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To ra do ra



STORY YUYUKO TAKEMIYA

ART YASU

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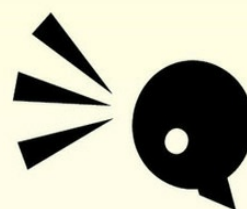
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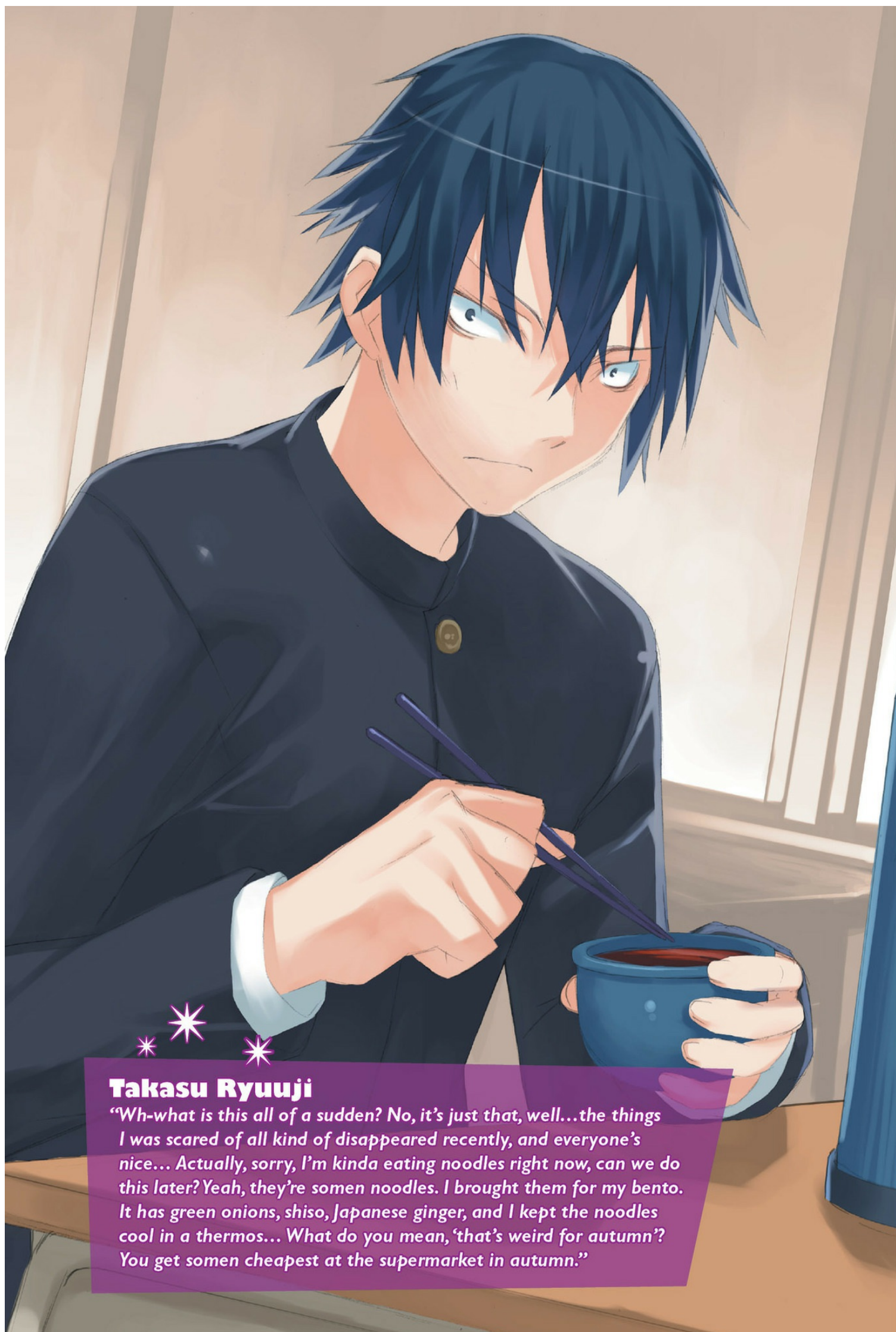
story **Yuyuko Takemiya**

illustrations **Yasu**

Class 2-C,

*I know this is sudden and it's your lunch break,
but how are you enjoying high school life?*





Takasu Ryuuji

“Wh-what is this all of a sudden? No, it’s just that, well...the things I was scared of all kind of disappeared recently, and everyone’s nice... Actually, sorry, I’m kinda eating noodles right now, can we do this later? Yeah, they’re somen noodles. I brought them for my bento. It has green onions, shiso, Japanese ginger, and I kept the noodles cool in a thermos... What do you mean, ‘that’s weird for autumn’? You get somen cheapest at the supermarket in autumn.”



Aisaka Taiga

"Huuuh? Pipe down! I don't know anything about that! Some idiot packed somen for my bento right in the middle of fall and my mouth's so cowl I can't tawlk!"





Kawashima Ami

"Hmm, what do you wanna know? About school life? No way, of course, it's super fun~! Everyone's super great, and they're all super kind to me. Every day is so fun... Uhh, it smells like curry..."

Kushieda Minori

"Whaat?! Somen sounds great! If you're that unhappy, then how about you try putting some of my curry on it! Huh? Wh-why's everyone in the class staring at me? Is it because I'm making the whole classroom smell like curry? Can't everyone just keep eating their lunches? This is an everyday occurrence in India y'know!"

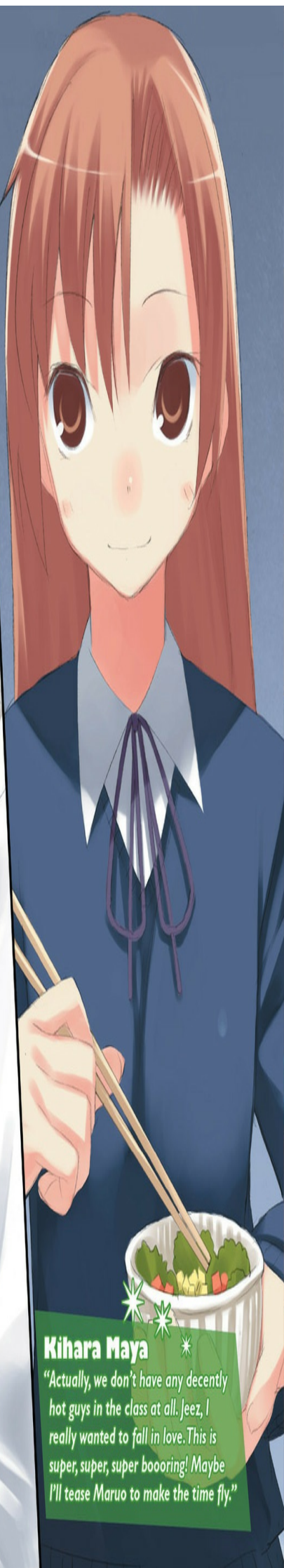
Kitamura Yuusaku

"Class 2-C is firmly united! We don't have troublemakers in our class! We don't even have behavioral problems! As the class rep, I take pride in our extraordinarily exemplary class... Why does it stink like curry?! Oh, I got it! Everyone, close your eyes! Be honest and raise your hand! This is how we'll find the culprit! Who brought curry for lunch?!"



Kashii Nanako *

"Oh ho ho. Isn't everyone cute?"



Kihara Maya *

"Actually, we don't have any decently hot guys in the class at all. Jeez, I really wanted to fall in love. This is super, super, super booring! Maybe I'll tease Maruo to make the time fly."



Noto Hisamitsu

"...Haruta, you should probably keep your mouth shut. Yeah, I think it's a fun class. There are more than a few idiots though. Oh, but actually, there are about as many cute girls! They are seriously cute—seriously!"



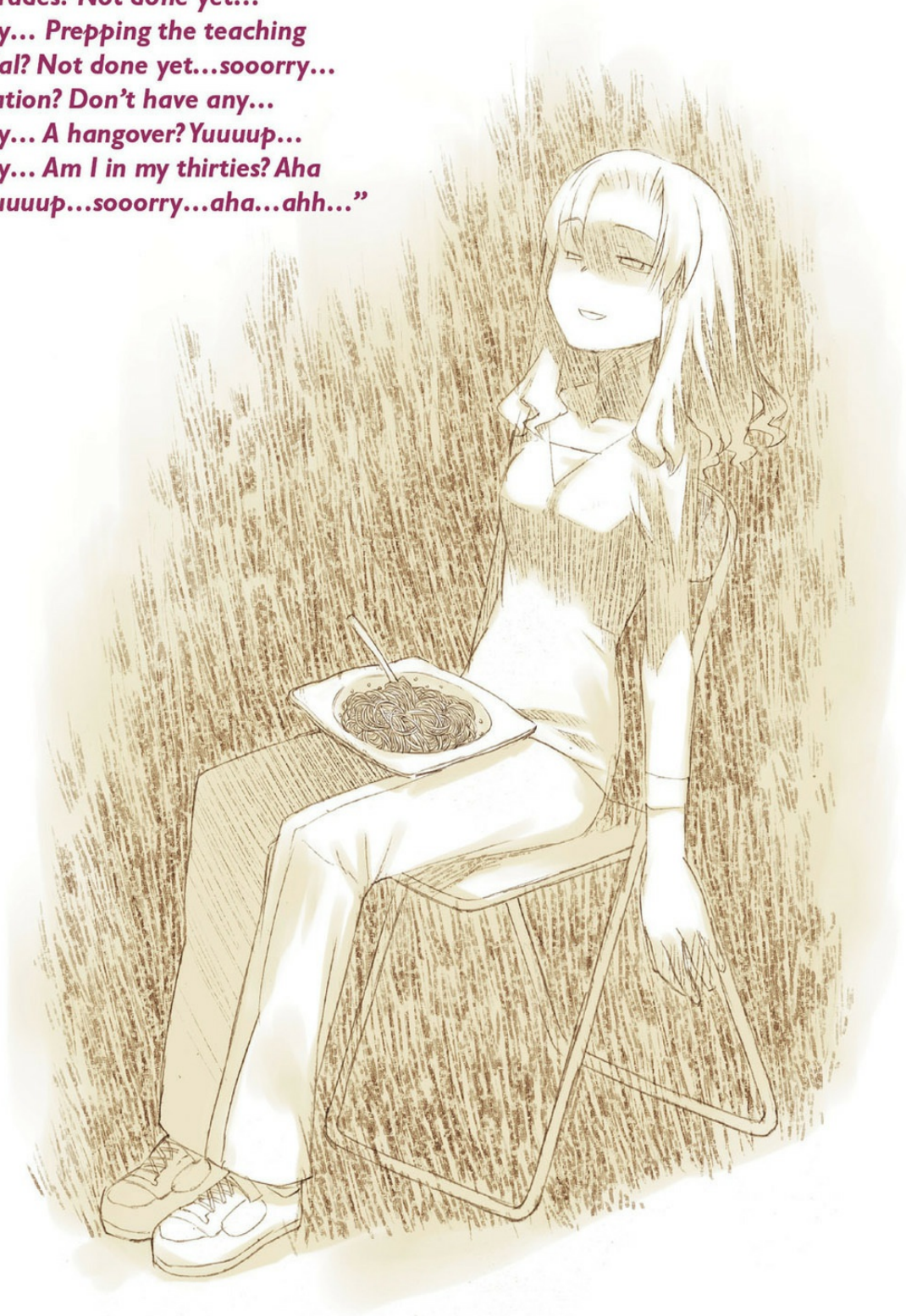
Haruta Kouji

"He's searching for the curry culprit? Aha ha ha ha, Kitamura is such an idiot! It's got to be someone from India, right? Aha ha ha ha ha!"

✧
✧ a bonus? ✧

Koigakubo Yuri (AGE 30)

“Quiz grades? Not done yet...
sooorry... Prepping the teaching
material? Not done yet...sooorry...
Motivation? Don’t have any...
sooorry... A hangover? Yuuuup...
sooorry... Am I in my thirties? Aha
ha...yuuuup...sooorry...aha...ahh...”



Let’s leave Yuri-chan be and go to the cultural festival! ➡

Toradora!

5

BY
Yuyuko Takemiya

ILLUSTRATED BY
Yasu



Seven Seas Entertainment

TORADORA! Vol. 5

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ToC

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PRELUDE



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Prelude

“So, in the end, the event is capped to just one day this year, too?” said first-year General Affairs officer Kouta. “Even someone like the president couldn’t pull enough strings to make it work.”

“It wasn’t simply capped,” said Sumire. “We’re reaching a reasonable compromise with the faculty and one that could give us an advantage. We’ll make them practically double the budget compared to last year and remove a number of restrictions. If things go as anticipated, giving up on having a two-day event will still be worthwhile.”

“But capping the cultural festival to just one day...sets a bad precedent, doesn’t it?” said the Public Relations officer, another first year. “I heard that year after year, no one really gets excited about it, and this has to be why. This is too much, even for a public school.”

“Not much we can do about that though, right?” said Sumire. “Well, this is how it ended up, so we’ll have to just turn that to our advantage and get everyone fired up because it’s only one day. This is the last large school function that I’ll work on.”

“That speech was magnificent,” said the Secretary. “You said, ‘Year after year, the student council has had a legacy of boring cultural festivals! We could abandon that legacy, or I could turn it around!’ right? The acting chairperson of the third years was so moved that she gave you a standing ovation.”

“It’s too early to get carried away. We’re going to get all fired up for this year’s cultural festival. No, we’ll *make* them get fired up. I went so far as to make that declaration, so I’ll show them what I’m like when I’m serious. You all make sure to follow my lead.”

“Well, we will,” said the Treasurer, “but...uh, we’re being supported by Market Kanou, right?”

“I’ll use any resources I have available to me—even my parents. Hey, don’t hog all the fries.”

“Aren’t you eating all the nuggets yourself, president?” replied Kitamura.

“Please, please don’t put ketchup on them. Aren’t you too old to be eating like a kid?”

“I’m only eighteen, I’m still a kid! Give it over! I said give it to me!”

“Ah, stop, stop!” Kouta cried. “Don’t fight!”

“No, you can’t! That’s not how you’re supposed to eat them! It’s an insult to the fries. Senpai, here, I’m passing it to you! Protect them!”

“Eeeeeek! Don’t touch my glasses with your oily fiiingers!”

This transpired on a certain Friday at a certain fast food place after school. Unbeknownst to anyone, a certain high school’s six student council members made plans for a certain event as everyone around showered them in awkward stares.

Chapter 1

They were broken up into five-person teams according to their number in the attendance register. They were in the middle of basketball class, during which the girls and boys took turns playing on the small gym's court.

PE was in the afternoon when everyone was full from lunch. The tracksuit-wearing high school students were all lazy and their movements sluggish.

"The girls are lagging like crazy."

"I feel like I'm lagging, even though I'm a guy... Oh, her panty lines..."

"Who? Where?"

The sound of the bouncing balls and the squeak of the slipping shoes somehow seemed dull and sloppy as they echoed through the gym.

Clumped in a corner, the boys were sprawled out exactly like docile cows. They were leaning against the wall or on their sides like old men on vacation who knew they had no fear of being scolded. With content, half-open eyes, they companionably watched the butts of the tracksuit-wearing girls together.

In one corner of that group, the one with the odd pair of eyes that gave off a dull glint said, "The hem on Taiga's tracksuit is frayed, isn't it..."

He was a hit man targeting the life of an enemy yakuza member by hiding among cows at pasture in full-body cow-patterned spandex—or not. He was just Takasu Ryuuji, and he was just as listless as everyone else.

His eyes, which were sharp completely independent of his own volition, had originally been targeting a different kind of prey at the start of the match. His target was the one in the group of ten girls whose movements were exceptionally animated and whose ponytail bounced while following the ball. He was staring at the sporty girl, Kushieda Minori.

Why, you may ask? He liked her.

As though pulled by a magnet, Ryuuji's eyes zipped along, following that dazzling smile. Then he glanced to the side for just a moment and was swept

away, his gaze now glued to a different place. Why, you may ask? It was because he couldn't help but let *that* bother him. It was just in his nature.

“Oh ho, of course, you've got your eye somewhere else, Takasu. Yeah, her hem, huh, huh.”

Someone's elbow prodded his back in a friendly way.

“The Palmtop Tiger's ankles...they're great. What great taste, you big pervert.”

Someone else's finger poked at his side.

“No, it's not her ankles, it's her *hem*. Whoa, it definitely is fraying...”

His dangerously sharp, sanpaku pupils converged as though they were plastered to a certain girl's feet. He continued to stare straight at the undone and flopping cuffed hems as if, through sheer anger, he could set them alight with beams from his eyes.

In actuality, there would be no beams. He was just vowing to himself that he would mend them that weekend.

The owner of the aforementioned tracksuit, the Palmtop Tiger, Aisaka Taiga, didn't notice that gaze. She remained completely unmotivated and just ran with everyone else. She raised both her hands to guard the goal, but because of her short height, she wasn't an obstruction; the ball arced over her head to easily swish through the net.

Kihara Maya threw her arms up in the air in victory, her long chestnut hair tied to the side to expose her slender neck. When she stooped to pull up her socks, the boys caught a glimpse of her chest through her collar, and a surreptitious whisper of joy slipped from the group.

“Ahhhghh! Taiga, why?!”

“It's not my fault!”

Minori, who was the only one serious about playing basketball, went after the rolling ball as she made an appeal to her teammate, Taiga. The athletic blood that flowed through that body inspired her even in the lazy afternoon PE class.

“I'm the only one who's been getting points in! Taiga, if you put in even a

smidge of effort, you'd really be good at this! Now take back the point they just took!"

"I got it, I got it..."

Taiga received the ball from Minori's fast throw and started dribbling, at least for the time being. It didn't seem like she was putting much effort into it, but she passed around the girls on the opposing team, quickly stepping under their arms as they reached out to reclaim the ball. It was as though that ball were stuck to those small hands.

A low vocalization of admiration passed through the recumbent group of watching boys—*Whoa*.

"Of course the Palmtop Tiger would have unrivaled reflexes. She's super, super good."

"Actually, isn't her tush small?"

"It is, it's tiny."

In the middle of the stirring group, Ryuuji alone was feeling uneasy from his hunch that the hem Taiga was now stepping on would bring her close to falling. Then he noticed that Minori was doing something cute again. She clapped her hands together as she followed Taiga around, crying "Good, good, Taiga-chan, do it like that!" Ryuuji's eyes glinted more dangerously, tinged with the heat of his secret sentiments. His gaze restlessly swerved left and right.

Eventually, Taiga was surrounded by a group of three.

"Hey, Dimhuahua!"

"Huh~?"

With a precise pass that bounced past the group's feet, Taiga sent the ball to the one whose very strange nickname only she used—Kawashima Ami.

"Whoa! It's Ami-chan, it's Ami-chan!"

"You're so cute, you angel! You're lovely, you model!"

"Ami-chan, you're cute even in your tracksuit! You're pretty! Kyaah!"

The sprawled idiots suddenly got up and put their hands together for the

dazzling beauty, who seemed to sparkle. They were feverishly and impatiently wriggling in anticipation of her play. This was to be expected. Ami was a high school girl and also a pro-model. Her face was fairer and more piquant than anyone's, and her magnificently large eyes glittered like sparkling jewels. Even in her tracksuit, her slim, tall figure was like that of a beautiful fairy that had appeared out of a dense forest.

Basically, anyone would recognize she was super stunning. Even Ryuuji, who knew the many shortcomings of her personality, unintentionally allowed his gaze to be stolen by her figure.

"No, no, stop, my nails are long right now, so I can't touch the ball. They might break." Ami pouted her cherry-colored lips as she griped.

Then she put her left hand on her cheek, and as though she were tossing something in the trash, threw the ball that had been passed to her back with her right hand. Taiga failed to catch it, and it bounced off the top of her head, flying up and into the hands of the opposing team.

Ow. As Taiga choked and held her head, Ami said something that would terrify even the heavens.

"Soorrry! No way, Aisaka-san! Did that impact just make you even shorter?! Oh no, now you're so small... Oh, I guess you were always about this short! Just kidding!"

Ha ha ha! Ami laughed, pretending to be cute.

"Nuahh! What are you doing, Ahmin, you fool!"

"Minori-chan, if we give up, the game will be over already, won't it? ♥"

"What are you saying?! Like I'd let it end like this!"

Pursuing Ami from behind, Minori gave Ami's slender neck a few tickles. Ami writhed.

"What are you doing, you dullard?! You dumb Dimhuahua! You ignoramus! You numbskull! You faux-oblivious Chihuahua! You're black hearted! You've got a washed-up personality! You horrible lecher! I'll have your head!"

"Ugh—ack!"

Without a pause, Taiga, who wasn't about to let this slide, punched Ami in the throat. *You can train all your other muscles but not your throat*, the action seemed to say. Ami sank to her knees.

"Hey, Minorin, pass it here, pass it!" With no time to spare, Taiga took the pass from Minorin where she was next to Ami.

"Hey, Dimhuahua, I'm passing it to you one more time!"

Taiga threw the ball, aiming for the top of Ami's head. Ami was still collapsed, folded over, and coughing. *Bop!* The ball made an odd noise as it hit Ami and curved through the air, frightening in its accuracy, once again into the hands of the opposing team.

"Taigaaa?! What do you think you're doing?! Are you trying to make me mad?!"

"No, Minorin, that was Dimhuahua's fault just now."

"Cough... No way. Seriously, Aisaka-san, I can't believe you..."

Ami eventually stood back up and stuck an angelic smile on her face, so pure that it was obviously phony. Even Taiga took a step back out of unease at that bloodcurdling act. Ami, still grinning, started to steadily close the distance between them.

To the boys watching the terrifying display from afar, it was nothing more than a scene from a lustful fantasy forming quicker than a storm cloud in midsummer.

"She's got such a cute smile. Ami-chan's definitely an angel..."

"Oh, oh, the Palmtop tripped on her hem and fell over..."

"Ami-chan's going along with it and riding the Tiger. That's nice, I want her to do that to me, too..."

"Riding on someone's back seems like it'd be nice for some reason..."

"It'd look like this from below..."

Ryuuji was the only one who realized one of the usual bloodbaths starting. Ami's long arms were trying to strangle Taiga, and Taiga's small fingertips were

trying to jab Ami's eyes. Their bellowing echoed throughout the gym. The other girls, realizing now wasn't the time to be playing basketball, were making a huge fuss, trying to pull the two apart, running away, providing aid, or leaving them be.

During that scene from hell, Haruta suddenly spoke up.

"Hey, everyone," he said, "you all like Ami-chan, right? You think she's cute, right? I think she is."

He pushed up his depressingly long hair. It was fading only at the ends, possibly the vestiges of the bleached (and infamous) hairdo that he had over the summer. Then with a serious look they normally never saw on his face, he flung his arm passionately around Ryuuji's shoulder.

Gross, thought Ryuuji. While he threw off Haruta's hand, Ami shrieked as though in the throes of death. He didn't know what was being done to her, but she was on her back on the court.

However, that was there, and they were here. The group of boys poked Haruta in the forehead as punishment.

"What are you going on about all of a sudden? That's conceited even for you, Haruta."

"Don't disturb my sweet time with Ami-chan with your trivial chitchat."

Even holding onto his now-reddening forehead, Haruta didn't back down from his mysterious assertion. "Owww...but you think so, right? Everyone's super in love with Ami-chan, right?"

"Of course, because Ami-chan's cute."

"But it's kind of infuriating when you say it, Haruta. Like, I don't want you to say my precious Ami-chan's name like you're all close with her. Of course Ami-chan's the cutest in the class—no, actually, in the school."

"Oh, is that what we're talking about? Then I'm Team Palmtop Tiger. I can't get enough of her ferocity."

"What? Then I like Kashii. Like, she seems like if you push her, she'd fall right over. She seems like she'd be gentle and forgiving, and even accept someone

like me.”

“If we’re talking about that, then isn’t Kihara super great? This stays between us, but even though she acts like that, she’s never been in a relationship.”

No way, really? I can’t imagine that, thought Ryuuji. As the boys worked themselves up, whispering to each other, he thought to himself, *I think Kushieda’s cute.* He thought her courage was cute as she planted herself between Taiga and Ami to pull them apart. Even that strange face she was making was cute as she soothed Taiga, who was trying to bite her, by saying “See? Nothing to fear...”

As though he were collecting the rose-colored images running through each of their minds, Haruta cast a sharp but suggestive glance at all of them.

“That! Is! It! Uhh, ladies and zentlemen.”

There ain’t any ladies here and what are zentlemen? was the general outcry. Haruta paid no attention to what they were saying.

“Well, everyone, don’t you want to see how cute your crushes look when they’re not at school? For example, how about as a maid?! Hoo hoo! Right, Takasu, you’ll get on board, too, won’t you?!”

Ryuuji felt the sweltering breath of his friend on his cheek. It reeked of Frisk mints. Reflexively, he looked intently into Haruta’s face.

“Haruta, are you okay? You didn’t get into something weird during the summer break? Like a weird drug, or a weird pyramid scheme, or a cult... Oh, are you acting weird because you’re holding a grudge over when Kawashima and I left you behind to go to her villa...”

“I am holding a grudge! But this is a separate issue. I’m serious about what I’m saying! Oh, I was too loud. All of you, listen to me and take this seriously. Yuri-chan said she’d talk about the cultural festival and the class’s exhibition during the next long homeroom, right? That’s me—me. I’m the acting committee member.”

“Were you?”

“I had no idea...”

“So? What about it?”

Haruta brushed aside the undesired reactions and secured a position at the center of their huddle. “Come, come,” he motioned and lowered his voice further.

“So, if, for example, our class did a maid café for the cultural festival, we could see all the girls dressed up as maids. If all the boys work together and we have a majority vote, they can’t complain. The girls aren’t all on the same page. How’s that?”

Right... A low murmur broke out from the corner of the sweaty-smelling gym.

“That’s good planning, for Haruta.”

“Seventeen years since he was born, and the light finally switched on in his head.”

“His parents must certainly be happy.”

“Hee hee hee, you can say whatever you want. So then, you’re all okay with it? We’re all completely unified in our maid café, so it’s decided—”

“Wait a second!”

The face that thrust itself before Haruta’s eyes belonged to his sworn friend Noto, who wore black glasses.

“I may be rocking the boat here, but I absolutely want to suggest a Chinese café instead of a maid café. Imagine it, Kihara in a cheongsam...in shiny fabric, and it’d be skin-tight around her body, like this—” He made a sort of hourglass gesture. “—and you’d get a peek at her thigh. And she’d be like, *how do you like the tea?*”

They pretty much all turned their eyes upward as they considered it. *That’s something we could totally go for. Yeah yeah.* Ryuuji wasn’t that sold on it, but he imagined his classmate exaggeratedly saying, “Nihao.” His eyes gleamed. Then he scowled immediately, as though he were reconsidering everything.

“No, wait everyone...”

His bitter voice rose up as though to cut off the imaginations and excitement of those around him.

“What, Takasu? Why’re you looking at us with those eyes while we’re all getting pumped?”

“We can see right through you. What a dirty guy.”

This a misunderstanding, he thought. He wasn’t staring at the boys with unrestrained thirst. He had just thought of something.

Kihara would look great in a cheongsam. Kashii, too. Of course, it’d look good on Ami also, and it would even be super cute on Minori. Her hair could be in wholesome, sexy buns.

But that one—Taiga—wouldn’t she look pitiful in a cheongsam?

If she ended up being exposed to other’s eyes in a form-fitting dress with her flat body, her psychological complexes would definitely become worse, and she’d end up with a neurosis so bad she wouldn’t be able to keep a meal down. He would be the one taking care of her. Then, after that was over she’d definitely be ordering him around. It would be *make pads* this and *make soy milk* that.

He needed to think of something that would fit Taiga better than a cheongsam or that would be easier on him to deal with.

“What about that Lolita thing or whatever you call it? That frilly stuff... Wouldn’t that be great?”

The boys all fell into silence for a moment. *Oh no*, he thought, *did I go too far?* He gulped.

“Takasu...are you a genius?!”

“This...is worthy of applause. Loli! Or Goth Loli! That’s what I want!”

Moderate applause surrounded him from inside the circle. The only one looking bitter was Haruta.

“Wait, wait,” he said. “We have to be unanimously on the same page, so don’t blurt out random stuff. We won’t know what we’re doing anymore... Uhh, uhh, what was I saying again?”

He just doesn’t have the mental capacity, everyone understood. They turned sympathetic looks on the biggest idiot in their class.

That was when the true genius appeared.

“If we do a cosplay cafe, then couldn’t we have everything?”

When all the boys turned around, the person they saw was none other than the honor student Kitamura Yuusaku, who was pushing up his glinting, silver-rimmed glasses with a finger. His even bangs were cut to a sharp edge for the second semester, and his nerdy Maruo engine was firing on all cylinders. The slightly concerning sunburn on his face and arms was the result of enjoying his summer club activities and trips.

“Th-that’s it! Let’s do that! If we do a cosplay café, anything goes! Good job, Kitamura. You don’t have a bowl cut just for show~!”

Haruta merrily grasped Kitamura’s back. Kitamura, not entirely dissatisfied, endured the stickiness of Haruta’s armpit. *Of course, of course.* Everyone praised his genius, ruffled his black hair, and rubbed his unexpectedly muscular arms.

Ryuuji, his close friend, had also joined everyone else to look upon Kitamura with loving reverence. He was happily dreaming up an image in his head. It was, of course, of Minori—Minori in a maid uniform, Minori in a cheongsam, Minori in Lolita—any Minori turning a faint smile at him and bashfully asking, “How does this look?”

It looks really good, he thought. It’s great. It’s absolutely great.

Kitamura stood in the center of the ring of excited boys, who jostled and pawed at him in praise.

“All according to plan!” he said.

Tilting his head down so no one else could see, Kitamura’s mouth contorted into a suspicious smile. No one had noticed it yet. *Hee hee hee*, he laughed soundlessly.

“Now we just have to wait for their move—ow!”

“Ow!”

“Ouch!”

That head, and the head next to it, and the head behind, and Ryuuji’s head

were smacked in turn. At some point, the girls' basketball game had finished. Kuro-muscle, the gym instructor, had an unpleasant look on his face as he hit the boys with the attendance sheet. They hadn't come when ordered, no matter how much time passed, and had continued to stick close together.

"All of you, drink some protein. Drink some protein and get yourselves up and moving."

"Ryuuji!" said Taiga. "Look at this, right here! Dimhuahua tore it!"

"Right..." said Ryuuji.

As they returned to the changing rooms through the breezeway, Ryuuji saw the River Sanzu for a moment—or so he thought. Taiga had jumped at his tracksuit from behind and used her whole weight to strangle him by grabbing his collar. As he was on the verge of blacking out, a roundhouse kick appeared before his shaking vision—or so he thought.

"Right here, it's torn! Dimhuahua did it!"

She was showing him her tracksuit hem. It had ripped and now drooped tragically over her heel. In order to show it to Ryuuji, she had brought her foot up as though to kick him from behind. As she did that, he automatically grabbed her ankle.

"Aaah, this is terrible... I think I can mend it by putting fabric behind it...a fabric backing...but the issue is with the elasticity... Guess I've got to cut up one of Yasuko's granny shirts."

As he thought of his mother's beige undergarments, he nodded to himself. He could put fabric backing on just one leg, but then there was the fear it might become unbalanced with the extra weight. He could roll both hems up and sew them, but he had qualms about making irreversible changes. Even gym clothes were still part of the school uniform. The furrows in his brow deepened.

Across from him, Taiga was losing her balance as Ryuuji held her ankle.

"Uhh! Uhh!" she cried, flapping her arms like she was drowning, but he didn't even notice. The inside of his head was dancing with shears, needles, tracksuits, and granny shirts. This was Ryuuji's world. Take caution all who enter, lest you be turned into a housewife.

“Hey, seriously,” said Ami. “Don’t say anything that would give others the wrong idea. You stepped on it and fell down on your own and tore it yourself, didn’t you? Hey, Takasu-kun, you were watching, weren’t you? I didn’t do anything, right?”

She had gone out of her way to rush up to them, probably so she could get a word in. She was right in front of him and looking at him with upturned eyes. She made her voice sound innocent, as though to appeal to him.

Huh, Ryuuji thought as he finally returned to his senses. His sanpaku eyes turned to Ami, and in that moment, disaster struck.

“Whoa, that was close,” said Taiga. “I almost fell again!”

Whether it was intentional or coincidental, Taiga’s hand grasped at thin air as she righted herself, and...

“Whoa?!”

...Pulled the waist of Ami’s tracksuit firmly down by seven centimeters.

In front of Ryuuji’s speechless eyes and those of several boys walking by, the pure white skin of Ami’s hip flashed at them like a lighthouse signal. Taiga pretended to wipe sweat from her forehead, and Ami stared at her in a stupor.

Finally, several seconds later, a scream erupted from Ami’s mouth like lava overflowing from a crater.

“GYAAAAaaaaaaaaa!”

“Uwah,” said Taiga. “What a racket.”

Several of the boys unexpectedly put their hands together, as if offering a prayer to Taiga as she stuck her fingers in her ears. Ami’s cheeks, whether from rage or shame, turned crimson.

“Y-y-y-you, what are you doing?! That was scary!”

“Gah ha, that face. Dimhuahua, look in a mirror. Your true colors are showing.” Taiga’s smile was heaped with scorn.

Ami swallowed her words with a “Guh!” A vein showing on her temple, she seemed to gather her strength for a moment.

“Hmph!”

And then...

“Ha...ha ha ha ha ha ha!”

BAM! An angelic smile appeared on Ami’s face. It looked like it had been hammered into shape out of iron. She was going this far to play innocent. She was like a museum-worthy piece of art—no, this performance was already peak pageantry.

Without thinking, Ryuuji turned a reverent gaze on her. Before him, Taiga huffed and became unnecessarily arrogant.

“Anyway,” she said, “that’s what happened. I’ll bring it home, so have it fixed by the weekend.”

Having issued this order, she walked briskly away. But Ami, who was filled with anger, walked even more briskly behind her with her iron-clad smile still in place.

“Ha ha ha ha, wait, Aisaka-san. We haven’t finished our talk, ha ha ha ha ha!”

Feeling as though he had just watched a stand-up routine, Ryuuji followed the two with his eyes as they disappeared into the girls’ changing room.

Then he noticed her.

Minori, who normally mediated between Ami and Taiga in times like this, was watching them from some distance away—or really, she was looking at the empty space where the two had been. She was stealthily peering from a gap among the other girls in a corner of the hallway. Their eyes accidentally met.

“Hey!”

He wasn’t sure what she was thinking, but Minori put up one of her hands and gave him a stilted, incredibly strenuous greeting, something to the effect of Y-yo. He put up his hand in the same way, but Minori didn’t say anything more to him.

With her hand still up, she crab-walked along the wall of the small hallway and kept her distance as she passed Ryuuji with a strangely curt laugh. She scratched her head as though she didn’t know what to do with her raised hand.

“Ha ha ha. Well, then, um, what was it... See ya!”

Then she jogged away and jumped into the girls’ changing room.

“Wh-what?”

Ryuuji tilted his head and let his raised sanpaku eyes glint. Immediately behind him, Kitamura, who had watched the whole thing, folded his arms together in wonder.

“She’s been acting weird. Well, she wasn’t that normal to begin with, though.”

Right, she was acting weird. Actually, Minori had been acting weird ever since they started the new semester. Ryuuji pursed his lips. Whenever Minori was with Taiga, or Ami, or anyone else, she was normal, but for some reason she kept a strange distance whenever she approached him—or, at least, that was what it felt like.

He’d felt like he had gotten closer to her during the summer trip, but he might have been conveniently misunderstanding what had happened. It always went well with the Minori in his imagination, but of course that would be the case, wouldn’t it? His imagination was just that, his imagination.

Ryuuji stared at the girls’ changing room door, reluctant to leave. Then, realizing he was creeping out an unfamiliar underclassman who was looking at him, he rushed into the boys’ changing room.

“Uh, well then, I’ll give it over to the cultural festival chair, I guess. Haruta, I leave it to you.”

“Yes.”

Finishing up the necessary announcements during the long homeroom period, Kitamura, the class representative, got off the teacher’s podium and gave the floor over to Haruta. They gave each other secret, meaningful looks.

“Thanks,” said Haruta “Anks-thay,” said Kitamura.

The moment they passed each other, they grinned.

Come to think of it, Haruta wasn't the only acting committee member.

"Ami-chaaan, you can do it!"

"Aha ha, I'll try. ♥"

Haruta, who had arrived at the platform one step ahead, looked unpleasantly delighted. Yes, the person who currently was being showered in enchanted looks and cheers by the class as she made her graceful way to the platform was Ami.

Ami, who transferred in May, was the only one who hadn't been part of any department or committee. At the lone, random judgment of a certain bachelorette who said, "It seems like it'd suit you," she was nominated as a chair for the cultural festival acting committee. For Haruta, who had been given the role after losing at roshambo, this was a turn of fortune that threatened the already precarious jury-rigging holding his adolescent brain together.

"It's my first time being a chairperson," said Ami. "I'm so nervous. Let's do our best, Haruta-kun."

"Uhhh, yeah, let's do it."

Standing side by side at the podium, he looked giddy as he grinned. Looking up at his friend's unseemly face, Ryuuji wryly smiled with everyone else as they clapped. For the time being, they'd got everyone riled up. There were glances exchanged in the classroom, but only among the boys.

You got it?

Got it.

Ryuuji also nodded and mouthed an answer to the others' looks. This homeroom only had one final stop, and that station's name was cosplay café.

"What're you grinning for? Gross."

"Whoa!" said Ryuuji, practically jumping in his seat.

While he was distracted, Taiga had appeared at the edge of his desk. She stooped; with her tiny body, she looked like she was nibbling at the desk like a baby rat.

“Wh-what are you doing?” said Ryuuji. “We’re in class right now.”

Still curled up into a compact crouch, Taiga stared up at Ryuuji with her large eyes narrowed.

“It’s fine,” she said. “Hurry up and bring *that* out.”

She chewed on the thin joints of her fingers in frustration and haughtily raised her chin.

“*That*?” said Ryuuji. “What?”

“My lunch. The one I didn’t have enough time to eat.”

Come to think of it, there was a Tupperware of fruit he had put together with Taiga’s bento box. “I’m definitely going to eat this later, so you’re responsible for keeping it good until then!” she had asserted.

“You’re gonna eat it now?”

“Yeah. Right now. I’ve got time.”

“You’ve got time...but we’re in class right now...”

“Shut up. Hurry, you mongrel. Whiners get shiners. Big ones, too.”

Ryuuji shuddered but received glances of worry from the other boys around him—*We’re begging you, please don’t make trouble in this important moment.* He felt a wordless pressure. There was no mistaking that if Taiga found out about their plan, she would smash it to smithereens. She would destroy anything related to it because that was the way of the Palmtop Tiger.

No, even if she didn’t find out about anything, just having this troublemaker stick by him was enough to make him scared the plan would come apart. That was what a troublemaker was. Her presence alone would disrupt fate and throw everything out of kilter. In that case, he had to hurry up and give her what she wanted. He needed to have her stand up and leave.

He searched the inside of his bag, pulled out a small Tupperware that was wrapped in an old-fashioned furoshiki cloth he had taken a liking to and mail ordered (though the pattern was modern, with freehanded geometric black and white lines on a nearly black indigo), and offered it to her. Taiga pursed her lips and uttered a long drawn-out “Wow.” Her eyes glittered.

“Hurry!”

She anxiously shook his shoulders even though he was already holding it out in front of her eyes.

“I said hurry up and open it!”

“M-me?”

“That Tupperware is so hard to open that it always spills! Hurry up and open it!”

You stubborn—but now wasn’t the time to rebuke her. He took the Tupperware and opened it. Inside was Taiga’s favorite sliced mango. Taiga gripped the teeny fork like a little kid and looked into the Tupperware, eyeing the mango with a gleefully murderous fervor.

“Why are you eating here?!”

“So I don’t have to go to the trouble of bringing the empty Tupperware back to you.”

At the teacher’s platform, Haruta’s face looked slick, like it had been freshly oiled, probably because he was so excited. He looked down at the class with both hands on the teacher’s podium.

“Well then!” he said. “Let’s get on with the agenda! The topic is what our class, 2-C, is going to do for this year’s cultural festival exhibition!”

At his side, Ami was smiling as though she were having fun, but she was holding something that looked like a tube of hand cream. She was massaging it into her nail beds. In short, it seemed she didn’t have any interest at all. Taiga, still at Ryuuji’s desk, was preoccupied with trying to stab at the pieces of mango that slipped and escaped from her fork. It seemed she didn’t intend to hear one word of what Haruta was saying.

Go eat at your own desk, thought Ryuuji. He tried pushing her away by the shoulders, but she was as unmoving as a mountain.

It seemed that Ami and Taiga weren’t the only ambivalent ones. The other girls all generally were, too. There were some completely face down on their desks as though they were sleeping, some opening magazines under their

desks, and some listening to music through the white ear buds they had stuck into their ears even though they were facing the front. The ones that were quiet were the better of them.

“Can’t we just not do anything?”

“Haruta, you should avoid bringing attention to yourself.”

There were a few jeering boorishly at Haruta as they listlessly sat.

Goth Loli would never look good on you, Ryuuji thought quietly to himself. Even if they picked the cosplay café without incident, he couldn’t let them wear frills. Of course, a cheongsam or maid outfit wouldn’t suit them, either. They could be behind the scenes. No, wait, behind the scenes of a café would be kitchen work. Could he leave the kitchen to them? That wouldn’t do. He shook his head furiously side to side.

The kitchen, the dishwashing, and everything needs to be properly managed, he thought. *By me*.

He was back in Ryuuji world. The scene playing out in his head was of the boisterous cultural festival, the chaos in the kitchen reaching its limits, the raw sewage building up in the sink, the clouding stainless steel, the dirty drain—*You don’t have to touch it! Don’t do anything to it! Leave it to me! I’ll do all of it!*

But this wasn’t the time for him to be immersed in his wild fantasies. When Ryuuji returned to his senses, Haruta was already finishing up.

“Uhh, does anyone have opinions?! N-no one?! If there isn’t then—”

A cosplay café.

And then it happened.

It happened when the leader decided for himself he was about to go write on the blackboard with chalk.

It happened when all of the boys passionately formed their hands into fists.

It happened when, at the corner of Ryuuji’s desk, Taiga said, *Ahhh*. She wrinkled her nose as she opened her mouth wide (even closing her eyes), trying to stuff her cheeks with the mango.

It happened when Ryuuji tried to thrust a tissue at her. *Oh no, the fruit juice is going to drip all over.*

“Innnnn seeeveeeennnteeeeeennn yeeeeaaaarrrrrssss...”

It was Nobunaga at Honnouji wrapped in fluttering flames—not. It was Minori, who had elected to say something during the listless, long homeroom. With a look of complete resolve, she turned intensely, as though she had come from the seventh circle of hell, and slowly, slowly stood up.

“If you’re taking opinions...”

She wriggled.

Her face turned scarlet, and she suddenly looked bashful. A foreboding feeling went through the coalition of boys like the crackle of lightning. Minori was a girl even more dangerous than the strong and sinister Palmtop Tiger. That was because her job was the tamer of that strongest and most sinister beast, Taiga, whom she puppeteered at will.

The beast tamer continued to wriggle and act bashful as she traced loops on her desk.

“Well, um, it’s not like I want to do this, but, uh, I actually don’t like stuff like this. Uhhh, see, I thought it would be great if everyone had fun. I thought it would be really fun for everyone. So, even though I don’t like it, I thought I’d mention it. But I had a really great idea. It’s something I’ve been warming up to for a while. No, no, it’s definitely not right for me, but I thought that maybe everyone would like *that*. Right, *that*...a-a haunt...ugh!”

The whole class wordlessly pulled away together as Minori’s face turned red and her nose dripped blood. No one made a sound. They were scared. Instead of making a sound, Ami squirted her hand cream ten centimeters out onto the teacher’s desk.

Taiga, who had frozen with her mouth still open, let her mango fall right from her fork and into Ryuuji’s palm.

“Ah-agh...hee hee. I got a nosebleed... Oh no, don’t misunderstand! I’m not trying to say anything weird. I-I just...uh-uhm, it’s a h-haunted...haunted house.”

Even more red liquid came from Minori's nose as she held a tissue up to it. It was visible from every direction in the classroom. It seemed that no matter how tightly she pressed the tissue, the blood came flowing from her nose just like her laughter. *Hee hee! Hee hee! Hee hoo!* Just how excited was she?



She was beyond help.

“Kushieda. Let’s leave it at that. Your body won’t hold up.”

“What did ya say?”

In the classroom that had gone silent, as though frozen over, just one person stood up. It was Kitamura.

His glasses glinting, he lowered his voice in order to keep her from getting any more excited. He dropped his shoulders as he slowly closed on Minori.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa...”

He approached her with his wide eyes as he mimicked the behavior of a chicken. He opened his arms up, and as though to soothe her, flapped them. It seemed Minori couldn’t tear her eyes away from the odd sight. She rubbed away her nosebleed, opened her eyes wide in wonder, and watched intently as he approached.

“Whoa, whoa...there, there... Now, Kushieda, why don’t you come with the chicken man to the infirmary? Right? We’ve got to get that nosebleed stopped, don’t we? It’s okay, the chicken man will make sure to get your proposal into the agenda.”

As though she had been hypnotized, Minori’s eyes went unfocused.

“R-really?”

“Ahh...whoa, whoa... Now, come this way!”

Too fast for the eye to see, Kitamura’s arms latched onto Minori’s shoulders as she stood dumbfounded. Anyone would have thought he had successfully grabbed her—but, in the next moment, they were taught a lesson.

“You thought you could win with speed?” she said. “You fool.”

“Guh...guh guh?!”

“Kitamura-kun,” she went on. “I saw through your whole hand. Don’t you dare underestimate Minori. Now, shall we start the show?”

“K-Kushieda?!”

“None of you come any closer! Get up to any funny business, and this one gets—”

The lesson they were taught, of course, was that the strongest, most sinister, and craziest member of this class was Kushieda Minori herself.

“—a SMASH! Okay...?”

Minori pinned Kitamura firmly from behind, wearing a thin smile. She held her pointer finger in the shape of a pistol and pushed it against the seam of Kitamura’s slacks, right between his butt cheeks. If she went SMASH, it seemed like it would be really bad.

“Kushieda! Don’t do anything stupid!” Haruta shouted from the top of the podium,.

“Stop it, Haruta! Kushieda’s for real! She means it for real, and her grip strength is over 50kg!”

Kitamura, held hostage with his glasses half askew, tried to entreaty Haruta not to come to his aid. Everyone in 2-C was altogether speechless and had dumbfounded looks on their faces. Ryuuji and Taiga watched openmouthed at the sudden development of the hostage situation in front of their very eyes.

“De de de den!” Someone started humming the rhythm to the Bayside Shakedown opening. The tension increased all the more, but unfortunately, there was no hero in sight. Minori looked at the idiotic faces sitting in a row, and her lip contorted wickedly.

“Well, of course, I don’t want to destroy Kitamura-kun’s lower half. I just have one demand! That we do a haunted house for the cultural festival!”

“Kuuh!” said Kitamura.

It might have been because of Minori shouting by his ear, or fear of the destruction of his lower half, but Kitamura jolted. Haruta bit his lip, unable to do anything. It was terrible. The classroom was in an eddy of commotion.

“A-a haunted house...”

“Whoa, lame!”

“On top of being dull, it seems like suuuuuch a pain...”

“Actually, I’m not interested in that at all.”

“Why would we do a haunted house when we’re second years?”

“Kushieda’s dangerous, super dangerous.”

The things the girls said were quite right. Plus, the boys were united and had already started up their train of desire, which was heading towards the last stop of a cosplay café. They couldn’t let the train derail in a time like this.

“We can’t give in to Kushieda’s demands, no matter what.”

“Yeah, I agree.”

“You’re our sacrifice, Kitamura.”

“Farewell.”

“Bye-bye, Maruo.”

As everyone waved at him, tears flowed from Kitamura’s eyes.

“How coldhearted you are,” he said. “But! I, Kitamura Yuusaku, have had the resolve to sacrifice myself for everyone from the moment you entrusted me to be the class representative!”

“Oh?”

“Now, do it, Kushieda! Now, now, now! If you’ll be satisfied by stabbing at my vital point, then stab away as many times as you wish!”

Kitamura’s resolve seemed real, but Minori smiled as though she had more.

“That’s good,” she said. “Youth is such a beautiful thing, Kitamura-kun. Now grit your teeth.”

SNAP. She cracked her knuckles. She pulled back her elbow, and Kitamura automatically shut his eyes. The class couldn’t look right at him, either. They averted their eyes to escape watching the merciless scene about to occur.

“Ha... I’ll say this: I’m not the only one losing something, Kushieda. You’ll also be extinguishing that flame of ambition in your heart!” Kitamura vexingly, but also somehow triumphantly, told Minori.

It’s a draw, was what he meant. That was right. If Minori finished this, then

she would also have to withdraw her strange proposal.

But they were fools. They were all such fools.

“Lose? What a strange thing to say. It seems that you misunderstood something. I, Kushieda, won’t stop at making only Kitamura-kun my scapegoat...”

“Wh-what?!”

“Nooow then...I woooonder whooo the neeeext scaaapegoooooat should beeeeEEEEEE?!”

In the middle of that shriek, Minori’s finger made its finishing stroke and moved to prod Kitamura. Kitamura’s head spun like a revolving lantern. If she wouldn’t stop at this, did it mean that his sacrifice had been in vain?

Shwooooooomp...

The sound came a split second before her finger could bomb its intended spot.

“Come oooooout, ‘Shadow Warriors!’” Haruta shouted while his hand danced and fluttered in midair. He pointed to the back of the classroom.

Several boys stood up from the seats where he pointed.

“Th-the Shadow Warriors?!” said Minori. “Ahhhh!”

In a flash, Kitamura had been rescued. The boys lifted Minori up onto their shoulders with a gallant “Heave ho!”

“Whaaat are you doing?! No, let go! I won’t give up! I’ll never give up! If you kill me, Kushieda, then your hearts will be haunted houses forever! Gaaaah!”

The army shouldered Minori and simply rushed out of the classroom. Eventually, Minori’s shrieks became distant, until they could no longer be heard from the classroom. *Forgive me*, Ryuuji thought as he clenched his shaking fist.

Forgive me, Kushieda. I couldn’t support you. This is all for your cosplay look.

“M-Minorin! You idiots! Where did you idiots take Minorin?!” Even though she had done nothing but watch so far, Taiga slowly stood up.

“To the morgue!” Haruta said. “It’s the most fitting place for those who try to

settle things with violence!”

“What did you say?!” Taiga barked at Haruta’s blunt response but then curled up and crouched down the next moment.

“R-Ryuuji! What’s a morgue?!”

“It’s where they keep corpses,” said Ryuuji.

“Corpses... Then Minorin is already...!”

“Whoa!”

For some reason, right at that moment, Taiga tried to eat the piece of mango she had left uneaten by stabbing it with the fork—where it was still enshrined in Ryuuji’s palm. Ryuuji put his head down on his desk as he held his hand, which now had a hole in it. Taiga paid no mind to him as she popped the mango into her mouth.

As she chewed she said, “Minorin isn’t here anymore.” Just how nervous was she?

Haruta, for his part, looked around the classroom now that Minori was gone. Kitamura was safe, and they had dispensed of the nuisances. Now he could finally return to the main subject.

“Well then, now that the troublemakers are gone, let’s get back to it! About the cultural festival class exhibition, I have an opinion I won’t hide! That’s a cosplay—”

But.

“Lan...lan la la lan lan lan...lan...lan la la laaaa...”

“Wh-who dares sing?!”

Haruta’s words were interrupted once again. Someone in a corner of the classroom was holding their knees, humming to their own rhythm into the empty void.

Her name was Spinster. No, her name was actually Koigakubo Yuri (age 30), the homeroom teacher.

“I won’t allow it...”

The spinster (age 30) slowly looked around her classroom of students. The large cotton pants that hid her body were beige, the knit V-neck that hid the thickness of her two arms was also beige, and the barely-visible stockings that wrapped around her ankles were beige. This was because you could only wear pink and blue and green into your twenties. Lace was also off limits, as were frills. Ribbons, pleated skirts, and anything that showed your knees were just as bad. It was difficult. This was Koigakubo Yuri's life in her thirties.

Yes, her thirties—the spinster's eyes (aged 30) were suddenly distant.

She had plowed through her opportunities as a college student. She looked down upon her friends who went out to play instead of going to class. She took her teacher-training course seriously.

When she graduated, they were at the peak of the employment glacier period. Around the time her classmates started to tell her they had printed hundreds of resumes that were rejected and failed, and when they started the year by failing to find employment, she was fatefully conquering the mighty hurdle that was her teacher certification exam. Since then, she had been serious about moving up in the world. She was entrusted with the role of a homeroom teacher. She had a bit of a reputation with the students' parents.

With what the salary was in this day and age, she'd been able to save a lot more than if she had been a lousy office lady (she was even paying more than 100,000 yen for rent). During the summer break, she had gone on a trip to Hong Kong with her mother and had even bought a Hermès Garden Party bag!

She had gotten used to her friends from her college days getting married left and right. That was because they were, of course, part of the populace from the glacier generation, and they had a plain college degree that only got them into small and medium-sized companies. The old bubble generation was blocking them from the top, and the new bubble generation was pushing up at them from below. If you were a temp employee, you would want something that was certain, of course. In her position as a government employee, she knew well enough just how much someone could save up. She wouldn't be flustered or jealous anymore because *she* was an adult. No matter what they said, she was *still* thirty. Once she got there, she just thought that this was what being thirty was about.

But.

There was one thing that bothered her.

It seemed her cousin, who was the same age and from the same hometown, had a child going to junior high the next year. She had found out the day before through a phone call with her mom. It wasn't really something she'd wanted to know. That was just how they were out in the countryside.

But, well, junior high though.

Even if she gave birth the next day, it would just mean that her child wouldn't be in junior high until she was forty-three. And then, it wasn't like she could get pregnant the next day or the day after that or the week after that. ...*That's it*, she thought, *that's all...*

"I won't allow it... I won't... I won't allow it at all."

The bachelorette (only 30!) took a step forward like a trainee soldier in the snow in Hakkoda. She roamed through the class as if searching for the future she couldn't see. She arrived at the top of the teacher's platform where Haruta and Ami stood side by side.

"Y-Yuri-chan-sensei?" they said in unison.

"Move aside!"

She pushed Haruta and Ami out of her way. *You insects!* The (just 30!) bachelorette smacked her bachelorette fist against her bachelorette podium. Then she turned a wily look on the class.

"I won't let you do anything fun!"

She breathed out the words a teacher would never be expected to say one at a time.

"A café? No! Making and showing an independent film? Absolutely not! Putting on an original play? Of course I won't allow that! Putting together a live band? Ahhhhhh! That's the number one thing you can't do right now in Japan! Getting everyone excited about something like that within a day is a delusion, after all! Even if you got people excited, you can't do that before Christmas, anyway! As your homeroom teacher, I want everyone to see how harsh reality

is! The whole time I was at my girls' high school, there wasn't anything fun to do. I won't let you... I'll never let you do it! Do you know about the employment glacier?! It was super difficult! Even if you applied to a hundred places, you wouldn't even get a single response! Even if you finally got something, they'd usually tell you after two or three months that they didn't actually want you full-time and would withdraw the offer! You'd have your heart broken by all kinds of rejections, and your personality would change, and even if you got a job, the girl you were friends with since spring of your first year of college would say, 'Your life seems fun. Oh, you bought a car. Hmm. Being a government employee is so easy, how nice. What's your salary? Ohh. But that money's coming from our taxes, isn't it? Hmph.' And then they'd abandon you! Haaaa, haaaa, haaa, haaaa!"

I can't look, thought Ryuuji. Their homeroom teacher (30, crying) had been reduced to a ghoul.

With a snap of Haruta's fingers, the shadow army appeared again.

"I wanted to become a government employee, so I worked hard for it! What's wrong with thaaaaaat..."

They lifted their homeroom teacher over their shoulders and took her to the morgue as well. Haruta was being serious today.

Then there was the sound of someone politely knocking at the door. Kitamura, holding his intact butt, quickly stood up. Through the cracked door, he exchanged a word or two with an ordinary-looking male student from another class—someone who seemed like they were probably from the student council.

"Thank you for the message! I wish you well on your way back!"

They watched as the student (was he skipping class?) saluted and ran away. Then Kitamura barged shamelessly onto the teacher's platform.

"A telegram from the student council! The principle and vice principle have bestowed a decision upon us!"

A telegram? Wasn't that just a human? His classmates tilted their heads.

"This year, the cultural festival is a class battle! We'll be making the class

exhibit a popularity vote with a point score. On top of that, we'll add points for the Miss Festival and Mister Festival pageants, and the class who gets first place will get a luxurious prize! To make it easier to understand, I'll make a diagram..."

In his over-excitement, Kitamura started to draw mysterious circles and arrows that wriggled over the blackboard. "I can't read that!" the class generally remarked.

"Uhh, er! Here are the prizes!"

Scratch, scratch, scratch! This time, the chalk he made dance across the blackboard with heavy strokes left thick marks: One new moisture-controlled air conditioner unit that was going to be installed next year will be preferentially installed sometime within the month.

One standin refrigerator to be installed in the class for a full year.

One of the bathroom's forbidden outlets will be powered back on.

One class to be exempt from common area cleaning duty rotation.

One set of coupons for Market Kanou.

There was rustling. The ones who were stirring had now been the most fundamentally unmotivated to do the cultural festival or anything at all: the girls who had been listlessly holding their faces in their hands.

"...Don't you want AC?"

Yeah, girls get parched.

"...Don't you want a refrigerator?"

Yeah, girls always eat chilled pudding and jelly and want to keep their leftover tea and juice and stuff cold.

"...Don't you want to use the power in the bathrooms?"

Yeah, girls always want to curl their hair in the bathrooms.

"...Don't you want to skip the cleaning?"

Yeah, girls always hate cleaning the bathrooms.

"...Don't you want those coupons?"

That was Ryuuji. Kanou Market was a little out of the way from the Takasu's house, but they had the best stuff around and kept a large variety of products stocked. For that reason, they were just a little more expensive than other places, so he wanted those coupons so badly, he could taste it. He subconsciously licked his lips. Taiga, who was hoarding her mango directly below him, looked up unpleasantly, but he didn't even notice.

"No way, no way, no way! I kind of want to win this!"

"I want to curl my hair! I definitely do!"

The girls were pretty much starting to stand up from excitement, making a high-pitched commotion. *This isn't good if we want things to go smoothly*, thought Ami. Without minding Haruta, she pulled him aside.

"Okaaaay, okay okay, then let's have everyone state their opinions all around? I'll write them on the board. Hey, Yuusaku, you're in the way. Hurry up and get off."

Ami pushed Kitamura off the platform, and without hesitation, erased all the words he had scrawled on the board. In their place, she wrote "Your Opinions Please. ♥" She turned her angelic smile on the class. The pressure was on from the stirring girls, but the one who gathered his café to make the first move towards certain victory was Noto.

"Y-yeah, yeah, yeah! How about a cosplay café!"

Fiiiiiiinally someone said it! Natural applause broke out from the boys, Haruta included.

"Whaaaaaaaaaat?!"

Faster than Ami could write it on the board, the girls were booing on a large scale.

"Isn't that super nerdy?! This is bad, this is bad! It! Is! Bad!"

"Come to think of it, we'll definitely overlap with another class."

"I'd neeeever want to do that!"

"What do the boys think they're going to cosplay?! A bottom feeder or something?! Huh?!"

“Anyway, you’re just going to make Ami-chan wear something super risqué so you can just enjoy yourselves, aren’t you?!”

“Perverts, perverts!”

“You perverts! Go extinct!”

Showered with a concentration of abusive fire, Noto was practically close to tears.

“Right. We can just switch it so the boys do their best at the front and the girls work the back. How about a host club or something?”

Pushing up her softly curled hair, Kashii Nanako spoke in a voice that seemed like it could melt. The mole near her mouth had an allure unlike that of a high school student. *That’s it.* Maya also clapped her hands together in support.

“As expected of Nanako. That’s a great proposal! Isn’t it super great? A host club! A host club!”

Hmm, hmm, a host club, Ami wrote in nice penmanship on the blackboard. This was bad. As they felt the conversation heading in a different direction, the boys avoided each other’s gazes. Then another tribulation paid them a visit.

“Wouldn’t you rather have a drag queen bar? That’d definitely be a laugh.”

What could you call this other than a tribulation?

“Ahh, now we’re talking.”

“No one would ever accept a host club unless everyone’s handsome, right?”

“We just have to go for making them laugh.”

“If Takasu-kun cross-dressed, that would be super funny, right?”

“M-me...?”

Ryuuji lowered his face, quaking with astonishment. He heard Ami sputter from the platform.

“Puh.”

As ever, Taiga, who was clinging to his desk, said, “No one would be laughing. They don’t understand it at all... They don’t understand the power of Ryuuji’s

face. It's okay, Ryuuji, I won't ever let them do that." She strangely and calmly seemed to be against the idea, though her words hurt him even further.

But it didn't end there. One girl from the troop of fujoshi, who were usually always in their own world of inside jokes and didn't participate in the classroom much, looked strangely happy as she stood up.

"Instead of cross-dressing, how about a BL café? A butler top and a domineering bottom who sometimes hate each other and sometimes love each other. They'll be impolite to the customers...or something like that! How about it!"

"Hm, mmhmm-what?! A love-hate relationship and being rude to customers... how is that useful?!"

"Actually, what would you think about putting on a play like that instead?!"

"Oh, that'd be fine. You're worthy of nomination as a lady in a leading role! You're a master!"

"You cute, rotten girls, you make sure you keep a tight grip on Granny!"

"Granny-sama, is this what they call BL theater?!"

"Nooo! Kyaaa! Who's the top going to be?! Do they have to speak politely?! What about glasses?! What about white coats?!"

"We'd definitely need to have Granny-sama write the script!"

"Kyaaa! The draaaaft! Yahoo! auctions aren't allowed!"

Though the fujoshi were still pretty much unintelligible, the other girls were applauding them.

"Shouldn't we just say it's decided?"

"This is completely perfect, isn't it?"

The girls were getting worse. Their piercing shrieks deafened everyone, so there weren't any boys left who could say anything. Everyone other than Kitamura had their ears covered, their eyes closed, and were on individual trips to different universes.

Guh, Haruta gasped.

Using the desk to bear his weight as he stood, he bitterly raised his voice.

“W-we won’t get anywhere like this! Since it’s come to this, we’ll take a decisive vote! Everyone, put down what you want to do on paper! Once you write it, pass them all to the front! Toss them in this convenience store bag!”

He was cutting off the likely flow towards defeat. It was a great proposal. After shooing Taiga back to her seat, Ryuuji wrote *cosplay café*, of course. All the other boys had definitely written it, too. No matter how motivated the girls were, they were just a disorderly gathering, after all. They weren’t a threat to the solid monolith that was the boys.

Or they shouldn’t have been.

“All right!” said Haruta. “Has everyone written what they want?! Shake! And! Lottery! It’s sudden death! When we chose the competition between Ami-chan and Tiger in our class, we did it like this so it was impartial, too! Whether you’re smiling or crying, don’t complain! This is it!”

“Okay!” the girls replied.

A lottery?

Sudden death?

This is it?

Wait...

Haruta smiled before the eyes of the boys, who had their hands stretched out in protest and were half standing. He pulled out one piece of paper.

“I’m announcing it! For this year’s cultural festival, our class 2-C’s exhibition is pro—huhh?!”

The paper fluttered down and dropped from Haruta’s hand. Ami quickly grabbed it from beside him.

“Uhhh, what? What? What is this?! A p-pro-wrestling show, and in parentheses it says, ‘no kayfabe’... What is this?! Who wrote this?!”

“Don’t screw with me! What’s wrong with all of you?! It’s not a cosplay café?!”

Ryuuji suddenly, composedly admonished Haruta, who was yelling beside Ami.

“Actually,” he said, “why didn’t you decide by majority rules...?”

They were in silence for a good five seconds.

“Huh?!” said Haruta.

The boys all put their heads on their desks and sobbed. *What do you mean, huh? Why is Haruta so stupid? He really must have bribed his way into this school...*

In the back of the classroom, which had two entrances, someone was snickering at the pandemonium.

“You thought you could throw out your homeroom teacher... Remember this... You remember this...”

She had returned to the earthly plane on her own power. Her vote was meant to rile them up. Nonchalant and covered in dust, the one who had spectacularly won the sudden death lottery through the power of sheer luck was the spinster (age 30).

Next to her was a dusty body that had also escaped the morgue. It had used up all its strength right before the vote and was slumped over, clinging to the spinster’s legs. It was Minori. In her hand was a note that she hadn’t been able to cast in the ballot. It had *haunted house* written on it.

Well, in situations like this, what was one to do?

“Well, setting that aside!”

Haruta casually stole the paper from Ami’s hand, crumpled it, and threw it somewhere. No one reproached him. Even if they had to do it after school, they could redo everything according to plan without their homeroom teacher.

Now now, we’ve forgotten it all, said Haruta’s body language as he once again leaned over the teacher’s desk. Beside the chairperson, Ami adjusted her bangs, and her angelic smile floated back on her face.

“Uhh,” said Haruta, “we’re starting the long homeroom! The topic is the cultural festival! So, come to think of it, right, right, we don’t have much time

left, but don't we have to pick a girl to be our Miss Festival pageant entry?"

"What about the Mister Festival?" someone asked.

"The guidelines for that will be announced the day of the cultural festival. Well actually, for our class, we don't really have to choose or anything. Right, Ami-chan?"

Ami's eyes opened so wide they seemed about to drop out of their sockets.

"Huh? Me? H-huh, what, what, whaaat? No way, I have no idea what you're talking about!"

"You're doing that again! You know just as well! If you're our candidate, Ami-chan, it's the same as us winning the Miss Festival!"

This time around, there was no contestation among the class. They all nodded in agreement with Haruta's words, thinking the same thing: *If Ami represents the class as Miss Festival, it's a sure thing.*

"Whaaat?! No way, no, no, no, not happening!"

Internally, the real Ami was laughing. *If I were representing the class, she thought, we would have been guaranteed victory even before prerecorded history, gah ha ha!* But Ami's goody-two-shoes exterior hunched her back like a shrimp and waved both of her hands. "No, no." She retreated until her butt hit the blackboard.

"I'm really taken aback by everyone's feelings, and I'm really, really happy, but actually, I'm going to be emceeing the Miss Festival pageant! Sorry everyone, even though you were nominating little old me!"

What?! The classroom shook with voices of despair as Ami's Chihuahua eyes stayed giddy, taking on a haughty glitter.

"Really?!" said Haruta. "I forgot, actually. I don't remember that at all, but if that's how it is...what should we do? Actually, I feel kind of sad for her..."

His gaze went to the dead spinster (30, close to burning out...) at the back of the classroom. They could have their homeroom teacher as the class representative for Miss Festival. Everyone started agreeing that it could work as a joke, but Ami intercepted that thought.

“Hmmm. That doesn’t seem like it’s allowed, Haruta-kun. According to the guidelines, jokes aren’t allowed this year. In other words, boys aren’t allowed, instructors aren’t allowed, people who aren’t in the class—cartoon characters, students’ family members, and so on aren’t allowed. They said we have to choose one representative from the girls in the class.”

As though the earlier rise in spirits had never happened, the second-year class C fell into silence. All of them were flummoxed.

They had to choose just one girl—the cutest girl from the class.

And the cutest girl couldn’t be Ami, the established pro-model.

It stood to reason they would be perplexed. If anything, the seventeen-year-olds were part of the Yutori education generation. Not “there can be only one”, but rather, “everyone.” They had been taught from birth to believe everyone was beautiful and everyone was great. For the most part, no one had ever asked them to rank people by how cute their faces were.

“I think Aisaka-san would be great.”

“Whaat?!”

The one who’d voiced this unexpected opinion was Ami, looking down on Taiga spitefully from the teacher’s platform. She narrowed her eyes and laughed—*nha ha*—completely ignoring the din of the class. Taiga, who had been on the verge of dozing off, jumped up and glared at Ami as though trying to shoot her down with her gaze. Ami easily evaded her.

“See,” she said, “because Aisaka-san is super teeny-tiny and adorable. She’s popular enough here to have her own cute nickname—I mean, Palmtop Tiger? Don’t you think she’d get a lot of votes~? Wouldn’t she? ♥”

“I don’t need any votes!” said Taiga. “What’re you saying, you super dim Dimhuahua?! Why have I got to do something like that?!”

Taiga’s mouth was gleaming from the shiny juice of the mango. She practically kicked her seat away as she stood up.

“Ohh...” said a classmate, “but I think that’s a good idea, too.”

“The Tiger really is famous...”

“The Tiger might be the only one in the class who could actually get votes.”

“Sh-shut uuup!” Taiga barked, her voice suddenly larger than anyone thought her body could hold. The class hesitated and grew quiet for a moment.

Ami smiled all the more.

“What?” she said. “You. Can’t. Do. That. Tiger-chan. As someone who’s a member of the class, you have to go along with events like this and participate. ♥”

She even gave Taiga an obvious, nearly audible wink—*Dink*, it seemed to say—as she added fuel to the fire.

“Dimhuahua, you... If you don’t get what I’m telling you, fine! I’ll finish this with my own two hands, and then I’ll wipe the cultural festival and the school—all of it—from existence!”

Taiga easily hoisted her desk above her head so all of the things inside of it clattered down to the ground. She was poised to hurl it clear over the teacher’s platform. The people in the desk’s path towards Ami screamed as they scrambled away: *Kyaah kyaah!*

“Well, well, keep it under control!” said Kitamura. “Aisaka, you might actually win, though. I thought you were a good choice, too.”

“Ahh...”

As Kitamura’s voice came to her ear, Taiga wilted. The corner of the desk she was holding fell on the crown of her head with a *CLUNK!* Due to the natural consequences of her actions, she collapsed to her knees.

“T-Taiga?! Are you okay?!”

Flustered, Ryuuji went to support the desk, but he was already too late.

“...Who were you again?”

That matchless klutz, Aisaka Taiga, had been robbed of every single one of her memories. *Whoa*, thought Ryuuji, taken aback.

“Then we’ve decided on Aisaka-san!” As everyone took shelter in a corner of the classroom, Ami’s voice rose behind Ryuuji, and a wave of applause followed

suit.

Incidentally, the spinster (working hard to make it to 31) had already vanished from the classroom.

Unnoticed, she had written up the formal plan for the exhibition setup and gone back to the staff room to present it. Of course, the contents of the plan were “Pro-wrestling show (no kayfabe).” She had even stamped it with her homeroom teacher seal.

Haruta’s shallow slyness in trying to table the exhibition plan was no match for a spinster with eight years of experience working as a teacher and twelve years of living alone.

Chapter 2

Didn't we have green onions?" said Ryuuji.

"This isn't a joke," said Taiga. "Ugh, I hate it, I hate it, I hate it, I hate it way too much!"

"Did we have bell peppers? And we just need a little bit of shiitake...and..."

"That Dimhuahua! If we meet again between lives, I'm going to make sure to knock her through multiple levels of hell!"

"We had two or three sausages... Well, I guess we'll have those in the bento..."

"Hey, what should we do?! Do you think it's really set in stone?!"

"Hey, what should we do? Do you think we really do need shredded cabbage?"

"..."

In the middle of their cross-purposes conversation, Taiga wordlessly went into a "Yay" pose and put up her thumb as she turned around. The next moment, a high-pitched scream echoed into the night sky and took a protracted time to trail off.

On the road lined with Zelkova trees, where housewives rode bikes loaded with groceries and junior high students laughed loudly as they went, Ryuuji fluttered to his knees. A dog pulled its owner by the leash to curiously sniff Ryuuji mid-walk.

Taiga (who had her memories back, it seemed) hadn't kicked him. She hadn't even punched him, or strangled him, either.

"You learned your lesson?"

It had just been with one thumb. With that one thumb, Taiga had just dug slightly into Ryuuji's left side. With just that one touch, Taiga's small fingertip had caused Ryuuji enough pain to make everything in front of his eyes go white.

A masochist couldn't have had a more efficient master. Unfortunately, Ryuuji wasn't a masochist.

"Wh-what are you doing?!" he said.

Taiga stood imposingly while Ryuuji held his side, which was still pulsing. He glared at her like something out of the Samurai Reincarnation movie.

"The heart of shiatsu is my heart," said Taiga. "Your pressure points are my pressure points."

Bam bam bam bam! Under a rain of lightning-quick, torturous acupuncture practice swings, his body trembled of its own volition, and he turned his eyes away. Where in the world had she learned that technique? Frightened, Ryuuji looked down. Taiga narrowed her satisfied eyes, which were clouded with sadism.

"You end up like this because you don't take my troubles seriously," she said. "So quit fooling around when you're discussing this with me. I'm actually really upset about this. No matter how much it's in your nature to be a dog, if you actually stop being a human at heart, then you really are done for."

"I've been listening this whole time!" said Ryuuji.

"Wheeeen?!"

"I'm telling you I've been listening the entire time! Aren't I the one who's always saying it?! I said to give up and have fun during the class events every once in a while! But you're always complaining, like blah blah blah, but but but! And you keep rejecting the message I've been giving you!"

"But I can't help not wanting to do it." Taiga haughtily snorted, looked at him, and arrogantly stuck up her chin. Against the vermillion-dyed sky, her wind-blown, pale hair fluffed up like a cloud. Her rosebud lips and her doll-like delicateness were outlined beautifully as well. Ryuuji looked up at that displeased but beautiful face. As he held his side, he lumbered back up.

"You're petty," he said.

He bluntly pointed out the reality of the situation. If she hadn't given him the pressure point attack earlier, he would have just given her platitudes like,

“Kitamura said you’d be great at it,” or “You can definitely win, so it’s fine.”

But at those words, Taiga went, “Ugh...” and held her chest as she bit her lip.

Frustrated wrinkles broke out on her forehead. He thought she would have been surprised, but somehow she seemed conscious of her own pettiness.

Serves you right. Ryuuji then dealt the finishing blow.

“You don’t have any space to spare in your heart,” he said, “and you’re trying to live without making any room in it.”

He used his words as a weapon. She could take a taste of her own medicine every once in a while.

Taiga glared at Ryuuji in frustration, but he had hit right on the truth of the matter, so she couldn’t find a retort. Instead, in desperation, she complained, “Well, you’ve been kind of all jolly wolly lately...”

“Jolly wolly? Me? When?”

He had no memory whatsoever of being “jolly wolly.” It had just been a month since they had started the new school semester. If Taiga was referencing Ryuuji’s tender spot, Minori, then she was unthinkably off the mark. Lately, Ryuuji had felt an indefinite distance from Minori. Taiga being unaware of that made him all the more depressed. Because of that, the remark hit him even harder than she had probably intended it to.

“Hey, according to you, when was I jolly wolly? You’ve got no idea what you’re talking about.”

“It’s fine. Just forget it, mottled mutt.”

“Who’s mottled?”

“You are...”

Taiga didn’t seem to be enjoying herself much. She lost interest and simply turned on her heel. She started walking briskly away, displeased.

“Look,” she said, “let’s go. The limited time sale at the super will start soon. You’re getting pork, aren’t you? On top of that, you definitely need cabbage. Hey, what are you dawdling around for? You really are like a stray mutt to the end. Give me a break.”

You're the one who was dawdling and complaining, thought Ryuuji. The reason why I couldn't walk in the first place was because of you hitting one of my pressure points...

Ryuuji started walking slightly behind Taiga in sullen silence. He swallowed his insufficient complaints, and they headed together to their regular supermarket. Taiga's request for that night's menu was pork fried with ginger. Actually, if he were going to be surrounded by the aura of the pork lining the supermarket shelves, he might as well buy some ribs to stew them. Then he remembered the necessary ingredient for both those menus.

"Right, come to think of it, we ran out of ginger. And Yasuko asked us to get a face cleanser... Taiga, give me your living expenses for this month."

Jogging, he went after Taiga and put out his hand right beside her.

"What?" she said. "Right now?"

"I don't know if I'll have enough on hand for shopping."

"Oh, oh, I see, magistrate-sama."

"Why do you have to go out of your way to complain about every little thing?"

Taiga, who pretty much depended on Ryuuji for three meals a day, handed over 10,000 yen to Ryuuji each month for food, living expenses, and everything in between. Despite her mouth, she didn't make a foul face at him, but rummaged through her bag until she pulled out a pink, sequined, cat-face wallet. On top of that, she dropped her highlighters, reference books, printouts, and other things all over the street.

"Y-you...should organize those a little more..."

Taiga let Ryuuji pick everything up and peeked into the cat face. "Oh," she said. "I've got to go to the bank. I don't have any money at all."

She started walking briskly. Receipts and all kinds of other things fluttered from the cat-face wallet. She let Ryuuji pick all those up, too. She was headed towards a convenience store with an ATM.

"Oh," Taiga said, "there's oden."

“Yeah, you’re right. It’s already the time of year for that.”

When they passed through the automatic door together, they knew the impending arrival of fall from the smell of oden that filled the store. Taiga simply sniffed as she wavered towards the oden. Ryuuji grabbed her by the scruff and switched her direction towards the ATM. Thinking he’d flip through magazines as he waited, he browsed the colorful shelves. But eventually...

“Huh? Why?”

He heard an electronic noise. Taiga tilted her head in puzzlement.

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s weird. I can’t get money out. Why? What’s going on?”

“You shouldn’t show that stuff to other people... Wait, your balance is zero.”

He tried to avert his eyes after she showed him the details, but for a moment he saw an unmistakable figure that firmly burned itself into his eyes. Taiga’s account balance was zero yen. She couldn’t withdraw from that. Ryuuji looked down at Taiga’s sour face in shock.

“You can’t get money out when your balance is zero. Seriously, you klutz. Well, tomorrow’s fine. I’ll get the money for today’s shopping out of my account.”

He pulled out a cash card from the red leather bag that was used for the household expenses and tried to stick it into the ATM. He did so without any hesitation because the account didn’t charge a fee when the card was used in a convenience store. Ryuuji didn’t miss things when it came to household financial management. But Taiga stopped him.

“No! Wait!”

“Why? Don’t worry about the fees.”

“That’s not it! This is weird... This is definitely weird! I can’t believe it!”

“Even if you don’t believe it, you can’t do anything about it. You don’t have money in the account. Look, really, don’t make such a commotion. You’ll cause trouble for other people.”

“But I had money just last week when I withdrew from it! Even after a withdrawal, there should be some money left over, right? It’s unbelievable that it’s exactly zero yen. He puts money in every month—that’s it.”

Taiga quickly clamped her mouth shut and glared at the card she hadn’t been able to use as though it were the enemy.

“It’s because I’ve been ignoring his phone calls this whole time...”

“Wh-what?” said Ryuuji.

“So he did something like this...”

“Oh, sorry. Anyway, let’s free up the ATM. Come over here, we’re leaving.”

He grabbed Taiga, who had stopped moving, and apologized to the person waiting behind them. Ryuuji went outside the convenience store. In order to keep them from being a nuisance, he pushed Taiga beside the trash cans.

“What did you say? What happened all of a sudden?”

“I can’t believe it,” said Taiga. “Doing it like this. This is why I hate him...”

She continued staring down as though she had frozen in place. She continued to glare at the cash card. Even when the wind ruffled her hair and made it stick to her lip-balmed lips, she didn’t move at all.

“I don’t really get it but...are you okay?” said Ryuuji.

He used his fingers to pull her hair aside for her and bent over to take a glance at Taiga’s expression. Taiga pushed him away as though he were being too nosy.

“Since a little while ago,” she eventually muttered, “that person—my dad—has been calling me over and over. But it was irritating, so I ignored them all. I erased all the voicemails, too. Then he emptied the living expenses in my account.”

“That’s...”

Terrible, is how Ryuuji wanted to continue, but he hesitated.

He didn’t know who was terrible—whether it was the daughter who ignored her parent’s phone calls despite receiving living expenses, or the one stealing

the living expenses...or rather, taking back the living expenses they'd provided. It was probably the father who was toying with his daughter's livelihood who was terrible. Ryuuji didn't know. Even if he'd had a father, the Aisaka father-daughter relationship was too complicated for him to understand.

Taiga, of course, seemed to think that her father was the one to blame.

"That cruddy old man..." she said, her voice hoarse, turning into a groan. "I want to kill him...for real..."

She tried to crush the cash card in her hand. Ryuuji took it away in a panic and put it into the cat wallet.

"You can't say something like that about your parents."

Pretending he knew something by using ethics as a shield, he admonished Taiga with words that actually rung hollow in a time like this. As though seeing through all his intentions, Taiga's eyes filled with a cold light. She glared at him as though he were stupid. He didn't have any reply, so he could only take the glare and be troubled by it.

Then, as though it had been timed deliberately, Taiga's cellphone buzzed in her jacket pocket. Taiga grabbed the phone strap and dragged it out violently. She flipped it open.

"This has got to be a threat," she said as she took in the name on the screen.

She wasn't looking anywhere in particular as her mouth formed a thin smile. At just that face, Ryuuji knew that the person who was calling over the phone was exactly who he imagined it to be.

"Answer it for now," he said. "Nothing will come of it if you don't talk anyway. And if you don't have money, you're in trouble, right?"

After saying that, Ryuuji simply left Taiga where she was and went into the convenience store again. He looked around the magazine shelf and at milk confections Taiga would probably like, and he side-eyed the drinks as he went into the candy aisle. He checked several new candies he wasn't familiar with and intentionally slowed down to look down at the appliance that housed the oden beside the register. However, not a single one of the contents in the oden penetrated his head.

He mechanically estimated the time, and pretending not to check on Taiga, he glanced through the glass of the storefront. He knew that she had finished her call from her closed flip phone. Her shapely face was contorted into a hard-edged expression. He watched up until she put her phone away in her pocket.

Once she did that, he casually returned to Taiga with sure footing.

"It was your dad?" he asked.

He held his breath, trying his best to avoid creating an unnecessary breeze. Their strange child-parent relationship was like walking a tightrope.

"...Ryuuji," said Taiga, her voice firm. She was still looking away. "You have time right now, right?"

"No, I need to go to the supermarket."

"I'll do the shopping. Give me the money. If there isn't enough, hurry and withdraw some. You're not going shopping. You're going to the second-floor café in the station building right now. Look, um, it's next to the general store where I bought that pouch the other day, the smoke-free place with the bagels."

"Huh?"

"You don't know where it is? The day when we had a ton of rain, we went there when we didn't have umbrellas to kill some time with Minorin and Dimhuahua, didn't we? You had a coffee and I had a salmon bagel—"

"That's not what I mean. Why am I not going shopping?"

"Minorin and Dimhuahua split a cheese toast, and Dimhuahua was saying her mouth hurt, and she had TMI or something, so she couldn't open her mouth much."

"She had TMJ. No, it's not that, it's not about the café. I don't understand what you mean at all."

"You understand."

"I don't."

"...So you don't."

Taiga swallowed her words a little. She tilted her head to the side several times as though she were thinking about what she was going to say.

“You’re going to go to that café in my place. You’re going to meet with him on my behalf, and you’re going to get the money back. That’s fine, right?”

Ryuuji grasped the situation properly.

“No way!” he said.

“Why not?!” Taiga’s voice echoed even louder than his. “Go for me! It’s fine! You can do it! Go get it! Go!”

Unwilling to lose, Ryuuji made his voice a step louder.

“No way! If it’s fine, then you go! Why do I have to talk to your dad about something so weird?!”

“It’s not that you have to do it, I just want you to go! Please, I’m begging you!”

“It’s impossible! Your father doesn’t know me in the first place, right?! If some guy he doesn’t know with a face like this goes and says to him, ‘I came to get your daughter’s money!’ it seems crazy suspicious! If it were me, I wouldn’t hand over the money to a guy like that!”

“You can explain, can’t you?! You have a mouth, don’t you?! Or did you forget Japanese, you dog brain!”

“Whaaat?! Is that the attitude you take when you’re asking someone a favor?!”

“It’s fine, just listen to what I’m saying!”

“Don’t toy with me!”

Unsatisfied with their shouting match, they started to get into a real squabble. They shoved each other in front of the store, winding up in a contest of strength, but neither of them would back down.

“Please! I’m begging you! C’mon, go! I haven’t asked you for anything up until now, have I?!”

“You! Definitely! Have! You ask me for stuff every day, and I do it for you! Last

night, you lost your TV remote control and said, ‘I can’t find it! Please, look for it!’ and I spent two hours looking for it!”

“What a cold-hearted person! You’re unreliable! Look, just go! Please! Go for me! Then I’ll help you with cleaning up dinner and everything! I’ll even wash all the dishes! I’ll do it tomorrow and the day after, too! Please, go...please!”

“Whoa!”

BAM! One of them was pushed over, right into the middle of the cold gazes of the passersby. The one who had been pushed over onto his butt was Ryuuji. Taiga had pulled back. Ryuuji, who had come to a stop, tried to get up, thinking of running away.

“Please...!”

The words from Taiga’s mouth weren’t, “Look what you did,” or even “You should have listened in the first place.” The words were an entreaty so delicate it seemed it could vanish into thin air. Her brows were knitted together, and her mouth was set in a thin frown. She crouched slightly by Ryuuji’s side and grabbed his sleeve. She shook him.

“Please, Ryuuji...”



“Seriously...what’re you saying...”

“Please...”

Taiga continued to jerk Ryuuji’s sleeve with her small, pale hands until he nodded. Her pitiful face was still turned down.

When Taiga had seen the root of Ryuuji’s psychological complex, which was a picture of a person, she laughed.

It was of the horrible look in his eyes. Of the terrible look on his face. Of the features he could do nothing about, the features that could only be seen as that of a gangster. It was of an aura that was so ominous that it could only frighten the general populace. Most of those characteristics were spectacularly imbued in Ryuuji. The person in the photo who was the origin of those genes was his father, whose current whereabouts and status were unknown.

Seeing the man in that photo, Taiga had laughed loudly until she cried that night at the family restaurant. *What is that? You look exactly like him; you’re the spitting image*, she writhed.

Ryuuji thought about it. That meant he had the right to laugh right now, too.

“Right...I see. I get it. Anyway, my daughter isn’t coming.”

“Yes...I’m sorry.”

After looking at the note Ryuuji asked Taiga to write, the man before him, who appeared to be in his forties, rubbed his eyes. He seemed glum. With one look at his hand and build, which could only be described as compact, it was obvious he was Taiga’s father.

This is my friend Takasu Ryuuji. Give the money to him. Taiga. He folded the note Taiga had scrawled as though it were precious. The father of the Aisaka household put it inside his expensive jacket’s inner pocket. Ryuuji didn’t normally make a habit of ogling people, but he still followed the man’s movements with his eyes regardless. The man was too unusual. He was a type of person Ryuuji had never seen before.

Just what kind of job would let him wear clothes like this and have free time

during a weeknight? He didn't have a single wrinkle on his sort-of-casual-looking high-collared shirt, which he wore under his jacket. The shirt seemed silky and lustrous. You could tell at a single glance that it was well tailored, or meant to look that way. He didn't have a necktie. Instead, he wore a loose silk scarf around his neck in an elegant knot. No matter how you looked at him, he was obviously not a so-called salary man. You could tell with decisive certainty that he had money.

But, thought Ryuuji, well, it's not like I get the sense I don't like him.

So, even though he didn't know much else about the man, in his mind, Ryuuji stamped a brazen "pass" mark over Taiga's father's face. He seemed okay. He seemed fine. He was chic and didn't give Ryuuji a bad vibe. The jacket, beige as an arm with a light tan, suited him. Ryuuji hadn't thought a Japanese man of that age could be so well dressed.

To be clear though, he didn't think the man was handsome. Compared to Taiga, who looked exactly like a French doll in face and figure, the fashionable man in front of his eyes, frankly, couldn't be described as having a handsome face. As far he could see, though, the impression the guy gave off was pleasant.

"Sorry Taiga's using you, uhh, Takasu-kun," he said. "I wanted to do anything to see Taiga. This was my last resort, but...I think she hates me more for it."

"Ah..."

"...Takasu-kun, are you angry?"

"No...my eyes are just that way."

"O-oh, I see. Sorry."

It wasn't his eyesight that was bad but the look in his eyes. Ryuuji's words still seemed to put Taiga's father at ease. His slightly stiff shoulders relaxed and something like a smile came on his face for the first time. When he took out his cigarettes, the crocodile skin watch on his arm and all its elaborate inner workings showed. The gold casing was so polished it shot a glaring light into Ryuuji's eyes. The clock face was made to be see-through to show the machinery and the dizzying delicacy that had gone into its making. The beauty of it made Ryuuji want to stare at it for ages, but he faltered.

“Um,” he said, “this café seems to be smoke-free.”

Just before the man was able to light his vintage-looking streamlined oil lighter, Ryuuji stopped him. Taiga’s father’s eyes went wide, and he looked around as though grasping the situation.

“Really?!” he said. “I see! I see... So this place is smoke-free, too... Lately, I haven’t been able to smoke anywhere. Ahhh...my daughter hates me, and I’m ashamed to be a smoker... I feel like the whole world hates me.”

He sighed deeply and rubbed his face like a cat as he sullenly put away his cigarettes.

“Uhh...would you like to go outside?”

“It’s okay, you haven’t even had any of your coffee. Well, I haven’t either.” Then he suddenly pushed the menu toward Ryuuji and flapped his hand like a bird. “Now that it’s come to this, order whatever you’d like. Have cake or anything you’d like now.”

“Oh, no... I’m fine...” said Ryuuji. “We’re having dinner soon, so...”

“Ahhh.” The man held his head in his hands again and put it down on the table.

“O-oh, um...uhh, I’ll have something. I’ll have this egg bagel...”

“Really?! Excuse me. Young lady, could we order?”

The sudden smile on his raised face really didn’t look much like Taiga’s. His wide forehead, which seemed to be showing his age, only had a single slightly familiar wrinkle. Taiga’s father was small though. To put it baldly, he might have been even shorter than Yasuko. He was also narrow-shouldered. The hand beckoning the waitress was small and so were his trimmed nails. Ryuuji hummed in admiration again at seeing the way the nails practically gleamed, as though they were hydrated. It was like they had cream on them. This man was even taking good care of his hands.

“I have an additional order,” he said. “He would like an egg bagel. And...I’ll have this salmon bagel, I guess. What’s in it? Is there cream cheese in it? Oh, there is. Then I’ll have that. Load it with a looooot of cheese. Put on as much as

you can. I'm counting on you!"

"Do you like cheese?"

"Huh?! How did you know?!"

Without thinking, Ryuuji looked at Taiga's father in shock as he breathed out a long sigh, just like he always did with Taiga. Taiga's father smiled happily, *How? Hey, how?* He was waiting for Ryuuji's response.

Anyway, how should I put this—though it was only a fraction of what Taiga had, it seemed the guy had what could only be called charm. Even though he was an older man, he was smiling strangely amiably and his large eyes moved restlessly.

"But well, bagels...hmm hmm, there are some pretty fashionable stores around here, too. I wonder if they're targeting women. These would be good for office ladies who are on the way home. And the interior design is pretty nice here. It has a Scandinavian vibe; there are a lot of girls who like this plain look. How is it as a boy? Would you come here alone?" he asked suddenly.

"No, I could never come alone," said Ryuuji. "Lately, I've liked chic places that use the colors of wood... Something harder, with a lot of rugged knots, but that's dignified... Yeah, like chestnut."

He'd spoken too honestly.

"Oh, our interests match!" said Taiga's father, his voice full of admiration. "Me too. I like dark wood colors. Either chestnut or oak—things that have faux striation or purposefully have rough walls with thick paint positioned against a stark dark brown. I want it to have casual lighting and for the chairs to be roughly made. I want the kitchen to say *kitchen!* I want it to show all that stainless steel."

"And a floor that makes a sound when you step on it in boots," said Ryuuji, "that's super thick and hard."

"And that's filled with tons of ashtrays."

"And like, pendant lights over the tables."

"Right, right, right, that's nice! Some dark orange antique thing! A man's

world!”

That’s it! Ryuuji wanted to joke, but he swallowed his words in a fluster. He was talking to an old man and one he’d never talked to before at that. He couldn’t get carried away and be rude.

That was close—he had almost been drawn in. Ryuuji sipped his coffee and gave himself a chance to cool down. He needed to err on the side of not saying too much, but he couldn’t keep his smile down.

He was a little happy. He had been told their interests matched. As an avid reader of interior design magazines, to get to talk to someone who had such refined tastes was already worth its weight in gold.

That said, it seemed Taiga’s father was happy to have had a conversation about taste with a high school boy. The depression that had been over him up until that point had gone somewhere else, and the man’s eyes glittered. He was looking around the café filled with more curiosity than ever. He hit the table happily with his fist, hit the walls, and he was leaning forward to look at the indirect lighting.

Thinking about it, this was the first time in his life that Ryuuji had ever been face to face with a man of this age in private. At the same time he realized that, Ryuuji was suddenly confused about what to talk about next. If he could, he wanted to stop while they were still enjoying themselves. Basically, he wanted to end it here, finish his business, and go home. It seemed that Taiga’s father’s interest hadn’t stopped there though. He took the tablecloth in his hands, looked at it, then turned over the menu and looked at it from corner to corner. He stood up to look at the decorative postcards. “Oh, a photo. I thought it was a drawing.”

Guess you would call this going at the beat of your own drum, Ryuuji thought.

“Right, before I forget,” said Taiga’s father, “here’s this. This is the point, right? Make sure to give it to her. I guess my mission was a failure. Taiga was mad, right? I felt murder coming through the phone receiver...”

“Oh, well, kind of—whoa!”

Even as he vaguely nodded, Ryuuji was astonished by the weight of the

envelope he had finally received. *Are the insides all ten thousand yen notes? It's super thick and super heavy... Just how much money is in this?* He couldn't imagine. Just thinking about having to bring it home made his underarms sweat strangely. It was a lot of money, *really* a lot of money. He had no idea Taiga was receiving this much...

"Make sure to tell her I'll put money in like usual next month."

"Uhhh..."

Next month? If they had just this much money, the Takasu household of just one parent and child could probably have lived for half a year with some to spare. Next month was just in a few days. It was absurd.

Taiga's father didn't seem to notice any bit of Ryuuji's nervousness. The man let out a small sigh and put his head in his small hands.

"I really wanted to see her, no matter what. Oh well, she won't even let me hear her voice, so... Anyway, she's been well. I wanted to see her face so much I had something important to talk to her about."

That's when it happened.

After he stopped talking, Ryuuji suddenly saw genuine sadness in the man's profile. The envelope in Ryuuji's hand was heavy, and he felt a painful, rough sense of incongruity.

The man had remarried and furnished Taiga, who had become a nuisance, with a condo. He had kicked her out of his home. Taiga's father was a cold-blooded man who could do something like that. Taiga had told him that, and Ryuuji had thought that was the truth. *But.*

Would a man like that make a face like this? Would a man like that sigh like this? Would he have such heavy shadows under his eyes?

Ryuuji didn't really know him, but he started to think that he couldn't. He was troubled by the question of what to do with the heavy envelope and kept it held in both his hands.

Taiga's father didn't once look at the envelope that was filled with that sense of incongruity.

“Well then,” he said, “is Taiga doing well? She’s not worried about anything? Umm, how do I say this... You...are you with Taiga? Are...are you dating?”

Caught by surprise, Ryuuji shook his head furiously.

“No, we’re not. Actually...we’re friends. I live next to that condo, and we somehow figured out we get along. We’re not dating or anything at all... It’s like we’re family or siblings. That’s probably presumptuous of me to say though...”

“I see. I see...”

No matter how well they’d connected through that interior design conversation, Taiga’s father had probably been thinking he would exterminate any rascals that came near his daughter. Knowing the truth, the man brightly nodded happily.

“So, um,” he said. “Taiga isn’t dating any weird fellows, right? Lately there’ve been stalkers and stuff, haven’t there?”

“That’s fine now. Because Taiga is strong.”

“Isn’t she!”

Relief appeared clearly over Taiga’s father’s face as he narrowed his eyes and smiled. He still had wrinkles that he couldn’t get rid of under his eyes.

“Taiga...must have been mad about the account. Yeah. She would be mad...”

He laughed at himself a little.

“When I talked to her over the phone a little, she told me, ‘At least take proper responsibility for the kid you abandoned.’ She must really be thinking that. That she was abandoned.”

“Was she not?”

“She wasn’t.”

For just one moment, a harsh gaze exactly like Taiga’s was intensely turned toward Ryuuji.

“She wasn’t,” he said. “That’s definitely not right. We couldn’t help the divorce. I just couldn’t make it work with her mother at all...and then, I met someone good and remarried. But the person I married was too young and just

couldn't get used to living with Taiga. They had a lot of misunderstandings, and after that their relationship just got worse and went downhill. Taiga and my current wife—her name is Yuu—Taiga and Yuu came to the point where one of them had to leave the house. Then Taiga...”

A waitress brought over their bagels. They were probably about as big as Taiga's face and wrapped up in paper.

“Right...” Taiga's father went on. “Why couldn't I have stopped her back then? I still have dreams about it. It was winter. It was in the middle of winter and a very cold day, and there was snow coming down outside. Inside our house, Taiga was crying like usual. They were shouting and having a huge fight. She threw something at Yuu and gave her a nosebleed... The house was like a battlefield. It was like hell itself. I had just finalized the divorced and remarried, and I thought I'd finally get to bring peace back to the house, and I thought 'How did it come to this?' I was irritated, and I said things that were a little harsh. They weren't meant for Taiga, but...she must have heard it that way. Then, suddenly, Taiga's expression...it was like a light had been switched off.”

Ryuuji looked down at his bagel. It was so big. Could he actually eat it?

“And then in my dreams, as though someone's pulling her by a thread, she just slips away through a crack in the door and disappears. No matter how much I go after her, she always slips away, and I just can't ever catch her... I wonder why I can't grab her? Even in my dreams, I can't grab her. She just slips away from my fingers. I remember what she was wearing. That lavender cashmere cardigan that was tied at the waist with a ribbon. Even though I try to catch her by that, she just slips away. And even when I try grabbing her by her tied up hair, she just slips away—I hear the sound of a gate opening, and it echoes loudly. That's when Taiga leaves...”

As though he were watching some phantom snow, Taiga's father's eyes became distant.

“She never came home again.”

He couldn't look at this. Ryuuji picked the egg bagel up in his hand and took a huge bite. Then, at the next words, he froze.

“I want to live with Taiga. Together again. That's what I wanted to tell her.”

“Uh...”

What was that just now? Ryuuji thought. With his mouth still filled with food, he forgot to chew. His sanpaku eyes were wide open, and he was looking at the man in front of him in a stupor.

The man wanted to live with Taiga. Just now, that’s really what he had heard. He hadn’t misheard, he was certain.

He couldn’t taste anything anymore. He let the dry stuff in his mouth roll around and somehow feigned calmness as he asked what he needed to ask in a low voice.

“But...but, wouldn’t the situation be the same again? Because...because that...”

“It wouldn’t,” said Taiga’s father. “I wouldn’t let it. I now know what I made a mistake in doing. I intend to start over with Taiga, just the two of us. Taiga is my one and only princess. She’s even more important than my life. I definitely won’t make that mistake again... That looks good, that bagel. Maybe I’ll have mine, too.”

He took up his salmon bagel with his small hands and Ryuuji just watched as he pulled back the paper bag wrapping around it. He was weighing the meaning of the man’s words.

I intend to start over with Taiga. So that basically means...

“Um. I’m going to divorce Yuu pretty soon. We’ve decided to, and I’ve finished talking with Yuu. So I can live with Taiga. Because we’re family. Because I love her. I shouldn’t have let her be separated from me in the first place. Next time I see her, I’ll definitely tell her that.”

“That’s—that... Are you serious about it...?”

“I’m serious—oh!”

“Whoa!”

A piece of salmon popped out of the bagel where Taiga’s father tried to bite. Before it could fall onto the table, Ryuuji stopped it with his bare hands without thinking. *What should I do with this?* he thought, as wrinkles formed across his

forehead like a thunderbolt.

“Nice follow through!”

Without hesitation, Taiga’s father took the salmon from Ryuuji’s hand and awkwardly pushed it back into the bagel. He put up his thumb for Ryuuji in a “yay” pose. It seemed that he really did share blood with Taiga. They were exactly the same in how they were klutzes and would immediately get carried away. Then Ryuuji suddenly felt weird. He realized something.

Although the time he had spent sitting with this man and talking had been pretty awkward, he hadn’t disliked it.

He felt a floating feeling, and in his heart, which couldn’t settle itself, Ryuuji was talking to Taiga.

This is bad. Your father said he’s coming back for you.

KA-CHUNK!

The sound echoed.

“It’s fine! Do you have to oversee every little thing I do?!”

“No, it’s fine but...don’t break them?”

“It’s not broken!”

Ryuuji really, really felt that he couldn’t just sit down. He stood right behind Taiga and worriedly looked at her dubious hands.

“You’re nosy. Go away!” Taiga turned to Ryuuji and showed him her sharp canines. If he had carelessly intervened, she definitely would have bit him. He couldn’t leave her alone either though. For Ryuuji, this scene was filled with thrills, shock, and suspense. He anxiously continued to stick by her in the kitchen.

With dangerous handiwork, Taiga randomly piled the dishes in the drying rack. Without batting an eye, she put a heavy earthenware plate diagonally over a small soup bowl.

“Wah!”

“Whoa!”

The plate also made a sound like a shriek and showily fell over inside the stainless steel drying rack. He couldn't watch anymore.

“Look, that's what I mean, you put dinnerware like that here—”

Without thinking, Ryuuji stretched out his itching hands.

“Really! It's fiiine! Don't do anything! I said I'd do it, you boil water and prepare the tea or something!”

“Th—”

“Don't even look at me!”

Taiga snorted roughly and seemed firm about continuing to wash the dishes. That she felt like fulfilling her promise was something to be happy about, but in reality, it was a trap. He couldn't help but feel worried. Taiga wasn't skillful at all. She was sloppy by nature and a klutz who did everything without thinking it through. She scrubbed the dishes one by one with the detergent-filled sponge, put the sponge on the sink rim, and then held each dish with both hands one at a time to rinse them thoroughly. Her method of putting things down was extremely crude. She seemed to have no qualms placing the bowl right side up and letting bubbles from the detergent fly.

Though she was careless, she was strangely sincere. Even so, she wasn't methodical enough. On top of everything else, the water was flying up and splashing the area around the sink. Taiga let her apron get sopping wet and even let the water splatter on the floor.

What bad execution.

At the vexation of not being able to do or say anything, Ryuuji was pretty much being driven up the wall. You were supposed to wash all of them at once, then pile them in a pyramid in the washtub. You could build up the water in the washtub that way to rinse them efficiently without wasting water or detergent. Actually, the amount of water she was letting flow was too much in the first place. If you let the water stream hit something curved while you had the flow at the max...

“Nyaah?!”

Water flew up from the grinding bowl and the area was naturally flooded even more with water. Even her bangs got wet, and Taiga stood bolt upright.

“...”

Ryuuji was already speechless. He started wiping up the water puddles on the floor with a dry dishcloth. Taiga allowed him to be involved to that extent. She wiped at her face with her bubble-smeared hand and continued to wash the dishes.

“Oh!” she said. “No way, you’re washing a parakeet’s food box and human plates together? You’re so thick-skinned.”

The dishcloth in his hand swiftly slipped down.

“That’s not what that is! Are you an idiot?! That’s where I put your side dishes in your bento box!”

“What? Is it?”

“It is! It’s not like I’d wash the bird food box and plates together.”

He had let it slip.

This was bad. In a fluster, he turned around and put on a forced smile, but he was too late. She must have been listening to everything. From inside the birdcage, the ugly parakeet, Inko-chan, was turning a sharp gaze towards him. Her rotting-meat-colored beak had some weird foam dripping from it, and her half-open eyelids fluttered resentfully. Her disordered and ruffled feathers convulsed as she fluffed them up. Her gaze was slightly cross-eyed but arrow sharp. He could see well enough in her expressive face that he had put her in a mood.

“That’s not true, Inko-chan. Please, listen to me. I wasn’t saying that you’re particularly dirty just now, Inko-chan, Taiga was wrong, so my tone was just strong.”

“She’s a bird,” said Taiga. “She doesn’t UN-DER-STAND Japanese!”

He didn’t know who taught her, but Inko-chan had a splendid command of Japanese. The expression on her face was suddenly dreadful, and on top of that,

she continued to stare at Ryuuji. She lowered her head and took three steps, then lost her balance.

“...I! Uh! ...Dung! No, Dung-ko-cha—...Huh...?”

It seemed Inko-chan had forgotten everything. Suddenly, she opened her beak up wide and let her eyes wander absentmindedly. As though trying to remember what she was doing, she started preening herself. Then she started pecking at her Japanese mustard.

I see. Ryuuji smacked his fist into his palm. Amazingly, her tiny birdbrain had forgotten everything with just three steps. They could continue their relationship as pet and owner without a grudge between them.

“Oh, no way... You’re talking with uggo-child,” said Taiga. “You really are nothing more than a dog, aren’t you?”

“Don’t call her uggo-child,” said Ryuuji. “She’s Inko-chan. Right, Inko-chan? Ahh, you’re so lively, so lively, ahh you’re so cute, you’re so good, Inko-chan, your heart is so wide, and you’re so kind, I like you, Inko-chan.”

“Oh. To you, crap on the street would be ‘cute.’”

“C-crap...huh...?”

Taiga turned off the faucet and slowly threw out her flat chest. She lumbered over and stood imposingly in front of Ryuuji, who was still shaken by the indecent words that had come from her mouth.

“Looooook,” she said. “I did it. While you were playing with uggo-child, I finished it all.”

Full of herself, she jutted her chin out as she proudly declared the completion of her mission. Ryuuji recomposed his posture, nodded yes, and even clapped for her.

“Oh, how good, how good,” he said, “you’re a housework genius.”

“Well, if I get in the mood, then I am.”

“You’ve got talent. If you keep it up, you’ll get better at it.”

“Yes, yes, now please just get the tea. Hurry up with it.”

“I saw your spark of talent. Right, the tea, and fast.”

He simply gave her gentle praise and didn't complain even though the apron he had given her was sopping wet. Compared to praising crap on the ground, praising Taiga's household skills was nothing.

Also, right, it was the first time since they had met that Taiga had washed the dishes. Though he was bothered that he hadn't been able to do anything, as long as she finished, that feeling would disappear like throwing out the trash. It didn't matter if she didn't do it well. He just wanted her to keep feeling like doing the dishes. He'd do that by praising her. That was Ryuuji's policy.

If she really started living with her father again and didn't at least know how to wash things, she'd be in trouble anyhow. He didn't really know if that would come to be, but it was better to be prepared.

Ryuuji boiled the water. In that time, he quickly wiped down the dishes, put them away in the shelves, and put a load of tea that the landlord always split with them into the teapot. It was widely accepted that it was better to use water that wasn't at boiling temperature when making Japanese tea, but Ryuuji liked pouring a steaming pot. He poured the boiling water onto the green leaves all at once, and they puffed up without resistance. They loosened gently as they danced in the flow. The strong smell of tea rose with the scalding steam.

After the single infusion, he immediately poured the tea. He poured the slightly cooler leftover boiling water in next. At first the tea would be somewhat light, but it was very hot. You could drink it right after a meal and then sip the stronger and bitter tea over time. The other merit of it was that you could have two cups without having to get up from the table, which was very housewife-like thinking on his part.

“What about snacks?” said Taiga.

“I'll make them.”

He pulled out two small, wrapped baumkuchen cakes that Taiga had brought in a snack box the other day and put them on a tray. Even after she ate two hundred and fifty grams of white rice, ginger, and three good meals, Taiga would want something sweet. Ryuuji decided to have a snack with her that night.

He quickly wiped the table clean and put the heavy tray down with deep care.

“Well, get up,” he said. “You can’t drink tea while lying down.”

He kicked Taiga’s shin. She had immediately folded over a sitting cushion and lay down. Taiga pushed up her long hair and got up.

“Sweets, sweets, baumkuchen...just two?”

“One is for me.”

“No way, that stinks of poverty. Bring the box.”

Looking at just the two sweets, she pouted in displeasure. *Sure, sure*, he thought and let that pass. The two of them sat on the cushions in their original positions. Then, like that, they raised the volume on the quiz show they watched every week and took an intermission from talking.

“What?” said Taiga.

“Oh? Nothing?”

“Gross.”

For some reason, he’d been looking at Taiga’s profile. Taiga’s forehead wrinkled, but then she turned back to the TV.

During that boring, normal night, Ryuuji weirdly felt like looking at Taiga. He wanted to talk to her. For some reason, he hadn’t been able to say anything while they were at the table with Yasuko. Taiga also, of course, didn’t bring it up. He wanted to talk about *that*.

“Um. Uuumm, your dad’s kind of...different, isn’t he?”

“You’re supposed to take these off layer by layer to eat them, right?”

Taiga completely ignored him. She showed all of her small front teeth and started eating a thin layer off the baumkuchen like a squirrel.

“That’s a weird way to eat that... Actually, come to think of it, this evening, he was eating a bagel. Your dad was. It was the same salmon one you had. The things you like really are the same. You also both like cheese.”

“You’re not eating yours? If you’re not eating it, give it to me.”

“We kind of talked about a lot of things. He seemed really worried about you.”

She stole Ryuuji’s baumkuchen from his hands. This time Taiga took a big bite of it. She continued to completely ignore Ryuuji’s words and obstinately looked only at the TV. Her shoulders shook just a little.

“Hey, are you listening? This isn’t something for me to say, but you should really see your dad. Do it as quick as you can. Because...right, what are you gonna do?”

He felt it was something he couldn’t tell her himself. Her father had to tell Taiga. Ryuuji would tell her just a little bit so Taiga wouldn’t shut him out completely without knowing anything.

“Your dad kind of wants to live with you.”

“Isn’t that stupid?”

Just the sound of the TV echoed empty in the small, two-bedroom apartment. Taiga didn’t even look at Ryuuji and only said that coldly. *What was that reaction?* he thought. He glared at the back of her ears, which were poking out from her long hair. *Why is she always like this?*

“Put down the snack,” Ryuuji said, making his voice hard. “Hey, seriously, talk to me.”

“Like I told you, seriously, isn’t it stupid? Aren’t you stupid?”

“But I’m saying this for your sake!”

“Who asked you to do that? Don’t stick your nose into other people’s business.”

“Huh?! You were the one who made me go over there! At least hear me out! Are you just going to take the money and let that be the end of it?!”

“That’s right, but I’m thankful you did that, so that’s why I did the dishes. Now that’s the end of it.”

“Don’t joke around! Just let me talk a little!”

“You’re noisy! Don’t touch me like we’re close!”

Taiga finally turned around. With eyes that seemed ready to blow fire from her anger and irritation, she looked right into Ryuuji's eyes. Before he knew it, the emotion was fading from her eyes. Even the fire from her anger went cold and disappeared.

"I'm done. This is no fun. I'm going home. Oh, I'll say this: be responsible and make sure to wake me up tomorrow like usual. *I'm* not upset about this unpleasant conversation at all."

It seemed Taiga had lost all interest in Ryuuji. She violently grabbed the baumkuchen she had left uneaten with her hand, pulled up her drooping socks with enough force to tear them, and lumbered on the tatami toward the entryway. He followed her and tried to block her way.

"Your dad is sad because you're ignoring him! It's sad!"

"I'm the one who's sad!"

It turned into a shouting match. *What stupid things she's saying*, Ryuuji thought, shocked. Turning a scornful glance at him, Taiga put on her shoes and only muttered, "See you tomorrow." Then she simply left. She actually went home.

He put on his sandals trying to go after her but hesitated.

"Seriously!"

In the end, he didn't go.

He peeled his hand off the cold doorknob. He locked the door and stepped away from the doorway. He noticed he was really angry. He was about angry enough to want to kick the shoes that were lined up tidily at the door.

"That idiot..."

Instead of hitting things, he spat strong, quiet words at the person who was no longer there.

She had a father who cared about her like that and worried about how she was doing. He had even reflected on his own actions and come back for her. Now all Taiga had to do was listen, and the happiness she was waiting for would be right there, but Taiga rejected that and was too caught up in her own self-

pity, claiming that she had been abandoned. *How stupid.*

The happiness Ryuuji could wish for and wish for, but never have, was right within her grasp. Taiga was tossing it out like garbage right before Ryuuji's eyes. Did she really love being poor, pitiful Taiga that much?

At the doorway where the heavy, cold air had settled, while Yasuko was away at work, there were only her sandals, which she used when walking close by, and Ryuuji's shoes. No matter how much Ryuuji and Yasuko prayed or waited, there was one person who would never come home.

Chapter 3

It'd be better if we just didn't do anything. The atmosphere drifting through the classroom after the school day was somber.

Unable to go home, every person in class 2-C was cold and quiet at the compulsory event. Their desks were all pushed to the back of the classroom like when they cleaned it, and they had their butts planted on the hard floor. Each and every one of their tense faces looked up at Haruta, who was on the teacher's platform.

Did they blame him? No, they were indifferent. As they sat in rows, their eyes were filled with harsh apathy. They didn't want to engage. If they could, they wanted to pretend it had never happened. Every one of them wanted to escape from this idiotic situation, even if they were the only escapee. All of their egoistic self-preservation instincts were going full throttle.

"Here...take one each. Could you hand them to the back?"

Haruta, the root of all evils, timidly concealed his eyes as though trying to escape from their gazes. He tried to distribute the mystery booklets, but no one would take them from him. Unable to do anything else, he got down from the teacher's platform and walked around to push the booklets into each one of their hands himself. He put the booklets down gently by the feet of the ones who wouldn't even reach out to take one. Then, as though they had conspired beforehand, they didn't listen to him and simply left them on the floor. If they listened, they'd lose. If they showed any interest, they'd lose. That feeling covered the classroom like the austere, heavy scent of incense swirling from a grave during the Obon holidays.

"I felt responsible for what happened. So...I tried making it up to you all by writing...this. I-It's a script. It's a pro-wrestling show, no kayfabe... Well, look, it's right here." Though no one had asked him about it, Haruta started to unnecessarily explain as he passed around the booklets. No one was listening.

Yes—though it was terrifying, class 2-C's exhibition for the cultural festival

was really a pro-wrestling show. Either because she had gone mad from jealousy of their youth or simply because her growing anxiety had caused her to self-destruct, the spinster (age 30) had unnecessarily used her homeroom powers to formally present the unfortunate proposal to the acting committee. She had even gone to these extremes to cause trouble.

That was the situation when Haruta had said, *I-It's a script*. Everyone was still wordless as they averted their eyes from the sloppily stapled printer paper. Even Ryuuji and Noto, who were always friendly when it came to Haruta, wouldn't humor him this time. The two of them were feeling uneasy as they sat huddled together in a corner.

"I'm scared of any script Haruta would write, too."

"Yeah, this is a mess..."

They whispered to each other in bated breaths. Ryuuji's eyes were unsettled and twitching for some reason. They gleamed dangerously, as though about to shoot down the idiot Haruta with the blue lightning of punishment. Haruta inferred that and couldn't bring himself to meet Ryuuji's eyes.

Ryuuji, however, was actually sympathizing slightly with Haruta in his Ryuuji-like way. *Poor Haruta*. Would the day come when that kinship would reach Haruta?

In front of Ryuuji, Kitamura, who would normally take the lead and make a big deal of class events, looked sort of tired. His glasses were slipping down his nose. "We can't get excited like this... My plan to get everyone excited about the cultural festival is..." he was muttering to himself.

Even further in front of him, Minori was sitting cross-legged. Taiga was clinging to Minori's back with all her weight.

"Ugh. Ugh."

"Ahh, you're heavy. You're heavy, Taiga."

"Ugh, Minori-ugh."

"Minori-ugh? Who's that? Ahh."

Taiga had turned into an animal with no higher reasoning skills, rubbing and

nuzzling Minori as though she were scent marking. Maya had boldly laid down on the floor and was sneakily rolling up Kitamura's shirt hem from behind. He wasn't wearing a jacket, so she was pointing and giggling with the other girls at his underwear, which was poking up over his belt. As for Nanako, she had taken out a giant mirror and brush. She dexterously put pins in her curly hair, practicing an updo.

"Everyone, I'm begging you to show some interest. We can't take it back." Haruta's cry echoed emptily through the class. "Heey, Kitamura," he said. "Say something. Aren't you the class rep? You take some responsibility, too, and get everyone pumped up~! Did you forget you're indebted to me for saving your butt from that crisis?"

"Hm, I can't complain now that you've said that... Th-then, let's do a round..."

Desperate, Kitamura lumbered up. That was the moment the incident occurred. They didn't know how it had happened, but Kitamura's belt was off, and his slacks slipped right down to his feet.

"Whaaaaaat?!"

"Kyaah!"

For some reason the belt was in the hands of Maya, who screamed first. It seemed that, at some point, the attention-seeking, beautiful girl's absentminded dexterity with her hands had taken the belt off.

His underwear was in full view. Everyone surrounding Kitamura withdrew all at once, like debris being blown away from the center of an explosion by its terrific force.

"Nooo!!"

"What're you doing?!"

Displeased screams crossed through the classroom.

"Why..." the one who groaned was Kitamura himself.

"Eeeek!" Taiga's voice rose like a whistle.

"The trauma from the seaweed..." said Minori as she covered Taiga's eyes with her hands. Her cheeks were hollow.

Waah. Ryuuji distanced himself from Kitamura. His suspicion that Kitamura was an exhibitionist who liked to take off his clothes was solidifying all the more.

“A pervert’s revealed himself,” Ami coldly spat.

Far from being excited, the class fell into pandemonium from suddenly being in close vicinity to an exhibitionist and his lower half. They screamed as though singing in rounds. Haruta held his head and stared a hole in the teacher’s platform. Kitamura pulled his slacks up in a fluster, but he couldn’t wipe what had happened from everyone’s minds.

“I’m done with this!” said a girl in the back. “I’m going home!”

“This is completely useless! It’s a waste of time!”

“Sorry, but I can’t go along with this!”

“Let’s go home. Let’s go home. Break uuup!”

It seemed the sober air that filled the classroom had burst all at once from the Kitamura exposure incident. As they spouted their complaints, the students got up and went to get their bags. Their desks clattered as they pulled them back in place. Everyone felt ready to go home.

“W-wait a second!” said Haruta. “Don’t go hooome!”

They all ignored Haruta’s shouts, which floated futilely through the air. No one in the classroom knew what to do with this situation.

But then that’s when it happened.

“Oh?”

A lifeboat arrived from an unexpected direction. The ears of those going home pricked up at the sweet and curious sounding voice. In that moment, their feet froze. Several people spun back around.

“Huuuh. Hmmm...this seems pretty fun. Everyone has a role and lines. Hmm, Haruta-kun, this is surprisingly good.”

“A-Ami-chan!”

At some point, Kawashima Ami, the teary-eyed youthful angel of class 2-C,

had used every ounce of her strength to peel her eyes off her childhood friend's lower half and turn them to the script.

“Ho ho ho,” she said, “I’m the main character? Yaay. ♥”

Beside Haruta, Ami grinned as she narrowed her eyes into slits. Ryuuji, who was preparing to go home like everyone else, looked up at Ami's suspicious smile. His eyes were seething like the flash of light right before critical mass. He wasn't trying to look through her with X-ray beams—he was just surprised.

Wasn't Ami the type who would be the first to take an amateur script like this, grind it under her heel, tear it to pieces, throw the pieces away, set them on fire, spit on them, and toss the ashes at a withered tree? On top of that, wouldn't she laugh loudly and say something like, “If you have the time to read something as cruddy as this, you might as well spend your time praising my beauty, you ugly commoners! Oh, but don't you dare open your ugly eyes! Your eyes wouldn't be able to handle this beautiful face, so use the power of your imagination to make up for that! What? You can't come up with anything? Then think of diamonds and the starry night sky. Just think of all the beautiful things in your memory. Bwa ha ha!”

Wasn't she that type of girl?

Hearing Ami enjoying herself, the students who had been going home came back into the classroom one after another. They put down their bags and started gathering around Ami with great interest.

“See, look, this page is super funny,” Ami said, lightly fanning the flames. That was enough to get them going.

“Huh, what? Where, Ami-chan? Which page are you looking at?”

“Which one?”

They all started paging through the distributed scripts.

“Huuh, it's true. It's actually kind of really good...”

“Haruta-kun's pretty bold, considering. Hmm, my role is Bodyguard C for Ami-chan.”

“Whoa, he's even using his kanji characters correctly. It's amazing what

spellcheck can do for you these days, isn't it?"

"Oh, I'm team Ami-chan's staff officer. I've got a lot of lines."

A graceful smile floated over Ami's face as she looked down in satisfaction at her classmates. Haruta was practically close to tears as he looked at Ami. He seemed dangerously close to gleefully licking her shoes or even her bathroom slippers out of adoration. Ami winked at Haruta.

"Oookay, Haruta-kun, let's give it all we got! Well then, how about we start practicing?"

"Yeah!"

"How about we put tape up in the shape of a ring?"

"Yeah!"

How about you hand over all your valuables? Yeah! How about we take off some of our clothes? Yeah! How about we surgically extract one of your kidneys? Yeah! It felt like she'd built enough momentum to take it that far. Ami's wholesome smile could even manipulate students who'd been on the verge of losing their sanity moments ago.

"This might be better than expected," she said, egging them on. "What's your role?"

They sat back down on the ground again. The boys and the girls rolled up the scripts in their hands and seemed really motivated.

What's she trying to do? thought Ryuuji, who knew about Ami's dark-hearted personality. He automatically turned a doubtful eye on her.

"Huh? What, huh?" she said. "Oh dear~? What is it~? Stop it, Takasu-kun. Why are you staring at me like that~?"

"I'm not staring at you or anything," said Ryuuji.

"Ohhh?"

Ami's large eyes glinted with spite. Her lips gleefully contorted as though she had found something fun to play with. "You don't come on until much later, so you don't need to be in character right now, Mr. Supporting Role. ♥"

“Huh? Supporting role?”

Ryuuji’s face went white. He saw Haruta’s smile and un-cute tongue sticking out. He didn’t understand. It was as he was trying to open the script in a panic that it happened.

“WHAT IS THIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIS?!”

The one who had let out a high-pitched scream a step ahead of him was Taiga.

Under their leader Ami-chan, all the students of class 2-C lived in peace and harmony.

“No way,” said Ami. “This seems fun~!”

“What do you mean ‘lived in’?! ” said Ryuuji. “Where was everyone living?! At the school?! What happened to everyone’s homes?! Are the parents not going to say anything?!”

“It’s weird right from the point where Dimhuahua is the leader!” said Taiga.

But there was someone dissatisfied with that peace. It was evil incarnate, the Palmtop Tiger and her delinquent henchman Takasu Ryuuji.

“No way, how scary~!”

“Why am I her henchman and a delinquent?! I don’t agree with this!”

“Evil incarnate?! Me?! Why?! Never mind Ryuuji, this is terrible!”

The Palmtop Tiger and delinquent attack 2-C. Ami-chan’s hard work proves to be for naught as her friends in class 2-C are brainwashed by the Palmtop Tiger.

“No way, this is super terrible!”

“Brainwashed?!”

“By who?!”

Under the Palmtop Tiger’s command, 2-C goes berserk. But then Ami-chan’s desperate persuasion dissolves the brainwashing. Through their combined power, they drive out the Palmtop Tiger and delinquent. They live happily ever after. The end.

“No way,” someone cried out, “they dissolved the brainwashing~!”

“They dissolved?! Isn’t that bad?!”

“You gave the whole plot away, stupid!”

The classroom filled with applause. Everyone sat hunched over with their legs pulled to their chests outside the temporary wrestling ring they had made with tape. Every mouth praised Haruta, who had written the script.

“Yeah, you’ve done a pretty good job. Go Haruta.”

“It’s simple yet dramatic. Isn’t the plot unexpectedly good?”

The earlier bed-of-nails situation underwent a complete one-eighty. Haruta happily scratched at his long, scruffy hair.

“Hee hee, you think so~?” he said. “Maybe I’ve got some talent? No way, this is amazing. Maybe I’ll be a writer in my future? Nooo way, that’s amazing. I’ve made it.”

“No, you haven’t!”

Ryuuji spontaneously smacked Haruta on the butt with his script. He actually wanted to hit Haruta with his hallway slippers but didn’t want his clean slippers to be sullied by Haruta’s butt.

“That hurt,” said Haruta, “What’re you doing, Takasu?”

“I’m not doing it for real, so relax, you idiot! What part of this is pro-wrestling?! You think you can just put anyone into villainous roles however you please!”

“What?” Haruta said. “Takasu, I thought you’d have some reading comprehension. This is pro-wrestling, no matter how you look at it. First, look at this, they ‘attack 2-C,’ right? And then, ‘Ami-chan’s hard work was for naught’ right here is wrestling. Then the class ‘go berserk,’ too, and there’s the ‘desperate persuasion’ and using ‘their combined power’ to drive them out. Just read in between the lines and figure it out, okay?”

Was there anything more humiliating than having Haruta comment on his reading ability? Ryuuji shook and a dark emotion flared up from the pit of his stomach. He felt like he was being eaten up from the inside. His feet were

dangerously unsteady.

“NOOOOOOOOOOOO WAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAY!”

On the other side of things, Ryuuji’s boss Taiga, evil incarnate, was lying on the ground with her huge mouth open. She was howling like a beast.

“Aisaka-san,” said Ami, “you’re so stubborn. You. Can’t. Do. That.”

“THIS ISN’T A JOOOOOOKE! I’m fine with doing the Miss Festival. That’s fine, but why am I the one doing all the weird stuff?! It’s all your fault! It’s your fault!”

“Noo, what an ugly thing to accuse me of—ow ow ow!”

FWOOSH! With terrifying power, Taiga bounded in one leap on Ami’s back. In an instant, she had all the joints in Ami’s body cracking.

“IT’S. YOUR. FAAAAUUUUULT!”

“Owwwwww, owwwwww, owwwwww!”

Taiga had Ami firmly locked up in a cobra twist. She put more and more weight on Ami’s thin and creaking body. Ami writhed and yelled as Taiga wrapped around her further without mercy. Her combo execution was perfect.

“Whoa,” cried out a classmate, “you’re really getting into it, Palmtop Tiger.”

“You’re already starting to practice. You’re way more serious than I thought.”

“That cobra twist...is beautiful. It’s too perfect.”

“They look like a drawing on a hanging scroll... No, like a limited-edition figure.”

Oh ho, the students gasped. At their applause, Taiga released Ami in a fluster and kicked her away.

“All of you, shut up!” she said. “I’ll never do this! What is this? Isn’t this bullying?! Are you trying to trick me into embarrassing myself for laughs?! This is horrible! You’re horrible! Horrible, horrible... I’m done! I got it, I’ll kill you all!”

Her bloodlust was peaking. She simply snapped. Her mad tiger eyes looked as though they were spitting flames as she glared at the classmates surrounding her. She ferociously licked her lips, as though she were going to clean them up

starting from the right—no, actually starting with the closest person. They all panicked as they backed up to escape. They were toppling over each other here and there, turning into a cluster. Taiga put her sights on the cluster and wound up her lower limbs for attack. It was then that it happened.

“Aisaka-san! No, Palmtop Tiger! You still don’t understand!”

In that chaos, a clear, dignified voice rang out. It was Ami.

“Whaaat?!” said Taiga.

Ami desperately staggered to her feet as though she was still hurting from the cobra twist. She was full of love, but the light in her eyes was similar to that of a mother’s strict anger. She expanded her arms like the wings of an archangel as she stood in Taiga’s way. Taiga had her claws out and was about to jump into the crowd. Her eyes filled ominously with the color of blood and burned even hotter.

“Shut up!” she said. “You’re bold for being a Dimhuahua! This is all your fault, isn’t it?!”

“Ouch!”

WHAP! Taiga slapped Ami on the mouth, but Ami still did not shrink from her. *Guh*, Ami bit her lip and raised her battered face.

“If hitting me will satisfy you, hit me all you want! But it won’t accomplish anything.”

“Ohh, then will I ever!”

“Fugah!”

Taiga pinched the tip of Ami’s nose and pulled, assaulting her with the infamous iron forehead poke as she staggered. However, no matter how many times Ami fell, she got up again and raised her pale face. Eventually, a thin smile appeared on her features.

“Guh...you really did it...” she said. “Now...have you gotten your fill?”

“WHHHaaaaaaaat~?! That’s bold for the likes of a Chihuahua!”

“Stop, it’s reckless,” someone yelled. “You’ll get killed by the Palmtop Tiger!”

Ami cut them off with a smile that said *It's fine* and took a step towards Taiga. Taiga's wild eyes, which thirsted for blood, continued to glare at Ami as she approached. The air was tense, but Ami was calm right to the very end.

"Aisaka-san, there's one thing I want you to know. Once you understand that, you can boil me, or roast me, or do whatever you like. No matter what happens, I wanted to tell you that we're doing this for you. You drift around like you're separate from us... For some reason, you just don't get along with anyone. You're distant; you might even be scared, the violent, vicious shrimp you are. What I'm saying is everyone is using this event as an opportunity for pitiful little you, Aisaka-san, so you can connect with your classmates! Did it work?! Did everyone's warmth and kindness finally get through to your empty heart, or do you still only understand violence?!"

"What're you doing," said Taiga, "getting all carried away?! I'm not distant or anything!"

Yeah...you're not distant, Aisaka...yeah...not distant at all...right... The bleated words from her surrounding classmates, meant to placate Taiga, seemed to intentionally go back and forth. Realizing that, Taiga clutched at her own neck as though she were being suffocated.

"Wh-what is this?" she asked. "It feels like there's a silk cord..."

"You see. This is the truth."

Ami closed her eyes as though she were satisfied. She shook her head as if to say *That's enough* and raised her hand at her classmates. As she waved her hand, all their voices died down at once. Like a chairperson at lunch break from a certain long running TV show, Ami had gained complete control over the audience at some point.

"Anyway," she said. "It means that we don't want you to think of this as a bad thing, okay? You got it? Look, let's try going at it from here. Together. Let's go from page four in the script, the start of scene two. It's your biggest scene, Aisaka-san. Bam! You pull Takasu-kun in with you, make a smart entrance, and brainwash all the people in the class."

"Liiike I saaaaaaid! I said I wouldn't do any of this, didn't I? I can't do that! First off, I've never brainwashed anyone before!"

“D-don’t act like it’s real,” said Ami. “Pretend. You can just pretend until the end. Let’s try a little trial run. Okay, go! Tiger, your brainwashing line!”

“Huh?! That’s so sudden... Uhhh... ‘DIIIIIEEE!’”

“Just how—well, I guess it’s fine, but do you really have to lead with that?”

“Oh, what, the lines are written out? ‘Tiger shouts something as she appears!’”

“That’s not a line... Those are stage directions.”

“What’re stage directions?”

Before they realized it, even Taiga was going along with Ami. Taiga and Ami’s baffling enthusiasm enveloped them. Ryuuji was half-shocked and still hadn’t joined in with the classmates who were laughing, applauding, and yelling interjections. Before he realized it, they had given in and were actually using the script. If only Taiga had been a little more serious about rejecting it, they might have gotten somewhere.

“Fool!”

“Scum!”

Now Taiga was simply happily (?) embroiled in an insult-slinging match with Ami. Ryuuji couldn’t do anything about it. He threw in the towel. The guys in the class were into it, and complaining about it all by himself wouldn’t do anything.

His natural honesty kicking in, if there was nothing he could do about it, he thought he needed to not cause trouble for those who were genuinely enthusiastic about this. Anyway, first of all, he needed to get a firm grip on his entrance. When he started reading the script, someone yelled, “Hit her...hit her...hit heeeer! You’re the kiiiiiiiing ooooooof theeeee kiiiiiiings...”

“...” Ryuuji doubted his eyes. The many other students who tilted their heads around him were probably doing the same.

“Wh-what’s your role?”

“Huh?! Oh, this?! U-uh, well...I don’t really know, either.”

On her knees at the side of the ring and passionately watching the scathing

exchange between Taiga and Ami, Minori was in a bald cap, had an eye patch, sported buckteeth, and also wore a stomach band even though it was the first practice. She was fully in costume for her role.

“Well, Haruta-kun said it’s an apology for throwing me into the morgue. It looks like he gave me an especially good role. He gave me the costume just now, too. Hee, hee, Haruta-kun’s a pretty good guy.”

“I see...I see?”

Minori, seeming a little bashful, popped out her buckteeth. Still in her eye patch and bald cap, she turned her glaring smile straight at Ryuuji. For the first time in a long time, that perfect golden smile was radiant, exactly like the midsummer sun. Ryuuji stood visibly straighter, like a plant being showered in sunshine.



Minori's smile really was the warmest light in the world. It was the source of all vitality itself. It was shiny and smooth all over...and no, he wasn't talking about her bald cap. Ryuuji couldn't release his eyes from Minori.

"So, um, Takasu-kun."

"Y-yeah?!"

Minori was trying to continue the conversation. She was still in her eye patch and bald cap, but that didn't matter. He'd take any conversation he could get, no matter what it was about. His eyes were so wide they were about to split at the seams.

If he could though, he wanted to talk about *that*. He could talk about the present she had promised him over the summer vacation and actually got him for the new school semester. That pretty set of two navy and khaki towels. He washed them with fabric softener and used them in rotation every day.

"Ahmin seems kind of different lately."

"Right, right, that tow...huh...you mean Kawashima?"

Why was Ami the topic of conversation now when he had gotten this far? He felt let down but nodded and agreed with her.

"Well...now that you mention it," he said, "she does."

He glanced at Ami, who was leading Taiga through the performance in the middle of the class. He remarked that her beautiful face, femininity, and popularity hadn't changed since she had originally transferred in, but he went on: "She's different, like...she wasn't the type of person to jump into someone's shoes like that. Usually, she's more like—"

She's more like, afraid or something.

He noticed what he was about to say and stopped himself. Ryuuji was suddenly feeling deeply emotional.

Right, he thought. Ami had always seemed to him like she had been afraid and timid. In order to keep the mask she had formed intact, and to prevent anything from getting shaken up, Ami had built a wall around herself. She had put down land mines to blow away anyone who got close. No one could get

near her. She had put up defenses to protect herself, to keep anyone from seeing her true self, but they had been too strong. But she was changing that. Her ironclad, good-girl mask, as always, was— “That’s not it!” Ami said. “Hmm, Aisaka-san, I wonder if you couldn’t possibly just be...a bit of an imbecile. How sad...”

“What’re you saying?! You Dimhuahua!”

Ami was in the middle of the class, messing around and laughing spitefully at Taiga. It seemed that, regardless of whether she was allowing her iron mask to go slightly askew, and regardless of whether she might come across as pushy, she was prioritizing putting herself out there. He didn’t know what had caused that change in her, though.

However, timing-wise, it was too soon for him to let those thoughts slip out loud. If anything, there were too many people around. Ryuuji stopped himself from saying it, and instead, looked somewhat spitefully at Ami.

“Seriously,” he said. “I wonder what’s up her sleeve. That black-hearted girl.”

He averted his eyes from her.

“Heeey! Don’t say that! Ahmin is a good person!”

As she smiled, Minori took off her bald cap and lightly hit Ryuuji around the arm with it. As he dodged her, he felt very slightly like he did want to divulge what he was really thinking.

“You’re kind of different, too, though,” he said.

“Huh?! Ya’ talkin’ to me?!”

Did that really surprise her so much that she had to change accents? Minori’s voice cracked as she looked at Ryuuji. She plucked off her eyepatch. She was back to being the real Minori. Seeming kind of frantic, she pressed him:

“Really?! H-how have I changed?! I-Is it in a good way?!”

“Wouldn’t you be the only one who knows that?”

“Whaat?! I don’t know anything about it! What is it? Seriously, you’ve got me flustered. Why are you blurting this out all of a sudden, Takasu-twerp?”

It wasn’t like he could just say, *Yeah, the distance between us is weird.*

Instead, Ryuuji picked up the bald cap Minori had let fall down. He knocked off the dirt with his hand and, with an intimacy she would probably forgive him for, placed it on her head.

Then it happened.

“NGYAAAH!”

“Huh?”

Minori yelled like a cat being attacked by a crow. With her bald cap still askew on her head, she took a big step away from Ryuuji.

B-but.

Had he been too chummy with her? Maybe he had, but she didn't have to back up that far away from him. Ryuuji now had another scar on his heart. He might have shown it on his face.

“Oh, no, no, no, no...” she said. “That's not what I meant. That's not...uhh...”

He didn't know whether she was trying to be considerate. Minori waved her hand back and forth. She took a half step toward Ryuuji once again. Their eyes met, and even Ryuuji didn't know what to say now. He was only confused.

“No, no, no, no... Well, uh, well...that's...it's that. Right.”

Minori took just another half step away from Ryuuji again. *It's fine now*, he thought. *Just decide whether you want to take off or fix that lopsided bald cap.*

Vexed, he could only look down at Minori. They didn't even notice the gaze of someone watching them.

Several days later, Takasu and Taiga's habituated relationship was becoming colder and colder. On their way home, the cold fall air blew between them. Even the dry leaves that seemed to slither across the ground as they were blown away seemed chilly.

Yes, it had been a while since the sounds of their bright laughter had petered out that night (though it could be said that they never laughed together in the first place). Despite that, Taiga would obstinately go to school with Ryuuji

following her like always, every morning. In the evenings, she went to the Takasu house to eat dinner and went with him to the supermarket when they went home, like they were now.

If you're in that bad of a mood, I'd rather you not stick near me, Ryuuji thought. He would have said it, but the usual ritual would start off with Taiga saying, "I'm not in a bad mood or anything. I don't have a reason to be. If you see it that way, then it's because you're so persistent about saying I'm in a bad mood." She would try to turn the situation around to her benefit like the one-trick tiger she was. Of course, it was clear from her completely sullen face that she was in a bad mood.

"What are we having tonight, then?" she said.

"Amberjack fish," said Ryuuji. "We just bought it, didn't we?"

"What are we doing with the fish?"

"Teri."

"...Yaki, is that what we're having?"

"Yeah."

Shwoo—air even colder than the wind froze the full meter of distance between them. It chilled them to the core.

By the time practice for the cultural festival was over and they finished shopping at the supermarket, it was already nearing six. They were right in the middle of fall. Lately, the days had become noticeably shorter, and the sky was darkening into a nearly black dark gray. The presence of night quietly came over them and made their skin fill with goosebumps. Though it was early, the streetlamps lit up.

Ryuuji pulled together the collar of his school jacket. *Hmph*. Taiga turned her face away. *Hmph*. He turned his own eyes away from her profile. He didn't need to go along with this stubborn and moody tiger when it came to everything.

Even when he turned his eyes to the side, Taiga's hair came into his vision as the wind blew through it. Her gray-tinged, mysteriously pale, soft hair swelled with a relaxed ripple. It covered Taiga's round cheeks for a moment and then

immediately fluttered, spread, and dispersed. The path it took was gentle and incredibly smooth. It moved in a way that seemed ungraspable.

“Ow, ow, ow!”

“Whoa!”

He had grabbed it. A tendril of Taiga’s light hair was in his hand. Taiga snatched back her own hair.

“What do you mean ‘whoa,’ you long-haired maniac! You trying to pick a fight?!”

“S-sorry...”

“You reaaaaally are a bully breed! You’ve got an atrocious face, get away!”

Taiga was seething. The fire of hatred was in her eyes as she glared at Ryuuji. It was his fault for sure, but did she have to be that angry about it?

Ryuuji kept his face turned away as he followed Taiga’s back. She was ahead of him and emitting her wrath. Well, he wasn’t really following her. They had to take the same road home.

The situation hadn’t been as complicated as it was now when Taiga’s father had been grabbing her hair. Though he, of course, couldn’t tell her that. If he said anything as meddlesome as that, there was no mistaking he would be the Palmtop Tiger’s live bait in no time. *What an idiot*, he thought as he looked at Taiga’s slender back.

Several days more passed since then. It seemed Taiga wasn’t taking messages from her father again. Ryuuji had scruples about telling her “Your old man wants to live with you,” straight out. He bet if he so much as said the words “your old man,” she’d be enraged. No, even if he said nothing and kept up the silence, she would start to get angry and say something like “What’re you about to say now?!”

“Why can’t you even be stubborn like a normal person...” he muttered to himself, figuring she wasn’t listening anyway.

“Who are you talking about?!”

Only in times like this, Taiga’s ears were sharp and could hear anything. She

attacked Ryuuji with her spinning bag.

“What! What! Seriously! This makes me angry! If you have something to say, you can just tell it to me straight!”

“Ow! Ow!”

She hit him again and again with the hard bag. Could he do anything other than scream? With his house just ahead, Ryuuji ran pitifully away down the sidewalk of the Zelkova tree-lined road. Taiga, of course, sprinted after him like a cold-blooded cyborg.

“Get back heeeeeereee! I won’t be patient anymore, I won’t be patient about the cultural festival, either! Why do things! Like this! Keep happening! Lately?!”

“How is that my fault?!”

“Isn’t it your fault?! Uwah...”

She continued to spin the bag around until her klutziness came to the fore. Taiga lost her balance and tripped on a sidewalk drain cover. Right before she fell over, she grabbed onto a sidewalk pole.

“Wah wah!”

It must have been punishment for her violence. The pole wasn’t properly fixed in place and Taiga simply toppled over. Together with the steel pole, she fell right into the street. Her terrific scream traveled across the neighborhood.

“Are you okay?!” said Ryuuji. “Y-you’re embarrassing...”

“Sh-shut up! Whose fault do you think this is?!”

“Can’t say it’s mine.”

Whatta klutz, Ryuuji muttered as he picked up Taiga’s fallen bag. No matter how much she ridiculed him, when she would go as far as to fall over like this, Ryuuji couldn’t leave Taiga without helping her up. Taiga, who was turning red from the blood rushing up to her face, was struggling to get back up. He tried to offer his hand to her.

“Tsk.”

“Whoa.”

“N-nice seeing you again.”

A hand that was slightly smaller than Ryuuji’s but slightly larger than Taiga’s, had grabbed Taiga’s hand first.

They were in front of the entrance to Taiga’s condo. A beautiful, silver Mercedes was parked there. Its top was down even in this season.

The black shadow that was lengthening in the twilight took on the shape of a petite, middle-aged man.

A cold light like a fire glistened in Taiga’s eyes as she raised them to look at him.

With the strength of a petite forty-year-old man, that shadow heaved Taiga up from where she had fallen on the sidewalk. He stood her up and hit the dust off her uniform.

“Sorry. I was waiting here this whole time. I had something to talk—ohhh...”

“Die. You stalker.”

She got him right in the family jewels.

Without a lick of mercy, she deeply kneed him in a place she shouldn’t have. The shadow—Taiga’s father—simply collapsed to the ground. Unable to make a sound, he balled himself up and writhed in agony. As a member of the same sex, Ryuuji could only look on with a blue face. Even though he was only watching, one particular part of his body reaaaally hurt. Taiga, the perpetrator and the man’s own daughter, didn’t even look back at the results of her bloodshed.

“Ryuuuuji! Let’s hurry and get home! This place is dangerous!”

“You’re more dangerous than anyone else!”

As he was paralyzed by terror, Taiga snapped onto his arm and pulled him to the next-door rental’s outer stairs. She started dragging him up.

“W-wait a second!” he said. “Wait, wait, wait! Are you planning to leave it like this?!”

Ryuuji desperately grabbed the iron railing and planted his feet. He forgot his

sympathetic pain. He couldn't leave the situation as it was now. He couldn't just leave that guy like that. He couldn't go home with Taiga. In one fell swoop, the situation had gone from simply tense to an enormous mess. That guy had actually come to take her away. That day had come. It was here and now.

However, at that terrifying prospect, Taiga tried to pull Ryuuji and his weight up, right along with the iron railing.

"Hmph!"

A blood vessel stood out right on her temple. The iron railing that Ryuuji desperately latched onto creaked. If they continued like this, either his shoulder joint or the railing was sure to give out. With a look of desperation on his face, Ryuuji flipped the tables and grabbed Taiga's shoulders.

"Damn it, you're really such a nuisance! Come to your senses and stop putting up a fight!"

"Whaat?! The puppy dog's got something bold to say!"

Even when she slapped his cheek, he wouldn't let go. Instead, he hung on stronger and pulled her towards him. Then he roughly held her against the wall at a distance where they were practically breathing on each other. As they yelled, their spit flew.

"Wait...stop!" she said. "Let go!"

"You're the one who was grabbing me first! I can't let you into my house like this! Definitely not!"

"Why not?!"

"He came for you, didn't he?! At least listen to what he has to say! Who do you think that is?! He's your dad, isn't he?!"

"No! That's a stalker! I don't need one of those!"

"Don't say stupid stuff! You cried and said you were thrown out, didn't you?! Be honest! At least go to him and give it a try! Actually look him in the face!"

"A-are you on his side?! You're terrible! You double-crossed me?! I thought you at least were the only one on my side... You backstabbing dog!"

“I’m saying this because I’m on your side! This is for your sake, it’s what you wanted! Your dad came to get you! Don’t you want to go home?! Don’t you want to live with him?! He said your annoying stepmother’s out of the picture now!”

“Wh-what do you know about me?! I gave up on expecting anything from that guy! That discussion was over a long time ago, it’s finished! I don’t need a guy like that. I don’t have any need for him anymore! Having someone you don’t need suddenly come back into your life is just a nuisance! What kind of idiot would be happy about trash they threw out returning back home?!”

“You...”

Unbeknownst to him, he was gripping harder and harder. He didn’t let go even when she shrilly shrieked.

“D-do you really think this person who’s planted himself to the ground waiting for you to come home is trash?! No matter how much I wish my dad would come home, he—”

He had made a mistake.

He shouldn’t have said that.

Conflating his circumstances with what was happening now was just selfish.

“...”

Ryuuji bit his lip and let go of her hand. Flustered, he drew away from her. As he exhaled, his breath seemed like it could catch on fire. He had kept saying it was all for Taiga—for Taiga’s sake—and yet what had he done? He had exposed himself as the joke he was.

He was trying to fill the hole in his heart that had been carved out by seventeen years of abandonment. Even though it had nothing to do with her, he was trying to fill it with Taiga’s happiness. He’d just been yapping away, exposing his own worthless self-pity.

Maybe I really am nothing but a worthless dog, he thought.

The pain that came along with the failure naturally made Ryuuji turn his head down in shame. His heavy hand rubbed at his eyes with regret. He still couldn’t

say anything. He felt like pulling out his own insides at his shallowness. At the very least, if Taiga slapped him or something like she normally would, his self-mockery would be fulfilled.

“It’s...okay... I understand.”

Her voice sounded angry, but Taiga gently touched Ryuuji’s lips, which he had bit until they bled. He held his breath at the coolness and softness of her fingers.

The tips of her fingers simply slipped down as though tracing his features. She grasped Ryuuji’s chin, as he was still unable to speak, and pulled up his shameful face. Then she looked straight at him with her brightly shining eyes. Without any fear, she looked deep into his mind.

“If that’s what you think...it’s fine. So don’t make that face.”

She pinched Ryuuji’s cheek and forcefully pulled it straight up.

“Taiga...”

“This is a good thing, right? I’ll think of it that way. I don’t know if I can actually see it that way or not, but you’re asking me to, so I’ll say I do.”

She let go of Ryuuji’s cheek. His forehead was still wrinkled from his moroseness and nervousness. Then he slowly narrowed his eyes.

“I...” he said. “I...”

“It’s fine now...”

Taiga rubbed her face with the back of her palm like a cat.

Suddenly, their knees, which had been rubbing each other, were pulling away.

Taiga pushed him, and her small shoulders slipped down and away from him.

Oh, I can’t hold her, he thought.

Taiga’s shoulders and her hair and her skirt hem lightly fluttered and turned like a beast’s supple tail as it went back into the depths of the woods. She escaped from him right before his eyes. Like he had unconsciously done, he tried to grasp her with his hand, but he knew that he couldn’t actually grab hold of anything. His empty hand slackened.

I see, he thought, there isn't any reason for me to hold Taiga and keep her here anymore.

Then like a bullet that was just about to actually be released, like she had suddenly been set free, Taiga ran down the stairs. In the fall night, she said something to the middle-aged man, who was still in pain as he grabbed the car door to stand. As though surprised, the man turned to Taiga. It didn't seem like they needed words anymore.

He put his arm around Taiga as though he were afraid, but he did it firmly. As he buried his face into Taiga's shoulder, the man continued to earnestly nod. Taiga seemed slightly unhappy at first and tried to pull away from him, but she eventually seemed to give in. She quietly put her hand around the man's back. Little by little, she relaxed and finally, it looked as though she were resting her whole weight and a whole lot of other things on her father.

Ryuuji watched them up to that point. Finally, he slowly started going back up the shabby iron stairs again. *This is good. This is good. This is good,* he muttered to himself, like an old man.

"Ryuu-chaaan..."

"Whoa!" said Ryuuji. "You scared me!"

As he opened the front door, his mother greeted him from up close. Yasuko had her makeup off and Ryuuji's full junior high tracksuit on—both the top and bottom.

"Why are you still in that?" he said. "Aren't you getting ready? Don't you have work today?"

"I do, but...I sort of heard your voices," said Yasuko. "W-was it a fight?"

Her huge chest swayed as she knitted her brows, which were too thin when she didn't draw them in.

"It wasn't," he said.

It seemed that Yasuko had been surprised at Ryuuji and Taiga's raised voices coming from outside, so she had been listening at the front door. Acting in a way that was very much not like someone in her thirties (and a high school

student's mother, to boot), Yasuko seemed even now like she was about to cry. She nervously hovered at the front door.

"It's fine, just let me in."

Despite her son's prompting, she stretched out her thin neck as though still wanting to see what was happening outside. Even now, she had her sandals on as though she were about to run out with no bra on. He roughly pushed her back into the house with his shoulder.

"It's really not a fight," he said, "so it's fine. It's fine, so just get ready to go to work. It's already six. I'll hurry and make the food. Anyway, put up your hair. It's a mess."

"That's true, but...what about Taiga-chan? Will she come after she changes?"

"She's not coming today."

"What?! Why not?"

What could he say? As he thought, Ryuuji's hand skillfully started cleaning on autopilot. He quickly piled up the mail order pamphlets Yasuko seemed to have spread out. Before she could order weird things, he put them up together in the usual place where the recyclables went. He brought an empty mug to the sink and quickly washed it. He even finished greeting Inko-chan, too. In a few brief minutes, barely in the blink of an eye, he returned the small living room to the clean state it had been in that morning.

"No reason," he said. "It's fine like this."

Ryuuji's reply wasn't good enough.

"That isn't fine! If Taiga-chan doesn't come, I'm lonely! We're a three-person family now! Ryu-chan, you're lonely, too, aren't you~?! I want Taiga-chan to come! Go and get Taiga-chan~!"

Yasuko sat on the floor cushion and put her head down on the table. Her cheeks were puffed up like a schoolgirl's on the tabletop. She pouted and wriggled unhappily. Keeping her in the corner of his eye, Ryuuji went into his room, which was partitioned only by a sliding door.

"This is the best thing for Taiga," he said. "Well, it's not like she'll never come

over again. Probably.”

Yasuko nibbled on the sleeve of her tracksuit. Still on the table, her large eyes turned up to look straight at her son.

“Really? It’s a good thing?” she said. “This is a good thing?”

“That’s right. This is really the best thing that could have happened.”

There weren’t any lies in that. Ryuuji put his bag in its usual spot. He put his cellphone in its charger and took off his school jacket.

“The best thing that could have happened, happened for Taiga. The reason she came to our house in the first place was because she needed emergency attention when she was on the verge of starvation. The issue’s been resolved, so she’s not coming over. It’s fine. It’s good like this.”

“What’s good about it?”

He hung his jacket on a hanger. Like a machine, he misted it as usual with deodorizing spray. With skillful hands, he straightened it. As he did that, he thought about putting one of the three slices of fish into the next day’s bento lunches. Once he decided where to put the fresh food, the inside of his head followed suit to organize itself.

“Taiga’s dad is down there. He’s divorcing his last wife, whom Taiga didn’t get along with, so he says he’s going to live with Taiga again. Isn’t that a good thing?”

He spoke the simple truth.

“Nnnnngh...”

With her face still pressed to the table, Yasuko seemed unable to accept it. As Ryuuji came back from his room after changing, she looked intently up at him like a child with her big eyes.

“He kind of seems like a selfish dad, doesn’t he...”

“Why’re you saying something like that?”

“Because it’s kind of...”

She pursed her lips. He wondered what she had remembered that had made

her stop talking. Yasuko shrugged her shoulders. Still in the tracksuit, she went to stand in front of the sink in order to get dressed.

“I don’t have any right to say anything about other people’s fathers,” she said in her usual carefree voice. Ryuuji wordlessly watched his mother’s back.

If she’d said, *Taiga’s father is selfish*, Ryuuji couldn’t deny that.

But, actually, he thought at that moment that he was right to have had Taiga run over to her dad.

He remembered the day when he had watched Yasuko’s back from an even lower vantage point than he did now.

The morning of that day, Yasuko had suddenly told him he was taking a break from preschool, and they got on a train. They rode and rode it, until they reached a town he didn’t recognize. He was tired and ate sweet bean paste bread Yasuko had bought for him at the station platform. They exited the turnstile, and Yasuko pulled Ryuuji’s hand. They walked along a neighborhood with rows of huge houses all over.

They turned the same corner over and over in circles, until eventually, Yasuko had Ryuuji sit on a bench in a small children’s park. Yasuko was standing and intently watching a house surrounded by pine trees. For hours and hours, she stared at the second-floor window.

Mom, Ryuuji had called her, but she didn’t move. He called her a second time: *Mom*. He didn’t get an answer and thought he would stop calling her for a while. They remained silent until before long it was sunset. Eventually, it turned to night and, finally, Yasuko turned around to him. *Sorry*, her smile said to him. Then the two of them firmly held hands and went back down the same path they came from, back to the apartment where they lived at the time.

He didn’t know it then, but that was probably Yasuko’s parents’ house, Ryuuji thought. Thinking about it now, around then was the tightest they’d ever been financially. Yasuko left Ryuuji at the preschool and worked day and night. She might have run herself ragged. Though he didn’t know the name of the disease, she’d been in the hospital for a long time. There were many times when he had to wait by himself for hours at the day care in the hospital.

It was difficult. She'd wanted to go home, but she hadn't been able to. She probably couldn't go home. She hesitated for hours and kept staring at the window of the house where her parents lived. Still, Yasuko, who at the time was barely in her twenties, brought the unforgivable child she wasn't allowed to have with her, and could no longer return home.

Poor Yasuko, the unforgivable child thought. He wondered how the girl, who at the time wasn't much older than he was now, compared the husband who wouldn't come home and the house she couldn't come home to. She must have thought about who was right and who was wrong.

She must have regretted it, too.

"Ryuu-chaaan! Waaah, I ran out of my hair stuff!"

"You have an extra! It's under the sink!"

She definitely must have.

Standing in the kitchen, Ryuuji opened the shopping bag. He washed his hands and took out the three slices of fish to lay them skin-down on a tray. He skillfully measured soy sauce, sake, and mirin by eye into a cup. He drizzled it onto the fish and poured it into the tray. As it marinated, he started preparing the miso soup. He didn't need to make rice since he had several servings stocked up in the freezer.

The least Ryuuji could do was be of even the slightest bit of use for the girl who could only choose her child over her parents. He could only make her think *I'm glad you're here; it wasn't a mistake*. If he could alleviate even the slightest amount of her sadness, that was enough. That was all he could ever do.

And now Ryuuji didn't want to burden another girl with this kind of sadness. He remembered her back as she ran. The image went through his head several times, and he turned it into words.

This is really for the best, he thought. Their father-daughter relationship was complex, so he didn't think she would live with her dad immediately that day or even the next day, but, still, they could slowly move towards that together.

This is a good thing, he thought. *It definitely is*.

Chapter 4

“Well, it doesn’t really matter.”

As Taiga spat that out, she turned away. *That’s not what I’d call honest.* Ryuuji was surprised as he watched her profile.

The Takasu household’s table had gone back to its mother and son, two-person system. It had been that way for several nights. Over the days that followed, they progressed deeper into the fall season. That morning, the wind was pretty cold.

“Anyway...ahh, it’s cold...”

Her hair scattering as it was blown by the fall wind, Taiga closed her eyes and shrugged her shoulders. Ryuuji completely fastened his school jacket collar shut and thrust his hands into his pockets. The fallen leaves on the pavement were a bit more colorful than before. The rain that came around dawn had left them wet, and now they were plastered to the asphalt.

At the sweet smell of the damp leaves and the warmth of the sun that touched them for a moment when the wind died down, Ryuuji took a deep breath without realizing it. It would probably only be cold right then. In the afternoon, the sunlight, which still smelled faintly of summer, would definitely warm up the air.

Ryuuji dashed slightly to catch up to Taiga’s side. Their toes aligned as they took their steps, and their very differently sized shadows overlapped.

“When the wind dies down,” said Ryuuji, “it’s not that cold. Well, I get what you’re saying. So then, how are you planning on breaking the ice? This is Kawashima we’re dealing with, so she’s going to be difficult.”

“I’ve prepared some ‘bait.’ It’s something nice that’ll be a waste on the likes of Dimhuahua.”

Taiga held up a tote bag. Enshrined inside of it was a fashionably wrapped small box that she showed Ryuuji.

“Huh, is that dessert? From the restaurant you ate at yesterday?”

“Yeah. I thought I’d have her eat a ton of calories. It’s a famous restaurant, and Dimhuahua definitely likes stuff like that, right? I’ll give this to her and ask her for a ‘favor’...blech! Thinking about asking Dimhuahua for a favor is giving me the creeps again!”

“Well, well...hee hee...”

As he soothed Taiga, Ryuuji couldn’t hide the strange smile creeping onto his face. Taiga’s eyebrows went right up. She swung the tote bag, assaulting Ryuuji’s flat butt.

“Ow!”

“What are you giggling about?!” said Taiga. “That’s gross! Don’t you go around laughing unpleasantly like Dimhuahua, you flappy-eared mutt!”

“My ears aren’t flappy, and it’s not like I was laughing...hee hee...”

“You’re laughing!”

I can’t help it, he thought, can I? Taiga, who repeatedly said she didn’t care, was so dishonest with herself and so stubborn that he couldn’t help but be amused. Ryuuji giggled and grinned and covered his mouth with his hand. He avoided Taiga’s bag attack and quickly pulled ahead of her on the pavement of fragrant, fallen leaves.

“That’s enough!” Taiga clamored in a fit of anger. “You’re definitely laughing! You’re making me out to be an idiot! It’s not like I care about this or anything! That’s right, it doesn’t matter, what I’m asking from Dimhuahua is definitely too stupid. I’m not doing it, not anymore!”

In anger, Taiga passed by Ryuuji, and this time it was his turn to rush to catch up to Taiga.

“Wait a sec!” he said. “I’m not taking you for an idiot! Sorry, sorry, it was a joke! You have to stop being stubborn and make sure you ask Kawashima sometime today, because tomorrow is when everything happens.”

Taiga’s feet stopped in their tracks. She looked at Ryuuji with round eyes.

“Yeah, that’s right,” she groaned under her breath. “It’s already tomorrow...”

“Of course it is. Of course it’s tomorrow. I scared myself just saying that. That was quick. It’s already tomorrow.”

Yes, the cultural festival was drawing near and was already coming up on the next day. They had been practicing and preparing every day and, before they knew it, the time had arrived. They had a mountain of things to do. They needed to practice, make the scenes, make the props, and even make the costumes. Yes, they would even be setting up the most important part, the ring, after school that day.

“We don’t have time to spare anymore,” said Ryuuji. “You can’t say you don’t care. So tomorrow, show him what you got. Do it for your dad. To do that, you definitely need Kawashima’s help.”

“I just said I couldn’t care less...”

Taiga started walking again, her voice growing small. But Ryuuji understood well enough. When Taiga said she couldn’t care less, that was when she really couldn’t care more. Ryuuji really couldn’t care more, either. Ryuuji had definitively decided that he would support building the relationship between Taiga and her father, no matter what happened.

“How do I put this?” he said. “He’s trying to do his best with you, right? Your dad, I mean. Since then, he’s come to get you every night and taken you out to restaurants to eat. And he brings you back every night. And on top of that, he’s coming to see a boring public school’s cultural festival since you’ve become a high school student.”

“Like I said, that all doesn’t matter. It’s not like I plan on trusting him and forgetting everything that’s happened until now for something as small as that. Well...I just think I’ll humor him a little bit. Yesterday’s restaurant was pretty tasty, after all.”

Ryuuji just quietly looked at Taiga beside him. Taiga “humoring” her father was incredible progress compared to that kick in the family jewels the other day. That meant Taiga’s father’s effort was worthwhile. *How great*, he thought. He felt like applauding both father and daughter.

To think that petite old man had gone this far in order to earn Taiga’s trust back. Honestly, he admired the effort. Though he was a man with status in his

job, he actually went out for dinner with his daughter every day without missing a single night. He had continued to prioritize his time with his daughter no matter what business he had.

On a certain night, when the road right in front of Taiga's condo and the Takasu house was closed for construction, Taiga's father had sent Ryuuji a message. *Come and get Taiga where the road's closed off*, it said. *Ah, I'm glad I asked for your contact details!* The overprotective father, who couldn't have his daughter walk alone ten meters in the dark street at night, wore an eye-catching and beautiful V-neck sweater. Taiga was next to him in a classic houndstooth dress. Her father raised his hands and laughed under the gloomy streetlights.

At his excessively wide smile, Ryuuji forgot the bother of having to come get Taiga and reflexively returned the smile. This old man really had charm. His daughter, however, looked grumpy and sullen. She presented him with a one-word shout: "Late!"

Ryuuji was in danger of laughing to himself just remembering it. He stopped himself. He looked down at Taiga's hair whorl again. It wasn't like he had a hair whorl fetish, but at this height difference and distance, he could only see the crown of her head and the tip of her nose.

"Well," he said, "basically, your old man is coming to the cultural festival Saturday, and then he's staying over at your condo, right? It's the first time he's staying over, right?"

"Yeah, but it's the first and last time. It's depressing, so I didn't want him staying. He has business here on Sunday morning, so he had to."

Looking up at Ryuuji, Taiga pushed up her hair with a poker face.

"Business?"

"That's right. On Sunday, a real estate agent is coming to assess the room."

"Assess?" Like an idiot, he parroted her words back at her again. Even Inko-chan wouldn't carry on such a stupid conversation. Ryuuji hadn't even thought of that possibility, but now that she was telling him, it was obvious.

If she was going to live with her father again, Taiga had no reason to live in

that condo alone. She had her dad's house, which her bothersome mother-in-law planned to leave.

"B-but you don't have to go out of your way to move, do you? It's close to school and...can't you just keep living there with your dad?"

He nonchalantly gave her his true opinion as he tried to somehow regain his dignity. However, under the surface, Ryuuji was pretty shaken.

"He said that place would be small for two people."

"I...see."

Was she really moving?

For a moment, a cold breeze spitefully licked at Ryuuji's neck. Somehow, he pretended not to notice that chill and fortified his shaken spirit to right himself again.

"Hey, don't kid around," he said. "Just how many times larger do you think your living room alone is compared to my house?"

Making it out to be a joke, he prodded Taiga's hair with the tip of his finger. He went into a defensive position for the Palmtop Tiger's counterattack, which he knew would be coming.

"I don't have good memories of my parents' house and don't want to go back, so I thought we could live together in that place," she said, "but Pa—that guy immediately started looking for properties. He's selfish. He said that he found a good place that's a little bit away from here. It's a house...and we went to look at it from outside on the way home from a meal, but it was fine. It was fine... I guess maybe it was nice."

She ignored his question. She muttered as though she were talking to herself and quietly continued walking beside him. Basically, she was completely absentminded. She didn't look at Ryuuji walking beside her right then. Her head was filled with other things.

The inside of Taiga's small head was filled with her dad.

They went out to dinner together every night. She was willing to move in order to live with him. She wasn't in a bad mood, either. It wasn't just her

father who was working hard. Taiga was putting in her all for the same goal. Taiga was working hard to trust the father she had once hated. She had heard that her father was coming to the cultural festival and was even willing to ask her mortal enemy, Ami, to switch with her for the “good role.”

This is a good thing, Ryuuji muttered at the bottom of his heart. He made the effort to form his mouth into the shape of a smile. *It is a good thing*.

“What? You’re definitely smiling.”

“I’m not smiling.”

“No, you’re grinning! That’s it, you stay there for thirty seconds! I’m going to go ahead with Minorin. You follow only when you can’t see us...huh? Minorin isn’t here. That’s unusual. I wonder if she’s running late.”

“What if we’re the late ones?”

“Huh? But it’s not like we overslept... No way?! We’re in trouble!”

She showed him her wristwatch, and Ryuuji practically jumped when he saw the minute hand further around than he had imagined it would be. This hadn’t been the time for them to take their time having a fun chat. They started running at top speed over the Zelkova tree-lined sidewalk that was colored with red and yellow fallen leaves. As they were running, Taiga slipped and fell. He somehow pulled her right back up. Would her father be able to watch out for her, as a klutz of the same kind?

Ryuuji, for some reason, looked up at the high, blue autumn skies.

“Ryuuuji! What’re you standing around for?! Well, if you’re going to give up and go slowly on your merry way, I guess all I can do is follow suit.”

“You idiot! We’re running!”

“If it pleases you, please have some.”

At that line of dialogue, Ami looked at the object that was being handed to her for several seconds without saying a word.

“No way,” she said. “What is that? Is it a dead animal or something?”

Ami, seeming to actually not want it, scrunched her willow leaf-shaped eyebrows. In the after-school classroom that seemed to shake from the commotion, the corner where the two of them were taking a break turned into an air pocket. Before they knew it, the atmosphere between them turned chilly—or rather, turned prickly. Taiga didn't back down.

"Oh my, oh my, Dimhuahua. I wouldn't give you something like that."

She shrugged her shoulders, as though this were trivial, and continued to push the package at Ami with incredible patience. The package was the pretty bag and small, decorated box—it was what Taiga had called her "bait." She pushed it into Ami's chest. Even when Ami dodged her saying she didn't want it, she chased after Ami.

"I'm saying I'm giving this to you. Hey, Dimhuahua."

"It's fine," said Ami. "I don't need it. If you're giving me something, there's definitely got to be something shady behind it."

That was to be expected of Ami. The one with the darkest heart would be the most sensitive to others' ploys. She was right, of course. Taiga really did have an ulterior motive. Ryuuji, who was watching from the side, groaned. Ami's perceptiveness was amazing.

"There isn't any," said Taiga. "There isn't any ulterior motive at all."

She tried to trick Ami by waving her hand back and forth in front of her face. Like her father, she opened her eyes wide, filled them with her charm, and pursed her lips so they were small.

"I just thought I'd give it to you, Dimhuahua. I thought you'd definitely like something like this, Dimhuahua."

"What?"

Like a regular girl, Taiga was speaking with a kind tone. Ami looked at Taiga like she'd transformed into a weird bug, but she at least stopped trying to get away. She turned and scrunched her face, seeming like she still didn't actually want the package. However, she was poised to listen to what Taiga had to say. Ryuuji covertly cheered on Taiga. *That's right, go on the offense, right now's your chance.*

“It’s best if you don’t take everyone to be a black-hearted, two-faced personality who only does things for Machiavellian reasons like you, Dimhuahua.”

...*Why?* thought Ryuuji. Why couldn’t she go on without getting an unnecessary lick in? As expected, Ami’s beautiful face turned rose red from anger in an instant.

“I can’t...just stay quiet and listen to you...”

“Take it, won’t you, Kawashima.”

Without thinking, Ryuuji stuck himself between the two. Behind him, Taiga was wearing a strange, forced smile—in Ami’s eyes it probably only looked like she was plotting something. He injected vehemently, “It’s pretty nice. Anyway, take it, here. I can guarantee that you’ll like it when you see it.”

It wasn’t like flattery from the likes of Ryuuji would make it through to Ami.

“Huh? Takasu-kun,” she said, “this doesn’t even have anything to do with you.”

She shooed him away with a wave of her hand.

“Th-that’s true, but...”

“I definitely don’t need a present from a tiger.”

Finally, she turned her face away. Ryuuji and Taiga were already at a stalemate. Though doing so wasn’t helpful in that situation, the two of them inadvertently looked at each other.

In the after-school classroom, the tension suddenly rose from the in-fighting between the two beautiful girls and the boy with a yakuza face, but no one had the time to bat an eye at them. Everyone was too busy preparing for the next day’s cultural festival show. Here and there, they laughed and yelled and made a huge commotion. It was the climax of the pro-wrestling show’s practice run. Haruta put on the airs of a director with all the gymnastics club members. He cut off their somersaults as he judged them. “No! Again!” He was being a nuisance, and it felt like the day his loyal shadow corps would overthrow him wasn’t far out.

Even though it was growing dark outside the window, it wasn't just class 2-C making a commotion. The class next door and the class over there—all of them were starting to do carpentry work or going this way and that while holding stepladders. Some of them were putting together mysterious maid uniforms. There was no sign of Kitamura. It seemed that he was running around the school preparing for the day of the festival. Somehow, it seemed it wasn't only class 2-C that had taken the bait the student council had set. Aside from the college-bound third years, practically every class was going to participate in the exhibition this year.

Caught as they were in the middle of the maelstrom, Ryuuji unskillfully tried to change the situation for the better.

"I-I think you'll find it's delicious. Just try it, even a little bit. Okay?"

"It's food~?"

That didn't go in their favor. The leading role, who was on break, contorted her cute face and stared at the villain and the henchman.

"Isn't that the scariest thing it could be? I don't need anything like that."

It seemed she was firm about not taking something being given to her by her natural enemy. Taiga's usual behavior really could be terrible, but he hadn't expected Ami's distrust of her to run this deep. Still, he just had to keep doing what he could. Without giving up, Ryuuji kept acting as an intermediary.

"If you open it, you'll get it. I think you'll definitely like what it is. Take it, take it. Anyway, at least try opening the packaging. Here."

At Ryuuji's ardent suggestion, Ami distrustfully tilted her head, "What, are you shilling for a delivery company or something?" However, it seemed she was hesitant to drop the thing being pressed on her now that she knew it was edible. Finally, she unhappily took the small box with her pale hands. Then she twisted up her face and cautiously looked at the marks on the wrapping paper. Her eyes abruptly widened.

"Huh? No way! Wait, is this for real?!"

They had caught her.

Despite the fact that Taiga and Ryuuji were locking eyes with each other, Ami pulled off the wrapping paper and gently opened the box.

“Whoa. What is this? Isn’t this super amazing?”

With a voice three times lower than her normal tone, she oohed and ahed. Inside the box was a pretty line of rainbow-colored macarons from a renowned French restaurant that was impossible to get a reservation for.

“My dad keeps dragging me to this place to eat out. The French restaurant we went to yesterday was pretty good, so I thought I’d buy this for you as a gift, Dimhuahua. I thought you’d like something like this.”

“With your dad? You had a meal? At this restaurant?”

As she looked at the macarons in enchantment, a black cloud seemed to suddenly spread over Ami’s gaze. Even her beautifully small chin started to steadily jut forward and get longer and longer.

“No way. What is this? None of my model friends have ever gotten inside, so how does a normal person’s old man get into that place... How did you get into that place, seriously? Hmph, I thought I’d been spotting pimples on your face lately, and it turns out you’ve been living it up?”

Before Ami’s glistening wet eyes, Taiga’s chin really did have one or two red pimples. They might have been from her feasting. Ami let more of her envy show as her nostrils flared in frustration.

“Your dad, huh... I was thinking, more or less, that your parents had gotten divorced and that you had to be super miserable living alone this year. Hmph. It seems you’re closer to him than expected.”

She was being incredibly rude with her remarks. They were the equivalent of stepping into another person’s family affairs with her shoes still on. If Taiga were her former self, she definitely would have made the planet rain with blood for seven days and seven nights. However, at that moment, Taiga was a tad different from before. No matter what Ami said, she had room to accept it. Her heart was fat and heavy after having been satisfied by the upscale French restaurant. To this queen of a tiger, a teeny Chihuahua attack was probably nothing more than a mosquito bite.

“We *are* close. How unfortunate for you.”

Putting on a smile, Taiga and her pimples gracefully brushed off the attack. Ryuuji was in awe. Taiga, in her own way, had taken in that burning aggression and pettiness without retaliating.

This is a good thing. He nodded deeply to himself. *Yes, it's a good thing—a good thing. Definitely.*

“Dimhuahua, try eating that.”

“Huh? Right here and now? Why? I don't want to. My mouth would get all dry. It irritates me, but the macarons haven't done any wrong, so I'll gladly take them home. I'll make tea at home and eat them right up. But, damn it, to think a normal person and a spoiled brat would get there before me... I was thinking next weekend...”

“Just try eating it! Hurry up and try them, try them right now!”

“No way, you're so insistent, what's up with you?!”

“Eat it!”

Like a child, Taiga stubbornly wailed and then started climbing onto Ami. She took tight hold of the tracksuit Ami was wearing and stepped all over Ami's butt with her indoor slippers.

“Wait, stop, don't pull on my tracksuit! It'll stretch out! Actually, don't get on me with slippers you've used in the bathroom! Argh, you're such a nuisance! I'll eat it, okay, look!”

Seeming to give in to Taiga, who she couldn't brush off, Ami threw a single macaron into her mouth. Taiga, who was hanging on like a monkey, quickly muttered, “You ate it...”

Then she jumped onto the floor and kept her distance. She watched intently until Ami swallowed. Ami clapped her pale hands together.

“There, I ate it, I ate it, it was great, delicious! There, get away from me! Shoo, shoo! Sometimes you're kind of super sticky and troublesome.”

“You ate it! Now listen up!”

“There it is! That’s scary! ...Cough!”

Immediately, the dregs of the macaron got caught in her throat. She coughed for a while and pointed at Taiga with tears in her eyes.

“What’s with you?! Isn’t that the worst?! Hey, hey Takasu-kun, did you hear that just now?! You said it was a gift, but in the end that’s the kind of girl you are, aren’t you?!”

Regardless of what she said to him, Ryuuji was also an accomplice, so he could only ambiguously smile. He noncommittally moved his head around and could only avert his gaze from Ami’s as the corner of her beautiful eyes went up. Taiga, however, slipped up next to Ami.

“You took the treat, so tomorrow for the cultural festival pro-wrestling show, even if it’s just once, I want to switch roles. I want to be in a good role. I don’t want to be the villain.”

Taiga had said it. She’d thrown her embarrassment, dignity, and spirit to the winds and asked Ami.

“Huuuh? Why?”

Her mouth became chubby and cat-like. It seemed she was now bashful and embarrassed. Taiga latched onto Ami’s tracksuit sleeve. She put her weight on the sleeve as she pulled and positioned herself as though she were yacht sailing.

“Tomorrow, my dad said he’s coming to see the cultural festival. But I couldn’t tell him that I was forced into the villain’s role...and when I said it was a role with a lot of lines, he got it into his head that it was like a play and that I had, like...the leading role...so, he said he definitely had to come see it... Even I know that this super sad excuse of a pro-wrestling show that the long-haired idiot thought up is crap! There’s nothing we can do about that! It doesn’t matter; if he’s coming, he’s coming! So I want to show him something good, even if it’s just with the role! I don’t want him to say that he’s not going to see it!”

“Hmmmm,” said Ami.

Based on Ami’s eyes, it didn’t seem like her heart had been moved. They coldly glistened as she looked down on Taiga. She even grabbed her sleeve and sharply pulled it back. Her lips contorted as though to say something spiteful,

but she held back her words. She thought for a bit and slowly traced her mouth with her fingertips. What she muttered in a small voice was, “I see. ♥”

“Did your old man also say he’d see the Miss Festival pageant?” she went on. “Did you tell him you were in it?”

“Yeah...I told him. I didn’t want to, but it slipped out...”

Ami spent a moment thinking, and then as though she had come up with a fiendishly good joke, she smiled and narrowed her eyes.

“Okay, listen up!” she said. “That’s a guarantee that you can’t run away from the Miss Festival pageant. If our class were to boycott the contest at the last moment, that would look bad for me as the emcee. Yeah, it’s fine. If your old man comes, I’ll trade roles with you, but only then. Well, sometimes even I might want the villainous role, since I’m always Ami-chan, the heroine. I’ll do a great job tricking everyone. This is you we’re talking about, so you’d be too embarrassed to tell anyone you’re doing this because of your completely obvious daddy issues.”

“Who has daddy iss—”

“Now, now. ♥”

Ami nestled up to Taiga and bent down to look at her. She made her voice strangely sickeningly sweet.

“Hey, hey, actually, what kind of work does your father do? The way you talk about him, he completely reeks of being, like, a celebrity or something. In exchange for exchanging roles, could you make sure to tell him that your friend who’s emceeing the Miss Festival pageant works as a model? And that she’s really cute but also super polite and such a nice girl? And also, like, could you tell him if he hears anything juicy to make sure and let Ami-chan know? Well, even if it didn’t get me a job, then, for example, a connection to get into that restaurant would be more than good enough. It seems like he reeks of having connections.”

“Uwah,” said Taiga, “what a despicable girl...”

“What?! I said I’d hear you out, and that’s what you have to say?!”

It seemed they had finally finished talking.

It seemed Ami and Taiga had pretty much gone past formal niceties and, in the end, started to chase each other around the classroom as they barked at each other. Ryuuji watched them, half astonished.

“I’ll make sure you introduce me to your old man! Got it?!”

It happened as Ami’s voice reached peak pitch.

“Taiga’s dad? What happened?”

As she polished the bald cap for the next day, Minori quietly stepped in next to Ryuuji. *She talked to me!* thought Ryuuji. He was at risk of jumping like an overjoyed puppy but restrained himself. He tried to make his expression as indifferent as possible. Though he thought it was odd that she didn’t know anything, he explained the situation.

“Her dad’s coming to see the cultural festival tomorrow. Kawashima heard that and seems to be making a big deal out of it, trying to get introduced to him. I don’t know what she’s expecting, though.”

“...”

In that moment, Minori clamped her mouth shut. Her eyes went wide and glistened. She didn’t even breathe as she watched Ryuuji dead-on. The round outline of her cheek dimpled as she braced her jaw. *How cute*, Ryuuji thought, entirely captivated by her round face.

“Wh-what’s wrong?”

After a while, he finally realized what was happening. Minori had been robbed of her next words as though she had heard something incredibly unexpected. Her face was stiff, as though she had frozen over. Minori, the super positive sunshine child who always reacted cheerfully no matter what the situation, was frozen over. Had he really said something that strange?

“Why...why?”

Finally, words came out of Minori’s mouth, but her voice was fluttery and didn’t seem grounded.

“Why? Well that’s—”

As he faced her, Ryuuji unintentionally cut himself off, too. *What in the world happened? What could I have done wrong?*

Minori suddenly and quickly looked around. Without drawing attention to herself, she turned her back to Taiga, who grappled with Ami. Then she positioned herself so she was cornering Ryuuji against the wall.

“Why? Hey, tell me,” she inquired. There was no trace of a smile on her face. Her features were hard. She frowned sternly and pursed her lips. Ryuuji had never seen Minori with an expression like this before. He hadn’t even imagined her making a face like this. Her bright smile, her silly strange faces, the momentary face of a troubled girl—those were the faces Ryuuji knew.

“Don’t be silent, tell me. Please. What’s Taiga’s dad planning on doing this time?”

“What’s he planning on doing? Like I said, he’s coming to the cultural festival.”

“I’m asking why he’s doing that!”

Ryuuji was surprised as her voice suddenly almost jumped into a shriek. It seemed to surprise Minori, too. She immediately shut her mouth. She closed her eyes for just a few seconds, apparently trying to calm herself down. Then Minori opened her eyes again, took a delicate breath, and exhaled slowly. Ryuuji finally understood.

Minori was angry.

The moment he understood, doubt ran through his mind like a lightning bolt. Why had Minori suddenly become angry? Wasn’t her anger too irrational, too baffling, and too swift? He didn’t understand it at all.

Minori faced Ryuuji as he was silent and spoke quickly in a voice that was wrapped in impatience.

“Hey, tell me. I’m asking you why. Takasu-kun, if you know, tell me. What’s happening in Taiga’s personal life? Why is her dad coming into this?”

Her detached words fired at him like the automated voice of a robot. For some reason, her unusually fast words seemed to echo with blame directed

towards Ryuuji. He didn't understand why she was blaming him. It wasn't as though he could ignore her, so he told her the facts as calmly as possible.

"Taiga's going to be living with her dad," he said. "You've probably known her situation up until now, right? I think he's been trying to fix their relationship recently."

For a moment, Minori was speechless.

He could see that she had sucked a deep breath in by how her shirt and the tracksuit she wore over it rose. The color in her face vanished before Ryuuji's eyes. She was at such a loss, her lips trembled. She couldn't even exhale the air she had breathed in through her half-open lips. She wasn't holding her breath like Yasuko would when she was being petulant. It seemed like something much larger was happening.

"Are you okay? Hey, what's wrong? There's definitely something the matter with you."

Though he was hesitant, he gently reached his hand to her shoulder. *Keep it together*, he thought as he tried to grasp her.

"What is this..."

Minori's eyes were no longer locked on Ryuuji. Swaying, she pushed away Ryuuji's hand and chewed on her short-trimmed nails.

The bald cap still dangled from her other hand.

"What is this? Don't joke about that."

Her mouth contorted as she once again spat that out. He didn't know to whom those words were addressed. Then Minori turned around in front of Ryuuji's eyes, took a step, and tried to walk towards Taiga.

"Wait!"

He had unintentionally grabbed her hand to stop her. The heat of love was nonexistent in that touch. Minori's eyes were still dimly lit with something that looked like hostility as she turned around.

"Let go, Takasu-kun."

“Where are you going? What are you going to do? You weren’t acting normal just now. Calm down a little. Please.”

“The one who’s not acting normal is Taiga.”

What? It was Ryuuji’s turn to hold his tongue.

“There’s something wrong with Taiga. I need to open her eyes. I have to tell her that she can’t believe in a dad like that.”

“Wha—”

The hair on Ryuuji’s whole body stood on end from shock. Goosebumps rose on his skin and, this time, he was repeating to himself over and over again, *Calm down, calm down.*

“Why are you saying that? Aren’t you supposed to be Taiga’s best friend? Why are you saying something so terrible... Why aren’t you happy for her?”

“Happy? Me? Why would I be? With Taiga’s dad appearing at a time like this. And Taiga is even believing in what he says. What are you saying I should be happy about? I could never stand back and smile while my friend gets hurt. Not me.”

In other words, he thought, you mean that I’m smiling as I watch Taiga get hurt? He felt like it was a miracle he was able to swallow back the impulse that ran through his body. *This is Kushieda Minori, the girl I like,* he recited in his heart like a spell. Somehow, he kept his voice composed.

“Don’t you think you’re overreacting? Taiga’s dad is really ordinary, but he loves his daughter way more than a normal person. He’s a good and decent guy. He definitely made mistakes, but he also got hurt. He’s trying his hardest to make up for those failures now. Taiga’s also trying hard. Don’t say stuff like that when you’re just watching from the sidelines. You don’t even know anything.”

Minori didn’t try to consider any of his thoughts at all. She didn’t try to cooperate with Ryuuji as he breathed deeply in order to calm himself. She twisted up her lips, narrowed her eyes, and spoke vehemently as though she were placing blame on him.

“Takasu-kun, you met with Taiga’s dad? So you met him. You met him and

then...I see. That's it. So you were the one who lit the fire under Taiga. Takasu-kun, when you met Taiga's dad, were both of your eyes actually open? Did you really have them open?"

"What? I don't get what you're trying to say. Of course I had them open."

"All right, fine. I got it. There's no use talking to you."

"What did you just say?!"

The more he tried to keep his voice controlled, the lower and hoarser it went. His voice barely came out.

"Don't talk like you know anything! Why are you, of all people, not happy for Taiga?! Open your own eyes and actually take a look at the situation!"

He had believed. He had believed Minori, this girl who was like the sun, would have wished more straightforwardly for Taiga's happiness than anyone. He believed she would have given her blessing to Taiga and her dad the most readily. He believed she would have been happier than anyone at the revival of Taiga's family. She should have been with him watching Taiga and smiling, knowing that this was the best thing that could have happened.

The wound of her betrayal was as deep as the trust he had had in her. It was so deep, even he couldn't comprehend how far it went. The more he looked into it, the more his head filled with blood.

"I don't believe it," she said. "I don't believe Taiga's dad."

"Are you the one who gets to decide whether or not to believe him?! That should be Taiga!"

"That's why I'm going to tell Taiga right now! I'm going to tell her not to believe in whatever he says!"

"Don't do anything uncalled for!"

"This doesn't have anything to do with you, Takasu-kun!"

"It has even less to do with you!"

What an overbearing person—why is she saying this stuff? he thought.

With eyes that seemed to glow, Ryuuji glared at Minori. Minori, though,

wasn't the type of girl to back down at that. As they glared at each other and their shoulders heaved, the people around them finally started to notice their fighting.

"Kushieda? What's wrong? You seem kind of..."

"Was Takasu the one shouting just now...?"

In the middle of the commotion, Taiga spun around. It seemed she had just noticed their argument. With surprise in her eyes and her mouth half open, she looked at Ryuuji and Minori. Then, looking frantic, Taiga ran over.

"Ryu...Ryuuji!"

"Minorin!"

She had an expression on that he had never seen before. She was anxiously looking into their faces but trying her hardest to smile. It was as though she were trying to wipe everything clean by treating it all as a joke.

"Now, shake hands!"

She stuck herself between them and grabbed their wrists with her hands. Then she tried to force them to shake hands. Ryuuji firmly clenched his fingers together and prevented the handshake. His hand rammed right into Minori's knuckles and reflexively brushed aside Taiga's hand. He glared at Minori. Minori's eyes were no longer looking at Ryuuji's and were only pointed down to her slippers.

He didn't turn around to see what happened after that. No matter what anyone else was saying, no matter what kind of expression Minori had on her face, no matter what was happening, he didn't look back to check. *Who cares about any of it?* he thought.

His mind filled with static. The inside of his brain had practically whited out as Ryuuji left the classroom and all of it behind as fast as he could.

Those who didn't know Ryuuji would call him a delinquent, or a thug, or a criminal with a record.

Those who knew Ryuuji well would say he was a kindhearted guy. They'd say

that he was nice and scrupulous and like a mom, which was strange for a high school student.

He was probably born with that personality. There was also the argument that he had become that way because he was raised by that laid-back scatterbrain Yasuko. As soon as he became self-aware of the world, he took on the role of son-*slash*-full-time-housewife-*slash*-Yasuko's-guardian. He had to be better and more self-reliant than other kids. He had to hold back any childish indulgences and discontent, and take things in stride.

In other words, Yasuko had brought Ryuuji up so he became a kid who would keep his complaints to himself, and go through the days taking things for what they were. Ryuuji had to face any day-to-day situation with a heart as flexible as a willow tree. If he didn't, the Takasu household and the two's somewhat vague parental relationship wouldn't exist as peacefully as it did now.

The gangster face Ryuuji had inherited from his old man through some twist of fate had also spurred on his gentle personality. That was a fact.

Even if he didn't do anything, people would get it into their head that Ryuuji was exactly what he looked like—a violent hooligan. They'd get scared and nervous, and then they'd say terrible things about him. Believing they were justified, people would exclude Ryuuji from their circles. After encountering that time and time again, Ryuuji came upon a realization. He realized that he had to be kinder and more honest than others. No matter what happened, he couldn't blame others, and he couldn't sulk. If he lived as straightforwardly as he could, someone would eventually understand. Those people would become his friends. As long as he had friends that understood, they would help him if something happened. Ryuuji really was a good person and, no matter what happened, they would know that.

So until that day, Ryuuji knew that no matter what happened, in the end, he would be the one to suffer the most from showing his anger or frustration. He did his best not to show those emotions on his face. At least, he hadn't until now.

"I wanna die."

Is this my punishment?

Feeling like Thanatos, he sat in the fifty-centimeter gap between the juice vending machines on the landing of the vacant staircase. He held six ice-cold coffees in his hands. Incidentally, the temperature at that moment couldn't have been higher than ten degrees Celsius. His fingers felt like they were being torn to pieces from holding the cold aluminum.

In the midst of his frustration, Ryuuji had done the one thing he shouldn't have. He kicked one of the faultless vending machines as hard as he could. The name of the move: venting his anger. The results: a dent in the vending machine's frame and cold coffees scattered at Ryuuji's feet as though the machine had thrown them up.

He probably could have left the cold cans on the ground, but his body had hardened up, and he couldn't move even a single fingertip. He felt like punishing himself, so he remained like that, even when he lost feeling in his hands.

Minori's wrong, he thought.

But I also yelled at her.

If he could only go back in time, then he probably could fix everything, but he couldn't. He definitely couldn't reverse time. So now he just wanted to die.

He no longer knew how many minutes he had been sitting there like that. The area around him fell into silence and he didn't feel the passage of time. Ryuuji couldn't think properly. He didn't want to look back at what had just happened.

If he just died right here as he was, then maybe Minori would cry for him a little.

"You. I-di-ot."

Suddenly a voice gently tickled Ryuuji's ears.

"Lay off," he said.

Even without looking, he knew the identity of the person who had appeared from the sweet smell of her wafting perfume and her elegant gait.

"That gap is my gap, though."

She folded her arms. Her long eyelashes dropped a shadow over her starry

eyes as they closed. With a pale smile on her lips, Ami stood right above him, looking down at Ryuuji where he crouched.

“Who decided that?” he said.

“Me. Look, move, out of the way. Get up.”

She grasped Ryuuji’s ice-cold hands with her fingertips, which were so thin it seemed as though her bones could show through. Her touch was soft, and she made no indication she would give him any more trouble, but her grip was firm and strong as she pulled Ryuuji from the gap between the vending machines. Then, Ami slipped into the open gap and sat down.

“See. This is exactly Ami-chan-sized. This is definitely my gap.”

She snorted proudly through her nose. Because he couldn’t do anything else, Ryuuji sat cross-legged in front of her. Oddly, in that moment, he didn’t feel that uncomfortable around Ami’s haughty eyes or even her spiteful smile. No matter how depressed he looked, this girl wouldn’t console him at all. Just knowing that might have made him feel better. He didn’t have to worry that she would tiptoe around him, and he didn’t need to tiptoe around her. He could lay on the depression as thick as he wanted.

“What happened to Kushieda?”

“What’s with all this coffee? I don’t really like canned coffee much, but oh well. Minori-chan went home.”

“Seriously? Ugh...”

He held his knees and pressed his face into them. *Ahh, this is the end.* Ryuuji knew the meaning of the word despair. He had no hopes. There was no tomorrow. There was no future.

“You reap what you sow, right? Well, you really did it yelling at the girl you’re crushing on like that.”

Ami pulled on the can’s tab. At the words she said, Ryuuji faltered without thinking.

“That was Kushieda’s fault! This happened because what she said was horrible!”

“Hmmm? Well, I dunno what you were fighting about, but you normally don’t get in fights, right? Especially with a girl. And especially with the girl you like.”

“You’ve sure got a lot to say... It doesn’t matter anymore. Kushieda doesn’t matter. I’m actually, seriously mad. I can’t believe her. That was the worst. It’s like I saw her true self. I didn’t think she was the kind of person who could say stuff like that.”

He knew what he was saying was petulant. He knew that he was being childish, but he couldn’t take back the words he had already said.

“Waah, shut up. Could you keep that lame gossip out of my ears? It’s not like I’m kind enough to sympathize with something like that or like I’d console you.”

“Right, yeah.”

Ami’s eyebrows sprung up as though she were surprised. She indifferently brought the can of coffee to her mouth. Without saying anything, Ryuuji watched Ami’s throat for a while.

“Hey. Could you bring my bag over here? Then I can just go home.” With nothing left to lose, he tried being petulant again.

“No waaay.”

Her spiteful look and the contemptuous way she answered were within his expectations.

“I’m going to take a break for a little bit longer and then I’m going back. Can’t you just come back with me to the classroom?”

“That’s impossible. Everyone was so excited, and I ruined the mood...”

“About that. I think that’s okay now. I covered for you. I told everyone it’d be best to leave the two of you alone for now, so they went on practicing like normal.”

“You covered for me? You of all people?”

“I can do that much. Well, that teenybopper Palmtop Tiger was the only one who was anxious. All her hair was standing on end. She was menacing everyone around her.”

“She didn’t go home with Kushieda?”

“She tried running out to follow her, but then she slipped and fell. She got left behind. She scraped her knee and was starting to cry, so Nanako took her to the nurse’s office. She should be getting back to the classroom around now.”

The whole scene seemed completely plausible as it played out before his eyes. Ryuuji sighed. Whose fault was it that things had become like this? The voice shouting, *It was Minori* and the sinking voice saying, *Maybe it was me* echoed like surround sound in his head.

But, regardless of that, he couldn’t forgive what Minori had said. He couldn’t understand it. He had prayed to go back in time, but even if he did, he definitely wouldn’t have been able to agree with her. No matter how many times he returned to that time, no matter how many times he repented, no matter how many times he tasted this despair, Ryuuji might not have been able to keep himself from trying to change what he considered to be her obnoxious viewpoint. *This is a good thing, so be happy*, he’d tell her.

“Let’s cut this break short soon and get back to the classroom.”

Finishing up the coffee, Ami threw the empty can into the garbage in a single shot. She pumped her fist.

“Hey. Let’s go. It’s going to be okay.”

Almost as though she were one of the guys, she grabbed Ryuuji’s school jacket and stood him up. Then she grasped his shoulder a little roughly, as though she were bumping into him. Because their heights weren’t very different, Ami’s beautiful face was in close vicinity to his. Even in a time like his, her beautiful double-lidded eyes couldn’t help but steal his gaze.

“As long as you’re with me, you can go back, right? It’ll be fine if you act like nothing happened.”

For some reason, the teasing look that was usually in her eyes was absent. The indecipherable allure she had, which he normally didn’t know whether to interpret as her seducing him or toying with him, completely eluded him.

She was simply looking at him with genuine friendliness and trying to cheer him up. That was probably because, at that moment, Ryuuji really was down on

his luck.

“You really have changed,” he said. “Like, actually.”

He was thankful. That was what was running through his mind.

“Is that what you think?”

“You went ahead and matured before everybody else.”

Hmph. Ami looked away. She didn’t turn towards Ryuuji but instead in the opposite direction where they needed to go forward.

“I was mature way before you. But, well, I might have changed in some ways. I’ve been thinking a little. There were times when I thought, I want to change, I really want to change. I wanted to change a lot of different parts of myself.”

As she said that, he felt very slightly like there was still something in her profile that was hesitating and that she was hiding.

“I want to change, too. What should we do? What do you think, Kawashima?”

“Don’t depend on me. Think for yourself.”

When she turned around, her familiar spiteful smile was plastered to her face.

“I’m not going to cling to you like that Palmtop Tiger, Takasu-kun. I won’t become that radiant sunshine Minori-chan is to you, either. I, Kawashima Ami, will walk on the same path, at the same level as you, but just a little further ahead. Now, let’s get back to the classroom. We have to practice. Tomorrow is our exciting cultural festival. The show is about to go live.”

Turning on her heel, Ami started walking in front of him. Ryuuji looked at his own feet for a while and then finally raised his eyes to watch her back.

In the deserted corner, someone had left behind six hundred yen wrapped in tissue inside the change slot of the middle vending machine. It was accompanied by a sticky note that read *I broke it, I’m sorry*, along with the culprit’s class and name.

Chapter 5

“**W**aah, there sure are a lot of people lined up outside... No way, I’m getting nervous. What should I do?”

“Calm down, Haruta.”

“Calm down? But Taka-chan...eep!”

They were in a cramped spot by the classroom’s blackboard. They had blacked-out the space and turned it into a dressing room. Haruta had been peeking out into the hallway from a gap in the door they had closed. He had raised his voice, taken aback, and the others surrounding him adopted the resolve to discipline him. A storm of outstretched arms rained down together to poke him in the forehead.

“What’re you doing, you idiot?! Keep quiet! If they hear us, it’ll ruin the mood!”

“Do you have no self-awareness as a director, you idiot?!”

“You’ve got no composure at all! You idiot!”

“Ow ow ow oww! But I can’t help it!”

Haruta finally crawled away and escaped from the explosive attack. He pointed at the black-clad back of the person facing away from the commotion, who was still occupied with preparations.

“But Takasu was glaring at me with that terrifying face!”

“Huh? Me?”

Ryuuji had just been talking to Haruta to soothe his nerves, though. He turned around in surprise at the unexpected words from his friend.

“Whoa?!”

“Gyaaaaaaaaah!”

Even the ones who had been reproaching Haruta completely broke down and ran away to the wall. *What in the world?* Ryuuji thought, tilting his head in

astonishment. Taiga, who had come out from the changing space after getting in costume, furrowed her brows at the commotion and grabbed Ryuuji's shoulder.

"Wait," she said, "what are you doing horsing arou—gyaaaaah!"

After looking into his face, she fell right over. This was abnormal behavior, even for her. Ryuuji impatiently pulled Taiga up.

"Even you, Taiga?! Why are you all screaming when you look at me?!"

"I was careless...to take your face flash directly..."

"My face? Uh, w-was my makeup too strong?"

He finally grasped the situation. Though his reaction was late, he became embarrassed and covered his face with his hands.

The cramped dressing room was only illuminated by a desk light someone had brought. They had surrounded the room with blackout curtains and turned off the rest of the lights so nothing would be visible from the stage. In that dimly lit space, Ryuuji's villainous face, lit diagonally from below, had become nothing less than a murder weapon. Thick, stark eyeliner brought out the dangerous sheen of his dark blue lids. The makeup on his sharp and lifted sanpaku eyes made his threatening presence seem more prominent. Concealer hid the color of his normally rough lips, making them look even more inhuman. If he swaggered onto the stage with a face like this, he would likely leave a permanent scar on the spectators' souls.

"What's your goal with this, you bomb-faced dog?"

Taiga threw makeup wipes at him. Ryuuji took them, though he was slightly sad. He had just been enthusiastic. He wanted to put in his best effort, even though he was being pushed into showing off his terrifying face, which was the origin of a psychological complex for him. He felt indebted to his classmates, who had accepted him back into the fold even though he had made a scene and ruined the mood the other day. He wanted to do everything he could to at least act the part of the villain.

"I got carried away..."

“You don’t need anything like that,” Taiga said, flatly carving away and throwing out Ryuuji’s feelings for him. “When it comes to you, it’s better if you think, ‘There’s something missing,’ on all points. That’s exactly good enough. You’re always overdoing something. You engrave this lesson deep into yourself.”

“What are you talking about?” he said. “I’ve always taken it to heart to use a moderate amount of salt... What’s with your face? Are you thinking of going out there and being the only one with your face all cute? Get your villainous makeup on. How about I do it for you? Huh?”

“No thanks. I’m fine as I am.”

Taiga plopped down behind Ryuuji. As she shrugged in the mirror, he could see her unfazed face had no sign of makeup. Though her face was as bare as usual, her hair was villainous, at least. She had put it up in a high and severe ponytail. *Hmph*, she snorted haughtily. She proudly flourished the jet-black cape he had made especially for her. She held a black feather folding fan in one hand. She opened it in all its splendor and showed it off to him.

“I’m switching with Dimhuahua for the leading role, so I’m passing on the baddie makeup.”

“Oh, is that so.”

She was so happy. *And your favorite papa is staying over today*, he thought. *You must be on cloud nine.*

Ryuuji sulked. He wretchedly put on the cape that matched Taiga’s and started taking off his overambitious makeup. Inside the cape, his outfit was comprised of a black T-shirt and black sweats. Taiga, of course, had a black T-shirt with black leggings. The slippers on their feet didn’t quite finish the look, but, somehow, their head to toe black outfits looked villainous.

“Anyway,” said Taiga. “More importantly, you understand, right?”

“You’re heavy.”

Taiga put all her weight on Ryuuji’s back as he sat with his legs under him and fumbled with his makeup. They locked eyes in the mirror and she sadistically traced the outline of Ryuuji’s scary face with the feathers of her fan. At a

distance close enough to bite off his earlobe, she whispered low into his ear.

“The thing we talked about this morning. Make sure you actually honor that.”

He didn’t have any choice other than to nod at her cruel gaze. In fact, he had said, “I don’t want to,” on the way to school, which resulted in her first rampage of the morning. Now, she looked at him with proud eyes.

Apologize to Minorin, she’d said. And definitely make sure to make up with her.

Even though she didn’t know the circumstances or anything about what happened, Taiga had actually taken sides and placed the blame on Ryuuji. She didn’t even know how he felt. Actually, she didn’t even know she was the cause of it in the first place...though he *had* hidden that from her, so of course she wouldn’t know.

“I said I got it,” he said. “Actually, why don’t you mediate between me and Kushieda? Weren’t you having a normal and happy conversation with Kushieda this morning? Why don’t you tell her all casually to, ‘Make up with Ryuuji,’ or something, too?”

“You think I could fix a relationship like that? You think I’d be able to ape my way through such a delicate matter of the heart?”

“I should have known better, but I asked you anyway. That’d be impossible for you, wouldn’t it? Sorry, my bad.”

He sighed as he tried to fix the eyeliner he had removed and redrew the line too thick again. Yes, he knew. He didn’t need to be told to make up with Minori. It wasn’t like Taiga could mediate their fight, so he had to do what he could. Though he said he wanted to make up, Ryuuji still wasn’t able to come to terms with Minori’s way of thinking. He’d just been hung up on it the whole time. If he didn’t find a way to resolve his unease, he definitely couldn’t make up with her.

Ryuuji’s gaze skipped past his increasingly ridiculous makeup job, angling behind him in the mirror.

“Whoa! As expected, Kushieda, you wear it well!”

“You think so? Does it look good on me?”

He didn't know what getup she had on. He could only hear a bright voice coming from the changing area. The owner of the voice, Minori, was hidden just beyond the curtain so Ryuuji couldn't even get a peek of her.

"Ahh, what a pitiful face you're making," said Taiga. "Hurry up and make up with her. You'll miss out on your chance to go around the cultural festival with Minorin."

Ryuuji didn't need Taiga telling him. He knew that, of course. He turned towards the small, pale face that had been the cause of his quarrel with Minori in the first place. Suddenly his detestation for her quietly piled up like the blizzards that occasionally fell on the town. His control broke.

"There."

"Ugyah?!"

With the eyeliner in his hand, Ryuuji drew a whisker on Taiga's detestable cheek.

"Wait, what do you think you're doing?!"

"There, there!"

"Noo!"

He pursued her all the more. He dabbed at her forehead and he marked her chin. Taiga thrashed her hands around like a beast and ran away on all fours from her dog's sudden rebellion.

"Ow!"

"Hey, Takasu! Don't get the tiger all riled up in this small space!"

"Uwaah, wait, the curtain!"

They rained down trouble on their classmates, who were packed together in the middle of preparations. Taiga tried to jump under the desk loaded with props, but a stray hand grabbed her by the collar and pulled her away. Taiga raised a shrill voice and tried to shake off the grip that held her. Then, when she looked up at the owner of the hand, her movements stopped exactly like magic.

"Now we should all quiet down soon. We're almost at our first show time."

Kitamura had appeared. As the vice president of the student council, he was working security and doing administrative work on top of his role as a student on Ami-chan's team for class 2-C. Since he was in a minor role, he wore a white T-shirt that matched everyone else's and the pants of his school-issued tracksuit. The glasses he had on glinted, as per usual.

"According to the information from the front, the people lined up for the first performance alone will fill 80% of the seats. Some people will probably come right at the last minute, so we should expect a full house."

Whoa... A stir rippled through the darkness in the dressing room.

"Uwah, a full house, seriously? I thought no one would be interested in pro-wrestling, though."

"Actually, aren't there way more people than there were last year? The hallways have been packed since morning."

"But last year, even the students from our school were skipping out, and the whole place was empty."

"There are a lot of people from other schools here, too."

Kitamura nodded heavily.

"This year," he said, "the student council made its way to nearby schools and went around doing intensive PR every day. We put up posters and explained the plan to pit the classes against each other. It seems that worked better than expected. Plus, kids from other classes are trying to get more votes by calling on their junior high classmates who ended up at different schools. On top of that, there are the junior high third years who'll be taking the high school entrance exam. There are more coming this year compared to usual."

"Whoa, junior high girls..."

"No way! We could hit on them."

In the cramped space, all the members of the class sat on the ground hugging their knees. A depressing whisper echoed through the room that was already uncomfortably hot and stuffy without any additional help: "Maruo, the guests are getting to their seats soon."

At the sound of the feminine voice from the front, everyone clammed up. Even Taiga, who had been writhing on her own after Kitamura touched her, got up and was quiet. It seemed she might have read the mood. From beyond the two blackout curtains they had partitioned the room with, they definitely felt the presence of many people. They started to hear the commotion of voices and the chairs they had put into rows being pulled across the floor.

“Everyone, are you ready?”

Ami spoke in a low voice from behind the curtains. She slipped through a gap and stood there. At her appearance, just the tip of her finger indicating for them to be quiet was enough to start a round of applause.

That was expected of the leading role. She was a blossom of the stage. Only the T-shirt that she wore matched everyone else’s costumes. Under that, she had a pure white skirt she had borrowed from the girls in the tennis club. Her straight legs glittered magnificently in the light. Of course, she was wearing bloomers underneath, too.

“As expected of Ami-chan, she knows...”

“She’s amazing...”

The boys were practically prostrated as they worshipped her dazzlingly beautiful figure. *What idiots*. They weren’t even concerned about the girls’ cold disparagement of them. Then they turned everything off, down to the last small light, and only the clamorous commotion of the audience remained, pressing down on the classroom.

“Okaay. Ami-chan’s legs have got us high-spirited. Shall we get going, everyone?”

At Haruta’s foolish voice, everyone nodded and stretched out their right hands. They all piled on top of each other, got close together, and somehow put their hands on top of each other.

There was Ryuuji, who ended up still wearing his terrible makeup, and Taiga, who was leaning on Ryuuji’s head with her feather fan under her arm. Kitamura nodded enthusiastically, and Ami looked at everyone with the smile of an angel. There was Noto, too, who had his arm over Haruta, and Maya, whose slender

arm was displayed by her rolled up T-shirt sleeve. Then there were Nanako and the boys, who stuck too close to her as Nanako skillfully glared at them with a faint smile. Then there was the boy who had gone too far joking around and put on sausage curls. Then there were the girls, who were holding onto their hearts that beat furiously from nerves. There was the one who until now had been clutching her script nervously, and even the one who wailed *I want to go to the bathroom again*. They were all there in full force. Minori was also probably somewhere where Ryuuji couldn't see her.

“And so, let's pray for the success of class 2-C's first pro-wrestling show performance... And go, fiiiiiiiiight...”

“Aaaaaaalllll...”

They quietly worked themselves up with their soundless fingertip applause. At that point, someone quietly muttered *What's with the Lipovitan commercial?*

“Please don't stand around here! The old school building is to your left, the new building to your right! Hey, no one's listening~!”

At one of the breezeway's V-connections, the groups of people who were faltering between going right and left were causing a traffic jam. *Where, where?* The sailor uniform-wearing girls from other schools were causing a commotion. Guys approached to hit on them. Parents went every which way with a camera in one hand. “Mom, where's 1-D?!” “I wonder if it's over here, Dad?!” The groups of junior high students got so excited they tried to run, and those who got mixed up in the group were dragged along.

“We have great crepes in our class...” There were some in aprons who grabbed the arms of the junior students. On the opposite side, there was yet another pulling them the other way. “Our class's crepes are even more freshly made...”

In that chaos, the armband-wearing student council girl directing traffic was close to tears.

“Wait, don't push, don't push! That's dangerous, so...eek! Ahhh!”

She raised her voice to a strangely provocative pitch and then was swallowed,

disappearing into the throng. In a fluster, a boy with the same armband rushed over. He grabbed her arm and yanked her out of the sea of people. This time, the boy went overboard and was lost to the sea of the crowd. He was swept away and simply disappeared far out into the hallway.

In a corner of that huge commotion, some students were deep in conversation.

“Oh, I got a message. What’s this picture?”

“What, lemme see? ‘Class 2-C’s pro-wrestling is super awesome’?”

“Isn’t that Kawashima Ami?! She really is cute... What?! What’s with that mini skirt?! Show me that picture again! Who sent it?!”

“Lemme see, lemme! That’s a picture to treasure! Who took that and where?!”

“Someone who went to see the pro-wrestling show. They said to hurry and come, too. They said the delinquent Takasu-kun and the Palmtop Tiger are super hilarious, too... Seriously?! That’s scary!”

“Huh? Does it look fun? Let me see, where?”

“Should we try going? We still have time until we need to swap places, and it’s too early for food.”

What’s that? Show it to us, too. What is that, what? Huh, what is it? Like a virus, the boisterous gossip multiplied and rapidly infected the school, all starting from a single picture someone had started spreading around.

“Th-that’s! The secret treasure handed down among 2-C?!”

“Of course! It’s the super precious, mysterious treasure—its name is the ‘Red String of the Homeroom Teacher!’ Weh heh heh!”

“Stoooooop~! What are you doing?! Anything but that~!”

At a volume just below howling, a high-pitched voice rang through the classroom. The one who was dancing as they pointed at the one who was screaming laughed, *Weh heh heh!* He had his thighs wide apart as a member of the disgraceful, bowlegged group. It was a hang-up of Haruta’s that the brainwashed ones had to be bowlegged. The group of bowlegged ones, with

their thighs shaking as they moved forward and back, surrounded Ami. In other words, everyone in 2-C except Ami had already been put under the magic influence of the brainwashing. *Oh, how terrible, what a mess.*

“This is hopeless!” the spectators laughed. Even the hecklers had become invested in the show.

“Noto-kun! You were part of 2-C once, too! There’s no way someone with a heart as beautiful as yours could do such a merciless thing!”

Lit by a spotlight, she was all that would be expected of the daughter of Yuudzuki Reiko, the bachelorette coroner. Though Ami was a hack of an actress, the enthusiasm traveled in her voice. She made the tension rise even in that idiotic scenario.

“Everyone else was part of 2-C, too! We were all friends! We lived happily together in 2-C!”

Ami stretched her shaking arms towards Noto and tried to persuade him with a desperate expression. When she yelled, her skirt fluttered and showed glances of her beautiful legs. The eyes of the boys in the front row seats were glued to them.

“Friends? That’s all in the past. Well...there was definitely a time when my heart was beautiful...”

Noto, who had gotten a role that was much better than expected, brought out a huge pair of dressmaking shears. *Schlick*. He stuck his tongue out and, in one drawn-out purposeful motion, licked his lips. He slowly opened the scissors and slid the edge of the shears along the mysterious treasure in his hand—the “Red String of the Homeroom Teacher.” As his black-rimmed glasses slid down to the middle of his nose, the role seemed to become more and more fitting for him—though, of course, it was fatally stupid.

“But now,” he went on, “I’ve offered my whole heart over to the Palmtop Tiger-sama! Now, Tiger-sama, I ask of you to give me an ooorrrdddeeer!”

The spotlight went to the stand they had made by putting together some stepladders.

“Bi bi bi, bi bi bi.”

“Bi bi bi bi bi bi bi.”

Taiga was at the front. Behind her was Ryuuji.

Clad in black capes, the two of them used their height difference to stand in front of and behind each other while bowlegged. They raised their hands high up and spread them out. Throughout the whole time they kept saying, “Bi bi bi bi.” Haruta the director had strongly insisted that would happen when anyone was brainwashed, along with the bowlegs.

Taiga gave Noto a wink as she whipped open the strangely appropriate feather fan. She fanned herself once and cast away the cape. With her right hand, she pointed it straight ahead. *Fwip!* Then, a well-carrying, low voice went over the brainwashed guys.

“Destwoy it!”

Bam! Even though they had timed the dialogue with a special sound effect, she had completely botched it.

Though it wasn’t part of the performance, the brainwashed soldiers collapsed to their knees. The spectators who had been laughing until then slipped right out of their seats.

“You klutz...bi bi bi...say it again...bi bi bi.”

As he sent out his brainwashing bi bi bi beam from behind her, Ryuuji poked the top of Taiga’s head with his chin. *Ugh*, she swallowed.

“D-destroy it!”

Bam. They did it again. Noto somehow got the timing right the second time and the spotlight showered him with light.

“Weh heh heh heh heh heeh! Doing irreversible damage is fun!”

Snip. He cut the mysterious treasure, “The Red String of the Homeroom Teacher.”

In that moment, Ami was supposed to yell, *What have you done?!* Instead, a voice fifty times louder than Ami’s screamed.

“GYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

Behind the crowded seats, the one suddenly standing up and yelling was their spinster of a homeroom teacher, Koigakubo Yuri (aged 30). *Whoa! That's so real, Koigakubo!* The spinster was yelling a little too realistically in front of the surprised guests, who turned around at the innovative direction the play was taking.



“Eeeei! Gaaaah!” She writhed in anguish as she collected the severed red thread by wrapping it around her hand. The cut thread was tied to the spinster’s pinky. Then, as she continued her performance of suffering, she indifferently exited the audience. She didn’t even shrink when her other students who were in her English class pointed behind her back and chattered: *Yuri-chan’s performing, that’s super funny.*

Haruta, who was acting as the lighting crew, narrator, and director from inside the shadow of the blackout curtains, watched the spinster’s act in satisfaction.

“As expected of Yuri-chan,” he said. “That was a nice, bloodcurdling performance.”

She had cried and said she didn’t want to do it even if it was make-believe, because words still held some power, but the whole class had begged her until she agreed to make the guest performance. The spinster might have been paying her dues for selfishly choosing the class exhibition. That, or she might have heard someone mutter, “The reason she can’t get married is because she’s got a pig-headed personality like this...”

Once the spinster exited the classroom, Ami held her head and writhed in agony in the ring.

“Gah! It’s too much! Just how far do you have to go before you’re happy?!”

“Weh heh heh heh heh!”

They had made the ring by placing mats down and putting three ropes around the stepladders they had substituted for poles in each corner. Other than Ami, the people in the ring were all bowlegged. They cornered her until she finally dropped to her knees.

“Just what do I need to do to save everyone in the class?!”

“Bi bi bi bi bi bi bi bi.”

“Bi bi bi bi bi bi bi bi.”

Above her, the brainwashing beam was working swimmingly. Ami glared sternly at the beam discharging from the Palmtop Tiger and her delinquent

henchman.

“I won’t forgive you for doing such a terrible thing! You, Palmtop Tiger, the ugly, idiotic brat with a violent personality and an itty-bitty body, and you, the lackey who only has a face that looks like a delinquent’s, but totally lives like an old maid!”

Huh, was the line that long? Haruta thought as he tilted his head to one side. *Bi bi bi.* Slight veins trembled in the middle of Taiga and Ryuuji’s temples.

“Who are you calling ugly with a violent personality?”

“...An old maid?”

Ami still had more to go for her passionate performance.

“Aah! But what can I do when everyone’s been taken hostage like this?! Does this mean all I can do is watch as everyone is lead astray?! What a cruel fate it must be! Someone, please save everyone!”

The surroundings blacked out. Quiet, tragic music played as Ami sank to the floor and cried, lit by a thin ray of light. The serious development was also the climax, but for some reason, part of the audience was strangely enthusiastic. They started to get worked up and whistled at her. Ami was sitting on the floor with her legs to the side. They were probably reacting to those. *Flash, pcht, ping.* The sounds of cameras went off here and there. In the interim, the bowlegged group shuffled off to the side of the ring and started preparing for the next development. Smoke wasn’t allowed, so several stagehands from below the ring held blackboard erasers filled with chalk dust and hit them together. The moment they did, faint smoke started to envelop the ring.

“God has witnessed everything.”

“Oh!”

Minori gradually rose from the haze, lifted by the power of four boys. She was on their shoulders.

“Captain K-Kushieda...”

“How could they do that to the famous commander who lead one of the top eight teams in Kanto?!”

Those who were lamenting were probably the junior players in the softball club. This was probably the first time they had seen Kushieda, the senior player they looked up to, outside of a sports setting. However, the other spectators clapped their hands together in great glee at her serious face.

Her getup consisted of a bald cap, an eye patch, buckteeth, and a camel bellyband. According to Haruta, her role was “the fairy of the ring”—though according to her lines, she was a god.

“Warrior Ami, I’ll give you a chance. If you can reach people’s hearts with your pure power, then the brainwashing will be undone. Now, I want you to answer this question that I ask of you.”

Suddenly, the bald-capped god began to deliver her lines with clear enunciation that fit their lofty eloquence.

“Do the best you can during this impromptu, incredibly important—ATTACK CHAAAAAANCE!”

Minori’s voice took on a peculiar and strangely unpleasant vibrato as it echoed through the ring. The audience was dumbfounded and the insides of their heads went blank. That was when she suddenly quizzed them, “What is the name of the fairest of them all?”

“Kawashima Ami!!” Several voices suddenly roared in miraculous unison immediately after the bald-capped god’s query. In other words, Ami had reached all their hearts.

“Splendid!”

Just as soon as that happened... Ami’s cheeks blushed with ecstasy in a way that couldn’t be explained away as part of the performance. She seemed fully satisfied as a smile of deranged delight slowly distorted her pretty face. Her joy seemed like something no one should have been witness to. Someone who was aware of the smile raised their small voice: “Sh-she’s kind of got a wicked look on her face...”

Right then, the lights all dropped for a moment. Then, intense lights radiated the stage from three directions.

“Wh-what in the world was I doing?!”

“Ami-chan, what were we doing?!”

“I feel like I was having a bad dream!”

“This is amazing!”

“I’m so happy!”

“We’ve been cured!”

While in that glaring light, the ones who had been cured of their bowleggedness (the chorus) lined up smoothly and sang, *Doo-waah!* They posed together and declared the brainwashing to be over. The enthralled spectators applauded. Of course, the Palmtop Tiger and delinquent couldn’t let this go without doing anything. They had to keep the plot moving.

“You! You used stopgap m-measures t-t-to...!”

“We won’t forgive you, Kawashima Ami!”

Ryuuji wrapped up Taiga’s line, which she seemed in danger of botching. They were done with their bi bi bi-ing. The two of them took on matching poses from the top of the stepladder. “Hah!”

“Let’s do it!”

“Yeah!”

That was the signal. They took off their capes and winked at the people below the ring. Ryuuji propped up Taiga’s torso.

“Heave ho!”

Whooooooooa! Excited cheers surged from the audience and made the earth feel as though it were rumbling. The confetti poppers the stagehands used shot off from four directions with perfect timing. Taiga leaped with all her strength from the top of the stepladder. As Ryuuji held Taiga’s torso, he threw her as hard as he could to add to her momentum.

“Whoa, amazing!”

“The Palmtop Tiger’s here!”

“Ami-chan, run!”

Somehow, she did two somersaults from the ladder going forward into the ring. A team of boys caught her from the top of the ring. Like a cat, she spun around and quickly landed in a standing position. Instead of a weak rope, the arms of several of the others stopped her recoil.

“Theeeere!”

She used her terrific leg power to her heart’s content as she jumped around the ring like a rubber ball. She cleared several meters in a single jump. She twisted her body midair like a spinning top and did an instantaneous rear roundhouse kick.

“Take that!”

“Tsk! That was close!” Ami yelled reflexively as she finished a magnificent backwards somersault. Although the attacks were going as planned for the scene, the heel of Taiga’s slippers dangerously grazed Ami’s bangs. As they received loud cheers, Taiga simply pivoted on her other foot.

“Who’s an idiotic brat now?!”

With two somewhat genuine-seeming quick kicks that cleared her head, Taiga smacked Ami’s chin. Of course, that was also going according to the scene. Borrowing the help of two people appointed to the task, Ami did a graceful backflip to escape. *Eek!* Ami screamed as she was brought up. Her cry might have been a little too close to real.

“Hey, did you see how she moved just now?!”

“No, it was too fast. I couldn’t follow her movements!”

It was an eye-opening performance for those at the side of the ring, who had to remember their lines.

Then Ryuuji jumped in. With synchronized timing, Taiga and Ryuuji attacked Ami with a double lariat, but Ami crouched and escaped. From behind Taiga and Ryuuji, Maya and Nanako, brainwashed no longer, returned the lariat. Their arms, however, were slightly feeble, which was potentially because of nerves.

“There!”

“Ho ho ho~!”

Pretending as though they had been hit, Ryuuji and Taiga both fell on their backs to the mat at the same time. Then the gymnastics club boys did some meaningless, showy cartwheels in the background to add some pizzazz to the ring. Ami, who had stood up in that time, bent over Taiga, who was also trying to get up. Taiga couldn't jump up, but Ryuuji was approaching from Ami's back. He held a folding chair in his cowardly hands.

"Ami-chan, behind you, behind you!"

The spectators kicked their chairs out as they stood and desperately tried to save Ami from crisis.

"Get him!"

"It's Takasu, get him!"

"Get that delinquent!"

Five boys from the class lifted Ryuuji up like a mikoshi palanquin. They simply collapsed onto the mat and rolled around, crushing him without pardon.

"How dare you go to Ami-chan's villa?!"

"I've got a grudge that's far from over!"

"Why didn't you take pictures of her in a swimsuit when you went to the ocean?!"

"Everything good has been happening to no one but you lately!"

The impassioned statements they breathed down into Ryuuji's ears were definitely, definitely, definitely their true feelings. As evidence of that, Ryuuji could no longer breathe even though they had promised they wouldn't put their body weight on him.

"I-I-I'll remember this..." he said.

The last event drew near. As they tumbled around in different stances, Ami and Taiga exchanged a look.

"We're doing it, teenybopper! Now..."

"Now! Ow ow ow!"

"Ow ow ow! That hit my leg!"

Ami lifted Taiga's light body up with her arms and legs. They were making a cooperative effort to perform a Romero special—they had completed a perfect surfboard hold. *Whooooooooooaa!* The overenthusiastic cheers of the spectators almost made the ground rumble. The classroom's windows shook behind the blackout curtains. Confetti rained down like a paper blizzard around the ring. Poppers shot off all at once. *Bam bam bam!* The peal of the sound effects echoed. Haruta, the director, was acting as the theater's announcer.

"Aaaaaand the winner iiissss Kawashimaaaaa Aaaaamiiiiii! And corps 2-Ceeee~!"

*Whoa...*the whole audience gave them a standing ovation at once. Their applause, cheers, and roars of laughter seemed like they would never end. They started calling *Ami-chan* over and over again until they drowned out Haruta's announcements.

Aaaaamiiii-chan! Aaaaamiiii-chan! Aaaaamiiii-chan! Aaaaami-chan! As they chanted her name, another conversation played out on stage.

"No way..."

"What?"

"My back is cramping up..."

"Just be patient until the curtain closes. If we trade, I'm going to have to do this, too."

"Ughh..."

No one noticed the tears starting to gradually build up in Taiga's eyes.

"Welcome home, master!"

"Welcome, princess! Your very own prince has come to welcome your highness!"

"I-I don't really care whether you come to my class's café or not anyway!"

"We have over 1,000 volumes in our manga inventory! You can read as much as you want of anything! With one drink you get a whole hour for free!"

The hallways of the school grounds were becoming incredibly congested as afternoon approached. The halls were filled with the commotion of girls and boys wearing uniforms from other schools, students, and their parents. There were even junior high students who seemed like they planned to take the high school entrance exam. Behind those who were clumsily using the momentum from the festival to try hitting on the girls, a mini reunion was forming. *It's been so long, I can't believe you actually came?!* Two long processions were forming by rival exhibits that neighbored each other.

"Hey, please move closer to the wall if you're in line for the maid café!"

"Wait! Don't you just go around moving our customers like that!"

"Huh?! This part from here to here is our line!"

"You're part of 1-A, aren't you? I'll remember this, you underclassman!"

"Shouldn't you be hunkering down and studying for your exams or something?!"

A maid battle that probably wouldn't solve anything broke out.

"Oh, it's a fight between gals! This is great! Get on with the cat fight!"

"Go, maid with the long skirt! I'm on any test taker's side!"

"What're you saying?! I'm rooting for the first year with the black knee socks! She's definitely in the right for establishing her territory!"

Spectators gathered, and the hecklers began to vie against each other.

"Displays of violence are forbidden in the exhibits, you brats!"

BAM! In a display of violence, the bickering maids were slammed together from behind. Their foreheads knocked against each other and the two maids collapsed to their knees.

"Sorry that she's so hot-blooded."

"No, no, I'm so sorry, senpai."

The maids were each pulled away by a boy from their respective classes. Cheers and applause rose from the students at this brilliant display of vigilante justice.

“Good going, Godfather!”

“As expected of the Kanou sisters’ older brother!”

A girl, who was like Yamato Nadeshiko in the flesh, if Yamato Nadeshiko wore a school uniform, was walking over. Her skin was so fair it looked transparent, and her long flowing hair went down to her back. The girl raised one hand and answered those voices.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa! Enough, now be quiet! All of you file into two proper lines! Don’t go out of those lines! Now, on with iiiit!”

“Roger!”

With a strange, pure power, the girl made even the parents watching over the students line up properly with a single yell. She was the older brother in the hearts of everyone in the school. She was Kanou Sumire, the perfect, superhuman student president.

“Just as expected of our president, amazing!”

“Hey, Kitamura, are you supposed to be loitering around here like this?”

“I don’t like that girl...”

The vice president Kitamura, Ryuuji, and Taiga were also among the spectators who surrounded the girl, giving her a large round of applause. After their pro-wrestling show had turned out to be a huge success, they had broken for lunch. The three of them had all joined the frantic festival together to find something to eat. Well, they weren’t really all together. Ryuuji hadn’t even been given the time to bluster about whether to apologize to Minori before she quickly disappeared off somewhere with some underclassmen. Incidentally, Ami had gone off with Maya and Nanako.

Kitamura, who was somehow the leader of the leftover trio, watched as the gallant student president disappeared around the hallway’s corner, accompanied by applause.

“It’s fine,” he said. “It’s fine. We change out security duties at a specific time. Actually, Aisaka, are you okay?”

“Huh... Wh-what about me?”

“You’re eating your uniform tie along with your crepe.”

Blech! Taiga spat the end of her ribbon tie out of her cream-covered mouth. *What a klutz, and a glutton...* Ryuuji was overcome by the spectacle.

“Ha ha ha, your head was out to lunch. That crepe must be super good! I should have bought one, too. Let me have a little?”

“Uh!”

Aaah. Kitamura shamelessly opened his mouth as Taiga turned a frenzied gaze toward him. Her face had gone beyond red and instead was ashen, as though she were on the verge of anemia. Ryuuji thought she might die if she kept this up, but, though she was practically shaking, she was successful in slowly offering the crepe to Kitamura so he could take a bite. She was out of breath and spoke in a falsetto voice that seemed like it could crack at any instant.

“Y-you can eat as much as you want...”

“Thank you! That’s generous of you!”

It was an emotional moment. Kitamura grinned and looked as though he wasn’t thinking about anything as he took a giant mouthful of a bite out of Taiga’s half-eaten food. It even still had the indents of her teeth. *Waaah!* Taiga screamed without making a sound. Only her mouth moved.

“Hm, this is pretty good. It’s got chocolate and banana, and it even has ice cream.”

“...”

Taiga looked at the crepe that had been returned to her. The stare she turned to the indents on the crepe from Kitamura’s teeth was like a beam of sunlight gathered through a magnifying glass. Ryuuji could imagine what she was thinking in her small brain. She was deciding between wanting to preserve it in commemoration of the event and having an indirect kiss while it was still fresh. She was too embarrassed to do that. She would die from happiness, but if she didn’t do anything, Kitamura would think she was weird. *What should I do, what should I do...*

That was probably where she was at in her head anyway. *What an idiot*, Ryuuji thought, as he looked at the top of Taiga's head, and then at Kitamura, who was in a jovial mood. No matter how close of a friend he was with Kitamura, he couldn't believe this guy who could eat food from the opposite sex as though it weren't a big deal.

"Ryu-Ryuuji, you can have a bite, too!"

"Gah!"

This was out of the realm of Ryuuji's expectations. He didn't know what Taiga was thinking. She might simply have been at the height of reckless confusion. Anyway, she stuck the crepe Kitamura had eaten from right into Ryuuji's mouth.

"Gah, buh, blugh..."

"It's yummy, right?! It's good, right?!"

She pushed the small remainder of the folded-up crepe further and further into Ryuuji's mouth. *They're so close*, Kitamura's smile seemed to say as he watched their antics. Ryuuji's breathing was labored. He was dying. He desperately chewed and brushed away the fingers that were all the way in the back of his throat. Somehow, he swallowed everything right as he was on the verge of mortal peril.

"You...you...were you trying to kill me?! Do you hate me that much?!"

"Ahhh..."

It wasn't just Ryuuji who was crying. Taiga, through her thoughtless actions, had lost all of her treasured crepe. In a sad stupor, she was looking down at her now empty hands.

Ryuuji coughed slightly again. He didn't have any pity for her. It was Taiga's fault in the first place and, on top of that, he wasn't with Minori even though the cultural festival was going on. Taiga could also stand to be a little miserable. She was sneaking off to live happily ever after with her papa and— "Come to think of it, your dad hasn't made it in yet, has he? Did he reply to your message?"

He remembered that Taiga had been fretting over her dad. She had sent him

a message immediately after their break had started. *You're not here yet? When are you getting here? We only have three showings in the afternoon.* Incidentally, he'd peeked at the title of the email she was sending, which read, "Hey, you geezer."

"Not yet. But it's not like he has to come anyway. Seriously, what is he doing?"

"Why don't you try calling him?"

"I did. It went to voicemail. That doesn't matter. Let's hurry up and eat something. I'm hungry."

"And where did you put away that huge crepe you were just eating?"

"There."

Without hesitating, Taiga pointed a finger at Ryuuji's stomach. *In here, too,* said Kitamura in a happy-go-lucky way.

"Okay, then shall we go and eat our lunch somewhere that looks decent? I wonder what's good... Uuuh, there's a yakisoba place, an udon place, okonomiyaki... They don't have any Japanese dessert or shaved ice places. What's this? 'Szechwanna piece of this?' So, a Chinese place."

"What? Making Chinese food with nothing but a lousy stovetop from the home-ec classroom is so cocky."

"Other than that, it looks like it's all just cafes."

As the three of them lined up against the wall to avoid the traffic, they glanced at their pamphlets with a contemplative *Hmmm*. It might have been because everyone had taken popularity votes, but that year the class exhibitions were overwhelmingly food and drink places. The plain exhibits on things like calligraphy, regional topics, and historical surveys that were regular installments until the previous year had disappeared for the most part.

"I don't like this."

"Yeah, I don't, either."

"I wonder why they decided to do this."

The next section of the pamphlet read, “Let’s study the fundamental fundamentals of Kaatsu vascular training.” For some reason, only the PE teacher Kuro-muscle’s class was doing something strange for their exhibit. According to rumors, the ripped homeroom teacher (his real name was Kuroma or something) had coerced his whole class into having protein drinks with lunch.

“That’s different.”

“Guess you’re stuck with your homeroom teacher.”

“But you’re not stuck with going along with it.”

The three of them nodded in pity, unaware that most of the other classes were saying the same thing about them and the just-as-eclectic pro-wrestling show that they were putting on for the cultural festival in class 2-C.

“Welcome home, master~!”

A girl in a maid uniform appeared and started trying to draw in customers. Her long hair was curled in twin-tails that were on the borderline of working in three dimensions. Before the three of them could turn around, she skillfully opened three of the menus she held.

“We have lunch time specials for this time only. Omelet rice is 800 yen. Adding a drink is 200 yen. You can get the ketchup moe moe drawing service for another 300 yen.”

“Whoa, that’s expensive!”

At first, Ryuuji was the one who was taken aback. Then, when the maid saw his face, she dropped the menu.

“Uwah, it’s the delinquent Takasu-san!”

Puh! Taiga sputtered at her response.

“Aha ha ha ha haaa! That’s what you expect from Ryuuji! Even the maid who’s supposed to get customers won’t engage with you! Your tragedy knows no bounds!”

“Wah, the Palmtop Tiger!”

The maid also noticed Taiga where she was hiding snugly in Ryuuji’s shadow.

Pretending not to have seen either of them, the maid bolted and snuck away. Taiga didn't even have the strength to follow after the maid as she dejectedly closed her mouth.

"Puh. She ran, didn't she? Wonder if I'm the only one who's tragic?" Ryuuji said.

"What did'ya say?"

Taiga's face contorted. As Ryuuji recklessly taunted her, she stomped on his foot hard enough to smash it to smithereens. "Hmph!"

"Ah!"

Kitamura was there, so this was probably her version of being easy on him. That itself was a terrifying thought.

"Hey hey," he said. "Don't get in a fight. Look, the advertisers won't come near us because of what you're doing."

At Kitamura's intervening words, Ryuuji and Taiga felt an odd emotion. Even if the maid hadn't run away, they were faintly aware from the start that no one was curious enough to approach the two of them in the first place. The peculiar duo's infamous reputations were made up of a mix of truth and rumors that accompanied them around the school.

However, right at that time, some unfamiliar but timid and charming boys called to them.

"Ummm, you three."

"Would you come by our class for a bit?"

Even when Ryuuji and Taiga turned to them, they didn't get scared and run. Kitamura was smiling as he told them, "Oh, what're you doing? We're looking for some place to eat lunch."

"We're not a food place, but we'll treat you to lunch if you come with us. Ummm, sorry, but you're the softball club manager, Kitamura-kun, right?"

"Yeah, that's right."

"Then over here, that's the delinq—that's Takasu-kun and the Pal—and

Aisaka-san, right?”

“Yo,” said Ryuuji.

“What’s with you?” said Taiga.

With an abject smile, the boys told them, “Our class is putting on a tenkaichi budoukai world martial arts tournament. But everyone’s novices so...would you come participate? Your pro-wrestling show moves were so sharp and amazing.”

We wouldn’t do something like that—Kitamura, Ryuuji, and Taiga all shared the same weak expression. Here, too, was yet another strange and eclectic exhibition mixed into the fray.

They politely declined, and the three of them strolled through the crowded food court area in the new school building. They were suddenly exhausted as they went into the old school building where there weren’t as many people. The traffic thinned out and it was easier to walk around.

“But we won’t find anything good to eat around here.”

“The fine arts club or whatever is exhibiting, but... Huh, the theme is ‘night scene monotone’. That seems boring. Actually, all the exhibits look super plain. That’s why no one’s here.”

“Well, well. According to the pamphlet, there are other places around here.”

Kitamura, who was guiding them, turned to the other two, who didn’t seem as enthusiastic. It was when he was talking to them that it happened.

“Welcome.”

A solemn voice called out to the three of them from the end of the hallway. There was a desolate atmosphere around the restaurant—or rather, the classroom. The sign read, “A place to eat, best in the national science exam.”

If one were to take the sign literally, it meant that the exhibit was being organized by the top-scoring third year class. This class was different from the ones pandering to customers with flashy costumes and charming girls.

“For three? We have many seats open at the moment.”

He was worthy of being called an upperclassman. The older male student who

lifted the entryway curtain with one hand wore an austere waist apron. He wasn't afraid when he saw Ryuuji and Taiga.

"I saw your class's pro-wrestling show earlier. That must have been a lot of work. You must be tired. You should have our class's yakisoba."

"Well then...is that fine with you, too, Takasu and Aisaka?" said Kitamura.

The two of them nodded and Kitamura quietly turned up the curtain ahead of them. Voices came from inside.

"Hey, lead the three guests in!"

"Yeah, gladly!"

"Glaaadly!"

It felt almost as though it were the first time someone had ever gladly welcomed them.

They sat on the classroom chairs, which had austere decorations similar to an izakaya-style bar and looked at the menu.

"Uhhh, right... Could I get chilled noodles?" said Ryuuji.

"What is this?" said Taiga. "Toasted octopus?"

"Then I'll...have the recommended yakisoba. A large helping please."

"Riiight! Gladly!"

"Glaaaaadly!"

It seemed all the orders were being sent right to the kitchen (?). Once they finally composed themselves and sat down, they noticed there were a few other groups of customers. It seemed everyone was enjoying the spartan restaurant as they looked at the menu, ate fried rice, or took part in other activities. They could hear the other customers talking and saying things like, *This is pretty good.*

Ryuuji automatically swept his hand across the table. He was confirming that there was no oil or dirt to the touch. The table was smoothly sanitary. He glanced at his feet. Even the legs of the table and chairs didn't have a speck of dust, which was something even professional restaurants overlooked. When

the customers ordered something, there would be a comforting echo of “Gladly!” There wasn’t much originality to that phrase, but it sure brought out the atmosphere.

Well, who knew what the results would be if he happened to check the top of the entryway curtain with his custom-made Takasu dusting stick. When a brutal grin graced his lips, Ryuuji suddenly felt a sense of *déjà vu*.

“Don’t you think this restaurant kind of has the same feel as Market Kanou?”

“Hm? Speaking of Market Kanou, that’s the president’s family-owned store. They even put a huge advertisement in the pamphlet. In other words, they’re a big sponsor.”

Ryuuji pointed Kitamura towards a nook of the wall. A week of Market Kanou bargain sale flyers were plastered to it. There was even a picture of the manager and a familiar-looking old man happily smiling as they held radishes at the storefront. Over that picture, the words “ingredient sponsor” were written out in imposing brush lettering. Kitamura clapped his hands together and nodded.

“I see, the top in the national science exam... So this is the president’s class...”

Here and there inside the restaurant, understatedly tasteful, small violet sumire-colored bowls were being delivered to the customers. The sumire bowls were probably a way of expressing their respect for the president’s command. Of course, it would stand to reason that the impeccable student president’s own class would naturally participate in the festival. She was the one pulling the strings behind everything. Ryuuji hummed and crossed his arms.

“You guys’ president has got a hand in everything... She’s even successfully running a restaurant,” he mused.

“No matter what she does, she’ll probably be successful. She’s made from different stuff than a normal person. And I’m kind of excited to try the food. I feel like they’ll bring out something great,” Kitamura said, his tone unusually curt. Normally, he acted as though he had been appointed to the role of brownnoser and would be enthusiastic to the point of causing a scene, all *Preeesident preeesident, how amazing you are*.

On the other side of things, Taiga was looking down and poking around at something. *She really hasn't got the skills to engage with others*, thought Ryuuji as he peeked at her hands.

"Whoa, what're you doing?" he said. "You've been quiet lately."

"Hm?! Uh, it's a-a game."

Flustered, Taiga closed the flip phone she had been gripping. *Liar*, thought Ryuuji, taken aback. His sanpaku eyes had seen exactly what she was doing. She had been scrolling through her email messages. She had been waiting this whole time for her unresponsive dad to message her. In the end, the inside of Taiga's head was a broken record of *Daaaad, daaaaad. Is he here yet? Is he here yet?*

She was worrying about that even though she was with her crush and should have been enjoying the cultural festival. She was wasting the opportunity she had. *Look at yourself first*, Ryuuji thought. He was a sad sight to behold himself. His own crush was completely ignoring him.

He unintentionally let loose a sigh. Was this how everything was going to end up? He'd thought he'd gotten just slightly closer to her through the spring and summer. Would all of that disappear into the distance? It wasn't as simple as catching her and apologizing, either. He didn't think that the day would come when he would be able to understand what Minori was thinking. The unrequited love that had lasted a year was now a candle in the wind. A pillar that had held up Ryuuji's heart for an age was in danger of toppling over.

"You're so carefree," he said. "You're a simple girl. So that was the extent to which you cared."

"Huh? What did you say? Is your head okay? I'm concerned for your brain, from the bottom of my heart."

As they were in the middle of their exchange and Taiga said that heart-chilling line, the roasted octopus, which was really takoyaki, arrived at the table. Taiga's interest diverted from Ryuuji in a split second as she pecked at her food happily with a toothpick.

"Wait until everything comes out," Ryuuji said as he stopped her.

Right as she was about to complain, she remembered Kitamura was there, and her cheeks turned red. Next, Ryuuji's order of chilled noodles came out. In actuality, they were made from regular ramen noodles. Kitamura's yakisoba also came to the table and they heard another "Glaaadly!" aimed at some other guest.

"Thank you!"

Finally, everyone took up their chopsticks. No sooner had they done that than it happened.

"Ah!"

"Whoa!"

Because of his worries, Ryuuji's busybody sensor might have grown dull. The takoyaki Taiga was trying to bring to her mouth fell into her lap. Ryuuji noticed it, but by the time he put out his hand, there was already a stain from the traces of sauce that had gotten directly on her skirt.

"Ahh, seriously," he said, "what're you doing, you klutz?! Bring your face forward and eat with your plate below your chin!"

"Ngh."

Taiga pouted as Ryuuji's words went in one ear and out the other. She rudely took the takoyaki that had fallen onto her skirt and tossed it into her mouth. *Hot hot hot*. She thrashed around. In the end, Ryuuji was the one to wipe her skirt for her. He started to wipe up the sauce like a mother while Kitamura smiled wryly. But he hadn't noticed it.

He hadn't noticed it at all.

He was too troubled by the incident with Minori. He was too preoccupied with himself to notice.

Taiga had also dribbled sauce onto the hem of her shirt. No one, Ryuuji included, had noticed it at all, and when that stain finally was discovered, quite a bit of time had passed.

By the time they found it, the stain had turned into something that would never disappear. It turned into a stain that even Ryuuji couldn't get rid of.

Four o'clock came around, and 2-C's pro-wrestling show had finished its final performance with a large crowd.

Together with the excited audience, the cast all applauded around the ring.

"It was a full house!"

"Yes, it was a huge success!"

They passionately strained their voices, which were hoarse from the performance, as they praised their fellow cast members. They cracked the leftover poppers and lavishly used up the rest of their confetti.

In the middle of the unceasing cheers and applause, Taiga was wrapped in her villainous cape. She didn't say a word as she loitered by the edge of the ring.

"Hey, co-lead!"

Haruta was in a good mood as he pulled her arm to have her stand in the middle of the ring along with Ryuuji. Even when she was showered with applause, she was still silent. She wasn't in a bad mood, but her trembling eyes continued to stare at her feet.

Taiga hadn't performed the leading role even once.

Chapter 6

“I saaaid dooon’t mooove!” said Ami. “I can’t draw your lip liner!”

“You don’t have to do that stuff.”

“I said we gotta do it! Your lips are thin, aren’t they?! How much faith do you have in your bare face?! Just how cute do you think you are?!”

“You’re noisy, Dimhuahua. You’re always yapping away.”

A sweet chemical smell floated through the air. The girls’ loud, shrill voices made it seem like a battle scene. The yells crossed the place here and there.

“No way! That color’s so pretty!”

“You ran into that girl, and you’re not even going to apologize?!”

“Huh?! Where did the powder that was just right here go?!”

“Ahh! My pencil broke!”

They were nearing anger.

Ami’s eyes were serious as she held onto Taiga’s chin. In one tumultuous corner, she carried a giant pouch filled with makeup from famous luxury brands. Taiga, who was sitting on a chair in front of the mirror, didn’t seem intent on cooperating one bit. She continued to tap at buttons on her phone and scowl. She wasn’t sitting still.

The pale pink pencil slowly traced the petal-like contours of Taiga’s pouted lips to give them a prominent lustrous tint.

“Don’t move, don’t move... Don’t open your mouth, close it, close it, yeah... There, it’s finally done. Next is the gloss, okay? But whiiich one? A limited-edition Chanel in coral pink? Do you think glitter would be too loud? Or RMK’s lilac pink... You have a blue undertone, so this one seems like it would work better. Or should we use a transparent MAC gloss that’s shiny to show your natural color? Hmmm, but you don’t want to be plain. We can give you some luster with NARS Multiple, but that might be too much...”

With her long fingers, Ami pulled out several glosses from her pouch all at once. Exactly like a master magician manipulating cards, she dexterously screwed open the tops and quickly dripped sticky drops of each one onto the back of her hand. *Hmmmm*, she solemnly examined them.

Shanel or nars or mack or dee-or, or a cheaper domestic brand? Ryuuji thought, trying to remember the brand names. Ami compared the colorful liquid against the natural tint of Taiga's cheeks and lips, as she spewed words that almost seemed like they were part of a baffling spell. She was deep in serious contemplation. Where was the normal, beautiful, goody-two-shoes Ami-chan? She was completely bowlegged.

"HMMMMMMMMM..."

"...Bi bi bi..."

"What? Takasu-kun, what did you just say?"

"Uh, nothing... I thought maybe you were brainwashed."

"Huh? Don't make stupid jokes, I can't humor you right now."

"Oh, sorry..."

Ryuuji's existence at that moment didn't even merit her looking at him.

Sitting Taiga down in the chair, Ami looked into her face and earnestly continued to do her makeup. Ami had balled up several tissues and stuck them into her jacket pocket. A battery of brushes and sponge tips were tangled in the gaps of her fingers. She was playing an active role in rubbing and dusting many substances on Taiga. Incidentally, she had professional-looking powder puffs on either hand, and on her collar, she had prepped hairpins that she was using to hold up Taiga's spilling bangs. She was probably on a completely different level from the other struggling teams of girls.

"This is kind of powdery...ha-choo! ...Ahh, tissue..."

"No! You'll take off the makeup on your nose!"

Unable to obstruct Ami's hard work, Taiga tapped her cellphone and sniffled like she always did when she had her usual allergies.

The classroom in the detached gym building was partitioned into several

blocks with curtains. In each booth, there were girls entering the Miss Festival pageant who were changing or doing their makeup or hair. The teams of girls from the classes that came with the candidates were in the middle of preparations, making a huge commotion. Incidentally, Ryuuji was the only boy amongst them in that atmosphere, though none of the girls cared. They were all solely focused on what they were doing. This was now a battleground.

“Wah, we have ten minutes left?! That’s so soon, I have to get ready for the emcee prep meeting... Takasu-kun, did you finish the costume?!”

“Yeah. I was waiting for you to ask. The seamstress division also helped. This is the completed product.”

Ryuuji stood up and unfurled the costume. The handicraft club girls in class 2-C had given him satisfied applause at its workmanship as they looked up at him.

“Waah! Takasu-kun, it’s amazing!”

“Amazing, amazing, you made it so cute!”

Naturally, the costume didn’t have a single wrinkle. He anticipated there would be no iron, so he had made sure to choose a costume made from material that wouldn’t crease.

“Ohh! It’s preeetty good!”

Ami brushed her fingers across the material. Her eyes glittered as she looked at it.

Taiga’s delicate physique would certainly be emphasized in the loose and flowing A-line silhouette. The soft and transparent silk material only had a moderate amount of Taiga’s beloved frills and lace. The layered organza trembled elegantly, like a real princess dress.

Charmed, Ryuuji happily looked at the costume in his hands. He didn’t go so far as to want to wear it, of course, but it more than satisfied his fashion sense, which was rarefied relative to a typical high school boy’s.

He had found the dress while organizing Taiga’s closet.

“This is super nice! Why don’t you wear this?!” he asked Taiga. The cute silhouette and elegant design were enough to leave Ryuuji in agony.

“I bought it thinking it was cute, but it’ll be obvious I don’t have a chest, so I don’t want to,” Taiga answered.

So for the Miss Festival pageant, Ryuuji borrowed the help of the other girls and put a little work into the dress. He had them help by sewing a long ribbon of cloth taken from other old silk clothes. At the spot the dress would hit the swell of Taiga’s chest, Ryuuji had added small, delicate pleats. Then he had the girls sew in a pale beige ribbon right under her chest where the fluffy bow would be. If he put untactful pads in, then it would affect the silhouette. This was enough. It would follow along her delicate bodyline and should have some pretty volume at the chest.

“The image we’re going for is Juliet’s dress... It’s the height of romance...with an empire silhouette...”

As his hand crawled along the finished dress, Ryuuji’s eyes took on a cast unfit for any mammal.

Takasu-kun likes stuff like this. That’s unexpected, that looks dangerous... He didn’t notice the looks of the girls that went slightly beyond respect as they were cleaning up the sewing equipment.

The costume didn’t just end with the Juliet dress. If anything, the Miss Festival pageant was still part of a cultural festival. Taiga wouldn’t be attention-grabbing enough with just the dress. Ryuuji had prepared just one more thing—a knockout prop for Taiga.

“Once you put this on, it’ll be complete. Ho ho ho, there was a scene in that DiCaprio *Romeo + Juliet* movie where she had one of these on, right? It’s a only faint resemblance, but it’s made in that image.”

The thing he had made to go on Taiga’s back using a fine satin ribbon were nothing other than angel wings. The wings were ever so slightly expanded so that they could be seen from the front. And where had he gotten his hands on such a thing, you might ask? A drag queen auntie from Bishamon Heaven who used wings regularly at work had handed them over to Yasuko at no charge.

“A pageant?!” she’d said. “Now, isn’t that lovely?! Even though I look like this, I’m a winner! ...I made a mistake while making this pair...”

“Aww,” Ami said, clapping her hands together at the cuteness of the wings, though she didn’t know their origin. “Yeah, I was right to put you in charge of everything related to the costume, Takasu-kun. Her makeup is mostly done now. See, raise your face. The last part is your cheeks. A little goes a long way.”

“Ngh...seriously, what is he doing? He hasn’t answered yet. It’s irritating... Maybe something happened? An accident? There couldn’t have been...”

Even then, Taiga didn’t look at her finished makeup but just clutched at her phone in frustration. She was still looking down at the screen from the corner of her eye and didn’t attempt to look at the mirror or the costume. Ami pulled up Taiga’s face and dusted pale peach powder on her cheeks with a huge brush. In the end, she pulled off the curlers she had put in Taiga’s hair one by one. Ami, with practiced handiwork, loosened the hair and sprayed it slightly from the underside.

“Kawashima-saaan! Please come to the stage wing soon! We also have to prepare!”

“Oh, riiight. ♥ Damn it, time’s up! Hey Tiger, Nanako and Maya will come to do your hair soon, so tell them that Ami-chan told them to make it, ‘fluffy and angelic with the bangs to the left, and a jagged part!’ Ahh, seriously, I wanted to see it through!”

Ami started to regretfully clean up her makeup box . Ryuuji wanted to ask her about her unexpected enthusiasm.

“You like this stagehand work a lot more than I thought you would,” he said. “I was thinking you were the type who couldn’t stand it unless you were in the leading role.”

“It’s not like I don’t enjoy backstage stuff. Doing makeup on someone else is super fun, too! Well, girls like doing this stuff, but it might be because I see how the pros work up close that I’m especially... Actually, what’re you doing, Takasu-kun? Everyone’s going to be changing soon. We can’t have a boy in here! So, Tiger! You hurry and change, and make sure to tell Maya and Nanako about your hair!”

“Ngh.”

“Have you been listening to what anyone’s been saying? Actually, are you still waiting for your dad? He’s probably not coming today. Aaah, the connections I was going to make, poor me.”

“He’s coming!” Abruptly, Taiga snapped up her head. “He’s definitely—he’s probably—running late because of work! So that’s why he can’t answer! I was lucky he didn’t see the pro-wrestling show. That would have been embarrassing. It’s good he’s late. He’s coming now. He definitely is.”

“If you say so, sure. Anyway, shouldn’t you change the introduction you decided on earlier for now? What do you want to do? I can think up a new one myself if you need it.”

“You don’t have to change it. Announce it the way it is.”

“But you—” Ami tried to interject.

“Kawashima-san! If you don’t hurry, we’ll be in trouble!”

“Yees, soooorry! I’m coooming! Are you seriously sure?”

“It’s fine! Hey, Ryuuji, you think so too, right? He’s coming right now, right? He promised, so he’s definitely coming. Right? It’s not an accident and he’s not sick, right?”

Taiga’s eyes turned to Ryuuji. Suddenly, they lost their strength and quivered.

“Even I’m not psychic,” he said, “so I don’t know, but...if it’s an accident or something like that, wouldn’t you have gotten a message?”

“Right! That’s what I think, too.”

At the pressing voice of the acting committee member, Ami ended any further conversation and turned herself around after grabbing her things. She grabbed Ryuuji’s arm and pulled him out of the booths where the girls seemed about to start changing.

“Thank you for everything! Now, you just get in the audience seats and be excited. ♥”

Ami shrugged her shoulders. Then she ran right off with the acting committee member and left him behind. In her place, Maya and Nanako went into the enclosure of girls with huge mirrors, brushes, and other things in hand.

“I’m tired...”

Ryuuji’s low voice echoed futilely to himself through the hallway in the deserted gym. He had finished the storm of things he needed to do, and suddenly the fatigue hit his shoulders and back. The melancholy he had forgotten as he had been sewing while panicked and pressed for time reared its head all at once. It settled again onto his neck.

When the last pro-wrestling show finished, the whole class knew Taiga had to prepare to go into the Miss Festival pageant. The whole class should have known, but in the end, Minori hadn’t appeared at this dressing room. She had left it all up to Ryuuji and Ami and the other girls, even though she was supposed to be Taiga’s friend. She hadn’t even come to peek in.

Ami had put it this way: “Ha! If that jock girl were here, she’d just be a nuisance!” Ryuuji still felt that if Minori had at least told Taiga to do her best or something, Taiga might have been able to relax more.

The thing he didn’t want to think about, even though he did, was the current situation—the situation of Taiga’s father still not making an appearance. Minori was probably thinking, “I warned you.” She would have been like *Look at what’s happened! that’s why I told you so*, as she watched Taiga nervously looking at her phone while he soothed her.

...Though he didn’t want to believe she was like that.

“Hurry and get here, old man,” he said to himself, gruffly rolling his stiff shoulders. He hit his elbow on the wall and crouched. He raised his miserable face and vigorously rubbed it with his dry palms. He imagined that old man appearing.

He would definitely drive up to the front school gate in his silver convertible.

He would be wearing a light jacket or something. He would say, *Sorry I’m late!* and shrug.

Taiga would be furious. *You’re late!* In the end, she would still be incredibly happy and embarrassed. She’d be smiling.

“You’ll definitely come. No matter how late you are, you’ll definitely come dashing in. You’re that kind of guy, right? You’re a dad, aren’t you?”

A hero was someone who arrived late, anyway.

Hmph. Ryuuji breathed out through his nose and heaved himself up. Noto should have saved him a seat in the gym. As though trying to step over the situation he couldn't progress through, he roughly plodded forward with large strides.

Anyway, if he didn't come during the Miss Festival pageant, the family jewels were sure to be punished again.

Click! Spotlights lit up the center of the stage from three directions.

"Sorry for the long wait!"

In that moment, the emcee appeared with a microphone in hand.

The filled gym shook. With a giant, earsplitting cheer and thunderous applause, the overjoyed spectators stomped on the floor.

"M-my ears hurt...!"

Ryuuji automatically plugged his ears and covered his face to protect himself.

"Nooooooooooooooooo waaaaaaaaaay! AAAAAAAAAAMIIIIII-CHAAAAAAAAAAN, AH HAAA HAAAAAAAAAAAAAA! AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!"

Right next to him, Noto jumped up and down, bumping and stomping like an overexcited puppy. He thrust a fist up and shook his head as he screamed like a maniac.

"N-Noto...Noto!"

"AHHHHHHHHHHHHH! AMI KAWA-SHIMA AGH, BYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH! UGYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

"You're acting strange Noto, you're acting strange! You'll die if you lose your cool like this!"

Ryuuji desperately tried to calm Noto down by rubbing his back, but his friend was still in the crucible of joy. Noto's glasses had slipped all the way to his chin. In that moment, his heart and the hearts of all the others were one as they jumped with the energy of a thousand saccharine pop stars over and over in the

narrow seating, to the point that they seemed about to break their spines. Naturally, Ryuuji's feet were in excruciating pain from being stepped on.

“Ho ho ho, everyone, please be quiet. ♥”

It was a completely full house, densely packed with folding chairs. There were even some people standing. Ami grandly and naturally accepted the audience's excitement and screams. Her beautiful face was graced with an enchanting, amorous smile.

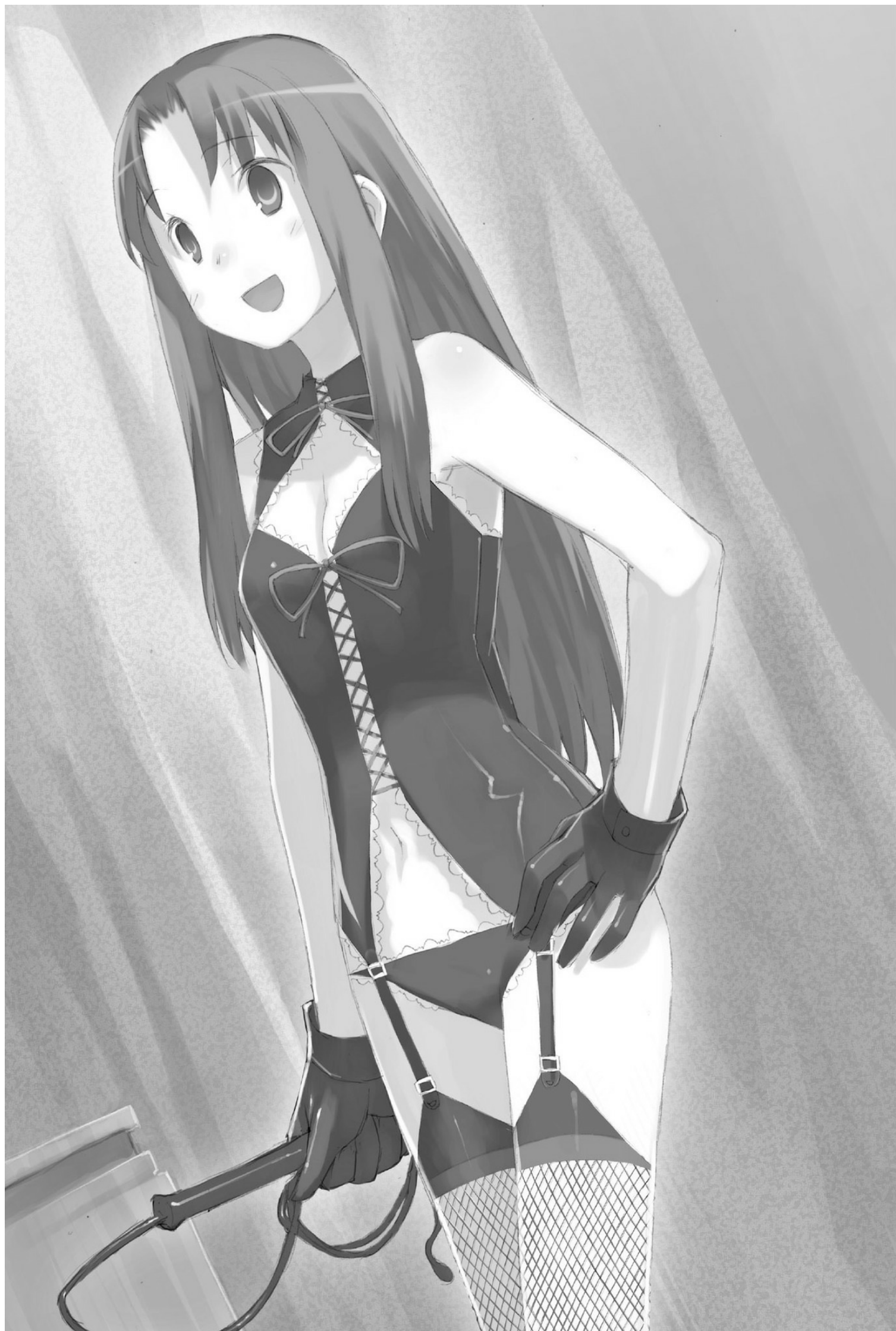
The way she looked was just unfair. *Are you the emcee?! Ryuuji thought, more shocked than captivated. Whaaat do you mean 'It's not like I don't enjoy backstage stuff?'* Her true nature definitely just came down to wanting to be eye catching, showered with attention, and to be called the most beautiful in the world.

He didn't know how, but through some quick technique, Ami had made a transformation. She had put coquettish makeup on her beautiful smiling face that bewitchingly set off her features in the lighting. *So this is why she's called a pro-model*, he thought. Her shimmering, radiant lips were vibrant and her skin's texture was that of a pearl itself. Using just a pale eye shadow, she had made her large Chihuahua eyes even glitterier. They were so pure they didn't know shame, and they seemed about to spill over. Her thickly drawn eyeliner had a limitless charm. If her gaze were to just quiver, Ami's looks were dramatic enough that they seemed able to tell a tale of their own, the kind split into three books with annotations in the back. Her luscious, spilling hair traced many gentle and charming curves. Somewhat terrifyingly, even the shadow she dropped was strangely dark and beautiful.

The costume that clad her perfectly proportioned, flexible, slender body had driven the audience mad, Noto included. It had even shocked Ryuuji.

“Now reeeally, if you don't be quiet, I'll PUN-ISH-YOU ♥.”

She held a whip in her hand above her head. There, in that public high school, on the cultural festival's stage, the queen stood.



Her stilettos were over ten centimeters tall.

Her fishnets climbed halfway up her thin thighs, cutting slightly into her flesh and making her fair skin more pronounced against the black threads that clung to her.

Her garter belt was black and alluring. She even had it connected to a leather bustier. Though thin, her soft inner thigh seemed plump as it overflowed from her shorts. The way the leather squeezed in her small butt and created a line was too sexy to look at. The bustier was tied with string at the chest and went all the way up to her neck, but like some kind of trap, only the valley of her chest had a large, daring cutout. In that hole were two charming, plump, and pale swells that held up as though they had been frozen in place. They were pushed together until they were perfectly round.

Under the too-beautiful hollows of her underarms, her two thinly muscled and sculpted marble-like arms were covered with leather gloves that, of course, went up to her fingertips, but were nevertheless lewd. The smile disappeared from Ami's face.

"I told you to shut up, you piiiiiiiiiiigs!"

PSHHT! The whip revolved elegantly through the air, hit the ground, and cracked.

...Her jeering isn't an act, it's real. This is Ami's true nature. She was showing her pitch-black insides as she yelled, each syllable coarse. Ryuuji shivered as though it were cold.

"Aaaah...master, I want to become the floor!"

"Bwaaaaah...hit me, hit me, I want to be hiiiit."

"I'm fine with being a pig, I'm fine with that! As long as I can get close to Ami-chan!"

The guys were overtaken by masochistic servility. They disgracefully swore their allegiance to queen Ami for eternity right on the spot.

"You want me to hit it even harder?! You greedy pigs, you're shameless! You hateful trotters! You ugly pigs should sit obediently like the pigs you are! A pig

that doesn't fly is just pooooooooooork!"

The gym was filled with enchanted voices that seemed close to drooling, but she effectively lowered the volume of the cheers. That was because queen Ami had told them to be obedient. Noto was on the verge of dying from mania. His eyes were drowsily and unpleasantly melting.

"Ami-chan's thighs... Ami-chan's violence... This is great, this is great. It's the best! A new, strong desire has risen inside me..."

He curled up as though in a dream and sat enchanted in his seat in the fetal position.

Ryuuji alone was calm—no, he was in considerable confusion—and still hadn't been pulled into the spiral of wild enthusiasm. He was looking at the emcee queen. Everyone was really excited now, but in all honesty, was this a good thing?

"Just kidding. ♥ No way, everyone, that was all just a joke, so you can't actually think it was real~! Now get your hearts pumping! I'll explain the voting now! First, you'll get to see the appeals of each candidate onstage, and after that everyone will have one vote..."

What was an emcee doing standing out more than anyone? That was basically the situation.

As emcee, Ami the queen briskly explained the ballot rules, but no one was listening. Everyone was looking at Ami's cleavage. They were looking at her thighs and her underarms and her fishnet tights where her delicate white skin showed.

The background music changed, and Ami moved to where the microphone stand was set up on the side of the stage. The audience's line of sight also moved along with her.

"And now, let's hurry and call them up! Entry number one, first year class A's —"

A fair, slender, and cute first year, probably still in the same costume as for her class's exhibition, appeared in a maid costume. He felt he had seen her before trying to lure in customers. *She's gonna say it, she's gonna say it*, he

thought.

“Welcome home, master!”

She said it with a rather nervous-looking smile. She had actually said it. There was applause from the hall, but it seemed rather distracted. The audience still had their sights obviously plastered on the emcee.

“Her specialty is welcoming her master home! She has a first-class license in being a maid! This pretty maid-san’s appeal is playing rock-paper-scissors! Everyone, give it up for her!”

Ami, as she tried to get the audience excited by announcing surprising fun facts on the side of the stage, was completely taking the spotlight. Her beauty and her wild antics were stealing the show. There really was a huge difference between a pro and an amateur.

Still not noticing the weird atmosphere, the first-year maid was speaking with a self-important flair.

“Let’s play a game of rock-paper-scissors! Um, this is the way we play at the class 1-A maid café—”

She danced around, sang a painful, mysterious song, and then *bam*, put out her clenched fist to symbolize ‘rock’. There were just a few girls going along with her...probably her classmates.

“This won’t do, Ami-chan’s too eye-catching! Actually, the acting committee made a mistake choosing her to emcee in the first place.”

Even Noto, who had regained the ability to understand human speech, finally turned a sympathetic eye to the first-year girl. Ryuuji completely agreed. As the least he could do, he clapped loudly for the girl who was walking out in this strange atmosphere.

Then the next first year appeared.

“W-welcome home, master.”

She said it, too.

“How many maids have we got in the school?!”

“Isn’t there anything else they can say?!”

No matter what they did, Ryuuji, Noto, and the audience couldn’t get enthusiastic about it. Of course, the candidate was cute. She had harsh cat eyes, a fluffy short haircut, and a miniskirt from which her slender and narrow legs peeked out like a goat’s. She was probably the class’s prettiest girl, but they had had their fill of maids and their uniforms. The “Welcome home” was just too predictable. They were fed up with the shallow replicas to the extent that they basically knew what each one would do. Each one would just be outshined by the emcee again.

“Takasu, did you know eight classes had maid cafés at this year’s festival? I went to four of them... They wrote Noto in hearts on the omelet rice with ketchup...for an extra 300 yen...”

“I thought you’d disappeared. That was what you were doing?”

“Right, I was. I went on a maid café crawl. Where did you go during the break, Takasu? Were you with Kitamura? I was going to invite you. I was looking for you for a while with Haruta.”

“I went with Taiga and Kitamura to a third year’s restaurant to eat. We also went to a crepe place... Right, right, we lined up for the chemistry club’s annual toffee making, but they sold out right in front of our eyes.”

“That toffee making is always so serious every year. I had some, and I bought some as gifts, too, since my sister’s a graduate and likes them. I have a lot. Do you want some?”

“Oh, are you sure? I do, I do.”

The flower of small talk unintentionally bloomed between them. Then, as Ryuuji returned to his senses and wondered whether they shouldn’t have been talking, it happened.

“Oh, a phone’s going off. Isn’t that yours?”

The cellphone in his pocket he had put on vibrate suddenly buzzed. Ryuuji pulled it out by its strap in a rush. Just as he was thinking that it was a nuisance in the middle of an event like this, he noticed those around him. There were already guys and girls who had their phones out. They were tapping at them

and taking pictures of the stage. He decided he could at least check his messages in a situation like this, and flipped the phone open. A maid was on stage, starting to do karaoke in a dubious, high-pitched voice.

“Ahh, poor thing...” said Noto. “Maybe I’ll vote for this girl...”

That time, too... And this time, too ♪ she sang, painfully. The mood in the place cooled as it steadily became clear she realized her mistake. This really was pitiful.

“You fool. Make sure you vote for Taiga. Those are points for the class, too.”

After saying that, Ryuuji poked at Noto’s elbow. Noto laughed and the song continued. Whether from nerves or tone deafness, it was out of tune. Ryuuji at least glanced politely at the stiff maid as he also looked at his cellphone.

The screen was glaring as it glowed in the dim darkness.

He could clearly see the characters. They were so clear, he couldn’t mistake or confuse them. All of it was clear. The characters jumped into Ryuuji’s retinas.

“A Favor,” read the title.

The message was from “Aisaka (dad)”.

The first line was *Hello*.

“Hey, Takasu, what number was Tiger? Is this going by year order?”

“Ah.”

Suddenly, all sound cut out.

I have something I want you to tell Taiga, if you could.

“Guess it’s not. A third year suddenly came on. Whoa, a kimono! Isn’t she a regular beauty?”

“...Yeah.”

I actually have to leave immediately for a job.

“Oh ho, seems like it’s a tea ceremony. So there was an upperclassman like that. Ah, how refined.”

“...”

So, sorry I can't make it today. Tell her I'll make up for it. And one other thing.

"Seriously, Ami-chan! She's standing out again! Ahh, that whip-user!"

"..."

Tell her that us living together again isn't happening.

Turns out I can't get divorced anyway because it would be inconvenient for the company.

So let's keep things the way they are.

And ask her to at least come out to eat with me.

Please apologize to my princess. Thanks.

"...Takasu?"

It was because of work or something like that.

He had been thinking that if Taiga's father had to go on a sudden business trip, or had a guest visit, or if her father had come down with something—if something like that happened and he couldn't come to the festival—that was just unfortunately how things were.

He had thought that no matter how much he wanted Taiga to enjoy herself, no matter how much she wanted her dad to come, no matter how much she believed her dad's promise—if something like that happened, there wasn't anything anyone could do. Her dad was an adult, so no matter how precious she was to him, he couldn't prioritize his high school kid's event over his career. Even Ryuuji understood as much. Taiga must have understood that as well.

But.

He didn't think that Taiga's dad would do this. He hadn't thought in his dreams that this would happen to her.

...He hadn't even imagined it.

"Takasu? What's wrong? Hey, wait."

"..."

So this was how it felt to be shocked beyond words.

He breathed in quickly, but he couldn't move his body. It felt as though he were wearing a steel suit of armor. From the moment he saw the message's first line, his raised eyebrows and wide-open eyes were frozen in time, motionless.

He was shocked. He was really shocked.

Ryuuji was truly shocked. He didn't know what to do. He didn't know the reason or the meaning of it. He didn't know what to do.

He didn't know what to do about this message—or about Taiga, or himself. No one told him what to do.

“Hey, are you really okay? The color in your face looks bad.”

Noto's hand shook his shoulder. *I'm fine*, he tried to say, but he didn't know if sound came out or not.

On top of the stage, the kimono-wearing beauty was reciting a strangely masochistic acrostic composition. The audience was breaking down in laughter. Finally, the Miss Festival pageant was starting to get exciting.

Ryuuji simply continued to look at his phone. Even though his eyes saw nothing, he just continued to stare at that glaring screen as though he believed that something would change if he kept looking at it. But nothing changed. The truth only continued to exist.

Taiga's father had not only abandoned the cultural festival but everything else, too. Then he'd run away.

That truth alone remained.

“Why...did I believe him...”

He didn't even realize the words had escaped his throat in a small, child-like voice. Ryuuji clasped at the left side of his chest. Why had he believed him? Why did he decide it was a good thing without actually thinking it through? Why didn't he listen to anything Taiga said? Subconsciously, he was digging his nails into himself through his uniform. He didn't feel any pain.

There was nothing.

All that remained was a thought: *Was it my fault?*

Ryuuji thought and thought over and over again. *Was it my fault?* An image of Taiga floated into his mind and wavered. It was her back as she ran back to her father after being admonished by Ryuuji. The arm that clung to her father's shoulders. It was her during the time when they had stood by each other under the streetlamps. She wasn't calm, but she was sour-faced and seemed bashful from her embarrassment.

Taiga seemed happy—truly happy. She always, absolutely always seemed happy, and, well...Ryuuji had been truly lonely.

He was lonely, and he hated it. Somewhere in his heart, there was a thought he had been ignoring. It was that he felt it would have been better if Taiga's father hadn't appeared. If he hadn't, the three of them could have kept living together as they had been. He wanted Taiga to ask him for things, he wanted her to need him, and to be dependent on him. He felt that if she were, he would have felt it wasn't a mistake for him to have been born. He felt like his existence would have been forgiven.

He'd felt that had all been stolen from him. It was like she had told him *I don't need you anymore*, and abandoned him. Ryuuji was lonely and he hated it. He'd been aware of those feelings, and so he'd desperately needed to tell himself, "This is a good thing."

That's right.

The reason he made Taiga go to her father wasn't because he believed it was a good thing.

He did it all for himself. He just pretended he was thinking of Taiga.

He was trying to compensate for his own deficit, for something that he didn't have, by having Taiga fulfill it. He'd even menaced Taiga: *How could you throw away something that I wish for and could never have?*

If Taiga were happy with her father, he felt it would be redemption for Yasuko having to leave her parents because of him. Even though Taiga and Yasuko were different people, if he could have one act of redemption, he felt that his soul would be saved. He felt he could stop thinking that it was a mistake for him to have been born an unwanted child.

But, in his heart, he was really praying for Taiga's father to disappear. He was praying for Taiga to stay by his side. He was doing it to give worth to his own existence.

How much of an idiot was he? He was selfish, egotistical, a worthless human being.

The whims of fate brought retribution down on him in this form.

How could he tell Taiga?

Like a blizzard, the shock froze everything from his heart to his lungs. Now Ryuuji was like a corpse. He couldn't think anymore. He couldn't move a single finger. No one's voice could reach his ears, no matter whose it was.

"Nooow, the next candidate! If I say she's the second-year class C's Palmtop Tiger, you'll probably recognize her, right?! As expected...it's Aisaka Taiga-san!"

Whooooooooaaaaaa, there was a low cheer. *She's here, the Palmtop Tiger's here! She's seriously in this?! Don't we need a cage or something?! Isn't it dangerous?!* The spectators were excited and rounded up an applause louder than any before.

"T-Takasu, hey... Tiger's up there now."

Even though Noto peeked at his face, looking troubled, Ryuuji only gripped the cellphone with his eyes wide open.

He hadn't noticed that the place had gone silent for a moment.

That person...that girl might have been nervous. She slowly appeared on the stage.

Shfft. The thin silk danced with her steps.

The angel wings were shaking on her back.

The pale hair that reached her hips was flowing exactly like music. It softly filled the space and made the air quiver.

Covered by the dress, her delicate body seemed like it could snap even now.

The eyelashes of her closed eyes created a shadow. Her delicate face, which looked like it was etched onto hard glass, somehow seemed hidden.

Gently.

As though she were flowing.

Taiga's steps were like ripples on water.

In the hush, her steps were like the wind.

She seemed like she could become transparent, like she could melt and turn into sweet water. No one could raise their voice.

They watched her like they would an ephemeral winged insect that had only recently emerged. Everyone was watching as though afraid to even breathe on that beautiful, breakable thing.



“No way...” someone whispered in admiration.

“Amazing, she’s cute...”

Ryuuji was—Ryuuji was— “Uhh, today, apparently Aisaka-san’s father should be here in this auditorium to cheer his daughter on! If you could, dad, please give her a cheer!”

Ami waved one hand widely as she yelled into the mic. As she did that, she seemed worried while she looked into the audience seats.

Taiga was standing with her wings at rest at the center of the stage. Her eyes said she believed he would come. She anxiously bit her lip. She was waiting for someone to yell for her from somewhere in that space.

The time flowed so slowly it was cruel.

“U-Uhh...uhhhhhhh...” Ami’s voice went high. There was no father here to cheer Taiga on. At the stagnant proceedings, the assembly gradually went into a commotion. They weren’t vocalizing praise for the beautiful angel but skepticism of the situation.

“He probably hasn’t come?”

“Go to the next one, the next one!”

Taiga’s wings wavered.

Ryuuji saw it.

Taiga.

Taiga— “Takasu?!”

He kicked back his chair and stood up. Taiga’s eyes looked at Ryuuji. Their eyes met. Taiga was more aware than anyone of the cellphone still gripped in Ryuuji’s hand. After seeing Ryuuji’s expression, her face contorted for a moment. He saw it. She was like a baby on the verge of bawling.

Taiga turned her face down and squeezed her eyes shut.

It was as though she were trying to say she knew all of it. That her father wasn’t coming and that he wasn’t coming to get her anymore—she knew it all. She didn’t even seem surprised. It was as though she were trying to say that

there was nothing else in this world she wanted to see anymore.

Her small shoulders were robbed of their strength, and her wings slowly turned down. Instead of spilling tears, loose feathers fluttered down to her feet.

As for what Ryuuji could do—he could do nothing. The stage Taiga stood on was too far away. Even if he stretched out his hand, he couldn't reach her. He couldn't drag her father over here either.

Then, with all eyes on her, Taiga apparently tried to run off the stage.

Her hair and dress fluttering up, she turned her back to the audience. She simply covered her face and tried to run, but even in times like this, Taiga really was a klutz.

“Waah?!”

Aaah! There were even screams from the audience. At a time that couldn't have been worse, she stepped on her dress with her heel. She lost her balance and tilted sideways, pulled by her own weight.

“Oh!”

“Wah...” said Ami, “little tiger...”

BAM! Taiga made a huge noise as she fell in the center of the stage. Ryuuji and Ami couldn't watch as she toppled face first to the floor. Her dress turned up and her legs were in full view. The other candidates, lined up at the side of the stage, froze at the sight. Not a single one of them could move. They just looked down at the situation that had occurred.

No one could say a thing about the dramatic incident. The gym fell into silence.

“Ow...ow, ow, ow...”

Only Taiga's low, growling voice echoed. She still hadn't gotten up. Her earnestly wind-milling hands tried to at least, somehow, fix the edge of her dress, but the hem had torn. It had torn right at a very risqué point on her thighs, and she couldn't hide her pale legs. She was red from shame. She was tearing up.

What in the world could Ryuuji do? Hit by the thunderbolt of divine

retribution, he was being skewered by the stake of self-hatred. With its scales sewn to the ground, even a dragon couldn't fly. Wings couldn't make their own wind either. A dog like Ryuuji was even more helpless. He could only stand there, at a loss. He felt like crying himself. Taiga was in that state, and he was stuck here.

“Ugh...”

Taiga finally raised her face.

It may have been because she was embarrassed or because she was overly agitated, but her face was redder than blood. Her eyes were filled with tears that were on the verge of spilling. Her small nostrils flared as she bit her lips.

The useless dog's thoughts felt like they were being shouted into the air.
There are only two options you can choose.

One option was to stay there and keep crying while down on the ground. Taiga could wait to see if anyone did anything. Maybe she would black out conveniently and someone would go and save her in the nick of time. Maybe they would take her away from this place, and she could move on to the next scene.

And then there's one other option.

That was for her to get up with her own two legs.

That was for her to embrace her shame and to come to an understanding with the world and her feelings. She could pretend something else had happened, or she could show her wounds, but somehow or other she would keep going. Even if she was frail, even if the situation was terrible, even if it hurt, even as she failed over and over again, she would somehow start walking.

Which will you choose?

Hey Taiga, which will you choose?

“Ahh, seriously...”

Her complaint was small.

Her light was strong.

It was strong and more dazzling than anything. Like a star glowing with light, Taiga's eyes slowly came back to life. The wings on her back bounced and moved. Frustrated, she squinted and unleashed her ferocious, tenacious eyes. She squirmed and stirred and swung her head side to side several times like an animal that had been aroused from its slumber.

"THIS IS...THEEEE WORST!"

In one forceful motion, she tore away at her hanging, ragged skirt. A stir rose from the audience to the tune of *Wah...that was so violent*. As the audience vocalized, a baffling arrogance came over Taiga, and she put up her chin. Though she was rubbing her reddening knees, she kept her chest thrust out in her regular pompous display. She staggered up with her own two legs.

She had gotten up.

I can't be doing that, she grumbled and contorted her face. The tears settled in her eyes, but she picked up her majestic stride down the stage's runway all on her own. Her costume's impromptu transformation into a daring miniskirt had turned her into the most likely front-runner. The Miss Festival pageant's victorious candidate continued. She walked on.

"She's got it..."

As she walked, Ryuuji could definitely feel the wind her wings cut through. But the wind was too weak for flying.

"Takasu?"

Ryuuji was the only one in the middle of the stirring and overwhelmed audience.

He was the only one doing it.

He started a forceful applause. He clapped his hands together with all his strength. That sound echoed and reverberated up to the gym's ceiling.

This was the wind.

I'll send it to you now. This wind is for you.

Hey, that's the delinquent Takasu. It really is, he's cheering on his partner—he

ignored the crossing whispers. He gave a single-handed standing ovation for that majestically walking girl. Ryuuji sent the wind forth for Aisaka Taiga and her alone. He sent her the best praise he could. *Do it, do your best*, he yelled. *Somehow, do your best.*

"But, well...is he cheering? That's cute."

“Right, right. Anyway, let’s give the Palmtop Tiger a hurrah!”

“The Palmtop Tiger’s strong! But she’s a transcendent klutz!”

Gradually, the applause spread around Ryuuji like a ripple. Noto, and then a guy next to him whose name he didn't know, and someone next to that person, all successively stood up and sent Taiga a huge applause. Naturally, each and every person in 2-C gave a cacophony of thunderous applause. As though slightly surprised, the emcee queen put the mic under her armpit as she clapped her hands. *Pheewew!* Someone even whistled for her. Everyone clapped loudly for the pretty, dangerous, unthinkably klutzy Miss Festival candidate who was walking down the platform. That turned into a tailwind and it firmly supported Taiga as she progressed.

Finally, when that applause filled the air, it happened.

"TAAAAAAAAAIIIIIIIIIIIIIGAAAAAAA!"

Like a roaring, rushing stream, a shriek passed through the air, but it hadn't come from Ryuuji's throat.

“TAIGA, YOU GOOOOOOOOOOO! No matter what happens, no matter what the time, you’re a strong giiiiiiiirl, Taiga! IT’S OKAAAAAAAAY!”

The voice was hoarse. That person took a breath.

It was Minori. Minori stood on a chair way in the back. She tried to yell again. She coughed and her voice went hoarse for a moment. Ryuuji took the baton.

“TAI-GAAAAAAAAAAAA!! You’re doing great! That’s right! Go! DO IIIIIIIIT!” he yelled. Noto, the others, and everyone looked up at Ryuuji in surprise, but he still yelled. Along with Minori’s voice, he yelled at Taiga to do her best. *Don’t lose*, he yelled. He screamed as he gave Taiga a standing ovation.

He believed Taiga's decision had definitely been right.

Even if you fell, you had to continue on with your life. That was because no matter what happened, no matter how hard it got, no matter whether it hurt, even if you were betrayed, even if you thought it was over, even then, as long as you were alive, you had to get up like this. You had to start walking again. No matter how many times you fell, even if you couldn't stand, even if your strength was gone, even then, you had to start walking. Whether you were crying or smiling, you had to walk your own path with your own two feet.

That was what living was.

Living unyieldingly, Taiga's red face looked incredibly displeased as she scowled. She occasionally rubbed her knees and elbows as though they hurt and lumbered with wide strides as she walked the platform. The feathers on her wings continued to fall, covering the route Taiga walked like light snow. With all his strength, Ryuuji sent applause to her. *Good, give it your all*, he continued to shout. The wave of applause was becoming louder and louder. Whistles echoed. From here and there rose voices yelling the Palmtop Tiger's name.

As she got to the mic, the veins on her forehead were trembling. Taiga wrung out all her strength and roared.

“SHUUUUUUUUUDDUUUUUUUUUP!”

Like the singer Yazawa, she tilted the mic stand as she held it. She forcefully stomped her feet, which her torn dress revealed.

“Who cares about my dad,” she roared, “I shredded him and plucked him and threw him in the m-mooooooooooooorgue!”

Whoaa... The audience drew back all at once. Then, as though in understanding, they gave a low groan. Of course, the Palmtop Tiger, the most sinister, strongest, free-reigning, dangerous animal around, would have a parental relationship that was painted with blood.

If Taiga was going this far, she was probably in a desperate state of mind.

“I'll show you my appeal now! Hey, you idiot! Bring *that* thing!”

“Y-yes!”

The one sitting in the front row was Haruta, who had already arranged the

prop long ago. He threw an overnight bag to her and she caught it. They weren't sure what she was doing or intended, but Taiga opened the zipper and folded her already small body even more compactly as she squeezed herself into the overnight bag. Then, from inside the bag, she yelled, "CLOOOOOOOOOOSE IIIIIIIIT!"

The one who approached in a fluster was one of the other pitiful candidates. Though fearful, she closed the zipper and the audience once again freely applauded at Taiga's compactness.

The first-year maid who closed the zipper, possibly trying to be considerate, picked up the bag. The audience's cheers became even louder.

"DON'T PICK ME UUUUUUUUUUUUUUP!"

"Eek!"

It seemed that hadn't been the right move. The maid lowered Taiga to the ground.

"OPEN IIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIT!" Taiga shouted after a few seconds.

The same maid opened the zipper. Taiga pushed up her messy hair as she slowly and arrogantly got up.

"Hmph! Aren't you lucky, maid servant! It must have been an honor to have been useful!"

Haughty and arrogant, she puffed up her chest... Even though, just moments ago, she had been wretchedly on the ground like a run over frog.

Then came the results of the ballot.

Somehow, the title of Miss Festival was actually, really given over to the arrogant, angel-wing-wearing, run-over frog-tiger. The decisive factor might have been how she so magnificently fell over or her performance with the bag that was vaguely reminiscent of a certain skinny psychic entertainer.

Taiga progressed to the center of the stage with a grumpy look, this time in the middle of an eddy of unfaltering applause. The acting committee guided her to where a chair was prepared in a slightly elevated place.

From below the stage, Ryuuji kept looking at her. Taiga faced the front and

stuck out her chin, but she was all alone. She was seen by everyone, she was looking at everyone, but there were no arms to hug her anywhere. There was no one to take her home, either.

She was alone as she sat there.

“Takasu? W-wait?! What are you doing?!”

Ryuuji tried to get even a little closer to Taiga’s side. He tried to step across the line of chairs in front of him. He knew that he alone wasn’t enough. Ryuuji knew the hole bored into Taiga’s heart was something he couldn’t fill with his shape.

But he might have been able to support her while she had to live with a huge hole in her abdomen. Right now, she might need him for that. He pushed his way through others’ shoulders and kept rushing forward, though he was being a nuisance. Flustered, Noto desperately stopped him by his shoulders.

“You can’t do that! S-sorry...hey, look! I’m the one who people are getting mad at!”

The gym was large, wide, and when it was chock-full of folding chairs, even Ryuuji’s scary face couldn’t shift the crowd. Noto’s arm was unexpectedly strong, too.

“Taiga...”

His chest felt like it was close to being ripped apart.

He didn’t know what he could do, but he knew he needed to get there. It would be enough if he could get a step or even a centimeter closer to where Taiga was sitting alone.

Then it happened.

“Now, ladies and gentlemen, it’s time for the final game.”

The voice that sounded like an old man’s, but was feminine and dignified, echoed through the gym. It made Ryuuji unintentionally stop in his tracks as he was learning the hard way that he couldn’t rush forward.

“NA HA HA HA HA HA HA HAA!”

The armband on her uniform was crimson.

An army six strong appeared.

They were on top of the stage and in rows. In the center, cradling a megaphone and happily roaring with laughter was the big brother in all of the students’ hearts. She was the living legend, the broadminded leader of everyone, the completely impeccable female student president Kanou Sumire.

“Oh, oh, what a lively bunch we’ve got here in these rows! Well now, we’ll commence this year’s Mister Festival pageant!”

Permitted to stand at her right was the vice president Kitamura Yuusaku, faithful as a rock. The other members of the student council stood in a line behind them, and the acting committee members, wearing green armbands, stood at the back.

The audience, still excited from the Miss Festival pageant, lost their composure and started to stir. What in the world was going to happen now? How were they intending to start a Mister Festival pageant? For starters, they hadn’t even chosen candidates.

Sumire reined in the commotion with just the smile that crossed her face.

“You’ll be judged in the Mister Festival pageant by...this!”

At Sumire’s signal, the members of the student council pulled forcefully on a string that they had hung down from the ceiling at some point. *Shoop!* A giant ball opened. Confetti and tape fluttered down all at once, and a weighty piece of paper unfurled and fell...

“Ouch!”

...Onto the head of an unfortunate student council member. Not minding him, Sumire pushed aside the member, who had crouched down. Though they could plainly read the paper themselves, Sumire purposefully read out the large characters.

“This year it’s a ‘Mister Lucky Man!’”

They didn’t glean anything from her words. What was a...Mister Lucky Man?

As though their brains had miraculously synchronized, all the spectators who were squeezed into the gym tilted their heads together. Still stuck between the rows of seats, being worried over by Noto, Ryuuji automatically tilted his head with them. Kitamura took a step forward on the stage. The mic was in his hand.

“The Lucky Man is a Shinto custom on the tenth day of the annual Ebisu opening in January at the Nishinomiya shrine in Nishinomiya, Hyogo Prefecture. You’ve probably seen the yearly news coverage of it. Every year on the dawn before the tenth day, a crowd of people gathers at the main front gate. When the gate opens, they dash two hundred and thirty meters down the stone pavement toward the main shrine. The first one who arrives is luckiest, and then the second and the third get prizes. First place is given the title of the Lucky Man. Well, to put it simply, there’s already a course on the athletic field. Anyone who wishes to enter should go gather at the start line now! In other words, the first place Lucky Man is the winner of the Mister Festival pageant!”

No sooner than he had firmly said “pageant!” than...

“You’re not having a foot race at a cultural festival!”

...The boos rang louder than the cheers. Following suit, others also spouted complaints.

“The girls just had to get out on a stage and sing, though!”

“Why is it just the guys that always have to do the hard stuff?!”

Alongside the booing, complaints were also directed to the student council on the stage. Sumire, however, was composed to the end. With a smile filled to the brim with tolerance, she stood in an imposing stance in front of the complainers.

“If you don’t want to enter, you don’t have to. Participation is voluntary, after all.”

Then no one’s participating, yeah, let’s go, let’s go. The audience’s voltage went down a notch. There were sounds of people getting up from their seats echoing here and there.

“But the prize conferred to the Lucky Man is, first, that he will have the right to ask this year’s Miss Aisaka Taiga for a dance at tonight’s campfire. And

second, he'll have the right to give Miss Festival this tiara."

On a cart, they brought out the aforementioned tiara. With reverent handling, a student council member held it up. Even if they had the right to ask for a dance, if Taiga refused, then that was it. Many of the guys seemed to lose interest and were about to go.

"Hey, there's something attached to it?!"

"What's that huge thing?!"

Directly underneath the sparkling tiara that seemed like it was part of a costume rental, was a mysterious, heavy-looking cloth bag. *Grin*, Sumire's red lips formed into a smile.

"Oh, I was about to forget...this tiara comes with something. That's a specialty Market Kanou shopping bag. You only get one if you buy over 3000 yen in groceries. And the stuff that's inside of it—well, I'm just recycling stuff I don't need, but it's something I've had for the past three years. Those are all the notes I've taken from the time I was a first year in April. I have everything from each and every subject, all the answer sheets from the periodic exams and their explanations, all in bite-sized notes. I'm unusually methodical by nature, so I have notes from class and the instructor's questions, those answers, how to organize the main points... Well, I couldn't throw them away, anyway. I thought that before I graduate, Miss Festival and the Lucky Man—that happy couple—could look over the footsteps of my academic career together, so—"

Like a slowly spreading ripple, the booing that had gone on up to that point changed in tune.

"Big brother Kanou's notes?!"

"The answers to all the exams?!"

"Notes on the questions, answers, main points?!"

"You mean we can follow in the academic footsteps of *that* student president? The one who has, by far, been top of the class in the last three years since she started school? Of course, she's gotten perfect scores, too!"

The commotion they were making was finally enthusiastic. The ones who said

they would go home started to come back to hear more. In particular, the third years with perilous grades who were pretty close to being in a dicey situation unanimously put their heads together. They started conferring with one another, and the room filled with a chorus of “Should we enter?!” The genius Kanou Sumire’s study materials—it was too alluring a prize. There was another part of the audience also getting excited.

“Huh, there are people who are entering?! Seriously?! Th-then, we could seriously dance with the Palmtop Tiger? But if she says no then that’s the end of it, isn’t it?! Isn’t it?!”

“I think so... What...if she weren’t allowed to say no?!”

“Is that believable?!”

“But, hearing that people are entering kind of makes me nervous... The dance aside, wouldn’t it mean that you’d definitely get to copy the notes together with Tiger?”

“What if we hit it off...”

“What if...that could actually happen...”

They started to glance at Taiga, who was still sitting behind the student council on top of the stage. Taiga didn’t get mad when Sumire brought up her name, and she wasn’t denying anything. She just quietly and snugly sat in the chair. Regardless of what she was thinking, there really wasn’t anything cuter than Taiga when she wasn’t in a rage.

“I’ve decided! I’m doing it!”

“No way! You’re serious?!”

“Okay! I’ll do it too! I’m aiming for luckiest!”

The ones who were running started to head out. On top of that, there were other groups that had been conferring.

“As the track team, we can’t be slower than the others.”

“Okay! Down with the track team! Now is the time for the basketball club to show our strength!”

“Soccer club meeting! We’ll kick the others out with our footwork!”

“Ho ho ho, we’ll choke the life out of the soccer club right here. Futsal association, assemble!”

They were the guys from the sports clubs who couldn’t lose to the likes of amateurs at this race. They each gathered, formed circles, raised their voices, and made their match for the seizure of the Lucky Man.

“I want big brother’s notes, too!”

“The Miss Festival pageant was one person per class, so why is the Mister Festival pageant open to everyone?! It’s unfair!”

The ones who were blubbering complaints and making a racket were the girls. Seeing the boys as they were getting excited, it seemed they had been quite fully motivated. On the stage, Sumire took the mic in one hand.

“For the Mister Festival pageant...it doesn’t matter whether you’re a girl or boy! Participation from girls is fully welcome! Now, everyone who has made up their minds, gather at the athletic field’s track peripheryyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!”

YEAH! The girls’ high cheers also mixed in with the deeper voices.

Among those who started moving and filtering out of the gym was Ryuuji.

Ryuuji didn’t really need the big brother’s notes.

He didn’t need the title of Lucky Man.

He didn’t really care about dancing with Taiga.

Anyway, no matter by what means, he wanted to get closer to Taiga faster than anyone else. He wanted to run to Taiga, who was sitting there all by herself.

That was all.

Chapter 7

The participants gathered at the starting point around the periphery of the track. They numbered around ten girls and forty or fifty boys.

It was already dusk. A large crowd of spectators smoothly took their places at the athletic field where the cool autumn wind blew. They clapped their hands together in rhythm as they waited for the event to commence. Taiga sat in a chair at the goal line, wearing a red cloak under the illumination of the floodlights. A protective ring of members from the student council and the acting committee surrounded her. As though to warn everyone off from approaching the prize, they eyed the participants as they stood unyieldingly at parade rest.

A secret feud was already beginning at the starting line. Naturally, it wasn't like everyone would get along standing side by side. They were all trying to get to the front to take more advantageous positions, no matter how slight.

"Don't push!"

"Shut up, I'm in the track and field club! You slowpokes are in the way, move outta the way!"

"Whaaat?! You've really done it now! You should be the one backing down!"

"Hey! We're girls, so don't push, okay?!"

"Don't wanna trip and cry, then get to the end, you slow girls!"

"Girls shouldn't be entering in the first place! You're really just getting in the way!"

"Whaaat?! That's so rude!"

"Drop dead!"

The situation was becoming extraordinarily treacherous as they pushed with their elbows, stepped on each other, and butted shoulders.

"What the?!"

“A-are you serious... Takasu-kun’s entering too?!”

At the entrance of a single boy, the crowd made a spectacle, like he was Moses and they were the Red Sea. The crowd trembled as it parted right in two so that the boy could easily take a spot at the starting line, where he stood imposingly. Of course, that boy’s name was Takasu Ryuuji. His small pupils rattled, and the look in his eyes said one word—“psycho.” He licked his parched, rough lips. He looked around, dominating his surroundings.

At just the look in his eyes, the surging crowd surrounding him shuffled back. Normally this was a situation that would hurt his feelings, but just this once, this was what he was aiming for. He was serious about getting first place.

He wanted to get to Taiga’s side faster than anyone else. Ryuuji had been shocked to death, and his mind had gone blank. Now, though, he was fixated on a singular goal. He was so angry he could die.

He wanted to take that guy who had called Taiga a princess, crumple the guy up into a ball, and throw the ball away. He wanted to yell at the guy with Taiga. *Who needs you?! You’re a failure of a king. I’m going to put that sparkling tiara on Taiga’s head with my own two hands. We don’t need your hands ever again,* he wanted to yell. He would use his hands to have Taiga’s back. From here on out, whether it be for decades or even millennia, he would lend her the strength to walk alone in her fragile state.

Then he would throw away his own idiotic self and be reborn, too. *I don’t need you anymore either,* he thought.

He would do anything to achieve that. If he didn’t, he would never be able to forgive the fool he had been. If he didn’t, he would never be able to bring himself to show his face to Taiga again.

“I have a few warnings! First, everyone please be careful not to hurt yourself! We’ve arranged for several cushions to be at the goal!”

Kitamura was working as the starter, pointing a finger towards the finish line. Sure enough, there were cushions distributed along the goal.

“Much appreciated!”

That came from the portly and tough-bodied members of the sumo club. They

were doing well considering the time of the year and the fact that their pale skin was exposed to the outdoors. They slapped their sides, dropped their waists, spread their thighs, and slowly sidled up to each other in their bare feet. *We will capture the Lucky Man with our brawn.* They spread out their arms and made everyone feel the strength of their resolve.

I wouldn't want that... said one girl. *No, actually, I'd be into that,* another girl said excitedly.

I don't care either way. Whether it's the sumo club or the American football club, I'll be the one to dive headfirst into their thick chests. As for Ryuuji, he was thinking something that could have left him open to slight misinterpretation.

"Well then, I'm going to explain the course, so please listen up!"

"By course, you just mean the half-circle around the track, right?" someone said, but Kitamura, his spectacles glinting, dismissed them with a single word, "Wrong!" With that, he signaled with his hand.

"Ooh!"

"Amazing, that must've cost a pretty penny!"

Starting at the participant's feet at the starting line, guiding lights switched on all at once to make a line of radiant light that guided the participants to the goal.

"It's really amazing, but...isn't this a little weird?"

"The line isn't following the track. It cuts off suddenly right before the school building, doesn't it?"

"Well noticed!"

Kitamura's pride had no end. *Huff!* His nostrils flared.

"The first section along the Lucky Man race is the straightaway! Then it continues along the back of the old school building. Then you'll once again return to the athletic field from the side of the entryway, and it's a straight shot to the goal! Run it using every ounce of strength you've got!" he proclaimed with his chest puffed out.

Immediately, there was an uproar of argumentative voices, "Whaa?!"

“Hold up, hold up, you stupid student council! You expect us to run in that tiny space that’s by that fence behind the old school building?! With this many people!”

“And isn’t the side of the entryway just stairs?! That place is ridiculously cramped, too!”

“You’ve just got to put in your best effort. Well then! Are you almost ready?!”

At Kitamura’s completely unconcerned voice, they all realized any further argument would be fruitless. *So basically*, thought Ryuuji, *what you’re saying is don’t enter if you don’t like it.*

He glared at the course before him as he retained his position in the middle of the noisy crowd. *If you’re unhappy*, he thought, *be my guest and quit. I’d be fine with everyone quitting.*

It wasn’t actually that long of a distance. The problem was when they would get behind the old school building. That place was practically a tiny tunnel. He would avoid the conflict of trying to fight his way through there. Anyway, all he had to do was be the first out, get behind the old building, and act as a cork so no one else could get through. After that, in the straightaway, he’d leave the rest to luck. It was just a matter of how much of a lead he could take up until he got to that point. At least he had formerly been part of a sports club at one point. During his third year in junior high, he had been in the badminton club. He wasn’t too slow.

Ryuuji bit his lip. He checked the position of his most formidable enemies, the track club, whom he probably wouldn’t have been able to beat had they been running a normal race. Pressure steadily oozed from his eyes in full force. As he stared at them, his evil eyes said, *Do not get in front of me.*

“On your marks! Get set!”

Ryuuji whipped his eyes back to the front. He was unaware of the disquieting discussion that was occurring behind him. With his butt, he offhandedly obstructed the group that was taking professional-looking crouching starts. Then he toed the start line as close as he could.

“Start!”

POP! The starting pistol fired.

Like a literal bullet, Ryuuji burst off into a reckless run straight ahead.

“Whoa?!”

They got him without warning. Someone had grabbed his shirt from behind. He lost his balance. Someone swept his feet out from under him. His ears picked up their voices: Take out Takasu-kun first! If everyone’s in, he won’t know who did it!

“Y-you jerks...!”

Ryuuji collapsed onto the course. They made sure to thoroughly trample all over his butt. As he was trying to get up, dust flew into his eyes.

“D-damn it!”

If they were going to do that, then he wouldn’t stay down and take it.

“I can’t lose this!”

He pawed at the ground and quickly stood up. Then he handed it out to each coward that ran past him. Naturally, it was the eyes—he aimed for their eyes.

“Uwah!”

“Ow ow ow ow!”

Once he had several people holding their faces and staggering, he left them. Next, he grabbed the back of someone within his reach.

“Don’t take this personally!”

“Uwawawawah!”

He pulled the person down with all of his strength. The first person got tangled up with someone else who also tripped over. Ryuuji was unable to hide his smile at his luck. Now he had completely joined the ranks of the villains.

What’s wrong with that? he thought. *You can even brainwash people.* After all, he was Takasu, the delinquent who had been born with a villain’s face slapped on him. He’d lived through it, strong and unyielding.

“Uwah?! Takasu-kun’s back from the dead!”

“I’m scaaaaaared! His face is terrifying!”

“There, there, there, there!”

“Ahhhh!” Screams were even coming from the audience. Apparently, the course lighting that illuminated them from below was having a compounded effect that worked great for him. As Ryuuji dashed at full speed, his determined face took on a malevolent cast. It seemed that the dim light of dusk made the eeriness in his face emerge. Those who looked over their shoulder at Ryuuji’s face tripped over themselves. With that alone, he made three people lose their will to compete.

“I know who you are. If I’m not mistaken, you’re...”

“Uwaaaah soorry!”

He whispered into someone’s ear from behind, and though he didn’t know the person who looked at him in shock, the guy still fell over. With that, he was up to four. But it wasn’t over. Other heads were stretched out before his eyes. As one would expect, the track and field members were fast, and their speed was already on a different level from everyone else’s. The failed start had really hurt him; it had put him too far behind.

“Daaaaaaaammit!”

“Ahhh, it’s a demon!”

After he screamed, rather than the five runners in front of him, a junior high girl in the audience fell over. *So close*, Ryuuji thought. He clicked his tongue and scrutinized the course with his scowling eyes. The group leading the pack was already diving behind the school. One by one, they disappeared.

No no no no, he thought. If he were to enter he wouldn’t be able to overtake anyone anymore. He also wouldn’t be able to cheat. *What should I do? I don’t know*. At any rate, he needed to keep going while he didn’t have to worry about his placement in the race changing. He slipped around the tight curve and approached the fence at the back of the school, which almost looked like a pitch-black cave.

“Whoa?!”

“Tsk! I missed!”

One of Taiga’s roundhouse kicks came flying at him before his eyes—or so he thought. The attack that assailed him was slower than he expected, and he did a Matrix-esque bend backwards right at a critical moment. He just barely avoided whatever had suddenly lunged at his eyes.

He simply fell over backwards. As he righted himself, he realized what it was. It was someone’s hand. An arm protruded out from a gap in the fence.

“What are you doing?!”

“Sorry, but we can’t let you pass! All but the basketball club will be buried in the darkness!”

“Ah, you idiots! He’ll figure out who we are!”

He didn’t know when they could have snuck into there, but on the other side of the fence, suspicious people using towels as masks were in a row and taking advantage of the darkness. They had been taking down unsuspecting pageant candidates who were running through. When he looked ahead, he could see trampled people here and there collapsed face down.

“Y-you’ve got to be kidding! I’m totally telling the teachers after this!”

“Do what you want! Either way you’re never getting through! Oh, there’s another one coming!”

“Come at us! That’s a Futsal guy!”

The person who had just come up behind Ryuuji fell prey to the merciless fence phantoms.

“Waaaah!”

What’s with these guys? Ryuuji thought, but he couldn’t waste time in a place like this. He could only advance forward. He once again made a break for it.

“Ow!”

“Oh! Sorry!”

He had stepped on the butt of someone who’d collapsed, but he didn’t have the time to spare standing around. On one side was the damp concrete of the

four-story old school building and on the other was the fence bristling with phantom people. And then if he went any slower...

“It’s the delinquent Takasu! Rumor has it you’re not actually as scary as you look?!”

“Yeah, you guys are much scarier!”

One after another, the people who were accompanying him from behind the fence stuck their arms through the steel wire and recklessly tried to seize his clothes and his hair.

“Waaaaah!”

Below him, those who collapsed became obstacles, catching at Ryuuji’s feet. He grazed them and stumbled. Then someone screamed from behind him. There were people in front of him who had piled into a heap after tripping over the obstacles. This was the first block of hell—that, or it was a human cockroach trap.

“Damn,” he said, “how annoying!”

With a hop and a step, Ryuuji jumped onto the fence. He quickly scrambled up the two-meter height with the momentum he had created and reeled once he stood himself up on the top of it.

“Is that allowed?!”

“D-don’t talk to me right now!”

People gave him dumbfounded looks from below, but it was much scarier for the person actually doing it. *Eeek!* Teary eyed, he was screaming a voiceless scream. Ryuuji intended to run through the darkness in one shot. He could only see a few centimeters ahead of him. *Don’t look down, don’t fall*, he told himself, feeling like he was going to die.

“Hey, that’s sneaky! Drag him down—ouch, ow, ow, ow!”

He was already in a daze as he mercilessly stamped on the outstretched hands trying to seize his ankles. He also stamped out his fear. He would get first place. That was it—that was the only thing he could bring with him. He would get to Taiga first. From then on, that was the only thought he carried forward

with him.

On the pitch-black course below, those who had fallen over and those who were tripping continued to arrive one after another. They bunched together in a heap, blocking the way forward. A traffic jam was in progress—this was his chance to win. He desperately righted himself as he teetered.

“Huh?! That’s Takasu the delinquent?! Are you serious?! Are you really willing to go this far?!”

“I am!”

“Why?!”

“I’ve got my reasons, leave it alone!”

He finally passed the pile of slackers who were looking up at him in amazement. Ryuuji might have been coming out on top. He was in extreme concentration as he ran through on top of the fence. Light from the course was flowing in from beyond the old school building. The line of lights that continued to the goal glittered. He kicked off the fence and landed with his now-sure feet.

He flew out ahead of everyone else from the darkness and went headfirst into the sudden curve ahead of him. The turn opened up, and he soared over the stairs of the four-story building in one go.

That was when it happened.

“...!”

Aisaka Taiga stood up from her chair.

A vivid rosy color spread over her doll-like cheeks.

Only one man was reflected in her faintly teary, wide eyes.

It was the one person at the top. It was the person who was diving towards her faster than anyone else. It was— “Ryu...”

That’s when it happened.

“Huh?! No way?! It’s Takasu-kun, it’s Takasu-kun, it’s Takasu-kun, ahhhh!”

“It’s true it’s true, he’s coming in first, amaaazing! It’s amazing, that’s amazing, you can do it!”

Kihara Maya and Kashii Nanako were yelling the loudest among the cheers that broke out. They were clapping their hands and jumping. Slightly behind them, Kawashima Ami, wearing an overcoat, muttered, “Oh?”

As she crossed her arms and an expression of amazement graced her face, a mysteriously passionate light danced in her eyes.

Then it happened.

“Huh?!”

Several of the gathered audience members’ eyes went wide as they realized the situation. At the unbelievable development, someone mumbled in a low voice, “Th-that’s fast...”

It happened just as the audience members saw and believed Ryuuji was the fastest one to have returned to the athletic field.

From his unguarded right, a shadow ran through the compact and sudden curve without a sound. It overtook Ryuuji. That person went up the stairs a step ahead of him, landing with sure feet. Then the person turned back around for a moment from a low position, narrowed their eyes, and whispered, “Slowpoke.”

“Ku?!”

Kushieda Minori?!

Her loose hair dancing in the wind, Minori flew by Ryuuji in a cold gust. She quickly turned back around. She seemed to soar through the air as she lightly dashed down the straightaway at a miraculous pace fast enough to overtake any boy running at top speed. She didn’t even turn towards him. She brushed him aside. He was being left behind. The bright line now glittered for Minori as it led her straight to the goal.

*I can’t lose—*Ryuuji threw gasoline on the flames of his own heart.

I definitely, absolutely can’t lose. I can’t lose—not to you.

Were both of your eyes actually open? Minori had asked Ryuuji.

They’d been open.

He’d seen the wrong thing.

“Damn...daaamn! Damn damn damn, daaamn it!”



He was the one who was mistaken. He doubted Minori. If he just thought about it, he would have known. That jerk who took Taiga out to eat every night. Hadn't Taiga gotten a pimple on her chin and gotten sick? That jerk who had made Ryuuji go out to get her because the road was closed. It was because he hadn't wanted to leave his car behind and take her home himself. That jerk who gave Taiga an unreasonable amount of money. He probably did that so she would never contact him about needing more. That jerk who never tried to have a homemade meal with her. That was because Taiga couldn't make anything, and he was too bothered to try. That jerk who even apologized for scrapping his promise by sending a message to Ryuuji. That jerk couldn't even apologize directly to Taiga. From the very beginning, that jerk tried to avoid anything that seemed like it could inconvenience him. *That jerk, that jerk, that jerk!* There had been so many hints!

That meant Ryuuji had overlooked everything. He had only been thinking of himself and hadn't seen even a single thing for what it was. He should have been cursing at himself. What a fool he'd been. What a stupid mutt. He hurt Taiga, doubted Minori, and now he was already so far behind he couldn't even reach out to touch Minori's back. If he lost here, he would truly finish as nothing but an idiotic jerk. He absolutely couldn't lose.

Minori, who was ahead of him, was the definition of determination. She steadily increased her speed as she plunged down the straightaway. Ryuuji could hear the heavy breathing of the others rising up behind him as they drew near.

"That girl's got amazing legs on her! Damn, she's a dark horse!"

"Isn't she the head of the girls' softball club?!"

"That one's fast, she must have been hiding so she wouldn't get trampled!"

Looking at Minori's back as she ran with an easy grace, Ryuuji and the others desperately pursued her. The goal was already right before his eyes; he was barely catching up with Minori because of his better stamina. The sound of approaching feet behind him drew ever closer. He could suddenly see someone's shadow slowly approaching from the side of the track. Then it happened when Ryuuji was thinking he definitely couldn't handle it, whatever it

was.

“Eeep?! Waaaaaaaah?! Eeeeeeeeeeeeeek?!”

Running alone at the front, Minori cried out. The mysterious person who approached had pulled up a hurdle they seemed to have been secretly pulling along with them. They put it right in the middle of the course in front of Minori’s eyes. Any member of the track and field club would have been able to jump over the obstacle, so they were likely the culprits. It happened in the blink of an eye, so Minori had to try jumping over the hurdle. She lost her balance. As she plunged into it, she kicked the hurdle down and tumbled right over. A dense cloud of dust rose. Of course, Ryuuji swerved to avoid the fallen Minori as he followed immediately after her.

“Aaah, watch ooout!”

He jumped to the side out of the course and fell right over, much to his chagrin. He fell face first and his cheeks felt hot as if they were burning. Minori didn’t even see him as she jumped up like a grasshopper. Ryuuji simply turned a somersault forward and continued to run without stopping. No matter how many times he fell, he would get up again just like *she* had—though he still regretted the time he lost. One person, two people, three people passed by, making Minori fall to fourth place with Ryuuji in fifth. Unable to think, Ryuuji sprinted single-mindedly with all his might. He couldn’t give up yet, he couldn’t stop running. But the finish line was right there, and the leader would burst through at any moment...

Is it too late?

“Kushieda-senpaaaaaaiiii! Take thiiiiiiiiiiiiis! ”

Right then, something white was flung out from among the audience. Minori reflexively stretched out her arm and caught it. It was a softball. As she ran, Minori looked at it, then looked at the people running in front of her, and then at the back of their heads.

“Goooooot iiiit!”

She took an abrupt step.

She planted both of her feet to the ground. She arched her back. She loaded

the spring in her body into her right arm, then she slung around a blazing fastball. The white ball that she threw underhand cut through the air like an arrow. Its trajectory briefly sunk and touched the lights of the course, then, using its spin, it went straight for its target.

“Ow!”

“Ouch!”

It was an absurdly accurate, perfectly calculated fastball. *WHACK!* First it made a sound as it struck the back of the leader’s head, then it shot out to hit the forehead of second place. The two of them suddenly collapsed to their knees at the force of the impact. *Who is she?!* Ryuuji thought as he turned towards her and it happened before his eyes.

“Nausicaa-kun, I beg of you, go on! Go on for Taiga!”

Who’s Nausicaa-kun? Her words were comedic, but her voice and eyes were serious. Minori’s eyes were piercing through him and only him. Then in the next moment, she made a sliding dive forward. She latched onto the legs of the guy in third place.

“If-I-die-we-die-together attaaack!”

“Whaaa?! You’ve got to be kidding meee!”

Screaming together, the two got tangled in each other and fell. Ryuuji understood her intentions. She was saying, *You go on ahead*. She meant, *You go on ahead of me*.

She was saying, *Get to Taiga before anyone else*.

“Kushieda...”

There was a loud cheer, as though the ground were rumbling.

Screams, complaints, commotion.

“Weeeeeeee maaaaaaaade iiiiiiiit!” There were the overjoyed people surging onto the athletic field.

Then it happened.

Still standing up, Taiga was watching that development.

The person who should have been running straight toward the finish line stopped, even though he almost fell when he did. He took several steps backward on the course. Then he went to the two-person heap and pulled the bottom person out—he pulled up the girl wearing the tracksuit.

They faced each other.

Without saying anything, they once again began to run.

Though neither of them initiated the action, they took each other's hands. Then, just barely beating out their pursuers, they dove through the finishing line together into first place.

Taiga slowly lowered herself back into the chair.

Her arms weren't shaking. Her legs also weren't shaking. She had her eyes fully open as she etched the faces of the two into her eyes. In the core of her heart, which had seemed close to being dashed to pieces, she had one thought. It was just a single phrase—*I'm fine*. Her mind had gone numb from the cheers and the applause.

"That's not fair, right?!"

"Which one won?!"

Here and there, the coarse arguments started to become rowdy. When everything was said and done, the massive cheers that seemed to give the crowd's blessing to what had happened were overwhelming. At the center of everything, Taiga's expression didn't indicate she had ever stood up. She quietly turned her eyes down once again. She continued to sit in the chair.

She continued sitting when they were placing the tiara on top of her hair.

She continued sitting as, side by side, they picked up the tiara together with their hands and anxiously peered into Taiga's face.

It's okay... she repeated, mentally. I have some pride, too. You don't have to worry that much. You saw me, didn't you? I can stand up, all by myself.

I can live by myself.

“We woon! We woon! We woon! I did it, I did it, I did it!”

In front of the huge crackling fire, the acting committee member—no, the director, Haruta continued to leap for joy. He must have been extremely happy. The class exhibition, Miss Festival, the Lucky Man—class 2-C had won them all. In the end, they had been victorious on all fronts.

To ride the high of excitement from the Lucky Man race, they just held the award ceremony on the athletic field. Haruta boastfully hoisted a gigantic certificate in his hands. The burning campfire at the center illuminated the many students who stayed until the very end of the one-day event’s festivities. The closing party had started. Countless sparks glittered and leapt into the indigo-dyed night sky.

Wearing her overcoat, Ami held a slightly beat-up trophy beside Haruta.

“Ahhh, I’m sooo happy! Stop it, you’ll make me cry...”

She wriggled as she donned her ironclad, goody-two-shoes mask. She even had her fake tears equipped. Each and every person surrounding her from 2-C was talking.

“Ami-chan, you did a great job~!”

“Ami-chan, don’t cry~!”

“I was so moved, too~!”

“Everyone was so great~!”

“And Haruta did so great, despite the fact he’s Haruta!”

There were even a few girls who were actually shedding a few tears. Right in the middle of that deeply emotional melting pot, Haruta nodded in triumph.

“You know, I was thinking. Don’t you think MVP would go to...Yuri-chan?”

“Huh?! ”

He pointed at the single woman (age 30) who was standing a slight distance away from the ring of students. The unmarried woman (age 30) jolted her shoulders. The students turned around all at once. Their eyes sparkled with radiant purity and spontaneous realization as they exchanged nods.

“Now that you mention it, it’s true...”

“Yuri-chan proposed the pro-wrestling show to us in the first place.”

“Everyone worked hard, but it was still definitely Yuri-chan who gave us the opportunity to work hard.”

“I agree. Yuri-chan is the MVP!”

“Yuri-chan, thank you!”

“Yuri-chan, what’s wrong?”

At the sudden shower of attention, the bachelorette (30) looked anguished as her legs wobbled. Her hair seemed desiccated in the light from the fire. She got on one knee, suddenly tired and rubbing her temples.

“Ngh, I-I just...sort of hate how petty I was being... I hate it, I hate being an adult...”

She couldn’t even look into her students’ eyes. One of them quietly took a step toward her and lent her a hand. It was Ami.

“Teacher, keep it together. Actually, I was just wondering, what’s with all the beige? The clothes, I mean.”

“I-It’s because I’m thirty...”

“No waaay~! That’s so funny!”

Tears flowed from the eyes of the spinster (age 30). All of her emotions flowed together into those tears until they were the most potent and strong tears there ever could have been. *It’s so funny that I’m thirty*, she thought, *it’s so funny, even to me*. She dropped her shoulders in dejection, and an intolerable shadow formed under her eyes.

“Teacher,” said Ami, “beige doesn’t really suit you. Your skin is a little translucent, so I think a bright pastel color would suit you much better. And you have a good figure, so you should bring out your body’s shape. It’s a weapon you know, a wea-pon. There aren’t any thirty year olds nowadays who dress that plainly. You’re single, so you have to be greedier about having your fun with love and fashion. ♥”

“K-Kawashima-san...”

“I saw you the other day. You had that killer purse at the garden party after school, right? It was new, right? It looked really great! I wish I had one...aaah?!”

The bachelorette (age 30) hugged the overcoat-wearing angel. *Thank you, thank you, thank you...* she (age 30) repeated over and over.

What a lovely scene. Deeply moved, the students of 2-C surrounding them gave them tremendous applause. Haruta embraced the single woman’s (age 30) shoulder, and nonchalantly embraced Ami’s shoulder as well.

“Yuri-chan-sensei, make sure you come to the after-party, too!”

“I-Is it okay if I go?! You wouldn’t be able to get up to any trouble, though?!”

“It’s good, it’s good, totally fine,” he said. “We were planning on going to a wholesome family restaurant right from the start.”

“Are you sure?! I’d make the average age skyrocket.”

“That’s completely fine.”

The fire flared two meters high beside the boisterous crowd, making their shadows dance across the ground. All the faces of those from other classes were lit up orange. They were enjoying themselves, looking completely tired, laughing, chatting, gazing at the fire, sitting around on the ground, and savoring the end of the eccentric cultural festival, each in their own way. There were a group of girls wearing uniforms from other schools and a mass of excited guys with them. Of course, there were other classes that had also gathered for their own activities. Though few, there were pairs of boys and girls sitting next to each other and creating a certain atmosphere. It was early, but the acting committee was under a tent, throwing a tearful celebration for their work. The student council was sitting in a line on the desks overlooking the cultural festival’s final event.

At last, it was over. The annual great celebration that occurred all in one day was over.

“You’re going to the closing party, right, Miss Cultural Festival?”

“Well, I guess if you went, there wouldn’t be dinner anyway. You may go,

Mister Lucky Man.”

“Ouch!”

At the edge of the ring surrounding the unmarried woman (age 30), Ryuuji yelped and jumped backwards. The princess was aggressively poking the prestigious wound he had gotten on his cheek.

“You got yourself hurt; how lame of you. How about I take you to the Miyake clinic tomorrow?”

“Miyake...isn’t that a vet?!”

Haaaaa ha ha, you figured it out. Taiga laughed devilishly with the beautiful Swarovski tiara perched on top of her head. The dress and the angel wings suited her well. No one could look at her and not find her charming. It seemed that a person’s personality and looks really were unrelated. Either that, or they had an inverse relationship.

Ryuuji stared at Taiga and hoped it said, *Who do you think I got this injury for?*

Taiga arrogantly scrutinized him and laughed with poison-laced lips.

That’s right, he thought, laugh. Though Taiga knew that her father, whom she’d waited for this whole time, had run away, and though she’d seen the message too, on this night Taiga’s laugh was even more provocative than usual.

The moment he had shown her the message she begged to see, she yelled “Hyaa!” ...As he panicked over the cellphone she’d pretended to vigorously throw somewhere, Taiga immediately quipped, “Just kidding,” and laughed. She looked down at the cellphone still properly clutched in her hands. With that, Taiga teased Ryuuji and laughed over how flustered he was. Her whole body was bathed by the fire’s brilliance, and even now, her mini-dress fluttered elegantly.

You didn’t even know how worried I was, Ryuuji tried to breathe out, but he couldn’t.

“Jeez...just how tough are you?” he said. “I was absolutely sure you would be in hysterics.”

“I didn’t care what that guy did from the start. It’s fine, really, it really doesn’t

matter. Nothing's changed. More importantly, how could you flirt with Minorin so boldly in front of my eyes when I was all alone? When did you make up with her?"

"Well, about that..."

I don't think that we've made up, he thought. Minorin was away from them, chatting with someone else. He glanced at her, averted his eyes, and scratched his head. Now that she mentioned it, in the middle of the mayhem, he felt like they might have held hands. *This hand*. The moment he tried to remember it, a shiver suddenly ran through his body. His cheeks started burning.

Right, he thought. *Didn't we hold hands?*

"Oh...oh..."

"What do you mean, 'Oh'? Do you have some weird hang up for the actress who plays that heart surgeon gal on *Grey's Anatomy*? You foolish jerk. Wipe that dim-witted grin off your face. Hurry up and apologize, you dumb, dawdling mutt! You promised, didn't you?!"

With Taiga prodding at his back, he couldn't get her with a counterattack. *Ow ow*, he groaned. Then, it happened as he tried to stagger away to escape her.

"Huh?"

"It's music."

A famous waltz began to stream out from the speakers. From the sound of it, it'd come off a slightly stretched cassette tape. As the rhythm ticked and the fire shone over the nighttime autumn sky, the carefree notes danced.

Come to think of it, Ryuuji thought, smiling slightly. When he did that, it pulled on the wound on his face, which smarted. Didn't the Lucky Man have the right to do *that*? Didn't he have the right to— "I'll go and apologize to Kushieda. But before that—"

Taiga's eyes were shining brightly. They burned and sparkled as they reflected the fire like burning gems. *It's not a gala but—*

He licked his lips, which were unable to say the unfamiliar words. Ryuuji

stretched out his hand towards Taiga. *Isn't it fine to do things like this every once in a while?*

“May I—”

But.

“Mi-no-riiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiin!”

Completely ignoring Ryuuji’s words, Taiga entirely interrupted him and called out to her close friend with the loudest voice she could muster. Her voice echoed like a howl. Minori turned around reflexively.

“What what what?! What’s wrong, what’s wrong?!”

Minori ran to Taiga. Minori stroked Taiga’s throat, rubbed Taiga’s forehead, and worked her way from Taiga’s hair to neck with such a force she seemed about to groom Taiga.

“Minorin Minorin Minoriin! I love love love love looove you!”

“Okay okay okay okay okay, I got it, I got it, I got it! Aaah, Taiga you’re so cuuute! The tiara really suits you! You’re a princess, the best in the world, you’re so cute, cute, cute!”

“I’m super happy because you put the tiara on me.”

“It wasn’t just me, Takasu-kun came in first place, too, didn’t he?”

“I don’t know about that. I didn’t see anything. I didn’t hear anything.”

As always, Taiga transformed into an animal. With all her strength, she clung to Minori, whose face was covered in bandages. She sniffed Minori’s neck, rubbed her face against her, and relaxed as though at ease.

What are you doing? Ryuuji could only laugh.

“Fwa ha ha,” said Minori, “I’m ticklish!”

Before he knew it, she was laughing, too. She looked into Ryuuji’s eyes. Noticing his gaze, she shrugged her shoulders a bit, but did so gently.

Taiga, who’d been relaxing, suddenly craned her neck. She struggled a bit and slipped out from Minori’s arms. She stood herself up imposingly and glared at the target of her scowl.

“Um, Kawashima-san. Would you dance with me?”

“No, no, dance with me.”

“I’ve always admired you. I fell completely in love with your queenly performance.”

As the waltz had started to play, boys had surrounded Ami. The boys were from every class and every grade. Even some guys from other schools joined in to shower her with passionate words of affection. The object of worship, Ami, knitted her eyebrows and seemed troubled as she slowly looked at the many hands presented to her. However, in actuality, she seemed to happily be appraising them.

“U-uhh...what should I dooo~?! This is too difficult, I’ve never done anything like this before~!”

She bashfully hemmed and hawed with her ironclad good-girl mask in place. The campfire was so piping hot no one could get near it, but the scene felt vaguely cold—especially to anyone who knew Ami’s true nature.

“If it’s that difficult for you, I’ll be your partner, Dimhuahua!”

“Huuh?!”

Taiga hopped on the scene like a sprightly cat. Then she clung to Ami and gnawed on her.

“N-no, wait, Aisaka-san! Get off, hey, that actually hurts...I said it hurts!”

“Come. Look, I said I’d dance with you!”

“That huuurts, you spoiled brat!”

Taiga continued to cling to Ami’s shoulders until Ami’s true dark nature came through. She shook Taiga off and chased her away...or so it seemed.

“HEAVE HO!”

“GAH!”

Taiga did a lariat takedown. It was exactly as though she were continuing on with the pro-wrestling show. As she took Ami down from behind and pinned her to the ground, the people surrounding them started shouting. “Count it,

count it!” “ONE! TWO!”

The cute dress and angel wings were meaningless when you stuck them on a ferocious tiger.

Ryuuji didn't know whether to stop them or leave them be. Just thinking about it was depressing. Ami would definitely be fine. She was pretty sturdy, after all. As Ryuuji watched in exasperation, someone lightly tapped his shoulder.

“Sorry about that, Takasu-kun.”

He realized Minori was standing right next to him.

The outline of her profile was tinged by the color of the flames. She watched Ami and Taiga, who were still fooling around with each other. Ryuuji hesitated for a bit, then lowered his head.

“I'm the one who should apologize. I was the one who didn't get it. I said some horrible things to you. Sorry. I'm really sorry.”

Minori's eyes went round as though she were surprised. She shook her head back and forth.

“That's not true! That's not true at all, Takasu-kun.”

She closed her eyes and murmured softly, as though she had to squeeze out her words.

“There were things I purposefully didn't tell you, Takasu-kun. I didn't tell you and then acted like I was better than you. I knew everything and still blamed you for it. There were things I should have explained that I didn't. That wasn't fair of me.”

She broke herself off at that point. The waltz continued to play, but no one was dancing. All the students were sitting on the ground, standing and facing each other, and shielding their eyes from the glaring fire. Annoyed and breathing heavily, Taiga had been left all alone after Ami had gotten away. A bespectacled boy was approaching her, unnoticed.

“Hey, Aisaka. I'm not the Lucky Man, but do you think I still have the right to ask you to dance?”

Taiga's eyes opened wide from shock. Right at that moment, an especially loud crackle came from the campfire. The fire shook. It shimmered on the surface of her misty, blinking eyes.

"Isn't it...the student council who makes those rules?"

Kitamura laughed a little. Without hesitation, he offered his hand straight to Taiga, who was moving stiffly and awkwardly.

"You're the one who gets to decide, Aisaka."

Taiga stared at his hand.

"Is it a yes or a no? Aisaka Taiga, would you dance with me?"

Ryuuji watched the situation from slightly far off. Taiga's face was illuminated by the fire so he couldn't see the color of her face. He still knew she must have definitely been turning bright red. He knew her heart must have been pounding so hard it would be audible.

Someone pointed at Taiga and Kitamura and yelled in surprise. *Glasses from the student council is asking out the Palmtop Tiger! Don't even think about it, that's reckless. Phew-ew!* Someone even whistled in amusement. However, Kitamura didn't flinch. He didn't move an inch as he simply kept his hand outstretched and waited for Taiga's answer.

"D-don't you...have to do stuff for the student council?"

"It's okay. I want to dance with a friend on a night like this."

A soft smile spread across Taiga's lips. Her large eyes quietly fixed on Kitamura's face. They wavered. They teared up. They shook. She closed her eyes and opened them again, no longer minding those surrounding her.

"Kitamura-kun," Taiga said her sweetheart's name. "Thank you. Thank you. Really."

At those words, Kitamura's eyes seemed to laugh behind his glasses. He narrowed his eyes slightly.

"Why are you thanking me? That's weird. You don't need to thank your friends."

“You think so?”

“Don’t you? Well, will you give me an answer?”

“Ha ha. How does dancing work?”

“You take each other’s hands, look into each other’s eyes, and spin until you’ve had enough. I think.”

Taiga laughed. Seeming embarrassed, she looked up at the sky. Then she put out her hand and took Kitamura’s. *Oh, look who’s getting close, it’s getting steamy*, someone recklessly jeered. It might have been because of the excitement from the cultural festival, but some people were going along with the mood and applauding.

She didn’t care about that.

She didn’t care as she smiled.

I’m fine by myself, she thought.

But thank you, thank you so much for asking me and offering your hand to me. She didn’t show anyone, even Kitamura, what she was saying in her heart as she elegantly swayed in her dress. They started dancing around and around.

“Just about a year ago, Taiga’s father came by,” Minori said.

Ryuuji stood beside the people watching the scene from around the fire.

“I knew that Taiga was living alone, so I was really happy about it. Like, ‘Taiga’s going to live with her dad, this is so great.’ ...But the day they were picking out a condo, he suddenly went off overseas for ‘work.’ Taiga waited at the meeting place for a long time, and in the end, the realtor was the one who told her. He said her dad never signed the contract. He also stopped the condo sale. It must have been fun to prepare for it, and like, to make the plans, right? Taiga was excited about it, too. But...he never actually intended to do it.”

“...I see.”

If he had asked, he would have understood.

He would have understood why Taiga never wanted to talk to her dad over the phone and why she kneed him in the crotch when he appeared. Ryuuji had

shaken Taiga's resolve. He had surprised her by carelessly showing her his own wounds. He didn't even listen to what Taiga had to say.

"So whenever that guy—"

Possibly taking into mind Ryuuji's sinking mood, Minori started calling Taiga's father "that guy." She said it roughly, as though she were trying to tell him, *It's not your fault, Ryuuji, it's that guy's fault.*

"Whenever that guy gets in a fight with his second wife, it seems like he's just like, I'll go live with Taiga! But, in the end, he makes up with her and Taiga is the one he casts aside. When that happened, I got mad and called that guy at his work. And do you know what he said? 'The relationship between a parent and child never disappears no matter what happens, but the relationship between a man and woman can. So the relationship you have to maintain is the one between the man and the woman.' He's the worst."

"Isn't he just using Taiga for his own thrills? That's..."

"Yeah. That's really what he's doing."

Minori faltered slightly. The pillar of fire that reached up into the night sky reflected in her eyes.

"So, that time...when we got into that argument, I should have just talked to you, Takasu-kun. But...but...I didn't want to tell you."

Something in her eyes looked lonely, but he knew it was probably best not to tell her that.

"Taiga didn't tell me anything. You were the only one who knew. When I thought about that... I don't know, it might have been because I was stubborn. It might have been because I didn't want to lose... It's like I didn't want to share what Taiga and I went through together with you... It was like I felt like I had an advantage over you. You didn't know the truth, and you were getting everything wrong. And it was like I definitely understood Taiga better than you. That's what it was like. I got it all wrong, didn't I? In the end, I just made Taiga sad again."

"But you weren't the one who made her sad. I wonder why Taiga didn't tell you about what was happening this time, in the first place?"

“It’s because if she told me, I’d get mad about her dad. I think she must have known that. In the end, even after what happened, Taiga didn’t want other people to think badly of her dad. So, since what happened a year ago, Taiga hasn’t told me anything about what’s happened with her home life.”

“...I see.”

The question he held on to for so long was finally answered.

Ryuuji always wondered why Minori hadn’t helped Taiga. Taiga was beyond repair when it came to household chores, but Minori was so good at everything.

So Taiga had been rejecting help from Minori.

If she’d given an SOS signal that she were in trouble, Minori would have hated Taiga’s father all the more for it. No matter how much she badmouthed her father, she didn’t want other people to do the same. She didn’t want others to hate him. That might have been true, and it was probably true even now. She might have wanted to put a lid on it and not say anything more than *I don’t care*.

Minori raised her hands slightly and shrugged her shoulders.

“Taiga’s precious to me. So, it’s really hard for me when there are things Taiga won’t tell me about... I get jealous, even when it’s you.”

A long waltz was going in the background, and he could hear a slight amount of self-hatred in her voice. How could he console her in a time like this? As Ryuuji stewed in his troubles, Minori said, “Maybe I’m a lesbian?”

“Uhh...”

As Minori raised her face, she looked strangely sincere. She suddenly looked into Ryuuji’s eyes. He didn’t know whether it was a joke or the truth. Her eyes simply glittered beautifully and softly.

Anyway, Ryuuji could only say one thing.

“I-I think it’d be nice...if you weren’t, though.”

Minori laughed for him, just a little.

“...Right,” was all she said.

Before he realized it, they were even closer than the time in the summer when they had been looking at the ocean. If Ryuuji stretched his arms, he probably could have fit Minori's shoulders right into them.

But, but—

"Oh. I'm talking like normal."

"Hm? What?"

Minori's words were always spontaneous and just a little ambiguous.

"It's fine, it's fine. I-I'm good. I'm good. I-I-I'm goo..."

Ack! Ack! Suddenly she started coughing. He tried to hit her back, but she bent back, as though she were suddenly in a panic at the indication of what he was doing. She leapt up to her feet as though she'd gotten an electric shock. She shook and twisted and finally, even though she hadn't been tickled, she unexpectedly yelled, "Eep!" Then she laughed out loud.

"Ahyaaaaaa hya hya hya hyaah!"

"That's not normal! You're not normal at all!"

While jumping in place, Minori started to laugh loudly to herself. He thought she would run, but she kept jumping, bumping her knees into Ryuuji. Just what could have been happening in Minori's head and soul?

"Someone tell me!" He wailed as though praying to the heavens. Several seconds later, it happened.

"Got it! I've captured a Takasu and Minori! Gotta catch 'em all!"

"What?!"

"Uwah!"

In the moments they were frozen in place, Ryuuji had been dropkicked into the dark. Suddenly, from behind him, Kitamura and Taiga, who should have been romantically dancing, appeared. The two of them violently shook Ryuuji and Minori, who were caught up right in their arms.

"Waaah, you scared me! What're you doing?!"

"Ha ha ha! It's the last event of the festival, everyone should be dancing!"

Kitamura and Taiga, who had loosened their grips, grabbed Ryuuji and Minori and forced them into a four-person ring. Kitamura pulled the ring and took them next to the fire, where many others could see them.

“Ahya hya, this is embarrassing! This isn’t dancing!”

Minori, however, was happily smiling as Ryuuji whispered something close to a curse into Taiga’s ear.

“B-b-but we finally had a good thing going between us! Why’d you bother us?!”

“I just came to make good memories. Actually, I finally, finally, fiiiiiiiiinally thought I’d be able to dance with just Kitamura-kun!” Taiga’s hand had a strong, terrifying grip over Ryuuji’s fingers.

“Ow ow ow ow...”

Ryuuji yelped in a low voice. *No, really.* He was just glad Taiga was happy. Look, even her fingers that were intertwined with his were overflowing with power... They were destroying Ryuuji’s fist with a grand strength that said, *I won’t let you be happy unless I am, too.*

“Owww...be reasonable! You’ll actually break them!”

“If your fingers break from something as small as this, they’d be better off broken from the start!”

They wouldn’t, he thought. On the other hand, Kitamura and Minori’s absurd excitement and energy were leaving the fierce pair completely in the dust.

“Okaay! I’m going to capture Ami!”

“Greeaat! Just you wait, Ahmin!”

With the eyes of hunters, they went to get their pitiful prey. Ami was completely unaware in front of the loud snapping and crackling campfire that was strong enough to burn up towards the sky.

“You really are beautiful, Kawashima-san.”

“Do you really not have a boyfriend? That couldn’t be true?”

“Everyone definitely must just think you’re out of their league.”

“Whaat~? No way, that’s not true at all~! I’m really not popular at all!”

“Again with that? You’re so oblivious.”

“There, there’s that obliviousness! But that’s the nice part about you.”

“No way?! Am I oblivious?! Nooo, why?! Seriously, I wonder why everyone says I’m oblivious?!”

I’m so pleased! her face practically screamed. She was happily spreading her charm around. She was with boys from another class. The boys she had lined up were all more or less handsome and looked five hundred times more intelligent than Haruta.

Kitamura, Minori, Ryuuji, and Taiga sneakily approached behind Ami. They were close to bringing up the ring they had made with their arms.

“I really have no idea. I wonder why everyone tells me that. It’s such a mystery why everyone tells me ‘Ami-chan, you’re so oblivious.’”

Oh ho ho! she laughed.

They got her right when she was in a good mood.

“Great! We caught Ahmin! Gotta catch ‘em all!”

“AHHHHH?! Wh-what is this?!”

The four of them had her securely captured. They ditched the surprised boys and pulled Ami in front of the fire where they had her surrounded.

“Hee hee hee, Ahmin,” said Minori, “weren’t you having so much fun just now?!”

“Did you forget about us?” said Kitamura. “Huh?”

“I was just caught like this, too...” said Ryuuji.

“What were you doing giving that weird laugh?!” said Taiga.

Ami didn’t know when to give up. She struggled and tried to escape from the four-person ring that tightened around her.

“No no nooo! I definitely don’t want this! On a nice night like this, I don’t want to be hanging around all of you!”

However, her struggle was futile, fruitless, completely and utterly in vain. Minori and Ryuuji firmly grabbed each of her hands and forcibly made her a part of the ring's structure. Even when she tried to crouch down, they pulled her back up.

"See, just give up! We're childhood friends, aren't we?!"

"Nooo~! This isn't a joke, you exhibitionist~!"

"Dimhuahua, you're the one who's an exhibitionist! Where in the world did you get that perverted getup for the Miss Festival pageant?!"

"Whaaat?! I did it so everyone would get excited for you! You're so ungrateful, you bratty tiger!"

"Whoa, beauties even have soft hands~!"

"Nooo~! Minori-chan's touching the parts between my fingers~!"

"Give up, give up! Be obedient and play with your friends!"

"Ahhh~! Takasu-kun, your hands are all sweaty~!"

"Ahh...that's just how they are!"

Like that, the five of them went around and around in front of the campfire. They laughed loudly, made a huge commotion, got angry, yelled, but they definitely were smiling. As they warmed themselves, the people around them laughed.

"They're like kids," someone remarked.

This night was special.



So, just for that night, anyone who had secret longings tabled them so that the emotions of that special night could always, always exist in perpetual motion. The moment would dance forever.

After that, they went to the after-party. They even followed through on their promise to bring Yuri along and didn't leave a single person in the class behind when they went to the family restaurant. Then, as they spun around and around, everyone formed a ring, and they were all in high spirits as they laughed loudly and talked to no end.

It was because they believed that if they laughed, despite the pain that ran through them, they would definitely—probably—actually—eventually—be fine as long as they got through that difficult night.

Afterword The bank gave me a shiatsu pressure point stick. Now, there are a lot of pressure point sticks in the world, but this stick is particularly well made, and I just can't seem to put it down. Whenever I'm conscious, I savagely grind it into my neck like clockwork. It just feels so great, I can't stop. Calling it this might be extreme, but I put this stick on the same level as an addiction, so I call it my "drug stick." While I'm out and about, I have withdrawal symptoms, and when I start using my drug stick, the eyes of the world seem to judge me. When I was young, I was normal, and I was so sad that no one would pay attention to me, but now I'm in the pits of sorrow that people look at me with such strange eyes... I'm Yuyuko (fatty nine...I mean twenty nine). Even though the rainy season has come and gone, I kept sleeping under my winter down blankets and sweated out a little weight.

Now then, to all of you who picked up *Toradora! Vol. 5*, I am so grateful that you went along with it! We got to the fifth novel before I even realized it, and we did it because you supported me. Did you perhaps enjoy yourself a little? Have I possibly repaid you? In order to pay you back for the joy and gratefulness I feel for you allowing me to write this book, I'll enthusiastically devote everything I've got to the romcom road (and forget to change my bedding in the process)! A sense of the changing seasons?! I don't need that in my life! Next up, I intend to deliver *Toradora! Vol. 6* to you before the year ends, if I can. If you would be so kind, I beg of you to lend me your power for the next volume! I'm counting on you!

And now, I'd like to report on the current situation... I've bought several potted plants. I buy them and pot them and buy them and pot them and they just keep withering away.

I read *Botanical Life* (Shinchosha) by Itou Seikou, which is made up of essays

written about growing plants on a veranda. It had an effect on me. I thought I'd make taking care of potted plants my hobby, too, and immediately went out to buy all kinds of things. They just keep withering and withering. They wither no sooner than I buy them. The moment I step into the main entrance of my house, they start dying, and it seems there's no stopping that process. Before I knew it, the cute mini roses I bought that were looking perky and healthy at the flower shop were hopelessly black. Anything that could be considered a flower starts turning the same color as a blackberry starting from the edge of its petals as it rots. The petals turn up and they just collapse in on themselves until they're ruined. I didn't want any of that. I was giving them a moderate amount of water, too. What happened? Just what did I do? Now the diseased plants all over my room are emanating this overwhelming aura of death, and the atmosphere in my condo is super depressing. It's all just negative. I wonder what it is... I don't like it... I was thinking the plants would share their life force with me, so I could live my life more energetically, too.

Well then, to everyone who has stayed with me right until the end, I am truly thankful for you! And Manager-sama, Yasu-sensei, please somehow don't succumb to the negative presence that follows me!

—Yuyuko Takemiya



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