Ushio finally said. There was a weight to her words and a confessional note to her voice. “We’re not dating. I told him I had

feelings for him, but he turned me down.”

Hoshihara gasped, and I couldn’t blame her. This had to be a pretty crushing revelation for her—especially since I hadn’t given her any reason to believe there were feelings there on either side of the table in our previous talks. But I didn’t feel like it was my right to go around divulging where Ushio’s affections lay, even though I was playing the role of confidant and offering my advice on Hoshihara’s *own* feelings for Ushio.

“But then...what was that kiss about?” Hoshihara asked fearfully.

That really was the big remaining question. By that point in time, Ushio and I obviously both had a pretty good grasp on each other’s feelings—yet she still kissed me. I was just as curious as Hoshihara as to why, but obviously I knew it was going to be a pretty sore subject that Ushio wouldn’t want to discuss.

My chest felt tight. How I wished we could all just say a magic spell and erase that whole event from our memories. But considering that wasn’t a possibility, then the next best option was to just lay the truth bare so that we could at least clear up any misunderstandings. Besides, even if it *were* a possibility, something told me Hoshihara wouldn’t agree to just forget about what she’d seen us do at the top of the stairs that day without getting an honest answer anyhow.

“I guess you could say...I let my emotions get the better of me,” said Ushio.

I could feel the tension growing in my nerves as though they were being stretched taut. I swallowed hard, keenly aware of the cold sweat running down my back.

“I just remember thinking, ‘Guess I was right. I really *will* never be enough for him,’ and wanting to scream out loud... But I knew I couldn’t do that, and so I just... I just...”

It was like she had to strain herself to wring out every single word from her throat as her breaths grew shorter and closer together. Her face had gone pale, and I could see a sheen of sweat on her forehead.

“And so I just, um... I don’t know what came over me, I just—”

“W-wait, stop!” Hoshihara blurted. Ushio’s eyes went wide, and so did mine—especially after I saw that Hoshihara’s were welling up with tears. “I’m sorry... I

know I'm the one who asked the question, but I can't bear to listen to this any longer. You just look like you're in so much pain, having to talk about it... It's breaking my heart."

I could relate to the feeling; I was right there with her. If Hoshihara hadn't said anything, I might have stepped in myself a few moments later. Ushio obliged, pursing her lips tightly as if in apology.

"I believe you when you say you two aren't going out," said Hoshihara. "I mean it. But...you shouldn't lie to yourself either, Ushio-chan. I mean, you—" She faltered, peering up at Ushio. Almost like she was trying to decide whether she should really finish this last thought. A few seconds later, she carefully strung together the words: "You clearly still have feelings for—"

"That's not—!"

This time, it was Ushio cutting off Hoshihara the instant she lifted her hanging head. Her voice was loud enough to echo through the entire food court. The other aquarium visitors looked in our direction. Sensing their gazes, Ushio narrowed her shoulders in shame and then weakly shook her head.

"That's not true," she said. "I don't. I promise."

"...Right, okay. Sorry," Hoshihara said meekly before lowering her gaze to the table.

*"You clearly still have feelings for—"*

I could surmise what words Hoshihara had been planning to say next pretty easily—and so could Ushio, I assumed, which was probably why she'd cut the other girl off. And if Ushio was adamantly denying this hypothesis of hers, then clearly Hoshihara had the wrong impression. Either way, all I could do was believe that Ushio was telling the truth. Even if she wasn't, there was nothing I could do to help her resolve any lingering feelings she might have had.

Hoshihara slowly rose from her seat. "We should probably head home."

There was a brief pause, then Ushio and I both nodded in agreement.

We left the aquarium on a fairly sour note, but there wasn't really any getting

around that. None of us were in the mood to look at fish anymore, and we'd already made the rounds and checked out most of the exhibits anyway. Plus, I figured that even if we headed home right now, it'd still be close to sunset by the time we got back to Tsubakioka. And so we headed straight for the station, without making a single stop along the way, and let the train's gentle undulations rock us all the way home.

We sat in the same arrangement we'd chosen on the way in, with Ushio and I sitting together on one side of a set of box seats. Hoshihara, who was sitting alone on the other, gazed absentmindedly at the scenery out the window.

Suddenly, I heard the sound of someone softly snoring beside me. I turned to see Ushio leaning her head against the wall of the train, fast asleep with her guard down and her mouth hanging slightly open.

"Wow, she's out like a light," Hoshihara whispered.

"Sure is. She must've been really tired."

I figured that last exchange we'd had at the food court must've taken quite the mental toll on her. Just imagining her anguish was enough to make *me* feel a tightness in my chest. Right now, I wanted nothing more than for her to get some much-needed rest. As Hoshihara gazed at Ushio's peaceful, sleeping countenance, her eyes narrowed with a twinge of sadness.

"I never should've asked her about that... I feel so terrible," she said, dropping her gaze to her lap. Haltingly, she went on, "I know this is only going to sound like an excuse, but...I really *did* just want to support you two, even if I had the wrong idea. I wasn't trying to make things worse."

"...Yeah, I'm sure Ushio knows that," I said. "And it's okay. We were going to have to address the issue sooner or later... Nothing you should feel guilty about."

I meant it; I wasn't just trying to make her feel better. Her expression remained gloomy nonetheless. I let out a small sigh and scratched the side of my neck.

"If anything, I feel like I'm the one at fault here for not telling you sooner that she'd confessed to me."

“No, I get why you didn’t feel like you could talk about it,” said Hoshihara, shaking her lowered head. “I mean, yeah, it was a surprise... But at least I know the whole story now. That’s all that matters, right?”

Her voice betrayed a hint of resignation not present in her choice of words. I assumed today’s revelations—about Ushio’s feelings and why she’d kissed me—were quite the shock to Hoshihara’s system, and they’d prompted her to reevaluate her own feelings. I wondered if she was still unsure whether she liked Ushio anymore.

Part of me was curious enough to ask, but I couldn’t bring myself to broach the subject with Ushio sitting right beside me—even if she *was* fast asleep. I looked over at Ushio, her shoulders rising and falling ever so slightly in time with her breathing, slow and sure, her face the very picture of serenity.

*“I guess you could say...I let my emotions get the better of me.”*

When I recalled Ushio stammering in her speech earlier, I felt a chill of bitter sorrow run through me like an icy winter wind. Before her transition, I always had a bit of an inferiority complex when it came to her. Deep down, I was even jealous of her—though that was just a product of misguided admiration. Really, I just wished I could be like her. So having to sit there and watch someone I once idolized sweat and struggle to even string together her words—like some sort of company representative forced to issue a public apology at a press conference—was just too painful for me to bear.

I had zero issue with Ushio wanting to live her life as a girl now. But I *did* wish that choice hadn’t cost her some of that unwavering confidence I used to admire so much. And more than anything, I didn’t want to see her so mentally distraught over a scrub like me. I mean, what did she even see in me to begin with? Surely there were plenty of other guys out there who were far more deserving of her. Guys with good grades, who could play sports, who were attractive, and who had great personalities. Even in a backwater hellhole like Tsubakioka, there were plenty of guys who’d fit the bill. So why did she pick me?

Was it because we were best friends growing up? Had she simply developed feelings for me over the years because of all the time we’d spent together? If



so, then how long had she been harboring them in secret? As my conflicting thoughts grew more and more tangled, I couldn't help but furrow my brow. I wondered if there'd ever come a day when Ushio would tell me why she'd fallen for me in the first place. While I'd be lying if I said I wasn't curious, I also didn't want to reopen any old wounds now that the whole situation was over. It was probably one question I'd just have to live with.

Hoshihara let out a bleary-eyed yawn and made some cute little sleepy noises.

"You can sleep if you want to," I said. "I'll wake you up when we get there."

Immediately, she covered her mouth with her hand. "Th-thanks, but I'll be okay. Don't worry about it."

So she claimed, but her drowsy eyes begged to differ. I wondered if it was her guilty conscience that was causing her to hold back. It didn't take long for her to start rubbing her eyes and nodding off again, despite her best efforts to stay awake. I knew it was only a matter of time before she'd conk out.

"...You sure you don't need some rest?" I asked.

A blush spread across her cheeks, and she hunched a little. "Sorry, yeah. I'm pretty tired... Mind if I take a quick nap?"

"Not at all."

"Cool, thanks. Welp, good night."

"Night," I reciprocated, and she closed her eyes.

Now there were two people sleeping soundly in our little nook of the train. Hoping to make the remainder of the ride go by faster, I pulled out my cell phone and flipped it open to kill some time. I navigated to the images folder and found one of the photos Hoshihara had taken of Ushio on the train ride this morning, which she'd sent to me while we were sitting around the table having lunch at the aquarium. There was the slightest hint of shyness in Ushio's melancholy expression as she stood there in the middle of the train, staring off with her face in profile. It was a good photo—one that might even have garnered a callback were I to send it off to a random idol agency or two. Obviously, I wasn't going to do that; the picture would never leave my images

folder.

I cast my gaze out the window of the train. The sun had already begun to set.

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A few days had passed since our trip to the aquarium. I'd spent them cooped up in my air-conditioned bedroom, working through my summer homework. I'd gotten a bit cocky, thinking I had time to spare after finishing the math portion early on. Then the days just started flying by, and now I was pushing up against the deadline. I begrudged my own inability to be an effective planner.

As I flipped through my world history textbook looking for help with a particular question, I could see Ushio in my peripheral vision. She was reclining against my bed, reading a paperback I'd recommended to her a while ago. This was the first time she'd been over to my house in about a week, and it was our first time seeing one another since the aquarium day. She didn't seem any different than before. Sure, we weren't talking much, but we never did. There was no unusual awkwardness between us; we were simply passing the time together in a space of mutual tranquility—or so I wanted to believe.

"Okay, break time," I said, setting my pen down.

Ushio just carried on reading in silence, the only sound that escaped her lips being the tiniest of sighs from time to time. I wasn't sure if she was just reacting to the contents of the novel or perhaps thinking back on what happened at the aquarium. Or maybe they were just plain old sighs, and I was overthinking it. Not that I had any intention of letting my curiosity get the better of me, of course. Even if there *was* something eating away at her, that didn't mean I could necessarily do anything to solve the problem, so I didn't want to make her self-conscious by asking about it.

As I sat there pondering my own futility, Ushio sneezed.

"Room too cold for you?" I asked.

"Oh... Yeah, maybe a little."

I used the little remote control to raise the temperature a bit. The AC unit in my room was a pretty old one, so it was kinda stupid when it came to regulating temperature. Set it to 27 degrees, and it was too hot, but set it to 26, and it'd

be way too cold. I was starting to feel a little bit chilly myself, honestly.

“Are you wearing those cold pack things again today?” I asked.

“No, I took them off before I came inside. Knew I’d be way too cold wearing them in an air-conditioned room.”

A mental image of Ushio standing on my doorstep, removing cold packs from various parts of her body, flashed into my brain. I imagined it would be a pretty bizarre sight—though knowing Ushio, she probably had a way of doing it discreetly.

“Hang on. I’m gonna bring up some tea,” I said, rising to my feet.

“Okay,” Ushio said as I closed the bedroom door behind me.

I walked down to the kitchen, packed some tea leaves into a small teapot, and poured in hot water from the electric kettle. I put the teapot and a couple of teacups on a tray and headed back up to my room. As I set everything down on the low table and started filling the teacups, Ushio closed her book and looked over at me with wide eyes.

“Wait. You went and made *hot* tea? Just because I was a little cold?” she asked.

“Sure, it’s no trouble,” I said as I poured. “I make it for myself sometimes too, even in the summer. It can get pretty cold inside with the AC on and all. A warm cup of tea always goes really well with mochi ice cream too.”

I held out one teacup to Ushio. She gratefully accepted it with both hands, lifted it to her lips, and tilted it back. After a single sip, she let out a soft but satisfied breath.

“It’s really good,” she said.

I took a drink from my cup as well, and the steamy liquid quickly warmed my chilled body from the inside out. Suddenly, I craved something salty to munch on—like rice crackers or something—but sadly I had nothing in my snack reserves that fit the bill. We both just sat there, taking little sips of our hot tea together.

That is, until Ushio closed her eyes with teacup in hand and murmured under

her breath, “God, it’s so hard when you’re so nice to me.”

I nearly dropped my teacup. I was so unsure how to take these words that my entire body went stiff. For a moment, Ushio stared absentmindedly into her teacup, but then her head snapped up—as if she’d only just realized what she’d said. Her face was flushed with panic, her mouth trembling in baffled horror.

“You didn’t hear that,” she said, clearly and forcefully. “Sorry, just...please pretend I didn’t say that.” Her tone was earnest and apologetic, and I could tell from her expression that this had been a pretty major slip of the tongue.

“Y-yeah, okay... Got it.” I knew that was the only right answer despite there being no way I could ever erase it from my mind. I watched as Ushio took a moment to steady her breathing, then downed the remaining contents of her teacup in one gulp. “Hey, hey, hey... Easy now. Don’t burn yourself.”

“I’m fine,” she said. “It wasn’t even hot anymore.”

She was lying through her teeth; I could see the tears in the corners of her eyes. Hopefully she hadn’t scalded her tongue or anything... But why would she ever do such a thing to begin with? Surely she knew how hot it was. Was she trying to physically punish herself for letting her real emotions slip through or something stupid like that? If so, then I really wished she’d knock it off. There was no need for that.

“...Feel like I need a cold drink all of a sudden. Let me go get us something,” I said, standing up again. Ushio’s brow creased in distress, but I paid it no mind and went straight back down to the kitchen. Maybe she really didn’t want this sort of consideration from me. Maybe it really did make things harder for her. But I couldn’t bring myself to just sit there and do nothing either.

When I got to the kitchen, I opened up the fridge and pulled out a liter of barley tea in a plastic bottle. I figured we didn’t really need glasses, since we still had our teacups. Cradling the plastic bottle in one arm, I turned on my heel to leave.

All of a sudden, I stopped dead in my tracks. My legs refused to take me even a single step further. I knew I shouldn’t keep Ushio waiting, especially after she’d probably just burned her mouth—but for whatever reason, the thought of going back into that room with her felt pretty suffocating right now.

I couldn't bear to see Ushio in pain, but deep down, another part of me was afraid of getting any closer to her. Afraid that my careless nature would end up hurting her in the long run. Even if all I wanted was to treat her nicely and be a good friend, I had to accept that for someone in her position, that very kindness might only be making an already tough situation even worse. And this thought—that Ushio might be better off if I just backed off and let her be—was so terrifying that it froze my feet in place.

“Ugh... What am I even *doing*, goddamn it...?”

I heard the sound of plastic crinkling beneath my fingers. I'd tightened my grip around the bottle of tea without even realizing it. Frustrated, I brought my free hand up and roughly scrubbed it through my hair. Then came the jingle of wind chimes as a crisp, cool breeze blew in through the screen of the open living room window.

*Guess summer vacation never lasts forever.*

I headed back up to my room.



## CHAPTER FOUR

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# *Romeo and Self-Loathing*



## Chapter Four:

### Romeo and Self-Loathing

**I**T WAS THE FIRST OF SEPTEMBER—the beginning of fall semester.

During my morning trek to school, I felt, as I assumed most students did, quite mournful in summer vacation's wake. The late summer swelter and morning cicadas were still as insufferable as ever. I wiped the sweat from my temples and walked in the main entrance, at which point I spotted a familiar, slender frame in front of the shoe cubbies. I could tell even from behind that it belonged to Ushio—the only person I knew who could radiate a cool, indomitable aura even in this broiling heat. As I removed my shoes and stepped up onto the duckboard in front of my own locker, she heard my footsteps and turned around.

"Oh, morning," she said.

"Yeah, hey," I replied.

Given that she'd been regularly coming over to my house up until a few short days ago, there wasn't that usual feeling of reunion after a long break between us. We just exchanged our standard greetings, then headed up to the classroom. As we made our way down the hall, though, I could hear plenty of other students asking all the stereotypical post-summer vacation questions: how've you been, where'd you go, how much sun did you get, et cetera.

Curious, I cast a sidelong glance at Ushio while we walked. Her skin was still such a pure and blinding white, you'd think it was something sacred—not to be touched without proper handling equipment, lest you leave a permanent bruise or smudge. A white peach came to mind.

"...Can I help you?" asked Ushio, quickly folding her arms as if to conceal them. She'd caught me red-handed, and I felt genuinely bad for staring.

"Er, my bad," I said, gaze flicking forward in a fluster. "Guess I was just wondering how your skin seems so impervious to the sun, is all."



“It really isn’t, though. My skin’s pretty sensitive, actually, so it just goes straight from white to red. I don’t really tan.”

“Oh, right. I feel like I remember you telling me this.”

*Way back in elementary school, if I remember right.*

“You don’t seem like you got much of a tan either,” she added.

“Yeah, but only because I stayed at home all break,” I said.

“Shouldn’t you try to fit some form of exercise in? Your metabolism won’t last forever.”

“Yeah, maybe so,” I said noncommittally, clutching at my stomach. I didn’t have a ton of flab or anything, though I didn’t have well-defined abs either. There had been a time when I’d decided to give weightlifting a try, but that phase hardly lasted more than a month before I fell off the wagon. Still, with the school sports festival coming up in the fall, maybe it wouldn’t be such a bad time to get back into the swing of things. But I supposed that wasn’t until after the culture festival, to be fair.

*“God, it’s so hard when you’re so nice to me.”*

All of a sudden, Ushio’s words flashed back into my mind.

As she requested, I’d been trying to pretend I hadn’t heard them. Ushio herself had gone right back to behaving like usual, despite being obviously unnerved and disoriented after her slip of the tongue. On the surface, everything was normal between us. But underneath, Ushio’s words were stuck in me like tiny fish bones lodged in my throat, occasionally reminding me of their existence with a sharp jolt of pain. I wasn’t sure whether it was safer to reach in and yank them out or pray they would be washed down and digested with time. As of right now, I was banking on the latter—with absolutely no idea if that was the correct choice or not.

When I set foot inside Classroom 2-A, I was greeted by an all-encompassing cacophony that rivaled even the cicada choirs outside as my fellow classmates

eagerly indulged in the morning hustle and bustle for the first time in weeks. Near the center of the room, I spotted Hoshihara engaging happily in conversation with some other girls. When she looked our way, she smiled and offered us a casual wave, which Ushio and I nonchalantly returned. I didn't sense any lingering awkwardness between us; one could even say we felt like closer friends than ever, in a sense. But it also felt like somewhere deep down, something vital had changed in our relationship.

There was a decided instability and uncertainty to pretty much everything about our relationship—but that was par for the course, I supposed, and we would just have to soldier on regardless. Even if I knew our friendship was formed on a foundation of ice that was growing thinner by the minute, I had no intention of getting cold feet now.

I set my bookbag down at my desk and looked up at the wall clock above the blackboard. The opening ceremony for the semester would be starting shortly.

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“And so, class...” said Ms. Iyo, standing up at the lectern, “without further ado, I'm pleased to announce that our class's contribution to the culture festival will be...a stage performance of *Romeo and Juliet*! Woooo! How 'bout a round of applause, huh?!”

As soon as the opening ceremony had ended, we'd headed back to the classroom for homeroom period. After the teacher offered her greetings and we handed in our homework, the topic soon turned to the culture festival coming up in October, and she revealed to us what exactly Class 2-A's exhibit would be. The response to this news from my classmates was mixed, to say the least, but Ms. Iyo was over the moon.

“Gosh, I just love *Romeo and Juliet*, don't you?” she said. “I can't wait to see how good your acting chops are, everyone!”

“You mean you're not going to be in the play, Ms. Iyo?” teased one of the boys—but Ms. Iyo just folded her arms and tilted her head far to the side, as if mulling it over.

“Gee, I dunno... Should I? What role do you think I should play if I did?”

Several voices from all across the classroom cried out, “Juliet!” Granted, most of them were probably joking, but I did see a couple girls who seemed to be genuine fans of the idea. Personally, I thought it was pretty ridiculous to even suggest that the teacher play the female lead—and thankfully, Ms. Iyo did too. She quickly laughed the idea off.

“Now, now, folks. This is a *student*-run culture festival, so I’m afraid I can’t participate in any capacity! Besides, can any of you even name a character from the play who isn’t Romeo or Juliet?”

She was right, come to think of it; I couldn’t think of any major or minor characters aside from the titular duo. Frankly, I didn’t remember much about the play at all other than a handful of the most iconic lines and the final scene. I took a look around the classroom, and it seemed most of my fellow classmates were in the same boat as me.

“I feel like there was some old grandpa-type character, wasn’t there?”

“Dude, don’t ask me. I don’t have a clue.”

“Are there even any other characters aside from them?”

“Wasn’t there that Gaston guy?”

“No, he’s from *Beauty and the Beast*.”

“Wait. I didn’t know *Romeo and Juliet* was a Disney movie.”

“Because it isn’t, stupid. It’s Shakespeare.”

A mangled choir of voices rang out from all across the classroom. Only when things started to go completely off the rails did Ms. Iyo put a stop to it by clapping her hands.

“All right, quiet down, everyone. Yes, I had a feeling none of you would be particularly familiar. Even I had a hard time remembering the finer details. But luckily for you, I’ve got a little refresher to help us out with that today.” She set down a DVD case and a stack of papers on the lectern. “Apparently, there was a class that did a performance of *Romeo and Juliet* at the culture festival three years ago. I managed to snag the DVD recording of it, along with the abridged script they used. Now we’ve got all we need to make sure we’ve got the story

and characters down pat!”

“Wait. Are we gonna watch it right now?” asked one of the boys in class.

“Why, of course. Anyone who’s too far to see the screen, feel free to move up.”

Ms. Iyo removed the disc from the plastic case, then fed it into the DVD player on the TV stand in the corner of the classroom. The screen wasn’t very big, so plenty of my classmates took her up on her offer and slid their chairs closer. As the screen flashed to life, we were greeted by an image of the school auditorium, moodily darkened.

*“We lay our scene in fair Verona, as another day of strife between the houses of Montague and Capulet casts the shadow of a long-held grudge over the city...”*

The curtain rose on the stage as the narrator introduced the costumed actors one by one into the spotlight. From there, the story progressed at a fairly brisk pace. In all honesty, it felt more like a highlights reel of the play’s most iconic scenes rather than an actual, intelligible plotline that could be easily followed by the uninitiated. I could tell they were using an immensely modified and condensed script without even checking, but to be fair, this *was* just a high school culture festival. It didn’t have to win any awards.

*“And so a mournful morning dawned, the sun in its sorrow unwilling to even show its head, as this woeful tale of an ill-fated love reaches its end.”*

The whole thing was over and done with in all of twenty minutes. Ms. Iyo turned off the TV and had us all return to our normal seating positions, then started handing out the staple-bound scripts she’d photocopied and left in a stack up on the lectern.

“Now, please note that the script and stage direction we have here is just the one that this previous class of alumni thought was best,” she said. “Feel free to make changes and rearrangements as you see fit. As long as it’s good enough to amuse a crowd of casual spectators, though, I wouldn’t fuss too hard over the finer details.” Once every student had a script in their hands, Ms. Iyo gave a satisfied nod. “All right! I think that about does it for homeroom today... But I guess we still have a little bit of time left over. What do you think we should do,

everyone?”

There were still about ten minutes left before the next bell. The classroom went astir with chatter in response to this open-ended question, with some hopeful that we could just be let out early, while others made suggestions ranging from choosing a new seating chart for the semester to making casting decisions for the play—the last of which seemed to get Ms. Iyo’s attention.

“Oh, good point!” she said. “I guess we *should* start thinking about who should play whom. Anyone hoping for a particular role? Early bird gets the worm, you know!”

Again, the classroom stirred with murmurs, but no immediate volunteers emerged. It seemed everyone was taking a wait-and-see approach—as if even those who had an interest in performing were afraid of being first to speak up, thereby making themselves the de facto leader of the charge, and were hoping someone else would kick things off.

“No one at all, huh?” said Ms. Iyo. “Every role’s still open for the taking, folks! I hear there was even a class many years ago that did it with a girl Juliet *and* a girl Romeo!”

This information did nothing to change the state of affairs. Just when Ms. Iyo seemed ready to give up, declaring that there was no huge rush...

“Um, e-excuse me!”

A lone girl with frizzy hair raised her hand and piped up with a stammer. Her name was...Nanamori, if I remembered correctly. Was she interested in playing a role, or did she simply have a question? She never struck me as the type to volunteer for anything, so I’d be a bit surprised if it were the former.

“Oh, uhhh, sorry,” she said. “It’s not that I want a role for myself, per se, but there *is* someone I think would be a good fit...”

“You want to nominate someone else, then?” asked Ms. Iyo, and Nanamori nodded mously—and in the most literal sense too. She really did give off the impression of a tiny, skittish mouse as she nervously took in a breath and confessed:

“I really want to see Tsukinoki-san play Juliet...if that’s okay!”

A visible wave of commotion washed over the classroom as even students who hadn't seemed to give a single damn about the play suddenly lifted their heads and looked in Nanamori's direction. But no one looked more surprised than the nominee herself.

"W-wait. Me?" said Ushio, eyes wide.

Nanamori turned to her and nodded a couple times, then fidgeted with her hands on her desk as she explained. "You see, um...I'm a member of the sewing club, so I really like making dresses and everything... And I just really think you'd look incredible in a well-made, old-fashioned dress, is all. Which I guess is why I want to see you play Juliet... Er, not that I'd ever dream of pressuring you into it or anything!"

Her manner of speaking was all over the place; she clearly wasn't used to being the center of attention. But there was a definite passion in her voice—so strong was her desire to see Ushio as Juliet that it apparently overruled her social anxiety. Despite that, it was just a nomination at the end of the day. It was still Ushio's decision whether she accepted it or not. As I turned to gauge her reaction, I heard a loud creak as someone dramatically scooted their chair out from under their desk.

"Hey, I think that's a *great* idea!" Hoshihara exclaimed as she stood up and faced Nanamori with eager eyes. "I'd totally second that nomination! Ushio-chan's more than pretty enough to make a perfect Juliet!"

"R-right?!" said Nanamori, her face lighting up now that she'd found a like-minded comrade. "She's just so slender and attractive, I feel like she'd look good in literally anything and *really* make it sparkle onstage!"

The two were now officially kindred spirits—and it seemed their excitement had sparked a minor revolution among the other kids in class, as several other voices chimed in to say how *they'd* like to see Ushio play Juliet or how perfect she'd be for the part. Granted, most of these supporters were girls; the guys didn't seem especially inspired by the idea, though none of them actively seemed repulsed by it either.

However, there *was* one student in our class who made no attempt to hide her revulsion at the concept: Nishizono. She wore a scowl between her long,

bleached blonde pigtails and looked as though she wanted to voice a complaint. Yet she held her tongue, perhaps due to Ms. Iyo's presence. During spring semester, she'd shown no such restraint when it came to hurling verbal abuse at Ushio, so this was still a minor improvement in my view. Perhaps summer vacation had mellowed her out a bit.

"Mmm... How do you feel about this, Ushio?" asked Ms. Iyo. "Not that we have to decide right now or anything. We still have time."

Ushio held her chin between her thumb and forefinger as she took a moment to mull this over. Everyone in class was on tenterhooks, waiting to hear her reply. After a pregnant pause, she lifted her head in determination.

"Okay then," she said. "I'll give it a shot."

A chorus of *oohs* rose up from the peanut gallery. Hoshihara sat down with a pleased look on her face, and Nanamori pressed her hands together with delight.

"Thank you, Tsukinoki-san!" she said. "Um, I'll do my very best to make you the prettiest costume you've ever seen!"

"Thanks. I'll look forward to that."

Ushio smiled at the other girl—the sort of gentle smile that seems to just naturally form when you relax your cheeks and lower your defenses. Perhaps I imagined it, but it seemed just the faintest shadow of sadness lurked somewhere beneath.

*Wait. Don't tell me...*

"All right, now who's gonna be our Romeo?" asked Ms. Iyo, forging onward with the casting call before I could find any hard evidence to confirm my misgivings.

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Just a few minutes later, homeroom period was over, and school was out for the day. For the first time in what felt like ages, Ushio, Hoshihara, and I walked home together.

"Gosh, Kamiki-kun!" said Hoshihara as she pushed her bike through the main

gate to campus. “I still can’t believe *you’re* going to be our Romeo!”

It was true—I had agreed to play Romeo in the play. One of the boys in class had casually suggested I do it when Ms. Iyo asked, and I ultimately accepted the nomination.

“Are you sure about this, though?” asked Ushio, turning to face me as we walked with a concerned look in her eyes. “I mean, you’ve already got your work cut out for you as a festival committee member...”

It wasn’t as though I had some deep-seated desire to play Romeo from the outset, nor that I couldn’t have refused if I really wanted to. The only reason I didn’t, in all honesty, was that it just felt like the way things had to be. Deep down, I knew that if Ushio was playing Juliet, I’d probably end up being the one to play Romeo. Because—while I knew this was a pretty rude thing to say—I really couldn’t imagine anyone else in our class actively volunteering to play the male lead alongside her. If I turned down the nomination, it’d probably be a bit like pulling teeth trying to find another Romeo, which I knew would only make Ushio feel horribly awkward about the whole thing. So I’d decided to just buckle down and take the role.

Obviously, I had my anxieties about it. Even things like public speaking or giving class presentations were definitely not my forte, so the idea of having to perform as part of a stage production in front of a huge crowd of people was enough to make me dissociate a little bit. But when I put myself in Ushio’s shoes and thought about what a bind she’d be in, I couldn’t bring myself to say no. She was right that I did have my work as a member of the festival committee to think about as well, but...

“Meh,” I said. “I’m sure I’ll manage.”

“Well, if nothing else, I admire your optimism,” she said in exasperation, just as a red dragonfly darted past the tip of her nose. There was still a lingering heat in the air, but on the calendar, it was fall. The town chime that let all the good kids know it was time to head home had been pushed up from 6:00 p.m. to 5:30 p.m. and when I looked out over the paddy fields, I could see the ears of rice starting to droop here and there. There was even the slightest whiff of smoke in the air, as though someone was burning off a field somewhere not too



far away.

“Haven’t seen Sera around in a while, come to think of it,” I said—then slightly regretted it. I didn’t even know why I’d brought him up, given that he was the last person I wanted to talk about. Perhaps he was simply still close to the forefront of my mind; negative memories *were* typically the hardest to shake, after all.

“Apparently, he’s got some new girlfriend he’s pretty obsessed with,” said Ushio. “Probably been too busy with her lately.”

“Wait. Did you hear this from him?” I was a little surprised she’d be in the know.

“Mm-hmm. Told me via text.”

“Oh, huh. Didn’t know you guys had exchanged contact info.”

“Yeah, though I don’t reply very often. It’s mostly just him who messages me.”

So she *did* reply sometimes, then. I wondered what in the world the two of them could possibly still have to talk about. Belatedly, I realized that this was a bit of a sore subject and would probably sour Hoshihara’s mood. Much to my surprise, it didn’t.

“Good for him, then,” she said. “Glad he found someone a little more suitable. Plus, now there’s no one stopping us from walking home together every day again!”

Hoshihara flashed a cheeky grin, and I couldn’t help but crack a smile myself. To an outside observer, this interaction probably would have looked like a single idyllic page torn from the photo album of our collective youth. But in the midst of all this candid small talk, there were still moments that gave me pause, ones in which I struggled to find the right words to say. I was fairly certain Ushio and Hoshihara had these moments too. It was like there was a mild but unnatural obstruction between us—one that was by no means a major inconvenience, but which we all felt and wished we could remove. I dearly hoped it was just me being a worrywart and overthinking things, but assuming I was right, I wanted to find a way to tear down that barrier, or at least adapt and

learn to live with it.

“C’mon, Kamiki-kun! Back me up here! You think so too, right?!” said Hoshihara, instantly breaking me out of my reverie as she put the ball in my court.

“Huh? Oh, sorry,” I said. “Could you say that again? I wasn’t listening.”

“Ugh! Pay attention, wouldja?!”

I did feel bad, though I couldn’t help but smile internally at how cute Hoshihara was when she got grumpy.

“We were *talking* about how Ushio-chan’s gonna make a *really* good Juliet! Isn’t that right?!”

“Ohhh, right... Yeah, for sure,” I replied, and Hoshihara nodded approvingly.

“Ugh, I can’t *wait* to see what she looks like in costume...” She gazed up into the sky, eyes glimmering with wonder. “I wonder what kind of dress they’ll make for her...”

“Y’know, Natsuki,” said Ushio, her bangs drooping down a little as she tilted her head forward to get a better look at Hoshihara’s upturned face. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but it kind of sounds like you might have liked to play Juliet yourself.”

“Who, me?!” Hoshihara said, blinking in disbelief a few times before shaking her head brusquely. “No, no, no! I wouldn’t be a good match for the role at *all*. Not to mention, I’m way too short...”

“You think? I feel like you’d be a way better fit from a character standpoint. Plus, you’re cuter and more ladylike, so you could pull it off more naturally than I ever could.”

“Oh, man. I dunno about that...”

Hoshihara’s cheeks went bright red, and her lips stretched into a sheepish grin. But like a dark cloud on a sunny day, the few rays of joy that shone through in that smile were overshadowed by a looming veil of loneliness.

“Either way, I think you should be the one to do it,” she said matter-of-factly. “I mean, if *I* were Juliet, I wouldn’t ever get to see you play her! Besides, didn’t

you say you always wanted to be a princess in a play from a really young age?”

I recalled this anecdote too. Back when Hoshihara and I paid a visit to Ushio’s house, she shared the story of how she’d volunteered herself to play Cinderella as a child, only for her teacher to laugh it off as a joke. While Cinderella and Juliet were two different characters from very different stories, they were both the female leads of their respective tales. This was the perfect opportunity for Ushio to settle an age-old score and fulfill her childhood dream—or so Hoshihara seemed to think.

“Wow. You remembered that,” said Ushio, sounding genuinely impressed.

“Of course,” said Hoshihara. “And while I know it was Nanamori-san who suggested it first, I swear I was thinking it’d be nice if you got a chance to play Juliet even before that. Though I do worry that we sorta pressured you into it...”

As Hoshihara’s voice tapered off nervously, Ushio put on an affectionate smile.

“...You’re fine,” she said. “I’ll try my best to be a great Juliet.”

Hoshihara’s pensive expression bloomed into a beaming grin. “Okay, yeah! I’ll be rooting for you!” she said with a big nod. Her tone was sprightly, and her smile was radiant. I took it back—she was far cuter happy than she was grumpy.

From there, we leisurely made our way home, engaging in whatever random small talk came up along the way. We chatted about how tough the summer homework was, and how Hoshihara had gone to visit her relatives to celebrate Obon—but before she could even finish recounting the tale, we reached the intersection where our paths diverged.

“Okay, I’ll see you two tomorrow!” she said cheerily, then hopped up on her bike and headed for home.

Then it was just Ushio and me, walking shoulder to shoulder down the sidewalk. Things got awfully quiet awfully fast as soon as Hoshihara was gone, but it wasn’t an uncomfortable silence. The sounds of chirping cicadas and children playing in the nearby apartment complexes reached my ears.

I glanced over at Ushio out of the corner of my eye. Her expression was calm, her gaze fixed forward. Her posture was picture-perfect, her spine stretched

straight as though the top of her head was being held aloft by an invisible string in the sky. And maybe it was this particular combination of body language that gave me the impression that she was trying very carefully to put up a tough front about something.

“Hey,” I said, “can I ask you just one question?”

“What? You know you don’t have to ask permission. You’re free to ask me as many questions as you like.”

I gripped the handlebars of my bike a little bit harder as we walked. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but I kind of get the impression you didn’t really want to play Juliet after all.”

Ushio stopped dead in her tracks. A few steps later, I did too.

“Why do you say that?” she asked, straight-faced.

“Er, yeah, sorry if I’m way off base here,” I began, fumbling for words as the utter lack of emotion in Ushio’s expression sapped my confidence. “And to be clear, I was in the same boat as Hoshihara at first. I thought you should just go for it, given what you told us before about the whole Cinderella thing. But...”

I took a deep breath before continuing, “When she and that other girl nominated you to play Juliet, I kinda noticed you didn’t look all that thrilled about the idea. And I mean, when I thought about it a little harder, it totally made sense, right? Like, that was *third grade* when you said you wanted to play Cinderella, so it only stands to reason you might have grown out of that little fantasy. I mean, heck—I always wanted to be Kamen Rider when I was that age, but if you told me to put on a costume and roleplay him nowadays, I’d probably punch you in the mouth... Oh, but that’s not to say I think you *shouldn’t* play Juliet, or anything like that, to be clear! Just wondering how *you* feel about the whole thing, I guess...”

I could feel my confidence waning partway through this explanation, which led to a rather ham-fisted and inarticulate conclusion—but Ushio listened carefully the entire time. After I was done, she just watched me in silence for a while, her gaze tying my stomach into knots as I wondered if I’d inadvertently offended her somehow. *Come on, say something, already...* I pleaded internally, and she finally let out a soft, nasal laugh of amusement.

“You sure did put a lot of thought into this.” Her tone was like that of an adult praising a child for some objectively shoddy piece of work.

“W-well, I mean... I dunno about that,” I said, feeling suddenly self-conscious.

“...You make good points, though.”

Ushio put down her bike’s kickstand and leaned back against the seat. I took this as a sign that she wanted to stop and have a more relaxed discussion about this, so I rolled up alongside her and did the same. Ushio squinted her eyes against the glare as she gazed off to the west.

“You’ve pretty much got the right idea,” she said. “It’s true that I *did* feel a strong desire to be a princess like Cinderella when I was younger, but I’m in high school now. Obviously those childish fantasies don’t hold the same appeal. So yes—to be honest, I was bewildered when Nanamori-san volunteered me for the role. But once Natsuki seconded the nomination, it felt pretty hard for me to say no at that point, so I just kind of went along with it so as not to make things awkward.”

Ushio let out a half-hearted chuckle. I totally understood, though; even I could tell from the vibe in the classroom that she couldn’t easily turn down the nomination without seeming a bit cruel to her peers, shooting them down after they’d gone out on a limb to voice their support for her and, in their own way, try to validate her new identity. Not that Ushio owed them anything, but it *was* kind of a scary thought to imagine letting one’s classmates down like that after they had come so far in terms of acceptance and were clearly making an effort to include you. To some, it might even feel like a form of betrayal.

“So I was right, then?” I asked hesitantly. “You didn’t want to do it?”

Ushio lowered her gaze, her long lashes casting shadows below her eyes.

“Well, if I’m being honest... No. I really wasn’t comfortable with the idea.”

A rush of cold blood coursed through my entire body. I felt suddenly disgusted with my own fecklessness for having picked up on Ushio’s discomfort in the heat of the moment, but not saying a word to try to help her out of the situation.

“I think you should drop the part, then,” I said. “No need to force yourself to

do it. I'm sure everyone'll understand if you just explain that you were feeling under a little bit of peer pressure. I mean, I can tell you right now that Hoshihara definitely wouldn't want you to feel like she'd forced you into anything, or—"

"Wha—?! Hang on a minute!" Ushio cut in, flustered. "I said I *wasn't* comfortable! Meaning past tense!"

"Oh... G-gotcha, okay." My self-loathing quickly turned to embarrassment as I realized I'd jumped to conclusions yet again. *Learn to listen, goddamn it*, I rebuked myself.

"But right now," Ushio went on, "I'm just unsure. Everyone in class seemed a lot more open to the idea than I would've thought, and I didn't get the impression that Natsuki was trying to artificially boost my confidence either. I guess I feel less pressured and more persuaded at this point, so I'm thinking maybe it wouldn't hurt to give it a shot. And yet..." Ushio looked down at her thighs. "At the same time, another part of me still feels pretty averse to the idea. I mean, I don't know how people are going to react once they see me onstage, and there's gonna be a whole lot of people even from outside the school at the culture festival. When I think about the possibility of being laughed at or something...I just get anxious, I guess. To the point that as of right now, even I don't know what I really want to do..."

Ushio looked up at me helplessly.

"What do *you* think I should do, Sakuma?" she asked.

Obviously, what Ushio wanted for herself was most important. But if she *really* wanted to know my opinion, I did have an answer for her.

"I...I think you should do it. Don't worry. No one's gonna laugh at you."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure. If anything, you're gonna knock 'em dead. Go show those country bumpkins you're as pretty and talented as any other girl at Tsubakioka High."

I said this in a fully confident, reassuring tone; Ushio scratched her nose and averted her eyes in turn. I could see the tips of her ears flushing ever so slightly

red.

“...Well, okay then. Guess I’ll give it my best shot.”

“Cool. And *I’ll* do my best not to drag you down with my terrible acting.”

We both laughed. I was relieved we’d managed to swerve away from the melancholy direction the conversation was headed a moment ago—especially since I really *was* sure that Ushio as Juliet would make for a fantastic performance.

“Thanks for the confidence boost, Sakuma.”

“Hey, don’t mention it. Not like I really did anything, though...”

“No, you definitely did,” she said, shaking her head. “If you hadn’t pressed me about it, I might’ve just bottled up my feelings and been weirdly anxious about it all the way up until the performance. I’m glad you know how to read me so well.”

“Aw, c’mon. It was nothing, really...”

I felt genuinely a bit vexed; I really hadn’t done anything worthy of gratitude. If anything, I still felt bad that I hadn’t spoken up on Ushio’s behalf during the casting stage. But this muddled mess of emotions was soon interrupted by Ushio lowering her head ever so slightly and saying, as if whispering to herself:

“Not to mention, I’ll be...a little more at ease with you playing Romeo, I think... Just a little,” she repeated, emphasizing the sentiment with a shy smile.

I was once again at a loss as to how to respond. I was flattered to hear this, but I wasn’t sure if I had the right to say it made me “happy,” per se, after everything we’d been through lately.

Ushio stood up straight from her half-seated position and stretched out her back, like a huge weight had just been lifted off her shoulders. It seemed the conversation was over—but then Ushio turned back to me as if she’d remembered something.

“Oh, right,” she said. “And you’d better not leave Natsuki in the lurch either. You’re her fellow committee member, after all.”

“Y-yeah, of course not,” I said, faltering a bit at this somewhat sudden shift in

topic. “Don’t worry, I know.”

“Cool. I believe in you,” Ushio said softly as she clapped me on the shoulder. Then she raised her kickstand and started to walk. I kicked mine up as well and hurried ahead at a brisk jog to catch up with her.

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Today was our first festival committee meeting. Hoshihara and I were required to attend, so we headed to the A/V room together. We had no idea how long the meeting might last, so we’d already said our goodbyes to Ushio back in the classroom.

“Stand up straight, Kamiki-kun! You’re all hunched over!” said Hoshihara.

“Hm? Oh, s-sorry.”

I quickly righted my posture. I must’ve looked pretty pathetic for her to actually criticize me on it, though I was pretty sure my posture wasn’t *that* bad... Still, I had to admit I wasn’t feeling very enthused about meeting the committee members from all of the other classes today, so that might have had something to do with it. I was a pretty shy person at the best of times, so big group meetings like this always got me ridiculously nervous beforehand.

“First impressions are really important for these types of things, y’know,” said Hoshihara. “Gotta hold your head high, or they’ll just see you as another sap they can bully and beat the stuffing out of!”

“I highly doubt that’ll happen,” I replied.

What kind of sketchy, rough-and-tumble high school did she think this was?

In stark contrast to my distinct lack of enthusiasm, Hoshihara was apparently raring to go. I’d been wondering for a while now why she’d volunteered herself to be a committee member in the first place; it didn’t seem to fit her personality or her academic record...but perhaps I was wrong. Though I considered asking her about it outright, given that she was walking right next to me, the A/V room came into view before I could bring myself to broach the subject. I talked myself out of it, convinced that I could just as easily ask her any other time. And so I held my tongue as we walked down to the room.



Upon entering, we were greeted by a large projector screen on the left-hand wall, with three long, rectangular tables arranged in a U shape around it. About half of the folding chairs were already filled with other council members twiddling their thumbs and waiting for the meeting to get underway. In a corner of the room, I spotted Mr. Iida, the chemistry teacher, leaning against the wall and struggling not to yawn—apparently not too thrilled that he'd been saddled with a supervisory role.

“Grade and class?” asked the boy standing at the far end of the room, in front of the screen. I recognized his face: he was the student council president, as I recalled. I couldn't remember how much of a role the student council had in organizing last year's culture festival, but apparently they were involved to some degree.

I answered that we were from Class 2-A, and the boy indicated a pair of empty chairs for us to sit down in. Hoshihara and I bowed politely and took our seats. It was just past four o'clock; it seemed the meeting was set to begin as soon as the committee members from every class showed up. As I took a look around to see if there was anyone else I knew, I noticed one pair of eyes to the right staring daggers at me. It was a boy sitting in a corner of the room, resting his head on one fist with an unpleasant scowl. Startled, I broke eye contact—but even then, the boy just kept on glaring.

*Wh-what the hell does this guy want? He's freaking me out...*

I had absolutely no clue why he was scowling at me, but I did know the boy's name. He had almond-shaped eyes, and he was one of those tall, tanned guys you could instantly tell was an athletic type. In this case, I knew he was on the track team, as he was one Fusuke Noi—the old teammate of Ushio's who'd stormed into our class and given her hell the first day she came to school wearing a girl's uniform.

While I knew there was bad blood between him and Ushio, there was absolutely nothing between him and *me* that would give him cause for such animosity; I'd never exchanged a single word with the guy. It was still enough to put me on pins and needles, so I did my best not to make eye contact with him as the remaining committee members trickled into the A/V room one after another—until at last, the final holdout we'd been waiting on waltzed through

the door.

“Aw, shucks. Looks like you guys already got started without me.”

*Oh god. Please no.*

I knew that mug—that loose-lipped swindler’s smirk and that irksomely handsome face with the droopy eyes that stood out under lavish locks.

It was Sera. Itsuku Sera. Apparently, he was Class D’s male committee member, arriving fashionably late (and quite a while after his female counterpart). He was clutching an open carton of coffee milk in one hand.

“Hurry and take your seat,” said the student council president. “And no eating or drinking in the A/V room.”

“Oh, my bad. Sorry!” Sera downed the rest of his drink in one go, then tossed the empty carton into a nearby trash can with an alley-oop before sauntering over to the only remaining empty seat. Along the way, he glanced over and made eye contact with me—and for a split second, his eyes widened, then narrowed again as his lips curled into the grin of a predator who’d just spotted their next meal.

The universe had a sick sense of humor.

After we’d gone through and let all of the festival committee members introduce themselves one by one, we closed the curtains to watch a slideshow via the ceiling projector at the center of the room. It was an orientation guide that gave a basic overview on what being a committee member entailed.

The first couple of slides were a general summary of the various tasks involved in performing our roles: checking in regularly with each class to make sure they were on track with their preparations for the event, handling general administrative procedures during the actual festival itself, et cetera. After that, we went over some potential pitfalls and incidents that had occurred in previous years’ festivals that we needed to be wary of, as well as weather contingency arrangements that might become necessary in the event that it rained the day of. It was a pretty comprehensive set of guidelines, all told. When at last the projector screen went dark, the student council president

flipped the lights back on.

“Okay, I think that should give you a basic idea of what the work entails,” he said. “Now, without further ado, I’d like to go ahead and assign everyone their specific roles, starting with the committee chair. Anyone who’d like to give leadership a shot?”

Not a single student raised their hand. Of all the various posts on the festival committee, the committee chair had by far the most responsibilities and therefore the largest amount of work to do. This fact had been made evident in the presentation just now. Most people were bound to shirk in the face of a challenge like that.

That being said, I assumed most of the students gathered here hadn’t agreed to become committee members without a little coaxing on their teachers’ parts. In which case, all we really needed was for one student who’d *actually* volunteered themselves as a natural-born leader to step forth and take up the mantle. I was fairly certain someone who fit the bill would raise their hand soon—and sure enough, they did. But it was the last person I might have expected. It was Hoshihara.

“I’d like to give it a shot!” she said succinctly, then lowered her hand.

*W-well, damn... Now there’s a surprise.* I really hadn’t anticipated *this* turn of events. To think she would not only volunteer herself as a member but to be the committee *chair* as well? I wondered what strange driving force had taken control of the Hoshihara I knew.

“Ooh, yeah! Atta girl, Natsuki-chan! You show ’em who’s boss!” Sera butted in from the sidelines.

Hoshihara cringed and laughed this off before collecting herself again. “Um, anyway, yeah! I’m Natsuki Hoshihara, from Class 2-A. I promise to do my very best, if you all will have me!” She’d introduced herself as though it were a job interview before giving a deep bow to the entire room.

Neither Mr. Iida nor the student council president had any objections. They welcomed Hoshihara warmly and called for a round of applause, to which my fellow students and I quickly obliged. Hoshihara, in turn, bowed her head graciously a few more times in each direction to show her thanks, then let out a

heavy sigh as though she'd just finished a big task at the workplace and was ready for a break. The student council's designated scribe then wrote "COMMITTEE CHAIR: HOSHIHARA" up on the whiteboard.

"Okay then. Next up, we need to choose our exhibits team..."

The meeting carried on at a relatively brisk pace from there, until all of the roles that needed filling had been divvied up among the remaining council members. I ended up on the administrative team—which was the position I'd singled out as the least time-consuming, given that I knew I'd be increasingly busy with rehearsals for our class's play as the festival drew nearer and nearer.

"All right, everybody. I think we can call this meeting adjourned. Good work today, everyone," said the student council president, releasing us for the afternoon at a little after half past five. Everyone started gathering their things and rising from their seats.

Before I could do the same, Noi walked from the opposite end of the room to where I was sitting. He didn't say a word, just stared down at me with frigid eyes. Though I was a little rattled on the inside, I managed to wring out a few words.

"Wh-what do you want?" I asked.

"What's goin' on between you and Ushio, huh?" This one line was enough to give me a pretty decent idea why he'd been glaring at me earlier. So it *did* have something to do with Ushio.

I rose from my seat. I had to admit, there was definitely an intimidation factor, standing face-to-face with a tall, muscular guy like Noi. He looked down on me from above whether I was seated or standing. If anything, being on my feet only made the drastic difference in our heights that much more obvious, so I kind of wished I'd stayed sitting down and played it cool.

"Nothing," I replied. "We're just good friends who go way back, that's all."

"Oh really, now," Noi said coldly, apparently unsatisfied with this answer. "Surprised you can even stand to be around that freak."

A chill of animosity shot through my heart. “What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

“I mean, who’d wanna be seen hanging out with a dude who dresses up like a chick? Gotta be pretty nauseating, right?”

*Ugh...*

A whole slew of conflicting emotions started swirling around in my head. I knew I should probably get angry here, but instead I just got painfully depressed. This was someone who’d clearly spent no small amount of time together with Ushio back when she was on the track team. And if he was *this* blatant in his prejudice and lack of empathy even to a stranger like me, I could only imagine that his judgmental nature had hurt Ushio more than a couple times in the past, whether he realized it or not. Sure, my own inability to relate to or understand Ushio’s struggles had probably caused her a fair amount of grief in the past—or even to this day—but I was at least different from *this* prick.

“I dunno what your deal is,” I said, glaring up at Noi, “but I can already tell that Ushio made the right call in quitting the track team.”

“Scuse me?” Noi said, his brow twitching with rage.

I didn’t back down. I stood firm in the face of his intimidation and held fast to what I knew was right. Our stare down didn’t last long, however.

“H-hey!” someone called out from afar, and we both turned to look. It was Hoshihara, trembling as she trudged over to where we were standing. “I...I think you should apologize, Noi-kun. That was really uncalled for.”

Noi gave a disgusted scowl and clicked his tongue reproachfully. “Whatever. Screw you two,” he spat, then begrudgingly left the room.

I nearly crumpled to my knees on the spot. After collecting myself and taking a look around, though, I did see that there were a few other committee members as well as Mr. Iida still in the room, all of them looking this way. I assumed they would have probably stepped in if things *had* started to get violent. Luckily, it seemed I was in the clear.

“Noi-kun sure isn’t the friendliest guy around, is he?” said Hoshihara.

“Yeah... Not sure what his problem is.”

Though I said as much, I did have a pretty good idea as to how complicated and frustrating his feelings toward Ushio must have been in their own right. I assumed he was probably the boy on the team who got closest to Ushio back at the start of freshman year, and the one who’d spent the most time with her. That would certainly explain why he had such a hard time accepting her transition—which I could understand, up to a point. But once it devolved into prejudice and insults, that was where I drew the line. I couldn’t condone that for a minute, which was the same reason I knew I could never get along with him.

“You can say that again. What a jerk, am I right? Wouldn’t wanna be caught dead hanging out with a guy like that,” came a voice from beside me that was decidedly not Hoshihara’s. Had it been anyone but Sera, I imagined she and I both would’ve nodded.

“Not looking for sympathy from *you*,” I muttered.

“Aw, c’mon... Don’t be like that. We’re both committee members, aren’t we? We ought to be pals! Ooh, speaking of which—you wanna know how I ended up getting nominated?”

“Nope, I sure don’t, actually.”

“So I was skipping class that day, right? And they just picked me to go to the slaughter ’cause I wasn’t there to say no! Is that hysterical, or what?!”

“Cool, man. I don’t care.”

“Sheesh, you’re a real stick in the mud... Oh yeah, so hey! Would you two wanna stop and get somethin’ to eat on the way home, or nah? Feels like we’ve got a lotta catching up to do, y’know? Could have ourselves a nice little chat over a plate of French fries or somethin’. C’mon, I’ll race ya to the station! Last one there has to buy everyone’s food!”

This guy did not have an off switch; I was convinced that if we let him be, he’d talk until the heat death of the universe. I noticed Hoshihara had been stealing glances over at the doorway for a while now, probably desperate to leave. I needed to peel this leech off of us so we could get the hell out of here ASAP.

“Look,” I said. “I need to get going, so you should head home too. Alone.” I turned my back to Sera and signaled to Hoshihara with my eyes that it was time to leave. But right as we were about to go, Sera’s irksome voice plagued us yet again.

“Ooh?” he said. “So you and Natsuki-chan are walkin’ home together, just the two of you, huh? llllinteresting...”

Even without turning around, I could picture his smug, twisted grin perfectly in my mind. The lingering discomfort of his obnoxious voice in my eardrums quickly permeated through my brain, where it was converted to pure anxiety. I couldn’t shake the feeling like I’d just been caught in a very compromising position by the *last* person I wanted to find out. But all I could do for now was pretend I hadn’t heard him.

As Hoshihara and I walked out of the building, the sun was already beginning to set. The western sky was dyed a burning red, and I could see a handful of bats flying over the nearby rice fields. From the east, there came a dry, bitter wind that foretold the coming of autumn.

“Looks like we might be in for an unpleasant couple months, huh?” Hoshihara said under her breath. I assumed she was alluding to Noi and Sera.

“Maybe so, yeah,” I said. “But if anyone can handle it, it’s you, Ms. Committee Chair.”

“Oh my goddddd, don’t call me that! It makes the pressure ten times worse!” Though her exaggerated squeal of dread was intended as a joke, there was a hint of genuine nervousness in it.

“Gotta say, though—I’m pretty surprised you volunteered yourself.”

“Ohhh, yeah. I’m kinda surprised myself, to be honest. I’m not usually the type to do that sort of thing.” Hoshihara smiled bashfully. Even *she* knew it was out of character.

“Have you been thinking you wanted to try being committee chair for a while now or something?”

“Mmm, no, nothing like that. In fact, I remember thinking, ‘Wow, that sounds like *way* too much work for someone like me!’ when they talked about it last year.”

“Oh, no kidding? Then why’d you volunteer?” I asked out of simple curiosity—and Hoshihara’s expression shifted into a somewhat lonesome, yearning look.

“I guess I just felt like, I dunno...I can’t keep being the way I am now forever, y’know? I mean, I’m always relying on others and counting on them to handle the hard stuff for me...as you’re well aware.”

I wanted to deny it outright, but unfortunately, I *could* think of a few instances in which she’d done just that. “Well...yeah, maybe a little.”

“I really put the pressure on you at the end of last semester, when I asked you to study your butt off to get first place on the final exams... And you just stepped up to the plate and pulled it off, too. That’s crazy to me. Meanwhile, I’m over here sitting at 81st...”

“Hey, but that’s still an improvement, though, right? Didn’t you say you got 176th the time before that?”

“Hang on, why do you remember the exact number?! God, that’s so embarrassing! How do I wipe your brain?! Ugh... But yeah, I *did* study pretty hard for these last exams myself, especially since we were getting together to have study sessions at the diner and stuff... Anyway, my grades are not the point here!”

She was officially closing the book on that topic. I needed to choose my words more carefully, it seemed.

“I guess what I’m trying to get at here,” she went on, “is that thanks to you getting first in our grade, we managed to get Sera-kun to back off. Not that it would have mattered either way, really, since he didn’t even crack the top ten. And after that, I caught you and Ushio-chan at the top of the stairs doing, well... you know. ‘The deed,’ as it were.”

I didn’t know how to break it to her that this particular roundabout phrasing implied we were doing something a *whole* lot more scandalous up there without derailing the conversation, so I held my tongue.



“R-right, yeah,” I said. “And? What about it?”

“Well, when I first saw that, I remember being really shaken up by it... But then I had, like, this momentary flash of insight, right? Kind of like an epiphany, I guess. Like a bolt of lightning came down out of nowhere, and I could see everything so much brighter and clearer all of a sudden.”

“Huh. And what epiphany was this, exactly?”

“That if I just keep letting everyone else do all the hard stuff for me, they’re all gonna learn to grow and improve while I just stay the same and get left behind. I literally couldn’t get that thought out of my head for pretty much *all* of summer vacation. But yeah! Basically, I just wanna learn how to grow too, and prove to myself that I’ve also got what it takes to do something great on my own...if that makes sense? Ah ha ha ha, I dunno! I’m not really sure it does!”

Hoshihara kicked a pebble lying in the road with her foot and sent it flying. She’d tried to laugh it off at the end there, but I could tell exactly what she was trying to say and what sorts of anxieties she’d been grappling with. She’d volunteered herself to be festival committee chair because she wanted to take on a challenge that would help her grow as a person. I felt like this might prove to be a shortsighted choice in the end, but it was a valid one nonetheless. And even if she did end up failing in the long run, she’d still gain plenty of worthwhile skills and knowledge from the experience, so there was still value to be had in trying.

“No, I think that answers my question. Rest assured, I’ll be rooting for you.”

“Aw, thanks! Gosh, you’re gonna make me blush!” she said with a cute little giggle.

She really was a sweet and honest girl—enough that I had a hard time believing just how precious she was.

“But don’t worry about little ol’ me. You’ve got your own stuff to focus on, right, Kamiki-kun? Gotta say, I think I’m looking forward to our rendition of *Romeo and Juliet* more than anything else at the festival this year. Already made up my mind that I’m gonna find a way to see the performance live, no matter how busy I get as chair of the committee!” Her voice was brimming with anticipation as she narrowed her eyes and gazed far off into the distance.

“Yeah, I’m really looking forward to it...”

Beneath her genuine excitement, there was a hint of melancholy to these last few whispered words. Given that Hoshihara wasn’t one of our actors, she’d only be working on the play behind the scenes—and even then, I assumed she wouldn’t be able to help all that much with making props and costumes or other preparations now that she had a whole host of other tasks on her plate as committee chair. I wondered if maybe she was feeling a little left out at the thought of that.

*Or maybe...*

“Hey, Hoshihara. How would you say you feel about Ushio now?”

“Huh? What do you mean?” she asked, blank-faced. Apparently, I needed to be a little more specific.

“Would you say you still have feelings for her? Like, romantic ones, I mean.”

“Bweh?!”

Her jaw dropped, and she did a double take, like she’d been ambushed by this question when she least expected it. Only a moment later, she bumped her shin into her bike pedal and yelped in pain, then stopped in place and started rubbing it profusely.

“Ugh! Why’d you have to ask me about *that* all of a sudden?!” she said.

“Well, I mean, you know...” I said as I waited for her to start walking again. “I guess I just figured if you still had a thing for her, maybe me playing Romeo while she plays Juliet wouldn’t exactly be the most fun scenario for you...”

“Wow, Kamiki-kun. You’re just going straight there, huh? Gotta hand it to you, that’s pretty bold,” she replied, eyes full of reproach. She wasn’t wrong, though; once again, I probably could have chosen my words a *bit* more carefully.

“S-sorry. Guess I was just a little curious, that’s all...”

“It’s fine. Not like it really matters.” She turned away in a huff, resuming her homeward walk. I wasn’t sure if I’d actually pissed her off or not, so I hurried forward to look over and gauge her expression.

Right when I caught up with her, she opened her mouth with eyes downcast and said, “I still don’t know, is the thing. Heck, I might even be more confused now than I was a couple months back. But what I *do* know is...” She glanced over at me. “If Ushio-chan’s gonna be cast as Juliet, then I think you were always gonna be the only real choice to play her Romeo.”

“You think so, huh?”

Hoshihara and I had come to the same conclusion, though I assumed it was probably a slightly harder pill for her to swallow than it was for me. I wondered what would have happened if I hadn’t been nominated for the role by another classmate. Would Hoshihara have volunteered me eventually? It didn’t seem too absurd to think she might have, considering what she’d just said.

We were now almost at the intersection where our paths diverged. It was already past six o’clock, and the sun had already tucked its lower half under the horizon, making way for the first stars of the evening high in the western sky. When we reached the intersection, we both stopped and turned to face each other.

“Hey...Kamiki-kun?”

“Yeah?”

Her face went deathly serious. “What do you think it means to love someone?”

This was a rather abrupt and hard-to-answer question. But Hoshihara had already pursed her lips as if determined to wait patiently for my response. I didn’t feel right answering with a joke or shrugging it off when she was being so clearly earnest.

“Man, that’s a tough one...”

I mulled it over. What *did* it mean to love someone? There was no one right answer to this question. If you asked ten people, you’d probably get ten totally different responses. But that was all the more reason that a half-hearted, canned answer wouldn’t work here. As I stood there hemming and hawing, I could feel the seconds passing by—five, then ten. Still Hoshihara waited in silence. A crow cawed loudly overhead. It was only after the echoes died that I

settled on an answer I was happy with.

“Well, I think when you really love someone...you want to always be around that person and exist in their general orbit, y’know what I mean? And I’m not just talking physical proximity but mental closeness too. Like, you want them to notice you, and pay attention to you, and know how you feel about them...”

“You want them to notice you...” Hoshihara repeated, perhaps trying to digest my meaning. Then, with a meek expression, she said, “Yeah. I think I get that, kinda.”

“Anyway, I’m probably not the best guy to ask about stuff like this,” I said. “You’d probably find a better answer in any shojo manga or romance novel, to be honest...”

“Nah, I don’t think so. Besides, you’re quite the avid reader yourself, Kamiki-kun, which is part of the reason I wanted to get your perspective.”

“O-oh, is that right? Well then... Glad I could come in handy, I guess.”

After that, Hoshihara straddled her bike with one leg and wished me a quick farewell before pedaling off down the street. I just kind of stood there for a minute, watching in silence as she rounded the corner.

“What it means to love someone, huh...?” I mumbled to no one.

All of a sudden, I felt awfully down on myself. Chances were, she’d never know that the definition I’d given was just a verbatim description of how I felt about her.

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There was now only about a month left until the culture festival, and all the classes had set about making preparations for their respective booths, exhibits, or performances in earnest. As of today, Class 2-A would begin practicing our parts and working on making costumes and props and everything as well.

As soon as sixth period was over and the teacher left the classroom, a girl wearing red-framed glasses stepped up to the front. Her name was Todoroki, and she was the student who’d been designated as stage director during role assignments for the cast and crew. She was an art club student, a self-

proclaimed movie buff who had always dreamed of directing her own film someday. It seemed the word “director” alone was enough of a draw to make her volunteer to take the helm.

“All right, people! Listen up! We’re not heading home just yet!” she said. “Hey! You there! What’s that? You’ve got a club meeting after this? Well, just hold on a minute, would you? This’ll only take a sec!”

Todoroki had always struck me as a go-getter who had her act together, but she seemed to have *really* taken an interest in making our little play a huge success. I felt confident that I could count on her to get the job done.

“Now, as you all know, we only have one month left until the big night! As such, we’ll need to hit the ground running with practice and preparations starting today! I know some of you are already busy with extracurriculars and part-time jobs, but I’d still really appreciate you participating to the best of your abilities. I’ll be in charge of acting instruction and stage direction, while Nanamori-san will be supervising all of the set production and backstage prep. Rest assured that we’ll both be giving it 110 percent!”

Flustered at having her name called, Nanamori stood up and gave a deep bow.

“But it takes more than just one person to put on a play. So let’s all put our efforts together and make this the best rendition of *Romeo and Juliet* this town has ever seen!”

Todoroki raised her fist and gave a rousing cheer, which a few of our classmates actually returned, albeit with more moderate enthusiasm. It wasn’t a bad vibe, on the whole—overall class morale was pretty high. With one exception, that is.





“What a joke,” said the lone dissenter.

I turned in the direction of the voice and saw that it was none other than Nishizono—elbow on her desk, cheek in her hands, and an unamused expression on her face.

“Pretty hard to be the best ever when you’ve got a *guy* playing Juliet,” she went on. “Think that probably disqualifies us from the get-go. Sure you don’t wanna reconsider our casting choices before we become the laughingstock of the entire town?”

The whole classroom went quiet at this blatantly targeted venom she was spewing. Ushio, being the object of the abuse, drew in her shoulders and lowered her head in a futile attempt to evade the awkward attention. Seeing her shrink in her chair like this made my chest ache, and it filled me with an indignant rage toward Nishizono. I’d hoped that she would’ve had a chance to cool her head and grow up a little bit over summer vacation, but it seemed that was overly optimistic. I could see no improvement in her tyrannical nature. If only Ms. Iyo were here, she’d surely set Nishizono straight. But there were no teachers or faculty members sitting in on this candid class meeting. Which meant one of *us* would have to stand up and tell her off instead.

“There’s no need to reconsider...” I said, figuring I was as good a man for the job as anyone. Granted, I really wasn’t the type to speak up at times like these, but I couldn’t just sit idly by while a good friend was being abused, so I mustered what little courage I had.

“Ugh. You again?” said Nishizono, twisting her head to look at me with a disgusted expression on her face, but without even bothering to turn in her chair. I could have said the same thing to her after all the times she’d gotten in trouble for harassing Ushio last semester—but apparently the concept of remorse was not one she was familiar with.

“Why the hell do you care who plays Juliet, huh?” I continued. “Not like she’s bothering anyone.”

“Sure, it might not bother *you* guys, but I promise you it’ll gross out our audience.”



“No, it won’t!” said Hoshihara, rising from her chair to refute Nishizono in my stead. “Ushio-chan’s more than pretty enough to fit the bill! And she’s not a boy either...”

“Pah,” said Nishizono. “Yeah, we’ll see what the audience has to say about that. Think he’d be better off just quitting now before he embarrasses himself.”

Hoshihara dropped her gaze in frustration; I assumed she was backing down in the face of Nishizono’s unapologetic rudeness and refusing to escalate. To my surprise, she quickly lifted her head and glared at the other girl with fiery determination.

“If anyone’s embarrassing themselves here, it’s *you*, Arisa!”

This floored me. Never before had I seen Hoshihara talk back to Nishizono so openly. Even Nishizono’s shoulders jerked back a bit, so unexpected was this act of open defiance.

“I beg your pardon...?” said Nishizono. “Not sure what that’s supposed to mean.”

Her speech lacked its usual sharpness. She really *was* a bit bewildered by this unexpected back talk. Just then, someone else chimed in to give Nishizono a piece of their mind, albeit falteringly.

“E-erm, excuse me!” said Nanamori. “I just want to say that, um... I r-really think Tsukinoki-san would make a wonderful Juliet too, so, um...”

This was yet another surprise; for an introvert like Nanamori to stand up to Nishizono was almost unthinkable. Granted, she’d done it in a soft, mousy voice, but it was still loud enough to reach my ears from where I was seated in the very back row, so I assumed everyone in the classroom had heard it too. But unlike with Hoshihara, Nishizono was quick to let her fury show on her face this time. She ground her teeth together and fixed Nanamori with a glare that could pierce through an iron plate. The other girl curled up in fear.

“I don’t really see an issue with Tsukinoki playing Juliet either,” said Todoroki, drawing Nishizono’s ire onto herself. “She’s just as cute as any other girl. Besides, it’s not like gender’s ever really mattered in theater to begin with. In Shakespeare’s day, all female characters were played by boys. And just look at

Takarazuka, where all men are played by girls.”

I couldn't help but think she was *slightly* missing the point of accepting Ushio as a real girl with this argument, but I supposed it was still a push in the right direction. It was nice to see people making more of an effort to understand and accept Ushio's identity (even if there were some growing pains). This overall shift had begun before summer vacation, but now it felt like Nishizono was the only remaining holdout in our whole class, and we had her surrounded on all sides. She looked around the room, desperate to find at least one other person who might take her side—but every student she made eye contact with quickly turned their head. Even those who were typically good friends of Nishizono's refused to have her back in this. And so, left with no other option, she simply trembled in rage for a moment, then shot up from her seat.

“You're all a bunch of *idiots*, then! I'm outta here!” she said, slinging her bag over her shoulder as she barged over to the door and swung it wide open, then stomped out into the hallway.

The classroom was quiet for a while after that. Eventually, Todoroki resumed her speech, as if snapping out of a daze.

“Er, all right, everyone!” she said. “Let's get to work, then, shall we?!”

The class split up into two groups: the acting group and the backstage crew, with the former staying in Classroom 2-A to practice our parts while the latter moved to the multipurpose room to start on their preparations. Hoshihara had some festival committee business to attend to, so she left in a hurry as soon as Todoroki's spiel was over.

There were about ten of us left in the classroom—though this wasn't *all* of the actors, mind you. Several were simply absent because they had club meetings or other, more important business to attend to. Still, this was a pretty good turnout for day one.

After pushing all of the desks to the back of the classroom, the other actors and I gathered around to do some vocal exercises, then go through the script and practice our lines (mostly just for fun). At one point, Ushio and I were seated in chairs, facing each other in the center of the circle with our scripts.

Todoroki loomed over us with a megaphone in one hand. I assumed she planned to really put us through the wringer until we got it right, given that our roles were by far the most important in the play. Weirdly, no one commented on the bizarrely unnecessary megaphone.

“Okay, let’s start from page three. The part where Romeo enters the stage.”

I opened my script to the proper page; it was the scene where Romeo sneaks into the Capulet family’s ball. For our class’s rendition of the play, this was effectively the prologue (the actual play began with a scene of strife between the Montagues and the Capulets, but our version just covered that information in the opening narration).

I swallowed and cleared my throat to read my first line:

“What beauty is that, which lights up the room—hanging like a jewel on the night, or a snowy dove in a flock of—”

“Cut,” said Todoroki, before letting out a beleaguered sigh.

*Cut? Really? Pretty sure that’s not a word you use when rehearsing a stage production. This girl really is a movie addict. Whatever, at least I know what she meant...*

“Yeah, no. Not gonna cut it,” said Todoroki, slumping her shoulders.

“What’s not gonna cut it?” I asked.

“That voice of yours.”

*Excuse me...? And what the hell am I supposed to do about that?*

“It’s pretty hard to even hear what you’re saying,” she went on. “Not that you’re speaking too quietly, but it feels like you’re just mumbling the words. Also, there’s just no emotion in your voice. You sound like a dead rat.”

*Why, you...!*

She was being awfully blunt for a girl I’d hardly ever spoken to before. Though to be fair, even I couldn’t deny that my delivery felt pretty stiff. I just felt like I’d be too embarrassed to try to act all emotionally invested in the role—especially since all of Romeo’s lines were so cloyingly starry-eyed and exaggerated to the point that it genuinely made me want to cringe. Maybe we needed to adapt the

script even further to tone that stuff down a bit.

“Granted, I’m no expert myself,” said Todoroki, “but I think you’d be well served to focus in hard on doing some intense vocal exercises, Kamiki. Okay, next up—let’s have you read a few lines, Tsukinoki.”

“O-okay,” said Ushio.

She was obviously feeling nervous; she’d been licking her lips and readjusting herself in her seat for a while now. Clearly Todoroki had picked up on this, too, as she offered a gentle smile and tried to reassure her.

“Don’t sweat it too hard,” she said. “This is only practice right now, so you can relax a little bit. Especially now that bratty Miss Pigtails is gone.”

I couldn’t help but snicker a little at this nickname.

Ushio took a deep breath, then looked dead ahead. It seemed she was ready now.

“All right,” she said softly. “Where should I begin?”

“We should probably start with the ball scene, same as Kamiki. Turn to page five, and read from where she learns that Romeo’s a Montague, and therefore an enemy of hers.”

Ushio flipped to the page and recited her first line:

“To think my first love would be born from my only hate! Oh, woe is me, that I should fall so deeply for a sworn enemy...”

Having finished her line, Ushio ventured a furtive glance up from her script—probably curious to know how well she did but expecting the worst.

“Now *that’s* what I’m talking about!” said Todoroki, her eyes aglimmer as she raised her voice into a cheer. “What were you so afraid of, huh?! That was spectacular! Trust me, you’ve got nothing to worry about. You didn’t sound too monotone or exaggerated. I think you struck the perfect balance, honestly. There was *pathos* in it, I tell you!”

“Y-you really think so...?” Ushio asked modestly. I could tell she was pleased to hear this praise, though. And I had to agree with Todoroki—she was definitely a natural at this. So much so, that I was honestly a little taken aback.

Her recitation was so full of emotion, and her husky voice only served to accent the yearful sincerity of the line.

“Okay, I’ve gotta ask: have you ever auditioned for a legit acting role before?” said Todoroki. “Honestly, you sound just as good as aspiring actors who I know have taken performance lessons to learn how to believably emote like that.”

“No, I’ve never done anything like that,” said Ushio. “Although there *was* a period when I was doing some vocal exercises on my own time. Maybe that ended up helping me out a little bit, who knows.”

Right. Once, when we were walking home from school, Ushio had mentioned that she’d done vocal exercises before because she had a bit of a complex about her low voice.

“Wow, you don’t say...” said Todoroki, looking down at her own script with a pensive expression on her face. After vacillating a good while, she flipped through the script and showed Ushio one particular page. “Hey, why don’t we try this scene next? The ‘wherefore art thou Romeo?’ bit. Sorry, I know it’s a pretty long part.”

“Mmm, yeah, I’m not sure I can do it justice...”

“Oh, you don’t have to be perfect or anything! I just kinda wanna hear you perform it. It’s one of the most iconic scenes in the whole play, so we’ll practice it intensively later, don’t worry.”

Ushio still seemed unsure, judging by the way she was fidgeting and casting furtive glances in my direction. It seemed she wanted to know my opinion, so I gave it.

“I don’t think there’s any need for that just yet,” I said. “We’ve still got plenty of time—and I wouldn’t want Ushio to get so good right away that I look even worse by comparison. I guess I’d prefer we didn’t rush too far ahead.”

“That’s *your* problem, Kamiki,” Todoroki retorted. “You just need to step up your game too, and you’ll be fine.”

I had no room for rebuttal. Ushio thought on this a moment, then nodded. “All right,” she said, mind made up. “I’ll give it a shot.”

“Nice!” said Todoroki. “That’s what I like to hear! Go ahead whenever you’re ready.”

She assumed a very haughty, director-esque posture, folding her arms expectantly and leaning to one side. I shut up and watched with anticipation as Ushio took a deep, quiet breath and instantly dressed herself in the proper vibes for the role.

“O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?”

The way she wove the words together one by one made them almost sound like a humble prayer. There was a heartrending nature to her voice that I couldn’t help but feel captivated by. It was an astounding performance that felt too real to be acting. I’d never seen a version of *Romeo and Juliet* aside from the previous class’s economical rendition, yet Ushio’s voice still inspired a vivid image of a young woman crying out for love from the balcony of her mansion in the back of my mind. And, as the one playing Romeo, it didn’t take long for me to imagine myself being the one she was crying out to, which made me feel a little hot in the face.

Before long, Ushio finished reciting her lines, and I realized the entire classroom was draped in a veil of silence. All the students—the ones who’d been diligently practicing along with us, the ones who were participating but clearly weren’t taking it seriously, and the screw-offs who weren’t even reading along—were just staring at Ushio in quiet awe. I was among them, mouth hanging open and unable to even say a word. When Ushio noticed this change in the classroom atmosphere, she became visibly bewildered, after which her face immediately turned bright red.

“Er, sorry,” she said. “I was just—”

“That was *incredible!*” Todoroki cried out.

This one appraisal from our director broke the dam, and immediately the classroom was astir, erupting with agreements like bees emerging from the hive.

“Hot damn, Tsukinoki...”

“She sounded like a legit voice actress!”

“I thought I was watching a real soap opera for a minute there.”

“Wow, that was *crazy*!”

Everyone in the classroom rushed over and started crowding around Ushio, some of them laying the praise on so thick that they actually started begging for an encore. Ushio, meanwhile, still seemed pretty discombobulated by these rave reviews.

“Um... W-was that pretty good, then?” she asked.

“I mean, yeah—that’s what everyone’s saying, isn’t it?” I cut in, hoping to shatter her disbelief. “That was a pretty powerful performance you just gave. Really feels like you’re on a whole ‘nother level compared to the rest of us.”

“Oh. W-well, okay...”

Ushio hung her head and gripped the fabric of her skirt as her shoulders began to quake ever so slightly. Suddenly, I got the feeling that maybe this *wasn’t* a very pleasant situation for her; it seemed the other students who’d gathered around her picked up on this change in her demeanor as well, as they slowly started to quiet down and back off.

Face still pointed down at the floor, Ushio rose from her seat. “Sorry, I need to use the restroom,” she blurted out, then quickly left the room.

I panicked a bit. Had we just stepped on an emotional landmine?

“O-one sec, I’m gonna go check on her,” I said, promptly chasing after Ushio without waiting for anyone else’s approval.

Thankfully, it didn’t take long to find her. As I suspected, she hadn’t actually needed to use the restroom at all. Instead, she was just standing at the far end of the hall, staring out the window with eyes downcast. She was facing away from me, so I couldn’t gauge her expression.

“Ushio, you okay?” I called out to her.

“I’m fine,” she replied in a nasal voice without even turning around—but she sure as hell didn’t *seem* fine. This feeble response only amplified my concern.

“Y-you think maybe playing Juliet’s a bit much after all? Pretty sure it’s not too late for you to step down and let someone else play the role, if you need

to.”

“No, it’s not that...” she said, sniffing. “I’m just...happy, is all. All the compliments, everyone being so nice to me... It’s just...been a while, I guess.”

*Oh... So that’s all it was.* When I thought back on all that Ushio had been through since her transition, I could definitely understand why this shift might feel pretty overwhelming. Although I was relieved to hear it, I figured I should give her some alone time to collect herself.

“All right,” I replied. “Well, just come on back once you’ve calmed down a bit, then. No need to rush yourself. Just take it slow.”

Ushio nodded, but didn’t say a word. I turned on my heel and walked back down the hallway, relieved that my anxieties had proven unfounded. Once I made it back to the classroom, my fellow classmates crowded around me with the exact same fear painted across their faces.

“How’s Tsukinoki holding up?” Todoroki asked, voice full of concern.

“She’s fine, yeah,” I said. “Just got a little too happy, it sounds like.”

“Oh, thank god...”

Todoroki let out a long sigh as though a weight had been lifted off her shoulders. The other students breathed similar sighs of relief, a few voicing how worried they were that they’d inadvertently said something offensive.

“You know, I have to admit...” said Todoroki, touching the frame of her glasses with one finger as she gave an almost apologetic smile. “Ever since that day she first showed up to school in a girl’s uniform, I’ve been a little unsure how to approach my interactions with her. Feels like I’ve been kind of walking on eggshells for fear of saying the wrong thing, if I’m being completely honest... But I’m glad to hear she’s happy.”

“Ooh, yeah! I totally know what you mean!” said another girl. “It’s definitely a bit nerve-racking, since I’ve never personally known anyone like her before. I’m always worried I’ll say something careless and hurt her feelings by accident, so I usually just default to saying nothing at all...”

“You guys are *way* overthinking it,” said one of the guys in the room. “Just



treat her like anyone else, duh. Acting like she's some fragile thing you've gotta wear special gloves to interact with is only gonna make her feel more out of place, you realize."

"You say that now, but I remember *you* totally avoided Tsukinoki-kun for a while there too," said yet another girl.

"I wasn't avoiding her, I just... I dunno. Didn't know what to say, I guess."

"Yeah, exactly. You're no better than us."

One by one, my fellow classmates chimed in to share how they felt about Ushio and her transition, but the one thing they all seemed to agree on was not being entirely sure how to properly interact with her anymore. While a part of me was relieved to hear I hadn't been the only one who struggled with it at first, another part of me couldn't help but feel a little bit sad thinking of Ushio and all the friendly interactions her decision had cost her, at least in the short run.

I felt a bit out of place just standing in the doorway, so I made my way back into the classroom—when all of a sudden, I heard a voice call out "Hey!" as I passed. I turned to look and saw a lightly tanned, athletic girl staring back at me. It was Mashima, and standing right beside her was Shiina, who wore a standoffish expression.

"Need something?" I asked, thinking it might have something to do with the play. The two of them were actors like me, after all—with Mashima filling the role of Juliet's wet nurse, and Shiina playing Friar Laurence.

"Nah, not really," said Mashima. "Just wanted to gush with you about Ushio's acting chops a li'l bit."

While certainly not as assertive as Hoshihara, both Mashima and Shiina had been supportive of Ushio's transition since day one. Perhaps this had something to do with why I'd seen them hanging out more with Hoshihara than Nishizono lately; maybe they'd both decided they couldn't condone the latter's behavior toward Ushio any longer.

"Yeah, she's a natural, all right," I said. "I was pretty impressed."

"Yeah, I'll bet... Bet it got you a li'l flustered too, huh, Kamiki?" Mashima

teased.

“Wha...? I mean, no? Not sure what you’re referring to.”

“Really now? I dunno... You looked pretty red from where I was sitting,” she said with an impish grin. It seemed, unfortunately, that I was being made fun of.

“Why the hell were you looking at me? Pay attention to the one performing, for crying out loud.”





“Oh, don’t worry. We were watching her too. Isn’t that right, Shiina?”

“We were,” said Shiina, nodding. “I found her performance to be rather impressive as well. So much so that I almost wonder if she has the makings of a bona fide actress... But enough about that. Kamiki-kun. Isn’t there something you’re forgetting to say to Marine and I?”

“Pardon?”

I was flummoxed. My mind was drawing a complete blank. *Unless...*

“Oh, right,” I said. “Thanks for volunteering despite your busy schedules, guys. What with your extracurriculars and all.”

Mashima was on the girls’ softball team, and Shiina was in the wind ensemble.

“Yeah, I’m pretty slammed,” said Mashima. “One of the seniors retired over summer break, so now they went and made *me* team captain. As if I didn’t have enough on my plate already... But it’s okay. I wanna participate and enjoy the culture festival too, so I didn’t mind volunteering to be an actor.”

“Whoa,” I said. “Team captain, huh? That’s pretty cool.”

“I know, right? Feel free to buy me a celebratory soda anytime, bud.”

“Don’t think I will, but thanks for the offer. So, uh...how ’bout you, Shiina?”

“Not too stressful on my end, actually. We’re not the most disciplined club in the world, so we’ve just been taking things slow... No, wait. That’s *not* what I meant.” Shiina widened her eyes a bit as if to admonish me. “Listen here, you. If I’m not mistaken, you ended up placing first on the end-of-semester exams thanks to our help, correct? Not that I think we deserve *all* the credit, mind you, but I think a few words of gratitude are in order, at the very least.”

Her harsh manner of speaking made me recoil a bit—but she was justified in her anger, given that it had been months now since the exam results were announced and I hadn’t made even the slightest effort to say a word to either of them.

“Yeah, Shiina’s kind of a stickler about that sorta thing,” said Mashima. “Me personally, I don’t really care all that much.”

“You’re too lax, Marine,” said Shiina. “Your teammates will never look up to you with an attitude like that.”

“Ugh... I hate that you’re right,” said Mashima, twisting from side to side.

“Well, uh...” I cut in, and they both redirected their attention to me. “Sorry for the delay, but thanks, you two. You really came in clutch. Don’t think I ever could’ve gotten first place without your help.”

With a contented little huff, Shiina replied, “That’ll do, I suppose.” At least she seemed satisfied, which was all that mattered for my purposes.

“So tell us, Kamiki—how are things between you and Nakki?” Mashima said nonchalantly.

“What ‘things’?” I asked.

“What, isn’t it obvious? I mean...” She leaned in to whisper in my ear, “You’ve got the hots for her, don’tcha?”

“Bwuh?!” I sputtered. “Wh-what are you saying, you idiot?! Like hell I do. Stop making all these weird assumptions about me.”

“Oh, you don’t? Huh, weird. Guess I just got the wrong idea, then?” Mashima’s lips curled into a knowing smirk as she said this, which prompted a perplexed furrow of Shiina’s brow.

“What are *you* grinning about? It’s creeping me out... Did something happen between Natsuki and Kamiki-kun?”

“Nope, nothin’ at all! Don’t you worry your pretty little head about it, Shiina.”

Mashima gave me a little wink as if to say my secret was safe with her. Which I appreciated, of course, but this got me curious: when exactly had she picked up on me having feelings for Hoshihara? Was it when I volunteered myself for the festival committee? Or during the group study session? Or after we started walking home together every day? Or maybe...

*Damn. I’m not being very subtle, am I?*

There were quite a few points of reference from which one could easily build a hypothesis that I had a crush on Hoshihara, come to think of it. If both Ushio and (most likely) Sera had figured me out, it wasn’t all that absurd to think



Mashima might have a hunch as well. If anything, Shiina actually seemed a little naive for having no clue at this point, especially for someone so book smart.

“Word of advice, though: don’t take your eyes off that girl for long,” Mashima went on. “Nakki’s a total klutz. I remember this one time we went to the movies, and she spilled a whole bucket of popcorn all over the ground.”

“And there was that time she stood us up because she thought we were going out at nine at night instead of nine in the morning,” said Shiina.

“Oh yeahhh, I remember that!” Mashima laughed. But then her expression took on a more sincere cast. “Still, I think she *has* been trying to change herself for the better recently, which is really nice to see.”

“True,” Shiina said, nodding. “She’s been really pushing herself lately.”

Mashima and Shiina had both known Hoshihara far longer than I had. It warmed my heart to hear two of her longtime friends recognizing the effort she’d been putting in.

“Oh, hey,” said Mashima, glancing at the door. “Looks like Ushio’s back.”

I turned to follow her gaze, and sure enough, there she was. Todoroki was the first to greet her and ask how she was doing, but it wasn’t long before our other classmates gathered around to check up on her as well.

“Let’s go say hi, yeah?” Mashima said to Shiina, before heading over to Ushio. I could feel a smile stretch across my face as I followed after them.

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In recent weeks, there’d been a sharp uptick in the number of students rushing frantically to and fro throughout the school building. More often than not, these were festival committee members simply trying to juggle their various duties. Today, I was among them. No one task was particularly difficult or time-consuming, but there was just so *much* that needed to get done. Apparently, those of us on the administrative team were going to be getting saddled with more and more overflow duties as the weeks went on, and as such, I was being used as something of an assistant for the other committee members in need of a hand. While I’d picked this role because I thought it’d be a pretty relaxed gig, it was proving to be anything but.

In any event, I was making my way around the building, putting up posters now that school was out. This was among the easier tasks I'd been assigned—nothing compared to trying to set up that massive administrative tent yesterday in the rain, with far fewer personnel than the job required. After smoothing out the final poster on the school bulletin board, I pushed a thumbtack into each corner.

“Okay, I think that about does it.”

I clapped my hands twice as I admired my handiwork a moment before heading back to the student council room—our de facto headquarters prior to the festival. All manner of tasks from conflict resolution to clerical work were handled there.

“Hey, I'm all done!” I called out as I popped into the room to deliver my report. With all the odd jobs I'd taken on for the publicity team polished off, I was done here—but the sound of Hoshihara's voice from across the room stopped me in my tracks. She seemed to be apologizing for something or other, judging from the way she was bowing her head to a senior whose expression was none too friendly.

“I'm really sorry! It won't happen again!” she said, flustered.

“I'll give these another look, so it's no big deal, but you need to be more careful next time,” said the upperclassman, waving the stack of papers in his hand. “We can't be filing faulty applications with the health care center. It could cause serious problems, you realize.”

“Yes, I do. Sorry again...”

Hoshihara hung her head in shame as the senior boy walked off, then trudged back to her seat. It seemed I'd shown up at a bad time; I felt bad for Hoshihara and wanted to raise her spirits, but I feared that empty reassurances might only make her feel even worse. As I stood there mulling over what to do, another upperclassman approached Hoshihara.

“Hey, um, Hoshihara-chan? Do you have a sec?” she asked, smiling politely.

Hoshihara's head snapped up at the speed of light. “Yes, how can I help?!”

“I just need to get your approval on this. So, um... If you could just stamp it for



me real quick, that'd be great."

"Oh, got it! S-sure thing, yeah!" Hoshihara dug through the mountain of paperwork her desk had become to find her committee chair seal, then stamped it on the printout the upperclassman had brought over for approval.

"Thanks! And, um... How's the budget review coming along, by the way?"

"Oh! Right, uh... Th-think I'm about halfway done, maybe?"

For a split second, the upperclassman's expression went stiff. "G-gotcha, okay. Well, worst-case scenario, I guess it's fine as long as it's done tomorrow. Just try not to overlook anything important, okay?"

"Yes, I know. Sorry for the wait..."

"Okay then, I'll leave it to you!"

With that, the upperclassman hurried off, and Hoshihara let out a weak sigh. It seemed the work was really piling up for her. I'd had a bad feeling this would happen from the outset, but as the festival drew closer and closer, I could tell she was being stretched increasingly thin. In fact, I couldn't recall a single time in recent memory when she'd gone home from school before I did. I wondered just how late she was staying after to get work done.

*"You'd better not leave Natsuki in the lurch."*

Ushio's words flashed through my mind.

I took a deep breath and clenched my fists. "Is there anything I can help with?" I called out from afar.

Hoshihara's eyes went wide, but then she shrugged it off with a sheepish smile. "No, it's fine. Besides, don't you have to head back to class now?"

She was right. Lately, as soon as I was finished with my committee work for the day, I'd head straight over to the classroom to take part in rehearsals for the play.

"Yeah, technically," I said. "But it's not like I'm required to show up either."

"Nah, go on! It's fine! You should definitely prioritize getting as much practice in as you can. I've got it covered—really."

She wasn't budging, seemingly convinced that she really could handle everything all by herself. Either that or she just didn't want to have to rely on anyone else for help this time around, no matter what. Perhaps she thought that would represent a personal failing on her part and only delay the independence she desired even further.

I couldn't completely reject this way of thinking. Even if it was a much lonelier and often inefficient way of doing things, there was still something to be said for accomplishing tasks all on your own. But in this case, I actively *wanted* to be of use to Hoshihara, and I couldn't bear to watch her struggle.

"Hey, Hoshihara," I said in a voice low enough that the other committee members working in the room couldn't hear. "Do you remember that time you and I went to the diner together back in July?"

"Y-yeah..." she said, clearly a little confused as to where I was going with this.

"Well, back then, you said if I managed to get first in our grade on the final exams, you'd do anything I asked you to, right?"

"Y-yeah... Why are you bringing this up now, though?"

Hoshihara pulled back a bit, retreating deeper into defense mode. There was even a hint of fear in her expression. I was hoping to broach the subject slowly and smoothly in the hopes that it might convince her more easily, but I immediately regretted that I hadn't just given my proposal from the outset and worked backward.

"I want you to let me help out," I said. "That's my request."

"Huh?!" Hoshihara gaped at me, utterly dumbfounded.

"Been trying to think about when to play that card for a while now, but I figure with this sort of thing, it's best to just use it at the first good opportunity that presents itself. I mean, I'm usually the sort of guy who saves all his best healing items until the final boss in any RPG, then never ends up using them, so I don't want that to happen here."

"I mean, same, but...are you sure that's really all you want?"

"Well, if you're that opposed, I don't mind coming up with something else."

“Nope! Nope, it’s fine! That’s cool with me. I’ll find some work for you to do.” Hoshihara backpedaled in a fluster, rifling through the mound of paperwork on her desk. A moment later, she handed me a few sheets of A4-sized paper. “Okay, could I ask you to go over these flyers and pamphlets for me, then? There’re quite a few typos, apparently...”

“Sure, leave it to me. I’m great at proofreading.”

I took the paperwork and sat down in the nearest open chair. I immediately set about tracing my finger along each sentence on the first page, scrutinizing every word.

“You sure have changed, Kamiki-kun,” said Hoshihara.

“Not so sure about that,” I said noncommittally as I went on proofreading.

A twinge of regret slowly wormed its way through my chest. I couldn’t help but feel like I’d end up kicking myself for this decision later. But I was never planning to ask Hoshihara to do anything for me she’d be legitimately uncomfortable with, so I knew deep down this was the right way to use it.

A little while later, I finished proofreading and set my red pen down. There were definitely a lot of typos and grammatical errors, so I was glad we were able to catch them while there was still time left to revise. Not that anyone in their right mind would go causing a fuss over some typographical errors in a random pamphlet they were given at a high school culture festival.

“Hey, all done.” I handed the marked-up proofs back to Hoshihara.

She gave them a quick once-over, then nodded with satisfaction. “Thanks so much, Kamiki-kun. The due date for these was getting pretty darn close, so you really helped me out here.”

“Don’t mention it. And by all means, feel free to let me know if you need help with anything else.” I tried to play it cool but ultimately cringed at my lack of charisma. *Man, I’ve got no game whatsoever...*

Yet the attempt still hit the mark with Hoshihara, who bashfully turned her eyes away. “It’s so nice that I can depend on you,” she said. “I’m really glad you joined the committee with me, Kamiki-kun.”

“Uh... S-sure thing. Anyway, I should probably get back to class now.”

“Okay, yeah. Good luck out there.”

I did a right-about-face and exited the student council room, trying my best to remain calm despite my very soul threatening to burst out of my body at any moment.

*“I’m really glad you joined the committee with me, Kamiki-kun.”*

*G-goddamn... Can this day get any better?!* I couldn’t agree more with Hoshihara—I was really glad I’d joined the committee too. Why, I could almost feel tears of joy coming on. If there weren’t other people in the building right now, I might have started skipping down the hall with glee. I needed to thank Ushio for pushing me to volunteer myself the very next chance I got.

“Hey there, Sakuma.”

Just when I thought nothing could break my stride, I heard a voice call out to me from behind, and I pitched forward with a wince.

“Ugh...” I groaned. It was Sera—hands shoved into his pockets, that smarmy grin plastered across his face like always.

“Ugh? Well, that’s not a very nice way to greet an old pal, now is it? If it were anyone else but me, I reckon you’d have hurt their poor feelings!”

“...Trust me, I wouldn’t react like that if it were anyone but you.”

*Well. Probably.*

I really wasn’t a big fan of Sera’s—or, well, I frankly hated his guts. But I was in an exceptionally good mood today, so I figured I could tolerate him a little longer.

“What do you want?” I asked.

“Nothin’ in particular. Just saw you lookin’ all giddy over here and thought I’d say hello. Somethin’ good happen to you today, or what?”

*Damn, this guy’s observant... Or am I just that easy to read?*

“Yeah, I guess you could say that,” I answered vaguely, not wanting to spill the beans but too happy to deny it.

“Oh, you don’t say...” Sera replied eerily, then sized me up from head to toe. “Let me guess—it’s somethin’ to do with Natsuki-chan, isn’t it?”

*How the hell did he figure that out?*

“No,” I said. “Not that it’s any of your business.”

“Ahem,” said Sera, clearing his throat. “*Gosh, I’m so glad you joined the committee with me, Kamiki-kun!*”

“Wha...?”

“Well? Was that a good impression, or what?”

“Not even a little bit. Also good to know that you were eavesdropping, thanks.”

Sera burst out laughing hysterically. He was a pretty good candidate for my least favorite person ever. I was just about fed up and ready to walk off, but I wanted to at least get a jab of my own in before I did.

“Aren’t you supposed to be a committee member too?” I said. “Maybe you should try doing a little work for once in your life.”

“Whaaaat? I am, though. I’m patrolling the building as part of the supervision team as we speak. Gotta keep folks in check and warn ‘em if they’re getting off task or doin’ stuff wrong!”

“Hah. Yeah, I bet. You’re probably just slacking off on the job like always. I don’t care what you do as long as you stay outta my way, but don’t cause any problems for Hoshihara, you hear me?”

“Oh, I won’t, big guy. Though I’ve gotta ask—why are you bein’ so protective of Natsuki-chan all of a sudden, huh?”

There was an almost flirtatious tone to his voice as he asked this question through his painted smirk, but it belied the sadistic glint in his eyes.

“...Because she’s my fellow committee member,” I said. “Of course I’m going to be worried about her.”

“Gotta say, I’m not sure I see what you find so attractive about that girl,” said Sera. “Not saying she ain’t cute or she’s too shallow or anythin’ like that. Just, I

dunno... Seems kinda boring to me, y'know? Me, I'd still pick Ushio over her any day of the week."

I felt a twitch as the muscles at the corners of my eyes spasmed. I assumed this was his way of challenging me; he probably figured that if he badmouthed Hoshihara enough, I'd lose my temper. This would have been an accurate read, in most cases. But since I knew he was just trying to get under my skin, I was determined not to give him the reaction he wanted.

"Well, that works out, then," I said. "Because I'm pretty sure she wouldn't be caught dead with a guy like you either."

"She *does* have a pretty nice rack, though."

"I'm gonna sock you in the mouth."

"Ha ha ha!"

I'd had enough of this clown. There was no point trying to converse with a chump like him. I resumed my original course and started walking back up to Classroom 2-A.

"Whaaat, leaving already?" said Sera.

"I've got rehearsals to go to," I said. "Don't follow me."

"Oh yeah, your class is doin' *Romeo and Juliet*, right?"

I didn't even respond this time; I just walked right past him.

"Hey. Sakuma," Sera called after me. For once, there was something in his tone that sounded actually sincere. This made me a bit curious, so I turned around.

"What is it now?"

"Why do you think Romeo and Juliet both die at the end of the play?"

"...It's just a series of tragic coincidences."

"No, what I'm saying is: why couldn't it just be one or the other?"

"I don't know. Why?"

Sera gave a soft, amicable smile. "Because it makes for a much more

interesting story that way.”

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It felt like I was running pretty close to max capacity these days—mostly because, with all of my committee work and acting rehearsals, my number of hours spent interacting with other human beings had increased quite a bit. As a result, I’d gotten far less reading done in recent weeks than I had back when I went straight home from school with plenty of excess mental energy to spare each day. On the other hand, my appetite had gone way up—probably a direct result of me being more physically active than usual.

Today was another day in which a packed lunch just wasn’t sufficient, so I was heading down to the student store. I descended the staircase and made my way down the first-floor hallway, past the main entrance, and to the end of the long line leading up to the counter.

“Oof. Pretty busy today...”

The school store was crowded with people—all of them surely hopefuls who’d finished their lunches like me and were hoping for an additional snack or some ice cream. This discouraged me quite a bit, though people *did* say autumn was the season of feasts, to be fair. Nevertheless, I had no interest in braving the throngs of people, and there was still plenty of time left before lunch hour ended, so I opted to wait until the crowd thinned. Since there was a lot of foot traffic passing by the school store, I stuck close to the wall so as not to get in anyone’s way. Most of the students passing by at this hour were on their way back from having lunch in the cafeteria—and among their number, I spotted a girl with gaudy, bleached blonde hair who stuck out from the crowd.

It was Nishizono, on her way back from the cafeteria with a cohort of girls from another class. I connected the dots: she’d been leaving the classroom right at the start of lunch hour for a while now. So *this* was what she’d been up to. I assumed she probably felt like too much of an outlier in Class 2-A to spend it with us anymore.

“Hey, wanna stop by the student store?”

“Ooh, yeah! I wanna get some Pinos!”

“You know ice cream just goes straight to your thighs, right?”

“Fine. I’ll get a Garigari-kun, then.”

“Don’t think a soda popsicle’s that much better...”

“Anyone wanna split a Choco Monaka?”

Their high-pitched, girly voices were audible even through the hustle and bustle of the lunchtime rush, but I noted that Nishizono’s was not among them. On closer inspection, she didn’t seem to be participating in the conversation much at all, only offering terse responses with a forced smile whenever she was addressed. She looked a bit like a fish out of water, in all honesty—not that it surprised me.

Although she’d enjoyed a long reign as the queen of Class 2-A, it was no mean feat to insert yourself into another class’s established structure of friend groups and cliques, especially for someone as prideful as Nishizono. The longer I looked at her, the more I could see how generally uncomfortable she was trying to blend in. Her fake smile peeled off and revealed the grave expression underneath from time to time.

As I observed her casually from afar, she happened to glance over in my direction, and our gazes met. Her eyes went wide, and her face simmered with rage as though I’d just insulted her entire family. This was not ideal. I quickly turned away—but it made no difference. Nishizono beelined toward me; I tried to walk away as though I hadn’t noticed her, but it was too late. She shouted out at me from behind, and the moment I turned around, I took a sharp kick to the thigh.

“Hey, ouch! That hurt!” I whined.

“Get over here.” She grabbed me brusquely by the necktie and dragged me to a nearby stairwell entrance, where few other students were loitering around. Only then did she finally release me. “Think you can just point and laugh at me from afar now, huh? You got a problem, or what?”

“Who the hell said I was laughing at you?”

“Oh, riiight. Because why else would you be staring at me like a creep?”



I took a moment to readjust my necktie and suppressed a sigh. “It wasn’t even intentional,” I said. “You just happened to walk into my field of view, that’s all. Maybe you should try not being so paranoid all the time.”

“Uh, excuse me? You trying to say I’m crazy or something?”

“No, of course not... See, that’s exactly what I’m talking about.”

Nishizono clicked her tongue loudly in frustration and rubbed her temples with both hands. “God, you people are all so obnoxious, I swear...”

She was in a particularly irritable mood today. Despite her usual bad temper, my impression of her was always that she could still speak cogently and logically even when getting argumentative. Right now, it seemed her emotions were completely taking control, as if all of her rational-thought conduits had been temporarily sealed off. I knew there was no productive conversation to be had while she was like this.

“...Can I go now?” I asked.

“Like hell you can.”

“Why not?”

She glared up at me a moment, then folded her arms as if to make herself seem bigger than she actually was. “...You’ve been indoctrinating Natsuki with your weird bullcrap, haven’t you?”

“What in the *world* gave you that idea?”

“Because I know she never would’ve spoken to me like that before.”

“Talked to you like what?”

“...She talked back to me. Said I was the one embarrassing myself and stuff.”

This was so patently ridiculous and appalling to me that I now felt compelled to give her a piece of my mind, the words boiling up from the pit of my stomach faster than my mouth could spit them.

“You *really* love playing the victim, don’t you?” I said. “So hang on, let me get this straight—you think you can hurl whatever verbal abuse you want at Ushio, but then when Hoshihara stands up in her defense and calls you out on it, you

immediately assume there must be some big conspiracy where I'm trying to turn your friends against you? You do realize that Ushio's part of that friend group too, right? Of course they're going to fight back if you keep insulting her week after week. If you can't read between the lines here and do a little self-reflection when even a sweet girl like *Hoshihara* is telling you you've gone off the deep end, I think you're probably beyond help. Get a clue."

Nishizono lowered her gaze, and her shoulders began to quake. She just stayed like that for a good, long while, never raising her head. Eventually, I started to worry that maybe I'd gone a bit too far, so I leaned down to better gauge her expression—when all of a sudden, her fist flew past my face, just barely grazing my nose.

"Hey, watch it!" I said.

I was fortunate to have dodged that; had I leaned even another inch forward, she very well could have broken my nose. But I didn't have time to be thanking my lucky stars—Nishizono was out for blood and coming right at me. She pushed me up against the wall with far more force than I thought her tiny frame could possibly muster.

"You just keep on running your mouth, acting like you've got me *all* figured out!" she shouted. "Meanwhile, you've never once had an original thought or formed your own opinion about something in your life!"

She was spitting in my face, but clearly didn't care as she gripped my collar with one hand and swung at me with the other.

"Whoa, hey! Kn-knock it off!" I cried.

She just kept hurling her fist at me over and over, so there were no opportunities for me to lower my guard and break free. It was all I could do to protect my face. Only when my forearms began to go numb did I hear a voice of authority shouting angrily from the stairwell. I peeked out from between my wrists to see that it was Ms. Iyo who'd come to my rescue.

"Hey! What do you think you're doing?!" she yelled. "Stop that right now, Arisa!"

Ms. Iyo immediately moved to restrain Arisa, who fought back a bit before

submitting limply to her authority, apparently having exhausted herself.

“Kamiki, are you hurt?” asked the teacher.

“Th-think I’m okay,” I said.

My arms were sore from being struck, of course, but it wasn’t that big a deal. At worst, I might get a couple of nasty bruises. Ms. Iyo grabbed Nishizono by the shoulders and spun her around to look her in the eye.

“Why did you do this?” she asked, but there was no reply. Arisa’s lips were sealed tight. Apparently, even Ms. Iyo realized there was no use in trying to get an answer out of her like this, so she let the girl go. Her face grew pensive as she thought things over, then said, “Have you both eaten already?”

“Oh, uh... Yeah,” I said.

“Arisa?”

Nishizono seemed determined to remain silent, but I *did* see her head bob with the slightest of motions—which I assumed was meant to be taken as a nod.

“Good,” said Ms. Iyo. “Both of you, come with me.”

And with that, our teacher walked off. I shot a quick glance over at my assailant before following after her, and Nishizono trailed us shortly thereafter. We walked up the stairs, down the hallway, and into the staff room, where we followed her into the partitioned-off counseling cubicle. It was a snug space with just a desk and four chairs underneath, mainly used (as the name implied) by the school counselors when discussing their students’ performance and higher education plans.

Ms. Iyo sat down on one side of the table and indicated for us to do the same, so I did as instructed. Arisa hesitated, then took the seat beside me—sliding it as far away from me as possible before actually sitting down.

“Now, I’ll ask you both again,” said Ms. Iyo. “What happened here?”

Given that Nishizono was still determined to keep her mouth shut, I figured if anyone was going to answer this question, it would have to be me.

“...She and I made eye contact as she was walking down the hallway, and then

we got into a bit of an argument.”

“And what was this argument about?” asked Ms. Iyo.

“I’m *not* wrong,” said Nishizono, cutting in abruptly. “I know I’m not. I *promise* you Ushio would have been better off just staying a boy. Why can’t any of you see that...?”

She muttered the words with her head hung low like a witch incanting some sort of hex. This alone was enough to give Ms. Iyo a pretty good idea as to what the root of our little altercation had been.

“I see...” Ms. Iyo’s folding chair creaked softly as she leaned against the seatback. “And what makes you feel that way, Arisa?”

Nishizono lifted her head just a little bit, her brow cautiously furrowed. “... Because there’s no downsides.”

“What do you mean?”

“If he stayed a boy, no one would ever look at him funny or treat him differently, but now that he’s trying to pretend he’s a girl, it’s going to make every single aspect of his life that much harder. Anyone with half a brain should be able to see that.”

This brought forth an unpleasant memory in my mind—of the time that Nishizono had made a similar argument when she made a brief appearance at our little study session last semester. At the time, it shut me right up; I couldn’t even think of a good counterargument. But I’d done a lot of thinking and growing of my own since then.

There was no doubt in Nishizono’s mind that she was in the right. She really did believe, from the bottom of her heart, that she alone had Ushio’s best interest in mind. And I thought that unwavering dedication to this belief was one of the main reasons she was able to make her position seem so defensible, even though we obviously didn’t agree. But it wasn’t that at all—she was just misguided. She didn’t realize that for Ushio, this wasn’t a matter of upsides and downsides.

“Nishizono, I think—”

“It’s okay, Kamiki,” Ms. Iyo interjected. “I can handle this.” She leaned forward in her seat again and stared straight at Nishizono, who evaded her gaze like a disgruntled toddler. “You’re right. I’m sure plenty of things *are* a lot harder for her now. And they’ll probably only get harder in even more ways going forward.”

“Exactly, so—”

“But that’s all the more reason to support her decision, I say. Because I want *her* to be happy more than anything else.”

She emphasized each word as if truly trying to impress them on Nishizono, but the girl just ground her teeth with chagrin.

“You want *him* to be happy?” said Nishizono. “Then that’s all the more reason not to support him. How can you condone a decision like that when you know how shortsighted and impulsive people can be, and you know it’ll only cause him nothing but problems? People change their minds all the time. Isn’t it your job as a teacher to think of your students’ future well-being?”

Ms. Iyo took a short breath. “Arisa. Have you never once thought to yourself that you wish you’d been born a boy?”

“Uh, I beg your pardon? Where the hell did *that* come from? No, of course not.”

“Well, fair enough. But like you said: people change their minds all the time. Think of all the things that are still waiting to happen in your life that you just haven’t experienced yet. Is it really so outlandish to think that these experiences could make you have some deep realization about who you really are deep down at some point? Or that you haven’t been fully true to yourself in one way or another?”

“I mean...”

“Listen, Arisa. You’re not wrong in thinking that yes, people do change their minds about big decisions sometimes, but it’s a fruitless point of distinction here. Ushio already has made a major change in this case, and I can guarantee that a whole lot of reflection went into that decision. She didn’t make it lightly. So it’s not right for you to disrespect her current identity just because *you’re*

afraid she might have second thoughts.”

Nishizono bit her lip. There was still no hint of remorse in her expression, but I could tell that something inside of her was starting to give way.

“I understand that you’re just trying to express your concern for Ushio in your own way,” Ms. Iyo went on. “And I can respect that feeling in theory. But it’s no excuse to go hurting other people verbally or physically. These are the sorts of actions that’ll only come back to bite you in the long run, when *you’re* the one who’s struggling and in need of a friend or helping hand. And if you ever feel like you just need an outlet to vent your frustrations before they bubble up and boil over, you know I’m always happy to lend—”

“Enough, already,” said Nishizono, cutting the teacher off as she rose from her seat. “Spare me the preachy bullcrap. Me, struggling and in need? Like that’ll ever happen. I’ve been on top my whole life, and that’s where I’m gonna stay. Save your advice for the losers who actually need it.”

And with that, Arisa walked out of the counseling cubicle, refusing to let Ms. Iyo get another word in.

*“I’ve been on top my whole life, and that’s where I’m gonna stay.”*

This was what Nishizono had claimed. But as I watched her trudge off like a sulking child who’d lost their parents after throwing a tantrum and running away at the grocery store, I had to say: she sure looked pretty damn low right now.

Ms. Iyo rose from her seat and left the counseling cubicle as well—then returned a few moments later, either unable to catch up with Nishizono or having realized that trying to persuade her any further at this point would be a lost cause. She sat down in her chair once again and threw her head back in resignation.

“Man, this stuff is hard...” she said, voice heavy with exhaustion. Apparently, she’d been really pushing herself to hold it together. I was a little surprised to see her get so candid in front of me, but it didn’t make me respect her any less.

“No, you were amazing, Ms. Iyo. You shut down all her arguments like it was nothing. You didn’t let her faze you at all...unlike me.”

Seeing how a real adult like Ms. Iyo handled themselves in situations like this hammered home just how far I had to go from an intellectual and emotional maturity standpoint. I only *wished* I could have been as eloquent as her during the argument I had with Nishizono at the diner last semester.

“There’s no need to force yourself to debate her,” said Ms. Iyo, lurching forward a bit to sit upright again. “Actions speak louder than words. As long as you keep conducting yourself in a way that shows how much you respect Ushio’s identity, I think that’ll send a stronger message than a convincing argument ever could.”

“You really think so?”

“I do! Have a little faith in your instructor, why don’t you?!”

“...Well, if you say so,” I said after a moment’s hesitation.

Ms. Iyo grinned at me, then stretched out her back. “Aw, shoot. Fifth period’s about to start, and I haven’t even had a chance to eat my lunch...”

“Couldn’t you just bring your food to class and eat while you teach?” I asked.

“Ooh, hey. Now there’s an idea... Psych! Like I’d ever get away with that!”

Ms. Iyo’s playful retort was enough to wipe away any lingering gloominess I might have felt after the talk with Nishizono. When I saw her cheery, radiant smile, I felt like I could count on this woman more than anyone else in the world.

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The dizzying days dragged on and on, with my schedule only growing more and more hectic as they went. Every day after school, I’d have a slew of tasks foisted upon me as a committee member—most of them odd jobs that no one else could find time to do. Stuff like collecting the various bits of mandatory paperwork from each class or bringing extra building materials like wood and packing tape to the groups who needed them. Today, I was in the gymnasium helping assemble the giant arch that would decorate the school’s front gate on the day of the festival. This particular decoration was not affiliated with any one class, and as such it was the student council’s responsibility to craft it each year. This time around, they’d opted for a sort of European castle motif that was as

striking and elaborate in its design as it was difficult to put together.

“All right, there.”

I’d finished the underlying structure for the castle’s central spire. It would be colored and erected along with everything else at a later date, so this was good enough for today. I decided to take a break before getting started on the other parts I was in charge of, so I set my Styrofoam cutter down and stood up from the floor. When I bent back to stretch out my aching muscles, my spine cracked at my waist.

I looked around at the other groups gathered here and there, working away on their own exhibits. The whole auditorium had been turned into a makeshift workshop for all manner of large decorations and art displays that were too cumbersome to work on in the confined space of a classroom. The gym was only open to us on certain days, so despite the occasional bit of chitchat, everyone was working away diligently, trying to make the most of what little time they had.

“Hey, we’re out of Styrofoam!” one of the senior committee members said to no one particular. His gaze fell on me, since I was the only one already standing up. “We need more Styrofoam over here.”

*Yes, pal. We heard you the first time,* I wanted to quip, but I knew this was his way of trying to tell me to go get more. *Fine, whatever.* I’d just finished a major task and was at a good stopping point, so I figured I might as well.

“All right,” I said. “I’ll go grab some more.”

“Thanks, you’re a lifesaver,” the upperclassman said, then returned to his work.

It didn’t seem like he needed it right away, so I figured I could take it slow and use the walk to stretch my legs a bit.

“Oh, are you going to get more Styrofoam, Kamiki-kun?” asked Hoshihara, lifting her head. She was wearing a tracksuit and holding a wood file in one hand. Her forehead was glistening with sweat from being in the hot and humid gym for so long.

“Yeah. Need anything else while I’m at it?”



“You sure? Okay, then yeah, I think if you could just bring back as much Styrofoam as physically possible, that’d be great. We’re kinda running low over here too...”

“Gotcha. I’ll bring some for you too.”

“Cool! Thanks so much, Kamiki-kun!”

I felt a sudden burst of energy coming on. Now that Hoshihara had thanked me in advance, I couldn’t afford to take things slow. Man, was I so predictably basic when it came to these things—but I kind of liked that about myself.

“Hey. We’re outta glue,” said a voice right as I was about to leave to fetch some Styrofoam ASAP. It was Noi.

*Sucks to be you, man*, I itched to reply, but I quickly realized he was probably asking me to get some for him while I was out. And while this rude, indirect way of asking definitely ground my gears, I knew someone was going to have to refill the supply sooner or later, so I figured I’d throw him a bone. *But he’d damn well better be grateful.*

“Ugh... Fine, whatever...” I said, nodding begrudgingly.

“And be back within three minutes too,” Noi added with a condescending snort.

*G-goddamn him!*

I marched out of the gym with a long, indignant stride.

Once my committee work was over, I had rehearsals to attend.

“No, you’re being too shy about it! Say it loud and proud!” Todoroki barked as Ushio and I practiced the balcony scene for the umpteenth time. “The worst thing an actor can do is half-ass it! You wouldn’t want to embarrass yourself onstage, now, would you?!”

I really didn’t know what she expected me to do; I was putting in the effort to speak louder and more confidently, but Romeo had way too many flowery, romantic lines in this version that were over-the-top in terms of cringe—especially for a pessimistic loner like me. I couldn’t tell you how many times I’d

wanted to find whatever alumni wrote this treatment and give them a piece of my mind. *Wait... That's it!*

"Hey, can we maybe change some of these lines up a bit?" I asked. "If we could make them sound just a *bit* more masculine, I feel like I'd be able to act them out a lot more naturally, which would make the performance more believable."

"What? No way," said Todoroki. "That'd make the whole play a huge snorefest. It's that embarrassingly raw, naive sort of love that makes *Romeo and Juliet* the classic that it is! That's the pièce de résistance!"

"I mean, *you* might think that, but I dunno... Hey, Ushio. What do you think? Wouldn't it be better if we tweaked some of this stuff?"

I turned to Ushio, praying she would bail me out. She'd never once gotten any real criticism from Todoroki on her acting skills—nothing but gushing praise anytime she'd recite a line. Surely she could convince the stage director to make a few changes on my behalf, even if I couldn't. Or so I thought.

"Why would we?" said Ushio. "Can't we just perform it as written?"

*Damn.* An outright rejection. I had no further recourse.

"See, even Tsukinoki agrees with me," said Todoroki. "You just need to own it a bit more, Kamiki, and I promise it won't feel so embarrassing. Want me to perform it for you myself as an example?"

"Uh... You sure you wanna do that?" I asked.

"Ha. He doesn't think I can, does he? Watch and learn."

Todoroki gently coughed to clear her throat, then recited one of Romeo's soliloquies from memory without even looking at her script. Everything about her performance—from her facial expressions to her vocal intonation—was so much more gripping and dramatic than mine that it was laughable to even compare the two. I had to give her props; I genuinely hadn't thought she had it in her.

"Whoa... That was incredible," I said, happy to admit her superiority.

"I know, right?" Todoroki puffed her chest out proudly. "Not to toot my own

horn, but I *am* a bit of a movie buff, you know. These things just come naturally to me.”

I was fairly certain that simply consuming a ton of movies did *not* usually correlate to an increase in one’s acting ability. Then again, she did have some serious chops, so maybe I was wrong.

“Yeah, that was really great, Meiko,” said Ushio, using Todoroki’s first name. “Wish you could have had the chance to perform onstage with us too.”

“No, no, no,” said Todoroki. “I wanted to direct, don’t worry. And everyone knows a director can’t act in their own production. That’d be just plain weird.”

“N-no, it wouldn’t be...” came a mousy voice of dissent from afar. I turned to look and saw that it was Nanamori, looking gingerly over in our direction. She’d been discussing costume logistics with some of the other actors a moment ago, but apparently those conversations were over now.

“It wouldn’t?” asked Ushio.

Nanamori shook her head and sheepishly shuffled her way over to us. “Well, um, you see... There are actually quite a few films in which the director plays the starring role. Or a minor one. Or even just makes a quick cameo.”

“Oh, huh. You don’t say,” said Ushio. “That’s a neat little bit of trivia.”

“Yeah, I’m really into movies too...”

I had no idea—not just about the director thing but that Nanamori was such a big fan of film. At least, I *assumed* she was if she felt the need to butt in and make a correction like that from afar despite her usually docile nature. On the other hand...

“I mean, yeah, I knew that. Obviously,” said Todoroki, lying through her teeth.

“...Poser,” I said.

“I beg your pardon?! You think I’m just gonna let that slide?! Fine, you asked for it! I’m going to be *twice* as critical of your acting now, Kamiki!”

“Wait, huh?!”

*D-damn... Should’ve kept that thought to myself, I guess. Oh well.*

Ushio and Nanamori started chuckling to themselves, watching Todoroki rake me over the coals. I felt slightly petty for making the quip, and a little bit sheepish—but I would have totally done it again, honestly. So whatever; if having her roast me during rehearsals even harder meant I'd be a better actor by the day of the actual performance, then so be it. I'd just have to suck it up and learn to deal with the cringey lines...I supposed.

All that said—while there were still plenty of things that could be going better in my life at the moment, it definitely felt like I was making the most of my time at school lately. I'd always raised an eyebrow whenever I heard it said that the most fun part of a student culture festival was the preparation phase, but maybe there was something to that sentiment after all. If only these simple, busy days could go on forever.

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Just like that, we dove headfirst into October. The winds grew colder as the harsh, unyielding rays of summer finally gave up the ghost and ceded to autumn's gentle, fleeting temperament. The crisp, cool climate was so pleasant and mild that I almost didn't want to say goodbye as I stepped inside the gymnasium.

Today was our first dress rehearsal for *Romeo and Juliet* in preparation for the main event at the culture festival next Saturday. We still did not have all our actors present and accounted for, mind you, but we would actually be getting into costume for the first time today, using the basketball teams' locker rooms as makeshift changing rooms. That said, my Romeo costume was unfortunately still being worked on, so I could only participate in my school uniform like before.

Not wanting to just stand around in the center of the auditorium waiting for everyone else to get ready, I headed over to a corner of the gym and leaned back against the wall. I felt a little bit anxious. Despite all of the festival committee duties I'd had to attend to, I'd managed to fit in enough acting practice that I honestly thought I could play the role pretty passably now—but I still clenched up at the thought of having to perform in front of an audience,

especially up on a big stage like this one.

“You seem a little tense, bud,” said my old friend Hasumi as he walked up beside me. As always, it felt like he could see right through me. He was a member of the backstage crew, but he was here for the rehearsal today to work on fine-tuning the lighting for each scene. For a guy who seemed to love watching people and their drama from afar without ever getting involved in any himself, it seemed a fitting role for him to be in charge of manning the spotlights from high above on the catwalk. Though this was obviously a very different sense of the word “drama.”

“Yeah, I dunno, man. Just a little jittery, I guess. I mean, you know I don’t love being the center of attention...”

“Believe me, I know. Couldn’t believe it when you volunteered to play the lead role.”

“No, I’m right there with you... Kinda couldn’t believe it myself, but I guess Ushio probably had a lot to do with it. If she weren’t playing Juliet, I definitely wouldn’t have stepped up to play Romeo.”

Though honestly, now that I thought about it, I’d done quite a few things over the past few months that made me stand out from the crowd in ways I never would have before—and all of them had something to do with Ushio. She was the one who convinced me to volunteer for the festival committee too. And I never would have pushed myself to get first place on our last exams if it hadn’t been to prevent her from having to go out with Sera. It was almost like the ripples of that initial splash of Ushio choosing to make a major change in her life were still spreading out and having an effect on me to this day, making *me* live *my* own life more assertively as well. It was pretty heartening to think about it that way.

“Guess you’ve got Tsukinoki to thank for dragging a bit player like you out into the limelight, then, huh?” said Hasumi.

My eyes went wide. “Dang... You say some pretty deep stuff sometimes, man.”

“Just calling it like I see it,” said Hasumi, apparently thinking nothing of it. “Anyway, check it out. Looks like your leading lady’s just arrived.”

“Wait, for real?”

Hasumi jerked his chin in the direction of the gym’s main entrance. I looked over and saw all of the other actors—having finished changing—now entering the auditorium in one big group. Sure enough, Ushio was right there at the center of the pack, wearing a long and elegant dress, its frilly skirt fluttering out as she walked.

She looked over in my direction, and our eyes met. She said a few words to the other actors, then excused herself from the herd and hurried over in my direction.

“Welp, guess I’d better head up top,” said Hasumi. I didn’t know whether he was removing himself from the situation deliberately, but he and Ushio didn’t have all that much in common, so I wasn’t going to insist on him sticking around to socialize.

“All right,” I said. “See ya around.”

I watched Hasumi as he walked off, passing right by Ushio on his way to the catwalk. Ushio turned to look back at him, then ran the rest of the way over to greet me.

“Sorry, did I interrupt?” she asked.

“Nah, you’re fine. We never end up chatting for very long anyway.”

“Oh, really? I thought you two were pretty close.”

“Eh. I wouldn’t go *that* far.”

Sure, we ate lunch together, and we would partner up for pair activities in gym class and stuff. But I definitely didn’t think of us as “close” by any stretch of the imagination. If I had to put a label on it, I would call us “amicably acquainted.”

“What do you guys normally talk about?” Ushio inquired.

“Just random stuff. Though sometimes he’ll say something super deep and introspective out of nowhere and then just dip out of the conversation like it was nothing.”

“Huh. Sounds like he’s a pretty decent person, then.”

“Yeah, I mean... He’s definitely not a *bad* person, that’s for sure.”

I chose my words carefully because it felt slightly embarrassing to say out loud, but I had to admit that Hasumi was a pretty good guy—if for no other reason than that he was nice enough to reach out to and converse with a loner like me all the time.







“Anyway, that costume looks really good on you,” I said, changing the subject.

“Y-you think so?” Ushio replied, sounding a bit unsure but unable to fully conceal the elation in her voice. “Everyone’s been complimenting me on it, but I dunno... I feel like maybe it’s a bit much?”

Ushio looked down at her dress and fidgeted. I recalled her acting similarly uncertain that day we met up outside the train station, come to think of it; maybe she really wasn’t used to wearing girly clothing just yet.

“Nah, I think it’s great. I mean, you’re the leading lady, right? You’re supposed to stand out onstage. I’m sure Nanamori-san’ll be thrilled.”

Ushio responded with a dubious hum, turning her head away as if too shy to even look at herself. She seemed pretty apprehensive; I assumed there was a part of her that wanted to do justice to Nanamori’s vision and effort, but it wasn’t enough to overcome her more general embarrassment at being seen in a fancy dress, regardless of who made it.

“Hey! We’re gonna start the rehearsal now, everyone!” Todoroki shouted from the far end of the auditorium. All of the actors who’d been loitering around the gym immediately pressed pause on their conversations and walked up onto the stage.

“Guess we’d better get going, then, huh?”

Ushio and I followed suit and headed over.

During the actual performance, we would be closing the window curtains and turning all of the lights down in the gymnasium aside from the ones onstage—but since this was only a rehearsal and we weren’t performing for an audience, we just ran through the entire play with the lights on. After the narrator introduced the plot and setting, we dove straight into the first scene, in which Romeo and Juliet meet after the former sneaks into a ball being held at the Capulet estate. They instantly fall head over heels for one another, their passionate love refusing to abate even after it’s ultimately revealed that they come from two feuding households.

“There is no earthly force that can deny me this love. Let them pursue me if they wish—night’s cloak shall keep me hidden from their sight.”

As Romeo, I professed my love to Juliet while she stood up on her balcony—or catwalk, in this case. Hopefully, some clever lighting and our papier-mâché props would make for a pretty decent illusion of a balcony on the night of the actual play.

...*Man*. No matter how many times we’d practiced this scene, it still made me red in the face. I had no idea how I hadn’t realized it sooner, but I really couldn’t believe that *Romeo and Juliet*, of all things, had become one of the standard-issue plays for students to perform at school. I couldn’t imagine this scene not being awkward as hell for anyone our age to perform unless they were already dating. And yet, when Ushio was actually onstage playing the role of Juliet, I didn’t sense any tension or embarrassment from her at all.

“My heart is laid bare before you, O gentle Romeo, here in the pale moonlight...”

Every word she spoke was performed with such sincerity that each one stirred powerful and conflicting emotions deep within my chest—a mixture of burning hot passion to chillingly bitter sorrow that conveyed the tempestuous nature of Juliet’s love, which Ushio delivered unto me using her voice alone. It felt so realistic that at times I had to ask myself: was she really just acting here? Was the believability of her performance solely a product of practicing lines and vocal exercises combined with natural talent? Or were these Ushio’s actual feelings I was hearing, only filtered through the words of Juliet?

“’Tis almost morning. O, parting is such sweet sorrow! Would that I could bind thee with silken threads and keep you till the morrow.”

But now was not the time to be wondering about such things.

I gave my final farewell of the scene to Juliet, then stole away into the night.

From there, Romeo killed Tybalt to avenge Mercutio and was banished from his hometown of Verona. Juliet, still deeply in love with him, hatched a plan to fake her own death and escape from the city to chase after him. In the end, she

succeeded—but a poor stroke of luck led to Romeo being informed of her untimely demise in such a way that he didn't realize it was all a ruse, and he ended up killing himself via poison rather than live without her. When Juliet learned of this, she took her own life with Romeo's dagger. With their deaths as the catalyst, the Montagues and Capulets finally agreed to settle their differences and bury their age-old feud.

"Okay, I think that's a wrap!" Todoroki said, then started loudly applauding.

I took this as permission to stop playing dead and picked myself up off the stage. All of the other actors came rushing out from the wings, chattering about how tense they'd been during the performance, how glad they were it was finally over, and other sentiments. The atmosphere onstage relaxed, and the whole troupe breathed a collective sigh of relief.

"Nice work out there," said Ushio, coming over to congratulate me. It seemed the long performance had tired her out a bit, judging from how flushed her face was and the thin layer of sweat that coated her skin.

"Yeah, you too," I said. "We didn't even mess up once."

"We sure didn't. At this rate, the actual performance should go off without a hitch. Although..."

"Although?"

"I'm kinda burning up in this thing."

Ushio grabbed the fabric around her chest and flapped it to air out the dress. *Aha*. So she *wasn't* all that tired; her costume was just cooking her alive. I assumed it simply didn't have very good airflow, though it was pretty hard to design with that in mind and afford all of the most ideal fabrics and materials for a costume that was really only meant to be worn a single day.

"Why don't you try talking to Nanamori-san about it?" I said. "There's still time before the festival. Maybe she can make some adjustments."

"Yeah, I think I will." Ushio walked over to an open window and pulled back her bangs, exposing her shapely, porcelain forehead to the cool breeze. It wasn't every day she'd candidly throw her hair back and tousle it around like this, but maybe she was just feeling liberated now that rehearsals were done.

Either way, it was nice to see her being so candid. I watched as she lowered her hand and let out a tiny snort of laughter before turning back to me.

“You know, Sakuma,” she said, “I’ve noticed you’ve been staring at me an awful lot lately. Can’t keep your eyes to yourself?”

“Who, me?! No, I haven’t!”

“Oh, yes you have. You were literally doing it just now. At least say something if you’re going to stare—it’s a little unnerving otherwise.”

Now that she mentioned it, I *could* remember several times I’d stopped to take a good look at her in recent weeks. This was definitely a bad habit that needed mending.

“S-sorry,” I said. “Wasn’t trying to be a creep...”

“It’s nothing to apologize for,” said Ushio. “I can tell you’re not checking me out or anything like that, so it’s not creepy—just a little peculiar, maybe.”

“I’ll try not to let it happen again.”

I felt genuinely guilty and determined to change... But now that she’d pointed it out, I wasn’t sure where to lay my eyeballs anymore. I got so uncomfortable that I turned my body diagonally away from Ushio, just to ensure there was no chance whatsoever of me accidentally staring. She furrowed her brow, as if pouting at this decision.

“Ugh, okay, now you’re just being ridiculous,” she said. “You’re allowed to look me in the eye when we’re talking, silly!”

She grabbed me by the shoulders and jerked me around to face her once again, and our gazes locked right onto each other. For a moment, I lost the ability to formulate words. I couldn’t take my eyes off of hers—like there was some gripping, magic force embedded in her pupils that was threatening to suck me in and swallow me whole. Ushio stiffened up too, just as disoriented by this unexpectedly deep eye contact as I was. *Man, this feels so bizarre... What the hell is going on?*

“Hey! Bravo, you two!”

Ushio and I both nearly jumped out of our skin, then whirled around to see

Todoroki walking over to sing our praises, a buoyant spring in her step.

“God, what a show! We’ll definitely be ready for the main event at this rate!”

*Sh-sheesh, kid... You scared the living daylights out of me.* But in all honesty, I was grateful to her; if she hadn’t interrupted when she did, who knew how long Ushio and I might have been trapped in that awkward deadlock.

“You really are something special, Tsukinoki!” the director gushed. “And that dress! It really does elevate your performance to the next level! If I could nominate you for Best Leading Actress, I totally would!”

“Ah ha ha... Thanks,” said Ushio, though there was a lingering restlessness in her voice. I took this as confirmation that she’d experienced the same weird feeling I had a moment ago, and she was still reeling from it too. *Really...what was that?*

“And as for you, Kamiki...” Todoroki went on. “You’ve shaped up quite a bit. I’d say you’re almost passable now.”

“Wow, that’s pretty meager praise... No nomination for Best Leading Actor for me, then, huh?”

“Nope! But if you work your butt off another five years or so, maybe we can talk about it then!”

“Damn. Not sure I have the patience to stick it out that long.”

“Anyway, as long as you both keep performing like that, we’ll have this thing in the bag! But for today, I’d say you’ve earned yourselves a good rest! Take it easy, you two—and be careful on your way home!”

With that, Todoroki hopped down from the stage and trotted off.

“...That girl sure has been enjoying herself lately,” I said. “She really does love getting to sit in the director’s chair.”

“Maybe we’ll see one of *her* films get nominated for an award someday,” said Ushio.

“I could believe it, yeah.”

Ushio and I watched as Todoroki went skipping out of the gymnasium and



around the corner, then stepped down off the stage ourselves.

As our classmates trickled out of the building in groups of twos and threes, I followed suit—though I still had to wait for Ushio, who was still getting changed in the table tennis clubroom inside the gym. Outside, the sun had already begun to set, and I could feel a cold breeze blowing in from the north. As the evening quiet crept up to settle in, I could hear the chirping of bell crickets from somewhere off in the distance.

I took a seat on the small concrete step leading up into the gymnasium and waited. It was half past five. When I looked over toward the main gate to campus, I could see a group of tennis team members with racket cases slung over their shoulders, many of them whining about how exhausted or hungry they were as they headed home from practice.

“Sorry for the wait,” I heard Ushio say from behind me, so I turned around. “Took longer than I expected because I ended up talking with Nanamori-san about the costume thing a little bit. Ready to head home?”

“Yeah, let’s go,” I said, standing up and wiping the dust off my pants.

Just when we were about to go to the bike lot, a familiar voice rang out from across the way.

“Wait, is it over already?!” Hoshihara called out from the breezeway connecting the main school building to the gym, then ran over to us. “But I thought the dress rehearsal was today...”

“It was. You missed it, sorry,” Ushio said with an apologetic smile.

“Aw, *man*! I really wanted to see you in that dress too...” Hoshihara slumped her shoulders in defeat.

“You’ll get another chance, don’t worry. Besides, a dress rehearsal’s never going to be anywhere near as cool as the actual performance.”

“Mrrrm... Yeah, I guess that’s true...” Hoshihara immediately popped her head and shoulders upright again. *Well, at least she got over that quick.*

“All done with your committee work for the day?” I asked.

“Yeah.” She nodded. “I wanted to watch the rehearsal, so I made a point of trying to finish everything as quickly as possible, but I guess I still wasn’t fast enough... Oh, but I do have one piece of good news to share!”

“Yeah? What’s that?”

“You’re not gonna believe it! We finished building the festival’s entrance arch today! Woo-hoo!” She threw a fist into the air. Her enthusiasm really was infectious.

“Oh wow, no kidding? Dang, you guys finished that up real quick.”

“Well, technically it’s not *done*-done. We still have to set it up over the main gate sometime between now and the day before the festival. But even just getting all the pieces done and everything was a huge pain in the butt... Feels good to be done.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet. You worked hard on that thing.”

I could still picture her in her work apron, all covered in gunk but painting away with her little paintbrush. I’d tried to fit in as much time to help out with the arch between rehearsals and my own committee tasks as I could, but I still hadn’t put nearly as much work into the thing as Hoshihara had.

“Yeah, I mean, it’s gonna be the first thing people see when they come to the festival!” she said. “Wanted to get it into a shape we could all be proud of. Though I sure ended up slacking on some of my other committee chair duties and creating a lot of extra work for a bunch of people as a result...”

“Nah, you’ve been doing great,” I said. “Pretty impressive that you managed to pull off such a big task while you’re already so busy trying to keep tabs on everyone else. You deserve mad props for that, I say.”

“Awww... You really think so? Sheesh, you’re gonna make me blush!”

Hoshihara smiled sheepishly and scratched her cheek with one finger. I knew she’d said her whole reason for wanting to give committee chair a shot was to help her grow as a person, but from where I was standing, she’d already accomplished that goal and then some. I was pretty happy to see this; it inspired me to push myself to be a better person as well. I smiled at her, then turned to look over at Ushio... But then I had to do a double take.



Ushio was expressionless, her face so chillingly blank and devoid of emotion that it was almost like staring into a painted wooden mask.

“Ushio?” I asked.

“Hm? What’s up?” she replied, the color instantly returning to her face.

“Oh, uh... Nothing, sorry. Ready to head home?”

“Yeah, think it’s about that time.”

Her voice sounded the same as it always had. I wondered if maybe I was just imagining things, or if perhaps it had simply been a weird trick of the light due to viewing her face at a very specific angle in the setting sun.

“Ooh, I know!” Hoshihara chimed in. “It’s already getting pretty late—what do you say we stop and grab a bite to eat somewhere on the way home?”

Now *there* was an idea I could get behind. I pounced on the suggestion, and Ushio was quick to agree. We each got in touch with our parents to let them know, then hopped on our bikes and headed for the local diner near the station.

The wind felt good against my cheeks as we pedaled down familiar streets. On a pleasant autumn evening like this, I would have been content to just ride our bikes to the ends of the earth—though perhaps that had less to do with the temperature outside and more to do with the company by my side. It had been an awfully long time since the three of us all got to head home from school together.

We rolled up to the diner. It was about as packed on the inside as we’d predicted, given that it was dinnertime on a Friday night. Although the waitstaff were rushing busily to and fro, they managed to seat us quickly without much of a wait at all. Ushio and I sat together on one side of the booth, while Hoshihara slid her way into the other side and whipped open her menu.

“Gosh, I don’t even know what I wanna get...” she said. “Ooh, we could order a big salad and split it three ways, maybe! And then order a pizza or something to go with it. Also, dang... I dunno about you guys, but I think I might get this grilled steak platter.”

“Wow, you’ve got quite the appetite,” I said matter-of-factly, meaning nothing positive or negative by it. But Hoshihara wore it like a badge of pride.

“Well, yeah! I’m a growing girl!” she said, puffing out her chest. “And I worked my butt off today, so I deserve it. Gotta know how to reward yourself for a job well done. Can’t go skimping out on your own wellness!”

“Oh, is that how it’s supposed to work?”

“Why, yes, it is!” She looked back and forth between me and Ushio. “You guys should make sure you’re getting enough food too. It’s like my grandma always said: if an apple a day keeps the doctor away, then the more apples you eat, the healthier and happier you’ll be!”

“Sounds like your grandma’s a real gem,” said Ushio, smiling.

“Yeah, she’s a sweetheart. Though I definitely had a major chubby phase back in elementary school because of her. Man, it was so rough trying to slim back down... Got called all sorts of names by the boys in class and everything.”

I could imagine the sorts of names she’d been called, knowing how cruel little boys could be. Though I had to admit, I found it a little hard to believe that someone as tiny as Hoshihara had ever been anything but skinny.

“Aw, shoot! Sorry, forget about that!” she said, slapping her cheeks with her hands. “Not trying to bring down the mood or anything. So, have you two decided already?”

“Yeah, I think I’m ready to order,” I said.

“Me too,” said Ushio. “If you know what you want, Natsuki, then I guess I’ll press the call button.”

“Okay, yeah! Go for it!”

Ushio pressed the call button, and a waiter quickly came over to take our orders. We went ahead and ordered fountain drinks as well, so the three of us walked over to fill our respective cups with whatever sweet beverages we desired before returning to the booth, at which point Hoshihara raised her glass in the air.

“All right! How ’bout a toast?”

“What’s the occasion?” I asked, and it quickly became clear she hadn’t thought that far ahead.

“Uhhh... Culture Festival’s...Eve?”

“The festival’s not until next week, though.”

“Okay, then... Culture Festival’s Eve Eve Eve Eve Eve Eve...Eve?”

“Yeah, great name. Really rolls off the tongue...”

And technically, it was *eight* days from now, not seven.

“Don’t sweat the small stuff!” she said. “C’mon, you two! Grab your cups! Cheers!”

The three of us raised our glasses and clinked them together, then proceeded to chug down our sugary sodas in unison. Mine was just plain old Pepsi, but I had to say—I’d never known it could taste so sweet as it did tonight.

“Oh yeah, so one of the senior classes is doing a haunted house, right? But we can’t have it be too dark, since that’s a safety hazard, so we told them they need to brighten things up a little bit—and *boy*, did that not go over well. Which I get, because I mean, who wants to go through a haunted house with the lights on, y’know? Tried talking it over with the faculty to find a happy medium, but every option we can come up with still isn’t bright enough to earn their seal of approval... Man, being committee chair sucks sometimes!”

Hoshihara plucked French fries from her plate one by one as she went over some of her recent gripes. She’d gotten pretty talkative all of a sudden after finishing most of her food; I figured maybe gorging herself and venting her frustrations were indicators of the extremely high level of stress she’d been under. She’d already finished her steak and half a pizza, then happily inhaled a plate stacked high with salad. Even now, she was still munching on French fries, so it seemed there was room in her stomach yet. Part of me was a little worried for her to be consuming so much food at once, but another part of me just felt warm and fuzzy inside seeing how happy she was as she stuffed her cheeks like a chipmunk.

“Wow, you’ve sure got a lot on your plate, Natsuki,” Ushio said, meaning it in a figurative sense.

“Aw, go on! Tell me how great I am! Eh heh heh!” said Hoshihara, holding her face in her hands as her lips broadened into the giddiest of grins.

“You’ve clearly been working very hard. It’s been pretty impressive to see.”

“Wah ha ha! Nah, it’s no big deal, really!”

From her demeanor, I couldn’t help but wonder if Hoshihara was feeling a little tipsy—not that she’d consumed any alcohol, obviously. After yukking it up a while, though, she let out a little sigh and went somber for a moment.

“And it’s not enough, at any rate... I’ve still got a long way left to grow...” she said, then raised her glass and pursed her lips around her straw.

I didn’t necessarily agree with this assertion; as a fellow committee member, I’d seen how hard she’d been working firsthand. Yet Hoshihara still wasn’t satisfied with her own performance. I’d never seen this humbler, stricter side of her before. While it did help me appreciate her in a new and more holistic light, it also made me feel just a little bit strange deep down.

“Nah, I think you’re doing more than enough as it is,” I said.

Hoshihara didn’t directly reply to this; she merely blooped a big bubble into her soda in acknowledgment.

“Anyway!” she said, releasing her straw from her mouth as she resumed her previous griping tone and changed the subject. “I can’t believe I still haven’t had a chance to see you guys perform *Romeo and Juliet* even once!”

“Oh, really?” I said. “Huh.”

Now that she mentioned it, I couldn’t recall a single time she’d shown up to our after-school rehearsals. She must have been too busy with her work as the committee chair to find time to sit in.

“Kinda wondering if I should stop trying and wait until the actual performance at this rate...”

“Probably a good idea, yeah. In fact, you might’ve actually lucked out a little bit, in that sense.”

“Mm? How so?”

“I mean, you wouldn’t want to watch the making-of documentary for a film before you watched the actual movie, right? Kinda the same idea here. You only get to experience something for the first time once, so you might as well wait and see the finished version at this point. And trust me—you’re gonna wanna see Ushio’s Juliet on the real stage, with actual lighting and everything. Her performance is definitely great enough to deserve it.”

“Oh, really?! I mean, I’ve been hearing great things, but yeah, I can’t wait!”

“It’ll be worth it. She’s literally like a professional actress, I swear.”

“You can stop now,” Ushio admonished. “You’re just inflating her expectations.”

“Okay, okay... My bad,” I said, smiling sheepishly. “But she really *does* make a great Juliet. Gotta admit, I was a little bit worried, since she told me she really didn’t wanna do it at first, but she’s definitely made the role her own at this point. Wouldn’t be surprised if she got scouted by a talent agency or something.”

As I finished singing her praises, I finished off the remaining third of my glass of cola. The ice had melted at this point, so it was a little watered down.

“Wait,” said Hoshihara. “She...didn’t want to do it?”

Her voice was trembling.

Immediately, I realized what I’d just said.

*“She told me she really didn’t wanna do it at first.”*

A chill ran down my spine as I became acutely aware of how this phrasing could be interpreted, given that Hoshihara had been one of the two people who originally nominated her.

“Oh god, did I...? Ushio-chan, I-I’m sorry,” said Hoshihara, her face white as a sheet. “I didn’t pressure you into it, d-did I...?”

Panic coursed through my entire body. One slip of the tongue on my part had robbed Hoshihara of her smile. This was bad—I needed to run damage control, and fast.

“N-no, it’s nothing like that!” I said. “She just wasn’t sure how it would go over, that’s all! And even that was only at first! *Now* she’s really glad she took the role!”

“Is...is that true, Ushio-chan?” Hoshihara seemed willing to hear me out, but she clearly wasn’t fully convinced. This was totally fine, though, because as soon as Ushio seconded my reassurances, all would be well and good again.

“Come on, Ushio. Isn’t that what you said before?” I pressed. “You weren’t crazy about the idea at first...but *now* you’re really enjoying yourself, right?”

Ushio didn’t respond. She just sat there with her lips sealed, looking down at the table. This silent treatment amplified my panic into full-blown distress. What was going on here? Why wouldn’t she say anything?

“Ushio...?” I repeated.

Then, finally, she let out a long, long sigh—as if releasing all the pent-up stress she’d been carrying in her chest. This sounded not like a sigh of relief but of someone who’d been trying to delay the inevitable.

“No, I still wish I hadn’t. I regret ever taking the role of Juliet,” she said in a detached voice. Then she leveled a condolent gaze at Hoshihara. “I’m really sorry, Natsuki. But that’s honestly how I feel.”

“That’s not true!” I shouted, so loudly that I startled myself. Some of the people sitting at the other tables turned to look, but no one stood up to interfere. “You’re lying through your teeth. I know you don’t actually mean that. Why are you being like this? That...that isn’t what you said the other day! You told me you were really happy to have everyone accepting and complimenting you again after such a long—”

“We should go,” said Ushio, totally ignoring me as she rose from her seat. She slung her bookbag over her shoulder, grabbed her receipt, and headed over to the register alone. Hoshihara just kind of sat there blankly a moment, looking as though her soul had left her body, before uneasily rising to her feet and following Ushio’s lead.

I, meanwhile, felt rooted to the spot. Paralyzed. Unable to move a muscle. My brain couldn’t imagine a single possible explanation as to why Ushio would ever

say such a thing. My feet felt wobbly and uncertain beneath me, like they weren't even my own. Like this was some bad dream over which I had no control. The voices of the chattering patrons all around me grew muffled and distant—and then a loud *ding* reached my ears.

I turned to look and saw Ushio standing at the register, waiting for a staff member to come over so she could pay her bill. I wasn't ready to settle up, though. I knew that once we did, we'd probably just walk right out of the restaurant and go our separate ways without resolving any of this. But I also knew that there was virtually no chance of us salvaging the situation tonight even if we stayed here and tried to talk things out—and something told me that if I didn't get up and join them at the register, Ushio would just pay my bill herself, which was not a thought that sat well with me.

And so I begrudgingly stood up and headed over to the register, where the three of us took turns settling up before walking loosely together out of the restaurant. It was already dark outside by now, and the wind chill felt even sharper against my skin due to the cold sweat of dread that now glazed my skin. The thought of ending things on such a horrible note filled me with an immense, looming terror.

"Wait!" I called out as they headed over to retrieve their bikes. "This isn't right! We were all just laughing and enjoying ourselves up until a few minutes ago, weren't we? Are we really gonna let one little thing turn us against each other here?!"

Neither of them said a word. Hoshihara just looked awkwardly down at the ground, while Ushio stared back at me with frigid eyes. I clenched my fists.

"Come on. Say something, why don't you?" I implored her.

"...Sorry, Kamiki-kun," said Hoshihara, slowly lifting her head to reveal the most manufactured smile I'd ever seen. "And you too, Ushio-chan. I feel really bad. I guess I just let myself get so excited, I wasn't really thinking about anyone else but me. In retrospect, it definitely wasn't right for me to nominate someone else without at least making sure they were okay with it first... I'm really sorry."

She bowed her head, then jerked it back up.

“All I can say in my defense is that I really, really wanted to see you play Juliet, Ushio-chan. The thought of you all dressed up in costume, standing under the spotlight onstage... Yeah, I don’t know. There was just something kinda magical to me about it, I guess. So I just...” She trailed off, turning her head pensively down at the ground again. Then, as if suddenly realizing she couldn’t take much more, she said, “All right, yeah. I think I’m gonna head home.”

Hoshihara then proceeded to walk right past Ushio to retrieve her bike from the rack. I called after her, but there was no response. It was like my voice didn’t even reach her ears—or maybe she heard it but simply didn’t have the strength left to turn around. Whichever it was, all I could do was watch helplessly as she hopped on her bike and rode off down the street. As soon as she rounded the corner and vanished from our sight, Ushio started walking away again too.

“...Wait a minute,” I said.

She stopped, but didn’t turn around. The light leaking from the diner window cast a long, black shadow across the ground from where she was standing.

“Why did you lie to her like that?” I asked.

“I wasn’t lying.”

“...So you really *do* regret taking on the role of Juliet, then?”

“I really do.”

Ushio turned around, and her face looked the same as it had back outside the gymnasium earlier: her expression as rigid, cold, and empty as if it had been carved from stone. In that split second, I nearly recoiled at the sight.

“But don’t worry,” she said. “I’ll still perform in the play. I won’t make things harder for you or anyone else.”

“That’s *not* what I’m worried about!”

*Why the hell did you do that to Hoshihara?*

I nearly said it aloud, but I swallowed my words. She probably wouldn’t give me a straight answer no matter how many times I asked her. I needed to think this through—to read between the lines of what she’d said. Wasn’t that exactly



what I'd promised her I'd do before? I told her I'd do my best to figure out the stuff that was too hard for her to say out loud, didn't I? Well, now was the time—so what was I waiting for?

I thought, and I thought—until at last, I heard a tiny click inside my brain.

"Is it because...you're trying to set me up with Hoshihara?" I asked.

Ushio didn't respond.

"Do you think you're just getting in the way, or something like that?" I probed further. "Is that why you said all those things? Is *that* why you're trying to push her away? To force *us* closer together by distancing yourself?"

Still Ushio said nothing, but I took her silence as a tacit confirmation. And with this realization came the wretched feeling of intense misery mixed with fuming rage.

"I don't need that kind of help from you... I don't need it one bit," I said, my voice quaking. I felt betrayed, in all honesty. Had she really thought I wouldn't notice? "And it's not just about Hoshihara either. I know it must be hurting *you* an awful lot to treat her like this too. So why, then? Why are you trying to make a martyr of yourself? Nobody wants that... That's not gonna make anyone happy here."

It felt like I had knife in my heart. Even if she did want to set me up with Hoshihara, surely there were better ways to go about doing that than this. Ways that I knew someone as bright as Ushio would be able to come up with in no time flat. So why had she chosen to take this route in particular?

Could it be because...she really *had* developed some weird hatred for Hoshihara, and she was willing to do whatever it took to distance herself, no matter how cruel? Or was it possible she really did regret accepting the role of Juliet, and she was just being brutally honest? But if that were the case, why had she told me how happy she was that everyone seemed to love her performance when I found her teary-eyed in the hallway the other day? Was that just a spur-of-the-moment lie to cover up the real reason she was crying?

There were so many things I could say right now—so many things I *wanted* to say—yet somehow, none of them felt right. In the end, all I could do was stand

there and look her in the eye. Eventually, Ushio let out a sigh, then made a face that looked to me as if she'd just given up on the whole entire world.

"You wouldn't understand, Sakuma."

Then she walked off to the bike rack, leaving me standing there frozen in the street. I got the feeling that there was no combination of words I could have possibly said at this point that wouldn't have only hurt her even more.

"Yeah... And how the hell could I?" I muttered under my breath.

Even these words fell flat as they dissolved, unheard and unheeded, into the encroaching dark of night.

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I awoke to the sound of my bedroom window being rattled by the wind.

After rubbing the sleep out of my eyes, I turned to check the clock on my bedside table and saw that it was only seven in the morning. Considering it was Sunday and there was no school, I figured I could afford to catch a few more winks. I closed my eyes—only to be rudely reawakened by an unprompted flashback to the night before last. A chill ran down my spine, and the pleasant morning vibes I'd been enjoying froze over before being promptly shattered by a metaphorical ice pick.

I thought of the pain in Hoshihara's smile. The coldness in Ushio's expression. And I thought of those last few words she uttered: "*You wouldn't understand, Sakuma.*" All of the images and moments from that day just kept swirling around on repeat in my head with no rhyme or reason, and I could feel myself falling further and further into a pessimistic spiral. I opened my eyes and let out a long sigh, trying to wring every last bit of oxygen from my lungs.

"...Guess I'll just get up."

I sat up in bed and twisted my body to set my legs down on the ground. I was not feeling very well rested this morning; I'd had a pretty hard time falling asleep last night as well. I just kept running back through regret after regret in my head, wishing I'd said or done something differently, but I was ultimately unable to gather my thoughts in any productive way before passing out.

I walked out of my room and down the stairs, stopping at the bathroom to wash my face before entering the kitchen and making myself some breakfast. I buttered up a piece of toast, poured myself a glass of milk, and walked into the living area—where I found Ayaka reclining on the sofa in her pajamas, idly watching the weather forecast as she shoveled spoonfuls of plain yogurt topped with an ungodly amount of honey into her mouth. I sat down beside her and started eating.

It was a little hard to hear the newscaster's voice over the wind outside. It was a gloomy, overcast day with some drizzle. The woman on the TV said something or other about low atmospheric pressure, but she assured us the weather would improve by tomorrow.

"Is Ushio-san not gonna be coming over to the house anymore?" said Ayaka, eyes still turned toward the TV. Now *this* was unusual—rarely did she open her mouth to address me unless it was to denigrate me. But in this case, it was less the sudden nature of this question that gave me pause and more that I didn't have a very good answer for it.

"Uhhh... Why do you ask?"

"No real reason, I guess. Just noticed she hasn't been over in a while."

More specifically, Ushio hadn't been over since the end of summer vacation. I assumed her primary concern about not feeling comfortable at home was largely mitigated now that she could be out of the house at school during the day for most of the week, so there was less of a reason for her to use my place as an escape.

"So she's *not* coming over anymore?" Ayaka pressed, turning to face me with pensive, narrowed eyes. This made me feel pretty lousy inside. There'd been a single time, over the course of the break, when Ayaka had hung out with me and Ushio, and the three of us had all played a game together. It was rare to see my sister so nervous, but she gradually loosened up and seemed to really connect with Ushio. It was the first time in a while I'd seen Ayaka with a smile on her face, and Ushio seemed to have a really good time as well. I could tell Ayaka wanted to hang out with her again, and so did I. But...

"Hard to say... She might come over if you invite her."

“Did you two have a fight or something?”

“Mmm... I dunno if I’d call it *that*, per se...”

It wasn’t really a “fight,” in my view—more like a difference of opinion. We each had our own ideas as to what was best for everyone, and we just couldn’t see eye to eye. Come to think of it, though, we’d had quite a few little moments of strife and tension in the past—like on that day we went to the aquarium, or when Hoshihara first nominated Ushio to play Juliet... Maybe these minor disagreements had just added up to the point that it was no longer tenable, and the incident two nights ago was just the moment we could finally see we’d reached a breaking point. There had certainly been warning signs that this was bound to happen sooner or later.

“If you two got in a fight, then you’d better apologize,” said Ayaka, returning her gaze to the TV screen. “Because I can already guarantee *you’re* the one in the wrong.”

“...Yeah, probably.”

I wanted to be smarter in how I handled disagreements like this. Not that sharper wits could solve everything, especially when people’s feelings were involved—but I did feel like I could’ve prevented things from getting so out of hand if I had only processed the situation a little bit faster. Feeling lost and helpless, I bit into the burnt corner of my piece of toast, and an ashy bitterness spread across my tongue.

“Hey, don’t be like that. I was just kidding,” said Ayaka, sounding a little taken aback. “So you two *did* have a fight, then?”

“Like I said, it wasn’t really a fight. More like a little disagreement.”

“...Gotcha,” she replied, relieved. She shoveled another spoonful of yogurt into her mouth without prying any further. “Well, I don’t know what happened, but I do think you should try to talk it out.”

“Yeah, probably...”

I knew this, of course. But that was the hardest part—and there was no guarantee that we’d be able to reach a mutual understanding even if we did both lay our hearts out on the table. It was entirely possible that trying to put

things into words would only lead to *further* tension and discord. Especially in our case, when there were still so many subjects we were deliberately trying not to address, like my feelings for Hoshihara. Or Hoshihara's complicated feelings for Ushio. Or in Ushio's case...

"Man, this is tough," I said, taking a sip of my milk.

I remembered how, on the day before summer vacation, I told Ushio she was my best friend, and I was going to keep myself planted firmly in her life no matter what happened—but now, I wasn't even sure I could say that with confidence anymore.

Ayaka laid her spoon down in her empty bowl with a loud *clink*, then stood up.

"You'd better bring Ushio-san over to the house again sometime." Turning away, she added, less confidently, "I mean, if you want to, that is."

I froze up a moment, speechless. Then I snapped out of it and nodded. "Yeah, don't worry. I'll extend the invitation, at least."

"Good."

Ayaka gathered up her dishes and headed over to the kitchen. I waited for her to leave, then let myself fall back hard into the sofa. I knew she couldn't have any real idea of what was going on between me and my friends, but I still felt like her words had inadvertently given me just a bit more confidence about fixing this mess. Maybe I was just choosing to interpret them as exactly what I needed to hear right now, but either way, I knew I wasn't ready to give up on Ushio just yet.

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And then it was Monday again. I cut across the paddy fields on my bike, enjoying the cold wind against my face and the golden colors of the crops as I took my normal route to school. Autumn had finally settled in, as if the stormy weather yesterday had blown away the last remaining vestiges of summer.

As I passed through the main gate, I saw the concealed silhouettes of the other classes' exhibits littered around campus—some of them only about the size of a small car, while others stretched more than a full story tall. All of them

were covered in protective blue tarps.

I parked my bike in the bike lot, then headed for the main entrance. I stopped along the way when I noticed a small crowd of students gathered around one of the walls of the school building. What's more, they all looked to be members of the festival committee—and every one of them was wearing a grave expression. I got a bad feeling in my gut, so I changed course to swing by and see what all the commotion was about.

And then I saw it.

At first, I thought it was just a big hunk of garbage—a giant, misshapen clump of Styrofoam that had been painted all over, with the pointy bits all snapped in half, revealing the framework structure underneath.

This was no hunk of garbage; I recognized the thing. It was the arch meant to go over the main gate on the day of the festival.

“Goddamn...” I muttered under my breath.

It had been bent and battered completely out of shape. Had the wind taken it for a joyride the day before? There were wet leaves plastered all across its surface, and the whole thing was covered in mud. It was going to take a long time to restore this to its original form. I hoped the other pieces were okay; I couldn't see the foundation anywhere, but I assumed it was either stored safely elsewhere, or had been blown away in a totally different direction.

All of a sudden, I recalled the look of giddy fulfillment on Hoshihara's face when she told us the thing was finally done just a few days prior, and a wave of misery washed over me, followed by the slow simmer of aggravation building in my chest.

*Ugh... Why did this have to happen now, goddamn it...?*

“Oh, dude... What the hell is that?” came an oafish voice from behind me. It was Noi from the track team—probably on his way back from morning practice, judging from the way his hair was bunched up with sweat. He took one look at the mess of Styrofoam and winced. “Is this the arch? Did no one think to secure the damn thing?”

“It *was* secured,” said one of the boys nearby. “We put a tarp over it and

weighed it down and everything... But the winds were just that strong.”

This excuse apparently struck a nerve with Noi, who immediately blew up. “Okay, then why did we leave it outside in the first place?!” he shouted, glowering at the other boy. “It’s made of Styrofoam, for god’s sake. Any moron with half a brain could’ve realized it’d get swept up if the wind hit it right.”

“Well, I mean...we were just following the committee chair’s orders,” said the other boy. “She told us to drag it out here...”

I heard a loud *fwump* from behind me—so I turned to look along with every other student in the vicinity. And there was Hoshihara, standing stock-still in a daze with her bookbag lying on the ground at her feet, presumably having slipped from her shoulder.

“Hey, Little Miss Chairperson,” said Noi. “Is that true? Why the hell’d you tell ‘em to put it outside, huh?”

Hoshihara bent down and awkwardly picked her bag up off the ground, her eyes wavering as though she was completely disoriented. “There just...wasn’t enough room indoors,” she said, “so I let one of the freshman classes use our space for their exhibit...”

“Oh, well isn’t that just perfect,” said Noi, clicking his tongue. “You gave priority to someone else and screwed your own team over in the process.”

Hoshihara shrank back like a child being reprimanded. I was all but certain that there were plenty of committee members around who understood the situation and would gladly stick up for her—but no one did. In fact, it seemed like all of them were starting to take Noi’s side, looking at her as though she were some sort of traitor. I couldn’t bear to stand idly by and watch her get treated like this, so I gathered my nerves and stepped forward in her defense.

“Hey, come on,” I said. “Be reasonable here. It’s not like anyone could’ve predicted the weather would take such a nasty turn, right? And I mean, the thing’s already broken now, so it’s not like trying to place the blame is going to get us anywhere. All we can really do is move on and fix it at this point.”

“Oh yeah?” said Noi, glaring at me as he walked over to get in my face. “Easy for a loner like you to say. Must seem like a real quick and easy fix to someone

who's never got anything going on after school. *Some* of us have been skipping out on work or practice to build this stupid thing. So maybe don't stick your nose in and try to tell us that it's no biggie to have to go back and fix something we already did."

I had no good comeback for this. None of what he was saying was wrong—and it seemed the other committee members tended to agree.

"Yeah, exactly!"

"Man, I've got enough on my plate as it is..."

"I can't afford to skip any more club meetings!"

As the other students chirped their complaints, I realized that my attempt to defend Hoshihara may have backfired big-time. I gritted my teeth and tried to think of another angle of attack I could use to dig us both out of this mess.

"...There's no need to fix it, you guys," said Hoshihara, who was now hanging her head in shame—or so I thought, but then she instantly perked right up and put on a smile. "Don't sweat it! Just focus on whatever other work you were already doing, everyone. As far as the broken arch goes, well...I'll figure something out myself."

"Like what?" I asked despite myself. But Hoshihara didn't answer me.

"For now, let's just try to move it somewhere else," she said, walking over to the misshapen heap. "Wouldn't want to risk it getting blown away again."

She then proceeded to try to pick up the entire thing herself. Were it only a matter of weight, this might have been doable, but given its massive size and awkward shape, it was definitely too much for one person to carry alone. I scrambled over to assist her. We lifted the mangled remains of the arch and hauled them off to a seldom-trafficked area behind the gym. Since we knew now that a tarp and some weight alone wouldn't prevent it from being blown away, we fetched some tiger rope and fastened it directly to the wall.

"Thanks," said Hoshihara in monotone. "Sorry for the trouble."

At first glance, she didn't seem to be wearing any expression whatsoever—but I could tell there was probably a whirlwind of violent emotions swirling



through her head right now. To me, it kind of looked like she was trying to stave off the pain of failure and inadequacy by numbing herself to any feeling whatsoever.

“...Don’t beat yourself up about it too hard,” I said. “There’s still time left before the festival, and I’m more than happy to help you fix it up.”

“Okay.”

“Also...” I trailed off, a little uncertain as to whether I should say this next part. But I could tell this was probably the best and only opportunity I would get, so I continued, “About what Ushio said at the diner the other day... I don’t think you should take any of that stuff to heart either. It’s not like she doesn’t like you anymore or anything. It’s just... Well, I think maybe she’s feeling a little —”

The warning bell for homeroom period rang before I could finish my sentence. Normally, I wouldn’t have let this interrupt my train of thought, but we were standing so close to one of the building’s outdoor loudspeakers that it was ear-piercingly loud, and I couldn’t even hear my own voice anymore. It appeared I’d picked the wrong time and place to broach this subject after all. When the little chime finally ended, Hoshihara forced the corners of her lips upward into the faintest of smiles.

“Better get going,” she said. “We’re gonna be late.”

As she walked off toward the main building, I knew I’d just blown my one chance to naturally bring this up—but all I could do was reluctantly follow after her.

“You’re sure hung up about something, huh?” Hasumi said between bites.

It was now lunch hour, and we were eating together like always.

“Wh-what do you mean?” I said, playing dumb—but I knew exactly what he meant. I’d been stealing glances at Hoshihara and Ushio all day, even during lecture, and he’d just caught me doing it again. I was a little surprised to see the two of them still eating lunch together at Ushio’s desk as usual today, but they were both just consuming their meals in silence without striking up any

conversation whatsoever. It was a stifling state of affairs to have to watch, even from afar.

“Something happen?” Hasumi asked.

“Yeah... Kinda. It’s a long story,” I said.

“Is it about the arch thing? How it got all busted or whatever?”

“Wait. How do you know about that?”

“Heard about it from a friend.”

News sure did travel fast. I assumed that either this friend of his was a committee member themselves or word of the arch’s demise was already circulating among the general student body. I kind of hoped it wasn’t the latter.

“The foundation and everything’s totally fine,” I explained, “but the entire top part is in really bad shape. I think we can probably fix it up in time, if we hurry, but...”

The main issue—at least as far as I was concerned—was Hoshihara. She had to be feeling pretty guilty right now, as the one who’d ordered the others to move the arch outside. And considering she was no doubt still reeling from what happened with Ushio, she already wasn’t in the best state of mind to deal with a major accident like this.

During today’s classes, I’d been trying to think of what I could do to help; I figured the first order of business was to devote as much time and energy as I could to getting the arch repaired, then try to patch things up between her and Ushio. It was a big ask, I knew, but I couldn’t just sit around twiddling my thumbs while a friend was in need. I wanted to fix this mess before the culture festival was over, no matter what it took.

“Sounds like a real pain in the ass,” Hasumi said, totally indifferent.

“It’s gonna suck, yeah,” I replied. “But it’s too important not to.”

School was done for the day, and my fellow classmates were either slowly packing up to go home or moving desks around to make space in the center of the room. As the festival drew closer, more and more students were staying

late to participate in rehearsals and backstage prep. Even so, Hoshihara was the first to gather up her things and rush out the door. I assumed she was in a hurry to finish her committee chair work for the day so she could spend most of the afternoon working on restoring the arch. I hung my bookbag over my shoulder, let out a little sigh, and headed over to Ushio's desk.

"So hey," I said.

"What's up?" she asked, turning in her seat. She didn't seem surprised or bothered by this approach, just indifferent to my presence. I'd had a very hard time reading her expressions ever since the incident at the diner.

"Just wanted to say that I probably can't take part in rehearsals today, sorry. Think I'm gonna be pretty swamped with other work now that we're less than a week out."

"No worries. You should prioritize that, then. You've got the part down pretty well at this point, so I don't think missing out on a little bit of extra practice is going to hurt."

This was a perfectly courteous response; I'd been so ready for her to curtly brush me off that I was actually a little disappointed. Maybe I really *was* overthinking things.

"...Thanks, yeah. I appreciate it," I said, then headed out of the classroom.

Even if the awkward tension *was* all in my head, I couldn't just pretend that night at the diner never happened. I still wanted to address these ill feelings and talk things out at some point. But for now, I had to focus on rebuilding that arch. If we couldn't get it fixed up in time for the festival, then it would really reflect poorly on Hoshihara. So I redirected my mental energy and headed for the clearing behind the gymnasium.

"Wait... What the...?"

The arch wasn't where we'd left it this morning. All of a sudden, I felt the blood drain from my face as I considered the possibility that it had been mistaken for a giant hunk of refuse and thrown in the incinerator or something.

*G-god, I hope not...* What would we even *do* then?

As I ran frantically around the building searching for any sign of it, I heard the sound of Styrofoam scraping against linoleum through one of the building's small windows. I peeked inside and saw that the heap of remains we'd tied down outside was being dragged across the floor of the gym by a small group of committee members who'd already taken it upon themselves to start restoring the arch.

This was a sight for sore eyes. It was a relief not only to know it hadn't been disposed of but to see other people already helping out with it as well. *Did Hoshihara instruct them to do that?* I wondered. I'd been kind of under the impression that the restorations might end up falling to her and me alone, so this was heartening to see.

I made my way around to enter the gym and help out. As we quickly got to work, I gleaned from the other committee members that it hadn't been Hoshihara who'd called for them to start the restorations, but the student council president.

"Yeah, I guess he felt pretty responsible for the whole thing," said one of them. "Makin' her manage all this stuff she'd never dealt with before on her own."

"Awww... What a stand-up guy," said the upperclassman sitting next to me as they carved out some new pieces of Styrofoam. "Yeah, you can definitely tell that Hoshihara-chan's really been running herself ragged lately."

Word had spread even faster than I thought, but everyone seemed to be on the same page now. I was glad to know that I'd been way off base in thinking the arch issue would be a bigger problem than it actually was. Obviously, there were probably still a few committee members who felt a bit salty about the whole ordeal, but I was fairly certain they wouldn't throw a fit now that the student council president had gotten involved. All that was left now was to lift Hoshihara's spirits back up again, and we'd be—

"Hey, have any of you seen Hoshihara-san?" asked a female student as she jogged over to us from across the gym.

She was the student council treasurer, if I remembered right. But all of the festival committee members in the vicinity just looked at each other and shook

their heads. I assumed the girl needed Hoshihara's approval for something.

"Well, shoot..." said the girl. "She hasn't been to the student council room all day, and there's still so much work left to be done..."

"Prolly slackin' off somewhere," one of the senior boys snarked.

"Here," I said, resisting the urge to be baited by this offhand quip as I pulled my cell phone from my pocket. "I've got her number. I can try to get ahold of her."

I scrolled to her name in my phonebook and pressed dial, but to no avail.

*"We're sorry, but the number you are trying to reach is not currently—"*

I shook my head, and the treasurer frowned.

"Mmm... I wonder if she really *did* go home, then. She never struck me as the type to skip out on her duties, but oh well... Guess I'll just have to figure out something else. Sorry to bother you folks."

And with that, the treasurer headed off. From her demeanor, it didn't seem like the situation was particularly urgent, but I still felt worried all the same. Because as she said, Hoshihara *wasn't* the type to skip out on things. I wondered what could have happened.

"Sorry, I need to step out for a minute," I said, then left the gymnasium.

First I headed over to the school's main entryway and confirmed that Hoshihara's street shoes were still in her shoe cubby. This at least told me she had to be *somewhere* on campus. From there, I took a process of elimination approach, going down each and every hallway in both the main and the special purpose building. But Hoshihara was nowhere to be found. I tried to think of anywhere else she might have gone that I hadn't checked yet, aside from clubrooms and bathrooms...and only one place came to mind.

I was hit by a wave of *déjà vu* as I made my way up the stairwell toward the door that led out onto the roof—and sure enough, I found her sitting on the stairs just a few steps below the landing. *Bingo*. It was the same place I'd found Ushio after she'd run away at the end of last semester. Perhaps it was just the obvious choice for people who needed somewhere to escape to, as one of the

most quiet and secluded areas of the building... Such were my thoughts as I approached, and Hoshihara lifted her head, noticing me.

“K-Kamiki-kun?” she said. “What are you doing here...?”

She seemed startled. But more than that, she looked miserable.

“Looking for you,” I said. “Some girl from the student council came by who needed your help with something. Said she hadn’t seen you all day.”

“Aw, jeez,” she said. “Was it really urgent?”

“Not sure... Didn’t seem like it to me.”

“Oh... Well, forget it, then.”

She was being pretty defeatist. This wasn’t the Hoshihara I knew.

“You’re...not gonna go check in, at least?” I asked.

“No need. I’m sure they’ll manage just fine without me.”

“Oh, come on. You know that’s not true...”

“It *is*, though,” she said, leaning forward to hug her legs to her chest. “I mean, I went in to give my report about the arch thing to the student council president during lunch hour, and you know what he said? To just leave the rest to him. And then he basically just clapped his hands, and boom—instantly found enough people who were free this afternoon to go and help fix it, then sat down and started working through this huge stack of paperwork I had piled up like it was the simplest thing in the world. When I saw that, I was just like, ‘Dang. Guess they really don’t need me here after all...’”

She took a moment to let this little jab at herself sink in before going on.

“If anything, it feels like I’m just getting in everyone else’s way by trying to help. Like when I told them to move the arch outside, for one thing. Or how I keep screwing up all our budget calculations. Not to mention...” She lowered her head, and her bangs hung down like a curtain to hide her face. “It was me and my big stupid mouth that made Ushio-chan agree to something she ended up really regretting...”

“That’s not even true, though,” I argued. “I promise you, Ushio isn’t actually

having a bad time playing Juliet. Yes, she was a little unsure how people would react to her playing the role at first—but once she actually had a chance to get into character, everyone *loved* her. They couldn't shut up about how great she was, telling her she could be a legit actress if she really wanted to... And I know for a fact that Ushio was really touched by all of that. I'm, like, 99.9 percent positive she's glad she took the role now, and that this is all some weird misunderstanding that I know the three of us can work out if we just sit down and talk about it."

This was more of an emotional rant than a logical argument on my part, admittedly, but it was all the reassurance I could offer her right now. My hope was that by showing Hoshihara how earnestly I believed this to be true, she might be willing to reconsider this spiral of self-loathing she'd started down. But it seemed she refused to be persuaded, as she shook her lowered head.

"You're wrong," she said.

"About what?"

"It's not just the Juliet thing... I made the same mistake back at the aquarium too."

It took me a little while to figure out what "mistake" she was referring to—but I assumed she meant how her misunderstanding forced Ushio to have to explain what really happened the day she kissed me at the top of these very steps. I could still remember how pale and suffocated she'd looked, trying to choke out the words in the aquarium food court—and how terribly sorry Hoshihara looked on the train ride home for having brought up the kiss again in the first place.

"I thought I was being so proactive in supporting you guys... But in the end, it was just another case of me jumping to conclusions and hurting Ushio-chan as a result. It's like every time I try to do *anything*, it only ends up backfiring and making things worse. Sometimes I feel like I should just stop trying and save everyone the trouble..."

She curled up, squeezing her legs even tighter, as if trying to crush something within her that I could not see. Seeing her like this was heart-wrenching.

"...I know what you mean, Hoshihara."

And it was true—I knew *exactly* what she meant.

I felt the same way sometimes, and not just with Ushio. That horrible feeling of being confronted by your own stupidity and thoughtlessness whenever you put yourself out there, tried to do something, and failed miserably. Night after night, you'd lie awake in bed doing personal postmortems on everything you could have done differently and how badly you'd messed things up. Eventually, you just wanted to curl up inside your shell and never do or say anything to anyone else again. You couldn't very well hurt another person if you never engaged with them to begin with. And if you could convince yourself to look at it that way, inaction didn't seem so bad after all.

At the same time...there was nothing to be gained from holing up inside oneself. It went without saying that no one ever grew or got anywhere as a person by doing nothing. And even if you were fine with sitting on the sidelines in the moment, there was a solid chance you'd later come to regret *not* taking action just as much as anything else. Sure, there might've been people out there who genuinely did see value in steering clear of other people's affairs—but for a sweet, kindhearted girl like Hoshihara, who loved being a friend to everyone, cutting herself off would only hurt her even more in the long run.

...Or would it?

Could I really say with certainty that it would be a *bad* thing for her to stop trying, in this case? Maybe distancing herself from Ushio and spending more time with her old friends like Mashima and Shiina would make her happier on the whole. If I truly cared about her and what was best for her, shouldn't I be more accepting of her choice to stop digging herself into an even deeper hole? I mean, who the hell was I to be preaching advice to her? She had way more experience with interpersonal relationships than me, a guy who could count all of his friends on one hand. Where the hell did I get off?

*Ugh, what am I doing? This is so pointless.*

The more I thought things over, the less I truly understood. There was no inarguably “right” answer here—that much, I knew for sure. And yet, I still



wasn't ready to throw in the towel, for whatever reason. I didn't want to just spew some trite optimistic bullcrap and try to tell her that was what she should do just because it sounded nice on a motivational poster. I wanted to really think this through and come to my own conclusion. But even *that* feeling felt wrong; hadn't my many years of public education up until this point instilled in me the value of trusting your instincts and choosing the most reasonable response when you just didn't know the answer? Sometimes, it was okay to go with your gut. Hell, that was what *I'd* been doing all this time. So how come I was having such a hard time with this right now? Why couldn't I seem to—

“...Kamiki-kun?”

Hoshihara was looking up at me in puzzlement, no doubt confused as to why I'd gone silent all of a sudden. Meanwhile, I hadn't even noticed she'd lifted her head.

“Oh, yeah, uh... Sorry,” I said, just spouting random words to fill the void. And to think I'd come up here thinking I could raise her spirits, when now it was all I could do to keep my head above water as a murky flood of self-doubt threatened to swallow me whole, gasping for breath with each meaningless syllable I managed to force out from my lungs. “I guess I just kinda feel like...I don't know anything anymore.”

“Huh? But...you just said you know what I mean...”

“No... I was just trying to act like I understood. But the truth is, I don't know a thing. I don't have anything figured out. All these words, these thoughts coming out of my mouth... They're all just ideas I borrowed from someone else. I don't have a single thing I can offer you that can truly be called my own...”

The more I spoke, the more I felt a deep, painful sadness growing in my chest—like my heart had been wrapped up in twine, and someone was tugging at both ends. Why did this have to hurt so much? What was I even suffering from? Was it just me? Was I the only one unfortunate enough to have to struggle so hard with this? Just to figure out how I felt about these sorts of things?

No, that couldn't be the case. Not when I was just an average teenage boy, and there were people like Ushio out there with way more complex personal issues and inner turmoil they'd been grappling with for years...struggles that

few people in the world could truly understand or relate to. Which meant the only person she could rely on was herself. She'd probably spent hundreds, thousands of hours self-examining and second-guessing herself like this. My stupid identity problems probably seemed pretty pathetic and run-of-the-mill when stacked up next to hers. Somehow, that only made me feel even sadder. Like I couldn't even be a hopeless ball of stress in an *interesting* way—and I knew that was a pretty crude, unmindful thing to say, to boot.

*Damn it.* I needed to get the hell off this negative train of thought. I was just going around and around in circles at this point, letting the self-deprecation pile up as my mind sank deeper and deeper into a dark, unfathomable abyss. Everything I thought I knew up until now was growing more and more intangible and uncertain by the second. A rush of heat expanded behind my eyeballs, and it was all I could do to lower my head and grind my molars in anguish to hold back the oncoming torrent of emotion.

Right then, I could see Hoshihara's feet coming down the stairs—stopping just one step higher than where I stood, a few inches below.

I tried to look up at her—only to feel my hair get weighed down as she placed her hand on top of my head. I froze up a moment, surprised by this unexpected touch.

“So you don't have it all figured out either, huh?” she said, her voice ringing softly in my ears as she stroked my hair. “And here I thought I just didn't get it because I was too stupid or something. But if even a smart guy like you gets lost sometimes, I guess maybe it's no wonder I don't know what to do.”

“...You've got it all wrong,” I muttered, still looking down at the ground. I couldn't bring myself to brush her hand off. “You're not stupid, and I'm definitely not a genius or anything. This isn't a matter of wisdom or book smarts—it's more basic and vital than that. It's like...a fundamental awareness thing, almost.”

“...Yeah, sorry. I don't think I understand. But I don't think you have to stress yourself out so hard about these things either.”

“But—”

“It's okay,” she said, her voice soft as sunlight, slowly melting away the

tension from my body like snow. “You’re gonna be okay, Kamiki-kun.”

As she repeated the sentiment, I felt the scritch of her fingers digging in ever so slightly, massaging my scalp as she combed them through my hair.

Nothing was going to be okay. I knew this. Hoshihara was only saying it to lift my spirits. There was no reason or logic behind it, no scrap of anything concrete I could rely on. She was literally just trying to cheer me up.





I wondered if that was why—why her pure, untainted kindness flowed so freely into my lungs. It felt so good and comfortable to breathe these few words in that I gave my heart over to the feeling and, for a moment, even let myself believe them.

Maybe right now, that was all I needed.

Maybe right now, that was enough.

Hoshihara slowly withdrew her hand, and I felt suddenly, briefly alone in the absence of the calming weight of her palm. But the pain was still gone.

“Kamiki-kun...” she called. “Thanks for talking to me about that.”

“...No, I’m the one who should be saying that. Feels like I just overcame some major mental hurdles, thanks to you.”

Hoshihara gave a cheery grin, then made her way past me down the stairs. “We’d better hurry back. I need to go apologize to everyone and then get the heck to work! I’m sure there must be *something* I can help with!”

When she got down to the landing, she spun around to look back at me.

“What’s up?” she asked. “Aren’t you coming?”

“Oh, yeah—no, I am,” I said, then hurried down the steps.

I felt pretty terrible for having come up here to rescue her, then somehow making it all about me and forcing *her* to do the consoling. If there was a giant hole nearby I could crawl into, I would probably do it. But right now, my body felt light—like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders. Maybe this feeling of liberation would only last a while, but I was glad to have the haze cleared from my heart for the time being.

Sure, there was still a lot I didn’t have figured out. But even though I didn’t know where I was going, I could see a path in front of me now—one that looked an awful lot like the way ahead.

After descending the stairwell, Hoshihara and I went to the student council room. She seemed pretty on edge; I assumed she was nervous they'd be upset or disappointed with her for having flaked on her duties as committee chair, if only for a short while. I wished I could offer her some heartening words of encouragement, but nothing good came to mind before we reached the door to our destination.

Hoshihara placed a hand on her chest and took a few deep breaths.

"You gonna be okay?" I asked, a little worried.

She chuckled, faking a smile as her eyebrows sloped upward. "My hands won't stop shaking. What if they already named someone else the new committee chair?"

"Nah, I highly doubt that..." I'd never heard any anecdotes about a student being impeached from a voluntary leadership position. Besides, it wasn't like anyone *wanted* to be festival committee chair in the first place. "I don't think they'd ask you to step down over something so small. You're the only one they've got, after all."

"Gee, thanks. No pressure... You're right, though." Hoshihara raised a fist to her chest as if to pump herself up. "I'm the one who agreed to do it, so I've gotta follow this thing through to the end."

"Yeah, that's the spirit."

"Okay... Here goes."

I could see the fires of Hoshihara's determination burning in her pupils. She took one last deep breath, then swung open the door to the student council room.

"I'm sorry for slacking off, everybody!" she cried out the moment she stepped inside, bowing her upper body until it was practically parallel with the floor. All of the festival committee and student council members in the room immediately stopped what they were doing and turned to look at Hoshihara. They all seemed dumbfounded. I could only watch uneasily from behind as the awkward silence dragged on.

That is, until one of the upperclassmen smiled and said, "Hey, don't worry

about it.”

This was followed by a handful of agreements from the other students in the room, each chiming in to reassure her that it was “totally fine” or “no biggie” before returning to whatever it was they were doing. It was a pretty indifferent reaction on the whole—and when Hoshihara lifted her head, she looked a little unsure how to feel about it. I could understand why. She was probably struggling to tell whether this lack of reprimand was due to the other committee members simply being kind or if it meant they hadn’t been expecting much from her in the first place. I wanted to believe it was the former—but I had no way of proving that, obviously.

Just when I thought that maybe I should say something to reassure her, one of the boys at the back of the room rose from his desk. It was the student council president. As he walked over toward us with a firm countenance, Hoshihara stiffened up.

“Hoshihara,” he said. “I have a message for you from one of the freshman classes. Would you like to hear it now?”

“A message?” she replied. “F-for me?”

“Yes, from Class 1-B. They wanted to thank you for giving up some indoor space for their exhibit... You know, the space that was originally reserved for the arch?”

Hoshihara’s eyes went wide, and the president’s expression turned soft.

“If you hadn’t given them that space,” he said, “it might have been *their* hard work that ended up getting destroyed instead. So don’t beat yourself up about it.”

With that, the student council president returned to his desk. Hoshihara just stood there a moment before letting out a long, heavy sigh of relief.

“Oh, thank goodness...” she said.

It took a load off my mind to see her slowly cheering up again. This really *was* great to hear; it meant there *had* been value in moving the arch after all. And even if things could have obviously gone better, that consideration on Hoshihara’s part hadn’t gone unnoticed by the people it benefited.



“Hey, don’t just stand there!” said one of the other committee members. “We’ve got plenty of work to do today! Come on, let’s go!”

As Hoshihara scrambled over to her desk, I figured I should make myself scarce and head back down to the gym. There was still an arch that needed fixing, after all.

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Yesterday alone, we managed to get pretty far along with the restoration work. At this rate, we could probably get the whole thing fixed up before the day of the festival, and with plenty of time to spare. It felt a little bit anticlimactic, if I was being totally honest, but at least things were progressing on schedule. Hoshihara seemed to have made a full recovery back to her usual peppy self, too, which meant all was well and good again.

Well. Not quite.

There was still one big issue that needed addressing.

As Hasumi and I chowed down, I took a look over at Hoshihara, who was still technically sitting and eating lunch with Ushio despite the current situation. The only real difference from the day before was that today, Hoshihara was actually attempting to strike up a pleasant conversation with Ushio—but she was met with only a cold shoulder and a few terse responses in return. Even from a distance, I could feel the awkward tension in the air. There was definitely a rift between the two of them, and I could tell Hoshihara was making an effort to bridge the gap, but it didn’t seem to be working very well; Ushio’s heart seemed completely sealed off. Hoshihara’s attempts to engage her slowly grew fewer and farther between, until eventually she defaulted to total silence.

*Maybe I should try going over there.*

Surely there was something I could do to help. And if I wanted to make a move, now was probably my only chance, since I’d be too busy working on the arch after school. More than anything, I just felt restless sitting idly by and watching this play out. I made up my mind to head over and see if I could offer Hoshihara some backup.

“Hey, Hasumi,” I said. “Mind if I step away for a minute?”

“Go for it, dude.”

I was so very grateful that he wasn't the type to pry or ask questions—though it was also entirely possible he just didn't care.

With my half-eaten lunch in hand, I made my way over to Ushio's desk. Hoshihara noticed me approaching before I could even say hello. She smiled broadly at me, while Ushio seemed utterly put off by my presence. This mixed reception definitely left me feeling conflicted as to whether this was truly a good idea.

“Hey, mind if I eat lunch with you guys?” I asked.

“...I mean, I guess not,” Ushio reluctantly responded.

And so the three of us sat there, huddled around Ushio's desk with our respective lunches. It wasn't the most spacious seating arrangement, all things considered. But there weren't any other open desks we could pull over to make more room, so we just started eating despite the lack of elbow room. After a few bites, I picked up where Hoshihara had left off and made my own attempt to break the metaphorical ice.

“Dang, Hoshihara... Your lunch is so small,” I said. “Is that really gonna be enough food for you?”

Immediately, the tension in Hoshihara's face began to ease up. “Oh, you betcha it will!” she said proudly. “Why, were you expecting me to *always* have a huge appetite after how much I ate the other night?”

“I mean...kinda, yeah.”

“Well, sorry to disappoint, but I'll have you know that my stomach community gets way bigger at night! But since it's only noon, this is more than enough to fill me up.”

*Uh... Come again?*

“What in the *world* is a ‘stomach community’?” I dared to ask. “You got a whole society living in your gut or something?”

“Or, sorry—not ‘community,’ but you know what I mean. It's, like, how much you can fit inside it, or whatever. God, what's the word...?”

“Uhhh...” I glanced over at Ushio, hoping for a lifeline.

She rolled her eyes, unamused. “Capacity.”

“That’s the one!” I exclaimed.

“Ooh, yeah! Nice one, Ushio-chan!” said Hoshihara. “Right, *capacity*! That’s what I meant! Derp, totally spaced... But yeah, I was gonna say—seems like *you’ve* got a pretty ‘small-capacity’ bento box yourself, Ushio-chan.”

“Is that right?” said Ushio.

“Uh-huh... Oh, hey! You haven’t even touched your rolled omelet yet. Are you the type who always saves the best for last?”

“Okay, look,” said Ushio, visibly annoyed as she set her chopsticks down and looked at me, then Hoshihara. “I really don’t need you two acting like this around me.”

“We’re not acting like anything,” I said reflexively.

“Oh yeah? Then what are you doing here, Sakuma?” Her eyes narrowed. “Don’t you usually eat lunch with Hasumi-kun?”

“Well, I mean...yeah, but...”

Ushio let out a disappointed sigh, apparently seeing no need to prove her point any further, then turned her eyes on Hoshihara. “And you, Natsuki? How come you’re trying so hard to engage with me today?”

“I’m...j-just talking to you like I always do.”

“No, you’re not,” said Ushio, clearly getting aggravated. “You hardly even said a word to me yesterday. It’s painfully obvious that you’re putting on an act.”

Regret billowed up inside my chest. I’d taken the wrong approach. I realized maybe I shouldn’t have come over here after—wait, no. It was too soon to be backpedaling just yet. Ushio was right; we couldn’t just *act* like we cared and hope this would all go away. We had to actually sit down and talk things out.

“If anyone’s putting on an act here, it’s you, Ushio,” I said.

Immediately, I felt a discomfort in my mouth—like I’d just bitten into a nice juicy clam only to be met by the gritty texture of sand grinding between my

teeth. Perhaps this was not the best choice of words on my part.

“And what makes you say that?” said Ushio, a quiet anger growing in her voice.

“You know damn well how weird it was for you to behave like that at the diner the other night,” I replied, the unpleasant tang still lingering on my tongue. “People don’t just turn totally cruel on their friends like that out of nowhere, especially when we were enjoying ourselves the whole night up until that point... If that wasn’t you putting on an act, then I don’t know *what* the hell it was.”

*No, damn it! What am I doing?!* I asked myself. There had to have been a less barbed way of phrasing this; I was so annoyed with myself for only being able to broach the subject in the most tactless way possible.

“It wasn’t anything,” said Ushio. “I just told you how I honestly felt.”

“You’re lying. The real Ushio *never* would have said those things.”

Ushio’s expression suddenly turned harsh. “And who might the ‘real Ushio’ be, exactly?” Her tone was so pointed that it felt like she had a knife to my throat. “Just what kind of person do you think I am, Sakuma? Some soft-spoken, mild-mannered saint of rationality who never has a negative word to say about anything? Don’t hold me to your impossible standards just because you’ve created some faultless image of me in your head.”

“Th-that’s not what I was trying to say at all...”

“I think I’ve heard enough.”

Ushio started packing up her half-eaten lunch and utensils. Hoshihara opened her mouth to say something, but the words wouldn’t come out. I was in the same boat; I kept thinking I needed to do something, but I couldn’t put those thoughts into action. Before we knew it, Ushio was standing up with her bento box in hand and her body turned toward the door. After a long pause, she cast a reluctant gaze back over her shoulder at us.

“Sorry,” she said, “but I think I’m gonna go finish my lunch in the cafeteria. Kind of just want to be left alone right now.”

And with that, she made her way out of the classroom. Hoshihara lifted herself a few inches off her seat but didn't get out of her chair, drooping back down in defeat instead. I held my head in my hands; I'd *royally* screwed that one up. I should have thought things through before opening my mouth, not just let my emotions take control at the expense of Ushio's.

I couldn't deny her assertion that I'd created a very specific image of her in my head—one that I was so afraid of her deviating from that I even accused her of not being the “real Ushio” the moment she acted any other way. I thought that maybe if I could keep stuffing her into that little predefined box, I'd have an easier time understanding what made her tick and what she was going through. But that was the absolute wrong way to go about things. Hell, it was no better than how Nishizono had been treating her.

Hoshihara let out a long sigh. “...Guess maybe we should've just kept our mouths shut after all.”

There wasn't anything I could say to that. And here I'd only just thought I'd found my way forward, only for it to be immediately shrouded beneath a dense fog. Now I was back to square one again. Just what on earth was I supposed to —

“Gosh, it's bleak in here,” said a flippant voice, breaking the silence. “Did somebody kick the bucket, or what?”

I turned to look and saw to my dismay that Sera had somehow wormed his way into the classroom again. He sauntered over with his devil-may-care grin and plopped his butt down in Ushio's empty chair. This made Hoshihara visibly uncomfortable, but it wasn't like Sera was going to pay this any mind.

“Bumped into Ushio in the hallway on my way here,” he said. “You guys didn't get in a fight by any chance, didja?”

“It wasn't a fight,” I said. “We just...mishandled the situation, that's all.”

“Oho...?”

Sera seemed suddenly uninterested in our current conversation as he leaned over and snatched the rolled omelet out of my lunch and snarfed it down.

“Hey, what the hell?!” I said.

“Mrm,” said Sera, smacking his lips as he chewed. “So your family makes ’em with dashi broth mixed into the eggs, huh? Not bad, not bad. That’s the way I like ’em too.”

*Damn him... I was looking forward to that all day...*

He gulped down the last of my rolled omelet, then licked his fingers with a snort. “Well, it’s cool, I guess. Not like you guys had any hope of actually getting through to Ushio in the first place.” He thought he had us all figured out. I was about to blow a gasket as my impulse to refute him grew stronger, but Hoshihara took the bait before I could even open my mouth.

“Oh yeah?! And what makes you so sure?!” she said.

“Hey, no need to get snippy! I’m not tryin’ to knock you guys here or anything. I’m just sayin’ that even if you can coexist with her, you’ll never be able to actually *relate* to her, y’know? Because you guys are privileged in ways that she’s not. You feel me?”

“And why’s that, huh?” I asked, taking over. I wasn’t even angry anymore; I just wanted him to hurry up and get to the point.

“Mmm... Well, if you *insiiiiist*...” said Sera, drawing it out to be as obnoxious as possible. “Okay look at it this way. You’re a guy, right, Sakuma?”

“Yeah.”

“And you like girls, right?”

“...What about it?”

“Well, there ya go. That’s privilege for ya.”

“Pardon? I don’t see what you mean. That’s not privileged, that’s just norm —”

The moment the words left my lips, I got a sinking feeling in my stomach like I’d just accidentally stepped into a snare.

“Right you are. It’s perfectly normal.” Sera leaned in to get a better look at my face, like a giddy hunter peeking in to see what foolish prey had fallen into his trap. He wore a twisted smile. “So what you’re saying is, Ushio *isn’t* normal, then. And that’s why I can tell there’ll forever be a disconnect between you and

her.”

“I didn’t mean it in a good or bad way,” I said. “Don’t read so much into it.”

“Ah, but it’s these exact little thoughtless slips of the tongue that so often reveal how a person *truly* feels deep down... Or so I heard some dude in a snazzy suit say on a talk show once, heh.”

Sera leaned back in his chair, teetering back and forth on its rear two legs. Hoshihara snuck a nervous glance my way.

“And in any case,” Sera went on, “it’s not even a matter of good or bad. Just that what you consider normal is different from Ushio’s normal. And if you don’t even see the world the same way that someone else does, it’s gonna be pretty damn hard for you to understand them on a deeper level. That’s why I don’t think you guys’ll ever be able to mesh well as friends or connect with her. Honestly, best thing Ushio can do for herself is get the hell outta this little podunk town ASAP and move somewhere she can find a lot more people like her. Just like polar bears live in the Arctic and camels live in the desert, everyone’s got an environment they’re best suited to thrive in. She’s nothin’ but a fish outta water livin’ out here in the boonies. I mean, c’mon—am I wrong?”

Every word felt like its own tiny needle stabbing at my chest. I couldn’t find any substantial material to make a single counterargument. In all honesty, it kind of sounded like there was some truth to what Sera was saying for once. I just couldn’t bring myself to admit it. The last thing I wanted to do was validate him here—because that also meant acknowledging that there was little I could really do for Ushio in the long run.

“...And what about you, huh?” I asked.

“Hm? What’s that?” said Sera.

“Do you think *you* could do a better job of connecting with Ushio?”

“Mmm... Yeah, probably! I mean, I’m pretty confident I could at least understand what she’s going through better than *you* could. Not to mention...”

Sera let the legs of his chair fall to the ground with a loud *clunk*.

“I don’t go around calling people disgusting just ’cause I don’t understand them.”

With that, he stood up from his chair.

“Thanks for the rolled omelet, though. Pretty darn tasty.”

Sera hummed a jolly little tune as he slunk out of the classroom. This was a pretty submissive retreat, by his standards. I wondered if he was planning to go check up on Ushio, but I couldn’t find the nerve to chase after him. The guy felt like a mirror in some ways; every time we talked, it felt like I was being forced to confront my least favorite parts of myself. Even my previous animosity toward him was being used against me now.

“...Um, did ‘normal’ pick up a new meaning I’m not aware of, or something?” asked Hoshihara.

From her expression, it seemed like she was genuinely curious and confused. But I didn’t have the mental capacity to even try to give her an answer at the moment.

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Ever since the incident during lunch that day, Ushio and I had effectively not spoken at all. Yes, we still read our lines at each other during rehearsals, but these were not actual conversations. We were just performing our duties as actors. Ushio had also started eating lunch by herself in the cafeteria every day, which meant there were far fewer opportunities for Hoshihara to reach out to her as well.

I knew this state of affairs wasn’t sustainable—but maybe I was wrong. Maybe for Ushio, it came as a major relief not having to deal with us all the time. It was entirely possible that this was genuinely her ideal scenario, and Hoshihara and I were going against her wishes in trying to “solve” it.

And yet, there was one thing that gave me pause: I felt like I hadn’t seen Ushio smile lately. Obviously, we didn’t see each other as much now, so it was possible that was a false perception based on limited interactions. But if my gut was right...then I knew I needed to change this situation.

I wanted to find a way to get closer to Ushio.



But I knew if I wasn't careful, I'd only hurt us both.

It was the classic hedgehog's dilemma I'd read about in a book once, a long time ago. Unfortunately, I'd completely forgotten what the name of that book was, let alone what the author suggested was the ideal approach to such quandaries—assuming there even was one. I assumed if I went through every volume in my bookshelf, I'd probably find it eventually—so I started spending any spare moments I could find reading.

Time crept up on me before I knew it. Tomorrow was the day of the festival.

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I left my house about an hour earlier than usual. The fresh morning air out the door tasted clean and crisp. I pedaled past an old lady walking her dog and a group of junior high schoolers on their way to morning practice. I made my way onto the road through the paddy fields and rode directly into the dawn glare, the gentle rays of autumn sunshine cascading down my face.

When I arrived at Tsubakioka High, I got off my bike before walking onto campus and took a moment to marvel at the reconstructed arch standing proudly over the main gate. The whole festival committee had come together to erect it in its final location yesterday. Seeing it finally complete in all its splendor was enough to fill me with a deep sense of accomplishment all over again.

I passed under the arch and set foot onto campus. The bike lot was still all but deserted at this hour, but I spotted Hoshihara's bike. And here I thought I might actually be the first one to school for once, but it seemed our dependable committee chair had already started her day. I parked my bike, then headed into the building. All of the classrooms were completely decked out in festival-worthy fashion, with flashy signboards and posters lining the walls, plus decorative balloons and tinsel all over the place. I could already vividly imagine the bustling crowds that would be making their way down these halls in just a few short hours.

I made my way to the student council room and opened the door.

"Whoa, dang," said Hoshihara, turning to face me where she stood in front of a metal bookshelf, apparently sorting through some papers. "You're here

awfully early.”

“Yeah, guess I got a little restless waiting around,” I said.

“Oh hey, me too! I was so excited and nervous last night, I could hardly sleep! I just kept reading through my welcome speech over and over...”

“Oof, yeah. Good to have that memorized so you don’t forget.”

“Nah, I’m allowed to just read it off my cue cards if I want to, so it’s not like there was any risk of me actually spacing or whatever.”

“Huh? Then why’d you spend so much time obsessing over it?”

I couldn’t help but laugh at this, even though I knew it might be a little bit rude. I pulled over a chair from a nearby desk and had a seat. Hoshihara took a break from what she was doing and sat down as well.

“Mmm, I dunno,” she said. “I guess I just wanted it to feel believable, y’know? Like, ‘Hey, everybody! Check out what a good and capable committee chair I am!’”

“Oh, that’s fair... Yeah, makes sense.” I could understand the feeling.

“Well, not that I didn’t also practice it a few times to make sure I wouldn’t stumble over my words or whatever. Definitely wanna end things on a high note, at least, considering how much trouble I caused for everyone along the way...”

“Yeah, I look forward to hearing your speech. Wouldn’t wanna miss it.”

“Oh, no, no, no! Don’t get too excited!” said Hoshihara, chuckling bashfully. “It’s not gonna be anything to write home about, trust me!”

Up until about a month ago, simply being in Hoshihara’s general vicinity was enough to make my heart race out of control. But now, it just felt calming and comfy to be around her—like the feeling you got after taking a long sip from a warm cup of tea. It wasn’t that I didn’t still have feelings for her, mind you—if anything, I felt more strongly about her now than I did before—just that the nature of those feelings had started shifting ever so slightly into something more complicated than a simple crush.

And so I asked myself: what did I ultimately want to happen between me and

her? Did I want us to be boyfriend and girlfriend? I knew I'd be lying if I said those feelings weren't there. But say we *did* start dating, what then?

How would Ushio feel about that?

"Well, to be fair..." said Hoshihara, bringing me back to reality. "I wouldn't miss your *Romeo and Juliet* performance for the world... So right back at you, I guess."

"Sounds good," I said. "Guess I'll see you there, then."

"Yeah. I'm really looking forward to it."

Hoshihara smiled the most carefree, contented smile I'd ever seen. I gave a firm nod in response, hoping we'd live up to the feelings embedded therein.

Once the opening ceremony concluded, I was immediately placed on reception duty outside the main gate as part of the administrative team. I'd be working alongside faculty and other committee members to keep a register of names and whatnot for all of the festival's guests. It was a Saturday, so plenty of alumni and even kids from other schools had come out to attend, in addition to all of the local families and relatives of current students. There were so many people coming in, especially after nine o'clock, that things quickly got busy enough to make my head spin.

"All right, Kamiki. I'm tagging you out," said one of the other members of the administrative team once eleven o'clock rolled around and the traffic had died down a bit.

"Copy that."

I rose from my chair and walked out of the reception tent. There was no committee work for me to do for a while, so I was free to go out and enjoy the festival until the *Romeo and Juliet* performance at two o'clock. But once the play was over, I'd have to get right back to working at the main gate, so these three hours were all the time I had to go check out the other classes' exhibits and refreshment booths.

That being said, I didn't feel any strong compulsion to make the most of them.

If anything, I just wanted to get this free time over with ASAP. There were no exhibits I'd been particularly looking forward to, nor did I have any friends to join me. Instead, I'd been planning to spend this time helping out at festival committee HQ, since the student council had let us know they could use all the help they could get if we had any time to spare. This was a welcome respite for a loner like me.

After changing into my indoor shoes in the entryway, I headed for the student council room. All of the other students I passed by on the way there seemed to be enjoying the festivities to their hearts' content. Among the many attractions were a haunted house and a themed café, so there were also students walking around still in costume for whatever their class's exhibit might be—some of whom had even dyed their hair just for today, as it was the one time the faculty turned a blind eye to what would otherwise be a flagrant violation of school regulations. Not that there weren't also students like Nishizono who spit in the face of those rules all year round, but alas...

I was struck by a sudden curiosity.

*I wonder what Ushio's up to right now.*

Hoshihara and I were both on the festival committee, so we hadn't even bothered making plans to go around and check out the festival together. Which meant that Ushio had to be either hanging out with someone else or meandering all by herself.

*Oh, man... What if it's the latter?*

I knew it really wasn't my job to worry about whether she was having a good time, yet I couldn't help but get a little bit anxious. I walked right past the student council room and continued down the hall, keeping a close eye out for Ushio as I walked through the building. I wasn't sure why, but the thought of her just sitting in a secluded corner of campus all alone just tugged at my heartstrings.

When I made it up to the second floor, I could hear a low, bass-heavy beat reverberate through the building from down on the athletic field. I took a look out the hall window and saw that the school's street dance team had begun their performance on the outdoor stage, with boys and girls in baggy T-shirts

shaking their bodies to the rhythm. I looked over at the spectator seating area, wondering if perhaps Ushio was down there. Surely I could pick out her snowy head of hair even from way up here on the second floor.

“Oh, hey! What’s up, Kamiki?”

Hearing my name, I turned to see Mashima and Shiina standing across the hall. Shiina was empty-handed, whereas Mashima was dual-wielding a churro and some fresh-baked cookies bundled up in plastic wrap. She seemed to be enjoying the festival exactly as intended.

“You all by yourself?” asked Mashima.

“For now, yeah...” I replied, feeling a little awkward all of a sudden.

“Aww, you poor guy... That’s too bad. Here, want some churro?” she asked, holding out the already-nibbled end of her fried cinnamon treat.

“Wha...? N-no, get that thing out of my face.”

“Ah ha ha! Look how flustered he is! Man, you’re fun to tease, Kamiki.”

“Come on, Marine,” said Shiina. “Have some manners.”

*Yeah, no kidding,* I agreed internally.

“Fine—guess I’ll give *you* a bite, then!” said Mashima, shoving the partially eaten churro straight into Shiina’s mouth. The other girl immediately started grumbling and groaning in protest. Nevertheless, she didn’t want to make even more of a mess by spitting it out, so she begrudgingly bit off the end and chewed. These two were pretty close to be able to screw around like this and think nothing of it. I was a little jealous.

“Oh yeah—have either of you seen Ushio anywhere?” I asked.

“Ushio?” said Mashima. “Yeah, pretty sure she’s with Loki-chan. Think I saw Nanamori-san with them too? Can’t remember.”

For reference, by “Loki-chan,” she meant Todoroki. It was just a play on the last two syllables of her name—no actual relation to Norse mythology.

“Oh, I see,” I said. “So she *was* hanging out with someone, then...”

Perhaps Ushio and Todoroki had grown closer than I realized as a result of

working together on the class play. I *had* seen the two of them talking a lot during rehearsals, come to think of it.

“So what’s next on the agenda for you, Kamiki?” asked Mashima. “Gonna go try to join up with them?”

“Nah. I was gonna go help out at HQ, actually.”

“Gotcha. Cool, cool... Oh, dang! Look at the time! The trivia contest’s about to start! C’mon, Shiina! Let’s go!”

“Mrrmf?! Hrey, waidduh... Marine, wait!” cried Shiina, covering her mouth with one hand as she chased after Mashima. They really *were* the best of friends; they’d known each other ever since they were little kids, if I remembered right. It was amusing to me how well they got along despite having polar opposite personalities—but maybe, like magnets, that was exactly what made them so easily attracted to one another. It was hard not to be a little bit envious of a connection like that.

In any event, I felt silly for having worried that Ushio might be alone, but now that I knew she wasn’t, I could stop searching for her and head back down to committee HQ to help out. It should have been a load off my mind—and yet, something didn’t feel right. Like a cold wind was blowing straight through a hole in my heart. I should’ve been *happy* that Ushio had found friends to enjoy the festival with, shouldn’t I? So why did I feel this way?

*Hang on! Is that—*

Just then, I spied a familiar face down at the other end of the hallway. I could recognize that bright, silver-blond hair from a mile away. It was Ushio. And just like Mashima had said, she was with Todoroki and Nanamori. The three of them were making their way down the hall in my direction, but they didn’t seem to have noticed me yet, so I quickly hid myself in a nearby corner.

*...Wait. Why am I doing this?*

It was just a reflexive action, of course. I didn’t have any specific reason for not wanting them to see me. Though I had experienced a similar sensation before; whenever I was running errands or something and happened to spot one of my classmates from school just out and about, I felt a similar compulsion

to veer off in another direction so we didn't have to deal with the awkwardness of bumping into each other in public. The difference was that this *wasn't* an unexpected place to bump into Ushio, and I'd literally been searching for her up until a moment ago. It made no sense that I was being so evasive. And so I was left in this strange middle state, neither showing myself to Ushio nor running away, merely watching her from the shadows instead.

The three girls seemed to be enjoying themselves, and they were engaged in what appeared to be a very lively conversation, too distant for me to tell what they were talking about. Ushio said something or other to Nanamori, then chuckled when Todoroki cut in with what I assumed to be some sort of quip.

*Well, would you look at that... Guess Ushio does still know how to smile.*

I felt a cold wind carve its way through my chest once again.

It was a strange feeling—a bit yearnful, a bit empty. Was I jealous of Todoroki and Nanamori, perhaps? Envious that they'd managed to become such fast friends with Ushio in recent weeks, while I'd been struggling just to salvage the status quo? No, it wasn't that. I felt no particular emotions toward either of them. This feeling had to do with me and Ushio specifically, but I couldn't quite place it. Yet for whatever reason, it almost felt close to dejection. In which case, it could only mean... *Ah.*

At last, I realized what that icy chill in my chest truly was.

It was disappointment.

I'd been telling myself I was worried about Ushio being all by herself, but in reality, I was actually *hoping* I'd find her alone and in need of a friend.

Deep down, all I really wanted out of this was the chance for *me* to be the one reaching out a hand of friendship and making her go, "Gee, Sakuma. What would I ever do without you?" I was just looking for a chance to make her feel emotionally indebted to me—because apparently, I felt like that was the way for us to form a more solid bond. And when I summed it up like that, the mere thought was enough to make me want to puke.

How vile could I possibly get? I'd literally been subconsciously *hoping* that Ushio was miserable right now, just to feed my own twisted desire to feel needed and depended on by her. But even if things had played out exactly like I wanted, it wouldn't leave Ushio and me standing on equal ground as friends, no—because the whole methodology of my little scheme was based around me finding her in a position of weakness from which I could rescue her by swooping in and playing the part of her knight in shining white armor.

The thought that I was capable of harboring such wicked, repulsive thoughts without even realizing it sent a shudder down my spine. My whole body was trembling, and I suddenly felt nauseous. In the end, I didn't care one whit about how Ushio felt—I just wanted her to validate *my* feelings... She was totally right to want to distance herself from me.

*Oh god. Wait a minute.*

Had I *always* been like this?

Were *all* of the things I thought I'd done out of kindness or consideration—not just for Ushio, but for everyone—really just a product of my own selfish desires? Why did I even want to be close friends with Ushio in the first place? Was it really because I cherished her as a person, or because we'd known each other for so long—or was it just so I could feel better about myself and what a good person I was?

No... No, it couldn't be that—could it?

“Wait. Kamiki?”

I heard my name and snapped back to my senses. I'd been so off in my own little world that I hadn't even noticed that Ushio and the other two girls had already made it all the way down the hall to where I was standing. It had been Todoroki who'd called out to me, and she was now tilting her head quizzically.

“You're not slacking off on the job, are you?” she asked with a ribbing tone. “If you're going to be on the festival committee, you should at least *act* like it...”

Behind her, I could see Nanamori snickering.

“Well, actually, I'm not even—”



I started to protest, then made eye contact with Ushio, who was just standing there looking uncomfortable. In that instant, feelings of shame and guilt burgeoned inside my chest, and I couldn't keep my cool any longer.

"L-Look, I'm not slacking off, all right?" I said, then immediately stomped off.

I knew I'd probably left them thinking that something very bizarre had gotten into me; I could practically feel their judgmental gazes on my back as I walked away. But I just couldn't bear to stand face-to-face with Ushio any longer. She was the *last* person I wanted to perceive these ugly emotions I was trying to reconcile right now.

My head was killing me. My skull was still reverberating with the echoes of the crushing realization that I was nowhere near as good a person as I once thought.

I didn't even know *what* I was anymore.

"You feeling a little on edge, Kamiki-kun?"

I turned around in my chair to see Hoshihara standing by my side, looking down at me with an uneasy expression on her face. In her hands was a stack of questionnaires I'd been tallying the results of just a few minutes prior.

After fleeing from Ushio's sight, I'd made my way to the student council room. There, I'd offered to help Hoshihara, who was swamped with managerial duties like handling guest complaints and disputes while also running the lost and found, so she'd gladly found some odd jobs for me to take over. She and I were the only ones in the room at the moment, but there were constantly people coming in and out, so it didn't *feel* like we were alone.

"O-on edge? What makes you say that?"

"You just have this really tense expression on your face," she said, staring intently. "Made me wonder if maybe you were feeling nervous about the play or something."

"Oh, gotcha... Nah, it's nothing like that. Don't worry."

Not that I *wasn't* anxious about the performance. But that wasn't what was

weighing on my mind right now.

“Well, if you say so... Anyway, I actually do need something else from you,” she said, sounding a little hesitant to bring it up. “It looks like you got your totals here wrong.”

“Wait, I did?!”

She nodded and handed me the stack of papers. It was the questionnaire we were collecting throughout the day that gave both students and guests a chance to rate each class’s contribution to the festival, the results of which we would announce during the closing ceremony. The class with the highest ranking overall would win an award. This had been a major source of motivation for no small number of students during the weeks of preparation leading up to the event, so getting the results right was a pretty big responsibility.

“M-my bad,” I said. “I’ll add them up again.”

“Sorry about that, yeah. Rules are that we have to keep recounting until our numbers are in agreement.”

“Yeah, I know. Sorry for the trouble...”

Feeling genuinely bad, I quickly set about tallying up the votes again. I was glad she’d managed to catch the error in her review; it wouldn’t go over well if it came to light that we’d given the award to the wrong class due to a simple mathematical error.

“Man, that’s pretty unusual for you, though,” said Hoshihara, smiling meekly. “I always saw you as the type of guy who can do pretty much any type of job like it’s no big deal. This might sound kinda bad, but I’m actually a little relieved to know someone as capable as you makes mistakes sometimes too.”

I knew the unstated implication here was that she wasn’t fussed about it, and I appreciated her amiability. But frankly, this sentiment fell pretty flat for me right now, so her words just went in one ear and out the other.

“...You give me way too much credit,” I said, pivoting to mild self-deprecation. “It only seems that way because I usually steer clear of anything I don’t actually want to do. I’m not a natural at anything, and I promise you, I make mistakes all

the time that you just don't get to see. If you think a guy like *me* is capable, then the other committee members must be like totally infallible superheroes in your eyes."

Hoshihara blinked a few times. "K-Kamiki-kun, what's gotten into you?"

She looked genuinely worried. *Damn. Guess I got a little too self-abasing there.*

"Sorry," I said. "Just forget it."

What was I even doing here? What was I hoping to achieve by insulting myself like this, other than putting Hoshihara in the awkward position of having to console me? Which, sure enough, she seemed ready to do, judging by the look of concern in her eyes as she inched her face closer.

"You sure you're not feeling a little on edge?" she asked. "Might be a good idea to try taking some deep breaths. Oxygen's really important, you know."

This last assertion was peculiar enough to get a smile out of me, but I took her advice and took a few deep breaths all the same. The exercise itself didn't seem to make a huge difference, but I did feel a little more relaxed now on the whole.

"Did it work?"

"Yeah. Feeling a little bit better now, thanks."

"Okay, phew," she said, the tension easing from her face. Seeing her smile again was definitely a better pick-me-up than any breathing exercise could be.

I really needed to stop being so irresolute; the big show was just a few hours away. If I couldn't get back into my usual frame of mind soon, it'd hamper my performance. I shook off my existential thoughts for the time being and set about retallying the stack of questionnaires, giving each one a closer look this time around.

"Oh yeah—so have you seen Ushio-chan at all today?" asked Hoshihara.

Just when I thought I'd reached a state of relative tranquility, simply hearing Ushio's name was enough to send waves of unpleasant emotion rippling once again through my newly placid heart. But I didn't want to make Hoshihara worry on my account any more than she already had, so I did my best to answer

calmly.

“Yeah, I have,” I said. “She’s hanging out with Todoroki and Nanamori-san.”

“Right, that’s what I heard... Wonder what those three talk about.”

“Huh?” I did a double take. “Wait, you already knew about that?”

“Hm? Knew about what?”

“That she was hanging out with them.”

I could feel my tone getting more forceful, though it wasn’t intentional.

“Er, y-yeah,” Hoshihara said with a confused nod. “She told me she was gonna be spending the day with them a while back...”

*Oh, I see. So some people got the memo.*

I could already feel myself spiraling back into a weirdly depressive funk; I was a little insulted that she told Hoshihara but hadn’t said a word to me, while simultaneously annoyed with myself for letting such a tiny little thing get under my skin. Obviously, Ushio was free to hang out with whomever she wished. She had no obligation to inform me if she had plans to hang out with someone during the culture festival, especially given that she knew I was going to be too busy with my committee work to spend much time with her myself. Thinking about it rationally, it was pretty absurd for me to be upset about her not keeping me in the loop on this—and regardless of whether that feeling was valid, I could have just asked her myself in advance if it was really going to bother me that much. Basically, I felt like an idiot for having emotions about it at all.

“Kamiki-kun?”

Even so, the fact that she told Hoshihara but not me was a bitter pill to swallow. I was even tempted to take this as a sign that Ushio didn’t want anything to do with me anymore—but no, it was way too early to jump to that conclusion. To read that far into her simply not informing me of her plans would be ridiculously paranoid. I needed to stop thinking every little thing she did had something to do with me. And yet...Ushio also knew me so well that it sometimes felt like she could read me like a book. It was entirely possible she’d

known how ugly and self-centered my feelings about her were for a long time now, and that our argument at lunch the other day was just the straw that broke the camel's back... In which case, maybe she really did—

“Kamiki-kun, I'm talking to you!”

“Huh? Oh...”

When I snapped out of it, I saw that Hoshihara was now leaning down like a concerned parent, trying to get a better look at my face.

“What's the matter?” she asked. “You okay?”

“S-sorry, my bad. Kinda spaced out for a minute there.”

“Are you not feeling well? If you need to go lie down in the nurse's office or something, you should do that. No need to push yourself to help out...”

“No, really. I'm fine, I swear.”

“You say that, but...”

Right then, the door to the student council room rattled open. I turned to look and saw a male student holding up some sort of key with two fingers as he walked in.

“Hey, I found this on the floor outside,” he said. “Is this the lost and found?”

Hoshihara looked at him, then back at me, in alternation. After a few moments' hesitation, she cast one last glance at me before hurrying over to help the other boy.

“Yeah, you can leave it here,” she said. “I just have a little bit of paperwork I'm gonna need you to fill out for me, so gimme one sec...”

As Hoshihara explained the procedure to the boy, I turned away and rubbed my temples. I'd told her I was fine, but in reality, my brain felt like a pile of mush. Since when had I been the type to get so up in my head about these types of things? I really didn't know. But one thing I could say for sure was this: pretty much all of the stuff I'd stressed myself out about over these past few months had something to do with Ushio in one way or another. And if I still couldn't keep myself from hurting her even when I was trying as hard as I could to be considerate, then maybe it really would be better if I just stayed the hell

out of her life altogether.

It was 1:57 p.m., and things were running about ten minutes behind schedule after the previous event in the gym. Even from behind the curtains, one could hear the growing crowd. More than half of the seats in the auditorium were filled already. All of the actors were suited up for the main event, with everyone standing restlessly in a huddle backstage—and I was among them. It didn't help that my Romeo costume was a bit too tight, which only made the nervous tension that much more stifling.

“Okay, folks! Once they get their instruments offstage, you're clear to go out! Shouldn't be more than another five minutes!”

This announcement from one of the committee members helping to run the show only amplified our collective jitters. I wiped the sweat from my palms and looked down at my script once again. Being one of the two main characters, I had a massive amount of lines, so I wanted to spend every last second I had making sure they were drilled into my head before we went out onstage.

But it just wasn't happening.

I couldn't focus one bit. It was like there was a violent tornado of emotions passing through my brain, scooping up everything that I'd worked so hard to memorize over the past few weeks and threatening to make off with all of it like debris. I'd been like this all afternoon, causing trouble for Hoshihara as I made mistake after mistake trying to help her out in the student council room. I'd completely lost my ability to concentrate on anything.

“Sakuma,” said a voice—and I nearly jumped out of my skin.

Ushio was standing there, dressed as Juliet, with a look of concern on her face.

“You're looking pretty pale... Are you gonna be okay?” she asked.

“Y-yeah, I'll be fine,” I said, keeping my gaze pointed down and away because I couldn't bring myself to look her in the eye.

“If you have to use the bathroom, you'd better go now. I'm sure no one'll

mind even if we have to delay the show a few minutes.”

“Yeah, I know. Thanks, I’m good.”

“...Is something bothering you?” she asked, her tone suddenly turning serious. Maybe she could see my self-hatred and discomfiture in my expression. I felt bad; Ushio had far more reason to feel nervous about going out onstage right now, yet here she was tending to *my* insecurities.

“Nope,” I said. “Not at all.”

“You’re not still thinking about what happened the other day, are you?”

By that, I assumed she meant when I blew up on her at lunch. That was definitely part of it, to be sure, but the main thing that was eating away at me right now was whether I, Sakuma Kamiki, was even a remotely good person deep down. And I didn’t want to talk about that with Ushio. I couldn’t.

“No, Ushio. It’s got nothing to do with you.”

Her expression evaporated so quickly, I swore I heard it fizzle. “Oh, is that right? Well, okay then.”

She did an about-face and walked back to where she’d originally been. *Sorry, Ushio*, I said internally. I hadn’t meant to give her the cold shoulder, but I didn’t have the extra capacity to worry about anyone else right now. Hell, I wasn’t even in the right headspace to be in this play, but the curtain would be rising any second.

“Okay, places, people!” said Todoroki, trying to kick everyone into gear. “We’re getting ready to roll here, so look alive!”

It was almost time. The narrator took a seat in front of the PA system and opened the script. No matter how bad I felt, I knew the show must go on. Sure, there’d be another culture festival next year, but this would be the first and last chance we got to perform *Romeo and Juliet* as Class 2-A. We’d practiced our butts off for this moment. Even if I flubbed my lines a bit, I could just improvise and find a way to get things back on track. I took a deep breath, then headed over to take my place at the side of the stage.

The whole auditorium was astir with the sounds of people chattering, clearing their throats, and scraping the legs of their folding chairs across the floor. None of these were particularly boisterous sounds on their own, but together they formed a nerve-racking cacophony that filled the gymnasium from the ceiling to the floor.

“Now, without further ado, please welcome Tsubakioka High’s very own Sophomore Class 2-A for their rendition of the classic Shakespeare play, *Romeo and Juliet*!” said the student council announcer in charge of facilitating the stage events in the gym.

The lights went down, and a hush fell over the audience as the auditorium was shrouded in darkness. Then at last, the curtain began to rise.

“We set our stage in fair Verona, where a long-held grudge between the houses of Montague and Capulet makes strife in the streets of the city an almost daily occurrence. But then, one fateful day, a Montague boy by the name of Romeo sneaks his way into a ball being held at the Capulet estate...”

Ushio and I headed out into the spotlight from opposite wings of the stage, and immediately all eyes in the audience were on us. For a moment, I couldn’t even breathe, as if their individual gazes had actual mass and were collectively weighing me down. They were watching our every move with anticipation now, waiting to be entertained. The moment I realized this simple fact, I started feeling the pressure; my heart rate skyrocketed, and I broke out sweating. I even missed the cue for my first line.

“Holy crap, I think that *is* Tsukinoki, bro!”

Suddenly, I heard voices calling out from among the crowd.

“Dang, they actually let him dress up and play Juliet?”

“Wait, wait, wait. *That’s* Tsukinoki-senpai?”

“I forget—are we allowed to take photos?”

“Hang on. You sure that’s a dude?”

It was pretty maddening how selective my hearing was choosing to be—like my brain was only picking up the things it knew I didn’t want to hear.



*Wait.* Things *I* didn't want to hear? Shouldn't it be *Ushio* I was concerned about?

After all, it was she who originally had so much anxiety about how other people would receive her if she played Juliet. She literally told me one of the main reasons she had reservations about it was that people might laugh at her. Granted, there was no *literal* laughter coming from the audience right now—but I knew she had to be taking these thoughtless comments and rude quips a whole lot more personally than I was.

And yet, despite her being up here onstage in front of a crowd of curious and judgmental spectators, *I* was the one obsessing over it, while *she* was one hundred percent focused on her performance as Juliet. The way she had her arms folded behind her waist, looking down at her feet like a bored little girl—it was the very image of Juliet feeling stir-crazy at the family ball.

This inspired a pair of emotions inside of me, the first of which was admiration. I was genuinely impressed with how she managed to remain calm in the spotlight and not let the few obnoxious voices distract or deter her. It was a testament to how insanely talented she was—something I'd honestly almost forgotten about with everything that had happened in recent months.

On the flip side, her perfect performance only served to exacerbate the other of the two emotions I was feeling: pressure. The play was called *Romeo and Juliet*, after all—we couldn't very well have an extremely talented Juliet but a lackluster Romeo. So *this* was what I had to measure up to. And with my brain having already been put through the wringer today, the pressure of being onstage was almost enough to make me go crazy.

I held it together somehow, and wet my parched mouth with saliva to give my line: "Oh, what lady is that, who now graces my eyes? Have I ever known true love or beauty before this night? I think not!"

As I recited my character's first sweet nothings to Juliet, I made my way across the stage toward Ushio, then took a knee and made my proposition.

"Oh, fair maiden, wouldst thouest—"

*Crap.*

A chill ran down my spine as I stumbled over my words, flubbing the line right out the gate. I heard a few snickers from the audience. I could feel my face growing hot.

“Er... M-might I have this dance?” I said, quickly rephrasing on the spot.

“And what may I call you, good sir?” said Ushio.

“Just a vagrant and a passerby, miss—not worthy of a name.”

“Well then, my dear passerby—I would gladly give you this dance.”

Somehow, I’d managed to not *totally* ruin the scene, but it was obvious I was struggling to keep it together compared to Ushio. I stood up and bowed, placing my left hand on my chest while extending my right hand to Ushio. She took it, and we moved straight into the dance scene. Not that there was any actual dancing on display, mind you; we just kind of did a lap around the stage while sort of spinning around as *if* we were dancing.

Even though it was still just the prologue, this was actually the scene in the play where Romeo and Juliet were in the closest physical proximity with one another—so Ushio and I were close enough to hear each other’s breathing as we did our little rudimentary dance. Yet I found myself unable to maintain eye contact with her, my gaze naturally drifting away for fear that she might see me for the wretch I truly was—or, alternatively, because I simply found her performance as Juliet far too radiant to look at directly for very long.

“There totally *is* something bothering you, isn’t there?” Ushio said, softly enough that only I could hear it. I was a little startled that she’d try to question me about this during the actual performance, but I warily lifted my gaze to meet hers. There was a spark of anger flickering in her pupils, and it was enough to intimidate me.

“N-no,” I said. “I told you, I’m fine...”

“Then focus on the play.”

“I know... I’m trying to, it’s just...”

“It’s just what?”

“It’s just... I don’t know...”

“Spit it out, already.”

“I guess I’m feeling kind of—”

Just then, I fumbled my footing and accidentally stepped on Ushio’s toes.

“Ow!” Ushio let out a little yelp of pain.

“Whoops, m-my bad!” I said.

“It’s fine. Go on—you were saying?”

“...Never mind. It’s not worth it.”

“How come?”

“Even if I told you, it’s not like it would fix anything... And besides, the dance scene’s already over anyway.”

We’d just finished our little circuit around the stage, and the narrator chimed in with some not-so-subtle foreshadowing about how our characters “would not enjoy each other’s company for long, as cruel fate would soon tear them apart.” Having no choice now but to postpone this conversation for later, Ushio relented as the scene faded out and we exited on opposite sides of the stage.

“Whew...”

I let out an exhausted sigh as soon as I was out of the limelight. It hadn’t even been three minutes since the play began, and already I was feeling pretty tuckered out. I resisted the urge to plop straight down on the floor and instead leaned my back against a nearby wall. Next up was the big balcony scene—the longest one in the whole play. I wondered if I had it in me to get through it with no mistakes, especially when things were feeling pretty awkward and tense between me and Ushio right now.

“Hey, Kamiki,” said Todoroki, who’d been waiting for me backstage. She looked me up and down suspiciously. “You were pretty stiff out there just now... Are you not feeling well or something?”

Come to think of it, Hoshihara said the same thing. Even Ushio had pointed out that I was looking pale. I wondered if perhaps my face was looking a lot more haggard than I realized. Maybe it would be a good idea to go take a look in a mirror.

“...Sorry about that,” I said. “But no, I’m feeling just fine. Don’t worry.”

I pushed myself off the wall with gusto to prove my fine bill of health, but it didn’t do much to allay Todoroki’s concerns.

“If you say so... Well, as long as you do it just like we practiced, it’ll go fine. And if worse comes to worst, we can always trade you out for a standin.”

“A standin...? Like who?”

“Like me.”

She said this with no hint of irony. I could only shake my head in disbelief.

“No, no, no,” I said. “Come on, now. I really don’t think *that’s* gonna work...”

“Why not? I know all the lines, and I’m sure the costume would fit me just fine.”

“...Pretty sure it’d be just a little weird if Romeo has a sudden change of gender halfway through the play.”

“Oh, pshaw. Like anyone would even notice... Okay, maybe they would,” she said with a sheepish smile, then tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear. “You’re right. Me playing Romeo is out of the question. Or perhaps I should say: using *anyone* as a standin is out of the question. You’re the only one we can count on, Kamiki. So all I can ask is that you go out there and give it your best shot. Let’s make this play a hit, all right?”

“...All right, yeah.”

“Great, that’s what I like to hear.” She nodded, then looked over my shoulder out onto the stage. “Oh, shoot. The next scene’s already about to start. Good luck out there, Kamiki! Knock ’em dead!”

And with that, Todoroki made herself scarce, presumably to go talk to Ushio or the lighting crew. There was no time to let myself relax here; as Todoroki said, no one could play the role of Romeo but me, and I wanted to make this show a success just as much as she did. And so, for the sake of Ushio and all the other actors who’d practiced so hard to make it this far, I steeled my nerves and pumped myself up for the next scene.

“Drawn by the light leaking from a nearby window on his way out, Romeo

leaps over the garden wall of the Capulet estate and sneaks in to get a closer look,” said the narrator. I clenched my sweaty palms and headed back out onto the stage.

Ushio now stood high above on the catwalk, which the prop team had fashioned to resemble a balcony. Up there under the spotlight, she cast her gaze toward the heavens as if in prayer, her visage so solemnly striking that I could no longer hear a single naysayer in the audience. All of them were cheering for Ushio’s performance at this point.

“But soft—what light through yonder window breaks?” I said, reciting what was probably the line I’d practiced most during rehearsals. “Why, it is Juliet! Shall I go and profess my love to her?”

Ushio looked down at me from on high. Now that we were standing on two completely different levels, I felt no shame in looking her directly in the eye. Throughout the entire first part of this exchange, we traded our lines back and forth, neither of us stuttering or forgetting a single word.

“Should they find you here, your life may well be forfeit,” she said.

“Worry not, my dear Juliet. Night’s cloak shall keep me hidden from their sight.”

Finally, I felt like I was getting back into my usual rhythm. I hoped I’d made up for my pathetic performance during the opening act by this point—not that my acting wasn’t still a bit stiff, but for a high school culture festival, I’d say I deserved a passing grade.

Once the balcony scene was over, it was time for the duo to be married in secret. As Friar Laurence (played by Shiina) stole the scene, I dutifully recited my wedding rites.

“Come what sorrow can—it cannot hope to deprive me of this joy.”

*Not bad.*

From there, Romeo murdered his arch-nemesis Tybalt in a duel, then was forced to flee the city, separating him from Juliet as a result. I looked up to the heavens and cursed the fates for making me fortune's fool.

*We're doing pretty well so far.*

And then at last came the final act, and Romeo's final scene—in which he finds Juliet's inanimate body and mistakes her for dead, then chooses to take his own life with the poison he has on hand rather than live without her. As long as I could get through this last sequence, the story was as good as over. There was a large pedestal in the center of the stage—really just a crude set piece made by covering a teacher's desk with some fabric—upon which Ushio lay, face-up and motionless.

"Oh, what cruelty is this!" I cried, acting utterly dumbfounded as I slowly walked closer, step by fearful step, trying to convey the tragic mixture of denial and disbelief my character was experiencing right now in my performance.

At last, we were almost done.

Granted, it probably hadn't even been twenty minutes since the play began—but for me, those twenty minutes had felt like a centuries-long battle with performance anxiety that had worn me down to the very last of my mental reserves. I wanted to treat myself to something sweet and tasty once this was over. I was pretty sure there was an ice cream stand somewhere at the festival, wasn't there?

...*Wait, no.* I needed to stop getting ahead of myself. I still had a few lines left to perform, after all.

I walked up to the pedestal where Ushio lay and stopped right in front of it, then turned to the audience to deliver a rousing soliloquy full of grief and anger and all of the other emotions Romeo might have felt when forced to confront the death of Juliet.

At least, that had been the plan.

But then I felt a trickle of sweat run down my temple.

I couldn't remember my lines.

My mind was a complete blank. My knees started wobbling as I was overcome by a feeling of drifting powerlessness, like I'd been cast out into the vacuum of space. All I could do was stand there, unable to say a word, as second after agonizing second crept by.

Ushio cracked one eye open where she lay flat atop the pedestal, her gray pupil peeking up at me with concern. Yet the only words that came to mind were things like "Oh man" or "What do I do?!" And as the impatience and frustration grew stronger, I could feel my body growing hotter in turn.

A commotion stirred in the audience as people wondered aloud as to why the play had stopped. I could see Todoroki standing off to the side of the stage in my peripheral vision, waving her hands and body wildly to convey some message to me. But I couldn't glean any sort of meaning from her flailing. My train of thought was still being held up by technical difficulties several stations down the line.

*Oh god. Oh god, oh god, oh god.*

I had to do something, and fast. Otherwise, I'd ruin the whole performance at this rate.

Just then, I felt my sweat-slicked fingers slip across something smooth and glassy. Only then did I remember what I was holding in my right hand—a small glass bottle. A vial of poison my character had bought from the apothecary on his way here.

*Of course. That's it.*

Maybe I didn't *need* to remember my lines. I could just drink this poison and then walk off the stage, convulsing in pain. Sure, it would be a pretty abrupt and unnatural way of ending the play, but from a visual standpoint, it would still be a pretty decent way of conveying how distraught Romeo was at the thought of

Juliet being dead without the need for any words. It was good enough for me, and probably the best I could do right now. This would be how my Romeo met his end. I lifted the bottle to my lips, and—

“Wait!”

I froze in place.

Juliet sat upright from where she lay on the pedestal.

“Don’t just perish without a word, my love,” she said.

Murmurs erupted throughout the audience, with some even raising their voices in abject consternation. And I was right there feeling flabbergasted along with them. This was the scene in which Romeo was supposed to mistake Juliet for dead, then take his own life. For Juliet to regain consciousness and stop him before the poison even touched his lips changed the entire plotline of the story.

Why had she come back to life so soon? Now we had no choice but to—

No, this wasn’t Ushio’s fault. It was mine. She was just improvising to cover for my mistake after I suddenly clammed up. This realization filled me with so much guilt, I thought my heart might burst inside my ribs. Our class performance of *Romeo and Juliet* was officially ruined—and it was all my fault.

“Sweet Romeo, there is no need for you to die here today,” Ushio said, stepping gently down from the pedestal to stand right before me. “Let us away to some distant land where none who know us might see fit to pursue. When the dust of this wretched feud has settled, we can return once again here to Verona. Now, come!”

Her voice was brimming with affection as she reached out her hand. I stood there hesitating a moment, unsure if I could give her my own.

Had I any right to take Ushio’s hand? Me, the guy who’d forced so many of his own selfish feelings upon her under the pretense that he was only trying to be a good friend? My actions had no doubt hurt her more times than I could count, without me even realizing what I had done. But I also knew—right here and now, at least—that by *not* taking her hand, I’d only be creating even more trouble for everyone. More than anything, I didn’t want to let her consideration go to waste. And so I let Ushio take me by the hand, and she effortlessly



interlocked my sweaty fingers with her own, pressing her palm firmly into mine as she led me offstage and we stole away into the wings.

“And so it was that Romeo and Juliet, against all odds, averted the cruel hand of fate, and lived happily ever after,” Todoroki said over the PA, taking over as narrator for this new impromptu ending. As the lights went down and the curtain closed over the stage, there came a few seconds of silence—followed by some paltry, scattered applause.

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“You *idiot!*”

The moment we made it backstage, Todoroki started chewing me out.

“How could you just choke like that in the very last scene? Ugh... And here I was actually planning to *compliment* you on getting your act together during the second half... Not that you weren’t still way too stiff, mind you!”

“Yeah, I know,” I said. “Believe me, I’m really sorry...”

I felt extremely bad, but all I could do was apologize at this point. Especially since I knew Todoroki had put more hard work and passion into making this play a success than anyone, which only made her reproach sting all the more. But after calling me a moron and a dumbass in every way imaginable, she seemed to wear out her capacity for being upset, and she just let out a sigh and shook her head.

“...Well, at least you still gave it your best shot, I guess,” she said. “Good hustle today, Kamiki. We should do this again sometime!”

She flashed me a cheeky grin, then ran off to go around congratulating the other actors. I watched as she slowly made her way out of the backstage area, exchanging high fives and commendations with all of the cast and crew members as she went.

“You seemed pretty rattled out there, Kamiki,” came Mashima’s voice from behind me. I turned around to see her standing there with Shiina like always, a look of playful disdain on her face. “What happened to all that confidence you had back when you stood up to Arisa, huh?”

“...Look, it’s a long story, okay?”

“Yeah, I bet... Well, whatever. It was still pretty fun to watch, I guess.”

Shiina stepped forward with a rather humble expression. “Personally, I...I thought it was fairly well done, actually. Obviously, I’m a little curious how things ended up going so far off the rails... But I liked that final scene quite a bit.”

Her eyes were earnest, so I could tell she wasn’t just saying this to make me feel better. Still, I wasn’t good with flattery, so it made me feel somewhat bashful.

“Th-thanks, that means a lot,” I said. “Though I’m not sure it’s entirely fair for me to take compliments on something that was really just a screwup.”

“Yeah, no kidding,” Mashima butted in. “Anyway, we’ll see ya later!”

As the two girls waved goodbye and headed for the door, I noticed the backstage area slowly growing more and more deserted. There was a pretty big interval of time between now and the next scheduled event, so even the committee members in charge of running the venue had gone off to take a break at the far end of the gym.

“Sakuma,” said a voice—the only one left around who would ever call out to me by name. I was a little bit scared to turn around, but I knew I couldn’t ignore her either.

I took a deep breath in, then turned to look in Ushio’s direction. “Nice work out there, Ushio.”

“That was *horrible*,” she said, brushing me off. “How could you go and make a total mockery of the most climactic scene? Put yourself in *my* shoes, having to just lie there and play dead through that. I’ve never felt more secondhand embarrassment in my life.”

She was offering me some pretty scathing criticism, yet her sharp words belied the look of abject misery painted all across her face. I wasn’t even capable of getting defensive or having my feelings hurt right now. I just felt bad.

“...Sorry.”

“Why did you freeze up like that?” she demanded, her expression quickly doing an about-face from somber to stern.

“Uh...” I wasn’t sure how to reply—or if I should just tell her the truth.

“Is it my fault?” she asked.

No, I almost said, but I held my tongue. I knew that making a half-assed attempt to hide it would earn me nothing except her distrust. And I was feeling way too exhausted to think too hard about anything right now, after we’d only just gotten done with our big performance. I decided to just get it over with so my mind could be at ease, and I started pouring out the feelings that had been slowly building up inside of me like so many layers of emotional sediment.

“...I guess that lately, I’ve just been feeling like no matter what I do, I’m only going to end up hurting you, or at least making things harder for you in the end,” I confessed. “And I’ve also been kind of realizing that maybe I’m just not a very good person deep down... Hell, for all I know, my brain’s probably just looking for a little cheap sympathy right now by telling you all of this, hoping you’ll reassure me that’s not the case... So I guess I’m just wondering if, like... maybe I should stop spending time with you altogether.”

As soon as I was done, Ushio’s face clouded over with melancholy. “That’s a pretty horrible thing to say to my face, you know.”

“Y-yeah, I mean...you’re not wrong. Sorry.”

She was right—it *was* pretty horrible. It was disgusting to think that I was making subconscious little ploys to manipulate her into responding the way I hoped she would. Yet again, I was resorting to self-abasement to distract from the real problem. Yet again, my disgraceful true nature was rearing its ugly head. I was utterly disgusted with myself for having *still* not learned a damn thing.

Now I finally understood where Hoshihara had been coming from. Maybe it really *was* a better idea to just keep my stupid mouth shut and stop trying to be of use to people. At least that way, no one would ever find out what a stupid, thoughtless wretch of a human being I was. Hell, maybe I’d even get lucky and everyone else would just assume I was a decent person with good intentions by default. But actually saying words—now *that* was scary. Especially when every

possible statement you could make brought with it some corresponding amount of risk.

Silence was golden.

Loose lips sank ships.

Least said, soonest mended.

There were so many idioms and proverbs dating back centuries that showed that people had known the virtue of keeping quiet since ancient times. In many cases, it was the best and safest option to protect you and yours. But to speak words, and to actually mean them, was terrifying—because it meant lowering your guard and making yourself vulnerable. And I was sick and tired of hurting other people and being hurt myself.

“Sorry,” I said. “You’re right—I shouldn’t have said anything. I should’ve just kept all of that stuff to myself. It’s like every time I open my mouth, I just end up saying something stupid and hurting someone else... I should just shut up forever before I’m so far gone that I’m totally beyond saving...”

“It doesn’t have to be so all-or-nothing,” Ushio said as if making an emotional appeal. “Sure, sometimes you might say things that are pretty tactless that’ll naturally result in other people getting their feelings hurt... But that doesn’t mean you should just keep your mouth shut forever. I don’t think that, and you definitely shouldn’t either.”

The conviction in her voice tugged at my heartstrings.

“Because I mean...you were also the one who reached out and offered to walk home with me that first day I came to school dressed as a girl, remember?” she went on. “Do you have any idea how happy that made me? Or that day after I first got assigned the part of Juliet—you totally guessed right about me not wanting to do it, and you talked to me about it. That alone made me feel a whole lot better...”

I just stood there, listening to Ushio in silence.

“Sure, maybe you could go your whole life without ever hurting anyone if you never said a word... But that’d be a pretty miserable form of existence, don’t you think? And besides, it’s not like there aren’t ups and downs in every

relationship, right? For every bad time I've had with you, Sakuma, there have been plenty of good times to make up for it... Yes, things have been pretty rough between us these past couple weeks. I'll be the first to admit that I really haven't wanted to spend much time with you lately."

Her bluntness on this gutted me like a knife through my chest.

"But right now, I..."

Her gray irises wavered as tears welled up in the corners of her eyes. She reached up and wiped them away with the back of her hand.

"Right now, I just..."

But her trembling lips couldn't get out another word, and she hung her head.

"...Ugh, forget it. I don't even know what I'm trying to say, or how I feel, or what I want... But please don't say you should just shut up forever. I don't want that, and neither should you."

All of a sudden, my chest went tight. I could feel my diaphragm rise and a lump form in my throat. I understood now why I'd been worrying myself sick to the point of nausea over all of this. It finally made sense—not to my head, but to my heart.

*It was because I wanted to always stand by Ushio's side. I wasn't ready for her not to need me.*

I tried my best to hold back the emotions that surged up inside of me, and I took a deep breath in. Then at last, I found my voice.

"...All right," I said, and Ushio lifted her head. Her ashen eyes bored into mine, but I wouldn't avert my gaze any longer. "Then I want us to keep on talking, Ushio. About anything and everything. And without thinking too hard about it, either—just whatever comes to mind, even if it's the sort of shallow, pointless conversation we'll be sure to forget come tomorrow... I know there'll probably be plenty more times down the line when I'll say or do things that'll only hurt or make things harder for you—but I hope we can talk those moments out whenever they come along, too."

I cast aside all pretense and told Ushio exactly how I felt. She looked a little

taken aback at first, then smiled with a sigh of fond resignation and nodded her head.

“If you’re okay with that, Sakuma, then I am too,” she said. “If I ever start having a bad time again from now on...I’ll be sure to let you know. So yeah—let’s try to keep the conversation going, okay?”

With that, Ushio bashfully scratched her cheek with one finger.

I knew we hadn’t actually solved any underlying issues here, in the end—we’d just passed the buck to our future selves. I was sure there’d be plenty more angst and suffering waiting for the two of us in the long run. But for the time being, she and I were doing just fine. And right now, in this moment, that was all I needed to feel okay.

The door to the backstage area swung open with a loud *bang*.

“Aha! There you are!” said Hoshihara, running over as soon as she spotted us. She’d said she was planning to come and see the play, so I assumed she’d been watching down in the auditorium along with the rest of the audience up until now. “Phew, thank goodness! I was worried you guys had already headed back into the greenroom or something.”

“Hey there,” I said. “What brings you here?”

“Whaddya think, silly?!” She bent forward excitedly. “I’m here to give you guys my impressions, of course! And trust me, there’s a lot I wanna talk about, but first and foremost...”

She paused and clenched her fists for dramatic effect, then belted out:

“God, I’m so glad it was a happy endiiiing!”

Immediately, the committee members who were busy making preparations for the next act on the docket came over to ask what all the commotion was about. I assured them everything was fine to shoo them away before listening to Hoshihara’s gushing review.

“You guys don’t understand—I am *literally* such a baby when it comes to sad endings or bittersweet resolutions! So I was out there thinking ‘Man, this is just

gonna be another tearjerker, isn't it?' But no! Both Romeo and Juliet actually lived this time! I was so not expecting that—it actually got me pretty emotional!”

“Yeah, about that...” I said, smiling sheepishly. “Would you believe me if I said Ushio ad-libbed that whole thing just because I screwed up and forgot my lines?”

“You’re kidding! Whaaat?!” Hoshihara exhaled in marvel at this revelation. “Well, dang. Now I just have a zillion more questions I wanna ask you... But anyway, that aside!”

Hoshihara’s face went serious as she turned to face Ushio, who seemed a little frazzled by this sudden change in demeanor.

“Wh-what’s up?” Ushio asked.

“I’m really glad I got the chance to see you play Juliet, Ushio-chan. You were so gorgeous, and charming, and dazzling up there onstage that it made me wish / could be just like that someday...” Her reverent expression melted into one of pained resignation. “As far as I’m concerned, you’re the best darn Juliet there ever was. Just wanted to let you know that. That’s all.”

Having said her piece, Hoshihara hung her head as if in shame or defeat.

In the end, we never *had* gotten to the bottom of whether Ushio truly enjoyed herself onstage or if she regretted agreeing to play Juliet. If the latter was true, then there was definitely a chance that Hoshihara’s glowing praise might rub Ushio the wrong way. But while Hoshihara knew that, she’d clearly felt compelled to give Ushio her genuine impressions.

Ushio looked a bit uncomfortable for a moment, perhaps feeling she’d been put in an awkward position, then finally mustered a reply.

“Once the festival’s over...”

Hoshihara lifted her head, and Ushio smiled gently.

“...the three of us should all go out and celebrate.”

Hoshihara looked flabbergasted for a moment—but then her eyes turned watery as they started filling up with tears, and she practically pounced on

Ushio.

“Ushio-chaaaaan!” she cried.

“Wh-whoa!” Ushio blurted as Hoshihara buried her forehead in Ushio’s chest and whimpered like a baby.

“Oh, thank goodness... I thought you hated me-hee-heeeee...!” Hoshihara sobbed in relief. Ushio just kind of stood there stunned a moment, before slowly loosening up and placing a hand on top of Hoshihara’s head.

“...I’m really sorry, Natsuki.”

I figured I could take this as a reconciliation.

Obviously, not everything had been addressed, solved, and wrapped up with a neat little bow. But at the very least, I didn’t get the impression that Ushio was going to be actively pushing Hoshihara away anymore. I stood watching them embrace from a short distance away, leaning my back against the wall. I knew there would be other students showing up to make backstage preparations any minute now, but I wasn’t ready to leave just yet. I wanted to stay here, bask in the afterglow just a little bit longer, and cherish this moment while I could, since I knew these feelings probably wouldn’t last forever.

Because make no mistake—this wasn’t over, and it was much too soon to be getting complacent. Even if Hoshihara and I might be satisfied with the way things were now, I knew the feelings of detachment and isolation were probably still lurking in Ushio’s chest, digging their thorns ever deeper into her heart. And I wasn’t about to settle for anything less than a fairy-tale ending where nobody had to suffer and the three of us could laugh from the bottom of our hearts, frolicking together around a winding green hillside to some faraway land where we could all live happily ever after.

Until we could make that dream a reality, I’d keep this dialogue going.





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# *Interlude*



## Interlude

**T**HE SAVORY SCENT of Worcestershire sauce curled its way up my nose. My stomach growled as I caught a mouthwatering whiff from the takoyaki stand nearby, but I knew now wasn't the time. I was on a mission—there was an important conversation to be had. Once that was over, I could buy as much deep-fried junk food as I liked.

I flipped open my cell phone to check the time. It was 4:00 p.m. Just one more hour, and our yearly culture festival would be over. Already, you could tell the mood was dying down as the crowds slowly filtered their way back out the main gate. The food vendors were no longer calling out to lure in potential customers, and the choral club's ensemble performance on the outdoor stage was starting to sound pretty grim as the glare from the setting sun in the western sky grew brighter.

I moved over from where I was sitting to a bench that was still in the shade. The chilly fall air pricked up goosebumps on my exposed legs as I carefully set my butt down on the icy metal. *Mmm, on second thought, maybe sitting in the sunlight would be better after all*, I thought to myself—but just then, Ushio came walking over, so I shot back up and started waving both hands excitedly to greet her. If I had a tail, I figured it'd probably be wagging pretty hard right now too.

"Hey, Natsuki—sorry to keep you waiting," she told me.

"No worries! I just got here myself," I replied. "Sorry for the sudden invite."

Ushio took a seat on the bench, and I sat down too. She'd changed out of her Juliet costume and back into her school uniform, which I was a little bummed about. I'd been hoping I could get a picture of her in it, but our backstage chat hadn't felt like the right time to ask. It wasn't that big a deal anyway, and I liked her just fine in her regular skirt and jacket. Plus, I was pretty sure the faculty had taped all of the stage performances, so I could probably go back and see her in it again if I ever really wanted to.

“You’re not putting off your committee chair work for this or anything, I hope?” said Ushio, tilting her head inquisitively as she turned to look at me.

“Nope! Things are pretty relaxed right now, honestly,” I said. “I mean, obviously I can’t slack off for *too* long, but I’ve totally got time to talk for a bit. Don’t sweat it!”

“Gotcha,” said Ushio, turning to face forward again. I followed her gaze and saw four girls from another class all huddling together to take a group selfie. They were so excited about the festival, they were practically glowing.

Ushio didn’t say another word; she was waiting for me to start the conversation. She didn’t look curious about why I wanted to talk to her or anything, just stared absentmindedly into the distance. I decided to interpret this as her being considerate and wanting to let me broach the subject whenever and however I felt comfortable, because the thought that she just didn’t care was too sad to even consider.

I had to say, though—she really did look beautiful in profile. You could drape a string around her sleeping silhouette and draw the contours on the ground, and that alone would be enough to tell anyone how attractive she was. If I could, I would have just sat there staring forever—but I knew that wouldn’t do. I had to tell her what I’d called her out here to tell her.

I took a deep breath. My heart was pounding like crazy. I clutched the fabric of my skirt and prepared to say the words.

“So listen, um...”

“Uh-huh,” said Ushio.

“I actually...used to really like you, Ushio-chan.”

“...Uh-huh.”

I felt bad for even putting her in this position, but I wanted to believe it was an okay time to bring this up. I mean, it *was* past tense now, after all.

“Sorry,” said Ushio, turning to face me with a pensive expression. “This might sound bad, but...I kind of already knew, to be honest.”

“Yeah, no—I figured you had a clue. I mean, I’m pretty easy to read, so I’m

sure I wasn't being super subtle about it. Ah ha ha..."

I tried to laugh it off to conceal my own embarrassment. I could feel my face growing hotter and hotter. Maybe moving into the shade *had* been the right call; if we were in the sun right now, I'd probably be a sweaty mess.

"So, um, you...*used* to like me?" Ushio asked. I could tell from her wary tone that she didn't really want to probe but felt it was an important distinction.

"Yeah. Oh, but I only mean that in, like...the romantic sense, of course! Because yeah, obviously if we're talking just as friends, I mean...I love you, Ushio-chan."

*Ugh.* Even with the "just as friends" modifier, it felt like such a monumental thing to say "I love you" to another person that I still had a hard time spitting the words out.

"Thanks, Natsuki," Ushio said with a chuckle. "I love you too."

She was also saying this "as a friend," obviously. And while this *was* exactly the response I'd been hoping for, and the sentiment really did make me want to jump up out of my seat with joy, it still hurt just a little bit to hear her say it.

I knew my feelings for her had been stronger than that when she was a boy. I just wasn't sure if I still felt the same way now that she was a girl. But after watching her perform up there onstage, it finally hit me:

Those feelings *were* still there, and I felt them just as strongly. It's just that they were in the past tense now.

"So tell me," I said. "Do you regret playing Juliet after all?"

Ushio leaned back against the bench, and narrowed her eyes as if trying to look at something way out in the distance. "...It's just a really sobering disparity, is the thing."

I nodded to show I was listening.

"When I'm actually *playing* Juliet, and I can express myself and everyone loves me, things are pretty great. Because even though I'm playing a character, I don't have to hide who I am or how I feel. But then once the show is over, and the mask comes off, it's *then* that I feel like I have to put a lid on my heart, and

go back to being someone that I'm not. And I guess it's that transition phase itself that I find so hard. Like jumping straight from a sauna right into an ice-cold swimming pool—I'm just not sure my immune system can take it. So yeah—if there's anything I regret about this whole thing, it's probably that."

I had to admit, some of this explanation went over my head.

But I knew what she meant. I knew all too well.

*So I was right, then.*

When I was watching the play, I remembered actually feeling jealous of Romeo during one of the scenes where Juliet was pouring her heart out to him, so desperate to find the words to express her love. Because that was the moment I realized that someone as sincere and single-minded as her would only ever have eyes for the one they loved—and, simultaneously, that as much as I liked Ushio, those feelings would never be returned. Which was when I knew that they could only be in the past tense.

"Gotcha," I replied. *Glad it wasn't anything worse than that*, I wanted to add, but I couldn't bring myself to say it as I felt the tension drain from my limbs.

Off in the distance, I heard the sound of a girl shrieking—probably from the haunted house one of the senior classes had made for their exhibit. I still thought that thing was *way* too scary to be in a random high school culture festival, honestly; when I went through it to do my inspection, I nearly peed my pants.

Someone in a big, bulky mascot costume walked by carrying a placard that read "FRESH COOKIES NOW ON SALE: MAIN BUILDING, 2ND FLOOR." I still remembered the original pitch document that Class 2-B had submitted for this particular costume, which was designed to look like a tsuba, or barn swallow, after the first two syllables in "Tsubakioka." Unfortunately, we'd had some trouble getting it approved due to the original design looking a bit too similar to some professional baseball team's mascot, so we'd had to make some adjustments that made it look quite honestly less like a swallow and more like a penguin. But I kind of thought it was

cuter that way anyhow.

*Man, I'm gonna miss this.*

Our little culture festival was quickly coming to an end.

"I should probably get going," I said, standing up. There were still things left that I needed to do, like deal with the remaining items in the lost and found and start getting ready for the closing ceremony.

"Okay," said Ushio, standing up as well. "Guess I'll see you later, then."

"Yeah. Still looking forward to our little after-party! See you in a bit!"

I waved goodbye and set off for the main entrance.

"Natsuki," she called after me—and I turned around.

Ushio looked at me with the most earnest eyes I'd ever seen.

"You can do this," she said. "I believe in you, Natsuki."

I could feel a sudden warmth building in the pit of my stomach as I forced my lips into a smile just to stop them from trembling.

"Thanks, yeah!" I said. "I'm gonna give it my all! Just you watch me!"

I swiveled back around and started walking. And then I walked faster. And then I ran right past the takoyaki stand, right past the main entrance, choosing whatever side paths would take me as far away from people as possible. And as I kept on running, I could feel tears streaming down my cheeks. Still, I ran and I ran until I was too winded to run any longer, and I found myself standing all alone in a little clearing behind the empty swimming pool. I took a moment to catch my breath, then wiped my tears off with my sleeves as I turned my head up toward the clouds.

*Oh, wow.*

I never knew an autumn sky could look so sweet.









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