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STORY YUYUKO TAKEMIYA ART YASU

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ART YASU

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VOLUME 10

story **Yuyuko Takemiya**

illustrations **Yasu**



TORADORA!



2-C ALL STARS+1



Toradora!

10

BY
Yuyuko Takemiya

ILLUSTRATED BY
Yasu



Seven Seas Entertainment

TORADORA! Vol. 10

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ToC

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PRELUDE



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CHAPTER



CHAPTER



CHAPTER



CHAPTER



Prelude

“Huh? Oh, it’s just you. Mom’s still... Huh? A message? How should I know? Why don’t you just tell her yourself?”

“Useless.” She heard him click his tongue at her.

“What did you say?” Minori pulled down hard on the string of her parka, making the hood pucker up.

“Bernie!” said the voice on the other end of the phone. The hip method of communication shared by the older-sister-and-younger-brother duo came back to her. *Say it ain’t so, Bernie!* When he urgently yelled those words in the past, it had always made her laugh, but now...

“If you need something, you could just call Mom’s cell,” she told him.

“I tried, but I couldn’t get through!” The disgruntled tone of her brother’s voice only made her feel like retorting more sharply. She frowned, even though he couldn’t see it over the phone.

“I’m cold over here, you dolt! I had to come all the way out to the hall just to talk on the phone with the likes of you! You’re a nuisance!”

“Then use a cordless!”

“A core-des?!”

“You don’t know what a cordless phone is?!”

“I don’t know where it went!”

It actually was cold. She had pulled off her socks while under the heated table, and now she was barefoot. In addition, the phone was set up near the entryway, in a wood-floored hallway that felt below freezing. Even though she was indoors, her breath was terrifyingly white.

“Then how should I know, ugly?!” the voice on the other end of the phone wailed back at her. *“You idiot,”* her little brother added as she wrapped the string of her parka tighter around her freezing hand. The hood along her back

crumpled into even more of a mess.

“Next time you come home, I’m actually going to kill y—oh. I think that’s Mom?”

The jingle of keys echoed loudly from the entrance, and her mother came in, wearing a coat and carrying a shopping bag in one hand. Minori thrust out the phone and just said, “It’s Midori.” When it finally registered for Minori’s mother that her son was calling from the dorms, her excited voice filled the room —“Hello, hello?!”

“Seriously,” Minori said, “you’re so loud...”

As she brought the bags over to the kitchen, she noticed the droplets shining on her mother’s coat. For a moment, she mistook them for rain.

“Huh? No way.”

Still barefoot, Minori headed to the entrance. She slipped on her loafers and opened the cold steel door, then ran into the outside hallway of the condo. The cold air that permeated her lungs came as a shock.

At some point, snow had started to descend on the town she now watched from the fourth floor. She forgot the cold in spite of herself and leaned out toward the white flakes fluttering down like countless small feathers from the night sky. She’d said she hated snow during the school trip, but it was special when it fell in her own town.

“Wow! It’s beautiful.” Minori thought about going back to her room to text her friends. *We got snow, did you notice? It’s so pretty. Hey, take a look outside. What are you doing right now?*

“A white Valentine’s Day...but we already have a White Day in Japan. What else would it be called?”

In the end, she stayed where she was and concentrated on the fluttering and dancing flakes in the sky. She formed right angles with her thumbs and pointer fingers, making a rectangle to look through, like she was taking a picture.

It was the sacred evening of Valentine’s Day. The snow might have been a gift from heaven. A pure white curtain sent for a brief period to insulate people

who weren't honest with themselves from everyday life.

In that case, come down, she thought as she stretched her hands farther into the freezing night sky. *I'll close my mouth and my eyes. I won't send out those texts. I'll just be here.* She spread her fingers to catch the snow in her palm. She could see the small flakes, faint and fleeting. As they touched down, it felt as though the warmth of her hand, the vivid emotions amassing within her in the moment, and the memory of the words she'd exchanged were all evaporating along with her body heat into the sky.

There, they'd turn into droplets of water and eventually freeze in the clouds to once again come down on the world. Her heat would become glittering diamond dust and fall on everyone's heads without so much as a sound, and—

"Hey, missy! Miso or soy sauce pork belly—what do you want?!" Her mom, who had poked her head out from the front door, held a rustling package of frozen ramen in her hand.

"You ruined it, Mooom!" Minori groaned, holding her head sorrowfully.

Seriously, this is why, this is why. She raked her fingers through her bangs and looked back up at the night sky from which the snow fell.

This might just be how it is. This might just be the way things go, even after everything, on a night like this. She twisted her fingers around the strings of her parka, which was pulled as taut as possible, and released a long white sigh into the night sky. The falling snow and her breath could become part of the curtain coming down on the world. It could become the protective white barrier sheltering the two people who were probably meeting somewhere out there right now, like the shell of an egg.

She was sure that if they were together, protected from the eyes of others, they could come clean to each other in their private moment.

Hey, universe! Minori thought as she breathed in a lungful of the freezing air. As though trying to draw people's attention, she spread her arms with the grandeur of an actress performing on stage.

"What kind of mother feeds her daughter, who works at a ramen shop, more rameeeeen?!"

“You...just stop...”

Ha ha ha ha, Minori laughed. This time, she actually went back inside. Light leaked from the front door.

She didn’t see the black sports car on the bridge crossing the river, racing smoothly past several cars like it had a life of its own.

Every dark-colored car that passed them looked like her mother’s Porsche to Taiga.

They were on a corner of the sidewalk at a crossing, hiding in the shadow of a closed salon’s sign and waiting with bated breath for the light to change. She thought it might never change as the intense, red light illuminated the snow that danced down from the sky like falling ash.

It’s cold, she wanted to say.

I wonder if the snow will stick, she wanted to say.

“...”

Ryuuji, she tried to say, but her voice froze at the back of her throat. Unable to make a sound, she blew away the snow that had come to rest on her bangs, which touched the tip of her nose.

Ryuuji, where are we going? What will we do? What will happen to us now? If she couldn’t say those things, she might as well keep silent.

A large truck turned too fast into the crossing in front of her, and its cargo creaked as it went. The shrill, grating sound echoed down the deserted nighttime residential road. It sounded full of deliberate menace. Taiga felt scared despite herself and shifted her weight on her booted feet. The chill from the freezing asphalt permeated through her toes and into her bones.

Her right hand was in the safekeeping of Ryuuji’s left the whole time. Ryuuji remained silent, but his fingers shivered. His grip firmed and loosened several times, but he never seemed to be able to stop from shaking.

She looked up at the side of his face from where she stood next to him. His blurred outline seemed as though it were incredibly high up, but she felt like if

she stretched her arms out, she might be able to reach him without even standing on the tips of her toes. He looked as though he was glaring at the red light with his intensely scowling eyes, but she was sure his face would be warm and his chin would be soft. A single snowflake fell onto the edge of his color-robbled upper lip, melting and disappearing instantly.

Touching him would mean the end. Taiga averted her eyes.

A desire so intense it frightened her soaked into her through their connected hands. She wanted to grip it harder, to pull it in, to tear into it with nails like claws. She wanted to cling to it and drive her fangs into it. She wanted to satiate her hunger and quench her thirst. Then, as she bit in, she wanted to scream the contents of her heart.

She wanted to drive away the emotions which she still didn't fully understand. She wanted to confront the ebbing and flowing feelings that had always been within her. And yet, she couldn't even say his name as she hid in the shadow of the salon's sign. A haircut was four thousand five hundred yen. For long hair, it was an extra thousand yen. A blowout was two thousand five hundred yen. She stared at the lettering until she'd almost memorized it. The light still didn't change.

If her best friend, who'd given her shivering, cowering back a push, could see them now—

“Uh...”

—how disappointed would that friend be?

When Taiga turned her face down, her nose started to run. She sniffled and rubbed at her nose with the back of her hand. Ryuuji might have mistaken that sniffle for the unbearable sound of her crying, because the hand that had so firmly held hers suddenly let go.

“Ah?!”

“Don't raise your voice. We'll bother the people nearby. Plus, we're runaways,” he said, scolding her for the yelp she let out without thinking. He hadn't spoken in a while, either, and might not have had full control over the volume of his awkward words, because they came out loud, carrying further

than expected.

But Ryuuji ignored that and quietly took off the cashmere scarf he'd been wearing under his down coat.

"Whaat... You can't be serious."

"It's fine," he said. "Just take it."

He gently wrapped it around her neck—well, not exactly around her neck. She already had her own scarf under her coat. Ryuuji put his scarf around her head in order to protect her from the snow. He even tied a neat knot right under her chin.

"I look like a loach collector..."

Ryuuji looked at her like he were the great king Enma, passing judgment on whether a departed soul would go to hell. "You don't collect loaches, you catch them," he murmured slowly, considering his words carefully. Snowflakes gathered again on the tip of his nose. His white breath quavered.

"I could have at least said something. Done my due diligence..." he continued, letting his cryptic words trickle out as though he were talking to himself.

"What about?"

"To Kitamura. I should have told him we were keeping our jobs secret from our parents."

Unable to meet his eyes, Taiga curled her lonesome right hand, which no longer had a place to go, into a fist. She opened it again. Would he hold it again for her? *But-but-but—*

The light still wouldn't change.

Regardless, it must be stated that arriving at a conclusion would be too premature. Period.

However, it is a fact that many have insistently objected to such. Period.

Irrespective of that, a conclusion has yet to be reached at this time—

"Unable to join the consensus" sounded kind of shaky. Maybe he should try to

be more direct? *“Conclusions cannot be drawn at this time.”* Period. Okay, that sounded about right.

After carefully collecting the sheaf of papers that made up the report, Kitamura took a proper count of the pages again. He had three people’s worth of reports, with ten pages to each. Now he just had to put the cover sheets on, staple them together, and he would be done. That would be two thousand yen times three, or six thousand yen in total. He had been careful to vary the handwriting and used a 2B pencil, an HB 0.3 millimeter mechanical pencil, and a thick, blue ballpoint pen to write each of them, so they probably wouldn’t be arousing suspicions any time soon.

He pulled off the glasses digging into the bridge of his nose and rubbed his temples. When he put an effort into stretching his back, it made a loud cracking sound. He rotated his shoulders and neck, then groaned, “Ngaaaah.” He was painfully aware he sounded like an old geezer.

Kitamura turned off the fluorescent lamp on the desk he had been using since elementary school and piled the three reports to the side, trying to make sure he didn’t get them dirty. Even if he only had to make it seem like they did their readings, it was pretty difficult to come up with three people’s papers from one thesis. It wasn’t mentally tiring so much as a strain on his eyes and arm.

According to his older brother, it had apparently become less acceptable to use a word processor recently (though he was fuzzy on how many college students were actually using word processors in his brother’s generation.) Because there were more students simply turning in articles they had found on the internet, or that they copied and pasted from scanned material, some papers were assigned with the condition that they had to be handwritten. Kitamura, then in his second year of high school, had seen this as a business opportunity to him. Of course, when the subject material was a little too specialized, it went right over his head, but when it came to general topics, he was a mass-producing machine.

He had listed the “bookings” his older brother had acquired for him on the corkboard next to his desk. Kitamura put his glasses back on and looked at them. His older brother was well connected within the large, wide-reaching social circles of famous private colleges. This was the time of year when they

did the best business; they had so many bookings that they could afford to charge five thousand yen per person. He had decided to take a break from softball club anyway, so he had time to spare.

“One thousand, five hundred, one thousand...that’s two—two thousand, so uhhh, up to now that’s twenty-eight thousand...”

He ticked them off on his fingers as he counted, but he was still far, far short of his goal. Kitamura pursed his lips. He still had to worry about fuel surcharges. Plus, his cheapskate brother would take a ten percent cut.

“Ten percent’s a lot. Damn, I need to fix that... What was that?”

He lifted his head at the loud sound of exhaust coming from outside his window. He remained seated in his cramped chair as he stretched out his arm to open the curtain.

“Whoa!”

He was surprised to see snow coming down. The countless flakes fell ceaselessly in the light of the streetlamps.

“Whoa...!” Kitamura exclaimed again without thinking. A pair of distinctive headlights crawled towards him from within the snow—the echoing sound of the engine was coming from a Porsche. Sports cars were rare in this suburb.

Shivering from the cold, he closed the curtains. He stood up to turn on the heat, and through the old heater’s groaning, noticed the engine suddenly go quiet. He heard a loud sound after it—probably the car door.

Maybe they were coming to his house? He didn’t know anyone who had a car like that, but—*ding dong*. He heard the doorbell, the sound of his mother’s footsteps, and then her formal, “Yes?” through the intercom.

He heard them talking about something for a while and, eventually, the footsteps coming up the stairs. There was a knock on the door, and his mother peeked her face in. She looked in with an indescribable, delicate expression.

“Could you come down for a bit?” Her tone was still half-formal—an ominous sign. He steeled himself.

“Me? What? Who is it?”

“She says she’s Aisaka-san’s mother. From your class—look, it’s that girl you went with as a group to Kawashima-san’s villa, right? It seems like... Well, she said she’s looking for her. She disappeared.”

Aisaka Taiga had disappeared—right when Takasu Ryuuji also went missing.

This is bad, he thought reflexively. The light bulb in his head lit instantly, and the pieces of the imaginary puzzle came together. It had been that phone call. Something must have happened since it had come.

Hey, Kitamura-kun, I can’t find Ryu-chan anywhere, but do you know where he is? Ryuuji’s mother had asked him. Kitamura had been stupidly honest and answered her.

He knew something special was likely to happen between Aisaka Taiga and Takasu Ryuuji on that day. He wanted it to happen, which was why he wasn’t worried to hear they didn’t get home at the time they normally did, that was good. He unconsciously thought of Takasu Yasuko as parent and guardian to both Ryuuji and Taiga, and so he hadn’t lied about where they were.

Aisaka Taiga said her parents were divorced and she was living alone. So why was it that her mother was in town and coming to his house with such timing? If she was looking for Aisaka, then wasn’t the house she should have been paying a visit to Kushieda’s or Takasu’s—or maybe the phone call from earlier hadn’t been made *just* to find his best friend? Were they together? Had they disappeared somewhere together? Were they being searched for because they had disappeared? Had they disappeared because they were being searched for?

“I wonder what happened... You know anything about it?”

Instead of answering his mother’s lowered voice, Kitamura left his room. He was lost in thought as he went down the stairs.

Chapter 1

Of course, they didn't have a plan.

Like someone who hated spiders but rushed headfirst right into a nest of them without realizing it, like someone who hated snakes but stepped on one, like a murderer bumping into a detective, Ryuuji had flipped directions and simply made a break for it. If he really were facing a spider or a snake or a detective, he might have actually been able to go into fight rather than flight, but the one standing in his way had been his own mother. He couldn't bludgeon her with a club (not that he had a club, anyway)—no, his words had already hurt her much more than a blunt weapon could. His mother—Yasuko—had turned white as a sheet and sat down.

But he still ran without looking back. *He* did that.

"Ahh!"

"Whoa?! Careful!"

He promptly gripped Taiga's hand as she lost her balance. Taiga's wide-open eyes emitted an intense light for a second. He heaved up the hand he held, and Taiga somehow regained her footing in the melting snow on the road. He wouldn't let go of her hand again.

Still umbrella-less, the two of them stumbled forward as they earnestly fled through the night snow. Taiga was just as frantic, he was sure. Their breaths were desperate and white as they focused on running. For the time being, all they could do was escape from that place.

Yasuko's selfish parental desires made Ryuuji feel like his existence was meaningless if he didn't do as his mother wished. Taiga's mother was also an obstacle; she'd tried to separate Taiga from Ryuuji. They were all enemies to him, so in place of beating them with a club, he beat them with words, and then turned around and ran. It was all he could do.

Taiga was by his side.

He gripped Taiga's hand again. He did it firmly, not even trying to hide his

sweaty palms.

The moment he had tried to run, his hand had sought only one thing and only one thing had sought his hand—Taiga's. That was all. He'd thought to run away with Taiga, and Taiga had thought the same.

Their mothers were probably following after them in the car. That was why, for the time being, they chose to dive into narrow roads that cars couldn't enter, running through residential back streets. They wandered aimlessly, and then—

"We're crossing the bridge. Careful of the cars."

"You mean the large bridge..."

"Let's cross it and get on a bus in the town over. If we stick around here, we'll get caught. If we take a train, we'll probably be tracked down right away."

All he wanted was to ask Taiga about her feelings and tell her about his complex and overflowing emotions. That would have been enough for him. He wanted to hear from Taiga's mouth, in her own words, how she actually felt about him. He wanted to tell Taiga how he felt about her. He wanted to ask her about it. He wanted to tell her about it. That was it.

He was sure that if he just did that, the world would take on new colors, like it was shedding its skin, and something new would begin. Ryuuji was sure he felt his heart beat like it were about to leap out of him.

So why had things ended up like this?

When he breathed in the sub-zero air, the very cells in his lungs hurt. Beyond the snow that fluttered down ceaselessly from the sky, two rows of streetlamps shone on the promenade of the bridge, the outlines of light blurring around them. The bridge straddled the flowing river, which looked black in the night, and led to the next town over.

Moving across the promenade, which was hidden by dead grass, Ryuuji pulled on Taiga's hand. They crossed the two-lane roadway, keeping an eye out. Obscured by the sound of a small truck engine heading the same way, they slipped onto the large concrete bridge.

But...

“Oh, we need money!”

In order to ride the bus, they needed money. They thought of that simple concept a third of the way across the bridge.

“Oh crap, you’re right. We don’t have any money!” Ryuuji said.

He scowled. *Ouch*. This failure stung after getting this far. He only had change in his wallet, he hadn’t brought along the family cash card, and to make matters worse, he had thrown the envelope with his pay from Alps at Yasuko’s feet.

“It’s okay! I’m pretty sure I have a lot!” Taiga pulled her sequined cat-face wallet from her coat pocket as she ran. She took back the hand that had been holding his and opened the fastener with her seemingly numb fingers. “See, I have one ten thousand yen bill, two...”

“I can’t believe you’re doing that here. That seems kind of risky, you’re going to trip.”

“But I need to check! You’re worried too, aren’t you? I also have a thousand yen bill, two, three, four...but I don’t have any change.” She started to count the bills she had clumsily pulled out. “Oh, there’s something rustling in my pocket. Maybe it’s another bill? ...Ugh, what is this?”

Just a receipt, she pouted. In that moment, a gust of wind laced with snow made the surface of the river warble and assaulted them on the middle of the bridge by blowing right through them.

It took just a moment for the twenty-four thousand yen she had pulled out of her open wallet to be swept away.

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

They couldn’t even make a sound.

The bills surfed on the strong wind, dancing as they blew higher and higher. They flew to the right and left, as if mocking them.

“Ah, ah, ah.”

“Oh, oh, oh.”

Taiga and Ryuuji stretched out their hands and hopped up and down as they tried to catch the bills fluttering through the sky. The wind seemed to ridicule the two idiots giving chase as it whirled through the bridge, changing directions.

“Ah, ah, ah, ahhh...!”

“Oh, oh, oh, ohohoh!”

Following the wind, they crossed the carless street in three bounds and practically leapt at the guardrail. They clung to the rail side by side.

The opportunity to nearly touch the bills immediately in front of their outstretched hands was expressly robbed from them as the twenty-four thousand yen fluttered and flitted—onto the dark surface of the river.

Their hands cut through the light snow in the air and stretched down futilely. As they turned their gazes downward, they realized they were already out of ideas. Cry or shout as they might, the flow of the river continued endlessly, and was steadfast and merciless on top of everything else.

They looked at each other at the same time.

“...”

“AHHHHHHhhhhhHHHHHHHHhhhhh!”

“...”

“Why youuuuuu?! How dare you act all calm, like you’ve reached enlightenment or something?! What are you going to do?!”

“...”

It wasn’t that Ryuuji had attained enlightenment—he was just dumbstruck. *This must be what it means to be struck dumb*, he thought. He couldn’t make a single sound as, holding onto the guardrail, Taiga screamed at him.

What is this?

Guess it’s that.

My so-called divine punishment—what people call karma.

Watching the flowing river that seemed to swallow up the falling snow, Ryuuji was unable to so much as move a finger.

Flat out telling his mother “That was a mistake,” after she sacrificed her own life to give birth to him and raise him must have been that heavy of a sin. It was the truth—he really should have never been born—but even daring to say it out loud had led to this sad state of affairs. Did this mean he’d never have a decent life if he didn’t resign himself to his fate? Was that it for him? He couldn’t even ride a bus?

Is it that terrible a sin?

“What are we going to do?! What do we do...?!” Taiga held her head in both her hands. She ended up putting her face down on the guardrail, looking as though she were about to doze off in class.

Standing like that next to each other, they fell into silence.

Next to Ryuuji, who still couldn’t move, the shoulders of the white angora coat froze as though Taiga was holding her breath. The snow came down and down. On those shoulders. On the cashmere scarf covering her head that Ryuuji had wrapped around her earlier. On the wavy hair that flowed down her back. On the shoulders of Ryuuji’s down jacket, his back, and his cheeks...

...on the bridge that continued from the promenade of the riverside...

...at 8 PM on Valentine’s Day.

A layer of thin, faint ice started to build up on the ground like sherbet. They had stopped walking entirely.

They turned their eyes beyond the bridge. It was an ordinary residential area. The bright lights of the houses and condos blurred with their white breath. Separated by the soundless snow that fell ceaselessly, the other end of the bridge felt like an incredibly distant universe to them.

If they didn’t have money, they couldn’t ride the bus. They couldn’t ride the trains, either. They couldn’t go anywhere. Maybe it was because of how cold they were, but they couldn’t stop shivering. All the time they spent standing there petrified had made their joints freeze up, and a Porsche might still be following after them. They couldn’t stay standing there.

They belonged nowhere in the world.

Ryuuji looked at Taiga's small, rounded back. He thought about what Taiga could have been thinking in that moment. Was she anxious, despairing, remorseful? She had to at least be cursing her clumsiness. She was gripping her head, which was protected by Ryuuji's scarf, hard enough to make her thin fingers shake. She probably actually wanted to pull at her hair until it was a tangled mess.

"What are we going to do, Ryuuji?"

Still unable to respond, he stood paralyzed in the snow. *What do you want to do?* He couldn't just ask her that. He couldn't ask her that, because it could imply Taiga was to blame. It would be like saying he wasn't in the wrong because he just did what she wanted. He would be the guy who blamed their running away on the girl—no.

But also, it was because part of him was scared of asking, "Taiga, what do you want?"

Taiga had taken his hand in order to run away with him. And she actually did run away with him. That was enough to convince him that she wanted to be with him too, but...

He was afraid.

He knew why he did it. When Taiga's mother appeared and said she would be taking Taiga, he couldn't have done anything except run away. He just couldn't live in a place without Taiga. Even if someone asked him why, all of his answers would only come retroactively. When he had decided to run and abandon the home he shared with his mother, his hand had grabbed Taiga's.

But he didn't know why *Taiga* had run with him. And the reason why he was scared and couldn't ask her and wanted to avert his eyes was that...

"Taiga."

His gut told him there was a deep, red, gaping wound right there.

He hoped he wasn't right but knew he probably was.

"Let's walk, anyway... There's nothing we can do just standing here like this."

He squeezed out his voice and once again touched Taiga's fingertips. He took her delicate fingers and grasped them in his hand.

Taiga swayed like a pendulum. "If we walk, how far will we even get...?" She swung back to where she had been. His gut feelings were inching closer towards reality.

He felt like the outline of what she was about to tell him was being etched out clearly, little by little, just by the way her body swayed and through the earnest echo at the end of her words. It was why Taiga abandoned her place, why Taiga was forced to abandon her condo next to the Takasu's house, why Taiga couldn't accept the place she belonged with her spontaneously appearing mother—and, whether all of it happened for the same reason, why Taiga's mother was trying to separate them.

His gut was right.

Ryuuji was so scared of the wound, he shook.

Taiga slowly raised her face. She still held his hand. "We...don't have money anymore."

She looked into Ryuuji's eyes.

"We don't. We really don't."

"I know... Didn't you just throw it all away?"

"So, about that. Look. Well..." She gently let go of his hand. She pushed up the hair that touched her cheeks and then thrust her hand into her pocket. "There's something that I need to tell you."

The scene he feared might be about to begin. Ryuuji almost instinctually tried to avert his eyes from Taiga's. He was scared of Taiga's eyes, blotted with darkness, turning towards him.

"We really don't have a single cent. What was in my wallet was really the last of it. Even my account is empty. I haven't had a deposit this year. I had a lot saved up, but then money started to slowly get withdrawn from it. First one hundred thousand, then two hundred thousand, and after that happened a couple of times, it's mostly—"

“Uh.” Ryuuji felt as though white flames were blowing from his eyes, ears, and nose.

So that was why.

Of course.

Of course, of course, of course that's what caused it! His shivering grew more intense, until he felt like he was about to explode.

“What! Does! That old man! Think he’s doing?!” The shout spilled from him like vomit, like he’d drunk poison that made him sick. It splattered around foully, probably tainting Taiga too, but the hate rising in his throat was too much to hold it back.

Would he try to get involved with her again? Would he make her suffer again? Would he hurt Taiga in the same way he did before? Well, if he did, then Ryuuji wished he’d just die already. *Just die already!*

Taiga turned her face down slightly. “He hasn’t contacted me,” she said faintly. “Apparently, he lost, after all this time. He’s been getting sued for a while now.”

The bangs that spilled over the tip of her nose quivered as snow fluttered down and clung to them.

“So, my dad ran away with Yuu. It was all because he had to pay a huge amount of money. Apparently, it’s the kind of thing he has to pay no matter what. It won’t go away even if he declares bankruptcy. He doesn’t have a company or a house, and the car and everything else is all gone, too. The condo isn’t ours anymore, either. I’m squatting in it illegally.”

On the thick, white earth were eyes like marbles, a nose like dried leaves, and a mouth like the branch of a tree. Inside the ellipse drawn in crayon were round eyes, a triangular nose, and a square mouth. The face was bloodless and without warmth.

That was Taiga’s face.

“My dad ran away. What’s going to happen? Will he eventually get arrested? I have no idea. In the end, I didn’t even know what kind of job he had or what

kind of work he did this whole time...and I didn't think that was weird. I didn't even know things had ended up like this. Until my mom came by during that school trip, I had no idea. I didn't even know my mom had ended up like *that*."

Why didn't you tell me anything? He didn't recognize the voice asking that question as his own. The voice felt like an echoing siren in the far reaches of another dimension.

"I'm sorry. I couldn't tell you. I'm really sorry."

What had she been planning on doing, then?

Her words slurred as she grew flustered, like she was saying it in a dream.

"My mom said that she would take custody of me, so I told her to buy the condo, then. That I would live there, and she could just deposit money in my account like my dad. I said that if she couldn't do that, then she should just leave me alone. Even though I'm a klutz, I would find a job, and I would do anything to make a living. But it didn't work. She said it was impossible for her... It was like my mom wanted to completely cut ties with my dad. She said that 'her own daughter' couldn't also be 'Aisaka Rikurou's daughter.' She said that she would take me away. She said she would take me somewhere where no one could follow. I kind of feel like I should have been grateful for Yuu—"

Ryuuji thought about Taiga's face until that day. She had been trying to pass it off by lying the whole time, but those empty eyes peered into true despair at times. He thought of her voice when she yelled in the lecture room—of the feelings that she should have been able to convey...

The feelings she wanted to convey.

"—Ryuuji."

Defeated by all of it, Ryuuji broke. He covered his face and crouched at Taiga's feet. He tried desperately to swallow the sob that overflowed from behind his hands by holding his breath. Crying wouldn't help anything.

There was nothing he could do.

"Ha ha ha..."

He heard Taiga's voice.

He felt something fluffy and warm be put on his head. It was the scarf he'd lent to Taiga, warmed by her body heat.

"I'm weird, aren't I?" Taiga stooped down to wrap him with the scarf, and with herself. She wrapped her arms around him, and her whisper quivered at the back of Ryuuji's head. Her long hair, which pushed into his nose, was cold. The faint snow fell on top of them, on the surface of the flowing water, on the town. "Things like this just always seem to happen to me..."

Protected by the scarf and Taiga's heat, tears wet Ryuuji's cheeks. *If you're weird, then I've got to be weird, too.* He couldn't form that into sound. *If the unbreakable Aisaka Taiga is weird, then, I, Takasu Ryuuji, have got to be weird, too.* He couldn't get the words to come out. The maddening sob just burned at the back of his throat, and he couldn't even scream. He had no place where he belonged. He had no place to go. He didn't even have a place to go home to.

Ryuuji desperately got up and stretched out both his arms. No matter where he tried to be, no matter where this place was, he would never change, and he wanted to make sure Taiga knew that. With every ounce of strength he had, he hugged Taiga back.

"Why are you...still staying by my side?" she said.

You idiot! Instead of shouting, he raised his face. He buried his chin in the top of Taiga's hair and looked up to the heavens the snow fell from. His wet cheeks immediately chilled and froze.

"You don't know?! You really don't know?!"

The night sky was starless, and he couldn't even find a constellation to guide him. He didn't even know where he was. He just knew that here, in his arms, he had Taiga. He was wherever Taiga was.

That was the only thing that was certain.

"Where else am I supposed to be except for here?!"

Huh? He blinked. *It was here all along?* Ryuuji gently let go in surprise. The answers to the questions that he hadn't understood to ask had all been here. They were all here.

Separated by half a step, he brushed the hair in Taiga's face behind her ear. He leaned down and peered into her pale face. When she asked, "Here?" he nodded as he touched her cheek with the palm of his hand. Her cheek was firm, even warm from the flow of her blood.

"Yeah." Ryuuji didn't hesitate as he looked at Taiga with resolve he could not take back. "That's right. It's here."

I don't know why or how, but that's just how it is. I've decided. The faint sherbet snow melted and collected at his feet in loose layers. He noticed the guardrail of the bridge had also collected a thin layer of ice and bumps of snow. So had Taiga's hair.

If she didn't want this, she probably would have kicked him, punched him, headbutted him, or run away or something. Though she was palmtop sized, she was still a tiger. Even as he thought that, though, he didn't want her to get away. So he executed a feint. Ryuuji took off the scarf and cocked his head to the side, pretending he was putting it around his neck. Then he took a giant step forward.

They weren't father and daughter. They weren't big brother and little sister or big sister and little brother. They weren't friends. They weren't landlord and freeloader. They weren't just classmates, or schoolmates, or neighbors. They weren't master and servant, or pseudo-family, or the best friends of each other's unrequited loves. He knew those flimsy relationships would be broken by this, and he knew they would lose the comfortable, convenient cushion that had separated them. But regardless of that, he wanted to touch her.

Ryuuji wanted to kiss Taiga.

Time, which ticked by one second, then two seconds, was the same as the falling snow. At the same rate that time progressed, the distance between them shrank.

Lips touched lips.



Taiga hadn't noticed Ryuuji's approach until they made contact, and in that moment, her warm breath leapt slightly. Ryuuji grabbed the back of Taiga's head with his right hand. He pushed his mouth harder into hers.

He did it in order to make sure she didn't get away, in order to make sure their lips didn't part.

His spine quivered. He knew anyone could kiss like this, but did it feel like this for everyone? It was terrifyingly soft, and hot, and the feeling of their lips was too acute. Only the sensation exchanged by their lips, so vivid it was sweet, ran through his brain and made him feel as though he were melting. He was at the point that the pulsing of his heart couldn't keep up, and lances of electricity seemed to pierce through his skin from the inside out. Just as science class had taught him, touch really did come from electrical impulses. His cranial nerves were sparked by a rush of lightning, and blooming flames scattered in the back of his eyes.

Humans were capable of doing something as amazing as this.

It made him feel...

"We ki—"

...keenly aware it couldn't last.

"—we kissed?"

Taiga took just a single step away from him and, like a beast, looked at Ryuuji with glistening, brightly shining eyes. She covered her lips with both her hands, like they were a treasure. Her hair fluttered.

"We did..."

They had.

"W-w-w-we did...?"

"We did, we did, we did!"

They had, they really had.

Nodding so hard he shook, Ryuuji also covered his lips with a hand. There was no way this could be normal. Was it because it was just intense the first time?

Was this something people just got used to eventually, too? If he tried to do it again, maybe it would go a little better. No—it might be even more amazing.

He took a step back. It felt he was being torn in two, but he didn't want to test it any further. And yet, he wanted to see where this path went. *Don't go, you fool*, he thought as he took a second step back. At the third step, he shook his head. He couldn't let himself fall into his bottomless desires.

Tottered perilously, as though he were drunk, he wandered back till he felt the hard shape of the bridge's rail at his back. Ryuuji clung to the snow-covered rail. He saw Taiga's boots coming his way, entering into his wavering vision.

"W-w-wait! Stop, stop, stop! Don't come near me!" he yelled with desperation that Taiga probably couldn't comprehend. He climbed up onto the base of the railing, which was shaped like a concrete step. The upper half of his body tilted, and he groaned. Ryuuji bit his lip firmly. He needed to forget about the sensation that felt as though it were melting his brain in that moment, or he wouldn't be able to do anything anymore.

Remember. The adults were trying to rob him of the place where he had decided he belonged. He and Taiga had closed the distance that separated them. They had directly touched each other's skin. But even so, the adults were trying to tear them apart.

No. He didn't want that. Ever. He grabbed his hair in both his hands. It was cold enough that the snow that had dampened it had refrozen. The smell from the dark, flowing river nearly two meters below his feet was cold to his nose. What was he supposed to do? How could he push through this? Where was their way out?

"ERGAAAAAAAAAAAH!" Taiga roared.

"BWAH!" Taken by surprise, Ryuuji was nearly blown off the railing as he staggered. He tried to cling to the rail with both his hands, but—

"J-j-j-just how much of an i-i-i-i-id-id-id-idi-idi—" Taiga grabbed Ryuuji's collar with one hand.

"Wh-wh-wha, wait, ahhh!"

"You idiot! Idiot! Idiot, idiot, idiot, idiot, idiot! Idiotidiotidiotidiotidiot!" Balling

up her fists, she hit him. *Slap! Bash! Thud! Thump!*

“Stop...really...ow...ahhh...”

“Just how! Much of an idiot! Are you?!”

“Calm down, really, you’re...GAH!”

“I’m sorry for slapping you and stuff!” Taiga’s voice was hoarse. “But the hand I slapped you with hurts more than the slaps!”

“That’s not even close to true?! Whoa...!” Ryuuji repelled her right hand as it came back to slap him.

“Just you try to jump to your death again! Definitely not ever, ever, ever...”

“Gweeeeh...?!”

Taiga’s hands locked mercilessly onto Ryuuji’s collar to strangle him. She quivered with the genuine brute strength of a growling beast. “Never! I’ll kill you if you do...!”

He couldn’t avert his eyes from her ferocity any longer. Blood rushed into Taiga’s cheeks, which had been cold and pale. The savagery of her hot, white breath blew at the tip of Ryuuji’s nose.

“I’ve thought it would be better if I never existed! I have...more than once! Ugh...” Taiga’s voice leapt, and then her tears finally overflowed, streaming down rosy cheeks. Her soft lips quivered and contorted. The pale hand gripping Ryuuji’s collar wouldn’t stop shaking. “But I’m alive...and that’s...!”

Ryuuji finally understood the misunderstanding that had caused Taiga to rampage, but he couldn’t console or rectify her when she was strangling him. Besides, just how stupid could Taiga be, really? How klutzy and rash and violent could even she be? How bad was she at listening to others? The only thing certain about her was that she was strong, and—

“That’s because you’re here!”

And just how honest was she?

Taiga didn’t turn her eyes away from him. Her face was a mess as she hit him with the genuine, real truth.

She bet her life on love.

“Because I care about you!” Taiga roared.

Like fire. Like a dart. Like a tiger. Like a bullet. Like light. Taiga’s voice struck Ryuuji’s heart like all of that. It pierced through him and then lit him on fire. It was painful and hot and difficult—and—

“Are you trying to kill me...?!” Ryuuji shouted as loudly as he could.

“Maybe I should! That’s right—I’ve been so mad at you all this time! What was that just now?! What was that you just told Ya-chan?!”

“Th-that was—”

“No making excuses, you idiot!” She shook his collar, which was still grasped in her hands. Vertigo on the verge of forming into a concussion made Ryuuji feel dizzy. “Don’t you dare ever say that again! I won’t forgive you if you do! I need you to be here! I was fine with you liking whoever you wanted and living out the rest of your life with whoever you chose! The only reason I’m here is because I wanted to see you, Takasu Ryuuji! That’s all! I didn’t care if I didn’t mean anything to you, I was fine just living near you... That was all it was! But... but then you kissed me, so I...because of that! I want to be by your side! I decided that I would be! So! S-s-so now...! You have to understand...!”

Her violent fingers pulled away from Ryuuji’s down jacket. Ryuuji reached out as if to hug her, but the moment that he took a step forward—

“WHOA?!” Through what could only be called bad luck, the bottom of his sneakers slipped on the loose snow, and...

“Hey! So do you get it now?!”

“I—”

Taiga jumped at him. He wasn’t sure if she was trying to cling to him or punch him, but given the timing, Ryuuji could only think it was dispensation from heaven. They ran into each other and Ryuuji’s body weight shifted all at once to the left. When his slipping soles couldn’t support him, he reached out to the railing, but his hand slipped on the cold sherbet snow, which yielded zero resistance. Then Taiga also slipped and fell to the ground, and her swinging

arms dealt the decisive blow. She hit the back of Ryuuji's neck and sent him flying with a lariat move.

“AHHHHHHhhhhh!”

Ryuuji went over the railing.

This really must be divine punishment.

No, maybe it's karma.

As he fell for what seemed like eternity, Ryuuji thought he glimpsed the face of Kannon, the deity of compassion, weeping. And then he sank back-first into the freezing river. He saw a column of water splash up. His breath stopped in that pitch dark, and a hush settled on him.

I must definitely be dead, he thought. It was neither cold nor not cold. It neither hurt nor didn't hurt. It was as though all his senses had frozen.

Ahhh! This is so baaad!

Even Taiga's shriek, coming from the top of the bridge, seemed to echo in slow motion. *I'm done!* Ryuuji's arms and legs thrashed madly on reflex, and he immediately reached the bottom of the river—actually, the river was shallow enough for him to sit in it on his butt.

“HGAWBABUHBUBUH.” He practically sprung to his feet.

“BMAHGAHZUBOA...BAH! BWAH!”

He coughed, struggling to replenish his oxygen. He would die. He would actually die.

Takasu Ryuuji, on the verge of death, decided to take down all God's creatures, big and small, with him. He had become a self-destructive bomb that could blow up the entire planet. His frantic, glinting eyes stared into the end of nothingness, and a gruesome smile played on his lips. His single black wing soared as a flash of light released from his chest. He would be reincarnated as a demon king in a thousand years' time. It would be a most frightful millennium—though, of course, that wasn't the case.

“See...we end up in situations like this...”

The true terror in this situation was Taiga, Ryuuji thought as his vision shook

to the point it blurred. She watched him from up on the bridge and then nodded like she'd realized something.

"I'm glad you were fine. But, well... You've learned through experience, right? You better not jump a second time. There's no easy way to go out in this world."

"Y-Y-Y—"

"You want to say, 'Yes,' don't you? Good. If you understand, then..." She rubbed away her tears, "Can you climb back up?"

...What are you talking about?! thought Ryuuji. I mean it!

"YOUUUUUUU, y-y-you were the one who pushed me offffffffffffffff!"

"Huh? What? Can't hear you."

"I-I-I-I wasn't trying to jump!"

"Huh? You weren't?"

"I-I-I can't believe you got the wrong idea and went violen-n-n-n-t!"

"Oh no! Then you should have hurried up and said so."

Submerged knee-deep in water, Ryuuji sucked in air to say who-knows-what to Taiga, who was looking down at him. The snow fluttered down onto his wet and freezing body, and he had already completely lost feeling in his hands and feet.

"Hey, are you okay?" Taiga leaned out from the railing and rubbed roughly at her tear-stained face with the back of her hand as she looked down at him.

"O-of course I'm not okay... I-I-I-I-It's cooooooold!"

"This won't do..."

"Well, it's all your fault!"

"Yeah, but it wasn't on purpose, so..."

"'It wasn't on purpose...' Then what was it?! Why you—you—you...you klutz! Klutz! Klutz! Klutz! You're violent! A ruffian!"

If he didn't say more, he wouldn't be able to calm down. He couldn't calm

down, but because he was on the verge of freezing to death, the melting, runaway furnace in his gut began to quiet. He looked up at Taiga as he breathed out white and rubbed roughly at his numb face with his numb fingers. As he did that, feeling came back to him; his blood was slowly starting to flow again.

His brain registered at that moment precisely how much distance there was between him and Taiga. Even if he stretched out his arms, he could never reach the top of the bridge from in the river.

“That’s why I said I was sorry.”

“You never said that...”

Taiga pouted. Her soft hair danced loosely in the wind where the snow fluttered. The reality that Ryuuji wouldn’t be able to touch that hair, her face, and her lips was already unbearable. He wanted to be near her, just closer to her, and to always, always be by her side.

He didn’t want anyone to steal the place he had decided to live.

And if he didn’t want it to be stolen from him, all he could do was fight. And the ones he had to fight were mainly adults, so to win against them, all he could do was become an adult himself.

In other words...

“Hey...Taiga.” Ryuuji waved his hand to get Taiga’s attention.

In order to be properly recognized as an adult by the adults, he needed to do things according to the ways of the adult world. He would quit being a kid who could be jerked around at an adult’s convenience. Animals all did that, didn’t they? The beasts of the ground, the birds of the sky, the fishes of the ocean and streams, and even the bugs of the trees—all of them—stood their ground when they matured into adults, saying “This is my spot.” They would rear their heads, release loud cries, and fight for their lives.

“I’m seventeen.”

Taiga was silent for a bit and then nodded. “Well...we *are* in the same grade together...”

“That’s not what I’m saying.” It might not just have been because of the cold

that the fingers Ryuuji reached out toward her were quivering. “I’m almost eighteen.”

They would get through this Thursday, get past Friday, Saturday, Sunday, and gain distance—they would run and run and run and wander, and their destination would be Ryuuji’s birthday. When that happened, he would plant his feet and yell, *I’m going to live here!*

But until then, he and Taiga could only run. Until the day he turned eighteen.

That was why he caught his breath as he looked at Taiga.

“Marry me.”

Taiga’s white coat was blinding under the line of lamps that lit the bridge, and he felt like it was made of light itself.

“From now on, for all my days, through everything that happens from here on out—for all of it—I’ll do it together with you. Let’s live together—forever, starting now.”

Before his quivering, outstretched fingers was the light he had been so, so, so wishing for. He would grab that star with his own hands.

“Are you...trying to save me?” However, Taiga’s face contorted, and her voice was like ice. “You’re doing that because you pity me... Is that supposed to be compassion? Sympathy? Kindness? Are you just so caught up in being a good kid that you get the warm fuzzies from sacrificing yourself? Is that why you’re saying that?”

Her ferocious, glinting eyes didn’t so much as falter as they pierced through Ryuuji, and her talons quivered. Blood hotter than magma rushed through Taiga’s whole body. *In that case, I’ll tear you to pieces. If you’re careless, I’ll tear you apart and eat you,* her body language said.

“Aghhhhhh, seriously...damn iiiiiiit...it’s cooooooooooollllllld!” Ryuuji yelled.

If she was putting her life on the line, he was, too. Ryuuji looked up at her. It was like he was standing on the very edge of a cliff, with the flames of love closing in after him. He shook uncontrollably, and both his eyes opened wide. He bit his frozen lips and desperately, with every ounce of strength he had left,

stretched both hands toward Taiga.

“You can think whatever you want! But you’re my one and only!” He yelled loud enough to make his voice hoarse. “I love you! That’s why I’ll fight anyone trying to steal you! No matter who it is, I’ll fight them!”

“You...love me?”

“It’s cold! It’s cold, cold, cold! I feel like I’m going to die!”

“Ryuuji, you love me?”

“Ahhhhhhh, it’s cold! It’s coooooooooooooold!”

“You said you love me. You said it, you said that, you did... You said that. You definitely said that. I heard it.”

If she heard it, then why was she questioning it? His hands relaxed. His knees suddenly buckled, too. Ryuuji turned his face down.

“I love you,” he muttered. He felt like he had vomited the entire contents of his heart, till it was wrung dry. In the end, that was what it was. That was exactly all it was. After all that commotion, he had finally squeezed out everything he’d been holding in.

“I can’t bear to see you dealing with anything that makes you sad. I don’t want to suffer anymore, either, but if all of that sad stuff and hard stuff and unbearable stuff brought us here—if it brought me to you, if it made you come to me, then it’s all precious to me. The effect your existence has on my whole world—”

...is what was keeping me together, I think.

As Ryuuji muttered that, he saw something unbelievable. Taiga disappeared for a moment from the other side of the railing, and—

Stepping over it, she was trying to jump over.

“Wait. W-w-w-wait, stop hey, whoa, ahhh...”

With an “alley-oop,” Taiga jumped. Her skirt puffed up and spread. Ryuuji thought it looked like a dome.

“I can’t catch you! I can’t catch you! Whooaaaaa!” In the next second, he was

intent on grabbing Taiga's weight. She hit him in the shoulders, back, and hip, bringing up a giant splash of water. Ryuuji veered dangerously and staggered. "Ahh!" he thought he heard himself yell.

"Well, now I've come to you." Taiga clung to him as he staggered, about to fall. "No take backs. I can't be returned. I won't let you go. It's too late."

"A-are you a monkey or something?!"

Taiga clung to Ryuuji's torso with her hands and legs, entrusting her entire body weight to him. She rested her chin on his shoulder and yielded everything to Ryuuji's arms. Under his ears, her front teeth touched the carotid artery beneath his thin skin as though she were nibbling on him. Ryuuji shivered from the warmth of her tongue.

"Who cares if I'm a monkey or whatever, you can't return me anymore!"

"That's exactly what I want. Who would give you up?"

But he really couldn't support Taiga's weight. A second later, the two of them tumbled right into the middle of the freezing river. A column of water splashed up, followed by their screams.

You, why you! Look what you did! Idiot, idiot! Stupid, stupid! Klutz, klutz! Ahh!

"Oh wow, wow, wow..." Ami groaned, rubbing her eyes. *It definitely is them.*

She had hidden herself in the shadow of a streetlamp. From her vantage point on the riverside sidewalk, she could see the two suspicious shadows making a huge commotion and raising splashes of water in the snow. Hiding her mouth with the oversized sleeve of her sport coat, she turned a cautious gaze on them.

Ahhh, it's cold! I'm gonna die! My leg's stuck! Ahhhh! Pull me out! I can't reach you! Taigaaaaa! Ryuujiiii! AGHAHHHH!

After getting to this point, her disinclination to get involved was at its max. They seemed unexpectedly energized, and she was almost ready to go home, but...

When her feet tried to cold-heartedly change direction, she couldn't do it.

“Tch...”

In the end, her feet wouldn't move.

Ami clicked her tongue and flipped her phone open. She stomped her feet in the cold beneath the lamplights and counted the number of times the phone rang. If he didn't pick up after five rings, she was definitely going home. She noticed that the toes of her mouton boots were damp and cold, wrinkled from the fallen snow. *No waaay*, she thought, contorting her face just when her childhood friend came on the line.

“Yo, hello! I’m in front of Takasu and Aisaka’s houses right now. I tried ringing the doorbells, but of course no one was home in either place. Where are you?”

“At the riverside... Actually, I found them. They're by the big bridge. They're in the middle of the river. I'm horrified.”

“What?! You’re serious?!”

“Yeah. They look like they're in big trouble.”

Ami brushed off the snow that had collected on her shoulders, thinking how she should have at least brought an umbrella. She stuck one of her hands deep into her pocket and leaned back against the streetlamp.

“They couldn’t be doing that, could they?! I’m scared to even say it out loud—are they doing that thing we talked about, like, th-that double suicide thing, were things that serious?”

“Nah, it's more like they've lost their minds.” When she glanced at them again, the crazy couple were continuing their midwinter bath.

“So they’ve lost their minds! Anyway, I’ll head there right away!”

“Can I gwo home now?” Her voice sounded nasally, not because she was faking it, but because her nose was actually stuffed up. She felt like she was coming down with something; she had been thinking of going to bed early that day. With the snow, she hadn't felt like going on her daily jog and was thinking of sinking into a nice long bath with a proper face mask on.

She hadn't been planning on thinking about what those two were doing after that, but...

“You can’t! If they’ve gone mad, you have to hurry and bring them back to sanity again! I’ll be there right away, okay? Oh, and let Kushieda know, too!”

“What? I don’t know her phone number anyway.”

“Liar.”

“It’s true, though... Hey, he hung up! I’m telling you not to mess with me... What is this, seriously?”

Her childhood friend had made things sound so alarming, so urgent, that she had stuck her feet in the new boots that were already out in the entryway and run out like this without so much as an umbrella. Cursing to herself, Ami unlocked her phone with her numb fingers. She searched her address book and hit call. She heard the phone ring. The person on the other end came on after just two rings.

“Oh, hello.” She spoke as dispassionately as she could. “I found them near the big bridge by the riverside. Yuusaku said he’d come right away,” she said quickly.

The person on the other end finished her reply in just four phrases—*no way, seriously, I got it, I’ll be there*. It sounded like the girl was running, her breath uneven.

Ami put her phone away in her pocket and breathed pure white into the night sky, thinking about what to do next. There were still shrieks of deathly agony coming from the middle of the river. Actually, if they could make that much noise, they had to be fine. She decided she would just watch them for a while longer, like an outsider.

The roads she’d run on to make it here had been deserted, so quiet it frightened her. She looked at the blinking lights from the opposite side of the river, where the idiots were making a huge commotion, thinking that it was probably quiet there, too. The snow, which came down from the heavens without pause, started to feel like a soundless curtain. She felt cut off from the world.

Which side should she be on? Was it here with the incredibly idiotic racket where the shrieks echoed, or there, the place that was so far away it seemed to

blur?

“Oh?! It’s Dimhuahua!”

“Whoa?! You’re right, it’s Kawashima!”

No way... Ami cautiously turned around. She hadn’t misheard. They were there, half-alive and half-dead, looking desperate as they paddled through water up to their knees in the middle of the river, dripping with so much water that they might have been sporting icicles. Takasu Ryuuji and Aisaka Taiga were waving their hands fervently at her.

“Diiiiiiiiiiiiimhuaaaaaaaaaaaaahuaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

“Kawashima! Heeey! Heeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeey!”

She pretended she didn’t understand them. *I wonder if a snow fairy is talking to me?* Her expression suggesting that she was seriously considering something of the sort, Ami turned the other way. She did so because she was very obviously afraid.

“Ahhhh! That Dimhuahua is pretending like she can’t heeeeeaaaar us!”

“Ahhhhhhhhh, you’ve got to be kidding, we’re practically on the verge of freezing to death!”

You devil! You devil! They yelled at her, but she didn’t have the faintest idea what they could have meant. She knew there was a classy princess of a celebrity here, a natural beauty who was the prettiest of them all, kinder than them all, but she didn’t know about any devils.

“Oh, it’s so cold,” she said, “maybe I’ll go grab a coffee.”

“Whoa, she’s actually planning on leaving! Wait, Dimhuahua! I said wait! Don’t leave! I said don’t leaaaaaave! Help meeeeeeeeeeeeeee!” Maybe because her reputation had turned to embarrassment and her pride was shattered, the Palmtop Tiger, at long last, half-cried as she sent out an SOS. The cheeky, arrogant Tiger called for help.

Ha ha. Ami snorted, in spite of herself. Tiger should have done that to start with. She stopped walking and turned around.

“Kawashima Ami-saaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaan, the model! Ka-wa-shi-ma-Ami-

saaaaaaaaaaaaan! Don't abandon your friends when they're about to freeze to deeeeeaaaaaath! Look, Ryuuji's freezing, too!"

"Nice! Excellent, Taiga! Kawashima Anna's daughter Ahhh! Miiiii! Saaaaaaaaaaaaan! Are you just gonna leave us here?!"

"No no no, wait wait wait wait wait! Seriously, stop that! I said stop!"

This wasn't funny. Ami planned to keep using her name in the entertainment industry for the next sixty years, and she wasn't going to let them turn that name into a weird city legend. "Don't mess with me! What are you saying?! Why are you just yelling people's names out there like that?! Are you an idiooooooot?! Actually, why don't you just say 'help me' like a normal person?!"

"So you really did hear us?! Eek, help!"

"Help us!"

Half-sliding in the snow, Ami ran down the slope of the riverside. As she got closer, the two of them looked even more terrifying. They were wet up to their heads, and the color of their faces was shading from blue to green. Even their lips were turning dark purple. She lost the will to snap at them.

"Actually...how did you end up like that...?"

"A lot happened... It's a long story. Ah, ahhh! My boots are slipping off..."

"W-wait a second Kawashima, please, give us a hand! The river bottom is so soft that we can barely walk!"

"Fine!" Ami stood on a concrete block that just barely touched the river water. "Oh dear, too bad, looks like I can't reach." She just waved around her hand up to her elbow, putting no real effort into it.

"Why youuuuuuu!" the Palmtop Tiger shouted grudgingly.

Ami just snorted. "I'm joking, of course," she said. "Eek! That's! So! Cold~!"

She grabbed Takasu Ryuuji's hand first, using all her strength to pull him up, and then took Tiger's small hand. Their hands were so cold that she just about shrieked.

"Yuusaku, and she... Kushieda Minori said they're coming right away. Actually,

aren't you both really in trouble? Your faces don't look a normal color."

"I-I-I-I-I feel like I'm in trouble. I'm r-r-r-r-really s-s-s-s-seriously feeling it."

"W-w-w-we're both feeling it. W-w-we're idiots-s-s-s-s."

"You're lucky to be alive. So, you're fine?"

They didn't seem composed enough for her to ask what had happened, so for the time being, she took off the coat she was wearing and put it on their heads. The chill that permeated her knit turtleneck made her whole body break out in goose bumps. She should have been doing better than the two who were soaking wet and frozen, but...

"I feel like I'm the one most likely to catch a cold."

I'm the one who's alone here, she almost said as she looked at them, huddling in the coat and shivering, but swallowed her words and took a breath instead. *Ahh*. In the end, wasn't she actually the most pitiful one here?

At just a single phone call from her childhood friend, she'd gone running, found them, and on top of all that, even lent them her coat. And the truth was, she wanted others to do the same for her.

The truth was, she wanted someone to treat her the same way.

That's so silly. Rather than biting her lip, Ami put her finger to her cheek. She then pouted her lips like a duck, and instead of swallowing her words, made her voice sound sweeter. "When heaven gave me the most beautiful face there ever was, they must have given me the greatest hardships to match... Eeeeeeeeeeeek!"

"Ahh, Dimhuahua, you're so warm..."

Her deep pain, which no one could comprehend, blew off into the unseen beyond as the sopping wet Palmtop Tiger firmly latched on to Ami with all four of her limbs. She thrust her hand into the back of Ami's knit shirt. The chill of that hand paralyzed Ami's whole body.

"You're really so warm, Dimhuahua. You're a lifesaver..."

"YAAAAAAARRRRGGGGHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!"

In the moment she was struck immobile, those cold-as-ice hands made their way under the extra undershirt she was wearing, stealing more of her body heat. Ami screeched like a pirate's war cry.



As though summoned by that scream, her childhood friend ran toward them, waving his hand. “Oh, there you are! Hey!” He skillfully slid down the snow-covered slope in his sneakers. “Were you just yelling like a pirate?!”

Another person arrived moments after him. “Found you! You guys! Wait, ahh!”

It was Kushieda Minori. But when she tried to slide down the slope in the same way as Kitamura, she slipped, landed on her butt, and then just skidded the rest of the way down until she arrived at the bottom of the river. When she stood, she said (of all things), “Ahmin, were you just talking about pirates?!”

“That’s not what she said!” they all cried at once.

“Sorry, I misheard!” Minori stuck out her tongue. “Actually, what’s going on here?!”

She pointed with both hands at the sopping wet duo. They looked at each other, and neither Ryuuji nor Taiga could find anything to say. They simply shook uncontrollably and intermittently breathed out white breaths.

“Actually, what happened to you, too?!” Minori suddenly pointed a finger at Ami.

“Huh?” Ami let her true face peek out as she looked back.

“The way you’re dressed! What’re you doing wearing barely anything!”

“M-M-M-Minorin, th-th-th-th-this is Dimhuahua’s coat. Sh-sh-sh-she lent it to me. Right, D-D-D-D-D-Dimhuahua?”

Minori replied before Ami could nod. “Ahhhhhhhhh! Seriously, just looking at all of you makes me feel cold! Are you okay?!”

She reached out to Ami without hesitation and rubbed roughly at her arms. “Get off!” Ami said without thinking, but Minori didn’t pull back her hands.

“First off, you two take off your wet coats. Here, hand them over to me.”

“Takasu-kun, you actually put on Ahmin’s coat. And then Taiga, you put on mine. And then, Ahmin, you take this! You’re sniffing, hurry up, hurry up!”

A wide checked scarf like a stole came to rest on Ami’s shoulders, which were

only covered in a knit shirt. Without thinking, she ducked her head at the sudden warmth.

“I’ll take that.” Her childhood friend reached out his hands and stole the scarf. In its place, Kitamura pulled off the duffle coat he was wearing and offered it to Ami and Minori. “Here, you two both wear this, you’ll get cold.”

Kushieda Minori took it and grabbed Ami’s elbow. “Come with me! Hey, come here! Come closer!” She jerked Ami into the wool of the duffle, which wasn’t very warm.

“...” Ami coughed to pretend her voice hadn’t caught. Pretending like nothing happened, she continued, “A bath. You guys will probably die if you don’t get in a bath. For now, at least.”

Chapter 2

Once the hot shower poured over his head, all the muscles in his body that felt like they had frozen finally regained their normal mobility. Ryuuji thoroughly wiped himself down with a towel and took a breath. He would have to deal with everything else starting from here, but at least his life wasn't in danger anymore.

"Done with your shower?" Kitamura's voice came from the changing area.

"Yeah," he answered. Ryuuji wrapped the towel around his hips and stuck his face out through the door.

"Things are pretty much half-dried, but I'm prioritizing your underwear and socks for now. The rest of your clothes...well...I think they'll take a while... Hmmmmmm..." Kitamura patted down Ryuuji's jeans, which were spread out on a stranger's washing machine. He grabbed the hair dryer again. "I guess I'll put it back in for a little longer."

"No, no, this is fine," said Ryuuji. "I can wear this."

He lowered his head and made a cutting motion with his hand, giving thanks like a professional sumo wrestler. Even though Kitamura had also walked through the snow without a coat and been chilled to the bone, Ryuuji had heard the sound of the hair dryer the whole time he was showering.

His clothes probably wouldn't be so easily dried, since they had been fully submerged in the just-about-freezing water of the river, but the underwear that Kitamura handed him was definitely warm and dry, just as he said.

"Ahh...I feel like I've just gotten back to normal. They were so sopping wet that they were sticking to my butt this whole time, and it felt so gross." Ryuuji squirmed to put them on under the bath towel he had wrapped around his hips and nodded.

"You're changing like a girl about to get into a pool," Kitamura blurted out.

Ryuuji tried to laugh it off. "What...huh...?"

As he thought for a second, his eyes opened wide. *A girl about to get into a*

pool? Yeah, I love that. It's a delicacy—like eating something that pops against your teeth—was not what he was thinking. His close friend had just suddenly become terrifying.

“Have you been peeking on girls while they were changing?!”

“What could have put that into your head?” Kitamura pulled off his glasses, which were fogged from the humidity, and wiped them clean. “When I was in elementary school, we didn’t have a locker room, so all the boys and girls changed together in the classroom.”

“Oh, that’s all... I was actually really scared for a sec. Actually, don’t watch me like that. Unlike you, I’m shy about being naked.”

“I’m not looking, I’m not. See, I’m not?” Kitamura stood imposingly in front of Ryuuji and seemed to purposefully lower his glasses, opening his eyes wide. *You idiot! That’s Haruta level!* Ryuuji retorted, and they joked about for a bit as he finished getting dressed.

“I wonder if Aisaka’s changed?”

“Her...her hair was all waterlogged, so probably not yet.”

They turned their eyes to the ceiling and were both briefly silent. Taiga, who had been sopping wet like Ryuuji, should be using Ami’s bath on the second floor in Ami’s room.

As the snow continued to fall, Ryuuji had run with his friends to the Kawashimas’ house, an attractive, tiled, two-story building built upon extensive grounds. Ami’s father’s older brother and his wife lived on the first floor, while the second floor had been divided into four side-by-side studios. Ami said she was using one as her own. She lived alone in the studio but ate her meals in the main house. She said the point of it was that it was like a kid’s room but with more space.

No one was in the main house, so Ami let the boys into the first floor, and the girls went upstairs. Instead of stealthily escorting them through like thieves, Ami gave them a proper tour of the downstairs, like she’d invited friends over and wanted them to have a good look around. The recessed ceiling bathed the patterned sofa in warm light as she pointed out each of her family members’

places. Some cushions, a cardigan, and a magazine had been left lying around somewhat untidily. It looked comfortable. He could see traces of the inhabitants' well-off status and excellent taste in the things lying around.

Using the bath would leave obvious traces, Ryuuji told Ami, but she had easily answered, "I can just tell them that I used it. You can use whichever towels you want, too."

This house must have been a saving grace for Ami after she ran away from her own parents' house because of the whole stalker commotion, whether she realized it or not.

"If Kawashima's uncle and the others come back and see us here, they'll think we're breaking in, won't they? And we'll seem like a pair of violent thieves that were even shameless enough to take a bath..." Standing on the thick bath mat, which felt nice under his feet, Ryuuji looked around, unsettled. He saw pristine and matching towels, makeup, a razor, toothbrushes, and toothpaste—no matter how cozy the place was, he was in the middle of running away. He couldn't stay here for long.

In a hurry, he stuck his legs into his still cold and damp jeans, without caring how they felt, and even put on his T-shirt and parka. He still had no idea what to expect.

"You're probably fine for tonight. I asked Ami about it, but the Mr. and Mrs. seem to have already left for night duties."

"They're working at night? Are they doctors or something?" Ryuuji roughly brushed up his wet hair, trying to banish the face of his mother, who also worked.

"The husband works at a college hospital. The wife is a nurse and caregiver, so it seems like she works in other places. They don't come back until morning, so that's as much relief we could have asked for...but the issue is my place. She's still there. *That person*." Kitamura once again took off the glasses that he couldn't seem to unfog and then used the hem of his shirt to wipe the lenses.

Ryuuji fiddled with the switch of the dryer in his hand. "Calling her 'that person'...makes her sound like some ridiculous mastermind or something."

“She looked like one. Kind of a like a final boss.”

“She did make a surprise entrance. Did she come in a Porsche?”

“She did. Um, and how do I put this, she was pregnant, too.”

When Taiga’s mother had showed up at the Kitamuras’ place, Kitamura had apparently told her, “I know somewhere they might be. I’ll bring them back, so please wait here,” and just left. He’d contacted Ami and Minori, and they had run around town looking for Ryuuji and Taiga.

In other words, it seemed Taiga’s mother was at the Kitamuras’ house at that moment. Kitamura had already gotten several calls from home on his cell.

“If my mom mentions Ami’s name, they might come searching here, but... Well, if it comes to that, we can pretend no one’s home.” Kitamura’s naked eyes seemed larger than ever as he squinted and then smiled.

“I’m...really sorry.”

Ryuuji had only just come to the realization that he’d ended up pulling the people around him into this mess. Despite his gallant and self-important proclamations of fighting, and running, and loving Taiga, he was causing his friends trouble. He was causing them worry and needing their help.

He rubbed at his eyes and turned his face down. He and Taiga had finally gotten their feelings through to each other, but the world where they were tied together by their resolve and infatuated with each other couldn’t exist without others inconveniencing themselves to help.

Maybe if they just hadn’t fallen into the river—but even then, they’d still have been at a standstill. The meager change they had between them wouldn’t even cover bus fare. Maybe if Taiga hadn’t dropped her money—but how far and how long could they even go with just twenty-four thousand yen? They might have been able to hide out the rest of the week at a cheap place, but he wouldn’t even know how to find a place like that. The police would have gotten involved, and their friends would still have searched for them, worried about them, and run around in the snow.

Was it better this way? Maybe this was actually the only thing they could have done?

“It wasn’t supposed to go this way...”

Then how should it have gone, instead? If the god of fortune had asked him that, Ryuuji wouldn’t have known how to respond.

“But, but, it’s kind of like I really... Taiga and I really didn’t want it to happen like this—”

“It’s okay.” Kitamura shook his head broadly. “I did all that stuff with the bleached hair and everything, remember? Well, this isn’t a give-and-take kind of situation. I’ll never forget what you did for me, of course, but I’m not doing this ‘cause I owe you.”

His friend’s words, which echoed in the herbal fragrance faintly wandering through the bright changing room, certainly seemed genuine. But just because Kitamura believed it was true didn’t mean that Ryuuji could accept it. Not yet.

There was something he was hung up on. This long, complex equation had been wrong from the outset, and the wrongness of blindly obeying it stuck in his craw. Ryuuji felt like plunging his finger down his throat and throwing it all up, but he couldn’t even do that.

“According to what you guys said earlier, her mother’s going to take Aisaka away, right?” said Kitamura. “Even though Aisaka doesn’t want to go—Aisaka said she was going to be kidnapped right before our eyes. In that case, this isn’t just you guys’ problem anymore. Aisaka is our friend, too. I can’t just stand by while she’s in trouble. And you’re also my friend. If a friend is being torn away from a friend he cares for, then I’ll do anything to help them both.”

He had no hesitation, no indecision, no pretensions.

“There’s something you and Aisaka finally, actually, really figured out too, right?”

Ryuuji nodded, because he wanted to answer Kitamura’s words with the truth. Even though it wasn’t all within his grasp yet, he wanted to convey everything that he could see in his heart as words. “I don’t want to leave Taiga’s side...”

He pushed up his hair, which had stuck coldly to his cheek from the shower, and awkwardly and earnestly moved his lips.

“Because I love her.”

He realized that his toes, which had just finally warmed up, were starting to get cold. He stooped over to put on his socks. His body staggered stiffly. It hadn't been easy to get to where he was now.

Kitamura must have understood that, too.

The feelings Taiga had once had for Kitamura absolutely weren't fake. And the unreachable feelings within Ryuuji that shook his heart so intensely, the times he'd wished for things to go well between Taiga and Kitamura—and the times he'd wished they wouldn't—weren't fake, either. The feelings that continually drew him closer to Kushieda Minori weren't fake. Not a single one of those feelings had been wrong. They'd been real, and they'd lived in all the moments that had passed with as much power as they could.

They'd lived, and survived, and finally made it here, but it hadn't been an easy path. They were bruised and battered all over, but they were still moving toward the future, Ryuuji thought.

And for the foreseeable future, his feelings were dedicated to Taiga.

“Then don't let her go.” Kitamura said curtly in his resonant voice, putting his silver-framed glasses firmly back on his face. “Fight to protect her with everything you've got.”

He was certain Kitamura was his fellow in arms, but the worry clouding Ryuuji's heart still swirled darkly. He had pulled his friend into his own battlefield, and he still didn't know whether that was right or wrong.

“It's just,” he said, “I kind of feel like...there's something wrong with the way I'm fighting.”

“Just think it through,” said Kitamura. “I'm definitely going to be here for you.”

Ryuuji finished drying his hair while Kitamura waited in silence. His face, reflected in the mirror, looked strangely firm and tense. He looked like a frightened member of the yakuza on the run—no, he looked like a scared little animal.

He stuck his feet into his wet sneakers. They locked the main house with the key they had borrowed and then headed to Ami's room on the second floor. When they knocked, Ami's voice called to them: "It's open, come in!"

They went inside.

"Well, this is practically a rock. This is too hard to be considered food."

"What did you put in it? What're you trying to do?"

"That's weird... I just melted them and let them set..."

"That's some miraculous chemistry you've accomplished. The cacao must be surprised, too."

"This stuff is practically a weapon now. You could assassinate two or three people with this."

"That's so weird, why'd they turn out like this?"

The three girls had buried themselves deep under the blanketed and heated kotatsu, and were in a heated discussion over the homemade chocolates Taiga had made and given to Ami. Ryuuji could see three sets of teeth marks standing out on the sweets.

Turning to Ryuuji and Kitamura, Minori's forehead wrinkled as she said, "This is kind of ridiculous. I wanted something sweet, so I tried biting into one, but none of our teeth are a match for them. They're confections unfit for consumption. No, that's not quite right; they're consumptions unfit for confection."

Ami continued after her, "Ugh! Takasu-kun, you've got river stink! That river's definitely dirty~!"

"Of course it's dirty. It's stagnant if you look at it in the daylight. Ah, my twenty-four thousand yen is still sunk, too..." Taiga looked cute in a velour tracksuit that she probably borrowed from Ami. "If I had just put some effort into it, I wonder if I could have found it?"

"What are you... What an idiotic thing to say... Actually, what're you doing going off and borrowing nice clothes?!"

"Well, I think they'd be too small for you, Ryuuji."

“I’m fine without them! What happened to the clothes you were wearing?!”

They’re right there. Shoulder deep in the heated table, Taiga used her chin to gesture to a corner of the room. Her coat was at least on a hanger, but the rest of her clothes were stuffed into a plastic bag and still wet.

“Ahhhh...!” Surging waves of reality drowned Ryuuji. The wet clothes Taiga had taken off and cast aside would gradually rot with the certain flow of time. Time, that was ticking even now.

“Don’t just stand there. Get under the table. You, too, Yuusaku. You can get in if you sit next to each other, can’t you?” Ami pulled up the open side of the table blanket for them.

Most of the furniture in the room was made up of steel racks, piled recklessly with all kinds of things—a small TV, a heap of magazines, a stereo for an iPod, and even brand-name bags. Ami’s room felt like a temporary rental.

“Where...do you sleep? You don’t have a bed.”

“I have a foldable futon. When I bring out the heated table, I put it away in the closet where it’s supposed to go.”

“You don’t even have a desk to study at.”

“Of course I do, it’s this one here.”

Still snugly buried in the kotatsu, Ami hit its surface with the palm of her hand. *For having no bed or desk, I’m surprised she always looks so put together,* Ryuuji thought. “It’s fine. My parents’ house is actually really nice—wait, she’s already asleep.”

Next to her, Taiga was burrowed in all the way, curled up with the top of her head pushed against Minori’s hip, and snoring.

“She must be exhausted. Just leave her alone for a while.”

At Kitamura’s words, Ami pulled away her hands, which had been just about to shake Taiga’s shoulders. They all ended up silent for a while, listening to Taiga’s breathing as she slept. Eventually, Minori opened her mouth first.

“So, I didn’t get to ask this when Taiga was talking just earlier, but...” Voice lowered, she fidgeted with the cord of her parka, staring at the discarded peel

of a mandarin that someone had eaten and left on top of the table. “Why is the situation with Taiga’s mom so hostile? Does Taiga not like the person her mom married? We’re sure that Taiga doesn’t like her mom...right?”

“Well, of course.” Giving Minori’s profile a sidelong glance, Ami answered in Taiga’s place. “First off, she stuck by her dad after the divorce. No matter whose fault the divorce was, girls would normally follow their moms, wouldn’t they? But that didn’t happen—you say you’re her best friend, but it looks like you don’t actually know much about Tiger.”

“It’s because I once... I once got in a fight with Taiga about that guy. About her dad. Even after we made up, I didn’t feel like I could really bring up her family.”

Ryuuji remembered something odd. During Christmas, Taiga had declared she would be a good girl and sent her father and his new wife presents, but now that he thought about it, he didn’t remember there being anything addressed to her mom. She hadn’t even known her mother was pregnant. And even when she had been horribly betrayed by her father at the culture festival, even after she attacked Kanou Sumire and got suspended, Taiga had never asked her mother for help. Even when she got hurt during the school trip, she never asked for her mom to come.

He didn’t know whether she didn’t want to ask for help or just hadn’t been able to ask, but regardless, the rift in their mother-daughter relationship might have been much, much, much deeper than he originally thought.

“So basically, Tiger’s running away so she won’t be separated from Takasu-kun. If she goes with her mom, she’ll be taken from him. I’ll only say this because she’s asleep, but...” Ami took a quick glance at the unmoving back of Taiga’s head and lowered her voice. “Things turned out this way because you decided to do this too, Takasu-kun, but to be blunt... Don’t think what you’re trying to do is that realistic.”

But I’m here, Ryuuji thought as he watched Ami’s expression, though he couldn’t get the words out of his mouth. He existed because Yasuko actually *had* done something unrealistic in the past. Yasuko had gotten pregnant, run away from home, had him, and cut off all contact with her parents for the next eighteen years, raising Ryuuji alone.

High school student or not, if someone set their heart on running away, it could be done. Ryuuji's existence itself was proof of that.

Ami, of course, didn't know that. She continued to speak.

"Even if you actually got away and got married, is that really going to be happily ever after? Takasu-kun, it's nice that you and Tiger have decided to live together, but—how do I put this? You keep saying you're adults, but you're kind of throwing the actual adults to the wolves? Like—are you really going to cut ties with Taiga's mother forever? Isn't that kind of childish? It's like you're saying that as long as things go your way, you've won."

Unable to retort, Ryuuji dropped his eyes to his own fingertips. She had a point. Still, he couldn't help but recall his life with Yasuko. She regretted the things she'd done, and she was trying to use Ryuuji to salve her own conscience. Was it so wrong for him to want to run from that?

Maybe everything would have been fine if he'd just kept in mind what was convenient for everyone else, swallowed his own desires, and behaved how the people surrounding him expected him to. But the adults in his life had manipulated him for their own convenience, and once he realized that, it became difficult to answer to their expectations. He didn't want to just cut ties with them like Ami said, of course, but he didn't want them to control him, either. If he and Taiga didn't break free of their grip, they'd never be able to live as they wished.

He knew this meant they might end up having to quit school and find jobs. He might never see Yasuko again. He didn't want that to happen, but he knew it was wrong to expect her to feed two mouths.

"If Takasu and Aisaka are prepared to go through with this, I'll support them with everything I've got. I'll do anything for them," Kitamura muttered.

Since the table was cramped and had become uncomfortably hot, he had moved away to sit on Ami's exercise ball. His eyes met with Ryuuji's, and Kitamura shrugged, trying to hide his embarrassment.

"When you said you'd figure out a way to get married, it made me genuinely happy. This definitely isn't how it usually goes, and you're moving too fast according to how the world works, but who cares?!" Kitamura grandiosely

raised both arms in the air without so much as wobbling on the exercise ball. “Kushieda said that she’d choose her own happiness for herself, didn’t she? I’m going to do the same. I’m going to choose my own happiness. Takasu, Aisaka, you just have to go for it! Even if you’re beat and have no idea what’s coming next, even if things are a mess, it’s fine! You just need to be happy!”

“That’s not a majority vote,” Ami said, raising the pointer fingers on both her hands. “One nay. One yay. Kushieda, this is the decisive vote. What do you think?”

Minori, who had been fidgeting with the mandarin skin, stopped for a moment. She put the palm of her hand in front of Ami’s face, trying to say, *wait a sec*. With her other hand, she hid her own lowered face.

“Kushieda...” Ryuuji looked at her. Maybe even Minori couldn’t find the words when she was cornered like this. Ami pouted her lips slightly and, like Ryuuji, stooped to look up at Minori’s face.

“Bwah ha!”

“Bwah haaa!”

The two of them burst out laughing.

“Sah-rry...it hwas too bwhig...” Minori had stuck the whole peeled mandarin into her mouth. Orange fruit juice dripped down her chin as she tried to desperately to swallow. “Hwai a sec, hwai a sec.”

Like a snake swallowing a mouse whole, her neck writhed painfully, and then finally, the mandarin descended.

“Ahhh, that was a shock... My mouth’s way smaller than I thought...”

She drank some tea and steadied her breath. Then, as though she had decided what she wanted to say way earlier...

“Anyway,” she said as she looked at Taiga, who was fast asleep. “I think it’s absurd for Taiga to be taken away against her will. I can’t accept that. I don’t want to be separated from Taiga. I don’t want Taiga to be sad. I don’t want Takasu-kun to be sad, either. I don’t want that—but I don’t think that’s right, either. I don’t think there’s anything in this world that’s right. I don’t think we

can decide what's absolutely right or wrong for someone else to do. It's just that I want my friends whom I care about and who mean so much to me, Taiga and Takasu-kun, not to suffer. So, that's what I choose. I agree that they should escape."

"I can't believe you're phrasing it like that!" Flustered, Ami raised her voice. "It's not like I wouldn't be sad about Tiger disappearing! I want to do something about it! But, but, I just end up thinking about whether that's the best thing for the future! Aren't you thinking about that?!"

"I know what you want to say, Ahmin, but there's one thing you don't know. Taiga's parents are, at their core—"

—*terrible*.

That was probably what she wanted to say, Ryuuji thought as he watched Minori's mouth while she faltered momentarily. She'd hesitated at the last minute to condemn her best friend's parents, which might have been the correct decision.



Taiga's small shoulders emerged from under the table blanket, though they weren't sure when she had woken up. She combed out her soft hair, which was so long it tangled around her face and shoulders, with her fingers as she got up.

"Minorin... Don't finish that thought."

Just like all the times they'd horsed around and messed with each other, Taiga rubbed her head into Minori's shoulder. As if taking her temperature, Minori held her hand to her own forehead and bit her lip for a moment, looking regretful. Eventually, she nodded slightly.

I'm sorry, really. Her whisper reached Ryuuji's ears.

"I get why Dimhuahua is worried about us." Taiga's face was bright red from the heat of the table. Even the rims of her eyes were dyed red. "And also, my mo...that hag...that woman...my mother came here to help me, I know. I think she's trying to go through with her responsibilities as a parent. But when my mom divorced my dad, she left me behind and went to that man. I can't forget that. She's going to have a baby with a guy she loves whom she got to choose, and I'm just some guy's kid who didn't need a mother... I can't ever expect her to love me the way that I want, even if she came to help me, because if I expect anything from her, she'll leave me. I've learned that from it happening over and over—that I'll never have the things I want. I've been trained and broken in with all that word implies, I think. But—"

Despite the painful words, Taiga smiled slightly. She looked at Ami, Kitamura, and Minori, and then her gaze met with Ryuuji's.

"...you fall in love with a certain boy. You like that he's kind and understands you, and being with him is fun, and you can't leave him—it's like an addiction. He's kind of weird, but you like his voice and the way he talks, the way he opens his mouth when he eats. You like his hands and his fingers and his lips... Actually, who cares about all of that?"

You really don't care, Minori teased. *Yeah, who cares,* Taiga nodded. Kitamura went silent, and wrinkles appeared on Ami's forehead.

"But I wanted to always see him. I aaaalways wanted to remember him and this whooole time just seeing him would make my heart race, but I'd still look.

When I was near him, the inside of my head would feel like—*bam*—like it was exploding and everything would go white... I don't know when it started to be like that, but I just couldn't help it. I thought I needed it to stop. I had to stop because that guy liked someone else. And then it was also because that girl also liked that guy. I pretended it was out of friendship and loyalty, but the real reason I wanted to turn my eyes away was because I thought that I wasn't allowed to want things. If I wanted something, it would break. Ryuuji didn't like me, and I didn't want to be jealous of Minorin, and if I reached out to grab it, I thought that everything would magically go to ruin—it's kind of stupid, but I really thought that." Taiga spoke all at once, still breathing shallowly. "I still kind of think that, even now. Since I couldn't stop and tried to actually get Ryuuji, maybe I caused the Aisaka family's ruin. I wonder if it's my fault?"

"Course not!"

"Like it would be!"

"Of course it ain't!"

"Are you an idiot?!"

As the last of the four people's worth of retorts finished, Minori decided to suddenly blind Taiga by poking her in the eyes. "Oh...I went harder than I meant to... Sorry... What should I do..."

Taiga covered her eyes and went facedown on the table. "Well, but that doesn't matter anymore," she said in a muffled voice. "I'm going to fight, too. I want to be with Ryuuji, so if my world self-destructs because of that, no matter where I am, I'll survive. I absolutely won't lose. I won't give up on Ryuuji. And I won't give up on Minorin or Kitamura-kun...or Dimhuahua, either. Because I love you. No matter what mass destruction comes, no matter where I am, I won't stop loving anyone."

Ryuuji thought about what to say. What words would be strong and certain enough to convey his resolve to Taiga and everyone else? He thought and then spoke like he had thoroughly reflected on what he would say.

"Then you're...declaring your love at the epicenter of the world..."

Takasu...

Takasu-kun...

Takasu-kun...

You...

Was it cold because of the snowy weather, because he had fallen into a river, or because of the temperature of the air filling the room? The cold silence lasted a good five seconds.

“Waaaaaaaaaahhhh... That’s so grossssssssssssssss...”

“Was it actually bad enough to make you cry??”

Ami had started to cry fat tears. Ryuuji thought she was probably being provocative, as usual, but she looked back at him with hard, reddened eyes.

“I can’t stand thiiiiiiiisssssss... Ahh, I want my moooooooooooooooooom...”

“Was it really that bad...?”

Ami stood up. “You can have this, so hurry up and just goooooooooooooooooo!”

“Oh...!”

She took one of the keys from a Louis Vuitton key case on the steel rack and threw it over to Ryuuji. He barely caught it. He remembered that old and yellowing key from somewhere. “Is this...the villa’s?”

“It is.” Blowing her nose, Ami breathed in. She gently wiped away the tears on her face. “There isn’t any electricity. They turned off the gas. If you open the stopcock on the meter box, you’ll be able to use the water, but it’ll track how much you used.”

He looked at Taiga’s face. Taiga also looked at Ryuuji as though reluctant. He hesitated, but...

“We can’t borrow this... Of course, this is—”

“Then what are you going to do? Like this is the time to act all high and mighty.” When he tried to return the key, Ami put her hands behind her back to say she wouldn’t take it. “You decided that you’re running, right? Then you’ve got to be bold about it! No one’s saying you’ll live there forever or anything! Even if you take a part-time job, you need a place to live, don’t you?! You don’t

have to go, but you can at least take it as insurance!”

How much trouble would Ami be in if her parents found out? Thinking over all the possibilities, Ryuuji was still unable to put that key in his pocket. He was immobile, like a robot whose battery had died down. If the police got involved and people found out that Ami offered them a place to hide, then wouldn't she end up in as much trouble as the ones who had run away?

She was probably actually prepared for that, too. Ami was a person whose heart was always passionately swayed by the power of ever-tremendous affection.

But was this really okay?

“Oh...” Kitamura said, looking at his phone. “*‘At least send us a message. We are very worried.’* ...It's from my mom. Time's almost up for me tonight. They might even come here. Should we leave now, you two?”

“If you're headed to Ahmin's villa, you might be too late to take the train. When we went during the summer, I looked up the schedule, but I think the route ended pretty early in the evening. If you leave now...”

“Ryuuji and I don't have any money.”

“I'll lend you some,” Ami said. “Oh, but you actually might not be able to make the train. Wait a sec, I'm pretty sure you can check the schedule on your phone.”

“No...it's fine, you don't have to check,” Ryuuji told Ami, who'd pulled out her phone, and he looked at Taiga. “Taiga, let's go back home one last time. I'll get some money. Tomorrow, you come to school. Tell your mom you want to at least show your face one last time to your class. You think you can come?”

“I'm not sure... She said that she would send in my school withdrawal through the mail...but if I say that I want to hand it over to my homeroom teacher in person, then maybe... What are you going to tell Ya-chan?”

Ryuuji hesitated for a moment. If he went home, would Yasuko be there? He'd heard that only Taiga's mother was at Kitamura's house, so maybe she'd gone home alone after she had her argument with him. Maybe she had gone to work.

“She’s probably at work, so I don’t think she’ll be home though...”

If she was at home, then what would he do? What would he say? Was it better for him to say nothing and just disappear the next day from school?

“You have to make sure you apologize for what you said to Ya-chan earlier and take it back. And then, talk to her about what we’re doing and make sure she understands. I’m sure that Ya-chan will actually get it. She’ll help us.”

She wouldn’t, Ryuuji thought. She wouldn’t understand, and she wouldn’t help them, but he couldn’t just say that to Taiga.

When they all went out the front, the snow had stopped. Here and there, the asphalt showed through one to two centimeters of white. It might have been because the temperature had increased slightly, but it melted under their shoes as they passed.

They all immediately noticed the black Porsche that appeared at the crosswalk a short walk from Ami’s house. The car, with its low height and unique shape, glided to a stop on the shoulder of the road. Taiga’s mother emerged, leaving the engine running.

She walked up to Taiga.

“Juicy Couture.”

She grabbed the nape of the parka Taiga had borrowed from Ami and turned it over to look at the tag. Her gaze looked heartless, her eyes light grey even in the darkness.

“Kawashima-san? Which of you is her? Would that be you?” Her eyes glided over Ryuuji, Kitamura, and Minori, coming to a stop at Ami. “This is quite expensive. We’ll buy it from you.”

“What? Uh, you don’t need to! Please don’t worry about it~!” Ami waved her hands in her usual good-girl act, but there was no hesitation in Taiga’s mother as she pulled her wallet from her small clutch. She moved with dexterity that made one think of the assertive smoothness of a sports car.

“This should be enough, shouldn’t it?”

“Um, I really... Actually, my parents bought me that, so—”

“Then please relay this to your parents.”

She forced Ami to take fifty thousand yen. Ryuuji didn't know whether that was a reasonable amount, but it was like this cancelled out Ami trying to lend out the clothes. With that, it would be like no trace of Taiga was left behind.

It was almost like a mother fox trying to erase all evidence of her child from around their abandoned nest hole, dusting over footprints, trampling and kicking the dirt in order to not even leave a scent.

“We're going.”

Taiga turned around, looking anxious. She looked at Kitamura, the boy who had, day after day, supported her. Whom she continued to see as someone to look up to, who had made her heart flutter.

She looked at Ami. They had been rivals, opposed each other, gotten in arguments, hit and kicked each other, and without realizing it, they had grown close.

She looked at Minori. She looked at the face of the girl she adored.

Then, she looked at the face of her only love in the whole world.

“H-have a good life.”

Ryuuji, unknown to himself, was trembling slightly as he listened to the words Taiga sent him off with. Though he knew that it was an act, that this was just a temporary parting, it was terrifying. If this was really the last time they would say goodbye to each other, what would he do?

He waved his hand and answered, “Yeah,” holding back the urge to start running.

Should he follow after her? If he let her go, if this was going to be their last goodbye, would it be better if he grabbed her hand and just ran for it?

But the car door made a loud clunk as it closed. He couldn't see inside because of the tinted windows. Taiga and her mom drove away.

Even Minori had started moving as if to go after her but sensed in the leap of Ryuuji's breathing next to her that they should hold back.

“It’ll be fine, right...” Kitamura let a few words spill out.

“It’ll be fine. I’m sure. Because Tiger is pretending like she’s going with her, but she’s really here with us.”

Minori nodded at what Ami said.

If Yasuko had gone to work, the lack of shoes at the front entrance, the coldness and darkness of an empty house, the closed curtains, and the silence that seemed to seep into the bottom of his feet would have all been ordinary. Possibly because of the snow, however, Ryuuji slowly turned his head.

The first sign things were out of place came from the birdcage not being in its normal spot.

He looked into his own room and Yasuko’s, checking that the birdcage really was gone. Forgetting to even change his damp clothes, he went right and left through the two-bedroom apartment. He tried calling the store. In the middle of telling them he was Yasuko’s son, they asked him, “How’s your mom doing? Do you know how long she’ll be out for?” and he knew that she hadn’t gone to work. He put down the phone and thought of asking the landlady. Then, for the first time, he noticed the thing left in the middle of the low table.

On the note, which bore the squirrel-shaped trademark of a phone shop, was an address.

The name of the closest station was written on it, and even a phone number. Next to it was the watch he’d worn to the Christmas party.

“...”

His throat made a strange sound.

The situation was no longer *I’ll run away from home and abandon Yasuko*. It was no longer about whether that was okay. It was no longer about whether that was how adults did things. He needn’t have worried about those things.

He was the one who’d been abandoned.

“Uh—”

They really were exactly alike, mother and son. The one who was quicker to run was the winner, and the one who got left behind was the loser.

Ryuuji dropped to his knees, or rather, didn't have the willpower left to stand. Before he realized it, he was sitting on the tatami mats. He didn't even know what he was looking at, what he was listening to, what he was doing, or what he was thinking as he took several drawn-out breaths.

Am I really starting from here again?

He had no idea where those short words he had assembled into one phrase had come from. *Am I really starting from here again?* He just kept repeating that. *Am I really starting from here again?* He forgot to blink. He was exhausted and worn out, but he was starting again—his spine felt like it was being crushed one vertebra at a time—he couldn't even move his fingertips.

Tick, tick, tick. He realized the watch was making a faint sound.

“Ah ahhhh, ahhhHHHHHhhhhhhhhhhh!”

Thrown with terrific force, the watch hit the sliding door and stopped. Ryuuji knocked over the table, grabbing the overturned legs to stand back up. He threw it against the wall. He punched the tatami mats with both hands. He held his head and scratched at his face, and since he had nothing in reach to hit anymore, he punched his own thighs.

“Why did this happen?! You can't be serious, you've got to be kidding, you've got to be kidding! You've! Got! To! Be! Kidding! Am I supposed to start over again?! Is it going...to keep going...like this...?!”

His voice seemed to go shrill as he writhed and yelled and clawed at himself. “Taiga...Taiga! Taigaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

Come, please be with me, he cried out, like a baby, though his cries would never reach her. Ryuuji rolled over on the tatami mats.

Maybe this was the “mass destruction” Taiga had spoken of? *If you acquired something, something would be taken from you in return. If you desired something, everything you loved would be destroyed.* This was what that meant. But did he even have the right to be so hurt by his mother abandoning him? He'd been planning to abandon her himself, after all.

In a way, he was in exactly the situation he hoped for. He'd gotten his wish.

"Taiga..."

Ryuuji once again called that name, covered his face, and buried his head in his knees.

The sliding door had once been patched with a flower made from the love letter that Taiga wrote for Kitamura. She'd knocked the hole through the door back in the spring, when she first raided the house. Though it had looked a bit shabby, that sakura-colored patch had had a kind of sweetness to it. It seemed to match their old house, and he actually really liked it. That was why, even though he had several opportunities to fix it, after everything was said and done, Ryuuji had created excuses to continue leaving it as is.

But now it was caved in, busted through by the watch he'd thrown. Another trace of Taiga's presence was erased.

He imagined taking Taiga's small hand and the two of them running away as far as they needed to go. They would run and run, escaping from the crumbling and cracking ground that followed on their heels. But if they did that, would the whole world just end up being destroyed?

Ryuuji coughed. When it came to just deserts, this one was well prepared. Yasuko, who abandoned her parents, had now abandoned Ryuuji. If that hadn't happened, then Ryuuji would have abandoned Yasuko. Any kid Ryuuji might go on to have was sure to abandon him too, if Ryuuji didn't abandon them first.

Taiga had also been abandoned by her parents and would now abandon them in turn. Her future kids would abandon her. It would be a cycle of abandonment, absent of love or affection.

Slowly, Ryuuji came to a realization. Being abandoned by Yasuko wasn't what really hurt—it was what the abandonment had revealed to him. Seeing not just the betrayal happening right now, but the ones in the past and the ones in the future, the way this pain would be passed on from generation to generation—that was what made him sad.

He saw that this sorrow would stay with them even if he ran away with Taiga. Even if she ran away with him, Taiga, in that future, would be sad.

Taiga was afraid of inviting destruction into her life, and so she was offering to sacrifice her bond with her parents to protect her love for Ryuuji. She might not be consciously aware that was what she was doing, but it was. Where did Ryuuji plan to lead Taiga while she was like that? What was he trying to show her? What destination did he think awaited them if she abandoned everything she had to reach it?

Wanting things isn't bad, Ryuuji wanted to tell Taiga. But in a way, he was helping to destroy everything. Their friends, who'd put themselves in harm's way for Ryuuji and Taiga's sake, might have been part of that destruction. Ryuuji and Taiga had locked themselves into an endless cycle of sorrow, all while saying they would do anything for the sake of happiness.

He was stupid, stupid, stupid. He was a kid who had no idea how small he was.

"I...really had it all wrong..."

In that moment, Ryuuji felt like he was sinking into a deep body of water. It was even deeper than the icy river, and he had dreamed for a long time of the bottom of a darkness where light wouldn't penetrate. But this was safe. Ryuuji was curled up, his head under his body, always sinking there. And then finally—finally—he took a foamy breath and breathed it out.

Taiga.

Bubbles issued from his lips with the utterance of that one and only name. His eyelids opened, feeling hard as scales. He gradually lifted his heavy head. He braced his hand on the tatami. Waking from his long dream, opening his intensely gleaming eyes wide, the dragonling known as Ryuuji got back on his feet.

(Up, up, faster.)

He headed to the sink. With water that was so cold it numbed him, he washed his face, wiped himself with a towel, and took off his strange-smelling clothes. He threw them into the laundry basket. He changed his underwear and put on clean loungewear. He glared at the bright red face reflected in the mirror with enough force to murder it.

(Even faster, float to the top.)

His dancing body parted the four seas and raised a roaring column of water mixed with white, cloudy bubbles. His gigantic shadow stretched across the ocean surface. The spray turned into torrential rain and came pouring down. A tsunami erased a continent and birthed several new islands, and Ryuuji ran up into the sky with his own four limbs. He passed through the clouds in a breath, devouring flashes of lightning. He could even fly.

There were things in this world he still wanted to see and do. Ryuuji sought for them, using the power of his imagination to soar as high as the stratosphere.

(Food. Anyway, I'm going to eat dinner. Where would I do it? Where would be a good place? In a marble room with a large skylight. It'll have crimson curtains and a fireplace. No, a nightscape with Tokyo Tower in view...or maybe the Rainbow Bridge? It'd be lit up like a jewel and look so pretty. Under the stars would also be nice. Or maybe even the moon, with Mars or Jupiter in the sky... No, it's got to be the Earth. I want to see a rainbow... Maybe a big waterfall that's making a rainbow with its spray. And as for the sky...well, I like the sunset.)

He righted the table he'd upturned, holding it as gently as he could in order to keep from scratching the tatami. He repositioned each of the floor cushions, placing his, Yasuko's, and Taiga's on the floor. He put the TV remote on the right side and lined it up with the corner.

(A red sunset. The sun will be golden, and the edges of the ashy clouds will shine like they're burning. Under those clouds, there'll be rain coming down. And we'll have a really big, absolutely huge table set...on the beach... No, it's got to be on a savanna. On a sunset savanna's grassy plain, right in the middle. There'll be a waterfall off in the distance, and it'll make a rainbow, and rhinos and giraffes will be walking around leisurely.)

He wiped the table down until it was sparkling.

(The tablecloth will be bright white, for sure.)

He whipped the cloth he was wiping with, making it flutter. Ryuuji could see the tablecloth that would puff up with the hot winds. In the distance, the grassy ocean that broke into waves and the cries of the far-off beasts and the

fluttering of birds' wings—on the TV stand, where he could pick them up whenever he felt like it, stood several Takasu sticks. He took one and traced around the bottom of the TV. The small bits of dust that had gathered from the static electricity came away with gusto. Ryuuji grinned.

(Aperitifs. First, we'll bring out sweet fruit liquor. Plum liquor... No, that's too normal. Strawberry or something, instead. Maybe fig would be good. And small glasses that let the red light of the sunset shine through.)

Ryuuji crawled on his hands and knees to the edge of the TV stand. Like a veteran hunter sighting his prey, his eyes lit up. What he was after was the area around the wall socket where the cables were entwined behind the TV. No matter how carefully he cleaned, dust always accumulated there.

There there there. Ryuuji bared his teeth. He poked around with the Takasu stick and got the dust that was easy to see, but the real challenge was yet to come. Ryuuji yanked all the cords from the outlet in the wall, skillfully reeling them in. The fluffy dust bunnies that had been in hiding tumbled forth, and he quickly wiped them away with his towel.

(And then the soup and hors d'oeuvres. Wait...I can't just serve them one at a time, though.)

Taiga was sure to pout and would probably complain—*there's mosquitos, it smells like animals*, "There's poop from something over there! I won't allow this! Ryuuji! Travel back through time and clean it up before I ever see it!"

Minori would be sitting next to her. "But they're animals, they poop whenever they want to."

Her eyes would stop on Ryuuji as he got up, and she would leave her seat to come help him. Meanwhile, Ami would have a Chanel bag resting on her knees. Despite her pretty face, she would say something terribly spiteful and twisted.

"Oh deaaar, Minori-chan! You're! So! Kind! ♥ Isn't that kind of suspicious? Why, aren't you the suspicious pair?"

"I got here in time! Sorry for being late! I was so busy with student council work! Oh!"

"It's fine, Kitamura, just keep your clothes on. Kushieda, don't make a big deal

about the curry and don't say it looks like poop!" It seemed Haruta really wanted to eat curry. Noto looked somewhat restless—ah, he was worried about Kashii and Kihara, who sat next to Ami. Really, he could just try talking to them.

Dust could even build up between the metal tongs of a plug and then ignite from static electricity. Ryuuji had heard that could cause house fires. Sitting cross-legged by the wall outlet, he held the Takasu stick tight and swept up every last speck of dust with masterful skill.

The wind crossing the savanna would tousle the back of his hair. He would turn and see the infinite, grassy field leading to the two-bedroom apartment.

French? Italian? Chinese or maybe Japanese food? Maybe it would be a large pot filled with boiled taro that would actually get everyone excited. Vapor would rise intensely from the bamboo steamers lined up in a row. He would steam little bits of dim sum to death. There would be pasta rolling with meatballs and gratin with cheese layered so thick that it couldn't be cut through. Crispy acqua pazza. Bavarian cream that would overflow from the bowl. A cake tower decorated with mimosa flowers. Ryuuji would even make white rice and, after all was said and done, he couldn't leave out the curry. Haruta would thank him with applause.

There would even be a spot for Kanou Sumire at that huge table. She would arrive with a heavy-looking trunk, and Kitamura would stand up to help her. Their teacher Koigakubo Yuri would show up too, and they'd tease her for being all dressed up. Inko-chan would be perched next to a dish, and even the Takasus' landlady would be present. Of course, so would Yasuko.

Showing up in a foreign car—or at least pretending to—Aisaka Rikurou would saunter in on foot, accompanied by Yuu, whom he'd never met. Taiga's mother and her new husband and impending baby would arrive. Yasuko's mother and father would be there, too. And, with a magazine stuffed in front of his stomach and a glittering Rolex on his wrist, Ryuuji's dad would be there as well. Even the people he'd parted with in the past and hadn't seen again—even people he had yet to meet—they would all be there.

Everyone would be at Ryuuji's table.

Everyone would open their mouths wide and laugh with joy. And because everyone in Ryuuji's world would be there, Taiga, more beloved to him than anyone, would be laughing, too. And if Taiga were laughing, then Ryuuji would laugh louder than anyone else.

The people Taiga loved—all of them—would be there, and they would be laughing. That was how it had to be. He wanted his and Taiga's future to be like that. There was only one thing Ryuuji wished for in the world, and it was that.

“Okay!”

He wiped around the wall socket until it was immaculate. He turned over the towel and wiped the TV stand until it squeaked. He went back to the sink and washed out the towel, wrung it out hard, and scrubbed at the sink. He went on his knees and wiped the floor. He washed the towel again and wrung it out.

“I'm doing it!”

Ryuuji got on all fours in the hallway that was so short it was suffocating and put the towel down on the floorboards. *Here we go.* “Start!” He raced down the hall with the rag. He wiped down the corners of the kitchen, changed direction and backtracked, with his arms outstretched like wipers to swab down the walls as he went.

What was wrong with having dreams? What was so sinful about having hopes? He wouldn't let a single person fall behind. He wouldn't give up. The mass destruction he and Taiga feared would absolutely never come. He would show Taiga the world he had seen as he flew through the skies.

But before that could happen, there were things he needed to do.

“Rice...”

Ryuuji picked up the hard grain of rice that had dug into his knee and bit his lip hard. He, Ryuuji, would need to take in all the pain and sorrow here. Could he do that? Would he falter?

Eyes unflinching, he stared at his destination. If he could compare himself to a dragon racing through the heavens, then there was nothing for him to fear.

Chapter 3

Only a few traces of snow remained at the bases of the street-side trees, but bands of elementary school students had already done their damage, poking at it until the snow grew muddied with dirt and started to melt. Snowballs that could hardly be called pristine were gathered at the bottom of the tree planted in front of Taiga's condo entrance. The variously sized balls were lined up together—large, medium, small, and mini. Ryuuji looked at the “mini” one, and his lips warped into a smirk. They were shaped a bit more like beans than snowballs.

The cold air that morning seemed cleaner than normal, possibly because of the overnight snow shower. Far out of the children's reach, bright white caps of snow perched on top of eaves and streetlamps, but their fate was sealed by the blue sky and bright sun. The edges melted first, falling in large drips to create scattered puddles on the asphalt.

Ryuuji avoided the water as he walked in long strides under the Zelkova trees. Eventually, he spotted the person waving at him from the corner of the crosswalk.

“Taaakaaasuuu-kun! Yo! Yo—”

“Ma!”

He lifted his hand and returned her greeting in earnest. He thought he heard a passing junior high school girl half-spit, half-mutter, “It's cold!” but when she saw Ryuuji's face, she just sped up and left him behind. Minori was at the crosswalk as usual, her cheeks red from the cold. She stood there with her sports bag over her shoulder, wrapped in her checked scarf, both her hands plunged into her peacoat pockets.

“I knew it, Taiga's not here. I thought she'd come here like she normally does, so I've just been hanging around waiting for her.” The wind scattered her hair, which stuck out slightly at her chin. She narrowed her eyes like she was looking at something blinding. “She didn't come back to the condo?”

“She didn't. I kind of hoped she would, so I stayed up until three...but then I

fell asleep. I think she'll come to school... If she doesn't, we'll be in a tight spot."

"Righty-o. What were you doing staying up till three?"

"I was cleaning the room and the kitchen drain and polishing the tarnish off the pots."

"Whoa... What's with that...?"

"I ate dinner, and then I tried to eat Taiga's chocolates but gave up."

"Oh, I tried that, too. My teeth felt like they were about to crack."

"In the end, I melted them in milk and had some hot chocolate."

"Hold up—what? That's a good idea. I'll copy you. You said you used milk? Did you actually get them to melt?"

"There was some weird oil floating on top, but it went away. I also kind of passed out..."

"What was Taiga even trying to feed us..."

They allowed the light to cycle in silence. At the next green, Ryuuji and Minori walked in step with each other. *It's so cold, but it's nice weather.* They made idle conversation for a few meters, but their only goal in doing so was using their voices.

"So, you're running away?"

"I am."

"Where to? Ahmin's villa? Are you just going to disappear together, never to be heard from again?"

"What're you saying? Are you actually worried we'd do that? You really must not trust me."

When his eyes met with hers, Minori seemed a bit flustered. She waved her hands at him vigorously. "It's because I'm worried!" she wailed. In other words...

"Then I wasn't completely wrong about you not trusting me..."

"I trust you, Takasu-kun, but I started rereading *The Poem of Wind and Trees*

because I was so anxious. If you haven't read it, I won't spoil it for you, but it's terrible! Or, here's something else, just think about that show *Skins*! I couldn't really get to sleep yesterday, and I started to way overthink things. I even remembered what Ahmin said. And what Kitamura-kun said, and what Taiga said, and what I said. There were all kinds of things I was thinking about..."

"What about the stuff I said?"

"The cold wiped it into oblivion... Actually, ahh...what was that about declaring your love at the epicenter of the world? I remember that. That even made Ahmin cry." Minori half-jokingly and half-seriously pursed her lips as she turned her face down. She rounded her back to look at her own toes and ended up going silent; she was thinking something over.

Ryuuji hesitated just for a bit before he addressed her back. "Hey, 'Minorin.'"

He used the corner of his bag to bump Minori's back. The bag shook a lot more than he thought it would, making a loud thump as it prodded at the back of her coat.

"Ngh...!" Minori turned around with an incredibly ridiculous expression. She looked like an upside-down candle melting from the flames of a grudge. Even Kira Kozuke no suke must have groaned when he was cut down on a snowy December day like this years ago.

"You've got a really terrifying look on your face right now..." Without thinking, Ryuuji accidentally told her what he really was thinking.

"How's that now?!" Minori wriggled herself around as she shrieked.

"But you promised me you'd keep looking forward. I promised that I'd keep believing in you while you did that. You're supposed to be looking forward, Minorin...I mean Kushieda."

"I guess so."

"Then don't just stand around thinking. Let's go. Let's get to the next thing—the next place we're going to is always going to be scary, but you've got to decide you'll go and get it done. That's what you taught me."

"Have you decided what you're going to do too, Takasu-kun?"

“I have. I’m going to run away and then come home.”

“And Taiga?”

“Taiga will, too. She’ll definitely come home. She’ll come back to where you and I and everyone else are. That’s the whole reason we’re running away.”

Ryuuji gave his finger a wide twirl and pointed at their feet. Minori’s head bobbed and swayed as she traced the path of his finger. Her face sprung up, and finally, a full, blinding smile bloomed over her face for the first time that day. In the bright morning rays, her wide-open eyes seemed to glitter more intensely than the sun.

“Okay, we’re about to be late! Let’s run for it!”

“What?! W-wait a sec!”

She started running down their usual road with long strides—nearly leaping, really. Ryuuji followed after her in a fluster. He couldn’t quite keep up in his sleep-deprived state, but when his breath leapt, the cold air that penetrated his chest felt good.

Another girl in the same uniform smiled and turned to Minori, *Oh, Kushieda-senpai, good morning!* Minori raised her hand, *Yo!* and exchanged a garbled answer with the girl. *You two sure are in good spirits,* the bicycling classmate said, laughing. “It’s all good!” “It’s all good!” the two of them said together, like Taiga said the day before.

“Hey, Takasu! You’re too fast! Wait for me, you’re going too fast!” Noto waved his hand widely as he ran. Ryuuji slowed his speed slightly to let him catch up. “Where’s Tiger?! You’re not with her today?!”

“Taiga had something she needed to do. She might already be at school.”

“I-I’m glad...so uh, you know, there was something—” In order to keep his glasses from slipping down, Noto held them with one hand as he kept pace with Ryuuji. He fumbled slightly with his words (which wasn’t cute). “Takasu, could you ask the master something but without letting him know it’s coming from me?”

“What is it?”

“Whether he got chocolates.”

“From whom?”

“I-It doesn’t matter! Hmph!” (He wasn’t cute.)

“Sorry, sorry, that was just a joke, I totally get it.” Ryuuji ran after Noto, trying to soothe his friend, who had taken offense and started running ahead. They had just made it through the school gate when they ran into someone else.

“Oh! What do we have here but a traitor?!” Noto exclaimed.

“Hmm? I was wondering who the military grunts doing laps were, but I see it’s just Noto-chi, Taka-chan, and Kushieda. Yo!” In his usual idiotic style, Haruta wore a grey parka hood that he had forced under his school jacket. His long hair had dried in the wintry air.

Noto crossed his hands in front of his chest and, with his legs working in tandem, jumped slightly to the side to signal his complete and utter rejection of Haruta. In a low voice that made his inferiority complex obvious, he groaned, “Youuuuuu traaaaaaiiiitoooooor!”

“What?! Stop name-calling! It wasn’t like I was hiding it~!”

“Tch, what a lewd aristocrat! Just go ahead and build your slimy, carnal tower of Babel while you slip and slide with that middle-class girl! You’ll get your divine punishment before long...!”

“Noto-chi~! Please wait! Please, you’ve got to believe me, I’m pure as the virgin snow! I haven’t done any carnal sliding, I’m telling you, she hasn’t let me do anything!” Haruta dashed sorrowfully after Noto.

“Haruta-kun has a girlfriend?! Seriously?! Wait a second! Come tell your uncle Minori your story!” Her eyes glittering at the scent of scandal, Minori also started chasing after Haruta.

“And she’s older, and kind of pretty! I can’t let it happen...!” Noto answered Minori in place of Haruta. “You could at least have told me ahead of time! You just suddenly appeared in front of me. Do you know what a shock that was?! I felt like I was being left behind! I felt like I’d been betrayed! Do you get that?!”

They all headed to the shoe cubbies, making a scene as they ran. Ryuuji gently

patted Noto from behind. “Noto, I’ve actually got something I need to get off my chest. So—”

“AHHHHHHHHHHHHH!” His friend leapt into the air. “It’s fine, I don’t want to know!”

Breaking into a sprint with terrific speed, Noto ran away. Well, if Ryuuji told Noto that he’d proposed to Taiga and she said yes, his friend really might die of indignation on the spot.

He ran up the stairs and sped through the school building’s entrance, only to hear Noto yell again, followed by a girl’s voice raised in complaint. “That hurt my ears! Was that you, Noto?!”

The sound really was chafing. Smoke almost seemed about to rise up from the soles of Noto’s shoes from the force of him spinning around. The girl standing before him raised one eyebrow coldly.

“You’re a nuisance!”

It was Kihara Maya. She raked up her smooth and straight long hair and pouted her glossy lips. She then buried her sullen chin in a purple scarf that had a slightly metallic sheen to it. It was flashy and didn’t seem to suit her.

“Y-you think I’m the one in the wrong?! Damn it, and you’re going around wearing a scarf like you’re that drag queen Miwa Akihiro!”

“What?! No way?! I don’t look anything like Miwa-san!”

Ryuuji pretended to cough to cover his laughter as he got to the shoe cubbies. Meanwhile, Maya frantically signaled for support.

“Umm, well, uh, well.” Toying with her long, curled, and soft hair, Kashii Nanako ambiguously tilted her head next to Maya.

“It’s okay, Maya!”

“Ami-chan...!”

They all turned around at the sound of Ami’s resonant voice. She seemed to have come to school with the other two.

“You’re not like Miwa-san, Maya! It’s just that your scarf is!”

“You serious?!”

It was a direct hit. Maya took off the scarf and put it in her bag. Haruta spoke up, possibly because he had a girlfriend now: “I think it’s nice! It kind of gives you a sense of mystique!”

“I don’t care what *you* think...”

Like a cat having a flehmen reaction, the bottom of Maya’s nose scrunched up as she watched Haruta go. Ryuuji put his shoes in an ecobag instead of in the shoe cubby. He started to follow after Noto and Haruta, then hesitated.

“Kihara, are you still on bad terms with Noto?” he asked.

“Have we ever been on good terms?”

“I guess not. Did you give Kitamura chocolates or anything?”

“What does that have to do with you, Takasu-kun?”

“You’re the one who said we’re fellows in arms, Kihara. Well, I’ve got something to report to you: I confessed.”

“Even though I said that I...hm? What? What?! Well, I didn’t give him any, but...actually, what?! What was that? In other words—basically, you mean to... Tiger?! AHHHHHHHHH!” Maya shrieked in a high-pitched voice. Her eyes glittered as she pounded on Nanako’s back. “Oh no, oh no, oh no, Takasu-kun and Tiger!”

“Gimme the deets!” Nanako burst into a grin. *Wait a sec, tell us more!* Ryuuji ran quickly up the stairs, the two girls making a commotion as they followed. When he turned back at the landing, he saw Ami and Minori talking behind him.

“Ahhh ahhh ahhh, everyone’s so happy... What’s going on with them?!”

“So, I just heard, but apparently Haruta-kun’s got a girlfriend... What’re we going to do about that?”

“Whaaaat?! No way?!”

“It must be the end of the century.”

“But we just started a new millennia... Ahh, how is it that even that idiot has one and I don’t?! I feel like I’m about to get depressed for reasons I don’t

comprehend...”

Ryuuji evaded the girls’ pursuit and opened the door of 2-C. “Yo, what up,” he greeted the new faces in order.

“Takasu, morning. We might have...a slight issue.” Kitamura sounded anxious.

There was no sign of Taiga in the classroom. During the morning homeroom, another teacher appeared in place of Koigakubo Yuri. Their first period started and then their second.

But Taiga still didn’t come.

The class representative apparently had to check with the homeroom teacher about announcements before class started every morning. Though Kitamura Yuusaku had a lot of things on his mind, he’d headed to the teacher’s office at the usual time that morning, but Koigakubo, their bachelorette teacher, had been called away to meet someone and wasn’t at her desk. *It couldn’t be*, Kitamura thought, but he said there hadn’t been a way for him to confirm whether she’d been meeting with the Aisakas.

“Do you think it’s weird?”

Ryuuji didn’t know who said that, but that utterance caused the dam to break. Whispers started to fill class 2-C after their third hour of mandated self-study. Normally, they would be having their English class, which their homeroom teacher was in charge of. However, their teacher never appeared, and a different teacher dropped in and told them to self-study. *Why?* they asked, but the teacher closed class 2-C’s door, decisively ignoring their questioning voices.

“I wonder what happened to Yuri-chan?”

“She’s not taking a vacation, right? What could she be doing?”

“I wonder if she’s sick. But if that happened, they could have announced it to us.”

“I heard earlier that class A had to self-study their whole second period during Yuri-chan’s English class.”

“Come to think of it, when I said Tiger still hadn’t come during morning attendance, they just said ‘We know.’”

That’s weird. Ryuuji didn’t even open his English textbook as he grabbed the edge of his desk. A strange sweat broke out on his palms.

“Takasu, is Tiger out today?”

“No, she’s supposed to come. She said she would,” he finally managed to grumble. He couldn’t answer the question that came after that, *I wonder if it’s related to Yuri-chan not being here?*

Ryuuji was scared, too. What would he do if their brief parting the other day at that crosswalk really was their last moment together? He’d thought that going back home would give Taiga’s mother a sense of relief, and let them prepare, so when an opening came, it would be easier to run away. Maybe that had been naive of him.

Have a good life—what if, with that meager phrase, Taiga just disappeared? *This is serious*, Ryuuji thought as he stared at the packed book bag hanging from the hook of his desk.

“Quiet! The other classes are in session!” Kitamura warned them like the rep he was, but he was lacking his usual composure. Minori opened and closed her flip phone over and over again, and Ami had been touching her fingers to her lips the whole time. After making a scene trying to get something out of Ryuuji just that morning, Maya and Nanako also seemed to have inferred something was up and were currently silent.

Noto turned around to mouth, “You okay?” Haruta hadn’t even dozed off, and his head was upright.

“Maybe Yuri-chan’s turned in her announcement that she’s retiring after a spur-of-the-moment elopement?”

“I have a spur-of-the-moment announcement for everyone. I’ve...bought a condo.”

“Are you really going there?!” Several people laughed at someone’s joke.

“Actually...maybe Tiger did something bad again?”

In that moment, everyone in the class went silent. They still recalled the time when the third years had rushed into their class and clamored, “The Palmtop Tiger is on a rampage!” That event hadn’t just scarred Ryuuji and his close friends.

“In that case, it wouldn’t be a laughing matter.”

“She’s already been suspended once, maybe this time she’s really out...?”

“No way...but that would be so bad! Kushieda, what do you know about it?!” a girl asked Minori, and Minori seemed troubled as she turned her eyes to Ryuuji.

“Taiga is—”

Ryuuji raised his head and said, “She’s not going to disappear. Not ever! I won’t let her do that!” He was trying just as hard to convince himself of that.

*Taka-chan, what’s the matter, why are you getting out of your seat—*came Haruta’s anxious voice. “So it’s weird enough to make that guy worry!” The class was reduced to even more confusion, and that was when it happened.

Clatter. The front door opened.

“To your seats. Everyone, get to your seats. I have something I need to speak with you about.”

Their teacher, who had been nowhere to be found—the bachelorette homeroom teacher Koigakubo Yuri (age 30)—finally appeared before them. She held a hand towel to her face, sniffing, as if to hide her smudged makeup. Her voice was hushed and her shoulders shook.

Every single person in class 2-C was at a loss for words as Taiga entered the classroom after the bachelorette, holding her pale, small face in her hands. Every single one of them understood that something terrible had happened to Aisaka Taiga.

*Taiga—*Ryuuji’s eyes opened, glowing softly. *You’re late, you dumb girl! I can’t do this anymore, it’s over! Over, I tell you! I’m slaughtering everyone!* Of course, he hadn’t snapped, only released the breath he’d been holding. *She’s finally here,* he thought.

“Aisaka-san, do you want to tell them? Or do you want me to...?”

“P-please tell them for me...uh, ugh, uwh...” Taiga was clearly faking her distress. Ryuuji saw no sign of her mother beyond the door Taiga had left open. He grabbed the bag that he left hanging on his desk.

“Then I’ll tell them. Everyone, please listen.” Koigakubo had probably been crying the whole time. She raised her bright red face. “Aisaka-san needs to move because of family circumstances, so she is going to be leaving school.”



Whaaaat?! No way?! The students raised their voices in shock. Standing behind the teacher, Taiga slowly lowered the hands covering her face. Ryu-u-ji, her rosy lips voicelessly moved. Her tough, beautiful face was defiant with arrogance, and she shamelessly raised her chin. She had her coat and a bag across her body, and in one of her hands, she—good job. Ryuuji nodded at her. She was holding her shoes in a plastic bag, just as she was supposed to.

“I know everyone is probably shocked. I also haven’t really been able to accept this—”

Taiga raised the thumb of her free hand and then pointed it at the hallway. Ryuuji once again nodded at her. A question mark seemed to float above the heads of the students of 2-C as they followed these motions, which their teacher couldn’t see.

Koigakubo, the bachelorette, told them from where she stood in front of the teacher’s podium, “I’ve been asking her mother to reconsider this whole time, but—”

She seemed oddly towering, almost like she was forming a wall between Taiga and Ryuuji. Ryuuji felt he would immediately be caught if he displayed any out-of-the-ordinary movements, but Taiga was already gradually shifting a little bit at a time towards the door, so he held his bag to his chest and tried to raise his butt from his seat.

“And Aisaka-san herself is so incredibly sad about this—” Koigakubo was crying fat tears again. She was clearly trying not to upset them, but to Ryuuji, just then, she was like the guardian deity of an impregnable iron wall. “As your teacher, I also wish I could have done more... I’m so sad that I don’t have enough power to protect you—”

Once the teacher was finished talking, Taiga would be returned to her mother’s side. Ryuuji slowly pulled his body away from his desk until his butt was in the air. All the muscles in his body shook. He had to go now, had to leave now, but couldn’t get caught.

Then suddenly something happened behind him.

“Tigeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeer!”

A shriek echoed through the class, and Ryuuji automatically jumped up and flipped around. Haruta, the one who cried out, stood up. His eyes rolled back into his head until only the whites showed. He had the shadow of death upon him. *Ahhhh!* While the girls screamed around him, the idiot twitched as he dramatically knocked over his seat and desk, swooning to the floor like a marionette cut from its strings.

“H-Haruta-kun?!” Koigakubo’s gaze was nailed to the collapsed idiot.

“What’s wrong, Haruta?!” Noto ran over with enough momentum to practically slide to Haruta’s side. His black-rimmed glasses were horribly askew. “Teacher, this is terrible, Ms. Koigakubo! Haruta fainted!”

“Why?! What happened?! Is he okay?!”

Koigakubo climbed down from the lectern, weaved between the confused students, and ran over to Haruta’s side, where he was splayed on the ground. She got to her knees and checked that he was breathing, then hesitated slightly before shaking him. “S-s-someone go to the office and get another teacher! We need to get him to the nurse’s office!” she yelled as she looked around at the students’ faces.

Ryuuji and Taiga snatched at each other’s hands.

For a moment, Koigakubo Yuri thought she’d seen a hallucination of the two madly dashing as fast as they could into the hallway. Then she realized it wasn’t an illusion but reality.

“I’m sorry, Yuri-chan. We’re actually the Haruta theatrical group...” The idiot who should have been stretched out on the ground apologetically opened his eyes a crack. The others who’d played along with the scenario Haruta spontaneously devised lowered their heads to their teacher in the same way, one after another, as if to say, *Sorry, teach*. However, it was too late for apologies.

“W-w-waiiiiiiiiiiiiiit?!”

Kushieda Minori ran from the classroom with light steps. Kawashima Ami ran the opposite direction. “Don’t have any clue what’s going on, but guess we’ll go, too,” Maya and Nanako said as they followed after Ami. Other students also

yelled, one after another, “Escape!” “Let’s all go!” “Actually, what is this?!” Getting carried away, they kicked away their chairs and scattered as they ran from the classroom like juvenile fish escaping from a net. The layered sounds of their footsteps came from everywhere until it was impossible to separate out whose were whose.

Of course, it was only twelve months until their college exams. There were some students sitting at their seats with their textbooks spread open, unaware of the state of affairs. There were students who froze as they watched the situation, confused and unable to grasp what was happening. There were some who hadn’t been paying attention to start with and some who tried to reel in their disorderly classmates, crying “Everyone get a hold of yourselves!”

“Wait... Did they... Did they just stage a mass revolt against me?” As Koigakubo babbled in confusion, someone appeared in front of her.

“I’m really so sorry!” Kitamura Yuusaku lowered his head at a steep angle. “We are really incredibly sorry for causing you so much trouble. We’re just stupid children... I’m sorry...”

“Ah ah ah—” Koigakubo grabbed Kitamura by the shoulders and shook him as hard as she could. “If apologies could fix these sorts of things, we wouldn’t need the police! I won’t ever ever ever ever eeeeeveeeeer accept this kind of childish behavior from you! I underestimated you idiot kids! I’m going to catch every single one of you!”

“Teach, look!”

Someone showed the scrap of notebook paper Ryuuji left on his desk to Koigakubo. *Ms. Koigakubo*, read the first line. When Koigakubo looked at that writing, she suddenly turned her gaze to the hallway. She grabbed it and threw aside her wet hand towel. The rubber of the nursing sandals she was using as indoor slippers slapped against the floor as she ran from the classroom, her skirt fluttering.

She grabbed a boy on the landing of the stairs and then dragged him along as she sprang into the staffroom. “They escaped! Please help me catch them, catch everyone!” she cried at all the teachers within.

Koigakubo pushed her catch at the first male teacher who stood up and didn’t

even knock on the waiting room door as she dashed to it and threw it open.

“Th-they ran away!”

“...”

Clunk. Taiga’s mother, who had been sitting on the sofa in the waiting room, dropped the teacup in her hand. She stared at Koigakubo’s face as the teacher hovered on the verge of crying. “I feel like I’m about to go into labor from the shock...”

“Eep?!”

“I’m joking. Well, didn’t I tell you?! I said I’d just leave with her! I can’t believe this happened... What an idiot I have for a daughter! Where does she think she’s going to run to?!”

“Please read this.”

What Koigakubo offered her was the scribbled note that Ryuuji had left on his desk. It read: *“Ms. Koigakubo, I’m sorry. Taiga isn’t the type to just let herself be taken away. Please believe in us. I’ll make sure her mother hears from her by tomorrow.”*

Taiga’s mother’s light-colored eyes scowled as if to say, *What is this?* She glared at the homeroom teacher.

That fearless gaze, that way she bites her lip and scrunches them when she’s frustrated, really is exactly the same, Koigakubo thought.

“Takasu-kun isn’t the kind of boy who’d break a promise. I’m sure they have a plan. Of course, we will do everything in our power to go after them. We will find Aisaka-san. But please believe him... Please believe me and at least wait until tomorrow, won’t you?”

“I don’t know Takasu-kun, and I don’t know you either, but I do know my daughter. She’s not the type of kid to obediently come back to me! She betrayed me yesterday, and now she’s done it again. What are you telling me I’m supposed to believe in?!”

“I may be overstepping my bounds, but you can’t fix a relationship immediately once trust has been broken. You need time. You and your

daughter need time.”

“I’m her mother!”

“I’m her teacher!”

For a moment, the two women went silent and stared at each other like they were breathing fire. However, Koigakubo immediately lowered her face and took a step back.

“I’m sorry, but I choose to believe in the kids. I’m sure that they believe in me, too. I will put my eight years as a teacher on the line for them. Eight years may be nothing in the scheme of things, but to me, teaching is my whole life. I’m sure they’ll come home on their own. Please, believe in those kids.”

“They ran away from you, right in front of your eyes. They just betrayed you, too. You still believe in them, despite that?”

“Yes. Because I know that *they* believe that I believe in them. They ran away because they’ve put their trust in me. He promised they would come home, so I choose to believe him—I’ll believe in his promise, our bond, and our connection. Believing in them is my job.”

“In that case, why don’t you put that in writing for me? You can even write it on this scrap of paper. If my daughter doesn’t come home before tomorrow, you’ll quit being a teacher. You couldn’t possibly put your trust in a flimsy little scrap of wastepaper— isn’t that right, Ms. Koigafuchi?”

“My name is Koi-ga-ku-bo!”

Koigakubo flipped over Ryuuji’s note on the marble table. Though she didn’t notice it herself, her ballpoint pen shook as she wrote. She signed it, dated it, and as she did so, bet her teaching career on the backside of a scrap of paper. This little note was like a cliff’s edge of unemployment she would be blown off of. *Please, Takasu-kun, please, Aisaka-san*, she said quietly.

“I know just enough that I’m sure Taiga won’t trust me. I’ve done enough to make sure of that. Aisaka and I have both tried to hurt each other, and we’ve ruined Taiga’s life in the process. I wasn’t a good parent, and I can’t become one, even now.” While watching Koigakubo’s hand move, Taiga’s mother seemed to grumble to herself. “But right here and now, I can’t just leave her

and go home.”

The reason why the person in front of Koigakubo’s eyes seemed like an impudent seventeen or eighteen-year-old student was definitely because the mother moved her lips in the exact same way as her daughter. Koigakubo put the pen down and once again looked up at the deeply chiseled face of the frustrated but elegant woman in the very expensive suit, who wore high heels despite being pregnant. Suddenly, anguished wrinkles appeared on her forehead.

“Ugh...so if I give birth on the spot, you’ll deliver it, right...?”

“You’re kidding, right...?”

“I am.”

“I was actually scared, please stop! You’re fine, right?! ”

“I think so.” As Taiga’s mother looked haughtily at the teacher and spoke with a teasing tone, Koigakubo thought, again, that she looked exactly like her daughter.

The escapees of class 2-C were caught before third period ended or made their way back to the classroom on their own.

Around the same time, still not knowing that their homeroom teacher had bet her teaching career on them, Ryuuji and Taiga had long since jumped out of a window, run outside, cleared the fence, and escaped from the school. They were running on side roads where the public’s eyes wouldn’t follow them.

“Okay, in the one-in-a-million chance we get stopped and asked, ‘Aren’t you supposed to be in school?!’ we tell them that we’re late and heading over right now... Taiga?! ”

“ ... ”

“Taiga! You can’t just check out like that!”

“Huh...”

Ryuuji stretched out his hand to Taiga’s shoulder where she was running next

to him and gave her a small poke. Her eyes didn't focus as she simply moved her legs.

"That hurt?!" She returned the poke with the same force, mostly unconsciously. "Well, I'm trying not to think much about anything right now."

"Why?!"

"When I think too hard about things, I end up getting really clumsy and doing things like pushing you over into a river or something. That's why I was thinking of just going into a trance. All I've got to do is stick by you and avoid tripping or getting lost. Make sure you do a good job guiding me to Dimhuahua's villa, got it?"

"You can't do that! You need to actually be thinking, too! Actually, we're about to be in big trouble—no, we already *are* in big trouble."

Ryuuji grabbed Taiga's elbow and steered them into a narrow alleyway. The truth was, he'd already settled on an escape route. They wouldn't use the nearest station but would make their way to the villa changing trains and taking a roundabout route to get there. And as for their destination, that was—

"A problem?! What problem?!"

"When I got home yesterday, Yasuko had run away from home!"

She didn't respond. When he checked Taiga's face to see if she was back in her trance, he saw she was so startled she was at a loss for words. Her eyes and mouth were wide open as she looked back at Ryuuji, and she stopped running. She grabbed Ryuuji firmly by the elbow.

"Wait...a second."

Her eyelashes fluttered in confusion, and she kept blinking. *Wait a second*, she groaned, repeating herself. She rubbed her pale forehead furiously with the back of her hand.

"Ya-chan ran away from home? And she did it...because she felt hurt from what you said yesterday?"

"I think so."

"Y-you think so?! We're trying to run away right now, you know! If Ya-chan is

running, then...you might never see her again...”

“I might not.”

“I don’t want that to happen!” Ryuuji watched quietly as Taiga raised her voice. “I decided that I would live with you, just the two of us, but that doesn’t mean that I want to hurt Ya-chan or abandon her! I know we just made a break for it, but after we run, even Ya-chan...if Ya-chan wants it, then I want her to be with us, too! I thought that’s how things would end up, but us trying to run away... I know we’re trying to run away from home like this... But...”

Taiga was practically in shock. Now that things hadn’t gone as she expected, she dropped her gaze. She was frightened.

“Wh-what should we do...?!”

She might have understood for the first time what it was she was actually trying to do.

“What do you want to do?” Ryuuji asked Taiga, grabbing her hand. Taiga might have been surprised by the firmness in his voice. She lifted her eyes and peered into Ryuuji’s face, searching for something. She started to look anxious, like she was thinking that if she answered incorrectly, she would end up being left behind. “There’s no wrong answer, so think it over. What’s the number one thing you want to do?”

“That’s—that’s obvious, isn’t it? I want to be with you! I want to be happy with you, but I want Ya-chan to be happy, too! I know what I’m saying is stupid, b-but you know—”

“I do. I get it now. I’m not going to give up on either—on either living with you or on Yasuko. In order to do that, we need to do something. There’s a place that we need to go, and it’s not Kawashima’s villa. Will you come with me?”

Taiga nodded without so much as hesitating. “Of course I’ll go! If you say you’re going, I’ll believe in you and go!”

Chapter 4

It was the third time he'd been here.

Whenever he stood in front of this gate, Ryuuji had never been alone.

The first time, it had been dark and he couldn't see anything. He was enveloped by the gentle sound of a heartbeat. He had no thoughts as he drifted, so it wasn't like he had any memories of that time. That had been eighteen years ago, the first day of fall and the end of summer, at 2 AM—the darkest hour. Ryuuji had been a life without a name, his body nothing more than an organized clump a few centimeters long. As she ran through this gate into the world at the dead of night, Yasuko was also nothing more than a child at the age of sixteen.

The second time, they hadn't gone through the gate. Standing in a park a short distance away, Yasuko and Ryuuji had simply stared at the gate for a long period of time. He'd grown bored of riding on the swings and tired of waiting for so long. *Moom*, he thought he remembered saying, pulling on her pale hand. He slowly got Yasuko to tear her eyes away from this gate.

And now, this would be the third time.

Taiga was by Ryuuji's side.

"This is it."

"This is it."

The two of them both swallowed their breaths.

Before they reached the station, they took a needlessly long route around to allow for the teachers who would be coming after them. They avoided the large terminals, purposefully made inconvenient transfers and, like normal people, got on the wrong train (because Taiga ran into a train at random on the platform), which ended up being an express (that part wasn't anyone's fault) and cost them a lot more time than they anticipated.

He probably made the right choice in giving up on his vague memories, relying on the house numbers as they walked instead. As he looked around at the

reality that was incredibly different from what he pictured in his mind, Ryuuji tasted the anxiety of a traveler wandering into another world's dungeon.

The entire area around the park he had considered using as a landmark had turned into a giant condominium. On the house-lined residential street, indistinguishable roads crossed his eyes like the lines of a go board, and the house numbers written on the utility poles were scattered at intervals. He went back and forth between the outer walls that looked like white stone and the deep green hedges of the labyrinth. Once late afternoon rolled around, and the brief midwinter sun started to slant down, they finally reached the place.

"Right. This...is it. It says Takasu on it."

Taiga hesitantly looked at the nameplate half hidden by the leaves of the trees reaching out from within the walls. She turned around. When faced by the simple truth that the Takasu name didn't come from his father, Ryuuji once again went silent. It was a bigger shock than he would have expected.

He'd always more or less assumed that the story Yasuko told him so often—"Your dad and I were tied together by fated love, but then he died. A tragedy!"—hadn't been the truth. Yasuko was a runaway, so she had no reason to purposefully take the Takasu family name. He didn't think she would have gone back to her maiden name if she was widowed, either. Whether she'd divorced the man or never married him in the first place, this only confirmed there had never been a father happily waiting for the bliss of Ryuuji's birth.

Even though he guessed as much, it was definitely still—

"What? What's with you? Why are you being so quiet?"

"Nothing... I'm just brooding over some stuff..."

"Do we have time for you to be hatching eggs?" Taiga demanded. The power of Ryuuji's imagination swept him easily in the direction of tragedy, but nodding flatly, Taiga pulled off the great feat of bringing him back to reality with her next words. "You're better off eating eggs than sitting on them."

R-right, Ryuuji agreed with her momentarily. ...*I guess?* He once again tilted his head.

"Breakfast aside, we really don't have time to be spacing out. You're going to

make up with Ya-chan, aren't you? That's why we came here, right? If you leave things as is after having an argument with Ya-chan like that, then I can't forgive you for running out back then..."

No, Taiga paused here.

"...then I can't forgive myself," she finished in a lowered voice that was still firm. She looked up at Ryuuji's face. Ryuuji understood it. The resolve that had brought him to stand next to Taiga in front of this gate was stronger than that.

"Ring the doorbell."

"I know... I'll do it now... I was just about to do it."

In truth, he was pitiful. He was nervous. Yasuko's resolve probably hadn't been shallow either when she brought Ryuuji here last time, and he knew the heaviness of the resolve she must have had for deciding not to return home for eighteen years.

He stopped the finger that he reached towards the doorbell button under the nameplate. If he just touched it slightly, his emotions would be soothed. He held back his breath as he repeated that to himself over and over.

"Well, right. You need to mentally prepare yourself for this."

A Buddha-like smile spread over Taiga's face. *Yeah, yeah*, she nodded along as she looked up at Ryuuji, who was so tense he looked like an ogre. With a gentle grip, she held his sweaty and secretly shaking hand.

"Taiga..."

Who in the world would have expected that Taiga, after everything that had happened, would be so nice? Ryuuji was strangely moved by the honest kindness that she had shown at this time. He felt almost like crying as he tried to squeeze Taiga's hand back.

"HRAGH!"

"NAHHHH?!"

SNAP! He heard the sound of destruction coming from his once-happy left hand.

“Practice is over, you oaf! Now, hurry up and ring the doorbell!”

Blue veins rose to her forehead, and suddenly they were in a midair arm wrestling match. With a ridiculous amount of power, Taiga tried to push Ryuuji’s hand towards the Takasu family’s doorbell. Ryuuji grit his teeth and held his ground, both sporting fierce looks on their faces as they pushed and pulled at each other’s gripped hands. Their fingers and wrists were making cricking and cracking sounds.

“You can’t just force me to do it! I-I have to do this in my own time!”

“Your time is up!”

“I need more time!”

“Well, I’m your phee-pheean-fiancée, so we’re one in body and soul now!”

“Ahhh! I said to stop, you idiot!”

Ryuuji guarded miraculously against Taiga’s other hand, which slithered up from the side like a snake. He firmly locked both his hands together and used all of his body weight to push against her.

“Thinking over things here isn’t going to help anyone!” Her out-of-place howl echoed through the quiet residential streets.

“That’s true, but there are a ton of things I need to think about!”

“Are those things going to resolve themselves if you just stand here all day?!”

“They won’t, but I want to get my thoughts in order a little more, and then—”

Mumble mumble mumble—Taiga mouthed something quickly, under her breath.

“Huh?!”

Like I said, I need mumble mumble mumble!

“I don’t know what you’re saying?!”

I mumble mumble mumble!

“Just say it out loud!”

“I! Need to use! The bathroooooooooom!”

SHRK. Ryuuji's left hand lost its match, overpowered by her confession that her actual goal was to meet her physiological need. He was in a dangerous spot just shy of the doorbell, but the bones in his fist struck the concrete wall.

"Ow! Ouch...!"

"Ahhh..."

Ryuuji wasn't the only one to shout. Taiga's face tensed up. She let go of his hand and dropped into a strange half-standing, half-sitting position. Like a doll, she held both her hands out rigidly and bobbed up and down. Now that she said it out loud, it seemed that her need felt more urgent. With the faint smile of one right at her breaking point, she muttered, "I feel like that just might've brought me to my limit..."

"I-Is this...an emergency situation...?!"

"Yeargh..."

Her voice became smaller and smaller. *Goodbye, cruel world, thanks for everything till now*—Taiga was fading rapidly from the real world. *Come what may*, Ryuuji thought desperately as he pressed the doorbell firmly. All kinds of thoughts were racing through his head—what was he going to say, how could he explain who he was, what kinds of people were Yasuko's parents, would he be able to accomplish what he decided to do, would they even trust him in the first place, actually, were these Takasus even Yasuko's actual parents? Innumerable possible outcomes went through his mind. He thought about all the terrible ways things could go and—well, actually, that was all he thought about. Now that he was at this point, the tip of his finger chilled from nerves. He was overcome by the power of "I need to use their bathroom," but that might have been a good thing in the end.

But...

"Oh, whoa, whoa, whoa, wait... What's going on..."

"No way..."

He had pressed it two, then three times, but hadn't gotten a response. *No way, no way*, Taiga groaned, like a chant. It didn't seem like anyone was home.

Ryuuji automatically looked down at Taiga's face. At some point her chant had changed to, *Nor-way*, but Taiga hadn't noticed and just continued to pray. *No-way, Nor-way, Nor-way...*

Of course. It was 3 PM on a weekday. If they had jobs, they would naturally be at work right now. Why hadn't they thought of that possibility?

"What do you want to do? They might not be home."

"Ahhh." She'd come back from Norway.

"Wh-wh-wh-what are we going to do... Seriously, hey, what do you want to do?!"

"Hey, now, don't you touch me." Taiga's demeanor changed. "Ha ha ha, don't you dare touch me, don't you dare lay a finger on me, ha ha ha ha!"

"Let's go back to Norway—no—I mean the railway!" said Ryuuji. "No, there was a convenience store on the way, so let's hurry and get back there!"

"Ahhhhh, I can't walk."

"I'll carry you! There's a Family Mart right over there! Don't lose hope!"

"Ahh ha ha, don't touch me please, aha ha haaa!"

Lit by the slanting midwinter sunlight, two suspicious shadows lengthened on the quiet residential street. Laughing while in a trance-like state was a girl in a duffel coat, and following her was a sadistic demon in a school uniform.

"Oh, excuse me..."

Society would have driven the value of not engaging with such people into anyone, especially the woman who now approached the Takasus' gate in a roundabout way, curving around to avoid the two as much as possible. Ryuuji bowed his head to her reflexively.

The woman glanced at the two from the side of her eye. Ryuuji, aware they both looked incredibly dodgy, pushed Taiga, who was in her "Nor-way, ha ha ha," state to the edge of the road. No matter what happened with Taiga, he would at least be her ally. She was his fiancée of one mind and body, and so he grimly prepared himself.

“Oh!”

“No way!”

Without thinking, the two of them raised their voices. The woman suddenly jolted, her shoulders shaking to a deplorable degree as she ran through the Takasus’ now-unlocked gate in a fluster. She was about to lock the gate behind her and just leave them.

“P-please wait! Um!” Ryuuji suddenly called out to her. He and Taiga looked at each other. *Right. This is her.*

She wore incredibly mundane dark grey wool pants, walking shoes, and a beige down coat. She carried a nylon bag from a drug store. Though the bag seemed normal, like something any place would sell, and her clothes screamed normal, forty or fifty-year-old “middle-aged woman,” the skin bordering her short-cropped hair seemed unusually youthful and smooth. Her mouth seemed springy, like a young girl’s, and her cheeks were plump and fresh—the word “genes” very clearly came into Ryuuji’s mind.

This person had to be Yasuko’s mother. The moment he thought that, their faces seemed to superimpose on each other. The shape of their eyes and the way the inner corners were set somewhat far apart made them look so alike it couldn’t have been a coincidence—of course.

When he called out to her, she turned her gaze towards Ryuuji’s tense face. The person, who seemed to be in a hurry to get away, stopped for a moment. He needed to say something. He took in a breath.

“Would you please let us borrow your bathroom?!”

“He’s Ya-chan’s son! Huh?! This is when you want to mention that?!”

“What...?! But you...!”

They’d both shouted completely different things. But Taiga was the one at her limit in this situation, and Ryuuji was resolute.

“Would you please let her use your bathroom?! I’m so sorry to suddenly spring this on you!” He stood firm on feet that seemed about to quiver. “I-I’m Ta...”

As his words caught and his back trembled, he realized that a small hand was patting him in support. Guided by the warmth of that hand, he exhaled all his breath at once and then inhaled.

“I’m! Takasu Ryuuji! I’m Takasu Yasuko’s son!”

He pulled out the watch and photo from his pocket. His hand shook to a strange extent, and he handed those over to the person on the other side of the gate.

God, will this go well? Will my prayers reach you?

The woman first looked at the watch and then at the picture of Yasuko with her large belly next to a man in a mobster-like suit. Ryuuji could tell her grip loosened in the same way he often saw from the main characters of TV dramas. Her bags thumped down to her feet from her hands.

“You’re...” He saw her lips quake as she squeezed out her voice that was delicate to a painful degree. “Where did you come from... How did you get here...?”

“This is my girlfriend! Some things happened, so she had to come with me and—”

“Wh-where is Yasuko?!” Her yell was almost a shriek.

Ryuuji pushed Taiga, who was on the verge of breaking loose, forward.

“There are many things we would like to tell you! A lot, really, there are so many things...but before that, please let her use your bathroom!”

“That’s a scam! Don’t let them in! You let them in?! You idiot!”

Even Ryuuji could tell the incredibly loud voice on the other side of the phone belonged to the head of the Takasu household. Yasuko’s father—the person who would be Ryuuji’s grandfather—came home about five minutes later, right as Taiga came out of the bathroom with an expression between relief and apology.

“What is this?! Who came from where to do what... AH?!”

“Whoa...”

“Ugh...”

Thump! The man threw the door open, and it hit the backs of Ryuuji and Taiga’s heads as they stood there in the entryway, too awkward to come all the way in. They both held their heads, moving in unison. Of course, they were so in sync because they were of one mind and body that they both wailed as they fell to their knees on the tiles of the entryway.

“Honey, um, it’s these children...”

“Wh-which one is it?!”

“The boy said he’s Yasuko’s...”

“Wh-wh-wh-wha—”

It was an incredibly normal house.

The walls and the floors were made from bright wood. A shoehorn hung on a practical black string in the entryway. The snow from the day before might have also come down in that area, since there were still two umbrellas out. There were dried flowers on the wall, along with postcards and other things put up with a clip under the calendar. On the other side of the hallway was a doorway with a navy curtain, and behind that stood the living room, where the sunlight was pouring in. It was a very normal house. Even in that moment, Ryuuji felt like he might see a girl with Yasuko’s face come out in a sailor uniform, flipping the curtain forcefully as she ran noisily in her slippers.

That house had a mother, father, and daughter who would be visited by the regular passage of time that brought morning, afternoon, and night. But Ryuuji also knew that, at the same time, that that “normal” was long in the past.

“I’m...I am Takasu Ryuuji. Taiga, can you stand up?”

He grabbed Taiga’s elbow as she nodded and the two of them gradually got up. He didn’t know how to talk to the suit-wearing old man who he’d just found out was a licensed tax accountant in an office nearby.

“This is Aisaka Taiga. She had to come here with me today because of some circumstances.”

Taiga ambiguously lowered her head slightly. That had probably taken

everything she had in her to do.

“And this. He brought it with him. It’s Yasuko, isn’t it?” Yasuko’s mother brought the watch and picture to the man. Still standing stiffly in the entryway, Yasuko’s father was dumbstruck as he looked between the objects. He did that for an incredibly long time and then raised his face. The spouses’ eyes met without a word.

For the clincher, Ryuuji pulled out the phone store note from his pocket and thrust it at them. In Yasuko’s handwriting was written the address and phone number of the house they were currently standing in.

“This ugly, bubbly handwriting...has to be Yasuko’s, hasn’t it?”

“It’s Yasuko’s... She’s still writing the kanji characters for the place she lived in since she was born wrong. This has to be her. Then, this boy really is Yasuko’s...”

Ryuuji also produced his student ID, proving he was named Takasu Ryuuji. He didn’t have any other identifying documentation at the time. All that remained was to fully illuminate the already brightening truth.

“Yasuko—my mother ran away from home yesterday! She abandoned me!”

The photo, note, student ID, and everything else fell from the married couple’s hands. Just as the watch was about to hit the ground, Taiga miraculously caught it. “Got it...”

“I can’t let her do that, so I came here! My mother is an adult, so I need her to stop being a runaway and to come home. I need her to come back here. To come home. I can’t forgive myself for being the reason Yasuko couldn’t come back to her mother and father. I used to think it would have been better if I’d never been born, but—” He didn’t know if his words would get through to them, but Ryuuji had to try. “Right now, I’m alive and have someone I love. I have someone who’s starting to love me. Because I was born, because I’m alive right now, I’m definitely...happy.”

He grabbed Taiga’s hand; his own shook. Taiga firmly gripped Ryuuji’s fingers back. At the entrance of the house Yasuko had run away from, he wasn’t alone.

“So...you might think I’m an idiot for suddenly appearing at your doorstep and suddenly telling you this, and you might think I’m just some strange guy, but! I

don't want to be a weight dragging Yasuko down! For the sake of the person who is here and loves me right now...for Taiga's sake, because she loves me, for the sake of all my friends, for my mom's sake, I want to be happy with who I am now! I don't want to think that someone who loves me needs to pay a price for my existing! I want my existence to be completely acknowledged as I am! I don't want anyone sacrificing themselves! So I came here...in order to show Yasuko the way home, I came all the way here!"

"We're not part of a weird cult or anything," Taiga chimed in once Ryuuji finished his incoherent clamoring. "He really means it. He's kind of a dangerous guy...but he can't help that. Because he's Ya-chan's son after all, he really—his heart is really, seriously, completely, absolutely full of love."

She understood him. A tear fell from her eyes.

"Can you really show Yasuko the way home?" Yasuko's mother muttered. "Yasuko so wanted to have you and meet you. She cried so many times when she got in trouble with us, because we were against it...and then she disappeared. Will you be able to bring Yasuko home this time?"

As Ryuuji nodded as vigorously as he could, a regular *tick tick tick* echoed from the watch. Even on that day, the watch Taiga grasped in her hand was still keeping time. The hands of the watch Yasuko took from this house, and that Ryuuji brought home, continued to move.

He was sure he could turn back time in this house. Just a little longer—just a little bit more. Ryuuji's sharp eyes looked down at the world he wished for and swam through the clouds.

The message they ended up sending had been their second option.

"I wonder if we'll be punished for this." Still sighing from worry, Yasuko's mother—he just couldn't bring himself to call Takasu Sonoko, the baby-faced fifty-five-year-old, "Grandma"—wandered in and out of the kitchen. Takasu Seiji, who at fifty-seven was also too young to be called "Grandpa," sat down on a stool by the counter that contained the sink. The man, whose name shared the same final kanji character as Ryuuji's, seemed to have nothing to do.

“All we can do is wait, right? Calm down a little, please. We can’t do anything about something we already sent.”

“If we do get punished for this, I think it’ll be on me. I’m the one who did it, after all.” Shameless as usual, Taiga was right at the center of the Takasus’ kotatsu and had thrust herself deep under the blankets in the best seat to watch the TV. She still held her phone in her hand so she could reply whenever she needed to. Like an animal of the feline persuasion, she turned defiant and rested her head on the tabletop.

“If words can affect reality, then I’m headed straight down,” Ryuuji said.

He sat behind Taiga with his knees folded under himself, like a vassal or manager, or if anything, a hit man. Ryuuji had been the one who came up with the message, and he intended to take full responsibility for it. Only an hour had passed since they sent it, but all of them were restlessly pointing their ears to the front door.

Ryuuji’s been in an accident and was hurt really bad, just come over.

He had Taiga use her phone to send that incredibly cursed fake message to Yasuko. Their first idea had been a little tamer—*There’s no house at the address anymore.* The third was *He’s been put in protective custody and can’t go home without someone to come get him.* They rejected the first on the grounds she would probably ignore it, and Sonoko struck down the third with a single sentence: “Then he’d be at the police station.” No one could come up with another idea, so they decided on the extreme second option.

“It’s almost exactly like a scam message. Wouldn’t any normal person think it’s too suspicious to be real?”

“I left a missed call, too. I think she’ll fall for it.”

“She wouldn’t call all the nearby hospitals or something, would she?”

“Uhh...she might.” Realizing the clumsiness of the plan, Ryuuji was stunned. But regardless of what happened next, it was done. And in this case, two adults approved of it, too—though they seemed to be regretting it slightly.

The TV was off in the quiet living room, and four people’s worth of silence hung over them. Ryuuji stood up and slightly awkwardly flipped open his phone.

“Um, here. It’s Yasu... It’s a picture of my mom from last week. We were having hot pot...”

Sonoko and Seiji hesitantly stretched their necks to peek at the phone in Ryuuji’s hand. They looked at the picture of Yasuko for a while without a word. Without makeup on, she looked glossy, like a peeled egg, and she wore a stupid-looking topknot and Uniqlo loungewear. She didn’t have any eyebrows drawn in, and she was flashing jovial peace signs with both hands through the steam of the hot pot. The photo might have been too stupid to show them, Ryuuji thought.

“Yasuko...really hasn’t changed...”

“She really hasn’t changed at all...”

Muttering quietly, the two of them came closer to take a better look at the small screen.

“I have a better one.”

He rummaged through a folder that he had left unorganized and tried to look for a photo that made Yasuko look a bit better. He felt like the one where she was walking in the middle of intense white light in the middle of summer might be good and let it fill the screen. He couldn’t remember just what possessed him to take the picture, but it might have been from when she was going to the river shore to have a barbeque with all the other women from Bishamon Heaven, based on how Yasuko had a cooler box dangling from one hand. Yasuko wore a hat with a large rim, a T-shirt, and jeans. Of course, she was smiling widely. A little ahead of her, the skirt of the dress Taiga wore fluttered, and she smiled in the same way. The photo itself was pretty askew. Ryuuji might have been smiling as he took the photo, too.

“Oh, she looks so good. It looks fun,” Sonoko muttered in a tone like she was talking to herself, and for the first time, wore a faint smile. “If she looks fine... If she was fine this whole time, then that’s good enough, right honey?”

“Of course not.”

“Why not? I think it’s fine. I’ve been worried this whole time, and then eighteen years went by. The neighbors told me that they saw Ya-chan.” As she

smiled, she used her fingertips to gently wipe the corners of her eyes. “There used to be a park over there before. They said that Ya-chan had brought a little boy and was standing there. They said they saw her. That she was so thin and looked so pitiful.”

Heaven’s net is wide, but its mesh is fine—it seemed no one had heard Ryuuji say that in a low voice.

“Even if they made a mistake and it wasn’t her...I didn’t understand why they hadn’t stopped her! I was so angry that I couldn’t help myself. But it was my own fault. I was waiting every day for Yasuko to come home, but that day, I was at the bank and other places and doing trivial errands. Usually I’m at home all day, but I wasn’t that day. I was so full of regrets and sorrow and I couldn’t stop... In my imagination, Yasuko was getting worse and worse, and I thought maybe she might have died or been killed... I have dreams about that, of following Yasuko holding a little boy in her arms, calling out, ‘Moom, help me, why aren’t you here for me?’ and running to that park as fast she can, crying... Ahh, I’ll stop. She was fine the whole time. I can stop.”

Sonoko lifted her youthful body and stood. “Want anything to eat? Do you need to use the restroom again?” she asked Taiga, who was buried under the table in the living room.

Taiga crawled out, still in her uniform, and came to the kitchen. “I kind of do... Something with rice...”

Ryuuji pulled on Taiga’s sleeve. “You...! Do you have any shame...!”

“But I’m hungry. We haven’t eaten any lunch. Actually, last night and this morning, my stomach hurt so much I couldn’t really eat. But it’s the same for you, isn’t it? I was thinking in the hotel yesterday, I’m sure Ryuuji is so sad right now that he probably hasn’t been able to eat anything... His stomach probably hurts just as much as mine... Isn’t that right? Since we’re of one mind and one body?”

“I ate! After Yasuko abandoned me yesterday and I was left alone at the apartment, I actually took out leftovers and made sure to have a decent meal! I even ate your chocolates!”

“No way?! Are you heartless or something?!”

“I ate breakfast, too! You have to feed yourself to make sure you have enough in you to get around everywhere today, right?! You didn’t even eat a meal to prep for a big day like this or make sure you were taking in enough nutrients?! That’s way more heartless!”

“My...!”

Taiga whispered purposefully into Sonoko’s ear, *See what he says, that’s your grandson’s true face*. Seiji chimed in, *Let her eat*, and ended up standing from his seat.

Sonoko laughed as she peeked into their fridge. “Oh, I have frozen rice and eggs, ham, onions, and a little...”

“You have mustard greens, too! Ryuuji can make mustard greens fried rice, then!” Taiga was all smiles as she checked out the leftovers in a stranger’s fridge. Ryuuji ended up blushing and turning his face down.

“You...! How can you be so chummy right off the bat... Don’t you have manners?!”

“But they’re Ya-chan’s mom and dad. And they’re your grandma and grandpa. Next year if I marry you, then they’ll be my grandma and grandpa!” Taiga’s mouth opened up into a triangular smile, and she raised both arms in the Glico man pose. Seeing that, Sonoko smiled slightly.

“You want fried rice? Want me to make you some?”

“Yay!”

Ryuuji blinked, and with speed on par with that of a launching battleship, Taiga was perched right at the dining table in the next moment. *Seriously?* He covered his face.

“I’ll help... Please let me help. I’ve really lost face...”

He came to stand next to Sonoko in the ordinary little kitchen. When Sonoko pulled on a string, the once-dark sink top was lit up by a harsh fluorescent light.

“Ryuuji is suuuuuuuuper good at cooking!”

“Is he now?” Urged by Taiga’s proud voice, Sonoko watched Ryuuji chop up an onion, and her eyes went wide. “Wow! I wouldn’t have thought you were

Yasuko's. She's terrible at that, and she could never remember the steps, so nothing came out of it. If she just put the time into it, she would have been able to make some tasty meals..."

"I know," Ryuuji continued to chop in an unfaltering rhythm as he answered, "because I was raised on Yasuko's cooking. Ever since I learned how to cook, I've been doing the cooking, but we always did it together before."

"I see. That's how it was."

I hope she's not going to cry, he worried as he looked at Sonoko, but Sonoko's gaze had only gone distant momentarily. She was silent for a while, mulling over something.

"She was stupid, that kid."

She stared out the window as sunset approached. He didn't know whether she meant, *The two of you going through all that without a father was stupid*, or *No matter how you tried to live, running away like that was stupid*, or whether it was both, and Ryuuji had no way of checking.

He was sitting at the table eating fried rice with Taiga when—

"You can take a look through these."

Thump thump thump! Seiji, who must have gone up to the second floor, piled albums of Yasuko onto the table. He brought the baby-faced spectacle of seeing her grow up through kindergarten, elementary, and junior high school. Ryuuji and Taiga became unintentionally absorbed in staring at the pictures, and at some point, night fell outside.

"Whoa... She's got a kid's backpack...! Whoa...a recorder...!"

"Hey, Ryuuji."

"And her face looks exactly the same as it does now...!"

Taiga's pointer finger prodded at the back of Ryuuji's hand, which held the page, trying to gain his attention. Next, she pointed at the Takasu couple. They wouldn't even sit at the heated table. They had just been staring out the living room's front window the whole time, even though it was too dark to see anything. They were waiting for the time when Yasuko would come home.

“If Ya-chan doesn’t come back, then what do we do...?” Taiga asked him, bringing her face close and lowering her voice.

“We’ll wait until she comes home, and if we can’t wait for her, we’ll look for her until we find her.” Ryuuji rasped next to Taiga’s ear so only she would be able to hear. It seemed Taiga accepted that. She rubbed her apparently ticklish ears as her eyes once again dropped to the album. Even though there were plenty of photos of Yasuko in her junior high school blazer and in her own clothes, Ryuuji was disappointed there were only a few pictures of her after she reached high school.

The answer he’d just given Taiga was flawed. He knew that his wish would never come true, even if he and Taiga went searching for Yasuko after waiting for her to show up. That wouldn’t be enough to fulfill it. The message they sent was toeing the line of legality...and they had done something terribly dark by sending it.

The watch that had been left on the table pointed out that it was long past dinnertime. The world he wished for was still far off, and his heart was growing impatient.

“Are you nervous?”

“Why? Of course not.” Ryuuji used both hands to prop up his face to hide his mouth. At some point, Taiga started to stare intently into his face. *I said I’m fine*, he mumbled back to her.

“Hmm...” She closed her eyes and lightly shook her head. After she took a long breath, she said... “Smooch.”

She threw him a kiss.

Ryuuji immediately threw his head to the side to avoid it. She continued to *smooch smooch smooch* in quick succession, and he dodged to the right and left to escape from them.

“Seriously. One over there. The next one’s over there, this time the last one is going to be there.”

She aimed for the ceiling, the wall, the top of the table in the living room. Taiga snorted as though she were enjoying herself.

“Well, you might have done the right thing by avoiding them. Those actually weren’t free. Each kiss costs three thousand yen.”

“You were going to charge for kisses? And they’re expensive to boot!”

“But wait just a minute! If you can catch all of them, you’ll get bonus points for ten thousand yen!”

“You’ll pay me that?”

“It’ll be added to the other charges...”

“You’re making it more expensive?!”

“But, in full, the burden will go to the shopping giant Japanet Takasu!”

“Yeah, Japanet Ta...so you mean me!”

He raised his right hand, thinking of giving her a physical comeback on the top of her head, but Taiga challenged him with her eyes—*If you want to try, I dare you!*

Then Ryuuji turned reflexively to the entryway.

The faint sound that came to him was familiar. When he stood without thinking, Taiga looked up at his face in curiosity.

“It’s Yasuko.”

Sonoko and Seiji looked at Ryuuji’s face as though surprised. “You heard something?!” “Well, I just...”

Ryuuji had heard it. The sound approaching them was certainly familiar. They were the shrill footsteps of teetering high heels awkwardly going at full speed on the asphalt. At the nursery, at the kindergarten, at school, and at home, Ryuuji would take that sound as a signal to raise his head from his toys or books, and to run to the entryway. Even now, he almost automatically kicked away his chair and headed to the front door, but no—he returned his butt to his cushion.

“That’s the sound of Yasuko’s footsteps. I think you can meet her at the entrance.”

“Honey...!” Sonoko raised her voice practically to a shriek as she looked into

Seiji's face. Seiji also froze for a second, and the couple both forgot to breathe as they looked at each other. They heard the owner of the approaching footfalls open the gate without hesitation and didn't even turn around as they ran into the hallway.

"You go, too! Hurry!"

"No, we'll come after. They've been waiting for eighteen years. We shouldn't get in their way," Ryuuji said to Taiga. His throat felt hot, like he had swallowed fire. He'd said what was actually running through his mind, but that was only half of it. The other half of him felt scared of facing her.

The words he'd shot off at Yasuko, who raised him this whole time, still felt fresh in his throat. It was like they were still stuck in his ears. *It would have been better if I'd never been born*, he had told his mother, who'd sacrificed everything away for his sake, *Your life was a mistake. You're a failure, and my existence was a mistake.*

He'd thought that Yasuko's extreme attempts to control Ryuuji's future were rooted in her inabilities. That she had been trying to atone for her failure to follow her parents' guidance when she was a child by making Ryuuji do what she couldn't. In other words, she must have thought having Ryuuji was a sin. She must have regretted it. He had wanted to blame her for that.

Don't control me just to make things easier for you. To throw around that easy phrase, which no other seventeen-year-old would have batted an eye at, he had to cause this much hurt.

Now he thought differently.

Would he be able to do things over?

Would he be able to overturn everything that happened in the last eighteen years and still affirm that everything in the present was fine as it was?

"Ryuuji—"

Would he be able to bring Taiga all of her joy without missing anything?

"This is a disaster—"

"Even if it is, no matter what I need to do, I'll do it. Who said that wishing for

something was a crime? There doesn't need to be any sacrifice or mass destruction, I'll do everything I can for—"

"It's a disaster, Ya-chan's—"

"I'll...huh?"

"Ya-chan is avoiding the entryway—"

With a look of astonishment, Taiga pointed, and he turned. Yasuko was taking apart the living room window frame, using all her strength to shake the window glass. They could hear Seiji and Sonoko's voices from the entryway, "Huh?!" "Where is she?!"

Fwump. Yasuko abandoned her high heels and stepped into her parent's living room. It seemed to Ryuuji that her wide-open eyes were flashing red and white with her ragged breath, which made her shoulders heave. She didn't smell like alcohol. Her hair didn't look like a bomb had dropped on it, either. She might have just come out of a bath without drying it; its long, perm-damaged, golden locks stuck to her pale face in tendrils.

As she approached, Ryuuji noticed she was wearing a green tracksuit from his junior high school days that did not match her shoes at all, along with a black down coat.

"Ya-Yasuko! Yasuko...!"

"Yasukoooooooo!"

The Takasus had come back from the entryway and were stumbling over each other. They were absorbed in going around either side of the heated table in order to hug Yasuko.

"Ryu-ryu-ryu-ch-ryuu-chan...wh-wh-wh-where did you get...hurt..."

Ryuuji could only stand there petrified, unable to touch Yasuko's hand, which shook like a person on the verge of freezing to death. Yasuko's knees seemed unable to support herself. Her whole body shook intensely as she looked at Ryuuji. It seemed her mouth wouldn't move properly, either. When she tried to speak, she held her mouth with her shaking hand and took long breaths, like she was spasming. That was all she could manage.

He could see that the eyelashes surrounding her wide-open eyes were wet.

He couldn't move at all now that he was in front of her. He listened to Taiga speaking in place of him, but the sound seemed to come through stuffed ears.

"Ya-chan...sorry..."

What a terrible thing they had done.

"I'm sorry, it was a lie... I'm sorry..."

"Yasuko!"

It seemed that Yasuko hadn't noticed Sonoko's hand reaching out to her. The table went flying like it had been kicked over. Yasuko flew straight towards him, her right hand high. *She's going to hit me*, Ryuuji understood, and he waited for the impact on his cheek.

But that hand first went to his forehead.

Then it cupped his cheek.

"Oh—"

It touched his chin. Her fingertips warmed his ear. She didn't even hesitate to flip Ryuuji's lips up as she continued to check his face. She patted his shoulders from over his uniform and then turned him around to check his back.

"I didn't know what to do." Yasuko tried to hug Ryuuji, and her arms went limp. As he watched that, his head went white, and he was only able to say one thing.

"I'm so sorry..."

He wasn't even able to support his falling mother.

Yasuko sank down onto the living room floor and cried out loudly. Her cry was a dreadful scream, like a baby just born, like a beast about to be killed. She opened her mouth wide and couldn't even wipe away the tears that overflowed from her eyes. Like she had gone mad, she could only yell over and over again, *You're okay, you're okay*.

Seiji stepped towards her.

"Get yourself together." As though to bring her to her senses, he slapped her

cheek. “You’re a mother, aren’t you?”

I-I-I, Yasuko’s throat fluttered as she looked up at Ryuuji. “I’m...a f-failure as a mother.”

Her wide-open eyes filled with more fresh tears.

“I made Ryu-chan think that. I’m a failure. I wanted him to be happy, that was all, but I couldn’t make that happen... I don’t think that about you...! Not that—”

Yasuko desperately shook her head side to side, trying to shake off a fretfulness that she couldn’t put into words.

“If you hadn’t been born, then I wouldn’t have anything! Ryu-chan, you’re everything in my life that makes me happy! So...I was scared!”

Sonoko and Seiji stayed silent. They already understood everything Yasuko wanted to say. They listened to her earnest voice as Yasuko heaved with even more intense sobs.

“I was thinking of what I would do if you left like I did. This whole, whole time since you were a baby, I’ve been scared you would eventually leave someday. I just couldn’t help but be scared! I abandoned my mom and dad, and I thought the punishment for that would eventually come for me! When...when you were born, I finally understood what a horrible thing I’d done...so I thought you would leave, and that I couldn’t stop you. I thought that time had finally come, and I didn’t want to see it. I couldn’t, I couldn’t bear it...so I ran away...! All I know...is how to run...”

The echoing words Yasuko breathed out filled the room with sadness, seeping out from corner to corner. *No, no.* Ryuuji bit his lip and glared down the sadness.

We’re done with the sadness. We don’t need any more.

“I thought that I needed to ask the landlady to watch until you left. Then the landlady said that you were crying yesterday...and I thought, I did it again...! I did another terrible thing, and I finally understood that...so when that message came, I thought this really was the end! I’m an idiot, so I thought that everything would be taken from me...and I thought this would be the end!”

“I’m alive!” Ryuuji declared firmly in order to keep Yasuko from making him cry. He got on his knees and held Yasuko’s shoulders. As though rebuking the sorrow that oozed around them, he breathed out sharply. No one had to run away from home again. Not anyone.

“I *was* born! And I am alive! What do you want after that?! What else do you want?!”

Like seeing a person for the first time, Yasuko’s eyes opened wide. Her lips trembled, wet with tears.



“After that...? What else...?” she repeated back at him, like the words puzzled her. “I’m happy that you were born and that you lived...and...after that...if that happiness were to last...forever...and ever...”

“Then it’ll last. Let’s make sure it lasts.” Nodding, he pulled on Taiga’s hand next. “She’s going to be here, too. Always. For a lifetime.”

“Taiga-ch—”

Yasuko swallowed her breath and trembled slightly, then eventually grabbed and roughly pulled Taiga’s head closer after Taiga crouched down. The rest wouldn’t form into words. She grabbed Ryuuji’s arm firmly and cried again. No matter how much she cried, her tears wouldn’t run dry, but if sadness tried to break into that place, Ryuuji decided he would strike it down as soon as it emerged.

“I was thinking about you, Taiga-chan.” Yasuko buried her crying face into Taiga’s small head and patted her hair several times. “I was thinking that you would end up going somewhere where I couldn’t reach you. I was thinking about how much pain and suffering you might have felt. I thought...if only I hadn’t cared about you so much. Because I can’t tell you not to go myself! No matter how much I wanted to! Even when I thought Ryuu-chan would leave me as long as you two were together... As long as there was something left for you two, I thought it was okay.”

“It’s okay. There’s something for Ryuuji. There’s something for me, also. Your share is here, too. Ryuuji already said so, and I agree.”

They exchanged words that were cryptic to everyone but the two of them. *Thank you, thank you*, Yasuko said over and over again. She was saying it to Taiga.

“Why? Why are you thanking me?”

“For everything. For being here. For coming to our house. For coming to love Ryuu-chan. For meeting me. For your mom and dad, too... I’m thankful for all of it. I’m thankful for everyone.”

“Are you gonna brush off your own mom and dad?”

At her son's joke, Yasuko seemed to look around her surroundings like she was noticing them for the first time. She sniffled and rubbed at her tear-puffed eyes as she finally looked at Sonoko and Seiji.

"Huh?"

Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh! Sonoko and Ryuuji sighed like tornadoes at the same time. *That's all you've got to say?* they were probably both thinking.

But...

"It's...okay now. It's okay, it's okay, it's fine now," Sonoko's tensed back suddenly curved gently. "Were you living together with Ryuuji-kun? Just the two of you? This whole time?"

Yasuko hesitated slightly and then finally nodded just once in response. Neither Sonoko, Seiji, nor Ryuuji asked anything more of her.

This was as far as they needed to go.

"You did a great job coming home. You finally made it home... You must have traveled so far. Isn't that great? Everyone came home safe. I'm so happy."

For the time being, give them something to eat—even though they had just eaten fried rice, Seiji's words made Taiga's eyes glitter.

Chapter 5

When Ryuuji thought he heard the faint creak of the guest room door one over from his, he crawled out from under the blankets he was half-buried in. He opened the door slightly, trying not to make a sound as he did. He got on his knees and poked his head out into the hall, where the cold felt so dense that a layer of it seemed to have sunk to the ground.

Taiga was looking at him in the same pose. She must have been waiting for his door to open.

“It’s cold, huh? I couldn’t sleep,” she whispered.

“Are you using the heater? I’ve got a stove in here.”

“I turned it on...but I’m dealing with this. I just kept feeling colder and colder.” Taiga shrugged her shoulders slightly and showed him her long, combed-out hair. Just looking at it, Ryuuji could tell it was still damp. It seemed she hadn’t dried it properly after getting out of the bath.

“I borrowed their dryer, but my hair takes so long to dry, and I didn’t want to just keep the bathroom occupied, so I just stopped partway through.”

“You had three helpings at dinner, and *now* you’re worried about the small things...”

“I am. I’m a good person, deep down...”

He ignored Taiga as she grabbed her damp hair in her crossed hands and half-closed her hollow eyes, posing like a certain saint. Ryuuji turned his ear to the situation on the first floor. It seemed Yasuko was still with Sonoko and Seiji in the living room. He occasionally heard fragments of their soft voices. They sounded like pinballs bouncing in the dead of night, and he couldn’t make out the contents of their conversation.

“I wonder what they’re talking about.”

Taiga went into a brief silence as she also surveyed the bottom of the stairs. “I’m sure they have tons to talk about. I mean, it *has* been eighteen years.”

“You saw Yasuko’s face when we told her we’d go to bed early—”

“Nah ha.” Unable to bear it, Taiga’s nose flared as she laughed. The corners of Ryuuji’s mouth also twitched uncontrollably.

Whaaat, you’re going to bed... Maybe I’ll go upstairs with you... I feel like they’re going to yell at me again... Ahhh, Dad’s going way overboard with whatever he’s got prepared for me... Yasuko’s face had tensed as she saw Seiji holding a five-iron. I’m going to pass judgment on my idiot daughter with the power of my own hands and property liability law!

This was, of course, not what Seiji was doing—he was merely cleaning up the living room where he’d left out the golf club.

“You know, I noticed a while ago that you and Ya-chan kind of look alike, but you’re kind of like your grandfather, too. Maybe that’s how you’ll look in the future? Good for you. By that, I mean his head.” *Looked pretty thick*, Taiga indicated at the top of her head with her finger.

“I’d like that... You think so? Also, Yasuko and I don’t look anything like each other.”

“I’m saying you’re unexpectedly similar. Well, except you’ve got *that* as a foundation for your face—”

Taiga suddenly stopped talking. Her soft smile went taut, and she peered into Ryuuji’s face like she was asking whether what she just said was allowed. *It’s fine*, Ryuuji said with the flicker of his eyes. When he did that, the tone of Taiga’s voice started to go up as she went on, “But you still don’t know much about your dad, in the end.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

“Are you okay with that? Like, do you want to know about him?”

“I’m curious.”

Ryuuji squatted down in the doorway in his borrowed pajamas and hugged his knees, entrusting his back to the door joint. He was careful to lower his voice to keep it from reaching downstairs.

“I do wonder why the two people in that picture split up after they left this

house. But...I feel like my dad not being here happened because of Yasuko's *choice*... It'd be different if she still wanted to see him and were searching for him. But she isn't."

Maybe in a few years he would be able to ask Yasuko why that person hadn't stayed by her side this whole time. He looked over at Taiga's toes as she sat down in the same way as him in the hallway. Ryuuji supported his chilly chin with the backs of his crossed hands.

A toddler like himself wasn't ready to understand his father's choice or his mother's choice. For now, all he could do was accept the present truth in its entirety.

But in the world he imagined, Ryuuji's father was at Ryuuji's table. He looked the same as he did eighteen years ago, just the same as when Ryuuji lost him, but he still at least existed. Ryuuji couldn't pretend he hadn't ever existed, so instead, he simply acknowledged the truth that he was still alive.

Basically, acknowledging that means acknowledging myself, Ryuuji thought. He raised his eyes and looked into Taiga's pale face. Taiga's long hair drooped all the way to the floor, and she curled up with her cheek pressed into her knees. An intense light shone from the large eyes she turned towards Ryuuji.

"Can you really keep yourself from holding a grudge...against Ya-chan...or your dad?" Her voice was quiet, but it was clear as it reached Ryuuji's ears. It grazed his ears softly; then the words disappeared, like they had dissolved.

Their sighs layered over each other in the chill of the evening.

"I've been thinking it over a lot."

Ryuuji had been keeping count of the unavoidable scars he collected on his being. He thought about the ones from dealing with money and going to college. The ones from thinking of the future. The ones from the people who'd been cruel to him as a child. The ones from when the eyes of the adults looking at him turned cautious when they found out the circumstances of Ryuuji's birth or what Yasuko's job was, and the ones from when he realized what those adults thought of him. He thought of the absolutely unforgivable rumors—he thought back on every scar, taking stock of them.

Some were already healed. Some hadn't. There were some that were still bleeding, some that were absurd, and some where there was nothing to be done but accept them. Of course, there were some that weren't related to his mother or father or how he was born. There were scars no one had meant to inflict, which had only been born from misunderstood feelings.

He chose the dwelling place of his own soul, but he couldn't move the multitude of other people's souls in this world. There were people who intentionally wanted to hurt others and times he couldn't avoid them. *That's reality. That's how people are*, he thought. And because he himself was a person living in reality, no matter how careful he was, there might be times when he involuntarily hurt others.

"But well...you're here with me, at least."

"Me? Really?"

He nodded and then went silent for a bit. Taiga looked at Ryuuji's face and buried her own in her knees as she hugged them. Her eyes were strange, like she wanted to laugh and cry, as she traced her soft, rosy lips with her fingertip.

"You think that much of me?"

I do, Ryuuji thought to himself. He had only one thing that kept him from becoming disheartened—one thing that kept him going, regardless of how hard or far away it was to get to the place he was going.

There was something in the depths of Ryuuji's soul that carried his body and mind through the harshness of reality. It was like a pair of eyes that saw him for what he was: someone who loved and was loved. He vowed he would never betray it. He would learn how to live in the place he was by looking through those eyes that established his being, his actions, and his emotions in his heart.

He believed that what he saw with those eyes *was* his own world.

He also believed that there existed something similar in Taiga's heart, which only she could have established. He just wished she could see that.

As they remained sitting in the ever-chilling hallway illuminated by a diminutive light, Taiga didn't pry any further. Her gaze dropped to the faint shadows cast by Ryuuji's feet.

“Do *you* hold a grudge against that guy?” he said. “He just did as he pleased and turned your life upside down. Then there’s your birth mother, your stepmother, and your mom’s new spouse...and you’re getting a new baby sister or brother. You’re the one who’s got it complicated. What are you thinking?”

“I—”

Ryuuji felt like he was praying as he watched those suddenly silent lips. But Taiga’s eyes wavered as she looked into the distance. She was looking at something all on her own. She raised her well-defined chin, and her eyes seemed to glitter, defying the world spread before her head-on.

What was she looking at? How vast was the vision she saw? What stars shone in her world? What seasons graced it? What winds blew on it? He wanted to know. Ryuuji wanted to see it. He wanted to stand in the same place. He wanted to exist beside her.

Born into separate bodies, their two divided souls would never become one. Regardless of that, he still wanted to know what he could do to be as close to her as he could.

“Can we head in there? Stoves are better.” As if to answer Ryuuji’s question, Taiga returned her gaze to Ryuuji. She rubbed her hands together and breathed warm air onto them. *Haah*. “It’s way too cold,” her voice trembled.

“Right. Go turn off the heater.”

Taiga briefly vanished into the dark room. *Beep*. The faint sound of the heater being turned off came to Ryuuji’s ears. The chilly floorboards of the hallway might have been too cold for bare feet. As Taiga softened her footsteps, she kept to the tips of her toes and hop-slipped into the room prepared for Ryuuji and Yasuko. Finally, she gently shut the door.

“Aah, this room is definitely warmer...” Her shoulders relaxed as she exhaled. She took a breath of warm air in the room illuminated only by the orange stove. “You better not look over here.”

She clutched at the chest of her borrowed pajamas, folding them in like she was collapsing a folding fan, curved her waist oddly, and tilted her head. *Are you somebody’s chambermaid or something?* Ryuuji wanted to tease her, but

instead just asked, “Why?”

“It’s because this is definitely too big. The chest is baggy, and that’s bugging me.”

“Ah, that’s too bad, what a pity. Cheer up and dry your hair by the stove.”

“I don’t know why, but you’re kind of irritating, and I can’t make a big deal about it, or they’ll hear downstairs. I’ll let it go, but I’m not forgetting this—I’ll never forget.”

Taiga glared at Ryuuji. She was still clutching tightly at her chest with both hands as she cut through the room. She sat down cozily in front of the stove that was separated slightly from the side-by-side bedding laid out for Ryuuji and Yasuko. She held her hands out to the heat source that emitted a strong orange light in the otherwise unlit room. “Ahh, I feel like I’m coming back to life...but I still haven’t forgotten!” She glared at Ryuuji once again.

Just keep staring. Ryuuji defiantly stretched his legs out over his own bed. He stared at his unshapely toenails for a while and exhaled all the air and nerves in his chest. He absolutely wouldn’t be able to get any closer to her that night. Even this far apart in a room behind closed doors, he felt terrified when they just looked at each other. That was why he was glad she was glaring at him.

But in actuality—if he were to say how he actually felt—the sound of her breath reaching his ears was maddening enough to scorch his mind.

That was because the girl he loved was here.

His heart felt like a roller coaster. All of his senses reacted to the girl immediately before him—to the strands of Taiga’s light, fluttering hair, her delicate shoulders, her ever-so-pale wrist where the roundness of her bones stood out. No matter what he did, his eyes would follow her first. She seemed like she would be gently fragrant, and the left side of the room where Taiga sat was warmer—probably because the stove was there.

Had he ever felt such a strong urge to touch another person before? He just wanted to be closer to Taiga, wanted to know more about Taiga, wanted to share more of his thoughts with her, wanted her to share hers with him. If he had to put it into words, all it amounted to were those desires, but he hadn’t

fathomed that those feelings could rage so tempestuously in his body.

But Ryuuji also understood that if he reached out his hand, that would be the end of the end. It was like a cliff he would tumble down to an unknown depth if he missed his footing on even a single step. Did he really want to be pushed off a bridge again, to plunge into icy water that would freeze his heart?

He tried to act natural as he covered his ears. He tried to feign ignorance as he rolled his tense neck to relax it. He averted his eyes and tried to keep his spine from breaking out into frantic shivers. He tried to whistle but stopped himself. They were fine before. Ryuuji just could no longer remember how they passed the time together before. He couldn't even really remember when "before" was.

In the corner of his vision, Taiga sat in front of the heater, long hair falling in front of her shoulders. She slowly combed it out with her fingers, letting it warm up. The hair brought up by her pale, slender fingers was too soft and immediately spilled from her hands. As Ryuuji watched it, he felt like it was melting honey. The tip of her nose, visible between her bangs and the line of her cheek, was shining, dyed by the color of the fire.

Just below them, separated by a single layer of floorboards, his mother, grandmother, and grandfather were gathered. On top of that, when Ryuuji looked around the room again, he noticed that it seemed to have been Yasuko's once. Her furniture, her school uniform still hung up on a hook, her ordinary clothes—it was full of shadows of his mother from the everyday life of her past.

"Hey."

"Yeah! Uh! Right!"

"You're being way too loud... Raise the temp on this. I don't know how to do it." Taiga didn't look at Ryuuji but kept staring at the stove.

Ryuuji moved closer to the stove—and to Taiga. *How do I turn it up... I wonder if she'd just let me hold her hand? Or just hug her and caress her back? Even friends would do that, right?*

Right. It would be fine as long as he stopped there—as long as he could get by without seeming like a stupid, presumptuous jerk. It would be fine as long as

touching her was really all he wanted. If his desire to understand her could be fulfilled by physical contact—by *only* that—it would be enough for him then.

He reached out his hand.

“This is it. I think.”

Ryuuji pushed a simple button that was marked with an upward pointing triangle. *Beep, beep.* It chirped the number of times he pushed, and the glass tube glowed brighter. The warmth he felt on his skin abruptly increased.

“Is it too strong?”

“That’s fine. Yeah, it’s nice and warm...”

“Make sure you don’t burn your hair.”

“There’s no way even I would do something that clumsy...huh?” Taiga suddenly grabbed the tips of her hair and brought them to her nose. She gave them a sniff. “There’s no way I’d do something like that.”

Hmph! She was oddly confident. She puffed out her chest beside him and brought her face closer to him.

“Don’t get too close.” Ryuuji scowled until his face split open to birth an alien larva—not really. He was just trying to look menacing. As Taiga drew closer, he bent his back away to the same degree to avoid her. He made sure they were an exact thirty centimeters apart.

“What are you doing? Why are you doing that? Why would you say something like that?” Taiga demanded.

Even if he touched her, it wouldn’t be enough—but, of course, he couldn’t say that. He couldn’t tell her it was because his mom was just below them, either. In the end, no matter what they did, it wouldn’t be enough. He was insatiably starved of Taiga.

It wasn’t enough.

No matter what happened, it just wouldn’t be enough. It just wasn’t.

There just wasn’t enough time to know her and love her in every way. A day was made up of merely twenty-four hours, a year of only three hundred sixty-

five days, and a lifetime was just barely eighty years long. Even this night would only last for a few more hours. Ryuuji was just a kid. He didn't have enough of anything. All he could do was writhe helplessly as he yearned and starved.

"It doesn't matter what happens or how it happens, but this line is the border between you and me." He traced the seam of the carpet exactly between where the two of them were sitting. *You better not cross!* He tried to make his face look like that of an old mountain witch.

"What happens if I cross that line?"

"There's an invisible sentinel with a gun, and it'll blast your brains out of your head."

"That's not what I meant... What would happen?"

Taiga stared at the ends of the hair that she had combed up with her fingertips. Her long eyelashes cast a shadow along the side of her face, and his heart quaked as though he had been kicked hard. *How are you so calm about this?* Ryuuji thought, on the verge of detesting her.

Maybe, in the end, she hadn't really understood anything. Maybe she still felt the same as when she fell defenselessly asleep in that two-bedroom apartment, when they had been part of adjoining lands?

"Well...it's not like I'm going to cross over anyway." Taiga said.

If that really was true, then what could he do?

"But if I really wanted to cross over," she continued. "If I made up my mind... you wouldn't be able to get away, even if you were crying or screaming."

"You..." *...You jerk, no, you devil, no, you Palmtop Tiger!*

"But you know what, having my head blown off by an invisible sentinel would kind of be a problem. I'd feel bad making you clean up my brains, too...right?"

"..."

He couldn't bring himself to respond. His innocent male heart was overwhelmed, leaping under Taiga's seemingly teasing gaze. It felt like he was being forced to tap-dance barefoot on a griddle. Ryuuji glared even more firmly at Taiga, who was fanning the flames that heated the griddle as she directed

him to *Dance! Dance!*

“What? What’s with that face? What do you want to say?” She sat slovenly cross-legged, putting together the undersides of her feet. Taiga rocked her body like she was a tumbler doll that could never be knocked down. She opened her eyes purposefully wide and pouted. “I have no idea what you want to say. Aren’t I a terrible fee-fwee-fiancée?”

Because he couldn’t achieve victory through words, Ryuuji resorted to launching a missile. He pushed a hand to his lips in a masculine way and blew a kiss, like a black mamba darting from the gap between his front teeth to spray lethal, deadly poison into Taiga’s eyes—though of course he wasn’t doing that. He was just trying to return the weird kisses she had blown at him earlier.

I don’t care if my mom or anybody else is downstairs, I can at least do this! Go! Go! One kiss for five thousand yen! Ryuuji clenched his fist.

“That’s all you got?! To my eyes, it looks like it’s going so slow it just stopped!” Taiga slapped the invisible kiss in midair as though crushing a mosquito.

“Oh! Y-you’re so cruel...!”

““Oh! Y-you’re sooo cruel...!”” she mimicked.

“I didn’t sound like *that*...”

“Actually, who knew you were such a shallow guy...” Taiga spitefully kept her jaw jutted out and spread her arms wide in exasperation. She shook her head, clearly resigned.

“What?!”

“I can’t believe you’d try to give me an air kiss. My, oh my... I can’t believe you’d do something that embarrassing...”

“Hey...you’re the one! Who did it first! Well, it doesn’t matter anymore...” When he couldn’t get his mouth to move the way he wanted it to, Ryuuji turned his eyes away from Taiga’s face. “I’m going to bed,” he said curtly and actually pulled the covers over his head, with his back facing her. He closed his eyes.

“Oh dear. Now he’s angry. Look at him pouting, even though I was just

teasing.”

“ ...”

“Ryuuji. Ryuuuuuji.”

“ ...”

“Ryuu-chan.”

“Stop that.”

“But you know what, didn’t things go great for Ya-chan?”

“ ...”

“And for you...too.”

Ryuuji kept his eyes stubbornly closed as he drew away from Taiga’s breathing at his feet.

“Things went great for me, too. I think I’m better off. I think so, at least. Ya-chan even thanked me...and I’m sure, when it comes to you, Ryuuji...” Her voice seemed to tremble faintly. The edges of it were growing hazy. “Are you really going to just sleep?”

Ryuuji’s only answer was silence.

“I guess it’s fine if you do. My hair is dry, and I’m warmed up now...so I guess it’s fine.”

He felt Taiga get up and then felt her step on the edge of his bedding. He automatically followed the sound of her receding footsteps. He opened his eyes and raised his head, his body following suit.

THUMP!

“Agh?!” Ryuuji swallowed his breath at the sudden assault.

“Sleeping people aren’t supposed to move.”

“Even if they’re not, you... Th-that hurts...!”

“You’re not allowed to talk, either.”

Ryuuji flailed his arms and legs, and choked, pinned solidly under the bedcover as he tried to grasp what was happening. Taiga had pounced right on

top of him and was holding him down with all her body weight. It was a picture-perfect vertical four-quarter hold, and his head was buried under his blanket to boot.

“You can’t run away. Because you’re sleeping,” Taiga whispered in a faint voice that could have been mistaken for a sigh.

He really couldn’t move. He couldn’t run away. Taiga probably only weighed forty kilograms, but she was using all of it to hold Ryuuji down, and she wasn’t letting go. “When it comes to you, Ryuuji...I really, really, reallyreallyreally, really—”

They had been born into separate bodies.

No matter what they did, their two souls would never become one.

“—love you.”

But regardless of that, in order to be as close as they could, they would—

She pulled down the covers that were over his face, and her soft hair tangled and fell to Ryuuji’s cheek. Their foreheads crashed into each other. As if feeling out the roundness of their heads, their eyebrows rubbed against each other. The tips of their noses pressed against each other, and their quiet sighs piled onto each other. Before long, they were separated just by the smell of shampoo as their hot lips touched. All of Taiga’s weight was on Ryuuji’s lips. It was much warmer than the first time, and much slower. Ryuuji barely got himself together before he melted from the heat of love. He desperately opened his eyes.

I love you, too. I love you, Taiga, he repeated.

He wanted to wriggle and leap up. He wanted to run through the lands on all four legs like a beast. He wanted to live one and the same life as her. But all they could do was draw their separate bodies close, all they could do was touch, and it was just too frustrating to stand.

It was precisely because they were separate and could never become one that they were drawn so strongly to each other. Even as they clawed at the air and cried out and suffered, they held each other firmly. They hungered for the world they wanted to make together, and their eyes opened wider.

Time and life were finite and too short, and their hopes were so far removed they knew nothing but impatience.

“But you’re actually going to sleep now.”

But they were also rapidly growing up. Time progressed and, once passed, would never return. “Now” was becoming the past.

Taiga’s fingertips touched his eyelids. He could feel her ever-trembling heart. As she trembled, she closed Ryuuji’s eyes and held down his eyelashes.

“I’m going to sleep, too. Good night.”

It wasn’t like he would be able to sleep.

—It wasn’t like he would be able to sleep.

He didn’t open his eyes.

It was cold—extremely cold—in what was probably the last morning of midwinter, when it seemed even the sun couldn’t rise. Ryuuji had enclosed his feet under the covers that his body heat warmed overnight. He lay on his side, both his hands covering his eyes. He was sure the bedding beside him was mounded up from Yasuko being under the covers.

He could tell by the sound and the feeling of her presence that Taiga was standing in the doorway after gently opening the door. He knew the faint clinks were from the metal fittings of the bag she had slung across her body.

Ryuuji, Taiga called his name in a small voice like she was scared.

Ryuuji didn’t move.

Ryuuji, she called one more time. She waited just a bit and then clearly called him again. When Ryuuji didn’t move the third time she called his name, Taiga seemed to accept it. “Well, I’m headed out for a bit.”

The floorboards squeaked faintly. Quietly, she closed the door. Slowly, she went down the stairs. She placed her shoes on the entryway tile. She stuck her feet into them and opened the door.

She opened the gate.

Ryuuji thought to himself that it was fine this way.

This town really was quiet. For a while, he could hear the sound of footsteps traveling under a chilly sky. At first, those footsteps seemed bewildered, but before long, he heard them gain their usual cadence until, in the end, they were outright running. The sound of the soles of her shoes firmly hitting the asphalt rang out and receded into the distance.

Her footsteps faded away.

Ryuuji remained immobile in his bed. He still had his eyes closed.

“A-are you—” Yasuko was the first to fling off her covers and get up. “Ryuu-chan! Are you actually, really fine with this...?”

This is fine—was what he wanted to say. But he couldn’t. Though Ryuuji knew it was fine this way, he couldn’t open his eyes.

Taiga needed to go back to her parents.

That was because Taiga loved them.

She didn’t need to run away from home.

Taiga had shown she didn’t need her parents by cutting them out. If she exposed herself to love, she would break, and because she found that frightening, she hadn’t been able to bring herself to seek it out until now. Taiga cried because the amount of love she received was nothing compared to the love she gave. Taiga didn’t believe she was allowed to dream big. She was bound by the fear that something would be taken from her in exchange for the crime of wanting the love she was not allowed.

But now things were different.

Taiga’s arms and legs were free. Now that she was released, she could run anywhere she wanted.

She should understand that, no matter what she loved or whom she loved, nothing would be taken from her. Taiga should know now, that her heart was free to love. She could love the world she lived in with all her heart and, more than anyone, she could love herself. She didn’t need to abandon anything or

have anything taken from her.

That was why this was—

“Ryuu-chan...!”

This was fine. He really did understand it all.

Ryuuji sat up in bed so he could answer Yasuko this time. He opened his eyes, breathed in, and raised his head. Then he saw the world.

He realized that Taiga was gone. In that winter morning, in a room lined with nothing but objects, he realized he was sitting in the middle of that reality. He tried to say it was fine.

“I think—”

But.

He was alone in this world.

Ryuuji was living—all alone.

Taiga wasn't there.

He didn't say anything. He didn't yell anything. He felt smashed to pieces. He felt like he had exploded. Sparks fired on the insides of his eyelids and absurd thoughts ran through his mind. His heart was pounding with a terrific amount of energy. *Aaah*, he groaned. *Everything really is going to break. This won't work, this is...it's...it's—*

“Ryuu-chan!”

When Yasuko firmly grabbed his shoulders, he looked into her face. It was bright red, and tears dribbled down her face. Her hair was standing on end as fragments of her broken world came down on her from all directions, and she trembled like she was about to explode from the feelings erupting in her—Ryuuji thought, looking at her, that this had to be what his own face looked like.

No.

He kicked off the bedcovers and dashed outside.

Still in his pajamas, he nearly tumbled down the stairs. Still barefoot, he jumped out of the entryway, pushing open the door Taiga had left through. He

flew through the gate into the outside world. He plunged into his new solitude on his own.

There was no one in the street as he looked around—just himself. Ryuuji frantically covered his mouth with his shaking hands. Unable to bear the words he was about to say and the name he was about to call out, he bit his lip as hard as he could. The bone-chilling wind blew against him, tearing into his skin. The midwinter sun still hadn't risen all the way, and the sky was heavy and oppressive as it embraced the cold.

His body started to run. His heart also started to race. His soul was screaming at him not to go. He tried to stop his body. He couldn't stop his heart. It was too late to stop.

He understood it, he really did, but his heart was calling madly for Taiga. It yearned and yelled for their worlds to join. *Are you really going to leave, Taiga? Are you really going to shake free from this intense power and run?*

Was she able to keep moving because, no matter how far she ran, she knew their worlds would come back together at some point?

Had she really found the power and the confidence to believe that?

Ryuuji wiped away the tears flowing down his face. He already knew he wouldn't be able to catch up to her. *This is fine.* He told himself that, but his feet kept moving even as his stolen heart continued to weep. Taiga was no longer in this town. He couldn't catch up with her anymore.

He knew he should have the same power and belief she did. He knew he should be able to accept everything in his world, and to love Taiga, and for her to love him.

It was cold. In the early morning of that quiet town, Ryuuji's white breath leapt into the air.

Ryuuji kept a slight distance from Yasuko as he passed through the empty ticket gate. It was a Sunday.

"Kushieda..."

His chest, which had somehow settled as they made their way home, was roused again. Minori stood behind the few people milling about the station. She'd covered her bedhead with a knit cap and was wearing a down coat and jeans.

"I don't understand." Once she spotted Ryuuji, that was all she said. After she mumbled just those words, she bit her lips so hard they lost their color.

Faced with her unmoving and wide-open eyes, Ryuuji didn't know what to say. When he thought about explaining to Minori why Taiga left, why he'd let her go, and why it was for the best that way, he felt himself quail. Minori would probably understand, but he was tongue-tied and knew his explanation would end up being clumsy.

Ami was standing a short distance from Minori, looking like she hadn't gotten much sleep. She stuck both her hands in her coat pockets, and her back was uncharacteristically hunched. Even her normally beautiful face looked ashen. Further away, Kitamura was walking towards them. Though he didn't look at all like he was blaming him, there was clear confusion in his eyes as he looked at Ryuuji, who was the only one in his school uniform.

The only thing Ryuuji had been able to write in the message he sent them was that Taiga had gone back to her mother. No wonder they were confused. Taiga had promised them she wouldn't give up on loving everyone. She and Ryuuji had promised they would return together.

"You're all friends," Yasuko murmured softly. She knew the faces of everyone there. She took a bunch of keys from her tracksuit pocket, unlinked the condo key that Taiga left with her, and held it out to Ryuuji. "You should all go and look for Taiga-chan. I need to go get Inko-chan."

"Who did you leave Inko-chan with?"

"With the landlady."

Then we're going the same way, Ryuuji started to say, but Yasuko smiled and waved her hand at them, "Off you go." She probably understood that Ryuuji would have to tell his friends that Taiga was no longer there.

He accepted the key and lifted his head.

At no one's prompting, he started to walk.

He walked with long strides down the familiar station road, and before long, everyone started running like they were racing each other. Even Ryuuji, who knew that Taiga was no longer in their town, hastened his legs as his heart quickened. They turned the corner that led to the Takasus' apartment, ran up the stairs, went through the condo entrance, and punched in the PIN to open the auto-locking door. Taiga said the condo had long been out of the hands of the Aisaka family. They might have already changed the lock. There might already be a realtor inside.

Though Ryuuji feared the key would resist when he tried the lock, it instead slipped smoothly all the way in and turned. Though the door was stately, it made a surprisingly light sound as it opened.

He turned on the light at the entrance. As though they were vying with each other to be first, they took off their shoes and came in one after another. "Taiga! We're coming in!" Minori called out, and her voice held the hope that Taiga was still inside. "Aisaka!" "Are you here, Taiga?!" Kitamura and Ami also called.

"It's me! I'm here, I'm coming in! Taiga! Tai—"

When they pushed open the glass door that led to the living room, Ryuuji froze in place automatically. Behind him, Minori was also at a loss for words. It was because they were familiar with the terrible spectacle that was Taiga's room when she had lived there alone that they couldn't find anything to say.

They were just shocked.

The large living room was terribly frigid without the heater on. Below the now tenantless chandelier, everything had been left behind—the one-person sofa, the small glass table, and the white cabinets. Covers had been placed over all the furniture. There was not a single scrap of garbage to be found anywhere—not on the kitchen island, the shag carpet, or the cushion Taiga often held. Every nook and cranny was neat and tidy, scrubbed until pristine.

Minori slowly stepped into the middle of the living room. Moving like a robot under someone else's orders, she opened a cabinet and pulled open a drawer to look inside without a second thought.

“The bag she kept all her valuables in is gone.”

She raised her face.

“It was flat, with navy and pink stripes. She always kept her bankbook and signature seal, her insurance card, and her passport in it. She always used to tell me that it was the only thing she would grab and run if there was ever a fire. It’s gone.”

Minori shut the cabinet. Walking with long strides, she opened the sliding frosted-glass door and stepped into the north-facing bedroom. She pulled the covers all the way up to the pillows and looked at the wrinkle-free bed. There was still a closed laptop left on the desk. The cords and cables that had always been a tangled mess and sent Ryuuji into a tizzy were unplugged and bundled together on top of the desk with a hairband.

Opening the closet, Minori was silent for just a moment.

“Her uniform is still here.”

Her back trembled.

“Tiger, how could you disappear like this?” Ami seemed in a daze as she muttered to herself where she stood in the bedroom doorway. Her voice echoed painfully in the large, silent room.

Minori turned around and looked up at Ryuuji’s face. She took in deep breaths for a while. Ryuuji just watched as her shoulders heaved up and down. “B-But...are you... Takasu-kun, are you... Are you fine with this...?!”

“I am.”

“But this is no good!”

“It’s fine!” It wasn’t like the louder person would win, but Ryuuji frantically raised his voice. “I think it’s fine that Taiga left like this!”

“But aren’t you sad?!”

Of course he was. He was so sad he couldn’t bear it. “I’m not!”

“Don’t give me that!”

“Kushieda, calm down,” Kitamura spoke softly as he grasped Minori’s shaking

shoulders from behind. “Aisaka might still be nearby. We might still be able to make it in time.”

“R-right. She might still be nearby. Maybe she’s just walking around acting like nothing happened!”

Minori turned around at Kitamura and Ami’s words. “Right. She might have been here all this time, just cleaning the place up. Maybe we can make it in time...right! Maybe we’ll make it in time! Takasu-kun!”

“...”

“Takasu-kun! Let’s go!”

Minori, Ami, and Kitamura started running toward the front door. Ryuuji followed after. They came out the entrance and ran down the street lined by Zelkova trees, and he gasped as the cold air stung his lungs.

Maybe we’ll make it in time—maybe he would make it in time to reach her back, where her fluffy hair fluttered, maybe he would make it to her as the hem of her dress billowed. Maybe he would be able to run up to her with his hand outstretched, and grab her shoulders, and tell her not to go.

“Kitamura.”

If only he could be with her without letting go.

“Kawashima.”

But if he couldn’t let her go...

“Kushieda...Kushieda!”

“Let go of me, Takasu-kun! Let’s go! Let’s chase after her!”

“We can’t, Kushieda! We can’t! This is...fine!”

“Why?!”

He grabbed the sleeve of Minori’s down jacket and used the weight of his entire body to hold her back. Minori chaotically swung her arms around and struggled to shake herself free from Ryuuji’s grip as, with his other hand, Ryuuji snatched at Kitamura’s elbow and the end of Ami’s scarf.

“Why are you okay with this?! We don’t know where Taiga went! There’s no

way this is fine! Didn't you say that you loved Taiga?! Didn't you tell me you knew where you wanted to go, Takasu-kun?! Didn't you say you would live together?! Didn't you say that was how you'd gain happiness... Why did it turn out this way?! Why?!"

"Taiga's not running away from home! Taiga's not going to give up on anyone! That's why it's fine this way!"

The people coming and going on the road turned their heads at the loud voices. Regardless, Ryuuji did not let go of Minori's wrist. He wouldn't let her go. There were tears on Minori's cheeks. The words she aimed at him were shaking so much he could barely make them out.

He closed his eyes and yelled so loud that it might just have reached Taiga. "Taiga! Go! Hurry! Get out of here!"

If there was a chance they could still catch up with her, then she needed to be moving faster. She needed to go as far as she could. *Go to the end of the world you live in. Go seize everything you deserve, go seize as much as it's in your power to hold.*

"GOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!"

Rather than cry, Ryuuji poured all his strength into squeezing out his voice. The distant sky was dazzling.

This was fine. It really was.

Taiga was already nowhere to be seen. She had already disappeared. This was fine.

Removing his glasses, Kitamura covered his face where he stood. He couldn't keep a low sob from escaping his contorted lips. When she saw that, Ami bit her lip. Her cheeks, nose, and throat were bright red. Clear tears fell from her long eyelashes down to her chin.

In the end, Minori stopped struggling and went limp. She crouched down in the middle of the sidewalk. "You mean...she left us behind? Taiga left me."

"No," Ryuuji earnestly said to her back—to his friend's back. "That's completely wrong. Taiga doesn't give up. She's not that soft. She's definitely

coming back. And when she comes home, you have to definitely be here, too!”

“It doesn’t matter how you put it... I’m still sad. I’m heartbroken Taiga isn’t here. Where am I supposed to put this sadness? Where did you put yours?”

He couldn’t deny Minori’s grief. And so, he would accept it instead. “It’s sad, but it’s fine.”

We’re sad because we’re apart—that’s the relationship I have with Taiga right now. But Ryuuji’s heart was filled with love. It was sad, but things would be fine.

Reeling his memories in one by one, Ryuuji thought back on everything that had happened.

At the end of the cherry blossom season, he’d met the hot mess that was Taiga. That had been the start of a time more turbulent than he could ever have foreseen. He couldn’t help being drawn in, unaware that he was tumbling towards love. He had fallen, thought he was done for, and then somehow gotten back on his feet. Somehow, their hearts had finally met. And after all that, in the present, Takasu Ryuuji loved Aisaka Taiga.

As long as they loved each other like this, he didn’t think the bond that connected them would ever break. Sooner or later, this love would find its voice and come overflowing from him. Their bodies, hearts, and souls would call to each other, and eventually, somewhere in the world, they would collide.

Ryuuji would take the days that had come to pass, the day he was currently living through, and the days to come, loving them in their entirety. Taiga would do the same for her days, and so would Yasuko, Minori, Ami, and Kitamura. They would each love what was their own to the very limits of their abilities.

They would absolutely meet again. Their attraction to each other was this strong, after all. They called to each other. They yearned for each other.

They persisted absolutely, unconditionally.

“I wonder if Tiger will even want to see me...” Ami muttered in a voice so small it seemed about to vanish.

Ryuuji answered firmly, as though summoning her back. “I feel like she wants to see you, too. Don’t worry about whether Taiga needs it. If that’s what you

need, then make sure you tell her. Show her with your actions. You're the only one who can make your thoughts into reality!"

"I—" Even more tears were spilling down Ami's contorted and tear-stained face. "I want to see Tiger again! I want to be here when she comes home! I want to get to know Minori-chan better! I want to make up with you, Takasaku-kun! I don't actually want to stop being friends! I want to be friends forever! I've enjoyed being with all of you—everything's been better with you here. I love you all...!"

"Wh-what about me?!"

"Who cares about you, Yuusaku!"

"Ahmin...!" Minori stood up and practically jumped on Ami. *Hminohrian!* Ami yelled back, still crying as she wrapped her arms around Minori's back. They buried their faces in each other's shoulders. Though they were perfectly matched in stubborn pride, for the moment, they entrusted their body weight to each other. They thought about the friend they had lost and paid no mind to the eyes of passersby as they cried out loud.

Kitamura also understood what was in his childhood friend's heart and the heart of the one he'd entrusted his team to. He joined their ring. Ryuuji put his hands around his friends and turned his face down. All four of them came together and held each other's shoulders. They stood in the middle of the sidewalk as they cried out loud, letting the children inside them run free.

If they could warm each other when they were hurt like this, then it was good they were born in separate bodies, Ryuuji thought. It was such a rare miracle, he thought, that they could be born separately, raised apart, meet, love each other, fight...and, like they were *now*, could bury their crying faces into each other.

Even at this point, when he felt his whole heart being washed away by sorrow, Ryuuji felt that everything he had then, everything that existed in the world, was so precious he could barely contain it. Yell as he might, he couldn't keep up with the love that welled up within him.

He believed that wherever she went on ahead of him, Taiga's journey was also overflowing with love. Not all of her love would be rewarded. There would

be days when she was betrayed, hurt, and brokenhearted again. But she would keep going. Each of them would keep going.

No matter how far apart or how far away their journeys led them, Ryuuji would reach Taiga and Taiga, Ryuuji. They would eventually converge again, so everything would be fine. The goal they headed towards was the same.

As he revolved around the endless skies, the world below the clouds was beautiful to Ryuuji. Among the vivid lives and merciless colors of the various living things of the land, a tough beast kicked up the dust of time and continued ever forward. With energy that warped her four limbs, she proudly ran through the earth she lived on.

I am a tiger.

I am a dragon.

They became nothing more than life itself as they called. They answered. Their roars traveled far and wide as could be.

Eventually, the clouds in the sky that the dragon roamed would break, and there would be nothing separating his voice from the earth where the tiger roared.

I don't care how anyone tries to blame you for this. I, your teacher, will always have your back, Takasu-kun. I understand exactly why you did what you did.

"Yay! You did it! Clap clap clap!"

"..."

"Yes, I've gotten exactly ten pages from you. Just look at this file and how thick it's gotten! I'm going to make sure that these get handed out when you graduate—right to your parent...uh. Wh-why are you looking so distressed..."

He wasn't actually distressed.

"Oh. Are you not feeling well?"

He was feeling fine.

"Well, you must have had a pretty rough time, with everything that's

happened, um...”

He was just slightly tired.

The file the bachelorette teacher Koigakubo Yuri (age 30) held in her hand really was incredibly thick. The label on its spine read, “Class 2-C Takasu Ryuuji’s Reflection Paper.”

“Well, I suppose it’s only natural it would be hard. It was hard for everyone who had to read these, too! You had six ten-page reflection papers due, but I told you that you just needed to do one—and then you turned in the Monday, Wednesday, Friday reports about how your apology cleaning was going... You’ve written too much, Takasu-kun! You even turned in the fifth and sixth ones! And you haven’t skipped a single one.”

“Well, I got carried away. I couldn’t help it.”

The only reason his and Taiga’s great escape hadn’t earned him a suspension was because Koigakubo Yuri had gone frantically to bat for him with the principal, vice principal, and head teacher. Ryuuji heard about it right from the principal in her office. In exchange for not being suspended, he went to the lecture room alone every weekend to write ten-page reflection papers on composition paper. He also had to clean the teachers’ bathroom by himself three times a week.

He’d worked diligently to do all of that and earned his best score yet on the end-of-term tests just the other day. He’d even outscored Kitamura, who prided his math abilities, and ranked at the top of his grade. When it came to the cumulative results, he rose above ten people from the previous tests and clawed his way into the top half of the single digit numbers. With that, Ryuuji hoped, he’d helped Koigakubo Yuri save face.

“Actually, your apology cleaning was quite the ordeal for the other teachers... They kept asking me how many hours you were going to keep cleaning for. And on top of that, all your reports were about exactly how many hairs were in the bathroom and how many cans were in the trash, and how dirty or sloppy everything was, and you even wrote down which teachers you thought were responsible... You were like a mother-in-law with a never-ending devil’s checklist. Everyone was trembling with fear whenever they had to go to the

bathroom.”

“I thought you didn’t have a mother-in-law.”

“I don’t... I was using my imagination. A castle in the air, if you will...”

Ha ha ha, Koigakubo Yuri laughed vacantly as she stuck Ryuuji’s reflection paper in the file. After that, she would read over it thoroughly and go over it with a red pen, writing things like, “I’m not really sure about this.” “Think over this more!” “Yes, it did seem that way.” Writing never-ending comments was her job as the teacher. Then, she would temporarily return it to Ryuuji, and Ryuuji would write comments on the comments, and they would be filed away.

They’d had school on Saturday, that day. It was currently after class.

The lecture room the two were in filled with silence for a while. The voices of girl athletes echoed on the school grounds outside. It was probably the softball club. All Ryuuji could hear were rough and effectively menacing voices. *HUER GO HUER! DEURAH! HEYUOO!* He’d once asked Minori what all of it meant, but she had replied back, “We’re saying, huer go huer! Deurah! Heyuoo!” The world was still full of mysteries.

Once the week started, they would have their third term closing ceremony.

“Okay, you’re done with writing reflection papers now, Takasu-kun. Thanks for all the hard work.”

“Not at all... I was at fault, so I had to do it. Thank you for everything you did, Ms. Koigakubo. I’m sorry I caused you so much trouble. I really am.”

“Thanks. It’s fine.”

The days of their second year in high school were going by without Taiga.

“Sensei?”

Hm? Koigakubo, who had stood up from her seat ahead of him, turned around. He thrust a paper in front of her face. He’d been walking around with it folded in half the whole time, and the crease went deep.

Ryuuji said his piece before she could open it. “I turned in a version of this earlier, but could you replace it with this? I’m sorry it’s so sudden, but I had to write something down. Excuse me!”

Using the moment of distraction as Koigakubo dropped her eyes to the paper, he quickly stood up. He opened the door and headed out into the hallway.

“What. What?! Whaaaaaat?!” Koigakubo exclaimed.

“I’m serious.” Ryuuji turned around to his teacher, who followed him out the door and walked backwards as he pointed with his finger. *I’m serious—seriously serious.* He couldn’t help but laugh out loud as he looked at his teacher’s bewildered face.

“I’m glad you’re serious about it, but the future aspirations questionnaire isn’t for announcing stuff like this!” Koigakubo said. “Don’t you have a brighter, more aspirational outlook?!”

“My outlooks *are* bright and aspirational. Actually, you’re part of the ‘everyone’ I’m talking about!”

“Whaaaaat... Well...th-thanks I guess...” his teacher muttered with an uncertain expression. In the end, Ryuuji heard her burst out laughing as he went down the stairs, “Ha ha ha!”

As he vanished from sight, his teacher’s mouth softened slightly. *I’m sure you really will have a bright future, because...* Then the adult in her returned, and she stopped herself from finishing the thought.

The future aspirations Ryuuji had committed to paper were summarized in just one phrase: *For everyone to be happy!*

He’d added an exclamation point on the end before turning it in.

As Ryuuji headed to the classroom where he had left his bag, he understood his teacher’s surprise. Honestly, he was still having trouble coming to a decision on a lot of things—the college he would go to if he could still somehow get into one, or what he would major in, or what kind of work he might want to find instead. His future remained unclear.

But he still had a year to go, so wasn’t that fine?

Maybe he was being naive. Maybe he was too optimistic and would end up being left behind by everyone else. But Ryuuji had only just started to understand how wide the world was and wasn’t ready to decide how he would

cross it. His indecision wasn't because of financial problems, or because he had been bound by Yasuko's words, or even because of her reconciliation with her parents. It wasn't because his options were limited or because he didn't like any of them.

It was because he wasn't done taking stock of his surroundings. It was because, compared to his peers, he was finally taking his time getting started on his path.

The future was too wide, too far, and it was frightening—but it was also rosy and infinitely bright. Ryuuji was looking forward to thinking about it. He thought he could do anything. He could believe that the things he hoped for would be within reach.

If he could feel this way, then he would be fine. No matter what arms or equipment he decided to outfit himself with as he travelled the world, he would be fine.

Besides, once he made a decision, all that would remain was to go through with it. That was why he wanted to just be a kid for a little while longer. These were probably the last days of his life that he could get away with being lost. Ryuuji wanted to enjoy wandering while he still could.

He wanted to enjoy the luxurious irresponsibility limited to this time of his life.

“Hey! Yo! I'm hungry, wanna eat?!”

“You actually turned that in?! *I want everyone to be happy!*”

In the classroom, Haruta and Noto stuck their hands into candy bags as they waited for Ryuuji to come back. *I really did*, Ryuuji nodded as he grabbed a potato chip and tossed it into his mouth.

“You really did do it! What did Yuri-chan say?”

“She said, ‘Whaaaaaaaaaat!’”

Ha ha! Noto laughed. Another group of stragglers still in the classroom cracked up about something unrelated at just about the same time, and the room filled with the sound of laughter.

“Well, of course she’d be like ‘Whaaaaaaaat.’ That’s normal. That’s a really weird thing to hear coming from someone with such good grades.”

“But that’s the great thing about Taka-chan! I think I’d like him to open up a restaurant or something.”

“Oh, me too. And then we could all use it as our watering hole.”

“I don’t think that’d be sustainable, money-wise... Actually, where do you want to go for lunch? Is Kitamura here yet?” Ryuuji cast his eyes around the classroom, assuming he was probably still at the student council.

“Ah. Uh. Um. Hello, the student council is conducting a mic test. Uhh. Ngah... hey! Could you stop pressing that button! You’re not even part of the announcement!”

The sounds of a live broadcast suddenly flowed from the speakers, and Ryuuji almost fell out of his seat at Kitamura’s voice.

“Apparently they’ve gotten into a fight with the drama club over next year’s afternoon broadcasts. The broadcast club is staying neutral, so Kitamura was saying they’d be having a civilized discussion,” Noto explained, but the broadcast went on.

“Uh! Whoa! I’m not giving it up...like I’ll ever give it up!”

“Ahhh! Let go, you dolt!”

“Ahh, it’s going to fall! Stop! Hey, there’s equipment over there!”

“A civilized discussion, huh? That sounds pretty bad... Think things are okay?”

Thump, clatter. The sounds of the racket that filtered through the speakers made it seem like things might be getting violent.

“Hey, throw that over here...oh...whoa! Okay! Got it! N-next year, we’ll continue to bring the Patron Saint of Broken Hearts to you on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. I hope you precisely enjoy us cheering on your love! Guh... I’ll give it up over my dead body! Music! Hurry up and get something playing! I hope you have a listen to...oh?! AH!”

They heard the sound of something falling and—*FZT!* The broadcast ended momentarily.

Uhh... Ryuuji and the others automatically looked up at the speakers.

“Oh! I think I’ve heard this song on a commercial before!” Haruta bobbed his head to the rhythm of the song that came on. Ryuuji also recognized the music that Kitamura had probably put on to cut off the drama club’s speech and started to bob along with Haruta.

“This kind of makes me feel like going to karaoke. It’s been a while...” Noto came up with a good idea.

“Sounds good! How about we go today?”

“Yeah, let’s go. How about we go to ‘My Voice’ behind the station?”

“That’s the *only* option there is! Send a text to the master of love, he can follow afta’ us.”

Noto immediately took out his phone as he shouldered his bag. “*‘Everyone’s going, so you better hurry it up!’* Done.”

Ryuuji left the classroom alongside Haruta, wrapping his scarf around his neck.

“It’s suuuper warm outside today, Taka-chan. Do you really need that? It was so hot, I had to take off my parka and put it in my bag.”

“Really. What...is it already spring?” He turned his eyes to the outside of the window. Now that Haruta had mentioned it, the line of cherry blossom trees leading to the school gate were hazy with faint pink. Though the flowers hadn’t bloomed yet, the swelling buds were already colorful.

“That’s right. The season of I, Haruta Kouji, has finally arrived! As you can see, my flowers, the Cherry Brocken Jr., are already vividly colored, and pink rain will fall on Berlin—”

“Don’t you mean cherry blossoms...?”

“Whoa! Looks like our paths have crossed with Ami-chan-sama’s party! Hee hee hee! Were you out to use the restrooms?”

Scary! Frightening! Terrifying! Ami, Maya, and Nanako, who had come out of the girl’s bathroom precisely as Haruta made his joke, all hugged themselves in the same pose as they looked at each other.

“What? You’re all still at school?”

“That’s kind of ridiculous.” Ryuuji pointed at the three girls’ long hair. They all had matching curls. He didn’t remember them looking like that during the end-of-day homeroom.

“We were all practicing curling our hair just now. ♥” As she sprung a curl near her chest with her fingertips, Ami cutely opened her mouth in the shape of a heart. She seemed in a good mood as she fluttered her long lashes at Ryuuji. “So, what do you think? Opinions? Ha ha, these super shiny, soft curls look scary cute on me, don’t they? It’s crazy, right? They’re bombastic, they’re powerful, they’re absolute! What do you think?! I’m even scared of myself, ahh! It’s so scandalous!”

“What’re you getting all worked up about? Actually, it’s ’cause of people like you that we’ve got hairs in the sink. Did you clean it up? Did you clean up all the hairs you shed from those smooth and fluffy curls?”

“How about you just go home?!” *Hmph!* Ami’s face contorted as she waved her hands at him, “Shoo, shoo.”

Maya and Nanako wriggled with laughter at Ami’s actions. Meanwhile, Haruta looked at Nanako’s hair. “I kind of think the way Kashii’s hair is curled is cute.”

“Really? Thanks. Actually, I kind of messed up.”

“Hmm. But you didn’t curl it super tight, so it’s kind of nice loose like that.”

Nanako opened her plump lips softly as Haruta praised her and then turned a meaningful look at Noto. “Hey, Noto-kun, how curly do you like a girl’s hair to be? Do you like it wavy like this or for it to be curled back and gorgeous like Ami’s? Or do you like it like Maya’s, with just the ends curled? What’s your favorite?”

“Huh?! Me?! Hair?! I—I—” Noto stared, against his better judgment, at class 2-C’s official knockout trio. “...Wanna karaoke?!”

That was unexpected.

Noto kept babbling as he headed past the girls’ bathroom door, “We’re just about to go, so... Well, I guess only if you’re not busy, but if you feel like coming

—or if you’re like—well, see—there’s a Mos Burger across from the karaoke place, and we could buy stuff to eat there and the drinks are free. Well, whatever, but if you are—but well, you might not be.”

He turned around slightly, but he wasn’t talking to anyone in particular. “Kitamura’s coming, too,” he added in a quiet voice.

“What a coincidence!” Maya said, her voice so bright it seemed like she was trying to stifle Noto’s. “We were just talking about going! How about we all go together? It’s okay if they join in, right Ami-chan? Nanako?”

“Of course! The more the merrier, right, Ami-chan?”

“Ahh, but my secret will be out if these guys hear my beautiful voice.”

They walked through the hallway as a group and changed into their outdoor shoes at the shoe cubbies. The girls headed out first and, for some reason, Noto whined, “You think they’re going for Kitamura? Is that it?”

How should I know? Ryuuji smiled wryly and nonchalantly pushed Noto’s head toward Haruta.

Under the yet-to-bloom flowers, they formed a noisy troop as they progressed forward. Ami looked towards the sports grounds and started to run. *Perfect timing!* She approached the netted fence.

“Heeeeeeey! Minori-chan!”

“Huh? Oh, it’s you Ahmin! Oh, hey, and you’ve got everybody with you! Are you on your way home?” Minori wore her softball uniform, which was smudged with dirt, and her fingers were taped up, but when she took off her cap, she had her usual smile on. “Yo!” She also waved a hand at Ryuuji.

Yo! Ryuuji waved back.

“You look ridiculous... Are you still practicing? Are you working today?”

“I’m done after this, and I don’t have work!”

“Seriously? We’re going to karaoke right now. You should come after you’re done changing.”

“Care-ee-oh-kee! Whoa, it’s been such a long time since I’ve gone! I’ll

definitely come! I'll subject your ears to my solo anime song!"

"Okay, okay, okay, okay, we got it, so just hurry and come over!"

"Okay! I'll hurr-over!"

Hurr-over...? As in hurry over...? Nanako and Maya cocked their heads at each other when they spotted Kitamura, who seemed to have just gotten their message, and was running down the stairs of the front entrance.



“HEEEEEEEY!” Ryuuji waved vigorously at him. “Hurry up,” he yelled to his best friend.

Waving his hand as rigorously as Ryuuji, Kitamura smiled as he ran, his glasses bouncing on his nose. The girls had moved slightly ahead of them, and Minori was calling to end softball early that day like a wartime general. *ROUND UP! ROUND UP, MY YOUNG COMPATRIOTS!* Noto, Haruta, and Ryuuji waited for Kitamura to catch up to them.

Everyone’s here.

Now we just need you, Ryuuji secretly told himself in his heart.

Everyone’s here, so hurry up.

Hurry and come back to me.

Taiga.

I want to see you.

There are things in this world that not a single person has witnessed.

“Oh...oh...oh...”

“In! I—In—Innn...In...liiinnn!”

“It’s tasty, huh? Right, right... You really are cute... Oh, hey, Inko-chan, stop that. It tickles.”

“Rin!”

In the morning light, the bird with the face like a bizarrely shaped rock nibbled at the skin on his hand. Takasu Ryuuji watched as the beak peeled off and consumed the skin around his thumbnail.

“Of joy—”

“Toy!”

“It’s great...!”

Ryuuji poked his ugly parakeet's head with the tip of his finger to pet her as she rested on his wrist. Probably because she was enjoying it, Inko-chan drooled cloudy liquid. The whites of her eyes showed as she shivered.

Mm-hmm, good, good. He gave her head an absentminded kiss without thinking about it. As far as Ryuuji was concerned, Inko was his beloved pet, and so cute he wanted to eat her right up. Of course, he would no longer be human if he did that, so he ended their morning communication session there and put her back in the birdcage.

He looked at the clock, ready for a change of pace. It was 7:45.

"Oh no!"

He had thought it was still half past seven. He couldn't let himself be late for the opening ceremony of his third year in high school!

"Wait, my head!"

Ryuuji leapt into the bathroom and looked in the mirror. "Urk!" Today, of all days, his bedhead was terrible. The back of his hair stuck up so intensely that it looked like he was wearing a beret—or a wig. He desperately combed it out with a brush and wet it with his fingers.

"Th-th-this won't work...!"

He headed back to the living room in his sock-clad feet, pulled down a small box of Yasuko's hair tools from their shelf, and looked for something that could fix his hair. He didn't care whether the answer was a spray, mousse, or a cream—as long as it could help him.

"You looking for something?"

"My head! I need to fix my hair! I can't go out looking like this!"

"Oh, that! The thing you're holding right now is spray meant for fixing bedhead! Give it here, I'll fix it up for you!" Yasuko, who was already awake, changed, and had eaten breakfast with Ryuuji, sprayed his head several times. She brushed his damp hair and held it down firmly as Ryuuji looked at the clock anxiously again.

"Crap, crap, crap... I might actually be late. What about you? When are you

heading out?”

“I’m fine! I just need to get to the store before ten. Okay, now you just use a dryer on the wet parts.”

Ryuuji gave her a rushed reply and headed to the bathroom again. He pulled out the dryer in a fluster, and the plug rang out as it hit the polished sink.

Everything okay? Yasuko peeked in at him.

Ever since she had chopped her heat-damaged hair to chin length, he thought she had started to look even more like Sonoko. Yasuko herself didn’t seem to like the haircut and declared at every opportunity she would be growing it out again.

Ever since that day, Sonoko had come to the rental three times and Seiji once. Ryuuji and Yasuko went back to Yasuko’s parent’s house once. After such emotional reunions, it was, of course, slightly difficult to go back to the independent, carefree rhythms of their everyday lives. The parents and former runaway daughter, after having been separated for so long, occasionally butted heads.

Yasuko had also retired from Bishamon Heaven at the end of March, though not because she was concerned about how her parents saw it. It had been the owner’s idea to install the number two, Shizuyo, as the new housemistress and to task Yasuko with opening a new store called “Okonomiyaki and Benzaiten Heaven.” She would be interviewing new employees starting that day.

“Did it work?”

“I give up!” Ryuuji held down his hair, which still looked exactly like a parakeet’s tuft, as he glared at his own face in the mirror. He would be a third-year high school student starting today. He scowled and decided that this was actually fine. There were things he needed to do, and he didn’t want to be late.

He ran into his room, which still had the curtains drawn, and tore apart the dry-cleaning bag. He reeled it in and thrust it into the trash. He put on his pressed school jacket.

A young married couple he still hadn’t gotten to know had moved into the bedroom of the condo that stood beyond the curtain. They always had the

blinds closed, probably wanting privacy, and he almost never opened his curtains anymore. He didn't really care. It wasn't like sunlight would make its way into the room even if he did.

Ryuuji grabbed his phone, threw his tote bag over his shoulder, and then ran out of the room. "I'm heading out!"

"See yooooooooou! It's fine, your hair looks greaaaaaaaaat! You're amazing, Ryuu-chan! You're the coolest guy in the wooooooooooooorld!"

"..."

This was what the world could call killing with kindness.

Ryuuji almost tripped under the force of his mother's torrent of loving praise as he stuck his feet into his shining loafers. He grabbed the cold doorknob and opened the front door, letting the blinding sunlight of spring bathe his whole body.

The shower of light was so intense he couldn't open his eyes. There was a warm, spring breeze, surreptitiously laced with the smell of flowers. Standing under the bright blue sky, Ryuuji breathed in a lungful of air.

His shoes rang out as he ran down the stairs, almost giving his landlady a heart attack as she swept the front porch with a broom. "Good morning!"

"AH! Don't just yell at me like that!"

A new school year. A new class. A new homeroom teacher. New friends. On this new morning, Ryuuji walked on, one step at a time. His legs swelled with power as he took a large step forward.

"Taiga..."

He threw out his chest.

"...how will you start walking forward?"

I'm boldly facing forward. I'm facing the same direction you are, and I know I can keep believing that this is the path that will lead me to you again.

So, you also need to—

“Guh?!”

“Ow!”

In this world, there’s something that no one has ever seen.

Something gentle and oh-so-sweet.

If anyone ever saw it, they’d surely want it for themselves.

But that’s precisely why no one’s ever seen it.

In order to keep it safe, the world hid it away.

But someday, someone will find it.

Only the one who was meant to have it will find it, in the end.

That’s how it’s meant to be.

“Ow...ouch...! Wh—”

“Wh-wh-wh-wh-!” Ryuuji’s quivering tongue had gone numb. Shock clouded his vision in an intense, halo-like white light. “Why?! Since when have you been here?! How did you get back?!”

It seemed that the girl before his eyes had no time for that. Taiga, who had landed on her butt from the collision, wore her usual uniform, though it looked oddly new. She held her head, which firmly conked into his when they ran into each other, and started to wail, unable to get back up.

“H-hey, wait...are you okay?!”

“I kind of feel dizzy... Wait! A! Sec...!”

Ryuuji saw murder fill the eyes under her two small hands as they opened wide and pinned him with a glare. A palmtop-sized tiger was still a tiger. She tensed her body as though she was about to pounce on him.

“I’ve been waiting here this whoooole morning! You’re so slow! We’re going to end up late! And you didn’t even notice me! And then you came barreling into me! Why didn’t you just—”

He used every ounce of strength in him to embrace the delicate body that readily clung to him with all her weight.

“—hug me from the start like this?! ”

This shamelessness, this strength, this minuteness, this weight, this energy, this sense of lovingness—this was Taiga.

“I’m so...sorry.”

Taiga was always sudden.

She would suddenly appear, suddenly knock Ryuuji off his feet, suddenly carry off his heart. That was just how she was, and she’d always been that way. Ryuuji knew that everything would always end up in its proper place like this. They would hug each other and inhale deep breaths of each other. They would yell at the top of their lungs. *Welcome home. Welcome home. I’m home. I’m home.*

“Taiga. It’s you, it’s you, it’s really you... It’s you, Taiga!”

“It’s you, Ryuuji. It’s really you. My favorite Ryuuji.”

“How did you get back?! ”

“So my mom rescinded the school withdrawal the day after and sent in an absence request instead. She wanted to make sure I would be able to come back to school if I wanted to, but it took a while for them to approve the request, and she didn’t want me to be confused, so she kept it secret. I didn’t find out until just recently.”

“What about your house?! Where are you living?! Actually...seriously! What’s with you?! Where were you up until now?! You never told me anything!”

“Well, of course, I couldn’t—” Taiga raised her slightly damp eyes and looked at the white condo that stood beside them. She continued to laugh at the back of her throat. “—go back there. But I’m close by. I’m right next to you. You have to come with everyone else! I’m really practically right next to you!”

“I definitely will.”

“I’m with my mom and my new dad, and also—I’ve got a little brother! He’s so cute! They rented out a house nearby for my sake! Well, actually, it was on

the condition that I'd help out with taking care of my brother while my mom's at work. And I'm pretty sure they'll move out right after I've graduated. Seems about right, huh?"

"Yeah."

"Yup."

Ryuuji painted the picture of a dream in his mind and was sure Taiga was picturing the same thing he was. At some point in the vast, endless future, he would marry Taiga and they would live together. Everyone they loved would be there. Ryuuji and Taiga would smile blissfully, their eyes squinting with joy, because they were headed toward that future together.

"I'm sure everyone will be surprised when I come to school. I haven't told anyone yet—not Minorin or Dimhuahua or Kitamura-kun."

"Let's give them a surprise. Let's go! We're actually going to end up being late at this rate!"

"Yeah!"

Ryuuji easily grabbed the bag he dropped and turned around, and the two of them ran down the sidewalk on the usual Zelkova-lined path. Both moving at once, they grabbed each other's hands and turned their faces to each other and smiled.

Their new days start once more from here.

THE END



Afterword

I was trying to talk about that one 007 film, *Tomorrow Never Dies*...but whenever I'd try to bring it up, I'd always call it *The Day After Tomorrow* and end up gushing alone without anyone else joining in. *Isn't that a different movie?* My friends would gently correct me, and my whole body would start emitting flashes of light from extreme embarrassment, and the gods who felt pity for me would summon me to heaven, and I'd become one of the constellations that dwell in the night sky.

Well, sort of. Once I turned into a brilliant star, I joked, "Japanese is hard!" to cover my embarrassment and got through it somehow. But now that I think back on it, the movie titles weren't even in Japanese... If you catch a glance of the constellation of a wretched woman covering her face with both her hands, wailing, "Ahhhh!" because she's unable to bear the surge of embarrassing memories, please make sure you give it a wave because that's me. I am Yuyuko Takemiya. *Sparkle sparkle...!*

And before I knew it, three whole years have passed since I started writing *Toradora!* I crafted the plot, wrote the manuscript, took a short break, looked at the galley proofs, crafted the plot, wrote the manuscript...and kept that cycle up for three years. That was really all I've been doing this whole time. It might be because I'd been pursued by deadlines constantly, but when I look back on it, I almost think, *I wonder if a full set of seasons has passed yet?* I might have been living in the seasons as they passed in the books. Of course, time in reality has continued to mercilessly tick by, so my body has aged a good three years.

Well, regardless, I spent three years writing about one, and I've amassed ten volumes of *Toradora!* To everyone who has picked up the books, thank you so very much for sticking with me this long! Did you enjoy it?

I'm so happy the series has lasted this long. I had a place to write and people who were kind enough to read it, and that has been such a joy. It has made me so happy! I want to write more! If I shed all the considerations of common sense, those would be the true thoughts that remained. But, in the end, I decided it was time to bring the series to a close.

Once again, to everyone who read *Toradora!*—I thank you from the bottom of my heart. Writing *Toradora!* was my way of making contact with you all. I wish I could have just slithered right out of the book—well, what would you think if that happened? Would you be scared? Are you afraid of me, the thirty-year-old, appearing suddenly from within the pages of your open novel? I’d have bags under my eyes from exhaustion, but my face would be thick with hair (I got a high-end face cream with some added nourishment in it, and when I tried using it, the hair on my face started growing uncontrollably. I’ve been putting it on my hands, too, and the hair on my knuckles has been ridiculous. What is a girl to do?) You don’t want that? In that case, how about I have Yasu draw me in his style like one of his pretty girls? How about if I had smooth and short blonde hair, golden eyes, and perked black cat ears? What if I was unabashedly stark naked, my body so skinny I could be mistaken for a boy, with nothing but a black velour choker on my neck?

But, well, becoming a buck-naked blonde catgirl might be pretty difficult for me. I might be able to manage the blonde hair and going nude, but I’m sure that would be miserable for everyone...

Maybe I’ll write another, new story. I think I’ll keep writing and writing. If I do manage to bring a new story safely into the world, I hope you’ll pick it up, even if it’s just to glance at it. And if you would be so kind as to open its pages, nothing would make me happier.

To everyone who has sent me letters of encouragement, I want to say that the messages I received from you saved me when I felt close to running out of breath. I needed that help many, many times, and when I did, I would read over them. To everyone I met during autograph sessions, it was my first time doing something like that, so I was shaking from the nerves, but it was enjoyable while it lasted. They are memories I will never forget. And to everyone who’s stuck with me this far, thank you for being there time and time again! I hope that you will join me for the next work! And starting with Yasu, good job to everyone who helped make *Toradora!* with me. After we’ve caught our breaths, I’m planning on starting again immediately!

—Yuyuko Takemiya

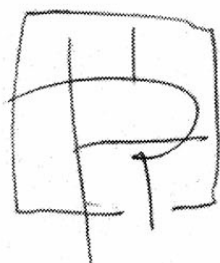
It's me, Yasu.

Somehow, I've managed to stay in charge of the illustrations all the way to the final volume. This is really thanks to all of you. Thank you so much for sticking with *Toradora!* till now! If the opportunity presents itself, I hope we'll meet again!

Takemiya-sensei, my manager
Yuasa-san, and my assistant
Sakuraba-san—thank you
for allowing me to be
in your care!



2009.3





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