
KOKORO CONNECT
NISE — RANDOM
Sadanatsu Anda

KOKORO CONNECT

NISE — RANDOM




"Let's BREAK UP."
"You're obnoxious, and frankly I'm sick of you."
"What I'm saying is, just make her your SIDE CHICK."
"It's the best option for everyone involved, which means it's the right thing to do."
"You want me to... ignore you?"
—You don't have to break up with Inaban. Just get with me.
—I don't need to be your NUMBER ONE.
This world is the ultimate game. Wouldn't you agree?


Uwa Chihiro (Age 15)
Blood Type: O
Hobbies: Listening to foreign music
Skills: Karate (I'm pretty decent)
Motto: Independence is a virtue.
Wishlist: 10-speed bike
Why CRC?: Yui-san invited me.
First Impression: You want my honest answer?
Voice
Taichi-senpai
Iori-senpai
Aoki Yoshifumi
文研部のセンパイ方
CRC Senpai
Inaba-senpai
Yui-san
Enjouji Shino (Age 15)
Blood Type: AB
Hobbies: Playing with my dog ♡
Skills: Being humble... I guess...?
Motto: I'll have one ready next time (>_<)
Wishlist: A strong heart... J/K.
Why CRC?: I want to be like them!
First Impression: They all radiate perfection!
New Recruit Profiles

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Afterword



Date: x/xx Weather: Cloudy

Today I met—

No! No I didn't! What am I saying? I take it back! I don't know what you're talking about! Never happened!

It can't have been real, so it must've been a dream. Yeah, just a dream. There's no way something like that would exist in real life. My world hasn't changed. Not a bit.

Today was just another ordinary day. And it'll be nothing but ordinary tomorrow, and the day after that, and all the days after that.

Not that I LIKE ordinary, mind you. But I'll take ordinary over

THAT.

I should go to bed early tonight. I'm exhausted, and the fatigue is making me all weird. I'll just save it for tomorrow! Tomorrow will be a better day, and then everything will go back to normal, and then I'll forget all about it. Good night!

I'm not worthy.

Chapter 1: The Sports Festival

“Alright, people, let’s talk about the Sports Festival!”

It was early June. Behind the teacher’s lectern stood Setouchi Kaoru, president of Class 2-B at Yamaboshi High School. During this Monday sixth period homeroom, they were sitting down to discuss the athletic event that would take place a month from now at the start of July.

“Everyone gather around your assigned sports committee representative. For the boys, that’s Watase-kun. Girls, you’ve got Kurihara-san!”

Already Setouchi seemed right at home in her new role as class president. Her cartilage piercings glittered against her short dark hair, affording her the respectability of an honors student juxtaposed with the aesthetic of a trendsetter.

At her command, the students all rose from their seats, Yaegashi Taichi included.

“That time of year already, huh? Man, the Sports Festival always gets me pumped! You know what I mean, Yaegashi-kun?” asked Nakayama Mariko, a cheerful girl known for her trademark high pigtails.

“Totally,” Taichi agreed, nodding.

“That’s it? Just a one-word reply? C’mon!”

Her pushy personality left something to be desired, and admittedly he wasn’t entirely comfortable around her, but as she was good friends with Nagase, he frequently found himself roped into conversations with her.

“S-Sorry...”

“Grrrr... That’s still just one word! Throw me a bone here, would you? Let’s hear those dulcet tones! Don’t save it all for Inaba-san!”

But then, someone tackled Nakayama from behind.

“*Gotcha!* Well, well... You two look like you’re getting along, eh?”



This picturesque little moment was intensified further with the addition of Nagase Iori, president of the Cultural Research Club and generally considered the most beautiful girl in their grade, wrapping her arms protectively around Nakayama. These days she wore her long hair down, and lately it felt like her personality had matured to match her more refined hairstyle.

“You jelly? Me and Yaegashi-kun are besties now.”

“What?! Besties?! Then me and Taichi are SUPER besties! We went through a whole year of club stuff together!”

But Taichi had to think that “club stuff” was putting it far too lightly—and yet here they were, smiling. His friendship with Nagase had survived. What else mattered? In that sense, maybe it really *was* just “club stuff.”

And should that threat rear its ugly head once more, they would join forces to fight it, just as they always had.

“Earth to Taichi! Come in, Taichi! How can you possibly zone out when you’ve got two total babes right in front of you?! Wait, I get it... Other girls don’t catch your eye now that you’ve got your wifey Inaban, huh?”

“Wifey?! I shoulda known! Ol’ Yaegashi-kun’s gotta be head over heels for that cutie!”

“What’s that? You wanna bury yourself in a harem of cute girls?! Me too!” shouted Kiriyama Yui, fellow member of the Cultural Research Club. Why she felt the need to broadcast this was a mystery.

With her petite frame, long silky reddish-brown hair, and an eternal love of all things cute, Kiriyama was the paragon of a girly-girl... except she was also a veteran of girls’ full-contact karate.

“Nobody said that...” Taichi muttered.

“They didn’t? Dang... And here I thought I’d found someone who could understand me...”

“You know, sometimes I really worry about you, Kiriyama,” he commented. Normally she was fairly level-headed, but that all went out the window the second someone said the word *cute* within earshot.

There, Taichi and the girls each went their separate ways. As he headed over to meet up with the other guys, their newly minted sports rep Watase Shingo (soccer player, good-looking and popular) called out to him.

“Gimme a break, dude. You can’t even walk to my desk without talking to some girls first?”

“Quit showing off!” someone shouted.

“Trade me! Name your price!” someone else hollered.

“Okay, first things first,” called the girls’ representative, Kurihara Yukina. Tall and slender, she was close friends with Kiriyama. But despite what her bleached hair and thick makeup might otherwise suggest, she was no airhead; on the contrary, Kurihara was a good student who devoted a lot of her time and energy to the track team.

She raised her hand in the air to get everyone’s attention—including the boys, apparently. “Let’s make one thing clear: Are we trying to win this?”

“Hell yeah!” a few students shouted in unison, followed by murmurs of agreement.

“Why wouldn’t we? The winning team gets some sweet perks come Culture Festival time!” Nakayama exclaimed.

At Yamaboshi High School, the Sports Festival was a competitive school-wide event wherein each team consisted of one class chosen from each of the three grade levels, for a total of three classes per team. The winning team was then granted special privileges to be redeemed during the Culture Festival, such as the freedom to hold any exhibit, as well as first dibs on event space, and so on.

“Yeah! If we win this, it’ll make the Culture Festival ten times better!”

“I mean, if we gotta do it anyway, why not at least try?”

“It’ll be more fun for all of us if we try to win!”

“Alright, everyone, settle down. I can tell we’re all passionate about this,” Kurihara called, shushing the crowd.

“Come on, Yukina, you’re our *representative!* You’re supposed to be setting an example for the rest of us! You can’t just phone it in!” Kiriyama scoffed.

“Yes, yes, I know. For the record, *you’re* the whole reason I wanted to set the record straight about this.”

“Me? How come?”

But Kurihara ignored her and turned back to the others. “Alright ladies, if there’s one thing we can all agree on, it’s that we should enter the Goddess of War Kiriyama in every competition. So, that’s one slot filled.”

“Wha...?! Hold on a minute! You can’t just decide these things without asking me! And where did ‘Goddess of War’ come from?!”

But despite Kiriyama’s flailing, everyone else was already nodding—
“Whawha...?! Seriously, you guys, I can’t be in all of them! There’s a limit to how many solo competitions each person can enter! It’s against the rules!”

“Don’t worry. We’ll list you as ‘Masked Kiriyama 1’ and ‘Masked Kiriyama 2’ for some of them.”

“Oh, do you guys need a mask? If so, I can lend you the one I’ve got in my bookbag,” Taichi cut in. “It’s a replica from the shortest world champion in WWE history, Rey Mysterio, a San Diego native who—”

“You know that’s not allowed, Yukina! And Taichi, don’t like, go around telling people you bring masks to school! You’re weirding me out!”

Damn... I was hoping I could gush about him a little more...

“I guess we’ll put the Masked Kiriyama thing on the backburner for now...”

“Not ‘for now’! *Forever!*”

As Kiriyama’s little comedy routine with Kurihara came to a close, the guys and girls turned back to their separate discussions.

“Okay, guys... So the girls might already be doing this, but I think our plan should be to prioritize the jocks and enter them in competitions where they can net us some points. Then we’ll take the average guys like Yaegashi and use them to fill the gaps, and then the rest of you can kinda go wherever. Sound good?” Watase asked.

The others nodded, especially the jocks.

“Sounds good!”

“I’ll do the relay race!”

“Maybe I could do capture the flag...”

“Yeah, feel free to put me wherever you need me,” Taichi agreed.

“You guys don’t mind, right?” Watase asked the less athletically-gifted guys in the crowd.

“Oh, uh, sure.”

“Yeah.”

“It’s cool.”

“Alrighty! First, let’s start with the competition worth the most points: the infamous Yamaboshi High School co-ed cavalry battle...”

Once everyone had been assigned to at least one event, the students all returned to their desks, and Setouchi moved back behind the teacher’s lectern.

“Okay, everyone! Now it’s time to choose our representatives for the cheerleading competition.”

At Yamaboshi, the cheerleading competition was the centerpiece of the entire Sports Festival. It wasn’t just a performance—it was a huge opportunity to win points for one’s team. In recent years, students had generally put a lot of effort into the planning, with rehearsals starting a solid month before the big day. These rehearsals were then overseen and directed by a handful of guys and girls chosen as representatives for each grade level.

“...anddd Yaegashi. Alright, now we’ve got our three boys. As for the ladies, we’ve got Kiriyama, Nagase... Anyone else want to volunteer?”

This was where they hit a snag.

“You do it!”

“No way, I can’t direct the whole thing!”

“What about you, Nakayama-chan?”

“Mmm... I’m not the athletic type, y’know...”

“I’d be willing, but the rules don’t allow it since I’m already on the committee...” Kurihara mused.

“Same here, since I’m class president. Hmm... What do we do...?” Setouchi folded her arms in contemplation.

That was when the bell rang, rousing 2-B’s class advisor Gotou Ryuuzen from his slumber. He had summarily passed out at his desk after dumping all the responsibility on Setouchi.

“Wuh...? Ack, look at the time! Are we all set to go? Let’s—”

“No, sir, we’re not done.”

“Are you kidding me?! But it’s time to go home!”

“How is this a surprise to you?! If you want to go home so badly, then help me out! We need to decide on one more girl to join the representatives for the cheerleading competition!”

Gotou had served as Taichi’s class advisor back during his first year at Yamaboshi; he also supervised the Cultural Research Club. In both cases, he was often *stunningly* derelict. (At this point, it was a wonder he wasn’t fired for incompetence.) “Rrgh... Let’s see. Right now you’ve got Nagase and Kiriyama... Hmm, feels like you’re missing someone... Oh, I know! Fujishima! It’s gotta be Fujishima!”

“...What? Me?”

Fujishima Maiko looked up in surprise. While she had filled the role of president of Class 1-C last year, she had since been demoted to mere constituent of 2-B.

At the time, she was a brilliant leader who oozed charisma. Back then she would have almost certainly been a key figure in this discussion, but these days she tended to keep her head down.

“I... I can’t do that... Surely there’s someone better-suited to the role...”

The class fell silent. An awkward tension hung in the air as they all waited for someone else to say something. Then, finally, Nagase spoke up: “W-Well, uh... I support the idea, personally! I think it’d be fun! And with your talent, we’d win

no problem, y'know, since the majority of our class are athletes anyways!"

"Y-Yeah! I agree! We need you to do this, Fujishima-san! You're our only hope!" Watase chimed in.

From there, things began to snowball: "Oh man, we could actually win..."

"I think we've really got a chance!"

"Let's give it all we've got!"

"Yeah!"

"Awesome!"

Class 2-B had been fairly enthusiastic about the Sports Festival from the outset, but now the whole room was burning with the drive to win. Everyone was staring passionately at Fujishima.

"Oh... W-Well... In that case... I guess I'll do it..."

Instantly, the room exploded in applause. For a second Taichi worried they were pressuring her to concede against her will, but one look at her shy smile and he knew that wasn't the case.

"Heh... For the record, I didn't nominate Fujishima just because I'm lazy and she already proved herself to be hyper-competent last year. You see, as your teacher, it's my job to help students who have lost their self-confidence by giving them the chance to—"

"Quiet, you. Some of us have to get to club practice," Setouchi growled. Evidently her glare was still just as vicious as it was during her rebel days.

"Yes, ma'am. Shutting up now. Sorry, Setouchi-san."

"Alright, that's that settled! Nice work, everyone!"

And with that, homeroom came to an end.

Meanwhile, Fujishima's eyes widened in realization. "Wait... Did Nagase-san just interact with me of her own volition...? Does that mean she's ready to accept my love?! WOOHOO!"

"Wh... Where the heck did *that* come from?! L-Look, you've got the wrong idea, Fujishima-san! S-Stop! Don't lick your lips like that! Aaaaaaagh!"

□■□■□

School had ended for the day, and the five original members of the CRC—plus their two first-year newbies—were all sitting around the tables in Rec Hall Room 401.

“What?! Chee-hee and Shino-chan are gonna be on the same team as Inaban?!” Nagase exclaimed.

“Apparently,” answered Chihiro in a flat voice.

With his messy, asymmetrical hairstyle, pointed features, and reticent personality, Uwa Chihiro seemed at first glance like the average emo kid—but while his facial structure may not have been the most masculine, his body was well-toned from years of karate at the same dojo Kiriyama attended. And it was that connection with Kiriyama that first brought him to the CRC. Now here he sat, an official member of the club.

“C’mon, is that all you’ve got to say? Not even a ‘Whoa, that’s crazy’ or anything?! You’re so frigid!”

“It isn’t ‘crazy,’ though. There was always a chance our classes would end up on the same team.”

“Boooo... Chee-hee’s no fun. Right, Shino-chan?”

“Oh, yes, he’s rather dull. That said, it’s possible he was acting like a buzzkill *on purpose* in order to be the ‘combo breaker’ for comedic effect. In that sense, perhaps he was trying to play along after all. Doesn’t change the fact that he failed, of course.”

“Holy crap, Shino-chan! Talk about a sick burn!”

“O-Oh... Was it? Everyone keeps saying I’m ‘overly honest’ and ‘surprisingly harsh,’ so I was trying to be more considerate this time...”

“Sheesh! I guess those catty quips must come naturally to you!”

Enjouji Shino was the other new recruit. With her poofy chin-length hair and timid nature, she was reminiscent of a Pomeranian puppy—but nevertheless, she knew how to speak her mind.

Now that more than a month had passed, Taichi’s initial hesitation towards

the new members had faded, and he saw them as a natural addition to the club. Hopefully they felt the same way.

“Hell yeah! This is gonna be rad!” Aoki shouted, his wavy hair bouncing in time with the movements of his lanky frame. “Me, Inabacchan, Chihiro, and Shino-chan on Green Team, and Taichi, Yui, an’ Iori-chan on Red Team! It’ll be great to go head-to-head!”

“Well, we still have the other team to worry about, and the whole school is in on it, so it’s not like we’re directly competing with each other, per se,” Taichi corrected him.

“Hmmm...” Nagase glanced from Taichi to Chihiro and back.

“What?” Taichi asked.

“Oh, I was just thinking... You two are both so calm and rational all the time... Kinda feels like we’ve got two of the same guy.”

“What? I’m nothing like him!” Taichi insisted. All of a sudden, it felt like his position in the club was being threatened. “You agree with me, right, Kiriyama?”

“Oh, uh, yeah! You’ve got your good points, just like Chihiro has his... so yeah!”

“Look me in the eye when you say that! At least *pretend* you believe it! Are you trying to hurt my feelings?!”

“I wouldn’t say the two of us are that alike. For one thing, *I’m* not a natural-born player.”

“Are you trying to suggest that I *am?!* Because I’m NOT!”

“I’m really digging all this energy, Taichi! Keep it up and you’ll establish your own separate identity in no time!”

“Is that what you think I’m trying to do?! Is this my life now?!”

The thought of being seen as that desperate killed his motivation to try to be more energetic... but without it, they would see him as a dupe of Chihiro... He was well and truly caught between a rock and a hard place.

“That’s the spirit, guys! Both of you try to get into the game a little more! Woooo!” Aoki cheered.

Beside him, Kiriyama sighed. “I’m just glad there aren’t two Aokis. I can barely tolerate one of them as it is... You know what I mean, Shino-chan?”

“Oh, yes. That would be downright obnoxious.”

“You weren’t trying to be considerate at all just now, were you?! You’ll try for Chihiro, but not for me?!”

“Come to think of it, Inaban, why are you so quiet? You can hear us putting Taichi through the wringer over here, right?” Nagase asked one Inaba Himeko, who had seemingly fallen into thought.

Concealed beneath strands of jet-black hair, her somber expression was alluring enough to make Taichi’s heart skip a beat. Though she was the same age as he was, Inaba had a mature appeal—less “cute” and more “beautiful”—and as her boyfriend, it was something he had come to deeply appreciate about her.

“Yeah, but I don’t care what anyone else thinks. Taichi will always be number one in my heart.”

Though it wouldn’t be right for him to comment on the matter, seeing as he was her boyfriend and all, everyone else claimed that she was currently in some kind of lovesick puppy mode, which Nagase generally referred to as “Ina-bashful Syndrome.”

“Meanwhile, Inaban’s personality has changed completely! Love is powerful... or maybe we have Taichi to thank!”

“Who, me? That’s flattering... Hahaha...” Taichi laughed bashfully.

At this, Chihiro turned to Nagase. “Nagase-san, I demand that you withdraw your earlier statement. I am nowhere near as stupid as Taichi-san.”

“Wh... Stupid?! I’m not stupid!” *My grades are pretty good, just FYI!*

“I don’t know, Taichi-senpai. That response just now *was* pretty stupid.”

“You’re really vicious, you know that, Enjouji?!” Worst of all, he knew she was just being honest, so he couldn’t find it in him to hold it against her. Instead, he

turned to Inaba. “Alright, I’m starting to worry about you. You okay? Something got you down?”

“Well... umm...” Inaba shifted in her seat, awkwardly averting her gaze.

“You know you don’t have to hold anything back. Or if you’re not comfortable talking about it here, you can always message me later.”

“Thanks, Taichi.” She smiled softly, and he could feel just how much she trusted him.

“Hrrrk... I’m gonna barf!” Nagase joked, hunched over as she pretended to vomit.

“So, uh, anyway...” Inaba continued, still a little hesitant, “I guess this makes us rivals in the Sports Festival, huh?”

“Yeah, so?”

“What do you mean, ‘yeah, so?!’ How can you possibly bear to fight your beloved?!”

“I mean... It’s just the Sports Festival...”

“*Just* the Sports Festival?! Is that all our relationship amounts to?!”

While he appreciated just how protective she was of their relationship, her anxiety could be downright insufferable at times. (It was still really cute, though.) “Taichi-kun, wipe that pervy smile off your face and snap Inaban out of it!” Nagase cut in.

“HEY! My smile is not *pervy!*”

“Okay then... Horny?”

“It’s not horny, either! Our relationship is pure!”

“Yeah, right!” Nagase laughed.

Meanwhile, Taichi turned back to Inaba. “Look, don’t hold back on my account. We’ll compete fair and square, alright?”

“Are you sure...? If I go all-out, I could make the other teams’ star players mysteriously turn up absent on the big day...”

“Were you listening?! I said compete *fair and square!*”

He had a feeling he didn’t want to know how she planned to make them “turn up absent”...

“O-Okay, you have my word... Then I guess I won’t be holding back! Lest you forget, I’ve never been a big fan of losing, you know! I’ll crush my enemies! Go big or go home!”

At this point, it was starting to feel like Inaba had multiple personalities.

“Hell yeah! Inabacchan’s all fired up! Now we’re gonna win for sure!” Aoki cheered.

“Forgetting something, Aoki? We’ve got Goddess of War Kiriyama on our side!” Nagase retorted, her eyes sparkling at this challenge.

“Yeah! As long as I’m around, you guys are—Look, Iori, can you please just drop the ‘Goddess of War’ thing? It’s, like, totally not cute!”

“D-Don’t worry, Yui-senpai! You’ll always be cute to me!”

“Awwww! Thank you, Shino-chan! Nngh... How can I fight the Green Team if you’re on it...?”

“Heh heh heh... And so the naive little girl could not withstand the might of the great Shino...”

“Inaba, why are you talking like a narrator in a movie...?” Taichi retorted. *Why is everyone so hyped up about this?*

“Chee-hee, get in on this!” Nagase commanded. “Tell her she’s cute! You know she’s a sucker for a handsome face!”

“Excuse you! I am NOT a sucker for his face, thank you very much!”

“Nagase, why are you ganging up on Kiriyama? She’s on our team!”

“Oh crap!”

“Fine, fine, I’ll say it.” For some reason, even grumpy Chihiro decided to play along with them. “You’re really cute, Yui-san.”

“What the... Chihiro-kun?! Wh... It almost sounded like you meant it, you dummy! Stop screwing with me! God, my face is like on fire! You little punk...

You're pretty cute yourself! Tee-hee!" She swayed her shoulders, fidgeting bashfully.

This was the precise moment Aoki chose to shout: "Yui! You're looking adorable today, as usual!"

"Oh. Yeah, I know."

"That's it?! That's all I get?!"

"*You* say it to me all the time! I'm used to it by now!"

Chihiro glanced at Kiriyama, then sighed to himself. "These idiots, getting all worked up over some stupid Sports Festival..."

"Your enthusiasm could use some work, Chihiro!" Aoki scolded. "You're a representative for your class's cheerleading competition, aren'tcha?!"

"Yes, but only because I lost at rock-paper-scissors, as I explained to you before. I'm just not one of the lucky ones, sad to say... Uh, Taichi-san? Can I help you?"

"Don't worry, Chihiro. I'm pretty bad at rock-paper-scissors, too. Maybe we *are* alike after all."

"I don't need your sympathy for this. And get your hand off my shoulder."

Sheesh, you're no fun...

"Either way, as your fellow teammate, I think you oughta commit to it a little harder, Chihiro! Wait, I know... If you need a little more motivation, how about we all make a bet, as a club?" Aoki asked.

Instantly, Nagase took the bait. "Sounds fun! We're pretty evenly matched, after all! Alright, let's see... How about this? Whichever team scores more points earns the right to give an order to a person of their choice on the losing team. Just one order, though!"

"I'm in!" Kiriyama declared.

"D-Do we have to obey the order, no matter what...?" Enjouji asked nervously.

"You betcha!"

“Oh god, no... Then that means... if I screw this up... I could get sold off to a foreign country and never see Japan again...!”

“I think you’re overestimating the danger here,” Taichi retorted. *No human trafficking, please, for the love of god*.

“Don’t worry, Shino-chan! We just gotta win! And then we can order Taichi or Iori-chan or Yui to do whatever we want!” Aoki consoled her.

“Huh...? Y-You mean... I could make Taichi-senpai whisper in my ear... and have him say whatever I want...? ALRIGHT, LET’S DO THIS!”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa! You’ve only been with us a month, Enjouji! It’s way too early for you to have a personality meltdown!”

That said, it was possible there were still sides to her that the rest of them had yet to discover. Regardless, her... fondness... for voices (Taichi’s in particular) was certainly something.

This passion of hers proved to be infectious, because Inaba broke into a dreamy smile. “Then that means... Yes... At last, I’ll take Taichi *there...* and then we’ll... Eeeek! I’m too embarrassed to say any more!”

“Wowie, Inaban’s a naughty girl! Maybe we should start calling her Nympho-ban!”

“Nagase! Don’t talk about my girlfriend like that!”

Before they knew it, the time flew by. And though they’d spent it just sitting around, there was never a dull moment.

At one point, Taichi realized that Chihiro had gone quiet, staring at his hands. For a moment, he started to worry that he wasn’t having a good time—but when he glanced over, he found the boy biting back laughter. All at once, relief flooded Taichi’s chest. Evidently he was enjoying himself after all— But then Chihiro’s lip curled in a smirk.

Chapter 2: Temptation

Date: x/xx Weather: Sunny *Kinda not looking forward to the Sports Festival... because I know I'll just end up being dead weight.*

Today we had a big discussion about it during homeroom, and (un)fortunately(?), nobody in my class is really invested in it. Knowing this makes me feel better. And then I start to hate myself. I HATE that I feel so relieved. I need to be better.

Everybody was bored during the discussion, and I could tell that they were all low-key trying to weasel out of having to do anything challenging by dumping it on other people instead. It was so hard to watch...

I really wanted to volunteer, but I couldn't possibly raise my hand. Not with everyone else acting like THAT. I didn't have a choice. So instead I told myself I'd just wait for someone else to do it.

I looked around the room and waited. Waited for someone who wasn't me to raise their hand. But nobody did.

Meanwhile, it seems like our senpai are all WAY more invested in this than we are, and it kills me inside because I KNOW we're going to drag them down. There's just nothing I can do about everyone else in my class.

I wish I could do something. But I can't, so I guess that doesn't matter.

I'll try harder next time. I'll just wait for the right moment.

+++

The next day after school, the clubroom was lively as Yaegashi Taichi and the others entertained themselves with their own independent activities.

"Alright gang, let's call it a day!" club president Nagase Iori declared with a grin.

That day, the six of them (Inaba Himeko was unable to attend due to a prior engagement) had briefly discussed the upcoming issue of the Culture Bulletin. Now they were headed home.

One by one, each of them split off to go their own separate ways... and by the time the train arrived at Taichi's station, he was all alone.

Tucking his commuter pass back into his bookbag, he passed through the turnstiles. A pleasant breeze brushed his cheek, and he stretched lightly. He could smell something sweet—probably from the bakery in the station square—and his stomach rumbled, but he decided not to splurge today. He'd only just gotten his allowance money for this month, and he needed it to last. So instead Taichi headed to the bicycle parking rack.

Summer was just a month away, and the weather was getting warmer and warmer.

Ahead of him, he could see two high school students walking down the street, holding hands. He watched them for a moment, then pictured himself and Inaba in their place.

Ever since the two of them made it official, Taichi had started to pay closer attention to random couples on the street, observing them, comparing their relationship to his own, making note of things for future reference.

Next the girl curled her arm around the guy's bicep—the exact sort of thing Inaba liked to do. *Maybe I don't need to be so uptight about PDA stuff... but still, it's kinda cringey... and what if it makes someone uncomfortable? Not like we could do it in the clubroom, either... Not after everything we've gone through—especially with Nagase—* [———]

Somewhere in the distance—in the far recesses of his mind—he thought he heard a tiny, faint sound. A voice. In his head. But this was merely a blip of abnormality, and it was gone before he ever became conscious of it.

He felt someone behind him, so he turned... and there she stood. Nagase Iori.

"What the...? What are you doing here, Nagase?" Taichi asked, dumbfounded. She lived in a different town entirely, so she had broken away from the group fairly early on... or so he seemed to remember. Did she have some sort of errand to run around here? If so, she hadn't mentioned it... and yet, here she was.

"Just wanted to... talk to you about something. Are you free?"

The goddess of Yamaboshi was gazing up at him, batting her lashes.

“I mean... can’t it wait until tomorrow?”

...Did I just turn her down? Why would I do that? He wasn’t sure. All he knew was that his mouth was moving on autopilot before his brain could catch up. For some reason, he felt a strong, visceral discomfort... as though his animal instincts were telling him it wasn’t safe to be here.

“Why? Do you have somewhere you need to be?”

“Well, no... I don’t have plans or anything... Okay, sure.” *God, I’m so stupid. Nagase needs to talk to me—why would I turn her down for no reason? Obviously it’s gotta be important or else she would’ve just called or emailed! What is wrong with me?*

“Wanna grab a table at a diner or something?”

“No, that’s okay. Here’s fine.”

“Oh... Alright then.”

The breeze carried a hint of a summery scent as it rustled Nagase’s long, silky hair. Around them, the first trappings of dusk began to fall—a frighteningly perfect match for the despondent look on her face. Some of the passersby glanced back at her on their way to the turnstiles, as if they were captivated by the sight.

Her eyes fixated directly onto his, making him tremble down to his core.

“What if I told you... I’m still not over it?”

All at once, a hush fell over the train station, almost as though the two of them had been transported to a world all their own. Then the illusion faded, and Taichi snapped back to reality.

“Wh... Uhh... Not over *what*, exactly?” His voice shook—why? What was there to be afraid of?

“You. I’m not over *you*, Yaegashi Taichi.”

Why this? Why now?

Her lips curled into a dreamy, bewitching smile with the barest hint of

loneliness.

Meanwhile, Taichi reeled. This was all too sudden... or was it? He had already processed what she'd said, but for some reason, he didn't want to accept it. Why? Because... it was just too hard to believe.

"What are you... talking about?" Clinging to the faintest shred of hope, Taichi forced the words out of his throat.

But real life, as it turned out, was merciless.

"Taichi... I still love you."

I thought we made a clean break, but maybe not... No, of course not. After all, what romance was complete without complications?

And so that beautiful fiction came to an end... and harsh reality returned once more.

□■□■□

The next morning, Taichi arrived at school feeling unusually tense. After all, Nagase had confessed to still being in love with him, and now he was probably going to have to interact with her in class.

Yesterday, after she'd said her piece, she walked off without waiting for an answer... almost like a declaration of war.

—I'm not over you, Yaegashi Taichi. I still love you.

He'd thought all the loose ends were tied up, but apparently they weren't, and it came as such a shock that he failed to respond at all. He had so many questions... and absolutely no idea what to do about this. Mainly he wanted to know how this conversation had gone between Nagase and Inaba.

Though the two of them had both fallen in love with him around the same time, they didn't let anything or anyone get in the way of their friendship, not even Taichi himself. And if prior experience was anything to go by, Nagase must've already had the entire "I'm still in love with him" talk with Inaba before she ever floated it past him...

He looked over at Nagase's desk. Evidently she had yet to arrive— "G'day, mate!"

“Waaaagh?!”

Speak of the devil. Out of nowhere, he heard her voice directly behind him.

“Jeez! You okay, Taichi? You really let out a yelp there!”

“Oh, uh... It’s nothing... G-Good morning...”

“Oookay... What’s gotten into you today?”

“W-Well...” *Can you blame me, considering what you said to me yesterday?* But he couldn’t bring himself to finish the sentence. Now was not the time to bring it up again.

“Anyways, it’s really hot out today, am I right? I’m glad these summer uniforms are less bulky, but personally I’m tempted to take it another step further, if you catch my drift.” She grabbed the hem of her vest and flapped it against the short-sleeved blouse she wore beneath, ventilating herself. “It’s gettin’ hot in here... Hm hm hm hm hm hmmm...”

She was her usual sparkling self... to an *insane* degree. Almost like she’d completely forgotten what went down between them yesterday. But Taichi knew she could be an exceptional actress when she wanted to be, and he understood that was what she was doing now.

“*Bonjour*, Iori! Good morning! It’s a real scorcher out there, huh?! Morning, Yaegashi-kun!” called Nakayama Mariko as she walked over, her pigtails bouncing.

“*Bonjour*, Nakayama-chan! I’m sweating buckets already!” Nagase replied cheerfully.

“...Wait, what the? What’s the matter, Yaegashi-kun? You’re not giving me the cold shoulder, are ya, pal?”

“No, of course not. Good morning, Nakayama.”

“Hmmm... You seem kinda out of it, Yaegashi-kun. You’re gonna throw me off my game! Actually, on second thought, probably not. Oh, Yui-chan, good morning!”

“Oh, Yui’s here! Yui! Wait until I tell you about my day yesterday!”

And with that, the two girls dashed away, leaving Taichi behind. Only then did he realize he'd broken out in a cold sweat.

Once they were gone, Watase Shingo walked up, as if on cue. "Sup, Yaegashi. Look, dude, I've been thinking. You know how girls tend to flock to you for some reason? Maybe if I hang around you, I'll have more opportunities to talk to girls... specifically Fujishima-san. I mean, not that I have trouble talking to girls or anything, but when it comes to *her...* Wait, what's with that look? Bro, she's not gonna come talk to us if you're over here looking like a grump!"

Unfortunately, he lacked the composure to make one of his usual witty retorts.

What was Nagase thinking?

How did she expect him to react?

And what was he supposed to do with these feelings that by all accounts should have been dead and buried?

After school that day, the cheerleading representatives from each grade were scheduled to have their first rehearsal. And after summarily losing a round of rock-paper-scissors held between the six representatives of 2-B, Taichi was chosen to stand in for them at a prep meeting during lunch.

He hastily finished his food, then headed off to the meetup location.

On the way, he thought he heard a voice in the back of his mind— "Have you given any thought to what I said yesterday? Y'know, my feelings for you?"

Goosebumps shot up his arms. There she was, in a corridor in the North Wing. Once again, it was like she popped out of nowhere.

This part of the building was reserved for special purpose classrooms, and as such, hardly anyone would ever come here of their own volition, much less during lunch. Normally Nagase would be eating right about now. This was no coincidence—she had intentionally followed him to a more private part of the school in order to talk to him.

He took it all in: her symmetrical features, her summer uniform worn over her perfect figure, her stunning smile... Wait, what? What was there to smile about

right now?

“I’m... not sure what you want me to say, Nagase.”

“I’m not playing around with you here.”

Instantly her expression turned serious, captivating him. Something told him he could never escape her. Her flawless beauty felt like a threat.

“Look, Nagase, what’s gotten into you all of a sudden? This is just so random... I can’t understand...”

“Were you even paying attention, Taichi?”

What was *that* supposed to mean?

He had already messed this up once, and after that, he had vowed to see her for who she really was... Had he failed her again?

On that early June day, the air should have been sweltering... and yet he felt a chill.

“See, I’ve decided to put myself first for a change.” She smiled faintly.

Inaba’s face flashed through his mind. According to her, it was thanks to Nagase essentially giving her permission to pursue her desires that helped her change for the better. But now this? Hadn’t their precarious love triangle been sorted out already?

Was it all starting up again, or had they never really “stopped” in the first place? Would this just keep going and going and going—right up until they all broke apart?

“Look, uh... What did Inaba say about all this, exactly?”

“I haven’t said anything to her. I mean, not like I need to, right?”

Technically she was right, in the sense that this problem only affected the two of them... but that just wasn’t the sort of friendship she and Inaba had.

It felt like Nagase had gone back to that cold, distant, frightening version of herself... Granted, that side of her was always in there somewhere... It was simply a matter of whether or not she chose to let it show...

“Don’t worry. No one will find out unless we tell them. So just think about it,

okay? You and me, more than friends?”

More than friends... as in...

“What brought this on?”

“Nothing much. I just decided to stop holding myself back. From now on, I’m gonna get what I want.”

Holding herself back? Had he and Inaba been imposing that on her somehow?

“No... That’s not possible...”

Their romance was over. They had both agreed on this. Plus, she and Inaba had agreed to stay friends... and Inaba was his girlfriend now... so...

“In this world, everything is possible. Nothing is forbidden,” she whispered, her lips glistening seductively.

After school, when Nagase turned up at cheerleading rehearsal, she was back to her usual jovial, friendly self.

□■□■□

The next morning, Taichi encountered Nagase on his way to school. His heart skipped a beat and his body tensed, but he quickly recovered and jogged up beside her.

“Nagase, we need to have a little heart-to-heart, okay?”

These days, being alone with her made him feel eerily uncomfortable.

“Hmm? What’s up?” she asked in a chipper, perfectly innocent voice.

Already he could feel himself getting defensive. Was this the real her, or just another mask?

“It’s about what you said to me.” He knew he couldn’t run from this. Even if it meant he had to break her heart, he couldn’t put it off. He needed to reach out to her in good faith.

Chances were good something had pushed her to start acting this way, just like last time—which meant there was a high probability that something serious was going on.

“What I said to you? Uhhh... Could you be more specific?”

“You know, yesterday? And the day before that? All that... stuff you said?”

“Okay, I’m trying to think of any important conversations we’ve had recently... Uhhh...” She furrowed her brows in contemplation. If this was an act, it sure didn’t look like one—it was too convincing. Then again, this *was* Nagase Iori, after all. “Sorry, Taichi... I really can’t think of anything. Help me out here! Did I say something wrong?”

Her smile was a perfect celebrity smile, flawless and completely unreadable. He’d have to navigate this conversation without any hints. Was she testing him or something? In that case, he was just going to have to put it all on the table.

“You know, the thing where you... said you love me?”

Nagase stopped short, frozen in place. A moment passed.

“...Who said that?” she asked, her voice so icy it stung, and Taichi found he was frightened.

“You did...?”

“And I said that to...?”

“Me. Yaegashi Taichi.”

“Are you sure I didn’t mean it platonically?”

“Trust me, I’m sure.”

Her smile stiffened until it wasn’t really a smile anymore—just a gnashing of teeth. It was the most terrifying “smile” Taichi had ever seen.

“Look, Taichi... I’m really not that hung up on it. Not when I talk to you, not when you’re canoodling with Inaban, not ever.”

Her voice sounded cheerful, and yet somehow forced... almost mechanical.

She took a step toward him.

“Because we settled it, remember?”

Another step.

“So this thing you’re doing? Dredging it all back up again?”

She leaned forward until he could feel her breath in his face—until he could practically count her eyelashes.

"*Extremely fucking disrespectful*."

Her words dripped with sheer venom.

Taichi could only stand there as she turned and walked away.

As it turned out, his actions that morning had angered Nagase quite a bit. She had been giving him the cold shoulder all day.

From Taichi's perspective, this didn't feel very fair at all, considering she was the one who had started this whole mess to begin with.

But then, between classes...

"Hey, Taichi?"

He was walking down the hallway on the first floor when it happened. Once again, she popped up when he was alone. No hesitation, no bitterness, just business as usual. It made no sense. *Nagase Iori wasn't making any damn sense*.

"Listen—"

"Hold it, Nagase. You're really jerking me around here, you know that? First you play dumb with me, then you treat me like I don't even exist, and now everything's all hunky-dory again? Seriously, what's going on with you?"

He was so beyond confused. What was he supposed to believe at this point?

"Huh?" Her eyes widened. "Oh, uh, well..."

"I admit, maybe I could've handled things better on my end, and I apologize for offending you... but *you're* the one who 'dredged this up,' not me."

"I was just... worried that... someone would overhear us..." she mumbled feebly.

This wasn't the reaction he had anticipated, and it made him hesitate. He was starting to feel like he was being too harsh on her.

"Fair point, I guess. Not like we were the only people on the street."

“Right?” She grinned, suddenly back to her usual high spirits. Her mood swings were getting a little ridiculous. “So anyway... Whenever we’re around other people, just think of it as an act. I’ll only be the real me when we’re alone. I’ll say ‘This is the real deal,’ and that’s how you’ll know. That’ll be the signal,” she blurted out quickly, and Taichi couldn’t get a word in edgewise.

The Nagase he knew *despised* the idea of anyone thinking she was “just acting”—she had agonized over this very thing for months. Hence he never imagined she’d ever suggest it of her own accord... and yet here she was.

“Why save the ‘real you’ for only when you’re around me?”

“Because I realized you complete me, Taichi.” She smiled playfully, like she’d just let Taichi in on a special secret, and he found himself enchanted. It all started to feel real... There was just something about Nagase that made it hard to argue with her...

“So here’s what I’m thinking, Taichi.”

The sublime beauty drew her lips to his ear. She smelled so... *girly*. He couldn’t move a muscle.

“You don’t have to break up with Inaban. Just get with me.”

Her lips twitched, ever so faintly alluring, like the Forbidden Fruit.

“I don’t need to be your number one.”

Taichi hastily jumped back. “Nagase! We can’t—”

But she put her index finger to his lips, silencing him.

Just then, two first-year students walked by, staring at them curiously. Nagase waited until they were gone, then took out a pen and notepad and wrote him a hasty note: *Meet me at the park by the fountain at 5 PM.*

After school, Chihiro and Enjouji didn’t turn up at the clubroom, as they allegedly had some kind of class meeting. For the first time in a while, it was just the five of them again.

In the clubroom, Nagase was happy to chat with anyone *but* Taichi. As the others laughed, he sighed and lowered his gaze to his notebook, attempting to will himself to finish his math homework... but instead he drew a big, angry

scribble with his mechanical pencil, then quietly erased it.

“Look, Inaban, if you just...”

“Hey! Knock it off, dumbass! I mean it! Pfff... gahahahaha!”

Nagase was goofing off with Inaba without the slightest trace of guilt... It was actually downright eerie how *normal* she could be. Was this her way of saying “It’s our little secret”?

Over the past few days, she was an ever-changing kaleidoscope, and there was a stark contrast between all these different versions of herself. So stark, in fact, he was tempted to believe that one of them had to be an impostor... but of course, he knew that couldn’t be true. They were all the real her—he just couldn’t quite wrap his head around it.

She had professed to still be in love with him, and truth be told, he was having trouble comprehending it. What was her motive?

At one point, the two of them had been in love. Their feelings were reflected in each other so strongly, it was possible they would’ve ended up together, supposing it had happened at a more opportune time. Back then, their hearts were on the same wavelength... but in a twist of fate, their love had ended before it ever really began. The communication between them was *crystal clear* in this regard.

The romance between them was sweet and special. Maybe it was a little premature, but it was still *real*. Hence they’d wiped the slate clean rather than try to salvage it. But now Nagase was already prepared to try again? It must’ve taken a serious amount of introspection to get to that point.

So what about Taichi himself? Was he ready to try?

He’d confessed, she’d accepted it, but they didn’t make it official, so he’d confessed again, and that time she’d turned him down, and then when they’d finally established an understanding, they’d agreed they’d press the reset button on the whole thing. Now, months later, she claimed she still wasn’t over him.

But was he still the same person who fell for her?

“What’s the matter, Taichi?”

“...Huh?”

Inaba had long since stopped trying to act tough all the time, and now she peered at him with concern in her eyes. There was nothing quite as reassuring as seeing that candid expression of emotion painted atop the lush canvas of her natural beauty. Taichi felt a spark of warmth return to the icy wasteland of his heart.

“Oh, no, I’m fine.”

Things were different now. He was dating a girl named Inaba Himeko, and she was the love of his life.

“You sure? You seemed a little out of it on the phone last night.”

He could see himself in the reflection of her glistening eyes.

“I’m fine... I promise,” he replied, averting his gaze as though she might see right through him. His chest ached. He felt like he was betraying her.

That was when Nagase joined the conversation. “*Ooooh!* Inaban’s been talking to a *boy* on the *phooone!*” she teased.

“S-So what?! He’s my boyfriend, you know... For that matter, since when did I replace Taichi as your favorite punching bag, huh?!”

This stupid drama with Nagase had screwed him up so much, it was starting to make his beloved girlfriend worry about him.

God, I’m so pathetic.

He needed to settle this mess once and for all—and that meant he needed to meet with Nagase at the park like she’d asked him to. With that in mind, Taichi cut his time in the clubroom a bit short, claiming he had an errand to run. After all, if he waited for club activities to wrap up, he wouldn’t make it to the fountain by 5 PM, as specified on the note.

When he rose from his chair, Nagase didn’t react at all. Maybe she didn’t want to risk drawing suspicion by heading out at the same time.

“Where are you going? I’ll come with you,” Inaba offered, but he was forced

to turn her down. His chest ached when he saw the hurt in her eyes.

The park was a short walk from Yamaboshi school grounds in the opposite direction of his usual route home. It was a large, open space, but there was only one fountain, so they'd likely find each other without much difficulty.

Glancing at the sports teams still in the middle of practice, Taichi cut across the athletic field.

What was Nagase planning? What was she after? He couldn't plan any countermeasures until he figured that out... and his powerlessness infuriated him. He wasn't going to find the right answer on his own; he needed an unbiased perspective on the matter. *Man, I wish I could ask someone for advice about this*.

When stumbling alone only led to dead ends, sometimes the solution was to get a second opinion. But who could he possibly turn to?

Right then, the air crackled with energy.

"Hold it, Yaegashi-kun," a majestic voice called, seemingly from the very heavens above.

Taichi turned to find a girl standing there, practically radiating charisma, her glasses glittering with the light of hope, her hair pulled back and bangs pinned up, wearing the Yamaboshi uniform so perfectly she might as well have been a model on the school pamphlet. It was Fujishima Maiko, her pose so confident and bold, it was almost as though she had gone back to her halcyon days as class president.

"Fuji...shima...?" Her timing was so unbelievably perfect, Taichi could scarcely process it.

"You need my advice, don't you?"

It was so ridiculously too good to be true. A split-second ago he had half-jokingly wished she were around to lend him her wisdom, and now here she stood—as the glorious leader they all once knew, not the broken bird she had become. It felt like something out of a dream.

But Taichi didn't question it; he was ready to spill his guts. After all, if he

didn’t have this conversation now, there was no telling when he’d get another chance.

“Can you promise not to tell anyone?”

“Who do you think I am?”

There was no doubt about it. Fujishima was back to her old, dependable self again.

“Well, you already pretty much know the details of my love life, so I’ll just cut to the chase. Nagase, uh... She told me she still loves me... Don’t tell anyone, okay?!”

“Just go for it.”

Her response was so instantaneous, she didn’t even pause to think about it.

“...What?”

“I’m telling you, just do it.”

“Do... what, exactly?”

“What I’m saying is, just make her your side chick or whatever.”

He had turned to her for an answer, and yet... this wasn’t the answer he had hoped for. To actively *hope* for an answer like this would make him a monster.

“Look, uh... I know that’s probably how *you* would handle it, but...”

After all, he knew Fujishima was a proponent of “free love” and all that... but still, something about this wasn’t quite right. Even if this genuinely was her best solution, wouldn’t she have at least phrased it a little differently?

But in spite of his hesitation, Fujishima looked directly into his eyes and pressed on. “It’s the best option for everyone involved, which means it’s the right thing to do. This way, everyone wins.” She smiled warmly, compassionately, like the Holy Mother herself. “Trust me.”

There was a loud *creakkkk* as the forbidden gears in his head slowly began to turn.

Is this really the right thing to do?

When Taichi arrived at the specified fountain, the sun had begun to set. Nearby, an elderly woman was walking her dog, and some grade schoolers were riding their bikes together. All in all, it was an idyllic little scene... and yet he felt restless. A storm was raging inside his heart.

On his way here, he kept replaying everything Fujishima had said to him. For as long as he'd known her, she'd gone by so many stupid nicknames—Love Guru, Apostle of Love, Goddess of Love—and now here she was, telling him to cheat on his girlfriend. It was *obviously* the wrong answer... and yet, if Fujishima felt so confident about it...

No, no, no!

He shook the stupid idea from his mind. Nagase would be here any moment, and he needed to be ready.

A vision of her floated to the forefront of his mind: the memory of that terrifying temptation.

—You don't have to break up with Inaban. Just get with me.

—I don't need to be your number one.

The words lingered in his ears like viscous honey. He could practically feel her breath again, its scent dizzyingly sweet.

No! I could never! The whole idea is ridiculous! ...Isn't it?

No matter how strongly Fujishima encouraged him, no matter how much he respected and trusted her, something about what she said was off... No, it was more than that. He wasn't sure when it started, but lately, it felt like something was off about the *whole world*... and he most certainly didn't recall doing anything to provoke it— "What the heck...? What are you doing here, Taichi?"

Snapping back to reality with a start, Taichi looked around for the owner of the voice—because whoever it was, it sure wasn't Nagase.

Then he spotted her standing a short distance away. It was Kiriyama Yui.

"...Kiriyama?"

Not only that, but for some reason, Uwa Chihiro was with her.

“I was just on my way to the dojo when I saw Chihiro-kun running over here. I figured he must’ve forgotten about karate practice, so I went after him to remind him, and then he tried to pull a fast one on me, but I caught him, and... well, here we are!” Kiriyama cheerfully explained with a lighthearted shrug. Beside her, Chihiro grimaced awkwardly. “So anyway, what’re you up to? Meeting up with someone?”

“Y-Yeah... You could say that.”

But in the end, Nagase never showed up at the park that day.

Chapter 3: The Ultimate Game

Date: x/xx Weather: Rainy/Cloudy

Today, all the cheerleading representatives had to go to a meeting. The cheerleading reps from our class are all people who lost at rock-paper-scissors, so none of them were happy about it.

Just when I started to worry, sure enough, Inaba-senpai started yelling about how all the first-years are "unmotivated." She's so cute when she's gushing over Taichi-senpai, but at any other time, she's kinda scary...

So I thought maybe I could be the mediator. I didn't want her to get mad at me for acting like a know-it-all, so I summoned up all my courage and... made a tiny little suggestion! Pretty cool, right? Baby steps, but still, I think I deserve a pat on the back for that one.

Unfortunately, my suggestion was so tiny that it was completely ignored.

I put in the effort, but it looks like it still wasn't enough. I'm starting to lose my confidence... I guess all it really means is that there's someone better-suited to the task out there. I'd like to get to that point someday...

Oh yeah, and I noticed something. Is it just me, or are the second-years all acting kind of weird lately?

+++

After recording everything I could remember from our conversation into a text document, I close my laptop, get up from my desk, and leave my room.

As I cut across the living room to the kitchen, I can see a bunch of celebrities on TV, laughing like idiots as they play some stupid penalty game. In front of the TV sits my younger brother, laughing along with them.

In the kitchen, I grab a bottle of mineral water from the fridge and pour some into a glass.

"How's high school, Chihiro? Are you keeping up in class?" my mother asks me.

“Yeah. The coursework is so easy, it’s nothing.”

“That’s good... I figured you wouldn’t have too much trouble...” She hesitates.

Spit it out already, would you?

“Are you... having fun? I know you weren’t too happy having to settle for your second choice, but...”

Why do you always have to trail off like that? Normally this would piss me off, but these days I have bigger fish to fry.

“Sure, it’s fun.”

Trust me, I’m having a great time.

See, I’ve always been the skeptical type, so the first time I did it, I was scared it wouldn’t work. But when I went for it, the results were extraordinary—enough to erase my doubts entirely.

Thinking back, I suppose the whole thing was too intricate to be a scam.

When we first met, it asked me if I’d like to “make this stupid world a bit more entertaining.” At first I thought this was supposed to be some kind of creepy joke, but one look at it and I realized it was dead serious.

It told me it was merely borrowing the body it was in. Then it switched bodies with me in order to prove it was telling the truth... It was so unreal. Never in my wildest dreams did I think I’d one day get to experience a body-swap in real life.

I’ve met with it a few more times since then. It told me all about what it’s been doing to its current targets, then asked me about myself in exchange. Later it told me this was essentially its idea of an “interview process.”

After that little back-and-forth, I felt like I had a better grasp of my personal motivations. Then it told me I had “passed the test,” and I was given this power. In exchange, I was told to “make things more interesting between the five of them.” Piece of cake.

I’ve never felt more alive than when I’m using my power.

My choice to target Yaegashi Taichi first was a smart one, if I do say so myself. He’s such a sucker, he’d fall for anything, and sure enough, my plan went off

without a hitch. Thinking back, I'm lucky he decided to tell me everything he'd gone through over the past year. It helped me figure out exactly how to rattle him.

Thus, I think it's safe to say stage one of my plan was a success.

I did my homework, planned out a script, and he fell for it hook, line, and sinker. Not only that, but things are snowballing faster than I expected... It's a thrill to watch. Most importantly, though, I discovered that I can safely turn into people I don't personally know.

Looks like I'm on the right track.

Granted, if I so desired, I could do a lot worse—but that would be a total amateur move, so no thanks. I was chosen for a reason, wasn't I?

This is all part of my plan to ascend to the next level.

But since I'm running this operation, and I do technically owe them my gratitude for serving as my stepping stones... I think I'll show them just how fragile their precious connections really are. I'll show them that what they think is "true love" is really just an illusion.

So go ahead, peasants. Lose yourself in your teenage dreams. It's your life, after all. But you'll have to come back down to reality eventually. This world wasn't designed for people to spend their whole lives acting out a stupid fantasy. Trust me, I know. So I'm going to show you how the world works.

Honestly, I can't thank «Heartseed» enough.

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As per his new routine, Chihiro arrived at school fairly early in the morning. Then he wandered around campus, focusing on all the places where he was most likely to encounter his CRC *senpai*. Naturally, the second floor was most ideal considering all the second-year classrooms were up there, but he decided against it. As a first-year, he'd be seen as suspicious for loitering around there too much.

He knew he probably needed to spend more time ironing out an aggressive plan, but looking back, spontaneity was clearly working in his favor. Besides,

there was a limit to how much he could reasonably script out. Surely it couldn't hurt to leave some things up to chance.

Near the staff room, he caught sight of a familiar figure—Nagase Iori. With her long dark hair streaming behind her as she walked, it felt like a scene out of a movie, and he started to understand why people loved to gossip about her beauty. To the vermin on lower planes of existence, she likely represented the ideal girl.

When Chihiro asked «Heartseed» what this power was called, it told him it didn't have one... so he decided to call it "Phantom Projection." After all, in his view, he was "projecting" himself as a "phantom" of someone else. This power was all too easy to trigger—all he had to do was stand near his target and announce who he was going to appear as.

He closed in on her from behind. Nobody he knew was nearby, so he figured he could get away with it for a few minutes.

"[Nagase Iori's vision of Yaegashi Taichi]."

He said it just loud enough for only Nagase to hear... but he knew she wouldn't actually *hear* it. After all, it was more of a posthypnotic suggestion.

"Hey there, Nagase," said [Taichi].

"Huh?" Nagase turned around. "Oh, good morning, Taichi."

With the Projection in effect, she now saw him as Yaegashi Taichi—everything from his appearance to his voice to his body language. It was all automatically converted for him, no acting skills required. That said, the transformation wasn't physical; the power of Projection merely changed how his target's brain chose to interpret him. (Apparently it had something to do with brain waves, but before «Heartseed» could finish explaining the process, it suddenly changed its mind and told him to "just go with it" instead.) Because the Phantom Projection worked directly on the target's brain, however, everyone else in the vicinity would continue to see him as regular old Uwa Chihiro... which meant he needed to be careful where and when he used his power.

"Can we talk?"

He could hear his voice being converted into Yaegashi Taichi's after a slight

delay. Everything he carried on his person, even his cell phone, would be visually converted into something Taichi owned—a replication so flawless, no one would ever be able to tell he was an impostor unless another person showed up.

Unfortunately, Chihiro could only use the Phantom Projection against the five second-year students in the CRC. It was a limit placed on him by «Heartseed» itself.

"...Sure," Nagase replied after a moment of hesitation, probably because things were so awkward between her and Taichi at the moment... all as a result of Chihiro's clever plan.

"Do you have a crush on anyone?"

"Not this again..." Nagase scowled. "I mean... not that I'm opposed to talking about it or anything, you know? Obviously it's fine. It's just... This really isn't a great time to ask me about that stuff, and I feel like you're usually smart enough to take the hint."

"I want to know," [Taichi] said firmly. The conversion would match whatever emphasis Chihiro put into his words, so he (Taichi) must've sounded pretty insistent to Nagase just now.

"Like I said... I..."

As it turned out, Nagase Iori was particularly susceptible to peer pressure. Normally she was a reckless wild card, acting of her own free will... or so she seemed. But though she was generally assertive towards other people, for some reason she couldn't handle being on the receiving end of the same behavior. Most people hadn't realized this about her... but Chihiro had.

She fell silent.

Here in a public space, he couldn't risk Projecting for long periods of time.

"On second thought, forget I asked. I gotta go do something... See you later." And with that, [Taichi] walked off.

He saw Nagase start to say something, but he ignored it.

In order to cancel the Projection, he needed to convince his target that the

Projected individual had left their presence. So, once he rounded the corner down this hallway, he would disappear from Nagase's sight, and the Projection would then come to an end. Were he to walk back over to her after that, she would see him as Uwa Chihiro.

He turned the corner... and his mission was complete.

Love, friendship, love, friendship. Blah, blah, blah. Don't these people ever give it a rest?

□■□■□

During the break between second and third period, a fellow Green Team cheerleading representative from 2-D paid a visit to my class (1-B). Evidently there's going to be a rehearsal during lunch... and we're obligated to attend.

"This sucks..." Shimono mutters as he sits in front of me, leaning back onto my desk.

"You're in my way," I scowl, prodding Shimono's head until he sits back up.

With messy hair and plastic black-rimmed glasses, Shimono is (as far as I know) a fairly talented guy in sports, studies, and even fashion... but his utter lack of motivation keeps him scraping the bottom of the barrel.

"All this Sports Festival crap is sooo lame... I mean, at least we won't have class that day, but now we have to waste *weeks* rehearsing this cheerleading crap? It's stupid! No, that doesn't say it—it's *allll* the way stupid!"

"If you ask me, it can't be any stupider than you," I retort.

Just then, I hear someone behind me laugh... and turn to find Enjouji Shino standing there, her hands clapped over her mouth, "oops" written all over her face.

"What do you want?"

"N-Nothing!"

"Nothing, my ass."

"Urk..."

"Spit it out already."

She looks like she's ready to bolt. Then again, she's so small and poofy, maybe a stiff breeze would do the trick.

She stares shyly at the floor, her lip quivering. "Sorry, Chihiro-kun... I mean, Uwa-kun!"

Didn't you promise not to call me that in class? And don't think I didn't notice that giant pause!

Enjouji paused to clear her throat, then continued, "Anyway... I just thought what you said was... funny, you know..."

"I don't remember anything funny. Eavesdropping, were you?"

"No! I was just passing by! And trust me, you were funny!"

Not sure I get your sense of humor, but okay.

"What about me? Was I funny, Enjouji-san?" asked Shimono.

Ugh, don't go there.

"Y-Yeah... you know... your '*allllllll* the way stupid'..."

"See, Uwa? Unlike you, Enjouji-san sees me for the comedic genius that I am!"

"I think you misheard her, Shimono. Pretty sure all she said was 'you're all the way stupid.'"

"Wh... Me?! All stupid?! I beg to differ, good sir!" Shimono scoffs in a joking voice.

But all he receives in return is a forced laugh from Enjouji.

An awkward tension hangs in the air. The joke bombed, and there's no recovering it. Even Shimono looks uncomfortable.

I need to get rid of her, fast.

"Look, Enjouji, did you need something or what?"

"Oh! R-Right! I was on my way to return the notebook I borrowed from Tomomi-chan... So yeah, umm... Bye." With a dutiful bow of her head, she heads off to the front of the classroom.

Shimono watches her go with a playful grin. "She just called you *Chihiro-kun*.

You guys are an item, aren't you?"

What a stupid question... Standard fare with these types. Maybe there's an unwritten rule that says you have to ask that, and Shimono is just following the social code.

"No, we're not an *item*. Everyone in my club calls me by my first name, that's all."

"Really now..." Shimono fixes me with a skeptical smile, but doesn't press further.

He may be a rule-abiding drone, but he can take a hint, and that's why I tolerate him.

"Y'know, I think Enjouji-san would fare a lot better if she grew a backbone. She's super cute and all, but she feels less like girlfriend material and more like a pet."

"Oh, is that your fetish?"

"Hey, look at that! You actually made a joke for once!"

I wasn't joking. I was mocking you.

"Anyway, I gotta say..." Shimono scans around the classroom, and I follow suit. "Feels like the whole class is gender-segregated, you know what I mean?"

"Yeah," I mutter in agreement.

The other students are all busy occupying themselves during their break period, some by themselves, others in groups of two or three. But not a single one of those groups features people of the opposite sex interacting with one another.

"It's just break period, though. Isn't that kind of normal?" I ask.

"I dunno... I feel like it couldn't hurt to mix things up a little more... Oh, but we were just talking to Enjouji-san, weren't we? Maybe that could spark a revolution!"

"And you're going to lead the charge, is that it?"

"Nope."

“Then I guess it’s not happening, is it?”

“Well, what about you? You know her better than I do! You take the initiative, and if all goes well, I’ll follow your lead!”

“And if I crash and burn?”

“I’ll always remember you!”

“So you’re just going to watch me fail? Looks like it’s not happening, then.”

“Aww, c’mon! Just give it a try, Uwa! If you pull it off, I’ll be right there with you!”

Shimono’s lazy, but his blunt honesty wins points with me. Not like I’m some goody-goody myself, anyway.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see the classroom door slide open, and a tall guy walks in.

“Hey, Tada!” Shimono calls out. “Cheerleading rehearsal! After school! Today!”

“Dude, *what?!* Since when?!” Tada wails dramatically. With his medium-length bleached hair and jangly bracelets, it’s obvious he thinks he’s hot shit, but he’s actually a pretty cool guy once you get to know him. He strikes me as the leader type, but according to him, he prefers to “goof off in the background.”

“Seriously, bro, you’ll never guess what they told us just now.”

“You just told him...”

“Aww, thanks for the snarky quip, Uwa! Seriously though, why do they keep making us do this rehearsal crap?! Can’t we just wait until the week before...? Man, this is why I didn’t wanna do cheerleading...” Shimono grumbles like a middle-aged man at a bar.

“Cheer up, buddy! Now we’re brothers in arms!”

“Nooooo! I don’t want your unluck to get on me!”

The two of them laugh at their own little comedy routine. It’s so stupid, I find myself laughing with them.

“Oh yeah, so what shows did you guys watch last night? I’m guessing you saw —”

As Tada changes the subject, my attention wanes and wanders, and the conversation between him and Shimono fades into meaningless babble—inconsequential background noise that slowly drifts away, fated never to produce anything of substance. Meanwhile, they don’t realize I’ve tuned them out.

This is the stupidity of the world I’m in.

But fortunately, life’s gotten a bit more entertaining as of late.

□■□■□

A few days passed as Chihiro completed the “test drive” of his newfound power. At this point, he’d used it at least once on each of the second-years in the CRC.

At lunch, after he’d eaten, he went out behind the school building, hid behind a tree, and waited for his target to arrive. Sure enough, there he was: Aoki Yoshifumi. *Time to find out if he actually walks the talk*.

“[Aoki Yoshifumi’s current crush],” Chihiro declared, projecting his voice so Aoki could hear him despite the slight distance between them.

At this, Aoki turned... and broke into a derpy grin. “Hiya, Yui!” Evidently the Projection had succeeded.

Because the Phantom Projection used the target’s own perceptions to create its hallucinations, specific names weren’t required to trigger it. At the same time, however, this meant he couldn’t transform into anyone the target didn’t know personally, nor anyone the target strongly believed was gone forever, *i.e.* dead people. Also, he had been cautioned not to create a logical paradox in the target’s mind; apparently that would cause issues of some sort, though he wasn’t privy to the details.

Looks like he really does have a crush on Yui-san... Would’ve been funny if it was someone else.

“What’s up, girl? Why’d you wanna meet out here?”

Here they were, out in a deserted part of campus generally designated for confessions of love, and yet he showed no signs of nervousness. His tone was casual. Was he intentionally acting normal in order to help Yui feel at ease? Unthinkable. He wasn't that smart.

"Oh, um... well... you know..." Chihiro hesitated slightly. He knew the Projection would automatically convert his pitch and manner of speech to Yui's, and yet he couldn't help but worry that his deep, masculine voice would somehow leak through and blow his cover. At the same time, however, he'd look like a dumbass trying to hold a conversation in a falsetto voice.

Aoki gazed lovingly at [Yui], and Chihiro tried not to gag. On the off-chance anyone walked out here, they'd see two dudes making eyes at each other... *Enough! Focus!*

"I have a favor to ask." He was so hyper-conscious of his voice, it slipped up a few octaves.

"Sure thing! You need somethin', I'm your guy! Anytime, anywhere!"

It felt like Aoki was genuinely ready to do literally whatever he asked. His blind faith made Chihiro uncomfortable... but at the same time, he was curious to see just how far Aoki was willing to go.

"I can't really go into detail, but I need to ask something of you. I promise it's for a good reason... Can you help me?" [Yui] (Chihiro) asked in his normal tone of voice.

"Anything at all, you name it!"

"Okay... Could you stop talking to me for a while? Completely? Until I say otherwise? I swear, there's a really good reason for this—I just can't tell you what it is. So from now on, even if I try to talk to you, could you find a way to ignore me? Not blatantly, just casually."

"You want me to... ignore you?"

"Yeah."

Aoki stared blankly back. No surprise there, of course. It was a request that seemed pointless... probably because it *was* pointless.

“Obviously it’s not that I don’t want to talk to you ever again or something like that. There’s a reason for it, honest. And once it’s safe for you to talk to me again, I’ll invite you back here and tell you in person... so can you do this for me?”

Silence descended between them as Aoki fell into thought, staring at the ground. “Man, I dunno... This is me we’re talking about... It would take a lot of effort...” he muttered to himself.

Meanwhile, Chihiro was having second thoughts. It was a stupid request, any way you looked at it. No one would possibly agree to— “Okay, I’ll do it!”

Seriously? Chihiro retorted silently.

“I just need to pretend to ignore you, right? Piece of cake!”

“Huh? Oh, uh... yeah.”

“Real talk, I don’t get the point of this literally at all... but since you’ve asked, I promise I’ll make it happen, 100%! Kick back, relax, and leave it all to me!” Aoki thrust out his chest proudly, without a trace of his earlier hesitation.

It was overwhelming... in the most cringey way possible. What moron would agree to such a bizarrely unfathomable request? What utterly incomprehensible planet did he live on? *Sickening*.

Sometimes it felt like these people were living in a perfect world... but Chihiro didn’t want to be part of it. They were all far too disconnected from reality.

Then again, now that I have this power, I guess I don’t really need to join them anyway, do I?

After school, Chihiro raced to the clubroom ahead of the others. A few minutes later, Yui and Taichi walked in.

“Oh, hey, Chihiro-kun beat us here! That’s like a first!” Yui remarked cheerfully.

“So? What are you smirking about?”

“Oh, come on! You know I’m hoping you’ll totally fall in love with the CRC like I did!”

“At no point have I said I liked this club.”

“Yeah, well, your *actions* beg to differ, buddy!” Yui insisted, pointing her finger in his face. Her shapely brow arched even higher, further accentuating her already upturned eyes. Given her small stature, however, she wasn’t intimidating in the least. If anything, it was cute.

“So you’re just making assumptions about me?”

“Damn right I am!” she declared. *What a spoiled little princess.*

“You two really get along, huh?” Taichi mused.

“No we don’t!” Chihiro and Yui snapped at the same time, causing Chihiro to wince. Yui, on the other hand, didn’t seem to notice or care... and somehow that made him feel worse.

“Anyways... Today feels like it’s gonna be a good day, you know?” Yui commented.

“What are you talking about? It’s already almost over,” Taichi replied.

“I know that! I’m not stupid!” she shot back.

Yes, today’s shaping up to be an interesting day indeed, Chihiro agreed silently.

“What’s so funny, Chihiro-kun?”

“Huh?! Oh, uh, nothing,” he blurted out hastily, turning away to escape Yui’s pretty eyes gazing into his.

One by one, the other club members showed up... Then, finally, Aoki walked in.

“Sup, guys! Sup, Yu—mmmgghpphh?!” He let out a weird yelp as he clapped both hands over his mouth.

“You’re being creepy again,” Inaba remarked idly.

“At least try to act startled, Inabacchan! Don’t talk about it the way you talk about the weather!”

“Not sure *anyone’s* surprised anymore... Right, Shino-chan?” Nagase joked.

“Yeah, he’s always creepy.”

“I get it, okay?! I’m sorry!”

“Good grief... What’s your problem? Seriously...” Yui sighed.

Silence. No response.

Confused, Yui looked over in his direction. Meanwhile, he quietly took a seat on the other side of the table. An awkward tension hung in the air as everyone stared at Aoki.

“What was that about, anyway?” Taichi asked finally, breaking the silence, and Aoki could scarcely conceal his relief.

“Oh, well... I almost broke my promise out of sheer habit... but at least I stopped myself! Guess I need more practice!”

“What are you even talking about...?” Taichi retorted.

Just like that, the mood in the room went back to normal, and everyone launched into their own individual activities. Meanwhile, Chihiro stared at his hands, biting back a snicker until he could bear it no longer.

“Pff...”

Afraid the others would notice, he tried desperately to wipe the smirk off his face, but he couldn’t. It was just too funny. He’d only suggested it to Aoki on a whim, and yet here he was, all too eager to comply. Oh, the hilarity of sheer idiocy.

Not only that, but to think Chihiro himself had made this happen of his own volition... What a thrill. With this, he would never again feel inferior to another human being.

“Chihiro-kun...?”

Startled, he snapped back to reality and turned in the direction of the voice. It was Enjouji.

“Wh-What?”

“Oh... um... I saw you shaking and staring down at the floor... so I got kinda worried...”

Meanwhile, Taichi was mediating a squabble between Nagase and Inaba.

“Oh, that... It’s nothing.”

“...Okay...” Enjouji nodded slowly, but didn’t entirely seem to accept this, as she continued to glance at him out of the corner of her eye.

A chill ran down his spine. Surely there was no way anyone could possibly discover his secret.

But then Yui turned in Aoki’s direction, and Chihiro pricked up his ears. Nagase had dragged Enjouji into the scuffle between herself, Taichi, and Inaba, which meant no one else was paying attention to Yui and Aoki except him.

“Hey, Aoki? About that thing in gym class earlier today...”

There was a pause... one that steadily grew into an extended silence as Aoki failed to respond.

“Um, Aoki—”

“Be right back, folks! Gotta take a leak!” Aoki announced as he jumped to his feet and hurried out of the clubroom.

“Aoki...?” Yui moved to reach out for him like an abandoned child begging for its mother—but stopped herself. Between the long strands of glistening coppery-brown hair, Chihiro could see her wounded, mournful expression.

Why did she look like she was on the verge of tears?

At the dojo, she would always, *always* complain about him. Constantly. *Aoki this, Aoki that. I can’t stand Aoki. Aoki’s so obnoxious.* She talked about him so much, it was a wonder she didn’t bore herself to tears.

In the end, I guess she— Well... not that it’s any of my business.

□■□■□

Near the end of club activities, I tell everyone that my mom wants me home early for the next couple weeks, then leave campus ahead of them. I take the train to Inaba Himeko’s station, then wait to ambush her just past the turnstiles.

Once I catch sight of her, I wait until no one else is within earshot, then announce: “[Inaba Himeko’s favorite person in the world].”

“Huh? Taichi?” Inaba accepts me as [Yaegashi Taichi] without a second’s delay. “What are you doing here? I thought you went home... D-Did you miss me or something...?” She promptly draws her own conclusion and begins to swoon.

Yui’s always raving about how smart Inaba is, but personally, I can’t begin to fathom why. Randomly, I wonder to myself just how far she and Taichi have gone.

“Say, Taichi, since you’re here, why don’t you come over and—”

“Let’s break up.”

All told, I was planning to ease into it a little more slowly, but when I saw the joy on her face, it made me want to crush her in one strike. I want to hurt her.

“...What?” Inaba freezes, her smile growing stiff.

At once, Yui’s mournful face floats to the forefront of my mind. Why? Yui has nothing to do with this. All of my Phantom Projection plans are going perfectly, so by all accounts I should be proud of myself... and yet for some reason I’m weirdly frustrated.

As [Taichi], I imagine myself extracting all his worst traits and distilling them down into a monster... and then I *skewer* her.

“You’re obnoxious, and frankly I’m sick of you.”

“...What?”

She gets a look on her face like the world is ending, and that’s when it hits me: with this power, *I can make the world end for someone, and that makes me a god*. So why am I letting myself get riled up by lesser humans? I have bigger fish to fry. I need to aim higher.

“Just kidding,” I tell her.

“Wh... That was... a joke...?”

“Yeah, of course. Tai—I would never say something like that. Forget I said it, alright? And please don’t bring it up tomorrow.”

“Oh... okay... right... yeah...” Inaba murmurs to herself, her expression a

conflicted mix of relief and pain.

“That’s a promise, okay? Anyway, I gotta go.”

“Huh? Oh, right... S-See you tomorrow!”

And with that, I disappear from sight, all without once looking back.

Turns out your perfect, unbreakable bonds can start to crack with just a single word. Human connections are fragile; they never last. So why cling to them? It’s stupid. You’re all stupid. Especially *her*.

I always believed this world was worthless. Everywhere you look, all you see are sheeple, gripped by preconceived notions, with pointless rules railroading them along... and I had long since resigned myself to the same fate.

But now I’ve been chosen. Now I have power. And now I know the truth: This world is the ultimate game.

Wouldn’t you agree?

Chapter 4: No Going Back

Date: x/xx Weather: Sunny

Something's not right. I'm convinced there's something going on with my senpai, but when I try to pinpoint exactly what it is, I come up empty-handed. So what do I do?

I thought to myself, if there's any way I can help, then I'm all for it. I don't want things to get all weird, you know? So I summoned up all my courage and decided to ask. For once, I wanted to pull my weight.

But once again, I failed.

It's okay. I get it. I'm not strong enough to accomplish anything on my own.

No, no, no! Let's not be too pessimistic! There's always next time!

Still, in the end, it seems all I can do is stand on the sidelines and watch. Ugh...

That reminds me. I feel like Chihiro-kun's been acting a little different lately, too. He seems more powerful? Confident?

Almost like he... met someone.

+++

The Uwa family is pretty ordinary, if I do say so myself. There's four of us: my mother, my father, my little brother, and me.

We live in a condo my parents purchased with a 25-year loan. My father has a stable, full-time job, and he earns a reasonably decent salary. We're not exactly rich, but we have enough to cover living expenses and mortgage payments... assuming he doesn't get fired, of course. In other words, we're no different from the average middle-class family.

In the morning, the men of the household sit around the table, eating our breakfast of toast and salad, while my mother prepares boxed lunches for my brother and me to take with us to school.

I butter my toast and take a bite. For the most part, we eat in silence. My father sips his coffee while he reads the newspaper. As for my brother, he

chews absently with a groggy look on his face that tells me he stayed up too late playing video games or texting his friends.

In the background, the TV drones on in vain.

It's a familiar routine I've experienced dozens... no, *hundreds* of times.

My father gets up to go get dressed for work—at the same company that hired him fresh out of college. And when I graduate college, the same thing will probably happen to me. I'm on track to follow in my father's footsteps... the same path a majority of people on this Earth tread. I never particularly took issue with this, of course. It's perfectly normal, and looking at wealth distribution in Japan, one can safely say it's a life of privilege. So what's there to complain about?

The grass always looks greener on the other side. I know that. Even if I wanted to cross the fence, I can't. So I don't bother hoping for it, and I don't feel jealous towards anyone already there. Some people are born destined for greatness, and others simply aren't; that much is predetermined from birth. Whether it's talent or connections or money that gets them there, these are all things they've possessed right from the outset.

There is a critical difference between the haves and the have-nots, and that's a fact, plain and simple.

Take Kiriyama Yui, for example. At the karate dojo, she was on an entirely different level from everyone else. But once practice was over, she'd be all smiles and energy—openly loving life. Our training was never easy, but *she* didn't need to put in effort like all the other worthless worms struggling to keep up. With her talent doing the heavy lifting, she was able to achieve greatness *and* still enjoy everything else life had to offer. Plus, she was good-looking and popular with men. She was perfect in every way.

I knew I could never beat her, so why try? She was in a different realm compared to me. So instead I simply watched her from a distance. Maybe we seemed like good friends on the outside, but in reality, there was a massive gulf between us.

Then one day, out of the blue, she suddenly stopped attending karate practice... and because we went to different schools, I lost contact with her

entirely. Years went by, and once again out of the blue, she suddenly came back, and I ended up enrolling at the same high school as her.

Fate works in mysterious ways, I guess.

That said, she'd been out of the game for a few years, and I heard rumors that she'd lost her spark, so I figured she must've burnt out... but no. There she was, shining brighter than ever, like she'd never even left. It wasn't fair.

In this world, the outcome of your life is determined almost entirely by the things you're born with. Now, I'm not saying that's a bad thing, or that I want to change it. It's just an observation, and it's the reason I don't try to overextend myself. I'm not like the idiots who make a mockery of themselves chasing after ridiculous grandiose delusions. I choose to walk the proper path.

Or so I'd thought, anyway.

"Alright, I'm taking off," my father says in the direction of the kitchen as he heads for the door.

"Okay! Have a nice day!" my mother replies.

My brother silently leaves the table and heads for the bathroom, probably to style his hair. His plate is clean, save for the tomatoes from the salad. This, too, is a common occurrence. You'd think my mother would wisen up and stop serving them to him, considering she *knows* he won't eat them.

Another morning, same as always... except for one major detail.

Thanks to «Heartseed», I see the world in a whole new light. I've changed. And now, looking back, I can finally admit it: while I talked a big game about accepting my station in life, the truth is, I always secretly held out hope that something special would happen to *me*, too.

I'm different from the sheeple. I have more value than they do. I'm *worthy*.

This is everything I've ever wanted.

□■□■□

"Did you know some classes are already practicing for the Sports Festival?" Shimono mentioned on their way back to Classroom 1-B.

“Seriously? Nobody in our grade, though, right?” Chihiro replied. *Why is everyone at this school such a tryhard?*

“No, there’s some first-years doing it, too. Apparently they saw the older students doing it and wanted to join in.”

“You’ve gotta be—”

“You’ve gotta be *yankin’ my chain!*” Tada cut in loudly, slinging an arm around Chihiro’s shoulder. “Like, bro, I get that people are excited, but practicing? Yikes! It’s obvious we’re just gonna lose, but lately it’s like they’re breathing down our necks—”

“As are you. Now get off,” Chihiro growled as he forced Tada’s arm away.

Then Shimono pointed through the window to the athletic field. “Yo, look at that!” Outside, seven or eight students were running a practice relay race in their uniforms, complete with baton passing. “Man, we still have three whole weeks to go! Ain’t it a little early to put that much effort in?”

“Yeahhh... If it were two or three days away, then maybe it would make sense, but...” Chihiro muttered, nodding.

“Dude, you know our class wouldn’t even practice the day before,” Tada pointed out.

“Sure we would... maybe...! There’s at least a tiny chance... Okay, no, you’re right,” Shimono relented.

“That’s what I thought!”

Shimono and Tada burst out laughing... and for the briefest of moments, it felt like they were forcing it.

But aside from that, Chihiro noticed Enjouji Shino staring absently out at the athletic field, clutching her textbook and notebook in her arms, her poofy brown hair windblown and messy.

Entirely on a whim, Chihiro lagged behind Tada and Shimono, then came to a stop next to her. But the guys didn’t seem to notice, and so they kept on walking down the hallway.

“What are you looking at, Enjouji?”

“O-Oh! It’s Chi... hi... I mean, no! Uwa-kun!”

“Don’t drag my name out like that, alright? Unless you’re *trying* to call me Chee-hee.”

Please tell me she doesn’t secretly call me that behind my back...

“S-Sorry... um... It’s just... a habit...”

She hung her head, fidgeting, and Chihiro let out a sigh. “Forget it. If you can’t keep it straight, then just call me Chihiro-kun all the time.”

“I know... I’m sorry. I promise, from now on I’ll be really, really careful not to mess it up again. I’ll take a deep breath to prepare myself, and then when I’m ready, I’ll say—Wait, you’re okay with Chihiro-kun?!”

“...Are you screwing with me on purpose?”

This little routine felt familiar. *Is this a running gag with us now?*

“S-Sorry... It’s not on purpose... So anyway, uh... umm... Oh, right! You wanted to know what I was looking at...”

“At least you remember my question, I guess.” She wasn’t stupid—just slow.

“The answer is... that.” Enjouji turned back to the athletic field. “See? There’s Iori-senpai and Taichi-senp—Whoa!” As she tried to point, she accidentally dropped her notebook and pencil case.

I take it back. She’s a dumbass.

Chihiro looked out at the field. Sure enough, Nagase Iori and Yaegashi Taichi were part of the four-guy, four-girl relay race team. Currently they were standing in a group and talking. Nagase was holding the baton.

At that point someone must’ve made a joke, because the whole group burst out laughing—some of them doubled over, while others leaned back. The conversation itself was inaudible, but their laughter was loud and clear.

Chihiro’s chest tightened.

“I guess they’re all from Class 2-B, then,” he muttered. Not like it mattered.

“Incredible, isn’t it?” Enjouji whispered.

“...Incredible how?”

“Good question.” She tilted her head and smiled vaguely. Her expression felt fake—like she was low-key telling him to use his own brain to figure it out—and that angered him a fair bit.

“Doesn’t it seem kinda nice?”

“What part of it?”

“G-Gosh... Good question!”

Okay, this time I know for sure you don’t have an answer. You’re so blatantly awkward.

Chihiro looked back at the field. Nagase was standing with her arm outstretched, apparently modeling proper form for the others. Taichi must’ve said something stupid, because a tall girl turned and gave him a light shove.

“Um... Chi—hiro-kun?” She was so nervous, she seemed to choke on her own spit partway through.

“What?”

“Oh, um... I was just thinking... maybe you’d know the answer... See, umm...”

He glared down at her. If she thought they were buddies or something, she had another thing coming.

“Oh... um... N-Never mind...” She wilted, pursing her lips together. Her eyebrows drooped sadly and her eyes were tinged with defeat. And for whatever reason, it *really* pissed him off.

Why in god’s name did he stop to talk to her in the first place? What did he stand to gain from it? What was the point? And for that matter, what was the point in watching Taichi and the others?

They were out there. Enjouji, Tada, and Shimono were all in here. But Chihiro—he didn’t fit in with either side. After all, he was beyond them.

He walked off, cutting through the courtyard to get back to Classroom 1-B as quickly as possible.

“Wh... W-Wait, Chihiro-kun!”

He didn’t respond. He wasn’t planning on stopping, either. But then he caught sight of Kiriyama Yui and Aoki Yoshifumi standing alone together a short distance away.

By the looks of it, they hadn’t noticed him yet. Slowing his pace, he pricked up his ears. Neither of them were facing in his direction, so as long as they didn’t glance away from each other, they’d never see him.

“You broke your promise yesterday,” Yui growled angrily.

“Huh? What promise?”

The area was relatively deserted, so Chihiro could hear their conversation without much trouble.

“Don’t play dumb with me, you jerk! God... Forget it.” And with that, Yui turned to walk away.

“Hang on a minute! I don’t follow you at all!” Aoki shouted after her... but she ignored him, so he continued. “What about you? You’re the one who made that one weird demand... I mean, I’m glad it’s over now, but still...”

“What *weird demand?* What are you even talking ab...”

That was when she noticed Chihiro watching them. Their eyes met. He inclined his head politely. Then Aoki noticed him, too.

Yui gave Chihiro a stiff, awkward wave, and hurried away. With a sheepish grin on his face, Aoki waved at him too, then walked off in a different direction.

Unbeknownst to him, his actions had created a ripple effect. The knowledge filled him with a strange mix of fear and excitement. He was experiencing his new world *firsthand*.

“Hey, Chihiro-kun?”

All at once, the voice seized his heart, freezing it solid. He knew it was just Enjouji, and yet somehow her tone was so clear and confident, it felt like she secretly knew everything and was about to read him a list of all of his misdeeds.

He steeled himself, then turned to face her.

“Don’t you think our senpai are acting kind of... *strange* lately?” She peered

into his eyes like she was searching for something.

“How so?”

“They’re just sort of... awkward with each other...”

“I dunno... Yeah, I guess they might be. Maybe the stress of the Sports Festival is getting to them or something.”

“I don’t know... It doesn’t seem that way to me... So, umm, I was wondering...”

She hung her head so low, Chihiro could see her scalp. Her indecision was really starting to make him lose his patience. But just as he was about to walk off, she suddenly looked up, and their eyes met.

Her gaze shone like a beacon, burning with determination.

“This is just a hypothesis, but—”

Suddenly, alarm bells went off in his head. Something told him he couldn’t let her finish that sentence.

“What are you trying to achieve, exactly?” he asked, turning the point of the conversation back on her in the nick of time.

“Huh? Trying to... achieve...?” For some reason, she froze like a deer in headlights.

Now’s my chance to throw her off the scent.

“You heard me. What are you trying to do here?”

“I... umm... I...”

The flames in her eyes flickered out until only empty darkness remained—almost like her spirit was physically fading from existence—and it was clear he had nothing left to worry about.

“I’m going back to class.”

“...Okay...”

This time she didn’t try to follow him.

□■□■□

In bed, I contemplate my next steps.

In exchange for the power of Phantom Projection, I agreed to “make things more interesting” between my five senpai—a condition so vague, I had no idea what «Heartseed» was expecting. When I asked it for clarification, it implied it took great enjoyment in seeing the rollercoaster of emotions between the five of them... It didn’t state this outright, however, so I can’t be certain. (All it told me explicitly was to “make my own interpretations,” whatever that means.) To me, the simplest and most effective way to induce a drastic change of emotion would be to destroy the seemingly unshakable bonds between them. When «Heartseed» turned up to “check on my progress,” it seemed reasonably happy with this proposal, so clearly I must be on the right track.

Destroying the perfect pentagon of the Cultural Research Club. Shattering their friendships. Collapse. Breakdown. Every now and then I start having second thoughts, and deep down I ask myself if I’m really doing the right thing... but ultimately, I already know the answer: I don’t have a choice.

«Heartseed» promised me that if I can entertain it to a satisfactory degree, it’ll let me use my Phantom Projection on people outside of the CRC quintet, too. Just think of all the things I could accomplish then...

My body shivers with impure desires.

I’m not addicted. I’m in full control. I’m not a sheep like the rest of them—I’m going to leave them in the dust. I’m destined for greater heights. I have to get there, and to do so, I need a stepping stone.

Besides, it was all going to come to an end in a couple years anyway. Surely it can’t hurt to expedite the process! Really, I’m just opening their eyes.

I’m doing the right thing.

At school the next day, I wait until Inaba’s alone.

“[Inaba Himeko’s vision of... whoever she’s most willing to take orders from].”

“Oh, hey, Taichi.”

Apparently Yaegashi Taichi meets this condition. How very boring and predictable.

She walks over with a smile... but there's a lingering shadow of hesitation in her eyes, probably as a result of all the shit I've done to her.

"Say, Inaba-san, how about we go somewhere the two of us can be alone?" [Taichi] says.

"A-Alone...? Wait... Right now?" She blushes and looks away.

In public Inaba acts so lovey-dovey you'd think she was doing it on purpose; alone, she transforms into a shy, innocent girl no different from any other. Looking at her from a rational perspective, it's completely cringeworthy, but maybe if I was into her it'd be another story.

"Yes, right now."

After a moment of hesitation, she nods.

As [Taichi], I bring her to the Rec Hall and step into an empty room—well, mostly empty. It's about half the size of the CRC clubroom, furnished with weathered old desks, chairs, and a couple of bookcases. Fortunately for me, I know for a fact no one comes here... and that the door can be locked from the inside.

"I didn't even know this place was here," Inaba muses aloud, and I observe her from behind. Clad in black knee-high socks, a skirt, and a long-sleeved white blouse, her slender body looks strangely seductive.

I follow her into the room and quietly lock the door behind us.

"So, why'd you bring me all the way—"

"Inaba-san, can I ask you to strip for me?" [Taichi] interrupts her.

She stares blankly as she struggles to process what I just said. Then her face flushes beet red.

"Wh... You... D-D-Don't tell me you want to have our first time *here*...!" Glancing around nervously, she puts up both hands in a *slow down* gesture. "Just... hold on a sec. Is this that 'blue balls' thing? I've seen it from time to time in hentai manga..."

Apparently their relationship is every bit as "pure" as they claim... and apparently Inaba reads hentai manga. Wasn't expecting that one.

“I want to see all of you.” As I attempt to put feeling into this line, my voice inadvertently imitates Taichi’s, even though I know I don’t need to bother.

“But this is all so sudden... I... W-Well... Y-You just want to look, right?! Okay... but we’re not going any further, got it?! I’d rather we have our first time somewhere else!”

Good god, she’s so *easy*.

“That said... I can certainly understand the appeal of a more kinky setup...”

Chill out, would you? No one said anything about having sex.

“I won’t ask you to do anything more than strip.”

“O-Okay, well... I’m not exactly sure how far you want me to go...”

“Just to your underwear for starters,” [Taichi] replies. I figure she won’t want to get totally naked right out of the gate.

“M-My underwear?! You want to see me in my *bra and panties?!*”

“Hhh... Yeah.” I hastily bite back a laugh. The way she said “bra and panties?!” is too funny.

“W-Well... I guess that’s not so bad... Pretty much the same thing as wearing a bikini, when you think about it... O-Okay, I’ll do it. C-Could you turn the other way?”

“S-Sure thing.”

At this point, *I* start to get nervous. If someone tries to open the door right now, we’re in deep shit. Behind me, I can hear the rustle of clothes. Is she done yet?

“Oh, um... Did you want me to leave my socks on?”

“Pffff?!” Caught off-guard, I choke on my own spit. “Uhh... Yeah, sure.” Oh god, I agreed to it? I swear, this is *not* what I’m into.

“Good grief... First you order me to take off my clothes, then you tell me to leave my socks on... and we’re at school, too! You kinky little horndog... Any other girl would run for the hills.”

The stupidity of this statement brings me back to my senses. “Uhh... Yeah, I

know. We're the perfect pair," [Taichi] says offhandedly, though I'm sure the power of the Projection will convert it into something suitably sappy.

Then the rustle of clothing stops.

"O-Okay... I'm ready," she whispers, her voice trembling nervously.

I swallow hard. My whole body feels hot. Why am I getting so tense? It's just a prank. I'm not like those other peasants. I'm not going to lose my head to lust like some kind of animal.

I turn... and inhale sharply.



Standing here in this dusty, stuffy, old unused clubroom is a slim, dark-haired high school girl... wearing nothing but a black bra, black panties, and black knee-high socks... for my eyes only. At my request, 80% of her skin is now on display... an ordinary sight made surreal by taking place on campus, in a closed space.

All that enters the room is the stream of sunshine filtering in through the windows. Other than that, it's just me and her—no one else. A secret space... a secret moment... equal parts sinful and beautiful and sweet.

Folding her arms behind her back, Inaba blushes and hangs her head, and I almost lose control... almost.

"Wh... What do you think?"

"You're beautiful," says [Taichi], and I actually sort of mean it.

A weird moment passes. Just a guy and a girl in her undies, staring at each other. It speaks to the abnormal relationship between her and Taichi—or maybe all couples are like this, who knows.

"C-Can I put my clothes back on...?" She wraps her arms protectively around her chest.

"Not yet."

"Wh...?! Are you gonna make me take off something else?! What's next, my socks?!"

Pipe down for a second, would you?

It's time for stage two of my plan.

"I want to take some pictures." I take out my cell phone and hold it up in her direction.

"P-Pictures...?"

After all the shit [Taichi] has done to her thus far, this is the first time I can actually see genuine fear in her eyes. At last, I've pushed her down into the ultimate despair... bestowed unto her by her favorite person in the whole world.

“Th-That might be taking things a step too far...”

She grabs her blouse off the desk and backs away. She must *really* not want to... and that’s precisely why I’m going to make her do it.

A scumbag sentiment spills out of [Taichi]’s mouth.

“You really won’t let me? You’re going to tell me no? I thought you loved me... Was I wrong about us?”

The despair deepens in her eyes as her whole body begins to tremble in fear, goosebumps prickling up her arms.

Meanwhile, I just stand there and watch.

After a long moment, Inaba reluctantly drops her blouse. “Fine...” She lowers her arms to her sides and hangs her head.

“Thank you.”

Right now, I am in full control of her.

I press the shutter button. *Click*. The flash of light makes her squint. No longer does her bare form strike me as seductive. Now it’s forbidden fruit, goading my lust.

Click. Can my cell phone camera truly capture the misery she exudes in this moment? I can’t tell from the preview thumbnail.

Click— Click— Click— Click— Click— “S-Stop! Please! No more!”

She snatches up all her discarded clothes and clutches them to her chest as she shrinks down into a ball.

“Listen... I promise, we’ll do something special next time... Please, just... delete those pictures you took... I’m begging you...”

Her voice grows watery as she buries her face into her blouse.

“It’s not that I don’t trust you... I’m just... scared of them getting leaked... and taking pictures is kind of fucked up anyway!”

She gazes up at me, pleading, her eyes pink and puffy.

The choice is mine. I call the shots.

A tear streaks down her face.

“...Okay, I’ll delete them,” says [Taichi]. I was always planning to, for the record.

“C-Cool... Yeah, I had a feeling you’d understand.”

“Of course.”

Relieved, Inaba puts her clothes back on.

“Aaand deleted. See? They’re all gone now.” I show her my phone screen.

“Great... Thanks.”

Not sure why you’d thank me, to be honest.

□■□■□

After school, I target Nagase on her way home, walking down the narrow sidewalk. No one else is around. Perfect.

Recently I’ve discovered that it’s safe for the target to see me prior to a Projection because those memories will just get wiped. Thus, I leap out in front of her. Then, hoping eagerly for this to Project the person I’m thinking of (because it would be hilarious), and trusting that I’ve laid the groundwork for this to proceed as planned, I announce: “[Nagase Iori’s vision of... the guy whose romantic affection she would most enjoy].”

“Wh...” Iori’s jaw drops as she comes to a stop. Then, slowly, her lips move to form speech. “Taichi... What are you doing?”

So *Yaegashi Taichi* is the guy Nagase would want to hit on her. What a riot. Are you not entertained, «Heartseed»? As of this moment, their once-resolved love triangle is back in action.

Granted, it won’t be easy to reverse the status quo, but one thing is clear: once romantic attraction is born, it doesn’t just evaporate once it becomes inconvenient. It sticks around, and your only choice is to constantly keep it in check—because the whole thing hangs in a delicate balance, and if one part gives way, the rest is going to come toppling down in a domino effect.

This love triangle will continue to be a thorn in their sides... right up until one

of them can't take the pain anymore. Just one more push, and it'll all crash upon them like an avalanche.

The finish line is within sight. These people don't even have the sense to realize someone's messing with them... and *that's* the crucial difference between the haves and the have-nots.

"Why so quiet? I know you're here for a reason," Nagase insists, looking guarded.

Now that we've come this far, it's time to bring out the big guns. I'll say something really crazy; that ought to make things interesting.

"I'm in love with you. Trying to date Inaba-san has made me realize you're the one I really want," [Taichi] confesses.

Hesitation flickers in her eyes. This is it. She's wavering... hard enough to break.

But just as a smile crosses my face—the situation takes an unexpected turn. Her brows furrow, her eyes narrow, and her lips curl in a vicious scowl. In a blink, she lunges at me and grabs me by the collar.

"You want me to fucking kick your ass?"

I can feel her fury, and for a second I'm terrified she's going to kill me.

"You think you can betray my best friend, you son of a bitch?" Her tone is menacing.

The hell is her problem? She's like a whole different person... It's freaking me out! Is she going to punch me? Or worse?

I'm stronger than she is. I should be able to shake her off. And yet it feels like I'm paralyzed. She's terrifying.

But... the fact of the matter is, Taichi is the person from whom she would *most* appreciate romantic overtures. Plus, she caves easily to peer pressure. We know this. Don't freak out. Don't back down. Fight through it!

"I'm sorry, but I can't control who I love! The heart—wants what it wants!"

Partway through, I feel her grip tighten, choking me, but I force the words out

regardless.

Her glare doesn't soften even a fraction. Desperate, I clutch at straws, seeking an escape.

"I love you, Nagase-san! I mean it! Really!"

This last-ditch effort appears to pay off, because her grip on my collar loosens... and tears well in her eyes.

But before those tears can fall, she hangs her head... and gives [Taichi] a hard shove with both hands.

"Don't do this to me... Not now...!"

With that final shout, she runs past me and down the street.

Got her. I win.

Nagase is as good as mine.

As for Inaba, I've given her numerous reasons to lose faith in [Taichi]. Not only that, but I took pictures of her in her underwear. One look at the despair on her face and I know her mistrust is reaching its limits.

Taichi seems hesitant to give in to [Nagase]'s temptation, so maybe he needs another push. Maybe I'll have [Inaba] tell him she hates him, then have [Nagase] confess her love. Then we'll be all set.

This love triangle is just one step away from wedging things open. And once it does, that perfect pentagon is as good as gone.

Now, for my finale... I'll stage a confrontation with all three of them.

□■□■□

Today, Sunday, is the final chapter of my sad little soap opera.

Using Phantom Projection and a series of creative excuses, I convinced Taichi, Nagase, and Inaba to meet "me" at the rest area in the nature park—the same park where, for some inexplicable reason, the CRC took part in the track team's annual April marathon the day before the deadline for club applications. And as it happens, it's also the place where I first met «Heartseed» piloting the body of Gotou Ryuuzen.

Now I just need to conceal myself behind this big rock out behind the rest area. It's the perfect hiding spot; plus, I'll have a front-row seat to the fireworks. If «Heartseed»'s been paying attention, then surely it realizes the climactic finale is nigh. Maybe it'll even turn up to congratulate me in person.

The first person to arrive is Inaba, glancing around nervously. There's a little shelter area with a bench right there, but she doesn't sit down.

Then Taichi and Nagase show up... holding hands. *Oh my god, are you shitting me?* I bite back a laugh. Never in my wildest dreams did I think they'd actually go through with it. This proves my plan is a complete success.

To be honest, I was pretty sure I hadn't pushed them far enough. Fortunately for me, however, those unshakable bonds had worked in my favor to bring about their downfall.

They believe in each other completely—because they have no other option. Thus, every word and deed is made real. As the impostor, I couldn't have asked for more gullible marks. And now all the points of conflict will converge, right here in front of me.

So what happens next? A confrontation? A clash? A breakdown? A breakup?

Granted, if they were to go over the conversations they'd had with "each other" point by point, they'd catch on to the ruse pretty quickly... but even then, that wouldn't change what happened or how they felt about it.

So what will they do? Will they decide it was all fake? They might think that's the smartest move, but it's actually the worst. Why, you ask? Because the second they condemn it all as "fake," they'll be forced to question whether this very moment might be "fake" as well.

That's the true horror of the Phantom Projection. Even if you know it's fake, that doesn't save you. If anything, it only drags you deeper into hell. You'll be trapped in a nightmare where you can't tell fact from fiction... and that's not something the human mind can survive in one piece. No amount of mental fortitude can keep you intact.

You say you've "overcome your fair share of adversity"? Then let's see what you've got.

As Taichi and Nagase walk over to Inaba, they pull their hands away and position themselves in a neat little triangle— "*Something sure is fishy about this!*" they shout, perfectly in unison, each of them pointing with both hands at the others, almost as though they rehearsed it.

"Something about it seemed *too* perfect," says Nagase.

"Really had me going for a minute there," says Inaba.

"I admit, I totally fell for it," says Taichi.

"*But the real you would never say that!*" they all exclaim again. Then they burst out laughing.

"Why were you guys holding hands, anyway?" Inaba asks.

"Nagase told me to..."

"Taichi told me to..."

"What?"

"What?"

At this, Taichi and Nagase crack up laughing once more.

"Starting to feel kind of left out over here... Well, whatever. Let's figure this out, shall we?" Inaba suggests.

"Sounds good."

"You betcha!"

The mood between them feels so peaceful... friendly... *detached from reality*.

Flabbergasted, I can't begin to process what I'm seeing. Is this for real? Or am I the one who's hallucinating now? Surely they'd at least suspect each other a *little*, right? I know for a fact my actions have affected them—I've been around them enough to see it. So where did I go wrong? Did they realize I target them when they're alone, and so they feel secure in a group of three? Or is this just representative of the unity within the Cultural Research Club?

Meanwhile, the three of them go over the events they've experienced as of late.

“...and that’s about the gist of what happened,” Taichi finishes.

“I would *never* say that! You know I’d never try to get between you and Inaban!” Nagase exclaims.

“Wait, so... Taichi, was it really you who told me you were sick of me after school that one time?” Inaba asks.

“What? No way! You know I’m... uh...”

“Finish your sentence, coward!”

“I know, I know! Quit hitting me, Nagase! Anyway... um... you know I’m crazy about you, Inaba.”

“Awww... Taichi...!”

“Whoa, whoa! Get off me! We’re in public!”

“Kiss! Kiss! Kiss!”

“Grow up, Nagase!”

Blood rushes to my head. Furious, I grab a fistful of grass and rip it out of the ground. Give me a fucking break! They’re not even taking this seriously!

“I wonder how this one works. Does it randomly impersonate one member of the club? Or is it physically controlling us?” Nagase murmurs.

“If so, one of us could be an impostor right now,” Inaba replies.

There you go! That’s the spirit! Have you finally realized how much trouble you’re in?

“Nah... I’m pretty sure the three of us are the real deal,” Taichi states casually.

“Yeah.”

“Yep.”

The girls nod in agreement.

Alone they seemed so fragile. It was so easy to wind them up. But they’re not breaking.

No... I still have plenty of opportunities to try again. I can keep going as long as I have to. Even if they figure out I’m an impostor, I’ll just keep weaving a

tangled web of lies until it finally trips them up...

“There may be an impostor among us, but the rest of us are still real. We just need to learn to tell them apart, that’s all. And no matter how many times it shows up, we just have to wait for the real one to come back. All we need is patience. Easy.”

I remember seeing tears stream down Inaba’s face—but now she’s talking like she’s in control.

“Deep down, we all know in our hearts who our friends are!” Nagase paused. “Then again, I guess that’s a little ironic, coming from the queen of emotional instability over here.”

“I was *just* about to say that,” Inaba snarks. They laugh.

Meanwhile, I continue to uproot the grass as my entire body breaks out in a cold sweat.

Rip. Rip. Rip.

You’ve gotta be fucking kidding me. They’re not breaking down. Here I thought I won, but... now it feels like I’m nowhere close...

Even with supernatural powers, am I perpetually consigned to the have-nots?

□■□■□

Long after they leave, I’m still rooted in place behind the rock.

What do I do? Am I on the wrong track? Is there a better way to “make them interesting”? If so, what is it?

There’s no one I can turn to for help.

Just then, out walks «Heartseed», wearing the body of Yamaboshi High School physics teacher Gotou Ryuuzen, and I feel like my heart’s gonna leap all the way up my throat and out through my mouth.

“Wh... Where did you come from...?”

“What do you mean...? I walked here, obviously... Maybe you just didn’t see me coming... After all, you did seem a bit preoccupied... Oh, but... I suppose it doesn’t matter...”

Here stands the source of all my problems: the entity that turned my world upside down. As usual, its manner of speech is rambly and indirect. It's piloting the same body, too. And while I'm grateful for the power it's given me, that doesn't stop me from thinking it's creepy as hell on an instinctual level.

"So anyway... Oh, yes..." It speaks as though it nearly forgot the entire reason it came here. "Looks like things... aren't going well for you, are they?" Its voice is slimy and... oppressive.

I swallow hard. "It's not my fault! I..."

"I thought you said you could make them entertaining...?"

It's criticizing me. I feel my veins turn to ice.

"Now that you've joined me... don't think for a moment you can go back to your ordinary life... unless you show me something worth my time... Just a thought..."

It's threatening me. Terror seizes me by the throat, eager to devour me. I can hardly stand upright.

"You seem hesitant... Are you taking this seriously? Are you really *trying*, Uwa-san?"

I've opened the forbidden door... and now there's no going back.

Chapter 5: Five Minus Two

Date: x/xx Weather: Sunny

Could Chihiro-kun be behind all this?

No... I guess not. That was a weird thing to write. Not like he has that power—I mean, not like that power exists!

It seems like our senpai have recovered from their recent weirdness, though, so that's good. I know they're struggling, and yet they still find time to fuss over me... It's really sweet.

They asked me a bunch of questions, like if I'd noticed anything unusual, or if anyone had been acting strange, but I couldn't think of anything, so I said no.

But while our senpai seem to be getting back to normal, on the other hand Chihiro-kun seems to be in a downward spiral. He's so tense all the time... almost like he's scared of something... These days it takes a lot of courage just to go near him.

I really think maybe he...

No, that can't be it. Right?

But... even if there's a one-in-a-million chance that I'm right about this, it's not like I can do anything about it, right? Not for lack of trying, of course. It's just that every time I try, I always fail. So in the end, it's about the same as not trying at all.

Whether or not I have the answer, I can't do anything with that information. So I just sit on the sidelines and watch.

Right in the same place I've always been.

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On Monday, Yaegashi Taichi and the other second-year members of the Cultural Research Club met up first thing in the morning in the clubroom to discuss the possibility that a new «Heartseed» phenomenon had begun.

As usual, Inaba took charge of the discussion for what must've been the

umpteenth time. First, they each took turns telling the others about any strange events that had happened to them in recent memory. As it turned out, they each had "memories" of another member saying or doing things that the person in question didn't remember in the slightest. From there, they considered the possibility that an outside force was controlling them, but for the most part, everyone had rock-solid alibis. This left only one conclusion: one or more physically identical impostors were running around behind their backs and having weird interactions with the others.

"So far, they've only ever approached us when we're alone... Maybe that's an enforced restriction rather than a tactic," Inaba mused as she set the chalk down on the tray.

"Mmm..." Kiriyama murmured. "The thing is, these imposters look SUPER identical. Like, obviously the stuff they say is just totally bonkers, but it really feels like it's the actual person talking to you, you know?"

"Get it together, Taichi. Can't believe you didn't use *the power of love* to see through the fake Inaba and her lies," Nagase joked.

Beside her, Aoki gasped. "You're right... I never noticed, the power of love didn't work for us either!" he howled, clutching his hair.

"Who the heck do you think you're including in that 'us'?!" Kiriyama snapped.

"Look, it's not my fault. Whoever they are, they know how to replicate Inaba, right down to her scent."

"My *scent...?* Oh god, do I reek or something?!" Instantly, Inaba went from competent commander to full-blown panic.

"No, no! I just mean your, um... natural smell. It's not bad at all—it's nice."

"GROOOOOOOOSS!" Nagase shouted.

"I... I see. So you think I smell good... Personally, I'd like our scents to *mingle* sometime soon... Hee hee..."

"*LEWD!*" Nagase shrieked again, though Taichi didn't see what was so lewd about it.

"*Moving on!* Let's come up with a plan!" Kiriyama called.

And so they began to brainstorm potential countermeasures. The debate progressed smoothly; after all, this was their fifth phenomenon, and by now they'd fully acclimated to the entire process.

"If they only target us when we're alone, like, maybe we should just assume any one-on-one conversation is fake?"

"That does make sense... but there's no guarantee it's limited to just one-on-one stuff, y'know?"

"Oh god... If we go with that, then I can't spend time with Taichi!"

"Why not? All you have to do is make sure a third person is around, right?"

"Oh... Of course...! Then I can be with Taichi as much as I want! Hee hee!"

"I'm on board, too! That way me and Yui can make up for lost time and—"

"I-Inaba, I appreciate the sentiment, but if you think about it, wouldn't that just create *more* situations in which two people end up alone together?"

"We'll just have to cross that bridge when we—"

"Inaban, I command you, cease all Ina-bashful activities at once! This is not a drill!"

"Fine, fine... Let's get this over with. Hmmm... Oh, that reminds me. Do you think these impostor assholes duplicate our memories, too? Maybe we could discern the fake if we ask it a question that only the real deal would know the answer to."

"Our memories... Of course! In that case, how about we decide on a code word?!"

"That might work... Good idea, Iori. It's worth a try, at least. That said, the rules of any given phenomenon are never designed in our favor, so there might not be a one-size-fits-all solution."

"Oh gosh... You don't think anything's happened to Chihiro-kun or Shino-chan, do you?! I mean, if no one's seen an impostor of them, then they're probably safe, but still!"

"Good question... I'll see if I can't probe it out of them."

“Either way, it seems like all we have to do is let the impostor do its thing, then check in with whoever it was later on.”

“You say that, Taichi, but there’s no guarantee it only impersonates the five of us,” Inaba pointed out.

“Y-You really think they’re impersonating people outside the club?” Kiriyama asked nervously. “That’s, like... kind of terrifying, don’t you think? Like, what if they impersonate our friends in class?”

“Yeah... It’d be a lot easier if we knew for sure they could only mimic the five of us, but if they can be *anyone*, then all bets are off. I mean, sooner or later we’ll start thinking *everyone* is a fake!” Nagase replied.

“Look, don’t take what I said and blow it out of proportion. There’s no definitive proof that they can impersonate anyone besides us,” Inaba reassured them. “We don’t even know what their motives are. Maybe they’re independent entities created by «Heartseed», or maybe they’re just controlled hallucinations. Who knows? Either way, we’re still going to handle it the same way.”

“And how’s that?” Kiriyama asked.

Inaba looked around at each of them in turn, leading Taichi and the others to follow suit. There in the clubroom, the members of the original CRC pentagon each looked into the others’ eyes. Then, finally, Inaba spoke: “We’re going to believe in each other.” She paused. “As much as we’ll want to start suspecting each other, we’re not going to fall for it. We’re going to believe in our friends, family, and acquaintances... but that doesn’t mean we take everything other people tell us as gospel, got it?”

The others nodded.

“Trust, but verify.”

Somehow, they innately understood what she meant by this.

“Still, I gotta say...” She shook her head and laughed. “I really don’t see why «Heartseed» keeps wasting its time trying to fuck with us when it ought to know it doesn’t stand a chance.”

□■□■□

After school, Taichi, Nagase, and Inaba headed off to cheerleading practice.

“You guys haven’t forgotten our Sports Festival bet, have you? The losing team has to do whatever the winning team saaays!” Nagase teased in a singsong voice.

“I’d be more excited if we weren’t lumped in with the other grades,” Inaba grumbled.

“What’s on your mind?” Taichi asked her.

“Our class is motivated, the third-years are... well, reasonably motivated... but our team’s first-years leave a *lot* to be desired. It’s like they don’t even want to try.”

“Really? Even with Chee-hee and Shino-chan there?”

“You know they’re both wallflowers. *Especially* Chihiro. He’s supposed to be a cheerleading rep, but he doesn’t even care! Do guys think apathy is a good look? Because it isn’t. Bah.”

“Now, now, Inaba,” Taichi soothed, “it’s not his fault he lost at rock-paper-scissors.”

“Whatever. The point is, Green Team needs to light a fire under our first-years’ asses or we’re dead in the fucking water. Problem is, there’s really not much us second-years can do about it... Uh oh, they’re calling for us. Gotta go.”

And with that, Inaba jogged off to join her classmates.

“Hmmm... Inaban’s really changed, hasn’t she? Last year she felt like more of a ‘puppet master from the shadows’ type, but these days she’s been in the spotlight more and more,” Nagase mused as they watched Inaba walk off. The soft look in her eyes was like that of a mother hen proudly watching over her baby chick.

“You’ve changed too, you know. You never used to volunteer for this stuff—you’d always just take whatever other people dumped on you.”

“Oh yeah? Well, right back at you! You... Well, okay, you’ve always been the volunteering type. But these days you’re more outspoken!”

Am I? Taichi scratched his head.

Meanwhile, Nagase concluded: “I guess we’ve all grown up in our own ways.”

That day’s cheerleading rehearsal was a full-scale performance. Thus, Taichi and the rest of the Red Team—all three classes from all three grade levels—had gathered together in one place. And although a handful of people couldn’t make it due to prior commitments, the crowd was still close to a hundred students in total. Pretty impressive.

More impressive still was that Taichi and the other cheerleading representatives were meant to lead them.

This quickly proved... challenging.

“Okay, so what I want you guys to do...”

“Setouchi-senpai! Could you come over here for a minute?!”

“Be right there! Yaegashi-kun, could you take over for me?”

“Y-You’re putting *me* in charge? I’m not sure I’m cut out for that...”

As it happened, a lot of the cheerleading reps were absent that day, and there were clearly not enough hands available to manage the rehearsal.

“O-Okay, break time! Second-year representatives, over here!” Setouchi called. She waited until everyone had gathered around her, then continued, “Alright, guys, what the hell are we going to do about this? We’re so short-handed, it’s ridiculous! Hardly anybody’s directing the other grade levels!” The look on her face was one of sheer panic.

“Maybe we should put one person in charge of the second-years, then have the rest sub in for the first-and third-years?” Nagase suggested.

“Normally I’d say go for it, but... I don’t think we have anyone who could manage our entire class on their own, do we?”

But just before Taichi could nod his head in agreement, a fitting candidate sprang to mind: “Well, we’ve got Fujishima, don’t we?”

After all, he himself had recently seen her back at her full potential... but now that he thought about it, something about the encounter had been off. That

“revival” he thought he witnessed might’ve simply been the work of an impostor. But even so, nothing could change the fact that Fujishima was once a charismatic leader unlike any other.

“Huh? M-Me? No, I couldn’t possibly...” Fujishima faltered, shaking her head despondently.

Oh, come on, Fujishima! If not you, then who— “Man, we really need Fujishima-san’s help if we’re gonna win this,” Watase Shingo commented nonchalantly... at a volume loud enough for the entire crowd to hear.

“Yeah, I know, right? Fujishima-san can do anything she puts her mind to,” Nagase continued, as if on cue.

From there, the rest of the crowd seemed to take the hint: “Fujishima-san’s our only hope!”

“Gosh, I hope she’ll help us...”

“She’s the only one who’s got what it takes!”

“I’ve... got what it takes...?”

“I don’t get it. What’s the big deal about Fujishima-san?”

“Shhhh! Just go with it, dumbass!”

“Y-You can do it, Fujishima-san!”

“Go for it, Fujishima!”

Well, that escalated quickly. I kinda feel bad for starting it... Seriously, our class latches onto things way too fast... Taichi thought to himself nervously.

“Fu-ji-shi-ma! Fu-ji-shi-ma! Fu-ji-shi-ma!” the crowd began to chant, louder and louder until it built to a roar. At that point, even the first-and third-years had started to join in. Somehow *the entire Red Team* had latched onto this idea.

Surrounded by nearly a hundred people cheering her name, Fujishima stood stock-still, staring blankly. Then, slowly, she began to tremble... and balled her hands into fists...

The next instant, she pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose, thrust out her chest, and put her hands on her hips.

“Hahaha... MWAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!”

“What are you, some kind of demon lord?” Taichi retorted under his breath. He’d never seen this side of her before, and frankly, he was starting to think maybe he should’ve let sleeping dogs lie.

“If you want it that badly, I guess I have no choice! You want me to lead these peasants? I’ll show you a TRUE leader!”

Seriously, you’re supposed to be our hero, but you sound like the villain.

“Y-You’re so badass, Fujishima-san!”

“You know, Watase, I’ve always questioned whether you might have some masochistic tendencies, and now I’m sure of it. You’re hot for her evil dictator persona, aren’t you?” Taichi muttered.

Sadly, the duration of Fujishima’s demonic revival expired at the end of rehearsal that day.

□■□■□

After cheerleading rehearsal, Taichi headed straight home.

As they understood it, the new phenomenon had been active for quite some time now, and yet «Heartseed» hadn’t turned up to explain it to them. Was it changing things up this time around? There was also the possibility that the mastermind behind this one was not «Heartseed» but «The Second», the entity who had foisted the Age Regression upon them last winter—during which it saw fit to possess the body of his younger sister Rina. Personally, Taichi was terrified to think he might have to relive that nightmare all over again.

“Huh? What do you mean, has anything unusual happened lately?”

Rina’s round eyes widened even more as she looked up from her magazine. The sixth grader’s wavy hair had grown nearly to her shoulders now, and she exuded an air of maturity almost unthinkable for a preteen. Yes, this was Taichi’s pride and joy, perfect in every way. No matter how old she got, she would always be his sweet baby sister.

“First you dash full-speed into the house, and now this... Wait. D-Don’t tell me... Did you finally notice?!”

“Uh... Yeah, that’s right! I noticed, alright! Now ‘fess up, young lady!” It was a total bluff, of course, but he needed to know if she’d witnessed anything potentially impostor-related.

“Hmmm... For the record, I really didn’t want to tell you ‘cuz I know you’ll probably have a heart attack, but I guess it’s too late now...”

I’ll have a heart attack? Good god, what could it be?

“Okay. The truth is...”

Rina paused for a moment, smiled, and dropped her bombshell.

“I have a boyfriend!”

A boyfriend...? Rina... has... a boyfriend...?

“GGGHHHHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!”

Taichi promptly passed out on the spot.

“Taichi?! Are you okay?! I heard a big *thump*... Did you fall flat on your face?!”

“No... It c-can’t be... Rina... Boy... Boy... Boy...”

“You’re sounding like a broken record, Big Bro! Earth to Taichi! Come in, Taichi!”

His consciousness grew hazy. Vaguely, he could make out her frightened expression... Then he felt a stinging pain in his cheeks and realized she had slapped him.

All at once, Taichi snapped back to his senses and jumped upright. *That was a close one... I nearly shuffled off this mortal coil.*

“You... You’re too young to have a boyfriend! You’re in *sixth grade!* Did I say you were allowed to date?!”

“Aww, c’mon! I waited a *loooong* time for you to start dating someone first!”

“What...?! Are you saying my love life was the trigger...?! So if I break up with my girlfriend, you’ll...?!”

“You’re gonna break up with your girlfriend right now?”

“W-Well... No...”

“What about later?”

“N-No... Not ever,” Taichi stammered bashfully.

At this, Rina grinned and looked into his eyes. “Good grief, you silly little lovebird. What if I told you *you* couldn’t date, hmm? How would you feel?”

“Nngh... I still think you’re too young, but... you’re at that age now, and I guess you’ve gotta leave the nest sometime. It might be a little earlier than I’d like, but... if it’s what you really want, then I give you my blessing,” Taichi choked out, fighting back tears.

Rina threw her arms around him in a big hug. “YAY! Thank you, Big Bro! I wuv you *sooo* much! Let’s all go on a double date sometime!”

“Sure... Sounds great,” he sobbed.

Later...

“So, is he in your class?”

“Oh, no. He’s a third-year in middle school.”

“*What?!* Dump him, now! What kind of fourteen-year-old dates a *sixth grader?!* That’s disgusting!”

“Not as disgusting as an older brother who tries to control his sister’s love life...”

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The jig is up. They know something’s going on. With a sigh, I drop the voice recorder I retrieved from the CRC clubroom onto the floor beside me.

Here I am, sitting on the floor, legs sprawled out, in an empty clubroom in the Rec Hall—the same one in which I made Inaba strip for me the other day.

They’ve already figured out that I can only Project if we’re one-on-one, as well as my potential to Project as someone unaffiliated with the club, something I still have yet to experiment with all that much. Worse still, they’re planning to catch me out using their shared memories. Frankly, that would completely fuck me over... and then «Heartseed» will— No, stop. Don’t waste time freaking out about a what-if scenario that’ll never happen. Look at it this way: it was my idea

to tap the clubroom just in case, and thanks to that, I've blown the lid off their plans. *I've got this under control.*

At least now I finally see why everyone has so much faith in that stupid lovey-dovey chick. She took charge, analyzed the information available to them, and even acted as a pillar of emotional support for the others while she was at it. I'll give her props for that. Perhaps Inaba Himeko is a worthy adversary after all.

Not to speak lightly of the others, of course. I knew they'd gone through this a few times in the past, but still, it's like they didn't even bat an eye. If you ask me, their ridiculous confidence is the *real* supernatural phenomenon. It's almost like they're more worried about the stupid Sports Festival! They're insane. They're *abnormal*... and so is the world for letting them exist.

Not me, though. I'm in the right. They just caught me off-guard, that's all. But really, I know I'm above them. They'll never be on my level. I mean, they don't have the faintest clue that I'm behind all this.

Inaba's ultimate plan is for everyone to "trust, but verify." What a joke. What good will trust do you? Nothing. Will trust save you? No. It won't. Trust *me*, at any given moment, the world is waiting eagerly for the tiniest chance to fuck us over. That's just how it is.

So guess what? I'm just going to Project even more. Club member or not, I'll pose as their Phantom. Everywhere you turn, you'll be surrounded by impostors and fakes. Soon you'll lose sight of what's real... *and then you'll never trust another living soul again*.

You want to underestimate me? Knock yourselves out.

I'll show you true hell.

□■□■□

After school, I target Yui before she leaves campus for karate practice. She's running late because she stopped by the clubroom first; now that the initial after-school rush is over, the shoe lockers are devoid of life.

"[Kiriyama Yui's vision of Aoki Yoshifumi]. Headed out, Yui-san?"

"Yup! What about you? Headed to the clubroom?"

In order for the rest of my plan to work, I *cannot* screw this up... It's okay. I can do this.

"Yeah... Oh, right. I guess we'd better be on guard since we're one-on-one. Okay, what's the code word?"

"It's 'Screw you, «Heartseed»!' Don't you think we should change it, though? Like, isn't it kind of rude?"

"I don't know... It's pretty straightforward if you ask me," [Aoki] replies.

"Hmmm..." Yui frowns.

With this, I've convinced her I'm the real Aoki. Now I can *really* mess with her. Even if she realizes I'm an impostor, it'll just show her what little use their stupid code word is.

So, time for me to go all-out. Should I force myself on her? Nah, that's probably crossing a line.

"Yui-san," [Aoki] calls, and I reach out to her.

She stares at my hand in alarm. As it moves, she watches it like a hawk to see where it goes. What's got her so freaked out?

She's so small and petite... with her little round face and clear, soft skin... As my hand closes in, something in the air shifts. For some reason, I feel myself tremble... but I ignore it and press on until my fingers come into contact with her cheek.

A pleasant tingle shoots through my body. Her skin feels cooler than I was expecting... It's nice.

"...What are you doing?" Yui asks, standing stock-still, looking me dead in the eye.

"Oh, um... I was just thinking about how cute you are..."

"So you touched me... because you felt like it?" She looks neither bashful nor angry. Her expression is perfectly blank.

I hesitate. "Well... yeah."

Her eyes glint sharply. "The real Aoki would *never* do that! Get lost,

impostor!”

“Bfffgh?!” The next thing I know, something hits me hard in the nuts, and pain rampages through my entire body. My legs give out, and I feel myself hit the ground. Meanwhile, tears spill from my eyes as overwhelming nausea washes over me. “Gah... aaahh... Fuck...! You’re not supposed to... kick that hard...! Not cool...!”

“That’s what you get, *impostor*. Oh, I know! I should just, like, tie you up while I’ve got you. That’ll solve everything! But where could I get some rope...?”

“What...?”

Tie me up? What? What the hell? Why would you do that? Why would you think that? Fuck, I’m dead. Fuck, fuck, fuck!

I can feel fluid leaking from every inch of my body.

What do I do? Deny it? That won’t work. One phone call to the real Aoki and I’d be screwed. And if anyone else shows up, they’ll see me as Uwa Chihiro, and then...

I’m dead.

Is this really where it ends? Here? Now? This easily? Like I’m some kind of stooge? No. No, no, no. This can’t be happening!

If they find out, there’s no way I can keep attending Yamaboshi with them. I’ll have to drop out... I’ll turn into a shut-in loser... I’ll never be part of society again... or maybe «Heartseed» will erase me entirely— My sight blurs.

What do I do?

Do I admit I’m an impostor and— Yes, that’s it! «Heartseed» told me the five of them think of it as omnipotent. I can work with that!

“Go ahead... Tie me up... I’ll just disappear...”

Did she buy it? Or did I just dig my own grave?

“You can do that? Darn... I guess it won’t work, then.”

She bought it. Thank god. I survived... by the skin of my teeth.

“Hmmm... You guys really do look *identical* to the real deal...” Yui scrutinizes

my appearance, staring down at me as I lie on the ground.

How can she be so calm? Almost like she's merely observing an insect... How dare she look down on me!

"How did you know... I wasn't real...?" [Aoki] asks through the pain.

"Because the real Aoki would never touch me for his own self-gratification," she answers easily, and it's obvious she believes in Aoki without a shadow of a doubt.

Yeah, well, screw your trust. Don't act like you all know each other perfectly!

"It was actually pretty easy, now that I think about it. Anyway, I gotta go now. Mess with me again, I dare you." Yui flips her long chestnut hair over her shoulder and smirks. "Oh yeah... I'd better tell them not to bother with the code word thing since you have all your memories."

And with that, Yui strolls off like she's lost interest entirely. I stare blankly after her.

"Whoa!"

And then another student turns up, staring at me like I've grown a second head.

Using a nearby locker for support, I stagger to my feet. "What are *you* looking at?"

Spooked, the other student dashes off.

I survived... Not only that, I've made them think I gain the same memories as my Phantom.

I've achieved my goal... and yet...

"*God damn it!*"

The locker reverberates with a metallic *BANG* as I slam my fist into it. My knuckles sting as my chest floods with an overwhelming sense of defeat and hopelessness.

I made a total disgrace of myself back there. What's worse, she made it clear she didn't see me as a threat—and rubbed it in my face.

She’s so far above me, I’ll never reach her...

This isn’t working.

The next day, on my way to school, I luckily spot Taichi right as he sets foot on campus. My gut tells me to attack.

I didn’t get any sleep last night—my mind was racing too hard—and now the sleep deprivation has me weirdly hyped up. Normally I’d never try this in a crowd, but fuck it.

“[Yaegashi Taichi’s vision of a friend in class who usually arrives late].”

It’s impressive how calm and composed I can manage to be in this state. You see, if the Phantom Projection ever creates a paradox in the target’s mind—for example, if they see two of the same person—the repercussions are allegedly pretty serious, so it’s up to me to ensure that doesn’t happen.

I’m on fire today. This is me at my very best. I’m gonna win this time.

“Oh, hey, Watase. I see you’re here early for a change.”

“Good morning, Taichi-san.”

As I speak, I hear the Phantom voice replay over my own (originally this creeped me out, but now I’m pretty much used to it) and learn that this “Watase” is a guy.

“Listen, I know this is kind of sudden, but could I borrow some money?”

It’s a crude method, but one that’s likely to work. They say money is the very embodiment of human greed, after all.

“Sure... How much?”

“As much as you’ve got. I really, really need it. It’s for something important, I swear.” [Watase] bows humbly.

This is Taichi we’re talking about. He’s a pushover. Hell, he might just give me his whole wallet.

“Alright, sure.”

See? What’d I tell you? The guy’s a moron.

“I don’t know what you need it for, but if you don’t want to talk about it, I won’t push it. When can you pay me back, though?”

“Oh, you know. Soon.”

This is so easy. It’s like taking candy from a baby... Wait... He’s glaring at me...?

Intimidated, [Watase] takes a step back. “Wh... What?”

“You’re an impostor, aren’t you?”

“Wha...?! H-How...?!”

“Watase’s *obnoxious* when it comes to borrowing cash. He’ll make you write an IOU over lunch money! He’ll put that crap in his will!”

“Wh... *What?*”

How was I supposed to predict that?! Who does that?! I scream internally. I need to escape. I turn and bolt.

I run out behind the school building, attracting the curious stares of students just arriving on campus, as well as some on their way back from morning club practice. My face burns scarlet. I feel sick.

No... This isn’t a defeat. It’s a tactical retreat.

That’s not how they’ll see it, though. They’ll think I’m running away like a coward.

Did I just make it obvious that I actually *don’t* retain the Phantom’s memories? Will they figure it out? I don’t know. Fuck!

This isn’t working. It really isn’t.

All throughout class, my mind is focused on one thing only: my next strike. I skip club activities to prepare. Then, that evening, I target Aoki on his way home from school.

“[Aoki Yoshifumi’s vision of a family member who might reasonably be here].”

“Oh, hey, sis! Headed home?” Aoki asks. I didn’t even know Aoki *had* a sister.

Wordlessly, I close in on him. I’m going to take this asshole down a peg.

“Huh? What’s wrong?” he asks.

Posing as [Aoki’s older sister], I smile... ball my right hand into a fist... and swing that fist directly into his stupid, trusting face. Twice.

“AGH!” He reels from the impact.

A shiver of pleasure shoots down my spine as I imagine myself destroying him. The violent impulses send dopamine to my brain. I could give in to my animal instincts and tear him limb from limb, right here, right now... but I won’t. I have self-restraint. Besides, it’s not his body I want to annihilate, anyway.

“Wh... *What the hell*, sis?!” Aoki shouts.

In response, I tilt my head slightly.

“Oh, I geddit... You’re an impostor...”

At this, I sneer at him.

“Damn you... How *dare* you try to wear my sister’s face...!”

That’s it. Get angry. Yell at me. Lose your composure. Go ahead, bring it on... Just know that whatever you do to me, I’ll do right back. Tenfold. And that’s the moment you’ll realize you’re in hell.

“Wait a minute... So you’re telling me you can be anyone? Nowhere is safe?”

Glad to see you’re up to speed, nimrod. I can use the Phantom Projection to be anyone I want. Sure, maybe you’ll see through the act once we start talking, but until then, you have no way of knowing. Anyone in the *world* could potentially be a threat. Who could possibly survive that? You’ll go nuts. And that’s precisely what I’m angling for.

You want *entertaining*, I’ll give you entertaining. God, I can’t wait to see that look of despair on your face— “That’s it? Meh, no biggie.” Aoki’s face lights up with relief as he smiles.

He’s *grinning* at me.

“Wh... What...?”

“Well, I mean, if all you can do is resort to physical violence, isn’t that kinda admitting you’re out of cards?”

“What?”

“When it comes to «Heartseed»... and «The Second», now that I think about it... For as much as they screw with us, they never attack us physically. Well, okay... To be fair, there was this one time during the body-swap, but we kinda started that one,” Aoki explains casually, as if discussing the weather with a friend. “I can’t say I get it myself, but Inabacchan says they’re interested in our ‘emotional turbulence’ and our ‘connections as a group’ and stuff. So basically, it’s a competition. If their phenomenon crap gets in our heads and screws with our friendships, then they win. But if we can endure it, then we win.” He nods to himself. “So when you resort to violence, it’s like... against the rules, sorta? You’re giving up your victory.”

“I’m not competing with you,” I reply. Call me a loser all you like;. I want no part of your stupid little game.

“Sure you are. And you’re losing, too. Wait... Real talk, you *aren’t* «Heartseed»? Are the rules different for you or something?” He muses on this for a moment, then shrugs. “I’ll just talk to the others about it, I guess. Anyway, my point is, you can punch me black and blue, but you’re not gonna beat us by throwing a little tantrum. And if you ever hurt one of the girls, I will *personally* make you pay.”

“Wh... What do you mean by that?”

“Doesn’t matter! You’re just gonna pay! End of story!”

He has no bite to back up that bark. He’s just bluffing...

So why do I feel so threatened? Why do I feel like I’m losing? I’m not losing. I’m winning. *He’s* the loser. In what world could *he* gain the upper hand?

“Against the rules”? “Giving up my victory”? Give me a fucking break.

I’m not losing. I’m winning. I’m not losing. I’m winning. I’m not losing. I’m winning. I’m not losing. I’m winning.

No matter how you look at it, I have the upper hand. Anyone could tell you that. Right? Someone look at this shit and tell me I’m right... Someone... Anyone...!

And yet, the only one of us *she* cares about is— This isn't working. None of this is working. Everything I do just backfires.

The whole world is working against me.

□■□■□

It rained all throughout the next day.

During karate practice, Yui asked me "Are you doing okay? You haven't been to the clubroom in a while," to which I replied that I was fine, though I couldn't bear to look her in the eye. I was her enemy, after all.

Thinking back, it's a wonder I managed to act so normal around them in the early days. I can't remember for the life of me how I pulled it off... Maybe it was easier back when my tactics weren't quite so... direct.

After practice ended, for some reason, I was gripped with this strange desire to talk to Yui. I was tired of the constant hostility... I wanted someone to lend a sympathetic ear for a change.

On the way home from the dojo, I follow Yui down the street as she twirls her pink umbrella. Then, loud enough to be heard over the rain, I announce: "[Kiriyama Yui's vision of the friend she wants to talk to the most]."

Meanwhile, I close the gap between us.

"Hmm...? Wait, what? Chinatsu?! Is that you?!" Almost in disbelief, Yui dashes over to me, splashing through the puddles in her polka-dot rain boots. "Did you just get back? Like, how are things going over there? Are you keeping up with karate practice?"

From this, I intuit that my Phantom was a fellow karate student who had once lived here, but has since moved away. Something about the name rang a bell, too... Then I remember: Mihashi Chinatsu, the girl who used to be Yui's biggest rival during competitions. She was a prideful girl, even more so than Yui, and always wore her hair in a ponytail.

Being [Mihashi] suited me fine, incidentally. Better her than some rando I knew nothing about.

"Tell me all about what's been going on with you," I say, mostly so she'll stop

asking me questions. When I cast the Projection, I made sure to specify a friend she wanted to talk to, so hopefully I won't need to contribute much. That way we can spend a long time— Wait... What am I doing?

"Yesss, I am sooo ready to vent! Let's go to a cafe or something!"

"N-No, I can't."

Seriously, what am I doing?

"Huh? How come?"

I'm... Yes, that's it! I'm researching how to screw with her next. That's why I'm Projecting as her best friend: for research.

With an objective now established, I regain my composure.

"Oh, um, I'm waiting on a phone call right now. I've got plans with family after this, so I can't really stick around." I need to ensure I can escape at any time.

"But it's raining!"

"So what? I like your umbrella, though. Cute boots, too." They were the first compliments I could think of.

"I know, right? You can tell a girl's worth based on how much style she has in any weather!"

"Even in a thunderstorm?"

"*Especially* in a thunderstorm! ...Actually, now that I think about it, you don't usually compliment me on my clothes... Oh god, you're not an impostor, are you...?"

Quick, before she figures it out!

"Impostor?" I ask.

"Oh, uh, nothing! Jeez, I really need to stop suspecting everyone..."

Apparently she bought it.

From there, Yui tells me about all sorts of things. She must've been excited to catch up with an old friend. As a result, I obtained a variety of information, but none of it was immediately useful.

Then, at some point we start talking about the guys in the CRC, and Yui mentions me and Taichi, but for the most part, her comments are all centered on Aoki Yoshifumi.

“Seriously, Aoki is driving me crazy. He’s like...”

Aoki this, Aoki that.

“...because Aoki...”

Blah blah blah.

“...and then Aoki was like...”

Aoki, Aoki, Aoki.

I can’t stand it anymore. I’m sick of hearing his name on her lips. It feels like she’s intentionally rubbing it in my face. So instead, I cut in.

“So.”

Yui falls still, her pink lips pressed together like a flower bud before spring. I had forgotten, of course, that interjecting meant I would have to come up with a statement of my own. What do I say? The sound of the rain seems to grow louder with each passing moment.

“Be straight with me: how do you actually feel about Aoki-san?”

It was the first question that sprang to mind.

Yui freezes for a moment. A gust of wind blows past, sending fat drops of rain splattering against my umbrella, though the rain itself doesn’t seem to have gotten any heavier.

“Well...”

Normally this topic would send Yui into a blushing frenzy, but today she’s calm and level-headed... possibly only because she believes she’s talking to Mihashi Chinatsu. Whatever she’s about to tell me, it’s likely the honest truth.

I find myself wishing the rain would pour down harder.

“I’ve always told myself it would be stupid to fall for someone just because they say they’ve fallen for me. It doesn’t feel right to ‘give in’ to them just because they’re nice, you know?” She pauses for a moment. “But I’m ready to

make my decision.” Her voice is firm, cutting through the drone of the drops hitting the concrete.

“Yeah?”

“I mean... Maybe not right away, but, you know, soon!” She spins her umbrella bashfully. Now *this* is more like the Yui I know. “No matter how it goes, I’ll be sure to call you and tell you about it.”

“No—I mean, yeah, for sure.” Reflexively I wanted to refuse, but I hastily force myself to nod along at the last minute.

Now for one last question... to seal the deal.

“What about Uwa Chihiro? How do you feel about him?”

“Huh? About Chihiro-kun?” She looks surprised that I would ask. “Hmmm... Well, we’ve been karate buddies for a long time... Plus, he joined the CRC on my recommendation... which made me look pretty cool, might I add!” She thrusts out her chest proudly. “He can be a bit of a grouch, and sometimes he picks on me... but all in all, I’d say he’s my favorite underclassman. Out of all the boys, anyway!” she finishes with a bright smile.

Look at her, rubbing it in my face. I already knew that, thank you very much... Seriously, what the fuck am I doing? I must be an imbecile.

Don’t lower yourself to their level. You’re above this plebeian tripe. Are you chickening out? Pathetic. You know what it is you need to do. No matter what happens, you have to achieve the task assigned to you.

«Heartseed»’s words revived in my mind: —Now that you’ve joined me... don’t think for a moment you can go back to your ordinary life... unless you show me something worth my time.

My body trembles down to my core, and I tighten my grip on my umbrella until my hand goes numb. Help me, help me, help me, help me!

No... I have to help myself. I have to win, or else I’m dead. No one can save me now.

After a while, I pick a random point to call it a day and let Yui know I’m leaving. All around us, trees line the sidewalk, their branches glistening with

dewy leaves.

“Bye, Chinatsu!” Yui calls from somewhere behind me as I walk off. Then she disappears, and I’m alone.

The streets are dark and devoid of life. No one sees me. No one realizes I exist.

Someone, please notice me. Find me. Acknowledge me. Someone, anyone, please!

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHH!”

Lost, I scream up at the sky.

□■□■□

Storm clouds billow in my chest.

I don’t have the first clue what to do. I could always try a different approach... but I can’t think of anything halfway decent.

With each passing day, the CRC quintet is slowly but surely regaining its strength. They’re barely even worried about the impostor now. They don’t care about the phenomenon. They don’t care about me.

Previously I believed the Phantom Projection was invincible, but now that I’m thinking about it logically, it’s actually full of loopholes and weak points. Why did I ever accept this defective crap with a smile?

«Heartseed» said it would “all depend on how you use it,” but I doubt that very much. Take any guy off the street and surely they would struggle with this... At the very least, I refuse to believe I’m worse than the average person...

But if I look at it from an objective perspective— No, I won’t accept it. I *can’t* accept it.

Because the second I do, I’ll give in to despair.

The following morning, before I left the house, my mother stopped me and said, “You’ve been looking a little under the weather lately. How are you feeling?”

I replied... Actually, I don’t really remember what I said, if anything.

Even after I arrived at the classroom, my mind was elsewhere. I vaguely recall talking to someone, but if I did, I can't remember what we talked about. Oh, but I do remember Enjouji shooting me a sad puppy dog look the whole time. Not that it matters.

Now it's lunchtime. I have zero appetite, so instead I leave the room.

The halls are full of obnoxiously loud students on their way to the cafeteria, and the classrooms aren't much better. Out of nowhere, it drives home the fact that I am alone in every sense of the word. Does everyone feel this way from time to time, or is it just me? Either way, it doesn't change the fact that I don't belong here.

I wander aimlessly around campus, seeking a quiet place where I can be alone, until I find myself at the Rec Hall. I guess I came here on instinct. Well, that works. Might as well collect the voice recorder from the clubroom, I think to myself. And so I climb the stairs.

Arriving at the fourth floor, I turn the corner—and blink.

I see a familiar face, a petite girl with striking reddish-brown hair. It's Kiriyama Yui. This is the first time I've seen her since we parted ways yesterday. She doesn't notice me, though. Instead, she heads into the clubroom.

I don't want her to see me here. Not right now. I quietly back away.

"What the? Chihir—"

"[Kiriyama Yui's vision of Yaegashi Taichi]!" I shout reflexively.

For a moment, Yui freezes in place.

"Huh? Oh... Taichi... For a second I thought you were Chihiro-kun... Weird..." She frowns to herself.

"Your eyes must've been playing tricks on you," [Taichi] says. Meanwhile, pulse racing, I heave a sigh of relief. That was close.

"Yeah, I guess so. Anyway, let's head in."

"Oh, hey, it's Kiriyama and Chihiro! Wait, what? Chihiro wasn't invited to the meeting, was he?"

That was absolutely the last voice I want to hear right now.

Evidently the second-years had planned to meet up here at lunch.

“Oh... Huh...? What the...? Taichi’s... here, and he’s... there? How are there two...?”

Here I am, Projecting as [Taichi] to Yui... while the *real* Yaegashi Taichi stands behind me on the stairs. To her, there are now two Taichis... and that’s exactly the sort of paradox «Heartseed» warned me about. What did it say would happen if I caused one? Oh, that’s right. It would “cause issues.”

But what does that mean, exactly? Is something going to happen to me? Will something happen... to Yui? We’re already exceeding the normal bounds of reality with this phenomenon. How much worse can it possibly get? Not only that, but now I’ve got a third party catching me in the act. At this rate, he’ll realize I’m the mastermind— I start to panic.

I need to get out of here. Right now. If they find out I’m behind the Phantom Projection, I’m dead. Taichi sees me as Uwa Chihiro. *Uwa Chihiro*. I need to do something. I need to bluff my way through this. It’s my only option. I don’t have time to hesitate. If I want to get out of this alive—I have to convince him I’m not me.

“[Yaegashi Taichi’s vision of Inaba—Enjouji Shino]!”

Whew. That was close. I almost said Inaba’s name on reflex, but then I remembered she’s probably going to show up any minute now— “Chihiro... Oh, wait... That’s not Chihiro. Sorry, Inaba.”

Instantly, my mind goes blank. The Projection must’ve defaulted to the first name I said.

I feel my entire body break out in a cold sweat.

Just roll with it. Roll with it. Roll with it. Roll with it.

Focus. You need to get out of here— “Hey, Taichi! Oh, Chihiro’s here too? What’s up with that?”

A moment later, Inaba Himeko arrives on the fourth floor. Now Taichi can see two Inabas—the real one as well as my Phantom.

“Wh... Huh? Inaba... and... Inaba... Two of them? Two... Inabas...?” Taichi mumbles.

“If that’s Taichi... No, but... they’re both Taichi...? Two Taichis...?” Yui mumbles.

Both of them are staring, eyes as wide as the human body will allow, babbling like they’re broken inside.

I start to shake so hard, I worry I’m about to break next. I feel like I’m going to pass out... but once again, the two of them beat me to it.

Their eyes are unseeing. Their minds are gone. They’re breaking. Breaking. Breaking.

And I’m the incompetent loser who broke them.

—When Kiriyama Yui and Yaegashi Taichi next awoke, their memories were gone.

Chapter 6: The Starring Role

After eating lunch with friends, Enjouji Shino had left the cafeteria with the rest of the group and was headed back to the classroom when she spotted three of her senpai from the Cultural Research Club—Nagase Iori, Inaba Himeko, and Aoki Yoshifumi—out in the courtyard.

Shino felt an impulse to go and talk to them... so she told her friends to go on without her.

And yet, no matter how badly her heart longed to run over to them, her body refused to cooperate. Her feet remained firmly planted on the ground, almost as though they'd taken root. So instead she stared at them, willing them to notice her instead. They were talking amongst themselves, but at this distance, she couldn't hear what they were saying.

Once again, here she was, standing on the sidelines... but this time, she was keeping her distance for an entirely different reason.

Then, another CRC senpai passed by—Kiriyama Yui, walking with (presumably) her friend. Normally Yui would dash right over to chat with her fellow clubmates... but today she simply inclined her head in a half-hearted greeting and kept on walking.

Almost like they weren't friends but mere acquaintances.

The other senpai didn't take this well. Nagase looked disappointed, Inaba looked hurt, and Aoki looked like he was ready to tear his hair out.

They all used to shine so brightly... but now all their light had been snuffed out. One of their perfect friendships had been spirited away—not damaged, but *erased*.

As Yui and her friend drew near, Shino could make out part of their conversation: "Look, Yui, did something happen with your club? It feels like there's something going on with you guys."

"N-No, everything's fine. Nothing's going on, Yukina."

"I'm not sure I buy that... You haven't been talking to Iori or Yaegashi in class,

either.”

“You’re just overthinking things. Seriously, don’t worry about it... Please.”

“Well, I guess if you *reeeally* want me to drop it, then I’d better drop it... Just remember, you can come to me if you ever need to talk.”

That was when Shino made eye contact with Yui’s friend. Now that she wasn’t so far away, Shino recognized her as the track member who got permission for the CRC to join their April marathon, back before the first-years had officially joined.

When the other girl recognized her, her lips curled in a grin, flashing her pearly whites. Shino hastily bowed in return. To think the other girl would remember her... It was an honor she hadn’t been expecting.

But as for Yui... She merely afforded Shino a small glance as she walked past. No smile. No nod. No greeting.

Almost like they were strangers... like two ships passing in the night.

□■□■□

Yaegashi Taichi and Kiriyama Yui had lost all of their memories pertaining to the Cultural Research Club.

Shino didn’t know what had happened between them or what could have caused it. All she knew was that at some point the two of them had passed out, and when they awoke, those memories were gone.

Honestly speaking, retrograde amnesia was probably best treated at a hospital, but for some reason the other CRC senpai all insisted that wouldn’t be necessary. After all, the amnesia itself was fairly limited, and—they didn’t say this part explicitly, but—the implication was that they had an idea of what could have caused it.

It was like someone had reached into their brains and neatly trimmed out everything tied to the Cultural Research Club, including any events or relationships connected to it. Conversely, this meant that they remembered everything else just fine—which was fortunate, as it meant their daily lives weren’t directly impacted.

Fortunately, Taichi and Yui still remembered the rest of the second-years, though not as clubmates but as students in the same grade. Because of this, their fellow classmates were more likely to see the drastic shift in closeness as “strained friendships” rather than capital-A amnesia.

Unfortunately, anyone who had met either Taichi or Yui solely through the CRC—namely, Uwa Chihiro and Shino herself—had been wiped from the two second-years’ minds completely. The sole exception to this was Chihiro and Yui, who had attended the same karate dojo for years prior. But Shino wasn’t as fortunate. She had been erased from both of the second-years’ minds.

Not much she could do about it now, of course. She knew that.

Shino thought back to everything Iori, Inaba, and Aoki had told her.

According to them, Taichi and Yui didn’t see themselves as having amnesia—which made sense, because they wouldn’t remember enough to know that anything was amiss. Naturally, this led one to wonder what club they thought they were in, if not the CRC. Well, when they asked Taichi and Yui about this, they both claimed they had received special permission to create single-member clubs—the Style Club for Yui, and the Pro Wrestling Research Club (whatever that entailed) for Taichi. Their brains had come up with the perfect fabrication to smooth out the wrinkles.

Naturally, the other second-years didn’t sit back and accept this. They immediately started to recount old stories and show them old articles they’d written for the Culture Bulletin... but this produced no results. Each time they tried, Taichi and Yui would clutch their heads in agony—a pain so strong, they could no longer speak.

The two of them recognized that everyone else associated them with the Cultural Research Club, and they had a latent understanding that they were “possibly forgetting something,” but any attempt to ruminate too deeply on the subject would give them splitting headaches.

In short, even without their memories of the CRC, Taichi and Yui were still able to live normal teenage lives.

After the second-years (mainly Inaba) had finished explaining all this to Shino and Chihiro, there was a point near the end in which Inaba had stated, “I know

this is hard to believe, and I know you probably still want us to take them to the hospital anyway, but... I wanted to be open with you, because I doubt we could keep this shit hidden for long.”

But although Inaba seemed anxious, Shino was firm.

“Don’t worry, I believe you.”

She didn’t have a choice, after all.

But this conversation had happened too late. Her one chance to actually *come to believe it* had long since come and gone.

One could argue that she was innocent. After all, she had taken no direct action of her own. But through her inaction as a passive bystander—especially one who knew better—she had essentially sided with the perpetrator. And that meant she was just as guilty. She was complicit in destroying the beautiful world she once knew.

Perhaps she was every bit as spineless and useless as she claimed.

□■□■□

That morning, I summoned all of my courage and went after Chihiro. No longer could I put my head in the sand and ignore it.

I had made numerous attempts thus far, all of them ending in Chihiro’s escape... but this time, I promised myself, I was going to try really, really hard. This was *my* responsibility, and it was up to me to see it through.

“Ch... Chihiro-kun!”

I had turned over a new leaf. For real this time. I was prepared.

There in the deserted hallway, Chihiro wordlessly turned back to face me.

“Eeek...!” Reflexively, I let out a little shriek.

His expression was hostile, his eyes glassy, and beneath them were a pair of pronounced dark circles. His whole face was gaunt, like a sick person... or worse.

I could tell he was at his breaking point... and I knew exactly what was breaking him.

“Um... Our senpai sure are having a rough time, huh?” I offered.

At first, he didn’t respond—just stared at me with those dead, empty eyes.

“I... I think there’s gotta be a root cause behind all this... Wait... Oh, right, I guess pretty much everything has a cause... That’s how science works... Oh, um, but that’s not what I meant...”

Gosh, what am I saying? I’m confusing myself at this point!

“The... the... the point is...” I swallowed hard.

Chihiro didn’t move an inch. Almost like a zombie or something.

“You... um...”

Don’t chicken out. You have to stand your ground!

I felt my eyes grow hot.

“You wouldn’t happen to... be involved... by any chance, would you...?”

You know... involved with that... THING. If it even really exists.

The blood drained from Chihiro’s face as shock and fear set in. That one look told me everything I needed to know. It wasn’t a dream or an illusion. It wasn’t all in my head. And I was wrong to tell myself it “wasn’t my business.”

It was real. All of it.

“...E-Excuse me? The hell are you saying?” Chihiro shot back after a long and obvious pause.

“Well... maybe the reason Taichi-senpai and Yui-senpai lost their memories... is because *you-know-what* is involved... and maybe you’re working with it.”

“That’s your little hypothesis? Is that it?”

His gaze honed in on me as his eyes narrowed, his glare made ever more effective paired with his ghastly complexion. I shrank back, but he leaned in, a deranged look in his eyes.

“Enlighten me, Enjouji. What *exactly* do you think is going on here?”

One thing was for certain: right now, Chihiro wasn’t safe to be around.

“Have you talked to him, too?”

Oh god, what if he erases my memory, too? The instant this thought crossed my mind, my entire body froze. *I don't know him. Never met him. I don't know anything, and I don't want to.*

"Wh... Who are you talking about?" I asked—a stupid question, considering I was the one who brought it up in the first place. My lips curled into a sheepish smile. All of this purely on instinct. It was a conditioned reflex ingrained in me over the course of many, many years... like a stain I couldn't wash out.

How stupid I must've looked to Chihiro in that moment.

"Forget it."

He wants to drop the issue. He's pushing me away. Just like the rest of this planet.

"You don't know him, right?"

No... He's not just dropping the issue. He's cutting me off.

"Right?"

Before I knew it, I was nodding. I didn't have a choice. I was just going through the motions, floating along the path the world had predetermined for me, like a glorified puppet.

"That's what I thought." Chihiro smirked darkly and stepped away, signaling that our conversation was over.

What am I doing? This isn't what I wanted. Didn't I promise myself things would be different this time?

Maybe it was too late now... but I didn't care. I ran after him.

"Ch... Chihiro-kun!"

"What is it this time?"

"Umm... Does the name «Heartseed»—Aagh!"

With frightening strength, he seized me by my uniform bow tie and pulled me in close, his bloodshot eyes blazing. "Don't you *dare* speak that name."

Fearing for my physical safety, I nodded my assent, trembling. He tightened his grip on my tie, crushing it, pulling it tight around my windpipe. Tears pricked

in the corners of my eyes. I was shaking so bad, it was making Chihiro's hand shake with me... *No, that's not right. It's not me, it's him! Wait, what?*

With his hand seizing me by the collar, he was clearly in the dominant, threatening position... but somehow it felt like *he* was the one crying out for help. And for some reason, this inspired me to take action. I was going to make a stand.

"Ch... Chihiro-kun, listen... I can't turn away from it anymore! I met «Heartseed», just like y—hgghh!"

"*I told you, DON'T SAY ITS NAME!*" he screamed in my face.

Stop! You're scaring me!

"Hnn... nnnnn..." Tears rolled down my cheeks. I couldn't breathe—not because he was choking me, but because I was too scared to move.

Before I could find my words again, however, he flung me loose. "Stay away from me," he spat, then turned and walked away.

After that, no matter how many times I tried, I couldn't get Chihiro to talk to me.

The truth is that I, Enjouji Shino, once met «Heartseed» while it was possessing the body of Gotou Ryuuzen.

I was out walking the dog one day when it turned up out of nowhere and spoke to me. It showed me proof of its power to convince me that it wasn't just Gotou doing a silly voice—it was something else borrowing his body. Then it told me it would give me one of these mysterious powers... so long as I agreed to use it against the CRC quintet.

When I got scared and refused, it tried to reassure me by telling me Uwa Chihiro would be on my side... but I was still too scared to accept. Instead, I took off running.

Later, I convinced myself I'd daydreamed the whole thing. I mean, how could something like *that* possibly be real? It wasn't merely beyond my capacity. It was a crushing weight, and I didn't want it resting on *my* shoulders. So I pretended it never happened. I told myself it was fiction and ejected it from my

reality. I averted my eyes from the truth.

But Chihiro, when presented with the same opportunity, had made a different choice. He took action.

I didn't pay attention to «Heartseed»'s explanation of how its power worked, so I only have a vague idea. And right now, that isn't enough information to help me decide what to do about it. So the first step to finding a solution is to get Chihiro's side of the story.

"Finding a solution"... I must sound so arrogant. I can't even manage to hold a conversation with Chihiro, and that's the *first step*. No matter what I try to do, it never changes anything. Enjouji Shino will always be a background NPC.

I was really going to try my hardest today. I wanted to stand up and fight. But I just... can't.

After school, we all headed out to the athletic field in our gym clothes for Sports Festival practice. There, I spotted Inaba, Nagase, and Aoki all standing together in a group. They did that a lot these days.

"Hi, senpai! Are we having club tod—?"

"No. Sorry. No club today," Inaba cut in brusquely. She seemed like she was in a bad mood... Then she faltered. "Look, uh... It's not your fault, alright? Don't let it get you down. It's just... We might not be able to do club activities for a while. I'm sorry." Her tone was softer now. Maybe she felt guilty for being so curt with me.

"Oh, no, um, th-that's okay... It's fine..."

"Sorry, Shino-chan." Nagase came over and gave me a soft, reassuring hug. Her usual goofy cheer was nowhere to be seen.

"Just double-checking, but you're *sure* you haven't had any weird stuff happen to you? Anyone say or do anything that didn't feel right?" Aoki asked.

"N-No, I think I'm fine," I answered, since it was technically true. If anything, I was a perpetrator, not a victim.

Even after everything they'd been through, my senpai still had the energy to worry about me and Chihiro. They were so sweet and kind, it brought tears to

my eyes and made my chest ache.

Although I could hazard a guess at what was going on behind the scenes, I still hadn't told them about «Heartseed» or Chihiro, and at this point it felt like I was hiding it from them deliberately. But somehow, I just didn't think they'd believe me. Plus, «Heartseed» itself had warned me not to go telling people about it "for the sake of everyone involved." That was why I felt I needed to hash things out with Chihiro, since he was bound to have a better understanding of the situation than I did.

Until then, I couldn't in good conscience pledge my support to the three of them.

I pulled away from Nagase's soft curves and took a step back, staring at the ground with a faint smile. "I'm sad we won't have club activities, but I understand why, so..."

The three second-years apologized to me again, and I insisted it was fine. "Fine"? What could possibly be "fine" about this?

Just then, Yaegashi Taichi and Kiriyama Yui walked up together... heading in our direction.

"Taichi!"

"Yui!"

Instantly, Inaba and Aoki lit up like fireworks, while Nagase balled her hands into fists. My heart fluttering in my chest, I looked back at Taichi and Yui. After losing their memories, the two of them should have been reduced to mere classmates in each other's eyes, and yet they were walking side by side, as if they'd gone back to the way they were meant to be.

My chest filled with hope. Maybe this tragedy was all just a bad dream— Then the two of them noticed the four of us. Grimacing awkwardly, Taichi headed off to the right and Yui went left, giving our group a wide berth as they headed to the center of the athletic field.

And just like that, they were gone. The pentagon was still broken.

Now more than ever, I realized just how badly it hurt that the two of them

were avoiding the others.

“Tai...chi...” Inaba called weakly, her hand closing on empty air. As lovers, the two of them had been head over heels for each other, and now they weren’t even on speaking terms. The whole relationship was just... gone. Erased.

After a moment, Inaba collapsed to the ground.

“Inaban?!” Nagase rushed over to help her up.

“Oh... Sorry... My legs kinda gave out there...”

The three of them were trying to be strong, but their hearts had all reached the breaking point, and it was only a matter of time before everything came crumbling down.

I shouldn’t watch this, I thought, and turned away.

The CRC quintet was so powerful... I refused to believe they were at the end of their rope. For a weakling like me, they were all I had to believe in. I needed them to resolve this in my place.

Not like it was all riding on *me* or anything. I could never handle that. It just wasn’t possible.

I had longed to be a part of that pentagon. And when me and Chihiro joined, it became a heptagon. Everything *seemed* to be going well, but on the inside, I was worried my presence would upset the natural balance of things.

Then the heptagon broke. Two people left, leaving only five once again. Almost like me and Chihiro were their replacements. Almost as though I had gotten my wish in the worst possible way.

This wasn’t what I wanted. Not at all.

It felt like the Yamaboshi High School Cultural Research Club was only allowed to be a quintet, nothing more and nothing less. Was that its destiny?

I tried my best, but once again, fate stuck me with the short end of the stick.

Despite the fact that no one was looking at me anymore, I bowed my head politely and hurried away.

Once the Sports Festival practice was underway, each team’s cheerleading

squad split off for rehearsal.

Inaba, Aoki, and I were all on Green Team, and our progress was slower than molasses. We were divided into two performances, one with just the third-years and one with both the first-and second-years, and the latter of the two was a complete mess. The main reason for this was because my class, 1-B, was entirely unmotivated, but today was especially bad. Inaba's usually snappy direction was slow and unfocused; meanwhile, Aoki was supposed to be acting as the "hype man" of sorts, but his energy was pathetically low.

"Alright, let's go over the choreography one more time..."

"Look alive, people! Brisk movements!"

The second-years were doing their best, but there was simply no overcoming the dull, lifeless vibe exuded by the first-years. We were all sluggish, like a herd of zombies.

"Man, this sucks..."

"It's so hot..."

"I freaking hate this..."

"Screw this cheerleading shit..."

All around me, people were grumbling complaints. The comments themselves were quiet, but when overlapped with everyone else's, they formed a bitter, resentful atmosphere that slowly but surely took on a weight of its own. It wasn't even directed at me, and yet I felt sick to my stomach. My mood was in a tailspin.

I hate this. I want to go home.

But although I kept these thoughts to myself, that negative energy was still there, contributing to the misery. Once again, in my inaction, I had become a perpetrator. But that knowledge didn't change anything. I was still paralyzed. Or at least, I was pretending to be, all the while not lifting a finger to stop what I knew was coming.

Everyone else is doing it, too. It's not like I'm doing it on purpose. There's nothing I can do about it. It's not my fault.

But then, a particularly uncoordinated member of the cheerleading representatives caught my eye up front. It was Uwa Chihiro, radiating a dark aura that seemed to drain the energy of all those around him.

I was entirely unrelated to the CRC's current crisis. Chihiro, on the other hand, was behind it all. It was *his* fault. And yet...

...Once again, in my inaction, I had become a perpetrator.

□■□■□

I really do hate myself sometimes.

After Sports Festival practice ends and I change back into my uniform, I head up to the roof of the East Wing and gaze out across campus. After today, I feel like a total failure.

I wanted a private place to put my thoughts together for a while. Granted, the roof isn't exactly private—there are a few other people up here—but none of them are paying attention, thank goodness.

A sheet of clouds now covers the sky, blocking some of the heat. I lean against the fence and exhale.

I'm such a pathetic loser. My heart sincerely wants to keep trying, but every time I do, I find myself once again bogged down by spineless hesitation.

Just this morning, I was practically brimming with determination. I thought I'd finally made up my mind for real. Told myself I'd turned over a new leaf. But that resolve didn't even last half a day.

I convinced myself it was my responsibility... that it was up to me to handle it... but then my stupid passive brain took over and passed it all off onto everyone else. How many times have I gone through this same exact thing?

I've compared my life to a lot of different media—movies, manga, novels, self-help books—and each time I come away inspired to change something. *Be more positive. Exercise more. Study more. Make new friends. Spice up my life. Be more popular. Be happy.*

I want to change. I feel like I need to. So I make an attempt. But when it comes to pursuing my ideals, I never get very far. I make it about three steps,

stall for a while, then eventually end up right where I started. It's almost like there's an invisible wall, and only the chosen few are allowed to make it past that point... Maybe I'm just not one of those people. Maybe that's why I can't change.

When I enrolled at Yamaboshi, I knew the after-school club I chose would greatly affect the outcome of my high school life... so I summoned up all my courage and made an effort to approach people who were decidedly out of my league, all for the sake of working toward a more ideal me.

That's a step forward.

Then I finally admitted to myself that the monstrous entity known as «Heartseed» was real. That's another step.

I even sought out Chihiro, even though he scares me, all because I wanted to work toward a solution. That's another step.

I'm clearly trying. I'm making an effort. But no matter how many steps I take, I never *accomplish* anything. It makes me think maybe I can't actually do anything at all. Maybe I don't matter, and so I'll never have an impact on anything.

Then what's even the point of me being alive?

I look down at the ground through the fence. I'm so high up... If I climbed over this fence and jumped off, I could smash myself into paste on the concrete, and then I wouldn't have to suffer anymore— Wait, what am I thinking? Don't even joke about that!

Spooked, I back away from the fence.

But just then, I spot someone who looks like Iori down in the courtyard. I squint for a better look. Sure enough, it's her... and Inaba and Aoki are with her. As usual, it looks like they're talking about something.

I gaze down at the tiny figures from high above. From this point of view, even my perfect senpai look miniscule, and I'm reminded that they really are just human. Is this how God sees us, too? If so, I bet we all look really stupid, unwittingly trying to fight against the predetermined outcome into which we've been railroaded. Instead of just going with the flow, we struggle upstream,

needlessly hurting ourselves in the process. Why bother?

Meanwhile, down on the ground, my itty-bitty senpai suddenly dash off in unison, each headed in a different direction. Did they decide on a plan of action, or are they dealing with something else entirely?

Inaba runs to the North Wing, Iori to the East Wing, and Aoki to the school gates. From where I'm standing, they look so small... and yet they run with confidence, firm and unwavering. I was wrong—they're not small at all. They have *significance*. Their actions *mean* something.

Why? How? I don't know. Theoretically they shouldn't. By all appearances, they were miniscule... and yet at the same time they were big and bright and *dazzling*.

Why? How? What's your secret? Someone please explain it to me so I can replicate it.

—Isn't that why you joined the CRC? Weren't you planning to discover it for yourself?

I think back to how I felt back then.

I've already taken the first step. Even *I'm* capable of that much. Sure, I might stall at the second or third step, but at least I've gotten this far, right?

Can't I just... try again?

Yeah... Maybe I can.

I head down the staircase and across the hall. My destination: Rec Hall Room 401.

I'm going to make a stand. I'm going to change, I tell myself silently. I can't stay like this, that's for sure. I need to psych myself up. So I'm going to the clubroom. I'll think back to the time I first found my courage... and everything my senpai have taught me since then.

Arriving at the Rec Hall, I head up the stairs. Time to get some kindling and light a fire in my heart... a fire that will empower me to fight on.

—Haven't you already tried this a dozen times? my pessimist brain retorts. *And didn't you fail spectacularly every single time?*

Yeah, well, this time it's going to be different.

—Gee, where have I heard that one before?

I know. I've said it a million times, only to ultimately prove myself wrong. I get that.

—Why don't you just give it up already?

I don't *want* to give up. It's not game over unless I let it be.

—You're just dragging out the inevitable. The "new beginning" you seek is never gonna happen.

Sure. Maybe it won't.

—You realize your inaction brought this tragedy on everyone, right?

Yeah, I do. After what I let happen to Taichi and Yui, and all the suffering I brought onto the others, I understand the weight of my choices.

As I climb the stairs, my legs grown leaden, and I feel myself hesitate.

But right now, I'm not the only one fighting. There are three people out there who have it a lot worse than I do, and they're still giving it everything they've got. They know the clouds can't block out their sunshine forever.

And if they can do it, I can, too. Come on, me. Just follow the light.

One more step... Now another... Almost there... I repeat the words like a mantra as I will myself up the stairs. I feel the urge to cry, but I keep going. I can't stop now.

Who cares if I can't do it, if I'm out of my depth, if I can't change? Maybe I'm pathetic, but so what? I'm going to do this anyway. For as long as it takes. Again and again and again.

Normally, this was the part where I would hit my third step and come to a standstill. Yes, that's what would usually happen. But as it turned out, this time was different. As of right now, the usual routine was already derailed.

How do I know this?

Because Yaegashi Taichi was standing outside the clubroom.

—If you get your motivation from seeing him, it doesn't really count as doing it on your own anymore, don't you think?

Shush! Enough! We'll come back to that later! Because if he's here at the clubroom... maybe it means he got his memories back! Gosh, I hope so!

Sensing my presence, Taichi turns toward me, and our eyes meet. How long has it been since he last registered my presence?

"Oh, are you part of this club? Sorry to bother you! I know it's not my place, but for some reason I just... really wanted to stop by... I don't really get it. Some of my classmates are saying I've lost my memories... Actually, never m—Whoa!"

"TAICHI-SENPAAAAI!" My emotions swell up all at once, and I fling my arms around him, wailing. From his perspective, he must've been startled to have some random girl throw herself at him.

Then he drags me up to the deserted Rec Hall rooftop, and I realize he probably didn't want to risk anyone seeing us.

"L-Listen, um... I... I'm sorry I invaded your personal space!" I bowed my head in shame of my presumptuous behavior. My emotions had, thankfully, calmed down a bit.

"Oh, no, it's fine. Just... don't sue me for sexual harassment, okay?" He bowed back. Wait, why would he apologize?

"No, no! This was entirely my fault."

"No, no! That's not true. I'm partially to blame."

"No, really..."

"No, really..."

"No, really..."

"...Can we give it a rest now?"

"Oh! R-Right! Sorry, Taichi-senpai!"

And so, with his help, our fruitless Japanese apology battle finally comes to an end.

"So, just to confirm: Do you know me from somewhere, miss?"

It’s been so long since I last heard his calm, soothing voice... And he even called me “miss”! I could die and go to heaven... Wait, what am I thinking?! Focus!

“Y-Yes, I do.”

“Well... I’m really sorry, but... I don’t remember you, so... How do we know each other, exactly?”

It actually really hurt to have him say that point-blank to my face.

“Oh, no, um... You don’t actually know me. It’s just a one-sided thing. I’m Enjouji Shino, from Class 1-B. It’s nice to finally meet you.”

“Enjouji-san, is it? Nice to meet you.”

Once again, our reset relationship begins anew. What a bizarre feeling.

Technically, Inaba told me I’m supposed to stay away from him and Yui lest I “get dragged into this mess,” but surely she’ll forgive me. After all, it’s not like I expressly hunted him down. It just sort of happened, that’s all... She’ll forgive me, right?

“So how come you were crying?”

Ah. Looks like we’re getting right to the point.

“Nngh... W-Well...”

That reminds me, Iori once told me: “Taichi’s biggest weapon is the element of surprise. That’s how he turned Inaban into Ina-bashful. Just be careful, okay, Shino-chan?”

“Umm... I’m... not sure what to say...”

“Well, I may not know you, but you certainly know me. And since we’re already here, I’d like to help you.”

Turns out Taichi is still an incredible person, with or without his memories. He took one look at a total stranger and agreed to help, no questions asked! I could never hope to compete with someone as cool as him—No, stop! We promised we’re going to make it work this time, remember?

And so I decide to tell him everything that’s on my mind... in the hopes that

something, anything, will finally change.

I can't give him the full story, obviously, so I skip the details and focus on the crux of the issue.

"Let's see... So you've been trying and trying, over and over, but you feel like you can't accomplish anything, and now you're wondering how you can change. Is that right?"

"Y-Yeah, exactly. I'm not completely sure if changing myself is the answer... It's just... I want to succeed at any cost..."

Now that I think about it, I realize I'm asking for help from the person supposed to be helping. Jeez, I'm such a mess.

"So you want results, hmm?"

"See, I've always been pretty useless. I'm kind of a hopeless case. I *try* to give it my best, but I get the feeling my 'best' is nowhere near anyone else's... and I don't have any redeeming qualities to balance it out."

"What makes you think that? Everyone has their good points, even you."

"N-No, I really don't! Not when you compare me to actual cool people... They're just naturally cool, and I'm not!"

"Oh yeah? Tell me about these 'cool people' you speak of."

"Well... There's this one senpai who's really nice. He's so compassionate, he'll even offer to help total strangers—oops..."

Crap! I said it right to his face! He's gonna think I'm obsessed with him or something!

"Hmmm... You're right. He *does* sound pretty cool."

"That said, he can be pretty dense at times!" (Fortunately for me.) "And from what I've heard, at one point he had the two prettiest girls in school fighting over him until eventually he decided to date the smart one!"

"Man, some guys have all the luck. I hope that asshole gets what's coming to him."

"I agree." No joke. "A-Anyway... so yeah, there are these cool people, and

then there's me, and I'm completely useless."

"Wait, hold on. What do the cool people have to do with you being useless?"

"W-Well... I'm just... inadequate, in a lot of ways..."

"Okay, look. What specifically makes you think you're so useless?"

"Huh? Well, I'm slow on the uptake, and I'm bad at school, and I'm not very athletic, and I'm a slow learner, and I'm indecisive, and I tend to get nervous and screw up... Stuff like that."

Ugh... Now I feel bad. I'm so worthless. I bet even Taichi can tell. He must be sad to see how utterly hopeless I am— "Oh, is that all?"

His words defy my every expectation. I stare at him in shock. I must have misheard.

"Uh... Wha...? What do you mean, *is that all...?!* You think it's nothing?! Because it feels like an awful lot to me!"

"No, it's not 'nothing.' Think about it this way: Sure, you're slow on the uptake, and bad at school, and not very athletic, and a slow learner, and indecisive, and you tend to get nervous and screw up... but so what? That's all it is."

" 'So what'?! I'm pretty sure these are fatal flaws!"

"Alright, settle down. Let me ask you this: am I wrong?"

"Huh? Oh... W-Well, no... I mean, yes, technically, that's 'all it is,' but... but it's a problem!"

"I don't see how any of those things are stopping you from accomplishing anything."

They... aren't? "B-But...!"

"None of those things automatically make you useless."

He's right... I've taken at least *one* step forward, so clearly I'm not *completely* useless... Maybe I just don't have what it takes to see things through.

"To me, there's something else that matters beyond all that. Something everyone has, deep down," he continues.

“But... but there are so many people who can do things better than I can! They’ll finish in minutes when it takes me hours!” I blurt out, even though it’s not really a direct argument. “Those people have *impact*... but me, I... I’m just a forgettable bit part... I can’t do anything...!”

“You’re not a bit part, Enjouji-san. You’re the starring role.”

“The... *starring role?!* I can’t be the star! I’m too boring! Any story with me at the center would be a total snoozefest for everyone else!”

“So? Who cares about everyone else? It’s *your* story. At least, that’s what I think.”

...Do I really get to have my own story?

“Besides, I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but people love stories about ordinary, ‘inadequate’ characters who go on to do great things.”

Ordinary characters doing great things... He’s right. That’s a popular narrative. But even then, the protagonist isn’t just some random person. They’re chosen for a reason. Maybe they receive a special power, or— “Anyway, my advice is to take action.”

—or maybe *they take a stand*.

Suddenly, it all clicks into place. I feel like I’m onto something huge—like maybe this time really *will* be different. In fact, I get the feeling this just made all my struggling worthwhile. This is my big awakening. This is my revolution!

“Wait... um... Am I embarrassing myself right now? This doesn’t really feel like me... Actually, it kinda feels like I had to learn this lesson myself somehow... but when...?” He tilts his head in puzzlement, his cheeks flushed faintly pink. Apparently he’s still retained all his character development even with the relevant memories gone.

“Taichi-senpai, you can be pretty cringey, you know that? Is that how you get all the girls?”

“Cringey?! Geez, I hope that’s not how I get the girls... Wait, what? I haven’t gotten any girls!”

“Well, I think you have the right voice for it, at least!”

“What does that have to do with anything?!”

The embarrassment is so palpable on his face, I can’t help but laugh. He really is a force to be reckoned with. I’ve never felt this empowered in all my life.

After I catch my breath, I find myself muttering, “Do you really think a loser like me can accomplish anything?”

“Of course you can. Anyone can do anything if they put their mind to it.”

Should’ve seen that one coming.

“I mean, if you sincerely believed it was impossible, then you wouldn’t try to do it in the first place, right?”

Wow... He’s a genius! I think I get it... I *actually* get it this time! Gosh, I’m so glad I joined the Cultural Research Club!

“I... I think I can do it...!”



“Yeah? Glad to be of service.”

What a touching little moment. I almost wish we could stay like this forever... but we can’t. Why? Because I need to take the next step. I’m going to save Taichi and Yui—myself.

“Thank you so much for hearing me out! I have to go take care of something, so I’ll see you later!”

I bow to him, then head for the door. Just a few meters from now, as soon as I cross that threshold, the game is back on.

But the moment Taichi leaves my sight, I suddenly feel alone and frightened. Can I really do this? If I can’t make it happen this time, I’m as good as sunk—Maybe I need a little more encouragement to keep me going.

“Taichi-senpai... Could you do me a favor? Could you say ‘You can do it, Shino’?” I ask without looking back.

“Oh, uh, okay... You can do it, Shino.”

“ALLLLLRIGHTY, THAT’S A MIGHTY FINE VOICE!”

And with that, I take a step.

One, two, three—four—!

“I’ll say this much, Enjouji-san... You may think you’re boring, but *I* sure don’t.”

□■□■□

This time it’s going to happen. This time it’s for real.

...If we’re being honest, I’ve probably thought this exact same thing hundreds of times by now. I would always try to make myself believe it so I wouldn’t waver... but in the end, every single “this time it’s for real” would end up being phony. And no amount of promising or bargaining with myself could change that.

Some people can maintain the same level of motivation and confidence through to the end, and compared to them, I’m undeniably useless. I’m slow on the uptake, and I’m bad at school, and I’m not very athletic, and I’m a slow

learner, and I'm indecisive, and I tend to get nervous and screw up... but in the end, that's all there is to it.

For us inadequate folks, there's one thing we need to turn those "this time..." commitments into the real deal: initiative. And not just any initiative—*life-changing* initiative.

Obviously, changing your life is no walk in the park. So if you're going to do it, then you have to *do it*. If you want to get better at school, then you have to start studying a little bit each day; if you want to get fit, then you have to do a bit of exercise, and so on. I have massive respect for those who can teach themselves new habits by taking these baby steps... but then again, maybe that's the default method for most people.

So what do you do when the default doesn't work for you? You fail, so you give up? No way! To heck with that!

If baby steps aren't enough to change anything, then you'll just have to go big and change *everything*. Maybe you take your study materials and hole yourself up somewhere away from the internet. Maybe you take a trip out to the mountains and train until you can run an entire Ironman Triathlon. Or maybe... just maybe... you face off against an otherworldly monster named «Heartseed» that, by all rights, should only ever exist in dreams or fiction.

Right now, everything Taichi said to me is still just talk. It's not a magic formula. It's not going to change me overnight. Trust me, I've read enough bestselling self-help books and listened to enough motivational speakers to know that much. It's just that none of them were real for me.

Okay, maybe that's not quite it. In actuality, I just let them stay phony instead of making them real.

In the end, words are just words. Squiggles on paper. *You're* the one who has to make something out of them.

In my case, I got these words from someone I deeply respect... so I'm going to make this the real deal.

Rain pours down from the dark clouds above me, but I pay it no mind. It's just water. It's not enough to stop me.

I’m taking action—I’m going to go have a talk with Chihiro. Maybe it sounds easy to most people, but so what? I’m not most people.

I’m a hopeless loser, and it takes me a lot of courage to do the same things everyone else can manage with ease. So when I *do* manage those same things, they feel like major accomplishments.

Before now, I always let myself take the easy way out. I let myself get used to not trying. But that’s *not* okay anymore. I’m going to be better than that.

Once a person has grown accustomed to indolence, however, it’ll take a dramatic shift to pull them out of that funk...

I remember «it» told me I could come back here if I ever changed my mind... All I have to do is call its name, and the door will open.

So here I am at the nature park near the school. Bring it on, «Heartseed». I’m gonna open that door.

I’m gonna change my life. Change it completely. Change *myself*.

I take a deep, deep breath... and scream louder than I’ve ever screamed before.

“*GET OUT HERE, «HEARTSEED»!*”

As it turns out, doing something dramatic can have dramatic results.

Chapter 7: At Any Given Moment

As I'm walking down the hall, by pure coincidence, Kiriyama Yui passes by in the opposite direction—but she doesn't interact with me beyond a curt nod. Once again, she's headed off to the karate dojo without even stopping by the clubroom.

Yui no longer remembers anything about the Cultural Research Club. When she looks at me, all she sees now is a kouhai and fellow karate student... Maybe this is my punishment.

Over the past few days since I caused the paradox that wiped her and Yaegashi Taichi's memories, I've come to realize just how utterly and painfully powerless I truly am. I'm not special; I never was. But then I met «Heartseed», and it gave me the power of Phantom Projection, and I happily deluded myself into thinking I was one of the chosen few.

I'd promised myself right from the start that I would never let it go to my head... but there I was, strutting around like some big man on campus. Worse still, the arrogance wasn't my only problem; after my first taste of power, I soon found myself overcome with a hunger for more. My mind wasn't strong enough to fight it, and so I steadily grew tainted...

And then I did something I can never take back.

Now the Kiriyama Yui and Yaegashi Taichi I once knew are gone... and everything they worked so hard to build in that club has been destroyed without a trace. I may as well have murdered them with my own hands.

Me, special? What a joke. I'm not even worth the consideration.

The world runs on a system: there's the shepherds, and then there's the sheep. Myself, I was keenly aware of this. And the very last thing I wanted was to be a *sheep*.

But just like that, I sold myself out and took on the role of «Heartseed»'s little minion. I puffed myself up and told myself I was a genius, but really I was little more than a dog begging for a bone... and I took the bait without a second

thought.

Honestly, everyone should just stay away from a loser like me.

Lately Enjouji's been sticking her nose in my business, and I've had to shoo her away a couple times. Most recently, however, I found out that I'm not the only one «Heartseed»'s been talking to. All this time, I thought I was *the chosen one*... I can't describe how pathetic I felt when I realized just how delusional I'd been.

"Oh, hey, Chihiro!"

I look up to find Aoki Yoshifumi waving at me. Apparently I'm a magnet for CRC people today.

"Man, you're lookin' pretty pale and corpse-y today. You okay, li'l dude?"

The very ignoramus I once looked at with contempt now has me beat in every way.

"I mean, I'm sure you're worried about Yui and Taichi, and I get that. Just hang in there for a little longer, alright? We'll figure somethin' out!"

Sympathy from the enemy.

"Not to be a broken record about this, but are you *totally 100% sure* nothing weird's happened to you lately? Any WTF moments you might've had with someone you know? Did anyone..."

Before the game begins, you have to choose your side... and I chose the darkness.

"...or anything like that? ...Uhh, you listening, Chihiro?"

"Just shut up and leave me alone, okay?"

"Huh?"

I turn and head back to the classroom, leaving him with that stupid derpy look on his face.

I have nothing of value to offer this world.

"Hey, Uwacchi!"

Shimono turns around in his seat to face me. Wordlessly, I meet his gaze.

“Is something going on with you, bro? Judging from those gnarly dark circles under your eyes, I’m gonna guess you were up gaming all night. Did you get into an MMO or something? Because let me tell you, those things are like, *dangerously* addictive. Last time I tried one, I could literally *feel* myself getting obsessed. Had to delete it ASAP.”

Where did that come from? I ignore him.

“...Is that a no? Wait... *Ohhh*, okay, I get it. It’s a girl, isn’t it? Did you screw things up with Enjouji-san or something? Maybe you found out she already has a boyfriend and you’re hella jealous ‘cuz you wanted to be the first one to tap that? Been there.”

“What’s going on, guys? Butthurt that you haven’t gotten laid?” Tada cuts in out of nowhere.

These two have been talking to me a lot lately. Maybe they feel some kind of weird kinship toward me as a fellow cheerleading rep and/or guy who sucks at rock-paper-scissors.

“Look, man, don’t judge us just ‘cuz you already lost your V-card!”

“Settle down, Shimono. I’m not judging anyone, alright? Yeesh... You virgins sure love to play the victim...”

“Rrgh... Screw you!”

What a stupid, harmless conversation. All this time I scoffed and turned up my nose at them, but right now, even they feel far beyond me. I can only *wish* I was on their level... and it hurts.

Why did I have to encounter that *thing?* Why did I listen to it? Why did I accept its gift? Why did I agree to its terms? *Why me?*

“C’mon, Uwa! Help me out here! Tell him guys with girlfriends ought to have sympathy for the less fortunate! By which I mean hook us up with her friends! Wait... I never thought to ask, but... Oh god, please don’t tell me I’m the only virgin here...”

“I dunno, Shimono. *You* might be ugly as sin, but Uwa’s a good-lookin’ dude. I

bet he could—Uwa?”

Unable to stand it a minute longer, I get to my feet and leave the classroom. I can’t make small talk with these people anymore. You think I can share a laugh with my buddies right now? What a joke.

I don’t remember how they reacted, or if I said anything before I left, or even what time it was when I walked out.

Fuck it all.

With no club activities after school, I head home as soon as classes let out. I haven’t been to the dojo lately, either.

The second I walk into my room, I fling my (mostly empty) bookbag onto the bed, where it makes a wimpy little *whump* sound as it lands. Another day of no plans and nothing to do. Just idling my life away.

Suddenly I remember the scrapbook sitting on my bookshelf. I grab it and turn to the section I made for the Cultural Research Club. Then I remove all the photos I printed, throw them in the trash, and flop down onto the bed.

“Chihiro, I’m coming in,” my mom calls from the other side of the door.

Weird. She almost never tries to come in here.

“Chihiro, I notice you’ve been coming home early for the past few days. Is something going on with your club? What about karate practice?”

“Nothing’s going on, Mom.”

“Are you sure? You seem... *distant* lately, and I can’t help but wonder if these two things are related. Of course, I trust you to tell me if there’s a problem—”

“There *isn’t*. It’s *fine*.”

So fucking obnoxious.

Don’t try to act like you care. Most days you hardly remember I even exist. So if you’re not going to help me, then kindly shut the fuck up and stay out of it.

“Maybe you think it’s fine, but... you barely eat your dinner...”

Just fuck off already.

“I know you tend to keep to yourself, but if you want to talk to me about it—”

“JUST GET OUT!”

“...Okay, well... Let me know if you change your mind, alright? I’ll be here...”

And with that last pathetic attempt at parenting, she finally, mercifully leaves.

Don’t talk to me like you know me. You don’t know *anything*.

Fuck you.

The next day, I do my usual morning routine and leave the house. Feels like I’m running late. I was running late yesterday too, come to think of it... Is it still considered “late” if it’s the new norm? Whatever. Doesn’t matter.

Time goes by. Meanwhile, I’m caught between hell and purgatory.

Before I know it, I’m walking out of the school building, bookbag in hand. I guess school’s over already.

I must’ve been the first person to leave campus, because I don’t see any other Yamaboshi students on my way home. Just me.

By all accounts, the summer air should have been oppressively hot, and yet here I am shivering.

For days now I’ve been sitting around like a prisoner on death row, waiting to meet my fate. Meanwhile, all around me, this mediocre world keeps on turning.

—Now that you’ve joined me... don’t think for a moment you can go back to your ordinary life... unless you show me something worth my time.

It’s obvious I’m not going to make it out of this alive.

What’s going to happen now? What will it do to me? Will it wipe my memories? Saddle me with more tasks? Use me as a puppet? Or... will it erase my existence entirely?

It’s all over. I made a critical error and now I’m dead. My life is over, and there’s no going back. The only option left is to press the reset button and hope that I’ll be born a bit more fortunate in my next life—ideally, fortunate enough to never encounter the likes of «Heartseed» again.

Goodbye, Uwa Chihiro. It was nice knowing you...

No, no, no! I don’t want to die!

“Chihiro-kun?”

A voice rings out—the voice of a goddess.

How bitterly I’ve yearned to hear this voice.

Is this a miracle? It must be a miracle.

Biting back the urge to scream, I turn around...

And there she is.

Long chestnut strands glitter in the light as they hang over her petite frame, and I can practically feel the warmth radiating from her sweet smile.

It’s Kiriyama Yui.

“...Yui-san...?”

“Were you about to head home?” she asks, her expression bright and sunny like the springtime sky.

She remembers my name. She’s talking to me like a friend. Almost like I’ve somehow gone back in time to a point before I single-handedly screwed everything up.

“Uhh... Yui-san? Are your memories back?”

“Uh, you bet they are! And what a total nightmare, too! I *demand* to hear an explanation of what happened, mister. You owe me!”

One would think I’d be afraid to tell her, but at this point, I’m ready to give in. Ready to be free from this hell. I’m tired of running from my sins, and I don’t want to have to make myself disappear... so if there’s a third option, I’m all for it. What more could I possibly want, really?

“You’re right... Okay.”

“Cool. Let’s go to the clubroom.”

“Don’t worry. «Heartseed»’s the real villain here, not you. But just so you know, we already sent him packing. You have nothing to fear.”

Rec Hall Room 401, home to the Cultural Research Club. I haven’t been here

in a while, but it feels like I'm still welcome.

"It all happened so fast... It almost feels like it was all a dream," I mutter.

"It basically was," Yui replies. "None of it was your fault, Chihiro-kun. Just tell me what happened, okay?"

A dream. Of course! It all makes sense now. None of this should have been possible to begin with. «Heartseed» couldn't possibly exist in reality, much less its phenomena. What a relief...

And just like that, the dam bursts.

"On the day I decided to join the CRC, I encountered «Heartseed» controlling Gotou's body right there at the nature park. It said it just wanted to introduce itself. Then a few days later, we met again... It showed me its supernatural powers and asked me if I was interested. It said it would give me the power to create illusions, so long as I agreed to use that power to spice things up between the second years. And if I did well, it promised it would give me even more power... I fell for it hook, line, and sinker. I thought if I had a superpower, I could turn my average life into something extraordinary. Make the world interesting for a change. I wanted that power.

"At first, everything seemed to be going well... but when it started slipping, «Heartseed» criticized me and threatened my safety. So I started using my power more and more... but things only got worse. Then I got scared and panicked... and in my carelessness, I created a logical paradox. That's what made you and Taichi-san lose your memories. I'm so sorry, Yui-san... I didn't have a choice... I let the power go to my head, and I lost control..."

Why am I telling her all this? Telling her all about my embarrassing emotions? I can't stop myself. Meanwhile, she nods patiently as she listens. Then, near the end of my explanation, she finally speaks.

"Hey, so... This is kind of a belated question, but... What made you want to join the CRC originally?"

What does that have to do with anything? Well, okay, whatever. Let's see... I never really thought about it up till now. Mostly I was just going along with what they seemed to want...

But before I can organize my thoughts, my mouth starts moving of its own accord—like it's speaking from the heart.

"This place has something I want... Something I lack... Something I can't have."

It does? Oh... I get it. The thing my heart wants— God, how embarrassing. I need to think before I speak, or else who knows what I might tell her...

"Someone you love?" Yui asks casually.

I freeze. My heart skips a beat. The hell? Why did it do that?

"Actually, never mind. You don't have to answer that." She shakes her head.

Seriously? You're just going to change your mind? Okay, whatever. I'm not going to complain.

"I think I see what happened. Thank you for telling me," she continues.

"Oh, no problem..."

Fear sets in, and I start to worry I've said too much. I confessed to some pretty awful shit just now... but then again, she never once got upset... I guess it's probably fine, then.

"Okay, wait here for a sec," she says, rising to her feet. Does she need to use the restroom or something?

As I watch her stride towards the door, something hazily rises to the forefront of my mind. According to her, Taichi's memories came back at the same time as hers... so why wasn't he present for this little interrogation? Surely he'd want to know just as much as she did. It struck me as odd.

Then Yui stepped outside and shut the clubroom door.

A split-second later, the door opened again... and Enjouji Shino was standing there, her expression halfway between guilty and sympathetic.

"I'm sorry, Chihiro-kun," she whispers.

I don't get it. Sorry for what? Where did you come from? Where's Yui? She only just left. Did you bump into her in the hall?

—I'm sorry, Chihiro-kun.

I shake my head. No... It can't be.

But Enjouji apologized. And the door was only shut for a fraction of a second, which means surely the same person had to have opened it again. And when it opened, Enjouji was standing there. *Enjouji*. The other person who claimed to have met «Heartseed». Now the pieces are all falling into place, and there's just one logical conclusion...

"You've probably figured this out, but... that wasn't really Yui-senpai just now. It was me. I used that power «Heartseed» gave us."

I'VE BEEN HAD.

Enjouji tricked me... and now she knows everything.

"Pff... kehehehe... haha... AAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!"

For some reason I can't stop laughing. Something inside me is slipping. Breaking.

All my plotting, all my misdeeds, all my shame and misery... It's all been brought to light.

Of course Kiriyama Yui and Yaegashi Taichi wouldn't have gotten their memories back that easily.

And now I've unwittingly confessed to my crimes—hoisted by my own petard.

I joined the CRC because "it has something I want"? How ridiculous. I literally *attacked* the CRC. I'm their enemy. Why did I ever think for a moment that I would be forgiven? How deluded can I possibly be? There's no hope for me. I'm fucked. My only option now is to disappear.

And as soon as this thought crosses my mind, I shove Enjouji out of my way and bolt from the room.

I run all the way into town. I run until my breath gives out completely and I'm forced to slow down. Sweat pours from every inch of my body, making my button-up shirt cling uncomfortably to my skin.

I find myself at the station square shopping district. Neon signs clutter my vision—bars, fast food restaurants, karaoke joints, you name it. At this hour, this part of town is a popular after-school hangout spot; I can spot students in

uniform here and there among the crowds. But they're not the only ones, of course. There's the young office workers wearing three-piece suits despite the hot weather; older women laden with shopping bags; fashionistas wearing entirely too much makeup; hell, I can even see a couple of foreign tourists.

People, people, people, everywhere I look.

Fortunately, of the students I see, none of them are wearing the Yamaboshi uniform. This suits me perfectly, as I'm *really* not eager to bump into anyone I know right now. But... am I really safe here? Enjouji can use Phantom Projection... That means she could be literally anyone.

Granted, I don't think she would chase me all this way... but she *might*...

I am surrounded by hundreds upon hundreds of people, all of them perfectly ordinary-looking—and yet every single one of them has the potential to be an impostor in disguise. And if I can't tell the difference, then they *all* may as well be impostors.

The Phantom Projection has me in the palm of its hand. I know this, and yet it feels like everyone around me is a wolf in sheep's clothing.

There's a guy smirking in my direction. Who are you? What do you want? I stop short. Then someone crashes into me from behind. A woman strides past, scoffing in annoyance.

As far as I know, only Enjouji and I can use the Phantom Projection... but then again, if «Heartseed» saw fit to give it to *her* of all people, then who knows who else it may have bestowed it to.

I notice a uniform-clad high schooler staring at me. Then the girl next to her whispers something in her ear. Up ahead, I see a group of guys in their early twenties walking my way, practically taking up the whole street... almost like they're trying to box me in. They aren't, are they? Are they?

Maybe they are. I'm a surveillance target. I'm an enemy. The whole world is against me. I can't think of any other explanation.

So I run. It's my only option. I can't survive here in this nightmare.

I arrive at the nature park and wander my way deep into the woods, seeking a

place where I can be alone.

I find an old, rusty bench and collapse down onto it. At this point, I don't care if my clothes get dirty.

I can't sense anyone nearby. All I hear is the chirping of birds and rustling of trees.

I'm so tired... I don't want to move another inch... At least now I can finally relax.

Now that I'm alone, I feel safe. I don't exactly enjoy it, but it's better than the alternative. Alone, I don't have to live in fear of the Phantom Projection.

After being on the receiving end for a change, I can't possibly fathom how the CRC pentagon could shrug it off like it was nothing. They're inhuman.

It's clearly been some time since this area last saw any proper maintenance; the place looks as abandoned as I feel. A perfect match, really. Guess I'll stay here for a while.

This nature park is where it all began. Not only that, but «Heartseed» has met me here a handful of times since. Sure, sometimes it would drop in on me unannounced, but whenever I needed some time to think, it would specifically ask to meet up here once I was ready. And somehow, even though I had no way of letting it know when I was on my way, it would always turn up right when I arrived. How the hell does it do that? Is Gotou in on it?

For that matter, what is «Heartseed» up to right now, anyway? Now that I'm here, I wouldn't be surprised if it turned up.

Go ahead. Come get me. See if I care.

I wonder what punishment it's planning for me, now that I reneged on our agreement. Maybe it'll erase me. I can't say I'd mind.

I'm so exhausted... I need some sleep. Haven't gotten a proper night's sleep in forever.

—Uwa Chihiro didn't go home that night.

□■□■□

The next morning, I wake up sore all over. Sleeping on a hard bench didn't do me any favors.

Here amid the trees and foliage, the morning air is dewy and cold. A stray dog passes by, pauses to glance at me, then trots off again.

I stretch my neck to work the stiffness out as the residual drowsiness clears from my mind. I'm kind of impressed I managed to spend an entire night out here in the wilderness. What time is it now? Six-ish, I'm guessing? I could turn my phone on to check, but I don't want to deal with any emails I might've gotten in the interim... That said, I went ahead and told my overly fretful mother that I would be spending the night at a friend's house, so theoretically everything should be fine.

If memory serves, today is Saturday, so I don't have to worry about school...

Meanwhile, the sun begins to rise on the horizon.

So, now what? Where do I go from here? Enjouji's probably already told Nagase, Inaba, and Aoki all about my misdeeds. I mean, there's no way she's acting entirely on her own. She's not smart enough to come up with that little stunt all by herself; Inaba probably told her to do it. Which means they all see me as the enemy.

24 hours ago I was free as a bird, but now I feel like a wanted criminal. Actually, no. Even real criminals don't have it this bad. After all, they can just go to jail, serve their time, and get a fresh start at the end of their sentence. But me? I committed a crime beyond the scope of the law. I don't get the *privilege* of a fresh start.

Should I lean into it? Should I play dumb and pretend I don't know anything about «Heartseed»? Maybe if I lie convincingly enough... Man, who am I kidding? I don't want to humiliate myself any more than I already have.

That leaves me with one last option: to disappear.

Not like I put much value in this world anyway. I'm one of the have-nots. No matter what I did, I was only ever going to have a mediocre life at best. No great ambitions, no great accomplishments... The world doesn't even need me.

The more I think about it, the more it starts to feel like the right choice. The

world is stupid and vapid and stagnant. It's hopeless. There's never going to be a light at the end of the tunnel. So why keep living?

No more idly drifting along the mediocre path life takes me on. It's time to end it. I may be a villain, but at least this way I'll go out with a bang.

"Keheh... heh... heh heh heh..."

And what massive, monstrous fireworks they were, too. I guess that's the biggest accomplishment I'll leave behind. Because my life is over. I'm dead. I'm dead, I'm dead, I'm dead, I'm dead, I'm dead, I'm dead— "I found you, Chihiro-kun!"

Out of the blue, a voice calls out from behind me, its tone oddly chipper.

"Gosh, that took *forever*! I've been searching since yesterday! I should've known you'd come to this nature park... Sheesh, I must've called and emailed you a dozen times! Why didn't you answer?!"

Enjouji saunters into my line of sight, her demeanor reminiscent of that certain delirious glee that came with staying up all night long. Hilarious.

"Hey, you're laughing! Why are you *laughing?!* I even tried to call your house, you know!"

"Th... The hell did you do that for?" I snap back reflexively, my voice croaky from lack of use.

"W-Well, what else was I supposed to do?! Oh yeah, and when I called, your mom was like 'He's at a friend's house, isn't he? Who are you?' so I told her I'm your girlfriend and that we're having a fight. She was like 'Ohhh, now I get it.' "

"You just made everything ten times more complicated!"

In what world would *Enjouji* have that much audacity and initiative? This isn't like her... Oh god, is she an impostor...?!

"How do you feel about Taichi-san's voice?"

"Sexy and mature, but with a hint of boyish charm! That's my official verdict! But I'll accept alternative opinions as long as they're positive!"

Nope, that's Enjouji, alright. I'd recognize that voice fetish anywhere. Actually,

it’s even worse than I remember.

It’s strange... I came here to isolate myself because I was afraid of being around people, but here I am having a normal conversation with Enjouji—someone who knows the full extent of what I’ve done. I thought I was going to make myself disappear, but now that she’s here, that idea has gone right out the window. It doesn’t make sense.

“Whew... I’m just glad you’re okay. I thought you vanished on us, or worse, maybe you were going to k—Never mind! Forget that! I don’t want to jinx it!”

“Why were you looking for *me* of all people, anyway? Wait... Are you saying you stayed up all night trying to find me...?”

“Oh, no. I went home after midnight, obviously.”

You stayed out until *midnight?*

“So what do you want?”

I need to get this conversation over with so I can go back to being alone.

As I sit there on the bench, Enjouji looks down at me and sighs.

“Chihiro-kun, I want you to come with me. Let’s go see our senpai and... and apologize.”

I knew it. They put her up to this.

“I’m not going.”

“Okay, great! Thanks! I know you’re probably embarrassed about it, but I’m glad all my tireless effort to find you has struck a chord with y—Wait, you’re not coming?!”

Shut up. Get lost already.

“It’s all over now. Going to see them won’t change anything.”

“Wh-What? What’s ‘all over now’?!”

“My life, genius. Yui-san and Taichi-san have lost their memories. Plus, you tricked me into revealing everything, and now the others know...”

“They do? Did you talk to them already?”

“No, of course not. But I know you did.”

“N-No I didn’t! I haven’t told them anything!”

“...What?”

I can’t believe it... and yet she doesn’t appear to be lying.

“So you’re saying you came up with that little trick all on your own? And then you searched for me... all on your own?”

“Y-Yeah...?”

This pathetic little weakling? All by herself?

“I really gave it my all. I met with «Heartseed» and asked it to help me, but it wasn’t very cooperative. Instead it told me to handle it myself... and that’s when it gave me the power to impersonate people.”

Then it hits me: Enjouji hasn’t had this power from the beginning. She analyzed the situation, then went to negotiate with «Heartseed» directly.

According to her, she first met «Heartseed» around the same time I did, and they had the same conversation... but where I agreed, she declined. That was the decision that set us apart.

“I was... seduced by the power...” Belatedly, I curse myself for being so greedy.

“And I was just a coward,” she mutters in reply, and for a single, fleeting moment, she returns to her usual wimpy self. “But coward or not, I still needed to... to take action. See, I always knew there was something going on, but I never did anything about it... so it’s my fault Taichi-senpai and Yui-senpai ended up like that.”

“Give me a break.” How desperate are you to blame yourself?

“As a bystander, I was no better than a perpetrator.”

Oh yeah? Then what about me, the *actual* perpetrator? Anger flares up in my chest, and I feel the urge to lash out. I’m done playing this game with her.

“So you want me to go explain myself and apologize? And then what?”

“Um... well...”

“What happens after that? Will that lead to a solution? Because I doubt it.”

The look on her face says *uh-oh*.

“W-Well... No, not exactly... but if we tell the others what’s going on, we might be able to think of a way to fix it! «Heartseed» told me they’ve been through this phenomenon stuff a bunch of times by now, so if we explain the situation and work with them...”

“You think we can magically fix this with the power of friendship?”

How naive. The world isn’t that forgiving. Nor is it that simple. Trust me, I know.

“But...!” Her face crumples on the verge of tears, and she stares down at the ground.

Here we go again. She’s too weak-willed to make anything happen. And for some reason, it really pisses me off. If you’re going to be that useless, then don’t bother trying. Don’t even think about it.

Frankly, I could say the same thing to myself. The have-nots were never meant to aspire to anything. It’ll only end in tragedy. So I need to stop her before that happens— Enjouji looks up, her face shining with courage and resolve. “We need to take action... We need to change this.”

I couldn’t get a word in edgewise.

“I want to do better. I want to fight. And I want to fix this.”

Oh, now I get it. Enjouji must have changed. She’s one of *them* now.

“Prevent a tragedy”? What a load of bullshit. I’m no saint. I just don’t want her to leave me behind. I’m so weak and pathetic, I’m grasping at straws to justify my behavior.

Enjouji and I were both drawn to the CRC in the same way. Deep down, we’re both cut from the same cloth. Birds of a feather. But now I see that at some critical juncture, we split off from each other. She took the right path, and I the wrong.

I just wish someone would’ve told me there was another option. I wish they would’ve warned me that this would happen. Maybe I could’ve... I could’ve... I

— “What I’m saying is... I want you to join the fight with me, Chihiro-kun.”

She who walks the right path now reaches out to me, the sinner led astray... and she calls for me.

“Join the fight...?”

Why would she want me? There’s no way she actually needs me.

“I’m going to try to fix this, but I need your help. I need your strength.”

She... needs me?

“Fix it? You weren’t even the one who broke it in the first place! That was all me! You think I can just waltz back in and be like ‘Yeah, I’m totally gonna fix it!’ Because I can’t!”

Why do I... sound like I actually *want* to? Do I? Maybe I do. This isn’t the first time I’ve spoken from the heart before my brain had the chance to process it.

Meanwhile, Enjouji’s hesitating like she’s not sure she’s allowed to say whatever it is she’s about to say... and then I realize I’m waiting in anticipation. I’m hoping she’s the light at the end of the tunnel. I’m hoping she’ll save me.

The world may be stupid and vapid and stagnant—but no matter how much it sucks, I don’t want it to end! I don’t want to disappear! Maybe it’s petty, but it’s the truth!

So all I can do is trust in Enjouji and wait for my salvation— “E-Everyone loves to see the bad guy make a heel-face turn... r-right?”

...Welp, so much for that. Could you at least say it with a straight face?! Your stammering just made it even cringier than it already was! Quit trying to be someone you’re not!

This whole conversation is ridiculous. Why are we doing this?

“Um... well... To be fair, I’m no better than you. I have no right to claim that I can fix this... It won’t make my mistakes go away. But if we use that as an excuse to do nothing, then we’ll only get worse. So it’s our responsibility to do something!”

Do something? Now? It’s too late to change course.

“We can still redeem ourselves if we can get Taichi-senpai and Yui-senpai back to normal... I think...”

Do I really still have a chance to redeem myself?

For fuck’s sake, why am I letting her go on and on? I already know what I want to do. I want to fight. I want a rematch. I want to atone, even if it doesn’t erase my misdeeds. And... if possible... I want things to go back to the way they used to be. I want to come home.

“I even went and talked to «Heartseed» to try and help you!”

Why are you so proud of that?

“So what? I’ve talked to it a bunch of times.”

“S-Stop! You’re making all my hard work sound like nothing!” She sounds genuinely panicked, too. What a riot.

I push myself to my feet. All at once, Enjouji’s face lights up. Hold your horses, damn it. I haven’t agreed to anything.

“I guess I do need to apologize... and explain things.”

“Yes! YES! Thank you!” She throws her arms up in the air in a display of jubilance, but her movements are stiff and unnatural, like she’s never actually been this excited before. “I did it... I changed you... I changed myself...!”

Obviously I can’t say for sure if *she’s* changed, but... I’m not sure I have.

“Have you always wanted to change yourself?”

“Yeah! And someday I want to be more like our senpai!” She gushes at me, beaming from ear to ear, and for once I actually believe she can do it. She’s well on her way.

But as for me, well... at the very least, I need to try to fix what I broke. I need to put an end to this nightmare. Then we can worry about everything else afterwards. And if they decide to punish me, then so be it. I’ll accept it. Hell, they can punch me in the face if they want to.

Once I commit to receiving punishment for my actions, I feel a weight lift off of my shoulders. Maybe what I lacked was the courage to accept the

consequences. In the end, all this running away only served to make me feel worse... Perhaps confronting it was the right answer all along.

If Enjouji can change this much, then so can I. I may be a shithead who was led astray by a supernatural entity, but I can still take baby steps back toward the right path.

Then maybe one day I'll be more like the girl I admire.

We decide to ask Nagase, Inaba, and Aoki to meet up with us at a different park near Yamaboshi, mainly so they won't have to change into their school uniforms on a Saturday.

At the meeting place, Enjouji and I stand around in silence. Twenty minutes pass without a word. We both stand perfectly still, barely even moving.

Then Enjouji coughs. I glance over to find her white as a sheet.

"Hey, you okay?"

"Y-Yeah, I'm okay... I'm... fine... Ulp..." She claps a hand over her mouth like she wants to barf.

"You really don't look fine. Maybe you should lie down somewhere."

"Says the guy who looks like a walking corpse."

"What does it matter what I look like?" That was pretty harsh, too. Do I really look that bad?

"A-Are they gonna be mad at us...? Yeah, they're probably gonna be mad at us..." Just like that, she gives form to the fear dangling over our heads. "Mad" doesn't begin to cover it. There are a host of other, stronger adjectives that would fit more aptly.

"This was *your* idea, remember? You were the one who said it couldn't wait." Why am I trying to encourage her? If anything, she should be consoling *me*.

"But—oh!"

Just then, we see Inaba, Nagase, and Aoki walking toward us, dressed in casual clothes. I doubt they all arrived here at the same time purely by coincidence; they must've met up with each other after we contacted them.

What sort of conversation did they have then?

The looks on their faces are by no means inviting, but they aren't exactly hostile, either. I try to envision how I must look to them, then hastily think better of it. Fear flares up, and I feel the urge to run off somewhere far, far away. They're just going to hate me. I'm scared. We're both scared... aren't we?

I glance to my side. Enjouji is trembling, her hands balled into fists, her lips pursed tightly together, tears welling in her eyes... but she doesn't turn away. She faces them head-on.

I can't run now. Not when she's giving it her all. I refuse to let her be the bigger person. I'm not going to humiliate myself again—not now, not ever. I can do this, I can do this, I can do this!

And so I give them the full story, with Enjouji occasionally chiming in to add things.

"...and that's about the gist of it."

As I speak, I feel the blood slowly drain from my face.

Enjouji's laid-back attitude had numbed me to the gravity of the situation—made me think not only was it safe to tell them, but also that I *needed* to. Looking back, I was an idiot. What I did is clearly far beyond the realm of forgiveness.

The three second-years listen to my explanation without really reacting, outside of occasionally closing their eyes or staring at the ground in contemplation... and that utter lack of reaction stokes the flames of my fear. Enjouji must be feeling the same, because she continues to tremble.

"I... I'm sorry..." The next thing I know, I find myself on my knees. Then I bend over and press my forehead to the ground, prostrating myself dogeza-style. *We humans are so quick to humble ourselves, aren't we?* my brain muses to itself like an uninvolved third party.

Take my punishment? Take baby steps toward the right path? Make things go back to the way they used to be? What a joke. That only works if the crime is small enough. And mine isn't.

“I... I’m sorry, too! I’m sorry I... couldn’t do anything!” Enjouji joins me on the ground, her voice watery.

No one replies. For a few seconds—the longest seconds of my life—all that can be heard is Enjouji sniffling.

Then, finally, Inaba breaks the silence: “You idiots...”

I’m the one who essentially erased the events between her and her beloved boyfriend. Who knows what she might do to me.

“THE FUCK WERE YOU THINKING, YOU *SHIT-BRAIN?!*”

Her scream makes my ears ring. She’s pissed—no surprise there. I was fully expecting this, and yet it still makes me flinch. Meanwhile, I can feel Nagase and Aoki staring at me, their eyes boring into me.

If only I hadn’t gotten those weird ideas in my head... If only I’d never met Yui... If only I never existed... The weight of my crime bears down upon me. Guilt consumes me. Just punish the hell out of me and get it over with!

“Get up, Shino.” Inaba helps Enjouji to her feet. Then she turns to me. “Look at me, Chihiro.”

Timidly, I lift my head... and find her face inches from mine. Fearfully, I squeeze my eyes shut.

“YOU LITTLE—hyah!”

Fwick. I feel a sharp impact against my forehead.

“Ouch!”

I clap a hand over it in wide-eyed surprise. Did she just... *flick me?*

“Get your ass up and dust yourself off. You too, Shino.”

“Huh? Wait, but... what?”

As I stare at her in surprise, she starts brushing the dirt from my clothes.

“Oh, thank god! For a second I thought Inaban was gonna commit murder! You okay, Shino-chan?” Nagase asks, her tone lighthearted and cheerful as she wanders over to Enjouji to help her dust herself off.

In contrast, Enjouji seems as baffled as me. “Huh? Oh, umm... Y-You don’t have to...!”

This is *not* the reaction I was expecting. By all accounts, they should be beyond furious... and yet somehow all I got was one little insult and a flick to the forehead? Really?

“Shino, you’ve done absolutely nothing wrong. And Chihiro, while I can’t pretend I’m not a little upset with you, what happened wasn’t your fault,” Inaba declares.

I haven’t told them everything, but I did admit to my inner weakness. I told them my ego got the better of me. So how can she say this isn’t my fault?

“Honestly, we’re the ones who ought to apologize,” says Nagase. “We should’ve told you about «Heartseed» before you joined the club, but instead we hid it from you. That’s on us.”

“Look, guys, I’m gettin’ tired of just standing around. Can we take this over there?”

And so, at Aoki’s prompting, the five of us head over to a side area with some playground equipment and raised flowerbeds. There, we each find a place to take a seat, and the three second-years tell us all about what the CRC has gone through. As it turns out, their connection to «Heartseed» runs a lot deeper than I thought.

“The point is, we invited you into the club knowing full well there was a chance you’d get dragged into some shit. Fortunately, you weren’t the victims this time around, but still... I’m sorry.” Inaba bowed her head in apology, and Nagase and Aoki followed suit.

“Oh, no... You don’t have to apologize...!” Enjouji insists modestly.

“Yeah, you really don’t,” I chime in. “If anyone’s in the wrong here, it’s me... and «Heartseed», I guess.”

“That’s right, Chee-hee! It’s all «Heartseed»’s fault! Don’t beat yourself up over what you did, okay?”

According to the second-years, there’s no point in bickering amongst

ourselves when the true mastermind lies elsewhere.

“That said, there *is* one thing that fucking infuriates me.” Inaba’s tone shifts.

I knew it. I knew it. She’s going to rip me apart— “If you two were struggling with this, then why didn’t you come to us for help?! We’re *right here!*”

“I know, right? We’re your senpai! That’s what we’re here for!” Nagase agrees.

“Ladies, please. It probably wasn’t that simple for ‘em.”

Why are they talking about this like it’s no big deal? This is insane. They’re so far beyond me. They’re really going to let me almost entirely off the hook? I mean, sure, maybe «Heartseed» is the real villain, and maybe they share some of the blame for not warning us, but even then... I don’t think I could do the same in their shoes.

“B-But... Taichi-senpai and Yui-senpai...” Enjouji hesitates.

Instantly, the second-years’ faces freeze over... but then a moment later it melts away.

“It’s going to be alright. This isn’t the first time a member’s gone AWOL. But in the end, we’ve always made it through with everyone intact... and we’ll do it again,” Inaba assures us.

“Yeah! ’Sides, this time we’ve got you and Chihiro with us, too! That makes five—and five is practically a whole army!” Aoki declares.

“Right you are, Aoki! If we put our heads together, we can fight our way out of this, no problem!” Nagase grins.

What is this? No, seriously. What is happening? I was ready to be burned at the stake, but all I got was a slap on the wrist. Instead, all I can see now is the overwhelming difference between them and me.

I mean, I always knew I wasn’t one of them, but now it’s been rubbed in my face. I’ve been agonizing over this shit for *days*, and yet they haven’t even batted an eye at it. I could never be like them.

I could impersonate them right in front of their faces and they’d just laugh it off. No matter how hard I struggle, I’ll never be anything more than a phony. I

acknowledged my own cowardice, found the courage to face my actions and accept my punishment, and what do I get? A giant, insurmountable wall in my face.

I always knew there was a gulf between us, but for as much as I envied them, I never looked at it that hard. I just assumed I knew its breadth based on my own imagination. But now here I am, standing right in front of it, and I know for a fact there's no way across. And when I look at them, I realize that the world has left me here to rot for the rest of my life.

"I'm thinking we're gonna need to put you guys to work. Is that cool?" Nagase asks intently.

I stay quiet. Put us to work? How could I possibly help? What use am I? A long silence passes. See? Even Enjouji doesn't— "O-Of course! I... I'll do everything in my power to help!"

"Awesome! We're counting on you, Shino-chan!" Nagase beams. Inaba and Aoki smile, too. Then Enjouji smiles, and together they share a nice little moment.

Right. I forgot she's already one of them. She does seem like the pure-hearted type; I guess she was born with the talent to cross that gulf. I mean, how else could she alone have changed herself so suddenly and dramatically?

"Wh... What about you, Chihiro-kun?" Enjouji asks, peering at me timidly.

She's not my ally here. It's me against them.

"Right... Sure, yeah," I nod. Not like I have any other choice.

"Alright then. Our next step will be to form a plan. But seeing as none of us brought any writing implements, we may as well head home, get changed into our uniforms, and meet back up in the clubroom," Inaba suggests.

"You got it, Inabacchan!" Aoki replies.

"Allllrighty then! No brakes on this brain train! We're gonna power through today, and then we're gonna power through tomorrow, and then on Monday when school starts, we're gonna power right on through class, too!" Nagase exclaims.

“Y-Yeah... I’m gonna... power through!” Enjouji chimes in, a bit hesitantly, but still eager.

Before we leave, Nagase adds one last thing: “Oh yeah, and just so you know, once this whole nightmare is over with, I totally understand if you want to quit the club.”

This is beyond my comprehension. She’s already planning for what happens after we resolve the problem—and she’s taking our feelings into account while she’s at it.

Together, the five of us head home. Partway through, my route branches off from theirs, so I bid them farewell... and just like that, Inaba, Nagase, Aoki, and Enjouji are gone.

Alone, I collapse to my knees. I just don’t have the energy to stand and fight.

“I can’t do this anymore...”

If only they’d punished me. Then I could’ve had some closure, and maybe I’d feel like I was ready to turn over a new leaf. But no. Facing the music didn’t lead me to a new beginning. All I found was despair. That’s life for you. Business as usual.

I’m done for today... I don’t have the motivation to do anything else. I mean, I know there’s something I need to do—a problem I need to solve—but I can’t do it right now.

I still need to do it, though... Oh, I know. I’ll just start first thing tomorrow. Yeah... tomorrow.

—Uwa Chihiro didn’t go to the clubroom that day.

□■□■□

Sunday came and went. Now it’s Monday, and the Sports Festival is next week.

As for me, I was dead all yesterday, and had a hell of a time waking up this morning, too. *And* I skipped out on the club meeting on Saturday, along with whatever plans they might’ve had yesterday. Man, this sucks. I missed my chance, and now I’m too late. Now I don’t have the guts to show up. It’s just...

too *intimidating*.

No, that's not it—I had a reason I couldn't go. I spent Friday night in a nature park, for god's sake. Obviously all that sleep deprivation was going to take its toll on my body. I was so lethargic, I was practically bedridden... I mean, not that I had a fever or anything.

If I explain it to them, will they forgive me? They probably will, right? They've forgiven me for a lot worse, after all. But... is it too late to ask to join them? How can I possibly find the courage to do that now?

Man, why didn't I just get my ass into gear on Saturday? Why did I put it off like that? I hate myself.

Hell, I was scared to show my face at school today. I'm only here because my body was basically moving on auto-pilot. Yeah... I used to laugh at those so-called "mindless sheep" for merely going through the motions, and yet it turns out I'm one of them.

Before I left, my mom stopped me at the door and said, "I can tell you're still struggling, but I hope you'll do right by your girlfriend."

I'd forgotten Enjouji fed her that BS. I tried to correct her, but to no avail.

"It's perfectly normal to get a little over-emotional with each other. You might want to just give each other some space for a while."

I never asked for that advice, but okay.

"Once you two kiss and make up, you should invite her over. Oh, but if things go south, that's alright. Just give it some time, then go on a date with a different girl. At your age, there's no harm in exploring—"

Dealing with her wasn't worth the hassle, so instead I ignored her and walked out.

As soon as I get to Classroom 1-B, I check for Enjouji. No sign of her. *Whew*.

"Hey, Uwa." Shimono points at my bookbag with his mechanical pencil.

"...My bag? What about it? You want me to... open it?" I don't understand why he's asking me to do this, but I do it regardless.

Then, at the speed of light, Shimono stuffs a paper bag into my bookbag. *The hell?* Dubiously, I move to check its contents— "Don't! Not here!"

—and catch a glimpse of a very *beige* front cover. Whatever this is, it's pornographic.

"The hell are you thinking, man?" I scowl at him, baffled.

Then Tada steps into the room and wanders over.

"Hmm? Oh, hey Tada. Guess what? I just gave Uwa the best gift ever."

"Oh yeah? Well, I've got a little present for him, too, sort of. See, I'm planning a get-together here soon. Nothing set in stone yet, but I'm inviting some girls. How about it, Uwa? Wanna come?"

"Wh... What kind of 'present' is *that?!* That's so far beyond gift material, dude!" Shimono shoots back before I even have the chance to respond.

"Why are you guys going on and on about giving me stuff, anyway? You know it's not my birthday, right?"

"Yeah, I know, but... you've been kinda down lately, y'know? I mean, for a while there you were barely even talking," says Tada.

"It was pretty bad, dude," Shimono laughs.

"So you're... trying to cheer me up?"

"Jeez, don't just *say* it! You're embarrassing me!"

"Yeah, something like that."

Why would they do that? What's the point? What do they stand to gain from it?

"So Shimono gives me 2D girls... and Tada gives me 3D girls."

"Dude, don't point it out, okay?! I already feel inferior enough as it is!"

"Hahaha! Nice one, Uwa!"

Then, out of nowhere, it hits me: *I made Tada laugh*. I was part of a positive interaction between people, and it barely took any effort at all. It came so naturally.

I'd thought the whole world was against me, but maybe it isn't. I feel so *loved*.

Has human connection always been this... *warm?*

"So, how about it, Uwa?"

"Huh? Oh... Maybe after the Sports Festival, sure." I can't bring myself to shoot him down, so I accept his invitation.

"Alright then, it's settled! Speaking of the Sports Festival..." Tada gives a sardonic laugh.

"Yeahhh... The other teams are all so ridiculously motivated for some reason. We're totally gonna get our asses handed to us."

"Totally... Not much we can do about it now, though."

But somehow I get the sense there's something more they want to say.

During class, I ignore the drone of my teacher's voice and lose myself in thought.

I believed it was hopeless. That it was all over. I thought today would be another nightmare... but instead, the world was kind to me for some reason. When I tried to shut myself away from everything, there were people who worried for me... helped me... *found* me.

Enjouji. Inaba. Nagase. Aoki. Shimono. Tada. Even my mother.

I'm trash for what I've done, and yet the world isn't attacking me for it. It's... protecting me. I don't remember it being like this. The world is supposed to be merciless, favoring only those born into good fortune. At least, that's what I thought. But for the longest time now, I've had this sneaking suspicion in the back of my mind that maybe... I was wrong.

For the first time in forever, I'm in a good mood. Maybe, with a little effort, I might just find the answer I'm looking for.

I look around the classroom. We're in the middle of Classical Studies right now; some students are taking notes, some are staring into space, and others are passed out on their desks.

Granted, I don't actually think my answer is literally lying around the

classroom.

Then I make eye contact with a male classmate who appears to be as bored of this lecture as I am. He grins at me, and I grin back reflexively. For some reason, I feel the urge to laugh, so I stare down at my desk until the impulse passes. It feels like the two of us are co-conspirators.

Then I realize... I'm smiling. Over this pointless exchange? Why? How is it that I can still smile after all that despair?

Then it hits me: Maybe... just maybe... I've been looking at it all wrong.

I thought the world hated me... but maybe it doesn't. Maybe it loves me.

Think about it. I wasn't punished, so I couldn't turn over a new leaf... but that lack of punishment in and of itself is a sign that no one hates me.

What I did to Yui and Taichi was monstrous, and yet the second-years have complete faith that everything will work out... which means it's really not that big of a deal.

Maybe I've just been overthinking this.

Maybe the world isn't as complicated as I made it out to be—and maybe the reason those "mindless sheep" have it so easy is because they've accepted this as fact. Maybe this is the answer I needed.

All of a sudden, it starts to feel like an epiphany. This is why Enjouji and the second-years are met with so much success all the time! And now that I finally understand, surely I'll start to see results, too. My mood skyrockets, and I feel a rush of adrenaline... No, no, I need to stay calm!

I was in a downward spiral for a long time, but that's all over now that Enjouji found me. Objectively speaking, this is the start of an upward trend. Now all I have to do is ride this wave—and by that I mean *take action*.

Spurred on in the heat of the moment, I suppress all my shame and walk over to Enjouji's desk. She looks up at me. *I have to do this. It's now or never,* I tell myself, goading myself onwards.

"Hey, um..."

This is taking all my courage, but god, it's so humiliating. I'm the one standing

over her, and yet somehow it feels like *she's* the one looking down on *me*.

"Sorry about, uh... Saturday and stuff." I avoid her eyes. "I was just kind of exhausted, you know, physically and mentally."

"And?"

I expected her to be overjoyed at my initiative, not... whatever this one-word response is supposed to be. It feels like she's trying to analyze me.

"And... I was wondering if there's anything I can help with."

"O-Oh... Right. I see." She nods stiffly.

"So what did you guys decide to do? About... you know."

"L-Let's take this conversation outside." She drags me out to the hall so our classmates won't hear. Then, once she's sure no one else is around, she continues, "Right now, the current plan is to stake out all the places «Heartseed» has turned up lately. We think it can fix the amnesia. A-And since it chose the same nature park to meet up with both you and me, we think that's probably its go-to place. So yeah, that's step one. Then the... the other thing we're doing is taking baby steps with Taichi-senpai and Yui-senpai. We can't be too direct or else it'll stress them out too much, so we've decided to make friends with them all over again. Oh, and we talked about maybe using the power to create *another* paradox, you know, sort of like shock therapy, but then we decided against it since it's so risky. Oh, and the others were saying «Heartseed»'s likely to show itself if we make ourselves 'entertaining,' so we're brainstorming ideas in that vein, too..."

This is a lot of information, all at once. I didn't realize they'd already established a plan to the point of taking action. That, and I'm impressed Enjouji managed to explain it all without losing her train of thought.

"Gotcha. So, um... What can I do to help?" I ask.

Once again, she levels a probing look at me. "I don't know."

It feels like she lowered a rope to pull me out of this hole I've dug for myself, only to yank it back up before I can grab it.

"Okay, well, look...!" I start.

What's your problem? I know I'm late to the party, but I'm here now, and I'm offering to help. Would it kill you to be grateful? Didn't you *want* me to "take action and change this" or whatever? I'm finally on an upward trend!

"Um... Just... go ask our senpai, I guess?"

Oh, is *that* what you want me to do? Alright then.

After school, I stand in the clubroom and bow my head in apology.

"I'm really, really sorry... and, um... I'd like to help with something, if I can."

My stomach was in knots on my way here, but they'd told me to arrive by a certain time, so I couldn't afford to be late. Besides, Enjouji *told* me to do this, so it must be the right answer.

"I know I'm late, but I was just physically and mentally exhausted."

I look up and gauge their reactions. No warm reception. Inaba, Nagase, and Aoki stare at me with hard looks on their faces... but this is just the prelude to their lighthearted forgiveness, like last time... right?

"Look, Chihiro... Are you committed to this?" Inaba challenges me, her voice cold.

Is she testing me? Yeah, I guess she is. No surprise there.

"Committed? Uh, yeah."

I don't really know what she means by that, but regardless, I'm sure I can commit to it.

"...What do you think, Iori?"

"Mmm... I do think we're going to need Chee-hee's help, but..."

"But" what? Am I... not welcome here? Am I not needed? Something must be wrong with this picture.

"Let's just have him do something for right now," Aoki suggests.

Inaba nods reluctantly, then turns back to me. "So you don't have any ideas of your own? Really?"

"Huh? Oh, um, I'm not great at... coming up with stuff, so."

“What’s stopping you?”

“Well... I just...”

“Inaban!” Nagase cuts in.

Why is Inaba so pissy with me? I don’t understand. I said I was sorry for the delay, and now I’m offering to help. Obviously I don’t expect asspats for this. But they’ve already forgiven me for so much! What’s left to get upset about at this point?

Did I go about this the wrong way somehow? Am I misunderstanding some part of this? I thought the world wasn’t actually this complicated. I thought the world loved me. Was I wrong? Please just tell me. I’ve been trying my hardest to take action and look for the answer. Just tell me I’m doing everything I need to!

Turns out, reality isn’t so lenient.

Instead, Inaba sends me home for the day.

□■□■□

When I wake up the next morning, I find an email from Inaba in my inbox summoning me to the clubroom. Feeling guilty, I head over right away. Not like I have the right to decline, after all.

We meet up before class—all seven of us—at which point Inaba gives me the following task: “Initiate contact with «Heartseed». Ask it to explain the amnesia—and if possible, try to negotiate. But for now, just try to find it.”

I tell her about all the times I met with it previously, and she agrees that the nature park is probably our best bet. Still, «Heartseed»’s always been the one calling the shots, so there’s no telling if it will show up there just because I want it to... Regardless, I’m just relieved to have a task at all. It makes me feel needed... makes me feel like I can contribute.

I listen quietly as the conversation continues.

Before we head off to class, Enjouji asks, “S-Say, um... This is just a thought, but... if «Heartseed» likes to possess Gotou-sensei so much, then sh... shouldn’t we just keep an eye on him?”

“Actually, we’ve already tried that, and we know for a fact it doesn’t work. For whatever reason, that asswipe *refuses* to possess Gotou while we’re watching,” Inaba explains.

It’s starting to sound like this won’t be easy.

“Oh... I see... Sorry for wasting everyone’s time...”

“Don’t be, Shino-chan! There’s no such thing as a dumb suggestion!”

“O-Oh, okay! I’ll keep that in mind, Iori-senpai!”

She really does seem to fit right in with them.

After school, they send me out to the nature park by myself, and now here I am. Who’d have thought this place would become one of my regular hangouts?

Now that I think about it, I haven’t seen «Heartseed» since it threatened me. If anything, *Enjouji* was the last person to meet with it. Maybe that means my time is coming.

Fallen twigs crunch underfoot as I walk through the park.

«Heartseed» told me I couldn’t “go back to my ordinary life,” and yet it hasn’t done anything to enforce that. Is it giving me some time before it makes its final decision? Or was it simply referring to the paradox-induced amnesia?

Was my crime its own punishment in and of itself?

If so, then I stood no chance of redemption. I’ll have to bear this guilt for the rest of my life.

So what do I do? Obviously the most ideal outcome would be to get rid of the amnesia, and I know I ought to take steps to work toward that. But is there really a way to cure it...? No, there has to be. More than anything, I need to believe there’s a way to fix it or else I’m fucked.

—*Now that you’ve joined me... don’t think for a moment you can go back to your ordinary life*— Stop.

I just... can’t envision how this can have a happy ending.

In fact, now that I think about it, I never once bothered to consider how it would end, right from the very beginning. I wasn’t actually prepared to *live* in

the “extraordinary” world I desired. One tiny taste of power and I thought I was hot shit—that I would transcend to a new level. What “new level”? I didn’t *earn* any of it. None of it was even my idea.

In my contemplation, I inadvertently wander into a section of the park I don’t recognize.

What am I doing here? I’m only here because someone told me to be. I haven’t stopped to think for myself at all. I’m just happy to be someone else’s *puppet*.

Wait... What am I supposed to do once I find—?

“Tell me, Uwa-san... Is this how it ends...?”

A voice calls out from the thicket—a voice that seems to crawl up from the depths of Hell itself. Then something enters my vision. Something wearing Gotou’s face.

Dude, school only just ended. Don’t the teachers have to stay at school for a while? What are you doing here? Did you get permission to leave campus for this? And how did you know I was here? How much of this are you controlling, anyway?

Questions upon questions flash through my mind.

«Heartseed» is here. It’s *right here*. I did it. I made contact. So what do I do now? Ask for an explanation. Negotiate. I wasn’t prepared for this. I know Inaba gave me explicit instructions... but did she explain how I’m supposed to talk to it?

“It seems you haven’t been using your power... Is this the end...?” it asks.

I freeze in place. I can hear my own ragged breathing, thunderous in my ears, and yet at the same time I feel like I’m suffocating. I need more oxygen.

Is it going to do something to me, or am I just paranoid? Is my imagination running away with me?

“Hello...? I’m going to need an answer... Is this really the end...? Because if so... I will end you...”

There’s. Another. Punishment?

Even worse than what I've already been through?

What is it? My memories? Will it make me forget?

"You think I'll stop there...?"

I didn't say that out loud.

CAN IT READ MINDS?

"D-Don't... Please don't... No...!" I whimper, my voice trembling, tears streaming from my eyes, as my knees hit the ground.

"You understand, don't you...?" Its flat voice frightens me all the more.

All this time, I thought I *wanted* punishment—that I was disappointed without one. And yet here I am, begging to get out of it. Turns out, what I really wanted was an excuse. That way I wouldn't have to try.

Its eyes glint in the light. It's going to get me. I'm fucked.

Someone, please. I know it's too late. But just this once—I'm begging you, someone, save me!

"Wait... Hhh... «Heartseed»!"

Someone's here. I'm saved. I turn to look. It's Enjouji Shino.

"I can't believe it... It actually showed—Hey, wait!"

Enjouji starts running. I turn back to find «Heartseed» disappearing into the thicket from whence it came.

"W-Wait—Gah! OUCH!" Enjouji trips and falls flat on the ground. "Nnngh..." she groans, pushing herself to her feet. "Wh... What are you *doing*, Chihiro-kun?! We need to go after it! We need to catch it!"

"...Huh...?" I get to my feet, but «Heartseed» is gone. I can't hear its footsteps, either.

"We lost him...?" Enjouji mutters, slowing to a stop. "I'd better let the others know..." She takes out her cell phone and dials someone, presumably Inaba. "...Okay, I'll do that. You guys stand guard outside the school, please."

I guess they're serious about catching «Heartseed»... but somehow I get the

feeling it's pointless to do all this, considering it can just switch itself out of Gotou's body at any time.

Once the call ends, Enjouji puts her phone away.

"Chihiro-kun."

She looks at me, her expression more vicious than I ever knew she was capable of. Is she... angry?

"Chihiro-kun... why? Why did you just *let it go?!* Why didn't you *go after it?!* That was... That could've been our *one chance!* What happened back there?!"

"Our one chance" to do what? Get me killed? That thing was going to— "You *knew* we needed to talk to «Heartseed». You did know that, right?!" she shouts, grabbing me by my collar and shaking me. For once in her life, she's really letting me have it with no hesitation. "I knew it... The others were right about you all along!"

"Oh yeah?" I mutter. I refuse to tell her that I got too frightened to think straight. It's too pathetic.

She relinquishes her grip on my uniform and takes a step back.

"Originally they were going to give you a bigger role in their plans. But then you didn't show up on Saturday, and when you finally turned up on Monday, they said you didn't seem all that committed."

They saw through me?

"So they decided to give you free rein to track down «Heartseed», and because you stood the best chance out of everyone, they wanted me to follow you."

"...You were tailing me?"

"W-Well, obviously I wasn't *hot on your heels* or anything like that... but yeah."

Ah, so that's why she turned up when she did. I knew it was too perfect to be a coincidence.

So I'm the bait, is that it? Is that all I'm good for...? Yeah, I guess it is.

"...Look, if I'd known you wanted me to catch him, I would've. All anyone ever told me was to *talk* to him."

"It's always someone else's fault with you, isn't it?"

The words hit me like a ton of bricks, impacting the very core of my being.

"The others have picked up on it, you know. You never take responsibility for anything. You just run away without ever stopping to confront it. You're afraid of getting hurt, aren't you?"

I can't think of any possible way to deny it.

"After I found you in the park that morning and we talked it out, I thought maybe you'd changed... but you haven't."

I already humiliated myself enough the first time around, and now it's happening again. I *tried* to change, okay? I just can't make it happen overnight!

"And when you finally did start to take action, once again, you left all the heavy lifting to everyone else."

Are you done? Or are you having fun ripping me a new asshole?

"Well, what the fuck was I supposed to—Oh." I cut myself short. *This*. This is exactly what she's talking about.

"Look, Chihiro-kun, I admit I don't have a lot of room to talk, personally. But compared to you, I do. So here goes: How long are you going to keep running? How far do you think you'll get?"

...I never stopped to think about it.

I thought I was on top of things. I thought I was looking ahead. But in reality, I was just focused on what I could get in the here and now.

Blaming others. Running away without stopping to confront it. Leaving the heavy lifting to everyone else. All my flaws are being shoved in my face, one after another. But none of them took me by surprise, because deep down, I knew. I just didn't put it together until recently—No, that's not true; I know myself better than anyone. I was just *pretending* not to know.

This is just another example of me running from responsibility—and every

time I run, I dig myself into a deeper hole.

“Don’t you think maybe you should *do* something? Or do you just want to let them have amnesia? Do you *want* Yui-senpai to see you as ‘some guy from the dojo’ for the rest of your life?! And lose *everything you built with her?!*” Her voice builds and builds until she’s screaming like her entire life hangs in the balance. Her frustration is so raw and overwhelming, it actually helps me keep my composure.

What are we doing? As far as I know, neither of us are generally inclined to get all emotional like this. Or... has Enjouji *actually* changed as a person? Is she really one of them now?

“You *are* in love with her, aren’t you?!”

I always aspired to be like her. She was light, and I was darkness, and I wanted so desperately to be close to her. But over time, that puppy love faded. All I could do was admire her sparkle from a distance, because I knew there was no bridging that gap. I was afraid of getting hurt, so I forced it all to the back of my mind.

Then I think back to the day I made her and Taichi lose their memories. I only used the Phantom Projection because I wanted to run away. It was the most reckless and irresponsible thing I’ve ever done... and yet somehow I *still* didn’t learn my lesson. Instead, I kept running.

“Do you really want it to end like this?!”

Now here I am, with Enjouji jumping down my throat. This is the end of the line for me. This is rock bottom.

There are tears in my eyes—in her eyes, too. Emotions are running high, I guess. Her face crumples... and then, finally, she hangs her head like she can’t take it anymore. A single drop falls to the ground. Then she looks straight up into the sky.

Oh, I get it. If you look down, the tears will fall, but if you look up, they don’t.

So I look up, too. The vast sky hangs above me, filling every corner of my vision—so blue, it hurts. And right now, for some reason, it seems less like a 2D background and more like a physical object with shape and depth.

Turns out the sky is still beautiful, all the way down here at rock bottom.

My tears refuse to recede, so I keep looking. Childish sentiment fills my mind —thoughts like *it's so big* and *it's so blue*. Yeah, I'm gonna be here a while.

What is it about looking at the sky that makes me want to wax philosophical? Somehow it doesn't feel right to worry myself over the minor details right now. Instead, I just want to think about... the world.

I always thought the world was cheap. No matter how much effort I put into my studies, on the day of my high school entrance exams, it all came down to luck of the draw. And one single moment of misfortune had the power to change the course of my entire life.

Meanwhile, there was a girl who could spend *two years* out of practice, then show up at the dojo and blow past everyone who never missed a day of training. And no matter how much I cared for her, she was only ever going to leave me in the dust. I could strive to change myself, to better myself, but I was chained to the bottom as though my position had been preordained by a higher power. The world refused to cooperate.

Oh well. The world around me may be stupid and vapid and stagnant, and maybe there will never be a light at the end of the tunnel, but at least the sky is still beautiful— Oh.

I've already put the pieces together, haven't I?

At any given moment, the sky will always be up there, vast and beautiful and unchanging.

At any given moment, the world exists unembellished.

Deep down, it all falls into place.

The world doesn't hate me. It isn't punishing me. But it isn't going to love me and coddle me, either. It exists in the exact same way for anyone and everyone. Unchanging. Watching over us.

I looked down on the world and called it worthless... but at the same time, there was a part of it I yearned for. I *knew* it wasn't really worthless. But I refused to acknowledge it. Instead, I just kept on trying to convince myself that

it was stupid and vapid. Why, you ask? Sadly, the answer is painfully simple: because I wanted to belong to the world I aspired to.

When things didn't go exactly as I planned, I blamed my own failures on the world being trash. I shrugged my shoulders and absolved myself of any responsibility.

Now, if things had actually worked out, I imagine "the world" would've been the greatest thing ever. Not to suggest I had the power to literally change *the whole world*, obviously—just that my viewpoint was so heavily centered on whether or not I benefited.

In truth, these things were my fault, but I blamed the entire world. I blamed *everything* on *everyone*. Not once did I ever put in my own effort. Not once did I stop and think for myself. And yet somehow I had a giant, over-inflated ego that I went to great pains to protect. I never actually accomplished anything substantial.

That was the world I built for myself.

The world exists unembellished, but at the same time, things can appear radically different depending on your perspective. It's up to the observer to change your outlook and rebuild it.

To me, the world was shitty—because I was a shitty person. To me, the world was tarnished—because my rose-colored glasses were dusty and cracked. But as it turns out, *I* determine my life's worth. *I* choose how to frame it. It's up to *me*.

The only reason I'm down here at rock bottom is because that's how I *choose* to see it. But Enjouji doesn't see it like that. So what if I change my perspective? What if I choose to see myself as a spring, fully compressed and storing energy? What if this life-or-death crisis is actually a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity? It all depends on how you look at it.

Is this the right answer? Have I finally tracked it down at last? I honestly don't know. But that doesn't mean I can shrug my shoulders and wait until someone else tells me what to do. I have to find out on my own.

There's always going to be a "right answer," but it's up to us to *believe* it's

right.

And now it's time for me to take responsibility for this reality of my own making.

I look back at Enjouji.

"Ch... Chihiro-kun?" Enjouji asks timidly. She sounds a little alarmed, and I don't blame her, considering I've been standing here staring at the sky for a while.

Just in case, I sweep my hands over my eyes. Dry. Looks like tilting my head up actually helped.

"You've really changed, Enjouji."

"Wh... What?! I have?! Is... Is it really that obvious?!"

"Yeah."

"Oh... Y-Yay... Yay...!" Once again, she seems uncomfortable expressing joy for some reason. "G-Gosh, I wasn't expecting you to come right out and say it... Hee hee... Actually, come to think of it, you seem kind of different right now yourself. What's up?"

"...You can tell?" I wasn't expecting my change of heart to be so... visible.

"Yeah. I can hear it in your voice."

Oh. Right. Voice fetish. Go figure.

Still, even if she's the only one who sees it, that alone feels like proof that it's a significant change.

"I think... maybe... I've found the right answer. Or something like it, anyway. In which case, I have you to thank, so... thank you."

How long has it been since I actually thanked someone out loud?

"Y-You're making me blush! But I'm not sure how you could possibly... Well, actually, maybe it *is* possible," she corrects herself. "Sometimes the epiphany just *hits you*, you know? Just a tiny little moment where you discover the real deal."

"Are you speaking from experience?"

“Yeah... W-Well, I think so.”

“Come on. Have a little more confidence than that.” What happened to the girl who grabbed me by the collar? “Anyway, yeah. Frankly, I don’t know if my answer is the *real deal* or whatever you called it. Is there a way to tell?”

For some reason, I feel like she’s bound to have the answer. She’s just... *incredible*. And the more I think about it, the more I start to notice her good points. I feel like I could learn a thing or two from her. Maybe then I’d mature as a person.

“Well, any answer can be phony if you don’t act on it,” Enjouji explains, puffing herself up slightly. Then her lips curl in a mischievous smile that tells me she’s about to let me in on a big secret. “That’s why you have to take action. Turn the illusion into reality.”

Right.

“That reminds me... What was all that crap about me having feelings for Yui-san, you little punk?”

“Wait, what?! Are you saying you *don’t?!* But... but when I used that power, I specifically said ‘the person Chihiro-kun wants to talk to more than anyone’ and it turned me into her!”

“Just... don’t say I like her ever again!”

“O-Okay! Wait, but... you’re not denying it... You *do* like her, don’t you?”

“What part of ‘don’t say it ever again’ did you not understand?! And... sorry for... all the trouble I’ve put you through.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean! All the running around and screaming at me and dealing with my shit! Don’t make me spell it out for you! *God!*”

“Are you apologizing, or are you mad at me? Make up your mind.”

“Oh... Sorry...”

□■□■□

First, I gathered the four remaining members of the CRC in the clubroom.

Then I apologized for my behavior, asked them to tell me everything they knew about «Heartseed» and its previous phenomena, then suggested a plan of my own.

“If you guys decide to go through with the paradox plan, I think I should be the one to do it. I’m pretty sure I can still use the power. Also, I think I stand the best chance of finding «Heartseed», so I’m going to try again.”

“O-Okay... I still think it’s too early to try and force a second paradox, though. It’s just too risky,” Inaba replied, looking a little startled.

I figured I’d need to do more than just apologize, which is why I chose to demonstrate my feelings with a calculated plan instead... but maybe it’s still not enough.

“Chee-hee?” Nagase calls, her arms folded, her eyes closed.

“Y-Yes?” I respond.

She slowly opens her eyes... and shoots me a smirk. “You’ve grown up, haven’t you, boy?” she asks in a dramatic, theatrical voice as she points a finger in my face.

“Thank... you...?” I incline my head politely.

“Wait, what?! Who are you and what have you done with Chee-hee?! Is this another impostor?!”

“Somethin’ happen, Chihiro?” Aoki asks.

“I just...” I begin, then hesitate. It’ll sound so fake if I say it out loud—especially to this crowd of actual, genuine people.

“Ch... Chihiro-kun, umm...” Enjouji starts.

Are you about to encourage me? Don’t you dare. You’re going to make me look bad, damn it!

“All this time, I refused to take responsibility for my failures, but really it was all on me. I just... didn’t see it until now. It’s like, the world itself exists unembellished, and what matters is how you look at it... Actually, forget that last part!”

God, I can't believe I said that... It's so cringey, it's not even funny... Kill me now...!

Just then, the second-years all burst out laughing. They're laughing at me... at what I said... but not in a mean way. Somehow I can tell that they're not judging me. Weird how that works.

"Good on you, Chee-hee! I knew you had it in you! You're just a little dark and twisty, that's all. But now you've awakened to your true power!"

"You think I'm dark and twisty...? Okay, well... For the record, I don't have any power. I'm just average."

"Then I guess the average guy must be pretty powerful!"

Is *that* how you're going to spin this? You goofball.

"You know what? I think it's high time your senpai gave you some advice," she continues, her voice deep and manly like some kind of tough-guy persona. "All you need is a little backbone and some self-confidence. As it stands, you're too wrapped up in what everyone else thinks. Forget about them! Just do things your way. Live by your own values."

"Gee, now where have I heard that before?" Inaba snarks.

Nagase sticks her tongue out playfully. "Shush!"

"You wanna know how I see it?" Inaba continues. "Don't put so much weight on *perspective*. Only a loser would change their outlook and stop there." She crosses her legs and smirks. "This world is *yours* for the taking. If you have a problem with it, change it yourself."

...That has to be the most audacious thing I've ever heard.

"Inaban, you're sooo cool!" Nagase squeals.

"Wow..." Enjouji swoons.

Uh, guys? Is now really the time for jokes? I feel like I walked into a bad teen movie. Don't you people have any shame?

Or... is being vulnerable what life is really all about?

Just in case, I wait to see if Aoki has anything he'd like to say.

“Hmm? What’re you lookin’ at me for? Oh! Did you want my advice?! Holy crap... This *never* happens! Normally everyone just pretends I’m not here—Okay, sorry! Don’t give me that look, alright? I’ll get to the point! I’m thinking of something right now! Uhhh... Hmmm...”

But for all his groans and murmurs, his advice turned out to be plain and simple: “Don’t think. Feel!”

Sounds like Aoki, alright.

I head to the nature park with the goal of hopefully meeting «Heartseed». At this point, I doubt it’ll show up anywhere else.

According to Nagase, once it says it’ll end the phenomenon, it always follows through... or at least “that’s how it’s worked so far.” This has formed the basis of my single, tenuous ray of hope.

No matter what, I have to catch it this time. But how do I fight it? There’s no way I can defeat a supernatural entity... At least, that’s what I believed.

But when it comes down to it, once you actually try, it’s amazing the things you can accomplish. If you take a hard look at what you’re up against, if you set a firm goal and make a plan, you’ll find your breakthrough... and if you can get that far, then you can fight. The only reason I believed I couldn’t fight was because I’d put my head in the sand and refused to look at reality for what it was.

My knowledge of «Heartseed»—its character, its definition of fascinating—will lead me to an answer. And then I’ll take that phony answer and make it the real deal... by putting my money where my mouth is.

It’s so clear to me... I’m *dying* to get started.

But naturally, now that I’m actually prepared for once, there’s no sign of «Heartseed» anywhere. I walk around the park—around and around and around. Oh, and this time Enjouji is with me, searching just as desperately as I am. Chances are high that «Heartseed» won’t interact directly with the second-years this time around, so it’s up to us. Meanwhile, the others are taking a different, separate approach.

The conversation has died out between us now, and so we walk in silence.

The sun is setting; a cool breeze blows past, snapping me out of my hazy reverie, and suddenly my chest feels tight.

“You know... I owe you a lot, Enjouji. Thanks again.” Great, now I’m embarrassed all over again. Didn’t I already thank her once? I should’ve kept my mouth shut. “A-Anyway... I know this isn’t over yet, so I shouldn’t act like it. Not until Yu—Taichi-san and Yui-san get their memories back, anyway.”

This is nowhere near over. I’ve only just taken my position at the starting line.

Enjouji smiles softly. “It’s all thanks to Taichi-senpai for giving me the courage to try... Actually, I wouldn’t have met with him if I hadn’t seen our senpai take action with my own eyes... in which case, I guess it’s all thanks to me for joining the club... a-and thanks to our senpai for being who they are, and to you for being who *you* are, and... Actually, it never would’ve happened if I hadn’t been born in the first place...”

“Alright, I get it,” I cut in, before she has the chance to attribute everything to the Big Bang or something. It’s really not that deep! I mean, don’t get me wrong, the universe would be pretty different without it... Ugh, forget it.

“You’re right, though. It’s not over yet... Our battle has only just begun.”

“Ah, so you *did* actually pay attention to what I said.”

Some things never change; she still stammers and hesitates a lot. Apparently, that one time she yelled at me was her “Primal Super Mode” in action. (Personally, I think the name could use some work, but I digress.)

In the end, «Heartseed» never showed up that day... nor the day after that... nor the day after that.

And so the next day after *that* found us dashing all over the place. We were desperate.

“It... It’s no use... «Heartseed»’s just... nowhere...” Enjouji gasps, doubled over with her hands on her knees.

“So it won’t come out to play unless it wants to, is that it?” I snark, but deep down, I’m furious.

If it won’t play ball, then we’ll have to try a different game altogether... and

the others are starting to seriously consider doing shock therapy on Yui and Taichi. I can't even remember how long it's been since the two of them last had their memories. My biggest fear is that their amnesia is permanent.

«Heartseed» has powers beyond my wildest dreams—supernatural powers—but it's not omnipotent. If this is something that's within its control, then I assume it's already accounted for it... but during this phenomenon it's been fairly hands-off. Did it create "backups" of all our memories in the event that its assigned minion (read: me) screwed up? Inaba didn't seem so sure of that.

On the one hand I wish she wouldn't scare us like that, but on the other hand, I think the fact that she opened up about her fears at all is proof that she trusts us. Thinking about it like that, it starts to feel like a good thing... kind of.

Recently I've come to understand just how important it is to stay strong and keep my thoughts positive.

There was a moment when I went to the clubroom to retrieve the voice recorder I had set up in there so I could throw it in the trash. Curiosity got the better of me, and when I hit the Play button— "Taichi... Nnhnnn... Taichiiii...!"

—the first thing I heard was Inaba, mourning her lost love.

She had always seemed so competent, so *together*. And with all of her prior experience paired with her tough outer persona, I mistakenly assumed she was perfectly fine. Superhuman, even. But I was wrong—so, so wrong.

The second-years are every bit as human as we are. They just choose to keep it hidden. To cry in secret. That way they can be the pillars of support Enjouji and I want them to be. And it worked, too; I can't tell you how many times their strength encouraged me to keep going. Their strength was contagious.

The five of them always seemed so infallible, but now that I think about it, they probably aren't. They just make it look easy. But there's more to it than that: they also put in the effort to try to turn the phony infallibility into the genuine article.

There was never any gulf between us. We were on the same level right from the start. And now I'm confident I can be like them.

"Let's try going back to that one deserted area it seems to like," I suggest.

“Okay,” Enjouji agrees.

And so we walk the same path we’ve walked a dozen times now.

The CRC has overcome four different phenomena thus far. This was what inspired me to commit to the fight. For a second I got my hopes up, thinking maybe the resolution would end up being easier than I expected—like maybe the world would change its tune the same way I had.

Naturally, this wasn’t the case. The world exists unembellished; it doesn’t bend to the whims of the individual. But that doesn’t mean I can throw in the towel.

And so we push forward in a world that doesn’t come with lower difficulty settings. We take step after step, again and again and again.

Meanwhile, my mind is filled with apprehension. *What if «Heartseed» never comes back? Or what if it DOES show up—what if we can’t fight it? What if I’ve lost the right to a happy ending after everything I did? What if it decides to “end” me like it said it would?*

That last one doesn’t matter.

You’re just trying to act tough so you can save face.

Yeah, I am. A phony like me only really cares about himself above all else... but right now, I want to at least pretend I’m better than that so I can keep going. It’s fake, but I want to pretend that it’s the real deal. All that matters is that I focus on the goal in front of me. Then maybe someday *I’ll* be the real deal, too.

I walk and walk and walk. I’m not going to stop. I’m going to keep taking action until I change the world— And then «Heartseed» actually appears.

It’s the moment I’ve been waiting for, and yet I freeze, rooted to the spot. It’s wearing Gotou’s face, but at the same time, it radiates a distinctly inhuman vibe that threatens to consume the whole park.

It’s «Heartseed», alright.

My knees go weak, and my legs threaten to give out entirely.

“It... It’s here...!” Enjouji grabs the hem of my uniform.

I’m up to bat. It’s my plan. I have to do this— “Y... You need to do something, damn it!”

“What?! M-Me...?!”

“No, not you, idiot! I’m talking to «Heartseed»!”

This is stupid. It isn’t working. It sounded a lot cooler in my head, but I guess real life just doesn’t work that way.

Calm down. It’s going to be okay. We have a plan, remember? Just follow the script.

«Heartseed» stands there wordlessly—so quiet, it’s hard to tell if it’s even alive.

Then, suddenly, its mouth moves: “Uh... It seems like... you’ve been looking for me pretty hard recently... Oh, but... normally I wouldn’t show myself... It’s just that... things are getting stagnant...”

“Does that mean... you’re going to quit?” I ask.

“Not necessarily. It can be fun to let things stew for a while...”

Damn it, what happened to “it ends the phenomenon once it gets bored”?

“L-Listen, um... «Heartseed»-san... Are you... c-capable of... fixing the amnesia?” Enjouji asks, her tone bizarrely formal.

“If it’s more entertaining not to... then I don’t think I will.”

In other words, yes, it totally can if it wants to.

“Oh, and... I think that was the first time anyone’s ever called me ‘«Heartseed»-san’... I’m flattered...”

“Y-You’re welcome...”

Why does it care about *that?* Seriously, it’s ruining the dramatic tension.

“Hey, «Heartseed»! You can fix them, right? Then do it. Just n-name your—p-price.” The words catch in my throat as the entity turns its piercing, half-lidded gaze to me. The tiniest shift in its expression has the power to halt my momentum.

“I’m impressed to hear that from *you* of all people, Uwa-san.”

It’s taunting me.

“Lest we forget... you gave up on making things entertaining for me... For that matter... this is a problem of your own making, is it not...?”

I can’t deny that. In any other circumstance, I would have no right to try to bargain for this. I’m clearly at the end of my rope, and I want to turn tail and run...

But really, that’s just all in my head. I know I can find another way as long as I’m willing to put in the effort to look for it. Besides, I don’t have to play by the rules when we already know this thing isn’t bound by common sense. There’s got to be an opening somewhere.

So I start prodding.

“Okay, then... all I have to do is spice things up, right?!”

The sharp glint in its eye fades until it’s just staring at me blankly.

“So I’ll do it! You want spicy, I’ll give you spicy! So in return, you have to fix Yui-san and Taichi-san! Those are the terms, shithead!”

The vulgar insult keeps my morale up.

“Like I said, Uwa-san... I don’t think you’re in any position—”

“I could tell everyone what I used my power for!” I scream at the top of my lungs. “I could tell them about all my cringey twisted fantasies! I could read them my old middle school diary!”

My mind tells me to stop, but I ignore it and press on. If I stop now, it’s game over.

“I could tell them all exactly what I think of them, right to their face! What else... Look, I’ll do whatever you want! This stuff is bound to be entertaining! Oh, and you can have your stupid Phantom Projection back! I don’t want it!”

“Phantom Projection?” «Heartseed» and Enjouji repeat back in unison.

“Oh, uh... Th-That’s just what I’ve been calling the power you gave us! It doesn’t matter, okay?!”

I've never felt more embarrassed about my own naming sense in all my life.

"I... I'll do stuff, too! Anything you want! I'll do my best! Please!" Enjouji joins in. This is turning from a negotiation into outright begging, and I'm starting to think she's not on the same page as me.

"Haah... Let's see... You're offering to entertain me... and in exchange, you wish for me to cure Yaegashi-san and Kiriyama-san of their amnesia... and take your powers away... Is that right?"

Faint hope sparks in my chest. It's working. This might actually be working!

"But still... I feel like those things fall short of the 'entertaining' benchmark... For example, what if you did something you've always wanted to do...?" «Heartseed» suggests, and all at once, it feels like it's seen right through me—right down to my heart's deepest desires. It's humiliating. I don't want anyone to see that. And yet... I'm already at rock bottom.

"Then I'll confess my love to Yui-san! Right in front of the whole club, if you want!"

I know «Heartseed» already saw this coming, but still.

"Hmmm... Well, that *would* be more... *effective*..."

Is it working? Is «Heartseed» going to go for it?

"But... what if I still refuse...?"

Give me a break. I've done everything I can... Well, okay, not quite. But I've played all the cards in my hand. I don't have anything left.

"Then you can erase my memories in exchange!" a voice shouts.

That wasn't me.

Which means it can only be Enjouji.

"Erase my m-memories of the CRC... in exchange for giving theirs back...? Y-You can do that, right? And besides, it's a fair trade!"

She's so reckless. Her logic, her methods, everything. Then I realize she isn't clinging to my hem anymore. She's prepared. She's committed herself to this.

Am I really going to let myself lag behind her *again?* Am I that much of a loser,

or is she just that cool? The answer is both—but I can choose how I frame it.

In which case, I choose to believe that Enjouji's a badass. Someday, I promise, I'm going to catch up to her. And then I'm going to leave her in the dust.

It's just a phony promise for now, but no matter where the world takes me, someday in the far future, I'm going to make it the real deal.

"You can erase mine, too! Two for two! Equivalent exchange!"

I have to fix this, even if it means I have to lose those perfect moments we shared. The CRC pentagon isn't complete without Nagase, Inaba, Yui, Taichi, and Aoki... and if I admire them as much as I claim, then it's only right that I do this.

It's my turn to commit. Here is where it all ends—because this is where it begins.

"How about it, «Heartseed»?!"

My actions will change my world— "...And if I still refuse...?"

—or not.

"No... Come on...!" Enjouji whispers, her voice shaky.

I admit, I saw it coming. There have been countless times over the course of my life where Lady Luck was simply never going to be in my court, no matter how hard I tried. It wasn't anyone's fault in particular—sometimes these things work out, and sometimes they don't. But... I thought for sure this time would be different.

Just this once, don't I deserve— No... I need to win this myself!

"If I refuse... what will you do then?" «Heartseed» presses.

This is the end. I have to claw my way through it. I have to dig and dig and dig until I find it. There's still something I can do... I'm not out of options unless I let myself believe it, so just make it happen! Surely there's *something!*

"Haah... If that's all you've got—"

Argh, I'm out of time!

"Come on, I... I'm gonna cry, damn it!"

Silence.

A bird twitters in the background.

Of all the places, of all the times, of all the moments in which to say “I’m gonna cry,” this was not one of them.

“Pffha—mmph! Pfff!” Enjouji desperately tries to suppress a snicker. “I... I’m sorry, Chihi—pfffhaha!”

“Enjouji! Don’t laugh!”

And right as I’m distracted— “Pfff... Don’t be ridic—Huh?”

—I hear «Heartseed»’s voice.

But something’s different. I can feel it in my gut.

I turn to find it standing there in shock—an expression it’s never made before.

When I pause to figure out what’s different, I realize: it’s so *natural*. This feels like «Heartseed»’s real, natural expression. Its real emotions.

“Did I just... laugh...?”

Its voice is so clear and transparent compared to its usual air of mystery. What’s going on? Has something affected «Heartseed»?

“I think this is as far as we’re going to get... I was always curious about having someone else do the work for me, but this? This is an unexpected boon... I mean, this is just so... so *entertaining*... Truly entertaining...!”

Though its energy levels are as low as ever, «Heartseed» is clearly excited about something. It’s enjoying the moment. This is our big chance.

I summon up all my courage... The words catch in my throat. This is the end. It’s time to reel in my victory and set things right.

“S-See?! Entertaining, isn’t it?! You just said so yourself! I won’t let you pretend you didn’t! Now then, that entertainment is our collateral! Give them their memories back, and we’ll entertain you even more! So just—”

“Alright.”

Just like that, my victory arrives without any buildup or fanfare.

Meanwhile, «Heartseed» continues to chuckle to itself like it's forgotten that we're standing here.

□■□■□

And so Kiriyama Yui and Yaegashi Taichi regained their memories and returned to the Cultural Research Club without any residual symptoms.

Once the seven of us had reunited, I explained everything that had happened in as much detail as possible, starting with the day I met «Heartseed» and ending with the conversation in which it agreed to take our powers away and put things back to normal. Needless to say, it was a long, long story, but I wanted them to have all the context before making the final call.

Even with Enjouji's help, this story took not one, but *two* full days to tell, and by the time I was done, I had talked myself hoarse. I finished with yet another apology—not because I wanted their forgiveness, but because I wanted to express the remorse I felt.

I figured the chances were likely I'd get thrown out of the club, or worse... and yet no one attacked me over it, not even the two biggest victims, Yui and Taichi. Instead, we ended up in an apology battle, second-years versus first-years. I guess I should've seen that coming.

The five of them claimed this all happened "because we kept you in the dark about «Heartseed» and its phenomena," but honestly, I have no right to complain. After all, I wasn't forced into this against my will. I had every opportunity to decline... but I didn't. I *chose* to get involved.

"Alright, that's enough! Everybody forgives everybody! The end!" Nagase calls, clapping her hands to put an end to all the apologies and counter-apologies. "Now then! Chee-hee, Shino-chan, do you guys want to stay in the club? Because if we're being honest, we can't guarantee this won't happen again. And probably more than once." She fights to keep her tone light and casual, but even then, she can't completely hide her tension.

"And next time, there's no guarantee we'll make it out unscathed," Inaba mutters, looking away.

"Fair warning, sometimes these things can really affect your grades. One time

I even failed a test ’cuz of it! No, really, it was all «Heartseed»’s fault!”

“Don’t listen to him, guys.”

“Don’t worry, Iori-senpai, I won’t. That’s our Moroki... I mean, Aoki-senpai!”

“Wow, that’s the most hurtful thing anyone’s ever said to me! Did you tell her to call me that, Inabacchan?!”

“Pipe down, Moroki. I’m just passing on CRC tradition to the next generation, that’s all.”

“Wait, what?! I was joking! How could you?!”

Taichi glances at Aoki, then turns back to us. “Seriously, though, these phenomena can cause real problems for the people around you. Your family could be affected.”

“Taichi’s such a great guy for putting his family first... but regardless, I’m *not* okay with his infatuation with his little sister! It’s unacceptable, got it?!”

“I’m afraid I must ask you to air your grievances with your boyfriend at another time, Ina-bashful-sensei,” Nagase cuts in dutifully.

“Yeah, like... If you wanted to quit the club or whatever, I’d, like, totally understand and stuff,” Yui chimes in. “N-Not like we couldn’t still hang out, obviously, so yeah.”

Despite her best intentions, it’s plainly obvious how she actually feels on the subject. Classic Yui.

I look at Enjouji. She looks at me. Then, without a word, we nod in unison. At some point we became quite the dynamic duo, though strictly in the platonic sense. I can’t really see the two of us dating... at least, not right now.

Our decision made, we turn back to the others.

“I’m staying.”

“Please let me stay.”

«Heartseed»? Supernatural phenomena? Bring it on. I won’t let it stop me. I’m not the coward I once was.

«Heartseed» has its limits. The whole world has its limits. And in both cases,

as long as you keep your head up, you can survive. Granted, I'm not the most confident in my ability, but right now, the CRC has welcomed us back with open arms... and for the first time, I really feel like I'm one of them.

"But still... I feel awkward getting off scot-free with no punishment," I mutter.

"Oh yeah? You need some kind of punishment to help you put it behind you, is that it?" Inaba asked.

"Y-Yeah, I guess..."

For a moment, her smile turns sadistic, and I shrink back... but I know it's too late to run.

"Let's see... Well, now that everything's come to a close... That reminds me!" She slams her fist down on the table. "We may have forgiven you for using the Phantom Projection against us, but those *individual events* are still up for debate, damn it! You know *exactly* what I'm talking about, don't you, you little rat?!"

"Eeek...! Y-Yes ma'am!"

"First of all... How dare you make me *strip* and pose for your little *photos*, you little prick! You corrupted my innocence! You want that content, you'd better cough up the cash to pay for it!"

"I... I'm sorry!" I incline my head in apology.

"Excuse me?! The hell did you do to my girlfriend, asshole?! Wait... Inaba, you make it sound like you don't mind as long as he pays you!"

"Don't forget the time he punched me in the face!"

"I'm really sorry!" I bow even more deeply to Taichi and Aoki.

"And lest we forget, Chee-hee-san, you messed with my heart, too."

"I'm really, really sorry!" I bow to Nagase until my nose almost touches the table.

"Oh yeah, and you tricked me into telling you all that embarrassing stuff! Now I can never get married! What are you going to do about it, huh?!"

"I'm really, really, really super sorry!" I press my face all the way into the

table. “I’m sorry for all of it! I’ll do anything!”

“*Anything?* In that case, I have a proposal for you.”

Inaba’s eyes glint sharply, and I can tell she’s going to make me put my money where my mouth is... No, that’s okay. I deserve it. Go ahead.

“Your punishment is... to get your class in gear and help Green Team win the Sports Festival! And if we fail, you can kiss your hair goodbye!”

She’s going to shave my head?! I’m not even on the baseball team!

Chapter 8: The Day of the Festival Date: x/xx Weather: Sunny

So many things happened. Incredible things. And at one point, I got to be the star of the show!

I know it's not very nice of me to celebrate that, considering how hard things were for everyone, but it actually means a lot. In a way, I think it *needed* to happen... Not that I'd want to go through it again, though.

I think maybe I changed... No, I definitely changed. I found the right opportunity. Now it's up to me to decide whether it's phony or the real deal.

I'm only just getting started! My—no, OUR battle has only just begun. And Chihiro-kun's got a big day tomorrow. Hang in there!

I love you, Cultural Research Club.

+++

Today our class held a meeting for the upcoming cheerleading competition.

Once the cheerleading reps had made a token effort to wrap things up, we all headed back to our desks... except me. I had a "promise" to keep.

As I stand behind the teacher's lectern, a few classmates look at me in puzzlement.

"Uwa? Was there something you forgot to say?" Shimono asks casually, but I don't answer. I *can't* answer. Every fiber of my being is tied up into nervous knots.

The mood in the room is dismal at best. No one was enthusiastic about this meeting to begin with; partway through, a handful of students lost interest and started talking to their friends instead. There's absolutely no sense of unity here, and the odds are clearly stacked against me... but I have to fight this fight regardless.

As I stand up here by myself, gradually, more and more of my classmates start to take notice.

See, when you actively care about something, it can come off as uncool... and what I'm about to do is extremely, *painfully* uncool. I don't know how this will go, but chances are likely I'll fail. And assuming I *do* fail, the results will be disastrous. They'll all think I'm a loser. It's straight up social suicide.

But... eh, it's not the end of the world.

Compared to rock bottom, this is nothing. I know I can bounce back eventually. The world will still be there, the same as always. A little change in social status won't kill me.

So now it's time to take action... and change this.

"Listen, everyone. I think we should really try to win the Sports Festival."

The room falls dead silent—the kind where you can hear a pin drop. Even *I'm* feeling secondhand embarrassment, and I'm the one who said it. This is so much worse than I imagined... I can't imagine how much backbone it would take to say this crap on a regular basis.

"Uhhh... Uwa..."

"J-Just think about it! We're going to have to do this either way, so it can't hurt to try, you know, just a little or whatever. And if we win, it'll make the Culture Festival that much better... S-So yeah, let's try to win this!"

I finish my speech.

Silence.

Not that I blame them, of course. It's easy to nod along when everyone else is already on board, but being the first? Not so much. When you're the first, it's hard to gauge what everyone else wants, and reading the room is an essential component of fitting in.

But if you live your life going along with what everyone else wants, then you can't change anything, least of all the status quo.

I just need one person to make a move. I don't care if your courage is a phony pretext to look cool, either.

Okay, seriously, they're not even going to dignify me with a response? Please tell me that isn't happening right now. Oh my god, this is so freaking cringey... I

don’t feel so good...

Just then, Enjouji jumps to her feet.

“S-Sounds like something out of a movie! Count me in!”

Prior to this meeting, I had asked her to come to my rescue if it looked like we were going to fail to get airborne. After all, as long as someone makes the first move, it’ll be easier to build up momentum. That said, I think “like something out of a movie” is a pretty dorky sentiment, but whatever. Nice work, Enjouji!

Here I stand at the lectern, and Enjouji in the center of the room. Together, we spark the flames of revolution. There may only be two of us, but two is a lot of people, if you think about it in a glass-half-full kind of way. And we won’t be two for long. I’m sure someone will join us... Even just one person... Someone will definitely... Any moment now... Someone’s going to...

...Or not.

Instead, we receive a reception so frosty, it’s practically a blizzard.

“Look, dude, you can’t just spring that on them. Especially not someone as broody—er, *quiet* as you. It’s just gonna freak them out,” Shimono explains after the bell rings.

“Oh, shut up! I get it, okay?! I get it! Goddamnit!”

After the whole ordeal with «Heartseed» and its supernatural phenomenon, not to mention the resulting melodrama with the Cultural Research Club, I’d forgotten what normal felt like. Of *course* they weren’t going to jump on board at the drop of a hat. Surely even the CRC senpai were smart enough to dial it down a notch in a classroom environment.

“S-Sorry it didn’t work out, Chihiro-kun,” Enjouji murmurs sadly. “I guess you’re gonna go bald now... I’ll always remember your cool hair, though...”

“First, don’t jump to conclusions! Second, having my head shaved is *not* the same thing as going bald, thank you very much! Third, you realize my hair’s going to grow back, right? Gah, I don’t know where to start with you!”

“S-Sorry...”

“Is this some kind of two-person sketch comedy or what?” Shimono asks, and

everyone around us bursts out laughing. Apparently we'd drawn a fair bit of attention after that stunt we pulled.

Goddamnit... I was really trying up there, and I have nothing to show for it. This is so soul-crushing... No, I won't give up. I need to figure something else out.

"Do you actually want to try to win the Sports Festival? Or is it just because Uwa-kun suggested it?" one of the girls, Higashino, asks Enjouji playfully, and it's obvious she's trying to ship the two of us together.

"I... I want to win, personally! It's more fun, and rewarding, and... cool!"

That's Enjouji for you, alright.

"There's nothing cooler than boys doing sports, that's for sure. Especially if they actually win. So you want to see Uwa-kun working up a sweat, is that it?"

"Huh? Why him? Oh, um... I think maybe you have the wrong idea... Personally, I'd just feel bad if he went bald this early..."

Again, will you stop jumping to that conclusion?!

"Huh? Wait, so you prefer guys who do sports?" Shimono asks Enjouji.

"Huh...? Oh... um... well... It's better than the alternative...?"

"I see... So that's what you're into..."

Enjouji, I don't think you understand what Shimono means by "prefer"... Gah, enough about that! I need to figure out how to boost morale around here! My hair is on the line!

Wait a minute...

I turn to Higashino and the other girls. "Hey, can I ask you something? How do you feel about guys who kick ass at sports stuff?"

"Huh? Is this a come-on? Are you trying to suggest you're gonna show off for us?"

"No, no, nothing like that. This is purely a hypothetical question."

I'm starting to think Higashino is actually pretty easy to talk to. She's not intimidating like most girls.

“Well, I mean, I don’t think there’s a girl alive who wouldn’t find that effort pretty sexy.”

From there, the conversation begins to pick up: “Guys are so dreamy when they’re all passionate about stuff... Well, as long as they’re not *too* passionate, anyway!”

“Yeah, like the baseball team. They’re pretty cool!”

“I know, right? I love to see them dripping with sweat...”

“Oh my god, you have a sweat fetish?”

“No way! Oh my god!”

“Why do you ask, anyway?” Higashino brings it back to me.

“Actually, I have a favor to ask... Could you bring this up with the rest of the girls, too?”

While there was a massive gulf in our class between the guys and girls, we all got along relatively well among our own gender. Thus, the topic of “sexy athletic guys” spread relatively quickly.

“Hey, Uwa! Just so you know, I’m gonna be doing my best during the Sports Festival.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“Me three.”

“Me four!”

As it turned out, the boys of Class 1-B were easily bought.

“Awesome... The guys changed their tune faster than I thought...!”

I can’t claim to understand it, but hey, I’m not complaining. Now I’ve got the momentum I need to get this ball rolling. Next I just need this motivation to spread to the girls and I’ll be set!

“Hey, Uwa,” Tada calls. “That was actually pretty impressive, you know that? The guys are all talking about getting together after school to practice!”

“Yeah, I heard. They’re saying we should give up on the cheerleading

competition and use all the time we have left polishing our sports skills. I'm really not that impressive, though."

If anything, my horny classmates are way more competent at figuring out how to scrape by with a narrow victory.

"What made you suddenly want to win, anyhow?"

"Well, Inaba-senpai—" I begin, then stop short. Is that really the reason I want us to win? Because she told me to?

If she'd never foisted this task on me, what would I have done then?

—I want to win, personally! It's more fun, and rewarding, and... cool!

"...I just felt like it."

"Because it's what Enjouji-san wants?"

"Look, I don't know what you think is going on with me and Enjouji, but trust me, we're just friends."

"*Riiight*," Tada laughs. "Alright, so you've won the guys, but now you're trying to figure out how to reel in the girls, is that it?"

"Yep."

"If you ask me, they just need one more little push. Right now, I guarantee they're looking at the guys and thinking, *should we really just phone it in and let them do all the work?*"

"So how do we push them, exactly?"

"Just leave it to me," Tada grins, shooting me a thumbs-up. Then he raises his voice. "Trust me, now that we've got the guys willing to practice, we've actually got a shot at this! If we lose, it's *totally* the girls' fault... Oops!" He claps a hand to his mouth in staged surprise, then whispers to me, "See, all we gotta do is turn this into a battle of the sexes! Heh heh heh!"

For what it's worth, it does seem effective. The girls near us *definitely* heard that... aaaand now it's spread across the room to the rest of them...

I guess when you have a girlfriend, you don't have to worry about what other people think of you. In other words, the exact opposite of Shimono.

“Damn... Smart thinking, Tada. I gotta say, though, I’m surprised you’d want to put in the effort for the Sports Festival.”

“If anyone’s ‘surprising’ here, it’s *you*, my guy. You’re honestly something else. Thanks to you, people are actually starting to come around on the whole thing, even me! ‘Cuz I mean, like... it’s kinda dorky to *care* about stuff, y’know?”

“Wait... What do you mean, thanks to me?” I ask. Is it because I gave that passionate speech up there? Did my courage actually change them after all?

“Well, I mean... At this point, nothing could possibly be more embarrassing than that stunt you pulled.”

I slam my forehead into my desk, clutching my hair. I didn’t want to come across as a dork, but life never seems to go the way I want it to. Is this just... how I roll?

If so, I hate it.

□■□■□

I decide to go peek in on Class 2-B to check on Yui and Taichi.

“Ioriii!”

“Whoa, whoa! Your tackle-hugs are too strong, Yui!”

“What’s with you two? First you’re giving each other the cold shoulder, and now you’re all over each other!”

“I haven’t been getting my daily dose of Iori, so I need to make up for it, duh! And I’m not going to let anyone get in my way—not even you, Yukina!”

“Go ahead and load up, Yui! What’s the matter, Yukina? Jealous much?”

“N-No!”

“Hee hee... You don’t have to lie to yourself, you know...”

“Will you quit talking like you know me, Fujishima-san?! You’ve been freaking us all out lately!”

...Yui seems to be having fun with the other girls in her class. No problems there. Next, I look over at Taichi.

“Hey, so, I know we decided to put all the athletic guys front and center for the Sports Festival, but I was wondering, do you have any preference where we put you? Anything you’re especially good at?” Taichi asks a quiet, aloof guy.

“Huh? Oh... Well, I don’t really have a *preference*, per se...”

“Per se?”

“Well, in elementary and middle school they’d always have me ride on top for the cavalry battle... and I’ve never lost once.”

“What?! That’s incredible! You should totally do that! Maybe we still have time to switch you!”

“Maybe... You’re welcome to try...”

“Okay, I’ll ask Watase!”

“Hey hey hey! Turns out Ooshima-kun has a special talent none of us ever knew about! How d’ya like them apples?!” an excitable pigtailed girl cuts in. “And as for you, Yaegashi-kun, you’re actually pretty slick! What made you think to ask him that, anyway? Confess your sins to Sister Nakayama!”

“Well, you see, I got the idea when I was talking to one of the younger students in my club.”

“Oh yeah?”

“I’m not sure how to put this... It’s like... Sometimes there are people who really want to do something, but they don’t know how to take the initiative on their own, I guess? I’m pretty sure I used to be like that myself.”

“Oho, I see... You are a force to be reckoned with, young Yaegashi Taichi...”

“What persona is that supposed to be, anyway...?”

These people really are incredible... It’s going to be a while before I can get on their level.

□■□■□

The day of the festival was bright and sunny. The general consensus among the student body was that they would’ve appreciated a bit more cloud cover, but once the event had started, the excitement was enough to overwrite any

complaints about the heat. According to some of the upperclassmen, this year's Sports Festival was even more hyped up than previous years.

The cheerleading competition ended, there was a break for everyone to stop and have lunch, and then the Sports Festival entered the endgame.

"You've been kicking ass out there, Chihiro!" Inaba exclaimed, ruffling my hair.

With the final event ahead of us, victory was currently a toss-up between the Green Team (Inaba, Aoki, Enjouji, and myself) and the Red Team (Taichi, Iori, and Yui). At present, Red Team was in the lead... but if the Green Team managed to win the final event, the points earned would be enough to turn the tables and take first place.

"This is coming along swimmingly... I guess that makes sense, considering *we're* involved. Now it's all riding on the last event... and that includes the bet we made."

"Yeah."

"*And* your hair, of course!"

I was hoping she would have forgotten, but alas.

"I won't be in the last event, so it's up to you. Break a leg out there, Chihiro."

The final event was Yamaboshi High School's infamous co-ed cavalry battle.

A cavalry battle, or "chicken fight" as it's colloquially known, is a game in which one student wearing a bandanna (the "knight") rides on the interlocked hands, arms, and shoulders of three to four others (the "mount") to form a "cavalry" unit. These units then attack each other to try to knock the knight off of their mount, or snatch the knight's bandanna.

Here at Yamaboshi, each team consisted of both all-guy and all-girl units. Obviously, it wouldn't be proper to allow rough physical contact between the guys and girls, so a special rule had been instated: Guys were only allowed to attack other guys, but girls could attack either gender.

Now, looking at it on paper, one might think this would give the girls an overwhelming advantage, but in actuality, not so much. The height difference

between the sexes meant most girl-on-guy attacks didn't have the reach to be effective. As such, although the battle itself was technically co-ed, each unit tended to stick to their same-sex opponents, with the girls occasionally going hog-wild and snatching a male unit's bandanna to uproarious applause. (Additionally, some people would take advantage of the "no guy-on-girl attacks" rule and position their female units to block a male unit's path, among other strategies.) After the first two preliminary rounds, it had come down to the Red Team versus the Green Team. And unlike the previous two rounds, the finals match would not have a time limit. Instead, we would keep going until one team had lost all their units. (In the event that the teams ended up with only male units on one side and only female units on the other, the victory would go to the team with the most units intact.) Excitement was at an all-time high. All eyes were glued to the field going into the final match. Sitting atop one of the mounts as the sun beat down on us, I could hear the cheers from the crowd: "GO FOR IT!"

"DON'T LET THEM BEAT US!"

"YOU CAN WIN THIS!"

"LET 'EM HAVE IT!"

Some of these cheers were more... *aggressive* than others— "UWA, YOU LITTLE BASTARD, YOU BETTER WIN THIS!"

"DON'T FORGET, IF YOU LOSE, WE'RE SHAVING YOUR HEAD!"

—and some of them were straight-up threats, apparently.

Among them, I heard Enjouji's voice: "YOU CAN DO IT, CHIHIRO-KUN!"

Honestly, I was surprised. I didn't know she had the lung capacity to scream all the way across the athletic field.

"Ready... Go!"

And so the final match began.

"Alright, here we go, Uwa!" Tada shouted up from below me, positioned at the front of our unit... and so we began to move.

There were a lot of brawny guys on the Green Team, and so we'd decided to

use that to our advantage to power through the preliminaries. By contrast, the Red Team didn't possess that sort of overwhelming strength, but they had one seemingly quiet second-year guy who turned out to have a vicious competitive streak, as well as a certain feisty little tiger rampaging all around the field: Kiriyama Yui.

Yui was willing to attack not just the girls, but the guys, too. Her mount was a squad of all the tallest girls in her class, boosting her offensive capabilities to the max. Granted, even then, she'd normally never be able to reach any of the male knights... but she wasn't playing by the normal rules. Instead of sitting on her mount, she was standing directly on their shoulders, an extremely risky feat few would dare attempt.

As much as the guys wanted to take her out of the competition, the rules prevented them from doing so—and none of the girls were a match for her. She had overcome the height difference handicap and was now effectively invincible.

"For now, let's have the girls distract Yu—er, that long-haired knight—to buy us some time while we take out the guys!" I commanded.

We were a team of all-rounders versus a team with two star players, and we soon proved to be evenly matched; we remained neck-and-neck through a majority of the battle, kicking up dust amid cheers from the crowd. One by one, the cavalry fell, both enemy and ally alike.

Now my unit stood face to face with the Red Team's *other* star player, the "quiet" second-year guy. He had stolen his fair share of bandannas, though the crowd hadn't really noticed, as Yui had completely stolen the show.

"Hyah!" I made the first move, lunging forward in a feint. He took the bait, exactly as predicted.

Then I reached out—"Grah!"—and snatched his bandanna.

"You rock, Uwa!"

"I guess all those years of karate finally came in handy!"

Before I knew it, the only cavalry left standing were mine, a female unit on our team, and a female unit on the Red Team—Yui's.

“Alright, folks, we’re coming down to the wire!” a commentator from the Broadcasting Club exclaimed over the loudspeaker. “The Red Team’s down to their ace in the hole, the star of the show, Kiriyama Yui-san! Where were you last year, Kiriyama-san?! As for the Green Team, they’ve got one male and one female unit left standing. Now, let’s have our sports analyst take a deeper look at the situation!”

“If Kiriyama-san goes down, that’s an instant win for the Green Team. But if she can take out the Green Team’s female cavalry, we’ll be down to opposite-gender units on either side, which means the game is over. Normally the win would go to the side with the most units, but since they’d both have one each, that means the game would end in a draw, with both teams receiving an equal share of the points. And if that happens, then the Red Team wins the Sports Festival. Now, if Kiriyama-san can take out the male unit, then the game will continue, but it seems likely the Red Team would win in that case. Regardless, with the Green Team’s male unit barred from attacking Kiriyama-san’s female unit, the game is essentially one-on-one at this stage, so I think we can all agree the Red Team’s going to—”

“Wowza, that’s some surprisingly professional commentary! Not to say any of it was wrong, but that last part will ruin the dramatic tension, so I gotta stop you there! In short, whichever side loses a unit first is essentially the loser! That’s all the information you need to know, folks! Now *this* is one hell of a climax!”

It was pretty obvious what the commentators were angling for. A hush fell over the crowd as their attention turned to the loudspeakers, and the battlefield grew quiet as the momentum came rolling to a halt.

Yui’s unit was positioned directly between mine and the other girls’. I made eye contact with my fellow Green Team knight, and together we closed in on Yui.

Frankly, there was no real point to this pincer attack; after all, the rules barred me from attacking, so it would all come down to the two female units duking it out. The commentators were right; it was undeniably obvious which of them would triumph.

But if I stopped to consider how the Green Team could possibly turn this around... well, there was *one* option I could take... Now *that* would be interesting...

To think there's still a chance, even down here at rock bottom... This world truly is the ultimate game. Now all I have to do is take that phony victory and make it real.

Steadily the distance closed between us until we were within fighting range. Then Yui stood up, with her feet on her mount's shoulders, carefully maintaining her balance. Standing at her full height, she was pretty damn tall, comparatively speaking—to the point that it really felt like she was cheating.

She flipped her long reddish-brown hair over her shoulder and surveyed the competition.

"Well, this is easy. Chihiro-kun can't attack us, so like, all I have to do is take out the girls and we win."

Time to initiate my plan.

"Really, Yui-san?" I asked.

"What?"

"Surely you're not *really* going to take the easy road and split the points just so you can win, are you? Because that's what would happen if you took out the girls' unit first."

Play to her competitive side.

"Wha...?! O-Of course not! We're going to *win*, fair and square!"

"Yui! He's obviously trying to bait you!"

And it's working.

"Whatever! The guys can't attack us anyway, so we may as well take them out first! Now go!"

"Alright, alright!"

Yui's unit started to run at us at a speedy pace, and I realized her mount was composed of nothing but athletic girls.

“What do we do now, Uwa?! Run for it?!” asked one of the guys carrying me.

The other female unit was moving in accordance to Yui’s trajectory, but it was clear they weren’t fast enough to intercept her.

“Nope. We’re fine as-is,” I replied.

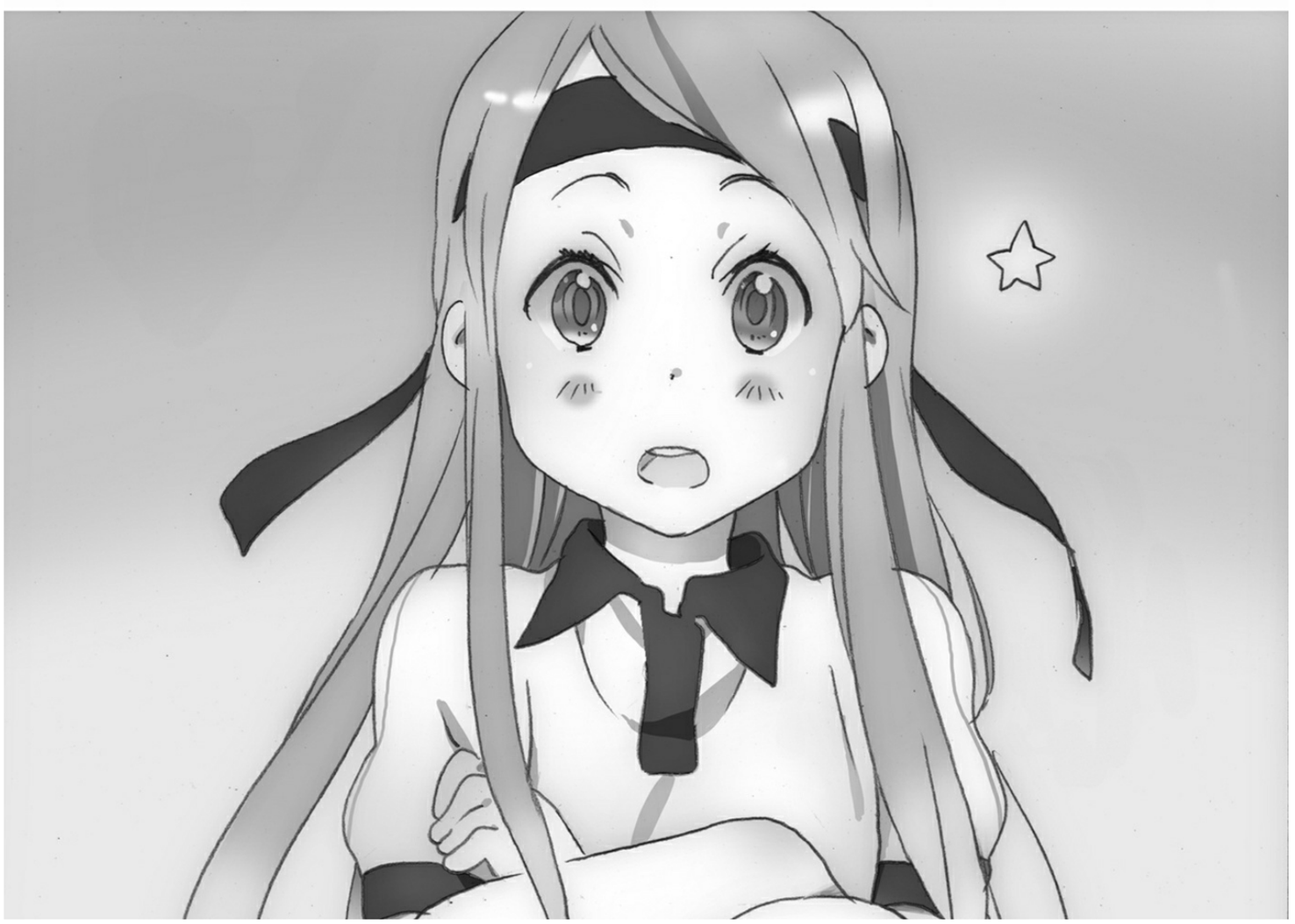
“What?! But... if we can’t attack her, then... if she catches us, it’s game over!”

Game over, indeed.

It was time to bring this little story to its conclusion—one that I had done my best to ignore for years. But now I was going to make it the real deal, and then I was going to end it for good. It was time for me to move on.

“I *was* actually in love with you, you know that?”





Her proud, confident gaze shifted to surprise as her eyes widened and her jaw dropped. Then, all at once, her face flushed beet red.

“What? *What?* Ch-Chihiro-kun... are you serious?! Like, for *real?!* Hold on... I... Wha... Ch-Chihiro-kun...? N-No way... This can’t... What...?!”

She began to panic, and the rest of her unit struggled to keep her upright.

“Yui! Focus! Quit flailing around and try to keep your balance, would you?! Hey! Are you listening?! You’re going to—!”

But it was too late. In the panic, the other female knight managed to snatch Yui’s bandanna.

Epilogue: Rock Their World “*Explain yourself, mister!*” Yui roared at me after the Sports Festival came to a close.

“Like I said, I *was* in love with you, past tense. It was a while ago. Surely it was bound to happen at some point, considering how long we’ve known each other. Am I wrong?”

Technically, when I say “a while ago” I mean “until yesterday,” but I digress.

“Nngh... You brought it up on purpose to make me all flustered, didn’t you?! But it’s not like you were lying, I guess...!” Clutching at her hair, she shook her head vigorously, as if to shake away her inner turmoil. “Rrrgh... We lost because of me... They’re never going to forgive me!”

But fortunately for Yui, as it turned out, the others didn’t hold it against her at all.

In the wake of our victory, Classroom 1-B’s festive mood showed no signs of fading anytime soon.

“Man, that was awesome!”

“I’m glad we decided to put in the effort. It actually paid off!”

“That was, like, sooo badass!”

“We owe a lot to the guys for kicking ass at Capture the Flag!”

“Nah, you ladies really stole the show in the relay race. You earned us a ton of points with that win!”

After dedicating so much effort to the festival and snatching victory from the jaws of defeat, everyone was celebrating, guys and girls alike.

“I gotta say, I think the real MVP was Uwa-kun!” Higashino declared, pointing at me.

“Totally!”

“You rock, Uwa!”

“Wassup, Festival Champ?!”

“Sup, sports nerd!”

“No, I... What? I’m not a sports nerd! Where’d that come from?”

Apparently they mistook my motivational speech at the teacher’s lectern as a personal, vested interest in sports.

“From now on, we’ll call you Mr. Sports Festival!”

“Don’t you dare! If you’re going to give me a nickname, can you at least make it applicable to my personality?!”

“Well, what part of your personality can we riff on, then?”

“I dunno, uhh... Mr. Secretly Cares...?”

“Oh yeah? That’s the sort of vibe you’re going for? Interesting... I wouldn’t have expected that...”

“Sorry, bro, but that’s a bit of a stretch.”

“Hey! Don’t judge me! A guy can dream, can’t he?! Er... Not that I dream about it or anything!”

“Chihiro-kun is quite a tsundere... I wager he’s 80% ‘tsun’ and 20% ‘dere’...”

“Stay out of this, Enjouji! And since when do you know enough about tsunderes to make that approximation?!”

Later, the whole class met up at the bowling alley for our official victory celebration.

In the morning, the men of the household sit around the table, eating our breakfast of toast and salad, while my mother prepares boxed lunches for my brother and me to take with us to school.

I butter my toast and take a bite. For the most part, we eat in silence. My father sips his coffee while he reads the newspaper. As for my brother, he chews absently, humming to himself. Either he’s in a really good mood or he’s got a song stuck in his head.

In the background, the TV drones on in vain.

My father gets up to go get dressed for work. My brother's plate is clean, save for the tomatoes from the salad. My mother knows he won't eat them, but she serves them to him regardless.

It's a familiar routine I've experienced dozens... no, *hundreds* of times.

But today, I'm going to change it up ever so slightly.

"That song you're humming. Is that Yuraty's new single?"

"Wait, you know *Yuraty?* Dang, your taste must be pretty niche. Their new single totally slaps, though! I really wanna buy the album, but I'm flat broke, so instead I've just been watching the music video over and over..."

"I own that album, actually. Want to borrow it?"

"What? You have it?! Dude, since when do you listen to the same stuff as me?! I thought for sure you wouldn't like them! Heck yeah I wanna borrow it!"

"Okay, but you have to eat your tomatoes."

"What? Aww, c'mon! What kind of deal is that?! Ugh... Fine, okay?! I'll eat them!" He stuffs all the tomatoes into his mouth and begins to chew. "Ggllpp... There! I ate them! Happy?! Now you'd better loan me that album after school today, okay?!"

And with that, he dashes off to the bathroom to style his hair, leaving his perfectly clean plate behind.

"Thank you, Chihiro," my mother says to me.

In the background, the TV drones on in vain... but as it turns out, if I listen closely, I can make out the peaceful sounds of my mother cooking, too.

I made an effort to change myself, and the world changed with me. I changed my viewpoint, and the world changed with me. The world we all share? That will always exist unembellished. But as it turns out, my life is something I can affect directly. And in a sense, that makes it *my* world.

I get ready for school and leave the house. It's the day after the Festival. What will the mood in the classroom be like? What if everyone reverts back to their original apathy? What if the camaraderie we built was only temporary?

To be fair, that would be pretty interesting in and of itself. And supposing that *did* happen, what action would I take then? Would I rest assured in the knowledge that our class is at least minimally capable of caring when the time calls for it, and decide to let things lie? Honestly, I don't think there's anything wrong with that. If we were constantly firing on all cylinders at all times, I think it would wear me out. I just don't have that much energy to spare.

Ideally I'd prefer if we only got that emotionally invested in school events... but knowing how the world works, it's not going to go my way. The world isn't designed to cater to me, after all. Everyone has their own concept of "ideal," and these differing ideals constantly conflict and influence each other... and the world is built to contain them all. So really, it just depends on how you look at it —at *life*.

I look up at the sky. Vast, sprawling, blue. And each time I see it, I think of the club—and the people in it—that rocked my whole world.

+++

Have I actually made an impact on someone's life? Yaegashi Taichi wondered to himself.

After the impostor phenomenon came to an end, Chihiro and Enjouji both thanked him and the other second-years for helping them change their lives.

The entire concept of changing someone's life was a pretty serious one. This was not something most people could simply set out to achieve. And yet, even with «Heartseed»'s phenomenon hanging over them, the first-years believed it had happened. But how exactly had Taichi himself contributed to that?

He hadn't even realized the phenomenon was happening. At one point Chihiro told him, "I could never hold a candle to you," but Taichi was inclined to disagree. There had been some *really* close calls. Frankly, he could think of nothing scarier than a world full of lurking impostors. And if there had been even one misstep, who knows what might have happened then...

According to the others, at one point, he'd fallen victim to amnesia. He could only imagine how hard it must have been on them. But fortunately, they were able to work together to overcome it.

This wasn't like «Heartseed»'s usual style, though. It was nowhere near random this time; Chihiro was in full control of when and where it happened at any given moment. But to the phenomenon's victims, it certainly *seemed* like the impostors were appearing at random, so in that sense, perhaps it was thematically appropriate after all.

But if «Heartseed» was switching up its tactics, then... maybe there was more to it. Something big, perhaps. Was it setting the stage anew? Or would the curtain fall at last?

Either way, the Cultural Research Club had proven victorious, and that was all that mattered. Not only that, but Chihiro and Enjouji were now officially part of the club. Though Taichi had encouraged them to consider quitting, they hadn't budged. In spite of «Heartseed», in spite of everything, they wanted to stay. Why? Because, according to them, "the club matters more."

They seemed so... *strong*. Chihiro was still his usual snarky self, but Taichi got the sense he'd opened up a bit more. And as for Enjouji, she seemed more confident in herself. In all likelihood, those weren't the only changes, either—just the only ones he could see. He simply hoped they were good changes, and if he had somehow contributed to their self-improvement, then he couldn't be happier.

So how exactly did I—we—change them?

He still didn't have an answer to that... but if he had to guess... perhaps the simple act of *living life to the fullest* had enough of a ripple effect to change lives.

+++

The amnesia wasn't permanent. I am so, so, *so* grateful. You have no idea.

If the memories we shared were just *gone forever*, I... Fuck, I don't want to think about it.

All those sleepless nights... I was barely holding it together. My little tough-girl act was on the verge of shattering completely. But thankfully, the situation was resolved before the worst-case scenario came to pass. Otherwise I probably would've freaked everyone out.

The whole thing made me realize... my entire life is directly centered on what we have now. This club is my *life*. This club *makes me who I am*. And oddly enough, this most recent phenomenon got me thinking about the future.

Frankly, I don't *want* to think about it. I don't want to imagine a world where things are different... and yet I know it's coming. So what will happen to me then? I can't even begin to guess. I'm just... terrified out of my wits.

Who is Inaba Himeko without Yaegashi Taichi?

The End

Afterword Thank you for reading *Nise Random*! This is volume 6 of the *Kokoro Connect* series, following Volume 1: *Hito Random*, Volume 2: *Kizu Random*, Volume 3: *Kako Random*, Volume 4: *Michi Random*, and short story collection *Clip Time*.

Anyway, Anda Sadanatsu here, holding out hope that the official abbreviation of “KokoroCo” is going to enter common parlance soon... Any day now, I’m sure... All together now: KokoroCo!

As you may have noticed, I make a point of listing out all the books in the series at the start of each afterword. Kokoro Connect doesn’t use volume numbers in the titles themselves, so I figure this might help alleviate any potential confusion for readers.

Now, you might be thinking, “If you didn’t want people to get confused, then you should’ve numbered them to begin with!” and trust me, I get that. People have said that. A lot. I admit, I desperately wanted to number my volumes—no, really! But that desire was flung back in my face, for an insurmountable obstacle stood in my path.

Yes, you guessed it: I couldn’t number my volumes because reasons.

...Okay, okay, I just wanted an excuse to say “because reasons.”

So, why am I bringing this up, you ask?

At the bookstore, whenever you encounter a series that doesn’t use volume numbers, normally you should check the spine, because there’s a way for you to tell (at least, with Famitsu Bunko books, anyway). For *Nise Random* in particular, you’ll see “A12 / 1-5” printed near the top. “A12” is my author number, and “1-5” means “Series 1 - Volume 5.” Simple, right?

Well, the thing is... Clip Time, the short story collection, is listed as “A12 / 2-

1.” Apparently, because the title and contents are both different from other volumes, it ended up categorized as a different series altogether... which means you won’t know where it fits in the main series...

B-But that’s no problem, right? You can always just check my author bibliography on the inner cover, right?! Well, assuming the book isn’t shrink-wrapped... Sorry in advance if it is! (Not to suggest bookstores shouldn’t shrink-wrap their books, just to be clear!) Okay, now for something completely different!

Volume 2 of the manga adaptation will be released in December of 2011! And the second drama CD, titled *Spring & Dates & Pretend-Siblings*, will be released in January of 2012! And last but not least... an anime adaptation is in the works! It’s pretty impressive when you see it all listed out like that, huh? Like, “Damn, this guy’s been busy...”

Once again, none of this could have happened without the support of everyone involved, including my beloved readers. Thank you so much! The manga, the drama CDs, the anime—it’s all thanks to your passionate support. We’re going to create something you’ll truly love, I promise! As the author, I’ll be doing everything in my power to make them the best they can be. In the meantime, I hope you’ll continue to support *Kokoro Connect*, both the light novels and the manga!

Okay, I’m running out of space now, so let’s move on to the acknowledgments!

First, I’d like to thank everyone who worked so hard to help me get this book published, particularly my editor. With every new volume, I find myself grateful all over again.

To Shiromizakana-sama: I honestly can’t thank you enough. Just... thank you. I look forward to the rest of our journey together!

Lastly, before I go, I’d like to extend my full gratitude to all of my readers once again. Thank you!

—Anda Sadanatsu September 2011


Taichi &
Inaban
BONK!

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Kokoro Connect Volume 6: Nise Random

by Sadanatsu Anda

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