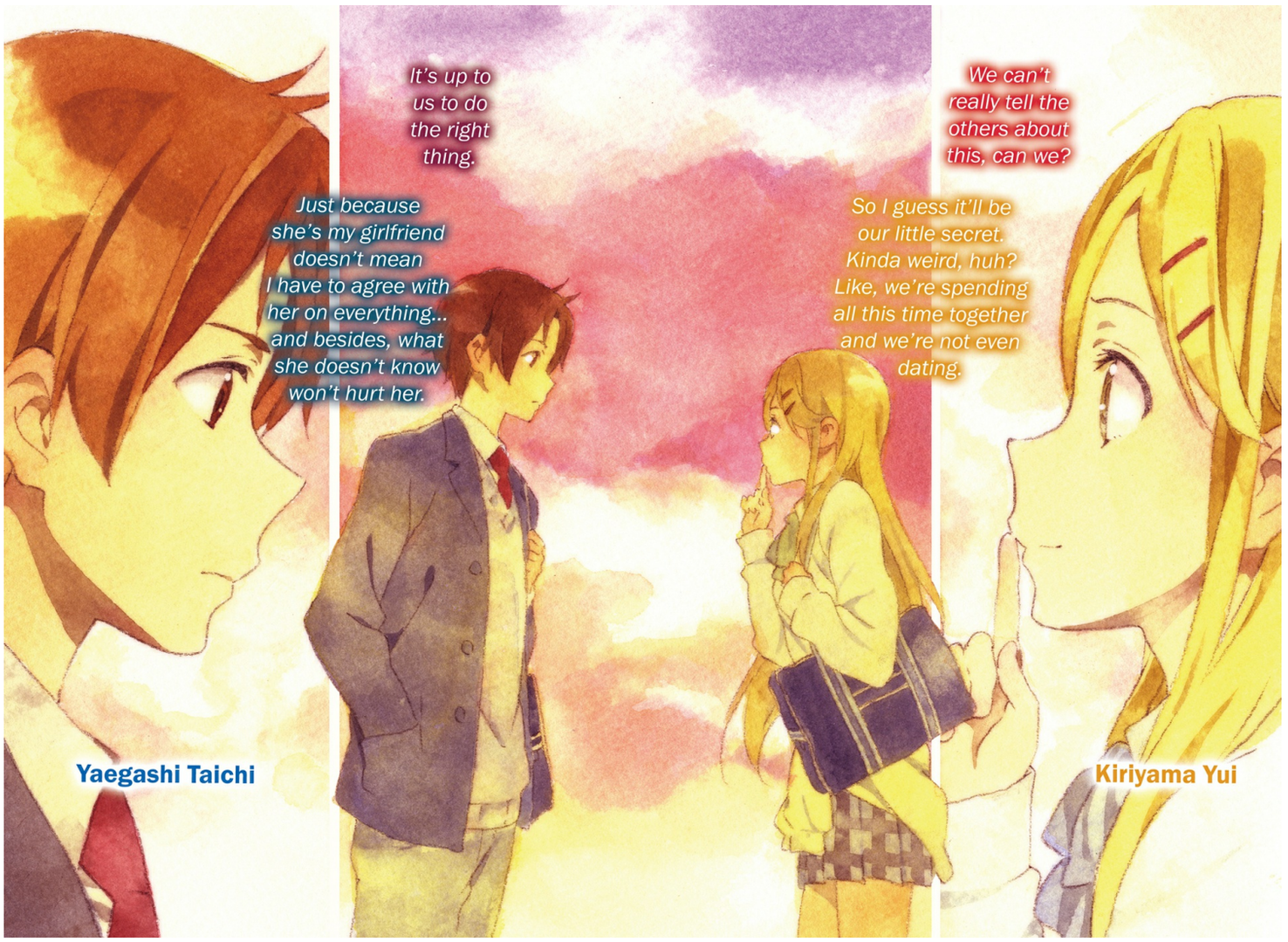

KOKORO CONNECT
YUME — RANDOM
Sadanatsu Anda

KOKORO CONNECT

YUME – RANDOM




It's up to us to do the right thing.
We can't really tell the others about this, can we?
Just because she's my girlfriend doesn't mean I have to agree with her on everything... and besides, what she doesn't know won't hurt her.
So I guess it'll be our little secret. Kinda weird, huh? Like, we're spending all this time together and we're not even dating.
Yaegashi Taichi
Kiriyama Yui


"This must be a recent development. Did you acquire some sort of special power?"
"Wh... Where did THAT come from...?"
"Tell me, Yaegashi-kun. Can you read minds?"
Fujishima Maiko
Fujishima Maiko had him pegged. Sirens blared as «Heartseed»'s warning replayed in his mind...


And so the second-years of Yamaboshi High School left the airport. From there, each class boarded a bus that would take them to their destination. Along the way, they admired the wide roads and expansive plots of land; then, after about an hour, they all filed off the bus and into a magnificent stretch of prairie field. Everything about it screamed rural Hokkaido, and the students couldn't possibly be more excited.
HOKKAIDO, MORE LIKE HECKA TIGHT, YO!
I NOTICED THIS BACK AT THE AIRPORT, BUT... THE AIR IS REALLY COLD HERE!
HOW MANY SOCCER FIELDS' WORTH OF LAND IS THIS?
Nakayama Mariko
Watase Shingo
Nagase Iori

Table of Contents

«Chapter 1» The Dreaded Career Planning Surveys

«Chapter 2» It Began, Prefaced as “The End”

«Chapter 3» Playing Cupid

«Chapter 4» A Fork in the Road

«Chapter 5» World’s Greatest Detective

«Chapter 6» Ensnared

«Chapter 7» Under the Sea of Stars

«Chapter 8» A Resolution for All

«Epilogue» Going Forward

Afterword



—This will be the last time.

Chapter 1: The Dreaded Career Planning Surveys I asked myself, *what is my life's purpose?* And when I did... I came up empty-handed.

I imagine this question hit Yaegashi Taichi just as hard as it hit me, Inaba Himeko.

If we had never stopped to think about it, would we have carried on living in blissful ignorance forever? No... I don't think we could have escaped it. We each would have been forced to come to terms with it sooner or later. And then we would've had to check in with each other about it.

Worst-case scenario, that's the point at which it ends. I get that.

And I'm really, really, *really* scared... but the resolution to this confrontation will determine what path I take going forward.

So that's just the way it's gotta be.

+++

Summer break had come to an end for the second time since Yaegashi Taichi first enrolled at Yamaboshi High School, and the new fall semester had barely begun. That day in particular found Taichi on cleaning duty after school. Once he was finished, he headed across campus in the direction of Rec Hall Room 401.

The Culture Festival had come and gone, and now the school was shifting gears back to business as usual. The sunlight still beat down harshly, but if he stood in the shade with the breeze brushing past, he could almost convince himself it was autumn.

Just before he entered, on a whim, he paused to look up at the quaint, old-fashioned Rec Hall building in all its glory. It was a structure in desperate need of earthquake retrofitting, and at this point, some were of the opinion that it would be easier to simply build a new Rec Hall from the ground up. Personally, Taichi hoped the old building would hang in there until after he and the rest of

his club graduated.

Nearly a full year had passed since the Cultural Research Club was forcibly dragged into a world of supernatural phenomena. Over that time, they had been subjected to countless crises, each of which they survived by working together. Most recently, their new recruits had gotten themselves caught up in yet another incident, but even then, it was nothing the seven of them couldn't handle. So when would it end? Surely not even «Heartseed»'s bag of otherworldly tricks was bottomless... though admittedly it was starting to feel like it.

The second-years only had 18 months left until they would leave this campus for good.

As he walked up the stairs, Taichi pulled out a sheet of paper—the handout his class had received that very day. This handout was titled: CAREER PLANNING SURVEY. Below that was a form in which he was meant to detail his plans for the future—college or employment—and choose between the humanities or a science course for his third year.

For the second-years, this decision was of paramount importance. Yamaboshi boasted a relatively high grade point average, and as such, most of its students were college-bound. Some classes even featured separate coursework for humanities or science majors—and this binary choice would affect which homeroom class he was assigned to next year as well.

Taichi flapped the handout back and forth through the air. It struck him as kind of silly that a single sheet of paper could change his life so drastically. Granted, the submission deadline was still two-ish months away, but it couldn't hurt to turn it in early... He knew he was definitely interested in college, but as for the rest...

As he contemplated his options, Taichi arrived at the fourth floor. He walked down the hall until he located the door with a sheet of A4-size printer paper taped to it bearing the words CULTURAL RESEARCH CLUB. Then he grasped the knob, twisted it, and opened the door.

The first thing he heard was a cheerful voice belonging to their very own Nagase Iori: "Shino-chan! Chee-hee! What do you guys wanna be when you

grow up?!”

As he stepped inside, Nagase glanced over at the door and spotted him. “Sup, Taichi!” she called, offering him a playful salute, her long, silky hair swaying with the motion. She was a total goofball at heart, but with that flawless beauty of hers, she could make just about anything look cool.

The other six members of the CRC had already gathered here; with his arrival, they were all accounted for. The others greeted him in a similar fashion as he took his seat at the table.

“When I... grow up...?! Right... When I grow up... Me, all grown up... My future... My life... My afterlife...”

“Getting a little ahead of yourself there,” Taichi snarked under his breath.

“Oh, right! Uhh... When I grow up... I, uhh... well... umm... mmgghh... gggghhh...!”

“Just forget it, Shino-chan! Like, don’t have an aneurysm, okay?!”

“Nngh... Thank you, Yui-senpai!”

Enjouji Shino relinquished her grip on her poofy brown locks and lowered her hands, gazing at Kiriyama Yui with damp eyes. This was one of two first-years who joined the CRC as of earlier this year. Reminiscent of a small animal, she inspired a protective instinct in pretty much everyone around her.

“You’re still just a first-year. You don’t have to worry about it for a long time still,” Kiriyama Yui cooed, stroking Enjouji’s hair with a big grin on her face. Her own long, tawny locks were looking as radiant as ever this afternoon.

“Yuiiii! Pet me next! Meooow!” a certain blond-haired, lanky youth cut in. This was, of course, Aoki Yoshifumi.

“Ugh... I’m gonna barf... Aoki-senpai, you should honestly go to jail for that offensive cat impression...”

“Don’t worry, Shino-chan. I’ll handle him. Three kicks and four punches sound good to you?”

“Seriously, y’all?! I get that it wasn’t amazing, but was it really THAT bad?!”

For an outside observer, perhaps it would come as a surprise to learn that Kiriyama was a trained karate fighter, or that Enjouji knew how to drop a sick burn. But for Taichi, it was just another day.

“What did I do wrong?! I just wanted to join in the fun for once!” Aoki wailed to himself, clutching his head in exasperation.

“Did you really think today would be any different...?” Taichi muttered under his breath.

“Can’t fault a guy for trying!” Aoki shrugged, stretching his arms out widely.

“Whoa... You know, when you do that, you kinda look like Riki Choshu when the ring announcer—”

“You can keep your asinine pro wrestling analogies, thanks,” Inaba Himeko cut in.

“Whoa! Inaban actually stopped Taichi! Does this mean you’re finally back to normal?! Because I’m pretty sure Ina-bashful would let him get away with murder!”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Iori. As Taichi’s soul mate, I’m always looking out for his best interests as my number one priority, no matter how—”

“Aaand there it is. Okay, Ina-bashful, you can keep your swooning.”

“HEY! That was *my* line! Don’t copy me!” Inaba snapped back at Nagase. Her remark may have been childish, but her looks were less cutesy and more sophisticated. At rest, she was captivatingly sexy, but with her emotions on full display and her shoulder-length dark hair ever so slightly out of place, it afforded her an alluring contrast... or was that just Taichi’s bias talking? She *was* his girlfriend, after all.

“Uh, Taichi-san? Why are you ogling Inaba-san like that?”

Busted . Caught off-guard by the sudden steely voice, Taichi turned to find Uwa Chihiro staring at him with an icy expression on his face. This was the CRC’s other new recruit, and as it happened, he and Enjouji were in the same class.

“I... I’m not ogling her! Well... I mean, she *is* adorable, but...”

“Now *I’m* going to barf,” Chihiro muttered dryly, and as he turned away,

Taichi got a good look at the shorter side of his messy, asymmetrical haircut. Even at this angle, his facial features were pointed and sleek.

Earlier that year, Uwa Chihiro had succumbed to «Heartseed»'s temptation and taken control of a supernatural power that wasn't his to wield. And despite having caught on to his deception early on, Enjouji Shino had chosen to do nothing.

But that was all over now, and in the end, the two of them both decided not to quit the club. Personally, Taichi and the rest of the second-years were fully prepared to let bygones be bygones, but nevertheless, the first-years still seemed to carry some residual guilt to this day.

Not that he blamed them, of course, after what they'd gone through. It would be beyond unreasonable to expect them to simply bounce back from *that* . Still, it was such a waste of heartache to keep agonizing over it months later. He hoped that over time, as the second-years continued to show them unconditional kindness, the first-years would eventually open back up to them.

"Anyway, we're getting off-track! I wanted to talk about what Shino-chan and Chee-hee want to be when they grow up!" Nagase declared brightly.

"And why should we tell you?" Chihiro asked coldly.

"You're the one who asked us if we turned in our career planning surveys!"

"That wasn't me. That was Enjouji."

"What?! B-But... judging from your voice, you sounded really curious about it..."

"You can tell just from his voice...?" Taichi muttered, though he knew she wasn't listening. She had a thing for voices that, as of late, had turned into a bit more than just "a thing."

"I mean, when we left the classroom earlier, you were saying—"

"HEY! Don't bring that up, damn it!"

"*Ooooh!* Chihiro-kun's *blushing!* How *cuuuute!* " Kiriyama teased, reaching up high to ruffle Uwa's hair.

"Yui-san! Stop that! Nngh...!" Chihiro grimaced, but didn't push her away.

Compared to his early days in the club, he had chilled out considerably—whether this was a genuine change of heart or merely a symptom of his guilt, Taichi couldn't say. The boy was still prickly, but he was notably less outwardly pessimistic. Naturally, this meant Kiriyama could mess with him to her heart's content, and as a result she was in high spirits these days.

"Well, in my case... I'm mostly just hoping to get into a decent university. Then after I get my degree, I'd like to work for a good company. Something stable," he offered after a moment.

"Wait, what? I thought your biggest dream was to be cool like our senpai."

"Quit making shit up, Enjouji!"

"Awww, you want to be like us? That's so sweet!"

"Yui-san, will you quit ruffling my hair?! Keep it up and I'm going to smack you!"

"So he says, and yet he never does! Classic *tsundere!* I guess *someone's* gotta fill those shoes, now that Inaban went full *deredere!* "

Chihiro now had Enjouji *and* Kiriyama *and* Nagase to contend with.

"Y'know, Yui's due to make the *deredere* switch any day now, so there's actually a second *tsundere* slot openin' up soon—"

"*Thank you* for your contribution, Aoki," Kiriyama interrupted without looking at him. Her tone was perfectly cordial, but her smile didn't reach her eyes.

"Hey, uh, Taichi? Is it just me, or did I stop being 'the guy people make fun of' and instead now I'm 'the guy everybody hates'?"

"Hah! Now you know what it's like to have Chihiro steal your thunder. Remember that time Nagase was saying how he and I are both so calm and rational that it felt like we were 'two of the same guy'? You have no idea how much that got to me."

"Oh, did that actually upset you? I had no idea. Sorry, Taichi!" Nagase shrugged. "Seriously, don't sweat the details. Either way, you're still pretty *[bleep]* . Like, totally *[bleep]* . Your *[bleep]* is so *[bleep]* , the rest of us are all like, 'Holy *[bleep]* '!"

“Sheesh, that’s one hell of a throwback! But you can’t just bleep out all the important words and call it a compliment!”

“I... I think for now I’d just like to focus on keeping my grades up!” Enjouji cut in, steering the conversation back on track. “I’d like to be a bit above average, if possible... but I still want to work on myself too, of course!”

“How so?” Taichi inquired.

“Well, umm... To put it simply... I want to get to the point where I can make Taichi-senpai say ‘You’re so cute, Shino’ in that cool voice he does! Eeee!”

“I’m not sure what you mean by my ‘cool voice,’ but if you want me to say it, I don’t min—gaahhcckk!”

Inaba promptly lashed out at him with a throat thrust.

“Did Inaban just attack Taichi?! Is her Ina-bashful phase gone for good?!”

“You don’t really need those vocal cords if you’re just going to use them to flirt with other girls... Wouldn’t you agree?”

“What do you call this next phase?! Ina-*bloodthirsty?!* ”

Inaba’s probably just playing along with Nagase, but still... I really, really hope she’s kidding...

“So, humanities or science? Who’s picking what?” Chihiro asked the older students.

“Oh, yes! Good question! I’d love to hear everyone’s awesome future ambitions!” Enjouji joined in, increasing the pressure tenfold for no apparent reason.

“Alright then,” Inaba replied. “Personally, I’ll be taking the science course. They say the humanities field has more job prospects, but as long as I get into a decent college and pick the right major, I’ll be set.”

“How very pragmatic. That’s our Inaba-san, alright.”

“Note to self... Get into a decent college and pick the right major...”

“Hmph! What’s the harm in being realistic? That said... I do have my own irrational reasons as well.”

“Like what?” Aoki asked curiously.

“I’m not confident I can do it, and I’m not exactly planning to put a ton of effort in, and I know it’s probably just a waste of time... but on the tiniest off chance that I get lucky, I want to expand my existing knowledge base—” she paused, and with a haughty smirk, declared: “—so I can solve the mystery of «Heartseed».”

“Whoa... I thought you gave up on that...” Kiriyama blinked.

“It’s only human nature to want to take a peek under the hood and find out how things tick, natural disasters included. Me, I hate not understanding things. But just to be clear, I’m not going to base my major around it. I doubt my affiliation with any one specific department will make a drastic difference.”

Evidently Inaba’s motto, “maintain total control of the situation at all times,” still applied to things that most people would simply accept as immutable. Not only that, but she was taking a rational, level-headed approach. All in all, it was an impressive stance from any angle.

Nagase clapped a hand to her forehead and sighed dramatically. “Jeez, Inaban, way to sound like a total badass! Now everyone else is gonna sound like a loser by comparison! I swear, you can be *sooo* inconsiderate!”

“L-Let’s hear it, Iori-senpai! What sort of... wonderful future do you have in mind for yourself...?”

“Gah! She’s merciless, this one! I’m starting to think she actually delights in our misery! Nngh... Or maybe not... Look at those innocent little puppy-dog eyes... Now I sound like a bitch for suspecting her...!” Nagase clutched at her chest and grimaced like a thespian onstage. “Fine, you win! Real talk, these days I’m actually starting to get a sense for what I want to do with the rest of my life.” She chuckled sheepishly. “And I don’t really need to pick one course or the other to get there, per se. There are entire departments dedicated to it.”

“The more you dance around it, the more I want to know the details,” Chihiro remarked.

“Well, too bad! It’s still a secret! But here’s a hint: it has to do with kids, most likely. Anyway, once I get all the particulars ironed out, I’ll be sure to tell

everyone. Just sit tight for a bit!”

“I get the sense you’re not-so-subtly dodging the question,” Inaba commented.

“Dang it! I almost had you guys, too! You’re always the toughest hurdle, Inaban!”

Meanwhile, Taichi could scarcely believe it. All this time, Nagase had wandered through life, unsure of her desires, preferences, or ambitions... but now she had a tangible goal that she was actively working toward. He’d known she was in the process of overcoming her hangups, but he didn’t realize just how much progress she had made.

Their eyes met, and Nagase offered him a radiant smile reminiscent of a sunflower. For a moment, he thought he heard her voice: *thank you* . He nodded back quietly.

“Gosh, you guys! Am I the only one who still hasn’t decided?! Don’t leave me behind!” Kiriyama flailed her arms in a quasi-tantrum.

“What are you talking about? I thought you were gonna get a sports scholarship or whatever,” Nagase replied.

“I mean, maybe if I do well in the next tournament... I’m still conflicted, though. I might retire from karate after high school.”

“That’d be a ridiculous waste of talent,” Inaba mused. “Are you sure you want to throw it all away?”

“I don’t know if I’m *that* talented... but what I *do* know is that I want to spend my life making the world a better place. Not that karate isn’t useful in its own way, but like... there’s more to life than just being physically strong, you know?” Apparently her natural talent and her ambitions weren’t quite one and the same. “When I look at «Heartseed»—like, I know it’s an extreme example, but when I look at it, I can’t help but think about all the people in this world who suffer on a daily basis with no way to escape. I want to help those people, you know? ‘Cause in a way, that’s kind of like purging the world of evil, if you think about it. So maybe I should be a police officer or something?”

At first glance, her toothy grin might’ve come off as cute and nothing more...

but upon closer inspection, Taichi could sense her physical and mental fortitude peeking out from within.

“A charming sentiment, but I find it funny how quickly you went from ‘purging evil’ to ‘cops,’” Inaba snarked.

“Rrgh... Look, I’m gonna figure it all out over time, okay?!”

“So what course will you take? Humanities, I guess?” Nagase asked.

“Mmm... I’ll keep thinking about it,” Kiriyama answered.

“You’re all so cool... I wonder if I’ll be this cool a year from now...” Enjouji murmured.

Beside her, Taichi felt a rush of anxious excitement. The three second-year girls were all wildly competent in their own right, and with their powers combined, he was sure they could accomplish damn near anything. This was, of course, a potentially terrifying concept.

“So, what about the boys? Starting wiiiith... Taichi!” Nagase whipped around and pointed her index finger in his direction.

“Well...” Taichi began. But the words didn’t come. His mouth hung open, idle. Silence.

“What’s the matter?” Kiriyama asked, puzzled.

He couldn’t respond. He couldn’t move.

“Uh, Taichi?” Inaba prompted.

Then, finally, he snapped back to his senses. Everyone was looking at him. His cheeks grew hot—was he turning red? He could feel himself start to sweat.

“I just, uh... haven’t had time to really think about it yet, so I’m actually kind of... completely undecided. But I’m gonna start thinking about it, you know, soon.”

“You don’t have to hide it, you know.”

“No, Chihiro-kun, you don’t understand. For someone at Taichi-senpai’s level, you have so many options available to you that it can be impossible to choose. He could be a voice actor, or a narrator, or an announcer, or my personal

morning wake-up call...”

“There’s a lot I could say in response to that, but I’ll limit myself to just one thing: that last one isn’t even a profession.”

“Oh crap... Did I say that one aloud...?!”

“Get my damn boyfriend out of your fantasies, Shino. That said, I’m not against the idea of a morning wake-up call... for my ears only, of course...”

“No! Inaba-senpai, please! You’ve got to record it and let me listen to it! Just once!”

“It’s actually kind of impressive just how aggressive you get when it comes to voices,” Chihiro commented dryly.

And with that, the spotlight drifted away from Taichi. He heaved a sigh of relief—then found himself wondering why exactly he felt so relieved in the first place.

“Hmmm... Fine, whatever. What about you, Aoki?” Nagase asked.

“Well...” he began, then fell silent—not an intentional pause, by the looks of it. It wasn’t like Aoki to hesitate. “I think I might just start my own company! Live that CEO life! If I can’t go to college, then I might as well work, y’know?”

“You’re too stupid to get into college? That’s so sad... Surely there’s got to be at least one low-ranking university who’ll take pity on you? I mean, you made it into Yamaboshi, at least!”

“Don’t feel bad for me, Yui! My stupidity has nothing to do with it this time! Er, I mean... Y-Yeah, it’s because I’m stupid, that’s all!”

“What’s gotten into you? You’re acting like a dumbass,” Inaba snapped.

“No he isn’t,” Nagase replied, then turned to Aoki. “Look, um... Is this a ‘don’t pry’ sort of thing?”

For a brief, tense moment, they simply looked at each other.

“Maybe don’t... Ugh, forget it! Pry away! Not like it really matters!”

“Are you sure? I’m not holding you at gunpoint here. I was just checking.”

“Yeah, I know. I just decided I don’t mind telling you guys.”

“Wait, what’s going on?” Taichi asked.

“I’ll explain it,” Aoki replied. “Seriously, it’s no big deal, but just so you’re all in the loop... it’s looking like my old man might lose his job. The company was already looking to lay off some folks, and now Dad’s been caught up in a scandal. He swears he didn’t do it, and the rest of the family believes him, but yeah.”

It was obvious from his tone that this was something serious.

“What’s he been accused of?” Kiriyama asked, looking extremely concerned.

“Mmm... I’d rather not get into it. Anyway, you don’t have to worry, Yui. We’ll be fine.”

“Oh... Okay. Sorry.” Kiriyama stared at the floor, seemingly unsure of how to respond.

“It’s fine. No sorry needed,” Aoki reassured her with a halfhearted smile. “If we need to, we could stay afloat on my sister’s income, but... when you add in the mortgage payments and everything... payin’ for college kinda just isn’t an option.”

“What about scholarships or student grants?” Taichi suggested as soon as the idea came to him.

“Well... Technically we could afford to pay tuition, but then my poor sister won’t be able to get her own place, y’know? And she’s already 24. Mind you, she’s been saying she’ll stay with us until I get my degree—she’s always been the super-responsible type—but I can’t do that to her. Not after she finally found someone she wants to start a new life with.”

“...I almost feel bad saying this, but... that’s actually a perfectly valid reason not to pursue higher education,” Inaba mused, her expression sympathetic.

“Guys, c’mon, quit acting like it’s my funeral! My family’s tryin’ ta figure something out for me, so I’m sure it’ll all work itself out eventually!”

Aoki donned a smile... but they’d known him for too long, and Taichi couldn’t pretend he didn’t see the pain lurking just beneath.

Sometimes real-world problems carried far more weight than the

supernatural. After all, the supernatural was only temporary.

“I only knew about it because... I kinda overheard Aoki talking with his teacher about it,” Nagase confessed sheepishly.

Kiriyama looked up. “Um... If there’s anything we can do, please tell us, okay? I mean it! Anything!”

“Thanks. I might just have to take you up on that!” Aoki grinned.

For a moment, Kiriyama’s expression softened... but then it darkened all over again, and she hung her head. Then she muttered something in a tiny voice that no one else was likely to have heard—save for Taichi, who was right in front of her and thus was able to read her lips: I wanted to tell him how I feel and lay this whole thing to rest... but I guess it’ll have to wait.

□■□■□

After club activities ended, Taichi and Inaba headed to the local cafe. The two of them actively made an effort to spend some quality time alone together, even if the end result wasn’t a full-scale “date,” per se. (And naturally, Nagase teased them relentlessly every time they left campus together.) As they were sitting there enjoying their drinks, Inaba suddenly reached across the table and poked Taichi’s cheek.

“Poooke.”

“What’s up?”

“Poke, poke.” She continued to press her index finger against his skin.

“Okay, seriously—”

“Poke.”

“C’mon—”

“Poke, poke—”

“Knock it off.”

“...Poke?” Inaba tilted her head innocently without pulling her hand away, reminiscent of a child begging for attention. Needless to say, it was adorable.

“I-Inaba... You know I’m weak to that kind of stuff...”

“Gotcha right in the heart,” she grinned, miming a gun with one hand and “firing” it off with a wink that was somehow both cute and badass.

“Gah!” Taichi clutched at his chest. He didn’t even have to pretend—it was just that effective. *Seriously, how is she so good at that?!*

“Hmm... Okay, I’d say I’ve met my lovey-dovey quota for the day.”

“Can we maybe not talk about our relationship like it’s a business transaction?” *You don’t have to ration out how much you flirt with me!*

“So tell me, are you really 100% undecided?”

Once again, the topic had shifted back to the career surveys.

“Yep. But hey, we’ve still got two months or so until it’s due... so...” Taichi took a sip of his milk tea to mask his awkwardness.

“Do you at least know what course you’re taking?”

“...No.”

“We’re already more than halfway through our second year. Surely you have at least *some* idea of what you want to do,” Inaba pressed.

He’d noticed she was a bit more critical of him as of late, and it made him feel like she was angry with him—possibly because he’d gotten so used to the soft and sweet “Ina-bashful” version of her. Then again, maybe she had every right to be angry.

Unlike Aoki, Taichi had every option available to him, and yet he had no clear vision for his future like Inaba did. He wasn’t even at the “conflicted” stage. He was just a blank slate.

Thinking back, he didn’t have any particular future ambition at the start of high school, either.

“I know you can be indecisive, and I know it’s because you care about making the right choice.”

Wasn’t that a little overly generous?

“And because you care so goddamn much, I want you to...”

Suddenly a shadow fell over her face—so dark, it seemed to reject all light—

but then it was gone, and her expression brightened once more.

“...think long and hard, young grasshopper.”

“We’re the same age,” he retorted.

She chuckled, her glossy dark hair swaying over her shoulders. Overall, she had a very mature vibe—but perhaps that was only natural, considering she was on the cusp of adulthood now.

As was he.

College. Future. Employment. Dream. Life. The words towered over him, immeasurably vast, weighing down on him like a ton of bricks. He knew he had to pick *something* , but he didn’t have the slightest idea of what he wanted.

A low hum of anxiety settled over him, and he exhaled sharply, hoping to expel it from his system.

“Eh, we’ll figure it out,” Inaba offered.

And so Taichi decided to stay optimistic for the time being.

Chapter 2: It Began, Prefaced as “The End”

“Thank you for all of your hard work, everyone... This will be the last time.”

Yaegashi Taichi sat in Rec Hall Room 401 with his four other fellow second-years. The two first-years were absent that day. And as it happened, that was the day «Heartseed» turned up, almost as if it had planned it—*oh, who am I kidding? Of course it planned it,* Taichi thought.

Just two days had passed since they’d been given their career planning surveys.

“Sorry, uh... what?” Nagase Iori asked, blinking.

“I said... thank you for all of your hard work...”

“The *second* part, you shit-for-brains!” Inaba Himeko roared.

“Oh... I believe I said... this will be the last time... Yes, that sounds about right...”

As usual, it spoke in a lethargic drone, piloting the body of physics teacher Gotou Ryuuzen. Unlike the normal Gotou, however, something about it screamed *inhuman* . Indeed, this was not Gotou—this was a different entity entirely. An entity of unknown origin that had foisted countless otherworldly phenomena upon the Cultural Research Club. An entity known to them only as «Heartseed».

“What do you mean, the last time...?!”

“Well, Kiriyama-san... It means exactly what it sounds like, I would imagine...”

“Okay, but... the last time for *what?* ” Kiriyama Yui replied in a shaky voice.

Beside her, Aoki Yoshifumi leaned forward, as if to shield her. “We’re not gonna buy that crap from some apathetic liar like you!”

“I beg your pardon, Aoki-san...? At what point did I ever lie to you...? Maybe I left out crucial details... or dodged a few questions... but believe it or not, I actually haven’t lied to you... No, wait... I apologize... I actually have lied quite a bit... especially near the beginning...”

“Are you here to jerk us around again?” Taichi asked coldly.

During the last phenomenon, «Heartseed» had only made contact with the two first-years. As such, it had been nearly six months since the five of them last spoke to it. Not to suggest they *missed* talking to it, mind you. Its presence always triggered painful memories and deep-seated contempt.

They’d all tried their best not to think about it—to put it behind them and get over it—but when faced with «Heartseed»’s half-lidded eyes, slumped shoulders, and utter lifelessness, it all came rushing back.

“Let’s all take a second and calm down,” Inaba said quietly.

She let out a long breath, and Taichi intuited that she was trying her best to keep her composure despite the burning rage she clearly felt inside. Glancing around, he could tell that the others had caught on to this, too. Together, they wordlessly agreed to let Inaba take the reins for now. The moment it looked like she needed them, they would be there.

“...So, what’s the deal with this ‘last time’ shit? Why now?”

“Oh... Well, you see... My work here has come to an end, that’s all...”

“So *you’re* done, but «The Second» or whoever else might not be? Is that it?”

“No... Chances of that are... nil... most likely...”

“So you’re saying there *is* a chance!” Nagase snapped before she could stop herself.

“Look, maybe you could just trust me on this... Well... Given what you’ve been through, Nagase-san, I understand that might be a tall order... Regardless, I think you’ve all... worked hard enough for one lifetime. So this last round will be... yes, that’s it... a bonus stage...”

“You know, the word ‘bonus’ generally implies something *good* . And given your track record, I’m not getting my fucking hopes up.”

“We don’t *want* your stupid bonus stage! Just leave us alone!” Kiriyama shrieked.

Inaba clucked her tongue in frustration. “So, is this new phenomenon already active? Because we haven’t noticed anything out of the ordinary.”

“Oh god... Did you do something to our kouhai again...?” Taichi whispered as a chill shot down his spine.

“Relax, you two... It hasn’t started yet...”

«Heartseed»’s lip curled in an amused smirk. *Amused* . Today, for once, this typically inscrutable entity was *emoting* .

“But it’s about to.”

This was the first time «Heartseed» had ever warned them in advance. Over time it had adapted its tactics, and as a result, «Heartseed» itself had changed ever so slightly. But now all those tiny changes had added up, and for some reason, Taichi had a feeling that they’d created something brand new.

“For the record... this won’t impact any of you...”

“...What? Then why bother telling us?” Inaba asked, staring blankly.

“Well, obviously... to give you your bonus stage... Anyway, I’m getting tired of dealing with you, so... I’m just going to give you the rundown...”

“Oh, right. I almost forgot what an unrepentant asshole you are.”

Only a few meters separated the CRC in their chairs from «Heartseed» standing at the door... but as with heaven and earth, that gulf could never hope to be closed.

“This time around... you will have dream-like visions... in which you see the hopes and dreams of other people... more or less...”

“We’re going to have dreams... of other people’s dreams?” Nagase repeats skeptically.

“Oh... I suppose that sounds a tad confusing... Basically, you will have visions... of other people’s wishes... be it future ambitions... or short-term desires... Hence, dreams of dreams...”

Its explanation was patronizing to the point of outright condescension.

“To put it simply... I figured I’d show you images of people’s hopes for the future... completely at random, of course... Oh... Not just images, but sound as well... Similar to the sort of dream you might have in your sleep...”

“So we’re going to have dream-like ‘visions’ of other people’s desires... Sort of sounds like the Sentiment Transmission, in a way... except instead of feeling other people’s feelings, now we’re dreaming their dreams...” Inaba mused. Despite her clear distaste for all things «Heartseed», she was already hard at work analyzing and digesting this new information. “On top of that, these ‘dreams’ will run the gamut from future ambitions to short-term desires... Look, pal, I don’t think you’re gonna wring anything more out of us with some half-assed Sentiment Transmission knockoff.”

“Exactly! We’re stronger than that now!” Nagase chimed in.

“No... You misunderstand... Perhaps I should have been more clear... When I say ‘other people’... I don’t mean your fellow club members... I’m referring to... everyone in this school.”

“What? No... Y-You’re joking... You can’t be serious...!” Kiriyama sputtered, wrapping an arm protectively around herself.

By the time Taichi’s brain finished processing this, his body was trembling in fear.

“You will see the dreams of everyone who attends this school... with the exception of yourselves... Oh, and... Uwa-san and Enjouji-san are exempt as well... seeing as they already associated with me once... Oh, but... I suppose you already knew that... Okay... I’m done...” «Heartseed» continued, in a tone that utterly lacked the appropriate level of gravitas.

Apparently the five of them would now suffer visions of someone else’s hopes and dreams for the future—mainly in image format with some accompanying sound—popping up randomly in their minds. Supposedly it would be easy to tell once the phenomenon struck.

These visions would include both short-term and long-term desires, but for the most part, the dreams themselves would feature desires the subject was actively preoccupied with. Only the five second-years of the CRC would be able to have these visions, and the subject of said visions could be anyone at Yamaboshi *except* for the seven current members of the CRC. When asked if this would apply to teachers, «Heartseed» responded vaguely: “Oh... Well, probably...?”

It was also possible for multiple people to see the same vision. These visions would be completely randomized regarding when they struck and who they featured, but allegedly it would be comparatively easier to see visions of those nearby. And if someone *wanted* to see a vision of a specific person—or if that person was simply on their mind—that would also potentially increase their chances of "dreaming" about them.

"So... now that I've given you a fairly thorough explanation... as you can see... you have nothing to fear... It's the perfect bonus stage... Yes, how lovely..."

«Heartseed» had a point there; nothing about this seemed directly threatening, per se. But Taichi still didn't like the idea of it using people outside the CRC as part of the phenomenon.

"You are free to use this power... however you wish... This is the end, so... I intend to observe as closely as I can..."

"What do you mean by that?" Taichi asked.

"Well... as close as I can possibly get... It's the last time, after all..."

At this point, with the way it kept repeating "the end" and "the last time," it was starting to feel like it actually meant it.

"Depending on how you use it... you could accomplish wonderful things... but rest assured... this time, you don't have to worry about... 'entertaining' me..."

We don't? But wasn't that your goal?

"And if you wish... I'll consider expanding the limits of the people you can dream about... Consider it a sort of... token of my gratitude... for all the fascinating things I've witnessed thus far..." It spread its arms out wide—a gesture that would've been dramatic if it hadn't been so sluggish.

Taichi wasn't angry, nor was he frightened. He simply felt distinctly uncomfortable.

«Heartseed» claimed this was the last time. It didn't seem to want to cause trouble for them... and it was spreading its influence to people outside of the club.

Looking around, Taichi could see that the others were similarly struggling to

process this... well, except for one.

Inaba Himeko sat with her arms crossed, her posture perfectly straight, her head held high—looking up at «Heartseed», but looking down on it at the same time. *Of course* . Inaba was always one step ahead of the game. Taichi felt bad for putting all the heavy lifting on her, but at the same time, she was the best fit for the job.

“Whatever,” Inaba scoffed coldly. She and the entity stared each other down for a moment, but Inaba didn’t flinch. “Oh yeah, almost forgot to ask. Will these people know that we’ve dreamed about them?”

“No... they won’t...”

“Figured as much. Otherwise you’d have one hell of a time keeping everyone quiet,” she replied smugly.

“You seem to be enjoying this quite a bit, Inaba-san...”

How did it make «Heartseed» feel to get a taste of its own medicine?

“I just pity you and your stupidity, that’s all. Honestly... To think you’d try to saddle us with such a total non-issue.”

“I see... Perhaps I should have expected someone of your caliber to catch on so quickly... but still... did you really think I wouldn’t be aware of that...?”

“You’re just embarrassed that I caught you with your pants down.”

“Am I...?”

Once again, the two of them silently glared daggers at one another. An intense battle was playing out somewhere beyond Taichi’s understanding. Then «Heartseed» looked away, its gaze drifting to each of the other four.

“Well then... since Inaba-san has such a strong grasp of the situation... I’ll be going now...”

Once again, the entity refused to admit defeat, even once. Inaba scowled, but «Heartseed» promptly turned its back on her and put its hand on the doorknob.

“Hey! One last thing: when will this be over?” Inaba asked.

“Who knows...? I’ll be seeing you again before long...”

And with that, it was gone.

“...D-Do you really think this’ll be the last time?” Kiriyama asked, breaking the silence that lingered after «Heartseed» had left the clubroom.

“I find it hard to believe, but... I can’t see why it would bother lying to us at this stage,” Nagase replied.

“Wait, so... one more phenomenon, and then we can kiss «Heartseed» goodbye? Is it time to throw a party, or something?” Aoki made no attempt to hide his uncertainty.

“Dreaming other people’s dreams... What on earth would we call this one, anyway?” Taichi mused, having already resigned himself to his fate.

None of them showed any signs of fear. They were ready to face what came next. That was the strength this past year of oddities had given them.

“Hmph... You wanna *name* it?” Inaba scoffed. “Alright, fine. Let’s see... Watching other people’s dreams... without their permission... peeping Tom... no, X-ray vision... Okay, how about ‘Dream Vision’?”

“Works for me... Ugh, it’s really not safe to get other people involved in this,” Kiriyama sighed.

“Seriously,” Aoki agreed. “Seven is already a lot of people, but now it wants to screw with the *whole school?* That’s one heck of a jump!”

“We’ll really need to be careful. Now more than ever,” Taichi murmured.

They had the strength to rise to the challenge, but it was still uncomfortably heavy. How could they possibly handle a phenomenon that would affect *hundreds* of people? The thought alone was enough to make Taichi shiver.

“Alright, guys. We’re going to be holding the fate of other people’s lives in our hands, and that’s serious business... which is why we need to start brainstorming our strategy!” Nagase declared in her most cheerful voice, as if to shoo the doom and gloom from the room.

“That won’t be necessary,” Inaba replied without hesitation.

“Okay, so—wait, what?” Aoki slumped his shoulders. “We don’t need to? *¿Por qué?*”

“«Heartseed» was right; this is a bonus stage. Don’t you get it?”

“Uhhh... No, I’m not sure I do,” Taichi replied quizzically.

“Even if the phenomenon happens, nothing has to *happen* .” Inaba tapped the table with her index finger. “Think about it. Say it strikes, and we have a Vision of someone’s Dream or whatever. They don’t know we saw it. And you know what that means?” Her eyes hardened with powerful resolve. “We do nothing, and it’ll be like we never saw it in the first place.”

“Wait, so, like... you want us to just *ignore* it?” Kiriyama asked.

“Damn right. Until now, the phenomena were contained within the club, and we’d all know when it was happening. But the rules are different this time. With Dream Vision, no one will ever find out that we saw. So what problems does it create? None.”

She clearly had a lot to say on the subject... perhaps a little too much.

“I mean, sure, there’s a chance we’ll learn something that will make it hard to interact with that person, but we just have to suck it up. All we have to do is endure it.”

She didn’t even pause to take a breath.

“The thing about bonus stages is that they’re *optional* . Which means we don’t have to do a goddamn thing. Hell, we didn’t even need to pick a name.”

It was a perfectly sound argument... There were no flaws in her logic... and yet...

“So obviously there’s only one real option here.”

...why did it feel like she was in a rush to end the conversation?

“We do nothing. We don’t let the Dream Vision start shit.”

“S-Slow down a sec, Inaban! We don’t have to rush to a conclusion!” Evidently Nagase was of the same mind as Taichi.

“I’m not rushing. There’s simply no other option here. Are you really going to argue that we *should* get more people involved? After everything we’ve been through?”

“...Well, no. That’s the one thing we’ve been trying to avoid at all costs.”

“Right. And if we take action based on the information these Visions give us, we’ll be making things happen that never would have otherwise. And in doing so, we’ll be breaking our own rules. Are you following me, Yui? Not even going to bother asking Aoki.”

“Hmm... Yeah, I’m with you... I think...”

“Wow, rude much?! I mean, you’re not wrong, but still!”

“Okay, hold on a minute.” Instead of this one-woman show, Taichi wanted to give the others a chance to think it through. “Obviously we haven’t experienced these Visions yet, so it’s hard to say what they’re like, but... suppose they inform us of something really dangerous that’s going to happen. You want us to *ignore* that?”

“They’re not visions of the future, so I don’t think that would ever happen, but I’ll bite. Supposing that we found ourselves in those circumstances...”

For the first time in what felt like forever—at least since the two of them became an item—Inaba fixed Taichi with a steely, dispassionate gaze.

“...Yes, we should ignore it.”

“*What?* Surely we can make an exception for, like, actual emergencies!” Kiriyama shouted.

“That’s a slippery slope. If we use the supernatural to change something, we’re essentially rewriting fate itself, don’t you think?”

There was no counter-argument.

“So like I said, there’s only one option,” Inaba continued. “Do nothing.”

□■□■□

After some more debate, club activities ended for the day, and Inaba left the clubroom without waiting for anyone.

“Inaba! Wait! Sorry, guys, but I gotta go,” Taichi told the others right before he raced out of the room.

It was Inaba who had declared club activities to be over—right after shooting

down a proposal to wait until a Vision occurred before making any final decisions.

She was speed-walking so fast, she was practically running, but Taichi managed to catch up to her just outside the Rec Hall.

“Hey! Why are you in such a rush, Inaba?!”

But when he grabbed her by the shoulder and turned her back to face him—he nearly let out a gasp. Her eyes were shining with tears, and something inside him told him he needed to be there for her.

“You were really scared when «Heartseed» turned up, weren’t you?”

“Did I... do a good job back there?” Inaba choked, clinging to Taichi’s uniform. He put his hand on hers.

“Of course you did. God knows I wouldn’t have been able to process it that fast. But you figured out the most crucial elements of the Dream Vision, just like that. You’re incredible, Inaba.”

They hadn’t seen «Heartseed» in months, and Inaba wrestled with anxiety on a daily basis... but because no one else could hold a candle to her powers of analysis, she had no choice but to stand at the helm herself. That was her burden, and it could be highly stressful at times.

“I’m pretty sure my logic is airtight... but «Heartseed» implied it’s already taken that into consideration... so I’ve got to be missing something...”

“You’ve done more than enough, Inaba. If you missed something, then none of us were ever going to catch it anyway. We’ll all figure it out together.”

“But I’ve been feeling so pathetic lately...”

“Pathetic? The Inaba I know is a total badass,” Taichi replied with a smile, hoping to nip her negative spiral in the bud.

“No!” she shouted back. “Ever since we started dating, I’ve been so—!” Suddenly she froze, eyes wide, then buried her face in Taichi’s chest. “I’m sorry. That asshole just showed up out of nowhere, and it freaked me out, and now I’m all worked up... Forgive me...”

“Okay. I forgive you.”

He tried to put his arms around her, but she quickly pulled away.

“Haha... What a stupid conversation,” Inaba joked halfheartedly. Taichi was proud of her for pulling herself together so quickly, but at the same time, he wished she would’ve let him console her a little.

She turned away and started walking. “Yeah, it’s gonna be fine,” she said aloud, like she was trying to reassure herself. “As long as it wasn’t lying to us, absolutely nothing will happen.”

Taichi started to tell her she was right—

“And even if something *does* happen, all we have to do is ignore it.”

Ignore it . No matter what happens... ignore it? Do nothing? Let them suffer?

Considering the Dream Vision hadn’t even struck them yet, they didn’t really know what they were dealing with, and so Taichi had taken her proposal with a grain of salt. But upon further reflection, her suggested strategy sounded kind of... monstrous?

“You can do that, right, Taichi?” Inaba asked, glancing over at him... but he was no longer walking beside her. He was standing behind her, staring after her. “Huh? Taichi?”

Realizing he wasn’t following her, she quickly came to a stop. Just then, he snapped to his senses and raced back to her side.

“I’m doing the right thing... aren’t I?” Inaba asked, though whether to him or to herself, he wasn’t certain.

But either way, Taichi couldn’t find it in him to agree or even ask her to go into detail. He simply stayed silent.

□■□■□

On his way home, Taichi felt completely restless. There was no telling when «Heartseed»’s new phenomenon, Dream Vision, would strike. They’d all agreed to send an email out at the first sign of anything unusual. No word from anyone yet.

He rounded the corner and turned onto his street. *Almost home,* he thought. What a relief. Soon he wouldn’t have to worry about some mystery vision

assaulting him while he was out in public.

“Haah... haah... What the?”

He heard a voice, and out of the corner of his vision, he could see someone else standing on the sidewalk. He glanced over... to find a familiar girl standing there, her hair tied back and bangs pinned up.

“What? Fujishima? What are you doing here?”

Sure enough, it was Fujishima Maiko, the former Apostle of Love who had lost the class presidential race in their second year. And while it had crushed her to lose her title, as of late she was slowly but surely pulling herself together. She was in full workout mode, wearing a long-sleeved white tracksuit and sporting anti-slip ear grips on her trademark glasses.

“What does it look like I’m doing? I’m jogging.” She grabbed the towel hanging from her neck and dabbed at her sweat.

“Jogging? Oh... Exercising. Right. Isn’t your house kinda far from here?”

“Yeah, I’ve traveled quite a ways. I take a different route each day, you see... Anyway, much as I’d love to stop and chat, I’d better get going. You don’t mind, do you?” She bounced impatiently on her heels.

“Right. Sorry for interrupting. See you at school.” She was clearly eager to get back to her workout, and he wasn’t about to stop her.

“S-See you!” And with that, Fujishima hurried past him and down the street.

But just as Taichi was musing to himself about her rigorous dedication... his sight blurred. Suddenly he was seeing double—*hearing* double. It was unlike anything he’d ever experienced, and he couldn’t escape.

[There’s a girl. It’s Fujishima. She’s standing in front of a door. The door has a placard with a stick figure of a woman on it. Fujishima rushes through the door, runs into a stall, pulls down her pants, and—]

“Wh... What was that...?” Taichi mumbled to himself without realizing. Then a wave of dizziness washed over him. “Nngh...!” He pressed a hand to his forehead.

The vivid imagery replayed in his mind. It was like a spontaneous daydream—

gone in an instant. Barely any time had passed; nothing around him had changed... and yet the memory of what he saw (and heard) still lingered. Well, to an extent, anyway. A lot of it was fuzzy.

One thing he was sure of: that was *not* something he imagined of his own accord. He felt violated, like someone had stuffed a videotape into a VCR in his brain and hit Play without his permission. In no way was that anything like a normal daydream.

No, there was only one conclusion to be drawn from this. A conclusion that fit way too perfectly. It was «Heartseed»'s Dream Vision.

Taichi glanced over his shoulder. Fujishima was still staggering down the street.

According to «Heartseed», the visions would show them the desires of everyone around them, from short-term wishes to long-term aspirations. And Fujishima clearly wasn't running straight. Was she just tired, or... did she really need to...?

"F-Fujishima!" He trotted after her, closing the distance between them.

She turned back to face him, her complexion ashen. "Wh-What is it?"

"...Do you need to use the restroom, by any chance?"

Taichi took his place at the dining table, where two cups of tea sat steaming. He'd felt a little dizzy earlier after the Dream Vision struck, but he'd recovered fairly quickly.

He thought back over what had happened. In the Vision, the "camera" was located approximately one meter behind Fujishima, positioned slightly above her, almost like he was her guardian angel. Much like a regular dream, a lot of the details (like the inside of the restroom, for example) were completely fuzzy. The events of the Vision also jumped around—at one point she had entered a stall, and then the "scene" cut to a shot of the placard on the door. This, too, was reminiscent of a regular dream.

Then he heard the toilet flush, and after a moment, Fujishima quietly reappeared. "Um... Thank you," she offered, clasping her hands together and fidgeting slightly, her head bowed.

To Taichi, this was a rare and unexpected display of bashfulness—

“Nothing worse than having to pee when you’re lost wandering through suburbia. I tell you, it felt like my bladder was about to—”

“Why are you going into detail?! I thought you were embarrassed!” As usual, Fujishima was somewhat removed from societal norms. That, and she was quick to change tack. “Anyway, I know you didn’t exactly come over to hang out, but at least have a cup of tea before you go.”

She paused for a moment... then walked over and took a seat. “You’re right. Wouldn’t want to be rude.” She grabbed her sports towel off the table and hung it around her neck once more. “Oh, right... Almost forgot,” she began again after a moment. Her gaze returned to the floor. “If you have any air freshener... I’d really like to... spray it around in there.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m sure the smell will dissipate pretty fast.”

“Okay. Good thing you have a smell fetish.”

“Look, are you embarrassed about it or not?! And no, I don’t have a smell fetish!”

She was impossible to read, to the point that he was starting to suspect that she was doing this on purpose. *Is she TRYING to make me think about it?*

“By the way, Yaegashi-kun... I’m impressed you figured out that I needed to go.”

“Huh?” This caught Taichi off guard. He swallowed.

“I didn’t want it to be obvious, so I was trying pretty hard not to let it show.”

Then it occurred to him: he had inadvertently disobeyed Inaba’s orders to ignore the Visions. It was all so sudden that he hadn’t really stopped to think it through.

“Well, you were pretty unsteady on your feet...”

“For all you knew, I could’ve just been tired. I wasn’t squeezing my legs together.”

“W-Well... you looked really pale...”

“But you stopped me *before* you saw my face—”

“I’M HOOOOME!” a cheerful voice suddenly rang out near the front door. It was Rina, Taichi’s younger sister, home from school.

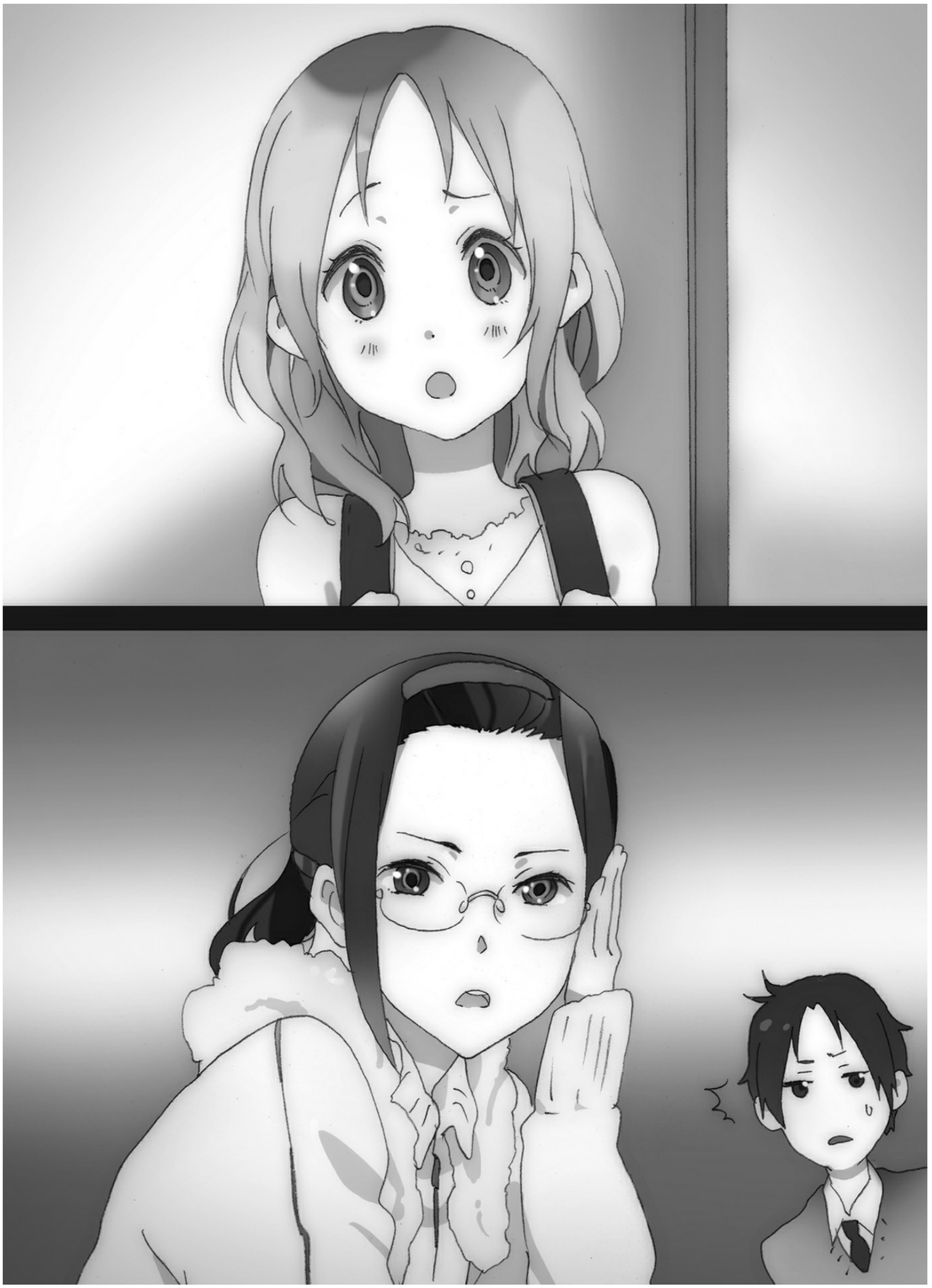
Rescued from the losing argument he was having, Taichi heaved a sigh of relief—then stopped. *Wait... Why do I feel like we’re about to have an even WORSE argument...?*

“Hey, Taichi? I don’t recognize these exercise sneakers—” As Rina popped into the living room, she froze in her tracks, her backpack still hanging from her shoulders.

With her long, wavy hair, she seemed more grown-up than the average sixth-grader, but at the same time, her big, round eyes afforded her an air of youthful innocence. Either way, it was plain to see that she’d someday grow up to be a beautiful young woman.

“Uhhh... Who’s this...?”

“Is this the younger sister I’ve heard so much about? It’s a pleasure to meet you. My name is Fujishima Maiko. Your brother and I are fri— I mean, riv— I mean... It’s complicated.”



“Damn it, Fujishima, couldn’t you have just said *classmates* or something?!” *Why would she leave it vague?! She has to be doing this on purpose!*

“Nice to meet you. I’m Yaegashi Rina... Wait, what do you mean, ‘it’s complicated’?! But my brother already has a girlfriend... Oh my gosh, don’t tell me... Now he’s got a second one?! No, wait... She said it’s complicated... Then that means—*friends with benefits?!* ”

“Look, I don’t know what you’re picturing, but for the record, she and I are just—”

“Oh, and your brother graciously let me use the facilities here,” Fujishima added, indicating the bathroom. This was a full bathroom, mind you, complete with tub and shower.

“Huh? The bathroom? Wait... Your hair’s wet... and you’ve got a towel... You used our shower?! Then... were you guys doing what I think you were doing?!”

“The hell do you think we were doing?! Because I’ll have you know, it wasn’t each other!”

“Oho, I see what you did there. Well played, Yaegashi-kun.”

“Could you shut up for a minute, Fujishima?!”

“Wow, my brother sure moves fast... I’d always assumed he’d be a late bloomer, but now I’m starting to think I should’ve had ‘the talk’ with him a bit sooner... Didn’t realize he was that aggressive... Oops...”

“Rina, I’m telling you, you’re operating under a *massive* misunderstanding right now! And why the hell would YOU give ME ‘the talk’?! *You’re in sixth grade!* Please don’t tell me you’ve already—!”

“*Whoa* there, big bro! You’re jumping to some pretty crazy conclusions! Trust me, I’m waiting until I’m *at least* your age before I... take that step, you know? It’s not something I want to rush into.”

“Well now, it seems your little sister actually has principles. Unlike you.”

“*Keep your comments to yourself, Fujishima!* ”

“Oh, but that doesn’t apply to kissing.”

“Aaaaaaaaggggghhhh!!!”

“Wow... I didn’t realize people actually curl into the fetal position in real life.”

“Listen, Taichi... If you’ve done it before, then I want you to tell me about it. I want to know what it’s like from a man’s point of view... you know, for future reference... Gosh, this is so awkward!”

“Awww, look at you blushing! You’re so sweet and precocious, I can’t take it!”

Once again, his sight blurred, and something forced its way into his brain. He clapped a hand over his mouth. Images appeared in his mind unbidden—[There’s a girl. It’s Fujishima. Opposite her is Rina, looking flushed. Fujishima approaches her and grabs her by the shirt. Rina closes her eyes and waits—]

Intense disgust flared up inside him—and the next moment, it was gone again. Like a daydream. He lowered his hand. Had he imagined that of his own will? No way. Which meant...

“NO! Not cool, Fujishima! Don’t even *fantasize* about that!”

“Gosh... I think this is the maddest I’ve ever seen him... I can almost see the steam coming out of his ears...”

“Surely *fantasies* are allowed! I’m not harming anyone! Besides, it’s not like I’d *actually* ... Wait, what? How did you know?! Are you psychic?!”

“N-No! But I know you, and I know how you operate!”

In the end, it took another thirty minutes before the misunderstanding was resolved—during which Taichi sincerely regretted ever going against Inaba’s wishes.

+++

«Heartseed» was on its way to the staff room, piloting the body of Gotou Ryuuzen. As it passed a student in the hall, the air itself seemed to shift.

“Hey, «Heartseed»,” the girl drawled in a soft, airy voice. Her half-lidded eyes indicated that she wasn’t who she seemed.

“...«The Second»... Not you again...”

“Oh, relax... I’m allowed to watch... aren’t I?” asked the entity who had

foisted the Age Regression phenomenon upon the Cultural Research Club.

“...I’d prefer if you didn’t...”

“You’re so strange... You’re the most fascinating of all.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere...”

“So... it looks like your task is complete. But is that what you want?”

“...What do you mean...?”

“You seem sad that it’s ending... correct? But why? Isn’t that strange?”

«Heartseed» froze in place. There was an abnormally long pause.

“.....Who knows,” it replied finally. “Regardless... there’s nothing more I can do...”

“Oh really... If you say so. Anyway... I’ll be watching, so... have fun.”

The instant it was done talking, «The Second» vacated its host body, leaving her to collapse on the spot. She snapped to her senses.

“Huh...? What the...?”

Alarmed and confused, the girl hurried away. Once she was gone, «Heartseed» headed on its way to the staff room, while attempting to look as human as possible.

Chapter 3: Playing Cupid

The next morning, the five second-years gathered in the clubroom to talk about the Dream Visions. As it turned out, all of them had experienced it at least twice thus far, be it fellow classmates, acquaintances at other grade levels, or even total strangers. And Taichi wasn't the only one who had inadvertently tested the validity of the phenomenon.

"Damn it, guys... Well, I guess we're all bound to slip up in the beginning. So, how did it make each of you feel? Queasy?" Inaba asked.

"Yeah... Me personally, I actually got a little dizzy. Fortunately I had a wall I could lean against," Nagase answered.

"Oh, I got dizzy, too. But it went away pretty quickly," Taichi chimed in, and the others agreed.

"I gotta say, I don't know how «Heartseed» expects us to react to these," Aoki remarked. "Like, I get a Vision of a guy I don't know playing baseball—so what? I guess he wants to be a pro athlete...? Oh, but then again, it kinda looked like he was playing on campus. Maybe he really just wanted to play baseball..."

"Stop talking, Aoki. We're done here." And with that, Inaba rose from her seat.

"What? Already? Isn't it, like, a little early?" Kiriyama protested, giving voice to the question that was surely on everyone else's mind.

"The Dream Vision is just that: it shows us visions of other people's dreams. Nothing more, nothing less. So there's nothing to debate."

"But just to be safe—" Nagase began.

"We're already safe," Inaba cut in. "Did it cause any problems for you? No? So all you had to do was stay quiet. The end. And Aoki, don't go blabbing about the details of your Visions anymore. This is a massive invasion of people's privacy as it is, so let's not make it worse, *capiche?*"

"Oh... okay... if you say so..."

“Alright, now let’s head back to—” Just then, she stumbled and lost her balance.

“Inaba!”

“Inaban?!”

Everyone jumped to action, but this proved unnecessary, as Inaba managed to right herself.

“Inaban, are you not feeling well?”

“No, that’s not it. I got hit with a damn Vision, that’s all. Caught me off guard... Eh, I’m sure I’ll be used to it by the end of the day,” Inaba sighed. “Anyway, isn’t it a little early to be thinking about—whoops. Now *I’m* about to blab.” She gave a self-deprecating laugh and headed for the door.

“W-Wait! Inaban, are you *sure* you’re not—”

“If I was, I’d tell you, okay?! I’ve learned from my past mistakes... Look, people, no more talking about the Dream Visions. We’re done.”

Inaba sped from the room, and Nagase followed after her. Taichi decided to let them have a moment alone together.

“Hmmm... Kinda feels like Inabacchan’s puttin’ on a show, am I right, Taichi?” Aoki asked.

“She’s got a lot of anxiety right now, but she’s doing her best to look out for us,” he replied. “She’s found the ideal solution.”

This time around, her rationale was absolutely bulletproof. It was clearly the “right” answer.

“Yeah... As long as we can keep our opinions to ourselves, it’ll be like the Dream Vision never happened at all,” Aoki mused. “Welp, guess I’d better get to class!”

But right as he stood from his chair—

“H-Hey, um, Aoki!” Kiriyama called.

“Mmm? Whassup?” he asked. It was obvious she was nervous about something.

“Um... well... I was just wondering if you’re doing okay... you know, since you’ve kinda got a lot on your plate right now... and also... there’s a bump on your cheek.”

At this, Taichi scrutinized Aoki’s face. She was right—his left cheek was looking a little puffy.

Aoki didn’t immediately react to this comment. Instead, he froze.

“Uh... Aoki?” Kiriyama asked nervously.

“...Aw crap, is it obvious?! Gah!” Aoki shouted after a moment, almost like he’d only just remembered... but more like he was covering for something. Taichi debated whether to point this out, but ultimately decided to play along out of respect for his wishes.

“No, I wouldn’t say it’s obvious,” he answered. “I didn’t even notice until Kiriyama pointed it out. Good eye, Kiriyama.”

“I... I... I wasn’t looking on purpose!” she shouted back, flustered. “I just... I have a keen eye for this sort of thing! All those years of karate, you know! Anyway, what happened?! Tell us, Aoki!”

“Oh, well... my sis kinda slapped me this morning. Over the whole... college money thing.”

Taichi fell silent. This felt distinctly like a question they shouldn’t have asked him.

“See, I was like ‘Don’t worry about me, sis! Just focus on your own life!’ and she was like ‘Right back at you! I’m not gonna throw my little brother under the bus!’ and then *pow!* ”

“She sounds very... *spirited* ,” Taichi commented carefully.

“And kinda badass,” Kiriyama chimed in.

“No, think about it! First she says something nice, and then she *hits me?!* It doesn’t add up, yo!”

His usual jokey slang had returned to his speech, but even that couldn’t lighten the gravity of the conversation.

At this point, Taichi couldn't help but start to worry about Aoki's emotional well-being.

"Like seriously, it's totes depressing the way these career planning surveys have thrown reality in our faces. I'm not done being a kid! Y'know what I mean, Yaegashi-kun?" asked Nakayama Mariko, Calligraphy Club member and fellow classmate, idly twirling her pigtails as they chatted in the classroom during lunch.

"For sure."

"Yeah, I'm not ready to grow up! I just wanna have fun! Right, Taichi?" asked Nagase. She and Nakayama were close friends right from the start of high school, and as usual, the two were in perfect sync.

"For sure."

"You're giving *me* the same answer you gave Nakayama-chan?! That's cold!"

"Yeah! Be nice to us!"

"But if I'd given you both different answers, you would've complained about that, too!"

"Yep," they answered in unison without missing a beat.

By this point, they'd teased Taichi so much that they were completely predictable.

"Aww, c'mon, Yaegashi-kun! Lighten up and goof off with us! Don't let the career planning survey get to you!"

"You can goof off all you want, but try to turn those surveys in early, alright?" cautioned class president Setouchi Kaoru as she passed by, her cartilage piercings gleaming through strands of chin-length hair.

"What about you? What'd you put on *your* survey?" Nakayama asked, clearly trying to get her to join the party.

"Sociology, education, something along those lines. That sort of stuff has always interested me."

"Wow, you're a *nerd!* And to think at one point you were trying to be a rebel

girl!” Nagase exclaimed.

“Oh god, please don’t bring that up!” Setouchi grimaced sheepishly, but otherwise didn’t seem all that upset.

As she walked away, as if on cue, Kiriyama and her best friend Kurihara Yukina walked up in her place. With short, feisty Kiriyama contrasted against tall, laid-back Kurihara, the two of them made quite a pair. As with Nagase and Nakayama, the two of them had been good friends dating back to their first year of high school.

“What’s up, guys?” asked Kiriyama.

“Oh, we were just talking about the career surveys,” Nagase replied.

“*Ugh* ,” Kurihara groaned, clutching her wavy, bleached hair. “I get that it’s important and all, but right now I need to talk about something fun, like the school trip! Please?”

“What’s going on with her?” Taichi asked Kiriyama under his breath.

“Boy problems,” she shrugged.

“Oh yeah, the school trip! The biggest event of our high school careers!” Nakayama shouted.

“I hear the weather in Hokkaido has been pretty mild this year, so that’s good. Plus, I’m looking forward to going on an airplane for the first time ever!” Nagase chimed in.

In mid-October, the second-years of Yamaboshi High School would be spending four days and three nights in the northern Hokkaido Prefecture.

“I’m glad we all get to go together,” Taichi murmured to himself. Instantly, the four others turned to look at him. “Wh... What?”

“Oh, nothing. Just kind of surprised at how dorky you can be,” Nagase answered.

“Says the biggest dork here,” Taichi shot back.

“I’m actually, like, *suuuper* excited to go somewhere new with all of you,” Kiriyama gushed.

“Yeah, same,” Kurihara replied. “This is the perfect opportunity for people to get to know their crush, too... Too bad I don’t have my eye on anyone in our grade...”

“Oh my god, Yukina, are you already looking for a new man? You move, like, *way* too fast!”

“No I don’t. *You’re* just slower than molasses, that’s all. You need to hurry up and ask someone out before the trip!”

“I’m not asking anyone out! Or asking *anything* , for that matter! I’m just... giving someone my answer.”

“Wait... Is it finally happening?!” Kurihara’s eyes lit up. “Man, Aoki’s one hella patient guy! This has been *a year and a half* in the making—that’s eighteen months! Most guys would’ve totally moved on by now. I like that sort of dedication in a man... Not that he’s my type, of course.”

“Well... it’ll happen soon, but... not right now. It’s, um... not a good time.”

“Oh, for crying out loud, girl...” Kurihara slumped her shoulders.

Looking at Kiriyama’s strained smile reminded Taichi of her tiny whisper from a few days ago: *I wanted to tell him how I feel and lay this whole thing to rest... but I guess it’ll have to wait.*

“Good grief. You’re in high school, Yui! Now’s the time to mess around and fall in love once or twice!” Kurihara scolded.

“Yeah, I know...” Kiriyama nodded.

Then Kurihara turned to Nagase and Nakayama. “What about you two? Anything new to report? We just got done with the Culture Festival, and now the school trip’s coming up... You never know! Everyone might start pairing off!”

“I’m not in the right headspace for that kinda stuff... Not yet, anyway,” Nagase explained.

“Aww, c’mon, Iori,” Kurihara sighed. “I know tons of guys have asked you out, and you keep shooting them all down—which means you’ve gotta have your eye on someone special!”

“Noooope! I really don’t! I guess I’m just waiting for the right person to come along.” She looked away, and her eyes met Taichi’s. Somehow he was never quite sure how he was supposed to react in this situation.

“I’m telling you, your standards are too high. Guys our age are all practically overgrown children, so you’re gonna have to make compromises.”

“Hear that, Yaegashi-kun?! She’s talking smack! You gotta speak up, pal! Use that sultry voice of yours and tell her you’re the exception to the rule!”

“You’re not trying to get out of answering my question, are you, Nakayama-chan?”

“Ouch... I swear, you have no faith in me, Yukina-chan! Okay, let’s see... Well... My love life’s looking pretty DOA, if you ask me. Got any pointers?”

“Hmmm... You’ve got lots of energy and spunk, so I imagine at least one of these guys is interested in you. Oh, but then again, you might have inadvertently friendzoned yourself with your ‘one of the guys’ schtick...”

“Yeah, maybe... I gotta figure that out.”

Nakayama was rarely one to talk about romance, but evidently she still thought about it, no different from any other teenage girl. Maybe she just didn’t want to talk about it around Taichi specifically, since he was a guy. But who would Nakayama of all people be interested in?

Without warning, his sight blurred—duplicated itself—and the next thing he knew, he was looking at something else entirely.

[There’s a girl. It’s Nakayama. She looks giddy. Someone’s next to her, holding hands with her. It’s a guy. His features come into focus. He’s tall, with a stocky body and shaved head. It’s Ishikawa, the baseball player. They’re on a date.]

At first Taichi panicked—but then he understood. It was a Vision.

From what he’d seen, Nakayama wanted to go on a date with Ishikawa... allegedly. He couldn’t be certain based on imagery alone. Sure, there was some accompanying dialogue, but like in a regular dream, it was too fuzzy to comprehend clearly.

Taichi began to think. If Nakayama was holding hands with Ishikawa, and she looked happy about it in her Dream, then... that meant she wanted to hold hands with him in real life, right? And that would mean...

He blinked his eyes a few times. It felt like an afterimage of the Vision was clinging to his retinas. Then he noticed Kiriyama clutching her head and blinking, too. Their eyes met, and after a long moment of sustained eye contact, she stepped closer.

“Did you see it, too?” she whispered.

“Nakayama, right?” he whispered back.

Apparently Kiriyama had seen the same Vision he had... and yet Nagase seemingly hadn’t, even though she was right there with them.

“Can you believe it? I mean, this means she likes him, right?”

Unlike Nakayama, who was a total social butterfly, Ishikawa was a man of few words.

“Probably... Okay, we gotta stop. We’re already prying into people’s minds, so we shouldn’t gossip about their secrets.”

And so Taichi vowed to never speak of it again.

But that vow only lasted until the end of the school day.

“Tai... T-T-Taichi!”

A flustered Kiriyama dashed over at the speed of light and slammed her hands on his desk.

“Whoa there, calm down. What’s up?”

“Listen, um... No, we can’t talk here! Come with me!”

And so he was unceremoniously dragged all the way to the corner of the hallway, where no one else was around.

“I... I saw something,” Kiriyama stammered.

She was physically shaking. What on earth could she have seen?

“I had a Vision showing that Ishikawa-kun likes Nakayama-chan back!”

“Wait, *what?!* That’s... a good thing, actually, now that I think about it. Nice.”

Nothing more heartwarming than mutual feelings, after all.

“But the thing is... as much as he wants to go out with her, he doesn’t intend to act on his feelings at all! At least, not for the time being!”

“You figured out all that from one Vision?”

“Oh, um, a lot of it’s just my own guesswork. The Vision itself was like a ‘I want to tell her how I feel’ kinda thing, but there was no real urgency, just kinda like ‘someday,’ you know? Does that make sense?”

“I guess...?”

Taichi had only experienced a handful of these Dream Visions, but he seemed to recall at least one other similar case. Then he realized—

“Okay, let’s think about this. We know these Dream Visions are images of what people want to see happen in the future. If we turn that on its head, doesn’t that mean all Dream Visions are things they don’t plan on acting on just yet? They’re wishes, not prophecies.”

Maybe that was a bit too far-fetched.

“Holy crap, Taichi! You sounded just like Inaba!”

“I guess she’s rubbing off on me... Hahaha...” *Oof, that was cheesy. Shouldn’t have said that.*

But Kiriyama didn’t laugh along with him.

“Dating is... pretty important, right?” she asked him quietly.

“Yeah, I think so.”

“Then maybe...”

She paused, hesitant. Then, after a moment, she closed her eyes and exhaled—and when she opened them again, they were brimming with determination.

“Maybe we should give them a little push.”

Instantly, the air between them grew tense. So tense that Taichi forgot to breathe. In any other situation, the idea of playing Cupid would have been

perfectly innocuous... but right now, there was a certain significance behind it. This was a weighty choice, and one they both knew they couldn't easily backpedal from.

"When it comes to love... timing really matters, you know?" She ran a hand through her long tawny strands. "I really wanted to talk to Aoki about my decision, like, lay this whole thing to rest. But over the summer I was off on a trip with the rest of my dojo, so I didn't really have time... No, I guess that's just me making excuses. The truth is, now that I have my answer, somehow I just don't have the courage to say it out loud. Pretty pathetic, huh?" She laughed weakly. "I just... I felt like I needed to talk to him, so I made up my mind to do it... and then he told us about his whole family situation, and I was like, *so much for that, I guess* ."

She was right; this definitely didn't feel like the right time for that sort of conversation. This made him think...

"Come to think of it, if our timing had been a little different, I might've actually dated Nagase." That much was fact, plain and simple.

"*Right?!* " Kiriyama exclaimed, her emotions inadvertently escalating her volume. "If they both like each other, and they're only holding back 'cause they're scared of rejection, then I think we should give them a little encouragement, that's all. It'll be their choice in the end, obviously."

After all, they had knowledge that the pair in question did not—irrefutable proof that their pining was mutual. But did Kiriyama have the right idea? Taichi contemplated this in silence.

Then, after a moment, she straightened up suddenly, eyes wide. "Oh, but... this is just an idea, you know? I know Inaba wouldn't want us to actually do it... and I bet she'd be pissed if she found out, so please don't tell her I suggested it, okay?"

With a grin, she pressed her index finger to her lips.

□■□■□

Following their conversation, Taichi and Kiriyama arrived at the clubroom a little late.

“Alright, now that we’re all here, let’s begin. Shino! Chihiro!” Inaba called.

The CRC second-years had all unanimously agreed on having this conversation with their kouhai.

“Yes?” Uwa Chihiro responded, lifting his chin from its resting place on his hand and leaning back in his chair.

“Y-Yes?!” Enjouji Shino shrieked, bolting upright.

“I’m just gonna be honest with you. «Heartseed» showed up again.”

And so Inaba explained the details of the phenomenon, as well as their chosen method of handling it.

“Oh... okay... So «Heartseed»’s back...” The color drained from Enjouji’s complexion.

“Don’t worry, Shino-chan!” Nagase replied hastily. “It sounds like it won’t affect you this time!”

“Hell, in a certain sense, it barely affects *us* ,” Inaba added.

“Oh! R-Right! Of course! I’m sorry... I have no right to be sad... You’re the ones who have to suffer, not me... I’m sorry...”

“Seriously, don’t worry about it!” Nagase insisted.

“You okay, Chihiro-kun?” Kiriyama asked. Like Enjouji, Chihiro was looking a little green around the gills.

“Yeah... I’m fine.”

To the two first-years, the return of «Heartseed» was likely akin to their worst fears made manifest. Taichi remembered the traumatic shock he’d felt back when he realized there was going to be a second time.

Inaba cleared her throat. “Just so we’re clear, I don’t think it’ll try to fuck with either of you this time around... but if it does, don’t take the bait,” she cautioned them firmly.

The two of them shrank in their seats like scolded children. It was a mistake they had already made once before.

“Don’t let it tempt you. Don’t let it threaten you. And don’t worry about the

phenomenon—we'll handle our shit. Just forget about it. Supposedly, we won't have any Visions of you, so you have nothing to be afraid of. *Don't do anything you'll regret* ."

It was a long and menacing warning, and Taichi felt the need to step in and lighten things up before the two first-years melted from the heat. "That said, if you ever need to talk to us for any reason, please feel free."

"Yeah, what Taichi said! As long as we put our heads together, we can solve just about anything!" Aoki declared cheerfully.

"Okay... um... Sure thing... I'll try not to stick my nose into your business..." Enjouji began hesitantly, staring down at her hands. "B-But... if there's ever anything I can help with... anything at all... please let me know and I'll do my very best! N-Not that my best is anything special... but I want to help, so...!"

In spite of her paralyzing fear, Enjouji still wanted to offer them her support.

"Oh, Shino-chan! You're such a good girl!" Kiriyama squealed, throwing her arms around Enjouji.

"Mmmphggh...! That hurts, Yui-senpai...!"

"What about you, Chee-hee?" Nagase asked, grinning as though she were deliberately challenging him.

Chihiro let out a long breath and yanked his uniform tie loose. "Yeah... I feel like I still haven't made up for the trouble I caused, so... if ever there's an opportunity for me to do that, then by all means."

"You're so stiff and *formal* , Chee-hee! Not that I was expecting anything different!" Nagase exclaimed, thrusting her fist into the air.

Meanwhile, Enjouji clasped her hands together at chest height and looked at him, her eyes sparkling. "Oh, Chihiro-kun! You're a no-good coward who falls short in all the most critical areas, but with you on board, we're invincible!"

"Uh, Shino-chan?! You *do* realize you just decimated him with the first half of that, right?!"

Meanwhile, Inaba snorted to herself—out of amusement, not condescension. "Alright, I'll hold you both to that. Anyway, moving on. Second-years! Nobody's

done any crazy shit, right?”

At this, Kiriyama flinched. Noticeably.

“Yui? Have you gotten yourself into trouble already?” Inaba asked, her tone laced with anger.

Kiriyama hastily shook her head. “N-No! I haven’t done anything yet! Honest!”

“*Yet?*”

“No! I mean... well... technically...”

“Excuse me?”

Taichi quickly cut in. “She and I were talking earlier, and we were wondering if it might be okay to take action as long as we know we’re helping someone.”

For the briefest of moments, Inaba’s eyes filled with hesitation—but then it was gone again, like a phantom.

“We had this conversation. There’s no room for debate.” Her burning gaze bored a hole right through his skull.

“Shouldn’t we at least talk about it?”

“No. End of discussion.”

“Look, will you quit rushing to a conclusion?”

“Guys! Stop! Enough!” Nagase cut in.

Taichi awkwardly averted his gaze.

“Inaban, I think we all understand the point you’re trying to make, but you’re coming across a little too heavy-handed. I’ll take over from here, alright? I *am* club president, in case anyone forgot!”

“Oh, right! Iori-senpai’s the president! I *did* forget that, actually!”

“...Shino-chan, if you can’t say anything nice, don’t say anything at all.”

But though her moment as a respectable club president was short-lived, Nagase pressed on regardless.

“We’ve all heard Inaban’s opinion on the matter, so let’s hear what everyone else has to say! Inaban, it’s your turn to listen! At the end, you’ll have your

chance to refute their points!”

“Okay, I’ll go first,” said Taichi, raising his hand. “I agree that ignoring the Visions seems like the safest option. I just think it’s a little early to jump to that conclusion, that’s all. And I know ‘carrying on like normal’ has pretty much been our go-to response for all these phenomena, but I feel like the circumstances are different this time around.”

“Hmm. A fair point. Next up... How about you, Yui?”

“W-Well... If we’re like, totally one hundred percent sure we can make something good happen, or protect someone from a bad outcome, then I think we should consider using the Visions to our advantage. Not in a weird way or anything.”

“You want to... *use* your power?” asked Chihiro. And considering how much trouble he’d caused in doing that very same thing, Kiriyama couldn’t help but hesitate.

“I’m not saying we go all-out. Just... I think we should consider the possibility, like, in case of an emergency where we really, really need to.”

“Okay, any other opinions? If not, I’ll give Inaban her chance to refute your points...”

Unfortunately, the discussion went nowhere. In spite of their best attempts, Inaba refused to change her stance even slightly. After that, it was time to head home.

Taichi, Kiriyama, and Aoki were at the train station, standing on the platform. The three of them took the same train home, though their final stops were different.

“Rrgh... Obviously I get that we shouldn’t act on *every single Vision* ...” Kiriyama grumbled, unhappy with the outcome of the debate.

“It just doesn’t make sense that we’re barred from reacting to *any* of them,” Taichi replied. “Every now and then, we’re going to find out that someone needs our help. Maybe they’ll have nowhere else to turn. You had one like that, didn’t you, Aoki?”

“Yep... I don’t wanna invade their privacy, so I won’t go deep into it, but they were wishing for a way to fix one big problem.”

“Hmmm...” Kiriyama frowned. “Honestly, *who cares* if we’re using some supernatural power? If someone’s in trouble, then don’t you think we ought to help them? Aoki, you didn’t have a lot to say back in the clubroom—what do *you* think?”

“I mean, not like anyone gives a crap about *my* opinions,” he joked. “But alright, let’s see...” He knitted his brows. “I think maybe we shouldn’t use our power. So I guess I’m on Inaba’s side.”

Kiriyama looked utterly scandalized. “What? Seriously? *Why?* ”

“Well... because ‘helping someone’ is a point of view, y’know? Everyone’s got a different way of looking at it. If we do something about Visions without the person having anything to say about it, it’s just kinda *arrogant* , right? Like, who are we to decide what’s best for them? That’s why we shouldn’t bother.”

In response, Kiriyama pouted her lips. Maybe she was hoping he would side with her. As for Taichi, he admired his friend’s conviction. In a sense, Aoki had them both beat.

“You’re pretty cool, you know that? You always put yourself in other people’s shoes.” Even if he couldn’t agree with Aoki’s position, he could still respect it.

“Nah, I’m a loser. Only reason I didn’t say anything in the clubroom’s ‘cuz I didn’t want Yui to get mad at me,” Aoki muttered so only Taichi could hear.

“Okay, let me ask you this,” Kiriyama began again, and Aoki quickly fell silent. “Let’s say... and this is purely hypothetical... but you know how you’ve got a kinda serious family situation going on right now? Well, let’s say you had a Vision that showed you the perfect solution. Would you *still* not do anything?”

It was a rather straightforward hypothetical, to say the least... but internally, Taichi was worried that Kiriyama was crossing a line by bringing it up at all.

This was followed by a lingering, nerve-wracking silence... until finally...

“Yep. I wouldn’t do a thing.”

“What?! *How come?!* Isn’t that kind of stupid?! You’re literally going to let the

perfect opportunity slip through your fingers over some stupid sense of pride?!”

“Some things just aren’t okay, and this is one of them.”

“I... I don’t get you at all!”

“It’s *fine* , Yui. I’ll figure somethin’ out on my own.”

“Why can’t you just tell us what’s going on so we can help you?!”

At this point, both Kiriyama and Aoki were getting heated. Their frustration was palpable.

“I know it’s gotta be hard to talk about, but we’re your friends, and we’re here for you! If your dad’s worried about losing his job... I mean, obviously it won’t be easy, but maybe we could help him find a new one! And for that matter, you never even told us what exactly he—”

“Molestation.”

Taichi had been meaning to intervene, but now there was no need. Just like that, the air between them froze over.

“He... He molested—?”

“Victim was a girl our age, supposedly. But he swears he didn’t do it, and we all choose to believe him. So far, they haven’t arrested him... but eh, who knows what’ll happen.”

“But... Wha... That’s...” Kiriyama faltered. Naturally, this bombshell had decimated her will to argue. Instead, tears now welled in her eyes. “I’m... sorry...”

“Nah, c’mon, you have nothing to be sorry for,” Aoki replied, his voice pained. Then he realized his folly. “Seriously, c’mon!” he insisted, his smile noticeably forced.

In that moment, Taichi realized that Aoki was doing everything in his power to keep his emotions in check... and it wasn’t going well. This was clearly not a conversation he could have unless he detached himself from it.

“Molested... a girl our age... but he claims he’s innocent...” Kiriyama mumbled to herself almost deliriously, and it was obvious she didn’t have the first clue

how to react.

“I’m not an expert, but... I’ve heard in passing that... people can be wrongfully convicted for that kind of thing,” said Taichi, hesitantly.

“As if! The idea that women make false claims about sexual assault is what keeps so many of them suffering in silence! ...I mean, not to suggest your dad actually did it! Of course he wouldn’t!” Kiriyama hastily corrected herself. “I’ve talked to him myself, you know... Well, technically I was stuck in [your body] at the time, but still, I could tell he’s not that kind of person. You know, from his general vibe.”

“Same here, actually. Your dad’s a good guy,” Taichi chimed in. “I’m convinced it has to be some kind of misunderstanding.”

“Thanks, guys. The problem is... it happened in an empty train car, and there were no witnesses.” Aoki hung his head, concealing his expression.

Taichi hadn’t realized just how critical Aoki’s father’s situation had become. Frankly, were he in a similar situation, he strongly doubted he could maintain Aoki’s level of composure.

Then the train slowed to a halt as the loudspeaker informed them of the next stop.

“It’s just not fair to help some people and not others,” Aoki muttered to himself. “If you’re going to be a superhero, you can’t pick and choose. It’s all or nothing... but at the same time, helping everyone just doesn’t feel right...” He balled his hands into tight fists.

All or nothing.

Truth be told, it did feel like Aoki was being unnecessarily stubborn... but at the same time, Taichi was impressed by his firm dedication to his beliefs.

At home, Taichi couldn’t will himself to do much of anything except lie in bed. His mind was a jumbled mess, and storm clouds rumbled in his heart. A high schooler like him had no hope of fixing a situation like Aoki’s.

“I guess I should be thinking about the Dream Vision...”

He understood the other side’s reasoning fully well... but was it right to ignore

Kiriyama's points entirely? Did they really have to turn a blind eye to people they *knew* were in trouble?

A moment later, his vision blurred slightly. Images and sound filled his mind.

[There's a girl. She's from another class. She's walking down the hallway at school, scanning the floor. Then she gasps, and her gaze fixes on one point. There's a cell phone strap on the floor—a blue bear. The girl's face lights up, and she whispers, "Oh, thank god!"]

A Vision of a girl finding a phone strap. Evidently, she must have lost it recently... Her voice had come through loud and clear, and now her words lingered in his mind. It was a tiny, mundane Dream, and yet it clearly meant a lot to her.

Tomorrow I'll keep an eye out for any dropped items on the floor. Surely that wouldn't count as a flagrant misuse of the Dream Vision... or would Inaba disagree?

Inaba and Aoki versus Kiriyama. Two ideas of "the right thing to do," completely at odds with one another. Then Taichi realized: Emotionally speaking, he was inclined to side with Kiriyama, but at no point had he made his own opinion known. He'd only expressed a desire to talk it over without rushing to a conclusion.

Essentially just like Nagase, who served as mediator between the two sides, he was more or less still on the fence.

Then, out of nowhere, Inaba's past comments revived in his mind:

—So tell me, are you really 100% undecided?

—We're already more than halfway through our second year. Surely you have at least SOME idea of what you want to do.

He shook them away. They had nothing to do with this.

Think! What do I believe is the right thing to do?

Inaba was the first to analyze the functions of the Dream Vision and decide on an approach to take. But Kiriyama was brave enough to disagree with their de facto "leader" and make her own feelings known. Meanwhile, Aoki held fast to

his own beliefs, even if they put him in opposition with the girl he claimed to love... and Nagase stood in the middle, watching.

So where did Taichi stand?

□■□■□

The weekend came and went, and on Monday morning, Taichi went straight to Kiriyama.

“I’m going to do whatever I can. Help whoever I can. But only within reason. Nothing big enough to cause a scene.”

“Uhhh, what?” It was the first thing out of his mouth, right there in the middle of the hallway, and so it took her a minute to realize what he was talking about. “Oh, right, the Dream Vision thing. You’re gonna start acting on them?”

“I think it’s the right thing to do.” After thinking it over, at long last, Taichi had found a conclusion of his own.

“R-Right. I mean, I totally agree and stuff... It’s just, the more I think about it, like, the more risky it feels... Almost like this is what «Heartseed» *wants* us to do.”

Naturally, Taichi had considered this angle as well. “I can’t rule it out completely... but either way, if the end result is a net positive, then I think it’s worth it.”

Over the weekend, he’d seen dozens of Visions from as many people. If he had the ability to help them... then what was stopping him from lending a hand?

“Net positive... *Right* ,” Kiriyama replied slowly, her eyes gazing firmly into his.

His heart skipped a beat... and for some reason, his chest ached. But why?

“Okay then. Next question is: do you really think we can convince Inaba?”

“Well... do we really need her permission?”

“What?!” Kiriyama looked at him in shock. “Taichi! We can’t do it behind her back!”

“Why not?”

Of course, he trusted and respected Inaba a great deal. But he was under no obligation to take her opinions as gospel.

"...I really think we should clear it with the others first."

"There's no way Inaba will give us the green light. You know that."

"Okay, but that doesn't mean—"

"I'm actually not one hundred percent sure about this myself," Taichi explained.

He'd been expecting her to be completely on board with this idea. Now that she was hesitating, he could feel self-doubt creeping up on him all over again. *Is this why Inaba says I'm so indecisive?*

A string of supernatural phenomena. An otherworldly entity with the ultimate goal of using them to create "entertaining" situations. And now, here at "the end," it had changed the rules.

Chihiro had once been endowed with a power like this... but in the end, he failed to control it. And his failure nearly ruined two people's lives.

Taichi could think of countless reasons to hesitate... which, in a sense, meant he was fully aware of the risks involved. As long as they didn't get too carried away, and made sure to back off if things got out of hand, they could keep any danger to a minimum. And in return, they would gain what was quite potentially unlimited power.

"Anyway, I'm not saying we should take action right this second. Why don't we test it out first before we decide? Let's see what happens if we play Cupid for Nakayama and Ishikawa."

If he needed to find his own path in life, then perhaps this was it.

Naturally, by "playing Cupid," Taichi didn't mean anything drastic. He knew that uninvolved third parties were better off staying out of other people's romantic affairs. Instead, he and Kiriyama decided that they would simply offer a tiny bit of encouragement.

"Hey, Ishikawa? This is just a stray observation, but... are you into Nakayama?" Taichi asked Ishikawa between classes when no one else was

around. Fortunately, he and Ishikawa were already on good terms, so he could ask without it seeming random.

“Wh... What?! N-No, I... I... I’m not...!” Ishikawa was so overly flustered, his deep voice went up several octaves. This was the same guy who was ordinarily so solemn and steadfast, one could mistake him for a monk-in-training.

“Relax! It was just a question.”

“D-Did you mention it to anyone else? What made you think that, anyway?”

Big, burly Ishikawa was now trembling like a leaf. It was downright adorable.

“I haven’t told anyone, I swear. It was just a feeling I got from watching you, that’s all.”

“I thought I was hiding it exceptionally well... Well, now I’ve just admitted to it. Oh well... I know you’re good friends with her...”

“You know, I’m kinda surprised. You guys don’t really talk all that much.”

“Mmrgh... Well, I’m not exactly the energetic type, but I do enjoy being around those with unbounded enthusiasm. That, and... well, I may be reading into it, but... I feel as though she treats me a bit differently than everyone else.”

“Sounds like she might be into you, too.”

“Either that, or it’s the opposite, and she doesn’t like me... or some other emotion altogether. It’s hard to say.”

Aha . That would certainly explain why he hadn’t made any moves.

These two were dying to be together—they just needed a little push. A small, careful nudge in the right direction. From there, the two of them could decide for themselves.

“Now that I think about it... based on some things I’ve noticed about her, I think she might actually be into you, too.”

Meanwhile, as with Taichi and Ishikawa, Kiriyama had approached Nakayama.

This was their chosen method of “helping”: no suggesting, no demanding, just talking. As such, they didn’t expect any new developments to happen right away; they simply hoped that the two would work it out sometime in the

future.

But oh, how wrong they were.

The next morning, Nakayama was more energetic than Taichi had ever seen her. She stormed over and seized him and Kiriyama both by the arm. “Y-Y-Y-Yui-chan! Y-Y-Y-Yaegashi! This way!” she shouted, dragging them both all the way out to the end of the hall.

“Wh-What’s wrong, Nakayama-chan?!”

“What’s up, Nakayama?!”

With Taichi and Kiriyama now standing side by side, Nakayama put her arms around each of their shoulders.

“I... I’m... M-Me and Ishikawa-kun are dating now! Thank you guys!” She pulled them both into a group hug.



“N-Nakayama-chan! Mmmph!” Kiriyama politely extricated herself and Taichi from Nakayama’s grasp. “What are you... Wait, *what?!* You?! And Ishikawa-kun?! Are dating now?!”

“I know, right?! But try to keep your voice down! It’s a secret!”

“If it’s a secret, then you should probably take your own advice. You’re the loudest person in class,” Taichi retorted.

...Wait, what?

“Awww, thanks for the sick burn, Yaegashi-kun! Oh man, I don’t know how I can even *sit still* , y’know?! I just wanna scream!” She was flailing her arms so hard, Taichi imagined she might just achieve liftoff.

“How’d it happen? Give us the details!”

“Oh, right. So he asked to meet with me after school, and then he asked me out, and I kinda freaked out, but then I said yes! Pretty normal, huh? Just your run-of-the-mill confession story! But that’s okay! So yeah!”

The two of them had made things official? Already?

“Yeah, that’s pretty normal, alright,” Taichi replied. “I get why you’d want to thank Kiriyama, but why me?”

“Ishikawa-kun told me it’s all thanks to you that he found the courage to tell me how he felt! Oh yeah, and Yui-chan, thanks for telling me Ishikawa-kun seemed like he was into me! You two are both *super* observant, huh? Reminds me of the Love Guru!”

It was all thanks to him? That was... wonderful to hear, actually.

“Honestly, it was no big deal, but yeah, congratulations! I’m, like, sooo happy for you!” Kiriyama beamed as though Nakayama’s good fortune was her own.

“Congrats,” Taichi chimed in.

“Thank you, guys. Man, I can’t believe Ishikawa-kun was secretly hot for me this whole time! What a twist!”

“I would say the same about you, personally,” Taichi retorted. “What made you fall for him?”

“Oh gosh... *Fall for him?* That’s so cheesy, Yaegashi-kun! But to answer your question, well... he’s just so stoic and old-fashioned, like a soldier! Gosh, he’s so manly... I bet his ancestors were all upper-middle-tier samurai!”

“That’s... oddly specific, but okay.”

“Now I’m like two... four... EIGHT times as excited for the school trip! Wahaha! Maybe we’ll have a romantic night alone together... Oh god, what am I babbling about?!”

And so Nakayama continued to gush at them with her energy levels cranked up to 11.

When Nagase arrived at school, Nakayama shouted “I gotta tell Iori! But you guys have to keep it a secret, okay? Bye!” and promptly dashed off.

Alone, Taichi and Kiriyama exchanged a glance... and burst out laughing.

“This is such a weird feeling! It’s great to see Nakayama so happy, though!” Kiriyama exclaimed.

“I’m happy for them. And I’m glad we did this,” Taichi replied.

At this, her smile clouded over with the tiniest trace of hesitation. “This *is* the right thing to do, right?”

Taichi stared back at her.

“Since we have this power, it’s only right that we use it to help people, right? As long as it’s nothing weird?” she continued.

Life didn’t come with a strategy guide. It was up to each person to decide for themselves what was right and what was wrong. And this was Taichi’s decision:

“If I have the power to make people’s Dreams come true, then that’s exactly what I want to do—what I *ought* to do.”

Meanwhile, he realized something: in helping to answer other people’s prayers, were they not akin to gods?

Chapter 4: A Fork in the Road

Over the next three days following their success with Ishikawa and Nakayama, Taichi and Kiriyama continued to make Dreams come true. Sometimes they helped two friends patch things up after a fallout, sometimes they played Cupid for mutual crushes, and at one point they even taught someone about stain removal (not completely out of the blue, of course; they had to lead up to it).

When it came to interpersonal issues, they never made direct suggestions—just helped to create opportunities for the affected people to take action. Furthermore, if they determined that a particular crush was purely one-sided, then they did *not* intervene.

The more they adapted to the Dream Vision, the more Visions they saw per day. Over the course of those three days, Taichi and Kiriyama successfully handled three interpersonal conflicts and four miscellaneous desires.

They couldn't risk anyone catching on—least of all the rest of the CRC—so they took pains to fly under the radar. So far, so good. Sure, they were using superpowers to learn about these problems, but their solutions were all too mundane. Surely no one would figure it out.

All in all, Taichi was proud of all the happiness they'd inspired in just a few short days.

Friday evening, after club activities, Taichi and Inaba were on a cafe date for the first time in ten days.

"You haven't been messing around, have you?" she asked suddenly.

"...What do you mean?"

Had she already caught on? *How?* They'd barely done anything noteworthy!

"I know what you're like, and I can't help but worry you might do some goddamn martyr shit."

Evidently, she wasn't suspecting him of anything in specific.

"Don't worry," he lied vaguely. Obviously it wasn't nice to deceive her, but it was better than fighting with her and causing her unnecessary emotional

distress.

In her view, acting on a Vision would create events that were never meant to happen... but as long as the content was something he could have otherwise discovered for himself, Taichi didn't really see the need to worry.

"Not only that, but you spent all last week going on and on about maybe using the Dream Vision, and now it feels like you've stopped talking about it completely. Then again, maybe that's because I told everyone to stop talking about it..." Her eyes narrowed sharply.

"W-Well... I said my piece, and that's all I can really do," Taichi replied.

It felt like he was reliving the Age Regression, wherein «The Second» had forced him to lie to everyone else. Naturally, he failed miserably. But this time was different; instead of sitting on the fence, he was taking action. He was making the choices he felt were right.

"Either way, if something happens, I'll be sure to tell you. What about you, Inaba? Are *you* doing okay?"

"I'm... Yeah, I'm fine... Th-Thanks."

Truth be told, he really loved catching her off-guard and making her blush.

□■□■□

Over the weekend, Taichi saw countless Visions—far more than he was used to. So many, in fact, that he started keeping a journal of the details (minus any identifying information, of course). From there, he and Kiriyama spent Monday and Tuesday making those Dreams come true. Making people happy.

"Man, we've really been busy. And it's all worked out perfectly," Taichi mused to Kiriyama, feeling proud of their efforts. They genuinely hadn't taken any risks thus far; if something smelled even slightly dicey, they simply chose not to get involved.

"Like, I admit sometimes I'm kinda surprised to learn some of this stuff, but other than that, there really haven't been any problems! It almost doesn't feel like one of «Heartseed»'s phenomena at all, you know?" Kiriyama replied.

"Of course, that doesn't mean we should let our guard down."

“I know that. Looking at how it’s gone in the past, this is right about when something bad usually happens.”

Once their morning meeting was over, the two of them headed back to Classroom 2-B—separately, of course. When he arrived, Taichi greeted a good friend of his—

[There’s a tall guy with spiky, wolfish hair. It’s Watase Shingo. He’s wearing a jersey and playing soccer. The camera zooms in on his cleats. Smash cut to the inside of a sporting goods store. Watase takes the soccer cleats to the register and hands them to the cashier.]

“Uh, hello? Earth to Taichi?”

Distracted by the Vision, he’d accidentally created a lull in the conversation. Though they no longer made him feel dizzy or nauseated, he still couldn’t help but stop whatever he was doing to watch. After all, these Visions obstructed his view of the real world for their entire duration.

“...Sorry, it’s nothing.”

Apparently Watase wanted some new soccer cleats. Come to think of it, he’d mentioned that there was a big game coming up... Nothing Taichi could help with, other than wishing Watase’s wallet good luck. Just then, someone grabbed him by the shoulder from behind.

“Huh?”

He turned to find Kiriyama standing there... on the verge of tears.

“Taichi... Help me... I just saw something really important!”

Instantly, he knew this was serious.

“I just had a Vision about Aoki’s dad’s scandal!”

After second period ended, Taichi and Kiriyama spent their break time on the third floor, where all the third-year classrooms were located. It was nerve-wracking, infiltrating the older students’ ranks.

Meanwhile, Taichi couldn’t help but think back over the conversation he’d had with Kiriyama on their way here:

“I had a Vision about a girl... and then Aoki’s dad was there! It was all really vague, but I definitely heard the word ‘groping,’ and something about ‘being fired.’ And the cops were there! And part of it took place on a train!”

“Right... Yeah, if it involved a girl on a train, then it definitely sounds related.”

He’d never considered the possibility that the girl from the scandal was in fact a fellow Yamaboshi student, but if the scandal happened within the district, then it was entirely feasible.

“It’s weird, though...”

“How so?”

“This was the first Vision where I could actually hear some of it clearly... and she was screaming ‘No! You’re wrong! This is all my fault!’ ”

“Yeah, a lot of the time their voices are too fuzzy to parse. So I guess this girl feels responsible for what happened... Wait, what? That’s weird. If he groped her, then why...?” Dream Visions were only supposed to show that which the affected person yearned for. They were by no means a depiction of past events. Which meant... “She believes she’s in the wrong, and wants to deny that any molestation happened...?”

“What? *Why?* ”

“And if Aoki’s dad was specifically involved... There’s no way this is some rando’s Dream, right?”

“Right. Either this girl was the victim, or she was a witness.”

Taichi was inclined to agree. “So why is she obsessing over this past event? Does she wish it never happened or something?”

“So then why say it was ‘all her fault’?”

From there, they decided to initiate contact with this girl, hence their trip to the third floor.

Initially, they didn’t know her name, but Kiriyama knew what she looked like, so they asked around until they found someone who recognized her description (to a downright unhealthy degree, in fact—yikes). Ultimately, they were going to find her sooner or later, seeing as Dream Visions were limited only to those

affiliated with Yamaboshi, but this saved them some precious time.

Walking down the corridor, they peered into each classroom, one by one. Naturally, given that this was a free period, a lot of students had wandered elsewhere... but soon enough Kiriyama found her quarry.

“That’s her.”

She pointed over at a tall girl with shoulder-length hair. Her dark eyeshadow gave off a fierce impression, but upon further scrutiny, it was clear even from a distance that she was miserable. Her eyes had lost all sparkle.

“Look at her! That’s *totally* her.”

“Should we talk to her?”

“I’d like to, but... I mean, we don’t even *know* her.”

And so it was that they decided to return to the classroom and brainstorm a plan later.

“You two sure are spending a lot of time together these days,” Nagase commented as they walked through the door. Her tone was perfectly casual—not too heavy, not too light—floating in the gray area between joking and serious. Then again, perhaps she had chosen an ambiguous tone on purpose.

“Huh?”

“Uhh, well...”

Neither of them had a good response to this.

“Plus, you’re both always disappearing during break time...”

“L-Look, we’re just... you know... talking!”

“Talking? About what?”

“W-Well...!” Losing steam, Kiriyama looked to Taichi for assistance.

“Oh, uh... just the usual stuff! Like Aoki, or... dating advice?” He fumbled, searching for a believable excuse.

“Ah, now I get it. Yeah, that stuff’s not exactly in my wheelhouse, I guess,” Nagase nodded.

But although they'd dodged that particular bullet, she still looked unconvinced.

All through class, Taichi continued to ruminate on the third-year girl possibly involved with Aoki's father's scandal. They could try to ask her for her side of the story, but... what if she was the victim? He wouldn't want to force her to relive any potentially traumatic memories. But then again, based on the way Kiriyama described the Vision, it sounded like there was more to the story...

Meanwhile, the teacher started erasing the blackboard. Realizing he hadn't finished copying everything down, Taichi started taking notes like mad—

[There's a girl. It's the third-year girl Kiriyama pointed out. She's crying. She bows profusely. Standing before her is an older man. It's Aoki's father. "I was mad at you. That's why I lied," the girl says. "But then the cops showed up, and everything snowballed out of control... I won't ask you to forgive me. I just wanted to explain myself." The girl prostrates herself on the floor.]

Taichi squeezed his eyes shut.

But by the time he opened them again, the blackboard was already blank.

□■□■□

With a second Vision now corroborating the first, there was only one conclusion to be drawn:

"I'm starting to think Aoki's dad was falsely accused," Kiriyama told Taichi.

He nodded. "Probably, but we can't be sure. A lot of this is still just guesswork."

At lunch, the two of them left the classroom separately, then met up in a remote corner of the school building to talk. Fortunately, Nagase was (hopefully) too busy goofing off with Nakayama to notice. Now all they needed to do was make sure to return at separate times as well... but for now, back to the problem at hand.

The information they'd gained through these two Visions was heavier than anything else they'd witnessed thus far. Acting upon it would irrevocably change the lives of everyone involved.

“According to Aoki, his dad’s still under suspicion, which means only three people know the truth: you, me, and her.”

“It’s insane that we *just happened* to see these Visions. It almost feels like fate —”

“I imagine you saw them... because the incident was on your mind...”

A chill ran up his spine. He whirled around. “«Heartseed»!”

Sure enough, there stood the lifeless form of Gotou Ryuuzen, piloted by «Heartseed». Taichi never would’ve imagined it would approach them so early into the proceedings—and in broad daylight, no less.

“I never feel you approaching... How do you do that?” Kiriyama asked, her arms raised in a fighting stance, both hands clenched into fists.

“What are you talking about, Kiriyama-san...? I just walked here...”

“Well, what do you want?” asked Taichi.

“Oh... well... Oh, right... I sort of came here to tell you... that you only saw those Visions... one, because Kiriyama-san wanted to... and two, because Yaegashi-san spent a lot of time thinking about it.”

It can read our minds?

“That said... you won’t *always* see what you want to see, of course...”

“Okay then, what’s the *real* reason you’re here? I know you didn’t come here *just* to tell us that.”

“Uhh... Yes, I did...”

“...What?” Kiriyama was so baffled, she forgot to be hostile.

“Anyway... it’s not a guarantee, but... it *does* help to want to see the Vision... and based on what you’re trying to accomplish... I imagine that information is useful to you, yes...?”

It gazed at them. Was it having fun, watching them?

“Are you manipulating us? Were you expecting us to do this, right from the start?”

“Well... I was certainly *hoping* you might... take it in that direction... though it doesn’t really matter either way...”

This response was so vague and noncommittal, Taichi wasn’t really sure how to respond.

“But since you’ve committed to this... I figured I would help you... This *is* your bonus stage, after all...”

“If you wanted to help us, you could just turn it off completely.”

“But if I turn it off now, you’ll lose your chance to help Aoki-san... and you’re *so* very close... Is that really what you want, Kiriyama-san...?”

Kiriyama inhaled sharply, then bit her lip and stared at the floor. What did «Heartseed» mean by that? Was it trying to suggest that their hypothesis about the scandal was indeed correct? Or was it just trying to get under their skin?

“Anyway... I’ll only be watching from here on, so... have fun... Oh, and... try not to let anyone else find out about your power... I’d hate for this to get complicated...”

With that, «Heartseed» turned and shuffled into the broom closet. And when Gotou Ryuuzen stepped back out, he was himself once again.

□■□■□

Gym class was the sole class that 2-B and 2-D shared, meaning the original five CRC members were briefly reunited. Personally, Taichi always found it kind of funny how they kept diligently going to class, even when they were afflicted with a supernatural curse.

Today the boys played basketball while the girls played volleyball. And when the boys were asked to pair up for dribble and pass practice, Taichi chose Aoki, since he looked like he could use a friend.

“Pass... Ack! Whoa!” Aoki’s dribble hit his own foot instead, causing him to inadvertently kick the ball. “Whoops... Sorry about that.”

“You okay, buddy? You seem kinda sleep deprived.”

“Mmm, well... I was up pretty late last night... er, well, *this morning* , really... having a family meeting. My sister yelled at me to go to bed, but obviously I

wasn’t gonna do that, so yeah.”

This crisis didn’t affect just Aoki. It affected his entire family—or maybe even worse.

“It sure costs a lot of money to raise a kid into adulthood, apparently,” he laughed.

Somehow money problems always felt the most viscerally painful to hear about.

“In the end, the talk went off the rails, and my folks started talking about divorce... not that I think they’ll actually go through with it, mind you. They always say stuff they don’t mean... But this isn’t about that! Man, you always get me to spill my guts, don’t you?”

Aoki passed the ball at him roughly. Taichi caught it, hoping against hope that maybe this was helping Aoki let off some steam. It just wasn’t healthy to keep it all bottled inside.

That said, it was unusual for Aoki to let himself be so openly vulnerable. Normally he would always fervently adhere to his role as comic relief, almost like it was his sworn duty. But evidently this real-world problem wasn’t something he could shrug off as easily as an otherworldly phenomenon.

Just then, Taichi sensed someone looking in their direction. He glanced over to find Kiriyama shooting Aoki a fretful look.

But Aoki didn’t notice.

After school, before heading to the clubroom, Taichi and Kiriyama met up by themselves.

“Do you think... if we could prove Aoki’s dad was innocent... then he wouldn’t have to lose his job?” Kiriyama asked in a pained voice.

“I imagine it’s entirely possible... assuming our hypothesis is actually correct, of course.”

“So if we tell the police it was really that girl’s fault... No, if we tell her to confess the truth... would that solve it, you think?”

“But if we prove it’s a false accusation... wouldn’t we also be proving that she

committed a crime...?”

After all, it would mean that she intentionally lied to the police. Still, based on how badly she seemed to want to apologize, she clearly felt remorse for her actions.

“Yeah... I guess what she did is a crime, huh?”

And they would essentially be turning her in. This was *way* beyond the scope of all the innocent, harmless Visions they’d assisted with so far. Was it safe to take action in regards to something so important? Was it the right call?

Anyone who committed a crime deserved to be punished. Surely most people could agree with that. But could they really pull the trigger themselves? Was that a decision they were capable of making? Taichi couldn’t help but hesitate. They weren’t *gods* , after all.

Of course, if he’d discovered this information through normal means, he would’ve acted on it without hesitation. But they *weren’t* using normal means—they were using superpowers. They were acting outside of nature’s laws.

“Does this mean someone’s going to end up in jail either way? What do we do?”

Unfortunately, Taichi didn’t have a response for her.

Unable to come to a consensus, the two of them trudged to the clubroom. When they arrived, they found four other club members waiting for them; only Aoki was absent.

“How come Aoki’s not here?” Kiriyama asked Inaba, since she and Aoki were in the same class.

“Some kind of family thing,” Inaba replied.

Instantly, Kiriyama’s face fell.

Club activities proceeded as usual, with each member occupying themselves as they saw fit... but with the phenomenon hanging over their heads, the room was oppressively quiet.

These days, hardly anyone ever talked about the Dream Vision. Inaba would ask the room if anyone had noticed anything strange, the answer was no, and

that was that. If anyone tried to continue the conversation from there, she would tell them to “shut up” or “stop talking about it.”

Hence, Taichi and Kiriyama had planned to get in contact with Nagase after club activities had ended.

“Well, I’ve got an errand to run before I head home,” Taichi announced as he got to his feet.

“What kind of errand?” Inaba asked.

“It’s... something I need to take care of on my own...”

“That doesn’t answer my... Never mind. Forget it.” For some reason, Inaba decided against pressing further. Instead, she changed the subject. “You know, it feels like we haven’t had much time to ourselves lately. I guess you’re probably busy with... career planning and all that...”

“Yeah...”

It was hard to hold a conversation with Inaba when he was going against her orders—no, her wishes?—behind her back. Not that he was obligated to obey her. He was his own person, and he was allowed to form his own opinions.

Just then, Enjouji gasped audibly. “A solitary errand... Career planning... That’s it! This is foreshadowing for later, when we find out Taichi-senpai went to sit in at a voice acting academy!”

“No, it isn’t. None of this is foreshadowing. Keep your headcanons out of my reality,” Chihiro retorted.

Fortunately, the first-years’ bickering helped to shatter the awkward tension between Taichi and Inaba.

At the park near the school, Taichi waited for Kiriyama to turn up with Nagase. The plan was for Kiriyama to tell her she “needed to talk about something,” then bring her here.

As soon as they showed up, Nagase took one look at Taichi and said, “*Aha* . I knew it.”

“Sorry to drag you out here,” Taichi apologized. “We couldn’t really do this on school grounds, and we couldn’t do it in the clubroom since Inaba’s there, so...”

He handed a can of soda to each of the girls.

For a moment they debated sitting on a bench, but the closest one was dirty, so they decided to stay standing.

“Nagase, what’s your take on the ‘acting on our Visions’ debate?” Taichi asked, cutting straight to the point. “You were the moderator last time we talked about it, so we didn’t get to hear your thoughts.”

Taichi and Kiriyama had posited that it was safe to use their power, so long as they were careful. But Inaba and Aoki were firmly against it, no matter the circumstance. In other words, they were split evenly down the middle. Not that they’d put it up to a vote or anything, but still, they wanted to know where Nagase really stood.

“Hmmm,” Nagase murmured thoughtfully. She turned and walked a few steps away.

It had been a sweltering day, and the setting sun had done painfully little to remedy the heat. Taichi squinted as Nagase walked against the sun, toying with her soda can.

“Is it right to make use of any power you’ve been given? Or is it wrong to utilize an unfair advantage?” she asked herself quietly. Then she turned back to face them. “Personally, that’s just not a decision I can make. Not yet.” She shrugged her shoulders, smiling softly, her long hair swaying with the movement. “Sorry, guys! I know you were probably hoping I’d say I was on your side.”

“No, no, that’s okay! I mean... sure, we’d love it if you sided with us, but...”

“At the very least, until I’m able to decide, I have to default to not using it. I mean, we all know how risky these things can be,” Nagase explained. Somehow it felt like she was the only person with a completely objective stance. “Then again, you could argue that I’m being indecisive, or I’m trying to get out of having to commit one way or the other, and you wouldn’t be wrong.”

“Nah... I don’t think it’s that,” Taichi muttered.

She’d confronted the issue and made her own decision about how to handle it. He could tell.

“Anyway,” Nagase continued firmly, “if you’re going to use this power, you’d better be thoroughly prepared for the consequences. That’s all I’m saying.”

After Nagase had gone her separate way home, the two of them headed to the train station. Kiriyama seemed to be lost in thought, so Taichi decided to do some contemplating of his own, this time taking Nagase’s opinion into consideration.

At the end of the day, there was a line they refused to cross. They’d had this conversation before; they needed to maintain firm boundaries, or else they’d play right into «Heartseed»’s hands. No sense in needlessly spreading the phenomenon into other people’s lives without good reason.

But that wasn’t a good enough reason to simply *not* solve these otherwise solvable real-world problems. Not when people were suffering right in front of them, and they had the power to fix it.

“I’m not going to stop,” Kiriyama declared suddenly, her voice brimming with determination. “This is about justice. And I’m not going to compromise on my beliefs.”

Justice —a word far too heavy for a mere high schooler to be throwing around.

“We have to protect them. We have to help them. Otherwise, if we ignore it... we’re no different from monsters.”

Lately, Taichi had come to appreciate just how kind, straightforward, and virtuous she was. He hoped she would never lose that sparkle.

“Yeah... I agree,” he responded, almost unconsciously. And the moment he said it aloud, he knew that it was the right response. They were both right, beyond a shadow of a doubt.

He wasn’t just going along with Kiriyama. This was a decision he made of his own will. Not only that, it felt as though every other decision over the course of his lifetime had intentionally led up to this moment. He was choosing the right path.

“It’s up to us to do the right thing. I don’t know what «Heartseed»’s plotting, but as long as we’re careful, we won’t cause any huge issues.”

They had overcome its phenomena countless times now; surely they would recognize any danger it threw at them. They couldn't let fear hold them back. Otherwise they'd never be able to make a stand.

"We'll solve whatever problems we can. And if it gets too risky, we back out. No hesitation."

Kiriyama nodded. "We can't really tell the others about this, can we? I mean, it's our choice—we can't go dragging them into it. So I guess it'll be our little secret." Frowning, she gave a self-deprecating laugh. "Kinda weird, huh? Like, we're spending all this time together and we're not even dating. And on top of that, we're going against *Inaba and Aoki* , of all people. Behind their backs."

Inaba's voice revived in his mind: *Do nothing* . But Taichi pushed it away. If he was going to stand on equal footing with her, then he needed to be his own person. He needed to do this for his own sake.

"Just because she's my girlfriend doesn't mean I have to agree with her on everything... and besides, what she doesn't know won't hurt her." He wasn't being selfish—he was *protecting* her.

"Right... Alright then, let's do it!" Kiriyama thrust her fist into the air. "All this time, I've just sat around and let Aoki help me... but now it's time for me to return the favor."

But Taichi could feel a tiny trace of fragility in that statement—almost as though her convictions were built upon the unreliable foundation of personal emotions. Then he thought better of it. *Of course* they were emotionally motivated.

Thus, he ultimately chose not to point it out.

□■□■□

And so their plans went into motion the very next day. After all, they had no way of knowing how far the criminal investigation and/or company layoff had progressed. Still, even if it turned out they were paranoid over nothing, it couldn't hurt to take action sooner rather than later.

At this point, they decided their best option was to simply approach the girl directly, no roundabout tactics. Their mission began at lunchtime—specifically,

right as it was ending.

“Are you sure about this, Taichi? What if we’re wrong about her? Then *we’ll* be the false accusers!” Kiriyama whispered, shaking like a leaf.

“If we’re wrong, we apologize. That’s all there is to it,” Taichi replied firmly.

He understood why she was nervous, of course—she had to handle part one of their plan entirely on her own.

“Sorry to bother you, senpai... I’m Kiriyama Yui, from Class 2-B... Could you come with me? I want to talk to you about something... Sorry to bother you, senpai...” Kiriyama muttered under her breath, rehearsing her lines.

“You can do this,” Taichi told her.

From there, he headed out to their meetup location in advance. Restless, he waited for them to arrive. Every passing second felt like a lifetime. Three minutes went by. Then five. Then seven. Then—at last, Kiriyama turned up with their quarry in tow. Evidently their decision to have just one person approach her had proved fruitful. *Stage one complete* .

From here on, Taichi would be joining the fray.

“What’s all this about? Why’d you bring me all the way out here?” the girl demanded. Then Taichi stepped out from behind the storage shed. “Whoa! Wh... What the hell is this?!” Frightened, she took a step backwards like she was preparing to bolt.

“W-Wait!” Kiriyama grabbed her by the arm to stop her.

There was no time to explain. They had to cut to the chase, now.

“I’m gonna be straight with you, senpai. We want to have an honest conversation about... the molestation incident on the train,” Taichi declared, vague enough to maintain plausible deniability, but specific enough to make it seem as though he knew what he was talking about.

Instantly, the girl froze in place. “Wh... a...” She could barely speak. Then, after a moment, she took in a deep breath as though she’d only just remembered to breathe. “Wh... What are you even talking about?”

By this point, even a child could tell that she had something to hide.

“We heard the story... from... someone who witnessed the whole thing.”

“That’s a lie,” she shot back, but her expression was clearly tense.

“It’s the truth,” Kiriyama chimed in beside her.

“*LIAR!* ” the girl screamed, rounding on Kiriyama and seizing her by the collar before she could react. “That’s! Not! POSSIBLE! You’re LYING! *No one* from Yamaboshi was on that train! And there weren’t any other passengers un...til after we...” All at once, the color drained from her face as she realized what she had just admitted to. “God... Why now, of all times...?”

Muttering to herself, she began to visibly tremble—and then she took off running at full speed.

“Hey!” Kiriyama yelled.

Seeing the girl’s outright panic filled Taichi with a sense of dread. Maybe they still didn’t fully comprehend precisely what it was they were doing here. On some level they thought they were divorced from reality, but they weren’t. This wasn’t a movie or a TV show. This was real life. They were *harassing someone* .

Then Kiriyama took off after her, and Taichi hastily followed suit.

“Wh-What do we do?!”

“I don’t know! We’ve just gotta stop her!”

Fortunately, even with a generous head start, an ordinary girl didn’t stand a chance of outrunning a talented athlete like Kiriyama. She reached out and grabbed her by the arm once again. “Wait! Please don’t go! Just relax!”

The girl flailed violently. “No! Let go! You’re wrong—it wasn’t my fault!”

“That’s not what we’re saying! It’s just... Someone’s in a lot of trouble right now! Someone who goes to this school with us! The man on the train—that was his father! Please!” Kiriyama pleaded, palpable desperation in her voice.

The other girl stood stock still, her shoulders heaving with her ragged breaths.

If her Dream was to apologize, then surely she regretted the entire incident. Perhaps that was a better way to approach it.

“Senpai... You feel bad about the way it turned out, don’t you? There’s still

time. Just apologize, and you can undo the damage. Then you won't have to feel guilty anymore. You'll be helping someone. Please... Help us help our friend," Taichi entreated her.

And as he spoke, tears steadily filled her eyes... until at last they spilled down her cheek.

"This can't be happening... I'm... I'm sorry... I'm so sorry... Will you at least... hear me out...?" she choked, and for a moment, she looked like she'd regressed to a little girl.

"Of course. Please, tell us what happened," Kiriyama urged her.

The other girl fell to her knees and hunched over into a little ball. "I... I never meant for it to happen. Any of it!"

From there, she poured her heart out to them, revealing everything she had been forced to keep locked away inside.

It all started when she was having a phone call while riding on the train. Aoki's father scolded her for her poor train etiquette and told her to hang up, but she ignored him and kept talking. Then he warned her again, more firmly this time, and in the process, he lightly grabbed her arm to get her attention. That was the last straw, and she shouted "Help! He's touching my body!"

"Then the train attendant came... and they radioed for a 'railroad cop' or whatever... and then it turned into this huge thing... and at that point, I couldn't take it back... and then the cop started making assumptions out of nowhere, like, 'This is where he touched you, right?' "

With very few passengers sitting nearby, there was no one present who could claim to have witnessed their entire exchange.

"Then, when I got home... I saw articles online about a 'false molestation accusation'... and they were saying the guy was going to get fired from his job... and I felt so bad for what I did... but it'd turned into this huge scandal, and I didn't know what to do—I wanted to tell them all it was my fault, but I *couldn't!* "

As her emotions flared up, her explanation veered off course at times, but was otherwise fairly coherent. It didn't make what she'd done any less awful,

but still, she was by no means the villain of this story.

Because the police were involved, they would have to go down to the station and explain everything. She understood this full well. But would she be charged with a crime for her actions? No one knew for sure.

“So... what do you want to do about this?” Taichi asked, once she’d calmed down.

“After talking to you guys, I’ve made up my mind. I want to go to the police and confess. And I’ll apologize to the man I accused... just like I’ve been meaning to.”

He knew she was telling the truth. After all, the Dream Vision had showed him just how badly she yearned to repent.

In the end, his and Kiriyama’s actions amounted to little more than a tiny push in the right direction. Of course, they couldn’t make her do the hard part on her own... so instead they asked Fujishima Maiko to get in touch with her father, who held a position of authority at the local police station. They were confident she could pull some strings for them.

Once they explained the situation, Fujishima contacted her father immediately. And when school let out for the day, a police officer was waiting outside the school gates to take the girl down to the station.

“I’ve asked him to make sure they’re as lenient as possible. After all, he *did* physically grab her, so I don’t think she’ll be charged with anything... assuming a compromise can be reached, of course,” Fujishima explained to Taichi and Kiriyama after the police car drove away.

“Gotcha. Thanks, we really owe you.”

“Oh, that’s alright. I must say, you two sure stumbled into quite the scandal! But you acted admirably. Thanks to you, there’s one less false accusation in the world. Plus, you’ve rescued a young woman from a lifetime of guilt.”

“W-We just got lucky, that’s all,” Kiriyama replied modestly, if a bit too quickly.

“Oh really? Is that right, Yaegashi-kun? Just pure luck?”

“Y-Yeah, of course.”

“Right...”

But the look in her eyes suggested she didn’t quite agree.

□■□■□

Although they tried to keep a low profile about it, like it or not, rumors had a way of spreading. And by the following Monday, a sizeable chunk of the student body knew all about the third-year girl and the false sexual assault accusation that Taichi and Kiriyama helped uncover.

“You’re a hero, Yui!” Kurihara Yukina exclaimed, ruffling Kiriyama’s hair.

“Stop, Yukina! I’m really not... Really.”

“There’s no need to feel bad for her, Yui-chan,” Setouchi Kaoru chimed in. “If you do something wrong, you have to face the consequences. That’s all it is.”

This made Taichi feel a bit better. He really didn’t want to make a big spectacle of the incident, but there was no stopping the rumor mill. Fortunately, no one had mentioned any of the smaller details, like the fact that the accusation victim was Aoki’s father. Otherwise Inaba and the others would find out.

...Oh, who am I kidding? This is INABA we’re talking about. Do we really think she’s NOT going to find out?

“Taichi. Yui.”

His heart skipped a beat at the impossibly perfect timing. Sure enough, Inaba had turned up in Classroom 2-B.

But she was... quiet. Unusually quiet. And that made it hard to gauge her current mood.

“I need to have a little talk with you guys... Meet me at lunch.”

Her smile was frightening.

“You used the power of the Dream Vision to solve the crisis with Aoki’s father, didn’t you?”

No intro, no lead-up—straight to the point.

Inaba was *pissed* . But instead of exploding all over them, she kept her rage boiling just beneath the surface. It was honestly terrifying.

"...Yeah, we did." *No point in trying to hide it at this stage* , Taichi thought.

"I want details."

The five CRC second-years were seated around the table in Rec Hall Room 401. Taichi could feel Kiriyama looking at him anxiously, so he took it upon himself to handle the majority of the explanation.

"—and then the police took her down to the station, and that was the end of it," he finished.

Inaba scoffed. "For *you* , maybe."

"...What's that supposed to mean?" he asked, rankled and slightly uncomfortable.

"I'm saying you people have *no idea* how this will play out. For you, it's over now—but for the people actually involved, this will stay with them for *the rest of their lives* . Tell them, Aoki."

All eyes turned to Aoki, whose expression was more grim and severe than they'd ever seen him.

"Well, my dad was cleared of all suspicion, and he won't be facing any punishment. I don't know what'll happen to the girl, but he's not planning to press charges, at the very least. And as for his job... he most likely won't be fired after all."

At this, Kiriyama's stony expression softened slightly. Taichi was relieved to hear it, too. So why did Aoki look so upset?

Meanwhile, Nagase observed them quietly.

"Now it's looking like someone else will get laid off in his place. The company's restructuring, so they were gonna get rid of someone one way or another."

Kiriyama's face froze. Likewise, Taichi felt his smile grow stiff.

"*Now* do you people understand?" Inaba asked slowly, grinding their noses

into the pavement, letting it really sink in. “Your actions have ruined someone’s life—their whole *family’s* lives.”

“But that’s—!” Taichi shouted, and a moment later he was startled by the severity of his reaction. He never would’ve imagined himself the yelling type. “If we hadn’t done what we did, Aoki’s dad would’ve been fired for a crime he never committed, and then Aoki—”

“*THAT’S NOT THE FUCKING POINT!* ” Inaba roared, slamming the table.

His body froze up as though he were rooted to the spot.

“You think it’s okay to SCREW PEOPLE OVER as long as it means you get to HELP YOUR FRIENDS?! Fuck that! How DARE you ignore my warning and sneak around behind my back!”

“W-Wait, Inaba,” Kiriyama choked, her voice watery. “I admit, like, we shouldn’t have gone behind your back, and for that I’m sorry. But please understand... we only did it because... because there was an unjust accusation on the line! We weren’t trying to screw anyone over!”

“*Unjust?* Justice has NOTHING to do with this! Who are you to say what’s right or wrong, huh?!”

Just like that, Kiriyama’s counterpoint was summarily crushed. Taichi couldn’t bear to sit by and watch another moment longer.

“It... It was a CRIME! I think *the law* is a pretty good judge of what’s right or wrong, thank you!”

“Laws only apply to people who operate within the scope of the real world!”

“Then—”

“But right now we’re *outside the bounds of reality* , remember?! I *know* you remember that!”

How were they meant to conduct themselves, as humans cursed with powers beyond mortal understanding?

The sound of Kiriyama’s sniffling filled the air.

“I’m *doing the right thing* ,” she declared tearfully. “I’m *helping people* . And

this time, I helped Aoki's dad... and I helped Aoki." As she named him, she glanced in his direction, and even an outside observer could tell she was begging him to see things her way.

Here sat the girl he loved, beseeching him. He grimaced—

"...I never asked for your help, okay?!"

—and cut her down.

She looked back in shock, her complexion ashen.

"If you're gonna do that, then you might as well go stick your neck into everyone else's problems while you're at it. You can't *only* help me. It's not fair!"

"Wh... Who CARES if it's not fair?!" The blood rushed back into Kiriyama's face. "We turned a bad thing into a good thing, so where's the problem?! You're always helping me, remember?! And now I finally got a chance to return the favor! Now we can... we can settle that unanswered question and everything! And you want to tell me what I did was *wrong?!*"

"So you're saying you only helped me because I was nice to you a few times?! You're not obligated to pay me back! If you're only doing it out of pity, or because you feel like you have to, then just... just *don't!*" Trembling, Aoki bit his lip.

Why? Why was Aoki being so stubborn? No... Maybe this was a line Aoki simply couldn't cross, the same way Taichi and Kiriyama couldn't sacrifice their ideals to please Inaba.

"Why...?! You should be happy... *Why aren't you happy...?!*" Kiriyama hung her head and rubbed her damp eyes.

"Some things are just wrong," said Inaba, her voice calmer now. "And you have to accept that, no matter how illogical or unfair or cruel it seems."

"What, so we should just let people commit crimes? Let people suffer?" asked Taichi. Was this his martyr-itis flaring up again? No. This was the morally right response. "I agree that it's wrong to use the power purely for our own benefit or just because we want to. But it makes no sense to blindly agree *never* to use

it when there are people out there that need help—”

“What are you, some kind of hero?” Inaba scoffed disdainfully. “The story always has to start with you, doesn’t it?”

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

“You’re like the braindead protagonist in an action-adventure story. Do you see what I’m getting at? Everyone could live their lives in peace if they left well enough alone, but *no* , someone’s gotta go kick the goddamn hornet’s nest in the name of *fighting corruption* . And you’re that idiot.”

He was just helping people. Were his actions really inviting that sort of unnecessary conflict?

“Normally your hero complex wouldn’t really be an issue, but right now, in these circumstances, it’s a fatal flaw... because it means you don’t have the capacity to do nothing.”

Her scathing critique made the blood rush to his head. Raw emotion coursed through his body.

“Yeah, you’re right—I *can’t* just do nothing. But so what? I was born that way, and I can’t change it! According to you, anyway! Remember?”

Inaba had once called him a “goddamn martyr” and said there was no fixing it—in which case, he knew exactly what he needed to do.

“I’m not going to stop. I’m going to do what I think is right... and that means using the Dream Vision to help people.”

It was his only option. And as he rose to the challenge... Kiriyama joined in.

“I’m not stopping, either. I’m going to prove to you all that I was right.”

Aoki opened his mouth to speak... then thought better of it and ran a hand through his hair. Nagase remained perfectly still and silent, watching the proceedings.

Taichi and Kiriyama sat side by side, facing Inaba and Aoki, also side by side. The four of them all glared at each other.

Why? Why are we mad? Why are we fighting? They hadn’t invaded anyone’s

personal privacy. No one was being forced to act on their emotions. Their pasts weren't shackling them down. Their inner thoughts weren't on display. There was no impostor running amok. This phenomenon wasn't directly causing problems for any one of them... but because of that, they all had the emotional composure necessary to split apart.

There was a fork in the road, and now it was up to them to follow their hearts.

Inaba narrowed her eyes... then turned back and glared at Kiriyama and Taichi.

"I'm only going to say this one more time. No matter your intentions, if you use supernatural powers to influence the natural world, then you're no better than «Heartseed». You're doing things that can never be undone, and that's wrong. Period."

She had always been there for Taichi.

"So no, I won't take action, no matter what Vision I see. And if you're going to try to act on them, then I'll do everything in my power to stop you."

But now she was criticizing them.

"Because to me, that's the right thing to do. *That* is what justice looks like."

For the first time, Inaba was an enemy blocking their path.

+++

"Rrrrrgh! Why'd it have to be like this?!" Inaba Himeko growled to herself as she headed home alone. She stopped to kick a utility pole in a pathetic display of frustration.

I'm at war with Yui and Taichi. At war. With Taichi. With Taichi. With Taichi. With Taichi!

"Not like I don't get it... He's a good person... They both are... Of course I understand why they'd want to help people..."

But they were misguided, and only Inaba could see it—so she needed to stop them. If she compromised on her beliefs, it would mean a one-way ticket down a slippery slope. Then they would never be able to fully "go back" to the normal

world.

And I'll never be able to go back to—

This was the last line of defense, and she was willing to sacrifice anything to protect it.

This was war.

Chapter 5: World's Greatest Detective

The next day, all seven members of the Cultural Research Club gathered in the clubroom.

Taichi and Kiriyama believed it was right to use their power, as long as they were doing something good; Inaba and Aoki believed it was *wrong* to use their power, no matter the circumstance. In the aftermath following their disagreement, no one had turned up at the clubroom after school that day—so, because each "faction" was segregated from each other by class, they effectively hadn't seen each other since lunchtime yesterday. It was only thanks to Nagase, their faithful mediator, that they were convinced to hang out and continue club activities with each other.

And so the CRC was split into two, with Nagase acting as a neutral third party—probably intentionally.

"...Is it just me, or is it really tense in here?" asked Uwa Chihiro.

"Yeah... Not to mention, they canceled club activities out of nowhere yesterday..." Enjouji Shino mused.

"Oh, right. We kinda forgot to explain things to the little first-years, didn't we?"

As Nagase got the younger members caught up on the particulars, the other four awkwardly turned back to their independent activities. Then, once Nagase was done—

"So, first-years, whose side are you on?" Inaba asked loudly.

Taichi's heart nearly stopped. *We're going to have this conversation AGAIN?*

Granted, Inaba was facing Chihiro and Enjouji, but he could still feel the hostility she was radiating in his (and Kiriyama's) direction.

"Wh... What do you mean, whose side...?" Enjouji asked timidly, glancing in every direction but Inaba's.

In contrast with her trepidation, Chihiro was perfectly composed. "Is there any particular reason we have to choose?"

“Nope. We may have filled you in on the details, but we’re not going to drag you into this. I’m just interested in your honest opinion, that’s all.”

Meanwhile, Kiriyama was trying her best (but still failing) to act nonchalant.

“Alright then...” Chihiro took a deep breath and exhaled. “In that case, I would say the correct choice is to do nothing. ‘Don’t start none, won’t be none,’ as the saying goes. Now, that’s not to say I believe in ‘peace at any price’ or anything... but I’ve already seen how these things can spiral out of control.” He grimaced.

At this, Inaba smirked. “Yeah, you would know, alright.”

“Wh... Come on, Chihiro-kun! We’re *helping* people,” Kiriyama muttered faintly.

“Shut it, Yui. He’s allowed to have his own opinion,” Inaba cut in sharply.

“Now, now, Inaban. No picking fights,” Nagase scolded—not too harshly, not too softly—as she slid between them to act as a buffer.

“Nice timing,” Inaba snarked, shaking her head with a smile.

“Keheheh! Not to brag, but I’m pretty much a pro at this.”

Unfortunately, it soon became apparent that Inaba wasn’t going to drop the subject. “What about you, Shino?”

“Oh, right! Um... I... I...” As everyone turned their attention on her, Shino shrank back in her seat.

“Relax. You don’t gotta tell us,” Aoki began.

But then, Enjouji drew herself up to her fullest height and declared, “I... I think... if you can make something good happen... then you should! Or... at least, it would be nice if you did... or... something...” Her words faltered as Inaba fixed her with a fierce glare.

“So you think it’s okay to use the power as long as you’re doing something good, yeah?” Taichi asked, helping her along.

“R-Right! It’s hard to explain eloquently, but... if someone was drowning, and you didn’t try to save them, I think that’s messed up. No matter what power you have, even if it’s supernatural, you should still use it to help that person!”

“But they’re *not* drowning. They’re just wishing to themselves,” Inaba corrected her.

“No, they’re not *literally drowning* , but it’s the same idea,” Taichi argued.

But Inaba ignored him. “Think about it, Shino. Are we all supposed to sit around and wait for someone else to come along and make our dreams come true? No! You’ve gotta make them happen by yourself! Right?”

“R-Right...”

“Lots of people get help from their friends to make their dreams come true,” Kiriyama cut in.

“And that’s fine, if the person with the dream is actively *asking* for help. But you’re getting involved without their consent, and that’s different.”

“Wh... but... I mean... that’s... uhhh...” Enjouji flailed.

“What’s your problem, Inaba? Are you trying to, like, *out-logic* Shino-chan until she tells you you’re right?” Kiriyama snapped.

“I’m just pointing out the loopholes in your flimsy argument. What’s wrong with that?”

Taichi wasn’t enjoying this underhanded tactic.

“Think about it. You people can’t keep going unless you have someone around to validate your actions, right?”

“S-Sure we can! I can validate myself just fine! Because I’m right!”

“Same here,” Taichi agreed. After all, he’d made this choice of his own free will. “I think *you’re* the one who needs validation here, not us.”

“Wh... How dare you...?!” Inaba’s glare faltered, and for a moment, Taichi hesitated.

“Guys! No more bickering! Constructive criticism only! How many times are you gonna make me mediate this? I might as well get a full-time job as a referee at this point!” Nagase sighed.

Out of respect for her, Taichi decided to drop it... but something felt off. Then it hit him.

Normally, in times like these, Aoki was always the one to jump in with a joke to lighten the mood... but today he was silent.

After yesterday, the club just wasn't the same.

□■□■□

Following their declaration to Inaba and the others, Taichi and Kiriyama began to proactively take action on more Visions than ever before—solving people's problems, helping them achieve their goals, and more—just so long as they were within the realm of plausibility, of course.

But as a result—or perhaps simply because they actively *wished* to have as many Visions as possible—the number of Visions they had per day skyrocketed from a handful to over a dozen. Not including the hours they spent asleep, and were thus unable to have Visions at all, it climbed to as much as one per hour. (Granted, this number had been on the rise ever since the start of the phenomenon, but when they asked Nagase, she said she was only seeing about seven or eight per day.)

That said, the extra Visions gave them more things to add to the to-do list, so in a sense, perhaps it was a good thing. Of course, far-fetched ambitions were still out of the question, but they found ways to make the smaller ones happen. A lot of them only required a small amount of help from them, or else a bit more effort on the Dreamer's part. Thus, they only needed to give slight encouragement (or pull tiny strings) to see success, and that was that.

But out of all those small ambitions, the job they found themselves stuck with most frequently was that of playing Cupid. They'd seen all kinds of Dreams, from ambitions to take part in the Olympics to idle wishing that math class would hurry up and end already—but more often than not, their Visions involved romance.

Granted, as teenagers, they were all *bound* to have a crush on someone. And at school, they were *bound* to encounter said crush at least once or twice a day... at which point they were *bound* to start thinking about them. This meant that nearly the entire student body was thinking about their crushes at least once a day—and this resulted in Visions for Taichi and everyone else.

But for Taichi and Kiriyama specifically, more Visions meant more work to be

done. Whenever they discovered a mutual crush, they would encourage both parties to take action. (And figuring out which crushes were mutual was by no means hard; once they discovered someone's secret feelings, they inevitably started paying more attention to the recipient of said feelings, which led them to figure out if it was reciprocated pretty quickly.)

Unfortunately, to an outside observer, this started to look like—

"Hey, doesn't it kinda seem like anyone who talks to Yaegashi-kun and Yui-chan about their crush has, like, a 100% success rate when they confess?! I mean, they're all dating now! Isn't that crazy?! They're the new Love Gurus," according to one Nakayama Mariko.

And once that rumor spread, it took less than a week before people started approaching Taichi and Kiriyama directly—mostly Taichi, for whatever reason.

To give a recent example, at one point a girl from another class came to him and said, "Yaegashi-kun, I really like Taira. He's in your class, right? Do I have a chance with him?"

"Give me some time and I'll find out," he told her.

From there, he focused his energy hoping that he'd have a Vision about who Taira had a crush on. Sure enough, just two days later—

[There's a guy. It's Taira. He's walking home from school. Next to him is a girl. It's the girl Taichi spoke to. They walk down the street, hand in hand.]

With that confirmation, Taichi told the girl, "Yeah, I think you have a shot."

Then, another two days later—

"Thank you so much, Yaegashi-kun! I asked him out, and he said yes! Apparently he had feelings for me, too!"

"Congratulations. That's great news."

"So how did you know I had a shot with him, anyways?"

"Oh, uh, well... I heard some stuff from a friend of mine, that's all."

"Hmmm... You sound almost like a detective... Well, anyway, thanks again! Without your help, I would've been too scared to risk messing up our

friendship. You gave me the courage I needed!”

And so another freshly minted couple was born.

September turned to October. After school, one of Taichi’s male classmates approached him to ask for advice.

“And... you’re sure she’s into me?”

“Yeah. Just be brave and put yourself out there,” Taichi reassured him.

“...Okay. Thanks a ton, Yaegashi! Hearing you say that makes me feel like I might actually have a chance. You really are an Apostle of Love, you know that?”

“Break a leg out there.” And with that, Taichi watched him go. He’d only given the green light based on (Vision-based) intel from Kiriyama that the girl in question liked him back.

He got up from his desk—

“Seems like you’re on a roll, Yaegashi-kun.”

The voice was so crisp, it seemed to chill the air itself. Then the last group of three left the classroom, and Taichi was left standing alone with one other person: Fujishima Maiko.

She drew his attention like a magnet, and as he gazed at her, the rest of the world seemed to fade away in comparison... *Why do I feel so uneasy all of a sudden?*

“You’ve been helping people with a lot of problems—romantic problems especially. It’s quite impressive.”

“Wait... You were there?”

“...Are you implying I’m some kind of wallflower?”

“Well, you don’t really stand out as much these days...”

“Nnngh... I’m trying my best, okay?!” She pushed her glasses up to rub her damp eyes.

“Wh... C’mon, don’t cry! I’m just messing with you. Trust me, there’s no one else quite like you.” *If anything, I thought you’d clap back with a spicy retort or*

something—

[There's a girl. It's Fujishima. She stands with her hand on her hips, laughing triumphantly. Before her, someone's lying on the floor—prostrating themselves. It's Yaegashi Taichi. He says, "You beat me fair and square, oh great and mighty Fujishima! You were the real Apostle of Love all along!" to which Fujishima replies, "But of course! That title belongs to me and me alone!" She cackles madly.]

...Not sure what to say to that one, but, uh... I'm glad to see you've bounced back from your depression.

"Oh, and don't worry about your Apostle title. I'm sure they'll all turn back to you eventually."

"Wha...?! You're pretty sharp. I can't believe you figured out what bothered me so much about that conversation just now..."

Why had he felt so intimidated earlier? Fujishima had long since been reduced to little more than comic relief. Evidently, he'd gotten worried over nothing—

"...Psych. Is that the sort of sniveling tripe you were expecting me to say, you poor fool?"

In a blink, her tone had changed completely; now she glared at him from behind her lenses. He froze, speechless—but she wasn't about to wait for him to catch up.

"Tell me, Yaegashi-kun. Can you read minds?" Her eyes bored into his. This time, she wasn't joking.

"Wh... Where did *that* come from...?"

"This must be a recent development. Did you acquire some sort of special power?"

Fujishima Maiko had him pegged.

Sirens blared as «Heartseed»'s warning replayed in his mind:

—Oh, and... try not to let anyone else find out about your power... I'd hate for this to get complicated.

What had it meant by “complicated”? And what exactly was “this” referring to? What would it be forced to do? Would Fujishima be affected? Would Taichi himself be punished for blowing their cover?

Part of him was convinced it would all work out in the end, but with «Heartseed», there were no guarantees. After all, this was supposed to be the “last” time... which meant it wouldn’t be coming back. And once it was done with them, it had no further incentive to ensure their safety.

Their lives were in the palm of «Heartseed»’s hand.

“Yaegashi-kun? Are you listening?”

He was walking on thin ice—but that was okay. He didn’t mind if he fell through the cracks as long as Fujishima was spared.

“...Yeah, I’m listening. Sorry, I was just... blown away by the sheer insanity of what you just said.”

“Don’t pretend it’s not the truth.”

“It’s not, though.”

“Hmmm... It seems you’ll be a tough nut to crack,” she mused, folding her arms in contemplation. Clearly, she didn’t have definitive proof... yet.

“Why is *that* the conclusion you’ve jumped to, anyway?”

“You’re just too sharp, Yaegashi-kun. Normally you’re completely oblivious! But most of all, it’s obvious from the way you’re advising these people.”

“What’s wrong with the way I’m advising people?”

He was under the impression he and Kiriyama had been rather conservative in their actions thus far, but... had he made some sort of fatal mistake?

“The amount of advice you’re giving is downright excessive, for one thing, but more than that... it’s the fact that *you’re* the one giving it in the first place.”

“What’s wrong with me giving advice?”

“You’re just not the sort of person who can guide people. I know that for a fact.”

“What?”

“You couldn’t give someone good advice if you tried. Not in a million years.”

“Hold on a minute. ‘Not in a million years’? Come on!” It felt like she was calling him stupid, and it irked him.

“Oh, sorry. Maybe that came across the wrong way. I’ll rephrase: *you lack agency* . You’re like the protagonist in a retro RPG.”

Protagonist . Inaba had described him that way recently, too. Was this more than mere coincidence?

“Tremendous power dwells within you. You have the courage to make important decisions. With these traits, you can save people... like a superhero.”

“Gosh, is it my birthday or what?” Taichi snarked.

“I’m not just buttering you up; I’m serious about this. They’re great traits to have.”

“Then—”

“You’re just too passive.”

...Passive?

“You don’t take action of your own accord. You just react to the existing problems you see in front of you,” she explained matter-of-factly, and Taichi tried to ignore the fact that she was steadily driving him into a corner. “Basically, you can handle whatever the plot throws at you, but you can’t make things happen of your own accord. You’re like a silent protagonist; you can only choose from the dialogue options presented to you. Pretty good analogy, am I right?”

He refused to accept it, but at the same time he couldn’t decide how best to deny it, so instead he went with an inoffensive retort: “...Feeling proud of yourself, are you?”

“Without any sort of player agency, Yaegashi-kun, you can never hope to protect someone from imminent danger, nor can you intuit their feelings.”

“Excuse me? As if you’re—”

In any position to talk . But Taichi fell silent before he could finish the

sentence. There stood Fujishima, hands on her hips, and in that moment, she looked as though she could take on the entire world. She was stronger than he was, at any rate. But what was it about her that made him feel that way? It wasn't her size or stature... Was it her determination? Her resolve? Her agency?

What IS "agency," anyway?

"To be clear, I'm not trying to criticize you. We're both still kids—we've got time to grow. That said, we're going to need to submit our career planning surveys soon, so you should try to find at least *some* agency by then, ideally."

"Oh, you're *not* trying to criticize me? Could've fooled me! Why are you jumping down my throat, then?" he snapped.

"Alright, I'll just cut to the chase," Fujishima replied. "The way you've been helping people lately? Yaegashi Taichi is *incapable* of that. One could argue that maybe you've matured as a person, but even then, this is simply too much, too soon. Not only that, but your track record is perfect—*too* perfect. That's what makes me think you must've gained some sort of superpower."

"Okay, I can accept the first part... but how did you arrive at *superpowers* , of all things?" he asked again.

She scowled. "Trust me, I know how crazy it sounds, but... it's just *abnormal* . Your entire club has been acting strangely ever since... right about this time last year, actually..." She fixed him with a challenging stare.

Taichi swallowed. He had no reply to this.

"In isolation, they were tiny oddities, and I was inclined to let them go. But then they kept piling up and piling up... until eventually I grew convinced that something was wrong. And the more I started to pay attention, the more I began to suspect that something serious had happened."

Something serious *did* happen. Six times, in fact. But it only ever affected the members of the CRC, and Taichi had been under the impression that they'd kept a lid on it... but like it or not, their tight-knit community was still obligated to interact with the outside world... Even if they never exposed themselves directly, perhaps it was only a matter of time before they were found out...

"And if my hypothesis is correct, Yaegashi-kun, you're at the center of it all."

Okay, maybe she wasn't one hundred percent on the money, but still... it was enough to make him sweat.

"What are you people doing in that club of yours?"

She took a step forward. He took a step back. And when he went to take a second, he bumped into his desk. He had nowhere to run.

"What are you up to?"

She leaned in until her lips were nearly touching his. Behind her perfectly composed expression, he could feel her unwavering tenacity. And this was the moment he realized he had messed up.

He'd known she possessed a keen sense of intuition—that she was a veritable fountain of untapped potential. But over the past year, she'd only ever devoted her energy to "love" or whatever, so he'd assumed that was all she cared about.

He hadn't given proper consideration to the people in his life who had witnessed the worst of the phenomena... and in his carelessness, he had brought this situation upon himself.

"...Not that I expect you to answer, of course." She took a step back. "But the battle has only just begun, Yaegashi-kun. I know there's more to this than you're letting on. And I *will* uncover your secret, I promise you that."

Her full attention was now directed squarely at him—at the CRC and its secrets. And deep down, on a visceral level, he could feel the severity of his mistake.

"As of this moment, you can consider me Master Detective Fujishima Maiko," she declared, her finger pointed in his direction.

Somehow her pose was both painfully cheesy and utterly badass.

□■□■□

They'd faced off with Inaba, and now Fujishima had declared war against them, but despite that—no, perhaps in part *because* of it—Taichi committed to using the Dream Vision that very day. After all, if he stopped now, it would feel as though he was proving them right. Proving that he did *not* , in fact, have any agency.

If he truly believed in this course of action, then he needed to see it through.

The next day, he told Kiriyama what had happened with Fujishima. Naturally, she found this news alarming. Fortunately, for whatever reason, Fujishima only suspected Taichi, not her; thus, they decided that he would serve as the public face of their operation.

Truth be told, he knew they should probably warn the others that Fujishima was sniffing around, but somehow he couldn't bring himself to do it. After all, he and Kiriyama were the only two committed to using their power, so in one sense it was *their* problem to solve. No longer were the five of them a united front.

A day passed. Then two. Then three. Slowly but surely, the rumors about Taichi and his flawless advice continued to spread. Over this time period, it became apparent that Inaba and Fujishima were taking action to combat them, because every now and then he'd get comments like "You know, Inaba-san told me not to ask you..." or "Fujishima-san demanded to know what we talked about. What's up with that?"

Regardless, neither of them ever tried to interfere with him directly. And so a few more days passed.

When he arrived at the clubroom, Nagase stormed right up to him. "Taichi, have you been talking to Inaban lately?"

"...Sure I have. You've seen me."

Despite the hostility between them, he was still mature enough to attend club activities. He wasn't going to treat her like a monster just because of this one disagreement.

"You know what I mean! Have you been spending time together as a couple?"

"Well..." Short answer: no. He'd stopped interacting with her outside of the clubroom—it was just too awkward.

"I knew it! Look, today we've got a lot of absent folks for one reason or another, so it's just gonna be the three of us anyways."

Indeed, absences had increased among them lately, though not dramatically.

“So I’m thinking—”

Just then, the door opened and Inaba walked in. “Hey.”

“—you guys should go on a date! That’s an order from your club president!”

“Hmm? What’s going on? Wait... Iori?!”

“Ouch! Don’t push me, Nagase! Whoa!”

And so Nagase steered them both bodily from the room.

“What the...? What’s her problem?” Inaba growled, baffled.

“Uhhh... Apparently almost everyone’s going to be absent today, so she wants us to go hang out by ourselves somewhere,” Taichi explained dutifully.

“Wh... Give me a break! We may be dating, but we’re still technically at war. And while I acknowledge that we haven’t cut off all contact, I refuse to fraternize with the enemy!”

“Come on, don’t be like that.”

She was clearly holding him at arm’s length, and yet she seemed... timid, somehow... No, he had it backwards. She was speaking harshly on purpose to make it seem like she was more distant than she really was.

“Either way, you’re still my girlfriend. Now let’s go grab some coffee.”

Without waiting for her response, he walked off... and after a pause, she reluctantly followed after him.

“...Don’t break out the G-word... That’s cheating...” she mumbled somewhere behind him.

See? I can intuit people’s feelings just fine, Taichi thought.

—That’s not what I’m talking about, the Fujishima in his mind replied.

At their usual cafe, Taichi ordered tea and a slice of cheesecake, while Inaba ordered coffee and chocolate cake. They discussed mostly harmless topics, like things that happened in class, or who won the soccer game the other day, or which movies were coming to theaters soon. And by the time they finished their dessert, they had both run out of things to say. Normally, the silence didn’t bother him, but today Taichi felt restless.

Stalling for time, they sipped at their drinks; Inaba was the first to finish hers. With a reluctant sigh, she set her mug down.

“Are you still doing that crap?”

It wasn’t like her to avoid his gaze.

“Yeah.”

“And you have no intention of stopping?”

“...Well, people are approaching me directly now, so I can’t really say no.”

For the briefest of moments, her lips curled in a grimace.

“This phenomenon really doesn’t play by the rules, does it? If only there was a clear enemy to fight or crisis to solve, it would be so much easier.”

They were perfectly civil. The air between them was calm. And yet Taichi remained uneasy.

“...Truth be told, I’d like to do everything in my power to stop you. By force, if necessary.”

“But you can’t?” he asked.

She narrowed her eyes at him; perhaps she interpreted this as a challenge.

“I *could* actually stop you if I really wanted to. I could always lock you up somewhere. Or I could do something to ruin your credibility to the point that no one would ever listen to you again,” she explained nonchalantly—all the more frightening because she was completely serious. “But naturally, I can’t go that far. If I cross that line, there’s no going back. And that means «Heartseed» wins.” Evidently she was willing to go to great lengths... just as long as they could bounce back from it. But after a moment of thought, she shook her head. “No... It’s just not a line I’m willing to cross, personally. No matter how deeply I disagree with your methods, I can’t lower myself to that level.” She went to take another sip of coffee before realizing the mug was already empty. Annoyed, she set it back down and pushed it away. “So, how does it make you feel, knowing I’m completely against you?”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, come on. Surely you must feel *some* sort of way about it. Doesn’t it bother you?”

“Well, I mean... this goes without saying, but... I don’t enjoy fighting with you. That said... this is just something I have to do,” he declared firmly.

“...That’s it...?” Her eyes widened slightly, as if to suggest she could scarcely believe it.

Was there something wrong with what he said? Surely not.

“...I see. So that’s how you feel.” She exhaled angrily. “Okay, I’m just going to ask,” she continued in a shaky voice, and he could tell she was about to say something important. “Who is it that you live to serve?”

That... was not the question he was expecting. “Who do I... live to serve...?”

He couldn’t speak. It was just *really* unexpected, that’s all. That’s why he didn’t have an answer right away. He searched within himself. Nothing came to mind.

“Well, obviously... my life’s purpose is to serve everyone.” Yes, that was the obvious answer. Obviously he would feel that way.

“Oh, fuck off,” Inaba growled, her voice crawling over his skin. He could feel her fury—quiet, but ever-present—pointed in his direction. “Is your martyr-itis flaring up again or something?”

“No! I’m not just trying to sacrifice myself. I know that’s selfish. This time I’m taking everyone’s needs into consideration—”

“Stop. Just... stop talking,” Inaba interrupted. She buried her face in her hands. “These days I’m really starting to understand who you are... as a person, I mean.” Her voice was faint, almost like she was scared... Scared of what? He didn’t know.

What he did know was that he was scared, too. Scared because it felt like she could see right through him.

He could feel her anxiety in the air, and he wanted to soothe it... but at the same time, he was already so busy... *God, I’m so confused...*

“Just let me say one last thing.”

She lowered her hands back to the table, and as she gazed directly into his eyes, he could feel a massive gulf between them.

“Let’s say everyone on Earth exists to serve someone else. Person A serves Person B who serves Person C, and so on. In the end, it all goes around in a big circle. And no one can ever have goals of their own, because everyone believes they’re only meant to serve others.”

Surely helping others—serving others—was a virtue. And yet Inaba disagreed completely.

“You know where that kind of world is headed? Decline. The extinction of humanity.”

Taichi recoiled. Never could he accept such an idea... and yet, at the same time, he could see the logic—

[There’s a girl with chin-length hair and piercings in her ears. It’s Setouchi Kaoru. In front of her is a tall bookshelf. Her head is tilted up, and her gaze is fixed on one book in particular... but she can’t reach it. Then, suddenly, a step stool appears before her. Relieved, she steps onto it.]

“—Where are you going, Taichi?”

“Huh...? Oh... uhh...” He realized he’d suddenly risen to his feet. Sheepishly, he sank back down into his chair.

There was a major book retailer infamous for their extremely tall shelves just next door to this very cafe. Was Setouchi over there right this moment? That proximity would explain why Taichi saw her Dream...

“Taichi!”

Snapping back to reality, he turned his gaze back to Inaba.

“Damn it, are you listening to me? You zoned out for a minute there... Wait. Did you have a Vision?”

His heart skipped a beat.

“...So you were about to go help them. Hah... You piece of shit.” She scowled at him contemptuously as she disparaged him.

How long had it been since she last treated him this way? Not since they started dating, that was for sure.

“Hey, Taichi?”

Inaba grabbed the bill off the table and started packing up to go.

“Do you think people with drastically different worldviews can pursue a romantic relationship?”

Her gaze was focused not at him, but at her hands.

“Have you even given any thought to... your future with me?”

Her tone was perfectly composed. A brief ripple of silence passed between them, and Taichi couldn’t help but wonder if that tiny ripple was heralding a tsunami wave.

This was his first serious relationship, so he’d never experienced a breakup before... and yet somehow he could feel one looming on the horizon.

She rose to her feet, and he followed suit.

“Listen, Taichi... I really love you,” she told him dispassionately, without batting a lash. To her, she was simply stating a fact.

This caught him off-guard, and he froze.

“But... do you actually love me back?”

For a moment, he hesitated.

And that hesitation was, itself, an answer. The wrong answer.

In a blink, all the color drained from Inaba’s face as her eyes filled with despair.

“N-No, Inaba, it’s not what you think! Don’t jump to conclusions, I definitely—whoa!”

Without looking up at him, she thrust her fist out—so fast, it resembled a punch. He extended his hand to meet it, and she dropped some money into his palm.

Then she lowered her head until her forehead was pressed against his chest.

Her hair smelled like the last lingering remnants of summer.

She was right here, reaching out to him—an oasis in the desert. One blink and she might disappear. But when he moved to touch her, she pulled away. He started to panic. He knew he needed to say something, but he couldn't think of the right words.

"...You know what? I'll cover the tab. I'm the one who wanted to come here, after all," he said at last, donning a bright smile that didn't feel genuine.

But Inaba simply shook her head. "No thanks. I don't take bribes from the enemy."

She was putting up a boundary. Their peaceful moment as boyfriend and girlfriend had come to an end, and now they were on opposing sides once more.

"I love you, Taichi. And that's why I'm going to crush you with everything I've got... even if it means we have to break up."

□■□■□

At the station, Taichi said goodbye to Inaba and headed home alone.

After everything she said to him, he was so lightheaded, he could scarcely walk upright. It felt like a stiff breeze could knock him over at any moment. And during the entire train ride home, his mind was in a daze.

Then, as he passed through the turnstiles and stepped out onto the street... there stood «Heartseed».

At first, he was sure it couldn't be real. This ethereal being couldn't *possibly* fit in with ordinary society this well. And yet there it was—Gotou Ryuuzen's body, piloted by someone who was decidedly not Gotou Ryuuzen. Absently, Taichi found himself wondering if all that body invasion ever had any sort of negative impact on Gotou's life, or god forbid, his health. This was not the first time the question had crossed his mind, either.

"Feels like I've been seeing a lot more of you this time around," Taichi commented aloud after a moment.

"You think so...?" replied the lifeless human puppet. "Well... I suppose you're

right...”

At first Taichi felt nervous to be having this conversation right there on the street, but after glancing around, he realized the sidewalk and neighboring parking lot were basically deserted. «Heartseed» must have chosen this location on purpose.

“Is there a reason you wanted to show yourself to me?”

“Well... I mean... it’s hard to explain, but... I think I’m on the cusp of making... a critical discovery...”

“You are?”

For a moment he thought perhaps it was about to tell him something important, but he quickly dismissed this idea. This was «Heartseed» he was dealing with; it only spoke in riddles. Surely it would say “Oh dear... It seems I’ve said too much...” and change the subject—

“Well... Should things go poorly... Actually, no, if all goes well... if I keep watching you... it feels as though I might just... find the thing I’ve been looking for all this time... or at least a clue...”

«Heartseed» had directly answered his question. Had hell frozen over?

“Why me?”

“I don’t know... It’s just a feeling I have... Oh, but... perhaps... if I were to describe it... It feels as though you and I... are the same...?”

“...*What?* No we aren’t. What could possibly make you think that?” The thought of being likened to an inhuman entity made him ill.

“Oh... It would appear I misspoke... Well, it’s something along those lines... Anyway, what was I doing here? Oh, yes... I came to give you some encouragement... You can do it.”

Encouragement? *Why?* «Heartseed» was acting completely unlike its usual self. What did it stand to gain from doing this?

“Now then... I’d rather avoid staying any longer than I need to... Wouldn’t want anyone to catch us, so... I’d better be going.”

“Catch us? Who are you talking ab—Hey!” But it ignored him and walked off.

As usual, «Heartseed» called all the shots.

Chapter 6: Ensnared

“Yaegashi-san!”

At school, Taichi was walking down the hallway when someone called his name. He stopped and turned.

“Oh, hey, Kimura.” Kimura was a first-year who had asked him for help with girl problems a while back.

“Hey! Thanks again for all your advice. Things are going great!”

“Glad to hear it.”

“Yep! All thanks to you, senpai! I’ll be sure to refer all my friends, too. Bye!”

“Wh—wait, you don’t have to tell any—aaaand he’s gone.”

Taichi didn’t enjoy speculating what «Heartseed»’s aims might be, but at the very least, the phenomenon itself hadn’t directly damaged anything, nor could he foresee any signs of trouble. But in the event that that changed, as per the agreement between himself and Kiriyama, they would back out immediately. This was the condition under which they continued to use their power.

Two weeks had passed since they started actively helping people, and now a phenomenon of a different sort had taken over Yamaboshi High School: something that could only be described as a *love craze* . (Not the most creative name, but it was at least accurate.) Taichi and Kiriyama didn’t bring it to life themselves, exactly; following the Culture Festival, the student body had already had an opportunity to deepen their bonds with one another, so everyone was in a rather cozy mood. As such, new couples had started to spring up like daisies.

And this, as it so happened, was right around the time the two of them started playing Cupid. They’d merely added a bit of fuel to the fire.

Pretty much everyone had a crush on at least one person, but confessing to said crush was by no means easy. With the entire school in a lovey-dovey mood, however, the risk was much less intimidating. And among the second-years, Taichi and Kiriyama (mostly Taichi) now had something of a superstition

associated with them: *if they say it'll work out, you're guaranteed to succeed* . As the rumor spread, more and more people sought that coveted green light.

"Hey, Yaegashi-kun? Could you talk to my friend here and give her some advice about the guy she likes?" asked a girl from a different class—someone he probably hadn't spoken to more than twice before now. And at this point, he'd already helped dozens of people, so he couldn't exactly turn her down.

She gave him a quick rundown of the situation, and when she was finished, he nodded. "Sure thing. But just so you know, my 'advice' is pretty ordinary. I'm not a miracle worker or anything like that. And it'll take some time for me to gauge the situation. Is that cool?"

With the love craze going around, romance was on everyone's minds, which meant love-related Visions were more commonplace than ever before.

"Oh, no problem. I'd rather you took your time to figure out the best answer, you know? Oh, but don't worry—I'm not super emotionally invested in this. It's just a superstition or whatever."

"No superstition works this well! Plus, your advice makes total sense. You know, 'give it some time' and stuff like that."

The most awkward part of giving love advice was whenever he encountered an unrequited crush. Obviously he couldn't just tell them their beloved was interested in someone else. Hence, he was instead forced to give vague responses like "give it some time" or "try to work on your friendship with them first."

"Alright! Now I don't have to worry about how you'll occupy your free time during the school trip!"

"What? You mean you're gonna ditch me for your boyfriend?! What'll I do without you?!"

"Guess you'll have to get your own boyfriend, then!"

"Ugh! This is such short notice! Whatever. I'll come by to talk to you a little later, Yaegashi-kun. Thanks in advance!" And with that, the two girls walked away.

Not only were the go-getters proactive in asking about their own love lives, some of them even approached him on behalf of their more bashful friends. As a result, he was now juggling quite a few inquiries.

“Taichi!” Ahead of him, he could see Kiriyama rushing over in his direction, her expression less than enthused. “Did you get another request? Who was it?”

“Okay, so...” He told her all the details he had been given.

“Alrighty then, I’ll try to have a Vision of who this guy likes.”

“Cool, thanks.”

They must’ve had this same conversation at least a dozen times by now. Except this time, Kiriyama just stood there, looking grim.

“What’s wrong?”

“...I’m not sure we should’ve let this turn into a huge deal.” This wasn’t the first time they’d discussed this, either. “We’re basically spying on who everybody has a crush on, and like, it’s an invasion of their privacy, you know? I mean, yeah, we were gonna have to see this stuff either way, but now we’re doing it *on purpose* , and...”

As it happened, Taichi had felt this same worry himself. “It’s okay, because we’re not doing it to hurt anyone. And we’re not spreading it around or anything, so they’ll never know that we know,” he told her, though it felt more like he was just reassuring himself.

“I mean, yeah, but...”

“Just relax. We’re making people happy.”

They were bringing people together—bringing joy into their lives. What could possibly be more important than that?

“Yeah... I guess you’re right. Relationships do, like, make people happy, right?” she muttered to herself. Then she looked up suddenly. “Are you happy in *your* relationship, Taichi?”

Taichi contemplated his relationship with Inaba Himeko. Being close to her. Holding her.

“Yeah, I’m happy,” he answered honestly. After all, he could tell Kiriyama was being genuine, so he didn’t need to worry about her teasing him for it.

I wouldn’t trade my connection with Inaba for the whole world. As long as I have her, I... Well, what would I be without her? No, let’s not bother thinking about what-if scenarios. But still, the possibility of breaking up is always there—stop! Where did that come from? Don’t jinx it!

—Do you actually love me back?

“Good, good. Glad to hear it...” There was a pause, and then Kiriyama muttered: “That reminds me, I haven’t talked to Aoki much lately.”

□■□■□

Meanwhile, Inaba and Fujishima had been quiet for far too long. And when they finally challenged Taichi directly, it was from an angle he least expected.

“Basically, the gist of it is, the tennis club’s practice session ran for longer than it was supposed to, and now our club supervisor is mad at us ‘cuz we supposedly ‘broke the school rules’ or whatever, and now as punishment he wants to shorten our practice time *and* assign us extra homework! Like, I get it if you wanna cut practice, but *homework?!* It makes no sense! You know?” explained Kimura, first-year student and tennis player, gesturing his hands emphatically as he spoke.

“Okay, and?” Taichi prompted.

“Well, you know how we have that policy where each club’s hours are decided by the Student Council based on the type of club it is? Well, right now they’re trying to come up with counter-measures to solve other rulebreaking issues, like students caught partying downtown late at night and stuff like that.”

“And?”

“And so we were thinking, well, why not go to them and have an official discussion about the tennis club thing? Like a debate, you know? Us versus them.”

“Okay, and?”

“And we want you to help us out!”

“Why me? I have nothing to do with any of this.”

He always knew Kimura was an overly imposing sort. Hell, it was obvious from the way he casually approached the older students that he wasn’t cowed by social mores. But even then, Taichi never imagined the kid would saddle him with *this* .

“I know you’re a total bystander and all, but... you’re just so good at advice, you know? So I figured you could help us! Please, Yaegashi-san! I mean, Taichi-san! That’s what Uwa calls you, right?”

“Sorry about this, Taichi-san. I’ll get him out of your hair for you.”

“What the—Uwa?! Wait! Let go of my arm! I thought you were gonna back me up, dude!”

“No, I came to keep you in line.”

Evidently Kimura and the CRC’s own Uwa Chihiro were in the same class; the latter had approached Taichi alongside the former. On top of that, there was a third visitor— “Quit bickering, you small fries!” demanded Enjouji Shino, dropping another one of her catty quips.



“Excuse me? What do you mean, small fries?”

“Oh... S-Sorry... Would you prefer medium fries? You can’t be large fries, because that’s what Taichi-senpai is.”

“...Can’t argue with that, I guess.”

“Whew! Thank goodness! You know, just for that, I’ll upgrade you to small chicken nuggets!”

“Don’t wink at me! I don’t even know what that means!”

“Why are you even here, Enjouji?” asked Taichi.

“Oh, right! Well, I overheard you guys talking about going to see Taichi-senpai, so... I just thought maybe I could help somehow!”

“Right. And what’s the real reason?” asked Chihiro dubiously.

“I mean, yes, okay, part of me just wanted the opportunity to listen to his sexy voice—oh god, why did you make me admit to that?!”

These days the two CRC first-years were getting along swimmingly.

“So you guys want me to speak on your behalf, is that it? Fair warning, I’m not that great at debating people,” Taichi cautioned.

“But Taichi-senpai, you’re great at playing devil’s advocate! And as I recall, you’ve made some great arguments in the past!” Enjouji insisted.

“...Have I?” Taichi tilted his head quizzically.

“C’moooon! Listen to Enjouji-san! The tennis club doesn’t have any other senpai we can turn to!” Kimura pressed, further emboldened by Enjouji’s support.

“How come?”

“We don’t have a lot of second-years in our club, and the ones we do have don’t really care about practice... and the third-years are all retired!”

“...So that leaves me, huh? No, wait, that still doesn’t make sense. Seriously, why me?”

“Well... to be honest... one of our opponents suggested we enlist you. She

was like, ‘There will be a lot of older students on our side, so why don’t you find one to vouch for you? I strongly recommend Yaegashi-kun. He loves to play the hero, so he can’t possibly say no.’ ”

“Wow, what? ‘Play the hero’? Who the heck said—”

“I did,” whispered a voice directly against his ear.

“AAAAAGH!” Taichi nearly jumped out of his skin.

“Glad to see I got a rise out of you, Yaegashi-kun.”

“I knew it...”

Sure enough, there stood Fujishima Maiko, active member of the Student Council Outreach Committee.

“Why would you refer Kimura to *me* of all people?”

“Well, you’re the one fanning the flames of this love craze that’s going around, and as a result, more students are starting to break the school rules. Hence, I was curious to hear your opinion on the subject.”

“Wait—really?” His heart dropped into his stomach. Were his actions directly creating unintentional negative conse—

“Sorry, just kidding. I just wanted to see the look on your face. Truth be told, I just wanted the chance to face off against you.” Fujishima grinned and adjusted her glasses.

“Well...”

Hesitant, he glanced around at the first-years. Kimura was clasping his hands together in a pleading gesture. Then Taichi made eye contact with Enjouji.

“Um... You have such a wonderful way with words... so... I think it’d be really cool if... if you wouldn’t mind helping Kimura-kun.”

Next, he looked at Chihiro, who met his gaze but otherwise didn’t speak.

What could Taichi possibly have to offer the tennis club? He wasn’t sure... but he could feel how badly they needed him. And what *he* needed was to be there for them...

“Alright. I’ll help you, Kimura.” *I’m not doing anything bad. I’m helping people.*

“You’re the best, Yaegashi-san—no, Yaegashi-sama! I gotta go tell everyone the good news!” And with that, Kimura scampered off; Chihiro and Enjouji waved goodbye, then turned and hurried after him.

“And now it appears we’re officially enemies, Yaegashi-kun.”

“I don’t see you as my enemy, for the record. You seem happy about it, though.”

“Hee hee. May the best debater win.”

“Mind if I join you?” drawled a domineering voice.

Taichi whirled around to find Inaba Himeko standing there. Exactly how much of that had she overheard?

“Inaba...?”

Instantly, he knew she had absolutely no intention of coming to his aid.

“Nngh... Inaba-san... Going to cover for your boyfriend, I take it? Well, anyone’s free to join, so I can’t stop you, but... with you on their side, my chances of winning have taken a nosedive...”

“Who said anything about *their* side? I was talking about joining *you* , Fujishima.” Sure enough, she was planning to oppose him.

“What? Well then... Interesting. By all means, we’d be happy to have you.” Fujishima curled her lip in a smirk.

Inaba grinned back. “With the two of us together, we’ll be unstoppable. So, Taichi, care to make a bet with me? How about if my side wins, then you have to stop doing this shit?”

“What? No. Why would I?” *So that’s what she’s after* .

“Tch... How boring. Well, whatever. At least we get to drag you into a real fight.”

And coming from her, he knew this was no bluff. What was she planning?

“Oh yeah, and I wanted to ask you something.”

She looked at him—not warmly, not coldly, just firmly.

“Do you think it’s right to oppose the school for assigning extra homework to students who broke the rules? Or conversely, do you think extra homework is a just punishment for rule-breakers?”

Judging from her tone, she was looking for a serious answer. Taichi gave it some thought.

“To be honest... it’s hard to make a sweeping statement one way or the other. Both sides have valid viewpoints.”

“And yet you’re siding with them regardless.”

“...Huh?”

For some reason, it felt like she’d struck upon a critical misstep... and yet he couldn’t see where he’d gone wrong.

□■□■□

Restless with thoughts of the upcoming debate, that weekend found Taichi visiting a music store over by the station square.

“Oh, hey. If it isn’t Taichi-san.”

There, he bumped into Uwa Chihiro, casually wearing a form-fitting black long-sleeved shirt and a pair of jeans with a wallet chain dangling from his pocket.

“Oh! Hey, Chihiro. What are you—right, of course. Looking at CDs. Duh.”

“Yeah, more or less.”

He was holding a jewel case in his hand; Taichi didn’t recognize the band, but he could tell it had to be a pretty niche genre. Truth be told, he was never sure what to talk about whenever it was just the two of them, but he at least wanted to have some sort of conversation before they went their separate ways, so he defaulted to music.

After a while, he realized he was probably holding Chihiro up, so he decided to cut it short.

“Well, see you at school—”

“Actually, Taichi-san, um... I wanted to ask you something,” Chihiro began, his

tone restrained.

“Sure, what’s up?”

“Why did you agree to help Kimura?”

Apparently this was about the debate thing.

“Why? Well... because he asked?”

“So you’ll do anything someone asks you to?”

“...No, of course not... but...”

Somehow the air between them had turned tense and uncomfortable... and the fast-paced jazz song playing over the store speaker system wasn’t helping.

“You’re a nice guy, huh?”

It didn’t sound like a compliment, but rather a cold statement of fact, and so Taichi was left unsure how to respond. “I am...?”

“So nice, in fact, it’s almost like you don’t particularly care one way or the other.”

“I... I’m not sure I follow...?”

“Taichi-san...” Chihiro’s expression hardened. “You never get angry, do you?”

“What? I mean, I’m not the short-tempered type, but I’d say I get angry an ordinary amount.”

“Then... why didn’t you get mad at me for everything I did during the last phenomenon? I gave you amnesia, remember?”

Chihiro was, of course, referring to the events of the Phantom Projection phenomenon.

“Well... no, that’s the thing. I don’t remember what happened, so it’s kind of impossible to be mad at you for it.”

The others told him he’d lived his life with no memory of the CRC for a few days, and while the mere idea of it was enough to turn his stomach, he had no recollection of ever forgetting. From Taichi’s perspective, it felt as though the whole incident had worked itself out overnight.

“Even after everything I did to Inaba-san?”

Specifically, Chihiro had impersonated Taichi and commanded Inaba to take off her clothes. Now *that* was certainly an infuriating thought. However...

“I mean, you apologized already, so... it’s over now.”

“*Right* ,” Chihiro growled darkly, his lip curled in a half-sneer.

As for Taichi, he didn’t understand what that expression was trying to convey. Then Chihiro turned back to the store shelves.

“Well, don’t worry. Inaba-san and the others already tore me a new asshole in your place.”

They did? Nobody had told Taichi about it.

“Anyway... After everything I did to you guys, you have every right to disregard my opinion, but... frankly, Taichi-san, your behavior lately makes me sick.”

□■□■□

Just a few days after Inaba and Fujishima teamed up, Taichi discovered exactly what they meant by *dragging him into a real fight* .

“Hey, Yaegashi! I heard about the debate. Pretty cool of you,” grinned Kurihara Yukina as they sat in class.

“How did *you* find out about it?” Taichi muttered, listless.

“Dude, c’mon. *Everyone’s* talking about it. They’re like, ‘Holy crap, the Love Guru is gonna fight the school in the name of our freedom!’ ”

“Ugh... Man, it’s really not that serious...” *Seriously, guys, don’t make it sound like something out of a TV show.*

“Yeah... Even I’m not sure we should be getting so worked up about some minor debate. I mean, it’s not like it affects the whole school, right? Just the tennis club?”

She was right, of course. It was silly for everyone to be gossiping about a single Student Council debate. Unless, of course, someone was actively spreading rumors... but the only possible culprit he could think of—

“Hey Fujishima, let’s talk strategy.”

Sensing Taichi’s gaze, Inaba Himeko glanced over. Then she turned and walked up to him until her lips were against his ear.

“With all this gossip flying around, I’d *hate* to see what happens after you lose the debate. Depending on which way the rumors go, everyone might just lose faith in you... Then people will stop coming to you for advice.”

Everything was going according to her plan. And if it all played out in her favor, this unrelated incident could turn into a death sentence for his entire operation.

That was the moment he knew that turning Inaba Himeko against him was a mistake.

On the day of the debate, everyone met up in the Student Council meeting room.

The room itself was about twice the size of Rec Hall Room 401. Long tables and chairs were positioned on the east and west sides of the room, each facing the other, as well as a third table set up on the south side against the windows.

The west side was occupied by the anti-punishment faction: five tennis club members, all boys, plus Taichi for a total of six. On the east were representatives of the pro-punishment (or rather, anti-anti-punishment) faction: five members of the Student Council Outreach Committee, who enforced the main Student Council’s various rulings, plus Inaba Himeko for a total of six as well.

To the south sat the mediators and/or neutral parties: the Student Council, the Student Council supervisor, the Newspaper Club, and the tennis club supervisor.

All in all, the mood in the room felt distinctly more austere than Taichi had been led to believe it would be.

“Now then, let’s begin. Ahem... We’ve arranged this venue so that we might hear a wide variety of viewpoints on the pros and cons of extra homework assigned as punishment. But first, let’s all remember that this isn’t a life or death discussion, and there will be no winners or losers,” the main Student

Council representative explained gently.

After the debate was over, the plan was to note down all the points raised therein, report them to the school staff, and await their final decision from there. But with a certain devious duo on the opposing side, Taichi knew it wouldn't be that easy. Even from across the room, they radiated hostile intent.

First, the two sides would take turns to explain their perspectives, after which the free debate would begin. Right from the start, however, it was clear Inaba and Fujishima were dominating the discussion:

"You have no right to complain about being punished when you were the ones who broke the rules in the first place."

"You brought this upon yourselves."

"You have no right to play the victim here."

"You should be grateful that tennis practice wasn't canceled altogether."

"You're being immature."

No matter what anyone on Taichi's side said, Inaba or Fujishima would shoot it down at the speed of light. Then they tried changing the subject to *why* their designated punishment was extra homework, but even then, the two girls were relentless:

"Why are club activities time-restricted in the first place? To ensure students have time for other things. Namely, studying. Hence, homework."

"We're not here to play sports, we're here to learn."

"I'm told that your grades have declined as a result."

Emboldened by their powerful offensive onslaught, the tennis club supervisor chimed in himself: "Your grades have *absolutely* gotten worse. Don't even pretend they haven't." He was so smug, he seemed to think their side had already won.

"Sensei, this debate is meant to be held between the students themselves," the other club supervisor warned him.

"Oh, whoops."

“So your grades have plummeted. That alone should be grounds to have your practice time shortened, don’t you think?”

“Look, schoolwork and clubwork are both important. But when it comes down to it, if you’re asked to pick one, it’s gotta be schoolwork. That’s the whole point of going to high school in the first place. Club activities are a privilege, not a right.”

Inaba’s faction was crushing them. Meanwhile, Taichi was panicking internally. At this rate, they would lose the debate. Which meant the extra homework would be assigned as planned. Which meant Taichi would disappoint everyone on the tennis club—or maybe the entire school. Which meant no one would ask him for advice. Which meant he wouldn’t be able to help anyone ever again...

Meanwhile, the debate continued.

“O-Okay, well... at least don’t enforce it on the entire club when only a handful of people broke the rules! It’s not fair!” Kimura shouted.

“All of you are expected to set a good example as representatives of your club. If some of your members are shirking this responsibility, then it reflects badly on *all* of you,” Inaba countered confidently.

“...Taichi-san, you’ve been quiet for a while now. Help us out!”

“I know, I know.” *Trust me, I just can’t get a word in edgewise.*

He wanted to help somehow; he simply didn’t have the means to do so. If only he had something that could turn the whole discussion on its head... That way he could help people and make the whole world a better place—

[There’s a man. It’s the tennis club supervisor. He’s at a bar, drinking alcohol. Across from him sits the school counselor. He hands her a sheet of paper with “Improving Grades At Yamaboshi” printed at the top. Her: “Now the entire tennis club will have to do make-up assignments.” Him: “Maybe we can turn this into a recurring thing.” Her: “And apply it to the other clubs.” Him: “If they spent all their club time on studying, maybe the graduation rates would improve.” At this, the school counselor laughs. They sip their drinks.]

Taichi returned to reality. The timing was so perfect, it was actually terrifying.

Was it mere coincidence, or was it fate?

As the debate began to wrap up, Inaba took center stage to give a final overview of her position. Everyone's full attention was on her.

"If you want to live solely for yourself, solely in the present, then sure, go ahead and waste your time solely on club activities. But life doesn't work that way. Once you're an adult, you're going to have to support yourself. Eventually you might even have to support your parents, or a family of your own." Inaba smirked at Taichi, and the look in her eyes said *I've got this in the bag* . "That is why we students are obligated to study, and likewise, the school is obligated to ensure that—"

"Can I say something?"

Everyone looked at him in shock as he rose to his feet.

"There's something I've been... hesitant to bring up."

His body grew hot, and his mind went fuzzy. Almost as though he were dreaming himself.

"...It's not polite to interrupt someone when they're speaking. What do you want, Taichi?" Inaba growled. But Taichi ignored her. He needed to do this. He needed to win. And he would do it for the sake of the entire school.

"Sensei?" He looked over at the tennis club supervisor.

"...Yes?"

"Did you assign this extra homework purely as a punishment? Or... is there something else behind it?" Taichi asked in a shaky voice.

"Excuse me?"

"You've been wanting to assign make-up work for a while now, haven't you? You were just looking for an excuse."

"I... beg your pardon?" The teacher's expression shifted to panic.

To Taichi, this all but confirmed the suspicion implanted in him as of just moments ago.

"What is it you're planning with the school counselor?"

“Wh... I... I’m not... I don’t...!”

But Taichi pressed further. “You want the students to have to reallocate their club time towards studying so that Yamaboshi’s graduation rates will improve. Isn’t that right?”

The tennis club supervisor turned white as a sheet, his mouth opening and closing fruitlessly like an oversized goldfish. And to everyone else in the room, this was akin to a confession.

A moment of silence passed, and then Fujishima spoke.

“Sensei... would you care to explain yourself?”

Everyone’s eyes were on the tennis club supervisor. Trapped on all sides, he finally relented.

Meanwhile, just one person was glaring furiously at Taichi: Inaba Himeko.

Taichi never learned precisely what went down after that, but suffice it to say, the subsequent investigation brought to light a certain conspiracy among a specific subset of the teachers. Apparently they wanted to improve the graduation rates to encourage more prospective students to enroll at Yamaboshi. This wasn’t a crime, of course, so no disciplinary action was taken against them... but naturally, the tennis club supervisor’s reputation tanked. As a result, no additional homework was assigned to the tennis club, nor any other punishment beyond a slap on the wrist.

As one might expect, the details of this incident were not openly made public to the student body at large, and yet rumors had a way of getting around regardless...

“Yaegashi-san—no, Yaegashi-sama—no, Yaegashi Almighty! Thanks a billion!” Kimura exclaimed energetically. “Seriously, how did you find out about that? I gotta know!”

“That’s... a secret. Really, it was just a coincidence.”

“No need to play it off! Man, I guess these things just happen when you’re Yaegashi-san, the star of the school...”

Just then, two first-year girls passed by in the hall.

“Yaegashi?”

“Yeah, he’s that one guy.”

“What one guy?”

“Haven’t you heard? He blew the lid on the teachers’ extra homework conspiracy in order to protect us.”

“Oh yeah, I heard about that! What a cool guy!”

Just like that, the entire school now hailed him as a hero for his courageous actions.

“Yeah... You’re awesome,” Kimura agreed.

As Taichi headed back to his classroom, someone from up ahead caught sight of him.

“Congratulations on your masterful victory. Without your help, I would’ve been a party to a horrible conspiracy,” said Fujishima Maiko.

She was, of course, the mastermind who had dragged Taichi into the debate in the first place. He’d been wondering how she felt about the results, considering she hadn’t mentioned it since.

“I have to hand it to you—you beat us fair and square. Of course, ultimately it was for the best that we lost, but...”

“No way. You guys *clearly* out-debated us on every point.”

“We may have won the battles, but we lost the war. And that’s what counts.”

“Classic Fujishima outlook.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

Her expression was soft, with no hint of sour grapes over their loss—

“Fortunately, that war was but one small part of a larger war. And I’m winning that one.”

Her tone hardened. All at once, she exuded the posture of a warrior.

“What are you... talking about...?” Taichi had a bad feeling about this.

“There’s no way you could’ve known about a conspiracy between two faculty

members... and yet somehow you did.”

“No, I—”

“Can you actually read minds?”

“Like I said, I—”

“And yet you seem entirely ignorant of my plans... Is there some sort of limit to your power? Yes, that would explain it. Otherwise you would’ve outpaced my arguments in the debate, or else revealed the tennis club supervisor’s secret much sooner. After all, it’s not in your nature to keep us in suspense.”

Right before his eyes, she was analyzing the information she had at her disposal. Searching for a solution.

“Hmmm... Does your power only trigger at random? Or does it take a specific length of time to activate? Perhaps you can only use it a limited number of times per day?”

She was approaching the truth—hell, practically knocking on truth’s door.

“Wait... Is *that* the real reason you made me join the debate...?”

Was that room really just her personal observation tank?

“Did you really think I’d set all that up for no reason at all?”

No. Of course not.

“A word of advice, Yaegashi-kun: never underestimate Detective Fujishima Maiko. Because I’m gunning for you.”

And with that decidedly un-detective-like statement, Fujishima smirked.

□■□■□

Back in Classroom 2-B, class president Setouchi Kaoru let out a huge sigh. She picked up a stack of papers on her desk, counted them, and sighed again. Then she pulled out a different worksheet, looked at it, and ran her hands through her short dark hair in frustration.

“You look like you’re having a hard day,” Taichi commented.

“Huh? Oh... Well, you know, we’ve got the school trip coming up, so now

there’s a lot more paperwork to be dealing with.”

Indeed, the school trip was just next week; Taichi had recently started packing his suitcase in preparation.

“Sounds rough. Hang in there.”

“What about you, Yaegashi-kun? You’ve really got a handle on this love craze thing.”

The number of romantic advice-seekers had skyrocketed, particularly among the second-year demographic. But the Dream Vision didn’t trigger on command, so Taichi was forced to juggle a handful of outstanding requests at the same time. And while his “clients” themselves seemed perfectly willing to wait, ideally he wanted to get them their answers in a timely fashion.

“Me personally, I’d like it if everyone could get their career planning surveys turned in soon. The deadline’s really strict, or so I’ve heard.”

It was her job to collect them, but evidently it wasn’t going so well. Even Taichi himself had yet to submit his.

“Eh, I’m pretty sure most people will turn theirs in on the day it’s due.”

“Yeah, I know... I’m just concerned that everyone’s too distracted with romance stuff to actually think about it. Not that I don’t understand the appeal of finding a special someone to spend time with over the trip.”

“Yeah, I guess there’s some weird synergy going. Well, at the very least, I’ll try to have mine turned in soon.” He’d been so focused on giving advice, he hadn’t had much time to think about it.

“Please do. I don’t want people to get so laser-focused on romance that they forget about what really matters... Not that I’m one to talk, I guess.”

During their first year, Setouchi had become obsessed with her crush to the point that she did some pretty messed-up things... and as it happened, Taichi was one of her victims. But to him, it was all in the past.

Still, that reminds me. “How are things going with Shiroyama, anyway?”

“Pretty good, actually...” Setouchi giggled bashfully. After she and the CRC had made their peace, she’d gone on to make her romantic dreams a reality.

“We’re trying to plan for some alone time together over the trip.”

It warmed his heart to see her so happy. He hoped everyone else would find that same happiness, too. But at the same time, this ongoing trend was starting to worry him... Then again, who was he to decide whether a given trend was good or bad?

“Are you and Inaba-san planning anything? If you’ve got any recs, I’d love to hear them.”

“Huh? Oh... No, I haven’t really given it much thought, now that you mention it...”

He and Inaba hadn’t discussed the trip at all. How could they, with everything that was going on? But unless something changed, he was on the fast track to spending the trip alone—

“Eh... I guess I’m just happy being together with the boy I love... Okay, that was cheesy,” Setouchi laughed.

At this, he found himself thinking: How could anyone actively choose not to spread the love to as many people as possible?

“Hey, Sone-kun! Miyagami-kun! Don’t forget about your career planning surveys, okay?” Setouchi called to two male classmates passing by.

“R-Right...”

“O-Okay...”

Their replies were a bit timid, possibly because she’d caught them off-guard. Then one of Setouchi’s female friends walked up, so Taichi decided to take his cue from Sone and Miyagami and make himself scarce.

“Hey there, Yaegashi. Man, you’re fine with literally anyone, even Setouchi, huh?” asked Sone, a chubby (“It’s not my fault I’m short and plump!”) otaku who was part of the Manga Club. Taichi had only just met him as of this year, but the two of them got along swimmingly.

“What do you mean, I’m ‘fine’ with her?”

“I mean, y’know, you can *talk* to her! She was a delinquent student last year, remember?”

Admittedly she'd been a little... rough around the edges... back when she bleached her hair.

"I don't know if she was a *delinquent* , exactly. But either way, she's chilled out quite a bit since then. She's a good egg."

"Just ignore him, Yaegashi. He's a coward."

"Wh... Me?! A coward?! No I'm not!"

"Are too! Wahaha!" laughed Miyagami, a Photography Club member with stylish hair and rectangular glasses. As with Sone, Taichi had met and befriended him at the start of their second year.

As it happened, the three of them were assigned to a five-member group for the school trip along with Ishikawa the baseball player and Watase the soccer player.

"Oh, shut up, Miyagami! You're not going to get girls by wearing those glasses and styling your hair like you're a magazine model! You look stupid!"

"Wha...?! I'll have you know, this is THE hottest look for guys right now! Just you wait!"

"Now, now. Calm down, you two," Taichi soothed.

"Ugh... Now Casanova here is trying to play mediator..." Sone groaned.

"For some reason, I feel even worse..." Miyagami sighed.

Though they tended to bicker with each other, more often than not, the two of them were generally on the same page.

"A lot of people are gonna be spending the trip with their boyfriends and girlfriends... If only there was someone out there for me..." Miyagami muttered.

"Just have Mr. Love Guru teach you the ropes!" Sone joked.

"Oh, you're right! I forgot we were in the presence of a celebrity!" Miyagami chimed in.

"Ha ha, very funny. Maybe I'll end up in one of your precious gossip magazines. Anyway, Setouchi was asking about your career planning surveys. Still working on them?" Taichi asked, hoping to change the subject.

“Oh, that dumb thing? Meh. I already decided my third-year course, so who cares? I still need to decide on my preferred college, though,” said Miyagami.

“All I know is, I’m totally picking humanities. Science can go suck a chode,” said Sone.

“Okay, well... maybe you guys should put a little more thought into it,” Taichi pressed.

“Absolutely not! It can wait until after Hokkaido! After all, this trip is going to be the most ultimate event of our teenage lives. We’re going to have a blast, and then afterwards, while we’re all basking in the afterglow? *That* is when I will pause to contemplate life after high school. After I get a girlfriend, of course.”

“Then I guess you won’t be turning yours in until you’re like 30.”

“Cram it, Sone!”

As for Taichi, he could scarcely will himself to get excited for the school trip, much less focus on his future career plans. So where was he devoting his energy, then? What was he trying to accomplish? He didn’t know... and this uncertainty made him *afraid* . Afraid of being an empty book on the inside.

“Maybe we could have Yaegashi hook us up with someone,” Miyagami mused.

“I bet he knows a lot of hot chicks. Just look at Inaba-san,” Sone agreed.

If only they knew about the emptiness he felt in his heart—what would they think of him then? Here he was, getting praised and thanked every day. So why did he feel so miserable about it? What was the solution?

Behind them, Setouchi shouted, “Damn it, Gotou! This is why I told you to get in touch with everyone who still hasn’t submitted!”

“Eeeek! I’m sorry, Setouchi-saaaan! I got busy and forgot!” whimpered Gotou Ryuuzen, advisor for Class 2-B. Evidently he was shirking his duties again.

“See, what’d I tell you? Setouchi’s scary!” Sone insisted.

“Trust me, if you had to deal with Gossan every day, you’d be shouting too,” Taichi replied.

Well... maybe not me, but still.

□■□■□

“Taichi, can I borrow you for a minute?” Aoki asked later that day, after club activities ended.

“Sure,” Taichi replied.

“...You too, Yui.”

“M-Me...?”

It felt like Kiriyama and Aoki had been casually avoiding each other ever since their last argument, hence her surprise at his invitation.

“Well... I figure I should talk to you guys. Get you up to speed.” His tone was level and serious.

For Taichi and Kiriyama, Aoki’s “class clown” persona had long since been shelved. This wasn’t a result of stress or anxiety, either; he managed to be his normal self around other people just fine. Either he was extremely angry that they had involved themselves in his personal life, or he was just distancing himself from those on the “other side.”

“...Why not tell us back in the clubroom?” Taichi asked, though this wasn’t meant as a critique.

“I didn’t really wanna get into it in front of Chihiro and Shino-chan, y’know?”

“...Okay,” Kiriyama nodded.

They told the others they had business to take care of, then headed for the courtyard—not that it mattered where the conversation happened, but it was the closest place they could think of. Fortunately, no one else was around; Aoki gestured for them to take a seat on a bench, but they both declined.

Instead, Taichi saw this as an opportunity to ask the one question that had been on his mind for quite some time: “How’s your dad doing?”

At this, Aoki’s stony expression broke slightly as his eyebrow twitched. “It looks like he’s not gonna get fired after all, and I’ll probably be able to go to college. So yeah, our family’s just peachy now.” The implication being, of

course, that their misfortune had ended up in someone else's lap. "Well, maybe whoever gets laid off will have better luck finding a new job. My dad hasn't told me who it was or anything. Oh, and he's not going to press charges against that girl who accused him, so she won't get a mark on her permanent record."

"That's good," said Kiriyama, looking relieved.

Aoki glanced at her, then hung his head as if to hide his expression. "Anyway, that's about as much as I can tell you guys. The rest we'll handle as a family."

"But the problem's basically solved now, right?" asked Taichi.

"No, it's not. Not for whoever got laid off instead. Worst case scenario, it might last their whole life."

Had they created a problem that would last someone's entire lifespan? The thought weighed on Taichi like a ton of bricks.

"Aoki, don't phrase it like—" Kiriyama began, then stopped short. "Forget it."

A moment of silence passed as the autumn breeze blew by; Aoki was the first to break it.

"...I know it's kinda out of character for me to be having all these serious-business conversations, but yeah. Anyways. Seems like Inabacchan isn't taking the direct approach."

Evidently Aoki had come up with a battle plan of his own. They'd been so distracted with Inaba and Fujishima, they'd forgotten to worry about him.

"What do you mean, the direct approach?" Kiriyama asked.

"Right now you guys are busy playing Cupid, right? Is it fun?"

"What do you mean, *fun?* "

"I'm literally asking you, is it fun to do that stuff?"

"We're not like doing this to *have fun* ," Kiriyama snapped. Perhaps Aoki had touched a nerve.

"Then why *are* you doin' it?"

"To help make people happy, *ob* viously. But we don't get pushy or try to force anyone."

To Taichi, their actions were good and just.

“I mean, that’s really great and all—”

See, even he admits it!

“—but are you sure you can manage it?”

“What are you talking about? We’re ‘managing’ just fine!”

“But it’s starting to get a little out of hand, am I right?”

“...W-Well...”

“We don’t try to micromanage every single aspect,” Taichi cut in, since Kiriyama had gone quiet.

“So, what, you just shrug your shoulders and do whatever?” Aoki replied, his tone accusatory.

“We... We’re doing the right thing!”

“We don’t get to decide what’s right or wrong,” he told her calmly.

“Rrrgh! What is your PROBLEM?! If you’re trying to lecture me, then just save your breath!” Kiriyama yelled in frustration.

“I’m not lecturing. Just tryin’ to get you to think about it.”

“Think about *what?!* You think I’m not thinking about this?!”

“I’m not talking about them. Do you ever think about what *you*

need?”

“*Of course I do!* I...” All at once, her furious energy petered out as she slammed on the brakes.

“So you’ve been thinking about your own problems?”

“I... I’m still thinking about the future, obviously, and... and...” Mumbling, Kiriyama stared at her shoes. She glanced up at him, then back to the ground. “And... I’ve been thinking about... you and stuff,” she muttered weakly. “Deep down, I... I’m ready. I’ve *been* ready. But then your family crisis happened, and the Dream Vision started, and... everything got all complicated...”

“So, do you think you have time to be worrying about other people right

now?”

“Well...” Kiriyama fell silent once more. But this time, Taichi stayed out of it.

Aoki glanced over at him, and all at once he felt a rush of embarrassment. Almost like Aoki could see the blank slate inside him. Aoki was by no means eloquent or intellectual, but he had a powerful sense of intuition, and Taichi realized he was terrified Aoki might just figure him out.

“Aaanyway, I get where you guys are comin’ from. Just wanted to go ahead and put that on the radar, so to speak. So yeah, that’s all I had to say!” Aoki finished in his usual goofy tone. Seeing him back to his usual antics made Taichi realize just how *different* he had been acting as of late... and apparently Kiriyama noticed, too.

“Welp, I got places, to be, so—”

“H-Hey!” Kiriyama called out.

He stopped and turned back, but evidently she hadn’t planned what she was going to say, because she began to panic.

“Um... I... Oh yeah! Do you still love m—*gaaahhh!* No! That came out wrong! I mean... how do you feel about me?”

Aoki took one look at her and said, “I love you.”

Instantly, her cheeks lit up like the sunset.

“But I don’t love what you’re doing,” he added firmly. “Oh, and one more thing: if you don’t put the kibosh on it now, I get the feeling the school trip’s gonna be an absolute nightmare.”

And with that last piece of advice, Aoki left the courtyard.

Did they have time to be helping others when their own lives were a disaster? Or were their lives a disaster *because* they were helping others? Was this the price they were forced to pay?

His body wasn’t injured, and yet it ached all the same. He was being consumed. Worn down. Criticized. And yet he pressed on regardless. What would he gain from it? Would it help others? Would he be rewarded? What of his own life?

His career planning survey was still blank, to say nothing of his other problems...

And then the school trip was upon them.

Chapter 7: Under the Sea of Stars

On the first day of the school trip, Rina had seen him off at the front door with “Don’t forget to bring home souvenirs! Get me something expensive!” From there, he’d met up with Watase, Sone, and Miyagami, and together the four of them headed to the airport, where the students were scheduled to meet up.

On the way, Taichi worried that they were a bit too early, but when they got there, it turned out that a lot of people had already arrived. They walked over to the group and set their luggage on the floor.

“Dude, why do you have so much stuff?” Watase asked Sone, who had brought a backpack *and* a large duffel bag.

“I packed my manga. Figured we could have a little manga reading party if we find time,” Sone grinned.

Watase clapped his hands together. “Oh man, that’s a great idea! Everybody’s talking about spending the trip with their crush, but I wouldn’t mind getting together for a late-night hangout with just us guys!”

At first glance, one might not think that a popular guy like Watase and a wallflower like Sone would get along, but they were both big manga fans, so it worked out.

As the scheduled meetup time approached, more and more people turned up. One by one, the crowd expanded to include Ishikawa the baseball player, Nagase, Kiriyama, Nakayama, and Kurihara. Everyone was dressed warmly in anticipation of the chilly Hokkaido weather.

“The girls are looking gorgeous in their street clothes. It’s finally starting to feel like a school trip,” Miyagami commented, adjusting his glasses for dramatic effect.

“How are those two statements related...?”



This was by no means their first school trip, but this *was* their first time staying overnight somewhere with the rest of the students in their grade, and despite the unreasonably early hour, everyone was in an especially giddy mood.

“Watch my stuff, okay? I gotta run to the bathroom.”

“Oh, I’ll come with.”

As Miyagami and Sone headed off together, Taichi moved their stuff next to the wall, where it would be out of the way.

“A four-day, three-night stay in Hokkaido! I’m! So! EXCITED!” Nakayama Mariko squealed, bouncing up and down and breathing heavily.

“Nakayama-chan, I know you’re eager to go on a trip with your new boyfriend and all, but you need to take it down a notch,” Kurihara chided, shooting a furtive glance at Ishikawa.

“Wh... Y-Yukinacchan! Don’t tell everybody!”

“Wait, *what?!* Who is it?!” asked Watase.

“It’s... a secret! F-For now!” she stammered. Meanwhile, Ishikawa looked everywhere but at her, scratching his head sheepishly.

Taichi glanced over at Kiriyama and found her looking back at him. They exchanged a meaningful look.

Here were two people who never would have found happiness together without a little help from him. The thought filled him with an inexplicable sense of... validation.

“If even *you* can find someone, then I guess I’d better get my act together. Maybe I should take advantage of this ‘love craze’ that’s been going around!” Watase clenched his fist in determination.

Meanwhile, Nagase walked up to Taichi. “You doing okay?” she asked, facing away from the others. She’d been a little quiet this morning.

“Okay how?”

“Well, the love craze is at its peak, so I figured you’ve probably got a bajillion requests now.”

“...It’s definitely a lot,” he replied.

Sure enough, a swarm of people had been clamoring for his advice, all thanks to the superstition going around about him. Granted, a lot of them weren’t that emotionally invested in a serious response, but there were some who said they wouldn’t make a move until Taichi got back to them with a definitive answer... and now they were urging him to hurry.

“Feels like it’ll be an uphill battle from here, so be careful.”

Taichi glanced over at Kiriyama again. “Are you on our side, Nagase?”

“No, I don’t think so. But I’m not on their side, either. I just don’t want things to get out of hand. Life doesn’t have an undo button, you know.”

She claimed she wasn’t on anyone’s side—neither theirs nor Inaba’s. And while at first glance she seemed like a fence-sitter, Taichi got the sense that she had simply taken a third option.

“...To be honest, this really sucks,” she muttered.

“What sucks?”

“Well—”

[There’s a guy. He’s from... Group 1, was it? He’s in the airport. He’s tugging on his backpack. One of the straps is caught in a door. He tugs really hard, and the bag is freed at last. He smiles in relief.]

...Judging from the contents of the Vision, someone was currently struggling with their luggage. *Is he nearby? Should I go help him?* Taichi wondered. He glanced around. Then he noticed Nagase pinching the bridge of her nose with her eyes closed and realized she must’ve seen it too.

“...Did you see the same one? With the guy from Group 1?” he asked her.

Frowning, she nodded. Then she stared at the floor for a moment, perfectly still.

“Just like you, the Visions tell me who needs help.” Her side profile was hidden behind her long hair. “But I just sit back and watch while someone else helps them instead. Again and again and again.”

“Right...”

They had both seen the same Vision. They both knew someone needed help. But only Taichi had instinctively thought to act on it; Nagase had not. And for those who didn’t take action— “Do you know how much guilt I feel because of that? Every time I hear about how much you and Yui have helped people, it feels like they’re rubbing it in my face.”

—the knowledge hurt.

Taichi realized he had never stopped to consider this. He was so busy worrying about how deeply to get involved, he had inadvertently assumed that the “other side” was just carrying on with their lives.

“I...”

“Anyway, I just wanted to, y’know... put that out there!” Nagase said in a lighter, more joking tone as she pantomimed the act of physically moving an object in his direction. “Somewhat related, I heard that, um... Fujishima-san is starting to suspect something?”

The subject change hit him like a ton of bricks.

“You... You know about that...?”

“This is *really* bad news, Taichi,” Nagase frowned. “If an outsider finds out about the phenomenon, there’s no way they’re going to keep quiet. And that means you-know-who is going to do something about it—we just don’t know *what* . Be careful.”

Evidently this field trip wasn’t going to be all fun and games. Not for him, anyway.

Later on, Taichi decided to use the bathroom before their flight.

“Oh! Yaegashi-kun! Can I borrow you for a minute?!” asked a girl from another class as she was on her way out of the ladies’ room. He recognized her as one of Setouchi’s friends; she always wore brightly colored makeup.

She dragged him to the very corner of the gate where they were waiting to board the plane.

“Man, am I glad I caught you! I’ve been DYING to get your opinion on this!”

An advice request, I take it. “We’ve got a few minutes while we wait, but... does it have to be right now?”

“Yes! Right now! I need you to solve this, pronto!”

And so she casually explained her circumstances: she was already in a relationship, but now a second guy had confessed his feelings to her.

“So who am I more compatible with: Nakajima or Makihara? Can you tell, like, who loves me more or something? Everyone says you can.”

“It’s not that simple... You’re already dating Nakajima, right? Why even second-guess it?”

“Oh, c’mon! Everybody has second thoughts sometimes!”

“Don’t you have feelings for him?”

“Sure I do. But I also kinda have feelings for Makihara, too. Like, sometimes you just get with somebody because they asked, you know?”

She was so flippant about it... and yet he knew she wasn’t exactly wrong. Humans were capable of loving someone simply because that person loved them first. And yet, it felt somehow immoral to dwell on the legitimacy of that logic.

“...Give me some time and I can probably figure out who’s more compatible with you. I just don’t know how much time it will take. And I don’t always have an exact answer,” he explained. This was the same perfunctory disclaimer he gave everyone.

“That’s not good enough. Makihara told me he wants me to give him my answer before the school trip, and that’s kind of today! Seriously, which one of them is Mr. Right?”

What am I, your horoscope?

“Ultimately only you can decide that.”

“No, I can’t! Why do you think I’m talking to you about it? If I was capable of figuring it out myself, I *would’ve* by now! So which one is it? Oh, and I wanna keep this whole thing on the down-low, if that’s cool. I trust you not to tell anyone.”

“I mean, you’re going to have to pick one...”

For a moment, he questioned whether choosing one over the other was really the right answer. But then he realized he’d gone through a similar situation himself, and he’d made his choice. Well... no, technically Nagase had made the choice. Only afterwards did he realize he was only in love with the *idea* of her.

But once he found out she and Inaba both had feelings for him, he’d become convinced that he needed to choose. Not out of strong feelings for one or the other; he just felt compelled to make a choice. Almost like picking a dialogue option in an RPG.

Suddenly he was starting to doubt himself. *Sometimes you just get with somebody because they asked...*

“Uhh, Yaegashi-kun?”

“Huh? Oh, sorry.” He’d gotten lost in thought. He tried to shift his focus back on the topic at hand, but for some reason his mind wasn’t cooperating. *What’s gotten into me? Hurry up and... give me the answer in a Vision!*

“Come *on* , Yaegashi-kun!”

She was demanding an immediate answer, but Taichi didn’t have one. Unfortunately, now that he’d offered a helping hand—*Do you know how much guilt I feel because of that? Every time I hear about how much you and Yui have helped people, it feels like they’re rubbing it in my face* —he couldn’t just shrug his shoulders and give up. He had an obligation to fulfill.

What do I do? Oh, right... I should just tell her my opinion! I can make the call myself!

For the first time since he started “advising” people, Taichi had encountered a situation in which he was forced to decide for himself.

I can do this. I can give her my own opinion.

So, what’s my opinion?

...I don’t have one.

This realization made Taichi’s sight go dark. The girl in front of him seemed to split into two, like an amoeba—no, wait— [There’s a girl. It’s the girl who’s

talking to Taichi. She's with a guy. They're being flirty with each other, suggestive of an intimate relationship. Close-up of the guy's face. It's Makihara, the one who recently confessed his feelings to her.]

"...Fine. If you can't do it, it's whatever."

He didn't want to disappoint her. He didn't want her to think him incapable. He could see the answer. With his power, he knew precisely what she wanted—she just didn't realize it herself yet. He just needed to give her a little encouragement to help her figure it out. It was his duty, and one only he could fulfill.

"...Makihara, obviously."

□■□■□

"Hokkaido, more like *Hecka Tight, Yo!* "

"...I'm amazed you said that without cringing at yourself," Kurihara sighed, shaking her head at Nagase's goofy antics.

"C'mon, guys, we're on a school trip! It's time to let our hair down and have fun! Right, Nakayama-chan?"

"Right! Now let's hear you say it, Yukina-chan! You too, Yui-chan!"

"Uhh... hecka tight... yo..."

"Oof, I can feel your embarrassment from here..."

And so the second-years of Yamaboshi High School left the airport. From there, each class boarded a bus that would take them to their destination. Along the way, they admired the wide roads and expansive plots of land; then, after about an hour, they all filed off the bus and into a magnificent stretch of prairie field. Everything about it screamed rural Hokkaido, and the students couldn't possibly be more excited.

Idly, Taichi wondered how Inaba and Aoki were doing.

"I noticed this back at the airport, but... the air is *really* cold here!" Nakayama remarked.

Without missing a beat, Nagase tackled her. "Here comes my ice breath

attack! Fffff!”

“Eeeek! Her breath can freeze lava!”

The two of them seemed like they were having fun. Meanwhile, the boys were goofing off, too: “Holy crap, look at this place! How many soccer fields’ worth of land is this? How many Tokyo Domes could we fit in here?”

“I bet if you shouted something, you’d hear an echo.”

“Wouldn’t we have to be on a mountain for that to work?”

“Guess we’ll just have to try it and find out!

! ...Did you hear that?! It echoed!”

“I’m pretty sure you’re hearing things.”

“Really, bro? ‘Yodel-ay-ee-oooo’? What are you, five? Tell him, Yaegashi.”

“You’re the one trying to measure Hokkaido in Tokyo Domes...”

“Everyone does that, okay?! It’s normal! Y’know, you seem pretty quiet. Did the bus ride make you carsick?”

“Huh? I’m fine.”

But beneath his feigned smile, Taichi knew Watase was right. He was off in his own little world, fretting that the advice he’d given earlier this morning had been too simplistic. The girl was clearly attracted to Makihara, which is why he’d encouraged her to pursue him... but now that he thought about it, he hadn’t seen how she felt about her current boyfriend. Was it right to tell her to dump him just because someone else was interested?

“Something on your mind?”

This wasn’t the only problem he was juggling, either. She probably wouldn’t be the only person to press him for answers over the course of this trip.

“Yeah, you could say that...”

“Listen up, Yaegashi!”

Watase grabbed Taichi by the hair, his other hand on his shoulder.

“Look at that sky!”

He tilted Taichi's head back. All at once, the cerulean expanse filled his vision, its color intensifying and fading in a perfect gradient. Charming little clouds dotted the sky, round and plump like squashed marshmallows. All in all, it felt like he was looking at a work of art.

"That prairie!"

An endless carpet of green (and sometimes yellow) stretched as far as the eye could see—the kind of scenery that made you want to start running until you found its end.

"That forest!"

He looked to the left, where yellow leaves rustled atop pristine white bark. Not having too many trees, this forest was not mysterious or intimidating, but quiet and welcoming.

"And that air! Take a deep breath!"

Clear, crisp, and ready to cleanse the human body of all its built-up toxins—
".....It kinda smells like cows."

"...Yeah, I didn't notice until after I said it. I guess there's a farm around here somewhere. Whatever! My point stands!" Watase relinquished his grip.
"Feeling better now, am I right?"

While he hated to think he was so easily fixed, ultimately, Watase was right. His dour mood had cleared to match the weather. *I can't waste this trip being miserable.*

"Yeah... When you're surrounded by nature, it starts to make all your day-to-day worries feel like no big deal."

"Oh, good grief. Want some wine with that cheese? I'm gagging over here."

"Sh-Shut up!"

I was trying to have a moment, damn it!

Their first order of business: visiting a research center focused on solving the environmental crisis. Next came the museum of anthropology, where they learned about the lives of indigenous peoples who built their villages on lakeshores. One such village had been recreated with painstaking detail, with

thatched-roof houses, ancient medicinal plants, and even boats carved from entire tree trunks. The art gallery was pretty spectacular, too.

Because the facility was fairly small, students were permitted to wander freely without sticking to their assigned group. Taichi was traveling with Watase, Sone, Miyagami, and a few other guys.

“Hey, look! There’s a bear!” one of them shouted, pointing. Sure enough, there was a bear in an enclosed cage.

“Why is there a bear here...?”

“Let’s go check it out!”

“Kiriyama-san’s really good at karate, right? Could she take a bear? What do you think, Yaegashi?”

“Eh... I’d say she’s got a 20% chance of winning.”

“Against a BEAR?! Holy crap, she’s inhuman!”

...It was just a joke.

“Oh, hey, Yaegashi-kun!”

Right as he was about to head to the next section, a guy from another class flagged him down. With his bleached hair, he was your typical mass-produced “rebel playboy” type. This guy in particular was quite the social butterfly, and he and Taichi had spoken on a few other occasions (usually him teasing Taichi about Inaba).

“So, got any plans with Inaba-san during the trip?”

“Nah, not really...”

“Whoa. You guys having a fight or something? That’s not cool. You can’t just avoid her, man.”

Is it really that serious? Taichi wondered. Sure, they hadn’t talked much lately, be it in person, via email, or over the phone...

Now the anxiety he’d been trying so desperately to ignore had started to creep up on him once again. Deep down, he knew things couldn’t stay like this. One wrong move and the relationship could end. But at the same time, that was

no reason for him to abandon his chosen crusade. He couldn't very well sacrifice his morals for her.

"Anyway, off-topic, you know how we're doing that tour of Sapporo two nights from now? The one where we're free to grab dinner wherever? Well..." Glancing around, he lowered his voice. "There's this plan going around."

"What do you mean, a plan?"

"We're calling it Operation Custom Tour. Basically, instead of doing the tour with our assigned groups, we're just going to walk around with whoever we want."

"Wait, what? You can't just ditch your group."

"It's not that. Look, making time for your friends is great and all, but you gotta spend private time with your special someone too, y'know? And this is the perfect opportunity. Plus, it'll give people incentive to confess their feelings."

"But... what about everyone else?"

"The single people can go hang out with each other! Sound good?"

"...Are you asking me for permission?"

"Duh! Obviously I gotta clear it with ol' Father Romance himself!"

"What for?"

"Well, everyone wants to do it, but they're still on the fence. They only wanna do it if *everyone's* doing it. But if *you* signed off on it, then they'd come around, y'know? So basically I want your stamp of approval!"

"I think you're really overestimating my authority here."

"No, I'm really not! Trust me, you've got enough street cred to start this trend."

Street cred... Authority... Do I actually have the power?

"We all just wanna make some special memories while we're here in Hokkaido, you feel me?"

"Wait, but... don't we get a free day to ourselves on the last day of the trip? In Otaru?"

“Yeah, but that’s during the *day* . Nighttime’s more special, y’know?” he grinned. Evidently he wasn’t going to take no for an answer. “C’mon, it’ll make everybody happy. Then we’ll all meet back up at the scheduled time, and no one will ever be the wiser.”

Everyone will be happy, and no one will get hurt. Looking at it from that perspective, Taichi really couldn’t find a reason to refuse. After all, it was nearly identical to his agreement with Kiriyama regarding the Dream Vision, right?

“...Well, if it’s what the majority of people want to do, then... I guess I don’t see the harm...”

“Aww yeah, we got the green light! Alright, I’ll go ahead and tell ‘em!”

“Tell them what? That I said it was okay?”

“Duh! That’s the whole point! But just to be clear, we’re not gonna try to pin the blame on you if we get in trouble. We’re the ones who came up with this plan. You’re just our... supervisor!”

If we get in trouble . These words sent goosebumps prickling up his arms. *Did I just make a huge mistake? Is everything I’ve done... one big mistake after another?*

“Anyway, thanks again! Have fun with Inaba-san!” And with that, the boy walked off.

“Inaba... Right.”

Some boyfriend he was proving to be.

□■□■□

The next day’s schedule was packed with hands-on learning opportunities. There was an agriculture tour in the morning, and in the afternoon, students could choose from a handful of optional activities, like horseback riding or visiting a ranch.

After the agriculture tour, Taichi had elected to go river rafting. Together, he and the other prospective rafters walked from the hill to the raft supply area on the riverside. There, they put on their gear: a drysuit, a life jacket, and a helmet. Then, with paddle in hand, they were ready to roll.

“This gear is so bulky... Feels like we’ve joined the army or something. *Attention!* ” Sone joked.

Each rubber raft could fit six people, plus one instructor. Each group, Taichi’s included, lined up in two even rows to carry their raft. During the hike upstream, for some inane reason Watase and Miyagami started arguing about whether this felt more like “an expedition” or “a mission.” This went on and on until Taichi proposed “ an adventure,” which they both agreed to accept as a compromise. *Whatever* .

At the starting point, their instructor launched into an explanation of the activity, taught them all the rafting lingo, and showed them how to paddle. Then, at last, it was time. They boarded the boat and pushed off onto the river’s surface. Fortunately, the rubber craft felt a lot more sturdy than Taichi had expected, though it jostled with the water’s movements. Everyone was in high spirits.

“Whoa, we’re floating! Let’s gooo!”

“You know, I thought this was gonna be kinda lame, but I’m actually really stoked!”

Here at the starting point, the river was maybe 20 meters wide. For now the current was slow and steady, but Taichi knew it would only get faster as they progressed, and they’d need to be mindful of the rapids. With heavily-wooded shorelines on both sides, it felt almost as though they were headed into uncharted territory, and the air was tense with excitement.

“You scared, Yaegashi?” asked Ishikawa next to him.

“Nah, I was just thinking... If I fell out, would the river carry me all the way to the Sea of Okhotsk?”

“Dude! That’s so morbid!” Watase retorted.

“Oh god, you’re right... That was Enjouji levels of dark...”

“Who’s Enjouji...? Well, if you *did* fall in, I would rescue you.”

“Ishikawa, you’re such a badass! I bet you’ll have a girlfriend by the end of the trip!” Miyagami shouted.

“Actually, I already... No, perhaps this isn’t the best time...”

I wonder how they’ll react when they find out he’s dating Nakayama, Taichi mused.

Meanwhile, their raft was steadily picking up speed, rocking with the current. They hit a bump, and a spray of water doused them all in the face. It felt like an all-natural roller coaster. This was the thrill of the wild outdoors— “Now *this* is one hell of an adventure!”

“Holy crap, Yaegashi’s actually shouting for once! And it sounded like a slogan for a second-rate theme park or something!” Miyagami yelled excitedly.

“Oh, shut up!”

Partway through, the instructor suggested they use their paddles to splash water at the other rafts, just for fun. This wasn’t a spontaneous idea, but rather a game that was built into the existing rafting tour.

“*Grrraaaahhhh!* I’m gonna splash ‘em all!” Sone declared. Like a man unhinged, he started swinging his paddle at anyone and everyone who came near. It was... alarming, to say the least.

Watase turned around in his seat. “He may seem like your average nice guy, but when he gets all worked up, he’s like a whole different person,” he whispered to Taichi.

Just then, they heard shouting somewhere behind them. Another boat was gaining on them... a girls’ boat. And right as it passed—“Punishment for your sins! *Hyaaahhh!”*—Fujishima Maiko splashed a metric ton of water at Sone with pinpoint accuracy. Then the boat sped away. “Farewell!”

“Did... Did you see that?! Those perfect wrist movements... That girl arced the water like a pro! She must have incredible arm strength!” the instructor remarked in awe. *Good lord, Fujishima, is there anything you can’t do?*

“Fujishima-san... She’s so hilarious! I love it!”

“Not sure what part of that was ‘hilarious,’ but okay,” Taichi snarked.

Meanwhile, Sone coughed and sputtered. “How the heck did she manage that huge splash?! I thought I was gonna fall overboard! What if I *died* because of

her?!”

“Don’t worry. You’ll float.”

“What, because I’m fat?! Is that your joke?! Huh?! Just for that, I’m gonna exhale all the air out of my lungs and sink straight to the bottom!”

“No, I meant because you’re wearing a life jacket—uh oh.”

They had just made eye contact with someone on another passing boat. Kiriyama Yui.

She froze for a minute... and then a mischievous grin crept up on her face. “HYAAAHHHH!”

“Gyaaahhhh!”

...As it turned out, Kiriyama was pretty good at splashing, too.

At the end of the rafting course, having survived the whole harrowing ordeal, Taichi and the others stepped back onto dry land. Arriving back at the raft supply area, they returned all of their borrowed gear, then walked back to the meeting place on the hill. All that remained was to kill time until the bus came to pick them up.

“Hey, let’s go on another expedition over that way!”

“I thought we agreed this was an *adventure!* ”

Meanwhile, Watase and Miyagami were still bickering like a pair of ten-year-olds. Taichi started to walk off with them, but then he spotted Kiriyama standing on the edge of a three-meter-high precipice over a stretch of rocky ground a short distance away from the road. On a whim, Taichi wandered over to her. This small cliff was surrounded with vegetation on all sides; a peaceful breeze brushed past as she patted her hair dry with a towel.

“Look at this! I look like a drowned rat!” she complained, then added as an afterthought, “Sorry if I went kinda overboard back there.”

“No kidding. We suffered a lot of casualties thanks to you, but... eh, we’re all dried off now. Too bad we didn’t get the chance to get our revenge on you,” he joked.

She grinned and thrust out her chest in a show of pride. “Revenge? Heh heh! Take your best shot! Fair warning, though: I can dodge anything you throw at me!”

This was perhaps the first genuine smile he’d seen from her since the start of the Dream Vision. But it was only fleeting; a moment later, it clouded over. Following her gaze, Taichi looked over his shoulder to find a girl giving her a thumbs-up a short distance away. Kiriyama returned the gesture, but her expression was grim.

“Funny, isn’t it? All this Love Guru stuff.” Though she wasn’t as renowned as Taichi, Kiriyama was still seen as an advisor in her own right. “They already told you about the ‘plan’ tomorrow, right?”

“Yeah.” Evidently they had sought out her stamp of approval as well.

“They told me you were fine with it, so I said I was too... but I didn’t feel like I *could* say no.”

“As long as they still meet back up at the scheduled time, it shouldn’t matter too much. Plus, this is what everyone wants.” Multiple people had come to him to ask about the plan ever since it was first mentioned to him.

“But just because they want to do it... Well, whatever.” Kiriyama sighed in defeat—to what, Taichi didn’t know. “I’m so focused on other people’s love lives, I... I’ve hardly gotten to enjoy my own.”

The look in her eyes was distant, and he could only imagine who or what she was envisioning. Then Inaba came to mind.

“Same here,” he muttered. “I’ve barely spent any time with my girlfriend. Feels like I’ve been neglecting her.”

At this, Kiriyama looked up suddenly, scrutinizing him as though she’d found something unexpected. “We’re actually really alike, aren’t we?”

“We are?”

“Yeah... It’s like, Aoki and Inaba are both one hundred percent certifiably *in love* with someone, right? But we’re different somehow.”

Silently, Taichi agreed. There was a distinct difference between their two

groups... but what?

“Like... a lot of it has to do with the fact that they fell for us first, don’t you think?”

He definitely had feelings for Inaba—but why? No, he knew the answer to that. There were plenty of reasons. He knew that.

But compared to the way SHE feels about ME, I feel like a total impostor.

Despite his silence, the look on Kiriyama’s face suggested she understood completely.

“So I can’t help hesitating, like, *doesn’t Aoki deserve better than me?* Someone who can love him with the same... passion?” The wind blew past, tousling her long hair; the damp strands clung to her lips and cheek. “It just feels like... like our feelings don’t... match.”

He could feel her hesitation, and while she probably didn’t intend for it to come off this way, it felt as though she was asking for help. But as much as he wanted to help her, he couldn’t. He didn’t have the answer.

It was a perfect representation of his own inadequacy towards Inaba. He wanted to do something. To help her. To treat her right. But he didn’t know where to start. Nor did he know how to solve his own problems.

“Man, we really *are* alike.”

All he could offer her was the knowledge that she wasn’t alone in feeling the way she did. He still meant it, though.

Kiriyama gave a tiny laugh. “Man... If only «Heartseed» hadn’t come along and screwed up our lives... You never know, maybe you and I would’ve ended up dating instead.”

She was the person who stayed by his side when he stood up for what he believed in. Hypothetical romantic feelings aside, she was the most approachable of the other four; everyone else was far beyond his maturity level. So perhaps, in another timeline where «Heartseed» had chosen a different club, the possibility was in fact there. Thus, he responded: “Yeah, maybe.”

“Oh,” said a flat, unemotional voice.

Taichi froze on the spot. The air around him turned to ice. Kiriyama’s mouth hung open. Behind him, the crunch of gravel underfoot sounded like a deafening rumble as it approached. And then Inaba Himeko walked out from behind the overgrown vegetation.

She wasn’t angry or hurt, though admittedly Taichi almost wished she was; at least then he’d know how to react. Instead, her expression was perfectly blank, outside of a single twitching facial muscle—probably from trying to suppress her emotions.

“Is that how you feel? Both of you, apparently?”

“W-Wait! Hold on, Inaba! I don’t know how much of that you heard, but I wasn’t serious about it! It was just a... you know, like, a what-if scenario!”

“Exactly. We didn’t mean anything by it... I don’t have feelings for her or anything like that!”

They were both desperate to explain themselves. But ultimately, they never should have let Inaba hear that last part of the conversation. Or any part of it, really.

What is she even doing here? Did she just get back from rafting? I didn’t even know she picked rafting in the first place.

That alone was proof of how little they were speaking to each other. They were boyfriend and girlfriend, but more importantly, they were on opposite sides of an ideological debate.

“Nah, I know there’s nothing weird going on between the two of you,” Inaba replied casually.

“Oh, okay. Cool.”

Clearly Inaba understood him after all. But right as he heaved a sigh of relief—“*Dumbass!*” she hissed. “Did you really think I’d just be... totally okay after... hearing that?”

Her voice was watery, despite her best attempts to keep herself together.

“Do you... Do you even pay attention to me? At all?”

He made an active effort to, at least, seeing as he'd failed Nagase in that regard.

"Do you *actually* l—"

But before she could finish the question, she fell silent, her mouth closed. Sniffling, she took a deep breath to calm herself. Just like that, all excess emotion vanished—or so she wanted him to believe, anyway.

"You... You people are just running away from reality."

"No we're not..."

"Well, that's how I see it," she declared, then added in a low voice, "Not that I have any room to talk." She smiled sadly. "I bet you'll get people asking you for advice over the trip, too. And you'll drop everything to go deal with it. Including me."

"I mean... yeah, I might get a request or two, but I haven't forgotten about you—"

"Taichi's... He's put a lot of work into this," Kiriyama cut in, timidly vouching for him.

Meanwhile, Inaba smiled as though she had it all figured out. But this only served to make Taichi anxious, because he knew that her calm composure was only a cover for the storm of emotions brewing beneath.

"I'm just trying to look out for you. But you? You never look out for anyone. Not even me."

"What? I'm looking out for *everyone* —"

"I know you, Taichi. You may *think* you've chosen everyone, but in reality, you've chosen no one at all."

Then another student waved Inaba over, and she walked away.

□■□■□

That night, they stayed at a hot spring inn. After bathtime came dinnertime, followed by bedtime; together, Taichi and the four other boys changed into their pajamas and laid out their futons atop the tatami flooring in their assigned

room.

“Not that we’re *actually* going to sleep!” Watase exclaimed.

“You’ve been shouting since this morning... How do you still have so much energy...?” Sone muttered.

“You build up a lot of stamina when you’re part of a sports team! Right, Ishikawa?”

“Mm... I suppose so,” Ishikawa mused. Compared to the others, the two jocks seemed wide awake.

“...Forget it,” Taichi mumbled to himself as he flung his cell phone down onto his pillow.

“What’s the matter?” asked Watase.

“...It’s nothing,” he replied.

He’d sent Inaba a handful of emails apologizing for what had happened earlier today, but she had yet to reply. He wanted to do something to fix the situation, but there wasn’t much he *could* do. He couldn’t exactly barge into a girls-only room at this hour; he’d have to wait until tomorrow. *Yeah... it’ll work out* .

“So, what should we talk about? Girls? Okay, Watase, you go first,” said Miyagami, the only person who was wearing one of the yukata supplied by the inn.

“Well... with this dumb ‘love craze’ going around, it feels like this trip is a huge opportunity to make my move on Fujishima-san, but... nothing seems to be working out. I just can’t seem to make any progress.”

“You know, Watase, you may seem like a total ladies’ man at first glance, but when it comes to the girl you actually want, you’re totally clueless, huh?” Taichi remarked.

“Nngh... Let’s just say that goes to show how serious I am about her. Otherwise my reputation’s gonna take a hit.”

“Oh, please. Your reputation’s worth about as much as Sone’s extra padding. Which is to say, absolutely nothing.”

“The hell did you just say?!”

“You wanna go, huh, punk?!”

From there, Watase and Miyagami started to “wrestle.” At first Taichi was content to merely watch, but before long— “Hey! The point of an armlock is to compete to see if you can break out of a two-handed clutch! Why are you half-assing the best part?! Oh my god, you can’t just brute-force it! The audience will never buy it! Let’s see some creativity, damn it!”

“...I’m not sure I understand what’s going on. Are you upset about something, Yaegashi?” asked Ishikawa, looking rather alarmed and more than a little uncomfortable.

“Oh... uhh... sorry. Disregard that. Just a reflex.” His inner pro-wrestling fanboy had taken over for a minute there.

“I heard what you guys said about my ‘extra padding’... Leave me alone... I don’t want to fight you...” Sone murmured as he lay sprawled out on his futon. “So, Yaegashi, do you have a girlf—wait, of course you do. I knew that. Okay, what about you, Ishikawa? I get the sense that you don’t care about much outside of baseball.”

“No, I have a girlfriend.”

“Oh, cool... Wait, WHAT?! You have a girlfriend?!” Sone leapt up into a sitting position.

“*What?!* ” Instantly, the other two stopped fighting and scrambled over. “With who?! Since when?!” they asked in perfect unison.

“Since a little over a month ago... But she doesn’t want to go public just yet, so I can’t say who it is.”

Ishikawa shot a furtive glance at Taichi, who nodded silently. *Sure, I’ll play innocent* .

“Dang, that’s recent... That reminds me, I heard Nakayama started dating someone recently, too. And she won’t say who it is, either. Not that there’s any chance it’s you, though! I couldn’t even *begin* to imagine that! No way!”

You’d be surprised , Taichi thought, tilting his head down to conceal his

expression, lest the look on his face give it away.

“Let’s play cards! Someone go get a deck. Whoever loses their chips has to answer any question we ask!”

“Alright, Miyagami! Our main target is Ishikawa, followed by Yaegashi! Let’s take ‘em for everything they’re worth!” Watase declared.

“Why am I a target?!”

A few hours later, the midnight card tournament ended in a historically uncommon major loss for Miyagami, who had proposed it in the first place.

□■□■□

The next morning, Taichi rubbed his tired eyes as he ate breakfast in the main hall. The card tournament had kept him up late, and he was grateful for a little homestyle Japanese cuisine.

“You look a little sleep-deprived, Yaegashi. What’re your plans for this morning, anyways? We chose different activities this time, right?” asked one bright-eyed and bushy-tailed Watase sitting across from him. *Seriously, does this guy ever get tired?*

“Uhhh... Glasswork, apparently.”

“Ooh, right. Yeah, I’m going hiking.”

“...Cool.”

“You doing okay, buddy? You better get your energy levels up by tonight! Don’t forget, we’re doing Operation Custom Tour!”

The mere memory was enough to send Taichi’s mood spiraling further.

Evening fell, and it was time to split into their groups for the Sapporo tour. Each group was allowed to walk around from 4:00 PM to 7:30 PM, during which time they were expected to have dinner together at some point. To streamline coordinated traveling, each group consisted of five same-gender students.

“Remember! Follow the rules, and don’t get into any trouble! And be sure you’re back by the scheduled time!”

Following a brief overview from the teachers, the students were free to go.

“Boys with boys and girls with girls. Nice and chaste! Now, don’t you kids even *think* about meeting up and having some kind of co-ed touring party, got it? If I find out about *anything* like that, I’m going to be so jeal—I mean, furious!” declared Gotou Ryuuzen, the (technically) grown man who was supposed to be supervising the students.

“...Is there something you’d like to talk about, Sensei?” asked class president Setouchi on behalf(?) of the other students.

“Setouchi, you angel! You’re gonna let me vent?! Okay, so get this. I was at a party—”

“Actually, I changed my mind.”

“I barely even started!”

Apparently there were some things she simply wasn’t willing to endure, obligations be damned.

Together, Taichi and the four other boys set off into town. The sky was clear—perfect weather for an outing. But it was bound to get chilly after sundown, so Taichi had packed a light jacket in his bag.

Suddenly, Watase came to a stop. “...Okay, let’s get something out of the way. What’re your plans for today?” he asked Taichi.

“Plans? I’m gonna be walking around with you guys, like we talked about.”

“C’mon, Yaegashi. People are going to be ditching their groups tonight, right?”

“And I’ll bet you wanna go canoodle with Inaba-san, am I right? Lucky you!” Miyagami grumbled.

“Well... I mean...” He’d sent Inaba a few more emails today, but still no response. And they’d chosen different morning activities, so he hadn’t seen her in person at all.

Then Miyagami changed targets. “What about you, Ishikawa? You still won’t tell us who your girlfriend even is! Sure, you beat us all at cards, but can’t you be a bro and tell us anyways!”

“You guys are gonna go somewhere together, right? Wait... She *is* a second-year, right?” asked Sone.

“She doesn’t want me to tell anyone just yet,” Ishikawa frowned, slumping his burly shoulders. “Anyway, we have no plans to meet up right this second. We’re meant to be traveling in our assigned groups.”

At this, Miyagami and Sone took turns praising him: “That’s our jock for you!”

“He’s got old-fashioned values!”

“The hero of the baseball team!”

“He’s our guy!”

“...That said, tomorrow’s trip to Otaru is a different story.”

Naturally, Miyagami and Sone completely changed their tune: “Bald loser!”

“Womanizer!”

“Go play with your balls, you creep!”

“You’re not the Ishikawa we know and love!”

Seriously, make up your mind.

“Whew... Well, I’m actually planning to meet up with a girl myself, so I’m gonna be scarce for the last hour or so. You guys hold down the fort for me, okay?” said Miyagami of all people.

“...What? WHAT?! Et tu, Miyagami?!” Sone wailed.

“Oho... Sure, knock yourself out. We all know it’s probably just a group hangout with the rest of your club,” Watase replied pointedly.

“I mean... yeah, but...”

“Oh, so you’re basically just an afterthought?” asked Sone.

“N-No! I’m the main dish, damn it!”

Meanwhile, Ishikawa turned to Taichi. “So what are your plans, then?”

“I... don’t really have any,” Taichi answered honestly.

“Oh, really? So I’m the only one sneaking out? I heard a lot of people would be ditching their groups, though... Hmm... Maybe I shouldn’t after all,” Miyagami mused.

“Yeah! Stay with us! This group is locked down—nobody gets in or out!” shouted Sone.

“Bros before hoes!” added Watase.

“I think it’s best to follow the rules,” Ishikawa nodded.

Likewise, Taichi was inclined to agree. “Yeah, I—”

“*Do you guys mind if I borrow your friend here for five minutes or so?”* Inaba Himeko cut in, her voice dripping with venom.

“Go for it,” the four other guys answered in perfect unison, all without missing a beat.

She dragged him by the collar into a nearby alley.

“Can you slow down for a m—whoa, what the?”

There stood Kiriyama, looking awkward, and Aoki, scowling angrily. Inaba glanced at them, then released Taichi with a forceful shove.

“What the fuck is this about everyone ditching their groups to hang out with whoever they want?! And *you* put them up to it?!”

“What? No, I didn’t...”

But he’d given them the green light to do it, so he could see how it could be interpreted that way. Thus, he decided to explain what had happened.

“They knew you were a soft touch, so they took full advantage... No, that’s not it. You weren’t thinking about their needs. You just didn’t want to rock the boat!”

“What do you mean...?”

“Tch... Whatever. My point is, I’m not going to sit back and let you encourage this flagrant rule-breaking!”

“Taichi, Yui, c’mon. Going against the rules? That’s really not cool,” Aoki scolded, his expression stern. “What were you *thinking?* I know you don’t agree with that crap! Especially not you, Yui!” Granted, his tone was more composed by comparison, but he was still just as upset as Inaba.

“Wh... What’s your problem? Either way, it’s none of your business,” Kiriyama

snapped.

“I beg to differ!” Inaba shot back. “You used the Dream Vision to gain influence over the school. And now you’re influencing them to violate school rules! What part of that is ‘none of my business,’ exactly?”

Kiriyama shrank back under Inaba’s fierce glare. “We’re... We’re doing what’s right.”

Truth be told, it wasn’t something they approved of wholeheartedly... but at this stage, they couldn’t afford to back down.

“...I acknowledge that the rules are there for a reason. But sometimes breaking the rules is the best course of action,” Taichi argued.

“Sure. In practice, maybe there are circumstances in which the rules should be broken. But is this really one of those circumstances? Is it that kind of emergency?”

Of course it wasn’t.

“Well, but... it’s going to make people happy, and it’s not going to cause problems, so...”

“Y-Yeah!” Kiriyama chimed in.

“Oh? It *won’t* cause problems?”

“...Huh?”

“Not a single person will be inconvenienced by this? Can you say that for a fact?”

“Well, if everyone’s free to walk around with whoever they want, then—”

“What if it prevents someone else from touring with who *they* want?”

“Well...” Taichi fell silent. Likewise, Kiriyama moved to say something, but couldn’t quite find her words.

“And that’s where your logic fails you, isn’t it?” Inaba sneered. “Now that we’re on the same page, what’ll it be? If you sent an email around to everyone, I bet you could still stop some, if not all, of the rule-breakers.”

Seeking an answer, Kiriyama looked up at Taichi.

Stop them and uphold the rules? Or let them do as they please? With these two options before him, Taichi found it odd that he was being asked to choose at all. Who was he to decide this?

"...It's not about what *I* want. It should be up to everyone to decide for themselves. And if they want to leave their assigned groups to walk around with someone else, so be it."

"When are you going to take a fucking iota of responsibility for once?!" Inaba roared.

As if I haven't been responsible this whole time? Taichi balked. "It's not that. But if it comes down to whether or not I'm going to stop them, then... no, I'm not going to stop them."

"Taichi...?" Kiriyama sounded surprised by this for some reason.

"They're free to walk around with whoever they want," he continued. "If it turns into a tug-of-war, then they should put in the effort to make things work in their favor. Nothing about that will cause problems for other people."

"You'd like to believe that, wouldn't you?"

"I've had dozens of Visions today. All of them were wishing to make fun memories with the person they have feelings for."

At this, Inaba's expression twisted in pain—anger mixed with grief. This gave him pause. As her boyfriend, he was meant to make her smile, not grimace.

"I guess you're just completely hopeless, aren't you? You can't let go. You have to help whoever crosses your path. Is that it? Is that who you are?" she asked, staring him directly in the eye.

Meeting her gaze, he declared firmly: "Yes, that's who I am."

She opened her mouth to reply... then closed it.

Meanwhile, Aoki turned to Kiriyama. "And you're totally okay with this?"

"Okay with... with what?"

"Do you think this is the right thing to do? Have you paused to think about it? Have you reached your own conclusion?" he asked, and it felt like he was trying

to get her to have an epiphany. Of what, Taichi didn't know.

"Well... um..." Kiriyama hesitated, so Taichi stepped in to help her.

"We agreed that we were going to make people happy, remember?" That was the condition under which they acted upon the Dream Vision.

"But... it feels like we're talking about two separate things here..."

Kiriyama was clearly confused, so Taichi decided to point out the most important detail: "This is what's best for them."

Kiriyama flinched.

"According to you, anyway," Inaba growled.

"We're not forcing anyone."

"Look..." Inaba took a deep breath, then exhaled. "This decision—is it a choice you're actively making? Have you thought about the consequences? Are you prepared to bear the brunt of it?! Maybe you were back when this whole thing started—but what about right now?!"

Choices. Consequences. Surely he'd had that level of conviction from the start—otherwise he wouldn't be feuding with Inaba now.

"Go ahead! Answer me... if you think you can!"

"Well, I've made people happy, haven't I?"

Did that count as conviction? He wasn't sure.

But for some reason, this answer seemed to frighten her.

"Please... I'm begging you... Snap out of it...!" Her tone wasn't critical; it was pleading. Her eyes shimmered with emotion. "For as impressive as you are during a crisis, I know you can't be trusted with this kind of power under normal circumstances... but still, I have to ask... *please...!*"

Impressive during a crisis, but can't be trusted with power? Is that how she sees me?

"Please, Taichi..." She paused, summoned up her resolve, and looked him square in the face. "Help me."

He wanted to help her. But at the same time, he wanted to help *everyone* . These two desires were in direct conflict.

So who do I choose? What do I base that decision on? Should I prioritize my girlfriend? Prioritize the needs of the many? Prioritize the greatest amount of good? Prioritize... whatever I feel like doing? I wish there was some sort of guiding principle that could help me make the right choice. Do I have to look inside myself to find it?

But he already knew it wasn't worth checking there, because— "Forget it. It'll be faster to email everyone ourselves... Let's go, Aoki." And with that, Inaba started walking.

"Real talk? Up till now, no matter how hard I disagreed with you guys, I could still see where you were coming from," said Aoki. "But this? There's no real argument for this."

Neither Taichi nor Kiriyama had a comeback.

The conversation had taken a lot longer than "five minutes," but fortunately the rest of his group had waited for him regardless.

"Hey, welcome back. Did you finish your chat? You guys gonna meet up later?" asked Watase.

"...No, I'm staying with the group," Taichi replied, trying his best to act normal. *It's not showing on my face, is it?*

"But you're practically the poster boy for the whole scheme... Alright, whatever." And that was the last anyone spoke of it.

Touring in a group of five guys proved to be surprisingly fun in its own right. They got into arguments over tiny details and teased Taichi and Ishikawa about their girlfriends, all while enjoying the beautiful Sapporo scenery. But every time they spotted a two-person or co-ed group, it made Taichi feel sick to his stomach with vertigo.

Once tour time was nearly over, they decided to grab dinner.

"We gotta have ramen! Sapporo is *famous* for its miso ramen!" Miyagami declared.

“What? I thought it was Asahikawa that was famous for *shoyu* ramen,” said Sone.

“You’re both correct. And Hakodate is famous for its shio ramen,” Taichi added.

“Wow. Thanks for that useless tidbit, Yaegashi,” Watase joked.

“We could get ramen anywhere. Since we’re in Hokkaido, we should try the seafood. Maybe we could go to a conveyor belt sushi place,” Ishikawa suggested.

Since it was obvious they weren’t going to come to a consensus, they decided to play rock-paper-scissors for it... and in the end, it was Taichi who won.

“Oh my god! Oh my god!”

“Wh... Why are you freaking out? You’re freaking *me* out!” said Miyagami, leaning away from Taichi.

“It’s just... I’m notoriously bad at rock-paper-scissors, so this is the first time I’ve ever won against multiple people in a row...”

“Feel free to marvel at the serendipity of life, but first you have to pick something for dinner,” said Ishikawa.

“Oh, right... Uhhh... Well, I’d definitely like to get some Hokkaido cuisine while we’re here...”

“Which means miso ramen!”

“No, shoyu ramen!”

“Sushi.”

“Guys! The whole point of doing rock-paper-scissors is that *the winner* gets to decide!” Watase pointed out. They nodded.

“Okay, well, what’ll it be, Yaegashi?” Sone prompted.

“Let’s see...”

As they walked down the street, Taichi looked around at the restaurants and mulled it over. Some people wanted to eat ramen, while at least one person wanted sushi. Taichi himself was fine either way, but he wanted to make

everyone happy... So what guideline would he use to make this decision? If he went with the majority opinion, that meant getting ramen—but those people each wanted a different kind of ramen, so they'd need a restaurant that could cater to both. In which case, the best possible option— "Hurry up!"

"Hurry!"

Miyagami and Sone were demanding an answer.

And right when he needed it— "Oh!"

"Hmm? See something?" Watase asked.

Taichi pointed to a sign outside one of the restaurants.

"What's that say? Ramen, sushi, jingisukan, curry soup... Oh, I get it! It's a buffet restaurant themed around Hokkaido cuisine! Well, that solves everything!"

If only life was this easy all the time.

The meetup location was a parking lot, where they were scheduled to board a bus to their hotel. On the way there, Taichi's group encountered some classmates sitting around in a park.

"Aren't you guys going to the meetup spot?" Watase asked.

"Oh, well... We're missing somebody from our group, so we kinda can't head over there until they come back."

Once they arrived at the meetup spot, each group was obligated to check in with their teacher. And if they checked in without all members present, it would become obvious that the missing student(s) had intentionally split away from the group.

Taichi checked the time. 7:10 PM—just twenty minutes left until the scheduled meetup time.

"I wonder if the teachers caught anyone breaking the rules. I know a lot of people said they'd rehearse an excuse beforehand, just in case, but yeah... Plus, it's gonna get chilly once the sun sets," Miyagami remarked.

Taichi was already shivering.

At the meetup spot, Taichi and the others checked in with Gotou, then boarded the bus. About one-third of the students had returned, with two-thirds still yet to show up. Meanwhile, Taichi prayed that everyone would make it back safely... but sure enough, the outcome he dreaded came to pass. 7:30 rolled around, and there were still a few groups missing.

Naturally, the teachers decided to search nearby. Naturally, they found the groups who were still waiting for their missing members. And naturally, it quickly became apparent that some people had left their assigned groups on purpose.

“The hell is going on here?!” one of the male teachers shouted. But he must have realized that yelling at the non-missing students wouldn’t lead to a resolution, because he composed himself and added, “Anyone who has any information on the missing students’ whereabouts, please let me know.”

Obviously these students all knew full well where their missing friends had gone off to, but they weren’t about to narc, so instead they pretended they would “try to get in touch.”

Taichi watched the events unfold from his seat on the bus, all the while quaking down to his core. His blood ran cold with fear as his mind played out all the worst-case scenarios.

“You look like you’re shivering. Are you cold?” asked the person in the seat next to him. All he could manage was a vague nod.

He wondered how Nagase and Kiriyama were reacting to this. He knew they were seated somewhere behind him, but he didn’t dare turn to look.

The minutes flew by, and soon 8:00 rolled around... but there were still students missing.

The teachers had worked tirelessly to locate most of the missing people, and with some help from the other students, they managed to get in contact with almost all of them... except for two: a boy and a girl.

“Yes... They’re still missing... and also...”

Worse still, one eyewitness claimed they’d seen the pair “walking with a shady-looking older guy.” This information quickly spread through the bus full

of students. Meanwhile, the teachers grew more desperate than ever, placing calls left and right as a few volunteered to search the city.

"Dude. Yaegashi." Watase leaned forward and whispered to Taichi from the seat directly behind him. "You look like you've seen a ghost, man. Relax! This isn't your fault, my guy."

"I know," he nodded, but in his heart he just couldn't agree. What if the two missing students were kidnapped or assaulted? Sure, he wasn't directly at fault, but if he hadn't encouraged everyone to break the rules in the first place, this never would have happened. This was *his* responsibility.

Inaba's words revived in his mind: *When are you going to take a fucking iota of responsibility for once?!*

He'd never meant to shirk the responsibility. He was only ever focused on taking action that would benefit everyone as a whole. But this, without a doubt, was a mistake of his own making. *And if I screwed up... then I need to fix it. I can do this. I have to.*

He rose from his seat.

"Uh, Yaegashi?"

"...I need to use the restroom."

With that, he walked off the bus and over to Gotou, where he explained that he was just running to the bathroom. Then he walked over to the nearby rest stop.

There, once he was safely concealed behind the building—he broke into a sprint.

He needed to get this situation under control, ASAP. As he ran, he contemplated how he would try to find them. He knew where they were last seen; could they still be there? Could he call them? No, he didn't have their numbers. Could he get their contact info from someone else?

"—ichi!"

The students of Yamaboshi weren't local to this area. Plus, it was nighttime. All things considered, it was possible that they'd gotten lost somewhere.

It was at this point that he stopped to wonder how it was that he came to hold so much influence over other people. Obviously the Dream Vision was a huge factor, but... how would his old self have handled it? Given this same power, would the Yaegashi Taichi from a year ago have taken it upon himself to help other people? To bring them happiness?

"Ta—!"

All his life, he'd been a "goddamn martyr" with self-sacrificing tendencies. But even then it was nothing extreme, and thus no one had ever pointed it out to him... until Inaba came along.

Over the past year, he had changed. Matured as a person. How many times had he thought about "fixing" or "saving" people over those twelve months? It was a notion that wasn't commonly present in the average person's life... but his martyr personality had deeply colored his outlook and affected his way of life. Was that a bad thing?

Arriving at the bus stop, he checked the posted departure timetable. *Hmm... The next bus won't be here for quite a while. Maybe I should just take a taxi? If I'm only going downtown, it shouldn't cost that—* "DAMN IT, TAICHI, I'M TRYING TO TALK TO YOU!"

He whirled around just in time to see a black blur fly forward—and latch itself to his abdomen.

"Whoa!"

He felt a pair of arms wrap around him and looked down to find a head of dark hair and an accompanying floral scent.

"Inaba...?"

"Give me... a minute to... catch my breath," she wheezed, still clinging to him. He could feel her heart pounding. Inaba Himeko was alive, and she was his girlfriend, and she was right here.

The only light was that of the fluorescent bulb overhead, as though the bus stop was the sole oasis in an ocean of darkness.

Meanwhile, he could feel her breathing slowly settle... and yet she didn't pull

away. Instead, she continued to press her cheek against his chest.

“Why the fuck did you run off like that, you moron?! I mean... I get why, but...”

“I’m more impressed you managed to catch up with me.”

“I had a feeling you’d pull a stunt like this, so I was keeping an eye on the buses to see who came and went.”

He felt bad for worrying her... but...

“Listen... I have to go, so... could you let go of me?”

Inaba whipped her head up to look at him, a single tear clinging to her lashes. “Why?”

“Because... I need to find them before something bad happens.”

She gave him a hard shove, putting space between them. “So your first instinct is to run off blindly?! You don’t have the first clue where they might be!”

“You’re right; I don’t. But I still need to look for them. I have to help them.”

“You’ll only make things more complicated! We’re all supposed to wait on the bus, remember?!”

“Sometimes following the rules means you can’t—”

“WILL YOU PLEASE JUST GET A GRIP?!” she bellowed at the top of her lungs. “You’ve been like this ever since you first started acting on your Visions! You decided it was okay to break the rules as long as *you* approved of it! And now look where that’s gotten us! You refuse to consider that maybe you ought to rethink your choices!”

...Was he really refusing to consider it? To him, he was simply choosing to remain on the path that matched his beliefs. This path had put him at odds with Inaba, so he needed to see it through for it to be worth it. That wasn’t “refusing to consider” an alternative. He’d looked at the options and made a choice. Of his own volition.

“Look... I get that I made the wrong choice, okay? But right now, I need to

take action! To help people who might be in trouble!”

Inaba’s expression twisted in deep misery. She wasn’t full-on crying yet, but he could tell she was close.

Please... Please don’t cry. I don’t want to hurt you. I don’t want to hurt anyone.

“Why...? I know you’re not usually this stupid... Come on, Taichi, please... Just stop this...!”

“I... I want to do everything I can.”

Inaba’s eyes flew open in a rage. “That’s not what I’m talking about here! You can’t be like this! It’d be one thing if you were a normal human fighting to solve your own problem, but you’re not! You have a superpower, and you absolutely cannot act like this!”

Act like *what?* She was speaking so vaguely, he couldn’t understand what she was getting at... and yet somehow he could sense that there was indeed a critical difference between a normal person and someone with a superpower.

“Can’t I just... act the same way I always have? I mean, how am I supposed to act any different? I was born this way!”

At this, she began to tremble. “I get it... That’s the same thing I told you, once upon a time. That the two of us were just born this way, and there are parts of ourselves we can never change.”

She was referring to a conversation that had taken place during the body-swap, nearly a full year ago now. Taichi was a “goddamn martyr”; she had anxiety and trust issues. These traits weren’t the result of some traumatic event—they were simply innate. And because of that, they couldn’t be changed. But together, he and Inaba had reached the conclusion that perhaps these things didn’t always need to be changed in the first place.

“Maybe I was wrong about that,” she continued in a shaky voice.

“What?” His sight blurred slightly. Was he shaking, too? Why?

“Be honest with me... Is that what’s been holding you back this whole time?”

Somehow, it felt like this question wasn’t completely directed at him. “What

are you getting at?”

“Do you just... shrug your shoulders and tell yourself you were born this way? Is that your excuse?”

“I’m not making ex—”

“Yes you are! And that’s how we got trapped in this nightmare!”

The word *nightmare* hit him like a ton of bricks all over again. The path he had chosen for himself had resulted in a nightmare for others. Was it really because he had made excuses? Excuses for what, exactly?

He’d been fighting his way forward all this time... and *this* was where it led.

“Don’t put your head in the sand! Think about it!” The look in her eyes beseeched him. “You’ve always been an incredible person. Not a day goes by that I’m not impressed with how much you can accomplish without even trying. And I admit, it was that natural drive that... that made me fall for you... but I need you to stop shrugging off the responsibility! Stop telling yourself that this is the only way you can be! That you’re doing it for *their* sake! That it’s for their own good! Start thinking for yourself! Form your own opinions!”

Her boiling anger seared the chilly night air around them.

“Look at us! We can’t stay children forever—we have to grow up! Don’t you realize what «Heartseed» is capable of?! Quit with the fucking selfless hero act and focus on what *you* want!”

Focus on myself? Wouldn’t that be MORE childish? Or does she mean something else?

By the end of her tirade, Inaba was gasping for breath. Her emotions had surged over him, consuming him, pulling him under. He wanted to say something in response, but somehow he just couldn’t find the words. And since he couldn’t think of anything, he simply let his mouth move on autopilot.

“*What I want* is to go find them. I’ll think about changing my ways once that’s taken care of.”

“There you go, acting on reflex again. Great.”

Her disparaging tone was starting to piss him off.

“Just because I’m ‘acting on reflex’ doesn’t mean I don’t think about what I’m doing!”

“Everything you do is on reflex! You help people entirely on reflex! You get involved only if you think it’ll make things better! And when someone tells you they love you—” She stopped mid-rant, eyes wide, realizing what she was about to say. Then, after a moment, she steeled herself and finished, “When someone tells you they love you, you date them purely on reflex!”

“No... That’s not true. I mean, yeah, you made the first move with me... But back when I had feelings for Nagase, I was the one who... who confessed first,” Taichi pointed out, though he was unsure if it worked as a valid argument.

“That was only because Iori flirted with you first!”

At this, he thought back to the conversation he’d had with Kiriyama yesterday. Inaba and Aoki had each actively fallen for someone, but the same couldn’t be said of himself or Kiriyama. Their feelings were of a different type. A different quality. Was it still equal, then? Did it still count as “loving them back”?

Evidently some part of this was showing on his face, because Inaba’s teary expression shifted to realization.

“I guess it’s no use... You won’t change,” Inaba murmured slowly. “You once changed me, but... apparently I can’t change you.”

“I changed you...?”

Hadn’t they come to the consensus that someone could change their behavior, but not the person they truly were deep down? Or was he misreading this somehow? Inaba had changed... but what about him?

“Oh... I see now... Maybe this is a *me* problem.”

The look on her face said she’d figured something out.

“Yeah... It makes sense that I’d interpret it like that... This is *my* world, and I need to change it,” she declared, then faltered for a moment. “See, I... When I’m with you... I can feel myself start to cling to you. I become overly dependent on you. Then I get tunnel vision, and suddenly nothing else matters... and at

that point, I can no longer make rational decisions."

It was clear she cared for him a great deal.

"That's why I can't manage to stop you this time around... in spite of every promise I ever made to myself."

It sounded an awful lot like she was admitting defeat. The game was over. No, maybe it was something else— "Maybe I'm just not fit to be your girlfriend."

—like their relationship.

He wanted so badly to put his fingers in his ears and drown her out. He didn't want to break up, *especially* not right now. As much as he'd managed to hide it, the truth of the matter was, he was falling apart. Slowly but surely, all of this had taken its toll on his mental health, wearing him down, and now he could feel something inside him threatening to burst. He couldn't handle another devastating blow—*come on, why am I being so pessimistic? It'll be fine, it'll be fine*— "Maybe we... shouldn't be together."

Never, in all his wildest dreams, did he imagine he'd hear those words from Inaba Himeko. He just... couldn't believe it. He'd actively put effort into this relationship, and cared a lot about it, but here she was, ready to throw in the towel.

"I believe that a good relationship involves two people building each other up, and... we're not exactly doing that, are we?"

"That's..."

But he couldn't deny it.

"Personally, I'm content to let you take the reins... but you have no vision for our future together. We're just not going to last."

"Are you serious...?"

At this, her eyes welled with tears until they threatened to spill down her cheeks.

Just then, he felt his phone buzzing. He put his hand to his pocket; Inaba saw this and fell silent. Someone was calling him. He hesitated.

“Answer it,” she prompted him.

It was Watase Shingo.

“Hey, Yaegashi! Where are you, man? You’re not looking for the missing students, are you?”

“Huh? Oh, uh... Yeah, kinda...”

“I figured you might be. Listen, the teachers finally got ahold of them just now.”

“...Oh, really?” Relief flooded his chest. *They’re safe. Thank god.* Now the worst-case scenario was safely off the table— “Apparently the girl suffered a nasty fall and had to go to the hospital. But it wasn’t too serious, so they’re on their way back now. Anyway, point is, the bus is gonna head out here soon, so you need to haul ass back here, stat.”

She fell. She got hurt. All because of him—because he didn’t stop everyone from breaking the rules.

“Also, have you seen Fujishima-san at all? She left the bus a while ago and we haven’t seen her since... Uh, hello? Yaegashi? You still there? Listen, man, just head on back, alright?”

“Oh... okay...”

After he hung up, he glanced back at Inaba to find that she was looking down at her own phone.

“Just got an email from a friend. Apparently they found the missing people and the bus is about to take off.” She gave a sardonic laugh. “If they were smart, they would’ve bussed everyone else back first, THEN focused on the missing kids. Our teachers are incompetent, I tell you.”

Thanks to this unexpected interruption, they’d each had enough time to get their emotions under control. The tension had eased, and Taichi was grateful for the chill of the northerly wind. Now they wouldn’t need to revisit their previous conversation.

Inaba turned and headed back to the parking lot. It was time to rejoin the others. For now he just needed a little time to get his thoughts in order, and

then they could— “You only love me because I love you, don’t you?” she asked casually, her back still turned.

It was so sudden, so flippant, he nearly agreed offhand. Hastily, he struggled to come up with a reply... but Inaba didn’t wait for his answer.

“Well, here’s something you should know.”

She turned back to face him, smiling softly.

“I don’t love this version of you.”

Taichi remained frozen in place as Inaba walked away. Slowly but surely, she vanished into the darkness of night. They used to be so close—both physically and emotionally—but now they were light-years apart. How did this happen? He couldn’t bring himself to chase after her. Not when he knew he could never catch up to her.

There he stood, alone. Abandoned. He had single-handedly caused the worst-case scenario to come to pass. Someone had gotten hurt. And now Inaba—the one person who believed in him more than any other—had given up on him entirely.

He’d never felt so pathetic in all his life. Could it get ANY worse?

“...Yaegashi-kun?”

How? Why are you here?

Come to think of it, Inaba would always turn up at the most bizarre moments, too—*oh, I get it. They’re keeping tabs on the enemy.*

Next to the sidewalk was a weedy, gently sloping hill. And at the top, standing between the uniformly planted roadside trees, was one Fujishima Maiko.

“I saw you get off the bus and had a feeling you were up to something, so I tailed you,” she explained. Evidently Inaba hadn’t been his only pursuer. “I have to apologize, though—I feel like that conversation really wasn’t meant for my ears. I’ll do my best to forget everything I heard.”

But Taichi wasn’t really listening. His mind was a blur.

“Granted, there were parts I couldn’t quite make out, given the distance.”

If she'd heard their whole conversation, then so be it. *C'est la vie* . All he could do was pray she hadn't overheard anything critical. Surely this situation couldn't get any worse than it already was.

"But I will say this... I think I've uncovered the two keys to the truth."

Oh god, what now? Please, no. If «Heartseed» started targeting her as a result of her incessant prying, there would be no saving her. He just didn't have room on his plate for that.

" 'Visions' and '«Heartseed».' "

These were, beyond a shadow of a doubt, the two things they were supposed to keep secret at any cost.

"I get the feeling there's something more to these keywords. That they'll lead me to the reason behind the Cultural Research Club's odd behavior."

What am I supposed to do, now that she knows this much? What can I possibly do?

"Anyway, I'm sorry. I'm really not trying to kick you while you're down."

He could only imagine what his expression must have looked like right now. Was he crying? Entirely possible. But if not, then perhaps he simply lacked the energy.

Him versus Inaba. Him versus Fujishima. In both cases, he had suffered a crippling defeat.

"I won't ask you to explain everything right now, obviously, but... I do expect an explanation sometime in the future. Understood?"

He could only nod his head.

□■□■□

As a result of the crisis, the students arrived at their hotel a little over an hour late. Naturally, once they arrived, they were all "treated" to a half-hour lecture about how "friends don't let friends break the rules." After that, the individual rule-breakers were singled out and lectured *again* , this time by their class advisors directly.

At some point during this interrogation, Taichi and Kiriyama were implicated as co-conspirators, and so they were called in to speak with the second-year chief advisor.

"...I understand what happened. You didn't plan it, nor did you take part. But you *did* encourage it, and that's still extremely unacceptable."

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry, sir," said Taichi.

"I'm sorry...!" Kiriyama sniffled.

The two of them bowed apologetically.

"It's late, so go on and get to bed. And be warned that Gotou-sensei himself may wish to have another talk about the subject once we're all back at school."

After a thorough tongue-lashing, they left the teacher's room. Kiriyama had started sobbing partway through the lecture, and she didn't show any sign of letting up.

"You okay, Kiriyama?"

"Yeah... I'm okay..."

But right as they arrived at the elevator lobby— "Hold it right there!"

—they were accosted by a girl with her hands on her hips, almost as though she'd been waiting in ambush.

"Who's this?" Kiriyama asked, her voice still watery. Evidently she didn't recognize her... but Taichi certainly did. It was the girl who had asked for his advice right at the start of the trip—the one who was torn between her current flame, Nakajima, and another guy who had recently confessed his feelings to her, Makihara.

"Is something wrong?"

"Oh, you'd better believe something's wrong!" she shouted, her fake eyelashes trembling with rage. She stormed up and seized Taichi by the collar. "You're the one who... who told me to go with Makihara!"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa! What the heck is going on?!" Kiriyama stammered as she tried to separate the two.

“You told me to choose Makihara! And I trusted you! But what do I get? ‘Oh, it was all a test!’ ‘Oh, he was in on it the whole time!’ I can’t *believe* this!”

“Start from the beginning! What happened?!” Kiriyama was so distracted with this new problem, her tears had dried up completely.

Clucking her tongue, the girl relinquished her grip on Taichi. “Ugh, I just don’t get it! And now my life is over!”

Baffled, Taichi stared back blankly. He honestly wasn’t sure if he had the right to get angry at her for her behavior.

“You remember when we talked? And I told you another guy wanted to get with me, but I already had a boyfriend? And then you said I should dump him for the other guy?”

At this, Kiriyama looked at Taichi in shock. Her eyes seemed to say, *did you actually say that?* He knew he needed to come up with an excuse.

“Well... I could see that, you know, it was what you wanted, deep down...”

“Excuse me? What does that even mean? My point is, I followed your stupid advice—and then my boyfriend told me he’d put Makihara up to it as a test to see if I really had feelings for him! Apparently Makihara doesn’t actually like me in the least!”

What the hell?

“So now I’m single again! My ex was like, ‘I always suspected you might leave me for another guy, and now I see I was right. If you don’t love me, then let’s end it.’ Thanks a lot, asshole!”

Had he failed? Had he misread her Vision? Had his actions... ruined her life?

He knew for a fact she’d wanted to be with Makihara. And if that was what she truly wanted, then Taichi was inclined to encourage it. But naturally, he’d had no way of knowing that it was all a setup.

“But... I mean, your ex sounds like kind of a jerk for tricking you like that,” said Kiriyama.

“Oh yeah, he’s definitely a scumbag. Only an insecure loser would test their girlfriend like that... but I wouldn’t have fallen for it if it wasn’t for *you* ,

Yaegashi!”

Her anger was directed entirely at him. Truth be told, no one was truly blameless in this situation, but admittedly it was Taichi who had given her the final push. If it wasn’t for him... if he hadn’t been there to pull that trigger... then she never would have made that mistake.

“Rrrrrgh! Damn it! The whole trip is RUINED because of this! And it’s all YOUR fault! Whoever spread that rumor about you being trustworthy was full of shit! You’re worthless! Now go away!” After tearing into him for a bit, she seemed to decide he wasn’t worth the effort. “I’m done with you!” she shouted as she stormed off.

Meanwhile, Taichi fell to his knees in despair.

He really, *really* didn’t feel like going back to his hotel room after that. Instead, he decided to step outside to clear his head and take in the night air, so Kiriyama followed him out onto the terrace.

The hotel was situated at the top of a mountain, right on the edge of a cliff. Beyond the wooden railing lay the city nightscape below; even Taichi had to admit it was a beautiful sight.

Kiriyama took a seat at one of the little round tables and looked over at him. “Um, Taichi, are you okay? Because judging from what I heard just now, it sounded an awful lot like that girl dug her own grave. She was, like, *super* pushy.”

“Doesn’t change the fact that I influenced her to do it. And I have to take responsibility for that.”

“Well... I mean... yeah, maybe...”

“I can’t believe I misread her Vision like that... and then I gave her the completely wrong answer... What’s gotten into me...?”

“Come on, Taichi, don’t be so hard on yourself. Like, obviously I don’t know what kind of Vision it was, but if even *you* couldn’t manage to decipher it, then I doubt I—oh.”

“What?”

Kiriyama trembled slightly, balling her hands into fists. “All this time, we’ve been giving people answers to their problems... but were they actually the *right* answers?”

“Huh?”

“Were they all correct? And if they were correct in that moment, did they stay correct? In the beginning, we always found out about the results of our advice later on down the line, but... what about now?”

No, Taichi wasn’t aware of how his advice worked out in most cases. After all, many of the problems didn’t have quick fixes.

“We saw their Visions... heard their prayers... learned their deepest desires... but were we right about all of it?”

The Dream Visions didn’t come with an answer sheet, so they had no way of knowing if they’d correctly interpreted what they’d seen. And even if they *had* interpreted it correctly, it didn’t necessarily mean the desire *itself* was correct...

Man, how am I only realizing this now? Taichi cursed himself for his ignorance.

“There’s no way for me to fix it... I made a mistake and damaged someone’s life. I hurt people.” And it was possible he’d done even more damage on top of this without realizing it.

“Um, Taichi?” Kiriyama asked as he wallowed in his misery. “Do you mind if I cry?”

“Haven’t you *been* crying?”

“No, I mean, like, *really* cry about this! I need to throw myself a big fat pity party and whine about what a loser I am!”

It was a bizarre request, to say the least.

“Okay, here I go... Nnn... But just so you know, I’m totally fine. Once you’re feeling better, you can... you know, head on in without me.”

True to her word, she took out a little washcloth and started sobbing into it —*hard* . For a moment Taichi hesitated, but eventually he decided she probably needed to get it out of her system. So he sat with her in silence, quietly

regretting his own actions. Her convulsive gasps nearly made him tear up along with her, but he narrowly suppressed it.

At one point he broke the silence to ask “Are you cold?” to which she replied “No, I’m okay” through sniffles.

Together, the losing team sat out on the terrace for who knows how long, the night breeze ruffling their hair. Then, eventually, Kiriyama spoke up.

“...We really screwed up, huh?” she muttered. Her voice sounded more composed now... but Taichi’s mind was still a blur.

“Yeah, I think it’s safe to say we did. We’ve caused a lot of trouble for a lot of people.”

“They were right. Inaba and Aoki, I mean.”

But Taichi wasn’t ready to admit that just yet. He could acknowledge his own failings, but he didn’t want to believe that the path he’d taken was completely erroneous.

“We have to accept it, Taichi.”

“I mean... considering the situation we’re in, yeah...”

He knew it full well, but he was too scared—too pathetic—to face the truth. Everything weighed down on him at once: he’d failed to guide the other students, he’d failed in his relationship with Inaba, he’d failed to throw Fujishima off the trail, and now he’d failed to give the proper advice to that girl. He didn’t even know where to start anymore.

“We tried to make use of our power, but... in the end, it consumed us.”

“The last thing I wanted was to let it corrupt me, but... yeah.”

“I think we probably should’ve thought a little harder about what it really means to wield power, you know?”

Everyone had cautioned them about this. And for all Taichi’s good intentions, he’d fallen short of the mark.

“That, and... I think we let ourselves go with the flow a little too much.”

“What do you mean?”

“Think about it! There’s sooo much pressure when everyone’s excited for something. And when they start talking about how great you are, it spreads like wildfire, and suddenly you feel like you just can’t say no anymore, you know?”

“...I admit, there were definitely times when I felt obligated to agree.”

They’d started this mission with the sole intention to “help people in need,” but somewhere along the way it had evolved into “help anyone who asks, no matter what.” And by the end, it had felt as though they couldn’t function at all without the Dream Vision.

How had it led to that? Well, put simply: “We lost sight of ourselves, didn’t we?”

“Haha... Yeah, that’s definitely one way to put it. We put on a tough front whenever people came to us for help, but deep down... we were just happy someone needed us.”

It felt so good to live up to their expectations. And once he’d had a taste of the forbidden fruit, he couldn’t stop coming back for more... until ultimately he was consumed by desire. Chihiro must have experienced something similar during the Phantom Projection phenomenon. What sort of senpai was Taichi if he couldn’t even set a good example for his kouhai?

“In the end, I was too quick to rely on the power, and so I misread the Vision I saw. I was careless.”

“We kinda started to forget just how risky it all was.”

Together they took turns expressing their regrets. And there were a lot of regrets to be had.

“Do you think if we’d kept it together... if we’d thought it through a little more... the power wouldn’t have consumed us like that?”

A world where things hadn’t gone so wrong.

“You mean, if we had the willpower and commitment and determination? I don’t know... Were we short on any of those things when we started?”

He couldn’t imagine—didn’t *want* to imagine—that they were quite that thoughtless.

“We might’ve had *some* , but we didn’t have *enough* . That’s how we ended up here.”

But what did a decision look like when it *did* have all those things in ample quantity?

“Maybe we never should’ve done anything.”

“That’s not true!” Taichi shouted reflexively, then flinched at the sound of his own voice.

“Wh... Where did that come from?”

“Sorry... It’s nothing.”

He’d rejected the idea purely on instinct. He didn’t want to admit it; he regretted the outcome of his actions, but *that* was one thing he couldn’t accept. After all, if he told himself that everything they’d done was a mistake... what would he have left?

“We still made a lot of people happy, so... I don’t think it’s right to disavow all of it,” he hesitated.

“R-Right, but... still, we probably should’ve had more concrete guidelines and stuff, you know?” Kiriyama asked timidly, possibly in fear of another volatile reaction from Taichi.

“W-Well... true.”

“I was wondering, actually...” She paused, summoned all of her courage, then continued, “Are you planning to... to keep acting on your Visions?”

He ruminated on this for a moment. If he did continue, then he had the potential to make someone happy... but at the same time, the possibility of another catastrophic failure loomed over him. Could he risk it? Did the martyr in him want to risk another plunge to rock bottom? Another taste of despair and emptiness?

...No.

“I can’t say I particularly want to.”

The idea was... terrifying. It felt as though there was something inside him

that he was barely managing to keep in one piece, and if he suffered another failure, it would shatter for good. That was Taichi's biggest fear of all.

Kiriyama heaved a sigh of relief. "Right! Totally! We should officially call it quits after this... To be honest, we really should've listened to Inaba and Aoki a lot sooner."

Taichi had been too hell-bent on pursuing his mission to pay Aoki or Inaba much heed. Now here he was at a dead end, unable to continue. If Aoki and Inaba were indeed correct, then where exactly had he gone wrong?

"Aoki was right. We really didn't have enough room on our plates for this," Kiriyama muttered.

"What if we *did* have room, though? Would it have been different?" Taichi mused aloud to himself.

He didn't mean anything in particular by this comment, and yet she looked at him in shock. "What?"

"What?"

"That thing you just said. 'If we had room on our plates, would it have been different?' "

"I don't think it'd be that simple, Kiriyama."

"Wh... You're totally the one who suggested it!" she shouted, jumping to her feet and gesturing wildly with her hands. Then she froze, looked down at herself, realized just how childish she was behaving, and turned bright red. "Look... I'm not very smart, so I don't know if this is the right answer, exactly," she began again—hesitant, but nevertheless willing to be vulnerable. "But for starters, I think we should focus on solving the problems right in front of us."

If you can't see the bigger picture, start by fixing the problems you CAN see. It was so simple... and yet there was something appealing about that simplicity.

"If we start there, I think... maybe we'll start to figure out all the places we went wrong."

She didn't want to sit around and feel sorry for herself—that wouldn't change anything. Instead she wanted to take steps to rectify the situation while also

maintaining an introspective look at her own faults.

“In which case, I guess I should start with... that thing I’ve been avoiding.” She balled her hands into tight fists and exhaled slowly. “I never meant to dodge around the issue for this long; I just kept worrying that it wasn’t right. And I wanted to do it the right way. No excuses.”

Taichi had a feeling he knew what she was referring to.

“But when it comes to Aoki...”

Sure enough.

He paused to reflect on his own immediate problems. There was the rule-breaking thing, the mishandled advice thing, the Inaba thing, and... the Fujishima thing. *So where do I start?*

“...I don’t want to give him any BS excuses. Like, that’d be a total copout. He’s the kind of guy who’ll be completely honest with me, and I want to be just as blunt right back.” She smiled, her puffy eyes illuminated by the dim terrace lights.

“Wait... Isn’t this kind of sudden?” Taichi asked. The timing struck him as odd.

“Yeah, I know. We’ve got all this other crap going on that we need to be worried about. But I think this is where I need to start... to start over.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because it’s been stressing me out for way too long! And besides, if it wasn’t for his dad’s crisis, I might’ve made a different choice about acting on the Dream Vision... I mean, sometimes personal feelings make you biased!”

That he couldn’t deny.

“But most of all... I just don’t want to keep holding out on him forever. This is a good opportunity to put it all out there. I’m gonna speak my truth... Maybe I’ll do it tomorrow.”

“W-Wait a minute. Isn’t that moving a little too quickly? I mean... what about me? What am I supposed to do?”

“I don’t know, but whatever it is, you were supposed to do it literally forever

ago, so you'd better hurry. Just think long and hard about what it is you should be doing... and after you get it done, we can meet up again to have another pity party, okay?"

She'd been knocked down, but now she was trying to pick herself back up again. And if he didn't hurry, she was going to leave him in the dust. But Taichi didn't foresee himself getting up anytime soon; he didn't have anything to support himself with. He needed a little help to get started.

"Oh, but... maybe I gotta do an apology tour first... Ugh, Inaba's totally gonna rip me a new one..."

He needed to do something, fast. Kiriyama had already admitted to her mistakes and was now trying to turn over a new leaf... but Taichi couldn't take that step. He didn't have that power.

All he had left was fear.

□■□■□

When Taichi returned to his room, he found Watase and Ishikawa waiting for him. He apologized for all the drama he'd caused, to which they replied that it wasn't his fault. Then they told him that the guy who had originally spoken to him about the plan had come by to apologize while he was out. Apparently, his plan was to come back another time while Taichi was around so they could talk face-to-face, but Taichi already felt loads better just knowing the other guy didn't hate his guts.

He had no desire to stay up late. He was exhausted. The others seemed to intuit this, because they encouraged him to go to bed early. So Taichi climbed into bed... and yet, part of him kept wondering if he was *allowed* to go to sleep. Wasn't there something else he was supposed to be doing right now?

Both his muddled thoughts and the less-than-comfortable pillow he was using were working against him. Time passed, and he drifted in and out of consciousness in fitful bursts. The events of the day had completely invalidated his beliefs. And if the path he'd traveled thus far was wrong, then where was he meant to go from here?

A vague sense of unease set in. Truth be told, this low hum of anxiety had

been plaguing him for a while now. He tried to recall when it started; it felt pretty recent, but still long enough for him to have grown used to it being there. The earliest he remembered it being there was back when they first handed out the career planning surveys— [There's a girl. The one who got dumped because of Taichi. She stands alone, grumbling to herself, "If only it wasn't for him." The world around her is fuzzy and unfocused, almost like... an actual dream...? She's complaining about someone. "If it wasn't for him, I never would've gotten dumped." She imagines the scapegoat in her mind. It's a familiar face—Taichi's face. "This is all Yaegashi's fault. If it wasn't for him—"]

Taichi jumped upright in bed. Neither Watase nor Ishikawa reacted; presumably they were fast asleep. *What was that Vision?*

His mind reeled. The way the images and sounds had blurred together, it felt as though his dream had fused with someone else's while he slept. His brain felt like mush, and he couldn't think straight. He needed some air. Pulling a jacket on over his pajamas, he left the room.

Bathed in amber light, the hallway was silent, save for the *thump, thump* of his footsteps.

Her Dream—her desire—was for Taichi to disappear. Granted, it was possible she didn't *consciously* want this; maybe it really was little more than a regular dream. But on some level, she did in fact want it. That was how the Dream Vision worked.

This knowledge weighed on him more heavily than any Vision he'd ever seen. Come to think of it, she'd told him as much directly, hadn't she? *Go away.* In other words, *disappear. Cease to exist.* He had screwed up so badly that someone who originally came to him seeking help now sought his erasure.

All this time, they'd been granting people's wishes—as long as it was reasonably doable without too much direct interference, and as long as it would make people happy. And the act of helping someone was a goal Taichi had aspired to his whole life. He was greatly empathetic, and if he didn't do something to solve the problem, he'd feel their pain as if it were his own.

Empathizing with others... Projecting onto others... Everything he'd built thus far... Every choice he made regarding the Dream Vision... If he wanted to hold

onto it... If he wanted to protect his sense of identity... then his next move would be...

With no set destination in mind, Taichi wandered down the stairs and out onto the windy terrace. Somehow the nightscape felt more peaceful now than it had when he was out here with Kiriyama earlier.

Weaving through the little round tables and chairs, he walked toward the wooden railing. On the other side was a steep incline—a cliff. If he fell, he would most likely lose his life. Everything would come to an end. And that act would make someone's Dream come true, in which case— "TAICHI, STOOOOOOOOP!"

"Whoa!"

Out of nowhere, someone grabbed him from behind and performed a double leg takedown. Caught off-guard, he lost his balance and fell over. Then he felt his attacker climb on top of him. He quickly rolled over onto his back to see who it was.

Nagase Iori.



“Not okay! What are you THINKING, Taichi?! Just because someone wants you to—you don’t even know if she *actually* wants it—I mean, not that it matters! You’re not allowed to do that, whether she wants it or not! *Absolutely not allowed!”* Nagase shouted down at him as she straddled him, her silky hair dangling in his face.

She was wearing a yukata beneath her jacket, but her obi belt had come loose, giving him an ample view of her chest—

“Wait, what are you looking at?! You perv!”

“Gah!”

Her palm collided with his cheek in a slap, and it hurt.

“I... I didn’t mean to, okay?! You’re the one putting it in my face—Whatever! It’s not important! Now what the hell’s gotten into you, Nagase?!”

“Huh? What do you mean? I saw that look on your face as you were walking out here—you were going to throw yourself off the cliff! I bet you saw that same Vision I saw!”

“I was going to... do what?”

“Th... Throw yourself off the cliff, obviously! To grant her wish or whatever!”

“Dude, come on. You know I’d never go that far. You really think I’d kill myself just because someone else wanted me to?”

There was a moment of silence.

“Oh... Right...” Nagase stuck out her tongue and bonked herself on the head in a playful show of self-deprecation.

“No, seriously, this isn’t funny.”

“Okay, I’m sorry! I’m really sorry! I jumped to a dumb conclusion, okay?!” She jumped off of him and prostrated herself dogeza-style right there on the terrace floor. “I was just... worried you might actually consider it, that’s all...”

“What kind of nutjob do you take me for...? Then again, it wouldn’t be the first time I was willing to throw my life away,” he muttered.

“See?! Exactly!”

They both got to their feet.

“Aren’t you cold out here in that yukata?”

“Nah, I’ve got a jacket. Besides, they wouldn’t give these out if they didn’t want us to wear them. I figured I owed my adoring fans a free fanservice scene!” She hiked up the skirt to flash some leg.

“Wh... Stop that! I thought you *didn’t* want me looking!”

“There’s a world of difference between you objectifying me and me objectifying myself, Taichi-kun.”

“If you say so.”

The slap had knocked him out of his funk, and it felt good to have a normal conversation for a change.

“So, what are you doing out of bed?”

“Well, I had a Vision, and in it... you’re not going to like this, but...”

“It’s okay. I saw it too.”

“Okay, so you *did* see it! I figured you were more likely to have seen it since it was about you, y’know? And after everything that happened today, I knew you were having a rough time, and... I got scared. So I started wandering around, and then I spotted you, and here we are! Anyway... I’m sorry for getting the wrong idea. That was dumb of me.”

“Nah, that’s okay. You were just worried about me, and I appreciate it.”

“Awww, you’re such a nice guy!”

Her saintly smile warmed him to the core, and before he knew it, his lips were moving.

“I really screwed this up, didn’t I? And not just part of it. All of it.”

He knew it was obvious that he wanted her consolation.

“I wouldn’t say you screwed it *all* up. Some of it, definitely, but yeah.” Though her tone was forgiving, by no means was she trying to sugarcoat things. “Hmmm... That look on your face tells me you wanna get something off your chest. Go ahead and vent to your big sister!” she joked, and Taichi laughed.

Bit by bit, he told her about the conversation he'd had with Kiriyama, and how he felt. How he'd worked hard to carve his own path, a path that ended in failure, but nevertheless, he still believed his viewpoints were at least somewhat valid... and so he was having trouble figuring out where to start over. Surprisingly, he found he wasn't all that embarrassed to admit it.

"I stumbled down the wrong path... grew dependent on my power... but that's just the kind of person I am. I can't stop myself wanting to help people."

"Okay, I'm gonna have to stop you there."

Until now she'd been content to simply nod along, but now she was actively halting his progress. "What for? Oh, right... It's getting late. I should let you get back to bed."

"Nope! I've got plenty of time to spare. I just wanna ask you something... because I think it might be important."

"What is it?"

She pressed her index finger to her lips and fell still. Around them, the silence of the night seemed to reverberate in his ears, growing more and more tense by the second. Then, finally—

"Tell me, Taichi. Is that *really* who you are?"

"...What?" He didn't quite... understand... what she was getting at.

"I mean, okay. I definitely think you have a hero complex, or as Inaban would call it, 'martyr' syndrome..."

Yes, exactly.

"But is that really a part of you that you can't fight?"

Of course I can't fight it. It's who I am.

"Because, I mean, I'm pretty sure you *could* hold yourself back if you wanted to. Not like you'd go through 'helperitis withdrawal' or something, right?"

"Hold myself back?"

"Think about it! This isn't the Liberation. Your body isn't moving on autopilot. So all you have to do is stop yourself! You don't literally *need* to help people.

You can hold it back if you just try.”

...Taichi couldn’t exactly argue with that.

“So basically, I think you’ve convinced yourself you ‘can’t stop it’ when that actually isn’t true,” she shrugged.

This struck him as completely presumptuous, and he was inclined to push back on it, but he couldn’t think of a counter-argument. Not only that, but something about this conversation felt... familiar, somehow—

“Sounds familiar, doesn’t it? That’s because the two of us had a conversation like this just last year.”

...*Of course* . One year ago, he had explained to Nagase that her various personas were all equally valid sides of her. That she was simply more expressive than the average person.

“That conversation gave me the push I needed to change who I was.”

Nagase... changed? Does that mean I can, too?

“And now it seems like fate’s led us to have this same conversation again,” she mused to herself.

“I... I admit... it might be... all in my head,” Taichi stammered, his voice shaking. “But then... why... why did I...?”

He knew what he wanted to say, but he couldn’t quite get the words out. He was on the cusp of a major revelation, and he only needed to take one more step to get there... but for some reason... he just... couldn’t. Something was going to break.

“...Who have I been, all this time...?” *Was it all just a preconceived notion? Unbelievable. Was I just fighting imaginary demons this whole time?*

“I mean, don’t get me wrong! I do think you’re pretty badass, the way you stick your neck out for just about anyone—”

“Only because that’s how everyone already sees me!”

“What, so you were just putting on an act? Like I was?”

Indeed, that was who she was. But him?

“...No. I wasn’t acting. It’s more like I was... clinging to... that version of me...?” The words left his lips unbidden. *Clinging? What does THAT mean?*

“You look like you’re on the verge of an epiphany, Taichi.”

“...Maybe, but... I still don’t quite understand...”

“Speaking from experience, the best advice I can give you would be to strip yourself bare.”

“Wh-What? You want me to get naked? I have a girlfriend, you know.”

“Ha ha, very funny! Don’t be such a ditz! What I mean is... Ugh, forget it! I’ll do it myself, okay? I’m gonna break you down!”

“Wait, what?”

“I’m going to break you, Taichi.” She moved closer until she was standing directly in front of him, then continued in a singsong voice, “Get ready... I’m gonna take everything inside you... Build it up *reeeeal* high...”

“Uh... You’re doing what now?”

“It’s a metaphor, okay?! Just picture it in your mind’s eye! Okay, here we go!” She took in a deep breath and raised both hands over her head.

What is she doing? What is she about to do to me?

Then she brought both hands down hard onto each of his shoulders and shouted at the top of her lungs, “*BOOOOOOOOOOM!!!*”

“Ow! That was loud! My ears are ringing...!” Taichi complained, grimacing.

“Well, there you go! I’ve destroyed the old you!” she declared in response.

“You... what?”

“Listen up, kid: as of this very moment, the old you is dead and gone! Now take a hard look at it! Contemplate it!”

“Hold on a minute. Look at *what?* If you already destroyed it, then what’s left?”

“Trust me, there’s always something left,” she insisted firmly. “No matter how hard you break yourself down, there’s always some part of you that stays. You

can *feel* it." Her unwavering gaze drew him in, consuming him. "I promise you, it's there. All you have to do is find it... and follow it wherever it takes you."

Her impact left him speechless, opening and closing his mouth like a beached fish. Smirking, Nagase turned away and looked out at the city lights, as if intentionally giving him time to be alone with himself.

She had broken him down; now he was destroyed. He could hear the pieces hit the floor. He had lost the battle, and as a result he had been crushed into dust. But with that obstacle gone, he could see past it... to the world beyond.

He had lost everything he had once believed he needed to protect. But now he could break it down and sort through it... until he found what really mattered.

He wanted to help someone. Contribute to something. It was a desire he felt on a visceral level, that much was true. But the reason he was constantly looking outward for validation was because—

Because he was empty on the inside.

A single tear rolled down his cheek, as though freed from whatever had been holding it back.

He had no real *self* . How did someone generally define their identity, anyway? Their opinions? Their agency? Beliefs? Viewpoints? Ambitions? They all seemed to fit, and yet none of them seemed quite right, either... Regardless, whatever it was, he was finally prepared to accept that he didn't have it—though admittedly he'd known it all along, deep down.

Without that "self," he couldn't make decisions. His opinions were generally safe and centrist. He never really got angry about much—he was tolerant of everything, good and bad. And in a sense, that meant he didn't really care one way or the other.

Lately, with the career planning surveys and the Dream Vision, he'd been given a lot of opportunities to examine himself as a person. And every time he tried, he inevitably started to panic—because there was never anything there. But he didn't want to lag behind the others, so he rushed into the first decision he came to. That way he could have a "path" of his own.

Someone like him was ill-suited to wield the Dream Vision. He was in no position to influence other people's lives when he couldn't even get his own under control. But Taichi didn't want to admit that he didn't have a self. That was why, once he made the choice to act on his Visions, he couldn't bear to give up partway through. It was the sort of decision he was normally never able to make, and he wanted to keep it alive. Otherwise, he feared everyone would realize he didn't have an identity of his own, and he was pretty sure that was embarrassing.

But Taichi *was* capable of helping other people. He could take a negative back to zero; that much was easy to comprehend, self or no self. But going from zero to a net positive? Out of the question. There were too many options—too many paths to take. He would have to pick one, and without a self, it was a choice he was incapable of making.

He wanted to help. He wanted to do something to make people's lives better. But he had no sense of direction. So if he got lucky and his actions led to some sort of half-assed result, he took it to mean it was the right thing to do. That was how he skated by all this time, and without it, he was afraid he wouldn't have anything left—so instead of trying to change himself, he clung to it. After all, change involved giving something up in exchange for something else, and Taichi didn't have the courage to let go. Everything he'd built... The path he'd traveled... It wasn't much, but it was *his* .

During the body-swap, he'd learned that his compulsion to help people was born of the desire to sate his own needs. But he never bothered to examine it further—until now. Now he knew there was another reason behind it: his desire to fill the void inside with validation from other people. That was who he really was... and he was finally ready to accept it.

Only now did he realize just how hard it could be to understand himself as a person. Suddenly, it struck him: *How was I able to figure all of that out in the span of a few seconds just now? Oh... Right.*

All this time, he'd been surrounded by criticism from various people in his life—Fujishima, for example, but most of all, Inaba Himeko. These people had basically told him the answer; Inaba had literally told him to change, and that he was capable of it. But nevertheless, Taichi had somehow bumbled along all

the way here—

“Hey, Nagase?”

“Hmm? What’s up?”

“I think I’ve finally... figured myself out.”

First, he asked if he could borrow a bit more of her time tonight—to which she responded with an enthusiastic “Of course! Trust me, I’m more than happy to help you level up!”—and then he told her everything that had crossed his mind just now.

“...and that’s where I screwed up. I was never worthy of wielding the Dream Vision like that.” Now that Nagase was up to speed, he paused. “If anything, Inaba and Aoki were the worthy ones,” he muttered a beat later. After all, they each had a solid identity.

“I mean... Yeah, they’re both great and all, but I honestly don’t think they’re *that* far beyond you. They just knew it would be super easy to get carried away, and sure enough, you did. If they were really *that* amazing, then they would’ve made the same choice you did and beaten you at your own game.”

“...Yeah, maybe so... Either way, I had no business acting on the Visions, and for that, I’m truly sorry. I know I’ve caused a lot of trouble for you, but I promise: from now on, I’m done. I won’t make use of my power ever again... Easy for me to say since I’m a coward, but yeah.”

“Oh, please! It’s fine! After everything that’s happened, it’s finally starting to feel like it was all worth it in the long run. And honestly, I don’t think you need to swear off your power.”

“What?”

“If we’re *reeeeally* being honest here... I don’t think it’s a crime to use our powers. I mean, after everything «Heartseed»’s put us through? It’s our bonus stage, dang it!”

“But...”

“Besides, I could never have helped you find yourself if it wasn’t for you acting on your Visions! ...Then again, it all started with me thinking you were suicidal,

and in the end, all I really did was shout ‘BOOOOOM!’ really loud...”

Something about this tickled Taichi’s funny bone, and he burst out laughing. “Classic Nagase. You’re a real piece of work, alright. Wait... That thing you said just now about ‘beating me at my own game’...”

“Sounds like my old perfectionist side talking, doesn’t it? It’s something I’m still working on, but for now my motto is ‘don’t sweat the small stuff and just do the best you can’!” She giggled, and he could tell that there was no weight on her shoulders. She had made her decision free of bias, be it fear or allure.

“You really thought this through, huh? You always blow my mind, Nagase.”

“Took me a ridiculously long time to figure it all out, but yeah.”

Still impressive, though , Taichi thought to himself.

The conversation petered out, and silence descended between them. During that time, he (and probably Nagase, too) fell deep into thought.

“Anyways, we have more important things to be worrying about,” she said after a moment. “About your lack of self... It sounds like it’s in the same vein as my own personal lack of direction.” That was the problem that had plagued her since childhood, wherein she had learned to adapt her personality to suit each person. “So we really need to figure this out.”

“Figure what out?” Taichi asked, though he had a feeling he already knew the answer.

“Our life’s purpose. Our value as people.”

Her long, silky hair danced on the breeze as though it was obeying the wind’s call. Under the moonlight, she stood tall and proud and beautiful, her eyes brimming with determination.

“...Gah, I can’t believe I just said that out loud! Too deep, bro!”

“I hate the way you always take a beautiful moment and completely ruin it.” *But that’s our Nagase for you.*

“Aww, man! If I’d known we were having a moment, I would’ve tried to think of something cool to say!” she laughed. “Anyway, my point is... you can start over, Taichi. Right here.”

“You know what? I think I will. And eventually I’m going to catch up to you, Nagase.”

“No rush, though! I don’t have much of a head start! And if you start doing laps around me, I’m gonna look like a total poser!”

Though they never made it to the dating stage, the two of them were still undeniably cut from the same cloth, and Taichi sensed a close-knit, if tumultuous, friendship in their future.

So where do I go from here? Where do I start? He had made up his mind, and now he needed to take action.

“From now on, I’m going to think for myself when I make decisions. That, and... I’m going to start thinking about my aspirations for the future,” he added, recalling his still-blank career planning survey.

“Future aspirations, huh?” she mused.

She looked up at the night sky, and Taichi followed suit. Above them twinkled a sea of stars, as far as the eye could see. Some were closer; some were farther; some were even overlapping.

He reached up into the air and pretended to grab a handful.

“Oh yeah, that reminds me. I haven’t told anybody about my career ambitions yet... Wanna be the first to know?” Nagase asked, her face still tilted up at the sky.

“Sure, if that’s cool with you.”

“I wanna be a schoolteacher. Or something in that field, anyway—I haven’t decided. But what I *do* know is that I want to help kids who are struggling. I want to guide them and help them grow, you know?”

Countless tiny lights, shining down on countless tiny lives.

“I want to be a lighthouse for all those lost at sea.”

Nagase was moving forward, and Taichi wanted to follow in her footsteps. But first... he needed to pen the ending to the story he had started.

Chapter 8: A Resolution for All

The school trip was nearly over. This afternoon, Taichi and the other Yamaboshi students were scheduled to fly back home.

The last day was spent touring the city of Otaru, and in true Yamaboshi fashion, everyone was free to wander around as they liked, no groups assigned. Admittedly, they nearly lost this privilege after everything that had happened the day before, but in the end the teachers decided to let them off with a slap on the wrist.

During breakfast, the guy who had originally spoken to Taichi about Operation Custom Tour came by to apologize to him directly for dragging him into it. Likewise, Taichi apologized in turn, and the two agreed to let bygones be bygones.

Truth be told, Taichi wanted to apologize to *all* the second-years for the trouble he helped cause, but he didn't really have the time for that at the moment. Instead, he approached the president of each class and let them know that he wanted to speak with their class once they were safely back in school.

"Yo, Yaegashi-kun! Your eyes are looking a little red. You okay, man?" one of the guys asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine." His brain had kept him up all night, so he was pretty sleep-deprived, but otherwise no worse for wear. There were a lot of things he needed to take care of: apologize to people, follow up with everyone waiting on him for his advice, decide on his next move, and so on. But one thing in particular took top priority.

He had lost the battle, and he needed to come to terms with that. Only after he confronted it could he start over anew. Or, looking at it a different way: all he needed to do to start over was face his failures.

The idea alone threatened to crush his spirit. Even if he came clean and acknowledged every fault and flaw, his past mistakes would still linger. Nothing could erase them. And he hated the thought of willfully wading out into that shame.

This was something he had already committed to doing, and yet... deep down, he still hesitated, worried that this wasn't the right time. That worry was holding him back.

He pulled out his cell phone to check the time, but instead spotted an email notification from... Uwa Chihiro, of all people? *Odd* , he thought. So he opened it right away.

Sorry, I know it's early. A guy I know has been badgering me to get in touch with you because he wants to know if you'd be willing to give him some advice on asking his crush out during the trip. Anyway, I'm only sending this out of obligation, so feel free to ignore it. Thanks.

Now here was an email Taichi no longer knew how to respond to. *It's over now. It's too late.* But then, he thought about that comment Chihiro had made to him, back in that music store:

—Frankly, Taichi-san, your behavior lately makes me sick.

Evidently, even Chihiro had noticed his shortcomings.

Just then, Taichi was struck with the urge to call him. There was still a little time before the students were scheduled to meet up, and for some reason, he *really* wanted to talk to him. He moved to the seating area in the hotel lobby, then hit the Call button. After a few rings, Chihiro picked up.

"Hey, good morning. Sorry about the email; I know you're busy and all."

In the background, Taichi could hear the familiar buzz of high school. Time-wise, first period wouldn't have started yet, but apparently Chihiro was on campus somewhere—maybe sitting at his desk.

"No, no, I don't mind. If anything, *I'm* sorry for calling you up out of the blue. Is this a good time?"

"Eh, I've got a few minutes or so. Let me step out of the classroom real quick."

"Thanks." Feeling a little guilty, he waited patiently.

"So, what's up? Is this about what I sent you, or something else?"

"Oh, uh... well... I'm not sure, actually..."

“...You didn’t call me just because you were bored, did you? That’s kind of cringey.”

“Don’t be a jerk! I mean, yeah, I can see how that would be weird... It’s just, uh... Oh, right!” At last, the cork in his throat came free. “I was just thinking... You’re not the type of person to email me about that stuff, regardless of obligation. Or at least, you never used to be.”

And yet, back when Kimura tracked Taichi down to ask him to take part in the Tennis Club debate, Chihiro had tagged along, despite the fact that he wasn’t directly involved and thus could have safely ignored it.

“I ‘never used to be’? When was this?”

“I don’t know, uh... Six, seven months ago?”

“That’s a long time ago,” Chihiro snorted, and the implication was audible: *Get with the program, slowpoke.* “Sorry. What I mean to say is... I’ve, you know... I’ve changed since then.”

“Oh... Right.”

After the Phantom Projection phenomenon came to an end, Chihiro had told them that the CRC had changed him for the better, a sentiment that Enjouji had echoed. And now Taichi found himself staring down the barrel of the same situation.

“Is it really possible to change yourself *that* dramatically?” he asked.

“Yeah, it is. And it’s a lot easier than you might expect. To be blunt, it all comes down to whether you *want* to.”

Taichi ruminated on this for a moment.

“Ugh... Great, now I sound like I’m lecturing you. Preaching to the choir, am I right?”

“No, no. Not at all. Trust me, I... I’ve made my share of mistakes. Big ones. I’m a total loser.”

This was clearly not the sort of conversation one ought to have with his junior associate first thing in the morning—and yet he couldn’t stop himself.

“You, a loser? *Please* . If anyone’s a loser, it’s me. You really kicked my ass back then.”

“Sorry, I’m not trying to have a pity contest or anything. But still, I mean... you overcame those failures, right?”

There was a brief lull of silence.

“Saying I ‘overcame’ them makes it sound a lot cooler than it was. I just... didn’t have anything left to lose, that’s all.”

“But even so... wasn’t it scary? You know, to... fight your failures?”

Another pause. He could tell Chihiro was choosing his words carefully.

“In my case... I don’t think I ever fought them head-on. But if I had the chance to talk to my past self, I’d want to say something like: *You only get one chance to make things right, and it won’t last forever* .”

To Taichi, it totally clicked. Once you disgraced yourself in the eyes of a particular person, being around them only added more humiliation to the pile. The mere memory of your shame became excruciating, and the average person would be inclined to wait it out until the “storm” passed. But with enough time, that failure would be permanently etched into history, and you’d lose the chance to make it right. Chihiro was right; the opportunity wouldn’t last forever. Pain and embarrassment be damned—this was his *only* chance to redeem himself.

“I admit, I keep wishing I could’ve sorted it out sooner. It would’ve been so much easier that way. Anyway, yeah... It’s one of those things where you just have to bite the bullet and get it over with.”

Easy for you to say , Taichi thought. But as it turned out, Chihiro had more to say.

“Not like it’ll kill you.”

What?

“Compared to actually dying, it’s not scary at all. And with that mindset, you can do just about anything.”

Wait, but... now I look like a total idiot for spinning my wheels...

“...Ugh, listen to me preaching again. I caught myself talking like this on the phone with Yui-san earlier...”

“Oh, you and Kiriyama—?”

Suddenly, Taichi heard some sort of commotion on the other end of the line.

“What the?! What’s your problem?!”

“...should ask you the same... on the phone with Taichi-senpai? Not fair! I want... sexy voice! Let me... Chihiro-kun!”

He could only make out bits and pieces, but even then, the culprit was obvious.

“You’re so mean!”

“Says the chick who tried to swipe my damn phone!”

“What’s the matter, Enjouji? That *is* you, right?”

“Give me the phone, Chihiro-kun! Yes, hello, this is Enjouji speaking! Enjouji Shino! Good morning, Taichi-senpai!”

“I see you’re full of pep this morning.”

Believe it or not (and it was getting harder to believe these days), there was actually a time when Enjouji was quiet and demure. But now she had graduated to snatching people’s cell phones? *Seriously, calm down.*

“Obviously! Here I was, thinking I wouldn’t get to hear your wonderful voice for quite a while, and then what do I hear on the other end of a phone conversation?! Your dulcet tones!”

“Oh... Sorry, I haven’t had time to talk much...”

“No, no! You have nothing to apologize for, Taichi-senpai! Well... Okay, outside of your voice, there are probably quite a few things, but I’m not paying attention to any of that!”

“Is *that* why you think I’m cool?! Because you’re not paying attention?!” He could feel his self-esteem take a hit.

“Oh yeah, um... Taichi-senpai?” She sounded more composed all of a sudden. “I maybe kinda... overheard parts of your conversation just now... Just the

things Chihiro-kun said, but yeah... Are you having a bad time right now?”

“Oh... uh... Yeah, kinda. But it’s nothing serious, so don’t worry about it.”

“O-Okay, I won’t—oh! In that case, um, I have something to say!”

“Okay,” Taichi replied, bracing himself.

He heard her take a deep breath, and then—

“You can do it, Taichi... I mean, Taichi-senpai!”

He laughed. “You think so?”

The words had a familiar ring to them, as though she were echoing a statement he had once made to her—but when? He could vaguely remember the view from the roof of the Rec Hall, but not much else. It must’ve happened at some point, though.

“Oh... Maybe a loser like me can’t inspire you the same way... Maybe I’m just being annoying...”

“No, no, not at all. I’m touched, actually. Thanks.” With her help, he’d found the resolve to commit to a plan of action. *Nothing to it but to do it.* “Anyway, could you put Chihiro back on the phone?”

“Sure!” And with that, Chihiro returned.

“About the guy who wants my advice—tell him I just need a little time. I’m sure I’ll be able to find an answer... A *real* answer,” Taichi declared, hoping his tone would convey his implicit meaning: *I’m a different person now.*

“Okay, will do... I look forward to it.” The amusement in Chihiro’s voice suggested that he got the message loud and clear. Clever kid.

“Anyway, I...” Taichi began, then hesitated.

Then, after a moment of internal debate, he decided to say one last thing before ending the call. After all, he’d only have this one chance, and it wouldn’t last forever.

“...I’m glad you two joined the club.”

On the other end of the line, he heard Enjouji shrieking gleefully: “Oh my gosh, YAY!”

After they hung up, Taichi hurried back to his room, got dressed, and went with Watase and Ishikawa to the meetup spot out in the parking lot. Outside, Kiriyama waved him down; he apologized to the other guys and stepped away to speak with her.

“Hey, Kiriyama. You’ve got some dark circles under your eyes.”

“And yours are all bloodshot.”

They shared a laugh.

She was wearing a baggy white shirt with beige shorts and a pair of mules—a look that was both cutesy *and* a fair bit more elegant than her usual style.

“So, what’s up?”

“W-Well... um...” Her face was flushed bright pink, whether out of embarrassment or fear, he couldn’t tell. “W-Would you want to... maybe... w-witness the biggest challenge of my entire life or whatever? I mean, not that it’s a life-or-death crisis! Just a totally regular challenge!”

“Uhhh...?”

“Rrgh! Okay, look... Basically, I... I’m gonna, like, say stuff... to Aoki... so... do you wanna come?” She stared at the ground, her cheeks burning red.

“You want me to... supervise your love confession?” It was a baffling proposition, to say the least.

“Wh... It’s not a *love confession!* I mean... like... okay, kind of, but like...”

“Why me, though?” Surely it was none of his business (although he had no right to say this considering he’d spied on her love life on more than one occasion).

“You’ve been there for me through a lot of stuff, Taichi. Now I want you to see me take my first steps into new territory. I mean, you’ve, like, earned it after helping me all those times.”

“Aww, come on. You don’t owe me anything for that.”

“Sure I do! Haven’t you ever heard of the Bushido code?!”

“What are you, a samurai...?”

She was right, though; he'd been observing her personal journey for quite a while now. Where would she go from here? What would become of her relationship with Aoki? He couldn't pretend he wasn't curious.

"...Plus, having you there means I can't try to, like, back out of it at the last minute."

Aha. So she wants me there to keep her honest, in other words.

"B-But just so you know, I already cleared it with Aoki. I... I told him you might be coming when we were arranging to meet up!"

"Yeah? What'd he say?"

"He was totally fine with it. Seriously, the crap he's willing to put up with..."

She pressed her hand to her forehead and shook her head. It was a sentiment Taichi could agree with.

"Oh, and... I talked to him about the Dream Vision and told him I kinda regret some of the stuff we did. And then he smiled for like the first time in a million years, and he was like, 'Yeah, I was being a baby about it myself. I just felt like it was a slippery slope.' But he apologized for his attitude and stuff... so I think we've officially cleared the air for the most part."

The relief in her voice reassured him that it was safe to tag along with her.

"Alright. If you're both okay with me being there, then... sure, I'll come. And I promise I won't interrupt."

"Awesome! I'll email you the details later. See you then!"

□■□■□

Once they arrived at the famous Otaru canal, the students were free to go their separate ways until 1 PM, when they were expected to meet back up at this very spot. With no restrictions on travel groups, Taichi expected that quite a few people would openly pair off for a romantic day tour.

"Wow, look at this canal! ...What is a canal, anyway?" asked Miyagami.

Previously Taichi had agreed to tour Otaru with Watase, Miyagami, Sone, Ishikawa, and a few other guys from their class. Starting now, they had three

hours to kill.

The city was a harmonious blend of historic buildings and more modern construction, creating an old-timey vibe. The blend of red bricks and European stone architecture made them feel almost as though they'd been transported to another country altogether... and yet it still retained a distinct Japanese style. It was unlike anything Taichi had ever seen before.

"Wait... Ishikawa, weren't you gonna hang out with your girlfriend today?" asked Sone.

"I will a bit later. Near the end."

"You better! I demand to know who she is, damn it! What about you, Yaegashi?" asked Miyagami.

"Actually... I gotta get going," he replied. As much as he hated to leave the guys hanging, he had a lot of scores to settle.

"Already?! Well... I guess that's fair. She deserves one day with you, at least! Rrgh... Lucky bastard!"

"Listen here, buddy," Watase called to him in a stage whisper as he was about to leave. "I don't know what's going on with you, but... you got this!"

And Taichi found he was immensely grateful for the friendship they'd built since the start of high school.

"Look for the... sign of the glass-blowing studio... then go two streets up... and make a right..." he wheezed under his breath as he raced to make it in time. "Is this it?"

The area was on the outskirts of the tourist district, and foot traffic was next to nonexistent. But sure enough, there behind a rectangular, two-story European-style mansion stood two figures he recognized all too well.

They stood a few meters apart; Aoki was staring directly at Kiriyama, whose gaze was fixed to the ground. Staying carefully out of sight, Taichi leaned against a nearby vending machine. He didn't want to interrupt, after all.

Aoki had been professing his love for Kiriyama for... well, a year now. The whole club was used to hearing about it; to them, it was just another part of

their daily lives. Meanwhile, Kiriyama had steadily put in the effort to overcome her androphobia—and now here she was, facing him head-on.

The two of them had come so far... Was this the climax of their story? Either way, Taichi resolved to bear witness to whatever resolution awaited them. He could feel his nerves escalating, and if *he* was nervous, he could only imagine how the other two must have felt.

“Uh... um... uhhh... T-Tod... day... I wah... wah...”

“Yui, c’mon. Relax, girl! You’re getting all tongue-tied!”

That was putting it lightly. She was stumbling over her words to the point that she was practically incoherent.

“S-Sorry... Okay, deep breath...” She inhaled sharply, then exhaled. “Okay... Ready.”

Aoki was palpably nervous too, though not to the same extent as Kiriyama.

“Battle mode, activate! Here I go!”

She crossed her arms in front of herself, thrust her fists back down to her sides, and looked straight up at him.

“I used to be pretty uncomfortable around guys, but these days I can look at them without feeling afraid—just like anyone else. So I started thinking, and I realized... If you want to know what my ‘type’ is, it definitely isn’t you.”

“Wha—?!” Aoki yelped.

“Wha...?” Taichi muttered under his breath.

“To be totally honest, I prefer more aloof guys. Guys like Chihiro-kun.”

“*Whaaa?!*”

“...Why do you keep reacting like that?”

“Well, can you blame me?! If *that’s* your opening line, I don’t think I’m gonna like the rest...”

“*Will you just shut up and listen?!* ANYWAY! So yeah, I’m into guys like Chihiro-kun.”

“Gghh...” Aoki pressed a hand to his mouth to keep himself quiet, and Taichi was tempted to follow suit.

“But... I can’t see myself dating someone like that. Not right now, anyway. It just doesn’t fit.”

The slight chill of the autumn air encompassed them as she spoke, almost as though it were watching over them.

“My ideal relationship would be really sappy and romantic. That’s the sort of relationship I dream about. But that’s not *realistic* ; that’s just me swooning over the idea of a knight in shining armor. I don’t see it ever coming true.”

Aoki’s expression slowly hardened.

“But if I try to imagine what sort of relationship I would *actually* have, like, realistically... I think it would be a lot like a regular friendship,” she continued. “I mean, like, there’s no one right way to have a relationship, you know? And yeah, I know some people out there probably wouldn’t approve of it or whatever, like, ‘Why don’t you kiss him?!’ and all that... Maybe it wouldn’t seem all that special...” she mumbled down at the ground, bashful, before looking up once more. “But thinking about it more broadly, like... Sure, it’d be great to date a sexy aloof guy and all, but when it comes to marriage and stuff, it’s like... I’d really rather be with someone who I can joke around with, you know? I want my marriage to be a happy one.”

Meanwhile, Taichi listened carefully. He was impressed to see the level of thought Kiriyama had put into this.

“So when it comes down to it, you know, ‘What’s my type? What kind of relationship should I have?’ Well... I won’t know if something’s right for me until I try.”

Indeed, mental simulations would only get her so far.

“In the end, I can see myself eventually having both a romantic relationship *and* a more platonic relationship at some point or another. And over time, I’ll figure out what’s right for me.”

They had their whole lives in front of them. This didn’t have to be the end—it could be the beginning, or just a stop along the way.

Aoki didn’t try to cut in; instead, he simply let her say her piece.

“I’m sorry I’m being so... *selfish* about it, you know?”

Was it really selfish, or was it simply honest?

“I can’t love someone unconditionally the way you can... but... I think maybe I don’t have to. Obviously the *idea* of it is super romantic and stuff... but I can’t keep hiding behind my romantic fantasies forever.”

Humans were born to dream, and keeping those dreams alive was a vital part of life. But that didn’t mean they were free to turn a blind eye to reality altogether. Reality was where the rest of their lives happened.

“I’m not madly in love with you... but I *do* love you.”

Was that statement truly bereft of romance? Even the slightest hint?

“It’s just that... we love each other in different ways.”

At last, Kiriyama had put it into words. Their viewpoints were different; she had hers, and he had his. They wouldn’t get anywhere by changing themselves to fit the other’s mold. They were their own people, after all.

“But that difference doesn’t matter to me. I still want to give it a try. And the person I selfishly consider to be the best fit for my first relationship... is you. And only you.”

She had put her dreams into words, and now it would decide her fate.

“So, if you’re still interested... I think we should go out sometime.”

After putting it all on the table, after thinking long and hard about her own desires—this was the conclusion she had reached. And instead of running from it, she was honest and upfront. Sure, maybe some people would judge her for it, but Taichi? He saw that honesty as something worthy of respect.

So how would Aoki respond, given that he claimed to love her?



With the biggest smile he could manage.

“C’mon, you already know what I’m gonna say. You and me, we can overcome our differences. ‘Variety is the spice of life’ and all that! I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Kiriyama shyly scratched her cheek.

“I gotta say, it’s kinda neat how much thought you put into it! Me, I’m just a ‘go with your gut’ kinda guy. *Buuut* they say opposites attract, so I guess it’s all good! Anyway, back on topic...”

After a pause, he put into words their new beginning: “I love you, Yui.”

“Heehee... I still think you put up with *way* too much from me.”

And so fate had brought them together at last.

□■□■□

Taichi quietly stepped away from the scene. Watching Kiriyama’s bravery in action had given him the courage he needed to fight his own fight... and the time had come. It was 12:40 PM; he needed to hurry, or else he’d be late to his rendezvous with Fujishima Maiko.

At first he’d had reservations about trying to schedule anything during the trip, but upon further consideration, he realized that Fujishima had spent a great deal of it chasing after him anyway. Sure enough, when he floated the idea of a meetup, she pounced right away: “When?! Where?! Now?!”

At Fujishima’s suggestion, their meetup location was at the harbor, on the pier next to a row of warehouses. When Taichi arrived on foot 20 minutes later, he found her standing on the very edge, her back to the ocean, waiting for him.

“There you are! Now then, I demand some answers, if you please! Tell me everything! I want to know about your ‘Visions,’ and... and whatever «Heartseed» is, and—”

“Whoa, whoa, slow down! One thing at a time, okay?”

Detective Fujishima was practically frothing at the mouth.

“Why’d we have to come all the way out here, anyway?”

It was a long walk on a mostly gravel road, and he'd needed a map to find his way here. Then again, no one else was around, so perhaps it was the perfect place for a private conversation.

"Any criminal confession has to take place beside the ocean—why, it's practically an unwritten rule! Truth be told, I would've preferred to do this on a cliff, but I couldn't find one nearby... Rrgh, this stupid ocean is way too calm! Where are all the crashing waves?!"

Apparently Fujishima really liked to set the stage.

"...Okay, well... First things first, there's something I'd like to get out of the way. Is that cool?"

This was not a battle; any battle between them had long since come to an end with Fujishima as the victor. He'd tried to think of some clever way to get out of it, but quickly realized he was well and truly screwed.

"By all means. I have all the time in the world."

Perhaps he was nothing more than a sore loser making excuses, but nevertheless... if he wanted to fight his failures, then this was a bridge he needed to cross.

"For the past... month and a half? You've made your opinions known. Criticized me, you could say."

"But of course. It was a battle between detective and suspect."

"Well, all that 'You lack agency' stuff... It gave me a lot to think about."

Truth be told, however, he didn't think about it at first. Deep down, he could sense that there was a problem, but he turned a blind eye to it. He was too scared to really look at his faults.

"And now I've finally thought it through."

He had hit a dead end and thrown a tantrum. Then, with a little help from Nagase, he'd spent the past night examining himself fully. And after a phone call with his two favorite kouhai, he'd thought about it a lot more on the bus ride to Otaru. It wasn't much, but it was something.

"Have you, now? So... Who stands to benefit from your actions this time?"

This question made him realize that Fujishima had understood all along. *Of course* . The smell of the ocean made his heart ache.

“...Me. I do.”

His life was *his* to live. It was a sentiment he always agreed with in theory... except when he wanted to trot out “helping someone else” as a convenient excuse. Yes, that’s right—it was an excuse.

“It’s so much easier to say I’m doing it to help someone, you know? That way I don’t have to make any of the hard choices.”

Fujishima nodded. “You’re a follower, not a leader.”

Life was easier as a follower. All you had to do was obey the instructions you were given. And anyone could do that—even those without a self. Not only that, but it was hard to criticize someone who was only following orders. The blame naturally traveled upwards, to the person who had made the decisions.

“I pretended I was doing it for them, but in the end, I was just avoiding having to make my own choices. You were right... Someone like me was never cut out to give people advice.”

“And yet somehow your advice always worked out.”

“Well...”

Supposing that telling her the truth would expose her to danger at «Heartseed»’s hands... was it better to lie and say it was pure coincidence? Shrug his shoulders and play dumb?

“Sorry, I promise I’m going somewhere with this, but... I need a minute.”

“No problem.” Likewise, she held up her hand in an “okay” gesture.

“In a sense... I didn’t have a *self* .” Would she understand what he meant by that? He wasn’t sure, but continued nonetheless. “I was subservient. I always did what I was told. And then I gained the power to influence people.”

He was going to tell her the truth of everything—what he thought, what he felt—because only the truth had the power to change the world. She seemed to sense his intentions, because she quirked a brow in surprise.

“But I lost control, and in the end, I failed. My desire to help people morphed into a fear of rocking the boat.”

“*A fear of rocking the boat...?*”

“And once I failed... for the first time in my life, I was completely destroyed. Stripped down to my most vulnerable self. There, I could finally see my faults for what they were.”

“*Stripped down...?*” Fujishima kept repeating his words under her breath as though they’d struck a chord somewhere.

“I had nothing—literally. But now I want to start again, bit by bit. I’m going to say goodbye to my fragile ego and all the rest of it... and I’m going to trust in the truth of who I really am.”

“*Trust in... the truth of who you are...?*”

Why does she keep repeating all the most embarrassing parts? He decided to clarify: “I’m going to find the courage within myself to let go of all the things I was hiding behind. I’m going to start over.”

She gasped. “*The courage to let go of the things you were hiding behind...!*” she repeated, then fell deep into thought. It was clear some part of this had spoken to her, though he wasn’t sure what or why.

Nevertheless, Taichi pushed forward.

“So, as a token of gratitude for hearing me out... I’m going to tell you what you want to know.” He exhaled, forcing his body to relax. *It’s okay. It’ll all work out. Not like it’ll kill me, right?*

Then he straightened back up. There was no telling how far sincerity would get him, but it was a risk he’d have to take.

“I’m caught up in a... problematic situation. But I can’t go into more detail at this stage. Once I know it’s safe to tell you... Once it’s all over...” *No—it’s high time I started taking responsibility for once.* “Actually, no. Once I put an end to it... then I’ll tell you all the details.”

He wasn’t going to sit around and simply *hope* «Heartseed» would go away. He was going to stand his ground and fight.

That said... he couldn't think of any realistic methods to put an end to the «Heartseed» problem. Maybe it was just a fruitless dream. But so what? Everyone was free to have their own crazy ambitions, and this was his. Going forward, he would take steps toward his dream, like a normal person.

"So... could I ask you to wait until then?" Frankly, it was an audacious request, but it was the best he could manage right now.

Fujishima pursed her lips. Her eyes were... shining. "And where's my guarantee that you'll make good on that promise?" she asked, in a tiny voice that the peaceful ocean waves threatened to swallow up.

"Well..." Truth be told, there was no guarantee. But for now... "I need you to trust me."

"Trust *you?* The one whose faults ultimately destroyed him?"

"Be that as it may... I have faith in my true self. Starting now, I'm going to build something new. And I'm going to get stronger."

It was a ballsy declaration, and for a moment he wondered if he was even capable of—*no, I'll make it happen.*

Fujishima fell silent again. Clearly something was on her mind. How was she reacting to his proposal? He wasn't sure, but... he got the sense that she was impressed.

"After everything you just said... you've helped me realize something, too. Something about myself."

"Fujishima...?"

Trembling, she pressed a hand to her forehead.

"All this time... all I ever cared about was my title!"

Uhhh... where did THIS come from?

"Of course... I see it now... I admit, I'm reeling a bit."

She dropped to one knee, right there on the pier. But whatever internal struggle she was having, it was a good two or three steps ahead of Taichi, and he was at a total loss.

“Uhhh... Fujishima...? Care to clue me in here?”

“I was so pleased that they called me the Love Guru... I worked hard so I wouldn’t let them down. It was fulfilling work, and I was perfectly happy. Then I got ‘promoted’ to Apostle of Love, and from there, even Goddess of Love... I was over the moon. I wanted to accomplish great feats so they would see that I’d earned it. But over time... I started prioritizing my title over my work.”

“Oh... uh... Gotcha.” Personally, he could empathize. He, too, had experienced what it was like to be so revered.

“Thinking back, I was the same way regarding student council matters, too. At some point, my entire identity revolved around other people seeing me as ‘class president.’ That’s why losing the election hit me so hard.”

“Ah... I see.”

Fujishima had always seemed hyper-competent, but deep down, she was human like all the rest of them. It all started to click.

“And then, the *pièce de résistance* ... I called myself Detective in the name of catching you with your pants down. And once again, before I knew it, being a detective was all I cared about. I could have tried to stop the students from breaking the rules... but I didn’t.”

“Don’t blame yourself for that. It’s my fault,” Taichi replied, but she wasn’t listening.

“I was so consumed by my title of Detective, I completely lost sight of what actually mattered!”

“R-Right.”

“But you helped me see that. Thank you, Yaegashi-kun.”

“I don’t think I contributed all that much, actually...”

“No, you most certainly *did* ,” she insisted. “All because you had the courage to cast off those shackles and bare your naked self to me.”

“Phrasing!”

All jokes aside, her words—and her soft smile—warmed his heart. Before

now, he never would have imagined he and Fujishima would one day share a moment like this.

But in a flash, the smile vanished from her face. “Anyway, now you’re caught up on my emotional process. But that doesn’t get you out of answering my questions.”

“Urk... Right...” He was hoping she’d conveniently forget, but life simply wasn’t that charitable.

“However... I’m willing to wait.”

He wasn’t expecting this. “...Huh?”

“Look at you, taking responsibility for a change! You’re going to put an end to your problem? And you want me to trust this new, upstanding Yaegashi-kun? Then I suppose I just might!” She grinned. “I have to say, you always have a way with words. I’m starting to understand how you make all these girls fall for you.”

Taichi blushed furiously at her sweet compliment— “*Womanizer!* You really piss me off!”

—or not. *She’s a real live wire, this one.*

“Now then, shall we head back?” she suggested. “I’d hate for you to lose the chance to accomplish something meaningful. After all, there won’t be another opportunity quite like this one.”

As usual, she was quick to change tack. Then she looked up suddenly.

“You know, Yaegashi-kun, you remind me of the protagonist in a superhero film,” she mused quietly.

“Ha ha, very funny. I’m just an ordinary guy... The protagonist of my own life, I guess.” *Just like everyone else.*

“Oh, slick line. Did you have to practice that one in the mirror?”

“Shut up! You made me say it!” he retorted, though admittedly he was enjoying their banter.

“In that case, allow me to make a little declaration of my own.” She put her

foot up on a mooring post and struck a pose. “Now that I’ve seen the error of my ways, I’m going to mend my faults. And once I’ve polished myself up, I will stand before you as Fujishima Maiko Restored... no, Fujishima Maiko *Reborn!* ”

“...If anyone should star in a superhero movie, it’s you.”

□■□■□

The conversation with Fujishima had taken longer than he’d anticipated. There was still some time until his next battle, but first he had an errand to run. And in a situation where time was of the essence, he was willing to splurge on a taxi to get him to his destination.

With just minutes to spare, Taichi arrived at a small church, with Gothic architecture beautiful in its simplicity. Its most striking feature was the red steeple in the center of the building, adorned with a cross. And with its ceiling-to-floor stained glass murals, the stone porch out front radiated gravitas.

Outside, tourists were few and far between. He did glimpse one other group from Yamaboshi, but they were on their way out, so they didn’t stick around for long.

Then he saw a figure at the entrance. A girl.

“Ina—”

Taichi froze in his tracks as her beauty took his breath away.

She was wearing a white cardigan over a white dress—the very picture of purity. This was the last thing Taichi was expecting to see. Not only did she generally avoid this sort of style in her day-to-day wear, but over the course of this particular trip, she had expressly chosen her outfits based on practicality. None of that mattered now, though. Here in the church, she was glowing like a goddess.

“...What?” she asked coldly.

In the time since their last conversation, in which she told him she didn’t love (the current version of) him, he hadn’t made a single attempt to smooth things over with her. It was practically a miracle that she’d agreed to meet with him at all.

“Oh... um... Well, for starters, thank you for... meeting with me today.”

“You didn’t really leave me a choice, considering how hard you were begging for ‘one last chance.’ ”

His face flushed with shame. Over the phone he’d acted like a desperate loser... No, it wasn’t just his behavior. He *was* a desperate loser.

“I’m surprised you’d want to come here. You know, to a church.”

“Don’t read anything into it. I’m meeting other friends here later.”

“Sorry to interrupt your plans. Like I said over the phone, I hope I’m not forcing you into it...”

“Hmph. They were nagging me to ‘go spend time with my boyfriend’ anyway, so it works out perfectly.”

There was a pause in the conversation. Normally he never thought twice about spending a quiet moment with Inaba, but today that same silence was *agonizing* . He was now painfully aware of the massive gulf between them.

“So, what did you need me for?” Inaba asked, her expression hard.

“Oh, um, well... Actually, can we take this somewhere else?” He didn’t want to block foot traffic by standing around the doorway. “Is it busy inside? Or would you rather—”

“Let’s just go in. It’s not that busy, and I already took the tour.”

And so Inaba led him into the building. How was she feeling? She refused to make eye contact with him, so it was hard to tell.

Inside, the church’s historic origins became much more apparent. Light streamed in through the stained glass windows, filling the interior with the aura of the sacred, on top of the homey warmth engendered through the natural wood furnishings. They climbed the stairs to the second floor.

“They call this area the sanctuary,” Inaba explained as they passed through the wooden threshold.

This was Taichi’s first time being inside a real church, and the first things he noticed were the white walls and high ceiling. In here, the stained-glass

windows were arched in shape. Wooden pews sat in two neat rows, each of them adorned with decorative trim. On the other end of the room sat an altar, with a statue of Jesus on one side and the Holy Mother on the other.

With no one else around, the room felt peaceful.

Gazing around at the furnishings, he and Inaba walked down the aisle to the altar, then casually turned to face each other. Was this the climax of *his* story? The solemnity of their surroundings weighed on him like a ton of bricks. In this holy sanctuary, dishonesty and vanity were implicitly forbidden. He could feel himself tensing up.

But nevertheless, it was time to start over. It was time to fight his failures. He had nothing left to lose; it wasn't going to kill him. But most of all, he wanted this church to be their stage. And so he decided to tell Inaba everything.

"There's a lot I want to talk about... but first, I want to start with the things you've pointed out to me lately. The things you want me to fix. And I want to tell you my thoughts about that. Is that alright with you?"

She nodded firmly. He took a deep breath... and thought back to their previous conversation.

—*You once changed me, but... apparently I can't change you.*

"Inaba... I think I can change, and I'm going to try."

He looked directly into her eyes, taking her in fully. No more putting his head in the sand.

"...Huh?" She blinked at him in confusion. "Change? What are you talking about?"

Starting the conversation was the hardest part. But once it got started, it was relatively smooth sailing from there. All he had to do was keep going, step by step.

"A while ago, you told me that in a hypothetical world where everyone is focused on helping others instead of themselves, humanity would go extinct. And now I understand what you meant by that."

Not to suggest he hadn't understood her point right from the moment she

said it, but now he had physically experienced it for himself.

“If no one’s around to lead the way forward, the world will stop advancing. Someone somewhere needs to set the standard.”

Someone had to step up. Someone had to carry that weight. And that someone was him.

“But even then, there’s no guarantee that standard will be the ‘correct’ one... I mean, it’ll never be ‘correct’ for every single person.”

There were simply too many viewpoints in this world for a single approach to fit all of them.

“What seems like justice to one person might look like injustice to someone else.”

Sure, maybe there were some circumstances in which one approach was *objectively* just, but for the most part, it was completely subjective. Even in wars, both sides were simultaneously heroes *and* villains, depending on what side you were standing on.

Meanwhile, Inaba listened without interrupting. And maybe he was just seeing things, but... he thought he saw the faint light of hope in her eyes.

“I tried to decide right from wrong, but in the end, no one can decide that. And it wasn’t a sense of right and wrong that I needed. Instead, what I really needed... was my own set of beliefs. The ability to make decisions. Agency. Don’t you think?”

That was what he was truly missing. Everyone around him had helped him see that. He’d been a real pain in their asses, but now he was finally on the same page.

He awaited her judgment.

“...Oh, uh... did you want me to answer that?” She turned away and sheepishly scratched her head, a masculine gesture that contrasted sharply with her feminine attire. “Well, uh... yeah, that’s pretty much what I was getting at. But it’s not really as serious as you’re making it sound. We’re still kids and all.”

“What happened to ‘We can’t stay children forever’?”

“Sh-Shut up! Yes, I regret saying that, okay?! Don’t rub it in my face!” She grimaced in embarrassment.

In the end, they were still just kids, and being a kid was about learning. Even if they lacked conviction now, surely they’d find it in time. The same went for Taichi himself; he didn’t need to rush. He could grow at his own pace... though admittedly perhaps his fear was somewhat justified, since he was already more than halfway through high school and still didn’t have a self. But even then, when he gained that supernatural power, he gained the ability to influence people.

“I mean... after all the supernatural shit we went through, and then we were given powers of our own? This was bound to happen,” she sighed.

Those powers changed everything. With the Dream Vision, they possessed the ability to affect people’s lives on par with any average adult—no, possibly even moreso.

“When it comes down to it... all I care about is seeing the people in my life happy. Childish, I know. But when it comes to wielding power, it takes more than that.” *As does growing up.*

“Basically, it’s all in the timing. The time came, so we needed to step up to the plate. Not like we all magically become adults the second we reach a certain age... but I guess in our case, we’re ahead of the curve, huh?” she replied.

No matter who you were, sooner or later, your time would come, and you would be expected to make the best possible decision while considering all the options and angles. In Taichi’s case, that time was now.

“You know, thinking back... you saw it all coming, didn’t you, Inaba? If only I’d listened to you... and I mean *actually* listened...”

“No, I wouldn’t say that.” Her expression softened somewhat. “It’s better that you figured it out on your own. That way you genuinely understand it. Plus... if I was really all that competent, I would’ve solved it a long time ago. But I couldn’t.” She looked down at the floor. “No matter how ‘correct’ I believed myself to be, I... I couldn’t help but wonder how you saw it. Sure, I have my strengths, but... I also have a fuckton of weaknesses... and... well... I...”

She started to fidget, playing with her fingers. Her tough front had receded, exposing the vulnerable girl underneath.

“It’s okay, Inaba. I’ll—” Taichi began, but just then, she glared up at him.

“This is *your* fault for... for being such a softie! For running around helping anyone and everyone! You... It feels like you only agreed to go out with me because you knew it was what *I* wanted. I love you so much, but you—oh god, what am I saying?!” She clutched at her hair in a panic. “Goddamn it, what’s the matter with me?! I thought I was done with you... I told myself it couldn’t work... but now look at me...”

“Honestly, I feel like I never would’ve gotten this far if you hadn’t tried to break things off.”

“Yeah... See? I knew we just needed some time apart...”

The way she looked away from him, it felt like she was conceding something. Why? Was it his fault? He needed to do something. Was this him “acting on reflex” again? No, he needed to examine this more thoroughly—take the next step.

What was next for himself and Inaba? How did he, Yaegashi Taichi, feel about it?

He had overcome a formidable hurdle and learned what he was meant to do. But in a way, that much was small potatoes. All he did was discover his inadequacies and discuss a potential fix. But where would he go from there? He needed to be an active participant in the decision-making process. He needed to have a vision for his future.

“I have something I want to tell you. Will you hear me out?”

She froze for a moment... then nodded. She seemed so fragile. Right now, they were just two people standing in a church.

“I believe that love takes many forms.”

He had to do this right. She deserved that much. After watching Aoki and Kiriyama, he knew he needed to put himself out there the same way they had.

“And there are a lot of different kinds of relationships. Everyone has different

ideals... including you and me.”

Everyone on the planet had their own unique viewpoint; no two were exactly alike.

“But despite our differences... we make connections anyway.”

Compromises could be made.

“So I asked myself, *how is that possible?* But when I thought about it, I realized that friendships just kind of happen regardless, so maybe romantic relationships aren’t much different.”

Life was like a river. It could carry you into a new relationship on momentum alone. And sometimes that worked out just fine.

“But... there’s no guarantee that those spontaneous relationships will all be successful.”

Sure, you can leave it to luck. It’s your life. But if this is the only chance you’ll get, would you really want to risk it?

“You have to *want* it.”

Inaba listened as he spoke. Fortunately, no one else had entered the sanctuary—almost as though fate itself was giving them time.

“When you make a decision, you have to take a lot of things into consideration. Like how it will affect other people, for example.”

Obviously it wasn’t healthy to base a decision *entirely* on the needs of other people, but you couldn’t outright ignore them either.

“But in the end, it’s a decision you have to make yourself.”

This was something far bigger than simply picking dialogue options in a video game. In a big, chaotic world where the right answer was never clear-cut, all you could do was prepare yourself for the consequences of your choice. But first, you needed to take a hard look at your desires and make your opinion heard. That was the first step.

“That’s why I want to tell you the conclusion I’ve come up with.”

It was a lengthy disclaimer, but she seemed to sense his sincerity from it. She

swallowed hard, and he realized she was scared. Then he remembered *he* was scared, too.

This wasn't his first big declaration, but it was certainly the most carefully considered. This was the final battle between Yaegashi Taichi and Inaba Himeko.

"I'm sorry to have to say this, but... I'd be lying if I said there weren't times I believed that because you loved me, I was 'supposed' to love you back."

His blunt honesty made her gaze waver, but she maintained her composure. "Yeah... If you'd tried to deny it, I would've called bullshit anyway. Besides, I don't think it's a bad thing, per se."

"But those fears were just getting in the way, so I pushed them aside and probed deeper."

She pursed her lips together, bracing herself. He looked her dead in the eye.

"You're adorable and beautiful and smart and sweet. And you've taught me so much."

Rosy color filled her cheeks.

"Those things alone make me want you."

They were perfectly valid reasons in and of themselves... but in Taichi's mind, they weren't quite enough.

"But the thing about me is... It's hard to explain, but... I want to go on a journey of self-discovery. I always want to keep learning."

For once, he was being true to his desires.

"And I want to learn how to help people—and not just to stroke my own ego. I want to *really* help them."

The point of life.

"And I can't get there without your help."

The point of human connection.

"...No, that's not quite right. I just... want you to watch me and see how far I go."

She'd pointed out all of his most shameful faults, and now he had changed. Likewise, he'd once done the same for her. And if being together helped them grow, and could help them make their dreams come true... then that was what he wanted.

Did that count as love? Maybe it wasn't normal... but then again, what was? This was *his* normal; what else mattered? *He* set the standard. It was *his* decision. He didn't know if it was safe to call this love, but either way, he wanted to be with her—and that was enough.

"I love you, Inaba, and I hope you'll still be my girlfriend."

Conviction. Vision. Agency. Those were the things he lacked.

Inaba fell silent for a moment, staring at him, her expression perfectly blank. "You... love me?" she asked slowly, probingly.

"Yes, I do," he replied.

"As in... romantically?" she pressed further.

"Yes, romantically," he replied.

"I see. Well, as it happens, I'm romantically interested in you too," she mentioned casually.

It was so out of nowhere, his heart nearly stopped. Was she going to take him back?

The next instant, tears began to stream down her cheeks.

"Haha... What the? That's weird... Why am I crying...?"



It was like a dam had burst. Inaba rubbed at them with both hands, but they kept coming and coming. And as they flowed, her emotions spilled forth in turn.

“I was so scared... I thought it was all one-sided. I couldn’t tell how you felt... and I just needed you so bad... It felt like if I didn’t do something, I’d end up being alone again.”

Her feelings washed over him in a tidal wave.

“I told myself I needed to handle it on my own... Needed to be able to stand on my own two feet. But if you broke up with me, I was scared I’d lose everything—and I *hated* the thought of being so dependent on you. So I pushed you away.”

Although she’d seemed strong and self-confident on the outside, she’d been at odds with herself on the inside, just like him.

“All those times I criticized you... I was really just lashing out,” she sniffled. “I’m sorry... It was immature of me.”

“Hey, come on. It’s okay. I was the same way.”

Their immaturity had posed a risk to their relationship. In a weird way, they had grown too dependent upon each other. But after they fought and spent some time apart, they learned some important lessons. And maybe this was the best they could manage right now... but they had plenty of time to improve going forward.

Then he realized she hadn’t technically answered him yet.

“So, uh... I asked if you could still be my girlfriend... Is that cool, or...?”

“Wh... You want me to *say* it?! Out loud?! Just read between the lines, damn it!” For some reason she sounded angry.

“S-Sorry...”

“Ugh, don’t look at me with those puppy eyes. You make me feel like the bad guy... Anyway, uh... yeah... I’d love to be your girlfriend.”

She blushed beet-red, and Taichi could tell he was blushing, too.

“Gah... This is so awkward... Why are we doing this in a *church?!* It almost

feels like you're... p-proposing or something!" Inaba stammered bashfully.

Then he remembered—"Oh!"—well, not that he forgot, per se; he just wasn't sure when to bring it up. He pulled something out of a small paper bag and held it out to her.

"...What's that?"

"A token of our relationship restored... or our bond, or... my love for you..."

It was a necklace—a trinket he'd bought on his way here today. The comma-shaped *magatama* pendant was made of red glass with a swirly pattern. She lifted it up to eye level to examine it.

"It's... pretty."

"Yeah... I liked the smooth, glossy look. They had bigger ones, but I figured it might be easier to wear something smaller and more discreet."

"I love it. Thank you," she replied without batting a lash. Blunt and to the point, but he could tell that she was sincerely grateful... so he took it as a sign to continue.

"And guess what? I got one for me, too." He took out a second necklace, nearly identical to hers, except his pendant was blue.

"To match?"

"Yep. Exactly."

Truth be told, he'd been worried that it was an extremely presumptuous move... but one look at her smile and that fear went out the window. It was the sweetest, brightest, most beautiful smile he had ever seen.

With her face burning red, Inaba quietly closed her eyes. Drawn in like a magnet—but with a clear will of his own—he moved close and kissed her.

As with their lips, their hearts were connected.

□■□■□

Shyly, they took turns reaching over and clasping a necklace around the other's neck. Then they walked out of the building, thanked the tour guide, and set off down the street.

There was less than an hour left until they were scheduled to meet up with the rest of the students, but they wanted to spend the remainder of their time exploring together. And to make up for all the time they'd spent apart, they were firmly holding hands.

This was their one and only high school trip, and now it was almost over. But before it ended, there was still time to make a few more happy memories.

They turned a corner, and right there on the side of the road—

«Heartseed».

Why? Why now?

He didn't understand. But then again, when it came to «Heartseed», its arrival never made sense. One minute they were enjoying their peaceful lives, and the next minute, something soulless showed up wearing Gotou Ryuuzen's body.

"What are you... doing here...? No matter where we go, you'll always find us? Is that it?" Inaba asked in a hard voice, trembling.

Taichi squeezed her hand. It hurt him to see her like this.

"My, my... I'm glad we made it in time," «Heartseed» replied, ignoring her questions entirely. "That was quite the close shave... Yes, right down to the—"

Just then, it froze mid-sentence. Its gaze shifted up and to the side, almost like it was listening to something.

"Wh... What?" Inaba prompted, baffled.

"Oh, just... marvelling at what a close call it was... Now then... Yaegashi-san."

At the sound of his name, Taichi braced himself, then took a half-step forward... only for Inaba to follow suit. The look in her eyes said *I'm not letting you go alone* .

"Truly, I cannot thank you enough... As I suspected, watching you has... led me to the thing I was searching for... Yes... Just as I anticipated..."

«Heartseed» was... *thanking him?* This was practically unheard of. What had it found?

"Why was it watching you?" Inaba whispered.

“Hell if I know,” Taichi whispered back.

“Anyway... This should just about be the right time to... wrap things up.”

It was here to announce the end of the phenomenon. That much wasn’t too far out of the ordinary. Sooner or later it would complain that things had grown stale, then vanish from their lives. And for this “final bonus round,” Taichi expected something along those same lines.

“But you’re just going to come back and screw with us again some other time, aren’t you?” he asked.

“No,” «Heartseed» answered promptly.

“Yeah, that’s what I—wait, what?” Inaba blinked in surprise.

“By ‘no,’ do you mean... we won’t see you again?” Taichi asked, his voice quavering.

“Correct... That’s my intention, anyway...” «Heartseed» replied casually.

...That’s it?

“What the hell...? Are you serious?!” Shaking like a leaf, Inaba relinquished her grip on Taichi’s hand. “Then we’re... we’re free from you and «The Second» and all the supernatural shit? Is that what you’re telling me?!”

“Well... Yes, I suppose you will be...”

“And you’re... telling the truth?” Taichi asked.

“You don’t have to believe me if you don’t want to, Yaegashi-san... I don’t care if you spend your whole life dreading my return... Alternatively, you can simply forget all about me... I’m fine either way...”

Is it serious? Does it... really mean that?

“Wait, but... This doesn’t make any goddamn sense! Do you know how much we’ve suffered because of you and your senseless experiments?!” Inaba’s voice wavered with emotion. “And now all we get is fucking ‘Thanks a lot, see ya’?! No explanation, nothing?!”

“Uh, Inaba? It almost sounds like you want «Heartseed» to stay.”

“Fuck no I don’t!” She landed a kick to his shin. “What I’m saying is, I refuse to

accept this! It's ridiculously unfair to us! What was the *point* of all this, goddamn it?!"

"Oh, well... it was simply a story of my own making... Commenced and concluded as I saw fit..." «Heartseed» replied in a flat, detached voice.

"You think this is a game?!"

"It always was, right from the start... Surely you people weren't under the impression that *you* were in control, were you? Don't be silly... How arrogant can you possibly be...?"

"If anyone's arrogant, it's *you!*" Inaba roared.

"I like to think I was rather considerate, relatively speaking... I'm a good person, you know... Anyway... there you have it." «Heartseed» looked up and to the side once more. "It seems I've well and truly run out of time, so... I'll be going now... May we never cross paths again..."

Out of time?

"Wait... seriously?" Inaba murmured. Taichi stared blankly.

The nightmare had descended upon them without warning, so really, it was only natural that it ended in a similar fashion. But considering just how much it had helped them grow, it felt distinctly unfair that they would have no hand in its conclusion. Or perhaps they did, but they just didn't realize it. This was «Heartseed»'s story, after all.

"...Huh?!" Just then, Gotou Ryuuzen snapped back to life. "Wait... Where am I? What the? What happened to the souvenir shop?" He glanced around, puzzled. "How did I...? Man, something's not right. Was I sleepwalking...? Maybe I should think about making a doctor's appointment... Oh, hey there, kids! Weird question: how long have I been standing here?"

And so the tale of the Yamaboshi High School Cultural Research Club and the supernatural phenomena came to an end.

It's over.

Epilogue: Going Forward

A few days after the end of this year's school trip, Taichi went with the rest of the ringleaders behind Operation Custom Tour to formally apologize to the teachers, as well as the rest of the students in their grade, for encouraging rule-breaking behavior. Plenty of people reassured him that he wasn't to blame, but nevertheless, he felt it was important for him to close the book on it, so to speak.

Apologizing may have netted him surface-level forgiveness, but he knew there was bound to be some lingering resentment. It would take time to regain the trust he'd lost, but he'd simply have to put in the effort. This was their post-war settlement, and they needed to handle it themselves.

As a result, the love craze slowly petered out, and Taichi officially retired from his post as Love Guru. Well, maybe "retired" was a bit of an exaggeration. Long story short, the majority of the student body stopped buying into the superstition about him. And whenever the occasional straggler came to him "for luck," he simply told them, "Have faith in yourself, or else the door shall forever remain closed!" (Or something to that effect.) Believe it or not, this advice proved fruitful... for at least two people that he knew of, anyway.

And that was that.

Together, Taichi and Kiriyama pledged to follow up with everyone whose lives were influenced by their advice. They weren't confident they could actually help anyone—in fact, they were probably better off staying out of it for the most part—but they wanted to take responsibility for the situations they themselves had created.

After that, Taichi finally settled on a career course.

"For now, I think I'll be taking the science course," he announced in the clubroom to the rest of the CRC.

"Oooh, science! Wait... Did you choose that one just so you could stay with your beloved Inaban? I notice she's gotten all lovey-dovey again!" Nagase remarked, grinning mischievously.

“N-No! I really thought about this, I swear!”

“Hmph. Even if he chose humanities, our relationship would survive the distance.”

“You’re not even remotely ‘bashful’ about being ‘Ina-bashful,’ huh, Inaban?”

“Yeah, well, it was *fate* that brought me and Yui both into the humanities course! We even told each other on the count a’ three, so there’s no way either one of us was biased! Pretty cool, huh?”

“...Maybe I should switch to science...”

“Yui, why do you hurt me so?! Why can’t you just be nice to your poor BF?!”

Despite their new relationship, Aoki and Kiriyama were the same as ever—

“Hee hee... I’m just kidding,” Kiriyama grinned brightly.

“Yeah, I know you were,” Aoki laughed.

...Correction: Okay, maybe they’d changed a little.

“S-So... what’s your *ultra-mega-awesome* dream, Taichi-senpai?!” Enjouji asked, eyes sparkling. As usual, she knew how to set the bar ridiculously high.

“Uh, well... I’ve been thinking really hard about what I want to do with my life, and in the end, it always comes back to helping people. So I’ve decided to pursue something along those lines,” Taichi explained. “These days you hear a lot of talk about global environmental issues on the news and stuff. A lot of people are saying the Earth’s headed in a dangerous direction, so... well, I still have to figure out what I’d need to major in to get into the field, but...”

This was the dream he had found for himself.

“You’re kidding...” Inaba looked at him in shock.

“No way...” the others murmured.

Uh, guys? You’re making it hard for me to say this!

But he decided to say it anyway. He had chosen this path of his own volition, and now he needed to make his opinion heard, or else the story would never get started... and Taichi very much wanted a story of his own.

“I want to save the planet.”

After a pause... the rest of the CRC burst out laughing. Some of them doubled over. Others clutched their sides.

“*Guys!* I won’t ask you not to laugh, but could you bring it down a notch, at least?!”

“Taichi, relax... Hee hee... We’re not laughing *at* you, I swear...” Nagase giggled.

“It’s just... incredible, that’s all,” said Chihiro.

Inaba was the last to finish laughing. “Whew... Haven’t laughed that hard in a while,” she grinned. “I gotta say, most people wouldn’t call that their personal dream.” Her smile deepened. “It’s pretty damn badass.”

“Geez... I don’t know about that...” It was a compliment of the highest order, and he floundered.

Truth be told, he knew it was kind of silly... but that was fine by him. It was *his* dream, inspired by *his* desires. He’d have to grow up sooner or later, but in his heart, he hoped to always carry that childish passion. As long as he kept himself firmly grounded in reality, he could afford one big, silly dream.

Obviously, he didn’t think for a moment that he could save the entire planet single-handedly. There were a lot of environmental issues at hand—global warming, environmental degradation, world hunger, the energy crisis—but if he could somehow contribute to solving even one of them, then that was enough for him.

He had failed. But then he came crawling back and pledged to fight. And if it wasn’t going to kill him, then he could fall down and pick himself back up as many times as necessary. As it turned out, losing had taught him a lot of things.

He knew now the importance of valuing himself just the way he was—but did that mean he could simply shrug his shoulders and turn a blind eye to his faults?

No. You can love yourself AND hold yourself to a high standard. Those two things are NOT mutually exclusive. There’s always potential for change, so keep your head up and keep moving forward. Find your conviction and choose a path

of your own free will. Sooner or later, you'll be the person you've always wanted to be. You'll live your dreams. And that's what life is all about.

"Oh yeah. That reminds me, Chihiro," Taichi began.

"Yes?"

"I've got a message for that guy who wanted to talk to me: If he wants advice from some legendary Love Guru with powers of clairvoyance, then I'll have to turn him down... but if he'd settle for regular old Yaegashi Taichi, then I'm all ears."

"Alright. I'll tell him," Chihiro nodded. And while he didn't let it show on his face, Taichi could hear the joy in his voice.

—Oh yeah, one last thing. Before the supernatural stuff gets buried beneath the mundane, I have to wonder:

Is it really over?

Is «Heartseed» really, really, really, really, REALLY never coming back?

+++

"Say, «Heartseed». What is this? Is this the end? Are you ending it? Really?"

"Oh... Well... Yes, I suppose I am..."

"Interesting... It seems you've... found something?"

"......Who knows."

"Hmph. It's so pointless... I don't get it. But... this isn't really the end, right? You still have one last thing to do, don't you?"

"....."

"Don't you have to erase their memories?"

The End

Afterword Thank you for reading *Yume Random* ! This is volume 7 of the *Kokoro Connect* series, following Volume 1: *Hito Random* , Volume 2: *Kizu Random* ... You know what? Forget it! There's too many! Just check my bibliography!

Anyway, hello there! KokoroCo! My name is Anda Sadanatsu! KokoroCo!

Truth be told, I've always wanted to make that "There's too many!" joke. It was always my hope that I'd publish enough books to make it possible—and now we've got seven books down, so it felt like the perfect time! All thanks to the support from my dear readers. Truly, I can't thank you enough! Thank you for making this silly fantasy come true. Almost makes me want to wax sentimental about how far I've come... Great, now I'm doing it!

Speaking of dreams, another one is coming true.

Kokoro Connect is getting a video game adaptation.

Yes, I'm serious. It's really happening... supposedly!

First the manga, then the drama CDs, then the anime, and now we're getting a video game. I can't say I ever saw this coming. When my editor told me the good news, I muttered to myself, "My reality has exceeded my wildest dreams."

We authors are a greedy bunch, and as such I always fantasized about a manga or anime adaptation, but a *video game?* Completely blew me away. I've gotten so much support, even *I'm* sitting here like, "Good gravy, just how popular is this damn book?" It's kind of terrifying! I'd be a little worried about the author if I were you!

So as you can see, the *Kokoro Connect* multimedia project is chugging right along! As of this writing, they just announced the voice cast for the anime. For the latest news on all the *Kokoro Connect* adaptations, you can check FBonline, the official Famitsu Bunko homepage, for periodic updates!

Now then, I'd like to make an announcement about the future of the series.

It’s looking like the next volume will be another short story collection; these stories will be set at various points in time in the chronology of the series, so look forward to it.

Also...

What follows this second short story collection... will be the final arc of the series.

That’s the plan, anyway.

If you’ve read this far, I hope you’ll follow the CRC’s journey to the very end. I promise to pour my heart and soul into my writing in order to meet your lofty expectations.

I know it can be depressing to think about “the end”... BUT! With *Kokoro Connect* , there’s no need to feel blue! I mean, think about it! You’ve got an anime *and* a game to look forward to! This series is going out with a bang, and I hope you’ll join in the fun with me!

(Also available for purchase: volume 2 of the *Kokoro Connect* manga, as well as the second drama CD, titled *Spring & Dates & Pretend-Siblings* !)

Lastly, the acknowledgments!

There are so many people I’d like to thank, I honestly can’t keep track of them all by this point. I may not get the chance to thank you directly, but know that I’m grateful to you from the bottom of my *kokoro* .

To Shiromizakana-sama: Thank you so much for your wonderful artwork. Your art makes *Kokoro Connect* what it is, and I hope you’ll stay with me to the very end.

Before I go, I’d like to extend my full gratitude to all of my readers once again. Thank you!

—Anda Sadanatsu
January 2012


Yui.k
Sooo many side characters in this volume!

Table of Contents Cover

Color Illustrations

Chapter 1: The Dreaded Career Planning Surveys

Chapter 2: It Began, Prefaced as “The End”

Chapter 3: Playing Cupid

Chapter 4: A Fork in the Road

Chapter 5: World’s Greatest Detective

Chapter 6: Ensnared

Chapter 7: Under the Sea of Stars

Chapter 8: A Resolution for All

Epilogue: Going Forward

Afterword

About J-Novel Club

Copyright



Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!

Newsletter

And you can read the latest chapters (like Vol. 8 of this series!) by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:

J-Novel Club Membership

Copyright

Kokoro Connect Volume 7: Yume Random

by Sadanatsu Anda

Translated by Molly Lee

Edited by Adam Fogle

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2012 Sadanatsu Anda

Illustrations by Shiromizakana

First published in Japan in 2012 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION ENTERBRAIN

English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION ENTERBRAIN

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC

j-novel.club

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Ebook edition 1.0: October 2019


KOKORO CONNECT
YUME — RANDOM
Sadanatsu Anda