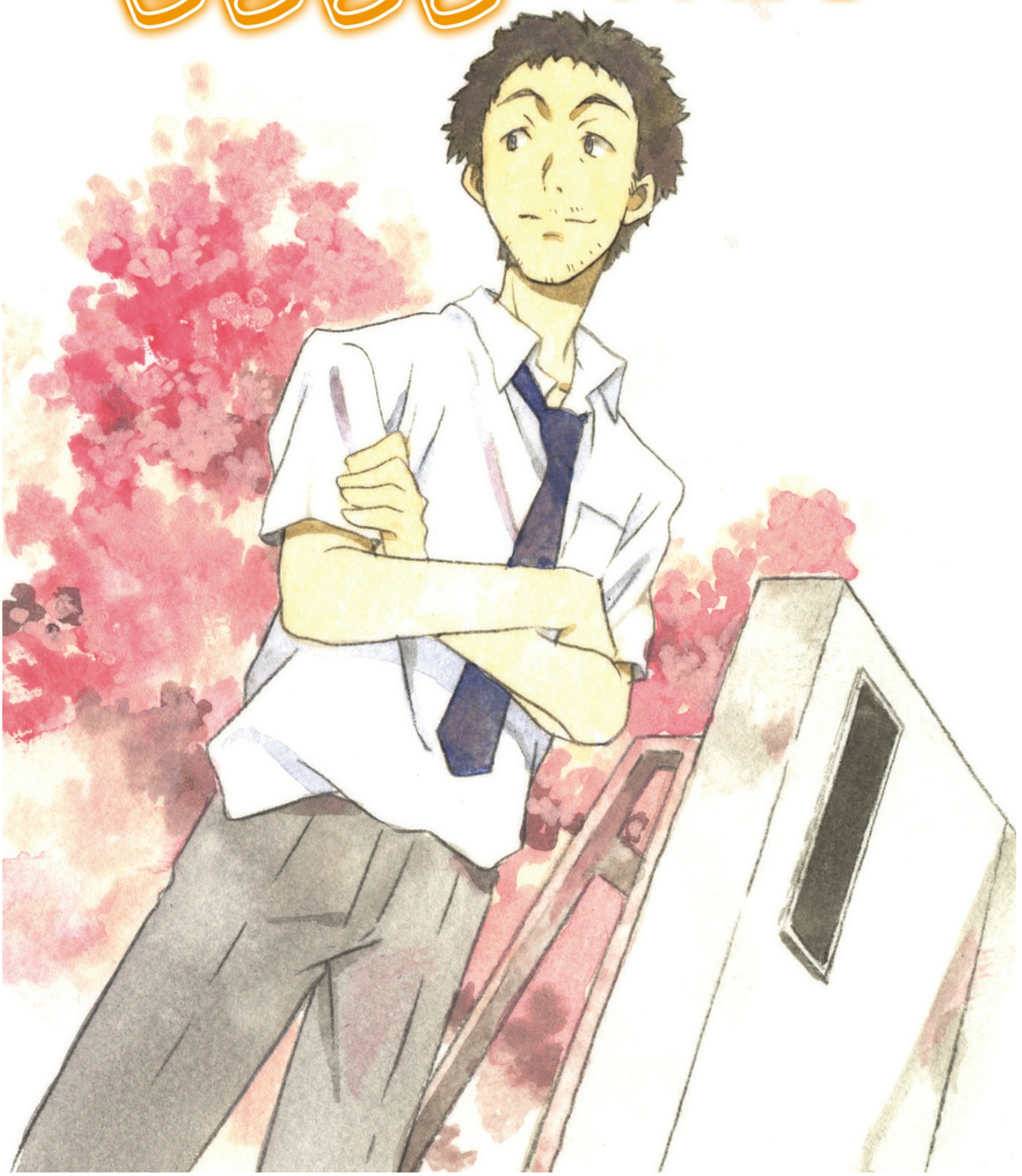

KOKORO CONNECT
CLIP — TIME
Sadanatsu Anda

KOKORO CONNECT

CLIP — TIME




And there, greeted with tumultuous applause, stood none other than their own Nagase Iori.
The crowd exploded in cheers.
SEPTEMBER


That's not the only thing in your face right now, if you'd just pay attention,
I thought.
I wasn't actually going to show him my panties, of course, but according to my research, the mere possibility alone would still trigger the desired effect.
NOVEMBER
OCTOBER
To her, it was probably more serious than that—a capital-D Date.
"Oh god, what do I do? I've never gone on a date before!"


"Look at you kids, all hyped up! In that case... I guess we'll all run the marathon!"
"I want to do everything you guys do... That's what it means to 'sit in' on club activities!"
"In that case, I'll run the marathon too. I may as well get a good workout while I'm at it."
APRIL
YEAR TWO
Nagase Iori
Enjouji Shino
Uwa Chihiro
Yaegashi Taichi

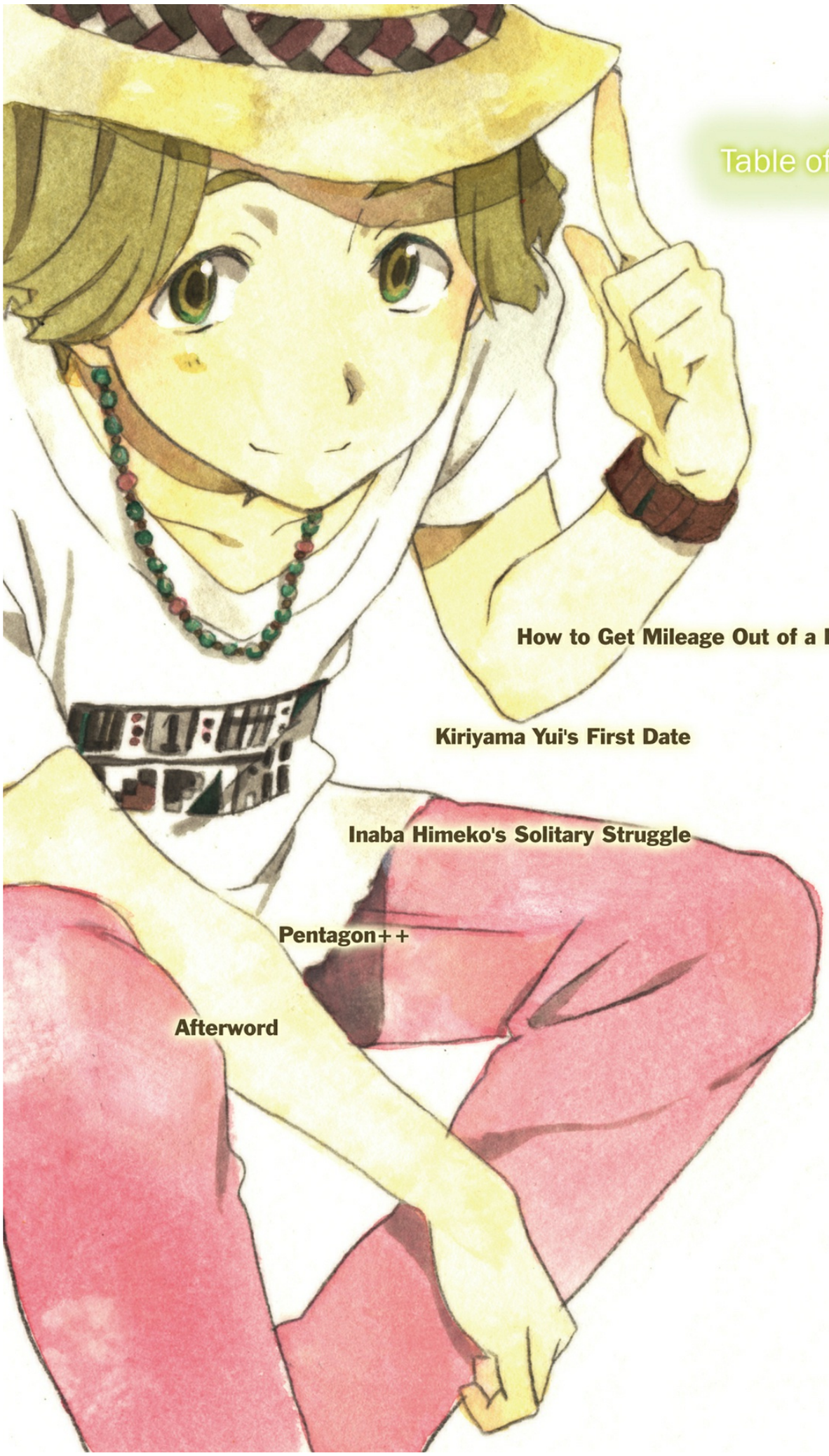


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HOW TO GET MILEAGE OUT OF A PAPARAZZI PHOTO



“The CRC’s pretty unstoppable when we put our heads together, wouldn’t you say?” Nagase Iori asked, entirely unprompted, of Yaegashi Taichi.

Sometimes this baffling beauty was rather hard to read.

“What do you mean?” Taichi replied.

“You know, just... unstoppable!”

“What? That’s so vague. How am I supposed to respond to that?”

“Well, I think we each bring a lot to the table... and there’s a lot we can only manage with the full group, y’know?”

Yaegashi Taichi. Nagase Iori. Inaba Himeko. Kiriyama Yui. Aoki Yoshifumi. Each of them a critical cog in the machine that was the Cultural Research Club.

“You’ve got a point. Everyone’s got their own areas of expertise... Well, except for me. I’m nothing special.” He wasn’t trying to be self-deprecating—just a plain statement of fact. Compared to the others, he was average at best.

“That’s not true at all. We wouldn’t be a team without you.” She twirled the strands of her ponytail around her finger.

“You really think so? Not that I’m trying to argue with you or anything.”

Maybe the “right” option here would be to simply nod along, but for some reason he couldn’t let it go.

“Okay, let’s put it this way. Who do you think is the most important member of the club? No right or wrong answer, just wondering.”

“Well, it’s gotta be you, right? You’re the club president.”

“Oh boy... You really don’t get it, do you?” She sighed and slumped her shoulders in a show of exasperation. “The most important member is *you*, Taichi. No two ways about it.”

Her words seeped into his heart, and for a moment, he almost accepted it.

Almost.

Instead, he hastily shook his head. “No, no, no! That can’t be true.”

“Well, it is.”

“No, it isn’t—”

“Is too.”

“Is not!”

“Is too!”

“...Fine, whatever! Will you just let me say my piece?!”

“You really hate the idea of you being important, don’t you?”

“No, I don’t hate it. It’s just... kind of hard to believe, I guess.”

“Hmph... Well, I think you should try. It can’t hurt to go through life believing in your own self-worth, y’know?”

“...Valid point. That’s a good way to look at it, actually.”

But he still couldn’t quite see himself as the central figure in their club.

“Dang it, Taichi... I really wish you’d see things my way...” Her tone was light and casual, but he could tell she was genuinely disappointed.

“You think too highly of me. I’m really not that amazing, I promise.” Still, he found himself wanting to be the kind of guy she thought he was. He could talk the talk all he wanted, but until he had proved himself capable, something about it didn’t feel right. “What *is* self-worth, anyway...?” he mused to himself aloud.

But his question faded away in the aether, unnoticed by Nagase, and the clubroom fell silent once more—

“Holy moly macaroni, I am *starving*!” she blurted out of nowhere, and consequently, the dramatic tension faded away into the aether as well.

□■□

The Yamaboshi High School Cultural Research Club, also known as the CRC. Objective: “a broader scope of research unfettered by existing frameworks.” (Translation: anything goes.) Currently it consisted of five first-year students.

Despite its classy name, it was something of a half-assed club with no real rules or restrictions, save for one exception: the production and submission of a monthly periodical entitled “The Culture Bulletin.”

It was the middle of summer break, and the five members of the CRC were sitting around the tables in the clubroom.

“Starting now, we’ll be presenting our article topics for submission in the Culture Festival Special Edition of the Culture Bulletin,” said vice president Inaba Himeko, all without the slightest hitch. She sat at the head of the table; her glossy dark shoulder-length hair and sharp, angular features afforded her an air of competence.

Today they were scheduled to discuss the upcoming Culture Festival, which would take place at the start of September, immediately after summer break ended.

“Let’s go clockwise, starting with Yui.” Without hesitation, Inaba indicated a petite girl with long chestnut-colored hair by the name of Kiriyama Yui, who giggled.

“Oh, just wait until you get a load of mine! All the girls are going to love it—especially all the visiting middle schoolers! They’ll want to enroll into our school, like, for sure!” Kiriyama declared as she pulled a sheet of paper from her bag. “Behold: ‘Perfect Your Style With The Top Ten Hottest Accessories Chosen By High School Fashionistas’!” She thrust out her chest in triumph as she held the draft up for all to see—

“Cool. Iori, you’re next,” Inaba continued.

“W-Wait a minute! ‘Cool’? That’s all I get? Just ‘cool’?!” Kiriyama leapt to her feet, her chair clattering behind her.

“That’s it,” Inaba replied flatly. It was obvious at a glance that she cared far, far less about this than Kiriyama.

“That’s *unacceptable*! I don’t care if you want to ignore the guys, but when it comes to us girls, you should *not* be blowing us off like that!”

Inaba turned to Nagase. “What am I supposed to say here, Iori?”

“I dunno... There’s not much we really *can* say when it comes to fashion stuff,” Nagase shrugged with a grin.

“F-Fine, whatever! I get it! Not like either of *you* need to care about fashion!

Inaba's such a natural bombshell she doesn't even have to try... and everyone says Iori's the prettiest girl in our grade..."

"Aww, c'mon, Kiriyama. You've got nothing to worry about. You're just as pretty as they are," Taichi reassured her.

"Whuh-huh?! O-Oh... Right. Thanks, Taichi," Kiriyama replied, looking a little startled.

"Hold on a minute... That's MY job! I mean, you're totally right, don't get me wrong," Aoki Yoshifumi cut in. (This lanky youth was by no means Kiriyama's boyfriend, but not for lack of trying.) "But yeah, Yui, what he said. You're lookin' gorgeous today!"

"I don't care what *you* think of me," she snapped.

Once again, the enthusiasm differential between the two was painfully apparent.

"Alright, alright. If you want my feedback... I think the girls will like it, probably. And maybe putting it in the Culture Bulletin will attract more readers. No complaints here, Yui."

Kiriyama sat back in her chair with a pout... No, the corners of her mouth were turned up. Sure enough, Inaba's shameless pandering had the desired effect.

"Okay, now that Yui's got the green light from Inaban, it's my turn! Presenting!" Nagase (who was supposed to be the club president, mind you) gleefully unfolded her crumpled-up sheet of paper. " 'A Day in the Life of a Yamaboshi Student: An Exclusive Scoop on Inaba Himeko.' "

"What the fuck?! You want to publish details of my personal life? Without my permission?!"

"I was just thinking, y'know, since it's supposed to be a school newspaper and all, it'd be nice to do a spotlight feature on a Yamaboshi student every now and then."

"I get that, and it's a good idea in concept, but I don't want that spotlight on *me*, thanks!"

“Aww, c’mon! Think about it! When I was brainstorming ideas for my article, I asked myself ‘If I was reading the Culture Bulletin, what’s the one thing I’d wanna find out more than anything?’ and the answer was obviously ‘Inaban’s private life’!”

“I admit, I’m a little curious myself,” Taichi muttered under his breath.

“Ooh, me too!” shouted Aoki.

“Me three!” shouted Kiriyama.

“Jesus Christ, how much do you people like me?! Get a life!”

“It’s not our fault you’re so secretive, Inaban. Obviously we’re gonna get a little curious!”

“You’re no open book yourself, Iori!” Inaba shot back, but Nagase shrugged innocently. “Fine, whatever. This little exposé is *not* happening, got it?! I’m not gonna let you give away my personal information to some unspecified number of people! Oh, I know. A while back, someone suggested doing an article on the National Athletic Meet, right? Just go with that.”

“Aww, c’mooon! I was just trying to infringe on your privacy, that’s all!”

“Was that supposed to convince me? Because now I trust you even *less*. Look, I’m not doing your little spotlight, and that’s final! You’re doing an article on the Athletic Meet! Done and done!” Nagase started to sulk, but Inaba ignored her. “Now let’s move on! Aoki, you’re up!”

“Since this is the Culture Festival Special Edition, figured I’d go with somethin’ extra special, with reader participation and a prize.”

“That sounds interesting,” Taichi commented.

“I know, right? I’ve titled it ‘Calling All Love Gurus! Rescue This Romance... For a Reward!’ ”

“Definitely sounds like a Culture Festival article. Not bad, considering who came up with it.” Evidently he’d even won Inaba’s approval, bizarrely enough.

“Yesss! Inabacchan’s on board with it! You could’ve left off the part after ‘Not bad,’ though!”

“So, what’s it about?” Nagase asked.

“Oho, looks like I’ve piqued Iori-chan’s curiosity! Well then, allow me to explain! Our troubled letter writer, A.Y., has a crush on someone—we’ll call her K.Y.—but she’s too shy to even go on a date with him. So, we’ll list all the relevant information and poll the readers for their advice—”

Kiriyama slammed her hands on the table. “Stop right there! A.Y. and K.Y.?! That’s obviously ‘Aoki Yoshifumi’ and ‘Kiriyama Yui’!”

“H-How did you know?!”

“Anyone with half a brain would figure it out, genius! And what do you mean by ‘relevant information’?!”

“Well, y’know, people need context before they can offer up good ideas... So, I’ll try all the suggestions, and then I’ll give the prize to the person whose idea worked—”

“Hold it! *That’s* what your prize is for?! Literally no one’s going to win, stupid!”

“Y-You can’t say that for sure! I mean, okay, maybe it’s ‘winning the lottery’ levels of impossible, but even then there’s still a teeny tiny chance, right?”

“So you’ve accepted that your chances are infinitesimally small, I take it.” Taichi was impressed by Aoki’s courage.

Naturally, Kiriyama threw a fit until the idea was officially shitcanned.

“Back to the drawing board, Aoki. Taichi, you’re next.”

At Inaba’s prompting, Taichi pulled out his article draft and unfolded it. “Like the rest of you, I wanted to write something with a little more mainstream appeal this time around. It’s titled ‘Pro Wrestling 101: Tips to Heighten Your Viewing Experience.’ Obviously, I focused primarily on my own preferred—”

“Fuck, I forgot I didn’t need to ask you!” Inaba shouted.

“Alert! Alert! Fanboy mode engaged!” Nagase joined in.

“Hold on, guys. Settle down. Now, I know my articles usually require too much specialized knowledge for the average person to understand, but this

time I've intentionally written it so absolutely anyone—"

"If you want people to understand your articles, *stop writing about pro wrestling*!" Inaba shouted again.

"I'm sure your article's *fine*, Taichi!" Nagase joined in... again.

"No, seriously, hear me out! I admit, I touch on some high-level concepts, like 'the more basic techniques (Boston crab, etc.) present in the opening act, the more exciting it makes the main event,' but—"

"Enough! Just write whatever you want!" Exasperated, Inaba waved her hand dismissively.

"Let's hear *your* article, then," Taichi shot back sulkily.

"Well... Seeing as it's a festival and all, I was thinking we've earned the right to go a little hog-wild." As she spoke, she pulled out a single photo.

Curious to discover Inaba's definition of "hog-wild," Taichi leaned in to get a better look—and froze.

He stared blankly, rooted to the spot. His mouth wouldn't work.

Beside him, the other three CRC members were in an uproar... and for good reason.

There, depicted in her photograph, were two faculty members employed at Yamaboshi High School... holding hands in a cafe.

It was a scandal on par with anything you'd read in a celebrity gossip rag.

"Wh-Where the hell did you get this pic...?" Taichi asked, mildly horrified.

Inaba chuckled. "Not telling." She was a total enigma, as always.

"W-Wait... Okay, maybe it doesn't matter how you got your paws on this, but... surely we can't publish it in a *school-sanctioned newspaper*!"

He glanced over at the other three, who were all busy shouting "Is this legit?! No Photoshop?!" and "*Him*?! With *her*?! You're joking, right?!" and "Holy mackerel!" and so on.

"Sure we can... as long as we get it cleared with our club supervisor."

“There’s no way he’ll approve it! And even on the off-chance he does, and we print it... how are we supposed to hand them out? If any of the teachers see it —*especially* these two—we’re dead meat!”

“Hmph! That’s hardly an obstacle. Not for the five of us, anyway.”

—The CRC’s pretty unstoppable when we put our heads together, wouldn’t you say?

“You say that now, but you *know* they’re not going to let us walk away from this with just a slap on the wrist!” Taichi cautioned.

Inaba’s expression hardened. “I’ll admit, even if we think it all through perfectly, we still might not be able to pull it off without stepping on a few toes... especially if we do it the same way *anyone else* would do it. But we’re gonna do this our way, and we’re gonna nail it. How do I know this?” She smirked and smugly folded her arms. “Because when we put our heads together, the five of us are invincible... if only on school grounds.”

Her confidence was utterly baseless. He knew that. And yet he found himself wanting to believe in her anyway.

“Now then, everyone! Commence the operation!”

□■□

The Culture Festival was now just one short week away, and Yamaboshi High School was filled with the sounds of banging hammers, choir practice, and chatter. Meanwhile, the CRC’s plan was well underway.

Today found Taichi, Nagase, and Inaba in the staff room, Culture Bulletin manuscript in hand, hoping to get the green light for publication from their club supervisor, Gotou Ryuuzen (physics teacher, age 25). This would prove to be their first hurdle.

“Well, if it isn’t the CRC kids! Or the three from 1-C, anyway. What’s up, friendos? How’s the cafe coming along?”

Taichi, Nagase, and Inaba were all students in Class 1-C, the class for which Gotou served as advisor. Thus, he was the teacher with whom they had the closest working relationship.

“Our class president runs a tight ship, as I’m sure you know, so everything’s right on schedule... Maybe a little *too* on schedule. Anyway, Gotou, we need you to sign off on our manuscript, so if you would be so kind as to pretend to read it, like you always do, I’d appreciate it.”

Granted, this relationship, however close it may have been, did not excuse Inaba’s blatant disrespect.

“Inaba, I keep telling you, if you can’t call me Sensei, at least stick to Gossan. Otherwise you undermine my authority as—wait, what the? Your submission seems a little different this month.”

Evidently his “authority” was not as pressing as the Culture Festival Special Edition. Taichi was dying to point this out, of course, but he bit back the impulse.

“What’s with the photo and the giant headline? Wait... Is that... Tanaka the social studies teacher with the one-in-a-million drop-dead-gorgeous Hirata Ryouko-sensei?! Were they an item this whole time?! I never heard about this!”

“Gossan, please don’t make inappropriate comments about your coworker,” Taichi retorted, unable to stop himself.

“They’re not actually an item. Not yet,” said Inaba.

Gotou heaved a sigh of relief. “Oh, thank god. They’ve gotta be, like, twenty years apart!”

“But apparently it’s only a matter of time before they get together.”

“What?! I thought Tanaka-sensei was married to his job! Damn it, and there I was getting pretty worried about him... Meanwhile he was out landing himself a major catch!” Gotou clutched his hair in frustration.

Meanwhile, Inaba snickered. From the way she toyed with him, you’d never guess that he was technically her teacher.

“Uggghhh... That just zapped any motivation I had to work today... Blegh. Tonight I’m gonna go home and get wasted.”

“So anyway, Gossan! Could we get your stamp of approval on this bad boy?” Nagase asked, waving the manuscript in the air.

“You want it that bad, stamp it yourself. I trust you kids not to write anything you’re not supposed to. Hah...”

For what it was worth, he did seem to trust them... for some reason.

“Yeah, I figured you would say that, so I already went and stamped it,” Nagase replied, beaming.

“You two are weirdly in sync today...” Taichi muttered to himself, mildly concerned.

And so, thanks to Inaba’s psychological warfare, they cleared the first hurdle like it was barely an obstacle at all.

Now that they were cleared for publication, they summoned Kiriyama and Aoki to join them in the clubroom. Recently, the two of them had grown rather busy with dance practice for the event their class would be holding for the Culture Festival, and so this was a rare opportunity to hang out as a group.

The topic of the day, naturally, was the Special Edition.

“I’m really not sure we should be publishing that paparazzi photo without their consent,” Taichi told Inaba.

“We’ll be *fine*, Taichi. According to my investigation, their feelings are mutual, but Tanaka-sensei’s notoriously uptight, and they’re both too worried about the age gap to make a move. But this right here? This will give them the push they need to take the plunge. We aren’t overstepping our bounds—I’m 99% sure of that.”

“Well, what about that 1% chance we *are*? You know, I can’t stop wondering... How the hell do you get all this information, anyway?”

“Like I keep telling you, it’s a secret.” She cackled.

“Your evil villain laugh isn’t exactly reassuring here, Inaba...”

It was even more frightening coming from someone as naturally pretty as she was.

“We’ll just have to trust her on this,” said Kiriyama. “Now let’s hurry up and figure out how we’re going to distribute all the copies. We need to make it so the teachers can’t confiscate them partway through, right?” Her long reddish-

brown hair swayed as she fanned herself with her clipboard.

“We do technically have permission to publish the photo... but just from Gossan. And it’s not like he actually thought this through,” muttered Taichi. He strongly doubted Gotou had much clout among the faculty.

“Look, people, this is a non-issue,” Inaba smirked.

“You have a plan, I take it?” Taichi asked. Whatever it was, if she was that confident about it, then surely it had to be extremely well-thought-out and complicated—

“We hand them out all at once. End of story.”

—or not.

“Yeah, that might actually be our best option. Straight and to the point,” Nagase nodded. She leaned in. “Ooh, I know! Why don’t we make it something to remember? Dump ‘em from the rooftop or something!”

“I like the way you think, Iori-chan! Add a little spice to this festival! Ooh, and y’know what would be even better? If we set off fireworks at the same time!”

“Aoki, you’re a genius! Now *that’s* how you make an impression!”

They were a little *too* excited about this, in Taichi’s estimation.

“If we make a big spectacle of ourselves, it’ll make everyone want to read the Bulletin... and if we hand them out all at once, we’ll be done in no time flat! Two birds with one stone!” Kiriyama chimed in enthusiastically.

“Heh! Not bad. We’ll need to make sure there’s nothing flammable nearby, of course... And we can’t just toss the full stack. We should limit the amount we toss... then either we leave the rest somewhere or hand them out, I guess... Oh, and we’ll need to check the wind conditions for the day of the festival... And we’ll need to pick up the excess after we’re done...”

Evidently Inaba was already looking to weave it into their existing plan.

“You know, Inaba, sometimes I can’t tell if you’re a genius or just downright insane.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Taichi. I’m *at least* the smartest person in the club.”

She looked like she meant it, too.

“Well, if we’re gonna toss ‘em...” All of a sudden, Aoki leapt to his feet. “I’VE GOT IT!”

Kiriyama rolled her eyes. “Oh my god, what is it now? It *better* not be something stupid.”

“Trust me, Yui, it’s brilliant! I’m on top of my game today! Listen, guys. If we’re doin’ this, we should wait until the main stage is at its most hype! And when is that? Right when they announce the winner of the Miss Yamaboshi Pageant! How about it?!”

“...That’s so totally average, I don’t even know what to say.”

“Aww, c’mon! Is average such a bad thing when it’s me?!”

“It’s not a bad idea, but it’s... missing something, y’know?” Nagase told him.

“What do you people want from me?! Eh, whatevs. Doesn’t matter.” And with that, Aoki had shrugged it off at the speed of light.

“Then let’s sweeten the deal,” Inaba cut in. She paused until everyone’s eyes were on her, then continued, “Wouldn’t it be hilarious if the winner of the pageant was one of us?”

The others murmured in surprise.

“That would be crazy!” Nagase mused. “But which one of us could possibly—”

“*You*, idiot,” Inaba interrupted. “Was that supposed to be sarcasm or something? No, who am I kidding... You probably meant every word of that.”

“Oh, *please*! Look, I know I’m pretty, but I don’t think I’m *that* pretty...”

“So you admit you think you’re pretty,” Taichi retorted. Granted, she wasn’t exactly wrong. Just overly honest, perhaps.

“You can do it, Iori! They select a winner for each grade level, and you’re objectively the prettiest girl in our grade, so clearly you’ve got this in the bag! Trust me, I know cute when I see it,” said Kiriyama.

“You sound rather proud of yourself,” Taichi retorted again.

“C’mon, guys! You both have just as much potential as I do! You could win it!”

Nagase insisted.

“Well, yes. I *am* considered conventionally attractive, as I understand it,” Inaba replied.

“And I’m pretty cute myself,” Kiriyama added.

Correction: *All* the CRC girls were overly honest.

“For the record, I think Yui’s the pr—GAH!” Aoki yelped as Inaba punched him in the shoulder.

“Shut it, dumbass! Argh, whatever! The point is, Iori’s a shoo-in! Tch... I’ll have to use my trump card... Tell her, Taichi!”

“Tell her *what*?” Taichi asked, flustered.

“If you tell her she can do it, I’m sure it’ll all work out!”

It was actually refreshing, having Inaba dump all responsibility on him for a change.

“I’m not sure it’ll be that easy, but... I mean, I *do* think Nagase has the looks to win a pageant,” Taichi admitted.

“So... am I right in thinking... you’re saying you think I’m really pretty?” Her innocent gaze fixed on his.

“Y-Yeah, basically,” he nodded.

A few seconds of silence passed as Nagase processed this response. Then she smiled—so shyly, so sweetly, it nearly took his breath away.

“That’s weird... For some reason, when you put it like that, I’m almost tempted to do it... Okay, fine! I’ll enter the pageant! And I’ll win! And that’s when we’ll make it rain Culture Bulletins!” Nagase declared loudly, thrusting her fist into the air.

“Atta girl, Iori-chan! You can do it!” Aoki cheered.

“They let you wear whatever costume you want for the pageant, right?! Oh my gosh, what should we have you wear?! Hee hee! I’m gonna make you super-mega-adorbs, or my name isn’t Kiriyama Yui!”

As Kiriyama squealed with excitement, Taichi glanced at Inaba to find her

looking back at him, her head held high, with a smirk on her face that said *I told you so*.

“I’m sure that was just a coincidence,” he insisted.

“Hah!” Inaba scoffed. “You keep telling yourself that, buddy. Anyway, we’re gonna need the biggest fireworks we can get our hands on... Other than that, we should be set...” Inaba pulled her laptop over and began to type.

“Let’s do this, Taichi! Let’s make this a Culture Festival to remember!” Nagase exclaimed, grinning from ear to ear as she held out her fist in his direction.

So what was it he brought to the table in this group? He wasn’t sure. But even if it wasn’t much... he still wanted to give it his all.

“Damn straight. If we’re doing this, we’re going to do it right.”

He pressed his knuckles to hers in a fist bump.

□■□

And so the day of the Culture Festival was upon them at last.

The weather was perfect for their purposes—clear skies with only a slight breeze. This resulted in a larger-than-expected turnout, and the Yamaboshi campus was abuzz with energy.

Some time after noon, the CRC (minus Nagase) headed to the main stage. The place was packed like sardines; Taichi worried he might accidentally kick the heels of the person in front of him.

When they arrived, the pageant was well underway, showcasing each first-year contestant. This was the moment that would decide the fate of “Operation Bulletin Blitz,” as Inaba liked to call it. Of course, even if Nagase were to lose, this wouldn’t impact the plan itself; naturally, Inaba had come up with a backup plan to account for that. Still, they were operating under the assumption that she’d win, and they hoped they wouldn’t have to switch gears at the last moment... Well, that and they wanted the mission to be a complete success, obviously.

“I looked up all the contestants at the first-year grade level. They’re all decently pretty, but they don’t stand a chance against Iori,” Kiriyama declared,

carrying a tray of takoyaki balls she had apparently purchased on their way here. Her long hair was tied up in a ponytail, likely to keep it out of her face during Class 1-A's dance performance.

Onstage, the eager emcee was asking the contestants a variety of borderline-inappropriate questions that provoked gasps and cheers from the audience. *C'mon, man, you can't go asking her what her cup size—aaaaand she punched him. Called it.*

Around them, a few onlookers shouted things like "Get him!" and "Kick his ass!" Needless to say, the crowd was hyped.

"Sorry I couldn't help with the costume fitting. How'd it go?" Inaba asked Kiriyama.

"Ghhck...! It burnsh...! Gah, these takoyaki balls are too dang hot!" she choked.

"For real? Lemme try!" Aoki opened his mouth wide.

"I'm not going to feed it to you, you weirdo!" she snapped.

Guess nothing's changed on that front.

"Anyway, what were we talking about? Oh, the costume! Yeah, it went perfectly! I had a heck of a time deciding, but in the end I decided to just go with my favorite!"

"Oh boy..." Taichi muttered.

"I've always wanted to make her wear it at least once, y'know? I can't wait for you to see it—it's going to be great! Everybody tell her how gorgeous she is so we can make her wear a bunch of other costumes later, okay?"

"Who exactly stands to benefit from Nagase in costume?" Taichi retorted again.

"Well, *me*, duh," Kiriyama (notorious lover of all things cute) answered as though it were the most obvious thing in the world. "What's the harm in making her our eye candy? Gosh, it must be so great to be that cute! I wish I could be her for a day... I could wear sooo many different outfits! God, I love cute! Cute or bust! Cute for life!" Evidently Kiriyama could entertain herself

with or without anyone else contributing to the conversation. “Ghhck—sho hot! Too dang hot! Wh... Inaba! Don’t swipe my food!”

“Mmm... You know what I think? I think you just have a sensitive tongue!” Inaba declared, pointing her toothpick in Kiriyama’s face.

“Pffft... Inabacchan... You’ve got a bit of seaweed stuck on your tooth—OUCH! Did you really have to hit me?! Don’t shoot the messenger, man!”

“Coming from you, it undermines my dignity as a human being.”

“Gah...! I think that’s the meanest thing anyone’s ever said to me...”

They were barely even watching the stage at this point.

“...Thank you very much! Next up, contestant #4!”

“Oh, that’s Iori-chan’s number!” Aoki exclaimed.

“What? That was fast! Oh god, where’s my camera... Ugh, I can’t do this one-handed! Stupid takoyaki!”

“That’s what you get for buying it,” Taichi retorted under his breath as he directed his attention back to the stage.

There, a girl walked out from backstage, clad in a light pink flower-patterned yukata. It was the perfect color—not too garish, not too dull; the sort of color Taichi could only describe as *charming*. The girl wearing it had such perfect porcelain skin, too... Altogether, she was reminiscent of cherry blossom petals atop freshly fallen snow.

Even from a distance, it was easy to make out her large, bright eyes and symmetrical features. Her silky, medium-length dark hair was tied back with a single scarlet ribbon.

Then, finally, at the center of the stage, she came to a stop, tilted her head slightly, and smiled—an infectious, heartwarming smile.

The crowd exploded in cheers. And there, greeted with tumultuous applause, stood none other than their own Nagase Iori.

Wordlessly, Taichi stared at her, entranced.

“Holy crap, dude! I always knew Iori-chan was pretty, but this is somethin’

else!” Aoki howled with glee.

“Hmph! What’d I tell you? If there’s one thing I know, it’s how to put an outfit together. And I put a lot of effort into her hair, too! But most of it’s just her own natural beauty, obviously,” Kiriyama grinned, pointing her camera at the stage.

“We haven’t seen all the contestants, and it’ll depend heavily on how many vote for her... but I think it’s safe to say we’ve won,” Inaba smirked.

And while normally Taichi might’ve scolded her for getting ahead of herself, in this case, there was no doubt in his mind that she was right.

□■□

At Yamaboshi High School, it was strictly forbidden to run in the hallways. Taichi knew this, of course, but nevertheless there he was, running just fast enough that he wouldn’t crash into anyone.

Beside him were Kiriyama and Aoki, still dressed in the same traditional *happi* coats they had worn during their dance performance.

Thus far, all had gone according to plan—but now Operation Bulletin Blitz had hit its first critical snag. In a few minutes the main stage would announce the winners of the Miss Yamaboshi Pageant, at which point they were scheduled to dump the Culture Bulletin from the rooftop, but *literally everyone* was running late, and now there was a strong chance they wouldn’t make it in time.

“How is it *you two* got held up?! I thought you said you’d have plenty of time!” Taichi exclaimed at the others.

“We didn’t... know there... would be... an encore...!” Aoki wheezed. After two back-to-back dance performances, this last-minute sprint had him completely out of breath. “Wh... What about... you...? I thought you... said your... shift would... end early...!”

“It was supposed to, but people kept asking me for help...”

At this, Kiriyama sighed heavily. “Your helper-itis strikes again...”

Unlike Aoki, two dance performances had barely put a dent in her stamina. Though she had long since quit karate, she was clearly still in better shape than a majority of the other students.

But then, three men appeared before them, each with a build like a rugby player, each wearing a frilly apron. They seemed to serve as gatekeepers, blocking off the hall.

“You three! I’ll bet you’re all starving, aren’t you?”

“Oh, they’re starving, alright!”

“Table for three, coming right up!”

The men spoke one after another, with phony customer-service smiles plastered on their faces.

“The combo meal at our cafe is a total bargain!”

“Let’s go with that!”

“Hey, chef! Three combo meals!”

Taichi hit the brakes and came to a stop. “Wh... What’s going on...?”

The other two followed suit.

“I’ve heard rumors about this... It’s a tactic where they start aggressively pursuing customers near the end of the festival so they can use up all their ingredients. Plenty of clubs run food stalls, so a lot of the time it’s their only option if they want to compete. Totally not cool,” Kiriyama muttered, looking somewhere between impressed and disgusted.

Meanwhile, the three apron-men were closing in. There was no chance they’d let their prey slip past them... and it would cost them too much time to loop back and take a different route.

So what was it Taichi could contribute to the team?

“I’ll be the decoy. You guys sneak past while they’re distracted, and I’ll catch up later.”

“Decoy? Oh, brother... Alright, wise guy, let’s hear your plan.” Kiriyama sounded more than a little annoyed.

“My plan? Well, obviously I’ll just eat the combo meal. Or all three, if I have to. That way it helps their cafe, too.”

She sighed. “You really are stupid, aren’t you? God, how can one guy be such

a pushover?! Who cares about helping their cafe right now?!” She had gone from annoyed to furious, and Taichi winced. “Forget it. We are NOT doing that, okay?! We’re already shorthanded with Iori gone... We just don’t have time!”

“Then what do we do?”

“*I’ll* be the decoy. I’ll draw their attention, and you guys run past them. Got it?”

“No! Don’t sacrifice yourself, Yui!” Aoki shouted dramatically.

“Trust me, I’ll be fine. Who do you take me for? Now then... here we go!”

Without even waiting for their counter-argument, Kiriyama bolted forward toward the apron-men, looking pitifully petite in contrast with their hulking figures.

“Nngh... Taichi... Haah... haah... We gotta go!” Aoki shouted as he took off running.

Taichi had no choice but to follow him. After all, he couldn’t let Kiriyama’s sacrifice go to waste.

“Whoa there, missy!”

“Where are you off to in such a hurry?”

“The entrance is that way!”

Sure enough, her drastic measure had caught their attention... and while they were distracted, Taichi and Aoki slipped right on past them.

“What the?!”

“Damn!”

“We’ve been had!”

The apron-men spun around, but it was already too late.

Taichi glanced back at Kiriyama. She looked a tiny bit frightened... but her gaze was sharp, piercing, and most of all, burning with the spirit of a warrior. Their only option was to believe in her. Surely her karate skills weren’t that rusty—

“We’ll have to settle for this one... Gotcha!”

But that was the moment Taichi overheard the worst possible statement. He couldn’t believe his ears. They caught Kiriyama? He stopped short and whirled around—

“Wh... It was just an after-image?!”

They’re just joking about that, right? Kiriyama can’t actually move that fast... right?

Telling himself the apron-men were just good sports who were playing along, Taichi took off running once more... and a split-second later, Kiriyama jogged up beside him. When he looked over at her, she shot him a mischievous grin and gave him a thumbs-up.

“Damn, girl, you rock! I’m in love all over again!” Aoki shouted, his exhaustion miraculously cured.

As always, it was downright frightening just how much Kiriyama was capable of.

□■□

And so they managed to make it in time, thanks in part to the pageant’s own delays. When they arrived, Inaba was already waiting for them; now all that was left was to retrieve the prints of the Culture Bulletin from the classroom directly beneath them, then get the fireworks ready...

Or so they thought.

For when they reached the roof, they discovered a far greater crisis than the one they had just escaped.

“How did this happen?!” Taichi hissed at Inaba, taking care to keep his voice down.

“Well, we had to go and get permission from the Festival Committee for the fireworks and the, uh... *confetti*. And when we explained it to them, they told us we’d need a teacher to supervise us... I wish I’d known about this ahead of time, goddamnit...!” Inaba spat venomously, her gaze fixed on their delegated babysitter.

This babysitter was, of course, none other than Tanaka-sensei, social studies teacher and one half of the very scandal they were about to blow the whistle on.

At the moment, he was quietly watching as Kiriyama and Aoki set up the fireworks; as usual, he wore a disgruntled look on his face like someone had taken away his birthday.

“Looks like the fireworks are ready to go, but... what are we going to do about the Culture Bulletin with Tanaka-sensei breathing down our necks...?” Taichi couldn’t imagine he would sit back and let them pass out photos of him holding hands with a fellow colleague.

“There’s no way. He’ll snatch them right out of our hands, guaranteed. Ugh... With him around, we’re dead in the water...” Normally Inaba was always confident to the point of arrogance, but this setback had her hanging her head in despondence.

“This can’t be happening...”

Taichi couldn’t believe what he was seeing—

“Buuut... do you really think I’m just gonna lie down and accept defeat? Take a wild guess.”

In a blink, her despair had vanished, and in its place was what Taichi could only describe as a shit-eating grin.

“Knowing you? Absolutely not.” Internally he scoffed at himself for ever thinking she’d thrown in the towel. This was Inaba. Once she committed to something, she would do whatever it took to make it happen.

“Got any ideas?”

“Of course I do. I’ve got the perfect plan to briefly get Tanaka out of our hair—and we’ll make it look like an accident, mostly.”

“*Mostly*? Should I be concerned?” he muttered, praying her sense of reason was still intact.

“The only thing is, we’ll need everyone to work together... and it’ll be risky.”

“You know I’ll do everything in my power to help,” Taichi answered

immediately, his tone firm. “And no matter the risk, we all know you’ll have our backs.”

Inaba froze for a moment. Then she looked down at the ground and laughed. Somehow, her smile felt a bit different then... More gentle, perhaps.

“Yeah, you’re right... That said, I don’t need your help with this one.”

“...You don’t?”

Now he felt stupid for getting all worked up about it.

“Okay, fine. You can be my gofer. First, get Yui and Aoki over here. Then I’m gonna have you casually *adjust* the location of the emergency water bucket. I’m counting on you, gofer!”

“Gofer... Great...” Taichi muttered under his breath as he carried out her orders.

He could see Inaba explaining her plan to Aoki and Kiriyama, the latter of whom was shaking her head desperately. Then Inaba leaned in to whisper something to her—and Kiriyama clapped a hand over her mouth. After a moment, she nodded hesitantly.

Yikes... I hope I never get on her bad side...

Just then, Inaba slapped her thigh. That must’ve been the signal, because Kiriyama and Aoki promptly walked off, nonchalantly putting some distance between them. He looked back at Inaba, waiting to see what his next instructions were, and she held up a hand in (what he interpreted as) a “stay” gesture. Then she slapped her thigh again—

“Oh no! I forgot to get the papers!” Kiriyama shouted, in the most dull and lifeless voice imaginable, as she took off running.

Naturally, Taichi’s attention shifted to her... and out of the corner of his eye, he could see that Tanaka-sensei had taken notice, too.

And then—

“Uh oh! I forgot to borrow a lighter!” Aoki exclaimed, dashing forward.

How was any of this supposed to get Tanaka-sensei out of their hair? Taichi

watched with rapt attention. He could feel his palms begin to sweat

And then something truly incredible happened.

“OH NO! I TRIPPED!” Aoki shouted as he fell flat on the ground, limbs splayed in a spectacular fashion. Before Taichi could react, next came Kiriyama, running at full speed, with Aoki lying directly in her path.

“Oh no! Look out!” she shouted. Just when it looked like Aoki was about to get trampled, she leapt into the air and soared over him... but her momentum kept her stumbling forward. “Whoa whoa whoa...!” she exclaimed, struggling to hit the brakes.

Just ahead of her was the emergency water bucket—

Instantly, Taichi had a terrible feeling he knew exactly what was about to happen next.

Struggling to comprehend how a plan this stupid could possibly work, he could only watch to see if his prediction was right. And sure enough—

“Tanaka-sensei! Get out of the way! ...Because *here I come*!”

With a (partially incriminating) warning cry, Kiriyama kicked the water bucket into the air!

Oh my god! This is so stupid!

Fortunately, the bucket itself didn’t hit anyone—but its contents were summarily dumped all over Tanaka-sensei. It was too perfect to be a coincidence. *Good lord, what a ballsy plan.*

“Sensei, are you okay?!” Inaba shouted in faux-panic as she rushed over. “Oh no, you’re soaked... We need to get you out of those wet clothes! Do you have anything else you can wear?”

“Brrrr... A change of clothes, you say? Sure, I have something... Look, I can’t believe I’m asking this, but... You kids didn’t do that on *purpose*, did y—”

“Of all the unlucky accidents! We really need to get you changed! The sooner the better!”

And with that, Inaba half-dragged Tanaka-sensei through the door and

downstairs. After they were gone, the three remaining members of the CRC could only stare blankly at the door as it slowly swung shut.

After a moment, it opened again, and Inaba peeked her head out. “Hurry and get the Bulletins ready! We’re out of time!”

As for Taichi, he was starting to worry this little stunt would come back to bite them.

From there, time flew by. First, the four of them ran down to get the printouts of the Culture Bulletin. When they returned, they carefully placed the stacks so they were ready to toss at a moment’s notice. With the loudspeakers keeping them informed of the pageant’s progress, they each made sure they had two rockets apiece... and then the wait began.

Sure enough, almost as though Inaba had seen the future—

“...And so, without further ado, our first-year Miss Yamaboshi is... contestant #4, Nagase Iori from Class 1-C! *Allllrighty*! I’ll bet we all saw that coming, didn’t we, folks!”

Next, they announced the second-year winner, then the third-year winner. Fortunately, thanks to the overly enthusiastic emcee hamming it up and dragging everything out for comedic effect, it gave the CRC plenty of time to get completely set up... but now they were all on edge, desperately hoping the big moment would arrive before Tanaka-sensei returned. The wait had become excruciating.

Just as the pageant was finally, mercifully about to end, a familiar voice called out over the loudspeaker—

“Could I say something?” The crowd’s response was eager cheers and applause. “Hiya, folks! I’m Nagase Iori, and as of today, I’m your first-year Miss Yamaboshi! You see, I’m the president of a little club called the Cultural Research Club, and starting now, we’d like to hold a special event just for you! Everyone, look up!”

At this, the rest of the CRC lit their rockets. With a *whoosh*, they shot off into the sky and exploded into bright colors—louder and more smoky than the four of them had anticipated. But they pressed on regardless, and on Inaba’s signal,

they began to drop the Culture Bulletins from the roof.

One by one, the fruits of their labor rained down on the crowd, bearing a large photograph of their teachers caught in a tryst.

Cheers broke out... followed by gasps.

“This is our monthly Culture Bulletin! New readers always welcome!”



And with that, their mission had ended in perfect success. All that was left now was to sit back... and enjoy the fireworks.

Taichi had no way of knowing what would happen from here, but the next thing he knew, he was laughing. No, not just him—they were all laughing uncontrollably, clapping their hands, clutching their sides, and otherwise generally making fools of themselves. And down on the ground, he was sure Nagase was laughing right along with them, radiant as the sun, maybe even jumping for joy.

Below, they could hear voices—secretive murmurs, angry shouts, yelps of surprise, squeals of delight. And the knowledge that they had caused it made it all the funnier.

“What in god’s name is going on?!” the emcee exclaimed over the loudspeaker. “Is this article the real deal?! Oh god, it is, isn’t it? After all, our first-year Miss Yamaboshi is the club president! Huh? What do you mean, that has nothing to do with this? Screw you, pal!”

Evidently he’d picked a fight with an audience member.

“And what do you mean, ‘our sources say the two are not yet official’?! Just get together already! What are you, twelve?! What was that? ‘Hirata-sensei was my dream girl’? Pssh! You and me both, pal!”

At this point, it sounded like he’d forgotten he was still on mic.

“What? They need to decide if they’re dating or not? Trust me, I agree completely. Hmm? Make them choose right here and now?! Well, how’s about it, folks?!”

The audience went wild.

“Thank you, thank you! Now then, we need to get our would-be couple onstage, pronto! Actually... Let’s drag them up here to kick off the after-party! Alright, folks! LET’S FIND HIRATA-SENSEI AND TANAKA-SENSEI! And get that bonfire ready, on the double! LET’S *GOOOOO*!”

Thunderous footsteps filled the air as the crowd of students broke into a run. Powered by the enthusiastic emcee and the general giddiness that pervaded all

festivals as a rule, the entire school worked in tandem to spontaneously throw together a bonus event.

...All things considered, this outcome was, perhaps, a bit excessive.

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And so, under the fading rays of the setting sun, the after-party began.

A bonfire dyed the athletic grounds in a scarlet glow. Meanwhile, the energetic emcee and his crowd-turned-mob were still in full force, and soon the two teachers were cajoled into a public confession in front of not just the entire student body, but all the visiting guests as well. At first they were opposed to it—rather, Tanaka-sensei was—but the tipping point came when a large majority of the faculty members took the students' side, urging them to "just get it over with already!"

In the end, the students got their happy ending; their efforts were rewarded with a love confession so cheesy it was almost painful, and this marked the birth of a brand new school-sanctioned teacher-teacher couple. Now the question remained: would either of them be able to teach their classes with a straight face after this?

Immediately following the end of the... ceremony(?), a few classmates took their jealousy out on Taichi, but fortunately they cooled off over time. Meanwhile, quite a few guys decided to use the romantic vibe to their advantage to spontaneously confess their own feelings. But while the big moment had everyone feeling a little emotional, surely the girls weren't so stupid as to let that sway them...

Part of him dreaded to think what the mood in the classroom would be like come Monday morning.

Upon that thought, he spotted Inaba headed over from the school building and called out to her.

"Inaba! Where have you been? People have been jumping down my throat, asking me where we got that photo!"

"Oh, right. I bet you stuck it out like a champ. Anyway, sorry to disappear on you, but I had some stuff to take care of."

“Like what?”

Inaba regarded his question with a scowl that said *are you braindead?*

“You really think we could get away with sneaking a paparazzi photo of our teachers and spreading it around the whole school without making at least *some* kind of apology to the people directly affected by the scandal? Is that what you think? God, you’re such a moron.”

...He couldn’t argue with that. Instead, he decided to apologize.

“Right... Sorry.”

“Hmph! Well, anyway, I got it all taken care of, so there’s nothing to worry about.”

“Dare I ask how you managed that...?” He found himself sorely wishing he could’ve been a fly on that wall. “Seriously, I’d love to know where you even got the pic... but I won’t ask. What made you want to make an article of it, though? You must’ve known there’d be consequences.”

It was a question that had lingered on his mind for quite some time, considering he knew how much Inaba disliked excessive effort (to the point that she would generally go to great lengths to avoid it).

After a pause, she said, “Well, I knew their feelings for each other were mutual. I knew they were just waiting for the right opportunity. And I figured if I could help that old coward, he might eventually repay me in kind... Of course, first I had to convince him it was a debt to be repaid in the first place, but that’s what the apology was for.” She smirked. “Did you know Tanaka’s got a hand in determining the budget allotment for each club? Maybe I’ll get him to *adjust* our funding. Heh heh heh!”

“You’re a monster...” More than ever, he was dying to know where she got her information. “So you were just doing it for your own benefit?” He laughed. *That’s our Inaba, I guess.*

But she didn’t seem to hear him.

“...Then again, that’s not the only reason. Part of me just wanted to goof off with you guys,” she muttered. “After all, if I were purely after a budget increase,

there's plenty of other ways I could go about it."

This wasn't quite what he had expected to hear from Inaba of all people. "I didn't realize you thought that way."

"Goof off" wasn't a phrase he generally associated with a pragmatist like her... but somehow it made him smile. *She wanted to have fun with us.*

Instantly, she blushed bright red. "HEY! Don't you smirk at me, mister! Wipe that sick grin off your face!"

"What's wrong? Embarrassed?"

"I am NOT embarrassed!"

But her frustration only made him grin all the more.

"I told you, quit smirking at me! Rrrgh! Goddamnit! I always end up running my mouth when I'm with you!" She clutched at her hair, pouting slightly. "...Huh? Oh, Iori's calling for you. Get over there, Taichi! Run along, now! Shoo!"

Taichi turned to find Nagase, now changed out of her yukata and back into her school uniform, jogging over. When he spotted her, she waved at him.

"I'll make myself scarce. See ya." She was hardly a third wheel, and yet she walked off regardless.

Meanwhile, Nagase came to a stop in front of him. "Sorry it took so long! A bunch of people asked me out for some reason!"

This nearly gave him a heart attack. "*For some reason?!* Yeah, right! Who was it?! Dudes from our class?!"

"Some of 'em were, yeah. Not all of 'em, though."

"...So how'd it go?" he asked nervously.

"Oh, I shot 'em all down, easy!"

"Don't say it was *easy!* Have some respect!" he retorted, and yet somehow he felt relieved to hear it... but why?

"I mean, I'm glad they like me so much, and it's not like I hate them for it or anything... I'm just not sure I'm... *up for it*, y'know? Not sure I'm capable of it,"

she finished in a shaky, fragile voice, her carefree attitude suddenly gone.

It was such a sudden, drastic change, Taichi wasn't sure how to handle it... but then she bounced back like it was nothing.

"Aaanyways! We sure kicked butt today, didn't we?! We put on a heck of a show, made someone's fairytale romance come true... and just look at the aftermath! Love is in the air! I'm tellin' ya, this is one for the history books!" With a grin, she held up her fingers in a V for victory.

"Yeah, for sure... Even I'm a little touched." He never dreamed that they could create this domino effect... bring so many people together... inspire change.

"The five of us made this happen as a team," Nagase declared, an expression of contentment on her face.

"Ordinarily I'd love to agree with you, but... I don't think I really contributed much this time around..."

"I mean, okay, Inaban was obviously the brains of the operation, and Aoki made a great suggestion, and I kicked butt in the pageant, and I'm told Yui got up to all sorts of trouble today... I guess by comparison, yeah, you were kinda just there!"

"Guh...!" He clutched his chest. He knew it was true, of course, but it still hurt to have someone else say it to his face.

Nagase snickered. "But I still think you're the most important member of the club. We need you." Her frighteningly beautiful eyes gazed into his. "Sure, sometimes someone else has a turn in the spotlight, but when it comes down to it, the one who seems the most useless is often the key player, y'know?"

"They are?"

"Not all the time. Just sometimes."

"...Are you trying to cheer me up or not?"

Nagase laughed, her smile brighter than any bonfire. "Look, I don't know about anyone else, but I definitely couldn't have done what I did without you... Wait, huh? Is that weird?" She tilted her head, puzzled. "Well, anyway, I think it's pretty safe to say things would've worked out differently if our group was

even *slightly* different from the five we have now. Like the butterfly effect or whatever! Sometimes all that matters is having the right people by your side."

"You can be really deep sometimes, you know that?" He felt like he was seeing her in a whole new light.

"Wait... Was I not supposed to be deep right now?! Oh, I guess not. This is a festival, after all! In that case, let's go track down the others! We gotta wrap things up as a club!"

"Wrap what up, exactly...?"

But she grabbed his arm and took off running regardless... so he followed after her, spurred on by the soft, warm hand against his skin.

Together they ran through the night air, through crowds of people, all of them smiling... and some of those smiles had surely been inspired by the CRC. Naturally, this thought put a smile on Taichi's face, too—and now he was part of the crowd.

He didn't know if he was actually a "key player," but tonight, just tonight, while spirits were high, he was willing to let himself believe it.


KIRIYAMA YUI'S FIRST DATE

Two weeks had passed since the end of the body-swap, and for me, it was just another morning... or at least, it should have been.

I got up (ahead of my alarm), checked to make sure I wasn't body-swapped (something I kept doing out of habit even though I knew I didn't need to anymore), went to the bathroom to wash my face and brush my teeth (don't forget the moisturizer and the mouthwash), ate breakfast (toast and two glasses of milk), got ready for school (changed my shampoo recently so now my gorgeous long hair was even more glossy than usual), and left the house.

Personally, I was hoping it was just another ordinary day... but when I got to school, those hopes were instantly crushed.

There, in my shoe locker, was a sky-blue envelope the size of a postcard leaning up against my indoor shoes.

I stared at it for a moment... then closed my locker.

"M-Must've been, like, seeing things... Y-Yeah, that's it..." I muttered to myself. Then, after another moment, I opened my locker again.

The blue envelope was still there, decorated with clouds and a cutesy cartoon bird.

My heart pounded in my ears. A letter in my shoe locker could only mean one thing... No, it couldn't be! Surely that was too old-fashioned in this day and age! I could maybe see a girl doing it, but a boy? No way. Something about this was *extremely* weird... but what else could the letter be about, if not *that?* Why bother leaving a letter instead of just, you know, sending an email? What could they possibly— "Good morning, Yui."

"Waahhheeeyyyy!" I snatched the envelope out of my locker and stuffed it into my bookbag AT THE SPEED OF LIGHT. Then I spun around to find my good friend from class staring dismally at me. "Um... good morning, Yukina!"

"Could you cool it with the goofy antics first thing in the morning? People are staring at us."

"Oh, uh... Sorry..."

"It's fine. So what was that thing you just put in your b—"

“Nothing! Nothing! Nothing at all!” I shook my head vigorously.

“Nice try. I know you put something in there.”

“Wh... N-No I didn’t!”

“Look, if you’re going to deny it, at least *try* to act a little more convincing, okay?” She ruffled my hair and sighed. “I understand you’re too pure and innocent to be a good liar, but I’m scared for your future... I can’t help but worry that some creep’s going to come along and take advantage of you.”

I opened my mouth to deny it... but the words wouldn’t come.

“Sorry... I don’t mean to get on your case. And you don’t have to show me if you don’t want to. Don’t pout, okay?”

“I’m not pouting!”

“Oh, good grief... You’re so precious sometimes... Now let’s hurry up and get to the classroom.”

“W-Wait. I can’t... I, uh... have somewhere I need to be...”

“Where could you possibly ‘need to be’ first thing in the morning before class?”

She looked at me dubiously, but I waved her off and headed for the most private place I could think of: the spot out behind the East Wing.

I probably could’ve just borrowed a bathroom stall, but somehow it just didn’t feel right, you know, thematically speaking.

I gave the sky-blue envelope another long, hard look. Was this really... one of *those?* It couldn’t be... could it? My whole body flushed with panic. I flipped it over to find that it was sealed with a red, heart-shaped sticker. *Oh god. There’s no doubt about it. This is a love le—no, wait! It’s not set in stone yet! I can’t be sure until I open it! Relax! Maybe I’m just jumping to conclusions!*

Reassuring myself, I took a deep breath... then another.

“W-Well, I guess I’ll just have to open it and find out,” I muttered to myself in the hopes of feeling a bit less scared.

I counted to three, then ripped off the sticker and pulled out the contents of

the envelope, forcibly humming to myself as I went. Inside was a single sheet of paper.

"Oh god, I'm so nervous..."

Squinting, I slowly unfolded the paper and scanned over the first line.

Dear Kiriyama Yui-san, I'd been entertaining the possibility that the writer had put it in my locker by mistake, but apparently not.

Willing my heartbeat to stop pounding quite so hard, I shifted my gaze to the next line. Even if it *was* a love letter, surely they wouldn't profess their love to me on paper; they'd probably just ask to speak with me in person. *Let's just keep calm and read it slowly—* I have romantic feelings for you. For the next week, starting today, I will wait for you behind the auditorium after club activities end each school day. Feel free to show up on whichever day suits your schedule. Otherwise, I'll assume you're not interested. Lastly, if you would keep this between us, I would really appreciate it.

"Oh god, I read the whole thing! Oh god, it's a love letter! And they confessed their feelings right there on paper! Is that how love letters are supposed to work?!" I was so panicked, I started practicing my karate for some reason. "Hah! Yah! Hyah!"

Okay, now I'm calm... Ugh, no I'm not! I'm not calm at all!

I had been trying my best to avoid this sort of romantic affection, but obviously it didn't work. Of course, it wasn't the first time someone had professed their love for me (*ahem*, Aoki), but... I just couldn't see myself getting that close to a guy. Not yet, at least. Not until I was completely over my androphobia.

"I guess I should meet with him and turn him down directly... It's only polite, right...? Ugh, this is so awkward... I feel so bad..."

I can't just write him off because of his gender. That's not fair to him. But my heart ached at the thought of having to invent some excuse to turn him down.

"Oh yeah... Who wrote this, anyways?"

I'd forgotten to check, so I hastily scanned down to the bottom of the letter—

Oosawa Misaki, Class 1-C

...Wait, what? I looked up at the sky, blinking to clear my vision, then back at the letter— Oosawa Misaki, Class 1-C

"It's... a girl?"

A girl. A girl wrote this love letter. And sent it to me, a fellow girl.

"A GIRL?!"

This was my first-ever love letter... and my first-ever same-sex love confession.

And to think this morning it was just another ordinary autumn day.

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After that, I spent the rest of the day spacing out in the middle of class. I was completely distracted.

Until now, I had never dated anyone in my life. I was at the perfect age to be holding hands with boys, and yet the slightest interaction with one triggered my androphobia. Men seemed so alien to me; at one point, it was so bad that simply being in their presence was enough to make me physically ill. But even after I'd recovered from that phase, I still couldn't handle them getting too close. To me, they were still monsters.

Naturally, I told myself I couldn't ever possibly fall in love with one. Romance was just... out of the question for me.

Whenever my friends would tell me about their boyfriends or crushes, I used to feel sad knowing I would never have anything to contribute to the conversation. I felt like it was a world I would never be part of. But a lot had happened recently, and now my androphobia was starting to fade. I had decided to move forward, one day at a time. And thanks to a certain good friend of mine, I had newfound hope for the future.

But this fear had been with me for years now, and I knew it wouldn't go away overnight. I still wasn't at a point where I could even *think* about dating someone...

Or was I?

With a female love interest now in the picture, the possibility suddenly seemed a whole lot more likely.

Talk about a change of perspective! This is revolutionary! If I'm being honest with myself, deep down, I can't pretend I'm not curious to see what this romance stuff is all about... And if it's with a girl, then my androphobia won't even enter the picture— I shook my head, stopping myself.

Girls aren't supposed to date each other! It's... weird! It's not normal! Girls are supposed to date boys! ...But are we really "supposed" to? Who decided that rule, anyway? Same-sex marriage is legal in a couple countries nowadays—No, I can't! ...Well, why not? I don't know... I can't think of a reason. Because two girls can't make a baby? But then again, it's not like I'm looking to get pregnant right now... Maybe there's no harm in dating a girl while I'm in high school... But what will everyone else think? ...No, stop. Why does it matter what anyone else thinks? Is the point of romance to make everyone ELSE happy? I don't even know what "romance" really is— "—Yui! Come on!"

"Ouch!"

I snapped to my senses as something collided with my head. Standing there was Yukina, looking thoroughly fed up with me.

"Homeroom's over now. Snap out of your little daydream already."

"Huh? Oh... I guess it is..."

My classmates were all packing up to go home; some of them were already on their way out the door.

Yukina sighed. "You seriously didn't even hear the bell? I swear, you've been zoned out all day today."

"Nngh... Sorry..."

"No need to apologize for it. Now start packing up and we can walk partway... Actually, hold that thought. My crush is walking this way."

"C-C-Crush?!"

"Good grief. What's got you so jittery today? Well, see you tomorrow... No, wait, tomorrow's Founding Day so we don't have class. See you the day after

that, then! Remember, don't come to school tomorrow! Oh yeah, and don't forget, Fujishima-san said the group hangout's postponed. You do remember what she told us at lunch, right?"

"Huh? Oh, right... Founding Day..."

"...You are *seriously* off your game today, girl. I'm not sure you actually remember anything we talked about. Well, whatever... I'll just send you an email or call you later tonight to remind you. Bye!"

And with that, she walked off... only to be replaced by the world's biggest idiot.

"Yui! Let's go to the clubroom!" It was Aoki Yoshifumi, tall and lanky, wearing a stupid grin on his face, as usual.

"Oh, it's you..."

"C'mon, aren't you happy to see me?! Aren't you excited to hang out together?!"

"Not in the *least*, thank you!"

"Ouch... That stings..." He slumped his shoulders, then perked right back up again, his goofy grin back in place.

I wonder how he'd feel if he knew a girl gave me a love letter today, I thought to myself.

After all, he'd professed his own love for me dozens of times by now... but how did it make him feel in the moment?

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After school, as usual, the five friends gathered in the clubroom. However, though they were together physically, they kept themselves quite busy with their own separate activities. This day found Yaegashi Taichi reviewing his coursework and studying ahead, as he did every other day too.

"Alright, that should do it..." He set down his mechanical pencil, stretched, and glanced around the room.

Beside him, Nagase Iori and Aoki Yoshifumi were playing Othello. The game

was nearly over, and the board was almost completely covered with white disks.

“Heh heh heh... What’s the matter, Aoki-kun? Are you really going to let me have two perfect games in a row?” Nagase sneered melodramatically like a third-rate villain. She swayed her body to and fro, making her ponytail bounce with her movements.

“You’re too damn good at this, Iori-chan!” Aoki wailed.

(For the record, Taichi himself could also easily defeat Aoki at Othello, though he’d never managed a perfect game.) Just then, someone tapped on the table, and Taichi looked in their direction.

“Hey. Yui. What the hell are you doing over there? You’re distracting me,” snapped Inaba Himeko, her posture perfectly straight, her laptop idling in front of her as she glared at Kiriyama Yui.

“Huh?! N-Nothing! I’m not doing anything!”

Kiriyama shifted under Inaba’s sharp gaze. The scene was reminiscent of a frightened hamster facing off against a cobra.

“You keep fidgeting. Knock it off.”

Admittedly, Inaba was right. For the past hour or so since Kiriyama had set foot in the clubroom, something about her behavior had been distinctly off. Instead of finding something with which to occupy her time, she’d just... sat there, shifting about restlessly in her chair.

“I... I’m not fidgeting...”

“Yes, you are. And you keep sneaking a look inside your bookbag for some reason.”

“Wh-What are you talking about? No I’m not! Really, I’m not! Totally not!”

As she spoke, she slowly pulled her bookbag away from Inaba and closer to herself.

It was *painfully* obvious.

“Whatcha got in there?” Nagase asked, peering over curiously.

“D-Don’t look!” Kiriyama shouted, yanking her bag away from the other girl... and at that exact moment, a blue envelope fell out. The bag’s owner didn’t notice this, but unfortunately, Inaba did. She promptly picked it up.

“Aww, c’mon! You’re making me curious! Just tell me, ya little punk!” Nagase teased, eyes glinting mischievously as she prodded Kiriyama.

“What’s goin’ on? I wanna know, too!” Aoki exclaimed eagerly.

Meanwhile, Inaba opened the envelope and pulled out its contents without hesitation—so quick, not even Taichi could stop her.

“Let’s see here... Ahem! ‘Dear Kiriyama Yui-san, I have romantic feelings for you. For the next week, starting today, I will wait for you behind the auditorium after club activities end each school day’—”

“Wh—How did you—Inaba, stop!”

“Yui got a love letter?! Damn, girl! Rock on!”

“Who the heck is tryin’ to make a move on Yui right under my nose?! I respect your taste, sir, but I called dibs!”

All at once, the room flared to life. Frankly, even Taichi himself was a little curious.

“Oh, who cares if we read it? It’s just a stupid love letter! They’re all basically the same! Anyway... ‘Feel free to show up on whichever day suits your schedule. Otherwise, I’ll assume you’re not interested’—”

“Not all love letters are everyone’s business!” Kiriyama shouted as she lunged at Inaba, desperate to snatch the letter back... but Inaba dodged out of the way.

“For fuck’s sake, why are you freaking out over nothing?! ‘Lastly, if you would keep this between us, I would really appreciate it. Oosawa Misaki, Class 1-C’... Oosawa Misaki...?”

Inaba froze. Nagase and Aoki fell silent. It was like the whole room had been put on pause. Even Taichi wasn’t sure what to do.

“I... I told you not to read it...”

“Oosawa Misaki, as in *our* Misaki-chan? From the track team?” Nagase

blinked.

Oosawa Misaki was in Class 1-C with Nagase, Inaba, and Taichi. She was tall, with a pixie cut—the sporty type. As he recalled, she specialized in hurdle races.

“I... I wasn’t expecting it to be so personal... I’m sorry. I promise, I won’t go telling anyone,” Inaba apologized. Normally she was never the type to admit her faults, but this time she knew she had crossed a line. She tucked the letter back into the envelope and quietly returned it to Kiriyama.

The mood in the room was now excruciatingly uncomfortable.

“W-Well, anyway, the cat’s out of the bag now,” Inaba continued in a tone of forced normalcy. “So, are you trying to figure out how to let her down gently? I know it won’t undo what I did, but I want you to know I’ll gladly do anything in my power to help.”

“Huh? Oh... Right...” Kiriyama glanced away, murmuring vaguely.

“C’mon, what’s there to think about? Not like there’s a chance you’d say yes _”

“Huh?!” Kiriyama jumped in surprise.

“Wait... You’re not *actually* considering it, are you...?”

“N-No... I... Gah!” Kiriyama hid her blushing face in her hands.

Aoki jumped to his feet so fast, he nearly flipped the Othello board. “Hold it right there, Yui! Since when do you date chicks?!”

“I don’t! But... when I ask myself *why not*, well... I don’t really have an answer for that...”

“Because dating guys is just better! End of story!” Unsurprisingly, Kiriyama’s number one fanboy had started to panic.

“B-But girls understand each other better... It seems like it would be easier... On the other hand, guys are a total mystery...”

“But two girls can’t do *you-know-what!* And that’s like the whole point of dating!” Aoki shouted.

Instantly, Kiriyama’s expression shifted, first to surprise, then to... grief.

“Oh... Right. I guess that really is all guys care about,” she muttered. “Men are so disgusting.” Her blank expression made it feel all the more harsh.

“No, that’s not what I meant! I...” Aoki stammered for an excuse, but Kiriyama ignored him and put the letter back into her bookbag.

“I’m going home for the day. Bye.” And with that, she walked out of the clubroom, shutting the door behind her.

Aoki moved to go after her, then stopped... and plunked back down into his chair. “Great... Now I’ve done it... Obviously it’s not the only thing I care about...” He dropped his head down onto the table with a *thunk*.

“Sounds like she took what you said the wrong way,” Nagase muttered with a frown.

“I can see where you’re coming from, Aoki, but your timing was bad and the way you phrased it was far worse,” Inaba sighed. “Keep this up and you might make a lesbian of her yet.”

“Wh... C’mon, it’s hardly *my* fault! Or is it?! Oh god... That means I’ll have twice the number of possible romantic rivals...!”

“*That’s* what you’re worried about...?” Taichi muttered under his breath.

“No... There’s no way she’d go full lesbo overnight! She’ll only be bi at worst! And then she’ll come crying back to me eventually!”

“Not to rain on your desperate little parade, but I’m *really* not sure about that last part,” Taichi retorted, just to be safe.

“Mmm, I wouldn’t be so sure about that. I hear things have improved between them lately. That said,” and Inaba glanced at Taichi, “the fact of the matter is, she has androphobia. And after what she’s been through, I wouldn’t blame her for washing her hands of men entirely. Besides, nowadays dumb teenagers question their sexuality all the time. You never know; it might just be a phase.”

“My Yui would never—!”

“She’s not *yours*, Aoki,” Taichi cut in. “And Inaba, you realize that makes you a ‘dumb teenager’ too, right?”

She had a bad habit of occasionally—no, *frequently*—talking like a middle-aged man.

“Personally, I don’t really care if Yui ‘goes gay’ or whatever. I’m gonna support her either way,” Nagase piped up.

“Now we’re all just *assuming* that Yui’s gonna start batting for the other team?! Is that it?!” Aoki howled.

“I gotta say, I didn’t realize Oosawa swung that way,” Inaba mused to herself. “Come to think of it, I feel like she’s been talking to Fujishima in class an awful lot lately...”

At this, Nagase flinched. “What...? F-Fujishima-san’s involved in this?”

Fujishima Maiko was the president of Class 1-C, and as of late, she had become something of a “love guru” among the student body. She was also openly bisexual and had a stated interest in Nagase specifically. At one point something had happened between the two of them—and ever since then, Nagase had mysteriously grown afraid of her.

“Eh, I don’t know that she’s involved. I’ve just seen them together a lot recently, that’s all. That reminds me... Speaking of Fujishima, I’ve been hearing some interesting rumors about her... So if she *is* involved...”

“...Then Yui might switch teams permanently. Heck, maybe Fujishima-san’s the one who ‘turned’ Misaki-chan...!”

“I’m starting to think Fujishima’s a little *too* powerful,” Taichi muttered. Truth be told, it was something that had been on his mind a lot lately.

“Noooo... Guys, c’mon! Don’t jinx it!”

“Oh, quit your crying, you baby. Anyway, with the way things are headed, if we take Yui’s personality into consideration... Yeah, this might escalate fast. We should probably keep an eye on her... just in case.” She stroked her chin in contemplation.

Meanwhile, Taichi felt the cold hand of apprehension creep over him. One thing was for certain: nothing good could come from Fujishima’s meddling.

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After I left the clubroom, I headed out to the athletic field and hid behind the gym storage building to watch the track team practice.

I spotted Oosawa Misaki almost immediately. She was someone I recognized from our joint gym classes with 1-C. Truth be told, I learned who she was pretty early into the school year; with her great reflexes, she easily stood out among the crowd.

She was tall, with a pixie cut and a well-sculpted face. Track shorts hung over her slender, toned legs. I watched as she leapt over the hurdles, graceful as a gazelle, her stride long and strong. Honestly, she looked so badass, I could easily see just about anyone falling for her— "Ack! Whoa!"

But then Oosawa's foot caught on a hurdle, and she fell flat on her face. Right as I started to worry, however, she sprang up again, seemingly unharmed, and put the hurdle back into position. As she was dusting herself off, another girl from the track team ran over, but Oosawa waved her away. Then she dusted off her hands and started walking.

Compared to her flustered teammate, she seemed so... cool and composed.

"If anything, *she* should be the one getting love letters in her locker..." I muttered. What would someone like her possibly see in me? She was completely out of my league!

Wait... If she's "out of my league," does that mean my "league" includes girls...?

"Ugh, I'm so confused...!" Clutching at my hair, I looked around at the other students on the field.

The boys were all big and bony and... *freaky-looking*, like a different species altogether. I couldn't relate to them at all. Obviously I knew they weren't all bad people... and thanks to a certain good friend of mine, I'd come to realize that I wasn't entirely powerless against them if it came to that... but I couldn't think of any reason I'd want to get close to one.

In contrast, girls were soft and cute and totally huggable. Being around them made me feel safe—I wanted to be *around* them.

...The more I thought about it, the more appealing girls started to sound... *No,*

this can't be right. It's too weird— "Nothing weird about it, you know."

"WHUH-WHOA!"

The sudden voice behind me made me nearly jump out of my skin. I whirled around to find a girl standing there, looking dignified in her glasses, her hair tied back with her bangs pinned up.

"Um... Aren't you the president of Class 1-C...?"

"Is this our first time speaking? It's nice to meet you, Kiriyama-san. My name is Fujishima Maiko, and I am indeed the president of Class 1-C. How do you do?" She bowed politely.

"Right... Nice to meet you. I'm Kiriyama Yui."

"Yes, I know your name. And I know that you're feeling chained down by societal norms."

"Wh... What?!"

"You've been going back and forth for a while now, haven't you?"

"I mean, yeah... but how did you know?! Was I pacing or something?!"

"When you've been in this business as long as I have, you start to pick up even the tiniest hints of yearning... It's a fairly common skill, actually. No big deal."

"Uh... If mind-reading isn't a big deal, I don't know what is..."

Gosh, she's even weirder than I thought...

"All I can say is this: science and biology don't matter in the slightest."

"What are you talking about?"

"All that matters is *love*. End of story."

"Love...?" It was a cringeworthy line, and yet somehow it touched my heart. What did it mean to love someone? What was *romance*, anyway?

"Wherever there's a girl in love, I'll be there to lend a hand. So don't sweat the details—just focus on what *matters*. Anyway, I'll be going now. The rest is up to you." Sliding her glasses up the bridge of her nose, Fujishima-san turned and walked off.

What... just happened?

“How did she find me, anyway...?”

She was an enigma.

Before I could make up my mind one way or the other, the bell rang, signaling the end of club activities and encouraging students to make their way home.

I knew I didn’t have the full picture, so I decided to meet with Oosawa Misaki directly. With my mind finally made up, I headed out behind the auditorium, as she had specified in her letter.

The sun had nearly set, and it was getting dark, but the auditorium lights were on inside, and I could still make out people’s faces in the distance.

“I hope this is the right place... Ugh, what do I do...? I’m pretty sure track practice is over now... She’ll be here any minute... or what if she doesn’t show? What if it was just a prank the whole time and I agonized over nothing?! Oh my god... What if I’m just a gullible m—”

“K-Kiriyama-san?!”

“YES?!” At the sound of my name, I nearly leapt out of my skin. *Why does this keep happening to me today?!*

Oosawa-san raced over from the track field and came to a stop in front of me. “Sorry I took so long... I kinda didn’t think you’d actually show up...”

“Oh, don’t worry about it! I only just got here, so...” Unable to think of anything else to say, my voice petered out.

Up close, she was every bit as toned and beautiful as I thought. Plus, she was a good ten centimeters taller than me. But now that she was in my presence, the composure I’d seen from her during track practice had gone out the window. Now she was stammering and blushing.

A strange, impalpable ache rose in my chest.

“Y-You got my letter, right?”

“Y-Yeah.”

“I know this is all really sudden... and I’m sorry about that... I know I probably

freaked you out...”

“No, don’t apologize! I mean, I can’t pretend I wasn’t a little surprised, obviously...”

“You’re not... annoyed or anything?”

“If it bothered me that much, I wouldn’t be here right now. Relax,” I reassured her, and her tearful expression softened.

Meanwhile, my heart fluttered slightly. *Why does my chest feel all weird around her?*

“So... Could you tell me what this is all about?”

Normally I would be more flustered right now, but Oosawa-san herself was obviously super nervous, and I knew one of us needed to keep a level head.

“Oh... Right... Um... Well, I... have a c-crush on you... and I’d like to take you out on a date...”

“Wait, so... you have a crush on me... even though we’re both girls...?”

“Yeah. My middle school was an all-girls school, and for whatever reason I’d always get plenty of girls flirting with me... Then one thing led to another, and I realized I was kind of bi-curious.” She averted her gaze shyly.

I was really curious what she meant by “one thing led to another,” but decided not to interrupt.

“Honestly, I thought it was just a phase... that I’d grow out of it once I enrolled in a co-ed school... but here I am in high school, and I took one look at you, and... well...”

She glanced back at me, her eyes damp with emotion, and I felt my chest grow heavy.

“I’ve n-never actually asked someone out before... I always figured, well, I only did that stuff because the other girls made the first move... and so part of me was thinking I should just try to get over you... but then Fujishima-san gave me the encouragement I needed to stop lying to myself.”

“Huh? She did?” I hadn’t realized Fujishima-san was involved in this. Not that

it really mattered, though, so I decided to disregard it. “Well, um... I can tell just how much you care for me, and um, I’m happy that you like me so much... but why me? I feel like we’ve barely ever interacted except in gym class, and even then, it’s not like we really talked much...”

“W-Well...” Oosawa-san fidgeted for a moment... then looked up at me, eyes shining with determination—the same look she’d worn during practice. “Back when we were doing the running long jump in gym class... I’ll never forget your performance that day. You were lightning-fast, and your form was so bold... You blew me away. I thought to myself, *she’s the most stunning creature on earth*.”

“Oh, please! You’re exaggerating!” I clapped my hands over my burning cheeks.

“No, really, you were incredible! It was such a powerful jump, it made me wonder how you could fit that much strength in such a small body... and ever since then, I started to notice you more and more... I admired you for both your athletic skills and your awesome style... and the next thing I knew... I was just... completely in love with you!” She squeezed her eyes shut, like she just couldn’t hold back any longer. Her cheeks flushed pink, and she began to tremble— Oh my god, she’s adorable!

“The contrast... I can’t take it...!”

It felt like someone had flipped a switch inside me.

“Um... Why did you do a fist-pump just now...?”

“D-Don’t worry about it! It’s nothing!”

Omigod omigod, she’s so dang CUTE!

The contrast of her boyish looks and cool composure with this girly shyness... No boy could possibly hope to be this cute!

Totally adorbs! I’m dying! She’s so cute! Aaaahhh!!!

“So, um... I won’t ask you to be my girlfriend, because I know you don’t really know me that well, but... Would you consider maybe going on a date with me, and then you could decide from there...?”

“Sure! I’ll go on a date with you, no problem!”

Instantly, Oosawa-san's face lit up. "R-Really?! You mean it?!"

"How could I say no? You're so cute!" *And cute is justice!*

"O-Okay then... How about tomorrow? It's Founding Day, so we don't have class... Are you free?"

"Oh, actually, I made plans to hang out with some friends... No, wait, that got canceled for some reason... Something about Fujishima-san..."

That's weird... For some reason her name keeps cropping up today... Oh well!

Cuteness conquers all!

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Yaegashi Taichi watched as Kiriyama Yui and Oosawa Misaki walked off, chatting excitedly about their plans for tomorrow. Once they were safely gone, the four remaining members of the Cultural Research Club tumbled out of the bushes. They'd all hidden there well before Kiriyama had arrived, and thus had heard everything.

"Well, I dun reckon she said yes! Our girl Yui's goin' gayer than a flannel shirt! But I ain't blame her none, 'cuz Misaki-chan was rootin'-tootin' cute as all get out!" Nagase shouted in what was allegedly a Texan accent.

"She did look happy about it," Taichi mused.

Beside him, Aoki clutched at his hair. "We gotta stop them... We gotta bring Yui back from the dark side...!"

"This might actually work out for them," Inaba muttered.

"Uh, Inabacchan?! You're joking, right?!"

"Relax. What's the harm? Just think of it as learning something new about Yui."

"It's really not that simple for me, Inabacchan!"

"Personally, I trust Yui to know what's right for her."

"Iori-chan, your selflessness is beautiful! Truly! And I know you're right... but...!"

“Aw, cheer up, Aoki.”

“Taichi! Don’t talk like that! You make it sound like I’ve already lost her! Anyone ever tell you that your pity hurts?! Well, I haven’t given up! Not yet!”

Nagase laughed. “Maybe you should!”

“Wh... Harsh much, Iori-chan?! You really gonna punch me in the gut with that smile on your face?!”

“Seriously, dude, cheer up,” Taichi repeated.

“Keep coddling me like this and I’m gonna cry! Is that what you want?! You want me to cry?!”

“Alright, that’s enough bullying Aoki.”

“I knew it... My heart is just a toy to you people...” Aoki fell to his knees in despair.

Personally, Taichi had meant every word of what he said, but he decided not to point this out lest Inaba make fun of him for it. By now he was wise to her usual tricks.

“If this is genuinely what they both want, then I have no objections... but if Fujishima’s forcing them together, then that’s another story. I refuse to let her meddle in Yui’s healing process.”

“I... I agree! We should tail them on their date tomorrow!”

“Yeah. Better safe than sorry.”

“You want to tail them? Isn’t that kinda messed up? You know, from an ethical standpoint?”

“Taichi, do you have a brain at all? This date is going to be hilarious. How could we possibly miss out?” She stared at him disdainfully.

“Wait, so... you’re not going to deny that it’s unethical...?” For some reason, despite having the moral high ground, it felt like he was in the wrong.

“Oh, you know how Inaban operates. She’s *actually* worried sick... She just doesn’t want to admit it,” Nagase grinned playfully.

Inaba clucked her tongue in frustration. “Enough about me! The point is, I’m

tailing them on their date tomorrow, and anyone who wants to join me is welcome!”

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Yesterday was a total whirlwind of events. Today, however, was Yamaboshi High School’s Founding Day, and there was no school.

All the other students were probably sleeping in or enjoying their bonus day off, but not me. My brain woke me up early to agonize over everything until I felt like I was going to explode.

“I kinda just agreed to it in the heat of the moment,” I muttered to myself, sitting alone in my room. “I hope I didn’t give her the wrong idea...”

At the time, I didn’t really think too hard about it. It seemed so easy. After all, we’d basically just be hanging out like friends, right?

But I got the feeling that wasn’t how Oosawa-san would see it. To her, it was probably more serious than that—a capital-D Date.

“Oh god, what do I do? I’ve never gone on a date before!” I flailed my limbs in a panic. “Date... date... What, like, makes something a ‘date,’ anyways? Is it just when two people hang out?” I’d said the word so much, it had started to lose all meaning. I knew it probably didn’t matter, but regardless, I pulled out my giant dictionary to look it up. “Let’s see... *Date*... Here it is!”

1. The day of the month or year as specified by a number.

2. A romantic appointment or engagement; a rendezvous.

I promptly slammed the dictionary shut.

“R-Rendezvous...?”

This was starting to sound a *lot* more serious than I’d imagined. I wanted to confide in someone... but at the same time, I couldn’t think of who I’d tell or what I’d tell them. Oosawa-san had sworn me to secrecy, so even if I tried to consult someone, I wouldn’t be able to give them the full picture.

I remembered the joyful smile on her face when we parted ways yesterday. How did she feel going into this date? And how was I meant to treat those feelings?

Date... relationship... romance... love...

There were so many things I didn't understand.

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Just before 1 PM, the CRC (minus Kiriyama) met up at a certain suburban shopping center. According to what they'd overheard yesterday, this was Ground Zero for the Kiriyama-Oosawa date.

This shopping center had it all—a full selection of stores, a movie theater, a bowling alley, and even an entire amusement arcade. Anyone who visited could easily keep themselves entertained for hours. That said, the center was a little too out of the way for most Yamaboshi students to bother making the trek, so it was also ideal in the sense that there was a relatively low chance of running into a familiar face (according to Inaba, queen of information gathering and analysis).

The four friends occupied the landing of the stairs, keeping a careful watch on the area near the fountain where the two girls would be meeting up at 1:30 PM.

"Can't wait to see how this turns out. What about you, Mr. We Shouldn't Do This But I'll Tag Along Anyway?" Inaba sneered.

"If one of us is going to be tailing her regardless, we may as well..." Her glare intensified, and he abandoned his prepared excuse. "Okay, no, I'm sorry. The truth is, I was curious, and also I didn't want to be left out."

"You were *curious*?! Go home, you coward! This is a battlefield!" Aoki shouted as he launched into a series of warm-up exercises. A pair of binoculars hung from his neck.

"*You* need to calm down," Taichi retorted.

"Oh, how I long for the day Yui brings Misaki-chan home to meet the family!"

"Iori-chan, have you decided they're already dating?! Is that it?!"

"Well, they *are* going on a date. Pretty sure that's the definition of dating."

"Rrrrrgh...!"

"Besides, they look good together, if you ask me."

“Grrraaaahhh...!”

“Ease up on him, Nagase. Otherwise he’s gonna have an aneurysm.”

“Yes, sir! What Taichi says, goes!” Nagase raised both hands in surrender, a mischievous grin on her face.

Still, if these little jabs were all it took to bring Aoki to his knees, Taichi couldn’t help but wonder how he’d react when reality swooped in to deliver its megaton punch.

“Back on topic, I was wondering... Won’t it be kinda hard to stalk her in a group without getting caught?” Nagase asked.

“Oh, don’t you worry about it,” Inaba smirked confidently.

Knowing her, she probably had some sort of clever plan— “Love is blind, after all.”

—or not.

“Uhhh, I feel like they’ll notice eventually,” Taichi retorted again, since she’d made it all too easy to do so.

“You’re so right! You’re a *genius*, Inaban!”

“...So we’re all just going to go along with this...?”

At this point, Taichi started to worry that he and the others weren’t on the same page.

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I continued to agonize over my date right up until noon. Then, ultimately, I decided to lean into it completely.

I didn’t want to break my promise, so that meant I was going on the date. As for the rest of my worries, well, I decided I’d cross each bridge as I came to it. Sure, a small voice in the back of my mind told me that it’d come back to bite me eventually! But I ignored it!

Now my biggest problem was what to wear. After all, this was a date—*with a girl*. I couldn’t just throw on whatever and call it a day... but at the same time, I didn’t want her to think I was trying too hard, either. Ultimately I decided on a

simple, no-frills outfit: a shirt with a plaid-patterned collar and cuffs paired with a pleated skirt. *Perfect*.

Once again, that small voice in the back of my mind had told me I should just grab the first things I saw, now that I was running low on time! But I ignored that, too!

At 1:10 PM, I arrived on location—20 minutes ahead of our agreed meetup time. It was the middle of a weekday, and so while the place wasn't completely dead, the crowds were on the thin side.

"Okay... I'm looking for a plaza with a fountain... Oh my gosh, I've got butterflies like crazy..."

I looked up, glanced around... and locked eyes with none other than Oosawa-san herself.

"Oh... Uhhh..." we said in unison. Neither of us had been prepared for this, and instantly both of us began to panic.

Then Oosawa-san took two deep breaths, turned back to me, and smiled. "Hi there, Kiriyama-san. Let's have fun today." Her eyes twinkled as her smile brightened.

She was wearing a light gray jacket over a jersey-knit shirt and rolled-up jeans. It was a pretty cuul ("cute" + "cool") look, and I felt my enthusiasm swell considerably.

"Scoring points already... You're pretty good..."

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

"Oh, nothing! Don't worry about it. Just... good job!" I giggled. Nothing put me in a good mood like a cute girl!

"You know, Kiriyama-san, sometimes it's like you go off into your own little world... It's pretty cute, actually."

"Wh... Stop! You're embarrassing me!" I held my hands up in front of my face. My cheeks felt like they were on fire.

"It's pretty hilarious that we got here at the same time. And here I was hoping we'd get to do the 'Hey, I'm here! Were you waiting long?' 'Oh, no, I just got

here!’ bit.” She stuck her tongue out and grinned.

Her nervous energy from yesterday had lessened; now she seemed like she was back to her usual self. Actually, no... At school she was more aloof. By comparison, this seemed like the *real* her... and my heart fluttered at the thought that she was opening herself up just for me. This was a feeling unfamiliar to me, and it felt brand new.

“Actually... Maybe it was fate that brought us here at the same time.”

“F-Fate...? Oh gosh...” I could practically feel steam rising from my scalp.

Oosawa-san laughed. “I’m just messing with you. Otherwise pretty much anything could be fate, y’know?”

“Huh? Oh... Right...”

“Anyway, no point in just standing around here. Let’s get going!”

“O-Okay!”

She started walking, and I followed after her. Internally, I heaved a sigh of relief. I really appreciated her willingness to take the lead, because otherwise I wouldn’t have known what I was doing, like, at all.

And so excitement sparked in my chest as I wondered where this date would take us...

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As Oosawa and Kiriyama carried on with their date, Taichi and the rest of the CRC followed after them, concealing themselves behind various objects as they went.

Window shopping was the first activity on the girls’ agenda. Currently they were exploring a trendy department store. At first, Taichi was worried about tailing them all the way inside, but in practice it wasn’t actually all that difficult; it probably helped that the girls were off in their own little world.

“I still think we’re way too close,” he muttered, careful to keep his voice down.

The four of them had gone into this with the understanding that their main

priority was to avoid getting caught... but now here they were, hiding just one aisle away from their marks. They were so close, in fact, they could overhear the girls' conversation.

"Well, obviously we need to see how they're interacting so we can get a sense of things," Inaba replied smugly, and Taichi found he was dying to know where she got her confidence.

"But... do we really need all four of us for this?"

"If you're so worried about it, just go home."

"N-No! It's my duty to keep you three in line!"

"Wow. Doesn't it make you cringe to talk like a cookie-cutter tsundere love interest?"

"I-It's not that cringey!" Or so he hoped.

"Will you two be quiet?!" Nagase hissed, then stopped and tilted her head. "Whoa... Déjà vu..."

"Real talk, we should all just be quiet," Aoki muttered, his hand cupped behind his ear, his expression dead serious.

"...Any more bickering and I'll shut this whole thing down. I mean it..."

Just then, Taichi thought he heard a faint voice. It was feminine in tone, but it definitely wasn't Nagase or Inaba.

"Wh-Who was that?!" He glanced around, but didn't see anyone nearby. Was he just hearing things?

"Ooh, look at these glasses, Kiriyama-san! Aren't they cute?"

"Oh my gosh, you look so good in them! Like, super sophisticated!"

"You think so? Thanks! You try them on, too!"

"Who, me? I don't think I'd look good in glasses..."

"It can't hurt, can it? Go on, try it!"

"Hmmm... Well, okay... How do I look?"

"Just as cute as I thought you would! Here, look in the mirror."

“Oh, wow... I’m actually pulling it off better than I thought I would...”

“Want me to take a picture for you?”

“No, no, that’s okay. Oh, look at those cute mugs! Let’s go check them out!”

And so Oosawa and Kiriyama headed over to another aisle in an open area where the CRC couldn’t follow them.

“That was quite possibly the girliest conversation I’ve ever overheard,” Inaba muttered.

Nagase nodded. “For sure. Honestly, they just seem like they’re having a good time.”

“I’m still safe... They just seem like perfectly platonic friends...!”

“Relax, Aoki. I’ll help you brainstorm ways to win her back.”

“You think I’ve already lost this fight, don’t you, Inabacchan?!”

“It’s not really a *fight* to begin with,” Taichi muttered to no one in particular.

“Misaki-chan is such a nice girl... Oh, I know! Why don’t we have her join the CRC? She can just visit whenever she doesn’t have track practice!”

As usual, Nagase hadn’t taken Aoki’s feelings into consideration in the least.

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Before we headed over to the arcade, we decided to rest for a bit.

“I’ll go buy us some drinks.”

“Okay, thanks,” I said as I sat down on a bench. I could have offered to tag along with her, but I wanted to have a moment to myself to think.

As I watched her go, I reminded myself that I was on a date with her, and my heart felt... conflicted, somehow.

“What is this feeling...?” I mumbled to myself, pressing a hand to my chest. My heart was beating, slow and strong.

It felt like I was just hanging out with a female friend—something I’d done countless times before, and this wasn’t much different at all. For a “date,” it wasn’t notably special; we weren’t doing anything I wouldn’t do with anyone

else. So why did I get so nervous whenever I reminded myself that this was, in fact, a date?

Strangely enough, the world felt so *different* when I was with someone who professed to be in love with me. Was I... falling in love with her...?

“No, no, no! Definitely not!”

No, I wasn’t in love just yet. Obviously she was a total sweetheart, and I liked her as a person, but... not in a romantic sort of way, most likely.

Would the day ever come that I felt romantic attraction to someone? I wasn’t sure. All I knew was that for now, I was optimistic about romance in general.

“Huh? I smell something spicy...” Suddenly, I sneezed. Then I caught myself feeling overly relieved that Oosawa-san wasn’t here to see me sneeze... and I wasn’t sure how to feel about that.

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Oosawa walked off, leaving Kiriyama alone on the bench. Meanwhile, Taichi and the others were situated on the second-floor balcony, watching them from above.

The girls had finished their window shopping, and based on where Kiriyama was waiting, they were on their way to the arcade next.

“Get a load of that dreamy look on her face,” Inaba commented as she watched Kiriyama watch Oosawa go.

“*Dreamy*...? I can’t... I can’t take this anymore...!” Aoki stormed off towards the stairs.

“Wh-What the hell do you think you’re doing?!”

“Don’t stop me, Taichi. Call me a sore loser, but I can’t let it end like this!”

“Just relax, Aoki,” Nagase chided.

But Aoki ignored them and took off running. “I gotta give it one more try! Otherwise I’d rather die than—OUCH!” He promptly tripped and fell flat on his face. “Ow ow ow... Wh-What the heck?! There’s a foot sticking out from behind that pillar!”

“I understand how you feel about her, but this is a crucial moment, and I’d appreciate it if you would stay *out* of their love affair.”

Her glasses glinted in the sunlight. Sure enough, it was none other than Fujishima Maiko, president of Class 1-C, presumed to be the true mastermind behind this incident.

“F-Fujishima-san?!” Nagase squeaked in alarm.

“So you finally decided to show yourself, eh?” Inaba smirked defiantly.

“Fujishima...? Wait...” Something about Inaba’s statement caught his attention, so he changed tack. “Inaba, you saw this coming?”

“What? Obviously. I mean, the main reason I wanted to tail Yui was to keep Fujishima in check, you know, make sure she doesn’t push the girls in a weird direction.”

“I didn’t know that... Why didn’t you tell me...?”

“Excuse you. ‘Weird’? It’s the *correct* direction.”

“I don’t know about *that*... Sounds pretty subjective to me... y’know, going by conventional wisdom... Hahaha...” Nagase laughed nervously, and it was obvious she was trying to discourage Fujishima’s interest in her.

“Conventional wisdom doesn’t stand a chance in the face of love, I’m afraid.”

“Nngh... It’s no use... Orthodox tactics don’t work on her...!” Nagase clapped a hand to her forehead and stared at the ceiling.

“*Now then*,” Fujishima continued, raising her voice, “I refuse to let you people interfere with Oosawa-san and Kiriyama-san.”

“But... but what about *my* love affair...?!”

“You’re... Aoki-kun, correct? Let me ask you this: Does Kiriyama-san love you?”

“Uhhh... Well...”

“Then you have no right to speak.”

“Wh... What’s *that* supposed to mean?!”

“Aoki’s right,” Inaba cut in. “If he has ‘no right to speak,’ then neither do you, Fujishima.”

“Y-Yeah! You tell her, Inabacchan! Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m gonna go talk to—”

But before he could finish, Fujishima blocked his path. “I said no, and that’s final.”

“What are you doing, Aoki?! You can push past her! Be a man!”

“Go for a feint! Feint left, then go right! You can do it, Aoki!”

“Inaba... Nagase... Have you two forgotten the entire reason we’re here?” Taichi muttered.

“You people don’t know how to listen, do you? Then I’ll have to play my final card...” Fujishima pulled something out of the bag hanging from her shoulder. “Take this! It’s a low-intensity black pepper bomb I made last night in anticipation of your antics! It won’t cause you physical harm or damage your clothes, but it’ll take a while to wash it off, thus making it the perfect method to buy time! Hyah!”

“GAH!” The pepper bomb hit Aoki square in the chest. Instantly he began to cough and sneeze.

“And here’s some for the rest of you!” She pitched a second bomb in the direction of Taichi, Inaba, and Nagase.

“Wh... What the fuck are you doing?! M-My eyes...!”

“Wh-What did *we* do wrong?!”

Inaba and Nagase burst into coughing fits.

“That’s strange... I thought I made sure these were low-intensity. Did I get the ingredient ratio wrong...? Achoo!” Now even Fujishima was sneezing.

“Ghhcck...! If you have the sense to lower the intensity, then don’t freaking make pepper bombs in the first place!” Taichi choked out.

“I suppose it doesn’t matter. Either way, I’ve succeeded in slowing you down. Now the girls will have time to disappear into the crowd... Oh, no! I just

remembered they're taking a break right now!"

...Sometimes Fujishima could be an incredible ditz.

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At the Amusement Zone, Oosawa-san and I were in the arcade, playing a reflex game where we pressed glowing buttons the images on the screen told us to.

"Hyah! Hyah! Hyah! HYAH!" The electronic buzzer sounded, signaling the end of the round, and I pulled my hands away from the button pad. Fanfare played; we'd achieved a new high score for co-op on this particular arcade cabinet.

"Yesss! Not too bad, am I right?"

"I think you're understating it, Kiriyama-san. Your reflexes must be crazy good! I mean, you were covering seven out of ten buttons on your own, and you didn't miss once!" Oosawa-san sounded not just surprised, but downright baffled.

Meanwhile, I could hear the murmurs of the crowd around us.

"Those girls are incredible..."

"Whoaaa... Get a load of that high score!"

"I didn't know a score like that was even possible..."

"We were just watching them. That little long-haired girl is nuts, dude. She's inhuman!"

Apparently we'd attracted some attention.

"Wanna go over there?" Oosawa-san suggested.

"S-Sure," I nodded, and together we quickly made our escape from all the curious stares. Soon the sign for the women's restroom came into view.

"Mind if I run to the bathroom real quick?" she asked.

"Okay! I'll wait around here."

Alone, I stretched my arms wide. So far, I'd been having a total blast.

"If all dates are this fun, I might just make a habit of this... Hee hee..."

I was just joking, obviously... but then I started to wonder.

I didn't understand the significance of dating someone. Of dating a girl. All I knew was that Oosawa-san had feelings for me, and I enjoyed being around someone who cared about me. So if "dating someone" really just meant being around them a lot—no weirdness, just fun—maybe it wouldn't be so bad. Plus, it would make Oosawa-san happy, too... Maybe there was no real need to overthink it— "...Huh?"

Just then, I heard voices I thought I recognized. I really didn't want my friends from school finding me here... so I decided to investigate.

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"You people again... I was afraid that wouldn't be enough to deter you, and it seems I was right. Indeed, it would appear you are all determined to interfere in their romance."

"Oh, fuck off, Fujishima! You attacked us!"

Surrounded by arcade cabinets, ping-pong tables, pool tables, and dart boards, Fujishima and Inaba glared daggers at each other. The CRC had been forced to spend a lot of time washing up after those black pepper bombs. From there, Taichi and Nagase attempted to mollify Inaba's fury; then Aoki started whimpering things like "My life is over..." and they had to mollify him, too; after all that, just as they'd finally located the arcade, they once again ran into Fujishima. Evidently she had been waiting to ambush them.

"Why do you care so much? Let's just let them do as they please!"

"Oh, I'd be more than happy to... but the way I see it, the person in control here is *you*, not them. What do you say to that, Fujishima?"

"You wound me with these accusations. Surely I respect their wishes more than anyone here."

"So you say, and yet your priority is to get Yui to date a girl at any cost? You call that *respectful?* Pretty sure the normal thing to do would be to let her make her own decision."

"Normal, indeed... Who decided such things, I wonder? But I digress; if we go

down that road, this conversation will never get anywhere.” Fujishima sighed and shrugged her shoulders.

“You have a valid point. Then there’s just one thing left to do... We settle this in a fair fight!” Inaba declared, pointing her finger in Fujishima’s face.

“Whoa... This really reminds me of pro wrestling! *If you can’t talk it out, fight it out!*”

“Taichi, you know nobody understands pro wrestling. Just keep that stuff to yourself,” Nagase scolded him.

But as a hot-blooded male, he would not be silenced!

“Very well. Name your game, I don’t mind.”

“I see you underestimate me, fucker... In that case, how about a game of ping-pong? The true test of skill!”

“Fine by me. So, if I win, you’ll accept Kiriyama-san’s relationship with Oosawa-san, correct?”

“And if we win—er, if Inabacchan wins—then Yui will date me instead!” Aoki shouted, having suddenly regained his vigor.

“Set whatever terms you wish. After all, I won’t be losing.”

“Oh HELLS yeah! Kick some ass, Inabacchan! Or should I fight her for you?!”

“I don’t need your help, thanks. I’ll crush her with my own two hands!”

“At last... a battle between the queen of the overworld Fujishima-san and the queen of the underworld Inaban! I can’t wait to tell everyone at school tomorrow!”

With nothing of importance riding on this fight, Nagase had transformed into a total spectator.

Indeed, the five of them had gotten so carried away, they completely forgot their true purpose in coming here— “What the hell are you people doing?” a voice asked, shaking with rage.



Taichi turned to find none other than Kiriyama Yui, looking positively livid. Their antics had escalated to the point that they'd inadvertently been spotted by their own mark.

"I'm guessing you didn't come by coincidence," Kiriyama continued, her cheek twitching with barely suppressed fury.

"Oh... Hiya, Yui... Um... Where's Misaki-chan?" Nagase asked, trying to conceal her trepidation with forced cheer.

"In the bathroom. I knew I recognized your voices...!" she spat. Evidently not even Nagase was safe from Kiriyama's wrath... which meant she was most likely beyond furious. "WHAT THE HECK DO YOU PEOPLE THINK YOU'RE DOING?!" she roared, and her voice seemed to shake the air itself, almost as though one of the nearby arcade cabinets had started vibrating.

"K-Kiriyama... Just because it's loud in here doesn't mean you can scream like that. You'll bother the other—"

"*You shut the hell up, Taichi!* Look at you! All of you! What the heck are you doing right now?!"

"I... I was tryin' to make sure you wouldn't get pulled into some alternative lifestyle..."

"*Alternative lifestyle?!* What's that supposed to mean?! Aren't I allowed to live my own life?! I don't take orders, least of all from *you*, Aoki!"

"*Guh!* I'm not a fan of the 'least of all' part...!"

"So if *you* win I date Oosawa-san, and if *you* win I date Aoki?! You think you can just decide my relationship for me?!"

"I was merely trying to eliminate any obstacles between the two of you—"

"I don't care how little you were involved. You need to start taking this seriously or I'm gonna kick your ass, Fujishima-san!"

"She sounds like she means it... You'd better apologize, Yaegashi-kun."

"Don't dump all the heavy lifting on me! Do it yourself!"

"Enough bickering! All of you GET LOST AND LEAVE ME ALONE!" Kiriyama

stomped her foot. “I can make my own decisions!”

When they saw the tears in her eyes, everyone fell silent. They knew they had taken things too far, and they all regretted it—or so Taichi thought.

But just then, Inaba snapped her fingers into finger-guns, pointed at Kiriyama. “Exactly. You tell them, Yui,” she declared.

“Wh-What are you talking about?” Kiriyama fidgeted. That statement, heavy with implications, had made her nervous.

“This is your decision to make, and you need to make it.” Inaba took a step forward, placing herself directly in front of Kiriyama. “No matter which road you take, I’ll support you with everything I’ve got... but you’re the one behind the wheel here. You’re the one who carries that weight.”

“What are you... talking about...?” Kiriyama muttered in a shaky voice. She pursed her lips.

“That’s all I can say. Oh, and... I concede we probably shouldn’t have followed you here. Sorry. We’ll be going now. That’s what you wanted, right, Fujishima?” She turned to look at the girl in glasses.

“Perhaps I got a little over-emotional myself... For that, I sincerely apologize... to everyone.” She bowed her head. “I’ll see you all at school tomorrow.” And with that, she turned and strode off in the direction of the exit like a good sport. She always knew how to take a hint when it mattered most, and that was why Taichi found he could never hate her.

“We should get going, too. Quick, before Oosawa gets back!”

And so, at Inaba’s prompting, the rest of the CRC headed off, apologizing as they went.

Taichi glanced back one last time. Kiriyama’s expression was hard to read—a weird mix of angry, conflicted, and... lonely, like a lost puppy.

“You sure we made the right call?” he asked Inaba.

“Yeah, she’ll be fine. You realize I was intentionally making a scene so I could have the chance to make things clear to her, right?”

“What? How do you always manage to think that far ahead...?”

As usual, Inaba had surpassed his every expectation. She was on another level entirely.

But then Nagase shot Inaba a withering look. “‘Fess up, Inaban. You were just winging it back there.”

“Nngh...” Inaba turned away and started to whistle in a show of feigned innocence.

“Wait, what? Is that true?” Taichi stared at her dubiously.

“Wh-What does it matter?! Anyway, you two have a decision to make yourselves! I don’t know if you’re both too shy or what, but you’ve been avoiding each other!”

“Th-That’s not true!” Taichi and Nagase blurted out in unison, then flinched and turned to look at each other.

They were both blushing.

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Together, Oosawa-san and I left the building. The red rays of the setting sun dyed the town scarlet.

“Whew! I sure had a great time today. Thank you, Kiriyama-san.” She shot me a dazzling grin.

“Oh... Yeah... No problem...”

“You seem kinda down all of a sudden. Did it get boring near the end there?”

“No, no! Not at all! I had a blast!” I insisted. “I’m just... kinda tired, that’s all.” But truth be told, it was Inaba’s speech back there that was weighing on me more than anything else.

“Oh, I’m sorry! I shouldn’t have dragged you around like that!”

“No, no, it’s fine! I’m not mad or anything! Please, don’t apologize.”

“Oh, okay then... Thanks.” She smiled softly. Ordinarily she was the sort of girl who gave off a “badass” impression more than anything, but in that moment, she was adorably feminine. Once again, I was reminded of what a sweet and innocent girl she was.

Deep down, I'd been prejudiced against her. Part of me had assumed she was some kind of weirdo purely because she liked girls. But now I knew better. She was a perfectly normal girl... A normal girl who had feelings for me.

"Hey, um..." I stopped short.

"Hmm?"

"Didn't this, like... take a lot of courage? To confess your feelings to another girl, I mean."

At this, Oosawa-san froze perfectly still, like a statue. I couldn't tell if she was even breathing.

Then that frozen statue began to melt from the eyes.

"Yeah... I was really scared. I know it's not normal... and if everyone found out, they'd probably think I was a freak... and I was pretty sure you'd reject me... but I was just so in love with you... so I talked to Fujishima-san and some of my friends from middle school, and they helped me." She smiled, her tears sparkling in the light. She was still so beautiful, even when she was crying... Then she laughed. "Oh gosh, why am I crying?! Sorry, I gotta run to the restroom. Wait here!"

And with that, she dashed off before I could say another word. *Gone in a blink... That's a track star for you, I guess*.

I debated going after her, but decided against it. Instead, I would wait right here like she asked. So I sat down on the iron railing.

A pleasant breeze brushed past, carrying a hint of warmth from the sunset.

"She was so brave to tell me how she felt..."

Especially since I was a girl. Or maybe all love confessions took the same crazy amount of guts. Was that the true meaning of "love"? To want someone so badly, you summon up everything you have?

Just then, my cell phone started to buzz. I'd received an email... from Aoki.

No matter what you choose, I'll respect your decision... but I'm still in love with you. I want to hang out and have lots of fun with you... and not in a pervy way! (Seriously!) I know it might be "cheating" to send this while you're still on your

date, but I really needed to get it off my chest. Sorry.

He didn't even use any emojis.

I quietly read it over, then a second time, then a third. Aoki had confessed his feelings for me dozens of times. No matter how much I shot him down, he never gave up...

Then a response occurred to me, so I hit the Reply button and started pressing numbers. Obviously I felt guilty for talking to someone else during my date with Oosawa-san, but nevertheless, I hit the Call button.

"Yui?! What's goin' on?! What happened to the date?!" Aoki shouted on the other end of the line, obnoxious as always.

"I want to ask you a question. A really weird question. Is that okay?"

"Are you kiddin'? I'll always help you out, anytime, anywhere, 24/7/365!"

I could just picture the chivalrous smile on his face as he said it.

"How does it make you feel when you... tell me you love me? Sorry, I know it's personal..."

There was a brief pause. "You really wanna know?"

"Yeah."

Another pause.

"I try not to let it show, but... I actually get really nervous. 'Cuz I mean, I'm tellin' my favorite girl that I love her, y'know? I'm always scared, like... what if she thinks I'm a creep? Not like I can read your mind, so..."

"Oh..."

Apparently guys felt the same way... even Aoki.

Of course they did. It was so obvious. Nobody was a mind-reader; gender had nothing to do with it. Anybody would be scared to confess their feelings... and yet those same people would summon up the courage to do it anyway, because that was just how love worked.

I still had a lot more to learn, but at least now I finally felt like I was approaching an epiphany.

“But on the other hand,” Aoki continued, his tone more cheerful, “the good totally outweighs the bad, y’know? It’s kinda fun, like, getting all flustered and jittery and stuff! How else will I know I’m alive unless my heart’s pounding out of control? That kinda thing.”

I had a feeling he was trying to make me laugh, so I did. “Gotcha. Thanks.”

I wasn’t really sure what I was thanking him for, but maybe I didn’t need to be specific. Maybe I could thank him for everything all at once and he’d understand.

“Not sure what I helped you with, but you’re very welcome!”

...He doesn’t understand at all! Ugh! Pay attention, dummy!

“Anyway, sorry for the dumb question. Bye... I’m almost ready, I promise.”

“Huh? Wait, what was that last p—”

I hung up, then powered my phone off so he couldn’t call back and stuffed it into my pocket.

A short while later, Oosawa-san came jogging back over to me, and I got to my feet. Her eyes were red and puffy; my chest tightened.

“Sorry for, you know... bringing on the waterworks like that... Haha...”

“Oh, no, it’s my fault! I’m sorry I asked you that stupid question!” There was a lull in the conversation, so I pressed on. “Actually, I wanted to talk to you about something.”

Her face stiffened... but then her eyes hardened with resolve, and she nodded.

“I, um... used to have androphobia.”

It was something no one at school knew except for my friends in the CRC, but I’d decided I wanted to tell Oosawa-san about it, too.

“Huh...?” She looked back at me in shock.

“I had a traumatic experience a few years ago, and after that, I’d get sick to my stomach anytime a guy touched me or got too close.”

“Oh, wow... I’m so sorry that happened to you...”

“No, no, it’s okay! I’m better now. One of my guy friends has really helped me through it, and thanks to him, I consider myself officially over it... though boys still aren’t my favorite.”

It was the truth. As far as I was concerned, I was basically over my androphobia.

“Which is why I’ve never dated anyone. Never fallen in love. I thought it was impossible for me since I couldn’t stand men, so... I avoided it. I ran away.”

For years.

“I never even stopped to think about what ‘love’ or ‘romance’ really meant.”

In spite of the fact that I’d spent all that time side by side with someone who told me he loved me.

“I never tried to accept someone’s love... because I’d convinced myself I couldn’t. I used it as like a get-out-of-jail-free card so I didn’t have to try.”

Oosawa-san listened quietly as I spoke.

“And I never stopped to consider anyone else’s feelings in the process.”

Now that my androphobia had faded, I’d told myself I wanted to move past it... and yet there I was, still spinning my wheels the same way I did before.

“But after today, it finally hit me... and without you, I never would’ve put those pieces together. Thank you, Oosawa-san.”

She smiled softly.

“I still don’t know what it means to love someone... to fall in love... or what ‘romance’ is all about... but starting now, I want to *try*. I want to put myself out there. I want to start taking it seriously.”

No more dodging the question or running away. From now on, I wanted to give those feelings the respect they deserved.

“And once I catch up to everyone else... once I understand how it feels to be in love with someone, then maybe I can... see what it’s like to date someone.” I bowed my head. “The point is... I’m sorry, but I’m not in a position where I can accept your feelings right now, and I don’t want to make any big decisions until

I've figured myself out. It might be selfish of me, but I hope you can forgive me for this."

With this, I'd (hopefully) said everything I'd wanted to say—an important first step in actually confronting the issue. I raised my head once more, waiting for her response.

"Uh... Did I just get shot down?" Oosawa-san asked, tilting her head and smiling sheepishly.

"Huh? Um, I mean, not technically... It's not a yes or a no exactly... Wait..." It occurred to me just what a crappy answer that was. "Look, um... I'm sorry. You're right. The truth is, I can't date you, so yes, I have to turn you down. B-But it's not because I don't like you! I just, um...!"

As I scrambled for a better explanation, Oosawa-san giggled. "Sorry, I was just messing with you. Don't worry! I know you can't give me an answer right now... so I'll just have to wait until you can. A-Anyways!" she blurted, then faltered. "Does that mean you're cool with... you know... me being a girl?" she finished in a weak, wavery voice.

"...Can I be totally honest with you?" I asked.

A few seconds of silence passed.

"Go for it," she replied finally.

"I'm actually not sure yet."

There was so much I had yet to understand... but I didn't want to use that as an excuse to run away from it.

Oosawa-san stared at me for a moment, mouth agape. "I wasn't expecting that... I was pretty sure you'd say no."

"Guess I'm pretty weird, huh?"

We both burst out laughing.

"You know... It really means a lot to me that you're taking my feelings this seriously. I was afraid you'd laugh at me or call me gross..." Oosawa-san sighed, then smiled. "I'm glad I fell in love with you, Kiriyama-san."

“Wh... In love...? With me...?! Oh gosh...!”

She’d already said it before this point, but somehow I still wasn’t used to it, and I couldn’t help but get all bashful. At the same time, however, I also felt kind of... happy about it...?

“I’m going to wait for you, Kiriyama-san. I’ll wait until you find your answer.”

“Thank you... I appreciate that. And... thank you for... telling me how you feel.”

Before I knew it, we had clasped our hands together in a firm handshake. Her hand was so warm and soft... It lit a fire deep in my chest, and I vowed to myself that I would never forget this moment for as long as I lived.

◇◆◇

Gingerly, I opened my shoe locker.

Just shoes.

I heaved a sigh of relief. I mean, obviously I wasn’t going to get *another* love letter. I knew that. The first one was basically just a fluke, if anything—

“Morning, Yui.”

“Whuh-ho?!” I jumped out of my skin and whirled around to find Yukina standing there, staring dismally back at me. “Oh... um... Like, good morning, Yukina...”

“Is this some kind of new fad? Making weird noises at people who say hello to you in the morning?”

“N-No!”

Together, the two of us headed for Class 1-A. On the way, as we passed Class 1-C, I glanced through the open door.

There she was. Oosawa Misaki. She was chatting with their class president, Fujishima Maiko, and she had a big smile on her face.

“Hey, Yukina?”

“Hmm?”

“Could you tell me about your boyfriend sometime? Like, during lunch or

something?”

“What?”

“Don’t give me that look! I’m just asking!”

“I can’t help it! You *never* want to talk about that kind of stuff!”

“W-Well, true... but I mean, surely it can’t hurt, like just once, right?!”

“Wait... I know what this is...” Yukina cupped a hand to her chin with a knowing smirk. “Yui... You’re in love, aren’t you?”

“N-N-No I’m not—”

At just the worst time, our girl talk was interrupted by an unwanted intruder: Aoki Yoshifumi.

“What?! Yui?! In love?! These are two things I’m afraid I can’t let slide!”

“Mind your own business!” I swung my bookbag up and slammed it into his chin.

“Gwagh!” He toppled backwards.

“God! It’s too early in the morning for you to be this annoying!”

“I see you two haven’t changed a bit... So, you’re in love! Admit it!”

“No I’m NOOOT!”

“Someone’s blushing...”

“Grrrrr!”

“Okay, okay, I’ll drop it! Quit throwing a tantrum! You’re not in love... but you’re totally somewhere in that zone, right?”

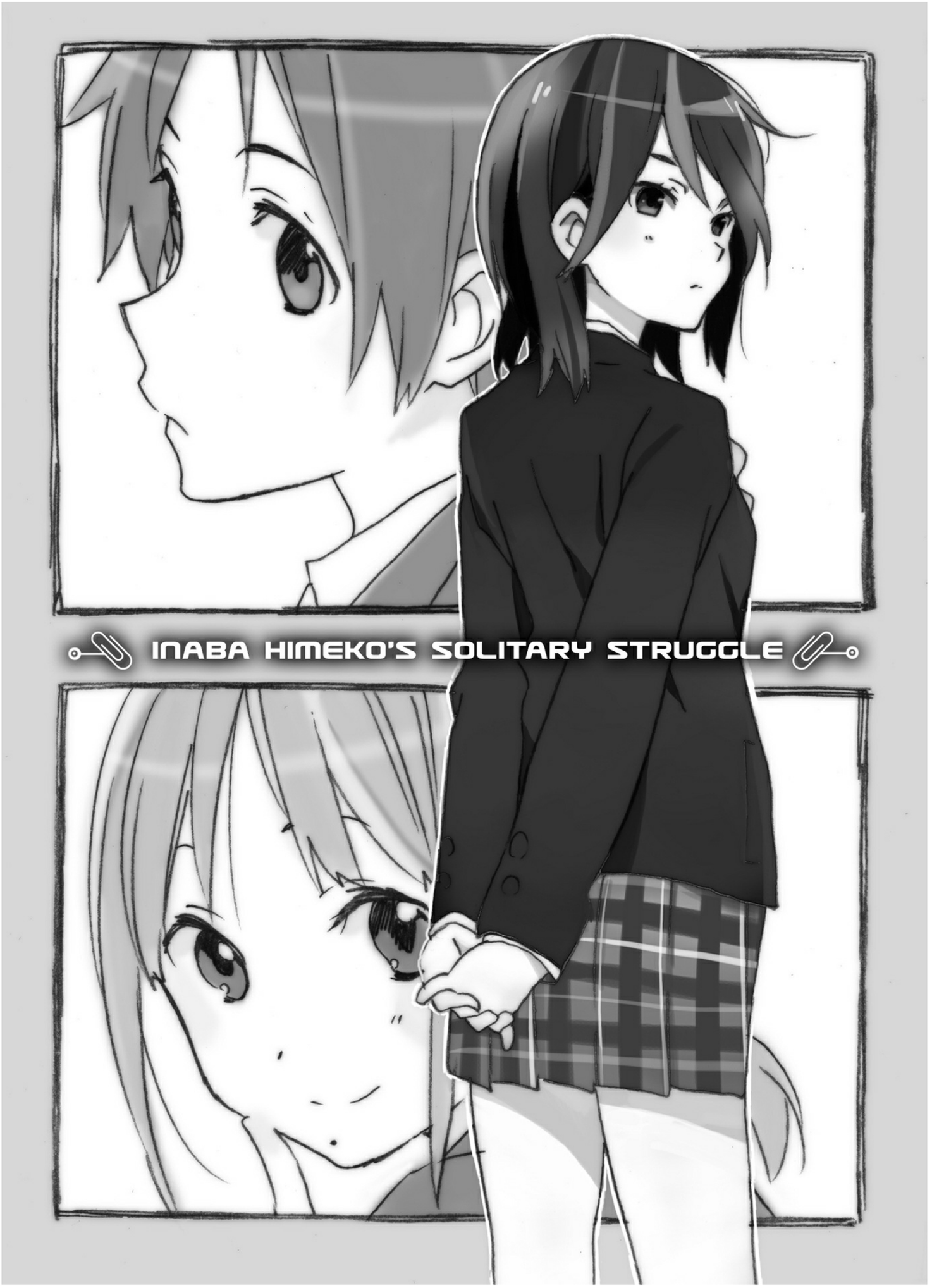
“I said no and I mean it!”

“Says the girl who asked me for mushy stories... Fine, whatever. Fair warning, though: I’m gonna gush like crazy! Just the other day, he and I—”

Yukina was so giddy, she apparently couldn’t even wait until lunchtime to tell me all about her boyfriend.

As for me, well... I still hadn’t learned the true meaning of love, but whatever

it was, I had a feeling it was something magical.


INABA HIMEKO'S SOLITARY STRUGGLE

From the moment I walked through the front gates onto the grounds of Yamaboshi High School, I felt it: starting today, I was going to change.

The sky was clear, with not a cloud in sight—the perfect weather for a new beginning. The campus itself was the same as ever, of course, but somehow I saw it in a whole new light. Was it because I'd found the courage I needed to fight? Or had I already changed in some way?

I arrived at the classroom early that morning. There, my fellow clubmates in the Cultural Research Club, Yaegashi Taichi and Nagase Iori, were already present. Normally we would spend our mornings chatting, but today...

"Oh... M-Morning, Inaba. We're finally back to our normal lives again, huh?" said Taichi.

...Something wasn't right. He wasn't making eye contact, like he was embarrassed about something. *Look at me, damn it!*

"R-Right... Feels weird to call this *normal*, but yeah..." My words came out noticeably softer than my thoughts.

"Uh, guys? Why aren't you looking at each other?" Iori asked.

Don't ask me! He's the one making this weird!

"N-No reason," Taichi muttered, scratching his head.

"Oh, good grief! We're finally free of that weirdo's stupid phenomenon, so could you at least try to seem happy about it? Think! Happy! Thoughts!" She prodded each of us as she spoke.

Truth be told, I didn't really mind her teasing, but I stepped out of her reach. "Stop that. I swear, you haven't changed a bit..."

Indeed, she was acting like nothing ever happened.

"S-Stop that, Nagase!" Taichi exclaimed, shooting me furtive glances.

Evidently this one was another story.

■□■

It's been just over a week since I, Inaba Himeko, confessed my feelings to Yaegashi Taichi. I had believed it to be a bombshell the likes of which could

destroy everything we'd built between us in the CRC, but so far the damage seems nonexistent (that I can see, anyway). The club is still together, functioning the same as it always has.

That said, until recently we were too busy dealing with that shitty Liberation phenomenon to worry about romance. But now the phenomenon is gone, and we're back to our normal everyday lives... and the inescapable fact of the matter is, I confessed my love to Taichi and declared rivalry with Iori.

"Okay, here's a hint for the last problem. Here, X is the variable—"

Shutting out the endless drone of my math teacher at the lectern, I delve back into thought. Time for a little objective analysis.

Girl A is friends with Boy B and Girl C, and the relationship between B and C is starting to take a romantic turn. A, B, and C are all in the same class and club, so they're together basically all the time. A wants to support C's relationship with B, but at the same time, A has feelings for B herself. A eventually decides to go after B, so she declares her intent to C. Then she tells B she loves him and that she'll compete for his affections with C. But despite this new rivalry, A and C continue to be friends, because C doesn't want to sacrifice her friendship for love...

Ridiculous. It's way too straightforward to be believable... There's no way it'll all work out perfectly in the end... Even if it's fine in the short-term, I just know in the long-term it'll bite us in the ass...

At the time, we were still smack-dab in the middle of «Heartseed»'s phenomenon, and I can't pretend that didn't influence my decision-making process. If it wasn't for the phenomenon, I'm not sure things would have turned out the way they did...

...Man, what is wrong with me? I keep whining like a dog. Didn't I just decide it was "time for Inaba Himeko to turn the tables" while I was on my way to school this morning? Keep acting like a child and we'll never get anywhere! I need to cast off my weakness and reinvent myself as a badass!

Okay, let's make a list of our objectives: 1. Operation Taichi: Fix the awkward tension between myself and Taichi and determine how best to interact with him.

He isn't avoiding me or anything, but our friendship right now is far from harmonious... Then again, maybe that's to be expected considering there's a "confessed to him / turned her down" aspect to our relationship now. Still, something needs to be done about it. After all, I'm pretty sure it's still too early to win him over, even for me... Logically speaking, of course! I'm not a coward!

2. Operation Iori: Find out how Iori really feels about this.

Even after Iori found out we both had feelings for the same guy, she told me not to give up on my love... and that we would stay friends no matter what. I'm guessing she said it to encourage me to stop being so pathetic and break down those barriers, and if so, it certainly worked.

But while I'm sure it's made her happy to see me grow as a person, I'm not so sure how she feels about this weird love triangle situation we're in now. She's been acting like nothing ever happened. And when I think about how she'd be dating Taichi right now if only I'd been a little stronger... it makes me feel unbearably guilty. If there had been any other way to snap me out of my whiny baby phase, I'm sure that's the route Iori would've preferred to take.

We're rivals in love... but we're also best friends. Unquestionably. So, now that things have settled down, it's my duty to find out how she truly feels.

Last but not least, should I complete objectives 1 and 2: 3. Operation Love Triangle: Find a stable balance in the relationship between myself, Taichi, and Iori.

Frankly, Iori has the advantage here, and by a long shot. (In fact, considering Taichi turned me down point-blank, one could even say I've officially lost.) But the two of them still aren't an item yet, which means there's still a chance. The fact of the matter is, this battle is far from over. But it'll take time to turn the tables in my favor... which means I'll need to create a stable love triangle in the meantime.

That should do it as far as my objectives. With a sigh, I look up... and realize someone is standing right next to my desk. Come to think of it, aren't we still in the middle of cl— "WHOA!"

Standing there is none other than the very boy who has of late completely overtaken my every waking thought: Yaegashi Taichi. My startled cry makes him

jump back in surprise, and I feel everyone in the room turn to look at me.

“Wh... What’s up, Taichi?”

“Last person in the row is supposed to gather up all the quiz sheets, remember? Wait... Inaba, why is yours blank?”

“Oh crap...”

I didn’t know we were doing a quiz!!!

■□■

My blank quiz sheet earned me a bunch of extra homework as punishment. Not only that, but everyone laughed at me for shouting in class, and it freaked Taichi out, too. So far, my “new beginning” wasn’t going so well... but it was still too early to give up. After all, I had vowed to change myself, and the new Inaba Himeko would be strong—strong enough to push through a minor setback like this one.

Mission: commence!

Operation Iori: Phase 1

I knew I wasn’t likely to get a straight answer if I asked Iori directly, so instead I went straight to her closest friend in class, Nakayama Mariko.

“Hey, has Iori talked to you about anything recently?”

“Like what?”

“Worries, troubles, anything like that? Issues with other friends? Boy problems?”

“Hmmm... Well, she asked me how to choose a gift for someone...”

“A gift...?”

Oh, I see your game, you wily little fox! You’re trying to buy his love with presents!

“I can’t really think of anything else... Actually, you know what?”

“Hmm? What?”

“If anyone’s been acting weird lately, it’s you! I mean, not to say Iori’s not

weird in general, obviously.”

“Wh-What?! I’m not acting weird! Far from it!”

Not right now, at least... although during the Liberation I wasn’t exactly normal.

“You sure? You seem kinda... emotionally unstable. Oh, that reminds me! You and Iori were sorta mad at each other a while back. Is that part of it? I mean, I feel awkward asking... but I guess I’m asking anyways! So what happened with you guys, huh?”

Crap. I had forgotten just how much Nakayama loved to gossip.

“Nothing particularly exciting. There’s not much to tell, I’m afraid.”

“Aww, you won’t tell me? Fair enough, I guess... Oh yeah! Inaba-san, you’re good at research, right? Could you help me with something?”

“Sure, I don’t mind.”

“Yesss! You’re so gangsta, Inaba-san! Must be nice to be so awesome!”

“O-Oh... Haha...”

Until recently I might’ve appreciated these decidedly unfeminine compliments, but right now they felt like salt in a wound. *Damn it!*

Operation Taichi: Phase 1

After class, I randomly plunked myself down at the desk in front of Taichi’s as he was putting his textbook away. He looked up. “What’s up, Inaba?”

“Oh, just wanted to chat.”

“Oh... Gotcha. What do you want to talk about?”

I didn’t respond.

“Didn’t you just say you wanted to chat?”

I stayed silent... and gauged his reaction. This was all part of my strategy, of course. I wanted to see how he would react without any influence from my own behavior—a control test to lay the groundwork for further experiments, if you will. How would he respond with no input from me?

After a moment of perplexed fumbling, Taichi decided to... make small talk.

“So, uhhh... It’s getting pretty cold these days, huh?”

Goddamn, why are you so awkward?

“Y-Yeah... It’ll be December next week...”

...Fuck, we’re both awkward!

Operation Iori: Phase 2

At lunch, I met up with one Kiriyama Yui in Class 1-A. We had just finished gym class, and her long reddish-brown hair was tied up in a ponytail.

“So, what did you want to ask me about?” she asked.

“Has Iori talked to you about anything recently?”

Outside of Iori and myself, Yui was the only other girl in the CRC, and she’d been through all the same stupid phenomena. Thus, she was the most likely shoulder for Iori to cry on... especially about me and/or Taichi.

“I mean, we talk about club stuff... but it’s all the same stuff she tells you, I’m sure.”

“Anything else?”

“Hmmm... Nothing worth writing home about, really...”

“Do... do you talk about boys at all?”

“B-Boys?! No, no, no! No way!” Yui shook her head violently, whipping her ponytail around at the speed of light. “Iori doesn’t really come to me about that kind of thing... Oh, but... she and Taichi are probably going to get together soon, huh?”

“No, the battle’s not over yet.”

“Huh? Battle?”

“Oh, er, don’t worry about it. Hmmm... With you and Aoki the way you are, I figured you guys might have a fair bit to discuss...”

“Th-*The way we are*?! Meaning what, exactly?! We’re not any *way* or anything!”

“Yes, yes, whatever you say...”

If Yui wasn’t her confidant, then maybe Iori hadn’t actually consulted anyone at all. As I paused to think, Yui clapped her hands together.

“That’s right! I meant to tell you, um... I know you asked me to format the Culture Bulletin, but like our computer at home isn’t working...”

“Oh, really? In that case, I’ll take care of it.”

“Huh?! You sure? I don’t mean to dump it on you...”

“Nah, it’s no big deal. Not that much work, anyway.”

“Oh... Well, okay. Thanks a lot! I really appreciate it.”

We chatted a bit longer, then turned to go our separate ways... when Yui suddenly called out again.

“Oh yeah, and I got all the stuff we need for the—mmph!” Out of nowhere, she clasped her hands over her mouth.

“What’s the matter?”

She shook her head vigorously.

“No, seriously, what’s wrong?”

Then, finally, she pulled her hands away. “I-It’s nothing! I’m just so used to you being in charge of this stuff... I mean, uhhh, don’t worry about it! Just forget it!”

And with that, she took off running like a bat out of hell.

Operation Taichi: Phase 2
Operation Iori: Phase 3
Operation Love Triangle: Phase 1

Yui didn’t come to the clubroom that day. Apparently, she had made plans with some friends from class, and she “felt obligated to go this time, you know, after shutting everyone out during the phenomenon.”

Indeed, during the Liberation, we had generally avoided contact with anyone outside of the CRC. And now that those shackles were finally gone, I was supportive of anyone who wanted to hang out elsewhere for a change. Sure,

these stupid phenomena meant we were spending significantly more time in each other's company, but we were by no means obligated.

"Awww, maaan... Why'd Yui skip club...? Doesn't she wanna have a nice, normal club rendebeau with me?" Aoki Yoshifumi whined obnoxiously.

"I'm surprised you even know that word," Taichi muttered under his breath.

"Why are you pronouncing it like that? It's 'rendez*vous*,' silly. 'Rendebeau' sounds like a ghost date!" Iori joked.

Though the three of us were in the same class, the clubroom was where most of our interactions took place... thus, it held the key to turning the tides of war. To me, it was a safe space and a battlefield all in one.

Aoki clucked his tongue. "Fine... Then I guess I'll just study! Hmph! You'll all be sorry!"

"Why would we feel threatened by that...?" Taichi retorted.

Enough eavesdropping; I need to make a move. I looked up from my laptop and— "So, Taichi, what's your type?"

"Bwegh?!"

"Gah?!"

"Okay, I get why Taichi would freak out, but *Inaban*? Hahaha!"

"W-Well... I mean..." I stammered, trying to think of a comeback.

Meanwhile, to the surprise of no one, Iori's question had Taichi flustered. "M-My *type?* It's kinda hard to say..."

"Okay then, which would you prefer: cute or sexy?" Iori continued without a moment's delay.

"Oh, you mean physically? Well... I guess I would generally prefer cute..."

"I see, I see. Cute over sexy, huh?" Iori nodded. Then she shot me a smug look, and it hit me: she was the cute type, and I was the sexy type. Which meant her question was really— So that's how you're going to play this, huh? Interesting. You may have taken the initiative, but I'm not letting you win!

"Sexy is obviously better. There's a sense of maturity and allure that cute

doesn't have," I declared.

"I mean, you don't have to be *mature* to be sexy, right?" Taichi asked.

"Oh, well... I suppose not." Evidently my defense of Team Sexy hadn't gone over so well.

"When you put it that way, sexy starts to sound kind of old and decrepit," Iori jabbed.

Relax. Don't panic. Think of a counter.

"Old and decrepit?! Do you seriously not see the appeal of maturity?! Sexy types look good in classy clothes. They don't have to try hard to be pretty. Plus, they're so much more stable! Meanwhile, the cute types are all afraid of growing up! Their youthfulness is seen as a good thing, but really they're just children! Cute equals child! And if your type is children, that makes you a pedophile!"

"...I don't know why you're getting so worked up about this, Inaba, but I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't accuse me of being a pedophile."

"Huh? Oh... R-Right. Sorry."

An awkward silence descended between us. Everyone was staring at me, even Aoki, with baffled looks on their faces that practically screamed *what is wrong with you?*

"Wh-What?" I asked uncomfortably.

"N-Nothing," Taichi replied, averting his gaze.

Why does everything feel so off?

After a moment, Aoki went back to his studying, and Taichi turned his attention to Iori.

"Where did that question come from, anyway? Don't make this weird, Nagase."

"Aww, c'mon! It's not weird! I'm just making small talk! What next... Okay, if you had to choose between the rational type and the emotional type—"

"Y-You'd pick the rational type, right?! While I acknowledge the appeal of the

emotional type, if you want someone who can plan for the future and all that entails—children, aging parents, and a stable retirement—you'll obviously want a partner who thinks rationally! Rational types can balance the budget and maintain a savings plan while accounting for all the risks! If you want to live a happy life, a rational partner is your best bet, don't you think, Taichi?!"

"...I was asking *him*, not you. What are you even talking about?" said Iori.

"Seems like Inaba's the emotional type today," said Taichi.

"There's no chance that the Liberation's still going on, right?" asked Aoki.

That was the final blow. I was acting so weird, they actually thought «Heartseed» might be involved. *What is wrong with me?* Filled with self-loathing, I clenched my jaw.

In the end, no matter how hard I tried, I only kept making things more awkward, so I ultimately decided to stop talking and focus on my laptop.

Why? Why do I keep messing up? I'm so embarrassed. And so tired. I feel like I'm going about this the wrong way... but I promised myself I would change. No pain, no gain, as they say. I need to suck it up and try again— My thoughts were interrupted when Taichi and Iori burst out laughing. I hadn't been listening to their conversation, but apparently it was hilarious, because they were clutching their sides. Their big, bright smiles only served to further illuminate the dark misery I felt.

And the darkness had no place amid the light, lest it be erased entirely.

"Hmmm... Taichi and Iori-chan sure got some good chemistry, don't they? It's like there's this magic in the air whenever they're together, y'know what I mean?"

If Taichi and Iori have good chemistry, then what about me?

"Inabacchan?"

Sadly, I didn't have an answer for him.

■□■

The next morning, a certain lanky guy waved at me as I was on my way to school.

“‘Sup, Inabacchan! It’s getting colder in the mornings, huh?”

“Uh huh,” I replied noncommittally. But although I tried my best to radiate “I am not a morning person” vibes at him, he blathered on regardless, to which I responded with vague grunts.

“...but there was like this weird crackling sound, y’know? Like *kkrrshshh!*”

“Huh.”

“And I tried using a different pair of earbuds, but it was still happening...”

“Yeah?”

“So I think I might need to buy a new MP3 player, but I’m not sure what kind to get!”

At this point, I had grown tired of responding, so I stopped.

“What about you? Anything on your wishlist these days? Whoa!” Abruptly, Aoki let out a yelp and came to a sudden stop.

I could’ve asked him about it, but instead I ignored him and kept walking. *It’s too fucking early for this shit.*

“Did I just miss my chance to ask...? Wait up, Inabacchan!”

And so we arrived at the front gates.

“That reminds me, you were actin’ kinda weird yesterday. What was that all about?”

A vein bulged in my forehead. I did *not* appreciate the likes of him calling me weird to my face.

“Weird? Explain to me exactly what part—” I began vehemently, but stopped myself.

Upon further reflection, he was right. Nothing about me was normal right now. After all, I was purposefully trying to change myself. And perhaps that departure from the status quo was going to register as “weird” whether I liked it or not.

“...Lately I’ve been thinking that I need to grow up, so... It’s just me trying to change, that’s all.”

I figured my explanation would click with him right away, but instead he murmured in contemplation.

“Growin’ up, huh... Yeah, I guess that’d change ya, but... Hmmm...”

“What? You don’t want me to or something?”

“No, ’s not that I don’t *want* you to... It’s just... Hmm...”

In the end, he never did find his answer.

■□■

Something’s weighing on my mind. I’m not sure what it is, but I think it probably has to do with yesterday’s screw-ups, not to mention that conversation with Aoki this morning.

I feel miserable, but that doesn’t mean I can back down from this. If I don’t keep pushing forward, I’ll never escape my weakness.

This battle has only just begun...

Operation Taichi: Phase 3
Operation Iori: Phase 4
FAILED

■□■

Operation Taichi: Phase 4

Why does god hate me?

Taichi was still acting awkward around me, and I was no closer to learning Iori’s candid opinion of the situation. My motivation was at an all-time high, but sadly it just didn’t translate to results.

Before I knew it, school was over for the day, and I still hadn’t made any progress toward my objectives.

I stuffed my textbook and pencil pouch into my bookbag. Maybe change was just impossible for me. Maybe humans simply weren’t capable of it.

Just then, it hit me. Taichi’s awkwardness was a recent development. So if I interacted with him the way I used to before this all started, perhaps he’d go back to normal.

Sure, maybe it wasn't a good idea to go back to being "just friends" now that I was actively pursuing his affections, but on the other hand, maybe a fresh start was just the thing we needed.

Pushing my weakness aside, I got up from my desk. *I just have to keep trying until I find the right answer.*

"Hey, Taichi," I called out nonchalantly. "Let's leave Iori to her cleaning duty and head to the clubroom without her."

"...Okay."

I clucked my tongue. "How enthusiastic. You awake in there or what?"

Act normal. Act natural. Don't overdo it. Be yourself.

"C'mon!" I clapped him on the back.

"Ouch! Yes, I'm awake, okay?! Don't hit me!"

I hadn't physically touched Taichi since the day of the field trip... the moment our lips touched behind the East Wing. There, it occurred to me that perhaps I'd distanced myself a bit too much since then. *Yes, that's right... We used to be a bit closer before...*

I felt myself relax.

On our way to the clubroom, we made casual small talk. It was nice, actually. Just two friends having a chat... For the first time in forever, it felt like Taichi was back to his usual self around me. Almost as though that confession—that kiss—never even happened.

I was treating him like any other friend, and he was doing the same in kind. He looked like he was having a great time, too. He was smiling. Maybe this was the Inaba Himeko he wanted...

Hah. "Maybe"? Good one. Obviously it is. He likes Iori, remember? He doesn't want me.

Knowing Taichi, it probably broke his tender little heart to have to say no to a friend. But I forced my feelings on him anyway. And now I was making things harder for Iori, too... all to suit my own whims. How could I possibly think it was the right thing to do?

Maybe Taichi didn’t want me to change...

“...and so then I told him—Wait, what the? Inaba? Why’d you stop?” Taichi asked, looking back at me.

“Oh, uh...” Now that I’d come to a stop, I couldn’t find it in me to move forward. “A-Actually, I just realized I need to do something before I go to the clubroom. You go on without me.”

“Oh, okay. Is it club-related? Anything I can help with?”

“No, just a... personal errand...”

What am I saying? Why am I running away? I cursed myself internally. But the whiny baby inside me had awoken, and there was no use fighting it now.

All Operations On Standby With no set destination in mind, I wandered into a different school building. The hallway with the special activity rooms was mercifully deserted; from there, I stared out at the athletic field and sighed.

“What is wrong with me...?”

What happened to all my conviction? Didn’t I tell myself I would win this? I vowed to stop being weak—both for myself and for my dear friend who supported me. And yet, the very person who initially inspired this motivation didn’t seem to want it to happen. So what was I supposed to do?

Maybe I was better off focusing on my current objectives... but at the same time, I couldn’t see myself finding much success. So what was I meant to do? What did I want to do? What did I want to achieve...?

Out of the shadows, I felt someone’s hot breath against my ear. “Well, well. If it isn’t a little lost lovelorn lamb.”

“Whoa!” An unpleasant shudder crawled down my spine, and I whirled around.

There stood Fujishima Maiko, president of Class 1-C, revered as the “Love Guru,” her hair pulled back and her bangs pinned up, her expression steely, her trademark glasses glittering in the sunlight. Up close I found she was rather beautiful, with perfectly clear skin— “G-Get out of my bubble!” I yelped, firmly pushing her backwards a bit.

“Goodness, don’t be so rough! It’s not proper for a lady, be it the giving end or the receiving end.”

“Yeah, well, that’s what you get for sneaking up on me and breathing in my ear like a creep!” The mere memory made my skin crawl.

“I can’t help it. You’re just so cute these days.”

“S-So what?! Wh... What’s that supposed to mean, anyway?! I’m not cute!”

“I’m afraid I must disagree. For instance, this thing you’re doing where you’re turning away and blushing? *Very* cute.”

“Urk...!”

“Turns out you *do* actually let your guard down sometimes, don’t you?”

“Nngh...”

“An ice queen who shows just a glimpse of her sweet side... How very erotic... I yearn to tease—I mean, bully—I mean, I’ll be in my bunk.”

“*That’s* the one you’re going with?!”

Fujishima chuckled. She was clearly toying with me. *Gah, I can’t deal with her... In fact, if there’s anyone on this planet who CAN deal with her, I’d love to know how they do it!*

“So, what do you want with me?” I asked.

“You see, my *apostle of love sensor* has detected a lost lamb...”

“...You’re a shepherd now?”

“Whosoever believes shall be saved!”

“Could you at least fucking acknowledge that I’m speaking to you?!” *Fucking hell, this chick is out of control.*

“Now then, all serious discussion aside...”

“Don’t you mean ‘all *jokes* aside’? If that was your idea of a *serious discussion*, then I’m leaving.”

“You’re struggling with something, aren’t you?” she asked suddenly—and after that weird back-and-forth just now, her calm, composed voice caught me

entirely off-guard.

“N-Not really,” I stammered. After all, it was nothing worth venting to someone about.

“This isn’t a serious discussion, remember? We’re joking. Just make something up.” Her expression softened ever so slightly... like the first drops of melting snow after a long, long winter.

“Did you just...”

First she softened me up, and then she hit me where it hurt. She had dismantled my defenses perfectly... and suddenly I understood why so many people in our grade treated her as a love guru. She had seen right through me, and now she had the advantage.

Meanwhile, I had lost the will to fight her. The old me would’ve been desperate to argue the point—anything to deny my own weakness. But I was different now.

“Right... Joking...” I smirked.

And so I decided to tell her my story, hoping against hope that she could guide me to an answer.

“...So essentially you wish to know how to seduce a man, correct?”

“Wh...?! How did you get *that* out of anything I just said?!”

Granted, I’d spoken vaguely on purpose, but I never said a single thing along those lines! And for a second there I actually thought she was cool, damn it!

“The simplest, most straightforward, and most effective strategy is to use your sexuality.”

“I just said—”

“High school boys are no different from monkeys, so you shouldn’t have too much trouble. But don’t forget, some of them have near-human intelligence. Just be careful not to let these apes string you along, alright?”

“Are you listening to me?!”

That said, she had a point. I filed her suggestion in the back of my mind.

“Recently I came up with a most excellent idea. Shall I pass it on to you?”

“No thank you!”

“Are you sure?”

“...I mean, if you feel like telling me, suit yourself...”

Not that I want to know! Because I don’t!

“Very well then. I’ll do just that.” She chuckled. “Have you heard of the suspension bridge effect? You know, the phenomenon where the human brain misinterprets fear as arousal. Well, as it happens, you can easily make use of this effect in your everyday life.”

“...How?”

“The ‘say ahh’ strategy.”

“Uhhh... What?”

“You make a boy ‘say ahh’ and feed him something. Provided he’s not a womanizer or a sexless monk, I guarantee he’ll feel something.”

Hm.

“He’ll get flustered, at the bare minimum. And that emotional unrest will feel like romantic tension.”

Hmm...

“Plus, when you take the initiative, in the back of his mind he’ll start thinking ‘Oh, this chick is totally into me!’ and that’ll get him even more flustered.”

Hmmmm!

“And *if* he’s a virgin, at that point he’s as good as yours!” Fujishima declared, her chest held high. “As long as he’s a *virgin!*”

“Will you quit stressing the ‘virgin’ thing?!”

“Watch your step, now. Virgin fantasies can be *scawy!*”

“Nothing could possibly be scarier than you! What the hell was that weird baby lisp?!” *She’s even creepier than I thought!*

“Good comeback,” she replied thoughtfully, peering at me.

I decided to get the conversation back on track. “How would you even set up a scenario like that? Seems complicated.”

“Well, you’ll just have to make it work, won’t you? It’s *your* love life, after all.”

Right.

“Personally, I think it’s a discovery on par with Ohm’s law. I call it the Law of Say Ahh!”

“How the fuck is it on par with *science?!*” *Seriously, you’re out of your mind!*

She heaved a sigh of relief. “I’m glad to see you’ve gone back to your usual self again.” Her tone was unexpectedly... gentle.

“Fujishima...?” *This is what I get for letting my guard down around her, damn it.* “Look, uh... Is it really that simple?”

“Of course it is,” she replied, casually adjusting her glasses.

Something else was bothering me about her comment. “So what do you mean, my usual self?”

“Well, you’ve been acting rather strangely, wouldn’t you say? You had a little spat with Nagase-san and everything. In fact, you’re still acting fairly weird to this day.”

“I am...?”

“Yes, you are.”

Was my current behavior really equal to the likes of the Liberation?

“Well... that’s because I’m trying to be different. I’m trying to change.”

“Changing yourself... I see... And who stands to benefit from this?”

I could see myself reflected in her lenses.

“Uhh... Myself, I guess?”

“I see. Very well, then. Have fun struggling.” And with a knowing look, Fujishima walked off.

Left alone, I psyched myself to go back to the clubroom. No point in dawdling; I needed to take this fuel from Fujishima and convert it into raw horsepower.

My feeble heart was hopefully in better shape now. Sure, it hurt to be called ‘weird,’ but... *No, don’t think about it. Focus!*

I arrived belatedly at the clubroom. As I opened the door, I heard Iori’s voice loud and clear— “Hmmm... Inaban might not seem feminine at first glance, but deep down she’s really just as girly as—Uhh, hi, Inaban!”

“What’s up? Gossiping about me?” I asked.

Instantly, the four other members of the CRC turned away and went back to what they were doing.

“Uh, hello? Is something going on, or what?”

“Hey there, Inaba. You’re late,” Taichi greeted me.

“Yeah. Got caught up in some stuff.”

I took a seat. Meanwhile, nobody looked me in the eye. They were clearly hiding something. *The hell? Don’t I get to be part of the fun?* I couldn’t let this slide. I needed to force it out of them.

I glanced around. One by one, they all avoided my gaze.

Normally, I would’ve demanded that they tell me. That was just the sort of person I was... and yet I couldn’t do it. Instead, I quietly set up my laptop.

Here I was, trying to change myself, but nothing was working. Everyone just called me weird—even the very person I hoped would understand me the best. And now that weirdness was making everything else weird, too.

Everything was going wrong. My pessimism was spiraling out of control. It was a bad habit of mine, and I knew I needed to stop it... but I couldn’t.

In the end, I failed to make any progress—be it in my objectives or in my clubwork.

■□■

The next morning, the sky was clear and bright. And after a good night’s sleep, my negative spiral had mostly been reset.

That morning, I summoned up all my willpower to suppress my anxiety. It was still way too early to throw in the towel. Why did I keep expecting all my plans

to work out perfectly on the first try? They just needed some tweaking, that's all.

Mission: recommence!

Operation Taichi: Phase 5

"Like I said, you gotta use the same formula as last time."

I sat at the desk in front of Taichi's, helping him with his worksheet.

"Oh, I see... So this number goes here... Substitute it in... I get it now!"

"Easy, right?"

"Yeah! Almost like the answer was staring me in the face. Thanks a ton."

That's not the only thing in your face right now, if you'd just pay attention, I thought.

I had seated myself on top of the desk in front of him with my legs crossed. Thus, my legs were directly at his eye level. Not only that, but I'd hiked up my skirt ever so slightly... and I wasn't wearing bike shorts.

I wasn't actually going to show him my panties, of course, but according to my research, the mere possibility alone would still trigger the desired effect. Not that I was going along with Fujishima's suggestion or anything! Still, maybe she had the right idea. Maybe the best move would be to get his blood pumping.

I still hadn't worked out where exactly I stood with Taichi, but for now I figured we could maintain a low-stakes friendship... and in the meantime, I could casually flaunt my femininity at strategic points throughout.

Unfortunately for me, he had yet to look up from his paper. *C'mon, are you THAT in love with math?!*

I debated changing positions, but I knew the second I uncrossed my legs, I would almost certainly end up inadvertently flashing him... I wasn't a fan of the idea, but then again... *No risk, no reward, as they say...*

Then I saw his gaze flick upwards for a fraction of a second, and right back down to his paper. *Aha! It's working!*

Blushing, Taichi scratched his cheek. "Uh, Inaba?"

“Yes?” I asked, in the sexiest voice I could manage.

There was a long pause.

“I can see your panties.”

“*THE WHOLE TIME?!*”

Reflexively, I kicked him in the face.

After that, I spent a long time apologizing for the nosebleed I gave him...

Operation Iori: Phase 5

At this point, I knew I wasn’t going to get anywhere if I kept pussyfooting around. I needed to go straight to the source.

“You want to know how I feel about you trying to steal Taichi from me?” Iori asked, paraphrasing the question I’d posed to her.

“That’s a little blunt, but yeah...” *I was trying to be considerate of your feelings, damn it!*

“What are you talking about? You’re always saying how you prefer being direct over beating around the bush.”

“Well... yeah...”

Lately it felt like she’d turned the tables on me. She’d grown stronger than I remembered.

“Right? Okay, so, my feelings on the topic: I’m not mad about it. I mean, it’s not like Taichi is my property or anything. He’s not even my boyfriend. So what’s there to get mad about?”

“But...”

“We had this conversation during the field trip, remember? We agreed we were cool with each other! Or were you lying to me back then?”

“Fuck no, I wasn’t lying.” Looking back, it was the most honest I’d ever been with anyone in all my life. That was the moment I finally tore down the walls around me.

“Well, there you go! All you have to do is fight me fair and square.”

“And you’re... *okay* with that?”

“Yep! I actually like having you on board... Makes me feel like I’m making the right choice.” As she spoke, her expression darkened faintly.

“What’s that supposed to mean...?”

“Who knows!” Iori laughed absently. Maybe she was trying to play it off, or maybe she really was amused... I could never quite get a read on her, no matter how hard I tried. “Anyway, there you have it! We should do some brainstorming sometime. Y’know, plan out how to get our crush to notice us.”

“Even though we’re sworn enemies with an interest in the same guy?”

“We are *not* sworn enemies! We’re just... romantic rivals!”

“Right...” *Same difference,* I thought.

“Enemies actively try to hurt each other, while rivals just *compete*. Having a rival is a good thing!” She held up two fingers in a peace sign and smiled softly. “Now I get it... So that’s what’s got you all weird lately, huh?”

“What? Weird?”

There’s that word again. It was proof that I’d visibly changed, and so I should’ve felt happy about it... and yet, something didn’t feel right. *If I’ve changed, then why aren’t I seeing results?*

“Don’t you think so? It’s like you’ve totally forgotten... Or maybe you’re just doing it on purpose, I dunno.”

“Forgotten what?”

“Huh? Do you seriously not know what I’m talking about...? Okay, never mind. It’s nothing.”

“Oh, come on! You know that’s only going to make me more curious!” *Is something going on behind my back?*

“It’s nooothing! Really! Anyway, remember when I asked you to help me return those clothes I bought? I’ve decided I’ll take care of it myself.”

I vaguely recalled this conversation. “Right... No, I still think I should come with you. I don’t trust you not to wander off on your own.”

“Aww, don’t treat me like a little kid!”

Before I knew it, Iori had steered the conversation to a different subject, and now there was no going back.

■□■

It was one thing to hype myself up by planning my objectives like I was a secret agent. That was all well and good. But if I couldn’t walk the walk, then I was just wasting my time.

Neither Operation Taichi nor Operation Iori were going as planned, and as a result, I hadn’t made any progress on Operation Love Triangle, either. (Technically speaking, Operation Iori was potentially already a success, but somehow I couldn’t bring myself to accept it.) Charging in headfirst just wasn’t my style; I was more of the scheming type. But what if that was the wrong way to go about it? What if I was supposed to change myself to be more straightforward? Abandon my normal self? The thought made me feel lightheaded all of a sudden.

I opened the clubroom door to find that once again I was the last person to arrive.

“I still think we should—Whoa!” Aoki stopped short in the middle of his sentence, and the four of them sprang apart, as if on cue.

The room was spinning. My legs were shaking. My mind went blank. I felt dizzy. That much was all in my head. But the reality of the matter was, I had lost my place among them.

I had changed. Shifted. And now that stability was gone... and...

I should have asked them what they were doing, but I couldn’t. What if my worst fears proved to be true?

Instead, I pretended not to care. I sat down in a chair and set up my laptop, trying not to think about it... but my brain was working at full speed to analyze it. What on earth could the four of them want to discuss without me?

My thoughts took a turn for the pessimistic.

Maybe they’d decided my rivalry with Iori was a problem. Maybe they were

trying to figure out how to get rid of me. Of course, I knew they weren't actually like that... and yet I couldn't help but worry nonetheless.

People always saw me as "the rational type," but that couldn't be further from the truth. The real me? Paranoid over nothing. Anxious and depressed over nothing. Constantly.

God, I can't do this anymore! Everything's a mess! I don't know what to do or how to act!

I have to change. But where to start?

I have to change. Do I change everything?

I have to change. I have to change!

But once I DO change, what happens to my friendship with Taichi, and Iori, and Yui, and Aoki, and everyone else?

In the end, yet again, I didn't get a single thing done that day.

■□■

The next day, I couldn't muster up the will to work on my objectives at all. Instead, I spent the whole morning dazed and unfocused. I kept agonizing over what to do, but found no meaningful answers.

Then class ended for the day, and it was time to head to the clubroom.

I glanced over. Iori and Taichi were looking at me and whispering to each other. As soon as I spotted them, however, they sprang apart; Iori cheerfully patted Taichi on the shoulder and left the classroom without us.

As I moved to follow her, Taichi approached me. "Hold up, Inaba," he called as he circled around in front of me.

"What do you want?" My voice came out in a low growl.

"Well, uh, there's something I want to talk to you about..."

"Can't we just talk about it on the way?"

"N-No, we can't. Let's just sit down for a bit, okay?"

"The hell is this about?"

But no matter how hard I pressed, Taichi refused to specify.

I could feel myself getting irritated. This asshole was the source of all my problems, all my confusion, all my anxiety... Why didn't he just hurry up and make Iori his girlfriend? Why did he keep being so goddamn nice to me? Why did he have to... make me fall in love with him...?

This is all your fault, damn it! I thought angrily to myself.

"What the fuck do you want?!" I hissed, trying to push past him.

"Don't snap at me, alright? Come on, just slow down for a minute."

"Then *spit it out* already!"

"Okay, okay! I'll talk! Come back into the classroom!"

"We can have this conversation on the way!"

"No, we can't! It's... important!"

Instantly, I froze. *Important?*

I turned back to face him. "Wh... What is it?" I asked, looking him directly in the eyes.

He sucked in a breath. "Oh... uh... well..." Then he looked away awkwardly.

What the hell is it?! You said it was important, didn't you?! If you have something to say, then say it. If you don't, then don't! Do you not realize how much value I place in your every word and deed? Don't you see how much I care?!

"Is it about my recent—" I began, but then an upbeat ringtone began to play.

"Oh crap! Did I forget to put it on vibrate?!" Taichi whipped his phone out of his pocket at the speed of light. "Aoki! ...Yeah...? All set? Thank god... Wait, how'd you manage it that fast...?"

■□■

When we arrived at the clubroom, Taichi gestured me inside. And as soon as I walked in— "HAPPY BIRTHDAY, INABA!"

—the sound of party poppers exploded around me.

For a few seconds I froze as my mind went blank. *Happy... birthday...?*

The room was decorated in paper chains—nothing fancy, and yet it hit me right in the heart.

“What’s the matter, Inaban? Did we leave you speechless?” Iori asked, grinning playfully.

“Get in there, Inaba,” Taichi prompted, gently pushing me forward.

And so I tottered into the room on shaky legs, my brain still struggling to process this.

“Now then, time for your gift! Here ya go!” And with that, Aoki lifted the lid on the box sitting on the table.

The first thing I saw was a white chocolate plaque with the words *HAPPY BIRTHDAY HIMEKO!* written in icing... sitting in the very center of a large chocolate cake. A medley of apricot-glazed fruits—strawberry, kiwi, orange, peach, melon, pineapple, blueberry—had been crammed onto every inch of its surface, and they glittered like jewels.

No, better than jewels.

Blinding me.

My sight blurred.

“Where did this come from...?”

I knew it didn’t matter—I knew I was supposed to just say thank you—and yet I couldn’t help but ask anyway.

“We ordered it, silly! And then I ran off to go pick it up just now,” Kiriyama explained, looking quite pleased with herself.

“At the speed of light, too!” Aoki added.

“Boy, do I owe you one. There’s no way I could’ve stalled her for as long as we planned,” Taichi sighed.

“Please. Like, obviously you didn’t stand a chance at distracting Inaba.”

“Come on, Kiriyama! You don’t believe in me?!”

“Oh, relax. It’s fine! Anyways, Inaba, um... I know you don’t super like being called by your first name and stuff, but it felt kinda dumb to have them write your last name on a personalized cake, y’know? So...”

“No, that’s fine... um...” If anything, I found it really touching. But I couldn’t say that, of course. Instead, I stared at the floor.

“Is our Inaban crying? Hmmm?” Iori peered at me.

“Sh-Shut up! I’m not... *crying!*” I looked away from her and rubbed my eyes with my sleeves. *It doesn’t count as crying as long as the tears don’t fall!*

“See? Inaban likes this stuff just as much as anyone! It doesn’t always have to be strictly practical, Taichi.”

“Got it... I’ll make note of that in the future.”

That was when I realized: this was the secret conversation they’d been keeping from me all along.

“Oh my god, Inaba, why are you just *standing* there? Is it really that life-shattering? You didn’t, like, forget your own birthday or something, did you?”

I didn’t answer... but she was right. Thinking back, my family had told me over breakfast that they’d made a reservation for dinner tonight. We almost never went out for dinner as a family, so I remember being confused as to why... but now I understood.

How could I have forgotten my sixteenth birthday?

Iori turned back to me. “Uh, Inaban? I mean, I know we’ve been through a lot lately... but this isn’t like you.”

“Which part?” I’d already been called weird a dozen times by now, so I was used to it.

“Well, it’s like... you’re trying too hard, or... you’re too uptight? Or tunnel-visioned, I guess?”

Tunnel-visioned. That made sense. Lately I hadn’t had time to look at the bigger picture—I’d been too busy inventing problems in my head. Problems I failed to solve. But still...

“I’m trying to change. Trying to be a stronger person... a better person.”

At this, Iori burst out laughing. “Oh, please! You’re already a total saint, you dork! I can’t even imagine what a better you would look like!”

“Whoa, whoa. I am *not* a saint.”

“Then why did you offer to come with me to return those clothes, hmm?” She shot me a wry grin. “And why did you agree to help Nakayama-chan with her research? Don’t think for a minute I don’t know *all* about that!”

“Plus, you were more than happy to help me with those math problems,” Taichi mused.

“*And* you took over my work on the Culture Bulletin!” Yui declared.

“And... uhh... I can’t think of any good examples off the top of my head, but you’re always there for me, too!” Aoki finished.

“What do you mean, you can’t think of anything?! She’s always saving your butt left and right!” Yui snapped.

“True... It all sorta blurs together, I guess... Hahaha...”

“Look, I don’t think there’s anything wrong with trying to change,” said Iori. “But does it really have to be that dramatic? I mean, you’ve already changed a *lot* over the past six-odd months I’ve known you, and you weren’t even trying.”

I’ve been changing... without even trying?

“Think about it! Six months ago, would you have helped Nakayama-chan? No way! The old you never would’ve agreed to ‘distribute your intel’ or whatever!”

I wasn’t even actively conscious of these changes, and yet they had happened regardless. There was never any need to force it... I must’ve gotten caught up in the emotional weight of the moment.

How I wished I was half the person Iori was. She was so fragile, and yet so strong. And while she struggled with her own identity, she always seemed to know the rest of us better than we knew ourselves. Her potential was immeasurable... It made me wonder if I truly knew her as well as I thought I did.

“Okay, Inaban, hurry up and take a seat! We gotta set up the candles!”

“Hold on, Iori. Isn’t it against the rules to start fires on campus?”

“Oh, c’mon. Who cares about a couple measly candles?”

“Plus, like, now that we have them, it’ll be a total waste if we don’t use them.”

“See? Yui gets it!”

“Then I, the humble Aoki Yoshifumi, shall serve as your... uh... candle-lighting guy!”

While the others were all fussing over the candle prep, Taichi approached me.

“Inaba...” He lowered his voice and continued, “I really appreciate... you know... what you said back then. Honestly, this stuff is all so new to me, I still have no idea how to handle it... Sorry, I know that’s just an excuse.”

This was the first time he had addressed my love confession since the day it happened. Evidently it hadn’t been erased from history. To him, it was real.

“You don’t have to apologize. If anything, I’m the one who’s been letting my selfishness make things awkward for everyone.”

“Nah. I actually really like this friendship we’ve built. And I don’t know what your plans are exactly, but I think it’d be cool to keep this going.”

“Oh...”

This caught me off-guard.

All this time, I’d convinced myself I needed to change... but that didn’t mean I needed to abandon all sense of self to achieve that end. After all, if I changed everything that made me “me,” good parts and all, I wouldn’t be Inaba Himeko anymore.

Indeed, although it was easy to forget, I had positive traits just like anyone else. After all, it was functionally impossible to possess 100% negative traits. I wasn’t a total monster... I just needed to have confidence in myself.

“Inaban!”

“Inaba!”

“Inabacchan!”

My friends were calling me.

“Let’s go, Inaba,” Taichi prompted.

And so I took a step forward. Starting now, I was going to walk with my head held high.

Sure, maybe I panicked and lost sight of my identity. And chances were good it wouldn’t be the last time I would make a dumbass mistake. After all, if a little willpower was all it took to make shit happen, no one in this world would ever have any problems.

No... In reality, willpower was the first step. The first of many. And to truly live our lives, the only option was to walk that path one step at a time—no shortcuts.

Granted, there would be bad days. Sad days. Some days we would despair at our fuckups. And some days we might stray from the right path. But in the end...

“Alright, candles are good to go! Everybody ready to sing?! Three, two, one, go!”

On Iori’s signal, everyone launched into a chorus of the happy birthday song.

...In the end, as long as I have my friends by my side, I know I’ll be just fine.

As the song came to a close, everyone burst into cheers and applause.

Now then... It’s time to make my comeback, Inaba Himeko style!

With courage burning brightly in my chest, I leaned forward and blew out those sixteen candles.


PENTAGON++

—I failed the entrance exam for my first choice high school.

It wasn't my fault, though. I mean, yes, it was the best public school in the district, but I scored an 80 on all the practice tests, so clearly I had the ability. No, I was just unlucky. After all, I know at least one guy at my cram school who passed, and he's basically a neanderthal compared to me.

And so I ended up enrolling at my second choice, Yamaboshi High School. As far as private prep schools went, it was fairly decent, and I'd heard the overall vibes were pretty lax. This did little to spark my enthusiasm, however, and so I was a sad little rain cloud, right from day one. *How fitting*, I thought to myself.

But just when I was getting ready to settle into my new, unexceptional life, things took a turn for the weird when a series of coincidences all hit me at once.

Or maybe none of it was a coincidence at all; maybe it was a foregone conclusion.

The people I met in that room were so full of light, it hurt. So dazzling, they made me sick.

Every now and then I'd meet people like them: beacons shining pointlessly amid a world full of despair. But in the end, they'd typically end up like *us*, and the world would grow more and more tainted. That was the system working as intended.

But every once in a blue moon, there were exceptions—people blessed with good luck right from birth. I always wondered what would become of those people... and why it was that I saw them as "dazzling" to begin with. The mystery intrigued me.

Maybe if I found the answer, I could join them— No, no, no. What am I thinking? Am I blind? No way *that's* happening.

But I'm still curious... Yeah, that's it. I'm just curious. That's all there is to it.

I don't want to be like them, that's for sure. No, really.

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—Starting my first year of high school, I wanted to reinvent myself. Like a makeover! Yeah, I like the sound of that.

Of course, I didn't fancy myself the *queen bee* or anything. I knew I wasn't cut out for that. Still, I don't think it hurts to dream a little, you know?

I don't need to be the star, I thought to myself. *I don't need to be in the limelight. I'll take any minor role you offer me, even just Villager A!*

But that motivation quickly faded, and before I knew it, I was right back where I'd always been. Literally the same exact spot! And at this point, I'm starting to think this is where I'll always be. This is the role I've been assigned. I get that, I promise.

I'm just a peg, and this is my hole. My world won't change—it's just not possible. I mean, it's just so *big*, you know? Compared to the size of the world, I'm an itty-bitty molecule. A speck of dust that floats along, fated never to take center stage.

But then I happened across the most dazzling spectacle I'd ever laid eyes on. I couldn't believe it! I never thought I'd witness something so... *perfect*. Something that ticked all my boxes. It blew me away completely. I didn't know something like that actually existed in real life!

It reminded me of that fruitless dream I'd thrown away... and made me think maybe it wasn't so impossible after all. Maybe if I joined them— No, no, no! Me? Who am I kidding? I'm not fit to stand among them. I'm just a peg.

But... if possible... No, I can't! What am I thinking?

I'm not worthy.

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First, she drummed her fingers on the table. Then she began to shift around in her folding chair, making it squeak. Then she grabbed a volume of manga, opened it, closed it, opened it again—and shot a hopeful look at the clubroom door.

"Nagase, will you please just settle down?" asked Yaegashi Taichi.

At this, Nagase Iori swung around. Her silky dark hair hung freely down her back, swaying with her movements like a shampoo commercial.

"Excuse me, Taichi?! Are you trying to insimuate I'm restless or something?!"

“It’s ins*in*uate, with an N.”

“Th-That’s what I said!”

“No it isn’t! You said ‘insimuate’ with an M! And to answer your question, yes, you’re fidgeting all over the place! Quit it!”

“You’re such a jerk today! Leave me alooone!” And with that, Nagase collapsed forward onto the table, cradling her head in her arms.

During their first year of high school, a perky ponytail had served as her trademark hairstyle. But these days it was nowhere to be seen. Instead, she wore it down; this afforded her a comparatively more grown-up vibe... on the outside, at least. Personality-wise, however, she was still her goofy, happy-go-lucky self. It was a very Nagase contrast, in Taichi’s opinion.

“You can’t blame her, dude,” chided Aoki Yoshifumi, with hands folded behind his head, his lanky body outstretched in full-on relaxation mode. “We’re gettin’ our first-ever new club member and we haven’t heard anything about ‘em! Who wouldn’t be curious?”

“W-We can’t just assume they’re going to join!” snapped Inaba Himeko, whose nervous tension placed her in diametric opposition to Aoki.

Spring had rolled around, but the flowers weren’t the only things blossoming lately. As of approximately one month ago, Inaba was now Taichi’s girlfriend. This had happened a little while after the pandemonium of club presentations —right after the end of «Heartseed»’s Sentiment Transmission phenomenon, if one wanted to get technical.

“What’s the matter, Inabacchan? Just yesterday you were goin’ on about how you wanted some new blood or whatever. Didja change your mind?”

“No, I still do, but... what if this new kid shows up and it’s a girl and she’s small and cute?”

Taichi’s ears perked up.

“What’s so bad about that?” Aoki asked.

“You know Taichi has a thing for little sisters! He might fall for her!”

In Taichi’s opinion, this was *not* something she needed to worry about.

Ever since the two of them had made it official, Inaba had come down with what Nagase liked to call “Ina-bashful Syndrome”—a condition in which she became overly doting to the point of clingy. Fortunately, these little flare-ups had grown more infrequent as of late, but she was far from cured.

“That’s completely baseless and you know it. Also? I do NOT have a thing for little sisters, thank you!”

The way she had phrased her statement made it sound like he had the hots for his real, actual sister. And while Rina was completely adorable, and he would gladly do everything in his power to help her, he was absolutely *not* interested in her like that.

“You sure?”

Her straight, dark, shoulder-length hair shifted as she leaned forward to peer at him, a hint of anxiety in her almond-shaped eyes. She was a natural beauty, with long lashes and angular features that gave her an air of maturity. (Recently it felt like she’d somehow gotten even more sexy... not that Taichi could bring himself to say that, of course.) “Yes, I’m sure! These days I’m more into the, uh... sexy older woman type? The kind of girl who doesn’t always smile, but when she does, there’s nothing more beautiful in the world. Never fails to make me weak in the knees... So obviously you have nothing to worry about... er... I mean...”

One way or another, he always ended up making a fool of himself lately. He was so embarrassed, he couldn’t even look her in the eye.

“Here we go!”

“Aagh!”

Out of the blue, someone grabbed his head and forcibly turned it until he was facing Inaba.

“Look at you, stammering and blushing like a lovelorn maiden! Say it loud, say it proud, my man!” Nagase declared from somewhere overhead. *Should’ve known she was behind this.*

Taichi had (unsurprisingly) felt a bit awkward around Nagase during the early days of his new relationship with Inaba... but as you might expect, Nagase

noticed and told him he was being obnoxious. As a result, things had more or less gone back to normal between them.

Despite everything they'd gone through, she was still willing to be his friend, and for that, Taichi was sincerely grateful... though he knew it was probably annoying as hell.

"Wh-What do you mean, say it proud? Let go already, would you?"

"Hey! Quit trying to look away! You gotta say it to her face!"

Inaba blinked back at him. Their faces were just fifty centimeters apart. And with every flutter of her lashes, his heart fluttered in kind...

"What do you expect me to—Actually, never mind." He'd been inclined to wriggle out of this, but changed his mind at the last minute. He knew what she needed to hear. "Don't worry, Inaba. You're the most beautiful girl in the world."

"Damn, playah, dial it back a notch!" Nagase teased. But Taichi wasn't paying attention.

Inaba's eyes widened in surprise. Then, after a moment, she smiled—innocently, like a little girl who just got a big plateful of cookies.

"Okay... Hee hee."

Hnnng. He didn't know how she managed it, but damn if it wasn't super effective.

"Gah! Who knew Ina-bashful was so lethal at point-blank range?! Don't tell Fujishima-san, but I might just play for both teams after all...!"

...Maybe a little too effective.

"Could you please let go of my head now?"

"We'll worry about that later! Did you get all that, Private Aoki?!"

"Sure did, Captain! Got a video of the whole thing right here on my cell phone!"

"Wh... I told you guys to quit doing that!" Taichi shouted.

"Put a sock in it, Taichi!" Nagase shouted back. "*We're* the ones who have to

put up with all your lovey-dovey antics, remember?! We gotta get it out of our system or else the cuteness is gonna give us all diabeetus!”

“Don’t worry, Taichi! I’m gonna edit all the footage into a cute little montage and give it to ya on your anniversary or something!”

“No thank you, Aoki! And Nagase, will you freaking hurry up and let go?! Inaba, help me out here!”

“Yeah, guys... You better stop... We don’t do any ‘lovey-dovey antics’... And I *definitely* don’t want an anniversary montage... Hee hee hee...”

Crap... Inaba’s too far gone! There’s no one left to save me!

“Wh-Where’s Kiriyama?! She’s supposed to be bringing the new person, isn’t she?!” Taichi shouted, praying for a miracle.

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Aoki nodding wistfully.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Hmm? Oh, I’m just glad you’ve loosened up, that’s all!”

“What do you mean?”

“You’ve been kinda tense today, dude. Maybe even more than Iori-chan.”

Tense? Was that how the others saw him?

Just then, the clubroom door opened, and he stiffened. *Oh god, it’s happening.*

Instantly, he thought back to the fateful event that had led to this. Indeed, it all started yesterday...

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“Where are the new kids?!” CRC president Nagase Iori wailed one late April afternoon. She lay on the clubroom sofa with her arms and legs sprawled, looking altogether displeased. Mind you, she had always been on the emotionally expressive side, but these days she was a veritable kaleidoscope... and Yaegashi Taichi had a feeling he’d always envy that about her.

“Maybe we, like, overestimated how interesting our club is?” Kiriyama Yui sighed and twirled a strand of her long reddish-brown hair. She always put her

hair up in a ponytail for gym class, but today she'd decided to leave it that way.

"The deadline for club applications is in five days! *Five!* That's less than a week!" Nagase flailed her fists, punching the sofa cushions. "I guess we needed more than just flyers..."

"You saying my idea sucked?" Inaba Himeko muttered.

"What? No, no, of course not! It was something we all decided on, after all."

"But we probably oughta get at least one new kid, right?" said Aoki Yoshifumi. "Maybe we should switch gears and start recru—"

"We literally agreed we weren't doing that! We can't just go back on it now!" Kiriyama cut in.

"While I do want the CRC to grow, I'm with Kiriyama on this one," said Taichi.

As of this month, the five of them were now officially second-year students. This meant they were subject to new class assignments, as well as all the other trappings of a new school year. But arguably the most important of all these numerous April events was club recruitment.

At Yamaboshi High School, students were obligated to take part in some form of club activities. This meant that compared to other schools the recruitment period at Yamaboshi was relatively more intense. And the Cultural Research Club, which saw its one-year anniversary this month, was expected to take part in active recruiting efforts just the same as any other.

In light of this, the members of the CRC had established two rules: 1. They would *not* aggressively pursue new members.

2. They *would*, however, put out flyers and pamphlets advertising the club.

"I already feel bad dragging these kids into a club that exists for no reason. And not only that, but... we still have «Heartseed» to worry about," said Kiriyama.

«Heartseed» was the mysterious entity that continually inflicted supernatural phenomena upon the five members of the CRC. The predominant fear among them was that, should they recruit any new members, it would be akin to handing this otherworldly being more toys to play with. After all, they couldn't

be sure if it was targeting the five of them specifically or the club as a whole... and if it was the latter, then they would essentially be consigning innocent students to a life of misery.

This risk was what kept them from taking a more active role in club recruiting... but deep down, they still wanted new members regardless. After all, they'd decided that the best weapon against the phenomena was to simply carry on with their lives as usual. Besides, there was no guarantee that «Heartseed» would mess with anyone else, and even if it did, the negative effects never lasted long enough to permanently ruin their lives.

Or maybe the addition of new members to the club would actually make the CRC *less* appealing to «Heartseed». Maybe it would give up on them entirely. But at that point it would probably just target new victims instead... and it would be their fault.

But was there even any guarantee that «Heartseed» would show up again? Sooner or later it was bound to get bored and leave.

...And so the debate went round and round in circles until finally they (read: Inaba) came to a conclusion: *Invite no one, but welcome all.*

"Okay, but at this rate, chances are good we're not gonna get any newbies. Are you *suuure* we wanna risk that? Not that I'm opposed to another year of just the five of us, per se. It's just kinda sad, that's all."

"Yeah... We can't just let all our hard work go to waste! We gotta leave behind somethin' we can pass on to the next generation!" said Aoki.

Personally, Taichi was inclined to agree. Sure, the Cultural Research Club was initially just sort of... a thing that happened. But by this point he'd grown attached to it, and now he hoped to see it live on even after his time at Yamaboshi was up.

"I admit, I totally want a cute little underclassman girl I can snuggle!" Kiriyama gushed.

"Hmmm... Yeah, it'd be nice to have a designated gofer. We need one."

"I'm a little concerned about your motives here... Especially you, Inaba..."

“Anyways, setting Taichi’s usual unfunny commentary aside...”

“Hey! That hurt, Nagase!”

She laughed. “Okay, but yeah, moving on...”

“No apology?!”

Evidently this free spirit wasn’t going to let anything tie her down, not even the social contract.

“Tell me your thoughts, Taichi. You want new club members, right?” she asked.

“Huh? Oh... Well...” He hesitated for a moment. “It would liven things up, I guess, right?”

“You don’t sound all that convinced, buddy,” Aoki remarked.

“No, I mean it!” Taichi insisted... though he could see how someone might interpret it that way.

“Fess up, Taichi. Are you opposed to this?”

“No, not at all...” He attempted to put more conviction in his voice, but it still sounded feeble.

“If so, then... Oh...” Inaba suddenly clapped a hand to her mouth, blushing. “I see now... If we get more club members, then you and I will have less time to spend interacting with each other, and you don’t want that...”

“Oh, for crying out loud! How did you even come up with that interpretation?! I thought for sure your Ina-bashful Syndrome was cured by now, dang it!” Nagase retorted.

“Isn’t it obvious? Love makes anything possible. Heh heh heh...”

“Did you seriously just say that?! Is your brain made of syrup?!”

“Syrup’s pretty great, isn’t it? Sweet and melty... just like love...”

“*Inabaaan!* What happened to ‘Desserts have no nutritional value, so they’re a waste of time’?! It’s like you’re a whole different person now!” Nagase wailed.

“You’re one to talk,” Taichi muttered under his breath. “Now all of a sudden

you’re making these catty quips at people...”

“Well, *somebody* has to point these things out, and I don’t see you doing it! Now that Inaban’s dead and gone, I can’t handle all this on my own! And Yui and Aoki are both basically just comic relief characters!”

At this, Kiriyama leapt to her feet. “Don’t lump me in with Aoki!”

“Relax, Yui! You don’t gotta be shy about it!”

“You can keep your overly generous interpretations to yourself! You’re as bad as Inaba!”

“What the fuck do you mean, now that I’m dead?! I’m right fuckin’ here!”

“As long as you’re Ina-bashful, the Inaban I know and love is as good as dead!”

Okay, this is getting out of hand. I need to do something, Taichi thought.

“Let’s all calm down, alright? You’re all acting like you’re in a free-for-all ladder match, but you keep trying to climb the ladder without taking your opponents out first, so obviously someone’s just gonna come along and yank you right back down again, and... Wait, okay, that was a bad analogy. Sorry, let me think of something el—”

“KEEP YOUR STUPID PRO WRESTLING JOKES TO YOURSELF!” the four of them shouted in unison.

I wasn’t joking, though...

Once Inaba reverted out of Syrup Mode, the conversation quickly got back on track. (It was clear they needed her to keep the rest of them in line.) “Okay, so, we’ve determined that we *do* in fact want new club members, but with our history of... *incidents*, we won’t be actively pursuing them. Correct?”

At Inaba’s question, the others nodded.

“Wait... We already established that much! This doesn’t change anything!” Nagase sighed.

April was nearly over, which meant most of the first-year students had already put in their applications. At the very least, they weren’t going around

sitting in on existing club activities anymore; likewise, the various clubs were spending markedly less time passing out flyers as time wore on.

The five of them murmured in contemplation. A long moment of silence passed... and then Inaba spoke.

“Guess our only option is to go back to our roots.”

“Meaning?” asked Aoki.

“Remember how this club was first formed?”

That really took Taichi back to the start of their first year. They’d all ended up clubless after attempting to join or start a “dead” club—that is, a club that failed to meet the prerequisite of five members. Then their teachers simply tossed them all together, and so the Cultural Research Club was born.

“Oh, I get it... So we just need to track down the kids whose applications haven’t been accepted for whatever reason,” Nagase murmured in understanding.

At the end of the day, the CRC was really nothing more than where you go when you have nowhere else to go.

“Maybe they’d appreciate the helping hand... but how do we find them...?” Taichi mused.

“Oh!” Kiriyama exclaimed.

“What is it?” Inaba asked.

“That reminds me, one of the kids at my dojo just enrolled at Yamaboshi this year.”

Nagase snapped her fingers. “You’re onto something, Yui! We should invite them!”

“Huh? Oh gosh, I don’t know if they’ll want to join... The person I’m thinking of is... well... a bit special, to put it nicely...”

“Who cares if they’re a little weird? We’re all a bunch of weirdos here! Besides, we were all in the same boat ourselves last year, so we’ve got no room to talk,” Nagase insisted.

“It can’t hurt to ask!” Aoki agreed.

“Not like we’re gonna force ‘em to serve us... I mean, join us.”

At least you’re honest about your intentions, Inaba...

“Are you cool with this, Taichi?” Kiriyama asked.

“Who, me?”

“Yes, you! I said your name, didn’t I?”

“Oh... Right... Of course.” The answer was so obvious, and yet for some reason saying it felt like pulling teeth. “You should have them come by tomorrow.”

“Then that settles it! Thanks in advance, Yui! What are they like, anyway? Is it a boy? A girl? Actually, you know what? Let’s let it be a surprise!”

For some reason, Nagase’s gleeful voice sounded so... distant.

—Five days left until club applications close.

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The clubroom door opened... but no one walked in.

“Come on! What do you mean, you’re going home?! That’s not an option here!”

Out in the hall, they could hear Kiriyama fighting with someone.

“Come! On!”

She stepped backwards into the doorframe, forcibly pulling the other person with both hands.

The rest of the CRC stared at the entrance with bated breath. Guy or girl? Good kid or bad kid? Appearance? Hairstyle? Personality? Hobbies? Would they join the CRC? And why hadn’t they attempted to join any other club?

“GRAHHH!” With one final pull, the mystery guest lost their balance and stumbled into the room.

It was a guy.

He was about Taichi’s height, or maybe a little shorter. His body type was

slender, yet toned, probably from all the karate, and he wore his hair in a messy, asymmetrical style.

“Oh, uh... Hi.” He inclined his head absently.

His gaze was sharp, perhaps uncomfortably so, but in conjunction with his androgynous features, it afforded him a somewhat dignified impression. And although they were only a few weeks into the new school year, he already looked right at home in his brand-new Yamaboshi uniform. In short— “Ooh, he’s handsome!” Nagase exclaimed.

Indeed, though he likely wasn’t everyone’s cup of tea, no one could claim he wasn’t conventionally attractive.

“Oh, please. You realize that sounds sarcastic coming from the so-called prettiest girl at Yamaboshi, right?” His voice was deep and steely.

“I’m not being sarcastic... Wait, hold on! The first-years are saying I’m the *prettiest girl in school?!*”

“Sure.”

“Huh... I mean, I can totally see how they’d think that, considering the many compliments I’ve gotten on my new hairstyle...”

“You’re not even going to deny it, are you?” Taichi retorted.

Nagase laughed. “I’m just joking!”

“Uh, Yui?! Hello?! How long are you gonna cling to his arm, exactly?!” Aoki shouted, looking flustered.

“Huh? Oh! Sorry about that, Chihiro-kun!”

“Hey! You should be apologizing to *me*, not him!”

“Why the heck would I apologize to *you?* Quit being full of yourself.”

“Her eyes... They’re like ice...!”

“Is this everyone?” the boy asked Kiriyama as he scrutinized each of them in turn.

“Yup. This is all five of us.”

“Hmmm...” He nodded pensively, and for a moment Taichi suspected he was plotting something... No, probably not.

Out of the blue there was a loud *BANG* as Inaba smacked the table. “HEY! Don’t just stand there! Let’s sit him down and introduce ourselves! Get the drinks and the snacks!”

“Spoken like a true matriarch,” Taichi snarked.

And so they moved on to introductions.

“So, I’m Kiriyama Yui... Wait, what am I saying? You already know me! We’ve been going to the same dojo for like forever! Okay, Iori, you go first!”

“I’m Nagase Iori. I’m technically the club president. And, as you know, I’m totally gorgeous. Aww yeah.”

“I’m amazed you can say all that with a straight face,” Taichi muttered.

“I’m Aoki Yoshifumi! My motto is ‘S’all good as long as you’re having fun!’ And for the record, punk, I expect you to tell me *exactly* what’s going on between you and Yui! If it turns out we’re both after the same thing, we’ll fight fair and square, like men!”

“Could you maybe not threaten some guy we only just met?!” Taichi hissed.

“Inaba Himeko. I know a fair bit about computers. Sitting here next to me is Yaegashi Taichi. He’s... my future husband.”

“That’s how you see me?!”

Meanwhile, the first-year boy listened quietly to each of their introductions.

“Taichi, you’re next!” Kiriyama prompted, snapping Taichi out of his shock.

“Right... I’m Yaegashi Taichi, and I believe pro wrestling is an art form. Nice to meet you.”

“Damn, bro! You said it with your chest held high and everything! Way to go!” Nagase cheered, and for some reason he got the distinct sense she was mocking him.

“Okay, Chihiro-kun, it’s your turn.”

“Alright... I’m Uwa Chihiro, and Yui-san dragged me here against my will. Nice

to meet you.” He inclined his head once more.

“That’s it? Come on!” Kiriyama prodded. The two of them seemed to act like brother and sister; maybe she was his mentor at the dojo or something.

“I don’t have much more to say... Okay, let me think. I’ve been attending the same karate dojo as Yui-san since I was a kid, my grades are above average, and as for hobbies... I guess I’d say listening to music in other languages. That’s about it,” he finished flatly.

“God... I’m *trying* to get you into a club, so the least you could do is, like, put some effort in!”

“I never asked for this.”

“But you told me your class advisor has been hounding you for your club application!”

“I never said I cared.”

“Err meh gerd, you’re so bratty and *un-cute!* Except for your face... Actually, I guess you’re more ‘handsome’ than cute...”

“See that? Yui’s going into Man-eater Mode,” Inaba muttered as she watched Uwa and Kiriyama interact. “Once she commits to something, she goes all-in... I can’t wait to see the carnage.”

“Hey! Don’t make stuff up about me! I am NOT a man-eater!”

“Okay, that’s enough!” Nagase cut in, evidently sensing a long and fruitless argument on the horizon. Then she turned to Uwa. “So, any thoughts? Also, is it cool if I call you Chihiro-kun?”

“Let’s see...” Scratching his cheek, Uwa averted his gaze. “Well, my initial reaction is that all the girls are hot. At first I was wondering why you don’t have a crowd of guys trying to join, but then I realized most of them are probably too intimidated.”

“So you’re saying we’re... intimidatingly hot? Is that even possible?”

“Makes me feel a bit out of place here, if we’re being honest.”

“Aww, don’t say that! We don’t discriminate based on looks!”

“I guess someone of your caliber could never truly understand,” he snorted, his lips curled in a smirk.

For a moment, Nagase’s eyes hardened—and then, just like that, she was smiling again. “To be fair, we haven’t exactly gone around broadcasting ourselves to the new kids.”

“So no one’s joined up and now you’re desperate to recruit someone?”

“Hmm... There’s more to it than just that, but I guess that’s the gist of it! Hahaha...”

“Right... I mean what I said, though. You and Inaba-san are both ridiculously attractive. Now that I think about it, some people in my class were gossiping about the two of you being in the same club together. And to be frank, Nagase-san, you’re very much my type.”

“Whoa there!” Nagase jokingly raised both hands in a suppressing gesture. “Wasn’t expecting you to be so... overly direct!”

“Say, Chihiro-kun,” Kiriyama ventured timidly, “those people who were gossiping about Iori and Inaba... Did they say anything about me?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“What?! Er, I mean... Oh. Right. That’s fine. I don’t really care or anything. Not like I’m anywhere near as pretty as they are. I get it.”

“Well, you *do* kinda look like you’re twelve, so...”

“Wh...?! Twelve?! I look like I’m *twelve?!* Is that what you just said to me?!”

“They *were* talking about you, though.”

“Wait, what?! But you just said—”

“I was messing with you, Yui-san.”

“You... You little twerp!”

The two of them seemed rather close. Meanwhile, Aoki was watching them with a dismal look on his face. He would open his mouth to comment, then change his mind and close it, over and over, until eventually he started to flail his limbs in frustration. His heart wanted to intervene, but his common sense

knew it would be immature... At least, that was how Taichi read his actions, anyway. *Poor guy*.

“So, why haven’t you chosen a club yet, Uwa-kun?” Inaba asked. “Is the five-member prerequisite keeping you from making your own, or something?”

“Well, I was trying to join the karate club.”

“Trying? What stopped you?”

“Mmm, well... Long story short, they clearly weren’t worth my time. So I asked them to list me as a member in name only, but they took offense to this...”

“No surprise there...”

“I mean, I wasn’t that blunt about it at the time. Obviously I made sure to ask nicely, but...”

“Sounds like it’s time to play dirty. Did you plan it all out in advance? Hmm... What if you—”

“Stop! Don’t teach him your nefarious ways!” Taichi cut in.

“You said that fight with the karate club sapped your motivation to go see any other clubs. That’s the whole reason I invited you!” said Kiriyama.

“And like I said, it’s not your problem to worry about. It’ll all work itself out in the end... I don’t know how many more times I have to say this before you get it through your head, Yui-san.”

“Oh, please! Once I told you about how this club made me stronger, you were totally on board!”

“All I said was that I would go and see them *one time*. And I only said it to get you off my back.”

“Fine, whatever! Done with this!”

“Okay then.” Uwa got to his feet. “I’m going home.”

“Wait, wait, wait!” Kiriyama blurted. “C’mon, I was just kidding!”

“So was I.”

“Grrrrrrrrrr!”

Taichi got the feeling these two would carry on bickering ad infinitum until someone stepped in.

“I bet you burn a lot of calories arguing at the dojo all the time,” said Nagase as she munched on snacks. *Wait, how is that plate already half-empty?!*

“Okay, that’s enough! Yui, Uwa, both of you stop!” Aoki shouted. Evidently he couldn’t take it any longer. “He’s supposed to be chatting with *us*, not you!”

“O-Oh... Right...”

“You guys have plenty of time to talk to each other at the dojo or something! Yeah... Plenty of time there... No, no, there’s nothin’ to worry about! The bond I share with Yui is too strong to be broken by some rando... Yeah, it’s fine... It’s fine! Hahaha!”

His near-infallible optimism was starting to waver.

“Trouble in paradise...?”

“Just because *your* love life is all sunshine and rainbows, it doesn’t mean you can dunk on mine, Taichi!”

Inaba loudly cleared her throat. “So, Uwa-kun, do you have any interest in joining us? If not, we won’t force you to stay... You’re a little too bratty to be a good gofer, anyway.”

“Your ulterior motives are leaking out again...”

These days she’d gotten better about expressing her emotions, but sometimes she could be a little *too* honest...

Meanwhile, at Inaba’s question, Uwa looked up at the ceiling in contemplation. “Well, I do have to join *some* sort of club, right? This is precisely why I despise private schools... Ahem. Well, let’s see... Yui-san tells me you don’t enforce attendance, so that’s a plus...” He mulled it over for a moment. “I guess the most I can say for now is... I’ll actively consider it,” he finished flatly.

The rest of them didn’t quite know how to respond to this. Hell, Taichi wasn’t sure how to even interpret it.

Uwa looked around the room at them, then stood up from his chair. “Anyway, I’d better be going now. I’ve got karate practice today.” He slung his bookbag over his shoulder and headed for the door. “You’re cool with me leaving whenever I need to, right? If not, let me know sooner rather than later. That way we don’t waste each other’s time.”

And with that, he walked out, shutting the door behind him.

Once he was gone, Kiriyama turned to the others. “See what I mean? He can be a little prickly... What do you think?”

—Four days left until club applications close.

◆◇◆

The next morning, as Taichi walked into Classroom 2-B, a pair of cheerful voices greeted him: “Morning, Taichi!”

“Gooood morning, Yaegashi-kun!”

“Hi, Nagase. Hi, Nakayama.”

Nakayama Mariko had been good friends with Nagase ever since their first year, in which they’d all been assigned to Class 1-C together. She was a cheerful, friendly girl who wore her hair in high pigtails—a style that had fallen out of fashion, but she rocked it nonetheless. With a big smile and a love of gossip, Nakayama made friends easily... but her overabundance of energy made her a little hard for Taichi to tolerate.

“You know, Yaegashi-kun, nothing gets my blood pumping like talking to you first thing in the morning! You’ve got this calm, soothing voice... and lately it’s got this sexy allure to it, too! I’ll bet we have Inaba-san to thank for that, don’t we? Get a room, you two! Seriously though, I’m like super in love with your voice. Just your voice, though!”

“...Someone’s certainly chipper this morning...”

“Hey! That look on your face says you think I’m obnoxious! What do we do about this, Iori?”

“Obviously we should just raise his energy levels high enough to match ours!”

“Alright, here we go! Energy chaaaarge!” Squeezing her eyes shut, Nakayama

raised her hands in his direction like she was channeling some kind of power to him.

This is stupid... but it'll be more awkward if I don't play along, so here goes nothing!

"Chaaarge!" Taichi shouted (not too loud; he didn't want to make a fool of himself) as he raised his fist into the air.

At that very moment, two girls walked into the room: Kiriyama Yui, her long reddish-brown hair flowing behind her, and Kurihara Yukina, Kiriyama's best friend from her Class 1-A days.

Kurihara was tall and slender, with wavy bleached hair. She shot Taichi an icy stare, then turned to Kiriyama. "Your friends are being weird in the classroom again."

"They're too weird to be my friends. I don't know them."

"Oh, okay."

And with that, they headed to their desks— "W-Wait! I didn't have a say in this! Nagase and Nakayama made me!"

But when he turned to look— "Great weather we're having today, huh?"

"Yeah! Such great weather!"

—the two of them were talking amongst themselves with no regard for him.

"Hey! Quit trying to play it off!" *Why is everyone screwing with me today, damn it?!*

"You're hilarious, Yaegashi," Kurihara laughed. Despite her no-nonsense personality, deep down, she was kind at heart.

"I'm not trying to be funny, though..."

"That's no good. You men should try to be at least a *little* funny... Oh, that's right. You're all lovey-dovey with Inaba-san, so I guess you don't need to worry."

"*Lovey-dovey?*"

Inaba had no interest in keeping their relationship private, and thus most

people already knew about it. According to her, she preferred it this way because then they could be more openly affectionate... *Oh god, we ARE lovey-dovey, aren't we?!*

"You should've been there, Yukina-chan!" Nagase exclaimed. "Those two were *allll* over each other yesterday. It was sooo disgusting!"

"You say that," Nakayama replied, "and yet you always have a grin on your face whenever you tell us about it!"

"Nngh... Okay, I admit it. Part of me kinda enjoys seeing them acting like total lovebirds."

"Hey! We are *not* lovebirds... are we?"

At this, Nagase, Kiriyama, and Nakayama all burst out laughing. *What the hell, guys?!*

"PDA can be pretty cringey if it crosses the line," Kurihara remarked. "But I think you should go ahead and enjoy it while it lasts. Over time you'll both cool off."

"Is that how all relationships work?"

"For the most part, yeah. That's how it worked with me and my current BF, anyways... Maybe I should dump him..." Kurihara had a lot of dating experience, and her advice was indispensable.

"I really wish you would just commit for once," said Kiriyama with a frown.

"How long are you going to play the sweet ingénue, Yui? I know you're just as horny as the rest of us."

"Bffgh?!" Taichi choked, caught off-guard.

"That's bullcrap! I am *not* horny! Don't spread lies about me!"

"Please. I saw you ogling that one page in that magazine we saw..."

Kiriyama's face flushed beet red. "N-No! I... Th-The girl was just really cute, that's all! I wasn't HORNY FOR HER!"

Nagase patted her on the shoulder. "Of course, Yui. We get it. You should probably stop shouting 'horny' in the middle of class, though."

“Huh? I... Oh god... NOOOOOO!”

But then someone clapped her hands loudly in their direction.

“Hey, guys? There are people trying to study in here, so could we try to keep our voice levels down, please?” It was the president of Class 2-B, Setouchi Kaoru.

“Oh... Sorry, Kaoru-chan,” Nagase winked.

“All is forgiven, Iori. I don’t mind you guys having fun. Just try to use your indoor voices.”

In the past, Setouchi was a rebel girl with long, bleached hair who had it out for the CRC. After chopping off her hair and dying it back to her natural black, however, she had transformed into a model student... though the piercings remained as a final vestige of the person she once was.

As it stood now, the CRC had made peace with her, Nagase included. The way she explained it was, “If she’s trying to better herself, then I want to support that.” Inaba, however, was not so readily forgiving, and every now and then she would put Setouchi to work as needed.

Nakayama smiled. “This class president stuff sure comes naturally to you, doesn’t it, Setouchi-san?”

Setouchi laughed. “I don’t know about that... Thanks, though.”

There had been two candidates for the position. At the time, Setouchi was widely considered to be the underdog, and by a long shot. Ironically, however, this led to a mass outpouring of pity votes, as well as votes from those who just thought it would be funny to see a rebel girl play the part of a goody-goody... and in the end, Setouchi won by a landslide.

As for Setouchi’s unlucky opponent, however...

“At first I was like, it’d just feel weird if it wasn’t *her*, y’know? But as it turns out, it actually feels pretty normal!”

There was a *THUMP* as a bookbag hit the floor. Taichi turned in the direction of the sound.

Standing there was Fujishima Maiko, former president of Class 1-C, runner-up

candidate for president of Class 2-B. During their first year she'd been the very picture of poise, but now her ponytail was messy and her glasses sat askew on her nose. She bent down, grabbed her fallen bag, and tottered off to her desk. There, she collapsed into her seat, looking utterly deflated.

"Oh, uh, not that you're bad or anything, Fujishima-san! We're just saying Kaoru-chan's doing a great job, that's all!" Nagase hastily added.

"It's alright, Nagase-san... I wasn't fit to be class president... I tried my best to do everything I could for you people... but that effort went unnoticed..."

Once upon a time, this former class president had reigned supreme as a "Goddess of Love," but now that she had tasted defeat, she had burned out completely—a condition from which she had yet to recover for the past two weeks.

"That's not true!" Nakayama exclaimed, her pigtails bouncing. "You were the best class president this school's ever seen! Sure, you didn't win this time around, but lots of people are still counting on you for your dating advice!"

"If I was the best, then why did I lose? If I can't even get elected, then I have no right to advise people on their love lives... I'm no president, I'm no apostle of love... I'm just an NPC named Classmate A..." She laughed under her breath. Losing the presidency had clearly dealt a heavy blow.

"Um... Fujishima-san?" called Setouchi, the very person who had defeated her in the election. "If it matters that much to you, I'm happy to step down. I'm not really that attached to this particular position."

At this, Fujishima looked up sharply, shooting daggers at Setouchi. "I'm not going to take your pity! Grrrr!" She began to bang her fists on her desk like a child throwing a tantrum.

"It's like she's a completely different person," Taichi muttered to himself.

But she wasn't the only one. Somehow, the mere act of moving up a grade had changed a number of people he knew. Was there something in the air, or what?

"Besides... You're the only one fit to lead this class, Setouchi-san. You're the one they chose, not me!"

“F-Fujishima-san...!”

The two girls clasped their hands together in a passionate handshake. Meanwhile, Fujishima used her free hand to wipe her tears.

“Hey, uh, I’ve been wondering... Why are you 1-C alumni all so obsessed with the role of class president?” Kurihara asked Taichi in a low voice.

“Fujishima had this incredible charisma back then... It’s just one of those ‘you had to be there’ things.” Taichi stared wistfully into the distance.

“Uh... Right... I guess even the rumors were selling her short...” Apparently Kurihara was a little weirded out by this.

Following the end of the handshake, Fujishima was still crying... and while Taichi felt her attachment to the role was perhaps a bit extreme, his heart still ached for her nonetheless. He wanted to reach out to her.

“Fujishima?”

“...What is it, Yaegashi-kun?” She turned in his direction and adjusted her glasses. She looked a lot more fragile now than she did back during her glory days, but frankly, that contrast was pretty damn cute.

“Back during our first year, you helped me countless times. To me, it doesn’t matter if you’re elected or not, because I already know just how incredible you are.”

“Hah... I’m not that great.”

“Sure you are! With a little self-confidence, you can still do great things for the rest of us. You just need to believe in yourself.” He scratched his head. *I hope that wasn’t too on-the-nose...*

“Ohhh, now I get it! You know, I’m impressed you can say those cheesy lines in public without even batting an eye. This must be how you got Inaba-san to fall for y—Nngah!”

Before Nakayama could finish her gleeful babbling, Nagase grabbed her by the pigtail and yanked hard. (As far as anyone knew, this was the only method of reining her in.) “Yaegashi-kun...” Fujishima gazed at him, her eyes widened slightly.

As for Taichi, he'd encountered this pattern of behavior multiple times before. Just when things would get serious, he'd go to say something heartfelt, only for the other person to promptly ruin the moment with a stupid joke. And Fujishima in particular was infamous for doing this. With a little setup, surely she'd take the bait and go right back to her usual infallible self— "J-J-Just so you know, you're not going to max out my affection meter no matter what you say, got it?! I'm not going to take part in your little harem!"

Uhhh... That's not how this was supposed to go... He stared blankly for a moment. Then his brain supplied him with all the ammo he needed for a response.

"What are you talking about?! What harem?! I don't have a harem!"

"Frankly, I'm a little offended you thought you could grind points with me with *that* sorry excuse for a line. I'm not that easy, you know."

"I never once thought that! And I don't 'grind points' with anyone, thanks!"

For that matter, I didn't even think you were a romance option in the first place!

"That said, it *did* make my heart skip a beat. Thank you."

"This conversation makes no sense! You're welcome, I guess?!" *What is the MATTER with you, Fujishima Maiko?! This isn't like you! And it's making me feel weird!* "Snap out of it, Fujishima! Wait, why is everyone cringing at me?!"

And that was when someone grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and hauled him backwards.

"Whoa whoa whoa?!" he exclaimed, struggling to stay upright. "Wh-What the hell... Whoa!"

He turned to find Watase Shingo, another 1-C alumnus, glaring at him. Watase was the rising star of the Yamaboshi soccer team; he wore his hair in wolfish, bristly spikes that seemed even more barbed than usual today. He was also a massive Fujishima fanboy, and consequently, had been positively ecstatic about sharing a class with her for another year.

Behind him stood a crowd of male classmates with equally hard looks on their

faces. They quietly formed a circle around Taichi.

“Care to explain this, Yaegashi?”

“I should ask you the same thing! The hell is your problem, Watase?!”

“You think you can just hang out in a big group of girls like it’s no big deal?!”

Behind him, the other guys nodded solemnly.

“I wasn’t trying to! They were the ones who initiated it!”

“That’s no excuse! Not only that, but they’re all hot, and all on ridiculously good terms with you for some reason! Even Fujishima-san!”

Aha. That explains it.

“I didn’t seek her out. It just sort of happened, okay? I’m allowed to talk to her, aren’t I?”

“I can’t believe you... What happened to ‘bros before hoes,’ huh?”

“Yeah!” shouted a few of the guys in the crowd. They were all weirdly invested in this, and it wasn’t looking good.

Desperate, Taichi searched for some way to take the heat off of him. Then he remembered.

“Hold on... *Bros before hoes?* What about that time you canceled on me so you could hang out with some girl from another school?”

Indeed, as a soccer player, Watase had plenty of game with the ladies.

“What?!”

“You’re just as bad as Yaegashi!”

“Not cool, dude!”

Just like that, Watase was pushed into the middle of the circle along with Taichi.

“No... This is all a big misunderstanding! Damn it, Yaegashi, don’t drag me down with you!”

“I was just telling it like it is.”

“But you knew it wouldn’t help your case! All it did was hurt meeee!”

And so the two friends were mobbed by the rest of their classmates. Fortunately, most of the crowd’s anger was centered on Watase for “pretending to be one of them,” so Taichi was set free relatively quickly.

“Thank god...” Taichi hurried back to his desk. *Thanks for taking one for the team, buddy.*

What a hectic morning this had turned out to be... At this rate, his second year of high school was sure to be a blast. Fortunately, most of the people he was closest with during his first year had ended up in the same assigned class with him...

Just then, his cell phone buzzed. He pulled it out of his pocket and flipped it open to find one new email from Inaba Himeko: Why? Why did everyone else get assigned to 2-B while I’m stuck here in stupid 2-D with AOKI of all people?! What did I do to deserve this?!

“Just a roll of the dice, I’m afraid...”

That was eerily good timing, though.

◆◇◆

After school, the five members of the CRC gathered in the clubroom along with their potential new club member Uwa Chihiro.

Based on how yesterday played out, no one had expected him to show up again, but much to their surprise, he turned up along with Kiriyama. Evidently he was at least *somewhat* interested in joining.

“It’s just weird... Why would they put all of you in one class and not me...?” Inaba grumbled sulkily.

“It’s a done deal, Inaba. You have to let it go,” Taichi replied. They must’ve had this conversation a dozen times by now.

“Uggghhh... If I’d known this would happen, I would’ve pulled some strings...”

“I’m not happy, either... I’ve been separated from my beloved Yui...!” Aoki wailed, clutching his hair. This, too, was a common occurrence as of late.

“Yeah... I think maybe God separated the four of you on purpose,” Nagase remarked matter-of-factly. “Otherwise you’d all grate on my nerves.”

Ouch.

“Now I understand why Yui-san always complains about you at the dojo...”

“What?! Is this true, Uwa Chihiro?! Wait... Maybe I can interpret that as gushing somehow...”

“How on earth does your brain turn *complaining* into *gushing?!*” Even Kiriyama was starting to take issue with Aoki’s ridiculous optimism.

“Oh yeah! We should all figure out what to call the new kid!” Nagase suggested out of the blue.

“You can just call me by my name, you know. I don’t need a nickname... For that matter, I haven’t even committed to joi—”

“No, no, no. Nicknames are important! You have to decide these things right from the outset. Take Taichi here for example. He said he’d only call me by my last name in the beginning, but sure enough, he still calls me Nagase to this day!”

“I just... never really found the right time to switch over... Sorry...”

And with that, they launched into a brainstorming session. After a handful of suggestions, they decided the best option was to simply stick with “Chihiro.”

“Whatever works for you all is fine with me.”

“Calling you Chihiro will match nicely with Yui’s ‘Chihiro-kun,’ anyway,” said Inaba.

“I’m still tempted to go with ‘Chee-hee,’ myself,” Nagase commented.

“I wouldn’t be caught dead calling him that.”

“I dunno... Considering how lovey-dovey you are lately... Er, never mind. Fine, I’ll just call him that myself! You don’t mind, right, Chee-hee?”

“I know I just got done saying I was fine with whatever works for you, but uh...”

“I’m sticking with ‘Chihiro-kun,’ personally,” Kiriyama cut in.

“Guess I’ll go with Chihiro, too,” Taichi mused.

That was where Aoki decided to take a stand.

“Guys... While we’re on the subject, I wanna request a nickname for me, too! Or if that’s too much to ask, then could you at least call me by my first name?!”

Naturally, everyone chose to ignore this. Alas.

“Uh, hello?!”

“You’ve kinda already established yourself as Aoki, dude,” Taichi explained. *And I don’t foresee that changing anytime soon.*

“You’re so cruel, Taichi...!”

But although everything looked to be the same as always, the vibe in the room felt ever so slightly different. Perhaps this was to be expected, considering that the table now accommodated six chairs where in the past they had only needed five. More than that, however, Taichi got the sense that this foreign element known as Uwa Chihiro was having quite the effect on them. Granted, it wasn’t that he was particularly opposed to recruiting a new member for the club or anything like that— There was a knock at the door.

Instantly the room fell silent. Tension descended over them. Aoki and Kiriyama froze in place; Inaba and Nagase glared at the door.

Meanwhile, Chihiro looked a little confused. “Uh... It sounds like you have a visitor.”

What he didn’t understand, of course, was that the CRC *never* got visitors. Only one person ever bothered to make the trip up those three flights of stairs, and that was Gotou Ryuuzen, class advisor for 2-B as well as club supervisor for both the CRC and the jazz band. And even then, sometimes the Gotou that showed up wasn’t really Gotou...

Knock, knock, knock.

The person at the door was growing more insistent.

Inaba glanced around at everyone, then called, “Come in.”

Slowly, timidly, the door opened.

The first thing they saw was her floofy, brown, medium-length hair. Then she peered into the room, and they caught sight of her prominent forehead and large, round, puppydog eyes. As she moved out from behind the door, Taichi could see that she was short and petite, much like Kiriyama, and her slightly oversized uniform was draped loosely over her curvy frame.

If he had to describe her in one word, that word would be *soft*. She was adorable.

“Umm... What’s up...?” Nagase prompted, startled.

At this, the girl straightened up stiffly. Then, after a few deep breaths, she clutched at her chest and said— “M-M-My name is Enjouji Shino and I s-saw a flyer that said you’re accepting visitors... so um... if it’s okay with you... I’m here to visit!”

At this unexpected event, the CRC sprang into action.

“Well, come on in and have a seat! There’s a chair right here... Oh, or you could sit on the sofa! Normally I’m the only one who ever uses it, but it’s not president-exclusive or anything. I’ll cut you a special deal, just this once!”

“So, what made you decide to come visit us?! It can’t have been that badly designed flyer! Or did you hear about us from someone? Gosh, you’re like *totes adorbs!* Can I play with your hair?!”

Apparently Nagase and Kiriyama were... particularly enthusiastic.

“Boy, am I glad you’re here! There’s only three days until the application deadline, and as president, I was starting to feel like we screwed up somewhere!”

“If you’re visiting, then you haven’t submitted your application anywhere yet, right? So you don’t have a club yet, right? Right?”

“Uh... Well... Um...” Enjouji glanced all around like a nervous squirrel.

“You’re freaking her out,” Inaba scolded. “Let her sit down first, would you?”

“Okaaay...” Nagase and Kiriyama sighed in unison.

“Thanks for having m—” Enjouji began... but right as she moved to take a seat at the table, she locked eyes with Uwa. Two seconds of silence passed, and

then... “WHAAAAAAAT?! Wh-What are *you* doing here, Uwa-kun?!”

“Took you long enough to notice... Hardly something to scream about, in my humble opinion...” Chihiro rolled his eyes.

“Oho... You two know each other?” Aoki asked.

Enjouji nodded. “Y-Yeah... We’re in the same class... and the seating arrangement has us sitting near each other...” Her voice was trembling.

Not that Taichi blamed her for being nervous, of course. He probably would’ve felt the same way, walking into a room full of older students.

“I’ll bet it’s reassuring to see a friendly face here, huh? Feel free to relax,” he told her gently.

“O-OKAAAAAAAY!” she yelped, flinching.

Everyone else jumped in surprise, Taichi himself included. “Wh... What’s wrong?!”

“Oh... Sorry! Sorry!” She bowed her head fearfully.

“Just sit the fuck down,” Inaba commanded. For some reason, she seemed to be in a bad mood.

“Oh... R-R-Right!”

After the CRC took turns introducing themselves, it was Enjouji’s turn.

“So, um, I’m Enjouji Shino, from class 1-B. My name is written with the kan—”

“Your name is Shino?! That’s sooo cute! We should call her Shino-chan, Iori!”

“Good call, Yui! I’ll bet everyone compliments you on your name, huh, Shino-chan? You don’t even need a nickname to make it cute!”

Once again, Kiriyama and Nagase jumped in straight away.

“...It’s written like this...” Enjouji dug in her bag and produced a notebook with her name written right on the front.

“Ooh, you’ve got some pretty cool *kanji* goin’ on!”

“Th-Thank you, Aoki-senpai...” Enjouji smiled softly. She was still a little stiff, but it was an improvement nonetheless.

“You don’t really see high schoolers writing their name on their notebooks... It’s a smart thing to do, in my opinion,” Taichi commented.

“W-W-Well, I tend to misplace my stuff a lot, so...!” She hung her head, blushing and avoiding Taichi’s gaze. Was he making her uncomfortable? He hoped not, though he’d only just met her, so he couldn’t be sure.

“So, um... Nagase-senpai, Kiriyama-senpai... if you’d call me Shino, I’d actually really like that...”

“Talk about a delayed response! I was starting to think you ignored us flat-out!” Nagase exclaimed.

“But it’s cute that you take things at your own pace!” Kiriyama added.

“S-Sorry...”

“No need to apologize! But I want you to call me Iori-senpai, okay?”

“And you can call me Yui-senpai!”

“Okay then... Iori-senpai and Yui-senpai... Got it.”

“*She’s soooo sweet!*” Nagase and Kiriyama squealed in unison. Evidently they’d taken a liking to her.

Enjouji fidgeted in her chair and glanced at Inaba. “So... should I call you Himeko-senpai...?”

“Don’t you *dare!*” Inaba hissed back.

“Eeek! I’m sorry! I’m sorry!”

“Look, Inaba, I know you hate people using your first name, but you don’t have to take it out on Enjouji here. She didn’t know any better,” Taichi scolded.

“You’re the only one who’s allowed to call me Himeko! End of story!”

“Wait, really...?” It made him feel really proud to be her boyfriend, but at the same time that special privilege made him a little embarrassed, too. Was this a thinly veiled hint for him to start calling her that...?

“O-Okay... Sorry, Hime—I mean, Inaba-senpai. J-Just checking, but... am I allowed to call him Taichi-senpai...?”

For some reason she posed this question not to him, but to Inaba. *Feels like there's something wrong with this picture...*

".....I'll allow it. *But just barely*."

"You really had to think about that one, huh?" *And it was a close shave, apparently?*

"Okay... Lastly, I'll go ahead and leave Aoki-senpai as is..."

"Whoa, uh, Shino-chan? How are you already dunking on me?! You only just got here! Do I radiate some kinda 'please bully me' vibes?! Help me out here! Where am I going wrong?!"

But Enjouji ignored Aoki's desperate entreaty and instead turned to Chihiro. She paused, swallowed hard, and said...

"Um... Uwa-kun... Is it okay if I call you Chihiro-kun, too? Um, I mean, I know it's probably weird to have someone your own age using your first name, but I figure I should match what everyone else is calling you, so..."

"Suit yourself."

"Yeah, I figured... Wouldn't want our classmates to hear me call you that, 'cuz then people will start gossiping about us, and that'd probably be embarrassing for you... I just figured I should try to fit in with everyone here... Obviously I'll stick to using your last name when we're in class... Wait, you're okay with it?!"

"*She's soooo hilarious!*"

"Like I said, knock yourself out. But for the record, I haven't officially joined yet," Chihiro replied coldly. "Have you decided you're joining? I thought you were just visiting."

At this, Enjouji froze. "You're right! Come to think of it, I haven't decided yet!" Apparently this one was a bit of a ditz. She wilted slightly. "Um... Sorry for acting like I'm one of you..."

"No need to apologize! You're already halfway there. Then once you join, it'll be official! Plus, it seems like you're already good friends with Chee-hee. What's the harm?" Nagase chimed in.

"Chee-hee...?"

“That’s my pet name for Chihiro-kun.”

“Sounds like the sort of name you’d give a chinchilla.”

“Are you trying to piss me off, Enjouji?”

“N-No! Not at all!”

Nagase burst out laughing, clapping her hands like a seal. “Good one, Shino-chan!”

“I’m glad you all are having fun,” Inaba grumbled under her breath. She still seemed rather disgruntled.

“Is something wrong?” Taichi asked.

“No, it’s nothing.”

But as her boyfriend, Taichi knew her better than that. It was obvious that she was unhappy. But what could possibly be bothering her? *Wait... Don’t tell me...*

“Inaba... This wouldn’t have anything to do with Enjouji being the ‘cutesy little sister type,’ would it...?”

“N-No! Th... That’s not it! Not at all!”

Bingo.

Normally she was so frank and unreserved, but every now and then she would get all bashful over the silliest things. She was bold, yet timid; aggravating, yet adorable. *That’s my Inaba Himeko.*

Granted, Enjouji was exactly the type of girl a guy would want to coddle and protect, but— “OW OW OW!”

And then Inaba pinched his thigh as hard as she could.

“What the heck was that for?!”

“Oh, I think you know the answer to that.”

Sometimes it was frightening just how easily she could read his mind. Something told him he’d never be able to cheat on her and get away with it... Not that he wanted to, of course!

“What are you guys doing?” Enjouji asked them.

“Oh, don’t worry about it. It’s just one of those things all couples do,” Nagase cut in.

“More like a couple of bonobos,” Kiriyama added.

“Wow... I’ve never seen bonobos up close before.”

“You really know how to drop a snarky one-liner, don’t you, Enjouji?” *Worse, you probably don’t even realize you’re doing it...*

At this, Enjouji started to panic. “Huh... Wha... Huh?!” She shook her head vigorously, then let out a breath. “Wait a second... So you’re saying Taichi-senpai and Inaba-senpai are a couple?!”

“Duh! Isn’t it obvious, Shino-chan?” Nagase replied.

“Oh my god, your delayed reactions are sooo cute!” Kiriyama laughed.

“I bet you’d think anything was ‘cute’ as long as Enjouji was the one doing it,” Taichi muttered almost on reflex. *Seriously, girls treat it like some kind of all-purpose adjective...*

“Oh gosh... Oh wow...!” Enjouji looked back and forth between Taichi and Inaba, murmuring in admiration.

“*What?*” Inaba breathed aggressively.

“Oh, um, I was just thinking, you two look so great together, you know! I’d love to have that kind of relationship someday... Oh, but, obviously I know it’ll never happen for someone like me...” She laughed weakly.

“So what you’re saying is... You see us as the ideal couple, and you want to emulate us?”

“Oh, I mean, I know it’s totally unrealistic, but... it can’t hurt to dream, right?”

At this, Inaba’s expression melted into a dorky smile. “Heh... Pretty dreamy, isn’t it? You know, I could always take you under my wing, Shino. You’re a real sweetheart, you know that? Yeah... If you ever need any help, you can always come to me, understand?”

“You just completely changed your tune about her, didn’t you...?”

It was rare to see Inaba pivot her stance a full 180 degrees.

“Thank you so much, Inaba-senpai!”

“You can call me the Love Guru if you want.”

Okay, now you’re getting ahead of yourself.

“D-Don’t go there, Inaba! That burden is too much for you to bear! Only Fujishima can carry its weight!”

“You just *love* to defend your precious Fujishima, don’t you?” Inaba glared.

“What? No! She’s just so crushed from losing the election, you know? I’d feel bad if we stripped her of anything else.”

Damn it... All this time I was making jokes about all her love nonsense, but when it comes down to it, I actually kind of miss it... Weird how that happens...

“By the way, Shino-chan,” Aoki began, “me and Yui are gonna be an ideal couple someday too, so you’re welcome to start calling me Sensei—OUCH!” He yelped as Kiriyama smacked him over the head with her notebook.

“Don’t spread that nonsense around!”

“Is there a point to me being here, or can I go home now?” Chihiro complained.

“We’re getting off-track, guys. Let’s talk about Shino-chan joining the club!” Nagase exclaimed.

“I... I haven’t decided yet... technically...”

“Oh, right. Hmmm... Okay, well, can you tell us what made you decide to come see us today?”

“W-Well...” Enjouji flinched, then froze in place like a statue—save for her eyes, which were darting around all over the place. Naturally, this drew everyone’s attention to her like a magnet.

“We’re just curious what brought you here,” Kiriyama repeated. Maybe she thought Enjouji hadn’t heard the question.

“I... I can’t tell you.”

“Why’s that?” asked Aoki.

“Because... it’s a secret.”

Yes, that much was implied, Taichi thought. But before he could put this retort into words, he stopped. Enjouji was hunched over, shrinking in her seat, as the energy in the room petered out.

“W-Well, not like you *have* to tell us or anything. M-Moving on!” Nagase continued.

“Oh... I did it again... I’m sorry...”

“It’s *fiiine!* Don’t worry about it! Now then, let’s do our usual thing and—”

This time it was Nagase’s turn to freeze in place, with a look on her face that suggested something critical had just dawned on her.

“What *is* your ‘usual thing’? I don’t really get how this club works,” Chihiro mused.

“I... I saw on the flyer that you ‘publish a monthly periodical with articles on a variety of topics, in addition to other things’... What are the other things?” asked Enjouji.

Instantly, the five second-year members all tensed up. They’d put out the recruitment flyers... waited for potential member candidates to turn up... *but they hadn’t planned out any activities to do with them!*

“Y-You’ll see! Today’s just... a meet-and-greet!” Nagase lied.

And so, after some more friendly banter, they sent everyone home for the day.

—Three days left until club applications close.

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The next day, the five members of the CRC gathered in the courtyard during lunch break.

“We’re so lucky Chee-hee and Shino-chan both found us before the application deadline! It’s gotta be fate!” Nagase declared, balling her hand into a fist. “We *need* them to join us. They’re too good to pass up!”

“Though they definitely have their idiosyncrasies,” Inaba remarked, and the

others nodded.

“Mmm... I don’t know about ‘need them to join us’... Shouldn’t we like, want them to want to join first?” Surprisingly, Kiriyama had taken a rational approach to the situation rather than blindly agreeing with Nagase, as Taichi had anticipated.

“What? But you’re the one who brought Chee-hee to us... and don’t you like Shino-chan?”

“Yeah, obviously! But like... when it comes down to it, it’s *their* choice, you know?”

“Hmm... Yeahhh...” Nagase murmured.

At this, Aoki asked, “Do you guys not want new club members after all?”

“Of course I do!” the two girls shouted back in unison.

“Okay, just checking, ‘cuz you don’t seem that enthusiastic about it,” Aoki shrugged.

“It’s hard to be *enthusiastic* when you-know-who is still out there somewhere,” Taichi argued.

“Guys, stop! We already came to a theoretical conclusion on that debate, remember? Right now we need to be talking about our club activities for the day!” Nagase cut in before they inevitably went on a tangent. *Whoops. Almost forgot.*

“Right... We want them to think the CRC is a cool club, and we don’t have a lot of time to convince them,” Kiriyama mused.

“That punk Chihiro might have *other reasons* for joining—”

“Let’s not open that can of worms or we’ll be here all day!” Nagase interrupted again. “The point is, we can’t let them find out the whole point of the club is to screw around. We gotta do something fun! Something... I dunno... club-like!”

“Easier said than done,” Inaba replied. “Personally, I was thinking it’d be fine to keep things the same as last year, but—”

“H-Hi there, everyone!”

Just then, they heard a loud voice nearby.

“Well, if it isn’t Shino-chan! Whatcha up to?” Nagase responded cheerfully, and the others followed her lead.

Having secured a warm welcome, Enjouji let out a sigh of relief and walked up to them. “I was just on my way back to the classroom when I saw you all gathered out here. What are you up to?”

“Oh, we were just discussing our after-school plans for the day... Er...”

“You don’t have it planned out?” Enjouji tilted her head.

In an instant, “oh crap” was written all over Nagase’s face... blatant enough so as to be obvious.

“It can’t be... I knew it... Is the Cultural Research Club really just an excuse for normies to get together and goof off...?!”

“No, no, no! Of course not! And what do you mean, normies?!”

“M-Maybe I don’t belong there... I should probably join a different club...”

“HOLD IT! F-For the record, we do a lot of big-time reporting assignments! Right, Yui?”

With the spotlight suddenly on her, Yui began to panic. “What?! Oh! Yeah! And... we were just talking about where we want to go scouting today!”

“Oh... I don’t know if I’d be any good as a journalist...”

“D-Don’t worry! Since it’s your first time, we’ll pick someplace easy. Right, Aoki?”

And with that, Kiriyama passed the baton to the guy paying the least amount of attention.

“Someplace easy?! Uhhh... Right... Right! We were sayin’ we should just pick someplace on campus, weren’t we, Taichi?”

Taichi had had a feeling someone would dump this on him at some point, and sure enough, it turned out he was up next. “R-Right. Someplace on campus...”

He shot a hopeful glance in Inaba's direction—to which she responded with a dismal stare.

No, I can't just dump this on my girlfriend... I need to be a man and figure this out myself!

"Uh... Which is why we decided we'll be interviewing some other clubs!"

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And so it was decided that the CRC would investigate Yamaboshi club activities. It was a fairly decent suggestion, considering he'd come up with it on the spur of the moment, and Taichi was feeling rather pleased with himself.

They couldn't all go in one large group or else they'd be distracting. Thus, the five second-years would flip a coin to split them into two "scouting teams"—Chihiro's team would be heads, and Enjouji's team would be tails. They would do this three times total, and each of these exercises would provide an opportunity for the second-years to show off their reporting skills while deepening their connection to their assigned newbie. (As usual, Inaba was a genius for coming up with this.) After school, Enjouji and Chihiro both turned up (though they'd been worried the latter would ghost them), and the coin flip began...

Investigation round 1 found Team Heads (Taichi, Kiriyama, Aoki, and Chihiro) in Science Lab No. 2, paying a visit to the Calligraphy Club.

"Why calligraphy?" Aoki muttered.

"Because someone in my class invited us to visit," Taichi replied.

"Hi there, folks! Come on in! Nice to see you, Yaegashi-kun, Yui-chan, and... miscellaneous male companions!" shouted Nakayama Mariko, full of energy, her pigtails bouncing. *Speak of the devil*.

"You don't mind, do you, Nakayama-chan?" Kiriyama asked hesitantly.

"Of course not! It's all good! We love to spice things up here in the Calligraphy Club! Right, guys?" Nakayama asked her clubmates.

"Pretty sure that's just you," one of them responded. Laughter ensued.

There were ten people present in the science lab—eight girls and two boys

from varying grades—and the atmosphere was peaceful.

“You know, I’ve been thinking about this for a while... You really don’t strike me as the calligraphy type, Nakayama.”

“Excuse me?! Is that a diss at me or a diss at the Calligraphy Club, Yaegashi-kun?!”

“It’s not a diss! I’m just saying, it doesn’t really gel with your overall vibe...”

“My vibe, huh? Alright then! You there, first-year! Er... you *are* a first-year, right?” Nakayama pointed at Chihiro. “What would you say is the Calligraphy Club’s ‘vibe’?”

“A niche for nerds.”

“Ouch! Surprisingly harsh, but okay!”

“Chihiro-kun! Just because it’s true doesn’t mean you should say it like that!” Kiriyama scolded.

At this, Chihiro rolled his eyes. “You realize you just validated my statement, right, Yui-san?”

“Hold it right there, you two! Call us nerds and I’ll pull the trigger on my pigtails!”

“Is that supposed to be remotely threatening? What does that even *mean?* Also, are you saying you’re okay with the ‘niche’ part?” Taichi retorted.

“That part is patently false! I’ll have you know, calligraphy is always in vogue within a five-kilometer radius of my location at any given time!”

“You’re clearly delusional, but it sounds awesome, at least!”

Nakayama was, if nothing else, refreshingly sincere.

After going through the basics of script technique, the CRC (plus Chihiro) was invited to try out calligraphy for themselves. The plan was to then write a report based on their experience.

“Alright, lesson’s over! You’re a certified calligrapher now! Come get some ink, paper, and a calligraphy brush. Then feel free to write whatever you like, and I’ll look it over for you!”

Nakayama seemed more than happy to play tutor for them, but Taichi felt guilty essentially taking over the Calligraphy Club's activity for the day. He attempted to apologize to the other club members, but they waved him off, insisting it was nice to change things up every now and then. *I guess Nakayama was right about you guys.*

And so Taichi picked up a calligraphy brush for the first time since elementary school. Chihiro sat next to him at the lab table; beside him, Aoki and Kiriyama had a table to themselves.

"Alrighty! What to write, what to write... Oh, I know! Yui, let's each write each other's names so we can give them to each other as a gift!"

"Knock yourself out. *I'm* gonna write whatever I want and decorate my room with it."

"Just so you know, my favorite words are—"

"You never know when to give up, do you?! Just shut up and write!"

"Ah, I missed this... Now that we're in separate classes, you hardly ever yell at me anymore..."

"Gross! You're being a creep! Someone save me! Chihiro-kuuun!"

Business as usual, I see.

"She's calling for you," Taichi prompted.

"I'm staying out of it," Chihiro replied curtly. "I don't want people thinking I'm as obnoxious as them."

"Well... I can't really argue with you there..."

Taichi lowered his eyes back to his paper and tried to think of something cool to write. *Should I go with some kind of slogan? Or maybe a pro wrestling term... Maybe something I could give to Rina? Or Inaba, I guess, but that would be so cheesy...*

"Normally I'd be at the dojo by now," Chihiro muttered down at his paper.

Taichi turned to look at him. "You care a lot about karate, huh?"

"A fair bit, I suppose."

“Are you gonna try for nationals or anything like that? Granted, I have no idea how hard that would be.”

“I don’t have any lofty goals like that. I’m not that stupid.”

“What? C’mon, it’s not stupid.”

“Sure it is. Just look at Yui-san. She’s a *prodigy*, is she not?”

“Kiriyama? Yeah, definitely.”

He could feel a hint of awkwardness between them, so he lowered his gaze back to his paper and dipped his brush into the ink... but he still couldn’t think of what to write. Instead, he fidgeted with the brush in his hand.

“Taichi-san?”

He looked up to find Chihiro staring at him intently. Normally he was the personification of apathy itself, but right now it was clear he was serious—
“Why am I here? Why am I doing this?”

Or apparently he’s just playing dumb. Ha ha, very funny. “Little late to the party on that one, don’t you think?”

“No, I’m serious. Is there an underlying reason?”

“What do you mean?”

“What I’m asking is, what is it exactly that we’re doing?” As he spoke, Chihiro twirled his still-pristine calligraphy brush between his fingers.

He had a valid point, of course. Just a few short hours ago, hanging out with the Calligraphy Club would’ve been the furthest thing from their minds, and yet here they were.

Taichi searched for an explanation. “This is just... how the Cultural Research Club works.” *Sorry, but that’s the best I’ve got.*

“I just don’t see the point.”

“Does there *have* to be a point?”

Chihiro’s gaze drifted to the window. “Honestly, I don’t really want to commit to a club when I’ve already got karate on my plate. I’m only doing it because the school rules are forcing me to.”

He was changing the subject, but Taichi let him continue.

“When the karate club refused to put me down as a nominal member, it turned the whole thing into a huge hassle, so I stopped caring and put it off... but now Yui-san’s started dragging me to visit you people and your poorly structured club, and so it’s become even *more* of a hassle...” He sighed and dropped his gaze to an empty corner of the table. “But once again, I find myself here...”

With the Cultural Research Club, in other words.

“So I’m just wondering, you know, is there a point to it or not?” Chihiro muttered to himself, so quietly Taichi couldn’t quite hear him. “But anyway...” At last, the younger boy met his gaze. “Am I meant to be here?”

There was an uncomfortable, probing look in his eyes that Taichi found himself wishing he could escape as soon as possible. A moment of silence passed between them, and somehow it seemed to drown out all background noise, Nakayama’s cheerful babbling included. Even the bickering between Aoki and Kiriyama felt distant.

“It’s not about whether you’re *meant* to be here. It’s about whether you *want* to be, you know?”

At this, Taichi thought he saw a hint of disappointment flicker in the other boy’s eyes... but he was pretty sure he’d said the right thing...

“A valid point,” Chihiro conceded.

Taichi heaved a small sigh of relief... then wondered why he felt so tense around someone who was younger than he was. “Right?” he replied casually.

But it was in that moment of relief that Chihiro struck again, almost as though he planned it.

“Taichi-san, do you actually want us to join the club?”

Of course I do, he thought... but he was startled to find that the words wouldn’t come. And the longer he silently screamed at himself to *say something*, the longer the lull in the conversation grew— “Alright, that’s enough! Yaegashi-kun! And... Uwa-kun, was it? Less chatting, more writing!”

Just like that, Nakayama had shattered the moment between them before Taichi had had a chance to respond.

“Then again, Yamaboshi automatically approves all club member applications, so worst case scenario, I could always brute-force my way into the karate club if need be,” Chihiro mused, lazily dipping his brush into the ink.

And that was how the conversation ended.

Taichi did want new club members. He was happy to have Chihiro and Enjouji on board. But in the back of his mind, he could feel something weighing on him... though he wasn’t sure what it was.

Maybe it was the ever-present fear of «Heartseed»... or maybe it was something else entirely.

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As investigation round 1 came to an end, the five CRC members and two first-years met back up in the clubroom. Evidently, Team Tails (Inaba, Nagase, and Enjouji) had had a worthwhile experience visiting the brass band.

Then, after another coin flip, investigation round 2 began. This exercise found Team Tails (Taichi, Nagase, and Enjouji) up on the second floor of the North Wing.

“So, here we are at the Student Council Outreach Committee office. Come on in, everyone,” said Fujishima Maiko, former president of Class 1-C and current SCOC member.

“I really appreciate this, Fujishima. Sorry to intrude when you guys are so busy.”

“Don’t worry about it, Yaegashi-kun. Hee hee hee... For once, I’m needed by someone... Hee hee hee...” A dreamy smile played about her lips.

“Oh, please. We can always count on you, Fujishima-san!”

“C-Count on me...? No, you’re right! With you cheering me on, I have the motivation of a hundred men! I’d better work hard just for you, Nagase-san!”

It was nice to see her back to her usual self after that depressive episode.

“I... I appreciate this too... Th-Thank you!” Enjouji bowed. Evidently she felt obligated to express her gratitude as well.

“It’s no problem at all, Enjouji-san! You’re a cute little thing, aren’t you? So cute, I might just gobble you right up!”

“Okay, now you’re pushing it.” Taichi shifted slightly, positioning himself between Fujishima and Enjouji.

“Hmph... You know, it hurts that you’d treat my jokes as threats.”

“Sorry... Just a reflex.” He glanced behind him to find Enjouji shrinking into his shadow. She had this sweet-little-sister thing going for her that made him instinctively want to keep her safe... Not that she could ever be as cute as Rina, of course!

“Taichi, you’ve got that look on your face again. You’re thinking creepy thoughts, aren’t you? Just gonna go ahead and point that out.”

As usual, Nagase’s keen intuition was not to be underestimated.

“Just come in already, would you?!”

And so they quietly stepped inside.

The SCOC office was neat and orderly. Two tables were positioned in the center of the room, one medium-sized and one large, with two additional single desks in the corner. On both sides of the room, the walls were lined with file cabinets. All in all, it was approximately 50% larger than the CRC clubroom.

There were four people inside, one of whom showed them to their seats and made tea for them.

“We normally have more people, but most of the Committee is out running an errand right now,” Fujishima explained as she took a seat across the table from Taichi, Nagase, and Enjouji. “Now then, let’s get started... Wait, what are we doing again?”

Taichi’s image of Fujishima was one of hyper-competence. It wasn’t like her to play the ditz, even as a joke.

“Basically, we decided we’ll be reporting on Yamaboshi club activities for this month’s issue of the Culture Bulletin,” Nagase answered faithfully. “See,

Yamaboshi has a ridiculous amount of clubs, and I figure at least some of them are bound to go unnoticed, y'know?"

"Oh my... Sounds like you'll be doing some actual journalism for once... Normally you people always phone it in, you know. So-called 'articles' on what amounts to little more than your own personal hobbies—"

"LA LA LA LA, I CAN'T HEAR YOUUU!" Nagase hastily shouted to drone her out. After all, Enjouji wasn't supposed to know that this thinly-veiled attempt to impress her was actually the CRC's first-ever attempt to produce something respectable for the Bulletin.

"Phoning it in...? Personal hobbies...?"

"Don't listen to her, Shino-chan! Some people just don't understand our trend-setting methodology of putting the spotlight on each member's individual expertise!"

"I'm not sure I follow you... but that sure was a lot of big words! You're so cool, Iori-senpai! I want to be just like you someday!"

"Just remember, if anyone else tries to use this strategy to win you over, they're lying to your face. Don't trust them, okay, Shino-chan?"

Meanwhile, Taichi found he was starting to grow concerned for Enjouji's future.

"In that case, I'll start by explaining who we are and what it is we do," Fujishima nodded. "As the name suggests, the Student Council Outreach Committee exists to support the student council. However, we are *not* directly part of the student council; we are composed of volunteers rather than elected into office, and our activities are strictly separate."

"Right. Most people already know that, I think," said Nagase.

"Naturally, the name alone tends to attract those who have an interest in student government. However..."

"Yes...?" Taichi prompted.

"The truth of the matter is... we're just the student council's lackeys! Mere pawns!"

At this, the four other SCOC members looked up swiftly from their work and started nodding.

“They make the decisions, and we carry them out. That’s how it works. But they use this arrangement as an excuse to *dump whatever they want on us!*” Her voice was steadily growing more and more passionate. “They don’t know what life is like out here on the streets! They just sit in their ivory towers!”

Apparently Yamaboshi High School was a microcosm of society itself. It sounded pretty intense.

“All this time, the Student Council Outreach Committee has performed countless impossible tasks at the behest of their masters...”

Taichi glanced over at the other SCOC members, and sure enough, they were still nodding along quietly.

“But not anymore... er... ma’am?” Nagase ventured.

Leave it to Fujishima Maiko to inspire someone her own age to refer to her as *ma’am* through sheer charisma alone!

“Well spotted, Nagase-san! Indeed, partway through I caught on to the inanity... and so I turned the tables and manipulated the student council to do my bidding!”

The SCOC members started applauding tearfully. Classic Fujishima Maiko, always quick to gain the upper hand!

“Um... But that’s also... past tense...?” Enjouji asked timidly.

In an instant, the energy drained from Fujishima’s body, and she slumped over. Gloom washed over the room as the other SCOC members hung their heads sadly.

“Huh...? Oh no... um... D-Did I hurt your feelings...?! I’m sor—Ouch!” Enjouji bowed so low, she smacked her forehead against the tabletop. “That hurt...”

“Yes... Past tense. Now we’re right back to where we started... All because they *insulted* me... Told me they couldn’t possibly entrust the whole school to me if I couldn’t even manage to win a class presidential election...” She lifted her glasses up to wipe her damp eyes. “Everyone fought for me, even the older

students... but... because of my antics, the new year migration process became even more jumbled, and... I'm so sorry..."

"Don't worry about it, Fujishima-san! We'll get another chance!" one of the SCOC members reassured her, to a chorus of agreement from the others. "Just focus on recovering your strength for now. The rest of us can hold the fort down in the meantime."

"Th... Thank you, everyone...!"

It was quite the emotional scene.

"D'awww, how sweet," Nagase murmured.

"You're right... All I have to do is pick myself back up again!" Fujishima exclaimed, flames of passion burning in her eyes once more.

"You can do it, Fujishima!" the crowd roared.

"Thank you... I promise, I won't let you down!"

"That's the spirit! Oh... Fujishima-san, it's nearly time," one of the girls piped up suddenly.

"Oh, you're right. Time for the usual daily routine!"

"You guys have a routine? In that case, we'll tag along so we can put it in the article!" said Nagase.

"Good call. I'm curious what a daily routine would look like for the Outreach Committee," Taichi added.

"Fine by me. In that case, let's all go to the locker rooms. You have your gym clothes, right?"

"...Why...?" asked Taichi and Nagase in unison.

"Isn't it obvious? Because we're going to exercise."

"*WHY?!*"

"Uggghhh... Nnngghhh..." Enjouji groaned, lying on the floor.

"You can't even manage ten push-ups? You really need to work on your stamina, Enjouji-san!"

“I... I’m sorry... I’m just... not very athletic...”

“Well, you’d better change that, or else you’ll never survive in this dog-eat-dog world!”

“Eeeek...!”

Standing in the corner in her gym clothes, Fujishima had transformed into the drill sergeant from hell.

“And you’d better not slack off either, Yaegashi-kun! You’re doing twice as many reps as the girls!”

“R-Right! Fifteen... Sixteen... Wait, what are we even doing?! How does this have anything to do with your club?!”

“What are you talking about? Any SCOC member worth their salt needs to have plenty of muscle and staying power!”

“So the whole club does this?!”

“Nope.”

“Damn it! This is just *your* daily routine, isn’t it?!” *What are we doing? What are YOU doing, Fujishima Maiko?!*

Fujishima sighed. “Enough whining, you pathetic little man... You really ought to take a leaf out of Nagase-san’s book.”

Taichi glanced over to find Nagase had already moved on from push-ups to sit-ups.

“Holy crap, this is so much FUN! I can feel myself getting buff!”

“You sure know how to go with the flow, don’t you...”

“I can’t... take it anymore...”

“It’s okay, Enjouji! Don’t push yourself too hard!”

“Enough chat, Yaegashi-kun! Now get that body moving!”

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Once the allotted time for round two was up, Team Tails escaped from Fujishima’s clutches and safely returned to the clubroom.

“My arms... My sides...” Enjouji whimpered.

“Sorry about that... I should’ve pointed it out sooner, but I got caught up in the moment...”

“N-N-No, that’s okay! D-D-Don’t worry about it, Taichi-senpai!” Enjouji blurted hastily, straightening herself up in her panic. Apparently talking to him made her even more tense than usual.

It was time for the final coin flip to determine the teams for round three. The results: Nagase, Aoki, and Chihiro on Team Heads, and Taichi, Inaba, Kiriyama, and Enjouji on Team Tails.

“Team Heads *again?* Maaan, I wish I could’ve hung out with Shino-chan at least once,” Aoki sighed.

“Wanna trade?” Taichi offered.

“Oh, no, that’s alright. A real man always plays by the rules!”

“Personally, I’m tired of dealing with him every time,” Chihiro remarked.

“HEY! How is it you new kids already know how to dunk on me?!”

“Oh well. At least I get Nagase-san this time. That helps balance it out.”

“What’s your barometer for this, exactly?!”

“Well now, *someone* sure seems to like me an awful lot! You know, you could always call me Iori-san, if you want!”

“No thanks.”

“You punk... You’re such a little *tsundere*, you know that?”

“Looks like they’re getting along swimmingly,” Taichi muttered.

“On the surface, at least,” Inaba replied.

“What are you implying?”

“Hmm? Oh, no, I wasn’t trying to imply anything. Don’t read too much into it.” She tilted her head. “On the surface...?” she muttered to herself in a small voice, as if even *she* wasn’t sure why she’d said it.

“Taichi, can I borrow you?” Nagase whispered, pulling him away. “I know it’s

too late to change teams... which means I really need you to keep an eye on Kaoru-chan and Inaban, okay?”

“Kaoru...? Ohhh, Setouchi. Right.”

Team Tails was scheduled to visit the Student Volunteer Club, of which 2-B’s class president Setouchi Kaoru was a member. And the CRC had some history with Setouchi.

“...So basically, the SVC works with external organizations to help with charity or volunteer work... Not that I’m one to talk, considering I didn’t exactly pull my weight last year,” Setouchi explained to them as she reviewed the general outline of the club.

“This is all good information to have. I appreciate you laying it out for us, Setouchi. Gotta say, though, I didn’t know you were in this club back then! That’s a bit surprising,” Taichi mused. While she certainly looked the part now, with her formerly bleached hair now dark and tidy, back then she was a paragon of a rebel girl.

“Yeah... But I did join, though. Technically.” Blushing, Setouchi averted her gaze. Evidently praise made her bashful... and if so, it was something she had in common with Inaba.

“Just so we’re clear, though, no amount of charity work will make up for all the fucked-up shit you did in the past,” Inaba cut in harshly.

Setouchi withered a bit. “Right,” she nodded solemnly.

“And don’t get full of yourself, either. Maybe everyone *else* wants to give you asspats for changing your tune, but me? I’d say the real heroes are the kids who were never delinquents to begin with.”

“Yeah. You’re completely right.”

“C-Come on, Inaba! Knock it off. We’re supposed to be having fun, remember?” Kiriyama scolded her.

“You people are too damn soft... Anyway, I’ll stop. I just wanted to put that out there.”

“I’m sorry,” Setouchi apologized, her head bowed.

“Um, guys...? Am I missing someth... Actually, never mind! I’m not going to ask!”

Probably for the best, Enjouji...

An awkward silence descended between them.

“Don’t get the wrong idea, now,” Inaba continued after a pause. “I hate what you did, and I hate that everyone kisses your ass for getting your act together... but I don’t hate you as a person.” Her tone took on a gentle warmth.

Setouchi hesitated. “Th... Thanks,” she replied after a moment, her voice similarly affectionate.

“Hey, Yui-senpai? I’m not smart enough to figure this out on my own, but... is this that ‘tsundere’ thing everyone talks about?”

“Sure is, Shino-chan! This is classic *tsundere* content. If Iori were here, I bet she’d be giving Inaba a new nickname right about now. Like Tsunaba! Or Tsuna-bashful!”

“Shut the fuck up, Yui! If anyone’s a *tsundere*, it’s you!”

“Not true! Right, Shino-chan?”

“Oh... ummmm... I’ll just say you’re both *tsundere* and leave it at that...”

“I’m not!” Inaba and Kiriyama shouted in unison.

“This Saturday we’re running an offsite Blindness Simulation event, and so today is kind of our dry run,” Setouchi explained.

“Oh yeah, they did one of those at my middle school one time! You wear a sleep mask over your eyes so you can experience what blind people go through in their day-to-day lives, right?” asked Kiriyama.

Setouchi nodded. “Yep! And we need to do a practice run of the entire process, so I was thinking we’d have you be our practice participants. How does that sound?”

“Sounds good to me! It’s the least we can do, seeing as we totally barged in on you guys anyway.”

“I... I’ve never done this before... but I’d like to try,” Enjouji added.

“Awesome. We owe you one.”

“Taichi wearing a blindfold... with me guiding him around... Me, the only one he can rely on without his sight... Heh heh heh... Now that’s a kink I could get into. Let’s do it.”

“Inaba, are you hearing yourself right now...?” *And what do you mean, kink?! Have you forgotten why we’re doing this?!*

“Okay, we’ll pair Inaba-san with Yaegashi-kun, and Yui-chan with... Enjouji-chan, was it?” Setouchi handed each pair a sleep mask to use as a blindfold, as well as a paper sign to hang around the blindfolded person’s neck. The sign read *BLINDNESS SIMULATION IN PROGRESS*.

“What’s with this stupid sign? It’s, like, totally not cute at all!” Kiriyama complained.

“We have to have people wear them for safety reasons since we’ll be doing this outside,” Setouchi explained.

“Okaaay...” Kiriyama sighed as she reluctantly put hers on.

“We’ll start by having you walk all the way to that flower bed over there. Keep in mind the things I warned you about earlier... There aren’t a lot of people out here, but the ground is uneven, so you’ll want to be mindful of any tripping hazards. After this round, we’ll practice using a cane with each other... Er, not like that...”

“Setouchi, not you too... Get your mind out of the gutter...” Taichi muttered under his breath. He refused to let Inaba’s wildly inappropriate comments rub off on anyone else.

And so it was decided that Taichi would go first, with Inaba as his guide.

“Now then, conceal thy sight...”

“Can you just say ‘put your mask on’ like a normal person...?” Regardless, he did as requested. “Whoa, these things are effective. I can’t see a thing...”

Of all the five senses, Taichi felt losing his sight would be the scariest. After all, he wouldn’t be able to perceive his surroundings without it... and that frightened him.

Meanwhile, his hearing, touch, and sense of smell all felt weirdly heightened.

“Taichi...”

He could hear Inaba’s voice. Following it like a beacon, he reached a hand in her direction. Soft fingers interlaced with his. He could feel the warmth of her skin.

He reached out to her because he trusted her, and she reached back because she was worthy of that trust. It was a tiny gesture, and yet somehow it meant the world to him. *Trust builds trust*. And this was proof of their unshakeable bond—not only with each other, but probably the rest of the CRC, too.

“Okay, let’s go.”

With Inaba guiding him, Taichi took a step forward... then another... then another. She was the one thing he could rely on, and so all of his remaining senses honed in on her—so sharp, he felt like he could *feel her skin respirating*.

“Wanna try holding onto something that isn’t my hand?” she offered out of nowhere, and he found himself wishing he could see her expression. “Go on!”

“W-Wait! Don’t let go of my hand!” Taichi panicked, groping blindly—
“Hnnn!” Inaba whimpered. “*That’s* not where I meant, dummy...”

“Oh god, where am I touching you?! It feels like I’m somewhere near your stomach or hips, but maybe I’m wrong?! Maybe your breasts are just weirdly bony and—Gwegh!” Something collided with his head. Probably her hand.

“Of course not! That’s my hip, okay?! I was just messing with you, damn it!”

“What, really? Oh... That’s kind of adorable, actually...”

“M-Me? Adorable? You big dummy...!”

“Could you two quit flirting?” Setouchi asked coldly from somewhere behind them.

“Sorry...”

Eventually curiosity got the better of him, and he decided to remove his blindfold so he could see what was going on. He noticed Kiriyama and Enjouji at the starting area, getting ready to begin.

“O-Okay, here we go, Yui-senpai! Don’t worry—I’ll help you as best I can!” Enjouji stiffly extended a hand to Kiriyama, who had put on her sleep mask.

“Okay. Let me know if it looks like I’m gonna crash into anything,” Kiriyama replied.

And yet, despite the blindfold, Kiriyama strode off at her regular pace. Had she not sensed Enjouji offering her hand?

“Huh...? Y-Yui-senpai! You’re supposed to take my... How are you walking normally?!”

“Huh? I mean, even without your sight, you can still kinda sense all the spiritual energy, right?”

“What *spiritual energy?!* Are you a monk or something?!” Taichi retorted.

Their favorite karate prodigy was so incredible, she had apparently ascended to another plane of existence.

“Y-You’re amazing, Yui-senpai...! Wait for me—ACK!” Meanwhile, Kiriyama’s non-blindfolded partner tripped and fell.

“Are you okay, Shino-chan? Here, take my hand.”

“Ow ow ow... I think I might’ve sprained my ankle...”

“What?! Is it serious?!”

“No, no, I’m okay!”

“Kiriyama *is* blindfolded, right? Or am I seeing things?” Taichi muttered in disbelief.

“Don’t worry. I see it, too... I’m gonna need to update her records...”

The hell kind of database does she have on us...? Is this her information gathering hobby at work...?

“Some practice run this is turning out to be,” Setouchi sighed. “At the end of the day, I want you to focus not on the fear you felt, but on the fact that there are actual people who experience this struggle on a daily basis. Armed with this knowledge, we can make the world a kinder place for those with disabilities.”

And so investigation round three came to an end.

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By the time it was all over, the sun had started to set. Beneath the scarlet sky, amid other students headed home from club practice, the CRC and their two candidates walked across the athletic field toward the school gates, the five second-years lagging slightly behind the first-years.

“So, how’d it go? Did it work?” Nagase quietly asked the rest of the CRC.

“I mean, it was fun, and I think the newbies enjoyed themselves...” Kiriyama trailed off.

“Me and Chihiro are real good friends now... to the point that he doesn’t even respect me as his *senpai!*” Aoki declared.

“But that doesn’t guarantee they’ll join us,” said Inaba.

“It’s hard to say whether they actually like the CRC...” Taichi added anxiously.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa! Why are we all so pessimistic? C’mon, guys! Have! Some! Faith!” Nagase clapped her hands to emphasize her point.

“Why don’t you go ask them?” Inaba suggested.

“I mean, I would, but... it feels kinda pushy...” It was rare to see Nagase so hesitant.

“What happened to ‘have some faith’?” Inaba snarked. Then she strode up to Chihiro and Enjouji. “Chihiro! Shino! Did you have a good time with us today? This is the sort of thing we do in the CRC... more or less. All that’s left now is to put it in article format and add it to the Culture Bulletin. That said, we can be flexible on subject matter, so if there’s ever a topic you want to cover, you can let us know and we’ll arrange for it... so... uh...” For some reason, her confidence began to peter out. She cleared her throat, then continued, “Have you come to a decision about joining us?”

At this, the two first-years came to a stop. In response, the four other second-years stopped short a small distance away to observe.

“Well...”

“Umm... Ummmmm...”

The two younger students glanced over at Taichi and the others, who all froze like a herd of deer in headlights.

“...I’m still thinking about it...”

“...I-I’m not sure...”

—Two days left until club applications close.

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The next morning, in Classroom 2-B...

“Guys, we really gotta make this happen! Today’s the last day before the deadline!” Nagase shouted.

“Yeah... I’m just not sure what more we can do...” Taichi mused.

They’d had a lot of fun yesterday... What more could they possibly offer?

“They both *seem* like they’re on board... Shino-chan came to us of her own volition, so she’s obviously interested, and Chihiro-kun has been asking me a lot of questions at the dojo...” Kiriyama murmured.

“Really? He has?”

“Yeah. He’s, like, weirdly enthusiastic for once? But of course, he never says one way or the other if he’ll join...”

The two of them had said they’d stop by the club again that afternoon, so it was clear they had a reasonable interest in joining. Otherwise, why would they waste their time?

And yet something was holding them back, be it some kind of apprehension on their part, or a lack of decisive evidence in the club’s favor.

“We just gotta show them another awesome day of club activities! Make ‘em *really* wanna join us!” Nagase insisted.

Their current plan was to do another round of club investigations.

“I just don’t think that’s enough,” said Kiriyama.

“Mmm... Yeah, probably not...” Nagase’s face fell.

Just then, a tall, slender girl with wavy bleached hair walked up to them.

“Well, well, if it isn’t the CRC trio, looking utterly miserable before class has even started.”

It was Kiriyama’s good friend Kurihara Yukina, known for being candid and outspoken.

“Oh! Like, good morning, Yukina!”

“You guys wanted to sit in on track practice this afternoon, right?”

“Yeah, but there’s kind of a problem...”

Once Kiriyama explained the situation, Kurihara nodded pensively. “Gotcha... So you’re in this weird space where you’re not sure if these kids are gonna join your club, and you don’t know what to do about it?”

“Yup,” Kiriyama nodded.

“Well, I understand why they wouldn’t want to rush into anything. It’s kinda hard to change clubs here at Yamaboshi, you know?”

“Yeahhh...”

“Rrgh...!”

“What’s wrong?”

Kurihara sighed. “I’m just such a sucker for your sad puppydog face... It makes me want to rescue you somehow...”

“You’re gonna be a good mom someday, Yukina-chan,” Nagase commented casually. “Either that, or you’ll end up enabling some deadbeat loser husband.”

“I didn’t need that last part, thanks,” Kurihara retorted. “Well, if it’s any consolation, you guys aren’t alone in this. Every club struggles with how to get new members this time of year. That’s why the track team’s having our big marathon race today. We do it every year on the day of the deadline.”

“How come?” asked Nagase.

“Think about it! Accomplishing something brings everyone together, you know? The first-years give it their all to make it across that finish line, and when they get there, us older students are there to pat them on the back... and then after that we have a BBQ party! Doesn’t that sound like a great time?”

“Holy crap! You’re a genius!” Kiriyama exclaimed, clapping her hands, and Kurihara thrust out her chest proudly.

“Not like Kurihara came up with it herself...”

“That’s pretty clever, actually. Use the pretense of exercise to weed out the lazy ones!”

“Yaegashi! Iori! Can’t you people just say it’s cool and leave it at that?!”

“Aww, I’m just joking, Yukina-chan! Anyway, sounds like we should try getting crafty ourselves!” Nagase suggested.

“Like what?” Kiriyama asked.

“Hmmm... Figure out what it is they like about the CRC, then play those aspects up?”

“Makes sense,” Taichi nodded.

“Hmmmmm...” the three of them murmured.

“You know, this is just a thought, but...”

“What is it, Yukina?”

“How would anyone be interested in the CRC when no one knows what it is you people do all day?”

“Oh,” the three of them responded in unison.

She had a good point. Sure, it was possible the CRC just seemed like a fun time, but the same could be said of pretty much any other club.

“So I’m thinking... Maybe what they’re really interested in is you guys,” Kurihara continued.

Interested... in us? As individuals, or as a group?

“Then it’s settled!” Nagase jumped to her feet. “We just gotta show ‘em how awesome we are!”

Personally, Taichi wasn’t so sure about this, but he couldn’t exactly argue.

“Yes! I’ll show them how badass and cute I am!” Apparently Kiriyama was completely on board with this plan; the look on her face was positively radiant.

“Alright, now we just need some kind of big event... I’ve got it! Yukina-chan!”

The president of the Cultural Research Club was on a roll, and there were no brakes on this train.

“Huh?”

“We’ll join your marathon as part of our club investigation! It can be just me and Yui, since we’re the most athletic members of the club. All we need is to run the same course as you, and then Chee-hee and Shino-chan can document it from the sidelines! This plan is *flawless!*”

“What? Slow down a sec! This is the *track team’s* marathon! Why would we let you randos join?! You’re not even a sports team!”

“C’mon, what’s the harm? Right, Yui?”

“Right! Besides, the CRC can handle anything! We’re like a... jack of all trades!”

“And master of none,” Taichi snarked.

“Look, I get what you’re saying, but I don’t know...”

“Please, Yukina? You can pull some strings, can’t you...?” Kiriyama looked up at Kurihara, puppy-dogging.

Kurihara grimaced. “Ugh, forget it! Fine, you win!”

A sucker for Kiriyama, indeed.

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According to Kurihara, when she asked the third-years about the CRC participating, the response was instantaneous: “What?! The Cultural Research Club wants to join the marathon?! As in, the club with all the hot girls in it?! Of course they’re allowed to join! Have them join us for the barbecue, too! Five hundred yen cover charge, girls get in free!”

“Ugh... The track team is a total sausage fest, and the boys all reek of desperation... I wish they’d realize that’s why they aren’t getting laid...” Kurihara sighed. (It was pretty brutal.) And so it was decided that the two most athletic members of the club, Nagase and Kiriyama, would take part in the

marathon—along with Aoki, who begged to join for some reason—while everyone else documented the results.

However, when they relayed this information to Enjouji in the clubroom after school— “Can... Can I join the marathon, too?!”

“No, no, you don’t have to run with us! Just sit back and let us handle it!” Nagase insisted.

But Enjouji held her ground. “P-Please... I want to do everything you guys do... That’s what it means to ‘sit in’ on club activities!” She had puffed herself up to her fullest height, her eyes shining with determination. “Once I prove I can keep up with the rest of you... That’s when I’ll...” She paused, glanced around at each of them... and suddenly wilted. “I mean... if it’s just going to cause problems for the rest of you, then don’t worry about it... I know I don’t have the stamina for a marathon... I should probably quit while I’m ahead...”

“Aww, Shino-chan! Okay, you’ve won me over with your courage! If you wanna run with us, then I’m not gonna stop you!”

“Yay!”

Unfortunately, this triggered a chain reaction.

“In that case, I’ll run the marathon too,” said Chihiro.

“You too?!” Kiriyama exclaimed.

“Not for the same reasons as her, mind you. I just figure I may as well get a good workout while I’m at it.”

“Oooh!” Nagase squealed, practically vibrating with glee. “Look at you kids, all hyped up! In that case... I guess we’ll *all* run the marathon!”

And so the five members of the CRC, plus Chihiro and Enjouji, all put on their gym clothes and headed to the nature park where the marathon was to be held.

“What’s with the bicycle, Inaba?” Taichi asked. Everyone else was on foot except her.

“Hmph! I’ve volunteered to supervise the race and keep everyone out of trouble. Aren’t I selfless?”

“...Okay, what’s your real reason?”

“I’m not gonna kill myself running for no reason, dumbass.”

She was nothing if not honest.

“Wait... You don’t ride your bike to school... Where’d you even get one?”

“Borrowed it from Fujishima. These days she’ll do anything if it’ll make her feel useful in some regard.”

“A-Anything...?” Taichi swallowed.

Her gaze hardened. “Your mind better not be in the gutter right now.”

“N-Nonsense! Of course not, my queen! Hahaha!”

“Alright, I’d better get going.” Inaba started to pedal away—then stopped short. “Whoops... Almost forgot.” She reversed her bicycle until she was right beside Taichi, leaned in, and planted a kiss on his cheek.

“Wh... Whoa, whoa, whoa!” He felt her soft lips against his skin.

“Hee hee! Consider it a magic spell that’ll help you make it across the finish line.”

All of a sudden, he felt strangely motivated.

“Look, uh... Listen... I appreciate—*really* appreciate—getting a kiss on the cheek from you for the first time ever—but don’t you think maybe we shouldn’t do that in front of everyone?!”

He could feel the others staring at them with mixed reactions: surprise, disgust, envy.

At this, Inaba gasped and snapped to her senses. Apparently she hadn’t even realized where they were. *Love sure is blind, I guess!*

“Oh... uhh... Well then... um... *Kill me nooow!*” Screaming, Inaba took off on her bike like a bat out of hell.

Meanwhile, Taichi had broken out in a sweat, his heart thumping as if he’d already run the marathon. He took a deep breath, willing himself to calm down.

Since the seven of them were guests more than main participants, the CRC

lined up at the back, behind the thirty or so track-affiliated students. Among them, one girl stepped out—tall and androgynous, with sharp features and a pixie cut. It was Oosawa Misaki, the girl who had once confessed her love to Kiriyama and taken her out on a date (which the rest of the CRC had... *chaperoned*). It was quite the memorable occasion.

"Yui-chan!"

"Misaki-chan!"

The two girls exchanged a high-five.

"Nobody told me you were running with us today! I laughed so hard when I heard about it. Someone ought to rein you in, girl!"

"Sorry to spring it on you guys..."

They seemed like perfectly good friends, not a hint of awkwardness to be seen. Meanwhile, Aoki was watching them like a hawk.

"Well, see you after the race—Actually, knowing you, you might just beat us all to the finish line!"

"Aww, no way! I don't stand a chance against the whole track team! I'll see you at the finish line, though!"

Once Kiriyama had finished speaking to Oosawa, Taichi called out to her. "Hey, Kiriyama?"

"What?!" Kiriyama hissed, practically leaping down his throat for no reason... Well, no. She had reason enough to be on guard, considering he'd been an accomplice in tailing her on her date. Would it be wrong of him to ask her in Aoki's place? He wasn't sure.

Meanwhile, a pink-faced Kiriyama started to explain herself of her own accord. "I don't know what it is you people are so worried about, but..." She paused briefly to glance at Aoki, then turned away. "Me and Misaki-chan are just friends. There's nothing else going on."

"Huh?!" Aoki yelped.

Kiriyama's blush burned even brighter. "L-Look, I'm... I'm not just twiddling my thumbs over here, okay?!" she snapped back.

“Wait, so... If you’ve turned her down, then... does that mean you picked me?!”

“What? No! Who said anything about picking you?! That’s not what I said at all!” she insisted fervently. “Forget it! I’m gonna go do warm-ups!” And with that, she ran off.

“Taichi... I think I might just break a world record today...”

“R-Right on...” And so Taichi left him to bask in the afterglow of the moment.

At that point, he spotted Nagase talking to the two first-years, so he headed over to join them.

“Let’s both try to make it to the finish line, okay, Shino-chan?”

“Oh, um... Don’t worry about me. You can run at your own pace... I want to prove I can keep up with you without a handicap... That way I’ll have confidence in myself...”

“Hmmm... Well, if that’s what you really want... You sure?”

“Y-Yeah!”

“What about you, Chee-hee? I’m guessing you’ll do your own thing.”

“Correct.”

“I gotta say, I wasn’t expecting you to volunteer for this, Chihiro,” Taichi cut in.

At this, Chihiro turned his perpetually dismal stare on Taichi. “And now you’re annoyed because you got roped into it as well?”

“Nah. If I really didn’t want to do this, I could drop out anytime. I was just surprised by it, that’s all.”

“Surprised... Right...” Chihiro muttered under his breath, averting his gaze.

“Uh... *Anyways!*” Nagase continued in a tone of forced cheer. “Be honest with me, guys... You’re both dying to join the club, right?”

Silence.

Here they were in their gym clothes, about to run a marathon for no real

reason... and yet somehow the first-years *still* didn't have an answer.

Nagase's smile faltered. "O-Okay, let me rephrase the question. What is it about the Cultural Research Club that appeals—"

"Everyone to the starting line, please!"

And so the track team's annual April marathon race began before she could finish her question.

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In, out, in, out. My breath forms a steady rhythm, pumping oxygen through my body.

My pace is perfectly steady—not too lazy, nor am I trying too hard.

The girls have to run nine kilometers. As for the guys, we take a three-kilometer detour partway through, adding up to twelve kilometers total. It's a fair bit more than I'd like to run, ideally, but at my current speed, I should arrive at the finish line without needing to catch my breath like a total loser.

And since I'm "competing" against a bunch of people from the track team, I'm not even going to bother trying to win. Not like I have anything to prove.

For that matter, why am I running in the first place?

The Cultural Research Club.

They gave me a whole long-winded spiel, but in essence, it's a club with no real direction or discipline aside from publishing a monthly periodical called the "Culture Bulletin." And if Yui-san hadn't dragged me there, I wouldn't have given a club like that a second glance.

No goals, no value, no significance. Seriously, I fail to comprehend how these people operate...

And yet, for some reason, here I am...

No, I'm not like them. I have a goal: to seek understanding. Still, I can't help but wonder how long I'm going to entertain this little charade. Am I really going to join this utterly pointless club just to "understand them"? Talk about cringey. There's nothing more pathetic than someone who jumps to conclusions after

failing to read social cues.

Speaking of pathetic, I had assumed Enjouji would be obnoxious in that regard as well, but as it turns out, she actually has a good grasp on these things. She's not *stupid*, just slow.

At this stage, it would be too much of a hassle to try to find another club, but at least that way I wouldn't be stuck with a bunch of morons... Why did I put it off so long, anyway? Why couldn't I have figured this out yesterday or the day before, back when I still had some time?

Anyway... I wonder what Enjouji will decide. I'm pretty sure she's been to a few other clubs... Surely she can't be *that* dense, right?

Just then, I spot the girl in question, jogging along in her gym uniform, her fluffy brown hair bobbing up and down. Looks like I've already caught up to her, despite the extra three-kilometer detour.

She's so out of shape and sluggish. Why would she volunteer herself to do this? Just look at the way she's running! She'll never make it to the goal like th — Wait, hold on. She's limping on her right foot...?

I don't know what happened to her, but she's clearly struggling... Not that it's any of my business. And even if it were, there's nothing I can do about it.

As I pass her, I decide the least I can do is say something.

"You alright? No need to force yourself. Seriously." And with that, I jog ahead of her.

In between ragged gasps for breath, she wheezes out "Yes, sir...!"

Sir? I'm the same age as you, dumbass.

I keep running.

I can sense Enjouji behind me. I didn't get a look at her face as I passed her, but I'll bet she looks like a sad puppy right about now.

I keep running.

Her heavy breathing fades into the distance. I'm really curious why she wanted to take part in this marathon... She made it sound like this race would

settle the score somehow. As if the mere act of crossing the finish line would decide things once and for all.

Granted, I don't know what she's set as her benchmark, but if she's hoping to come in first or beat some record, she's boned. That said, if all she cares about is crossing the finish line *period*, then maybe... Wait, why am I even thinking about this? Ridiculous. Who cares?

I keep running.

Either way, she's just going to embarrass herself.

I keep running.

How will this little charade end? I just want to see it for myself, that's all. I just want to know. I want to see what she does, and I want to see how they react to it. End of story.

In which case—

"Tsk... Guess I don't have a choice, now do I?"

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The finish line was located at the top of a small mountain within the nature park, with long, gentle slopes leading all the way to the top.

After the better part of an hour, most of the entrants had successfully crossed the finish line, the CRC included. Thus, most of the track team was off getting the barbecue party set up.

Kiriyama was quite pleased with herself, as she had been one of the first few to arrive. Then Nagase turned up a short while later, pouring sweat. Bringing up the rear were Taichi and Aoki, both gasping for breath, as well as Inaba atop her borrowed bike (who naturally wasn't winded in the slightest, and yet she still had the nerve to complain about the mountain incline).

Fortunately, by this point they'd all recovered and were ready to have a good time... except for one small problem: Chihiro and Enjouji were nowhere to be seen.

Inaba lounged idly on her bike while the others sat on the grass.

“Man, where *are* they? Maybe I should’ve stuck with Shino-chan after all... but I was worried she’d think I don’t respect her...” Nagase muttered.

“Chihiro-kun’s probably running with her. Otherwise, like, there’s *no* reason why he’d be this late,” said Kiriyama.

“He’s definitely with her. A few people told me they saw the two of them together on their way here,” Inaba replied.

“In which case we’ll just have to wait,” said Taichi. “Not like they’ll give up and go home partway through, right?”

“Taichi! Don’t jinx us!” Nagase snapped.

“They both *wanted* to be in this race. They’ll get here,” Kiriyama murmured... whether to them or to herself, Taichi wasn’t sure.

“That’s the spirit!” Aoki replied brightly. “And once they cross the finish line, they’re gonna join the club!”

Nagase flopped onto her back on the grass. “Uggghhh... I’m not sure about this... We had so much fun investigating the other clubs... and then today the plan was to show off and make ourselves look cool, but we ended up running as a group... I just hope we can win them over this time...”

“We’ve done all we can. Now all we can do is wait and see if...” Taichi began, but stopped short. *Wait, what?*

At this, Inaba spoke up suddenly, as if something had just dawned on her. “I know we agreed this was for the best, but... it feels like all we’ve done is sit around.”

“Yeah... Just sitting around...” Aoki echoed.

“On our butts...” Kiriyama added.

“We’ve been doing that a *lot* lately, don’t you think?” asked Nagase.

She was right, of course. Granted, this was the stance they’d all decided upon at the beginning, but still.

On the first day Chihiro visited, Inaba had asked, “Do you have any interest in joining us?” to which he replied, “I’ll actively consider it.” And yet no one said a

word.

Later, Chihiro had asked him, “Taichi-san, do you actually want us to join the club?”—a question to which he had had no answer.

Then, at the end of club investigations, Inaba had once again asked them, “Have you come to a decision about joining us?” At this, the two first-years had glanced over in their direction, and yet none of them had lifted a finger.

They’d wanted the newbies to join, and so they’d been trying to show off... but what about the next step?

“I’m just wondering... Why haven’t we flat-out told them we want them to join?”

This question from Nagase hit Taichi like a brick. Once again, she was right. They’d just sat around on their laurels, waiting for the other side to make the first move.

“What if, like... *that’s* the reason they haven’t made up their mind?” Kiriyama asked.

Their club was vague and generally formless, and only two new kids wanted to join them. In terms of same-age friends, they would only have each other, as well as five older students.

Thinking about it, there were countless reasons to hesitate... and yet they came to the CRC anyway. To do so must have taken a tremendous amount of courage. But when it came to the second-years, the five of them were entirely noncommittal.

They’d held the door open, but hadn’t tried to give the new kids that final push. Why? Mostly because of «Heartseed»... but there was more to it than just that.

“Y’know, I’ve been thinkin’... We’re all kinda scared to let anyone else join, huh?”

Aoki had hit the nail on the head.

“I don’t want to admit it, but... it makes sense,” Nagase whispered, and the others nodded.

Taichi closed his eyes. There, in the darkness, he felt perfectly safe, like he was right where he belonged.

The Yamaboshi High School Cultural Research Club was its own tight-knit community, and... if he was being completely honest with himself... he was a tiny bit afraid of losing that. Maybe the others felt similarly.

This would certainly explain why Chihiro and Enjouji wouldn't commit to joining the club. *Trust builds trust.*

"We wanted them to join, but at the same time we were afraid of them actually doing it, huh?" Inaba mused. "We told ourselves we'd be fine with them joining as long as we didn't actively invite them in, but at the end of the day, it didn't matter *how* they joined us. Either way, the risk would still be there. All we really wanted was a reason to feel less guilty about it." She paused. "Anyway, I'm probably preaching to the choir."

Indeed she was. Taichi knew she was right... He'd simply been turning a blind eye to it.

"We need to open up to them without just dancing around it," Nagase declared.

"Yeah... Looking back, we've really been phoning this in. Maybe we're still settling into the new school year or something..." Inaba grimaced.

Meanwhile, Taichi ruminated on this.

Their club appeared to have little significance or value, and yet two kids wanted to join it anyway. But as for the existing members, despite having full knowledge of the club's worst aspects, they all sat around like pompous jerks, dumping the responsibility on their younger peers. They shied away from the risk, yet they still wanted the reward. *How unbelievably arrogant*.

Swallowing his pride, Taichi turned to the others. It was time to take a stand.

"Hey, guys? Now that we've got everything out on the open, let me ask you all again... Do you still want new members?"

Everyone nodded.

"You want Chihiro and Enjouji to join us?"

They nodded again.

Then, finally, Taichi said the words that had evaded him for so long: “I want them to join, too. And I know it might be too little, too late... but I think we should tell them, and...”

There, he faltered. Part of him was afraid that what he was suggesting was, in actuality, an extremely cruel thing to do.

But when he saw the encouraging looks on the others’ faces, that fear vanished into the ether.

“By doing this, we might be exposing them to «Heartseed»... but I think we should own up to that.”

We can do this. The five of us can do anything. Add two new faces, and that’ll only make us stronger. We’ll have a blast!

Sure, we may not have the final say... but we can at least tell them how we feel.

And then we’ll all band together to fight «Heartseed»!

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It really, really hurts.

My left ankle is screaming at me to stop, and after putting all my weight on my other foot, now my right ankle is mad at me, too. They’re probably both swollen. And since I can’t run anymore, we’ve decided to just walk the rest of the way.

“Good grief... Why would you volunteer to run today if you twisted your ankle yesterday?” Chihiro-kun snaps as he walks beside me.

“I... I’m sorry... I kinda forgot... right up until we started running...”

I’m so embarrassed, I want to disappear.

“Fine, whatever...”

He’s been walking with me the whole rest of the way ever since he caught up to me.

“Listen, um... Maybe you should just go on without me.”

“What, and waltz across the finish line while you’re down here limping? Believe it or not, that would take more spine than I have. Now then, the arrow’s pointing this way, so... Oh, for crying out loud...”

He comes to a stop, and I follow suit.

I look up from the ground to find a long, sloping hill just ahead. Apparently this is the last hurdle before the finish line.

“Did they really have to end the race on top of a mountain? What a dick move,” Chihiro-kun mutters, then glances at me. “Look, you did the best you could. I’ll go up to the finish line and get some help, and then we can head home. Actually, I’m not sure anyone will be waiting for us up there... Not like we’re part of the track team...”

“Wh... But... But...!” The protest catches in my throat. Maybe I just... have to give up. “You’re right... If they’re still up there, then they’re probably bored of waiting for me...”

Everybody else crossed the finish line a long, long time ago—including the CRC. And they’re all probably off at the barbecue party by now.

In the end, they’ll never see me. I’ll always be lagging behind them for the rest of my life.

Oh well. That’s just the way the world is, and I have to accept that— “Look, Enjouji... Why did you want to join this stupid club, anyway?” Chihiro-kun asks me out of nowhere.

I hesitate. I don’t see how the flow of the conversation led him to that.

“Hello? Are you listening?” he snaps, scowling.

“Huh?! Oh! Yes, I’m listening!” Okay, let’s see. “To be honest... I wouldn’t presume I’m allowed to join, per se, but...”

“Spare me the pretense of humility. You came to sit in with them of your own volition, and then you volunteered to run a marathon with them. It couldn’t be more obvious what you’re after.”

“...Which means it applies to you too, right?”

“Are you trying to piss me off?”

“N-No, no! Of course not!”

Why would he think that? I don’t get it.

I take a deep breath.

“They’re just... perfect. They’re my dream, I guess. I’m the moth, and they’re the flame... Haha...”



I add in a joke at the end, but Chihiro-kun doesn't laugh. Instead he stares intently, almost like he's impressed. Maybe the two of us are a little bit similar... After all, we're both interested in the CRC, aren't we?

"Okay, but... why them, specifically?" Chihiro-kun asks.

"I don't know... Something deep down tells me they're the best."

For a moment I worry that he'll yell at me and tell me to be more specific, but he doesn't.

"The best at *what*, I wonder..." he mumbles.

It's weird... Standing here beneath the melancholy of twilight, it feels like I can say whatever I want and he won't think I'm dumb.

"Everything. That's why I'm worried I don't belong there."

"Yeah... I can relate."

I wasn't expecting him to agree with me, but I'm a tiny bit glad he does... so I keep going.

"Knowing them, if I tell them I want to join, they'll let me in right away... but that doesn't guarantee I'll be able to keep up with them. To this day, they don't seem sure of whether we'll join or not... and I just..."

This is why I'm stuck in a rut, isn't it? Maybe if I put my foot down, I could change... but at the same time, I don't want to bother anyone...

"I knew it. You're not stupid at all. You know how to read the room."

"...Are you saying you *used* to think I was stupid?"

"You're just slow, that's all."

"Oh, okay. Just slow... *Slow?!* You're such a jerk!"

"Yeah? Stop being so slow and I won't *have* to be a jerk."

We burst out laughing. Come to think of it, this might be the first time he's ever laughed in front of me.

There's a pause, and then he asks me one last question—or at least, it feels like the last question.

“So you’re done here, I take it? Done with the race? Done with the Cultural Research Club?”

At this, I’m flooded with feelings of bittersweet longing. I want to try again, but if they don’t want me around— But then I hear screams from atop the mountain.

“CHEE-HEEEEEEE!!! SHINO-CHAAAAN!!! WE’RE WAITING!!! PLEASE COME JOIN THE CLUB!!!”

That’s Iori-senpai.

“CHIHIRO-KUUUUN!!! YOU BETTER BE A GENTLEMAN AND HELP SHINO-CHAN GET UP HERE!!! AND I HOPE YOU’LL BOTH JOIN THE CLUB!!! IT’LL BE FUN!!!”

That’s Yui-senpai.

“HURRY AND GET UP HERE, Y’ALL!!! I WANNA EAT SOME BARBECUE!!! YOU GUYS AREN’T JUST OUR *KOUHAI*, YOU’RE OUR FRIENDS!!!”

That’s Aoki-senpai.

“YOU’VE GOT A LOT OF NERVE, MAKING YOUR *SENPAI* WAIT AROUND FOR YOU!!! NOW GET YOUR ASSES UP HERE!!!”

That’s Inaba-senpai.

“WE’D LOVE TO HAVE YOU!!! IT’S GONNA BE A BLAST, SO PLEASE JOIN US!!!”

And that’s Taichi-senpai.

I freeze in place, listening to all the different voices. But I’m picking up more than just that... I feel so... so... *loved*. And maybe that’s what I needed most.

“...What’ll it be, Enjouji?” Chihiro-kun asks.

I might be slow on the uptake, but one thing’s blatantly obvious, even to me — “You’ve got ‘Let’s get up there’ written all over your face, Chihiro-kun.”

—It’s time to make my dreams come true.

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“Being in this club might make your life... *really complicated*. I mean, the chances are low, and worst case scenario, we’ll all do our best to help you... but

the possibility is still there, so...”

Chihiro and Enjouji stared back, mouths agog, as Taichi attempted to explain.

“What are you talking about, Taichi-san?”

“Well, there’s something you need to know if you’re officially going to join us, and that’s—”

“Can’t it wait, buddy?” Aoki cut in. “If we don’t hurry, they’re gonna run out of meat, Chihiro! You’re still hungry, aren’tcha?!”

“Yes, sir!”

And with that, the two boys dashed off to the grill.

After the track team marathon came to an end, the seven members of the CRC headed to the park campground and crashed the barbecue party.

Originally they’d been hesitant to do so, of course, considering it was the track team’s event and not theirs, but a group of male track members convinced them to join in on the condition that they all come and spectate at a track event at some point.

(When the CRC finally caved, one of the track guys shouted “YES! Now all we gotta do is show off and the girls are as good as ours! WOOHOO!”) And so Taichi was left standing alone with Enjouji.

“That reminds me, Enjouji... You never did tell us what it was that first got you interested in us.”

She flinched. “Oh... um... well... ummm...”

“You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to. I’m not gonna bite, so just relax, okay?”

“O-OKAY!!!”

“I said *relax*. Geez...”

Nagase and Inaba wandered over, possibly drawn by Enjouji’s shout.

“What’s going on?”

“Is something the matter?”

“No, it’s noth—”

“AS YOU WISH, I SHALL HUMBLY ANSWER YOUR QUESTION!” Enjouji blurted out as though she had an audience with the Queen of England.

“Wait, what? What question?” Nagase asked curiously.

“After all your words of encouragement... and seeing as I’ve officially decided to join... it’s only fair that I tell you what interested me about the Cultural Research Club!”

“Ooooh! I like your spirit, Shino-chan! Tell us, tell us!” Nagase beamed.

“Okay... The first reason is... because I wanted to be like you guys.”

“You did?” Inaba asked.

“Y-Yeah... See, I was walking by one day when I spotted you all together... guys and girls, hanging out with no awkwardness... and I thought to myself, *this is what I want high school to be like*... and then I heard one of you say ‘Cultural Research Club’...”

“That sounds like a perfectly good reason to me. Why would you feel like you had to hide it?” Taichi asked.

Enjouji hung her head. “W-Well... It’s kinda embarrassing, that’s all...”

“I take it there’s more reasons than just that one?” asked Nagase.

“Y-Yeah... The other reason is...” Enjouji’s glance flickered to Taichi. After approximately ten seconds of silence, he tilted his head in confusion. Then, finally, she worked up the courage to confess: “...I like Taichi-senpai!”

“.....What?”

He froze. His mind went blank.

“What?! Holy crap! Are you serious?!” Nagase panicked.

“Wh... Wh... What the fuck...? Wh... What are you... Aah...!” Inaba started shaking so hard, she dropped her plate.

“I mean... I like his *voice!*”

“.....Huh?” It was the most Taichi could manage.

“Wait... *Just* his voice?” Nagase asked in his place.

“Yes! A hundred—no, *thousand* percent just his voice! It’s got this lovely, deep timbre that matches perfectly with his stoic style of speech... almost like classical music! It’s my ideal aesthetic!” Enjouji chattered excitedly.

Evidently his voice was more of a ladykiller than he was.

“Wh... What about the rest of him?” Inaba asked.

“Absolutely not. The second I learn anything about who they are as a person, it completely kills it for me. Hard pass,” Enjouji declared, her index finger pointing confidently in Inaba’s direction.

Who are you and what have you done with Enjouji?

As it turned out, the girl had a few idiosyncrasies of her own.

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The barbecue party was nearly over, and their stomachs were full. After a quick visit to the restroom, Uwa Chihiro decided to kill time by wandering around the park.

In an unbelievable turn of events, he had inadvertently agreed to join the Cultural Research Club. So what had Taichi meant when he said that being in this club might make their lives complicated?

“Oh, hey! It’s Chee-hee!”

There, he was spotted by one Nagase Iori. Intentionally or by chance, he couldn’t be sure.

“Is this the way to the bathrooms?”

“No, the restrooms are over there.”

“Oh, whoops! Thank you!” She turned in the direction he indicated... then came to a stop. “That reminds me, Chee-hee. I was wanting to ask you something.”

She turned back to face him. The wind blew, rustling her dark hair, tinted copper by the sunset. And with her perfect figure, her plain gym clothes looked anything but.

“You’re not actually the kind of guy who would tell a girl she’s beautiful, are you?”

Her voice was so crisp and clear, it set him on edge. That, and he didn’t really see what she was getting at.

“I mean, you’re too much of a grouch... Not that that’s a bad thing, of course.”

“Uh... Okay...?”

He found himself ensnared by her sharp eyes. Beautiful, yet impalpably terrifying.

“Remember that time you said I was attractive?”

“Oh yeah... I *do* recall saying something along those lines.”

“It struck me as really out of character, so I thought about it, and then it hit me: When you flirt with one person, you’re subtly suggesting that you’re *not* interested in *someone else*... In other words—”

“*Nagase-san!*” he shouted, cutting her off.

She blinked back in surprise.

“Oh... uh... It’s nothing.” *God, I’m such an idiot.*

At this, Nagase smiled softly, affectionately, like the Virgin Mary. “Okay, I’m sorry. Just try not to fall in love if you know you’ll regret it, is all I’m saying. Trust me, I...”

“Huh?”

But the rustle of the tree branches drowned out the rest of her sentence.

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Following his encounter with Nagase, Chihiro headed further away from the others, to a deserted area of the forest within the nature park. He needed some alone time so he could defuse his anger.

In his mind, he couldn’t stop replaying the conversation they’d had. *What’s with her? Acting like she knows everything... God, I’m pathetic. What an embarrassment. I’m a miserable little worm.*

“This is so stupid...” he hissed under his breath.

“...It is, isn’t it...?”

A lethargic voice wriggled up from the earth itself.

Chihiro whipped around and spotted a single figure, concealed in the shadows.

“Wh... Who are you?!” he shouted.

“Who...? Let’s see... «Heartseed», perhaps...?”

The End

Afterword Thank you for reading *Clip Time*! This is volume 5 (as well as the first short story collection) of the *Kokoro Connect* series, following Volume 1: *Hito Random*, Volume 2: *Kizu Random*, Volume 3: *Kako Random*, and Volume 4: *Michi Random*.

Anyway, Anda Sadanatsu here, back at it again with the “KokoroCo” schtick. KokoroCo!

Now, I know some of you might be thinking “Where the heck did the ‘Random’ go?!” but not to worry! Short story collections will use the “(x) Time” naming convention instead. Of course, that makes it sound like I’m already planning to do more of them, but rest assured, nothing is set in stone just yet... Not that I wouldn’t love to write more, obviously! I would love to!

Okay, now that I’ve got the low-key “Please buy all my books!” shilling out of the way... Gah, I’m running out of space in this afterword... I’m not going to be able to go over each individual short story, like you see in all the other short story collections... How does this keep happening? I always write more than I’m supposed to! Whenever I complete a manuscript for a volume of Kokoro Connect, it’s always WAY over the page limit, so I have to go back and trim it down. Then I promise myself “Next time it won’t be like this,” and yet it always happens without fail...

So, with that sorry excuse for a “behind the scenes” story, let’s move on to the acknowledgments!

First, I’d like to thank everyone who has been supporting the series from the first volume onwards. And to everyone who sent in postcards during the drama CD promotional campaign—I haven’t read every single one of them, but I know a lot of you sent me thorough critiques as well as amazingly high quality fan art... It may take me some time, but I promise, I’m going to read through all of

them eventually!

Second, I'd like to thank everyone who worked hard to help me get this book published, particularly my editor. Thank you for working through my various scheduling issues this time around; I really appreciate all your help!

Third, a HUGE thank you to Shiromizakana-sama. The new characters are ADORABLE! Thank you sooo much!!!

Last but not least, CUTEG-sensei's *Kokoro Connect* manga is now available for purchase!

Before I go, I'd like to extend my full gratitude to all of my readers once again. I would be truly honored if sales of my book contributed in some small way to the recovery efforts following the Tohoku earthquake.

—Anda Sadanatsu April 2011


I'M A TOTAL SUCKER FOR OLDER GIRL/YOUNGER GUY PAIRINGS, SO I CAN'T HELP BUT SHIP CHIHIRO/YUI! LOL
SORRY, AOKI!

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Kokoro Connect Volume 5: Clip Time

by Sadanatsu Anda

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Edited by Adam Fogle

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