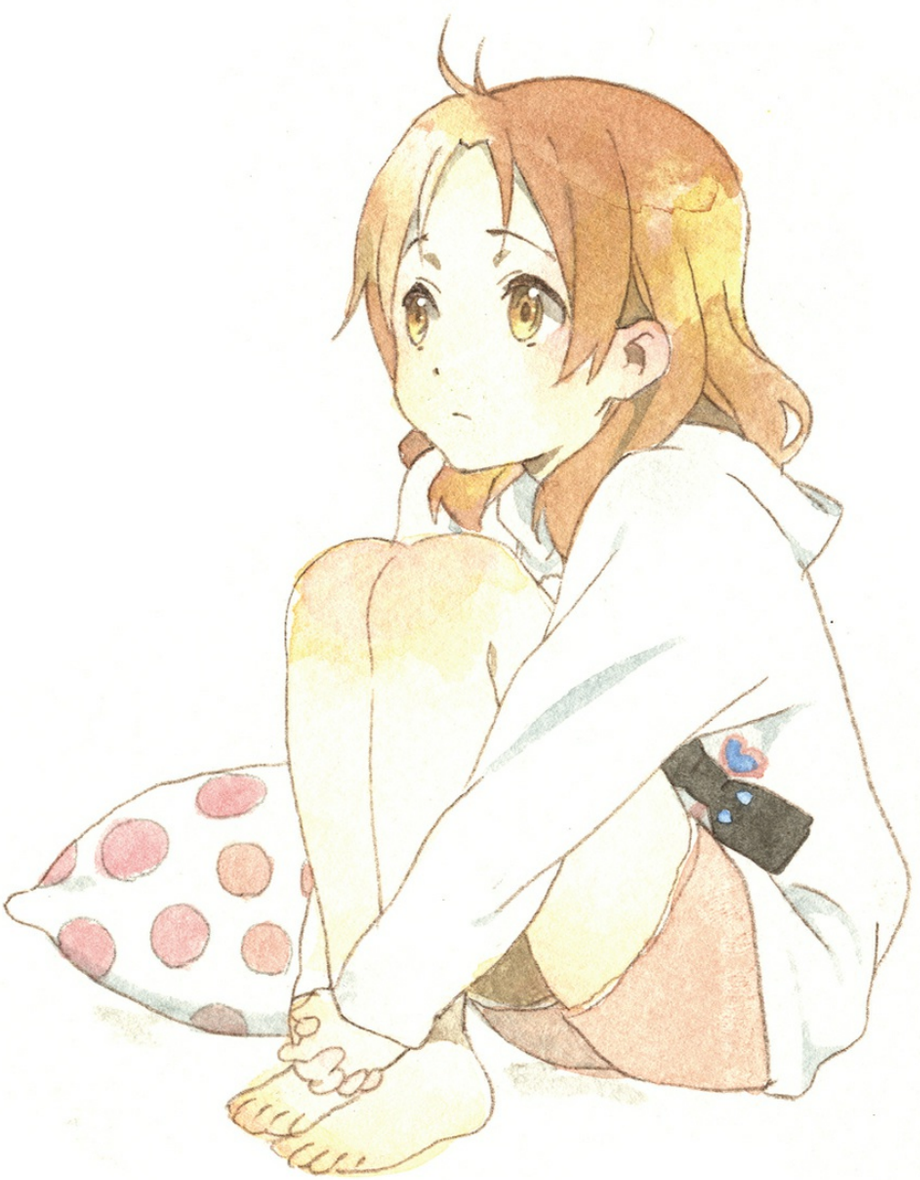

Part 1
KOKORO CONNECT
A S U — RANDOM
Sadanatsu Anda

Part 1

KOKORO CONNECT

A S U — RANDOM




Oosawa Misaki
Nakayama Mariko
Ishikawa Daiki
Kurihara Yukina
"Yukina, wait! Please listen to me!"
"But did they switch for reals, though?"
"At the rate we're headed,
we might just end up completely isolated from everyone."


Setouchi Kaoru
Watase Shingo
Katori Jouji
Fujishima Maiko
"If you're struggling with something, we can hear you out.
Or if it's something we did wrong, we can make it right."
"Is that what this is? The 'World Isolation' phenomenon?"

Table of Contents

«Chapter 1» Just Another Day

«Chapter 2» By the Time They Realized, It Had Already Begun

«Chapter 3» Not Quite Right

«Chapter 4» Someone Else's Story

«Chapter 5» Finally, It Begins

«Chapter 6» Sheep and Shepherd

«Chapter 7» Left Behind

«Chapter 8» Seeds Sown in Secret

«Chapter 9» Parting Words

«Chapter 10» Departure

Afterword



—I heard some crazy shit's gonna happen there.

—People swapping bodies and stuff.

—Or reading minds.

—Crazy, right?

—Beyond crazy, if you ask me... But I guess that's just how it works or something.

—Oh, and I heard they transport you off to somewhere else.

—Yeah, I heard about that. And once you're there, you can't leave, supposedly?

—Doesn't that sound kind of shady?

—Yeah, there's no way they... Well... I guess that's just how it works.

Four months had passed since the final day of the Hokkaido trip—the day «Heartseed» said goodbye for good.

Chapter 1: Just Another Day

“Hurry up and finish your breakfast, kids. I’m leaving for work a little early today.”

“Yes, Mom,” Yaegashi Taichi replied absently, his mind only half-awake, as he sat at the dining table and slowly worked his way through his meal of eggs, toast, and fruit.

“Quit taking tiny little nibbles! What are you, a squirrel? You’ll be there for hours!”

His mother’s nagging went in one ear and out the other. She was always yelling about something at all hours of the day, and it was exhausting to deal with.

His eyelids drooped. Last night, his sixth-grade (soon to be seventh-grade) sister Rina had begged him to stay up late watching a horror movie with her, and as a result, he was a little sleep deprived. Granted, they were only “up late” by a grade-schooler’s metric, but nevertheless, it had thrown his usual bedtime routine out of whack. This, in turn, had made it harder to get out of bed that morning.

“Alright, I’m done waiting! Whichever one of you leaves the house last, be sure to clean up, got it?”

“But Moooom! I’m not done styling my hair!” Rina complained as she devoured her grapefruit slices.

“Not my problem. Okay, I’m heading out!”

And so their mother dashed out of the living room.

“Mom, wait—ugh, fine! See you after school!”

“Have a good day, Mom...”

“Alright, Taichi, I’m leaving cleanup duty to you!”

“Nice try. If you’re the last to leave the house, then you have to take care of it, like Mom said.”

“I said I’m not done getting ready!”

“Don’t be lazy, Rina. Nobody likes a slob.”

“I’m not lazy! I’m helping with dinner tonight, remember? You’re such a jerk!”

“Less talking, more eating.”

“Forget it! I didn’t even want this toast. I’m done!”

“Hey! Don’t waste your food!”

“You sound like Dad. It’s not a waste if I already ate half of it!”

And with that, Rina disappeared back upstairs. She was turning into a real brat lately, and since their father wasn’t around these days, it fell to Taichi to straighten her out. He decided he’d give her a stern talking-to after school.

The Yaegashi household was the standard nuclear family: mother, father, and two children. Mr. Yaegashi was currently working out of town, so he hadn’t been home in a while, and Mrs. Yaegashi was a temp worker at a large corporation. Their house was empty five days a week.

Taichi finished his milk and rose from his chair. “Fine,” he muttered.

Then he stacked Rina’s plate onto his own and carried them both to the sink.

As soon as he stepped outside, he was immediately accosted by the chilly winter wind. He shrank into himself slightly, hunching over and crossing his arms. This was going to be one miserable walk to the train station.

Valentine’s Day had come and gone, and now it was nearing the end of February. Not only were Japanese winters chilly in general, but today was overcast, and the weather report had warned that a cold spell was setting in.

He stepped off the train at the station closest to Yamaboshi High School. *Almost there*. It was wild to think he’d attended this school for nearly two full years now.

As he walked down the street, he could see other students ahead of him, walking in unusually large clusters. Maybe it was their way of staving off the cold.

“Morning, Taichi!” a cheerful voice called, melting away the winter air’s bitter

chill. Then he felt someone clap him on the back.

"*Ow!* Morning, Nagase. I see you're chipper as ever."

"Who, me? Nahhh!" Nagase Iori grinned.

When she smiled, it felt like the wind and clouds and all his other wants and worries no longer mattered—if she was happy, then the whole world was happy. Of course, he knew this was a massive overstatement, but still, that was just how radiant she was. She walked beside him, her long, silky, dark hair blowing behind her in the breeze.

He could recall a time when the two of them had been in love... but that romance never led to anything more. Instead, she was now one of his most trusted friends, always pushing him to be his best self.

"Whenever it gets this cold outside, you know the end of the school year is right around the corner! Nothing left to look forward to," Nagase sighed, exhaling a white fog.

"We still have finals coming up. Oh, and club presentations."

"Yeah, but those aren't *fun*, Taichi! And we've already got everything prepped for our presentation, so there's nothing really left to do!"

"That reminds me—are you doing another high-speed cosplay show this year? It was a big hit, you know."

"Hell yeah! I'll wear a swimsuit, a maid outfit, and of course, last year's dark horse favorite, the pro wrestling costume... *Not!* I wouldn't do that crap again even if you paid me! ...Okay, maybe if you paid me... No, no, definitely not!"

Only Nagase had the energy to subvert her own jokes this early in the morning.

Club presentations were both a showcase of each club's activities as well as a graded performance that would directly determine said club's funding for the next school year. This year, similar to their presentation from last year, the CRC was planning to present a "Special Edition" of the Culture Bulletin. Unlike last year, however, they had the forethought to start prepping their presentation materials ahead of time.

“Well, if you’ve got nothing you’re looking forward to, then why don’t we come up with something ourselves?” Taichi suggested.

“Wait... Holy crap, you’re a genius!”

“*Genius?* Please. It’s just common sense.”

“Yeah, but you’re the last person I’d expect to have any!”

“...You think I’m stupid, don’t you?”

“Haha! Oh my god, Taichi, I’m *kidding*. My point is, it’s a great idea. I know we’re already planning a CRC outing over spring break, but it’d be awesome if we could get the whole class together for something, too. Maybe a giant sleepover!”

“A sleepover? Sounds fun.”

“Sweet! I’m gonna talk to some people and see if we can make it happen!”

Beaming from ear to ear, Nagase bounced around like an excitable little puppy.

It was just another peaceful day.

As soon as Taichi arrived at the classroom, he dropped his bookbag off at his desk and walked right back out again. The weekly school assembly was scheduled that morning in the gymnasium.

The building was large enough for three basketball courts, but when accommodating nearly a thousand people—the entire student body plus the staff—things could get a little cramped. This week, both the principal *and* the student council president were presenting speeches.

“The first-and second-years are preparing for finals while the third-years are busy studying for college entrance exams. I encourage all of you to practice self-care so you can keep operating at 100 percent for the days ahead...”

Taichi didn’t know how anyone could find the courage to give a speech in front of literally hundreds of people, but it was an impressive feat however you looked at it.

“It *is* impressive, isn’t it?”

“Wh...?! Quit scaring me like that! You made me think you could read minds for a second!”

It was Fujishima Maiko, former president of Class 1-C and current self-proclaimed “apostle of love,” being her usual enigmatic self. For whatever reason, their fates kept bringing them together, often at highly inopportune times.

After the dramatic showdown during the Hokkaido trip—not to mention whatever mischief she’d gotten into with Enjouji and Chihiro recently—Fujishima seemed to be back on top of her game. With her hair tied back, her bangs pinned up, and her glasses spotless, she was looking as stylish as always.

“For the record, Yaegashi-kun, I didn’t *need* to read your mind. You literally said ‘whoa’ under your breath just now.”

“Oh.”

The rest of the class had lined up in alphabetical order, but Fujishima had arrived late due to her morning club duties, and the only space available to her was directly behind Taichi.

“Anyway, yeah, his charisma is really something else. You can instantly tell why he won the student council election,” Taichi noted.

“That’s Katori Jouji for you. He has looks and brains in equal measure.”

“Whoa. That’s high praise, coming from you.”

“Perhaps it is. As a member of the Student Council Outreach Committee, it’s my job to enforce the rules set by the student council, and this current president has certainly earned my respect, I’ll say that. He could stand to be a little less demanding of us, but in our line of work, that’s hardly uncommon. If he didn’t have the bite to back up his bark, I would have had him ousted a long time ago!”

Katori Jouji was a fellow second-year student. With a handsome face, an athletic body, and hair so perfect he could be a salon model, it was no wonder he was popular. Not only that, but he was a diligent student and a natural-born leader to boot. Taichi had never shared a class with him, so he barely knew the guy, but they’d spoken on at least one occasion.





“Of course, I know *some of us* are more focused on spring vacation,” Katori continued, and the crowd chuckled. Not only could he give this speech without coming off as flustered, but he managed to fit a joke in, too.

“There’s always that one person your age who’s destined for greatness, huh?” Taichi muttered, partly to Fujishima, but partly to himself. Then it occurred to him: “Actually, now that I think about it, I know quite a few people who fit the bill. There’s you, there’s Inaba...”

For some reason their graduating class was rife with leaders of every stripe.

“Yes, we’ve got a lot of good apples in our barrel,” Fujishima replied. “Personally, I’d be inclined to add your name to that roster as well.”

“Me? Nah. I’m no good at this public speaking stuff.”

“Oh? I seem to recall you making at least one impassioned speech... though it wasn’t in front of a large crowd, I suppose. Well, once you get a little experience under your belt, I wouldn’t be surprised if you turned our trio into a quartet. Speaking of *experience*, by the way, have you and Inaba-san finally taken each other’s—”

“I don’t think I could ever compare to Katori.”

Taichi was by no means a wallflower, of course, but he was no force of personality, either.

“You must think very highly of him. Not that I blame you, but... To me, he could use a hint of color, you know? Maybe a little pink, like me. Which brings me back to my previous question: have you and Inaba-san—”

“I agree you’re a... *colorful character*... but I don’t know what you mean by ‘pink.’”

“I just want to know whether or not your relationship is *rated R*, so to speak —”

“I’m not going to answer that, so quit asking! I just woke up, for crying out loud!”

Lately she wasn’t the only one who teased him in this fashion. Personally, he wished they would stop trying to taint his pure love for Inaba.

“I’m just messing with you, Yaegashi-kun. Anyone would know better than to stick their nose into your love life. That said, it’s a little cringeworthy to refer to your own romance as ‘pure,’ don’t you think?”

“Okay, I *definitely* didn’t say it out loud that time! Can you *actually* read my mind?!”

“Oh, I was bluffing. Looks like it paid off, though. Eww.”

“Wow, you’re really good at bluffing... Hey! Don’t say ‘eww’! That’s so rude!”

“Yaegashi! Fujishima!”

Taichi felt someone grab him by the head. He looked over and found Fujishima similarly seized.

“Pay attention to the principal’s speech!”

It was Gotou Ryuuzen, advisor to Class 2-B and supervisor for the Cultural Research Club.

“Otherwise the head teacher’s gonna rip me a new one. Help me out here, alright?”

If only he’d kept that part to himself, he would’ve sounded like an actual teacher for once.

“Hey, Yaegashi! I heard you were getting all buddy-buddy with Fujishima-san during the assembly this morning. That true?” asked Watase Shingo, the spiky-haired “soccer stud” (his words, not Taichi’s), once first period came to an end. “You trying to move in on her behind my back? Is that it? Huh?”

Watase had carried a torch for Fujishima ever since the autumn of their first year, and there wasn’t much Taichi could say in his defense except: “It’s your fault for missing the assembly.”

“Well... I mean, you’re not wrong...”

“Look, if it bothers you that much, then maybe you should just tell her how you feel.”

“I told you, I... I kinda already did! But she’s just... When it comes to her own love life, she’s as dense as a brick!”

“You sure? I can’t imagine Fujishima being ‘dense’ about anything... although she *does* leap to insane conclusions sometimes.”

“Exactly! And whenever she comes to a conclusion, it’s damn near impossible to move her off it... Haahh... I gotta go take a leak.”

And so, with a distant look in his eyes, Watase left the room. He always acted like he could get any girl he wanted, but maybe his love life wasn’t as rosy as it seemed...

Next, as if on cue, Miyagami walked up.

“What was that about? You’re not trying to make a harem for yourself, are you? Man, save some for the rest of us!”

With wavy hair and rectangular glasses, Miyagami was the kind of guy who was always up to date on the latest trends. Not only was he a member of the Photography Club, he was also one of Taichi’s good friends.

“I don’t *need* a harem. I already have a girlfriend.”

“There you go, bragging about your girlfriend again! I know your type—you’re always two-timing! Or maybe even three-timing! That’s how you keep us single losers oppressed!”

He also had the tendency to believe whatever he read online.

“Dude, I’m not gonna cheat on her. Cheaters are the biggest losers of all.”

“He’s been reading those men’s magazines again, hasn’t he?” commented Sone, another of Taichi’s good friends. He was a chubby (“I’m *not* chubby!”) otaku affiliated with the Manga Club.

“So what if I have? I like to stay ahead of the curve. Besides, what do you care? You only like 2D girls.”

“That’s not true! Just because I like manga and I’m... *big-boned*... doesn’t mean I’m one of *those* creeps! I want a 3D girlfriend, too!”

“What, like, in addition to your 2D girlfriend?” Taichi asked.

“No! I don’t have a 2D girlfriend! I decided a long time ago that I wouldn’t let myself get that deluded... That said, I don’t actually have a crush on anyone

IRL.”

“Well, you should probably start there.”

“Dude, no girl’s gonna date a guy who calls her his *3D girlfriend*,” said Miyagami dismally.

“They’re not going to date *you* either, so stuff it!” Sone shot back.

But right as it looked like they were about to start bickering again, they both turned to Taichi.

“On second thought...”

“...why do you have to be such a know-it-all, Yaegashi?!”

“Wha...?!”

“This is why I can’t stand taken guys!”

“Or maybe this is how he got a girlfriend in the first place...”

And so Miyagami and Sone took turns berating him, like the perfect tag-team.

“Rrgh... I should’ve taken advantage of the love craze while I had the chance!” Miyagami groaned, lifting his glasses to wipe at imaginary tears.

“What I wouldn’t give to swap bodies with Yaegashi for a day,” Sone sighed.

“Swap bodies...?” Taichi ruminated on this for a moment. “I guess it could be fun to see if the grass really is greener on the other side.”

Normally such a thing would be impossible, of course, but it was still fun to dream.

“Let’s see... Whose grass would *I* want to check...? Oh, I know. Tanaka-sensei, the social studies teacher! Dude’s living his best life!”

“What? Why *him?* He’s ancient!”

“Hey moron, have you forgotten who he’s dating?”

“OH! He’s dating... the most popular teacher at Yamaboshi... Hirata Ryouko-sensei!” Sone gasped dramatically.

Meanwhile, Taichi reminisced on the event that brought those two teachers together: Inaba’s paparazzi photo. The CRC published it in the Culture Festival

Special Edition of the Culture Bulletin, then printed a bunch of copies and flung them off the roof. From there, one thing led to another, and the two lovebirds confessed their feelings to each other in front of the whole school.

“She’s sweet, outgoing, funny, beautiful, and super photogenic, too! Not to mention that rack... She’s so stacked, I can hardly pay attention in class!”

“I knew it! I thought I saw you staring at her boobs!”

At this, it occurred to Taichi that next period was math class... and Hirata-sensei always showed up a little early to chat with the students before the bell rang...

Sure enough, there she was.

“N-No, sensei, it’s not what you think! It was just a joke!” Miyagami blurted in a panic. He was usually a pretty laid-back guy, but when it came to thinking on his feet, he often stumbled.

Fortunately, Hirata-sensei seemed genuinely unruffled. She grinned and patted him on the head. “I don’t care where your eyes wander, but you’d better listen and take notes when I speak. I don’t want you to fail your math final, understand?”

“Y-Yes, ma’am! Don’t worry, I’ll totally ace it!”

“Oh god, look at that stupid grin on his face... He’s gonna have Hirata-sensei mentionitis for days now,” Sone complained, and Taichi nodded sagely.

There was just one class left before lunch: art class.

“Today is the last art class of the semester... and for those of you who have chosen the science course for your third year, this might well be your last art class, period. So let’s try something different!”

Their assignment: a group art project.

“You’ll all share one giant canvas. Use whatever tools you like and go wild! You can draw, paint, or write whatever you desire, but on one condition: the *whole group* has to contribute to it in some form or another! Now then, let’s divvy you all up!”

With that, their perpetually cheerful art teacher went down the rows,

assigning a number to each of his students in turn.

“Seems like it could be fun,” Taichi muttered.

“Yeah, it sounds like an interesting concept, at least. Maybe I should take art in my third year, too,” mused Setouchi Kaoru, president of Class 2-B, a girl with short, dark hair and lots of ear piercings.

He could hear her humming to herself under her breath, and it warmed his heart to know she was sincerely enjoying herself these days. If only she hadn’t wasted her first year pretending to be a rebel... At least now she had come to terms with who she really was on the inside.

“It would give you a break from all that studying, at least,” Taichi suggested.

“Our whole lives don’t have to revolve around *studying*, Yaegashi-kun. I get that you’re excited to take the science course, but you know what they say. All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.”

With an attitude like that, she had well and truly earned her position as class president.

“Everybody gather around the canvas! Ooh, this is so exciting! I can feel my creative juices flowing!”

In sharp contrast to Setouchi’s relaxed demeanor was Nakayama Mariko, a pigtailed girl with energy to spare.

“We’re allowed to write words if we want, right?! I *love* pairing words with pictures! Alright, guys—I’m gonna start us off with my all-time favorite!”

The other members of her group—Setouchi, Taichi, and Nakayama’s boyfriend Ishikawa Daiki—all stepped back to give her room. She picked up her brush.

“Okay, here I go... Oh, wait, we didn’t get the paint out! One sec!”

“Don’t be such a ditz, Nakayama-chan! What color do you want?” asked Setouchi.

Meanwhile, Taichi turned to Ishikawa. “Your girlfriend seems like she’s having fun.”

“Agreed. I doubt she’ll get bored anytime soon.”

Ishikawa was a tall, burly baseball player. He and Nakayama had made their relationship official last autumn, and while no one ever imagined that a bubbly chatterbox like Nakayama would get together with strong, silent Ishikawa, they turned out to have more chemistry than anyone gave them credit for. Though they were both a couple of late bloomers, this was resolved by dragging them out on a group date; after that, it was smooth sailing from there, and they’d gone on several more dates since, or so Taichi had heard.

“Now then... Ready or not, here I come!”

Facing the canvas, she held her paintbrush aloft, its big bristles coated in bright red paint. She took in a deep breath and fell perfectly still. Instantly, something in the air changed, and they could sense that she was focusing every fiber of her being on the paper in front of her. Perhaps this was her ten-plus years of calligraphy experience at work.

And so Nakayama proceeded to write *LOVE* in giant letters in the center of the canvas.

“God, Nakayama-chan, you took up half the paper! Now it’ll look like our whole project is themed around love! Do you see anybody else doing that?!” Setouchi complained, pointing around at the other groups.

“I... I just wanted to start us off with something sweet and lighthearted, but... I guess my love was a little too intense...”

“Oh, I see.”

“Makes sense.”

“Will you boys quit coddling her?!”

“Now, now, the main objective of this lesson is to figure out how to work together as a team,” the art teacher explained, weaving his way through the students. “So how will you expand upon it? It’s up to the rest of the group whether you bury it or help it flourish.”

“Uh... Wow... This lesson’s really deep! I feel like it’s teaching me some serious life lessons! Don’t you think, Kaoru-chan?!”

“Y-You’re totally right, Nakayama-chan! You know, Uejima-sensei, I always thought you were kinda boring, but now I understand you’ve got some real hidden depths!”

“Not your best compliment, Setouchi,” Taichi retorted under his breath.

Meanwhile, Ishikawa grabbed a felt-tip pen. “Let’s see what I can do with this.”

“Y-You’re going to fix it, Ishikawa-kun?! I knew it! You’re my... No, you’re *our* hero!”

“Personally, I don’t mind being just yours.”

“Huh? What kind of hero only helps one person?”

“...Good point, I suppose.”

“Those two sure are quite a pair,” Setouchi muttered to Taichi.

“They’re not quite on the same page, but that actually seems to work for them,” he replied.

Ishikawa chose a blank corner and pressed the tip of his pen to the paper. Then he sketched out a series of lines—right, down, up, left.

“There.” Satisfied, he capped his pen once more.

Taichi stared blankly. “Wh... What is it?”

“I’ll use my girlfriend powers to decode it! One sec... Uhh... Sorry, I got nothing.”

“It’s a person, obviously. A person screaming ‘LOVE’ from the edge of a cliff.”

“That gangly scribble is a *person?!* And the horizontal line is a *cliff?!*” Setouchi shouted.

Ishikawa’s artistic ability was *shockingly* bad.

“Come to think of it, I guess this is my first time ever seeing you draw something...”

“Surely it’s not as horrible as you people make it out to be. Go on, Yaegashi, it’s your turn.”

“Who, me?! Trust me, I’m no artist either. Haha...”

“Oh god, don’t tell me... We don’t have a single good artist among us...?!”

Sure enough, Setouchi turned out to be right... and the resulting “artwork” that came of their joint efforts was enough to make the teacher burst out laughing.

At lunch, Taichi explained the art class mishap to his girlfriend, Inaba Himeko, as they walked down the hallway.

“Now you’re getting buddy-buddy with Setouchi, too? Ugh, whatever. This one looks open,” she said, pointing at a classroom in the North Wing. It was a room only occasionally used for special classes, and as such, no one was there during lunch period.

“Yeah, I don’t see anyone,” Taichi replied as he double-checked to make sure. Inaba liked her privacy, after all.

They walked in, and she shut the door tightly behind them.

“Well, it’s... just the two of us now,” she continued, her voice tinged with nervous excitement.

“Yep. Just the two of us.”

Gazing into each other’s eyes, the two of them drew close, bit by bit. Taichi was captivated by her glossy hair, her long eyelashes, her almond-shaped eyes, her slender, sexy body...

Standing in the center of the empty classroom, they were in a world all their own.

“Well then... Let’s get started, shall we?”

Inaba reached down... and pulled out her bento boxes.

The two of them met up once a week to eat lunch together, and often—though not always—Inaba would bring food from home for them to share. But eating lunch as a couple at school opened them up to lots of teasing from their peers, and Inaba in particular *really* didn’t want anyone else seeing her home cooking, so they ended up going out of their way to find a secluded spot.

“Thanks. I’ll treat you next time to make up for it. When was the last time we had your cooking, anyway? Two weeks ago?”

“Yep. But I’ve spent those two weeks doing a lot of research... and now I think I’ve found the answer I’ve been looking for.”

“O-Oh. Cool.”

Inaba was by no means an *awful* cook, but... she wasn’t that great, either. According to her, she hated following recipes because the wording was often “too vague”—for example, “a pinch of salt” or “season to taste.”

Most recently, she had attempted to make boiled squash. The results were disastrous. (Quote: “If you’re going to title your cookbook ‘Recipes For Beginners,’ then make sure actual *beginners* can make them, goddamn it!”) “This time around I’ve made sure to include lots of different colors. That way you can’t complain about how ‘brown’ everything is.”

“Sorry...”

Last time Inaba brought in her cooking, she’d asked him to give her his “honest opinion.” And when he did, she got upset about it. *Girls are so complicated.*

She set her adorable two-layer bento box on the table, took off the top layer, and placed it in front of Taichi. Then she lifted the lid on both layers simultaneously— “Feast your eyes on this! It’s the most colorful food you’ve ever seen!”

“Whoaaa! Check out the red and green contrast on the bacon-wrapped asparagus! And look at these golden mini-croquettes! The red from the spicy shrimp really offsets the bright yellow *tamagoyaki!* And there’s yellow kernels of corn in the sauteed spinach! But best of all, it’s all retained its shape beautifully!”

“I know, right?! It looks like it came right out of a photo in a cookbook!”

“You’re not wrong! This is incredible... I really ought to thank whatever store you bought these from.”

Bam! She punched him hard in the shoulder. *Ouch*.

“Shut up! How did you even figure it out?!”

“It’s kind of obvious, don’t you think? The size and shape of everything is *way* too uniform to be homemade.”

“Rrgh... Well, they’ll taste good, at least! I’m not the biggest fan of frozen food, but I know everyone else eats it all the time!”

“Kinda defeats the purpose, doesn’t it...?”

Personally, Taichi was hoping for a more romantic lunchtime, but at the rate they were going, they could have done this back in Class 2-B.

“Well, I just... I thought you’d like it better this way,” Inaba mumbled, fidgeting with her hands as she flicked her gaze shyly up at him. It was so adorably pathetic, Taichi couldn’t resist reaching out and stroking her hair.

“I’m lucky enough that I get to eat your cooking at all, Inaba.”

Unfortunately, she still seemed uncertain. “But... what if I’m not girly enough...?”

“I don’t need you to be girly. Anything you cook is great.”

Somehow, she still wasn’t convinced. “But...”

“You have nothing to worry about. I’m not going to stop loving you,” he insisted.

She looked up, not a trace of anxiety left on her face. “I’ve really got you wrapped around my little finger, don’t I? All I have to do is start whining and you’re putty in my hands.”

“I knew it! I knew you were faking at least part of that!”

He could never quite tell how much of it was an act.

“Anyway... I know you’d prefer someone who could cook, so... I’ve been practicing at home.”

“And pretty hard, by the sounds of it. What did your family think when you first started?”

“Well... My mother’s excited to start teaching me things, like how to make soup stock, but I don’t think I’m at that level yet. My father’s... nervous about it,

I guess? I haven't made anything for them just yet. Oh, and my brother's been completely obnoxious; he refuses to leave me alone about it. My oldest brother, though—the one who has his own place—he offered to buy me my own custom knife set. I swear, he spoils me *way* too much... Wait, why are you laughing?"

"Because you're trying your hardest to make this sound like a bad thing, but I can tell it makes you happy. Listen to you, talking up a storm!"

She always talked about her family as though they didn't really care about her, but it was clear that was the furthest thing from the truth.

"Don't make fun of me! That's it—I'm not going to hand-feed you anymore. You'll just have to eat it yourself!"

"If you really wanted to punish me, shouldn't you take away the food...?"

"That was delicious. I'll be sure to wash the bento box before I give it back."

"Nah, I'll take care of it. I want to see this mission through to the very end."

Taichi wanted to respect her agency, so he decided to take her up on her offer. With his belly now full, he let out a satisfied sigh.

That was when the intruders barged in.

"Well, well, well! Now what do we have here?" asked Kurihara Yukina, a girly-girl from the track team (not to mention Kiriyama Yui's best friend), as she walked into the classroom. Her short, wavy hair was freshly re-bleached.

"Stop it, Yukina! Don't bother them!"

Behind Kurihara stood Oosawa Misaki, another track team member, lingering hesitantly by the door. Despite her boyish pixie cut, she was very meek and feminine in romantic situations; Taichi and Inaba had once spied on her during a date, so they knew this for a fact. It was an adorable personality contrast. Incidentally, she was attracted to both guys and girls, and during their first year of high school, she had fallen head over heels for Kiriyama.

"Bento boxes, eh? Well, I know for a fact that Yaegashi almost never brings food from home... which means it must've been Inaba-san's home cooking, am I right?"

“Enough already, Yukina! Ugh... Sorry about this, you guys.”

Both Kurihara and Oosawa had tall, slender builds. Side by side, they were intimidatingly gorgeous.

“Nah, it’s fine,” Taichi replied offhandedly.

“Oho! Nothing ruffles your feathers, eh, Mr. Boyfriend? Your relationship’s too rock-solid to get rattled?”

“You sound like a drunken old man,” Inaba retorted.

“I’m in the process of discovering a new me... One that likes to spy on happy couples!”

“You’ll have to forgive her—she’s all over the place today. She just found out her latest boytoy has been making moves on other girls behind her back.”

“Yeah, and I just got back from tearing him a new one! Hmph!”

“And I decided to tag along, you know, in case things got... out of hand.”

Lately Kurihara had a bad habit of going off the rails every now and then. Evidently Oosawa was her designated babysitter for today.

“You should’ve let me beat his ass, Misaki! Vigilante justice! It’s what cheating scum like him deserve!” she shouted, swinging her fists at an imaginary opponent.

While at first glance Kurihara may have seemed like the kind of girl who had it all together, she very much did not. When it came to romance, all sense went out the window. That was how Taichi and Inaba got roped into that triple date, among other things.

“Seriously, cool it.” Oosawa administered a solid flick to Kurihara’s forehead, putting an end to her practice punches.

“*Ow!* Okay, fine... I’m sorry.”

“Just because *your* love life isn’t going well, it doesn’t mean you can mess with everyone else’s. You really need to stop doing this.”

“Yeah... You’re right... Trust me, I know... I’ll work on it.” Kurihara slumped her shoulders.

Taichi chuckled. “Now I understand why you two are such good friends.”

“What’s so funny, Yaegashi?” Kurihara asked dubiously.

“Oosawa’s your ‘big sister’ friend, same way you are to Kiriyama.”

“You’re totally right... Oh gosh, that’s embarrassing... How can I be a ‘big sister’ if I need one myself...?”

“Oh, interesting. I didn’t know you and Yui-chan had that kind of friendship,” Oosawa murmured, her gaze pointed upwards in contemplation. “So you act like a baby around me, but when she’s around, you suddenly want to be the mom?”

“Wh—Misaki, will you stop embarrassing me?! God!”

Inaba smirked deviously. “I’m telling Yui about this.”

“*Noooo*! Don’t you dare! I’ll die!”

Time flew by in a blink, and before they knew it, the school day was over.

“Let us once again climb this formidable staircase to our beloved headquarters!”

“Formidable? Dude, it’s just three flights.”

“Taichi, I’m trying to make the most out of every moment, okay? Just play along!”

And so Taichi and Nagase walked up the Rec Hall stairs. It was a path they’d traveled so many times, they could do it blindfolded by this point. Their destination: room 401, home to the Cultural Research Club and all their shenanigans.

When they opened the door, they found two people already inside.

“Homework? I’m only worried about the stuff we have to turn in. Otherwise, who cares?”

“Shame on you, Chihiro-kun! That’s not fair! You need to play by the rules, same as everyone else!”

“What’s going on in here, kids? Fighting already?”

“Help me out, Iori-senpai! Chihiro-kun’s being unfair and refusing to do his homework!” shouted Enjouji Shino, one of two first-year CRC members. With her poofy brown hair and round, youthful face, it was hard to feel threatened, even when she was at her most furious. She was like cotton candy with legs.

“It’s barely even homework. It’s just a Japanese worksheet, and we don’t even need to turn it in. It’s a waste of time,” replied Uwa Chihiro, the other first-year, remaining perfectly composed in spite of Enjouji’s claims. With his androgynous features and messy, asymmetrical haircut, he was probably *very* popular with a certain subset of the female student body; even Taichi, a fellow guy, could tell he was handsome.

Apparently the first-years were squabbling again.

“Alright, alright. Cool your jets, errybody. So if I’m getting this right, Shino-chan doesn’t want Chee-hee to cut corners, but Chee-hee wants to use his time efficiently. Right?”

“Exactly. I’m not trying to blow off my homework; if it seems worthwhile, then I’m happy to do it.”

“It... It doesn’t *matter* if it’s ‘worthwhile’ to you! It’s your *homework!*”

“You say that, but I totally kicked your ass on the midterms, remember?”

“Wha... But... Y-You’re not going to mature as a human being if you only ever focus on hard numbers! Right, Taichi-senpai?! Oh, wait... I forgot the only thing ‘mature’ about you is your voice.”

“Wh—HEY! I’m more than just my voice, okay?!”

Enjouji was very fond of Taichi’s voice... Perhaps a little *too* fond of it, you might say. She didn’t seem to pay much attention to the rest of him. *Y-Yeah, it’s her fault for not paying attention, that’s all...*

“Oh, way to go, Enjouji. Now you’ve hurt Taichi-san’s feelings. Got anything to say for yourself?”

“Huh?! Wha...?! How did that happen?! What part of that made you cry?!”

Enjouji was often completely oblivious to her own sick burns. *And for the record, I’m NOT crying!*

“Taichi-senpai... I admit, I could have phrased that a little better. Considering the incredible power of your voice... Yes, I think you’re an incredible human being in your own right!”

“Ooh, Taichi got Shino-chan’s stamp of approval!”

“A-And you’re incredible too, of course!”

“Aww, thank you, Shino-chan! I’m nothing special, though.”

“Incredible how? What’s your metric for this?” Chihiro complained under his breath.

“I don’t know. All I know for sure is that *you* are not incredible.”

“Then neither are you.”

“E-Excuse me? I can understand if you’re jealous of me, but I’m afraid you and I are not the same!”

“Who in god’s name would be jealous of *you*? What’s so great about you?”

“W-Well... a lot of things, actually! Don’t judge a book by its cover!”

“*In that case, why don’t we go on a date and I’ll decide for myself*...” Taichi interjected, mimicking Chihiro’s voice.

“*What*?!” The two first-years whirled around to stare at him.

“Oh, sorry. I thought that was where this conversation was going... Was I wrong?”

“D-Don’t scare me like that, Taichi-senpai! I almost had a heart attack!”

“Seriously, Taichi-san!”

Naturally, that was the exact moment Nagase decided to add fuel to the fire: “Honestly, maybe you two *should* go on a date. You already act like an old married couple.”

“No we don’t!” they shouted back in unison.

“See? You’re doing that thing again.”

She had a point. Lately, Enjouji and Chihiro were in perfect sync with each other. But whether that chemistry would lead to anything more later down the

line, well... that was anyone's guess.

"Look who's here! The *actual* married couple!" Nagase announced as Kiriyama Yui and Aoki Yoshifumi walked in.

"Haahh... I can't believe you," Kiriyama grumbled as she threw her bookbag down on the table and dropped into a chair. Then she folded her arms and let out another giant sigh. Every inch of her petite body radiated abject misery; her long tawny locks were looking frazzled, and yet she didn't even seem to notice.

"I told you I was sorry, didn't I? It was just a suggestion!" Aoki whimpered, pressing his palms together in apology. Normally he was a cool and upstanding guy, but right now his flailing motions, lanky body, and wavy hair all combined to create an exemplary case study of *cringe*.

"I don't think so, mister! Get a load of this, you guys. You wanna know where he suggested we go for our next date?"

"O-Oh dear... Well, considering how furious you appear to be, my best guess is... the graveyard...?"

"Shino-chan, this isn't the time for your wacky jokes, okay? Sometimes they make everyone uncomfortable. Anyways... He suggested we go to some Italian restaurant! You know, the kind of place that puts *garlic* in everything!"

"W-Well, yeah, but..." Aoki slumped his shoulders.

"What's wrong with that?" Taichi asked, puzzled. "Garlic is delicious."

"Right? I like a little garlic every now and then..."

"Hold it, Taichi! I'm not saying garlic is gross, okay? Because it isn't. It's good for your body and helps build stamina, and I like it a lot. But think about it! Garlic? On a date? A DATE?! What sort of girlfriend wants to reek of garlic when she's with her boyfriend?! It's, like, *soooo* uncute!"

As a notorious superfan of all things cute, Kiriyama had certain aesthetic standards that only really made sense to her.

"Yeah. Not like you can make out with garlic breath."

"Exactly! I don't want our kisses to taste like garlic! That's so... Wait... *Chihiro-kun?!* I don't... We don't *make out!*"

“You totally do,” Taichi and Nagase muttered in perfect unison.

“Hey! Peanut gallery! Shut the heck up!”

“Heh heh heh... *Actually*... Ouch!”

“No smug chuckling!”

“Chihiro-kun... I’m glad you’ve recovered to the point that you can tease Yui-senpai about it... You truly have matured, haven’t you?”

“What in the world are you talking about, Shino-chan...? Ugh, forget it!” Kiriyama waved a hand dismissively. “*My point is*, it’s a crappy date idea!”

“O-Okay, okay! Ix-nay on the garlic! Wait, but... what about barbecue and ramen? Those use garlic, too!”

“W-Well... it’s okay if it’s just a little bit! I refuse to give up barbecue and ramen!”

“Alright then, I guess those don’t count.”

“Yay! Thank you, Aoki! Wait... What the heck am I *thanking you* for?!”

“And they lived happily ever after. The End,” Taichi snarked under his breath.

“Man, it’s wild to see Yui and Aoki actually going out on dates. Feels like their relationship is finally official, y’know?” Nagase remarked.

At this, Kiriyama flushed pink and scratched her cheek in embarrassment. “Well, *obviously* we’re going on dates... I mean, me and—and...”

For some reason, she faltered mid-sentence. Taichi looked over at her. “Hmm?”

Blinking, Kiriyama gave Aoki a good, hard stare, her expression perfectly blank.

“Wait... what the...? Hold on... Who are you again?”

“Oh, *very funny*, Yui! Don’t pretend you don’t know who I am!” Aoki shot back at full force.

“...Oh! No, I... Right! Aoki, Aoki, Aoki!”

“Okay, now you’re making it sound like you actually forgot!”

“No... No, I was... I was joking! Just joking around!” In the face of Aoki’s flustered antics, Kiriyama donned a smile.

For a minute there Taichi really thought she was serious, but upon further reflection, that wouldn’t make much sense. After all, the Cultural Research Club was a tight-knit group of close friends. How could anyone forget Chihiro or Enjouji, much less Aoki or Kiriyama or even—?

Wait... Did I miss someone just now? Chihiro, Enjouji, Aoki, Kiriyama... Nagase. Yeah, that’s everyone. I guess my mind was just playing tricks on me.

Then Inaba walked in, and the subject was dropped entirely.

“Well, *that* sure took a lot longer than I was expecting,” Inaba grumbled as she sat down at the table and opened her laptop. At last, all seven members of the Yamaboshi High School Cultural Research Club were present and accounted for.

“Alrighty then! Let’s get right into today’s club activities!” club president Nagase declared cheerfully.

“Yes please! Oh, I’m so excited!” Enjouji gushed, even though they didn’t have anything special planned.

“I mean, we don’t have any actual activities, you know. So you can ‘get right into’ whatever you want.”

“Oh, don’t be such a grouch, Inaban. Are you in a bad mood today?”

“They were bitching at me about some overdue paperwork. Waste of my goddamn time.”

“Not that any time spent in this room is ever productive,” Chihiro pointed out, and aptly so.

“Heh. That’s our Chihiro for you.”

“Taichi, quit smirking at Chee-hee and help Inaban feel better already! Awaken her inner Ina-bashful or something!”

“Oh my gosh, are we about to see Inaba get really cute?!”

“Stop. Ina-bashful’s not waking up, got it?”

With all seven members present, things were growing ever more rowdy in the CRC clubroom. But eventually the fuss would quiet down, and they'd all settle into their own separate activities— Except that was when the door opened.

The clubroom never saw any visitors. After all, no one in their right mind would bother making the trek all the way up to this remote corner of campus. If someone needed to speak to them for whatever reason, generally they'd ask the CRC to come down instead.

It was a door only the seven members of the CRC ever opened... but now, someone else's hand was on the doorknob.

So who was it?

All eyes turned to the doorway... and there stood Gotou Ryuuzen, advisor to Class 2-B and supervisor for the Cultural Research Club. At age 25, he was on the younger end of the scale as far as teachers went, but judging from his body language he did appear to be a bit... tired...

"Haahh... Man, it kills me walking up three flights of stairs... Doesn't it ever get tiring for you kids?"

Spoken like someone at least twice his age.

"...What do you want, Gotou? It's not every day you drag your lazy ass up here," Inaba demanded, without a shred of respect for his authority.

"Oh, uh, yeah, so... Wait, what was it again?"

"You *forgot?!*" Nagase groaned.

"Uhhh... Oh yeah, that's right! Inaba, lemme see those forms I gave you. It should be in there somewhere..."

Rolling her eyes, Inaba reluctantly complied with his request.

"...Bingo! Yeah, see, I'm actually supposed to hold onto this one."

"Is... Is that all?" Aoki asked, dumbfounded.

"Yep, that's all," Gotou responded without missing a beat. "Oh, and, uh... I was thinking about trying to make time to stop by a little more often from now on. Gotta at least *pretend* to have my act together, y'know? Otherwise the

other teachers will start breathing down my neck! Anyway, you kids have fun. But not too much!”

And so, waving the retrieved sheet of paper in one hand, Gotou walked out of the clubroom.

“You know... Every time I see that guy...” Chihiro murmured.

“He’s always slacking off as much as possible, isn’t he?” Enjouji responded.

They seemed amazed that he was still employed at all.

During this time of year, the sun was always quick to vanish beneath the horizon. As a result, most students headed home a little earlier than they otherwise would—the CRC included.

As they stepped out into the elements, the chilly winter wind slapped them all in the face.

“Gaahhh, it’s so cold! Help me, Inabaaaan!”

“Whoa! Jeez! Get off me, dumbass!”

“But you’re so waaaarm! Get in here, Shino-chan!”

“Oh dear... um... Are you sure she won’t mind...?”

“Tsk... Fine, knock yourselves out. And yes, I see you looking at me with those puppydog eyes, Aoki, but hell no, you’re not invited to this group hug.”

“Nnrgh... Fine, then let’s get a guys-only group going! Come share the warmth, fellas!”

“Hard pass. I’d rather die.”

“Look, Aoki, uh... I love you like a brother, but...”

“Don’t be a dick, Chihiro! And damn, Taichi, that hurts!”

“Those idiots... Forget it, I’m joining the girls’ group...”

Just then, Kiriyama spotted someone and came to a stop.

“Oh hey, if it isn’t Yui!”

It was her best friend Kurihara Yukina from the track team. Her bleached, wavy hair was tied up in a ponytail, suggesting she’d just finished track practice.

When she spotted Yui, she jogged over.

“Hello there, CRC folks!”

“Yukina, where’s the rest of the track team? Aren’t they with you?”

“Oh, actually, today I’m... Whoops! That’s my phone—Huh?”

And then Kurihara’s body went limp.

“Wh—Yukina?!” Kiriyama shrieked. She dashed forward.

Taichi whirled back.

As Kurihara’s legs gave out from under her, her cell phone went flying out of her hand.

“Yuki—na!” Fortunately, Kiriyama slid in between Kurihara and the ground and caught her just in the nick of time. “Oh my god, Yukina, are you okay?!”

“Mmm... Yeah, I’m... Huh? Yukina?”

“Yes, you! What’s the matter with you?”

“Huh...? Wait... what?”

“Earth to Yukina! Are you still out of it?”

It was around then that Nagase, Inaba, and Aoki caught up.

“Are you okay, Yukina-chan?!”

“You nearly gave us a heart attack, Kurihara!”

“Should we call an ambulance?!”

Meanwhile, Taichi had stopped to retrieve her phone. Then he walked over and handed it back to her. “You okay? Here, you dropped this.”

But Kurihara was so startled, she nearly dropped it a second time. “Whaaagh!”

“Hey! Careful! You’re gonna shatter the screen. Seriously, are you feeling okay?”

“Nnn...” Clutching her forehead, Kurihara shook her head vigorously like she was trying to snap back to her senses. “I, uh... Yeah, I’m okay. I’m sure I’m just

seeing things, that’s all.”

Chapter 2: By the Time They Realized, It Had Already Begun “Go on, now. And make sure you pay attention in class, you hear me?”

“Have a good day, Taichi!”

“The same goes for you, Rina! Save the chitchat and run along to school!”

“Okaaaay...”

And so, with his family’s cheerful voices at his back, Taichi headed off to Yamaboshi. This time he wasn’t lucky enough to encounter any friends on the way there, but he arrived safely nonetheless.

When he stepped into the classroom, however, he caught sight of Kurihara Yukina and was reminded of how unwell she had seemed yesterday. At least she hadn’t called in sick today, but still... He wanted to ask her how she was feeling, but she was on the phone with someone.

“I’m telling you, you have nothing to worry about. Just come to school and we’ll talk about it in person, okay? Bye.” She hung up the phone and let out an aggravated sigh.

Before Taichi could walk over to her, however, Kiriyama hastily cut in. “Hey, are you okay?!”

“Settle down, would you? It’s 8 AM. And I’m fine.”

“Morning, you two. How are you feeling?”

“Morning, Taichi.”

“Morning, Yaegashi. Even *you’re* worried about me now?”

“Of course I am! You really scared us.”

“Okay, well, I’m only gonna say this once, so listen up: I’m as fit as a fiddle.”

“You sure? You’re not lying to us, are you? Because you literally *passed out* yesterday!”

“I did *not* pass out! I just came really close, that’s all. Why would I lie to you?”

Kurihara replied with a grin, as if to allay Kiriyama's worries by emphasizing her own good mood.

"Well, I'm glad to hear you're doing better—"

"AAAAAAAAHHHH!"

Out of nowhere, Kurihara let out a scream and tumbled out of her chair to the floor.

Taichi failed to process this. "Huh?"

"Yukina?!" Startled, Kiriyama hastily offered her a hand to help her up—
"No!"

—but Kurihara flinched away. Almost like she was *afraid* of Kiriyama.

"Yukina, what's the matter with you?! Tell me what's wrong!" Kiriyama shrieked in a panic. And after the past two days, Taichi could only imagine how concerned she must have felt for her best friend.

"What... what's...?" Kurihara stammered deliriously as she stared around the room.

Meanwhile, the commotion had drawn attention from their other classmates.

"Hey, what's going on?"

"You okay?"

"Wait, what happened?"

Then Kurihara turned back to Taichi and Kiriyama.

"No... *NOOOO!*" she screamed uncontrollably. Then she leapt to her feet and bolted from the room.

"Yukina, wait!" Kiriyama yelled as she gave chase.

In her wake, hushed whispers broke out all around the classroom.

"Is she okay?"

"What was that about...?"

In the end, Kurihara returned to the classroom partway through first period, accompanied by Kiriyama. Once class was over, Taichi (and several others)

approached her.

“I heard you weren’t doing too hot this morning, Yukina-chan. What happened?” asked Nagase, her tone carefully balanced somewhere between lighthearted and serious.

“Oh, um... Yeah, I was really out of it,” Kurihara replied, her face pale, her smile stiff.

Talk about an understatement.

“Maybe you should go home for the day,” someone else suggested.

“Yeah, you should rest up so you’ll have the energy to sit through finals week,” a third chimed in.

“Don’t worry about it. I’m sorry for scaring you, but I’m better now, and I’m ready for the rest of the day,” Kurihara insisted, dropping her textbook onto her desk with a firm *thump*, as if to say *this conversation is over now*.

Third period was scheduled to be held in a different classroom, so after second period ended, Taichi, Nagase, Kiriyama, and the rest of the class headed out into the hallway.

“I’m getting kinda worried about Yukina-chan,” Nagase mumbled quietly. The girl in question had left the classroom ahead of them, accompanied by some other friends.

“Something’s definitely going on with her,” Taichi replied. Not that there was much he could do about it, of course, but it still weighed on his mind.

“This morning she was trying to hide out in the girls’ bathroom, so I took her to the nurse’s office instead, and like... she was totally zoned out. Like, that’s not normal,” said Kiriyama, her brow furrowed.

“Well, this is Yukina-chan we’re talking about, so I’m guessing we can cross ‘too much studying’ off the list,” Nagase mused in a half-joking tone.

Just then, screams broke out somewhere up ahead, and Taichi’s heart nearly stopped. Startled, he looked in the direction of the sound.

There were two girls standing there—Taichi recognized them as fellow second-years, but they were from a different class, and he didn’t know their

names off the top of his head. They looked at each other... then looked at the three members of the CRC... then back at each other.

“Hey, uh... what’s wrong?” Nagase asked—and a split-second later, the two girls scrambled into a dash with looks of terror etched onto their faces.

“Wh-... what was *that* about?!” Kiriyama glanced over her shoulder and peered around the hallway.

“More importantly... why did they seem like they were kind of... scared of us?” Taichi asked as the thought occurred to him. That was the sense he got, at least.

“Why would they be? What did we ever do to them? Those girls were from the track team, right? From Class 2-A?” asked Nagase.

“Honestly, I haven’t really talked to them much...” Then Kiriyama looked up as a certain realization hit her. “Wait, but... Didn’t Yukina seem kind of scared, too? She looked at us and screamed!”

“Are we causing this somehow? If so, then how? I can’t think of any reason why... except maybe...”

If something out of the ordinary was happening, well... they certainly knew of one particular entity that could be behind it. But... it had promised them it would never show itself again.

“Maybe it’s a coincidence,” Taichi offered, attempting to stay optimistic. “Maybe we were just in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“True...”

“Yeah, that could be it...”

The two girls nodded thoughtfully.

“Anyway, we’re gonna be late, so let’s book it!”

“Ack! You’re right!”

And so, with Nagase leading the way, the three of them hurried down the hall.

They had witnessed abnormal occurrences two days in a row now. But was

the source purely external? Or... could they be somehow responsible? What if they were unknowingly sowing the seeds of disaster everywhere they went? The thought was terrifying.

Halfway there, they passed by two male students in the middle of a conversation. And since Taichi was now hyper-conscious of everyone, his gaze naturally drifted to them.

“__ __”

“__ __”

Apparently they were having a private chat. He could see their mouths moving, but he couldn’t make out what they were saying. In fact, he couldn’t hear their voices at all... not even as he passed them at point-blank range.

What the? Confused, Taichi came to a stop.

The boys weren’t covering their mouths or anything; on the contrary, they were talking like they had nothing to hide. So why couldn’t he hear their voices? Were they just mouthing the words or something...?

“Pretty crazy, huh?”

“Yeah, dude, it’s insane! ...Huh? Did you need something?” One of the guys looked over and met Taichi’s gaze.

“Oh! No, sorry.” With an awkward smile, he hurried after Nagase and Kiriyama.

I guess my mind was just playing tricks on me.

At lunch, Taichi realized he had forgotten to bring his thermos from home, so he decided to pay a visit to the nearest vending machine. The heaters were always on full blast during the winter months, and similar to the blazing summer, the dry air had a way of making him thirsty.

As he headed down the hall, he randomly spotted Inaba up ahead, walking along with two of her other female friends. As she approached, she picked at her ear canal with one finger... and as her boyfriend, this was not the most attractive sight.

Then one of her friends spotted Taichi—“Oh!”—and consequently, so did

Inaba. For some reason, she had a pronounced scowl on her face.

The two other girls exchanged a look... then nodded in perfect unison.

“Okay, well, the two of us had better get going!”

“Yeah, we gotta go do something else! Sorry!”

Barely concealing their knowing smirks with their hands, they hurried away.

“Ugh... This is why I don’t like bumping into you at school. Everyone starts mocking me.”

“Oh, please. They’re not mocking you.”

As an openly confirmed couple, they were occasionally subject to this sort of misplaced kindness from their friends.

“Good grief. Why are they so convinced that I constantly want to be alone with you at all hours of the day? Good grief, I tell you. Good grief.”

“They probably enjoy seeing that little smile you get on your face whenever you try to play it cool. You know, the one you’re wearing right now.”

“Hyah!” She karate-chopped him in the chest.

“Ouch!”

“I don’t need your rational analysis, okay?! I’m your girlfriend! If I’m smiling, then you should be smiling even harder!”

Unfortunately, that was a tall order; Taichi really couldn’t imagine himself grinning gleefully without it coming off as creepy.

“Well, I don’t want to hold you up if you were on your way somewhere.”

“Nah, it’s fine. I was just headed back to class.”

“Oh, okay. And also... please don’t pick your earwax in public. It’s gross.”

“I don’t do it all the time, alright? I’ve just been having trouble hearing people lately.”

“What do you mean?”

“Earlier there was this one guy whose voice I couldn’t hear at all for some reason... Does that make sense? Or to be more exact, there was an entire group

of people, and I could hear everyone else, but not him."

"Almost like he was just mouthing the words?"

"Yeah, exactly! You're pretty quick on the uptake."

"Actually... I had that happen to me recently, too."

Was it just a coincidence, or... could there be some common cause?

"You did? Give me the details."

In a blink, her expression hardened, and all cheer evaporated from the air.

As it turned out, Inaba had experienced the same bizarre "selective deafness" Taichi had, albeit with a different person.

Personally, Taichi wanted to believe they were just overthinking it, and even Inaba had conceded that "sometimes certain voices are harder to hear than others; you know, their pitch or whatever." But there was also the incident with Kurihara to take into consideration, plus the two other girls... All these tiny oddities were starting to add up.

Add up to what, though? Wasn't *that* supposed to be over now? Not that Taichi truly believed *you-know-who* was gone for good; he *wanted* to believe it, obviously, but at the same time, he wanted to be prepared for the worst case scenario, too. His desires were mutually exclusive.

For that matter, what about the people who experienced the phenomena before the CRC did? *You-know-who* did say they weren't its first guinea pigs, right? So how did those people go back to their normal lives afterwards?

All this time, it never truly felt "over," but soon, Taichi and the others would all have to come to terms with it. The story had ended, and now they needed to pen the epilogue. Everything that happened... Everything that changed... Everything they felt... They would have to find a way to carry it with them for the rest of their lives.

This idle train of thought came to a halt as he realized there were only fifteen minutes left until the final bell. The blackboard was now covered in chalk letters, and yet Taichi had barely copied more than the first line.

Next to him, Setouchi peered over at his notes and blinked in surprise. Then

she tapped her notebook with her mechanical pencil and gave him a look that said *want to borrow mine?* Taichi smiled, shook his head, and held up a hand slightly to decline. No, he needed to take his own notes—no cutting corners. There was no point in worrying over a threat that might not actually exist.

His gaze wandered idly to Nagase and Kiriyama, both of them busily scribbling away. Seated ahead of them in a different row was none other than Kurihara Yukina. Their eyes met.

Kurihara flinched slightly, then immediately hung her head... as if to hide from his gaze.

After school, the five CRC second-years met up in the clubroom.

“Apparently, Chihiro and Shino are having a study session with their classmates,” Inaba informed the others.

“Interesting... Sounds like Chee-hee and Shino-chan have finally broken out of their little shells... Wait, why are they reporting their absences to you and not me?! *I’m* the president, dang it!” Nagase sniffled loudly and pretended to wipe away her tears.

Since finals were coming up, everyone pulled out their study materials—even Aoki, though the look on his face suggested he would rather be doing literally anything else.

And so the five of them scribbled in their notebooks, with some light conversation here and there.

“...Something’s been bothering me lately,” Taichi said finally, after debating whether to bring it up at all. Then he talked to them about Kurihara, about the other two girls from the track team, and finally, about the two boys whose conversation he was somehow physically unable to hear.

He wanted them to tell him he was overreacting—that he was just paranoid. Unfortunately, that was not what he got.

“Actually,” Inaba replied slowly, “you know, after I bumped into you at lunch... there was this first-year who came barreling at me down the hallway. He was completely out of control—like he was panicking about something.”

“Wait, what? So... did he crash into you or something?” Nagase asked.

“No, no. He came to a stop right in front of me and said ‘I didn’t mean to do that’ and ran off.”

“That’s, like, *really* weird,” Kiriyama mused, tilting her head with a pensive hand at her chin.

“Real talk, though, that reminds me... There was this moment where I made eye contact with Oosawa-san and she totally blew me off! Stared at the ground and ran away and everything!”

“Maybe she just doesn’t like you?”

“Hey! Be nice to your boyfriend, Yui! And for the record, normally she always smiles and asks me how things are going with you, so... I’m really not sure what I did to weird her out.”

“Sounds like things are weird all around. Scary,” Nagase commented brightly. “Me personally, I haven’t noticed anything. Well, except for the Yukina-chan thing. But we were all there for that.”

Unfortunately, her forced cheer rang hollow. Everyone was thinking the same thing, but no one was willing to say it out loud. Sure, maybe they were just paranoid, but... it felt like the mere act of putting it into words would subsequently make it real. Like some sort of jinx.

They told themselves it was all in the past... but they weren’t the ones who ended it, so they couldn’t rest easy.

“...A phenomenon?” Taichi muttered aloud.

He refused to say its name. One would think he’d have gotten over it by now, but to this day, the merest mention of a certain tropical plant was enough to make his pulse quicken.

At first, no one responded, and he wondered whether he should have waited.

“It said it was done with us. And it sounded pretty serious to me,” said Inaba. She was there with Taichi when «Heartseed» turned up to give its final farewell. “Not to suggest we should *trust* it, but... I’d like to watch and see for a bit longer.”

Inaba was always the de facto leader when it came to strategizing against the phenomena, and it was no mystery why. In Taichi's view, she had the right idea... but on the other hand, he was concerned it was just an excuse to put their heads in the sand.

"But for now, let's come up with a hypothesis. Supposing this was a phenomenon, what kind would it be? Again, purely hypothetical. Think of it as a creative exercise."

Oh, now I get it, Taichi thought to himself. *She's striking a careful balance. Classic Inaba.*

"R-Right. Hypothetical. Well, let's think about it," said Kiriyama. Her expression was stiff, but her voice was firm.

"Okie-dokie! My guess is it's a 'people randomly get scared of you for no reason' phenomenon!" Aoki suggested eagerly, though his energy was a little forced.

"Just because Misaki-chan thinks you're gross doesn't mean something supernatural is causing it, Aoki."

"Yui! I'm not making excuses, okay?! And she does *not* think I'm gross!"

"I definitely know what it's like to have other people shrink away from you in fear. Nngh... I'm not sure I could handle it," Nagase said with a grimace.

"Other people get scared of us... They fear us... And because they're afraid, they lash out...?" Inaba mused. Clearly she was trying to find an explanation for why a first-year would randomly charge at her.

"Did it seem like he was going to attack you, Inaba? If so, then we'll need to take precautions regardless," said Taichi.

"It's a *hypothesis*, dummy. I'm just considering all the possible interpretations."

"Good gravy... Well, with a phenomenon like that, we might *hypothetically* need the couples to stay together at all times! For safety reasons! And since I'm the odd girl out, I can just follow along behind you and take notes!"

"Keep your fangirl fantasies to yourself, Nagase."

“Oof! That one stung, Taichi!”

“Wait, but what about the ‘randomly going deaf’ issue?” asked Kiriyama.

“That could’ve just been a one-off thing,” Inaba replied.

“Yeah... It’s hard to see how selective deafness would relate back to other people fearing us.”

“There’s still a lot we don’t know,” Aoki murmured. “But then again, if we actually knew anything for real, then this *hypothetical* brainstorming would kinda stop being hypothetical, huh?”

He was right, of course.

“Alright then. As an experiment, let’s take it all into account,” said Inaba. “Since we’ve got ‘people fearing us’ and ‘muted voices,’ maybe the phenomenon’s about... I don’t know, ‘isolation from the world around us.’ Or if we add in ‘attempted assault,’ maybe it’s *hostility* from the world around us.”

At first it seemed absurd, but... the more Taichi ruminated on it, the more he started to come around. Sure, the phenomena may have started small, but over time they had steadily started to affect the world around them. Perhaps this was the logical next step.

“Was that too dark? I’m sorry,” Inaba said after the room fell into a contemplative silence.

“Don’t be! We’re just impressed how well you can put together all the pieces of the puzzle, Inaban.”

“There’s no puzzle. It’s just a... a creative exercise,” Inaba insisted.

Though whether to them or to herself, it wasn’t clear.

Once the conversation ended, the five friends went back to their studies... but it was blatantly obvious that no one could focus. After an apology for “needlessly scaring everyone,” Inaba suggested they all pack up and study at home instead. It was a bit too early to call it a day, but no one objected... so Taichi and the others headed out of the Rec Hall and across campus.

“Hey, don’t feel bad. One of us was going to have to say it eventually,” said Inaba in an attempt to console him.

“Yeah, I guess... Thanks for all your support today.”

“Likewise. Thanks to you, we had a good, productive discussion. You should be proud of that.”

Sometimes she wears the pants better than I do.

“Maaan, am I really gonna study when I get home? ’Cuz I feel like the answer is no...”

“Does anyone else, like, really hate spineless men, or is it just me?”

“On second thought, I’m gonna study!”

“You know, I’m starting to think you’re the best thing that ever happened to Aoki,” Nagase commented to Kiriyama. “But if you’re not careful, he might just outscore you.”

“That will *not* happen! If Aoki gets better grades than me, it’ll destroy the power balance in our relationship! I have to be superior or else I can’t lord it over him!”

This seemed like a fun conversation, so Taichi decided to join in. “Maybe Kiriyama’s just the motivation he needs to—”

“...You there...”

But then there was a voice.

An icy, inhuman voice that sounded like it wriggled up from the depths of hell itself.

Directly behind them.

Taichi knew he needed to turn around... and yet his body refused to budge. He didn’t need to see the owner of the voice—its presence had already ensnared his heart.

Move!

Slowly but surely, he turned his head. The rest of his body followed suit.

There stood a male student he didn’t recognize—maybe a first-year—staring at them with empty, lifeless eyes... and yet his gaze was palpably intent.

“So... you’re the ‘fascinating’ ones, hmm...?”

It was an ordinary boy who just happened to speak in an odd, sluggish manner.

Hah. Yeah, right. If only.

“So this is what «Heartseed» has left behind...”

As soon as it spoke that name, all doubt summarily vanished. This boy was possessed by someone—*something*—that knew about «Heartseed».

Once again, the five of them found themselves under the lens of a supernatural eye. And worse still, they had already *come to expect* this “plot twist” where they let their guard down only to learn their horrifying ordeal wasn’t over. It was stale.

“Wh-... Who the hell are you?” Inaba demanded, her voice wavering slightly.

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Oh, we’re going to worry about it,” Taichi shot back. For as interested as these entities were in human emotions and connections, they seemed to have next to no understanding of human nature.

“What do you want with us?” Nagase asked cautiously.

“Oh, I just wanted to get a closer look... That’s all...”

“That’s all?” Aoki pressed.

No reply. What was it after?

“Very well... Just one question...” Whoever it was, its manner of speaking was much more direct than «Heartseed» or «The Second». “What do you think of «Heartseed»?”

“...What do you mean?” Kiriyama asked, quietly puzzled.

Truth be told, there *was* a strange connection between the CRC and «Heartseed». But to put it into words... What came to mind the fastest was *anger, resentment, hostility*—and yet there was more to it than that. After having known it for as long as they had, there were some conflicting feelings at play that couldn’t be summed up in a single word. Not that they were by any

means *fond* of it, but when you took into consideration what their lives would have been like without its meddling...

“On second thought... never mind. I’ll be going now,” it continued before any of them had the chance to respond—and a split-second later, the boy’s head slumped forward and he staggered sideways.

Fortunately, he managed to catch himself before he lost his balance completely. Then he looked up again.

“Hmm...? Wait... huh? What the... Oh, did you need something?” he asked the five older students standing in front of him. Now that the light had returned to his eyes, he seemed perfectly normal. Just another Yamaboshi student.

“...No, it’s nothing,” Taichi replied. Not like there was anything else he could say, really.

“Oh, okay. Well, see ya,” the boy muttered, perplexed. As he walked away, they could see him tilting his head in confusion.

“For the time being... let’s go back to the clubroom,” said Inaba.

Her voice was flat and emotionless.

■□■□■

And so the five second-years filed back into the clubroom and returned to the same seats they were sitting in just a few minutes prior.

“Well, that sure wasn’t «Heartseed»... and I get the feeling it wasn’t «The Second» either...?” Kiriyama asked, looking in Taichi’s direction for confirmation.

“No, that definitely wasn’t «The Second». It’s... something else. Something new.”

Though his interactions with «The Second» were few and far between, Taichi was still considered the most knowledgeable, since the others had barely spoken to it at all. And yes, he was confident that the entity they spoke to was *not* «The Second».

“Okay then... For our purposes, let’s call it... I don’t know, «The Third»?” Inaba suggested, since it hadn’t exactly introduced itself.

Yes, this wasn't «Heartseed» or «The Second», but a new entity altogether. The question was: Would this otherworldly being reveal itself to them purely on a lark?

No. No way in hell. Its presence could only mean one thing. And in the end, it was Nagase who shouldered the burden of saying it out loud: "They're putting us through another phenomenon."

"Either that, or they're about to," said Inaba with a sigh.

"Whenever somethin' weird happens to us, it can only mean one thing," Aoki nodded quietly, as though he'd resigned himself to his fate.

"«Heartseed» said it was done with us," Kiriyama muttered, clutching the hem of her skirt until her knuckles went white. "But I guess... it never said anything about *any of the others* messing with us..."

In which case, depending on how many more of these supernatural beings were out there, they could spend their whole lives trapped between one phenomenon and the next.

Inaba exhaled heavily. "We can't keep this shit a secret forever. Or are they trying to see how many hoops we can jump through before we finally break down?"

The scariest part? None of them could say for certain that «they» weren't angling for *precisely that*.

"Someone's gonna start to notice, whether we want them to or not," said Taichi.

Considering how many phenomena «Heartseed» and its ilk had caused thus far, surely there had to be some reason why no one had found out about it. Or was this their first time experimenting on Yamaboshi students? *Probably not,* Taichi thought to himself. «Heartseed» had admitted to experimenting on others prior to meeting the CRC. And another thing: How exactly did it occupy its time *between* phenomena...?

"Well, I don't see any reason to let it get us down," said Nagase in a firm, yet cheerful voice, and Taichi found himself admiring the way she always managed to strike a careful balance between optimism and pessimism.

She was right, of course. He didn't need to mourn their circumstances, but neither was he required to look upon them lightly. Instead, he needed to accept them as reality... and from there, he could be an active participant in the decision-making process with his own vision of the future.

Empowered by this new philosophy, Taichi declared: "Let's beat them at their own game. And this time, we'll end it for good."

There was no telling what these beings might try to do to them. Each new phenomenon was ramping up the stakes higher and higher. And this time, they weren't dealing with «Heartseed». But nonetheless...

"If we put our heads together, the five of us can accomplish anything."

He was going to take an active role this time. He was going to carve the path forward.

"Or, at the very least, I think we should try."

For once, he had made his personal opinion explicitly clear.

Aoki donned a goofy grin and held up a triumphant fist. "Business as usual!"

"You know, I'm getting sick of them underestimating us," Kiriyama snorted, folding her arms.

"Folks, I don't mind you psyching yourselves up as long as you're confident you can handle it... Oh, who am I kidding? Of course you can handle it," Inaba corrected herself, shaking her head in amusement.

"What about you, Inaba?" Taichi asked, concerned.

Inaba generally ended up in a leadership position, which meant her needs were often put last. Even *she* tended to forget she had needs. Hence, it was up to him to remember on her behalf.

"Eh, I'm fine. I'm just glad all five of us are on the same side for this one."

The last phenomenon had caused a rift in their group, but Taichi wasn't about to let that happen again. "This time we'll talk it through like a team," he declared firmly.

United, the five of them nodded in unison. Together they were unstoppable—

“If only we actually knew what we were fighting...”

“Dude, Taichi, don’t ruin it! Be a man! Hold your head up high and say ‘bring it on’!” Aoki shot back.

“Yeah, Taichi!” Kiriyama chimed in. “You know I’m counting on you way more than Aoki, so you need to pull your weight!”

“Uh, Yui?! You know *I’m* your boyfriend, right?!”

“Taichi’s right, though,” said Inaba. “We made a decent attempt at brainstorming possible theories, and I’m sure we’ll discuss it more going forward, but as it stands, there’s too much we don’t know about what we’re dealing with. Has it already started? And if so, is one of these assholes gonna come explain it to us?”

As she folded her arms in contemplation, Nagase looked up. “Well, «The Second» never showed itself, right?”

“Yeah... Now that I think about it, «Heartseed» was more considerate than any of us realized.” Inaba grimaced bitterly.

“Then maybe we should pay close attention to everything that happens and try to figure it out for ourselves,” Kiriyama suggested, and Taichi was inclined to agree.

“That sounds like a good start.”

From here on, their to-do list would only grow. But their main goal was clear: hold their ground, no matter what.

“I imagine no part of this will be easy. Especially with finals coming up,” Inaba commented.

“Oh crap!” Aoki clutched his head in despair.

Indeed, none of them really had room on their plate for more problems.

“So we’d better crush them fast,” she continued with a sinister smirk.

Taichi’s girlfriend was a feisty one.

+++

“I’m home!” I called as I opened the front door.

The house was dark and chilly. I let out a sigh.

“Great... Another hassle,” I muttered to myself as I kicked off my shoes. “Two was enough, but now there’s a «Third»...?”

But as I was putting my shoes away, I noticed my mother’s favorite work shoes were sitting there, too— “Welcome home, Iori.”

“Whoa!” All at once, the lights clicked on, blinding me briefly as my eyes adjusted. “H-Hi, Mom. Didn’t see you there.”

“I only just got back. I would’ve said something sooner, but I was on the phone.”

Oh, I get it. She must’ve been too busy talking to switch on the lights.

“How was school today?” she asked. The sentiment was a warm one, but her tone was soft and icy.

Nagase Reika, age 37. Other people often described her as “ethereally beautiful.” We’d been through a lot (and I mean *a lot*) together, and we didn’t always see eye to eye, but for the most part we were as close as a mother and daughter could be.

“Fun like usual,” I answered, then headed to my room. Usually I didn’t mind her asking me about school, but after what I’d just muttered aloud, I didn’t really want to get into it.

She was generally the quiet, soft-spoken type, so I was hoping she wouldn’t press the issue...

“Is that true?”

Oh god, here we go. “Huh? What do you mean?”

“You were just saying something about ‘another hassle,’ weren’t you?”

“W-Well, yeah, maybe...”

“It sounds like something’s wrong. Don’t you want to tell me about it?”

“I mean... yeah, there was... some annoying stuff that happened...” Faltering under my mother’s sharp gaze, I knew I had to keep talking. “Look, how do I put this... Basically, we have to put up with some pretty stressful stuff every now

and then. And right when we thought we were free at last... we found out it's happening all over again. So yeah."

"By 'we,' you mean your club?"

Luckily, she didn't ask for specifics; all she wanted to know was who was involved.

"Y-Yeah..."

"Are you sure you can handle it?"

"Yeah, of course! We're all working on it together."

"Hmmm... Well, good luck with that," she replied. Then her usually soft voice hardened. "But don't do anything unsafe. If things get dangerous, you come to me."

I recoiled slightly. I knew it was just proof that she cared about me, but...

"Don't worry, Mom. I won't do anything to scare you."

"Every now and then, your behavior can be so... *abnormal*..."

My heart skipped a beat in fear. Was she onto me?

"But this time it feels... different somehow..."

"I'm fine, I swear! If anything happens, I'll tell you. I promise."

"I'll hold you to that."

Chapter 3: Not Quite Right

In the end, they decided to keep the nitty-gritty details between themselves without dragging Uwa Chihiro or Enjouji Shino into it. As far as they knew, the first-years were safe from the phenomenon. Then, the next day, they met up in the clubroom first thing in the morning.

“Y’know, I haven’t noticed anything weird since the last time I saw you guys,” said Aoki.

“I was expecting something to happen that would remove all doubt,” Inaba replied, her expression conflicted.

“Hmmm,” Nagase murmured. “This seems like the perfect time for one of *them* to show up and tell us what’s going on.”

Likewise, Taichi hadn’t noticed any blatant oddities, either.

“But, like... it’s probably a good thing they haven’t... right...?” Kiriyama muttered, confused.

“Looking at it through the lens of our hypothesis from yesterday, it’s possible it simply didn’t trigger because no valid targets were around. Maybe it doesn’t apply to family members or something,” Inaba suggested.

Suspicion. Hostility. Isolation. These were the symptoms they’d detected thus far.

“Good point. The last phenomenon only applied to people at school,” Taichi agreed, thinking back to the Dream Vision.

Inaba nodded. “Exactly. And it’s highly possible that the same sort of restriction could be in play with this one, too. We all need to stay on guard.”

Inaba and Aoki were assigned class duties that morning, so they took off ahead of everyone else, with the 2B group—Taichi, Nagase, and Kiriyama—following suit a short while later. Hardly anyone was passing through this part of campus so early in the morning.

“I’m excited to see my friends, but at the same time, I’m scared of what might

happen when I do," Taichi admitted anxiously.

"Come now, my dear Taichi-kun! Did we not vow to end this nightmare once and for all?!" Nagase demanded in a theatrical voice.

"Yeah, I know, but... we need to make sure we have the right understanding of how this phenomenon actually works."

"Yeah, true. Wouldn't want anyone to get hurt."

"You know what they say," Kiriyama chimed in as she took two little steps forward. "Fortune favors the... *bold!*" She leapt forward in a long jump.

"Quite the bold jump range you've got there," Taichi remarked.

"Not to mention, that was a pretty bold panty flash," Nagase grinned.

"Nice try, but I'm wearing volleyball shorts under here. The only thing I'm 'flashing' is spandex!"

Arriving at the main school building, they headed up the stairs—and immediately spotted Kurihara Yukina, Oosawa Misaki, and three other girls from the track team walking down the hall.

"Yukina! Misaki-chan! Good morning!" Kiriyama called in her most cheerful voice. Naturally, all the girls turned to look.

But when they saw Kiriyama... and Nagase... and Taichi... their expressions froze over in fear.

What were these girls so afraid of? What had the CRC ever done to them? Was there more going on that Taichi and the others weren't privy to?

Startled by this unexpected reaction, the three of them stopped short, hesitant to get any closer.

"Let's go," one of the girls whispered. Then the track team hastily beat a retreat down the hall.

At this point, it almost felt like they were doing it out of spite.

The next incident happened shortly after the lunch bell rang.

"Have you been ignoring me?" Kiriyama asked Kurihara Yukina directly.

Meanwhile, Taichi chose not to wade into the confrontation, but rather eavesdrop from a distance. Likewise, Nagase stared vacantly into space, but he could tell she was listening, too.

“N-No...? Why would you think that?”

“Because this is the first conversation we’ve had all day!”

“No it’s—well—okay, maybe it is, but—”

“I tried to talk to you during first *and* second period break, but you got up and walked off both times. And it feels like you won’t even look at me! What did I do wrong?”

The more Kiriyama pressed, the more Taichi started to worry that she was taking it too far. After all, it was entirely possible that this new phenomenon was forcing their friends to act against their will.

Kurihara shook her head. “It’s not you, I swear...!” she whimpered in a watery voice.

Kiriyama frowned slightly. “Alright. Sorry—I promise I’m not mad at you, okay?” She offered Kurihara a reassuring smile. “Wanna get lunch together?”

“I...” Kurihara faltered, then glanced furtively at the classroom door like she was looking for someone. “I, um, I already have lunch plans with the rest of the track team. Sorry...”

“Next time, I guess!”

Normally Kurihara fawned over Kiriyama like they were sisters, but today she rose from her seat with a grimace on her face. On any other day, standing at her full height next to small, petite Kiriyama would only serve to further highlight just how tall she was... but right now, she seemed downright miniscule by comparison. Maybe it was in the way she was standing—hunched over, shoulders slumped, like she was trying to shrink herself down.

“Yukina!” Kiriyama called, and Kurihara froze in her tracks. “I’m probably just overthinking, but is there something going on with you and the rest of my club m—?”

But before she could even finish her question, Kurihara ignored her and

started walking.

“H-Hey!”

Kiriyama raced after her. Likewise, Taichi and Nagase followed suit. Now they were *certain* something fishy was going on.

“Hold it!”

They needed to find out what it was, ASAP— “Excuse me, you three.”

But right as they stepped out into the hallway, they were approached by a male student. He looked at Taichi, Kiriyama, and Nagase in turn.

“Sorry, but could you please come with me?”

Behind him stood Aoki and one *very* disgruntled Inaba.

■□■□■

“Sorry to send someone after you like that. Although I did say it could wait until after you all finished eating.”

“Yeah, well, we’ve got shit to do. Now let’s get it over with,” Inaba snapped back.

They were standing in the student council office, invited by none other than student council president Katori Jouji himself. Clearly he must have had some business with the five second-years of the CRC, though Taichi couldn’t imagine what it might be.

“I debated whether to summon the first-years, but ultimately decided against it for now. Go on, take a seat.”

Taichi had never really interacted with Katori much, and the same appeared to be true of the other members.

Also present in the room with them was the vice president, as well as the secretary guy who had come to fetch them.

“I’m gonna cut to the chase: What do you want with us?” Inaba demanded without a trace of trepidation. “Because we have no business with you people.”

“Oh, come now. We’re peers, are we not? Let’s not be so hostile,” replied Katori, gesturing to the chairs with an affable smile.

“He’s got a point there,” said Kiriyama as she took a seat.

Likewise, Inaba pulled out a chair for herself. “You’re just weak to anything with a pretty face.”

“Excuse you?! That is *not* why I sat down first! I didn’t choose this seat on purpose so I could look at him from the optimal angle!”

“Uh, Yui?! Care to explain that suspiciously specific denial?!” Aoki yelped.

“Some people only see me for my looks, I guess. Relatable, am I right?” Katori grinned in Nagase’s direction.

“What?”

“Oh, I just figured you probably get the ‘pretty face’ comment a lot yourself.”

“Ah, gotcha. Eh, it doesn’t really bother me. If someone wants to call me pretty, I’m just like, ‘Cool, thanks!’”

“Yeah, same.” He laughed amiably without a hint of sarcasm.

“...He’s practically perfect,” Nagase muttered under her breath.

“What was that?” Taichi asked.

“Oh, nothing. Just talking to myself.”

The more they talked, the more the tension in the air started to soften. But the vice president and secretary didn’t actively join the conversation—they just smiled and nodded along—and it almost felt like they were trying to hide in the president’s shadow (figuratively, not literally). Were they simply trying to let him take center stage?

“You know what I love about the CRC? You’re all such good friends. I was in the Kendo Club originally, but I had to quit once I joined the student council. I miss it every day.”

At Yamaboshi High School, where club membership was mandatory, the student council was considered a “club” in its own right.

“But we don’t do any sports... How exactly do we remind you of the Kendo Club?” asked Taichi, confused.

“It’s not about your activities—the CRC just has that special X-factor. Not to

suggest your club is especially popular or impressive in any particular regard... and yet you still manage to be influential in your own way.”

“Really? I didn’t think we were anything special,” said Aoki.

“Think about it. Inaba and Nagase always score highly on tests, Kiriyama has incredible athletic ability, and Yaegashi displayed some powerful charisma during the school trip to Hokkaido. I’d say you’re the only one without a single specialized skill, Aoki.”

“Why is it he already knows how to dunk on me?!”

“Whoa, he’s right... Aoki really is the only average joe in our club!”

“Could you maybe not rub it in, Iori-chan?! You’re hurting me, dude!”

“Am I dating the wrong guy...?”

“You’re scaring me, Yui!”

“And here we have Aoki’s *actual* specialized skill: acting as the glue between the other members,” Katori explained like he’d planned the whole thing.

“Oh... Uh... That’s... Jeez, you’re gonna make me blush...”

“Gross.”

“Can’t a man have *basic human emotions*, Inabacchan?!”

“You’re right... With Aoki around, the conversation’s never left hanging, is it?” Taichi remarked, impressed.

Katori laughed heartily. “You guys are great! No wonder Fujishima finds you so entertaining.”

“How do you and Fujishima-san—oh, wait, I get it!” Kiriyama exclaimed, clapping her hands together in understanding. “You know her through the Student Council Outreach Committee, right?”

“Indeed. But if you ask me, she’s the most entertaining of all.”

No kidding. She’s like a cross between Inaba and Aoki, Taichi thought to himself.

“So if she thinks you’re awesome sauce, that opinion carries a lot of weight,

you see?”

“In that case, you must be pretty impressive yourself, considering just how much she respects you.”

“What? Did she tell you that? No way. I’m flattered!”

The rest of the student council smiled in response... but didn’t speak aloud.

“Not to be a buzzkill, but could we get to the point already?” Inaba demanded, changing the subject.

“As you may have noticed, something strange is happening at our school,” Katori shot back.

“Huh...?” Inaba was caught off-guard by his utter lack of segue.

“You people have something to hide, don’t you?” he continued without waiting for a response.

It was all so sudden... The CRC was too baffled to protest.

“Wahaha! That was easy, wasn’t it? Inaba, you like to take the initiative so you can control the pacing, right? But when someone yanks the rug out from under you, you fall apart.”

“Wh... No, I...!” Inaba spluttered, utterly defanged.

As much as Taichi wished he could say Katori wasn’t right about her, he unfortunately was. Still... that’s what Taichi was for.

“Strange? Where did that come from? And for the record, I don’t recall us hiding anything.”

“Oh, quit trying to act innocent, would you? You’re only making yourselves look more suspicious.”

Had the rest of the school started to notice the peculiar behavior caused by the current phenomenon? Had Katori somehow traced it back to them? And if so, what would happen next? Normally «Heartseed» warned them against letting outsiders find out about the phenomena, but «The Third» hadn’t specified anything of the sort... Did that mean it wasn’t against the rules this time around...? No, perhaps it was more sensible to assume the rules hadn’t

changed—they just weren't as explicit this time.

"Gee, I can't really think of anything," Inaba mused sarcastically, her tone challenging, though Taichi couldn't pretend he didn't see a barely concealed hint of desperation in her eyes.

"These people aren't acting normal," Katori insisted, his expression dead serious. The rest of the student council stared intently at the CRC.

"Can you give us an example?" asked Nagase.

Smart question, Taichi thought. This way maybe they could get a read on just how much Katori knew.

"As if you don't already know?"

"What are you talking about? Is this about Yukina or—mmph?!"

Inaba quickly clapped a hand over Kiriyama's mouth. "Don't talk out of turn, Yui."

It was readily apparent that both sides were trying to weasel information out of the other through leading questions. The mood in the room wasn't quite *hostile*, but it certainly wasn't friendly anymore.

"Was it you people who started all this?" Katori asked.

"Don't be ridiculous!" Taichi shot back instantly.

"I thought as much," he replied, immediately backing down as though he'd known the answer all along.

Taichi was utterly lost. Katori seemed to be onto something, hence he summoned them all here... but what did he suspect them of, exactly? He seemed to have more information than they did. So how did he—and by extension, the rest of the student council—play into all this?

For that matter, what sort of phenomenon were they actually dealing with? Was «The Third» really the one behind it? And were they right in thinking «Heartseed» wasn't involved this time?

"Could we negotiate some kinda info exchange, if at all possible?" Aoki suggested gently.

“Then tell me everything you know.”

“Uhh...”

Aoki fell silent in the face of Katori’s demands. He was *undeniably* trying to dig something out of them.

“You *are* actually Katori, right?” asked Inaba, and at first Taichi didn’t understand the question—until she followed it up with, “You’re not just using his body as a puppet, right?”

Normally, what she was suggesting was impossible. *Normally*, he’d probably reply with something like “What are you talking about? That’s insane.”

But instead he smirked and said, “I don’t know. You tell me.”

No one had a response to that. Katori was in full control of the conversation.

“You’re just so eerily confident, it’s uncanny. Is there something wrong with you?” Inaba asked, her voice full of venom.

“From where I’m standing, there’s something wrong with all of *you*,” he shrugged.

“Well then, I guess we’re at an impasse,” she spat.

Was Katori always this overwhelming? The possibility was certainly there. But there was also a different possibility: that the phenomenon had made him this way. Not to suggest it had rewritten his personality entirely, of course, but according to their current theory, it was more than capable of making them look like enemies in his eyes.

“So where do you factor into all this?” Inaba asked point-blank.

“I’m just doing my job as student council president.”

“Your job...?”

“Ordinary students have nothing to worry about.”

Ordinary? We’re dealing with a supernatural phenomenon here. What part of this is ordinary?

But in the end, Katori let them off with a single warning: “Don’t try anything funny, CRC.”

■□■□■

After school, Taichi and the other second-years met up in the clubroom. They didn't have to worry about the first-years, either; now that finals were coming up, Chihiro and Enjouji had both requested time off from club activities in order to study.

Inaba slammed her fist into the table. "What the hell was that about?!"

"Relax, Inaban," said Nagase, placing a soothing hand on the other girl's shoulder.

"Okay, but like... what's the deal with this Katori guy, anyways?" Kiriyama muttered, her expression conflicted.

"He seemed to know a little more than your average student council president, that's for sure," Aoki replied dubiously.

"The question is, has he actually figured out what we're dealing with?" Taichi wondered aloud. "Or is the phenomenon just making him hostile?"

"Good question," Inaba replied. "We already know Kurihara and the track team are acting weird around us; now it's happened with Katori. And when two anomalies happen at the same time, it's hard to believe they're entirely unrelated. In both cases, they treated us with suspicion... There's got to be some kind of connection there."

"Nnngh," Nagase groaned. "It's not like anything *supernatural* has happened yet, but then again... «Heartseed» and its friends sure do love using their phenomena to cause a bunch of mundane problems in our lives..."

"Sorry to interrupt, but I'm kinda confused—who are you people, and what are we doing here?"

Taichi recognized the voice, but the words it spoke were so unbelievable, it took him a second longer to parse who it belonged to.

"...What? Aoki, we're trying to have a serious discussion here. I can appreciate you trying to lighten the mood, but come on. Pick a better joke," Nagase shot back.

"Joke...? I mean, uh, right! Yeah, that was a joke! Whew... Just a bad joke.

Hahaha!”

But Aoki’s laughter sounded incredibly forced, and Taichi was starting to think maybe he genuinely *did* forget who they were for a second... *Wait, really?* He swallowed hard.

“Hey, um...” Normally Kiriyama was the biggest critic of Aoki’s bad jokes, and yet her expression was grave. “Just wondering, but... has anyone else had moments where you forget who the others are for a sec?”

Taichi ruminated on her question. “Now that you mention it... The other day, when we were all hanging out in the clubroom—well, everyone except Inaba, I think—there was a moment where I couldn’t remember one of your names.”

“Right, and I had that moment where I forgot Aoki’s name.”

“Wait, so... my brain wasn’t messing with me that one time...?” Nagase murmured. Evidently it had happened to her at some point, too.

“I guess that’s another part of the phenomenon,” Inaba commented.

“Wait, what? This is part of the phenomenon, too?” Taichi replied, baffled.

“Of course it is. Why else would we ever forget the names of the people closest to us?”

“Yeah, it’s the phenomenon at work! Wait, but... that doesn’t make it any less terrifying! Obviously it all comes back to you, but for a couple seconds, you seriously forget!”

“But at least it comes back! Piece of cake!” Kiriyama began brightly, but her cheer quickly began to fade. “You just... randomly forget someone, that’s all...”

“Hold on a minute,” said Nagase. “So everyone’s looking at us weird, *and* we’re forgetting each other... and these are *both* caused by the phenomenon? How many elements are involved here, exactly?!”

“At the rate we’re headed, we might just end up completely isolated from everyone,” Taichi mused as the thought came to him.

Forgotten by their friends... Scorned by everyone else... What would happen then?

“Is that what this is? The ‘World Isolation’ phenomenon?”

Coming from Inaba, it sounded entirely plausible. Somehow it struck Taichi as precisely the kind of thing «Heartseed» and the others would find entertaining.

“Everyone around us starts to see us as their enemy... and then we forget our closest allies... until eventually it’s us against the world. A solitary battle.”

All of their past experiences with the phenomena had taught them the importance of human connection. In the end, those bonds were what helped them make it through. So if this one was going to seal away their greatest weapon, then perhaps it would be their toughest challenge yet.

But even then...

“All we have to do is believe in ourselves and keep fighting... so that’s exactly what I’m going to do,” Taichi declared. He wanted to lead the charge, even if it meant he was a bit out of his depth—and he would say it as many times as it took. Silently, he vowed to put an end to the supernatural nightmare once and for all... with his own two hands.

“I hope that’s not just your ‘goddamn martyr’ side talking,” Inaba teased.

“You of all people ought to know the answer to that,” he replied.

“Touché.”

“Well, even if the phenomenon messes with us in the short term, our friendship isn’t *actually* going anywhere,” Kiriyama chimed in brightly. “Things always go back to normal in the end.”

“The red string of fate will bind me and Yui forevermore!”

“Eh... I can’t say for sure if you’re Mr. Right, but you’re definitely Mr. Right Now.”

“Is that a joke, or...?!”

“Well, folks, it looks like we’ll have to make sure our teamwork is on point for this one,” said Nagase. All eyes shifted to her, and she grinned. “We just have to have faith in everything we’ve built together. Keep your eyes on the prize.”

“You heard the woman. Let’s get this shit done,” Inaba declared smugly.

Four fists rose into the air in unison.

"*Yeah*!"

After their meeting had ended, Taichi and the others left the clubroom. Once they got home, they'd all probably break out the textbooks; phenomenon or no, they still had finals to worry about.

"If it only affects people at Yamaboshi, then we should be fine once we get home," Nagase muttered to herself as they walked.

"It probably can't apply to every single person in the whole world, right?" Kiriyama asked hesitantly. "I mean, that's just too ridiculous!"

"Agreed. If they could control every person on the planet, then they wouldn't need to target the five of us specifically. Nor would they need to worry about us blabbing about it to anyone else."

"That's our Inabacchan with her epic analysis powers!"

If their battlefield was restricted to the school, that alone made it ten times easier to deal with.

The five friends crossed through the athletic field, populated sparsely by the few sports teams still practicing at this hour. Near the front gates was a group of three male students, shivering in the cold; maybe they were waiting for someone else to arrive.

As Taichi approached, he could see that they were chatting about something __ "__ __"

"__ __"

"__ __"

—but as he passed, he found he couldn't hear a single word.

+++

"Yo, I'm home!" an annoying voice called from the front door. "Mooom! I'm gonna eat dinner at home tonight! ...Oh, hey, Himeko."

I looked back at my college-age brother, standing in the doorway to the living room. I was only sitting out here on the sofa because I'd worked myself into a

tizzy upstairs in my room and I needed the change of scenery... I'd been hoping to avoid him, but no such luck.

"Not often I see you in here. Where the heck is Mom at? Is she gonna be back in time for dinner or what?"

"She said she'd be a little late. But even if she wasn't, she's not going to make food for you."

"Sure she would! Why wouldn't she whip something up for her favorite son who's hardly ever home?"

"Because you're a loser who doesn't actually go to class?"

"Huh? Did you say something?"

"Nope!"

I rose to my feet. This was no time to be entertaining my brainless older brother; I had my own shit to deal with.

"Hey, wait! You leaving already? Come back and chat! I don't bite!"

Somehow I could picture him using this exact line on a girl at a bar, too. As much as it irked me... perhaps I'd be able to sort my thoughts more easily if I talked through it. *Fine, whatever.*

"Okay, so... Judging from past experience, I'm 100 percent convinced this will play out the same as all the others."

"Wow, this already sounds complicated. Go on?"

"Lately it's starting to spread... Granted, I saw this coming."

"O-Okay...?"

"But... it's possible..."

Indeed, for the briefest of moments, I'd struck upon another possibility: "If my supposition is correct... they might flip the script entirely."

I was pretty sure I was just paranoid, but if I thought about it the other way around, there were parts that made a *lot* of sense. Of course, even then, there was still too much left unexplained...

“...No, it can’t be. There’s only one explanation for that.”

Only a phenomenon could explain their memory loss episodes.

“I guess that’s that, then.”

“Hold it, Himeko! I have no idea what you’re talking about!”

“What else is new?”

“Heyyyy! Himeko-saaaan! ...Sheesh... And here I thought you’d softened up lately...”

I walked out of the living room, leaving my brother behind.

“Wait! At least let me give you one piece of brotherly advice! Seriously, wait! Hear me out!”

He sounded so desperate; I decided to momentarily entertain his request.

“I don’t know all the details, but speaking as someone who’s known you your whole life...”

I turned back to look at him. For as airheaded as he usually was, he was at least a good-looking guy.

“...You’ll find your answer eventually. Just wait for it. And once you find it—go for it with everything you’ve got.”

It was... actually pretty solid advice...

“It’s like if you’re trying to gauge whether you’ve got a shot with a girl—you won’t know unless you try. Feel her out a bit, and once you think you’ve got the green light, go in for the kill! But don’t try to seduce every girl you know, because they’ll get mad at you for that!”

“Die in a fire.”

“Wh... Sheesh! I was just trying to lighten the mood for my baby sister! C’mon!”

Chapter 4: Someone Else's Story The next morning, Taichi and friends met up in the clubroom yet again. Together, they decided they would investigate not just their immediate surroundings but *the whole school,* all while simultaneously taking care not to frighten anyone. If the CRC was indeed the catalyst behind the phenomenon, then they would need to conduct themselves with the utmost caution.

Then, on their way out of the Rec Hall...

"Hey there."

"G-Good morning!"

...they bumped into the two CRC first-years, Uwa Chihiro and Enjouji Shino.

"Wait, what the? Chihiro-kun and Shino-chan? Where are you guys going?" asked a flustered Kiriyama.

"This dimwit can't find the textbook she needs for class and thinks she might've left it in the clubroom. Personally, I hardly think she needs a chaperone to retrieve it, but everyone yelled at me to go with her, so here I am."

"Wh-... What about you guys? Aren't club activities canceled until after finals...?"

The five second-years fell silent, unsure how to answer.

"...We've got a little *assignment* to take care of," said Nagase, her voice cheerful with a tiny hint of frustration.

"Oh, is something going on? I mean, not to pry or anything."

"Chihiro-kun seems really worried about you guys. I think he wants you to let him know if there's anything he can help with."

“I don’t need you to translate on my behalf, thank you very much! That is *not* what I meant!”

“Anyway, um... Did something bad happen?” Enjouji asked anxiously.

At first Taichi was confused how they could have caught on so quickly, but on second thought, these kids had known them for months by this point. *Of course* they’d notice when something was up. The question was: Should they tell them?

“I guess we should tell them,” Inaba decided.

“I wouldn’t want to drag them into it,” Taichi protested.

“True, but they were safe from the Dream Vision, remember? Plus, «Heartseed» already went after them once—it might do so again. They’ll be safer knowing what they’re up against.”

It was clear she’d thought it through.

“I vote we tell them. They’re part of the club, just like we are,” said Kiriyama.

“I agree,” said Nagase.

“For sure,” said Aoki.

While Taichi had some misgivings about the idea, he wasn’t strictly opposed to it, so in the end he relented.

“Let’s see, how much time do we have...? Alright, we’ve got about fifteen minutes. We’ll give you the general overview of what we’re dealing with.”

“The phenomena are still happening... and this time, it’s not «Heartseed»...?”

“And you don’t even know the rules this time around?”

Both Enjouji and Chihiro seemed skeptical, probably because so much of the explanation was guesswork.

“We don’t have any concrete proof just yet,” Inaba explained.

“But people are definitely acting weird, right? And you keep having memory blips?”

Chihiro grimaced. This conversation probably reminded him of the time

during the Phantom Projection when he accidentally wiped Taichi's and Kiriyama's memories.

"I'm so sorry we keep dragging you guys into this crap," Nagase apologized, bowing her head. The rest of the second-years felt just as guilty as she did, and they followed suit.

"No, no, it's not your fault! It's the... the enemy's fault!"

"But if you hadn't joined our club, then you wouldn't need to worry about any 'enemy'!" Kiriyama wailed, her eyes damp.

"It'd be a lot scarier to share the world with them without ever knowing they exist, Yui-san."

"Oh, Chihiro-kun... You're so... You're so *tsundere!*"

"Cram it, Enjouji!"

Business as usual for the CRC first-years.

"You kids have gotten stronger... I'm impressed you can withstand it."

"Well, Taichi-san, I think maybe my view of «Heartseed» is different from yours, since I've never been on the receiving end of a phenomenon before."

He had a point; the Phantom Projection was something he controlled at will, and he was spared from the effects of the Dream Vision.

"Yeah... We've never truly experienced any of the phenomena," Enjouji agreed, and Taichi was relieved to know their suffering was thus far limited. "B-But... in that sense, it feels like we're outsiders... I mean, not that I *want* to take part in a phenomenon, but, you know... it's scary to think maybe we can never truly relate..."

"If you feel like an outsider, Shino-chan, then it's on us for making you feel that way," Aoki declared loudly. "Don't feel obligated to get involved!"

"N-No, that's not it!" Enjouji shouted back. "I just... I want to help you wherever I can. I don't want to be the sort of person who... you know... I don't want to be a bystander," she explained slowly, yet firmly. Anyone who mistook her mild personality for weakness was sorely mistaken; deep down, she was stronger than they knew.

“Besides, I already stuck my nose into this once,” Chihiro continued hastily, as if unwilling to let Enjouji hog the spotlight. “It’d be pretty lame of me to back out now. So yeah, I’m done running.”

Taichi could hear an unwavering conviction behind his words that conveyed precisely how serious he was.

Nearly a year had passed since they first met Enjouji and Chihiro, and that amount of time was more than enough for personal growth. These kids were probably working their butts off in ways the second-years couldn’t begin to imagine. And while at first they both left something to be desired, they were now trustworthy kouhai in their own right.

“Alright, you’ve both made your opinions known. In that case, we want you to help us as much as you’re comfortable with,” Inaba announced.

“*Yay!*”

“Cool.”

Both Enjouji and Chihiro looked pleased as punch to be treated as equals.

“Nnnn... Chihiro-kun’s all grown up... I’m gonna cry...!” Kiriyama sniffled.

“Aww, Yui! You’re like a mama bird watching over your baby, aren’tcha?” Aoki mused to himself, nodding.

However, the first-years seemed more worried about Taichi and the others.

“B-But what about you guys? There’s so much you don’t know yet... Aren’t you scared?” asked Enjouji.

“Seriously, don’t overextend yourselves,” added Chihiro.

“This is the part where I’d normally say ‘Nothing you two need to worry your pretty little heads over,’ but... then I remember what happened during the Dream Vision,” Inaba sighed. Indeed, their infighting had made for plenty of awkward afternoons.

“This time will be different,” Taichi declared.

“Yeah! This time I’m gonna act like the competent senpai I was always meant to be!” Nagase chimed in confidently.

The original CRC pentagon had gained two new faces, and now the seven of them were stronger than ever.

With everyone on the same page, Inaba started delegating tasks: “Right now we need to figure out exactly what the hell we’re dealing with. I need you to ask around about bizarre incidents and report back if you find anything.”

“Yes ma’am, Inaba-senpai!”

“Understood.”

“Also... I strongly doubt this’ll happen, but in the event we forget about our friends, or the club... try to remind us, alright?”

“O-Okay... I’ll try!”

“Will do.”

The two first-years nodded firmly.

“Lastly... We don’t know what might happen going forward, so don’t hover around us too much. Think of yourselves like a backup generator, or a satellite unit.”

“R-Right!”

“Got it.”

“Oh, and just to be on the safe side, try to stick together as much as you can.”

“Oh my *god*, Inaban, you sound like a helicopter mom!”

“Sh-Shut up, okay?! I’m just trying to cover all our bases! An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure! Now then, am I missing anything...?”

But at that point they were interrupted by the bell ringing over the school loudspeakers.

“Wait... Isn’t that the five-minute bell?” Aoki asked quietly.

A beat later, everyone started running.

“Bye, Shino-chan! Bye, Chee-hee!” Nagase called as the two first-years headed off to their classroom.

Then Inaba and Aoki split off to head for theirs. Fortunately, as long as they

kept up this pace, they would all arrive in time for the final bell.

“Good grief. I can’t believe we’ve got our kouhai worried about us,” Nagase muttered.

Kiriyama nodded. “We need to be setting a better example for them. Which reminds me, apparently my whole family’s worried that I’m ‘acting weird’ lately. Like, I appreciate their concern, obviously, but sometimes it just feels so *suffocating*, you know? I can’t let them find out about this.”

Personally, Taichi was amazed she could say all that in a single breath while running down the hallway at full speed.

“Yeah, my little sister said something along those lines last night. The last thing I want is for her to get caught up in this,” he replied.

Once a phenomenon started, their behavior would change in response to it... and at that point, their families would usually notice. (Specifically, Rina had commented, “Are you having another one of your high-stress episodes? Get it together, Taichi.”) “Same here,” said Nagase. “My mom flat-out called my behavior ‘abnormal.’ She made me promise to stay safe, and to talk to her if things get dangerous.”

Her family situation was probably the most complex of all, since she and her mother only had each other to rely on. Theirs was a deeply complicated bond.

“Whenever a new phenomenon starts, there are times when I wish I didn’t have to go home,” Taichi half-joked.

“Same,” she replied. “I mean, we’re already meeting up super early and staying super late, so we might as well.”

A lot of the time, they were honestly better off staying together as a group.

“And when it’s happening every day, it gets harder and harder to come up with excuses,” Kiriyama muttered, grinning wryly. “If only they’d take a hint and let us do our thing when we need to.”

Evidently Taichi wasn’t the only one wrestling with family issues at the moment.

■□■□■

When Taichi arrived at the classroom and took his seat, he noticed one of the desks was still empty. And when he realized who it belonged to, his stomach lurched as goosebumps shot up his arms.

It was Kurihara Yukina's desk.

She arrived at school around the end of first period, her once-pristine wavy hair now dry and frizzy. As her friends called out to her in concern, she gave them all a halfhearted, perfunctory response. Then she took her seat and stared down at her desk, almost like she was silently willing everyone to stay away... In Taichi's eyes, she didn't seem like she was doing too well.

"Good morning, Yukina," Kiriyama called, a bit more gently than usual.

Kurihara and Kiriyama were best friends; Kurihara in particular always loved to smother Kiriyama with affection like she was her little sister. But today, Kurihara simply glanced in Kiriyama's direction, then averted her gaze. She was blatantly ignoring her.

"Yuki—never mind. I'll talk to you later."

At first Kiriyama seemed primed to try again, but then she backed down; evidently she'd decided not to cause a stir. Looking back, Kurihara had openly avoided the CRC yesterday, too...

Then Nagase tried to talk to her, but the results were the same. And after second period came to an end, Kurihara staggered out of the classroom.

"Yukina-chan's not doing so hot. Is she depressed? Did she break up with another crappy boyfriend or something?" Nakayama Mariko asked Taichi, clutching her pigtails in distress as she glanced furtively in the direction Kurihara had disappeared.

Wait, what?

An unidentified lump rose in his chest like smoke.

"Yaegashi-kun?"

"Oh, uh... yeah, she seems like she's not feeling great. Maybe don't hang all over her today."

"Don't worry, I won't. But for the record, I do *not* 'hang all over her'! I'm

allowed to be affectionate with my friends, ya big jerk!”

And with that, she (jokingly) stormed away.

It was during that conversation that Taichi realized something: other people had taken notice of Kurihara’s condition. Granted, she wasn’t exactly doing a good job of hiding it, so anyone paying attention was bound to see it, but... wasn’t *the CRC* supposed to be the root cause of Kurihara’s fear? If so... why was she acting weird with other people, too?

This was *the CRC’s* phenomenon... wasn’t it?

In the end, Kurihara never came back for third period. Now the whole class had started to notice that something was up with her.

“I really think she should go home and rest, but I know she’ll just say she’s fine,” sighed class president Setouchi Kaoru, looking concerned.

Meanwhile, Taichi, Nagase, and Kiriyama were having a discussion of their own. At this point, it was looking like they’d have to force it out of her.

“We can’t do anything until we know what’s going on with her, and like, I doubt she’ll be in immediate danger once she tells us,” said Kiriyama.

“She needs to just tell us what’s wrong. Then, after that, if she sincerely wants us to stay out of it, we’ll respect her wishes,” said Nagase.

“If nothing else, I’d like to put this Kurihara situation to rest,” Taichi agreed.

Admittedly they were getting a little impatient, but since Kurihara was such a good friend of theirs, they were confident they could patch things up in the end.

At lunchtime, Kurihara wandered off yet again... but this time, the three of them went after her. She walked across the hallway in silence, unaware she was being followed. Then she headed down the stairs and out of the main school building in the direction of the sports clubrooms.

Out here there was no one else around, which meant it was time to strike. They all approached her at once.

“Yukina, wait! Please listen to me!” Kiriyama shouted as she ran up in front of Kurihara.

Meanwhile, Taichi and Nagase walked up from behind, closing off her exit.

“I’m begging you, please, tell me what’s wrong!” Kiriyama pleaded.

Kurihara turned away from Kiriyama—then saw Taichi and turned back—then turned away again and saw Nagase. Panic set in as she realized she was surrounded. If the phenomenon truly did make the CRC appear monstrous to her, then this was probably frightening beyond belief, but for right now they needed her to suck it up.

“Come on, Yukina. We’re friends, aren’t we?”

The desperation in Kiriyama’s voice was as clear as day. But Kurihara didn’t answer; she simply shook her head fearfully.

“Come *on!*”

“Calm down, Yui. We can’t force it out of her,” Nagase cut in.

“Nngh... Sorry...”

Then Nagase turned to Kurihara. “Okay, but seriously though, what’s going on? If you’re struggling with something, we can hear you out. Or if it’s something we did wrong, we can make it right.”

Fortunately for them, it seemed this unintentional “good cop, bad cop” routine had worked in their favor.

“Look... I’m not doing this because I want to, okay?!” Kurihara shouted. “It’s just... He told me to stay away...”

He who?

“Nngh...!”

She grimaced like the cat was out of the bag—and then she took off running.

“Wh—Yukina—aah!”

Kiriyama reached out to try to stop her, but Kurihara shoved her hand away. Then, snapping to her senses, she turned back.

“I’m sorry, Yui... It’s not your fault!”

With that, she dashed away, tears in her eyes... and none of them could will

themselves to go after her a single step further.

“Yukina,” Kiriyama whimpered softly, and Taichi could only imagine the pain she must have felt in that moment. He wanted so badly to help her somehow.

“She made it sound like... like someone’s forcing her to keep her distance from us,” Taichi muttered, thinking back to the one tiny detail Kurihara had let slip.

“But who would do that?” Nagase muttered.

Was someone out there, pulling the strings in secret?

“...Another impostor?” Kiriyama asked off the top of her head.

“That would make sense,” Taichi nodded. “What if there was another type of Phantom Projection that used our likenesses to go around threatening people?”

The possibility was there.

“But she flat-out *said* it wasn’t Yui’s fault,” Nagase countered.

“Right... Well, we’re not going to find our answer standing around here,” Taichi muttered. His mind was a mess, and he couldn’t think straight.

It felt like there was a giant contradiction tripping them up somewhere... One of their calculations was wrong, and in turn, it was throwing off all the rest of their data...

Just then, Taichi’s cell phone buzzed in his pocket. Someone was calling him.

“It’s from Inaba,” he explained, and with permission from the others, he answered it. *What could this be about?* “Hello?”

“Hey, Taichi. I know we weren’t planning to meet up at lunch, but something’s come up.”

“Yeah? What is it?”

“It pertains to *you-know-what*. Is anyone listening?”

“Just Nagase and Kiriyama.”

“Perfect. Basically, I gave our hypothesis some more thought, and...” She hesitated. “Have you noticed that... only a select few people seem to find us

frightening?”

Indeed, Nakayama Mariko hadn’t found him frightening at all. If anything, it was just— “Oosawa Misaki, Kurihara Yukina, and those three other girls.”

All of whom oh so coincidentally happened to be on the track team.

“But what about the conversations randomly going mute?” Taichi asked. “That seems to happen with a whole bunch of people lately.”

“Set that aside for now. Obviously it’s not normal, but we’ll get to that. In terms of people who seem to actively reject us... who comes to mind?”

“...The track team. Like you said.”

“Right,” she replied in a low voice.

“So... what’s the significance there?”

“I don’t know. I just wanted to bring it to everyone’s attention.”

And with that, the phone call came to an end.

“What did she say?” asked Nagase.

“Well...”

Only a select few people were behaving strangely *and* actively rejecting the CRC. Or rather, actively rejecting everyone around them.

What if the focus wasn’t on the CRC at all?

The unidentified lump of smoke from earlier began to change form until it was right on the tip of his tongue. If only he could get the words out, it would all click... but they just wouldn’t come...

“Uh, hello? Earth to Taichi!” Nagase shouted, bringing him back to reality.

“Oh hey, it’s Misaki-chan,” Kiriyama commented, and he turned to look.

Sure enough, tall, slender, short-haired Oosawa Misaki was headed their way, a vacant look in her eyes. She was one of the five track members who had started to avoid them; was she going to the same place as Kurihara? In which case, the most logical conclusion was that they were all meeting up in their clubroom.

Were they... hiding out in there?

Then she spotted Taichi and the others and came to an abrupt stop, her expression stiff, her lips pursed tightly together.

Kiriyama took one look at her and approached slowly. “Seriously, you guys... What’s wrong...?”

“Yui, wait,” Nagase called, then hurried after her. Taichi promptly followed suit.

Meanwhile, Oosawa stared at them intently... and a moment later, she relaxed. Blinking, she glanced around. Then her gaze returned to the CRC.

Her lips twisted in a pained smile, like she was holding back tears... or the urge to scream.

“Be honest... Would you believe me if I told you... that I’m Kurihara Yukina?”

That was all it took to turn Taichi’s world upside down. The revelation made his head spin. And then [Oosawa] went in for the kill.

“What if I told you... that people can switch bodies in real life?”



After that, [Oosawa] ran away, shouting “Pretend I never said that!”

They couldn’t stop her. They were too busy reeling from the bomb she dropped.

“Was I hearing things, or... did she say ‘switch bodies’? That... That can’t be it, right?” Kiriyama asked, her voice shaky.

“There’s a phenomenon happening, alright... but it’s not happening to us.”

Which could only mean it was happening to— No, that had to be ridiculous. Right?

“J-Just hypothetically, uh...” Nagase began, her voice unusually flat, “maybe... one of them made her say that to us on purpose...? To... screw with us?”

Good point. That sounded plausible. It was the sort of cruel joke «Heartseed» and its ilk were bound to enjoy.

“Or... if you want an even wilder theory...” She swallowed hard, and Taichi got the feeling he knew what was coming: “Maybe they’re inflicting phenomena on the people around us to... to mess with us that way?”

“You’re joking,” Kiriyama whispered, staring blankly into space.

It was just so surreal. They needed time to digest it. And so they went back to class.

But naturally, Taichi couldn’t focus on the lecture for a single moment.

His eyes were fixed on Kurihara, shrinking down into her desk like she was trying not to exist.

■□■□■

After school, the five second-years all gathered around the long tables in the clubroom.

“You freaking—why didn’t you come straight to me?!” Inaba raged as they told her what had happened at lunch.

“Sorry, Inaba,” Taichi apologized.

“L-Listen, Inaban! We all needed time to process it for ourselves, and... and

we wanted to check on Yukina-chan when we got back to class, and... Ugh, I'm just making excuses, aren't I? Sorry."

"It's just so hard to believe..."

Nagase and Kiriyama hung their heads apologetically. Fortunately, Inaba was understanding. "Nah, it's fine... I can only imagine what a blow it must've been to witness it firsthand."

"But did they switch for reals, though?" asked Aoki intently.

"It's... hard to say," Taichi replied.

"You didn't make sure? C'mon, man! What were you thinking?"

"We... It all happened really fast, okay?!" Kiriyama spat, frustrated.

"Okay, you're right. That was a dick thing to say. Sorry." Aoki scratched his head awkwardly.

"So either they had her say that certain phrase to freak us out, or... they're straight-up inflicting phenomena on other people to freak us out?" Inaba mused, ruminating on the possibilities Nagase had come up with earlier.

Considering «The Third» had introduced itself to them, and their memories of each other faltered seemingly at random, it would be weirder if there *wasn't* a phenomenon currently targeting the CRC...

"I guess those would be the most viable theories," Inaba concluded.

"Right? I agree," Taichi replied, bolstered by her confirmation. "I know it sounds ridiculous, but—"

"Actually, hold on a second," Inaba interrupted, staring into space. "This is a long shot, but what if..." She narrowed her eyes. "What if it's some—"

Just then, the door opened.

"S-Sorry we're late..." Enjouji Shino whimpered as she peered anxiously into the room. "You don't mind if we interrupt, right?"

Now that they were up to speed on the latest bizarre occurrences, the first-years were essentially working as the second-years' gofers. Their sudden entrance changed the mood in the room, but in a good way; the tension eased,

if only slightly.

Nagase welcomed them warmly. “Of course not! Come on in. You too, Chee-hee.”

“I had a feeling we’d find you all up here,” Chihiro remarked.

“Any news? You should’ve finished cleanup duty a while ago... Oh, uh, come sit!” said Kiriyama, gesturing to the empty chairs.

“Actually, yeah. This time we’ve got something solid.”

“Whoa, really?”

“...This *is* what you meant when you said to report back to you, right?” Chihiro confirmed with Inaba, who nodded.

“At this point, any tiny detail could be relevant. Go for it.”

“Th... There was a fight...!” Timidly, Enjouji shrank down in her seat like she was reliving the memory all over again. “We just happened to be passing by at the time, but it was a big one. Even the teachers got involved!”

“That sounds pretty serious, especially for Yamaboshi,” said Taichi, his eyebrows raised. “You don’t hear about a lot of fights at our school.”

“And... and there was something weird about it, too. One of the boys kept saying stuff like ‘I didn’t mean to do that. I admit I was mad at you, but I never meant to take it that far. There was a **[voice]** in my head, and my body moved on its own.’ Scary, don’t you think? Like something out of a horror movie!”

Enjouji’s performance was rather impassioned, and Taichi found himself impressed by her acting skills... but that was just his brain trying desperately to avoid thinking about the implications behind what she had described. Because to him, it sounded an *awful* lot like the Liberation phenomenon.

Surely it would be insane to jump straight to that conclusion, and yet...

“Hold on a minute... Are you saying...? O-Okay, wait a minute. Can you describe him for me?” asked Inaba. Panic was written all over her face.

“Describe him how?”

“Anything you know about him. What’s he look like? Any defining features?”

“Oh... Well... He’s in our class...? As for defining features, um... he...”

“He’s pretty short?” Chihiro offered in Enjouji’s place, since she seemed to be struggling.

“Could it be that same guy...?” Inaba muttered under her breath.

“What are you talking about, Inaba?” asked Kiriyama nervously.

“Remember when I told you a first-year charged at me? He told me he ‘didn’t mean to do that,’ too.”

Wait, so... are you saying...?

“I think it’s probably the same guy,” Inaba continued in a hollow voice. “But given the timing, I completely misinterpreted it... Goddamn it! If only I’d had the sense to consider the other possibilities back then... Oh, but then again... if we consider our hypothesis at the time...”

“Wait, what? Back up, Inabacchan!”

Aoki clearly couldn’t keep up with Inaba’s line of thought, and admittedly, neither could Taichi. It was on the tip of his tongue, but he just couldn’t get the final piece of the puzzle to fit.

Inaba paused to think for a moment, then spoke. “Chihiro. Shino. Sorry to run you ragged, but could I give you another task?” she asked, her voice almost... mechanical.

“Uh... sure...?”

“O-Of course you can!”

“I want you to find out if there are any other people like him. People who’ve done something they ‘didn’t mean’ to do.”

“Wh-... What do we look for, exactly...?”

“Ask around for anyone who’s made similar statements to the one you heard. Or anyone who’s been acting out dramatically. My guess is, you’ll probably want to start with people close to this guy—people in his club, for example.”

“His club...?” Enjouji whispered, looking around at the second-years.

“And if we find any? What do we do then?” asked Chihiro.

“Turn around and report back to us. They’re probably not safe to approach.”

The first-years must have picked up on the gravity of the situation, because they leapt into action straight away.

“Alright then, we’ll be back later!”

“See you.”

“G-Good luck!” Nagase called after them anxiously.

And so it was just the five of them once again. Their numbers had only decreased by two, and yet somehow the room felt palpably empty without the first-years. For a long moment, they all simply sat there in silence... until...

“S-So, uh, real talk, Inabacchan, I’m totally lost here,” Aoki volunteered suddenly. “Are you saying they’re making phenomena happen to other people now? Why the heck—”

“Here I ammm...!” a voice called as the door opened. And this time, it was an uninvited guest.

That was how their “story” always started... when one of them inevitably walked in...

“Who are you?!” Kiriyama shouted, jumping out of her chair and adopting a battle stance. Likewise, Taichi rose to his feet, too.

This wasn’t Gotou. Hell, they weren’t even male at all. It was Hirata Ryouko, the math teacher, her body swaying slightly, her eyes half-lidded.

“...Hello...?” it asked in a soft, floaty voice that seemed to slip right past them.

“I know who you are,” Inaba began.

“Yup... «The Second»...” it replied, revealing its identity without hesitation.

“You’re joking,” she whispered in a shaky voice.

Somehow the room always felt a little different whenever «Heartseed» invaded it... but this time, it wasn’t even «Heartseed». So how far would the phenomena spread? When would it end? This wasn’t going to last their entire lives, was it?

“I’ve met you before...? Quite a few times, as I recall...?” asked «The Second»,

pointing at Taichi. The second its gaze shifted to him, a chill shot through him, piercing like a knife.

“Is that true, Taichi? Because I can’t say I was ever acquainted with this one,” said Nagase, clearly flustered.

“I’m pretty sure... No, yeah, it definitely talked a lot like this. Plus, it always chose to possess female bodies for some reason.”

Safe to say, this was (almost certainly) «The Second».

“It doesn’t matter if this is the «The Second» or «The Third»... or hell, even «The Fourth» for all I care,” Inaba snapped. “Either way, you aren’t welcome here.”

“Yeah, I know... But you seemed like...? You were struggling, so...?”

“Struggling with what? What do you know that we don’t?” asked a bewildered Kiriyama.

“Alright then... Since you’re all so confused... I guess I can clue you in?” it volunteered, as if out of the kindness of its heart.

“You disgust me. Why are you doing this?” Inaba demanded, though her voice was trembling.

“*Why*...? Because you people seem to think... that a phenomenon is happening to you...? I’m just trying to answer that question...?”

Evidently these otherworldly beings *were* in fact keeping tabs on them, though to what extent, it wasn’t clear.

“Well, what else would it be?!” shouted Nagase, looking like she was poised to lunge at a moment’s notice.

But «The Second» didn’t even blink. “There is no active phenomenon.”

There was a pause. No one moved a muscle. As if time itself had stopped.

“What are you talkin’ about? We *know* there’s a phenomenon. We’ve *seen* people actin’ weird,” Aoki insisted, though the uncertainty in his voice was palpable.

“No, there isn’t...? Oh, but... yes, there is...”

“Which is it? Please just explain it to us,” said Taichi impatiently.

“There is no active phenomenon affecting *you*. But for others... yes.”

Others?

“It doesn’t involve you in the slightest. You’re... outsiders...? Yes, outsiders.”

So we’re not at the center of it... nor on the fringe? We’re not in the picture at all?

“Then... then what are you... saying?” Inaba asked, her breathing labored. “That there’s a... a body-swap phenomenon happening? Not to us, but to the track team? And there’s a Liberation phenomenon happening to... to some random first-years?”

“Yep,” «The Second» replied—so casually, in fact, Taichi was at a loss. “For the most part, it’s all managed by... «The Third»...?”

“R-Right, this Third guy! If we’re ‘outsiders,’ then why did it come talk to us?!” Kiriyama demanded.

“Did «The Third» ever say anything about a phenomenon happening to you...?” «The Second» shrugged.

At this, Taichi thought back to the encounter.

—What do you want with us?

—Oh, I just wanted to get a closer look... That’s all...

When it said “a closer look,” it never specified *at them*. In fact, it never addressed the CRC at all... Had they simply jumped to conclusions about its intentions...?

“Wait a minute. What did you mean by ‘for the most part’?” Inaba asked dubiously.

“Well... Wouldn’t want to forget about «The Fourth», would we...?”

Inaba had just mentioned “«The Fourth»” as a throwaway joke. That didn’t mean they were ready for the news that «The Fourth» *actually existed*. After so many bombshells, Taichi’s senses were going numb.

“Anyway... As you know, «The Third» and «The Fourth» are playing with other

people right now... doing all sorts of things... but it's none of your concern."

"Of course we're going to be concerned! There are people *suffering* right now!" Taichi shot back.

"Act out of line and you might put yourselves in danger... and your friends, too...?"

"...What do you mean?"

"Well, it's against the rules for outsiders to find out about what's happening, remember...? Wasn't that how it worked when it was your turn...?"

Evidently they weren't allowed to interfere. This was someone else's story now.

"Look... Is this another one of «Heartseed»'s schemes? To watch us squirm?" Nagase asked like she was grasping at straws.

"No...? Your story is over now."

Apparently «Heartseed» was telling the truth when it said it was done with them.

"But—regardless, you have to acknowledge the fact that weird shit is still happening to us! We keep randomly forgetting each other! There's gotta be something to that!" Inaba blurted desperately.

"Hmmm...? Hmmm..." «The Second» tilted its head for a moment, then nodded pensively. "That's fascinating..."

"No, it isn't!"

"Something is trying to happen to you... or perhaps... something is trying to un-happen to you..."

"What's *that* supposed to mean?" asked Taichi.

"...I can't blab too much or they'll get mad at me... I think...?"

"They" who, damn it? «The Second»'s vague, meandering manner of speech was starting to drive Taichi insane.

"Anyway... You're not involved, so don't mess with the people who are... That's all I wanted to say... Bye-bye now...?"

“W-Wait up! Wh-... Why bother telling us in the first place?” asked Aoki, right at the end.

«The Second» tilted its head again—first to the left, then to the right.

“Because... it’s entertaining...?”

And with that, it piloted its borrowed body right out of the clubroom. It could’ve simply switched back with the body’s owner, but for some reason, it chose not to.

Perhaps, like «Heartseed», it had the good sense to put things back where it found them.

■□■□■

It was then that Taichi realized he had remained standing throughout that entire conversation. Defeated, he collapsed back into his chair. Now that «The Second» was gone, the whole clubroom felt desolate.

“How could it just waltz in like that...? When did we decide they were allowed to walk all over us...?” Kiriyama lamented.

Inaba pressed a hand to her forehead. “Is this whole school insane, or is it just the people around us? This isn’t *normal*, is it? God, I don’t know anymore... All I know for sure is...” She took a deep breath, exhaled, and finished: “They’re using other people for their supernatural phenomena now. There, I said it.”

Spoken almost as matter-of-factly as «The Second» itself.

“So they dropped us like yesterday’s news and moved on to our friends? Is that even possible? I mean, «The Second» literally said as much, so I guess the answer is yes... Are they just going to keep doing this...?” Nagase muttered to herself. “What even *are* these phenomena, anyway? Does this stuff happen all across the world and we just never knew about it until now...?”

“Maybe this ‘supernatural’ stuff is more natural than we thought,” Taichi replied, capping it off with a hollow laugh.

“God, I hate this,” Kiriyama growled in a low voice. “I hate how they toy with people’s lives. They’re monsters!”

Taichi was firmly inclined to agree. More than anything, what he felt was a

deep sense of emptiness, but underneath that was anger at the injustice of it all.

“But it said nothing’s gonna happen to *us*, right?” Aoki asked, and instantly their fury faltered.

They were still angry, of course. Enraged, even. But that rage burned at a different temperature this time around. Having been through it themselves, they could fully empathize with the current victims... but that was all they had to offer. Their friends’ imagined pain simply wasn’t the same as their own lived experiences.

It was like watching a TV show; no matter how realistic the events of the story, it would never truly be “real.” There was always a barrier between you and that fictional world.

“You’re not going to suggest we just *abandon our friends*, are you?” Kiriyama pressed back.

“’Course not,” Aoki replied without missing a beat.

After a moment of thought, Taichi looked up. “We should do everything in our power to help them.”

Not because he couldn’t bear to see people suffering, but because he wanted to break the cycle and end «Heartseed»’s reign of terror once and for all.

“Then here’s our first step!” Inaba barked, her expression hard, as if to chase all the doom and gloom out of the room. Her soft, affectionate side hadn’t shown itself in quite a while. “Let’s find out if we can get rid of «The Second» and «Third» somehow.”

They would need to take drastic measures if they were going to combat this scourge... but...

“Honestly, I don’t think it’ll be easy,” said Nagase, conflicted. “«The Second» doesn’t seem interested in fighting us, and I doubt «The Third» will pay us a visit anytime soon.”

“Right,” Inaba nodded. “It’d be easier to formulate a plan if we had some kind of direct connection to them, but we don’t.”

“We’re ‘outsiders,’ after all,” Taichi muttered.

“Oho, so you agree?” Inaba blinked at him in surprise, then smirked knowingly.

“...Well, what choice do I have?” Not like he *wanted* to accept it, obviously.

“Sorry, that was rude of me,” she apologized, smoothing things over. “So, this brings us to Plan B: We accept that there’s nothing we can do about «The Second» or «Third» and simply wait it out until they get bored. In other words, the same strategy we’ve always implemented. But this time, we’ll pass it on to the affected students and help them through it.”

“Yeah, that makes a lot of sense!” Kiriyama nodded.

“Same tactics, just with different players. I don’t see why it wouldn’t work,” Aoki chimed in.

Unfortunately, it wasn’t quite that straightforward.

“That said, before we do anything else, we’ll need to evaluate whether this sort of direct interference counts as ‘acting out of line,’” Inaba continued.

“In which case... what exactly can we accomplish...?” Nagase laced her fingers together, then pressed her hands to her forehead in contemplation.

“I don’t know... I feel like we got plenty of help from so-called ‘outsiders’ during *our* phenomena,” Taichi mused, thinking back over the past year and a half.

“Oh, we absolutely did. But the thing is, *they* didn’t know about the phenomena. They weren’t trying to solve our supernatural problems—just the normal ones.”

“Your point?”

“My point is, it’s complicated. When it comes to the phenomena, we have a lot of information at our disposal; how will it come into play if we attempt to help the new victims? How will *you-know-who* see it? Will they decide the victims must have spilled the beans to us? For that matter, are these phenomena really *this* common? If so, why didn’t the victims before our time step forward to help *us?!*”

“G-Guys, don’t fight,” Kiriyama whispered feebly.

At this, Taichi snapped back to his senses. “Sorry...” He stared at the floor.

“I’m sorry, too,” Inaba replied, averting her gaze awkwardly. “You know, it’s funny... I never thought these phenomena would make me feel *left out*, but here we are.”

Her trembling voice permeated his entire body. They should’ve been over the moon to learn that their “story” was over... and yet Taichi didn’t feel happy in the slightest. Instead, his skies were covered in a thick sheet of clouds as he gazed out at the distant storm.

He wanted to do something, but what? As ready as he was to lead the charge, he didn’t want to run afoul of «their» rules and inflict more suffering on the victims. As long as that possibility existed, it limited the actions they could take.

In the end, it wasn’t his call to make. He couldn’t steer the ship without the cooperation of everyone aboard.

“I don’t know if you remember,” Inaba began, breaking the silence, “but during the Dream Vision, I kept saying ‘we don’t have to let this story start.’ Well, this time around, we don’t even get that option... because this time, it’s *someone else’s* story.”

This was Inaba’s preferred analogy. For other people, the story was moving along, right on schedule... but for them, nothing was happening. The story refused to start. And if they weren’t part of the story, then they would remain outsiders.

“...Hmm? What’s up, Iori-chan?” Aoki asked. “I see you glancin’ around at us.”

“Oh, I was just wondering—who might these fine folks be?” Nagase asked without a shred of hesitation.

Her expression was so innocent... Taichi’s blood ran cold. This was no light-hearted joke; it was an honest question.

“Wait... No, that was a joke!” Nagase shouted, her eyes wide. She leapt to her feet, knocking over her chair in the process. “Just a joke! Haha! A funny gag!”

But the sweat sparkling on her forehead told them everything they needed to

know.

What was happening to them? If there was no active phenomenon affecting them, then why did they randomly keep forgetting each other? Wasn’t their story over?

Or perhaps... now that it was over, was «Heartseed» trying to destroy the evidence...?

And then the door opened again.

Chapter 5: Finally, It Begins By this point, it was no longer unusual for the CRC to receive visitors. There was a time when that alone was a sign that they would soon step into a new supernatural nightmare. And now the door was slowly, carefully creaking open once more.

The gap grew wider and wider until a figure was revealed—a tall male teacher in a business suit.

It was Gotou Ryuuzen.

Except it wasn't.

Its posture was languid. Its eyes were half-lidded. Its presence instantly put everyone in the room on edge. It exuded an otherworldly aura no human being could replicate.

There could be no mistaking it: «Heartseed» was back, and their story was starting at last.

Taichi's mind went white... and then, as if to make up for lost time, the whole room exploded.

"You *bastard!* How *dare* you show your face here again!" Inaba roared.

"Why is this happening again...?!" Nagase choked, unable to suppress her emotions.

"I knew it... I *knew* you were involved somehow!" Kiriyama shouted, brimming with righteous fury.

"It's always you, isn't it? *Isn't it?!*" Aoki screamed.

"Then it looks like we're going to have to fight you. This has to be settled once and for all," Taichi declared.

Just when they thought it was over, surprise surprise, it wasn't. «The Second» was wrong. With the arrival of their true enemy, their wilting passion flared up

once more.

“You don’t understand... It’s not like I want to be here, either...”

«Heartseed»’s voice was lethargic and tepid, like it was just complaining to itself.

“So you didn’t choose this of your own free will?” Taichi asked the otherworldly being.

“Correct... Honestly... My intention was to wrap things up last time...”

“How can we possibly believe you? You literally *told* Taichi and Inaba that you were never coming back!” Kiriyama shouted in an accusatory voice.

“Well, I did my best to stay away, but...”

“You ‘did your best’? What a fucking joke,” Inaba spat. “Out with it, then: What do you want? First it’s «The Third», then «The Second», and now you... If this is some kind of joke, it’s getting stale. But the worst part of it is... I find myself actually *hoping* to have a conversation with you. Disgusting.”

Indeed, for as much as Taichi hated interacting with «Heartseed», part of him felt it was preferable to their other options. That was how numb he had become to the horror of it all.

“Yes... There’s a very important conversation to be had... but first...” «Heartseed» paused—not that anyone in the room was having trouble keeping up. “What did you talk about... with «The Second»... and «The Third»...?”

“What, so... you weren’t watching the whole time?” Nagase asked.

“I’ve been busy with stuff, you see,” it replied in the world’s most idle voice.

Meanwhile, Inaba was losing patience. “Apparently we’re not going to get anywhere unless we tell you, so fuck it—I’ll tell you. «The Third» said some shit about wanting to ‘get a closer look,’ and «The Second» told us «The Third» and «The Fourth» are inflicting phenomena not on us, but other people. Told us to stay out of it, basically. Happy now?”

“Ah... Yes, that’s about the gist of it... These ‘phenomena,’ as you call them, won’t affect you in any way...”

“Wait a minute—then why the hell are you here? If this doesn’t affect us, then what business do you have with us?” Inaba demanded.

This was a valid question, of course. If their time in the supernatural spotlight was over, then why would «Heartseed» bother showing up? For what purpose?

“Isn’t it obvious...? Aren’t your memories... starting to flicker...?”

Instantly, it clicked. Apparently their memory issues were a separate problem.

“Hmph... I get it now. So this memory thing is happening independently of the other phenomena, is that it? Alright then, what is it this time? Some kind of memory wipe phenomenon?” Inaba asked as though she’d already put all the pieces together.

But «Heartseed» shook its head.

“Phenomenon...? Ah... No, not quite...”

“It’s not? Whaddya mean?” asked Aoki.

“What you are experiencing is not a phenomenon... It’s the disposal.”

Disposal. The word had an eerie ring to it. Almost like they were machines on a conveyor belt, headed into a trash compactor.

“These memory lapses aren’t happening at random... or anything like that... The erasure will be permanent.”

Taichi’s mind reeled. *Permanent? Not random?*

“B-But it’s still just another phenomenon, right? The memories will stay gone for as long as it’s active, but once it ends it’ll all go back to normal? Right?” Nagase asked loudly, her voice full of forced cheer. Normally she wouldn’t try to sound that excited about *any* phenomenon, but compared to the worst-case scenario Taichi had just envisioned, anything was preferable.

“Ah... Perhaps this will make more sense...”

The five of them didn’t quite comprehend it—didn’t *want* to comprehend it—so «Heartseed» simplified its explanation for them.

“Everything that happened during the phenomena... will vanish... and your world will ‘go back to normal’... as though the phenomena never happened.”

There was a moment of silence in which the five of them stared, dumbfounded, at «Heartseed».

“Ah... Perhaps I should start with a general outline...” it mused after a moment.

From there, it explained that its kind existed in great numbers, inflicting phenomena across the globe. In most cases, the experiment would end after just one phenomenon, at which point all related memories would be erased from all affiliated parties.

“This world is by no means *brimming* with phenomena... but... they’re not unheard of, either...”

So it’s everywhere? We’re not the only ones? No, forget it. This is no time to be worrying about other people. First we have to figure out our own situation. We can’t take action without a solid foundation.

“When you say our memories will ‘vanish,’ what... what sort of scale are you talking about?” Inaba asked, like she was begging for the faintest hint of a silver lining.

“All traces of the phenomena’s impact will vanish... completely... And anything that happened as a result of the phenomena... will be undone.”

Vanish completely? Be undone? And what do you mean, “anything that happened as a result”?

“Okay, so for example... we’ll definitely forget that we ever switched bodies with each other, right?” Inaba asked tentatively.

“Right...”

“What about the secrets we learned during the swap?”

“Those, too.”

“And any trauma we consequently overcame?”

“If it’s something you wouldn’t have overcome otherwise... then it will be reverted.”

“What about any friendships that deepened through the Liberation?”

“Those will be reverted, too...”

“What about any romantic relationships that were forged during one of these hellish nightmares?”

“If it would have happened otherwise, the relationship will remain intact... Otherwise, I imagine it will be reverted...”

You’ve gotta be kidding.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me... You... You can’t be serious!” Taichi sputtered helplessly.

Meanwhile, Nagase was visibly shaking. “Surely we can’t forget *all* of that, right?” she asked in a hollow voice. “Those phenomena *changed* me. If I forget everything that happened, I won’t be myself anymore! The bonds I made with everyone will just... disappear!”

“I wouldn’t say that... Even if you lost the memories directly pertaining to the phenomena... I’m sure your lives would carry on just fine...”

I mean, yeah, maybe... but still...

“B-But... if you deleted literal *years* of our memories, don’tcha think we’d notice?! That’s a giant gap, man!” Aoki pointed out.

“Ah... To be clear, you won’t lose all memories of that time period... Just the parts that directly pertain to the phenomena... After all, surely there were still times when you had mundane conversations with friends... ate meals, went into town, did your schoolwork... Those things would have happened either way, and so they won’t be erased.”

Taichi sincerely doubted it would be as simple as «Heartseed» made it sound. It just wasn’t feasible.

“Okay, here’s a question: what about journal entries we wrote during the phenomena?” he asked. “Those wouldn’t disappear, right? So wouldn’t we just re-remember everything? Same for photos or videos we took.”

“Those would, in fact, disappear. Surely you remember... that drastic physical alterations are not beyond our power...”

“Wh-What, so you can just *alter the universe* or something? No way... That’s...

That’s impossible...” Kiriyama croaked.

“Is it...? We turned you back into your younger selves, did we not...?”

Indeed, at one time, they had regressed into their past selves—both physically and mentally.

“You make it sound so far-fetched, Kiriyama-san... All we’re doing is painting over the past, really... and since we limit the duration and number of people affected by any given phenomenon... the impact is minimal...”

“Painting over the past” will have “minimal impact”? Don’t be ridiculous! Without those memories, we wouldn’t be who we are today! And besides...

“Even if you erased *our* memories, other people would still remember the events as they happened, wouldn’t they?”

“No, they wouldn’t.” «Heartseed» shot his question down point-blank. “I’m not sure you understand... Your world will revert back to how it would’ve been if these things had never happened to you... Naturally, your friends’ memories will be adjusted accordingly...”

As «Heartseed» explained it, all relevant events would be erased from the records of history; any gaps deemed unnatural would be smoothed over in whatever way made the most sense. In most cases, these gaps were fairly small to begin with, so it usually wasn’t much trouble.

“‘Fairly small’? We’ve spent the better part of the past *eighteen months* dealing with you!” Inaba hissed, openly flustered.

“Oh, I see... So that’s what you’re all worried about... Because I haven’t explained that part... Now I get it...”

“I don’t care if *you* get it. Help *us* get it,” Nagase spat.

“Basically... the five of you are a special case... Not only do you still possess your memories... you went through many, many different phenomena... Normally the duration is much shorter... resulting in a smaller impact overall... Key word: normally...”

“What part of this is *normal?!*” Kiriyama shrieked, and it was clear she had reached the limits of what she could tolerate.

“Normally a phenomenon lasts for a week... maybe two at the most... Then, once it ends, all related memories are erased from history... The end...”

One week? None of ours were ever that short! It’d take us a week just to figure out what was happening!

“In other words... You continue to possess something that should have disappeared long, long ago...”

The number of phenomena... The average duration... The total amount of memories built up over the past year and a half... All of these things were anomalies?

“Hold on a minute—let me get this straight!” Clutching her head, Nagase closed her eyes and began to mutter to herself. “So there are phenomena happening all over the world... Normally they only last a week or two, and after that they’re erased from history... But in our case, we’ve gone through a whole bunch of them for an abnormally long period of time, and we can still remember them...”

Likewise, Taichi started his own mental review of the facts.

“...Why haven’t our memories disappeared?” asked Inaba. It was the next logical question, of course, since their own phenomena-related events were very much present and accounted for.

“The biggest reason is because... you’re all so fascinating...” «Heartseed» paused. “No... *Too* fascinating, perhaps.”

Fascinating. Fun. Entertaining. It always came back to that, didn’t it?

“*The fuck is so fascinating to you?!*” Inaba screamed.

“For example... when the body-swap was at the height of its complexity... you all lasted a full month... That duration would have broken most people...”

Evidently they weren’t entirely off the mark when they suspected that their ability to endure the phenomena was part of the reason they were subjected to them in the first place.

“Basically... I’d like to leave the events intact, if I can... After all, once they’re erased from history... my memories will be erased along with them...”

“Hold on a minute... What do you mean, *your* memories will get erased?”

«Heartseed»: a being that seeks entertainment by inflicting phenomena on others. The criteria for “entertaining” varies between individuals. Once a phenomenon ends, the «Heartseed»’s memories are erased, leaving only the most essential data. And then the cycle repeats itself.

When asked why they felt compelled to do this, the only answer was, “It’s simply what we do.”

“That’s just what a «Heartseed» is...?” Taichi mumbled dazedly.

If «Heartseed» was in danger of losing its memories, too, then that suggested a couple of things. One: «Heartseed» wasn’t fully omnipotent. Two: There was something else out there even *more* powerful than «Heartseed».

This was perhaps beyond Taichi’s mortal understanding.

“Let’s just say... I’ve started to put two and two together... Thus, I’d like to avoid having my memories undone... if at all possible...”

This was a rather human sentiment, coming from «Heartseed». Almost... relatable?

“Alright, fine. I get it,” Inaba shrugged. “You purposely didn’t erase our memories because you wanted to keep your own. For your sake, I’ll go ahead and ignore all the logistical questions I want to ask...” She let out a mirthless laugh and continued, “So why are they starting to flicker out?”

They were having a metaphysically impossible conversation about a metaphysically impossible scenario. Was that their only option at this stage? Taichi wasn’t sure. His perceptions of “realistic” were utterly warped by this point.

“Well... they aren’t meant to remain intact... and as such... steps are currently being taken to wipe out those last traces... That’s all...”

“Then who’s behind it?” Taichi asked.

“Perhaps the easiest answer... would be «The Third» and «The Fourth»...”

“So *that’s* how «The Third» ties into all this? Wait... Then what about «The Second»? Is that one in on it, too?” Kiriyama asked.

«Heartseed» nodded. “Probably... Although «The Second»’s abnormal behavior is... something of an irregular case...”

“Okay, so to sum it all up: Once the phenomena ended, all relevant memories and events were *supposed* to get erased, but you chose not to do that... so now «The Third» and its friends are here to finish the job?”

“Yes... I’d say that’s a very nice summary indeed... Now, as I explained, a phenomenon usually only lasts one or two weeks at the most... Part of the reason for this is to keep the quantity of memories at a manageable size...”

“Wait, but... wouldn’t our quantity be pretty massive by this point?” asked Aoki.

“Precisely... which is why «The Third» brought in assistance... In order to erase memories at that scale, it will take a fair bit of preparation... Yes, the ‘flickering’ you’re experiencing is simply a sign that those preparations are underway...”

In a way it made sense, but it still didn’t feel real—more like the plot of a sci-fi flick.

“That said,” «Heartseed» continued, “would you be willing to... team up?”

Now there was a line Taichi never imagined he would hear.

“If we work together... we can stop it from happening...”

Fury flared up inside him. “Why should we trust you? After all the times you deceived us?”

“I understand that... but right now, we share a common goal... You don’t want those memories to get erased, correct...? I certainly don’t...”

A common goal? Was their situation really so dire that they had no choice but to join forces with the very being who antagonized them all this time? Who showed up out of nowhere and meddled in their lives to its heart’s content? And who now dared to stand before them and ask for their help?

What a joke.

“Guys, are we really gonna fall for this? I mean, our memories? Getting erased?” Kiriyama asked, trying (and failing) to smile.

“What about you three...? Surely you know better than anyone just how very possible it is... to have your memories erased by our hands...”

At this, Inaba, Nagase, and Aoki went completely pale; «Heartseed» was referring to the time during the Phantom Projection when Taichi and Kiriyama temporarily had their memories wiped.

“Back then... Taichi and Yui forgot all about us,” said Inaba.

“They couldn’t even remember they were part of the CRC... Instead, they just figured they were in some other club by themselves... Like their minds invented the easiest possible answer, and they just accepted it,” said Nagase.

“I guess... maybe we should accept that this memory loss thing is legit,” said Aoki.

Back then, Taichi and Yui weren’t permanently affected—they went back to normal eventually. This time around, however, the erasure would be full-scale. Not only would they lose their memories, but so too would everyone around them. And there would be no coming back from it.

At this point, Taichi was tempted to run out of the clubroom and never look back.

“Rrrgh! Damn it! God fucking damn it! Is there anything... *anything* we can do to combat this... I don’t know, ‘Record Wipe’ or whatever you want to call it?” Inaba asked. She was on the brink of losing it, but as usual, she refused to give in.

“Record Wipe...? Ah, yes... These things are easier to understand once you give them a name, aren’t they...? So much easier... The power of a name must never be underestimated... Oh, but... let’s see... As a baseline... I am currently attempting to... prepare a countermeasure...”

Crisis aside, «Heartseed» was being awfully detailed in its explanation this time around. This was quite possibly the longest conversation they’d ever had with it. Was this a sign that the situation was as urgent to «Heartseed» as it was to them? Taichi wasn’t sure... but if they were going to take advantage of its generosity, they’d have to act fast before it changed its mind.

“That said... I’d appreciate any assistance you could offer... For example, if

you could... relay any information you happen to acquire... keep your distance from «The Third»'s group... and take steps to preserve your memories...”

“Not sure about the first two, but if you know a way to preserve our memories, then let's hear it! Now!” Inaba commanded.

“Well... you could try to create something that could... help you remember after the fact...”

“Wait, what? Didn't you say this thing was gonna erase physical records? Or am I tripping?” Aoki asked under his breath.

“It does, yes...”

“Quit fucking around with us!” Inaba raged.

“Ah, but... if it has no visible connection to the phenomena... it may not be subjected to the Record Wipe... So just try to come up with something that could remind you... in a more abstract fashion...”

“So no photos or explicit documentation?” she asked.

“Right...”

“...What, you want us to encrypt it somehow?”

“I can't guarantee it will be effective, but... perhaps you could disguise it just enough...”

“Wait a minute,” Nagase cut in. “So we're operating on the assumption that we're definitely going to lose our memories?”

“Well... there isn't much you can do to prevent it from happening... If anything, that's *my* job... but judging from your current condition... it's possible you may lose some memories well before their Record Wipe hits...”

“How much time do we have left? It's not gonna hit us right now, is it?” Kiriyama whimpered. Perhaps subconsciously she had already come to terms with the reality that their memories were going to disappear.

“You still have some time. It appears that their preparations are not quite complete... Not to mention, «The Third» and the rest have other things to attend to as well... so I imagine they'll be busy for a while... Granted, this is only

conjecture...”

So their only option was... to create something that could somehow survive a full-scale history alteration. In other words, they were playing defense. And that meant they couldn’t just wing it.

“Alright, let me go over this one more time,” Inaba began, her eyes half-lidded, her tone lethargic. “So, any events or memories pertaining to our phenomena were supposed to be ‘undone,’ with all the gaps smoothed over. But you put it off because you wanted to keep your memories... and in doing so, you broke the rules, leading «The Third» and everyone else to show up. And now they’re preparing a Record Wipe to finish what you started.”

She pinched the bridge of her nose and closed her eyes. Likewise, Taichi could feel a migraine coming on. Then she let out a dry laugh.

“So now all of us, including you, have to figure out a way to fight it. And we have to come up with some way to encode our memories into something so we can *maybe* regain them after the fact... How idiotic.”

Evidently that was the end of the explanation as far as their story was concerned.

For the time being—no, more specifically, for the next 24 hours—they needed some time to process everything they’d just learned.

But this time around, the conversation wasn’t over just yet.

“Okay, so now explain why these phenomena are happening to other people!” shouted Kiriyama, her voice quavering. At this point, her love for her friends on the track team was probably the only thing keeping her going.

“Oh... We can talk about that some other time...”

“No! We’re talking about it *now!*” she roared fiercely.

In response, «Heartseed» regarded her with its usual cold, unenthusiastic stare. “Why...?”

“Because! Yukina and Misaki-chan are my friends, and... and they’re struggling!”

“So... you don’t care for the rest, then...?”

“Ha ha, very funny,” Inaba cut in sardonically. “We don’t have time for your little games, asshole. First, let’s confirm: There *are* phenomena happening to other students, yes? Specifically, five girls from the track team, as well as some first-year boys?”

“Yes, there are active phenomena... As for the people you specified, that sounds correct to me... I admit, I haven’t exactly compiled a list of all their names... so I can’t rattle them off for you...”

“So «The Third» really is the mastermind this time around?”

“Yes, that’s correct... The same individual who seeks to... erase your history records...”

“Wait, but... wasn’t that the whole point of them being here? So why are they messing with other people?!” Aoki demanded, sounding utterly at a loss.

“Good question,” «Heartseed» muttered, glancing out the window. “Their main purpose here is to erase your records, I’m certain of that... and preparations are indeed underway... but... it seems they’re doing other things in their spare time,” it mused.

“Just wondering,” Inaba piped up, “but is it possible to start up a second phenomenon right after your first one ends?”

“That would be fairly uncommon... but then again, so is conducting two at the same time within close proximity of one another... Normally we avoid that so the groups don’t interfere with each other...”

“Then why are *they* doing it?!” Kiriyama hissed.

“Well, the prep work for the Record Wipe is taking quite some time, so... perhaps it’s... something to do in the interim...”

At this, Taichi’s rage flared up. *Keep your callous remarks to yourself, you bastard!*

«Heartseed» seemed to sense this, however, because it quickly amended its statement: “Or perhaps not... although the possibility exists. It takes effort to conduct a phenomenon... so that would suggest... they have some other objective...”

“Like what?” Inaba asked without missing a beat.

“Who knows...”

“How much do you know about «The Third»’s group and their plan, anyway? Because it kind of seems like you’re rebelling against the rest of your kind.”

«Heartseed» froze for a moment... in a way that felt *different* compared to all the other times.

“Indeed... I suppose we *are* on opposing sides... which is why it took me so long to work out their next move... hence I showed up late... They won’t attack directly, but... once they erase your memories... mine will be erased along with them... as will my rebellion... or so they probably hope...”

Not even «Heartseed», in all its omnipotence, had the full story this time around. Even it had limits it couldn’t exceed... For some reason, «Heartseed» was starting to feel a tiny bit relatable. Or maybe it was all in Taichi’s head. *Yeah, probably.*

“Anyway... I think I’ve gone over all the pertinent details, so... now all that’s left is for you to try your best...”

“Hold it!”

All of them had moved to say it—but Taichi was the fastest.

“You should know... we can’t just turn a blind eye to the victims of the current phenomena.”

He looked around at each of the others’ faces in turn. Sure enough, they all shared the same sentiment: they had to do something.

“Did I not warn you... to keep your distance from «The Third»’s group...?”

“Does talking to their victims count as ‘approaching’ them?”

“...Yes, it does...”

“What’s wrong with that?” asked Aoki.

“We don’t want them to start paying attention... If they find out you’re trying to evade the Record Wipe, things could get... complicated... But right now they’re occupied with other things, so... if we let them stay distracted... it will

delay the Record Wipe that much longer...”

“Oh, so you want to use Yukina and the other victims as bait? You’re despicable,” Kiriyama spat. But «Heartseed» ignored her.

“Won’t it be kind of risky, trying to avoid their notice? I mean, they can spy on us whenever they want, right?” asked Nagase. Her apprehension was well warranted, of course.

“Well... I think you’ll be safe for the time being... They assume your memories will simply be erased later on, and so they aren’t paying that much attention...”

“Then surely we can help the victims to *some* extent,” Taichi pressed. And this still wasn’t his “martyr” side talking; he sincerely wanted to help those who were suffering the same way he had in the past. He was *committed*.

“Are you *still* going on about that...?” Surprisingly enough, «Heartseed» actually seemed kind of annoyed. “Are you serious...?”

Its words felt like an implicit threat, and Taichi could feel himself starting to waver—but then backup arrived in the form of Inaba.

“You can threaten us all you like, but I’m afraid sitting on our asses simply isn’t an option for us.”

“You think we can just leave our friends to suffer?” Kiriyama snapped.

“Not happening, dude,” Aoki chimed in.

“All this time, we’ve been trying not to let these phenomena break us. But in my case, it actually succeeded once.”

Taichi’s heart went out to Nagase as she spoke.

“But we never fully gave in to you, «Heartseed». That’s how we got this far.”

Her words echoed the sentiment in all of their hearts.

“Besides,” Inaba added, “if you’re done messing with us, then this is our last hurdle. We beat «The Third», and we’ll be done for real.”

This was the true final battle.

“So we’re gonna keep fighting, right to the bitter end. There’s gotta be *something* we can do to help the current victims, right? Out with it already.”

Only Inaba had the sheer force of will necessary to bark orders at a supernatural entity.

“I get the feeling you all know full well what a bad idea this is, but if you insist...”

Reluctantly(?), «Heartseed» explained that its species was unable to stop a phenomenon that someone else had started. It estimated that «The Third»’s phenomena would last one to two weeks, come to an end, and then the Record Wipe would go into effect, erasing it all.

The phenomena would end after reaching one of two conditions: either the perpetrator found it sufficiently “entertaining,” or the phenomena lasted long enough that the risk of hassle during the Record Wipe became too large to ignore. Normally the Record Wipe would erase all events pertaining to the phenomena, as well as anything that happened through the butterfly effect, but it would also patch holes where necessary.

“That said... during times of emergency, there is also a nuclear option...”

“What do you mean, ‘times of emergency’?” asked Inaba.

There was a pause.

“Tell us the truth, damn it! You have no reason to hide this shit from us!” she insisted. At this point, she was too desperate to hold back.

“If I tell you... I get the feeling things might... head in the wrong direction... but... if it helps convince you to work with me... very well,” «Heartseed» muttered after some deliberation. “Normally... we try our best not to erase more than absolutely necessary... that way we reduce our impact as much as possible... Plus, it’s less work that way... Of course, when it comes to patching holes... some small details must be sacrificed... but these things happen... However... there is an *emergency shutdown* option...”

Taichi really didn’t like the sound of that.

“In the event of an emergency shutdown... the result resembles what happened to Yaegashi-san and Kiriyama-san... The subject will lose all memories of their friendships with others in their group... and revert to mere acquaintances...”

“Wh-...?! Why the heck would *that* happen?! That makes no sense!” Nagase shouted, visibly flustered.

“This problem is avoided if the phenomenon ends safely... but in the event of a problem... the emergency shutdown will occur. It will erase the entire memory block... with none of the usual fine-tuning we do.”

“If you feel the need to erase one to two weeks of our lives, that... that’s one thing. I could accept that,” Inaba stammered.

To Taichi, her perception of what was “acceptable” was clearly slipping.

“But I refuse to let you fucks make us forget our friends!”

“Sometimes there’s simply no way around it,” «Heartseed» shrugged.

Should the phenomenon be revealed to a third party, cause a societal scandal, or result in a full mental breakdown for one or more participants—basically, anything deemed “too complicated to undo”—the emergency shutdown would trigger. Evidently it was their ultimate security measure to prevent any lasting wide-scale effects on human society.

“Ironic. This ‘emergency shutdown’ sounds way more complicated than the other way,” Nagase commented sardonically.

“Ah, but... curiously enough, it really isn’t... That said, it poses the same amount of risk to us as well, so... we generally avoid using it where possible...”

“What about last time?!” Kiriyama shouted hopefully. “After Chihiro-kun’s phenomenon, everything went back to normal, right? I mean, I remember everyone just fine!”

“That was... something of a glitch in the system... It wasn’t a real emergency shutdown, per se...”

“Okay, so... basically, we should avoid this emergency shutdown thing at all costs, yeah?” asked a discontented Inaba. “Which means, conversely, it would actually be *more* ideal to let the phenomenon end safely... Is that what we should strive for? They’d only lose a couple weeks’ worth of events... Fairly negligible, compared to the alternative.”

“...Perhaps so...”

“Hmmm,” Nagase murmured. “«Heartseed» always got bored with us once we achieved some level of stability... so maybe we should steer things in that direction? Teach them to ignore the phenomenon and go on with their lives?”

Perhaps their best strategy was, in fact, the very same one they themselves had used to survive their own phenomena. After all, it had proven effective.

“...Well, «Heartseed», I appreciate you talking to us about this,” said Taichi with a tiny hint of affection. Then Inaba fixed him with a withering look that said *give me a fucking break*, to which he replied, “Think about it: now we know what we have to do. We can’t just sit back and let them erase our past.”

They needed to stand up and fight, and for good reason.

“Let me confirm one last thing real quick,” said Inaba. “Are we allowed to talk to the victims about their phenomena? Because «The Second» told us not to.”

As usual, she was one step ahead of the rest.

“I imagine that warning was something of a formality... Frankly, as long as it’s not too excessive, you should be fine... While we prefer to limit the spread of information... you are already aware of what we do... therefore, there’s no point in hiding it from you... However... Let’s see... If you were to, say... inform them of rules they weren’t previously aware of... or other unnecessary details... that would be another story...”

The lines weren’t explicitly drawn out for them, so they’d have to play it by ear... but at least they weren’t completely powerless.

“Hmm... It feels like I’ve made some kind of mistake in telling you all this,” «Heartseed» mused. Evidently it could feel regret.

Perhaps that was why its final words sounded like a warning: “Just remember... your first priority should be yourselves... Go ahead and look out for others, but... not at your own expense, please...”

And with that, «Heartseed» walked out.

■□■□■

The mood in the clubroom, post-«Heartseed», was neither cheerful nor gloomy. There was no single distinct emotion, and as such, it felt a little

different somehow.

No one addressed the room. Instead, they sat still, deep in contemplation, occasionally shifting their weight or muttering to themselves. It was just... a lot to take in.

This was unlike anything they'd ever experienced, and their feelings toward «Heartseed» were jumbled up with their feelings toward their new enemies. How were they supposed to feel? They couldn't choose between hope and despair.

But when «Heartseed» turned up, their brains all switched into combat mode, like some sort of Pavlovian response. Their behavior, subsequently, was influenced by those emotions—all five of them, united in heart and mind. This was how they'd supported each other through their phenomena... and this time, it was how they'd support their friends through them as well.

"Okay, let's get real for a minute," said Inaba, breaking the silence in the dull, murky air. "Worst-case scenario... they'll survive losing one to two weeks of their lives."

"It's not ideal, but... it's way better than an emergency shutdown situation," Nagase agreed, her expression conflicted. After all, an emergency shutdown had the power to erase entire friendships.

"But in our case, we went through so many different phenomena for so long that... now everything's complicated," Inaba continued.

It had been roughly eighteen months since the start of the body-swap, and during that time period, they had survived *six* different phenomena. The question was: How much of the past year and a half only happened because of «Heartseed», and how much of it would have happened regardless? Which events were safe, and which were on the chopping block?

"If only we weren't so abnormally *fascinating*... If only we'd never bumped into the anomaly that is «Heartseed»..." she mused.

Was there anything they could have done to avert their fate?

"Well, for right now, we just have to do our best," Taichi assured them. "Our records haven't been wiped just yet. We're still us."

“R-Right! We have to help Yukina! And all the others!” Kiriyama chimed in.

“Maybe our past experiences will help ’em stick it out!” Aoki added.

“We can do this. Let’s make it happen,” Nagase declared, her eyes brimming with the will to fight.

Meanwhile, once again, Inaba was one step ahead of them. “First and foremost, let’s make sure we avoid an emergency shutdown. All we have to do is make sure we all fly under the radar for the next one to two weeks. Just be careful not to hover over them too much so we don’t attract any unwanted attention.”

Perhaps their history could serve as a reference.

“Right,” Nagase nodded. “Other than that, all we have to do is... try to prepare ourselves for the Record Wipe.”

“Yeah, we’ll need to figure out some way to leave a coded message for ourselves... First, let’s each try to come up with something on our own. Then, if you think of anything brilliant, share it with the rest of us.”

“Okie-dokie!” said Aoki.

“You got it!” said Kiriyama.

“It’ll all work out... We’ll make sure of it,” Taichi declared. When the five of them put their heads together, they were unstoppable.

They’d spent the past year and a half fighting against «Heartseed»’s rules. This didn’t change anything. The only difference was that unlike «Heartseed», these new enemies seemed to actually *want* to ruin their lives... but even then, it didn’t change their gameplan.

Business as usual, no matter what.

■□■□■

With the battle officially declared, Taichi and the others sprang into action at last. As far as they knew, there were two groups currently suffering: the track team and the first-year boys. The CRC’s first step: reach out to the track team and try to talk to them.

They were worried about the first-years too, of course, given that they seemed to be experiencing the Liberation phenomenon, but when they got in touch with Chihiro and Enjouji, they were told that the boys in question had already left school for the day. But on the upside, they had narrowed down the victims to four boys in their class.

There was no track practice scheduled, but nevertheless, Kurihara and the other girls were holed up in the track clubroom. They must have arrived at the same conclusion the CRC once had: that staying together was the least risky option.

The sports clubrooms were located in their own cluster off to the side of the athletic field. Not only was it the middle of winter, but it was getting late in the evening, and no other sports teams were in sight.

“Hey, guys?” Kiriyama called through the door to Kurihara and the others.

These girls had been avoiding the members of the CRC for quite some time. At first they thought it was the effect of a phenomenon... and technically, they were right. But now they knew who was *actually* in the crosshairs.

The track team was avoiding other people—probably coerced into keeping quiet. They were suffering in secret in their own little isolated world. And they were experiencing body-swaps. Maybe they wouldn’t want to talk right now... but if so, that was okay. Sooner or later, the CRC was going to dig them out of despair.

“We understand that you’re going through a really tough time right now!” Kiriyama shouted. As the person who had a close relationship with multiple track members, she was in charge of outreach. “And maybe you’re not allowed to tell us about it, so we won’t ask you to! But if you did, we could try to help you find a solution! A safe solution!”

The door was open just a crack—wide enough to let them confirm that the track girls were, in fact, inside. They didn’t respond... but surely Kiriyama’s impassioned plea resonated with them regardless.

“But if the stress ever gets to be too much... if you ever need someone to talk to... just remember, the CRC is here for you.”

“You can talk to any of us! Me, Yui, Inaban... and if you’re cool with venting to a boy, there’s Yaegashi Taichi and Aoki Yoshifumi, too!” Nagase finished cheerfully.

This is our battle.

+++

Real talk, I’m at a total loss.

There I was, sitting in the living room. The TV was on, but I wasn’t really watching it—just kinda zoning out.

When everyone else was like “hell yeah, let’s do this!” I joined in, too—tried to keep up the morale. But I was obviously forcing it. We all were.

I mean... this Record Wipe is going to erase the past. For me, for the CRC, and even for some people outside the club. Like, *come on*. Sheer insanity. Without those “records,” I wouldn’t be me anymore! Put nicely, it’s like being reborn... but from a pessimistic perspective, it’s kinda like dying.

Does that mean my life is on the line here? Instantly my blood ran cold. Brrr.

Why do I have to feel this way? Isn’t it about time someone woke me from this nightmare?

I know we agreed to risk the danger to fight for our friends, but... honestly, man, I don’t know if we have room on our plate for this. I mean, we’re just ordinary teenagers! No special powers!

But when entire friendships are at stake, no way are we gonna shrug it off.

That said, I think we were at least partially bluffing as a defense mechanism... so if we lose morale and start to back down, it’s all over. The guilt of abandoning our friends will start to weigh on us, and we’ll slowly lose control of our own lives. So, for our own mental health, it’s better that we take a more aggressive stance, no matter the risk.

We want to fight both for ourselves *and* for our friends. Ideally I’d like to dedicate all our resources to both causes, but with enemies this powerful, 100 percent might not be enough.

We live each day the best we can—full-throttle, like it’s our last. I’m a “no

time like the present" kind of guy, but... is that mindset enough to get us through this? Is it *safe* to think like that?

"You look like you're thinking reeeal hard about something. Who're you and what've you done with my little brother?"

"Oh, hey, sis. Welcome home."

Then my sister walked in, wearing her business suit. (After she graduated college, she started working at a clothing company.) "Ugh, it's so freakin' cold in here! Yoshifumi, get me some hot *sake*, will you?" She plopped down and slid herself under the *kotatsu* table without even bothering to change out of her work clothes.

"Sure, at dinnertime."

"Aww, c'mon! Your big sister neeeeds to warm up after being out in the cold!"

She was still a pretty lady, even when she was giving me the puppy eyes. That said, this was probably the reason she couldn't keep a steady boyfriend.

"Sooo, what's on your mind? Let's figure it out so it doesn't make dinner all miserable."

"...Are you drunk?"

"I got roped into attending this stupid after-work function, and when I got there, it was even stupider than I imagined—so I downed a whole pitcher and left!"

"Damn, that's badass... but I mean, don't destroy your liver!"

"Oh, please. I'm barely into my twenties; I can handle it. So whazzup?"

Ugh, you're so annoying when you're drunk. "Well, there's a lotta crap happening in my life at the moment, and it kinda feels like I've got everybody's fates in my hands... so I'm just wonderin' if I should handle it the same way I always do," I explained vaguely, since I couldn't exactly go into detail.

"No."

"Sheesh, that was fast!"

“What do you even mean by ‘the same way you always do’?”

“Shouldn’t you ask that *before* you answer...? Well, whatever. Basically, I like to live in the moment, y’know?”

“Hmmm... In that case, yeah, definitely no.”

“Wh-Why not?”

“You’re not strong enough to be holding *anybody’s* fate in your hands. Go put it back where you found it.”

“How would *you* know how strong I am?”

“Because you’ve been leaving early and coming home late these days. That’s a recurring thing with you every now and then, isn’t it?”

Uh oh. Granted, my sister was never one to nag about that kinda stuff, but apparently she’d still been paying attention.

“If it was just you, then that’d be one thing. As long as it doesn’t kill you, it’s your business. But when it comes to being responsible for other people’s lives? You’re just not cut out for that.”

This kinda pissed me off. “What are you *talkin’* about? I’ve handled tons of crap like this!”

“Hah! That’s what you think. More like you floundered around and got lucky.”

“...Forget it. I’m done talkin’ t’you.”

“Ooooh, the little baby’s sulking!” she teased as she lowered herself to the floor and wriggled herself deeper under the *kotatsu* blanket.

Grrr. But before I could think of a good retort, she started up again.

“Don’t get me wrong—I like who you are as a person. You’re an optimist, and you always try to see the bigger picture.”

Was this her drunken side talking? I couldn’t see her face, so it was hard to tell if she was serious.

“But sometimes that just won’t cut it. And maybe that time is now.”

Her words cut into me like a knife.

“If that devil-may-care attitude of yours pushes you to bite off more than you can chew, well... I can’t have my baby brother causing trouble.” She forced herself back up into a sitting position. “If it comes to it, I’ll stop you myself.”

The look in her eyes was dead serious.

Chapter 6: Sheep and Shepherd

“...See you after school,” my older brother Yaegashi Taichi muttered, like an afterthought, as he walked out of the house.

“He seems a little depressed lately... and he keeps leaving the house so early,” my mom commented quietly. Personally, I was inclined to agree.

When Taichi came home yesterday, it seemed like something was really getting him down. I tried pressing him about it, but all he said was “I need to help them somehow.”

Naturally, I chastised him: “How about you worry about *yourself* for a change? Pull yourself together.”

I just wanted him to be the responsible big brother I knew he could be. But instead, he waved me off, claiming he was “busy” and that I ought to “go study.”

So of course, I went and tattled on him to my mom. Hmph! Served him right.

Sure, there have been other times in the past when he’s acted weird, and he always recovers from it eventually, but still! What the heck is going on?!

I know my brother’s a total softie who loves to help people. He’ll take on problems without anyone asking him to. And I love him for it, really. I just wish he’d slow down and pay more attention to his own needs. Unfortunately, he’s the type of dummy who’d rather sacrifice himself to get the job done—which is where I come in. If his condition gets any worse...

“I need to help him somehow. Good grief, my big brother is such a handful!”

“RINAAAA! Get your butt down here and eat your breakfast!”

“Eep! Yes, Mom!”

+++

The next morning, their first task of the day was to summon the first-years to the clubroom and pass on everything «Heartseed» and «The Second» had told them.

The CRC had already experienced both the body-swap and the Liberation.

The body-swap involved switching into another person's body at random. The swaps lasted anywhere from two minutes to two hours, and it wasn't always a perfect 1:1 trade; three-or four-person shuffles weren't unheard of.

The Liberation would randomly unleash one of the victim's desires—typically the one they felt most strongly at the time—causing it to bypass their normal rational decision-making process altogether. But because the Liberation's duration was comparatively short, the victim usually didn't have enough time to fully act on said desire. Lastly, as a side effect of the phenomenon, the victim usually heard a **[voice]** in their head discussing the desire.

Now that these same phenomena were affecting other students at Yamaboshi High School, they could only assume the rules were the same. In fact, they'd witnessed (and then misinterpreted) the telltale signs. But when «The Second» showed up, followed by «Heartseed», they learned that their hypothesis was completely off-base. They weren't the stars of the story this time around.

This time, the ringleaders were «The Third» and «The Fourth». If no action was taken, the phenomena would end in one to two weeks, the events pertaining to said phenomena would be erased from history, and the victims would be set free. However, if a major problem occurred, it could trigger an "emergency shutdown" that would erase *everything*, potentially entire friendships. This was something they needed to avoid at all costs.

Worse still, that wasn't «The Third»'s only objective—it was planning to erase all of the CRC's phenomena-related history, too. Taichi and the others were in danger of losing their memories, *permanently*.

Given all that they'd learned after school yesterday, it was no wonder they'd all staggered home like zombies. Frankly, it was a miracle that they'd managed to reach out to the track team at all.

"So there's currently a body-swap..."

"And... and a... 'Liberation'...?"

"Affecting a group of five girls on the track team..."

"And... and four boys in... our first-year class...?"

Chihiro and Enjouji stared back in shock. This reaction was perfectly understandable, of course.

“It’s okay if you don’t believe us,” said Kiriyama.

“N-No! That’s not it, Yui-senpai! I believe you! It’s just...”

“They’re going to... *erase history*...?”

“So... everyone will end up like Yui-senpai and Taichi-senpai did that one time...?”

Both of them looked terrified.

“Just checking, but have either of you experienced any memory flickers?” asked Nagase, her expression serious.

“N-No, I haven’t noticed any...”

“I don’t think so, no.”

Since the Record Wipe would allegedly affect *all* events related to the phenomena, the first-years would surely lose their memories of «Heartseed» and the Phantom Projection... but at least they were safe for the time being.

“So... what will happen to us after our memories—er, ‘records’?—are erased? Will I... go back to being useless...?”

“Words can’t describe just how much I changed after what happened... That’s a pretty freaky thought, actually.”

“Obviously we’re not just going to sit back and let them take these memories from us,” Nagase declared, hoping to reassure the trembling first-years.

“For real, though, it’s gonna be okay. I’m gonna fight like I’m the only one who can!” Aoki proclaimed, although it felt a little forced... Then again, he probably wasn’t the only one.

“I understand if you’re feeling anxious. These are scary times we’re living in,” Taichi chimed in, acting as the voice of reason in contrast with their optimism.

“Y-Yeah... I think... um... I...” Enjouji faltered, eyes watery, but pushed the words out regardless: “I promised myself I wouldn’t put my head in the sand anymore, but... I think it never really felt real to me until now, since... you

know... we weren’t there for it.”



She sounded almost disappointed in herself.

“I wouldn’t say you ‘had your head in the sand’ at all,” Chihiro reassured her. “We just didn’t take it as seriously as we should have—and that includes me. It took this crisis for everything to finally sink in... Man, I’m such an idiot.”

“No, you’re not. It happens to everyone,” Inaba muttered.

There was now an oppressive weight hanging over the clubroom, and Taichi knew he needed to shake it away.

“This is going to be tougher than anything we’ve ever faced... which is exactly why we need to work together, all seven of us.”

“And how many people do we need to protect, exactly...?” Enjouji asked faintly.

“Well, there’s seven of us... five girls on the track team, and four first-years... Altogether, that’s sixteen... although that number could increase...”

“Which means it’s important that we keep an eye out for any other afflicted students,” Inaba commanded.

As hard as it was, someone needed to say it—they needed the first-years’ help.

“All you two need to do is keep tabs on your fellow first-years and report back if you notice anything weird.”

As it stood, Enjouji and Chihiro were invaluable assets to the team.

“I feel like our first priority should be to brainstorm countermeasures for the Record Wipe, though,” Chihiro pointed out, and he wasn’t exactly wrong.

But the battle had started, and they were short on time.

“Was it a mistake to tell them everything? Surely they realize they’ll be affected,” Inaba muttered once the first-years had left the clubroom.

“No, we needed to tell them. We couldn’t have kept it hidden,” Taichi replied, and he was pretty confident the others felt similarly.

“We’ve got a lot we still need to take care of...” Kiriyama balled her hands into fists.

“So, how are we feeling? In general, I mean,” Inaba asked the room at large.

“Well... this is all pretty crazy,” Nagase answered, still wrestling with disbelief.

“Yeahhh... It was almost *easier* back when it was just ‘oh noes, the phenomenom!’ Y’know?” said Aoki.

“I agree. In a way, it’s kind of anticlimactic... which is partly why I feel so restless. I hate the thought of not being able to do anything,” Taichi admitted.

“Yeah... It’s not our phenomenon, so it’s not our place,” Inaba replied. She paused for a moment, then continued, “So... what are we doing about this Record Wipe?”

“Oh, um... I wrote a bunch of stuff down in my notebook. All kinds of stuff. Hoping some part of it will help me remember,” Kiriyama volunteered.

“Yeah, me too,” said Nagase. “Oh, and I made copies of all my photos. No idea if it’ll help, though.”

“Yeah, but... I’m not sure what else we can really do,” Aoki replied.

“I’m still trying to wrap my head around the concept of our history getting erased. It just doesn’t feel real,” Taichi muttered. It was the honest truth of how he felt.

“The problem is, we won’t know what works until it happens. Not that I *want* it to happen, mind you. It’s just... Ugh, I wish we could test our theories in advance,” Inaba grumbled, clutching at her hair. Knowing her, she was probably analyzing every possible countermeasure she could think of.

“If anything, I feel bad for the current victims, since they don’t even know their memories are in danger at all,” said Nagase.

She had a point, of course. «The Third» almost certainly hadn’t given its current subjects that much information.

“I don’t know what, if anything, we can do for them... but if we’re the only ones who know, then we’re the only ones who can take action,” Taichi declared. More than ever, it was starting to feel like their sworn mission.

They had to do it—for the sake of those who did not yet know true fear, as they did.

Not for themselves. For their friends.

Right?

■□■□■

Evidently the track girls had showed up early that morning, too, because the CRC bumped into them on the way to class.

“Hey, ladies! Have you thought about what I said yesterday?” Kiriyama called, her tone gentle.

The girls turned, spotted the CRC, and flinched away. Likewise, the CRC stopped short. Both groups were now frozen in place.

“Guys, look,” Nagase began, choosing her words carefully. “If you could at least acknowledge that we’re on your side...”

“Just *stop!*” one of the girls shrieked. “Don’t talk to us! Leave us alone!”

“C-C’mon, don’t be like that. We’re not gonna hurt ya,” Aoki stammered, visibly flustered.

“But... but he—!”

Thinking back, Kurihara had mentioned a “he,” too. Back then, they should have realized what she meant—that they’d met a «Heartseed», be it the «The Second», «Third», «Fourth», or whoever else.

“Don’t! You know we can’t talk about it!”

“Well, they keep pestering us about it!”

The girls began to bicker among each other.

“Is something going on? Did some weirdo try to talk to you or something?” Inaba asked.

Instantly, the air between the two groups froze over like the North Pole. It wasn’t clear whether Inaba had intended for this to happen, but either way, it confirmed their suspicions in one fell swoop.

Supposedly it was safe to talk about the phenomena... to an extent, anyway. They didn’t know where the line would be drawn, but if they wanted to offer even the most basic tips, they’d at least have to try.

“...Would you be willing to talk to us about it?”

“Don’t be ridiculous! We *can’t!*”

Unsurprisingly, they shot Taichi down at the speed of light... but the CRC wasn’t ready to give up. Next, it was Nagase’s turn.

“We actually know a lot more than you think we do.”

“No, you don’t. You’re outsiders.”

In a blink, they had thrown up a wall between themselves and the CRC, forbidding entry.

“Yukina... Misaki-chan...!” Kiriyama whimpered, invoking the names of her two close friends who, thus far, had yet to say a word.

“Yui...”

“Yui-chan...”

They both grimaced in response— “Aah!”

“Gah!”

“Wha...?”

Just then, three of the girls (Oosawa included) reacted aloud.

“What happened?!” Kurihara shouted.

“Oh... We switched...”

“Again?!”

“Hold on—who’s who? I’m—”

Unfortunately, the march of time was merciless; that was when the bell rang.

“Oh... Gotta get to class...”

And so the track team wandered away in a daze, with the CRC left standing there, unable to stop them.

The next hour was spent pretending to listen to their teacher, and after that, it was break time. Kurihara had arrived a bit late for first period; once the bell rang at the end of class, she jumped to her feet and made a beeline for the

restroom.

“Oh, Yukina... I just want to help you,” Kiriyama whimpered in a watery voice as she watched her best friend walk out of the classroom.

“The restroom’s probably the safest place for them,” Taichi commented. He wasn’t about to try to stop them, of course.

Instead, the three of them—Taichi, Kiriyama, and Nagase—decided to check on the other four members of the track group. During each break period between classes, they walked down the hall and peeked in on the other second-year classrooms.

In the first room they visited, one of the track girls was lying facedown on her desk. In the next room, another girl was in the exact same position, while a third was conspicuously absent. At least, it felt conspicuous to them—or was that only because they were paying extra attention?

In a way, they were doing exactly what the «Heartseeds» hated most—catching on, asking questions, putting two and two together—and Taichi was worried their actions could trigger an emergency shutdown.

As he watched the track girls, however, another thought occurred to him: “Man... It’s crazy to think we survived this same nightmare for a full month.”

“Eventually you *do* get used to it, y’know,” Nagase replied.

“Or are we just, like, really weird?” Kiriyama asked.

“Maybe that’s why *you-know-who* kept saying we were so interesting... Is that why we went through so many...?” Taichi mused.

Lastly, they finished their rounds by paying a visit to Oosawa Misaki’s class. Unlike the rest of her group, she was talking to her friends like nothing was wrong. Hell, she was even smiling.

The three members of the CRC stood in a circle outside the room, pretending to “chat” as they spied on her.

“Damn, Misaki-chan’s totally owning it. I mean, she *is* affected, right?” Nagase whispered.

“Misaki-chan’s the type who can do anything she puts her mind to. She’s, like,

really level-headed," Kiriyama explained proudly.

"Yeah, she seems like she has the most composure out of all of them. Maybe she's the 'pillar of support' for her group. You know, the way Inaba is for us," Taichi remarked.

When the CRC experienced their first phenomenon, it was Inaba who remained calm and analyzed the data available to them. In a way, that was what kept them all sane. Perhaps it was Oosawa, then, who was keeping this group together at school.

"Hang in there, track team," Kiriyama whispered, clasping her hands at chest level as if in prayer.

"At this point, I guess all we can really do is pray, or... Wait a minute." Nagase stopped short.

Taichi followed her gaze back to Oosawa. Where only moments ago she was smiling, now her expression was blank.

Uh-oh.

Sure enough, a split-second later, Oosawa bolted for the door. Stumbling out into the hallway, she spotted the CRC and staggered backwards with a shriek. Then she turned 180 degrees and ran off in the opposite direction.

"Wait! Misaki-chan—or whoever you are! Hey!" Kiriyama started after her, but soon slowed to a stop.

Meanwhile, everyone in the classroom was staring after [Oosawa] with dubious looks on their faces.

The body-swap must have triggered... but there was nothing any of them could do about it.

"I hope they're okay," Nagase murmured, clutching her arm.

Indeed, all they could do was hope. The supernatural circumstances weren't harming them directly; it was well and truly none of their business. That much was painfully obvious.

Sitting on the sidelines wouldn't resolve the problem, and yet they couldn't keep pressing the track team to let them help. They needed to do something,

but until they knew exactly what was going on, they couldn't. They wanted to help save the day, but in the end, they were just supporting characters.

And if their desire to help never resulted in taking action, then it was functionally the same as not wanting to help at all.

■□■□■

At lunch, the entire CRC (first-years included) met up in the clubroom.

"Since the phenomena don't affect us, we aren't obligated to carry on with our normal lives... We could skip class if we needed to," Inaba mused lethargically.

"Okay, but only in an emergency," Taichi replied.

Inaba blinked in surprise. "I was kind of expecting *you* of all people to push back against this idea."

Then they took turns reporting their morning activities. Personally, Taichi was most concerned about the first-years facing the Liberation.

"From what I've heard, there's definitely four guys in the Liberation group," Chihiro explained.

Fortunately(?), those four first-years were classmates with Chihiro and Enjouji. At the very least, it would make the outreach process a little easier.

"Th-They all made comments like 'I heard a **[voice]**...' and 'My body moved on autopilot' and 'Deep down, part of me really did want to' and stuff like that," Enjouji added.

Though this information was all secondhand, at this point it was safe to say that the first-years' phenomenon was indeed the Liberation.

"They're all really freaked out, a-and they've already tried to tell people about it, but we did what you said and warned them to keep quiet. Oh, and they said it all started two days ago."

Apparently the «Heartseeds» had yet to approach them about it.

"Seems like it's only happened a couple times thus far."

"So they're in the early stages... Well, we can't afford to wait around until

they start avoiding us, so let's give them as much advice as we can, ASAP. I'll write up everything you need to tell them and give it to you later."

"Sure thing."

"Y-You got it, Inaba-senpai!"

"Feels like we're ahead of the game for once," Nagase commented.

"Hopefully we can help them this time," Kiriyama agreed, stroking her chin pensively.

"We're better off letting Chihiro and Shino handle it," Inaba interjected. "They're not gonna open up to a bunch of older students they've never met. That said, we *should* probably try to meet them at some point."

"Alrighty then, we're counting on you two! Right, Inabacchan?" Aoki exclaimed, and the first-years smiled bashfully.

As the conversation sailed along... Taichi started to feel a little uncomfortable about where it was headed. Was it really safe to entrust this mission to Chihiro and Enjouji? After all, the Liberation was arguably the most dangerous phenomenon of all—not just for its victims, but for people in their proximity, too.

Still, they couldn't expect the first-years to read their minds. *Someone* had to reach out to them. Was their "outsider" status slowly making him paranoid?

Either way, their time was limited—and with so many high-priority items on the list, it felt like their relative importance was getting lost in the shuffle. Lunch was already nearly over... and they had yet to speak at length about their countermeasures for the Record Wipe.

■□■□■

Surprisingly enough, things took a more favorable turn after school.

"So, uh..."

Shortly after the final bell, Kiriyama received an email from Kurihara, requesting for their two groups to meet. Naturally, the CRC had dropped everything to accommodate this request... and now the five members of the track team were standing in the CRC clubroom.

Since they knew the room was going to be cramped (not to mention, the presence of unfamiliar younger students would possibly make their guests uncomfortable), they had asked Chihiro and Enjouji to step out for a while.

“Umm...” Kurihara Yukina faltered. Apparently her group had appointed her as their representative. Then the girls began to whisper among themselves.

“Maybe we shouldn’t do this.”

“It’s so risky...”

“But...”

“Want me to say it?” Oosawa Misaki asked Kurihara.

“N-No, that’s okay,” she replied, shaking her head. Then she took a deep breath... exhaled slowly... and blurted out, “O-Okay, um, we’ve decided to trust you! So please just hear us out!”

Then she bowed her head as low as it would go.

The five members of the track team sat down opposite the five members of the CRC. Unfortunately they were short on chairs, so Taichi and Aoki opted to stand in the back instead.

Just as they’d suspected, Kurihara and the others had come into contact with an entity they presumed to be «The Third».

—The five of you... will switch bodies at random intervals...

—There are only two rules... Carry on with your daily lives... and do not let others find out...

—As long as you keep living your life as normal... it will all end eventually... or rather, that is to say, fairly soon...

—Do not break the rules... or else... Good luck...

As the girls relayed what it had told them, Taichi’s brain automatically “translated” it into its eerie manner of speech.

“The guy made it sound like something bad would happen if anyone found out, so... we all decided to keep our distance from you,” said Kurihara.

“He even named your club specifically! He said you went through something

similar in the past, so you know all about it," said another girl.

"It went out of its way to point us out? How flattering," Inaba snarked. It certainly explained why they kept the CRC in particular at arm's length.

"But we just can't do this alone anymore. We need help... even if we're not all in agreement on that subject," said Oosawa. As she spoke, she glanced over at the girl wearing her hair in a ponytail, currently staring at the floor with a grimace on her face. That said, Oosawa spoke more clearly and firmly than the rest of her group; evidently she had still managed to keep herself together.

Eyeing the ponytail girl, Inaba turned back to the others. "I can understand why you wouldn't want to break their rules. However... we've already confirmed for ourselves that some minor assistance is well within bounds."

"You 'confirmed' it?! How?!" the ponytail girl demanded, leaping to her feet.

"...We have an informant. A different entity, not the one you spoke with."

And so Inaba spoke (somewhat vaguely) of what «Heartseed» had told them, with Taichi and the others occasionally chiming in.

"That description completely matches the one we met..."

"Either they witnessed the moment we met him, or... they met him themselves..."

As a result, the track girls were soon convinced that the CRC had, in fact, experienced their phenomenon in the past.

"So you have prior experience, then... and you all made it out okay, right? That's kind of a relief. Now it feels like maybe we'll be okay, too," Oosawa sighed. Hope had returned to her eyes.

"For real, though, this crap is super bad for my mental health. Especially since we don't know when it'll end," Kurihara added. "I know we've been kind of bitchy to you guys, and it might be too late to ask this, but... if you have any advice, I'm all ears."

They'd attempted to handle it on their own, but now they were at their limits. Apparently they'd been debating whether to take the CRC up on their offer for quite a while.

“Just because *you’re* tired, you think we can break the rules and... and tell them everything?!”

“C-Calm down, Akemi!” Kurihara stammered back. “Okay, let me ask this: Did you guys ever let it slip to someone?”

“Actually... this is our first time discussing it with someone outside our club,” Inaba admitted.

“Don’t you think maybe the only reason *you* made it out unscathed is because you didn’t blab?” Akemi, the ponytail girl, hissed back.

“Akemi, why are you so obsessed with the stupid rules?! Why should we listen to that creep, anyway?!”

“What if he punishes us with this crap for the rest of our lives?!”

“We can’t just let him get away with this!”

“Guys! Relax!” Nagase called, stepping in just as the argument began to flare up. Somehow she managed to have perfect timing in a situation where no one else could get a word in edgewise.

“All this infighting? It’s *exactly what they want*. Never forget, you all share a common enemy: the asshole who cursed you with the body-swap. You’ll be stronger as a team.”

She had such a strong point that the argument promptly petered out.

From there, the conversation progressed smoothly. Taichi and the others explained to the track team about the importance of working together and making an effort to ignore the phenomenon. As far as the body-swap specifically, their best advice was to keep in contact with each other as much as possible, to avoid the public eye, to remain calm, and—in situations where they were forced to interact with other people—to try to “act” like that person.

Some of the girls still seemed to be in denial, but they all listened dutifully and agreed to follow the CRC’s advice.

“Lastly... It’s important to tell yourself that this is ‘no big deal.’ It helps a lot,” Inaba recommended.

The more they talked, the more questions the track team had: *What exactly is*

going on? How is this happening to us? Unfortunately, the CRC's only answer was "We don't have the specifics."

"Okay... Now that I know there's an end in sight, I think I can stick it out."

"All we have to do is... act like normal, right? That's all we have to do..."

"We've got this... It's going to be okay..."

As the girls murmured to themselves, Oosawa turned back to the CRC. "Hey, um... Thanks for helping us, guys... and sorry for dragging you into it."

Despite everything that was going on, she still had room on her plate to be concerned for them. While Taichi personally appreciated the gesture, he was mildly concerned she was going to overload herself and have a breakdown.

"You didn't drag us into it, Misaki-chan. We—"

"Yui."

Kiriyama was probably about to tell her that it was the CRC's fault the «Heartseeds» were toying with them, but Inaba stopped her. They weren't *technically* lying—only by omission—but it was still painful to endure.

"I can do this... I can do this..." Kurihara muttered under her breath, as if trying to convince herself.

+++

It was a weekday, but my mom came home early for some reason. Luckily, I didn't have any plans with my friends that day, so the two of us decided to go grocery shopping together. Then, when we came home, I'd help her make dinner. *That's what Taichi gets for calling me lazy! I'll show him!*

Since we were going into town anyway, we decided to take the train to one of the fancy grocery stores. It was nice to have a little family outing for a change; my mom was the "young at heart" type, so spending time with her was always fun.

"Rina, aren't you cold?"

"Nah, I'm okay."

After we got off the train, we headed down the street, side by side. There was

no wind, and we weren't going that far... Honestly, I probably would have been fine if I hadn't worn a scarf, either.

Just then, I heard an "Oh!" up ahead. Curious, I looked up... and spotted a woman wearing a white knee-length down jacket with a white scarf. Heck, even her skin was really pale. But she wasn't completely white from head to toe; she had some jeans on, too. Still, she looked so angelic and beautiful... If I had to guess, she was probably in her thirties, but if she told me she was younger, I'd probably believe her.

I scrutinized her face. Why did she remind me of someone...?

"...*Oh!* Are you Nagase-san's mother?! You are, aren't you?!" my mom exclaimed, as if she'd only just remembered. *Mom, that's rude!*

Still, at the word "mother," it all clicked. Apparently this lady was the mother of one of Taichi's clubmates.

"Yes, that's me. I appreciate your son always treating my Iori with kindness," the woman replied politely, with a bow.

"Likewise! You're... Reika-san, was it? Your daughter is a saint for putting up with my idiot son."

Then my mom bowed back, kind of as an afterthought. *Ugh, kill me now.*

"Oh, and this is my daughter, Rina. She's in sixth grade right now, but she'll be starting middle school soon!"

"Nice to meet you! I'm Yaegashi Rina." Then I turned to my mom. "So how do you know Iori-san's mom?"

"We met back during Taichi's culture festival, remember? Oh, wait... That's right, you weren't there for that."

I missed it? Dang!

"It was so nice meeting you. You know, Iori talks about her club all the time..."

From there they launched into the stereotypical parent conversation: taking turns talking about their kids. Reika-san's speech was soft and slow, which in comparison made my mom look like she was rambling at full speed. That said, they seemed to go together nicely, and the conversation they had was

entertaining.

Since I had nothing to add, I just stood there quietly... Upon further inspection, I realized Reika-san's down coat was a cheap knockoff from an emporium. From the way she wore it, you'd think it was a designer brand... *I need to take style notes!*

"Actually... before I let you go, I have a question," said Reika-san. Evidently the conversation was nearing its end. "Lately Iori seems... conflicted about something. She gets this way every now and then, but it always seems to work out in the end, so I probably shouldn't be worried. Still..."

This struck a chord with me. "That sounds like my brother," I replied.

"Yaegashi-kun's the same way?"

She fixed her gaze on me, and I flinched. "Y-Yeah. Every now and then he'll get all weird and spacey, like he's worried about something."

"During those times, does he leave the house to go to 'club activities' a lot?"

"Yes! Exactly!" *Is it some kind of code?*

"Wait, what? I'm not sure I'm following..."

"Mom, you really need to start paying more attention to Taichi!"

"I mean, sure, he gets a little weird sometimes, but what teenager doesn't?"

"You shrug these things off way too easily! Anyway, Reika-san, has Iori-san talked to you about it at all?"

"Supposedly they get dragged into some sort of mess fairly frequently, and now it's happened again."

"I heard my brother saying 'I need to help them somehow.' Maybe we should compare notes?!"

"Rina! Loop me in! I'm the adult here!"

+++

The weekend rolled around... but nevertheless, the CRC met up in the clubroom. After all, just because school wasn't in session, it didn't mean the phenomena took a day off.

“For the body-swap, it’s easiest if the whole group holes up in the same room together. But for the Liberation... I guess they could hide during breaks...?” Inaba mused.

“The thing is, it still hasn’t hit them yet, since it’s only happened a handful of times,” Chihiro explained.

“Yeah... We could try to tell them it’s a phenomenon, but they probably won’t believe us,” Taichi muttered.

“They’re probably still hanging out with their friends like nothing is wrong,” Inaba sighed. “Meh... I guess they’re fine for now.”

“I’ve been checking in with them over email, you know, stuff like ‘What are you up to?’ So far two people wrote back ‘Eating.’ What about you?” Chihiro asked Enjouji.

“Oh, yes... I’ve gotten some replies, too. Normal stuff like ‘Are you doing anything later?’ So yeah, I don’t see any reason for concern...”

“You sure about that? Because I’d be concerned if I were you.”

“Huh? H-How come?!”

Is it just me, or does Chihiro look a little displeased?

“Alright then, let’s set them on the backburner for now and go back to the track team,” said Inaba.

The CRC planned to use this weekend to have a long talk with the track girls. Five days had passed since the start of their body-swap, and at this point, they had probably built up a ton of stress. Thus, the plan was to try to make things a tiny bit easier for them.

“I’ve got it all planned out,” Kiriyama declared proudly.

Meanwhile, Nagase stared at Taichi and Aoki in turn. “I’m trying to figure out if we should take the boys with us.”

“You never know when ya might need us!” Aoki replied playfully.

“Don’t forget, we still need to figure something out for the Record Wipe,” Taichi murmured quietly.

So far they'd been hiding photos and notes in all sorts of places, but none of them had come up with a bulletproof plan.

The track girls had gathered into two groups based on the proximity of their houses. Likewise, the CRC split into two groups to go and see them: Taichi and Nagase in one group, Kiriyama, Aoki, and Inaba in the other. Their tentative plan was to visit each track group in rotation; after all, it was possible some of them might feel more comfortable talking to certain CRC members.

And so Taichi and Nagase took the train to meet up with Kurihara and Akemi. As they headed out of the station on foot, they chatted idly.

"I know we're supposed to be meeting up with Yukina-chan and Akemi-chan, but it's possible that by the time we get there, we'll be talking to someone else entirely. Kinda silly, isn't it?"

"Yeah... It's crazy."

That possibility, in turn, had the potential to throw a wrench into their entire plan.

"Worst case scenario, there's always tomorrow... But y'know, when I was leaving the house this morning, my mom kept grilling me. 'Where are you going? What will you be doing?' It was so annoying."

"Come to think of it, my little sister was being really nosy, too."

Worse still, when he answered "I'm going to school for club activities," she stared at him goggle-eyed. It was kind of freaky.

"Family, am I right?" Nagase laughed.

"Not like we can ask them to stop asking questions," Taichi snarked.

"The struggle is real... So anyways, going back to what you were talking about earlier," Nagase continued, "it's kind of a nightmare, having our memories in danger, huh?"

"I think 'nightmare' is an understatement."

"Yeah, like... I think this sets a new all-time record for the biggest possible threat to our lives. We really ought to be thinking about this a lot more than we have been..."

Not only would they lose their memories of past events, but the very events themselves would be erased from the annals of history. Eighteen months' worth of friendship was on death row; there was no telling what sort of effect its absence would have on them. And if they changed as a result, what sort of ripple effect would they cause in turn?

Soon, Nagase spotted two figures standing around up ahead. "Oh, good, they're already here."

And so the two of them jogged over to the track girls. Their conversation would have to wait... Right now, they needed to focus on the problem at hand.

"Glad you could make it!" Kurihara greeted them brightly.

As for the other girl, Akemi, she seemed fearful and reluctant. Still, it meant a lot that she was willing to meet with them at all.

Together, the group of four headed into a karaoke parlor. After all, no parent would let a random teenage boy into their daughter's room without supervision, so in terms of relative privacy, there was no better place than a karaoke box.

They ordered enough drinks for everyone, then settled into the cramped room. No one reached for the microphones. Instead, they started things off with some small talk.

"This is my first time visiting this part of town!" Nagase remarked.

"I used to come here every now and then for baseball games back in middle school," Taichi replied.

From there, Kurihara and Akemi discussed their experiences living here. No one attempted to dive into the main topic.

Then, when the drinks arrived, the conversation petered out. It was time to begin. But since he didn't know which way was the "right" way to lead in, Taichi defaulted to a lazy question: "So... how's it going?"

"You guys were right—if you tell yourself it's no big deal, it really does start to feel like that! Whenever a swap happens, all we have to do is sit there and stay quiet. Not that we weren't already doing that, obviously, but... it's just really

reassuring to have someone telling us we're doing the right thing, you know?" Kurihara explained cheerfully, though her voice was hoarse for some reason.

"Yeah, for sure. It's *so* annoying to switch bodies when you're in the middle of studying, am I right? One minute you're looking at math, and the next it's English!" Nagase laughed.

Times like these, Taichi was always amazed at Nagase's ability to keep the mood light. Without her, this would have gone a lot worse.

"God, what if we switched *during* the test? It'd be one thing if we were both good at each other's subject, but if we ended up with our worst subject... Ugh, I don't even want to think about it..."

"Yeahhhh, we had to worry about that, too."

"Hey, Akemi—"

"If you actually take it seriously," Akemi interrupted, ignoring Kurihara, "this situation we're in is downright *bone-chilling*. What if we get stuck in each other's bodies forever?"

"Oh, that won't happen. We reverted back just fine," said Taichi.

"So what? That doesn't mean it won't happen to us!"

"Akemi-chan—" Nagase began, but Akemi ignored her.

"This shouldn't even be happening! Think of all the problems it causes! No hanging out with friends or boyfriends, since they might notice a switch..."

"And when we're home, we have to hide out in our bedrooms, but since we could switch at any time, we can't do anything remotely private!" Kurihara chimed in.

"And there's no way to gloss over a switch mid-conversation, so the other person always looks at you funny!"

"And since there's that tiny gap where you lose control of your body, you can't even hold a kitchen knife!"

The dam had burst, and complaints rushed out one after another.

"The other day, I switched with Yukina right when she was eating some super-

spicy kimchi stew, and I started choking! I can't *stand* spicy food!"

"You think *you* had it bad? My whole family was staring at me like I grew a second head! And for the record, that was *not* 'super-spicy'—you're just a baby!"

"Ooooh, now I wanna test this theory. Wanna order the spicy pizza off the menu and have a taste test?!"

"Iori, no! *I'm* not even that big of a spicy food fan, okay?!"

This griping party was turning out to be a lot more fun than Taichi was expecting. Maybe this was actually proving to be good stress relief.

"Man... Feels like it's been forever since I laughed this hard. I just... haven't had much to laugh about lately, you know?" Kurihara muttered quietly.

"We're just happy to help in any way we can," Taichi replied.

"The good news is, for right now, we have nothing to worry about," Kurihara continued. "Even if we switch, we'll be fine. And unlike at our houses, we don't have to worry about anyone seeing anything too personal!"

"It *is* a little easier to deal with when we're in a safe place," Akemi conceded, and her expression softened slightly. "I didn't realize you had anything to hide from us, Yukina."

"I don't! I mean, not really. But I'd be embarrassed if you saw, like... my old chat logs with my ex or something, you know?"

"Okay, that's fair. I definitely—"

Suddenly, for a split-second, the two girls froze in place.

"...Whoa! There's another me?! Wait, no, I must've switched with Akemi. Okay, guys, just FYI, this is Kurihara Yukina speaking!" said [Akemi] (Kurihara).

"Ohhh, I get it. So that means Akemi-chan got swapped into... [Yukina-chan's body]... right...?"

Nagase's voice faltered; [Kurihara's body] had started to tremble so violently, her teeth were chattering.

"Wh-What's wrong? Wait... sorry, who are you?" Taichi asked.

But [Kurihara] wasn't listening.

"Hold on a minute... I was just... putting it away... I knew I was going to have visitors, so... I wanted to be safe and... It was only going to take a minute... Just a minute... It was supposed to be fine... I told myself nothing would happen... No one was... supposed to see that...!"

They would later learn that the person in [Kurihara's body] was actually Oosawa Misaki.

+++

"Please, please, please, please," I whispered as I held my phone to my ear. It rang... and rang... and rang... until at last, voicemail picked up.

Normally I would never leave a voicemail 'cause they're like, super cringey, but this was an emergency.

"Misaki-chan! What happened?! If something happened to you, you can tell me! I'll always be on your side, I promise!" I shouted from the bottom of my heart, then hit the End Call button.

On Saturday, Misaki accidentally revealed something private to someone else, and it really freaked her out. I was on my way to her house at the time, so I wasn't sure what to do, but then Iori and Taichi got in touch to tell me that [Yukina] (Misaki) wanted us to stay away. At that point, all I could do was wait.

Then, an hour or so later, everyone switched back, and the three of us (Inaba, Aoki, and I) met with Misaki. She seemed kind of flustered at first, but as time passed, she calmed back down. Likewise, I started off pretty worried, but eventually I decided she was going to be fine.

Earlier this afternoon, however, she stopped replying to our calls and emails. At first I figured she was probably just busy, but it's been hours since then, and I still can't get through. No one can.

"What do I do, what do I do...?"

What happened to her? Should I run straight over to her house? What do I do?

Normally I wouldn't worry about it too much, but considering everything that's going on, I couldn't help but think that maybe something bad happened.

Like, *really* bad.

Then I heard my little sister Anzu calling for me downstairs: “Yui! Dinnertime!”

No matter how crazy our lives get, the rest of the world keeps on turning.

For now, I’d better eat dinner. Can’t fight on an empty stomach, after all.

“What’s gotten into you today?”

I snapped back to reality to find Anzu staring at me.

“Where’s your appetite? Normally you’d be asking for seconds right about now!”

My rice was starting to go cold, and I’d barely touched my ginger pork.

“Are you sick? If so, then you need to get to bed. These days you’ve been staying out late doing who knows what,” my mother chimed in, concerned.

“No, Mom, I’m not sick. I’m fine.”

Great, now I made things awkward. It didn’t help that my dad wasn’t home to eat with us—he was still at work. Like me, he came home later than normal these days.

“You don’t *look* fine, sis. Are you sure you’re okay?”

Whenever there was an active phenomenon, it was always super stressful for me. And since I’m not a good actress, it would always be really obvious to everyone around me. As a result, my family’s gotten super worried about me multiple times over the past year and a half.

But this time, the “active phenomenon” was affecting other people. *Are they handling it okay?*

“Listen... If something’s going on, I want you to be honest with me,” my mom insisted.

I didn’t want them to panic over me any more than they already had, so I decided to talk about it... just a little. Maybe they could point me in the right direction.

“Well... Basically, a lot of crazy stuff has happened to us over the past year-

ish, but now it's happening to our friends," I explained, choosing my words carefully. "So obviously I want to help them with it, but... right now, I kinda have a lot on my own plate already."

Understatement of the year. After all, I might forget all about my besties in the—like—or—or—or— Wait, what? No! The CRC! Aoki and Iori and Inaba and Taichi! Plus Chihiro and Shino! See? I remember them! I'd never... I could never... forget them... right...?

Why do my memories keep flickering out? Are they really going to disappear?

Deep down, part of me was really hoping this was just another phenomenon. Another empty threat from «Heartseed», and then in the end everything would go back to normal. But... what if we can't run from it this time? What if those memories never come back?

No! I don't want that! Please!

"Nngh..."

I was starting to feel sick. So sick, in fact, I fell out of my chair.

"Yui?!" my mother and sister shouted in unison.

I clapped a hand over my mouth as my eyes blurred with tears. Nothing to worry about, though. Just felt sick for a moment.

"M-Maybe we should get you to the hospital," my mother stammered.

"I... I'm fine, Mom... I'm fine..."

"What's wrong, sis?! Constipation? Headache? Morning sickness? What medicine do you need?!"

"...Anzu, do you, like, even know what 'morning sickness' means?"

Over and over, I insisted to them that I was fine, until at last they calmed down and let me return to my seat at the dinner table. It was my fault for freaking them out, obviously, but still... their concern was exhausting.

"Yui, I'm only going to say this once," my mom began, staring me hard in the face. "You're my daughter, and I love you. I don't want you to get hurt."

"I know..."

Normally she wasn't this direct, so it was kind of awkward.

"Frankly, I don't care what happens to other people, as long as it means you're safe."

"What?"

I knew she was probably just being honest with me—no, yeah, definitely—but it felt like the kind of thing she maaaaybe wasn't supposed to admit out loud to her kid. And yet she said it anyway.

"Uhhh..." Still holding a bite of food in her chopsticks, Anzu stared between me and Mom.

"So I don't want you to do anything reckless, Yui. I don't want you to put yourself in danger."

"I know, okay? You don't have to tell me." *Because it'll only make things harder for me later.*

"Yes, I do. Otherwise you won't understand."

Of course I understand. Like, I totally get where you're coming from on this. But you're my mom, and I can't have you crucifying me with laser precision. You're way too good at it.

"But... but I..."

What I wanted *her* to understand was that this wasn't just about me. This was about protecting other people. And the more terrified I became of losing the things I cared about, the more I wanted to make sure it didn't happen to my friends. Those two desires were directly connected.

"No buts," she replied.

She was normally such a pushover; why was she being so hard on me today? Why now, of all times, when I had important things to do?

"Yui, it's very virtuous of you to want to help other people," she continued, and I could hear the tough love on her tongue. "But you have to put yourself first."

Unfortunately, I just couldn't agree to that.

Chapter 7: Left Behind

“Oh, that reminds me, Taichi. I bumped into Nagase-san’s mother the other day,” Mrs. Yaegashi announced out of nowhere that morning.

Somehow, Taichi quickly had a very bad feeling about this. “Sorry, Mom, but I gotta get to school early today. No time for breakfast!”

This wasn’t a lie—he genuinely was short on time—but he also wanted the chance to speak to Nagase about it first.

“Hold it, mister. You ought to at least eat something first.”

“Taichi! What the heck are these ‘club activities’ you’re doing?!”

But he ignored both his mother *and* his indignant little sister...

“Wh-... Hey! Don’t just ignore me! HEY!”

...and walked out the door.

He knew he’d have to suffer the consequences when he came home, but right now he had bigger fish to fry. Frustrating as it was to slowly run out of places to relax, he didn’t really have a choice at the moment. He had to hurry.

On the train, his impatience spiked with each stop. He had received a terrifying email that morning, and he needed to find out what was going on, ASAP.

Arriving at the second floor of the school building—the section with all the second-year classrooms—he found Nagase, Kiriyama, and Kurihara.

“What’s the situation? Where’s Oosawa and the rest of the track team?”

“They’re, uh... not here yet,” Nagase replied, her voice tinged with panic.

“Hey, Taichi? Everything’s going to be okay, right? Misaki-chan’s going to be okay? I mean... this can’t be happening, right?” Kiriyama wheezed, trembling.

Meanwhile, Kurihara simply stared out the window—perfectly still, like she was balancing a cup of water on her head.

Then Inaba and Aoki arrived, and they all moved to one corner of the hallway.

That morning, they had received a chilling message from the track team...

Then, finally, Oosawa Misaki arrived at school—tall, slender, with a pixie cut. She walked down the hall, greeting her friends with a wave.

“Oh, hey, Yui-chan... and Iori-chan... Oh, I see the whole CRC’s here.” She squinted dubiously for a moment, then quickly shrugged it off. “Morning!”

Her smile was radiant, as though all her worldly troubles were gone.

“Misaki!”

Kurihara Yukina called out to her close friend on the track team.

“Oh, good morning, Kurihara-san.”

But though Oosawa used to call her Yukina, today she referred to her by last name only. As though the world itself had been altered retroactively.

“No... No, it can’t be... No, no, no, NO!” Crying, Kurihara staggered toward Oosawa. “Misaki, please! Call me Yukina, like you always do! Don’t talk to me like we’re first-years all over again!”

“Wh-Whoa there... Where’s all this coming from?” Oosawa stammered in alarm. “Alright, I promise, I’ll call you Yukina from now on. Heehee... Feels weird, but in a good way.”

She smiled bashfully, as if it was her first time saying the name aloud.

But that bright sparkle, in turn, cast a dark shadow of despair.

Oosawa Misaki had lost all memory of the phenomenon, as well as the memory of her friendships with the four other members of her group. That wasn’t to say she had forgotten every last detail about them; she still recognized them as fellow Yamaboshi students as well as fellow track team members. But she had no recollection of the time she’d spent with them.

Other people could tell that something was weird between her and the rest of them, but it wasn’t drastic enough to warrant mentioning. In other words, it was exactly like the time when Taichi and Kiriyama temporarily lost their club memories as a result of the Phantom Projection.

On Saturday, someone had discovered Oosawa’s secret. At first she had a

breakdown, but slowly she regained her composure, and then everything was fine...

But apparently something else had happened since then.

As for the other four track members, well... after they learned of Oosawa's current condition, they lost the will to attend class like nothing was wrong.

"I can't believe this... This can't be happening!"

"She lost her memories?!"

"This has something to do with the body-swap... right...?"

"Misaki... *Misaki*...!"

"Girls, please, calm down," Kiriyama called weakly.

"*Calm down?!* Nice joke, airhead!"

"Guys, I get it, I promise. Just... come with us," said Nagase, and with that, she led them to the safest part of campus: the CRC clubroom.

They had swiftly given up on their daily duty of attending class. Instead, while school was in session, Kiriyama and Nagase focused on helping the track girls stay calm.

At one point, Taichi worked up the courage to speak to Kurihara.

"What happened with her, anyway? I'm guessing you must know at least part of the story, right?"

"Misaki was really panicking on Saturday. Then Sunday afternoon, we lost contact with her. We were all terrified that something bad had happened... but late that same night, she finally answered her phone. The thing is... she was really cheerful all of a sudden, you know?" Kurihara smiled as tears streamed down her face. "And she acted like it was so weird of me to call her on the phone... and... she called me *Kurihara-san*..."

What could have happened in the span of a few hours to make Oosawa lose her memories?

"What was she panicking about?"

"...I'm sorry."

Kurihara seemed to have an idea of the answer, but her lips were sealed.

Had they gotten careless? Arguably, yes. Because *they* turned out okay, and because the track group seemed to be fine from an outside perspective, the CRC had convinced themselves there was nothing to worry about.

What an idiotic assumption.

Hadn't «Heartseed» outright *told them* the phenomenon normally lasted one to two weeks? That was still more than enough time for something like this to happen. Any one of them should have seen this coming... but no. They never paused to really *think* about it.

Now Oosawa Misaki had lost her memories of the phenomenon, along with any human connection involved. By all accounts, it was the result of an emergency shutdown—the one thing they'd vowed to avoid at all costs.

They had made a mistake that, quite possibly, could never be undone.

Worse still, this set off another event in a chain reaction... or perhaps it was mere coincidence that «they» chose now of all times to take action.

"Hey, uh, Taichi-san?"

"Taichi-senpai!"

Between classes, Chihiro and Enjouji came running up the stairs to the clubroom.

"What's going on? Did something happen?"

"It's about our classmates... You know, the group facing the Liberation?"

"It... It sounds like «Heartseed» or... someone similar... has gotten in contact with them!"

And so, now that «The Third» had revealed itself to the first-years, the story of their Liberation had begun in earnest.

■□■□■

With permission from the track girls, the seven members of the CRC gathered in the track team clubroom at lunch for a meeting. This was because, well, the track girls were currently occupying the CRC clubroom.

Inaba let out a long, exhausted sigh, then started barking orders.

“Status updates! First up, the track team.”

“Right,” said Nagase. “Yukina-chan and the others are still experiencing the body-swap phenomenon. But... one of the members, Misaki-chan... has lost all her memories of the body-swap, as well as those of her friendships with the other members of her group, and it’s unclear if she’ll ever go back to normal. Our current theory is that she was subjected to an emergency shutdown.”

“Y’know, I didn’t realize they could do it to just one person. I thought it’d affect all of ’em at the same time,” Aoki commented.

“So did I,” Inaba replied. “But by picking them off one by one, they can inflict greater panic on the survivors... The question is, what happens if the other members manage to hold it together until the end of the phenomenon? Will they still remember their friendship with the shutdown victim...?”

If that shared history was left intact, perhaps there was still hope. Perhaps, as long as at least one person remembered it, others could re-remember it, too.

“...Somehow I feel like that would be a little too convenient for our purposes,” Inaba continued. “Knowing them, they’ll probably ‘smooth things over’ by erasing *everyone’s* friendship memories.”

“Inaban, stop it! You’re scaring me! I mean, I know you might be right, but still... Okay, uh... Anyway, the fact of the matter is, Misaki-chan’s current state has got the other four *really* freaked out. At this point, it’s possible someone else could get... you know... *shut down*.”

Next, Inaba turned to Chihiro and Enjouji. “What about the first-years facing the Liberation?”

“This morning, they came into contact with «The Third», who was possessing the body of a second-year student they barely knew,” Chihiro stated.

“A-And... it told them... b-basically the same stuff it told the track team,” Enjouji added.

“They were already stressed out about the Liberation as it was, since it was making them pick fights with other guys and piss off all the girls. But now they

finally accept that what they're going through is a supernatural phenomenon. It feels like they finally believe us."

"T-To put it simply, they're really scared. 'Does this mean we don't have to go to the psych ward? What's going to happen to us?'"

"Sounds like their situation's getting pretty critical, too," Inaba murmured. "Now then, moving on... The Record Wipe."

"Well, the five of us are still experiencing occasional memory flickers," Taichi replied. "It's unclear what effect they may be having on us. Our only hope of a countermeasure is to create something that can bring the memories back, and everyone's been taking steps to do so, but so far there have been no major developments... at least, that we can tell, anyway."

"Any update on «Heartseed» or any of the others?"

"Well, like our first-years were sayin', «The Third» showed itself to the Liberation kids, but nothing else so far," Aoki answered. "We sure haven't run into any of 'em since we last spoke to «Heartseed»."

"So I guess that's where we're at, huh?"

None of this was new information, but at Inaba's suggestion, they each took turns presenting it to the group. Honestly, it was the only way they could get it to sink in. Otherwise, it was liable to fly right over their heads. It was just too surreal.

"Anything else anyone would like to say?"

At this, Kiriyama spoke up. "Hey, um... about Misaki-chan's memories... Do you think she'll be okay? I'm choosing to believe she will be, but..."

"I don't know. None of us do."

"So... do you think our memories... our 'records' or whatever... Will they...?"

Slowly but surely, much as they were loath to admit it, the Record Wipe was finally starting to feel real. The fear was starting to set in— But then, there was a knock at the door, and a visitor peeked in. It was the boy who served as the student council secretary.

"Sure enough, here you are! Hey folks, uh... the president wants to speak to

you. Could you come with me?”

And so yet another obstacle sprang up in their path.

“Alright, CRC. Now I *know* something weird is going on,” student council president Katori Jouji declared across the table.

His summons was directed at all five of the second-year CRC members, but Kiriyama and Nagase headed to the clubroom to comfort the track team while Chihiro and Enjouji went back to their classroom to follow up with their Liberated classmates. Thus, the only ones who turned up for this meeting were Taichi, Inaba, and Aoki.

They didn’t really have time for this, but since Katori made it sound like he was onto them, they couldn’t exactly turn a blind eye to it. The three of them stood facing him; likewise, he didn’t invite them to have a seat.

“What do you mean, something weird?” Inaba asked with a perfect poker face.

“Don’t play dumb with me. I’m talking about the girls on the track team and those four first-year boys.”

Somehow he had managed to pinpoint the current victims with laser precision.

“What about them?”

“I’m told every single one of them skipped class this morning... as did every single one of you.”

Anyone could have noticed that, so his suspicions... actually sort of made sense?

“As the student council president, I believe I have the right to know exactly what you were up to during that time. Wouldn’t you agree?”

Next to him, the vice president and secretary nodded vigorously. Once again, they didn’t seem eager to join the conversation; granted, Taichi wasn’t exactly contributing much himself.

“*Do* you have that right? I’ll have to check my student handbook.”

“Very funny, smartass. I’m just trying to keep our students safe, okay?”

Maybe he sincerely meant that.

“Now tell me what you know, CRC.”

Why would he target them, of all people? Purely for information? Or was there some other objective at play?

“I don’t mind answering your questions if you’ll explain why you’ve chosen to single us out. Fair trade, wouldn’t you say?”

“No can do. You really think I wouldn’t protect my informants?”

“Frankly, it’s extremely shady that you need ‘informants’ at all.”

“I’m getting nowhere with you. Yaegashi, you’re not planning to skip next period, are you? Explain your absence.”

“Sorry, Katori, but it was important.”

Right now, they didn’t have time to feel out a compromise.

“Aoki?”

“Yeah, man, we’ve got some stuff going on.”

“This is a *high school*. You people do realize you can’t just opt out of attending class, right?”

“Student council this, high school that. You’re always so quick to throw around your authority, aren’t you?” Inaba smirked.

Katori’s eyes narrowed. “I’d advise you not to mess around with me. You won’t like what happens.”

His intimidating aura sent a shiver down Taichi’s spine.

“Oh yeah? Try me.”

“Hah! You’re bluffing,” Katori snorted, then tensed up once more. “What are you after?”

“Funny; that’s what I was going to ask *you*.”

Both Katori and Inaba refused to be outdone... but in the end, it was Inaba who backed down.

“...I admit, our behavior’s been a bit strange lately. If we promise to explain ourselves later on, could you let it go for right now?”

“I’m afraid not. See, in a sense, you people are the enemy.”

Now that a line had been drawn, perhaps compromise was no longer an option.

“That’s a little extreme,” Taichi muttered under his breath.

“Sorry, but I refuse to tolerate your club’s attitude. Give you an inch, and you’ll take a mile. Now just follow the rules and carry on with your daily lives.”

“Follow the rules...”

“...and carry on with our daily lives...?”

This hit Aoki and Inaba particularly hard. After all, those particular phrases reminded them of a certain something else: the «Heartseeds».

Was this a warning?

“You see, this task ultimately falls to me,” Katori explained, glancing around at his fellow council members. “I mean, normally a teacher would handle this, and yet none of them have taken action. But I guess you’d already know about that, now wouldn’t you?”

His last words were laced with sarcasm.

“I know we’re acting out of line... I get that, goddamn it!” Inaba spat as they headed back to the CRC clubroom from the student council office.

“Well, at least now Katori will focus his attention on us instead, right?” Taichi offered.

Indeed, the reason they’d taken such an aggressive stance with Katori was to distract him from the first-years and the track girls. After all, the last thing the phenomena victims needed right now was an interrogation, or else they might let something slip... and the CRC did *not* want to risk anyone triggering another emergency shutdown.

“Katori’s right, though,” Aoki muttered, folding his arms with his hand on his chin. “It *is* kinda weird that the teachers are shruggin’ this off so easily. Was our

school always this lax? They haven't been... *hypnotized* or anything, right?"

There was no solution in sight—nothing but negative speculation as far as the eye could see.

Before lunch ended, Taichi and Nagase decided to swing by their classroom to check on things. If their classmates had noticed their absence, then they'd need to consider staying for afternoon classes.

"Where *were* you guys? Seriously, man, your whole club skipped?" Miyagami called as soon as Taichi walked into the room. "I mean, the girls are hot, so I get it."

"What? Dude, it's not like that."

"So did they put out, or what?" he asked in a low voice, his eyes sparkling mischievously behind his rectangular glasses.

But Taichi shrugged him off—his mind was more preoccupied with what was happening a short distance away.

"You've been leaving the classroom during *every single break*. I get it; that's your prerogative. But missing class when you're not even sick? That's crossing the line."

Setouchi Kaoru, president of class 2-B, was currently grilling Nagase.

"I... I'm sorry..."

"What *I* wanna know is," Nakayama Mariko called across the room to both Taichi and Nagase, "what's going on with Yukina-chan and the rest of the track team?"

Taichi's heart skipped a beat.

"I want to know, too," said a new voice. It was Manga Club member Sone, stroking his belly after another fine meal... but his usual laid-back attitude was nowhere to be seen. "Something's going on with them. And whatever it is, it's not normal."

"Are you guys involved with that?"

Evidently Miyagami was done joking around, too.



Was the cat out of the bag? Was everyone on to them? Was the act of skipping class as a group their ultimate undoing? If only they hadn't wasted so much time thinking a phenomenon was targeting them. Maybe they could have taken steps to cover for the track team; maybe then this never would have happened.

What would happen if their entire class found out about the phenomena? Would it be deemed "problematic" to the point of another emergency shutdown? Would all the track girls end up like Oosawa?

"Oh, and I heard something similar's going on with some first-years," Setouchi commented like she'd only just remembered.

"Wh-Where did you hear that?" Nagase asked nervously. "And... how much have you heard?"

"One of my kouhai told me there's a rumor going around about some first-years who've started cutting class."

Sure enough, the first-years were in a similarly precarious position. Taichi edged closer to Nagase.

"Nagase..."

"We should probably look into that, huh?"

"No time to waste."

"Right."

They weren't just looking for an excuse to leave; they needed to take action, and they couldn't afford to wait. They were fighting with all their might, and this was the end result.

Taichi and Nagase exchanged a look... then took off running.

"Sorry, guys!"

"We'll be right back!"

"Hey!"

"Where are you going?!"

“The bell’s gonna ring!”

But Taichi pretended not to hear them. He knew it was a jerk move... and if he kept acting like this, he’d start hemorrhaging friends... but...

Out in the hallway: “Fujishima!”

Blocking their path was none other than their biggest nightmare, Fujishima Maiko. During the Dream Vision phenomenon, she had caught wind of their supernatural circumstances, and there was no way in hell she was going to let them pass— Or so he thought... but then she quietly stepped aside without even asking them where they were going.

Why did she look so guilty?

Together, Taichi and Nagase arrived just outside Class 1-B, where a crowd had formed... with Chihiro and Enjouji at the center.

“C’mon, Uwa. I *know* you know why they’re skipping.”

“I don’t know what you want me to say.”

“Tell us, Shino-chan! We’re worried about them!”

“Y-Yeah... I get that... Me and Chihiro-kun are worried, too...”

“Uwa! Enjouji-san! We all know they’ve been acting weird lately! Don’t try to pretend otherwise!”

The student screaming the most obnoxiously was none other than Kimura, the boy who had once dragged Taichi of all people into a formal debate regarding the tennis club.

“We should probably rescue them... right?” asked Nagase.

Not that they were in any real danger, but they were clearly struggling in the face of this interrogation. And so, making use of their status as upperclassmen, Taichi and Nagase forced their way in.

“Sorry, kids, but we’re gonna need to borrow them!”

“I-Iori-senpai?!”

“Nagase-san?!”

She grabbed both Chihiro and Enjouji by the arm.

“Sorry, but something urgent’s come up,” Taichi explained, bowing apologetically to the younger students as they stared back in alarm.

■□■□■

Ultimately, they would end up being forced to skip their afternoon classes as well.

“This is getting pretty serious. At this rate, they might start calling our parents,” Taichi muttered to Nagase. Since the track team was still using the CRC clubroom, they’d taken this conversation out behind the Rec Hall building.

They were shirking too much of their schoolwork; the teachers were bound to lecture them for it. Worse still, since his mother and sister had started to get naggy with him lately, he had the feeling he’d probably end up grounded or something.

“If they do, my mom is gonna *freak out*,” Nagase murmured anxiously.

But the CRC was in no position to back down, no matter the consequences. Times like these, Taichi found himself wishing he didn’t have a family to worry about at all.

Later, in the CRC clubroom: “This all happened because we opened up to you! It’s *your* fault!”

Having recovered from their panic and despair, the track girls had moved on to anger... directed at the CRC.

While the CRC didn’t want to upset the track team any further, they now felt obligated to explain the emergency shutdown, if only partially.

“What do you mean, our memories will be erased?! Why didn’t you say anything sooner?!”

“You hid it from us on purpose!”

“Girls, no! We weren’t *trying* to be jerks. We’re just trying to do what’s best for everyone,” Kiriyama argued desperately.

“You don’t get to decide what’s best for us!”

“I *told* you it was a mistake to trust them. I tried to stop you... This is all Yukina’s fault!”

“I...”

While the other three howled with rage, Kurihara stared at the floor, looking hurt.

“Misaki’s not innocent either. Both she and Yukina kept spewing that crap about ‘Let’s believe in the CRC!’ and now look where it got us! I’m telling you, we would’ve been better off staying quiet like he told us to. I guarantee it,” Akemi hissed, her eyes wide with unbridled fury. “It’s all *their* fault... If it wasn’t for Misaki and Yukina...!”

Meanwhile, Kurihara broke down into sobs.

“As far as I’m concerned, Misaki got her just deserts. Why should the rest of us have to suffer?”

“Take that back!” Taichi shouted back reflexively, as the question had touched a nerve.

“What do *you* care?!” the girl shot back, enraged. “You’re the ones who made things worse! This is all just a game to you, isn’t it?! It’s not *your* problem, so you don’t actually give a rat’s ass!”

Taichi wanted to tell her she was wrong, but... he couldn’t. The truth of the matter was, there were more precautions they could have taken; there was just so much going on that they hadn’t had the resources to cover every base. They didn’t have enough hands to juggle it all. Hell, they... they didn’t even have time to worry about *themselves*.

Looking at the track girls, he was finally starting to understand what it meant to lose memories... experiences... friendships... *permanently*.

These supernatural beings treated humans like their playthings. By contrast, «Heartseed»’s treatment of them was a *kindness*; it was the exception to the rule. That was why they needed to put their own safety measures in place.

Was this just another part of their game? The pressure was starting to sink in...

“This is a living nightmare... Why us...?”

One small hope remained for the track team: that the remaining members would survive the one-to two-week period and make it out with minimal history erasure. But the CRC wasn’t that fortunate. No amount of gritting their teeth would save them from the Record Wipe.

So what were they supposed to do, exactly?

With the exception of Kurihara, the track girls all filed out of the CRC clubroom. Never mind that classes were still in session—they were going home, and at this point, there wasn’t a single thing anyone could do to stop them.

The strength drained from Taichi’s body.

“Why did this have to happen...?” Kiriyama whispered tearfully, wiping her eyes again and again.

“I just... wanted to help them somehow...” Nagase collapsed to the floor and tucked her knees up to her chin.

“No matter how much we try to reassure them, it won’t get through to them... We’re just untrustworthy outsiders now.” Inaba gritted her teeth like she was cursing her own powerlessness.

“Isn’t this kind of a problem...? I mean, are they even gonna show up tomorrow? And what’ll happen if they don’t?” asked Aoki.

The answer was that they would be deemed to have broken the “carry on with your daily lives” rule. But what would happen then?

“They’ll show up... They won’t want to lose their memories, right...?” Kurihara suggested weakly. Abandoned by the rest of her group, she sat on the old black sofa, staring at the floor. “Whatever you do, please don’t blame them for this... They’re being forced to swap bodies with each other, and now they might even forget each other completely...” She looked utterly exhausted, like she was on the brink of passing out. “I mean, Misaki already—”

Suddenly, Kurihara paused, frozen.

“Wait... Misaki...?”

She looked puzzled... almost like she didn’t recognize the name.

Was she losing something right in front of their eyes?

"*YUKINA!*" Kiriyama screamed, and the windows shook slightly.

Kurihara snapped out of her daze, then refocused her gaze on Kiriyama. "Wh-... What is it, Yui?"

"You were acting weird just now... like you forgot Misaki-chan..."

"E-Excuse me? I could never forget Misaki. That's silly... Yeah, that's silly..."

But her denial was all too telling.

"Did the emotional distress cause that? Because we're told excessive stress can cause emergency shutdowns, too," Inaba stammered, panicked.

"Actually, about that... I meant to ask you something earlier, but everyone was too busy pitching a fit. So... what exactly did you mean when you said we can't let it get to us?"

"Well... Granted, this is mostly guesswork, but you'll want to avoid any severe emotional instability. Panic, depression, despair..."

In light of the previous conversation, Inaba delved into more detail regarding the emergency shutdown as previously conveyed to them by «Heartseed».

"Despair...?" Kurihara was now paler than Taichi had ever seen her. "B-But we're talking *major* trauma, right? Like... not to be morbid or anything, but... like rape or murder...?"

"Probably, but..." Inaba hesitated.

It was clear from the way Kurihara phrased her question that she wanted the answer to be *yes*... but it quickly became apparent that Inaba had decided there was little point in hiding the truth from her any longer.

"...I think the definition of 'major trauma' will vary from person to person. Something that may seem minor to you can have a massive impact on someone else internally, and vice versa."

It was the individual who ultimately decided what mattered to them, and how much.

"Oh my god... Then that was probably what happened...!" Kurihara clapped a

shaking hand to her mouth.

“Did you just have an epiphany, Yukina?! Don’t freak out, okay?!” Kiriyama blurted, flustered.

“Because they didn’t know what she was into... or who she used to date...”

“Oh, you mean the fact that she’s bi?”

“*Yui!*” Kurihara glanced around pointedly at the other people in the room.

“It’s alright. We’ve all known this about her for a while,” Inaba explained.

Indeed, Oosawa had once asked Kiriyama on a date. That was how the CRC learned that she was attracted to both guys and girls.

“Oh... Okay then. Well, the thing is... we never knew that about her. But then we found out. Through the body-swap.”

Swapping in and out of other people’s bodies purely at random, it was all too easy to uncover those sorts of secrets.

“Personally, it doesn’t make me uncomfortable, and I’d never stop being her friend because of it. But I know there are a lot of homophobes out there, so I get why she’d be scared. Heck, I admit, it kinda surprised me at first, but... I think Misaki misread my surprise and thought I was creeped out instead.”

And sometimes those secrets, which would have been a total non-issue in any other situation, were revealed in the worst possible fashion.

“Our reactions really hurt her...”

Some people could be needlessly protective of those otherwise minor secrets.

And when all these circumstances overlapped... tragedy was inevitable.

That evening, Taichi headed home alone through the winter chill.

What an *exhausting* day it had been. So much had happened—too much for one single day, honestly. Not to mention, it hurt to hear the track team lash out at them after everything they’d done to try to help.

Objectively speaking, however, he could see why they would react the way they did. One person had already lost their memories; anyone would be rattled by that. And given the timing, it would make sense for them to assume it was

the CRC's fault. In fact, maybe it was; Taichi couldn't say for sure.

There existed an alternate future in which the CRC never got involved with the track team, but it was too late—that path was closed to them now. And during the Dream Vision phenomenon, they had learned just how much responsibility was required to make that choice.

Had their actions completely backfired?

They had already roused the suspicion of the student council president, Katori Jouji. While it was unclear what, exactly, was going on with him, the fact remained that they were better off not getting on his bad side if they could help it. Also, it didn't help matters that he'd sensed there was "something weird" going on involving the current phenomena victims; after all, if they wanted to uphold the "carry on with your normal lives" rule, then they would need to keep attending school.

Worst case scenario, the CRC could stop going to school, too... Oh, but then their nosy family members would get on their case.

Nowhere was safe. They had no one they could call an ally (though whether they actually had any *enemies* remained to be seen). Where did they belong?

No matter where they went, they were attacked, criticized, questioned. The people in their lives had gone from helpful to a downright hindrance. Times like these, Taichi selfishly wished he could cut them out of his life, but naturally that wasn't feasible. Those connections were chains, tying him down.

Conversely, now «Heartseed» had volunteered to join the fight with them.

Back when it was their enemy, things were so much simpler. There were only two sides to the story; all they had to do was fight back against its intentions without thinking too hard. But now? These days, Taichi had vowed to have agency of his own... but those chains were weighing him down.

Everything in the world was getting in their way. They were fighting an uphill battle at every juncture, and no one was rooting for them.

They thought a single change of heart could change everything, but real life wasn't that easy. Maybe that was how it worked in *their* world, but in the real world, that wasn't enough. Their feelings weren't enough. *They themselves*

weren’t enough.

Was this simply how things went in real life? In the world beyond their club?

It was all so confusing; Taichi wanted nothing more than to get home and sleep for a thousand years—to shut himself down and descend into perfect inky blackness.

The question was: Could he come back to the light afterwards? There was no guarantee. After all, he might wake up one morning without his memories... without his most treasured friendships. By this point, he knew full well it was no laughing matter this time around.

After seeing Oosawa get “reset” with their own two eyes, the rest of the track team lost all composure. But in some sense, Taichi had distanced himself from them; he understood that now. Not to suggest he hadn’t cared about their plight—on the contrary, he was constantly wishing for a way to help them. But it hadn’t felt truly real to him. Like he was watching a show on TV—no matter how emotionally invested he became, it was never quite 100 percent. His heart wasn’t fully in it.

But now, finally, he had reached 100 percent.

Memory loss. History erasure. A permanent black void. And in their case, it wasn’t the consequence of messing up—it was the consequence of *doing nothing*. Unlike the phenomena, this wasn’t a matter of entertaining «Heartseed», and as such, it had no safety measures in place for them.

Some unknowable entity was attempting to drop them into the bottomless abyss, and right now, Taichi felt as though he’d caught a glimpse of its invisible hand, large and shadowy. Unable to stop it, he could only watch as it coiled its fingers around his body, pulling him down into a world of darkness.

Slowly, his fear took shape.

All this time, it never truly felt real... and besides, he was too busy with other things to really think about it... but most of all, he never wanted to believe it. Now, however, it had manifested to the point that he could touch it, hear it, smell it.

He was going to lose his memories—lose his *self*. It was hilariously, tragically,

absurdly fucking terrifying.

His body shook to the point that he couldn't stay upright; he staggered against the wall. The cold concrete felt firmly reassuring. With its unwavering support, he found he could push himself back onto his own two feet.

But he knew that reassurance was only fleeting.

The fear was closing in. He couldn't fight it. He didn't have time to think. He couldn't do anything.

It made him want to throw in the towel right then and there. After all, he just didn't have the capacity to help anyone else right now. Quite the opposite—he was drowning, and no one could be bothered to toss him a lifesaver. Instead, they were pushing him down under the surface.

He'd worked so hard—tried his best to consider every angle. Surely he'd earned a break. All that mattered was the CRC. That was enough for him. Humans could only do so much for other people, you know?

Sure enough, his "self-sacrificial" desires revealed themselves to be purely self-focused in nature. The second it seemed like it was too hard, he was ready to give up. And with this chaotic contradiction, Taichi lost his path forward, as well as the path he had traveled to get there.

He was ready to admit it: deep down, he had simply assumed they would prove victorious yet again. That there was nothing the five of them couldn't accomplish if they put their heads together. After all, they'd made it this far, hadn't they?

Unfortunately, this was quite possibly a battle they couldn't win. But they had only ever known victory, so they didn't know how to face defeat.

Maybe this was the stage at which they needed to admit they had lost and start doing damage control... but Taichi couldn't make that call. Knowing him, come tomorrow morning, he'd go right back to helping people.

■□■□■

Selfishly, part of him had hoped that when he woke up the next day, everything would be back to normal. But no, Oosawa Misaki's memories didn't

conveniently return just because he wanted them to.

On the bright side, contrary to the CRC's worries, the four remaining track girls and the four first-year boys all came to school that day... but they were all very clearly at the limits of their sanity. Anyone could tell at a glance that there was something going on.

They were at school... they were sitting at their desks... but they didn't respond to a single word anyone said. The first-years were zoning out one minute, then acting out the next; eventually the other students started to rethink interacting with them at all. Then their gazes shifted from worry to *apprehension*.

And all Taichi could do was watch from the sidelines.

"Do you think Yukina-chan's... doing okay?" Nakayama asked Taichi and Nagase after first period ended.

Together, they gazed at Kurihara, sitting soullessly at her desk.

"We should probably just... leave her be for right now," Nagase replied. It was the only answer she had.

"Something's totally going on with her. I feel like we should talk to a teacher about it," Nakayama insisted.

"I agree," said class president Setouchi Kaoru.

"See?! Kaoru-chan gets it!"

The two of them started to discuss Kurihara further; meanwhile, Taichi and Nagase slipped out of the conversation and into the hallway.

"This is seriously bad," Nagase murmured, looking pale. "If someone tells the teachers, the track team will totally get called in for questioning. They won't be able to talk their way out of it... and then their memories are as good as gone!"

"But... we can't exactly stop everyone from telling the teachers," Taichi replied reluctantly. Loath as he was to admit it, there was no visible solution to the current crisis.

"But if the teachers find out, they'll report it to the girls' families. Then they'll run out of places to go!"

Somehow, the CRC had always managed to keep their phenomena contained. But once the irregular behavior started to leak out into the rest of their lives, it started to have an immediate—and dangerous—ripple effect.

“Even *my* family is starting to suspect something,” Taichi muttered.

What were the track team’s home lives like? Because once their families started to question them, they would be forced to remain constantly on guard for every moment of their lives.

“Yeah... My mom’s started paying a *lot* more attention. I can’t even be on my phone without her listening in... She can be pretty dumb a lot of the time, but every now and then her intuition kicks in, I guess...”

Just then, both of their phones lit up with an email notification. It was from Inaba Himeko, and it was only one sentence long: *“You-know-who wants to talk.”*

Now that they had something more important to attend to, the five second-years of the CRC summarily ditched second period to gather in the clubroom instead. At this point they were essentially flushing their student records down the drain, but they’d have to deal with that later.

So there they were, face to face with an otherworldly entity like it was the most ordinary thing in the world... and in that sense, they were more than a little bit otherworldly themselves.

“It’s become clear to me... what they’re trying to do... so I came here to let you know...”

“Wh-What do you mean, ‘what they’re trying to do’?” Taichi stammered, his mind fuzzy.

As always, «Heartseed» was piloting the body of Gotou Ryuuzen. Did Gotou have any classes during second period? Hopefully not. Otherwise there’d be trouble.

“Didn’t I tell you... they’re conducting these other phenomena... for a reason...? Wait... If you’ve forgotten, then maybe I don’t need to report back after all...”

At this, he remembered: it wasn't considered normal behavior for multiple «Heartseeds» to gather in one place and cause multiple phenomena at the same time. Hence, they had suspected there had to be another motive behind it... but lately they were so swamped, they couldn't see the forest for the trees.

"So it seems... one of them has had an emergency shutdown... and lost their memories, correct...?"

"Gee, I'm glad to see you're all caught up," Inaba growled, openly irritated.

"I have to say, their timing was most unusual... They simply shut her down without any hypnotherapy for any of the other members... Surely they would have known the mass hysteria that would cause... So negligent..."

"*Hypnotherapy?*" Nagase repeated dubiously.

"Something like that, anyway... After all, if the emergency shutdown makes one member start acting strangely, it's only natural that the others would panic as a result..."

The CRC had discussed this very thing at one point.

"From there, it is all too easy for things to snowball out of control... That's why we normally use hypnotherapy to smooth things over, but they didn't bother... It just feels so sloppy... in a lot of ways..."

«Heartseed» blathered on and on, tilting his head pensively.

"Well, me personally... I'm choosing to put the effort in... so I'd like you all to do the same... with regard to your memories..."

"I thought you said you figured something out about them? So spit it out already. We're in the dark here," Inaba snapped... but it was clear she was just frustrated.

"...I would appreciate it if you wouldn't shoot the messenger..."

«Heartseed» paused there to look at each of them in turn with its empty, soulless eyes. What was it looking for? What was it thinking?

"It would appear they are planning... to involve a majority of the people at this school in some... large-scale phenomenon. Their current phenomena are a sort of... dress rehearsal."

“What? ‘Dress rehearsal’?” Kiriyama was baffled. Taichi was having trouble processing it, too.

“Basically... They’re planning something even bigger...”

“‘Basically’ my *fucking ass*!” Inaba howled with all the fury of an erupting volcano.

The body-swap. *And* the Liberation. *And* the Record Wipe. And this was *only the beginning?* Unbelievable. Unacceptable.

They were already struggling to keep their heads above water—any more and they’d drown.

“S-Sorry, man, but that’s kinda... hard to believe.” Even Aoki the Optimist was having trouble coming to terms with it.

Meanwhile, Nagase had reached the point at which all she could do was minimize the situation in her head and then cling to that fantasy. “Are you sure this isn’t just another one of your tricks meant to freak us out? This is all just an illusion, isn’t it?”

Admittedly, Taichi could relate. It felt like he was in freefall. He didn’t understand anything anymore—not a single thing.

“What’s even the *point* of all this...?” he muttered without realizing.

“Like I told you... «The Third»’s group is planning some large-scale event... in addition to your Record Wipe...”

“Not that. I mean, what’s the point of the body-swap or the Liberation or any of them?”

It was a question borne of sheer frustration, and he didn’t expect an answer. «Heartseed» had never once answered any questions regarding its existence or purpose.

So naturally, when it actually gave an answer, Taichi assumed it was joking.

“This is... shall we say... an experiment.”

“Wha...?” Taichi blinked back like an idiot.

“What kind of experiment?” Nagase asked, seemingly by reflex, her voice flat.

“Let’s not worry about that... Right now we should focus on the problem at hand,” «Heartseed» replied evasively. Did it tell them these things purely on a whim, or was there a motive behind it? Its expressionless face was impossible to read.

“One of these days we’re going to get it out of you,” Inaba growled. “So tell me, how are they planning to involve ‘a majority of everyone at this school’? Are they going to do a bunch of phenomena all over the place? Because I feel like that would get untenable very quickly, don’t you?”

“Oh, certainly... The more they added... the more easily it would leak to the rest of the world... Not to suggest it hasn’t already, of course...” It stroked its chin as if in contemplation.

“What, so they’re going to go crazy with the phenomena, let it turn into a nightmare, then pull an emergency shutdown on everyone? Over and over?” Taichi bristled.

But if it was an experiment... an experiment where those in power had full control... and they were the guinea pigs, then...

As loath as he was to admit it, if this was all an “experiment,” then... a lot of things started to make sense.

“In truth, much of this is still under investigation... but one thing’s for certain... You’ll find hints in the rumors floating around...”

“Rumors?” Taichi muttered, confused.

“Ah, yes... I forgot you’re unable to hear them... thanks to the hypnosis...”

“What *rumors?* What fucking *hypnosis?* No one told us any of this shit!” Inaba spluttered in bewilderment.

“Indeed... «The Third»’s group took great pains to make sure you wouldn’t find out... Surely they wouldn’t do that without reason... Yes, I suspect there must be some greater objective...”

So there was more to it. Taichi’s brain had reached its capacity for emotional reaction and could no longer produce the appropriate response. *Well, that sucks,* he thought impassively.

He didn't stand a chance of processing this information; any willpower he might have had to actually *try* was probably just for show. Outwardly he was fine, but internally he was flatlining. Like a lifeless puppet.

"Not to worry... I have taken it upon myself to fix this little issue... Previously you would have noticed people moving their mouths without actually hearing their voices, but now... if you think back, you should be able to remember—"

"Some kinda giant experiment, they said?"

"They're not seriously gonna trap us inside, right?"

"I heard they're holding it on school grounds with, like, TONS of people."

"Hmm... I heard people are gonna swap bodies."

"I heard some people will be able to read minds. Yikes!"

"If you're forced to only tell lies, then couldn't you just explain you were lying right afterwards? I don't get it."

"So when does it start? And... when does it end? Does anybody know?"

How had they failed to notice all this time? Everyone was talking about it—in the classroom, the hallway, the cafeteria, the restrooms, everywhere. All at once, the world had changed so drastically, it felt as though they'd stumbled into an alternate timeline by mistake.

But no—this was unmistakably the same world. Its change was gradual, happening all around them; if anything, it was *their* fault for not noticing sooner. They had clearly observed situations in which they were unable to hear people, despite being within a perfectly reasonable range... but at some point, that little issue had gotten lost in the shuffle amid bigger, more urgent problems. And that simply wasn't acceptable.

Strange, mysterious rumors were floating around Yamaboshi High School. The rest of the world was changing, leaving the CRC behind.

In the course of an extremely belated investigation spanning morning break periods, lunchtime, and afternoon break periods, they combed through the whole school building and asked around until at last they found their answer.

The rumors had spread predominantly among the first-and second-years,

possibly because the third-years were too busy with college entrance exams, and at this point, attending class was purely optional.

During each break between classes, they would travel across campus. Then, when it was time for the next class, they would sit at their desk and wait for it to end, until eventually the final bell rang.

At this point, frankly, Taichi didn't even see the point of attending class anymore. His textbooks and notebooks had gone untouched for the past several hours; he packed them into his bookbag and rose to his feet.

He made eye contact with Nagase, then Kiriyama, but they didn't speak. Instead, they all left the classroom separately. Standing near the entrance was Nakayama Mariko with her boyfriend Ishikawa Daiki.

"Sounds kinda intense to have your affection for someone switch at random, huh?!"

"I can't even fathom what that must feel like."

Even *they* were gossiping about the rumors.

"Hey, guys?" Taichi called.

"Oh, hey! What's up, Yaegashi-kun?"

"That rumor you mentioned just now—where did you hear it?"

"Well, uh... Hmm... Where *did* we hear it? Ishikawa-kun, do you remember?"

"I'm pretty sure I heard it from you, Nakayama..."

"What? No, I thought I heard it from you! Mmrgh... Oh well. I guess that's just how these things work, huh?"

None of these people could remember where they first heard the rumors. There was no clear source. And yet none of them seemed to find that fact even a tiny bit creepy.

«The Third»'s "hypnosis" had prevented the CRC from hearing these rumors; maybe it had cast some other hypnosis on the rest of the students to keep them from questioning anything. The entire school was under its control, like a little puppet show... and the students were the puppets.

Taichi decided to review the facts before he headed to the clubroom. He had a feeling... a tiny little hopeful feeling... that maybe he'd find a miracle solution lying around somewhere. So there he was, wandering around school grounds, when he happened to bump into Inaba.

"Where do you think you're going?" she demanded.

"Oh, just doing some investigating... What about you? Why aren't you headed to the clubroom?"

"...Same as you, more or less."

They each intuited the other's intentions, and together they started walking. They didn't talk much—no discussion of countermeasures. From an outside perspective, maybe it would look like they were taking action, but in reality, they'd hit a dead end. Even Inaba didn't immediately have the right answer this time around.

That was when they encountered the very last person they would have wanted to see: "Hey, CRC. I hear you've been asking around about those rumors," said student council president Katori Jouji.

"Yeah, we—" Taichi began, but Inaba stopped him.

"What of it?" she shot back, her tone challenging.

She seemed to have a grudge against Katori that spurred her to constantly try to one-up him—a grudge that, by all accounts, was mutual. Then again, maybe it didn't help that he was accompanied by one Fujishima Maiko.

Together, the two of them were blocking their path.

"Now what would the great almighty student council president and the star of the Student Council Outreach Committee want with us?"

"I wanted to ask you..." Katori shot a quick glance at Fujishima beside him. "How much does your club know about these rumors? For example, do you know how many there are in total?"

"In total?"

Inaba fell silent, unsure how to respond. But although she probably had her own ideas about how to play their cards, Taichi determined it was probably

pointless to bother with negotiation tactics at this stage. After all, Katori was just another student at this school... which meant he wasn't their enemy.

"We only learned about them today, so we don't have anything concrete. If you've got anything you can tell us, we'd appreciate it," Taichi told them. His plan: to simply be honest and ask for their help.

"Today? That can't be true. These rumors are everywhere! Are you serious?"

"It's the truth," Inaba chimed in. "So just... uh... please, tell us what you know, and we'll do the same." Once again, she had sensed Taichi's intent and adapted accordingly.

All this time, they were convinced that Katori seemed to know something—that there was something fishy about him. But maybe, in the end, the punchline was that they were completely in the dark themselves. In which case, there was a chance Katori might help them after all.

But those hopes were swiftly dashed.

"In that case... never mind," he replied, disheartened.

"Wh-... What do you mean, never mind?" Taichi pressed, forcing the words out of his throat.

"I always thought you people had some... some *critical role*, you know, somewhere in all this," Katori explained as Fujishima continued to stand there in silence. "But... if you honestly have nothing to do with it, then... I guess I jumped to the wrong conclusion. Sorry for dragging you down to the office so many times. I only targeted you because Fujishima here insisted you were the most suspicious people at this school."

Fujishima? Taichi looked over at her to find her staring awkwardly at the ground.

"Oh, but for the record, I'm not trying to pin this on her. I was the one who made the call to act on her intel. So if there's anyone to blame here, it's me," he clarified in defense of Fujishima. "Anyway, let's get in touch if anything else happens. I'll be sure to make it up to you some other time."

And with that, he walked off, leaving Fujishima behind with Taichi and Inaba.

Then, finally, she spoke up.

"...I'm really, truly sorry. I thought the rumors were rather peculiar, and felt we should investigate, and... judging from the nature of those rumors, I couldn't help but think that... maybe the CRC was involved somehow," she explained, looking guilty.

To be fair, she wasn't technically wrong; the CRC had gone through all the same things the current victims were experiencing now.

"But it seems I was wrong. Whatever oddities you're involved with, they're separate from these particular oddities. I'm sorry for making the president suspect you, and I'm sorry we wasted your time."

With this, they had apparently escaped the student council's suspicion, and now they didn't have to worry about Katori or Fujishima any longer. This was probably a good thing. But to Taichi, it felt like their connections to the outside world were slowly being severed, one at a time.

Fujishima bowed deeply, then turned to excuse herself.

"No, wait... Wait!" Inaba called hastily, her voice nearly cracking. "Fujishima... You think there's something weird about the rumors?"

"Yes, I do."

"I see... Good... That's good!"

"How so?" Taichi whispered, confused.

"Think about it, dumbo! You-know-who told us they're all hypnotized, remember? That's why nobody thinks these rumors are creepy!"

But unlike everyone else they'd spoken to, Fujishima *did* take issue with the rumors.

"Knowing you, you're probably doing your own independent investigation, right? Have you tracked down the source of the rumors, by any chance?" Inaba asked hopefully.

"The source? No, I just sort of picked it up from somewhere. That's how rumors work, is it not?"

Wait, what?

Even Inaba faltered—just for a moment, though. Then she recovered. “W-Well, yeah, but... Wait, hold on. You do think that they’re weird, though, right? Weird in what way?”

“Well, there’s simply no way they could have spread throughout the entire school all at once, don’t you think? It’s absurd!”

“Sure, yeah... but...” Inaba murmured to herself, then shivered slightly, like she wasn’t sure whether to keep pressing.

To Taichi, however, there was only one option... so he summoned his resolve. “Okay, but the rumors themselves are pretty weird too, am I right?”

“Are they?”

Oh.

“I thought they were pretty average rumors, myself.”

Okay.

“Nothing to write home about.”

And that was the moment they realized they were too late to save a single one of them.

+++

“Iori! Enough is enough!” my mother, Nagase Reika, shouts at me angrily as I walk into the apartment late that night.

I ignore her and head for my room.

“Iori, you’re as white as a sheet!”

Yeah, I bet. “I’m really tired, so I’m going to bed. That’s all it is. Don’t worry.”

“Hold it right there, young lady! Tell me what’s going on!”

Will you shut up? Why can’t you just let me live my life? “You wouldn’t understand.”

“Tell me.”

“No, seriously—”

“Tell me!”

Don’t be such a dictator. What if they decide this counts as an “information leak” and do an emergency shutdown? It’s a volatile situation, so don’t push my buttons right now.

I force my way past her. She tries to block my path with her arm, but I duck under it. I know I’m being a total bitch, but I don’t have time to smooth things over with her right now. I walk into my room, shut the door behind me, and promptly sink to the floor.

“*Iori*!” she roars after me, and I flinch.

I know, okay? I know you’re worried sick about me. You’re my mom, and you care about me. I get that. But sometimes that puts me in a hard position.

I don’t need you to help me, but I’d appreciate it if I didn’t have to keep my guard up around you constantly. You may not be my enemy, but you’re sure acting like one. Here’s an idea: don’t harass your daughter just so you can get some peace of mind for yourself!

Then again, I’m being pretty self-focused myself... and as a result, it’s stressing *her* out, too. In the end, we’re both putting ourselves first. I guess that’s just human nature, huh?

The people in my life are in trouble, and I want to help them... but I know there are limits to what I can reasonably handle. First I need to take care of my own business; then I can think about friends and family. Only after that can I start thinking about everyone else. *Before you start pointing fingers, make sure your hands are clean,* as they say.

Right now, we’re on the cusp of losing our memories, and we spend each passing day in fear. In my case, I’m in danger of losing the very moment that helped me change for the better. Without it, I’ll go back to that formless darkness I existed in before I had any idea who I truly was as a person.

Would I have ever come to understand myself without the phenomena? If so, great. But if not, what then?

Honestly, there’s a lot more than just that. Over the past year and a half, I’ve matured in all sorts of ways. What will happen to this version of me? And above

all, what will happen to my friendships with the people who matter most?

At one point, the Record Wipe used to be hypothetical. But now it's manifested into our reality with fangs bared. It's going to erase all past events related to the phenomena... which means anything that happened as a result will get the axe, too. That means I'll change... and *that* means my relationship with my mom will change, and...

Wait, what?

It feels like the scope of the Record Wipe is a lot larger than I've been giving it credit for... Is that why «The Third» had to bring an entire posse and dedicate so much time to setting it up?

So what am I meant to do with this event horizon bearing down on me at every moment? There's a decision being thrust in my face, and all I can do is make it. Even if that decision is cruel and irresponsible, there's only so many options available to us.

I've learned my limits. I understand my insignificance. My powerlessness.

"...I should get in touch with the others..."

At the door, my mother mutters something... but my mind's so preoccupied with other things, I don't quite catch it.

Chapter 8: Seeds Sown in Secret

The next morning, they discovered that Yamaboshi High School had stopped functioning.

Despite «The Third»'s "hypnotherapy," the students didn't blindly accept *everything*. They had clearly noticed the situation going on with the track team, and some worried individuals had taken their concerns to the faculty. But the only response they got was "There's nothing to worry about. Nothing is wrong."

If it was only one specific teacher shrugging their shoulders, Taichi could accept it—but *all of them?* Plus, no matter how much class the CRC ditched, none of them ever commented on it. Something was going on. Something unnatural. It just wasn't clear what, or where, or how, or to what extent.

Meanwhile, rumor propagation was at an all-time high. Everywhere they went, *everyone* was talking about it... and the content of said rumors had evolved, too.

"Y'know, uh... aren't these rumors kinda weird?"

"I agree. They can't be real... but the whole school's talking about them, and no one can name a source... Plus, now they're getting more detailed..."

"Something about this is weird, man."

"And there's already a handful of people acting even weirder..."

"Is this going to get worse?"

"It sure feels that way..."

"Maybe we shouldn't be here."

"Yeah, but I mean... we gotta go to school, right?"

"It'll work out... won't it?"

"Maybe someone will help us..."

The students had started to sense that something serious was going on. One would think they would've suspected something right from the start, but alas,

only now did they voice their doubts. Furthermore, although they could tell that the situation would escalate, they refused to evacuate and instead chose to wait it out.

The hypnosis had carefully manipulated the student body's mental states in order to shape their overall consensus. Slowly but surely, «The Third»'s group was laying the groundwork for a large-scale phenomenon encompassing the entire school... and all the CRC could do was watch.

At lunch, the five second-years held yet another meeting. Its purpose: to discuss the Record Wipe. Since their efforts were independent of one another, they all frequently forgot to report back on the subject, but today they were making an active effort to talk about it. Not because any one person said they should, but because they knew they were running out of time.

Sure, the track team had emailed them to say they "couldn't take it anymore." And Oosawa Misaki still didn't remember the events of the body-swap or her friendships with the others. And two of the boys suffering the Liberation were reportedly at school, but not in class. And Chihiro and Enjouji had contacted them to confirm that none of the third-years had heard the rumors—only first-and second-years. And Taichi's mother had threatened to interrogate Nagase and his other friends if he kept acting this way. And their classmates were now so panicked, they no longer noticed or cared if he cut class. And something was looming over the entire school—something big—something that excluded the CRC altogether.

But the Record Wipe had sat on the back burner for far too long, and they had no choice.

"So what should we do? Should we set up some way to remind ourselves after the fact?" Taichi asked.

"Sure, if we still have time," Inaba replied. "But if we make the hints too direct, they'll get caught up in the Record Wipe, so we need to be as vague as possible... But at the same time, we can't be *too* vague or it won't work..."

Although the Record Wipe would erase the events of the phenomena, it wouldn't erase every single thing that happened within that timeframe. Thus, their tentative plan was to start with a "safe" memory and leave a trail that

could guide them back to what was erased.

Of the five second-years, Taichi and Kiriyama had firsthand experience regaining lost memories, and it was Kiriyama who spoke up next.

“I knitted little matching dolls for everyone in the club,” she volunteered. “That way, even if I forget that we were friends, I might stumble across them and at least wonder why I made them... Maybe then I’ll remember.”

“Yoooo, that’s incredible!” Aoki exclaimed. “Me, I wrote all our upcoming plans into my calendar. If they’re only erasing the past, they might not think to erase the future, y’know? Then again, I guess I technically *wrote ’em* in the past...”

To prepare for the Record Wipe, the most they could do was try to create opportunities for their future selves to stumble across. But the Record Wipe could erase objects, so they needed to stay out of its range. They needed their objects to be categorized as something that would have existed regardless of the phenomena. Naturally, this was a rather arbitrary guideline. Still, all they could do was craft a plan and hope there was some loophole that would accommodate it.

At first, they hesitated to get started. After all, the second they started taking the Record Wipe seriously, they would essentially be admitting that the threat of memory loss was in fact real. Even Taichi was guilty of this pointless selective resistance, something he sorely regretted.

“Hmmm. You guys are so creative! I’ve—” Nagase began.

But just then, the clubroom door flew open.

“Se-... Se-... Senpai...” Enjouji Shino wheezed as she gasped for breath.

“You’re completely out of shape, you know that?” Uwa Chihiro commented casually. His breathing was elevated, but not to the same extent. “Guys, the Liberation first-years are in trouble. A huge fight broke out, and as you can probably guess, the teachers showed up.”

“Yeah... What he said... The first-years... are in trouble...”

The second-years had tasked Chihiro and Enjouji with keeping an eye on their

Liberated classmates for precisely this reason.

“If there are teachers on the scene, then the fight’s probably settled down by now, right?” Inaba asked, focused only on the most critical part.

“Yeah, probably.”

“Alright then.”

And that was the end of that. No one else had anything much to say.

“Huh...? But isn’t it a huge problem...? Don’t you need to do something...? Or... is this your way of telling us to take care of it ourselves...?!” Enjouji started to panic.

“We’ve got something a lot bigger on our plates right now,” Taichi explained.

“Oh, right... You’re going to lose your memories...”

They hadn’t told the first-years about the schoolwide phenomenon. There was no point in doing so... because neither Chihiro nor Enjouji found the rumors all that strange.

Two vertices of the CRC heptagon had fallen under «The Third»’s hypnosis.

“So you’re just going to turn a blind eye to what’s happening?” Chihiro shot back defiantly.

He had a point, of course, but... his priorities were very different from Taichi’s. Would he feel the same way if he was in their shoes?

“It’s just... We need to be worrying about ourselves right now,” Nagase explained, her tone pragmatic.

“Oh. Right. That makes sense,” Chihiro replied, more calmly this time.

“I... I can’t afford to lose anything, either,” Enjouji chimed in. “That’s why I’m... I’m doing my best to think it through... Oh, but I did manage to come up with one good idea. I’ll get it to you sometime soon.”

The CRC first-years were working their butts off, trying to combat not only the two separate phenomena but the Record Wipe as well.

Unfortunately, the same couldn’t be said of the second-years.

As the end of their lunch period approached, the seven friends filed out of the clubroom. But on their way back to their respective classrooms, a boy came charging at them at full speed, his expression one of abject terror. It took them a second to recognize him as one of the first-years facing the Liberation.

“Hey, what’s wrong?!” Chihiro shouted, his tone uncharacteristically compassionate.

Then the boy came to an abrupt stop—whether in response to Chihiro’s question, it wasn’t clear.

“Gah...!” The momentum sent him stumbling forward a few more steps, and then he fell to his knees.

“A-Are you feeling sick? Is it ‘controlling you’ again?” Enjouji asked as she rushed to his side.

“I just... wanted to run away... to get the hell out of here,” he mumbled, hanging his head. “And then it struck me, and my body started moving on autopilot, and...”

A drop of liquid fell from his face to the hallway floor. Had that sprint worked up a sweat, or—?

“Please... I can’t take this anymore...!”

No, he wasn’t sweating. He was crying.

And so Nagase, Kiriyama, and Taichi returned to Class 2-B. When they arrived, the whole room was gossiping about all sorts of rumors. Fujishima, Nakayama, Watase, Setouchi, Miyagami, Sone—*everyone*.

No one hassled the CRC for information anymore; there was too much going on at this point. Likewise, the CRC didn’t bother any of them, either; the situation had snowballed to the point that they could no longer handle it.

Only one person sat perfectly still, staring into space amid the chatter: Kurihara Yukina. Out of nowhere, she flinched. Then she looked around the room.

“Hah... Great... Not again...”

Scoffing, she stared up at the ceiling and rested an arm over her eyes. But

though it was clear to them that she had switched bodies, not a single one of them approached her. Not Taichi, not Nagase, not even Kiriyama.

They were at their limits just dealing with their own problems.

If there were any warning signs, the CRC failed to notice them.

They had already tuned out the rest of the world.

And by the time they tuned back in, the students of Yamaboshi High School had vanished.

■□■□■

"They *vanished?* That's absurd," Inaba muttered, and Taichi was in complete agreement.

After school, the five second-years met up in the clubroom while Chihiro and Enjouji were taking care of their own business. An hour later, Nagase got tired of sitting around thinking about things, so she left to go look around campus—only to immediately come scrambling back. Panicked, she led them all out of the Rec Hall building onto the athletic field, where they found... absolutely no one. Not a single soul. The people who should have been there were gone.

Here at the tail end of the school year, it was normal for the majority of students to go straight home, with no club activities to attend to. But that didn't mean there were zero clubs operating right now; plus, a handful of students generally liked to stay behind to study or just chat with friends. And yet those people were nowhere to be seen.

But when they walked through the school building, they found teachers in the staff room and third-years in the library and study rooms. At this, Taichi heaved a sigh of relief. For a minute he thought they'd wandered into some alternate reality, but of course they hadn't. He was just paranoid.

They decided to speak to some of the third-years, just in case.

"Something different about today? Hmmm... It feels weirdly quiet, I guess?"

Next, they flagged down one of the teachers: Tanaka, the social studies teacher.

"The first-and second-years are gone? What's so odd about that?"

No matter who they asked, they all shrugged it off.

Admittedly it wasn't that unheard of for the younger students to take off early at this time of year, but... *would they really leave their bookbags behind?*

Every classroom they peeked in on had papers and writing implements strewn all over the desks, as if their inhabitants had been spirited away in the middle of their daily lives. But even when they explained this, the teachers still wouldn't budge.

The answer they got was always the same: "These things happen."

No! No, they really don't!

Here in this altered world, there was no one left with whom they could have a reasonable conversation. And they knew who was behind it. The only ones unaffected— "Ah... Things have gotten rather interesting, it seems..."

—were «Heartseed» and its ilk.

"The students are still at this school... just in a separate space... I wish I could have realized sooner, but... I'm afraid this caught me entirely off-guard..."

The five second-years of the CRC stood in the now-empty Class 2-B, three rows away from «Heartseed», who stood near the door. "Surreal" didn't even begin to describe it.

"They're not here! What 'separate space' are you talking about?" Nagase asked, her voice dry.

"They're not *here*, but they *are* at this school... They have simply been isolated from the rest of your world in a... Well... Let's call it an 'Isolation Zone,' I suppose... Yes, let's call it that... Having names for these things makes it all so much easier..."

Supposedly the missing students were confined within this "Isolation Zone" at an alternate Yamaboshi High School that was an identical clone of the real thing. But because they were trapped in a completely isolated space, no calls or emails could get through to people back in the real world.

Taichi laughed in spite of himself. It sounded like something out of a freaking *fairytale*. How could they entertain this absurdity?

“You’re really challenging my suspension of disbelief with this one, buddy. The fuck are you talking about this time?” Inaba hissed.

“Yes, «The Third»’s group was planning this all along... No wonder it took so long to prepare...”

“Planning *what*, exactly?” Kiriyama demanded.

“It seems we can safely say... that their main motive is indeed to erase all your memories...”

They were under attack, and their enemy was an entity they’d barely even spoken to. It all felt so unreal... and yet that only heightened Taichi’s sense of impending danger. Perhaps it was naive of him to think a true enemy would bother revealing itself to him at all.

“I was wondering why they would induce the body-swap and the Liberation with other groups, place the rest under hypnotherapy, and spread those rumors... Well, here’s our answer... Oh, right... You remember how I told you that you’ve spent a comparatively long time under the effects of the phenomena... and therefore, erasing that history would be a massive undertaking...?”

Granted, «Heartseed»’s posture was still as sluggish as ever, but... considering the current circumstances, it seemed unusually chatty. Almost like it was enjoying this.

“Well, not only would undoing those events require a lot of time... but they would need a *place* in which to do it... The five of you interacted with many, many people during those past phenomena... thus it would require a lot of minute adjustments... for a normal Record Wipe, anyway... but I imagine they... figured they’d go the extra mile... while they were at it...”

“Man, I’m so freakin’ tired of this. Can you just get to the point?” Aoki was usually a patient guy, but apparently even he had reached his limits.

“Right... As you wish, Aoki-san... Basically... they have created this Isolation Zone... for maximum entertainment value... and on top of that... I imagine they plan to... erase all the affected memories of every single person who came into contact with the phenomena.”

Erase everyone's memories? For "maximum entertainment value"?

"What are you talking about...? Why would they... do that... to the whole school...?" Taichi mumbled absentmindedly.

"Why, indeed..." «Heartseed» replied. "Admittedly, I can think of at least one hypothesis..."

Just then, they heard the *clack, clack* of footsteps walking down the hall.

This was the floor with the second-year classrooms, and as such, they should have had total privacy. But now there was one aberrant noise cutting through the silence: *clack, clack, clack.* A sound only high heels could make.

Then this third party came into view and interrupted their conversation to announce: "It's because you people are so interesting... as is «Heartseed»... so maybe everyone else will be interesting, too... I guess...?"

It was «The Second», piloting the lethargic, tottering body of Hirata Ryouko, their math teacher, straight into the classroom. Apparently, it had listened in on their conversation.

Now they were face to face with not just one, but *two* supernatural beings. In the same room. At the same time. This was... new, to say the least.

The CRC stared in shock at «The Second» as «Heartseed» grimaced.

"What's the matter...? It's me, <The Second>...?"

Perhaps it felt this introduction would "solve" the silence.

"Could you please stay out of this...?" «Heartseed» replied.

"What the...? But I've helped you so much...? And you wouldn't have learned half those things if I hadn't betrayed them... right...?"

«Heartseed» averted its gaze and fell silent. What were they talking about? What was going on between these two?

"Anyway, back to the conversation...?" «The Second» turned back to the CRC like it was suddenly in charge of the discussion. "Since we have to erase this stuff either way... and it's going to take a lot of time... and we have to create this giant empty space... we may as well have a little fun with it, right...? That

was our line of thought.”

So, since they had to do the work regardless, they figured they’d make the most of it.

“Wait, but... that’s...”

Having recovered from the shock of «The Second»’s entrance, Taichi’s brain started firing on all cylinders.

So this was all... the CRC’s fault...?

He looked around the room—at the notebooks and textbooks left open, at the open water bottles, at the uncapped tube of Chapstick rolling around on the floor. From the looks of it, these students were whisked away right in the middle of their everyday lives. And although the CRC apparently caused it to happen, they were left behind, powerless. They weren’t even permitted to suffer the consequences of their actions.

“Hold on a minute,” Inaba said suddenly, as though the idea only just occurred to her. “Whose side are you even on? You said you ‘betrayed them’?”

“I am one of them... but I’m helping your side, too. At the end of the day... all I care about... is seeing what I want to see...?”

Evidently the «Heartseeds» had something of a complicated relationship with one another. Not that the CRC especially cared.

“Right now, for example... I only came here out of curiosity... Uh oh. Looks like I have to go...?”

First it crashed their party, and now it was leaving early. Typical.

“I guess we’ll never know where you truly stand, will we?” Inaba muttered bitterly.

“I’m leaving now, but before I do... I want you to know... speaking as someone who is both enemy and ally... everything you heard just now was the truth... Ta-ta...?”

And with that, «The Second» sauntered off.

After that unforeseen interruption, the conversation went back to square

one. All they knew for sure was that «Heartseed» and «The Second» didn't appear to be working together to deceive them. They were being honest.

"The students trapped in the Isolation Zone—how are they doing right now?" Inaba asked on the supposition that everything they'd heard was true, though she never once said she actually believed any of it.

"The Isolation Zone is separate from the real world... therefore the other people in their lives cannot interfere... and so there is no need for any hypnotherapy... because the fact of the matter is, they can get away with anything in there... so I imagine things must be... fairly interesting..."

Taichi thought back to the rumors he'd overheard—the ones they'd only found out about well after everyone else.

Trapped.

Unable to escape.

Strange phenomena.

Spanning the course of several days...?

"Is this going to last for multiple days?" Taichi asked without thinking.

"Well... probably...?"

"And this won't impact the real world? At all?" Nagase asked faintly.

"I'm sure some might notice their absence, but other than that... not really, no..."

"Seriously?" Taichi blinked.

"Yes... No matter what happens in there... it'll all be gone by the time they get back..."

So, what, it doesn't matter?

"It's all going to get erased... All the memories of events that took place in there... as well as... all of the events caused by your phenomena here in the real world..."

Wait, what? It felt like that last part was new information.

“When you say ‘all the events that took place in there,’ you’re talking about the events that happen in the Isolation Zone... right?” Taichi asked tentatively.

“That is correct...”

“Okay, and what was the thing you said after that?”

“All of the real-world events you indirectly caused under the influence of the phenomena... Those will be erased too, remember?”

Yes, we’ve been over that.

“Naturally... this means they would need to erase memories from people other than yourselves...”

Of course the Record Wipe would erase their memories. After all, it wouldn’t be enough to erase *just* the CRC’s; they would have to be completely thorough or else the events wouldn’t truly be “erased” at all. Taichi understood that; it made logical sense. But while it should have been ever-present in the back of his mind, only now did he truly grasp it.

The Record Wipe was going to erase chunks of other people’s lives. That was a clear, indisputable fact. *No man is an island*, as they say; at some point along the line, their paths had intersected in an impactful way. So if the CRC’s history was erased, so too would that ripple effect disappear.

But until this very moment, it hadn’t occurred to him that he was carrying those other lives on his shoulders. Instead, he’d been looking at the world through a very narrow lens. He’d deluded himself into thinking that the fight against the Record Wipe only affected the CRC—that the fight was happening on *their* turf, within *their* context.

But that wasn’t enough. He lacked awareness of the connection between himself and the rest of the world... and to an overwhelming degree.

No man is an island. Humans needed each other to survive, and as a result, they made an impact on each other’s lives. Only now did it finally, *finally* sink in.

“What if... we had used our phenomenon powers to help two people start dating? Would that couple... lose those memories?” Taichi asked, his voice shaking.

“Yes, they would... Well, to be precise, priority is given to whatever fits best... and since there’s a chance they would have dated regardless... I can’t say for sure...”

History was going to be rewritten. Lives were going to change. All the events that only happened because of the phenomena would be erased in order to return the world to the way it “should have been”... and in a sense, it was the right thing to do.

But was it really right to erase the past? Without that foundation, what would they stand on?

“Well then, what are we supposed to do about *their* lost memories? It doesn’t matter how many precautions we put in place for ourselves if it won’t help them!”

“Allow me to go into more detail... The Record Wipe does not erase the memories of each person individually... but rather, the ‘records’ themselves... As it happens, *your* memories are centered upon the phenomena much more so than anyone else’s... hence they take precedence... This is key...”

“So... wh-what are you gettin’ at?” Aoki asked, panicked.

“What I’m saying is... if you succeed in keeping your memories here in the real world... some of them may be able to piggyback off of that success... and regain their own memories...”

“But not all of them?” Nagase asked in a low voice. It was hard to tell if it was safe to get their hopes up.

«Heartseed» let out a sigh. “Anyway, it’s interesting they didn’t take you all to the Isolation Zone with the rest... Evidently they don’t see the point in making you participate... since it’ll all be over before you know it...”

“It’ll all be over?” Kiriyama repeated in a flat, emotionless voice.

“What I mean to say is... the Isolation Zone experiments will all come to an end... and everyone will return to a world that no longer remembers us.”

At the same time, almost everything they’d built thus far would vanish.

“But in your case... based on the effort you put in here in the real world... it’s

possible you'll make it out with your memories intact... Not like they put you in the Isolation Zone, after all..."

«Heartseed» was dangling a carrot under their noses... but Inaba ignored it.

"How much time do we have before this Isolation thing is over?"

"All I can say is... not long... At least, I think it's safe to assume so..."

Evidently the students would only be away in the Isolation Zone for a short period of time—so short, the rest of the world wouldn't even notice. Perhaps time passed at a different speed inside the Zone. But this only raised more questions: "So... normal people won't notice that the isolated students have vanished, right? If so, then... why did *we* notice?" Taichi asked. After all, if the CRC had managed to notice, then maybe there was still a chance.

"Oh... That's just because it has less of an effect on people who have past experience with us... For example, those who have endured our phenomena, or those whose bodies we have possessed..."

Just when he thought he found a ray of hope, it was snuffed out right in front of his eyes.

"...So there's nothing we can do?" Inaba asked plainly. They were at a total loss, and all they could do was ask «Heartseed» for the answer.

"Not from the outside, no..."

"Then what about from the inside? We could go into the Isolation Zone with everyone else, right?" Nagase pressed.

All of them were desperate. Desperate for the smallest hint of a possibility.

"With some brute force, yes, I imagine you could enter the Isolation Zone... and from there, you might be able to accomplish something... but to do so would be risky... It is a space they designed to their own liking... so there is no telling what you may find there..."

And yet their friends were trapped inside right this very minute.

"For that matter, what are you people even planning to do...? You're running out of time... You must focus on creating a safety net for your memories... here in the real world..."

“But everyone else is trapped in there,” Taichi replied automatically.

“You want to... save them...? Well, I suppose you could... if you really tried... but if any trouble were to break out within the Isolation Zone... an emergency shutdown could still occur...”

“Wh... So they’re *still* in danger of forgetting their friends?!” Inaba stammered.

“Yes, but... that being said... you have no reason to worry about them... I’ll try to pull some strings on my end or something... but only for my own sake... After all... they stand to lose much, much less than you do...”

Comparatively speaking, sure. But if their friends were in danger, then wasn’t it their duty to come to their rescue? Or... would the act of protecting their own memories then protect other people’s memories in turn...?

Maybe... they had no reason to put themselves at risk...?

“My point is, don’t worry about other people’s business... Remind yourself that no one will be harmed, and please... just focus on what you need to be doing.”

And so «Heartseed» left.

Out of all of the things they’d been asked to believe thus far, this was by far the hardest... and yet the students didn’t return to the classroom.

No one gave the command, but nevertheless, the five of them split up to check the first-and second-year classrooms. Then they checked all the neighboring rooms. But no matter where they looked, there wasn’t a soul in sight.

As Taichi walked through the school building, the only sound was that of his own breaths. Newly devoid of life, this school now felt far more divorced from reality than any “Isolation Zone” the «Heartseeds» could create. It felt... unsafe. He was frightened.

“Inaba!”

Just then, he spotted Inaba stumbling down the hallway up ahead. But right as he approached her—her body pitched sideways.

“*Inaba!*”

On reflex, he dashed over and caught her right before she hit the ground.

“Inaba, what’s wrong?! Are you okay?!” Searing panic raced through him.

“Uh... Yeah, I’m fine. Let go of me.”

But Taichi wasn’t ready to let go of her just yet. Not after that. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Got a little dizzy, that’s all. There’s just... too much happening.”

Her voice was weak, and her slender body was trembling. For Taichi, this was too much to bear. His chest ached. It killed him to see the love of his life so frightened; he wanted nothing more than to put a smile back on her face as soon as possible.

After everything that had happened lately, his heart was just so worn out. And he imagined everyone else probably felt the same way.

“Wanna go home?” he asked—without thinking, as if it was the most natural conclusion in the world.

Supposedly the Isolation Zone was unsafe... but they weren’t part of it. They couldn’t do anything about it, and even if they could, it’d only be a drop in the bucket.

Besides, there was already something worth protecting right here in the real world. Right here in his arms.

His cell phone buzzed. He checked the screen; it was his little sister, Rina.

I might be home a little later than usual today. But you better be there when I get back!

Lately his family had started nagging him to stop staying out late and come straight home after school. For the most part he’d ignored them, but that didn’t mean they weren’t important. He needed to arrange things with Rina so she could potentially help him regain his memories after the Record Wipe; plus, he wanted to sit down with her and just talk. After all, this was quite possibly the only chance he’d get.

Of course, he planned to put his full effort into preventing that from being the case. Yes, there was still a lot left to do here in the real world. Even if fantastical events were taking place in a separate dimension beyond all mortal control... Taichi had his own business to take care of.

“Yeah... Let’s go home,” Inaba muttered after a moment.

At some point after that, the five of them had met up again to discuss... something, but Taichi couldn’t remember what. All he remembered was that it was very cut-and-dried, with no bickering.

Then the five members of the CRC left the school building, walked off campus, and headed home.

+++

“I dunno... Are you *sure* you’re doing this right...? Letting them make the call?”

“Well... I don’t think I have much of a choice...”

“You think it’ll work, though...?”

“As long as I’m there to steer the ship... it will be impossible for them to veer off course...”

“Hmmm... I know you’ve got your own prep work to do... using other powers... or something like that...? But is it safe to leave the rest to... fate? Chance?”

“Not all of it will be left to chance, no... So yes, I’ve got a bit more to try to accomplish... but...”

“But what...?”

“Well... in the end... the fact of the matter is, all I can really do is pray...”

“*You*...? Are going to *pray*...? Hee... heehee... That’s so *strange*...”

“Given the current circumstances... I’d appreciate it if you didn’t point and laugh...”

+++

It happened when I was on my way home from elementary school. All of a

sudden, I started feeling sick—but in a super weird way, and I really, *really* didn't like it. All I remember is a thick, syrupy sensation in my head... Almost like my body was being vacuumed away to another dimension...

"A high school...? Is this my brother's school?"

At the same time, for some reason a vision of Yamaboshi High School came into my mind.

Standing on the sidewalk, I readjusted my grip on my backpack straps and let out a sigh. Clearly I was really tired... I needed to get home...

And yet... for some reason, I couldn't stop thinking about it. Something bad was happening at my brother's school—I could *feel* it.

Mind you, normally I would've just written it off as some silly paranoid delusion. But lately, Taichi's been acting really weird... and Reika-san told me that Iori-san was acting weird, too. Maybe it was just my intuition, but... somehow I knew something was going on with them.

I pulled out my wallet and checked its contents. Just enough for a train ride there and back. Part of me was reluctant to spend the last few coins of my allowance... but I brushed that aside and headed for the train station.

By the time I came back to my senses, I had already deboarded at the transfer station. *What am I doing?*

A few minutes ago I felt drawn to that place, convinced that something was going on there... but now that I thought about it, maybe it wasn't actually that big of a deal. Instead, I was kind of embarrassed that I got so worked up over nothing.

Nothing weird happening at all.

"...Maybe I should go home..."

It felt weird and a little scary, wearing my school uniform in a crowd of people at a place I normally never went. Maybe that was silly of me, since I would've been fine in my street clothes.

I looked up at the digital timetable to see what time the Yamaboshi-bound train was coming. Then I checked to see when the return train would show up.

There were no delays listed; both would be here in just a few short minutes.

What do I do now?

If one of them was running drastically late, I could've let that make up my mind for me... but no. Caught between two choices, I was paralyzed.

Maybe I should just go home. It's cold out here, and it'll get dark soon... It's not safe for a cute little girl like me to walk around town at night... Yeah, maybe I...

But before I could talk myself into leaving, I spotted the last person I expected to see. In her white clothes, she stood out prominently among the rest of the crowd.

"...Reika-san?"

"Hmm? ...Rina-chan?" Sure enough, it was Iori-san's mom, Reika-san. "Are you all by yourself? Where's your mother?"

I was scared she'd get mad at me if I said I was here for no reason at all, so I blurted out a dumb excuse. "I, um... I just... needed to go to Yamaboshi, so..."

"Do you have some business to take care of there?"

"Uhhh... well..." *Oh gosh, what do I say?!*

But right as I started to panic, Reika-san said the very words I wanted to hear: "Why don't we go together?"

Passing through the turnstiles, we stepped out onto the street and headed for Yamaboshi. Lucky for me, I still remembered how to get there after the time we came to see the Culture Festival. It was a pretty short walk.

"The truth is... I was thinking about paying a visit to Yamaboshi myself. When I called and spoke to the parents of the kids in Iori's club, and they *all* told me their children were acting strangely, I started wanting to investigate."

"Oh, so that's where you were headed when I ran into you?"

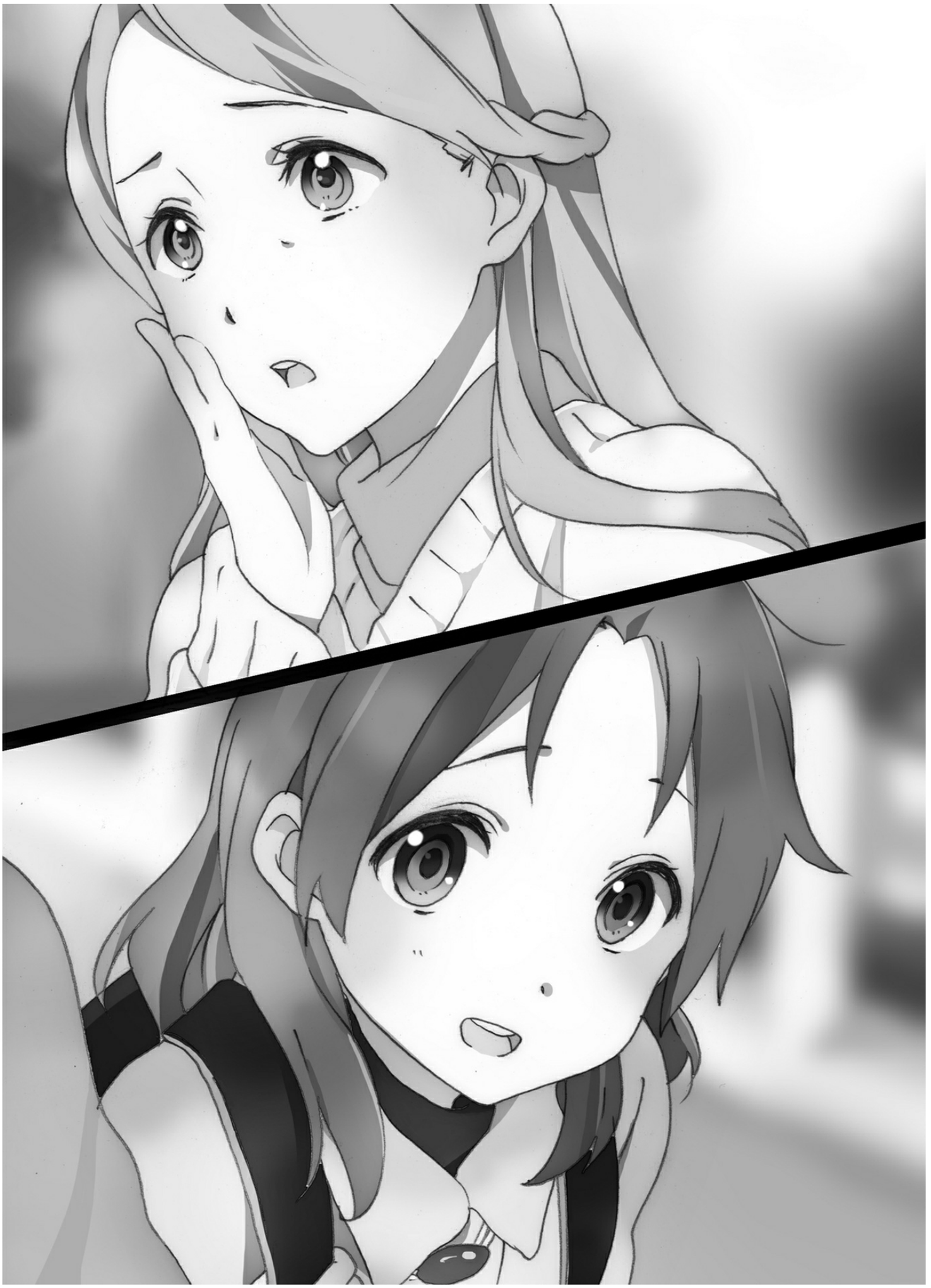
"Not exactly. I wasn't quite planning to go there in person, but I *was* thinking about making a phone call to the staff room to speak with a teacher. But then you came along... and I'm so glad you did."

Likewise, I felt a lot more comfortable now that I had a partner in crime. Best case scenario, maybe I could tag along with her and get the chance to talk to a teacher about Taichi.

“But maybe it’s not my place to hover over her at school... What do you think? I never know what to do in times like these... I’m just not sure what’s best for my daughter...”

“I’m only in sixth grade, so I’m not sure, either.”

“Oh, right.”



Reika-san seemed to have a bit of a ditzy side to her, but all the same, it was clear just how much she cared for her kid.

“Right now, I just hope that... nobody’s getting bullied,” I muttered in a small voice. “Anyway, here we are at the front gates.”

Like I said, it was a short walk.

“Well then, let’s head in.”

Reika-san passed briskly through the gates, and I followed suit.

But as soon as I set foot on campus... a trickle of dread dripped down my spine as a weird, sticky sensation engulfed my whole body. I felt so heavy... and my head ached... Why did this feel so familiar...?

“...kay? Are you okay, sweetheart?”

“Huh-wha?!”

The next thing I knew, Reika-san’s pretty face came into view.

“You look a bit ill. Are you feeling alright?”

“Oh... Yeah, I’m okay...”

After a few moments, the sick feeling started to fade. What *was* that?

Regardless, we cut across the athletic field and headed for the main school building.

“Hey, um... I don’t see anyone...”

It was eerily quiet, almost like a ghost town. Er... ghost school, I guess.

Together, the two of us walked in through the front entrance.

“Let’s see... Where’s the staff room...?”

Reika-san stared at the map near the door. As for me, I was more worried about something else.

“Uh, Reika-san? This place really feels deserted. Isn’t that... kind of weird? Did everybody go home early today?”

Or was Yamaboshi always this quiet after school? It was downright spooky.

“Seems normal to me.”

Normal? Really?

We arrived at the staff room without encountering a single person on the way... but inside, there were teachers at their desks, working like normal. *Thank goodness!* I never thought I’d be so relieved to see fluorescent lighting. It felt like proof that we were still in a normal world with people in it.

“Hi there... I’m Nagase Iori’s mother. I’d like to speak with either the advisor for Class 2-B, or the supervisor for the Cultural Research Club... Actually, on second thought, I seem to recall they’re the same person...”

As Reika-san made her request, I hid behind her and listened quietly. Now that I thought about it, it wasn’t that common for a parent to come storming into their child’s school... and it *definitely* wasn’t common for a little sister to do it. Was I acting weird? Belatedly, I felt a little embarrassed to be here.

“Oh, yes! Hello there, Nagase-san. Haven’t seen you since the parent-teacher conference. You’re looking lovely, as always!”

One of the male teachers walked over. He didn’t look that old, but at the same time, he kinda talked like a creepy old geezer.

“Ah, and I see you’ve brought a cute little lady with you! I didn’t realize you had a younger daughter.”

“Oh, no, this is Yaegashi-kun’s little sister.”

“Well now, that’s an odd pairing if I ever saw one. Here, have a seat... Man, it’s weirdly quiet today, isn’t it?”

The man who directed us onto the (unsurprisingly) empty visitors’ sofa was none other than Gotou Ryuuzen-sensei. He was both advisor to Taichi’s class *and* supervisor of his club. *So this is the guy they call “Gossan”!*

“So, what brings you here today? Nagase-san doesn’t seem like she was raised by helicopter parents, so I’m hoping it’s something sane and reasonable.”

He was honest to an almost rude degree. I didn’t realize grown-ups were allowed to be like that. But Reika-san was unruffled by his comments. Instead, she slowly and calmly explained her worries about Iori-san—that she was

coming home late, that she seemed concerned about something, that she mentioned she was in some kind of trouble, that it seemed to involve her club, that she had acted strangely in the past, that this all seemed to apply to the other members of the club.

"And... and my brother's been really struggling with something lately... It's not the first time he's acted like this, but all the other times weren't quite this bad. And when I try to ask him about it, he just says it's 'none of my business'..."

I was really nervous talking to a grown-up I'd never met before, but I did my best. Thankfully, Gotou-sensei looked me in the eyes, listened, and nodded intently. *Maybe he's actually a really good person.*

"She's never home... and when she is, she always steps outside to make phone calls," Reika-san continued.

"She doesn't have a secret boyfriend, does she? Okay, bad joke. Sorry."

There's a fine line between "casual" and "rude," Sensei—and you're starting to cross it. This is no time to joke around!

"Anyway... I can see where you're coming from," Gotou-sensei continued, returning to a more serious tone. "They've been dealing with some kind of serious problem, and for quite a while now."

So serious, even this clown managed to notice.

"But me personally, I've chosen to sit back and let them do their thing."

"Are you sure that's the right choice? As their teacher? As their guardian?" Reika-san pressed intently.

"In my view, yeah, it is. Sure, there are some things that we adults will need to step in and solve for them, but for the most part, it's better to let them figure things out on their own as much as possible. And if they make mistakes as a result? Good for them."

"You think mistakes are *good?*" I asked. The conversation was getting kind of complicated, but I was doing my best to follow along.

"Making mistakes is how people learn. If you ask me, kids ought to get into as much trouble as they can while they're still young... Well, within reason, of

course! Ain't that right, little lady?"

For a guy who didn't look that old, he sure talked like a grandpa. Only grandpas said "little lady."

"But... I'm just so worried," Reika-san repeated. *Parents sure do worry about their kids a lot.*

"Being family is a lot more complicated than it appears at first glance. You care about them, so you want to help them... but if you help them too much, they'll never be able to leave the nest."

Leave the nest? Will I have to do that, too?

"Eventually you have to let go, ma'am. Try to have a little more faith in her. She's a very capable girl—I know that for a fact."

"I do understand what you're saying. Really. But... I'm just afraid she'll make the kind of mistake that can never be undone. You see, I wasn't always such a good mother, and... there were times in the past that I was too hands-off with her. So now I'm just... terrified that she's too far gone..."

"But she has you, right? She has a place she can always call home."

Leaving the nest didn't always mean staying gone.

"Basically, the best thing you can do for her as her mother is to leave the door open for her to come back anytime... Uh, hello? Ladies? Am I being too obtuse here? Should I stop talking now?"

He wasn't classy or polished... but he was still an incredible teacher.

"No, it's not that at all. I think you've really opened my eyes."

And unless I was seeing things, a hint of color had returned to Reika-san's perfectly porcelain skin.

When we left the staff room, the rest of the building was ice-cold—but not in a wintery sort of way. It was just... indescribably strange.

"While we're here, should we stop by their classroom?"

"D-Don't you think this place feels kind of weird, Reika-san? And another thing: Are you sure we're allowed to wander around the school if we're not

students here? I hear they've gotten really strict about that kind of thing."

"You're rather precocious for a sixth grader, aren't you, Rina-chan? Well, don't worry. We'll be fine."

"H-How can you be sure?!"

As we walked, we finally caught sight of two other people.

"L-Look! Students! Wait... Do I know them from somewhere...?"

"Ch-Chihiro-kun! Doesn't the school feel kind of weird?! It does, right! It totally does! Even weirder than your face!"

"What does my face have to do with anything?! And quit yanking on my clothes, Enjouji!"

It was Enjouji-san and Uwa-san, squabbling with each other. They were my brother's CRC kouhai.

"Th-There are suspicious people over there, Chihiro-kun!"

"Suspicious? Looks like a normal mother-daughter pair to me... Wait, what the...?"

Uwa-san seemed to recognize me.

"H-Hi there... I dropped by to take care of some business, so here I am..."

"Oh, it's Rina-chan!" Enjouji-san exclaimed.

I first met these two when the CRC came over to hang out at our house.

"Oh, and this is Iori-san's mom."

"Iori-senpai's *mom?!* N-Nice to meet you! I'm Enjouji Shino! Iori-senpai's a really great club president, and, umm...!"

"I'm Uwa. Likewise, I'm also a club member."

"Hello there. Thank you for looking after my daughter," Reika-san replied, bowing to each of them.

"So, er, what brought you here?" Uwa-san asked. He seemed a bit tense.

"I noticed that Iori... well, the whole club, really... You all seemed to be struggling with something, so I wanted to speak to a teacher about it," she

explained.

The two older kids flinched like they were busted.

“But instead, what I got was some very salient advice,” Reika-san continued warmly.

The older kids both heaved a sigh of relief.

“I admit, Nagase-san and the others *do* seem to be in a rough spot lately. They have a lot to deal with, and we only ever hear about it secondhand... although I get the feeling there are things they’re keeping from us so we won’t panic.”

“Y-Yeah... Plus, they’re keeping us at arm’s length to ‘serve as their support team’ or whatever...”

What are they talking about?

“A-Anyway, if you could just be there for Iori-senpai when she needs you, I’d really appreciate it!” Enjouji continued, bowing politely.

“Hold it, Enjouji. Now that I think about it, we’re only going to scare them if we keep talking about this.”

“Oh... R-Right...”

“I don’t really get what’s going on, but don’t worry! I’ll always be there for my big brother!” I announced, since I could tell that they cared about Taichi and the rest of the club.

The two older kids paused and whispered to each other like best buds. Then they turned back to us.

“While you’re here, could we ask a favor of you two?” asked Uwa-san, who was pretty handsome now that I got a good look at him.

“C-Could you guys pass these along to them? We ordered them a while ago, but we only just picked them up today. Let them know we’re pretty confident it’ll help.”

Enjouji-san had a cute “little sister” vibe to the way she spoke. She handed a vial of little black lumps to me, then a second to Reika-san.

“You want me to give this to Taichi?”

“Yeah. He’ll know what to do with it... I think...”

“And I’m guessing I’ll give mine to Iori, then.”

“We were planning to hand them out ourselves, but apparently everyone already left school for the day.”

“Taichi, too?” Given his recent behavior, it was unusually early.

“Well then, maybe we’d better run along ourselves,” Reika-san suggested.

“Okay!” I nodded.

Right before we parted ways, we traded contact info with Uwa-san and Enjouji-san with the request that they get in touch if anything dire happened to their CRC senpai. *The things I do for Taichi, I swear.*

“Which way is your house, Rina-chan? Now that it’s getting dark, I’d like to escort you home.”

“Oh, you don’t have to do that! Wait... Crap, I forgot to ask them why the school feels weird—”

“—I see the young Yaegashi-san has resisted the hypnotherapy... Ah, of course... Because «The Second» possessed her in the past,” drawled a lazy voice.

A chill ran down my spine and my stomach turned. Whatever it was, it seemed to alter the very air around us.

“Oh. Did you need something, Gotou-sensei?” Reika-san asked, turning to look at it.

But while it definitely *looked* like Gotou-sensei, I knew for a fact that it was something else entirely. How could I tell? No idea. Better question: Why didn’t Reika-san sense anything weird?

“In that case... perhaps little Yaegashi-san here will prove useful to me...”

Then it reached out—to grab my head.

No... just my mind playing tricks on me. We were meters apart, after all. It couldn’t reach me from that far away. And yet... it felt like its feelers were wriggling their way into my brain.

Images appeared in my mind... Sounds, smells, tastes... Like something was cramming sensory information into my head. It was so much, all at once—so dense, it all blended together in a dark swirl... a senseless, formless mass...

No, wait. I could make out something—just barely. It was all fuzzy, and yet the words hit me all at once. The truth replayed on fast-forward, shifting around me like a kaleidoscope.

Bodies, swapped. Desires, liberated. Age, regressed. Sentiments, transmitted. Phantoms, projected. Dreams, envisioned.

There were so many phenomena. So many threats. So many problems. All of it extraordinary. And it was all crashing down on my brother. He endured, and endured, and endured, and endured, right to the very end—*good for you, Taichi!* But now it was... going to... disappear?

It was all going to cease to exist. The slate would be wiped clean, never to be restored. It was really, really sad... I really, really wanted to cry. *You can't just erase everything that happened! That's not fair to Taichi!*

All at once, a torrent of emotions washed over me. I couldn't breathe... I was drowning... My mind was fading...

"That's strange... I just wanted to get little Yaegashi-san up to speed..."

"R-Rina-chan?! What's wrong?! Are y—"

Chapter 9: Parting Words

Holed up in his room, Taichi scrawled the past eighteen months' worth of events into a notebook. He pressed down hard on the paper, hoping that even if the writing itself was erased from the paper, maybe the imprints would remain on the sheets beneath.

He didn't want to forget; he couldn't afford to let them make him forget. Even if the Record Wipe succeeded, he could use this to get it all back.

Next, he opened his desk drawer and pulled out a photo album. Most of his photos were on his digital camera and cell phone, but he'd taken the opportunity to have some printed. Something about having physical copies made him feel more secure. After all, physical objects couldn't be erased... right?

The first photo was one taken back in the early days of the Cultural Research Club in their first year of high school. It depicted the five original members, all of them smiling stiffly.

The next was from the trip they went on that summer. Everyone was much more comfortable with each other by then, and the girls looked stunning in their summer clothes.

Why did humans like to leave records? Was it so they could reminisce about the past? Was it so they wouldn't forget?

In their case, *forgetting* was the least of their problems. No, the events of their past were going to be rewritten entirely.

Supposing «Heartseed» was telling the truth, any event that wouldn't have happened without the phenomena was in danger of being erased. Part of him had to wonder if it was really that easy to erase these things... but upon further contemplation, the only real *proof* of the past was in human memories or other physical records, like photos and videos. So if those things were all erased, then it would in essence erase the past itself. Without any physical records or anyone who remembered it happening, it was really no different from never happening in the first place.

Looking at it that way, the Record Wipe was starting to seem... kind of mundane. The only difference was that the Record Wipe would ensure, without a shadow of a doubt, that they would be unable to remember.

The next photo was one taken during the Culture Festival, featuring Kiriyama and Aoki in their *happi* coats. Beside it was a photo commemorating the Culture Festival Special Edition of the Culture Bulletin; Inaba's paparazzi photo stood out prominently on the front page.

If the Record Wipe would erase any interpersonal connections that wouldn't have happened without the phenomena... chances were, that would include the most distant of acquaintances, too. They would forget those people, and so too would those people forget them as well. The CRC would be erased from people's lives... and in turn, they would be no different from the dead.

Taichi had come face to face with his ultimate destiny... and he hated it.

Why was everything so fragile? Was he truly too small and insignificant to leave any kind of impact on the world? Even then, he refused to stop trying. Maybe he didn't have the perfect solution, but he was still going to do everything he could regardless.

Before everything, he needed to protect himself. Himself and the rest of the club. Not that he *wanted* to turn a blind eye to everyone else; he just didn't have a choice, given the danger.

He caught sight of a photo taken during the autumn field trip in their first year, right when his romance with Inaba first began. Then club presentations took place that winter; there were photos of Nagase's high-speed cosplay show, too. Right around then, his romance with her officially met its end... because his relationship with Inaba Himeko officially began.

How could he possibly give up all of that without a fight? The thought filled him with unparalleled despair.

Other people were in danger, too. They were probably suffering just as much as he was. But there were too many of them in total—too many to grasp. And there was nothing he could do to help them. That was what distanced him from other people's struggles.

Whenever he saw people hurting, he could always vividly imagine their pain. But it was only a figment of his imagination, and as such, it carried no weight. There was nothing he could do about it, and so he didn't dig any deeper than surface level. Subconsciously, he didn't feel the need to.

Taichi was so inundated with his own problems, he didn't have the mental capacity to juggle anyone else's. Now more than ever, he understood that the desire to help others was only enabled by security in one's own position.

He flipped through the album.

In the spring, they were joined by two new members; then, in the fall, they had the biggest school trip of their high school careers. There were countless other memories, too—and even if they only lost a handful of them, the rest would still be rendered meaningless as a result.

He turned the page and found a photo of himself with some people he didn't recognize. Whoever they were, they seemed to be good friends with both him and each other. It seemed like a happy moment. But who on earth— Hold on a minute. How the hell could I forget?

Nagase Iori, Inaba Himeko, Kiriyama Yui, Aoki Yoshifumi. They meant so much to him; how could he possibly forget them? It was impossible. Only supernatural forces could cause such a thing.

Frightened, Taichi hastily grabbed his pen and paper and wrote down all of their names, along with a brief explanation of his relationship to each of them. His hand was shaking to the point that it was messing up his handwriting, but he didn't care. Then he tore the paper out, folded it up, and tucked it inside one of his textbooks.

Just then, his cell phone buzzed... but he didn't have time to deal with anyone at the moment. He decided he'd only answer if it was a club member, since it might be important. Then he checked the screen: *Yaegashi Rina*. She wasn't in the CRC, so he didn't answer.

His phone continued to vibrate loudly atop his desk. Ringing... and ringing... and ringing. But Taichi didn't answer it. He was focused on his own world right now; external connections were only a distraction. If he reached over and turned his phone off, he could isolate himself completely... and yet the outside

world still called for him.

But he didn't care. He had enough on his plate as it was. They could reach out to him all they wanted; there was nothing he could do for them... Not even his own little sister...

Taichi answered the phone. Then, a split-second later, he thought: *Wait, what the? Didn't I decide I wasn't answering?*

"T-Taichi? Are you at home?"

"Oh, uh, yeah. What's up?"

Why had he unconsciously picked up the phone?

"W-Well... I'm at school right now—your school, I mean. I'm at Yamaboshi High School."

"Wh-... *Why*...?"

"I'll explain everything later! Anyway, I need you to... come get me. I, um... I saw something. Something really scary. You... You were..."

He could hear her voice shaking on the other end of the line.

"Are you okay?! Where are you specifically?!"

"The nurse's office... Oh, but Nagase-san's mom is here with me, so I'm okay."

There were at least two things about that statement that confused him. "What are you doing in the nurse's office?" As he spoke, he grabbed his wallet and his train pass.

"I got kinda lightheaded... Oh, and another thing! Isn't your school kinda weird? And creepy? There's something wrong about this place—I just know it! I'm scared, Taichi!"

He was still wearing his uniform, so the only thing he needed to put on was a coat. He had the bare minimum he needed. Time to go.

"I'm coming to get you. Wait there, okay?"

He didn't have time for other people... but Rina was his sister. This irrational logic was more than enough to push him forward.

As her older brother, he needed to go to her rescue.

■□■□■

On the way to Yamaboshi, he realized the significance of Rina pointing out the school's abnormal state, so he emailed the rest of the CRC to let them know what was going on. In a postscript, he mentioned that Nagase's mom was there (allegedly) and a few minutes later, he got a call from Nagase herself.

"My *mom?!* Ugh, I'm coming too!"

Meanwhile, Inaba wrote back: I'm curious to see what's so "weird" about it to these outsiders...

She didn't say it outright, but it sounded like she might tag along herself.

Taichi moved against the current of people, students and office workers alike. All of them were simply trying to get home on a winter night.

When he arrived at Yamaboshi, the school was pitch-dark. It wasn't unreasonable for some students to still be on campus at this hour, and yet he couldn't see a light on in any of the windows. Had the teachers already left?

At first he contemplated checking the classrooms to see if the missing students were back, but then he remembered he was supposed to be focusing on his own problems, so he headed straight to the nurse's office.

When he entered the school building, he found only the emergency lights were on. He passed through the darkened halls, flicking on the lights as he went. At last, the nurse's office was in sight.

"T-Taichi?!"

The door opened, and Rina dashed out into the hall. She must have heard him coming, because her timing was perfect. That said, it was *really* surreal to find his kid sister here of all places.

"What in the world are you doing here, anyway? And... are you feeling better?"

She was crying.

"Taichi... *Taichi!*" Sobbing, she shot down the hall and into his arms. "R-Reika-

san... She was just here... She said she'd stay with me until you came to get me... but then a minute ago she just... She just *left!*"

"Well, I'm sure she must've had her reasons, but still... that wasn't very nice of her."

"N-No, it wasn't her fault... She was acting kinda weird," Rina choked. "And all the teachers left at the exact same time as her... and I was all alone, and...!"

Was it a coincidence? Or were they all manipulated by some greater power?

"So what happened? What was it that scared you? Are you sure you're okay?"

Rina was fairly mature for her age, so it was rare to see her quite this upset. It didn't matter how she got here—for now, he simply held her pint-sized body in his arms and squeezed tight. What had she seen here in this emptied husk of Yamaboshi High School?

Suddenly, there was a loud *bang*. He turned and looked in the direction of the sound; he thought he could sense someone else coming down the hallway, but couldn't see anyone.

"Oh, Taichi... You've been through so much!" Rina wailed in a muffled voice, her face buried in his chest. "I'm sorry I didn't notice!"

"What are you talking about?"

"All this time... you've been fighting that *thing*, haven't you? And I was totally clueless the whole time... I'm so sorry!"

"Fighting what thing?"

"It was really hard for you, wasn't it? It must've been. You went through all that crazy stuff over and over and over... and all you could do was wait it out..."

Wait... She doesn't know about «Heartseed», does she...? No. No way. That's just not possible. Who could have told her?

"Rina... Do you know what's been going on with me...?"

"No, I don't! I'm totally clueless!" Rina wailed. Apparently she didn't actually know anything... and yet her emotions were out of control.

"Look, Rina... I don't know what happened to you, but—"

She whipped her head up to look at him, her face damp with tears. “You’re still going through it, aren’t you?!”

He still didn’t understand why she was acting this way, but at the very least, he understood that she was worried about him... and he loved her all the more for it.

“I’m okay, Rina. Your big brother’s right here,” he reassured her softly, as if invoking a lullaby to soothe her.

Admittedly, he wasn’t okay. And admittedly, he’d already vowed not to pretend otherwise. Nevertheless, he said it anyway; after all, it wasn’t really a lie. It was an older brother’s job to be strong for his little sister.

As she continued to sob uncontrollably, he stroked her hair and waited for her to get it all out of her system. Then, gradually, she regained her composure.

“What the heck...? Why am I...?” she murmured, eyes wide, like she’d snapped to her senses. Then her cheeks flushed. “Gah! Get off me!”

From the tone of her voice, she made it sound like his embrace was unwanted.

“Rina, are you sure you’re alright? You kinda lost it for a minute there.”

“Wh-What are you talking about?! I... I’m as confused as you are! First I took the train to Yamaboshi with Reika-san, then we spoke to Gotou-sensei, then we decided to have a look around the classrooms, then we ran into Gotou-sensei again...”

“Huh? Gossan?”

Was it actually Gotou Ryuuzen they spoke to, or... *something else?*

“At first I thought the school was weird... but then *I* got all weird... and there was so much new stuff going through my head... Stuff I didn’t know before... Crazy stuff that happened to you... and it was really hard for you, and... Wait, what am I talking about?”

He didn’t know. He could only make an educated guess. What was she even doing at Yamaboshi, anyway? All he knew was that it sounded like she had a run-in with «Heartseed» or one of its other associates.

“I felt like I should talk to you... but I’m just so confused... All of a sudden I got this urge to check out your school... Then I ran into Reika-san, and when we got here, I could tell something was wrong... Then I almost passed out, so I came to the nurse’s office and called you... But then Reika-san and the other grown-ups got all weird...”

Clutching her head, she grimaced.

“I’m fine, Rina. You don’t have to worry about me. If anything—”

“Yes, I do! Just *let me*, okay?!” she raged. “You don’t have to focus on me all the time! I’m sick of you never talking to me about your problems! And you never talk to me about school stuff!”

Then her anger petered out; evidently she was still struggling to process some things.

“I mean... I get that I probably can’t do anything to help you most of the time, but... it’s just... I... uhhh...” She tilted her head, her eyes darting furtively in all directions. “Okay, whatever! I’m just gonna say it!” Then she took a deep breath and continued softly, “I’ll never forget you, no matter what happens.”

Strangely enough, they were the exact words Taichi wanted to hear most.

“I’ll always be here for you when you need me.”

Here at Yamaboshi, or...?

She looked directly into his eyes. “Because we’re family, and nothing can change that.”

Then there was a pause as her cheeks flushed red.

“Gosh, talk about stating the obvious... Gah, no! It’s even more embarrassing to think it’s obvious! Just... don’t tell anyone I said this, okay?!”

Groaning, she hung her head.

“For some reason I got this feeling that... that you were scared you were gonna forget a bunch of stuff... Rrrrgh, I’m so confused!”

—I’ll never forget you, no matter what happens. I’ll always be here for you when you need me. Because we’re family, and nothing can change that.

How was she able to offer him exactly what he needed to hear with laser precision? It was statistically impossible. Was someone *making* her say it? Perhaps. But even then, she still meant every word of it. After ten-plus years of being her older brother, he knew her well enough to be able to tell that much.

The Record Wipe would erase anything related to the phenomena. As a result, Taichi stood to lose a lot, and to him, it felt like the world was ending.

But it *wasn't* ending.

Even if memories were deleted and events were undone, some things would still remain. He wouldn't lose everything—because some things could never be erased. Things like family ties.

Even if they became estranged, formally disowned each other, fell out of contact for decades, cut all ties and forgot each other, they would still carry the same blood in their veins forevermore.

For as long as humanity persisted, as long as the circle of life continued, no matter what was stolen from them, no matter how hard their lives wore them down—as long as they had each other, they would always have someplace to call home. *Always*.

"Taichi? Are you crying?"

At this, Taichi snapped back to his senses. "What? Yeah, right!"

But truth be told, this was the first time in several days that he actually felt reassured. He'd been on edge constantly, trying to stay on guard at all times, as if the entire world was out to get him. But in the end, there was always a place he could rest... right there beside him the whole time. The answer was just so obvious, he failed to think of it.

Without that little nest there to keep him safe and warm, he never would have lasted against the phenomena as long as he had. He would have broken down a long, long time ago.

But as luck would have it, he had a home. A place to belong. People worth protecting, who would protect him in kind. And that was all he needed.

"Oh, Taichi, you're always biting off more than you can chew," Rina sighed,

patting him on the stomach. “You’d work yourself to the bone if it meant you could help someone.”

“I’d like to think I’m doing better about that these days...”

“It’s not always a bad thing,” she replied. She was starting to sound less like a little sister and more like an *older* sister. “But you need to keep me and Mom in the loop. Don’t shut us out of your life, okay? We’re your family.”

Now she was starting to push her luck.

“Don’t treat us like strangers,” she insisted firmly, sincerely, without giving him any room to argue.

All this time, he’d resented them for “weighing him down” and “getting in his way”... but her sincerity was starting to make him want to rethink his attitude. As she folded her arms haughtily over her chest, he reached out and ruffled her hair.

“Hey! Don’t mess up my hair! God! ...Actually, come to think of it...”

“What’s up?”

“Your club kouhai, Uwa-san and Enjouji-san... They asked me to give you this.” As she spoke, she reached into her pocket. “Let’s see... Wait, where did I put it...? Oh, maybe it’s in my backpack. I’ll give it to you later, then!”

“Whatever it is, please don’t lose it, okay? It might be important.”

“I know, I know!”

It surprised him to learn that she’d encountered Chihiro and Enjouji. Evidently they’d stayed behind at Yamaboshi for some reason... On second thought, knowing them, they were probably searching for a solution to the Record Wipe.

So many people were out there, doing their best, lending their strength to the cause—and all of them were connected. If at any point a tiny seed of hope sprouted among them, it would be passed along the chain until it reached him. All was not lost.

Though he made the decision of his own will, he found himself questioned by others. Rejected by the very people he was trying to help. Interrogated about his secrets. Harassed in his own home. Obstructed every step of the way with

no encouragement like Rina's.

He thought he was powerless. No matter how deeply he cared, life just wasn't that simple. The world was full of limitations, restricting how many things he could juggle at once.

He thought it was impossible. He thought there was no fighting it—that no one was on his side... which meant that at times, they were his enemies. But at other times, they were his allies, too.

Fate brought other people into his life. Sometimes things didn't always go to plan. But it was those restricting elements outside his control that enriched his life in ways he never imagined. Anything within his grasp was a connection in its own right—so were those bonds really chaining him down? Or were chains in fact the strongest bonds of all?

With all these bonds holding him up... lending him their power... maybe he could keep fighting after all. At last, it felt like there was a light in the darkness, illuminating the path forward.

Only a total pessimist would give up now.

"Alright, Rina. Time to go home."

"Yeah... Let's go home, Taichi."

+++

If you'd told me an hour ago that I'd be watching this unfold, I would have laughed in your face.

When Taichi emailed us to tell us his sister was at Yamaboshi, he mentioned that my mother of all people was with her. At first I was annoyed that she was snooping around, but then I realized I was the one who pushed her that far.

Either way, I couldn't sit idly by. For one thing, I didn't want her talking to my teachers about me, but most of all, I couldn't let her wander around the school in its current condition. I was terrified to think she might get caught up in the nightmare.

I told myself I didn't have the mental capacity to worry about anyone else, but my mom was an exception. At the same time, though, I cursed my apparent

inability to fully focus on the CRC.

I told myself I had hit a dead end. That it was all over.

And yet...

“Wait, what the? Guys, they’re coming this way!” I whispered over my shoulder to Inaba Himeko, Kiriyama Yui, and Aoki Yoshifumi. They all snapped to their senses like they weren’t paying attention—apparently they were all lost in thought.

The four of us were hiding around the corner, spying on Yaegashi Taichi and his little sister Rina.

“They’re coming this way?! Then... m-maybe we should go say hi?” Yui suggested.

“We can’t just waltz out and reveal that we were spying on them, dumbass! It’d be weird!” Inaba hissed. “And it’d be even *weirder* to get in the middle of whatever’s going on with them!”

“On one hand, I kinda wanna ask what you mean by ‘weird,’ but on the other hand, I think I already know. I don’t want any part of that,” Aoki joked.

Not that we set out to spy on the Yaegashi siblings, mind you. When Taichi sent me that email about his sister and my mom, I leapt into action. Then I met up with Inaban, who wanted to hear what they thought of the school in its present state. And when we let Yui and Aoki know what we were up to, they joined us.

Then, when Inaba asked Taichi where he was, he wrote back that he was “headed to the nurse’s office,” so we followed suit—and that was when the four of us nearly walked in on this touching brother-sister moment.

After taking everyone’s opinions into consideration, I commanded quietly: “Then let’s get out of here!”

Instantly, the four of us broke into a run, scrambling out through the main entrance. We could have simply run around the side of the building and waited for the Yaegashis to leave, but instead we headed for the front gates.

“What now? Knowing Taichi, he’ll probably want to take Rina-chan home,

right?” Yui asked calmly.

“Nothing we can... really do about that...” Inaba wheezed, entirely out of breath. “We’ve all got... our own business to... take care of, right?”

“Yeah,” I nodded. The brother-sister moment had given me a lot to think about, to say the least. “I want to go home and make sure my mom is okay.” Especially since I’d apparently just missed her.

“Yeah... I should go home too,” Aoki mused.

“Me too,” said Yui.

“Me too, I guess,” said Inaba.

We each had a score to settle.

“Alright then... Let’s go home,” I declared.

“Right.”

“Yeah.”

“Okay!”

+++

When we arrived back at home, it was past 7 PM.

On the way here with Rina, I’d made an important decision. But first, there was a conversation I needed to have.

We were in the living room—the place where I’d spent a great deal of my childhood.

“I know you’ve both been really worried for me lately, and I’m sorry. Things have gotten kinda dicey,” I explained across the dinner table to my mother and sister.

“And now you’ve dragged Rina into it?”

“N-No, Mom! I chose to go there myself!”

“Oho. So you *chose* to stay out past your curfew?”

“Urk...!”

Mom was upset with us for failing to let her know that we'd be coming home late. Granted, it was unacceptable behavior for a teenager, but *especially* for a sixth-grader.

"Anyway... Is that it, or is there more to it?" she asked me.

Normally she kept things casual and lighthearted, but today she was deadly serious. She'd even stopped cooking so she could focus on what I had to say. Fun fact: we were having curry and rice tonight.

"Well... Right now, there are people who are still in danger. Me included."

She nodded silently, encouraging me to continue.

"And I want to do something to fix it."

I'd put my whole heart and soul into this decision.

"It'll put me in a lot of danger, but it's a risk I'll have to take."

"I have no idea what you're even *talking* about! You're being so vague!" Mom shot back, slamming the table. I couldn't deny it, of course.

For a long moment, she sat there in silence, arms folded.

"...But there's a reason you can't go into detail, right?"

She stared at me intently. I couldn't remember the last time we'd held such prolonged eye contact... Not since I became a teenager, at the very least.

"Yeah."

"Is this going to cause a lot of trouble for other people?"

"No... but I'm sure you guys will worry about me."

"Will it cost money?"

"No, no, nothing like that."

"Is it questionably illegal?"

"It's kinda *beyond* legal or illegal, if that makes sense... Yeah, it's not that."

The interrogation continued on and on. But instead of dodging or rebuffing her questions, I answered them sincerely. And as I spoke, I realized something.

I had thought of my family as chains weighing me down—or even as potential enemies. But was that really *their* fault? If I wanted them to be on my side, didn't I owe them the bare minimum effort?

"You keep talking about 'danger' and 'risk.' What kind of risk are we talking about?"

"Long story short, we might lose memories that have sentimental value to us."

"Hmm... So you're trying to defend something, is that it? What, like a school monument or something? You gonna have to duke it out with students from another school?"

"This isn't a battle manga, Mom..."

"I'm just joking."

Not really the time for jokes, but okay.

"You'll come home safe, correct?"

"I'll try."

"And you're not going to chicken out partway through, right?"

"I'm committed."

"Alright then, go for it," she shrugged with a smirk, like it was no big deal. "Do your best. As long as you're committed to your cause, that's all I care about."

Not to be a nerd, but... Damn, my mom's badass. I hope I'll be this cool with my own kids someday.

"As for your father... I guess I'll give him the basic rundown," she mused as she rose to her feet and went back to the kitchen.

"That's it?"

"What, do you have more time to kill? Wanna help me with dinner?"

She was invincible. She always had been, and knowing her, she probably always would be.

Once again, I felt an invisible hand enveloping me... protecting me. This was

my most important human connection—and my greatest source of strength.

“Sorry, I can’t. I gotta get going.” And with that, I rose from my chair.

“Go get ’em, tiger!” she replied like some kind of baseball coach.

I was probably running short on time, so I hurried out of the living room into the hallway— “T-Taichi!” Rina called, breaking her silence at last. “Are you leaving? I don’t know why, but it feels like... like you’re going somewhere far away... You’ll be fine, right? You’ll come home safe?”

Her tone was anxious, and I felt guilty for endlessly scaring her like this.

“It’s okay. I’ll be home before you know it.”

This was a promise I’d need to work hard to keep. She was my precious baby sister, after all. Besides... Rina liked to charge penalty fees.

“I... I’m gonna hold you to that!”

“See you later.”

And so I left the house one more time.

“Good luck! Come home soon!” she insisted sweetly. Now I’d *really* have to hurry home.

“Taichi!” my mother called from the kitchen.

I turned back, expecting some words of encouragement... but what she said next was a thousand times more motivating than any cliché.

“Want me to save you some curry?”

“Yes please!”

■□■□■

Late that night, Taichi arrived back at Yamaboshi High School. It was his home away from home... and it was the place where his story first began.

One would think surely the place would be locked up at this hour, and yet he practically waltzed right in. The place was deserted, and all the lights were off... but the school felt creepy for more than purely mundane reasons.

Likewise, the main building wasn’t locked, either. Did the janitor forget, or...?

Lest he get reckless, he reminded himself of the possibility that someone—or *something*—was here with him. Watching him.

To be on the safe side, he did a full sweep of the first-and second-year classrooms. Some tiny part of him hoped the situation would be magically resolved, but alas, that hope was summarily stamped out. The rooms were still littered with bookbags and other forgotten belongings, as if the human beings who owned those items had been spirited away without warning. Surely someone had to be freaking out about their absence by now, right?

That said, he knew now that not all of them were taken to the Isolation Zone; he'd discovered this when he bumped into a friend on his way to school.

Since he was technically trespassing and didn't want to get caught, he didn't turn any of the lights on. Instead, he could only rely on whatever stray light shone in through the windows as he wandered aimlessly through the building.

He had no set destination in mind, but he *did* have an objective. After all, he knew that as long as he loitered around here, he would eventually encounter—
"My, my, my... I certainly didn't anticipate *this* plot development..."

He wasn't surprised by this, of course. If anything, he had seen it coming a mile away.

The sluggish, lifeless body of Gotou Ryuuzen stood at the end of the hall, possessed by an entity known only as «Heartseed». Beneath the moonlight, its borrowed face looked deathly pale.

Taichi slowly came to a stop in front of it. Now they stood face to face, and no one was here to interrupt their showdown.

"Why are you here, Yaegashi-san...?"

"I decided I can't choose my own safety over theirs. I just can't."

"Seems you've had a rather abrupt change of heart... What brought this on...?"

"My sister opened my eyes to what truly matters."

"Ah, yes, your sister... I didn't break her, did I...?"

"What did you *do* to her, you bastard? Were you trying to manipulate her?"

“No, no... I just tried to feed her a tiny bit of information, that’s all... Though it appears it was too much for her, since «The Second» had possessed her body in the past... I can assure you, I wasn’t trying to ‘manipulate her’... or anything of the sort...”

Since it was a little late in the game for «Heartseed» to start lying, Taichi decided to take it at its word.

“Okay, be honest with me. Are we really going to lose our memories of the phenomena?” he asked, just to be safe.

“How many times must you ask me this...? The answer is yes...”

“It just seems like you’re creating more work for yourselves by erasing them, that’s all. Isn’t it a hassle to make everyone’s memories consistent after the fact? I mean, you’re basically rewriting the world.”

“You appear to interpret this as some... herculean undertaking, but I’m afraid you are mistaken... Think about it... On a global scale, your memories are purely inconsequential... Their absence won’t impact much, if anything...”

“About that, actually...”

To him, the loss of his memories was a critical blow, but to the rest of the world, sure, it was basically nothing. To the rest of the world, a single person was insignificant, and a fraction of that single person’s memories even more so. But these things were connected from all sorts of angles. Chained to each other. Holding it all together.

“Those ‘inconsequential’ events form the foundation this world is built on.”

Looking at it that way, a single person’s memories were in fact *vital*. The world simply wouldn’t exist without the countless moving parts that came together to create it.

“So in turn, protecting those little details actually means protecting the entire world.”

The fight to defend one tiny piece was still a fight to defend the whole thing.

“And when you’re asked to protect the entire world, who could possibly say no?”

Something about his devil-may-care tone reminded him of Inaba, and he chuckled to himself. He wasn't trying to imitate her, of course; he was his own person. But after all the time they'd spent together, they had influenced each other in immeasurable ways.

"That's an interesting way to look at it... If that is what motivates you to protect your memories, then so be it... However... What do you plan to do about everyone else...?"

"Isn't it obvious?"

If it wasn't, he'd simply make it obvious.

"I'm going to protect them, too."

"But their memories have nothing to do with you... Oh, I get it... Is this your martyr side at play...? Your tendency toward self-sacrifice...?"

There were times when «Heartseed»'s superhuman powers of perception made it seem like it could read minds, and yet it didn't seem to understand the first thing about the way his mind worked. Either «Heartseed» was clueless, or Taichi had somehow surpassed the scope of its understanding.

"No. This isn't just about me. This is about more than that."

He wasn't the only person on Earth who cared about retaining his memories. *Everyone* felt that way; it was human nature. And if he didn't want it to happen to *him*, could he really live with the knowledge that he'd let it happen to other people? He sincerely doubted it.

In a way, this was just ordinary common sense, but now he had fully grasped its significance.

"I'm done putting myself on a pedestal."

No more drawing lines in the sand and pretending the other side was fiction. It was time to look at the rest of the world as a part of his own.

"So in other words... their fight is now your fight..."

"Exactly. The world is more than just the things I personally see and hear on a daily basis. Heck, there are things I'll never know about for as long as I live... but they still matter."

The world didn’t cease to exist outside his own scope. There was so much more out there—and in the end, it all tied back to him.

Truth be told, he probably wouldn’t have arrived at this conclusion if he hadn’t paused to re-establish his bonds with the people closest to him. He was connected to them, and they were in turn connected to other people, who were connected to *other* people, and on and on and on. In that sense, he was connected to the entire world.

Looking at it that way, it finally felt real to him. After all, there were only so many degrees of separation between him and the rest of the planet.

“And if it’s *my* world, then I need to do something about it, don’t you think?”

“Seems to me you’ve simply... deluded yourself into feeling that way...”

He couldn’t argue with that. There was no outright need for him to step in and bear the weight of other people’s problems...

“But I was born into this world, so it can’t hurt to care about it, right?”

After all, life had so much more to offer when you looked at it that way.

“Well... yes, I suppose... So what’s your point...?”

«Heartseed» wanted to cut to the chase. And since Taichi wanted to save the world...

“Put me into the Isolation Zone.”

This was where his heroic journey would start.

“...What do you plan to do in there?”

“You said we’d be able to help them from inside, right? So I’ll take up the mantle to protect them. See where that gets me.”

“I cannot guarantee you will be successful... You very well might fail...”

“I guess we’ll find out once I get there, won’t we?”

From the outside, there was no way to tell what was going on, nor what would resolve the situation. But from the inside, surely there was something he could do to help. Was it reckless? Absolutely. Was he overextending himself to stroke his own ego? Inarguably so. But maybe there were some things that

would only ever be within reach if you got up on your tiptoes and made a fool of yourself.

If he wanted to accomplish something beyond his own power, then he would have to push himself past his current limits. Otherwise, he'd never be able to expand them. *Can't know unless you try.*

"Whatever's happening in the world right now, I'm going to fight it... for them, and for myself."

But he couldn't achieve it on his own. After all, no amount of hopes or prayers would get him into the Isolation Zone. That was why he had decided to convert an enemy into a friend.

"So how about it? What do you say we take «The Third»'s gang down a peg?"

His greatest foe would become his strongest ally.

"It'd be a lot more entertaining than letting them get one over on you, don't you think?" he pressed.

«Heartseed» froze perfectly still; its expression seemed to carry the slightest hint of disbelief. Hell, even Taichi couldn't believe what he was saying.

A moment of silence passed, and then «Heartseed» responded at last: "Perhaps it's time I bit the bullet... and took a gamble..."

He couldn't read the emotions behind that statement, if there were any. But oddly enough, he felt a strange sense of camaraderie between the two of them.

There was strength to be found in numbers—as long as he didn't charge in blindly. He'd learned that lesson before. Bravery and recklessness were two very different things; he needed to be responsible and communicate to the rest of his team.

So he pulled out his cell phone and started to type up an email to the rest of the CRC...

+++

Sitting in my inbox was an email from my boyfriend. It was a lengthy one, filled with his thoughts, plans, and decisions. Fascinating stuff, really—he was always a riot. Easily the most impressive man I knew. Of course, I wouldn't have

fallen in love with him otherwise.

This time around, the crisis was affecting not just us, but other people—and on a large scale, at that. This level of danger was unprecedented, and thus we were required to think more carefully than ever before.

So that's exactly what we did: we racked our brains over and over and over. And in the end, we concluded that we either needed to focus entirely on the Record Wipe threatening us, *or* we needed to protect everyone's memories, not just our own. But in weighing risk versus return, it was impossible to say which was the "correct" course of action.

Pathetic, isn't it? All that brainstorming, and we still couldn't fully commit to one or the other. But hey, maybe there isn't always a "better" option.

So I decided that what I want is to see this through to the end with Taichi at my side.

In his email, he didn't ask us to join him or fight with him. He simply made his own intentions clear. And I was going to follow my heart, too.

I pulled on my winter coat and left my room.

This place was my home, and as such, I wanted to be forthright with my parents and tell them I was leaving. On the stairs, however, I bumped into my older brother, home from college.

"What the? Hold on a minute, Himeko. Where are you going this late at night? Hanging out with your boyfriend?"

Now that I thought about it, even this brainless nitwit seemed to sincerely care about my well-being.

"How would you feel if I disappeared? If I stopped being myself?"

"I dunno... Probably start crying uncontrollably?"

"Gross."

"Well, what did you want me to say, then?!"

I walked past him down the stairs. To be fair, though, as annoying as he could be, I'd probably cry if he disappeared, too. He was family, after all.

I turned back in his direction. “Oh yeah, that reminds me.”

“Hmm?”

“I’m not getting married for a while yet, but when the time comes, I’ll be sure to invite you. Don’t worry.”

“.....What? Wh—*Whoa, whoa, whoa!* Are you and your man already at that stage?! Don’t tell me you’ve got a bun in the oven—*Himeko!* Wait! We need to talk about this!”

+++

Unfortunately my folks weren’t home yet, so I had to settle for my big sis instead.

“I have to go. I’m gonna fight to protect everybody.”

She stared back at me from under the *kotatsu* table. “What are you talking about? Are you some kind of *chuuni* now?”

“What? No! I’m serious!”

“Wait, I remember! Is this that one thing you mentioned? About ‘holding everyone’s fates in your hands’? God, you’re such a *chuuni*.”

“Ugh, forget it!”

“Okay, sorry! I take it back! Anyway, as you were saying? Where did this come from all of a sudden?”

“If I tell you, are you just gonna make fun of me?”

“I said I was sorry! C’mon! I’m all ears.”

She crawled out from under the *kotatsu* and sat up straight, but this only made it harder for me to explain. It was just so dang cringey to say out loud.

“Basically, uh... I’ve been wanting to do this for a long time, but... it felt like it wasn’t right of me to just ‘wing it’ like I normally do, y’know? So for a while there I wasn’t really sure what to do.”

This was the most honest I’d been with my family in... a really long time, actually.

“But now I’ve made up my mind. I gave it a lot of thought, and then I got an email from one of my pals, and now I’m convinced. No matter the danger, I gotta fight.”

Part of me felt like maybe I shouldn’t have said the word “danger,” since it would just freak her out more. Plus, she might tell me no— “Alright then, break a leg. I’m rooting for you,” she replied, her tone casual, yet still direct. “...Huh? What’s that look for?”

“I mean... I wasn’t expecting you to just shrug it off...”

“Why not? You put a lot of thought into it and you made your own decision. That’s what matters most,” she explained, and I could tell she was about to launch into another one of her lengthy diatribes. “Out of everyone in this family, you’ve always been the most flexible, Yoshifumi. Even when you don’t get your way, you hardly ever complain. On the one hand, it’s one of your best traits, but on the other hand, it kinda worries me at times. Like maybe you’re *too* considerate, y’know?”

Whoa. I had absolutely no idea she saw me that way.

“But now you’re making stupid, selfish demands for once, and I’m glad to see it. Growing up poor, we were always having to go without... but now that you’re almost an adult, I want you to pursue your dreams, whether it’s college or a career. And I hope you’ll share those choices with me... and Mom and Dad too, of course. Wait, am I getting off-track? This whole conversation is kinda dorky, isn’t it?”

Her face was flushed, and this time it wasn’t from the alcohol.

“Awww, sis... I’m actually kinda touched...”

“Alrighty then! You’ve made up your mind—now get out there and make me proud! Oh, and don’t come home empty-handed like you did when you made the trip to M Prefecture! I want some local brew!”

“Dude, they’re not gonna sell beer to a teenager!”

+++

Misaki had lost her memories; the rest of the track team had lost a friend. I

couldn’t afford to let that happen to anyone else. Plus, I wanted to try to get Misaki back to normal somehow... and maybe the Isolation Zone held the key.

Nothing ventured, nothing gained. Even if there was a 99 percent chance I would lose, I still wanted to rise to the challenge. But it would mean putting myself at risk... and honestly, I was kinda scared. That, and I wasn’t confident my mom would let me.

But I couldn’t just sit around and do nothing. Not after I watched Taichi open up to his sister. Instead of avoiding the conflict, I needed to just be honest with my family for once.

“Mom... Anzu... I have somewhere I need to be. I want to make a stand.”

In the living room, I told them exactly what I wanted to do.

“I can’t go into too much detail, and there’s some danger involved... but I still want to try.”

“What on earth are you—Okay, I’ll set that aside. Why do you feel the need to do this, Yui?” my mom asked, looking conflicted and tearful.

“I don’t *need* to—I *want* to. Because if I don’t, other people will suffer.”

“Isn’t that their business?”

“I... I’m the only one who... Well, okay, maybe someone else could do it in my place, but...”

“Well then, there’s no need for you to handle it.”

“Why not?!”

“Because I forbid it.”

My mother was an obstinate woman. I was tempted to ask *why* she would forbid it, but if the response was “because I’ve been worried sick about you,” I wouldn’t really have a counter-argument. At the end of the day, this was my fault.

“Come on... Please...!”

I couldn’t think of anything else to say. Should I blow her off and leave anyway? I couldn’t do that. Knowing me, I couldn’t fight at full power with that

on my conscience.

“I... I don’t know what this is all about, but... I think it’d be really cool to see you in action!” Anzu piped up nervously. Clearly the tension in the room was making her restless.

“You want to see it...?”

“Duh! You’re really badass when you fight!”

She could be a bit of a ditz, so I wasn’t sure how much thought she was really putting into this... but I knew her feelings were sincere, and her heart was in the right place.

“Besides, Mom... didn’t you say you were happy to see Yui putting so much effort into karate and her studies and all that?” Anzu pressed, now that she had some wind in her sails.

“Anzu? Where are you going with this?”

“Think about it! Yui’s a karate prodigy! I’m sure there are some fights only she can win!”

I was being completely unreasonable, and yet my little sister was defending me anyway. *Sometimes it really feels like YOU’RE the big sister around here, you know that?*

“Mom... I want to put myself out there,” I told her honestly... and all at once, it felt like I’d been transported back in time.

There was a long, long silence... and then my mother let out a sigh.

“This is the same thing you said to me all those years ago when I wanted you to stop doing karate, isn’t it?”

Oh, right. I could vaguely remember that moment, but it felt like an eternity ago.

“At this point, I guess there’s really no stopping you.”

“You mean...?!”

“Just promise me you won’t get hurt, okay? Promise me.”

“I promise. Thank you, Mom!”

Thank you for always tolerating my nonsense. And thank you, too, Anzu. And... thanks, Past Me. Without you, I don't think I would've gotten through to her.

"But if you're going to put the effort in, I expect you to stick it out until the very end."

I seemed to remember her telling me this same thing back then, too. Did she remember that? Yeah, probably. Knowing her, she hadn't forgotten a single moment of our lives together.

"I'm so happy for you, Yui! I have no clue what's going on, but I'll always be your number one fan!"

These somewhat-ditzy words of encouragement reminded me why it was that I was able to dedicate myself to karate all those years—because my friends and family were always rooting for me. No matter the tournament, no matter how nervous I was, they were always there to give me the push I needed... and that was my greatest source of strength.

If I listened carefully, I could hear those voices from the past, resounding within my heart. And as long as I could hear it, I could move forward. I could keep fighting.

Empowered by the spirit of true courage, I rose to my feet.

+++

When I got home, I could smell the salty-sweet scent of soy sauce. My mother wasn't an especially good cook, but apparently she was giving it her best shot tonight.

"M-Mom? Just checking, but... did you go to Yamaboshi today?"

"Oh, how did you know? I bumped into Yaegashi-kun's little sister and we went there together. Oh, yes, and then I spoke to Gotou-sensei. He's a good teacher, isn't he? He gave me a lot of sound advice."

Her tone was unusually chipper.

"Did anything weird happen?"

"Not really. After we left the staff room, we decided to have a look at the

classrooms, and then we ran into Uwa-kun and Enjouji-san. Then Rina-chan wasn't feeling too well, so we... Wait, what?" The color drained from her face. "As I recall, she seemed rather anemic, so I took her to the nurse's office... Why on earth did I leave her there...? I feel like... like I heard a sudden **[voice]** telling me I needed to go home..."

"Don't worry, Mom. Rina-chan's home safe now."

"Is she? That's good. I'm glad to hear it." She looked sincerely relieved.

From what I could tell, it sounded like she'd been briefly hypnotized into going home. Fortunately it didn't seem to have any other effects on her.

She turned back in the direction of the kitchen.

"So anyway, uh," I called after her, but couldn't find the words to finish my sentence.

Sure, I cared about the rest of the people on this planet, but I couldn't pretend I loved them as much as I loved my mother. It'd be one thing if I could say for sure that I would come home again, but... on the off-chance I wouldn't... could I really leave her?

Just then, she stopped what she was doing and turned back to me.

"Iori, if something's going on, I want you to tell me. Be honest with me about your plans. You have nothing to be afraid of—I'm always on your side."

Her timing was eerily perfect. Was she trying to be more understanding than she had in the past? Or did something happen to her at Yamaboshi that brought this on? Either way, it was a miracle that she somehow knew exactly what I needed to hear at this precise moment. A gift from mother to daughter.

"I believe in you, Iori."

A mother's trust.

"Besides, I already made a promise to you. I promised I'd work hard to give you the kind of life you want."

I remembered that promise. It took place during my last year of middle school, in the spring, when my fifth father passed away. Many a tear was shed.

Looking back, that was the moment that Nagase Iori's story of self-discovery truly began. Was it her fault I lost sight of who I was? No way. If anything, it was the opposite: She helped me find myself again.

"Mom, I... I appreciate you making dinner and all, but... I've got somewhere I need to be," I explained, my lips trembling.

"No problem. I'll put the leftovers in the fridge for you."

From the way she talked, it felt like she already knew exactly what was going on. Did «Heartseed» do something...? No, that wasn't it. She was just... my mother. *And moms always know best.*

"Follow your heart, Iori."

She was the one who raised me. She was the one who got me this far. Without her, there would be no heart to follow.

"I'll be home soon," I replied, my heart filled with a thousand emotions.

She looked back at me, and her loving smile was more beautiful than any other.

"I'll be here when you get back."

Those were the magic words that put the wind under our wings and helped us leave the nest. It was an unspoken promise to return, and the story would remain unfinished until we did.

We had fought through years of uncertainty and doubt to find ourselves, and now it was time to embark on a journey of our own making. Then, when at last we found our way back again, we would write the final page with the words: "I'm home."

Chapter 10: Departure

Yaegashi Taichi.

Nagase Iori.

Inaba Himeko.

Kiriyama Yui.

Aoki Yoshifumi.

The five second-year members of the Cultural Research Club were gathered at the first-floor entrance of the Yamaboshi school building. With them was «Heartseed», piloting the body of Gotou Ryuuzen.

For the past year and a half, «Heartseed» was an entity they couldn't seem to escape... but this time, things were different. Instead of fighting each other, they were fighting *together*.

"Well then, I'm glad you've decided to join us. But I'm gonna ask you this one last time, «Heartseed»: are you *sure* you're not lying? You haven't omitted any inconvenient details, have you?" asked Inaba.

"No... This time around, I've been almost completely honest," «Heartseed» replied lethargically.

"*Almost*...?" Kiriyama repeated under her breath, pouting her lips.

"Okay then, let me ask you this: Why is it that you and your kind even *bother* going to all this trouble? If you're so all-powerful, surely there must be a more logical method, right?"

This was something Taichi had wondered as well. As far as experiments went, there were too many variables; «Heartseed» always seemed to leave things up to chance.

"Well... that lack of logic is... actually preferable..."

"How come?" Aoki asked.

"Because... humans are irrational creatures... One could argue that... that is

what makes you human... *and we so dearly wish to be human*."

The words sent a shockwave through the CRC. Everyone froze; Taichi could scarcely breathe. This was the most open and honest «Heartseed» had ever been with them— Out of nowhere, they heard loud footsteps barreling in their direction.

"S-See?! I told you they'd be here!"

It was Enjouji Shino, one of two first-years in the CRC. And as for the other one— "Yeah, yeah, I heard you! Now let go of me!"

A very annoyed Uwa Chihiro yanked his hand out of her grasp.

"Wait, what the... What are you guys doing here?" Nagase asked, startled.

"W-Well, you must be gathered for a reason, right?! I... I can't believe you were going to leave us behind! We... We're in this club too, you know!" Enjouji shouted, her face flushed, and it was clear she was desperate to get through to them.

"But how did you know where to find us?" Taichi asked. Surely the timing was too perfect to be a coincidence.

"Well, we got a call from Taichi-san's sister and Nagase-san's mom," Chihiro explained.

"Are you serious? How does my sister have your number...?" Taichi groaned.

"The heck did she tell you?!" Nagase yelped.

"That you'd left the house, and if we happened to know where you were going, would we please look out for you? That kind of thing," Chihiro clarified.

"Oh, okay. So she's not trying to hunt me down..." Nagase let out a sigh of relief.

"And if we had to guess where you'd be headed, our first thought was the clubroom..."

"S-So here we are!" Enjouji chimed in.

"My, my, my... How very entertaining..."

"Wait... Huh...? HUHWHAAAA?! «HEARTSEED»?!"

“Took you long enough,” Chihiro retorted. Apparently Enjouji honestly hadn’t noticed it standing there.

“Wh... Wh-What do we do...?! How are you so calm about this, Chihiro-kun?!”

“I dunno. I’m just kinda over it at this point.”

“Enough chatter. We need to get this ball rolling,” Inaba commanded, and the two first-years immediately fell silent. “Long story short, we’re about to head to the battlefield, and... we estimate it’s going to be pretty goddamn dangerous. More dangerous than anything we’ve ever faced.”

Enjouji and Chihiro swallowed hard.

“So I’m not gonna mince words here: *go home*.”

And yet, despite her harsh tone, she must have known how they’d respond—

“N-No!”

“No can do.”

“Why not?” Inaba asked, testing them.

“If... If you’re not going home, then neither are we!” Enjouji shouted.

“Plus, if you know the risks and you’re choosing to do it anyway, then it must be important,” Chihiro added calmly.

“We’ve seen how much our Liberated friends are suffering... and how much you’re all suffering, too!”

“So if there’s anything we can do to contribute, then count us in.”

They were the protagonists of their own lives, and they had come to this conclusion of their own free will. Their minds were made up.

Inaba still seemed reluctant. “But since we don’t know what will happen in there... ideally someone ought to stay behind...”

“Why don’t you stay behind?” Taichi suggested.

“If *I* had to stay behind, I’d be worried sick about the rest of you!”

“Well then, there you go.”

“Ugh! Fine! Whatever!”

That said, they couldn't exactly drag the first-years into the Isolation Zone totally blind, so they gave a quick overview of the situation at hand.

"This is ridiculous..."

"You can't be serious, right...?"

But although they were briefly tempted to avoid facing reality, the two first-years ultimately insisted on tagging along.

"Alright then. Are we ready?" Inaba asked.

"Bring it!" said Nagase.

"Yeah," said Kiriyama.

"Let's do this!" said Aoki.

"R-Right!" said Enjouji.

"Ready," said Chihiro.

Lastly, Taichi turned to the supernatural entity standing with them. "We're counting on you, «Heartseed»."

"Well then, let's get going... I'll have you know, I put a lot of effort into setting this up..."

And off they went into the Isolation Zone.

+++

At the table, Mom and I finished our dinner alone. Without Taichi.

"Thanks for the food, Mom."

"No problem. Want an apple or something for dessert?" She paused. "You know, after everything I said tonight, I gotta say... I'm curious where exactly your brother went off to. Maybe I should talk to the other kids' parents."

Muttering to herself, she carried the dirty dishes to the sink.

"I think I'll skip the apple for tonight," I told her. And with that, I headed upstairs.

As I passed by Taichi's room, I could feel the total emptiness radiating from inside, and it made my nose sting.

“Oh, that reminds me...”

Come to think of it, Uwa Chihiro-san and Enjouji Shino-san had given me something I was meant to pass on to my brother. Sure, I could always wait until he came home, but... something told me I might forget.

Weird that I would feel that way, since it seemed *super-duper* important, but oh well.

I went into my room, retrieved the item from inside my backpack, then stepped into Taichi’s room. Glancing around nervously, I headed for his study desk— “Ouch!”

Then I tripped over something. It was his bookbag.

“Jeez, you’re such a slob! Wait...”

On second thought, maybe this was the perfect spot.

So I rummaged through his bag, picked out a notebook that looked like it saw a lot of use, and slid the item between its pages.

The End

Afterword Putting my works out into the world is a very stressful thing. I'm always on edge, thinking maybe this is the one that turns all my readers against me.

This might make it sound like I'm "afraid of criticism" or something, but it's not that. As an author, I feel honored when people form opinions on my books, even if those opinions are negative.

That said, if every single person who read my work ended up hating it, I'd probably have to stop and wonder whether there was any merit in me writing it in the first place. Conversely, if even one person has an enjoyable experience reading my work, it gives me the motivation to continue. Yes, the opposite of "everyone hates it" is not "everyone loves it." It's "*not* everyone hates it." And that's enough for me.

Maybe that one person is you. And if so, I appreciate you.

I mean, obviously I'd love for thousands of people to enjoy the books and support my further work, but those thousands are still made up of individuals. And right now, I'd like to give thanks to the individual reading this text.

Anyway, I'm approaching the end here, so I thought I'd wax sentimental for a change. Please know that your individual support directly contributes to the success of *Kokoro Connect*.

Lastly, I'd like to extend my thanks to everyone who helped me get this book published.

—Anda Sadanatsu September 2012

Character Popularity Poll Results!



1st Place:
Inaba Himeko
(2,951 Votes)

2nd Place:
Nagase Iori
(1,301 Votes)

3rd Place:
Kiriyama Yui
(441 Votes)

4th Place:
Yaegashi Taichi
(294 Votes)

5th Place:
Aoki Yoshifumi
(153 Votes)

See the rest of the poll results here →

http://www.enterbrain.co.jp/pickup/2012/kokoro-campaign/

Table of Contents

Cover

Color Illustrations

Chapter 1: Just Another Day

Chapter 2: By the Time They Realized, It Had Already Begun

Chapter 3: Not Quite Right

Chapter 4: Someone Else's Story

Chapter 5: Finally, It Begins

Chapter 6: Sheep and Shepherd

Chapter 7: Left Behind

Chapter 8: Seeds Sown in Secret

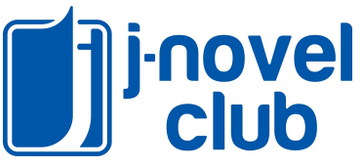
Chapter 9: Parting Words

Chapter 10: Departure

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. 10 of this series!) by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:

J-Novel Club Membership

Copyright

Kokoro Connect Volume 9: Asu Random Part 1

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 June 2020


Part 1
KOKORO CONNECT
A S U — RANDOM
Sadanatsu Anda