
Sunsunsun
Illustrated by
Momoco
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Когда-нибудь ты всё-таки выберешь меня, да?
Alya Sometimes Hides Her Feelings in Russian


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Alya Sometimes Hides Her Feelings in Russian


“Is *this*
distracting
you?”


“This could work... This could definitely work.”


“Oh-ho-ho-ho!
Victory is mine!”

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ИНОГД
НО
КОКЕТ
ГНИЛОЕТ ПО-РУС

Alya Sometimes Hides Her Feelings in Russian

7

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Illustrated by Momoco

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PROLOGUE

Whoa. Hey now...

“Enjoy,” said Professor Side Slit, smirking mysteriously as she exited the handicraft club’s clubroom.

The sun had completely set, and only the soft glow of the schoolyard lights illuminated the space. The only sounds were the faint, muffled voices of the students outside.

“Uh… Are you sure you don’t want to go?”

“…What? There is no way I am going outside after what she told us. There’s been a huge misunderstanding, and that would only make things worse.”

“Yeah, I guess…”

She didn’t even have to specify what the misunderstanding was. Professor Side Slit had just revealed that there were rumors going around about Masachika and Alisa, and if they walked out dressed to impress as they were, then numerous students would surely start to think that they were a couple. Even telling people they weren’t dating wouldn’t work, since most would probably say something like, “What? You’re joking, right?” with a straight face.

“Besides, this dress… While it’s beautiful, it’s a little too…you know…to wear in public,” Alisa muttered bashfully. Masachika’s gaze followed hers until he landed on two massive mounds, prompting him to swiftly redirect his eyes toward the ceiling.

Yep. Those would definitely get everyone’s attention.

He wavered—at the brink of voicing his thoughts—before just agreeing with her inwardly. Her band outfit had been pretty revealing, with its daring neckline, but this dress took it to a whole new level. To be completely honest, he could see most of her upper chest…and the cleavage was incredible.

I bet she could hide her phone in cleavage like that, then randomly pull it out like sexy women do in comic books sometimes.

Masachika instinctively tried to escape into the depths of his nerdy, otaku mind, imagining an older, sexy woman in place of Alisa. But then he shook his head.

Hold up! Shouldn't I be able to see her bra with this much cleavage exposed?! The fact that I can't see anything makes me wonder if she's wearing something unusually shaped... O-or is she not wearing a bra at all?!

He nearly ogled her chest once more, so he smacked himself to refocus, forcing his gaze upward. He ground his teeth, picturing Professor Side Slit's smug grin as if boasting, "I made that entire outfit."

Professor Side Slit, you punk!! There's no way she can wear an outfit like this in front of the other students!! Who told you to do this?! Because it wasn't me!! Anyway, the outfit is incredible, so thank you so much!!

But his internal rant was interrupted when he noticed Alisa's icy glare.

"So this is what you're into?"

"No, that's probably more Professor Side Slit's thing. Long story."

"...Uh-huh."

Although Masachika answered promptly to avoid any misunderstandings, he could still feel her skeptical gaze piercing him. Suddenly, music began playing in the schoolyard, drawing their attention briefly.

"...!"

When their eyes met once more, Masachika became entranced by her otherworldly beauty, sending his heart racing. Her skin was as pale as fresh snow, luminous in the dim light. Her blue eyes sparkled like gemstones. She wore a dress so ethereal, it was like something out of a fairy tale, perfectly complementing her unrealistically gorgeous features. Alisa's slender waist only accentuated her delicate appearance...and yet her ample, earth-shattering—

"A-ahem...!"

Masachika cleared his throat and tried to rid his mind of the impure thoughts. Then he offered his left hand to Alisa. He was

desperately struggling to maintain his composure.

"So, uh… Would you like to dance?"

"…Sure."

They faced each other, with Alisa's hand in his, and tranquility washed over him as he pulled her closer. He gazed into her eyes and began to move to the rhythm of her breathing. They were so close that he could feel her exhaling onto his skin.

"…Your dancing's a lot tamer this year, huh?" remarked Masachika with a mischievous grin, recalling her wild antics at the previous year's festival. His comment made Alisa frown.

"I don't want to take any risks in this dress, since I'm borrowing it. That is, unless this isn't enough for you?"

"Ha-ha-ha! It was kind of challenging to keep up with you last year, so let's stick to this."

"…Okay."

Their bodies moved as one, their gazes intertwined, feeling a sense of harmony until all of a sudden, Masachika was swallowed by a wave of nostalgia. Memories of his childhood flooded his mind.

This makes me feel like I'm in ballroom dance class again. But I think my dancing partner was Ayano—?!

Alisa took a sudden step forward, and her body pressed against his, causing Masachika to step back in a fluster. Yet they somehow remained close—close enough for their legs to almost touch.

"Alya? Don't you think we're a little close?"

"I don't know. Are you sure you're not just overthinking it?"

"No, we really are!"

Before he could finish his sentence, Alisa stepped forward once more, forcing him to scramble backward again. It was no longer a dance, because all of his attention was focused on avoiding stepping on her feet and not losing his balance.

I thought she had matured and wasn't going to dance like a maniac anymore?!

He desperately tried to coordinate his feet, but her soft, yielding body pressing against him was doing its best to break his concentration.

Ahhh!! These have definitely matured, though!

Despite being distracted by something pressing against his chest—*somethings* that were even more pronounced than a year ago—Masachika refused to look down, knowing that if he did, he would be sucked into the mysterious, deep valley between the mountains.

Heh! I'm not going to fall for Professor Side Slit's trap! I—ack?!

He stumbled, emboldening Alisa's relentless pursuit, as her lips twisted sadistically.

Tee-hee! Oh my. Where did all that confidence go? You were so calm and composed a moment ago, she thought.

Alisa had somehow sensed that he was thinking about another woman during their dance. So she playfully pushed herself up against him to punish him, but his reaction was even better than she could have imagined. His eyes widened as he instinctively glanced down before looking away in a fluster, which only further amused Alisa.

Heh… I'm wearing such a revealing outfit and giving you the honor of dancing with me…so I don't want you thinking about anyone else!

She pulled him closer, preventing his escape while she stepped forward, and yet he still managed to respond with astonishing speed.

"Heh-heh."

His thoughtfulness was evident by his deft avoidance of her forceful steps while gently guiding her with his right hand on her back. She smiled softly. Alisa knew that he would always be there to catch her, no matter how recklessly she danced, and that thought alone filled her with an overwhelming joy, making her only want to tease him more.

Ah, this is so much fun… Look at me more. Look at me and nobody else. I want you to be my partner and nobody else's. I would do anything for that, even—

Their intertwined fingers were warm with body heat, and her heart hammered in her chest. As if drawn into a vortex by his gaze, Alisa unconsciously leaned forward, bringing her face closer to his—

"Wh-whoa?!"

"Huh?! Ah!"

That was when it finally happened: Masachika lost his balance, collapsing onto the floor with a gentle thud, his back hitting the wall. Alisa stumbled forward as well…and fell straight into his arms as he reached out to catch her.

“Ow… Alya, you okay?”

The fall was undeniably her fault, yet he only expressed worry for her, and it was that kindness and concerned gaze that made her heart flutter and dance with joy. Although Alisa knew she needed to apologize, she couldn’t hold back her smile. She was overwhelmed with happiness and excitement and didn’t want to see Masachika upset, so she turned her grin into something more mischievous.

“What’s wrong?” she asked. While gazing up through her eyelashes into his eyes, Alisa slipped her right index finger in between her bosom, then gave the neckline of her dress a sharp tug, deliberately showing off her cleavage as she whispered in a sultry voice:

“Is *this* distracting you?”

“What the…?!”

All signs of composure and gentlemanly behavior vanished as Masachika became visibly flustered. But in return, Alisa suddenly felt his gaze fix on her chest, causing heat to surge through her entire body, leaving her flushed and burning from within.

“H-ha-ha… You’re such a perv. ♪”

Although consumed by embarrassment so overwhelming that she wanted to cry out, Alisa teased him some more, then placed her head against him to escape his gaze. But when she pressed her ear against his firm, reassuring chest, she realized that his heart was racing wildly, just like hers.

Wow… His heart is beating so fast… Tee-hee! He really is such a perv.

But that didn’t bother her. She didn’t mind if he looked at her or touched her. She wasn’t sure what she was feeling. Alisa’s heart was singing with glee, despite her being so embarrassed that she wanted to scream. She had felt like this once before—

“H-hey? Earth to Alya.”

Masachika’s troubled tone was so amusing that she couldn’t help but laugh, her shoulders shaking.

“Uh… What’s so funny? If you’re not hurt, then do you think you could get off me?”

“Oh? Does being hugged by me disgust you?”

“Wh-what?! ‘Hugged’?! I…!”

Masachika was at a loss for words, unable to hide his nervousness. Alisa’s smile was filled with warmth as she closed her eyes.

I’m only teasing Masachika. That’s all this is… Alisa thought as she snuggled into him.

Her utterly trusting smile disarmed Masachika, allowing him to finally relax.

…And just like that, they quietly held each other while listening to the music from the schoolyard.

CHAPTER 1

Reunion

Regular classes resumed after the Autumn Heights Festival and the extra day off school that made up for it. However, many students were clearly far too distracted to concentrate on their lessons, fidgeting in their eagerness to talk to their friends and classmates. Some were even caught sneaking glances at their phones to text, unable to control themselves. It seemed, however, that the main topic of conversation was a particular event that had unfolded during the assembly in the gym that morning: a public apology.

"I am truly sorry for my actions and the pain that I have caused."

With a dramatic bow onstage, Yuushou Kiryuuin, one of the top three most popular boys in the school, apologized profusely to the entire student body. Born into a wealthy family, he was known not only as the Prince of Piano for his extraordinary musical talent and good looks, but for his pride as well. Which was why his unexpected act of humility left the entire student body stunned, especially the female students, who gasped in disbelief. However, what was most surprising was the fact that his scalp was shining radiantly as he bowed.

His usually flawless, silky hair, which was adored by countless fans, had become a memory of yore. And to make matters worse, whoever shaved his head must have done a terrible job, because there were bandages all over his head. Although a rather painful sight, it was honestly hilarious, and his strikingly beautiful face only made it funnier—to the point that it was genuinely hard for anyone to even pay attention to Touya's explanation.

Nevertheless, as understanding of the situation gradually spread, anger began to simmer, particularly among the students who had been directly affected by the incident. Before things could escalate, Sumire—who was onstage by Yuushou's side—suddenly took out a pair of scissors and claimed that she shared responsibility for what had happened. Then she grabbed one of her beloved spiral curls as if she were going to snip it off. Chaos ensued as numerous girls from the kendo club rushed onto the stage to stop her, creating a scene reminiscent of their recent swordplay drama. However, Chisaki's stern shout brought a quick end to the madness, turning the situation into what could only be described as a comedy sketch.

While the student body was in a state of confusion, not knowing whether to laugh or to be angry, the principal announced a one-month suspension for Yuushou, bringing the assembly to a close. The incident quickly became the talk of the school, so naturally, Masachika became the focus of everyone's attention, since he was rumored to be the one who thwarted Yuushou's plan.

"Yo, Kuze! Did that little display this morning have something to do with your piano battle at the school festival?"

"Did you seriously beat the Prince in a piano-off?!"

"How did you know that he was behind those incidents at the school festival?"

The moment first period ended, Masachika's classmates crowded around him, making him grimace. But he decided to answer their questions as best as he could, since he was well aware that he had to clear up any misunderstandings before weird rumors started spreading.

"Well, I assumed it was probably someone trying to ruin the reputation of the current student council, so I figured it was highly likely someone running to become the next student council president would have been behind the incidents. Of course, it could have just been someone with a grudge against the previous student council president and vice president…but either way, I had a good feeling that they would try to make contact with the First Light Committee, so I staked out the room they were staying in until he showed."

"Nice! How'd you convince him to 'debate' you, though?"

“That’s…a secret.”

“Oh, come on! The curiosity is killing me!”

“For real! That’s what I really wanted to know!”

Although his classmates pressed him for more details, there were just some things that Masachika couldn’t tell them, let alone even wanted to, so he simply offered a forced smile and an evasive response.

“Give me a break. You guys know how some things can’t be discussed when they involve the First Light Committee, right?”

The classmates, who had been leaning forward with anticipation, all let out a collective “Gah” and scowled at his response.

“Oh, so that’s why…”

“Yeah, good point…”

There was a simple reason why their expressions soured all at once: A gag order had been put in place immediately following the Autumn Heights Festival incident, thanks to the members of the First Light Committee, who had been present at the festival.

However, despite the attempts to silence them, a few festival guests managed to post videos and pictures of the incident on social media—all of which were deleted within a minute, along with the accounts themselves. The media’s coverage was equally brief and misleading, being nothing more than a sanitized version of the event, stating only that “An intruder sneaked inside the Autumn Heights Festival but was apprehended by security.” This vague news report, which made it seem as though the intruder had been caught right away, failed to capture the public’s attention and was soon forgotten. And that was why even the Seirei Academy students, who knew about the First Light Committee and how they operated, couldn’t help but find the situation unsettling, to say the least.

Incidentally, the police were never called to the scene, and the intruders, who were taken to the disciplinary committee room, vanished without a trace. Regardless, it was probably best not to know where they went or what had happened to them.

“You know those conspiracies about how there are secret organizations controlling entire countries from the shadows? Well, I’m starting to wonder if the First Light Committee is one of them.”

“Except they’re not even trying to hide it. It’s really obvious now how many powerful people are part of that group.”

“I’m just surprised Kiryuuin got away with only a month suspension.”

“Well, he was doing it for the election…so I guess he’s basically getting a pardon from the committee?”

Masachika’s classmates huddled together, their voices low and filled with a mix of fear and wonder. Masachika gave his peers a wry smile, then his eyes darted toward the back of the room…where another cluster of students had gathered.

“The show was incredible! Hey, did you guys record yourselves? Like demo tapes or something? A few guys in another class want copies.”

“D-demo tapes? Oh, I didn’t even think about making any…”

“We have some recordings of our practice sessions…but we didn’t professionally record in a studio or anything.”

“““Nooo!”””

Both Takeshi and Hikaru seemed somewhat troubled yet proud after hearing their peers’ disgruntled complaints.

“Alisa, I know it’s a little late…but I wanted to thank you for warning us during the whole firecracker incident. I was kind of panicking, so you have no idea how reassuring it was to hear your voice.”

“Really…? I’m glad I could help.”

“I wish I could see you cosplaying as an elf again…”

“Th-that was a one-time thing…”

“Awww… Come on.”

“The outfit you wore onstage was so cool, too! I was really far in the back, so I didn’t get a good look at it, though… Where’d you get it?”

“Nonoa was the one who picked out all our outfits, so I’m not sure…”

A blend of admiration and affection shone in their eyes as they fixed their gaze on Alisa, who was awkwardly smiling. Meanwhile, Masachika watched the scene unfold until the second period teacher walked through the door, prompting the students to return to their seats, albeit reluctantly. Alisa followed suit and went back to her desk as well.

“Look at you now,” Masachika whispered.

When Masachika gave Alisa a tired smile, she looked away nervously and nodded.

"…You too," she mumbled, before sitting down and facing straight ahead. Her reaction made Masachika grin.

Yeah… She's still thinking about what happened the night of the festival, isn't she? All the excitement…led to that*, after all.*

His mind had begun to wander as he reminisced, so he furiously shook his head to clear it. After dispelling these impure thoughts, he tried to focus on the lesson…but he couldn't ignore the feeling of his classmates' gazes, which made him too uncomfortable to concentrate.

Hmm… I'm glad we really got our names out there during the festival…but this is more exhausting than I thought.

The current situation was ideal for their election campaign, though. After all, the main reason he had pushed Alisa to join the band was to improve her image and social skills, and it obviously worked. The school festival had completely changed how people saw her. Once a solitary figure admired from afar, she was now surrounded by people eager to get to know her, at least more so than before. And Alisa, though a little taken aback, seemed to be embracing this change as well.

If I'm only looking at results, then this was a huge success… What I hadn't expected was that people would start paying more attention to me as well, though. Obviously, a huge miscalculation on my part.

If anything, he kind of felt like he was stealing most of the attention, but that was definitely not a bad thing, since it would still help their chances during the election. Regardless, it was definitely making it hard for him to pay attention in class.

Then again, this is probably only temporary, and people are only still talking about it because of what happened this morning. Everyone'll stop talking about it once word gets around as to why and how I did it…

It was a foolish wish, though. No more than a pipe dream.

"Hey, did you seriously jump kick a firecracker that got thrown at Alisa?"

"I had no idea you were that good at piano. Where did you learn?"

“Any idea what happened to the people who tried to ruin the school festival?”

“Can I ask you about something that happened during the trivia game?!”

One person after another…over and over and *over* again approached him in between classes, expressing their envy and praise, giving him absolutely no time to rest. So by the time lunch came around…

“Ahhhhhh!!” …Masachika was alone in the student council room—dying. “Ngh!!”

He was lying facedown on the couch, writhing around and making strange, muffled noises. He was acting like a crazy guy on the subway, and his behavior would have given anyone who saw him incurable secondhand embarrassment. However, with nobody around to judge him, he decided to indulge in a wild fit of interpretive dance, only stopping abruptly to mumble:

“…This is getting ridiculous.”

His words were tainted with regret and embarrassment. Everyone around school was talking like he was some sort of hero to the point that he already kind of wanted to forget it all. If “Don’t look at me! Don’t talk about me! Please leave me alone!” were a mood, then that was what he was feeling right now.

Kicking a firecracker back at someone onstage, punching some punk right in the face, and…

He couldn’t help but think about his numerous interactions with Yuushou, especially how he’d let Yuushou’s theatrical performance provoke him to the point that he tried to act like a badass…

“Gaaahhh!”

Masachika exploded with mortification, making him jump in his seat and then shrivel in agony.

Guhhh!! I’m going to die. I’m seriously going to die…

Fortunately, there weren’t many people who had seen what he did when he wasn’t onstage in the schoolyard or auditorium. There weren’t any witnesses to how he acted around Yuushou, so nobody saw the embarrassing wrestling move he tried on him, either. Fortunately, Yuushou was definitely not going to tell anyone about it, so the most embarrassing exchange he had

during the festival would likely die along with the gossip—as if it had never happened at all.

While there were a few people who had watched as Masachika knocked out that thug, Nonoa's special "friends" put on quite a show, startling all those who saw, which was probably why nobody was talking about Masachika throwing a punch. The main rumors about him were how he jump kicked a firecracker and had a piano duel against Yuushou. Neither of these were particularly embarrassing, but whenever someone brought up either, he couldn't help but remember how he acted like some sort of wannabe badass using pro wrestling moves on Yuushou.

No, I get it. Nobody's laughing at me or even knows that it happened. I get it, but—ahhhhhh!!

Whenever something good and bad happened around the same time, Masachika's mind always overwrote the good with the bad. Even his wonderful memories of Mah were tainted by his depressing memory of their good-bye, so it was safe to say that this wasn't going to be any different.

Guh… I'm starting to feel ashamed about what I did to Nao and my little surprise for Alya.

He slowly found himself spiraling, unable to break free. Memories of Nao's tear-streaked face, Alisa's devilish smile and captivating cleavage…

"Bfft!"

A very indecent memory resurfaced, causing him to jolt upright once more. Despite his attempts to suppress it, the vivid image that had been deeply etched into his mind began to play on repeat: the soft feel of Alisa's body in his arms, her mesmerizing smile that could steal anyone's heart, paired with the tantalizing sight of her plump, jiggly—

"Hnnng!"

He slammed his forehead on the couch, hoping to erase the memory, yet the sensory details of that experience remained stubbornly engraved in his mind.

Come on! Alya was so beautiful, and she smelled really good, and her boobs were pressed up against me! My reactions seemed to have put her in a good mood, but I can't stand how obvious I was being. Yeah, her boobs were incredible, and she kept snuggling up

to me, and I bet Alya didn't even notice, but when she tugged on her outfit—ahhhhhh!!

Masachika squirmed and twisted his body once more, but for different reasons than before.

Sigh… I really deserve a pat on the back for being able to control myself after all that…

"Want me to give you a pat on the back?"

Go away, you stupid little demon.

A small, devilish Yuki popped her head out in his mind, and he wasted no time smacking her to the ground, reducing her to dust. The ash, however, immediately reassembled, resurrecting the demon.

"Demons can't die. ♪"

Tsk. You sure know how to be annoying.

He let out a deep sigh, feeling utterly defeated and rightfully annoyed as the devilish figure pranced away with a mocking laugh. Though the shocking memory had momentarily pulled him out of his tailspin, his situation hadn't changed at all. The most likely scenario was this: The moment Masachika stepped out of this room, he would be bombarded once more with the curious gazes of passing students, and that thought alone filled him with dread.

Sigh… This has made me once again realize just how much I hate being the center of attention.

Although he had a faint suspicion this was the case, the fundamental reason he'd acted as a behind-the-scenes vice president in middle school probably had to do with that. Because he was convinced that he was worthless—that he was a terrible person—he had always been afraid of being in the limelight, worried that people would discover the real him, so he had always gone out of his way to avoid attention, preferring to lurk in the background…

But I have to start getting used to it, because I promised I would be there for Alya—right by her side…

Masachika had already made up his mind that he was going to make himself visible during the campaign. Because unlike Yuki, who was fully qualified to be the student council president, Alisa needed someone to be there for her.

—Did she really, though?

Doubt suddenly infiltrated his thoughts. His mind replayed the many instances that proved Alisa's recent growth: how she courageously performed solo during the trivia show, how she was recognized as the band's leader by her peers, how she displayed leadership during the firecracker incident as she calmed the crowd, and most recently, how she responded to her classmates with a smile, albeit awkwardly, as they crowded around her. Thinking back to these moments fed the premonition within him. It was the same thing his gut had been telling him during the school festival. Put simply…

The day that Alya doesn't need me anymore is going to be here sooner than I thought…

At the very least, he probably didn't have to hover as much anymore. Alisa was growing far more rapidly than Masachika could have ever predicted. If anything, he was starting to worry that his overprotectiveness might be stifling her social life.

"I'm just making excuses so I don't have to help her anymore. What kind of human garbage am I?"

He spoke those words aloud, as if to convince himself, then sat up, resettling himself on the couch while looking up at the clock. He realized that half of his lunch break had already slipped away.

"*Haaah…*"

With no lunch packed that day, Masachika was stuck between going to the cafeteria or the co-op for a meal, but the thought of being surrounded by his peers again made him hesitate.

…I'm not that hungry, so maybe I'll just skip lunch. Besides, I'd barely have any time to eat if I left now to buy something.

Although lost in thought, he was hardly surprised when the door to the student council room abruptly burst open. His indifferent gaze wandered toward the entrance, where his eyes met Maria's, bringing a radiant smile to her face.

Whoa. What a lovely smile.

As he squinted, Maria approached him, then placed the papers she'd been holding on to the table. She looked down at him on the couch, her gaze brimming with compassion.

"Is this where the lost lamb, Sah, has wandered?" Maria asked, as if she were some sort of holy nun.

"Sister Masha, is that you?" he retorted, deadpan.

She sat down next to him and spread her arms wide. In that instant, a vivid memory flashed through his mind: the recollection of her overbearing maternal instincts.

"…I'm not going over there, even if you hold your arms out like that, and I'm not going to let you come here, either."

Masachika raised his arms protectively in front of his chest to keep Maria in check, and his obvious wariness made her eyebrows droop with disappointment.

"…Does it really bother you that much when I kiss you on the cheek?"

"Huh? O-oh, a kiss on the cheek…?"

Maria's sorrowful expression filled him with shame and embarrassment for misreading the situation. He lowered his hands, unable to make eye contact due to the overbearing guilt, but right as he averted his gaze, she moved.

"Huh?"

Before he even realized it, a pair of arms had slipped around his neck, and with a sudden tug, he was pulled forward, only centimeters away from Maria's school uniform ribbon.

"…?!"

"There, there. What happened?"

Her gentle tone rained down from above, but Masachika was no longer in any position to reply.

What happened to the kiss on the cheek?! A kiss on the cheek! You liar!

His mind screamed in protest, but he couldn't voice his objections, because everywhere from his nose to his mouth was completely buried in something soft. He couldn't even say a word, let alone breathe. That wasn't, however, because he was physically incapable of breathing. It was an issue of the mind.

After all, if he breathed in through his nose, it would look like he was sniffing her like some sort of creep. And when he exhaled, it'd look like he was breathing heavily onto her like a pig. Even breathing through his mouth would make it look like he was trying to suck on her…like a creep. In other words…

How am I supposed to breathe like this? Through my skin? Is that how I'm supposed to survive?

He tried to tap Maria's shoulder to convey the urgency of the situation, but she showed no signs of letting go, and as the

seconds continued to tick by, he could slowly feel his brain beginning to starve for oxygen…

Does she not even notice that I'm tapping her? Then again, I guess it makes sense… Masha's massive bust is just—ah, so this is what it means to be sandwiched in happiness…

His consciousness slowly started to fade—

"Ready for the spring roll? Say 'ah.'"

"Ahhh. Mmm."

"Do you like it?"

"…! It's really good."

Before Masachika knew what was happening, he was being fed from Maria's lunch box.

"Why…?"

"Huh?"

"Huh? Uh…? How did this happen?"

"'How'? You looked hungry, so I told you I was going to share my lunch with you, and I only have one pair of chopsticks, so I told you I'd feed you."

"…And I agreed to that?"

"You even nodded."

"Seriously…?"

While hard to believe, there was no denying that he had been passively allowing Maria to feed him. In fact, on closer inspection, her lunch box was already half-empty.

What is going on…? Why can't I remember anything? Don't tell me that I regressed into an infantile state because of Masha's motherly love?! Nooo!!

But even as his thoughts became an inaudible shriek—

"Here comes the airplane."

His mouth automatically opened for the chopsticks hovering before his lips. *Chomp, chomp.*

"Is it good?"

"So good."

He had been perfectly trained and conditioned.

"Wait! No!"

"Eek! What's wrong?"

"I don't even know what's wrong…"

Masachika's head drooped low, and Maria appeared confused, until she eventually nodded, as if she understood what

he meant.

“Well, that’s very thought-provoking.”

“I just feel lost.”

“You’re in the student council room.”

“No, not like that. This is mind-bending.”

“…Nothing about this seems unusual to me?”

“Yeah…”

“Here comes the airplane. Ahhhn.”



“Are you trying to change the subject?” Masachika interjected scornfully as the chopsticks hovered in front of his mouth. *Munch, munch.*

“Is it good?”

“It’s really good…but, uh… I think I’ve had enough.”

“What? Why? You’re a growing boy. You need to eat.”

“If I keep eating, you’re not going to have any lunch left for yourself.”

“Hmm? Don’t worry about me. I’m already satisfied. The happiness that this gives me just fills me right up.”

Masachika instinctively averted his gaze from her innocent, cheerful smile.

I—I don’t see how she can say something so embarrassing with a straight face.

A prickling sensation crept over his entire body, making him hunch forward and scratch his arm…but a pair of chopsticks hovered in front of him once more.

“Open wide.”

“No, really. I’m fine… I’m already full…of something.”

“What? Really? Are you sure you’re not just trying to be nice?”

“I’m positive. Thanks a lot, though. It was really good. The rest is all yours.”

As he firmly refused and held up his hand to stop the advancing chopsticks, Maria pouted slightly and pulled the food away…and suddenly, her eyes widened as if she’d had an epiphany. She grinned and held out her entire lunch box toward him.

“Then could you feed me next?”

“What?”

“I want you to return the favor by feeding me just like I fed you.”

After placing the lunch box in Masachika’s lap, Maria leaned toward him, closed her eyes, and parted her lips.

“Ahhhn.”

“Huh? S-seriously?”

“Ahhh.”

Maria continued to wait in that position, paying no heed to Masachika’s concern.

Uh… Feeding each other like this makes us seem like some sort of stupid couple… Wait! Wouldn't this be an indirect kiss?!

He swallowed hard as he gazed at Maria. Her eyes were closed, emphasizing her long eyelashes and her soft, plump cheeks. Her delicate beauty was a blend of youthful innocence and mature allure.

"Hmm?"

"…!"

Her eyes snapped open, making Masachika flinch a bit as they made eye contact. Her irises, which had always appeared light brown from a distance, were actually a complex blend of shimmering greens and blues up close. The intensity of her stare made his heart flutter.

"…!"

He quickly looked away, and the first thing he saw as he avoided her gaze was a cherry tomato. He picked it up with his chopsticks, then offered it to her while cupping his left hand underneath, in case he accidentally dropped it.

"Uh, a-ahhh."

"Ahhh."

But right as Maria tried to bite down on the cherry tomato he was awkwardly holding to her lips…

"Ah!"

…the cherry tomato slipped from the chopsticks between Maria's lips and landed on his left palm. Right as it was about to roll off and onto the couch, he curled his fingers, trapping it. Maria immediately placed her hand under his, then lifted it up and brought it to her lips.

"Eep?!"

She scooped up the tomato from his hand with her mouth, her lips brushing against his palm. It was over in the blink of an eye, and the sensation could have easily been dismissed as his imagination, but a shiver still ran down his spine. She chewed on the tomato and smiled bashfully, perhaps oblivious to his reaction.

"Tee-hee. I guess that wasn't good manners," she remarked after swallowing. Masachika then shoved both the chopsticks and the lunch box back into her hands.

"Um… You should eat the rest by yourself."

“What? Why?”

“Come on. Give me a break already.”

Watching Masachika shake his head, Maria took back her belongings, as if she had realized something. Although he tried not to make it obvious, he was undeniably overcome with relief as she resettled in her spot and faced forward, taking her eyes off him.

“So, uh…”

“Yes?”

“…Is it just me, or are you sitting a little *close*?”

It was a rhetorical question because she was undoubtedly sitting closer to him, made clear by the fact that their arms and legs were touching.

“You look really depressed, so I thought you could use a little physical affection to help you relax and feel better.”

“I don’t think I’m going to be able to relax at all like this…”

If anything, he couldn’t stop thinking about it. On the other hand, it didn’t give him any time to be depressed, either.

“…Are you nervous?”

“Er… Uh… I guess…”

Why is she only sharp during times like this? wondered Masachika, while averting his gaze. She’d smiled after asking her probing question.

“Is that so? I’m glad. Because my heart is racing, too.”

“O-oh? Really?” Masachika asked skeptically, making Maria pout.

“Really… Want to see for yourself?”

“…?!”

How would people usually check…to see if someone’s heart was racing?

“H-how?”

Before he even realized it, he was saying those words aloud, and a wave of hope and regret washed over him. He wanted to bury his head in his hands, but what was said couldn’t be unspoken. Maria, however, turned her back to him.

“…?”

“Go ahead.”

“…?”

“Listen to how quickly my heart is beating.”

“……Ohhh.”

He remained frozen for a few seconds before eventually realizing what she meant.

Right, this is Masha we’re talking about. Obviously, it would be easier to listen to her heartbeat from behind than from the front… Ha-ha-ha…

In his mind, he chuckled mirthlessly, then he plopped sideways onto the couch, curling up into a ball while using the armrest as a pillow.

I want to die…

What exactly was he expecting? Regardless, Masachika just wanted to die, disgusted by his own desires.

“Kuze? Huh? What’s wrong? You shouldn’t lie down right after eating. If you do…uh, what’s that saying…an animal? Yeah, you’ll turn into an animal, you know?”

“An animal…?”

“H-ha-ha… Which would you prefer to be? A pig or a cow?”

“…Generally, you’d go with cow.”

“Really? Then you’re a cow! You’re my cow now.”

“What kind of dominatrix role-play is this? Should I start calling you Queen Masha? Hold up… Wouldn’t it be better if I were a pig, then?”

“…? If I’m a queen, wouldn’t it be better if you were a cat?”

“I feel like we’re thinking about different kinds of queens.”

Nevertheless, he wouldn’t know how to even respond if she were to ask him why a queen would prefer a pig to a cat, so he dropped the topic completely. He then sat up, lay heavily back on the couch, and started to daydream once more. They continued to sit in silence until Maria eventually finished her lunch and asked:

“So? What are you so depressed about?”

“…!”

The abrupt question was straight to the point, making Masachika briefly freeze in astonishment…but he relaxed almost right away, then replied with a sense of resignation.

“I was just thinking about…how I’m the villain.” He paused after the nonchalant comment, then began to add a few details, since he realized that he was being too vague. “Some villains are just born with talent, and they mock the hero’s hard work. These villains put no effort into anything. They don’t even have any

passion for what they do. They simply produce results, and everyone hates them."

"…Are you talking about the piano debate?"

"Well, that's part of it."

"But you did work hard. I can still remember how you used to tell me all about it when we were little."

"…!"

Memories of Mah instantly erased all expression from Masachika's face…but it wasn't long before he smirked cynically.

"Well, I did work hard to get my parents to like me."

"…"

"To me, piano, karate, my studies—they were a means to an end. I didn't particularly like doing any of it, and I wasn't putting my heart and soul into any of it, either." All he did was diligently practice just like his teachers told him to. "I never felt troubled or distressed. I just used the talent I had to produce results…and I was praised by people who knew nothing about me. How is that supposed to make me happy?"

He immediately regretted his venomous words. He knew perfectly well that the people around him had no ill intentions. The fact that he couldn't accept that was his own problem, and his words were nothing more than a way to vent his frustration.

"Do you have to suffer for it to be considered hard work?"

Maria's gentle question tickled Masachika's ear. Frowning slightly and racked with guilt, he replied cautiously.

"…Well, I think if you're really working hard, you're going to run into trouble, right? You have to fight against your own weaknesses and incapabilities while continuing to bravely push forward. That's far more beautiful than the alternative, right?"

"Oh… You truly believe that." Maria nodded before cheerfully adding, "Then I guess that means you're working extremely hard."

"…What?"

While the unexpected comment made him rudely wonder if she was being an airhead on purpose, Maria met his skeptical gaze head-on.

"I mean, look how distressed you are right now," she argued.

"…!"

“You worry a lot, you suffer, and yet…you continue to push forward, right? And you’re doing it all to help Alya. Isn’t that ‘working hard’ by your definition?”

Masachika tried to deny it, but he couldn’t find the right words. He simply froze, his mouth slightly agape as Maria wrapped her arms around him.

“It’s okay. You’re working hard… You’re putting your heart and soul into this.” She had once told him something similar before. “You have nothing to worry about. You will find a way to love yourself one day.”

Her words, as gentle and considerate as ever, slipped effortlessly into his heart, making him feel miraculously lighter. He even found himself thinking that maybe she was right, with an optimism he hadn’t felt in a long time.

“…Yeah,” he whispered. Maria then gently pulled away, offering him a smile. As if drawn to her smile, he returned it with a faint grin of his own, though it was tinged with a bitterness hers lacked. “Hey, I’m sorry for always bugging you like this.”

“You’re not bothering me at all. I told you. I’m doing this because I want to. I want you to depend on me.”

Maria smiled in a carefree manner, as if it were nothing at all. It was a pure, innocent smile, like that of a girl who had never known hardship. Yet in his eyes, it was the strongest, most reassuring smile he had ever seen.

“So you don’t need to hide your pain from me. You can come to me whenever you’re hurt.” Her words carried the weight of truth, and her girlish smile took on a more mature air. “If Alya is going to lead you by the hand, then I want to be the one who gives you a push from behind when you need it.”

Suddenly, Maria’s smile merged with the memory of *that* girl’s, something that he couldn’t have even fathomed up until this point. Immediately, he felt a sharp pang in his chest, his heart racing wildly as he looked into her eyes.

Wh-what the…? What is this? Don’t tell me that… Huh? This can’t be happening.

Despite his desperate attempts to deny it in his head, both his heart and body were telling him the truth. This was the same thing that he had felt a few months back with Alisa…and the same thing that he had felt with that girl all those years ago.

Wait, wait, wait. Come on. Have some standards, Masachika. Then again, I guess I'm still being faithful, since Masha is technically Mah…

It dawned on him at that moment that he had unconsciously accepted that Maria = Mah, which took him by surprise. Masachika didn't know why, but he felt as if he were finally being reunited with her for the first time, and although the woman in front of him was vastly different from the girl in his memories, he couldn't shake the feeling that they were one and the same.

Er… Seriously?

A deep, unfamiliar emotion was welling up within Masachika, filling him with a sense of dread. He had thought he had finally moved on from his feelings for her—for Mah—so he had assumed she was a shadow of the past and that the feelings he once had for her would never resurface…but he was wrong. It was as if the ending of one chapter had led to the beginning of a new one. It was because he faced his feelings and came to terms with them that he could now recall his brilliant memories of her. Emotions he had thought were lost were now so vivid that he couldn't understand how he had ever forgotten them…

Yep, I apologize. My first love seems to have hit me harder than I expected.

A mischievous glint appeared in Maria's smiling eyes as she watched him wrestle with his own feelings.

"But…if it really bothers you, then there is a way you could thank me… How about a kiss on the cheek?"

"Huh?"

"You've never kissed me on the cheek before, right? So…?"

Maria spread her arms as if she were waiting for something, her eyes glittering with expectation while Masachika grimaced.

N-now of all times? I feel like if I kiss her now…I'm going to explode!

The situation was spiraling out of control. Not the least bit good. If Masachika allowed himself to get carried away by these intense emotions before unpacking them, then he was either going to scream or cry while being consumed by whatever was burning inside him. And he was going to do something he might regret.

But that doesn't mean I can just run away… There has to be a way to get out of this without causing any damage…

Amid the tempestuous storm of emotions raging within him, he desperately clung to his thoughts until he suddenly recalled something from but a moment ago.

…! That's it!

Masachika was hit with the perfect idea of how he was going to make his escape.

"All right. A little kiss on the cheek, right?" he asked with a straight face.

"Yep."

"Okay, then." He nodded with the most serious of expressions while lifting himself slightly off the couch. He then wrapped his arms around Maria and held her tightly, her face pressing against his chest.

Oh, gosh. This is actually… Wow.

He wanted to scream, "I missed you so much, Mah!" at the top of his lungs. Nevertheless, he somehow managed to calm himself as he embraced her for five whole seconds before letting her go.

"Did you think I was going to kiss you? Ha-ha! This is payback for what you just did to me a second ago…"

With a smug grin, he looked down at Maria but froze when he noticed her face was completely red. The expectant smile she'd had only a moment ago was nowhere to be found, replaced by a blank expression. Her big brown eyes were wide, staring down at the floor and blinking rapidly. It looked like steam was about to shoot cartoonishly out of her ears.

"Uh…"

"…!"

Her unexpected reaction made Masachika freeze, his smirk stuck in place.

"Oh, um… So…," mumbled Maria, hastily packing up her lunch box and throwing it into her tote bag before hopping off the couch.

"I-I'm going to head to class."

"Oh. Okay."

"Yep. See you around."

Avoiding meeting his eyes, Maria repeated her good-bye before rushing over to the door leading to the hallway. And then,

for some unknown reason, she tried to push the door open without even attempting to turn the doorknob, only to be met with resistance—to no one's surprise but her own.

"Ah!"

Maria yelped as she bumped into the door with a thud, but without missing a beat, she opened it properly as if nothing had happened, then hurried out of the student council room. Once the door shut behind her, Masachika buried his face into the couch's armrest once more and shouted as loudly as he could.

"Why did she react like that?!"

◇

I—I can't believe he did that…

Maria floated down the empty hallway, her steps light and airy and her mind still reeling from the sensation of being held by him just moments before. The feeling of his hard, broad chest against her nose and cheek, the strength of his arms as he pulled her close, almost roughly… She knew that if he had pushed her down with that much force, she wouldn't have been able to resist. That was a man's body. There was no denying it.

Th-that was a man…

Maria felt her face grow warmer as she put these feelings into words. It may have seemed unusual, but she had never really thought of him as a *man* before. To Maria, Masachika was simply an extension of her childhood friend, Sah, and because of that, her feelings for him had remained pure and innocent, just as they had been when they were young.

Hugging him or kissing him on the cheek was only natural, since she liked him. Those were merely innocent displays of affection, and while there was a bit of embarrassment, feeling fear was unthinkable. Or so she had thought.

"…"

When he embraced her, Maria couldn't help but imagine what would come *next*. Faced with his overpowering strength and insistence, her heart raced with a combination of excitement and fear. She had never been so acutely aware of him as a man, and at the same time, so conscious of herself as a woman.

O-oh my gosh. I'm so embarrassed…

Maria felt deeply ashamed of her past actions now. She recalled how she'd held him closely to her chest, and when he had happened to see her in her underwear—moments she had never even considered to be sexual at all. He was Sah, after all, and even now, she expected him to simply blush, acting no different from how Sah had when they were kids.

But…maybe he wasn't just embarrassed? M-maybe he was… t-turned on?

While Maria was aware that he found her physically attractive, she never expected him to desire her.

B-but it makes sense, right? Sah—Masachika—is a teenage boy going through puberty. He doesn't only want to touch girls' bodies because he's curious about how they're different… He…

And yet until now, she had been acting like a child, clinging to him without a second thought.

"…!!"

Suddenly, everything she had done to him seemed indecent. Maria sank to her knees at the foot of the stairs. Her heart raced as she thought about the man who he had revealed himself to be, but at the same time, she felt a pang of sadness knowing that Sah had changed.

In that moment, they had both realized a truth very different from each other's.

"Masha really is Mah…"

"Kuze is Sah…but he isn't Sah anymore…"

After several years, they found themselves once again back at the starting line. And standing a dozen or so meters apart, they simultaneously murmured to themselves:

""How am I supposed to act the next time we see each other?""

As they both racked their brains for answers, there was a girl a few dozen meters away from both of them…

"Ah! My sister sense is tingling! My dear brother is depressed again!"

A brother-obsessed sister, sensing something was up, started to prepare in secret.

CHAPTER 2

Would rather not have this foreshadowing.

“I know it’s a little late, but let’s get this celebration started! Cheers!”

“”””Cheers!”””

Following Alisa’s lead, the six of them, divided by gender on opposite sides of the table, clinked their glasses together. It was after school, and the members of Fortitude, including Masachika, were celebrating at a karaoke spot. In seating order from the back of the room sat Masachika, Takeshi, and Hikaru on the guys’ side, then Alisa, Sayaka, and Nonoa on the girls’ side.

Although Alisa subtly averted her gaze as she and Masachika awkwardly clinked their glasses together, the other four began chatting as if they hadn’t noticed.

“A lot went down, but I’m really glad it all worked out in the end!”

“You can say that again… I was worried for a second there.”

“Hikaru, how does your stomach feel?”

“I’m fine now. Thanks, Alya.”

Hikaru smiled in a troubled manner while he rubbed his stomach where the delinquent had punched him.

“I still can’t believe that actually happened. Getting beat up by delinquents was something I thought only happened in comic books.”

“You simply can’t reason with some people. I am a bit surprised that someone, especially nowadays, would suddenly punch someone from another school like that, though.”

“I know, right? I totally thought Japan was safer than that… but I guess it just depends on where you are.”

Says the girl who tried to gouge a stranger’s eyes out…

Masachika looked away, inwardly scoffing at Nonoa's comment. It wasn't like he could criticize her, though, having knocked some thug's front teeth out to save her. Plus, he hadn't told Alisa about what had happened, and he didn't really want others to know about it, either, so he decided not to bring it up.

"If anything, I'm surprised there are students who are willing to start trouble at other schools just for a few bucks."

"I don't know, man. Like, you've heard of sugar daddies, right? There are even students who do illegal work on the side for cash, too. I mean, it looks like there are people willing to do anything for money."

"…Yeah, I guess it all depends on the environment you grow up in."

Masachika decided to change the subject, glaring at Takeshi for even bringing up "sugar daddies" out of the blue like that.

"Anyway, did you guys make up with Nao and the others?"

Takeshi and Hikaru seemed caught off guard by Masachika's question, and they exchanged glances and somewhat bitter expressions.

"Yeah… For the most part."

"Of course, that doesn't mean things are going back to how they used to be, but, well, we promised to hang out again soon."

"Really? I'm glad to hear that," said Masachika with a nod, deciding to leave it at that.

He had no intention of delving deeper into their relationship or revealing his role in mending their friendship. After the school festival, he made time to apologize directly to Nao for being a little harsh, but even then, he didn't inquire about what had happened to Luminous.

I should probably keep out of their business. I've already done too much… Besides, it looks like Takeshi and Hikaru are feeling a bit better, so that's all that matters.

Masachika thought that while grabbing one of the countless french fries from the pile. Nonoa, however, surprisingly expressed interest in the subject.

"So? Like…? Is Luminous gonna get back together or what?"

"Oh, uh… I guess?"

"We still need to search for a new singer, since ours transferred to a different school, though."

“Word,” replied Nonoa, making it hard to tell if she actually was interested. Takeshi’s gaze then shifted toward Alisa before he hesitatingly asked:

“By the way…would you be interested in continuing to sing in our band…? Maybe…?”

“Huh?! I…”

Alisa looked away, but Masachika knew exactly how she felt. Fortitude was a band formed solely for the Autumn Heights Festival, and Alisa wasn’t an actual member of Luminous, either. She was essentially a stand-in. Therefore, they couldn’t expect her to simply drop her current life to become a singer. The situation was even more complicated, given that the original members of Luminous were in the process of making up, too.

“…She’s going to be too busy with student council work, since we don’t really have that many members this year. Of course, someone with unlimited stamina like Chisaki can tackle two clubs at once…but I think that’d be a little too much for Alya, since she has a lot on her plate.”

Noticing Alisa was in trouble, Masachika stepped in to assist. Right away, Takeshi grinned sheepishly.

“Yeah, I figured. Sorry, Alya. I just had to ask, since your singing was incredible.”

“O-oh, no. It’s okay. I’m just sorry I can’t help.”

Alisa also looked a little apologetic, but just when the atmosphere had gotten a bit heavy, a cheerfully out-of-place voice cut through the silence.

“Then can I do it? I legit want to try singing.”

“““What?!”””

Nonoa’s hand was in the air, catching both Takeshi and Hikaru by surprise. Their eyes went wide.

“Nonoa… Are you sure?”

“Hmm? I’m not in the student council or disciplinary committee like Alisa and Saya, so why not? Like, I don’t see a problem?”

“No, of course not. It’s just… Takeshi’s asking if you’re going to be comfortable joining a new band. We already know each other, but they’re basically strangers to you…”

“What? I don’t care,” Nonoa replied nonchalantly. After Hikaru and Takeshi exchanged glances, Takeshi timidly spoke up.

“If you’re fine with it…then we’d love to have you. Of course, we have to ask the other two first, though…”

“A’ight. Just let me know when you figure it out, okay? Oh, hey. I guess I should, like, show you guys what I can do, since we’re here, right?” Nonoa picked up the tablet and selected a song that happened to be one of the cover songs that Luminous was familiar with. “Check, check.”

She adjusted the microphone’s volume as she stood, followed by Sayaka, who swiftly grabbed the tambourine on the couch and got into stance.

Hmm? The tambourine?

Just as Masachika turned to face them…an extremely powerful, impressive performance began. Gone was Nonoa’s usual languid demeanor as she belted out a powerful rock song with a raw, energetic voice. Meanwhile, Sayaka kept an unusually straight face as she played the tambourine with incredible skill and speed. Four pairs of eyes darted back and forth between Nonoa and Sayaka, but when the song came to an end, the room erupted with applause.

“Wh-whoa, that was badass.”

“Yeah… She doesn’t sing like Alya at all, but she’s really good in her own way.”

“Thanks.”

But amid Takeshi’s and Hikaru’s genuine praise, Masachika couldn’t help but comment.

“Wait, wait, wait. Yeah, that was great, but…where did that come from? Not only was the singing incredible, but what was up with the tambourine? Why the hell are you two showing off your secret skills now? Feels like I’m staring at two people who already defeated the last boss and have the best equipment.”

Sayaka pushed up her glasses and replied in a matter-of-fact tone, “Well…there aren’t many songs I can sing, so I learned to do this to keep things from getting awkward when we go do karaoke together.”

“Oh, right. Sorry.”

Masachika, being the perceptive person that he was, correctly understood that Sayaka wasn’t actually limited in the number of songs that she could sing; rather, her preferred songs were heavily skewed toward the otaku genre.

“I just didn’t, like, see the point of telling anyone?”

“Yeah, that tracks for you.”

Masachika, being the perceptive person that he was, correctly understood the unspoken sentiment behind the words “I just didn’t feel like telling anyone.”

“Anyway, did I pass?” asked Nonoa as she lowered the microphone.

“Yeah, you did!”

“Yes, that was perfect.”

Takeshi and Hikaru immediately nodded.

“Hooray.”

Nonoa sluggishly raised a fist, her cheering monotone and her eyes heavy-lidded like always. At a glance, it was questionable whether she was genuinely happy, but Masachika somehow knew that Nonoa was thrilled.

“…I’m just surprised you got addicted to playing in a band like this.”

“Hmm? Really?”

Once Masachika voiced his honest opinion, Sayaka promptly joined in, agreeing with him.

“Yes, I was genuinely surprised as well. I wasn’t expecting her to get *that* into the performance. I heard she advertised the show at her maid café while waiting on customers as well.”

“Wait. Really?”

“Whaaat? I wasn’t advertising? I would never mix my personal life with business, especially since my class was after the so-called special award.” Nonoa dismissively waved her hand at Sayaka’s claim, but her eyes darted away. “Like, people were just asking me when I was gonna be working at the café, so I was telling them that I wasn’t going to be there much longer because I was going to be performing in the schoolyard.”

“…Oh.”

“Ha-ha… Yeah, I guess that wouldn’t really count as advertising.”

“Uh… Sounds kind of like stealth marketing to me.”

“I don’t think it counts as stealth marketing…”

Nonoa’s straightforward explanation elicited subtle smirks from everyone other than Sayaka, who simply let out a small sigh of resignation.

“But haven’t you been mixing your personal life with ‘business’ from the start? I heard you made a fuss so that you could do the maid café with Sayaka,” Masachika said.

“I sooo wasn’t making a fuss. I was just, like, ‘I wanna do whatever our class ends up doing with Saya’ when asked about our class attraction for the festival, and then everyone just made it happen.”

“Class D’s world really does revolve around you, huh?”

Speaking of blurring the lines between personal life and work, there was a certain maid who’d helped with her mistress’s class attraction as well, so Masachika decided to drop the subject out of fairness.

I didn’t really think much about it because she really blended in at the time, but Ayano’s in Class C…

It hit him out of the blue yesterday, but when he asked Yuki about it, she told him that Ayano was apparently treated as her stand-in while she was out. It was a seamless swap that seemingly went unnoticed by most.

“Takeshi, Hikaru, what about you two? Did you have time to go check out their maid café?”

“Y-yeah, we stopped by for a second after our performance.”

“Nonoa wasn’t there, though.”

“Oh, seriously…? Did you two enter the raffle?” Masachika grinned while thinking back to the countless guys salivating over the chance to get their picture taken with their favorite maid. But Takeshi didn’t seem to want to make eye contact with him, so Masachika blinked repeatedly in utter astonishment.

“Wait… Did you really?”

“They actually bought three raffle tickets,” Sayaka revealed.

“Seriously?!”

Masachika’s eyes were as wide as saucers, and he was trembling in shock.

“Well, uh, I mean…,” stammered Takeshi, but before he could finish his unclear sentence, Sayaka continued with a sigh:

“On his third draw, Takeshi managed to pull a winning ticket, too… And out of anyone he could have chosen, he chose me. I was surprised, to say the least.”

“Y-yeah, you know? I just wanted to take a commemorative photo. It’s not every day we get to see you dressed like that, after

all," Takeshi blabbered, channeling his inner auctioneer…but there was something about him that seemed a bit off to Masachika.

Hmm? What's he so worked up about…?

Though Masachika was bewildered, Alisa nodded in agreement, as if she didn't notice anything wrong with their friend's behavior at all.

"It really was a fresh look… Masachika seemed to prefer Nonoa, though."

"No, Sayaka basically forced me to do that."

"Hmm? Did you take a picture with Nonoa or something?"

"Yeah… Now that I think about it… Sayaka, how did you rig it so I'd pull the winning raffle ticket?"

Masachika quickly changed the subject, only to be met by Sayaka's feigned innocent gaze.

"Good question. I completely forgot."

"Come on."

"…? What happened?"

"I just magically happened to draw the winning raffle ticket, so I was curious. That's all."

"Wait. Were the odds of pulling a winning ticket that low? Takeshi got a winning ticket on his third try, right?" Hikaru confirmed.

"I saw around four people who drew over seven raffle tickets and didn't even win once," Masachika said.

"Wow…"

The three guys in the group all shifted their gazes toward Sayaka, who simply shrugged back.

"We didn't receive any complaints from the school festival committee."

"That's exactly what someone guilty would say."

As Masachika glared at her reproachfully, Alisa suddenly spoke up, as if she had remembered something.

"Now that I think about it, did nobody get hurt during the incident at the festival? I heard that a group of thugs went to Class D to start some trouble…"

"Nothing major happened. They creeped the girls out, but the vice president of the disciplinary committee apparently handled things."

“The vice president…? Oh, Kiryuuin…? Violet Kiryuuin?”

Alisa uncomfortably calling Sumire by her supposed real name brought a sharp, smug grin to Masachika’s lips.

“No, Alya. You have to call her *Madam* Violet. She loves it when you call her that. It feels more friendly to her.”

“It sounds to me like you’re kind of mocking her, Masachika.”

“Yeah, man. You must not value your life.”

Masachika was spouting nonsense with a completely serious expression, earning him dumbfounded looks from his two best friends. In reality, Sumire’s reputation within the school was more than deserving of the title “Unattainable Beauty,” since she was out of everyone’s league.

Possessing a good family background, stunning looks, and a great personality, she would have been hailed as one of the school’s three most beautiful girls, had she not humbly declared, *“It would be presumptuous of me to even consider myself in the same league as my lady!”* Therefore, it was no wonder that Takeshi and Hikaru were dumbfounded by Masachika’s audacity to essentially mock such a respected and envied goddess. Masachika himself, however, remained completely unfazed.

“It’s a testament to her character. That’s all.”

“I guess you could say that,” said Hikaru, sighing with exasperation before suddenly turning to face Sayaka, as if he had recalled something.

“By the way, is Sumire going to be the president of the disciplinary committee now? Taiki Kaji ended up resigning after taking responsibility for the lapse in security, right?”

Masachika’s eyebrow twitched. Taiki Kaji had been the student council president in middle school and was an upperclassman with whom Masachika got along especially well. Taiki had been coerced by Yuushou into helping some outsiders break into the school during the festival, but the incident was never made public. Instead, as far as the student body was concerned, Taiki had merely resigned, claiming he wanted to take responsibility for failing to prevent the disaster.

Although there was no concrete evidence proving Taiki had been involved in the intrusion, Yuki’s wishes had determined his fate. After all, Taiki had wanted to confess his crime and atone

for it, but Yuki stopped him. At any rate, she had personally called Masachika after the school festival to explain the situation.

"I mean, to be honest, I have nothing to gain if he—if Taiki—ruins his reputation at school, so I told him that if he wanted to do me a favor, then he should keep his mouth shut about his role in the security lapse and help me with my election campaign."

Although it wasn't really something to normally discuss with a rival, Masachika ultimately decided to keep the matter to himself, respecting Yuki's wishes. Of course, if he had wanted to, he could have probably used the "debate" and what they'd wagered as leverage to force Yuushou to testify about his accomplice. If Masachika had been solely focused on winning the election, he should have dragged Taiki down with Yuushou as well. However, he chose not to because Taiki was someone whom Masachika deeply respected.

I'm not innocent, either. I grew distant from Taiki, since I didn't know how to act around him after he lost the election. He must have been devastated by the outcome, since he was so positive that he was going to win, too. He was torn away from his beloved fiancée and abandoned by those who used to support him…so it's no surprise he went off the deep end.

And throughout all this, he had someone who was telling him that he was a friend and that the election results were nonsense, so what was he supposed to do when the only person who seemed to care about him suddenly told him that there was a way he could fix everything?

Yuushou is seriously a wizard when it comes to manipulating people's negative emotions…

Masachika grimaced bitterly as he thought about his schoolmate, whose scheming nature went far beyond some sort of charming label like "the black-hearted prince." However, Sayaka shrugged nonchalantly, ignoring Masachika's reaction as she replied to Hikaru's question.

"Naturally, Sumire Kiryuuin would be next in line to take over…but she doesn't seem to be too enthusiastic about the idea, since Yuushou is her cousin and all… There aren't any strong candidates right now, either, so the committee is going to put the decision on hold for the time being."

“Oh… But, yes… There aren’t really that many people who would be better than her for the job, so it makes sense. Plus, Taiki was the student council president in middle school while she was just a regular member, so their relationship in the disciplinary committee must have felt natural to them.” Hikaru nodded as if it made sense to him.

“Then how about you be the president, Saya?” Nonoa blurted out suddenly.

“No way.”

“What? Why?”

“Almost everyone worships Sumire, so they’d simply end up resenting me, even for suggesting I could take over as the president of the disciplinary committee,” Sayaka explained with a matter-of-fact tone. That was when Alisa suddenly spoke up.

“But you beat her in a debate in middle school, right? So if anyone is better than her for the job, it would be you.”

“I…”

Surprised by Alisa’s unexpected opinion, Sayaka quickly averted her gaze. Although Alisa was baffled by her unusually uneasy reaction, Masachika understood exactly why she reacted that way.

Because it was actually Nonoa who took down Sumire at the debate, not Sayaka… Plus, if you knew what really happened, you’d probably agree that it was a really horrifying battle that felt like a showdown between a villain and pure evil itself…

It was the debate that had revealed Nonoa’s true nature to Masachika and Yuki. Although they had suspected she was more than just a lazy, disinterested, flashy girl, after the debate, they were certain that there was something wrong with her. She was a dangerous opponent, which was why they had a gut feeling that Sayaka and Nonoa would be their main rivals in the election until the very end…

And yet we’re now hanging out like friends… Life’s full of surprises, huh?

While Masachika was lost in his old man–like thoughts, Sayaka, who seemed to have collected herself, cleared her throat softly.

“…That was three years ago. Besides, they wouldn’t allow a first-year student to be the president of the disciplinary

committee anyway."

"Really?"

"Really. Plus…"

A mischievous grin suddenly appeared on Sayaka's lips.

"The most important trait for a member of the disciplinary committee to have…is apparently combat power."

"…Really?"

"Don't take what she's saying seriously, Alya. It's not. The only reason why the disciplinary committee's like it is right now is because of Violet and Chisaki. I guarantee it."

"…? I get Violet, but why Chisaki?"

"Oh, she was actually a member of the disciplinary committee all throughout middle school and her first year of high school."

"O-oh, I do vaguely remember hearing about that…"

"Also, it was Chisaki who turned Violet into the kind of person she is today. In other words, she's the root of it all."

"I wonder what happened to her to make her change the disciplinary committee into essentially a martial arts faction?"

"Well, uh…"

Masachika hemmed and hawed in response to Alisa's question. If he were to answer honestly, he would have to say something like, "The bullies were forced to join the disciplinary committee after Chisaki gave them a good beating and were then mentally and physically toughened up, almost as if they had been sent to a reform school. That was how it ended up like this." But Masachika hesitated, unsure whether he should tell her…when all of a sudden, Takeshi spoke up, sensing Masachika was uncomfortable.

"Speaking of Chisaki, did you hear what she did to those thugs that sneaked into our school? I heard it was chaos."

"What do you mean 'chaos'?" joked Masachika, despite having a good idea of what happened. Although he didn't know in detail what kind of rampage Chisaki had gone on, when he'd curiously decided to check on the intruders in the disciplinary committee room after the debate…a single male student came running out of the room, pale as a sheet, muttering, "*Human… human bodies weren't made to bend like that…*"

Those words, in addition to the student heaving, prompted Masachika to turn around, sending him back to where he'd come

from.

“I’m sure Sayaka has an idea of what happened.”

Masachika shifted his gaze toward Sayaka, who simply shrugged while looking away.

“Eh, it doesn’t matter. Let’s talk about something more positive. Hikaru, are you not going to show Masachika?”

“Huh? Oh, right.”

Hikaru took out his phone and went through it for a few seconds before showing Masachika the screen.

“Check it out. I was planning on sending this to everyone later, but…”

“…? Hmm?”

Masachika tilted his head, listening to the commotion coming from the phone’s speaker being handed to him, but the moment he saw the screen, his eyes opened wide. There, over the heads of the crowd, was Alisa in her band outfit, but suddenly, the roars of the audience were pierced by a powerful overture as Alisa’s voice filled the air.

“I asked my friend to take a video of us playing. I know it’s a little far away, and everyone’s heads and arms are kind of in the way, but it’s better than nothing…”

Admittedly, the live footage really wasn’t of the highest quality. But because it was raw footage taken from an extremely hyped audience, the heat of the moment was incredibly palpable. The audience swayed and jumped in time with the music, and you could see Alisa, who initially seemed a bit stiff, gradually getting into the groove.

Whoa… This is incredible…

Masachika smiled as he watched Alisa move around the stage, soaking up the cheers of the crowd. The sight of her exchanging glances and working together with her friends to pump up the audience was a far cry from the title “solitary princess.”

She’s so radiant…

Although he was so proud of and happy for Alisa as he watched her on the screen, he couldn’t wash away the tinge of loneliness that it made him feel.

It’s nothing like the audience’s reaction when I played in the auditorium.

Masachika inwardly let out a bitter laugh while comparing their completely different performances in his mind. After the video eventually came to an end, he handed the phone back to Hikaru.

“That was incredible. The audience went crazy. I can see why nobody can leave you guys alone during class,” teased Masachika, hiding the dark emotions swelling in his heart. However, Hikaru, exchanging an uneasy glance with Alisa and Takeshi, smiled back warily.

“Yes, we are getting a lot of attention…”

“It’s kind of exhausting, though…”

“Hard agree,” said Takeshi, Hikaru, and Alisa, making Masachika tilt his head curiously.

“Seriously…? You too, Takeshi? I thought you’d at least be, like, ‘I’m finally popular!’ and be thrilled that you’re finally getting attention from the opposite sex.”

After Takeshi’s eyes widened in surprise at Masachika’s remark, he glanced at Sayaka for some reason before shaking his head vigorously. However, it wasn’t only Masachika who found this overreaction bizarre. Hikaru seemed curious as well.

“…Now that you mention it, Takeshi has been acting really calm, despite being surrounded by countless girls.”

“What? Come on, guys… It’s not like I want to be popular with just anyone. I only want to be popular with one girl…”

“‘“…??””

Masachika and Hikaru exchanged puzzled glances as Takeshi mumbled something that sounded unconvincingly pure. Then, as if he was unable to bear their scrutiny, he took a big gulp of his drink and looked the other way.

“Besides, we have midterms coming up, now that the school festival is over! Things are going to get rough! And then we have field day after that…,” Takeshi said with a crack in his voice.

The blatant attempt to change the subject made Masachika suspicious, but he still played along.

“Oh, right. We have too many things to do this time of year.”

“I bet the student council’s really busy, huh? You have to work during field day, too, right?”

“No, field day isn’t going to be that busy… The field day committee’s going to handle most of what happens then, so the

student council just has to help with a few small things. The main thing we need to do is decide on the events we're participating in on field day," replied Masachika.

"We're in high school, so, like, obviously you're doing the Run, right?" Nonoa interjected.

"Oh, right… Uh… We would need a little time to prepare for that, though…"

"The 'Run'?"

Thanks to her puzzled expression, Masachika could easily imagine a question mark appearing over Alisa's head. This made him realize that he had completely forgotten to tell her about it.

"It's a little form of entertainment we do during the lunch break on field day. It's essentially a game of 'chicken fight,' or a cavalry-style among people *running* for student council president, hence the name the 'Run.' By the way, we really only do it for fun, so it doesn't matter if you lose, and it doesn't mean you're out of the presidential race, either."

"You're totally better off winning it, though," suggested Nonoa, making a somewhat tone-deaf remark. Masachika seemed troubled but eventually replied:

"Yeah, I guess winning would be ideal. Plus, we have a bit of momentum going right now, to be honest. The student council speeches we did before the semester, the trivia show during the school festival, the time we removed the disturbance at the festival and kept everyone calm—people are talking about us way more than about Yuki and Ayano, and I want to keep this momentum going and keep our names on everyone's lips."

"I agree. The momentum is shifting in your favor more than I thought it would," Sayaka commented suddenly. Masachika's and Alisa's expressions became serious, making Sayaka frown. "… What?"

"I just wasn't expecting to hear you say something like that…"

"I'm simply stating facts," insisted Sayaka, while she faced forward. Meanwhile, Nonoa, sitting next to her, leaned into her with a laugh as she slipped her arm around Sayaka's and rested her head on her shoulder, gazing up at her through her lashes.

"…What, Nonoa?"

"Oh, nothing."

Sayaka sighed softly, having roughly figured out what Nonoa was trying to say and knowing that prying would only make things worse.

Like something straight out of a yuri *comic…*

With a complex mix of emotions as he watched the scene unfold, Masachika faced Alisa once more.

“Anyway, Sayaka’s right. We rose up from a huge disadvantage, and now it’s time to push back. I know it’s supposed to be just for fun, but let’s do the Run, and let’s win so that we can keep this momentum up.”

Alisa nodded with a serious gaze, only to be interrupted by Takeshi, who seemed to be having a little trouble reading the room.



“I mean, you probably don’t even have to try. You have the height advantage to win easily.”

“Yeah, if this were any ordinary Run, then I guess.”

Masachika chuckled bitterly at the overly candid remark that so abruptly ruined the mood, but he had a point. After all, there was nearly a half-meter difference in total height between Team Alisa-Masachika and Team Yuki-Ayano, and obviously, a taller knight had a significant advantage in mounted combat. Plus, there was a considerable difference when it came to the arm length of the riders as well. Therefore, Alisa had an overwhelming advantage in mounted combat if he were to consider only their physical attributes.

“But you need more than two people for cavalry battles, right?”

“Hmm? Oh, yeah, you need three horses per rider, so we need two more people.

“You guys said we’d have a height advantage, but wouldn’t two helpers completely change everything?”

“Hmm… Not necessarily. After all, the candidate for president is always the rider, while the candidate for vice president is always the head of the horse… Actually, there are cases when it’s the other way around. If the candidate for president’s a guy, and the candidate for vice president is a girl, then the candidate for vice president gets to be the rider. For obvious reasons.”

“Yeah, that totally happened with our current president and vice president and apparently with the two before them as well.”

“Yeah, although I kind of doubt that Chisaki needed Touya to switch with her… I heard it was a terrifying sight to see, though.”

“Yeah, I, like, saw the video? And it was awful. It was like watching a dump truck run over tricycles.”

“Or like watching the legendary warrior Lü Bu ride his steed Red Hare against low-level soldiers on ponies.”

“…The others didn’t stand a chance, huh?”

Masachika smirked at Alisa’s indescribable expression and added, “It was apparently a really memorable debut match for Touya, since he didn’t have a partner for a while. Anyway, we got a little off track, but the physical abilities of the two candidates running are far more important than their two helpers.”

“Oh…”

“Which is why people focus more on name recognition over physical capabilities when it comes to picking their helpers.”

“…? Why?”

Masachika thought for a moment before replying.

“Well… Think of it this way: Who do you think the audience is going to cheer for? A candidate who brings the two strongest kids in their class with them or the candidate who brings the current student council president and vice president with them to help?”

“Oh, that makes sense.”

“Just to be clear, though: There’s an unwritten rule that both the student council president and vice president don’t get involved with upcoming elections, since it’d look like an endorsement, even though the Run is only for fun. But that’s exactly why you should always pick popular, influential people to be your helpers, regardless of whether they’re going to be good enough to help you win.”

“Which means…”

After hearing Masachika explain the situation, Alisa immediately turned to face Sayaka and Nonoa, then glanced at Masachika once more to see how he was reacting.

Yeah, those two would definitely work…

He subtly nodded back to let Alisa know it was okay, so she faced Sayaka’s frigid glare head-on and went for it.

“Sayaka, Nonoa, would you two be our helpers?”

Despite the straightforward and unadorned nature of her request, Masachika was touched by Alisa’s willingness to openly ask for help from others. However…

“What’s in it for me?”

Sayaka’s response was rather curt.

“I told you before. I have no intention of endorsing you. I only agreed to be in the band because it sounded fun, but this is a completely different story,” Sayaka explained with an indifferent tone and chilling gaze. She then stared straight into Alisa’s eyes and firmly declared, “You would be gravely mistaken if you believe I’m your friend in this election.”

Sayaka’s declaration, which ruthlessly pushed Alisa away, filled the room with tension. Takeshi and Hikaru watched with bated breath. Masachika, who had anticipated this development, also observed the two with a stern expression. As for Nonoa?

Well, she was still clinging to Sayaka as always. Nonoa really was Nonoa.

"…So? What are you offering me in return for being one of your helpers?"

Perhaps this was a challenge directed at Alisa from a girl once considered the most likely candidate for president.

What did it mean to motivate others? To have others work toward one's cause? What kind of negotiation skills did someone need to motivate those who didn't take action based on emotion but on merit? Maybe this was what Sayaka was testing Alisa on. At least, that was what Masachika thought while he watched from the sidelines.

I would have used some kind of nerdy otaku merchandise to bribe her…but that probably wouldn't have worked on her this time.

After all, this was vastly different from simply forming a band together for the school festival. Because agreeing to support someone in a student council election was essentially an endorsement for that candidate in front of the entire student body. Furthermore, becoming Alisa's "horse" would have been humiliating for Sayaka, since some might argue that her participation represented her raising the white flag after losing the debate. Plus, given that she had never bowed down to anyone at school before, it was hard to imagine her accepting such a proposal so easily.

Even I feel like I'd have a hard time trying to negotiate with Sayaka right now… What are you going to do, Alya?

Masachika considered coming up with a backup plan just in case Alisa's persuasion failed, but eventually, he decided to simply trust his rapidly improving partner for now and waited for her answer.

Under everyone's watchful gazes, Alisa seemed to succumb to the pressure of Sayaka's stare as she looked away. Sayaka's eyes narrowed with evident disappointment.

But as the tension grew, Alisa fiddled with her hair while she shyly argued, "We might not be friends in this election…but we're friends in real life. Plus, I don't know anyone else I could ask…so it would make me really happy…if you agreed to help."

With a slight blush to her cheeks, Alisa glanced up at Sayaka. There was an unguarded vulnerability and cuteness that could undoubtedly have any guy swooning. But…

Alya… I mean, I know she's being genuine, but Sayaka's asking how this would benefit her, and all Alya's doing is essentially trying to appeal to her emotions. Sayaka isn't the kind of person who is swayed by emotions…

Masachika furrowed his brow, perplexed by Alisa's words, which hardly seemed like a negotiation at all.

As if confirming Masachika's thoughts, Sayaka let out a soft sigh and looked away from Alisa. Then she pushed up the bridge of her glasses with her middle finger and replied, "Well…I guess I have no choice but to help you, then. We are friends, after all."

It worked?!

Masachika's eyes went wide, and he was taken aback by how much higher her voice sounded, while she restlessly adjusted her glasses.

Is that all it's going to take?! What happened to the debate queen?!

He stared at Sayaka, unable to hide his shock at her unusually uncharacteristic reaction. Gone was the cold, detached demeanor she had been exuding just moments ago, and although she maintained a slight pout, she seemed to be in surprisingly good spirits.

"Sayaka, are you sure?"

"…Well, I don't see why not, seeing that you are coming to me for help as a friend."

"Thank you, Sayaka. So… Nonoa…"

"I'm in if Saya's in."

Nonoa nodded readily, sticking close to her childhood friend, who frowned at Nonoa's grinning face, only millimeters from her own.

"Will you get off me already?" grumbled Sayaka, peeling her childhood friend off her arm before grabbing her cup and standing.

"I'm going to go get a refill," she stated, before swiftly withdrawing from the room, but the instant she was gone, Nonoa grinned.

"Saya's so shy."

“…I definitely wasn’t expecting that.”

“Hmm? Oh, like, Saya doesn’t have that many friends? So she was probably really happy.”

“Oh…”

Masachika was left dumbfounded as Alisa had effortlessly sealed the deal—something he’d thought difficult to resolve—in a way that even he wasn’t expecting.

I’m honestly kind of shocked… Alya just made the ice queen all giddy and nervous without even trying. She’s clearly the main character here.

Masachika felt a bit disgusted by how calculating his strategizing was, casting a faint shadow over his spirits. Meanwhile, Nonoa, while casually reaching for some honey toast with her fork, remarked nonchalantly:

“So, Takeshi? You in love with Saya?”

“““…?!”””

The abrupt, out-of-the-blue question left the other four visibly startled, and three of them immediately looked to Takeshi. Although he seemed shocked, his cheeks gradually turned red, leaving his three peers stunned speechless.

“Wh-what? No. Wait, wait, wait. Seriously?” asked Masachika, stuttering like a fool, as he was sent reeling by yet another startling surprise. Takeshi’s eyes darted around the room while he mumbled unintelligibly, but his reaction alone was more than enough.

“What? Seriously. What?”

“Come on, is it really that big of a deal?”

“It’s just…really surprising…”

“…I agree with Masachika. Takeshi, the girls you’ve liked have always been more…nice? I guess you could say.”

“Sayaka is nice, though,” Takeshi replied somewhat bashfully, earning intense stares from his two best friends as a heavy silence fell over them for the next few moments.

Takeshi, who was caught off guard, didn’t know what to say, and Masachika and Hikaru were both reeling from the completely unexpected revelation about their close friend’s crush. Meanwhile, Alisa seemed to be frozen solid, as if she too was caught off guard, since she had never heard three boys

discuss relationships like this before. However, the instigator, Nonoa, simply continued to enjoy her honey toast.

The silence, unfitting for a karaoke box, was only broken when the door abruptly opened.

"…? Did something happen?"

Sayaka entered the room, a glass of ginger ale in hand, while frowning at her peers, but Masachika simply ignored her while he downed the rest of his cola in one go.

"All right, my turn to go get a refill."

"Let me join you."

As if they had planned it, Masachika and Hikaru placed their arms around Takeshi's shoulders from each side in a tight embrace.

"You're thirsty, too, right, Takeshi?"

"Uh…?"

"Yeah, let's go to the drink station and make some crazy soda combinations."

The boys left the room, practically forcing Takeshi to come as well, without even listening to what he had to say. They even left his cup in the karaoke room, but that was far from the biggest issue right now.

"…So do you really like Sayaka?" Masachika asked the instant they arrived at the drink station. But after seeing Takeshi avoid eye contact without even trying to deny it, he looked up at the ceiling and said, "…Wow."

While it was clear that Takeshi was serious, it was honestly difficult to cheer him on, for multiple reasons. First and foremost, their families stood at opposite ends of the pecking order. Sayaka was the daughter of the CEO of one of Japan's largest corporations, and while Takeshi was technically the son of a company CEO as well, his family owned what would be considered a small, local factory. There was essentially a three-digit difference when it came to the number of employees and annual revenue between the two companies.

That alone already put her out of his league, and then there was Sayaka's personality. She didn't seem to have any interest in dating, to put it lightly. In fact, she seemed like someone who was more likely to strategically marry for the family business, if she got married at all.

Plus, I bet Takeshi has no idea that she's actually a huge nerd… And then there's Nonoa…

Masachika's expression was troubled as he considered the various circumstances until Takeshi suddenly spoke up with a hint of discontent in his voice.

"Come on. Is it seriously that weird?"

"I wouldn't say it's weird…but didn't you tell me there was a girl you liked before summer break? When you came over to my place to study for exams, you said you were going to be more alpha and direct with her."

"Oh, right. I remember him saying that, too. What happened with that?"

"Oh… Uh…"

"…Don't tell me she turned you down."

"Not exactly…" Takeshi spoke hesitantly, pausing for a few seconds, as if deep in thought, then, as if resigned to his fate, he continued, "…The girl I liked—I'm not going to say her name, but she's the manager of the soccer club…"

"Oh?"

"The manager of the soccer club? How'd you…?"

"She actually helped the baseball club practice for a little while, and she was so nice…which got me interested. Know what I mean?"

"…Hmm?"

Masachika's eyebrow twitched when he heard Takeshi's reason…because it felt like he had a strong feeling that he had heard this story somewhere before. The manager for the soccer team was helping the baseball team practice…? Uh…? Who was the one that suggested that again?

"So I mustered up the courage to ask her out…but she told me that she was actually dating the captain of our club…"

Uh…? Dating the captain? The captain had a secret girlfriend? Why did that sound vaguely familiar? Although unintentional, who was it that recklessly motivated Takeshi to be more straightforward?

"Anyway, I was heartbroken…but when Sayaka helped us with the band and protected Kanau at the school festival for me, I suddenly caught feelings for her. Know what I mean?"

Who was it again that asked Sayaka to join their band?

“…All right, then.”

It was at that moment that Masachika realized who was the root cause of all this. It was him. Even though he hadn’t intended for any of it to happen…he felt an overwhelming sense of guilt.

“…I’m rooting for you,” he said hoarsely. It wasn’t like there was anything else he could have said to fix this.

CHAPTER 3

Wait, am I stupid?

“That was a lot more fun than I thought it’d be.”

“Yeah, I had a really good time, too.”

Masachika ended up walking Alisa home after karaoke, which they wrapped up in about two hours. Although it was a rather small event to celebrate their live performance and to say good-bye to the band, they didn’t have much of a choice, since they still had school tomorrow.

They had originally planned to do this on their makeup day after the school festival, but they couldn’t find a time when everyone was going to be free. Plus, they couldn’t wait until next Saturday came around, since the following week was exam week, so it had to be today. Regardless, they agreed to spend time together again to make up for today (or at least, that was the excuse they were going with), so it wasn’t like this was the last time these six rock stars were all going to hang out.

“I never knew singing with friends would be so much fun.”

“Is this the first time you’ve done something like this?”

“I’ve sung with my family before, but that’s about it…”

“Oh, family karaoke?”

“It wasn’t karaoke… At the family dacha—the cottage—my grandfather used to play the guitar while everyone sang along with him.”

“Sounds very pastoral…”

Masachika and Alisa were their usual selves, engaged in their usual casual conversation, but there was still an underlying awkwardness.

Yeah… We obviously still haven’t gotten over what happened the night of the festival…

Masachika suddenly remembered Alisa's devilish teasing, then quickly shook the thought out of his head.

Eh, things'll eventually go back to normal. Yep.

Or so that was what he told himself while he tried to act as normal as possible…but the instant the conversation died, Alisa stopped in her tracks.

"…? Alya?"

Masachika turned around with a questioning look on his face and found Alisa staring down at the ground. However, after a few moments went by, she lifted her chin, and there was determination in her eyes.

"Masachika… Did something happen?"

"Huh?"

"You're acting…funny."

"…"

Masachika's first instinct was to say, "What? No, you're the one who's acting funny," but after thinking about it for a few seconds, he concluded that maybe she was right.

Am I acting funny…?

Perhaps he had been acting awkward without even realizing it, but he had a good idea why.

It's because of Masha, isn't it?

The interaction he'd had with Maria during lunch break. The flutter of excitement he felt toward her. For some reason, he was feeling guilty, as if he had done something to Alisa.

What is this? I feel like…I cheated on her? It's not like we're going out, so I definitely wasn't cheating, but…

He remained quiet, with a troubled expression for a few moments, while Alisa's gaze only grew more concerned.

"Something did happen, didn't it?"

Even Alisa's pure concern made him feel guilty. However, now that she seemed to have noticed something was wrong, he felt that dodging the issue and pretending everything was fine would only make things more awkward. So after a moment's thought, Masachika decided to speak up.

"Yeah… There is something that has kind of been bothering me, I guess."

"Something's bothering you…?"

"It's not a big deal, but…"

After gently clearing his throat, Masachika adjusted his expression, then shifted his gaze toward the night sky.

"…I was watching this anime a while back, and the last episode was so depressing that I was traumatized for a while."

"…?"

"A few years have passed, and they finally announced a second season—a true sequel. But I wasn't planning on watching it after how the first season just ruined me. My friend was like, 'The second season is so good,' but I was like, 'Nah, I'm already too busy watching the most popular series this season,' and he was like, 'That's cool, but maybe give the second season a chance after the season's over,' so I thought, 'Why not?'

Masachika continued despite knowing that Alisa was only getting more and more confused.

"Anyway, I figured if my friend likes it so much, I should give the first season a rewatch, but this time, the last episode really blew me away. Marathoning the whole season made me realize how good of a show it was…and I ended up getting kind of addicted to the second season after that…

Masachika looked down and shook his head.

"But it's hard to tell my friend that I got obsessed with the second season, especially after being, like, 'I'm only planning on watching the most popular show this season.' On the other hand, it'd be hard to not even bring up the show at all… Anyway, that's where I'm at right now."

"…That's what's bothering you?"

"Yep. What do you think?"

"Wouldn't your problem be instantly solved if you were simply honest with your friend?"

"Hmm… Yeah, true…"

Masachika smirked, not at all surprised by her fed up glare.

It'd be easy if this really was about anime…but when it's about a person… I guess it is my fault for not being straightforward with her, though.

Alisa tilted her head in confusion as she observed Masachika looking downcast and mocking himself inwardly.

"What's the problem? You liked it, right? You can't control what you like. Besides, not telling them how you feel and making

things awkward wouldn't really be nice of you if you really are their friend, right?"

The words, carefully chosen and pondered, unexpectedly struck a chord with Masachika. His eyes widened in surprise, and when he looked up, he met Alisa's gaze.

"…Yeah, I guess."

"Right? At the very least, that's how I feel."

"Yeah…"

After nodding slowly to himself a few times, Masachika gave Alisa a weak smile.

"Thanks. I feel a little better now."

"Really? Well, I'm glad I could help…"

Again, Masachika smiled gently at Alisa, who tilted her head in a puzzled manner. However, after they resumed walking, he raised his voice in a cheerful, playful tone and admitted:

"Whew… I never thought the day would come when I would be going to you for advice on how to fix my life."

"Come on… You're exaggerating…"

"No, I mean it. Everyone worries about different things, right? And everyone is affected in different ways."

"Yeah… Well, if you ever need someone to talk to, you can come to me, okay? I mean…we are partners, after all," Alisa insisted with a pout, which only made Masachika smile even more gently, realizing that she was trying to hide her embarrassment.

"I'm counting on you."

"…!"

Alisa, who was walking by his side, suddenly jumped.

"…?"

"It's nothing," she said, brushing aside Masachika's questioning gaze before briskly walking ahead. Nevertheless, she actually seemed to be in a rather good mood.

Well, uh… It looks like everything's back to normal?

With a sigh of relief, Masachika picked up his pace to catch up and walk next to her, but as they approached her house, Alisa remarked, "Now that I think about it, exams are coming up…"

"Y-yeah."

"What do you want to do? I'm fine with studying together if you want," Alisa proposed cheerfully. Masachika then pondered

for a few moments before shaking his head.

“Nah, I think I’ll be fine studying alone this time. I mean, it’d be pathetic if I started to condition myself to only be able to study when someone’s with me.”

“…Oh.”

Was Masachika imagining things, or did Alisa sound a little disappointed? Regardless, it wasn’t long after that until they arrived at the entrance of Alisa’s apartment building.

“Anyway, see you tomorrow.”

“Thanks for walking me home,” she replied, placing a foot on the first step to her apartment complex before spinning around, effortlessly slipping into Masachika’s personal space and pressing her cheek against his.

“<I’m counting on you, too.>”

After Alisa’s whisper tickled his ear, she swiftly spun back around and bolted into the apartment building, leaving Masachika dumbfounded. But once her figure completely vanished from view, an unexpected shiver traced its way down his spine.

She startled me…

He could feel warmth spreading from where Alisa’s cheek had touched his, causing him to shiver once more before he took off sprinting, unable to take it any longer.

He dashed through the night, the lingering summer heat still heavy in the air. By the time he reached his house, he was out of breath, his entire body flushed, and yet he felt an unprecedented surge of motivation swelling in his chest.

“I can do this,” he declared, firing himself up to the point that he felt like he could study all night.

All right, then… Starting today, no more messing around on the computer, and I’m going to keep TV and phone time to a minimum!

With each stride, he solidified his resolve, then paused before his front door and took in a deep breath.

“I’ve got this!” shouted Masachika, his voice brimming with determination as he opened the door.

“Oh, welcome home.”

The sight of his little sister, bouncing around with her ponytail bobbing, instantly made his motivation plummet.

“Would you like me for dinner? Or Ayano? Or…a threesome?”

“A ‘threesome’? What game are you playing that requires three people?”

“I’m not playing any games.”

Masachika elegantly ignored Yuki’s incredibly crude greeting and headed straight for the bathroom while casually announcing that he was home. After washing his hands and rinsing his mouth, he went into the living room where Yuki was waiting, her ponytail still bouncing as she fidgeted happily.

“Anyway, now that the school festival’s over, I think it’s time for us to get up to speed on our anime backlog before exams!”

Seeing his sister unintentionally trying to shatter his resolve with a brilliant, innocent smile actually made Masachika feel a tinge of guilt. However…

“I know I have no right to say this, since I just got back from hanging out with my friends…but I need to start studying for exams, or I’m going to be in trouble.”

“Don’t worry! You can hit the books starting tomorrow!” Yuki suggested, with a confident flick of her ponytail.

Masachika pursed his lips. Saying “you’ll start tomorrow” was something people only said when they weren’t going to work hard, but Yuki was an exception. She was probably planning to let loose today so she could truly buckle down tomorrow.

She looks like she’s been really looking forward to this, too, so I guess I could spend tonight hanging out with her… It’s not like I wasn’t out messing around all day already.

But he almost instantly shook the thought out of his mind.

What is wrong with me? What happened to all that determination from a second ago?

Chiding himself, Masachika shook his head once more, determined to resist the temptation.

“I’m really sorry, but I already promised myself that I’d start studying hard the moment I got home. Let’s catch up on anime after exams, okay?”

“Whaaat? You’re going to make me wait two more weeks? I’m already having enough trouble avoiding spoilers as it is now,” complained Yuki, her ponytail drooping listlessly.

“I’m sorry. I’m serious about cracking the top thirty in our grade this time.”

Although feeling a pang of guilt, Masachika replied firmly, and Yuki nodded back reluctantly, her ponytail seeming to droop even more.

“…All right, I’ll wait until exams are over.”

“I feel bad, since you came all this way…”

“It’s fine. I’ll just be in my room catching up on some reading so I don’t get in the way of your studies.”

“All right… By the way, I was actually planning on not saying anything at first, but…”

Unable to ignore it any longer, Masachika narrowed his eyes as he watched Ayano stealthily manipulating Yuki’s ponytail from behind.

“…What are you doing?”

“Heh! I’m glad you asked.”

“Couldn’t really help it.”

Yuki suddenly placed her right fingertips on her forehead, hiding her face as she smirked mischievously—all while Ayano was making her ponytail sway seductively. Masachika, however, narrowed his eyes further, starting to regret that he ever brought it up.

Yuki cast a melancholic gaze into the distance, as if she was completely oblivious to her brother’s growing irritation. His eyes went blank, with the kind of vacant look usually reserved for watching paint dry.

“Where should I begin…? Yes, it all started—”

“Fast-forward thirty seconds.”

“—ing? That’s her trademark—”

“Fast-forward a little more.”

“—tails should be like this.”

“Too far. Rewind ten seconds.”

“—ing down, her ponytail droops lifelessly, but when she’s happy, it bounces around cheerfully. I was shocked to my core when I first realized it, to say the least, and I came to the decision that all characters with ponytails should be like this.”

“You’re good. And Ayano, I’m sorry she made you do this.”

Yuki moved her head in an exaggerated manner with each word, quite literally swinging Ayano around. But despite Ayano struggling not to pull on her mistress’s hair, Yuki spread her arms

out wide and spun around, as if she were hazing the poor maid, leaving Ayano to scramble around her waist.

“Come on, stop torturing her like this.”

“Dum, dum, dum! You know what I just realized?! A ponytail is more than just something to express if you’re happy or sad!”

“Which means?”

“If you’re going to put your hair in a ponytail, shouldn’t you express all your emotions with your hair?”

“I feel stupider now for asking. Thanks.”

“That’s because you kept fast-forwarding through the good parts. You Gen Z kids have the attention spans of goldfish.”

“Says the girl who’s also Gen Z.”

“I’d prefer it if you didn’t label me with a meaningless term that adults just arbitrarily came up with.”

“You’re the one who started it.”

“I think labeling everything and everyone like that really divides us as a society.”

“Interesting. It’s hard to believe that these are the words of a girl who just said, ‘All characters with ponytails should be like this.’”

The moment Masachika scowled at her, Yuki dramatically raised her hands up toward the ceiling as if she were performing onstage.

“Oh, indeed! Ponytails! Now that I know their potential, I began training to become a true ponytail character…and I’m starting to master the art of moving my ponytail in relation to how I feel!”

“Wouldn’t it be more productive if you practiced a special move instead?”

“There is one issue with that, though…”

“Uh-huh.”

“My hair got really frizzy, and I gave myself a cowlick.”

“Got yourself a new useless skill, huh?”

“Heh! The world still has no idea…that this useless skill has the potential to one day become the ultimate weapon.”

“Your cowlick?”

“You’re naive… Being able to give myself a cowlick means that I can control the hydrogen bonds in the keratin in my hair. In

other words…! If I were to master this, it would allow me to manipulate the molecular bonds of any biomolecule at will.”

“I think you’re overestimating your new skill.”

“Useless skills are always underestimated at first.”

“People are going to start thinking it’s a joke if you overdo it, though.”

“The fact that it started with a cowlick is already going to make people think I’m stupid.”

“I wasn’t expecting you to one-up me with a legitimate, sound argument,” replied Masachika while he turned his gaze toward Ayano.

“Anyway, you can’t actually move your ponytail at will, so you’re getting Ayano to do it for you?”

“Precisely! By utilizing her stealth ability, I have completely mastered the—”

“Ayano, this is textbook workplace harassment. If you want to sue, then let me know, because this would be a layup.”

“Thank you very much for your concern, but I’m fine.”

“You’re too nice.”

“Pretty sure my maid here’s just a masochist.”

“And you’re a coward for making her do this shtick with you.”

“‘Coward’… Like ‘cow’… And ‘shtick’ rhymes with ‘lick’… In other words, you could call me ‘Cowlick’—a fitting title for a genius such as me.”

“…”

“…”

“…”

“…What?” Yuki asked, breaking the silence.

“That was a stretch, and a bad one at that. You have nobody but yourself to blame, too, so don’t look at us like we’re the problems.”

“It’s your fault for not playing along.”

“Now you’re mad at me? Did you expect me to jump on the grenade when you were the one who stupidly decided to pull the pin?”

“What a terrible thing to say! I can’t believe you would leave me to blow up all by myself! I thought you were my brother!”

“Oh, shut up. Don’t try to drag others into your mess. If you’re going to die, then go die by yourself.”

“What kind of human waste are you?! You’re the kind of monster who kicks their friend to the curb when something scary happens, and they latch on to you!”

“Also known as ‘Exhibit A,’ a character whose sole purpose is to show the readers how vile humans can be before being killed off,” Masachika recited knowingly.

“Yeah, they usually get killed off in the next panel by something behind them.”

“And the characters who don’t betray their friends end up being saved by the protagonist and his party.”

“Exactly. So pick up the grenade.”

“And hope someone will come save us? The moment I pick it up, you’re going to race off, leaving me behind.”

“Tsk. You’re good,” Yuki said begrudgingly.

“You’re the trash character who everyone hates yet always ends up surviving somehow.”

“Heh! And right before you blow up, I’d mutter something like, ‘Big Brother…’ before disappearing into the fog.”

“That big brother is only going to die because of you, you know?!”

“Who cares? Don’t you have some studying to be doing?”

“You’re the one who started this, though?”

“Hey, Ayano. He’s asking you to pick up the grenade for him.”

“…?!”

“I told you to stop dragging others down with you… *Haaah*,” said Masachika, grunting with utter exhaustion while he gave Yuki’s head a few rough rubs.

“O-oh?”

After letting go of Yuki, who was still blinking in wonder, Masachika gently patted Ayano on the head to express his gratitude to her as well. Yuki then glared up at her brother, rubbing her head where she had been aggressively patted.

“Mmm… For your information, if you think you can make girls happy just by patting their head, then you need to stop watching so much anime, because you’d be wrong.”

“That’s not what I was trying to do.”

“It did make me happy, though. So go on. Rub my head some more,” admitted Yuki while leaning forward as she pushed her head against him petulantly.

“What is wrong with you…?”

Although visibly drained, Masachika ruffled Yuki’s hair just like he would do to Rir, their pet dog back at his grandparents’ place.

“Arf.”

With a forced, overly cheerful voice, Yuki lifted her shirt, revealing her belly like a dog. She even grinned, as if to say, “Hurry up and pet me,” but Masachika effortlessly ignored her and headed straight to his room.

“Tsk. What kind of monster ignores a perfectly flat stomach like this…? He’s not even trying to hide that he’s a boob guy.”

Pretending not to hear Yuki’s whining from the other side of the door, Masachika slipped into his pajamas and made a beeline for his desk, diving straight into a rigorous study session for the upcoming exams. Time ticked by unnoticed until Ayano quietly entered, placing a steaming cup of coffee beside him. He continued to study with an unusually high level of concentration. But once he finished his last sip and took a short breather, he glanced up at the clock, surprised to see that it was already creeping toward nine thirty at night.

“…”

Masachika briefly turned his attention to the world outside his room but heard nothing. It seemed that, true to her word, Yuki had shut herself in her room to avoid disturbing him, and while this was what Masachika had wanted, she was being a little too true to her word. It was anticlimactic. It made him feel a little bad as well, and he felt like something was missing…

What is wrong with me? Stop obsessing over your sister.

He knew full well that his usually playful, mischievous little sister was actually a serious person, overflowing with love and kindness, so if her older brother was dead set on studying, then she would be kind enough to respect his wishes.

But that was precisely why…

She could at least complain a little and beg for attention.

He couldn’t help but feel this way. At the very least, he wanted to pamper his little sister, who was far too used to bottling up her feelings and not doing what she wanted to do for the sake of others. But Yuki would never ignore Masachika’s feelings to assert her own will, and it was this unusually mature

understanding of others that made Masachika feel both lonely and sad.

I guess I'll just have to hang out with her for as long as she wants after exams are over.

After coming to that decision, Masachika stood up from his chair and stretched.

Mmm… Time for a bath…

He remembered hearing a few minutes ago that the bath was ready, so he figured he might as well hop in if Yuki and Ayano weren't going to. After leaving his room, Masachika went over to Yuki's and knocked on her door.

"Yes?" she answered without opening her door.

"Can I take the first bath?"

"Go ahead," came another muffled reply.

After getting permission through the door, Masachika went to the bathroom with a change of clothes from his room, peeled off the cold compress he'd been wearing on his neck, then slid into the bath area. From there, he washed his hair and body, then submerged himself in the hot water. He felt the fatigue, which had built up from studying for so long, disappearing like a dream.

"Ahhh…"

Breathing a sigh of satisfaction, Masachika completely relaxed in the tub, because at least for now, he could forget about his studies and just reset…when suddenly, he heard a door slide open just outside the bathing area.

Hmm? Does somebody need to wash their hands?

But before he could even gather his thoughts—

"Boom!"

"…?! What the…?!"

Yuki kicked the door to the bath area wide open, then stepped inside, fully naked.

"Wh-what do you think you're doing?!" shouted Masachika, immediately sitting up.

"I decided that instead of bothering you while you're studying, I would bother you while you're bathing!" Yuki replied proudly with her chest puffed out.

"Y-you can't be serious! You're completely naked!"

"Duh? I'm about to take a bath. Don't worry, though. The light and steam will take care of the censorship for us."

“They’re not helping at all!”

“It’ll be fine. We’ll just have to do some editing later with some correction tape.”

“How about starting now?!” Masachika blurted out hysterically and faced the other direction. Much to his surprise, however, he heard Yuki close the door…before taking a seat on the bathroom stool, as if it were nothing.

“Huh?! Wait. Are you seriously going to get in the bath with me?”

“What? Of course. This is the only way I get to talk to you without interrupting your studies, right?”

“But this is insane.”

It was beyond bizarre for two siblings in high school to bathe together, no matter how anybody tried to justify it. In fact, most girls at that age wouldn’t even want to use the bath after their father or older brother had. Even having their laundry washed together would gross most girls out.

Well, Yuki isn’t going through any sort of rebellious phase, so she doesn’t really mind stuff like that…but shouldn’t this be a little more embarrassing for her, regardless?! We’re both going through puberty, for crying out loud!

Masachika, at least, actually felt embarrassed about his sister seeing him naked, and the fact that his sister was *a girl* only made it worse. However…

“Maybe there really is something wrong with me?”

He noticed a sense of seriousness in Yuki’s soft words, prompting him to glance in her direction, where he saw his sister washing her hair while staring fixedly at her lower abdomen.

“…”

Sensing something in her demeanor, Masachika turned away again and began to ponder. Objectively speaking, Yuki’s behavior was, without a doubt, strange. But if he were to consider only Yuki’s individual circumstances without generalizing…

“I don’t think there’s anything wrong with you at all.”

That was the only thing he could say. He knew why she was this way. The reason Yuki hadn’t shown any signs of ever going through a rebellious phase was because she had been forced to grow up before she’d even had a chance to experience adolescence.

Yuki, being the intelligent girl that she was, had realized that she couldn't really be a child, because she was surrounded by an incompetent older brother and self-serving adults her whole life. She had given up her right to seek comfort from her parents and her right to rebel against them as well, skipping several stages of growth to become an adult, and she did it all for the sake of protecting her family.

Yuki's far more of an adult than me. That's for sure.

He believed that from the bottom of his heart. However…

There's a part of her that's still just a child…

There was no doubt that adolescence and puberty were crucial periods for a child's growth into adulthood, so what would happen to someone mentally if they were forced to skip that stage? Even though they may have appeared to be an adult, wouldn't this have distorted their growth?

"I'm sorry, Masachika… I'm staying here…in this house."

It was maturity far beyond her years.

"I don't care if you see me naked."

And yet there was still this childlike side to her.

Maybe this childlike side of Yuki's is…

Perhaps this was the part of her that was left on her bed in that sterile, hospital-like room. Yuki used to say that she wanted to play hide-and-seek in the yard. She used to say that she wanted to play video games. But somewhere along the way, she stopped making such simple requests. She became the heir to the Suou family, forcing her desires to remain as dreams, never to come true, and it was none other than Masachika who left her behind to do that.

Is she the girl I left behind…?

Back then, Yuki had to be careful even when taking a bath. She was prone to asthma attacks from things like steam and temperature changes, so long baths were strictly forbidden. Often, she would have to simply make do with a sponge bath in bed, so of course, she probably never got to experience the joys of playing in the tub, splashing around and whatnot. And if that was what she had been longing for all this time…

"Anyway, just do whatever makes you happy," Masachika commented with a hint of sorrow, before submerging himself

deeper in the bath. Yuki, her hair pulled back, stared at Masachika for a moment before grinning smugly.

"…Okay." Masachika felt a sense of relief as the seriousness faded from her voice. "Don't mind if I do."

"Pfft?! Hey?!"

"Boom!" Yuki roared with a bright voice as she dived into the water, creating a huge wave that smacked Masachika right in the face, letting him know that the sound effect wasn't just for show.

"Tsk! Seriously?" He sighed with a mix of exasperation and reproach while he vigorously shook the water from his hair. After having dive-bombed into the bath, Yuki grabbed the edge of the tub and pulled herself up to the surface.

"Whoa! The water's really hot."

"Then get out."

"You're right! This is way too hot! I'm going back to my room… Not! Did you really think I'd say that? Well, too bad. I'd never give myself a death flag that obvious."

"How is that a death flag? If anything, you're in far more danger here in the tub."

"Oh my… Don't tell me you—"

"No! That's not what I meant!"

"I heard it was easy to make murders look like suicides in the bathtub, but I never thought you would—"

"Yeah, that's definitely not what I meant."

"Situations like this make it easy to gauge how much of a perv you are."

"Baseless slander. All we learned from this was that you're still a creep."

"Not as much of a creep as *Elena*."

"I refuse to even entertain the comparison."

"Tsk. You're getting good at this."

Yuki submerged herself up to her shoulders while leaning back against Masachika.

"Hey?!"

"Ha-ha-ha! We're acting like some stupid couple that lives together."

"Uh…?"

"Heh. It's over now, bro. Now I can use the classic childhood friend phrase, 'We used to take baths together all the time,' and

you can't be like, 'Yeah, when we were kids!'"

"…Haaah."

He was on the verge of voicing his disapproval, but he hesitated, eventually letting out a sigh instead.

Well, I guess I can just pretend we're kids again…

He stared off into the abyss, when—

"Pew!"

"Bfft?!"

Hot water splashed across his face, and once he could open his eyes again, he noticed Yuki cupping her hands in the water, creating a makeshift water gun.

"Have another!"

"Bfft!"

The instant she squeezed her hands together, a jet of hot water shot out from between her palms, splashing across Masachika's face again and making him grimace.

"Seriously? You're acting like you're in elementary school, you know?"

"Heh. Sorry for being so innocent and pure that this is all it takes for me to have fun in the bathtub."

"Quit shooting me in the face."

After Masachika karate chopped his sister on the head to stop her painfully accurate machine-gun skills, he wiped his face off with his hand…bringing Yuki's naked body into view, and though he knew it was wrong, he couldn't help but stare.

"…"

Yuki had a very well-proportioned and beautiful body, but what really caught his attention was how slender she was.

While she had feminine curves, her overall frame was very thin and delicate. In fact, she was so delicate that she was probably not even half the size of someone like Touya, if that.

Is she eating enough…?

Masachika was starting to get genuinely worried, but when Yuki looked up at her brother's concerned face, she grinned.

"Oh? About time you acknowledged how stunning this flat stomach is."

"No, I'm not that much of a degenerate yet."

"How can you not see how sexy this is? Look at how you can subtly see my abs. *Haaah…* It seems you still have much to

learn…”

“What abs??”

“Right here. Touch them.”

“Nah, I’m good.”

Although she was his sister, and it was only her stomach, Masachika hesitated to touch her and instinctively declined. Nevertheless, Yuki narrowed her eyes smugly before she began to slowly rub her own stomach.

“Rub my stomach… It would make the baby happy…”

“I don’t see any babies.”

Yuki took Masachika’s hand, her expression oddly filled with tender affection as she gently urged him to do it. Sensing that she wouldn’t be satisfied unless he did it, Masachika sighed yet still hesitantly touched his sister’s tight stomach—

“Hyah-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

And immediately, shrill laughter erupted, startling him as he quickly pulled his hand away. However, Yuki’s expression instantly turned blank as she closed her mouth, so Masachika timidly reached out once more—

“Hyah-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

As he pulled his hand away, her expression instantly went blank, so he tried again.

“Hyah-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

“You’re seriously scaring me!” Masachika cried in despair, for every time he touched her, Yuki’s eyes would open wide as she burst into a shrill laugh. “Can you at least make it sound like you’re happy?! You sound like some sort of cursed doll screaming!”

“I’m actually starting to feel a little embarrassed.”

“I’m worried about your mental health if this is you acting embarrassed.”

“I can’t help it. Compassion makes up half of who I am.”

“What’s the other half?”

“Lewd passion.”

“That hardly makes any sense.”

“I’m lewd and compassionate… Hold up. Doesn’t this make me the perfect rom-com heroine?”

“Do heroines in rom-coms need to be lewd? If anything, people seem to prefer girls who are more naive and innocent.”

Yuki's eyes went wide and then she glared up at her brother menacingly.

"Maybe if you're a virgin-obsessed loser like my brother here!!"

"I like sluts, too?!"

"The only kinda sluts ya like are the older ones that take the virginity of nerds like you!!"

"What the…?! How the hell do you know so much about what your own brother's into?!"

"Huh? Th-that's because…"

Yuki suddenly seemed embarrassed, her gaze darting around the room until eventually settling on the water in the tub, when she mumbled:

"That's what I like, too…"

"Stop confessing your fetishes like you're confessing your love for me. And what do you mean you like perverted, older women?"

"Lately, I've been really into this comic where this lewd, older woman seduces this girl who's not into women… By the way, it's *yuri*, if that part wasn't obvious…"

"…Interesting."

Masachika didn't know if he should have felt relieved that it wasn't anything twisted or if he should have felt worried that his sister was starting to get into GL as if BL wasn't doing it for her anymore.

…I guess it's 2D, and it's fiction, so it doesn't matter. It's not like she's confusing her fantasies with reality…

Right after he came to that conclusion, Yuki suddenly clenched her fist and admitted, "Anyway, I've been shipping Nonoa and Sayaka lately."

"I take back what I just said in my head."

"I mean, things are kind of fishy between them, right? I never heard any strange rumors about Sayaka, and Nonoa seems to have an unusually strong obsession with her."

"Yeah… I guess…"

"Honestly, if someone told me that Nonoa was secretly disposing of every man that tried to approach Sayaka, I wouldn't be surprised."

"…"

Even Masachika couldn't deny the possibility of her half-joking hypothesis. One of the reasons he couldn't wholeheartedly support Takeshi's feelings for Sayaka was precisely that.

I should probably talk to her and double-check…

Masachika was lifting his head, his gaze on the ceiling as he pondered that. Just as he came to that decision, Yuki slid down even deeper into the tub, then looked up at her brother and uttered:

"By the way, my sweet brother…"

"What?"

He looked down to see his sister grinning at him as she reached out and gently rubbed his neck.

"Who bit you on the neck?"

A jolt of lightning shot through Masachika's body.

Oh, crap. Whoops…

Masachika had completely forgotten that he had peeled off the cold compress on his neck…which was covering the mark Alisa left when she bit him.

"…"

He stared straight ahead, his expression never more grave, since there was no way that he could hide what had happened any longer.

"I got bit by a zombie."

"Seriously? That's rough. But you didn't turn into a zombie… which means that you're immune to the virus, huh?"

"Yeah, I can still think and function like a human, but I have superhuman strength."

"And to save a girl who was bitten by a zombie, you're going to inject her with your bodily fluids under the guise that you're giving her the antibody, right?"

"Yeah, it starts off with some French kissing, which seems to kind of work at first, but it's not enough, so—hold up! This is getting too X-rated!"

"What are you going to do if it's a sweaty old man who gets bit?!"

"I'll let him say a few final words, then put him out of his misery."

"You didn't even have to think about that one."

“Anyway, I’m feeling nice and toasty now, so I think I’m going to head back to my room.”

“I’m not letting you go.”

“Pfft. Do you really think you can stop me?”

“Excuse me? Not so fast…!”

Right as Masachika tried to get out of the bathtub, Yuki pushed down on him with all her might, using both her hands and feet to pin him in place. But Masachika wasn’t weak. Far from it, in fact. Despite being trapped between the bathtub and Yuki’s back, he slowly managed to wriggle free despite being obviously flustered.

“You’ve left me with no other choice. I didn’t want to have to do this,” she muttered while letting him go. Masachika took this opportunity to swiftly stand up and get out of the tub before anything happened. However—

“Angel Mode Activate. ☆”

The moment he heard those words, it was already too late. She had grabbed his left hand, and a terrible premonition consumed his soul. He cautiously lowered his gaze, meeting Yuki’s bright, innocent eyes.

“Dear brother, you have to count to a hundred before getting out. It’s the rule.”

“Gah!”

His heart skipped a beat at the sight of those eyes, and Masachika started to stumble backward. But…

No, I can’t…! It’s a trick! Getting back in the tub would be exactly what Yuki wants!

He froze, wondering what he should do…when he noticed Yuki staring intently at him, making him crouch.

“Seriously?”

Masachika closed his legs and glared at Yuki with resentment. But she merely looked puzzled, comparing her nether region to Masachika’s while tilting her head.

“Big brother, why is there so much hai—?”

“All right! Let’s count to a hundred together!” Masachika suggested desperately, to which Yuki responded with a cheerful nod.

“Okay!”

However, as if a sudden idea had popped into her head, she then exclaimed in an innocent tone:

“I want a duck! A yellow rubber ducky!

“We don’t have one.”

“Then would you be the rubber ducky for me?”

“Are you asking me to float? Ah, the innocence of a child. Or should I say the cruel nature of a child?”

“You don’t have to float. I just want you to become a duck.”

“…? How?”

“Hey, did you know that rubber ducks are supposed to look like ducklings? That’s why they’re yellow. And they need someone to take care of their every need because they’re completely helpless.”

“What are you getting at?!”

“I want you to be my little duckling.”

“You’re not really an angel, are you?”

“Tsk!”

“All right, I’m getting out of the tub for real this time,” Masachika declared, stepping out of the bathtub, where he began showering to rinse his body off while Yuki watched him with a sly grin. But behind that smile, she secretly let out a sigh of relief.

Heh. He seems fine. Guess I didn’t need to worry about him, after all.

Yuki was relieved to see him being his usual self, since he had seemed somewhat depressed ever since he’d played piano at the school festival. She knew that if she had left him alone, he would have spiraled into an endless pit of despair at the slightest trigger, and that was why she was a bit concerned and decided to check up on him. But…

Did somebody say something to make him feel better?

Yuki knew there were countless others who would be there for her brother if he needed them, whether it was someone from the student council, a band member, or perhaps someone else entirely, and although it filled her with a mix of pride and joy, she couldn’t wash away the tinge of loneliness it made her feel.

That bite mark on his neck… I wonder whose teeth those were? I mean, it was most likely Alya, but…

Although curious, she knew her brother wouldn’t tell her anything, even if she pressed him for answers.

“…”

A dark, unpleasant sensation welled up inside her chest, prompting her to abruptly stand in an attempt to shake it off.

——And her vision instantly went black.

“Umf…?”

She could feel the blood draining from her body. A dizziness that was several times worse than any dizzy spell she had ever experienced swallowed her as her sense of balance faded. Leaning forward, Yuki grabbed on to the edge of the bathtub, but her sudden fall caused her to slip, slamming her lower leg into the tub. The pain was oddly dull, but she could feel a throbbing sensation throughout her body.

“Yuki?!”

When she raised her head in response to the urgent call, she saw her brother right away, but the look in his eyes made it seem like the world was going to end. A mix of happiness, amusement, and guilt swept through her when she saw the serious look on his face…and she couldn’t help but weakly smile.

“I’m fine… I just stayed in the tub for too long…”

So there was no need to worry, she claimed, waving her hand dismissively as she remained curled up in the bathtub…until out of nowhere, she felt herself being lifted into the air.

“Huh…?”

Before she even knew what was happening, she was being carried out of the bathroom like a princess.

M-my big brother is sooo strong. ♪

Yuki had some unique thoughts about the first time in her life she’d been carried like a princess while she was gently laid onto a towel spread out on the floor.

“Ayano, come quick!”

“It’s not a big dea—”

“Did you call— Lady Yuki?! What happened?!”

“Nothing. I just stayed in the tub too long, so—”

“Ayano, call for an ambulance!”

“…! Roger!”

“Guys, relax.” Yuki managed to avoid having an ambulance called after desperately explaining that she simply got dizzy from staying in the hot bath for too long. However… “…Come on, you

don’t need to wait on me hand and foot. I’m fine. Besides, I have Ayano if I need anything.”

“You’re not well. Just let me take care of you.”

“I’m fine, though…”

Yuki was treated like a full-blown heatstroke patient as she was laid on her bed. With a cold compress on Yuki’s forehead, Ayano fanned her face vigorously, while Masachika handed her a sports drink, which she sipped through a straw.

“I already feel better, for the most part… I feel bad, since I know this is my fault for making you worry, but this is kind of embarrassing… You’re overreacting…”

“Then consider this punishment for making me worry.”

“Oh, come on.”

Masachika shoved the sports drink straw into her mouth, effectively silencing any further protest. *Sip, sip.* Although it tasted good, she was getting tired of it.

“At least let me go dry my hair… And didn’t you have exams you needed to study for anyway?”

“That’s not important right now.”

“Yeah, it is.”

“…”

“I don’t need any more fluids!”

She shook her head vigorously to refuse the straw that was being thrust toward her every time she spoke, but the moment she let out a sigh of relief, being freed from the straw—

“You hit your right leg on the tub, right? Does anywhere else hurt?”

“Huh? No, I’m fine.”

“All right, we’ll have a doctor check out your leg later, then.”

“Stop making this a bigger deal than it is!”

“Ayano, can you get us a taxi?”

“Very well.”

“I don’t need a taxi!”

“…”

“I said I don’t want any more of that sports drink!”

Yuki suddenly hopped out of bed, feeling smothered by their overprotectiveness, which felt eerily similar to bullying, but her right leg, which had slammed into the bathtub, instantly began to throb in pain, causing her to stumble.

Ah!

It was already too late.

“Ayano! Call an ambulance! For real!”

“Roger!”

“Please stop! I beg you!”

Yuki desperately tried to stop her brother and maid from calling for an ambulance…and before she knew it, that dark, unpleasant feeling that she had felt in the bathtub seemed to have vanished completely.

CHAPTER 4

The most colossal backfire of the century.

Two weeks of grueling exams had finally passed for all middle and high school students. So on the Saturday following the second semester midterms, Masachika and his friends were taken to an amusement park in the suburbs in the Taniyama family's spacious, imported four-wheel-drive vehicle (with a personal driver, no less). The group consisted of the six bandmates…plus one extra bonus guest…

"Hikaru. ♪ Are you okay with roller coasters?"

"Mmm… I'm okay with the average roller coaster, I guess… But I'm not really a fan of being left hanging upside down or spun backward or anything…"

"Really?! I'm a really big scaredy-cat, so I really look up to people who don't get scared."

"Oh. Ha-ha…"

As soon as they arrived at their destination, Hikaru was immediately smothered by Lea Miyamae, Nonoa's younger sister, who seemed to be eager to get to know him better after he saved her at the Autumn Heights Festival. Therefore, Nonoa decided to let her tag along.

Officially, this outing was to celebrate that midterms were over and to celebrate (again) that their performance at the festival was a success. Nevertheless, there was also a hidden motive behind why Lea, an outsider, was invited as well. Unbeknownst to her and Sayaka, the real goal was to assist Takeshi in romantically pursuing his crush.

After they explained to Sayaka that Lea had a crush on Hikaru, they asked her to help by simply giving them some space and allowing Nonoa to be her sister's wingwoman. Put simply,

with Nonoa helping Lea and Hikaru, they would inevitably form a group, leaving Masachika and Alisa to pair up as well. This would naturally lead to Takeshi and Sayaka being paired together. Or at least, that was the plan…

However, the instant they stepped inside the amusement park, Masachika and the others realized that their carefully laid-out scheme had already gone awry.

“Do you often go to amusement parks, Alisa?”

“No, actually, this is only my second time…”

“Really?”

“What about you, Sayaka?”

“I actually enjoy them a lot, so I go four to five times a year.”

“Really? I’m kind of surprised.”

“I get that a lot.”

Masachika couldn’t help but scream on the inside while he watched Sayaka and Alisa chat.

Sayaka won’t even leave Alya alone for a second!

The group divided into two smaller groups of three and four, which was fine…but nobody expected that Sayaka would be so aggressive taking the initiative to engage in conversation with Alisa.

As it turned out, the group formed into a rather unfortunate configuration. First, leading the way was a trio of exceptionally attractive individuals. Next, following closely behind were two stylish and beautiful girls as well. And last and also definitely least, bringing up the rear were two rather lackluster boys, walking along dejectedly. It was a sad sight, to say the least.

“Psst! Takeshi, you and me are going to end up sitting next to each other on all the rides, at this rate,” Masachika whispered the issue while glancing at Takeshi out of the corner of his eye.

Takeshi, who also remained facing forward, replied in a whisper, “But Sayaka looks like she’s having fun, so I don’t really wanna bother her… If she’s enjoying herself, then that’s all that matters.”

“Stop talking like she already dumped you!” Masachika whispered intensely. He then promptly pointed at Hikaru, who was at the head of the group, smiling stiffly as he made small talk with Lea. “You see that? Even Hikaru is working hard and

suffering for your sake. Are you going to let his sacrifice go to waste?”

“Is being sandwiched between two beautiful sisters really suffering?”

“I know what you want to say, but don’t. Being hit on by girls is torture for him.”

“…Think you could start talking to Alya first for me?”

“Seriously?”

Masachika sighed in exasperation at Takeshi’s unbelievable shyness. Of course, fulfilling this request wouldn’t be difficult, since Alisa, who was in on the plan to bring Takeshi and Sayaka closer together, would undoubtedly cooperate if Masachika asked. However, he couldn’t help but doubt that Takeshi would ever be able to converse smoothly with Sayaka even with their assistance.

But I guess I should give him a little help in the beginning.

He decided to strike up a conversation with Alisa, when—

“Oh, hey! Guys! Let’s check out that ride!” Lea suggested suddenly, walking ahead and ruining their chance. When Masachika looked in the direction she was pointing in, he saw spinning teacups, accompanied by cheerful music.

“The teacups here are apparently famous for how fast they spin! What do you guys think?”

“Oh…”

“I probably haven’t been on the teacup ride since I was a kid…”

Nobody in the group objected to getting on the teacup ride, especially with how excited Lea seemed, so they decided to give it a whirl. Since each cup could fit a maximum of four people, they naturally divided into two groups: the Miyamae sisters and Hikaru in one teacup and the remaining four in another. Sayaka sat on one side of Alisa, while Masachika sat on the other side, leaving Takeshi to sit in between him and Sayaka. The teacup was nearly full to the point that their legs almost touched, but Takeshi was actively making sure that never happened, quickly moving his legs away before they grazed Sayaka’s.

I’d give him an A-plus for sitting posture if we were on the train.

A snort escaped Masachika as he observed Takeshi, who was sitting up straight with his legs tightly together. But before another second even went by, a soft whirring sound filled the air as the teacup slowly began to rotate.

“So… Should I just start turning the handle in the middle here?”

He gently turned the handle, causing the teacup to rotate slightly faster.

“Whoa! That’s already kind of fast. Should I spin it even faster?”

“I don’t mind.”

“Sure.”

“Yeah.”

“All right, then. Here we go!”

Right as he tightened his grip on the handle…

“Eek!”

Lea’s high-pitched voice instantly caught Masachika’s attention, prompting him to glance in her direction…and shudder.

“Oh my gosh! This is going sooo fast!”

The teacup was spinning so rapidly that Lea had no choice but to cling to Hikaru for dear life…or at least, that was the excuse she was going with so she could have a chance to throw herself all over him.

Obviously, they were experiencing a significant amount of g-force, but it was clear from how the other two were leaning that Lea was exaggerating. Furthermore, it was likely that, despite her protests, she had actually asked Nonoa to spin the cup even faster. A shiver ran down Masachika’s spine as he sat terrified of her calculating, manipulative nature.

What a scheming little—! She’s the epitome of a femme fatale!

That was when it hit him: He could re-create the exact situation in this cup if he spun the handle as hard as he could.

Hold on. Is it really okay if I do this?

Masachika wondered if this would be the gentlemanly thing to do, knowing that he was about to create a “lucky pervert” scenario, albeit a small one. Then again, it would be weird if he didn’t spin the teacup at all, since he’d already asked if he could.

Plus, he was on a mission to get Takeshi and Sayaka together, regardless.

Yeah, what's wrong with a little surprise? Amusement parks are supposed to be amusing, after all.

Within two seconds, Masachika had made up his mind, then sharply tugged the handle, and he continued to turn it like a maniac, making the teacup spin faster and faster. As the centrifugal force pressed them into their seats, a powerful lateral g-force pulled at their bodies, and those who weren't holding on to the handle obviously felt the full brunt of it.

"Eek!"

A startled cry escaped Alisa's lips as she grabbed Masachika's thigh, making him jump.

Whoa?! What the…?!

The sensation of a girl touching his thigh, something he definitely wasn't used to, sent a strange tingle down his spine.

"Ah! Sorry—!"

She quickly withdrew her hand and apologized, but then her entire body was thrown against him. A sweet fragrance tickled Masachika's nose as their arms touched, making him immediately look up, where he noticed that Sayaka, sitting directly in front of him, was also leaning on Alisa's shoulder. In summary, Alisa was leaning on Masachika's shoulder, Sayaka was leaning on Alisa's, and Takeshi was sitting perfectly upright, like an upstanding citizen on the train.

Hey?!

Masachika couldn't help but mentally face-palm as he watched Takeshi desperately grip the edge of the teacup, trying his hardest not to topple over onto Sayaka.

I mean, you're doing the honorable thing! You're a gentleman! But you're making me look like the bad guy!

It almost seemed as if…Masachika was the only one who wanted this situation. As that thought crossed his mind, the spinning teacup gradually slowed, allowing Alisa and Sayaka to settle back into their original positions.

"<…Pervert.>"

But while Alisa was settling back in her seat, she whispered into his ear, causing him to let out a pathetic squeak.

I'm not…

◇

After enjoying a few more rides, they took a break for lunch, but when they all went to the restroom to wash their hands, Masachika and Hikaru decided to seize this opportunity to corner Takeshi.

“Do you even want to do this?”

“…I do.”

“Speak up, punk.”

Masachika sighed as he looked at Takeshi, who was slumped over with a gloomy expression, a far cry from his usual cheerful self. After all, Takeshi hadn’t been able to have a decent conversation with Sayaka that morning, despite others going out of their way to create numerous opportunities for them to interact, including making sure they were paired up for a few activities like the haunted house. Unfortunately, however, Takeshi was the biggest scaredy-cat out of the entire group, which only made Sayaka worry about him. The roller coaster was no better, either, since he had screamed so loudly that he had weirded Sayaka out. Basically, all he had done so far was make her worry.

“I know it might be strange to hear me say this…but maybe you should be more aggressive, like Lea?”

“Come on, I’m a guy. I can’t get away with what she’s doing.”

“Yeah, I suppose.”

Lea was so aggressive in her pursuit of Hikaru that it was almost impressive. Both at the haunted house and on the roller coaster, she would look up at him with pleading eyes and say, “I’m scared. Can you hold my hand?” as she touched him, pretending to be a defenseless, weak little girl… However, this kind of approach likely worked only because it was a common tactic girls used on guys. Whether it was effective on Hikaru was a completely different story.

Generally speaking, when it came to guys trying to impress and get closer to girls, their only options were to show that they could be depended on or to show that they were fun to be around —neither of which Takeshi was doing right now.

“I get that it’s a little late to be saying this, but you don’t look like you even like amusement parks,” Masachika calmly pointed

out, since Takeshi didn't seem to be enjoying the rides very much at all.

"…!" Takeshi swiftly averted his gaze and mumbled, "But, like… Everyone looked like they were really looking forward to this…and I wanted to have fun with everyone, too…"

"…In other words, you knew you hated roller coasters and scary rides, but you still came anyway."

"Of course, Takeshi, this is something that we both really appreciate about you, but…"

Masachika and Hikaru exchanged indescribable glances as they realized that, beneath Takeshi's goofy exterior, he was actually really thoughtful when it came to his friends.

We just need him to hang in there a little longer… This is one of those situations where you push through the pain until you can't take it anymore, and when you finally throw in the towel, everyone's like, "Seriously?! You don't even like roller coasters?! You did this for us?!" and they end up liking you even more.

But there was no way he was ever going to make a good impression when he couldn't even handle any of the rides. After all, it was to the point that he was just making Sayaka really concerned. Takeshi himself seemed pretty bummed out about how pathetic he was being. In other words, he wasn't really showing off his best qualities right now.

"…I've got it! Let's stop focusing on doing things you're not good at and focus more on something you are good at!"

After reconsidering his approach, Masachika came up with a new plan, and when lunch eventually came to an end, they headed to the "strikeout" game area, where there was a board with panels numbered one to nine and a soccer ball ready to be kicked.

"I'm afraid someone's going to lose their lunch if we hop back on the roller coasters already, so how about we have a little friendly match in the meantime? We'll pair up and compete to see who can hit all the targets with the fewest shots."

Masachika's suggestion was met with nods from those who had been briefed beforehand, and Sayaka and Lea agreed to it as well. Just as he planned, they had Takeshi and Sayaka in one pair, with Hikaru and Lea in another. However…

“Oh, and the losing pair has to ride the drop tower! What do you think?”

Out of nowhere, Lea suggested they spice things up a little to make the game more interesting.

Well, I guess a little pressure would help Takeshi work harder.

Completely unconcerned as a free man, Masachika started to leave the strikeout area, leaving Alisa and Nonoa behind, but just as he was about to step over the fence, Alisa called out to him with a skeptical note in her voice.

“Masachika? Where are you going?”

“Huh? Oh. Balls hate me, so I’m going to sit this one out,” he replied, as if it were only natural, especially since he hadn’t included himself in the plan from the beginning.

“What kind of excuse is that?”

But Lea interjected with a disappointed groan:

“Come on, you can’t sit out now just because you’re afraid to lose.”

“What? No, I’m not—”

“Right? A’ight, Kuze’ll be on our team.”

“Guh…”

Nonoa grabbed Masachika by the shoulder and pulled him back, forcing him to stay at the strikeout corner. Although wearing a sullen expression, he watched Alisa stand in front of the number board until she eventually ran up and gave the soccer ball a good kick.

“Ooo!”

Masachika’s eyes widened at the beautiful shot. The ball soared through the air in a perfect arc, heading straight for the center target, number five…then hit the frame with such incredible force that it bounced off the ceiling…and struck Masachika right in the face.

“Gah!”

A searing pain shot through his sinuses, forcing him to double over.

“That sucks.”

“Ah! I-I’m so sorry! Are you okay?!”

As Alisa called out in concern, Masachika stood up, masking his pain and holding back his tears. Then, while putting on a brave face for Alisa and Nonoa, he groaned:

“Told ya.”

Blood trickled from his nose, making both Alisa and Nonoa simultaneously avert their gazes.

◇

“I’m so sorry…”

“It’s not your fault. Balls just have it out for me. That’s all…”

Having been injured and forced to leave the game after the first kick, Masachika sat on a bench a bit away from the strikeout corner with Alisa while he kept his head tilted back, pressing a tissue to his nose.

“But still… I-I’m sorry I laughed…”

“…Eh. Don’t worry about it. I’d laugh, too, if I saw blood squirting out of both nostrils.”

If anything, Masachika was impressed that she managed to hold her laughter back at all. However, Alisa, being the one who accidentally injured him, seemed to be almost on edge, and after a moment of silence went by, she suddenly began to poke Masachika on the arm.

“Hmm?”

When he turned his gaze toward Alisa without moving his head, she began to pat her lap and instructed, “Come here… We need to ice your nose.”

“What?”

“I bought a cold drink a second ago, so while it’s not exactly ice, it should help.”

After pulling a plastic bottle of barley tea from her bag, Alisa patted her lap once more, making Masachika freeze as he finally understood what she was getting at.

“Uh… Is this one of those fabled ‘lap pillows’ I’ve heard of?”

“…Are you trying to make this weird?”

“No, it’s just— I’m kind of embarrassed, since we’re in a public place.”

“This is a medical procedure.”

“Well, that’s a very liberal use of that term.”

“J-just hurry up and lie down.”

“O-ohhh?”

He was caught off guard by a sudden, forceful pull, and he collapsed onto Alisa's lap. The soft, warm sensation of her thighs against his cheek forced his brain to shut down for a moment as he felt the familiar sensation of blood starting to trickle out of his nose again.

Oh, gosh. If blood starts gushing out of my nose now, I'm going to look like a creep… I'd get Alya's clothes dirty, too.

Feeling a sense of urgency on multiple levels, Masachika turned so that he was facing up with the back of his head on her legs. Only now his left ear was pressed against her lower stomach, so a rather imposing "mountain range" was blocking the left half of his vision.

…Guh.

Masachika seemed to be experiencing a rapid drop in his IQ as he stared at the rather shocking scenery before him…when he suddenly heard Alisa's voice, a mixture of confusion and embarrassment, echoing down from the other side of the mountain range.

"Um… Do you think you could slide down a little toward my knees?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Following orders, he slid out from behind the mountains' shadows, where Alisa pressed a towel-wrapped bottle of tea against his face. The cool sensation was surprisingly pleasant, causing him to narrow his eyes, because apparently the spot where the ball had hit him was throbbing with heat, much to his surprise.

"…Feeling better?"

"Oh, yeah… Feels really good," he unconsciously blurted out, only to suddenly realize how that could sound out of context.

I mean, like… Of course, her lap feels great, but that's not what I meant…

A list of excuses raced through his mind, but he knew saying them aloud would only make things worse. Instead, he focused on swallowing the blood that was creeping up his throat while trying to ignore the sensation of Alisa's thigh against the back of his head. But just when he thought he had found a moment of peace, she suddenly began to shift her legs.

"…Hey, if you're feeling embarrassed—"

“No…! I’m fine…”

Though Masachika’s view was blocked by the tea, Alisa could clearly see that strangers were staring, which must have been at least a little embarrassing. Nevertheless, when he tried to ask her about it, she denied it, and when he tried to sit up, she pushed his shoulders down to stop him, leaving Masachika with no choice but to surrender.

“…By the way, how are you feeling now? Healthwise.”

After a pause, her question registered, but Masachika was still bewildered.

“What are you talking about?”

“You know…? You seemed like you weren’t feeling that well before exam week.”

“Oh…”

As soon as Masachika replied, he realized his mistake, because his reply was more or less a confession, even though he was planning on keeping that all to himself.

“So you really were feeling a bit under the weather. I knew it.”

“Yeah… A little, I guess.”

Masachika decided to come clean, realizing there was no point in denying it any longer. Truth be told, he actually had been feeling a bit under the weather before the test.

But…that was because he had been so busy taking care of Yuki after the bathtub incident that he ended up allowing his body to get too cold after the hot bath. Nevertheless, there was no way he could tell Alisa any of that. Besides, it wasn’t anything serious like a cold. He simply got a slight headache, so he had no problem going to school. In fact, it was such a nonissue that he thought he was acting perfectly normal at school, to boot.

“I just had a bit of a headache… I’m impressed you noticed, though.”

“Of course I noticed,” Alisa replied, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world, then added with a mutter:

“<Because I always have my eyes on you.>”

Gah!

It had been so long since this exhibitionist had verbally exposed herself to Masachika this close-up that blood nearly

squirted out of his nose. After frantically sucking life's liquid back into his body and swallowing it, he claimed in a serious tone:

"I was just a little careless. That's all. Anyway, I'm feeling better now, so you don't have to worry."

"Okay."

"But, uh… I know this is just an excuse, but I'm not sure I'm going to be in the top thirty…"

"It's fine," retorted Alisa as she gently rubbed his head.



“You’re always working so hard as my partner, so don’t worry about your exam grades. It’s not a big deal.”

“Really…?”

Perhaps it was because they weren’t facing each other, but Alisa’s words seemed kinder and more honest than usual, so although Masachika was a little taken aback, he genuinely felt at ease.

“Thank you, Alya.”

“…”

After expressing his sincere gratitude, a peaceful silence descended upon them…

“Hey… Masachika, I—”

But just as Alisa seemed ready to say something important, Nonoa suddenly interrupted them.

“Yikes. Kuze, what happened?”

““!””

Startled by her voice, both Masachika and Alisa jumped. Masachika then lifted the bottle of tea off his face and sat up. Nonoa was staring down at him with heavy-lidded eyes—plus there were a few looks from people passing by, glancing in their direction.

“She was just icing my nose to help stop the bleeding! Right?” he frantically explained while he turned to Alisa for help, making her jump once more before nodding back hesitantly.

“E-exactly… Hey, uh… I’m going to go buy another drink, since this one isn’t cold anymore…”

“Huh? No, hey. I’m fine now.”

But Alisa hastily hopped up and hurried away, ignoring his pleas. While Masachika watched her swift escape with an indescribable expression, Nonoa curiously faced him and asked, “Did I interrupt something?”

“No, you’re good… By the way, did you already finish your turn?”

After he casually changed the subject, Nonoa waved her hands, flashing peace signs, though her expression remained as bored as ever.

“After you and Alisa left, I hit the remaining panels in thirteen shots.”

“Seriously?! That’s basically a seventy percent hit rate. That’s insane.”

“Yeah, I’m pretty good at sports,” she stated matter-of-factly before taking a seat where Alisa had been sitting.

“…? You’re not going to watch the others shoot?”

“Oh, like, it’s Hikaru’s and Lea’s turn? And if I stayed, then Saya and I would talk a lot, and I totally didn’t want to get in Takeshi’s way.”

Masachika’s brow furrowed in surprise at Nonoa’s casual remark. However, after checking his surroundings, he decided to ask something that had been on his mind.

“Are you fine with this?”

“Fine with what?”

“Let’s say that Sayaka and Takeshi hit it off…and they start dating.”

Nonoa didn’t even blink at the premise, but even then, Masachika continued to stare her in the eye, carefully choosing his next words.

“To tell the truth, you don’t seem like you’d be too thrilled if Sayaka got a boyfriend.”

“Just be straight with me. Are you, like, worried that I’m going to try to ruin things between them?”

“…Kind of.”

Instead of denying it, Masachika simply continued to stare back at Nonoa, who simply shrugged, her expression unsurprisingly blank.

“I have absolutely no intention of getting in their way. Like, why would I? I just want Saya to be happy.”

“Really?”

“Really. If Saya’s happy, then I think that’d make me happy, too.”

Masachika was speechless by how selfless she was being. While still wearing a completely blank expression, Nonoa glanced sideways at him, then smirked.

“Could you make how you feel any more obvious?”

“…Sorry. I’m just surprised to hear you say something so selfless.”

“Ha-ha. You totally just say what’s on your mind, huh?”

“I apologize if I offended you.”

“Come on. You’re only saying all that ’cause you legit knew it wouldn’t offend me.”

With a deliberately dissatisfied tone in her voice, Nonoa gazed up toward the heavens as she stared off into space. A few moments of silence followed until she eventually made an abrupt, unrelated remark.

“Glass harps? Like, I think that’s what they’re called? You put water in glasses and then play them like a harp?”

“…? And?”

“If you fill identical glasses with the same amount of water, they resonate with each other when you play them.”

“…What are you talking about?”

Although Masachika tilted his head, completely lost as to where the conversation was going, Nonoa continued indifferently, without even looking in his direction:

“My glass? I bet my glass is ridiculously thick and weirdly shaped.”

“…!”

His eyes widened as he finally realized what Nonoa was trying to say.

“No matter how musical the glasses are around me, mine still doesn’t move. But I legit tried out so many different things, you know? None of it worked, though. Didn’t matter how many times I had tried to hit my glass to make a sound. All I ended up doing was breaking the other glasses nearby without creating a ripple in my water. Until the day Saya slapped me, that is.” Nonoa smirked, seemingly lost in thought about the past. Then, in a surprisingly gentle voice, she revealed, “Saya’s the one who created a ripple in my water. Saya’s glass was the only one to resonate with my bizarrely shaped glass. And that’s why…if she’s happy, then I’m sure I’ll be happy, too.”

In a way, it was almost like a confession of love. Masachika was taken aback by Nonoa’s words, which seemed almost too sacred to even be spoken.

But even then…Masachika decided to go a step further so that one of his best friends could finally find love.

“Even if that means she finds someone even more important to her than you? Even if it means you’ll get to spend less time with her?”

“Well…”

Nonoa glanced around while deep in thought as she considered Masachika’s rather abrupt, brazen question, but after a moment of silence, she smirked.

“I guess when that happens…I’ll finally be able to see what it feels like to be lonely.”

Her expression seemed almost joyful, and her side profile gave Masachika some insight into the struggles of a girl who had never experienced happiness or sorrow like a normal person.

Perhaps it was merely an illusion. Maybe it was just Masachika’s hope that this girl was like any ordinary person who made him see her this way. But even then…

“…” He shifted his gaze to the ground and scratched his head, but after a moment of hesitation, Masachika stated, without even looking in her direction, “…I’m always here to listen if you want to talk.”

He waited a few seconds for a reply, but there was none. When he glanced sideways, however, he met Nonoa’s surprised gaze and quickly looked away.

“After all, I’ve got to keep an eye on you and make sure you won’t do anything that traumatizes Takeshi.”

Even he knew he was doing a poor job hiding his embarrassment by looking away…when suddenly, he felt her presence right next to him. But before he could react, he found his right arm was intertwined with hers. He promptly shifted his gaze to find Nonoa, much to his surprise, gazing up at him so closely that he could feel her breathing. Her playful expression startled him. He instinctively leaned back, but it was essentially pointless, with her arm clamped tightly around his.

Before him was the extremely stunning face of a young woman, a rarity even in the entertainment world, her soft chest pressing against his upper arm as she clung tightly to him. Yet instead of the thrill a young man might feel, Masachika’s heart raced with a primal instinct—he sensed danger.

Wh-what the…? Oh, gosh. Is she going to eat me?!

Despite being embraced by an exceptionally beautiful girl, he felt like a peasant who had been tackled by a wild animal. Not only was the excitement not making him feel hot, but he was

growing cold as his back was becoming slowly drenched in sweat.

“This could work… This could definitely work.” Nonoa licked her lips, her eyes glowing brightly as she watched Masachika tremble. It was like watching a savage beast licking its chops, intensifying the sense that he was in danger. She slowly drew her lips even closer to his face and whispered into his ear in a sultry voice, “Hey, Kuze. How about you try hitting me, too? You might make a ripple.”

“Why would I do that?!” shrieked Masachika, taken aback by the sudden, abnormal request, but the moment he actually processed what she was saying, he began to tremble with fear. “Give me a break, will ya? I’m probably too vanilla for you anyway.”

“Are you sure? Because if you don’t hit me, I’m totally gonna kiss you.”

“Wh-what the…?! No, stop!”

He instinctively raised his left hand to cover his mouth, but Nonoa’s questionable smile only twisted even more as a profound sense of danger pierced Masachika’s heart, when—

“What are you doing?”

His rapidly pounding heart skipped a beat when he heard Alisa’s voice, and when he shifted his gaze to her direction, he saw her standing there with a completely stunned expression, holding a drink that she got from the vending machine. Masachika was at a loss for words as well, since there was no way that he could come up with an excuse for whatever was going on. Nonoa, however, nonchalantly replied:

“Hmm? Oh, I was trying to seduce Kuze.”

“Y-you were what?!”

“Like, is that a problem? Kuze’s not dating anyone, right?”

“……!”

Alisa looked like she’d swallowed her words right as she was going to say something. However, seeing her face harden as she struggled to speak helped Masachika calm down enough to think straight.

Yeah… I froze there for a second, but all I have to do is turn her down, right?

His mind raced, recalling countless romantic comedy scenes he had seen where the protagonist would fumble for words and end up upsetting both girls, creating hell on earth.

Exactly… The reason things usually go south in situations like this is because the man is being indecisive. So just being straightforward and turning Nonoa down should clear things up immediately.

After sighing softly, Masachika faced Nonoa once more.

“Nonoa.”

“Hmm?”

“I’m sorry, but there’s no way I’m ever going to be interested in you romantically. To be blunt, there is absolutely nothing about you as a member of the opposite sex that I find attractive.”

“Word. But that’s still no reason for me to stop trying to seduce you.”

“Oh. Uh…”

It hadn’t fixed anything.

She’s good… Too good…

He was seriously having a difficult time trying to come up with a good enough reason to stop Nonoa, so he just started to say whatever came to mind.

“Let’s all calm down for a second. We came here today to help Takeshi and Lea, right? We’d be stealing the spotlight if we created a scene here, so let’s just focus on making Sayaka and Lea happy, okay?”

It was a desperate attempt to put an end to this by simply mentioning Sayaka’s name, and to his surprise, Nonoa actually stopped. After slowly blinking a few times, she began to look around vacantly.

“Yeah… You’re right… I made a promise,” she mumbled to herself while she gently released Masachika’s arm. He capitalized on this moment of freedom, got up, and approached Alisa.

“I really appreciate you going out of your way to buy another drink for me, but my nose stopped bleeding already…”

“Oh, okay…”

“Thanks, though. I mean it. How much do I owe you?”

“Don’t worry about the money…”

“No, I want to pay you back. These things are important.”

“It’s my fault for hitting you in the face with the ball…”

“You already paid me back for that by letting me lie in your lap,” he promptly replied, making Alisa pout in annoyance. Her expression alone was enough for him to realize that he hadn’t chosen his words wisely, making him fall silent.

“Unbelievable!” With a disdainful snort, she thrust the drink at him, then turned on her heel. “…Come on. Everyone’s waiting for us.”

“O-oh, right.”

“A’ight.”

Urged on by Alisa, they made their way to the strikeout cage while the awkwardness remained heavy in the air.

“Hikaruuu, you’re so cool. ♪ I had no idea you were this good at soccer. ♪”

“Ha-ha-ha. Thanks…”

“My bad, Sayaka. Today’s just not my day, I guess…”

“You don’t need to apologize. I didn’t even hit a single panel.”

There, they found Lea clinging to Hikaru’s arm while Takeshi was apologizing to Sayaka with his head bowed. All Masachika could do was shout silently in his heart.

What are you doing losing?!

And just like that, the losers, Takeshi and Sayaka, were sent down the drop tower…where Takeshi tragically died. RIP.

◇

“*Haaah*… If you knew this was going to happen, then you could have just said ‘no.’ I get that we made a bet, but still…”

Sayaka looked down at Takeshi, who was slumped on the bench, and let out an exasperated sigh. While the others were on the nearby Ferris wheel, waiting for Takeshi to recover his soul after his terrifying free-fall drop, Sayaka had stayed behind to look after him and decided to finally say what had been on her mind.

“In fact…you could have just told us you didn’t like thrill rides, because we didn’t *have* to hang out at the amusement park. There were plenty of other places we could have gone.”

Takeshi lifted his head and offered her a weak smile, making Sayaka sigh yet again.

"*Haaah…* You always put others' needs before your own. You're allowed to be more selfish from time to time."

"…You're no different, though." After Sayaka scowled, taken aback by his completely unexpected reply, Takeshi slowly sat up straight and looked her directly in the eye. "You always prioritize keeping everyone together and never put yourself first, Sayaka."

As her eyes widened in astonishment, she averted her gaze and pushed up her glasses.

"…Only because that's the easiest way to keep everyone together. People don't trust those who try to manipulate others for their own personal gain."

For Sayaka, the driving forces behind human actions were reason and benefit—rationality and profit. By prioritizing these, she had consistently demonstrated leadership within her groups. She saw no need for emotions, which she considered contrary to reason, and while she would take emotions into account, they were never her primary focus. Furthermore, no matter what anyone said about her coldness, Sayaka had no intention of changing this about herself, either.

Then again, look where that got me. I lost to Alisa, who speaks to the heart and inspires people by opening up to them emotionally… I'm nothing more than a heel in her story.

Sayaka inwardly chuckled to herself with a hint of self-deprecation…when she heard something she wasn't expecting to hear.

"You're incredible…" Sayaka's brow furrowed as she turned in the direction of the seemingly impressed voice, forcing Takeshi to hurriedly stammer out an explanation. "Oh, uh…! It's not often you see someone who can suppress their feelings and desires to prioritize keeping everyone else happy… So, like…I think it's incredible. I think you're a really good person…"

"…" Her eyes widened as Takeshi bashfully complimented her, scratching his cheek. She fixed her gaze on him, forcing him to shyly avert his gaze and face forward, so she faced forward as well, ruminating on his words before muttering, "…Nobody has ever told me that before."

As she thought back, the feedback she had received from others about her personality was almost always negative: "cold," "boring," and the like. While her abilities were often praised, she

had rarely, if ever, been complimented on her character, and that was exactly why Takeshi's words were so refreshing and shocking to Sayaka. Hesitantly, he continued:

"Even during the school festival, you did the maid café, and you worked hard without even a single complaint, even though it's obviously something you wouldn't be interested in…and I thought that was really cool of you."

"…"

Sayaka pushed up her glasses in silence…because deep down, she was completely on board with the maid café idea. Truth be told, she actually enjoyed being the head maid as well. And why wouldn't she? She was a nerd, after all. Nevertheless, Takeshi took in another deep breath, unaware of Sayaka's inner thoughts, and continued:

"But we— We're friends…so maybe you could be more yourself around me? Like, be more assertive? When we all hang out like this…"

"Be more myself…?"

"Y-yeah, like do what ya wanna do? Maybe you could be more straightforward with that? Like, I'm the only one here right now, so if there's something ya wanna do, you can tell me, and we'll do it."

Although unusual for her, Sayaka smirked at Takeshi's rapid-fire, friendly suggestion. She then stood up off the bench, still smiling.

"All right, there actually is something I want to do while we're here."

"O-oh? Okay! Let's do it!"

Takeshi froze for a moment with his gaze fixed on her smile but eventually stood up as well. The two of them then began walking side by side, their atmosphere noticeably more relaxed than usual.

◇

"Hold up… Check out those two people walking… Is that Takeshi and Sayaka?" wondered Masachika while gazing down from the Ferris wheel window. Alisa, sitting across from him, followed his

gaze, where she also saw two individuals, who appeared to be Takeshi and Sayaka, walking away together.

“Wow… I was kind of worried…but it looks like things are actually going smoothly,” he added with a mix of faint surprise and relief.

“…”

Alisa stared intently at him, images flashing through her mind of Lea hitting on Hikaru and of Nonoa clinging to Masachika’s arm from just moments ago.

Is being in love really that amazing?

It wasn’t mockery or disdain but genuine curiosity.

It wasn’t as if she had never seen people around her in love before. Touya and Chisaki were obvious examples of people in love. Around the time of the Autumn Heights Festival, the whole school was practically buzzing with romantic energy, to the point that even Alisa could tell. Furthermore, even her older sister seemed to still be madly in love with the boy she broke up with years ago.

Though Alisa had never been interested in romance, seeing her friends caught up in love like this…somehow made her feel like she was being left behind.

What has gotten into me? Why am I comparing myself to others? Falling in love and dating aren’t things you should rush into.

After all, Alisa had never really considered pursuing a romantic relationship. She could neither imagine herself falling for someone, nor did she ever feel the need for a romantic partner.

But…

Despite always believing that she would be fine on her own, Alisa was undoubtedly having fun with her friends and genuinely enjoying their company. In other words…maybe love was something far better than she could have ever imagined.

Would I even be able to know—to understand—what love is?

If possible, she wanted to know what it was like. If it was truly that wonderful, then she needed to know. She couldn’t stop thinking about it, especially after witnessing Nonoa flirting with Masachika.

If Takeshi and Sayaka, Hikaru and Lea, and Masachika and Nonoa all ended up together, then Alisa would end up all alone, and that was why she couldn't help but feel a sense of urgency.

Masachika flat-out turned down Nonoa, but…

But that was because…Masachika already had someone he was deeply in love with. That much became evident to Alisa the moment she heard him play the piano at the Autumn Heights Festival.

Ah…

While staring at his profile, Alisa suddenly imagined the look on his face that day. His expression was so gentle and sorrowful that it tugged at her heartstrings, prompting her to lean forward —

"Whoa?!"

"…!"

The gondola suddenly rocked, snapping Alisa back to reality as she leaned back into her seat.

"Come on, don't rock the cabin like that. You almost gave me a heart attack."

After seeing Masachika's troubled expression, Alisa paused for a moment before returning his gaze with her usual mischievous grin.

"…Oh? Did I scare you? What about this?!"

"Whoa?!"

She leaned back, rocking the gondola again, prompting Masachika to stretch out his arms and legs for balance. However, Alisa found his reaction so funny that she couldn't resist rocking the gondola even more.

"S-stop! That's dangerous!"

"Pfft! Ha-ha-ha!"

And so her playful antics continued, reminiscent of a child's—somehow both cheerful and a bit forced—until the gondola returned to the ground.

◇

"So… Any idea where they went?"

"I didn't get any texts from them."

"Same."

“That probably means they didn’t go far…”

After the five of them got off the Ferris wheel, they began to search for Takeshi and Sayaka, who had wandered off somewhere. They had decided against calling them and instead opted to search on foot, since they didn’t want to risk ruining the mood if things were going well between them. However, after a few minutes of strolling in the direction they were seen going last…

“Oh, there they are.”

…they found the two of them right by the capsule toy machines in a corner at the food court.

“Maybe I’ll get the pink one next…? No, it’s green… Mmm… All right, just two—no, three—more tries…”

Sayaka was pressed up against the side of a capsule toy machine, muttering to herself as she peered inside, with a basket overflowing with capsules by her feet. Alisa and Hikaru were unsurprisingly left speechless by how Sayaka was unapologetically embracing her nerdy side. Even Masachika was momentarily taken aback.

…Seriously?!

However, he regained his composure and hurried over to Takeshi.

“H-hey, Takeshi. What’s up…?”

Masachika hesitated, his gaze fixed on his friend, who had just witnessed a hidden side to his crush that he had never seen before, when—

“Check it out, Masachika… Sayaka’s having the time of her life.”

“…I’m proud of you. You’re a good man.”

Masachika placed a hand on Takeshi’s shoulder, his gaze filled with sincere respect as he watched Takeshi look at Sayaka with such a genuine smile.

CHAPTER 5

Be proud of your fake persona.

“Before we decide on the events for field day, I have a little announcement,” declared Touya while glancing briefly at Chisaki. They were holding the first student council meeting after midterms.

“During the disciplinary committee meeting the other day, they voted on who would fill the position of disciplinary committee president, which has been vacant since the Autumn Heights Festival…and they went with Chisaki. The official announcement will be made at the next morning assembly.”

Everyone except Maria, who probably already knew what had happened, looked astonished when they heard Touya’s report. But in the midst of their surprise, Yuki calmly raised her right hand.

“Does that mean that she is going to be both the student council vice president and the president of the disciplinary committee?”

“That’s what it looks like. I know this is surprising, but with no other qualified candidates, the committee had no other choice.” Touya shrugged, or rather slumped his shoulders, as if to say, “It is what it is.”

Although Masachika was certainly surprised at first, it actually made sense to him after reflecting on the idea for a moment. The disciplinary committee, having taken the lead in quelling the commotion at the school festival, had become something of a hero among the students. Plus, Sumire, who had been at the forefront of it all, had been popular to begin with. Many students already believed that she would be able to bring peace and order to the school. Unfortunately, however, the main

instigator of the commotion was none other than Sumire's own cousin, and while only a very small number of students actually had a problem with that, Sumire herself had declined the position of disciplinary committee president. That, however, left them with a different issue at hand: There was no other student who was trusted enough to take over as disciplinary committee president. Except for one person, that is.

Right… Normally, she wouldn't even be considered, since she's the student council vice president, but this is Chisaki we're talking about. People trust her.

Not only had Chisaki herself played a significant role in resolving the incident, but she was also the one who had transformed the disciplinary committee into the militant group that it was today. Under ordinary circumstances, she should have become the disciplinary committee president in her second year of high school, just like she was in middle school. However, she ended up accepting Touya's proposal and joined the student council instead, so Sumire essentially took over for her in spirit. In fact, one could argue that having Chisaki as the disciplinary committee president would be like bringing the committee back to how it was supposed to be.

"Well, then… 'Congratulations,' I guess?"

Masachika glanced back and forth between Chisaki and Touya, unsure if he should applaud. Chisaki also smiled hesitantly, tilting her head, as if she was unsure about how to react.

"Mmm… Yeah… I'll probably be more like an honorary adviser while Sumire handles most of the real work, though. Still, I probably won't be showing up to student council meetings as often as I used to."

"Oh, so that's why Touya looks so depressed."

"Ha-ha! Exactly. You're so cute." Chisaki grinned, playfully nudging her seemingly depressed boyfriend's shoulder as his uniform strained in protest.

"Mn! At any rate, shall we start deciding on what events we're doing for field day?" asked Touya as he smoothed out the wrinkles in his twisted uniform. Each member then lowered their eyes to the documents in front of them that listed the names and

descriptions of the field day events collected from a school-wide survey.

“As you can see on the whiteboard, I’ve already listed the most common events from every year, like the one hundred–meter dash and the four hundred–meter relay, so I hope we can find something a little more unique in these surveys…”

“…Most of these already seem a little *too* unique, if you ask me.”

Masachika’s quip was met with a chorus of wry smirks as everyone began to point out the ridiculous suggestions that were clearly meant as a joke.

“‘Waterfall training’? Where are we gonna get a waterfall?!”

“This ‘sword dancing’ has to be because of the play at the school festival, right?”

“What’s a ‘snow cone–eating contest’?”

“‘Handstand twenty-meter dash’…? I’m not even sure a single kid at school could reach the finish line on their hands.”

“Although ‘sumo match’ sounds ridiculous, it actually might work…”

“Yeah, that at least sounds realistic…”

Amid their excitement, Touya, with a rather ambiguous expression, mentioned:

“The suggestions here like ‘*kumite*’ and ‘melee combat’ feel more like military exercises than actual field day events. I can’t help but feel what happened the other day has something to do with this.”

Everyone’s expressions soured while they slowly discovered other ridiculous events here and there that seemed more suited for military training than for field day. It was easy to see why these options had been suggested, though. Ever since the Autumn Heights Festival, there had been a surge of interest in martial arts among the student body. The kendo club, in particular, had been inundated with out-of-season club membership applications, making it difficult to manage. It was clear that the incident at the festival had had a significant impact in various ways.

Although the violence that occurred during the otherwise enjoyable school festival had been quite traumatic for some students, the sight of the student council members bravely subduing the intruders, despite being students themselves, had

left a strong impression on many. Ultimately, what seemed like nothing more than a tragedy, where many students realized their own vulnerabilities, had sparked an unprecedented boom in self-defense training at Seirei Academy.

“Well… I guess this is a far healthier alternative to everyone having emotional trauma, which would obviously interfere with their school life as well,” suggested Touya, tilting his head curiously, to which Chisaki shrugged and added:

“Plus, the school nurse and counselor were highly adamant about everyone getting enough exercise, to boot. In fact, it doesn’t look like there have been any student complaints regarding physical or mental health issues lately, either.”

“Really? That’s good. They say that a healthy mind is the key to having a healthy body, after all.”

“Exactly,” Chisaki agreed with satisfaction. Glancing sideways at her, Masachika then muttered:

“I did hear a guy complain that his delicate, sensitive girlfriend joined the kendo club and turned into some sort of rude, hard-ass street fighter, though.”

“…I’m glad he discovered something new about his girlfriend.”

“I think his issue was that she used to be nice.”

Chisaki swiftly avoided Masachika’s fed up glare. After all, he couldn’t help but want to know how some girl, who apparently used to be sweet and love flowers, was now looking at roses and saying things like, “Pathetic. Do you really think those thorns are going to protect you? Don’t make me laugh.”

“Hey, I’m not the captain of the kendo club… That’s Sumire’s job, right? So don’t ask me why she turned out that way…”

“And Sumire turned into the woman she is today because of you, right? I know that Sumire used to be a proper gentlewoman and a stranger to violence when she first started going to our school.”

“Ha-ha… Yeah…”

Chisaki awkwardly looked away, as if she was self-aware enough to know what she had done, then obviously tried to change the subject as she focused on the survey at hand.

“Oh, hey. Someone wrote ‘steel stitching.’ Really takes you back, huh?”

"…? What's that?" Maria wondered aloud.

"Oh, it's a training regimen from this old, famous comic called 'Record of the Ruler's Path,'" replied Masachika.

"A comic? Oh, neat. I've never heard of it."

Maria looked up at Masachika…but when their eyes met, she quickly averted her gaze, her eyes eventually landing on the documents in her hands. Her reaction even started to make Masachika uncomfortable, too.

Gaaah! I was trying so hard not to think about it…

Aware of the unsettling feeling in his chest, Masachika returned his gaze to the documents in front of him as well. Meanwhile, Chisaki, sitting across from them, appeared completely oblivious to the tension between the two while she reminisced.

"This really does bring back so many good memories. Maybe I'll give it a try."

"Wait? Seriously?" said Masachika. He grunted, just trying to take his mind off Maria.

"Seriously. Could you grab me the frying pan and the sewing set?" asked Chisaki. When she noticed Maria looking completely baffled, she added, "Ah, right. So 'steel stitching' is a training method that the comic's protagonist used to see the flow of energy… He says something like, 'Everything in this world has a flow of energy. If you can perceive it and apply force to the correct place in the correct direction, then strength becomes unnecessary. Even sewing a steel plate with a needle would be child's play.'"

"Yeah, that used to be so popular. I didn't read the comic until later in life, but I remember getting to the part where that martial arts master had a tiger stitched into his armor and being, like, 'That's so badass.'"

"I know, right? When I read that comic, I was in the middle of trying to change myself…so it really had a big influence on me."

"Oh, you read it when you were…'modifying' yourself?"

"Yeah, coincidentally, this method was made for the small, weak protagonist to put on some muscle and get stronger, right? So I thought it was perfect for me…and I started having stare-offs with the frying pan at home every single day so I could train myself to see its chi flow."

“How long did you end up doing that?”

“Until middle school, I guess.”

“That long?!”

“Yep. Soon after I started middle school, I learned something that completely shocked me, though: Inanimate objects don’t have chi, and there’s no way for the human eye to perceive chi, either.”

“I’m amazed they even let you into Seirei Academy.”

“You have no idea how startled I was… I remember thinking, ‘If this isn’t chi, then what is it?’”

“What *were* you seeing?!”

“I had no idea you were a master of the *kidou* combat method…”

“Hmm? Yuki, did you read ‘Record of the Ruler’s Path,’ too?”

“Oh, no. However, I remember seeing my male classmates being really excited about it back in elementary school.”

That was when Masachika decided it was time to bring the conversation back on track before Yuki could completely out herself as a nerd.

“At any rate, I don’t think anyone but Chisaki can stitch frying pans with a needle, so let’s pick a different game.”

“Just so we’re clear, I can’t embroider a frying pan, either.”

“Oh? Not even you, huh?”

“Yeah, I can get the needle through, but the thread keeps bunching up at the hole, and for the life of me, I can’t figure out what I’m doing wrong.”

“The thread’s probably fusing with the head of the needle.”

“Ohhh, that makes sense.”

“I know this has nothing to do with what everyone’s talking about, but what do you guys think of this class-versus-class domino toppling competition? It sounds pretty fun.”

“That does sound fun…but wouldn’t it be a little hard to stand dominos outside? One strong gust of wind would ruin the game.”

“I believe we would have trouble standing up dominos in the dirt as well.”

“Good point.”

And with those words from Touya, the other members suddenly began to seriously discuss the events for some reason, ignoring the obvious jokes.

“What do you think about this ‘foot-pressure-point race’? ♪”

“Maybe we could use that as one of the obstacles for the obstacle course?”

“However, that would mean that everyone would need to take their shoes off while running the course… What are we going to do about that?”

“We’ll just let the sports festival committee handle the details. I’m personally interested in the foot-pressure-point race, too, but making a mat that’s a few dozen meters long would be tough… That’s why I think we should include a smaller version in the obstacle course.”

“Good idea! ♪”

“The ‘sandbag-lifting’ event was really fun last year, so everyone’s fine with including that, too, right?”

“Yeah, that doesn’t require a lot of space, so we could do that simultaneously with other events, too.”

“Good point.”

“How does everyone feel about the ‘waiter race’?”

“The waiter—? Oh, here it is. Is it a race where you run while holding a tray with a glass on it? Of course you’d want to do this. You’d obviously win.”

“Ha-ha-ha! Yeah, she probably would, but it does sound a little fun, doesn’t it? It would be easy to set up, too.”

“I agree. ♪ I think we should consider it at least, if we don’t have enough races.”

But right as they had more or less decided on the events… Yuki suddenly spoke up:

“By the way, do you think we could talk about this year’s Run?” Yuki’s casual remark immediately put Masachika and Alisa on guard. Yuki then flashed her trademark mysterious smile at them while she asked Touya, “Alya and I are going to be the only ones competing this year, right?”

“Hmm? Oh, I guess you’re right.”

“Then I have a suggestion.” Yuki clapped her hands and continued, “A one-on-one match would end far too quickly, so how about we make this year’s Run a team battle with three riders on each side?”

It was a suggestion that seemed purely concerned with how fun she could make field day. Of course, the proposal to switch

the Run into a team competition, arguing that one-on-one matches lacked excitement, was quite reasonable, but the suggestion was full of downsides for Masachika and Alisa.

You little punk…! You're only suggesting this because you know there's no way we'd ever find ten people to help us!

Having three riders meant that they needed twelve participants altogether, so even after getting Sayaka and Nonoa on board, they still needed to get eight more people. Put simply, while it would be easy for Yuki to get that many people to help her, since she used to be the student council president in middle school, Alisa, being a transfer student, was going to have a much harder time.

I could use my connections to get enough people together…but that would be kind of pointless. Tsk. Little punk sure likes to fight dirty.

Though feeling bitter, Masachika retorted calmly, "I agree that the match would be over too soon if we were fighting one-on-one, but why don't we just do best out of three? That'd give us a clear winner, and I'm sure the crowd would love it."

"I am worried that three matches would be too exhausting. Furthermore, if the first match concludes with one of the riders falling off due to injury or exhaustion, then it would be difficult to continue the competition. Besides…"

After countering Masachika's suggestion, Yuki placed her hand on her cheek and frowned.

"…There is currently far too much of a size difference between our teams, so I worry that it would not be a fair match. Surely such a one-sided match would bore the audience. Wouldn't you agree? However, if the match were three-versus-three, then a sense of possibility would arise that anyone could win with the right tactics, and I believe that would make for a far more exciting match."

I—I can't believe she just came out and said it!

Masachika gritted his teeth in frustration as Yuki boldly used their disadvantage as a shield. No matter how Masachika and Alisa tried to argue, it would only make them look like bullies. Plus, there was no way a certain sporty girl was going to keep quiet once Yuki mentioned that it wasn't going to be a fair fight.

“Yuki does have a point. The size difference is too much. It wouldn’t be fair,” agreed Chisaki, just as Masachika—and Yuki—had expected. There was an unwritten rule that the student council president and vice president would not interfere in the election of the next student council president, which Touya had been following, maintaining his silence. Meanwhile, Chisaki seemed to be speaking purely from a sense of sportsmanship. Or perhaps she simply wasn’t aware of the unwritten rule. There was even a possibility that she wasn’t even conscious of the fact that her statement could be seen as interference in the next student council election.

In any case, the fact that the vice president supported Yuki’s proposal was huge.

This isn’t good. She’s the one suggesting something that breaks the rules and tradition, and yet I look like the bad guy now.

Masachika felt a growing sense of urgency, but before he could even say a word, Alisa, who had been silent the entire time, suddenly spoke up.

“What do you think, Masha?”

Masachika’s eyes went wide in astonishment.

That’s it. We just need Masha on our side. If we could get her to agree with us, then…

He looked at Maria with hopeful eyes as she calmly tapped her finger near her lips.

“The Run…is that game where all the candidates running for student council president battle on ‘horseback,’ right? Alya, who are going to be your other two helpers?”

“…I plan on having Sayaka and Nonoa help,” Alisa answered, her eyes occasionally glancing at Yuki and Ayano. Unsurprisingly, Maria pouted, with her cheeks puffed out.

“What?! Why didn’t you ask me? That sounds like so much fun. ♪”

“…?!”

A shiver ran down Masachika’s spine, for Maria’s remark had completely derailed Masachika and Alisa’s plan, so without missing a beat, Yuki capitalized on this opening and tried to win Maria over.

“Oh? Well, if Masha wants to play, too, then it probably would be better if we did three-versus-three. That way, Masha could

play, too."

"That would be wonderful. ♪ Do you two mind if I join you?"

Yuki smirked, Chisaki nodded solemnly in agreement, and Maria grinned like an innocent little angel. The moment Masachika and Alisa saw their reactions, they knew they had been outmatched.

◇

"Dammit… She got us…"

"It's not like we had much of a chance. She made a good point."

After the student council meeting, Masachika and Alisa returned to their classroom, turned their seats to face each other at their desks, and held an emergency meeting to discuss their campaign strategy.

"But what are we going to do now? If we invite Takeshi and Hikaru, then we could have a team of four with the members of Fortitude…but we still need five more members, even if we include Masha."

"Yeah…"

"Do you have anyone in mind who could help?"

"…"

Alisa simply looked away without saying a word, but Masachika knew full well this was how she was going to react, so he didn't say another word and simply began to rack his brain.

"…If we can't come up with anyone else to help, then we might as well go all out and form a real team."

"What do you mean by 'real team'?"

"We'll ask tall guys in sports clubs to help us so that we can win, no matter who Yuki brings with her. I mean, if we're not worried about finding the most popular people to help, then I know a few people in the basketball club that might be interested __"

"Absolutely not."

He blinked in astonishment at Alisa's abrupt, firm interruption.

"…Why?"

“‘Why?’ Er…,” Alisa stammered in response to his innocent question. Then, looking down to the side, she grumbled:

“<Because you’re the only man who’s allowed to touch me.>”

“…?!”

Masachika was completely caught off guard by the sudden Russian. He desperately tried to keep himself from reacting, so he tensed up as Alisa averted her gaze.

Wh-why did you have to say that?! I just want to—gaaah!!!

He ground his teeth while screaming in his head, unable to even form a complete sentence, but he eventually managed to put on a mask of bewilderment.

“What did you just say?”

“…I said I don’t want to do the Run with guys that I don’t really know.”

“…Okay. But did you consider the huge advantage we’d have if you had three guys support you?”

“I looked up how these cavalry games work. When you have four people, the rider sits on the arms or the shoulders of the two guys in the back, right? I-in other words…th-the two people in the back are going to be touching my butt…” Alisa paused as a shiver ran down her spine, causing her to wrap her arms around herself tightly. She then narrowed her gaze sharply and snapped at him. “Absolutely not! I’d rather die!”

“What a germaphobe,” Masachika joked.

Alisa’s vehement rejection would make any guy in school slump in disappointment, feeling like they were lower than scum, but the reality was that it actually could end up being a problem.

If some guy’s drooling over Alya while he’s holding her, he might not even be able to focus on the match… Regardless, I’m not going to force her to do anything she doesn’t want to.

Masachika shrugged, then began to rack his brain once more.

“Then naturally, we should put Masha in our group… I’m sure that’s how she imagined it as well, so all we need now is to come up with five more members…”

After discussing the issue, they finally decided on four potential candidates…

“All right, so I’ll talk to those six tomorrow, including Takeshi and Hikaru… All we need now is one more female helper in our group…”

Masachika listed a few female students who were well-known and influential within the school.

“…That’s about all I can come up with for popular girls that could help us, but…do you know any of them?”

“I’ve met a few during student council work…but they’re essentially strangers to me.”

“Yeah, they’re not even in our grade, so it makes sense,” said Masachika. He wasn’t going to get his hopes up, either. He then leaned back in his chair, gazed up at the ceiling, and furrowed his brow in contemplation.

“Hmm… Decisions, decisions…”

“…What about that one girl?”

“Hmm?”

Lowering her gaze, Alisa continued hesitantly.

“You know…? That girl from the handicraft club.”

“…Oh, Professor Side Slit?”

“Yeah… I don’t even know her real name, thanks to you, you know?”

“If I had to give her a name, it’d be ‘Quirky.’”

“What?”

“Nothing. Anyway, what’s wrong with just calling her Professor Side Slit?”

“Everything,” she replied, but Masachika simply crossed his arms and ignored her.

“Hmm… I think she’d do it if we asked her, but Professor Side Slit isn’t really that well-known in her grade. A lot of first-year students know her, but I’d rather have someone who’s taller and more well-known. A girl that’s a second- or third-year student would be ideal…”

“…I hardly know anyone in the grades above us, and I definitely don’t know anyone who’d want to help me…”

“All right, I guess I could use one of my connections to help us, but…”

“But—?”

“Do you mind if one of our helpers specifically supports me? The rest of them, like Masha, are your supporters, right?” Masachika interrupted before Alisa could shut him down. She pondered for around ten seconds before reluctantly nodding.

“Well, I suppose I wouldn’t mind if it’s only one person…”

“Good. But I’d rather not pick someone you don’t even know, so… Hmm… I need someone who knows you and someone who’d be willing to help me out… Plus, she needs to be somewhat well-known around school…”

After thinking about it for a while, Masachika groaned, realizing how unrealistic finding someone like that was.

“This is hard… Because my supporters are Yuki’s supporters, for the most part…so I’d need to find someone who’d pick me over her…”

“I figured as much…”

“Yeah… Oh, hey. Do you know Kitagawa? She’s the vice president of the flower arrangement club.”

“Huh…? No. Well, maybe, but I don’t recall.”

“All right… What about Kanazawa? She’s a third-year student in the volleyball club, and she’s really tall.”

“I’ve seen her around before…but I’ve never talked to her.”

“Then how about Minamiho? She’s a second-year student in the literature club. She’s not very tall, has short hair and red glasses…”

“…I don’t know her.”

“Hmm…”

That was when he noticed Alisa’s seemingly random, chilling gaze.

“…Alya? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“Uh… The way you’re looking at me is scaring me.”

“I’m not looking at you any differently than I usually do. I was just thinking about how reliable my partner here is,” claimed Alisa, slowly crossing her arms and legs. Then, with a cold, mirthless smile, she urged him to continue. “Go on. Are there any other girls who you think can help us?”

“…No, just those three.”

He lied. There was actually one more person he had in mind, but his gut was telling him to keep his mouth shut.

“Uh-huh.”

Alisa skeptically stared at her partner for a few seconds until she eventually shrugged.

“Fine.”

Masachika inwardly let out a sigh of relief, when—

“So how did you become friends with the three girls you just named?”

“…?!”

“Where did you meet them? Who talked to who first?”

“…Is that important?”

“Of course it is. It might help me figure out how to gain more supporters.”

While her words were certainly diligent and virtuous, she had the piercing gaze of a police officer interrogating a suspect.

“Well, uh… Kitagawa… I had the chance to see what the flower arrangement club was like. It was like a workshop…and she liked how I arranged the flowers…so we started talking a little.”

“Uh-huh.”

“And I met Kanazawa when I was at the gymnasium for student council work, and she spiked a volleyball that hit me on the head…”

“Ff—! Uh-huh?”

“I ended up with a mild concussion, and she felt really guilty, so she started taking care of me a little, and we got to know each other, I guess?”

“O-oh.”

“Now, with Minamiho… We both like reading, so I guess that’s how we got to know each other.”

“…Okay.”

After listening to Masachika’s rough explanations, Alisa suddenly smirked triumphantly for some reason.

“<The way we met was far more dramatic.>”

How??

Although utterly baffled, with a blank expression, Masachika decided to not even think about things and asked, “So? What do you want to do? Want to try asking one of them?”

Alisa froze the instant she heard his suggestion and frowned, but after ten seconds of contemplation, she clenched her teeth and painfully asked her question.

“By the way, do you have any boys you were considering, if given the option?”

“Huh? I mean, I do, but you just told me you didn’t want any guys helping…”

“I was just checking! Just in case. That’s all.”

“Well, we could always ask the guy in the basketball club who I was just telling you about, but…”

He named a few candidates, as requested, but unsurprisingly, none of them were familiar to Alisa. She fell silent, her face twisting in frustration.

“So? What do you want to do?” Masachika asked timidly, while Alisa seemed to be battling some sort of inner demons. She gritted her teeth, but right as she opened her mouth to respond—

“Oh! There you are! Kuzeee! ♪”

The sliding door to the room slid open with a loud rattle, followed by an exaggeratedly sweet voice that echoed throughout the classroom. Both heads turned as a female student with long black hair tied in a side ponytail approached them, waving her hand enthusiastically. She had a perfectly proportioned figure and was wearing a short skirt that revealed long, shapely legs. The blue ribbon on her uniform indicated that she was a third-year student. Her appearance was full of the brightness and cuteness of a famous pop star, while giving off the vibe of a cheerful and friendly young girl…and yet Masachika seemed exhausted, for some reason.

“Heeey. Come on. What kind of reaction is that? You’re gonna make me cry.”

“Sorry, Elena. Your positive aura’s so blindingly bright that I lost all my HP.”

“Ha-ha-ha! Oh, come ooon! I know you don’t get nervous around extroverts like me!”

“Ha-ha. Well, as a nerd, I believe it’s important to be intimidated by popular girls,” he replied in a monotone voice while being slapped on the shoulder. The female student then spun around to face Alisa and smiled charmingly.

“Oh, hey. Sorry, Alisa. I know this is sudden, but can I borrow Kuze for a second?”

“Oh. Sure, Narahashi—”

“Oh my gosh. Call me Elena.”

“Uh…”

“Sorry, Alya gets really nervous around extroverts, so can you go a little easy on her for me?”

“For real? My bad. Was I being too friendly?”

“No, it’s fine…Elena.”

“See? I knew you could do it, Alisa. Anyway, now that we’re friends, maybe we could hug?”

“Don’t push it,” Masachika retorted sharply with a cold glare, eliciting a dry laugh from the female student as she gave him the thumbs-up.

“Oh, yeaaah. I like it when you boss me around, Kuze.”

Her name was Elena Narahashi, a third-year student at Seirei Academy, the president of the brass band club, and believe it or not, she was actually a former student council vice president. Therefore, she would still occasionally visit the student council room to tease the younger students, help out with student council duties, or simply enjoy a cup of tea. She’d actively participated as the vice president of the school festival executive committee during the Autumn Heights Festival the other day as well.

She’s apparently loved by the younger students in the brass band club, since she’s really friendly and takes care of everyone… She used to be the vice president as well, so she is pretty popular…

“There aren’t many people at school that boss me around and talk down to me the way you do, Kuze, so come on! Come whenever you’re ready! I can go all night if you can keep up!”

“Don’t be gross.”

“Ah! Why are you staring at me like I disgust you? I feel like you’re about to awaken something inside me…”

“Well, let’s hope it’s something with a brain.”

“Is this enlightenment? My eyes have just been opened…but I don’t want to be awakened! What would be left of me without my sexual desires?”



“Your desires to sleep and eat.”

“Wow, I’m nothing more than the embodiment of the three basic desires of humanity…”

“I’m kidding, Elena. You’d still have your wealth, popularity, and good looks.”

“Tsk! But…! Wait. That doesn’t sound bad at all.”

“It might even be a good thing.”

“Oh… I still haven’t reached enlightenment, I guess.”

“Nobody is telling you to reach enlightenment, but maybe it’s time to settle down a little.”

“No waaay. I still wanna go skirt chasing.”

“You’re already wearing a skirt.”

“We can change that if you want.”

Masachika glared at her, for Elena was such a creep that she made Yuki in “little-sister mode” look like an angel in comparison.

“You really like fooling around like this, don’t you?” Masachika replied coldly, eliciting a sly grin from Elena as she exaggeratedly wiggled her body.

“Whaaat? C-come on, we haven’t even started fooling around yet…”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Ha-ha… I mean…”

She bashfully scratched her head with a forced smile and cheerfully admitted, “Everyone at school is either a gentleman or gentlewoman who ignores my jokes, or they’re just really quirky, which forces me to play the straight man. It’s rare for me to find someone that I can freely goof off with like you.”

“You should just go ahead and be your silly self with everyone… You’re way too serious of a person to be like this…”

“Hey?! Don’t call me a serious person! Because I’m not! In fact, don’t call me Elena anymore. Call me your queen…and worship me because I’m the lewdest girl at school.”

“And yet I never hear any strange rumors about you.”

“That’s because I don’t like being tied down to just anyone, because if anyone’s doing the tying, it’s gonna be me.”

“Yeah, yeah. It’s very cool that you still like to play pretend, Queen Elena.”

“It’s not pretend!” she said, fuming, while Masachika gave her another fed up glare.

“…So? What do you want?”

“Oh, right!”

As if she had suddenly remembered why she had come here in the first place, Elena flashed Masachika a bright, almost cartoonish smile and extended her hand.

“Kuze, I want you to make a pact with me and become the harem king. ☆”

“Go away.”

“Why?!”

After being told to leave, Elena slammed her hands down on Masachika’s desk with a bang.

“This is *the* harem king we’re talking about! Any boy in high school would kill to be in this position!”

“Except this so-called harem of yours is your brass band club! So I’m guessing becoming the ‘king’ means you want me to be the president? Which I would have no reason to do!”

“Wow, you’re sharp, Kuze.”

Masachika blocked her friendly elbow nudges until her expression suddenly became slightly more serious.

“Okay, sorry. I’ll explain from the beginning.”

“…Uh-huh.”

“I was joking about becoming the harem king. To tell the truth, I want you to play piano for the brass band club.”

“”…!””

Masachika wasn’t the only one whose expression hardened at those words. Alisa’s face grew stern as well. Elena, however, raised both hands in a helpless gesture, seemingly oblivious to their reactions.

“We had a third-year student playing piano for us for a while, but he’s apparently too busy now studying for college entrance exams, so he quit. In other words, we currently don’t have anyone who can play piano for us. Of course, we don’t need a piano for all our songs or anything, but everyone who joins our club obviously does it because they like wind instruments…so we’re having trouble finding anyone that wants to play piano for us.”

“Yeah, I guess everyone who wants to play piano joins the piano club, huh?”

“Exactly. So I was like, ‘What are we going to do?’ And then suddenly…”

Elena nodded, a gentle smile playing on her lips as she slid her arm around Masachika’s shoulder.

“You took my breath away. I had no idea someone so talented was so close by the entire time.”

“Uh-huh…”

“So forge a pact with me and become our harem king.”

“No thanks.”

“Why?!”

“I’ve had bad experiences with people pressuring me into signing contracts. Plus, this whole thing sounds more like I’m signing up to become a servant, not a king.”

“Come ooon, you make it sound so much worse than it really is… Heh. Let’s do club stuff together. ☆ That’s all I’m asking from you.”

“You’re asking for way more than that!”

“Mmm… You’re being more stubborn than I thought…”

“I’m actually surprised that you thought you could trick me into joining by asking me to become your harem king.”

Noticing Masachika’s exasperated look, Elena altered her expression and changed her tone.

“King Kuze, there are tons of cuties in the brass band club, you know?”

“Do you really think that’s going to convince me to join?”

“They all complimented your fingering after they saw how long you could perform, too.”

“On the piano, right?!”

Masachika’s eyes narrowed in annoyance as he glared at Elena, questioning how she could talk like this in front of Alisa, but she returned his gaze with a puzzled expression.

“Kuze, please tell me I’m wrong, but…are you not interested in having a harem?”

“That’s not the issue here.”

“Then what’s the issue? Look how sincere I’m being.”

“What part of this is being sincere?” he asked flatly, making Elena throw her arms around herself, a look of frustration

crossing her face.

“Those eyes… Wait… Are you telling me that my words aren’t enough to please you?! Fine… I know how I can please you—”

“No thanks.”

“I’m giving you all this, and you’re saying ‘no’?! Look at this body! You’re free to do whatever you want with it! Use my perfectly ripe body to release all those pent-up frustrations of yours!”

“‘Ripe’?”

“You can twinkle, twinkle my little star all night!”

“‘“…”’

“Oh. Okaaay, then. You’re giving me the silent treatment, huh? Looking at me like I’m crazy. Heh. Give me a break, will ya?”

Caught in the cross fire of their cold glares, Elena scratched her head with a sleazy grin, eliciting a sigh from Masachika.

“If you really want to be sincere, then ask me to help you like a normal person.”

Masachika appeared fed up with the fact that she’d never once made a serious attempt to recruit him. Elena’s eyebrows rose. She dropped her playful demeanor and looked down at Masachika with a frighteningly serious expression.

“Do you mean…you want me to get on my knees?”

“No, I just need you to be normal—”

“Ah! How dare you?! You expect me, a former student council vice president, to get on my knees to please you, a first-year student who’s only a general member in the student council?” Elena spat out dismissively with a sarcastic sneer… Then, in a fluid motion, she plopped down onto her knees in a sudden, dramatic bow, with her forehead to the floor.

“Please help the brass band club. I beg of you.”

“Th-the lack of self-respect is staggering.”

“Heeey, come on. I want you to play piano for us! This is going to be my last performance in high school! I’ll do anything!”

Elena was now clinging to his arm, her knees still on the ground, which was starting to make him feel guilty.

“Yeah, but you’re a former vice president, so it’s not like—”

—*you could help us*, he trailed off…when it suddenly hit him.

Hold up…? The Run is just for fun, right?

Regardless of the intentions of those involved or how observers perceived it, the Run was essentially a sideshow, and participation was not even mandatory. Therefore…

Having a former vice president join us…is kind of a gray area, I guess. After all, if it really was a big deal, then it wouldn't be an unwritten rule. Somebody would have put it in writing…

In other words, he could easily talk-jutsu himself into a victory if anyone protested.

Besides…

Masachika sneered at the haunting image of his mother that had been lingering in his mind ever since he'd heard the word "piano."

I have come to terms with my past with Mah…so it's about time I overcame my issues with my mother.

With that in mind, Masachika and Alisa exchanged a glance, and after briefly communicating in silence, he slowly turned to Elena.

"You said you'd do anything, right?"

"Huh?"

Masachika smirked as he looked down at Elena, who was clearly caught off guard.

"You said I could use that 'perfectly ripe body' of yours, too, right?"

"H-huh…? Uh…?"

Elena abruptly stood up, as if she sensed something sinister in his soul, her eyes darting between Masachika and Alisa as her expression stiffened. Her cheeks flushed as her eyes began to well up with tears, when—

"I…"

"…?"

"I'm not wearing cute underwear today!!"

"Stop screaming nonsense and get back here!!" Masachika shouted, furiously chasing after Elena as she fled like a frightened rabbit, her arms clutched around her chest to shield herself, with tears brimming in her eyes.

◇

“…Are you sure you’re okay with this?” Alisa asked hesitantly after they returned to their desks from discussing things with Elena in the hallway.

“Hmm? Oh. Well, she did get on all fours and bow, and they only need my help starting after field day until their performance in December…so if that’s all it’s going to take to get Elena to help us, then that sounds like a good deal in my book.”

Masachika shrugged back at Alisa with a wry smirk.

Ultimately, Elena had agreed to participate in the Run, but only on one condition. Nevertheless, the condition itself was actually proposed by Masachika, so Elena had essentially agreed to everything they wanted. In return, Masachika had agreed to help the brass band, just as Elena had originally requested.

“Anyway, I can’t believe she wants to start practicing together right after field day is over… I guess deep down, she really is a serious person… She can be rational. Plus, I bet she came to ask me today to help instead of right after the school festival, because she was waiting for exams to be over.”

Masachika chuckled inwardly at his older schoolmate’s thoughtful nature, which was far different from her outwardly wild persona. However, Alisa asked once more.

“Are you sure you’re okay with this?”

“…?”

“You know… Helping out on piano…” Alisa was worried about Masachika going to play the piano, and although still questioning herself after seeing the look on his face, she steeled herself and voiced her hypothesis. “Because…I got the impression that you didn’t really like piano all that much.”

It was a gut feeling that she’d had after hearing Masachika play the piano at the Autumn Heights Festival. When she first heard him play, Alisa had felt a surge of resentment. Why had he hidden the fact that he could play the piano so well? Why didn’t he want to be in the band with her? And why was he showing off his skills here, of all places?

However, as she listened to him play, her childish resentment gradually subsided until she finally realized the answer to her own question: Masachika probably didn’t enjoy playing the piano. In fact, perhaps he even despised it. At any rate,

Masachika's eyes widened in astonishment at Alisa's almost instinctive guess.

I knew it.

His reaction alone convinced her that she was right.

"If you're forcing yourself to do something that you don't want to, then let's go tell her no. It still isn't too late. We can find someone else to help us in the Run."

Masachika looked away, a thoughtful expression on his face after Alisa spoke. But after a few seconds of silence, he slowly replied:

"…I don't exactly hate the piano, and I'm not forcing myself to do something that I don't want to, either."

After a long pause, Alisa instinctively felt that his words came from the heart…but at the same time, she couldn't shake the feeling that he was hiding something.

He's doing it again.

He'd done it before. Once again, Masachika had evaded the question, sidestepping the issue as if to prevent Alisa from digging deeper. And it worked, too.

Why can't I just ask him? "What do you not like about it, then?" "Why didn't you play in the band with us, then?"

But despite her feeling that way, Alisa's throat tightened, unable to get out the words. She feared that being so blunt would push Masachika somewhere far, far away, so she simply froze.

"I just don't really have any passion for it…which kind of worries me."

"Why does that worry you?"

"Well, think of it this way: In a chorus or orchestra, it's vital that everyone's in sync. It doesn't matter how good you are if you're all not on the same page or if someone isn't putting their heart into the music. It won't sound good," he replied in his usual playful manner.

"That's why putting someone like me in a brass band, who isn't even interested in performing, is a recipe for disaster. At the very least, it could be disappointing. I purposely didn't say all that to Elena, though," claimed Masachika, smirking cynically…when it finally hit Alisa.

So that's why…

Masachika's lack of passion for music, she realized, was the real reason for him not wanting to do the band with her, since he believed that his own lack of enthusiasm would hold the others back. Realizing this reminded Alisa of a similar feeling that she had experienced not long ago.

It's like how I don't understand love…

Unable to feel the same passion as those around her, Alisa felt a profound sense of loneliness and isolation, as if she were the only cold, cruel person in the world.

Is this how you feel?

The instant that thought crossed her mind, Alisa replied, "I disagree." Masachika stared at her, taken aback by the intensity of her words. Meeting his gaze directly, she noted, "Maybe you don't feel passionate about music. But…"

Although she didn't know what had happened to Masachika in the past, Alisa had been around him long enough to know one thing.

"You have a passion for supporting those with passion. You showed us that when you worked so hard to help Fortitude…and you showed me that when you decided to run for student council president and vice president together."

Leaning forward in her chair, she took Masachika's hand and gazed intently into his eyes, hoping her feelings would reach him.

"That's why…it's going to be okay. You'll be able to make Elena's dream come true…so please don't let this tear you up inside."

She didn't know why she said what she did at the end there. The words had just spilled out while she gazed into his eyes…and when Alisa saw his eyes waver, she instantly realized that she was right. Beneath his playful, carefree exterior, Masachika was suffering and probably had been for a long time…

"…!"

The moment she came to this realization, Alisa couldn't bear it anymore. Her chest tightened painfully, and before she knew it…she was pulling Masachika into a tight embrace. She leaned in, drawing her lips closely to his ear and, with a strained voice from the depths of her throat, whispered:

"Do you think that one day…" Her voice weakened until the words got stuck in her throat. There was a fear lurking deep

within her—the fear of going any further, and it was trying to silence her. Nevertheless, Alisa desperately fought back, her voice barely a whisper as she continued, "…you could share this pain of yours with me?"

Alisa had mustered all her courage to ask that question, but Masachika didn't immediately respond. A long, agonizing silence followed, each second feeling like an eternity…until Masachika finally nodded ever so slightly.

Alisa's heart swelled with relief and joy as she tightened her arms around him…when a certain thought suddenly crossed her mind: *Maybe this would be the perfect time to tell him?*

What is this feeling…? I feel like I can tell him now.

It was something that she had been wanting to tell him for so long, so she mustered up the courage to tell him…then changed her mind at the very last second.

No. If I'm going to tell him, I should wait until after the Run.

If she was going to tell him, it would be after winning. She wanted to stand proud before him and tell him, and to do that…

I have to win, no matter what.

With renewed determination, she looked ahead…where her gaze suddenly met Elena's at the classroom door.

""…!""

Their gazes locked, and they both flinched. Although they remained completely still for a few moments…Elena's brain ended up rebooting before Alisa's.

"Oh! Uh… I just realized that we still hadn't talked specifics y-yet," stammered Elena, her eyes darting around wildly while her cheeks gradually turned red.

"A-anyway, I—I didn't see anything! I won't tell anyone! I promise!!" she said, screaming, as if she had just witnessed a murder, while bolting off like a frightened hare.

"Stop spreading nonsense while running away!" screamed Alisa the instant her brain rebooted.

CHAPTER 6

A girl bad for the heart, a girl good for the heart.

“Yuki Suou did that?”

“She did. That’s why, while I know this is sudden, I was hoping if you, Sayaka, could form one of our teams with Takeshi and Hikaru…”

The next day, after Takeshi and Hikaru agreed to help them in the Run, Alisa and Masachika visited Sayaka in Class F during break time to explain the situation.

“Well, sure. That’s fine… That was really careless of you, though. She completely manipulated everyone into changing the match’s format so that it would only benefit her,” replied Sayaka while slowly pushing up her glasses.

“Yeah… She completely outsmarted me this time…”

Sayaka shot a sideways glance at Alisa, who had her head down and her shoulders slumped.

“Anyone can mope around and be depressed, so how about you start thinking about what you could do next time to prevent this from ever happening again?” Sayaka said bluntly.

“…Yeah.”

Alisa could only nod in agreement with Sayaka, despite how relentless and harsh she was being, and that was exactly why Masachika couldn’t help but say something.

“I mean, there wasn’t much we could have done, though. Yuki had a point. She came at us with a perfect strategy.”

He tried to mediate, but Sayaka simply snorted.

“But even then, you didn’t have to simply agree to her proposal. If she was going to use physical differences as an excuse, you could have countered by saying, ‘Then we’ll balance it by only asking girls to be our helpers.’ After all, Nonoa and I

already agreed to help you, right? There would have been absolutely no downside."

"…I didn't even think of that."

"Even with team battles, you could have proposed that you would each disclose who'd be participating beforehand. You had plenty of conditions that you could have come up with."

""…""

Masachika and Alisa were speechless, their eyes wide as Sayaka calmly laid out her argument in a matter-of-fact tone. She had a point, too. Masachika hadn't even thought of that because he was so busy focusing on what was happening in front of them when Chisaki and Maria were agreeing with Yuki.

Instead, he was already thinking about who else they could recruit. However, when he sat down to calmly think about it, he realized there was absolutely no need to accept Yuki's proposal unconditionally.

"You're absolutely right. It sounds like we've got a lot to think about."

"We do…"

Sayaka snorted at Masachika and Alisa, who were so eager to raise the white flag and admit defeat.

Unable to even look at them, she seemed colder than usual, almost sullen…which made Masachika tilt his head in confusion. Alisa, on the other hand, nodded back, looked Sayaka straight in the eye, and exclaimed:

"I really appreciate the feedback. We're lucky to have your help."

"…Good," Sayaka curtly responded, all the while pushing up her glasses…but there was something about how she was reacting that made Masachika's face twist as a certain realization hit him.

Wait. Is she…?

He immediately tried to reject his own hypothesis, but it was the only explanation that made sense anymore.

Is she just in a bad mood because her spot on Alya's team was taken away from her?!

Although Sayaka hid her expression behind her hand as she readjusted her glasses, Masachika could sense that she was actually in a good mood. The more he watched her, the more

shocked he became as his image of her from middle school gradually crumbled.

◇

“I hope I didn’t keep you waiting for too long.”

“No, not at all.”

Masachika had been summoned by Maria to the student council room during lunch, and when he opened the door to the quiet room, he found her sitting alone on the couch.

“…”

The situation, eerily reminiscent of his recent interaction with Maria, gave Masachika a strange sense of unease as he approached her.

“So… Uh… What’d you want to talk about?”

“Mn… Have a seat.”

Maria gestured to the seat next to her, once again reminding him of what had happened before exams, as he swallowed his breath.

Obviously, she asked me to meet her here to talk about what happened the other day, right?

Maria had been acting a bit awkward around him ever since that incident. Although Masachika understood that his awkwardness stemmed from his feelings for his first love resurfacing…he couldn’t quite understand why Maria was acting so strange now.

If we’re going to talk about that…then let’s do it. I’m not going to be a coward and run away. I want to process all these feelings I’m having, too.

After bracing himself for battle, Masachika sat down beside Maria, then patiently waited as she stared at her lap, seemingly searching for the right words until an entire minute ticked off on the clock.

“So… Kuze…”

“Yes?”

After seeing Masachika sit up straight with a serious demeanor, she took a deep breath and asked, “You look at me…in a sexual way, don’t you?”

“…What?”

His mind went blank at the completely unexpected question, causing Maria to panic, waving her hands frantically.

“Oh! No! I’m not scolding you or anything… It’s just…I know that teenage boys like stuff like that! So I don’t think it’s a bad thing, but…”

Her voice trailed off as she lowered her head in embarrassment… Then, out of nowhere, she bent at the waist, bowing deeply.

“I’m so sorry! The thought never even crossed my mind! And I’ve been…touching you and hugging you so much…” Slowly lifting her head, Maria looked away and bashfully added, “It must be very…troubling for you, right? Since it makes you feel ways, and you can’t do anything about it… So I’m very, very sorry! I had no idea what I was doing!”

Masachika stared at the top of her head as she bowed once more…and pondered.

H-how am I supposed to respond to that?

It was hell. For a boy going through puberty, it was nothing short of hell. It felt like being caught reading a dirty magazine by your mom. Of course, Masachika had never experienced anything like that, but the situation was pretty similar, seeing as a woman was confronting him head-on about his urges and intentions.

Uh… Should I accept her apology? But that would be an admission of guilt… I mean, I do check her out sometimes… I do look at her lustfully! But that’s only because I’m a teenage boy, just like she—

He suddenly shook his head.

No, that’s just an excuse. I don’t look at Nonoa or Elena like that at all…

That was when it finally hit him.

He did feel something when he looked at Maria, and the very fact that he was harboring these feelings was the clearest evidence that he saw her in a romantic light. However…

But that’s not everything… It’s weird. I feel…really guilty now that I’m finally able to admit that Masha **=** *Mah…*

Masachika felt as though he was tainting the beautiful memory of that girl with his own filthy desires. Now, belatedly, an overwhelming sense of disgust toward his own lustful thoughts

surged within him, making him feel like he wanted to just die on the spot.

“Please stop bowing… You didn’t do anything you need to apologize for.”

Overwhelmed by a heavy sense of guilt, he tried desperately to end the conversation, but before he could do anything about it, Maria suddenly looked up sharply, making him flinch.

“So Kuze…!”

“Y-yeah?”

She spread her arms wide, leaning slightly back toward Masachika, and with a serious expression and flushed cheeks, she exclaimed:

“To make it up to you…I’ll let you touch my body as much as you want!”

“…What?”

“I want you to get it out of your system for all the times you wanted to do it but couldn’t.”

“This is not the direction I saw this conversation going!!”

Normally, wouldn’t this kind of situation lead to them being more careful and not being as touchy as much anymore? How did the situation escalate in the complete opposite direction? And why, of all things, would she be basically accepting these terrible, lustful thoughts of his?

“I-it’s okay! I don’t mind if it’s you, Kuze! I’m a little embarrassed, but I’ll try my best!”

“Well, I do mind, and you don’t have to try your best!” cried Masachika while her spinning eyes opened wide, her cheeks tinted with crimson.

This isn’t going to work. She overthought this whole thing until she fried her own brain!

Masachika’s mind was fruitlessly racing in bewilderment as Maria went completely off the deep end…

“A-anyway, I get how you feel, Masha! And I appreciate the thought!”

Unable to make sense of anything, Masachika thrust his hands forward, blurting out whatever came to mind to try and stop Maria.

“But please don’t do this! Yes, I… I admit that I do look at you like that, but, like, I hate that about myself…and if I touch you,

then all this self-loathing is probably going to kill me!”

Without really knowing what he was saying, he closed his eyes while he shouted at the top of his lungs… A painful silence filled the student council room, broken only by the ticking of the clock…until he eventually heard Maria’s faint laughter, prompting him to slowly open his eyes, where he then saw Maria smiling softly, as if she were somewhat relieved.

“…Masha?”

“Oh, no. It’s nothing. I’m sorry. I was just thinking about how you really are Sah.”

“…?”

Although confused, Masachika cautiously lowered his arms, since Maria seemed to have calmed down. She then looked at him with a composed expression and reverently bowed once more.

“I’m sorry. I just realized that you’re a man now, and it scared me.”

“Uh-huh… Okay…”

In other words, she realized I was having filthy thoughts about her and got scared? thought Masachika, feeling a wave of despair swallow him. But just as he was about to sink to his knees in anguish, wanting to die again…Maria smiled and admitted:

“But I’m okay now…because I know you wouldn’t do anything to hurt me. You’re still the same sweet Sah from years ago.”

“Uh…”

Ruminating on Maria’s words, Masachika arrived at a certain conclusion, despite still being utterly confused.

“Were you testing me?”

“I… I’m sorry. I guess that was kind of what I was doing deep down.”

“‘Kind of,’ huh?”

Maria apologetically knit her brow.

“I meant what I said, though. I do feel guilty for hugging you so much without even considering your feelings as a man. I also would be okay if you touched me. But…you have no idea how relieved I felt to see you even more flustered than I was.”

She giggled softly, her eyes affectionately crinkling at the corners.

“It made me realize that you haven’t changed at all… I just got so scared that I lost my mind for a moment, I guess.”

“Oh… But… Like…”

Masachika averted his gaze and began scratching his head while mumbling:

“You were right about one thing. It is a little…‘troubling’ when you touch me so much…so maybe you could cut back a little?”

“Heh-heh. I’ll see what I can do.”

“In other words, nothing is going to change?”

“Can you really blame me for wanting to touch someone I like sooo much?” Maria argued with her usual bubbly smile. She then switched to a more serious tone and added:

“But… Hmm… I guess I’ll try to give you a warning before touching you from now on.”

“But you’ll still keep on hugging me…?”

“Yep.”

Maria then spread her arms out, making Masachika grimace at the oddly familiar scene…when she cheerfully grinned and suggested:

“So let’s hug and make up.”

“…”

The first thing that popped into his head was *What are we even making up for?* But the question seemed to lose all importance before her angelic smile.

Yeah… Just like how I’m Sah… Masha is still Mah.

There was probably no deeper meaning to this hug, he thought. It was no different from two kids making up after a fight. Therefore, he just had to innocently hug her back, just like they did when they were younger.

“All right, fine. Let’s hug and make up.”

Thinking about it that way made him feel as if a weight had been lifted off his shoulders, allowing him to lean in with a faint smile and give Maria a gentle hug. She returned the embrace, squeezing him tightly while she giggled into his ear with evident satisfaction.

“<I knew it. This isn’t scary at all.>”

She softly muttered those words, as if she was filled with relief, then—

Smooch!

“What the…?!”

Masachika jerked back, startled by the sensation of her lips against his cheek.

Maria stood up with a playful sparkle in her eyes—a look she probably wasn't even capable of making when they were kids. She then raised her index finger in front of her lips and teased, "I only said I'd *try* to give you a warning from now on. ♪"

With a mischievous wink, Maria skipped out of the student council room…leaving Masachika behind to collapse onto the couch, burying his face in the armrest while he screamed:

"I'm going to die!!"

◇

After school that day, Masachika and Alisa, having finished their student council duties, changed into their gym clothes and headed to the back of the schoolhouse. Shortly after they arrived, Maria appeared as well, followed by Elena a few minutes later.

"Heeey, what's up? Whew. It's a little chilly out, huh?" Elena pointed out, rubbing her bare arms in her short-sleeved shirt while Masachika frowned.

"You okay? We aren't going to train hard today, so you can put on a jacket if you want…"

"Eh. I'll warm up after I start moving around a little."

"Are you sure? Alya, Masha, same goes for you two as well. Feel free to wear a jacket if you're cold."

"I'm fine."

"Me too. ♪"

"…Please don't catch a cold, okay?"

While Masachika felt a pang of guilt for not being more considerate of the girls, Elena, who was standing beside him, looked at Alisa and Maria.

"Anyway… Those are your gym clothes, huh? Niiice," she commented.

Masachika silently glared at her, as if he was disgusted by how passionate she sounded, but she simply grinned back at him, her eyes crinkling at the corners, like some sort of creep.

"Mm-hmm. I'm starting to drool already. Like, this is really turning me o—"

"Elena, can I take you out?"

“What? Are you asking me on a date—?”

As Elena squirmed dramatically, Masachika swiftly feigned a karate chop right in front of her eyes.

“…”

“Whoops. My bad. I won’t miss next time.”

“Wait. Ohhh! You want to *take* me out,” said Elena, realizing his meaning with a straight face as Masachika swiftly lifted his hand back up. She then covered her mouth and looked up at him with wide, pleading eyes.

“It’s my first time, so be gentle, okay?”

Masachika delivered a playful smack to her head, granting her wish.

“Mmm… You’re so cruel, Kuze. I can’t believe you would hit a woman. What are you gonna do if I start to like being hit?”

“Then you’d be a masochist, thanks to me.”

“Oof! What kind of monster are you?! What are you gonna do once you turn me into a masochist?!”

“Ignore you.”

“You’re just gonna pump and dump me like that?!”

After Elena casually dropped another crude remark, Masachika once again playfully smacked the back of her head. Of course, it was more of a feigned slap, with a flick of the wrist for dramatic effect, and in actuality, he was barely tapping her with his fingertips. Nevertheless, Elena dramatically clutched her head and feigned agony, which perhaps wasn’t too surprising for an actress like her.

“Mmm… I think I just lost a few lewd brain cells…”

“Just hurry up and get into position. We need to form the horse.”

He decided to ignore his older schoolmate, whose mind was completely clouded with worldly desires, and turned his attention to Alisa and Maria…who were already staring at them with indescribable expressions.

“…What?”

Maria tilted her head slightly, her finger pressed to her lips as she watched Masachika recoil.

“You two really get along. ♪”

“What? Does it really look like that to you?”

“This is the first time I’ve ever seen you speak so casually with a girl before…”

“No, I—”

I always act like this around Yuki, thought Masachika, when he suddenly realized that he only spoke this casually with her in private when she was in little-sister mode.

In other words, he didn’t speak this casually with any other girl at school, much less joke around with any of them like this.

“Mn…! Come on, what’s the big deal? More importantly, I, uh… I can see your stomach, Masha,” pointed out Masachika, looking away after catching a glimpse of Maria’s belly button peeking out from under her gym clothes.

“Huh? Oh…”

After Maria managed to fix her outfit, he turned his back to her.

“All right, we’re going to start off by practicing getting into position. Masha, Elena, I want you two to hold my hands while placing your free hands on my shoulders… Yeah, just like that.”

Still facing forward, Masachika linked arms with Maria and Elena from behind…but that was when it hit him.

Hold up… We’re all holding hands like we’re dating…

But right as he realized that, two other people made the exact same comment behind and to the left of him.

“Hold on. Oh my gosh… We’re holding hands like a couple. I’m so embarrassed.”

“Oh my. You’re right. ♪”

Elena’s fingers fidgeted nervously between Masachika’s, while Maria purposefully tightened her grip on his right hand… all while Alisa’s chilling gaze pierced his cheek.

“…Alya, we’re ready for you to hop on.”

“…”

Pretending not to notice any of this, Masachika crouched in place with Maria and Elena, in preparation for their rider, Alisa, who swung her legs over the female members before slowly lowering herself onto them.

“Ooo! Alisa’s soft butt is touching my arm?!”

“You on? All right, now place your feet on our hands—”

“Wait! What kind of wrestling move is this?!” said Elena, yelping, as if her fingers were being crushed, so Masachika

promptly loosened his hold, albeit with a small sigh, allowing her to breathe a sigh of relief.

“Ouch, ouch, ouch… Masachika’s fingering skills almost brought me to my knees. I wasn’t expecting it to be that hard, either.”

“You really don’t get tired of that, huh?”

“Heh. That’s what makes me me.”

“…May I?”

“Oh, sure.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

With a cold, exasperated voice, Alisa lightly tapped Masachika’s and Elena’s arms with her foot, prompting them to spread out their joined hands. Alisa then gently placed her feet, free of shoes and socks, onto their outstretched palms.

Touching Alya’s bare feet like this is—

“Ooo! Alisa’s holy feet?!”

Elena’s stupid voice managed to dispel Masachika’s worldly desires, allowing him to calmly adjust his hand position. They say that having someone more flustered nearby actually helps people stay calm, but having someone nearby being a total perv seemed to help keep Masachika coolheaded, too.

“All right, ready to stand, everyone? On three. One, two, three!”

The three of them simultaneously stood up. After Maria and Elena placed their hands on Masachika’s shoulders, Alisa added her own hands on top of theirs as her weight pressed down on him.

Mn! This is kind of…

“Ah, this is a little…”

“Oof! I wasn’t expecting you to be this heavy…! I don’t mean that in a rude way, though!”

Everyone managed to stand but was having a hard time keeping their balance.

“Uh… Okay, guys. Let’s try to move around a little like this.”

Once they were all set up, they tried moving in all the basic directions—forward, backward, and sideways—while maintaining their postures, and although they struggled to move in sync at first, they gradually began to get the hang of it, thanks to Masachika’s instructions.

“All right, that should do it for that. Next, Alya, I want you to see if you can stand.”

“What? …Are you sure?”

“Yeah, you don’t really need to stand while we’re moving, but you’re going to need to stand to steal our opponents’ headbands.”

“Okay… I’ll give it a try,” replied Alisa, raising her hips up until she could stand straight up…when Elena suddenly screamed.

“W-wait! Stop! This is getting really painful! M-my hand’s gonna slip!!”

Alisa quickly lowered herself before the others carefully placed her down.

“Phew… That was more painful than I imagined. I wasn’t expecting it to be that much harder when she stood up.”

“That’s because Alya’s entire weight is being balanced on our hands.”

“Yeah… But I think it’s half your fault, Kuze.”

“…Or maybe it’s the girl who won’t stop making lewd comments.”

Masachika quickly averted his gaze from Elena, who was resentfully shaking her hands, where he caught yet another glimpse of Maria’s stomach, forcing him to look away once more.

“…Masha, I can see your stomach again.”

“Ah! Mmm…”

Elena nodded smugly as Maria busily straightened her clothes.

“Makes sense your shirt would keep riding up so much, since your boobs are so big.”

“Cough! Hack!”

Masachika was so taken aback that he choked on his spit, unable to even comment on the blunt remark, and with no one to stop her, Elena immediately turned her attention to Alisa.

“Same goes for you, though, Alisa. I mean, mine are big, but I’m starting to feel a little insecure after seeing those honkers.”

“Excuse me! Could you please not talk about that when there’s a boy standing right there?!” cried Alisa while facing the opposite direction, as if she couldn’t take it anymore. Nevertheless, the reaction made Elena smile joyfully as she shifted her gaze to Masachika.

“Hmm? What’s the big deal? We always talk like this in the brass band club.”

“Sounds like a wonderful workplace, where sexual harassment is rampant.”

“It *is* a wonderful place, where everyone always has a smile on their face! And I have a harem, too!” Elena said, pouting as Masachika pierced her with his resentful glare. He then muttered spitefully:

“Hmph… A harem, huh?”

“Yes? Is that a problem?”

“I heard a rumor that at band camp, you kept pestering all your female bandmates to take a bath with you, but then you ended up taking a bath all by yourself in your room.”

“Stop!”

“I also heard that you said something like, ‘I’m gonna make sure you’re not getting any sleep tonight,’ then you dozed off before midnight.”

“Quit it! You’re ruining my rep!”

Elena waved her arms around wildly, making excuses that she only went to bed early because she didn’t want to tire everyone out, since they had work to do the following day. At any rate, the three of them ignored her numerous excuses while Maria softly asked Masachika:

“Wait. Is that what Elena’s really like?”

“She’s actually really shy and innocent. She talks a big game, but she doesn’t even hug or touch others. She’s a serious person deep down.”

“Hey! I can hear you!”

“Because I want you to.”

“You’re so dirty. ☆”

“Not trying to be.”

“Anyway! Stop spreading baseless rumors about me!”

“Don’t worry. I’m pretty sure everyone’s already realized that you’re actually a very serious person.”

That’s why you were elected to be president of your club, thought Masachika, but he bit his tongue and instead joined Alisa and Maria, watching Elena with a somewhat warm gaze that made her blush until she began to tremble. Then, out of nowhere, she buried her face in her arm, spun on her heel, and dashed off.

“Waaah! I’m gonna sue you all for defamation!”

“I don’t think that’s going to hold up in court, since you didn’t record us talking!”

But Elena continued to run away until she turned the corner of the school building and completely disappeared from sight, ignoring Masachika’s calm retort.

“Uh…? We were still in the middle of practicing…”

After watching Elena vanish with a bewildered stare, Alisa turned to Masachika with a puzzled look on her face, but he simply shrugged, as if it weren’t a big deal.

“Don’t worry. She’s not the kind of person who just leaves when there’s work to be done.”

Only a few seconds went by, when…

“Oh, she’s coming back…”

“See? I told you she was a serious person.”

◇

“You’ve come a long way to make it here, brave warrior.”

“You could just say ‘Welcome home,’ like a normal person, you know?”

After finishing their secret after-school practice, Masachika returned home to find Yuki leisurely sitting in the living room, so he shot her a piercing, reproachful glare. He then looked around to make sure that the maid, who was usually blending into the background, was nowhere to be seen.

“…Just you today?”

“Oh? Am I not enough for you?”

“I’ve already had my fill of bull for the day.”

“So you want Ayano for dessert?!”

“No clue how you came to that conclusion.”

Yuki cackled and said, “By the way, where’d you get your fill? Did you hang out with someone exhausting today? Like Elena?”

“…!”

Masachika’s cheek twitched the instant she dropped that name, making him realize where he’d slipped up. They had been purposefully practicing secretly behind the school building after class so that nobody would see who was going to be their helpers

during the Run…and yet Yuki was audaciously smirking, as if she had seen right through their plan.

“Did your practice for the Run go well, my dear brother?”

“…If that was you baiting me into telling you what you wanted to know, then I’m impressed, my dear sister.”

“What? I didn’t bait you into doing anything. I was just making sure, since I couldn’t imagine any other reason why you would be getting home this late,” she said, grinning mischievously. Masachika smirked back, realizing that he had been completely played.

“So? Come to spy on your enemy today?”

“Hmm? That’s just something I figured I’d ask while I was here. Besides, it doesn’t matter who you bring. I don’t even really want to know, either. I’m going to win, regardless.”

“…Wow, pretty confident. You really think you can handle an opponent you’re not even expecting?”

“Don’t underestimate me. I can tell what someone’s capable of with just a single glance. Just like how I can tell just how dirty a comic is going to be simply by reading the first chapter!”

“Pfft. I can do that, too. Easily. In fact, all I need to see is the first few pages that are in color.”

“Obviously, because the skin-to-clothes ratio on the first few pages is always proof of how lewd a comic is going to be!” Yuki exclaimed with a trembling voice, as if she was some sort of expert on the subject, only to elicit an unenthusiastic response from her brother.

“So? What are you doing here?”

“Excuse me? Isn’t it obvious?” Yuki slowly stood and slammed her hands on the table. She glared up at her brother and barked, “We promised to marathon all that anime together after exams were over!”

“…Oh.”

“Don’t tell me you forgot?! You better have not forgotten!”

“No, my brain was just lagging a little.”

“Do you have enough RAM? We should get you some more. Let’s get you an external hard drive while we’re at it, too.”

“I’m using USB one point zero, so it’d take a while to read anyway.”

“Upgrade already.”

“Are you telling me to go through reincarnation?”

“I’ll do it with you.”

“Oh boy…”

“The heroine of the new world was actually your sister in your previous life.”

“I’d be surprised if that wasn’t already an anime.”

“And your little sister in the new world was actually the heroine in your previous life.”

“Things suddenly got complicated.”

“By the way, this isn’t a new world. You’re being reborn in the past.”

“…Hmm?”

“And right now, the little sister in the current world is yelling at the heroine, ‘Give me back my body!’ while trying to grab her.”

“Why did this turn into horror out of nowhere?! I just got chills.”

“The title is ‘My Little Sister Might Not Be My Little Sister.’”

“That’s going to really piss off all the readers who were looking forward to a rom-com with a stepsister.”

“The real meaning to the title of the series isn’t explained until later, though. I personally like this story.”

“I like it, too, but it’s different from what I was hoping for.”

“Anyway, watching anime together is only one of the reasons why I’m here.”

“There’s still another reason?”

“I got you sick before exams, and I wanted to make it up to you. Duh.”

Masachika was rendered speechless for a few moments until he eventually smiled wryly at her serious expression.

Well, I guess if Alya noticed, then there’s no way you wouldn’t.

After his little moment of reflection, Yuki boldly approached him until their faces were only millimeters away.

“Are you feeling okay now?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. What about your right leg? Does it still hurt?”

“It’s all better.”

“Really? I’m glad.”

“Sounds like we can fight fair and square during the Run, then.”

“No need to hold back, huh?”

After exchanging fearless grins, Yuki changed her smile into a more playful one as she spread her arms out wide.

“Anyway, I’m going to make it up to you by letting you cherish me and love me for the rest of the night.”

“…How’s that any different than usual?”

“It’s a mindset. Oh, hey. And while we’re at it, how about you pick me up like a princess again?”

“And now you’re even asking me to do stuff for you… You know the adrenaline rush was what gave me that strength, right?”

“Oh? So you’re saying you can’t do it? You had no problem lifting Alya earlier today, but you can’t lift me?”

“All right, all right. Ready? Mmmph!”

After pumping himself up, he slid his arms around Yuki’s shoulders and the back of her knees, lifting her up in one swift motion.

“Whoaaa! This is amazing! I’m so high up! Ha-ha-ha!”

“Hey?! Stop swinging your arms and legs around like that!”

“Okay! Now keep holding me like this until we finish watching anime!”

“My arms would literally fall off!”

“I’m going to put an end to those arms before the Run. After that, I’ll win the election…”

“What happened to fighting fair and square?!”

It was just like any other day for the two of them. Amid their casual, everyday conversation, they cleared up any lingering concerns they’d had about each other and reaffirmed their commitment to a fair and honorable fight.

And before long, the day of their showdown arrived.



CHAPTER 7

At least it was probably an accident.

Seirei Academy's field day was held in late October, with a temperature that was almost too warm to call autumnal but still perfect for working up a good sweat.

"…What a view," muttered Masachika, gazing out at the field from the student council's tent.

"The red team is fast! But here, coming from the outside, is Higashiyama from the green team! Look at those legs go! Higashiyama is gaining! He's catching up! Aaand he passed them! First place goes to Higashiyama on the green team!"

"What is this? Some sort of horse race commentary?"

"Horse race…? Masachika, don't tell me you've been to a horse race before…"

"No, absolutely not. I've played a horse racing video game before, and it sounded like that. That's all."

The moment Masachika commented on the performance of the obviously overzealous broadcast club member, Alisa, who was standing by his side, shot him a quizzical stare, forcing him to explain himself in a fluster.

"In fact, from the sound of it, I bet the commentator from the broadcasting club has played the same game before, too… Looks like the audience is enjoying it, though, so whatever."

He glanced at the commentator's tent, packed with teachers and broadcast club members. Suddenly, something big apparently happened during one of the games.

"Oooh! Third-year student Sasaki from the judo club, has just dropped his sandbag! Sasaki is out! The record so far is eight minutes and twenty-seven seconds!"

Turning his gaze to the field, Masachika noticed a large male student walking dejectedly back to the stands. But at the same time, he spotted a group of buff guys standing still, unmoved even after their competitor had dropped out. That wasn't all, though. There was even a group of female students behind them who were sprinting at full speed.

"Wow… This looks so random."

Since there was no time limit for the sandbag-lifting contest, it was being held concurrently with other events…so a rather incongruous sight emerged: Numerous muscle-bound male students were lined up around the track, while a group of female students were youthfully working up a sweat behind them.

"We have just reached the ten-minute mark, with only thirteen warriors left! Who will be the last man standing?!"

"…Touya's really working hard."

Somehow surviving among the muscle-bound athletes from the judo and rugby clubs, who were absolutely confident in their strength and stamina, was Touya. However, the sandbag was slowly slipping from his grasp, as if his forearm muscles were about to give out.

"Oof… That looks painful… He's barely holding on with his fingertips."

"I'm sure he wants to try to adjust his grip, but he's probably worried he'd drop it."

"Yeah…"

But just when it seemed like Touya was about to raise the white flag, Chisaki, who was helping with the sports festival committee, passed by him and whispered something.

"O-oh?"

As if his girlfriend had given him the greatest words of encouragement that one could give a man, a burst of energy suddenly shot through Touya's body as he let go of the sandbag with his right hand before quickly slipping his hand under it. He followed up by doing the same thing with his left hand, allowing him to carry the sandbag in both hands, palms facing up.

"Ooo! President Kenzaki has just readjusted his grip! But it doesn't really look that well-balanced! Is he going to be okay?!"

After hearing the commentator's reaction, Alisa's brow furrowed.

“I guess he doesn’t need to worry about his grip giving out anymore, but…”

“Yeah, but the sand moving around in the sandbag might throw him off-balance, and if that happens, it’s over.”

“Yeah…”

Masachika and Alisa were worried that it was a risky gamble, but contrary to his younger schoolmates’ pessimistic predictions, Touya was continuing to hold the sandbag in that position without fail, when—

“Ahhh! Kamiizumi dropped his sandbag! The winner is President Kenzaki! The president of the student council really showed us what he’s made of, huh?!”

“““Yeah!!”””

As the crowd erupted in cheers and applause, Touya dropped the sandbag and let out a victorious roar while Chisaki rushed over to high-five him.

“And a powerful high five from Vice President Sarashina to deliver the final blow to his arms!”

Although the commentator’s words brought laughter to the crowd, Chisaki sent a menacing glare toward the broadcast box. However, perhaps realizing the situation that they were in, Chisaki didn’t choose violence today. Instead, she swiftly returned to her duties as a committee member, while Touya went back to the student council’s tent.

“Congratulations, Mr. President. Very cool stuff.”

“Congratulations.”

“Oh, thanks.” Touya smiled wearily while Masachika and Alisa welcomed him back with applause.

“I honestly thought you were a goner when you changed how you were holding the sandbag. That must have taken a lot of mental strength.”



“Yeah, it was really a battle of willpower at the end there. But, well, I guess a big reason why I managed to win was because neither Kagami nor Saijou participated in the event.”

With a slightly puzzled expression, Touya named two individuals with top-level recognition among the sports clubs at school. They were considered the prime candidates to win this sandbag-lifting event during the planning stages. Kagami was a refreshing and handsome rugby player known as the absolute best player in the rugby club, while Saijou, the captain of the judo club, was an athlete at the national level and known as a reserved but very gentlemanly student. Both were quite popular with the girls, and their fame at school was almost on par with Yuushou’s. In fact, they were quite a bit more popular than Yuushou among the boys as well.

“…I’m actually surprised they weren’t part of the sandbag event, too. I guess maybe they just weren’t interested in a simple competition of raw strength. Either way, you managed to win while up against athletes, which is still incredible.”

“Thanks, Kuze. As Chisaki’s boyfriend, I’m just hoping I did enough to not be an embarrassment,” said Touya, smirking with evident satisfaction…all while Chisaki could be seen in the background carrying seven bags of sand at once. But Masachika simply chose to pretend that he didn’t see anything.

“Y-yeah, she high-fived you, so I’m sure she was really proud of you. She knows she can depend on you.”

“You really think so? I guess all that hard work really paid off, then! Ha-ha-ha!”

He didn’t see a thing, and he definitely didn’t see Chisaki being offered a platform cart by the committee members, only to refuse it with a smile while waving her free hand. Not even the announcer was mentioning what was going on!

“Hey, uh… Masachika?” Alisa whispered.

“I didn’t see a thing,” came his hushed response.

“…Me neither.”

Alisa, following Masachika’s lead, also pretended not to notice. At any rate, Touya still had a long way to go before he could become the kind of man his girlfriend could rely on when she needed some muscle.

“And now, for the teacher relay! Homeroom teachers from each grade and class on each team will be passing the baton! Starting for the red team, it’s Mr. Sendagawa of Class 1-A! Will having quit smoking during summer break pay off?! Next, starting for the blue team is Ms. Tabata of Class 1-C, who supposedly just got a new, younger boyfriend! Next up, starting for the green team, is Ms. Kohinata of Class 1-E, the ice-water enthusiast who apparently only drinks ice water in the winter, too! And for the yellow team—”

The audience roared with laughter at the lighthearted, revealing tidbits about the teachers included with their introductions, and Masachika was laughing along with them… when Alisa suddenly stood up after checking the field day schedule.

“The event after the next is the cosplay race, so I’m going to go get ready.”

“Oh, all right. See you later.”

“You’ve got this, Alisa.”

Right after Alisa left, one of the sports festival committee members called out to Touya and asked, “Hey! Sorry for bothering you, but do you think you could help us set up the ball-tossing game?”

“Oh, sure.”

“Wait. Sit. I’ve got this.”

After Masachika sat Touya back down, he promptly rushed over to help the committee member set up the game…

“…Wait. ‘Ball tossing’?”

…without even realizing what he had gotten himself into.

◇

“I feel abused…”

After helping set up the ball-tossing game, Masachika was roped into assisting with the actual competition. And as expected, it was a disaster. His job was to hold the pole for the basket and count the balls afterward. This meant standing directly underneath the pseudo-basketball hoop…which meant that he might take countless balls to the face. Of course, he could lower his head to protect his beautiful mug, but that only meant that the balls would be whacking him on the back of the head.

Therefore, he decided to be brave, with his chin held high…when a ball suddenly smacked him right in the cheek, of all places. At first, he figured someone must have accidentally kicked a ball, but numerous balls continued to come flying over from the side… *There were so many balls that it better have been an accident*, he thought.

"Well, at least the basket didn't break over my head! That's a plus!"

At least, that was what he told himself to feel better…as pitiful as that was. At any rate, it wasn't long before the announcer presented the next event.

"Next up is the costume race."

The moment the event was announced, the audience erupted with even more excitement than ever before. It was time for the costume race—a glorified cosplay competition where one boy and one girl from each class participated, and, as usual for events like these, the most attractive students were always chosen. When Masachika looked over at the waiting area before the starting line, he was surprised to see so many familiar faces. In fact, most of the first-year girls were involved with the election in one way or another.

But, well, this is hardly even a competition, so it doesn't matter who wins… I'm sure Alya's going to go for first place because she wants to beat Yuki, though. All I ask is that she doesn't get hurt.

Masachika wished Alisa the best from afar while he waited at the finish line for sports-festival-committee-related work. Before long, the first-year girls were lined up at the starting line, then they suddenly dashed off the instant the starting pistol was fired.

"Whoa! That's Alya for ya. Look at her go."

Alisa was in the lead, followed closely by Yuki. The rest were neck and neck until they arrived at the designated spot with several black plastic bags placed on the ground.

"The contestants have arrived at the costume station, where their choice will determine their fate!"

Of course, the costumes varied widely in terms of how long they took to put on and how easy they were to run in. In fact, it could be said that this was the most important part of the race, but all Masachika could do was pray that Alisa would get a costume that she could run in comfortably. Before long, Alisa and

the others each took a plastic bag and disappeared into a large, dark tent set up along the course.

“The contestants have all entered the changing zone! Who will be the first to emerge in costume?!”

Fortunately, there were several members of the handicraft club waiting inside the tent to help anyone who needed assistance changing into their costumes. Apparently, they wanted to ensure that no one would be left behind due to a complicated costume. While Masachika wanted to question the wisdom of creating such intricate outfits, he appreciated the effort to keep the changing times relatively even for everyone. At any rate, a few minutes went by when a figure eventually emerged from the tent.

“Oh?! The first to emerge is—”

Her silver locks danced in the breeze, kissed by the sunlight.

“Kujou!”

“Yes!!”

As the crowd erupted in cheers, Masachika pumped his fist in the air, and—

“Hmm?”

He frowned as he took another look at Alisa’s costume. She was wearing the classic white sailor uniform, the epitome of youth, with a blue schoolbag slung over her shoulder. And in her mouth…was a slice of bread.

“I can’t believe my eyes! A sailor uniform?! No! This is cosplay of your good ol’-fashioned comic book heroine, loved by girls all over the country!”

The announcer’s commentary was met with laughter from the audience. Meanwhile, Alisa, clearly oblivious to the commotion, began to dash off with the slice of bread still in her mouth.

Her silver hair danced in the wind, her skirt bouncing with each step while the bread bobbed up and down. As she rounded the corner, revealing a bit of her midriff from her too-short sailor uniform, a certain portion of the audience exploded in excitement, for some strange reason.

“She’s turning the corner! She’s going around a freakin’ corner!”

“Who do you think she’s going to bump into?!”

With all eyes on her, filled with a bizarre sense of anticipation, Alisa sped around the track while nothing out of the ordinary happened until, eventually, the second runner burst out of the tent.

“The next contestant is coming out of the tent! It’s—huh?”

The commentator’s voice, which had initially risen with excitement, faltered. And it was no wonder why, either, for what emerged was…not exactly an ordinary costume but a full-on mascot costume.

A rather silly, endearing dinosaur-like figure, which was seemingly constructed from paper and plastic, had emerged with Ayano’s expressionless face peering out from its neck.

“This is…Kimishima? Is she dressed as a T-Rex? Or something? It definitely looks like she drew the short straw when it comes to costumes!”

The commentator, clearly unsure of how to react, tried to muster up some enthusiasm, when suddenly—

“…! Mn…!”

Ayano-saurus, with her tiny legs, began to sprint forward as hard as she could. Her head, made of paper, bobbed wildly from side to side while her tail wagged furiously. Though she was hardly running—despite her best efforts—the sight of her waddling along brought laughter and squeals from the female spectators.

“Ayano is sooo cute!”

“I want to take her home!”

“Look this way!”

She had, without a doubt, become their mascot. At any rate, no more than a few seconds had gone by before a pink figure came bursting out from the tent as well.

“Oof! That’s bad.”

Masachika let out a gasp, a mix of shock and pity, the moment he witnessed the next competitor. Because the pink figure that had emerged was…truly pink from head to toe, wearing a pink bodysuit and a helmet that had what appeared to be a horn sprouting from it.

“Ooo?! Is that—? Is that the pink ranger?! I have no idea what that is! I don’t even know who’s inside that suit!”

The commentator and the audience burst into laughter with a mix of amusement and surprise. But when the pink superhero (superheroine?) started chasing after Ayano-saurus, the comical pursuit sent the crowd into fits of laughter, with tears in their eyes.

“Look at the superhero go!”

“Run, dino-girl! Run!”

But amid the cheers and applause, Masachika muttered, “Seriously, who is that, though? It doesn’t seem to be Yuki… Don’t tell me that’s Nonoa—”

But his concern was quickly dismissed.

“Someone else is emerging from the tent…! Oooh?!”

After a string of comedic costumes, a more serious cosplay outfit appeared, causing the commentator’s excitement to soar.

“Is that…a police officer in a miniskirt?!”

The audience erupted into cheers at the sight of the blond beauty, looking like some sort of crooked cop in a comic book who would chew gum and blow bubbles.

“It’s me! I did it! Arrest me!”

“I’m a criminal, Ms. Officer!”

Amid the crude cheers of the dirty-minded gentlemen, Nonoa, armed with handcuffs, ran with her beautiful legs wrapped in fishnet stockings.

A miniskirt-clad police officer was chasing a superhero, who was chasing a dinosaur. It was an incredibly surreal sight, to say the least. And before long…

“Aaand Kujou just crossed the finish line! Not only was she lucky enough to pick an outfit that was perfect for running and easy to change into, but she also ran incredibly well!”

Masachika rushed over to greet Alisa at the finish line.

“Good job, Alya. Congratulations on getting first.”

“Thanks.”

“Supposedly, you change out of your costume in the building over there…but I think your gym clothes are still in the tent.”

Masachika glanced toward the changing area, where he coincidentally saw Yuki emerging from behind the curtain.

“Oh, that’s…”

“She looks incredible…”

They both let out audible gasps of admiration at Yuki's attire. She was wearing a pure white and red dress, exuding a sense of purity. Her long black hair was tied back, adorned with an intricate golden crown, and in her hand was one of those sacred bells used in traditional shrine maiden dances.

"Oh! It's Suou, dressed as a shrine maiden! And a kagura shrine maiden, at that!"

Her outfit, which undeniably conveyed a sense of holiness and elegance to Japanese people, perfectly suited Yuki, who was classically beautiful…as long as she kept her mouth shut. However…

"That looks really hard to walk in, huh?"

Yuki was rather short, so the *hakama* skirt was dragging on the ground. She was also wearing *tabi* socks and straw sandals, which only made running more difficult. But despite Masachika's expectations, Yuki managed to jog at a surprisingly fast pace, all while making sure not to dirty her outfit.

"Man, I'm impressed she can run like that."

"But…she looks like she's going to get last place, at this rate. She might be able to pass Ayano, though…"

"Yeah, the second-year girls are already getting lined up at the starting line. They might even pass Ayano if she doesn't pick up the pace."



Despite being the second one to have finished changing, Ayano was still only halfway through the course, and although she was waddling as rapidly as she could, she was gradually being overtaken one by one. Alisa and Masachika watched with furrowed brows. Even the audience, which had initially watched with amused smiles, seemed almost worried, as if they were concerned that Ayano was going to collapse at any moment. When Yuki eventually caught up with Ayano with about a quarter of the course remaining, she seemed to have said something to her, took her dinosaur hand, and then started walking alongside her at a slower pace.

“Interesting. She really thought this through…”

The pair, hand in hand, was met with warm applause and cheers from the audience as they worked together toward the finish line. Although they had already secured last place, their confident strides, accompanied by cheerful waves to the crowd, somehow felt like a victory lap.

Hmm… I guess you could say that she didn’t win the match, but she won the battle? Looks like Yuki came out on top this time.

Although he didn’t say it aloud to Alisa, Masachika could tell that she felt the same way as she watched Yuki with a hint of frustration in her eyes.

“Alya, your face.”

“Ah.”

Once he pointed out that Alisa had been glaring at Yuki, she frowned uncomfortably, as if she suddenly recognized what she was doing, too. Therefore, Masachika decided to change the subject to lighten the mood.

“By the way, there’s one thing that’s been bothering me. How in the world did Ayano’s costume fit into that plastic bag?”

“Oh… The costume was actually inside the tent. The plastic bag just had a piece of paper inside it that said ‘dinosaur,’ and there was some cushioning? Or something inside to make the plastic bag look like it had an actual costume in it.”

“Ohhh. That makes sense.”

“I have a question, too. What did the commentator mean by ‘good ol’-fashioned comic book heroine’? The audience got really excited.”

“Uh… I actually didn’t get the specific reference, either, but there’s a common trope in comics where a girl has a slice of bread in her mouth while she’s running to school saying, ‘I’m going to be late!’ She usually bumps into a boy when she turns the corner, and that boy ends up being the one she’s destined to marry or something…”

“Oh? So that’s what the slice of bread was for…”

Masachika smiled wryly as he watched Alisa stare at the tooth-marked bread with a troubled expression.

“I guess you got yourself a free lunch, huh? Hey, check it out.”

The crowd erupted in applause as Yuki and Ayano crossed the finish line hand in hand while Masachika, as a member of the organizing committee, went over to greet them.

“Good job, you two—especially you, Ayano. I mean it.”

“Thank…you…”

Masachika offered his heartfelt sympathy to Ayano, who looked exhausted despite her expressionless face.

“What do you want to do? The changing room’s over there, but I can help you if you want. I could even get a cart and push you all the way over there.”

“No… I’m fine. I realized that I can keep my balance as long as I walk slowly.”

“Are you sure? Don’t overdo it, okay?”

Suddenly, there was a burst of cheers, drawing Masachika’s gaze to find the fourth girl from the second-year student lineup emerging from behind the curtains… And it was none other than Maria, dressed as a nurse, with a toy syringe and a binder.

“Whoa! Would you look at Kujou! Hellooo, nurse! Now, that’s some traditional cosplay, if you ask me! And check out how good she looks!”

The announcer may have been going wild, but the crowd was even more hyped, enveloped in an unusual and intense atmosphere of enthusiasm, despite the outfit not being all that revealing.

“Argh! My stomach! It hurts! Nurse!”

“My heart hurts… Is this lovesickness?!”

…Some students even started feigning illnesses. The enthusiasm for Maria was so overwhelming that you couldn’t

help but feel sorry for the other three participants currently running on the track.

“L-look how thick she is in all the right places!”

The instant Yuki whispered her honest, blunt opinion, Masachika reflexively reached out to smack her…but then remembered she was still in costume and stopped himself. Regardless, one runner after another gradually emerged from the tent in costume…until there was only one left, and it was definitely one to remember, to say the least.

“Whoaaa?! It’s Kiryuuin! And what a dress! What an incredible dress!”

The ever-popular Sumire made her grand entrance, dressed in a voluminous gown reminiscent of a medieval noblewoman, complete with a wide-brimmed hat, a flamboyant fan, and her signature cascading curls.

““She looks *too* good in that.””

The brother and sister unintentionally uttered the very same words, but that was simply a testament to how good Sumire looked… She was incredibly fast, to boot.

“Look at the trails of fire following Kiryuuin! How do you even run so fast in that dress?!”

Sumire ran at an incredible speed, one hand holding her skirt as she used her fan to cover her mouth. She quickly overtook the other runners and made her way toward the front of the pack.

“How is she running so fast in that skirt?”

“Um… I really hope that I am seeing things, but is she wearing heels?”

The siblings watched in stunned silence as Sumire surged ahead right through the finish line, crossing it first. She then haughtily threw back her head and let out a triumphant laugh.

“Oh-ho-ho-ho! Victory is mine!”

“…She appears to really understand the role.”

With a newfound respect for his schoolmate’s dedication to fan service, Masachika turned his attention to guiding the second-year girls who had just finished the race.

“The changing room is on the first floor in the school building! Please go change after you are given your gym clothes!”

Maria crossed the finish line in fourth place in the middle of his announcement.

“Oh, hey. Good job, Masha.”

“Thank you, Kuze. Ah, I was so close to getting third place…”

“Having to hold that syringe and binder while you were running definitely didn’t help, either, I bet,” added Masachika while he approached her.

What the…? I don’t know if I’d call her thick…as much as I’d say she’s bursting at the seams.

After getting a good look of her up close, he noticed how stretched her pink nurse uniform was in some places, straining at the seams while making it hard for him to find a place to look.

“Whoa?!”

Something slammed into Masachika from behind, causing him to stumble, but when he turned around in a fluster, he found Alisa staring at him, with her shoulder forward and that piece of bread still in her mouth.

“Alya? What’s wrong? Wait. You still haven’t changed out of that?”

“…”

Although Alisa didn’t even reply to Masachika’s concern, the look in her eyes made it seem as if she knew that he was having impure thoughts about Maria, prompting him to break out in a cold sweat.

“*Haaah…* Come on, Masha.”

“Huh? But they still haven’t brought me my gym clothes yet… Oh, hey! Kuze! Do you have your phone with you?”

“What? Yeah…?”

“Then could you take a picture? Come on, Alya. You too.”

“…?!”

Just as Masachika reached into his gym uniform pocket for his smartphone, Maria grabbed his arm and pulled him toward her, then pulled Alisa as well, sandwiching herself in the middle.

“Ready. Go ahead, Kuze.”

“Uh… Are you sure?”

“About what? Oh, is the sun too bright where I’m standing?”

“No, that’s not what I meant,” he replied with a straight face, then shrugged before holding out his smartphone.

“Come closer, Alya. You’re too far.”

“But…”

“Come on, smile. Say cheese.”

“All right, you guys ready? Three, two…one.”

Masachika switched his phone to selfie mode and took a few photos, just as he was asked to. He also took a few shots of just Alisa and Maria as well.

“Thanks, Kuze. Do you think you could send those to me later?”

“Yeah, sure.”

Masachika nodded, feeling a mix of excitement and guilt at having inadvertently obtained photos of the two of them doing cosplay, when…

“Masachika, do you think you could take pictures of us, too?”

“Oh! Me too!”

“Would it be too much to ask to have my picture taken as well?”

Yuki, Nonoa, Sumire, and many others started to raise their hands one after another, suddenly creating what could only be described as a cosplay photo shoot (with only one photographer).



Once Masachika finished taking pictures of everyone who wanted one, a voice called out to the students from the side.

“Second-year students! I have your gym clothes here! Please make sure your name is written on the name tag before you take your clothes!”

Meanwhile, Masachika raised an eyebrow as he watched one of the members of the handicraft club approach them, carrying a black plastic bag.

“Professor Side Slit?”

“Hey, Kuze. What’s up? Doing a photo shoot?”

“Yeah, everyone kept asking me to take their picture…”

“Really? Nice,” said Professor Side Slit, nodding with pure joy until she stopped in front of Masachika, and her expression became gravely serious.

“Give me the pictures.”

“No.”

“Why?!”

“Because I have image rights!”

“My girls have rights, too!”

“Are you talking about your costumes?”

“Yes!”

“Listen, Pro-Slit.”

“That’s not my name, but go on.”

“Clothes…don’t have rights.”

“Maybe legally.”

“What kind of argument is that?”

“Kuze, in my club, humans are accessories for clothes.”

“What the…?! Sounds like a horror movie. I don’t even know what you’re talking about anymore.”

“Put simply, even when taking pictures, the clothes are the real stars while whoever’s wearing them just happens to be there.”

“Sorry. I feel listening any longer is only going to twist how I see the world, so I’m going to head back to work.”

Although Masachika’s job was to guide those who had finished the race and assist them if needed, he didn’t have much to do during the race itself. So after making an excuse to leave, he returned to the finish line, only to find that Professor Side Slit was following him.

“Stop following me. You have work to do, too.”

“Don’t worry.”

“About what?”

The moment those words escaped his lips, the third-year girls started emerging from the tent one after another.

“Ooo! Check out Narahashi wearing a traditional Chinese gown!”

Elena, the second runner, waved to the crowd as she sprinted down the track, her long legs on full display, thanks to the deep—very deep—slits in her skirt.

That was when Masachika was tapped on the shoulder and turned around, only to be met by Professor Side Slit’s smug grin while she silently pointed to herself with her thumb.

“…”

“Yeah, I know. It’s obvious you made that. Stop trying to show off like you don’t even need words to show how great you are,” he ranted, almost wanting to roll his eyes at the fact that she’d come all the way over to do that. He then shifted his gaze back toward Elena.

“Anyway, those slits are way too high. Elena’s tall, so she can get away with it, but if anyone else wore that, you’d easily be able to see their butt.”

“That’s why it has strings. You’d only need to make a few adjustments, and you wouldn’t be able to see a thing.”

“Uh-huh… I’m just surprised that Elena seems to be confident wearing that… Oh, wait. She’s starting to look a little embarrassed.”

“She’s surprisingly so innocent, isn’t she?”

Elena beautifully crossed the finish line in first place, a hint of shyness flushing her cheeks.

“Yay!”

“Congratulations, Elena… Your gym clothes are over there.”

“What? Why does it seem like you’re trying to get rid of me? I heard you were doing a photo shoot for all the girls after the race.”

“You heard wrong.”

“I saw you taking pictures. Come on, take my picture.”

“Fine…”

“Yay! Check it out.”

The moment Masachika raised his smartphone, Elena grabbed the back of her Chinese gown with a mischievous grin and made it flutter in the air.

“Weee!”

“Yeah, so sexy. Wow.”

“Hey?! Could you at least make it sound like you mean it?! Besides, isn’t there something else you want to tell me?”

“You’re blushing. Stop embarrassing yourself.”

“What?! My face is red because I just got done running!”

“I hear that Chinese medicine is good for palpitations and shortness of breath.”

“Stop treating me like an old lady! I’m only eighteen years old! Check out this tight body!”

“A real eighteen-year-old girl wouldn’t be bragging like that.”

“Come on, Kuze. Why are you so mean to me?”

“This is how I always act around girls I’m close to. Right?”

“Yep,” Professor Side Slit said in agreement, inspiring Elena to theatrically cover her mouth in shock, as if she were trying to hold back her tears.

“I can’t believe you! I thought I was special!”

“…Well, I definitely have no filter around you…so I guess that makes you special in a way.”

“See? See! I am special! Oh, Kuze. You’re such a playboy.”

“A ‘playboy’? Who says that anymore?”

“Are you calling me an old hag?!”

“I didn’t say that. Anyway, hurry up and let me take your picture,” grumbled Masachika as he looked down at his phone.

“Get out of the picture. Nobody asked for the designer to join,” he added, with a reproachful glare toward Professor Side Slit, who decided it was only natural that she would stand next to Elena.

CHAPTER 8

My, have you grown.

“I need all students participating in the scavenger hunt over here, please!”

“Class 1 students in the front! Class 2 students behind them!”

Masachika got in line, following the directions of the sports festival committee members, who were waving their arms and shouting.

“Next up is the scavenger hunt. Commentary from here on out will be handled by me, student council publicist, Yuki Suou.”

A cute, well-projected voice suddenly echoed, stimulating the audience to erupt in cheers. When Masachika looked up, he saw Yuki, sitting in the commentary booth, waving with a friendly smile.

That little punk… She plans on winning more votes this way, huh? “Publicist” is such an unfair, cheap job…even though I am the one who suggested the student council have one.

Yuki’s plan seemed to be working, too, seeing as how the other students standing in line with him were visibly excited.

“What?! The princess is going to do the commentary? Seriously? She might even say my name…”

“Maybe she’ll cheer me on if I pretend I can’t run fast?”

“Excuse me! May I have your attention, please?!” shouted a committee member, since there were obviously more than a few filthy guys making their desires no secret instead of paying attention.

“Your goal is to first run over to the table, which will have pieces of folded-up paper on them! After that, you choose one piece of paper and open it! That’s where you will find your objective! Please return to the table once you find your item!

After that, you need to start running to where our helper there is standing, then take a lap around the track until you reach that person holding the flag! That is the finish line! One of our checkers will confirm if you brought the correct item back. If you make a mistake, then you will have to start all over, so please be careful! And make sure you don't forget to do your lap around the track, or you'll have to start over!"

The committee members were working tirelessly to fulfill their duties. However…

"Hmm? Is that Alisa Kujou holding the flag?"

"Oh, you're right. She really stands out, huh?"

"Listen to me!!"

Masachika looked at the committee member, who was shouting, with pity in his eyes, for the hormone-fueled stares of the teenage boys were already fixated on Alisa, who was standing at the finish line.

Eh. This is basically just a fun little game, so it's not like anyone's serious about winning. I'll just make sure I don't get last place…

Just as that thought crossed his mind, he felt a shiver run down his spine, as if someone was watching him, so he turned around…to find Alisa glaring right at him.

…Oh, you're telling me that I better win? Yes, Your Majesty.

Masachika knew that look in his competitive partner's expressive eyes and realized that losing wasn't an option.

I guess I could at least shoot for third place. It doesn't really get us that many points, but it's better than nothing…

Every field day at Seirei Academy, students would be divided into four groups based on their class and would compete for the highest total score. There was no particular reward for winning, and both Yuki from Class A and Masachika and Alisa from Class B were all on the red team, so there was absolutely no reason for them to be competitive…unless you were Alisa, it seemed.

She's always giving it her all. If she's going to do something, she's going to do it to win. That's the kind of person my partner is.

Masachika rotated his shoulders as if he had no other choice, then sharply exhaled before putting on his game face. He was dead serious now, aiming for at least third place. While everyone

else was taking it easy and only interested in having fun, he was going to go all out to win, even if it wasn't the mature thing to do.

"Next group to the front! You're up!"

When his turn came, Masachika took his place at the starting line and got in position to sprint.

"On your mark! Get set! Go!"

When the starting pistol fired with a bang, Masachika took off with all his might, and he easily reached the long table first, probably since most of the students who were participating were more interested in having fun rather than in showing off how fast they were.

Please be something easy to find and easy to carry!

When he grabbed the piece of paper in the middle and unfolded it…he found the words "*someone else's girlfriend*" written inside.

"…"

He closed his eyes and leaned his head back for a second, then looked down at the paper in his hand again.

"Someone else's girlfriend."

And in the corner, in tiny writing, was a footnote: "**women who are already in relationships (excluding married women).*"

You've gotta be kidding me!!

Only after reading it a second time did Masachika finally grasp the reality of the situation and let out an inner scream.

What? Am I supposed to be like, "Excuse me! Does anyone have a girlfriend I can borrow?!" Obviously, I can't borrow someone I don't even know, and trying to borrow someone I do know would be way too awkward!

And to make matters worse, the footnote specifically said "excluding married women," which meant that he couldn't even grab someone from the audience like his mom or his friend's mom, either.

I guess they expected the hunter to go ask their sister in the audience for—wait. What kind of sister even comes to watch their sibling play on field day? Which means they wanted the hunter to choose one of the students…

Masachika gnashed his teeth in frustration when the commentator, Yuki, suddenly stated, "*Whatever could have happened? Masachika Kuze on the red team seems to be having trouble, despite being the first to arrive at the table! Perhaps he drew a difficult object for the scavenger hunt? Whatever the case, he is going to be left behind, at this rate!*"

She was right, too. The other students who came after him didn't hesitate at all before scattering, and before he knew it, Masachika was the only one left standing in front of the long table.

I'm going to get in the next group's way if I don't move soon… What should I do?! I know a few people with girlfriends, but borrowing them would be so awkward… Wait! Hold on.

In that instant, a memory from around half an hour ago flashed through his mind.

"Next, starting for the blue team is Ms. Tabata of Class 1-C, who supposedly just got a new, younger boyfriend!"

…! That's it!

No sooner had the idea occurred to him than Masachika dashed toward the tent where the teachers were gathered, and he immediately yelled to the teachers, who were looking at him in surprise.

"Excuse me! Is Ms. Tabata of Class 1-C here?!"

While waiting for a reply, he decided to search for Ms. Tabata himself…when one of the teachers in the front suddenly mentioned:

"Somebody's already borrowing her."

"You've gotta be kidding me!!"

The teachers burst out laughing at his sudden exclamation. Feeling a little embarrassed, he turned around, and, sure enough, there was Ms. Tabata, holding hands with a large male student as they waited at the finish line.

Seriously? What now? Should I wait for her? No, I can't. The checker still has to make sure they got the right "item," which is going to take a while. Then I'd have to return to the course before running back to the finish line. It would take way too long. There has to be someone else—

Masachika was suddenly struck with another idea. He remembered someone who was known to have a boyfriend and

who wouldn't mind him borrowing her.

After hesitating for only three seconds, he ran back to the tent where he had been, mustered up all the courage he could, then extended his hand to the one person he was looking for, who was sitting in a folding chair.

"Masha! Can I borrow you?"

"Huh? Oh, sure."

After blinking in bewilderment for a few seconds, Maria took his hand and stood up. Grasping her hand tightly, Masachika then dashed back out onto the field.

Huh… I'm starting to feel a bit of déjà vu.

Though he knew he was in the middle of a race, Masachika couldn't help but smirk as memories of playing with Mah in the park popped into his head like a flashback.

Adjusting his pace to match Maria's, he glanced around the track.

There's only one person ahead… All right, I can do this!

Although one student with a parasol was walking ahead, the other students were still nowhere to be seen. Perhaps Masachika managed to get one of the easier tasks, since he almost immediately found someone. Maybe he hit the jackpot, even, he thought, only to shake the notion out of his head.

No. What am I thinking? I didn't hit the jackpot… Then again, it could have been worse. It might have been hard actually finding someone with your objective, depending on what it was, and if you ended up not being able to find anyone with it, you might have had to go all the way back to the school building to get it. So I guess my "item" was pretty manageable in comparison, seeing as how I still have a chance of placing.

He reached the long table with the objective slips on it while lost in thought, then took off down the track in pursuit of the finish line once more, when—

"Uh-oh! Calling Masachika Kuze on the red team. You must carry your 'item' you borrowed all the way to the finish line."

Masachika stopped dead in his tracks when he heard the commentator's voice, and when he turned his head sharply toward the commentary booth, he saw Yuki with the most amused of smiles.

“Technically, your item must not touch the ground even once during your lap around the track, either,” she claimed.

The crowd exploded with cheers and jeers.

“You’ve got this, man!”

“Pick her up like a princess!”

“Prove to us you’re a man, Kuze!”

Masachika’s cheeks twitched involuntarily as the crowd provoked him.

Pick her up like a princess? That’s definitely not happening. There’s no way I could carry her in my arms while running all the way to the finish line. I might be able to carry Yuki, but Masha would snap my arms. Besides, what kind of scumbag would borrow someone else’s girlfriend, then carry her in his arms like it’s their wedding day?!

Of course, the students who were teasing him didn’t know what his actual objective was. They probably thought it was just something a little embarrassing like “find the most beautiful girl at school” or “find someone you admire.” This was further proved, when—

“L-like a princess? Oh, come on. ♪ Stop. ♪”

Maria cupped her face with both hands while swaying from side to side with a somewhat troubled smile. But the fact that she was basically grinning from ear to ear made Masachika wonder if she really was troubled at all. Her constant, hopeful glances weren’t helping, either.

Is it just my imagination, or is Masha kind of hoping that I’m going to pick her up in my arms…? It’s definitely not my imagination.

Masachika twitched his lips, as if he could hear the voices in her head saying, “I’m embarrassed, but I’ll do it if you want to, Kuze.”

“<Crossing the finish line in his arms? Makes it sound like…… *squeal.* ♡>”

Masachika took back what he’d just thought, because she was imagining something far more extreme. She was definitely fantasizing about life’s finish line, and that realization even made Masachika start to blush, making him briefly forget about the race altogether.

“The other students are gradually making their way back, but Masachika Kuze remains still! Is this the end for him?!”

Yuki’s commentary suddenly snapped Masachika back into reality, and when he turned around, he saw a student with a DSLR camera running his way. And behind that student, for some reason, was another student carrying an ornament of a bear.

“Where in the world did you get a bear?!” Masachika jokingly remarked at the student carrying the wooden bear. He then began to grind his teeth as he became even more aware of the reality he was facing.

This isn’t good… I might not even get third place at this rate. Ugh! It is what it is, I guess!

Instantly making up his mind, Masachika stuffed the prompt into his pocket, turned his back on Maria, and crouched down. Then, ignoring the teasing from those around him and Maria’s expectant gaze, he called out to the person behind him:

“I’ll carry you on my back. Hop on, Masha.”

“H-huh? But I’m kind of sweaty…”

“I don’t care! Hurry!” he strongly urged, while inwardly giving himself a pep talk.

Listen, the person on your back is Mah. You’re going to give this sweet, innocent angel a piggyback ride while you run. Got it? So there’s nothing to be embarrassed about! And you’re not going to have any lewd thoughts, either!

Right after he managed to form a mental image of himself as Sah carrying Mah…Masachika felt something warm and soft squish against his back.

Noooooo! Mah, you’ve grown so much.

The overwhelming softness fully shattered the delicate image of Mah that he had conjured up. It not only brutally destroyed how he viewed her but also left him completely paralyzed as well.

“A-are you okay? Am I too heavy?”

“You’re fine. Hold on tight…”

Although he was troubled for reasons other than her weight, Masachika mustered all his reason to avoid showing any signs of uneasiness. Nevertheless, Maria then delicately draped her arms around his neck, surrendering her entire being to him, and the

pull of gravity drew her so closely against his back that their embrace couldn't have been any more intimate.

Gaaaaaah! Something is smushing against my back! I'm not going to say what it is, but my shoulder blades are being smothered by something huge!

A sensation he had never experienced before caused Masachika to let out an involuntary cry, somewhere between a scream and a cheer, as he started to stand erect—meaning that he was going to stand tall, of course. After all, he was crouching so that Maria could get on his back for a piggyback ride, but he needed to stand to start running. There was no hidden or second meaning behind it. This was about his legs.

Ugh! Pull yourself together, you filthy scoundrel! The girl on my back is Mah! Stop having filthy thoughts about her, or I'll kill ya!

He was once again desperately trying to persuade himself of that while doing anything he could to ignore the sensation touching his back. He then reached around to wrap his arms under her legs—*squish.*

"…"

In an instant, his thoughts were blown away by the raw sensation of her bare skin, which was far more intense than what he was feeling on his back through her gym clothes. To make matters worse, Maria began to bashfully squirm while he held her as well.

"Mn! Ahn. This is kind of embarrassing…because my legs are so fat…"

"They're not," he reflexively replied, but his focus was on his own hands and arms, which were gripping Maria's hamstrings and thighs. Her skin was oh-so-smooth, and her legs were soft. The door to the world of foot fetishes, which Alisa had already cracked open, was now flung wide open so hard that the hinges broke right off.

It all makes sense now… No wonder thighs are so popular.

And it didn't just end there. He was on the verge of some strange enlightenment…only to be snapped back into reality when the student with the camera passed by him.

"…! Ready to go?!"

"R-ready!"

Determined to at least get third place, Masachika took off running with Maria on his back.

“Look at Masachika Kuze go! It is hard to believe that he can carry someone while still running this fast!”

The audience, who had been talking smack, seemed to mirror Yuki’s sentiment as well and were now cheering and roaring with surprise. Nevertheless, running so quickly would obviously come at a price.

“…!”

With every step, a heavy thud reverberated through his legs and arms. In addition, the sensation of Maria’s soft, squishy body pressing against him became more prominent.

Gaaaaaah! The girl I’m carrying on my back is Mah! The angel Mah!

Masachika gritted his teeth while he ran, as if his once rational mind had turned into mush. He ran with everything he had. He ran to forget.

At any rate, he continued to run until he saw Alisa standing right at the finish line beyond the student ahead.

Oh, crap.

That was the first thought that instinctively came to mind when he saw her. After all, Alisa’s eyes were actually burning with an azure flame, as if to prove his intuition correct. She stared at Maria, who was being carried by him, then her eyes shifted toward Maria’s arms wrapped around his body, before stopping one last time on her legs in Masachika’s hands. Finally, her gaze returned to Masachika’s face, where it lingered. It lingered and lingered.

Eeek!

A shiver ran down his spine, accompanied by a strange sense of guilt as he was once again overcome with this bizarre feeling that he was cheating on her.

“Hwoo!”

“Eep?!” Masachika squealed bizarrely, feeling someone suddenly blow into his right ear, followed by the giggles of a young maiden.

“Tee-hee. You’re so cute,” exclaimed Maria in an almost a devilish whisper, sending a chill down his neck.

“Masha? Y-you know we’re in a public place, right?”

“Don’t worry. I made sure nobody would see,” she whispered into his ear, while tightening her arms around him.

“I don’t want to give you up.”

The whisper was so soft that it was almost inaudible.

Unable to see the look on her face, Masachika reached the finish line before he could even ask her what she meant.

“Masachika Kuze has crossed the finish line for third place!”

“It’s over. You can put Masha down now.”

“O-oh, right.”

“Go talk to the checker over there,” Alisa demanded coldly in a stiff voice, before turning her head away from him. However, the instant Maria hopped off his back and gently wrapped her hand around his, Alisa swiftly turned back around.

“…? Alya?”

Alisa narrowed her eyes at her clearly bewildered sister and mentioned:

“Masha, I’m pretty sure you don’t need to hold his hand.”

“Huh? But I’m his scavenger hunt item…”

“Y-yeah, but…!”

“Hey! Can I check your borrowed item over here, please?!”

A committee member called out to Masachika, and though he was still worried about Alisa, he honestly felt a little relieved as he headed over to the checker. All the while, he could feel Alisa’s gaze piercing his back, making him feel even more guilty than he already did.

It’s not like I did anything wrong, but…

Was it simply a man’s natural inclination to feel guilty, or was there a deeper, more shameful reason?

And why did Masha…?

Masachika felt that there was something off about Maria purposefully holding his hand in front of Alisa, and he glanced at her profile.

“…?”

A gentle smile played on Maria’s lips as she tilted her head at his gaze. Her expression seemed innocent enough, and yet…

“I don’t want to give you up”?

“May I see your scavenger hunt objective?”

“Oh, right.”

He took out the piece of paper from his pocket and handed it to the checker.

“Heh-heh. What was your objective anyway?” wondered Maria, seemingly even more cheerful than usual. And yet—

◇

“Hmph.”

A minute later, Maria was inside the student council’s tent with a pout, which was a very rare sight.

“Masha? Are you mad about something?” Masachika asked hesitantly.

“Yes, I’m mad,” she immediately replied, making him recoil. To make matters worse, everyone else was gone, meaning he had to face Maria’s anger directly and alone.

“Kuze.”

“Y-yes?”

He jumped as Maria, who took a seat by his side, called his name. She remained facing forward, only glancing at Masachika out of the corner of her eye, and revealed:

“I’ve never dated anyone other than Sah, you know?”

“Oh… Yeah.”

He felt a rush of embarrassment by Maria’s unexpected confession, when all of a sudden, she pivoted her entire body toward him, leaning in with an intensity that once again caught him off guard.

“I like you and have only ever liked you, Kuze.”

“Th-thank you?”

“And you parading me around the entire school…as if I were someone else’s girlfriend. Do you know how that feels?”

“Ah—”

Masachika was overcome with intense regret as he gazed into her eyes, a mix of anger and sadness.

“…I’m sorry. I should have been more considerate of your feelings.”

“I don’t forgive you.”

She coldly rejected his apology, which was muffled by the weight of his guilt, as he bowed.

“The only way I’m going to forgive you is if you go on a date with me!”

“A what now?”

Masachika unconsciously raised his head, completely taken aback by her unexpected proposal.

“A date. I want you to take me out on an extremely romantic date for an entire day, or I’m never going to forgive you.”

“‘An extremely romantic date’…?”

“One that will make my heart skip a beat.”

It was quite a challenging proposition. After all, Masachika had very little dating experience. And besides, was it really right for him to go on a date with Maria when he knew about Alisa’s feelings for him…?

“Got it?”

“Y-yeah, got it,” Masachika agreed in spite of his doubt, for the pressure Maria was putting on him was far too much.

“Good.”

She then turned back around, seeming a little more cheerful, but the sudden realization that they were going on a date made Masachika’s heart pound. Nevertheless, his bewilderment went even beyond that. He skeptically stared at Maria’s profile in silence until she noticed his gaze, tilting her head to the side in wonder.

“What’s wrong?”

“Oh, uh…”

Masachika hesitated for a few agonizing seconds, wondering if he should even ask. But after going back and forth in his head a few times…he eventually made up his mind and timidly muttered:

“Uh… I don’t even know if I should be asking this, but…”

“Yes?”

“Didn’t you tell me…that you wanted me to understand and accept how Alya felt for me?”

It was her request to him two months ago at the park, and Masachika believed, without a doubt, that this was what Maria really wanted. That was why all of this felt so out of place: Maria holding his hand in front of Alisa and suddenly inviting him on a date—

“I did say that,” readily admitted Maria, much to his surprise. It was so effortless that he was actually taken aback. “I want you to accept how Alya feels for you. I mean it,” she added with sincerity…when one of the committee members suddenly called out to Maria from outside the tent.

“Masha! Sorry to bother you, but could you lend me a hand?”



“Oh, okay! Be right there!”

Maria stood out of her chair and took a few steps forward.

“But…”

She then turned around, her cheeks slightly red as she bashfully admitted:

“<I still want you to choose me in the end.>”

CHAPTER 9

Encounter

"…Alya? Don't you think it's about time that we get everyone for the Run together?"

"We still have plenty of time."

"I don't know… It's a lot of people…"

Although she knew in her mind that Masachika was correct, Alisa pressed her lips together and responded with silence, but before even another second went by, a committee member called out to them.

"Sorry to bother you! But do you think you could lend us a hand?"

"Be right there."

"What? Alya…"

Masachika tried to stop Alisa, who eagerly accepted the request, but she cut him off in a harsh tone.

"I'll be right back."

"…Okay. I'll get everyone ready for the Run in the meantime."

"…Thanks."

As Masachika didn't even attempt to argue, a tinge of guilt crept over Alisa while she hurried off to help.

Sigh… What am I doing?

She inwardly scoffed at her own irrational behavior, but she couldn't bear the thought of seeing Maria right now.

She couldn't stop thinking about how they looked together during the scavenger hunt—how they held hands—how closely their bodies touched while they raced toward the finish line. Every time she thought about it, a strange mix of anger and disgust churned within her.

Hmph.

She understood that Masachika had no choice but to carry Maria, because it was a scavenger hunt, and those were the rules. Neither Masachika nor Maria did anything wrong. She knew that, but she still couldn't shake this frustration. When she saw Masachika running while leading Maria by the hand, she just wanted to shout, "Let go of him!"

Alisa thought back to how Masachika took her hand while they danced at the school festival last year and how he took her hand as they ran through the night of the summer festival, but it was as if Maria had tainted those memories. A feeling of irrational, dark rage burned within her like never before, and she hated herself for ever feeling this way toward her own sister.

I know I'm being irrational—that it's all in my head. Masha didn't do anything wrong.

Maria didn't do anything wrong. She didn't…?

She didn't do anything wrong…! But still! Come on! What was that look on Masha's face?! She was all over him, too! Th-the indecency!

Alisa's intense sense of chastity sounded an alarm while she thought back to the smile on Maria's face as she clung to Masachika.

Girls shouldn't just let boys touch them like that! You're only supposed to let boys who you really trust and care about do that… I can't believe she would let him do that, even though she already has someone she likes… And Yuki! I can't believe her!

The more she thought about it, the angrier she got until it eventually spilled over onto Yuki for being the one to force Masachika to carry her sister in the first place.

She knows that Masha has a boyfriend already, so why would she do that? I know they're the rules, but still…! And now that I think about it, Yuki always has her hands all over Masachika, too! Come on, Masachika! Do you not know that it's okay to tell people "no"?!

Unable to quell the growing fire within her, Alisa furiously shoved the large rope into the gym storage room, as if to extinguish her burning anger.

"Thanks, Alisa. I really appreciate this."

"…It's fine. I'm a member of the student council, after all."

“Oh, right… Anyway, good luck during the Run! I’ll be cheering you on!”

Although taken aback by the unexpected encouragement from an older sports day committee member, Alisa managed to thank her with a smile. However, as she turned to leave the gym storage room and head back to the schoolyard, her legs began to strangely feel like lead. While taking out her anger on inanimate objects had temporarily cooled her down, she was now slowly being consumed by a growing sense of self-loathing.

Sigh… I should go wash my hands.

Glancing down at her somewhat dirty hands, Alisa decided to use them as an excuse to stall and head to the nearby restroom. After finishing up her business, she reluctantly began to make her way back to the schoolyard…when she suddenly spotted an elderly woman wandering alone far away from the parents’ seating area.

…? What is she doing all the way out here?

After tilting her head slightly and confirming that there was no one else around, Alisa decided to approach the elderly woman.

“Excuse me? Are you looking for something?” she hesitantly asked, but when the old woman swiftly turned around, her eyes widened. She looked to be in her sixties, dressed in a brightly colored blouse and a loose-fitting floral long jacket, which was a bit flashy but still fashionable. Combined with her gentle and kind demeanor, she gave the impression that she was some sort of refined gentlewoman.

Is she married to some big shot CEO around here or something…?

It was a reasonable assumption, given the school they were at.

“Oh my. You’re…,” muttered the old woman, as if she were a bit surprised.

“…?”

“Ah, my apologies. I was looking for a vending machine.”

“Oh, there’s one right over there. Follow me.”

“Are you sure? Thank you so much.”

Alisa felt a pang of guilt as she realized the elderly woman had taken her suggestion as a genuine act of kindness, even

though the truth was that she simply wasn't ready to face Masachika yet. Therefore, she began to head over to a nearby vending machine with a heavy heart.

"Today ended up being so hot, so I was really wanting something cold to drink."

"Yes, it really is hot for autumn."

"Right? I suppose climate change is making summers longer."

The elderly woman continued to speak with a gentle smile, as if she simply loved chatting, seemingly unconcerned that Alisa couldn't think of anything thoughtful to say in return.

"One of my grandchildren has been telling me how students have to keep going back and forth between the new and the old summer uniforms lately."

"Yes, my class is the same. We have two different types of summer uniforms, so there are still a lot of people who change, depending on the weather."

"But you have to switch to your winter uniform in November, right? I really hope it gets a little colder by then."

"Me too."

Perhaps due to the lady's gentle demeanor, Alisa found her relatively easy to talk to, as they walked all the way to the vending machine.

"Thank you so much. Let me buy you something for helping me."

"No, thank you. I'm fine."

"Don't be shy. Come, now. Pick whatever you'd like."

"Really, I'm fine."

After a few rounds of back-and-forth, Alisa gave in and pointed at the cheapest bottled water in the machine.

"I guess I'll go with this, then…"

"Oh my. Are you sure? Why not go with juice or something?"

"I can't. I have a match coming up."

"Ah, that makes sense. But then shouldn't you get a sports drink instead?"

"They leave a sweet aftertaste in my mouth and make my throat feel sticky, so I'd prefer water."

"I see. Well, I don't want to be pushy, so if that's what you want, that's what you get," replied the elderly woman as she

inserted money into the machine and began to select some drinks.

“Hmm… Grandpa wanted a cola…”

“Here, let me help.”

“Why, thank you, dear.”

Although a bit puzzled by this so-called grandpa’s choice, Alisa pressed one of the buttons on the top for cola. She then grabbed her bottled water as well and began to fidget with it in her hands.

Uh… Should I drink this here…?

But without even reaching a conclusion, Alisa ended up walking back the way she came with the old woman, missing whatever chance she had to say good-bye and return to Masachika.

“Thank you so much for your kindness.”

“Don’t mention it… It’s my duty…as a member of the committee…”

“You’re so sweet…and beautiful, to boot. I would be thrilled if my grandson had a nice, young lady like you in his future.”

“Ha-ha…”

“Oh my. ♪ I apologize for my teasing.”

“It’s fine…”

“Besides, I’m sure a lady as wonderful as you has plenty of suitors already. Do you have anyone you like?”

“I don’t really think about stuff like that…”

“Oh… Well, it’s nothing you have to rush into.”

Alisa felt a sense of relief when she heard the old woman’s casual remark. The loneliness and alienation she had felt at the amusement park and that gnawing anxiety of being left behind seemed to dissipate, as if a cool breeze had blown past her.

Maybe she would have an answer to what’s been bothering me.

Following her intuition, Alisa almost unconsciously found herself confiding her troubles to this elderly woman, whose name she didn’t even know.

“I don’t understand…what love is. How is it any different from affection…?”

The elderly woman analyzed Alisa’s expression while she hesitantly uttered those words. Then, as if she had seen something in Alisa’s profile, she faced forward and cheerfully

replied, “That’s a difficult question. Heck, I’m old, and I still don’t even completely understand how to explain it.”

“What? Really…?”

Even though she was married and already had grandchildren? Alisa’s gaze was filled with disbelief while the elderly woman smiled as she continued to face forward.

“Of course, I know love. But I don’t know how to define it. After all, everyone views love differently.”

“…”

In the end, it seemed all Alisa was going to get was this vague answer, but just as her heart began to fill with disappointment, the elderly lady casually remarked:

“In fact, I don’t even think ‘love’ refers to simply one feeling.”

“…? Isn’t ‘love’ just love?”

“But love makes you feel so much, doesn’t it?”

“…?”

As Alisa raised a questioning eyebrow, the old woman calmly continued.

“You can feel admiration, respect, friendship, and of course, you can feel affectionate, like you mentioned a moment ago. Some people even experience obsession and resentment. And to be crude for a moment, it is nothing more than sexual desire for many.”

“S-sexual desire…?”

“But no matter what you feel, it’s still love, right? At least, that’s what I believe.”

“…”

It honestly wasn’t an idea that Alisa could easily nod to and agree with. To her, friendship and respect were completely different from love, and she couldn’t help but tilt her head in confusion at the idea that obsession and hatred could also be a type of love.

Isn’t love more…pure? Something magical and beautiful?

A vague counterargument arose in her mind…but the elderly lady’s interpretation was surprisingly refreshing to Alisa, who was still searching to uncover the true nature of love. She knew of attachments like friendship and respect, so if love was born from the accumulation and heightening of such attachments, then perhaps, someday…she would be able to understand it.

“…I learned a lot today.”

“Ha-ha. Really? I’m glad. But, well, this is merely my opinion, so don’t think too hard about it, okay?” said the elderly woman, smirking and making Alisa smile as well. They continued their exchange, and before long, they had made their way to the parents’ seating area.

“Anyway, I should get—”

But before Alisa could tell the woman good-bye—

“Oh, Asae! What are you doing with Alisa Kujou?!”

Hearing a familiar voice calling her name from somewhere behind and to the side, Alisa jerked her head around in surprise… where she found a thin old man standing on a plastic picnic blanket while looking straight at her, making her scowl.

“Huh? W-wait… Y-you’re Masachika’s…?”

“Oh, you remember me! I apologize for not formally introducing myself last time we met. I’m Masachika’s grandpa, Tomohisa Kuze.”

“I-it’s a pleasure to see you… Hmm?”

Which meant…?

Alisa looked back to see the elderly woman covering her mouth while she laughed.

“My apologies. I should have introduced myself. My name is Asae Kuze.”

“Y-you’re…?”

It was only then that Alisa realized what had just happened, instantly filling her mind with despair.

Masachika’s g-grandmother?! What?! Hold on. Did I just seriously ask his grandmother for advice about love?!

On the verge of having a mental breakdown, her brain desperately tried to escape this reality, making her notice something completely unrelated.

Hold up! Are they dressed in matching outfits?! This elderly couple put on matching outfits before going out?!

Alisa screamed inwardly the instant it dawned on her that Tomohisa was also wearing a brightly colored shirt and a flashy floral jacket. Of course, it wasn’t a bad thing. She even found it stylish and enjoyed seeing how close they were. Nevertheless, there was no way she would ever go outside with her own grandparents if they were dressed like that.

Then, while looking at the elderly woman—or rather, at Asae—she was shockingly struck with yet another realization.

Wait. When she first saw me…

She finally understood why this older woman looked at her with such surprise earlier. At the time, she didn't put much thought into it, since she figured that the lady was simply surprised to see a girl with silver hair and blue eyes, but…

She realized who I was the moment we met?!

She stared hard at Asae, who simply gave her a slightly apologetic smile, and that alone told Alisa everything she needed to know. She was overwhelmed by a fit of misplaced anger, followed by an even greater sense of shame.

"…!!!"

A voiceless cry escaped her lips as she trembled uncontrollably…when she suddenly spotted the woman seated beside Tomohisa.

Hold on! Don't tell me that's Masachika's mom?!

The passing hunch made her jump, before she was struck with a sense of unease, as if something were off.

But his parents…?

Although Alisa had visited Masachika's apartment numerous times, he was the only one there. She suddenly thought back to the story she'd heard when Masachika was sick, and her brow furrowed…when her eyes met the woman's.

"…?"

Alisa felt a sense of déjà vu when she looked at the woman's face.

"Hmm? Oh, this is—"

Noticing Alisa's gaze, Tomohisa turned to the woman beside him to say something, but before he could even get a word out, the woman promptly stood and bowed slightly.

"It's a pleasure to meet you. I'm Yuki Suou's mother, Yumi."

"Oh, you're Yuki's… Nice to meet you. I'm Alisa Mikhailovna Kujou. I'm in the student council with Yuki."

"Yes, I've heard all about you…," Yumi timidly replied while averting her gaze. That was when Alisa realized why this woman seemed so familiar.

Now it makes sense… She looks so much like Yuki.

Unlike Yuki, her mother's expression was somehow lacking in vitality—or perhaps confidence…but they did share a lot of features. Nevertheless, this realization only led to yet another question.

But why are Masachika's grandparents hanging out with Yuki's mom…?

Tomohisa suddenly cackled.

"I found Yumi all by herself earlier, so I invited her to join us."

"Oh…," replied Alisa, still unable to shake the feeling that something wasn't quite right.

I get that they're childhood friends…but why are his grandparents this close with her mother? Is that normal?

Confused, Alisa was at a loss for words as Yumi fell silent, until a familiar voice called out to her.

"Alya! We should probably get going."

When she looked up, she saw Masachika walking toward her, waving hesitantly. He must have spotted her silver hair and rushed over, but when he got closer, he suddenly noticed the two people standing near Alisa and frowned.

"Ack! Grandma? Grandpa? What is going on?"

His gaze then shifted to the woman standing next to them… and the air suddenly grew cold.

"M-Masachika?"

His eyes widened and his expression twisted, startling Alisa. She began following his gaze until she saw Yumi looking back at Masachika with a similar shocked expression.

Huh? What? What's going on?

Alisa glanced back and forth between the two of them, completely bewildered, but the tense standoff eventually ended when Masachika looked away. Although it had only lasted for about five seconds, the bizarre atmosphere made it feel like an eternity.

"…Come on. Everyone's waiting for us over there."

"Huh…? Oh, right… Um… Bye."

"Have fun."

"I hope we get to see you again soon… Ah! Masachika! Let's all have lunch together later, okay?!"

"I'm good. I'm going to have lunch with my friends," bluntly replied Masachika as he walked away without even looking back

at Tomohisa. Alisa immediately followed him, alarmed by his unusual behavior.

“Masachika, why—?”

But Alisa swallowed those words the instant she caught up and saw the look on his face. It was a storm of intense emotions: A mix of rage, resentment, and sorrow hid beneath the surface of his skin, and it was a far cry from the usual nonchalant Masachika who never showed his true emotions, leaving her speechless.

“…”

He didn’t even have it in him to try to hide his emotions, not even before Alisa’s gaze. Even this was so unlike him, and that left her speechless.

What can I…? But I can’t…

Words swirled around in her head and throat, but nothing came out. She knew she had to say something, but what? Nothing came to mind. And that was why—

“…!”

Without even saying a word, Alisa pressed the bottled water she was holding against Masachika’s cheek.

“Ack! That’s cold!”

He flinched, stopped in his tracks, and pulled away from the newly purchased bottle of water. But when he looked at her with furrowed brows, Alisa blurted out the first thing that came to mind.

“I don’t think…you should talk to your grandfather like that.”

After stumbling over her words, she felt embarrassed by what she had said. A few seconds of awkward silence then passed between them…when Masachika let out a small, amused chuckle.

“Yeah, you’re right. I guess I should have lunch with him from time to time,” replied Masachika in his usual humorous tone as his expression softened. Although she was relieved…a sense of unease still lingered in Alisa’s heart, since she still had so many unanswered questions.

Why did he react that way when he saw Yuki’s mother? What had happened between them? She wanted to know. She wanted to know and say something to make him feel better…but she decided to wait.

Because he promised that he’d tell me one day…

And that was why she was going to wait until the day Masachika would tell her everything. Until then, she had to focus on becoming a more reliable partner—someone he could trust enough to share his pain with.

And that's why I can't lose.

And…there was something else that Alisa had to tell him as well. That was why she had to win the Run. She—

"Check it out. Alisa's here."

"What took you so long?"

"Hey, Alya."

"Yo."

Her allies were waiting for her: Nonoa, Sayaka, Hikaru, and Takeshi.

"I'm sorry I'm late. ♪"

"What? We're so on time."

Maria and Elena arrived next. And then…

"Oh, it appears we're last to arrive."

Sumire appeared, serene and confident, her chest held high, with her signature spiral curls bouncing with each step. As Alisa greeted her with a smile, she returned the gesture both elegantly and powerfully.

"Glad you could make it, Violet."

"It's Sumire!" she hissed with a sharp glare.

◇

It all started two weeks prior in the classroom after school, when they were discussing who to ask for help.

"…Do you think we could ask Sumire Kiryuuin for help?" wondered Alisa.

"I think…she'd help. She seems to have really taken a liking to you, too," said Masachika.

"What? Since when?"

"Remember when she came to apologize after the school festival?"

Near the end of the Autumn Heights Festival, Sumire visited the school festival committee's headquarters with Yuushou. There, she explained the situation to the student council president, vice president, and student council before ending the

apology with a bow. She also took the opportunity to apologize individually to Alisa as well, but…

"*You didn't do anything you need to apologize for. You had nothing to do with what happened, and it didn't ruin our performance, either. In fact, our show was a huge success. If anything, I should be thanking you for helping us stop the incident from getting any worse*," argued Alisa while she bowed in return. Sumire smiled contently at the sight and even ended up telling her:

"If you ever need any help, please do not hesitate to ask."

"…Well, she did say to just ask if I ever needed any help, and I genuinely planned on asking her for help if I ever needed it…but that doesn't necessarily mean that she likes me."

"I think that's exactly what it means. Violet stands by everything she says, so she wouldn't ever say something if she didn't mean it."

"Really…?"

Alisa tilted her head, her expression a mix of joy and doubt while Masachika stroked his chin, wearing a faint smile.

"Anyway, if we get Violet's complete support, then we might get all the Sisters of the Four Seasons."

"The what?"

"Oh, the disciplinary committee's—the girls' kendo club's famous sisters. They're not really sisters, but they're the four top members, excluding the captain, Chisaki. In other words, the vice-captain, the *senpou*, *jihou*, and *chuuken*."

"Uh…?"

"Violet is the vice-captain and essentially their older sister. Anyway, they might help us, and getting all four of them means they can form an entire team by themselves. Both their reputation and their fighting skills are top-notch as well. Oh, now that I think about it, you've seen them before. You know, the group that apprehended that guy during the firecracker incident."

◇

And so…Alisa gathered the best members she could find. Three female students appeared after Sumire, lining up on each side of

her…while posing. Sumire angled her body the same way, then snapped her fingers, cueing a lively girl with pigtails on the right to boldly puff out her chest and state:

“Ayame Shinbashi!”

Following her, the tomboyish girl on the far right covered one eye and exclaimed:

“Kikyou Oomori.”

Furthermore, the girl with glasses on the opposite side pushed up her glasses and roared:

“Hiiragi Kurasawa.”

Finally, Sumire fluffed up her ringlets and announced:

“Sumire Kiryuuin.”

And in closing, they all cried in unison:

“““We are the Sisters of the Four Seasons!”””

All that was missing from their grand entrance was an explosion in the background. Meanwhile, Sayaka nodded slowly in admiration and even began to applaud, prompting Takeshi to join her, even though he wasn’t actually sure why they were clapping.

“Yooo, Nonoa! Still got that nice ass on you, huh? Can I touch it?”

“Fifty thousand yen.”

“That’s highway robbery…! How long do I get?”

“Two seconds.”

“‘Seconds’…?! Do you take credit cards?”

“Are you seriously going to pay?” interjected Hikaru as Elena continued to harass Nonoa.

“Hey, uh… Masha? I can see your stomach.”

“Ah! Unbelievable.”

Masha adjusted her clothes while Masachika awkwardly looked away. Then, after taking one last look at her allies gathered around her…Alisa muttered:

“<I think I may have made a mistake.>”

CHAPTER 10

The Run

“Okay, I’m counting on every one of you.”

Everyone gathered there nodded back at Alisa. They had all shared the expected enemy tactics and their counterstrategies during practice when they all got together for mock battles, so all they needed to do right now was a quick review.

And yet Masachika found himself deeply moved as he watched Alisa take charge of such a large group.

She really has grown…

While he watched Alisa with a mixture of joy and loneliness, a feeling not unlike that of a parent—

“By the way, uh…,” Takeshi muttered timidly while staring at Elena. “Elena… Are you really going out there dressed like that?”

Takeshi’s comment drew everyone’s attention to Elena, who suddenly placed a hand on her cheek while she boldly grinned.

“Who is this ‘Elena’ you speak of? I am the mysterious hero, Sexy Mask!”

Elena’s eyes widened, her gaze framed by a lacy Venetian mask, the kind that actors wore at masquerade balls in the movies. It was a mask to conceal her identity, and it was the compromise that Masachika had offered when he invited her to join the Run. Incidentally, Elena was the one who chose the mask and alias.

“That was perfect, Elena—I mean, Sexy—pfft! Sexy Mask.”

“Did you just laugh?”

“Not at all.” Masachika nonchalantly shook his head. Then, with a serious expression, he nodded and continued. “Anyway, this should keep her identity a secret from the other students…

and even if they do figure out who she is, it's not like Elena's publicly endorsing Alisa and me, so it should be fine."

"Tee-hee. Really?"

Elena flicked her newly tied ponytail back, looking quite pleased with herself. But Hikaru still raised a hesitant, skeptical voice.

"I'm fairly certain that mask isn't going to fool anyone…"

"What are you saying? Countless people have worn masks around their eyes, and nobody ever figured out who they were. Besides, check out this new hairstyle. Nobody's going to be able to connect the dots."

"I am pretty sure you're thinking about comic books… Guys, people are just going to think that she tied her ponytail on the wrong side of her head," argued Hikaru, looking around in search for agreement, but…

"You look so nice, Elena," muttered Maria, dreamy-eyed.

"I think it works, too."

Sayaka's nerdy heart must have been dancing in excitement.

"Like, I've legit never seen anyone wear a mask like that outside of a photo shoot."

Nonoa was acting like this had nothing to do with her.

"I think it looks very fashionable. Perhaps we should wear masks like that next time," remarked Sumire. The Sisters of the Four Seasons appeared to be bubbling with excitement for some unknown reason, leaving Masachika curious about what kind of superhero team they were attempting to form here. The only ones feeling skeptical like Hikaru seemed to be Alisa and Takeshi, so they were up against the overwhelming majority—

"…Well, if Elena's fine with this, then I guess that's all that matters."

But almost immediately after Hikaru folded, the announcer's voice boomed over the crowd.

"I know everyone is just getting ready for their lunch break, but it's time for a special program! The Run!"

The crowd erupted with cheers.

"Now let's welcome our first team! Coming out of the gate, we have Alisa Kujou and Masachika Kuze!"

Surrounded by cheering crowds and expectant eyes, Masachika and his group emerged from the gate onto the field.

"*Let's give it up for the captain and rider, Alisa Mikhailovna Kujou! And for her helpers making the horse, we have Masachika Kuze, Maria Mikhailovna Kujou, and…uh…*" The commentator hesitated when he reached the last contestant, then, with a tinge of embarrassment in his voice, he announced, "*Th-the mysterious hero, Sexy Mask!*"

Elena—aka Sexy Mask—struck a pose with a peace sign while shouting, "Yaaay!" during her bizarre introduction, creating a stir of confusion among the crowd.

"What an *Ele*-mazing costume."

"We need a *Nara*-tor to give us some backstory on this hero."

"What an *Ele*-gant woman!"

Masachika firmly nodded as he listened to their comments.

"Good job, Sexy Mask. Sounds like you've got them completely fooled."

"Really?! Because they're saying things that are kind of worrying me!"

"Captain! You've got this!"

"Thanks. ♡ …Hey?! I'm not your captain!" Elena had waved to the female student who looked like she was probably in the brass band club, only to immediately deny that she was Elena. Then, seemingly realizing how absurd this all was, she leaned in closer to Masachika and whispered, "H-hey, are you sure I'm fooling them? Is this okay?"

"Don't worry. As I mentioned earlier, everyone will understand why you're wearing a mask, even if they figure out it's you."

"Really…?"

"Really," argued Masachika with an air of confidence as he tried to reassure his schoolmate.

Of course, some people might just think that Elena's messing around, but simply having her with us is going to have a pretty big impact, regardless of the fact that she's in costume.

He kept his devious thoughts to himself, though. At any rate, the audience had burst into a frenzy of enthusiastic cheers as the commentator introduced each member.

"Whoa?! Is that Sumire Kiryuuin?! And the disciplinary committee is with her!"

“The Sisters of the Four Seasons from the kendo club! Are they really going to be doing the Run with them?!”

“Looks like Maria Kujou and El—that mysterious woman—are going to be part of the horse…and the other team looks like it’s made up of her band friends… Not surprising, except for the mysterious woman.”

“Dude, come on. That team is stacked! She has her old rival, Sayaka, now teaming up with her! She even got Sumire on board! This is like some kind of student council dream team in the works.”

“Yeah, good point. If she was telling the truth during the first semester greeting…then maybe she plans on getting Sumire to join her new student council, too? Because if that’s the case, then I’m definitely voting for Alisa Kujou!”

The surrounding students stared at Alisa and her teammates with sparkles in their eyes and anticipation in their hearts—as if they were imagining the student council that would one day be formed.

Sounds like we made the right picks for our teams. I’m glad we stuck to Alya’s belief of including even former rivals and picking people at least somewhat involved with the student council.

Masachika was really happy to hear all the positive reactions.

“…Hold up. Does this mean that Kuze’s going to have a harem all to himself?”

…There was at least one student who was focusing on the wrong thing, but Masachika simply pretended like he didn’t hear anything.

“Now, let’s give it up for the other team coming from the opposite gate, Yuki Suou and Ayano Kimishima!”

Once the introductions for Masachika’s team had finished, Yuki and Ayano made their entrance. The instant Masachika saw their team, however, his eyes widened in utter astonishment.

“You’ve got to be kidding me. What the…?”

“Wow. Has she no shame?”

“She really brought some notable helpers with her.”

Elena let out a startled gasp while Sumire responded with a mix of admiration and suspicion. But amid their reactions, Sayaka calmly pushed up her glasses and speculated:

“I’m assuming that everyone other than their riders, Kaji and Asama, are going to be extremely athletic students… She created the ultimate team of warriors.”

“And I suppose the reason she could do that was because of her wide network of contacts. I guess there is no better way to show off all the connections you have than this…”

“For real. Other than the riders, she legit just made a team of random athletes, and even though they’re all unrelated to each other, they still endorse her.”

Just as Hikaru and Nonoa had pointed out, many in the audience were expressing their admiration over Yuki’s connections. Meanwhile, Masachika passively listened to their excitement while keeping a wary eye on the two individuals standing behind Yuki and Ayano. Because they were the same two people that Touya had mentioned after the sandbag game.

“No wonder Kagami and Saijou didn’t participate in the sandbag event… Must have been saving their strength and stamina for this. This is…going to be tough.”

“So those two are the boys you all were talking about earlier…? They seem to be quite popular with the girls in the crowd.”

“Yeah, they’re apparently really popular, especially Kagami. At any rate, those two are top-tier when it comes to popularity and physical abilities. They never really showed any interest in getting involved in anyone’s campaign, so I definitely wasn’t expecting this… I’m impressed Yuki somehow won them over.”

“Seems pretty obvious to me why they did it,” Nonoa chimed in casually, interrupting Alisa’s and Masachika’s conversation.

“They’re definitely into Yuki.”

“…What?”

Masachika looked over at Nonoa with a serious expression, taken aback by her unexpected comment. She met his gaze with half-opened eyes and indifferently added:

“Like, is it really that surprising? Yuki’s legit popular.”

“…”

He silently shifted his gaze forward, where it landed on Yuki, who seemed to be mirthfully conversing with those two athletic teammates. Alisa’s words from earlier flashed through his mind.

“I looked up how these cavalry games work. When you have four people, the rider sits on the arms or the shoulders of the two guys in the back, right? I-in other words…th-the two people in the back are going to be touching my butt… Absolutely not! I’d rather die!”

Masachika couldn’t help but roll his eyes at the time, feeling that she was too much of a clean freak. However…

I’m sorry, Alya. I was wrong.

Those filthy hands—those goons, who were drooling over Yuki—were going to be touching her.

I’m going to kill them.

It was pure rage.

Who the hell do you think you are, putting your dirty hands on my sister? Looks like I’m gonna have to unleash my chi blast.

“Whoaaa, Kuze. Looks like you’re ready to kill.”

“Masachika…?”

After Alisa’s quizzical voice snapped Masachika back into reality, he tucked away his bloodlust to save for after the battle, deciding he needed to have a word with those two guys. Because for now, he had other matters that required his focus.

“I’m fine. Obviously, this is going to be tough, but if Ayano’s going to be in the front, then I’m going to have the height and speed advantage. Plus, the person in the front is ultimately going to have to do most of the work when the rider leans in to grab their opponent’s bandanna.”

“…Yeah.”

“More importantly, Sayaka, Sumire, how are you two feeling?”

“It’s Sumi—! Ahem. Are you asking how we feel about going up against those two riders? I’ll be fine.”

“…Sounds like you were expecting me to say something else.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

As Sumire averted her gaze, Sayaka pushed up her glasses with a sidelong glance and claimed, “You don’t have to worry about me, either. I don’t plan on holding back.”

“All right…”

Though reassured by their encouraging words, Masachika still found himself filled with bitterness.

I know I considered the possibility, but she really went with those two, huh?

To Sayaka and Sumire, both Taiki Kaji and Kirika Asama were figures they'd looked up to as student council president and vice president in middle school, and although they claimed this wouldn't be an issue, there was no way to deny that this was going to be difficult for them. There was no telling how much of this was intentional, but their opponents probably expected that Sayaka would be here helping the instant Yuki suggested that they make this a team battle.

While Sumire might have been unexpected, they obviously predicted Elena's participation as well, and to Elena, those two worked under her in the student council. At any rate, they were going to be difficult opponents. However, once Masachika reached this conclusion, a sudden realization dawned on him.

Hold up. Wouldn't this go both ways, then?

Even Taiki and Kirika would hesitate to go all out against schoolmates younger than they were. Therefore, Masachika couldn't help but wonder what else they had up their sleeves that was worth risking these two going easy on his team. But before he could come up with a single hypothesis, the student introductions came to an end.

"*If your headband is removed or if you fall off your mount, you lose! The game ends once a team loses their captain! Violent acts, such as pulling hair, punching, and kicking are prohibited! However, tackling is allowed! Anyway, that does it for the rules!*" The commentator paused for a moment before continuing, "*Now, let's get this started! Horses and riders, get into position!*"

Once the commentator gave them the word, Masachika stopped trying to speculate, then exchanged a glance and a nod with Alisa.

"Whatever happens, let's stick to the plan."

"I know."

After their brief exchange, Masachika and the others formed their respective teams, and once the riders mounted their horses, they waited in a crouching position for Alisa to address the group.

"As we discussed during the meeting, I believe their strategy will be to create chaos, but I want each of you to only focus on

your target. Sumire, I want you to go after the…”

“How about we refer to them as the boy group and girl group?”

“Good idea. I want you, Sumire, to handle the boy group. Sayaka, you take the girl group.”

“Very well.”

“Roger.”

“Now, let’s win this.”

After everyone firmly nodded back at Alisa…

“May I ask both teams to please rise?!”

Following the commentator’s instruction, all six teams stood in unison. The two teams faced each other as the crowd’s excitement reached its peak—

“Let the Run begin!”

Once the curtain of the battle was lifted, an unexpected turn of events unfolded before Masachika and his team.

“…?!”

Leaving their captain behind, two enemy riders began to charge toward them. The unexpected turn of events gave Masachika little choice but to order his team to fall back…but he couldn’t do it.

No, Alya is the rider. I don’t have the right to give orders.

Alisa’s trembling hands on his shoulders told Masachika everything that he needed to know. There was no doubt that both Maria and Elena, whose hands were clasped with Alisa’s, noticed as well. But Masachika and the others waited silently, their trust in their leader unwavering.

“…”

And then, after what felt like an eternity…Alisa finally spoke up.

“Sumire, Sayaka, move out. Make sure they don’t get near me while you attack.”

“As you wish.”

“Roger. Move out.”

“We’re going to back up a little. I want to observe for a while without being disturbed.”

“All right. Let’s move back ten steps.”

After giving Maria and Elena their orders, they counted to ten while retreating ten steps in unison. Once at a safe distance, she

reassessed the battlefield, albeit while tilting her head in wonder.

The two enemy riders who had been charging toward them had slowed down as soon as Sumire and Sayaka moved to intercept them, and before long, they came to a complete stop.

“Whaaat? They’re just staring at us.”

“They stopped moving…?”

Both Elena and Maria expressed their surprise toward the unusual behavior. One moment, the enemy was acting extremely aggressive, and now they were being cautious.

The male rider and horses on the opposing team were all tall and strong, making them a formidable match for both Sumire and her team. Meanwhile, with the female rider and horses, there was Kirika, who was a skilled member of the ping-pong club, leading their team, which would genuinely be a difficult matchup for Sayaka.

In other words, there was almost no logical explanation as to why they weren’t being more aggressive. The only reason Masachika could come up with was the fact that many of them used to work in the student council together, so there were psychological factors slowing them down. However…

Surely, they already prepared themselves for a situation like this and came to terms with it, right?

Maybe they thought they would be ready for this, but they got cold feet now that they were face-to-face? While it wasn’t impossible…it was improbable.

Then does that mean that Yuki wants to stall?

Although Masachika didn’t know what they were trying to accomplish, the fact remained that their two allies were doing nothing more than having a staring contest with the enemy right now.

This isn’t going to be fun for the audience at all…

Regardless of their personal feelings, the Run was essentially a fun event for the audience to enjoy. In other words, a certain level of showmanship was expected, regardless of who won.

No one wanted to see the captains retreat to the back while letting their teammates do all the fighting alone, and winning with such a cowardly strategy would actually lower their popularity, which was the opposite of what each team wanted. That much was apparent during the costume race, when Yuki

fully committed to the fun aspect of the game, so she obviously understood this, too.

And that's why I thought she was going to try to create chaos, run around like a maniac, and all that…

While it would be seen as cowardly if the captain let her teammates defeat the enemy without fighting herself, it would be considered honorable if she were to act as bait in order to allow her teammates to take out the enemy captain.

From the moment Yuki proposed a three-on-three team battle, Masachika couldn't shake the feeling that she had been aiming for a scenario like that. That was also why he gave Sayaka's and Sumire's team the orders to focus on the other two riders, instead of on the captain, and that was exactly what they were doing as the group slowly began to surround the enemy riders.

"Looks like they're planning on flanking us… They probably figure they could try to isolate us individually if we try to run away."

Just as Masachika voiced his prediction, the two opposing riders made their move, maneuvering in opposite directions to prevent themselves from being surrounded…until a straight line was formed between the two captains.

"Um… Isn't this…exactly what we want?"

"Yeahhh… It's not exactly what I was imagining, but we could take on their captain one-on-one now, right?"

Maria and Elena exchanged puzzled glances, and Alisa and Masachika shared their confusion as well.

Everything was going exactly as planned. If they were aiming for a chaotic battle, Alisa's team was aiming for a duel. They suggested a team battle because they weren't confident that they could win in a one-on-one fight. In other words, being forced into a duel would be the worst-case scenario for them…

At least, that's what I thought… What is going on?

And yet a path had opened up, as if Yuki was inviting them over to duel. It was exactly the situation Masachika and the others had hoped for…and that was exactly why it was so unsettling.

"Is this a trap…? Are they trying to lead us into a pincer attack?"

Masachika voiced his doubts and shared them with his teammates.

“Or is this the old empty fort strategy? Maybe there’s really nothing there, but they’re waiting like this to make us think it’s a trap, hoping we’ll wear ourselves out?”

Not only were two of the horses here girls, but Alisa was a heavier captain than Yuki as well, which meant that Alisa’s team had a clear disadvantage if this turned into a long battle of stamina.

Tsk! I’ve got a bad feeling about this.

Ever since the battle began—no, ever since Yuki proposed a team battle—Masachika had a nagging sense that they were being manipulated and were playing right into her hand. Despite their seemingly advantageous position, he couldn’t shake the feeling that they were being slowly cornered. However, one thing was clear to Masachika.

This is exactly what Yuki wants.

That was what it boiled down to. But what could they possibly do to change the tide of battle and seize control?

“Let’s do this.”

Alisa’s sudden voice pulled Masachika back from the depths of his thoughts.

“Let’s believe in our friends and push forward. I’ll take care of Yuki.”

It was a voice filled with confidence and strength. Despite surely having her own doubts, she showed no sign of fear as she dispelled the uncertainty of her comrades. It was undoubtedly the voice of a leader who was meant to guide and inspire.

Alya… You’re incredible… Since when did you become such a strong leader…?

Masachika was filled with awe and felt a strong resolve growing within himself that was guided by Alisa’s voice.

“You got it, Captain,” he replied with a fearless grin, only to be met with a light slap to the head, but it was this gesture that completely calmed his nerves, allowing him to smile broadly and say, “Masha, Elena, let’s do this.”

“Sounds good to me. ♪”

“As ye command, matey!”

“Why did you say that like some sort of low-level pirate?”

“How dare ye?! What in the blazes makes ye think I’m some sort of scallywag?”

“Your face.”

After Elena and Masachika’s playful banter brought a faint smile to everyone’s faces, Alisa ordered:

“Full speed ahead! Head straight for their captain! If they look like they’re going to retreat, then we’ll pincer the girl group first with our allies, then go for the boy group!”

“““Roger!”””

They responded in unison, then charged forward, breathing in sync while sprinting as quickly as they could, just like they’d practiced.

Meanwhile, Yuki’s team began to advance as well.

“…!”

With the impending battle looming, Alisa’s grip tightened on Masachika’s shoulders, but once they closed the distance halfway between them…the enemy team made their move. Like jaws snapping shut on helpless prey, the two enemy riders on each side suddenly began to charge toward them.

It was chaos born from a pincer attack, and even though it was exactly what they were worried about, not a single one of them stopped…because Alisa told them to believe in their allies. And with those words in their hearts, the three of them continued to push forward.

“Uh-oh! They’re going for a pincer attack! But wait! What is this?! Look at Sumire Kiryuuin go! Ah! Oooh! Oooh! She did it! She grabbed her opponent’s bandanna! Whoa?! What a tackle by Nonoa Miyamae! She just threw her entire body at them on the return! …Ahhh! Both riders have fallen! Both riders are out!”

The commentator announced the valiant efforts of Masachika’s comrades, and for a fleeting moment, he genuinely worried about his friends, who apparently had stopped their opponents rather aggressively.

“Charge!”

But once again, Alisa’s powerful voice dispelled those worries. Strengthened by her words, Masachika confidently glared straight ahead.

We’re not going to team up with Sumire and try to corner Yuki’s team… It’s just us versus them!

Masachika's rational side honestly had advised against a direct confrontation, since they hadn't quite figured out Yuki's intentions yet. There was still a nagging feeling that they were being led straight into a trap…and if that was the case, then so be it.

The captain had made her decision, and besides, this was far more exciting.

We aren't going to use any cheap tricks or unfair tactics. We're just going to charge forward like heroes would.

With a ferocious grin of exhilaration, Masachika charged forward. The distance between them narrowed: ten meters, five meters, three meters…when their opponent suddenly stopped. Yuki, who had been standing, sat down on her horse.

…! Is she going to try to go around?

Masachika watched intently, trying to anticipate Yuki's next move…when he suddenly noticed something peculiar: Yuki was sitting far back on her horse, with her hands resting on the shoulders of the two boys behind her. It looked almost as if…

Are they doing a three-person gymnastic formation…? That looks like the cactus move, where—

Out of nowhere, something slammed right into Masachika.

"…! What the…?!"

He instantly lowered his gaze, where he found that Ayano had thrown her arms around him tightly. The impact was so strong that it had stopped Masachika in his tracks, throwing the other three off-balance as well.

Hold up. Does that mean Yuki—?

While trying to regain balance in a fluster, Masachika looked ahead to find Yuki with her feet resting on the hands of the two boys as she leaned forward sharply—

""Three, two…one!""

In perfect sync, the two strong, young men swung their arms up…launching Yuki into the air.

Are you kidding me?!

Although Masachika immediately tried to dodge, he could hardly move with Ayano holding on to him.

"Stand strong!" he shouted, for all he could do was hold on to Maria's and Elena's hands as firmly as he could. However…

What the…?!

Alisa's mind went blank as she watched Yuki dive toward her…and she instinctively braced herself to catch her. As if she had forgotten all about the competition, she planted her feet firmly, spread her arms wide, and prepared to catch the girl with wings.

And then, with all her might, she caught her friend, who had recklessly turned herself into a projectile. Alisa clenched her jaw, her eyes closed as she withstood the impact, when—

"Thanks. I'm really sorry about this."

Just as the mischievous whisper tickled her ear, Alisa felt her hair being tugged while the headband was ripped from her head.

"I did it!" yelled Yuki, thrusting the headband into the air. In an instant, the audience burst into a chorus of cheers and astonished exclamations.

"Whoa! Yuki Suou just took her bandanna! But this—no! According to the rules, that was completely legal! She's still not touching the ground, and tackling is not prohibited, either! That was a legal move!"

After a brief pause, the commentator declared:

"Yuki Suou and Ayano Kimishima win!"

The crowd once again erupted into cheers and applause at the announcement…as Alisa simply listened with a sense of detachment, her mind seemingly far away.

EPILOGUE

So this is…

Once the Run was over, Alisa found herself in the empty classroom for 1-B. She had escaped here after parting ways with her friends and making a flimsy excuse to decline Maria's invitation to eat with the family. Obviously…she had absolutely no appetite for lunch.

Settling into her seat, she gazed vacantly around the room while listening to the chatter and noise coming from the schoolyard in the background. "I'm sorry," she told her friends with a bow, but nobody blamed her for what happened. The kindness of her friends, however, only made her feel worse.

"…"

She had no idea what it meant to carry the weight of her friends' expectations—no idea how painful failing to live up to them would be—because she had always been all alone up until now. Whenever she failed, the only one she disappointed was herself. But now…

"…!"

They were her friends who believed in her and helped her. They were students not even in her grade who wanted to support her. Even her sister was there for her with a smile on her face… And yet…

"…!!!"

The image of her face flashed in Alisa's mind, and she buried her face in her desk. Grinding her teeth, she weakly slammed her clenched fists onto her desk.

She had gotten carried away. She had become arrogant. She had made so many friends, and they had acknowledged her as their leader. She had gotten so caught up in playing that role—so

intoxicated by her sense of omnipotence—that she had thought she could do anything…and it had clouded her judgment.

Alisa would have realized it if she had actually put some thought into it. She was no match for Yuki when it came to strategy and mind games, so she should have simply asked Masachika for help. Perhaps they wouldn't have fallen right into her trap if she had done that. Instead, Alisa was eager for victory and overconfident in her own abilities. She'd challenged Yuki unprepared and was utterly defeated. And if that wasn't bad enough, the only reason why she was so eager to win was due to personal reasons.

"I hate myself…"

The self-deprecating words that escaped her lips were accompanied by moisture. Everyone would have rolled their eyes if they knew. They may have even gotten angry. The reason Alisa had tried to win the Run all on her own…was simply because she wanted to proudly invite her friends to her birthday party.

November 7—her birthday—was coming up in two weeks. It was stupid. She could have just invited them without involving the Run. She was so preoccupied with such trivial thoughts that she had suffered this humiliating defeat, and she had nobody to blame but herself. Of course she lost. It was the only logical outcome. But…even then…!

"<I wanted to win…and invite everyone!>"

Alisa wanted to win the Run on her own and show her friends and parents in the audience how far she had come. She wanted to proudly invite her friends to her birthday party. Every year until now, she had celebrated her birthday with her family, and even though her parents never said anything, she was sure that they were worried about her.

That was why she wanted to introduce the friends she made in high school to them this year with her head held high. She wanted to show them that she was no longer alone and tell them about how wonderful her friends were. Surely, that would bring a smile to their faces.

"<I wanted to spend my birthday with everyone…!>"

If only she could have celebrated her birthday surrounded by her smiling parents and friends, how wonderful it would have been. Alisa could hardly even imagine how happy she would

have been and how much fun they would have had…but it was too late now…

I… I'm a loser who let everyone down. How dare I even think of asking them to celebrate my birthday now?

"Mn…!"

It was all because of something that she personally wanted to do. Everything was her fault and her fault alone. No one else was to blame. Alisa had brought her personal feelings into the Run, foolishly dreamed of some happy future, and lost because she had gotten carried away.

She wished that her birthday would never come. Even a birthday party among family would feel fake and only make her more miserable. And if that was how it was going to be, then—

"Hey! Good game."

Alisa jumped at the sound of the voice. Why was he here? She had come here after telling him good-bye, and there was no way he would have known she was here, since she was supposed to be with Maria.

But in spite of Alisa's bewilderment, the owner of the voice pulled out his chair with a loud scrape and took a seat in his usual spot. Then he faced Alisa, who was still slumped over her desk, and began in his usual voice:

"She got us this time. I definitely wasn't expecting them to throw their rider like that. They must have practiced a lot." He reflected on the match as if he didn't even notice how upset Alisa was. "I guess they're going to have to change the rules next year, though. I mean, if riders are allowed to dismount, then technically you'd only need one person to give the rider a piggyback ride while the other two just wreak havoc. It only worked this time, since nobody ever thought of making a rule to prevent stuff like that. Anyway, it's hard not to get distracted when your opponent pulls a crazy stunt like that, huh?"

He was acting infuriatingly normal…and right now, it was seriously getting under her skin.

"…Hey."

"Hmm?"

"Could you please just leave me alone?"

They were words of rejection, trembling with barely contained anger, and yet…

“What? No.”

…her words were casually dismissed. Although fueled by even more anger, Alisa kept her head lowered, and in a voice forcibly suppressing her emotions, she replied, “As you can see, I’m really depressed right now…so leave me alone.”

“Not like you to be depressed. Remember what Sayaka told you? ‘Anyone can mope around and be depressed.’ We lost, so after lunch, we should start discussing how we’re going to beat Yuki again.”

“…! But…!”

Finally unable to take it any longer, Alisa slammed her fist on the desk, raised her head slightly, and with a downcast gaze, she cried in agony:

“We lost because of me! Everyone worked so hard to fulfill their role! And yet I made a mistake and ruined everything! All their efforts went to waste because of me!”

Glaring at her desk, she struggled to hold back her tears, when a chilling voice suddenly pierced her side:

“Don’t be so full of yourself, Alya.” The out-of-character words naturally got Alisa’s attention, but she was taken aback by his piercing stare. Masachika was staring at her straight in the eye and matter-of-factly stated, “I—we—didn’t help you because we thought you’d win. We helped you because we wanted you to win.”

His words pierced Alisa’s heart like a dagger.

“That loss is your loss, but it’s also our loss, and everyone understands that, which is why nobody blamed you for what happened. So stop trying to take this loss all by yourself, because what you’re doing is arrogant and disrespectful to us.”

Masachika’s words, spoken calmly and slowly, resonated deeply with her, painfully so, and before she knew it, the tears that she had been desperately trying to hold back were rolling down her cheeks.

As her vision blurred, she saw Masachika stand, wrapping his arms around her head until she could see no more.

“I know… It’s frustrating.”

“…!”

“Me…and everyone else—we’re all in this together.”

“…!”

Masachika's gym clothes were stained with tears, but as she cried in his arms, it felt as if the pain in her heart was finally washing away.

Yeah… He's right.

Alisa had realized something as she silently wept. Of course, it still hurt that she wasn't able to live up to her friends' expectations, but she didn't have to suffer alone. She could share that pain with them…because that was what friends did. Both the cause and consequences were things that should be shared among friends.

But bringing her personal feelings into the Run was Alisa's crime, so she alone would bear that punishment. That was how it should be.

"…I'm okay now," she muttered, so Masachika quietly let her go, revealing his tearstained T-shirt, suddenly overwhelming Alisa with shame.

"…! I…"

With a downcast gaze, Alisa tried to find something to wipe away her tears with once more, when she was suddenly handed a bottle of water wrapped in a handkerchief.

"Here. Consider this payback for what you did for me at the amusement park. Don't worry. The handkerchief's clean."

Alisa understood exactly what he was doing and smiled faintly, accepting the bottle of water, which she pressed against her eyes. As the newly purchased cold drink gradually absorbed the heat from her eyes, she could sense that Masachika was sitting back down in his chair.

"By the way, I know this has nothing to do with what we were talking about, but…"

"…?"

She stiffened at the somewhat dissatisfied tone in his voice, and she raised a questioning eyebrow, although hidden behind the bottle of water.

"When are you going to invite me to your birthday party?" he asked offhandedly.

"…Huh?"

"Don't act confused. You're the one who told me that it's the custom in Russia for the birthday person to plan their own birthday parties. Takeshi and Hikaru usually have nothing to do,

so you don't have to worry about them, but you should probably invite Sayaka, Nonoa, Yuki, and the others as soon as you can."

He was speaking so nonchalantly about it that Alisa glanced up, meeting Masachika's gaze before lowering her head once more.

"But I—"

"And if I remember correctly, I'm pretty sure that not inviting someone to your birthday in Russia is the equivalent of saying that you're done being friends with them, right? Oh, and I'm pretty sure I already mentioned that to Yuki, Takeshi, and the others a while back while dropping some random trivia on them, so I think it's going to hurt your friendships with them if you don't invite them."

That was something that she had told him months ago in desperation and out of sheer agony, and it was something that even she had completely forgotten about until now.

You still remember that…?

Before Alisa realized it, she was smiling, not even knowing whether it was out of joy or because of how ridiculous the whole thing was. But somehow, the sorrow and self-loathing that had filled her heart had vanished. It was hard to believe, but this wizard could effortlessly erase the pain and punishment that Alisa was feeling as if her self-centered determination meant nothing to him.

"…So? Are you going to invite us or not? I could go invite the others for you if you want."

"…I'll invite them myself."

"Okay," he briefly replied, before making noises as he stood up. Nevertheless, Alisa still didn't glance in his direction.

"Anyway, don't forget to eat lunch after you head back, okay? We still have a lot of hard work to do after the lunch break is over. Besides, aren't you the one who told me that I better eat lunch with my grandparents? So you better go eat with your family, too."

Masachika's footsteps seemed to be heading toward the door, so Alisa placed the bottle of water down, rushed after him, and embraced him tightly from behind, burying her face in his shoulder blades.

"Will you…come to my birthday?"

“…Sure.”

“Will you celebrate my birthday with me?”

“Of course I will,” he replied, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world, but it filled Alisa’s heart with pure joy. The corners of her eyes began to burn again, so she shut them tightly.

“…Thank you.”

Barely managing to utter those words, Alisa pulled away. She then lowered her gaze and bit her lip, desperately trying to hold back her tears, but Masachika didn’t look back.

“Yep.”

With a brief wave over his shoulder, Masachika left the classroom… Alisa couldn’t help but let out a bittersweet laugh through her tears at his unwaveringly familiar yet infuriatingly compassionate attitude.

“I can’t believe you… You really are…”

He acted so nonchalant, and yet he was always one step ahead. Although it was infuriating and frustrating…he had a magical way of melting away Alisa’s sadness and pain. Masachika was truly someone…she could count on…?

Hold on…?

Her heart pounded against her chest. A tingling heat began to spread throughout her entire body, not just around her eyes. He really was someone she could count on. That much was undeniable. She could trust him more than anyone. He was someone she could respect…but there was also a part of him that was so aggravating. And that was why—

I…

Alisa’s heart ached. Her body was on fire as conversations with Maria and Asae suddenly echoed in her mind.

“It would make you blush and want to scream, but not because you don’t like it. It fills you with happiness and…”

“You can feel admiration, respect, friendship, and of course, you can feel affectionate, like you mentioned a moment ago. Some people even experience obsession and resentment.”

All these feelings and everything she had been taught was finally coming together to form a single answer…

No.

Alisa instantly rejected what her mind was telling her, but she couldn’t change what she felt in her heart.

She had to deny it. This was wrong. Wrong, wrong, wrong. This wasn't how she really felt. It was some kind of mistake. Because—

So this is…


Любовь...

SIDE STORY (BECAUSE SOMEONE COULDN'T WRITE A LONG ENOUGH AFTERWORD.)

When she was but a childhood friend.

"Lady Yuki, do you have a minute?"

"Yes? What is it?"

"Is Ayano with you?"

"Yes, she is right here."

"May I come inside?"

After knocking and receiving permission, Natsu Kimishima, a maid of the Suou household, opened the door. But upon entering, she spotted a woman seated across from Yuki's bed and graciously bowed in her direction.

"My apologies. I had no idea Madam Yumi was with you."

"Is it time for dance lessons?"

"Yes, the instructor should be here any minute now," announced Natsu, prompting Ayano, who had been playing cards with Yumi and Yuki, to slide off her chair at the bedside.

"See you later, Yuki."

"Yeah, have fun dancing, Ayano."

Ayano shared a small wave good-bye with Yuki, who was lying in bed, then faced Yumi and quickly bowed.

"Thank you, Madam Yumi."

"Good luck."

"Um… I am very grapeful?—ah!—*grateful* for those kind words." Natsu smiled as Ayano essentially waddled over after the rather awkward exchange. Lately, this granddaughter of hers seemed to have been imitating her and her husband, practicing polite manners toward Yumi, Kyoutarou, and Gensei, and on one hand, Natsu found it absolutely adorable. However, on the other hand…

"I apologize for keeping you waiting, Grandmother."

Ayano had started using overpolite language, even with Natsu and her husband, as if she was imitating Masachika and Yuki, and that made her kind of sad.

I hear children her age are easily influenced by their surroundings, so I suppose I shouldn't worry too much…?

Natsu had said several times that she could still call her Grandma just like she used to, but their granddaughter seemed to be surprisingly stubborn for someone who was usually so obedient and reserved. It was like once she started acting overly polite, she couldn't stop herself, so Natsu had given up trying to correct her.

I guess I should be proud of how polite she is at such a young age! She's using big words, too! She's going to grow up to be a wonderful maid one day! But…do kids nowadays even want to grow up to be maids?

Natsu was a doting grandmother who was unwittingly planting a seed…with no idea that seed would one day soon bear fruit.

◇

"And end with a bang! Good! Let's try the dance again from the top!"

The dance instructor's crisp instructions filled the air of the Suou residence hall as Masachika and Ayano joined hands.

Originally, these dance lessons were intended for Masachika, the heir to the Suou family, but Ayano had also started joining as his partner, receiving instruction alongside him. Natsu let out a breath of admiration while she watched the two of them dance in perfect harmony.

In fact, the only thing stopping her from clapping and cheering for them was the fact that she didn't want to bother them.

Ah, what beauty. Master Masachika is the very definition of a prodigy…

Despite having started only recently, Masachika could already waltz with a certain level of ease. Even the dance instructor, known for her rigorous teaching even within the industry, nodded in evident satisfaction as she watched him.

“Very good, Masachika! When you turn, your lower body seems to move slightly ahead of your upper body, so be careful, okay?”

Masachika responded instantly to the instructor’s direction. He was like a sponge with how quickly he managed to grasp new things, and because he was a genius, being his partner was no easy feat.

“Ayano, don’t look down! You’re hunching! Always face forward, even if you make a mistake!”

Ayano carelessly stepped on Masachika’s foot, prompting her to swiftly look down to check. Following the instructor’s direction, she lifted her head back up, but now knew that her footwork was all wrong. One mistake led to another, leading her into a vicious cycle of foot stomping.

“Okay, good! Take ten!”

In the end, Ayano accidentally stepped on Masachika’s foot six times before their first session was over, and it made her so upset that she slumped down in her chair.

“I’m really sorry, Chika… I’m such a bad dancer… I stepped on your feet a lot.”

“It’s okay. Besides, I stepped on your foot, too… Sorry about that. Did it hurt?”

“You only stepped on my foot because I messed up… I’m sorry.”

Just as Natsu was about to say something comforting to her dejected granddaughter, Ayano murmured softly:

“Yuki wouldn’t have messed up like this… I’m so bad…”

It was an expression born from the inferiority complex Ayano had been harboring toward the siblings who she had known since childhood. Natsu was left speechless by the unexpectedly serious tone of those muttered words…when all of a sudden Masachika, looking puzzled, argued, “You’re not bad. Because you’re really nice.”

“…I’m nice?”

“Yeah. You help me practice dancing, and you play with Yuki, who can’t even leave her bed. I’m always really thankful for you.”

Ayano looked up with her eyes opened wide to discover Masachika smiling at her.

“I like your dancing. We make a good team, and it feels good… and it’s fun. That’s why…”

Masachika hopped off his chair and held out his hand to Ayano.

“Will you continue to be my partner from now on, too?”

Ayano blinked in wonder at his innocent smile until her lips curled mirthfully as well. She then got up from her chair and took Masachika’s hand.

“Okay!”

“Thanks.”

Natsu held a handkerchief to her eyes while she watched her granddaughter and Masachika holding hands, full of smiles.

Master Masachika… How noble of you! You possess such great talent without arrogance, and you never fail to consider others’ feelings… The Suou family will be in good hands with you at its head.

She was overwhelmed with emotion.

But Master Masachika, that was a proposal!

Natsu couldn’t help but jest, despite knowing that Masachika absolutely didn’t mean it that way.

Of course, I would be thrilled to have you as Ayano’s husband… but the difference in status and wealth is just… Then again, that would make for a beautiful love story! I’m sure Madam Yumi and Master Kyoutarou wouldn’t mind, either, and the current master and madam of the household—

Natsu, despite her age, couldn’t help but fantasize about her granddaughter’s future, like an innocent little girl. Meanwhile, her granddaughter…

Chika’s the best! I’m going to have to work twice as hard now!

Perhaps it shouldn’t be a surprise, because she was still so young, but Ayano didn’t notice any proposal-like undertones in Masachika’s words. She simply felt a deep admiration for him. Nevertheless, being a girl in her tender years, there was no denying that certain feelings had begun to stir within her.

When Chika stepped on me earlier…I felt weird… I felt something inside me…

…It simply happened to be something far different from what her grandmother was imagining.

It would still be some time before the girl would make a decision that would change her life and give her purpose, but that was a story for another day…

Afterword

Hey, everyone, it's Sunsunsun. Just like in Volumes 4 and 5, I had found myself in a troubling afterword situation again, with no pages left to write on, but now I'm completely dumbfounded after adding around sixteen pages a week before the deadline. There had to have been a better way that I could have done this while leaving myself with a few extra pages. If I had just three to eight extra pages, I could've done so much more. I know, I know. It's completely my fault for not managing my pages properly.

At any rate, I've completely run out of things to say. I'm sure the comments I leave on the cover sleeve make that much obvious. It's a mess. I don't even know what I'm talking about half the time. Maybe science-minded people will find the peculiar use of numbers interesting, but I bet most people who are more liberal arts–minded will be utterly confused.

Then again, I bet everyone's confused. Plus, I know I'm the one who came up with this pen name, so I'm not doing myself any favors making fun of it, but to tell the truth, I'm not a huge fan of the number three (sun in Sunsunsun sounds like *san*, which is the Japanese word for the number "three"). My favorite number is actually twenty-four. My next favorite number is twelve. I mean, twenty-four is such a cool number, isn't it? It's hard to describe. It has a nice ring to it, doesn't it? It looks cool, too. Also, it's divisible by all single-digit numbers except five, seven, and nine, which is another beautiful thing. And twelve is just great overall: the Twelve Apostles, the Twelve Heavenly Generals, the Chinese zodiac, the Twelve Ranks, the duodenum… Anyway, I think there's a unique beauty to this number that appears in so many places. Oh, and thirteen is cool, too. It has that edgy cool factor to it. For the same reason, I can't really

dismiss fourteen, either. The number fifteen is weak. I feel nothing for it. It's just…there.

Speaking of edgy charm, we can't forget about zero. I get that it's a bit debatable whether zero is actually a number, but it's cool nonetheless. By the way, if you don't understand the appeal of zero, you're not a true edgelord. You're back to square one. Too bad if you start from one, you'll never reach zero! Mwah-ha-ha!

…Okay. I said the cover sleeve comments were aimed at science-minded people, and yet I rambled about something even they wouldn't understand. Huh? What's that? You want me to keep going? Well, if you insist! Let's talk about three-digit numbers, but of course, as an edgelord… (The following has been omitted for brevity.)

Now that I've talked about six-digit numbers, let's move on to the next topic. I think I might have just revealed my phone's passcode toward the end there, but maybe it was just my imagination?

Okay, so what should we talk about next? Oh, right! I need to address something. It's about the afterword in the previous volume. I claimed that putting in a short story instead of an afterword was probably a first in the light novel industry…but a writer friend of mine was like, "What? Plenty of other people have already done that."

…I'm embarrassed, to say the least. This is what happens when you don't read enough light novels. That's right. Despite being a light novel author, I don't actually read that many. I mentioned this briefly in the afterword of Volume 5, but starting something new takes a lot of effort for me… Whether it's a light novel, manga, or anime, I find it really difficult to start something new. And the more famous or long-running a series is, the harder it is to start. Due to being like this, I think I had only bought and read about ten light novels before my debut? And out of those, only two were rom-coms? Plus, after starting university, I started reading web novels on sites like *Narou*, which are easier to access and have new works all the time, so I drifted even further away from traditional light novels… But anyway, that's beside the point. I thought I was doing something groundbreaking, but it turns out someone else did it before me and used short stories instead of

afterwords. But sandwiching an afterword between short stories? I'm sure I was the first to do that in the light novel industry. Maybe.

At any rate, after getting a taste for it, I just had to throw in another short story this time to pad the word count. It's hard even to imagine filling the afterword with random thoughts after you realize how easy the short stories are. After all, you can use up more lines with short dialogue in a short story, and you can freely add line breaks to the narrative. Of course, I got carried away last time and ended up having to cram lines together and delete text because I didn't have enough pages… I just had so much fun writing about Professor Side Slit…

Speaking of Professor Side Slit, we still haven't seen any illustrations of her in the light novels (and there are no plans currently to have any illustrations of her, either), but she has already made an appearance in the manga. When I was working on Volume 6 of the light novel, the manga adaptation was covering a flashback of the middle school festival arc from Volume 1, and when I saw one of the handicraft club members in the rough draft, I thought, "She's perfect." So I went to the manga's artist, Saho Tenamachi, and was like, "How about we make this Professor Side Slit?" She was really enthusiastic about the idea, so I proposed it to those in power when I turned in my rough draft for Volume 6 of the light novel. And that was how Professor Side Slit came to be.

Interestingly, when the chapter featuring Professor Side Slit was updated on *Magapoke*, Volume 6 of the light novel story hadn't even been released yet. In other words, she actually appeared in the manga adaptation before the original novel… which created a bit of a trap where readers who followed every update of the manga adaptation might have ignored her or not even noticed her existence. But to be fair, the second volume of the manga, which includes that story, was released after Volume 6 of the original novel, and the manga artist, Saho Tenamachi, touched on Professor Side Slit in her afterword in the second volume…so readers who follow every update would have probably bought Volume 2 when it came out and noticed what was going on. Right?!

Ahem! Anyway, what I'm trying to say to you all is buy the manga volumes, too! If you do, you can read my ridiculously detailed afterwords. I'm the kind of author who, when asked to write a one-page afterword, would reply, "Oh, so as long as it fits on one page, right?" And then I'd not do what I'm told. But it's not my fault. I-it's their fault for not specifying how many words I can write. If something isn't against the rules, then that makes it okay, right? You can't tell me that I should be using "common sense" after I'm done, either. Because there are plenty of people in the world like me who do things that don't make sense to most people.

You're probably thinking I'm being cocky, even though I'm aware that I'm being unreasonable and lacking in common sense. But it's actually quite the contrary. I'm cocky *because* I know I'm being unreasonable and lacking in common sense. People who feel guilty about something tend to act overly arrogant to intimidate others to avoid being called out. If you ever see someone like that, look at them with pity and think to yourself, "Awww.What a pitiful creature who can't live without pretending to be a tough guy." You know what's even sadder, though? There's also a certain number of people who are completely unaware of their own unreasonableness and still act superior. So if you ever see someone like that, look at them with pity and think to yourself, "Oh, what a sad monster created by the unfortunate environment they were born into." Look at them with pity and then give them a German suplex. Wait, no. Don't actually do that. Just do it in your head. Huh? What are you looking at me like that for? Oh, by the way, you can also read the short story I wrote if you buy the manga volumes. So get on it! All right, I'm done pushing my stuff!

Anyway, now that I'm done promoting the manga, what should I talk about now? The anime adaptation? Actually, I don't really have much to say about that. I'm not even sure how much I can reveal. But the project is progressing steadily. The reason why it took five months for this novel to release is because we've been working on the manga adaptation in addition to the anime adaptation. This is the most I can handle as a part-time author.

Then again, it's a bit up in the air, but I sort of feel like maybe I might have been able to possibly keep up with that one-novel-per-four-months pace if, perhaps, I had panicked more and pushed myself harder to finish the manuscript at the last minute, kind of like a high school student cramming to finish their paper during summer vacation, though who's to say, really…? Yeah, I know. Even I'm kind of confused now.

Anyway, if I can't talk about the anime…then maybe I can talk about creative theory instead? Surely the literature nerds would like that. I won't, though. I hate talk about creative theory. It feels so self-important. I don't mind when other people do it, but when it comes to me, a little devil on my shoulder always starts snickering, "Hey, only one of your series has ever been picked up by a publisher, and you're already spouting off about creative theory?" Plus, who's going to take writing advice from some weirdo who writes chapters one, three, six, and eight almost simultaneously? Yes, you heard that right. I actually don't write *Alya Sometimes Hides Her Feelings in Russian* in order and don't even start with the prologue. I usually write multiple chapters simultaneously, and at my worst, I write the entire novel out of order, going back and forth between stories.

Just like how everyone has their own way of writing novels, creative theory is *so* subjective that it's best not to take it too seriously, so don't put too much thought into it. Maybe just use half your brain to listen. No, a third at most. Even when I hear professional writers talk about creative theory, I often think, "Really? I don't know about that." In fact, I rarely agree with them. So instead of studying how to write novels, I think it's better to deeply immerse yourself in the works you love and the ones you think are good and practice the principle of "learn by watching," or in this case, "learn by reading." Make these techniques yours. Of course, I'm not telling you to plagiarize.

But if you still want to hear others' opinions and use them in your writing, I suggest joining a group of fellow writers, preferably one with a diverse range of writers. Of course, you'll get all sorts of different opinions there, but if there's something that you actually need to improve on, then multiple people will likely give you the same feedback. And I think if you apply their feedback, you'll gradually be able to write better than the average

person. Then again, I suppose this is also a form of creative theory in a broad sense, so you don't have to take it too seriously. Just use a third of your brain to listen and take what I say with a grain of salt, because who takes advice from someone who rambles like this? In fact, only use a third of a third of your brain for this stuff. That's one-ninth for you science people, so… (The following has been omitted for brevity.)

Anyway, it seems like I've been talking about numbers quite a bit, and we're almost out of pages, so let's move on to the acknowledgments.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Miyakawa, my editor, who has been very patient with my slow progress. I'm so sorry for always submitting my work right at the deadline…… okay, after the deadline. I do feel bad. Or maybe I just say that I do. Thank you for your understanding and for always providing me with your honest feedback. I'm truly grateful for your support.

Next, I'd like to thank Momoco for drawing the wonderful illustrations once again. Despite your busy schedule, you've consistently provided us with an incredible number of high-quality illustrations. Especially this time, in addition to designing new characters, you've drawn numerous illustrations featuring multiple characters. Thank you so much.

Also, I must thank Tenamachi, who has drawn Alya, Masha, and now Yuki in her cute "younger-sister mode" for the manga adaptation. I made sure to promote the manga on Twitter as you requested as well. I'm pretty sure it was a joke, but you picked the wrong person to joke with. Heh. Then again, whether or not that counts as promotion is up for debate, I guess!

And last but not least, I would like to express my immeasurable gratitude to Suzuki, who has recently joined us as the editor for the manga adaptation, and to all the staff involved in the production of *Feelings in Russian*, as well as to all the readers. Thank you very much! Let's meet again in the next volume! Actually, let's meet again in the afterword of the manga for Volume 3! See you there!


Alya, I look forward
to continuing
to work with you! ☺

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