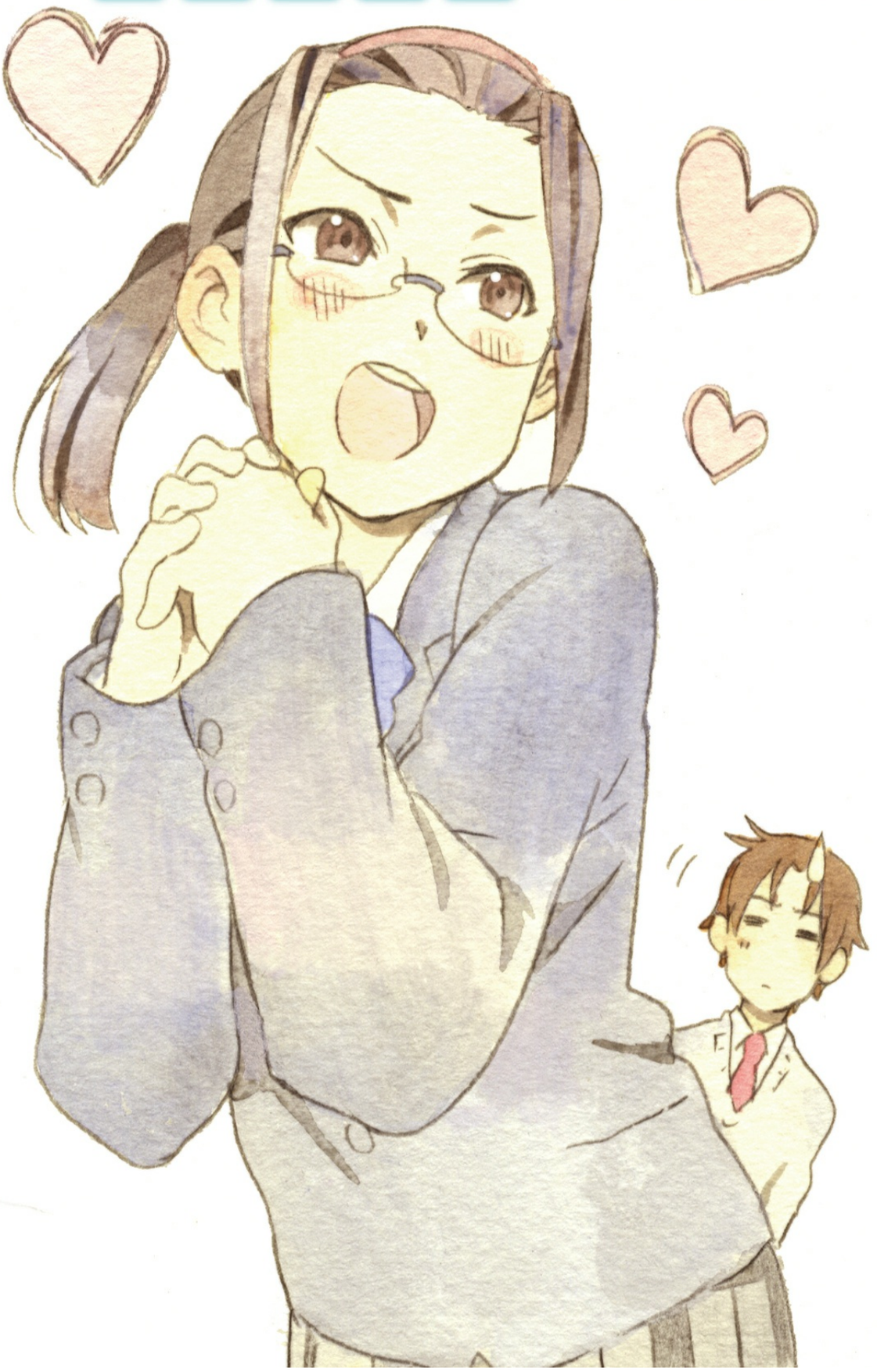

KOKORO CONNECT
MICHI RANDOM
Sadanatsu Anda

KOKORO CONNECT

MICHI — RANDOM




Alright, now when do I give him this choco-late...?
2/14
Sorry? Sorry about what?
"What?"
"I'm really sorry."
She mumbled something, but he couldn't quite hear it.
"...I'm sorry."
2/13


Normally Iori-chan was a bottomless fountain of ideas for this stuff, but today she sat there silently, her expression cold and distant.
As usual, Inabacchan was leading the discussion... but something was visibly off this time around.
"We need to brainstorm a plan for our club presentation and win back our conveniently useless advisor."
Real talk, it was throwing us all off. Nobody knew how to handle it.
Nagase Iori
Inaba Himeko
Kiriyama Yui
Aoki Yoshifumi
Yaegashi Taichi
2/16



Table of Contents

<Chapter 1> Yaegashi Taichi's Confession

<Chapter 2> Valentine's Day With Inaba Himeko

<Chapter 3> Aoki Yoshifumi's Preferred Battle Tactic

<Chapter 4> Yaegashi Taichi's Tangled Love Life

<Chapter 5> Kiriyama Yui's Dramatic Struggle

<Chapter 6> Inaba Himeko's Commitment

<Chapter 7> Yaegashi Taichi’s Epiphany

<Chapter 8> Nagase Iori Settles the Score

<Epilogue> Nagase Iori's Final Chapter

Afterword

Prologue: I Just Can’t

[No, this isn’t right. This isn’t it. I can’t make this work anymore.

It’s impossible. I can’t do it anymore. I can’t. I physically cannot.

Am I a liar? No. I didn’t lie. I’m one hundred percent sure I didn’t. I absolutely did not lie to them.

But there’s a massive gulf between my ideal and reality.

Maybe I just like who I am when I’m in love with him—maybe that’s the only reason I—

I can’t do this anymore. I can’t make it work.

I can’t even be normal.]

Chapter 1: Yaegashi Taichi’s Confession

Maybe it could be excused by the appearance of «Heartseed» and the manifestation of the supernatural phenomena... but only a coward would blame it on that.

This time the five of them had vowed not to let it cause any major complications. They would be getting out of this one wholly intact. And if possible... they would try to put an end to it, once and for all.

Their countermeasure: to keep living their lives as normal.

Now a week had passed, with no major incidents to be seen.

Yaegashi Taichi had vowed to himself that he would keep living his life, just like everyone else. And so he decided that today was the day he would settle a matter that had been left vague and inconclusive for far too long. Today he was going to man up for once.

It was February 13th, the day before Valentine’s Day—the deadline he’d set for himself.

In Japan, the chocolate confectionery and retail industries had teamed up to create a certain long-lasting tradition. And while it wasn’t unheard of in this day and age to buy chocolate for oneself or one’s friends, there was one predominant expectation: February 14th, Valentine’s Day, was a holiday in which girls across the country would give gifts to their beloved.

At present, he had somehow attracted the interest of two different girls. And if he chose to do nothing, he would likely end up with two gifts. But his heart only had room for one of them. And if he was smart enough to understand that, then he needed to make a decision. After all, only a limp-dick loser would keep stringing both of them along.

And so, with his decision made, he had asked the girl in question to meet him after school, out behind the East Wing.

He was worried the others might have overheard, but that was probably just

his paranoia talking. At least, he sincerely hoped it was.

And now here she was, standing in front of him.

“I know this is kind of weird timing, but I need to say this... No, I *want* to say this,” he began.

“Okay,” she replied with a nod.

His heart was thumping like crazy. His legs were shaking. He couldn’t feel his lips. His chest ached, and his stomach felt like it was going to eject its contents at any second. He exhaled hard, summoning all of his strength for this one unforgettable moment. Then he looked back at her, directly into her eyes.

Don’t run—fight. Fight like your life depends on it.

He was going to confess his love to Nagase Iori one more time.

“I’m still in love with you. And I want you to be my girlfriend.”

There. I said it. Oh god, I said it!

This time the words carried a slightly different weight.

He had moved forward. This was a once-in-a-lifetime challenge, and he had risen to the occasion. Now the ball was in her court.

At his confession, Nagase looked away, concealing her expression. Then she spun neatly on her heel, turning away from him entirely. Would she accept his love? Was she savoring the moment?

Taichi paused to wistfully reflect on the long road that had finally led up to this. Months had passed since his initial confession. He never should have made her wait this long. The shame of it made him restless. He wanted her to hurry up and break this stupid tension with a response, but of course he’d never actually say that.

Instead, he quietly gazed at Nagase as she stood there, unmoving. Her well-proportioned figure was stunning from behind... Her cute little ponytail... He thought back to all the emotions he’d seen from her over the weeks. Joy, anger, sadness. She was so much more expressive than the average person, and Taichi never got tired of it. That said, her sunny smile was still his favorite, of course—

“...I’m sorry.”

She mumbled something, but he couldn't quite hear it. "What?"

"I'm really sorry."

Sorry? Sorry about what?

"I... can't be with you, Taichi."

He couldn't believe what he was hearing.

He couldn't accept it.

This shouldn't have come as a surprise to her. She had known how he felt for a long time. And as it happened, she had admitted to feeling the same. Was she just lying?

"It just... doesn't feel right. So yeah... All that 'I'm in love with you' stuff... Let's just pretend I never said any of it."

That was the final blow. This was the undeniable truth, and he couldn't escape from it. But strangely enough, it didn't hurt. The shock of it all had numbed his pain receptors.

"Anyway... I'm gonna get going."

With that, Nagase hastily started to walk away.

Please don't go. Please... Please just explain to me why!

But his mouth wouldn't move.

Finally, he forced the words out of his throat:

"Wh... what the hell, Nagase?!"

He knew he should just accept her rejection with grace, but he couldn't stop himself from asking.

She came to a stop.

"I... I..." she stammered in a shaky voice.

But before she could finish the rest of her sentence—

[No... I'm not the person he thinks I am.]

The thought—*her thought*—echoed through Taichi's mind, and all at once he

felt a rush of eerily foreign emotion, dark and cold.

“Crap...” Nagase muttered under her breath, suggesting she knew he’d heard it.

The next instant, she took off running at full speed, like she couldn’t stand to be around him a second longer.

But Taichi just stood there, left behind like an abandoned puppy.

A strong gust of wind blew, shaking him slightly.

“This can’t be happening... What’s going on...?”

He just couldn’t process it. Had he done something to offend her? If so, he certainly hadn’t noticed. Was she mad at him for not choosing her sooner? For taking his sweet time?

“This isn’t... how it was supposed to go...” he mumbled helplessly.

He didn’t understand it. Any of it. But that didn’t change anything, of course. Her answer was still no. And he was forced to accept that.

“...She shot me down...”

In other words...

Yaegashi Taichi’s love story had come to a close.

□■□■□

The next morning, every high school boy in the country was restless with excitement for Valentine’s Day. They could try to play it off and pretend they didn’t care, but deep down, every single one of them was quietly hyper-focused on the girls’ slightest actions.

Yamaboshi High School was no exception, of course, filled to the brim with unusually energetic boys. But it wasn’t just them—there was a certain giddiness among the girls, too.

And amid all this nervous, giggly energy, Yaegashi Taichi trudged down the hall on leaden legs.

One minute the holiday cheer would start grating on his nerves, and the next minute the apathy would kick in, and all he felt was emptiness. He sighed for

the umpteenth time.

Until yesterday, he never would have imagined his Valentine's Day would end up like this. He'd been expecting something... special.

As he walked down the hall, random students shot him weird looks. He knew he must've looked utterly miserable, and it was probably a total buzzkill, but he couldn't find it in him to pretend he was fine. He'd been a gloomy little raincloud since last night.

Was it a mistake to initiate the conversation during a phenomenon? In the past, Nagase had told him she wanted to maintain the status quo during «Heartseed»'s shenanigans. But things were different now. Besides, she never really seemed to let the phenomena get in the way of her life...

These thoughts pervaded his mind at every moment, dragging him down deeper into depression.

This particular phenomenon, Sentiment Transmission, would broadcast their unspoken thoughts and feelings to one or more of the others, entirely at random. There were plenty of problems to be had from this invasion of privacy—but they all agreed that they would be fine. They would overcome it. They would put an end to it.

Thankfully no one else knows about what had happened yesterday... I'll be fine... I just need to get over it... I need to get over her ASAP...

He found himself riding this train of thought around and around in circles, unable to get back on track.

Arriving at Classroom 1-C, he opened the door and stepped inside.

"Sup, Taichi!" shouted Watase Shingo, Taichi's good friend. "Are you hyped for Valentine's... Wait, what happened to you?"

"Nothing."

"You say that, but you've got a look on your face like your crush handed you a gift bag and said 'Could you throw this trash away for me?' and you were like 'Holy shit, a real-life *tsundere*?! No need to pretend your chocolate is trash, c'mon!' but then you looked inside to find that it really was just her trash."

“That was... extremely specific, but okay.”

Suspiciously specific, in fact.

“Aw, cheer up! The ‘woe is me’ routine will get you less chocolate, y’know!”

Frankly, he didn’t care how much chocolate he received from whomever else. He only wanted hers—and now he knew he wouldn’t be getting it.

Before he knew it, he’d made it to the last class of the day. He couldn’t remember which classes he’d had before this one; he couldn’t even remember picking up his pen. It was a miracle none of the teachers had called him out on it, really. Or had he been taking notes on autopilot?

School’s almost over, he thought.

Normally he eagerly anticipated the chime of the final bell, but now it felt like a death knell. Like he was a prisoner on death row, waiting for his turn in the electric chair... Okay, maybe that last one was a bit overly dramatic. Obviously he wasn’t going to die... He just wished he was.

Taichi hadn’t looked at Nagase all day, much less spoken to her. But once school ended, they would be meeting up in the clubroom. After the emotional devastation the day before, he’d skipped club activities entirely, but he knew he couldn’t just avoid the clubroom forever. He had to go.

And there, in the relatively small space that was their clubroom, they would be forced to interact—Nagase with the guy she rejected, and Taichi with the girl who shot him down. No matter how they tried to spin it, it would be awkward.

And then there was Inaba, the girl he *hadn’t* chosen, though she didn’t know it yet. She would be there, too. Which meant there would be two victims of rejection and two perpetrators of said rejection, all in the same room. “Awkward” didn’t even begin to cover it.

Nagase probably felt awful, too. For a moment he entertained the notion of avoiding the clubroom purely for her sake.

I’m so pathetic and miserable. I’m worthless trash.

His self-esteem was in tatters.

But worst of all, their current phenomenon threatened to broadcast their thoughts and feelings to everyone else. Now *that* would be humiliating. Excruciatingly so.

Damn it, I'm spiraling. Remember what we promised? Remember what we learned during the Liberation? Don't overthink it. Don't create problems. We're going to get through it together. We can do this... We can do this...

Ultimately, Taichi continued to wallow in his misery all the way until the final bell.

"Yaegashi-kun, could I borrow you for a moment?" asked Fujishima Maiko, president of Class 1-C.

Taichi found he lacked the energy to try to get out of it, so he nodded.

As they left the room, he could hear curious whispers behind them: "Whoa, Fujishima's into Yaegashi?!"

"The Love Guru's joining the battle?!"

"She's going to show us all how it's done!"

"What the hell, Yaegashi?! You're not into her, right?! And you remember who *is* into her, right?! Pretty sure I've told you a million times?!"

(That last one was a very jealous Watase, of course.)

He wasn't sure where Fujishima was taking him, but he followed her regardless—all the way up to the school roof.

The roof itself was freely available to students, and even furnished with a few benches, but no one in their right mind wanted to spend time out here in the biting winter wind. Seriously, it was freezing.

"Uh, Fujishima? You sure you want to be out here without a coat on?" he asked.

She had been perfectly quiet on the way here, but now, finally, she turned back to face him. As usual, her hair was tied back in a ponytail with her bangs pinned up; she tucked a stray strand back into place as she opened her mouth to speak.

“Don’t worry about me—the fire in my heart keeps me warm enough. Now then, Yaegashi-kun. You’ve got some relationship troubles, don’t you?” Her glasses glinted as she slid them up the bridge of her nose.



He knew she couldn't possibly have read his mind, and yet somehow this (self-proclaimed) apostle of love could see right through him anyway. This was nothing out of the ordinary for her, of course.

"...I mean, yeah, you could say that. But it's none of your business, so please just stay out of it." His tone was harsher than she deserved, but he couldn't help it.

"Today is Valentine's Day, the most important romantic holiday of the year, and I can't have you moping around and being a wet blanket."

"I'm sorry. I'm not doing it on purpose." If he could've controlled it, then he wouldn't have been so snippy with his friends.

"Is this about Nagase-san?"

Evidently she wasn't going to butt out anytime soon... so he gave up and nodded. "Yeah."

"This is just a guess, but... did she turn you down?"

The words hit him square in the chest like a cannonball.

"Yeah," he replied, hoping it would help his brain hurry up and accept this horrible reality.

Fujishima's eyes widened in surprise. "No way... Really? From my perspective, things between you seemed to be going rather well."

"Yeah, well, it's the truth."

"I see..."

Fujishima averted her gaze sadly, and Taichi's heart ached. He was tempted to tell her not to feel bad on his account, but then she looked up—

"*IT'S TIME FOR MY BIG COMEBACK!*" she shouted triumphantly up at the sky.

For a moment, Taichi's brain struggled to determine whether this was real life. How could someone so openly rejoice over another person's heartbreak—No, wait! He'd forgotten the crucial detail that Fujishima was possibly interested in Nagase, too! *Crap!*

After a moment, she snapped back to her senses. "Oh, right. Forgive me,

Yaegashi-kun. I shouldn't have let myself get so overcome with joy."

"Just because she rejected me doesn't mean you automatically win, you know."

"Oh, don't be such a sore loser. Pfffft." Her expression was one of mixed pity and scorn.

"Rrrgh... You witch...!"

"I mean, like, with all the history between you two, who could've seen it coming? That's, like, *totally* hilarious."

"Quit kicking me while I'm down, you monster! And why are you suddenly talking like an airheaded bimbo?! What happened to being the stoic intellectual type?!"

"There we go. Looks like that helped cheer you up a bit. I'd forgotten how tiring it is to use all these facial muscles." Just like that, Fujishima had gone back to her usual composed countenance. She rubbed her shoulder as if to massage her muscles.

"What the hell was that...? You make it sound like..."

Like she'd put on a silly little performance for the express purpose of cheering him up. *What's your deal, Fujishima Maiko?*

"Talk about a lucky break! OMG, totally hilarious!"

"Wait, so you really were trying to screw with me?!"

Seriously, what the hell is your deal?!

"Just try to cheer up, would you?" she asked in her usual serious tone. "Obviously I don't know all the details, but I approve of you trying to make things official before the holiday. That *is* essentially what happened, yes?"

"...You're pretty sharp."

"Have you forgotten? I'm the Goddess of Love."

Apparently she had been promoted to godhood now. Soon she would be free of this mortal realm altogether.

"I wouldn't get too hung up on it if I were you. Why not use this opportunity

to date Inaba-san instead?”

“Pfffbgh?! Where did that come from?! And how do you know about me and Inaba?!”

When did she figure it all out?! You’ve earned my respect, Goddess!

“I know she has feelings for you, at the very least. I mean, just look at her these days. She’s completely smitten! Frankly, it’s baffling that no one else has noticed!”

Precisely.

If Inaba cared for him that deeply, then that was all the more reason he couldn’t be with her. If he pursued her now, it would look like he was simply settling for his second choice, and she deserved better than that.

“I think it’s fine, personally,” Fujishima continued, and instantly his heart leapt in his throat as he wondered whether she’d read his mind... but such a thing was impossible, of course. “Who cares if you get in a rebound relationship after a rejection? It’s perfectly common to seek consolation after getting your heart broken. The rest of the world will forgive you for it, as will I.”

“But—”

“It’s *fine*. Love is transient, you know. As long as you both have feelings for each other—or, more accurately in this case, as long as you respect her feelings and make an effort to reciprocate, it’s hardly a crime.”

“That doesn’t sound like something an ‘apostle of love’ would say.”

“Sure it is. I believe in the right to love freely. Naturally, this doesn’t mean I think it’s okay to cheat or anything like that. But doesn’t it feel kind of silly to get all uptight about it? I mean, just my personal opinion, obviously.”

But then—

[Alright, now when do I give him this chocolate...?]

It was the voice of Inaba Himeko, who was most certainly not present on the roof with them. He could feel her anxious excitement... Then he realized something critical: He’d meant to tell her not to get him a gift, as he didn’t intend to accept it, but it had completely slipped his mind. Granted, this was

less of a casual memory lapse and more of a critical brain shutdown after his envisioned confession scenario had gone so entirely off the rails.

“Besides, I’d say it’s worth it just for the experience. I know I tend to play the part of your mentor, but really we’re both just teenagers. None of us really know what ‘love’ is. All we can do is experiment, screw up, and learn from our mistakes.” She smiled slightly, and in that moment, she was neither a guru nor an apostle nor a goddess—just a normal girl. Somehow it was easy to forget that. “Anyway, once you feel you’ve gotten over Nagase-san, I think it’s safe to go ahead and hook up with Inaba-san.”

“No way. That’s just...”

Inexcusable. Disrespectful. Messed up.

“And then once you’re all lovey-dovey with Inaba-san, I shall lay claim to Nagase-san myself.”

“So *that’s* what you’re after!”

As usual, she was utterly unpredictable. Still, she had made an effort to have a serious conversation with him, and the fact of the matter was, it helped him cheer up considerably.

□■□■□

With Fujishima’s help, Taichi had managed to regain his composure... Well, not all of it, but enough to go to the clubroom, at least. This was no time to be wallowing in misery. After all, they’d all vowed not to cause any drama. If they were going to get out of this unscathed, then that obviously included him. Now, with Fujishima’s meaningful lesson engraved deep in his chest, he summoned the last dregs of his courage to get him all the way to the clubroom.

But as it turned out, reality was a merciless beast. Of all the times to throw a wrench into their normal lives, it just *had* to be during a supernatural phenomenon.

Scene: Rec Hall Room 401.

Club president Nagase Iori and vice president Inaba Himeko recounted to

their fellow clubmates a message from Gotou Ryuuzen, advisor to Class 1-C and supervisor for the Cultural Research Club.

“And then at the end he was like ‘Sorry to rain on your V-Day parade... Well, I guess it’s not that big of a deal. You’ll just be getting a new advisor, that’s all. Anyway, just a heads up!’ ” Nagase explained in her best Gotou impression.

Willing his mind to stay perfectly blank, Taichi focused on the words themselves. Not the fact that it was Nagase doing the talking. *It’s not her, it’s just a recording... just a robot voice...*

“ ‘Just a heads up’ my ass! This is a matter of life and death, damn it!” Inaba roared, slamming her fist on the table. On the outside she looked the part of an ice queen, but on the inside she was a veritable inferno of rage.

“Like whoa, Inaba, calm down,” Kiriyama Yui chided. “It’s not Gossan’s fault. He has no idea how serious this is for us.” She paused there to tuck a strand of long, reddish-brown hair behind her ear. “Also... ‘Cook him alive’? Maybe chill out with those violent fantasies.”

Apparently Inaba had inadvertently Transmitted something to Kiriyama. Inaba’s expression hardened for a moment; then her lip curled in a smirk.

“Hmph. He deserves it.”

Kiriyama smiled, relieved to hear the usual venom in Inaba’s voice. The Sentiment Transmission didn’t matter. They were beyond over it.

“So, what do we do?” asked Aoki Yoshifumi, swaying his tall frame from side to side, making his wavy locks bounce with the motions.

Taichi had been laser-focused on the words themselves, so he had all the details memorized.

According to Gotou, he was lined up to get a promotion at the start of the next school year—and this new position was only allowed to advise one club. That meant he’d have to give up his advisor position for either the Cultural Research Club or the jazz band. And according to him, he wasn’t allowed to make this decision for himself; instead, it would be decided by the club presentations held at the end of the school year. Supposedly, whoever scored higher would get to keep Gotou as their advisor.

For something that was casually dropped on them out of the blue, it seemed like kind of a big deal.

“Honestly, Gotou hasn’t exactly been much help to us, so changing advisors wouldn’t really matter *in theory*, but... he’s the reason we’re allowed to have so much freedom in our club activities in the first place,” Inaba mused.

Club activities were an important part of life at Yamaboshi High School. Students were generally allowed to create and join whatever club they liked, but in exchange, a certain level of effort was expected from them. In other words, it was a privilege they had to earn.

“Normally all we’d have to do is put in some decent effort... but unfortunately we’ve got «Heartseed» and its ilk to deal with,” she continued.

Six months had passed since they first fell into «Heartseed»’s clutches, and its grip was as strong as ever. Thanks to its otherworldly phenomena seeping into every facet of their lives, there had been several times when they’d failed to turn in the Culture Bulletin on time.

“I don’t know how long they plan to keep screwing with us, but if there’s one thing we *do* know, it’s that they refuse to take no for an answer. Which means we stand a lot to gain from having an advisor who never bothers to check in on us.”

Kiriyama sighed. “Yeah, like... Normally I’d *want* an advisor who actually does their job, but we’d be in real trouble if we got saddled with someone who comes by every single day.”

I should join the conversation, Taichi thought. “About this club presentation thing... I’ve heard rumors about it, but what is it actually like?”

“I can answer that,” Inaba replied.

Club presentations were to be held after end-of-year exams over a period of a few days. The main purpose was for each club to showcase their activities over the course of the past year, but because they would be graded—and because this grade would directly affect their club budget—it was really more of a competition to see who could put on the best performance.

Each presentation would last up to a maximum of fifteen minutes. Naturally,

because this was Yamaboshi, the students were free to present whatever they wanted (within reason).

There would be ten judges on the panel: five faculty members and five student council members. The presentations would take place onstage in the auditorium, and for the sake of transparency, other students were welcome to sit in and watch (also because otherwise the room would feel empty and depressing).

“For now, we just need to learn more about the presentation format, find out how good the jazz band is, and come up with a plan to out-score them... Oh, I know! Why don’t we go scope ‘em out? That way we can kill two birds with one stone!” Nagase suggested cheerfully.

It was rather frightening how... *normal* she sounded. Almost like she’d completely erased the memory of having shot Taichi down. It made him sad to think she didn’t care about what happened yesterday. Or maybe she did care, but was making an effort not to let it show... If so, she was way too good at it.

If only she’d Transmit her thoughts so I could know what she’s thinking... God, I’m such a creep.

In the end, it was decided that the CRC would go pay a visit to the jazz band, per Nagase’s suggestion.

“Wait... If they were willing to give him up, then that would solve our whole problem... Maybe it’s worth it to negotiate... Ugh, I hate that we have to fight over *Gotou* in the first place! Gross!” Inaba muttered to herself as she led the way to Music Room 2, where jazz band practice was held.

“Well, hi there, Yaegashi-kun, Inaba-san... Oh, and Nagase-san!”

When they arrived, they were greeted by Shiroyama Shouto, a fellow classmate in Class 1-C. Mild-mannered and soft-spoken, with boyish good looks, he looked like the sort of kid who’d say stuff like “Golly!” and “Gee whiz!”—in other words, a rare breed these days. Some of their other classmates referred to him as “Little Prince,” often sarcastically.

“Oh, hey, Shiroyama. I didn’t realize you were in the jazz band,” said Taichi.

The two of them weren't particularly close, but as classmates, they'd had their fair share of interactions together.

"Yup! And you're in the Cultural Research Club, right? Did you need something?"

They decided to give him a quick run-down of the situation.

"Hmmm..." Shiroyama tilted his head in contemplation.

"What's wrong?"

"Well... I don't think we can give him up, really. We kinda need him."

"Please," Inaba scoffed. "You *need* him? What for? Literally what reason do you have to want that slacker as your advisor?"

"Oh, I'm sure we both have our reasons," Shiroyama replied with a sheepish smile as he invited the five of them inside.

There, sitting in the center of the practicing students, was Gotou Ryuuzen—rocking the saxophone with such extraordinary skill, even the most tone deaf person could tell he was gifted.

"Wh..." Taichi was speechless.

From there, Gotou's mind-blowing performance continued (and on top of that, it seemed like he was guiding the other students?!) until the song ended... at which point Taichi applauded. By that point, he was so captivated, he'd completely forgotten why they were there in the first place. Save for Inaba, the others clapped with him; evidently they felt the same way.

"Gossan, that was incredible!" Kiriyama gushed.

"That was nuts, dude..." Aoki murmured.

"The rest of the band kicked ass, too!" Nagase exclaimed.

"Aww, shucks... I wouldn't say I'm that good... Hahaha..." Shiroyama mumbled shyly.

"No one was talking about you," Taichi retorted for good measure.

"Hmm? Well, if it isn't the full CRC crew! What brings you here?" Gotou asked, his tone as laid-back as ever.

“The rumors always said you were incredible... but I was convinced they had to be wrong...!” Inaba muttered bitterly to herself for some reason.

“Fun fact: Gotou-sensei can play pretty much any instrument. Not as well as he plays the sax, of course, but still above average!” Shiroyama added.

“Nngh...! Then... that bullshit about a recruiter trying to scout you to a professional orchestra...”

“Oh yeah, I forgot about that... That was a long time ago,” Gotou replied casually.

Where’s she hearing all these rumors, anyway? I guess her information gathering hobby isn’t just for show...

“Gotou... Shouldn’t you be a music teacher? Why the hell are you teaching *physics* of all things?”

“Why? Because I like physics, obviously!”

Taichi had to admit—he was kinda badass.

□■□■□

Back at the clubroom, the brainstorming session resumed.

“No wonder they want to keep him,” Nagase remarked.

“Yeah, well, they can’t have him,” Inaba replied. “Not right now, anyway.”

Sadly, their attempt to negotiate had ended in failure, as expected. Inaba tried to use her tactical data to their advantage, but alas, the jazz band refused to compromise.

“All that’s left is to fight ‘em fair and square, I guess,” Aoki mused.

Kiriyama sighed. “I don’t know... They sounded *really* good,” she whispered. “It’ll take a miracle to beat them.”

“Then I guess we’d better give this club presentation everything we’ve got,” said Taichi.

Inaba nodded. “Now that it’s clear Gotou’s some kind of master musician, I’m actually grateful they chose to settle it via presentation scores. I’m not sure if they’re trying to be fair, or if they just don’t give a shit... Yeah, they probably

don’t give a shit...” She clucked her tongue in frustration. “So, what do we do? Come up with a plan? Supposedly we’re free to present whatever we want, but it still has to tie back to our club activities. In our case, that’d mean we’ll have to present some kind of article...”

Suddenly, Aoki jumped to his feet. “Ladies and gents... I know our rivals are tough... and I know we can’t afford to lose this battle... and I know we need to focus on it... BUT!” He raised his fist in the air as he continued his theatrical little speech. “Don’t we got something more *important* to be worrying about on this fine February the 14th?!” He glanced around the room. Crickets. “...Uh, guys? Who’s with me? Anyone?”

“A-Aoki, look, um...” Kiriyama hesitated. “With everything that’s going on right now, I don’t think we can afford to mess around...”

“*Au contraire*! We gotta confess these things before the Transmission sends ‘em anyways! That’s our policy, right, Inabacchan?”

“Well... Yeah, I guess...” Inaba replied vaguely.

“Besides, we’re all friends here, right? No reason we can’t talk about lovey-dovey stuff like who you gave chocolate to, or who you’ve got your eye on!”

After a moment, Kiriyama smiled. “On second thought, maybe you’re right. I admit, I *am* pretty curious what Iori and Inaba decided to do this year... I tried asking, but, like, neither of them will tell me!”

It was obvious she saw the topic as harmless.

Their goal was to live their lives unaffected by the phenomenon, avoid causing problems, and make it out unscathed. Thus, they were taking the correct approach... technically.

Isn’t this kinda risky? No, it’ll be fine... I just gotta believe...

“C’mon, Inaba. Don’t think I’ve forgotten that time you asked me for baking tips a while back! And I get the feeling I know what it was for... After all, I can’t imagine you’d go to all that trouble just to hand out freebie candy to random boys in your class!”

“Well, you see... uh...”

As things stood, neither Kiriyama nor Aoki knew how Inaba felt about—

[I can't! This is no time to go blabbing about how I'm in love with Taichi!]

But despite Inaba's best intentions, Taichi heard it anyway.

This was the nature of the Sentiment Transmission—broadcasting their innermost thoughts and feelings to other people at random.

His heart thumped uncomfortably in his chest as he glanced around the room at the others.

Fortunately, just because he heard it didn't necessarily mean everyone else did; the recipients of said Transmission were entirely random as well. Maybe she'd gotten lucky and he was the only one—

But as soon as he saw their faces, he knew. Kiriyama and Aoki had both heard it. Which meant they both must've picked up her emotions along with it, thus proving that she was serious.

As for Nagase, it seemed she'd been left out of the loop. "Huh? What happened? Did somebody Transmit or what?" she asked lightheartedly.

"Oh, uh, well... uhhh..." Aoki fumbled awkwardly.

"I knew it," Kiriyama whispered to herself. Apparently she must've sensed something between them at some point. "I always had a sneaking suspicion... but at the same time, you were always so supportive of Taichi and Iori... I mean, you told me flat-out you wanted to play Cupid for the two of them, so I'd assumed you weren't interested, but—um..." Realizing she'd said too much, she fell silent.

At this, Inaba finally came back to life. "D-Don't worry about it! But just so you know," she hastily cut in, "we've already talked about it. A-And I meant to tell everyone eventually, but I couldn't find the right time..." Her expression was one of desperation. "But anyway, yeah, so... um...!" She glanced down at her lap, exhaled—or laughed, Taichi couldn't quite tell—then looked back up at them. "It's... exactly what you think it is. Iori and I are fighting over Taichi. Pretty hilarious, right?"

Kiriyama and Aoki stared back, mouths agape.

“But like I said, you don’t have to worry about any drama or anything. Right, Iori? Taichi?”

As the conversation turned to him, Taichi panicked. Nagase was dead silent. But one of them needed to say something. Anything!

“Yeah, uh... This is gonna sound really weird coming from me, but... we’ve got it all figured out,” he replied.

But the truth is, it doesn’t matter anymore. The story’s over. After all,

[I tried to make things official with Nagase yesterday and she just shot me down completely.]

Instantly, Taichi’s heart leapt into his throat. He knew someone had heard that. And in the next moment, he knew. Inaba, Kiriyama, Aoki, Nagase—they’d *all* heard it. And that meant they all probably felt the way he was feeling.

“Uh... Dude, what?!” Aoki blurted.

“Wha-wha-wha...?!” Kiriyama stammered.

Then he heard a shaky voice beside him.

“What the fuck...?”

It was Inaba.

“...I know I’m just the dark horse in this race, and I know I have no right to say this, but... you knew I was going to make chocolate for you, right? Didn’t you hear my Transmission?” Her face crumpled, on the verge of tears. “Don’t you give a shit about how I feel?”

“I, uh... well...” Taichi looked away, desperate to escape her pained gaze. He knew it wasn’t cool of him, but he just couldn’t bear it. He couldn’t bear the thought that his actions had hurt her.

And so, in his desire to flee, he said the one thing she probably wanted to hear least of all, the one thing he knew would just hurt her even worse:

“...I’m sorry.”

“You’re... *sorry*?”

Even without looking at her, he could tell from her voice just what sort of

expression she must have had on her face.

After all, there was an unstated implication in this apology: *I'm sorry, but I'm not interested.*

He didn't mean it like that, of course, but his intent wasn't what mattered here. If his statement was misinterpreted, then that was his fault.

Inaba slammed her fist down on the table, and he could feel her anger in the vibrations.

"And what about you, Iori?! Why the fuck would you do that?!"

If only they'd had this conversation at a better time, Inaba wouldn't have lashed out at Nagase. This was his fault, too. *Ugh, I'm the worst.*

Perplexed, Nagase waved her hands dismissively. "I mean, yeah, it's true that I turned him down... Look, just calm do—"

[It's none of your business. Don't get pissy with me.]

Before she could finish her sentence, she was interrupted—by her own Transmission.

He could feel her emotions, icy and sharp like a blade. She was unhappy with Inaba... and angry?

Inaba gasped and flinched in fear. Evidently she'd heard it, too.

"N-No, I didn't mean it! I'm not mad at you—"

[Oh, now you feel bad? Well, that's what you get for jumping down my throat.]

Once again, the phenomenon struck, broadcasting Nagase's thoughts and feelings. She wasn't exactly wrong to feel that way, of course, but should that have been Transmitted to Inaba, well... Taichi could think of few things more cruel.

Speaking of the Transmission, it seemed to be striking quite a bit. *What happened to the "random" thing?*

But then it happened again—

[She's virtually nothing like I thought she was.]

—and Taichi knew it had Transmitted his thoughts and feelings directly to Nagase Iori herself.

And again, there in his mind, he heard Transmissions from Kiriyama and Aoki:

[Iori's kinda freaking me out...]

[I don't remember Iori-chan being like this before...]

Had Nagase heard these? Or perhaps she heard someone else's... a Transmission he himself hadn't picked up—

"I... I didn't mean that, Iori!" Inaba shouted, though Taichi didn't understand why. What was going on? Inaba must have Transmitted something... but what?

With the Sentiment Transmission, they all learned things they were never meant to know—conveyed things they never wanted to express—all bundled up in raw, genuine emotions that they couldn't make excuses for.

And now Nagase's expression was filled with despair.

They should've been brainstorming a plan for the Gotou problem. They should have been laughing and joking. But now the air in the room was frozen solid.

And that was the moment Nagase Iori broke down.

□■□■□

Arriving home, Taichi headed up to his room. Just as he made it to the second floor, however, his ten-year-old sister Rina came dashing out of her room, her long wavy hair bouncing behind her.

"How'd it go today? Did you get any... um..." Her cheerful voice petered out, and she blinked in surprise. "Wh-What's wrong with you? You look miserable... Well, *someone* must've given you freebie chocolate, at least, right...? C'mon, don't tell me you struck out completely! That can't be possible! You're not *that* much of a loser!"

"Yes, I got some freebie chocolate."

"Well, there you go! Isn't that all that matters? Wait, I get it... I bet you didn't get any from that one girl you have a crush on, huh? Maybe you saw her giving

another guy a big, fancy gift or something?”

“...I’m going to my room now. Sorry.” Taichi attempted to move past her.

“W-Wait!” She reached out and grabbed him by the sleeve. “Seriously, Taichi, what’s going on with you?! Are you sick or something?!”

“No, it’s nothing like that.”

He’d told himself over and over—convinced himself it would all work out this time.

“If something’s bothering you, I’m happy to help, y’know!”

He sincerely appreciated the sentiment. Normally *she* was the one who always needed help, so it was nice to see her reciprocating in kind.

“Thanks, but... I’m fine.” He gently pried her hand off of his arm. The last thing he wanted was to for her to get involved in «Heartseed»’s supernatural shenanigans.

“Fine? You super duper don’t *look* fine! Listen—I’ll give you some chocolate I made, okay?! Here! Now cheer up already!”

She handed him a small pastel pink gift bag, which he accepted. “Okay... Thanks.”

“A-And just so you know... this is ultra-super-special chocolate, just for you!” she declared, fidgeting with her fingers, gaze averted.

“Cool... See you at dinner.” He put his hand on the doorknob.

“What the...? You’re not even going to respond to that? I thought you’d be over the moon! Now I feel like I shouldn’t have bothered! Well, you know the drill. You better pay me back five times as much on White Day, got it?! Also, I need help with my homework again... Hello? Earth to Taichi? Are you listening...?”

“No drama this time around. We’ll all make it out unscathed.” Yeah, right. What a joke.

With «Heartseed» in charge, that feeble dream never stood a snowball’s chance in hell.

Chapter 2: Valentine's Day With Inaba Himeko

This is now the *fourth* supernatural phenomenon imposed upon me and the rest of the Cultural Research Club.

Once again, it all started after «Heartseed» turned up at the clubroom, piloting the body of Class 1-C advisor and CRC supervisor Gotou Ryuuzen, no interference from «The Second» or anyone else, just like normal... or *its* idea of normal, at least.

After the total curveball that was the Age Regression, I'd been anticipating something more along those lines, but evidently not. I guess we're just back to the usual schtick...? Who the fuck was «The Second», then?

When I tried asking «Heartseed», it said "Oh... Right... Apparently I'm 'rather fascinating'... Not my words, obviously... It seems like I've become more entertaining myself lately... Wait... Why did I bother telling you that...? Was there a point...? I'm not sure..."

Right. Whatever.

So, this time around we're dealing with a phenomenon known as "Sentiment Transmission." Put simply, it broadcasts your thoughts to specific people, regardless of distance. And when it triggers, not only do you hear their voice in your head, you also get a taste of the emotions they're feeling at that moment. This means it's typically pretty obvious who each Transmission is from. You can just kind of tell.

How, specifically? It's hard to explain. It's not like you're really *hearing* their thoughts, since it doesn't pass through your ears. They're just kind of *there* in your mind. And their emotions? You just... *feel* them. If I was forced to describe it, I guess I'd say it's sort of like normal human empathy, except cranked up to eleven... but even then, that still doesn't quite capture the full experience.

This phenomenon affects all five members of the CRC and occurs entirely at random... although judging from past experience, we can reasonably assume

«Heartseed» can make it strike when he sees fit as well. In addition, it's entirely random who receives a given Transmission—always at least one of us, often more. Furthermore, the sender will always know precisely who received their Transmission, but those on the receiving end are left in the dark.

Basically, if I was to use an analogy, the five of us are now radio stations that randomly go "on the air" from time to time, only to be heard by whoever happens to be "tuned in to our channel" at the moment—but unlike regular radio, we can somehow pinpoint who our "listeners" are.

Fun fact: the more strongly you feel a given Sentiment, the more likely it will be Transmitted. And if you happen to be a direct cause of a Sentiment, you yourself are more likely to receive it. (Supposedly it's possible to Transmit at will if you *really* want to, but this hasn't been proven, so it's safe to disregard for now.)

And there you have it. That just about sums up the entire explanation «Heartseed» gave us.

It kind of goes without saying, but this phenomenon felt *really fucking weird* at first. Like, yeah, no shit—who wouldn't feel weird having someone else's thoughts and emotions randomly take over? Seriously though, it made us sick to our stomachs and gave us migraines. Fortunately(?), now that a week has passed, we're all pretty much used to it.

Objectively speaking, it's downright bizarre how quickly we're able to acclimate to this shit. Unfortunately, that acclimation in and of itself has become part of the routine, loath as I am to admit it.

For the first three days, notorious pessimist that I am, I decided I would try to "combat" the Transmission by sleeping as much as possible—only to end up with a mild case of insomnia instead.

Once again, it's terrifying what these phenomena do to us. Who wouldn't go insane with all their most private thoughts on loudspeaker?

But then again, this isn't exactly our first rodeo. At this point, we've formed tight friendships that can survive a few spilled secrets.

By day four I was at peak fatigue levels—but all it took was one little "We're

going to be okay” from Taichi, and that night I slept like a baby.

In the end, all it really takes is that one moment of security for everything to go back to normal. And the next thing you know, you’ve accepted that the only thing left is to keep living your life... all the while waiting eagerly for the otherworldly misery to be over... because you know that’s the only way out.

Supposedly these things want to be “entertained.” That’s the whole reason «Heartseed» is putting us through all this shit. So if we refuse to dance to their tune, could we make them lose interest in us? If we go on with our everyday lives without giving the phenomena so much as a passing thought, could we convince them we’re not worth toying with anymore?

When «Heartseed» ended the Liberation, its reasoning was that we’d all “gotten too used to it.” That’s why, as of a few days ago, we’ve decided to fight back by... simply not caring. And we’re going to give it all we’ve got.

Of course, that doesn’t make the phenomenon any less dangerous.

We deluded ourselves into thinking we could get out of this one entirely unscathed, but those hopes were promptly shattered after the conflict the Sentiment Transmission caused in the clubroom yesterday. It hurt Iori so badly, she didn’t say another word for the rest of the day. And after everything I ***[heard]***—and everything she ***[thought]***—the future looks grim.

But worst of all, I keep thinking back to one specific little comment that asshole made:

“Oh yes... I think I might get more actively involved this time around... maybe... or maybe not...”

□■□■□

February 15th—the day after Valentine’s Day.

Today I headed to school with homemade chocolate hidden in my bookbag for the second day in a row. Too scared to go straight to the classroom lest I be forced to interact with Taichi and/or Iori, I instead wandered my way to a deserted corner of the school building.

I knew I was supposed to be focused on brainstorming a plan to solve the

Gotou issue, but that would have to wait.

"I bet I'm the only dipshit who brought chocolate today," I muttered to myself. Good thing I'd decided to go with plain old chocolate over something that used fruit or cream—this way it wouldn't spoil as quickly.

(Truth be told, I'd originally attempted something a bit more elaborate, but it ended in utter failure. Thankfully, no one would ever have to know.)

I opened my bookbag and peeked at the gift-wrapped box of Valentine's Day chocolates. This was my first time baking for someone else... and my first time giving a guy a gift on this cheesy holiday.

At least, it was supposed to be.

But here I was, still carrying it. And that fact served as a harsh reminder that he didn't want me.

Anger, pain, and loneliness swirled together in my chest as my eyes grew hot. *Stop it. Don't you dare cry, you pathetic little baby.*

I didn't have the full picture, but the bottom line was this: Yaegashi Taichi had chosen Nagase Iori over me.

Truth be told, it was a choice he had probably already made right from the start. I simply chose to pretend I still had a chance. And when Taichi asked Iori out on the 13th, that should've sealed the deal.

But then Iori turned him down, and my entire understanding of the situation went out the fucking window.

At one point I contemplated throwing this chocolate in the trash, but ultimately I couldn't bring myself to do it... and so there it sits, still in my bookbag.

As far as I knew, Iori had long since admitted to having feelings for Taichi in return... and yet deep down, somehow I was *still* hoping I might have a shot.

"Did she just... lose interest or something...?"

Had something happened between them to sour their relationship? And if so, how was I supposed to react? I had no clue. I was pretty sure I wanted to be

with Taichi, and yet the thought of him and Iori falling apart made me feel awful inside.

Speaking purely in terms of my own benefit,

[...the fallout between Taichi and Iori is technically good news... I think.]

Fuck. I Transmitted. To Taichi and Iori. Because of fucking course I did.

“Oh, sure, *that’s* the part you send them, you dick!”

I’ll have to clear things up with them later.

“Great... Now I sound like a total bitch...”

Then again, even Iori acts nice on the outside while spitting venom on the inside... No, I can’t compare her to me! God, I hate myself. I’m such a coward.

Eager to snap myself out of this dark spiral, I slapped my cheeks with both hands—hard enough to hurt.

The Sentiment Transmission won’t affect anyone outside of the CRC unless we let it. So all we have to do is suck it up and endure it... together.

“Alright, let’s do this.”

If I was going to nip this thing in the bud, then I knew I needed to have a talk with the affected parties directly.

As I turned to head back to the classroom, I glanced up to find I wasn’t alone.

“S-Sorry for interrupting, Inaba-san! We just got done with morning practice, so I thought I’d take a shortcut back to the classroom...”

There stood Shiroyama Shouto, a fellow classmate who was part of the jazz band. As I recalled, we’d briefly chatted yesterday during our visit to Music Room No. 2.

...Oh god, that means he saw me talking to myself... Fucking kill me...

“Y-You were rehearsing your presentation speech, huh? Well, see you in class!”

I knew he meant well, but it only made me feel worse.

Damn it, what the hell do I do with this stupid chocolate?

During lunch, Iori and I relocated ourselves to an empty hallway.

“I explained everything to Yui and Aoki. They said they’re not going to judge us for it,” I told her.

“Cool,” Iori replied. Her expression had been grim ever since she arrived at school this morning.

“So... I’ll cut to the chase...” I continued hesitantly. Meanwhile, Iori’s cold stare bored into me. *Please don’t look at me like that... Can’t you see I’m already scared enough as it is?* But I pushed on regardless. “Is it true that Taichi asked you out? And is it true that you said no?”

“Yeah. It’s all true.”

“What happened?”

“Nothing *happened*. He asked, and I declined. That’s all there is to it.”

Her tone was so icy, it set me ablaze. “But you—I mean—then what the fuck was the point of our stupid love triangle shit?! Did something happen to make you change your mind or what?!”

Fuck, I’m losing my composure again. Just like yesterday.

“Why do you want to know?”

Her flat, mechanical voice chilled my anger.

“So I can understand—”

“What is there to understand?”

Her expression was perfectly blank, like a sculpture. Beautiful, yet terrifying.



“I’m sorry, Inaban... I don’t think I can explain it to you. Either way, you don’t have to worry about me. I’m not interested in being Taichi’s girlfriend anymore,” she explained gently.

You can’t just tell me not to worry. It doesn’t work like that!

“Look... By any chance, does this have something to do with the Sentiment Transmission?”

“...I can’t pretend it’s one hundred percent unrelated.”

“O-Okay, well, let’s maybe rethink this, alright? The phenomenon’s clearly affecting your judgment. Let’s just wait for everything to go back to normal, and __”

“Yeah, I told myself that for a while,” Iori interrupted. “But when exactly do we get our ‘normal’ back? Sure, this phenomenon will end eventually... but what happens when the next one starts?”

Good question.

“People are easily swayed, y’know? So what makes «Heartseed»’s phenomena so different from, say, peer pressure?”

I couldn’t say.

“Besides, this whole thing with me and Taichi first started during the body-swap. Wouldn’t that mean my judgment was affected back then, too?”

I wasn’t sure.

“Seriously, though, what’s your deal? Do you want us together or not?”

Of all her questions, that was the one I should’ve had an answer for... but I didn’t.

How could she be so cold and detached about her own love life? How could she be so hostile to her own friend? It was eerie.

Just then, we were interrupted by a Transmission from Taichi:

[What do I do...? After everything Nagase said... and then there’s Inaba... and I haven’t even done my homework...]

His anxiety swirled inside me.

Figure it out yourself, dumbass, I replied silently, knowing he wouldn't hear it.

In the end, I never did figure out what was going on with Iori. All I learned was that she genuinely seemed to not want a romantic relationship with Taichi anymore. That, and she was actually kind of frightening.

"I should probably..." I murmured inaudibly to myself during the middle of an unusually long homeroom period. I knew I was better off focusing on myself instead of worrying about other people. And I was probably just using the Iori thing as an excuse to procrastinate on solving my own problems.

He already turned me down once. Now he's officially chosen her over me. So what am I supposed to do?

Truth be told, I knew I was supposed to accept my defeat with dignity and grace. But did it really still count as a "defeat" now that his chances with Iori were nil? No matter how hard I searched through the database of information in my mind, I couldn't find the answer.

I don't "get" romance... I don't "get" love... I'm so fucking clueless... Someone, somewhere, please tell me what I'm supposed to do!

My mind was a swirl of emotions. I didn't want to let myself have any more dark thoughts lest they get Transmitted again. I didn't want them to hear all my pessimism and cowardice and realize just how much of mess I was.

Maybe I could just stop thinking entirely... That would make things easier... No, there's no way I can manage that. Why am I angsting over boy problems, anyway? We have more important shit to be worrying about!

I know ignoring the phenomenon is the best tactic available to us, but it isn't as easy as it sounded. It affects me regardless of whether I want it to or not. And if people find out I'm not as strong as I like to pretend, well... I would be so humiliated, I would probably never recover...

Stop. Enough! Fuck it all! Forget this misery! I'm not cut out for romance, anyway! I should just dump this chocolate in the trash can where it belongs—

[Sorry it's late... I meant to give it to you yesterday, but I didn't get a chance.]

Out of nowhere, I got a Transmission from Yui, followed immediately by one from Aoki:

[OH HELL TO THE YEAH, DUDE!!! I wasn't expecting to get anything... but NOW I'M SO HAPPY I COULD DIE!!!]

"Nngh..." I grimaced and covered my ears out of reflex.

"What's wrong?" asked the girl seated behind me.

"Nothing," I replied, my heart thumping in my chest. Aoki was so damn loud, it startled me.

I found myself impressed that they had the strength to move forward in spite of the phenomenon. It was a good thing, of course. The less impact the Transmission had on us, the sooner the end would come... hopefully.

Meanwhile, my heart kept racing. *Sheesh, she must've really caught him off-guard... No, that's not it. This isn't just surprise... It's their romantic tension... Well, Aoki's at least. I wonder if Yui's come around... Good grief, you two lovebirds.*

I smiled to myself. My elevated pulse had made my face flush pink.

The two of them would know I'd heard them... I could picture Yui blushing and getting all bashful about it. (Knowing Aoki, he probably wasn't that bothered.)

So pure... so innocent... so passionate... For some reason, I envied them.

Did I want someone to love me that deeply, too? Sure. But more than that, I was jealous of the ability to love in general.

This isn't over yet... I refuse to accept second place... My feelings are just as strong—

Oh.

Well then. Looks like the solution to my problem was right in front of me all along.

Immediately after homeroom ended, I sent Taichi an email that read:

Before you go to the clubroom, meet me outside behind the East Wing.

Then, without looking to see if he'd checked his phone, I dashed out of the classroom.

No one ever bothered to go out behind the East Wing, which in turn made it a popular place for declarations of love. For all I knew, the place had probably seen its fair share of visitors on Valentine's Day proper, but today it was deserted.

Then, after a few minutes, Taichi showed up. "Inaba!" he called out, and quietly I realized this was our first conversation of the entire day. We hadn't spoken since the incident yesterday.

"I'm sorry about yesterday... you know, the whole 'Don't you give a shit about how I feel?' and all that."

After all, I had no right to demand that he love me.

"No, you don't need to apologize. It was entirely my fault."

"Quit trying to take one hundred percent of the blame. I was the one who... Actually, you know what? Fine. We can split it fifty-fifty," I joked, careful to keep my tone lighthearted. "I gotta say, I'm surprised. I knew you were going to ask Iori out again sooner or later, but... knowing you, I kinda thought you'd give me a heads-up first."

Better to be honest with him now than have him find out via Sentiment Transmission later, I thought.

"W-Well, you see, my plan was to ask her out first, and then after she said yes we'd ask for your blessing..."

"What am I, her mom?"

[I couldn't risk talking to Inaba first... Part of me was afraid she'd change my mind.]

"...Huh?"

“Uhh... D-Did I just Transmit...?”

“Y-Yeah...” *Wait... Then that means...* “Oho... I see how it is.” I grinned. “So you were starting to have second thoughts after all, huh?”

I’d assumed he was completely uninterested, but maybe I was wrong... Maybe my plan had worked after all...

Meanwhile, Taichi blushed bright red. “N-No!”

“Oh... You weren’t...?” I asked, hanging my head like a sad puppy.

“O-Okay, maybe it a little!”

Oh, Taichi. You’re always so much fun to tease. I snickered.

“Hey! Quit screwing with me!” he snapped, but this only made me laugh harder. Then he cleared his throat, suggesting he wanted to get back to the topic at hand, so I hastily composed myself.

“I’m not sure how to put this... I was in love with Nagase, but that’s never stopped me from appreciating how incredible you are. Seriously, in all my life I’ve never met anyone like you.”

Never met anyone like me...? Wait, so... if I’m the only one in this category... doesn’t that make me number one?

“I mean, you’re smart, and you always put your friends first, and you’ve got a heart of gold, and you’re considerate of other people’s feelings, and you’re really grown-up and pretty, but at the same time you have a girly side, and maybe you’re not great at cooking or athletic stuff, but you have plenty of other good points to make up for it—”

“S-Slow down!” I interrupted. *Give me a break... I’m going to start grinning like an idiot if you keep that up!*

If I let myself read into it, I could almost be convinced that he was actually really into me... but he had already turned me down twice, so clearly he still preferred Iori. I was tempted to ask him what specifically he liked about her, you know, for reference...

“Anyway, you get where I’m going with this. You’re a really great girl, but... I can only choose one of you, so...”

“Hold on a minute. What about the rest of the ‘good points’ you said make up for my faults?”

I’m not letting you weasel out of it, you jerk!

“What does it matter?”

“Just tell me-heee...!”

“What?”

“Er... Ignore that! I got something caught in my throat, that’s all!”

Why did my voice come out all... beguiling?! And whose idea was it to start making grabby hands?! That’s so cringey, even for me!

This time it was my turn to clear my throat. “Anyway, I understand that you’re a faithful guy. I’ve always known that, really. You could’ve led us on or two-timed us, but instead you committed to a choice, and that’s pretty remarkable. I know I’m the one who put us in this situation, but... still, I appreciate it.”

“Likewise, I appreciate you, too.” For what, I wasn’t sure... but the expression on his face was one of intense relief.

“This is where I first professed my love for you, isn’t it?” It was just three short months ago, and yet those three months felt like an eternity.

“Yeah...”

“And this is where I kissed you.”

“Hey! Don’t bring that up!” Taichi’s cheeks reddened once more.

Though he was great fun to bully, when it came down to it, he was also a reliable friend. *Great, now I’m gushing... Ridiculous.*

“Wanna do it again?” I asked, curious to get his reaction.

“Bfffgh?!” Just as I expected, he started choking. It was his go-to reaction to a lot of stuff lately.

“Okay, all jokes aside...” I pulled the little parcel out of my bookbag and handed it to him. “Here.”

It was... surprisingly easy.

“Huh? Oh, uh... Thanks...”

“I know you chose Iori, but seeing as she shot you down and all, have you considered settling for me instead?”

“No way... You deserve better than that.”

I must’ve sounded more serious than I intended... though in reality, I wasn’t as morally opposed to it as he was.

“Honestly, I don’t know what to do anymore. I feel really conflicted about Iori claiming she doesn’t have feelings for you. And if you asked me if I’d be okay with dating a guy knowing I was his second choice, well... I’m not sure I have an answer for that, either. There’s just... so much I don’t know.”

Was it really safe to try and forge romantic relationships under the influence of «Heartseed»’s phenomena? I sincerely didn’t have a clue... but that wasn’t going to stop me.

“At the end of the day, the fact remains, I’m in love with you. So here you go. It’s a day late, but... Happy Valentine’s Day.”

If nothing else, my feelings were the one thing I could be certain of... and I knew what I had to do.

Taichi nodded. “Thanks. I’ll be sure to return the favor on White Day.”

“Can’t wait.”

He gently slid the box of chocolates into his bookbag, careful not to damage it. And with that, my mission was complete.

See that, «Heartseed»? We can play your little game. We might stumble sometimes, but we’ll always pick ourselves right back up again.

Just as we were about to head to the clubroom, I thought of something else I wanted to say.

“You got rejected, I got rejected... We’re two peas in a pod, you and me. And I look forward to seeing where we go from here.” Too embarrassed to gauge his reaction, I began to walk off.

Then, out of nowhere—

“...I GOT REJECTED!” he yelled at the top of his lungs.

It was so out of left field that I initially mistook it for a Transmission.

“Wh-What was th—?”

“I got rejected! I got rejected! I GOT REJECTED!” he shouted down at the ground, his hands balled into fists. Then, lastly, he screamed with all his might —“*SO THERE*!”

...While this part of the school was typically deserted, someone was bound to have heard that. I myself was a little weirded out by this... but not enough to stop loving him, of course! Tee-hee!

Still pretty damn weird, though.

“Uh... Are you done?”

“Sorry. Just wanted to get it all out of my system.”

“I didn’t realize you were a scream-at-the-ground kind of guy.”

“Well, I can’t let it drag me down forever, you know? If I could’ve come to terms with it sooner, maybe I could’ve saved you the worry.”

“Eh, I don’t think you’re obligated to accept it straight away.”

Otherwise, the second they say no, it’s game over.

“In my head I knew it was over, but my heart was a different story. I let it destroy me emotionally... It was pretty stupid. I need to just confront it, accept it, reflect on it, and move forward... not that I know what ‘forward’ looks like at this point,” Taichi muttered sheepishly, scratching his head.

Now that’s the Taichi I know and love, I thought to myself, though I was too shy to actually say it out loud. In fact, this was the one time I found myself a little disappointed that «Heartseed» hadn’t gone and Transmitted it for me.

Instead, I went with my honest opinion: “You’re an odd duck, Taichi.”

“Yeah, well, you’re no ordinary girl yourself, Inaba.”

“Touché. To be fair, a lot of stuff has changed us... whether we wanted it to or not.”

“Yeah... Maybe that’s why Nagase changed her mind,” he mumbled.

That was when I got a Transmission:

[I bet you think I’m a liar, don’t you? Don’t you? I know you do!]

It was Iori... and with this Sentiment came a biting chill that threatened to freeze the blood in my veins.

Truth be told, I’d had a sneaking suspicion in the back of my mind for a while now... a suspicion that perhaps I didn’t actually understand the real Nagase Iori as well as I thought I did.

And now I had a sinking feeling that I’d critically misinterpreted some part of her.

So who was she, really?

Chapter 3: Aoki Yoshifumi’s Preferred Battle Tactic

[Which is the real me—the one on the outside or the one on the inside?

Either way, I can’t keep up the charade. I can’t. I just can’t.

I don’t get to choose between different selves anymore.

This is my only option.]

□■□■□

The next morning, I wake up with a start, fling my covers off, and whip my head around. *Where am I?! Oh... Just my room.*

“Was it all just a dream...? It felt so real, though...”

It felt like... like I was experiencing someone else’s emotions—and I’ve got a feeling they belonged to Iori-chan. I can’t remember much, but my heart feels heavy, like it’s full of someone else’s pain.

“Did she Transmit or something...?”

The Sentiment Transmission doesn’t normally work this way, but maybe it struck while I was asleep. There’s a lot we still don’t understand about it, y’know. Sure, «Heartseed» explained a lot to us going in, but it definitely didn’t tell us everything. We know that from experience.

Then I realized—I’m starting to treat the Transmission like a normal part of life. Ugh. Gross.

Okay, so back to Iori-chan. Should I tell the others about it...? She seems to be upset about something lately... But then again, what if I’m the only one who got the Transmission? It’d be kinda messed up to go around telling people about her private feelings...

“Man, I dunno... She was acting kinda weird yesterday...”

The Sentiment Transmission will expose our hearts for the whole world—er, club—to see. So, our motto this time around? Just ignore the stupid

phenomenon altogether!

'Course, it's not gonna work out perfectly. We're bound to screw up and hurt each other.

Take me, for example. Most people probably see me as the type who wears his heart on his sleeve (which is a good thing, because that's what I'm goin' for). But that doesn't mean I'm not still kinda scared to have my inner monologue broadcasted to everybody. Sometimes I have mean thoughts that I know I ought to keep to myself. Sometimes I get all pissed off and pessimistic. And sometimes I think about boobs, man!

That said... If the phenomena creates problems, then all we have to do is work together to solve 'em! We've done it before, and I know we can do it again. All it takes is a little effort to keep things together—and the best way to put in that effort is to act the same as always.

And you better believe your boy Aoki is gonna put the pedal to the metal, baby!

We gotta kick ass with this club presentation thing. And then we've got finals to worry about... Uggghhhh, I wish I hadn't remembered that...

[Nnnn... I kinda wanna get seconds... Ever since I started my dojo training, it feels like I'm hungry constantly these days! But Anzu already gave me half of her food... Hmmm... Screw it, I'm eating!]

Oho, somebody's feeling feisty today... Morning, Yui!

□■□■□

"Am I the last one here? No?" asked Taichi as he walked into the clubroom. "Hmm... Still waiting on Nagase, I guess."

Now Iori-chan was the only one missing.

Yesterday Yui had to skip club to go to the dojo, and the other three were late showing up. Today, though, the five of us were all supposed to meet up here.

"Oh, that reminds me," Taichi continued. "Thanks for the chocolate, Kiriyama. It was really good."

"Oh, no problem. You're very welcome."

Two days ago Taichi would have avoided this topic like the plague. Apparently he was over it now... which meant I was free to go all-in.

“Oh, you gave him some of those little cocoa dusted truffles you were handing out to all the dudes in 1-A? I got something different, so I wouldn’t know what those were like,” I humblebragged, flaunting the fact that my gift was more special.

“Truffles? I got some kind of chocolate cake—”

“T-Taichi!” Yui interrupted, glancing nervously in my direction.

“Huh? You got cake, too? Weird... It almost sounds like you got the same thing as me—”

“D-Don’t get the wrong idea! I didn’t mean anything, like, romantic by it! Technically!”

“Uh... ‘Technically’...?”

Doesn’t that mean she kinda DID mean something romantic by it...? No, that can’t be! Who cares if it’s platonic on a technicality?! It’s still platonic! End of story!

Wait, but... if that’s true... and I got the same gift he did... Was mine platonic, too?!

“Aw, man... Maybe I read too much into it...”

“J-Just for the record, Aoki, *yours*...”—Yui paused, her cheeks flushed faintly pink—“...has extra strawberries.”

“YES! I win!”

“Uh, I don’t think a few extra strawberries... Actually, never mind.”

Taichi! Don’t look at me like I’m pathetic, okay?! I know it’s not a huge difference! Just let me be happy, alright?!

“I gotta say, I don’t like the sound of that either,” said Inabacchan, shooting Yui a withering look.

“Wh-What’s your problem?”

“As far as Aoki’s concerned, I literally could not care less what you do—”

“Hey! Did you really need to add that disclaimer?! Harsh!”

You oughta care at least a little! C’mon!

“—but if you’re going to be giving Taichi fancy gifts—”

“L-Look, both he and Aoki are good friends of mine, so I figured they deserved something with a little more effort put into it, that’s all!”

“*That’s all*, huh?”

“Yes, that’s all! Obviously I love Taichi as a friend, but I’m not like *in* love with him!”

“But you *love* him?”

“Not like *that*! Oh my god!”

As I watched their little exchange, it finally sank in: “You’ve really got it bad for Taichi, huh, Inabacchan?”

I kinda thought she was just teasing him... y’know, like, REALLY teasing him...

“Hmph. Yeah, so? Got a problem with that?”

“N-Not at all, Commander Inaba!”

But just so you know, there’s only enough room in this club for ONE lovesick puppy, got it?!

“...Sometimes I wish you were just like a tiny bit smarter... Oh, but then again, your stupidity is part of your charm...”

“Hmm? You say somethin’, Yui?”

“Oh, nothing...”

“Wait, Yui... Didn’t you give chocolate to the guys at your dojo, too?” Inabacchan cut in.

“Just some little freebie stuff... You found out from one of my Transmissions, didn’t you?”

At this point, Yui had made so much progress working through her fear of dudes, she was practically fully recovered. I was super proud of her.

“I don’t see anything wrong with taking an aggressive stance against your

phobia, but don't go turning into some man-eater, alright?"

"Excuse me?!" Yui jumped to her feet and slammed her hands on the table. "Who the heck are you calling a man-eater?!"

"Gotta say, I'm on Inabacchan's side for this one!"

Red alert! Red alert!

"Oh yeah, that reminds me... Yesterday you were Transmitting stuff like ***[That boy's stance looks pretty badass]*** and ***[That guy has a very symmetrical face]***..."

"*Taichi*! Don't just casually tell them that, you jerk!"

"Okay, this is *super* not kosher! Maybe I'd better join your dojo, too!" I declared.

"It's not like that! The girls at my dojo are always gossiping about the guys, and I never have anything to contribute to the conversation, so I was just... thinking of some comments I could make next time!"

"So you were ogling all the men in your dojo... You dirty little tart," Inabacchan teased.

"Oh my god, *NO*!"

Then the door opened, and Iori-chan peeked her head in.

And just like that, the room fell dead silent.

"So, let's review the crisis that threatens the very survival of our club... Alright, maybe that's a bit of an exaggeration. The point is, we need to brainstorm a plan for our club presentation and win back our conveniently useless advisor. Didn't get much done yesterday, after all."

As usual, Inabacchan was leading the discussion... but something was visibly off this time around. Normally Iori-chan was a bottomless fountain of ideas for this stuff, but today she sat there silently, her expression cold and distant.

Real talk, it was throwing us all off. Nobody knew how to handle it. With our beloved ball of sunshine now a gloomy little rain cloud, the whole clubroom

was dark and dismal.

Fortunately, we still had me.

“I know! Let’s have all the girls dress up in costumes and seduce all the male judg—GUH!”

Before I could finish, Yui kicked me hard in the shin. “In that case, why don’t *you* dance naked on stage? Maybe we can get some pity votes.”

She smirked playfully, and I grinned back. I could tell she’d figured out what I was going for... in which case, I would’ve appreciated a slightly less painful kick, personally! Just sayin’!

Inaba nodded thoughtfully. “So you suggest taking an aggressive approach when it comes to winning points with the judges... I like it. In fact, I get the feeling that’s our only real option if we want to stand a chance at winning. Now then, let’s each share the information we’ve gathered. How about you, Taichi? Any luck?”

“Let’s see... Okay, first of all, according to our friend Shiroyama, the jazz band has been practicing stage setup so they can start and finish their performance within the allotted fifteen-minute timeframe.”

“I see... In that case, maybe we’ll have an advantage if we fill our fifteen minutes completely,” Yui suggested.

“From what I’ve heard, not necessarily. Because of the sheer number of clubs, these presentations will be running nonstop, one after another. So if we take too long, it could potentially do more harm than good.”

Sounds about right. I heard something similar from a friend of mine.

“I heard that in the past, some clubs have shortened their presentations on purpose so they could offer the judges a bathroom break. I’m told it didn’t really pay off, though.”

People get pretty crafty with these club presentations, eh?

“The jazz band’s plan is to give an overview of their activities over the past year, set up their whole ensemble, perform, and then clear away their chairs and music stands, all within thirteen minutes.”

“Interesting...” Yui murmured, somewhat impressed. “I heard from my friend who’s in a sports club that they pretty much just go over their season tournament scores and that’s it. Nothing for them to really show off on stage, you know? So the whole thing takes like five minutes. Is it, like, fair that the culture clubs have to work so much harder?”

“Agreed,” Inaba replied. “It’s hard for outsiders to determine our ‘accomplishments’ when we don’t have any tournaments to compete in. For us, it all comes down to how well we appeal to the judges. If we screw up, they could take away our club budget or even force us to disband.”

Whoa... So this is a big deal with or without the Gotou situation... Okay, time for me to chime in!

“Oh yeah, and I heard the Fine Arts Club puts on an impromptu painting performance each year...”

After we finished exchanging all the info we had on hand, we transitioned into the brainstorming phase. Taichi was the first to make a suggestion: “Since our main club activity is the Culture Bulletin, the most obvious option is to create a super-sized version and center our presentation around that. We could make a top-ten list of all the articles we’ve done over the year, or something.”

“That’s definitely the safe choice... but it’ll be hard to beat the jazz band with just that, don’t you think?” Yui asked.

“Yeahhhh... We gotta do something ten times as awesome as their performance or else they’re gonna steal Gossan from us...” I muttered.

It would be tricky, but fortunately we had a powerful ally on our side—a brilliant tactician who always led us to victory without fail.

And her name was Inaba Himeko.

“I’m sure they’ll give us points for effort, but the jazz band’s skill is so phenomenal that we don’t stand a chance if we play it by the books. If we show up with a bunch of articles, they’ll just skim over them and go ‘Meh.’ So, we need to take a different approach... One possible route would be to create something fancy, exclusively for the presentation. That ought to impress them quite a bit—‘It’s the effort that counts!’ and all that. Teachers eat that shit up,”

she snickered.

“And they’d probably be heartbroken if they heard you talking like that,” Taichi muttered.

And so the heated debate continued. Ideas were suggested and shot down, over and over.

As the discussion was entering its final stages, Yui jumped in with a new suggestion: “Okay, then how about we create a spotlight guide map for the local area around the school?”

“Well, that’s a bit divorced from our usual club activities... but if it involves going around and researching material for what’s essentially an article, then I guess we could just think of it as a special edition of the Culture Bulletin...” Taichi mused.

“And if it’s handy info the judges can actually use, maybe that’ll help keep their attention, right?” I chimed in.

“If we make a giant map with lots of effort and small details put into it, we’ll win points with the teachers for sure,” Inaba added.

The more we thought about it, the more it started to sound like the perfect plan... And so we decided that we would create a spotlight guide map for our club presentation!

Our map would have it all—our favorite restaurants, stores, hangout spots, and so on—with one caveat: nothing too mainstream. Hidden gems only. Once we had it all outlined, we’d create a giant version for the presentation as well as miniature brochures that we could pass out.

“So how do we create a spotlight guide map, anyway? We could try to look at tourist maps or travel guides, but I kinda doubt our town’s big enough to be featured...” Yui crossed her arms in contemplation.

“Ever heard of a thing called community journalism? We can take our cues from there... Hmm, maybe that won’t be enough. We’ll probably need to do some onsite field investigation... Wait... Damn it, this is starting to sound like a lot of work!” Inaba snapped.

“Oh, stop complaining. You’re the one who said we should make something fancy, right?”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m sure it’s all par for the course for ol’ Tryhard Taichi. Well, just FYI, I prefer to work *smarter*, not harder.”

“But we need to score a lotta points with the judges so we can beat the jazz band!”

“...You know, Aoki, I really hate it when you’re right.”

“Why?! What did I ever do to deserve this?!”

And so, for the first time since the CRC’s inception, we had decided to do more than just skate by on the bare minimum. We were going to make a serious, full-scale presentation—mostly because our whole club kinda depended on it, but still.

Despite Inaba’s complaints, the rest of us were eager to get started. Well... most of us, anyway. Iori-chan hadn’t said much of anything during the entire discussion—just “Yeah” or “Maybe” or “Sounds good.” She was clearly acting weird.

Later, after we’d started work on our new project—

“Hey, Iori?” Inaba called hesitantly.

Now that I thought about it, normally she was the type to call people out if they were being too quiet. So why hadn’t she said anything sooner? Strange... Had she seen the darkness in Iori-chan’s heart like I had?

“C’mon, what’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing’s wrong.”

“Nothing? Yeah, right. You’re acting way too different. Something’s gotta be up.”

“Who says I have to act the same all the time?”

But then, I heard Iori-chan’s Transmission:

[I knew it. This is the one place I just can’t make it work.]

Meanwhile, I felt her emotions—dark and smoldering like coal. Had anyone

else felt it?

[“Nagase Iori” is over, okay? She’s done.]

I looked around the room. *Is anyone else hearing this?*

[No, I can’t! I can’t make it work! Hurry, hurry, hurry!]

Her emotions were a jumbled mess, all melted together in one hot lump. It felt so foreign in my system, it actually made me kinda sick to my stomach. *And here I thought I was used to this.*

“I-Iori-chan...?” I called out timidly.

She shot me a sharp look and shook her head. “Don’t worry about it.” In other words—*keep your mouth shut*. “Looks like the discussion’s over, so I’m gonna head home.” With that, she got to her feet and grabbed her bookbag.

She wasn’t acting anything like herself.

And before I knew it, I was the first one to react.

“Hold up, Iori-chan!” I shouted... but I hadn’t thought of anything to say after that.

Crap. What do I do? What SHOULD I do? What CAN I do?

Guess my only option is to play it like I always do.

“Slow down, girl! Why’re you tryin’ to reinvent yourself as some kinda ice queen?” I joked, keeping my tone as light and casual as humanly possible—y’know, my usual style. “Did you and Inabacchan switch roles? Now you’re the hardass and she’s the wild card?”

Now whaddya say to that, eh? No matter what you throw at me, I can handle it! Bring it on! Let’s hear it! ...Any time now! I’m waiting! Uh, hello? Is... Is anyone gonna say anything? Why does it feel so chilly in here? Did I just blow it?

And so Iori-chan walked out of the clubroom without giving me a second glance.

□■□■□

On my way home, I walked along the riverbank. The sun had nearly set, and the streetlamps were starting to flicker on, one by one. I looked out at the river;

its deep, dark depths loomed ominously, threatening to swallow me whole.

I sighed, slumping my shoulders. I knew I needed to keep my chin up, but I just couldn't help it.

All this time, I'd been doing my best to act the same as always, with or without «Heartseed»'s games. I figured it was the best way to help everyone else do the same. But everything that happened today served to remind me just how powerless I truly was. I'd caught a glimpse into Iori-chan's heart, and yet I still couldn't help her.

Am I too stupid to make the right call? Maybe I can't—

In the middle of that thought, I caught sight of someone walking in my direction up ahead. The road was mostly deserted otherwise, so I couldn't help but peer at them. They looked familiar— "Hmm? Is that...?"

It was. *It's friggin' Gossan!*

"Hey, Gossan! What're you—"

Then I realized.

[His] eyes were half-lidded. Lethargic.

Anyone who saw [him] like this would probably just assume [he] was really freakin' tired... but I knew the truth. This wasn't Gossan. It was «Heartseed».

Wait... what? «Heartseed»? Here on the street? What?

"Hello there, Aoki-san... Oh... Come to think of it, I haven't really bothered to speak to you directly until now..."

As usual, its speech was sluggish. It didn't even bother to introduce itself— just assumed I would know. That kind of pissed me off.

Seriously though, what the hell is it doing here?

"Were you lookin' for me, specifically?" I asked. I'd heard of «Heartseed» visiting the others while they were alone, but this was my first time experiencing it for myself.

"Well... Remember how I said I was going to get more actively involved this time...? Feel free to consider this part of that... or don't... I can't say I really care

either way...”

Maybe YOU don’t care, but I sure as hell do, thanks!

“So what do you want?” I growled, glaring back at him.

I was used to having everyone else right there with me whenever he’d turn up. Me, I always stayed out of it. Figured it’d be best to leave the complicated stuff to the pros, y’know? So I had no idea what stance to take with him now that we were one-on-one. If I’d known this was going to happen, I would’ve tried to rehearse something in advance.

Should I wait for my chance to make a break for it? Call somebody?

“Aoki-san... What are your thoughts on the current phenomenon...?”

“...Whaddya mean, my thoughts?”

“Your candid opinion, if you please...”

“Freakin’ sucks dick.”

“So... would you say this phenomenon is the worst thus far...?”

“Dude, they’re all the worst.”

“I see... Yes, I can imagine...”

Man, what even is this conversation?

“So... what do you plan to do about it...?”

“Just be my usual self.”

“I fail to see the point in that... I mean... isn’t that the same as doing nothing at all...?”

“Trust me, there’s a point to it.”

I don’t know exactly what it is, but I’m pretty sure it’s there...

“Oh, I get it... It’s not that you’re *choosing* not to do anything... It’s that you *can’t*...”

Yeah, yeah. You’re all-powerful, and we’re worthless worms. I get it.

“You truly are the most uninteresting of the five, aren’t you?”

Uninteresting. This matter-of-fact observation pierced my chest like a knife.

Then, all at once, my mind cleared. What am I doing? Why am I wasting my time talking to this dude? Ridiculous. It could kill me in a heartbeat if it wanted to. It calls the shots—all of them.

Instantly, it felt like a veil had been lifted from my eyes.

Darkness. Moonlight. Streetlamps. The sound of the river. Just me and some supernatural entity. *Who wouldn't be scared in my shoes?* «Heartseed» had a way of making you feel like no one in the world could save you.

"Let me ask you again... What do you plan to do about it?"

I looked into «Heartseed»'s—Gossan's—dead, soulless eyes.

A chill ran down my spine. 'Course, that's nothing out of the ordinary for a crisp February evening. But this felt like absolute zero.

"You are powerless, Aoki-san... What can you possibly do?"

Screw you. Why should I answer that? I'm tryin' to get home, if you don't mind. Let me go home, damn it! Let me leave already!

"You are an utterly useless—"

I know, okay?! I know! I'm a stupid moron! I'm the weakest link! I'm dead weight! I'm—

[I wonder what Aoki's up to...]

Right at that moment, I got a Transmission... and a rush of emotion.

Disappointingly, there was no palpable giddiness or affection. Just pure curiosity.

I had no clue what led to it, or what the context was, but one thing was for certain—Yui was thinking about me.

And after last time with the Age Regression, I'd promised myself to never let one of these stupid phenomena hurt her again. I promised myself I would protect her.

[As long as Yui cares about me, I'll keep fighting as long as it takes. «Heartseed» can suck it!]

Whoops, I Transmitted that... Pretty cool timing, actually. And it got sent to Yui, too! Because it was about her, I guess? Could've lived without Taichi hearing it, though.

"No matter what you try to do, Aoki-san—"

"I'm just going to be my usual self."

I'm done letting «Heartseed» get to me. I won't back down. I'm doing this for me, and I'm doing it for Yui... and the others, too, of course. I'm going to do whatever I can—whatever needs to be done.

"Like I said... that's essentially the same as not doing anything at all..."

"Right now we have club presentations to worry about!"

I'm not even gonna think about finals, either!

"Oh... You're really committed to this, aren't you...? Not that I couldn't tell from the start..." «Heartseed» shook its head in exasperation.

...Wait, what? Exasperation? I don't remember it having normal people emotions before!

"Oh, Aoki-san... You truly are dull and insipid..."

That reminds me... Inabacchan was saying maybe the phenomena will go away if we just bore «Heartseed» to death... Maybe she was right!

"But that is precisely why I keep going... and eventually... Oh, right... I should go ahead and stop talking now..."

Keep going where?

"Well then... Anyway... Perhaps I'll end our conversation here... Yes, let's call it a night..."

With that, «Heartseed» turned on his heel and walked away.

"Huh? What the hell, man?! First you show up with no warning, and now you're not even gonna say goodbye?! Hey!"

I considered going after him, but I knew it wouldn't accomplish anything.

"You know my house is that way, right?! Can't you go in the opposite

direction?! Now it looks like I'm following you!"

But of course, it didn't respond... so I decided to just stand there for a while.

"Damn, it's cold out here! What if I get pneumonia or—"

[Was I ever really in love with Nagase Iori?]

Just then, I got a Transmission. It was from Taichi. *What's gotten into you, bro? What if she hears you thinkin' that?*

"Oh, right... She turned him down..."

I guess it's all complicated. Still... the best thing we can do is be ourselves.

+ + +

"Hiya, Nagase-san. Sorry to spring this on you, but I wanted to talk."

In front of me stands Shiroyama Shouto, a classmate who's in the jazz band. Until our group visit to Music Room No. 2, he and I hadn't had many opportunities to interact.

"There's... something I want to say..."

I can hazard a guess as to what it is, and I sincerely wish he wouldn't. Not right now. I can't even be normal right now.

"So, umm... You know, considering how popular you are, I figured you'd have a boyfriend or at least a crush on someone, but... I heard you didn't give out any chocolate on Valentine's Day... so I started thinking maybe you don't have anyone special in your life right now..."

No, I don't.

At one point I thought I did.

But I don't.

"Y-You see, I... I think you're swell, and—"

"Don't bother," I cut in.

Normally I wouldn't do this... but this isn't the normal me.

"Huh?"

“Don’t finish that sentence. Just quit while you’re ahead.”

It’s for your own good. I mean it. Go be with someone normal.

“What...? Wait, so, do you have someone special after all? Okay, well, at least let me—”

“Please, just stop!”

Here I switch to pleading. This is the most effective option at my disposal.

“Why...? Do you despise me that much?”

“No, I don’t despise you.”

“Then... why are you acting so different?”

Acting so different. Not myself.

“Normally you’re more easygoing... Radiant like the sun... You’re always happy, with a big smile on your face... Everyone loves you...”

Is that how he sees me? No, wait... that’s how *everyone* sees me. Right.

“I see. So that’s the version of me you have the hots for... but not this version?”

“Umm... well...”

The blood drains from his face.

I go in for the kill.

“How can you claim you care about me when you don’t know the first thing about me?”

“I... I...”

It’s for the best that I shoot him down hard. That way he’ll get over me faster. I do think I went over the line this time, though.

But I have to choose one or the other.

Maybe the old me could’ve handled it better, but I don’t get to be the old me.

I’m sorry.

+ + +

“I heard you tore Shiroyama-kun a new asshole when he asked you out.”

A girl from my class, Setouchi Kaoru, glares at me.

“Well? Is it true?” She runs a hand through her long, bleached hair.

I didn’t get why she was so pissed. I wanted to tell her it was none of her business, but I guess it kind of is, considering she has a big, fat crush on Shiroyama herself. I always had my suspicions, but now I’m sure of it.

“Say something already!”

“Yes, I did.”

It’s the truth... but I guess the old me would normally never act like that.

“And you don’t feel guilty for what you did? Even a little?”

“You want me to be sad about it?”

That was a harsh thing to say, even for me. Why am I trying to piss her off even more? I guess I’m just as irritated as her.

“You love to act like such a goody-goody, but deep down, you think you’re hot shit, don’t you?”

“Says the pot to the kettle.”

I shouldn’t have said that, but for some reason I wanted to throw it back in her face. Why?

“Excuse me?” I can see a vein bulging on her forehead from barely suppressed rage.

“What business is it of yours how I handle unwanted interest?”

I know I’m in the right. But emotional people don’t like it when you take a clinical tone with them; it just makes them angrier. I knew this, and yet I wanted to say it anyway.

I can’t stop myself. I suck at this. Why do I keep making the worst possible choices?

“I knew it! You’re so full of yourself! And you’re such a fucking bitch!”

“If anyone’s the bitch here, it’s you.”

“Excuse me?! Oh my god, you’re so two-faced!”

“Yeah, sure. Whatever you want.”

Two-faced. Yeah, I can see how it would look that way.

“How could you lie to everyone like that?! You tricked poor Shiroyama-kun!”

That part I refuse to accept. I didn’t “trick” anyone, thanks.

“What’s your problem? Why *you*, of all people...? What about me? Deep down, I...”

“You what?” I ask.

Instantly, her flushed face turns beet red. “Screw you! I’ll get you for this!”

With that, she storms away. Great. Now she has a grudge against me. Good job, me.

Maybe she’s right.

Maybe the real me is just a two-faced bitch.

This or that. This or that.

So many possible choices.

Normally—

If it were me—

So I—

Chapter 4: Yaegashi Taichi's Tangled Love Life

As the end of February approached, the number of students sleeping through their lessons in Class 1-C had decidedly decreased. To Yaegashi Taichi, this served as yet another reminder that end-of-year finals were looming just ahead. Not only that, but the club presentations would be held right afterwards. Thus, the CRC planned to split up and go scout locations for their spotlight guide map after school that day.

[Ugh, I feel like shit... I hate my fucking period...]

It was a Transmission from Inaba.

With this phenomenon, any semblance of privacy had gone out the window. Fortunately, it worked a lot like the body-swap in that they could generally smooth things over by quietly turning a blind eye to anything they knew they weren't supposed to know. After all, they knew just how embarrassing (and, at times, painful) it could be to have the Sentiment Transmission broadcast thoughts that were never meant to be public.

Personally, Taichi was determined not to end up dead weight like he was during the previous phenomenon, the Age Regression... and he imagined the others felt similarly.

The problem now was one Nagase Iori.

"Hey, did you hear about Nagase-san? I heard she..."

"But Iori's so... She'd never..."

He could hear his classmates whispering to each other. And if he could hear it, surely Nagase herself could hear it, too.

"The way I see it, Nagase..."

"Right? It's kind of hard to believe—"

"Well, it's the *truth*," said Setouchi Kaoru at full volume. Evidently she was the source of this rumor. Either she didn't care who heard, or... No, maybe she

wanted Nagase to hear. “She’s a two-faced skank. Don’t buy into her little act.”

Setouchi was known for speaking her mind, and her opinion carried weight among the students in their class. Not only that, but with her piercings and bleached hair, she fit in among the “rebel” clique, making her somewhat scary to oppose. And now she and her friends all had it out for Nagase.

But despite all her influence, even Setouchi couldn’t change the entire class’s outlook overnight—at least, not on a normal day.

Unfortunately, today was not one of those days.

“Hey, um, Iori?” called Nakayama Mariko, one of Nagase’s close friends.

“What?” Nagase asked flatly, her expression icy.

Nakayama hesitated, but Nagase ignored it.

“Um... So... There’s a weird rumor going around about you right now... but I just want you to know I don’t think it’s true, okay?”

Perhaps she was trying to make a statement by having this conversation right here in class.

“Because I know you’re not that kind of person. They’re just making stuff up—”

“So just let them,” Nagase replied without batting a lash. Her usual sunny smile was nowhere to be seen. “Just ignore them.”

Something about her tone was... menacing.

And if it was enough to frighten *Taichi* of all people, he could only imagine how drastically different she must have seemed to their classmates, who only knew her cheerful outward persona.

“I mean... I don’t blame you for being mad about it...”

“I’m not mad at all.”

And yet her eyes were still dull and empty.

And then Taichi received a Transmission—

[Enough already. It’s fine. This is fine.]

—of Nagase's shadowy Sentiment.

"Come on, Iori... You're kinda freaking me out..."

"This is just how I am."

Nakayama shrank back. "W-Well, okay then. Talk to you later?"

"Yeah. Sorry."

At this apology, Nakayama's expression grew even more conflicted.

This was far beyond the average mood swing or bad day. Following the start of the Sentiment Transmission, Nagase had begun to exude a thorny, unapproachable vibe. Now the girl they all knew—the girl who was all smiles and cheer—was gone, and in her place was a stranger. A cold, unfriendly stranger.

Why is she doing this? What is she thinking?

[The real Nagase is more energetic and vibrant. This isn't her.]

Instantly he cursed himself, but it was far too late. His Sentiment had already been Transmitted to Nagase.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw her flinch slightly.

As it turned out, the prep work for the club presentation was a lot more involved than they had anticipated.

According to Shiroyama, who looked utterly drained, the jazz band was rehearsing more than ever. All the non-sports clubs had kicked their efforts up a notch.

As for the CRC, they were desperate to track down material for their spotlight guide map. First they had researched possible candidates via local newspapers and word of mouth. Next, they'd need to physically visit those places and take extensive notes.

After school, they met up briefly in the clubroom, then headed off to their assigned locations. Today, as it happened, Taichi and Nagase were headed in the same direction.

“Looks like we’re both going the same way, huh?”

“Yeah.”

Wearing heavy coats over their school uniforms, the two of them walked through the school gates and turned down the street, this time in the opposite direction of their usual route home.

They hadn’t been alone together in quite some time; in fact, they hadn’t really spoken at all since the 13th. After the rejection, it had taken him some time to get back on his feet, and there was the Sentiment Transmission to deal with... *No, I’m just making excuses. Who cares if it’s awkward? This is my chance!*

“Look, Nagase... What’s going on with you?” he asked, knowing full well she probably got this question a lot lately.

“Nothing,” she answered curtly, for what was probably the umpteenth time.

“Is there anything I can do to help? You know I’m always here if you need me.”

“I don’t need anything.”

They pressed on against the chilly winter wind, and Taichi slid his hands into his coat pockets. “Look... Okay, this is purely hypothetical, but...” He hesitated, then continued, “If you’re feeling weird about turning me down the other day, don’t worry about it. I’m fine.”

She pursed her lips together—tightly, like she was trying to keep all emotion locked away inside.

“...I’m sorry.”

The apology weighed on his chest like a ton of bricks... but as her friend, he refused to back down. “Okay, well, you have to admit you’ve been acting pretty weird lately.”

She didn’t respond. Instead, she looked down at the ground.

“Something about the Sentiment Transmission is bothering you, isn’t it? I know I can’t make miracles happen, but... plenty of problems can be solved with a little help from your friends, remember?”

Nagase began to tremble, and Taichi had a feeling it wasn't from the cold.

"I appreciate it, really—"

[I don't need your help. Mind your own business.]

A Transmission from Nagase—one of abject rejection. With it came a mix of emotions so complex, he found he couldn't parse it. He stopped in his tracks.

"Nagase..." he muttered.

But he knew it wouldn't change anything. In her heart, she had rejected his help.

Whoever this Nagase Iori was, she didn't need him. Not even slightly.

And now that he got "no" for an answer, his only option was to give up.

"Anyway, so yeah... Let's get going... Sorry."

With that, she walked off.

As he watched her go, Taichi realized: *I never actually understood her, did I? To this day I don't know a single thing about her.*

And yet he had claimed to love her.

□■□■□

On that day, Taichi was scouting out the arcade that had just recently opened nearby. At least, he was supposed to. Truth be told, he'd lost the will to complete his task.

As he walked inside, he was bombarded with noise—people laughing and shouting over the din of mechanical clicks and electronic beeps. All at once, he felt like a foreign entity. An unwanted presence. A ghost wandering the earth.

Perhaps he really was powerless. He couldn't get himself back on track. He had no motivation.

Being here is a waste of time. Maybe I should just go home—

But just as he thought this, he got a Transmission from Inaba:

[Maybe the Cultural Research Club ought to disband.]

Taichi's heart nearly stopped. He could feel exactly how seriously she was

considering it. Why would she even think that?

But more than that... Without Nagase, and without the CRC, what would he have left?

The arcade was well-heated, and yet he found himself shivering. Overcome with panic, he called Inaba's cell phone and started babbling— "Enough! You're not making any damn sense. Let's just hash it out in person."

And so, at Inaba's suggestion, Taichi headed over to the cafe she was assigned to research.

"This works out perfectly, to be honest. The place is so fancy, I'd feel like a loser getting a table for one."

Inside, they quickly found that they were the only teenage patrons. Apparently this establishment was a bit too pricey for the average high schooler.

The interior design made heavy use of solid wood, which afforded the place a warm, homey feel. In addition, the tables were spread out sparsely, giving customers plenty of space to relax and take their time.

"I get it... This would be the perfect place to take someone on a date," Inaba muttered to herself as she scribbled on her notepad.

They ordered two lattes—the "house special"—and asked permission to take pictures. With the manager's blessing, Inaba snapped a few shots of the interior, after which they sat down at a table for two.

"You know, it really sucks having all my dumbest ideas broadcasted to you people."

"Sorry..."

"Chill. I'm not mad at you. It wasn't your fault, obviously."

Together, they picked up their coffee cups and each took a sip. The mild flavor of the latte warmed his stomach, and he felt himself relax a bit.

"So, about that Transmission... Why would you want to disband?" he asked.

For a while, Inaba didn't respond. She lifted her cup to her lips and took another sip, her posture perfectly straight.

"...I've been considering it for a while now, actually. After all, «Heartseed» seems to be interested in the CRC as a collective group, wouldn't you say?"

"Yeah, seems like it."

«Heartseed» was always saying how "fascinating" it found the five of them... and every single phenomenon thus far had targeted the entire group, no more, no less.

"So, if the five of us stopped being a 'collective group'... isn't it possible the phenomena would stop, too?"

This theory assumed «Heartseed»'s only interest was in the five of them as a package deal, of course.

"I mean, this is the same entity that won't even bother explaining everything unless we're all present and accounted for," Inaba explained. "So if we disband the club and stop hanging out... maybe we could go back to our normal lives."

Truth be told, Taichi got the sense she was probably onto something here... "But—"

"Don't you think we should do whatever it takes to bring these horrible phenomena to an end?" she asked, nipping his counter-argument in the bud.

He had no choice but to nod his assent.

"Iori's sort of... weird lately," she continued.

Instantly the homey warmth of the cafe vanished. A leaden mass sank into the pit of his stomach.

"It'd be one thing if she kept her issues confined to just the five of us, but judging from the way she's been acting in class, she's starting to cause problems outside of the clubroom. And we can't exactly use the phenomenon as an excuse with normal people. So once things change... they won't go back."

"So you want to disband the CRC?"

"I was hoping it wouldn't come to this, but... if we can't even keep Gotou as

our advisor, then I'd say it's the perfect opportunity."

What were they supposed to do in the face of the supernatural phenomena that threatened to consume their lives for months on end?

Then Taichi realized something—something he'd felt all along.

"Let me ask you one question," he replied. "Is that really what you want?"

Silently, she gazed back at him. Her almond-shaped eyes and long lashes were almost... magnetic.

"Who benefits from that course of action, exactly?" he pressed, unwilling to back down.

Then, finally, she glanced away, clucking her tongue in annoyance.

"Fine, whatever. You win, okay? Personally, no, I don't want to lose any of you. I was trying to think of what's best for everyone else, alright? Got a problem with that, you jerk?! Hmph!" She pouted openly.

"Thought so."

As usual, Inaba was a total softie who always tried to put her friends first.

"When did you get so clever, anyway? Do you know how humiliating it is to have *you* of all people figure me out without so much as a Transmission to help you?"

What do you mean, me of all people? Give me a break...

"Of course I'd figure it out. We both feel the same way... We both want the group to stay together, no matter how hard it gets." As the words left his lips, he realized just how sincerely he felt it. And now that he could make sense of his emotions, his conviction returned at last. "The CRC is what brought all of you into my life. Being in the club has taught me so much... given me so much... and I want us to keep making memories together. That includes you, of course."

That much he was sure of.

"Hey, could you say that last part again? Like, exact same emphasis?"

"...That includes you, of course."

"Hnngh...!" She clapped a hand to her mouth to conceal her grin. What was

that about?

“...Anyway, I’m pretty sure the rest of us all feel the same way. Aoki, Kiriyama...”

But somehow he couldn’t bring himself to say “Nagase” and finish the sentence. He didn’t understand the first thing about her, after all.

As he faltered, Inaba’s countenance hardened... Then her lip curled in a smirk. “Just admit it. Deep down, you totally agree that disbanding the club is the most rational solution.”

“Huh?” He swallowed, unable to escape Inaba’s piercing gaze. “Well... sure, I can’t pretend I disagree one hundred percent...”

“Thought so. I know you hate putting burdens on other people just as much as I do.”

Perhaps one day they’d be forced to get rid of «Heartseed» at any cost...

“But I guess you’re trying to be the optimist to balance out my inner pessimist.”

“No? I’m not thinking about it that hard.”

“There are multiple sides to everything. Even *love* isn’t a one-way street. It all depends on perspective, see. If you think about it, the Sentiment Transmission broadcasts people’s thoughts and emotions, which are naturally one hundred percent genuine—but because it doesn’t give us the whole picture, its accuracy is limited.”

She felt that they ought to disband the club, but at the same time, she didn’t want to. These two conflicting sentiments existed in tandem.

“...This conversation went in an odd direction. Let’s wrap things up here. Man, it’s weird being able to see right through each other.”

Right down to their hearts.

“You say that, but... when it comes to Nagase, I never understood the first thing about her.”

“...Yeah, me either. And I was sure I knew her better than anyone else.”

He'd been hoping maybe Inaba would have some insight into the Nagase situation, but evidently not.

"I wonder what's gotten into her. She's acting so differently... and her Transmissions are kind of mean and frightening... It's a total 180 from what you'd expect."

"Well, I always knew she had some hidden depths, but still... If *that's* the real her, then I guess the happy Iori we all knew was just a farce... No, that's stupid. It couldn't have been a *total* farce."

"Yeah... That was still her."

Nagase had put on so many different personas over the course of her life, she'd lost sight of who she really was... but that, too, was likely just a matter of perspective. After spending a full year of his life with her. Taichi refused to believe that it was just some performance.

"I just... I don't even know how to talk to her anymore."

"Me either."

If she was struggling with something, then he wanted to help her... but she didn't want his help. She seemed to want things to stay just as they were. Still, she didn't exactly seem to enjoy it.

"...Sorry," Inaba apologized, hanging her head.

"Where did *that* come from?"

"I just... feel responsible," she replied in a small voice, quiet enough that he could have mistaken it for part of the background music playing faintly over the cafe's speakers. "If only I'd never admitted to my feelings for you, the two of you would've gotten together by now, and none of this would've happened to us... to Iori."

As things stood now, Nagase was emotionally isolating herself from the others.

"Personally, I'm not so sure." Taichi's expression twisted in misery; thankfully, Inaba didn't look up to see it.

"I ruined everything... I'm sorry..."

Don't apologize, he thought. *What good will that do any of us?*

Besides, she wasn't at fault here. It wasn't a crime to have feelings for someone.

He'd told himself he was only ever interested in Nagase, but thinking back... maybe his romance with her was doomed from the moment Inaba's confession made him hesitate.

"You had nothing to do with it, Inaba... Okay, maybe not *literally nothing*. Maybe if you'd kept quiet about it, I would be dating Nagase right now."

"See?!" Inaba looked up, her eyes glistening with tears.

"But I never understood Nagase as a person, so our relationship probably would've sucked... and then we would've fallen apart anyway." *Can't have a relationship without mutual understanding, after all.* "Sure, maybe you threw a wrench in things, but we would've ended up here sooner or later, you know?"

"...But maybe your relationship would've brought you closer together... Helped you understand each other..."

"Well, we never got that far. And that's on me." *That's a fact, and I need to stop trying to escape it.* He looked directly into her eyes. "It wasn't your fault, Inaba."

He couldn't be strong for his own sake, but he could do it for her... and thankfully, this helped him figure out where to go from here. After talking to Inaba, he was reminded just how important it was to open up instead of holding everything inside.

"...Our little love story was great for what it was, but I don't think either of us were really ready for it. We didn't have anything figured out. We were just... going through the motions."

He was bluffing, of course. This was just the person he *wished* he was. Maybe later he'd go home and feel sorry for himself—but for now, he wanted to be the kind of guy who had his act together.

"But at the end of the day, she turned me down, and now we're back where we started. Where we'll go from here, I can't say. Maybe I'll give it another shot

with her, or maybe not. All I can say for sure is, things are far from over. This is only the beginning."

As he finished, it occurred to him just how... *relieved* he felt.

Who cares if I screw up? I can just give it another try. Nothing's stopping us from falling in love all over again!

"Uh, hello? Are you going to factor *me* into your little 'beginning'?"

Oh, right.

Come to think of it, Inaba had reached the same conclusion herself. She had confessed her feelings only to be met with rejection... but instead of giving up, she declared she would keep trying, no matter how many times she met with failure. *Would it be arrogant to say I really appreciate that about her?*

"...As long as you're okay with that."

He'd need to spend a lot of time rethinking his feelings, but he wanted to do right by everyone involved.

"Hah! No shit, genius." A warm smile spread on her face.

Despite the tough front he was putting up, he wasn't sure he was completely over Nagase just yet. But now that the slate had been wiped clean, surely there was no shame in falling for her all over again... Or who knows, maybe he'd start to see Inaba in a new light— "You know, Taichi..." Inaba paused to wipe her eyes. "Even if you got shot down like a loser, you're still pretty damn badass... even though you totally got shot down."

"I heard you the first time, alright?!"

Still... After talking it out with her, Taichi finally felt like maybe he wasn't so powerless after all.

□■□■□

The emotional damage of the rejection was still there, and Nagase was getting harder and harder to interact with, but right now Taichi was feeling optimistic. He wanted to give it another shot—love, specifically, but maybe everything else, too.

But first, there was something he needed to take care of—something so important, he couldn't fathom why he'd put it off for this long.

"So, what d'you wanna talk about?" Rina called as she came down the stairs to the first floor.

"Come in and have a seat," Taichi replied from the living room.

"Why're you trying to act all serious? It's weird."

Yaegashi Rina had a way of running her mouth.

She took a seat on the sofa—

"Wait, why are you sitting next to me? Take the hint and sit *across* from me!"

"Who cares! Just make it quick, okay? I'm a busy girl!"

...Yaegashi Rina also had a way of being a cheeky little brat.

"Okay, whatever. Ahem! So, we need to have a little talk. It's important."

"Yes, I get that. Is it really this big of a deal?" She tilted her head.

Yaegashi Rina had a way of being completely adorable—

Enough! Focus!

"Do you remember what happened on Valentine's Day?"

"What part of it? You were in a bad mood that day, so we barely talked."

"The part where you gave me some chocolate."

"Oh, right. Yeah, i remember that."

"Do you remember what you said to me at the time?"

"No...?"

"You said, and I quote, 'A-And just so you know... this is ultra-super-special chocolate, just for you!' Remember?"

"Oh, that's right. What about it?"

"What do you mean, 'what about it'?! Okay, look... I love you very, very much. But only as a sister. I understand you may think of me in a special way, but because we're blood-related, the ethical implications—"

“Pfffhahaha! Oh my god... Just because I said your gift was special, you think I have a crush on you? Pffft!”

“Wh... But I... But you...!”

“Hahahaha! You’re so silly! Good grief... Of course I wouldn’t have a crush on you. You’re my brother!”

“Oh... Good... I mean, I figured I was wrong, but I wanted to set the record straight just in case...”

Taichi had jumped to the weirdest possible conclusion. How very awkward.

“Sheesh! Don’t be so obsessed with me, you dork!”

“Look, you’re my sister, alright? Of course I’m gonna worry about you.”

“Most brothers don’t, you know! But I do appreciate how much you love me and care about me.”

“In a brotherly way, of course!”

“Hee hee! Yeah, yeah, I get it. Hmm... I should give you something nice in return... Oh, I know! Come closer so I can tell you a secret.”

“Hm? What’s up?”

Taichi leaned over so she could whisper... and she planted a kiss on his cheek.

“Whawhawhawhawhawhawha...?!”

“And just so you know, that was my first kiss!”

[My little sister just kissed me!!!]

And so, the next day, Taichi was forced to explain to everyone that his relationship with his sister was perfectly ordinary and not at all some weird incest thing.

Chapter 5: Kiriyama Yui's Dramatic Struggle

At Yamaboshi High School, gym classes are held jointly—two classrooms worth of students at the same time. And as luck would have it, Class 1-A (containing myself, Kiriyama Yui, and Aoki Yoshifumi) is always paired with Class 1-C (containing Inaba Himeko, Nagase Iori, and Yaegashi Taichi). It's the one class of the day where the whole CRC gets to be together, and seeing as I already liked gym class to begin with, that easily makes it my number one favorite class of all time! It's the thing I look forward to most each day!

Today the first-year girls are playing soccer—Team A (Class 1-A) versus Team B (Class 1-C).

The whistle blows to signal the kick-off for the second half.

"Yui!" a classmate shouts as she passes the ball to me.

I trap the ball with my right foot and begin to dribble as I charged forward into enemy territory. The opposing team closes in on me from all sides, eager to steal the ball. But these girls are amateurs, and they don't stand a chance against me. I run freely around their half of the field, dodging one after another... Then, with a kick, I send the ball flying toward the goal!

The goalie shrieks and jumps out of the way, letting my shot pass. The impact with the net makes the whole thing rattle. "Yes!" I shout, pumping my fists.

"Nice shot, Yui," says my good friend Yukina. "But don't you think maybe you should let the rest of the team have a turn?"

Meanwhile, Fujishima Maiko, president of Class 1-C, blows the whistle. "Goal! One point to Team A. Special yellow card issued to Kiriyama-san!"

"Like, what the what? What for? And what the heck is a 'special' yellow card, anyway?"

"It doesn't matter. Starting now, you're not allowed to cross into the other team's field until I say you can."

“Why are you giving me a handicap?! This is ridiculous! Like, you all agree with me, right, girls?!”

But no one, not even my own team, steps up to bat for me.

“Yui, when you play that hard, the other team doesn’t stand a chance,” Yukina tells me.

I went easy on them during the first half, didn’t I? Let me have fun for once! Tch...

After my handicap was instated, I gave myself a second restriction—no dribbling—and focused instead on passing to my teammates. (See? I can totally take a hint!)

Without much left for me to do, I glance over at the other soccer field where Teams C and D are playing... and before I know it, I find myself watching Iori.

Before now, she would always be the center of attention in gym class... but no one’s passing her the ball. She’s completely open—and they can *see* that she’s open—but they’re ignoring her. Almost... on purpose.

Her expression is dark, which is her aesthetic these days.

“Yui-chan! Heads up!”

At this, I glance back in time to notice a girl from Team B headed my way with the ball. I jog over a few steps, swipe the ball from her, then kick it over to someone else on my team.

“How are you still so good when you’re not even paying attention...?” Yukina mutters, but I can tell she isn’t actually looking for a response, so I totally ig her question.

I look back at the other field.

Instead of competing for the ball, Iori stands idly in the back.

But then—





—a fellow teammate slams into her, and she staggers. Meanwhile, the other girl (can't remember her name, but I want to say it's... Setouchi?) jogs back to the center of the field without so much as an apology.

"Wait... Did she do that on purpose...?"

It looked a little too rough to be an accident.

After the match ended, we put all our equipment away, and with that, gym class was officially over. (For the record, Team A was down by one point right up until the very end when Fujishima-san lifted my handicap, so I scored two goals and clinched the victory in the last minute!)

I wanted to talk to Iori about what I saw, but she was on the opposite side of the athletic field, so I didn't quite get the chance.

Normally she was a social butterfly who would strike up a conversation with just about anyone, but from what I saw, she barely talked to anyone except Inaba.

Taichi, you're right there! Can't you see Iori's all alone?! Why aren't you talking to her?! ...Oh, right. I guess things are still awkward between them.

"I noticed you kept staring at Nagase-san," Yukina comments. She hesitates for a moment, then continues, "I've actually, um... heard some stuff..."

"What's up?"

"There's some awful rumors going around about her. People are saying she's two-faced... that she uses her good looks to lead guys on, only to turn around and eviscerate them when they ask her out..."

"Yukina, you don't believe that stuff, do you?"

"Relax! Of course I don't! You've told me before what a good friend she is. It's just, you know, there's bound to be people out there who buy into it... I don't mean me! Will you please stop looking at me like that?!"

What jerk is spreading rumors about Iori?

On my way back to the locker room, I managed to flag Iori down. “Hey, Iori!”

“...What is it?”

“Oh, umm...”

Crap... I should’ve thought of something to say!

[Whoa, her tits are huuuge...]

Keep your eyes to yourself, Aoki, you stupid horndog! Boobs aren’t everything, you jerk! Also, I’m kind of in the middle of something right now, so shut up!

“Umm... During the match just now... Nnn...” Partway through my sentence, it occurs to me that Iori probably won’t want to talk about this, so I start to hesitate... No, I gotta push through! I keep my eyes firmly on hers and continue, “Everyone was acting weird, weren’t they?”

To be fair, things with Iori have been “weird” for quite a while now, but anyways.

“Nope.”

“But nobody passed you the ball!”

It’s almost like her weirdness has spread to everybody around her.

“Just a coincidence.”

“Are you sure? Maybe something’s going on—”

Right then, I get a Transmission from Iori:

[Stop. Don’t talk to me.]

Her jumbled emotions make me stop dead in my tracks... but Iori keeps walking.

I can tell she’s struggling with something—I can *feel* it—but I don’t know what.

Here I am, literally reading her mind, and yet I still don’t understand what’s going on with her. I can feel her pain, but I can’t ease her burden... and it hurts. It really, really hurts.

On top of studying for finals (and in my case, karate practice at the dojo), the Cultural Research Club was busy prepping the spotlight guide map for our presentation.

“Let’s see... We’ve got a little-known cafe ideal for dates, a Chinese restaurant with large portions for good prices, a store that sells cute jewelry and accessories, a small but fancy hair salon... and that’s not even everything! I’m impressed we managed to cover this much ground,” I mutter to myself. Looks like we’re on track! “Though, some of them are obviously super-biased, like whoever decided to put this *pro wrestling venue* in here,” I add.

Taichi reacts instantly. “Hey! Do you even *know* how many historic pro wrestling events have taken place right there inside that—”

“You know, if we classed these brochures up a bit, we could probably sell them,” Inaba cuts in.

“Good grief, Inaba! You’re always looking to make a quick buck, aren’t you?” I retort, ignoring Taichi entirely. Aww, he looks sad... Maybe that was kinda mean...

“I gotta say, the brochure took *wayyyy* too much time to put together. We should’ve started with the map,” she grumbles.

Our current plan is to showcase the giant spotlight map, then have all the little details organized in the brochures alongside it. Right now, we’ve just started work on the map part. Basically, all we need to do is draw up the map, then place all of our locations onto it, all while maintaining a legible, yet memorable style... but there’s a lot of work to be done.

The auditorium is a big room, so we’ll need to make sure the people sitting in the back can still read it... and the judges sit even *farther* back (so they can observe the audience reactions, or something like that)... which means we’ll need to tape together a *lot* of construction paper.

And we don’t have a ton of time to do all this.

“You’re cool with this font style for the title, right, Inabacchan?” asks Aoki amid the clutter.

“Yeah... Damn it, this design is too fucking elaborate! We should’ve gone with something easier... I never should’ve read that stupid ‘Advertising That Sells’ book!”

Not only that, but she picked up books on hand lettering and color theory, too. As usual, once she’s put her mind to something, she goes all-out!

It’ll be a lot of effort, but once we’re done, our presentation will be *leagues* ahead of any regular old high school assignment. Like, if we entered it in a guide map competition, it would *totally* take home the trophy! (I don’t think they actually have guide map competitions, but still!) It sucks that we’ll only get to use it for this one presentation, you know?

“And why do we have so many goddamn locations?! I’d like to trim down the list... but if that loses us points, I’ll be pissed! I refuse to let those assholes beat us!”

“Quit shaking the paper! You’re going to make me screw up!” Taichi scolds her.

And so the busywork continues... but our club president and life of the party, Nagase Iori, is nowhere to be found. These days she’s always taking off early—and that’s assuming she even shows up at all. Her absence is painfully apparent, too.

This time around, the phenomenon we’re facing is called Sentiment Transmission. Sure, it can be embarrassing—like having all the details of your love life broadcasted to everyone—but for the most part, we haven’t let it bother us. Maybe it’s because we’ve been through it so many times already.

Still, that doesn’t mean we’re totally unfazed. Iori’s suffered the most out of all of us. And based on the timing, I’d say the Sentiment Transmission is directly related to her weird behavior... The rumor mill probably isn’t helping things, either... Plus, there was that incident during gym class today... Maybe I should’ve acted differently back then.

Now that I think about it, of all the emotions I felt in that jumbled mess she Transmitted, the biggest one was... sadness.

Just as I realize this, Inaba taps my shoulder with her pen. “Focus, Yui! You’re

the most artsy person here! Without you, we'll never get done in time!"

"Inaba... Just because you suck at it doesn't mean you need to take it out on poor Kiriyama..."

"Nngh... *Contrary to your wild delusions, I'm not taking anything out on her, so quit making me into the villain, Taichi, and for the record I do not suck at this, thank you*!"

"And she said it all in one breath, too! Damn, girl," Aoki comments appreciatively.

Never a dull moment here in Rec Hall Room 401.

"Sorry... I was just thinking about Iori... I mean..." Crap. I shouldn't have said that.

"Yeahhh..." Now Taichi's expression is tinged with remorse. I really shouldn't have said that... God, I'm so sorry...

"It's that asshole's fault for playing God and tormenting us with its stupid phenomena," Inaba mutters. "Sure, this one's a bit less scary than last time since it won't affect the world around us, but still, it—actually, never mind—"

[I'm so fucking scared... I'm terrified.]

It's a Transmission from Inaba. Her fear makes my chest tighten.

Instantly, Inaba's expression grows panicked—but then she exhales and looks at me, her long eyelashes fluttering, firm resolve in those almond-shaped eyes. It's a look that says "Don't say anything. I'm fine."

She clears her throat and continues, "Anyway, thus far I personally haven't Transmitted anything I wouldn't want the rest of you to know about, but if that happened, well... it's a frightening thought. Maybe that's what happened to Iori... I just wish she'd tell us."

From her tough outer persona, you'd never guess she was holding all that anxiety deep inside. Everybody knows she's a total worrywart—but most of the time we don't realize just how *scared* she gets. To make things worse, she never actually tells us how she's feeling; she just tries to be strong for the rest of us.

I always assumed she was a total badass by nature, but there's more to it than

that. She actively works hard to conceal her weaknesses. I never realized just how much effort she puts in on a daily basis... All this time, I've just sat back and let her make the tough calls...

The room falls silent. The air between us is heavy.

Until, that is, Aoki's dopey voice breaks the tension:

"*Anyways*! I'm sure Iori-chan knows she can come to us whenever she needs help. We just gotta wait until she's ready. And then once she's ready, we'll give it all we've got! That's all there is to it, folks!" he declares.

His cheery tone contrasts sharply with the vibe in the room. It catches me off-guard, and I stare blankly back... Then I realize what his game plan is, and I grin. "Right!"

This guy always knows how to take control of the conversation. At first glance it seems like it's entirely unintentional, but like with Inaba, I bet he puts a lot of effort and consideration into it. He knows he might annoy someone, but he does it anyway... I genuinely respect him for it.

[This is one of the things I love about you, actually.]

"Wh—?!"

Oh my god, don't Transmit that! And did you really have to send it to Inaba and Taichi, too?!

"Y-Yui...? Do you mean it...? Wait—it's a Transmission, so you've gotta mean it! YES! Finally, a declaration of *love* from my swee—Mmph?!" I hastily stuff a crumpled ball of paper into his mouth to shut him up. Sadly, he spits it out. "*Ghcckk*! What was that for?! It's the truth, ain't it?!"

"Shut up! Don't get the wrong idea, okay?! I was just complimenting you on *one* single facet of your stupid personality, that's all!"

"She couldn't sound more *tsundere* if she tried," Inaba snarks.

"And she's blushing, too," Taichi comments.

"Both of you shut up or I'll kick your asses!"

Everyone laughs as my cheeks burn. Grrrr!

I fold my arms and pout, and the others start to apologize. You guys think just because you said *sorry* I'm going to let you off the hook?! Because... well... you're right! But still!

"I think Aoki's got the right idea," Taichi muses. "There's not much we can do for Nagase... that she one hundred percent definitely *wants* us to do... except keep the CRC going in her absence. She's the president, after all. So we need to do our best to make the club presentation a success."

She shot him down, and yet it's obvious he still cares about her... despite the emotional devastation she put him through. I got that Transmission he sent, and I felt every bit of it.

That said, the disclaimer of "one hundred percent definitely" is kinda playing it safe, in my opinion.

All at once, I feel a burning passion rise up from deep inside. I don't want to let Aoki show me up! I want to pull my own weight! I want to help Inaba and Taichi... and Iori, too!

In the past, I always let them do all the heavy lifting... but then I promised myself I would get stronger and fight my own battles. So, the best thing I can do right now is put in effort, one step at a time. Otherwise I'll never get on their level!

"...Is it cool if I take off?"

"Don't be stupid! Without you, our work efficiency will plummet!" Inaba snaps, but I stand my ground.

"Don't worry! I'll just make up for it later!" I insist as I start putting away all the markers I was using. Then I toss the pen case into my bookbag and hop to my feet.

"What's goin' on, Yui?! Need my help with anything?!"

"No! I can do it myself, thank you!"

"K-Kiriyama, wait! Don't be so impulsive!" Taichi warns me.

"I'll be *fine*! Super ironic coming from you, though!"

"Will you just slow down for one goddamn minute?" Inaba demands as she

blocks my path to the door. “Look, I got a feeling I know what you’re up to, but...” She scratches her head, then continues in a small voice, “I think you should hold off for the time being.” The look on her face is dead serious. “If she needs help, she’ll say so. It’s just... risky, that’s all.”

“Risky how?”

“Well, I mean, you...” Inaba falls silent and looks to the floor.

“Relax, Inaba. I’m stronger now.” I shoot her a winning grin.

She furrows her brows at me for a moment... then smiles back.

“Okay, see ya!”

And with that, I slip past her and out the door.

After a quick phone call to let her know I’m coming over, I jump on the first train to Iori’s house. My plan is to have a conversation with her—a *real* conversation, not just idle chatter. I can’t assume I know her based on things I’ve heard from everyone else. I need to talk to her myself.

The others are all doing their best to put her needs first... and they’ve all chosen a more passive “watch and see” approach. I mean, they’re not wrong—I’m sure Iori would come to us of her own volition if she needed us. But what if she doesn’t even understand what it is she’s struggling with? Maybe she *can’t* ask for help!

I’m sure the others all understand that, of course. But sometimes if you pry too much, you risk pushing the other person further into their shell. Sometimes you have to give them space to think... and I know Iori just needs to sort out her emotions, so all we can really do is... Oh, but we have to take the Sentiment Transmission into consideration... Gahhh, I don’t know anymore!

But once we have this talk, I’m sure I’ll figure it out.

There isn’t much I can do that’s guaranteed to be the “right” choice. What matters most is to find the courage to take that next step in spite of the risk.

I can do this! I’ll prove I can do it just like the rest of them!

Meanwhile, my train pulls into Iori’s station.

I pass through the turnstiles and head down the street. Eventually I see Iori heading my way.

“Iori!” I hurry over to her. “Sorry to spring this on you. I appreciate you meeting me halfway...”

“It’s fine,” she replies, her expression blank. Her trademark smile is nowhere to be found. Instead, her expression is perfectly blank, like a work of art—beautiful, yet... eerie.

Rather than take up space on the sidewalk, we decide to take our conversation to the parking lot of a nearby restaurant. We’re not going inside, though, because I’m going straight back to the clubroom after this.

Iori’s the first to speak.

“Remember the last time this happened? Except now it’s the other way around.”

“Huh?” For a moment, I don’t understand what she’s talking about. Then it hits me. “Ohhh, right.”

She means during the Liberation, when I isolated myself in my room, refused to go to school, and generally made myself a huge burden for everyone else to deal with. Back then, Iori came over to my house dozens of times. She was the one who tried the hardest to fix everything, often by herself.

And now I have the chance to return the favor.

“Say, Iori... how do you feel about the Sentiment Transmission?”

“What do you mean?”

“You know, like... ‘it’s really hard’ or ‘it really sucks’ or something...”

“It’s... definitely hard.”

“C-Could you be more specific about that?”

“I thought you wanted me to say ‘it’s really hard’ or ‘it really sucks’ or something,” she replies, staring dully at my general chest area.

This... isn’t working out the way I thought it would. It’s harder than I was expecting. I take a deep breath, then exhale.

“But you seem really... sad. Like you’re in pain.” At least, that’s what I got from her Transmission, anyway. “I’d really like to help you feel better.”

“I don’t think you can.”

Just like that, she shoots me down. But I’m not done yet!

“C’mon, what’s the matter, Iori? Normally you’re all sunshine and smiles, but lately you’ve gotten all dark and gloomy. You’ve helped me so much... I’d do anything to help you get back to—”

“I’m not gonna fucking go back to normal,” she snaps, and I hear a slight quiver in her voice. “You don’t see it. You don’t get it. No, it’s not just you... it’s everyone. None of you see the real me.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m just... tired. I can’t do it anymore. I can’t make it work... Not like I used to.”

Stop! Don’t talk like that! Don’t give up!

“Sure you can! You can still make it work—”

[I can’t be friends with Yui anymore.]

...What? Are you serious? That’s not true! Don’t even think that!

But her Transmitted emotions make it painfully clear that she meant every word.

I won’t accept this! I *refuse* to accept this!

“I love you, Iori... That’ll never change, no matter what.”

I wish I could send a Transmission right now so she would know I meant it.

“What if *I* change?”

“That won’t matter.”

“Even if I changed literally every part of myself?”

“...Yeah...?”

“So what about me makes you want to be my friend? If I changed everything about myself, I would be an entirely different person. I’d be a stranger.”

Right. I see what she's getting at. "We'll still have all our history together."

"So as long as you were friends with someone at one point, you'll stay friends with them forever, even if they turn into a jerk? Even if they commit crimes or something?"

"W-Well..."

Is this a logical debate now, all of a sudden? How am I supposed to counter that? What do I say? She's freaking me out... What do I do? What do I—

[This isn't Iori...]

I just Transmitted that.

And... I can't quite rationally explain it, but... I have a gut feeling that it was something I *really* shouldn't have let Iori hear.

Still, it doesn't change the fact that I thought it. I can't pretend I didn't. It wasn't an emotional reaction in the heat of the moment. It's just an immutable fact of life now.

[This is why I can't be friends with her anymore. I can't. I can't!]

Her Transmission—all her sorrow and loneliness and anguish—cuts me to the bone.

Now, finally, I understand why Inaba said this was risky. During the Sentiment Transmission, these deep conversations can dig up way more than we ever wanted. We can't risk seeing each other's most despicable thoughts.

Now there's a plainly visible gulf between myself and Iori... and there's nothing I can do about it. I'm powerless. I can't melt her frozen heart... I can't keep trying anymore.

Somebody save me...

Night falls.

Alone, I trudge down the street, huddling into my jacket to shield my face from the icy breeze. Meanwhile, I flex my gloved fingers to keep them warm.

During the daytime, it feels like spring is just around the corner, but once the

sun goes down, winter rears its ugly head.

Still, I felt like walking home, so here I am.

Everybody else probably went home by now. I feel bad... I meant to come right back, but instead I basically ditched them.

I was arrogant. I thought for sure I could make it work, but in the end, all I did was pour salt in the wound.

Suddenly, my cell phone starts to vibrate. Someone's calling me. I pull off my right-hand glove and check the screen: Mihashi Chinatsu. She was my karate rival back in elementary and middle school. Then we lost touch with each other for a while... until winter break, when she came back to visit. One thing led to another, and now we're good friends.

As I answer the call, I get the feeling this might take a little while, so I step into the nearest bus shelter and take a seat.

She tells me about her life, and I tell her about mine in return—mostly. Not the parts with «Heartseed» or the other supernatural stuff, obviously.

Thankfully the bus shelter is heated, and no one else is around.

"...So yeah, that's about the gist of it. What do you think I should do, Chinatsu?"

"It's hard to say without knowing the full story... but to be honest, it kinda sounds like you should just leave her be. Most things just take time to sort themselves out."

"No! I can't just... sit around!"

I can't just abandon Iori when she's struggling! What kind of monster does that?!

"...Look, this isn't why I called you, alright? I have my own shit to complain about."

"But mine's worse!"

"Maybe so, but seeing as I'm not directly involved, I can only help so much."

"You're so mean!"

“Yeah, yeah, I know. I’m a jerk. You knew this going in.”

“But I need your help, so like, just help me already!”

“Hah!” Chinatsu scoffs on the other end of the line. “Give me a break. Can’t you do *anything* by yourself?”

She must think I’m such a baby.

“L-Look, I *tried*, okay?! It just... didn’t work out...”

My effort was just a waste of time... and now I don’t know what to do next.

“...Sorry for getting grumpy with you. I’m sure you’re doing your best, so—”

Just then, there’s an ear-splitting electronic beep, and the call forcibly ends. I check the display to see the “out of battery” screen waiting for me. And just my luck, I don’t have a spare battery on hand with me.

“Ugh, this sucks!”

And so I find myself alone in the bus shelter.

I can feel my palms starting to sweat. Man, the heater in here is cranked up *really* high... That’s not very eco-friendly, you know!

Then the door slides open, and the chilly winter air rushes in from outside, brushing against my flushed cheeks. I hear the sound of footsteps and look up.

There stands «Heartseed», wearing the body of our club advisor, Gotou Ryuuzen.

“Uh... hhh...”

My heart nearly stops. No, I take that back. It *totally* stops.

I can’t breathe.

Then my pulse starts racing super-fast, and my face feels hot... No, cold? I’m not sure which.

My hands shake.

“Good day to you, Kiriyama-san... Wait... Maybe I should have said ‘good evening’... Ugh... I should have just said ‘hello’ like normal...”

Its posture is limp and lifeless. Its voice is somehow both wet and dry at the

same time. And it radiates a darkness that threatens to pull me in.

Someone save me!

I feel myself start to sweat again—this time for a different reason entirely.

“What’s wrong, Kiriyama-san...? You look unwell... Not that it matters...”

Do you care or not?! Make up your mind!

“Is it just me, or... have we not spoken much compared to the others...? Maybe you don’t see fit to speak to me...?”

I admit, I’ve barely spoken to «Heartseed» at all since this whole thing started. I didn’t see it at all during the Age Regression, or the Liberation before that. I was there when it showed up to explain the Sentiment Transmission, though. But the others were with me at the time.

Right now, it’s just me.

“Umm... Could you say something in response now...? Otherwise this is going to turn into a soliloquy on my part... although that tends to happen most of the time regardless...”

“Wh... What do you want?” I ask, forcing the words out of my throat.

Here I am, alone in a bus shelter with «Heartseed», who’s blocking the only exit.

I remember Aoki told us «Heartseed» approached him when he was alone one time. And Inaba said it might be a recurring thing, so she wanted us all to keep our guard up. But I never thought it would happen to me, so I didn’t worry about it too much.

If I fought it, could I win? No way. I know the answer to that question. After all, I tried once before—and got crushed instantly.

“Oh, but... Please don’t try to fight me... or do anything dangerous...”

Busted.

“So... Kiriyama-san... How do you feel about this phenomenon...?”

What kind of question is *that*?

“Does it... frighten you...?”

Frighten me? Of course it does. And so do you, you freak!

“Isn’t it frightening, having your most personal thoughts and feelings put on display for all to see?”

Why does it feel like his voice is getting stronger...?

“Your deepest fears...”

I know fear can hurt people. When I learned about Iori’s pain, it only made me hurt her worse. And in the same way I was shown her darkness, the others might see mine, too. My rawest self—all of my most shameful and disgusting parts laid bare. They might hate me for it...

All this time, I tried so hard not to look into the abyss—and now here it is, staring me in the face.

I’ve always known just how scary the Transmission is. I just forced myself not to think about it. Feign ignorance. That’s what we decided as a group, right from the start. After all, it’s a slippery slope—the more you think about it, the further you slip.

So we chose to carry on like normal. It’s not even that hard, since we’re all kind of used to it at this point. But now I’m slipping.

What do I do? What do I do? I can’t unsee it!

As «Heartseed»’s dead-eyed gaze bores into me, I feel all my most negative emotions surging inside me—jealousy, contempt, resentment, hatred—

[Help me!]

And the Sentiment Transmission strikes, sending my fear to Aoki and Taichi.

Thank god... I’m saved... They have no way of knowing where I am, but knowing them, I’m sure they’ll find me... I’m safe now... My friends are on their way—

Then Chinatsu’s voice replays in my mind: *Can’t you do* anything *by yourself?* Her voice is so crisp, it’s almost like she Transmitted it.

I just... want to pull my own weight. No matter how hard it gets, I don’t want

to give up. I want to be stronger!

The flames of determination rekindle inside me, and I remember the promise I made to myself. I swore I would never lose to anyone or anything ever again! Why the heck am I asking for help?!

I get to my feet and hop into a fighting stance—left side forward, my hips low, my abdomen tensed, my fists at chin-height. Then I fix «Heartseed» with a pointed glare.

“What are you—”

“Sure, the Sentiment Transmission is scary, and it sucks, and I hate it... but I’m done running away. I’ve already made a fool of myself in front of them, like, a thousand times by now. So I don’t really care what you send them.”

Weird... I don’t even feel scared of «Heartseed» anymore!

Inaba... Aoki... Taichi... Iori...

“They’re all out there fighting... and I’m going to fight, too.”

Then I realize something important: No, I shouldn’t be asking my friends to solve my problems... but that doesn’t mean I should fight alone. We should be fighting this thing together!

“...Doesn’t seem like anything I say will have much of an effect at this point... Ugh... You know, I’ve been thinking...”

«Heartseed» slumps forward even farther, and its dull expression grows even duller. Maybe it’s... disappointed...?

“...Maybe this tactic isn’t very effective... It’s not fun anymore... Maybe I’ll stop... It’s too much effort, anyway... But I need to directly interact with... Oh...” «Heartseed» stops and nods to itself. “Maybe this is why *that one* manages to meddle so much... My, it seems I’ve taken an interesting turn myself...”

By “that one,” does it mean «The Second»? And what was that about “taking an interesting turn”? Is «Heartseed»... adapting?

“Anyway... Now that you’ve gotten stronger... you might even be less interesting than Aoki-san... or perhaps *more* interesting? Maybe I should...”

“Um, hello?”

“Oh...”

“Could you quit babbling to yourself and pay attention to the person in front of you? Or are you done here?”

I’m doing it. I’m having a conversation with «Heartseed»! Am I totally awesome, or am I just numb to the fear?

“No... I think I’m done... Goodbye.”

“Bye.”

Oh my god, I’m so stupid. Why did I bother saying goodbye to it?! Actually, no—why did *it* bother saying goodbye to *me*? Almost like it... wants to be friends or something...

And so «Heartseed» turns and leaves the bus shelter, sliding the door closed behind it.

Instantly, I collapse on the spot.

“Oh my goddd, that was terrifyinggg!”

I never dreamed I’d ever find myself one-on-one with that thing... but I survived. It actually feels kind of... empowering, strangely enough... but at the same time—

[...That was sooo scary...]

Ack! I Transmitted that!

[[Where is she?!]]

And then I get a double Transmission from both Aoki and Taichi. Good grief, those worrywarts... I guess it’s technically my fault for asking for help, though... I wish I could tell them—

[...I’m at the bus shelter closest to my house...]

Whoa! I was mostly joking, but I actually sent that! Wait... Have we mastered the Sentiment Transmission to the point where we can have, like, entire telepathic conversations?!

With no way to tell them I didn't need their help anymore, I decide to wait right where I am. While I wait, I try to will myself to Transmit to them, but unfortunately I wasn't that lucky.

"You okay, Kiriyama?!"

Taichi arrives first, gasping for breath.

...Wait, what?! Aoki, where the heck are you?! Don't you think *you're* the one who ought to show up first at a time like this?! This is the problem with you, oh my god...

Eh, I guess it depends on where he was when he got my Transmission... Or maybe Taichi just has ridiculously good timing...

"Oh, um... Sorry, Taichi. I'm okay now."

I'm gonna give everyone the full run-down first thing tomorrow, so for now I just give him the abridged version.

"Huh... I guess it's really making an effort this time around. So that leaves me, Inaba, and Nagase..."

"Mmm, I dunno. It told me 'it's not fun anymore,' so it might not bother."

"Fun...?" Naturally, Taichi furrows his brows.

"Hey, Taichi..." I think back to the important discovery I made a little while ago and slowly begin to speak. "We've all been doing our best to fight these phenomena, don't you think? Everyone except me, anyway... But I think I'm going to change that."

"Nah, I'd say you've been doing your best, too."

"Thanks... But still, you guys have had to cover for me a lot, and I haven't really had the chance to return the favor."

"Mmph... I *guess*..."

Normally Taichi's more of the stoic type, so it's super obvious what's he's thinking. Hee hee! What a dork.

"That's why I ignored Inaba's warning and went to have a talk with Iori. I wanted to contribute more. But... I screwed up."

I made a mistake, and I need to accept that.

“Same thing happened to me. She completely pushed me away.” His expression darkens. “I never understood a single thing about her... and that means there probably isn’t a single thing I can do to help her.”

“That’s not true! I’m sure she’s waiting for you to come to her rescue!”

“No... I don’t think she actually wants that. There’s just nothing I can do...”

“Taichi, you’ve been kind of pathetic lately, you know that?” I glare at him, and he flinches. “You used to be so confident!”

Granted, it’s probably a sign that he’s grown as a person and learned to think things through a little more. And that’s a good thing, of course! Wouldn’t want him to keep jumping in headfirst like a moron... Like when he had [me] kick him in the... you know!!!

“I mean, think about it. Are you really gonna let her keep acting like this in the middle of class?”

“Well...”

Yes! He took the bait!

You know... I think maybe Iori’s got it worse than I thought.

“Now that I think about it... Earlier, when you were like ‘There’s not much we can do for Nagase except make the club presentation a success’... That’s the kind of thing a total loser would say, don’t you think?”

I mean, I get why we need to back off and wait until Iori comes to us of her own free will. But think about it this way: that’s no different from just sitting back and watching! I know internal struggles aren’t exactly easy to solve, but surely we could solve her external ones, at least!

“Look, I want to help her as much as you do, but we can’t. Not until we figure out what she *wants*.”

Okay, point taken. Iori’s definitely been kind of an enigma lately, and I get where he’s coming from on this. I’m just so frustrated—

“I’ve already screwed this up pretty badly... I just... don’t know...”

Grrrraaaaaahhhhhh!!!

“Oh my *god*, will you stop being such a BABY?! Nobody knows what the right answer is, okay?! It’s not just you! We’ve *all* screwed up!” Blood rushes to my head as I lose my temper. “You just gotta try to do better next time!” Wait... This totally applies to me, too! “I don’t even have the right to lecture you on this! But I have no choice ‘cuz you’re acting like a total loser! And now *I’m* acting like a naggy wife! Thanks a lot, you jerk!”

“Um... I’m... sorry...?”

“You think your apology’s gonna fix anything?! Is that what you think?! Because... I mean, I *am* gonna forgive you, obviously...”

“Th-Thank you...?” He blinks back at me, looking like *what’s the matter with you?*

An awkward silence falls between us, and I start to feel bad for going on a tirade. Am I even *allowed* to act this high and mighty after the way I handled things back there with Iori? What if I’m just... making things worse...?

“Hey, Kiriyama?” Taichi glances over at me, directly into my eyes, and I find myself kind of entranced... Not in a romantic way, obviously! “Let’s figure it all out together, alright?”

Oh, I see. Taichi’s got the same idea.

It’s not about doing all the work yourself, or making someone else do it for you. It’s about bearing that burden *together*. That’s what friendship is really about.

To me, anyway.

“Yeah. We got this!”

As long as Taichi and the others are on my side, I can keep pushing forward.

“I may not know what’s going on with Nagase right now... and at times it seems like she’s trying to turn everyone against her on purpose... but there’s no way in hell I’m just going to stand around and do nothing.”

“Yeah... I don’t know how to help her, and I’m worried things’ll get worse if I go too far... but I still think we should do whatever we can!”

Hearing this, Taichi beams at me, and I grin back.

“When she pushed me away, I felt so powerless... but now I’m starting to think I was wrong.”

“Darn right!” I declare firmly. Glad to hear he’s picked himself back up again!

[Yui!!! I’m almost there!!!]

Dang it, Aoki, will you hurry the heck up already?!

+ + +

I got a nasty surprise this morning.

When I arrived at school, I found a message scrawled on my desk. It didn’t take long to erase, so it wasn’t a huge issue, but no one bothered to help me. Too scared to interact with me, I guess. Maybe things would’ve been different had Taichi or Inaba been around.

Not only that, but I had a fight with my mom that morning *and* I misplaced my favorite scrunchie, so I was already in a shitty mood.

So naturally the universe decided it was going to make things worse for me. Of course.

[I can’t let myself be a coward while everyone else is out there trying their hardest. I need to be brave, damn it.]

I got this Transmission from Inaba around lunchtime, and sure enough, she approached me that same day after school, right when I was at my lowest. *She couldn’t have picked a worse time if she tried,* I thought.

“Iori, you need to tell us what the fuck is going on with you. We seriously can’t keep letting it slide.”

“Then what took you so long?” I asked. It wasn’t what I wanted to say, but I didn’t have a choice.

This retort is all it takes to get a reaction out of her. Apparently Inaba didn’t account for this question. She reeks of hesitation... Maybe she’s not on her game today.

“...I won’t make excuses. I’m sorry I waited as long as I did. I admit, I wasn’t

exactly sure what to do or how to handle this. You're just so different now..."

Different. Yeah, I guess I am.

"And? What about it?"

Why do I keep taking this tone with her? A normal person would never act like this... but then again, I guess that's my problem. I *can't* be normal.

"Iori... *please* just tell me what's going on with you," she begged, teeth gritted.

"I don't have to. The Transmission will just tell you anyway."

"The Transmission doesn't give us the whole picture, just bits and pieces. It's not enough to understand you completely. I need you to tell me everything."

"Why should I?"

Her eyes widened in shock. "Are you serious...?"

Just like that, she began to fall apart, right before my eyes. I knew she was fragile. *God, it hurts.*

Right as she was on the verge of tears, she shook her head. Was she choosing to pretend I didn't say that? Was she trying to keep it together?

"Iori... You've helped me so goddamn much, and now I want to help you! Well... Okay, I know that sounds arrogant of me, but still..." She balled her hands into fists. "We're friends, aren't we? Isn't helping each other what friends do? Just ask me!"

"Don't tell me what to do," I shot back flatly.

"What? Give me a fucking break. You know it's the right thing to do!" she hissed, and I could hear anger in her tone.

"See? There you go again, making assumptions."

"Excuse me? What the fuck is wrong with you?! The real you would never say something like that! You're not like this!"

The real you. You're not like this. Well, sorry, but I can't be that me. I can't make it work.

Meanwhile, Inaba's emotions were running high. "What's the *matter* with you?! You've been acting weird ever since you rejected Taichi's confession! Look, I know it's hard to keep things normal when we've got the Transmission going on. I know it's scary. I know it hurts. Hell, I was scared myself... but that's no excuse. Why would you feel the need to shoot Taichi down like that? I know you have feelings for him—"

And there it is again.

[Stop assuming you know me.]

"...Huh?"

At my Transmission, she blinked at me like an idiot, and dark emotions began to froth up inside me. *You wanna know everything? I'll give you everything, alright.*

A voice in my head warned me that I shouldn't take it out on her, but I ignored it.

"If anyone's weird, it's you," I snapped. "First you tell me to get with Taichi... try to set things up for us... go on and on and on about how we should *totally* be an item... and then once we finally give in, all of a sudden it's 'Whoops, turns out I like him too!'"

"I... I..." She began to shake like a leaf, her arms wrapped tightly around herself like she was freezing cold.

"But then when I decide *not* to hook up with him, suddenly you don't like that either! So which is it? What the hell do you want from me?" I knew I wasn't in any position to judge her, but I kept going. "Nothing's ever good enough for you, is it? First you try to play Cupid, and then you throw it all out the window so you can join the party. Have you ever once thought about how *I* might feel? Are you even thinking at all?"

Normally I would never have said something like this. *I must be a monster.*

Inaba fell to her knees in defeat.

[I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry...]

As I heard her voice, I could feel all of her regret and guilt and self-loathing. It

hurt so bad, my chest felt like it was going to burst. I wanted to tell her not to feel bad about it.

But I didn't. I couldn't. If I could, we wouldn't be having this problem.

And that would be when I got a Transmission from Taichi:

[I'm not fighting this alone. I just need to do whatever I can... for Nagase's sake.]

I could feel his burning passion, pure and just.

It stung.

Give it a rest already, I thought.

I don't deserve it.

I'm not ready.

Chapter 6: Inaba Himeko's Commitment

I was so crushed, I wanted to die... but I knew better than to let myself think like that, even for a moment.

Last night, I had myself a pathetic little pity party. That was all well and good, of course, until I inadvertently Transmitted it and freaked everyone out (by which I mean Taichi rushed straight over to my house the moment he heard what I was thinking).

I went in with conviction only half-baked. A sense of duty that was more obligatory than anything else. And for that, I paid a painful price.

I remember everything Iori said to me yesterday.

I thought I knew just how selfish I was being. I told myself I would live with that guilt resting on my shoulders. Clearly I wasn't doing a good job, however, considering how badly Iori had hurt me. At some point I must've taken the easy way out and just pretended not to notice.

Was it because Iori herself told me it was fine...? No, I shouldn't try to pass the blame. That's the *last* thing I should be doing right now.

I could pretend this is a chick flick or teen drama and say something like "It's not a crime to love someone," but that doesn't work in real life.

I think back to Iori's perfectly sculpted face, her expression blank like a doll's.

"Stop assuming you know me"? What exactly was I assuming back there?

There's this massive gulf between my personal image of Nagase Iori and whoever she is right now. What happened? How did it get like this? Everything's falling apart. And soon, all that will remain—

"Inaba! Quit spacing! We're not going to be able to do club stuff for the next three days while we head into finals week, so today's like our last day to get all our presentation prep done, remember?!"

"Yui's right, Inabacchan! I need to study! If I fail all my classes, it'll be your

fault!”

“...Uh, no, I’m pretty sure that’d be your fault still...”

“Taichi! You’re not s’posed to correct me! You’re supposed to say ‘We didn’t agree to come in on a Saturday just to sit around’ or somethin’!”

“...W-We didn’t agree to come in on a Saturday just to sit around...”

“Yes! Perfect!”

“Will you two meatheads quit goofing off?! We’re already shorthanded as it is! We need to, like, pull double duty!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

“Sorry, Kiriyama...”

“As long as you’ve learned your lesson, I forgive you, Taichi. But just so you know, Aoki, one whole day’s worth of studying isn’t going to save you.”

“Aww, c’mon! Don’t crush my dreams!”

“No matter the outcome, ultimately, you have no one to blame but yourself.”

“I heard you the first time, Taichi, you jerk!”

“Don’t come crying to me when you get held back... *Ahem*...”

“Y-You’re freaking me out, Yui! Hahaha... AAAGGGGHHH! Now I’m scared, dang it! I don’t wanna get held back!”

These idiots always have something to scream about, it seems.

“Inaba! You’re zoning out again!”

“R-Right. Sorry.” At Yui’s insistence, I get back to work. “Anyway, relax. You’re not *that* stupid... I’m sure you’ll manage to graduate your second time around.”

“So now you’re assuming I’m gonna get held back, is that it?! Yui didn’t snap you back to reality just so you could jump on the Aoki hate train, y’know!”

Now that I’ve dunked on him for a bit, I’m feeling more like myself again.

At last, the presentation prep is starting to wrap up. Our jumbo-sized presentation map took more than 10 sheets of construction paper to put together; it’s so large, we don’t even have space here in the clubroom to unfold

it all the way. Not only that, but we wrote everything in a fancy script with a matching color scheme, too. It's extremely classy-looking. Plus, partway through Yui was inspired to add a bunch of little doodles everywhere. I keep finding new things every time I look!

We really knocked this out of the park, if I do say so myself. There's so much here, it'll be impossible to cover every little detail within the 15-minute time limit. With this level of effort, I'm hoping we'll have a decent chance of scoring higher than the jazz band. Maybe they'll even give us bonus points for outclassing all the other culture clubs!

We can do this. I'm confident.

Our plan was flawless, but moreso than that, we've all poured our hearts into it—and now we have something that represents all of our work over the past year. Something we can really be proud of.

All that's left now is to practice our individual portions of the speech. Then, after finals, it'll be showtime.

We have two versions of the presentation: one with all five of us, and... one for if Iori doesn't show up. But even if she's been skipping club meetups, I'm sure she'll be there for the big day... or so I want to believe, anyway. But we only get one chance to do this, so we have to be prepared for every contingency.

...I wonder what she's up to right now.

"Inaba, it's going to be okay," Taichi whispers so only I can hear, and for a moment I question whether I Transmitted... but it turns out I'm just wearing my anxiety on my sleeve.

"Thanks," I reply quietly, then turn my attention back to the task at hand.

I can feel how much he cares for me, and it makes me want to run crying to him with all my problems... but I can't. Not while Iori's out there suffering.

I assumed I knew her better than anyone else, but I didn't have the first clue about how she really felt.

I wouldn't be here right now if it wasn't for her. That's a fact. Without her, I

wouldn't have come out of my shell. She was the one who got me to open up in class and talk to people.

She once told me she'd always want to be my friend, no matter what. That our friendship would never fall apart over "some stupid boy." So how much of that did she actually mean? Or... did she mean it at the time, but she changed her mind since? I really hope that's not the case. That would be... heartbreaking.

In times like these, I finally realize just how much she meant to me. Hindsight sure is 20/20, isn't it? God... This is why I always fuck up the things that matter most. I can't apologize enough. Can't I atone? Can't we just go back to normal somehow?

If only I could go back to the days of watching her and Taichi grow closer... I know I shouldn't wish for that, but I can't help it.

Just as I think that, the clubroom door opens, and my heart leaps into my throat. *She's here. She actually came to help us prep—*

"Hey there, folks! Working hard?"

In walks Gotou Ryuuzen, advisor to Class 1-C and supervisor for the Cultural Research Club.

For a moment my heart stops for a different reason entirely... but fortunately his eyes are fully open and there's no lethargic vibe to be seen. It's not our favorite chronic Gotou-body-stealing asshole—it's just Gotou.

Still not the person I was hoping for, though.

"Oh, it's Gossan! Thank God," Yui sighs.

"That excited to see me, eh? That's real sweet of you, Kiriyama."

"Me, sweet? Aww, shucks... Hee hee... Wait, what am I saying? Who cares if you think I'm sweet? Am I just taking pity on you 'cuz you're going bald...?"

"Me going bald has nothing to do with this—Hey, wait! I'm not going bald! I just have a larger-than-average forehead, that's all! You got that?!"

This is the first time I've seen Gotou actually get mad about something... Maybe he's sensitive about his hairline... I'll need to make note of that for the

next time I want to bully him...

Look at me, making jokes and shit. Turns out nothing takes your mind off your problems quite like a dumbass adult! Alright, now I'm in Extrovert Mode. Let's do this.

"Inaba, were you mentally trash-talking me just now?"

"Go away."

"You're not even going to deny it?!"

"You know, it's kinda weird to see you up here, Gossan," Taichi comments.

"This might actually be the first time in CRC history!" Yui exclaims.

"It's a Christmas miracle!" shouts Aoki.

"It's kind of embarrassing, actually, considering you're supposed to be our club advisor," I mutter.

"Don't be ridiculous, kids! I definitely came up here before... like, once-ish! Aren't I great?"

"Yeah, right. Teacher of the year."

"So what's up, Gossan?" Aoki asks.

"Oh, right. Here you go!" Gotou sets a plastic to-go bag on the table. In it are exactly five cans of soda. "Just a little gift for my hardworking students."

"Whoaaa," the four of us murmur in unison.

"Besides... y'know... it might be kinda hard to score higher than the jazz band at club presentations." He adopts a more serious, teacherly tone. So even *you* don't believe we've got a snowball's chance in hell, huh? "But I'm rooting for you, y'know. When you put in the effort for something, you'd be surprised just how much it really shows. And other people will take notice."

For once, I get the feeling Gotou's actually trying to tell us something important.

"Wow... I guess you really *are* a teacher..." Yui muses.

"Yeah, he has his moments," Taichi replies.

“I must’ve missed the memo,” jokes Aoki.

“If you don’t see me as a teacher, then what—Oh, I get it. You see me as a dependable older brother, don’t you? That’s so cute.”

“As always, your optimistic interpretations never fail to astound me,” I retort.

Deep down, I’m glad we’re all together.

“Wait... I knew we were missing someone! Where’s Nagase? In the bathroom?”

Right then, speak of the devil, I get a Transmission from her.

[Another cold winter day.]

...I really wish you were here, Iori.

□■□■□

On Monday morning, I arrived at the classroom a bit earlier than usual. It was finals week, and today was the last day before testing would officially begin.

Our finals would cover all subjects, so I really needed to get my ass in gear, but... I just wasn’t making much progress in terms of studying. I wasn’t in danger of failing or anything, obviously, but there was a good chance my total grade would slip.

Once about two-thirds of my classmates had arrived, the room took on its usual easygoing vibe.

“How many hours did you study last night?”

“I didn’t. I mean, I’m always so busy with club stuff, you know? Now that we’re finally free from it, I just wanna relax!”

“Dude, you *still* haven’t finished the worksheets? You said you’d have them done yesterday!”

“Yeah, well, that went out the window when we had that big long phone call, didn’t it?!”

Unsurprisingly, test prep was the topic of the day. However, that wasn’t the only conversation to be had in the room. There was some downright inane babbling—

“Hey Watase, how’d it go with the whole ‘Give Fujishima-san a gift on White Day even though she didn’t get you anything for Valentine’s and ask her out anyway’ plan?”

“Shhh! Keep your voice down! Okay, so about that... Turns out Fujishima-san has plans that day to ‘go around spanking all the boys who fail to step up to the plate and return the favor they received’...”

—as well as some giddy gushing from the girls:

“Oh my gosh, you guys! Last night I bumped into Fujishima-san while she was out walking her dog. Did you know she has a bulldog?! It’s sooo cute!”

“Cute? Really? Bulldogs are like, top ten ugliest dogs ever.”

“*I won’t stand for that!*”

“F-Fujishima-san?!”

...Evidently Fujishima Maiko was a popular topic as well.

[I’m gonna be late! Run, run, run! AAAAHHH! RED LIGHT! STOP!]

The Transmission was from Aoki. I could feel his panic, too. *Buzz off, would you? I’m trying to eavesdrop!*

But then I had the misfortune of hearing something rather unpleasant.

“I always thought Iori was trying too hard to play the ditz. She’s so shady... I’m pretty sure it was all just an act.”

“Has to be. Nobody’s *that* much of a goody-goody cinnamon roll.”

“Judging from the way she’s acting lately, maybe those rumors about her are true... You know, the ones about her toying with all the guys?”

Just then, I made eye contact with one of the girls participating in the conversation.

Hastily averting my gaze, I sped back over to my desk and took a seat. I’d been wandering around the class under the pretext of fetching a dictionary, which I promptly opened and placed in front of me, even though I didn’t actually need to look anything up.

The gossip about Iori was steadily growing worse by the day, permeating

through the class and tainting their opinions of her. At this rate, it was questionable whether she'd ever be able to set things right. I wanted to believe it was possible, of course, but... there just wasn't much I could do in that regard. It was painfully clear to me just how powerless I was.

So much for my stupid information gathering and analysis... So much for "maintain total control of the situation at all times"—

"Guys, listen up!"

Suddenly, a familiar voice rang out across the room, and I looked up to find Yaegashi Taichi of all people standing behind the podium with a look on his face like a soldier heading off to war. It was a look I'd seen a handful of times in the past, and normally it would always fill me with a sense of hope... but this time, all I felt was dread.

Come to think of it, Yui had sent me an email this morning warning me to "be on the lookout for any Transmissions from Taichi that might hint at some sort of Plan"... I should've been keeping a closer eye on him.

The classroom was still missing a few people, and as such, Taichi's voice easily cut through the light murmur of conversation.

"What's gotten into you, Yaegashi?" Watase laughed. But Taichi wasn't laughing, and the others quickly took the hint.

"Truth be told, I was planning to tell everyone later on, but I really need to nip this in the bud before it gets out of hand."

Oh god, what are you plotting now?

"As you probably know, Nagase's been acting a little... *differently* lately, and there are weird rumors going around about her."

I knew it. It's about Iori.

I shot a quick glance around the room, but Iori herself was nowhere to be seen.

"They're not 'rumors' if it's the truth!" someone commented loudly. It was Setouchi Kaoru, the rebel girl who was trying to turn Iori into Public Enemy #1.

Taichi turned to look at her. Silence fell as they stared daggers at each other

for a few seconds. Then he glanced around at the others.

“I don’t know what all has been said about her, and I don’t know what you’ve heard, but the main thing I’d like to ask is that you take it all with a grain of salt.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I thought this was a *free country*,” Setouchi hissed.

“Yes, it is. That’s why I’m asking all of you to decide for yourselves whether you think the rumors are true or false.”

He was impressively committed to this plan of his. Classic Taichi.

The other students began to whisper to each other. As latecomers walked in, they saw Taichi at the podium and turned to their friends for an explanation.

Taichi’s request had visibly moved them. After all, they didn’t start out hating Iori—they’d all spent the past year of their lives having fun with her, so naturally they were inclined to believe she was a good person at heart.

I’d known this full well, of course. It could’ve been me standing up there. But I never tried... and I wasn’t about to join in now, either. Why? Because I was afraid of the backlash I might receive if I screwed up.

High school was a jungle. One wrong move and you could end up turning everyone against you.

As things stood, I already had a reputation among my classmates for being arrogant and overbearing. Because of this, I took great pains to avoid getting on anyone’s bad side.

The thought was frightening... Surely Taichi was aware of the risk.

And yet he went up there regardless—all to protect Nagase Iori, the very girl who broke his heart.

“But isn’t it obvious just from the way she’s acting?” Setouchi shot back. At this, public opinion began to shift again; I could feel it in the air.

“She’s got a point...”

“Yeahhh...”

“I mean, she’s acting totally different now...”

And that was the biggest reason I hadn't attempted anything like what Taichi was doing.

Of course I wanted to set the record straight about Iori... but her cold, distant behavior wasn't exactly helping her case. If anything, it was like she *wanted* them to believe the rumors. We could vouch for her all we liked, but without her cooperation, our word meant next to nothing.

"There's a reason for that."

There is? I thought. Had Taichi finally figured out the issue?

"Oh yeah? Let's hear it," Setouchi scoffed.

"Okay... So... The truth is..."

Taichi paused, pursing his lips together, and the whole room could feel his tension. Instantly everyone was on edge. Whatever the real reason was, it must've been serious—

"I... I was in love with her!"

...WHERE THE FUCK DID THAT COME FROM???



Everyone’s jaws dropped.

But Taichi kept going.

“So I made a move on her. Dozens of times... like... really aggressively... in a bad way.”

...What? When did that happen?

The room was dead silent.

“Full disclosure, I kind of... crossed a line. Like, way over the line. I went way, way too far.” He balled his hands into fists. “I... I did all kinds of horrible things you wouldn’t believe!”

The girls in the class had started to visibly recoil, while the guys just looked baffled that a milquetoast like Taichi would even be capable of such a thing.

“And after everything I did... I broke her spirit!”

Dear Diary: I always suspected this dude was mentally incompetent, but today my suspicions were confirmed. He’s braindead. Holy fucking shit. Why would you say that in front of the entire class?!

“My point is, Nagase’s bad attitude is all my fault. She’s done nothing wrong!”

[Except I made it all up!]

[No shit, genius!]

Weirdly enough, the two of us somehow managed to have a little Transmission exchange.

“Wait... So he...?”

“If so, then that means...”

“This is starting to sound really serious...”

Naturally, the class began to build into an uproar.

“Does that mean he ra—mmph?!”

“Don’t! Don’t finish that thought!”

Then the uproar grew to a frenzy, and by that point, even Taichi was starting

to panic.

“W-Wait, wait, wait! Come on, guys! Obviously I didn’t rape her!”

“Hello? Dad? I think one of my classmates is a criminal. Could you send a squad over?”

I glanced over to find Fujishima apparently on the phone with her father, the local police chief.

“Wait, what? No, listen! I didn’t break any laws—Whoa, what’s the matter, Inaba?”

The next thing I knew, I was standing in front of him.

“Have you ever once considered the consequences of your actions, you GODDAMN DIPSHIT?!”

“GUH!”

As I screamed, I summoned all of my strength to ram my fist directly into his solar plexus, then physically dragged him from the room.

□■□■□

Fortunately, first period was study period, so I had no qualms in skipping class. Naturally, I’d decided to drag Taichi along with me whether he wanted to or not.

When the teacher came in before the start of class to take attendance, I explained that “my friend here has a stomachache” (which was technically true, heh) and that I would be taking him to the infirmary. Then I told the class that Taichi was delusional, to ignore everything he said, and that I would explain the *actual* situation later. (Fortunately I somehow managed to convince Fujishima not to have him arrested.)

“Inaba-san... ma’am... it’s really cold down here...”

“Quiet.”

There we were in the clubroom. I sat in a chair, looking down my nose at Taichi as he prostrated himself before me on the floor.

“Now then, let’s hear it. How the *fuck* do you explain your little stunt back

there?” I asked, my voice shaking with barely suppressed fury. A moment of silence passed. “Uh, hello? Answer the question, damn it.”

“Huh? But you just told me to be quiet...”

“What are you, five? How stupid can you be?!”

“I just... Well, knowing you, I figured you’d make me wait it out while you launch into a huge long lecture...”

“I don’t know what kind of kinky BDSM shit you thought this was, but no.”

“...It’s not?”

“Why do you sound so disappointed?!”

Is that what you’re into?! Because that can be arranged! ...Gah! I’m getting distracted!

I sighed. “What were you trying to pull back there?”

“Uh, just to be clear, I was *not* disappointed. Just surprised.”

“Okay, I get it! Now explain yourself, for fuck’s sake!”

Don’t worry, pal. I’ve already determined that you’re a masochist. Which means I need to read up on how to be a sadist—

I cleared my throat to force my attention back to the matter at hand.

“Well... I wanted to put a stop to the rumors...”

“And the first part of your speech was pretty good, in my opinion. You know, ‘take it all with a grain of salt’ and all that. If anything, I messed up by not saying something along those lines myself. But the rest... That’s where we have a problem, you and I. Why the hell would you lie to them about something like that?”

“Well, I wanted to clear up the misunderstanding, but I knew Nagase probably isn’t going to change her behavior anytime soon...”

“Understandable.”

“So I figured if there was an external reason for her bizarre personality shift,

the others would choose not to hold it against her...”

“That does make sense.”

“And it’s not like we can go around telling everyone about «Heartseed», so I needed to invent a different external reason along those same lines...”

“Perfectly sound logic thus far.”

“And the best thing I could come up with was that I sort of sexually harassed her into misanthropy.”

“How the fuck was that your *best idea?*! Why would you purposely throw yourself under the bus like that?!”

Seriously, his “heroics” back there have already nearly shredded his reputation! The fuck is wrong with this dude?

“I just couldn’t think of anything better, okay? My next best option was to say that something awful had happened to someone in her family, but then Nagase could just deny it and I’d look like a psychopath. But on the other hand, if I confessed to being a creep, then that’s not something she could outright deny as easily.”

Admittedly, I could see where he was coming from on this, but still.

“Use your brain, Taichi! You can’t go telling people you *raped her*! That shit would follow her around for life!”

“Okay, hold on! I never once tried to say I *raped* her! That wasn’t what I meant at all!”

“Of course it wasn’t. I know you better than that. But people are going to jump to conclusions!”

Taichi slumped his shoulders. “I just figured I needed to make it sound serious enough to be believable...” he muttered sadly.

Surely he must have regretted the damage he caused to his own image, and yet he cared far more about the damage he caused to everyone else. I understood that. At the same time, however...

This goddamn martyr shit pisses me off so fucking much... and I love him to

death for it.

"Okay, but even if you weren't trying to imply you raped her, you were still planning to implicate yourself as the villain in some sense, right? You just wanted to give them someone else to hate, is that it? How does that solve anything?"

If he tells me he "wanted to bear the burden of her pain in her place" or some shit like that, I'm gonna punch his goddamn lights out.

"...I get the feeling the rumors are contributing to her... current condition... just as much as the Sentiment Transmission. So I thought, maybe if we could solve one of them, she'd recover that much faster. Plus, this phenomenon hasn't taken much of a toll on me personally, so I have the capacity to focus on someone else's problems."

...I GUESS that makes sense... but just barely! You win this time, Yaegashi Taichi!

"Besides, once everything's over, I figured we could solve things by explaining the whole situation to them."

Christ, this guy's optimistic. I could never place that much confidence in other people.

"...I'll help you set the record straight. I swear, just when I thought you'd finally gotten your act together, here you are causing trouble again..."

"I talked to Kiriyama, and she was telling me how I 'used to be so confident,' and... well, it made me think maybe confidence is key after all..."

That goddamn birdbrain... I'm gonna rip her a new asshole...

"B-But just so you know, she did nothing wrong, okay?"

"Hmm? I didn't Transmit just now, did I?" Evidently my rage was showing on my face. *Deep breaths.* "Anyway, the point is, next time you come up with another one of these moronic schemes, fucking talk to me first, got it?! No, seriously, do you understand what I'm saying to you right now?!"

I can never be sure with this dumbass...

"Yes, ma'am..." he answered meekly, and it was clear he regretted his actions.

Good. Guess I'll let him off the hook this time.

"By the way..." I continued.

"What's up?"

"How long do you intend to prostrate yourself on the floor, exactly? Isn't it cold down there?"

"You never told me I could stop!"

He's so submissive... I feel like I might develop a fetish for—Ahem! Let's not go there!

□■□■□

"...So, in short, it was all a bunch of nonsense he cooked up in order to take the heat off of Iori," I explained.

Beside me, Taichi bowed his head. "I'm sorry for lying and scaring everyone like that. Please forget everything I said."

Our plan (or rather, *my* plan) was to go around and explain the situation to each of our classmates individually. Simple and straightforward.

"...Why's she all moody and distant, then?" one of the two girls asked us.

"It wouldn't be right for us to tell you," I replied. "I know it sounds like an excuse, but please, trust me on this—she's really not a bad person at heart. I promise, it'll all make sense eventually."

"If there's anything I hope you can take away from this incident, it's that Nagase's worth inventing a crazy story for," Taichi added.

At this, the girls exchanged a glance... and smiled.

"Yeah, that makes sense. I knew you weren't that kind of guy, Yaegashi-kun."

"I'm *so* glad it's not true! Now we can still be friends!"

Sometimes the most efficient method wasn't flashy or dramatic. Sometimes honesty really was the best policy.

"I'm still confused about what's going on with Iori, but apparently there's a reason for it, so okay. I guess we should just give her some space...?"

“I can tell you guys are serious about this. Besides, I’ve always known Iori’s a total sweetheart.”

I was relieved to discover just how understanding they were. After our conversation ended, they headed back into the classroom... and with that, we had officially spoken to every last student in our class, save for Setouchi and Iori herself. That was the reason we’d decided to single each classmate out individually—we didn’t want either of them catching wind of what we were up to. It was a long and laborious process, to be sure, but fortunately we managed to get through them all before the end of the school day.

Following Taichi’s stupid “confession” as well as our joint effort to have a heart-to-heart conversation with each member of the class, the general attitude toward Iori had shifted considerably. I wasn’t one hundred percent sure, but... I got the feeling we could have saved ourselves some time by doing the “heart-to-heart” thing right from the get-go. It was so... *easy*. Why didn’t I think to try that first?

Of course, deep down, I knew the answer. I hadn’t attempted it because taking the initiative took courage. It was relatively painless once we took that first step, of course... but just imagining the possible risks involved made me hesitate. And for a negative-Nancy like myself, picturing the worst-case scenario—in this case, the possibility of turning the entire class against me—made it that much harder.

But Taichi? He had the courage.

The downside, of course, was that he used this courage of his to barrel forward without any careful calculation whatsoever, but I digress.

“We should’ve just talked to them one-on-one from the start,” Taichi mused. Evidently the two of us were on the same page.

“Just talk to me next time alright?”

“Yeah, I know...” He sighed. “I really can’t handle a single thing on my own, can I? Without your help, I’d be in a world of trouble right now.” From the way he was acting right now, you’d have never guessed that he’d given an impassioned (and self-incriminating) speech just hours prior.

“But you took the initiative, and in so doing, you gave me the courage to take action myself. We both needed each other—”

All at once, it hit me. With his courage and my careful calculations, we each made up for what the other lacked. Together, the two of us made the perfect team. With his help, I could accomplish so much more... For once, I felt like I finally understood the power of human connections.

“I see you two have been getting rather cozy lately.”

“Huh?!”

“Whuh?!”

Startled by the sudden voice behind us, we whipped around to find Fujishima Maiko, president of Class 1-C.

“Nice work out there today. You did well,” she continued, adjusting her glasses. “With you two in charge, it seems I needn’t have worried.”

“Actually, now that I think about it,” I began, “you *knew* the class was getting more and more hostile towards Iori. Normally you’re the type to nip this shit in the bud. So why didn’t you do anything about it?” It was something I’d been wondering for quite some time now.

“Well, I thought about it... but it didn’t feel right to stick my nose in quite that far. So I decided the best thing I could do as your president would be to wait for everyone to mature out of it.”

“What are you, our mom?” Taichi retorted under his breath.

“Going forward, my task will be to guide each of you toward your own personal growth without inadvertently taking those opportunities away from you.”

“How do *you* know what’s best for our personal growth?” I shot back.

“That said, I didn’t think it would escalate quite this far. I know I’m late in asking, but do you still need my help?”

Taichi glanced at me, and after a moment of hesitation, I replied, “No thanks.”

[When we put our heads together, Taichi and I are unstoppable.]

“Realistically speaking, I’m pretty sure there’s a limit to what we can achieve,” he muttered, and I summarily kicked him in the shin. *Don’t be such a wet blanket, goddamn it!*

Taichi and I walked side by side across the athletic field. With club activities canceled during finals week, the place was deserted.

“That reminds me,” I spoke suddenly as a certain memory crossed my mind. “A while back, you told us you can’t stand other people’s suffering. So how are you holding up, now that you can literally feel our pain?”

“It’s easier, actually. This way I know exactly how bad it hurts, so my imagination doesn’t need to try to fill in the gaps. If anything, it keeps me from being a so-called ‘goddamn martyr’.”

In that case, maybe the Sentiment Transmission was actually beneficial for him.

“Alright, that’s good to hear. But just so you know, you’re *still* a goddamn martyr. That part hasn’t gone anywhere, my friend.”

He’s still recovering from helper-itis! Don’t you dare make him fall off the wagon, «Heartseed», you son of a bitch!

“I swear, you need someone like me around to keep you out of trouble,” I continued.

He laughed. “Yeah, maybe so. Maybe I should officially hire you.”

“Y-Yeah...”

After a pause, I felt my face flush bright red. The more I thought about it, the more conscious I became of the romantic implications of this little exchange. *I swear, I didn’t mean it like that!*

Then something occurred to me. Maybe it was just a misunderstanding, or my brain conveniently interpreting his actions in a favorable light, but... was it possible Taichi needed me as much as I needed him? Because I kind of got the sense that he did...

I mean, I was completely in love with him, but he’d technically already chosen

Iori over me, so I'd been agonizing over whether to give up or what... but what if our union is objectively a good thing? What if our partnership not only fulfills my needs, but his as well?

[What's it like to really fall in love with someone? To be in a relationship?]

"Whawhawha?!"

Taichi's sudden Transmission made me stammer in surprise, causing everyone in our vicinity to give me weird looks. *Awkward.*

"Oh, uh, I was just—you know—thinking about stuff!" Taichi hastily explained.

My heart was thumping uncontrollably in my chest—racing much faster than usual. Could it be that... I received Taichi's own flustered emotions along with his Transmission? Everything was so jumbled up, I couldn't tell where my feelings ended and his began.

[Nagase pretty much flat-out told me she doesn't need me, but what about Inaba?]

"Huuuh?!" This time I let out an inelegant yelp, and the weird looks intensified. *Kill me now.*

"Nngh... Not again! Is the Sentiment Transmission more active during this time of day or something?!"

"N-Not sure... Maybe... Haha..." I replied, doing my best to act natural. Then I realized I ought to answer the question he Transmitted. "But just so you know... I do need you." The words left my lips in a small, soft, almost timid voice.

"Huh...? Oh, right... Thanks." Blushing, Taichi averted his gaze shyly.

...Did I just make a total idiot of myself?

But just so you know... I do need you.

I said it... I totally said it...

Aaagh, I'm gonna die!

My cheeks were so red, they were practically on fire. It was probably extremely obvious, too. *God, how mortifying.* I shrank down, trying to bury my face into my scarf, but couldn't get very far. Noooo!

I was so embarrassed, in fact, it felt like all my other emotions had gone numb, and I was starting to think maybe a little more couldn't hurt.

I could feel my rational side telling me to turn back, but I ignored her. *I'm gonna do it. I'm gonna ask him!*

I grabbed my scarf and yanked it up to unmuffle my mouth.

"What about you? Do you... need me?"

The whole world went silent.

I couldn't even hear my own heartbeat.

What an insane question to ask someone. Maybe not by the average person's standards, but it was to me.

A question like "Do you need me?" was perhaps even more intense than "Do you like me?" What if he said no? What would I do then?

"...Of course I need you."

Instantly, I forgot to breathe. My mind went blank. Then, finally, I managed to process what he said.

Look at me, all giddy and shit. I'm such a dumbass.

□■□■□

Once we finally came to our senses, the two of us promptly went our separate ways as we headed home for the day.

Taichi had told me his Transmissions had been delivered to Yui and Aoki, but not Iori. *Thank god.*

Who was Nagase Iori, anyway?

She was a fellow classmate who served as the president of my club. She was my closest friend—the person I'd spent the most time with since enrolling in high school.

I thought I knew her better than anyone... but apparently that was just a delusion of my own making. And I need to accept that, in the actual sense of the word. Accept it as fact. Then, after I accept it, I need to figure out my next steps.

If I had been this committed right from the start, maybe I wouldn't have given up halfway through talking to her. Maybe she wouldn't have pushed me away. Maybe I wouldn't have hurt her.

God, I'm pathetic.

Watching Taichi's antics today helped me remember something important—something I really shouldn't have forgotten, considering how often it's saved my bacon in the past.

Either I was extremely fucking braindead, or... maybe I just hadn't taken it seriously until now. *Good grief.* How could I have asked her to tell me everything when I had no intention of doing the same in kind? If I wanted her to be that vulnerable and transparent with me, then I should've set the stage by bringing down my own walls. It was so goddamn obvious.

Right now, I feel like I could do anything. I'm surging with confidence. Is this the same "helper-itis" I always nagged Taichi about? Maybe. But I don't care. After receiving some much-needed validation from the guy I loved, I'm feeling more powerful than ever. A girl could get used to this!

Who am I? I'm Inaba Himeko. No matter how the cards are stacked against me, I never give up. I never admit defeat. Arrogant, patronizing, manipulative, and fully committed—that's just how I roll.

A good friend once said these words to me when I was at my lowest, and I'd never forgotten them.

How could I be such a baby? Did I seriously believe that everything she said back then was just a crock of shit? No way in hell.

So, I'm going to be exactly the sort of Inaba Himeko she said I was. I'm going to choose to believe in her.

I've been spending too much time in Girly Heartsick Mode lately, but now it's time to get back to business.

It's thanks to her that I'm standing here today. No matter what happens, Nagase Iori will always be my friend. Now, when should I put my plan into action? Let's see... Maybe this Friday, after finals are over... Please don't let me Transmit until then... Wait, what am I thinking?

“Don’t you dare Transmit any of this, «Heartseed». Trust me, it’ll be more entertaining for you this way. What do you say?” I said aloud to no one in particular, a wicked grin on my face... because I knew it was out there watching me.

+ + +

“Setouchi-san is asking for you,” one of my classmates, Nakayama Mariko, tells me.

“Okay,” I reply as I get to my feet, push my chair in, and step away from my desk.

Near the classroom door, I see Setouchi Kaoru standing with two girls from another class. Girls with equally notorious reputations. Her buddies, I presume.

“You okay?” Nakayama asks. She sounds worried.

“I’m fine.”

“Hey, um... Iori?” Her tone grows fearful. “I understand why Setouchi-san would make you angry, but... do you really have to take it out on the rest of us, too?”

Good question.

I know I shouldn’t act like this, but I just can’t do it like I did before.

“This is the normal me.”

Normal. Right. Maybe to me. But to *them*, nothing about me is normal.

“Inaba-san and Yaegashi-kun told me you’ve got something personal going on... so I figured you’ve got your reasons...”

“Right.” I glance away from her and start walking.

“...I just don’t understand you right now.”

Trust me, I don’t understand me either.

“Feeling sorry yet?” Setouchi sneers.

The darkness takes over.

You think you're so tough, but you can't even talk to me without your little friends standing by to protect you.

"I have nothing to be sorry for."

All I did was turn down a love confession from a guy she likes. I'm an innocent bystander. If I could just stop and point this out to her, I'm sure we could solve this... and yet I keep running my mouth.

Meanwhile, Setouchi seems to have taken this all very personally.

"You're so fucking full of yourself!" she hisses. "I can't believe you had Yaegashi make up some sob story about you. You probably just used your good looks to trick him into it, didn't you?"

"...What are you talking about?"

Come to think of it, Nakayama mentioned him, too. Why would they bother? I'm not worth it. I'll never live up to their expectations.

"Hah!" Setouchi scoffs. "Gonna play innocent, is that it? Fine, whatever. Did you decide to drop your good-girl act now that everyone's seen your true colors?"

The other girls sneer at me from behind her, and my blood boils. I decide to throw it back in her face.

"It doesn't matter. What's your ultimate goal here? What is it you want to achieve?" I ask, with the implication that she's wasting her time, because she is.

At my question, Setouchi's arrogant smirk vanishes, though the other two don't react.

"...Why should I tell you?" she responds.

I knew it. She knows there's no point in this.

"Anyway, I heard your little club... Culture Research whatever... is fighting with the jazz band over who gets to keep your club advisor. The best club presentation wins, right?"

Oh, right. That. I'd forgotten about that. Some club president I turned out to be.

No, forget it. Save the self-loathing for later.

“What about it?”

“Let them win.”

Oh, so that’s what you’re after.

“Your club’s just a joke anyway, right? Digging up dirt on our teachers’ love lives... You call that journalism?”

She’s talking about Inaba’s article from back during the Culture Festival.

“At least the jazz band actually *tries*. How can you losers possibly deserve to win more than they do?”

“Why do you care? You’re not even in the jazz band.”

“Shut up.”

“Is it because it’s Shiroyama-kun’s club? Is that why?”

“Shut up!”

I’m pushing her too far. I could’ve handled this differently... What’s wrong with me?

Her face flushes red. “The point is, I’m telling you not to get in their way.”

She sounds like a total amateur. Has she ever actually threatened anyone in her life? She doesn’t scare me in the least.

“You should tell that to the people who are actually working on it. I’m not part of it.”

“So take them down from the inside.”

“What would I stand to gain from this?”

“Uh, hello? Do you realize the position you’re in?”

“No?”

“You little twat...!”

Actually...

[...I think I’ve got Setouchi Kaoru all figured out... Maybe my powers of

analysis are still worth something.]

Whoops. I inadvertently Transmitted that pointless Sentiment to Yui and Aoki.

But interrupting that thought, one of the other girls speaks up. “Y’know, I’m really getting sick of this bitch. Don’t you think maybe we ought to put her in her place? Like, for real.” She shoots me a wicked grin.

“Totally,” the other girl agrees.

One of them starts whispering to Setouchi.

“Like, what if we had...”

“What...? That’s crossing a line...” Setouchi replies, sounding hesitant.

Yep. I knew it.

“Don’t worry. As long as we tell them we’ll...”

“...R-Right. That could work...” Setouchi turns to me. “You brought this on yourself, you hear me?” With a sinister smirk, she turns and walks off, her posse in tow.

“What are they planning...?” I mutter to myself once she’s gone. My legs start to shake. I’ve got a bad feeling I know where this is headed, and I’m scared.

What am I doing? I keep enabling this harassment. What if it gets worse? What if no one trusts me anymore? I guess it’ll look like I brought it on myself.

She mentioned the CRC. What if she tries to mess with the others? I need to warn them about her. I need to go to the clubroom.

What is *wrong* with me? Why can’t I just make up my mind?

I hate this. I hate this! All of it!

Maybe it was better before... I’m not sure.

I just can’t deal with it anymore.

Chapter 7: Yaegashi Taichi’s Epiphany

On Friday, after testing concluded that morning, Taichi and Inaba were headed straight to Rec Hall Room 401.

Before they left the classroom, they asked Nagase to come to the clubroom, seeing as they were going to need her to take part in the club presentation. In response, she gave the world’s smallest nod.

They could’ve dragged her bodily from the room, of course, but they wanted to respect her free will.

Presentations would be held the next week, and the fate of the Cultural Research Club hinged on their success. The presentation map was ready. The brochures were ready. All that was left was to rehearse their individual portions of the speech.

Supposedly there’d be more than two classes’ worth of people watching these things, so they needed to memorize as much as possible in order to make sure they could still perform even under pressure. At first Taichi had dreaded the arrival of presentations week, but now he was starting to look forward to it. He was excited to see what everyone would think of all their hard work.

He thought back to his middle school days—all those months of practice leading up to the tournament, the unique blend of anxiety and excitement when the big day arrived... It was something he never thought he’d experience in the CRC. The thought made his pace quicken all the more.

The students had been barred from club activities during finals week, so he hadn’t seen their map in days. He was practically chomping at the bit, eager to go take a look at it.

[Can’t wait to see our little baby... Ooh, I should take a picture of it...]

“Ack!”

Just like that, his passionate Sentiment was Transmitted to everyone else in the club.

“Taichi, listen... We’re all proud of our work, myself included, but you really need to dial it back a notch.”

Great. Now Inaba thinks I’m a creep.

They arrived on the fourth floor to find that Kiriyama and Aoki had beat them there. The door was open, but for some reason, neither of them had gone inside; instead, they were just standing there in shock.

“Hey, what’s going on?” Inaba asked.

Still rooted to the spot, Kiriyama slowly turned her head—tears streaming down her cheeks. “Inaba... Taichi... What do we do...?”

“Kiriyama?!”

As Taichi raced over, Aoki shifted to look at him, his complexion ghostly pale. Then he raised a shaking hand and pointed into the room.

“What is it?” Taichi asked dubiously as he peered inside.

There, he found only wreckage.

Tables overturned, chairs scattered around... No, that was the least of it. Not like they were broken—merely knocked over. The real damage, however, lay in the tiny scraps of paper lying scattered all over the room. Their giant life-sized guide map had been torn to shreds.

“...Why...?”

Taichi staggered into the room, knelt down, and began to gather the scraps of paper into a pile. Their lovingly-crafted map was now nigh-indistinguishable from confetti.

“I... I put my whole heart into this drawing...” Trembling, Kiriyama picked up a fragment of what used to be a cute little doodle.

But she wasn’t the only one. Each scrap held a tiny portion of someone’s hard work. He could faintly recognize bits from Aoki’s, Inaba’s, and his own section. And although Nagase’s workload had been drastically less than the rest, he could recognize hers, too.

This map was, at one point, a product of the entire club’s effort. They’d each

put so much into it. And while they could always create a functional duplicate, it would never carry the same weight. That sentimental value was irrevocably lost.

“All that time we spent...”

He felt sick to his stomach. He knew there would be no repairing it.

“Who could’ve...? I mean, the door was locked when we got here... and the key was in the staff room when we went to go and get it...” Aoki mumbled lifelessly.

“They don’t keep a close eye on who takes the keys. Anyone could’ve borrowed it,” Inaba replied, but before Taichi could reflect on how remarkably composed she sounded for someone who looked like they were ready to commit murder, she turned and punched the wall. “If I find out who did this, I swear to god...!”

“Getting mad about it won’t change anything,” Taichi muttered. For him, despair had won out over anger.

“How can you look at this shit and tell me not to get mad?! Who the fuck did this?! Was it the jazz band?!”

“No... They’ve been working their butts off to try to win. I don’t think they would do something this underhanded...”

That said, he couldn’t think of anyone else who would stand to benefit from doing this. Had they inadvertently pissed off the wrong person without realizing? Or did the culprit merely do it on a whim?

It pained him to think of how much work they’d put in the past few weeks.

“Is there nothing we can do...? It’s just... gone...?” Kiriyama whispered, wiping her tear-stained cheeks with her sleeve.

The room fell silent. None of them said a word. None of them could stand up against the hopelessness.

If only Nagase were here, Taichi thought to himself. She was always a bit of a wildcard, of course, but regardless, she used to light up the room wherever she went. So what would she do in a situation like this?

Then, before he knew it, his mouth was moving—

“Let’s remake it.”

He couldn’t believe what he was saying. Even for a bluff, it was ballsy.

“But... presentations start next week... We’ll never finish in time...” Kiriyama replied weakly.

“I don’t think I got the motivation to start over,” Aoki muttered.

“It might not be possible to make the exact same map—” Taichi began.

“But if we simplify the design, we could have it done pretty fast,” Inaba cut in. Smirking, she playfully prodded Taichi in the chest, and instantly he found himself wishing the Transmission would strike them right then and there. Not that they really needed «Heartseed»’s help to get their feelings across, but still.

“What...? But if we simplify it, we’ll have literally no chance of beating the jazz band...” Kiriyama hesitated.

But Inaba didn’t flinch. “Yeah, we might have a real struggle on our hands—”

“But there’s still a chance,” Taichi cut in, mirroring her own interruption moments earlier.

She chuckled, then continued, “When you think about it, all we’ve really lost is a big poster. A prop! All we need to do is refocus our efforts into ironing out our performance.”

Together, the two of them were slowly but surely steering the CRC back towards the light.

And then Aoki clutched his hair and began to groan. For a second, Taichi worried perhaps he wasn’t feeling well—

“You’re right! Screw this pity party! We just gotta move forward!” he shouted, then added belatedly in a small voice, “I really need to take a leaf out of your book... Seems hard, though...”

Next, Kiriyama began to whimper into her hands. Had Aoki rubbed off on her?

“Nnnn... God, why am I acting like such a baby?! *Wake up*!” she screamed. “This is no time for crying! Even though it’s a perfectly valid reason and also,

like, I already did cry about it! Battle mode, activate!" She crossed her arms in front of herself, then brought her fists back down to her sides. "You're right—we do need to polish our performance. But if we use that as an excuse to slap together a lazy replacement map, aren't we basically just giving up at that point?" She grinned. "I'll work on it all night if I have to, but by god, I'm gonna make our new map super adorable! *Viva la bonita*!"

Battle mode, indeed.

"You rock, Yui! You're hella badass!" Aoki shouted enthusiastically.

"You're supposed to say I'm hella cute!"

Moments ago their spirits were in tatters, but in just a few short minutes they'd already completely recovered—at least on the outside. They knew they each needed to put up a tough front to help the others pull through.

The Cultural Research Club had grown stronger. That much was undeniable. And Taichi felt confident they could take on any obstacle life threw at them.

"Alright, guys. Let's forget about trying to figure out who did it and just focus on the task at hand," he told them.

"Oh, I'll forget about it... *for now*. But once presentations are over? I don't care if I have to go to the ends of the fucking earth... I'm gonna track down those motherless bitches and make them pay!"

"Inaba... maybe cool it with the supervillain routine, would you?"

"Well, we *do* kinda need to figure out who it is. Otherwise they might keep messing with us," Kiriyama remarked.

"That's my Yui! She's so smart! And bada—I mean, cute!" Aoki corrected himself.

"On second thought, make that cute *and* badass!" Kiriyama smirked.

"Hmm... I think we can prevent any further damage by keeping our presentation materials at home rather than in the clubroom," Inaba mused.

The CRC was now moving forward, step by step. Filled with motivation, Taichi glanced around the room. First they needed to clean up all the paper scraps, then fix the tables and chairs—

Just then, his train of thought was interrupted by a tiny creak as the clubroom door slowly opened and Nagase Iori shyly peeked in, her ponytail bouncing.

She froze in place.

For a moment, she seemed to struggle to process what she was seeing. Then her eyes widened, and the color drained from her face.

She looked around at the upturned tables, the scattered chairs, and the confetti-like shreds of paper everywhere, taking it all in.

Then she disappeared and shut the door behind her without ever taking a single step inside.

[They're dead. "Sorry" won't cut it—I'll never forgive them for dragging innocent people into this!]

It was a Transmission from Nagase... and the emotions that came with it were one big steaming fumarole of hatred and fury that set Taichi's chest on fire.

[I'll make you pay for this, Setouchi Kaoru! Get ready to beg for your fucking life!]

His vision blurred crimson as all the blood rushed to his head. It felt like he was engulfed in dark flame, steadily pulling him under, and it made him queasy. Shaking his head, he forced himself to snap out of it—and found that he was sweating.

It was the most powerful Sentiment he'd felt yet.

Instinctively, he knew something bad was about to happen. Judging from the fury he felt, she wasn't in the right state of mind to act rationally... and this volcano was about to blow its top.

"Don't do it, Iori!" Inaba shouted in the direction of the door, though Nagase herself was long gone.

"Inaba, did you get her Transmission just now?"

"You too, huh?"

Taichi nodded.

"Uh, guys? What's goin' on?" Aoki asked.

“Just when we finally got her to come to the clubroom... and this was the first thing she saw...” Kiriyama murmured.

From the way they were acting, it seemed like they hadn’t heard Nagase’s Transmissions.

“Did you feel that anger?” Taichi asked Inaba.

“I did. This is serious business, Taichi. Worse comes to worst, someone could get hurt.”

“Should we go after her?”

“Definitely. Yui, Aoki, you two clean up the clubroom without us. Let’s go, Taichi!”

And with that, they bolted from the room.

“Why didn’t you invite Kiriyama and Aoki to come with us?” Taichi asked as they headed down the stairs.

“I figured Iori would prefer we keep it to ourselves.”

Those Transmissions hadn’t been pretty, that was for sure. She probably wouldn’t want others knowing she’d had those thoughts to begin with. After all, they were entirely unlike her.

“She’s too worked up to make rational decisions, so she’s probably just running around in a frenzy. In that case, all we have to do is beat her to the punch.” With that, Inaba took out her cell phone. “Hey, Fujishima? Sorry to spring this on you, but would you happen to have Setouchi Kaoru’s phone number?”

Of course. They knew who Nagase was looking for, so all they had to do was find her first.

“Great... Thanks. I’ll make it up to you later.” Inaba closed her phone. “She said she’s going to send me her number. I gotta say, though, I’m surprised she didn’t ask for anything in return, not even a rundown of what’s going on... I guess she could tell it’s an emergency.”

Fujishima Maiko was a master of many things, including but not limited to

taking a hint.

“But still... why Setouchi Kaoru?” Taichi mused to himself.

For reasons Taichi didn’t comprehend, Setouchi was currently the ringleader behind the nasty rumors floating around. Maybe she had a personal grudge against Nagase for some reason. But what would make Nagase so convinced she was the one behind the vandalism in the clubroom?

Then Inaba’s phone buzzed again, and she flipped it open. “Got it.”

Without wasting a single moment, she promptly placed a call.

Fortunately, Setouchi was still on campus, and so a meetup was quickly arranged.

“Wh-What do you people want with me all of a sudden? And why are we out behind the school?” Setouchi demanded, running her fingers through her long bleached hair.

“You may or may not be in danger, but don’t worry. If she shows up, we’ll stop her,” Inaba explained.

“Wh-Who are you even talking about?” Setouchi asked, fidgeting nervously in such a way that Taichi got the sense she already knew the answer.

“I’m *talking*,” Inaba paused, “about Nagase Iori.”

Setouchi flinched, fear written all over her face. Was she really the culprit behind the destruction in the clubroom? Taichi felt a spark of fury flare up, but quickly suppressed it. After all, they had no way of knowing for sure just yet.

“I... I’m innocent. I don’t know anything,” Setouchi blurted out, though they hadn’t asked her any questions. *Definitely not suspicious*.

Taichi glanced over to find Inaba glaring daggers at her.

“Well, whatever,” Inaba continued. “Let’s take this back to the classroom. I want to ask you—”

Suddenly, Taichi spotted her.

Nagase Iori, gasping for breath.

How had she found them so fast? No, that wasn't important right now.

Even from a distance, it was plain to see that she was shaking with unbridled rage like an animal gone mad—not a trace of her usual self to be seen. It was so dramatically unlike the pretty, popular Nagase Iori they knew that it single-handedly shattered the image Taichi had built up of her.

Then she charged forward.

"YOU'RE *DEAD*!"

She moved at the speed of light, her fist raised in an attack.

"Wh... aaahh...?!" Setouchi shrieked, frozen in fear.

They needed to take action.

Taichi and Inaba moved in tandem.

"Don't do it, Nagase!"

"Slow down, Iori!"

Together, they blocked her path. She struggled to slip past them, but Taichi grabbed one arm and Inaba grabbed the other.

"Chill out, would you?!"

"Let me go! I'm going to make her pay! She's *dead*!" screamed Nagase.

"Setouchi! Get out of here! Now!" Inaba shouted.

Finally, Setouchi snapped to her senses. "R-Right!" She took off running.

"COME BACK HERE, SETOUCHI!" Nagase roared after her, flailing desperately to escape their grasp. "Why are you stopping me?! Let me go! Let me... Let me go..." Her voice grew weak. "Let me go... Let... I'm so sorry..." She crumpled to the ground and began to sob. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry... It's all my fault! I should've... God, I'm so sorry... Why... Why did this happen...? Because of me... All because of me—!"

But then Nagase fell silent, wiping her tears away with her sleeves. But just an instant later, her expression went blank like a canvas... almost as though her very soul had left her body.

Taichi relinquished his grip on her arm, and it fell limply to her side.

Back when the Sentiment Transmission phenomenon first started, they had decided as a group that they were strong enough to endure it and carry on as normal. A few days later, Taichi had asked Nagase out, only to be turned down.

As the Sentiment Transmission continued to broadcast their various emotions, nasty rumors began to spread regarding Nagase, and their classmates gradually turned against her. Meanwhile, Nagase herself started behaving strangely. She rejected help from her friends and instead chose a life of isolation.

Their classmates had since adopted a more forgiving attitude towards her, but nevertheless, she continued to be hostile. Then their clubroom was vandalized —and now here she was, sitting on the ground in emotionless silence.

The air between them was so quiet, it was hard to imagine Nagase had been howling her head off just moments prior.

Taichi wasn't sure what to say. He couldn't find the right words.

But Inaba beat him to it. "Hey, Iori?" she asked, her voice soft and full of compassion. "Why don't we talk this out?" There she paused, and an impish grin crept up on her face. "By which I mean, I'm not taking no for an answer."

□■□■□

"Eh... I guess you can stick around for the first part of it."

That was how Taichi was granted permission to tag along with Inaba and Nagase as they headed back into the school building. First, they stopped by the staff room, where Inaba sweet-talked Gotou into letting her borrow a key to an empty classroom. From there, their next destination was obvious.

Once they were inside, Inaba locked the door behind them.

"First you take us to an empty classroom, and now you lock it?"

"Yeah, I don't know... I figured I'd turn it into a locked-room battle royale."

"...You're not actually going to fight her, are you...?"

It sounded like the sort of thing you'd see in a pro wrestling show. Maybe

with the headline “No Escape!” to really spice things up.

Here in this unused classroom, all the desks had been pushed against the far wall. Inaba and Nagase stood face-to-face in the open space near the doors, while Taichi was positioned off to the side.

Inaba glared with her posture perfectly straight and her arms folded, looking as arrogant as ever. Meanwhile, Nagase hung her head, staring down at the floor.

Naturally, Inaba made the first move.

“A while back, I told you that ‘the Transmission doesn’t give us the whole picture, just bits and pieces,’ and I asked you to tell me everything.”

Evidently Inaba had, at some point, attempted to help Nagase in her own way.

“But looking back, that was stupid of me. How could I ask you to reveal all your innermost thoughts... for nothing in return?”

As Inaba spoke, Nagase listened quietly, her face as blank as ever.

“Pretty one-sided, wasn’t it? Not like I offered to reciprocate. Hardly seems fair of me.”

Nagase flinched.

“So let’s *make it* fair. If I’m going to ask you to expose your scars, then I’d better pay for it in kind.”

...For some reason, Taichi got a strange sense of déjà vu.

“As it stands, the Sentiment Transmission is broadcasting all the things we don’t want anyone else knowing. But that doesn’t mean it gives us the whole picture. You’re aware of this, of course.”

What is she plotting now? Taichi wondered.

“So... I’m going to make an extremely cringeworthy confession.”

Oh god.

“I’m going to utterly humiliate myself, alright? So in return, I want you to suck it up and tell me why you’ve pulled away from everyone.”

You spill yours, I spill mine. Just like that time during the body-swap—

“Hold on a minute! Inaba! Isn’t this the same thing I did with you?!” He’d meant to stay out of it, but he couldn’t help himself.

“Yeah, so? Got a problem with that?”

“You bet I do! What sense does this make?! I don’t understand your logic!”

And it was my idea first, so don’t copy me!

“Sense? Logic? It was originally *your* brain-shit, shit-for-brains! Figure it out yourself! Seriously, get a fucking clue, dumbass!”

“Is that your solution to criticism?! Getting pissed off at me for no reason?!”

“Damn right!”

“So you admit it?!”

“Look here, dipshit, I’m talking to *her* right now, not you! If you’re just going to whine about it, then get out!”

Taichi fell silent. He didn’t want to derail the whole conversation.

“...Anyway, where were we? Right. Okay, time to embarrass myself.”

Apparently she was still dead-set on this tactic.

“It’s pretty risky to have this conversation while the Sentiment Transmission is active, you know. *And* the guy I like is standing right here. This is grade-A humiliation material, if I do say so myself.”

So that’s why she brought me along, Taichi realized. *You know, from an outside perspective—*

“This is really stupid, isn’t it...”

“*You’re the one who came up with this in the first place!* You looked me in the eye and told me you think about the girls you know when you j—”

“Stop, stop, STOP! Don’t just casually toss that out there!”

He could feel himself begin to sweat. Talk about a close shave with social suicide (or murder, in this case).

“Next time you interrupt me, I’m gonna throw your ass out.”

“Then don’t make any weird comments! I thought the point was to embarrass *you*, not me!”

“Cram it, dickwad! I think I know what my *point* is, thank you very much!”

Taichi had half a mind to keep arguing, but when he thought of how long Nagase would be forced to stand there waiting for them to finish, he reluctantly gave in.

“Now then, let’s begin.” Inaba let out a sinister chuckle. “As you know, I’m in love with Taichi.”

Oh god, here we go.

“These days, my feelings have grown so strong that he shows up in my dreams.”

Nagase didn’t react—just stood there quietly.

“Then, the other day, it finally happened. I had a sex dream about him. Or rather... we were *going* to have sex, but then I woke up right before he put it in.”

Taichi felt his face growing practically incandescent. *Wasn’t the point to embarrass YOU?! Are you doing this just to get back at me?!*

“When I woke up, my heart was thumping like crazy, and my chest felt so tight... but at the same time there was this desperate longing...”

All of a sudden, Taichi had a bad feeling he knew where this was going.

“I wanted him so bad... I can’t even describe it... I was just so frustrated... so then I began to fantasize about him while I—”

“Stop! Don’t finish that thought! What kind of pervert are you?!”

“Oh, but you were fine having this conversation when it was *you*, huh?!”

“I... I never... I mean, maybe... Okay, technically I might’ve done something along those lines...”

Have some shame! Taichi thought to himself—

[Fuck... Somebody kill me... I’m gonna cry...]

It was a Transmission from Inaba. As her emotions sank in, he was reminded anew: though she loved to act tough, on the inside she was a shy, anxious girl—

[No... I won't let myself cry. Thank you, Taichi... for stopping me at the last minute.]

—who carried the strength to overcome her faults.

Had Nagase received these Transmissions? Taichi had no way of knowing. Still, he had a feeling she'd pick up on it regardless.

Inaba stomped her foot in triumph.

"How do you like them apples, huh?! The execution could've been better, but ultimately it's still pretty mortifying, don't you think?! Not only that, but I said it in front of you and Taichi, all the while knowing it might hurt either of you. I really dropped a bomb, didn't I?! Now you can do the same! Or if you want me to keep going, I can do that, too!"

Leave it to Inaba to take his idea and put her own new and improved spin on it.

"But wait, there's more!"

Oh god, there's more?

"You were completely right about me. First I tried to get you and Taichi together, only to turn around and fall for him myself, and I let you convince me what I did was okay."

A lot must have happened between them. Inaba had filled him in on some of it—that she used to think of herself as human trash until Nagase accepted her—but evidently there was far more to the story.

"So when you threw it all in my face... frankly, I was at a loss. I tried to figure out what to do about it, but as it turns out... ultimately, there's nothing I *can* do."

Inaba had given up looking for a one-size-fits-all solution.

"Before now... back when I was all about *logic and reason* and shit, I never would've let myself give up, you know? But now here I am! Who needs facts and objectivity?! I... I..."

There, for the first time, Inaba's emphatic tirade began to lose steam.

In the past, Inaba always hated her aloof, pessimistic, fretful self.

But now things were different.

"I may not love myself as much as I should..." she began, hiding behind another one of her self-deprecating disclaimers. Then she looked Nagase straight in the eyes. "But now I have the confidence to be myself!"

It was something the old Inaba Himeko never would have admitted.

"I know I'm a fickle bitch, but what of it? Nothing I can do about it! Am I full of myself? Probably! But so what?"

Inaba Himeko had chosen to own her faults.

"You're welcome to complain all you like. Hit me with your best shot. Fair warning, though: I'm pretty fragile, so I'll probably take it personally."

She had chosen to stand her ground.

"But all I have to do is pick myself right back up again!"

Stand her ground and *fight*.

"I'm gonna give myself permission to be me, and likewise, you should do the same! It's goddamn excruciating to watch you bottle it all up! I'm forcing this shit on you, so just force your shit on me right back!" Inaba paused, took a deep breath, then screamed, "We're doing this my way, and *that's final!*"

Something in her speech seemed to have an effect on Nagase. Clutching the hem of her skirt with both hands, she pursed her lips tightly together and began to tremble.

"...really don't have..." Nagase mumbled inaudibly, and it occurred to Taichi it was the first thing she'd said since they got here. He turned his ear toward her.

"Hmm?" Inaba followed suit.

"We really don't have to do this..." Nagase repeated in a flat, emotionless voice.

"Do what?" Inaba asked.

“This! *ANY OF THIS!*” Nagase screamed, gesturing around at the room. “Just *stop!* What is *wrong* with you people?! Seriously, you’re just... just so...”

With every breath she shrank further and further into herself, almost like she was storing energy for an explosion. Then she straightened back up, took a deep breath, and roared—

“...so *STUPID!*”

The magnitude of her voice practically shook the school building itself. Fortunately this floor consisted mostly of empty classrooms, but still... What if someone on the ground floor heard them?

Meanwhile, Taichi was completely blown away. “Wh-What’s the matter with you, Nagase?” he stammered.

She shot him a baleful smirk. “Golly gee, how touching! What a humiliating little confession! *Is that it?*” She stared him in the eyes for a moment, then smiled. “Yeah, I get it. All I have to do is break down crying and confess ‘the truth’ and then we get our poignant little happy ending, don’t we? Too bad, so sad! I’m not going to follow your little script. You know why? Because *this isn’t a fucking movie!*” She scoffed, and he could tell she was furious. “I’m so sick and tired of the same crap over and over and over! Don’t you people ever get bored of it?!”

“Look, Nagase... Don’t you realize how much courage it took for her to say all that out loud?”

Of all the things he was willing to let slide in the name of helping Nagase, belittling Inaba wasn’t one of them.

“Wh-Why should I care?! I never asked her to do that...!” Her expression crumpled, and her defensive posture deflated. Then, as if to keep herself going, she clutched at her hair with one hand. “I don’t care! I just... I can’t keep playing the tragic heroine, okay?! It’s just not realistic! This is supposed to be *real life!* What happened to that?!”

Their world ought to have been perfectly ordinary, and yet their lives were far from it.

“How many times do I have to put myself on display?! How many times do I

have to fall apart?! When does it end?! When does «Heartseed» go away?! What even *is* that monster?! Why is it named after a plant?! How does it go about possessing people's bodies?! Nothing... Nothing about this is *normal!*"

Her rant had shifted targets slightly.

The five of them had gone head-to-head with these otherworldly phenomena multiple times now, and deep down, Taichi had assumed they could keep going. But last winter, during the Age Regression, Inaba had warned him—

—There's no guarantee our luck won't run out. We're on thin ice, Taichi.

"Enough is enough! Why do I have to keep suffering over and over?! I can't keep doing this! I just can't take it anymore!"



He knew this supernatural onslaught was bound to break someone sooner or later.

He just wasn't expecting it to be Nagase.

The fact of the matter was, «Heartseed»'s many phenomena had forced them to mature and grow stronger, whether they wanted to or not. And after safely averting crisis after crisis, they'd grown cocky. They told themselves they were seasoned pros now. But that was merely an assumption on their part, and a stupid one at that.

How could they look at a situation like this one and decide it was no big deal? Had they simply grown numb to it after all this time?

By failing to put the pieces together (until Nagase threw it in their faces), they were partly to blame for everything that had happened.

Now that they'd reached a lull in the conversation, Taichi cut in.

"You're right... You're completely right. We should've known you were suffering, but we didn't notice... and for that, I'm sorry."

"That's not it..." Nagase replied.

"I thought I knew the real you, but I didn't... I never knew you were struggling this badly," Inaba piped up, looking pale. "I'm so sorry... None of this was your fault. Anyone in your shoes would have the same reaction. I just wish you'd let us help you through it... You know we'd do anything to help put a smile back on your face—"

"Would you just listen to me?! You don't *understand!*" Nagase screamed. Then, pressing a hand to her eyes, she hung her head, and the room fell silent once more. No one dared speak.

Ordinarily this was where the conversation would die, and no progress would be made... but as mentioned before, their world was far from ordinary.

And so their extraordinary curse got the ball rolling once more.

[What version of me do you people want?! I can't do this anymore!]

With Nagase's Transmission came the dark chaos that was her heart. Taichi

could feel it for himself, and yet he couldn't begin to process it.

"What do you mean, 'what version of you do we want'?" Inaba asked. Evidently she'd received it, too.

"Huh? W-Wait... Hold on..." Nagase shook her head, looking flustered.

As a young child, her then-stepfather's physical violence led her to start inventing more palatable personas to suit the tastes of those around her. From there, she eventually lost sight of the "real" her. Over time, however, Nagase learned to acknowledge those personas as a valid part of her, and she began to regain a sense of who she really was.

But evidently she still felt conflicted deep down inside—in which case, Taichi knew just what he wanted to say.

"Nagase... Don't let it get you down! Don't worry about it so much! No matter who you are, you'll always be our Nagase. You're our sunshine, and everyone loves you—"

"I keep telling you, *I can't do it anymore!*"

As soon as the words left her lips, Nagase gasped in surprise.

Why was she throwing in the towel? Sure, being so multifaceted was bound to have its downsides, but at the same time, Taichi knew her to be a brilliant, shining ray of hope—

Wait... Do I actually "know" that, though?

Over the past few months, the five of them had opened up to each other considerably, and in so doing, they'd forged unbreakable bonds with each other. Not only that, but thanks to the Sentiment Transmission, their hearts were now on display more than ever before. They had a direct link to each other's most raw emotions. So why had none of them realized what was wrong with Nagase? They knew something was going on... so why hadn't they taken action sooner?

Part of it was that her radically different behavior had given them pause... but another part was that they'd simply assumed she would be fine. While she had her moments of instability, everyone understood her to be a strong girl at her

core. After all, she had suffered more than anyone when it came to «Heartseed» and its phenomena, but she still pulled through. Thus, they had all believed that this, too, would pass—that she would pull herself together and go back to her usual self sooner or later.

They knew her, and they knew she could handle it.

Or so they thought.

Upon that realization, he got a Transmission from Inaba:

[She said I made assumptions about her... No, we're all guilty of that. So where did we go wrong...?]

Taichi added this missing piece to the puzzle.

This was the Nagase Iori he (thought he) knew: vastly expressive with emotional instability to match... sometimes gloomy, sometimes fragile... but ultimately a beautiful, sweet, cheerful, pure-hearted girl who had the strength to carry on in the face of adversity. An amazing person, in other words.

But what if... he was wrong?

The clues slowly fell into place.

Earlier, when Nagase lost her temper over the phenomena, her emotions were messy and human and relatable—and yet somehow not in line with his image of her. After all, she was "supposed" to be a flawless beauty with dark depths, with enough charm and mental fortitude to attract people like a magnet—a paragon of the human ideal.

But now, with the help of the Sentiment Transmission, everything finally came together in his mind.

[Maybe Nagase Iori is really just... an ordinary girl like anyone else.]

This Sentiment inadvertently Transmitted to the entire club.

"Hey, Nagase...?" he asked weakly.

"I can't... I *can't*...!" she sobbed, tears running down her cheeks. Clearly she was at her limits. "I can't do it! I can't be the person everyone wants me to be... I just can't! I can't be their *sunshine!* I'm not that perfect!"

Such was their expectation...

“If anything, I’m generally pretty aloof! But I’m sure you’ve worked that out by now, going by my Transmissions, not to mention everything I just said!”

...and this was her reality.

“All that time, I was just trying my best to act friendly! I figured it would make things easier for everyone... especially me!” Wiping her tears away, she paused to catch her breath, and it was clear she meant every word. “It wasn’t just a lie, though. It was the me I aspired to be, and so in a sense it really was me—the ideal me. But now... I’m just... I’m just tired of always having to be the version everyone else wants me to be, okay?!” she shouted.

Meanwhile, Taichi and Inaba quietly began to process this confession.

They’d spent so much time with her—Taichi in particular—and yet they somehow never realized she was trying that hard.

“I’m a coward! A pathetic coward! I’m pessimistic and bitter and bitchy—more than any of you realize! Just look at what I said to Inaban for of all her effort! I’m fucking *trash*!”

Taichi was inclined to disagree with the latter statement, but still... he was surprised to see just how *different* she was compared to the person he had imagined her to be.

“If anyone’s a fickle bitch, it’s me! First I try to be the perfect little good girl... make everyone think that’s who I am inside... and then suddenly I decide it’s too hard to keep going!”

Here she was, confessing her deepest feelings, no assistance from the Sentiment Transmission required.

“But once you act a certain way, people will start to expect it from you! And I wanted to meet those expectations! Otherwise I was going to look like a total liar!” She choked the words out with all the energy she could muster. “I told myself, *this is the me they want*... tried to convince myself it was who I really was... No, maybe I just really wanted to be that person... but I wasn’t! It made me realize who I really was—and the answer was ‘anything but that’! I just couldn’t be that perfect girl anymore!”

Nagase had a lot of sides to her. And as it turned out, she'd inadvertently made her most ambitious self her default.

Overcome with emotion, she took a deep breath. "I mean... if I could've lived a normal life... maybe then there wouldn't be this gulf between my ideals and reality. Maybe then I could've stuck it out... but..."

Her voice grew stronger again, as though she were slowly but surely working through her feelings.

"What even is «Heartseed»?!" *The mastermind.* "It took over my body, threw me in the river, told me I was going to die... and despite all my fear and grief, I did my best to stay strong to the very end!" *The body-swap.* "Then it came back—the thing who was almost my murderer, even if it didn't mean to be—and I was left paralyzed with fear, dreading the moment it tries to get me killed again, but still I tried to act normal for you guys!" *The Liberation.* "Then, just when I was at my lowest, it came along and offered me the chance to start all over, like it saw right through me! And I was so weak by that point that it almost worked... but no, I kicked it to the curb!" *The Age Regression.* "I tried so hard! Really gave it my all! To the point that it's actually kind of impressive, by my standards!"

Taichi had guessed she was putting in effort—after all, she'd have to be superhuman to manage all that without even trying—but he had severely underestimated the level at which she was operating. No wonder she was practically falling apart.

"But I can't keep trying this hard forever! I can't be my perfect self anymore. I can't make it work! So I decided to stop living up to those expectations. I just wanted to go back! Back to a version of me that I could live with!"

Taichi glanced over at Inaba to find her standing perfectly still, staring straight at Nagase.

"So I figured, if I was going to stop being my ideal self, then I might as well put all my worst traits out in the open... but with the Sentiment Transmission going on, I knew I needed to hurry up or else the contrast between my thoughts and my actions would make me look like a liar, and I was so scared of that happening... The last thing I wanted was for you guys to think all our history

together was just a big fat lie... because it *wasn't*, okay?! I was just trying my best!"

Nagase was overly self-conscious of the performative aspects of her personality. It seemed she'd grown paranoid that the others would see her effort as deceptive.

"I was so panicked and confused... I didn't know how to make the old me go away... or how to get everyone to accept the new me in her place... I was so lost and conflicted, and everything started to go wrong, and I couldn't fix it... but I mean... I'm just... I'm not always perfect, okay?! I wish I was, but I'm not!"

She sniffled quietly.

The dam had burst, and all her pent-up emotions had come flooding out, overwhelming Taichi in a torrent of painful truths. He was speechless.

He'd claimed to be in love with her—told her he wanted to be like her. But unbeknownst to him, this had likely only served to further contribute to the external pressure she felt to maintain her ideal self.

How could he possibly console her when he'd never understood the first thing about her? Even Inaba seemed to struggle to find her voice—

"WHO CARES, STUPID-HEAD!"

It was an extremely childish remark that, frankly, kind of ruined the moment.

"What?" Nagase stared back blankly for a moment. "You... You can't just call me *stupid*!"

"Why not?! You've called *me* stupid before, haven't you?! Christ, that little monologue nearly put me to sleep! Learn some brevity, buttmunch! Asswipe! Dickweed!"

Her tone was straightforward, without a hint of sentimentality. In an instant, the oppressive atmosphere in the room was gone—because she had single-handedly erased it. Was she always this ballsy?

But soon her condescending expression began to fade. "Dumbass..." she whispered gently. "Just so you know... I'm kinda reeling from this. I feel like... like I literally might break down crying," she continued in a watery, emotional

voice. Ballsy, yet fragile. “I feel so bad... You’re one of my best friends, and yet... I never understood how you really felt...”

She hung her head. Dark, glossy strands of hair fell over her face, hiding it from view, and she wrapped her arms around herself like she was fighting to contain all her anger and sadness.

Then she looked up—and stared Nagase dead in the eye.

“But I’m gonna say something to you, partly because I think you need to hear it, but mostly because I feel like saying it!” Fragile, yet ballsy. “You’re not perfect? Can’t make it work? Bitch, you aren’t special! I suck at this shit too! You think I don’t try to be smart, competent, and beautiful at all times?! Of course I do! But I can’t! Hell, I can’t even get my crush to notice me!”

I’d say I’ve noticed you plenty, Taichi retorted silently.

“Exactly how high are these goddamn standards of yours?! I’ll admit, we probably put some unreasonable expectations on you! But you’re the one who felt overly obligated to live up to them, damn it! You’re an idiot, that’s what you are!” She paused, then mused, “Feels like the tables have turned this time, doesn’t it?”

What do you mean, “this time”? Taichi wondered.

“You’re such a perfectionist, it’s disgusting! The second you fall short of your own ideals, you just give up and throw it all away?! No wonder you were worried about us thinking you’re a liar!”

The second the word *liar* came into play, Nagase began to panic. “Listen... It wasn’t all fake, okay?! It was still me—”

“I know! And you know what else I know? I know what your damn problem is! It’s always all or nothing with you!”

Nagase’s eyes widened in shock.

“Why do things have to be so black and white?! ‘Welp, I can’t be my *best* self, so I guess I’ll just be my *worst* self instead!’ Like, what fucking sense does that make?! Why pivot from one extreme to the other?! If you can’t be your ‘ideal self’ 24/7, then maybe give yourself permission to *take a goddamn break* every

once in a while! Don't bottle it all up until you explode, you fucking imbecile!"

Her furious tirade had Nagase rooted to the spot.

"Let's get one thing clear, alright? You think we expected perfection of you? Are you braindead? Seriously, who do you think you are? The romantic lead in a movie? You really think everyone is paying that much attention to you at all times? You're so full of yourself. No one is as obsessed with you as you are, you *FUCKING MORON!*"

Inaba Himeko was now dominating the room.

"We're all too busy dealing with our own shit, okay?!" she continued. "It's your life, so live it *however you want!* And the rest of us will just have to accept that! *I will accept that!*"

The words weren't directed at him, and yet he found it touching all the same. Before he knew it, his eyes were transfixed on Inaba.

"You need to refocus your damn effort! It's not about being 'perfect'! It's not about being your 'real self'! Who cares?! *I'm* supposed to be the overthinker here, not you! Focus on what really matters, for fuck's sake!"

Taichi thought back to the moment during the Liberation when Fujishima had asked him: *What is it that you truly care about above all else?*

"Okay, time out!" Inaba shouted, wiping her forehead and gasping for breath. Then she continued, "So, you've been dealing with a lot, and yet you came to the clubroom today. *Why?* You saw the mess in there and got angry. *Why?* Were you worried about being your 'perfect self' or whatever? You weren't, were you? Try to remember how you felt in that moment!"

She folded her arms, and Taichi began to wonder where she was going with this.

"Gah, why am I psychoanalyzing you right now?! Figure this shit out yourself, you nimrod. I'm tired! Real talk, I have no right to act like I have my shit together—I'm just winging it! So don't call me out later and be like 'Hey, remember when you said blah blah blah?' I can't be the smart one all the time, you know!"

Evidently she had stopped holding herself back.

“But yeah, I guess... your past probably has something to do with it...” she continued, her voice softer now. “Still... If you’re so far from perfect, then stop trying so hard to be what you’re not! Just fight through your failures, make a total ass of yourself, then pick yourself back up again and push onwards... like me!”

Sure, Inaba would put her foot in her mouth from time to time, but she was still a total badass. At least, Taichi was inclined to think so.

Nagase’s expression twisted in misery. “Seriously, we don’t have to do this... I can’t pick myself back up like you can, Inaban... I just can’t...”

The Nagase they knew always pushed through, no matter how bad it hurt. But now she was claiming she couldn’t.

“Iori...” Inaba faltered. After a pause, she glanced at Taichi. “Got anything you want to add to this?”

With the spotlight suddenly on him, he mulled over the concept of Nagase Iori for a moment.

They met on the first day of high school, right there in Class 1-C. His first impression was that she was really pretty, and sometimes he found himself staring after her. Then the next thing he knew, they ended up in the same after-school club together. Months flew by, and gradually he found himself drawn to her more and more until eventually... he fell in love.

“I said I was in love with you... but I never really saw you for who you were. I wanted to be like you so badly... I idealized you a bit too much. So at this point, it’s no wonder you don’t want to go out with me.”

He’d fallen for the “ideal” Nagase, not the real her. He only wished he could’ve been the one to see through it all.

“Now that I know the perfect you *and* the regular you, I’d like to say this again—but this time I’m saying it to the real Nagase Iori.”

He had no logical or rational basis for doing this. It just felt right.

“I still love you, Nagase.”

Nagase's eyes widened, and he knew he'd gotten through to her.

"T-Taichi...?" Inaba asked weakly. Then, belatedly, he realized the implications of his statement.

"Oh, uh, love you as a *friend,* obviously! We can set all the romance stuff aside!"

Whew. Nearly gave her the wrong idea... Wait, who exactly am I worried about...?

Regardless, he wasn't about to claim he had romantic feelings for someone he had completely misunderstood up until today.

"You might be way different from the person I imagined you to be... but that won't stop me from wanting to be your friend."

Her eyes filled with tears. "Why...? *Why?* Wouldn't that difference bother you? What are you basing your friendship on, then?"

This time he decided to take a leaf out of Inaba's book. "Who cares?"

Damn, that feels good.

"What?"

"Sure, you might be nothing like the Nagase I used to know. You've got a different vibe now. But you're both Nagase, and I like both of you."

"But *why?!*"

"Who cares why? I want to be your friend, and I want you to be mine. That's all that matters! End of story!"

Inaba let out a cackle. "Damn right! That's what I'm talking about! We don't need reasons or logic. We just need to follow our hearts. And if we start to have second thoughts, then we just need to push through it."

So what *was* it that he based his friendships on, anyway? Personality? History? He didn't have the answer... but he didn't need one. As long as it felt right, then it was right. What was stopping them?

Sometimes the best option was to stop thinking so hard. After all, you couldn't poke holes in logic that wasn't there in the first place.

Nagase stood there for a long moment, silently taking in their idiocy.

“I’m sorry... I just... You guys have given me a lot to think about... I just need some time.”

And that was the last thing she said to them.

+ + +

It was Saturday—the day after the clubroom vandalism and the conversation with Iori.

There was no school that day, but the CRC had agreed to meet up anyway. There wasn’t much time until club presentations began, and they needed to finish as much as possible.

On her way to the clubroom, Inaba Himeko stopped by the hardware store to pick up some things she needed for her section, then continued on foot to the school grounds, cutting through the park to save a bit of time.

As she walked, she heard male voices conversing nearby.

“...Y’know, I never knew Setouchi was such a monster.”

The name Setouchi gave her pause. Instantly, she thought of Iori’s biggest hater, Setouchi Kaoru—a girl who was quite possibly involved in the vandalism herself.

Sitting on a bench were two shady-looking teenagers. Inaba had a feeling she recognized them... Maybe they were fellow Yamaboshi students.

“*She’s* the monster? You’re the one who went hog-wild in there.”

“I mean, I *did* feel guilty doing it... but at the same time, it was pretty good stress relief, y’know?”

They sniggered.

Meanwhile, a red flag went off in Inaba’s head. *Of all the insane coincidences... or was it fate that brought me here? Maybe God finally did something right for the first time in my life.*

Her blood began to boil.

“Still, I feel kinda bad for ‘em. What were they called again? The Cultural

Research Club? Tore their whole presentation poster to shreds.”

“Eh, it’s just paper—”

That was the moment Inaba snapped.

“YOU *BASTARDS*!”

She hadn’t thought anything through—merely lost her temper.

“Wh-What’s your problem?”

“*Fuck you*!”

She was furious. They needed to pay. How? She wasn’t sure. Nevertheless, she stormed over.

“Seriously, what do you w—Whoa!”

She seized one of them by the collar.

“You fucking—Hgghh?!” Out of nowhere, she felt someone wrap their arm around her neck, putting her in a chokehold. “Ggghhh!” She couldn’t breathe.

“Who the hell is this chick?” she heard her attacker ask, his voice deep and masculine, from somewhere high above her head. *This dude is a giant*.

“Did you get bored and harass some girl on the street again?”

“There’s no way you’ve got game with an ugly mug like that. Haha!”

Two new voices. This made for a total of five guys now.

“No! She picked a fight with me for no reason! Who the hell are you, bitch?!” One of the guys got up from the bench and roughly grabbed her by the chin. “Wait... Are you from the Cultural Research Club?”

“Ooh, she’s a hottie!” another one smirked, peering at her face from over her shoulder.

The blood drained from her face.

What is happening to me right now? His arm is so beefy. I can barely breathe. This isn’t safe. There’s five dudes. They’ve got me, and I can’t escape. I’m scared... I need to get away!

She opened her mouth... and sank her teeth into the guy’s fingers.

“AAAGGHHH!”

“What the fuck? Settle down, bitch!”

Then a heavy impact rattled her brain—and her consciousness faded.

+ + +

—Maybe we should’ve left her somewhere.

—We didn’t have a choice! We knocked her out. Plus, she’s seen our faces. We needed to shut her up somehow.

—Kinda got carried away back there. Oh well! This is fun. Feels like we’re in a movie.

—Quit screwing around! Maybe you three don’t give a fuck since you go to Akitaka, but she goes to Yamaboshi with us!

—Yeah, yeah, whatever. So this is the chick those Yamaboshi girls have beef with, right? Did you message them?

—I dunno, man. It’s a Saturday morning, so... Oh, Setouchi says she’ll come. Apparently this girl’s involved somehow.

—Ugh, not Setouchi...

—Relax. Maybe the other girls will turn up later on.

—Hell, we got one tied up right here! C’mon, we all know where this is going, right?

—You really gonna cross that line?

—Dude, look at what we’re doing! We crossed it forever ago!

—Oh, cry me a river. She was the one who picked a fight with us. We were just defending ourselves. Anyway, we just have to wait until the girls get here... So who has beef with who, exactly?

—I don’t have all the details. I just helped fuck with their shit... Gah, this is so not worth the reward she promised us...

And so there I was, inside what appeared to be an abandoned factory, arms and legs tied up, mouth taped over, listening to these thugs carry on their

conversation.

One thought fills my mind:

I can’t believe this shit actually happens in real life.

Chapter 8: Nagase Iori Settles the Score

[They couldn't have managed to carry me very far on foot, which means this abandoned factory they've got me tied up in must be somewhere near the school—]

Curled up in the fetal position under my blanket, I receive yet another Transmission from Inaban. Considering everything else she's Transmitted today, it's obvious she's in danger. So what do I do about it?

The best me would go in and heroically rescue her, the worst me would sit around and wait for someone else to do it, and a normal person would probably just call the cops.

Then again, the cops probably wouldn't take action without a specific location... so in that case, ask a friend...? Oh, right, there's always Fujishima Maiko. I could have her get in touch with her dad, maybe...

On and on, I mull over the many options available to me... but I can't bring myself to commit to one. And in my indecision, I essentially choose the worst option—to do nothing.

Just goes to show what a piece of shit I am. How pathetic.

I know I need to confront it, and yet I keep running away.

How did you get yourself *kidnapped*, you idiot? What turn of events could possibly lead to that? Is your life a movie now? Stupid. Everything about this is so stupid. I'm stupid. My whole life is stupid.

Yeah... stupid's one way to put it, I guess. Not to act like I'm some kind of victim, but I've always had a less than ordinary life. And then «Heartseed» came along. Icing on top of the cake, really. What a mess... Thanks to its supernatural phenomena, my world has turned upside-down.

I can't change history, nor can I go back. I know that. If anything, I was going to accept my past as the lived experience that it was and keep pushing forward...

But I don't think I can handle any more of this torment or else I'm going to break.

I'm sick of it. I'm exhausted. Screw it. I'm done. I don't want to do it anymore. Just let me go—

[I'm coming to save you!]

[We gotta get her out of there!]

[To the rescue!]

Then I get three new Transmissions—from Taichi, Yui, and Aoki, in that order. It's the first time I've ever gotten three at the same time. I guess the desire to save Inaban struck them all simultaneously.

I can feel their passion—warm and bright and pure and beautiful, all to an agonizing degree. Filled with all their emotions at once, I feel like I'm going to burst. It's a strange sensation, to say the least.

I wrap my arms around myself, willing myself to keep it together. Under my blanket, shrouded in darkness, I feel like I'm starting to see the light.

—I'll admit, we probably put some unreasonable expectations on you! But you're the one who felt overly obligated to live up to them, damn it! You're an idiot, that's what you are!

When the Sentiment Transmission was first foisted on us, I told myself I was probably in for another hellish trial, but I needed to survive it. Not only that, but I was scared that all the worst parts of me—the less-than-ideal me—would be put on display for the world to see.

And then I lost my way.

—Why do things have to be so black and white?!

All this time, I did my best to make it work. I told myself I couldn't screw this up. After all the failures I'd experienced in the past, I became obsessed with the perfect persona. Maybe that's why I kept telling myself to choose one or the other. Maybe I wanted my perfectionist tendencies to help keep me my very best self.

—Seriously, who do you think you are? The romantic lead in a movie?

She’s right. I’m so ridiculously self-centered, it’s not even funny. Look at me, everyone! Unlike the rest of you chumps, *I’m* a fragile flower who can’t handle «Heartseed» and its phenomena!

In other words, I used my lack of identity to throw myself a pity party.

—No one is as obsessed with you as you are, you FUCKING MORON!

I can’t even deny it at this point. They weren’t the ones with high expectations—it was me. I had those expectations for myself. And when I failed to live up to them, I took it out on everyone around me. Extremely mature of me, I know.

I suck at this. I’m trash. So why are my standards so high?

It’s because I never had confidence in the real me. I didn’t know who she even was, really. But the uncertainty drove me crazy, so instead I labeled myself with a black and white dichotomy I could readily understand: success or failure, ideals or reality, fact or fiction.

—It’s your life, so live it however you want! Focus on what really matters, for fuck’s sake!

I kept overthinking and overthinking until I turned the whole thing into a bigger deal than it actually was. All the important stuff stopped mattering, and soon all I cared about was whether I could perform to my own satisfaction. What a self-centered loser... I’m nowhere close to my idea of perfection, and yet...

—I still love you, Nagase.

...they accepted me regardless. And it gave me the kick in the ass I needed to finally confront myself.

Where did I go wrong? What was it I failed to see?

Is the point of life to be *perfect?* No, of course not. Perfection is subjective. It never hurts to strive for it, but perfection itself is not the end goal.

No... The point of life is simply to live the way you choose. *What do I want to do? Who do I want to become?* These are the questions I should be focusing on.

Who cares about past failures or potential future failures? I still need to keep

living my own life. Otherwise, what am I even living for in the first place?

Why didn't I understand this until just now? Am I braindead? I must be. I'm the biggest moron ever.

But that doesn't matter anymore. I'm done overthinking.

So what is it I really want to do?

I take a hard look deep inside myself—and the next thing I know, I'm on my feet.

Sunshine streams in, lighting up my whole world... Squinting, I find I can still make out all the colors.

My feet carry me to the front door, and I step outside with nothing but the clothes on my back. Inaban's Transmissions are all I have to go on, so I unlock my bike and hop on.

I'm done with logic. I'm done with common sense. No more normal or abnormal. No more dichotomies. No more perfection.

None of it matters anymore. I won't let it chain me down. I'm going to be the *real* Nagase Iori—I'm going to follow my heart.

—Choose your own path.

It feels like I finally understand what my dad—my fifth dad—meant by those words back in the spring of ninth grade.

□■□■□

I had a feeling my call wouldn't go through, but I tried it anyway, just in case. Sure enough, no dice. So, my only option was to bike around and hunt for the place myself.

People on the street looked at me in alarm as I flew past at full speed. Not to make light of the crisis, but... it felt *amazing*.

After a long search, I finally came across a building that seemed to fit the bill. Instantly, I was convinced this had to be the place. Not like there were a ton of other abandoned factories within walking distance of Yamaboshi school grounds.

I hopped off so fast, I didn't even bother with the kickstand—just let my bike fall to the ground. Wiping my pouring sweat, my first move was to find some way to see inside.

Soon, I spotted an old, beat-up locker positioned directly beneath a shattered window. *Perfect*. I carefully climbed up onto it and slowly peered inside.

From there, I could see a handful of people on the right-hand side of the interior. Fortunately, they were close enough that I could easily make out their features.

Bingo.

There she was, lying on her side, arms and legs bound, duct tape over her mouth. *Congrats, Inaban. Looks like you're living in a shoujo manga now,* I snarked silently. The sight was so surreal, it took considerable effort to convince my brain that this was reality.

I continued to scan around inside the building. Aside from Inaban, I could make out five shady-looking guys... and Setouchi Kaoru.

My mind went blank. *Setouchi's involved in this?* I knew she had a grudge against me, of course, but I couldn't imagine she conveniently had an entirely unrelated grudge against Inaban as well... which meant she was almost certainly doing this to get back at me.

I turned away from the window and slumped against the wall. My first reaction wasn't anger—it was nausea. I could feel a pressure in my throat, like a pent-up scream. Desperate to hold it all in, I pressed a hand to my mouth, willing myself to endure it.

This can't be happening! This can't be happening! This can't be happening!

What could have possibly led to this? I didn't know for sure, but I was certain I was the root cause.

A tear slid down my cheek. Instantly, my determination plummeted, and my legs turned to lead. *Me and my stupid mood swings,* I thought bitterly. As my ragged breathing began to settle, I overheard a conversation taking place inside.

“Seriously, guys, this is going way too far... We’re gonna get in huge trouble...” said Setouchi.

“And like I told you, it’s not our fault this bitch picked a fight with us first!” one of the guys replied. “Besides, you’re the one who wanted us to rip up their giant poster thing in the first place! This is on you!”

Aha. So she *was* behind the clubroom vandalism—not that there was ever any room for doubt.

“But... I had to... The girls told me to ask you... so I didn’t have a choice...”

I knew it. She’s not what she seems... but that’ll have to wait.

“Quit playing innocent!”

I heard an impact, and Setouchi let out a shriek. Hastily, I peeked back through the window to find her lying on the floor.

“Get a load of Mr. Domestic Violence over here,” one of the other guys joked.

So far, it sounded like they had kidnapped Inaban in the heat of the moment, and it wasn’t part of their original plan. For a moment, I was relieved to learn that she hadn’t been targeted specifically to mess with me, as I’d originally thought... Then I cursed myself for prioritizing my own interests in the middle of a literal hostage situation—especially considering the culprits seemed highly volatile and unpredictable.

So what do I do?

I was up against five guys and technically one girl, though I wasn’t sure how much of a threat she would be at this point. Meanwhile, I had no one but myself. No weapon, no combat training, and absolutely no confidence.

What do I do? What CAN I do? I can’t think of anything!

Suddenly, a loud, metallic *CLANG* made me nearly jump out of my skin. It sounded like someone kicked a wall or something. Reflexively, I shrank down under the window, clutching my chest as I gasped for breath. *Relax... They haven’t found me... probably,* my rational brain reassured me.

With my composure regained, I peered back through the window. My gaze wandered to the entrance.

There stood Taichi, Yui, and Aoki, all wearing their school uniforms, all completely unarmed, and with no clear plan (that I could tell, anyway).

"Why would you just barge in without *scoping the place out first,* you moron?!" Yui shouted, promptly kicking Taichi in the shin.

Called it.

Meanwhile, the kidnappers clearly hadn't anticipated these surprise visitors.

"Who the hell are you?!"

"Who said you could come in here?! Get out!"

Uh, you know you guys are trespassing too, right?

Meanwhile, Setouchi had fled to the corner.

Despite their total lack of planning, the CRC stormed boldly into the factory building to save Inaban—except for me. *Maybe if I ran around... No, I wouldn't make it in time. All I can do now is watch.*

The five thugs quickly recovered once they realized their opponents were merely three high school students. One of them stepped forward. "Look, folks, we're in the middle of something here. How about you get lost before I make you wish you'd never been born?" he sneered.

Taichi and Aoki promptly sent him flying with a perfectly-timed double punch—and the blows landed in such a way that he passed out instantly.

It was so sudden, so *drastic*, I couldn't help but stare. Never before had I even *imagined* that the boys of the CRC would actually punch someone. Clearly they were furious... but more than that, they were desperate to save Inaban. And thanks to the Sentiment Transmission, I knew just how strong and pure that desire was.

To them, there was no logic or reasoning behind it. They didn't care what the odds were... They just wanted to do it anyway.

I balled my hands into fists. Surely I could be like that, too...

But thanks to my own cowardice, it was too late for me to join them. Now I was left with nothing but despair.

Apparently the other thugs were as shocked as I was. After a moment, they finally snapped to their senses.

“The fuck you think you’re doing?!”

“You wanna go, punks?!”

Enraged, they slowly closed in on Taichi and the others. Then one of them picked up what appeared to be a steel pipe—but by then the battle had already essentially been won. Yui had infiltrated their half of the factory. With my bird’s-eye view of the entire area, I had a front-row seat to the whole thing, but to them, she must have been moving at the speed of light.

Her long chestnut hair swirled behind her as the thugs collapsed, one by one. Her performance was so beautiful, it captivated the room.

One of the guys punched at Yui, but missed. Another swung with the steel pipe. It didn’t connect. They, too, fell victim to her dance... and just like that, she had trounced all four of them.

There was no room for debate—she was insanely strong. At this point, maybe they didn’t need me after all.

I wasn’t the hero. I wasn’t the sidekick. I was just a bystander. The CRC didn’t need me—

“They won’t stay down for long. Now hurry!” Yui shouted at the boys.

“Awesome...!” the two of them murmured in admiration.

“Save it for later, would you?!” Yui hurried over to their captive comrade. “Inaba!”

Unfortunately, the sheer spectacle of it all must’ve caused the three of them to let their guards down.

One of the thugs got to his feet. *Oh no*. I knew I should warn her, but I couldn’t find my voice. I had become a total bystander in body and mind.

He reached into his pocket.

“Huh?!”

Yui noticed a moment too late.

The guy ran over to Inaban and put a Swiss army knife to her throat. Furious, he growled something I couldn't quite hear. Then I caught sight of Inaban's eyes—dilated in fear.

"What are you doing?!" shrieked Yui.

"Th-That's extremely dangerous!" stammered Taichi.

"Don't be stupid! Now drop the weapon!" shouted Aoki.

But the thug showed no signs of listening. "Cram it! Nobody move or she gets it!" he screamed, a deranged look in his eye.

"A-Alright. We hear you. Now let's all calm down, okay?" Taichi answered gently, clearly trying his best not to set the guy off. The three of them stood rooted to the spot.

Meanwhile, I began to tremble. *What am I looking at right now? A life-or-death crisis? And it's up to me, Nagase Iori, to save the day?* I couldn't think of a more convenient twist of fate. Just like that, I had gone from idle onlooker to sole savior.

The best me would take action to rescue them, the worst me would run away like a coward, and a normal person would... just call the cops, right? But once the cops show up, wouldn't that just push the guy over the edge?

Just then, it hit me—the perfect plan suited to my perfect self. It was stupid, and totally cliché, and it would take a lot of courage to pull off... but if I could manage it, then I could rescue Inaban.

The question then became: now that I'd lost all confidence and thrown everything away, could I still manage it? Could I do it? Could I make it work?

Stupid fucking twat, I thought to myself, cursing myself with the most vulgar insult I could think of in the moment. *There I go, thinking in absolutes again. It's not about whether I "can" or "can't." It's about what I WANT to do. And if I want to do this, then I just gotta fight through my failures, make a total ass of myself, then pick myself back up again and push onwards! No "best," "worst," or "normal" necessary!*

The next thing I knew, I had hopped down from the locker, run around to the

entrance, and rushed inside...

“Great, who the fuck is it this time?!” the thug yelled. Calmly, I approached him.

“Nagase!”

“Iori!”

“Iori-chan!”

I could hear my friends all shouting my name. Even Inaban was looking at me.

“What do you want?! Are you with them?!”

“Oh... uh...”

That was when I realized something critical: While it was admirable of me to find the courage to pursue what really matters, I had forgotten to look before I leapt, and now I had skipped a step in my plan.

How could I have screwed this up already? What a joke. Was I getting rusty already?

Regardless, I couldn’t back down now.

I put on a cold, condescending smile... and pulled the trigger.

“I just thought you look like you’ve got a lot on your plate, that’s all.” I said to the thug.

I should’ve planned my entrance better. I should’ve come up with a script. What was I thinking?

Unsurprisingly, the others stared at me in confusion.

“You’ve got your hands full in here, huh? Want some help?” I asked again.

“Excuse me?”

“I mean, you can wave that little knife around all you want, but are you actually going to do anything with it? I doubt it.”

Meanwhile, I silently begged for the Sentiment Transmission to strike. At this stage I no longer had the option of using my phone, so my only choice was to take a gamble. *God, what am I even doing?*

“So, like I said, I’ll help you out. Give you some ideas to work with.” I tilted my head to create the perfect air of mystery... and prayed that it was working. My acting ability was a double-edged sword, but today it was my lifeline.

“Come again?” The guy looked at me dubiously.

“What are you doing, Nagase...?” Taichi asked feebly.

Look, don’t freak out, okay?! I just screwed up the order of operations, that’s all!

I glanced around. Setouchi was still curled up in the corner; I could tell she was frozen in shock. *Guess I can safely ignore her*. I lowered my voice and put on a dramatic affectation.

“See, I’ve got a score to settle with these losers. And the enemy of my enemy is my friend, as they say. So that means I’m on your side.”

My sense of intuition had grown dull, but right now it was telling me he’d like the sound of that.

Sure enough, he smirked. “So we have a common interest, then.”

Perfect. He’s falling for it. Holy cow, I can’t believe we’re acting out a scene from a manga... Now put the knife away, you amateur.

“Iori... What’s gotten into you?!” Yui shouted.

Just stay out of it, will you? Although I appreciate the confirmation that everyone’s buying into my little act!

I wanted to try to make eye contact with her, but I couldn’t. Not while this dudebro was looking at me.

Transmit! Transmit! Transmit! Transmit!

“So, what’s your plan? Real talk, this whole thing has gotten *way* out of hand... though I imagine my friends will wake up sooner or later... Oh, I know. Why don’t you go wake them?”

He had made a request, and I was in no position to say no. *I’m running out of time! Transmit! Please!*

My acting was perfect. Now I just needed to play my last card, and then the

actual heroes could handle the rest.

“Iori-chan, quit screwing around!” Aoki yelled.

“Don’t call me that. We’re not friends,” I replied flatly, my tone colder than the North Pole. *Stop that! Don’t give me that abandoned puppy look!*

I approached one of the unconscious thugs... and came to a stop right beside him. I was out of time.

Please trigger! Trigger! Trigger! Trigger! Damn it, «Heartseed», would it kill you to help me for once in your life?!

[Now’s your chance to save Inaban!]

Finally! Thank you!

According to my plan, I would’ve liked to Transmit that ages ago, but whatever. At least it happened. Plus, all four of them received it, so I couldn’t complain.

Instantly, everyone’s expressions shifted. *Glad we’re on the same page, but you people really need to practice your poker faces!* Now that they were clued in to my real intentions, all I needed to do was make a diversion.

My friends were standing stock-still diagonally to my left. Behind them, near the wall, stood Knife Guy and Inaban. Our positions were perfectly triangulated.

Knife Guy’s focus was on me, but he could likely still see Taichi, Yui, and Aoki out of the corner of his eye, so this wasn’t enough to create an opening for someone to disarm him. I needed to really get his attention. But how?

“C’mon! Hurry it up!” the guy snapped. My slow pace was starting to make him suspicious of me.

I crouched down and peered at the unconscious guy’s face. Something told me he’d wake up any second now. I moved to slap his cheeks—and was struck with a good idea.

I’d only get one shot at this, but that would have to do. It was my only option if I wanted to achieve my ends.

Slowly but surely, I drew my face close to the unconscious guy’s—carefully

angled so our lips were lined up.

If this didn't get Knife Guy's attention, nothing would.

Sure enough, I felt his gaze boring into me. I tucked my hair behind my ear seductively.

Hurry up! Crap, I'm running out of time! Any longer and our lips might actually touch! Crap, I might actually give this trash mob my first kiss! Should I look up? Will he start to suspect me? Oh god, oh god—

"GAH!"

Reflexively, I jerked back.

Yui had kicked the pocketknife from the guy's hand, then swung a roundhouse kick into his face while she was at it. One-hit knockout!

The knife clattered to the floor; Taichi grabbed it and used it to cut Inaban free. Then he pulled the duct tape off of her mouth.

What incredible teamwork. The Yamaboshi High School Cultural Research Club was not to be underestimated.

"Taichi!" Free at last, Inaban clung to Taichi. He looked a little alarmed, but otherwise happy, and he put his arms around her in kind—a touching moment befitting the happy ending. To me, they looked truly perfect for each other.

Thank god... I'm so glad nothing bad happened...

In an instant, the tension drained from my body. Tears rolling down my cheeks, I staggered away from the still-unconscious thug and collapsed to the ground, sobbing. "God... I can't keep dealing with all this crap! I'm sick of it! I don't want to! I'm scared, I'm scared, I'm scared!" To hell with *perfection* and *my best self*—I was throwing a bona fide tantrum. "I thought I was gonna die!"

It felt so good to put all my emotions on display in front of them. I should've been embarrassed, and yet I was completely invigorated.

I sniffed and wiped my tears. Thinking back, I never really complained much as a child; I was always trying my best to be a "good girl." Maybe I'd been wrestling with perfection for longer than I realized...

“Iori!” Coming out of nowhere, Yui threw her arms around me in a tight, warm hug. “Inaba told us a bit about what’s going on... how like our high opinions of you put pressure on you to be perfect. I’m so sorry...”

“It’s not your fault, Yui. I put that pressure on myself.”

“I still want to apologize... and just so you know, I still love you, no matter who you are! Don’t ask why—I just love you! Like, lots and lots! I know you’re not a bad person... Besides... Nnnn, I just love you soooo much!” She nuzzled her face against mine.

“Thanks... I love you too, Yui... ...Alright, that’s enough! I can’t breathe!” Gently, I pushed her off.

“Iori-chan!” Aoki called. “I dunno what to say, ‘cept... You’re just fine the way you are, girl!”

He gave me a thumbs-up, and I thought to myself, *He really does have it all figured out better than the rest of us*.

Then I heard the electronic click of a cell phone camera going off, and I turned to find Inaban documenting the whole scene. What was she planning to do with those pictures?

Once she was done, Taichi turned to the others. “Let’s get out of here. I’d rather be *anywhere* else... and Setouchi, you’re coming with us.”

□■□■□

We needed a safe place to talk, but neither I nor Setouchi were wearing our uniforms, so going into the school building was out of the question. Instead, we ended up on the riverside promenade in a little resting nook with benches and a water fountain.

“I feel like we’re still too close... Then again, we went in the opposite direction of the park, so maybe we’re fine...” Inaban muttered.

And so there we were, interrogating Setouchi Kaoru about her involvement. She looked utterly exhausted, her long hair frizzy and unkempt, dark circles under her eyes. We had her sit on a bench while the five of us stood around her, and Inaban started making veiled threats, but I got the sense she would’ve

told us everything either way.

Sure enough, her story was pretty much exactly what I'd figured. She had a crush on Shiroyama Shouto, a jazz band member in Class 1-C. On Valentine's Day she'd tried to work up the courage to ask him out, but then she heard that I'd shot him down, and that pissed her off. Naturally, my drastic change in attitude only served to exacerbate things, which led to her bullying me, spurred on further by her rebel-clique friends. Then, ultimately, she'd asked those guys to vandalize the CRC clubroom, both to get back at me and to help Shiroyama's club.

"I'm sorry," she mumbled weakly at the end of her long confession, shrinking into herself like she was trying to disappear.

"So, what now?" Inaban asked me. Evidently she wanted to hear my thoughts first.

I walked over and stood directly in front of Setouchi. I couldn't exactly blame it all on her, considering at least part of it was my fault... but she had undeniably crossed a line. It all started when she picked a fight with me because I refused to date the boy she liked, and now it had escalated to the point that innocent people got hurt—including my best friend. Plus, she had destroyed our presentation map beyond repair.

How could she have been so selfish, all in the name of a stupid petty grudge? I didn't care if she hurt me, but *my friends?* Unacceptable. My anger raged inside me, yearning to break free and make her wish she'd never been born. I wanted to punish her—wanted to hurt her the way she hurt me. I'd never been so furious in all my life.

Meanwhile, the rest of the club silently watched me, waiting to see what I would do. What *was* I planning to do, anyway?

My best self would let bygones be bygones, my worst self would rip her a new one, and a normal person...

Just then, Inaban's voice replayed in my mind.

—Why do things have to be so black and white?!

Normally there were more than just two choices.

—No one is as obsessed with you as you are, you FUCKING MORON!

Anything that deviated from the norm would draw attention.

—It's your life, so live it however you want!

But normally...

Wait... What is "normal," anyway? Oh... I get it now...

Just like that, I was on the verge of tears—partially out of happiness and partially out of regret for my own utter blindness.

All my life, I had chained myself down for no reason. I spent every day obsessing over what was normal; anything better than normal was ideal, and anything worse than normal was trash. Those were the standards by which I made every decision... No wonder I always felt like I was putting on an act.

The first time my mom got remarried, it was to a violent alcoholic. I didn't want to set him off, so I tried my best to be a "good girl"—be the sort of daughter he wanted. Then they got divorced, and my mom remarried again. My kid self felt pressured to make it work this time, so I tried my best to fit my second stepfather's ideals. And then *they* got divorced... and so on.

All this time, I had tried to be a "good girl" for everyone. That was the root of all my stupid problems. And as I grew older, that latent fear turned outward to the social groups around me. I started to obsessively compare myself with others; "normalcy" became the framework with which to judge my own actions.

Don't be worse; be better. Always be better. Without that mindset, I was afraid I wouldn't live up to their ideals. I had no confidence in my real self, so I built up an ideal self based on the standard of normalcy presented to me by my peers. And although I loved to act like I didn't care what anyone else thought of me, that couldn't possibly be less true. Everything I said to Inaban could apply to me, too. We were both hung up on other people's opinions, just in different ways.

God, how cringey. Who cares about any of that?

—It's your life, so live it however you want!

Yeah... You were right, Inaban.

Then I noticed Setouchi staring dubiously at me and realized I'd been lost in thought for a little too long. Suddenly the weight was gone, and my anger with it.

...Well, now what? I gotta put an end to this charade somehow... Do I just wing it?

You sure you want to play it like that? my rational brain cautioned me.

My response? *Hell yeah! Nothing's gonna chain me down! Not now, not ever!*

"Grit your *teeeeth*!" I shouted in a playful, singsong voice that hadn't seen much use as of late, and I felt everyone look at me in surprise.

Weird... Why am I having so much fun right now? Er, not that I'm going to enjoy this next part, obviously! Seriously, though, why am I so hyped up? Man, this is why everyone calls me unstable... Oh well! I used to be in a bad mood, and now I'm in a good mood! That's Nagase Iori for you! Got a problem with that?!

"You ready?!"

"Uh... wha...?" Confused, Setouchi hastily shut her eyes and pursed her lips together.

"HERE WE GOOOOO!"

And with that, I slapped her in the face as hard as I could!

My palm stung like it was on fire. Meanwhile, Setouchi tumbled from the bench to the ground, rolled a few feet and stopped, motionless.

"Uhhh... Did I overdo it...?"

Behind me, my four friends sounded more than a little alarmed.

"Wow... That was less of a slap and more of a palm thrust..."

"Yeah, that was a straight-up palm heel strike."

"She really put her hips into it..."

"Poor girl might have a concussion..."

It's not my fault, okay?! I've never slapped anybody before, so I didn't know

how hard to do it! Damn, it stings!

Then Setouchi began to twitch.

“A-Are you okay?!” I asked as I dashed over to her and crouched down beside her. “I’m so sorry! I hit you *way* too hard!”

“Nnngh... It hurts... Nnnn...” Setouchi whimpered, clutching her cheek. “I’m sorry... I’m sorry... I’m really, really sorry...”

I was scared she would get (rightfully) pissed at me, but as it turned out, that fear was groundless. She knew what she did was wrong, and she regretted her actions. That much I understood—no need for any Sentiment Transmission nonsense.

“I’m sorry too,” I whispered, looking her in the eye. “Anyway... Consider that slap your punishment from everyone else. As for me, I’m just gonna let it go.”

“Huh?” She looked at me in surprise.

I laughed. “Bet you weren’t expecting that, were you? Eh, I forgive you. I mean, I’m not exactly innocent myself, so let’s just call it even, okay? Will you forgive me?”

But Setouchi shook her head. “You did nothing wrong... It was all me,” she muttered in a weak, watery voice.

It was then that I decided to tell her what I’d learned about her over the course of all this drama—the *real* Setouchi Kaoru beneath the bad attitude and bleached hair and piercings.

“Truth is, I’ve got a little hypothesis about you, judging from the way you’ve been acting... You’re secretly a good girl, aren’t you?”



“What?” She froze.

“Why are you trying so hard to act like some sort of rebel?”

At this, Setouchi began to cry even harder. “W-Well... b-because... an old crush of mine would hang with the rebel clique... so I wanted to fit in, and...”

Yeahhh... I feel you there. You change yourself for someone else, and then one day you find that you can’t go back.

The two of us were birds of a feather, caged by our own misconceptions, unable to fly freely. And familiarity breeds contempt, as the saying went. But we never should have been enemies. We should’ve walked the same path hand in hand, helping each other to be our true selves, fighting through our failures, making total asses of ourselves, then picking ourselves back up again and pushing onwards.

It’s hard to be that strong on your own, after all.

But maybe there was still time. Maybe I could still make it work.

“Tell me, Setouchi-san... What sort of person do you really want to be? What sort of life do you want to live?”

“What? Um...”

“Oh, sorry... Probably should’ve warned you before I started dropping the deep questions on you, huh? Basically, the way I see it, you’re trying too hard. Forcing yourself to do stuff you don’t actually want to be doing. So I’m just wondering what it is you’d rather be doing instead.”

She stared back at me in damp-eyed bewilderment. *She’s spent a large chunk of today being totally baffled, hasn’t she?* I mused idly to myself. Admittedly, it was kind of cute.

“I... No, I... I don’t deserve...” she mumbled in a shaky voice, then hung her head in shame.

Bored, I put on my best hillbilly accent. “Cain’t ya tell me, sugar? Don’t be shy, now! I knows ya got it in ya!”

“Wha?!”

Worth it to see that look on yer face, darlin'.

"...The truth is... I want to do more with my club... and maybe join the student council... just to see what it's like... and then... maybe Shiroyama-kun..."

Yep, she's a good girl, alright. A girl empowered by romance. Personally, I could never hope to be like that—but I didn't have to. I had my own way of living, just as she had hers.

"So do it! Maybe you won't be perfect, but so what?! Don't throw a fit and take it out on other people! ...Also, full disclosure, I'm a total hypocrite and I really need to learn to take my own advice!"

Yeahhh... I'm the last person who should be acting like I've got it all figured out. Sorry about that. I'm basically just talking to myself at this point.

Setouchi was so surprised, she had stopped crying entirely.

"While we're at it, Setouchi-san... I think we should be friends."

It was what my heart wanted. Together, the two of us could make it work.

I got to my feet and turned around to find Inaba Himeko, Kiriyama Yui, Aoki Yoshifumi, and Yaegashi Taichi... all grinning at me from ear to ear.

Good grief, these idiots... They're the best friends a girl could ask for.

I was so happy, I felt like I was going to cry. What could I say now? How was I supposed to act around them?

Goodbye, "best self." Farewell, "worst self." So long, "normal person." I don't need those labels anymore.

"It's official! Nagase Iori is back in business! Sorry for everything I put you guys through!"

I dropped to my knees and prostrated myself, right there in front of them... because I felt I needed to, but mostly because I wanted to.

There was still a lot of damage control to take care of, but for now, the dramatic finale had reached its conclusion... or so I thought.

See, I never anticipated that one of the thugs would find us by chance.

Or that he'd be carrying the steel pipe from the factory.

I had let my guard down entirely.

The man let out a roar as he lunged at Inaba.

Taichi dove in to protect her.

And then there was a loud, sickening *THUD*.

Chapter 9: The Tipping Point For Yaegashi Taichi

Ironically, he was conscious of the fact that he was unconscious.

It was a warm, relaxing place.

He couldn't move his body—no, he couldn't even feel his body.

Just his emotions.

Then a voice rang out in his mind, not unlike the Sentiment Transmission.

[Were we ever actually in love?] the voice asked.

[I think so, at least. Although neither of us really knew what we were doing,] Taichi responded.

[Yeah... You're right. Sorry I was so clueless.]

[No, no. I'm sorry, too. Thank you for everything.]

[No, thank you!]

[I never really saw you for who you were. Just admired you for your persona.]

[Nah, that's not true... Well, okay, maybe it is...]

[Yeah. It's the truth.]

[Still, it made me really happy to know you felt that way about me. Honest.]

[Cool... I'm glad.]

[And I used to feel the same way about you.]

[Used to?]

[Back then, I swear I was in love with you... but there was a lot I didn't understand at the time, and I was going about it the wrong way. Now that I know better... I've changed.]

[Yeah, you definitely have.]

[Or maybe I've just gone back to the way I was meant to be. I don't know. All I know is that this change has been pretty drastic for me. Not just the more recent stuff—all of it.]

[Right.]

[That's why I need to wipe the slate clean... Sorry for putting you through this.]

[Nah, that's okay. If I were in your shoes, I'd probably want to do the same thing. Besides, I think this change will be good for you, and... well, it's not like I haven't put you through some crap myself. To be honest, while I was definitely in love with you... I think I was just as much in love with the idea of being in love.]

[Oh, man, I totally get you there.]

[Right? I mean... it's pretty fun, you know?]

[Yeah, it's pretty great! Just... everything about it!]

[The way I see it... when it comes to love, it's okay to put yourself first. I mean, obviously you want to be loyal to your partner, but you shouldn't feel obligated to focus entirely on them at the expense of your own needs, you know? Not that I'm the first person to have this epiphany or anything.]

[Love sure is complicated, huh? Not that friendship is any easier... Then again, I guess we're all better off not overthinking it, right?]

[There's so much I don't know... I don't even have an answer for that question.]

[Yeah, I don't blame you. I guess you just gotta feel these things out...]

[One step at a time.]

[Oh em gee, that's so cheesy!]

[Shut up!]

[Well then, I guess you'd better hurry up and date someone so you can figure it out!]

[Yeah, I guess so. Same for you, too.]

[Yep... But I get the feeling it won't be happening with each other.]

[Yeahhh... Agreed. You know, looking back... is it just me, or did we have one hell of a love story?]

[It's definitely not just you! Maybe we were clueless, but that doesn't mean it wasn't real. That's part of why we can't just start over.]

[Right.]

[Now that I think about it, this whole conversation is kinda awkward, isn't it? I definitely couldn't say these things to your face. In fact, I don't even think I could say it over the phone... and yet somehow, here and now, I'm doing just fine.]

[I guess we have the Sentiment Transmission to thank.]

[No way in hell am I thanking «Heartseed» for anything! Oh, but it looks like our time is almost up... Wait, how do I know that? What even IS this? Did I finally pass out after my sleep deprivation hit its limits, or something?]

[...I'm guessing you're not supposed to ask.]

[Yeah, probably... Well then, one last thing from me!]

[Likewise.]

[Thank you for loving me, Taichi.]

[Thank you for loving me, Nagase.]

Suddenly, he could feel his body again. His senses returned—the light shining against his eyelids, the distant murmuring, the smell of disinfectant mixed with something sweet.

He reached up—toward the light—

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His fingers twitched. His hand was enveloped in something soft and warm... He grabbed hold of it, securing it in a firm grasp.

Then, blinking against the light, his eyes slowly opened. His world gradually came into focus... and there was Inaba Himeko, her face inches from his, her

eyes brimming with tears.

“Taichi?! Taichi!” She was practically on top of him on the bed.

“...Good morning, Inaba.”

He relinquished his grip on her hand in order to wipe her damp eyes.

“What a relief... Thank god you’re awake! I mean, the pipe itself was pretty small and thin, so I knew you’d be fine, but... Christ, if anything were to happen to you, I... I...”

Taichi stroked her hair. “C’mon, don’t cry...”

He retraced his memory of what had happened. One of the thugs from the factory had attacked them... Taichi had jumped in front of Inaba to shield her, at which point he got hit in the head... He must have passed out shortly afterwards.

He glanced around the room to find that they were not at the hospital but the infirmary at Yamaboshi, and Inaba was the only other person here. Clearly his injury wasn’t that big of a deal.

“Oh... Everyone else is standing guard outside in case those assholes follow us here,” Inaba hastily explained. Evidently she’d guessed his train of thought.

“Gotcha.”

He’d expected to find Nagase asleep, but the bed next to his was empty. *Wait... Why did I expect her to be asleep? Oh, that’s right. I had that weird dream... It was a dream, wasn’t it? No, maybe not... I remember being in control, so maybe it was reality. Maybe it was real...* He sat up.

“Don’t get up yet!” Inaba scolded.

Still, he felt pretty much fine. He touched his head and found that someone had wrapped a gauze bandage around it; the affected area twinged slightly under pressure.

“Please, don’t push yourself... Seriously, if anything happened to you, I... I mean, especially knowing it was my fault...” Her expression crumpled. She looked fragile, on the verge of tears, and he felt an obligation—but more than that, a *desire*—to protect her.

“I just... I...”

[...I need you so bad... I can’t do this without you... I love you... I love you... I love you... I love you... I love you... I love you... I love you so goddamn much, Taichi...!]

It was a Transmission from Inaba. He could feel every ounce of her devotion flooding out at once, washing him away, pulling him under.

“Wait, I don’t mean—well, okay, I *do* mean it—but just ignore it!” Hiding her face in her hands, she shook her head desperately. Through the gaps in her fingers, he could see that she was blushing.

[I love you... I’m crazy about you... I’m head over heels for you... I adore you... You mean so much to me... You complete me... I’m yours forever...]

Her love was so blissfully warm and peaceful, it made his heart ache. She needed him more than he’d ever known anyone to need anything—it was almost hard to believe. And yet, at the same time, the feeling was mutual. Granted, he couldn’t deny that part of it was a desire to give back equal to what he had received... but still, the fact of the matter was, he needed her.

She had taught him so much. Shown him what really mattered. Pointed out his “helper-itis” and called him a “goddamn martyr.” Cared for him enough to keep him in check. Served as a sounding board for his troubles. But most of all, she placed value in him more than anyone else on this earth. He wouldn’t be here today if it wasn’t for her.

Together, they filled each other’s gaps. Together, they made the impossible possible.

Was he moving too fast? After all, he’d only just got done being in love with someone else... and yet, once he stopped to listen to what his heart wanted, the answer was obvious. He could only hope she still wanted it, too.

She’d been waiting for so long... Now that he could see the next step, there was no sense in waiting until things calmed down. He didn’t want to keep her hanging.

This time around, his intention was to pursue a serious, grounded relationship.

And so he asked the question—

“Wanna go out with me?”

The words came to him much easier than he’d expected.

Meanwhile, Inaba froze stock-still, staring blankly at him... for practically a solid minute.

“Uh... WHAAAAAAAT?!”

The moment she finally snapped back to reality, she began to panic, arms flailing, her face flushed beet-red as she repeatedly punched the infirmary bed.

Then, after a spell, she straightened back up again, combing her hair into place with her fingers.

“Y-You think I’m cute?”

Judging from the question, she was officially capital-F Flustered.

“Of course. Super cute,” Taichi replied casually. All shame had gone out the window... or maybe his brain just wasn’t fully awake yet.

“Oh... Cool... Wait, WHAT?! Holy fuck, what the hell did I just ask?!” She shook her head. After taking a moment, she sat down on the bedside chair, her posture perfectly straight, knees together, hands in her lap. “Um... uh... Is... Is this really happening...? But... um... well...”

She hung her head, cheeks still bright red, desperately trying to find her voice again. Seconds ticked by, but Taichi wasn’t in a hurry. He waited quietly, patiently, until at last she looked up at him—directly into his eyes.

And then she responded—

“.....Yes, please.”





Epilogue: Nagase Iori's Final Chapter

The next thing I knew, «Heartseed» was standing there, wearing the body of Gotou Ryuuzen. As with Aoki and Yui, it had purposely cornered me when I was alone.

Just when I was wondering what it wanted with me, it said to me, "I think I'll go ahead and end it here, Nagase-san... For some reason, I felt it would be best to tell you specifically..."

Any fear I felt was far outweighed by disgust. If anything, I wanted to punch it in the face. Why would it choose to make this announcement to me specifically? Was it trying to suggest that I was the star of this little charade once again?

"Now that I think about it, the Sentiment Transmission always seemed to trigger whenever I was at my absolute lowest. You sent all my most cruel thoughts on purpose, didn't you?"

It kept happening so often, I had started to believe I must really be a monster (though to be fair, I was definitely headed in that direction).

"I think that's... something you'll have to decide for yourself, Nagase-san..."

Yeah, yeah, whatever. Screw you.

"Oh well... At least now we've reached a good stopping point... Am I wrong?"

How should I know?

"Perhaps it's time... to transition to the next phase..."

"There's *more*?" I did *not* like the sound of that.

"You know... I never imagined things would turn out this way between us... I always knew you were fascinating, but this is truly something else... Or perhaps I simply have unusual tastes... That would explain why another felt the need to interfere..."

Apparently even «Heartseed» had cultural norms to be worrying about. It was

weirdly relatable, for an otherworldly being. Maybe there was more to «them» than any of us realized...

Then, at last, my fear belatedly kicked in. Even after all these months, «Heartseed» still wasn't the sort of entity I wanted to be alone in a room with.

"Well then... I guess I'll be going now..." And with that, it turned and began to walk away.

Now that I thought about it, surely «Heartseed» didn't *need* to manually pilot Gossan's body away. Couldn't it simply switch his soul back into his body right there on the spot? So why didn't it choose to do that? Was it worried about Gossan finally noticing something fishy about the gaps in his memory? No... Something told me there was more to it than that. Was it just me, or... had «Heartseed» changed?

"When will you finally leave us alone?" I muttered, not expecting an answer.

And yet, by some whim, it turned around. Maybe it really *had* changed.

"Obviously, I wouldn't know..."

Right. Figures. That's what I get for getting my hopes up.

Evidently «Heartseed»'s proclivity for ambiguity hadn't gone anywhere... or so I thought.

As it turned out, I was wrong about that.

"Oh, but—"

□■□■□

On Monday morning, Setouchi Kaoru walked into the classroom with chin-length black hair—a drastic change from her long bleached locks. At first, the other students barely even recognized her. No one had seen this coming, and so it sparked a minor uproar.

While her rebel friends were standing a short distance away, unsure what to say to her, I walked right up to her desk.

"I notice you kept your piercings."

"Yeah... I like them too much to get rid of them, I guess."

“Y’know, I’m actually really digging this classy new look, Kaoru-chan. You’re so cute now!”

“Uh, Iori? Are you trying to say I wasn’t cute before?!”

Me and Setouchi—er, Kaoru-chan—were now officially friends.

While we were squabbling, another one of my friends, Nakayama Mariko, walked over to us with a smile on her face. “What’s going on with you two?! I totally demand an explanation, Iori!”

Despite how horribly I had treated her in recent weeks, it seemed she still cared about me. I’d been worried that I’d need to apologize and explain everything... but maybe it would all work out regardless. *Man, I’m lucky to have such great friends.*

“Just as I predicted... I knew my children would pull through in the end...” muttered Fujishima Maiko, president of Class 1-C, sounding weirdly maternal. Although... *Is it just me, or has she gone back to ogling me the way she used to...?*

After the incident on Saturday, next to no progress had been made on the replacement map. So, as soon as school let out, we all threw ourselves into our prep work. Seeing as I’d been completely slacking off prior to now, I decided to work as hard as possible to make up for it. Even Kaoru-chan offered to help us, which we gratefully accepted.

And so, with all our powers combined, we somehow managed to finish in time for our presentation!

Our replacement was by no means anywhere as good as the original, of course. Still, we made up for it with thorough research, well-rehearsed speeches, and... a certain performance Inaban insisted I do to make up for my truancy. These factors helped to tip the scales in our favor, and our presentation was a total hit!

What exactly was my “performance,” you ask? Well... Let’s just say it was a little something called “Nagase Iori’s High-Speed Cosplay Show,” where I’d repeatedly dash backstage and change into a different themed costume to

match the store or restaurant being presented. A maid uniform, a Chinese *cheongsam* dress, a pro wrestling costume (which some guy in the crowd loudly referred to as a "glorified bikini")... Uggghhhh, I don't even want to think about it!

I mean, obviously I was super into it during the presentation itself, but mostly because I didn't have a choice!

Consequently, this legendary(?) presentation received considerably high marks from the judges. Apparently all the teachers were talking about it back in the staff room, and naturally, Gossan was there to overhear it. Afterwards, he tracked us down to tell us:

"I heard you guys kicked butt out there. Especially you, Nagase. And the jazz band put on their best performance yet! I couldn't miss that, of course. Not after all that effort they put in during rehearsals. Believe it or not... I'm actually really impressed by both my clubs this year! To think I've got you kids fighting over who gets to have me as your advisor... I tell ya, I'm blown away by just how darn popular I am! In fact, I was so touched, I started brainstorming whether there's any way I could still advise both clubs."

It was quite the heartwarming speech... until...

"And you know what I realized? Just because I'm limited to one club *on paper* doesn't mean I can't visit other clubs in my free time! So I've decided I'll officially advise the CRC and just check in on the jazz band whenever I'm not busy. Bam! Loophole in the system, am I right? Now I can choose *both* instead of one or the other! So, whaddya think? Pretty genius of me, wouldn't you sa —*aaaaaggggggghhhhh!* Inaba-san, *that hurts!*"

"Then why didn't you just do that *right from the start*, you goddamn birdbrain?!"

The next thing we knew, she'd put him in a standing armlock.

I've always wondered where she learns all her sick moves... Maybe I'll ask her sometime.

As for those violent thugs, well... Considering we were technically equally

guilty of assault, we didn't bother reporting them to the police. Instead, Inaban teamed up with Fujishima-san, and using her father's government influence combined with the photographic evidence, the two of them "made sure they won't be bothering us anymore." I guess that's that problem solved!

...Real talk, I saw the sinister looks on their faces when they were off whispering to each other, and... Yeah, I'm not sure I want to know the details.

Sometime after that, Taichi and Inaban officially started dating. Yui and Aoki were startled, but supportive; as for me, I was happy for them.

At one point Inaban got super insecure about it. She asked me, "Are you *sure* you're okay with me dating him?"

So I told her, "My thing with Taichi is in the past now. You have nothing to worry about." And I sincerely meant it.

To be honest, I was kinda expecting that she'd be the one to wear the pants in the relationship, but nope! On the contrary, she's gotten all sweet and meek, and she doesn't even try to hide it! She's gone from Inaban to Ina-Bashful!

Seriously, I hope this honeymoon phase ends before the new semester starts, because it's already kinda getting on my nerves.

Man, my life has been such a rollercoaster, it's kind of ridiculous. Even *I* think it's been a little too obnoxiously melodramatic at times. I used to joke about writing it all down and publishing my own autobiography someday, but now I'm actually starting to seriously consider it.

That said, though, the fact of the matter is, my past experiences have taught me a lot of valuable lessons. If it wasn't for everything that happened during the Sentiment Transmission, I wouldn't have realized what life is all about—and then I probably would've wasted countless years being completely miserable.

"How could you fail to realize something so completely obvious?" you might ask. All I can say is this: It's one thing to talk in circles about "what really matters," but it's another thing entirely to actually *understand* it.

I can sit here and tell you how important it is to *follow your heart and live*

your dreams, but it can be hard to picture what that looks like in execution. Obviously we can't all just run around doing literally whatever we want. Sometimes we have to think rationally and consider our surroundings—like me and Taichi back when Inaban got kidnapped. And we have to take care not to let our actions negatively affect innocent bystanders—something Kaoru-chan and I both failed at.

These inhibitions are actually really important... but if you suppress yourself too much, then you stop *living*. So how do you decide when to choose reason over emotion? When to put others first? Well, to be honest, I don't think any of us will ever find the "correct" answer to that. We're only human. All we can do is try our best to be good people.

And when we screw up, we just gotta fight through our failures, make total fools of ourselves, then pick ourselves back up again and *give it another shot*.

For the first time in my life, I think I finally understand what it means to be true to myself. And frankly, I envy those who can innately comprehend it without even trying. For chronic overthinkers like me, it can take a while to get to that point... but hey, at least we get there eventually, right? Better late than never, as they say.

So, where to from here? What's my next goal? If I had to say... Romance, probably.

Taichi showed me how *magical* love can be, and for that, I can never fully express the gratitude I feel. Thank you so much.

Now here I stand, the craziest year of my life safely behind me. Well, okay—maybe it's a little early to call it that. I've got many, many years still to come, and who knows what might happen! Maybe someday I'll look back on freshman year and think, "Hah, that was nothing!"

Now that I'm entering my second year of high school, I'm bound to meet dozens of new people—new classmates as well as all the new freshmen enrolling this year. Will any of these cute little underclassmen join the Cultural Research Club?

...If so, we might have to warn them about a certain all-powerful asshole who likes to make our lives a living hell. Still, I kinda hope we get at least one fresh

face in the CRC, just to liven things up. No matter what happens, as long as we have fun, it'll all be worth it in the end.

I made a lot of mistakes this time around, and I still have a lot to learn. Fortunately, I'm blessed with friends who will always lend a helping hand—and I hope someday I can return the favor. That's how I want to live my life: not as a solitary struggle, but a joint venture. I want to put faith in my tomorrow. After all, my life isn't just a journey—it's who I am. And "finding yourself" means *believing* in yourself.

Maybe I'll stray from the path every now and then, but that's okay, because I know my friends will be there to put me right back on track. So I'll push forward, full speed ahead, and live each day to the fullest!

One last thing, though... I keep thinking about «Heartseed»'s last words to me:

—Don't worry... I can see precisely how this will all end.

At this point, I'm just wondering... Do you think it actually meant it?

The End

Afterword

Thank you for reading *Michi Random*! This is volume 4 of the *Kokoro Connect* series, following Volume 1: *Hito Random*, Volume 2: *Kizu Random*, and Volume 3: *Kako Random*.

Anyway, hello again, everyone! It's your old pal Anda Sadanatsu, back at it again, trying to make the new official abbreviation stick.

KokoroCo!

I can't believe we're already four volumes in! Not a day goes by that I'm not grateful for all of your support. I'm gonna work hard to make this novel series the best it can be, so I hope you'll keep reading!

KokoroCo!

Meanwhile, the Kokoro Connect multimedia project continues. As I announced last volume, a manga adaptation of *Kokoro Connect* is currently being published in Famitsu Comic Clear! You can check it out for free online, so what are you waiting for? I guarantee you'll fall in love with CUTEG-sensei's adorable art!

Also: Kokoro Connect will soon have its very own drama CD featuring a brand-new story (written by Shimo Fumihiko; I also helped out a tiny bit myself) as well as an all-star cast of incredible voice actors! It's scheduled to release on February 16th, 2011, so keep an eye out for it! Together, we've created something truly special.

While I have you, I'd like to make one more little announcement: The next volume is going to be a short story collection. These stories will be set both between and after the events of the four previous volumes, so you won't want to miss it!

...This afterword's turned into nothing but announcements, hasn't it? It's a shame I don't have the page space to write anything more interesting. Sorry about that... Hmm... Well, at least it's efficient, I suppose.

KokoroCo!

Now then, on to the acknowledgments!

First, I'd like to thank everyone who has been supporting the series from the first volume onwards. My work couldn't have been published without you. And to everyone who has sent me fan letters—I'm sorry I can't respond to each of you, but your words of encouragement really mean a lot to me! Thank you so much!

Second, I'd like to thank everyone who worked hard to help me get this book published, particularly my editor. Honestly, I wish I could go around thanking each of you in person.

Third, a HUGE thank you to Shiromizakana-sama for all of your extremely adorable illustrations! I will do everything in my power to craft a story worthy of your talent. Thank you for sticking with me!

Lastly, before I go, I'd like to extend my full gratitude to all of my readers once again. Thank you!

—Anda Sadanatsu
November 2010


THANK YOU FOR READING!
HMPH!
IORI'S QUITE THE TROUBLEMAKER, ISN'T SHE? LOL

Table of Contents

Cover

Color Illustrations

Prologue: I Just Can’t

Chapter 1: Yaegashi Taichi’s Confession

Chapter 2: Valentine’s Day With Inaba Himeko

Chapter 3: Aoki Yoshifumi’s Preferred Battle Tactic

Chapter 4: Yaegashi Taichi’s Tangled Love Life

Chapter 5: Kiriyama Yui’s Dramatic Struggle

Chapter 6: Inaba Himeko’s Commitment

Chapter 7: Yaegashi Taichi’s Epiphany

Chapter 8: Nagase Iori Settles the Score

Chapter 9: The Tipping Point For Yaegashi Taichi

Epilogue: Nagase Iori’s Final Chapter

Afterword

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