



The Kimono Confessions

Book Three

By Mei Hachimoku
Illustrations by KUKKA

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*The
Mimosa
Confessions*



As long as we're happy right now, that's enough.
Or at least, that's what I kept on telling myself
as I tried my best not to think about the bleak future
that awaited us down the road.
Wherever this kindness was coming from,
it didn't matter to me.
Even if I knew that deep down,
it might just be a form of atonement.





ITSUKU SERA

ARISA NISHIZONO

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The Meltdown

MIMOSA NO KOKUHAKU Vol. 3

by Mei HACHIMOKU

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The Mimosa Confessions

Book Three

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KUKKA

TRANSLATION BY

Evan Ward



Seven Seas Entertainment

Characters

SAKUMA KAMIKI

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

USHIO TSUKINOKI

Sakuma's 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.

FUSUKE NOI

One of Ushio's
old track and field
teammates.

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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Interlude



Interlude

SOMETIME IN EARLY JULY, while the cicadas still buzzed their summer song...

It was broiling hot in the second-floor student counseling office at Tsubakioka High. With no proper air conditioning in the building, and no breeze flowing in through the wide-open window, it fell to the lone, rickety pedestal fan in one corner to keep the whole room cool—and it was doing an awfully poor job of it. In fact, despite its dial being turned to “High,” one might not even be able to tell the fan was displacing air at all if not for the way it blew through the bleached blonde pigtails of the girl sitting nearby with each rotation. The girl was leaning back in her metal folding chair, staring down at the rectangular conference table in front of her with a disgruntled look on her face. Her instructor—a woman by the name of Iyo—sat across from her, staring sternly.

“Come on, Arisa,” said Iyo. “Do you even feel *one iota* of remorse for what you did?”

“Yes, I already *told* you,” said the girl. “Stop making me repeat myself.”

Arisa Nishizono was, put simply, a problem child—always falling asleep in the middle of class and tardy more often than not. Even her dyed hair was a breach of school regulations. But what concerned the teaching faculty most of all was her unapologetically disobedient nature. No amount of lecturing or punishment ever seemed to elicit a genuine admission of fault from her. If anything, it only made her dig her heels in even deeper, until her instructors threw up their hands and gave up on ever getting through to her. She was often let off the hook entirely just because she was a straight A student in spite of her devil-may-care personality.

This time was different.

“Now give me a break already,” said Nishizono. “How much longer are you gonna keep dragging this out?”

“Until you recognize what exactly it was you did wrong,” said Iyo.

“I literally *just* said it was an accident. Didn’t you hear me? Obviously I didn’t *mean* to hit Ushio in the face with my thermos.”

“This isn’t an isolated incident. Your other classmates tell me you’ve been repeatedly harassing her for quite a while now. You really expect me to believe all of that was ‘just an accident’ too?”

Nishizono went silent.

“Hey,” said the guidance counselor standing beside her—a man by the name of Nakaoka—as he glared down at her. “Don’t think you can make it through this by just keeping your mouth shut. This isn’t over until we see some remorse, young lady.”

“You two sure love that word an awful lot,” said Nishizono. “If you want me to show my remorse so bad, why don’t you just make me turn in a written apology or whatever?”

“That’s not the point here.”

“Then what *is*? You want me to say I’m sorry? Okay, I’m so sorry! Wow! I was totally in the wrong, it’ll never happen again! There, happy now?”

“See, that’s exactly the attitude that—”

“Mr. Nakaoka,” Iyo cut in. “It’s fine. I’ll handle this.”

Nakaoka scoffed and turned away as Iyo let out a short sigh.

“Arisa,” she said. “Could you at least *try* to explain to me what you’re so vehemently opposed to here? Just what is it that you refuse to accept about this situation?”

“All of it.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I mean the whole thing. Ushio, and the way everyone’s acting all supportive, and how the school’s not doing anything about it. It’s all so stupid and performative.”

“So you disagree, and you think that entitles you to lash out and get violent?”

“Yeah, what’s wrong with that?”

“Arisa, please. You can’t seriously believe that’s okay.”

Nishizono’s lips curled into a self-righteous smirk. “And what if I say I do, huh?”

You gonna expel me or something?"

Iyo narrowed her eyes in disappointment at this provocation. "No, I'm afraid it won't be that simple," she said, rising from her seat. She signaled Nakaoka with her eyes, then looked back at Nishizono. "For now, I'm just going to call your mother to come pick you up from school. We'll determine what your ultimate punishment will be from there. Is that clear and understood?"

"Do whatever you want," said Nishizono. "Doesn't matter to me."

Iyo promptly walked out of the student counseling office.

Nakaoka checked the pack of cigarettes in his pants pocket. "I'll be back in ten minutes. Behave yourself until then."

He strode out of the student counseling office, same as Iyo.

This left Nishizono alone in the room, accompanied only by the low hum of the electric fan and the shrill chirping of cicadas outside. A humid breeze blew in through the window, and a trickle of sweat ran down her temple.

"God, it's hot in here..."

Nishizono rose from her seat and walked over to the corner of the room to stop the fan from oscillating so it would only blow air in her direction. But on her way there, her eyes happened to land upon a steel-framed book rack standing against the wall. Its uppermost row contained various self-help guides, plus pedagogical publications on a variety of topics. Words like "puberty," "diversity," "communication," "psychology," and "discrimination" adorned their spines.

Nishizono plucked a random volume off the rack and started flipping through its pages. But after skimming it for all of about ten seconds, she closed the book and took it with her over to the open window. She stood with her waist perpendicular to the windowsill and her legs slightly spread out—then, clutching a corner of the book tightly between her right thumb and forefinger, she threw it as hard as she could out the window.

The book carved a parabolic arc as it hurtled through the sky, its covers opening and closing as its pages flapped frenetically like a pigeon that had forgotten how to fly. Nishizono leaned out the window to watch as it hit the dirt

in the schoolyard below, then—without the slightest hint of amusement or satisfaction in her expression—walked right back over and resumed her seat. Leaning all of her weight against the backrest, she kicked her legs up onto the table and rocked back and forth in her folding chair as though it was a cushioned recliner. The sound of its metal frame creaking with every tilt joined the cries of the cicadas and the hum of the fan.

Until one of the faculty members returned to the student counseling office, Nishizono just sat there in her chair—creaking, creaking.

CHAPTER FIVE

Score to Settle



Chapter Five: Score to Settle

THREE WEEKS HAD PASSED since the school culture festival.

Summer's lingering heat had now fully subsided, and the cold was beginning to deepen as autumn fully settled in. It was the beginning of November, which meant it was time for Tsubakioka High's annual sports festival—an interclass athletic tournament encompassing a variety of different sports, all in the course of a single day.

The other boys from Class 2-A and I had already been eliminated in one of the earlier rounds and had since dispersed in groups of twos and threes to spectate the other ongoing matches. I was in the gymnasium, where two events were being held simultaneously: volleyball on the northern half of the court and basketball on the southern half. I was on the sidelines of the former, leaning my back against the wall as I watched the intense volleyball match going on between the girls of Class A and Class D.

There was a resounding *thunk* as the ball bounded off the shiny waxed floors after a beautiful spike. Class D had just scored another point. They'd already won one set, and the tournament rules were that the first to two advanced to the next round, so Class A would have to pick up a lot of ground to avoid being eliminated.

"Yeah, they're totally gonna lose," said Hasumi beside me. He'd been watching the match pretty attentively—albeit through half-lidded eyes—but now he let out a yawn that told me he'd essentially lost all interest.

"Come on, we don't know that yet," I replied. "Stop being so pessimistic and show some support."

"Hey, I don't see *you* cheering them on all that hard either, Kamiki."

"I totally am. Just not audibly."

"Uh-huh... Whatever you say, pal."

He didn't believe me one bit. But it was true; I really *was* rooting for them in my head. Which I supposed might not technically qualify as "cheering them on" in the traditional sense, but what could I say? I just wasn't the hooting and hollering type.

"Hell, just look at Hoshihara," I said. "She's working her butt off out there."

I fixed my gaze on a girl with her hair tied off on either side. They swayed back and forth like two wagging dog tails as she ran eagerly around the court like an excited puppy, trying to keep the ball from touching the floor. She was Natsuki Hoshihara—and despite her best efforts, she was apparently not very good at volleyball. The moment she finally bumped the ball upward, it went flying off way out-of-bounds.

"I mean, she's definitely trying, I guess," said Hasumi. "Not sure she's actually *contributing* much, though."

"Sure she is," I said. "Just having her out on the court is a huge morale boost to all the other team members."

"I dunno about that, dude."

"Well, *I* do," I insisted—right as Class D scored yet another point.

Hoshihara stopped in the middle of the court and hunched over, placing her hands on her knees. She seemed a bit tuckered out. After only a few moments' rest, she stood up straight again, and we made eye contact. She flashed me a silly, sheepish grin, and I couldn't help but smile back. Right after this brief bit of nonverbal communication was done, she trained her eyes back on the opposite side of the court, ready for the next serve. As euphoria steadily spread throughout my chest, I let out a sigh despite myself.

"Man," I said. "I dunno how one girl can possibly be so cute..."

"Bro, you like that girl so much, it's not even funny," said Hasumi.

"Huh?!" My heart shrank in shock, like I'd just gotten a bucket of icy water dumped over my head. "Wh-what are you talking about?! I n-n-n-never said I *liked* her!"

"Don't even try to deny it, dude. You're not fooling anyone. Not after all this

time.”

“Who said I was trying to fool anyone?” I shot back. “Wait. What do you mean, ‘after all this time’?”

“I mean I’ve known for a while now that you’ve got the hots for her.”

“What? You’re kidding, right?”

“Not sure how you could possibly think it was a secret, my man. No offense, but you’re not exactly slick.”

There was a hint of exasperated disappointment in Hasumi’s voice as he said this. Apparently, I hadn’t been as subtle in concealing my feelings for Hoshihara as I thought I had—and now I felt awfully stupid for ever letting myself think Hasumi wouldn’t pick up on it. That being said, why did he feel the need to call me out on it *now*, of all times?

Man... Et tu, Hasumi?

“Since when?” I asked.

“Hm? Since when have I known, you mean? Prolly since before summer vacation or so, if I had to say. Wasn’t *sure*-sure until you volunteered yourself to be on the festival committee with her, though. Think just about anyone would be able to tell from something as blatant as *that*.”

“Aw, man... You really think so?”

I didn’t want to believe it, but on further reflection, maybe he was right. That was more than two months ago now, so I couldn’t vividly remember how people reacted, but my classmates probably found it awfully peculiar that a diffident guy like me would raise his hand to fill a role like that—and only *after* Hoshihara had already volunteered herself for the female slot, no less. The ulterior motives were...legible.

“You’re tellin’ me no one’s ever pointed it out to you before?” said Hasumi. “Like, ‘Hey, Kamiki. Seems like you’ve got a thing for Hoshihara,’ or anything like that?”

“I mean...” *No*, I wanted to say—but sadly, I could think of at least a couple of instances. “Yeah, maybe once or twice.”

“See, told ya so.” He said this like it was the biggest no-brainer in the world.

Now I was starting to feel a little bit nervous. “W-wait. You don’t think Hoshihara *herself* already knows, do you?”

“Hell if I know. Why don’t you go ask her, if you’re so curious?”

“Uh, because then she’ll *definitely* know I like her, maybe?!”

This retort came out much louder than I expected. I shut my trap in a fluster and did a quick scan of the immediate vicinity. Thankfully, all of the girls appeared to be too focused on the volleyball match to have heard it, and none of the other spectators nearby seemed to be paying us any attention either. I let out a sigh of relief.

“Okay, look,” I said, lowering my voice. “Just help me think this through, all right?”

“Think *what* through?”

“Like, I dunno... What I should do if she does know, for example...”

“Think that’s something only you can figure out for yourself, bud... Besides, I wouldn’t sweat it. She’s probably totally oblivious, honestly. Doesn’t seem like the sharpest tool in the shed, if you catch my drift.”

“Hey. Don’t insult Hoshihara, you hear me?”

“Ugh... Whaddya want from me, man? You’re the one who asked my opinion,” said Hasumi, sounding utterly fed up with this subject despite me trying to earnestly engage. “Look, just don’t ask for my advice on this sort of thing, okay? Find someone else who’ll lend you an ear.”

“All right, fine.”

Even the most fascinated yet emotionally detached people-watcher I knew couldn’t care less about romantic gossip. It wasn’t like I had any intention of getting him deeply involved in my personal drama to begin with, so I was ready to just leave it at that. Almost.

“I do wanna make one thing clear,” I said. “Just because I admitted to liking her, that doesn’t necessarily mean I have any romantic intentions or anything like that. Love comes in many different forms, y’know? Some of which are more

platonic.”

“Uhhh, so, like...is this your roundabout way of saying you only ‘like’ her as a friend or somethin’?” asked Hasumi.

“No, it’s not that... Well, I guess maybe that’s not *too* far off the mark, but... Ugh, dammit. Sorry, I can’t explain it very well, so let’s just drop the subject, already.”

“*You’re* the one who kept going with it, bro...”

He was so right that I had no comeback.

Really, though, it felt like I was becoming less and less sure of how I felt about Hoshihara. The more time I spent around her, the more it felt like my feelings for her were beginning to shift into something different from my original starry-eyed crush.

Yes, I still liked her, obviously. But it also felt like if I pursued those feelings to their logical conclusion, I’d end up losing something more important in the end, whether it ultimately worked out or not. It was a strangely intrusive thought that had been occupying my mind more often than I cared to admit.

“Nice one, Marine-chan!”

I set my conflicted thoughts aside for a moment and gazed over at the southern court, where another group of Class A girls were currently engaged in a basketball game—and actually wiping the floor with the competition, unlike Hoshihara’s team.

“Woo-hoo! How do ya like *that*, huh?!” said a girl with tanned skin and an overall tomboyish vibe as she threw up a victorious peace sign. This was Rin Mashima (aka Marine), who I assumed had just made a basket. As I recalled, she was a member of the school softball team—and their captain, no less—so it didn’t surprise me that she was a more versatile athlete.

Mashima and I had first been introduced by Hoshihara, who’d brought her in to help me study for final exams at the end of last semester, and now the two of us were close enough that we talked on rare occasion. That said, it was usually just her teasing or grilling me, so I wouldn’t call us good friends or anything. But for a social outcast like me, I considered it a pretty big win just to

have reached the point where I could converse with more “popular” girls like her in any capacity whatsoever.

“Hey, Shiina!” Mashima called out. “Didja see that?!”

“Sure did,” said a long-haired girl on the sidelines. “You’re on fire today, Marine.”

“I know, right? Maybe I should try out for the basketball team too!”

“Okay, let’s not get *too* carried away, now.”

This other girl—the one with the long, silky black hair—was Toka Shiina. By now, I was more than familiar with this usual rapport of theirs, in which Mashima would make some bold or outlandish statement, only to be brought back down to earth by Shiina’s deadpan replies. The two of them were virtually inseparable, though I had to admit I found Mashima a lot easier to get along with than Shiina with her fastidious nature and (occasionally) forceful personality.

“Man, those two sure are good friends,” said Hasumi.

“Yeah,” I said. “Known each other since they were little kids, I hear.”

“Oh, well, that explains it. Must be a ton of lore there, in that case.”

“*Lore*? The hell are you talking about?”

Hasumi sure did use some colorful turns of phrase.

“So hey,” he said. “Speaking of childhood friends, when’s *yours* gonna get to play?”

“Oh, you mean Ushio? Yeah, good question...”

I looked back over at the volleyball match, where they just so happened to be subbing in someone new for Hoshihara, who was shaking both her hands wildly as she walked off the court. I assumed she’d hurt them receiving the ball or something, but luckily there were several other girls seated in folding chairs on the sidelines, ready and raring to go. And among them was my aforementioned friend.

“Hey, Ushio-chan!” said Hoshihara. “Think you can take it from here?”

“Sure thing,” replied Ushio, rising from her seat. “Just leave it to me.”

With her almost translucent pale skin and silver hair like silken thread, she had by far the most eye-catching appearance out of anyone in the gym—yet she also gave off a sort of ephemeral impression, like a phantom or apparition that might disappear if you so much as accidentally brushed up against her. Ushio Tsukinoki stepped onto the court. I gulped.

“Finally her time to shine, huh?”

All of the Class D girls on the opposing side set their eyes on her as she joined the match. The reactions to this development varied from person-to-person, with some of them looking slightly surprised, others more inquisitive or brimming with excitement. And I could only imagine the trepidation still others might feel, as even I still wasn’t entirely sure of the best choice of words to describe Ushio’s current circumstances. Only one thing was for certain: until spring semester of this year, “she” had been a “he”—at least as far as her public persona was concerned—but she’d now transitioned completely to living her life as a girl.

The match reconvened, and Class D served the ball. One of the girls on our side received it and sent it over the net, where it was quickly bumped, set, and then spiked back over to immediately score another quick point. This had been the other team’s (simple but admittedly effective) strategy all throughout the game, and it had been the same girl spiking the ball the entire time. I assumed she might even be a member of the school volleyball team, which made her a distinct advantage that Class A simply didn’t have on our side. But what we *did* have now was Ushio.

“Come on, everybody! We can still turn this around!” said Ushio, trying to light a fire under her despondent teammates. They had all but given up by this point and were in desperate need of a morale boost.

The other team served the ball again. The Class A girl closest to the net bumped it before it hit the ground, and Ushio made a run for it. Just as the ball was at the peak of its arc and about to come down, she leapt off the ground and then—bending backward in midair like a bow—spiked it back across the net with a loud *thwack*. The ball soared through the air, making a beeline toward a

corner of the opposite side of the court, hitting the floor well within bounds and seconds before any of the other team's players possibly could have dived to save it. I was pretty sure this was the first point Class A had actually earned this entire game outside of technicality points they'd been given for errors made by the opposing team.

"Wow, that was incredible, Ushio-chan! Way to go!" Hoshihara cried out from the sidelines as she loudly clapped her hands in support. Ushio's teammates also turned to give her props for a play well made, and she accepted the praise and fist bumps, albeit with a hint of bashfulness reddening her cheeks.

"Damn," said Hasumi, impressed. "Tsukinoki's one hell of an athlete."

"Yeah, you can say that again," I mumbled as I looked over at Class D's side of the court. For their part, they were all shouting out reciprocal reassurances at one another, insisting they still had the match in the bag. Some of the girls did seem a bit peeved about how perfectly unpreventable that last point had been, but none of them seemed to be side-eying Ushio specifically or anything like that. She'd been fully accepted by this point.

It had been about a month now since Ushio started participating as one of the girls during gym class. Ms. Iyo had given her more than a little encouragement, promising her it'd be much less boring than sitting out a whole period every day.

At first, Ushio flat-out refused—presumably because she felt obliged to, for fear that she might be accused of playing with a physical advantage compared to the other girls. But after Hoshihara and I repeatedly assured her it would be totally fine, she begrudgingly agreed to take part in our daily gym activities and exercises.



Just as we'd told her, there was no real trouble or drama worth mentioning. Most of the girls in Class A had already come to accept Ushio as a girl anyway, so it wasn't long before she fell right back into her groove and let her natural athletic ability shine through once more. She seemed to be enjoying gym class quite a bit now—which made me sad when I considered that she'd probably been wanting to participate this whole time. Not that I couldn't understand her hesitation, given the circumstances.

I looked back over to Class A's side of the court. The tides were definitely turning now that Ushio had entered the fray. She was making some pretty clutch saves, as well as a few more spikes here and there. Over time, the other girls on the team seemed to finally find their grooves, and they started putting points on the board as well. Slowly but surely, the massive gap between Class A's score and Class D's narrowed, until a comeback didn't just seem possible—it seemed inevitable. But just as I let myself get my hopes up, there came a double-tweet from the referee's whistle, and I could see the tension instantly drain from Ushio's shoulders. The other players crowded around her to thank her for her efforts as she strode off the court with her head held high, and Hoshihara shot up to her feet from the floor where she'd been resting.

"Nice work, Ushio-chan!" she said as they walked past each other and exchanged a high five. "I'll take it from here!"

"Thanks, Natsuki," said Ushio. "Counting on you."

The match wasn't over yet; Ushio had simply reached her max allotted play time. This was one of the (extremely slapdash) handicaps that had been hastily placed on Ushio's participation in today's tournament in an attempt by the faculty to ensure no one had any grounds to complain that the Class A girls had an unfair advantage in any of the team-based events. They'd put similar restrictions on her ability to take part in contact sports for comfort reasons, as well as track and field events where some might argue she was at a natural advantage due to her build and muscle mass. This was definitely overkill as far as I was concerned, but Ushio seemed willing to accept these terms, and I hadn't heard any of the other girls kicking up a fuss about anything, so perhaps it was none of my business. Not to mention, while she'd been accepted by her fellow Class A girls for some time now, today was the first time she'd had a

chance to compete with girls from other classes. It was nice to see that things had gone over pretty smoothly.

“Phew, thank goodness...” I said, letting out a sigh of relief.

“Don’t get ahead of yourself, bud,” Hasumi cut in. “They’re not in the lead yet.”

“Oh, no. I really don’t care who wins or loses.”

“Thought you said you were rooting for ‘em?”

“I am. But that’s not why I said ‘thank goodness.’”

“Oh yeah? Then why’d you say it?”

“Just the whole Ushio situation. With this being an interclass tournament and everything, I figured all the other classes’ motivations would be running pretty high, since everyone’s obviously gunning for first place.”

“Uh, yeah? And what does that have to do with Ushio, exactly?”

“Well, this is her first time participating on the girls’ side of things, so I figured at least *someone* would come forward and call that unfair or foul play or what have you. And if that snowballed into more vocal prejudice or discrimination against Ushio all over again, well...” I shuddered at the thought. “Yeah, it just wouldn’t have been a pretty sight after how much progress she’s made. But as of right now, no one’s challenged her involvement, which is a huge relief. Hence me going ‘thank goodness.’”

“Dude. Are you here to support her or to chaperone?” Hasumi was really on point with the cutting retorts today.

“Yeah, I know,” I replied. “You think I’m being too much of a worrywart. I hear you...”

I wasn’t *completely* oblivious to my own shortcomings. He was right. I was supposed to be Ushio’s friend, not her helicopter parent. Still, I couldn’t help worrying about how she was feeling and how her peers were treating her. I’d imagine all sorts of what-if scenarios, then stress myself out about them to the benefit of no one at all. I was an overthinker by nature, plain and simple—but *especially* when it came to Ushio.

“And I get that me worrying about her isn’t going to change anything,” I went on. “But I just can’t help it, y’know? I didn’t even realize how bad it was until the culture festival, but I’m pretty sure there’s no curing some of these more obsessive tendencies. Like, I think they must be terminal. Gonna be the death of me one of these days.”

“Sounds rough, bro,” said Hasumi.

“It is, believe me. At the very least, I’ve stopped letting myself spiral in solitude lately. Been trying more and more to at least talk things out when something’s bothering me, which I think has helped a lot. You know, ‘communication is key’ and all that.”

“Ya don’t say... Heh. Well, fair enough. Better than suffering in silence, at least. Even if that *was* kinda cringe.”

“You could have just not said that last part, y’know.”

“Also, guarantee you’re gonna say something you’ll seriously regret one of these days if you just let yourself voice every little thought that pops into your mind.”

“Okay, knock it off! You’re gonna make me start bottling everything up again at this rate...”

Just then, the whistle blew, and the volleyball match was over. Class A had lost the game. As soon as Ushio got subbed back out, they’d immediately started getting trounced again. It was a fairly predictable result—if anything, I was impressed they’d lasted as long as they had against a class with multiple members of the school volleyball team. And it seemed the Class A girls felt more or less the same, as none of them seemed particularly distraught by the loss as they walked up to the net to bow to the other team. And with that, Class A was officially eliminated from the girls’ volleyball competition.

The girls all moved as a single unit off to the sidelines and started chatting among themselves, discussing whether they should go do karaoke or get food together after school to celebrate (losing, apparently). Ushio and Hoshihara were among them. In fact, Ushio even seemed to be the center of attention, probably due to her stellar performance out on the court just now.

She'd become quite popular with the other girls as of late. Not that she hadn't always been, of course—but there were obviously more romantic undertones to the sorts of attention she got from them back before she transitioned, whereas now she seemed to be accepted as an ordinary member of the gang like any other girl. I assumed that her having pretty feminine facial features to begin with didn't hurt, but she'd always seemed to get along better with girls, to be fair. This was probably also why she appeared to have more trouble finding a comfortable rapport with her old guy friends again. From where I was standing, she seemed to be making pretty great strides in that regard lately too. By all accounts, it was surely only a matter of time before she'd reclaim her spot as one of the most popular kids in class.

I nonchalantly slid my gaze over from Ushio to the adjacent court, where a basketball game was currently underway. As with the volleyball match, several students were seated on the sidelines in folding chairs, waiting to be subbed in. Just as I suspected, one of these reserve players had her sights locked firmly on Ushio and was all but scowling at her with an ominous, reproachful gaze.

Yes, Ushio *was* getting along better with the other girls, for the most part. But not all of them. There was still one girl in Class A who outright refused to accept Ushio's newfound identity—and her name was Arisa Nishizono.

With her small frame and massive pigtails, her cutesy appearance belied her true ferocious nature. She had an extremely huge ego and was an almost pathological sore loser. After getting suspended back in July, she'd definitely dialed back her more vocal harassment, but she still rejected the new Ushio and everything her transition stood for. And unless she had some miraculous change of heart, I couldn't imagine the two of them ever getting along again like they once had—but maybe that was okay. Some people were simply incompatible. Better to let them keep their distance and go about their own lives in peace rather than risk any friction by trying to force a friendship.

I averted my gaze from Nishizono and looked back at the volleyball court, where the championship match between two of the other classes had just begun.

In the end, the Class A girls were eliminated from the basketball tournament during the semifinals, and that was the furthest our class got in any of the day's events. After a brief closing ceremony to finish out the annual sports festival, all of the students quickly filed out of the gymnasium. It was already past four o'clock, and there were no classes left to attend today. All we had to do now was grab our stuff and go home.

The other boys in Class 2-A and I headed back to the classroom to get changed, and the girls came up to join us from their locker room shortly thereafter. It had gotten pretty chilly outside in recent weeks, so everyone had already made the switch to their long-sleeved winter uniforms, with some students even opting to wear hoodies beneath their blazers. As my fellow classmates made idle chitchat and packed up their things to head home, I looked over at Ushio to see that she was currently engaged in conversation with Hoshihara. The two of them seemed to be making plans of some sort. Curious, I strained my ears and briefly tried to listen in.

"So," said Hoshihara, "which would *you* prefer, Ushio-chan: McDonald's or Joyfull?"

"Mmm..." Ushio thought it over. "I guess if we've got a pretty big group of people, then maybe Joyfull makes more sense?"

"Ooh, good point! Okay, let's do that, then. I'll let the other girls know."

"Sounds good, thanks."

Hoshihara trotted off and went around the classroom telling the other girls about these impromptu plans. It seemed they really *were* planning to go out to eat to celebrate the end of the sports festival. But it was clearly meant to be an all-girls thing, and I certainly didn't want to impose, so it appeared I'd be walking home alone today. I got up from my desk and slung my bookbag over my shoulder—but just as I was about to leave, a tall boy with an athletic build poked his head in through the classroom door.

"Hey," he said. "Is Ushio in here?"

I nearly let out an audible *Ack*.

This was Fusuke Noi—an old track and field teammate of Ushio's. Despite his

sportsmanlike appearance, I had a distinctly negative impression of the guy and his character. I still remembered him coming up and trying to intimidate me for being Ushio's friend at the first meeting of the culture festival committee. He was one of the only people I knew in the school, aside from Nishizono, who still clung to calling Ushio by male pronouns and refused to accept her new identity.

"Can I help you?" Ushio said sourly, remaining seated in her chair. Taking this as permission to enter the classroom, Noi waltzed right up to her desk.

"Wanna talk to you about something. C'mere for a sec."

"Sorry, no way!" said Hoshihara, butting in to refuse on Ushio's behalf.

"We're all going out to eat together right now, so I'm afraid it'll have to wait!"

I suddenly recalled that it had been Hoshihara who stepped in to break things up when Noi got up in *my* business as well. Being a full head shorter than him, I remembered her looking like she was shaking in her boots back then, but right now she seemed fully confident in her ability to stand up to him. It just went to show how much she'd grown from the experience of volunteering herself as festival committee chair.

"Won't take long," said Noi. "Few minutes, tops. I've got practice right after this too."

"Well, if it's so urgent, then I guess you can talk to her about it right here in the classroom, can't you?" said Natsuki.

"Look, it's personal, all right? Don't want any randos listening in."

"Okay, fine. Then I'm coming too."

"Uh, did you not hear what I just said?"

"Oh, I heard you. But I'm not just a 'rando'—I'm Ushio-chan's friend. Which means it's up to me to look out for her," said Natsuki, her brow wrinkling.

"Especially if there's a chance you might try to rough her up or something."

Noi's cheek twitched as he clicked his tongue, and the air in the classroom was electrified with tension. The worst part was that it wasn't even that hard to imagine him trying to "rough her up," as he'd barged into class and grabbed Ushio by the collar the very first day she came to school in a skirt... Which was

probably the exact moment that Hoshihara was referencing as well, now that I thought about it. I didn't think anyone in Class A who'd been there that day would have forgotten that incident.

"Oh, gimme a break," said Noi, scratching his close-shorn head of hair in frustration. "What kinda person do you think I am?"

"I mean..."

"Actually, scratch that—I don't care. All I know is you're getting on my nerves, so I suggest you back off and just let me talk to Ushio. I told you, it'll only take a sec."

Hoshihara bit her lip and shrank back at the restrained snarl in his voice.

This son of a... Where the hell does he get off?

Just as I was about to set my bookbag down and lend her my aid, Ushio stepped in.

"Sorry, Fusuke," she said. "But if Natsuki can't come along, then I'm not going either."

She unaffectedly informed him of these terms like an ultimatum. In stark contrast to Noi's irritable demeanor, Ushio seemed cool as a cucumber—but there was a glint of cutting precision in her eyes that suggested a quiet rage simmering beneath. She just glared at him in silence, and all the after-school hubbub of the classroom fell quiet. Our chatting classmates had pressed pause on their conversations and turned to see what might transpire. In the end, Noi simply clicked his tongue with chagrin.

"Fine," he said to Hoshihara, then turned and plodded slowly out of the classroom. "Come on already."

Hoshihara turned to the girl next to her and gave a few last instructions regarding their evening plans, then trotted out the door with Ushio. The classroom quickly buzzed with conversation once more, with more than a few students speculating as to what might be going on between the three of them. As for me, I stood there like an idiot for a little while before snapping back to my senses and rushing out into the hall.

“H-hey, wait up!” I called after them.

Noi turned to look back, his expression stern and dubious.

“I’m coming too,” I said.

“Uh, what? Why?” said Noi. “And who the hell even *are* you, kid?”

“Oh, please. Like you don’t remember me. Especially after that time you came up and tried to spook me at that one festival committee meeting.”

“Sorry, don’t have room in my brain to keep track of losers like you.”

Oh, so you do remember me, then, I nearly said, but I held my tongue. I knew that Ushio and Hoshihara had plans after this, so I didn’t want to waste their time by bickering with him.

“I know there’s bad blood between you and Ushio,” I said. “So I figured I’d better come along just in case, well...you know.”

“No, I *don’t* know,” said Noi. “What are you tryin’ to say?”

“I’m trying to say that, uh...”

Most of all, I was just curious to hear what Noi had to say—but I couldn’t very well say that, or I’d sound no better or more involved than your average rubbernecker. I needed to come up with at least some sort of reasonable justification for being here.

I could always go with the one Hoshihara had cited: that there was a risk of him trying to “rough Ushio up,” and I wanted to make sure she had enough backup—which actually sounded like a pretty good excuse, now that I thought about it. But it also kind of made it sound like I didn’t think Hoshihara could monitor the situation alone, so maybe something more oblique and indirect would be preferable... *Actually, no. Forget it.*

“You know what I mean,” I said. “I shouldn’t have to spell it out for you.”

When in doubt, just keep it vague, I figured.

Noi wasn’t having it. “No, I really don’t. Are you just screwing with me or something? I’m trying to have a serious conversation here. If you’re just looking for drama, then you can get lost.”

“No, I’m not looking for drama,” I said.

“Then why the hell are you here? If you can’t even give me one good reason, then buzz off, all right? Did you not hear me say I’ve got practice after this? If you don’t stop wasting my time trying to interfere, I swear to god, I’ll beat your ass.”

Damn. He was being a bit of an overbearing jerk about it, but there was nothing technically wrong with what he was saying. That, and I knew Ushio and Hoshihara had dinner plans afterward. I needed to find a way to turn this around before... *Wait. Why am I suddenly starting to feel like I really am only here for the drama? Maybe I really should just buzz off and let them sort things out.* But as I stood there waffling back and forth, Ushio let out a disappointed sigh and threw me a lifeline.

“Don’t worry about Sakuma,” she said. “He can come too. It’s fine.”

I greatly appreciated her vouching for me (even if it *did* make me feel a little pathetic). I looked at Noi with my head held high and let out a little scoff. “Heh. See? Even Ushio says I’m allowed.”

“Why are you acting like that’s some huge win? Man, you’re annoying...” Noi said, then looked at Ushio. “Come on. There can’t seriously be a good reason for *this* chump to come along, can there?”

“Not really, no,” said Ushio. “But I’d feel more comfortable talking with him around.”

“Huh? The hell’s *that* supposed to mean?” said Noi, scrunching up his face in irritation. Nevertheless, it seemed he wasn’t planning to fight back any further. He simply looked at me and said, “Fine. But you’d better keep your mouth shut, got it?”

With that, Noi turned and walked down the corridor, and the three of us followed after him. As we walked, I leaned over to whisper in Ushio’s ear.

“Thanks,” I said. “I owe you one.”

“Next time, try to think a little harder before you open your mouth.”

“Urk... Yeah, sorry about that...”

As I repented for my sins, Hoshihara peered over Ushio's other shoulder. "Well, / for one am gonna feel better having you around, Kamiki-kun," she said.

"Wait, for real? Dang, you're gonna make me blush..."

"Yeah! I mean, three against one's always safer than two, y'know?"

"For sure. There's definitely strength in numbers. Worse comes to worst, I'm sure the three of us could totally kick his ass."

"Yeah. If he tries anything funny, we'll beat him to a pulp."

"Hey! I can *hear* you, ya know!" Noi shouted, whirling around with a menacing glare. This was the expected reaction, of course, as we'd said those last bits plenty loud enough to reach his ears. We all knew he couldn't really do anything to us here in broad daylight, with so many other students still in the building after school.

We proceeded down the stairwell, through the corridor, and out into the center of the school's enclosed inner courtyard. While a popular spot during lunch, the place was totally empty right now, and understandably so. It was quite dark, as it was surrounded by buildings on all sides, so there wasn't much light unless the sun was directly overhead. On top of that, it was pretty chilly out. Noi had evidently deemed this a secluded enough location for whatever this private conversation would be about.

"So," said Ushio. "What was it you wanted to talk about?"

Noi turned and looked at Ushio with a serious expression on his face. "Well, I'm guessing you already know, but we made it into the prefectural preliminaries for the men's long-distance relay."

"Yeah, I heard during the last assembly. Congrats."

"It's our first time qualifying in nine years. Elimination round starts next month. Everyone on the team's feeling pretty fired up, and they all think we might actually be able to take the top spot if we just work hard enough."

"That's good to hear."

"But me—I want someone faster on our side," said Noi. Ushio narrowed her eyes. "Right now, we've got Nagase on board for the prelims, but... Well, no

offense to him, but he's definitely the weakest link. He knows it too. Been pushing himself extra hard to improve lately, but his times aren't getting that much lower."

"And what does that have to do with me?"

"What, you still don't get it?"

I already knew exactly where he was going with this—and Hoshihara probably did too. But if anyone could have seen this coming from a mile away, it was Ushio. Yet she played dumb, waiting for Noi to say the words himself. And sure enough, he grew fed up with waiting and obliged.

"I want you back," said Noi. "On the boys' track team."

Yep. Had a feeling. Apparently, this had been Ushio's guess as well; she gave him the most melancholy look I'd ever seen without even a moment's surprise.

"Sorry, I can't do that," she said.

"Sure you can," said Noi. "I mean, yeah, you're gonna be a little rusty, but you've got more raw, natural talent than anyone I know. A couple weeks of practice, and I'm sure you'll be back on your game and ready to run with the best of us."

"It's not about whether I'm physically capable."

"Oh, don't worry. You can still race even if your name's not on the entry form. Long as you're a student of Tsubakioka High, they don't give a rat's ass who runs."

"It's not that either."

"If it's a confidence thing, I'm happy to practice with you one-on-one."

"Fusuke," Ushio said as if rebuking him. "I can't *be* on the boys' track team anymore."

Finally, the optimism in Noi's expression clouded over. "And why the hell not, huh? Not like you got injured or anything. You've got the talent *and* the experience to go to regionals... It'd be a total waste not to."

A waste. Unfortunately, this was a thought I remembered having about

Ushio's newfound lifestyle too, back when she first transitioned. At the time, I couldn't comprehend why someone so gifted and popular would throw it all away and choose a way of life that made so many things so much harder for her. Now I understood that for her, it wasn't a matter of "choosing" which was easier or harder, nor was it based on whether it benefited her. It was a matter of identity, and Noi clearly didn't get that.

That said, there was something else about this that felt peculiar to me.

"Um... Sorry, can I ask a question?" I said, and Noi glared daggers at me.

Yeesh! Though, in fairness, he *had* told me to keep my mouth shut.

"So, I don't know if I'm just remembering wrong, but...weren't you a *short-distance* runner, Ushio?"

I was pretty positive that was her specialty up through junior high, at the very least. They'd always announce her accolades during school assemblies, so I remembered it well. And I was fairly certain a short-distance runner wouldn't take part in a long-distance relay.

"Man, you tagged along for this and you don't even know *that* much?" said Noi, bristling even more. It felt like I was literally incapable of inspiring any emotion in him other than anger—and I wasn't even *trying* to be combative this time.

"Ushio-chan switched over to being a long-distance runner as of last summer," Hoshihara informed me from the sidelines as I stood there like a deer in headlights.

"Oh..." I said. "S-sorry, I didn't know..."

Of course I didn't, since Ushio and I didn't talk whatsoever throughout all of freshman year. For a moment, I considered apologizing to Noi for derailing the conversation—but then he took his gaze off of me and looked back at Ushio, as if this little tangent had reminded him of something.

"Actually," he said to her, "you did the same thing back then too, didn't you? Just up and quit being a short-distance runner without telling anybody."

"I just changed focuses. I don't see how that warrants any criticism."

“Just ‘changed focuses’? Come on, dude. You can’t just go from being a sprinter to a marathon runner overnight. It requires a whole different muscle makeup and training regimen. It’s not a decision to be taken lightly. So why’d you do it?”

“I felt like I’d be better at it.”

“Like hell you did. You were making great times running short distance too.”

“I’m telling you, there was no deeper reason for it.”

“Don’t you lie to me.”

“I don’t know what you want me to say, Fusuke.”

Ushio already sounded fed up with this conversation, and her anger was plainly visible in her expression. For someone usually so agreeable, she could be pretty scary when she got mad; I could see even Hoshihara tensing up at the sight of it. But Noi didn’t wither one bit. If anything, this only seemed to make him more frustrated.

“I don’t get you at all, man,” he said. “First you start wearing skirts all around town, then you just up and quit the track team... What are you even trying to do, huh? Imagine how *you* would feel to be betrayed and abandoned like that.”

“I’m not taking the blame for your persecution complex,” said Ushio. “I already apologized for quitting the team without any notice, but I did nothing to hurt or even inconvenience you. If you feel slighted by my own personal choices—none of which have anything to do with you, I might add—then that’s *your* problem.”

Noi didn’t say a word in response.

“Now can we *please* be done with this, already?” said Ushio. “I’m never coming back to the track team, end of story. So don’t ask again. Good luck at the preliminaries.”

“Hey, no,” said Noi. “I’m not done talking yet.”

“Natsuki, Sakuma—let’s go,” said Ushio, walking off to cut the conversation short. Hoshihara quickly followed, and so did I—but not before taking one last wary glance at Noi.

Chances were, he simply couldn't wrap his head around Ushio's transition or why she felt the way she did. It wouldn't have surprised me all that much if the relay race thing was only a pretext, and he was actually just looking for an excuse to interact with her again and get some answers. Though whether his ultimate goal was to try to understand the new Ushio or get her to go back to being the old one, I couldn't say. If it was the former, then I could maybe empathize with him a bit. At the same time, if Ushio didn't want anything to do with him anymore, that was totally her prerogative.

"Hey, wait!" Noi called out. When Ushio refused to stop, there was a pregnant pause, and then he added, "We...we made a pretty good team, didn't we?"

His tone was almost that of a plea. It was enough to make Ushio stop walking away, though she still didn't turn around. I cast a furtive glance over to gauge her expression, only to find her looking stone-faced. Or, no—there was a hint of something like tedium or weariness in her countenance.

"Don't tell me you forgot all those long nights we spent competing with each other to lower our times as much as possible," Noi went on. "Hell, I still have that running tally of how many wins and losses we each had memorized. We'd run ourselves ragged late into the evening, then stop by the diner on our way home... And then we'd both show up to the clubroom at the same time the next morning for early practice. I dunno, maybe I'm alone here, but I thought those were some pretty good memories we made together."

Noi took a step forward.

"If you come back and rejoin the team, and we can run together again like we used to, I'm totally willing to forgive and forget this ever happened," he continued. "Hell, I'll even let you wear whatever clothes you want or hang out with whoever you want, and I'll promise not to judge or give you any flak for it. Plus, I mean...you're probably itching to show people what you're really capable of again, right? I saw you out there playing on the girls' side today... Come on, man. We both know your full potential's just gonna go to waste if you keep on living like this."

I could feel the embers of indignation being kindled in my chest as I listened

to this thoughtless petition by Noi—and the worst part was that I knew he probably *felt* like he was making some major concessions here. But for someone claiming they weren't going to be judgmental any longer, he was doing an awfully poor job of hiding his prejudices. His desire to control Ushio and force her to live her life how *he* wanted her to was plainly evident in his tone, as though it was dripping from every word.

“You'll ‘let me’ wear whatever I want, huh?” Ushio muttered as she turned around.

Just then, I got chills. At first, I thought it might have been a cold breeze blowing by, but no. It was Ushio's demeanor that had sent a shiver down my spine. Her expression was perfectly calm, yet something in the way she carried herself was frigid enough to make me shudder in fear. One look, and I could tell she was *furious*.

“And why exactly do I need *your* permission if I want to wear a skirt, Fusuke?” she demanded. “Or to hang out with whoever I want, for that matter? Last time I checked, those weren't your decisions to make. Not even a little bit. Also, yes, maybe to an outside observer, we might have seemed like a pretty good team. I won't deny that our little rivalry was mutually productive. But that has nothing to do with anything but running. As far as personalities go, we have *nothing* in common.”

“Wha...?” Noi gaped, his eyes wide in disbelief at this harsh rebuke.

“And another thing,” Ushio went on. “You keep making an awful lot of assumptions about me being ‘itching to show people what I'm capable of,’ agreeing that this is a ‘waste of my potential,’ and whatnot... Could you maybe stop trying to act like you know the first thing about me? Because that's not how I feel at all. I'm totally satisfied with the way things are for me right now in gym class and everything. Obviously, yes, there'll always be certain things I wish were easier or different, but I wouldn't *ever* want to go back to being the old me—not even for a *second*.”

Her tone was fierce, but she managed to get it all out in what felt like a single breath as she thoroughly dismantled everything Noi had said. When at last she was done, she let out a sigh. I assumed she was relieved to get all of that off her

chest, but then she set her icy gaze on Noi once more. She wasn't done yet.

"But I guess I do owe you *one* apology," she said. "Because you're right—there *was* actually a reason I quit being a short-distance runner."

"What?" Noi uttered in bewilderment.

Judging from the way Ushio was leading into this, I assumed it was something she knew Noi definitely wouldn't want to hear. I tried to imagine what the real reason might be, but I couldn't come up with anything plausible. It was probably something more complicated than a mere preference or aptitude issue, as there'd be no reason for her not to be open about that from the start.

I waited for her to elaborate, but she never did. Even when she opened her mouth to speak, the words didn't come out, and she slowly lowered her head until her gaze was pointed at the floor. Five seconds passed like this, then ten, and then I started getting a little nervous. Just how bad could this revelation possibly be?

"Well?" Noi finally cut in. "Aren't you gonna tell me?"

At his urging, Ushio drew in a deep breath as if to steel her nerves, hesitantly lifted her head, and—eyes still downcast, unwilling to meet Noi's gaze—said her piece.

"Because I didn't want my legs to get too big."

"Uh, what?" said Noi.

"You need a lot of muscle to quickly propel yourself from a standstill in short-distance events...and I didn't want my legs getting too thick. I mean, not that all sprinters have massive legs or anything, but I definitely didn't want my thighs and calves and everything to get any more muscular than they already were..."

"Say *what*?"

Noi seemed utterly confused, and I could understand why. To be completely honest, I felt like this was a pretty anticlimactic answer after all that buildup. I also recognized that to Ushio, it probably *was* a very serious matter. Especially given that from the way Noi had made it sound, it was no mean feat to switch from being a short-distance sprinter to a long-distance runner, and Ushio had

been good enough at the former to participate in regional track meets. It couldn't have been a decision she made lightly. *But damn, that's crazy... I never once thought she had bulky legs or anything like that.*

Ushio cleared her throat, her gaze sharp once more. "So don't misunderstand," she said. "It wasn't like I switched to running long distance because I wanted to compete alongside *you* or anything like that."

"Wait, wait, wait. Hang on a minute," said Noi, his voice turning frantic. "You're tellin' me you just didn't wanna have thunder thighs? *That's* the whole reason you quit being a sprinter? After all those school records you broke and everything?"

Ushio pursed her lips uncomfortably. "Yeah, don't worry. I knew you wouldn't understand."

"I totally do, though!" Hoshihara eagerly chimed in, her expression earnest. "Back when I was in junior high, I had a friend who was on the swim team who ended up quitting just because she hated how tan she got. But she still really loved swimming, so she started taking indoor swim classes instead. It was super expensive, too, so all her friends kept telling her it was a waste of money and she should just come back to the swim team. But she never did." Hoshihara paused a moment, then continued with an imploring tone, "Just because something might seem insignificant to you, that doesn't make it any less serious for the person dealing with it. Especially when it comes to appearances. Everyone has their own insecurities, big and small. I wouldn't go around acting like it's 'not a big deal' when you couldn't possibly know."

"Thanks, Natsuki," said Ushio, smiling softly at this warm sentiment.

"Well, not that I *wouldn't* be curious to see what Ushio-chan would look like with big ol' juicy thighs, of course... Heh heh heh..."

"Um... On second thought, maybe keep your thoughts to yourself..."

"All right, that's *enough*!" Noi growled.

His eyebrows were slanted in outrage, and a vein bulged from his forehead. He had apparently left denial and gone straight to anger. The guy looked like he was just about ready to start throwing punches. I went back on guard.

“You really expect me to believe that load of bull? Who the hell *cares* what your legs look like, dude? You think you’re some sorta model or something? Well, here’s a news flash for you, pal: it doesn’t matter how much you try to tweak your appearance—you’re *always* gonna be a dude underneath.”

Ushio winced as his remark ran her through.

“Hey, watch it, asshole...” I said, stepping forward to show him we wouldn’t tolerate any further provocations. But Noi kept his eyes firmly locked on Ushio.

“Oh,” he added, “and I take back what I said about us making a good team. I’d never be caught *dead* partnering up with a disgraceful traitor like you.”

“You know, you sure do talk a pretty big game,” said Ushio, keeping her voice low and measured. With a condescending sneer, she added, “But traitor or not, I’m still a better runner than *you’ll* ever be—and you know it.”

Noi didn’t react to this at first; he kept glaring straight at Ushio, but no sparks flew. Another icy chill fell over the courtyard. Soon, a cricket began to chirp from the nearby bushes, its song much too calm and elegant to serve as background noise for the tense situation at hand. Then, as if taking this as his cue, Noi finally responded.

“Oh yeah?” he said. “How ’bout you race me, then?”

Ushio scowled, knitting her brows.

“Two weeks from now. Standard 5K. If I win, you have to rejoin the boys’ track team and run with me in the long-distance relay. If you win, then I’ll apologize for everything I’ve ever said against you.”

“Aw, come on. How the hell is *that* fair?” I butted in. Noi glared at me, but I went on undeterred, “Ushio’s been out of practice for months now. And how does forcing her to rejoin the team if she *loses* even make any sense? Why would you want her going to preliminaries if she’s not even gonna be able to perform at the same level as you?”

“Hey, Ushio. You hear that? Sounds like your friend here doesn’t have much faith in your abilities.”

“That’s not what I said!”

God, this guy's irritating. I couldn't believe Ushio had put up with his personality for as long as she had, even if it *was* only as teammates. I knew he was just trying to get under our skin, so I should have just shrugged it off, but I was incensed by his cocky attitude. I looked over at Ushio to make sure she wasn't buying into any of his bullcrap either. She shot me a knowing look that told me she had it covered, then turned back to face Noi once again.

"Sakuma makes a good point," she said. "Why force me to compete against my will when I could just throw every race to get back at you? I don't see any reason why I should agree to race you, at least not with *those* terms. There's nothing in it for me."

"Aw... What's the matter?" said Noi. "Don't think you can win?"

"I never said that."

"Nah, you're totally chickening out. You know damn well you can't beat me anymore. Not when you've been goin' around roleplaying like you're some dainty little girl for so long. You'd probably be out of breath after the first hundred meters."

This was a pretty blatant attempt to provoke her—yet for whatever reason, Ushio seemed to take the bait, as I could see her eyes light up with indignation.

"All right, fine," she said. "If that's how it's gonna be, then you're on."

I was a little taken aback; I didn't think she'd accept the challenge.

"Good—and you'd better actually show up too," Noi said with an incendiary grin. "Don't back out on me now."

"Oh, I won't. And you'd better be ready to apologize when I win."

"*If* you win. But cool, then I think we're done here." Noi turned to me. "Now move it, shrimp."

I stepped out of the way, and Noi strutted back into the school building with a swagger in his step, as though all of his previous frustration had melted away. Once he was out of sight, Ushio tottered in the opposite direction, then promptly plunked herself down on a nearby bench. She looked completely burned out as she sat there hunched over with her head drooping, her hair

concealing her expression as it hung over her face.

“You gonna be okay, Ushio-chan?” Hoshihara asked as she walked over to check on her, and I followed suit. Ushio reached up and pressed her palm to her forehead.

“Ugh, what have I gotten myself into?” she said, sounding utterly exhausted. “Wasn’t even planning to take him up on it... I guess I let him get under my skin a little bit more than I realized.”

I could almost see the haze of regret hanging over Ushio where she sat. So she’d just agreed to it in the heat of the moment, then. Not that I could really blame her, after all the provocations he’d flung her way. While Ushio was definitely one of the calmer and more collected people I knew, she wasn’t superhuman. I’d been her friend long enough to know that she could get just as emotional (or even irrational) as anyone else if something truly hurt her feelings or rubbed her the wrong way.

On second thought, perhaps that wasn’t giving her enough credit. Ushio *was* a lot more unflappable than your average seventeen-year-old, to be sure. But the kinds of experiences she’d had in life, particularly as of late, were also a lot more stressful than what your average seventeen-year-old had to deal with, so it wasn’t really a fair comparison to make. After everything she’d been through, it took an awful lot to faze her nowadays—which kind of made my heart ache, in all honesty.

“Well, we should go tell him you changed your mind, then,” said Hoshihara, sitting down beside Ushio to reassure her. “I mean, you shouldn’t feel forced to agree to something like that, especially when you’re at a major disadvantage.”

“No, it’s okay,” replied Ushio, abruptly lifting her head. “I’ve made my bed, so now I have to lie in it. Besides, it’s not like I can’t beat him or anything.”

“You sure about that?”

“Yeah,” said Ushio, smiling. “You can trust me on this one.”

But her smile was so thin and frail, it almost hurt to look at.

“Well, don’t force yourself either,” I said, sitting down on the other side of Ushio. “Not like it was gonna be a fair fight to begin with. Obviously, it’d be

pretty impressive if you still won in spite of that—but it just doesn't feel worth it if losing means having to answer to *that* guy, y'know? So if you really can't let it go, then I guess..."

Ushio and Hoshihara both looked at me.

"I don't mind racing him in your stead," I declared.

"You?" said Ushio, unable to hold back an amused chuckle. "You'd be at an even bigger disadvantage than me, silly. You've never played any sports in your life."

"Hey, that's not true. I was on the tennis team back in seventh grade."

"Yeah, for like a month. I really don't think that counts."

"Okay, fine. Then I'll just be your fall guy and join the track team if you lose."

"Something tells me Fusuke probably won't agree to that..."

She looked at me funny, perhaps uncertain of what I was really trying to say. I felt a little frustrated with myself for failing to convey my feelings in a more eloquent or articulate way, but I swallowed my pride and decided to tell it to her straight.



“I just want to help you, that’s all.”

“Huh?” said Ushio, blinking.

“See, because the thing is, like...it’s pretty painful for me to see you struggling when you’ve done nothing to deserve it. So I guess in my head, I feel like, I dunno...if there’s anything I can do to lighten your mental load, then I wanna do that for you.”

“Oh, I...I see... Well then...”

After giving this stilted reply, Ushio simply looked down at the ground. *Great, now things are totally awkward again. Why do I ever bother opening my stupid mouth?* But as I glanced over to try to gauge Ushio’s expression, I saw Hoshihara nodding adamantly in agreement with me. Ushio slowly lifted her head and turned to look me in the eye.

“You know, Sakuma,” she said, “I feel like you really have changed since the culture festival. You’ve gotten a lot more vocal with sharing what’s on your mind, for one thing.”

“Well, yeah,” I replied. “You told me not to keep things bottled up anymore.”

“I mean, sure, I guess I did... But I feel like you’ve taken it a little *too* far.”

“Look, it’s hard to find the right balance, okay?” I stumbled over my words as a mild vexation continued to eat away at me. Unable to withstand the awkwardness any longer, I cast my gaze upward to where the school buildings’ eaves carved out a perfect square of sky. It had gotten fairly dark out in just the time it took for us to have this little altercation with Noi.

“All right,” said Ushio, standing up. “I think we’d better get going.”

“Oh, shoot! You’re right!” said Hoshihara, also jumping to her feet.

The two of them had dinner plans to get to. I felt a bit left out, especially since it meant I’d have to walk home alone today, but I’d live.

“Oh, wait a minute!” said Hoshihara as I stood up as well. “Would you wanna come to our little hangout too, Kamiki-kun?”

“Nah, I think I’ll pass. It’s just supposed to be between you and the other

volleyball players, right? I'd stick out like a sore thumb."

"Awww, I don't think anyone would mind, though!"

"It's fine. I mean it. Let me know how it goes, yeah?"

"Well, okay," said Hoshihara, relenting.

The three of us walked back into the building together to retrieve our bookbags. There was no longer anyone left in Classroom 2-A when we got there—only the setting sun pouring in through the windows. Since we were the last ones here, we'd have to lock up. I took care of that once we'd gathered our things and stepped back into the hallway.

"I'll go return the key," I said. "You guys can go on ahead, since you're already late."

"You sure?" said Hoshihara. "Okay. Thanks, Kamiki-kun."

"Appreciate it," said Ushio.

"No worries. See you two tomorrow."

After waving the two of them goodbye, I headed to the staff room all by my lonesome. As I made my way down the abandoned hallways, I thought back on the events that had just transpired this afternoon.

Fusuke Noi. By all accounts, the guy seemed to think he and Ushio had been pretty close. Yes, perhaps they were more rivals than friends, and perhaps Ushio never truly felt he was her equal—but as far as Noi was concerned, there was a lot of goodwill and camaraderie in that relationship. *Yet look how he treats her now.*

Just remembering the insulting language and taunts he'd lobbed at her a few minutes ago was enough to make my blood boil. In many ways, he was treating her no better than Arisa Nishizono—which was saying something, as she'd probably harassed Ushio more than anyone else, despite also having been a close friend of hers and even having a crush on her at one point.

But sometimes it was the strongest loves that so easily turned to hate.

Obsession could do strange things to people, and it was usually those who loved a person most (or claimed to, anyway) who could so easily grow resentful of them—often at the drop of a hat and over the tiniest of things. It was an all-too-common occurrence, sadly. I remembered seeing a news report just the other day about a popular idol who'd received a credible death threat from someone who, the investigation found, had once been one of her biggest, most passionate fans.

"I suppose the more you believe you love and care about someone, the more betrayed you tend to feel when things don't turn out the way you wanted them to."

That was how one of the commentators on the program summed it up—and I felt like it was a sentiment just about anyone could relate to, even if obviously the vast majority of people were well adjusted enough to not lash out or send death threats. I knew I sure as hell felt slighted when the girl I had a crush on back in junior high ended up confessing her feelings for Ushio instead. In fact, I was so distraught by the experience that I pretty much stopped talking to Ushio for years, even though she had objectively done nothing wrong in that situation. But I still *felt* like I'd been betrayed. So maybe I hadn't been any better than Noi or Nishizono in that regard.

But that was then, and this was now. Obviously, I couldn't change who I'd been or what I'd done in the past. Instead, I was determined to prove—through my words, and actions, and attitudes—that I was different from the two of them. Sure, I still had plenty of self-doubt from time to time...but I wanted to believe that I was on the right side here. That I was a decent person at heart. Sometimes, it felt like that was all I *could* do.

I returned the classroom key to the staff room, then headed home.

The strong winds outside shook the classroom windows in their frames.

“All rise!”

My fellow classmates and I stood up from our desks and bowed to thank the teacher. Then it was lunch hour at last. With the culture and sports festivals now concluded, there weren't many major school events left this semester. The class trip was still a ways off, so all that really remained between now and winter break were our final exams. As a result, the overall vibes in the classroom were pretty low-key for the time being. The usual hustle and bustle was still there, but it felt somewhat neutered, like we were sports fans showing up to support our team even though we all knew we were already out of the running. And yet, there was a kind of comfort for me in that subdued excitement. Enough that I wished things could *always* be this chill—but just then, the door to the classroom loudly rattled open as a single student barged in.

“*There’s my girl!*” said the intruder. “Hey, Ushio! Didja miss me?!”

God. Damn it.

If our classroom was an aquarium, then someone had come along and dumped a big, floundering black bass into our tight-knit school of small, unassuming freshwater fish. Only it wasn't a black bass—it was Itsuku Sera.

Sera wove his way through the maze of orphaned desks and clustered chairs full of students as he made his way over to where Ushio sat. He leaned down and rubbed his cheek against her face right as she was about to start eating her lunch. Ushio did not look pleased at all by this development. Beside them, Hoshihara even let out a shriek.

“Hey, hey, hey!” she shouted. “Back off, Sera-kun! Not okay!”

“I’m so sorry, Ushiooo...” Sera whimpered. “I’ve just been so swamped lately, I haven’t been able to make time to come over and talk to ya...”

“O-okay, stop,” said Ushio, peeling her face away. “That’s really uncomfortable.”

“Aw, come on! No need to be so cold,” he said, affecting an exaggerated tone of distress as he turned to look at Hoshihara. “And how’ve *you* been, Natsuki-chan?”

“Fine, thanks.”

“Oh? Is that a little resistance I’m sensing? Come on, why can’t we just be friends?! Hey, I know! What if I called you ‘Nakki’ too? Would that help?”

“Eeeek... Ushio-chan, help me out here!”

“Sera,” said Ushio. “Stop picking on Natsuki.”

“Awww, but I just want us all to be best buds!” Sera said, snickering like an idiot.

Just watching this scene play out from afar was enough to put me on edge. From where I was sitting, Sera was nothing more than an unwanted outsider. The guy *claimed* to have feelings for Ushio while also having, like, four other girlfriends, and he made no attempt to conceal that fact. There was something about that wry, superficial smirk of his that felt almost like an indefatigable poker face. I couldn’t see through his cheesy, overconfident veneer, so I never knew what the hell he was thinking. He was simply an enigma, one I wanted absolutely nothing to do with but was forced to interact with at times due to his apparent fondness for Ushio. Even *those* intentions might have been a lie, since I had no clue what his true motivations were.

“Y’know, Ushio, I’ve gotta say...” Sera went on. “Your lunches always look *real* tasty. Mind if I have one of your sides?”

“Yes. I mind.”

“Aw, shoot. Well, that’s okay. I’m sure Natsuki-chan’ll give me somethin’ good.”

“What? No, I don’t really have anything I can share either...”

“Sheesh, you guys! Talk about leaving a fella out in the cold! And after I came all the way over here without even eating lunch first too!”

“No one said you had to do that.”

“But I wanted to see my sweet little Ushio as soon as possible!”

“Well, hope it was worth starving for, then.”

Despite the rather brutal reception he was getting from Ushio and Hoshihara,

one could definitely be forgiven for thinking the three of them actually *were* quite good friends, at a glance. Sera was stupidly good at committing to the bit and being a sort of comic relief character, which made him pretty well liked by the majority of our classmates. And he probably *was* a fun guy to have around, in small doses. But after everything we'd been through, and what I knew about his personal life, I still didn't think I'd ever warm up to him. He and I just seemed totally incompatible, plain and simple.

Figuring it was about time for me to dig in as well, I reached into my bag and pulled out my lunch—but just then, I heard a disgusted rebuke from elsewhere in the classroom.

“Freaks...”

The voice was soft but carried clearly enough to be unmistakable. It belonged to none other than Arisa Nishizono. Up until quite recently, she'd been eating her lunch in the cafeteria with some girls from other classes, but now she'd resumed spending lunch hour in the classroom—alone. After her repeated harassment and disapproval of Ushio's change of gender, she'd effectively ostracized herself from the rest of the class. Which was fairly ironic, as far as just deserts went.

Ushio's desk was much closer to Nishizono's than mine, so I knew they *had* to have heard her bad-mouthing them if I had. Sure enough, the three of them fell silent almost instantaneously, and Hoshihara's expression tightened.

“Did you guys hear that? Almost sounded like *someone's* bein' a real sour grape,” said Sera, turning his body to face Nishizono. “Was that you, Arisa-chan?”

Nishizono just kept quiet and continued eating her lunch, stuffing her cheeks with a big, angry bite from a premade sandwich she must have bought at a mini-mart or the school store. Her beverage of choice today was a half-liter carton of milk.

Ever undeterred by the silent treatment, Sera casually sauntered toward the back of the classroom, pulled a chair out from an unoccupied desk near Nishizono's, then sat down right next to her. More than a few of my classmates started whispering among themselves, clearly on tenterhooks as they waited to

see what might happen next. It was like they knew it was only a matter of time before the inevitable volcanic eruption. After all, when you pitted a cloyingly friendly buffoon like Sera who loved pushing people's buttons against a feral brat like Nishizono who'd bite back at anyone who so much as looked at her funny, there was sure to be *some* sort of chemical reaction.

"Actually, I don't think we've ever really spoken before, have we, Arisa-chan?" said Sera. "Lemme introduce myself, then. The name's Sera. Itsuku Sera. Nice to meetcha."

Nishizono didn't say a word, so Sera went on.

"You bleach your hair to make it that color, I'm guessing? Gotta say, it looks good on you. Really digging the pigtails too."

Still, Nishizono remained silent.

"Want me to let you in on a little secret, Arisa-chan? 'Cause I know a surefire way to get someone to stop ignoring you when they're giving you the cold shoulder. All you gotta do is swipe somethin' of theirs right out from under their nose. Like, if they're playin' on their phone, take it away from them. If they're listening to music to drown you out, pull out their headphones. If they're reading a book, yoink it away. Or, if they're like you right now, and they're trying to eat their lunch, you've just gotta pull *this* ol' number."

Sera snatched Nishizono's sandwich from beneath her fingertips just as she was reaching to pick it up for another bite. And right on cue, she lost her temper and glared up at the smarmy food thief.

"You wanna go, you little prick?" she said.

"C'mon, Arisa-chan. Whaddya say you and me head down to the cafeteria? Heck, I'll even buy you somethin' else to eat. Lunch is always more fun when you're eating with company, am I right?"

"I'm not going anywhere with you. Now give me back my sandwich—actually, no. I don't even want it anymore, now that you've put your grubby hands all over it. You probably use those to wipe your ass for all I know, you revolting little germ."

"Ah ha ha! Dang, you've got quite the mouth on you, huh? I'll have you know

there aren't many guys our age as good-natured, hygienic, and chivalrous as yours truly."

"Good-natured? Hygienic? *Chivalrous*? Ha!" Nishizono scoffed as she mocked every one of these descriptors. "You've got a lot of nerve, acting like you're God's gift to women when you've gotta be the biggest cheating swindler in this entire school."

"Well, now *that's* just plain rude. I'm an extremely faithful and upstanding boyfriend, for your information," Sera confidently declared, then took a triumphant bite of his ill-gotten sandwich. Apparently, Nishizono was well aware of Sera's morally ambiguous polyamory situation; perhaps Hoshihara had mentioned it to her at some point.

"You, faithful and upstanding? That's pretty rich, coming from the guy who's dating three or four girls at once."

"How so? Why does it matter, if they're all totally fine with it?"

"Uh, because you're not telling any of them you're also seeing other people? Duh? That's, like, literally the dictionary definition of infidelity."

"Ha ha, aw, man... Love getting judged by folks who don't know the first thing about my life. Reminds me of a certain someone, actually."

As he said this, Sera twisted his neck to look straight at me. Flustered, I quickly averted my gaze. *Damn... Thought he might have let that go by now.*

"At any rate," said Sera, turning to face Nishizono again, "you've got one very important detail wrong there, little lady. I actually *have* told each of the girls I'm dating right now about all of the other ones. And they're all totally cool with it, just FYI. Can't exactly call it infidelity if it's consensual, now can you?"

That was the first I'd heard of this. I'd definitely judged him for not having disclosed his relationship status to all of his many girlfriends in the past. At the time, he told me himself that he hadn't been up front with any of them about it yet. He *did* tell Ushio, at least—after I caught him red-handed and called him out on it—but I never would have expected him to tell any of the other girls. Then again, this was Sera we were talking about, so maybe it was a complete lie. Nishizono would see it as such, at least...right?

“Huh,” she said. “You don’t say.”

Against all odds, she seemed to take him at his word. For once, even Sera seemed caught off guard by this, as his eyes went wide in surprise.

“Wait,” he said. “You actually believe me?”

“Why, were you just pulling my leg?”

“No, but I guess I was half-expecting you to call me a liar or demand some sorta proof or whatever. Dang, you’re kinda throwing me for a loop, actually,” said Sera, tilting his head. “Are you secretly more of a sweetheart than I gave you credit for?”

“Don’t press your luck, bub. I just don’t see any reason to doubt you, that’s all.”

“Oho... Well, well, well...”

He took another bite of Nishizono’s ex-sandwich, seemingly still unsure how to interpret this benefit of the doubt. It was kind of incredible to see him pausing even for a moment to consider his next words or rethink his plan of attack. Normally, he was such an incessant chatterbox that I thought he might have some condition that meant he’d literally die if he ever stopped talking. Evidently growing bored with this, Nishizono took a lengthy sip of her milk carton and set it back down on the desk.

“Anyway, as far as I’m concerned,” she said, “all that means is that those girls you’re dating are just as dumb and trashy as you.”

Sera frowned ever so slightly. Nishizono leaned back in her chair, lifting her chin up so that she could look down on him from an assumed position of dominance.

“I mean, what self-respecting girl with decent values would just ‘be cool’ with her boyfriend dating a bunch of other girls? Isn’t that what healthy relationships are—just finding someone who happens to like you as much as you like them and agreeing that you want to keep it exclusive? People wouldn’t get jealous, and cheating wouldn’t be a problem if wanting to keep someone to yourself wasn’t a thing. Not that people don’t get bored of each other and stop caring, but still.”

Nishizono just kept on ranting.

“Far as I’m concerned, these ‘girlfriends’ of yours must either be unfaithful skanks who are messing around themselves, or just sad, pathetic losers who are totally dependent on you to the point that they don’t feel like they have a choice or any room to complain. Not that it really matters to *me*, obviously. Trashy people need love too, I guess, so as long as you only keep inbreeding among yourselves, it’s no skin off my nose.”

The usual classroom clamor had fallen off even further than before, with everyone absorbed in Nishizono’s angry tirade. Just how much bitterness and rage could one girl possibly contain in such a tiny frame? Her scathing words left a lump in the pit of my stomach, to the point that it felt like I’d swallowed a hunk of lead. I couldn’t even fathom what Sera was thinking as the one taking the full brunt of all these admonitions. Like my fellow classmates around me, all I could do was watch warily in wait to see what his next move might be. And after a few seconds’ silence...

“Mmmmm...” Sera loudly hummed. “Feels like you’ve got some interesting opinions when it comes to love, Arisa-chan. Maybe a little overly antiquated for my tastes, but more than that—I think you’re probably just sheltered and naive.”

“Excuse me?” said Nishizono.

“I mean, yeah, people do often get possessive of their partners. And like you said, that’s generally where feelings of jealousy and betrayal stem from in relationships. But you’re also overlooking a pretty major caveat in that regard.”

“Oh yeah? And what’s that?”

“Possessiveness is nothing more than a desire to control someone. Any rational human being also has the power to resist those kinds of urges. We’re not just rabid beasts frothing at the mouth, unable to overcome our basest, most animalistic instincts, y’know?”

With that, Sera popped the remaining corner of the sandwich into his mouth, then gently clapped his hands, rubbing his palms together to brush the crumbs onto the floor.

Nishizono's face contorted with aggravation. "Not the most convincing argument, coming from a guy who prances around town indulging in every temptation known to man."

"I mean, just think about it for a minute," said Sera. "Take dieting, for instance. That's nothing more than trying to overcome your body's desire to eat, and plenty of folks are successful at that. People can totally resist those kinds of urges if it's for the sake of achieving some greater end goal or getting closer to their ideal self. Same thing applies to relationships. My girlfriends and I can keep our possessiveness in check because we know we love each other more than that."

"Oh, shut the hell up. Even if what you're saying is true, it's only a matter of time before your supposedly harmonious scenario falls apart. It's not like a diet, where all that matters is one person's willingness to control themselves. As soon as *any* of the girls in your perfect little harem feel unhappy, it's not an equal arrangement anymore."

"It's not like they're my prisoners or anything. They're more than welcome to leave or see other people at the same time if they want to. You're making a lot of assumptions based on what *you* imagine my relationships must be like, but let's not talk about what-ifs here. Fact of the matter is, all my girls are happy right now."

"There's no 'fact of the matter.' You're just delusional and telling yourself things are fine because *you're* the one in the position of power right now."

Sera let out a sigh and shook his head. "If that's really what you think, then I dunno if there's anything I can say to convince you. Y'know, I like a tough, hard-headed girl as much as the next guy, but when you've already made up your mind not to accept *any* of the other person's point of view from the start, there's just no possible dialogue or resolution to be had here."

"That's only because you're—"

"Guess it makes sense, though," said Sera, cutting her off. Then he flashed a surly smile and said, "No wonder everybody hates you, when you treat 'em like that."

I could have sworn I heard a noise, like a fissure tearing in the ground—the

splitting of some foundation being ripped in twain. And I was pretty sure it wasn't just me. Surely everyone in the classroom had heard the sound of Nishizono's pride cracking.

"Welp, thanks for the sandwich," said Sera. "Remind me I owe you lunch sometime."

"Wait," said Nishizono, stopping him right as he was about to get up and walk off like nothing had even happened. I found it pretty strange that this last jab of Sera's hadn't provoked a more violent reaction out of her whatsoever—but chances were, she was just trying her best to play it cool. I knew there was no way she wasn't furious right now. "You must be pretty thirsty after all that bread, right? Here, have some milk."

"Oh, uh... Nah, that's okay. I'm good."

"No, really—I insist."

Nishizono stood up with her milk carton in hand.

I knew exactly what she was about to do.

There came a gasp from a corner of the classroom as she slowly turned the carton upside down and let all of its contents pour out onto his head.

The whole room erupted with commotion as Nishizono simply stood there like a gardener patiently watering her foliage, waiting for all the liquid to drain out of the carton before she shook out the last few drops. Sera didn't move a muscle the entire time, which may have contributed to the image of him being nothing more than an obedient houseplant.

"Whoops, sorry. Guess I lost my grip," said Nishizono, but anyone with eyes could see that this had been no accident, and she was far from sorry. She sat back down in her chair and smugly added, "Looks good on you, though. Now you and your precious Ushio can have the same hair color."

The white liquid dripped from Sera's bangs onto his blazer. He was so soaked that I almost thought I could smell the pungent scent of milk from where I was

sitting. Slowly, and without rising from his chair, Sera pulled a handkerchief from his pants pocket and used it to wipe his face and slick back his hair. A single trickle of milk streamed down his forehead, and he wiped it up with one finger before licking it clean. Then he let out an amused laugh.

“You’re a very interesting girl, Arisa-chan,” he said calmly. “Something tells me you and I are gonna have a lot of fun together.”

“Sorry, could you get lost already?” said Nishizono. “You reek of milk.”

“Yeah, yeah. I’ll get outta your hair.”

Still sopping wet, Sera rose from his seat and waltzed out of the classroom with his usual swagger, apparently not wanting to let even a hint of discomfort show despite leaving a trail of white droplets in his wake. And while the lunchtime hustle and bustle *did* return to the classroom, there could be no denying that this confrontation cast an eerie shadow over the rest of the day.

“I mean, that was pretty unhinged, right?” I said. “Even by *her* standards.”

On the way home that day, the topic naturally came up again between Ushio, Hoshihara, and me as we pushed our bikes along the pavement. It had been quite the nail-biting turn of events, after all. Just thinking back on it was enough to make my hair stand on end all over again. Obviously, Nishizono’s audacity had been as intimidating as always—but not knowing what Sera was thinking was just as, if not more, terrifying.

“Yeah, wonder if there’ll be any blowback,” Hoshihara mused uneasily, her profile glowing in the setting sun. It wasn’t quite late enough to be called evening, but the orange hue of early twilight had already begun to creep across the western sky. With no streetlamps here on the little road that cut through the rice fields, it could get awfully dark awfully quick. Yet the cooler temperatures this time of year made for a much more pleasant homeward commute than in the summer, so we were happy to take our time regardless.

“For sure, yeah,” I said. “Sera’s definitely not one to let things go, so I feel like he’ll totally try to get her back somehow... Or keep needling her for a while, at least.”

“Man, I hope not. I got goosebumps just from watching them today.”

I knew from firsthand experience just how obnoxiously persistent Sera could be. He wasn't the sort of pest who would be deterred by a cold shoulder. And given that Nishizono was *also* the extremely obstinate type, something told me we'd be seeing them butt heads again before long.

“I mean, it'd be nice if they could resolve things amicably, but yeah...” I glanced over at Ushio. She'd been awfully quiet ever since we started talking about what happened during lunch hour, and now I was curious. “What do you think, Ushio?”

“Who cares,” she said disinterestedly, keeping her eyes fixed on the road ahead. “Just let them do whatever they want.”

I was a little caught off guard by this uncharacteristically blunt reply. But I supposed it made sense, after thinking about it; Ushio certainly hadn't had very positive experiences with either of those two, especially Nishizono. It was kind of thoughtless of me to even bring them up, honestly.

“S-so, Ushio-chan, are you gonna go out for another run tonight?” Hoshihara asked, changing the subject as she presumably picked up on Ushio's distaste for our conversation. Her ability to read the room definitely had something to do with her being one of the most universally liked kids in our class; I could really learn a lot from her.

“Yeah,” said Ushio. “Hoping to every day leading up to the race, rain or shine.”

“Oof, gotcha... Sounds pretty rough.”

“Shouldn't be too bad. I mean, I like running, so just because I quit the team doesn't mean I stopped entirely. It'll just be more than I've done in a while.”

From what the two of them were saying, it sounded like Ushio had already started training for her upcoming race with Noi. It seemed she was taking it pretty seriously.

“Anything I can help with?” I asked.

“Mmm...” Ushio mulled it over. “No, not really. But I appreciate the

sentiment.”

“Ah... Okay.”

I had to admit, I felt a bit left out, but that was fine. I mean, what was I even going to do? I couldn't very well be her running buddy or anything. I'd only slow her down.

“Well, if you think of anything, don't hesitate to ask,” I told her. “More than happy to contribute in any way I can.”

“Thanks. I'll definitely let you know.”

“Same goes for me!” Hoshihara chimed in. “If you ever need someone to ride behind you on a bike and cheer you on with a megaphone, I'm your girl!”

Ushio donned a gentle smile. “C-cool, I'll keep that in mind.”

Our shadows stretched long and dark over the fields of harvested ears of rice.

People often said that spring slumbers brought out the deepest of sleeps, but I'd argue that autumn snoozes gave them a run for their money. Fall's cool weather was nippy, yet not cold enough to turn on the heat, which always made one's comforter feel that much more enticing and made getting out of bed that much harder. And so, yes—I'd overslept.

“Ugh... Damn it...”

I stood high on my pedals as I hurried to school, the bitter morning air assailing my exposed fingertips as it brushed past. Eventually, the resultant body heat from this exercise kept me warm enough that it stopped bothering me. By the time I walked onto campus, I'd even worked up a bit of a sweat. In the end, I made better time than I expected; perhaps it wasn't so necessary for me to rush after all. As I walked through the main entrance feeling weirdly let down, I quickly spied a familiar head of silver hair.

“Hey, Ushio,” I said.

“Oh, morning, Sakuma.” She turned to face me as she stood up on the duckboard, removing her shoes. I stepped up and changed into my indoor shoes as well, and the two of us made our way to Classroom 2-A. There were still five

minutes and change left before morning homeroom began—more than enough to take our time heading there at a leisurely stroll. We merged into the sea of students making friendly conversation as they walked up and down the halls to their own destinations, but we hardly made it five steps into the corridor before Ushio let out a loud yawn.

“Someone sounds tired,” I said.

“Mm, kinda. Got up pretty early.”

“Oh yeah? What time?”

“Like, five.”

“Wait, seriously?”

Wow. So before the crack of dawn, even. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d woken up that early.

“Dang, that’s crazy,” I said. “I always wake up at, like, seven... Kinda slept in today, though. Hell, over summer vacation, there were a lot of days I wouldn’t even go to *bed* until after five o’clock.”

“Okay, now that’s just unhealthy. Why even do that to yourself?”

“Yeah, I dunno. How come time always seems to fly right by when you’re just screwing around on your phone or computer, but never when you’re doing something actually important? Is this the ‘theory of relativity’ or whatever?”

“Definitely not,” Ushio said with a chuckle.

“So why’d you wake up that early, anyhow? Still plenty of time left before exams... Oh, wait, I know! You probably went out for a brisk little morning jog, didn’t you?”

“You got it.”

I was kind of teasing her with my diminutive wording, but if she was actually waking up at five in the morning for this—while also doing late-night runs as she alluded to yesterday—then that meant she had to have given herself a pretty hard training regimen for the upcoming race. She was probably spending more time moving her legs *now* than she ever had while actually on the track team.

“It’s a good thing I love running,” she said, “because otherwise, I don’t think I’d be able to do it. I’ve got pretty low blood pressure, so I’ve always had a really hard time waking up early. It was always a slog dragging myself out of bed for morning practice too.”

“Yeah, damn... That’s dedication,” I replied as we started up the stairwell side by side. “Plus, you’re already running more than once a day, right? I could never commit to a schedule like that, especially while *also* going to school in between. Ton of respect for that.”

“Wow, what’s with all this praise?” she asked, eyeing me up as though I might be delirious with fever.

“Sorry, just speaking my mind. I actually *am* a little worried about whether you’ll burn out, if I’m being honest... But for right now, yeah. Just wanna support you in this.”

As we reached the second-floor landing and headed down the corridor, Ushio adjusted the strap of her bookbag and cast another glance at me over her shoulder.

“You know, this new emotionally honest streak of yours is really throwing me for a loop,” she said. “Feel like I’m way too used to you being an indecisive fence-sitter by now.”

“Wow, I see how it is...” I grumbled. “Fine then. Maybe I’ll just shut up from here on out.”

“No, I don’t mean it like that’s a bad thing! Really, I don’t...”

Ushio’s expression looked half guilty, half conflicted. Maybe it really *was* a bit cringey for me to wear my heart on my sleeve, like Hasumi said. But things were easier for me when I didn’t keep them bottled up, and Ushio just told me she didn’t think it was a bad thing, so I wasn’t going to overthink it. For now, I’d stay the course.

We walked into Classroom 2-A. Right as we parted ways to head for our respective desks, I spotted an intruder in the classroom: Sera. Admittedly, this wasn’t an uncommon sight (even if it was always an unwelcome one), but after yesterday’s kerfuffle with Nishizono, I was immediately on edge. Was more

drama about to go down? I nonchalantly glanced in his direction as I made my way to my desk, and I managed to overhear him talking with someone.

“Anyway, what do *you* think, Marine-chan?” he said.

“Who, me?” Mashima replied. “Mmm, I dunno...”

Interesting. I’d never once seen Sera strike up a conversation with Mashima. It didn’t sound like he was having much success in this endeavor, but that wasn’t surprising if they’d never spoken one-on-one before (if you could call it one-on-one with Shiina looming nearby). Perhaps it was no cause for concern—still, the sight of him trying to sweet-talk yet another female classmate of mine left a foul taste in my mouth.

I set my bookbag down and took my seat, keeping a close eye on Sera as I pulled out my textbooks and moved them into my desk.

Yeah, no. He’s totally up to something, isn’t he?

Before my suspicions could be confirmed, the bell rang, and Sera waltzed out of the classroom with a spring in his step. He looked like an employee who’d just gotten off work, feeling satisfied after a job well done.

Sera swung by our classroom during every break period after that. Each time, he’d just chat around spewing nonsense at a few of my classmates (seemingly at random) for about five minutes, then slink off. That was all he did—just made small talk with whoever would listen and without any particular topic or objective in mind. He wasn’t directly needling Nishizono, at the very least; he steered totally clear of her. For a while, I was pretty much convinced that he had to be simply killing time. But eventually, I noticed that there *was* something all of his conversation partners had in common.

In which case, perhaps there was a method to his madness after all.

“Yo, Kamiki,” said Hasumi, walking over as soon as lunch hour rolled around.

“Hm? Oh, hey.” I quickly cleared a space for him at my desk.

“No, don’t worry about it. Got a table tennis team function today. Gonna be eating lunch there, so just wanted to let you know that you’re on your own

today.”

“Oh, got it...”

That was kind of a bummer. Not that I’d been especially looking forward to eating lunch with Hasumi or anything, mind you, but... *Actually, hang on.*

“Why do you say that like it means I’m gonna have to eat alone today?” I said. “I have other friends aside from just you, y’know.”

“Mm? Ah, right,” said Hasumi. “Anyway, I’m headin’ out. See ya.”

With that, Hasumi walked out of the classroom, shrugging off my comment as though he literally couldn’t care less. This attitude *did* annoy me a bit, but I appreciated him giving me a heads-up, so I figured I’d let it slide. It was pretty hard to dislike the guy.

In any event, it seemed like I’d have to eat lunch with Ushio and Hoshihara today. I reached down to pull out my bento box—but my fingers couldn’t find it.

“Wait, what the...?”

I set my bookbag up on my desk and did a more thorough search of its contents, but alas, there was no lunch to be found. I must have forgotten it at home when I rushed out the door, worried I might be late after sleeping in. I could always go buy myself a bun or sandwich of some sort at the school store, but there’d probably be a huge line there by now, so I figured I’d just get a hot lunch at the cafeteria for a change. I grabbed my wallet, then got up and walked out into the hall.

After receiving a bowl of tempura udon on my tray, I scanned the lunchroom from the cafeteria counter to try to find a table where I could sit. Unfortunately, the lunchroom was about as packed as I feared the school store might be. There were still open seats here and there, but not enough to avoid sitting right next to someone else. In which case, I’d rather share a table with a total stranger who was also eating by themselves than sit next to a classmate I recognized. I’d never liked having to fake-socialize with people I was only barely acquainted with. Surely there had to be at least one other loner I could eat in peace with.

“Hey, look who it is! Kamiki, over heeere!”

As I stood there sizing up my options, someone called out my name. When I turned to look, I saw a rather animated girl waving excitedly at me from a table in the back of the lunchroom. It was Mashima—and Shiina was sitting across from her.

“O-oh, hey,” I said uncomfortably, waving back as I obediently walked over to stand at the side of their table. Mashima had a plate of curry, and Shiina had ordered the special of the day: a deep-fried horse mackerel platter.

“You were lookin’ for a place to sit, right?” said Mashima. “You’re welcome to sit with us if you wanna. Only 300 yen for every ten minutes!”

“Ouch, that’s pretty steep,” I replied. “Think I’ll pass, in that case...”

“Aw, I’m just messin’ with ya. Siddown already!”

She pulled out the chair beside her and patted it with her hand. Seeing no reason to refuse this kind offer, I gratefully set my tray down and took a seat. Unlike with certain people I knew, I didn’t mind being messed with by Mashima—probably because there was never any real mean-spiritedness behind it. It also proved that she thought we were close enough to fool around, which felt nice. Funnily enough, my only mild source of reservation in this regard was her companion. Whenever Mashima joked with me, Shiina would watch me very carefully from her side, as she was right now. And there was something about her guardedness that unsettled me a bit.

“Kamiki-kun,” said Shiina, right on cue.

“Yes, ma’am?!” I blurted out in response to this authoritative address.

“Don’t you usually eat with Hasumi-kun in the classroom? What brings you down here all by yourself today?”

“Well, uh...Hasumi had other plans, and I kinda forgot my lunch...”

“Oh, you don’t say.”

“Yeah...”

Thus ended this woefully pathetic interaction. Her somewhat interrogative tone had made me stiffen up a bit, despite the innocuous nature of the

question itself.

“C’mon, Kamiki!” said Mashima. “At least try to keep the conversation going!”

“Sorry... Wasn’t really sure what else to say...”

“Shiina’s obviously trying to socialize with you here! But you’ve gotta meet her halfway if you wanna get to know her better! Sheesh, no wonder you’re such a loner.”

Ouch. Now that one stung a bit.

“Could you please not put words in my mouth, Marine?” said Shiina. “I never said anything to imply I wanted to get to know him.”

“Oh, so you don’t, then?” said Mashima. “Dang. Sucks to be you, Kamiki.”

Th-this brat! I took back what I said before about her teasing never being mean-spirited—she could totally be cruel at times. I knew playing into it would only make me look like even more of an idiot, so instead I got to work on my bowl of udon in silence, relegating myself to the role of third wheel. The two girls went back to chatting as though I wasn’t even there, Shiina entertaining all of Mashima’s excited ranting with gentle, muted replies. Despite their opposite dispositions, there wasn’t a hint of awkwardness in their rapport. They were completely open with one another. It was a little hard to believe that Nishizono would have probably been sitting right here with them, were it only a few months prior.

Both Mashima and Shiina had been members of the now-disbanded Nishizono clique, but I hadn’t seen either of them say a single word to her in recent weeks. I assumed it was because they’d grown disillusioned with her after her recent behavior. I thought that was a change for the better, anyhow; they were both good people who deserved better friends than Nishizono. Hell, they’d even helped me study for my first-semester exams free of charge, back when I was aiming to score first in our grade.

Since I wasn’t participating in the conversation, I wolfed down my lunch far faster than my tablemates. After slurping up the last of my noodles, I set my chopsticks down. I didn’t want to just sit here awkwardly now that I was finished, though, so I figured I’d probably mosey back up to the classroom. Then

I realized that this was the perfect opportunity to ask these two something that had been weighing on my mind all day. I waited for a lull in their conversation, then spoke up.

“Hey, so by the way—did I see you two talking to Sera this morning?” I asked.

“Oh, right, yeah!” said Mashima. “Man, that was so bizarre!”

I leaned over the table a bit and lowered my voice. “You think he’s just trying to get on Nishizono’s nerves with that, or what?”

“I mean, what *else* could it be? Like, the guy was literally singling out all of the kids who used to be her friends and tryin’ to get all buddy-buddy with them. I’ll give him one thing, though—he’s got balls, that’s for sure,” said Mashima, scrunching up her face.

So she’d picked up on that pattern too; it wasn’t just me reading into things.

“Wait. What’s this about trying to get on her nerves?” Shiina asked after swallowing a bite of her deep-fried mackerel. Apparently, she hadn’t noticed what we had.

“Well, I mean...” said Mashima, obliging, “how would *you* feel if someone you really hate suddenly started getting a lot closer to all of *your* friends?”

“Does it matter? If they want to be friends, that’s their business.”

“Oh, so you wouldn’t mind if I started eating lunch with Sera tomorrow instead of you, I take it?”

“What?!” Shiina was so obviously flabbergasted by this suggestion, her chopsticks slipped from between her fingers and clattered to the table. Then she fell silent, wearing a troubled expression as she thought this over for a good five seconds or so. It went on long enough that I nearly chimed in to remind her it was only a hypothetical, but she finally said, “Well, if that’s what you really want...I suppose I won’t stop you...”

“Aw, quit with the noble act!” Mashima said, clapping Shiina on the shoulder so hard, the other girl yelped in pain. “I mean, yeah, obviously people can be friends with whoever they want, but it’d still make you feel pretty crappy, right? And Sera knows that Arisa hates him, but he’s still going out of his way to try to

chat us up right where she can see it. Hence, trying to get on her nerves.”

“R-right, okay...”

It seemed she finally saw what we were saying. To be fair, I could totally see why it might seem like an ultimately harmless—if somewhat petty—form of harassment to some people. But for the person actually being subjected to it, it could definitely feel like torture. Intentional or not, it was something I assumed most people had experienced in their lives: seeing someone they really liked getting along with someone they really didn’t and feeling helplessly vexed about it, even if there was no rational basis for that emotion.

In Sera’s case, it clearly *was* intentional, which made it feel an awful lot more malicious. Especially because he wasn’t technically doing anything wrong. Even if Nishizono blew her top and went after him about it, he’d still have the moral high ground. The guy could even gaslight her and tell her to stop being so paranoid and self-centered about it, which would no doubt only piss her off even more.

On top of that, it was an effective way to further isolate Nishizono from her friends, redirecting her anger not just at Sera but at her old friends who saw no issue with giving him the time of day. This would only serve to deepen the rift between her and her peers, making her even more of the “villain” of the classroom through no one’s fault but her own. It was a pretty wicked thing to do, in that sense.

“Well,” I said, “if Nishizono’s able to just block him out and ignore it, then I guess it’s no harm, no foul, but yeah...”

“Nah, I’m pretty sure it’ll get to her,” said Mashima. “Arisa’s really catty about this stuff—like, who’s friends with who and all that. It’s kind of a loyalty thing to her.”

“Can’t *you* do something about this, Kamiki-kun?” said Shiina.

She looked at me as if I was their only hope, but all I could do was shake my head.

“No way. I can’t deal with that guy, sorry.”

“God, you’re such a... Well, I guess there’s nothing for it, then.”

“Sorry, what were you about to call me?”

Why does it feel like this girl low-key has a bone to pick with me sometimes?

After finishing off the last few bites of food on her plate, Shiina set down her chopsticks and demurely wiped her mouth. Meanwhile, Mashima was still only halfway through her curry (being so talkative made her a slow eater, it seemed). I took a look around and saw that the packed lunchroom had cleared out quite a bit by this point, with only Mashima and a handful of other people still eating lunch, as well as a few groups that had finished their food but were still lingering around chitchatting. Shiina put her elbows on the table and rested her head on her hands as she waited for Mashima to finish eating.



“Anyway, I’m sure Arisa can handle it,” said Shiina. “That girl hates losing more than anyone I know.”

Yes, which is exactly what I’m worried about, I thought, but I kept that to myself. Still, there was no denying that Nishizono was totally liable to blow her top and escalate the situation in any number of underhanded or even violent ways.

“I take it you’re on Nishizono’s side, then?” I asked Shiina.

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?” she replied, furrowing her brow.

“Uh, sorry. Not saying I think you shouldn’t be or that I’m on Sera’s or anything. Guess I’m just belatedly realizing that it’s a little surprising you two ever got as close as you were, what with you being such a model student and her being anything but... Feels like you two would probably be mortal enemies in any other timeline.”

“Oh... Yes, I suppose I can see that,” said Shiina, lifting her cup to take a sip of water for the first time in a while. “But with Arisa, it’s a bit of a nuanced situation. While I can’t in good conscience condone her actions, I can’t exactly oppose her either.”

“Huh? Why, does she have dirt on you or something?”

“No, it’s more of a courtesy thing. And that I owe her a debt of gratitude.”

“Really? For what?”

“Well, for one thing, she and I went to the same elementary school, though we didn’t actually start speaking to one another until junior high.”

“Mm-hmm! Same here!” Mashima chimed in with her mouth full of curry. This was mildly fascinating to me; I’d known Mashima and Shiina were childhood friends, but I didn’t know they went that far back with Nishizono as well.

“Yes, the three of us were in the same class back in eighth grade,” Shiina continued. “Along with this one particular boy who was infamous at our school for having a bit of a violent streak. There were always eerie rumors floating around about him having stabbed someone before and so forth. No one ever

wanted to get on his bad side.”

“Oh, man,” I said. “I feel like I can already see where this is going... Nishizono beat the crap out of him, didn’t she?”

“What the...? How did you know?”

“Wait, so she actually did? How the hell did that happen?”

“Well, there was a period of time in which that boy started stalking me around campus, more or less. During the worst of it, there was a day when both Arisa and I were tasked with cleanup duty. He came by our classroom after school and basically told me to ‘blow it off’ so I could walk home with him.”

“Oof, sounds like a real creep...”

“Obviously, I said no, but he refused to back down... And that’s when Arisa came over and told him off on my behalf. But the guy wasn’t exactly the type to listen to reason, so of course it turned into a full-blown altercation. It was rather brutal, I must say... You know those extra-large blackboard triangles from geometry class? Arisa grabbed one of those and just started swinging it wildly at his face like some sort of weapon. I’m fairly certain she was the only person in our entire school who’d ever dare to do such a thing.”

That was still one person too many, as far as I was concerned—but at least it was to protect another girl from a stalker in this case. And in total fairness, junior high was a pretty rough time even for the very best of us. It was that awkward in-between period of pubescence in which you weren’t quite as emotionally mature and developed as a high schooler, but you were more hormonal than an elementary schooler. Plus, it was the first time you had to grow accustomed to doing group work with other kids who may or may not be your friends, and you had to really start thinking about your extracurriculars and higher education trajectory. It was a confusing and stressful time for a variety of reasons, and kids could be awfully cruel, so it was typically a far more volatile social environment than high school. It wouldn’t surprise me at all if that was where Nishizono’s more combative sensibilities had been instilled in her.

“Thankfully, the guy stayed far, far away from me after that,” Shiina continued. “But from then on, Arisa and I started talking more... And, well, the

rest is history.”

“Interesting... Okay,” I said.

This felt more like a one-off tale of heroism than a recounting of how two people became friends, but I could see how Shiina might feel somewhat indebted to Nishizono after that. But even with this added context, the current situation didn’t fully sit right with me. If anything, one would think that them having that sort of history together should make Shiina *more* comfortable voicing opposition to Nishizono’s current prejudiced frame of mind. Weren’t true friends supposed to reach out and show each other the errors of their ways when they were acting out of line or harboring harmful delusions? There was a lot I could have said—but I also didn’t feel like it was my place to lecture her, so I held my tongue. Shiina must have picked up on the gist of my thoughts from my reaction alone, as she cast her eyes down with guilt.

“As I said before, it’s not as if I condone all of Arisa’s actions here,” she said. “She’s done plenty of things I think are utterly unacceptable. At the same time, I wouldn’t feel right just casting her aside either.”

There was something about what Shiina was saying that I couldn’t quite swallow. Not that she refused to totally give up hope for someone she once called a friend; that was completely understandable. It was something separate from that, but I couldn’t say what.

“Well, I guess it’s just a matter of perspective, yeah...” I said vapidly. I didn’t want to push the issue until it turned into a moral argument, which would only leave her with a worse opinion of me than she already had. “Wait. Why aren’t you still eating lunch with her, then? I assumed you guys were distancing yourselves from her on a moral basis, but now you’re telling me you *also* don’t want to abandon her?”

“Yes, it’s a bit touchy in that regard,” said Shiina. “Part of it is that I don’t get the impression Arisa *wants* us talking to her right now... She has this sort of unapproachable aura about her lately, especially after all the recent drama.”

“Pretty sure she’s always had that, but okay, fair enough...”

“Phee-yew! I’m stuffed!” Mashima blurted out, having finally finished her curry. “Kinda wish I’d just ordered the regular size... Figured I could handle the

large since Nakki finished it no problem, but *man*, that was a lotta food.”

She grabbed a napkin from the nearby dispenser and wiped her mouth, then looked between Shiina and me.

“So,” she said, “we done with all the serious talk for now?”

“Yes,” Shiina immediately responded.

“I guess so, yeah,” I said at the exact same time.

“Oh snap! Sounds like you guys are on the same wavelength now. That’s so cute! There’s nothin’ sweeter than a budding friendship.” Mashima nodded, then gave me an ominous look and added, “But don’t get too full of yourself now, Kamiki... Shiina’s *mine*, you hear me? Don’t even think of trying to run off with her.”

“I mean, I wasn’t planning to...”

I wasn’t sure what the hell she was implying, but Shiina seemed almost pleased by this possessiveness on Mashima’s part. I was tempted to make a stupid quip about *theirs* being the friendship that seemed likely to bud into something more, but I held off.

I awoke to the sound of my alarm going off.

Still face down, I reached for my phone by my bedside and turned it off. It was five o’clock in the morning—the same time Ushio claimed to be waking up every day. Only when I strained my eyes could I tell that the tiniest amount of light was beginning to leak in through my window curtains. I knew I’d only fall back asleep if I didn’t get up right away, so I dragged myself out of bed through sheer willpower, then changed out of my pajamas and into a tracksuit before heading downstairs.

“Blegh... So tired...”

My eyelids felt heavy; this was my first early morning in quite a while, and my body was definitely letting me know it was none too pleased with me. After washing my face to wake myself up a bit, I heard the sound of footsteps coming down the stairs.

“Wait... You’re up already?” said my sister, Ayaka. I could see her standing behind me, reflected in the washroom mirror—her face was languid, and her hair was frizzy. She always got up well before I did, so I never got to see her with bedhead like this.

“Yeah. Got stuff to do.”

“What stuff? Oh, wait... You’re on litter cleanup duty, aren’t you?”

“Uh, no... Not sure where you got that idea.”

“Oh, right... Radio calisthenics, duh...”

She was legally classifiable as still asleep, it seemed. (And no, it was not radio calisthenics either. Obviously.)

Ayaka hobbled upstairs on unsteady legs. Just as I was wondering why she’d come down here in the first place, she turned and descended the staircase yet again.

“Right, gotta pee...” she mumbled, then headed into the bathroom.

Funnily enough, I felt a lot more awake after this bizarre exchange with my sister, whereas she was still in zombie mode. I brushed my teeth and went outside without grabbing my things or even a bite to eat.

“Ugh, it’s freezing out...”

The frigid autumn air stung my skin, wringing a sigh of resignation from my lungs that turned white the moment it left my lips. I’d picked out a nylon tracksuit that I figured would block out most of the wind, but perhaps I should’ve worn another layer. I didn’t want to head back inside now, though, so I hopped on my bike that was parked at the edge of the yard and pedaled off down the road.

I wondered how long it had actually been since I last woke up this early. Daybreak was drawing nearer, but the clear skies overhead were still dim, with only the slightest hint of a sunrise gradient forming on the eastern horizon. It was quiet all around; the autumn insects were still fast asleep, so the only sound was that of a nearby newspaper carrier making their daily rounds by motorbike.

After about ten minutes of pedaling, I reached my destination and set my feet down on the pavement a short ways from the property. Still straddling my bike, I waited outside the house for a couple minutes. At length, Ushio emerged in her tracksuit and started jogging down the sidewalk to warm up. I pedaled up from behind.

“Morning, Ushio,” I said, squeezing my brakes as I pulled up alongside her.

“Hm?” She looked over. “Oh, hey, Sakuma...”

I could tell from her half-lidded eyes and mumbly voice that she was barely awake.

“Heard you’d started training in the mornings, so I figured I’d swing by.”

“Right, okay... Gotcha...”

I hadn’t told her that I was planning to show up, so I’d been expecting a bit more of a reaction than this, but she seemed fairly indifferent to my surprise appearance—or so I thought. All of a sudden, her droopy eyes shot wide open, and she finally came to her senses.

“Wait, Sakuma?! What are *you* doing here?!”

Aaaaand there we go. She was still in the process of waking up, apparently.

“I mean, I just told you... Figured I’d show up to offer emotional support for your morning runs. I know it’s gotta be rough waking up so early, but I thought having some company might make things a little more bearable.”

“Y-you could have given me a heads-up, at least!”

“Nah. I figured the surprise aspect might help you wake up a little.”

“I mean...it certainly helped in *that* regard, yeah...”

Ushio seemed fairly distraught by this development—to the point that I wondered if I’d only hampered her focus by showing up. But I couldn’t turn back now.

“Anyway, I promise I won’t get in your way or slow you down,” I said. “So I hope you’ll let me ride along for today, at least.”

“I certainly don’t mind... Yeah, no. You’re more than welcome to join. Should

help me stay motivated to have someone around to keep me honest too.”

“Cool. Guess I’ll follow you from behind, then.”

Ushio nodded, then resumed her warm-up jog. After loosening up for about ten minutes, she instructed me to follow closely behind her and keep up the pressure, then started to run. I did as I was told, pedaling a bit more regularly to stay on her tail as I watched her silver-blond hair flutter behind her.

Right as we turned onto the riverside road, the sun finally crept up over the horizon. Its bright-orange glow forced me to squint with one eye as it gently warmed one half of my face, while the other remained crisp and cool. It was a nice feeling, enough to make me think maybe getting up early every once in a while wasn’t all that bad after all.

Eventually, Ushio slowed her pace until she was running abreast of me.

“You know,” she said, “our team advisor always said that talking while you run is a great way to build stamina.”

“Oh yeah?” I replied. “Because it tucks you out faster, or what?”

“Well, that’s part of it. But I guess it’s mainly just that it’s easier to keep pushing yourself and not focus on how tired you are when you’re engaged in conversation.”

“Ah, that makes sense. Well...maybe we should talk about something, then?”

Having said that, I couldn’t think of any particularly good conversation starters at the moment; there was still a bit of a sleepy haze hanging over my brain. Thankfully, Ushio took the initiative before I said anything stupid.

“How’s Ayaka-chan been lately?”

“She’s been good. Pretty much the same as she was last time you saw her, over summer vacation. Talked to her briefly this morning before I headed out, actually.”

“Dang, at this hour? She must be an early riser, then.”

“Nah, we just happened to cross paths when she got up to use the bathroom. She was totally out of it—thought I was on my way to go do radio calisthenics, of all things.”

“Ha ha, oh, man. That’s really cute.”

“Yeah, wish she was always that adorable. When she’s actually awake, feels like all she ever does is hurl insults and orders at me. Oh, but she *does* behave herself whenever you’re around, to be fair. She may be a little terror, but she’s pretty shy when it comes to people she respects.”

“Awww. Hope I can see her again soon.”

“I mean, you’re always welcome to swing by. I’m sure she’d love that.”

“Okay, I’ll have to take you up on that one of these days...”

“For sure.”

A resounding splash echoed through the quiet morning air as a fish breached the surface of the nearby river, then arced through the air and fell right back in. The river was calm today, and the dawn light shimmered on its surface like so many shards of shattered glass. It was a beautiful morning—which might’ve been why my gaze was so easily drawn to the massive stretch along the floodplain that had become a hotspot for illegally dumping everything from minor trash to discarded furniture and appliances. I’d heard that it had been reported to the local authorities multiple times already, but it had been a problem for quite a while now, and they’d done absolutely nothing about it thus far. It was just a massive eyesore—a pile of discarded humanity left by the river to rot.

Every once in a while, I couldn’t help but think that was all our town of Tsubakioka amounted to as a whole: a festering, forgotten trash heap that no one who mattered gave a damn about. The countless potholes dotting our roads were simply left there to deepen, and our once-charming shopping district was practically a ghost town of shuttered, deteriorating buildings now that a behemoth AEON Mall had opened nearby. According to my parents, the local youth population was steadily declining as well, which meant that there were never enough able-bodied volunteers for things like the fire department or festival-planning committees. And I was planning to leave too, someday.

Sure, it was the only place I’d ever lived—my hometown where I’d been born and raised—but I harbored no fondness for the place. Someone could absolutely call me a traitor or what have you for abandoning my local

community and becoming part of the problem, and I'd still pack up my bags and leave it to rot with no shame or guilt.

I wondered if Ushio would do the same. It was then that I realized that we'd never talked about our post-graduation plans before. Given her academic credentials, there was no doubt in my mind that she'd be planning to pursue higher education, but I'd never asked her what colleges she was considering, for instance.

"Hey, Ushio. What are you planning to do after high school?"

There came a brief pause in Ushio's measured, panting breaths as she raced along—but then she swallowed and resumed her previous rhythm.

"Hoping to go to college in Tokyo," she said.

"Oh, no kidding?" I said. "Same as me, then."

This was a relief to hear, in all honesty. Even if we ended up going to totally different colleges, we at least wouldn't be too far apart if we were both in the big city. We could totally stay in touch and meet up casually on a day or two's notice if we wanted to. It remained to be seen whether we actually *would*, but it was reassuring to know we had the same general course in mind.

"Yeah, you always did talk about wanting to move to Tokyo when we were little," said Ushio.

"Wait, did I really?"

"Sure you did."

When did I ever say that?

I scoured my memory, yet all I could recall was casually mentioning that maybe it would be cool to live in Tokyo, given the opportunity—but that was just an offhand remark I made back in elementary school or something. Still, I'd always had my sights set on Tokyo to some degree. Perhaps I'd mentioned it more times than I realized, and it simply stuck in Ushio's brain more than my own.

"But I've never even *been* to Tokyo, except to go to Disneyland," I said.

"That's in Chiba, silly."

“Huh? But it’s literally called Tokyo Disneyland.”

“It’s *near* Tokyo, yeah. But it’s technically in Chiba prefecture.”

“...You’re kidding me, right?”

“No, I’m serious. It’s a pretty common misconception, though.”

Now I was *really* embarrassed. I felt like my whole life was a lie.

We kept chatting idly as we made our way along the riverside. While Ushio did gradually start talking less and less the farther we went, she still maintained a consistent pace throughout. But of course she did—she was a star athlete.

Finally, after about forty solid minutes of running, Ushio slowed to a walk and started her cooldown. I hopped down off my bike and started pushing it by the handles alongside her as the growing sunlight gently pressed against our backs.

“Feel like I managed to keep a pretty good pace today,” said Ushio, wiping the sweat trickling down her temple with the shoulder fabric of her track jacket.

“Hey, that’s good to hear.”

“Definitely nice having someone else around. Makes the time go by a lot quicker.” She hesitantly turned to face me. “Um, I’d actually really like it if you came with me again sometime... Obviously doesn’t have to be every single day, though.”

“Sure, I don’t mind. And I can totally do every day.”

“No, that’s okay. I’d feel bad making you wake up this early all the time.”

“I mean, yeah, that part kinda sucks—but it feels a lot nicer getting up and out there first thing in the morning than I thought it would. The air’s nice and crisp, it’s super quiet, and it’s really pleasant feeling the warm sunlight on your skin... So yeah. I’ll totally go out with you every day.”

Ushio blinked at me a couple of times, then bashfully lowered her gaze. “Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it.”

After that, we stopped at a nearby park, where I joined Ushio in doing some cooldown stretches before returning to her house and finishing our loop.

“Well, guess I’ll see you at school later,” I said.

“Yeah,” said Ushio. “See you then.”

And with that, I hopped back on my bike and headed home. The sky overhead, so dim and dusky when I first set out, was now dyed a uniform shade of blue, as if carefully coated from corner to corner by some unseen painter with slow, methodical brushstrokes.

I stifled a yawn as I made my way up to Classroom 2-A. I thought I’d fully woken up after accompanying Ushio on her morning run, but as more time passed, my drowsiness caught up with me. At this rate, I’d probably fall asleep during class. Thankfully, I’d arrived at school a bit early, and there were still ten minutes left before homeroom began, so I figured I could squeeze in a little catnap. But as I walked down the corridor, nodding off, I felt a clap on my shoulder from behind. I whirled around, only to immediately wish I’d stayed home today.

“...Hello, Sera,” I said.

“Morning, Sakuma!” he said. “How’s it goin’?”

This irksomely chipper greeting added a layer of annoyance on top of my fatigue.

“Is there something I can help you with?” I asked, monotone.

“What, I’m not allowed to talk to ya unless I need something?”

“I mean, no, but... Actually, yes, on second thought. Don’t ever speak to me unless it’s important. You’re too obnoxious to deal with otherwise.”

“Sheesh, now *that’s* pretty rude. And after all we’ve been through together...”

“Don’t start with me right now.”

I didn’t want to waste any of what little energy I had remaining on this chump, so I picked up the pace to get away from him as quickly as I could. Yet even after we passed by the door to Classroom 2-D, he remained stuck to me like glue.

“Hey,” I said. “What gives? You gonna follow me all the way to *my* classroom?”

“You betcha. Wanna talk with some of my good pals in Class A again.”

So he said, but I knew he was only trying to get on Nishizono’s nerves.

“...I wouldn’t grind that girl’s gears too hard, if I were you,” I told him.

“Ooh—*hoo*. So you’re on Arisa-chan’s side, eh?”

This was a tacit confirmation of what I already suspected—he wasn’t even making an *attempt* to hide that these were his true intentions.

“No,” I said. “I’m only saying that you probably shouldn’t start drama with her just for the hell of it. I can almost guarantee you won’t like what happens next... Get her riled up, and they’ll have to pull her kicking and screaming off your mutilated body.”

“Boy, that does sound scary. But don’t worry. She can’t win against me.”

He sounded awfully sure of this. While I didn’t know where that confidence came from, Nishizono *was* at a pretty big disadvantage here. She was already on thin ice after the Ushio debacle last semester. Maybe Sera had heard about her getting suspended for that, and he knew there was a pretty high likelihood of her getting expelled if she were to cause another violent altercation now. Put another way, she’d already been issued a yellow card, and the referees were watching her like hawks, whereas Sera—while by no means a paragon of exemplary conduct—was not considered as much of a potential threat to school security, at least as far as the faculty were concerned. Perhaps *that* was why he felt so confident he could triumph over her.

“You’re pretty conniving, you know that?” I said. “Is this your idea of fun? Relentlessly egging someone on because you know you’ll get off scot-free if they snap?”

“You wound me, buddy boy,” said Sera. “But no—the *real* fun’s just getting started.”

There was a glint of childlike anticipation in Sera’s eyes as he said this.

We arrived at Classroom 2-A shortly thereafter, and I headed for my desk

while Sera ran off in another direction to where a group of girls had gathered.

Once again, Sera came by to visit our classroom during every break period. His methodology hadn't changed one bit from yesterday. He would swing by, try to chat it up with some of Nishizono's old hangers-on, then leave when the warning bell rang. Some of them seemed to have wised up to what Sera was scheming, however, and were now actively trying to evade him or make excuses. But this was Sera we were talking about, so of course he didn't give up that easily. He persisted with his charm and cajolery until he drew a smile from the other party, and without fail, he always seemed to get them feeling talkative eventually. Loath as I was to admit it, he was a master at the art of conversation.

As for his target, this strategy was having exactly the effect that Sera intended. It was plain to see that Nishizono's anger was slowly coming to a boil. She was tapping her foot incessantly against the floor with nervous tension, and from time to time she'd even turn her head to glare at Sera directly. There was enough fury in that gaze to make most grown men wither in fear, yet Sera readily took it on the chin with his devil-may-care attitude.

Eventually, lunch hour rolled around. As I cleared my desk and pulled out my bento box, Hasumi walked over with his own lunch in hand.

"So how'd it go yesterday?" he said, pulling up a chair to sit across from me. It seemed we were going back to our typical eating arrangement today.

"How'd what go?" I asked.

"Didn't you eat lunch with Tsukinoki and Hoshihara yesterday?"

"Oh, right... No, I went down and ate in the lunchroom, actually."

"Whoa. All by yourself?"

"Nah, Mashima and Shiina invited me to sit with them."

"Dang, sounds like *someone's* getting awfully popular with the ladies."

"Oh, please. It's nothing like that... Though I guess I *have* made a decent number of female friends lately, so maybe you're right. I mean, who knows—

perhaps my Casanova era is yet to come, eh?”

“What’d you guys talk about?”

“Just gonna totally ignore that, huh? Ouch, man.” Granted, I knew it was a pretty lame joke, so he might’ve given it exactly the reception it deserved. I unwrapped my bento box and started eating. “We talked about a few different things. Mostly Nishizono, just because of how volatile things have been with her recently.”

“Yeah, no kidding. Girl’s got some real menacing vibes. Feels like she’s been literally *oozing* hostility lately.”

“For sure. Definitely seems like she’s about ready to blow her top.” I split my rice ball in half with my chopsticks, then used them to ferry a piece up to my mouth.

Having said that, I really couldn’t claim to be that concerned with the current state of affairs—mainly because, for as long as Sera’s and Nishizono’s attentions were focused on each other, neither of them would have the extra capacity to mess with me or Ushio. Sera actually hadn’t said a single word to Ushio since the day Nishizono dumped her milk over his head. Bad as it sounded, it was kind of a godsend that the two of them were too preoccupied butting heads with one another, especially since Ushio had enough on her plate right now—namely the upcoming race with Noi.

“Who do you think’ll come out on top?” Hasumi asked me.

“Huh? Sorry, come again?”

“Between Nishizono and Sera. Who do you think’ll win? It’s kinda the talk of the whole school right now, apparently,” he said, munching on a chunk of fried chicken. “Which I guess isn’t a huge surprise, what with them both having bad reputations and all.”

“Well, I don’t think it’s great for people who have no stake in it to speculate and encourage this sort of thing, personally. There’s no winners or losers here.”

“Aw, come on, man. It’s really not all *that* dire, now, is it? I mean, Sera sure seems to be enjoying himself, at least.”

“I mean, yeah, but like...”

As I tried to formulate a counterargument, the man himself came waltzing into the classroom. *Speak of the devil*. Judging from the plastic bag in his right hand, it seemed he was planning on eating his lunch here today. He quickly sought out another ex-member of the Nishizono clique and made a beeline to where she was sitting. After two days straight of sheer persistence, the girls in my class had pretty much accepted his presence as normal by this point and even welcomed him with open arms. It didn’t take long for the voices from that corner of the room to sound a lot livelier.

“The real fun’s only just getting started.”

Sera’s ominous words from this morning were still ringing in my head. I didn’t know what on earth the “real” fun was going to entail, or when it would truly begin (if it hadn’t already), but I sure didn’t like the sound of it. Then again, maybe I shouldn’t have put too much stock in his puzzling choice of phrasing, given how capricious he tended to be.

As I tried and failed to not let it gnaw at my brain the way I was chewing on a particularly tough hunk of meat from my bento box, I heard a strange, rhythmic tapping sound amid the lunchtime clamor—almost like a knife chopping vegetables. It was soft enough that I thought it might have been my imagination, yet clear enough that I opened my ears and listened closely, determined to find its source.

Lo and behold, it was coming from Nishizono. Her heel hit the floor over and over as she rapidly tapped her foot, an unconscious byproduct of her leg trembling uncontrollably again.

Tap-tap-tap-tap-tap.

There was a sort of frustrated quality to the sound produced by this nervous tic. To me, it almost sounded like a ticking time bomb as Nishizono’s patience slowly but surely counted down to zero. All I could hope for was that the shrapnel from the inevitable detonation wouldn’t fly far enough to make casualties of any innocent bystanders.

After a few more days of accompanying Ushio on her morning runs, it was beginning to feel like a natural part of my daily routine. She'd run for about an hour or so, then we'd both briefly return home before heading to school. Over the weekend, we started a bit later, at a much more reasonable eight o'clock in the morning, and Ushio did a mixture of endurance running along with some light resistance training well into the afternoon. She was holding herself to a pretty strict training regimen.

We were already less than a week out from her race with Noi, and while I was sure she could feel the pressure, she didn't seem all that stressed about it. If anything, *I* was feeling more nervous than she was. I didn't want her to have to rejoin the track team. That'd eat up virtually all of her free time, and it would also mean she couldn't walk home with me and Hoshihara anymore.

"So yeah, I went over and tried to talk to her, but it turned out it was a completely different person. Whoops! We kinda hit it off anyway, and now we're actually really good friends, and we even..."

My train of thought was interrupted by Sera's obnoxiously loud voice. I pressed pause on my inner monologue and turned to look across the classroom at where he was sitting, having lunch with us as he always did now, ever since the day Nishizono dumped milk over his head. And yes, he was still coming by during every ten-minute break period between classes as well (aside from ones in which we all had to move to a different room or building). By this point, I was pretty sure no one would bat an eye if Sera wormed his way into our class's group photo in the school yearbook.

Come to think of it, this was oddly similar to what happened last time, when Sera asked Ushio out and started visiting our classroom almost every day up until summer vacation in an attempt to get closer to her. While it wasn't all that bad in and of itself, he was also dating several other girls who (at the time) had no idea about one another. Then he even had the gall to just stop caring about fulfilling her condition for going out with her, and he gave up on placing first on our final exam partway through. I supposed Sera was nothing if not unpredictable—which was probably why I felt so nervous about this situation. You never knew *what* he was going to do next.

Thankfully, the warning bell to announce the end of lunch hour was going to

ring any second now, and he'd have no choice but to slink back to Class D where he belonged. Right on cue, Sera glanced up at the clock, then excused himself from the conversation he'd been having—and headed right over to where Nishizono was sitting.

Wait. He's not going back to his own class?

Immediately, my mind went on red alert as he stopped right in front of Nishizono's desk, looking down on her as she idly fiddled with her cell phone. Noticing his presence, she looked up at him with the most despondent expression imaginable.

"What?"

"Let's have a little chat," said Sera. "Must be awful lonely over here by yourself."

"I've got nothing to say to you. Buzz off."

"Aw, c'mon... No need to be like that." Sera hopped up to plant his butt on Nishizono's desk like it was the most natural thing in the world.

"Hey, get *off*!"

"Why don'tcha try to make me, huh?"

"Excuse me? You want me to kick your ass, or what?"

"Oh, I'd love to see you try—assuming you actually could."

I could almost hear the sound of Nishizono's teeth grinding together. Seeing the irritation plain on her face, Sera's own expression turned to one of smug satisfaction.

"But we both know you can't afford to do that, can you? Not when you're on academic probation already. Next time you cause an incident, it'll have *major* repercussions on your long-term education plans. And I know even you wouldn't want that, Arisa-chan."

"So you came over here just to try to get a rise out of me? You really are a worm."

"No, it seems you're not getting it, Arisa-chan," Sera delicately continued.

“See, the thing is—and I’ve been meaning to tell you this for a while now—I’m a little upset with you, to be quite honest. And I mean, who wouldn’t be, after getting milk poured all over them? You have no *idea* how hard it was to get the smell out of my uniform that day. Made me the laughingstock of Class D when I walked back in there that afternoon. People were pinchin’ their noses, sayin’ I smelled like rotten eggs... Coulda easily gone and told the teacher on you, but I didn’t. You wanna know why?”

“Like I give a rat’s ass.”

“Because I’m a pretty nice guy, y’see. Decided to just let it go outta the kindness of my heart. Wouldn’t be very fair to go report a poor, helpless, lonely girl like you to the faculty just for a little petty payback, now would it? I figured maybe I should just come over here and try to hash things out with you one-on-one. How’s that sound? Because if I can be frank for a sec, all I’m really looking for is an apology. If you just give me one little ‘I’m sorry,’ I’d be willing to completely forgive and forget. Let bygones be bygones.”

“You sure know how to run your mouth, don’t you?”

Nishizono shot up to her feet—so angrily that it made her chair screech back across the floor. This immediately drew the attention of everyone in the room, and my fellow classmates looked on with worry in their eyes. Mashima and Shiina in particular seemed especially anxious as to what might happen. Nishizono was clearly pissed, judging from the deep creases in her forehead and the furious glint in her eyes.

“Don’t you talk down to me with your stupid bullcrap. I’ve got *nothing* to apologize to you for. I didn’t ‘pour’ anything. Like I said: I just lost my grip, all right?”

“Okay,” said Sera. “Let’s say for the sake of argument—and I’m being *very* generous here by even entertaining the notion—but just for a second, let’s assume it really *was* an accident. Wouldn’t a little apology still be in order? I think that’s only fair, right?”

“Pretty sure I *did* say I was sorry, like, immediately afterward. Also, why do you have to be such a ratty little schemer about everything, huh? I know you’ve only been coming into our classroom and chatting everyone up lately to piss me

off. That's, like, genuinely the most underhanded way of trying to get back at someone I've ever seen. You literally make me want to puke."

"Okay, now that's just—"

"Just what? Me being paranoid? Victim blaming? Don't even lie. There's no way a slithering little snake like you who knows he's good at pushing people's buttons could ever act like this and not realize it. Actually, no. I don't even care if you're doing it on purpose at this point. I'm just sick and tired of hearing your stupid voice. Don't *ever* speak to me again. And don't ever come to Class A again either. Just go ahead and try me—I *dare* you. I'll pry open your loud mouth and stab you in the back of the throat with a ballpoint pen."

By the time Nishizono finished this feverish rant of hers and the class went quiet again, her feverish panting was the only sound reverberating through the room. All of my classmates were at a loss for words, scared into silence by the sheer intensity of a small-statured girl not even a meter and a half tall. Then, at last, the warning bell rang—as if it had been waiting for everyone to shut up for its chance to speak. The two warring parties simply remained there with their gazes locked, each refusing to take their eyes off the other, until the familiar chime finished playing over the intercom.

Eventually, it was Sera's smug grin that faded first. He lowered his eyebrows, and his expression gradually turned gloomy and morose.

"You poor, poor little girl," he said.

"The *hell* did you just say?!" Nishizono barked, grabbing Sera by the collar. He made no attempt to wrest himself free, but he slid off her desk and stood up straight—which only made the dramatic difference in their heights that much more apparent. But Nishizono didn't falter one bit, nor did she take a single step back. She just continued glaring up at him from far below. "And what's *that* supposed to mean, huh?"

"I'm just saying I feel sorry for you, that's all. I mean, just look at you—jumping at shadows, so convinced that everyone else is out to get you... Well, not that I can't understand how you got to this point, I guess. You've been left behind by all of your friends, and you're treated like you're on a watch list by every member of the faculty... And to top it all off, you must feel like you were

totally blindsided and betrayed by your little secret crush too, huh? Kinda hard *not* to sympathize a bit, when I put myself in your shoes.”

“Uh, I beg your pardon?”

And then Sera went there.

“I mean, you totally had the hots for Ushio, didn’tcha?”

Nishizono was rendered speechless. Her mouth hung agape, and she froze up as if she’d just taken a bullet to the chest and was in a state of absolute shock—unable to understand how he could have possibly hit her from this angle.

“Friend of yours told me all about it,” Sera went on. “Man, that must’ve been a real unpleasant surprise for ya, huh? All of a sudden, the boy you like comes to school one day and says they wanna live their life as a girl instead... Can’t even imagine what a blow that must’ve been to your mental. But it all makes sense now. All that harassment was just your way of trying to bully her back into being a boy again, wasn’t it?”

“Wha...?” said Nishizono, her hands quaking on Sera’s collar. It wasn’t just her grip that was growing shaky; her lips and eyes were trembling in utter astonishment too. “Shut the hell up. That’s not even—”

“Like that time you got suspended, for instance,” said Sera, interrupting her. “You hit her in the nose with a metal thermos, right? At first I was like, ‘Damn, how cruel do you gotta be to wanna damage a pretty face like that?’ But then I asked around a bit more and heard that it actually *didn’t* seem all that intentional, and that you seemed pretty shaken up when she started bleeding from the nose and stuff, which made a lot more sense to me. I mean, you were only bullying her because you wanted her to change her mind and go back to being a boy again so you could still have a chance with her, right? And I mean, yeah, that’s still a pretty selfish motive, but at least *you* thought your heart was in the right place, so I can definitely believe that you didn’t mean to literally assault her. Which would explain why you were so shaken up about it, am I right?”

“No. You’re delusional.”

“But see, it’s too late,” Sera said with a derisive snicker. “Doesn’t matter *how* strong your feelings for Ushio might be—they’re never gonna get through to her now. You poisoned that well a long time ago. I mean, would *you* ever wanna date someone who called you disgusting just for being who you are and trying to live your life in peace? Did you really think that if you just harassed her long enough, she’d eventually go ‘Wow, I see the error of my ways now! Golly gee, Arisa-chan, you were right all along! Thanks for setting my life back on track!’ or something? Because that’s ridiculous. Even if you did successfully bully her into submission and make her go back to being a boy again, all you’d be leaving her with is a whole new bundle of trauma. Your little ‘tough love’ strategy was never going to pay off and garner any affection from her in the long run. *Ever*. But I guess love really can make a person blind, if you couldn’t even grasp that simple fact.”

“...Shut your mouth.”

Nishizono spoke these words as though she had to wring them from her throat. Her face was flushed red with fury and shame. Her humiliation was plain to see—and for once, I could totally relate, as I’d experienced this sort of treatment from Sera as well. His way of calling a person out on their contradictory or morally questionable behavior really *did* make you feel like you were an idiot kid who deserved to be talked down to. And I could only imagine that it was far, far worse for Nishizono than it had been for me, given her prideful persona and that this was happening right out in the open for our entire class to see. It was a public execution.

Suddenly, I wondered how Ushio was taking all of this, so I cast a quick glance in her direction. There was no hint of any distinct emotion written on her face. She didn’t seem to endorse Sera’s appraisal or sympathize with Nishizono. She simply watched the proceedings as though she was an impassive overseer.

“And for the record,” Sera went on, “just because Ushio decided *she* wants to be a girl now, that doesn’t necessitate changing what gender or genders she’s attracted to. So assuming she was ever attracted to girls, and *you* were willing to be a little more open and understanding, and show that you had feelings for her as a human being regardless, you might’ve even had a chance. But you went

and blew it by being closed-minded and selfish from the get-go. And you've got nobody to blame for that but yourself."

Sera's smug grin broadened with every word he spoke.

"But that's not all—by being such a jerk to her, you've pretty much tarnished any and all goodwill you might have had with any of your other friends too. I mean, just take a look around you, sweetheart. I'm right here in your classroom, relentlessly raking you over the coals, and I don't see a single person rising in your defense. They're all more than happy to sit and watch you get told off, which should tell you everything you need to know. Well, not that they'd be able to defend you very well even if you did still have any allies left, since anyone with half a brain can tell you've got no room to argue with—"

"Thought I told you to shut your *goddamn mouth!*"

Nishizono finally blew her top and reared back her right arm.

"Wait! Arisa, no! Don't do it!" Mashima cried out from the sidelines, making her the first spectator to even attempt to step in and break it up. But her words fell on deaf ears.

Nishizono's balled-up fist landed square on Sera's cheek.

SMACK!

The visceral sound of bone hitting flesh resounded through the silence. Somebody let out a shriek—and then a wave of gasps rippled across the classroom. Every single one of our classmates had been witness to it: Nishizono socked Sera right in the face.

"Ha ha... Dang, some right hook you got," said Sera, chuckling to himself as he rubbed his reddened cheek. He seemed nothing like a man defeated. If anything, he looked like someone who knew they'd just checkmated their opponent.

Nishizono went in for a follow-up strike—but this second punch failed to hit its mark. Sera grabbed her by the wrist and held her right arm up to restrain

her.

“Hey, let *go!*”

“You should really never resort to violence, y’know. Won’t ever do you any good... Well, maybe for *you* that felt pretty cathartic. But it still means you lost this time around, so I hope it was worth it.”

“I said—”

“Oh, you want me to let you go? Sure, I can do that—in a few more seconds or so. Just hold tight for me until then, okay? Won’t be long now.”

“The hell are you even *talking* about?! Quit stalling and let me—”

“What’s going on in here?!” came an angry shout.

I looked up to the front of the classroom and saw that our history teacher had just walked in the door. From his body language, it seemed he hadn’t fully grasped the situation yet but knew that *something* was most definitely not right here. I felt similarly startled to see him; I’d been so transfixed on the altercation between Nishizono and Sera that I completely forgot that fifth period was about to begin.

Actually, hang on a minute.

Had this been Sera’s plan all along? To wait until right before the teacher walked into class, then push Nishizono’s buttons until she hit him right in front of a faculty member, leaving her no room to run or deny intentionality by creating an eyewitness?

All for the sake of sweet retaliation.

Honestly, I was impressed. Not just with Sera’s cunning, but perhaps even more so with his willingness to take a punch to the face just to get her back. I didn’t think many people would voluntarily let themselves get socked in the kisser. Or maybe he’d only been expecting her to punch him in the gut or something? No, anyone who knew anything about Nishizono would have at least considered the possibility that she’d go that far. And having her hit him somewhere that’d leave an obvious mark was the best way to create undeniable evidence of her crime. Judging from the devilish grin on his face

right now, he considered this a huge success.

“Time’s up, Arisa-chan,” he said, a trickle of blood running from the corner of his lip. He’d let go of Nishizono’s arm by this point—I assumed to make it that much more obvious that he was the victim here, not the assailant.

“You piece of...!” Arisa growled, then bit her lip with chagrin as she glared up at him. Apparently, she’d realized his scheme—and that she’d played right into his hand.

“Hey!” said the teacher, approaching them where they stood. “Did you not hear me? What do you two think you’re doing?”

All Sera had to do now was simply tell him what had transpired, and the teacher was sure to take disciplinary action without doubting his word for a minute. Or maybe he wouldn’t even *have* to say anything. The massive bruise on his cheek might do the talking for him. Either way, it was clear that Nishizono’s goose was cooked.

“Better luck next time,” said Sera, still grinning impishly.

“Heh.” Nishizono scoffed in mild amusement at this assertion that he’d already won—then sneered back at him like a wolf with its back against the wall. I could see her canines peeking out from the edges of her defiant grin, like she was baring her fangs and ready to fight to the last. “You don’t know who you’re messing with, asshole.”

Sera’s eyes went wide with astonishment as Nishizono reared her arm back once more—then clenched her fist and let it fly.

SMACK!

When lunch hour rolled around the next day, I got up to go use the bathroom before I started eating. As I walked down the corridor, I gazed idly out the hallway windows to see a skyful of dark-gray clouds ready to release a downpour at any moment. *Looks like I might be riding home in the rain this afternoon.* Thankfully, I did have a spare raincoat in my locker, but the thought

still didn't enthuse me.

I headed into the boys' bathroom and quickly did my business. As I washed my hands with cold water at the sink, another student walked up to use the mirror beside me to readjust his hairdo with some sort of wax product. Even through my peripheral vision, I could tell from his lanky build and golden locks that it was Sera. I glanced over at his reflection in the mirror.

"Quite the welt you got there," I mumbled.

He was wearing an eyepatch over his right eye, and the cheek below it had swollen up massively overnight. It was a pretty big blemish on his naturally good looks.

"Yeah, she clocked me good that second time, heh," said Sera, chuckling awkwardly. "Definitely wasn't expecting her to hit me again, that's for sure. There's somethin' majorly wrong with that girl. Chick's crazy, I tell ya."

Immediately after that debacle, Nishizono had been dragged off by the teacher to the staff room, where they promptly slapped her with a three-day suspension. It seemed the main reason she got off with a less severe punishment (even compared to last time) was because of an anonymous report from one of our classmates stating that she only got violent after repeated provocations from Sera. That, and Ms. Iyo really went to bat for her against the other faculty members—though this was all hearsay, admittedly.

Sera, on the other hand, was now banned from entering our classroom under any circumstances. It was technically against school regulations to visit other classes, but this rule was rarely enforced. I assumed they were only reemphasizing it now to prevent any future conflicts like this. I didn't know how much of a punishment this would be as far as Sera was concerned, but it was definitely a lighter sentence than suspension.

"You're the one who's crazy," I said as I turned off the faucet and shook the water from my hands. "Don't tell me you didn't know you were gonna get punched going into that."

"Course I did. I mean, that was the whole point, right?" Sera said nonchalantly as he worked the wax through his hair.

“Surprised you actually went through with it, then... That’s pretty ballsy. Do you just not feel pain, or what?”

“Oh, no. It definitely hurt, believe me. Heck, my eyelid’s so swollen right now that I can’t even open it halfway. Even my girlfriends can’t stop snickering at me about it.”

“You really wanted to take Nishizono down a peg that badly, huh?”

“Boy, Sakuma. You’re being awfully forward today, aren’tcha? Sure wish you’d show this much interest in what I have to say *all* the time.”

I hadn’t realized this until he pointed it out, but it was true. Normally, I would have just walked right out of the bathroom the moment Sera came in, and I *certainly* wouldn’t have started a conversation with him of my own volition. So why was I chatting with him today? Because I wanted to know what the hell was going through his head, I supposed. He was a dangerous enigma, to be sure, and my instincts were always telling me to steer clear of him—but just this once, my curiosity got the better of me.

“Just answer the damn question,” I said.

“Mmm... Not sure if I wanna, actually,” said Sera. “Oh, but if you promise to make plans with Ushio for the three of us to hang out together, I might feel a bit more talkative.”

“Never mind. Just forget it.” I wiped my hands off with my handkerchief on my way to the door.

“Aw, c’mon! I’m just kidding!” Sera called after me. “All right, all right. I’ll tell ya for free, but *only* because you’re my favorite person in the whole wide world.”

This last comment almost peeved me enough to make me quit caring, but I figured I’d at least let him run his mouth a little longer on the off chance that he actually shared something interesting for once.

“Now let’s see, uh...what were you askin’ about again? Arisa-chan, right?” said Sera as he sat up on the bathroom countertop. “Nah, it’s not like I’ve got a bone to pick with her or anything. Just didn’t feel right letting her do that to me without any repercussions whatsoever, y’know? But now that I’ve paid her back

for it, I'd say we're all settled up, fair and square. No more hard feelings on my end."

"Is that right?" I said, attempting to size up Sera's expression through his current facial distortions. His entire right eye had become little more than a big purple bruise, its edges peeking out from beneath the eyepatch. Just looking at it was enough to make me wince. "Not sure I'd call it even anymore after that second punch, honestly."

"You don't think? 'Cause this'll heal up in no time."

"I mean, yeah... But it's still gotta hurt pretty bad, right?"

"Pain's not such a big deal. I mean, it's just temporary signals sent by receptors to your brain, right?"

I was briefly taken aback by him getting weirdly scientific on me. "All right, *now* you're just acting tough."

"Okay, maybe calling it 'just' signals is a bit of an understatement, yeah. Guess it might be more accurate to say that pain's just something I'm kinda indifferent to, that's all."

"How the hell does *that* work?"

"Not sure. Just somethin' I was born with, I guess. Like, you know how some people try not to touch metal railings and stuff when it's cold out 'cause they're afraid of static shocks? I've never given even a second's thought to stuff like that. Like, obviously things like that still hurt when they happen, but it's just temporary, y'know? Feel like everyone's makin' a big deal out of nothin' when they act differently just because they're afraid of getting hurt even a teensy bit."

"Huh... Interesting."

This felt like a pretty eccentric take to me, but as far as personal philosophies went, it toed a pretty blurred line between bizarre and commendable. Still, it seemed he wasn't just blowing smoke about being mostly indifferent to pain.

"Heck," he went on, "I got a root canal a while back, and I didn't tense up once."

“Think that just means you’ve got a really good dentist.”

“Never even winced at getting a shot before either.”

“I mean, that’s not... Okay, no, that’s pretty impressive, yeah.”

I felt like *everyone* got at least a little nervous before an injection, especially in their younger years. I still remembered all the kids who started bawling during the immunizations we had to get back in elementary school. You could always tell that anyone who acted totally unfazed at that age was clearly just putting on a brave face. I fell into the latter camp; to this day, needles still made me pretty anxious. Not that I could really imagine a guy like Sera seizing up at the doctor’s office either, of course—but it was pretty crazy to think he’d been this nonchalant ever since he was little.

“Man,” I said. “You almost don’t even seem human sometimes, you know that?”

It wasn’t even that he lacked all common sense or anything; his sensibilities just seemed slightly *off* in so many little ways—and sometimes not so slightly. Sometimes, I couldn’t help but wonder if he was a Martian or something just disguising himself as a human and attempting to blend in with our earthling society. There was nothing wrong with being different—or even wildly different—from everyone else. But there was something about the guy that always put me off, and it was a feeling I just couldn’t shake.

“You know anything about centipedes, Sakuma?” said Sera.

“Huh? Centipedes?” I said in disbelief, unsure where the hell this bizarre change of subject was coming from.

“Yeah, you know—with the big ol’ pincers and the slithery-shiny exoskeleton! Been my all-time favorite insect ever since I was a little kid, actually.”

“Why are we talking about this?”

“See, I watched this educational program on TV about ’em back when I was in elementary school,” Sera went on, totally ignoring me. “That’s where I learned that centipedes are pretty overprotective parents, as far as insects go. Once they lay their eggs, they’ll stay *right* where they are until their babies hatch to protect them. Won’t even eat. They’ll just curl that long, wriggly body up

around the eggs and lash out at any predator that dares to get close. Heck, they'll even lick the eggs clean over and over to keep 'em from getting even a little bit dirty. Kinda hard to believe a creepy-crawly that looks like *that* could have such powerful maternal instincts, huh?"

I could not for the life of me tell where this conversation was going. What did any of this have to do with what we were talking about before? Was it because I said he didn't seem human? Was he about to reveal he was actually a centipede-man or something? I hadn't the slightest clue, but I did have to admit—he'd kind of hooked me at this point.

"Though there's one *other* interesting quirk that centipede mothers have," he said. "Sure, they'll put their lives on the line to protect their eggs, but sometimes even that's not enough. 'Cause obviously they don't stand a chance if a bird or a frog comes to try and eat 'em, and they get attacked by praying mantises sometimes too. So whaddya think a mama centipede does when she determines there's no realistic way for her to protect her eggs?"

I thought on this a moment, then shook my head. Sera curled his lips ever so slightly.

"She eats 'em. Gobbles up every last one."

"Wha...?"

"It's called filial cannibalism. If the alternative is having your eggs eaten by a predator, then you might as well eat 'em yourself for some nutrition so you can try to escape, right? Because then you can at least have a chance at laying more eggs in the future. It's shockingly practical, actually—turning the very thing you spent so much time and energy protecting right back into raw energy for yourself as a last resort. Just think of how much adaptability it takes to make a snap decision like that and throw it all away just for a fighting chance at survival! Blew my friggin' mind as a kid, lemme tell ya."

I couldn't help but grimace. Not only was the centipede talk pretty nasty on its own, but hearing Sera gush so excitedly about something so visceral made my stomach churn.

He rubbed his chin thoughtfully, as though trying to recall his point in all this. "Anyway, that moment planted a little seed of a thought in my head."

“Yeah, what?”

“It made me wonder if I could do the same thing.”

I was...not sure how to respond to this.

“Uh, sorry—I don’t mean eat my babies or anything,” he clarified. “I just mean, would I be able to make the rational choice under pressure, destroying what was most important to me of my own volition, if it meant a better chance of coming out on top? Been asking myself that question ever since I was a kid, and now here I am.”

Sera hopped down from the countertop and walked over toward me.

“So basically, what I’m trying to say here is...” he said as he came to a stop, “when you start to see the world like I do, even something like getting punched in the face really ain’t that big a deal in the grand scheme of things.”

And then, as if to negate the ominous undertones of this assertion, Sera winked at me with his one good eye. Though perhaps it was more like a Schrodinger’s blink, since I couldn’t see the other eye? Either way, it was a very Sera way to end this eerie anecdote.

“I don’t think I could ever see the world like you do.”

“Aw, that’s too bad,” said Sera, slumping his shoulders in an exaggerated manner.

Just then, another group of guys came chattering loudly into the boys’ bathroom, walking right past us toward the urinals. This reminded me that I needed to get back to the classroom and eat my lunch. I’d wasted far too much time talking to this dope.

“Anyway, I’m gonna get going,” I said.

“Aww, c’mon! Stay and chat a little while longer! Especially since I can’t come visit Class A anymore.”

“That’s a good thing, as far as I’m concerned. Now that your little spat with Nishizono is over, you can stay in your own classroom like a good boy.”

Not to imply that I was grateful to Nishizono for getting him banned or anything, but I was definitely going to enjoy spending my break periods in peace

without him coming into the classroom to bother me or Ushio or anyone else. It seemed harmony had finally been restored to Class A, at least for the time being.

I exited the bathroom without further ado.

“Hold on there, big fella,” said Sera, calling after me. “This isn’t over yet.”

I let out a sigh, then begrudgingly turned around. “Yes, it is. I need to go eat my lunch at some point this century.”

“No, that’s not what I meant. I’m talkin’ about the thing with Arisa-chan.”

“Sorry?” I furrowed my brow. “What do you mean by that? You’re not planning some additional payback or something, are you?”

“Nope. *I’m* not gonna do a thing. No need to.”

“Then what are you insinuating?”

“You’ll see soon enough.”

With this final unsettling comment, Sera sauntered off in the direction of Class D.

Right then, I heard a muffled rumbling sound—a peal of thunder from outside.

It had finally started to rain.

“Still not letting up, huh?” said Hoshihara, gazing listlessly out the window from her desk as she rested a cheek on her palm.

After my conversation with Sera during lunch hour, fifth and sixth periods had flown right by, and now school was out for the day. Ushio, Hoshihara, and I should have already headed home together, but unfortunately the weather was poor enough to give us pause. The rain had really started to come down during fifth period, and by now, it was a full-on storm. Ushio and I had pulled up some nearby chairs to sit next to Hoshihara at her desk. There were a few other students still lingering in the classroom, most of them either killing time until the next bus came or waiting in the hopes that this sudden squall would pass

before too terribly long.

“Maybe I should just take the bus home today,” said Hoshihara.

“Probably a good idea,” I replied. “Especially since it’s gotten pretty windy out there. Would be a really bad time if you slipped and fell into one of the irrigation canals along the rice fields or something.”

“What will you do, Kamiki-kun?”

“I’ve got a raincoat here, so I think I’ll just try to power through on my bike. Ushio?”

“Hm? What’s up?” said Ushio, lifting her head. Apparently, she hadn’t been listening; she’d been clicking away on her cell phone keyboard until I called her name.

“We were just talking about how we’re going home today. Sounds like Hoshihara’s gonna take the bus. What are you gonna do?”

“Oh... I think I’ve got a ride coming to pick me up. Was just shooting them a text.”

“Ah, gotcha.”

I probably would have asked one of my parents to come pick me up too, if they weren’t both at work right now. Even if I were to text them right now, they’d probably just tell me to figure out my own way home.

“You still planning to run tonight?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Ushio said with a nod. “Sounds like it should clear up by this evening, and I really don’t want to break my streak before the day of the race.”

“Man, you’re dedicated... Just don’t catch a cold, all right?”

“Don’t worry. I know how to take care of myself, silly.” Ushio looked back down at her phone and continued composing her message.

“Oh yeah,” said Hoshihara, turning to face me. “So Ushio-chan was telling me that you’ve been joining her on her morning runs lately?”

“Yeah, kinda. Just riding alongside her on my bike, though.”

“Aw, man... That’s still pretty cool, though. Wish I lived closer so I could come

too. Feel kinda bad that I can't help out in any way..."

"Nah, I'd say you're already providing motivational support."

"I am? How so?"

"Just by being, like...a bubbly bundle of joy and cheering her on."

"Hey! I'm not some sort of sports team mascot, okay?!"

Hoshihara puffed out her cheeks in protest. This was exactly the sort of behavior I was referring to—though, admittedly, her cute little mannerisms were probably more motivating to *me* than they were to Ushio.

"Sorry, I need to take a quick phone call." Ushio stood and hurried out of the classroom with her cell phone in hand. I assumed it was from one of her parents.

This left Hoshihara and me sitting alone together for the time being. It was funny to think that only a couple months ago, this would have been enough to turn me into a nervous wreck. But since serving with Hoshihara on the festival committee, I was cool as a cucumber around her. I couldn't believe it had been almost half a year since we first started talking. When I recalled how bumblingly awkward I was around her at the beginning of our friendship, I couldn't help but cringe at my former self.

"So tell me, Kamiki-kun," Hoshihara said, leaning forward a bit as if we were about to discuss something scandalous. Her sudden proximity made my heart skip a beat. *Cool as a cucumber, my ass.* "How are things going with you and Ushio-chan?"

"Wh-what do you mean?" I asked.

"Like, are you getting along well when you're alone? Things aren't awkward at all?"

"I dunno, I'd say the vibes have been pretty natural lately..."

"You mean it?"

I nodded emphatically.

"Okay, good," she said, relieved.

I could only assume she was asking out of concern after the brief falling-out I'd had with Ushio prior to the school culture festival. She must've been wondering if there was still any lingering weirdness there. She'd always been extremely considerate of others in that regard; I could totally see how she'd effortlessly endeared herself to our entire class.

"Hey, so different question," she said. "What's your ideal type of girl?"

"Well, *that* was quite the change in topic. Where's this coming from?"

"Aw, just humor me! I'm only trying to make small talk here while we wait. No need to think too hard about it."

"I dunno, it feels like a pretty loaded question..."

How could I *not* overthink it, especially when it was coming from *Hoshihara*, of all people? Not that I assumed she was trying to drop any hints by asking it, of course.

"W-well, someone who's really sweet, for starters," I said.

"Okay, what else?"

"Uhhh... What else, what else...?"

Great, what am I supposed to say now?!

I knew that sharing your respective "types" was pretty standard conversation fodder between certain types of friends, but I never talked about girls or anything with Hasumi, so I'd never had to formulate a response of my own before. Hell, I'd never even been able to give an answer when my male classmates asked me what celebrities I thought were hot because I'd never watched much TV.

Hoshihara was staring at me expectantly, waiting for me to give an answer. Feeling slightly bashful, I lowered my gaze—only to get an eyeful of her ample chest pressing against the tabletop due to the angle at which she was leaning over her desk.

Without even thinking, I said in a fluster, "...S-someone with nice boobs?"

"No, you can't say *that*!" Hoshihara immediately reproached me, then pulled her body back and slammed her fist down on the desk. "Come on, Kamiki-kun!

You *know* that's not a good answer! Get with the program! You've gotta focus on people's faces and what's on the inside! You can't be swayed by surface-level appearances! People can't change things like that, you know!"

"R-right, sorry."

Pretty sure faces fall under that category too, but okay...

"Good boy," said Hoshihara. "Now, I'm just gonna pretend I didn't hear that, so why don't you rethink your answer and try again?"

"Okay..." I said like a child being lectured. Still, I supposed this was a better outcome than her calling me a disgusting pig or something. A slipup like that could gross some girls out enough to permanently stain their impression of me. I felt like she'd let me off easy with a scolding; if she started acting all distant and uncomfortable around me because of it, I would've probably wanted to kill myself. Though I couldn't help but wonder *why* it didn't bother her more than this—was I just that deep in the friend zone, or what? The thought made me feel a little depressed, but I tried not to let it eat at me.

"Hey, sorry—can I interrupt for a second?" said Ushio, walking back in while shielding her cell phone's microphone with one hand. It seemed she hadn't hung up yet.

"What's up?" I said.

"Um... Yuki-san's offering to give you guys each a ride home too, if you want."

"Wait, really?!" said Hoshihara, jumping to her feet. "That'd be great! Yes, please!"

"Okay, cool. What about you, Sakuma?"

"Oh, uh... Sure, I guess I'll take her up on that too."

Unfortunately, leaving my bike at school meant I'd have to walk tomorrow morning, but it was still a kind offer, and I didn't want Ushio's stepmom's consideration to go to waste. Ushio quickly conveyed to her that yes, we'd both love a ride home, then promptly finished the conversation and hung up the phone.

"Sorry about that," she said. "Yuki-san can be a little overbearing sometimes..."

Hope the sudden change of plans isn't a problem."

"No, no. It's a huge help, honestly," I assured her. "Plus, it'll be nice to see Yuki-san again. Been a while."

"Ha ha, yeah..." Ushio said, chuckling awkwardly.

Even though it had been more than three years since her father remarried, Ushio still referred to her stepmother as "Yuki-san" instead of just "Mom" or even "my stepmom." I sensed that this was a deliberate distance she maintained, but it didn't *seem* like the two of them had any problem communicating or getting along with one another, so I wanted to believe there weren't any major family issues there.

"Anyway, what were you two talking about just now?" asked Ushio. "Seemed almost like you were a little offended, Natsuki... Did Sakuma say something inappropriate?"

"Um, no—that was just because, uh..." I faltered, looking over at Hoshihara for guidance. Hopefully she'd agree that we probably shouldn't answer truthfully here.

"Oh yeah, so get this," said Hoshihara. "Kamiki-kun was just telling me about how the last time he went to a conveyor-belt sushi place, he *only* ate the fish off the top and left all the rice on the plates. Can you believe that?"

"Wait, seriously?" said Ushio. "Are you on a diet right now or something?"

"I mean, uh... Yeah, I guess you could say that..."

"Huh. Well, in that case, I can sort of understand it, but personally I'd say you should just eat fewer pieces in general rather than let all that rice go to waste."

"I know, I know... Sorry."

I felt like the excuse Hoshihara had given was a bit of an affront to my true character, but it was still better than her revealing what I'd *actually* said, so I let it slide. About twenty minutes later, Ushio got a text from Yuki saying she'd arrived, so we headed down to the main entryway, from which we could see a line of cars parked just outside the school gates. The three of us changed back into our street shoes, then made a mad dash across the schoolyard through the

rain, with Hoshihara shrieking the whole way.

“That’s her car!” said Ushio, pointing to a black sedan. We hurried over and let ourselves inside; Ushio took the passenger seat, while Hoshihara and I hopped into the back. As soon as we were in the car, we immediately closed the doors to keep as much rain out as possible.

“Thanks so much for the ride!” said Hoshihara, greeting our driver with a smile.

“Yeah, thank you,” I chimed in.

“Hey, don’t mention it!” said Yuki. “It’s the least I can do for Ushio’s two closest friends! Feel free to make yourselves comfortable back there.”

As the car slowly pulled away from the curb, I noticed that Yuki was wearing a full-on, neatly pressed suit jacket and matching pants. I assumed she’d swung by to pick us up on her way home from work. Her professional aura was off the charts.

“Right, that reminds me, Sakuma-kun,” she said. “Thanks for letting Ushio spend so much time at your house over summer break.”

“Oh, no... Not at all,” I replied. “I didn’t have anything better to do, so it was nice having someone to keep me company.”

“Yeah? Well, that’s good to hear. And thank *you* for being a good friend to Ushio too, Natsuki-chan. She’s *always* telling stories about you at home.”

“Wait, really?!” said Hoshihara. “Oh my gosh, that’s so sweet...”

“That’s enough, Yuki-san,” Ushio said, admonishing her.

“Sorry, sorry. Just thought I should express a little gratitude, that’s all. Couldn’t help myself.”

“...It’s fine, yeah.”

We approached a red light, and Yuki stepped on the brakes. Rain pitter-pattered on the roof of the vehicle, and the wipers swept restlessly over the windshield. This had never been a particularly busy road, but due to the rain making other forms of transportation less desirable at the moment, there was actually a tiny bit of traffic for once.

“Did you just get off work?” Hoshihara asked right as the light turned green.

“More like I decided to head home early,” said Yuki. “Our firm’s decently large and well staffed by local standards, so we get pretty good flexibility as far as work hours go. You know what an administrative scrivener is?”

“Uhhh... I *think* I’ve heard the term before?”

“So in a nutshell, our job is to draft up documents and file paperwork with local government offices, like city hall, on behalf of individuals and corporate clients. It’s pretty complicated work, but it’s definitely a cushy gig once you get the hang of it.”

“Ooh, yeah... Sounds like a smart-people kinda job for sure. Feel like there’d be a lot you’d have to keep track of... But that’s really cool, though!”

“Ah ha ha, thank you, yeah. If you ever need to know anything about legal contracts or the like, feel free to give me a holler.”

“Will do!”

A chipper response as always from Hoshihara; I could see through the rearview mirror that Yuki seemed quite pleased with her enthusiasm as well.

“Oh! There’s actually one more stop I need to make, if you guys don’t mind.”

“What’s that?” said Ushio, turning her head sideways.

“Just gotta swing by the junior high. Promised I’d pick Misao up from school too.”

“Wait, huh?” Ushio leaned forward in her seat. “Did you tell her we were going to be here?”

“No, I figured she’d probably decline if I did. Do you think I should have?”

“...Well, I guess it shouldn’t be a problem.”

There were certainly some telling undertones to this exchange.

Misao was Ushio’s little sister, whom she very rarely brought up unprompted, so I didn’t really know what their relationship was like currently—but I did know that they were definitely not on particularly amicable terms as of summer vacation. And from the way these two were talking about her, it sounded like

that hadn't changed.

Yuki pulled the sedan up to the curb outside the gates to Tsubakioka Junior High. It looked no different now than it had when Ushio and I had attended. The main building was a fair bit older than our high school's, and it looked even sadder and more decrepit now that it had been dampened by the rain. Yuki gave Misao a quick call to let her know we had arrived, and a few moments later, a young girl carrying an umbrella walked out to the curb. Hoshihara scooted over into the middle seat to make room right as the car door opened.

"God, took you long enou—wait, huh?" said Misao.

"H-hey there!" Hoshihara greeted her, and the other girl's eyes went wide.

"Oh, s-sorry!" she said, then promptly slammed the door.

She must've thought she had the wrong car. Morbidly curious how long it would take her to realize, I watched as Misao walked around to the back of the vehicle, checked the license plate, then came back and warily opened the door again. The moment she saw Yuki in the driver's seat, her face went red as a tomato.

"You could at least *tell* me if you're bringing a bunch of other people!" she shouted.

"Sorry, sorry!" said Yuki. "Just thought you'd say no if I did."

"Forget it. I'll walk myself home."

"Misao," Ushio said firmly before her sister could shut the door. "Just get in the car. Your shoes'll get all muddy."

Misao instantly froze up, hesitating. There was a distinct pause—probably no more than a second or so, but long enough to feel an air of tension and strife between the two siblings—before she relented and begrudgingly climbed in the car. She held her umbrella out over the curb, shook off the raindrops, and closed the door behind her.

"What part of town do you live in, Natsuki-chan?" Yuki asked.

"Oh, you can just drop me off at the station! It's fine!"

"You sure? It's no biggie. The trains'll probably be packed this time of day."

Plus, it kinda defeats the purpose of giving you a ride if you still have to walk home through the rain from your local station.”

“Well, if it’s really not too much trouble, then okay... Thanks, I really appreciate it.” Hoshihara described the general area in which she lived: near a grocery store in the next town over. It seemed the landmark was enough for Yuki.

“Okay, off we go, then!”

And with that, we drove off to Hoshihara’s neck of the woods.

Misao flipped open her cell phone and started fiddling with it in apparent boredom. As she tilted her head to look down at the screen, her bob of black hair hung over her cheeks, revealing the pale skin at the nape of her slender neck.

If Ushio was like a blonde European bisque doll, then Misao gave off the more elegantly refined aura of a traditional Japanese wooden doll. Their overall appearances were in stark contrast with one another, yet you could still tell they were blood-related by their similar facial features.

Hoshihara looked a bit restless sitting next to Misao. I’d caught her stealing furtive glances over at the other girl several times now, as if she was trying to gauge Misao’s temper from her expression. Eventually, she seemed to muster up the confidence to say something and turned to face the other girl.

“It’s nice to meet you again, Misao-chan!” said Hoshihara. “Haven’t seen you since Kamiki-kun and I stopped by your house that one time... Do you remember me?”

“...Vaguely, yes,” Misao said without looking up from her phone. This was, by any interpretation, a fairly cold response.

“Oh, right! I never introduced myself, did I? My name’s Natsuki Hoshihara. I’m in the same class as Ushio-chan. We eat lunch together pretty much every day.”

“You don’t say.”

“Did I hear you’re in ninth grade? Bet you must be studying your butt off for entrance exams right about now, huh... Oh yeah! So have you decided what

high school you want to go to yet?”

Misao let out a heavy sigh, then closed her flip phone. “Is there really any need for me to share that with a complete stranger like you?”

Hoshihara let out a squeak, faltering at this scathing reply. It seemed the situation really *hadn't* improved since we visited their house prior to summer vacation. I definitely remembered her being a much more courteous, endearing little sister back in the day...

“That was extremely rude, Misao,” said Ushio, turning back to scold her.

“Oh, it’s okay!” said Hoshihara, waving her hands rapidly to cover for Misao. “I’m not offended or anything!”

But Ushio just kept looking back over her shoulder, her intense gaze fixed on her disrespectful sister. Still, Misao only let out an unremorseful snort.

“See?” she said. “Your friend says she’s not bothered by it, so why do you care?”

“Because it’s not okay to treat people like that,” said Ushio. “Now apologize.”

Her tone was so stern that it made *my* stomach curl up into a ball, and I wasn’t even part of this dispute. I’d seen Ushio lose her temper with Noi the other day as well, but this was an altogether different kind of anger—one I wasn’t sure I’d ever seen from her, and that was scary in its own unique way. Hoshihara seemed to have completely withered at the sight of it as well, and even Misao didn’t look like she was willing to test Ushio’s patience any further, as she furrowed her brow in frustration.

“You’re not the boss here, you know...” she grumbled.

“Misao,” said Ushio.

Misao let out an exaggerated sigh, then turned to face Hoshihara. “Okay, I’m sorry.”

“Aw, it’s okay!” said Hoshihara. “Don’t even worry about it! Ah ha ha...”

Her laughter was strained and unnatural; I could only assume this interaction was twisting her stomach into knots as well, and she just wanted it to be over and done with. Ushio looked like she still had more she wanted to say, but she

refrained and turned to face forward in her seat again. The conversation died there, and a silence fell over the car. Misao resumed typing away on her cell phone, while Ushio propped her head up with her elbow on her armrest and gazed absentmindedly out the window. Yuki just focused on her driving, while Hoshihara and I could do nothing but sit there at our wits' end.

God, this awkward tension... It feels like I'm suffocating in here!

The rift between Ushio and Misao was deeper than I'd suspected. Were they always like this at home? If so, I could totally understand why Ushio wanted to spend most of her summer vacation at my house to escape from it all. This was *not* the sort of atmosphere one could relax in.

I wondered how Yuki felt about this state of affairs. Surely she knew it was far from ideal. But situations like these weren't generally all that easy to mend, especially when there was clearly still an entirely separate layer of nonacceptance between her and her stepchildren. Was there truly no hope of reconciliation here? Was the Tsukinoki family doomed to be forever dysfunctional?

As if in answer to this question, the softening rain shower beyond the windows grew more tempestuous—like an omen of the uncertain future that lay ahead. It seemed this storm wouldn't be letting up anytime soon.

After about ten minutes of no real conversation, Hoshihara hesitantly broke the silence. "Um, so you just turn right at this next light coming up here..."

Just ahead of us was the grocery store she'd given as a landmark to Yuki; it seemed we were getting close to her neighborhood. Yuki followed her instructions and turned right onto a residential street. After another minute or so, Hoshihara pointed to a three-story house just down the road. Yuki gently pressed on the brakes, coming to a smooth stop a short distance from Hoshihara's residence.

"Is right here okay?" asked Yuki.

"Yep, here's fine!" said Hoshihara. "Thank you so much again for the ride!"

Yuki smiled. "You're very welcome."

As Hoshihara gave a quick bow of her head, I looked out the window at her

house. It was a ritzy, borderline extravagant home compared to the other ones on this street. The place had large windows, a big garage, and a sizeable lawn surrounded by a gated fence. It was pretty modern in terms of design as well, so it had to have been built within only the last few years as well. It was—to use the most uncultured term imaginable—a rich-people house. I could totally picture them having a massive purebred or something.

“Sorry, Kamiki-kun. Gonna have to get around you,” said Hoshihara.

“Oh, right. My bad.”

She couldn’t get out of the car unless I did first, so I opened the door and stepped outside, and Hoshihara slid out after me. She quickly said her goodbyes to Ushio to limit her time in the rain, then turned to me.

“Guess I’ll see you tomorrow too, Kamiki-kun.”

“Yeah, have a nice night.”

Holding her bookbag aloft to shield herself from the rain, Hoshihara trotted off toward her house, and I hopped right back into the vehicle. After wiping a few drops of rain from my eyelashes, I was prompted to give Yuki directions to my house, so I told her the general vicinity in which I lived. Luckily, she knew the area I was talking about (probably because Ushio and I didn’t live very far apart to begin with) and made a U-turn.

And then there were four: myself and three Tsukinokis. The tense atmosphere in the car was uncomfortable but tolerable—and I would much rather endure a few more minutes of awkward silence than try to strike up a conversation, lest I step on a land mine and make things even worse. Besides, I was the guest here anyway, so I decided to just keep my mouth shut until I was delivered safely to my doorstep.

“By the way, Sakuma-kun...” Yuki piped up, immediately foiling these plans.

“Y-yeah? What’s up?” I replied, looking at her through the rearview mirror.

“Do you need a ride tomorrow morning as well? Considering you left your bike at school and all.”

“Oh, uhhh...”

I'd been kind of planning to take the bus or something, but the nearest bus stop was still pretty far from my house, so a ride *would* be much appreciated. At the same time, I didn't want to take advantage of Yuki's generosity.

"Hmmm... Well, that's a very kind offer..."

"Why not take her up on it, then?" Ushio said from the passenger seat. "She's planning to give me a ride to school anyway, so it wouldn't be that far out of the way."

Oh, right. Duh. I nearly forgot that Ushio rode her bike to school today too, so she would also need some alternate form of transportation tomorrow morning.

"In that case...I guess I'll take you up on that, yeah," I said.

"Great! We'll swing by your place on the way to school, then," said Yuki.

"Oh, no, no, no. I'll walk to your house, it's fine. I couldn't put you out any further..."

"You sure? Well, just let us know if you change your mind. It's really no trouble for a good friend of Ushio's."

"Ha ha... Thanks, I appreciate it."

I'd only met her twice, and I could already tell that Yuki was an incredibly good human being—almost beyond reproach, at least based on my own interactions with her. I had to wonder what Ushio felt was lacking in her as a mother, but I knew there had to be plenty of family drama behind the scenes that I wasn't privy to. And it probably had less to do with anything she "lacked," per se, than the circumstances themselves.

I was suddenly reminded of Ushio's birth mother, a beautiful woman so pure and effervescent, it was as though her conscience had been crystal clear. She looked an awful lot like Ushio too. But she was sickly and frail in my recollection, to the point that my mental image of her was that of a bedridden inpatient, as she had been for quite some time at the end of her life.

One memory in particular stuck out to me from that time. It was back when we were in third grade, and Ushio and I had gone to visit her at the hospital bearing gifts. I'd brought her some strawberry daifuku my mother had given me

to take along. Now that I was a bit older, I knew that fresh fruit like apples or pears would have been more appropriate, but apparently my mother considered strawberries covered in mochi with sweet filling close enough to fit the bill. While they may not have been the most traditional get-well-soon gift, Ushio's mother was delighted all the same. She opened the package right then and there, and the three of us ate them together.

The powder-dusted mochi bites were each about the size of a ping-pong ball—and Ushio's mother would pop whole entire pieces right into her mouth. I remembered just standing there, watching in disbelief as the white powder fell from her lips onto her hospital gown, her cheeks puffed out like a hamster's as she filled them. My impression of her up until then had always been that she was something of a modern-day noblewoman, so seeing her totally pig out like that definitely stuck with me. From the way she gulped it all down, then smiled so broadly at me, the corners of her mouth caked with powder, I never would have imagined she'd be gone only a few—

Something tapped my thigh, snapping me out of my reminiscence. I looked down and saw the culprit: a cellular device. Misao was poking me in the thigh with her flip phone. And yet, she wasn't even looking at me; her gaze was pointed out the window as if she were trying to pass me a note in class on the sly. Perhaps that was *exactly* what she was doing. On closer inspection, it appeared she'd typed out a message on the screen and was nudging me to read it.

“so how long until my brother goes back to normal”

I felt a churning in my gut. The *last* thing I wanted was to be dragged into this... But I supposed it was at least better for her to confront me in private than to say it out loud. Obviously, Misao wanted Ushio to go back to being a boy—she'd made that abundantly clear the last time I visited their house. At the time, I was too frazzled by her open disdain to say anything in Ushio's defense, but now I felt calm and collected enough to give an actual response. I pulled out my own cell phone and typed one out.

“Sorry, she's not going back.”

Misao took one look at the screen, then hastily wrote out a reply.

“why not.”

“Because she’s happier this way.”

“how do you know”

“I’m her best friend.”

Misao’s fingers froze, unable to craft an immediate reply to this.

I tacked on another sentence in the meantime.

“Also, she’s been having a really good time at school lately. Everyone likes her now.”

“liar.”

“Nope. Dead serious.”

I opened the images folder on my phone and pulled up the photo Hoshihara had sent me previously of the little after-party they’d had following their loss in the volleyball tournament. In it, Ushio had a big smile on her face, surrounded by all the other girls she’d competed alongside during the sports festival. I showed it to Misao, who stared at the image for a little while before giving her response.



“what a joke.”

I'd had a feeling she would still refuse to accept it, but the tone of her messages was really starting to irritate me now. I typed up another message.

“You know, there actually is one girl in our class who feels the same as you.”

“good. that just means she’s sane”

“And now no one in class will even talk to her. She’s all alone.”

Misao made a disgusted face, like she'd just swallowed a fly. I'd intended for this to be a sort of counterattack, but maybe I'd been a little too mean with my insinuations. Still, it was the truth. There was a brief pause, and then Misao angrily typed out her response.

“i bet you like my brother, don’t you.”

“Bwha?!”

I nearly choked on my own spit.

“Something wrong?” Ushio asked, looking back over her shoulder.

“Oh, uh... Nope, I'm all good. Sorry...”

“Well, if you say so.” She turned back around.

God... What the hell, man?

Just where in the world had that come from? I shot a quick glance over at Misao, and our eyes met. She was looking at me with contempt out of the corner of her eye. As far as I could tell, this hadn't been a legitimate suspicion of hers but more of a crude attempt to get in one last dig to rile me up or get a defensive reaction out of me. In which case, she'd certainly been successful. Despite my better judgment, I wrote out a reply.

“I mean, I like her as a friend, yeah.”

Upon reading this response, Misao simply turned her nose up at me and looked out the window. It seemed she had no intention of continuing our conversation. Perhaps she'd decided she didn't want anything to do with me anymore. This was a pretty depressing thought, given how she'd always seemed to adore me and Ushio when we were little and hung out together all the time. I

really hoped I could mend that relationship at some point. That said, until Misao showed some willingness to accept Ushio for who she was, it seemed pretty unlikely to me. I slipped my cell phone into my pocket and cast my gaze out into the storm raging beyond the windowpane. The rain just kept on coming down.

The next morning, I made my way over to Ushio's house in the pouring rain. It was about a ten-minute walk from my place to hers, and my exposed hand clutching my umbrella handle was already freezing cold from the rain and wind. It was another icy morning—one cold enough to see my own breath—and the wetness didn't help matters.

I traversed a single crosswalk, strode through residential streets awhile, then arrived at Ushio's house to take Yuki up on yesterday's offer. I rang the doorbell and soon heard hurried footsteps approaching from down the hall. The front door swung open, and out popped Yuki's face.

"Morning, Sakuma-kun!"

"Good morning." I gave a little bow. "Thanks again for the ride."

Yuki was wearing a business suit again today; I assumed she was going straight to work after dropping us off at school.

"Ushio's still getting dressed, so just sit tight for a sec, okay?"

"Oh, okay."

It seemed I'd shown up a bit early. Thankfully, Yuki invited me to wait in the entryway, so I crossed over the threshold into the house's warm interior, where the smell of freshly made toast filled my nostrils. After another few minutes, Yuki came back down the hall with Ushio in tow.

"Sorry for the wait," said Ushio.

"No, don't be," I replied.

She must've gotten dressed in a hurry, as she came out carrying her necktie in one hand, most likely intending to put it on in the car. Once we walked out of the house, Ushio locked the door behind us, and the three of us headed over to the car. Ushio and I climbed into the back seat together, and Yuki started up the

engine. We fastened our seatbelts, then pulled out onto the road and headed for Tsubakioka High.

“Wait, are we not dropping off Misao-chan?” I said, belatedly noticing her absence.

“No, she left a little while ago,” Yuki told me. “I offered, but she insisted on going alone.”

“Oh, all right...”

I figured I was probably to blame for that; after our little exchange yesterday, she probably didn’t want to be forced to sit in the car with me again. In which case, I felt pretty guilty for effectively stealing her ride on a rainy day.

Ushio craned her neck to look into the rearview mirror and fastened her necktie, her slender fingers deftly looping the fabric around itself before pulling the resultant ring taut around her collar. I noticed some sweat at the base of her neck, which suggested that she really *had* gotten ready in a hurry.

“So did you end up going for a run this morning after all?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Ushio said with a perfunctory nod.

I’d been planning to accompany her on her morning runs rain or shine, but since I’d left my bike at school the day before, I was sadly unable to do my usual ride-along. Yes, I could have tried actually running with her for once, but there was no chance I’d be able to keep up with her pace. I figured I’d only slow her down.

“Bet you got totally soaked, huh?”

“Well, yeah. Can’t let a little rain break my streak, though.”

“Man, that’s dedication... Honestly, I always got the sense that you *hated* getting even a little wet, so I wasn’t entirely sure.”

“Oh, really?” Ushio said with a slight chuckle. “What gave you that idea?”

“I dunno—I guess maybe because you usually seem kinda fidgety on windy or rainy days? Like, you’re always fiddling with your hair in class whenever it’s even slightly disheveled.”

“Wait, seriously?”

Ushio’s baffled expression seemed to suggest this habit of hers was an unconscious one—but I’d noticed her constantly readjusting her hair on days when she had bedhead and stuff, all the way back in junior high. I assumed having a naturally eye-catching hair color made her more particular about keeping it presentable at all times.

“Wow, I didn’t even realize... But I definitely *do* care a lot about my hair being nice and neat, so I guess that shouldn’t surprise me.”

There came a sudden chuckle from the driver’s seat, as though Yuki couldn’t contain her amusement at this exchange. “You sure do pay close attention to Ushio, don’t you, Sakuma-kun?”

“You know, she’s told me that herself, actually.”

“Well, isn’t that sweet,” said Yuki. “You two are just thick as thieves, aren’t you?”

I laughed sheepishly; meanwhile, Ushio scratched her neck as though she felt a bit uncomfortable. She didn’t seem upset or anything, though—just unsure what to say.

As we turned out of the neighborhood and onto the main drag, I could see another Tsubakioka High student riding their bike down the sidewalk in a school-provided raincoat. I had to admit that seeing them pedaling furiously through the rain while we glided by in our warm, comfy vehicle filled me with a momentary sense of superiority. *Man, getting driven to school is great...* I almost wished I could ask Yuki to drive me to school on every rainy day from now on, but I knew that was a bridge too far. Not that she wouldn’t gladly give me a ride or anything—I just wasn’t that shameless.

Before long, the school came into view, and Yuki pulled up alongside the main gate. I thanked her again for the ride, then stepped out onto the sidewalk. Ushio followed closely behind.

“Have a good day at school, you two!” Yuki said before driving off.

Umbrellas in hand, Ushio and I made our way across campus to the school building. We’d arrived right in the heart of the morning rush, so the area

outside the main entrance was packed. As we wove our way through the crowd, I shook the rain off my umbrella, then looked up at the sky. The storm had definitely softened from the day before, but the overcast skies still showed no signs of clearing up.

“Wonder if it’ll let up before the day is over,” I said.

“Want a ride home again if it doesn’t?” said Ushio.

“No, no, no... I’d feel way too bad. Think I’d better take my bike home today, no matter the weather.”

“You sure? I mean, I’m fine either way.”

I closed my umbrella as we walked in the main entrance. Right then, someone swooped in from behind us and bumped into me. Hard.

“Whoa!”

The floor was wet, so I slipped and tumbled to the hard linoleum on my hands and knees. My umbrella clattered loudly to the floor, and my bookbag slipped from my shoulder to join it. The students passing by in both directions avoided these new obstacles with visible annoyance.

“Sakuma, are you okay?” said Ushio.

“Y-yeah, sorry,” I said, taking her hand to regain my footing. After gathering my things, I turned to see Noi standing directly behind me. As soon as we made eye contact, he gave me a dirty look and clicked his tongue.

“Keep it moving, slowpoke,” he said. “You’re in the way.”

“Fusuke!” Ushio shouted, visibly outraged.

Noi paid her no mind, marching right past us to the shoe cubbies. Ushio immediately chased after him, grabbed him by the shoulder, and spun him around.

“What do you want?” he said.

“You know what. Stop acting like a child.”

“It’s his own fault for blocking the doorway with his lazy ass. Oh yeah, and also...” Noi looked at me, then back at Ushio, and snorted. “Did I see you two

getting out of the same car just now? You stay the night at his place or something? Boy, you guys sure are spending a lot of quality ‘bonding’ time with each other lately, huh?”

The thinly veiled implications of Noi’s words were not lost on me—and it seemed they’d drawn some scandalized glances from a few of the students nearby as well. Noi and Ushio were now officially making a scene, and the crowded entryway grew even more congested as people stopped to watch on their way in. I tried to step in and break it up.

“C’mon, Ushio. Let’s just—”

“Shut your mouth this instant,” Ushio snapped at Noi.

I was a little taken aback. Noi’s blatant taunting hadn’t bothered me all that much, but it had been more effective on Ushio, judging from the malice in her eyes as she glared up at him. Perhaps in their time together on the track team, they’d gotten close enough for Noi to know exactly how to get under her skin.

“Wow, sounds like someone’s a little upset,” said Noi. “Guess that must mean I’m right on the money, huh?”

“No,” said Ushio. “I’m just baffled how you can take pleasure in being so cruel.”

“What? It was just a simple question. No need to get all butthurt about it.”

“Please. If anyone’s ‘butthurt’ here, it’s you. Trying to force me to come back to the track team by pressuring me into your little bet, pushing my friends around when they’ve done literally nothing to hurt you... I’m not sure why you’re so obsessed with me, but I’m really not interested, so feel free to get over it whenever.”

“I’m not obsessed. I’m trying to hold you accountable for quitting the team without even telling anybody.”

“Whoa there, lovebirds!” a random student quipped from the sidelines. “Let’s not have a domestic dispute first thing in the morning, yeah?”

Ushio and Noi both immediately shot dirty looks at the kid.

“You wanna say that again?!” Noi shouted, and the comedian promptly made

himself scarce. “Great, as if I wasn’t in a bad enough mood already... Forget it.”

Noi turned on his heel and stomped off, having accomplished nothing at all aside from souring the vibes of the day for everyone present. Ushio, too, seemed like she still had quite a few choice words locked and loaded that she hadn’t gotten the chance to voice. She shook her head and walked over to the Class A shoe cubbies.

“Ugh... God, he’s so infuriating...” she said.

I didn’t say anything to this. Not that I wasn’t angry myself, of course. It was just that for whatever reason, I was still stuck on that stupid “lovebirds” quip that random kid had made. My mind refused to let it go even after we’d changed into our indoor shoes and headed up to class. Obviously, it had only been said in jest, and sarcastically to boot—but there was something about the mental image it produced that left a bad taste in my mouth. Especially since, for all Noi’s faults, he *was* a pretty tall and attractive guy, while also being enough of a contrast to Ushio that they’d probably look pretty good together from your stereotypical “opposites attract” standpoint. And while I knew this was a ridiculous hypothetical to even be entertaining, for whatever reason, the thought made me feel...weirdly inferior in some totally irrational sense. At the same time, who cared how I felt about it? That wasn’t the important thing right now.

“Man, that guy’s a pain in the ass,” I said. “Don’t let him get under your skin. He’s totally just trying to intimidate you. Think you handled that pretty well, though.”

I thought this was a decent show of support. Apparently, Ushio felt differently.

“You could’ve stepped up and said something too, you know,” she said, shooting a critical sidelong glance in my direction. “I mean, he literally shoved you to the ground.”

“Well, yeah, but like—”

“No, there’s no ‘but.’ He only treats you like that because he knows you’re too much of a doormat to stand up to him.”

While she may have been right in theory, I thought this assessment was a little unfair after the times I'd stood up in *her* defense. And to be clear, it wasn't as if I hadn't been angry at Noi myself—I only thought that no good would come from playing into his provocations. I nearly said as much, actually, but I thought better of it. Us getting into an argument about this was probably exactly the sort of outcome Noi was hoping for, so I held my tongue. And I knew Ushio was probably just feeling a little heated still. Sure enough, she took a deep breath in, then slowly let it out before her shoulders slumped with guilt, and she cast her eyes downward.

"Sorry," she said at last. "I shouldn't take my frustration out on you."

"Don't worry about it. You have every right to be frustrated after that."

"...I'm gonna make him eat those words. Just you wait."

Her tone was firm and resolute, and I could see flames flickering in her lowered gaze. I was this close to reminding her that she had no obligation to validate him by going through with this stupid race, but I felt that wasn't the right thing to say here.

"No doubt in my mind about that," I said instead. "I mean, you've been training hard every single day. You can totally beat him."

Ushio nodded with conviction.

The race was only four days away.

The bell rang for morning homeroom period to begin, and Ms. Iyo walked into the classroom. Her long ponytail bobbed behind her as she stepped up onto the podium and signaled to begin our morning ritual: stand, bow, "Good morning, Ms. Iyo," be seated.

"Yes, good morning, everyone," she said. "Boy, it just keeps getting colder and colder out there, doesn't it?"

She gripped her upper arms and rubbed them rapidly as she spoke. On top of her usual outfit of a smart button-down and tight-fitting slacks, she'd begun to wear a blazer to help stave off the encroaching chill.

“Seems the drop in temperature’s got quite a few students calling out sick lately,” she continued. “Let’s all be sure to bundle up and stay warm overnight so that doesn’t happen to any of us, okay? That goes double for those of you who’ve still got sports practice this time of year. Make sure you wipe yourself off with a towel if you start sweating out there, or you’ll regret it. Also, I know for some of us, this gloomy weather can be just as detrimental to our mental health as our immune system, so if you need...”

Typically, she’d start things off by handing out paperwork and reviewing our upcoming schedule, as well as sharing any school-related announcements or reminders. Today it seemed there wasn’t anything of note to share in that regard, considering that she was starting off with her more informal spiel and random anecdotes from the get-go.

“Oh, and one last thing!” she said, calling back everyone’s attention after several minutes of rambling about proper health precautions. Even my classmates who’d been falling asleep at their desks shot upright in their chairs at her imperative tone. “I have a small announcement to make: the town’s begun a recruitment drive for its new ‘Keep Tsubakioka Clean’ initiative, but I guess they haven’t gotten enough volunteers. They reached out to the school to see if we could find some students who might be interested. So, any takers? Doesn’t matter how many or how few!”

The classroom went dead silent. *Nobody* was interested, it seemed—which didn’t surprise me. I didn’t know anyone in our class altruistic enough to do community service of their own free will.

“Oh, come on, now!” said Ms. Iyo. “Not a single person, really? You won’t get paid, but I can give you extra credit for it that’ll look *verrry* nice on your transcript!”

Extra credit... Perhaps these were the magic words that would get some hands up. For honor students aiming to get one of our school’s limited endorsement slots for more selective universities, there were few things more enticing. Yet it appeared even this wasn’t enough to outweigh anyone’s natural aversion to boring menial labor, not to mention the time commitment. By the time morning homeroom ended, there were still no volunteers.

“Gosh, you kids are so unmotivated! Where’s your community spirit, huh?!” said Ms. Iyo. “Well, if anyone changes their mind, just let me know, and I can give you the rundown. Okay, I think that’ll have to do it for homeroom today!”

We stood and gave our closing bows, and Ms. Iyo exited the classroom—which then promptly went abuzz with chatter in her absence as my fellow students started speaking among themselves and getting ready for first period. Meanwhile, I pulled my classical literature notebook out of my desk and followed Ms. Iyo out into the hallway. There was an assignment I’d forgotten at home the day before and thus been unable to turn in. Obviously, I could just wait until fifth period and turn it in then, but I figured I might as well do it now on the off chance that it slipped my mind.

“Ms. Iyo?” I called after her, and she stopped and turned around. “Sorry, here’s that homework I forgot to turn in yesterday.”

I held out the notebook to her, which she accepted after a moment’s recollection.

“Oh, right, right,” she said. “Y’know, it seems like you’re a little bit out of it lately, Kamiki. You’ve been falling asleep in class a lot too.”

“Uh, yeah,” I said. “Sorry about that, ha ha...”

Noticed that, did she? It was true, though. Waking up early to go on Ushio’s morning runs with her had definitely done a number on my sleep schedule.

“It hasn’t affected your grades as of yet, so I won’t grill you too hard for it,” she told me. “But if this happens again, I’ll make you stand out in the hallway for the whole period.”

“I hear that’s considered cruel and unusual punishment nowadays,” I noted.

“It was only a joke, don’t worry. Just wanted to convey how unimpressed I am.”

Ms. Iyo furrowed her brow with reproach. I could tell she was right on the verge of chewing me out, so I dispensed with the smart remarks and simply apologized again.

“Oh, by the way,” said Ms. Iyo. “I assume you were present enough to hear

that announcement I made just now? The one about the volunteer work opportunity.”

“Yeah, I was,” I said. “What about it?”

“Guessing there’s nothing I can say to convince you to take part?”

“Afraid not, yeah...”

“Wow. Not even gonna *pretend* to consider it, huh?”

I’d been called out. Perhaps I should have acted a bit more wishy-washy.

“You’ll earn extra crediiit... Doesn’t that appeal to you at all?”

“I mean, I’m not shooting for an endorsement slot, so not really... Feel like that’d be a more effective incentive for someone already doing a bunch of extracurriculars.”

“Well, you’re not wrong there,” said Ms. Iyo, graciously acknowledging her defeat.

It was true, though. For someone like me, who had no special skills or accolades to speak of, competing with the other students vying for a school endorsement would be a complete waste of time. I could never be a worthier candidate than the kids who spent all three years of their high school careers diversifying their portfolios with myriad academic and extracurricular accomplishments.

“You should probably ask someone else, sorry,” I said. “Maybe someone who’s already on a club or sports team.”

“I would, but they’re already busy enough with their other activities.”

“Then ask someone you think would have the time for it. Someone who isn’t me.”

“I mean...I guess I *did* have one other person in mind.”

“Great, then why don’t you go with them?”

“Well, I don’t know... I’m just not sure Arisa would be game for it.”

“Wait. *Nishizono*?”

Of all the possible candidates... No way in hell she'd show up.

"Yes, I know exactly what you're going to say," said Ms. Iyo, as if my thoughts were written plainly on my face. "I'll admit, I have my doubts there too. But she's been acting up so much recently, I feel like she needs to do *something* to improve her image in the eyes of the school's higher-ups, and this would certainly fit the bill..."

I assumed that by "higher-ups" she meant people like our sophomore advisor, the vice principal, and so on. They'd probably been tearing their hair out over Arisa's recent behavior. Even the rest of us students could tell she was on thin ice; I'd heard some kids speculate that they might not let her graduate. Ms. Iyo was right to be concerned about her. And yet, despite her best intentions...

"I dunno... Not sure Nishizono would be caught dead picking up trash," I said.

"Yeah, that's the real question, isn't it? And even if she went, there's always the concern that she could cause another incident there, especially since it'd be outside the school's jurisdiction..."

She pressed a palm to her forehead. It seemed like she had a lot on her plate. Honestly, I didn't have anything else going on after school, so I *could* participate if I really wanted to. *Maybe I should at least consider it... Ugh, but I already know it'd suck so hard.*

"Oh, shoot," said Ms. Iyo, checking her watch. "I've gotta get going. Let me know if you change your mind, though, Kamiki. Plenty of flexibility to fit you on a cleanup crew whenever you want. Anyway, see you later."

And with that, Ms. Iyo hurried off down the corridor, so I headed back to class.

Nishizono, huh?

I was, like, 90 percent certain she wouldn't take Ms. Iyo up on her offer. But community service aside, I was curious to see what would happen when her suspension was up and she came back to school tomorrow. Hopefully, there wouldn't be any more trouble in our classroom, since Sera was now forbidden from visiting Class A, but there was no telling what Nishizono *herself* might do independent of him. I could only pray she wouldn't unleash her pent-up anger

indiscriminately on our entire class. And, for Ms. Iyo's sake, that the worst was over.

We were now in the second half of November. It was a tranquil morning just before dawn, and I was accompanying Ushio on yet another of her morning runs. The weather had finally cleared up after two straight days of rain, and there were puddles all over the pavement. The wide river along the main road through town was running high, its waters browner than usual. Also, I wasn't sure if it was the extra humidity after the rain or what, but it felt particularly cold outside this morning. It was frosty enough that my hands would probably have gone numb by now if not for the gloves I was wearing. Running alongside me, Ushio panted out puff after puff of white vapor, her rhythmic breaths taking on color in the frigid air.

"Man, it's freezing out today... Feels like winter already," I said.

"Why don't you hop off that bike and run with me, then?" said Ushio. "Guarantee it would warm you right up."

"Yeah, no thanks. I'd rather be cold than out of breath. Plus, there's no way I'd ever be able to keep up with you."

"I don't mind matching your pace."

"Kinda defeats the purpose if you're not straining yourself at all, doesn't it?"

"Okay, fair," Ushio said, then picked up the pace a little. I pedaled faster too.

We took our usual course, occasionally slowing down and making small talk along the way. As we passed by the telephone pole that marked the end of the loop, Ushio eased up from a jog to a walk, and I offered her the sports towel that was balled up in the basket of my bike.

"Here. Good hustle today."

She took it. "Thanks."

"Want some Pocari?"

"Sure."

I pulled out the bottled sports drink I'd purchased yesterday from my little shoulder bag. After wiping her face off, she handed back the towel and took the Pocari, then took a long drink as she walked along. When she at last pulled the bottle from her lips, I noticed her expression had turned awfully meek.

"You know...it feels kind of like you're my personal assistant sometimes," she said.

"I guess it kinda does, doesn't it?" The towel was Ushio's, but I'd been bringing her bottles of Pocari every morning since last week—for no other reason than I figured it would be much appreciated after a good run.

"Maybe if I end up having to rejoin the track team, you could apply to be team manager," Ushio said with a playful smile.

"Don't even joke about that. You're gonna win, right?"

"I'm just teasing, silly." Ushio took another swig of Pocari.

"...Okay, but seriously, how sure are you that you can beat him?"

It was a question I'd been itching to ask for a while now, but I was also kind of afraid to hear the answer. There were only three days left until the race with Noi. I wanted to believe that Ushio could totally wipe the floor with him like she said she would, but I knew she had to have a more realistic view of her chances. Ushio didn't respond at first, perhaps mulling the question over.

After about ten seconds' thought, she said, "Maybe about fifty-fifty or so."

Damn. These were not odds I'd want to bet on.

"Can I ask what you're basing that figure on?"

"Not sure," said Ushio. "Just what my gut is telling me, I guess."

"Gotcha..."

Well, great. Now I'm way more worried than I was before.

I wondered if maybe it *would* be a good idea for Ushio to just drop out of the race after all. It wasn't as if she really stood to gain anything from winning, and she definitely had a lot to lose if she came up short. Neither the terms nor the circumstances were particularly fair. Yet Ushio seemed determined to rise to

the challenge, and I knew there'd be no talking her out of it. Perhaps somewhere deep down, the thought of rejoining the track team wasn't all that unappealing to her... But it certainly was to me.

"...Guess maybe I should fill out my team manager application in advance," I said.

"Oh, come on," said Ushio. "I told you I was just teasing."

As the sun crept above the horizon, the skies turned crystal clear and blue, as if the long rain had washed away every speck of cloud dust that hung over our little town. The temperature had risen a fair bit since our morning run, and it was now almost pleasant enough outside to forgo a jacket.

I wheeled my way up to Tsubakioka High and quickly parked my bike in the bike lot. Right when I grabbed my bookbag from the basket so I could head inside, I heard the sound of a kickstand clicking behind me. I turned to see that it was Nishizono, of all people. She locked her bike and grabbed her own bag. Then we made eye contact.

On instinct, I took a step back. Mainly because she was glaring at me with the fire of a thousand suns. Not that it was all that unusual for her to be staring daggers at me, mind you; if anything, it was the norm. But this time, there was clearly a deeper malice to her gaze, as though she were staring down her mortal enemy. Fortunately, she whirled away from me in a huff and walked off toward the entrance hall.

What the hell was that about?

I didn't think I'd done anything to her recently that would warrant that level of stink eye. Hell, we hadn't so much as exchanged a single word in almost a month now. At the same time, I didn't get the impression that she was simply in an extremely bad mood and would have given that same vicious look to anyone unfortunate enough to cross paths with her today. Was it possible she felt I'd slighted her somehow without me even realizing it? This question gnawed at my brain the whole way up to Classroom 2-A.

Despite two suspensions, Nishizono's attitude in the classroom showed no signs of improvement. If anything, she was giving off an even *more* diabolical aura than ever before, as if to say, *Approach me at your own risk*. Like before, she made no attempt to engage with anyone else, but now it felt like she was actively trying to let each and every one of us know from her demeanor just how utterly deplorable she thought we were. She was even giving the stink eye to any classmates who were so bold as to simply make idle chitchat in her general vicinity—usually while clicking her tongue at them as well.

“Feels like someone cast Berserk on that chick or something,” one of the boys joked at her expense.

I assumed he was referring to the *Final Fantasy* spell that inflicted its target with a status ailment of the same name, turning them into a bloodthirsty maniac only capable of blindly attacking with reckless abandon. It also raised the target's attack while lowering their defense, so it could be good for tanky characters who dealt solid damage with their basic physical attacks, but it was a major annoyance on your spellcasters or anyone with more specific roles to fulfill.

It was definitely true that Nishizono seemed to have lost any semblance of composure. In months prior, she'd concealed her discontent behind a layer of snide, holier-than-thou sarcasm that—while still indefensible—was at least a slightly more sophisticated way of expressing her hate. Nowadays, she was lashing out like a rabid dog, with no sense or forethought to her actions. In which case, one certainly *could* say that it seemed like she was under the effects of Berserk right now.

That begged the question: who cast the spell?

It had to have been Sera. He'd inflicted her so deeply with his curse that even now, after he'd been banned from entering Class A, its effects were still eating away at her. It really *was* a wicked thing to do to someone you already knew had a short fuse.

“Um... Hey, Kamiki-kun?” someone said.

It was Hoshihara—she'd come up to my desk during lunch hour just after Hasumi and I had finished eating and were engaging in random small talk. This

was awfully unusual for her; she typically spent her entire lunch break parked at Ushio's desk and rarely interacted with anyone else during, much less me.

"What's up?" I asked.

"Could you, um...come with me for a bit?"

"Huh? I mean, yeah, I suppose so..."

I cut short my conversation with Hasumi and rose from my chair, then followed her out of the classroom. *A lunchtime invitation from Hoshihara?* I couldn't deny that this normally would have sent my heart a-soaring, but I could tell from the withered look on her face that it probably wasn't going to be anything to feel giddy about. *But what could it be, then?* As soon as we were out in the hallway, Hoshihara stopped and looked at me.

"I just got a text from Arisa," she said. "She told me to bring you and come outside to the back of the gym..."

"Wait, she told you to bring *me*? Why?" I racked my brain for any reason that seemed even slightly plausible, but I came up totally empty.

"I don't know. Did something happen between you two?"

"No, not that I'm aware of. I mean, I did notice she was glaring at me pretty hard this morning, but I haven't even spoken to her lately... What about you?"

"Same as you, basically. I wonder what she wants..."

Hoshihara seemed a little unnerved, and I didn't blame her. I could maybe see Nishizono having beef with me for some reason I was simply oblivious to, but her calling out Hoshihara as well was a mystery. While the two of them weren't currently speaking, Nishizono had always seemed to have a bit of a soft spot for Hoshihara. She never gave the girl too much flak for hanging out with Ushio directly. Hell, she'd even come to help out at our group study session before finals last semester when Hoshihara called in a favor (even if she left the moment she realized it was for my benefit).

"Well, let's go see what she wants, I guess," I said, and Hoshihara nodded.

We made our way downstairs, changed back into our street shoes in the entryway, and headed outside into the brisk and blustery autumn weather.

After a short walk around campus, we made it to our destination. The small, open area behind the gym was in the shadow of the building, so it was awfully chilly and dim despite the hour. We found Nishizono waiting there with her back leaned up against the building.

Mashima and Shiina were also in attendance. As soon as they noticed us, we exchanged mutually perplexed looks. It seemed they were every bit as clueless as to why we'd all been summoned here as we were. After Hoshihara called out to announce our arrival, Nishizono peeled her back off the building and faced us.

"If you're wondering why I called you out here," she said, "it's because there's something I need to get to the bottom of."

She scanned our faces with keen eyes as she spoke—first looking at me, then Hoshihara, then Mashima and Shiina in turn. Whatever this was about, it was clearly something of grave importance to her. And then she asked us all a question.

"Which one of you told him? Fess up, now."

Silence.

What is she talking about? I glanced over at Hoshihara, but she seemed just as lost as I was.

"Sorry, what's this about?" I asked when no one else responded.

Nishizono shot me an angry scowl and then clicked her tongue. "Don't play dumb with me. You were all there the day I punched Sera, weren't you?"

The four of us looked at one another, then nodded in unison.

"Then you'll remember what he said that a 'friend of mine' told him," she continued. "Which means it must've been one of you. And I wanna know who. Are you with me now?"

Man, I'm so confused. What was she accusing us of telling him, exactly? I wished she would stop beating around the bush and just ask the question straight. But I also didn't want to risk setting her off, so I traced back my memories from that day and tried to figure it out for myself. I *did* vaguely recall

Sera saying that he heard something from a friend of hers, during their little altercation—but what was it?

“Come *on* already!” Nishizono blurted out, losing her temper. “Why are you all trying to gaslight me here?! I know at least *one* of you must know what I’m talking about!”

“Calm down, Arisa,” said Mashima, stepping forward. “None of us have any idea what you’re trying to get at here. What did he say a friend of yours told him?”

“Oh, for the love of... Fine!”

Nishizono gritted her teeth and stared at Mashima with a look of anguish in her eyes. She almost seemed more distraught by the thought of having to say whatever it was out loud than she was resentful of whoever actually did it. She clenched her fists until her knuckles whitened, and gradually lowered her gaze to the ground. And just as her body began to quake as though she couldn’t hold it back any longer, she finally said the words.

“Which one of you told Sera I had a crush on Ushio?!”

...Ah. So that’s what this is about.

Finally, it all made sense. This explained why she’d glared at me so intensely this morning. And now that she mentioned it, I was pretty curious who’d gone and blabbed to Sera as well. It hadn’t really occurred to me to think any harder about it after the shock from her punching him overshadowed that minor detail, but I totally could see how, for her, it had probably been the single biggest question on her mind ever since.

“I only ever told you three about that,” said Nishizono, lifting her head. “I know that much for a fact.”

...Wait. You three?

“Why did you call *me* out here, then?” I asked. Sera *had* claimed that a “friend of hers” told him this, after all, and she hadn’t told me herself, so why would

she have any reason to suspect me?

“Because you obviously knew too,” said Nishizono. “You totally insinuated as much when you threatened me in class that one time.”

I was about to ask what she was referring to, but after thinking about it a little more, I realized I probably already knew. It had been the time I first really stood up to Nishizono and got into an argument with her about Ushio in class. I had alluded to her having feelings toward Ushio that she probably didn’t want me to air out for the entire classroom to hear. While it may have gone over the heads of most of our classmates, it had to have struck a chord with Nishizono. In which case, I could see how she’d gathered that I was privy to her little secret too.

“Anyway, I don’t even really care if people know at this point,” she went on. “Not like Sera didn’t already broadcast it loud and clear to our entire class. Like I said before, what I really wanna know is who spilled the beans to *him*.”

Now that we’d arrived at the heart of the matter, I could feel the tension growing in the air. I certainly hadn’t told Sera anything, which seemed to imply that one of these three must have told him. But I didn’t get the impression that any of them would have shared such a personal detail about Nishizono, let alone to a guy like Sera. As I looked around wondering who it could possibly be, Nishizono fixed her razor-sharp gaze on Hoshihara, singling her out.

“If I had to make a guess,” she said, “I’d say it was *you*, Natsuki.”

“Wha—?!” Hoshihara cried in disbelief.

“I mean, you’re the only one who would have told Kamiki here, right? If you’ve got loose enough lips to tell *him*, why should I believe you wouldn’t tell Sera too?”

“N-no, I never... That’s not...!”

This accusation sent Hoshihara into an incontrovertible state of panic. This was bad—especially since she actually *had* told me, which made it even harder for her to plead innocence. Nishizono’s eyes narrowed with even greater suspicion.

“Well?” she demanded. “Are you the rat or not?”

“N-no!” said Hoshihara. “I didn’t say anything to Sera...”

“To *Sera*? So you *did* tell Kamiki, then?”

“Well, I mean, uhhh...”



Hoshihara hung her head and started desperately fumbling for words. I couldn't just stand idly by and watch this play out any longer.

"Come on, Nishizono. She's not—"

"Quiet," she snapped. "No one asked you."

She closed the distance between herself and Hoshihara and leaned over, getting right up in the girl's face so she could look her straight in her downcast eyes. It startled Hoshihara, judging by the way her shoulders twitched. My danger senses started tingling. Knowing Nishizono, I wouldn't have put it past her to start throwing punches if she decided she didn't like Hoshihara's answer. And we weren't in the classroom right now, so there'd be no teachers or even other students out here aside from us to help break it up. As I took a few steps closer to pull Nishizono away if need be, Hoshihara finally opened her mouth.

"...Okay, yes," she said. "I did tell Kamiki-kun. Sorry."

Nishizono's face went red with rage as if a sudden fever came over her. "You're *filth*. Can't believe I ever called you my friend."

This rebuke was more deeply tinged with disappointment than anything, so violence struck me as unlikely at this point. Still, I didn't want to take any chances, so I hurriedly inserted myself in between the two of them.

"Wait, Nishizono!" I said.

"Move it," she growled. "I'm talking to Natsuki right now."

"It was my fault, all right? I was the one who asked her if there was any dirty laundry we could use against you."

"Excuse me?" She glowered at me with such ferocity that I wanted to curl up into a ball and never speak again—but I knew I had to say my piece.

"Well, you were like a freaking dictator in our class back then, okay? Obviously *now* the tides have turned, but at the time, we were the only ones standing up for Ushio, so of course we wanted to find some way to fight back against the person spearheading all of that harassment. I can totally get being paranoid about your friends betraying you, but you *definitely* weren't the victim back then, so let's not conflate this with that, all right?"

“You really think that excuses anything? Because all you’re telling me right now is that you’re just as scummy as she is,” said Nishizono, pushing me aside so she could get right up in Hoshihara’s face again. “Besides, you must’ve had a little grudge against me too, am I right? Especially after I ‘bullied’ your precious Ushio so hard right in front of you. But you didn’t have the courage to stand up to me yourself, so you went and told my little secret to Sera to give *him* some ammunition he could use against me.”

“N-no! I... I’d never do that!” Hoshihara protested tearfully.

“Hey, lay *off*, already,” I said, confronting Nishizono once more. “There’s no way she would have told Sera, okay? I mean, just use your brain for one second. Have you ever gotten the impression that she has a remotely good opinion of him? Why would she risk collaborating with someone she considers an enemy just to take you down a peg? Besides, would someone who has a grudge against you have invited you to that group study session and begged for your help? I don’t think so.”

“Kamiki’s right,” said Mashima, backing me up. These two words of agreement seemed to get through to Nishizono far more than anything I’d said. She stepped away from Hoshihara and turned to face Mashima.

“You’d rather take this loser’s side instead of mine, huh, Marine?”

“No, that’s not it at all. I’m just saying that nothing good’s gonna come of grilling Nakki like this. Can we just drop it with this weird interrogation sesh already?”

“I’m not dropping anything until I find the culprit. How can I sleep at night knowing someone backstabbed me and then got away with it?”

“But, like...this has gotta be exactly what Sera wants, right? To drive us even further apart? He only said all that stuff because he knew it would get to you and make you isolate yourself even more. You can’t keep playing right into his hand.”

Nishizono pressed her fingers to her brow in frustration, then shook her head. “Sorry, but I’m not taking any chances. Once I figure out who the rat is, I’ll teach that person a lesson for betraying me, then apologize to the other three for suspecting them. Not isolating myself if I’m just weeding out a no-good traitor.”

“I mean, I *wish* it were that simple, but...” Mashima trailed off, and in the end she never finished this sentence.

I could only assume she was going to point out that Nishizono already *had* isolated herself from the three of them, and a simple apology wasn’t going to suddenly mend those relationships after everything she’d done. Not to mention, regardless of who among them might have told Sera, something told me the other two suspects wouldn’t just stand by and let Nishizono “teach them a lesson.” They’d want to protect their friend, naturally, and this would only create further discord between her and her old friend group. Until Nishizono herself decided to abandon this course of action, she was doomed to keep digging her own grave deeper and deeper, until she was completely and utterly alone. Which, as Mashima said, was just what Sera wanted.

It was at this point that I realized something. Was *this* what Sera was talking about the other day when he said it “wasn’t over yet”? If so, then indeed, it hadn’t mattered that he’d been banned from Class A. The seed of doubt he’d planted in Nishizono’s mind had successfully taken root and twined its thorny stems around her thoughts, just as he wanted.

“Speaking of which,” said Nishizono, turning to Shiina now. “*You’ve* been awfully quiet this entire time. Anything you’d like to confess?”

Startled by this sudden accusation, Shiina lowered her gaze in discomfort. “I didn’t tell him,” she said. “I don’t think any of us did, honestly...”

“Then how did he know, huh?”

“I...don’t have an answer to that, sorry.”

Nishizono let out a long, heavy sigh. “You know, you’ve always been this way. It’s like you refuse to think things through unless somebody tells you to... You look all cool and composed on the surface, but in reality, there’s nothing going on up there in that head of yours. If you’re saying you didn’t tell him, then you could at least spare a little brainpower to help me figure this out.”

Shiina kept her mouth tightly shut after this, gripping her skirt like a child who’d just been scolded. She’d always seemed like such a dauntless, rational person to me, yet even she shriveled up in the face of Nishizono’s cruel words and intimidation tactics. Or maybe it was like she’d told me in the lunchroom a

while back: that she simply felt she couldn't oppose her, given their history together.

"Man, you're useless," Nishizono spat.

"Hey, come on, Arisa," said Mashima. "Can you just give it a rest already?"

Nishizono redirected her ire to Mashima. But unlike Shiina and Hoshihara, Mashima didn't flinch.

"The only person who stands to gain anything from us bickering with each other like this is Sera," she said. "If I were you, I'd just pretend not to care so he never got the satisfaction of thinking he'd fazed me. Besides, even if there *was* a rat here, it's not like there are any deep, dark secrets left for them to share at this point, are there? You never talked to us about your vulnerabilities or whatever in the first place."

"This isn't about preventing another incident," said Nishizono. "This is about settling the score for the damage that's already been done. Don't act like you're the voice of reason here when you don't even know what I'm thinking."

"And how exactly were you planning to settle that score, huh? You've already been suspended twice this year. Act up again, and they're gonna expel you for sure. And what's the big deal here, anyway?" Mashima was starting to look fed up now. "I mean, who *cares* if you have a crush or not? Tsukinoki's one of the most popular kids in school, so it's really not that absurd to think you'd have—"

"I *don't* have a crush on him!" Nishizono shouted in denial, silencing Mashima before she could even finish her point. My ears started ringing; I could almost feel the very air around us trembling with anticipation. "Maybe I did at one point, but not anymore! I *despise* that freak!"

Her tone was colored with deep shades of regret. She dug her nails into her own arms with repugnance, as if she were rebuking her past self for ever having fallen for someone she now despised.

"And not just Ushio!" she went on. "I hate you, and Natsuki, and Shiina, and everyone else too... I can't *believe* you people!"

It seemed there was no end to Nishizono's bottomless resentment. There was a sort of pain in her voice, as if she was shedding her own blood with every

word she spoke.

“Arisa...” said Mashima, taking a concerned step forward.

“Stay away from me!” Nishizono shouted, throwing a hand out in front of her to reject this approach. Her shoulders heaved up and down from her erratic breathing as she sized us all up with menacing, bloodshot eyes. It was the sort of look you might expect from a wounded beast—cornered and ready to bite anyone who dared to reach out a hand and touch it, friend or foe. It seemed she was beyond reasoning with.

This silent tension continued for a short while, until eventually the warning bell for fifth period rang. At this point, Nishizono drew in a deep breath, slowly collected herself, and scanned our faces one last time.

“I don’t care about the repercussions,” she said. “Mark my words: once I figure out who the rat is, there’ll be hell to pay.”

And with that, Nishizono stomped off, leaving the four of us standing there behind the gymnasium in a shared state of disbelief. No one dared to chase after her. An icy wind blew through the gaps between us.

“Aw, man...” said Mashima, sounding disappointed but not surprised. “Really have to wonder sometimes how she even ended up this way...”

There was the tiniest hint of pity in this lament.

Despite getting somehow roped into Nishizono’s wild-goose chase, I wasn’t going to let it affect the other things I had going on in my life. I was still going to accompany Ushio on her morning runs, and I would try to go about my life at school without letting her intimidation tactics get to me.

For fifth period the next day, I had art class—one of three possible electives for that time slot—so I’d made my way to the art room with about a third of the kids in our class. The others headed off to either music or calligraphy class instead.

I sat there spinning my mechanical pencil with my right hand, staring down at the blank sheet of drawing paper on the table in front of me. Today’s prompt

was to draw “a building in your neighborhood,” but it was now twenty minutes into the period, and I still hadn’t advanced beyond the brainstorming phase. I looked up from my empty canvas and glanced at the seat diagonally in front of mine, where Hoshihara sat staring down at a similarly blank sheet of paper, apparently experiencing the same artist’s block as me.

That said, Hoshihara had also seemed pretty down ever since lunch yesterday, what with the whole Nishizono debacle. I’d tried to tell her not to let it get to her as we made our way back to class after that, but it seemed this paltry reassurance had done nothing to alleviate her anxiety. I was starting to think that this situation might cast a longer shadow over us than I initially thought.

“Man, this sucks...” I said.

“What are *you* sighing about?” came a chiding voice from beside me.

It was the girl with thick-framed red glasses sitting next to me: Todoroki. She’d been the stage director for our class’s production of *Romeo and Juliet*, which we’d performed during the October culture festival. Her highly particular acting directions were still fresh in my memory. As the guy who’d volunteered to play Romeo despite having zero stage experience whatsoever, she’d put me through the wringer. That being the case, we’d maintained a mild acquaintanceship as a result. We even chatted like this during art class from time to time, albeit mostly because we’d been seated close to each other.

“There’s no need to get impatient,” she said. “As you can see, plenty of other people haven’t started on their drawings yet either.”

“No, it’s not the prompt that I’m stressed out about. It’s just...some slight interpersonal drama, I guess.”

“Oh, really? I didn’t realize kids who weren’t in any clubs or committees had to worry about that sort of thing.”

“I mean, yeah? Of course they do... Not all lazy people are loners, you know.”

I presumed she was an adherent of the club supremacy mindset. Though I found it funny that, as a member of the choral club, she’d chosen art as her elective instead of music. (I’d actually asked her about it once, and she claimed it was because she “didn’t want to make the other kids feel too inferior.” Ever

the humble one, this girl.)

“So, there’s a bit of drama afoot, huh?” she said. “Let me guess—is it about Ushio?”

“No, not really,” I replied.

“Hasumi, then? Did you two get in a fight or something?”

“Of course not. We’re not even *close* enough to argue about things.”

“Oh, I know! It’s gotta be Nishizono. She’s been really on edge lately.”

“Well, it’s kind of related to that, but she’s not really who I’m most worried about... Also, what is this, twenty questions?”

“Ooh. Must be Natsuki, then.”

I faltered at this, and Todoroki let out a victorious, knowing chuckle.

“So it *is* Natsuki, eh?” she said. “Feeling a little lovesick, are we?”

“N-no, don’t be ridiculous,” I said, trying (and failing) to play it cool. Not wanting her to get the wrong idea, I figured I should probably just explain the situation straight. Though since it was a long story, I abbreviated it considerably. “Yesterday, she and Nishizono got into a bit of a...spat, let’s say. And she’s seemed kinda down ever since.”

“Oh, dang. *Those* two went at it? I mean, I noticed they weren’t really talking all that much recently, but that sure sounds like drama, all right...”

“Yeah, it’s rough,” I said glumly.

“Hey, I know. Maybe I should recommend her a good movie or something to cheer her up next time we talk.”

“...I guess that might help, yeah.”

Todoroki *was* a self-proclaimed movie buff, so maybe she’d actually have some luck with that. I’d had success with recommending Hoshihara some of my favorite novels last semester—although we’d kind of fallen off on that lately, so I wasn’t sure whether she was still reading as much these days.

“Maybe I should recommend *you* something too, Kamiki.”

“Nah, I think I’m good.”

“What, how come? I’m over here offering to share some of my valuable wisdom out of the goodness of my heart, so you’d darn well *better* hear me out.”

“I mean, I feel like basically anything you’d recommend would be too artsy-fartsy and highbrow for me, not to mention depressing...”

“No, no, no. I’m mostly into films with genuine entertainment value, actually. Even Nanamori-chan told me I have very good taste, I’ll have you know.”

Nanamori had been the costume designer for our play during the culture festival. I’d gathered that the two of them had gone on to become pretty good friends after that, and it seemed they’d only gotten closer in the time since.

“Did you know she’s even *more* into movies than I am?” said Todoroki. “Heck, she probably watches, like, three times as many as I do. So if she says I have good taste, then that means you can definitely trust my aesthetic sensibilities. Now, come on—let me introduce you to a few of your new favorite films.”

“You just want an excuse to gush about your favorite movies, don’t you?”

“Okay, so this first one is a major Bollywood cult classic...”

“You’re not even listening to me!”

“Hey!” shouted the teacher. “You two back there! Stop yapping with each other and start putting pencil to paper, why don’t you?!”

We’d officially been reprimanded for our impudence. Our art teacher was much more lenient than most when it came to chitchat, but we’d been pushing our luck with this last extended dialogue. Flustered, Todoroki and I bowed our heads in apology, then shut the hell up and got back to work on our drawings.

Eventually, art class drew to a close. While I *had* drawn a few lines by the end of it, my sheet of paper was still mostly blank. As my fellow classmates quickly shuffled out of the classroom, I spotted Hoshihara among them. Her posture looked a little more hunched over than usual, and I could tell she was still feeling pretty down in the dumps.

“Hey, Hoshihara,” I called out from behind her. She turned around, and I

jogged up to walk alongside her.

“What’s up?” she asked.

“Well, nothing in particular, I guess. Just noticed you seem kinda bummed out.”

“Oh...” She forced a smile. “Yeah, wish I could say I’m all good! But you’re right, I’m definitely not feeling too great, ha ha...”

“Guessing it’s because of the stuff with Nishizono?”

“Yeah...”

I assumed the only reason she was admitting this and not putting on a brave face right now was because Ushio wasn’t around. Hoshihara and I *never* talked about Nishizono when Ushio was present—it was a sort of unspoken agreement we’d established after recent events. That, and Ushio always made a face when we did. I couldn’t blame her after all the harassment she’d put up with.

“I was thinking things over yesterday,” Hoshihara said in a somber voice. “And I think it really wasn’t right of me to tell you Arisa’s secret after all. I don’t even blame her for calling me filth, honestly.”

“Nah, come on,” I said. “That was only because I pressed you for it.”

“Still, I could have just not mentioned it, right? I mean, I know / sure as heck wouldn’t want random people finding out that I had feelings for Ushio-chan either. So I was ultimately in the wrong there.”

“...Fair enough, I suppose.”

It sounded like she’d already given this a lot of thought and decided how she felt on the matter, so it would be pretty insensitive of me to try to convince her otherwise. If she was feeling down out of guilt due to a mistake she believed she’d made, then I needed to let her come to terms with that herself, and then she should naturally cheer up again.

“...Maybe I should just apologize to her,” Hoshihara mumbled.

“Do you really think that’s necessary? Even if there might be some amount of fault on your end of the table, I’d say Nishizono’s done so much worse at this point that she doesn’t deserve the validation.”

“You don’t think?”

“If you *really* want to, I’d say you should at least wait until the situation dies down a bit to do so. Apologizing to her now would probably only make things worse, honestly.”

Not to mention, Nishizono might not even be willing to hear her out at the moment. Even *that* would be preferable to her blowing her top again and reacting violently, which we definitely wanted to avoid.

“When will the situation die down, though?” said Hoshihara.

“I mean...probably after she figures out who told Sera, I guess.”

I didn’t particularly want to call said person a “rat” like Nishizono had, especially when I didn’t know under what circumstances they’d been compelled to share her secret with Sera—and I wanted to believe none of the three girls would have done so maliciously.

“Jeez, who the heck could it be?”

“Beats me... Really don’t think Mashima or Shiina would have told him. Or you, of course.”

We rounded the corner, then headed through the skybridge that connected the special purpose building to the main school building. We were almost to Classroom 2-A.

“You think it’s possible someone *else* could have told him?” said Hoshihara, as though it only just occurred to her.

“Like who?” I replied. “Didn’t Nishizono say she only told the three of you?”

“Well, yeah, but couldn’t someone have figured out that she had feelings for Ushio-chan from her behavior or something? Even if it’d only be a hunch.”

“Ah, I see what you’re saying. In that case, basically everyone in Class A would become a suspect... Wait, I know. Why don’t we literally just ask Sera who told him?”

“Ooh, yeah. That might work... Actually, no! That’s not acceptable!”

This was quite the sudden change of tune. What could have possibly made

her do a complete one-eighty in such a short span of time?

“That’s beside the point. Trying to figure out who to pin the blame on isn’t gonna do anything to solve the underlying issue here,” she said, shooting me a reproachful look.

“R-right, I guess not,” I said.

But then how *were* we supposed to fix this? On second thought, maybe it wasn’t our problem to solve. Maybe we had to think of Nishizono’s wrath like a natural disaster, something to be waited out rather than fixed. Logic dictated that if we just remained calm, her irrational fury would exhaust itself eventually.

And yet, as Classroom 2-A came into view, I found myself unable to move on from thinking about the Nishizono situation. Not that I had any intention of trying to get to the bottom of who told Sera myself or anything—but god, if I wasn’t curious.

That night, I rode into town on my bike to make a quick stop at the supermarket. I needed to pick up some more Pocari for Ushio’s morning runs, plus a little late-night snack for myself while I was at it. Both would be cheaper at a grocery store than the closest mini-mart.

It was just past 9:00 p.m., and the cold outside was bitter enough to convey that autumn was nearly over and winter was just around the bend. It felt like time had been flying by since the culture festival. Now it was once again the season to bundle up and stay indoors, since the weather made going out and doing things less and less appealing by the day. But it was an unwritten law of the universe that the fun times could only last so long. You had to enjoy them while they lasted, but also brace yourself for the inevitable hardships to come. Lately, I’d begun to feel like that was the main trick to getting by in life while maintaining a modicum of sanity.

After riding along the highway for a while, I spotted the large signboard for the aforementioned supermarket. I turned into the parking lot, parked my bike at the bike rack near the entrance, and headed into the glaringly bright interior. I grabbed a shopping basket and made a beeline for the beverage aisle. The

place was pretty deserted at this hour; the only other customers I could see were a handful of businesspeople who seemed to be making a quick stop to pick up a few things on their way home from work.

I grabbed two half-liter bottles of Pocari and placed them in my basket, which still didn't even amount to 150 yen. They were definitely cheap here, so I had no intention of asking Ushio to reimburse me. Instead, we'd agreed she could just buy me lunch at the cafeteria some random day to repay the favor.

After making a stop by the candy aisle to pick myself up a little snack, I went to the register to pay, then headed outside. I could see some winged insects flying around the streetlights in the parking lot, preying upon the smaller bugs that were drawn to the light. I lifted my gaze even higher to see a full moon shining clear and bright in the night sky, and I wondered if Ushio was out running right now. *Nah, probably not.* Chances were, she fit her evening runs in before dinnertime because she'd need time to digest, and I knew she'd been going to bed no later than ten o'clock recently. She was probably just chilling in her bedroom or taking a bath at this hour.

A wintry chill ran up my spine. *God, it's cold out here. I should hurry home before my face goes numb.* I placed my shopping bag in my bike basket, then raised my kickstand.

"Wait a sec... Is that *you*, Kamiki?" said a familiar voice.

I turned to look and saw a girl in a loose-fitting hoodie standing across the parking lot, her figure illuminated by the glow of the supermarket. It was Mashima, and she had a shopping bag of her own in her right hand.

"Yeah, it totally *is* you! Man, what are the chances? Fancy seeing you here!"

"Oh, h-hey... Yeah, what a coincidence..." I said, sounding awkward as hell.

Aside from my close friends, like Ushio and Hoshihara, I still got a bit nervous whenever I bumped into someone I knew from school out in public—especially when it was a girl. Plus, it was pretty disorienting to see Mashima alone in general, given that she had almost always been accompanied by Shiina in my limited time knowing her.

"What brings you out here so late?" I asked.

“Just running errands,” said Mashima, holding up her shopping bag as she walked over. “Grabbed some stuff for breakfast tomorrow. Same as you, I’m guessing?”

“Er, not so much... More like a late-night snack run.”

“Oh yeah? Lemme see whatcha got!” She started rummaging through my shopping bag. “Chocoballs and Pocari? You shouldn’t drink sports drinks unless you’re actually physically active, y’know.”

“No, no—those aren’t for me. Bought ’em to give to someone else.”

“Is that right? Well, guess it’s none of my business anyway,” she said, suddenly losing interest in the contents of my grocery bag. “Anyway, I’ll see ya around!”

She waved me goodbye and trotted off past me; apparently she’d parked her bike farther down than I had.

“Actually, wait!” I called after her. “Um...”

Mashima turned around and tilted her head. I was extremely tempted to ask her who *she* thought spilled the beans to Sera, but now I was getting cold feet—especially since Mashima had been the one who originally said we were only playing into Sera’s hand by trying to turn this into a manhunt. I didn’t want to ruin an otherwise pleasant interaction by souring the vibes. I *also* didn’t want to seem like a total wishy-washy flake and say “Y’know what, forget it” after I’d made her stop and reopened the conversation.

“What is it?” she asked. “If you don’t spit it out, I’m gonna leave.”

“Sorry, I guess I was just, uh...wondering how you feel about the whole Nishizono situation,” I said so as not to waffle any longer, ultimately deciding to make it a broader question than the one I was originally planning to ask.

“How do I feel about it? Man, that’s a tough one...” She crossed her arms and hummed a contemplative note as she mulled this over. It had only been a spur-of-the-moment question on my part, but she appeared to take it seriously. “Honestly, I think she’s just acting out in desperation at this point. Feel like someone’s gonna have to step in and save her from herself sooner or later.”

“Someone like who, though?”

“Like me, maybe.”

This wasn’t an answer I’d been expecting.

“So you still wanna salvage this trainwreck of a friendship, huh?”

“Okay, that’s a *bit* harsh, don’tcha think?”

“Am I wrong, though? Hard to just forgive and forget after the way she acted yesterday...”

Granted, as far as Nishizono was concerned, it may have been nothing more than an impulsive outburst in the heat of the moment, but I didn’t know many people who’d be willing to just let that go. Hoshihara was good-natured enough to do so, but it seemed Mashima might be just as forgiving.

“That’s what real friends are for, ya dink. Who else is gonna help her see the light?” said Mashima. “I mean, I can get why *you* wouldn’t wanna even give her the time of day, but I can’t just abandon a friend when they’re obviously in need of some help.”

Mashima twirled around and walked off. At first, I assumed she was going to leave, but then she grabbed her bike and came back over to where I stood.

“Hey, Kamiki,” she said, flashing me a friendly smile. “Why don’t we chat for a bit?”

The two of us made our way from the supermarket over to a small roadside park nearby—a relatively forgettable one that lacked any sort of playground equipment aside from a rickety swing set. A lone lamppost bent in the shape of an upside-down L cast its light upon a single wooden bench, which was exactly where Mashima and I seated ourselves after parking our bikes. Even through my pants, I could feel the icy wood numbing my glutes the second I sat down. Mashima similarly let out a shivery yelp of surprise at the cold, rubbing her thighs in a futile attempt to warm them up.

“Actually, you know what? Hold tight for a sec.” I stood back up and dashed out of the park.

Now, where was it? Man, I could've sworn there was—aha! There we go!

I ran over toward the inviting glow of a nearby vending machine and fumbled for the loose change in my pockets. I inserted a few coins, bought a hot Kochakaden Royal Milk Tea and a hot BOSS Café au Lait, then hurried back to the park.

“Okay, take your pick,” I said, holding both options out.

“Ooh! Now we’re talkin’!” said Mashima, taking the milk tea and wrapping both hands around it. “Aw, yeah... Nice and toasty!”

Her open appreciation proved I’d made the right call. I reclaimed my seat next to her on the bench and pulled the tab on my café au lait. After only a few glugs, I could feel my body warming up from the inside out. My breath was now so white and dense that it looked like I was exhaling smoke from a cigarette.

“You’re actually kinda thoughtful, Kamiki,” said Mashima. “Gotta say, I wasn’t really expecting that.”

“What kind of guy did you *think* I was?” I asked.

“Honestly? You always seemed a little inscrutable to me...but nowadays, I feel like I sorta get you. You’re way more personable and talkative than I thought you were, you’ll tell it like it is, and yeah—you’re pretty thoughtful too.”

“Well, damn. Wasn’t anticipating all the kind words, but much obliged,” I said, taking another sip of my café au lait.

“Honestly, I feel like you could go after Nakki way more assertively.”

“Bwuh?!” I nearly spat out my drink. “Wh-where the heck did *that* come from?”

“I mean, you’ve got a crush on her, right? If you’re that caring and thoughtful, I feel like you’ve got enough going for you that there’s no real reason to hesitate. Might as well just shoot your shot and see what happens, y’know?”

Right. I’d almost forgotten that she’d seen right through me on that one. Now that I remembered the last time she’d called me on it, prior to the culture festival, I started blushing up a storm. I’d known since the first time I met her that Mashima was a pretty smart cookie, but it still surprised me every time.

“Appreciate the advice, but no thanks,” I said. “I don’t have any ulterior motives when it comes to her.”

“Oh yeah? You *sure* about that?”

Mashima grinned at me teasingly. She didn’t believe a word I was saying, did she? Not that I could blame her. That said, considering she was one of Hoshihara’s closest friends, perhaps it would be prudent to explain myself rather than let her continue under this mistaken assumption. I’d done a bit of soul-searching after Hasumi called me out for having “the hots” for Hoshihara, and now I finally felt I could properly put my feelings toward her into words.

“You’re right, I may have had a crush on her in the past,” I said. “But now...I feel like having her as a friend far outweighs any desire I might have to make her my girlfriend or whatever. So I guess you could say I’m taking a slightly more conservative approach. Don’t feel any need to change the status quo when I’m having more than enough fun with her right now as it is. Kinda realized that sometimes, it’s best to just appreciate the most unattainable flowers from afar, rather than crawl through thorns and needles just to try to pluck them for yourself.”

It was pretty embarrassing to finally admit all of this out loud; I was a bit worried Mashima might burst out laughing at me, but she actually listened attentively the whole time with a surprisingly earnest look on her face.



“Interesting,” she said. “Yeah, I think I can sorta understand that.”

“Wait. You can?”

“Yeah. I mean, I haven’t been in that position *personally* or anything, but I figure it’s pretty common. Definitely known more than a few people who’ve decided not to push the needle from friends to lovers because they’re satisfied with the way things are now, so I totally get what you’re saying.”

Mashima took a loud sip of her milk tea. Meanwhile, I felt like a massive weight had just been lifted off my chest. There was nothing quite like the feeling that someone else could understand how you felt, and it made me recognize once again the importance of putting your feelings into words.

“Well, aside from that cringey poem you tacked on at the end there,” she added.

“Shut up! It wasn’t a *poem*!”

Th-this brat! While I agreed it was a fairly cringey monologue, implying that part was some tryhard poem I’d rehearsed in advance was a bit much.

“But, you know,” she said, “there’s no guarantee it’ll last forever.”

“What do you mean?”

“Like, what would you do if she suddenly asked you out?”

“Huh?!” I nearly dropped my drink. “C-come on, now... That’d never happen.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure if I were you! I mean, you’re definitely her closest guy friend right now.”

She might have a point there. We *did* walk home together every day, and we talked pretty frequently at school too. But it was clear to me, at least, that she’d always had more interest in Ushio than me—because she’d told me as much herself.

Does she still have feelings for Ushio now?

The two of us hadn’t really talked about it in the past several months. As far as I could tell, she was treating Ushio like any other friend, with no hint of romantic tension whatsoever. In fact, it seemed like she was actually trying to

set *me* up with Ushio more than ever. Perhaps she'd given up on Ushio at some point, and I was simply unaware. I figured I might as well ask her next time I had a chance.

"Anyway, in the event that she asked you out and you said yes," Mashima went on, "I'd say your claims of only liking her as a friend are null and void. That'd just mean you were too much of a scaredy-cat to ask her out yourself. So I'd think long and hard about that if I were you. Assuming you don't wanna lie to yourself about how you feel, that is."

"...I'll take that to heart, thanks."

Mashima nodded proudly at this, then slumped over with a bashful chuckle. "Aw, man... Almost sounded like a relationship counselor just then. Maybe forget I said anything. Wasn't tryin' to talk down to you or nothin'."

"No, I'll keep it in mind. Feel like it was good advice. You could totally call yourself a relationship counselor if you wanted to. Might even be a good career path for you—get a little magazine column where all you do is tell people to dump their boyfriends."

"Okay, *now* I feel like you're just making fun of me."

She puffed out her cheeks in protest. I had to admit, it felt pretty satisfying to give this unrepentant teaser a taste of her own medicine.

"Anyway, this isn't even what I called you over here to talk about," she said, switching gears.

I was *wondering* when she was going to get down to brass tacks—not that I minded the little aside about Hoshihara.

"I actually wanted to talk a bit more about Arisa," she said, lowering her voice a bit. "Because from what I can tell, it seems like you kinda hate her guts."

It was true that I definitely wasn't her biggest fan, but I felt a bit hesitant to affirm that I outright despised her. Especially since I knew Mashima seemed to still consider her a good friend, even now. Thankfully, she kept talking before I came up with a response.

"And for the record, I can totally understand why," she said. "She's been

super cruel to both you and Tsukinoki, so it makes sense. I agree that she's one hundred percent in the wrong there, and I'm kinda complicit for just standing on the sidelines and letting her get away with it for so long. She was definitely the instigator here too, so I don't blame you at all for not having any sympathy to spare... And yet, it's kinda funny because I still can't find it in me to abandon her." She softly pursed her lips around the mouth of her bottle.

"What, because of the stuff she did for Shiina?"

"Huh? Oh, you mean how she fended off that stalker dude for her? Yeah, that's part of it—but we actually go back a lot further than that."

"Oh yeah?"

"Mm-hmm, all the way back to elementary school. Did I tell you we went to the same one?"

I vaguely recalled Shiina mentioning something of the sort. "Uh, but didn't you say you only became friends in junior high?"

"Yeah, it's true. We barely talked in elementary school. But I do remember one specific incident involving her from back then very vividly." Mashima leaned back against the bench and lowered her gaze to the bottle of milk tea she held between her knees. "I think we were in third grade, maybe? She and I were in the same class, and it was Bring Your Parent to School Day, so my mom came. It wasn't the first one or anything, so none of the kids were all *that* psyched up about it. Most of us were pretty chill. Then right at the end, just before class was over, Arisa started *bawling* out of nowhere."

I listened attentively to her story without interjecting.

"It was *nuts*, I tell ya. She was wailing like *crazy*—face all covered in snot, not even caring about how much of a scene she was causing. There weren't any hints of her being upset leading up to it either, so the teacher was super frazzled by it. She tried her best to calm Arisa down, but there was just no getting through to her. And with all of our classmates and their parents starting to get visibly concerned, the teacher just wound up dragging her off to the nurse's office. I dunno what happened after that."

Mashima took a breath before continuing.

“Guessing her parents just couldn’t make it that day or something. I mean, obviously they weren’t there, or I’m sure they would’ve tried to cheer her up when she started crying. I never found out what the situation was there, honestly... But I gotta say, seeing her start crying like a baby in class made me feel really, really bad for her. Still can’t get that image out of my mind to this day.”

“And that’s why you sympathize with her so much?” I asked.

“More or less, yeah.”

Mashima brought her drink up to her lips, then downed the rest of it in one go. She gripped the empty bottle with both hands, crumpling the metal between her fingers.

“Maybe this is just me making assumptions here,” she went on, “but I feel like Arisa must have some pretty serious abandonment issues. And I think maybe the reason she always had a soft spot for Nakki was because she was pretty much the only person who made an effort to include her in things, no matter what.”

“Gotcha.” Or so I said, but frankly this did very little to excuse Nishizono in my eyes. “Everyone’s got their own traumas and problems they’re dealing with, though.”

Even serial killers, to use a rather extreme example, had probably been abused by their parents growing up or betrayed by the one they loved most. Maybe it was those very experiences that led them astray or caused a chain reaction that ultimately resulted in them committing heinous crimes. Point being: if you really wanted to, you could find *something* to sympathize with in even the worst of human beings. Obviously, it was important to consider a person’s circumstances—but two wrongs didn’t make a right, nor did one right always excuse a wrong. Regardless of what kind of abandonment or neglect Nishizono might have endured growing up, or how many people she might have saved from a dangerous situation, that didn’t change the horrible things she’d done to Ushio. At the end of the day, my opinion of her hadn’t changed.

“Yeah, I wasn’t asking you to forgive her or anything,” said Mashima. “Just thought that context might humanize her a little bit in your eyes, maybe. That’s

all.”

Mashima tossed her empty bottle through the air, landing it perfectly in the mouth of a garbage can several meters away. *Dang, nice arc on that throw. Guess she’s not softball team captain for nothing.*

“Anyway,” she said, standing up, “I should probably get going. My folks must be getting worried about me.”

I downed the rest of my lukewarm café au lait and stood up as well. We walked over to our bikes together, but it seemed we lived in opposite directions.

“Welp, guess I’ll see you at school, then,” she said. “Oh, wait. Here, we should exchange contact info just in case. Since we’ve kinda been talking a lot lately and all.”

“Oh, sure thing,” I said.

We pulled out our cell phones and gave each other our phone numbers and email addresses. She was the first girl I’d added to my contacts list since Hoshihara, so it was kind of a nice feeling.

“Sweet,” she said. “Now we can call it even for you buying me that drink.”

“Wait,” I said. “You’d give out your phone number in exchange for a single vending machine beverage? Have a little more self-worth, jeez.”

“Whaddya talkin’ about? *Obviously*, I’m giving you special treatment here, big guy. You ought to be counting your lucky stars, my friend.”

Mashima slid her cell phone back into her pocket, then climbed onto her bike. We waved goodbye to each other, then headed off in opposite directions. As I pedaled my way back home, I thought back on the things she’d just told me.

Even if, for the sake of argument, Nishizono’s wrongdoings did stem from some personal traumas of her own, I still didn’t see that as a reason to cut her any extra slack. Everyone had times they felt powerless or hated themselves so much that they wished they were dead. Even someone like Ushio, whom I’d always thought of as the perfect, exemplary high school student, must have had countless sleepless nights as she came to terms with her identity (including

some sleepless nights that may have even been *caused* by Nishizono). Yet she still managed to be true to herself and find the strength to carry on, bruises and all. Nothing gave anyone the right to spit all over that strength and willpower, regardless of what they might have been through themselves growing up.

However.

If Nishizono ever recognized her mistakes and truly apologized to Ushio, then...

Well, I guess it'd still be up to Ushio whether she forgave her, not me.

I shifted up a gear and pedaled harder.

A cold wind grazed my nose. I was out with Ushio on another of her morning runs. The sun had just peeked its head up over the horizon, and the rhythm of her footsteps echoed over the flat expanse around us. With each stride, her nearly shoulder-length hair swayed and shimmered in the faint dawn light like silken thread. I needed to be careful not to get so transfixed on watching her that I lost my balance and went tumbling down onto the floodplain, bike and all. I tore my gaze away and stared straight ahead down the path.

"So tomorrow's the big day, huh?" I said.

"Yup," said Ushio.

Her pace seemed somewhat faster than usual today. She didn't look fazed at all from what I could see, but it was entirely possible her heart was fluttering with anxiety at the thought. Not that I couldn't understand being a little nervous, given the stakes.

"How ready do you feel?"

"Feeling pretty good. Haven't completely made up for lost time, but I think I can perform better than I expected. Only question now is how much work Fusuke's put in to improve since I quit the team."

"Gotcha..."

Still only fifty-fifty, then? I wanted to ask, but I was too afraid to hear the answer. Again, the thought of her having to rejoin the track team and no longer

being able to walk home with me and Hoshihara was not a pleasant one. I also didn't want to give up all the progress we'd made in becoming closer friends just because Noi waltzed in and threw a wrench in things. Personally, I still thought she should just not take him up on his stupid bet, but I knew her mind was made up.

It was pretty vexing—and all I could do to help was buy her some bottles of Pocari and talk to her while she ran from time to time, but not enough to distract her from her main focus or make her run out of breath. Though even that would be coming to an end tomorrow... *Or, wait. Will this be the last run, if the race with Noi is tomorrow?*

"Hey, Ushio. Was gonna ask: are you planning to run tomorrow too?"

"No, I think I'll hold off. Wanna reserve all of my stamina for the race."

"Makes sense... Then I guess this'll be our last run together."

I was honestly going to miss this. Aside from the major hurdle of dragging myself out of bed so early, I'd found riding my bike through the crisp morning air to be a fairly invigorating daily ritual. And getting to talk to Ushio at the same time made it even better. I wasn't sure I could motivate myself to do this on my own without a partner.

"We can always go on another run sometime," said Ushio.

"Yeah, I guess that's true."

"Only next time, you've gotta ditch the bike."

"Huh?! Oh, man... I dunno about *that*..."

"Trust me, you'll get a lot more out of it if you actually use those legs of yours instead of just spinning them around. Plus, you said you're trying to lose weight, right?"

I'd forgotten Ushio was under the assumption that I was on a diet, thanks to that bizarre conveyor-belt sushi lie Hoshihara told to cover for me. Never thought that would come back to bite me. But it *was* true that I could stand to get a lot more exercise, so maybe going for a jog every once in a while wasn't such a bad idea.

“...As long as you go slow so I can keep up with you,” I said.

“Of course,” Ushio replied with a satisfied nod.

After running a little while longer, we came to our usual turnaround spot: a bridge that spanned the wide river that ran through town. We would make a U-turn here by crossing over and coming back along the opposite bank, then stop to stretch at the park on our way home. But today, Ushio ran right past the bridge.

“Wait, we’re not crossing over?” I said.

“Figure I should push myself a little harder, since it’s the last day and all,” she said, then picked up the pace quite a bit.

I shifted up a couple gears and pumped my legs harder to keep up. Her breaths grew shorter, and she lifted her thighs higher as she cut through the wind. Yet somehow, she still didn’t seem exhausted whatsoever. If anything, she seemed refreshed and reinvigorated, as though she’d finally hit her stride. Something told me I probably shouldn’t speak to her right now; she was too focused. So I fell back until she was ahead of me, then followed closely from behind.

...Man, she really seems like she’s on top of the world right now.

I wondered when Ushio fell in love with running. I could only vaguely recall our time in elementary school at this point, but I felt like she’d always been pretty averse to physical activity back in second or third grade. My mental image of her from back then was of the sort of kid who’d always be off hiding in a corner of the playground, drawing pictures in the dirt with a branch or something.

Then, after a certain point, we all found out that she was the fastest kid in our class, and her popularity skyrocketed. As far as I knew, that was the moment when she really started to distinguish herself from the crowd. I wasn’t sure if she’d always been talented and charismatic from the get-go and we simply hadn’t noticed, or if she’d put in a ton of effort to become a fast runner and be more sociable. Then again, I supposed there was a lot I didn’t know about her, despite us being longtime friends. It wasn’t the sort of thing I was dying to know, but if the chance ever presented itself, I might ask her about it.

“...Wait.”

Uh-oh.

I checked my wristwatch, and sure enough—I’d lost track of time.

“Ushio!” I called out. “We’ve gotta start heading back!”

As Ushio gradually slowed her pace to a walk, I hopped down from my bike and ran up alongside her. A single trickle of sweat rolled down her flushed-red cheeks. I reached into my bike basket and offered her a towel.

“Thanks,” she said. “What time is it?”

“Already ten of seven.”

“Oh gosh, really? Dang... Guess I got a little too carried away.”

Ushio came to a stop as she wiped off her face. Even if we were to turn back and head home at the exact same speed, we’d still get there about twenty minutes later than normal. And Ushio was already pretty winded from running faster than usual for this last sprint, so she’d probably be wiped for the rest of the day.

“Wanna just hop on the back of my bike, then?” I asked her.

“You sure?”

“Yeah. We’ll get there a lot faster that way, and you won’t have to completely tucker yourself out. Plus, there’s basically no roads around here, so there’s virtually no chance of us getting in trouble for it.”

“Mmm...” Ushio seemed a little conflicted.

It went without saying that riding two to a bike was a safety violation. Worst-case scenario, if we got caught or someone were to report us to the police, they’d contact our parents. Which still wasn’t that bad, since we’d ultimately be getting off with nothing more than a stern talking-to, most likely, but those weren’t exactly enjoyable either. And I knew an honest and upstanding person like Ushio might be more opposed to the idea than I was, just from a purely moral standpoint.

“Also totally fine if you don’t want to,” I said. “Wouldn’t wanna pressure you

into anything, obviously.”

“...No, it’s fine. We’re already in a bind, so I think I’ll take you up on that,” said Ushio, sounding slightly reluctant. “Oh, but let me just stretch first really quick.”

“Oh, sure. Go for it.”

Ushio placed the towel back in the basket, then started loosening up her limbs right away. Making sure to stretch even when we were crunched for time struck me as a very “her” thing to do. Once she finished a few minutes later, she turned to me and bashfully scratched her cheek.

“Okay then...” she said. “If you’d be so kind.”

“No need to be so formal about it,” I said, smiling sheepishly as I straddled my bike. Ushio hopped sideways onto the cargo rack, then lifted her butt up a bit to find the most comfortable position before fully settling in. “Okay, off we go.”

I tried to remember how long it had been since I’d ridden with another person on the back of my bike. The pedals felt heavier than I was expecting, and the bike wobbled a bit as we got into motion. Ushio clung tightly to my shoulders.

“Everything okay?” she asked.

“Y-yeah, we’re all good,” I said, trying to play it cool as I strained my thighs to pedal harder. Thankfully, things got a lot easier as we picked up speed, and I could just let inertia do most of the work. Once I felt like we’d stabilized completely, I shifted up a gear and increased our speed. At our current clip, we’d be able to make it back with plenty of time to spare. We zoomed straight down the riverfront.

“Whoa... We’re going so fast!” said Ushio, sounding utterly thrilled.

For once, I felt like a kid in the prime of his youth, just living his life to the fullest. Funny, considering I didn’t get that feeling at all when I met up with my friends and we went out on a day trip over summer vacation, or when we set things up for the culture festival, or any of the other stereotypical things people always seemed to look back on with rose-tinted glasses later in life. I wondered why that might be.

Was it because we were doing something bad? Because riding two to a bike

was technically a traffic law violation, which made me and Ushio partners in crime right now. Maybe it was the rush of breaking the rules and enjoying ourselves while doing so that made me feel so young and invincible right now. In which case, maybe youth had less to do with age and more to do with maintaining a troublemaker's spirit and keeping that mischievous spark of adventure alive deep down in your heart. This was a nice train of thought, and one I might have indulged in a bit longer—if I hadn't been jerked out of it by a loud *ka-thunk* as my front tire hit a pothole and the whole bike lurched.

"Ow!" Ushio yelped.

"M-my bad! Didn't see it until it was too late."

"Ah ha ha... It's okay. Just startled me a little, that's all."

"Nah, I need to pay better attention... It'd be really bad if we crashed at this speed."

Ushio needed to be in peak condition for her race with Noi tomorrow—not that it would be fine for her to suffer a nasty injury any *other* day either, of course. As I lowered our speed a bit, I felt Ushio's shoulder bump against my back. And not by accident, I assumed; I hadn't hit the brakes or anything, and she was making no attempt to pull away. I could feel her weight pressing softly against my back.

"You're so gentle with me lately, Sakuma," she murmured into the breeze.

All of a sudden, a dreary feeling cast a shadow over my heart as Ushio's words billowed throughout my chest. It was true. When it came to Ushio, I could be as kind and considerate as I wanted to be. Why? Because she knew I had no ulterior motives.

I probably couldn't be this openly considerate with Hoshihara, for instance—not because I liked her any more or less than Ushio, but because I was afraid of her *suspecting* I had feelings for her. My worst nightmare would be her bailing out of our friendship because she thought I was after something more. Which was why I always had to curb my natural enthusiasm whenever I was with her.

But with Ushio, that was never a problem. She would always just accept my kindness at face value, exactly as it was. I didn't have to worry about her sizing

it up with a wary eye and wondering what was in it for me. And that made me really happy.

...There was only one problem.

Deep down, I knew this kindness was—at least in some small part—a form of atonement. It was my own guilty conscience that compelled me to be so gentle with her. I still felt terrible for having rejected Ushio's feelings for me when she first confessed them, then hurting her even more after the fact with my lack of understanding. And, Ushio being the sharp girl that she was, it was entirely possible she'd already realized it too. Perhaps she was simply playing along with this ham-fisted show of remorse, letting me ease my own guilt in whatever paltry ways I could. Maybe *that* was the only reason she accepted the stupid Pocaris I brought her every day with a smile.

Which begged the question: was I really doing the right thing here?

Was I just going to end up inadvertently hurting her again?

I worried about that sometimes. But I chose to believe that as long as I could keep that smile on Ushio's face, I couldn't be doing anything all *that* wrong here. Not that there was ever only one right or wrong answer when it came to things like this, of course.

"Oh yeah, that reminds me," I said. "Maybe once you beat Noi, we could do something to celebrate."

"Like what?" said Ushio.

"Whatever you want. Could invite Hoshihara out and go do something as a group again like when we went to the aquarium, or we could just do something chill at home... Anything you'd wanna do together?"

"You mean as a reward? Hmm..." Ushio paused, apparently contemplating this offer. But even after a surprisingly long silence, all she said was, "Sorry, do you mind if I wait until after I win to think about it?"

"Sure, no worries... Ah, but try to keep it under five thousand yen, if possible."

“I’d never ask you for anything *that* expensive, silly.”

“Yeah, I guess you probably wouldn’t, huh? I mean, you *are* the same person who asked me to get her a pack of Papico when I was offering Häagen-Dazs, after all.”

“Oh, you mean during summer vacation? Wow, I’m surprised you remember that. Wait, then why did you feel the need to specify if you knew I’m not the type?”

“Just thought I’d let you know my budget.”

“Okay, fair...”

I felt a light tap against my back as she gently laid her head between my shoulder blades. Off to the east, I could see that the break of dawn had cast a vivid gradient over the ether as night gave way to brilliant azure in the sunrise glow. I watched as a flock of migratory birds flew south in V-formation through clear and cloudless skies.

It was shaping up to be another beautiful day.

“You wanna know why I chose Papico?” Ushio asked, her voice so soft that it was nearly swept away by the whispering wind. “Because I knew I could split it with you.”

For a split second, my feet nearly slipped off the pedals.

I had no idea how I was supposed to respond to this.

“Gotcha,” I said—the only lackluster reply I could muster.

We were almost back to our neighborhood.

The race with Noi was scheduled to take place tomorrow, right after school. Ushio would be going for one last practice run by herself this evening, but now that our morning training regimen had concluded, there was nothing more I could do to assist her. All that remained was to cross my fingers and have faith in her.

It was lunchtime, and I was eating at my desk with Hasumi as always amid the

usual classroom clamor. It was another harmonious day in Class 2-A—and one on which I felt particularly safe and comfortable, since I knew there was no chance of Sera swinging by to tarnish it. And yet, it was this very sense of security that made me that much more concerned about our one remaining problem child: Nishizono.

Her attitude was still as toxic as ever. She would readily bare her fangs at anyone who dared to come close or address her, be they student or teacher. The girl seemed to have nothing but distrust for her fellow human beings at this point. I'd always felt a weird sort of pity (though not sympathy) toward her, as I knew it couldn't be fun to live your life in a constant state of paranoia like that. But after hearing Mashima's theory about her having abandonment issues, I'd come to regard her in a somewhat different light, though that did nothing to change how I felt about the current situation.

I had no intention of trying to extend an olive branch to her—at least not until she made amends for the way she'd been treating Ushio. Otherwise, I'd be a bit of a traitor, not to mention a hypocrite. Just like when Sera went around getting all buddy-buddy with Nishizono's old friends, no one liked to see their allies breaking bread with the enemy. So for the time being, I was just going to stay out of it and let her seethe in solitude.

"Um, excuse me? Is Tsukinoki-senpai here today?" came a voice at the threshold.

I panned my gaze over from Nishizono to where a freshman boy was poking his head in through the classroom door. He seemed like a studious kid, and while he was by no means handsome, his thin-framed glasses hardly did his sharp features justice.

"Sahara-kun?" said Ushio. "What's up?"

Apparently, Ushio knew this kid. She set her chopsticks down, got up, and walked over to where he stood. She didn't seem at all worried, so I assumed this wasn't an intruder to be cautious of—like, say, Sera or Noi. If anything, it was this Sahara boy who seemed a little nervous now that Ushio was standing directly in front of him.

"Well, it's just that, um...I need to talk to you about Noi-senpai," said Sahara.

“Oh really, now?” said Ushio, furrowing her brow. “What’s going on with Fusuke?”

“Uhh... Sorry, I’d kinda prefer to tell you in private, if that’s okay.”

“Sure thing. Just give me one second.”

Ushio walked back to her desk for a moment, said a few quick words to Hoshihara, then followed Sahara out of the classroom. *He had something to tell her about Noi, huh? Hrm... What could it be, I wonder? Something about the race tomorrow?*

“Huh. Weird,” said Hasumi, turning back to his meal. “Not every day that Tsukinoki gets a visitor, especially after Sera got hit with the banhammer.”

“Eh. Just an old track teammate, by the looks of it,” I said.

“Wait, you don’t know who that was?”

“You *do*?”

Hasumi looked at me incredulously. “Dude. Everyone’s been saying that Sahara kid’s, like, the next up-and-coming superstar of the track team. Figured you would’ve at least recognized the name, since they’re always rattling off his laundry list of achievements at every assembly.”

“Ohhh... Now that you mention it, maybe that *does* ring a bell.” To be totally honest, I turned my brain off during school assemblies. “And he came all the way over to our classroom just to tell Ushio something about Noi... That’s a little ominous, don’t you think?”

“If you’re that curious, why don’t you go chase after ’em and see what’s up?”

“Mmmmm...”

I thought about this, but knew I wouldn’t feel right eavesdropping on a private conversation. Plus, I didn’t even know where they went. If it was Noi himself who’d come to drag her off like that, I would’ve insisted on going with, but this was just a random freshman teammate of hers. I assumed there was nothing to worry about.

“Nah, I think I’m good,” I said. “I’ll just ask Ushio about it later.”

“Fair,” said Hasumi, sounding utterly indifferent as he bit into his rolled omelette.

About five minutes later, Ushio returned to the classroom alone. I tried to gather any hints I could from her expression as she calmly walked back to her desk and sat down, but there was no visible emotion there to be gleaned.

“What was *that* about?” asked Hoshihara.

“He just, uh...wanted to report something to me, basically,” said Ushio.

“Report something?” Hoshihara tilted her head. “Like what?”

Hoshihara continued pressing Ushio for more details, but unfortunately, I couldn’t make out much of their conversation after that. Not that it really mattered, of course—I was sure Ushio would gladly give us both the full rundown after school.

Or so I thought, anyway.

But even after school got out, and the three of us were walking home together, all she said when I asked about it was that it “wasn’t a big deal” and that we “really didn’t need to worry about it,” without offering any specific details whatsoever.

Naturally, this only made me and Hoshihara that much more dubious, but none of our attempts to casually steer back to the topic proved successful. Ushio remained stubbornly elusive, always quick to change the subject. Something was definitely up with her. Thinking back on it, she’d seemed a little out of it during fifth and sixth periods as well, unable to answer even the simplest of questions when the teacher called on her.

I could only assume she was too preoccupied thinking about whatever it was that freshman boy had told her about Noi—but what could it have been? Did it have something to do with the race tomorrow, perhaps? If I’d known it was going to bother me this much, I would have just tailed them during lunch and tried to eavesdrop on their conversation after all. Instead, it continued to eat

away at me for the rest of the evening.

Just as I was about to climb into bed that night, I got a call from Hoshihara. It was, predictably, about Ushio.

“Ugh, I wanna know so bad, though!”

Hoshihara’s voice crackled loudly through the cell phone’s speaker.

“Believe me, I’m right there with you,” I said. “It wouldn’t even be so bad, if it weren’t so blatantly obvious that she doesn’t want to talk about it.”

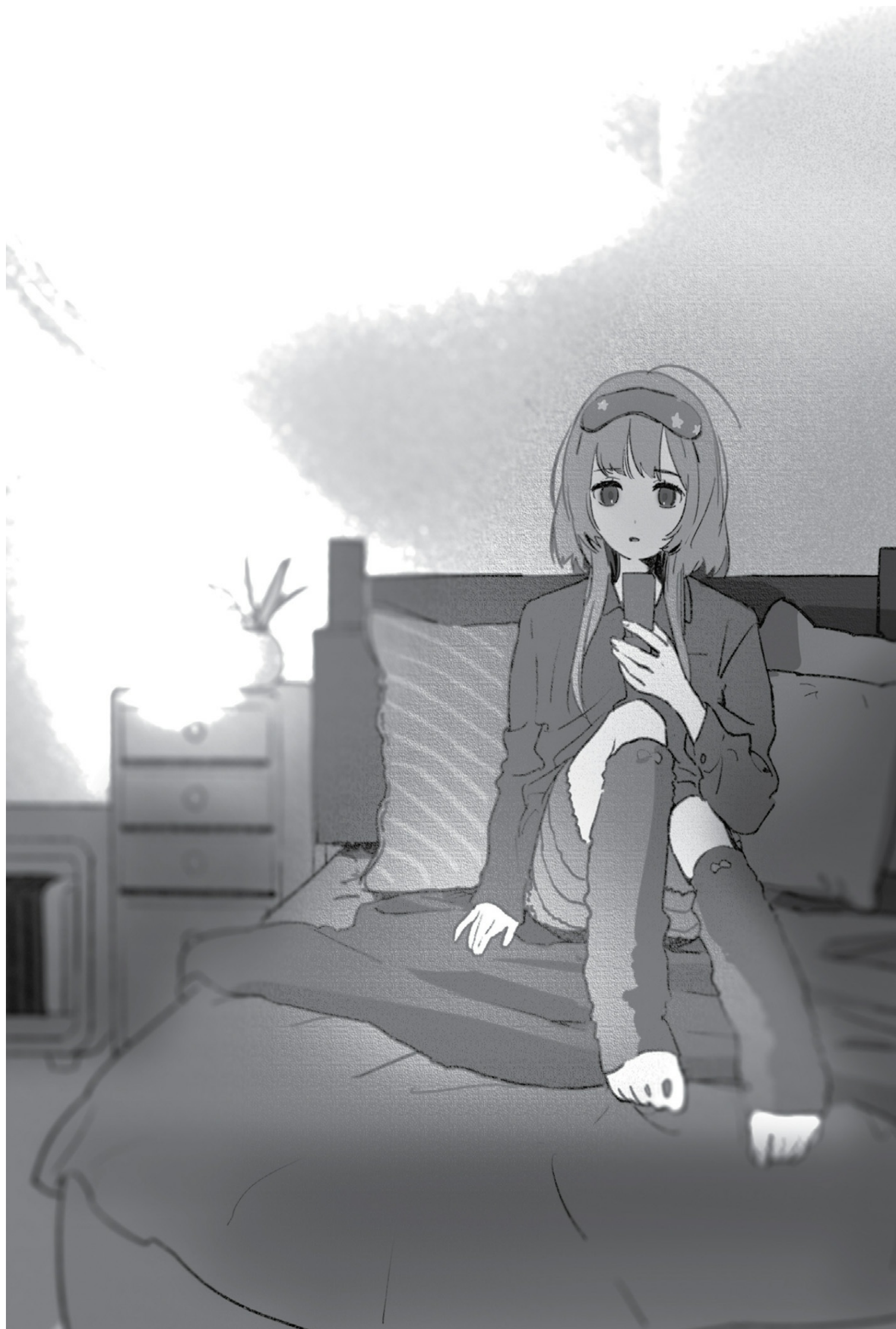
“I know, right?! Why is that, I wonder? You think it’s just something so unspeakable that she literally can’t tell us, maybe?”

“Like what?”

“Like, I dunno... Maybe Noi-kun’s hiding a dead body in his basement or something?”

“Okay, now you’ve *really* got the tinfoil hat on... Let’s try to keep the conspiracy theories in check, all right?”

This was neither here nor there, but it felt really nice that Hoshihara and I were at the point in our friendship now where we could make deadpan jokes and playfully rib each other like this. We’d certainly come a long way in that regard.



“Besides, if it were a major scandal like that, one would *hope* that the kid would go straight to the police with that information. There’s no reason to tell Ushio.”

“I dunno... That’s pretty much exactly what happened in this mystery novel I was reading the other day...”

My ears immediately perked up at the words “mystery novel.”

“Ooh, nice. A whodunit, I’m guessing? Was meaning to ask you if you were still reading as much, actually.”

“Sure am! Kinda fell off it for a little while, honestly, but now that it’s getting colder out, it’s the perfect weather for curling up with a good book! You should send me some more recommendations sometime! Preferably stuff that I can blow through in one sitting, so around two hundred pages or so!”

“Oh, sure thing. I’ll pick out some candidates and send you a short list.”

“Thanks! But anyway, yeah! Back to the topic at hand!”

Truth be told, I was hoping we could talk about books a little while longer, but it seemed this little aside was doomed to be blissfully brief. How very sad. I was glad to hear that she was still reading, though—especially since that had been the hobby over which she and I had formed a connection in the first place.

“Okay, all dead body jokes aside, what could it actually be? Ushio-chan said that boy wanted to ‘report’ something to her, but I dunno what the heck that could mean.”

“Mmmmm, yeah, I dunno... Maybe there was some drama between Noi and the rest of the track team?”

“I don’t see why Ushio-chan wouldn’t just be open with us about that, though...”

“Yeah, exactly...”

The two of us spitballed a few more theories back and forth, but none of them seemed like they would explain Ushio’s evasiveness. And now it was starting to get late.

“Maybe we could just ask that freshman? Sahara or whatever his name was.”

“Oh yeah. I already tried that.”

“Wait, seriously? When?”

“Like, two hours ago. Got his contact info from a friend of mine who’s also on the track team, so I shot him a quick message... Um, but you can’t tell Ushio-chan, okay?”

“O-of course, yeah... My lips are sealed.”

Hoshihara sure did have some crazy connections. Or perhaps it had less to do with the connections themselves and more to do with her resourcefulness. It was pretty impressive that she’d managed to get in touch with Sahara within a day despite having never even met the kid before. I definitely wouldn’t have been able to pull that off.

“So what did he have to say?”

“Not much. Just said he couldn’t tell me.”

“Damn. Figures, I guess.”

So much for that idea.

There came a *whump* from the other end of the line as Hoshihara presumably fell backward or readjusted herself in bed. I could hear her bedsprings creak ever so slightly.

“It’d be one thing if we knew Ushio-chan would tell us herself sooner or later, but now it’s got me all worried about the race tomorrow and everything... Ughhh...”

Hoshihara let out a long, exhausted sigh. It sounded like her brain was at max capacity with Ushio-related stress right now. Heck, for all I knew, maybe she’d really gone out of her comfort zone to ask for Sahara’s contact information earlier. Social butterfly though she was, it still must have taken a lot of courage to ask a pretty bold and invasive question to a random freshman who knew nothing about her. I had to wonder if it was really just friendship that made her go to such lengths for Ushio—or something more.

“Hey, um...Hoshihara?” I asked.

"Mm?" she said sluggishly. "Yeah, what's up?"

I was right on the verge of asking—but then I got cold feet.

"...Sorry, it's not important."

"Oh, no you don't! Cough it up, buster! You can't just hint at something and then leave me high and dry like that!"

"Nah, I don't think now's the right time to ask."

"Aw, just say it already! If you don't tell me now, I won't get any sleep tonight!"

She seemed liable to throw a tantrum if I held back on her now, but it was my own fault for being insinuating. My only recourse now was to spit it out.

"Well, I guess I was just wondering if you've had any more revelations recently in terms of, like...whether or not you still have feelings for Ushio."

"Wait, huh? I mean, didn't I already—oh."

All of a sudden, the voice coming through the speaker fell silent. This total drop-off was so abrupt that it didn't feel like she was faltering mid-sentence—more like she herself had glitched out or something.

"Hoshihara?"

"Sorry, sorry. I just realized that I never told you, did I?"

"Huh? Told me what?"

She sucked in a sharp, pensive breath. Just what was she about to tell me? I could feel her tension through the speaker, so I sat up straight and braced myself for the worst.

"So I actually told Ushio-chan I had feelings for her. Right at the end of the culture festival."

"Wha—?!" I was so caught off guard by this, my voice caught in my throat.

"But yeah, just realized it wasn't meant to be, so that's all in the past now. Oh, but I do still love her as a friend. I'm sure that much was obvious to you, heh."

"Y-yeah, dang... Sorry, I had no idea that happened..."

I was so confused. She *realized* it wasn't meant to be? Did that mean she'd stopped short of actually asking Ushio out, or had she been turned down and was only phrasing it like this as a coping mechanism? But then the random aside to clarify that she "still loved Ushio as a friend" almost made it sound like she had been the one who spurned Ushio here. Or, hell—were we even talking about romantic feelings in the first place? I was tempted to ask for more details, but I knew it would be pretty tactless to press her to elaborate on what was probably a bit of a sore subject, so I figured I'd just leave it be.

"W-well, uh...glad you got some things off your chest, at least?"

"Ah ha ha... That's a pretty weak consolation, but yeah."

It seemed I'd made a poor choice of words. *Way to go, Sakuma, you freaking moron.* I scrambled internally to come up with some way to salvage this flub, or at the very least offer a sheepish apology—only for Hoshihara to beat me to the punch.

"Anyway, sorry. I probably should've told you about that right after it happened. But I swear I wasn't deliberately keeping it from you. I genuinely just forgot."

"Nah, don't apologize. This stuff's not easy to talk about. You're fine."

"You sure? Well, okay... Guess I'm not sorry, then! So ha!"

Her voice regained its usual peppy cadence. I could totally picture her puffing out her chest with pride. I didn't sense any lingering awkwardness or depression from her at all; whatever happened between her and Ushio, it seemed Hoshihara had fully come to terms with it. As such, I figured there was no need for me to adjust my behavior around them or anything—especially since the culture festival was well over a month ago now. There'd been more than enough time for the dust to settle at this point.

"Well, shoot. Sounds like you won't be needing my consulting services anymore now that you've finally closed the book on that, huh?"

"What are you talking about, Kamiki-kun? I'm literally making use of them as we speak, aren't I?"

I nearly tilted my head with confusion, then quickly realized she was totally

right. She *had* technically called to consult with me about something; it just wasn't related to her feelings for Ushio.

"I guess that's true, huh? Well, okay then. If you ever need someone to talk to about anything, just know that my door's always open."

"Ooh, thanks! Glad to know I can count on you for that!"

I was just as glad as she was. It was nice to feel like I could be of use to her in some slightly more tangible way that made us closer than your average friends. But I wouldn't get to savor that feeling for long, as I heard a stifled yawn from the other end of the line.

"Aw, man. We've been talking so long, I'm starting to get sleepy..."

"Yeah, we should both probably get some rest. Let's try not to think too hard about our little lunchtime mystery for now."

"Mmm, yeah... I mean, I'm sure there must be a reason why Ushio-chan isn't telling us, so it's fine... Obviously, I'm super curious, but I trust her."

"Yeah, me too. Anyway, I'll talk to you tomorrow, okay?"

We each said good night, and then I hung up the phone.

I couldn't blame her for being so worried about it affecting tomorrow's race that she'd gone out of her way to contact that freshman kid. Hell, I was so vexed about the whole situation that I'd even entertained the thought of interfering in some way that would leave Noi at a disadvantage—even if I'd ultimately decided it wasn't worth it from an ethical standpoint, and due to the risks it might pose in the event that I got caught.

No petty scheming or speculating was going to change anything at this point.

By this time tomorrow, we'd all know who the true victor was.

The meteorologist on TV this morning forecasted subfreezing temperatures today on par with midwinter lows, as a sudden low-pressure system crept northward up the Japanese archipelago, bringing with it a skyful of dark-gray clouds that now hung heavily over Tsubakioka High. Supposedly, things were expected to clear up again by tonight for the most part, but as of right now, that

prediction seemed awfully suspect. The winds were out in full force today too; my necktie thrashed wildly against my chest in the fickle afternoon flurries.

The after-school rush was already over, leaving the sidewalk outside the main gate to campus all but deserted. Hoshihara and I stood off to the sidelines with bated breath, watching as Ushio and Noi stared each other down in their tracksuits. There was only one other person here aside from the four of us: a member of the track team Noi had brought along. I didn't recognize him.

"Don't mind Fujise," said Noi, indicating the other boy with his chin. "He's just here to make sure you guys don't try anything funny."

Judging by Noi's attitude toward him, I assumed Fujise had to be a freshman, though I wouldn't necessarily have known it from his massive build. He had a rigid crew cut and the demeanor of a brick wall; he hadn't said a single word this whole time.

"You hear that, peanut gallery?" said Noi, casting a quick glance over at us before turning back to Ushio. "Fujise here's gonna be watching *very* carefully, so no funny business. You can't fudge your way out of this one."

"I don't *need* to fudge anything," said Ushio.

"Hah. We'll see about that."

It seemed Noi was on the lookout for foul play, which suggested he thought he could easily win so long as it was a fair fight. I had to admit, his boorish overconfidence was almost enough to make me lose heart. Thankfully, Ushio seemed as unfazed as ever by his intimidation tactics, and she just kept staring him right in the eye, undaunted.

"Let's just go over the rules one more time so there's no ambiguity," she said.

"Be my guest," said Noi.

"Six laps around the perimeter of the school, with the main gate serving as both the start and finish line. Do I have that right?"

Each lap around the school's rough perimeter was eight hundred meters and change, so six laps would be almost exactly five kilometers. Apart from this initial sidewalk, the route they'd planned out was also entirely on paved, one-

lane roads along the paddy fields that surrounded campus. There were no traffic signals, and there'd be few to no cars as well. It was a pretty ideal course for a long-distance run.

"Yeah, that's right," said Noi. "If you don't like those terms, we can always wait and do it on the actual track once the rest of the team gets done with practice."

"No thanks," said Ushio. "I want to get this over and done with."

"Whoa, hang on a sec," said Noi as Ushio started doing lunges to warm up. "Just to be perfectly clear: we're still in agreement that if I win, you promise you'll come back to the boys' track team, yeah?"

"Yeah. And if I win, I expect you to keep *your* promise too."

"Huh? What promise?" Noi looked genuinely dumbfounded.

"Wha...? You said you were going to apologize to me, remember?"

"Oh, right. I guess I *did* say that, didn't I? Totally slipped my mind, heh."

He was so unapologetically shameless, it was downright infuriating. How much of an incorrigible oaf did you have to be to forget the conditions of your own bet? This last remark seemed to be the final straw for Ushio, as her deeply furrowed brow suggested that she was right on the verge of losing her patience with him.

"...You know what, I changed my mind," she said, her voice brimming with resentment. "That's not gonna be enough after all. You have to apologize to Sakuma too."

I was startled to hear my own name all of a sudden. *Wait, why me?* I turned from Ushio over to Noi. As soon as we made eye contact, he put on a hateful grimace.

"*This* loser again?" said Noi. "What, you two hooking up or something?"

"No, and that has nothing to do with it," said Ushio. "I just want you to apologize to him for shoving him to the ground the other day."

"Wasn't asking *you*, Ushio," said Noi, turning to face me fully. "Answer the question, you little scrub: are you two dating, or what? Just want a yes or a no."

I wondered for a moment if it was even physically possible for this chump to go thirty seconds without getting in someone's face or making a smart-ass remark. I wasn't sure I'd ever understand why people like him and Nishizono seemed to go actively out of their way to pick fights with other people. What made them so *obsessed* with the people they hated? Wouldn't it be so much easier for everyone involved to ignore them and go about their lives? Could they literally not resist the urge to harass other people? What made them think that was a good use of their limited time on this earth?

I didn't think I'd ever understand it. Nor did I really want to.

"...Like Ushio already told you: no, we're not," I said firmly.

"Yeah, no—I figured as much," said Noi, looking at Ushio and then back at me with abject contempt. "I mean, what self-respecting dude would ever wanna go out with some pansy-ass freak who thinks he's a girl? That guy's got problems."

I could feel my blood simmering to a boil. I was *this* close to letting my seething emotions take over, and I stopped myself only just before I lost control. He was trying to provoke me here; he *wanted* me to lose my cool. But getting into an argument with him would only be a waste of time. Even so, I had to refute what he was saying. I couldn't let him insult Ushio without at least paying him back in kind.

"...If anyone's got problems here, it's you," I said.

"Sorry, did you say somethin'?" said Noi, closing the gap between us. "'Cause your voice was so small and puny, I didn't quite catch it."

He squared his shoulders and stared down at me from point-blank range—another obvious attempt to intimidate me. But unlike Nishizono, I knew this guy didn't have the balls to actually hit someone.

"Ushio's not a boy," I said. "And she's not a member of your stupid team anymore either. So stop living in the past and get over it already, you whiny little baby. Quit trying to bully her into coming back like you're her clingy ex-boyfriend."

"Wha—?!"

I could tell from the way his shoulders trembled with rage that the ex-

boyfriend comment got under his skin. Noi reached out and grabbed me roughly by the collar.

“You shut your goddamn mouth! I ain’t no—”

“If you wanna prove me wrong, then stop acting like she owes you something and let her move on with her life. You keep saying all this stuff about wanting closure or holding her accountable for quitting the team, but I know deep down you’re just upset that she didn’t care about your little ‘friendly rivalry’ as much as you did. But you can’t bring yourself to just admit that, so instead, you’re showboating in a petty attempt to win her back with this stupid bet of yours. Isn’t that right?”

“Why, you...!”

Noi clenched his free hand into a fist and raised it. Hoshihara, who’d been watching this play out in a state of dazed disbelief, finally snapped out it and let out a little shriek. But right before he threw his punch...

“That’s enough,” said Ushio, grabbing Noi’s arm. “Let’s just do this already.”

Noi glared spitefully down at me, then begrudgingly lowered his undelivered fist. Then he unhanded me, but in such a way that it was more of a shove than a release. Still, I was silently glad to have gotten through that without taking a punch to the face.

“Fine, you little shrimp,” he said to me. “You can just stand there and watch me wipe the floor with your precious Ushio, then.”

“Go ahead and try,” said Ushio.

The two of them turned their backs to each other and started doing warm-up stretches in silence. A gust of wind blew in, sending a few fallen autumn leaves drifting across the pavement at their feet. I was reminded of a scene from an old spaghetti western I’d once seen in which the heroic gunslinger popped open the cylinder of his revolver to check it one last time, gave it a roll, and holstered it before the climactic duel.

That was the mood in the air right now. Like it was high noon.

Ushio and Noi took their positions at the main gate, with its embedded rail serving as the starting line. Fujise would be giving the signal to begin the race.

“Runners, on your mark!” he said.

The two competitors aligned their front feet with the groove in the pavement and leaned down into a standing start posture.

“Get set...”

Tensions were high; my adrenaline was pumping.

“Go!”

And with that, they were off—the race was on.

This was going to be a 5K. While I wasn’t the most knowledgeable when it came to track events, I did at least recognize that they’d be keeping a pretty fixed and steady pace throughout. As such, it probably wouldn’t be a very “exciting” race until the last lap...or so I thought.

Immediately after the word “go,” Ushio took off at full speed, putting a significant gap between herself and Noi. Were this a short sprint, I would have started cheering at the sight, but unfortunately all it inspired in me was anxiety. Would she really be able to maintain this pace for the full six laps? Hoshihara seemed similarly concerned, as she warily watched Ushio pull farther and farther ahead.

“Won’t she waste all her energy too early?” Hoshihara asked.

“I’m guessing she’s got some sort of plan in mind,” I replied. “Probably just wants to put some distance between her and him right off the bat to psych him out, then she’ll slow down and just try to maintain that lead for the rest of the race or something.”

“I sure hope you’re right...”

Hoshihara shot a quick glance at the freshman whom Noi had brought along to referee. Maybe she was hoping he’d offer a more expert analysis of what this strategy might mean in a race of this nature, but sadly Fujise remained a man of few words. He had the same aura about him as one of those trained palace guards with the funky hats—not the sort of person you could speak to lightly.

In the end, Hoshihara didn't say a word. She turned her attention back to the race just as Ushio, then Noi, rounded the first corner and disappeared behind the school building. The runners were now completely out of sight.

What the hell is going on?

Why was I falling so far behind? We weren't even halfway through the first lap yet, and Ushio was running like it was a 1500-meter sprint. Maybe his plan was to break as far away as possible at the start, then try to keep a comfortable lead before making one last push in the final lap? Assuming that *was* his goal, he was totally overdoing it. I mean, this was a 5K, for crying out loud.

I could haul ass and catch up to him if I really wanted to—but that would only give me a brief sense of security, and at the cost of breaking my current pace. There was no need to panic. Not yet, at least... Something definitely felt off about this, though.

I supposed I'd always gotten a funny feeling from Ushio, ever since freshman year. That unshakable sense that something was a little bit off—like when you accidentally button up your shirt wrong without realizing it, or you see a single volume of a totally separate manga crammed into a shelf that was all one long series with matching spines. I wasn't sure if the other guys on the team noticed it too, but I sure did. Though at the time, it wasn't enough to stop me from taking a shine to him.

Hell, I even thought it was kinda cool how he always quietly disengaged whenever the rest of the guys started making dirty jokes, and he never came along when we all went to go take a piss. It made him seem like a badass lone wolf who never caved to peer pressure and didn't give a damn what anyone else thought. He was a good-looking guy who could run better than any of us, but he never acted cocky or let it go to his head.

That's what I liked about you, dude.

You were different from the rest of them.

That was why I made an effort to get closer to you—and when we finally started talking, I was amazed to find out that you were an even *more* disciplined

athlete than I already gave you credit for. You knew so much about the sport, and you were so keenly aware of your physique and how to get the results you wanted. You showed up to morning practice earlier than everyone else, even though you said your low blood pressure made it really tough to wake up early. You were competitive as hell, but always a good sport and never a sore loser. All the other guys on the team loved you, and every time you complimented me on anything, it made my day. You were like our shining star, man.

So why the hell'd you have to go and throw it all away?

I mean, I know we always gave you flak for having a girly-ass face, but actually coming in to school wearing a skirt like that? Come on, dude. Of course I felt shocked. Of *course* I felt confused. I mean, how was I supposed to react? I knew there were guys out there who liked to cross-dress and stuff like that, but I never would've taken *you* for one of them. Not in my wildest dreams... Okay, no—that's a lie. To be totally honest, there *were* a few times that made me wonder if you swung the other way. And when I started thinking about it more and more, piecing together all those little funny feelings I got about you over time, it all finally added up. It made sense.

But that didn't make it any easier to accept.

And after a while, my disbelief turned to rage.

I felt like I'd been played for a goddamn fool.

Even though we were never in the same class, you and I spent more time together at practice than anyone else. The thought that you'd been hiding this "true identity" of yours from me that entire time made me feel straight-up betrayed. And then you had the nerve to quit the team without even telling me? Now *that* was a bridge too far.

That first day you came to school wearing a skirt, I went straight to practice after school like usual. Stomped my way down the hall, wanting to vent my frustration with the other guys as soon as possible. I was so sure that they'd all be just as pissed at you for making such a selfish, stupid decision as I was. But then, right as I was about to open the door to the clubroom, I heard some of the freshmen on the team chatting about you. Word always traveled fast around the school, so no surprise there—but when I heard what they were

actually saying, my hand froze on the doorknob.

“Honestly?” said one of the guys. “I’d still tap that. I mean, she totally passes, and she’s got a great personality. Who cares what type of equipment she’s got downstairs?”

“Damn, bro... You’re a braver man than I am,” said another. “Not to say I wouldn’t have *maybe* considered giving her the D if I didn’t already know she was a dude.”

You’re kidding me, right?

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. Thought I had to be going insane. Were these two just being sickos for the hell of it? Surely not *all* of our teammates were treating this like it was just some big joke. I could hear other voices in the clubroom too.

“Man, I wish she wouldn’t have quit the team, though,” somebody said. “Or, wait, I forget—did they say it wasn’t a hundred percent final yet?”

“Teach already told everyone, so I’m pretty sure it is,” another guy replied. “I guess maybe Tsukinoki-senpai could always change her mind.”

“Ooh, you think she’ll switch over to the *girls’* track team, maybe?” the very first kid chimed in. “That’d be sweet. Then I’d still get to see her sometimes...”

“Dude, just ask her out already.”

Laughter erupted inside the clubroom. I just stood there, unable to move a muscle until another one of our teammates showed up for practice. *No way...* There *had* to be some sort of mistake here. How could everyone be so quick to accept this? It didn’t make any sense.

Later, when the rest of the team showed up that day, I learned that opinions on the subject were more or less split right down the middle. But as the weeks went by, more and more people seemed to be supportive of Ushio’s decision, until it felt like I was one of the only ones left who disapproved. And then came the big turning point: after he somehow landed a leading role in *Romeo and Juliet* at the culture festival—as the *female* lead, I should mention—it felt like the whole school started treating him like some kind of celebrity. Even kids who’d never even *heard* of Ushio before were suddenly hyping him up and

singing his praises. And every time I witnessed it firsthand, I had to excuse myself and go find somewhere else to blow off steam. I couldn't stand to watch my old teammate continue to transform into something else. Something I knew he wasn't.

After a while, one of my senior teammates sat me down to give me a warning. Said my behavior was "discriminatory and unacceptable." Wasn't long after that before literally the entire rest of the team was against me. Acted like I was the enemy.

But it wasn't even really about that for me, at the end of the day.

If it were anyone else, I probably could have accepted it.

Goddamn it, Ushio... Why did it have to be you, of all people? You were the one person I thought I could trust to never flake out on me.

Eventually, I knew I couldn't take it anymore. I tried not to think about it, but every time I heard his name or saw him around campus, I couldn't help but compare this new version of him with the old Ushio—and that was what really hurt the most. If I'd never gotten attached to him in the first place, this pill wouldn't have been so hard to swallow.

It was then that I came up with an idea: I just had to erase the old Ushio from my mind completely, convincing myself once and for all that he simply didn't exist anymore. And what better way to do that than by beating him out on the track, fair and square, to prove that there was no fraction of the person I once looked up to left inside of him?

Saying I wanted him back on the team to take part in the upcoming prefectural preliminaries was nothing more than a convenient excuse. In reality, there was only one thing I wanted to get out of this: to kill every last fond memory I had of Ushio.

But enough reminiscing—I still had a race to win here.

Sure, Ushio was in the lead right now, but I just had to overtake him at the very end, when he was bound to be winded as hell from pushing himself so hard early on. All I had to do was keep pace and wait for my moment to strike. No more thinking about the past. I just had to focus on my breathing and keep

putting one foot in front of the other.

We finished our third lap.

Then the fourth, and the fifth.

All right. Now's my time to shine.

I started sprinting as fast as I could. Screw strategy—all I had to do was pull out all the stops and go as hard as possible for this entire final lap, and I could easily blow right past him and win this thing.

The wind rushed past my face. I stretched out my jaw as I pumped my arms with every stride. I fixed my gaze dead ahead, kicking off the ground harder and harder each time. I just kept on accelerating faster and faster so I could close the distance between me and Ushio in one fell swoop.

I was going fast. *Really* fast. And yet...

How the hell is Ushio so much faster?!

I couldn't even catch up to him, let alone overtake him. If anything, it felt like he was pulling further and further ahead.

But how's that even possible?! How could he *not* be totally exhausted by now after sprinting so hard in the first lap?! After being off the team and out of practice for almost five whole months?! He was going just as fast now as he was back then—or maybe even faster!

All at once, I could feel my legs growing heavy as my body threatened to throw in the towel right then and there. *You're kidding me, right? I'm actually going to lose here?*

No—it wasn't over yet. There was still more than half a lap left to go. Ushio had to lose steam sooner or later. I couldn't give up now. I just had to dig deep and power through. Show this pretender what *real* willpower and dedication could do.

The cold air burned my lungs. With each breath came a new, deeper sting in

my chest as my heart threatened to burst right out of my rib cage. I wasn't catching up to him at all. My thoughts became a muddled blur as a haze of panic and exhaustion came over my mind. This was bad—I needed to pick up the pace, or else.

Ugh, what the hell... Why can't I keep up?

Slow down already, goddamn it...

You can't just...leave me in the dust...

As soon as Noi crossed the finish line, he collapsed on the spot and started panting on all fours, his back heaving dramatically up and down as he desperately sucked as much oxygen into his lungs as he possibly could.

Meanwhile, Ushio just looked down at him in silence.

She'd won the race fair and square, with no room for any ambiguity, having finished at least ten seconds before Noi did. I didn't know if that long of a gap between runners was pretty typical for something as long as a 5K, but from where I'd been standing, it sure looked like Ushio completely blew him out of the water.

The moment she'd crossed the finish line, Hoshihara and I had both started cheering. After having been so stressed out about the race for the past two weeks, I felt the same rush of relief and elation you might get from learning that you and your best friend had both passed the entrance exams to be admitted to the same school.

Ushio, on the other hand, didn't seem all that thrilled with her achievement. She hadn't even acknowledged the cheers from me and Hoshihara, keeping her gaze fixed on Noi as he exhaustedly carried himself over the finish line. And once he fell to his knees on the pavement, she walked over and stared down at him as though she'd caught him red-handed in some irredeemable transgression.

"Why?" Ushio breathed. She was still a bit winded herself, though nowhere near as badly as Noi, who struggled to even turn his head up to look at her.

“Why what?” he said between hacks and huffs.

“Why are you so much slower than before?”

Wait. Slower? I could understand Ushio being a bit slower since she’d been off the team for several months, but *Noi?* Yet judging by the way he bit his lower lip and remained silent, it seemed he knew there was some truth to this accusation.

“Have you been skipping practice?” said Ushio.

“N-no!” said Noi, rising to his feet on shaky legs. His knees trembled so hard, I worried he might collapse again. “I haven’t been skipping anything! I just... wasn’t giving it my all just now, okay? Trying to save my strength for the preliminaries where it—”

“Come on, Fusuke. We both know that’s a lie.”

Ushio didn’t even let him finish this flimsy excuse. Hell, even I could tell he was lying. It was pretty obvious from how utterly disheveled he was that he hadn’t simply thrown the match because he thought it wasn’t worth the energy.

“You really expect me to believe that when you can barely even stand up right now?” said Ushio. “Just admit it: you’ve been letting yourself slip lately, haven’t you? That would explain why you walked into school at the same time as us the other day instead of showing up early for morning practice like you were supposed to.”

The other day? Is she talking about the day he shoved me to the floor?

“That was just because...there wasn’t any morning practice that day,” said Noi. “They canceled it on account of the rain.”

“They don’t cancel practice because of the rain. They just move it into the special purpose building to do weight training and indoor drills instead. Did you really think I would’ve already forgotten that? Plus, it’s not like they *forbid* you from running outside in the rain either. You’re still allowed to if you want. I know I did it all the time.”

Noi didn’t say a word.

“And besides,” Ushio went on, “weren’t you on the culture festival committee, Fusuke? Guessing you had to skip at least a few practices for that too, am I right?”

“Okay, yeah, but that’s different,” said Noi. “That was a legit obligation, so—”

“You could’ve still gone out running in the evenings. Or on the weekends, or stayed late on other days. You *know* how important it is to make up for lost practice time, Fusuke... Just what exactly have you even been doing since I quit the team?”

I watched a bead of sweat trickle down Noi’s forehead. I could tell he was desperately trying to come up with some sort of excuse. But no matter how long we waited, no words came—only the sound of the whistling wind and his own haggard breathing against the silence. There were still a good couple hours left before sundown, but the skies were so overcast that it was already getting dark outside.

“Can I ask you a question, Fusuke?” Ushio said, like a kindergarten teacher gently lecturing a misbehaving child. “Did you think I’d stopped running completely just because I quit the team or something?”

Noi’s eyes went wide.

“Because I didn’t, for your information,” Ushio went on. “I still went out for at least one run every single day. And after you challenged me to this race, I upped that to at least two per day. And yet, it seems not only did you neglect to train hard enough to win your own stupid bet—you haven’t even been going to *normal* practice lately either, have you? Or if you still insist you haven’t been slacking off there, fine. We can just say you were too complacent instead. As if that’s any better.”

A blustery wind blew down the street.

“You really don’t think much of anyone but yourself, do you?” Ushio said softly. There was a sobering weight to her words now, as though they’d been dyed jet black after marinating for so long in a mixture of anger, disappointment, and contempt. “Just because I put on a skirt and started getting grouped up with the girls in gym class doesn’t mean I’m going to stop enjoying the things I love. I didn’t quit the track team because I don’t care about

running anymore. I quit because I didn't want to compete—or even be *thought* of—as a boy anymore. That's the main thing you don't seem to be getting here. Regardless of what gender I am, I'm still *me*, okay? I didn't die and get reincarnated as a totally different person or something.”

“...I know that,” said Noi.

“No, it's pretty clear that you don't, actually. You don't know *anything*, Fusuke. You never change. You're just an overconfident brute who doesn't know how to cope when things don't go his way, so you throw a tantrum like a little kid. That's what you've always been. You're not fooling anybody. You haven't changed one bit...”

These were some pretty harsh words, yet it almost seemed like it pained Ushio more to say them than it hurt Noi to hear them. It was a little messed up to watch, actually. By rights, Ushio should have been reveling in her victory, but it seemed like Noi's half-assed attempt had rendered it hollow for her. And I imagined it only felt that much more insulting given what his lack of preparation implied he thought about *her* dedication and work ethic. Obviously, none of us could say whether the end result would have changed even if Noi *had* trained properly, but something told me that Ushio didn't really care to offer him a rematch after that pathetic performance.

“I hope you still remember your promise, at least,” she said.

Noi's shoulders twitched.

“You're going to apologize right now. To me, and to Sakuma.”

Indeed, that was the deal. Even though this had ultimately been a somewhat sour victory for Ushio, a proper apology from Noi would hopefully help wash the taste out of her mouth a bit. And yet, in an almost unbelievably stubborn display, Noi simply frowned at her—lowering his head as he tightly pursed his lips. Ushio let out a heavy sigh.

“Fine then. Be that way.” She turned to me and Hoshihara, then walked through the gate back onto campus. “Come on, you two. Let's go.”

Was it really okay to leave without any penance from Noi whatsoever? Hoshihara glanced over at me, clearly just as concerned and looking for my

opinion on what to do here. While I definitely didn't feel right about walking away and letting Noi completely off the hook, I knew it wouldn't accomplish anything for the two of *us* to try to drag an apology out of him. All we could do was respect her decision and follow her lead.

But just as we were about to leave...

"Hold on a minute," someone said. It was Fujise, the boy who'd been nothing more than a silent observer up until now. After successfully stopping Ushio in her tracks, he addressed Noi. "Come on, Noi-senpai. Swallow your pride and admit defeat already. If you don't do it now, you'll never be able to let this go."

Surely this entreaty from a fellow teammate would elicit *some* sort of response from Noi. This wasn't just between him and Ushio anymore; if he still refused to accept his loss even now, he'd lose a ton of respect from Fujise as well—though maybe there wasn't much of that left at this point. We all waited to see how Noi would respond.

"Damn," said Noi, letting out a self-deprecating chuckle as he lifted his head. "Got my ass handed to me after talking such a big game, and now I'm getting told off by one of my own teammates... Guess a deal's a deal, yeah. Feel like I'd be better off dead if I couldn't even keep a promise on top of all that... Sorry, Ushio."

That was all he said. I assumed it was a genuine apology by Noi's standards, but it sure was pretty underwhelming. I couldn't help but feel like Ushio should have demanded something more from him. I looked to my side to gauge her reaction, but her expression hadn't changed one bit. She didn't say a word or even nod to indicate she'd heard him. I couldn't glean from her demeanor how she felt about this apology.

"Sorry for shoving you too, Kamiki," Noi added, almost as an afterthought.

"...It's fine," I said. I knew Ushio had only tacked me on to this for good measure.

Evidently, Noi had no intention of saying any more than this. He turned to Fujise, signaled that it was time to go, and the two of them started walking off in the direction of the track. Maybe they were going to practice or something; I had no idea.

This was a pretty lackluster resolution, as far as I was concerned. Yes, Ushio had won the race and gotten her apology. But there was a mutual pensiveness left hanging in the air after it all was over. Was it really okay to just let Noi slink off virtually scot-free? Would Ushio really be satisfied with this outcome?

Damn it... Now I'm getting worked up again...

Right then, Noi slowly came to a stop, then turned around and looked at Ushio again. Maybe he *did* have something more to say after all.

“You know something, Ushio?” he said. “I always...”

Whatever it was he was about to admit, it seemed like he felt far more conflicted about saying it than he'd been when he offered us his apologies. His lower lip trembled as he tried to finish his sentence—but in the end, he couldn't force out the words.

“Actually, forget it,” he said. “It's not important.”

Noi made to walk off again, but the moment his back was turned, a blur of movement shot through my peripheral vision. Without so much as a single word, Ushio chased Noi down and slapped him as hard as she could on the back of the head.

“Hey, *ouch!*” he shouted, whirling around.

Immediately, Ushio grabbed him by the collar of his shirt and yanked hard on the fabric. This was so unexpected, all I could do was stand there dumbstruck. And I wasn't the only one: Hoshihara and Fujise were right there with me. Even Noi himself, whom I would have normally expected to blow up and fight back, seemed far more astonished than anything by this aggressive move from Ushio.

“Wh-what the hell, man...? Let go of—”

“Just say it already!” Ushio shouted, and Noi flinched in fear. “Stop vaguely alluding to things and say what you mean! Or if you're too much of a coward to finish your sentence, then don't say anything at all! Did you really think I'd find it cool of you to just *imply* you want to tell me something meaningful, then bottle it back up and walk off?!”

Even though I knew she was saying this to Noi, I couldn't help but be

reminded of the many similar failures to communicate properly that she and I had around the time of the culture festival, and how unpleasant that had been for both of us. We'd made an agreement to just be honest with each other about how we felt back then. Ever since, we'd tried to keep an open dialogue going—even if there were obviously still some awkward feelings we weren't addressing and sort of tiptoeing around.

But to be sure, it wasn't always a great idea to share your every single thought with someone. Sometimes, a little white lie could save you both a lot of heartache. At other times, it could even be a *good* idea to be vague and leave certain things unsaid until the moment was right. The only problem was that in Noi's case, there'd never *be* a better opportunity than this. If he had any parting thoughts to share, this was his last chance.

"Not like it even matters at this point," Noi said, turning his face away from Ushio. "You already beat the bad guy and got your little apology... Why should I waste my breath now when it wouldn't change a thing?"

"Say it anyway," Ushio insisted. "It's over, Fusuke. You know as well as I do that we're never going back to the way things were. I'm never coming back to the track team, and we're never going to compete to see who can get better times ever again. This ends right here. After this, we're through. So if there's anything else you want to say to me, whether it's to make amends or just slip in one last petty dig, you'd better say it now."

Ushio was talking about this like they were never even going to see each other again—and to be fair, that might as well be the case. Their relationship was over, full stop. Even if they bumped into each other in the hallway or happened to end up in the same class together next year, for instance, what happened here would never change. They could never be friends again. Hell, they were worse than mere strangers at this point. It was kind of sad, in a way, but neither Ushio nor Noi seemed to have any desire to bury the hatchet—and they probably couldn't mend these wounds even if they tried.

"...Okay, fine," said Noi. "I'll say it."

He still sounded reluctant, but it seemed he didn't have the energy or willpower to fight her on this any longer. Not that I could blame him, after

running a 5K.

“All I wanted to say...”

He trailed off, then started again, looking Ushio dead in the eye.

“All I wanted to say was that I really looked up to you, man.”

Ushio finally released her grip on his collar. Her face was now perfectly placid, as if whatever demon of rage that briefly possessed her had just been exorcised. She took a step back and considered him calmly for a moment.

“I know you did,” she said.

With that, Noi and Fujise finally went on their way, leaving Ushio, Hoshihara, and me standing alone on the sidewalk outside the main gate. As the two boys trudged onto campus, they passed by a group of chattering girls in bulky baseball jackets walking from the direction of the athletic field. It seemed softball practice had just let out. The girls passed right in front of us as they headed to the bike lot.

“You did great out there, Ushio-chan!” said Hoshihara, trying to lighten the mood.

“Thanks, Natsuki,” said Ushio, offering a slight smile in return.

“No, I’m serious! You were so cool! God, I love watching you run... The way you just cut straight through the wind like a shining white horse... It’s so dreamy!”

“A shining white *horse*?” Ushio chuckled. “Not a knight in shining white armor?”

“Um, wait! I didn’t mean that as an insult or anything!” said Hoshihara, panicking. “Just saying that your form and everything is really beautiful to watch, that’s all...”

“You’re fine, Natsuki. Just thought it was an amusing choice of words,” Ushio said, then faced me. “Well, Sakuma...I did it. I beat him.”

“Yeah, I was watching. Don’t think I’ve ever seen you run that fast before... Pretty impressive to see what you’re capable of when you really put your mind to it.”

“Did my best, yeah... But now I feel like I’m about to keel over. I want to go home, take a shower, grab something to eat, and climb straight into—”

Before she could even finish her sentence, Ushio’s legs wobbled as though she was feeling faint, and she collapsed to the ground on her butt.

“H-hey, are you all right?” I asked.

“Sorry, yeah...” she said. “Just need to rest for a minute, I think...”

Ushio spread her legs out and leaned forward to stretch out her tendons. It didn’t seem all that serious, but I still couldn’t help feeling concerned.

“Well, it’s only gonna keep getting colder out here, so we should at least get you back inside the school building,” I said. “Here, I’ll help you walk.”

“No, that’s okay,” said Ushio. “I’m fine. Really.”

“Well, I don’t wanna stand out here in the cold either, so c’mon—just put your arm around me, and... Oh, wait. Sorry, are you saying you don’t want to be touched?”

“I mean, no, I don’t mind *that*, but—”

“Okay, then let’s go.”

I knelt down beside her, and (after a hesitant pause) Ushio gingerly wrapped her arm around my shoulders. I gripped her slender, somewhat bony wrist through the cuff of her tracksuit as the slightest scent of sweat reached my nose.

“Hey, hold up!” said Hoshihara. “I’ll help too!”

She knelt down and offered her own shoulders for Ushio to put her other arm around. Ushio rolled her eyes and relented, apparently knowing better than to try to refuse at this point. Once her arm was around Hoshihara, we stood up on the count of three, supporting Ushio on both sides as we helped her to her feet and set off toward the school building.

“Man, this is way more embarrassing than I thought...” Ushio complained, though she didn’t seem all *that* bothered by it. And even if she was, it was only a short walk away; she’d be free of us again in no time.

A few rays of light from the setting sun came pouring through a gap in the parting clouds. I could feel the soft sunbeams on my back as they cast a long, six-legged silhouette over the pavement—our three shadows, coalesced into one.

After a quick detour to grab our bags, which we'd left leaning up against the wall beside the gate, we headed into the school building via the main entryway. We sat down as a single unit on the duckboard, with Ushio still in between us. It was definitely warmer here than outside, but a slight draft was still coming through, so it was chilly regardless.

"Fweh—*choo!*" said Hoshihara, stifling a sneeze. "Brrr... Gosh, it's so cold... Oh, wait! Here, I have an idea!"

She pulled out a small blanket from her bag and spread it out over all three of our laps. It didn't completely cover our lower bodies or anything, but it was still pretty warm. If I leaned back against the shoe cubbies behind me, I felt like I might even fall asleep.

We made small talk as we waited for Ushio to feel like she'd recovered enough to walk on her own. We looked back on everything that had happened over the past two weeks, since the initial challenge from Noi, and found that we were able to laugh about a lot of it now that it was finally over. Even Ushio cracked a few carefree (if obviously exhausted) smiles here and there, as though the pressure of the race had finally been lifted from her shoulders. And thank goodness she won too; it was scary to think that we probably wouldn't even be sharing this little moment of happiness if she hadn't. Hopefully all the drama at school would finally calm down for a little while.

No sooner did I have that thought than I heard the echo of several pairs of feet rushing down the hall. As Ushio and Hoshihara lifted their heads to see what the commotion was, I felt myself gripped by an inexplicable sense of apprehension.

Slowly, I turned to look.

"You're okay—no need to rush, just take it slow... That's it..."

I could hear an older woman's voice—the school nurse, I was pretty sure. It sounded like she was trying to keep someone calm as they walked down the corridor.

Wait... Did someone get hurt?

Step by step, the voices drew closer, until eventually, a group of faces I recognized came around the corner from behind the shoe cubbies. The first person to emerge was the school nurse, as I expected—followed by Mashima and Shiina.

“Huh?” uttered Hoshihara as she looked on in disbelief.

An anguished expression adorned Mashima's sweat-speckled face as she hobbled forward on unsteady legs, leaning all of her weight on Shiina for support.

“Out of the way!” Shiina shouted, wearing a look of desperation as they approached us on the duckboard.

We immediately cleared out, and Shiina grabbed Mashima's loafers from her shoe cubby and dropped them on the ground. Mashima clumsily slipped her feet into the shoes, crushing the backs beneath her heels. The nurse, who'd already finished changing into her own street shoes, called out to them from the main entrance, and Shiina and Mashima quickly followed her out the double doors.

It all happened so fast that I still had no idea what was going on, but it was clear that this was some sort of emergency. As the three of us exchanged concerned glances, wondering what could have possibly happened, one final straggler emerged from down the hallway. Her face was deathly pale, and she didn't even look over at us as she trudged after the others in her indoor slippers. When she opened the door and stepped out into the cold, her bleached blonde pigtails fluttered in the blustery wind.

“...Nishizono?”

CHAPTER SIX

The Meltdown



Chapter Six: The Meltdown

ONE HOUR PRIOR...

“Do you know why I called you down here, Arisa?” said Ms. Iyo.

Like I give a damn, I wanted to say—but swallowed the urge.

“No,” I lied. Honestly, I had a pretty good hunch. She was probably going to lecture me about “my recent behavior in class” or something stupid like that.

This was the third time I’d been called down to the student counseling office on the second floor of the special purpose building. The first time, it was because I hit Ushio in the nose with my thermos, and the second was after I punched Sera in the face. All they did was sit you down in these hard metal folding chairs and lecture you for hours on end until they thought you seemed remorseful enough. I was sick and tired of the disciplinary rigamarole; it was just so *tedious*.

“I’ve gotten a lot of reports about you from several different teachers lately, you know,” said Ms. Iyo. “Sounds like you’re misbehaving even more after your recent suspension. If you were only failing to turn in your assignments, that would be one thing, but talking back to your instructors is pretty inexcusable.”

As usual, she was wording her criticisms very lightly, with no obvious hint of anger or disappointment in her voice. Her expression was calm too; I figured she was hoping that by taking a softer approach, I might be more willing to open up to her.

Pfft. Like I’d ever fall for that.

I dropped my gaze and kept my mouth shut. I knew if I just stayed silent, she’d lose her patience with me sooner or later. And I’d much rather her get fed up with me than give me this half-assed “good cop” act. At least with anger, you knew it was honest. Fake kindness was scummy and manipulative. But for now, Ms. Iyo went on in spite of my silence.

“Your test scores and everything are still fine, for the most part, so it’d be a real shame for you to keep getting docked points for your classroom behavior. Surely you wouldn’t want to tarnish an otherwise solid transcript over something so petty.”

I ignored this.

“Your math teacher, Mr. Mori, has been really worried about you too, you know. And he’s been in an awfully good mood lately—I think because he just adopted a cat. Are you much of an animal person, Arisa?”

Why the hell do you care?

“Hey, here’s a thought: there’s a volunteer work opportunity coming up pretty soon. Just doing a bit of trash cleanup down on the floodplain. Maybe you should take part? I could give you some extra credit for it to sweeten the deal...”

Thanks, but I think I’d rather die.

Ms. Iyo kept on changing the subject, like she was randomly plucking at my heartstrings to find the right note. I could tell she was just trying to worm her way through my defenses in whatever way she could. But all it made me feel was pity for the saps unfortunate enough to be school teachers. What a sad existence that had to be.

Just above the student counseling office was the music room, where I could hear the wind ensemble practicing some classical tune I’d heard before but didn’t know the name of. I cast a quick glance out the window; the weather was pretty blustery today. I’d biked to school, so I hoped I wouldn’t be riding straight into the wind on the way home. God forbid it started raining too. Hopefully Ms. Iyo would shut up before long so I could get out of here. She must’ve been able to tell I was hardly listening at this point, as she let out an exaggerated sigh.

“Look, I get that you probably just want to go home,” she said, “but I need you to at least *try* to play ball with me here. It’s got to be pretty exhausting to be so hardheaded all the time, right?”

“You’re the one who seems exhausted to me,” I shot back.

“Well, aren’t you perceptive,” Ms. Iyo said with a snort of laughter. “Yes, it’s very taxing having to deal with students who are too stubborn to change their ways.”

“Then why don’t you just stop caring and leave me alone?”

“Come on, you know I can’t do that. You’re a member of Class A, which means if anything were to happen involving you, it would be *my* responsibility.”

“Pfft. So you admit it, then. You don’t actually care about me or my future—you’re just trying to cover your own ass.”

“You can feel free to dispense with the pouty act anytime. It’s true that if this weren’t my job, I wouldn’t be staying here late to try to talk through this with you... But that doesn’t mean I don’t care about you.”

“Doubt it.”

Ms. Iyo’s brows lowered, like she was actually a little *hurt* by this. “I wish you wouldn’t be so distrustful of my intentions...but whatever.” She cleared her throat as if to reorient herself. “In any case, I’m not trying to rake you over the coals here. But I did think it might be a good idea to go over your grades as well.”

Grades, ugh. My stomach churned.

“Surely you’re aware that your performance has been declining bit by bit since September,” she said. “That being said, your academics are probably still good enough to get you into your first-choice university for the time being, but if they keep dropping at this rate, you might have a harder time of it.”

Damn her. She *had* to know this was a sore spot of mine.

It was true that I’d been having a tough time staying focused on my studies these past two or three months. No matter what I did, I couldn’t stop my mind from wandering off to more unpleasant thoughts—like how to get Ushio to go back to normal or whether Natsuki still considered me a friend. Lately, though, it was mostly just me being reminded of Sera trying to push my buttons (and getting pissed off all over again), wondering who the hell told him my secret. It felt like my head had been filled with nothing but a haze of static lately—and it was no different now. It didn’t feel great.

“Even now, I think your grades could end up really holding you back,” Ms. Iyo went on. “Assuming no endorsement, if you don’t score all that well on the entrance exam, they might look at your transcripts to decide whether you get in or not...”

This I didn’t know. But it was a trivial issue, as far as I was concerned.

“Then I’ll just have to get my grades up again, won’t I?” I said.

“You make it sound so easy. But yes, if you’re capable of that, then by all means.”

“I’ve just been distracted with other stuff. If I really wanted to, I could still easily cram to ace any old stupid exam.”

“Oh? What have you been distracted by? Sera-kun? Or is it Ushio, perhaps?”

I could have throttled her for bringing them up; these were two names I would’ve preferred to never hear again for the rest of my life. Especially Sera—I hoped that guy would drop dead in a ditch one of these days.

“...What does it matter to *you*?” I said. “Just let me go home already. I didn’t bring a raincoat today. What do you expect me to do if the weather gets any worse?”

“Either take the bus home or just deal with it, I guess,” said Ms. Iyo.

“If I catch a cold out there, I’ll report you to the PTA for holding me here.”

“Look at you, with your pointed threats...”

Honestly, I didn’t know much about what the PTA actually *did* on a daily basis, but I got the impression that teachers feared retribution from them more than anyone else. Not that I was seriously planning on reporting anything to them—it was only a bluff. I didn’t even know who I would contact to do so. I looked up at the clock hanging on the wall.

“Um, it’s already five o’clock, FYI.”

“Okay, okay, fine. We’ll leave it at that for today. But if your grades drop any lower, I’ll be calling you right back here. Is that understood? And *please*, whatever you do, don’t cause any more incidents here at school.”

Finally, I was free. I stood up from my chair, picked up my bag off the ground beside me, and slung it over my shoulder. But as soon as I started walking toward the door, Ms. Iyo called after me again. For a second, I considered ignoring her, but I didn't want to have to suffer through another lecture just for that, so I begrudgingly turned around.

"What is it *this* time?"

"Butting heads with your peers all the time is no way to live, you know. It's only going to make you miserable in the long run."

Her voice was full of something like pity and maybe a hint of compassion.

Pfft. Don't remember asking for your advice.

"You're so right," I said—then stepped out into the hallway and shut the door behind me. As I walked down the cold and dimly lit corridor, I shivered. From the temperature in the building alone, it felt like it was winter already.

Kinda wish it was winter, at least as far as the calendar goes.

All I wanted was for it to be winter break already. I didn't want to be here anymore; I hoped a meteor or an airplane or a giant semitruck would come crashing into the school and wipe it off the face of the earth. I'd found myself wishing this countless times during my last suspension. Even though I knew it was a stupid, childish fantasy, imagining it *did* make me feel a bit less miserable, at least for a little while.

All of a sudden, Ms. Iyo's parting words flashed through my mind.

"Butting heads with your peers all the time is no way to live, you know. It's only going to make you miserable in the long run."

It wasn't like I *enjoyed* constantly fighting people on everything. I was totally capable of going with the flow and tolerating things—even things I found pretty objectionable—if it meant navigating an awkward social situation a bit more smoothly.

But not this time.

Ever since people started accepting Ushio's "new identity," my social stature in the classroom had been on a steep and steady decline. Not that I cared all

that much whether people hated me. If they did, that was their loss. But now that Sera had gone and aired my dirty laundry to the whole class...I couldn't just let this slide. There was no way I was going to let people start thinking less of me because of that scumbag. If I didn't pay him back in kind, I'd never live this humiliation down. So I *had* to get revenge. I'd strike back hard, and in a big, bold way for all to see, so that everyone would know I wasn't some weakling. *That* was why I had to fight—and I wasn't going to let anyone stop me. Especially not Ms. Iyo. She'd never understand how I felt. Not in a million years.

Ugh... Great, now I'm getting super pissed off again.

I started walking faster as my whole body twinged with a vexing, helpless irritation. It felt like my nerves were being whittled down to their very last threads from the inside.

I descended the stairwell, but stopped at the first midpoint landing I reached to gaze out the window. The dark blanket of clouds overhead was slowly beginning to clear, but the sun was still hidden—and once it started going down, I knew it would only get even colder. I rubbed my shoulders reflexively in an attempt to warm myself up even a tiny bit in preparation for the ride home. Then, all of a sudden, someone else came up to the landing behind me. Someone I recognized, even.

"Wait, what the...? Arisa?" said the girl, tilting her head.

It was Marine. Apparently, softball practice had just gotten out; she was wearing her letterman baseball jacket and had her bag slung over her shoulder.

"Pretty rare to see *you* around campus at this hour," she said. "What's up?"

"...Nothing," I said. "Just got called out for another stupid counseling session."

"Ooh, gotcha... Dang, that must've sucked, heh."

Marine sounded uninterested and unsurprised. I assumed the only reason she wasn't asking *why* I'd been called out was because she felt like she already knew. All of my classmates were well aware of how I'd been behaving in class as of late.

"Oh, hey! I've got an idea," said Marine. "Practice got out early for me today, since the winds were too strong, so I was actually going to head home with

Shiina for once. You wanna come too?”

Wow. How long had it been since the three of us had gone home from school together? Probably not since first semester, given that Marine and Shiina were both involved in extracurricular activities and I wasn’t, which meant we could only do so on days when neither of them had practice after school. But lately, we hadn’t been taking advantage of even *those* rare opportunities. Marine and Shiina—as well as Natsuki—had been treating me like a leper ever since I stated my disapproval of Ushio’s new “lifestyle,” so I’d been going home alone every day for the past few months.

“You’ve got some nerve, you know that?” I said, indignation creeping up my throat like bile. “You don’t *dare* to even speak a word to me during class, but then when no one else is around, you act like everything’s fine and dandy between us, huh?”

Marine’s eyes went wide with surprise, and she blinked a few times. “Wha...? No, I wasn’t trying to—”

“No, it’s fine. You don’t want the teachers or Ushio’s little fan club to set their sights on you too. I get it. God forbid you get branded with the scarlet letter of being friends with the class villain, right? Y’know, for someone who acts so chill, you’re pretty calculating when it comes to covering your own ass.”

Marine furrowed her brow as though this wounded her deeply. Good. I’d said it specifically *to* wound her, hoping that seeing her hurt as well might make my own frustration die down at least a little bit. But it didn’t die down. If anything, it felt like a toxic cloud of black smoke was swirling around in my heart, as though the emotional hand grenade I’d been trying to lob at her had detonated prematurely. And now I was only getting angrier and angrier.

“You’re wrong, though,” said Marine, an added twinge of animosity in her gaze. The air on the stairwell landing felt like it had suddenly grown colder. “It was *you* who pushed *us* away first, Arisa. You’re the one who went off and started eating lunch with kids from other classes as soon as summer vacation was over.”

“Is it such a crime to want a little variety every now and then? Or, what—are you saying I should’ve asked your permission first or something?”

“No, but you could’ve at least given us a heads-up! Then we wouldn’t have to wonder where you were. And let’s not pretend it was *just* about having lunch. Anytime I tried to talk to you in the hall or during break periods, you either gave me a dirty look or ignored me. So yes, of course I was going to stop reaching out after a while.”

Marine’s shoulders slumped as though she’d suddenly lost the will to fight.

“At the same time,” she went on, “I don’t want things to stay like this forever, y’know? I figured I’d at least float the invitation. I mean, going home alone all the time must be a bummer for you too, right? We could even swing by McDonald’s or something on the way and try to talk things out a little.”

Marine flashed an amicable smile, as if she was offering to just forgive and forget. But something about that smile flicked a switch deep within me.

“...The hell is *that* supposed to mean?” I said, emotions churning in the pit of my stomach. “You feel bad seeing me alone all the time, so now you wanna extend the olive branch and do stuff together again? How ’bout you check your savior complex at the door, huh? I don’t need any self-serving pity from the likes of you.”

“Y’know, I really wish you’d stop twisting my words and just give me the benefit of the doubt here,” said Marine, pressing a palm to her forehead as though she were dealing with a petulant child—which only pissed me off even more. “Look, I can get why you’re probably feeling extra paranoid lately. But like I told you before: you really need to stop letting Sera get to you. For all we know, he could’ve just made the whole thing up to get under your skin—so just ignore it, all right? That’s part of the reason I think we should talk things out. I wanna clear up all these misunderstandings.”

“And why should I listen to you? Can you prove you’re not the rat?”

“See, there you go again...” There was frustration in her voice now. “How long are you gonna keep obsessing over this stupid witch hunt? I mean, the cat’s already outta the bag, so there’s no point in fixating on it. Let it go already.”

I felt my blood pressure spike.

“How the hell am I supposed to just ‘let it go’?” I said, stepping forward to get

in her face. “Just because it’s easy for *you* to forget about doesn’t mean I can do the same. Maybe I should write one of *your* most embarrassing secrets up on the blackboard tomorrow for everyone to read, huh? Guarantee you’d be singing a different tune about me ‘obsessing’ over things then.”

“Wha...?!” Marine went bright red from ear to ear.

Heh. Yeah, that’s what I thought, you little traitor.

“You know what? Fine,” said Marine. “You can just keep on being alone, then. Clearly, it was stupid of me to even bother.”

Marine tried to walk past me, but I moved to block her way.

“Oh, no you don’t,” I said. “This conversation isn’t over yet. Just admit it: it was *you* who told Sera, wasn’t it? That’s why you’re so determined to make me give up the search.”

“Believe whatever you want. Not like anything I could say could convince you to trust me at this point.”

Her abrupt curtness definitely rubbed me the wrong way. This was the first time I’d seen her get huffy with me; it made me wonder if I ever really knew her at all. *Yeah, no. I can’t trust anyone at this goddamn school. I was an idiot for ever letting my guard down around them in the first place.*

“Move it,” said Marine, attempting to shove past me. She was more forceful than I was anticipating, and it actually knocked me off-balance a little. A jolt of rage ran through me, from the top of my head to the tips of my toes.

“You little...!”

I shoved her right back. Not as hard as I could, just enough to make her stagger back a step or two. Only one problem: the landing ended less than two steps behind her.

“Wha—”

Marine’s eyes shot wide open as she fell backward. Then came a series of *thumps* and *thuds* as she went tumbling down the stairs like a rag doll, her body colliding repeatedly with the concrete steps.

“Huh?” I breathed in disbelief—and the sound echoed through the empty

stairwell. Now lying flat on the first-floor hallway, Marine wrung some sort of guttural groan from her lungs and curled up into the fetal position. Meanwhile, I just stood there looking down on her as though she was some sort of eerily realistic mannequin. I couldn't believe what had just happened; my brain refused to register the thing that had just fallen down the stairs as a person—as Marine. But even after scrunching my eyes shut tight, then reopening them again, she was still lying crumpled on the concrete floor.

It's my fault. She fell because I pushed her.

The lingering texture of her clothes on my fingertips served as a reminder of the truth.

“H-hey, are you—”

I started to call out to her, then heard a soft *fwump* from the second-floor landing. Still rooted to the spot, I looked up to see Shiina standing there with a dumbfounded look on her face, her bag lying on the floor beside her. She walked down to where I was standing to get a better look and, as soon as she saw Marine, let out a shrieky gasp.

“Marine!” she shouted, flying down the rest of the stairs to kneel by her friend's side. She looked around, frantic and teary-eyed, as though she wasn't sure whether it was safe to touch the other girl or not. “This can't be happening... S-someone! Anyone, come quick! Please, it's an emergency!”

Shortly after Shiina cried out for help, a male teacher came running. The moment he spotted Marine lying on the floor, he went pale and told Shiina to wait a minute before rushing off again. About a minute later, he returned with the school nurse in tow.

Shiina and the faculty members crowded around Marine and started talking among themselves. I heard someone say the word “hospital,” at which point Shiina and the nurse helped Marine up, then started walking her down the corridor.

And the whole time, I just stood there stock-still on the landing. It didn't seem

real. It felt like I was having some sort of omniscient, out-of-body experience, watching the events play out from afar. I could see and recognize that they were happening, but none of the usual emotions accompanied them. Only very, very belatedly did I feel a creeping sense of dread and remorse start crawling up my spine.

Oh god... What have I done?

One after another, intrusive thoughts wormed their way into my brain. I ran down the stairs in an attempt to shake them off. For now, chasing after Marine was my priority. They'd mentioned taking her to the hospital, which usually meant calling an ambulance—but a car would be faster in this case. They were probably heading for the school parking lot, so I made my way in that direction too. I ran past the shoe cubbies and burst out the doors just as a car came driving out from the parking lot and turned onto the road in front of campus. For a split second, I saw the school nurse in the driver's seat, which meant Marine had to be in there—and probably Shiina too.

"Wait..." I said as the car sped away, but my voice was too soft and weak to reach a thing.

I was too late. Even if I'd made it in time, who knew if they would have even let me ride along? Should I just make my way over to the hospital myself? Problem was, I didn't know which hospital they were taking her to. I could text Shiina and ask, but I knew I was too chicken to do that. And she might not even tell me.

Which meant I had no other options.

All I could do now was just...go home.

Yet my stubborn feet wouldn't budge a single step out of the school building. I couldn't take my eyes off the spot where the car had raced down the road and disappeared. Like my consciousness had been dragged away with Marine and the others.

"Hey, uh... Arisa?" said a voice from behind me. I turned around.

Natsuki was standing there with a concerned look on her face. And behind her were Ushio and Kamiki. It seemed like this was the only face Natsuki was

capable of making around me nowadays—that of an abandoned puppy begging for someone to take pity on it. Knowingly wielding her endearing appearance as a shield so that she could weasel her way into other people’s affairs. I’d always hated that about her. But right now, that wasn’t important. These three had nothing to do with this. And what were they even doing here at this hour, when none of them were in any sports or clubs?

“Did something happen?” asked Natsuki. “I just saw Shiina rushing outside with Marine on her shoulder, and the nurse was with them too... Do you know what the heck is going on?”

“I...”

The moment I opened my mouth, I was hit by a flashback of what had just transpired a few minutes prior. The soft *thud-thud-thudding* of Marine’s body as it tumbled down the staircase, followed by her groaning in distress.

“No,” I said. “I have no idea.”

After that, I practically fled the scene. I couldn’t stay here a moment longer; I had to get out of the school. Only as I was already halfway out to the bike lot did I realize I was still wearing my indoor slippers, having forgotten to change back into my street shoes in my haste. I didn’t have my bookbag either; I’d left it lying there on the landing. God, I was so stupid. I couldn’t just go back the way I came either, or else I’d run into Natsuki and them again, and I didn’t want to have to interact with anybody right now.

I circled around to the back of the school building and entered through the breezeway. The thought of returning to the scene of the crime had my stomach in knots, but I couldn’t just leave my bag lying there overnight. I made my way down the dimly lit corridor past the blood-red glow of the fire alarm lights, which seemed to watch me like eyes. Eventually, I came to the stairwell where Marine had fallen—and I had to swallow hard before attempting to climb back up to the landing. But then I saw a stain on one of the stairs. It looked almost like a dark, reddish-black smudge or skid mark that had been wiped up in a hurry. And it didn’t look all that old.

Is that...blood?

Like...Marine’s blood?

My body went ice-cold, and my breathing came harder, like I'd just taken a punch to the sternum. From what I could tell at a glance, Marine hadn't suffered any major injuries—but it was totally possible I just hadn't noticed or that they couldn't be seen outright. In fact, one would tend to think you'd get injured after falling down a concrete staircase, unless you were *extremely* lucky. She might even have hit her head—the scalp was pretty tender, so that would explain the blood. And while blood loss alone was bad enough, if she'd suffered any brain damage as well, then...

I collected my bag and continued up the stairwell, climbing all the way to the uppermost landing, then leaned my back against the door leading out onto the rooftop and crumpled to the ground. I'd wait here until I knew for sure that Natsuki and her friends had gone home. It was already getting dark outside. In the silent, half-lit school building, I closed my eyes and held my breath—but this only made my senses grow sharper and projected the memory of me shoving Marine onto my eyelids.

“Damn it...”

I couldn't get the look on her face—frozen in that moment of realization, just before she fell—out of my mind. Her baffled eyes held just one question: *Why?* But I hadn't done it on purpose; I'd only pushed back because she shoved me first. Not that I wasn't still at fault, but I didn't intend to push her down the stairs... She was still technically the one who started it. Especially since she'd gone out of her way to say all those provocative things to make my blood boil.

Even *then*, I was still going to try to help her. If Shiina hadn't shown up when she did, I would've gone down there and called for a teacher. Then it would have been *me* going to the hospital with her, I just knew it. I had every intention of apologizing and helping out, honest. But it didn't change the fact that I'd pushed her.

I wondered what would happen to me now. Once Marine told the faculty her version of events, they'd no doubt have to slap me with *some* sort of punishment. Maybe I'd finally get expelled this time. I could say it was an accident all I wanted, but were there any faculty members left at this point who'd take my word over hers?

“Nnnngh...”

I held my head in my hands.

This was different from the drama with Ushio and Sera.

This time, I’d *really* screwed up.

Maybe Marine was right. Maybe I never should’ve tried to figure out who the rat was to begin with. Or maybe it was stupid of me to take the bait and pick a fight with Sera in the first place. God only knew nothing good had happened since then. I never should have let a morally repugnant loser like him get under my skin. I wished I could turn back time. If I’d just ignored his stupid bullcrap that day, none of this ever would have happened.

Actually, no. Maybe I needed to restart my whole high school career while I was at it, from the day we first got into Tsubakioka High. If I’d never developed feelings for Ushio in the first place, then there was no doubt in my mind I’d still be friends with Marine, and Shiina, and Natsuki to this day. *Yeah... This is all his fault.* In the end, it all came back to Ushio. If it weren’t for him, I—

No. I knew the truth.

It wasn’t Ushio who started this. It was me.

I did it to myself by denouncing his life choices.

I could have just as easily kept my opinions to myself and gone along with it like everyone else. Or at least detached myself from him in a less ostentatious way, if it really made me that uncomfortable to be around him. I could have just said “Whatever floats your boat, I guess,” and let him live his life while I lived mine, and we could have stayed out of each other’s business, and all these headaches and all this heartache could have been avoided from the very start... The more I thought about it, the more regrets welled up inside of me. There was no end to the what-ifs. The if-onlys.

I didn’t want to think about anything anymore. I just wanted to live my life in peace. I was sick and tired of butting heads with people—I’d learned the hard way that all that ever accomplished was even more hurt for everyone involved. On top of that, it was downright *exhausting* to bear a grudge against someone for so long. Starting tomorrow, I’d shape up—be a good person. Surely it wasn’t

too late for that.

I couldn't sleep a wink that night.

Whenever I closed my eyes, my mind quickly filled to the brim with too many distracting thoughts that refused to be laid to rest. All the things I could have done differently, not to mention my growing concern for Marine. I still didn't even know whether she was going to be okay; I hadn't mustered up the courage to contact Shiina. I tried searching "falling down stairs injury" on my phone. With every case I saw in which the victim walked away relatively unscathed, my anxiety grew a tiny bit lighter.

I'd done the exact same thing with Ushio, come to think of it—ran a search on people who'd changed their gender identity like him and then come to regret it. I was hoping to find some empirical evidence to prove I wasn't crazy—not just to him but to myself. And I did manage to find quite a few of the exact sorts of testimonies I was hoping for. Yet even more numerous than those were the reports from people who only grew *more* confident that they'd made the right decision with time.

But I always ignored the data points I disagreed with.

I'd chosen to believe only the ones that validated me.

At this point, though, I was just about ready to break.

After a sleepless night, I dragged my leaden body out of bed and started getting ready for school. I washed my face, ate breakfast, got dressed, and walked out the door—at which point I nearly keeled over from an intense pain in my stomach.

It was no wonder that I really, *really* didn't feel like going to school today. For a moment, I considered playing hooky; it would be all too simple to fake illness so I had an excuse to stay home. But I knew that would only be delaying the inevitable. And whether I went to school or not, reality was going to catch up with me sooner or later. Most of all, I didn't want Marine or Shiina to be able to interpret that as me "running away," so I swallowed my dread and got on my bike. In stark contrast to the gloomy haze inside my chest, the skies overhead

were clear and blue.

When I arrived at Tsubakioka High, I noticed something as I was parking my bike in the bike lot: Marine's bike was nowhere to be found. Was she just late? Or was she not coming in at all today? Assuming it was the latter, then there was no doubt in my mind it was due to the fall she'd taken the day before. In that case, she must have gotten pretty beaten up after all. The unpleasant imagery of her bedridden due to various hypothetical injuries made my stomach curl up into knots all over again.

But I couldn't just turn around and go home now. I steeled my resolve and headed inside. Assuming the teacher was going to make an announcement about it, it would probably happen during morning homeroom period. I'd need to mentally brace myself for the worst between now and then.

Classroom 2-A came into view. I took a deep breath to stifle the searing pain in my gut and the suffocating anxiety in my chest, and stepped through the open door. A small crowd of people were gathered around one of the desks in the back of the room. And from the center of the group, I heard a familiarly chipper voice.

"Yeah, it's extra brutal 'cause it's my dominant arm too," said the voice. "Gonna be pretty hard to even feed myself for a little while here, heh."

It was Marine. She was here today after all.

Doing my best to keep a low profile, I cast a furtive glance in her direction as I made my way over to my own desk. Through a gap in the crowd, I could see that she had a cast on her right arm, as well as a sling around her shoulder.

So she did get hurt, then.

A cast and a sling suggested a major bone fracture—and on her dominant arm to boot. *Guess that explains why she couldn't ride her bike today.* I assumed she'd either taken the bus or gotten dropped off by a parent instead. Still, it was a relief to see that she seemed to be in fairly high spirits, even if the apparent severity of her injury left me with a heavy pang of guilt in my stomach. And I couldn't help but wonder if she'd sing a different tune once she saw me, despite her current cheerfulness.

Still, whether it was intentional or not, I knew I owed her an apology. I just couldn't work up the nerve to go over there and try to talk to her, especially while she was surrounded by a bunch of other people. Maybe I should wait and try to approach her sometime later when she was alone.

...No, screw it. Let's just do it now.

I didn't want to stress myself out about it the whole morning. And with these sorts of things, the longer you waited, the harder it got. I needed to just suck it up and get it over with. I set my bag down on my chair and took a deep breath, then made a beeline for Marine's desk, and the two of us made eye contact through the crowd.

But right when I was about to call out to her...

"What do you think *you're* doing here?" said Shiina, stopping me dead in my tracks as she emerged from the group to confront me. There was an air of open hostility about her; she'd drawn back her usual cool and collected persona to bare her fangs.

"Wh-what?" I said, faltering. "I'm trying to talk to Marine."

"About what, exactly?"

"I just...wanted to apologize."

"*Apologize?*" The glint in Shiina's eyes grew sharper. "You ran off like a coward from the scene of the crime, and *now* you want to apologize?"

These words hit me where it hurt. My breath caught in my throat, and my mind went blank.

"Wait, what's this about running from the scene of the crime?" someone said. Apparently, the rest of the class didn't know the full story yet. At least a few of them seemed to glean the gist from Shiina's comment just now, judging by the way they were now staring daggers at me.

"No," I said, struggling to wring out even this one-word denial as my mouth went dry as the desert. "I didn't run from anything... I tried to help her. I chased after you."

"Did you?" said Shiina. "Because when I looked, you were nowhere to be

found.”

“I just...didn’t make it in time. I couldn’t catch up to you guys.”

“And why is that? We were both right there in the same place, last I checked. You expect me to believe you couldn’t keep up? It’s not like *you* were the one who got hurt.”

A cold sweat ran down my back. I couldn’t say a word—couldn’t even maintain eye contact with her. Since when had Shiina been *this* intimidating?

“I always thought you were a strong person, Arisa,” she went on. “But I see now that I was wrong. You just avert your eyes from anything that might present even the *slightest* discomfort or inconvenience to you. I like to think I’m a reasonable person, but I think I can safely say you’ve exhausted the very last of my trust and respect... I will *never* forgive you for pushing Marine down the stairs like that.”

Shiina’s final words reverberated through my skull, as if every last syllable was an anvil dropped directly onto my head. The whole classroom stirred at the revelation that yes, I *had* been the one who’d pushed Marine down the stairs. Their animosity toward me grew more and more tangible by the second.

“Wait. Nishizono did that to you?”

“I thought you guys were friends...”

“Damn, that girl’s gone way off the deep end.”

“What did the teachers have to say?”

“Okay, this is just getting ridiculous now.”

“Did you two have beef or something?!”

“Oh, hell no. I’d file a police report for that.”

Disapproving voices from every corner of the classroom filled my ears, their barbed words slowly gouging an even deeper hole in my heart. Something about this whole ordeal gave me an eerie case of *déjà vu*.

Oh, right. It was almost the exact same situation as when I accidentally hit Ushio in the face with my thermos. No one believed me then either. I was all

alone, a villain with no allies to stand up in my defense, despite there being plenty of other kids in class who'd happily mocked Ushio alongside me until then. Now they were all acting like they'd done nothing wrong, sucking up to Ushio like he was some paragon of diversity. But that was how it had always been—with my friends and parents both. People tried to be my best friend and butter me up at first, only to hang me out to dry when I needed them most.

I guess that's to be expected.

After all, I was the one in the wrong, especially this time. There was no talking my way out of this. *Ugh... Just forget it. I don't even care anymore. Sure, it's all my fault, whatever. We all know I'm gonna be branded the villain here at the end of the day, so go ahead and spit on me all you like. I just need to hurry up and apologize so that I can get the hell out of here. All I want is for this whole thing to be over and done with.*

Yet even as my popularity sank to an all-time low, my pride refused to give in.

Yes, I was officially at rock bottom. But I wasn't going down without a fight.

"...It was an accident," I told Shiina, flaring my nostrils and clenching my core for fear that my voice might quake otherwise. "All I did was gently shove her back after she shoved me... I didn't maliciously 'push her down the stairs' or anything. Not saying it wasn't still my fault, but I don't have to stand here and take these accusations from *you*."

Shiina's face immediately turned red with rage. "You've got *some* nerve, you little—"

"Wait, Shiina!" said Marine, standing up. All eyes in the room flicked over to her. "Arisa's telling the truth. It really *was* an accident, pretty much... So let's just leave it at that, okay? I appreciate you standing up for me, but you blaming it all on Arisa isn't going to heal my arm any quicker."

Marine lifted her cast up slightly as if to remind her.

...Did she just cover for me?

Even though it was my fault she got hurt?

Why would she do that?

“Sorry, Marine,” said Shiina. “But that’s not good enough for me.”

She turned her wrathful gaze back on me.

“You want to know something, Arisa?” she said. “Even after we had to get her fixed up at the hospital, Marine still insisted she’d only tripped and fallen down the stairs. And do you know why? Because she was worried what might happen to you if she told the truth, since you’ve already been suspended twice. Meanwhile, you didn’t bother to say you were sorry or even contact one of us to see how she was doing. And now you have the nerve to come in here and get testy with me when I call you out for it, quibbling about how it was ‘just an accident’ and how you ‘don’t have to take these accusations.’” She paused, then spat under her breath, “You disgust me.”

I couldn’t say a single word in response.

“Also, let’s not forget that Marine’s captain of the softball team,” she went on. “Gonna be awfully hard for her to participate during practice without the use of her dominant arm. And that’s assuming there aren’t any long-lasting side effects. The doctor told her she might not ever be able to throw as fast or as far as she used to, even after she’s healed up. Do you have any idea how *crushing* that is for an athlete?”

My head was starting to feel unbearably heavy on my shoulders.

“Oh, and another thing,” said Shiina, refusing to let up. “You might not be able to tell at a glance, but she actually suffered some minor head lacerations during the fall. If she’d hit her head just a little bit harder...there’s a good chance it could have been fatal or paralyzed her for life. How exactly would you have taken responsibility for *that*, hmm?”

Enough already... I don’t wanna hear another word.

“You know what, Arisa?” said Shiina, her breathing haggard. “You got off too easy with those suspensions... You *deserve* to be expelled.”

Whoa... Hang on a second. You can’t just say something like that.

I mean, had I done something bad enough to warrant it? Sure, but...but come on. Even if I knew that was what I deserved, despite all my efforts to convince myself otherwise, she couldn’t just...pluck that raw insecurity of mine from the

back of my mind and then bash me over the head with it like a blunt weapon.

Except... Oh.

This was exactly what I always did to people, wasn't it? Pinpointing the other person's biggest vulnerabilities, and then using those against them in an argument.

I guess I never realized...it could hurt this much.

All of a sudden, the room went quiet, and I slowly lifted my head to see that Shiina was crying. Big teardrops rolled down her cheeks one after another, as though her seething anger was so great that it was leaking out of her. Then at last, she sank to the ground, buried her face in her knees, and began sobbing loudly.

Wow. This is really it, huh? She hates me.

The warning bell rang.

As my fellow classmates knelt down to check on Shiina, I turned away.

I walked back to my own desk and gently took my seat.

It seemed Shiina had been right—as far as I could tell, Marine hadn't told any of our teachers what had really happened yesterday. During morning homeroom, Ms. Iyo did express her concern for Marine's condition, but she made no reference to me. It was the same in every period after that.

During each of my classes that day, I spent the whole lecture earnestly scribbling in my notebook. I wasn't just copying the words off the whiteboard. I filled page after page transcribing full paragraphs straight out of my textbook as well. I just needed something mindless and methodical to keep my mind off of things.

Every last one of Shiina's words had hit me right where it hurt—so much so that simply thinking back on what she'd said was enough to make my heart feel

like it might split open. Even when I managed to stop my brain from thinking entirely, the sadness still hit me in waves from time to time, and I found myself struggling not to cry for no reason in particular. I might have tried to escape to the nurse's office or gone home early, but my guilt kept me from doing so. I felt like forcing myself to be in the same space as Marine and Shiina right now was the only form of repentance I could offer, even if I knew this was ultimately just another manifestation of my own self-serving pride.



After what had to be one of the top five longest mornings of my life, it was finally lunch hour. Marine and Shiina both left the classroom to go eat elsewhere. I knew this was probably my best opportunity to chase after them and apologize, but I couldn't even move a muscle. My legs were firmly rooted to the spot for fear that the next time Shiina went off on me like that, it might genuinely shatter my heart beyond repair.

I didn't feel like eating here in the classroom either, as I couldn't stand the thought of all my classmates watching me with scorn. It was something I'd so easily shrugged off up until now, but after the incident this morning, I found it impossible to ignore. With every break period, I'd catch at least a few of them stealing glances at me and whispering among themselves. I stood up, took the plastic bag I'd brought my lunch in, and exited the classroom. I just wanted to be alone right now—to be able to eat my lunch in peace, somewhere safe from prying eyes.

Trying my best to avoid being seen, I made my way up to the top of the stairwell in the special purpose building, then sat down on the stairs just below the uppermost landing and ripped open the plastic wrapper of my melon bun. Hopefully no one would see me here. I'd considered locking myself in a bathroom stall just to be totally sure, but I figured that would be way too pathetic and decided against it.

Not that this isn't pretty pathetic already, I guess.

Honestly, there was no reason why I couldn't just stay in the classroom and eat my lunch in plain view, ignoring any judgmental looks I might get from my peers. After all, it wasn't like any of this was actually getting to me—or so the old me probably would have said. But right now, I just couldn't bring myself to act tough. Not when a few words of criticism from an old friend had just hit me so hard that I was having trouble breathing. I felt like I was mentally at rock bottom in a way I'd never been before. I was starting to worry if I even had what it took to make it through my afternoon classes...

Maybe I should just go home after all.

Staying at school any longer was only going to make me feel even worse than I already did. Besides, it wasn't like there was anyone who'd miss me. If

anything, there were a bunch of people who'd probably rejoice at me being gone. Like Shiina, and Ushio...and Kamiki too. That guy was probably feeling so full of himself now that I was the one who was suffering. I could almost guarantee it. Even Natsuki would probably be pretty relieved, deep down, to see me finally out of the picture once and for all.

Screw those guys... So ready to write me off and move on.

I felt a sudden itch on my cheek, so I reached up and scratched it—only to look down and see that there were teardrops on my fingertips. *Ugh... Great. I let myself think about things for half a second and now I'm crying.* Hoping to distract from my own sadness, I took a big bite of my melon bun—then heard footsteps coming up the stairs.

Damn. Someone's coming.

I swallowed my food as quickly as I could, then scrambled to wipe the tears from my eyes—even though it was probably just one of the school troublemakers coming up here to smoke a cigarette or something. *Ugh, this sucks. I'd better just get out of here while I can.*

I shoved my half-eaten melon bun back in the plastic bag and stood up.

But then I caught a glimpse of who those footsteps belonged to.

They were looking up at me from the bottom of the stairs.

"There you are. Been lookin' all over for ya."

And here I thought this day couldn't get any worse.

This was no ordinary troublemaker.

No, this was worse. It was Sera.

Alarm bells started ringing in my head. Something deeply instinctual was screaming at me to get the hell away from this guy, and fast. So I obliged, quickly getting up to rush past him before he could say another word—but he reached out to block my path with his arm before I could get through.

“Whoa there, little lady,” he said. “Just wanna talk to you real quick, that’s all.”

I noticed the massive welt I’d left on his face last time seemed to have healed. Even more shocking than that was how unusually earnest his expression looked. But whether he was grinning like an idiot or not, I knew he had to be up to something. And I had no intention of even giving him the time of day.

“Move,” I said. “I don’t have anything to say to you.”

“It’ll only take a sec.”

“Please, just let me go home... I *really* don’t want to talk to anyone right now.”

I was so desperate right now, I was literally begging him. *Ugh. How humiliating.* Surprisingly, it seemed to have had the desired effect, as Sera slowly lowered his arm. Why would the most persistent gnat I knew back down so easily, though? I had a bad feeling about this, but I kept my mouth shut and walked past him down the stairs.

“So...I take it you don’t wanna know who told me your little secret, then?”

I stopped dead in my tracks on the landing below.

My secret. The one who told Sera I had a crush on Ushio.

Like blown air over a dying fire, these words reignited the smoldering embers inside of me. Was he offering to tell me who the rat was? The traitor? If so, then of course I wanted to know—and who better to testify against them than the very person they told? At the same time, I knew better than to think that lending *this* guy an ear would fix anything for me. Hell, he was probably just trying to ensnare me in another one of his little traps. So then what did I do here?

“Heard about what happened to Marine-chan through the grapevine,” he said from behind me before I could make up my mind. “Took a nasty tumble, huh? That’s rough. Also heard that everyone’s accusing you of pushing her down the stairs, since you were there with her at the time. But you wouldn’t do that, right?”

I neither confirmed nor denied it. I didn't want to say a single word to him, yet I couldn't help but feel compelled to hear out his little spiel, assuming it was relevant.

"And I'm not just being sarcastic here either. I totally believe it was an accident. Sure, maybe you'd sock a guy like me in the face a couple times, but I find it *very* hard to believe you'd purposely injure an old pal like that. Then the real question is: why does everyone else *think* you would?"

Sera paused a moment before continuing.

"Honestly, I think I might've had a little something to do with that. 'Cause from what I hear, ever since you got suspended for assaulting me, you've been lashing out an awful lot at your fellow classmates, haven't you? Now, maybe at first that was just your way of blowing off steam after a punishment you didn't think you deserved... But me? I think it's probably just a defense mechanism. I know you've been extra paranoid and high-strung ever since I revealed your little secret to everyone. Am I right, or am I wrong?"

"...How?" I said, turning to look up at Sera. The scales had tipped; my desire to know the truth was now winning out. "How do you know so much about what's been going on with me? You're not even allowed in our classroom anymore."

"No, but I've still got friends there who tell me things from time to time. Once I got the basic gist from one of 'em, it was pretty easy to figure out what was probably going through your head. I'm pretty good at reading people, if I do say so myself."

Sera shrugged his shoulders in a lighthearted manner.

"Now, all of that is to say: I know you probably think I'm a pretty irresponsible guy. And you'd be right. See, I can laugh just about anything off as a joke—even when the punchline's at my expense. But for once, I really do feel bad about what happened here. Genuinely wish I hadn't said what I did. Feel like I really did you dirty there, sorry."

Sera bowed his head to me in apology. I couldn't shake the feeling that something wasn't right here, but I didn't have the mental capacity to analyze that feeling any further. Right now, all I cared about was getting him to tell me what I wanted to know.

“Who was it?” I asked, climbing back up the stairs toward him. “Who told you I had a crush on Ushio?”

My heart was pounding like crazy. I *needed* to know who’d betrayed me. If it weren’t for them, I never would have accidentally pushed Marine down the stairs or been verbally eviscerated by Shiina. I had to pay them back for what they’d done to me.

Sera licked his lips. “Well, it wasn’t Marine-chan, for one.”

Okay, I guess that makes sense.

Granted, if Marine had been the rat, I might have felt just a teensy bit less guilty for what happened to her. Not that I’d been hoping she was or anything, but having her innocence confirmed made me feel that much worse for having considered her my primary suspect for a time. *God, I’m such a horrible friend.*

Still, if it wasn’t Marine, then that left only three other suspects.

Shiina seemed the least likely by far. She’d never struck me as the type to even take an interest in rumors and gossip, much less spread it herself, and she’d always been loyal to me in the past, even during our rough patches. *Well, up until now, that is...*

This left only Natsuki and Kamiki—who, to be fair, had been the most suspicious to me from the very start. Natsuki had always been pretty loose-lipped, and Kamiki hated my guts, so I could totally see either of them blabbing to Sera. Though it was also possible they’d told someone else at first, and then *that* person told Sera who they’d heard it from, in which case the number of suspects would—

“Actually, it wasn’t any of the others either. That thing about hearing it from one of your friends? I just made that up.”

“...Huh?”

The plastic bag I’d been carrying slipped from my fingers to the floor.

Made it up?

What does he mean, he just made it up?

“It was just an educated guess, really,” said Sera. “Heard how shaken up you were when you hurt Ushio by accident, and that planted the initial seed of the idea in my noggin. But it was still just a hunch, basically. Wasn’t until I saw how you reacted to the accusation that I really knew for sure. Though I guess you probably would’ve had a pretty visceral reaction to it even if it wasn’t true, so maybe it wasn’t the most well-thought-out plan in retrospect. Definitely wasn’t expecting it to cause *this* much of a commotion, but oh well! We’re here now, and hindsight’s always twenty-twenty, right?”

He was being awfully candid now, but I still hadn’t fully registered the first thing he’d said. Just what was he trying to tell me? What possible motive could he have had to simply “make up” such a thing?

“Why...?” I choked out.

Sera smiled sheepishly, like a mischievous child who’d been caught red-handed. “Just thought it might make things a bit more interesting in the long run.”

His words reverberated through the empty white vacuum of my mind.

All of this, just for the sake of making things “a bit more interesting.”

“Gosh, yeah, I’m real sorry about all of this,” he continued. “Trust me when I say I feel super terrible about it. But hey—look on the bright side: at least this means none of your friends actually betrayed you! That’s a pretty good silver lining, right?”

In other words...there never was a rat to begin with?

But then...what had I even suffered through all this stress and heartache for? Interrogating my friends like criminals, making them hate me, hurting them both physically and emotionally... Was he saying all of that had been completely pointless? For nothing?

“Man, I kinda feel like I owe the others an apology for all the hassle this caused,” Sera went on. “But as you know, I’m not allowed in Class A anymore, so there’s not a whole lot I can do to make it up to you, sorry. Oh! But if I bump into anyone from your class in the hallway or whatever, I’ll be sure to let ‘em

know the score. Sound good?”

No. No, it didn't sound good. Not even remotely.

Just what in the *hell* was this guy's problem?

“Anyway, I think that's all from me,” he said. “Good talk. Catch you later.”

Sera descended a few steps. Meanwhile, I remained frozen in place, as if all control over my body had been wrested from my grasp. I just stood there rooted to the spot, trying and failing to grasp any one of the emotions swirling through my brain.

“Oh, right. One last thing,” said Sera, stopping directly beside me. “Just a little word of advice: you really shouldn't be so quick to trust guys like me.”

And with this ominous closing remark, Sera set off again, humming a jolly tune as he sauntered down the stairs.

Even after fifth period began, the raging whirlwind in my head refused to abate. Not a single one of the teacher's words made it through the storm. All five of my senses felt hazy and dulled. It felt like the real me was off somewhere far away, leaving my body sitting abandoned at this desk like an empty shell. My sense of time was beginning to blur too, as the interaction I'd had in the stairwell just minutes ago started to feel more and more distant, as though it had taken place several hours prior.

Sera's parting words were still ringing in my ears.

“You really shouldn't be so quick to trust guys like me.”

The worst part was that he was completely right. Probably the single most crushing realization for me was that I'd taken one of my greatest enemies at his word over my best friends. Hell, Shiina had even suggested this from the very beginning.

“I didn't tell him. I don't think any of us did, honestly...”

And so had Marine.

“For all we know, he could've just made the whole thing up to get under your

skin—so just ignore it, all right?”

Why hadn't I believed what my friends were trying to tell me?

Why had I taken a scumbag like Sera's words at face value?

“You just avert your eyes from anything that might present even the slightest discomfort or inconvenience to you.”

Right. Shiina had said that too.

At the time, I felt like she'd hit the nail on the head, but thinking back on it now, it didn't quite add up for me. Because if I was really so good at averting my eyes from discomfort, then wouldn't I have just put what Sera said out of sight and out of mind?

...No, I get it now. It's the opposite, isn't it?

It was *because* of that slight discomfort that I obsessed over it so much. I wanted to remove that tiny seed of doubt from my mind as quickly as possible, and resorted to forceful, toxic means in order to do so. But now karma had come back to bite me, and I was getting my just deserts for the way I'd treated my friends. It was as simple as that.

“So what are you gonna do now, huh?” asked my inner self.

What was I supposed to do? I didn't have the first clue. Should I apologize to Marine and Shiina? Would they forgive me and be my friends again if I did? Not a chance. It was too late for that. I'd made too many mistakes at this point—burned all my bridges for good. People were probably gossiping about me in other classes by now. And it wouldn't be long before the teachers heard what happened too. No one would ever want anything to do with me again. My high school career was over.

People were going to talk about me behind my back until the day I graduated. And the last thing I wanted was to be a loner. I'd rather just go somewhere far, far away and start all over in a place where nobody knew my name. Next time, I'd do things right for sure. I'd be a good, obedient little honor student. Wouldn't get in fights with anyone. Wouldn't make fun of anyone. Wouldn't try to change things just because they rubbed me the wrong way. I'd make new friends, and never hate anybody, and just go about my life in peace. It would be

so much better wherever I ended up next. I just had to make it through another year and change until graduation... *Ugh, no way... I can't put up with this humiliation for a whole 'nother year, are you kidding me?*

"Too bad," said my conscience. *"You did the crime, so now you've gotta do the time."*

I know that. Stay out of this.

"It's all your fault."

Shut up. Nobody asked you.

Stop making so much noise inside my head. Please, I'm begging you.

No matter what I did, I couldn't stop the negative thought spiral. Regret and sorrow just kept welling up inside of me, to the point that it hurt to breathe. My pulse quickened, and I fell over my desk, clutching at my chest, desperate for air. But my breaths only grew shorter and shallower. I was going to drown—I knew it. And I wasn't even underwater. The air was so thick. Everything was starting to go blurry.

"You deserve to be expelled."

All at once, like a breaker had tripped, the whirlwind ceased.

My breathing calmed, and my pulse went back to normal.

I lifted my head off my desk. I knew what I had to do. It was so simple.

"Excuse me," I said, raising my hand. "May I please go to the bathroom?"

"Go right ahead," said the history teacher with a nod.

I stood up from my chair and exited the classroom.

Class was in session right now, so there was nobody in the hallway. The sun was shining down on the classroom side of the building, so the air in the corridor felt slightly chilly—enough to sharpen my senses. My thoughts were now crystal clear; it was as if the mental haze I'd suffered a moment ago had been a figment of my imagination. I felt calmer than I'd ever been in my entire

life. No anger, no sadness, no regrets. All I had inside of me right now was the resolve to fulfill the one objective I knew I had to fulfill.

I walked into Classroom 2-D.

“And when we want to use it intransitively, we throw an ‘-ing’ on the end here, and... Huh? N-Nishizono-san?”

Everyone in Class D, including the teacher, turned to look at me as I entered through the rear doorway. It didn’t even take me three seconds to find my mark; there was only one person in Class D with their hair dyed, after all. And so, with all eyes on me, I made my way over to the center of the classroom, where Sera sat at his desk.

“Um, Nishizono-san?” said the teacher. “We’re in the middle of a lecture...”

I ignored the teacher and walked right up beside Sera’s chair. Sera simply looked up at me from his seated position, no hint of surprise on his face. He was remaining perfectly calm in spite of what were clearly unusual circumstances. He even cracked the slightest of smiles at me, as if he were welcoming a good friend into his home.

“Can I help you with something, Arisa-chan?” he said.

“Tell me something,” I said, watching carefully for any potential opening with every word I spoke. “Is it true that all boys fantasize about how they’d stop a school shooter if one burst into their classroom one day?”

“Mmm...” Sera blinked as he mulled this over. “I’m not sure I’d say *all*—”

Now.

I put all of my weight behind my clenched fist and launched it right at Sera’s face. He fell from his seat onto the ground. The English teacher screamed. The classroom went abuzz with commotion like a disturbed beehive. All of the students sitting in my immediate vicinity got up from their desks and scurried away.

I was perfectly calm.

Tranquil as the surface of a lake under clear skies on a windless day.

I knew what I’d done. And what I was going to do next. And what would

happen to me once it was all over. I'd taken this course of action well aware of all of those things. There was no hesitation or relief. I was just watching myself make these choices from an impassive, third-person perspective.

Sera, having fallen on his back, now lifted his upper body to sit up. Blood streamed from his nose onto the collar of his shirt. Yet still he smiled at me. In fact, he seemed even more amused now than he had a moment ago.

"Hot *damn*, girl!" he said. "You've totally lost your marbles!"

I kicked him back to the ground and stomped right on his gut, and he croaked like a dying frog. Then I got down, straddled his abdomen, and started pounding my fists into his face one after the other. Anytime he lifted his hands up to block my punches, I wrenched them away, and when he tried to grab my arms to restrain me, I bit his fingers down to the bone. Before long, the skin of my knuckles tore away, until each punch hurt exponentially more than the last. But I just kept whaling on him regardless.

"Hey, slow dow—kgh! Ugh! Pfft... Ha ha! Ah ha ha ha ha!"

Sera started cackling like a maniac between each blow.

Some boys nearby came over to pull me off of him.

Another teacher came rushing into the room.

But I was still perfectly calm.

Calmer than I'd ever been.

"Man, I knew that chick was crazy, but I didn't think she was a freaking psychopath," I heard one of my classmates say after school got out for the day.

Nishizono's vicious assault had caused such an uproar that it derailed fifth period lectures for several other classes, including Class A. As soon as our history teacher heard the shouting, he went to go see what was going on. He didn't come back for a full ten minutes after that. Once fifth period was over, a student from Class D came into our classroom and told us the long and short of it: Nishizono had burst into their classroom and proceeded to mercilessly beat Sera to a bloody pulp.

It was pretty hard to believe, even knowing Nishizono's violent tendencies, but it explained why she'd never come back to class after being excused to go to the bathroom. Apparently, Sera had been taken straight to the hospital. It seemed, by all accounts, that there was no room for doubt. But what in the world had driven her to do that?

She had to have known this would be her third and final strike. No one in their right mind would go beat someone up in the middle of class unless they were actively trying to sabotage themselves. It was more likely than not she'd be expelled this time.

Could that have been her *goal*, though?

She *had* been acting pretty strange today. Ever since the altercation with Shiina this morning, she'd seemed almost...strung out. Like she was at the end of her rope. There were dark circles under her eyes, yet it felt like someone had taped her eyelids wide open. Frankly, she'd looked manic—like she was a ticking time bomb that was one false move away from blowing up. And if it *was* an expulsion she was hoping for, then it would certainly explain why she'd taken such drastic, self-destructive measures. But again: what could have possibly made her *want* such a thing? Maybe I was just overthinking it.

"Kamiki-kun."

Hoshihara had come over to greet me now that she'd finished packing up her things. Ushio stood right beside her.

"Ready to head home?" she asked.

"Y-yeah, let's go," I said, putting a pin in my thoughts and rising from my seat. I slung my backpack over my shoulder, and the three of us headed out into the hallway together.

As we walked down to the entryway, we filled the silence with random small talk, discussing our English homework, the upcoming history quiz, and the like. But none of us said a word about the Nishizono incident, despite it no doubt being the biggest thing on any of our minds. Hoshihara and I were still adhering to our unwritten rule to not mention her in front of Ushio, though I couldn't help but wonder how Ushio herself felt about this. It wasn't enough for me to dare broach the subject, of course, but I was definitely curious. It seemed like

Hoshihara was too, judging from the way she kept glancing over at Ushio every now and then, as if to gauge her expression.

When we arrived at the entryway, I spotted Mashima leaning up against a wall down the corridor. Noticing us, she raised her good arm in a “what’s up” gesture. Hoshihara did the same, then trotted over to where Mashima was standing.

“Hey,” said Hoshihara. “You waiting for someone?”

Probably her parents, if so. She couldn’t exactly ride a bike with that cast on, so it wouldn’t surprise me if she was being driven to and from school for the time being.

“Ah, yeah...” said Mashima. “Just waiting for Arisa.”

Hoshihara’s face stiffened. “Wait, seriously?”

“Yeah, I noticed her shoes are still in her cubby, so I figure she’s gotta be *somewhere* on campus still. Just wanted to talk to her a little before I head home.”

“Ohhh, got it...” Hoshihara was trying to act nonchalant, but I could tell she was curious. After a hesitant pause, she asked, “What are you gonna talk to her about?”

“Just various stuff. About today, and about...well, this,” said Mashima, looking down at the sling around her neck and right arm.

“Riiight, makes sense...” Hoshihara said, feigning disinterest while simultaneously casting a furtive glance at Ushio. I could tell from the look in her eyes that she was dying to hang back and see what happened but knew we’d already agreed to go home together.

Ushio must’ve picked up on this too, as she let out an exhausted sigh. “If you’re that curious, you can wait here with her. We’ll go home without you. It’s fine.”

“Rrrgh... Sorry, I feel bad...”

“No need to apologize,” Ushio said, then turned to me. “Shall we?”

“Hm? Oh, yeah. Sure, sure.” I followed Ushio out to the shoe cubbies.

In all honesty, I was also pretty curious to see what would happen, but I wasn't about to make Ushio go home by herself. I figured I'd hold off for now and just ask Hoshihara what happened tomorrow.

At the same time, if Nishizono *did* get expelled, then this might be the last chance I'd ever get to speak with her. Not that I had any unfinished business with her myself, per se, but the thought still left a bad taste in my mouth. While she was far from my favorite person, I wasn't going to revel in her getting kicked out of school either.

As we approached the shoe cubbies for Class A, I noticed Ushio staring at me.

"Wh-what is it?" I asked.

"Don't tell me... You want to stay behind too, don't you?"

D-damn, she's good. Or maybe I was just too predictable. But even if she had read me like a book, I wasn't going to just admit it.

"Nah, not at all," I said. "Who cares about Nishizono anyway? C'mon, let's go."

I reached into my cubby to pull out my shoes, but my fingers touched only thin air. *Wait, where the heck are my shoes? Oh, this isn't even my cubby... What the hell am I doing?* Ushio looked at me again, this time with a more critical gaze. *Damn. Guess I'd better fess up.*

"...Okay, sorry," I said. "I admit that I *am* actually a little curious. But not because I'm worried about her or anything—just because I want to know how things play out. Also, considering Nishizono's probably at her most desperate right now, it's entirely possible she could take her anger out on Hoshihara and Mashima physically, and—"

"All right, already," Ushio interjected. "I'll stay behind too."

So she said, but she didn't seem all that pleased with this outcome.

"Y-y'know what, never mind!" I said, panicking. "Let's just go. It's not like there's anything I wanna talk to her about, and I just remembered I'm on rice-cooking duty for dinner tonight, so I'd better get home and get started on that."

"Don't worry about me. I've got a few things I'd like to say to her too."

Ushio walked back to where Hoshihara and Mashima were standing. I followed after her, kicking myself internally for being so easy to read. As we joined in Mashima and Hoshihara's small talk, I noticed that the latter seemed quite concerned about Ushio being around for this as well. Nevertheless, she seemed to relax a bit over the course of our conversation. Eventually, the after-school rush died down, and there was no one left but us in the entryway. It made the building feel eerily deserted, and the sun was going down too.

"So I was gonna ask you, Marine..." said Hoshihara, turning to Mashima. "How will you be getting to and from school now?"

"Just gonna take the bus for now," said Mashima. "Technically, I *could* still ride my bike, but it'd be pretty dicey."

"Oof, yeah. Must be really inconvenient to have your dominant arm out of commission... Well, if you're gonna have nothing but free time after school now, you're always more than welcome to call me and chat."

"Hey, thanks. But I think I'll actually still be attending practice, even if I can't participate, since I'm the captain and all. Can still give instructions even if I can't throw a ball for a while, y'know?"

"Oh, gotcha. Dang, you're committed." Hoshihara seemed quite impressed with her dedication; I myself was a little in awe.

"Huh," I said. "Gotta admit, I can't really picture you being the coaching type. Doling out orders and whatnot doesn't really seem like it'd be your bag."

"Whoa, dude," said Mashima. "You're not makin' fun of me, are ya? I'll have you know that the girls on the team all think of me like more of a drill sergeant than a captain."

"What? You're kidding me."

I nearly burst out laughing. This was the exact opposite of what I'd expect from her goofy, laid-back personality. That said, I knew from firsthand experience that she could be just as exacting as Ushio, so I assumed she wasn't exaggerating.

"Also, for your information," she went on, "I work directly with the coach to come up with game plans and practice routines, so—ah. Hold that thought."

Mashima stopped mid-sentence and shifted her gaze to look past me. I turned around and saw Nishizono and a woman I didn't recognize walking down the hall toward us. Our congenial conversation abruptly came to an end, and the pleasant vibes we'd been indulging in were quickly replaced by an air of sudden tension. I held my breath, watching and waiting as the two of them grew closer. Nishizono was trudging along with her face turned squarely down to the floor. I assumed the woman next to her was her mother; there was a resemblance there. I could tell from the way they walked that they were both feeling deeply exhausted.

"Arisa," Mashima called.

Nishizono looked up, and her grim expression grew even cloudier. "Marine..."

"Oh, hello, Rin-chan," said her mother, bowing her head politely as they came closer. "Ah, and Natsuki-chan's here too... My, it's been a while. It's good to see you girls."

"Good to see you too," Hoshihara and Mashima replied in unison.

The closer they got, the more I could tell they had to be related. Her mother even had the same high-strung look and dark circles under her eyes.

"Oh dear... Rin-chan, what happened to your arm?" she asked.

"Uh, yeah, it's a long story," said Mashima, smiling sheepishly. "Or, well, I just fell down some stairs, basically, so I guess it's not, ha ha..."

"Mom," Nishizono said. "Go start the car. I'll catch up."

"But—" Her mother hesitated. "Well, okay, dear. But we still have to go apologize to the boy and his family at the hospital after this, so please make it quick."

Nishizono's mother put on her street shoes, which were lying on the dirt floor below the duckboards, and exited the building. Her daughter waited for her to be out of earshot, then turned to look at us.

"What are you doing here?" she said, her tone both sharp and slightly fearful. Despite my distaste for her as a person, it was pretty sobering to see someone as strong-willed as her in a vulnerable moment like this.

Mashima seemed especially thrown off by it. “W-waiting for you, Arisa. We just, um...wanted to know how things went down and all that.”

“How what went down?”

“Well, like, for instance...did you get suspended again?”

Nishizono looked down and gripped her arms. Both her hands were wrapped in bandages from the knuckles down, like she was a boxer wearing gauze wraps. They looked pretty beat-up, from what I could tell. I could only assume she’d sustained these injuries from punching Sera—in which case, the rumors about her going completely postal seemed to be true after all.

“No,” she said, still averting her eyes. “I got expelled.”

“Huh?” Mashima seemed to be at a loss for words; Hoshihara and I reacted similarly. Only Ushio remained utterly indifferent to this news, at least on the surface.

Granted, this was more or less the punishment I’d been expecting, but hearing Nishizono admit it herself lent an added weight to the word. At the same time, it was her just deserts. She’d gone on an unbelievably violent rampage right after getting back from a suspension. And depending on the severity of Sera’s injuries, I wouldn’t even be all that surprised to hear that the police would get involved.

“But,” she went on, keeping her gaze lowered, “they also said they’re going to be monitoring me until the end of the semester...and it’ll only become official if the overall faculty opinion on me hasn’t changed by then.”

It was kind of like a suspended sentence. This honestly seemed pretty lenient, considering what Nishizono had done. I could only assume Ms. Iyo had done everything she could to advocate on her behalf.

“So it’s not for certain, then. Thank god...” said Mashima, relieved.

“I’m not gonna be coming to school anymore, though,” Nishizono said decisively.

“Huh? B-but why?”

“...Don’t feel like doing anything anymore. I’m just...sick of it all. And I know

everyone else will be happier once I'm gone anyway."

"Hey, come on! That's not true at all!"

"You don't have to sugarcoat it for me, Marine. You know the score as well as I do."

Nishizono seemed utterly determined not to make eye contact with any of us; it was almost as if it was physically strenuous for her to keep her gaze locked in place. The fact that she was still here conversing with us in spite of this seemed to suggest that there *was* something she wanted to tell us, though. Either that or she was just forcing herself to give Mashima a proper explanation as a form of atonement, given that this might be the last time they saw each other.

"Look," said Nishizono, dropping her gaze even further. "I'm not a good person. Anyone I get involved with, I always end up hating them in the end. I'll forget all the good things they've done for me in the blink of an eye, but anytime they rub me the wrong way, I'll obsess over it and hold it against them forever. And then I'll start acting rashly, lashing out at everyone around me... until I ruin everything we built up. Friendships have to be a give-and-take, and I never bring anything positive to the table. All I ever do is burn bridges. You'll all be better off without me."

"That's not true," Mashima said again, louder this time. "I mean, we've been friends ever since junior high, haven't we? Sure, we've gotten kinda distant lately...but that doesn't mean we can't get close again. I'm sure that if you just apologize to everyone and work hard to slowly regain their trust little by little..."

Mashima trailed off as Nishizono shook her head in resignation.

"Sorry, I just don't think I have the energy for that anymore," she said with a sigh. "I've been a stubborn brat since as far back as I can remember. Always hated losing. Never wanted to be looked down on. Honed my words and my nerves to be sharp enough so that no one could ever get the better of me. But now I realize that all I ever managed to do was make myself tired. Tired of the world, and myself. I didn't gain much of anything from living on the offensive all the time..." Another self-deprecating sigh. "Makes me wonder what the hell I thought I was fighting against in the first place."

Despite everything, it was hard seeing her so defeated. I nearly had to avert

my eyes myself. None of us said a word; the silence just carried on as a cold breeze blew into the entryway, making Nishizono's skirt flap weakly in the wind. I felt like I was watching someone who'd finally met their end after years of thinking they were invincible. But as Ms. Iyo had said at one point, you could only hurt other people for so long before it eventually came back to bite you. Nishizono had engaged in so much verbal harassment and been so outwardly oppressive to whatever she disapproved of for so long that she might very well get crushed beneath the weight of all that karma. As much as I felt like she deserved to face the consequences of her actions, I couldn't help but feel just a twinge of pity for her at the same time. That being said, I still had absolutely nothing to say to her.

After clamming up for quite some time, Nishizono let out yet another sigh. "There's something I need to tell you, Marine."

She clenched her fists tightly, as if trying to summon forth any last dregs of willpower within her. Seeing this, Mashima straightened up with respect and waited patiently for whatever it was Nishizono had to say. Nishizono took in a breath so deep, you'd think she was about to make some earth-shattering confession, then scrunched up her face and said in a trembling voice:

"I'm sorry... Sorry for pushing you yesterday, and sorry for all the cruel and hurtful things I've said to you lately..." Tears spilled from the corners of her eyes. The tip of her nose turned red as she began to sniffle and sob between her words. "You still covered for me even though I hurt you so badly, yet I just kept trying to make excuses... I couldn't even apologize for *that*, even though I know I've hurt your feelings and caused you so much grief in countless other ways too... And here you are, still trying to be considerate of me at the very end, when I'm just trying to run away from it all... Yeah, I know it's way too late to apologize for all of that now, and I don't expect you to forgive me, but I still just wanted to...to tell you I..."

"I forgive you," Mashima said with a smile. She pulled a handkerchief out of her pocket and used it to wipe the tears from Nishizono's eyes like a doting mother. "I know you've always had a thing about acting tough and digging your heels in. I'm sorry I didn't step in and try to help sooner, like a good friend should have. But really, all you have to do is make an effort to live your life

more kindly going forward. It's not too late to make a change. I mean, we're only seventeen..."

"No, it *is* too late," Nishizono said, gently brushing Mashima's hand away as she sobbed. "Like I just said, I don't have the energy to change anymore... I'm just pushing myself right now because I know this is the end..."

"It doesn't have to be, though."

Nishizono ignored this, wiped her face with her sleeve, and turned to look at Ushio. "...Ushio."

Ushio's eyes went wide; maybe she genuinely hadn't expected to be acknowledged here. But this visible surprise was only momentary, as she quickly regained her previous lack of expression. There was no fiery emotion or deep-rooted sorrow in her eyes right now—only a cold, robotic stare.

"I've been really horrible to you too," said Nishizono. "I'll admit that...the stuff Sera said was true, but I know that's no excuse. I'm sorry for everything. And for trampling on your skirt too. I know how much that meant to you."

Nishizono lowered her head deeply. Her pigtails now hung straight downward, and we could see the whorl of hair on her crown. A heavy silence fell. Only the muffled echoes of the sports teams shouting to each other out on the field resounded through the quiet entryway. Nishizono seemed determined to keep her head hung low for as long as Ushio remained silent. After a good while, the latter let out a sigh of resignation.

"Come on," said Ushio. "Lift your head."

Nishizono did as she was told. The moment her head was upright again, the tears that had welled up in her eyes while it was lowered promptly ran down her cheeks.

"Sorry, but...I don't think I can forgive you," said Ushio. "But I don't need you to atone or anything. As long as you stay out of my business from now on, you're free to do as you like, as far as I'm concerned."

Nishizono bit her lip as if trying to withstand some excruciating pain.

This was totally fair, in my opinion. What Nishizono had done to Ushio was a

completely separate issue from the incident with Mashima, and there was no need for the former to forgive her misdeeds just because the latter had. Everyone here knew it. No one would criticize Ushio for standing her ground on this.

“...Sorry,” Nishizono said once more before addressing Hoshihara. “I owe you an apology too, Natsuki. I’ve been totally awful to you lately as well, despite how kind you’ve always been. I’m so sorry I didn’t give you the benefit of the doubt like you always have for me.”

“It’s okay, don’t worry about it...” Hoshihara said in a nasal voice. Her eyes were misty, and she was getting a bit sniffly as well.

It was easy to forget sometimes that Hoshihara had been a member of the Nishizono clique as well. While Hoshihara had clearly drawn a line in the sand over Nishizono’s treatment of Ushio, that didn’t completely negate the long-standing friendship they’d had before that—and fundamentally, Hoshihara was a pretty forgiving person. Hell, if Ushio weren’t here right now, I wouldn’t have been surprised if *she* had been the first one to stay behind and wait to talk to Nishizono instead of Mashima.

“I’m sorry too,” Hoshihara added. “I never should have told Kamiki-kun your secret...”

“No, you’re fine. You wouldn’t have done it if I hadn’t been so cruel to Ushio,” Nishizono said with a sniffle, then slowly turned to face me. We looked at each other in silence for a good several seconds. “...Sorry to you too, Kamiki.”

Gee, why the long pause just for me?

But I understood, really. I knew I was just an afterthought in this equation. Sure, she and I had gotten into a few heated arguments, and there was that one time she’d kicked me in the thigh, but there was nothing between us that warranted the kind of heartfelt, emotional apology that the other three had received. Apologizing to me was more likely than not a means of gaining mental closure—as well as escaping the unintended social pressure I’d created. Because I was present, it would look like Arisa was singling me out if she apologized to the others but not to me. Honestly, it made me feel a little bad for hanging back and inserting myself in this conversation at all.

"It's all good," I said. "Not much to apologize to me for, I don't think."

With that, Nishizono let out a deep breath as if to say her work here was done, then turned her back to us all.

"Well then..." she said, walking off. "I'd better get going."

"Hey, w-wait a sec!" Mashima piped up. Nishizono stopped but didn't turn around. "You're not seriously gonna stop coming to school, are you?"

"I am."

"But if you get expelled, then...Arisa, you're gonna be a high-school dropout! You're gonna have so much trouble getting into college, and finding a good job, and all sorts of other things. You really oughtta at least stick it out until graduation."

"If I feel like studying again, I'll just sign up for one of those remote learning programs. Besides, it's not like a high school education's compulsory or anything."

"Yeah, but I mean...if you don't go to school, you're not gonna make any nice memories with your friends and whatnot to look back on when you're older and stuff..."

"Also not a necessity."

"You're gonna be real bored just sitting around at home all the time, y'know. I'm sure it might be nice at first, but you're gonna get stir-crazy before long, I guarantee it."

"Then I'll just get a part-time job or something."

"Okay, but—"

"Could you just give it a rest already, Marine?" Nishizono interjected, her agitation written plainly on her face. "Why are you so determined to stop me, anyway? Why do you even care about me? It's not like...we were even all *that* close to begin with..."

"Do you remember why we became friends in the first place?"

This abrupt change in topic seemed to catch Nishizono off guard.

“It was back in eighth grade,” said Mashima. “Remember how you scared off that guy who was stalking Shiina? Well, I felt just as grateful to you for that as she did.”

I remembered Shiina herself recounting this to me in the cafeteria a while back—that tale of Nishizono heroically fending off some creeper with a wooden triangle.

“At the time, I felt like there was nothing I could do to help my friend aside from offer a listening ear... It hurt pretty bad to feel so powerless. Even reporting it to the faculty didn’t solve the problem. So when you came along and sent him packing, it was *such* a relief. You really were our hero that day, y’know.”

Nishizono didn’t say a word.

“I mean, I love Shiina like a sister. You coming to her rescue was enough for me to feel forever in your debt as well. That’s why I’m here now, still talking to you. No matter how far off the deep end you might go, it’ll never change what you did for us back in the day.”

“Yeah, easy for *you* to say,” said Nishizono, clutching at her chest with an agonized expression on her face. Her emotions wavered in her eyes, as if they were unsure how or where to vent themselves. “You’re right: the past is set in stone—for better *and* for worse. Just like you might never forget how grateful you felt for that, it’s not like Shiina’s just going to turn around and forgive me for this someday... Even if I did come to school tomorrow, how exactly am I supposed to face *her* again, huh?”

“What’s this about me?” said a voice.

Nishizono’s shoulders twitched. I jumped a little in surprise as well.

I didn’t know how long she’d been there, but lo and behold, Shiina was suddenly standing not too far away from us. I assumed wind ensemble practice had just gotten out. She walked up to us and folded her arms crossly. She had a forbidding aura about her.

“Sh-Shiina...” said Nishizono, withering.

It was interesting to see their power dynamics having undergone a complete

one-eighty. Now it was *Nishizono* who seemed scared into silence by *Shiina's* daunting presence. She stood there with her eyes darting nervously and her shoulders hunched forward.

“Sorry,” said *Shiina*. “Truth is, I’ve been eavesdropping from around the corner for a while now. I didn’t mean to at first, but then I wasn’t sure when it would be appropriate to walk out and insert myself in the conversation, until I heard you mention my name...”

I wished she’d just shown herself from the start, but I could also understand her hesitancy to get involved. Given what transpired this morning, she was probably still downright livid with *Nishizono*.

“How much did you hear?” asked *Mashima*.

“Everything since the part about *Arisa* getting expelled,” said *Shiina*.

“Oh, jeez. So literally almost everything, then...”

“*Ahem*,” said *Shiina*, clearing her throat as she fixed her sharp gaze on *Nishizono*. “So tell me, *Arisa*. Was there something you wanted to say to me?”

“I mean...it’s not like you don’t already know, right?” said *Nishizono*.

“Actually, I’m afraid I don’t. I refuse to think things through unless somebody tells me to, you see.”

I remembered these words—this was an insult *Nishizono* had lobbed at *Shiina* during that first interrogation session behind the gym. Apparently, *Shiina* still felt awfully spiteful about that particular dig. It was pretty brutal to throw it right back in *Nishizono's* face now, of all times. Critically effective, though, because *Nishizono* hung her head and shut right up.

“Well? Do you have something to say to me or not?” said *Shiina*, pressing her up against the metaphorical wall until *Nishizono* caved.

“I don’t...feel like I even have the right to speak to you, *Shiina*.”

“And why’s that?”

“Because I said all those horrible things to you and refused to believe what you were telling me even after you’d been so loyal to me for so long. And most of all...” *Nishizono* paused as tears began streaming down her face once more.

“I hurt your best friend so badly... I’m really sorry, Shiina...”

I’d already lost count of the number of times I’d heard Nishizono say “I’m sorry” today, despite those two words being so far removed from her usual vocabulary. Yet there seemed to be a genuine emotional weight behind it every time. If even I could pick up on that, then I was pretty sure Shiina could as well. And given that she’d been listening in on this entire conversation, she’d no doubt heard the other apologies Nishizono had made thus far—and also heard Mashima forgive her. Shiina uncrossed her arms but remained stone-faced.

“Sorry isn’t good enough, I’m afraid.”

“Ngh...” Nishizono probably knew this was coming, but bit her lip all the same.

“I do owe you a debt of gratitude for saving me from a scary situation back in junior high. But this is one thing I can’t just sweep under the rug. Marine might have been generous enough to forgive you...but an apology alone isn’t going to cut it for me.”

“Aw, come on, Shiina,” Mashima cut in. “I mean, *I’m* the one who got injured here, right? So as long as I forgive her, shouldn’t that be enough?”

“No. It’s not.”

Damn. Not even giving her an inch, huh? This adamant refusal to forgive Nishizono’s misdeeds just went to show how deeply Shiina cherished Mashima, even if they weren’t connected by blood. And yet, it didn’t seem like she was telling Nishizono she *wanted* her to be expelled anymore either—so what *did* she want from her?

“You know, I was hoping to shoot for a college endorsement from our school to avoid the headache of entrance exams,” said Shiina. Nishizono furrowed her brow with worry at this astoundingly sudden change in topic. “But with the way my transcripts are looking right now, I’m not sure I’ll make the cut. I was thinking I might take Ms. Iyo up on that extra credit offer she mentioned, although I’d really prefer not to have to go out and do community service all on my own with a bunch of strangers...”

Shiina’s expression softened just a bit. It was only then that I noticed something: the corners of her eyes were slightly red, like she’d rubbed them

profusely earlier today. I had a hunch as to why.

“But if you came along and volunteered *with* me, Arisa...I think I might just be willing to forgive you.”

Nishizono’s eyes went wide with disbelief. “You’d...you’d forgive me just for that?”

“I mean, if you don’t like those terms, you’re more than welcome to just stay home and get expelled, I suppose.”

“No, I... That’s not...”

Nishizono seemed utterly bewildered. As her lips trembled and she fumbled for an adequate response, a single teardrop ran down her cheek. But even after she reached up in a fluster to wipe it away, another tear came trickling out, and then another. Soon she started to whimper, and before long she gave up on trying to maintain her composure and let herself sob openly.

If I had to guess, I’d say Shiina had probably already forgiven Nishizono on the inside, but she couldn’t bring herself to accept this apology so easily when Mashima was standing right here. Instead, she’d put forth the volunteer work idea as a tangible way in which Nishizono could atone for her actions—and probably do herself some good in the process. In which case, Shiina was a pretty compassionate friend, just like Mashima.

“Okay, yeah, I’ll...I’ll do it...” Nishizono finally said, sniffing through fits of sobs.

Mashima and Shiina huddled close to her, and Hoshihara joined in to comfort her too. I didn’t sense any hint of Nishizono’s previous pridefulness and animosity; she’d cast away her stubborn dignity and seemed like she was feeling pretty weak right now. But there was a kind of serenity and relief in that vulnerability, like she’d finally been freed from the demons that had possessed her for so long and could at last lay down her arms and stop with all this pointless fighting once and for all.

She’d mentioned wondering what it was she’d been fighting against in the first place. From where I was standing, it didn’t seem like it was Sera or Ushio she’d been at war with, nor Mashima or Shiina—it had been *herself* she needed

to defeat. Granted, this was far from a unique struggle, as everyone had to confront and conquer their own personal demons from time to time, myself included. I also couldn't say if that would be what Nishizono herself took away from this resolution or if she'd just fall back into her old habits again at some point. But I felt confident that as long as she had good friends like Mashima and Shiina by her side, they'd hold her accountable to this new leaf she'd turned over and make sure she never slipped up like this again.

I glanced over to my side, and caught Ushio stifling an apathetic yawn.

Given what she'd been through, I thought that was a totally valid response too.

Later that night, just before eight o'clock, I was riding my bike down the riverside against the cold evening breeze. As I rode along, I noticed that the floodplain, which had long been little more than an eyesore due to all the illegal dumping, had been cleaned up considerably since the last time I passed through the area. It seemed the city's volunteer work initiative was already underway. All of the large appliances and furniture that I'd always assumed would be a permanent fixture had been taken away, and the tall grass had been mowed down a great deal closer to the riverbank. I wondered how much would be left to do by the time Nishizono and Shiina joined the cleanup efforts.

My whole life, I'd always thought of this backwater town as a blight on the earth, left to fester and rot in its old, outdated ways while the world outside surged forward at a breakneck pace. But it seemed that even in our little closed-minded community, there were still those pushing for change. That alone was a pretty big step, as we'd never clean up our act if we didn't come together and agree not to wallow in our own filth anymore. Maybe there was hope for old Tsubakioka yet. Maybe one day, those fireflies from my childhood would shine their lights over this once forsaken floodplain again.

Following the directions I'd received via text, I turned off from the riverside and down a residential street, eventually bringing my bike to a stop in front of a two-story house. I pulled out my phone again and hit dial.

"Hey," I said. "I'm here."

“Okay, sweet,” said the voice on the other end. *“I’ll be out in a sec.”*

The other party hung up, then emerged from the front door about three minutes later in a slouchy cardigan. Even in the soft glow of the neighborhood streetlights, I could make out her face—tanned complexion rendered a deeper shade in the shadow of her shoulder-length bob—as Rin Mashima trotted over to me from across the yard.

“Hey there!” she said. “Sorry for making you trek all the way out here.”

“Nah, it’s cool,” I said. “Don’t worry about it.”

I’d gotten her message almost immediately after making it home from school, though all she really said was that she wanted to talk to me about something, with a couple of pleading emojis. Bewildered by this sudden invitation, I asked for more details, but she insisted she’d rather talk about it in person.

“Mind if we walk and talk?” said Mashima. “Told my folks I was just running out to the convenience store. They got kinda pissy with me, actually—said I shouldn’t be out wandering around so late with a broken arm, heh heh...”

As Mashima chuckled, I glanced down at her white cast in its sling, peeking out from beneath the cardigan she’d draped over it. She passed by me and started down the road; I followed suit, pushing my bike as I walked alongside her.

A warm, inviting scent tickled my nostrils as we made our way through the quiet residential streets; it seemed someone in the neighborhood was cooking up something awfully tasty for dinner tonight. I’d already eaten, but my mouth still watered.

“So,” I said. “What did you want to talk to me about?”

“Heh,” said Mashima. “What do you *think* I wanna talk about?”

“Honestly? No idea.”

“C’mon, just take a guess!”

Believe me, I’d been trying to think of possible reasons she might call me out this late at night, but I genuinely hadn’t the foggiest. I assumed it was probably something she felt was pretty urgent—but also confidential enough that she

needed to tell me in private, and in person. Otherwise, there'd be no reason not to simply tell me via text or at school tomorrow. Maybe she didn't want to risk anyone else hearing it? In which case...

"You weren't...gonna confess your love to me or something, were you?" I asked.

"What?! Ew, no! Are you nuts?! Bah ha ha ha!"

Ouch... Obviously, I hadn't meant this as a serious guess, so I was glad to hear her laughing it off—but the added "ew" did make me shrivel up a little on the inside. Then again, it was a pretty daring suggestion, given our rapport, so maybe I deserved it. As I weakly chuckled in an attempt to conceal my humiliation, Mashima clapped me on the shoulder a couple of times with her good arm.

"Sorry, sorry," she said. "Didn't mean for that to sound cruel or anything. Just thought I'd mess with you a little bit for being so bold, that's all. Don't take it personally."

Although I didn't fully buy this backpedal, I decided not to think too hard about it for the sake of my own self-worth and emotional well-being.

"Though I guess, to be fair," she went on, "you're maybe *half* right. There *is* something I kinda wanted to confess to you."

"Huh?"

"Say, Kamiki...can you keep a secret or nah?"

There was an affable lightness in her smile that belied the gravity in her gaze. I could tell she wanted to dispense with the joking around, so I answered honestly.

"Depends on what it is. Like, if it's something that stands to hurt or endanger another person by virtue of me staying silent, then I can't promise anything."

"Fair enough, fair enough. Well, I've already decided I'm gonna tell you regardless, so I guess it doesn't matter either way."

"Then why the hell did you ask?"

"Just thought it'd make for a good segue, really. Figured I should preface with

something before diving headfirst into a more serious subject.”

While Mashima had, admittedly, always been a pretty aloof and inscrutable character to me, right now she felt like a complete and utter enigma. I had zero clue what she was about to share with me.

“Lemme ask you somethin’, Kamiki. Do you know how I broke my arm?”

“Yeah? You tried to push your way past Nishizono in the stairwell, and she pushed you down the stairs...” I paused, then hastily corrected myself. “Uh, by accident, of course.”

Granted, the word around campus was that it had been intentional, but Mashima was the victim. If *she* insisted it was an accident, then I had no reason not to take her at her word—even on the off chance that she was simply covering for Nishizono.

“Yeahhh...” said Mashima. “So that’s *technically* not what happened...”

I looked at her, eyes wide. Were the rumors true, then? That would be *crazy* to me, if so. I couldn’t imagine being so considerate of someone and going out of my way to make amends with them after they’d assaulted me with malicious intent. That went well beyond simply being willing to forgive and forget. Only a literal saint would—

“I actually let myself fall on purpose.”

My train of thought screeched to a halt.

Uhhh... Did she just say what I think she said?

Mashima took a few more steps, then stopped and turned to look back at me. The streetlight overhead shone down, casting a long, dark shadow of her silhouette across the street. All of a sudden, I could see a new, eerie coldness beneath her friendly smile.

“Oh, but don’t get me wrong: I wasn’t actually *planning* to break my arm or anything psychotic like that,” she clarified. “That was just a dumb oversight on my part. I mean, I’d seen plenty of people fall down the stairs in movies before, but I guess you’ve probably gotta be trained in order to do it safely, huh? Was just kinda lying there on the ground in shock for a second—and then boy, did

the pain hit me like a truck. Never gonna pull a stunt like *that* again, lemme tell ya.”

So I hadn’t misheard her, then.

The moment this clicked for me, a deep unease crept up my spine.

“B-but why, though?” I asked.

Mashima simply turned and started walking down the street again. I hurried after her until we were walking shoulder to shoulder once more. I didn’t know where we were headed, but I was warily willing to listen.

“Because I knew I couldn’t let Arisa stay on the path she was clearly going down,” said Mashima. “Knew she’d only get worse and worse unless someone stepped in and gave her a major reality check at some point.”

Mashima was facing straight ahead.

“You remember that time she accidentally clocked Ushio with her thermos? Apparently, she was pretty shaken up by that whole incident. Like, for a *while* after the fact. Figured I’d have to make her do something at least as drastic as that if I wanted to really get through to her, so I put her in that same sort of position and then goaded her into shoving me the way that she did... Well, not that it was planned way in advance or anything. Just a spur-of-the-moment impulse, really.”

She goaded her into it?

I couldn’t believe the words coming out of Mashima’s mouth.

My legs quaked as a strange, uncomfortable floaty feeling came over me.

“It wound up being pretty effective,” she went on. “What with me breaking my arm and Sera getting the snot beat of him and all that. The Sera part was probably a *good* thing, ultimately. I mean, now there’s no way he’ll ever mess with Arisa again, right? I sure as heck don’t think so, anyway.”

“...Hold on a second,” I said, doing everything I could to wrangle my jumbled emotions into shape and ask the single biggest question on my mind: “Why in the world would you ever go that far, though? Not just for her, but for *anyone*?”

“I mean, isn’t it obvious?” Mashima said as if this was a silly question. “It’s

because I feel sorry for her, duh.”

“You feel...sorry for her?”

“Yeah, didn’t we talk about this before? About how bad I felt for her that time she broke down and cried on Bring Your Parent to School Day? Despite how hard she tries to act tough all the time, deep down, she’s just a scared little girl who doesn’t wanna be left behind. That’s as true now as it ever was—so *someone’s* gotta look out for her, right?”

“...Even if it means throwing yourself down the stairs?”

“Yeah, now you’re getting it! Sheesh, took ya long enough!”

Was this even the real Mashima I was talking to right now?

The mischievous teaser you couldn’t help but like, yet who was surprisingly sharp and always thinking of her friends? The bright and cheery girl who never turned her nose up at anyone or treated them differently, even when they were a random loser like me?

Sure, she had the same face, the same voice, and the same manner of speaking. But there was also something deeply unsettling about her that made me think I had to be talking to some sort of impostor.

Hey, Mashima.

Are you sure you’ve really got your friend’s best interest in mind here?

Or are you being just as manipulative as her, but in a different way?

Mashima sauntered down to the end of the street, where she entered a small corner store. I followed her inside. She headed straight for the dessert cooler, grabbed a tiramisu cup, and took it to the register to check out. With her shopping bag dangling from her left arm, she exited the convenience store in under three minutes. I didn’t feel like buying anything at all at the moment, so I followed her outside, and we headed back the way we came.

“Why did you tell me all of this, Mashima?” I asked, genuinely curious.

It didn't make any logical sense for her to share this with *me* specifically, when she could have easily just kept it a secret forever and gotten away with it. Surely she could have guessed I'd think at least a *little* bit less of her for it—which I did.

"You sure do ask 'why' a lot, Kamiki," she said. "Girls don't like guys who pester them to explain every little thing they do, y'know."

"It just seems weird, is all. Like, why me, of all people?"

"No real reason. I guess if I *had* to give an answer, I'd say it was just process of elimination. I couldn't tell Nakki or Shiina without there being at least *some* chance of it making it back to Arisa. And I wouldn't want that. She might pound my face in if she ever found out, just like she did to Sera. But it'd be just as risky, if not riskier, to just confess it to a random stranger and hope they were trustworthy. So I figured you and I have pretty much the perfect level of rapport for me to share something like this in confidence. Especially since even if you *did* double-cross me and tell Arisa, there's no *way* she'd take your word over mine."

The perfect level of rapport. She made it sound like a positive thing, yet the unsaid implication here was that she didn't consider us "real" friends, which stung a little bit.

"And I guess it was just, well... Man, I dunno how to say this," she went on, muddling her words a bit. "I guess maybe it was just a little too heavy of a secret for me to bear all on my own, if that makes sense. Thought I might as well be selfish and force *you* to share that burden with me, even if no one else can ever know. Heh heh..."

Mashima snickered devilishly—but now I knew it was just a facade. I could tell from her tone that there were some feelings of guilt she was trying to get off her chest.

"...Got it," I said softly, unable to muster the will to reproach her.

Seeing her and the others have a chance to make up with Nishizono in the entryway this afternoon had been pretty touching to behold. Even as someone who'd never been Nishizono's biggest fan, it was nice to see her admit her faults, commit to (hopefully) turning over a new leaf, and start to mend some of

the friendships that she'd tarnished. But now I knew that entire outcome was all predicated on a lie by Mashima.

Never take an inexplicable act of kindness or goodwill at face value. There's always something in it for the other person too.

That was a lesson I'd learned the hard way, once upon a time, and a personal motto I'd forgotten for quite a while. It rang soberingly true for me right now. Maybe I was right to assume people generally couldn't be trusted in the first place.

And yet, even if it was a resolution only made possible due to a lie—and not one based in sincerity—as long as it led to a future in which all parties involved could be happier in the long run, was it really so bad? Maybe so. Maybe not.

"But listen, Kamiki," said Mashima, turning to face me. "You'd better not lie to Nakki or Tsukinoki like this, you got that? I mean, I guess if it's a little white lie about something super insignificant, that's one thing. But if it's the sort of major fib that'd destroy everything you've worked so hard to build up together? I don't care what the circumstances are. Don't you *ever* tell either of those two a lie like that."

"...You're one to talk."

"I am, yeah. But you're a much, *much* worse liar than me."

She flashed me a mischievous grin.

That playful, teasing grin I knew so well.

I was wrong. This *was* the real Mashima after all.

The smell of distant smoke hit my nose as I made my eight o'clock commute to school. I assumed they had to be doing a controlled field burn somewhere in the vicinity. I tried to keep my breaths shallow and my feet firm on the pedals to get through it faster.

Upon passing through the main gate to Tsubakioka High, I was greeted with an all-too-cheerful “Good morning!” from the school gym teacher, which I returned with a much more measured level of enthusiasm. After parking my bike, I headed in via the main entrance, wove through the crowd of chattering commuters, and made my way up to Classroom 2-A. Already, more than two-thirds of my fellow classmates were here—enough to make the room feel pretty warm despite the cold weather outside and lack of heating. The tension in class seemed to be loosening up a little bit every day now that there was less than a month remaining until winter break.

Like yesterday, a group of people had gathered around Mashima’s desk. They seemed livelier and more talkative today than they’d been the previous morning. Upon closer inspection, I spotted not only Shiina and Hoshihara among the crowd but Ushio as well. Everyone was taking turns signing Mashima’s cast.

“Gee, thanks, Nakki...” said Mashima. “You wrote your kanji wrong.”

“Wait, I did?” said Hoshihara. “Which one?”

“Literally the first character in ‘get well soon,’ see? You’re supposed to write it with the radical for ‘heart’ on the left-hand side, ya dink.”

“Uh... Which one is that, again?”

“Man, did you sleep through *all* your Japanese classes, or what?”

This quip from Mashima got a big laugh from the crowd. I couldn’t help but crack a smile as well as I walked over and took my seat.

I noted that Nishizono had not shown up for class yet.

Before long, the warning bell rang, and the morning hustle and bustle started to die down a bit, with a few students heading back to their seats to start getting ready for first period. I saw a hint of worry beginning to form on Mashima’s and Shiina’s faces; virtually everyone else had arrived in class by now.

Then, less than three minutes before homeroom was set to begin, the door at the front of the room gently rattled open, and a wave of whispers rippled out over the class. Amusingly enough, I caught myself feeling a hint of genuine relief

when, out of the corner of my eye, I glimpsed a pair of swaying, bleached blonde pigtails.

“Aw, man! Why do I feel so exhausted after school these days?!”

Hoshihara groaned like a construction worker who’d just clocked out from a long day of backbreaking manual labor. The eastern sky was already darkening as we made our way home. Though the days were still tolerably mild, it was starting to get awfully chilly around this time in the afternoon, and that temperature difference was only growing by the day. Not that I was complaining just yet, but in another two weeks or so, we’d be in December, and there’d be no reprieve from the winter chill for months on end.

“Ugh, I’m gonna have to start studying for final exams soon too...” Hoshihara went on. “Can’t afford to let my grades slip any further than they already have.”

“Don’t you say that every time, Natsuki?” Ushio said teasingly.

“Hey, this isn’t a joke!” said Hoshihara, pouting. “I’m in big trouble here, okay?! I slipped *really* far down in our class rankings on the last exams...” She let out a despondent sigh.

“Maybe we should schedule a study session for one of these days, then?”

“Wait, you mean it?! Heck yeah, we should!”

And just like that, Hoshihara cheered right up.

Wow, she’s easy to please. It’s pretty cute, I’ve gotta admit... A study session, though, eh?

Hoshihara had arranged one of those for me before last semester’s finals. Mashima, Shiina, and even Nishizono had come out for it (though the latter ultimately bailed after we got into a heated spat). Those days of endless studying were brutal, yet they felt so long ago that it was as if the whole time period had almost come full circle and become a fond memory now. Or maybe it was this chilly, late-autumn air making me wax nostalgic for warmer days.

“You should come too, Kamiki-kun!” said Hoshihara.

“Hm?” I said. “Oh, yeah. Sure thing.”

I'd love that.

We parted ways with Hoshihara shortly thereafter, having agreed to hold a study session without actually settling on a date. Ushio and I split off and headed the rest of the way to our neighborhood together. The soft rattling of our bike chains revolving around their sprockets filled the silence. Ushio and I rarely talked all that much during this part of the walk home, though the silence between us was never uncomfortable. Sometimes, we'd even go the whole rest of the way without saying a single word, content to just bask in the afterglow of whatever lively conversation we'd just been having with Hoshihara. Today was shaping up to be one of those days, it seemed, as we were nearly to the T-shaped intersection where our paths diverged.

Wait a minute. Why do I feel like I'm forgetting something?

"Oh, right," I said, stopping where I was. "We never figured out what we were going to do to celebrate you beating Noi, did we?"

"Hm?" said Ushio. "Oh, right. I guess we didn't."

With all of the Nishizono drama over the past few days, it had totally slipped my mind. I felt pretty bad all of a sudden; I wished I'd at least remembered a little bit sooner so that Hoshihara could have taken part in this discussion.

"Well, any ideas?" I asked. "Something you'd like to do together, maybe?"

Ushio held her chin between her thumb and forefinger and thought on this a moment. Only a second or two later, she lifted her head up as though she'd just had a sudden burst of inspiration.

"In that case," she said, "do you mind if I come over to your house?"

"Huh? You...wanna come over to my place? I mean, sure, if that's what you really want, I guess..."

What exactly did she want to *do* there, though? Have a little low-key celebration party, perhaps? It wasn't the most illustrious venue, but I could at least invite Hoshihara too, and the three of us could have snacks and watch a

movie or something. We'd just need to settle on a date, in that case—maybe next weekend.

“Cool,” said Ushio. “Shall we, then?”

As I drafted up a simple hypothetical agenda in my head, Ushio turned and started walking down the street in the direction of my house.

Wait. She wants to go there now? Confused, I chased after her and tried to gauge what was running through her head by glancing at her face. Evidently picking up on this, Ushio turned to address my curiosity.

“I want to go say hi to Ayaka-chan,” she said. “You told me she'd love it if I came over again one of these days, right?”

“Oh... I did say that, didn't I?”

I remembered extending this invitation, though it had been quite a long time ago. I wasn't sure when, exactly. *Although...*

“Mmm, but I'm not one hundred percent sure she'll be home right now...” I said. “Sometimes she stays pretty late at practice after school.”

“Oh, does she?” said Ushio. “Maybe another day, then.”

“No, sorry—we can still do today. When I say ‘pretty late,’ I only mean, like... 5:30, latest. It's not that big a deal. But are you sure that's all you want? I mean, I'm more than happy to take you out somewhere nice to eat or something—there's no need to be modest or anything. You deserve a proper celebration. Live it up a little, y'know?”

“Thanks, but I think I'm okay,” Ushio said without hesitation. She was being awfully reserved here. I wasn't sure if it was out of consideration for my wallet or if she just genuinely didn't have any earthly desires to speak of. I felt almost let down, in a weird way, that I couldn't make it more special—but it was *her* celebration, I supposed.

We made our way down the street and arrived at my house in no time. I checked the front door and found that it was still locked. It seemed Ayaka wasn't home yet after all.

“Well, I'm sure she'll be here before long,” I said as I pulled my own house key

out of my bag to unlock the door. “We can hang out in my room until then.”

I walked into the house, and Ushio politely followed suit. We climbed up the stairs to my bedroom, which was a bit warm due to it being on the side of the house that faced the sun. I set my bookbag down on the floor and loosened my necktie a bit.

“Hang on,” I said. “I’ll go grab us a couple of drinks.”

“Oh, thanks. Yeah, I could definitely use something.”

I headed down to the kitchen and pulled out a carton of apple juice from the fridge. We had barley tea as well, but I knew from all the times she’d come over during summer vacation that Ushio typically preferred this. I grabbed two cups, filled them up, then walked back upstairs.

“Sorry for the wait,” I said.

Ushio had taken off her blazer and was sitting up on my bed. Personally, I would have been a little too cold without my jacket, but I remembered Ushio being awfully self-conscious about sweating too much, so maybe this was just right for her. She’d neatly folded up her blazer and placed it at the edge of the bed.

“Thanks,” Ushio said as I set the cups down on the low table. She promptly grabbed one and took a long drink. I sat down in my rolling desk chair and watched as she plugged it down.

It was a bit of a novel sight to behold, I had to admit—having her lounging in my bedroom while still wearing her school uniform. Obviously, we’d hung out up here many a time during summer vacation, but she’d always worn casual attire then. It was a far cry from the long-sleeved button-up, pleated skirt, and black tights combo. This change in outfit alone was enough to make it feel less like I simply “had a friend over” and more like “there’s a girl sitting on my bed right now.” It was a bit nerve-racking, actually.

Ushio let out a satisfied sigh as she pulled the cup away from her lips; I quickly averted my gaze so as not to be caught staring.

“Been a while since I’ve been up to your room, hasn’t it?” she said.

“Yeah... Probably not since summer vacation.”

“Hasn’t changed at all, though. Maybe a few more books on the shelf, it looks like? But that’s about it.”

“Yep, I’ve been buying a lot more recently. Feels like I always catch the autumn reading bug, heh...”

“Are you still hoping to write your own novel at some point, or have you kind of given up on that?” Ushio asked, tilting her head.

“I mean, I’d love to write a new one if I had the time,” I replied, sheepishly scratching my cheek. “Just been so busy with studying and stuff lately, y’know?”

“Yeah, I hear you. Well, if you ever write something new, you should let me read it. Happy to give you my honest impressions again.”

“Just try to be a little gentler with me next time, all right? I’m only an amateur.”

“Roger that,” Ushio said with a nod.

I looked up at the clock; it was just before five. It was getting pretty dark outside, so I turned on my bedroom lights. Ayaka still wasn’t home yet.

“You *sure* you’re cool with this, though?” I asked.

“Hm? Cool with what?” said Ushio.

“With this being your only reward for winning the race. I mean, you can literally come see Ayaka anytime. Sure there’s not something else you’d like instead?”

“Mmm... I mean, I guess there is *one* thing that might be nice, but...”

Whatever it was, she seemed a bit hesitant to admit it.

“C’mon, just say it. I wanna celebrate with you too. No need to be shy.”

“Okay then...” Ushio faced me head-on. “I want a hug.”

“Sorry? A hog?”

“A *hug*.”

“Um... As in, like...you wanna be held?”

“Yes.”

Ah, okay. Fair enough.

Wait, what?

“You want a hug...from me?” I asked.

“Yes,” said Ushio, utterly straight-faced.

I was waiting for the inevitable “just kidding,” but it never came. She just kept staring me in the eye. If she was messing with me, then she was really committing to the bit—but I didn’t get the sense that it was a joke to her.

“Aw, man, ha ha...” I said. “A *hug*, huh?”

I wasn’t sure how to react to this, so I just kind of scratched my head and chuckled awkwardly. My gaze was darting to and fro; all of a sudden, the seat of my desk chair felt weirdly foreign and uncomfortable.

Obviously, I knew that giving someone a hug was a pretty standard greeting in many parts of the world, but here in Japan? It was considered a bit more of an intimate act, in my experience. Probably more so than holding hands, but not as much as, say, kissing. The same way I’d find it a bit odd to see two platonic friends holding hands, I’d most likely raise an eyebrow if I saw them hugging as well. Well, not that you didn’t see girls who were really close hugging from time to time—but when it came to guys or members of the opposite sex, you definitely wouldn’t do that unless you were romantically involved with them. Though to be fair, Ushio *was* half Russian, so maybe her mother’s influence had made her fall more on the European side of the spectrum when it came to hugging? In which case... No, I felt like it would still be a bit odd for her to request a platonic hug from *me*, given our history. Just how serious *was* she?

“Sorry,” Ushio suddenly said, snapping me out of my frantic, cyclical thoughts. “Guess that’s probably asking too much.”

She offered an apologetic smile.

My stomach dropped.

Not “psych.” Not “gotcha.” Not “just kidding.”

“Guess that’s probably asking too much.”

She wasn't even going to try to play it off as a joke, then. Ushio really had been hoping for a hug from me. And she had no problem admitting it.

"Okay... Let's do it, then," I said, letting the words flow smoothly through my lips. Somehow, I knew that if I backed out now, it would leave an awkward rift between us that could probably never be mended. My basic instincts told me so.

As if compelled by some urgent force, I got up and moved over to Ushio's side, the bedsprings creaking beneath our combined weight when I sat down. Our shoulders were now less than ten centimeters apart. I was close enough to see my reflection in her silver eyes as she twisted her upper body to face me and opened her arms wide.

She'd said she wanted a hug *from* me, so I assumed she expected me to go in first. My heart was pounding like crazy. But it was too late to be getting cold feet now; I'd just have to go for it. I slowly leaned forward, bringing my body closer to Ushio's.

Just then, there came a knock on my bedroom door.

My eyes shot wide open, and I sprang to my feet. "Y-yeah, what's up?!" I shouted back in a fluster, and the door slowly opened.

"...Oh, h-hey, Ushio-san. Long time no see," said Ayaka, poking her head in nervously. She was still wearing her uniform, so I assumed she'd only just gotten home. "I, um...saw your shoes down in the entryway, so I figured maybe you were visiting..."

Her bashfulness was plain as day. I'd gotten used to her turning into a meek little kitten whenever Ushio was around, despite what a vicious cretin she always was to me—but the contrast was still pretty amusing.

Thank god she knocked first, at least... Talk about dodging déjà vu.

The thought of her walking in on the two of us embracing was enough to send a shiver down my spine. That could have easily turned into another very, *very* awkward moment we'd have to scramble to explain, like a certain kiss from a few months back.

"Good to see you again, Ayaka-chan," Ushio said, so calmly and politely that it

was like this unexpected intrusion hadn't fazed her in the slightest.

I shambled back over to my rolling chair and took a seat. I was in a total daze; it felt like I'd completely checked out of reality. Ushio and Ayaka started making small talk, while I just sat there unable to register a single word of their conversation. My head was still too busy trying to wrap itself around what Ushio had said to me a moment ago—not that I had any trouble interpreting the unstated implications of her request. Because yes, I didn't see her as the type to ask for a hug from someone she didn't have feelings for. Which could only mean one thing—a simple fact that I knew, deep down, but had been deliberately averting my eyes from for so long that I was too scared to address it or even put it into words.

“Well, okay then... I guess I'll get out of your hair now,” said Ayaka, walking out of my bedroom with a beaming smile on her face. Apparently, I'd been lost in thought for so long that they'd finished their conversation. As soon as the door shut behind her, the awkward tension in the room came right back—even more palpable than before.

“Sakuma,” said Ushio.

“R-right, okay,” I said, swallowing hard.

Ushio stood up and assumed the same open-armed posture she'd been in prior to Ayaka's intrusion. *Oh, we're doing it standing up now? Okay.* I rose to my feet and faced her.

Honestly, I didn't feel ready for this. Perhaps the unexpected interruption had given me enough time to let the reality of the situation sink in and recognize just how reluctant I felt about the whole thing. Not that I was *opposed* to hugging Ushio or anything like that. I was just afraid that once I did, there was no going back. Something told me this might cause a fundamental shift in our relationship, and I just couldn't tell whether that would be a change for the better or for the worse... Maybe I was overthinking it, though. It wasn't like we were going to *kiss* or anything—it was only a hug. No need to overanalyze it. People in other countries hugged each other all the time, so why shouldn't we be—



“Um, hello?” Ushio said impatiently. “My arms are getting tired over here.”

“Oh, sorry. All right, uh...here goes...”

I leaned in and gently pressed my body against hers. Ushio wrapped her open arms around my back, then squeezed just a bit to pull me in even closer.

Oh, man... We're actually doing this!

Whoa, hang on. I just got a weird tingly feeling down my spine.

Almost feels like...my brain's releasing endorphins or something...

Unsure what to do with my own hands, I placed them gently around Ushio's waist. Her body was slender but fairly rigid and toned, with very little flab. Her long, silky hair brushed against my cheek as she held me even tighter—so tight, it nearly squeezed the air from my lungs, while also wringing another wave of euphoria from my brain like a wet washcloth. There was a comfort I'd never known in this embrace, so deep and rich that it felt almost *too* indulgent—like I should feel guilty for relishing in it, lest it rewire my neurons and change me in some basic, fundamental way. But I didn't want to stop.

I could feel Ushio's pulse through her skin. Her heart was beating pretty fast. With this came another realization: she was holding me *really* close, wasn't she? Far closer than what I might expect from a simple hug between friends, at least. Surely there had to be something more to this embrace...right?

Guh, it's no use... Can't even think straight...

All of a sudden, Ushio took a step forward and split my thighs apart with her knee.

“Hey, what the—”

Oh god. Th-this is bad! At this rate, I'll...

“Whoa, h-hang on! You're gonna make me—”

Reflexively, I tried to push her away, but she wouldn't let go. Sure enough, I lost my balance and fell backward onto my bed, with Ushio still clinging tightly to me. As we crashed down together onto the mattress, I coughed out a croak as all of her body weight pressed down on my chest. Thankfully, she pushed

herself up, lifting her upper body until she was hanging over me in a position of dominance. With her arms bracing the bed on either side of me, she looked down on me with a covetous gaze—peering deep into my eyes like there was something I had for which she desperately yearned.

A sweetish scent grazed the tip of my nose. And it wasn't just the apple juice from earlier, or the fragrance of her conditioner, or the hint of sweat mixed in. No, there was something else in her breath. Something far more alluring. It was less a smell and more a sensation, one that crept its way up my nostrils to tickle the very fibers of my brain stem. Yes, this was a fragrance I'd known before—the exact same one I'd caught a whiff of that day she kissed me at the top of the stairwell. The one like pheromones.

That intoxicating scent which could only be described as “woman.”

“H-hey, slow down!” I said, as though I were pleading for my life as she pinned me to the bed. “Wh-what’s gotten into you? This is too much, too fast...”

“Do you remember that freshman boy?” Ushio asked, her breath hot and heavy.

“Sahara-kun,” she clarified. “The one who came into our class and asked to talk to me in private on the day of the race?”

I searched my muddled memories like a child digging through a toybox. “Yeah... The one who had something to tell you about Noi?”

“That was a lie,” she said. “He just wanted to ask me out.”

My eyes went wide. My heart skipped a beat.

“Told me he had feelings for me and wanted me to be his girlfriend,” said Ushio. “And this was someone who actually knew me. From *before* I transitioned. I couldn’t believe it. I turned him down, but it still made my day. I was happy, Sakuma. *Really* happy.”

Her voice was gradually growing more and more feverish.

“And that’s when I remembered something,” she said.

“Remembered what?”

A defeated smile crept onto Ushio's face. "That I'm a pretty good catch, actually."

...Ah. So that's what's going on here.

It all made sense now. Ushio had accomplished an awful lot lately: she'd beaten her toxic track rival in a race, gotten an apology from her biggest harasser in Nishizono, and even been asked out by a talented old teammate. And before that, she'd played the starring role in our class play during the culture festival, earning the adoration of almost the entire student body—boys and girls alike. More and more, Ushio was starting to get recognized and respected for who she was. But that wasn't all she'd earned as a result.

It had renewed her confidence as well.

She was once again keenly aware of just how attractive and talented she was. And I assumed that was what had emboldened her to be so assertive with me right now. Confidence was, after all, the single greatest weapon one could equip themselves with when facing life's greatest uncertainties. Ushio already *had* good looks and sharp wits, but now that she had the confidence to wield them as well? There was nothing in the whole wide world that could stand in her way.

God, I'm so happy for her.

I could almost feel myself starting to tear up a little. This wasn't the same girl I'd seen sobbing to herself on a park bench that fateful night anymore. No longer would she let curious onlookers, or judgmental glances, or deep-seated biases and malicious gossip deter her from living her life *exactly* the way she wanted to. There was a radiant glimmer about her—one that no one in their right mind could ever look down on.

And yet, as happy as I was to see her living her life unapologetically and in full bloom...what exactly did this newfound assertiveness mean for *me*, in this situation? What was Ushio planning to do here, anyhow? We'd already hugged...so did she want something *more* than that? But that could only mean... *No way. She wouldn't be that bold, right?*

She had me pinned to the bed, sure, but my hands weren't restrained or anything. If I really wanted to, I could probably push her off of me. And I was

about to bring my hands up to chest level just in case—but then I spotted the slightest hint of hesitation in Ushio’s bleary eyes. Her gaze was fluctuating. Desperate.

I let the tension drain from my limbs.

“...All right, all right,” I said. “You win.”

If me resisting was only going to make her lose all the confidence she’d worked so hard to build up, then it wasn’t worth it. I was sick and tired of seeing Ushio suffer due to *my* waffling and uncertainty. Even if I wasn’t ready for this, I felt like I should probably just shut up and deal with it a little while longer and let her do what she was going to do.

So I closed my eyes and braced for whatever that might be.

I could feel her breath and hair brush against my face.

And I squeezed my eyes shut even tighter.

I waited. And I waited. And I waited.

...But nothing happened.

Eventually, I felt a light *thud* as something knocked against my chest. Warily, I opened my eyes to see a silver-blond head resting directly beneath my chin.

“...Sorry,” she whimpered, face buried in my chest. “What am I doing...? I *know* better than this... I *know* this isn’t okay...”

She was sniffing just a little bit.

Unsure what I could possibly say to console her, I reached my hand up and rested it on top of her head. Her hair was smooth and soft to the touch, and its subtle layers draped nicely along the contours of her skull. She probably took great pains to maintain it. I stroked my fingers through her hair, again and again, until she finally calmed down.

Then, a little while later, Ushio rolled off of me, and we both lay there on the bed just gazing up at the ceiling. As I slowly regained my usual clarity of mind, I found myself feeling overcome by a strange mental numbness.

What the hell are we even doing here?

“...Could I ask you something, Ushio?” I said, still staring up at the ceiling. “What even *was* it that made you fall for me in the first place?”

It was something I’d been wondering for a long time now. Not that I was desperate to know or anything, but I figured if I was going to ask, then now was the time.

“I mean, I’m not sure I could really pin it down to one major thing.”

“Well, just say whatever first comes to mind, then.”

Ushio rolled over on the bed, turning her back to me. “...Come on, I don’t want to talk about that. It’s too embarrassing.”

“So what? Pretty sure we’ve already hit peak embarrassment for one day.”

Compared to what just happened between us, I sincerely doubted it could be *that* bad, all things considered. Hell, I was getting embarrassed again just thinking about it.

“I told you, it wasn’t any one thing in particular,” she said. “It was...a lot of things.”

“Like what, for instance?”

Ushio turned to face me again. She brushed her hair out of her face with her fingers and looked at me with earnest eyes. “I guess I could try to explain it. But it might take a while.”

“I’ve got time.”

“...All right. I’ll tell you.”

And so Ushio began to speak, weaving her words together with the soft, measured rhythm of a mother’s bedtime story—so soothing that it could have lulled me to sleep.

What followed was a faded but familiar yarn that whisked me back to nearly ten years prior. I opened my ears and listened closely, letting the nostalgia wash over me in waves as my mind sank ever deeper into a bottomless sea of reminiscence.

Afterword

WHenever you cram a bunch of people together in one place, there's bound to be *some* sort of drama or strife—so wouldn't it stand to reason that cutting everyone else out of your life would save you a ton of stress in the long run? Me, I'd probably say that's about 80 percent true. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, there was an emerging term for this self-inflicted isolation in Japan: social reset syndrome. I assume it's because there must be plenty of people out there who, like Nishizono, would rather completely disengage than put in the work to salvage relationships that often feel like they're more effort than they're worth. Granted, I realize that common decency seems to dictate that you shouldn't just go around burning bridges all the time... But boy, does it ever feel refreshing to cut people out completely sometimes, huh? As someone who's been on both ends of that equation, my personal take is that people are always going to come and go, and if we could all just learn to cherish those who choose to stay, we'd be a lot happier.

...All that being said, though, I'll totally admit that I get just as bummed out as anyone when a person I was really hoping would stick around just up and vanishes from my life. Our interpersonal relationships don't always operate according to logic or reason—something that can be very scary in some ways, but quite fascinating in others. And sometimes all it takes is a little love or adoration to make us stop digging in our heels, let go of our deep-rooted convictions, and change as people.

Now for some acknowledgments.

To my editor, Hamada-sama: thank you for your hard work and assistance once again. I can't believe we've already done six books together... No—*only* six, I should say! Rest assured, I've got plenty of manuscripts to write for you yet!

To KUKKA-sensei: each time I receive one of your wonderful illustrations, I

can't help but kneel and pay my respects to what true artistic talent is capable of... Thank you for your lovely contributions once more.

And lastly, to you, my dear readers: it's thanks to your loyal support that we were even able to make it three volumes deep with this series. Rest assured, I plan on seeing it through to the very end, so I do hope you'll stick around to see how things play out. I'll endeavor to deliver a conclusion that lives up to your high expectations.

On that note, I'm afraid I must bid you farewell for now, but I hope to see you back here again in Volume 4. Things are *really* coming to a head now!

MEI HACHIMOKU

DECEMBER 2022



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