
The Mimosa Confessions
Book Five
By Mei Hachimoku
Illustrations by KUKKA

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The Mimosa Confessions


The better things are now, the more I fear for the future.
Because if this is the peak, then it's all downhill from here.
But that's all the more reason not to let it slip away.
And savor this moment for as long and as best as I can.
USHIO TSUKINOKI
NATSUKI HOSHIHARA



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MIMOSA NO KOKUHAKU Vol. 5
by Mei HACHIMOKU
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The Mimosa Confessions
Book Five

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Seven Seas Entertainment

Characters

SAKUMA KAMIKI
The protagonist. A high school sophomore. Has very few friends.

USHIO TSUKINOKI
Sakuma's best friend. Recently transitioned to living her life as a girl.

NATSUKI HOSHIHARA
Friendly girl with a whole lot of pep. Beloved by the entire class.

MIKA IYO
Sakuma's homeroom and Japanese teacher. Twenty-seven years old.

RIN MASHIMA
Softball player who marches to the beat of her own drum.

TOKA SHIINA
Sharp-witted girl. Plays for the school wind ensemble.

ITSUKU SERA
A recent transfer student from Tokyo.

ARISA NISHIZONO
Former queen of the class. Callous girl with a caustic tongue.

mimosa

/mɪˈmoʊ.sə/, n.

(not to be confused with the genus Mimosa)

Common name for *Acacia dealbata*, a species of fast-growing evergreen tree in the legume family Fabaceae, widely known for its fragrant golden blooms.

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Interlude



Interlude

IT WAS A THURSDAY AFTERNOON, and I was sitting in the second-floor conference room with the other sophomore class teachers, waiting for the proceedings to begin.

Unlike our monthly all-hands faculty meetings, this was a routine check-in and planning session for just the teaching staff in our grade. We'd report on student progress in our respective facets of the curriculum and iron out the details of any upcoming class-specific events.

Also, since the only people in attendance were our immediate colleagues, these meetings were typically a bit looser on the whole. We could waste far less time on stifling formalities than we might if, say, the school principal were overseeing things. But while this free-form structure created an atmosphere in which everyone could openly voice their opinions, it was something of a double-edged sword—as when those opinions clashed, it often led to heated, unending debate. I could only hope it wouldn't come to that today.

"Are you with us, Ms. Iyo?" asked Mr. Jojima, head teacher for the sophomore class. "I think we're ready to begin now."

"Oh, sorry! Yes, I'm here," I replied, looking up from the spread of documents that had just been handed out. When we first passed them around the square-shaped corral of folding tables, I'd noted that all ten of us were accounted for today.

It was five o'clock, and the building was quiet; extracurricular activities were on hold in preparation for final exams. The conference room wasn't heated, and I shivered as I glanced out the window at the dark winter sky.

Around the room, my colleagues' faces had one emotion in common: fatigue. Mr. Jojima looked especially exhausted—which didn't surprise me, considering he had his duties as head teacher to

attend to on top of prepping for finals. He wasn't much older than me, yet his hairline was already beginning to recede.

"All right," he said. "Let's get this over with so we can go home, shall we?"

And so the meeting began with a few introductory remarks from Mr. Jojima, followed by a quick review of the documents set out before us.

"We've been receiving a lot of reports lately about negligent and reckless behavior due to students playing on their cell phones as they commute to and from school," he said. "Including a few who received warnings from local police after being caught riding their bikes one-handed so they could talk on the phone at the same time. The guidance office is planning to set up a neighborhood watch team along the major routes to and from the school, but word among the faculty is that we'll be adopting a stricter policy regarding cell phone usage on campus as well."

Mrs. Saotome, the homeroom teacher for Class B, nodded in understanding. She was the oldest among us, but despite the heavily caked-on makeup lending her the impression of a snooty aging housewife, she cared an awful lot about her students and was well liked by the vast majority of them.

"Isn't it strict enough as it is, though?" she said. "I mean, confiscating them for three days already seemed like overkill to me, if I'm being perfectly honest."

"Believe me, I hear you," said Mr. Jojima. "Especially when up until last year, we'd just return them at the end of the day. But apparently that wasn't enough of a deterrent."

"And now they want us to be even *stricter*? How exactly are we supposed to do that?"

Mr. Jojima glanced down at the documents. "Well, the new school regulations state that all cell phones are to be left at home. So I figure it's a zero tolerance policy now. Confiscate on sight."

"Even during break periods?" asked Mrs. Saotome.

"Correct."

"But…isn't that a bit ridiculous? I thought the unspoken agreement was to turn a blind eye, as long as they don't pull them out in the middle of class…"

"Not anymore, I'm afraid. What the guidance office says, goes."

Mrs. Saotome grimaced.

The guidance office was primarily composed of PE teachers and the school's most tenured instructors, so the thought of voicing any opposition to them was never an appealing one. The whole department had a bit of an overbearing aura, and they operated in close solidarity with the principal to boot, which made them a rather intimidating monolith to students and teachers alike.

"Can't we at least lighten the punishment a little, then?" asked Mrs. Saotome.

"Again, that would require changing school regulations," said Mr. Jojima. "You'd have to take it up with both the guidance office *and* the principal, so I think it's pretty unlikely… Not that there haven't been exceptions in the past, of course." Mr. Jojima cast an implicative glance in my direction.

"Why are you looking at me?" I said.

"No reason in particular. Just wondering if maybe you'd have another strongly worded opinion to share about all of this."

"Oh, so *that's* my reputation now? I'm not champing at the bit to fight them on literally every decision they make, you know."

"If you say so…" he said teasingly, then turned his head away.

Now I was a little annoyed. But I supposed it wasn't entirely undeserved.

While it was by no means my intent to be difficult or combative, the guidance office and I had certainly not seen eye to

eye as of late. We'd had our fair share of vehement disagreements, and there'd even been a handful of times when I'd completely disregarded their demands and acted on my own judgment.

I hadn't always been so headstrong. If anything, I considered myself a fairly reasonable person who generally didn't mind keeping my mouth shut and going along with majority rule. But all that changed about half a year ago—after what happened with Ushio. That was when I learned to stop caring what my colleagues might think about me and to prioritize my own moral convictions first and foremost.

Not that it hadn't come with a huge uptick in my daily stress levels.

"So, just to clarify…" another teacher chimed in. "Does that mean we should start confiscating them more rigorously as of tomorrow?"

When Mr. Jojima nodded in affirmation, the teacher furrowed his brow.

"Mmm… I feel like the students might have a hard time accepting such a sudden change in policy. I mean, it would be nice if it didn't cause any issues, but I can think of a few kids who'd react quite poorly if we actually started enforcing it overnight…"

Several other teachers piped up to voice their agreement.

"Three days *is* a pretty long time."

"Plus, it's not like they don't see *us* using our phones in the hallway all the time."

"Maybe we should put a stop to that too, then?"

"Great… What a pain in the ass."

"We might even get some complaints from parents, honestly."

"What do *you* think, Ms. Iyo?" Mr. Jojima asked me, cutting through the noise.

"Well…it sounds like our hands are pretty much tied here. We'll just have to explain the situation to the students and why this new policy is being put into effect. I'm sure they won't be too thrilled about it, but they'll have to accept it sooner or later. And even if we do get any parent complaints, I assume a simple explanation will suffice."

"Yes, I suppose it'll have to," he replied with a pained expression. The other teachers nodded as well. It was pretty clear that no one was fully on board with this plan, but we'd have to make do with the hand we'd been dealt.

This was more or less the norm, though; it was virtually impossible to reach a resolution everyone could agree on when it came to things like this. If I'd come to learn anything about this school, it was to pick my battles. No matter how hard you dug in your heels, the best you could hope for was to find a compromise everyone could begrudgingly agree on but no one was truly happy with. Sure, it was worth it sometimes to avoid the worst possible outcome. But it was always a war of attrition, and some hills weren't worth dying on.

"Okay then," said Mr. Jojima. "Let's move on to our next topic on the agenda."

The meeting carried on rather uneventfully from there, as we discussed our plans for the upcoming exams, after-school study sessions, faculty training seminars, and how much progress we'd made in helping our students narrow down their higher education plans. Before I knew it, it was six o'clock, and we'd reached the final subject on the docket without any major hiccups.

"Now, about the class field trip… Allow me to hand the floor over to our head chaperone. Could you give us an update, Ms. Iyo?"

"Gladly." I looked down at the papers before me. "As you all know, we'll be leaving on February 1st for Hokkaido, where we'll stay for four days and three nights, same as last year. I'd like to note that this winter is expected to be even colder than usual, so please do

everything you can to ensure that both you and your students are prepared for inclement weather, and pack plenty of warm clothes. As far as the schedule goes, we'll be using more or less the same itinerary as last year, but with a few changes, such as—"

Just then, the conference room door rattled open.

When I saw who walked in, I couldn't help but frown.

"Oh, don't mind me! Go on, as you were!"

It was the principal.

He grinned and gave a little bow as he shuffled over to a corner of the room and pulled out a chair to sit down in. That ever-friendly smile of his made him well liked by a certain subset of the student body (I'd even overheard him being compared to the cheery-looking Ebisu, of the Seven Gods of Fortune), but in all honesty, I found him to be a bit of a nuisance; I assumed my fellow teachers felt the same deep down. He had a reputation for abruptly poking his nose into all sorts of situations, shaking things up in ways no one asked for. And to be fair, sometimes his input did help move things in a positive direction, but I couldn't help but wonder what "helpful insights" he might have to share in this case. I had a bad feeling about it.

Mr. Jojima signaled with his eyes for me to hurry up and get on with it. *Believe me, I know*, I mentally responded, then peered back down at my papers.

"So as I was saying, the biggest change in this year's itinerary is that we've made the decision to place a greater emphasis on student autonomy. To that end, we've substantially increased the amount of free time they'll have compared to previous years, and we'll be giving them most of the third day of the trip to explore and do what they like with whomever they choose to group up with."

This was a change that last year's head chaperone had proposed at the end of the trip, which I explained we were simply carrying over to implement on an experimental basis this year. There didn't seem to be any objections to the idea.

"Also, one point regarding lodging assignments: While we will be, for the most part, allocating two students to each hotel room again this year, we plan to give Tsukinoki-san a single room all to herself. This was a decision we reached after discussing the matter with her in depth, and we intend to honor her preference."

"Oh, I see," said Mrs. Saotome. "Yes, I suppose it doesn't make sense to expect her to share a room with any of the other students or vice versa, regardless of gender. That sounds like the safest option to me."

The teachers around her nodded in agreement.

I breathed an internal sigh of relief. While I'd assumed no one would take issue with this, I'd also been worried about what to do if anyone *did* speak out against it. If it were just six months prior, I knew they most definitely would have—which I supposed was a sign of how much they'd all come to understand Ushio's situation and sympathize with her struggles. Or maybe they wanted to get this meeting over with so they could go home, who knew.

"And what about visiting other students' rooms?" asked Mr. Jojima.

I faltered a moment. "What about it?"

"We generally give students free time after dinner until lights-out, correct? But male students aren't allowed to enter the rooms of female students and vice versa. So what should our policy be for Tsukinoki-san in this regard?"

"Oh, uh…"

I hadn't thought about this. But since everyone seemed to be on board with her having a room to herself, I figured I should admit it so we could discuss.

"I apologize. I suppose I hadn't considered that."

"What floor will she be staying on?"

"I believe the current plan is to place her on the same floor as the boys. But each floor at our hotel in Jozankei has separate wings

for singles and twin rooms, so she won't actually be *among* the boys, per se. She'll be closer to the male instructors."

"I see," said Mr. Jojima, folding his arms languidly as he mulled this over. "Well, we can't exactly force her to stay locked up in her room, so I guess it makes sense to let her move freely around whatever floor she ends up being on."

This seemed reasonable to me—and it wouldn't be entirely fair to give just one student free passage between both the boys' *and* the girls' floors.

At the same time, this would be the first and only class trip of Ushio's entire life. According to her, she'd stayed home during her junior high class trip for fear of being put in uncomfortable or compromising situations. Even now, she still had so many anxieties that she hadn't confirmed her participation until the very last minute—and that was *after* we'd extended the deadline to give her more time. It was clear to me that it had taken a lot of courage for her to sign up for this trip, as someone who'd already faced so many hurdles just to exist. As her teacher, I wanted to do everything I possibly could to ensure this trip would be a good memory for her.

When I thought back on my own high school class trip, I remembered nights spent having pillow fights in the hotel rooms, or playing card games until lights-out…not to mention plenty of giggling and girl talk about who liked whom, of course. My hope was for Ushio to be able to look back on her own class trip and remember it as fondly as I did mine. Even if she obviously had her own set of circumstances we needed to consider, I didn't want her to be treated differently than any of the other students.

I knew what I had to do.

"Um, actually, sorry—in that case, I think it would make more sense to have Tsukinoki-san on the girls' floor after all."

Immediately, all eyes in the room were on me.

Not letting it get to me, I carried on, "Since she'll be staying in a room all by herself, I can't imagine there would be any incidents.

And I don't see a problem with treating her like all of the other girls, letting her visit with them freely in their rooms, so long as—"

"No, I think that's probably a bad idea," Mr. Jojima interjected before I could even finish my point. Being cut off had to be one of my biggest pet peeves.

"And why's that, exactly?" I asked, trying my best not to sound grumpy.

"Please don't misunderstand. I'm not saying I think Tsukinoki-san would pose any danger to the other girls or anything like that. And I'm well aware that most of them think quite highly of her and have accepted her as one of their own. But I think that's all the more reason *not* to get careless and assume there won't be any issues."

"Again, what are you suggesting? Just say it outright, please."

"Well, I mean…"

As Mr. Jojima tiptoed around the issue, it almost felt like he was implying I was stupid or something for not being able to read between the lines. This vague vacillating only served to amplify my growing frustration. Before I could press him on it further, someone else stepped in to answer for him.

"Oh, Iyo-chan, Iyo-chan…" said Mrs. Saotome, shaking her head condescendingly. "Think about it, dear. Even if Tsukinoki-san has no ill intentions, that doesn't necessarily mean the *other* girls might not go after her, whether as a harmless prank or otherwise. I'm sure Mr. Jojima just wants to avoid any worst-case scenarios."

"Ah." *So that's what he meant…*

To be sure, there would always be some amount of risk in that regard. Girls certainly could be the aggressors in cases like this, same as boys—one need only look back at the way Arisa used to treat Ushio to realize that much.

"Forgive me," I said. "Perhaps that was a shortsighted suggestion."

"Nothing to apologize for, dear."

I had no choice but to reflect on this. Obviously, I believed we should do our very best to treat Ushio as a girl whenever possible—but there were still sexual differences we as a faculty needed to consider when making policy decisions like this for the sake of everyone's comfort and safety. And I'd made a major oversight in that regard.

Perhaps I'd let my emotions blind me a little. To think I'd been doing everything I possibly could to make my classroom a safe environment for Ushio and everyone else for over six months now, and yet here I was, suggesting a plan that could have actively invited all sorts of trouble. As I sat there ruminating on my own thoughtlessness, Mr. Jojima cleared his throat as if to bring the conversation back on track.

"Okay then. It sounds like we're all in agreement that the best course of action would be to give Tsukinoki-san her own room and let her visit only the boys' rooms during free time. Is that acceptable to you, Ms. Iyo?"

"Yes, I believe so…"

"Well, I suppose we can also monitor the situation and adapt accordingly, if need be. Plus, the trip's still a ways off yet."

I assumed he could tell I was beating myself up about it, as this felt like an attempt to console me—but all it really did was fill me with a weird mixture of worthlessness and chagrin.

In any case, we'd covered all of the topics on the agenda for today. All that remained now was for Mr. Jojima to give his parting remarks, and then we could all go home. Ashamed as I was of my little blunder, I tried to look on the bright side: At least there hadn't been any major disagreements.

"All right," said Mr. Jojima. "I think we can call this meeting adjour—"

"Actually, could I chime in for a moment?"

Immediately, the atmosphere in the room turned heavy—and everyone turned to look at the principal. He'd been so quiet that I'd forgotten he was sitting in. Why was he speaking up right when the meeting was about to end? I didn't like the sound of this one bit. As I braced myself for the worst, he turned his eyes on me.

"Ms. Iyo, correct me if I'm wrong, but I assume you were only suggesting this change in Tsukinoki-san's rooming arrangements because you want her to have the most enjoyable class trip possible, no? Granted, it sounds like you didn't quite consider all the potential risks, but I still think that's a truly admirable cause."

"Th-thank you, sir," I said, my voice cracking a bit at the unexpected praise.

Surprising though it was, it did make me happy to be acknowledged in that regard. All I really wanted was to make this trip a good time for Ushio, and for the principal to pick up on that and applaud it warmed my heart. I felt bad for thinking of him as a nuisance earlier.

"Which gives me an idea…" he went on. "Why not just let Tsukinoki-san *share* a room, then? With one of the boys, that is."

"Pardon?"

"I mean, no one would want to spend any part of their class trip all alone, would they? And if putting Tsukinoki-san in one of the girls' rooms isn't an option, then I figured: What about letting her room with one of the boys? How does that sound?"

The principal fixed me with a wholesome, innocent gaze.

It took every fiber of my self-control not to reply that this was the stupidest idea I'd ever heard. How in the world had he listened to that previous exchange and come away thinking that *this* might be a viable solution? Especially when no one had objected to the idea of letting Ushio have her own room. Just what the heck was this guy's angle?

"Um, sir…the decision to let Tsukinoki-san stay in her own room was based on my discussions with her regarding her preferences and comfort levels for the trip as a whole. And she approves of the current plan."

"Did she say she'd *only* accept a single room, though?"

"I mean, not specifically, but I'm quite certain she wouldn't want to share a twin with any of the boys, at the very lea—"

"Surely Tsukinoki-san has some good male friends she feels comfortable around, doesn't she? I think it might be good to speak with her again and see how she feels about that as an option. It's not as if we'd have to worry about them engaging in any improper conduct, after all."

"I really don't think that's her primary concern, sir."

"Not to mention, I do feel it's a bit unwise to give preferential treatment to only one student. It sets a bad precedent, you know? Like, for instance, what if *other* students start requesting single rooms from now on, citing this as an example?"

"That's not…"

Ugh. Where do I even begin? I could feel a migraine coming on.

Honestly, while I felt like the principal's argument was completely off the mark, I couldn't shrug it off either. Mostly because he had the power to make the final decision here, so I was at risk of being vetoed if I didn't make my case. Also, I could tell he genuinely thought he was making this suggestion in good faith, trying to think of what this precedent would mean in the long run for the *entire* student body.

Even if we clearly disagreed, I could respect that in his eyes, closing any potential loopholes that might result in future policy abuse was more important than the discomfort of one student whose circumstances he clearly didn't fully understand. And it was my responsibility as someone who *did* to offer a rebuttal that

addressed those concerns while also trying to get him to see my own point of view. Otherwise, this would devolve into an unproductive argument that would probably not end well for me.

I knew it was worth the effort… But *god*, if it wasn't a pain in the ass.

No, no. I need to stay firm. If I failed Ushio in this, I wouldn't even know how to explain it to her. I took a deep breath to fan the flames of my resolve, then sat up tall in my chair.

"Mr. Principal," I said firmly, "let me remind you that we are only making special accommodations for Tsukinoki-san because of the unique and delicate circumstances arising from her gender identity and dysphoria. We are not giving her preferential treatment—and any students who came forward in the hopes that they might get a single room as well would have to make their case as to why they, too, are deserving of equal lodging arrangements. If they can do that, then yes, we would have to accommodate them. But aside from that, I don't think you have to worry about students piggybacking off of Tsukinoki-san's precedent. There's no 'unfairness' at play here."

"You say that, but—"

"Also, this will be Tsukinoki-san's very first time participating in an overnight school event. I'm sure she has all manner of anxieties about it. And yes, it's entirely possible she might spend her nights at the hotel holed up in her room feeling completely alone. I'm worried about that too, believe me—but giving her a space in which she can feel safe and decompress if necessary is a strict requirement, as far as I'm concerned."

"Is it, now?"

"Yes." I nodded adamantly. "Yes, it is."

"Mmm…" The principal hemmed and hawed; he wasn't satisfied quite yet. "I'd prefer not to have to bend the rules if we can help it."

"Sir," I said, looking him straight in the eye, "it's far better to do that now than be responsible for what might happen if we wait until it's too late."

"Oh, come on… Now you're just blowing things out of proportion."

The principal looked around at the other teachers as he chuckled in an attempt to laugh me off. But when none of them so much as cracked a smile, he realized that he was alone on this issue, and his expression clouded over. Eventually, he raised his hands in surrender.

"All right, all right. We can stick with the current plan, I suppose."

With that, he rose from his chair and excused himself from the conference room. No sooner had he closed the door behind him than I let out a sigh so heavy, it felt like all the air was being loosed from my body. I felt so weary and winded after all that talking, you'd think I'd just run a marathon.

"Well," said Mr. Jojima, "now that *that's* over with, I think we can finally wrap this thing up. Meeting adjourned. Have a nice night, everyone."

The tension in the conference room evaporated, and the other teachers expressed their relief as they stood up to leave.

"Phew… Glad to finally be done for the day."

"We got through that pretty quickly, all things considered."

I watched my colleagues file out the door as I gathered up my things and rose from my seat. Only Mrs. Saotome hung back and walked over to wait for me.

"Good work today," she told me when we emerged into the hallway.

"Thanks. You too."

"That was quite the little kerfuffle at the end there, wasn't it?"

"You can say that again… I'm glad I managed to persuade him."

"Oh, I knew you would. He's not a bad person, dear—just a little slow on the uptake sometimes!" Mrs. Saotome chuckled haughtily, and I felt obliged to let out a strained laugh of my own. "At least it went relatively smoothly this time around. That was an absolute cakewalk compared to that whole sports festival debacle."

"Ugh, don't remind me…"

It had happened way back in autumn, when there'd been a huge debate among the faculty as to which gender Ushio should be allowed to participate as. The gym teachers were staunchly opposed to her taking part as anything other than a boy, but after a long, hard-fought battle of wills that lasted well into the night, we finally managed to make them relent and allow her to play on the girls' team, albeit with a few caveats.

Truth be told, I still wasn't entirely sure how to handle cases like that: where we wanted to be inclusive but had to take biological sex into account. Thankfully, there hadn't been any real fuss about the decision we'd ultimately landed on, but one false move, and we might have ended up with a scenario no one was happy with. I couldn't help but wonder what might have happened if it had been someone other than Ushio—someone with the same exact struggles, but not blessed by popularity and acceptance like she was. The pessimist in me tended to think things would have gone far more poorly.

In the end, I had no regrets with the choices I'd made in always pushing for her inclusion as a girl. But when I looked back on some of the battles I'd won and realized how perilous some of those bridges had been, I got chills.

"By the way," said Mrs. Saotome, "it sounds like some of us will be going out for drinks after this. Will you be joining us, Iyo-chan?"

"Oh, no. I don't think so, sorry. I've still got a lot of exam prep left to do."

"Staying late even *after* a staff meeting? My, you're so diligent… Well, more power to you, then, I suppose. Best of luck, dear."

As we entered the staff room, Mrs. Saotome and I said our goodbyes, and I headed over to my desk—which was piled high with papers and reference materials I was using to draft the end-of-semester exam for my Modern Japanese class. I already had about two-thirds of the exam questions finalized, so hopefully I could finish up the rest tonight.

When I prodded my computer out of sleep mode, my eyes happened to land on the date in the bottom-right corner of my desktop. Christmas was right around the corner, not that I had any real plans this year. Chances were I'd spend it swamped beneath another huge load of work. Which was fine; I'd never really bought into the manufactured romanticism surrounding the holiday—but it did still make me feel ever so slightly blue.

"All right… Let's get this over with," I said with a sigh.

But before I could even load up Excel, I felt my phone buzz.

Pulling it out of my pocket, I saw that I had one new text message.

The notification on the little display listed the sender's name: *Yuki Tsukinoki*.

***

The New Year came and went, and it was now January 8th. I was waiting at a cozy little izakaya situated just a stone's throw away from Tsubakioka Station. The vibe in the establishment was calm and subdued, despite it still being prime season for New Year's get-togethers. Aside from me, there were only a few tired-looking businessmen and apparent regulars sipping their sake in silence.

As I sat in my counter seat, waiting for my plus-one to arrive, the door to the restaurant swung wide open to reveal her: Yuki

Tsukinoki, frazzled and slightly out of breath.

"Sorry I'm late!" she said, hurrying over to join me.

"No, not at all!" I replied. "I just got here myself."

Yuki set her bag down and folded up her overcoat, then placed them both in the basket at the foot of her seat. First order of business: We called over a waiter to order a couple of drinks and some small bites to snack on. Once it had all been laid out on the counter before us, we turned to face each other in our seats and said a toast.

"Well then…" Yuki began. "I guess this is Happy New Year."

"Indeed. Happy New Year, Yuki-san."

We clinked our beer bottles together and each took a sip. The frothy liquid went down nice and smooth.

"Whew," said Yuki. "That hits the spot…"

"You know, I've never been here before, but I must say I like the atmosphere of this place. Very quaint. Nice and quiet too."

"It's a little bit of a hole-in-the-wall, yeah. Used to come here all the time before I got married. Also…"

She leaned in so close that I was forced to shrink back, and I couldn't help thinking, *Man, she's pretty.*

"For the hundredth time, you *really* don't have to speak so formally with me, you know. It's not like I'm that much older than you."

"It's not that," I said. "It's just… Well, you're the parent of one of my students, and…"

"Oh, *I see* how it is." Yuki pouted a bit before taking a bite of the wasabi octopus we'd ordered. "Too bad. Maybe someday."

Yuki and I had first met at a parent-teacher conference back when Ushio was still a freshman. At the time, I interacted with her no differently than I would any of my other students' parents—but after Ushio came out to the class last June, we'd begun touching

base more regularly to chat about how things were going for her at school. Over the course of these check-ins, we'd gradually built up a fairly close rapport, to the point that we even occasionally met up outside of work just to get coffee and such.

"Though I have to say, I certainly wasn't expecting you to suggest an izakaya, of all places. That's definitely a first."

"True," said Yuki. "But what better way to ring in the New Year than over a few drinks, right? Plus, I think you told me you can hold your liquor, didn't you?"

"Well, in moderation, of course."

"Oh yeah! Speaking of things worth celebrating…you'll never guess what happened the other day."

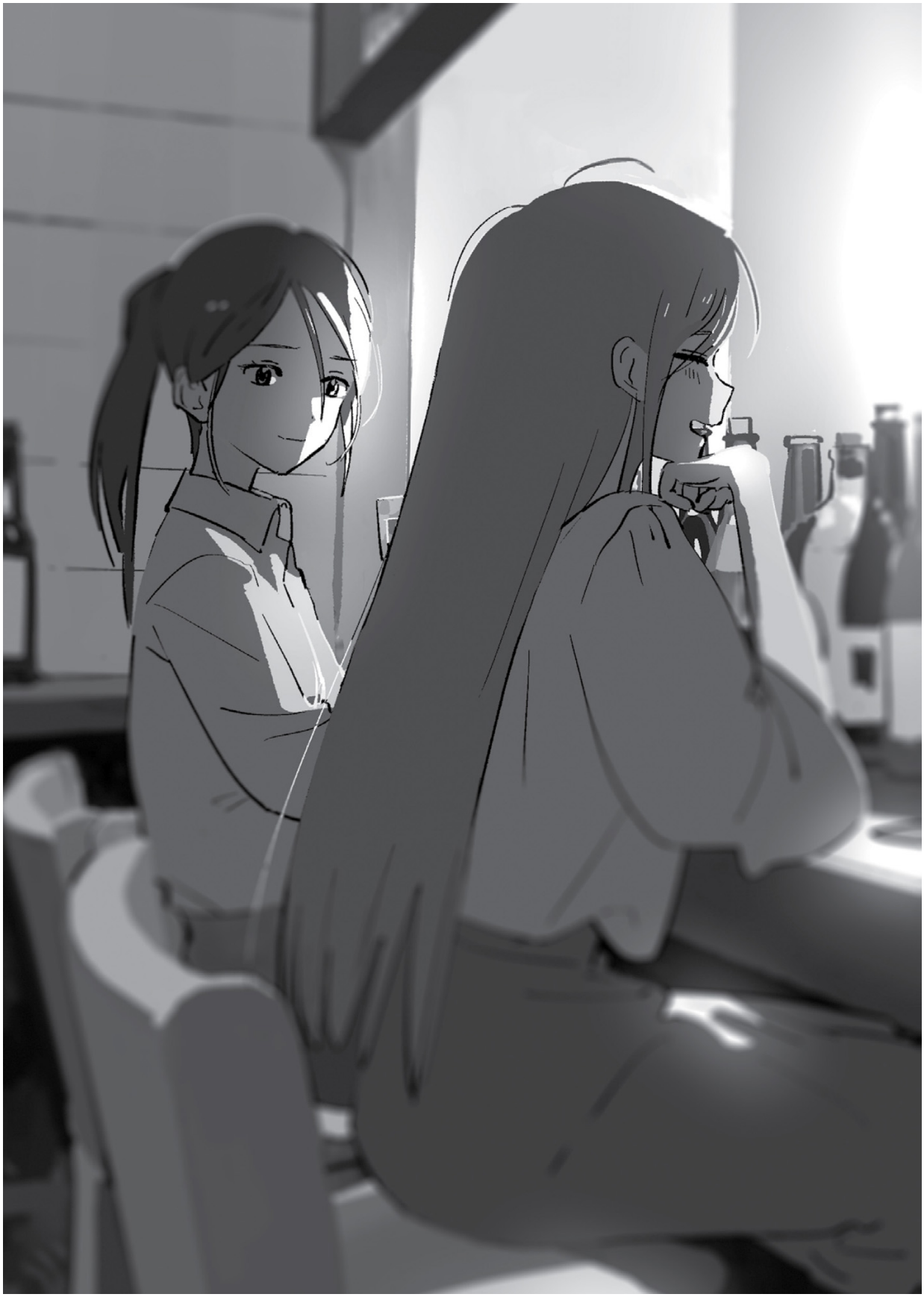
"Oh? Do tell."

Yuki smiled sheepishly, unable to stop her elation from seeping through. Whatever it was, it must have been fairly momentous indeed.

"You're not gonna believe it…but Ushio's actually started calling me 'Mom' now!"

"Oh, wow… That *is* a pretty big win."

Last I knew, Ushio had still been referring to Yuki by her first name. I had been quite shocked to hear this when Yuki first disclosed it to me; I could immediately tell that there had to be some major significance to this gesture for Ushio. Someone as perceptive and considerate as she was would not draw such a line in the sand by accident.



"You know," Yuki went on, "I tried to tell myself I wouldn't care all that much what my stepchildren called me. Because, I mean, just look at *Ponyo*, for instance."

"What, the Ghibli film?"

"Yeah. The little boy in that calls his mom by her first name, remember?"

"Oh yeah… 'Lisa,' right?"

"Right! So I figured, 'Hey, even if they call me Yuki, it's not the end of the world… Because in some families, that's just completely normal.' Y'know what I mean?"

"I see. So you found it pretty relatable."

"Mmm… I don't know if I'd call it *relatable*, per se, but it was definitely reassuring to see those sorts of family dynamics being depicted as, like…wholesome and valid, if that makes sense. Who knows, maybe I was just trying to convince myself that my own situation wasn't so weird or abnormal. And yeah, I know that might just be me assuming authorial intent where there might not have been any to begin with… But I guess that's the fun thing about stories, isn't it? We can all derive our own meaning from them."

Yuki paused and let out a little chuckle.

"God, what am I even rambling on about?" she said with a shake of her head.

True enough, she was being far chattier than usual. It seemed the alcohol was already kicking in—and she'd only just begun to pour her second beer into her glass. I called the waiter over and ordered some hot sake.

"I do know what you mean, though," I told her. "I find myself tearing up over the most innocuous of scenes too sometimes. Especially after I've had a few drinks."

"Yes, exactly! God, I turn into such a crybaby when I'm tipsy. Give me a tall drink and a Miyuki Nakajima album and I'll cry buckets

every single time."

"Oh, man… Now *that's* relatable."

As the conversation grew livelier, so too did our drinking pace and the speed at which our chopsticks flew. The food was every bit as good as the company. Yuki was right; this place was a hidden gem. And now that I had a nice little buzz setting in, a pleasant warmth was spreading through my whole body.

It had been ages since I'd had such a good time socializing over a meal and some drinks. Lately, it felt like I'd been too swamped with work to ever go out and enjoy myself—and drinking with my colleagues after hours wasn't really my idea of fun.

But tonight, I wouldn't let anything hold me back. After all my hard work last year, I'd sure as heck earned it.

Not even an hour later, I was completely plastered.

"Oh my *god*, it's so infuriating! Like, how can you even call yourselves adults when you throw a total fit over every little thing like a bunch of spoiled little brats?!"

"Yeah, that's it! You tell 'em, sister!" Yuki laughed as she egged me on; she was pretty drunk herself.

"I mean, I'm literally just trying to have a more open dialogue about these things, but nooo… All these old farts have to come crawling out of the woodwork the moment I say anything that might threaten their precious Showa-era sensibilities. I don't get it. Are they just pissy because it's a *woman* who's standing up to them, or what? It's gotta be a cold day in hell when even the students are more mature and open-minded about this stuff than half the faculty, I swear…"

Uh-oh. This was not good—not good at all. A teacher like me should not have been airing out her workplace woes to one of her students' parents. But man, if it didn't feel good to vent like this when you were drinking with friends.

"Stupid pricks… Trust me, if I was in charge, the first thing I'd do is disband that pathetic joke of a 'guidance office' and rebuild it from the ground up."

"Well, we sure are lucky we've got *you* going to bat for us, at least."

"Oh, no, no, no!" I said, shaking my head at these undue words of appreciation. "You're giving me way too much credit… Honestly, I've been so all over the place that I'm kind of having a hard time just keeping up with my regular teaching responsibilities. Believe me, I could be doing a lot more…"

Shoot. I'm gonna start getting emotional… I can feel it already. I needed more alcohol, and fast—so I poured and threw back another cup of sake.

"I mean, you pushed pretty hard on Ushio's behalf to get her a single room for the class field trip, didn't you?" said Yuki. "That alone makes you a hero in my book. I'm really glad she was lucky enough to have you as her homeroom teacher and not someone else."

"Aw, come on… You're gonna make me cry at this rate." I'd intended it as a joke, but actual tears welled up in the corners of my eyes. I snatched the warm hand towel in front of me and dabbed at my face. "I haven't done that much, really… It's all a result of Ushio's own hard work and perseverance."

"Ha ha… You think so, huh?"

I rolled my hand towel back up and scooped myself a big spoonful of offal stew. The delectable miso-soaked meat fell to bits in my mouth. Meanwhile, Yuki took a refined sip from her glass of red wine, and her eyes crinkled in fondness.

"Ushio *has* been in unusually high spirits, though," she said. "Been getting all dolled up and going out on her days off… She's even started coming to me for advice on clothing and makeup and whatnot. Much more often than she ever used to."

"Ooh, hey! That's encouraging," I said around another mouthful of soup. I swallowed before adding, "Do you think maybe she found herself a boyfriend or something?"

"Hmm… A boyfriend, eh?" Yuki's expression softened to one of sheer affection. "Now wouldn't that be a nice surprise…"

CHAPTER NINE

Trial Run



Chapter Nine:
Trial Run

"AH—*CHOO*!"

A muted sneeze came from beside me.

"You cold?" I asked.

"No," said Ushio, pulling her scarf up a bit. "Just had a little itch in my nose."

I leaned over to get a peek at the front of the line. There were still about five groups between us and the register—close enough that I could smell the sweet scent of crepes wafting out from behind the counter, but far enough that it felt like torture as my mouth watered endlessly in anticipation. My appetite was growing with every sniff, and we'd only just had lunch.

Ushio and I were out on a day trip to the shopping district of a bigger city in the neighboring prefecture. This was our third time going out together since the New Year, but the first time going on such a long-distance excursion. There were an awful lot of people out and about today; I wasn't sure if that was just normal here, or if it was because it was the last day of winter break.

"Have you decided what kind of crepe you want to get?" asked Ushio.

"Still kinda thinking about it. But I'm sort of in the mood for something with banana in it. How 'bout you?"

"I might try the baked apple crepe. Never had one like that before."

"Ooh, that sounds pretty good. In that case, maybe I should try something a little more interesting for a change…"

"You could always try the avocado crepe, if you're feeling adventurous."

"Um, nah… Think I'll pass on that one. Savory crepes are against my religion."

Ushio snickered. "Wait, what the heck does *that* mean?"

"I'll never forget this one time, when I went to AEON with my family and got a crepe with sausage in it… It was years and years ago, and I'm not sure what compelled me to order it in the first place. But the moment I took a bite, I practically seized up in shock. I was like, 'Wait a minute—this isn't sweet. What the hell's going on here?'"

"I mean, sausage isn't generally very sweet, Sakuma."

"Yeah, I know it's not, but like…I guess I'd always thought of crepes as inherently sweet, and having that preconception challenged kind of rocked my whole worldview, *way* more deeply than I expected. With every bite, I started longing more and more for the real crepes I once knew, regretting my life choices for having ordered this pathetic imitation… In the end, I forced my sister to trade me for her strawberry-banana one."

"Poor Ayaka-chan…"

It was true; I did her dirty that day. Looking back on it now, I'd always treated Ayaka rather harshly when we were little… Which was probably exactly why she'd grown to regard me with such animosity in the present day. Truly, little sisters were meant to be cherished, not spurned.

"Still," said Ushio, "I'm pretty sure that's not quite the same thing as being opposed to something on a religious level."

"Look, it was the only way I could think of to describe it, okay?"

"You could just say you're on Team Sweet, not Team Savory, or something."

As we debated this meaningless distinction, our turn finally came. Ushio ordered the baked apple pie crepe, and I went with my usual standby: banana custard. After repeating our order back to us, the man at the register looked back and forth between the two of us as if attempting to size us up.

"So, we're actually offering a couples' discount as part of a promotion right now…if that's something you two are interested in."

"Oh, yes," I said without asking Ushio. "That'd be great, thanks."

As the worker punched in the promotion for us, I saw it subtract a hundred yen from each crepe on the little display. We paid our bill, then shuffled over to wait at the pickup window for our crepes.

Ushio shot me a sidelong glance. "You sure about that?" she said, somewhat teasingly.

"A-about what?"

"Calling us a couple."

"I mean, we're dating, aren't we?"

It still felt a little weird to say it out loud.

But it was the truth.

***

"Let's go out with each other."

Exactly one week had passed since I said those fateful words, on the day we ran up that hill to greet the first sunrise of the New Year. Ushio had chosen the viewing location, a small roadside pull-off overlooking the whole town. Yet it felt as if there was no one else around for miles as we stood there, gazing out over a sea of newborn sunlight as it washed its warmth over the land. As far as romantic settings for asking someone out went, I could have done a hell of a lot worse.

To be fair, I hadn't exactly "asked her out," per se; the way I'd framed it was a lot closer to a casual proposition than a question. I could tell that Ushio had picked up on this distinction, as she frowned and considered me with wary eyes.

"You…want me to go out with you?" she replied, her white breath drifting away in the morning air.

I calmly nodded. "Yeah. And I don't just mean to go shopping, or on another morning run, or anything like that… I'm saying I want to go out with you. Like a real couple."

"A 'real' one, huh?" Ushio said with an obviously snide undertone.

Okay, maybe that wasn't the best choice of words on my part.

"Listen, Sakuma. I don't mean to be rude, but could we just… not? Talk about this right now, I mean."

"Wait… Huh? Wh-why not?"

I'd been prepared for a negative response, don't get me wrong—but I certainly hadn't expected her to be unwilling to even broach the subject.

"I mean, just take a look at this gorgeous view." Ushio squinted as she turned to face the sun. Her pearlescent cheeks glistened in the gleam as she basked in its glow, her profile backlit by the first light of dawn. It was a lovely sight to behold. "I really don't want to ruin such a beautiful morning by getting into a big uncomfortable conversation that'll only depress us both."

"Well, yeah, but like…"

Wait, no—why the hell am I agreeing with her?

"What makes you so sure it's going to be uncomfortable?" I asked, pivoting.

"Because it has been every other time we've talked about this."

"Okay, fair… But this time could always be different, couldn't it?"

"I mean, we both know you're not really serious about this."

The words left her lips so effortlessly, but they stung like a finely honed dagger driven straight through my chest. A turbid slew of negative emotions coursed through me—both the usual self-loathing and disgust with myself for having been so spineless for so long. I felt utterly pathetic for putting her in a position where she could say such a thing about me with relative confidence.

"Just give me one more chance," I pleaded. "Hear me out, at least."

Ushio scowled, then ultimately sighed in resignation. "Okay, fine."

My shoulders sagged in relief. At this point, we agreed that we should probably go somewhere else to have this conversation, so we descended the hill and walked back along the highway for a while. The sun was still low in the sky, so nothing was open, but there were quite a few pedestrians and cars out on the road—probably folks who'd come out to see the first dawn of the New Year themselves or were only now heading back home.

When we came to a small park on the side of the road, Ushio and I walked in and took a seat on one of the benches. The feel of the icy metal through my sweatpants was an instant shock—and when I looked over, I saw Ushio shivering beside me.

"Want a warm drink or anything?" I asked.

"Oh, are you going to the vending machine?" she replied. "Here, I'll come too."

"No, no. I'll buy. Least I can do in exchange for you hearing me out."

"You sure? Okay, yeah. I'll take a hot coffee, then. Something sweet."

"Got it."

I got back up to make for the vending machine we'd seen near the entrance of the park. As I went, I reached a hand back into my

butt pocket—then did a U-turn and marched straight back to where Ushio was sitting.

"Wow, you're back already? That was fast."

"I forgot my wallet at home," I confessed.

"Oh, for the love of… You can't be serious."

She had every right to be exasperated. Hell, I would be too, if I were in her shoes. Served me right for trying to do something even mildly suave for a change.

"Fine, whatever," said Ushio. "Is there anything *you'd* like to drink?"

"Huh? Oh, no—don't worry about it. I'll live."

"It's fine, I said. Just let me pay. Not like one drink is going to break the bank."

"W-well, okay… But you have to let me walk over there with you!"

Wow, Sakuma. Way to drive a hard bargain, you moron. Even I wasn't sure what I was trying to prove with this bizarre attempt at saving face. But so it was that the two of us walked over to the vending machine together, and Ushio bought the warm drink I'd been planning to buy for her. We hadn't even begun our more serious discussion yet, and already I felt like the wind had been taken completely out of my sails. Clutching my canned coffee like a hand warmer as Ushio purchased one for herself, I hung my head in shame.

"Man… I feel like such a scrub."

"It's okay," said Ushio. "You've always kinda been that way."

"Ouch, Ushio… I mean, you're not wrong, but ouch."

"So? What was it you wanted to talk about?"

It sounded like Ushio wanted me to get on with it. Something told me it wasn't the best time for us to sit down and be fully vulnerable with each other anyway, so I figured I should oblige so as

not to exhaust her patience. And it wasn't like I really wanted to get into the weeds when it came to the more difficult questions right now. I pulled back the tab on my canned coffee to crack it open, then took a sip.

"I know this'll probably sound a bit ridiculous, coming from a guy like me all of a sudden, but… Well, I guess I always saw going out with someone as, like…this holy, sacred thing that was meant to be done a certain way, and it would just kinda happen to you when it happened to you. You know what I mean—girl drops her handkerchief on the ground, guy picks it up for her, and it's love at first sight… That sort of thing. I always aspired to have *that* kind of romance one day. Thought it was the 'correct' way of doing it."

"I don't think there's anything wrong with wanting that," said Ushio. "Even if it's obviously a bit unrealistic."

"Yeah, you're right. It *is* unrealistic—though like you said, that's not necessarily a bad thing, if you're willing to wait and save yourself for a fairy-tale love that might never come true. But I guess what I'm most afraid of…is being so preoccupied with some overly idealistic definition of love that I let a kind of happiness I *can* attain slip right through my fingers. And yeah, I think I definitely needed a reality check in that regard."

Ushio tilted her head to one side, a tad puzzled. "Sorry, I'm not sure what you're trying to say, exactly."

"Basically, I'm thinking that instead of stressing over whether things will work out in advance, maybe we should just *try* going out with each other, and see how it goes—y'know? Like, there's gotta be plenty of stuff we won't know if we're compatible or incompatible on until we actually date. I think that's pretty much the idea behind some of those old-fashioned matchmaking services too—like, 'Hey, stranger! Why don't we get married and see if things work out from there?'"

"M-married?!" Ushio gasped, her voice cracking in surprise.

This threw me into a bit of a fluster. “Er, just to be clear, that was only an analogy!”

“Y-yes, I realize that, you idiot! How stupid do you think I am?!”

Uh-oh. This was her “actually mad” voice.

“S-sorry,” I said sheepishly.

Ushio gripped her café au lait with both hands and chugged it. Out of the corner of my eye, I watched her throat bob up and down with each gulp, waiting in suspense for her to finish. Finally, she lowered the can from her lips and let out an exasperated breath.

“I see what you’re trying to say, Sakuma,” she said, regaining her composure. “You’re suggesting we go out with each other on a trial basis first, essentially. I don’t think that’s a bad idea in theory. And yet, for some reason… I don’t know. Maybe this is just my intuition speaking, since I know there’s nothing wrong with what you’re saying from a logical standpoint, but…”

She was hedging her words quite a bit. Whatever it was she was about to say, it had to be something fairly uncomfortable for her to say out loud.

“I feel like…that’s a pretty big compromise for you to make.”

“What? How so?”

“I mean, if you’re giving up on your ideal romance just to take a chance on going out with me, despite all your misgivings… Aren’t you basically just settling at that point?”

“No!” I fired back. “That’s not it at all!”

My voice strained a bit as I shouted—so loudly that Ushio jerked back in fright, causing a bit of her café au lait to spill across her slender fingertips.

“Oh, my bad…”

She was completely off the mark, so why had I lost my cool? I pulled my handkerchief out of my pocket and offered it to Ushio,

who looked at it curiously.

"You'll forget your wallet at home, but not your handkerchief, huh?" she said.

"Yeah, I know. Weird, right? I wonder why that is…"

"Don't ask me…"

Despite the lackluster rapport of this exchange, Ushio accepted the handkerchief, then carefully wiped the top of the can dry around her fingers.

"Anyway," I said, getting back on topic, "I'm *not* settling, for the record. I wouldn't be proposing this in the first place if I didn't want to give this a genuine shot."

For a moment, Ushio's hand froze in place. "I know you wouldn't," she said, her gaze still fixed on the can. "I was just needling you a little bit, sorry."

Once she was done cleaning up the last few drops, Ushio set the handkerchief in her lap and started methodically folding it back up. At first, I marveled at her neatness—then realized that she was probably feeling a bit awkward and needed something to do with her hands to displace that nervous energy.

"And obviously you know that, like…I was hoping for that sort of relationship with you," she went on. "But I guess the thought of us actually going out still makes me a little bit nervous…and I can't help but brace for the worst."

This I could completely understand. The closer you got to another human being, the more you were made painfully aware of the fundamental rift between them and yourself as two distinct individuals. And when that rift presented itself as a difference in core values that might affect both people's ability to grow and prosper in the way you rightly should, sometimes it made more sense to just nip that relationship in the bud rather than try to bridge that divide and fail.

When it came to Ushio, things were a bit more complicated than that, even. This was someone I'd always thought of as my best male friend growing up. While I certainly accepted her as a girl now, those memories added an extra layer of complexity when considering her as a romantic partner—a hurdle that would obviously *not* need to be overcome with someone I'd known as a girl all her life.

"God, it's so hard when you're so nice to me."

Ushio had uttered those words back during summer vacation. She quickly withdrew them and asked me to forget that slip of the tongue, but I couldn't deny that there was a kernel of truth to the sentiment. At the time, I had no idea how painful it must've been for someone to turn you down romantically yet treat you so kindly that you couldn't just move on. Whether you tried to set your feelings aside and stay friends or push the person away, someone was probably going to get hurt in the end.

Regardless, I'd decided to pursue a relationship with Ushio.

I had to find out what these feelings were.

"I totally get why you'd have anxieties about this, and I'm asking you to go out with me in spite of all that. I still want to give this a shot—together."

As I spoke, I gripped my coffee tightly. No matter how hard I squeezed, the steel can didn't dent or buckle—but every second, it yielded more of its warmth to my tensed fingers.

Ushio kept her gaze trained firmly on the ground. Eventually, she lifted her head and straightened up, as if she'd made up her mind.

"Okay," she said resolutely. "Let's go out."

All the tension drained from my hands.

Oh, thank god…

To be totally honest, I'd been a little nervous. Not that she might turn me down, though there was that too, of course. What I'd

been worried about most of all was whether I'd feel truly happy if she *did* agree to go out with me. That wave of relief just now had sealed it for me—and I was so glad to know I was the type of person who could feel genuinely elated at the thought of dating someone like Ushio.

"Cool. Yeah, we'll give it the ol' college try, at least!" I flashed a cheeky little grin, and Ushio's expression went blank.

"Never mind. I take it back."

"Wait, what?!"

After all that?! But why?! Could she have had such a visceral change of heart that fast?

As I panicked, Ushio turned her head away like a sulking child. "You have to be a *little* smoother than that."

Smoother, huh? O-okay, I think I can do that.

I cleared my throat and sat up straight to try again. "Ushio." I turned her by her shoulders to face me. "I think I have a crush on you. Would you do me the honor of being my girlfriend?"

And so I asked Ushio out again, this time in a more clear-cut (if a bit painfully overdramatic) manner. My face felt like it was on fire. I hoped I wasn't blushing up a storm, but I was probably redder than a ripe tomato. It was so cold out that I'd been shivering until a moment ago, yet now I felt so hot that I wanted to rip off my jacket and throw it into the nearby trash can. The slightest of smiles cracked its way onto Ushio's face—though whether it was because she could tell I was feeling awkward or for another reason entirely, I couldn't say.

"Sure," she said. "I'll give it the old college try."

At this, we both burst out laughing like idiots.

Just like that, the two of us were going out. It happened so fast and so easily, once we finally let it, that it almost made the past

six months of twists and turns in our relationship feel like nothing more than a fever dream.

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"All right, here you go," said the clerk, handing us our crepes at the pickup counter. "Sorry for the wait, you two."

I took my banana custard crepe, and Ushio her apple pie mille-feuille-style crepe, and the two of us stepped away from the window. We walked for a little while in search of a comfortable place to eat, then sat side by side on a free bench at a nearby rest area. The warm steam from the freshly cooked batter gave off a tantalizingly sweet scent. I peeled back the wrapper and took my first bite.

"Aw, yeah," I moaned. "That's the stuff."

The triple threat of sweetness from the banana, fresh cream, and custard came together to fill my mouth with a singular euphoric bliss. It had been a safe choice, to be sure, but it hadn't betrayed my expectations. My deep-seated bias was validated once again: Crepes should only ever be a *sweet* dessert, never savory.

I turned to my side to look at Ushio, her cheeks puffed with pastry. "Is yours good?"

"Yeah. You can really taste the cinnamon."

"Ooh, nice…"

As I sat there imagining what that might taste like, Ushio must have noticed my curious gaze fixed on her crepe. She turned to me and tilted her head with consideration. "You wanna try?"

"What?! You sure?"

"Yeah. Only one bite, though." Ushio held her crepe up to my mouth.

What a saint. I opened my mouth so readily, I almost didn't register that this would constitute an indirect kiss… Not that it really

mattered between us at this point, but I went ahead and took a bite from the side opposite where Ushio had been eating, just in case. I closed my eyes and chewed, eagerly anticipating how the texture of the baked apple would complement—

Hey, wait a minute.

"Well? What do you think?" Ushio inquired as I swallowed.

"I don't think I got any apple…" I confessed.

"Wait, really? Oh shoot, you're right. That's too bad."

I stared at her, putting on my best puppy-dog eyes.

"Sorry, I'm not giving you another bite."

Giving up, I returned to eating my own crepe in silence. I vowed to myself that I would order the baked apple variety next time I had the opportunity.

Once we'd finished our desserts, we made our way toward the local theater, where we were planning to catch a matinee showing of a recent domestic release. After a twenty-minute walk, we reached the theater, which was about as crowded as one might expect on a weekend. We made a beeline for the box office and bought our tickets, then had to wait around until the doors opened for our screening. There was still a little while left before showtime.

Ushio took off her scarf, then folded it up and placed it in her bag. As she combed her fingers through the hairs at the nape of her neck to smooth them out, she swept a restless glance around the lobby.

"Been a long time since I've gone to the movies," she said.

"Same," I replied. "Kinda tough when there isn't a theater in Tsubakioka."

"Oh, hey!" Ushio exclaimed, spotting something at the nearby merch counter. "I didn't know this was based on a book."

She peered down into the glass display case at the promotional pamphlet for the movie we were about to see: an adaptation of an

award-winning mystery novel from a couple years back. The film had garnered rave reviews as well.

"Yeah," I said. "I've actually got a copy back at home, if you wanna borrow it."

"Wait, so you've already read it? Won't that kind of spoil the fun for you, though? Since it's supposed to be a mystery and all."

"I mean, it'll take away from the surprise factor, yeah. But it's honestly less of a traditional whodunit and more of a human drama, so I'm not all that worried."

"Well, okay." Ushio leaned over to examine the other merch on offer. Once she was done, she stood up and asked, "Actually, that reminds me—are you still interested in being a writer at all? Or have you kind of given up on that?"

"Oh, right… Guess we haven't talked about that in a while."

Honestly, I'd been trying not to think about it, after how badly I'd embarrassed myself last summer by letting her read my pathetic excuse for an amateur novel. At the time, I'd made the stupid assumption that sharing a vulnerable secret of my own might make Ushio feel more comfortable opening up to me. But in the end, all it really did was hammer home via peer review just how mortifyingly bad my own writing truly was.

"I haven't really felt the urge to write anything lately," I said. "And pretty soon, I'm gonna be too busy studying for entrance exams to have any leftover energy to spend on creative pursuits. Oh, but I guess…"

I trailed off, and Ushio tilted her head curiously.

"You guess…?" she said, pressing me to finish my thought.

"I guess if things are only gonna get busier from here on out, then maybe I *should* try to write something now while I still have the chance. I mean, we're already at that age… Gotta start thinking more seriously about our futures here sooner or later. So it might make sense to give it one more shot to see if I've got what it takes

to be a novelist, or if I should just let that dream die already and focus on other things."

"You really think most kids our age are planning that far ahead?"

"Probably, yeah. I mean, we're gonna be seniors in the spring, and then we'll have to decide what we wanna do with the rest of our lives whether we like it or not… Like, if we're gonna go to college, or just try to find a job or whatever. Though I know *I* sure as hell haven't given those things a whole lot of thought just yet."

"Wow, way to lead by example, Sakuma…" Ushio let out a disappointed sigh, then gloomily dropped her gaze. "I suppose I have no room to judge, though. I really don't like thinking about the future either."

Her confessional tone betrayed the depth of her anxiety. I couldn't claim to understand how Ushio must have felt in this regard, let alone relate. But even I knew she'd face far more hurdles in her life than the rest of us ever would, just to merely be accepted as a valid member of society. It wasn't my place to make light of that by reassuring her that everything would be fine. But I also didn't want to simply commiserate either, so I wasn't quite sure how to console her.

At length, I replied, "Well, worst-case scenario, I guess we could always run away into the mountains and build a cabin in the woods somewhere. Try to live off the land."

"What kind of 'worst-case scenario' are you envisioning here?" It seemed my attempt at lightening the mood had missed its mark. "And why would *you* have to run away with me, huh?"

"I mean, I don't *have* to… Just figured you'd be lonely otherwise."

Ushio blinked at me a few times, caught off guard by my response. Then slowly, her expression relaxed, and she shook her head with a smile.

"Guess I'd better brush up on my wilderness survival skills, then…"

"Uh, no… I think you're probably better off studying to get into a good college."

"Don't abandon the bit as soon as I start playing along, you traitor."

As we carried on with our conversation, I noticed my throat was beginning to feel a bit parched—perhaps due to the theater's indoor heating making the air in the lobby awfully dry. Ushio and I agreed to check out the concessions counter, where we each ordered a drink. We also got a medium-sized popcorn to share, since neither of us were feeling particularly hungry after the crepes we'd just eaten.

"Attention, moviegoers. Thank you for your patience. The doors to Theater 8 have just opened for the 2:30 p.m. showing of—"

Hearing the announcement over the intercom that seating for our film had begun, Ushio and I walked over to get our tickets torn by the lobby attendant, then headed up the escalator and into the theater. We were the first ones there. After having our ticket stubs checked by the usher near the door, we headed in and sat down right in the center of the auditorium.

The theater was so quiet, it was hard to believe there was a large crowd of people in the lobby just outside. In a way, it felt like we'd been cut off from the rest of the world. There was a certain kind of thrill to the thought that we had this vast, empty space all to ourselves. The film hadn't even started yet, and already I was reminded of what a cool experience going to the movies could be.

"Almost feels like we rented the whole place out," Ushio whispered excitedly, just as tickled by the situation as I was.

"I know. Maybe it's been in theaters long enough that most people who want to see it already have? Either way, we really lucked out."

"You can say that again."

The screen lit up, and the previews began to roll. I put my phone on silent and sat up in my chair as a handful of other moviegoers trickled in, and the lights in the theater slowly dimmed.

Before I knew it, the movie was over.

It was a great adaptation, I thought. Even knowing all the story beats going in, I still found the climax riveting, and the action scenes had me on the edge of my seat. The director also took some liberties, I noted, with several scenes playing out a bit differently than they did in the novel; the protagonist also had a slightly different personality from what I remembered. Nevertheless, I got used to these minor changes before long.

As soon as the credits finished rolling and the lights in the theater went up, Ushio stretched back in her chair and let out a satisfied sigh.

"Wow," she said. "That was really good."

"Yeah, definitely."

We agreed to share our more detailed impressions later, then promptly stood up and exited the theater, handing the ushers our empty drinks and popcorn container on our way out the door.

Speaking of popcorn, there'd been a few instances over the course of the movie when Ushio and I had both gone in for a handful at the same time, and our hands brushed against each other. It was the sort of cliché, blush-inducing "accident" you often saw in rom-coms, but frankly I'd been too focused on enjoying the movie to think much of it. Now I wondered if Ushio had felt anything when it happened.

Despite the fact that we were ostensibly an item now, it sure didn't feel like we were doing many of the things you'd associate with being romantically involved. Just look at today, for instance: Sure, we'd called it a "date," but aside from Ushio sharing a single bite of her crepe with me, we weren't being any more intimate than

platonic friends would be. Could we really even call ourselves boyfriend and girlfriend?

Maybe I should be making more of a push for us to do couplesy things together. Like holding hands, or feeding each other, or…k-kissing and stuff…

I always enjoyed spending time with Ushio—but in all honesty, I didn't feel the urge to do any of those things with her. Perhaps that awkwardness could be chalked up to this still being a fairly recent change in our relationship.

Either that, or…

By the time we'd meandered our way out of the movie theater, it was already dark outside. There were still plenty of other pedestrians out and about, including what appeared to be groups of businesspeople going out for drinks after work.

Ushio checked her phone. "Wow, it's already five o'clock. Might wanna start heading back."

We hadn't made any plans to eat out tonight, so our parents would be expecting us home for dinner. I'd had a good time today, so I felt pretty satisfied with our date overall… Yet for whatever reason, I wasn't quite ready to let it end just yet. As if there was something we still needed to do.

"Sakuma? What's up?" said Ushio, noticing my hesitation.

"Here," I said, pulling out my phone. "We should get a photo together."

"I mean, sure, if you really want to… What for, though?"

"Just for memory's sake. Gotta have at least a few photos from when we first started dating, don't we?"

Ushio stared at me blankly for a moment, almost as if in disbelief—then smiled and let out a little chuckle of amusement. "Okay. Where do you want to take it?"

I looked around. It would have been nice if there were a picturesque backdrop nearby, but we were right in the heart of downtown, so I highly doubted we'd find any good scenery. Not that the background mattered much if it was just going to be selfie anyhow; all we really needed was a decent light source.

We moved over to the edge of the sidewalk so as not to obstruct any passersby, and I held up my phone to take the picture, using the glow from a nearby store window as our light source. Both our faces appeared in the small, rectangular screen, though Ushio's was ever so slightly cut off.

"Scoot in a little bit, Ushio."

"O-okay."

She leaned over until her shoulder was touching mine. I could see her cheeks reddening in real time on the screen—which I found rather amusing, given how forward she'd been in requesting a hug from me a few weeks prior. Not to mention stealing my first kiss. I wasn't sure why she felt shy about *this*, of all things.

"All right, say 'cheese'…"

I hit the capture button, then brought my phone down to check the photo. Ushio leaned in to look as well.

"Hey, nice," I said. "It turned out pretty good."

"Can you send that to me later?" she asked.

"Yeah, of course."

I slid my phone back into my pocket, and the two of us made our way back to the station. Idly, I wondered if I'd managed to move the needle at all in terms of us being more like lovers than friends. I knew that taking photos together was pretty low on the relationship intimacy ladder, but there was no need to rush. We could take it slow and reach those bases at our own pace.

"I'm a little surprised," said Ushio. "I thought you hated taking selfies."

"Well, I just know I'm not super photogenic, so it always feels a little embarrassing. Figured I should try getting used to taking them every once in a while, though."

"Yeah, that's good. Photos can last forever, after all…"

As Ushio softly trailed off, I sensed some hidden undertone to these last few words. It was true—photos *could* last forever nowadays, assuming you didn't erase them. But would she and I last that long? Was she trying to say that if this relationship didn't work out, and all the time we spent together ended up being for naught, at least the photos we'd taken would still remain even if nothing else did?

I'm probably overthinking it.

And even if she *had* meant it like that, I shouldn't have read into her words and assumed the worst when there was no real basis for it. At least not as of now, anyway.

"Oh yeah, so about that one scene near the end…" I said, changing the subject.

As we walked down the street, I gushed endlessly about the movie: which scenes I liked, how great I thought the actors' performances were, et cetera. The two of us went back and forth sharing our impressions all the way up until we arrived at the station, where we hopped on the train back to Tsubakioka. Thankfully, it wasn't too crowded, so we were easily able to find a place to sit down, and the under-seat heating vents slowly warmed our wind-chilled bodies from the bottom up. The exhaustion from a long day out finally began to set in, and I felt a yawn coming on.

"Aw, man… Can't believe we have school again tomorrow," Ushio said languidly. Despite her grumbling, I could hear the slightest hint of giddiness in her voice.

"I know. It always feels too soon," I replied. "Gotta finish up the rest of our winter homework tonight, and then it's right back to the daily grind…"

"Yeah… Wait, you haven't finished your homework yet?!" Ushio did a delayed double take at me, flabbergasted.

"I mean, I'm like, 70 percent done with it. I'll manage."

"I dunno… That feels like a *lot* to do in just one night."

It absolutely was. I'd probably be pulling an all-nighter to try to get it done, just like I had during last year's winter break. Thankfully, I'd had Ushio's help for my summer homework, so I got it done pretty quickly—but generally speaking, putting it off to the very last minute was more my style. I was a chronic procrastinator.

"Sheesh, I could've helped you out if you'd told me," she said. "We shouldn't be out having fun around town when you've been slacking off on your schoolwork."

"Yeah, you're not wrong. But we also literally just started going out, so I wanted to prioritize that as much as I could."

Ushio awkwardly scratched her cheek, perhaps embarrassed to hear this. "I really appreciate that, but still…"

Though I *did* want to spend as much time with her as possible over winter break, I couldn't deny that there was also an aspect of escapism there due to me simply not wanting to do my homework. But since *she'd* apparently managed to finish her homework already, while still spending the same amount of time with me, I had no excuse. And now I had to reap what I had sown—though I had to admit, the thought of an all-nighter right now after I'd spent all day walking around the city was not appealing.

"All right, I've decided," said Ushio. "I'm going to help you with your homework."

"What? You mean, like…today?"

"Yes, today, silly. It's due tomorrow, isn't it?"

"But it's already past five, and we'd probably be working on it until after midnight. I can't keep you out that late."

"Then you can just come over to my place after dinner, and we'll try to get through it as quickly as we can."

"I mean, I really appreciate the offer, but…"

It was one hundred percent my own fault that I'd fallen so behind on my summer homework; it didn't feel right to put her out due to my own lack of self-discipline. She had to be feeling pretty tired herself, and I really didn't want to impose on her family by staying over at her house into the wee hours of the night.

However, if we did work together, then I could probably avoid an all-nighter. Sure, it'd likely still take until well after midnight, but I wouldn't be walking into school as a total zombie tomorrow. Ushio was also the one who'd made the suggestion, so maybe I should just gratefully accept her offer.

"All right," I said. "I guess I'll take you up on that."

"Good." Ushio gave a satisfied nod, then leaned back in her seat.

And so it was that I got roped into letting Ushio help me finish my winter homework—as ridiculous as that sounded. I'd go home, eat dinner, then head straight over to her house.

I'm not gonna need a change of clothes, am I?

***

I raced down the road on my bike like a speeding bullet piercing through the dark. The night air was frightfully crisp; even with gloves on, my fingers stiffened around my handlebars, and the tips of my ears stung like crazy.

"God, it's *freezing* out here!" I practically shrieked.

After finishing my dinner, a mild post-meal drowsiness had come over me, but this cold was enough to shock me wide awake again. I stood straight up on my bike and carved a course for Ushio's house, the icy wind battering my cheeks harder the faster I pedaled.

When I made it to her front door, I got off my bike and, shivering, grabbed my tote bag full of paperwork from the basket and slung it over my shoulder. I checked the time on my phone; it was seven o'clock. I might have arrived a bit too early.

Still, I rang the doorbell, and the front door swung open in no time to reveal a bob of black hair about a head shorter than I was. It was Misao. I'd been so certain it would be Ushio coming out to greet me that this caught me a little off guard.

"Evening, Misao-chan," I said. "Is Ushio around?"

"He's taking a bath right now," said Misao. "You can come wait inside."

A bath, huh? Guessing she's already eaten dinner, then, at least.

I bowed politely to Misao's invitation. After taking my shoes off, I headed straight for the stairs.

"Um, where are you going?" Misao asked.

"Huh? Up to Ushio's room… Why?"

Did she not know I was coming over to do homework? No, surely Ushio had let her know in advance, or else why had she invited me in without so much as a question?

"I'm not sure Ushio would really appreciate you going in there without permission."

"Y-you think? But she already knows I'm coming over… And it's not like she's ever had an issue with me going in there before."

"Just wait down here in the living room, please."

And so, without any proper explanation as to why, Misao effectively dragged me into the living room with her. Thankfully, they had the heat on downstairs, so I could use this extra time to let my frozen body thaw a bit. But when I saw Ushio's father—Arata Tsukinoki—sitting on the couch watching TV, I stiffened right back up again.

"Oh, Sakuma-kun," he said. "Good to see you."

"Y-yeah, you too."

"Come, have a seat." He stood up to offer me a spot on the couch. "Ushio mentioned you'd be coming over. She should be out any minute now, so just sit tight."

"Okay, sounds good." I set my bag on the floor and sat hesitantly on the edge of the couch.

"Can I get you some coffee or tea?" asked Mr. Tsukinoki as I took off my jacket.

"Oh, sure… Coffee would be great, thanks."

"Milk and sugar?"

"Both, please."

"You got it. Give me one minute."

With a spring in his step, he walked over and opened the kitchen cupboard.

Mr. Tsukinoki had always been polite and considerate toward me, yet—as evidenced by the awkward tension that hung over the dinner table the last time I was over—I didn't feel comfortable enough to act casual around him. I wasn't sure why; he was very down-to-earth while still maintaining an air of dignity, and he seemed like a good, loving husband to boot. Basically the complete opposite of my own father. Maybe that would explain why I didn't really know how to interact with him.

As I sat there fidgeting, hoping Ushio would come out to collect me before long, Misao lowered herself onto the carpet and went back to watching TV. Or so it seemed, anyway—but after a while, I caught her stealing surreptitious glances at me every few seconds. Almost like she had something she wanted to say, but was too timid to bring it up. I figured I could try to strike up a conversation from my end.

"So, uh, Misao-chan… You've got high school entrance exams coming up here pretty quick, don't you? Think you'll be ready for 'em?"

"More or less, I think."

"It's next month, right? Must be pretty nerve-racking."

"It's very stressful, yes."

"Yeah, been there. Wouldn't wanna do it again. You have my sympathy."

"Thanks…"

Jeez, okay. Guess that's all I'm gonna get out of her.

Had I read her body language wrong or something? I was all but certain she had something to say, but she wasn't giving me anything to work with, so I figured I'd better shut up and watch TV while I waited for Ushio. Their giant LCD flat-screen was a fair bit larger than the one we had at my house, and it was tuned in to some sort of New Year's concert special. A singer I didn't recognize was onstage, performing a song I didn't know. Losing interest at the speed of light, I looked idly around the living room instead. It occurred to me that I didn't see Yuki anywhere. Maybe she was still at work.

"So hey," Misao finally said after an extremely long and awkward silence.

Aha. There *was* something she wanted to say.

"What's up?" I asked, trying my best not to sound vindicated.

"I, um…I wanted to apologize for my behavior the other day."

"The other day? Ohhh… Right."

I assumed she meant when she ran away from home a couple weeks back. Which was also the last time she and I had seen each other, come to think of it.

"Don't worry about it," I said. "I wouldn't say you owe me an apology."

"But I acted like such a stubborn brat—and after you went out of your way to help look for me too…"

"Well, it sounds like you and Ushio had a pretty good heart-to-heart after that, so I'd say it was worth the effort. Seriously, don't worry about me. I'm just glad you two are on speaking terms now."

"Oh, Sakuma-san…" Misao bit her lip.

For a moment, I felt pretty good about myself for handling this so maturely—then realized that an actually mature person probably wouldn't pat themselves on the back for such a thing and felt like an idiot. Still, I meant what I said: I hadn't done anything special here. It was her and Ushio that put in the work to make amends.

"Sorry for the wait," said Mr. Tsukinoki, walking over with my cup of coffee.

I leaned forward on the couch as he set it on the low table in front of me. I thanked him for the trouble, added the milk and sugar he'd brought along, and stirred it in with the little spoon on the saucer. Once everything was put away, he sat at the dining room table and picked up a paperback that was lying there spine-up and half read. It seemed I'd stolen his spot on the couch; now I *really* felt bad.

"Hey, um…can I ask you something?" Misao said meekly.

"Hm? Sure, what's up?" I replied.

"You've…been going out and doing things with my brother a lot lately, haven't you?"

"Yeah, today was the third time this week. Why do you ask?"

"I knew it," Misao whispered meaningfully, then moved up to sit on the couch next to me; I recoiled a bit at her closing the gap so suddenly. "Be honest… There's something going on between you and my brother, isn't there?"

"Wh-what do you mean by that?"

"He always seems so restless whenever he's getting ready to go out… But not like he normally is. It's like he's in a really good mood and can't wait to leave… Almost like he's about to go out on a date or something."

"Huh, you don't say…"

I took a sip of my coffee, and Misao leaned in to whisper in my ear—presumably so her father couldn't hear what she was about to say.

"Don't tell me…you two aren't going out, are you?"

She asked the question so pointedly, I nearly spit out my coffee. "Uhhh…"

I was floundering. While I had no intention of denying it, I wasn't sure if *Ushio* would be okay with me telling Misao about us. Something told me it might only make things harder for her if I revealed such a thing without checking with her first. At the same time, it made me feel like a terrible boyfriend to have to beat around the bush about our relationship. But as I set my coffee cup down and tried to think of how best to respond, Misao gasped as though she'd just made a huge mistake and looked away.

"I'm sorry! Forget I said that. I should respect your privacy. And I know I have zero right to interrogate you or butt in on your relationship…"

"Okay, *now* you're just blowing things out of proportion."

Perhaps more accurately, she was backpedaling hard; she probably wanted to err on the side of caution, given her already strained sibling relationship with Ushio. I assumed she was afraid of making things even worse by sticking her nose into our business—but I gathered that she was concerned about Ushio in her own way.

"You've got nothing to worry about," I told her. "Ushio and I are doing just fine."

Misao shot me a look, then pouted in discontent. "I wasn't worried about *that*," she grumbled, lowering her head.

"Wait… You weren't?"

"No. I'm a little annoyed, that's all. Because my brother and I literally *just* started speaking again, and now all he ever seems to care about is you."

"Oh, I see… So you're feeling jealous, basically."

"No, I'm not!"

Well, well… Quite the vehement denial. Methinks the lady doth protest too much.

Over at the dining room table, I saw Mr. Tsukinoki crack a slight smile without looking up from his book. Perhaps he could hear our conversation.

To be fair, I remembered just how attached Misao was to Ushio when she was little. By the time Misao entered junior high, she'd grown a little more defiant and rebellious—but even that was just a symbol of how strongly she felt about her sister, in a certain sense. Ushio had always weighed very heavily on Misao's mind, for better and for worse. Thankfully, Misao was definitely trending for the better, and their relationship seemed to be slowly recovering, which was heartwarming to see.

"All right, all right," I said. "My bad. I'll be sure to tell Ushio to pay more attention to you from now on."

"I told you, I'm *not* jealous! And he'd only get angry at me if you told him that, anyway…"

The look in her eyes as she glared at me was almost identical to how Ushio looked when she was upset. And, speak of the devil—just then, I heard the *click* of a door opening from down the hall, followed by the *pitter-patter* of bare feet coming closer. Ushio had finally finished her bath, as she walked out into the living room in a baggy sweatsuit with a towel wrapped around her head. Her flushed cheeks were still a bit damp.

"Misao, I need to dry my hair, so you can go ahead and—wait, *huh*?!"

The second Ushio spotted me, she hid around the corner in the kitchen.

"You're already here?! Why are you down in the living room?!"

"Well, I just figured it'd be kinda rude to enter your room without permission."

I glanced at Misao, hoping she would back me up as the one who'd led me down here, but she feigned ignorance and looked away. *Have I been duped?!*

"Okay, well, I need to get ready still, so give me a sec." With that, Ushio turned around and headed straight back into the bathroom.

Once she was gone, I turned my gaze back on Misao.

"Sorry," she said without a hint of shame. "I just wanted a chance to talk to you while my brother was in the shower, is all. You can go upstairs now."

"Oh… W-well, okay, I guess."

I felt like I'd been played for a fool. I was glad to see that Misao and Ushio were getting along now, but it seemed the gap between Misao and myself was still vast. How very sad indeed. I downed the rest of my cup, grabbed my bag, and stood up.

"Thanks for the coffee, sir," I said, bowing my head politely.

"Don't mention it," Mr. Tsukinoki replied with a smile. "Good luck on that homework."

I nodded, then turned and made my way up the stairs to Ushio's bedroom.

Right as I stepped inside, a toasty heat enveloped me. I wasn't sure whether Ushio had deliberately put it on so the room would be warm for us or she'd just left it on after she got home, but I was grateful for the warmth either way.

I pulled my homework out of my bag and set everything out on the table. Then I sat and waited for Ushio, since I didn't feel right

getting started without her.

For whatever reason, merely sitting here in Ushio's room was a new and exhilarating experience. I'd been over to her house countless times, even spent the night back in elementary school—but things were different between us now, so I figured I could count this late-night visit as a first. This wasn't a childhood sleepover; we were in high school now. And, trial basis or not, we were a couple…

Which, now that I thought about it, made this a bit of a spicy scenario.

Sure, we were only getting together to do some homework, but just looking at the situation objectively: We were boyfriend and girlfriend, it was getting late, and we were going to be all alone in her bedroom… What was my game plan if things started getting hot and heavy all of a sudden? I hadn't come mentally prepared for that.

Wait. Mentally prepared for what*, exactly?*

What was I even expecting to happen here?

Aw, great… Now I'm getting all antsy for no reason…

"Hey, sorry for the wait," Ushio said, walking into the bedroom. She was wearing the same sweatsuit as before, but her hair was now dry. She took one look at me and frowned quizzically. "Why are you sitting on your knees like that?"

"Oh, uh, no reason…"

I quickly relaxed my posture. It must have been my nerves; I hadn't even realized I was sitting so stiffly. Ushio padded over to the closet, threw on a fleece jacket, and sat down directly across from me.

"You came over so fast," she said. "You're normally pretty slow to eat dinner, so I assumed I had enough time to take a bath."

"Yeah, I kinda wolfed it down… Wanted to get started as soon as possible, since it was already getting late. Also pedaled like a madman the whole way here because *man*, is it cold outside!"

"It's freezing out there, yeah. Glad it wasn't too bad this afternoon, though."

I nodded in agreement as I laid my math worksheet on the table. Might as well get the most annoying part out of the way first, I figured.

"Oh yeah, so where's Yuki-san?" I asked. "Still at work?"

"No, I think she had some holiday function to go to," said Ushio. "Probably out drinking with her colleagues."

"Ah, gotcha. Guess it's still New Year's party season."

Ushio looked down at my worksheet on the table. "How much of that have you gotten done already?"

"Probably about half, maybe."

"Oof, all right… We'd better get started, then."

"Yeah, let's do it."

I grabbed a mechanical pencil from my pencil case, clicked out a little bit of lead, and started reading through the next word problem on the page. With Ushio's help, I was able to work through each question fairly quickly. Having a skilled tutor who could guide you through something step-by-step really *did* make a huge difference. At this rate, I assumed we'd be finished with the math portion in no time. And yet…

"No, you've got that part wrong."

"Huh? Oh, shoot, you're right."

"Are you getting tired or something? Seems like you're making a lot of little careless mistakes tonight…"

"Nah, I'm not tired… Just a little distracted, maybe."

Ushio blinked at me curiously. "By what?"

After a long pause, I admitted, "You just smell really good. Must be whatever soap you use."

Ushio's cheek twitched upward for a split second—then she let out a heavy sigh and gave me a stern, disappointed look. "You really shouldn't say things like that, Sakuma. Like, how am I even supposed to respond to that? And it makes you sound kinda creepy, to be honest."

"What?! It does?"

"Obviously, I know you well enough to just shrug it off, but I guarantee if you said that to another girl, she'd be totally grossed out. Like, 'Wow, does he go around sniffing *every* girl he meets?' Even Natsuki would probably feel a little violated."

"I mean, I guess it *does* sound pretty weird, when you put it that way…"

It made me feel surprisingly terrible to be chided in this fashion—even more so than it probably would have if she'd just gotten angry and *called* me a creep—but I appreciated the warning. I needed to watch my words more carefully.

"Sorry. I must really like the smell of soap."

"That's *also* a pretty weird thing to say, Sakuma," Ushio pointed out, but this time the corners of her mouth curled up in what seemed like mild amusement, at least.

All right, back to work. I shouldn't be wasting Ushio's time with stupid stuff like this when she's doing me a major solid.

Resolved, I returned my attention to the worksheet.

It was right after midnight when a knock came at the door.

"Come in," said Ushio, and in walked Yuki with a tray of food in hand.

"I see you two are hard at work," she said. "I threw together a little late-night snack, if either of you are interested."

As Ushio's stepmom came closer, I could smell the slight scent of alcohol on her. She set the tray down on Ushio's desk, and I craned my neck to see what was on it: some rice balls, a big rolled

omelette cut into slices, and two cups of hot tea. Quite the late-night snack.

"Thanks," said Ushio. "I was just thinking I could go for a little something…"

"Let me know if you're still hungry after that," said Yuki. "I can always whip up a few more rice balls."

With that, Yuki let out a great big yawn. Something told me we shouldn't ask for seconds; she clearly needed to go to bed.

"Anyway, keep up the hard work, you two!" Yuki waved goodbye as she excused herself from the bedroom.

"I suppose we might as well take a quick break," said Ushio.

"Sounds good to me."

We set our paperwork aside, then transferred the tray of food to the low table. After we clapped our hands together in appreciation for this unexpected meal, I grabbed one of the rice balls and took a bite.

"Aw, yeah… That hits the spot," I said with my mouth full. "Nothing like a good ol' fashioned rice ball in the middle of the night."

Next, I popped a slice of the rolled omelette into my mouth. It was equally delicious; you could really taste the dashi. I couldn't believe Yuki had cooked up such a scrumptious little spread for us right after a long night out. She was almost *too* hospitable, honestly.

"Gosh, it's been a while since I've eaten this late," said Ushio, stuffing her cheeks with a big bite of her own rice ball. It seemed she really *had* been feeling peckish. "It's funny… There's almost a kind of guilty pleasure to it, know what I mean?"

"Oh, you have *way* more self-control than me. I do it all the time. Love to just grab a bag of potato chips, put on a movie, and then pass out at, like, 2:00 a.m."

Ushio swallowed. "That's really not a healthy habit to get into. Your teenage metabolism isn't going to last forever."

"Eh, I'm not too worried. If I put on too much weight, I can start going on morning runs with you again. If anything, I feel like *you* could stand to eat a little bit more, Ushio. Don't you think you might be a little too skinny?"

"That's just my body type. And it's not like I don't have muscle tone either. I do ab workouts every day."

"Wait, seriously? Damn. You must be pretty shredded, then, huh?"

"No, not particularly. They're not, like…*that* defined."

"Huh. Well, you would know better than me, I guess." I took a sip of my tea, then reached for another slice of rolled egg.

"Do you…wanna feel?" Ushio said hesitantly.

"Huh?!" I sputtered. "Y-you want me to?"

"I mean, I don't mind…"

It wasn't like I had some burning desire to feel her abs or anything like that… But now that she'd offered, I *was* a little curious. It wasn't every day that you got to touch a six-pack…or whatever it was she apparently had.

"Well, okay. If you say so, I guess…"

I grabbed a tissue and wiped my fingers clean, moved to the other side of the table, and sat down next to Ushio. She leaned back and placed both hands behind her on the carpet for support, as if presenting her lower abdomen to me for review.

I'm sure it's fine… I'm only gonna be touching her stomach, after all. Nothing too crazy. Not even intimate, arguably. No need to overthink it.

I reached out and brushed my hand along her stomach through her sweatshirt.

Whoa, what the hell?! Are these really her abs? Holy crap! They're rock-hard!

Perhaps I should've expected as much from the former star athlete of the track and field team. Maybe doing cardio every day was all it took to get abs of steel. It was enough to make me feel kinda jealous, honestly…but I wondered how Ushio felt about her physique. Did she even *like* being so ripped? I knew *I'd* feel pretty damn good about myself if I had a six-pack, but I also recognized that having muscles wasn't usually considered a very "feminine" thing, at least by traditional beauty standards, so maybe I shouldn't have assumed Ushio felt the same. Then again, she probably wouldn't have offered to let me get a feel of them if she were ashamed.

But damn, though… And here she said they weren't all that defined.

Wanting to see just how far the muscles went, I slid my fingers to the side, and—

"Bwuh?!" Ushio blurted out, wriggling away—then glared at me with a look of betrayal. "Hey, I didn't say you could feel my *sides*!"

"What? That was only an inch or two away from your belly button. I really don't think that qualifies as your 'side.'"

"Well, maybe we have different definitions, then, because it definitely qualifies in my book… And I'm *pretty* sure it was more than a couple inches." Ushio wrapped her arms around her torso and rubbed them up and down, as if trying to smooth away goosebumps.

"Okay, even if it *was*," I said, "I'm fairly confident most people aren't that sensitive on their sides. Are you just super ticklish or something?"

"I mean, I don't let other people touch me very often, so I guess I wouldn't know. But yeah, maybe so."

"Heh… At last, I've discovered your one weakness…"

Not that I intended to do anything with that information, obviously. Aside from telling Hoshihara, maybe—she'd probably get a kick out of it. But then again, that would require explaining to her that I was feeling up Ushio's abs in her bedroom late at night…so perhaps I'd better not. She might get the wrong idea.

"What about you, Sakuma?"

"What *about* me?"

"Are your sides sensitive too?"

"Couldn't tell ya. Don't think anyone's ever tried tickling me there either."

"Oh, is that right? Maybe *I* should do the honors, then."

Ushio lifted her hands up to chest height and wiggled her fingers. It seemed it was *my* turn to get felt up now. Unlike Ushio, I didn't have any real muscle to speak of, so I was a little more uncomfortable than she was about being touched. But it would be unfair to tell her no after she'd just let me touch *her* abs, so I figured I should just grin and bear it.

"All right," I said. "Do your worst."

As she reached out, I tensed my abs as much as I could in the hopes that she wouldn't feel my stomach flab. She grazed her hands over my stomach and poked at my belly a few times to gauge its (nonexistent) hardness, then traced her fingertips along the edge of my ribcage and down my sides.

I remained completely stoic throughout.

"Dang, that really doesn't tickle you at all?" asked Ushio.

"Nope, not even a little," I said. "Guess it must vary from person to person."

"Well, sheesh… That's no fun," she grumbled, pulling her hands back. "I suppose your skin must be as thick as your head."

"Um, ouch? *That* was uncalled for."

"Sorry, sorry. I'm only teasing. Here, you can have the last slice of rolled omelette." Ushio snickered as she slid the plate in front of me.

It was nice to see her enjoying herself, even if it *was* at my expense. In fact, it felt like she'd been a lot chattier and more assertive throughout *all* of our interactions today, from our date this afternoon onward. The Ushio I thought I knew definitely wouldn't have insisted on helping me with my homework or offered to let me touch her abs, for instance. It was like she finally felt comfortable wearing her heart on her sleeve. Perhaps we were starting to achieve a so-called "lovers' rapport," as it were.

Despite this weirdly detached analysis of mine, I couldn't deny that I'd really enjoyed my time with her today as well. There was something about simply spending quality time with someone you knew you could trust (and who you knew had feelings for you as well) that made the whole world seem that much brighter. There was a strange comfort there that I couldn't quite describe—a feeling of being totally at ease around a person, yet still filled with childlike glee and excitement at the mere thought of coexisting in the same space. A quiet sort of happiness.

It was a good feeling. No wonder there were so many couples in the world.

But right now, we had more urgent things to worry about. We both had school in the morning, so it was time to quit playing around and hit the books.

We finished up our late-night snack, then got back to work.

After two more hours of steady scribbling under Ushio's guidance, it was done.

"Phew… Finally!"

I set my pencil down, then threw my head back and gazed up at the ceiling. It was almost 2:30 in the morning. Earlier than I expected to be finished, but I was exhausted all the same; I could

probably pass out right here if I lay flat on my back. Ushio was getting awfully tired too, judging from her intermittent yawning.

"Thanks so much for all the help," I said. "Now I don't have to try to convince the teacher that I did my homework but forgot it at home."

"I'm pretty sure that excuse only flies in elementary school, Sakuma. Are you saying you didn't think you'd be able to get it done tonight on your own?"

"No, I figured I could. But I also promised myself I wouldn't make the same mistake I made on our first-semester finals this year, when I pushed myself so hard that it did a number on my health. So I probably would've called it quits at some point."

I still vividly recalled just how miserable that had been: cramming so hard each and every night to the point that I came down with a nasty fever, which had me barely able to think straight or keep my eyes open during the actual exams. In retrospect, I was pretty damn impressed with myself for ranking first in our grade despite all that.

"Yeah, I remember that," said Ushio. "Things were definitely tense for a while there… Hard to believe that was more than half a year ago already."

"Yup, we've come a long way since then. Had our fair share of struggles to deal with, and a whole slew of drama too. But I also feel *way* more fulfilled now than I did just going through the motions as a complete loner my freshman year. And I think I owe a lot of that to you, Ushio. Thanks for helping me turn my life around."

"Jeez, where'd that come from? You don't owe me for anything, silly…"

"Sure I do! You just saved my bacon on this winter homework!"

"Yeah, but I offered to. Because *I* genuinely wanted to help you out. And, well…" Ushio cast her eyes downward and fidgeted

with her hands. "I guess I thought it'd be kinda nice if we could spend a little more time together today…"

There was an earnest warmth to these words as she breathed them out with a sigh. I nearly cracked a giddy smile at the sentiment, and my chest filled with a warm, fuzzy feeling. I was really, really glad to hear her say this.

"But *anyway*, ha ha!" Ushio promptly lifted her head, attempting to laugh off the awkwardness. "Sorry, not trying to get all sappy on you so late at night… I should really go to bed, and you need to go home and rest too, so—"

"Ushio," I said soberly, and she blinked at me in bewilderment. "You said something a while back that's really stuck with me…about how the way I was treating you made it hard for you to even be around me. I know you never meant for me to hear that, but I guess I was wondering: Do you still feel that way now?"

This was a selfish, cowardly thing to ask her when I knew she probably didn't, and she'd specifically asked me to forget she'd said it. But it was something I felt I needed closure on, and this seemed like the right opportunity. I didn't want to find out later that Ushio was still suffering in that regard while I assumed we were both on the same page, having a good time together. The thought of her simply going along with this whole "are we, aren't we" trial-dating thing because *I* said we should give it a shot was more harrowing than I could describe.

"No," said Ushio, somewhat firmly. "I don't feel that way at all. And we wouldn't be where we are right now if I did."

"Yeah, I guess not."

I felt pathetic for asking such a stupid question, but I was grateful to Ushio for answering so quickly and definitively.

"All right," I said. "I'd better pack up and get going, then. Thanks for staying up so late to work through this with me."

"Don't mention it," said Ushio. "Besides, I was the one who invited you over."

The conversation ended there, and a silence fell over the entire house as I started gathering up all of the paperwork I had laid out on the table. There'd been occasional noises from downstairs up until 1:00 a.m. or so, but now all was quiet. Yuki was probably fast asleep by now—as was Mr. Tsukinoki, no doubt. Once I'd finished stuffing all of my schoolwork back into my bag, I started putting on my jacket…

"So hey," said Ushio, so nonchalantly that I thought nothing of it.

"What's up?" I replied, sliding my arms through the sleeves.

"Do you wanna try, like…kissing or anything?"

Understandably, this stopped me dead in my tracks. Yet it didn't catch me off guard—to the point that even *I* was surprised at how unshaken I was by this sudden proposal. It also made sense given that (consensually or not) I'd already kissed her once before, and we'd shared a fairly tender embrace more recently too. More than anything else, there was the simple fact that she and I were now in a romantic relationship. So of course I knew there was a good chance one thing might lead to another if we ended up in a situation like this, where we were all alone in the same room late at night. I'd also given some thought to how I might respond this time around, for a variety of possible scenarios, and how far I was comfortable going with Ushio at this point in time.

A kiss, I was pretty sure I could handle.

"Okay, yeah," I said. "Let's do it."

Ushio's eyes widened in surprise, but she quickly regained her straight-faced composure. "I'm not just playing around, you know. I'm actually gonna do it."

"Yeah, I know. No need to tack on a hundred disclaimers beforehand. You're just gonna make us both start feeling awkward

about it…”

“W-well, I wasn’t feeling awkward until you said that!”

Then let’s both just shut up and do it already! I wanted to say, but I held my tongue.

Ushio let out a frustrated groan, then took a deep breath and looked me square in the eye. “Here goes…”

She scooted around the table to my side.

We were sitting shoulder to shoulder now.

She turned her head and slowly leaned closer.

Her warm breath caressed my skin.

Oh, man… We’re actually gonna do this, huh?

Not that I didn’t know what I was signing up for. And thankfully, there was almost zero chance of anyone walking in on us at this hour. But that didn’t make me feel any less nervous. As Ushio’s face came closer and closer, my heart started pounding like crazy.

Just then, a flood of faded memories came surging forth from the depths of my mind—memories of Ushio, flashing one by one through my mind like slides from an old projector. Ushio as the shy, unassuming introvert she’d been when we first met. Ushio standing tall atop the podium after taking first place in the school marathon. Ushio getting swarmed by her female admirers after our junior high graduation, each of them begging for a button from her uniform jacket that they could keep as a memento…

Then all at once, these disparate visions of Ushio taken from throughout our shared history—from back when I still only knew her as a boy—converged into a single image. One that perfectly superimposed itself onto the face right in front of me.

And I reflexively pulled away.

“Wha…?”

Ushio blinked at me in confusion. For a second, I didn't fully register what I'd just done. The moment I realized how horrible the implications were, *especially* from Ushio's perspective, my blood ran cold.

Oh god… What have I done?

"Er, sorry, I just, uh…guess I wasn't quite mentally prepared…"

Ushio looked puzzled for a moment—but then her eyebrows quickly fell back into line as though she'd had a sudden epiphany, and it all made sense now.

"Maybe we'd better not after all?" she said with an apologetic smile.

Her neatly trimmed lashes cast a jagged shadow over her wavering, ash-gray eyes, so full of sorrow and resignation. I couldn't bear to see her like this, yet it was me who'd made her feel this way. I had to apologize—no. There was only one way to make this right.

I leaned in and kissed Ushio on the lips.

Even with my eyes closed, I could tell she was startled by this; I'd gone in with such momentum that our front teeth clacked against each other. At first, her lips tensed, as if in resistance—but slowly, they relaxed, and the two of us just kind of sat there frozen in place with our mouths pressed together for a short while.

When at last Ushio gently pulled away, I opened my eyes to see her staring back at me in disbelief, like a deer in headlights. "J-jeez," she murmured. "Wasn't expecting *that*."

An intense wave of embarrassment came crashing over me. I couldn't bear to look her in the eye, so my gaze darted frantically to and fro. I knew I had to say something—and I was frustrated that I couldn't come up with anything, for whatever reason—but eventually, Ushio tilted her head in concern and broke the silence for me.

"…I hope I didn't force you into that."

"No, not at all," I assured her. "I guess I'm…a little surprised that it felt so different from last time… Not sure how to explain it. Probably just…nerves, I guess…"

I was stumbling over my words so bad, I felt borderline unintelligible.

Ushio flashed me a reassuring smile, then rose to her feet. "You should probably head home and get some rest."

While I didn't know how to respond to this at first, I ultimately nodded and packed up my things in silence. Ushio led me down the stairs and out the front door, where I was surprised to find that I didn't feel all that cold. Maybe I'd been so frazzled by what just happened that it sent my body temperature through the roof.

"Well, be careful on your way home," said Ushio. "G'night."

"Yeah, night… See you tomorrow…"

When I turned around, Ushio closed the door behind me. I climbed onto my bike and started pedaling. Then I shifted up a couple gears and stood up. After that, my body started swaying from side to side as I pushed all my weight down into the pedals.

Left, right. Left, right.

I couldn't feel the cold anymore; I just kept on pedaling as hard as I could, gripping my handlebars with all my might. Like I was desperately trying and failing to get away from something—or contain some irrepressible emotion bubbling up inside of me. Something hot and fierce, boiling up from the pit of my stomach to the back of my throat. And then I couldn't hold it in any longer.

"Raaaaaaagh!"

I roared at the top of my lungs.

For the life of me, I couldn't tell you why. There was no sense of pleasure nor displeasure behind it—only a simple, animalistic urge. A rush of pure exhilaration, just begging to be let out. Even after I got home, even after I took an ice-cold shower, the fever inside me refused to abate.

I didn’t sleep a wink that night.

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“Dude, you look like a freaking *raccoon* with those dark circles.”

These were the first words out of Hasumi’s mouth when he came to greet me as I walked in the main entrance to Tsubakioka High the next morning.

“Yeah, Happy New Year to you too, pal…” I grumbled.

“Happy New Year!” Hasumi said cheerily, not even missing a beat. “So let me guess: You were up all night scrambling to get your homework done, weren’t you?”

“I was up all night, yeah. But not doing homework.”

I slipped on my indoor shoes, and the two of us headed up to the classroom. Winter break had only lasted a couple weeks and change, so it didn’t feel like I’d been away from my fellow classmates all that long. Aside from the New Year’s greetings being exchanged here and there throughout the hallway, you probably wouldn’t even know we’d been on break. Everyone seemed to be picking up right where they left off.

I loosed a massive yawn. “Man, I’m tired…”

Hasumi eyed me curiously. “So were you just up playing games or something, then?”

“Wasn’t doing anything, really,” I said. “Hopped into bed, but I couldn’t sleep.”

“What are you, a seven-year-old the night before a field trip?”

“Nah, it’s not like I was excited to go back to school or anything… Though it’s probably the first time I’ve been too wired to fall asleep since I was about that age.”

“Huh. Somethin’ good happen last night, or what?”

“Uhhh, well…”

It certainly hadn't been something *bad*, at the very least—but I didn't feel like I could give a definitive yes either. Did what happened between me and Ushio last night qualify as a "good" thing, like a stroke of luck or a pleasant surprise? It wasn't as if I'd really "gained" anything from it. Not that it mattered, of course; I was fairly certain most people didn't kiss each other because they were hoping to get something out of it.

So why *did* lovers all around the world kiss each other so often?

Was it to reaffirm their love for one another? Or were they merely going through the motions because that was what society *taught* them lovers were supposed to do? Maybe it *was* an antiquated ritual with no inherent purpose or meaning behind it, one that had been glorified and made into this semisacred thing by all the famous romance novels and plays and whatnot from the past few centuries.

I knew it was stupid for me to be ruminating over stuff like this when there had to be a single logical explanation for it. In actuality, I was just struggling with how to interpret *my* kiss with Ushio last night—so I was using all of these weird abstractions in the hopes that I might find a more palatable way to wrap my head around it. Because if I couldn't do that, I knew I'd just keep worrying.

"Hey. Kamiki."

I turned around; Hasumi had stopped walking several meters behind me.

"You walked right past the classroom, chief."

"Oh, shoot. My bad."

"You still asleep or something? Wake up and get a grip."

Hasumi shook his head at my lack of awareness, then headed into class; I jogged back and followed him through the sliding door.

Once inside, I could see that the morning hustle and bustle was in full swing. More than half of our classmates were already

there, and all the chatter and activity made the room feel awfully warm and cozy despite the distinct lack of central heating. And right there in the middle of the laughter, a group of girls was gathered around Hoshihara's desk, engaging in whatever small talk was on the docket for today. Ushio was among them, but not exactly close enough for me to walk over and say hello to while remaining nonchalant, so I figured I'd go straight to my desk for now.

Then our eyes met, so I greeted her with a little nod of acknowledgment—which she returned before turning right back to her friends. This was business as usual for us, no different from our typical rapport. If that was any indication, there probably wouldn't be any residual awkwardness about last night from either of our ends. Things were going to be perfectly normal between us—which was a good thing, in my book.

Or so I thought, anyway.

Huh? What the…?

I clutched at my shirt.

Strangely enough, there was a restlessness in my chest. Like that feeling of anticipation you get when the teacher is looking for a student she can call on to answer a question on the blackboard. Not the nervous dread you get when you *don't* want to get called on—but the subdued excitement of being one hundred percent certain you know the answer and praying you *will*. But what could that sensation even mean, in this case?

Had I been hoping Ushio would see me walk through the door, then drop everything she was doing and come talk to me instead? *No, how the hell would* that *make any sense?* I shouldn't have expected that of her when she was already hanging out with her friends; if I cared that much about getting to say "good morning" or whatever, then *I* should've gone over to *her*.

I tried to think of other, more sensible explanations. Like, maybe this weird restless feeling was just a byproduct of me not having gotten any sleep last night.

Yeah, that's probably it, I told myself as I sat down at my desk.

***

There was nothing quite so blissful as the first day of a new semester: no lectures, no tedious classwork, no stressful exams to worry about. The worst you might have to deal with was pleading for mercy if you hadn't done your homework over the break or maybe getting a stern talking-to if you failed. And thanks to Ushio, I'd averted that fate.

However, there was one *very* important thing I'd forgotten about.

"Okay, folks! It's finally time to choose your groups for the class trip!"

When Ms. Iyo made this declaration from the lectern, the whole classroom stirred with commotion. Right, how could I have let it slip my mind? The entire sophomore class at Tsubakioka High was going on a four-day, three-night field trip to Hokkaido next month. And today was the day we'd be dividing ourselves up into groups for it.

The thought alone was enough to make my breathing shallow. Whether I liked it or not, I was always reminded of the harrowing debacle from my second year of junior high, when we were told to split into small teams for our summer group projects. At the time, I wasn't worried one bit; surely *someone* would invite me to join their team sooner or later, I thought. But my hubris proved to be my undoing, as when all was said and done, I was the lone remainder left sitting all by myself, and the teacher ultimately had to pick a random team for me to get tacked on to. I'd never felt like such a loser in my life.

Ever since that fateful day, when there was an upcoming group project or school sports event on the horizon, I'd made a point of striking an agreement to team up with someone in advance. Somehow, I'd completely forgotten to do that this time.

"Okay, let's get the hotel room situation sorted out first," said Ms. Iyo. "It'll be two students to a room, so everyone find a roommate. Ready? Go!"

As soon as this ruthless decree left her lips, my classmates shot to their feet. Panicking, I stood up from my chair as well. Speed was going to be the deciding factor here; the longer it took me to find someone, the slimmer my options would become.

Hasumi was my first choice. We'd known each other since freshman year, and he was one of my precious few male friends. I also knew *he* had no shortage of friends to choose from, so I'd have to be quick if I wanted dibs. But as I made a beeline for his desk, I caught a sudden glimpse of Ushio out of the corner of my eye, and another thought occurred to me: Who was *she* going to room with?

Would the faculty even let her share a room with another girl?

Or would they still treat her like a boy?

She had plenty of friends from either gender, no doubt—but simply being friends with someone didn't necessarily mean you'd want to *room* with them. And given that everyone in our class knew about Ushio's unique circumstances, there was an additional layer of touchiness and uncertainty that could make people less keen on approaching her first.

Should I *be the one to do it, then?*

I briefly considered it, but there was still the question of whether they'd even let her share a room with a guy. And before I could even come to a decision, another girl walked up to Ushio's desk and beat me to the punch.

It was Hoshihara.

"Hey, Ushio-chan," she said. "You spoken for yet?"

"Sort of," said Ushio. "They're letting me stay in a single, actually."

"Oh, gotcha! Okay, I'll go ask someone else, then!"

And with that, Hoshihara trotted off toward another group of girls.

Dang, she gets a room all to herself? Lucky…

It seemed I could cross Ushio off my list of potential roommates; Hasumi it was, then. I turned my head, and—to my great relief—saw that he was still sitting at his desk, so I stormed over and accosted him before he had the chance to get up.

"Hey, Hasumi!" I called out, and he flinched. "Wanna room together?"

"I mean, s-sure, I guess… But chill the hell out, dude. No need to stare me down like a psychopath…"

Apparently, he could see the desperation in my eyes. I felt a little embarrassed, but I'd managed to avoid the worst-case scenario of being the only person left out in the cold—at least on the rooming arrangement front.

"Has everyone found a roommate, then?" asked Ms. Iyo, scanning the classroom to confirm that no one was left unaccounted for. "Good. Now, let's go ahead and decide on your four-person activity groups while we're at it. These are the people you'll be going around and doing things with during your free time, and they can be coed if you so desire. You won't be permanently joined at the hip with them, if you'd like to go do something with friends from another class, for instance—so don't stress about it too hard, okay?"

Yeah, easy for you to say… But okay, let's think about this.

My personal preference would be to stick with our usual trio—me, Ushio, and Hoshihara—but that would leave us one person short.

"Well, at least we can be in the same activity group, right?!" Hoshihara exclaimed in a cheery voice from across the classroom. When I looked over, I saw her clinging tightly to Ushio's arm as if to stake her claim on the other girl. Ushio, for her part, chuckled awkwardly at this but seemed receptive to the idea.

Okay, so those two are grouping up together… Should I go over there too?

Before I even had the chance, two more girls joined up with them: the tanned tomboy known as Mashima and the long-haired, seemingly standoffish Shiina. It felt like it had been a *while* since I'd seen the two of them, for whatever reason. They exchanged a few words with Hoshihara, then they all joined hands excitedly. I was by no means an expert on female body language, but I was fairly certain the four of them had just agreed to group up with one another.

Wait, what about me?!

Panicking and hoping against hope, I looked over at Hasumi. "H-hey, man! Would you maybe wanna—"

"Sorry, dude. Already promised my other friends I'd group up with them."

My stomach sank, and my soul nearly left my body. It was like I'd been dangling from the edge of a cliff and my partner cut me loose—sending me tumbling down into a bottomless pit of despair. Aside from Ushio, Hoshihara, and Hasumi, I had no other friends in class I was close enough to group up with.

It seemed my fate was sealed: I'd almost certainly get tossed into a random group that was missing a member at the very end. Which probably wouldn't be the end of the world, but I sure wasn't looking forward to feeling like a fourth wheel who didn't fit in for the entire duration of our class trip.

I supposed I only had myself to blame. After all, I'd made no real effort whatsoever to expand my social circle. I should have learned from Ushio's and Hoshihara's examples and tried a lot harder to put myself out there and forge other friendships. But I hadn't, so now all I could do was accept the consequences.

"Sakuma," someone said, and I turned to see Ushio eyeing me with concern. "Are you okay? You look like you're on the verge of death… Do you not have anyone to group up with or something?"

"Er, yeah, unfortunately not," I confessed. "But I'm sure it'll be fine. They'll just put me in one of the other groups that doesn't have enough members, I'm guessing."

"Hmm…"

It sounded like she had an idea, and I had a hunch as to what it was.

"Why don't you just join our group? I'm sure they won't mind us making a group of five instead if we ask."

Yep, called it. I appreciated the sentiment, but…

"Mm, I dunno if that's such a good idea."

To be completely honest, I didn't really want to be the only guy in a group of girls—especially not when they were already as tight-knit as these four. Sure, it might have been better than getting stuck with a group of kids I hardly knew, but there was an entirely different brand of feeling like you didn't belong when it came to situations like that. On the other hand, I wasn't exactly in a position to be looking a gift horse in the mouth. And I'd much rather be in a group with Ushio than a bunch of virtual strangers.

"What's up, you two?" Hoshihara asked, walking over to where we were standing. Mashima and Shiina followed shortly behind.

"I was wondering if maybe we could let Sakuma join our group too," said Ushio.

"Sure! I don't mind one bit!"

Damn, without even a moment's hesitation… You're a saint, Hoshihara.

"Are you two okay with that?" she asked Mashima and Shiina.

"Awww, what's the matter, Kamiki?" Mashima teased. "Couldn't find a group willing to adopt ya, huh? Poor little guy…"

Th-this brat! Then again, I supposed I'd rather be on the receiving end of her teasing than her pity. Not that it didn't piss me

off, of course. Yet as I ground my teeth together with chagrin, Shiina graciously came in to rebuke Mashima on my behalf.

"That's enough, Marine. Let's not be cruel. I'm sure *you* wouldn't like being made fun of if you were the odd one out. Now take it back."

Whoa! Is she actually going to bat for me?! Here I'd always had the impression that she hated my guts or something. Clearly I needed to revise my preconceptions. Perhaps she and I could be allies yet.

"Okay, fiiine!" said Mashima. "Sorry about that, Kamiki, heh heh…"

"It's fine." She certainly didn't *sound* all that sorry, but whatever.

"Anyway, how 'bout this?!" Mashima pivoted to address Ushio and Hoshihara. "What if me and Shiina go find a different group to join instead? I'm sure Kamiki would probably feel more comfortable hanging out with just the two of you anyway."

"Wha…?"

I certainly appreciated the thought, but I'd feel pretty bad about effectively kicking the two of them out of the group just so I could take their place.

"You sure?" asked Hoshihara, presumably sharing the sentiment.

"Yeah, it's no biggie," replied Mashima. "There's someone else we kinda wanted to group up with anyhow. And I'm sure they'd be okay with groups of three, wouldn't they? Actually, hold on—lemme check. Hey, Ms. Iyo!"

Hearing Mashima call out to her, Ms. Iyo stopped sorting through our winter homework for a moment and looked up from the lectern.

"Is it okay if we only have a group of three?"

"Mmm… Well, I guess if you really can't find anyone else, then sure."

Mashima turned back to face the rest of us with a triumphant grin. "See? Totally fine."

Well, damn. That was quite the favor she just did me. Now I almost feel kinda bad for getting pissed off at her a minute ago…

"Um, Marine…?" said Shiina, tugging on Mashima's sleeve. "This 'someone else' you're referring to wouldn't happen to be who I think it is, would it?"

"Yeah,…" said Mashima, casting a glance at the edge of the classroom.

There, sitting alone at her desk and making no attempt to find a group, was a bored-looking girl idly twirling a bleached blonde pigtail around her finger. It was Nishizono. Despite her recently turning over a new leaf and abandoning her long streak of tyranny, it was plain to see that everyone in class was still avoiding her like the plague. It didn't seem like anyone in their right mind dared to approach her, let alone ask her to be in their group…

At least, not yet.

"Hey, Arisaaaaa!" Mashima called out, padding over to where Nishizono sat. Shiina trailed after her. "You wanna hang out with us on the class trip? Doesn't look like you're in any other group yet."

Nishizono stared at Mashima for a moment, dumbfounded. "Uh… Sure, I guess," she finally said with a little nod.

"Sweet! Now we just need to try to find one more person…"

It seemed there was nothing to worry about. I watched Mashima scan the classroom for another cohort, then turned back to Ushio and Hoshihara.

"Welp, uh…looks like this is our group, then," I said.

"Yeah!" said Hoshihara. "I can already tell we're gonna have a *great* time together!"

Ushio gave a satisfied nod of agreement. And just like that, I'd somehow managed to make it through the group selection process completely unscathed.

Since it was the first day of a new semester, we were free to leave once homeroom was over. After packing up my things, I linked up with my usual crew of Ushio and Hoshihara, and together we headed home. Since there'd been no actual lectures today, both my bookbag and my heart were feeling awfully light. We still had basically the whole day ahead of us; why couldn't we go home after first period *all* the time?

"Wait, so do you actually know how to ski, Ushio-chan?" Hoshihara asked as we pushed our bikes down the road. She must have been quite sensitive to the cold, judging from how bundled up she was. I could barely see half her face behind the thick scarf she had wrapped around her mouth. She almost looked like a stuffed animal.

"Yeah, I do," replied Ushio. "Just went a couple weeks ago, actually. What about you?"

"No, not really," said Hoshihara. "I've only ever gone once, and that was way back when I was in elementary school, so I barely remember it. Pretty sure I'm gonna wipe out and fall on my butt at least a couple times…"

"Well, the snow's really soft and powdery up in Hokkaido, so it shouldn't hurt that badly even if you do. And once is better than nothing. There are bound to be plenty of other people on the trip who've never gone skiing in their entire lives."

"Yeah," I chimed in. "Like me, for instance."

"Wait, huh?" the other two said in unison.

It seemed this was news to Ushio as well. "You've never gone skiing before, Sakuma? Why did I think you had?"

"I've been to the slopes a few times, but only to go sledding or screw around in the snow. You'll have to show me how it's done if I

end up failing miserably."

"I'm sure they'll have an instructor there… But I don't mind giving you a few pointers, I guess."

"Sweet. I'll be counting on you."

"Ooh, yeah! Me too, please!" said Hoshihara, raising her hand.

Ushio nodded, smiling. "Sure thing."

I couldn't tell you why, but I'd always gotten the impression that Ushio was *really* good at winter sports. And since she was a great tutor as well, I figured even an uncoordinated klutz like me could probably learn how to ski with her guidance. Though I might've been underestimating just how difficult skiing truly was—hard to say.

"Man, this trip's gonna be so fun… February can't come soon enough," said Hoshihara.

"It'll be here before you know it," I said. "You know what they say, after all: 'January jaunts along, then February sings its song'…"

"Oh yeah, I know that one! 'March dances to the beat,' uhhh… What's April, again?"

"'April smells like stinky feet.'"

"Ew, gross… Is that really how it goes?"

"You shouldn't lie to your friends, Sakuma," Ushio chimed in.

"Wooow, okay! See if I ever trust *you* again!" Hoshihara said in a huff.

There was some truth to that old saying, though—the months leading up to spring did always seem to fly right by. And if that was true, then so would this last semester.

I wondered if we'd still be walking home shoulder to shoulder next year, when we were seniors. As much as I wanted to believe it, when I was little, I'd also believed that Ushio and I would be best friends forever—only to be proven wrong when we grew further and

further apart during junior high. You could never predict when a long-standing friendship might begin to fall apart, or why.

Yet here Ushio and I were, walking home together again—now closer than ever before, even if our relationship had changed quite a bit from what it was back then. Even Hoshihara and I had a bit of an awkward start at first, but now we were very close friends who could talk to each other about most anything. So I was fairly certain we didn't have anything to worry about in the upcoming school year that might tear the three of us apart. No, something told me we'd be just fine.

"By the way," said Hoshihara, changing the subject, "did something happen between you two, or what?"

I was so caught off guard by this question, I nearly fell over. It seemed like Ushio was too, judging by her speechlessness. We hadn't told Hoshihara about the recent developments in our relationship just yet. Not because we had any reason to hide them from her; we'd put it off because it was a long story, and our current state of affairs wasn't exactly the easiest to explain.

"Oh, sorry! I didn't mean that in, like…a negative way, to be clear!" she said. "It just feels like you two are acting a lot closer than usual, is all. Like, even the way you talk to each other sounds a lot more…excited, I guess? Sorry, maybe it's just my imagination."

She was a sharp one, that was for sure. I'd always known her intuition was good, but I wouldn't have expected her to deduce *this* one so easily; even Ushio looked surprised. It seemed we had no choice but to let the cat out of the bag. I looked over at Ushio for permission, and she nodded at me.

But this was hardly the place for such a conversation.

"You wanna…swing by the diner real quick?" I suggested.

Hoshihara looked puzzled, but she nodded regardless.

"I see…"

Once Hoshihara heard the full rundown on how Ushio and I came to start dating, her expression was oddly placid as she took a sip from her cola. I was surprised at how calm she'd been throughout this whole discussion. Given some of her previous overreactions to Ushio-related revelations, I was half expecting her to let out some hysterical, ear-piercing whoop of exhilaration.

Okay, maybe that was doing her a disservice.

"So you're not surprised at all?" said Ushio, clearly as confused by this as I was.

"Nah, not really," said Hoshihara. "I kinda had a feeling that was it, to be honest. You were giving off those vibes today, y'know? I was like, 'Wait, are these two *dating*?'"

Oof… Was it really that obvious?

"How can you even tell that sort of thing?" I asked.

"It's pretty easy, actually. When someone's facial expressions are a lot more relaxed than usual, or their voice sounds higher or has a different inflection or whatever, it's always easy for me to spot. It's not just you two."

"Dang. You must have a sixth sense or something…"

"Aw, c'mon… It's not *that* special…"

So she said, but she seemed pretty darn pleased with herself as she grabbed a slice of pizza from the center of the table (we'd ordered one to share between the three of us for an early lunch). When she took a bite, then pulled the slice away, the cheese stretched out between it and her teeth, but she deftly reeled it back into her mouth. Just as I was about to grab a slice for myself, Hoshihara set hers down on her little personal plate, then lowered her gaze as her expression took on an almost melancholic hue.

"I do kinda wish you had told me without me having to ask," she said, crestfallen. Now I *really* felt bad. She was right, though—we'd done her a disservice by not filling her in sooner, especially

after all the advice she'd given me as my main confidante these past six months about the drama surrounding Ushio.

"Sorry…" I said meekly, and Ushio echoed the sentiment.

"Oh, no! You don't have to apologize or anything! And I mean, I think it's totally reasonable to not wanna feel obligated to update your friends on every little detail of your private life! I should've chosen my words more carefully, my bad!"

Hoshihara slammed her hands down on the table to hammer home what she was saying. I wished she wouldn't be so dramatic; there were other customers around us, and the last thing we needed was to get thrown out for making a racket.

"Anyway, no more moping around!" she said. "We ought to be celebrating! Let's have a toast to you two, in honor of your shiny new relationship!"

"It's not exactly official yet, but yeah…" mumbled Ushio.

Her voice was soft but loud enough for Hoshihara to hear, as it took the wind right out of her sails. "Yeah, so I was kinda wondering, actually," she said, furrowing her brow. "What's this 'trial basis' stuff all about? And what makes it different from a normal relationship?"

"Uhhh… Sakuma?"

Ushio turned to me, hoping I could explain it better. But to be honest, I wasn't really sure what it meant for us either. Ushio had been the first one to use the "trial basis" phrasing; all I'd said was that instead of stressing ourselves out over the ways in which things could go wrong, we should just "try" going out and see how it went first. But apparently, she'd interpreted that as me suggesting we start off with some sort of "preliminary" dating period—which I guess wasn't technically incorrect, but it did leave us in this nebulous state where neither of us were sure how to define our relationship when someone asked about it. Still, something told me Hoshihara wouldn't accept "I don't know" as a valid answer, so I tried my best to explain.

"Well…it's not all that different, really. I guess the main thing is that we're approaching it with a more cautious mindset."

"And what does that mean, exactly?" asked Hoshihara.

"It's like…a form of insurance, basically. To make sure that if either of us get the sense that things aren't gonna work out, or something feels off at any point, we can always go back to just being friends without any hard feelings."

A form of insurance—this was a pretty good analogy, if I did say so myself.

Whether due to a fight or things naturally fizzling out over time, it was awfully hard for two people who'd broken up to go back to being friends as if there'd never been anything romantic between them. I still remembered this couple who'd started dating in my junior high class one year, then broken up shortly thereafter—and it was like they became totally different people overnight. One minute, they were being all lovey-dovey with each other and indulging in copious amounts of PDA, and then the next, they were telling all their friends how horrible the other person had been to them and refusing to even make eye contact. Somehow, they'd come out of that relationship *worse* than total strangers—and I didn't think theirs was a rare case. Hell, if anything, it was probably the norm. I didn't want Ushio and me to end up like that.

"Insurance, huh?" said Hoshihara, chewing over the idea in her lingering confusion. Her gaze slid to Ushio beside me. "And you're okay with that, Ushio-chan?"

Ushio, who'd been struggling with a particularly uncooperative stretch of cheese, grabbed her fork to wind up the slack and sever it from the slice, then swallowed her bite.

"Sure. I don't see why not."

She said it so casually, you'd think she was commenting on something that didn't concern her in any way. But maybe she just didn't want Hoshihara to probe any deeper. And it seemed the other girl picked up on that too.

"Gotta admit, it still doesn't make a whole lot of sense to me," said Hoshihara. "But I know it's not really my business. If you two are okay with it, then I support you."

"Thanks, Hoshihara," I said. "That really means a lot."

She chuckled softly, then grabbed her half-eaten slice of pizza, folded it like a scoop, and fed it into her mouth. Despite her apparent cheer, I could see a hint of gloominess in her expression as she chewed, her eyes fixed on the table. *Maybe she's more unsatisfied with that explanation than she's letting on*, I thought—but the empty look in her eyes suggested it was something deeper than that. Like loneliness, maybe, or a feeling of estrangement. Which made sense; when two people in a trio of friends started going out, it was pretty common for them to spend way more one-on-one time with each other, and for the third person to get left out of their hangouts more often than not.

That was exactly what was happening: Ushio and I had hung out several times over the course of the break, yet we hadn't invited Hoshihara even once. Perhaps we'd already begun to carve out a divide between her and ourselves that would only get deeper with time. The thought made me feel awfully apprehensive; I liked it when the three of us spent time together. It wasn't a matter of choosing love over friendship; we could absolutely have both, as far as I was concerned.

"Just to be perfectly clear," I said, "this doesn't mean we don't still want to spend time with you, or hang out as a group, or anything like that."

Ushio nodded in firm agreement. "Yeah, no matter what might happen between me and Sakuma, we'll always be friends with you, Natsuki."

Hoshihara—who was about to take another bite of pizza—froze in place with her eyes wide open. I watched as a piece of bacon fell onto her plate. "G-gosh, you two… Where'd *that* come from?" she said in a fluster. "Why are you getting so sappy all of a sudden?"

Then a moment later, the light bulb went off, and she grasped our meaning.

"Ohhh, I get it. Nah, don't worry about me. I'm not going anywhere. And for the record, I don't feel like you're 'abandoning me' or anything."

"Y-you don't?" I said.

"I thought for sure you'd feel a little left out," Ushio admitted.

It seemed we'd jumped to conclusions. Now I felt a little embarrassed for making such a big deal out of it by assuring her we'd stick around.

"I guess I'd be lying if I said I wasn't a *little* afraid things might go down that route eventually," said Hoshihara. "But more than anything, it's you two I'm most concerned about and whether you'll be able to make it work as a couple. But again, I know that's probably none of my business… Ugh, I don't know anymore…"

Hoshihara was definitely conflicted about our current situation, judging from the way she kept hemming and hawing. Come to think of it, Misao had hedged her words before saying how she really felt about me dating Ushio as well; I wondered if our relationship seemed like such a touchy subject to those around us that they were afraid to even broach it, lest they be seen as judgmental busybodies or whatever.

"It's okay, Natsuki. You don't have to sweat it so hard. We know you're only looking out for us, not just sticking your nose in to satisfy your own curiosity."

"Ushio-chan…" An anguished Hoshihara gritted her teeth, then hung her head in shame. "Sorry, I won't lie—there *is* definitely a part of me that kinda just wants to know all the deets…"

"Oh, for crying out loud," I groaned from the sidelines, though I did find her honesty quite endearing. She wore her heart on her sleeve, that was for sure.

"Well, I suppose I can understand that," said Ushio. "I'd probably be curious too."

"I'll try to keep it in check," Hoshihara said with a pained expression. She peered up at Ushio through her lowered lashes. "Then for the time being, should I make sure not to tell anyone else you two are going out?"

That sounded like the safest option to me, based on how Ushio felt about things right now: not wanting to share too many details, clarifying that we weren't technically official, et cetera. And yet, to my surprise, she showed a bit of hesitation before answering this question. Perhaps she too felt conflicted about it—not only wanting to maintain a level of privacy, but also kind of wishing we didn't have to hide it.

"I guess so," she finally said. "It should probably be our news to share."

I was relieved to hear her say this; she'd had me concerned for a moment there.

"Agreed. Not to mention, I can think of a few people who might give us a hard time for it if they found out, so better safe than sorry."

"Well, okay then," said Hoshihara. "My lips are sealed!"

"Thanks, Hoshihara," I replied with an appreciative nod.

All that being said, Tsubakioka was a small and insular community. Sooner or later, people were going to see us walking around town together and start spreading rumors. There was nothing we could do about that—and if it got to the point where it effectively became an open secret, we'd likely have no choice but to accept it.

There came a break in the conversation after that, so I figured I might as well take advantage of the opportunity to finally have some pizza myself.

Except there was only a single slice remaining.

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Even now that winter break was over, Ushio and I tried to go out and do things together as often as we could. You could probably call these little outings "dates," if you really wanted to, but I was still a bit too skittish to throw that word around all willy-nilly. The cynical, sneering loser I was back in junior high whispered in my ear, saying surely no self-respecting girl would call these uninspired hangouts "dates"—at least not with a guy like *me*. I wished that part of my personality would just drop dead already.

What we did and where we went varied from day to day. Sometimes, we'd head over to the arcade or the bookstore and kill time for a couple hours after school, while on weekends we might take the train over to the city or a neighboring town. One thing we hardly did anymore was hang around the house, like we had over summer vacation.

"I mean, I'd rather go out and do something a little more *active*, you know?" Ushio said.

She swung the bat and—with a loud *crack*—sent the next ball from the pitching machine soaring high up into the protective green netting.

It was a Sunday near the end of January, at about four in the afternoon. Since it was too late to go out on a day trip but too early to grab dinner, Ushio and I were paying a visit to the local batting cages at her request. She'd been the one deciding what we did for most of our outings lately, come to think of it.

"Plus, we already watched all the movies I'd been wanting to see over summer vacation," she added.

"Yeah, but now there's a ton of new ones out," I said.

"You wanna go home and watch a movie after this, then?"

"Nah, we're already out and about. And I've been kinda enjoying getting a bit more active lately too, so—*hmph*!" I swung the bat, but my timing was way off, so I hit nothing but air. "Damn. I dunno why I'm so bad at this."

"Everyone is at first, silly."

"Do you come here and practice your swing pretty often, then?"

"I wouldn't say that. Maybe once a year at…*most*!"

Another swing and a hit. I was getting absolutely crushed, and she had her machine set a full twenty kilometers per hour faster than mine. Even an amateur like me could see her form was beautiful; it was no wonder she aced her physical fitness tests every semester.

"Is there some sort of trick to it?" I asked her.

"You probably want to start by holding the bat a little higher up. Focus on hitting the ball first, then you can start trying for distance or speed."

"Gotcha, okay…"

I figured I'd give it a shot. *Focus on hitting the ball… Okay.* I stared down the pitching machine as it counted down from three, then shot out the next ball.

"Ngh!"

This time, the bat made that satisfying *crack*.

"Hey, I actually hit it!"

"Nice job."

It was only a ground ball right toward the pitcher, admittedly—and my palms were stinging from the reverberations because I hadn't hit it with the center of the bat. If this were a real baseball game, I would've been an easy out. Nevertheless, I felt proud of myself.

This time, I'll try to hit it right on the sweet spot, I told myself as I gripped the handle and reared back yet again—but the next ball never came. Our twenty minutes were up.

"So how'd it feel?" asked Ushio. "Pretty therapeutic, huh?"

"Yeah," I said. "Might have to start coming here more often."

"Hey, that's the spirit. And you know I'd always be down to join you."

I fed another few coins into the machine to the side of the batter's box. There were only two or three other customers here, so we didn't have to worry about giving up our cages for anyone waiting behind us.

Swing after swing, I felt my form gradually improve. I got pretty into it, surprisingly; I'd always thought of myself as very anti-sports, but this was fun. Didn't have to think at all, and I wasn't dragging anyone else down when I screwed up. Just had to wait for the ball to come, then hit it back. Simple, cheap entertainment.

In no time at all, I'd gone through another 200 yen's worth of balls. But when I reached into my pocket to grab some more change for one last round, I felt a sharp pain on my finger. I had a huge blister; I must've been gripping the bat harder than I thought.

On second thought, maybe I'd better stop here for tonight.

I walked out of the batter's box, then sat down on one of the benches just outside the protective netting. It wasn't long before Ushio finished her round and came out to join me, and together, we made our way out of the batting cage center.

It had been light out when we entered the building, but now it was completely dark, and a northerly wind was blowing to boot. I felt fine, but I knew I'd be freezing once the sweat on my back started to cool down. As we made our way toward the bike lot near the station, the growl of my stomach begged for sustenance. Probably because I'd just exercised for the first time in a long while.

"Hey, I know," I said, turning to Ushio. "Why don't we grab a bite to eat on the way home? There a ramen shop around here that offers a decent Sunday discount…though it wouldn't make for the fanciest dinner date, heh."

"Sounds good to me," said Ushio. "I was getting pretty hungry myself."

We took a moment to text our parents and let them know we'd be eating out, then cut a course directly for the ramen shop. In a corner of the little izakaya district beneath the overpass, I saw the restaurant we were looking for. When we slid open the door and stepped inside, there weren't many customers; it was still a bit too early for the dinner rush. Ushio and I sat down at the counter and took a look at the menu.

"Okay," I declared. "I'm gonna get the tantan ramen with fried rice on the side."

"Jeez, that was fast! Do you come here a lot or something?"

"Only about once a month. And yes, I get the tantan ramen every time."

"Interesting… Guessing it's probably pretty spicy, though."

"Yeah, it's not for the faint of heart. But you know, it's funny—first time I ordered it, I was hooked by the time I finished my bowl. That dish is *addictive*, I tell ya."

"It's really that good, huh? Maybe I should try one too, then…"

"Nah, I don't think that's such a good idea."

"Why not?!" Ushio pouted. "You just said it's really good."

"Yeah, but it's also *insanely* spicy… And I know you've never been good with spicy food. I remember back in elementary school, you couldn't even eat Karamucho without tearing up."

"Th-that was forever ago! I can totally handle a little spiciness now."

I tried to warn her away from it, but I'd only provoked her rebellious instincts. She raised her hand and called over the waiter. I had a feeling she'd regret not heeding my warning, but if she was that determined to try it, it wasn't my place to stop her.

Not long after that, the waiter brought out our bowls of tantan ramen with fried rice on the side, as well as a plate of gyoza Ushio had ordered on top of that. Ushio pulled a hair tie out of her pocket and bunched her hair up in the back, revealing her rear hairline as well as the nape of her neck. This might actually have been the first time I'd ever seen Ushio with her hair up, come to think of it.

"Okay, let's eat." She gave her bowl of ramen a little stir with her chopsticks. Drops of deep-red chili oil dotted the surface of the fragrant, sesame-scented broth. I knew she'd probably get angry at me for staring to see her first reaction, so I watched out of the corner of my eye as I grabbed my own chopsticks.

Ushio slurped up her first mouthful of ramen, and…

"Mfgh!"

She choked right off the bat.

Ushio immediately reached for her cup of water and glugged it down, heaved a sigh, and glared at her bowl of soup like it was her mortal enemy. "So that's what we're dealing with here, huh?"

"See? Told you it was hot."

"Yeah, it is… But not worse than I expected. Well within my calculations."

She sounded like the nerdy data-loving support character in an RPG. I was fully convinced she was just acting tough. Had it been within her "calculations," she wouldn't have choked on it. But she'd already ordered it at this point, so there was no point in me giving her a hard time about it; she'd made her bed, and now she had to lie in it.

"Well, if you don't think you can finish that, just let me know," I said. "I could eat as many bowls of this place's tantan ramen as my

stomach could take."

"Don't worry about me," she replied. "I can handle this, no problem…"

She steadied her breathing as if trying to focus, then slurped up another batch of noodles. I dug into my own bowl of ramen as well. We just sat there eating in total silence for a while, with each minute of spicy torture dragging on longer than the last. Yet Ushio's expression was totally determined in a way I'd never seen: Though her face was red and there were tears in the corners of her eyes, she kept on slurping with all of her willpower. I didn't even dare to ask her how it tasted.

I almost felt guilty for introducing this to her, like I was sharing some delinquent pastime with a sheltered, innocent girl who knew naught of the world and its vices. Obviously, this was an exaggeration; Ushio had way more life experience than me, and it wasn't like eating a bowl of spicy tantan ramen was some outrageous or scandalous thing by any means. Even so, it *did* feel kind of like I was tainting her cool, collected image with my own two hands.



Yet I had no intention of stopping Ushio as she grabbed a tissue to blow her runny nose, then poured herself yet another glass of water. How many was that now? She was about to empty the whole pitcher all by herself. Finally, after about a thirty-minute back-and-forth struggle against her spicy noodle soup, she set her chopsticks down.

"Phew… All done."

And she was—she'd even defeated the whole plate of gyoza too. She left the remaining broth behind, as drinking that would've been outright masochistic, but this was still a complete victory for her in my eyes. Beside her ramen bowl was a large pile of balled-up tissues she'd used to wipe her nose and sweat throughout.

"C-congrats?" I said.

"Oogh… My mouth is on *fire*."

She took one last drink of water, then we headed to the register to settle up. After we paid our bill, they gave us a hundred-yen coupon we could use on our next visit, and we headed outside. Ushio removed her hair tie and shook her head gently, her platinum blonde hair flowing freely beneath the streetlights.

"Ahhh… It's so nice and cool out here…" she said.

"So what did you think of the ramen?" I asked.

"It was good. I could definitely see myself getting hooked on it like you are… Though next time, I think I'll come alone."

"Ha ha ha…"

It seemed she was well aware just what a hot mess those noodles had made of her.

My breath was thick and white in the cold night air, probably because my body had been warmed by the hot soup. It looked like cigarette smoke as it drifted away and dissipated amid the pedestrians passing us by. It was evening rush hour, so there were plenty of commuters heading home from work. I shoved my hands

in my pockets as we returned to the bike lot near the station, rubbing the blister on my right index finger as we went. It still hurt to touch, but that pain reminded me of the thrill of hitting that first baseball at the batting center.

Today had been a lot of fun. With batting practice and the spicy tantan ramen, respectively, both Ushio and I had gotten to try something new with the other person. My heart felt warm and full, even though none of the things we'd done on our outing were all that crazy or out of the ordinary. I wondered if it would have felt any different had Hoshihara been here to share it with us. At the very least, I had a feeling Ushio wouldn't have opted to suffer through that bowl of ramen with me if it weren't just the two of us.

"Maybe I should get a part-time job," Ushio said out of nowhere.

"What makes you say that?"

"I mean, we've been going out and doing stuff a lot lately. If I don't do *something*, my savings are gonna run dry."

"Ah, yeah. I'm getting pretty low on funds too here, now that you mention it."

"I wonder if there's anywhere that would hire me."

"Oh, I'm sure. I mean, you're a quick learner with a really good head on your shoulders, so you'd be a valuable asset just about anywhere."

A job, huh? I'd given some thought to the possibility of getting one myself. Since I wasn't in any after-school clubs or on a sports team, I had the time and energy to spare. I'd even picked up a free job-hunting newspaper with nothing but classified ads, thinking I could find an easy manual labor job or something, but I'd idly leafed through it and hadn't applied for any of them. In the end, I came to the conclusion that since I was going to be working nonstop whether I liked it or not once I became an adult, I might as well enjoy my free time as much as I could while I was still in school. I wanted to believe this was a shrewd decision on my part.

"Wish there was some easy, totally stress-free job I could do out there," I mused. "Like being the guy who puts the strawberries on top at a shortcake factory or something."

"I feel like that would still take a mental toll on you after a while…"

"Ha ha, okay, fair."

We were almost to the bike lot now.

Tomorrow, it was back to school again. And once our class field trip was over, it'd be spring break before we knew it. Maybe it wouldn't hurt to think about getting a short-term job at some point in that interim.

"Hey, Sakuma," said Ushio, still looking straight ahead.

"Yeah?" I said.

"So are we gonna—"

"Hey! Is that who I think it is?!" a voice cried out from behind us.

Had it been simply a rowdy college student or a drunk businessman or something, I probably would have completely ignored them—but there was something about this voice that felt eerily familiar to me. As if compelled by an evil force, I fearfully turned around.

The very next instant, I let out a horrified gasp.

That lanky, slender frame. That affable smile. To any casual observer, he'd probably seem like a well-put-together, good-natured youth. But I knew that there was a more insidious truth behind that paper-thin smile and the confident swagger in his step.

It was Sera.

"Yeah, I knew it!" he exclaimed. "Wow, funny bumping into you two out here, huh?! What a crazy coincidence!"

He sauntered right over to us with a girl I didn't recognize clinging to his arm—one of his many girlfriends, I assumed. Her

wavy, permed hair was tied off on either side and hung over her shoulders, and she wore a pair of round, thick-rimmed glasses. Her tanned skin and heavy makeup made her look a bit like your average gyaru.

She tilted her head to one side and eyed us curiously. "Baaabe… Who are *these* two?" she asked Sera.

"The average-looking one is Sakuma, and the cute one is Ushio. They're my friends from school."

"Like hell we are," I said. "When did I ever agree to be friends with you?"

"Um, excuse you?" the girl cut in. "Who do you think you are, talking to him like that? People have different definitions of what it means to be friends, FYI. Are you trying to embarrass him, or are you just that socially inept?"

"Urk…"

I was *not* expecting to get so verbally eviscerated by this random girl I was meeting for the first time—and the worst part was, she was totally right. I could have let it slide; I didn't have to let my personal beef with Sera get in the way of him merely introducing me to her. This completely knocked the wind out of my sails.

"Sorry…" I said.

"Ah ha ha!" Sera cackled. "Way to apologize like a big boy, Sakuma!"

As I stood there trembling in chagrin, Ushio grabbed me by the arm. "Okay, that's enough. We'll be on our way now."

"Hey, wait a minute!" said Sera. "Don't you wanna get dinner together or something first, at least? I mean, we're here now!"

"We just ate, so no."

"Aw, really? That's too bad." Sera sighed, then faced me again. "So what else have you two been up to today? You out on a date or something?"

Alarm bells immediately rang in my head.

Ushio and I had agreed that we weren't ready for other people to know about our relationship just yet—especially not an unrepentant mischief-maker like this chump. Sera was a shameless hedonist who knew no boundaries when it came to getting his kicks. He'd even hurt himself for the sake of his own amusement, if he had to.

I already knew my answer. Sure, maybe the "manlier" thing to do would have been to own it because we obviously had nothing to be ashamed of—but I also knew better than to give this guy any ammunition he could potentially use against us.

And so I said what needed to be said:

"It's not a da—"

"So what if we are?" Ushio snapped at him.

I spun to face her, utterly perplexed. Had she lost her *mind*? And yet, judging from the look of resentment in her eyes, this wasn't just a slip of the tongue; it was intentional.

"Well, well, well, now…" There was a sadistic glint in Sera's eyes as they narrowed in understanding, like those of a predator that had cornered its prey. And sure enough, there was nowhere left to hide; trying to deny it now would only make things worse.

"Didn't know you were going out," he went on. "But I guess congratulations are in order. Good for you two."

As he clapped his hands together in a slow, exaggerated manner, a blithe smirk crept its way across his face. It was all too obvious that he was being facetious; the guy had his eye on Ushio himself at one point. Granted, it seemed he'd since given up on pursuing her—but I couldn't help feeling a bit unsettled.

"Babe, come on… Let's go already," said the flashy girl, tugging at Sera's sleeve.

"Oh, right! Sorry, we'll let you two lovebirds get back to your date." Sera offered a satisfied nod, then a little wave goodbye. "See

you at school tomorrow!”

And with that, the two of them set off toward the station.

The entire interaction couldn’t have lasted more than a minute or two, yet it had left us with a whole lot of cause for concern. This was Sera we were talking about, easily the most loose-lipped person I knew. It was only a matter of time before the whole school knew Ushio and I were going out.

This was a very unfortunate turn of events.

“Sorry,” Ushio murmured. She’d hung her head, so I couldn’t make out her expression, but her voice was tinged with regret. “I guess I just…lost control of my emotions. I shouldn’t have let him get to me like that.”

I hadn’t been planning to rebuke her for it or anything to begin with—but boy, did her submissive tone make me feel like a complete jerk.

“Don’t worry about it,” I told her. “It’s not like we’re doing anything wrong, right? Sure, maybe the drama-fiends at school will have a field day gossiping about it, but I’m sure they’ll move on to whatever the next big scandal is in no time.”

“Yeah, I know…” Ushio said despondently, then started walking down the street again. I hurried to catch up with her.

I couldn’t think of many worse ways to end what had otherwise been a really enjoyable day—and it was all Sera’s fault. The longer I stewed on it, the more anger boiled up inside me. I couldn’t believe there were women in this world who’d actually want to date a lying, cheating swindler like him. It made literally no sense to me at all, and thinking about it was only making me even more frustrated.

Hoping to get my mind off of things, I fumbled for a change of subject. “Oh yeah, that reminds me—weren’t you about to say something earlier?”

She'd spoken up right after our conversation about part-time jobs, but then Sera had come along and interrupted us.

"Wait, was I…?" said Ushio.

"Sure seemed like it."

Ushio rubbed her chin in contemplation, then promptly gave up and shrugged. "Sorry, I must've forgotten. I doubt it was anything important, in that case. I wouldn't worry about it."

"You sure? All right, if you say so…"

Oh well, I thought to myself as the bike lot came into view. *Maybe she'll remember at some point.*

***

I lowered my kickstand, then grabbed my bookbag from the basket and slung it over my shoulder as I made my way into the school building. I wasn't running particularly late or anything, but I'd definitely slept in. With it getting colder and colder by the day, I was finding it increasingly difficult to drag myself out of bed.

Once I'd made it into the entryway, I reached up to retrieve my indoor shoes from my shoe cubby and felt a dull pain in my upper arm. My muscles were still surprisingly sore from all that swinging in the batting cage yesterday.

The warning bell for first period rang while I was walking down the corridor. All of the students who'd been chattering in the hallway cut their conversations short and headed into their respective classrooms. At that moment, I locked eyes with a male student I recognized from another class. His name escaped me at the moment, and we'd never actually talked to each other or anything—yet for whatever reason, he stared straight at me for several seconds before averting his gaze.

The heck was that *about?*

It had been way too long for accidental eye contact, so I couldn't help but feel like there had to be a reason for it. *Maybe*

there's something on my face, I thought, but I didn't see anything when I used my cell phone camera to check. Maybe a slight case of bedhead, but nothing too unusual; I smoothed out a few stray hairs, then ventured into class.

Weaving through the morning commotion on the path to my desk, I heard buzzwords like "Sapporo" and "skiing" being thrown around by my fellow students. Come to think of it, our class field trip was only a week away, which might've explained the heightened energy in the classroom today. I was pretty excited for it myself. I'd never been to Hokkaido or gone skiing before, and this was going to be my first time on a plane as well. I was frankly feeling a little bit nervous about it, but for the time being, my anticipation was winning out. My class trip in junior high had been a completely miserable experience, but I was a changed man now. Things would be different this time—I was sure of it.

As I sat there fondly reminiscing on my recent growth as a person, Hoshihara walked over to my desk and broke me from my reverie.

"Hey, Kamiki-kun," she said. "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

"Sure, what's up?"

It was awfully rare for her to come talk to me in the classroom. Usually, she saved anything she might have to tell me for our walk home and prioritized her other friends, like Mashima and Shiina, since they had extracurricular activities after school. And also probably in part because she was more comfortable talking to other girls while in the classroom than boys.

"Well, class is about to start, so I'll give you the short version, but…"

Her expression was a bit grim, and she spoke in a hushed tone of voice.

Wait a minute. Don't tell me…

I had a feeling I knew what the next words out of her mouth would be.

"I think word might have gotten around about you and Ushio-chan dating."

Goddamn it.

I didn't even have to go out of my way to verify what Hoshihara had told me. Throughout every break period, and even during class, I could feel my classmates' gazes on me. But that, in and of itself, I might have chalked up to just paranoia on my part; it was when I went to the boys' bathroom during lunch that I confirmed it without a shadow of a doubt. Because the urinals had all been taken when I got there, I'd used one of the stalls—and when a couple of kids from another class came into the bathroom, they immediately began talking about me and Ushio.

"Dude, so did you hear? Apparently, Tsukinoki and Kamiki are dating now."

This made me more livid than I cared to admit. Not just with Sera for spreading the word about us, but also with these boys who were using the two of us as gossip fodder. The latter, in particular, filled me with some very conflicted feelings. Namely because they weren't even saying anything hateful or derisive about us; if anything, they were giving massive props. To me in particular.

"Gotta hand it to Kamiki, bro."

"I know. Major respect to him for doing that."

To reiterate, I was not flattered by this one bit. I was pissed off.

What had I done that was so worthy of being commended for? And by total strangers, no less. This wasn't charity work. Did they think I was dating Ushio as some sort of favor? Had the possibility that I *wanted* to go out with her not even occurred to them?

I wondered if they would have said the same thing if (purely as an example) I were going out with Hoshihara. Sure, maybe they

still would've given me props for that—said they couldn't believe a guy like me managed to land one of the cutest, most popular girls in class or something along those lines. But there would almost certainly have been a slightly jealous undertone there too. Something I hadn't heard a lick of from those boys.

Yeah, they'd still been praising me for it—but in a way that suggested they felt *bad* for me. Like they didn't deem being in a relationship with Ushio something worth bragging about or being envious of. And that thought both frustrated and distressed me. I was not so big a person that I could simply shrug off these sorts of things; unfortunately, I couldn't help caring about what other people thought of us.

"Ugh. I need to stop thinking about this."

I rose from my desk. Sixth period would be in the science lab, so I gathered up my things and moved into the hallway. Maybe I was being a little too negative here. While the rumors would continue to spread, it wasn't like anyone was bullying us about it yet or saying horrible things behind our backs, as far as I could tell. And again, I was certain that by the time the class trip was over, they'd all have long since moved on to whatever the latest juicy bit of drama might be by that point.

I took a deep breath in. *All right.* I was officially done stressing myself out. If there was anything for me to worry about, it was our class trip a week from now. Unfortunately, that train of thought got derailed before it could even begin.

While I was walking down the hallway, a student from Class D burst out the doors of their classroom and nearly crashed right into me.

"Whoops, my bad!" he said. "Oh, hey! Look who it is!"

As soon as I registered that it was Sera, I could feel my blood boil. I stared him down as I walked straight up to him and got in his face.

"You just couldn't keep your mouth shut, could you?"

"Sorry?" said Sera. "Keep my mouth shut about what?"

"You know what. About me and Ushio."

"Hm? Oh, you mean the fact that you two are dating? Yeah, I mighta mentioned it once or twice. Why, is there a problem with that?"

His unruffled demeanor only made me that much more infuriated. For a split second, I could understand how Nishizono must have felt when she finally caved to the urge to beat the ever-loving crap out of this schmuck.

"Stop playing dumb," I said. "You knew exactly what you were doing. Now the whole school's talking about us, thanks to you."

"So? Did you not *want* people to talk about it or something?"

"Of course not."

"And why's that?"

Because I didn't want people giving us weird looks, for one thing, I almost said, but held my tongue. My intuition told me that this was a bad thing to admit, though I couldn't come up with a concrete reason as to why. Or at least not before Sera put on a smarmy grin and opened his stupid mouth again.

"Look, I dunno what you're so upset about, Sakuma," he said, "but are you sure you're not just projecting your anger onto me? I mean, sure, I told a couple of my friends that you two were going out—but you also didn't ask me to keep it a secret, now, did you? And it's not like you're some celebrity idol or having an affair or anything, so what's there to be ashamed of? Shouldn't you be *proud* of your new relationship, and want to share it with the world, and all that good stuff? Unless, of course…"

Sera leaned down to peer directly into my eyes. Given that he was much taller than me, there was something inherently intimidating about this gesture, and so I shrank back.

"Could it be that you're not *comfortable* with other people knowing you two are dating, just in general?" Sera said, his mock

speculations deliberate. "Yeah, maybe that's it. Maybe *you* don't feel like Ushio's a girlfriend you can be proud of, and *that's* why you're so desperate to keep your relationship under wraps."

"That's not true." I nearly raised my voice but resisted the urge. I refused to give him the satisfaction of knowing he'd gotten under my skin. "Now quit it with all this psychoanalytical bullcrap… You're just antagonizing me, and you know it."

"Antagonizing you?! Boy, that's quite the persecution complex you got there, buddy. You're the one who's clearly got some sort of vendetta here. You're just confusing the two things because you've always had a bone to pick with me. If it had been literally anyone else who let the cat outta the bag about you two, would you really be lashing out like this? Or are you just deflecting because I'm your favorite bogeyman?"

"No, it's not—"

I couldn't even finish my sentence, as the righteous fury that had been broiling in my chest receded into a lukewarm mixture of powerlessness and shame.

Damn it, not again…

It was like this every single time I talked to this guy. I always ended up feeling like a total idiot who'd gotten his hackles up over nothing and shown his entire ass for the whole world to see. But this time, I felt that way even more than usual… So maybe I really *was* in the wrong here. Perhaps I was only taking my anger out on him like he said, and I refused to accept it because I hated his guts. I wanted to think I was more mature than that, but I couldn't come up with anything to say in my defense.

"Okay, hold that thought," said Sera, thrusting his palm out like a traffic guard telling me to stop. "I've gotta go to the bathroom, and you've gotta get to class. If you wanna keep talking about this, we can do it after school. I'll be hanging out over by the station—probably at Café Camellia. Feel free to come say hi if you want to."

With that, Sera cut our conversation short and strode off down the hall. I could neither stop him nor formulate a response. I just stood there stewing in defeat.

"Feel free to come say hi if you want to."

"Think I'd rather die," I muttered, then headed for the science lab.

"Did you hear that we're the talk of the school, apparently?" I asked Ushio on our walk home that day. We'd already parted ways with Hoshihara, so it was just the two of us. I'd wanted to bring it up sooner, but Hoshihara seemed to be doing everything she could to keep the conversation positive, so I'd held off.

"Uh-huh. Natsuki told me earlier. I did get the sense that people were looking at me a bit differently today too."

"Yeah, I figured you'd pick up on that."

Ushio was way more sensitive to people's gazes than I was, no doubt, so she'd probably realized it even sooner than I had.

"I also noticed that *you* seemed pretty antsy all day, Sakuma."

"Wait, did I really?"

"Yeah. Like you were feeling restless or something. You kept twirling your pen, scratching your head… Even caught your leg bouncing a couple of times."

"D-dang, I didn't even realize… That's a little embarrassing."

I'd always been a habitual pen twirler, but I was pretty certain I didn't do the whole foot-tapping thing much anymore. That was a nervous tic my mom and sister had given me a ton of flak for back in junior high, and it had taken me a lot of time and effort to break the habit. I must have been more stressed than I realized.

"What do you think we should do now?" Ushio asked casually.

"What, you mean, like…should we go official with it or not?"

"Well, that's part of it, yeah. But I just mean in general."

This was a pretty broad question, so I wasn't quite sure what sort of answer Ushio was looking for here. I also got the sense that I'd sound like a complete dumbass if I asked her to clarify, so I assumed I should answer the way I interpreted it.

"I mean, what *can* we do? Whether we announce it to the world or try to keep it secret, people are probably gonna keep on gossiping about us regardless. So I figure we might as well just ignore it and carry on like before."

"Yeah… I guess so," Ushio said with a slight nod.

She seemed a bit down. She'd been acting perfectly normal up until a minute ago, but as soon as Hoshihara left and I brought up the rumor-spreading, she'd gotten pretty despondent. Maybe she was more stressed out about it than she'd let on.

There were always implications behind people's gazes—be they warm or cold, comforting or unsettling. And while you might be able to shrug off one person staring at you in a way you weren't sure how to interpret, once those gazes began to multiply, it didn't matter whether those implications were positive or negative. It would take a mental toll on you regardless.

"Okay," Ushio said when we reached the intersection where we always parted ways. "See you tomorrow, then."

"Yeah, have a good night," I replied, waving goodbye.

As I watched her walk off down the street, a cold wind grazed my cheek. Far in the distance, the sun was nestling away behind the western mountains.

"Man, I dunno what to do anymore," I mumbled to myself as I stood there rooted to the spot. What's more, I was pretty certain this hazy, uncertain feeling wouldn't go away on its own. If anything, it would probably get worse with time—especially if I went home and sat alone with my thoughts for the rest of the night. I either needed to go out and do something to distract myself or talk with someone about it. And to my distinct dismay, I already had a specific person in mind.

I strongly suspected that meeting up and talking with him would not lead to any positive developments. I'd be walking right into his trap, and it would likely only exacerbate the situation. But I felt too restless to just do nothing. More than anything else, I wanted to do *something* that might change the current state of affairs.

"Maybe I'll just swing by."

I hopped on my bike and pedaled toward the station to meet up with my worst enemy.

It was five in the afternoon.

Café Camellia was a coffeehouse and eatery right on the main drag outside the station. I'd only ever gone there once, mainly because they charged about a hundred yen more for a cup of coffee than anywhere else in town. It also had a bit of a chic, sophisticated vibe that wasn't really my cup of tea.

I parked my bike on the sidewalk outside the café and walked in. Even though I'd already committed, I was a little nervous stepping through the doorway. As much as I *really* didn't want to have to deal with Sera's nonsense, I felt like I might just gain a bit more insight into how I truly felt about the current situation by conversing with him. He was a liar and a cheat, to be sure—but for better or worse, our conversations always challenged my worldview and reshaped my way of thinking. It felt like a fairly drastic measure, admittedly, but it might just give me the clarity I needed.

"Hello," said the host. "Table for one?"

"Oh, no, sorry. I'm actually meeting up with someone."

I made my way into the seating area, keeping a keen eye out for Sera. The interior was as stylishly decorated as the facade suggested, with a large antique clock hanging prominently on the wall. Perhaps due to the slightly higher price tags on the menu, the clientele trended a bit on the older side; most of the tables were occupied by groups of housewives or elderly couples engaged in quiet conversation as they sipped their drinks. I didn't see a single

person my age—that is, until I spotted a familiar Tsubakioka High uniform on a blond youth in the very back.

"Oh, hey! There he is!" said Sera, waving at me. "Come on over, Sakuma!"

It was at that precise moment that I had a horrifying realization: Sera was not alone. There were three women sitting around him at the table.

You idiot*, Sakuma… You stupid, stupid, idiot…*

Why had I not seen this coming? Of course a guy like Sera was not going to sit around sipping coffee all by himself at a café after school. Of course he would have his friends or girlfriends with him.

I needed to abort this mission, and fast. I wasn't confident I had the mental capacity to handle talking with Sera one-on-one, let alone with three girls I didn't know added to the mix. I immediately did an about-face and started power walking toward the exit, not even making an attempt to pretend I hadn't noticed him. After rushing out the door, I fumbled around in my pocket for the key to my bike lock, and—

"Where do you think you're going?"

"Bwagh!"

I was so startled that I dropped the key on the ground. Sera quickly leaned down and scooped it up, flashing a devilish smile at me.

"C'mon, you can't chicken out on me now. You came here to talk, didn'tcha? Let's sit down and have a little chat."

"No way. Besides, I just remembered I have someplace to be."

I tried to swipe the key back from him, but he deftly pulled his hand away. "Fine, let me put it another way," he said. "I'm not letting you go home until you come back inside and have a nice, long conversation with me."

"And why the hell should I, huh?!" I shot back. "I was dreading this even when I thought it would just be you, and now you wanna sic your girlfriends on me too?! No way, man. You've got too much of a home-field advantage here. Why should I think you'll even allow me to get a word in edgewise, let alone say my piece?!"

"Man, you sure do love to assume the worst. I just let you get a whole paranoid rant in edgewise, didn't I? And trust me, the girls are total sweethearts. Now c'mon, let's go."

Sera slipped my key into his pocket, then headed back into the café.

For a moment, I seriously considered just walking home without my bike, but since Sera had the key, I had no clue how to get it back without eventually caving and letting him have his stupid conversation. I might as well get it over with.

Damn it, man… This sucks. I knew I never should've come here.

And so, with regret hanging heavily over my shoulders, I followed Sera into the restaurant like a prisoner in chains, then all the way back through the seating area to the table where he and his girlfriends were sitting.

"Sorry for the wait, ladies," said Sera. "Eriri-chan, do you think you could move over to that side for me?"

"Okaaay!" said the tanned girl, gladly moving her chair to the other side of the table. Sera then stole a chair from one of the nearby tables and dragged it over for me to sit down in before having a seat himself. Now he and I were sitting on one side, with the three girls sitting across from us, and a few coffee cups and an assortment of cookies on the table in between. The tanned girl also had a half-eaten parfait in front of her.

"Wow, this almost feels like a college mixer!" said Sera. "Whaddya think, Sakuma?"

"I think I want to go home."

"You two wanna play King's Game or somethin'? That's a pretty classic icebreaker at those things. Also, who even started that trend, I wonder? Bit of weird setting for a game where you force other people to do your bidding just because you drew the lucky straw. Whoever first came up with that idea must've been either a real sadist or had, like, *negative* social skills."

I didn't say anything.

"Speaking of kings," Sera went on, "did you know that Louis XIV supposedly only took *three* baths in his whole entire life? Crazy, right?"

"…Please let me go home."

I already felt sick to my stomach. Why did it seem like he was having so much fun all by himself? Was he getting a twisted kick out of my misery?

"Um, Sakuma-kun, right?" said one of the girls. "Would you like to order something to drink first, or…?"

Hearing my name, I hesitantly looked up. The one who'd addressed me was the girl sitting in the middle—though "woman" or "lady" might have been a more appropriate descriptor. She did not look like a high schooler to me. She had an air of composed maturity and was the only one of the three not wearing a school uniform. Her braided hair was draped down to about chest height.

"Er, no thanks," I replied. "I'm not planning to stay for very long…"

"But Ikkun practically dragged you back in here, didn't he? I think it's only fair that he treats you to something nice in exchange. Isn't that right, Ikkun?"

Who in the hell is "Ikkun"? Does she mean Sera? Oh, right… His first name is "Itsuku," isn't it? Okay. Pretty dorky pet name, but whatever.

"I think I can afford a drink for my good buddy Sakuma, yeah," said Sera. "Just one, though, so choose wisely."

"Well, if you insist."

I grabbed a drink menu, skimmed the price column, and picked the most expensive item: a Viennese coffee. Sera flagged down a waiter to put in my order; all that remained was to wait for it to be brought out. This petty victory made me feel a little less nauseous.

It seemed I wasn't going to be heading home anytime soon, so I figured I might as well take this opportunity to reassess my situation. For starters, I took a better look at the three girls sitting across from me.

The tanned girl on the right I already recognized—she'd been the one Ushio and I had seen walking around town with Sera the night before. Her uniform was that of a high school from a neighboring town, if I remembered right.

In the middle was the older-looking girl who'd offered me a drink on Sera's behalf. Unlike the tanned girl, who had bratty party-girl vibes, this one seemed so prim and proper that I couldn't for the life of me imagine her dating a guy like Sera.

On the left, there was a girl wearing a Tsubakioka High uniform. Although we went to the same school, I had no idea who she was. She had a small frame, wore her hair in a neat little bob, and had thin-framed glasses. Compared to the other two girls, she seemed demure and fairly plain to me.

Finally, there was Sera: the guy sitting next to me, and one I knew all too well. He was a bit of a playboy who liked to have multiple girlfriends at the same time—though it wasn't cheating, apparently, but simply his preferred style of romance. He'd told me so himself about half a year ago, and his preferences hadn't changed in that regard. I had no way of saying for sure yet whether all three of these girls were officially his girlfriends or not, but they did seem close with him in one way or another.

"All right, how 'bout we do some introductions?" Sera suggested, then turned to the tanned girl on the right. "You go

ahead and start us off, Eriri-chan."

"Okaaay!" she said in an upbeat, girly tone. "Hiii, I'm Eriri Momozawa, and I'm a senior at Keika High! Nice to meet youuu!"

Aha. So she *was* from the next town over. If memory served, Keika High ranked about as high or even higher than Tsubakioka High when it came to test scores and academic reputation… It just went to show that you should never judge a book by its cover.

Next, it was the middle girl's turn.

"Hello. I'm Umi Yuzuki," she said. "I think I'd prefer not to reveal my age… But it's a pleasure to meet you all the same."

The woman named Yuzuki smiled bashfully. I had to admit, the simple fact that she was keeping her age a secret made me all the more curious to know how much older she actually was. Surely she couldn't be more than college-aged, could she?

I turned my gaze on the last of the three girls: the plainish one who went to the same high school as me. It was her turn to introduce herself—yet, for whatever reason, she just stared at me in silence.

"…Do you really not recognize me?" she asked, eyeing me dubiously.

"Wait, huh?" I blurted out, fairly certain I'd never even seen this girl before in my life. "Er, sorry… Have we met before?"

The girl gaped at me like she couldn't believe her ears, then rolled her eyes and shook her head in disappointment.

"Not sure if I should feel insulted, or what. Here, does this help?"

The girl took off her glasses, and my memory was jogged in an instant.

"Wait!" I said. "Is that you, Nashimoto…?"

"Correct. Nagi Nashimoto. We were even in the same class back in freshman year, assuming you haven't forgotten that as well."

D-dang, I couldn't even tell it was her… It was crazy to me just how much a pair of glasses completely changed her overall appearance. Even beyond that, one would think I'd have recognized her from her voice. I felt pretty bad now; the only lame excuse I could muster was that I'd been a complete loner who kept to himself back in freshman year, but that was hardly enough to excuse such a massive flub.

In any event, I now knew all three of these girls' names: the tanned one was Eriri Momozawa, the mature one was Umi Yuzuki, and the plain one was Nagi Nashimoto. *Cool, got it. Pretty sure I can remember all of that.*

"Okay," said Sera. "Your turn now, Sakuma."

"R-right, yeah." I cleared my throat. "So, uh…I'm Sakuma Kamiki…and I'm a sophomore at Tsubakioka High."

"And I'm Itsuku Sera! Also a sophomore at Tsubakioka High!"

"Yes, we already know that, thanks," said Nashimoto, and Momozawa cackled like mad. I was not a huge fan of this group rapport.

The waiter came out with my Viennese coffee and set it in front of me.

"Tell me," said Yuzuki as I stirred the tuft of whipped cream into the coffee, "did you have some particular reason for coming here today, Kamiki-kun? Or did you just come for coffee?"

Right, how could I forget? I'd come here to have a chat with Sera about Ushio, and he'd completely derailed me the moment I walked in the door. How was I supposed to broach that subject now? The thought of talking about it one-on-one with Sera was already unappealing enough, and he had three unexpected allies here, so it could effectively turn into *four*-on-one. What if I said something critical of him, and the three of them started lambasting me for it like Momozawa had last night? I'd be at a complete disadvantage if there was any conversational strife whatsoever.

Who *were* these girls to Sera, anyhow? It seemed safe to assume that Momozawa was probably his girlfriend, but I found it a little hard to believe that Yuzuki and Nashimoto were as well. Especially the latter—she'd never struck me as the type to go around partying with playboys in the past.

"So, just to be clear…" I said, leaning over to whisper to Sera so that the three girls couldn't hear.

"Yeah, what's up?" he replied, leaning in as well.

"Are these three just friends of yours, or…?"

Right away, he turned toward the group. "Hey, ladies, Sakuma here wants to know what kinda relationship we all have with one another!"

Oh, gee! Thanks for shouting it from the rooftops, asshole!

"I mean, isn't it obvious?" said Momozawa. "We're in love, duh."

"In a word, yes," Yuzuki added. "I suppose you could say we're dating."

"Yeah, I mean…we're going out with each other, I guess," said Nashimoto.

Welp. Guess that settles that.

It seemed they really *were* all his girlfriends, even if none of them had actually used the word. And despite some other hedging language, it seemed they all considered him their boyfriend as well. If this were any other relationship, these three would surely be throwing hands at each other (or Sera) the moment they found out about one another, yet this appeared fully consensual for every party involved. Still, I couldn't help but think that somehow, Sera must have tricked them into this and that they were victims here in some form or fashion. I refused to give him the benefit of the doubt.

"Did you already know that Ikkun will typically date multiple women at a time, Sakuma-kun?" Yuzuki asked me with a sweet smile.

"Yeah, more or less…"

"I see. Then I suppose I shouldn't have to elaborate any further."

She was right; objectively speaking, I could comprehend what was going on here. But from a purely *subjective* standpoint, my mind refused to accept it. I knew that was my own personal biases talking, and I certainly wasn't going to judge these women for their choices or tell them they shouldn't date who they wanted to date. Assuming they were all happy with this arrangement, what business was it of mine?

And yet, in my heart of hearts, I didn't buy that this relationship could truly be as harmonious as it looked on the outside. There had to be some sort of catch.

Perhaps sensing my inner conflict, Yuzuki let out a gentle laugh. "Did you think we'd all be shallow, sex-crazy bimbos or something?"

"What?! No, I—"

"You thought to yourself, 'Surely no self-respecting woman would want to date a guy like him, so they must all be either simple-minded or delusional'… You assumed we'd been manipulated, didn't you?"

"N-no, that's not true at all…"

"You're a terrible liar, you know," she said with another laugh.

A cold sweat seeped down my back. *Damn… Am I really that easy to read?*

"Wow, so that's what you think of us, huh?!" said Momozawa. "Well, screw you too, you little buttwipe."

It was a simple insult, but that made it sting even worse.

"Can you really blame him, though?" Nashimoto chimed in. "Pretty sure that's what most people would assume. I know I

definitely thought it sounded pretty sketchy before taking the leap myself."

"Wait, for real?" said Momozawa. "I just thought it sounded hella fun, honestly."

"That's because you're kind of a ditz, no offense. You wouldn't know a red flag if it walked up and slapped you across the face."

"Nah, you all just overthink everything. Love should be *freeing*, not stressful!"

As the two girls chattered on, I took a sip of my coffee.

It appeared that none of the three had been deceived or blackmailed into going out with Sera; they'd all made that choice of their own volition. And they seemed like relatively normal people, at least judging from the brief interaction we'd had so far.

If anything, that only made me more confused. Why would any normal, well-adjusted person *choose* to be in this sort of relationship—and with Sera, of all people—assuming they had literally any other option?

"Do you think our relationship is immoral, Sakuma-kun?" Yuzuki asked, the same affectionate look in her eye as an adult addressing a small child.

"…I wouldn't go so far as to call it *immoral*, per se. But it does confuse me."

"I appreciate your honesty. But the main thing you need to understand here is that your idea of what a relationship should be is fundamentally different from ours."

I furrowed my brow. "In what way?"

"Well, I can only speak for myself… Whereas you might consider yourself and your significant other to be partners, I consider all four of us to be a team, if that makes sense. We work together to help each other feel less lonely, fulfill each other's wants and needs, and provide the pleasure and excitement we all crave. Two-person relationships often ask too much of each individual,

since both will be expected to meet virtually all of the other person's needs, and that can feel restrictive and breed jealousy and resentment. This can happen even if both people ultimately want the same things out of the relationship. But when you're a team, the risk of that becoming too great a burden is dramatically reduced. It's a far more humanistic way of going about being in love than your traditional monogamous relationship."

Humanistic was not an adjective I'd typically think to use in the context of romance. I chewed over Yuzuki's explanation for a moment; I could understand what she was saying. Some parts made perfectly good sense to me, from a logical standpoint. But it was still hard for me to fully digest right away, like I'd just been given a massive convoluted info-dump in a sci-fi novel about the in-universe lore, which I needed to understand for the plot to make any sense whatsoever. Perhaps my biggest issue was…

"Are you just parroting how Sera explained it to *you*, though?"

"You're awfully guarded when it comes to Ikkun, aren't you? Not that a bit of skepticism is unwarranted when it comes to him," Yuzuki said with a refined smile. This didn't answer my question, but thankfully she continued, "It's about half and half, I'd say. My views are my own, but they're also far from unique. If you asked Ikkun to explain things to you, I'm sure you'd recognize a lot of the same ideas. Where I differ is a product of personal philosophy and time spent in contemplation."

"…I see."

For whatever reason, I was on tenterhooks now. Was it largely still Sera's philosophy, then, or was it different enough to be considered separate? Which parts had Yuzuki come up with herself? I felt weirdly unsatisfied with this explanation, but I couldn't summon the urge to ask her to clarify.

"You and your dumb old 'logic,' Yuzucchi, I swear…" Momozawa grumbled, snapping a cookie in half between her teeth and sending a shower of crumbs raining down upon the table. "No need to be all

philosophical about it when you can sum it up in just five words: 'more lovers equals more fun.' Boom. Simple as that."

"Wait," I said. "Do you have other boyfriends, Momozawa?"

"That's Momozawa-san to you, kid. Respect your elders."

"Oh, sorry… Do you have other boyfriends aside from Sera, Momozawa-san?"

Meanwhile, she doesn't give a damn about respecting her *elders when it comes to Yuzuki, but whatever…*

"Nah, I don't," said Momozawa. "But *girl*friends, on the other hand…"

She shot Yuzuki a suggestive look, which the other girl warmly returned.

Oh, wait… Is that what's going on here?!

Obviously, I knew lesbians were a thing, and bisexual people too—but to my knowledge, I'd never actually met either before, so it was pretty difficult to conceal my surprise. I couldn't believe they actually existed, even out in my neck of the woods.

Well, duh. Of course they do, Sakuma, you moron…

It went without saying that sexual minorities—or, more generally, people whose identities didn't fall neatly into society's preestablished "norms"—existed in all parts of the world… Even if they might often feel like they needed to hide who they were in order to fit in, like Ushio had for many years. I should've known *that* much, at least.

I felt pretty embarrassed with myself all of a sudden, being in this company. Of the five of us here, I was the only one who'd never had to worry that the world might reject me for who I was or whom I loved.

"I think Eriri-chan's probably the closest to me, in terms of philosophy," said Sera. "Life's all about having fun… Who needs more reason than that? Whether it's friends, family, or lovers—the more

the merrier, I say. Most folks are just too stuck-up or set in their ways to admit to themselves that our lifestyle is better than theirs. Isn't that right?"

He turned to Momozawa for agreement.

"You can say *that* again," she said with a straight-faced nod.

I looked at her, then back at Sera. "You know, there's something I've been wondering for a while now. This 'anything goes, as long as it's fun' philosophy of yours… Where did it come from? Have you been this way ever since you were born? Or did you get it from someone else?"

"Ooh, curious, are we?" said Sera, his eyes lighting up as though he'd been waiting for this exact question. "Sure, I don't mind telling ya. Our story begins in the distant past, so allow me to take you back in time, to the turn of the millennium…"

"And *please* keep it brief."

"I was always a bit of a wunderkind growing up, right? Super healthy, super talented, super athletic… Could beat any of the other kids on the playground in a race, could play 'Chopsticks' on the piano way sooner and way faster than anyone… Always felt like I stood head and shoulders above the rest. But see, my older brother, on the other hand—he was pretty sickly and weak, and not a quick learner either. Still the sweetest kid you'd ever meet, though. Even though I surpassed him in just about everything but age, he did everything he could to make me feel special and loved. Then one day, his condition took a turn for the worse, and the doctors told us he didn't have much longer to live. And on his deathbed, he gripped my hand and turned to me and said, 'Don't cry for me when I'm gone, Itsuku. Go out there and live your life to the fullest. Enjoy all the fun things I never could and won't ever get the chance to.'"

"Well, damn."

Now *this* sounded like a made-up sob story if I'd ever heard one. But I couldn't exactly call him out on it, just on the off chance that it was actually true. Such tragedies weren't completely unheard

of; hell, even Ushio's family had gone through something similar when her mom passed away. *Then again, this is Sera we're talking about. Maybe I should just trust my gut instinct and not give him the benefit of the doubt…*

"Oh, come on, Sera-kun." Nashimoto shook her head, snickering. "That's gotta be your worst one yet. I mean, you already *told* us you're an only child."

"But *he* doesn't know that," said Sera. "Sheesh, way to spoil the fun, Nagi-chan…"

See, I knew it. Still, it wasn't even worth getting upset about; I was used to his deceptions at this point, and I knew getting a rise out of me was exactly what he wanted.

"So what do you see in this guy, Nashimoto?" I asked her. "I mean, it sounds like you know he's a lying scumbag. Why go out with someone like that?"

"Hey, watch your mouth, bub!" said Momozawa, glaring at me. "Don't talk about our boyfriend like that!"

"S-sorry, ma'am…"

Jeez, this chick is scary. She reminded me a little bit of Nishizono, back in her more combative era.

Nashimoto hummed in thought, tapping her chin. "I wouldn't say I have a solid justification for it like these two. I've still got some reservations myself, to be honest, so I guess you could say I'm testing the waters for now. And if it doesn't end up working out, well…I can just bail, and that'll be that."

"So you're feeling things out, basically." The similarities to my current situation with Ushio were not lost on me. Maybe it was a more common way to approach a new relationship than I originally thought.

"What I will say," Nashimoto went on, "is that being with Sera-kun is a whole lot of fun. I mean, he's like a jack-in-the-box full of surprises—and you never know what he might pop out with next. I

can always count on him to give my boring day-to-day a much-needed dose of excitement and unpredictability. That's what I like about him."

"Awww, Nagi-chan… You're gonna make me tear up," said Sera. "And what I like about *you* is that you're a little cutie-patootie!"

"Ah ha ha… Thanks."

I took another sip of my Viennese coffee. It was tepid at this point, though the whipped cream was now fully mixed in, which gave it the perfect level of sweetness. I went ahead and polished off the rest of my cup, then set it back down on the table.

"So," said Yuzuki, her eyes locked on mine once again, "would you say your perception of us has changed at all, now that you've gotten to know us a little better?"

"Yeah, I'd say so…" I admitted.

In all honesty, my initial impression of them had not been a positive one. It was just as Yuzuki had said: I'd been utterly convinced that no one would ever go out with a guy like Sera unless they were either shallow and trashy or had a screw loose. Now I saw that this was just my own prejudice against him talking, and that these three were all perfectly normal human beings. Not that I was a huge fan of the whole concept of "normalcy" in general, but this felt like an acceptable use case. Because sure, we might have our differences when it came to our thoughts, tastes, and beliefs—but there wasn't anything about them that went beyond my ability to understand or sympathize with.

"I don't think you've been indoctrinated into some weird, creepy cult anymore, at the very least," I added.

"Ah ha ha… My, aren't we blunt," said Yuzuki.

"Even so…I still think one romantic partner is enough for me, personally. Or I guess I should say: I only *want* to be in a relationship with one other person."

Yuzuki's soft, gentle smile remained firmly affixed to her face as she looked at me, waiting patiently for me to explain my reasoning and finish my thought.

"I can understand your point of view too, of course," I said. "And maybe if everyone was completely and equally faithful to and in love with one another, then having multiple lovers would only ever be a net positive. But for me, the thought of the person I love in a romantic sense going around and doing stuff with other people… It just makes me feel kind of nauseous, to be honest. Like, I'd want to be the single most important person in their life, and for them to feel the same way about me."

"Yeah, that's called being possessive, buddy," said Momozawa, who turned to address me with a scornful gaze. "Try having a little self-confidence, maybe. It's guys like you who are tanking our country's birth rate."

"Pretty sure that has nothing to do with it, dude…"

"Don't call me 'dude.'"

"Sorry." I cleared my throat and circled back to my original point. "I won't deny that possessiveness can be a very toxic trait in a relationship. At the same time, like…doesn't that just kind of come with the territory when it comes to love? Sure, it can be messy and ugly sometimes… And yeah, when you're in a committed relationship, you're both bound to hurt the other person in some way sooner or later, and probably more than once… Oh, but I guess that'd probably be the same even with multiple partners, wouldn't it…?"

The more I prattled on, the more I could feel my face growing redder and redder. What business did a total beginner to love like myself have pontificating to these people on what it meant to be in a relationship? Regret billowed up from within me.

"I think I see what you're trying to say," said Yuzuki. "But to be clear, we have no intention of trying to force our lifestyle on you. For

the record, I think monogamous love can be a very beautiful thing, in its own right."

While I appreciated the validation, I felt like I hadn't given a single effective argument in defense of my own position. Which was fine, since it wasn't like I was looking to debate her or anything—but it did make me feel a bit empty to realize that my own philosophy was so flimsy and underdeveloped compared to hers, which I hadn't even been able to put a single dent in.

"Kamiki-kun," said Yuzuki, lowering her voice in seriousness. "I'll say it again: I don't think your point of view is invalid. But I also want you to know that I'm one hundred percent certain it's only a matter of time before relationships like ours will be seen as perfectly normal, or even commonplace. The prevailing notion of what romance should look like—as something that should only exist between one man and one woman—is already on its way out. It probably would have died off even sooner if it hadn't been propagated and kept alive by the media for so very long. But mark my words: Sometime in the not too distant future, the world will be a much freer place to love."

"…I guess we'll just have to see, yeah."

There came a resounding *dong* as the antique wall clock struck six.

Shortly after my back-and-forth with Yuzuki, Sera readily relinquished my bike lock key. Since I'd already finished my coffee, I wasted no time in excusing myself from the table. I vowed to never accept an invitation from Sera again as I got on my bike and pedaled for home through the bitter evening breeze.

I'd been so ready to give him a piece of my mind to get myself some mental clarity when I first walked into the café, but in the end, I hadn't even managed to do that. Not to imply that it hadn't been an enlightening experience for me, of course; talking with his three girlfriends had given me some food for thought in terms of what a

romantic relationship could look like and the many different forms one might take.

Perhaps Yuzuki was right, and there'd soon come a day when relationships like theirs would be totally commonplace. But even if it didn't, I was still pretty sure that the traditional, widely accepted image of what love should look like would shift over time as society continued to progress. One of these days, even the stereotypical fantasy of love at first sight with a random passerby who just so happened to drop their handkerchief might be seen as no less ridiculous than some antiquated mating ritual from the Stone Age. Or maybe that day had already come.

"But I guess what I'm most afraid of…is being so preoccupied with some overly idealistic definition of love that I let a kind of happiness I can attain slip right through my fingers."

This was something I'd said to Ushio on the day I'd asked her out. While I certainly had no intention of experimenting with Sera's particular brand of romance, perhaps I'd be well served to question *myself* a bit more when it came to my definition of what love should be.

Like, what did I really want to happen between me and Ushio, in the end? Or what form did I want our relationship to take going forward?

I needed to start thinking more proactively about these kinds of things.

Hitting a break in my train of thought, I let out a sigh. "Man, why do I feel like I'm doing something wrong here?"

I wasn't even sure if I was doing the right thing by merely letting myself *think* so hard about all of this stuff. Wasn't love supposed to be something you could enjoy and indulge in without second-guessing everything all the time? I should be thinking about fun new date ideas, not questioning whether we were doing things all wrong by virtue of the manner in which we were dating. Or did every couple in the world grapple with questions like this constantly,

but they put up a front to look like they were doing just fine and enjoying themselves to an outside observer? That would be a tough reality for me to swallow, if so.

I came to a red light and hit the brakes. When I lifted my gaze, I could see the crescent moon shining clearly in the pitch-black skies overhead. I'd seen on the forecast that the weather here in Tsubakioka was expected to be unseasonably good these next few days.

I wondered if Hokkaido would be so kind.

CHAPTER TEN

Northbound



Chapter Ten:
Northbound

IT WAS THE FIRST DAY of our class trip. We'd made it through security, and from there it was a short walk to our designated gate, down the long departures concourse that seemed to stretch on endlessly, past boarding lounges filled with passengers headed for other far-flung destinations. Out the thick glass windowpanes that lined one full side of the corridor, I could see several aircraft taxiing to the runway to await their turn for takeoff.

We'd shown up with time to spare before our early morning flight. Boarding was scheduled to begin in twenty minutes, and then we'd be climbing aboard our own airplane bound for New Chitose Airport. In the interim, the other sophomores from Tsubakioka High and I were sitting at the gate and killing time in whatever ways we pleased.

We were permitted to wear our normal clothes during the class trip—and in fact, not a single student had come in their school uniform. Everyone (the girls especially) was very excited for the rare chance to dress how they liked around their friends. We'd all lined up near the window and taken a group picture together when we got to the gate, but now everyone had dispersed to do their own thing. Some kids were chatting in their seats, while others had gone off to buy snacks and whatnot at the nearby stores and food vendors. Hasumi and I were in the former camp.

"Aw, man… I'm actually getting kinda nervous," I said. "I forget, have you been on a plane before, Hasumi?"

"Yeah, but only once," he replied. "Flew down to Okinawa back in junior high."

"What was it like? Was there a lot of turbulence or whatever?"

"Yup, it got pretty shaky for a while there."

"How bad are we talking?"

"Whole plane turned ninety degrees on its side one time."

"Wait, seriously? I feel like you'd fall out of your chair at that point."

"That's what seatbelts are for, my man. Flight attendants always come by and make sure they're tightly fastened before takeoff."

"Ooh, got it… Makes sense."

"Also, they make you take your shoes off before you even board the plane."

"Really? What do you even do with them, then?"

"You've gotta put them in a little shoe baggie and carry 'em around with you… Wait, don't tell me… You didn't forget to bring your shoe baggie, Kamiki, did you?"

"What?! You mean they don't provide them for you?!"

"Nope. But don't worry—any of the stores here in the terminal will sell 'em."

"Shoot. Guess I'd better go buy one right now, then…"

"Don't bother. I just made all that stuff up."

I smacked Hasumi hard on the shoulder.

Feeling nature calling all of a sudden, I stood up from my chair. There was still plenty of time left until we were set to board, so I went down the corridor to the men's room and quickly did my business. Upon walking back out of the bathroom, I spotted Ushio and Hoshihara chatting with a group of girls from our class.

This was going to be Ushio's first school field trip ever. Until recently, I'd been checking up on her periodically to gauge how anxious she might be feeling about it, and as far as I could tell there was nothing to worry about. Granted, the trip had hardly even begun, but based on how comfortable she appeared to be right now, she'd probably do just fine.

"Wait a minute…" said a voice from behind me, and I turned around.

The first thing I saw was an almost perfectly spherical head of hair, neatly trimmed into a short little bob. It was one of the girls from the other day: Nagi Nashimoto. She'd just come out of the women's bathroom.

"I had a feeling that might be you, Kamiki-kun," she said. "Recognize me this time?"

"H-hey there," I said. "Yeah, of course I do…"

She'd approached me so abruptly and without warning that I was fumbling for words. Even if she hadn't, I'd still probably feel a bit awkward conversing with her, given that she and I hardly knew each other at all.

"You're not wearing your glasses today," I noted.

"Yeah, I only wear those when I'm with Sera-kun," she said. "Not for any particular reason, though. It's just how I feel like dressing around him."

"Oh, I see…"

I thought for sure it would be to hide her identity or something; I could imagine how a girl might not want the entire school finding out she was dating a guy like Sera. Having nothing else in particular to say, I nodded farewell and turned to walk away.

"You know," she called after me, and I turned back around, "Sera-kun seems to have really taken a liking to you, Kamiki-kun."

"To *me*? Nah. Pretty sure he just likes messing with me."

"That's how Sera-kun shows that he likes someone, though."

"Oh, give me a break…"

What was he, a bratty little boy playing pranks on the girl he liked? No, that analogy was giving him too much credit—he was way more conniving.

I took a look around the immediate vicinity; if Nashimoto was here, then it stood to reason that Sera might not be too far away. “Is he not with you right now?”

“No? Just because we’re dating doesn’t mean we’re joined at the hip. I mean, you’re not hanging out with Tsukinoki-kun right now either, are you?”

“So you know about that, huh?”

“Duh. The whole school’s been talking about it all week.”

Ugh. I wished people would mind their own business and leave the two of us alone; I hated unwanted attention. But there was no point in me airing those petty grievances to Nashimoto, so all I could do was awkwardly laugh it off.

“Did I hear that Sera-kun was the one who spread the word about you two?” she continued. “Boy, that’s rough.”

“If you *really* feel bad for me, then why don’t you tell him off or something? I mean, you’re his girlfriend, right? I’m sure he’d listen to you.”

“What? No way. I can’t control that guy—are you kidding? You’re underestimating just how much of a loose cannon he can be. He’s basically a giant five-year-old.”

“That is not a very flattering comparison.”

It fit the bill, though. He had that stupid, smug little smile that might have been kind of endearing if it didn’t always mean he was getting up to some sort of mischief, plus the innocent-minded cruelty of a little boy who went around killing insects for fun and thought nothing of it. He really *was* like a child in many respects, for better or worse.

Okay, no. Maybe just for worse.

“Honestly, he might be the most free-spirited person I’ve ever met,” Nashimoto said in earnest, a hint of adoration in her tone. “Do you play RPGs, Sakuma-kun?”

"As in role-playing games? Yeah, I mean…every now and then…"

Wh-why the hell is this girl still talking to me? I'd never really pegged her as one for conversation, but maybe she just didn't have any real friends in our class.

"So you know how in an RPG, you'll sometimes get a dialogue choice where you have to pick from a set of answers? Like, 'Yes' or 'No,' or 'Help' or 'Refuse,' or whatever it might be. And you know how they'll sometimes pepper in funny dialogue options that you can tell right away would only make the situation worse? Like the game developers put them in as a joke or something?"

"Oh yeah—I know what you mean," I replied. "The ones you're always tempted to select just to see how the other characters might react, right?"

"Exactly. Or, like, the ones where the story won't progress until you choose 'Yes,' but you can keep picking 'No' and get yourself stuck in an infinite dialogue loop."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah!"

"Sera-kun makes those kinds of choices, but in real life."

A chill ran down my spine. Was *this* why she'd brought up RPGs?

"He's not only a guy who's true to his curious nature," she said. "He's curiosity incarnate. Because underneath it all, he's effectively a little kid. But unlike a literal child, he actually has the power to make things happen. Once he gets an idea in his head, there's nothing any of us can really do to stop him."

Nashimoto kept on babbling. The way she spoke of Sera so fondly, even when discussing how abnormal he was, made me feel more skeeved out by the minute. My impression of her as a sane, sensible person was now crumbling to dust.

"Surprised you'd still want to date someone like that," I said.

Nashimoto chuckled to herself. “I mean, you don’t meet guys like him every day, do you?”

“I guess that’s true, but still…”

Nashimoto checked her watch. “Looks like it’s almost boarding time. I’d better head back.”

She gave me a little wave goodbye, then walked off and joined up with a group of girls who had gathered nearby. I watched as she effortlessly assimilated herself into whatever conversation they were having, offering interjections here and there before bringing up a whole new topic and leading the discussion herself. I felt kind of embarrassed for assuming she might be an outcast in her class.

As I walked back toward Hasumi, a thought occurred to me.

“Does she genuinely think he’s a huge catch or something?”

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For my first-ever plane ride, the flight itself was utterly uneventful. Sure, I’d been on the edge of my seat before takeoff, and the weird pressure in my eardrums was kind of novel, but the initial excitement wore off pretty quick. About ten minutes after we reached cruising altitude, I was gazing out the window at the scenery below, feeling bored. I *did* really like those precious few seconds when we first passed through the clouds and everything went white; in that moment, it felt like we might find ourselves in a whole different world when we emerged on the other side.

A couple hours later, we landed at New Chitose Airport. Perhaps we were a bit pressed for time, though, because we weren’t allowed even a minute to soak it all in before we were rushed out of the airport and crammed onto our shuttle bus. From there, it was about a one-hour drive through mostly barren winter scenery before we ultimately arrived at something resembling the big city, at which point we promptly disembarked.

"Wooooo! We're in *Hokkaido*!" Hoshihara exclaimed gleefully, throwing her hands in the air.

It was eleven o'clock in the morning.

The air in Sapporo was a lot cooler and clearer than it was back in Tsubakioka. With each breath I took, it felt like my lungs were being cleaned of all their impurities. After several hours of being stuck in a seat, the feeling of liberation won out over the cold for me, and for a while I just soaked in the crisp, fresh air without even putting my coat on.

Although the skies overhead were clear at the moment, the city streets were covered in a thick blanket of snow. All the major roads—like the one outside Sapporo Station, where we now stood—had been cleared away, with large mounds of snow piled high along the shoulders of the road.

"Okay, everyone," said the head teacher for the sophomore class. "Make sure to be back here by five o'clock sharp. Don't be late, or you'll be left behind."

He proceeded to rattle off a few more rules and warnings in a stern tone of voice. Everyone listened attentively, though I could see a few students so eager to be let loose that they were practically vibrating in their boots. Hoshihara was one of them; it seemed like she didn't even realize she was swaying rapidly from side to side. When the head teacher had finished giving his spiel, his expression suddenly softened.

"All right," he said. "Now have fun out there, and be careful. Dismissed!"

And so our free time began. We gathered into our activity groups and quickly dispersed in threes and fours. As soon as I linked up with Ushio and Hoshihara, the giddy girl immediately made a proclamation that almost sounded like a mandate: "First order of business: food! Hokkaido's famous for its seafood, right? Let's head on over to the street market like we planned!"

We had indeed drafted up a rough itinerary for our free time in advance. Hoshihara had been the one to suggest we check out one of the local public markets.

"How do we get there?" asked Ushio.

"Well, it'd be fastest to just take the train," said Hoshihara. "But we could totally get there on foot, no problem!"

"Sure, I'm down to walk. It's pretty nice out, and it'll help us work up an appetite."

I had no objections either, so the three of us set off down the street.

While I'd been thoroughly impressed with how clean the air was here in Sapporo, the city itself didn't feel all that unique or interesting at a glance. Sure, the roads were a lot wider, and the traffic lights were vertical instead of horizontal, but those were the only two novelties worth mentioning. Other than that, it was no different from your average big city, as far as I could tell.

"Feel like maybe I set my expectations a little too high," I said.

"About what?" asked Ushio, leaning over as we walked.

I'd merely been musing aloud, so I hadn't been expecting her to catch it. "Sapporo, I guess. Always figured it would feel a lot more different, since Hokkaido's almost like a foreign country in some aspects."

"You think? I'm not sure I've ever thought of it like that."

"I mean, it's completely detached from the mainland, with a big ocean in between."

"You could say the same thing about Okinawa, though, couldn't you?"

"Yeah, but Okinawa kinda has foreign country vibes too, in my book."

"I feel like you're making arbitrary distinctions. I'm fairly certain the locals might be offended if they heard you talking about

their island like that."

"W-wait, really? Damn, I'd better watch my words from now on…"

Now that I thought about it, I could definitely see how what I'd said could be interpreted negatively… Like, from a geopolitical standpoint or whatever.

"Hey, what are you two talking about?" said Hoshihara, falling back to walk alongside us. She'd immediately taken the lead and had been charging forward a fair few strides ahead of us this whole time—presumably because her stomach was calling to her.

"Oh, I was just telling Ushio that I was kinda expecting Hokkaido to feel more like a foreign country, but now I'm realizing that it isn't all that different."

"Like a foreign country? You mean because of all the Ainu town names and stuff like that?"

"Yeah, exactly! That's a big part of it. Like, yeah, they still use kanji—but the way you're supposed to read them is always so ridiculously unintuitive, y'know? Almost feels like you're in a foreign country where you don't even know the language."

"I guess it kinda does, now that you mention it…"

It seemed Hoshihara agreed with me. I considered this a win.

We came to a red light and stopped at the corner of the sidewalk. Ushio pulled her phone out and typed something in with her thumbs. I figured she was probably just checking the map or something—but then she turned her phone around to show us the screen.

"Look," she said. "I found this little online quiz someone made: 'Hard-to-Read Place Names in Hokkaido.' Wanna give it a shot?"

"Heck yeah!" Hoshihara exclaimed. I was curious too.

"Okay, question one…" said Ushio, scrolling down. "Here's what the kanji looks like."

She showed us her phone again. There were two large kanji characters displayed in the center of the screen, and it seemed you had to scroll down even further for the answer, so even Ushio probably didn't know the correct reading yet. We all tilted our heads to one side and tried our best to puzzle it out.

All right, let's see here…

"Well, I'm guessing it's not just 'Shimekanmuri' or something," I said.

"Yeah, no," said Ushio. "They wouldn't put it in the quiz if it was something as obvious as that. Unless it was a trick question, I guess."

"Mmm… Yeah, I dunno," said Hoshihara. "There aren't really that many alternate readings for these two characters in the first place, are there?"

The three of us gave up right away, and Ushio scrolled down to the answer.

"What?! 'Shimukappu'?! That doesn't even make any *sense*!" I shouted. "How the hell is that only the first question?!"

"Yeah, but a lot of Hokkaido place names do the whole 'double p' thing, to be fair," said Ushio. "So I guess maybe I can see it?"

"I never would have gotten that," said Hoshihara.

Even after the signal changed and we crossed the street, we continued working through the quiz as we made our way over to our destination. We didn't fare any better on the other questions, though. "Shakotan," "Wassamu," "Ottoineppu"… None of them sounded anything like place names you might find back in mainland Japan, and in the end we didn't get a single question right. I considered myself pretty good at reading kanji too—but even I was thoroughly bested by Hokkaido's regional toponymy.

That said, the quiz was still fun and a great way to make the time fly by, and we reached the public street market in no time. The smell of fresh seafood hung in the frigid air as we walked down the

road past stall after stall of local fishmongers through a sea of other sightseers. It felt a bit like being at a crowded festival.

"Damn, look at all these vendors," I said. "How do we even pick a place to eat?"

"Hey, are you three in high school?" came a voice as we were passing one of the many storefronts. It was an older man with a waist-high apron strung below a pretty hefty beer belly. He appeared to be the owner of the place.

"Yep! We sure are!" said Hoshihara.

"Well, aren't *you* just chock-full of pep! Say, want to try a free sample of crab?"

"What?! Are you sure?!"

The man snipped a leg off one of the crabs on display with a pair of scissors and plunked it into Hoshihara's palm.

"Come on over, you two," he said to me and Ushio. "There's plenty to go around."

"O-okay, thanks," I replied hesitantly. We walked up and held out our hands. Common etiquette dictated that it was impolite not to buy anything after you'd been given a sample, so I couldn't help but be a little on guard—though I was fairly certain we didn't have to worry too much about that, since we were technically still kids. Pulling the crab meat out from where the man had made an incision in the husk, we each took a bite.

"Oh, wow!" said Hoshihara, her face aglow. "That's *really* good!"

She wasn't wrong. The elastic texture and slight sweetness made me immediately start salivating for more. I could feel my hunger growing exponentially.

"Ah ha ha! Glad to hear it, little lady," said the man. "If you want, I've got plenty of other tasty things you're welcome to have a sample of inside."

"Wait, you mean it?!"

Like a moth to a flame, Hoshihara tottered after the man into the store's interior.

"Uh, should we really be letting her do this…?" I asked.

"We'd better go in after her," said Ushio.

The two of us followed Hoshihara inside and were greeted by a veritable cornucopia of undersea delights. The selection they had on display at the storefront had led me to believe they primarily dealt in crab, but I couldn't have been more wrong. Hoshihara was currently being given the rundown on everything they had in stock, receiving samples of each in turn. Before long, another store worker came over to offer her yet *more* things to have a taste of: salmon roe, shellfish, shredded crab meat, a shaved-off piece of tuna… And Hoshihara kept popping these offerings into her mouth and chomping them down one by one, like a nutcracker at an all-you-can-eat buffet. Amazingly, she at one point broke free from her food-induced hypnosis and seemed to briefly regain her senses, looking over at us in desperation.

"Wh-what do I do?!" she said. "They just keep giving me free samples!"

"Sounds like a good problem to have," I said.

I could totally understand the shopkeeper's perspective, though. Hoshihara was *absolutely* the type of girl you wanted to keep giving little treats to. But by now, I also felt like we were obligated to buy something from them, so I took a peek at what they had available. Unfortunately, everything was rather pricey—not prohibitively so, but we were on a tight budget. Perhaps it was about time we got out of here before they made her wash dishes to pay off her tab. Just as I was about to go and fetch Hoshihara, another shopworker came over and started talking to me.

"Wait a minute," said the middle-aged woman. "Have you kids had lunch already?"

"No, not yet," I replied. "But we were just trying to find a place to eat, actually…"

"See, I figured as much. All the restaurants around here are very touristy, so it'll cost you a pretty penny if you want to eat anywhere nearby."

Ohhh, okay. That makes sense… Hey, wait. No, it doesn't.

I'd always had the impression that local street markets were places where people could buy up fresh seafood and produce on the cheap, not tourist traps. But that would definitely explain why everything here seemed to be a bit on the expensive side. Here I'd assumed I just wasn't up-to-date on the market value of seafood.

"Here, let me recommend you a good place to eat that's a lot more affordable," said the woman. "It's a bit of a trek from here, though."

"You'd do that for us?"

"Well, of course! You're here on a class trip or something, right? I want you kids to have fond memories of your time here in Hokkaido, not feel like you got ripped off!"

Dang… She was a good person.

Once the woman had given us directions, I went over and collected Hoshihara, and the three of us excused ourselves from the store.

"Thanks for coming in and grabbing me, you two. I was literally on the verge of caving and buying one of everything they gave me!"

"Hoshihara, please…" I said. "You're gonna go bankrupt on day one at this rate."

After about a ten-minute walk, we made it to the restaurant the shopworker had recommended. At first glance, it looked like just another fish market, and not the sort of place you could sit down and have a meal. As I pulled out my phone to make sure we had the right spot, Ushio pointed toward the back of the store.

"Looks like there's a little dining area back there," she said.

"Oh, really? Okay, let's go check it out."

The soles of our shoes squeaked against the slick floor as we headed to the back of the shop, which led into a cozy little dining area, as Ushio had said. It wasn't packed with customers or anything, and it certainly wasn't fancy in terms of decor, but everyone seemed to be more than happy chowing down on their plates of sashimi and grilled fish in silence. This appeared to be the place.

"Come on in," said the old lady at the counter. "Have a seat wherever."

We grabbed one of the tables nearby and sat down. The stools had clearly seen better days, and they were pretty uncomfortable to sit on now that the cushioning was almost completely worn away. I opened the handwritten menu and scanned the list of assorted sashimi platters and seafood rice bowls. I didn't know what the going rate was for a good sashimi bowl, but I was pretty sure anything under 2,000 yen was a good deal. Probably.

Hoshihara flipped back and forth through the menu several times, mumbling to herself as though she couldn't make up her mind. There weren't any pictures, so it was a bit of a gamble no matter what you ordered.

"What are you gonna get, Ushio?" I asked.

"Mmm… I think I'll get the salmon and scallop bowl. What about you?"

"Probably the whitebait bowl, I think. Nice and cheap."

"You can afford to splurge a *little* more than that. We're on vacation, remember? Why don't you get something you actually want?"

"Urgh, I guess you've got a point… All right, then I'll get this 'Ocean's Bounty' one that's got five different kinds of fish in it!"

"Ooh, nice. Looks like that's the fanciest one they've got… Wait. Are you picking based purely on the price again?"

"No, of course not." I turned to Hoshihara. "Made up your mind yet?"

"Mmmmm… Okay, nope! No more second-guessing! I'm gonna get the Ocean's Bounty too!"

We called over the waiter to put our orders in, and they brought out our bowls in no time. All three of them were so filled to the brim with fish, they were practically overflowing. I wasn't the type of guy who liked to take pictures of his food most of the time, yet even *I* couldn't help but pull out my cell phone to take a commemorative snapshot of this meal. I looked over to see that Ushio and Hoshihara were doing little photoshoots of their own bowls as well.

"Look over this way, Ushio-chan!" said Hoshihara.

"Huh?" said Ushio. "Oh, uh… Okay…"

"Now say 'cheese'!" Hoshihara snapped the pic. "Nice, I got a good one with both you and your bowl in it. I'll text it to you later!"

"C-cool, thanks."

"Okay, your turn, Kamiki-kun!"

Do people really take selfies with their food nowadays? Is that the new trend?

After having my picture taken by Hoshihara, I returned the favor and took one of her as well. It was a pretty cute photo: her holding her bowl up to her face with one hand while making a peace sign with the other, smiling from ear to ear. I kind of wanted to get it framed and hang it up in the classroom.

"All right, let's eat!" she said.

Ushio and I clapped our hands together and prepared to dig in as well.

I dissolved a bit of wasabi into a little tray of soy sauce, dipped some sashimi into it, and shoveled the fish into my mouth along with a good helping of rice.

"Oh, man… Now *that's* good!"

I could tell from just one bite that this was no ordinary sashimi. The fish was so much fresher than the prepackaged, store-bought sushi I always got that it didn't even feel fair to compare the two. The sea urchin in particular was downright sublime—so much so that it made me wonder if the sticky, reddish-brown kind I was used to was imitation meat or something. Beside me, Ushio was over the moon as well.



"It's so tasty," she gushed. "Almost makes me wish I lived in Hokkaido…"

"You can say that again. The locals here have it good, that's for sure."

When we were originally deciding on what to have as our first lunch in Hokkaido during free time, we'd come up with several candidates: jingisukan, ramen, soup curry… But now I was one hundred percent confident that seafood had been the right decision. Not that any of the other candidates would have been the *wrong* decision, of course, but I could say with certainty that if I ever took a trip to Hokkaido again, I'd probably come straight back here and eat this exact same sashimi bowl.

Suddenly, I realized something: Hoshihara hadn't made a single peep since we started eating, and she was the biggest foodie of us all. On closer inspection, I could see the fire of determination burning in her eyes as she stared down at the bowl in front of her—so intensely that it actually scared me a little. Perhaps this was what happened when she finally found a foe worthy of her discerning taste buds—she shut up and focused on eating in complete and total silence. I didn't want to disturb her, so I dove back into my own bowl as well. It really was that good.

Slowly but surely, we finished our meals.

"Phew… Okay, I think I can die happy now," said Hoshihara.

These were her first words since our food had arrived. She was rubbing her stomach with a look of total ecstasy painted across her face. I was glad to see she liked it just as much as I had.

"I think I might have to come to Hokkaido for my graduation trip," she said.

"Planning for next year already, I see."

After leaving the restaurant, we got on the train and headed for Shiroi Koibito Park as we'd originally planned. It was a relatively famous tourist attraction in Sapporo, a name that came up a bunch

when we were researching things to do. Hoshihara was the one who'd ultimately insisted on going, though—mainly because there were all sorts of tasty sweets to try. She was nothing if not loyal to her stomach.

"Whoa! Look at that!"

Only about a five-minute walk from the station, the park came into view, its large brick facade standing out prominently amid the other buildings nearby. Sticking up from the roof was a large signboard that read "CHOCOLATE FACTORY."

"Dang, it sure looks a lot like a theme park," I said. "Here I was expecting it to be a tour of the actual factory where they make the cookies or something."

"Oh, come on, Kamiki-kun!" said Hoshihara. "Did you really not even look into what the place *was* when we talked about it? Yes—and it's a really popular place for couples to go on dates and stuff too."

"Huh, no kidding…"

As we got closer to the building and eventually passed through the exterior gate, we were greeted by a scene that looked like it had been plucked right from the pages of a children's book: a grand clock tower, some European-style buildings clustered around the perimeter, a gingerbread house, a tree house… It had been designed to look just like a quaint little fairy-tale village. The place was pretty packed too; there were a ton of families who'd come to visit the park with their kids, and I even spotted a couple other groups of students from Tsubakioka High here and there.

Before entering the park itself, we explored the courtyard for a while. There was a fountain, some snow sculptures, a telephone booth, a double-decker bus… Any of these would have made for a great photo op. In fact, there were so many of them that it felt like the park's designers were literally *begging* us to take as many photos as we possibly could. There were pedestals to set your camera down when using a self-timer and plenty of mirrors all

around for taking selfies. And like obedient little tourists, we did a full circuit of the entire courtyard, taking photos at every turn.

"Ushio-chan, Kamiki-kun!" said Hoshihara. "Go stand over there for a sec!"

"Hm? Sorry, where?" I asked.

I looked in the direction that Hoshihara was pointing to see a large, heart-shaped arch lined with flowers—an installation clearly devised for couples to stand beneath and take photos together.

"Come on, hurry up! Other people are gonna want a turn!"

Oh, man. Is she serious right now? This is gonna be a little embarrassing…

I glanced over to my side to see that Ushio seemed to be feeling awkward too.

"Well, we're here now," I said. "We might as well."

"Yeah, okay. Since she's offering, I guess."

Ushio said this as if trying to convince herself, then walked over to stand beneath the arch. I followed suit and positioned myself beside her.

"Scoot in closer, you two!" Hoshihara shouted. "Smile like you mean it, will ya?!"

She sounded like an amateur photographer barking out orders. We did as we were told, closing the gap between us until we were standing shoulder to shoulder, and I tried my best to give a more natural smile.

"Okay, say 'cheese'!"

Then came the first shutter snap—followed by a second, and then a third, before Hoshihara finally gave a satisfied nod.

"Sweet, looks good! I'll send it to both of you later."

"Yeah, thanks, ha ha…"

"I think I need a minute," said Ushio, fanning her reddened face with her hand.

We'd explored the entire courtyard now, so it was time to head inside.

After paying the admission fee, we continued into the park proper. As we meandered through the main building, we stopped at various little exhibits to learn the history of chocolate-making and took advantage of several more photo ops. Once we reached the third floor, we came to a hallway lined with large glass windows that offered a view down into the cookie factory, where we could see all the different phases of the confectionery process. Several large pieces of machinery with conveyor belts running between them were letting out low, rumbling noises.

"Well, that doesn't look very magical," Hoshihara said bluntly.

"I know, right?" I said. "Needs more Oompa-Loompas."

"Okay, Willy Wonka," Ushio quipped. I was glad she got the reference.

There was little reason to linger here, so we took the elevator up to the lounge on the fourth floor. We'd seen most of what there was to see in the park at this point, so all that was left was to pay a visit to the dessert café Hoshihara was originally so enticed by. We were given a table by the window with sofa-style seating, where we had a great view of the entire park. Hoshihara ordered a Shiroi Koibito parfait, and Ushio and I each got a slice of a Shiroi Koibito flavored Swiss roll.

"Aren't you full after eating that big sashimi bowl, Natsuki?" asked Ushio.

"Nope, I'll be fine!" said Hoshihara. "I've always got room for dessert, and we've been walking around for a while now, so I'm actually kinda hungry."

"I'm surprised you never seem to gain any weight. Are you on some special diet I don't know about or something?"

"Mmm, not sure it qualifies as a diet, per se… But I do try to suck my stomach in at basically all times, since I heard that helps burn some extra calories."

"Wow, really? Maybe I should give that a try."

"Nah, I think *you* could use a little extra meat on your bones!"

Just then, our orders arrived. As soon as the waitress set the hefty parfait down on the table, Hoshihara grabbed her spoon and scooped up a big bite of ice cream. After allowing the flavor to sink in for a moment, she let out a moan of ecstasy and cupped her face in her hands with glee.

"Yeah, no," she said. "Sweets are definitely where it's at. That sashimi bowl was great and all, but the one thing that place was lacking was a good dessert!"

She shoveled another spoonful of ice cream into her mouth, and the spiraling mountain of soft serve began to cave in. Her dessert was clearly a lot more food than the Swiss rolls that Ushio and I had ordered, yet at this rate, she'd probably finish before us.

"You sure do love to eat, don't you, Natsuki?" Ushio said, sounding amused.

"Yep!" Hoshihara nodded triumphantly. "But I mean, so does everyone, right? I'm a firm believer that you should never be ashamed of your own appetite."

"Wow. You could almost put that on a motivational poster."

"I wasn't always like that, to be fair. Only for the past few years or so…" Hoshihara's spoon paused in the air as she reminisced. "See, back when I first started junior high, I didn't know many of the kids in my class. But everyone else already seemed to have their own little social circles of kids they'd been friends with since elementary school. So it was pretty hard for me to find a friend group I could latch on to."

This was a relatively common predicament. Since junior highs usually pulled their student bodies from several different elementary

schools, there could be some major disparities in terms of what percentage came from where depending on the school district. And when you then divided them up even further by class, you were bound to end up with some kids who felt like fish out of water, as Hoshihara evidently had.

"I'd always eat by myself during lunch hour," she went on. "But then one day, the cutest girl in our class came up to my desk and said, 'Wow, you sure can eat a lot, Hoshihara-san! I wish I could do that!' Then a bunch of other kids came over and started saying the same thing. And they weren't making fun of me for it or anything. Everyone seemed to find it genuinely amusing and endearing, which made me feel pretty good about myself. And that's when I sort of had an epiphany…"

She finished off the last of the ice cream portion of her parfait and licked her lips.

"I was like, 'Huh… I guess when I eat a lot, it makes other people happy.'"

Ushio and I didn't say a word. We just listened in silence.

"From that day on, I gained a reputation for being the 'big eater' in our class, and for a while I sort of made that my whole identity because that's what everyone seemed to like about me. But really, it was just an easy bit I could do to make friends with people. And over time, I only got better and better at eating more and more, until eventually I became the girl with the black-hole stomach sitting before you today! Kinda funny how little things like that can have such a huge impact on who we grow up to be, huh?"

It sounded like Hoshihara didn't think of this story as anything more than a mildly amusing anecdote, but I didn't see it that way at all. I felt kind of unsettled, actually.

"Do you still feel that's your whole identity now?" Ushio asked cautiously, suggesting she was trying to navigate the subject as tactfully as possible.

"What, you mean being the big eater in class? Mmm… I'd like to think I've rounded out my personality a little bit since then, but who knows? Maybe some of the other kids still see me that way. Hard to say!"

"Sorry, I guess what I really mean is…do you still feel like you're only eating that much to make other people happy?"

Ushio's face had gone slightly pale with apprehension—and I could only imagine mine looked much the same. She was probably feeling just as guilty right now as I was. Hoshihara glanced back and forth between the two of us a couple of times like a deer in headlights, then picked up on the nervous tension in the air.

"Oh, no, don't get me wrong!" she said, waving both hands frantically in front of her face. "I'm not, like, *forcing* myself to eat for other people's amusement or anything! That's just an unintended side effect, or, like…a neat perk, I guess? There *was* a period of time when I had to really push myself to keep stuffing my face all the time… But that's ancient history! Now I only eat so much because I genuinely like to! Promise!"

"W-well, all right…" said Ushio, shrinking back a bit at this emphatic response. "As long as you're not feeling pressured into doing something you hate. That's the last thing I'd ever want to do to another person, let alone a friend."

Ushio scooped up a bit of whipped cream with the side of her fork and brought it carefully up to her mouth.

"For me, I remember always feeling like I was just performing the role of some character that everyone else wanted me to be," she said. "And that person was so far removed from my own mental image of who I was that it felt like I was constantly suffocating myself for the sake of others… But it sounds like in your case, Natsuki, you've managed to incorporate what other people want and expect from you into your identity in a way that makes you happy. I wonder what the difference is there."

Ushio's expression carried a hint of gloominess, but I could tell she wasn't just being down on herself here—she was genuinely curious.

Hoshihara hummed, mulling this over for a good while. "I feel like it's just a matter of whether you actually like the thing or not, y'know? Like, I always had a pretty big appetite even before that, so it's not like the person I thought everyone else wanted me to be was all that different from who I thought I was to begin with, unlike you."

"But that's the thing, though," said Ushio. "I didn't hate the idea of being that person either at first. Up until I started junior high, I really *did* feel like I wanted to be more like your stereotypical boy… I don't feel that way anymore, obviously, but I did."

"Yeah, on second thought, it's probably just a fundamental difference in the nature of your situation and mine, actually. I could always *stop* eating so much if I really didn't enjoy it, but for you it's a lot more complicated than that. It's kind of like if I learned to enjoy eating green peppers because I knew everyone else hated them and liked it when I took them off their hands. But for *you*, it doesn't even matter whether you like them or not—you're allergic. And if you eat too many, your throat will swell up and you'll choke to death or something. You can't just 'learn' to be okay with it."

"Interesting analogy… Not sure it's entirely apt, but it definitely *sounded* convincing."

Ushio and Hoshihara both seemed fully invested in getting to the bottom of this conundrum. Come to think of it, I remembered having a similar conversation with Ushio once—though I honestly found it just as difficult to relate to now as I had back then.

"Gotta admit, this is getting a little too high-level for me…" I said.

"You've never had any struggles like that, Kamiki-kun?" asked Hoshihara.

"Nope, not at all. It's enough to make me kinda jealous, actually. I feel so left out."

"Interesting… Guess that means you must have a much more solid grasp deep down on who you are and who you wanna be."

"I assure you I don't."

This wasn't mere modesty or self-deprecation, mind you—it was simply that perhaps the only thing I *did* know for certain about my own convictions was that they were nebulous at best. I had a terminal case of indecisiveness.

Hoshihara awkwardly laughed this comment off, then resumed eating her parfait. Ushio got back to work on her Swiss roll too. I breathed a little sigh of relief internally; for a second there, I'd been afraid that conversation might take a very different turn.

Once we were finished at Shiroi Koibito Park, we headed back to Sapporo Station. It was only 4:00 p.m., so we had another hour left until we were supposed to meet back up with the rest of the sophomore class. That was fine; we'd already planned to do some sightseeing around the station if we had any time left. There was probably enough to go check out the old clock tower and Odori Park, at least.

More than enough, it turned out, as thirty minutes later we'd taken all the photos we possibly could at both locations and still had another half hour to kill before free time ended at five. We couldn't wander too far, and we were already tired from walking, so we found a nearby fast-food place to have a quick bite at. We went up to the counter and ordered three buttered potatoes (a quintessential Hokkaido treat), then went to sit down. Luckily, we managed to find a few open seats, as most of the tables in the cramped little dining area were already occupied.

"Man, I'm beat," said Hoshihara. "We sure did a lot of walking today, huh?"

"I know," said Ushio with a yawn. "I'm going to sleep like a baby tonight…"

I was feeling pretty tuckered out myself.

"Hey, I know!" said Hoshihara. "We should all play cards tonight. I'll come to your room after dinner, Ushio-chan."

"Er, sorry… You're not allowed in my room, Natsuki. None of the girls are, I should say."

"What?! How come?"

"It's just what the teachers decided. Said they just want to 'avoid any potential mishaps' or whatever."

"Huh?! That's so messed up! It wasn't Ms. Iyo who said that, was it?"

"No, she tried to fight them on it, apparently. But I guess they felt like there were too many potential problems. It's fine, though. I'm used to it at this point."

"If you say so… Oh well! S'pose we'll just have to save it for my graduation trip instead!"

"I didn't realize I was coming along."

These plans were becoming more and more concrete by the hour. And I could tell Hoshihara wasn't just joking around either. I wasn't sure if I'd get an invite too, but the thought of the three of us getting to enjoy those sashimi bowls together again was definitely an enticing one.

"Hey, there's a spot over here!" cried a spirited voice.

I turned toward the source and saw a girl about our age waving two of her female friends over to the table beside ours. She had a buttered potato in one hand and a steamed pork bun in the other. For a moment, I thought she might be a local, but then I realized that today was a weekday; they were probably on a class trip like us. The three girls sat down on the bench next to Hoshihara, though there was only really enough space for two to sit comfortably, so they had to really cram themselves in.

"Hey, can you two scoot down a little bit?" Hoshihara asked me and Ushio.

She was trying to be considerate, it seemed. Once we'd all scooted down, there was a bit more room for the three girls to share—and one of them picked up on this.

"Oh, hey! Thanks!" she said.

"Don't mention it!" Hoshihara replied with a friendly smile. This good-faith gesture broke the ice, and the three girls turned their full attention on us.

"Are you here on a field trip?" asked one.

"Yep, we sure are!" said Hoshihara.

"Us too! Flew all the way up from Tokyo. Where are you guys from?"

"Oh, you might not have heard of it! It's—"

My hunch about them being on a high school trip was right. Now that they'd found some common ground, the conversation really started rolling. As I sat there marveling at Hoshihara's exemplary social skills, I noticed one of the girls craning her neck to look at Ushio.

"Also, who's your friend back there?!" said the girl. "She's freaking gorgeous! Hey, are you mixed? Let me guess: You're probably a model too, aren't you?"

Ushio forced a polite smile but was clearly on her guard a little bit. "Yes, I'm mixed," she said. "But no, I've never done any modeling…"

"Dang, you totally could, though! I mean, just look at you!" The girl stared at Ushio for a few seconds, and then her eyes went wide as if in realization. "Wait, are you a guy?"

My stomach dropped.

When it came to passing as a girl, Ushio most definitely looked the part, but those with a more discerning eye could probably still pick up on her voice or physique being a bit more masculine than the average girl's. And these girls were total strangers, so of course

they had no way of knowing about Ushio's circumstances. But how were you supposed to succinctly explain all that to someone you'd only just met in a way they could empathize with? Regardless, I knew it wasn't my place to interject on Ushio's behalf, so all I could do was watch nervously to see how she handled it.

"No, I—"

"Oh my god, your *voice*!" said the girl sitting farthest away, leaning over to get a better look. "You totally are, aren't you?! What are you doing going around town dressed like a girl, then? That's so funny!"

The girl laughed, and not even in a derisive way. It was the same high-pitched laughter you might hear from any group of high school girls at the mall, or in the hall between classes, or at a café. Sure, it was at Ushio's expense, but there probably wasn't any discriminatory intent behind it. Yet even so, it still seemed to hit Ushio pretty hard, as she hung her head in embarrassment. Now I had to say something.

"Hey, you really shouldn't—"

"QUIT IT!"

My words were drowned out by an ear-piercing reprimand.

All the other customers, the restaurant employees, and even a few pedestrians outside stopped what they were doing and whipped toward Hoshihara. Meanwhile, the girl she'd yelled at just sat there wide-eyed in disbelief, as if shell-shocked by this sudden change in Hoshihara's demeanor.

"I would appreciate it…if you didn't laugh at my friend, please," said Hoshihara, still glaring fiercely but attempting to keep her voice down as she trembled with rage.

"Oh, no, I wasn't trying to make fun of him, or…or…" said the other girl, scrambling to explain herself. But she clearly still didn't understand what she'd done wrong, so in the end she bit her lip and shut up entirely.

A very awkward, very uncomfortable silence fell for a time, and the people around us went back to whatever it was they were doing. Eventually, the girl who'd first started the conversation with Hoshihara opened her mouth. "S-sorry about that," she said. "I guess we're just not really familiar with that sort of thing, is all."

"It's okay," said Ushio, brows creasing apologetically despite her being the one who'd been wronged in all this. "No harm done."

"Okay… Well, let us get out of your hair now, at least."

Apparently, the awkwardness had become too much for her to bear; she rose from her seat, and the other two girls quickly followed suit. As they passed by, the girl who'd laughed at Ushio turned in our direction—her frivolous smile now replaced by a confused blend of shame, discomfiture, and the slightest hint of discontent.

"Sorry for bothering you," she said.

The three girls took their leave, vanishing into the crowd of pedestrians out on the sidewalk. There was no need for us to huddle so close together anymore, yet Hoshihara made no move to occupy the newly opened space on the bench.

"Thanks, Natsuki," said Ushio.

"No need to thank me," said Hoshihara. "Just…kinda ticked me off, that's all."

The interaction had obviously left Hoshihara with a sour taste in her mouth—and although Ushio was smiling at her pleasantly enough, I sensed some lingering unhappiness hidden beneath her expression as well. What a depressing way to end our free time in Sapporo; it had been such a good day up to this point too.

I had to find some way to resolve the situation—but all I could think to do right now was start ravenously devouring my buttered potato to distract from the awkward silence. I crammed the whole thing into my mouth like a starving prisoner who hadn't seen a bite

of food in days. Sure enough, Ushio and Hoshihara were flabbergasted.

Unfortunately, I'd made a minor oversight, as it promptly got caught in my throat.

"Mfgh?!"

Oh god. I'm gonna choke!

"W-wadder!" I pleaded.

"What are you doing, Sakuma?" muttered Ushio, shaking her head as she passed me the mineral water she'd bought at a vending machine earlier. Like a glutton, I greedily guzzled it down, not even having the time to care about it technically constituting an indirect kiss.

"Phew, thanks… That was a close one." I handed the water back to Ushio. Before they had the chance to ask me why I'd done such a thing, I added, "Gotta eat these things before they get cold, y'know?"

"True that!" said Hoshihara. "Buttered potatoes always taste best when they're still piping hot!" She proceeded to stuff her cheeks with a big bite of her own potato.

"Hey, hey, hey! Don't you go choking on us too, now!"

"Don't worry! I'm not an amateur like *you*, Kamiki-kun."

"Ha ha ha, ouch… Yeah, we'll see about that."

From anyone else, this comment probably would have stung a whole lot more, but Hoshihara was so cute that I had a hard time feeling insulted by it. Ushio watched us banter with each other, and her expression finally lightened a bit. This was such a relief to see that it made almost choking myself to death feel totally worth it.

We made it back to the meetup spot right on time. We let Ms. Iyo know we were back, then climbed aboard our next shuttle bus. Once all of the other students were accounted for, we set off for our hotel in Jozankei.

The whole bus ride was fairly quiet throughout; maybe everyone was feeling too tired to socialize after several hours of frolicking around the city. Most kids spent the hour-long journey napping, reviewing the photos they'd taken on their phones, or engaging in some other restful pastime. Me, I just gazed absentmindedly out the window as we headed up the mountainside, watching as the buildings slowly grew farther and farther apart. It was already getting dark out.

"Not sure I've ever seen Natsuki that angry before," Ushio said softly. She was sunken down in the seat beside me, staring listlessly down at her knees. She looked totally spent.

"You mean when we were talking to those girls?" I said. "Yeah… Though I guess I'm not too surprised. That does seem like the sort of thing that would set her off."

"What about you? Would you have just let it go?"

"Nah, I definitely would have said something if she hadn't. In fact, I was literally about to before she cut me off."

"Gotcha. Yeah, I guess you would, wouldn't you…?"

There was a faintness to her tone that I wasn't quite sure how to interpret.

"I mean, I definitely appreciate her sticking up for me," Ushio went on. "But at the same time, like… I don't know. I suppose I feel kinda guilty."

"Well, you shouldn't," I said. "She wouldn't have done it if she wasn't genuinely offended on your behalf. I'm sure she didn't feel obligated to or whatever."

"No, that's not what I meant. Like, yeah, I do feel a little bit bad for putting Natsuki in that position… But I mostly meant that I feel bad for those three other girls."

Ah. Now I could see what Ushio was trying to say.

"How come?" I asked anyway, just to be sure.

"For one thing, I really don't think that girl who laughed at me meant anything *actively* malicious by what she said. She probably didn't even think twice about it. Though I know a lot of discrimination can be subtle and inadvertent like that… But now that one negative interaction will probably put a huge damper on the whole rest of their day, when all they were trying to do was enjoy their class trip."

"That goes for us too, to be fair."

"Yeah, I know. I'm not saying we're the bad guys or anything. I guess it made me reflect a little bit on how I'd like those around me to react when someone laughs at me or says something hurtful."

I nodded for her to continue.

"I know I've said this already, but I really *am* grateful to Natsuki for standing up for me. At the same time, we all have our blind spots when it comes to what is and isn't discrimination—you and me included. If there's no malicious intent behind it, like with what those girls did, then I'd like to think it was just an honest mistake—no more worth making a huge fuss about than when someone accidentally steps on the back of your shoe, for instance. I suppose I'm realizing that my ideal resolution to that situation would have been just a quick 'Oh, sorry!' and then for us all to go back to chatting and having fun together again."

Unfortunately, things hadn't played out like that.

I recognized that she wasn't trying to criticize Hoshihara for her actions—nor those other girls for theirs. Ushio was lamenting something far greater than any one party's behavior here; she saw it more as a problem with our society as a whole and how defensive people tended to get in these sorts of conflicts.

"I wish it didn't feel like my identity was such a nuisance to others," said Ushio.

"Oh, come on… That's not true at all," I said. I wasn't just trying to console her either—I was simply stating a fact. "And it's precisely *because* everyone has those blind spots that we could all

stand to be a bit more careful and considerate of others. Part of that is letting people know when they've done something hurtful so they won't make the same mistake again. That's why it's important to call people out on these things."

The air inside the bus felt dry on my tongue, so I swallowed.

"Sure, it might make the other person feel pretty bad for a moment, but it's not a nuisance at all—any half-decent person would rather know they messed up so they can change their behavior. *I'd* sure wanna know if I hurt someone like that. And you shouldn't feel like you have to sacrifice your own comfort for the sake of others either—or else those heels of yours are gonna turn black and blue from being stepped on all the time."

Ushio slowly turned to face me. "Sakuma… You've really grown up, it feels like."

"Wait, what? You think?"

"Yeah. I'm genuinely impressed."

"Dang, seriously? Huh, I wonder what happened… Maybe this cold weather is toughening me up or something."

"Is that a thing?"

"Yeah. I mean, don't you always feel like some badass, hard-boiled lone wolf detective with a big ol' trench coat on when you're walking around in the freezing cold with your hands shoved in your pockets? I know I sure do."

"Hm… Okay, I take it back. Maybe you haven't grown up at all."

"Wow, okay! I see how it is!"

Ushio smiled gently at this, then cast her eyes down. "I mean it, though. It's really nice to see how much you've matured." Upon saying as much, she let out a big yawn and hunched her shoulders. "Gosh, I'm tired… I think I might take a little nap, actually."

"Sure thing."

Ushio closed her eyes.

I turned my gaze out the window once more, resting my elbow on the armrest and my cheek on my palm. I could almost feel the howling wind through the glass. Nights would be a whole lot colder here in Hokkaido than in Tsubakioka, that was for sure.

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We made it to our hotel in Jozankei safe and sound.

The place was even fancier than I'd been expecting. The lobby alone was pretty massive, softly illuminated by the warm light of glistening chandeliers. I could only imagine what a single night's stay at a place like this would cost under normal circumstances. To be honest, if the school had this kind of money, I wondered why the hell they couldn't use it to get proper air conditioning and heating installed instead of blowing it on booking luxury hotels… But it probably wasn't that simple.

We all dropped off our luggage in our individual rooms, then gathered in the downstairs buffet area for dinner. After smacking our lips and filling our bellies with a meal fit for kings, we headed back up to our rooms—and just like that, the first day of our class trip was effectively over. All that was really left to do now was shower and sleep, though more than two hours still remained before lights-out at ten o'clock.

"Man, I'm *exhausted*…"

I collapsed onto my bed. The fresh linen sheets felt nice and cool against my skin; I could already tell that as soon as I got under the covers, I'd be out like a light.

"Hey, mind if I hop in the shower first?" I asked Hasumi, who was sitting upright on the edge of the other bed, tapping away on his cell phone.

"Go for it," he replied, standing up. "I'm heading out for a bit."

"Wait, to do what?"

"Gonna go play mahjong with some buddies in another room."

"Oh, gotcha… Well, have fun."

"Will do," Hasumi said as he walked out the door.

Now I had the room all to myself—but I didn't have anything else to do, so I figured I'd take my shower right away. Once I was all cleaned up, I put on some comfy track pants to sleep in and brushed my teeth. With that, my bedtime routine was complete. I crawled into bed, closed my eyes, and waited for sleep's sweet embrace to take me.

A few moments passed.

And then I shot upright.

No, I couldn't go to sleep just yet. This was my high school class field trip! There were so many other quintessential nighttime activities I was supposed to do, like play cards, talk about girls, have pillow fights, and whatnot! But with Hasumi already off playing with his other friends, the only person I really had to hang out with…was Ushio.

Not that I was opposed to hanging out with her, obviously—but since the whole school knew she and I were going out, I did feel a bit worried at the thought of being seen walking into her room, and that only adding fuel to the fire for all the rumors that were already swirling about. I didn't want either of us to have to deal with any more unwanted attention… But I also didn't want to spend the whole rest of the night alone. And Ushio was probably feeling pretty lonely without a roommate herself.

"Yeah, screw it."

I'd just have to be careful to stay out of sight while sneaking down the hall to her room. That should be simple enough, right?

First, I needed to give her a heads-up that I was coming by. So I pulled out my phone—only to find that I already had a new text message from Ushio. Apparently, she'd sent it while I was in the shower. It was only two words: *"come over"*

Wh-whoa… What the hell?

Granted, Ushio had never been one to mince words in text-based correspondence, but this was the first time I'd ever gotten a message from her that was *this* short and to the point. In that respect, I wasn't quite sure how to interpret these words. Was this a command or a request? What tone had she meant for it to be read in? Was she just feeling depressed, or was she in some sort of trouble? Or was she simply too tired to be bothered writing out a longer message when we could just as easily talk in person?

Regardless, I had no choice but to go over there and find out what she wanted, so I grabbed my room key and stepped out into the hall. Plates on the wall next to each door provided the room number, so I used those as my guide to navigate the hallway's many twists and turns. I knew her room was somewhere on this floor.

"This must be it," I said when I found her room number.

I looked up and down the hall to make sure no one was watching, then knocked on the door. I wondered for a moment if this was how famous actors felt when trying to hide their relationships from paparazzi—and then the door swung open.

"Hey, bud. Took you long enough."

For a split second, I thought I had the wrong room. All I could see was the chain of a silver necklace dangling right in front of my face. And when I lifted my gaze, I came face-to-face with the smarmy smirk of a natural-born swindler.

It had been Sera who answered the door.

"Wh-what are *you* doing here?!"

"Better hurry up and get in here if you don't wanna be seen by anyone," said Sera.

That was the plan all along, thanks.

I slipped into the room and shut the door behind me. Walking a bit farther in, I spotted Ushio sitting on the room's lone bed with a concerned look on her face. It seemed she hadn't showered yet, as

she was still in the same outfit she'd worn during the day, minus the jacket.

"Sorry, Sakuma," she said. "He just barged right in when I opened the door…"

"Don't apologize. You've done nothing wrong, Ushio." I turned to glare at Sera. "But *you*, on the other hand… I sure hope you realize how much trouble you're going to be in once the faculty finds out you forced your way into her room."

"Hey, I feel bad for breaking and entering, all right? Really, I do," said Sera. "But I just couldn't bear the thought of my poor little Ushio sitting in her room all alone, y'know? Figured I might as well swing by to hang out with her, that's all. And now there's three of us here, so we can play cards together!"

"I think you'd better get the hell out right now, if you know what's good for you."

"Aw, c'mon. Say, what if I promise to leave before lights-out?"

"You're in no position to negotiate with us. Now get out, or I'll *make* you get out."

"Oh yeah? And how are you gonna do that, exactly?"

I had not been prepared for him to call that bluff, so I stumbled briefly at this retort before coming up with a suitable rebuttal. "I'll grab a teacher from one of the rooms next door."

"Ah ha ha!" Sera cracked up. "Relying on others as always, I see!"

"I'm dead serious. And they're already highly sensitive about Ushio and her circumstances, so I guarantee you won't get off with just a slap on the wrist."

"Ooh, now you've *really* got me shaking in my boots!"

My threats had fallen on deaf ears; Sera made no indication of budging even an inch as he stared down at me, his little sarcastic grin still plastered on his face. I wanted him out of Ushio's room

right this second. He had to be plotting something. But as I just stood there glaring at him warily, Ushio let out an exhausted sigh of resignation.

"Fine, whatever," she said. "I guess we can play for a little bit."

"What?!" I exclaimed.

"If he tries anything funny, we can tell a teacher right away. Besides, I was getting kind of bored, to be entirely honest."

"Okay, but…we can find something to do with people other than him, can't we?!"

I shot a glance over at Sera, who chuckled ostentatiously.

"See?" he said. "Even Ushio wants to play with me."

"God, you're so annoying… Don't get all cocky, you little punk."

I still wasn't okay with this by any measure, but this was Ushio's room, so I felt like I had no choice but to go along with Ushio's decision. I sat beside her on the bed, and Sera did the same, plopping himself down on her opposite side so she was sitting between the two of us. This wasn't a problem in itself, mind you, as there was only one bed in the room and nowhere else to sit—but I couldn't help feeling like he was sitting *much* closer to Ushio than was strictly necessary. This made me get weirdly defensive, so I scooted in a bit closer to Ushio myself.

"What are you even doing here, anyway?" I asked. "Don't you have any guy friends in Class D you could go hang out with instead?"

"I already told you, didn't I?" said Sera. "I didn't want Ushio here to feel lonely."

"Yeah, right. You're up to something—I just know it."

As I braced myself for whatever shenanigans he might have in store, Sera pulled a deck of cards from his pocket and started deftly shuffling it with the exact sleight of hand you'd expect from such an

expert in deception. It seemed we were going to play right here on the bed.

"So, what do you wanna play?" he asked. "I'm down for whatever. Old Maid, Poker, President… Pretty sure I know most of the popular card games out there."

"What do you think?" I asked Ushio, deferring to her judgment.

She thought it over. "Let's do President, I guess."

"Works for me," said Sera.

He proceeded to deal out three hands of freshly shuffled cards. The three of us sat around atop the mattress, facing inward to use the center of the bed as our playing area. We did a quick round of rock-paper-scissors to determine who would be President for the round. I won, so I went ahead and discarded my four of hearts.

"So hey, how 'bout we spice up the stakes a little bit while we're at it?" said Sera. "Like, what if whoever comes in last place has to tell the others a secret about themselves? That'd make things a lot more interesting, don'tcha think?"

"Like hell it would. Don't push your luck, dude," I said in the most threatening voice I could muster. I knew better than to agree to terms like that—especially with this guy. "You're the last person we'd want to play that game with, Mr. Loose-Lips."

"Yeah, figured you might feel that way… But what if we tack on a little condition?" Sera held up his index finger. "Whoever comes in last has to reveal one secret about themselves—*however*, that secret doesn't necessarily have to be true."

I furrowed my brow. "You're saying we can just make something up? Why even bother having a penalty for losing, in that case?"

"Look, I'm only trying to be considerate here, all right? I wanna make sure this is a fun and comfortable playing experience for all three of us."

I wondered if I could take this statement at face value. Knowing Sera, he had to have some sort of master plan here—but I also couldn't see how these terms could be of any real detriment to us, assuming we said some random bullcrap whenever we lost.

"Sure, why not?" Ushio said, beating me to the punch. "If lying's fair game, then I don't have a problem with it."

"Well, if Ushio's fine with it, then I guess I am too."

"Great!" Sera said with a suggestive smirk. "We'll go with that, then. All right—now who's ready to play some cards?!"

At this invitation, I threw my first card down emphatically onto the playing field. Even if the penalty wasn't actually a threat, I still didn't want to lose to the likes of Sera.

I was gonna beat this schmuck if it was the last thing I did.

The game was rapidly approaching its climax, with only a few cards left in each player's hand. Sera played the eight of diamonds, clearing the playing field, then started a new trick with the five of spades. Next it was my turn, and I could finally see a route to victory. I slapped down a joker—which only the three of spades could beat.

"Pass," said Ushio.

"Same," said Sera.

"Okay, sweet!" I exclaimed. It was all over now; I threw down the four sixes I'd been holding on to. "Take that! Revolution! And now I'll clear the field with an eight of my own, then finish off with a pair of fives! Boom, I win!"

"You're *really* getting into this, Sakuma," Ushio mumbled.

I paid her no mind as I basked in the glow of victory. That had been a pretty perfect round, if I did say so myself. I hadn't played President in so long, I almost forgot just how fun it could be. Obviously, I wished Sera hadn't invited himself to join us, but otherwise this was pretty much the ideal class trip hotel room pastime I'd been looking for. At least for now.

Ushio completed a trick with the two of diamonds followed by the seven of diamonds, leaving her with no cards remaining in her hand. "I'm out."

Per the rules of the game, this made Sera the Scum for this round.

"Aw, shucks," he said. "Looks like I lost."

"Well, what are you waiting for?" I said. "Go on, then. Tell us your 'secret,' big guy. And try to make it sound *really* convincing for us while you're at it—even though we all know it'll just be another one of your lies."

I was definitely leaning in to my role as the victor, but given all the teasing I'd put up with from Sera over the past year, I felt like a little payback was warranted.

"Yeah, all right," he said. "Fair's fair. I'll tell you a secret, don't worry."

Sera set his cards down and looked straight at me and Ushio. I had every confidence that his "secret" would be a complete load of bull, but I braced myself all the same. It *was* odd that he seemed to have one locked and loaded in advance as the person who suggested the penalty to begin with. He was definitely up to something.

Sera loudly cleared his throat, then confessed, "I don't plan on pursuing Ushio anymore."

Huh?

I could almost feel a giant question mark appear over my head. *That* was his secret? Fib or not, it didn't even make any sense; it did nothing to offend or provoke us, and it wasn't even formatted like a secret in the first place—it was more like a statement of intent. About the only thing it did accomplish was to make me feel a momentary sense of relief, even if I knew he was probably feeding us a line.

"Wow, cool secret," I said. "Anyway, I think we're done here."

"Whaddya mean?" said Sera. "We've still got plenty of time before lights-out, don't we? C'mon, let's play another round!"

Sera gathered up the cards and started shuffling them up again with a look of feigned innocence. It was true that we had time for at least a few more rounds, but since I still couldn't tell what Sera was after here, I felt distinctly uneasy.

"What do you think, Ushio?"

She stared at Sera with a distinctly unamused expression as he shuffled. It seemed she had her own misgivings about this as well.

"I suppose we can play a bit more," she said. "Hasn't done us any harm yet."

"All right, if you say so…"

And so began our second round, with Sera starting us off this time since he lost the last round. Most variations of the game would typically apply various other handicaps and penalties based on who placed where in the previous round, but we'd agreed to play without those stipulations for now. I glanced down at my hand; I had both jokers this time. It'd be pretty hard to lose like this—and sure enough, the game flew right by, and I emerged as the runaway victor as I'd expected.

"I'm out," I said, playing my last card.

My second win in a row, though it didn't feel quite as sweet as the first. Ushio finished next, with Sera coming in last. It was exactly the same result as the first round.

"Aren't you two having a lucky night?" said Sera, slouching as he tossed his cards down on the pile. I could tell he was putting on an act, though; while it was true that my luck had been pretty great so far, I couldn't shake the feeling that this was all according to Sera's plan. Though as for *why* he might suggest we add a penalty for losing, only to deliberately lose each round himself, I hadn't the slightest clue. Perhaps his next "secret" would shed some light on that mystery.

Sera cleared his throat again, and out it came.

"Now it's Natsuki-chan I wanna go out with."

A jolt of rage shot through my entire body like a lightning bolt.

Immediately, I understood the penalty thing had only been a pretext. All this rabble-rouser wanted was an excuse to say random incendiary nonsense right to our faces, without any warnings or repercussions, because it was presented as a "punishment" for losing the game. And he'd totally gotten away with it too—his plan was a complete success. Before I even realized it, I'd slid off the bed and jumped to my feet.

"Okay, that's enough," I said. "You have to go now."

"But we've only played two rounds so far!" Sera protested.

"Yeah, and now you're getting on my nerves, so it's time for you to leave. I don't even care if what you said just now is true or not—you clearly chose to say it purely because you knew it would get a rise out of me, so I'm not interested in playing with you anymore. Or being in the same room, for that matter. Now get out."

"Sheesh, no need to get so heated, bud… Isn't telling each other which guys or girls we've got crushes on, like, a quintessential part of any late-night hangout on a high school class trip? And why are you getting so defensive over Natsuki-chan, anyhow? I mean, it's not like you're her boyfriend or anything."

"I don't have to be to want to protect her from a sleazeball like you."

"Wow, so you think she's so stupid and gullible that she might fall for a 'sleazeball' if she didn't have you to protect her, huh? Some friend *you* are."

"Enough with the cheap digs. This isn't even your room, so we're not obligated to keep entertaining you and your bullcrap… Isn't that right?"

I called on Ushio for backup, knowing she surely felt the same. She had to be just as livid about him bringing up Hoshihara's name

to get our goat as I was, even if she was doing a much better job of concealing her anger.

"Sera," she said, lowering her voice with a sharp glare. "If you say anything like that again, I'll have to ask you to leave."

Yeah, that's right! You tell him, Ushio…

"Wait, huh?" I gaped at her.

"Again"…? Was she really planning to keep playing cards with this asshole? *No, surely not,* I thought as I looked over at her—only to find that she was sitting there with a completely placid look on her face, waiting for the next hand to be dealt.

You've gotta be kidding me, right?

"Well, well, well…" said Sera, apparently as surprised as I was. "All righty, then."

"Uh, are you sure about this, Ushio?" I asked. "I really don't think it's a good idea to keep playing with this guy."

"Shuffle the cards, Sera."

"Yes, ma'am."

Wait… Did she just completely ignore me?

But as I sat there at a loss for words, Ushio leaned in to whisper in my ear, "Just lose on purpose."

At first, I didn't quite grasp what she was saying. But even after it clicked a few moments later, I was still a little perplexed. I could see how losing on purpose would prevent Sera from having any more opportunities to say things that might provoke us—that part I understood. But in that case, why were we still playing along with his little game at all? Why not just kick him out of the room and be done with it? Especially when it wasn't like our opponent was wearing a muzzle or anything; Sera could just as easily say whatever he wanted to say whether he lost or not.

The more I thought about it, the more confused I got.

"Okay, time for round three!" said Sera.

Before I could figure out what Ushio might be thinking, the cards were shuffled and dealt once more. It seemed I had no choice but to go along with it for now. I'd have to trust her judgment; perhaps she'd devised some sort of trap for Sera or something.

I picked up the cards I'd been dealt. I had all four twos this round—another extremely good hand, if it weren't for the fact that we were aiming to lose. Ideally, we'd want to keep Sera from noticing what we were up to, but the better our hands were, the harder it would be to conceal that we were playing poorly on purpose. I did my best not to give it away as I selected my cards in such a way that it *seemed* like I was trying to win at first glance, while keeping a mental list in my head of all the cards that Sera had already played and what he might still have in his hand.

Man, why are we wasting our time playing weird mind games with this guy on our big class trip? I couldn't help but curse my luck as we went around throwing down cards in absolute silence. Eventually, Ushio got out first, followed by Sera, who finished with three of a kind. I'd successfully thrown the match.

"All right, Sakuma," said Sera. "Let's hear your secret, big guy."

"Yeah, I remember the rules, thanks."

Obviously, I had no intention of revealing any actual secrets to this schmuck. I was planning to just make up some random factoid about myself that seemed plausible…but right now, nothing was coming to mind. I knew there was no need to overthink it, since it didn't even have to be true, yet I racked my brain to come up with the most run-of-the-mill secret I could imagine.

Hrmmm… Okay, I think I've got it.

"I'm really afraid of spiders."

"Awww…" said Sera. "That's kinda cute, actually!"

"Oh, shut up…"

It was actually Ayaka, not me, who was deathly afraid of spiders. I apologized to her internally for stealing her little secret,

then peeked at the digital clock on the bedside table. It was 9:37 p.m., so we probably only had to make it through another two rounds or so before it would be lights-out. Personally, I would have rather we kicked Sera to the curb right now, but it was still Ushio's room, and she didn't seem to have as much of a problem with it. Plus, our little plan was working pretty well thus far, so I sat there and shuffled the cards for round four.

"Hey, can't we chat a little more while we play?" he said. "It's no fun just going around in circles, setting cards down without any conversation, don'tcha think?"

"You're the one who insisted on playing cards," I said. "Now shut up and play."

"My sweet Sakuma… You're so cruel to me nowadays. It wounds me, it truly does…"

"Oh, put a sock in it," I grumbled as he pretended to wipe his tears away with his seven of spades. After playing it on the field, he let out an exaggerated sigh.

"Fine, fine… If you two aren't feeling very sociable today, I guess I'll do the talking."

"No, *you* keep quiet."

"Let me tell you a little story from back when I was in ninth grade."

"Ugh…"

I was too fed up at this point to bother wasting my breath any further. It had been a long day of traveling and sightseeing around the city already; I had neither the stamina nor the willpower to keep arguing with him on this.

"So there was this girl I really wanted to get with, right?" Sera began. "Wasn't my first crush or anything like that, but definitely the first one in a while who I fell totally head over heels for. I did everything I could to get closer to her—tried to really make a move, y'know? Kinda like how assertive I was with you last year, Ushio. I'd

keep faking random illnesses over and over just to go see her in the school infirmary…"

Wait… Infirmary?

I raised an eyebrow at this but played my two of clubs all the same.

"Then when fall semester rolled around, we finally started dating," Sera continued. "Man, I was over the *moon*, I tell ya. Probably the most I've ever had to struggle to win a girl's heart. Though I guess I probably shouldn't call it a struggle, now, should I? Not when I savored every second of slowly whittling away at her defenses until she finally lowered her guard, heh… Alas, the fun didn't last for very long. Once word got out that I was dating the school nurse, it was all downhill from there."

Sera let out a wistful sigh as he casually dropped this shocking plot twist as though it was but a minor detail. It was a testament to his mastery of misdirection that I hadn't seen the reveal coming from a mile away, despite him foreshadowing it pretty heavily from the start. And although I was slightly taken aback, I could also totally believe it, just knowing the sort of person Sera was. The guy had zero sense of boundaries. To him, things like age gaps and social hierarchy were merely hurdles to be overcome.

"Didn't help that the girl who caught us together was someone I'd *also* gone out with in the past either," he went on. "Went around telling everyone she knew just out of misplaced resentment or whatever, and pretty soon, the whole school was talking about it. Not that I minded—but it put the nurse in a pretty awkward spot, obviously. Wasn't long before the school board 'dealt' with her, as you might expect, and she never contacted me again, so I don't know where she ended up after that."

I hated to admit it, but I couldn't help but listen with rapt attention to this little story of his. Even if it was just a complete fabrication, it would still be pretty impressive for a random anecdote

he came up with on the spot to fill the silence. And right when I thought it had to be over, the story went on.

"It was the hottest gossip of the year for a while after that," said Sera. "But man, kids can be cruel though, huh? Everyone started calling the poor nurse a criminal, or a slut, and you can probably imagine what else. I felt really bad for her."

"Yeah, well…you could've just *not* pursued her," I pointed out. "You're the one who put her in that position by trying to force a relationship."

I'd been planning to keep ignoring him to the bitter end, but I couldn't help butting in to call him out on his hypocrisy.

"Ooh, nice!" Sera said gleefully. "'Bout time one of you acknowledged me—even if I *do* wish you'd think about how your words can hurt before you speak. Because I'm not just some total nimrod, y'know. I knew exactly what the risks were before I went after her. But the thing about love, see, is that it doesn't stop for anyone. You can't make the feelings go away just because society tells you it's 'wrong' for you to want something."

"Oh, please. You've gotta be the last person on earth with any moral authority to be preaching to people about love."

"Lemme ask you somethin' real quick, Sakuma, while you're feeling so chatty. I told you that everyone started talking about the nurse like she was some perverted, inhuman monster, right? But what do you think they said about *me*? Any guesses?"

I contemplated this for a moment.

What *would* the other students say if they found out one of their classmates was having a relationship with a faculty member? Surely nothing positive, at the very least. If I had to guess, they'd probably sneered at him with contempt, just like they'd done to her. Or at least, that was what I wanted to believe.

And yet, it seemed I was way off the mark.

"They treated me like I was a *king*," said Sera. "I'd just be walking down the hallway, and random kids would come up to me and wanna give me high fives or say 'Nice going, bro,' and stuff like that. You remember how being a known delinquent could make you cool back in junior high, for whatever reason? It was pretty much that, but taken to the extreme. All my peers seemed to look up to me like I was some kind of god for having done something so unspeakably bad and gotten away with it."

"Pretty damn sickening, if you ask me," I said.

"I know, right? I thought the exact same thing…which is why I figured I'd try to teach 'em a little lesson they'd never forget, if ya catch my drift."

From his playful tone, you'd think he'd simply played a harmless prank on them or something. But knowing Sera, I was certain it had to be something far more insidious.

"So first, I did everything I could to make them hate my guts," he said. "Tried to be as obnoxious as possible, until some of 'em got so annoyed, they started bullying me and getting violent. And you'd better believe I made sure all of those altercations either got captured on video, or happened where there were plenty of eyewitnesses, or left me with huge bruises that no one could deny… Kinda like what happened with me and Arisa-chan last year, though none of these guys went on a totally psychotic rampage like she did. Anyway, after that, I waited until high school entrance exam season rolled around, then finally busted out all the damning evidence I'd gathered up to that point and watched the sparks fly. Man, you wouldn't *believe* how good that felt."

Ushio set her last card down on the playing field.

The game had reached its climax without me even noticing.

"And there you have it," said Sera. "Now you know a little bit more about your good friend Itsuku Sera's junior high school career. Hope you enjoyed the extra lore."

"So did all that stuff actually happen, or no?" I asked.

"Maybe it did, maybe it didn't. But I'm flattered to hear I've piqued your curiosity. You just can't help but wanna know more about me, can you, Sakuma?"

"I never said *that*… Don't put words in my mouth."

Sera threw down his last card, ending the round with me in last place once again. So far, all was going according to plan.

"Okay, Sakuma," said Sera. "Hope you've got another secret ready for us."

"…I hate tomatoes."

"Wow, imagine that. So do I."

I glanced over at the clock again. There was only enough time left for one more round, and I was more than ready to be done with this, so I quickly shuffled the cards and dealt out three hands. And with that, the fifth round began—though in truth, there was something that had been bothering me for a while now.

Why does it feel like Ushio's being so quiet?

This wasn't my ideal scenario for enjoying a game of cards either, so I couldn't blame her for feeling a little on edge… But even taking that into account, she was being awfully quiet. And I still didn't understand why she was letting Sera overstay his welcome either, or what point there was to us losing these last few rounds on purpose. Right now, she almost felt more inscrutable to me than Sera…not that it mattered, I guess. She could always explain her rationale to me after he was gone.

"So what were *you* two like in junior high?" asked Sera. "It's not fair for me to be the only one doing all the sharing here."

"That was your choice," I replied. "We don't have to tell you a damn thing."

"Jeez, you're so cruel to me sometimes… And here I'm just trying to help us get to know each other a little better."

Despite his muttering and complaining, Sera kept on throwing down his cards all the same. This time around, there was basically no action or tension whatsoever, and he easily emptied his hand before either of us even got close.

"Sweet, looks like I win again," he said. "Feels good to be on top at the very end."

Okay, nice. Now that Sera was out of the way, we didn't have to worry about losing on purpose anymore. I checked my hand to reconsider my strategy, only to be reminded that I'd already used up all of my good cards in the first few turns. Chances were I'd lose no matter what, so maybe there was no point in trying to win second place after all. I decided to play whatever cards felt natural instead.

As soon as I relaxed my guard, I felt an immense wave of fatigue wash over me. *Ugh, I'm beat…* The second we were done here, I needed to head back to my room and rest up for our skiing lessons tomorrow.

"Wait, what the…?"

Before I knew it, I'd played my last card—which put me in second place, and Ushio in last. But how could that be, when I had only terrible cards remaining? Had Ushio's hand really been that much more unlucky than mine this round? Not that it mattered, I supposed.

"All right, Ushio," I said. "Secret time."

"I know," she said, nodding readily.

I was a little curious to hear what she might say, but I knew there was no way she'd actually reveal anything of substance, so I wasn't all that invested. I was merely glad to be done with this stupid card game, I thought to myself as I stifled a yawn.

"I don't think I can keep doing this much longer," Ushio said softly.

This was her secret: a vaguely worded confession that lacked even a concrete subject. And yet, it was that very abstract nature

that made it *feel* that much more like a genuine secret. After all, if it were nothing but a lie, there'd be no need for obfuscation.

"I don't think I can keep doing this much longer."

What was "this"? And why couldn't she keep doing it?

Ushio let out a short sigh, then looked up at Sera. "All right, I think we'd better call it a night. It's almost lights-out, and the teachers will be coming by to do their evening rounds soon."

"Yeah, good point," said Sera. "Really wish we could keep playing, but I guess that's all we have time for today. Oh well!"

Sera gathered up his cards and slid off the bed. He was being uncharacteristically obedient, even considering that it *was*, in fact, time for us to leave. I was a little put off by this, but not so much that I felt compelled to call him out for acting strange. Ushio walked us out into the hallway, and we each said good night—but before Ushio closed the door behind me, I spun back around and slid my foot in the doorway.

"Whoa!" said Ushio. "Jeez, don't startle me like that…"

"Sorry," I said. "I just wanted to ask you something really quick."

I glanced back over my shoulder to make sure Sera wasn't loitering around, but it seemed the coast was clear. *Okay, good.* It was probably safe to state my business right here in the hallway, then.

"That secret of yours just now," I said. "What was that all about?"

"Oh, right… That…" Ushio scratched her head uncomfortably, as though I was putting her in an awkward position. "Don't worry about it. It was just something I came up with on the spot."

"Y-you sure? Well, if you say so…"

"Was that all you wanted to ask me?"

"Er, yeah… I think that's it."

"Gotcha. See you tomorrow, then."

"Yeah, g'night…"

And with that, Ushio shut the door.

I wasn't satisfied with this explanation at all. Why would her first thought be to say something so vaguely ominous? Even assuming it *was* something she'd tossed out on a whim, there had to be a reason for it. Like, maybe she felt unhappy with her current state of affairs in some way. I couldn't fathom why her brain would immediately jump to that unless there was a kernel of truth to it.

Either way, her answer didn't sit right with me—and it hit me that I'd also forgotten to ask why she agreed to keep playing cards with him in the first place. Maybe I could ask her about it again tomorrow? Though I really didn't want to pry or nitpick with her when we were supposed to be enjoying our class trip either.

"Kamiki."

"Whoa!"

I whirled around to find Ms. Iyo standing directly behind me with her hands on her hips and a stern look on her face. I could already tell I was in for a lecture.

"It's almost time for lights-out," she said. "You'd better hurry up and get back to your own room, if you know what's good for you."

"Y-yes, ma'am," I said. "Right away, ma'am…"

I breathed a sigh of relief; this wasn't anywhere near as severe a reprimand as I'd been expecting. Yet as I turned on my heel to leave, she called after me once again.

"Oh, and Kamiki…were you in Ushio's room just now?"

I wasn't sure if I should answer honestly. Obviously, it was totally allowed to visit the hotel rooms of other students staying on the same floor as you—but Ushio was a bit of a special case, since

she was staying on the boys' floor despite being a girl. Would Ms. Iyo suspect us of engaging in indecent activities if I admitted it?!

"Wh-why, I'm afraid I haven't any idea what you mean, Ms. Iyo," I said.

"You're a terrible liar, Kamiki. Don't worry—you're not in trouble or anything. I was merely curious, that's all."

"Oh, okay… Then yes, I was visiting her. But we were only playing cards, not getting up to anything scandalous or whatever."

"No need to answer questions I didn't ask, but thank you for clarifying, I suppose." She sighed, then her gaze softened as she offered me a faint smile. "I was going to say that I hope she's making the most of her class trip, since it's a once-in-a-lifetime experience she'll always look back on and want to remember fondly… But it sounds like she's been really enjoying herself so far. That's a relief."

I could hear a hint of exhaustion in Ms. Iyo's voice.

It was true that there was a lot of pressure associated with this "once-in-a-lifetime experience." She had to be pretty stressed out right now, just from running around and trying to keep tabs on all her students to make sure that they were doing okay and there weren't any incidents. It was no small feat to take several dozen rowdy teenagers at the height of puberty on a trip all the way across the country, then bring them back home safe and sound. I had a hell of a lot of respect and sympathy for any high school teacher who had to deal with that.

"There are three days of the trip left to go, though," she said. "I hope you'll continue to make as many positive memories with her as you possibly can."

"You bet," I replied. "Hope you get to take a breather at some point too, Ms. Iyo."

"Oh, you don't have to worry about me, silly. This is my job, remember? Now, go on! Off to bed with you!"

"Okay, good night." I gave her a small bow as I turned and headed back to my room.

Perhaps I would be well served to take Ms. Iyo's words to heart; this *was* my one and only high school class trip, so I had to enjoy it while it lasted. It would be a real shame to waste it worrying myself sick over imagined problems. I needed to make a clean break from these pessimistic thoughts and focus on having fun here in Hokkaido. And perhaps most importantly, I needed to get some sleep.

When I got back to my room, I found Hasumi lying on his side and playing around on his cell phone. I walked straight past him and plopped down on my bed, then clutched my head in my hands.

"Ugh, see… It's the same thing all over again," I groaned.

"Sorry, what?"

I'd realized something on my way down the hallway. These past six months or so, it felt like I'd been trapped in a cyclical pattern I couldn't escape: First, something bad or at least concerning would happen. Then, I'd stress myself out about it. After that, I'd tell myself to stop being so pessimistic and try to think positively about it. And finally, I'd fail miserably and end up stressing myself out even more. Rinse and repeat at least once or twice per month.

The exact same thing was about to happen here. There was no *way* I could simply shrug this off and forget about it. Here I thought I'd actually overcome the worst of my worrywart tendencies, but it seemed I was sorely mistaken. I was a chronic overthinker by nature—something I'd grown to accept, but it still wasn't an easy condition to live with.

"Not like I can even do anything about it either," I mumbled.

"Dude, you're talking to yourself again…"

I lay flat on my bed; I'd already brushed my teeth, so all that remained was for me to drift off to sleep. I plugged my phone in to

charge and turned to look at Hasumi.

"Think I'm gonna hit the hay here pretty soon," I said.

"Y-yeah, sure. Go right ahead," he replied. "Though I gotta ask, uh…do you *always* think out loud like that when you're at home?"

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Damn… He doesn't even realize it…"

"Pardon? Look, I'd love to stay up and chat, man—but I need to get some rest."

I pulled my comforter up to my chin and gently closed my eyes.

***

It was day two of our class field trip. After eating a quick breakfast at the hotel, we took a thirty-minute bus ride to the Sapporo Kokusai Ski Resort. Luckily, the weather was nice yet again, with only a few clouds peppered here and there across the clear blue sky.

We entered the rental building at the edge of the parking lot and changed into skiwear, put on our boots, and received our poles and skis. It was *way* more awkward to walk with them on than I'd expected…and exhausting too. I was already getting worried I might end up feeling too sore after this to do much of anything tomorrow.

Once we headed out to the slopes, my eyes were assailed by blinding white, as the snow-covered hillside seemed to concentrate and reflect the sunlight directly into my retinas. That said, the contrast between the pure-white snow and the blue skies overhead was surprisingly gorgeous and serene.

"Look, Ushio-chan! I made a little snowman!" said Hoshihara, holding out the tiny friend she'd clumped together on her palm. It was pretty cute, I had to admit. Both she and Ushio were wearing

their personal skiwear from home; everyone had been given the option to either rent a set or bring their own prior to the trip.

As I stood there, soothed by the sight of Hoshihara's infectious excitement, one of the ski instructors called out for everyone in Class A to gather around. My fellow classmates and I waddled over like penguins to hear what they had to say.

"All right, folks. First things first, we're gonna separate the beginners among you from those with prior skiing experience," she said. "If it's your first time hitting the slopes, you're gonna stay here with me. Otherwise, you can go line up with my friend over there."

Oh, shoot. They're splitting us up?

I was a complete beginner, and I assumed Hoshihara was too—but Ushio definitely knew her way around a pair of skis.

"Sorry, you two," said Ushio. "I know I promised I'd show you the ropes…"

"It's okay!" said Hoshihara. "You deserve to have a good time out here too! No need to sit through the crash course with us when you already know how to ski!"

"Yeah, don't worry about us," I said. "Go have fun."

"Well, all right." Ushio smiled, then walked over to the young male instructor standing by the ski lifts.

"Wh-whoa, whoa, whoa…!"

I watched as Nishizono came barreling down the bunny slope on wobbly, uncertain legs. At first, she'd been going more or less in the direction the ski instructor had told her to—but at some point, she changed trajectory, started rapidly speeding up, and plowed straight into a large snow mound. After squirming and thrashing around a bit, she eventually gave up and had to take her skis off to free herself.

"Okay, who the hell came up with this stupid sport?" she said. "It's way too hard…"

Nishizono was taking the beginners' course as well—which kind of surprised me, given that she was athletic enough to have placed in the top ten in the school marathon last year, right up there with several members of the school track team. But apparently, winter sports were simply beyond her natural area of expertise, as she'd probably had the most wipeouts of anyone in Class A so far today.

"Ugh, why can't I do it right?" she grumbled. "This sucks…"

"Hey, at least you're doing better than before!" said Hoshihara.

"Yeah, barely…"

It was a strange sight to behold: Hoshihara offering Nishizono words of encouragement like they were the closest of friends again. Perhaps even more surprising was that Hoshihara had actually turned out to be a pretty good skier herself in an extremely short amount of time—easily mastering both turning and braking so fast, it made me suspicious of whether she'd lied about never having skied before.

"Y'know what I think?" said Mashima, standing beside me. Her gaze was trained on Hoshihara and Nishizono, but she was talking to me. "I think being athletic is actually a handicap when it comes to skiing. Seems like being a totally uncoordinated klutz makes you better, not worse."

"Oh, come on," I said. "Let's not be mean."

It also wasn't very scientific to base claims like this on such a tiny sample size. Though it did feel like a somewhat convincing hypothesis, at least for our little group. I was hardly athletic myself, for instance, but even I was doing better at this than Nishizono and Mashima were—and the latter was captain of the school softball team.

"I mean, I'm not wrong, am I?" said Mashima.

"You're not right either. I mean, just look at Ushio. She's a really good skier—not that I've ever seen her do it myself."



"Ohhh, yeah… I could definitely see Ushio being an exception. Feel like she'd be great at both skiing *and* snowboarding. Come to think of it, is there anything she's bad at?"

"Sure there is. Her spice tolerance is pretty abysmal, for one thing."

"Ooh, you know so much about her… Is that 'cause you two are going out?"

"No, it's because we've been best friends since we were in elementary school. And don't try to catch me off guard with questions like that."

It seemed the rumors about us had reached even Mashima's ears. Not that I found this all that surprising, mind you—it just felt a bit jarring to be accosted about it by someone like her out of the blue.

"So you're not denying it, eh?"

"I mean, no. But that doesn't mean we want people going around spreading the word. All that'll do is invite even more unwanted attention."

"Ah ha ha… Okay, fair. My bad, sorry!"

She sure didn't *look* sorry. If anything, she was being nosier than normal—probably because her usual minder wasn't around (Shiina had gone off to the advanced course with the other more experienced skiers). I appreciated her going out of her way to socialize with me, but her tendency to tease me was as frustrating as ever. Not that she was anywhere *near* as relentless as Sera was in that regard, I supposed.

"Okay, everyone! Try to keep up with me, please!" the instructor called out.

Following her lead, we used our ski poles to slowly push down the gentle beginners' slope. Not even the worst among us fell over at this speed, which was more than manageable enough for Mashima and me to continue talking.

"Gotta admit, though," said Mashima, "I definitely hadn't pegged you for the type of guy who'd wanna go out with a girl like her."

"I'm not a fan of how you phrased that," I replied.

"To be clear, I'm not even talking from a looks perspective or a physical standpoint. I just mean that, like…you two have known each other since *way* before she transitioned, y'know? Was it not hard for you to stop seeing her as a guy friend and start seeing her as a potential love interest? I feel like I'd have a pretty hard time with that."

Now it *really* felt like she was trying to prod at my sore spots. That very conundrum had been a huge source of inner turmoil for me.

"Yeah, that history does make things a little more complicated," I admitted. "But we've decided we wanna at least give this the old college try regardless."

"Well, hey… Props to you, then," said Mashima.

I frowned at this. She probably didn't mean it in a condescending way, yet I couldn't help wondering if she had the same misconceptions as those boys I'd heard gossiping about us in the bathroom, and she thought I was only dating Ushio as some sort of charity work or whatever.

"I'm not looking for 'props' or anything," I said. "There's nothing to commend me for. I'm going out with her because I *want* to, for your information. I don't get why everyone keeps patting me on the back for it like I'm doing her some sort of favor."

"Wait, are you actually getting a little pissed off?" asked Mashima, peering over to gauge my expression with mild concern in her eyes. "Sorry, should I apologize?"

"Nah, don't worry about it. It's not that big a deal."

"Oh… Okay then." With that, she faced forward once more.

The sound of the soft snow slipping beneath our skis grew ever louder as an awkward silence fell between us. Right as I was about to apologize for overreacting, Mashima cast a furtive glance over at me again.

"Maybe 'props' wasn't the right word," she said. "I guess I just meant that I realize you probably made that decision knowing people were going to sensationalize your relationship like it was some big, newsworthy event. And I wanted to say that I respect you for not being deterred by the thought of your classmates judging you for it and spreading rumors behind your back. That's all."

Mashima paused, then offered me a sheepish smile.

"Then again, maybe I'm not one to talk when I was kinda needling you about it just now, huh?" she added. "Sorry about that."

"It's fine," I told her. "I could've been a little less prickly about it myself."

I was relieved to have cleared the air with her. Things still felt a bit awkward, but at least it didn't seem like there'd be any residual tension between us as a result of this interaction.

Though I had to say…it was strange to me that someone who was clearly capable of resolving conflicts maturely and amicably like this was the same person who'd taken such extreme measures to essentially force Nishizono to change her ways only a couple months back. That whole incident—despite supposedly being a show of how much she cared about Nishizono as a friend—had been so twisted and manipulative in my view that I'd honestly been slightly afraid of her ever since she told me the truth. But such was the duality of Mashima, I supposed.

Everyone had a dark side. Hers was simply a bit darker than most.

"I've gotta hand it to you, though, Kamiki. You've gotten a lot better at holding conversations with people."

"You think?"

"Yeah—or at least with me, anyway. I still remember how shifty and awkward you were when we first started talking. Wouldn't even look me in the eye."

"I mean…I've always been kinda shy, to be fair. But yeah, I'd agree that I've gotten significantly better in that regard."

"Well, it's all relative, I guess. Some might argue that it shouldn't take more than half a year for you to reach the most basic level of social interaction with someone."

"Oh, shut up, you."

"Ah ha ha!"

Our ski instructor came to a stop, then gave us some new directions. This would be our last drill before we broke for lunch. Our day out on the slopes was nearly halfway over already.

We ate our lunch at a little guesthouse not far from the ski resort, then returned for the afternoon portion of our skiing lessons. These were a bit more rigorous than any of the drills we'd done this morning, and by the time we were through, just about all of us newbies were going down the bunny slope without any trouble.

Once four o'clock rolled around, we finished up and climbed back onto the bus to return to the hotel. Our dinner was even fancier than the night before: an all-you-can-eat feast of jingisukan and other local delicacies. By the time I was finished gorging myself on grilled mutton and vegetables, I felt too full to walk normally.

"Oogh… Think I ate a little too much," I groaned, rubbing my bloated belly as I flopped backward onto my bed after Hasumi and I returned to our hotel room.

The second day of our class trip had flown right by.

Skiing was a lot of fun. I knew this one-sentence review sounded like an elementary schooler's journal entry, but I couldn't think of anything else to say about the experience right now. I was feeling incredibly tired, both due to fatigue and my oncoming food

coma, so my brain wasn't functioning properly. I didn't even have enough leftover energy to get up and take a shower.

Maybe I should just go to sleep. I can always shower tomorrow morning… Ugh, but I'm totally covered in sweat and probably filthy from falling on my face in the slush so many times… I should force myself to get back up and get it over with.

"Hey, Kamiki," said Hasumi, as he stood up from playing on his phone in bed. "Think I'm gonna go ahead and take the first shower tonight."

"What?!" I said. "No, I was literally about to go take one myself…"

"Too bad. You snooze, you lose, my friend."

"Hey, no! Wait a minute!" I cried after him as he scurried to the bathroom. "That's not fair at all! At least rock-paper-scissors me for it!"

"Ugh… Okay, fiiine…" said Hasumi, walking back.

Heh. What a sap. In my household, we wouldn't even entertain such negotiations. Whoever made it into the bathroom first had dibs—that was the law of the land. Which was why you'd often see Ayaka and me take off sprinting down the hallway as soon as the water finished heating up, like we were practicing for the hundred-meter dash. As I mocked Hasumi internally for his foolishness, I stood up and held out my right hand.

"Okay… Rock, paper, scissors, shoot!"

"Damn it. This sucks…"

I heaved a sigh as I trudged down the hallway.

Having lost my own gambit, I was now forced to wait what would probably be at least another twenty minutes before Hasumi got out of the shower. I could have stayed and waited in the room until he was done, but I was afraid I might fall asleep in the meantime, so I'd opted to kill time in the hotel lobby instead. Visiting Ushio's room was also an option, but I'd decided against it, since I

knew we were both probably much too tired to play more card games or anything like that tonight.

I walked down the staircase and out toward the front desk. We were forbidden from leaving the hotel, but I was fairly certain I wouldn't get in trouble for visiting the lobby—even if I didn't see a single other student hanging out down here at the moment. Instead, there was what appeared to be a tour group of middle-aged and elderly folks occupying most of the lounge area. I didn't feel comfortable hanging around while they were here chattering with one another, so I spun around to head back upstairs…but then I spotted a couple of vending machines tucked away in a corner of the lounge, in what appeared to be a smoking area. The machines looked abandoned and forgotten, as if no one had used them in days, perhaps because the hotel had its own little convenience store where guests could buy food and refreshments. It seemed like the perfect place for me to lie low for a while without bothering anyone else—and I was getting pretty thirsty to boot. I made a beeline for it and checked the drink lineup.

"What the heck does 'Soft Katsugen' taste like, I wonder?"

"Yeah, the name doesn't really tell you very much, does it?"

"Says here it's got a ton of really good health benefits, though."

"Like one of those nasty-tasting 'superfoods' or whatever?"

"Yep, exactly. Wait, what the…?!"

I nearly jumped out of my shoes in fright. How had I not noticed him standing right beside me when we were literally talking to one another? Was I really *that* blockheaded?

"What are you doing here, Sera?" I asked.

"Same thing as you, buddy," he said. "Came down to buy myself a drink."

I wanted to gag. I couldn't believe I'd just stood there and bantered with him about the drink choices like we were friends

without even realizing it. Any day I ran into Sera was not a lucky one in my book, and now I'd had two unlucky days in a row.

"Please don't talk to me right now," I muttered. "I'm way too tired to deal with you today."

"So you'd gladly talk to me if only you *weren't* tired?"

"Sorry, allow me to rephrase: Never speak to me again, period."

I had no qualms whatsoever with being cruel to him anymore. It was like the more time I spent around him, the more he brought out the worst in me.

"Y'know, I always heard that they sold alcohol in hotel vending machines," he said. "But not here, for some reason. You think it's because they get a lot of high schoolers staying here on class trips?"

He had struck up yet another conversation with me as I was trying to decide on a drink. It went without saying that I completely ignored him.

"Speaking of which, did you know that they completely shut off the pay-per-view channels when there's a school group staying here? Won't let you watch 'em even if you put a thousand-yen bill in the machine—something a friend of mine found out the hard way back during our junior high class trip. Man, he was so mortified…"

I wasn't sure what to get. Coffee milk was my old standby and would be the safest choice, but I was really curious about Soft Katsugen now. After going back and forth in my head for a little while, I put some money in the machine and pressed the button. A few moments later, I heard my carton of Soft Katsugen fall down with a little *ka-thunk*.

But as I reached down to retrieve it, Sera made another effort to rope me into a chat.

"Boy, Ushio sure was acting strange last night, wouldn't you say?"

This stopped me dead in my tracks. For once, he'd said something I actually agreed with; it *had* seemed like something weird was going on with Ushio yesterday.

"Like, it wasn't just me, right?" he went on. "She seemed *way* different from usual that whole time we were playing President. I mean, why would a girl who usually won't even give me the time of day let me stay in her room and play cards with you two for so long? And what was that secret of hers about, anyhow? She 'can't keep doing this much longer'? I'm tellin' you, man, something's definitely up with her."

I grabbed my Soft Katsugen and turned around. "Yeah? Like what, exactly?"

"What do *you* think?"

The corners of his lips curled up in a smirk. His ostentatious attitude only served to fan the embers of my impatience. I knew he was only bringing this up to get a reaction out of me; there was no way he actually gave a damn what Ushio was going through. Still, I had to wonder: If Sera had picked up on her strange behavior as well, did that mean he also had a theory as to what was causing it? While I could criticize Sera for a lot of things, his perceptiveness was not one of them.

"Don't mess with me," I said. "Just come out and say it."

"If you ask me, I'd say it seems like Ushio's trying to prepare herself," said Sera. "For a major change in her life. Or at least a life-changing decision."

"What makes you say that?"

"She's holing up inside herself, like a butterfly gearing up to finally spread its wings. And I can almost guarantee that when she emerges from her chrysalis, she'll hardly resemble the person you thought she was before."

There wasn't a shred of sense to this baseless theory of his, yet I couldn't help but entertain it. I didn't believe for a minute that

he had the situation all figured out or that he understood Ushio better than I did—but I was desperate for some sort of hint, or at least a new perspective that could potentially give me some deeper insight into what she might be going through.

"What about you, Sakuma?" asked Sera, tilting his head to one side—though not in the way one usually might, as if they found something rather peculiar. It was a more relaxed inclination, like his neck had simply grown tired of supporting his head's weight. "Have *you* noticed anything strange or contradictory about Ushio's behavior lately?"

He flashed a cheery, upbeat smile.

"Come on, now. Really try to rack your brain for me. Think about the sorts of things she's been saying and any subtler emotions that might've peeked out from beneath her cool and composed exterior. Doesn't anything come to mind? Anything at all?"

"What are you trying to say, exactly?"

My drowsiness had long since left me at this point, and in its place was a swirling vortex of emotions: suspicion, jealousy, indignation. He was talking about her as though he was in on some sort of secret that I was totally oblivious to. And I *hated* that my gut was telling me he wasn't just blowing smoke this time.

"What do *you* know about Ushio, huh?"

"Easy on the crazy eyes, there, Sakuma. You're lookin' a little unhinged." Sera tapped his temple with his index finger and said, "C'mon, use your head, big guy. I really think this is one you should try to figure out for yourself."

"Man, stop playing mind games with me already…"

"Wasn't trying to. Heck, I don't even *want* to talk about Ushio anymore. Didn't I tell you? It's Natsuki-chan I've got my eye on now."

The carton crinkled beneath my fingertips as I reflexively gripped it tighter. Why did this guy seem to always know exactly

how to push my buttons? First, he'd get me going with all these vague insinuations about Ushio. Once I was riled up and irritated, he'd bring up Hoshihara. I could see what he was trying to do here, but that didn't make it any easier to contain my frustration.

"All right, I've had about *enough* of you!" I snarled, getting right up in his face as though I was about to grab him by the collar.

Sera raised both his hands, as if to say he didn't want any trouble, all while staring down at me with a provocative gaze. "Ooh, scary! How come you always get so worked up when it comes to Natsuki-chan, huh?"

"Maybe because *you* only ever bring her up to get a rise out of me!"

"I mean, it works, doesn't it?"

"I'm gonna sock you in the mouth."

Sera let out an exaggerated sigh and shrugged. "I don't know why you're so defensive of her, Sakuma. Is it that you still have a crush on her, or what?"

I could feel my face growing red-hot. It was hard not to flinch at him taunting me with my own unrequited feelings—even if they *were* a thing of the past now. Yet I couldn't let him know that he'd hit me where it hurt, so I had no choice but to bluff it off.

"Oh, screw you," I said. "It's not like that anymore."

"Not 'anymore,' eh?" said Sera. "So you admit that you used to."

"No, that's not what I… Ugh, never mind. I'm done talking about this. It's ancient history at this point. Now stop changing the subject and tell me what—"

Only then did it hit me: Why was I even arguing with this pathological needler? Wouldn't the best strategy be to shut the hell up and be on my merry way? I needed to get out of here ASAP. Sure, I'd let him pique my curiosity about Ushio and get under my skin about Hoshihara, but I couldn't afford to let this conversation

continue any longer. Not only was it a waste of time, but it was actively planting new and unnecessary seeds of anxiety in my mind. I didn't want to spend my whole class trip jumping at shadows thanks to this prick. I still had the power to bail myself out.

"Actually, y'know what?" I said. "Forget it. I'm outta here."

I pushed past Sera and stomped off, vowing not to turn around under any circumstances, no matter what tactics he might employ to stop me. But as I rounded the corner out of the little vending machine area, I nearly bumped into someone.

"Whoa!"

It was a girl in a comfy, oversized hoodie with her hair tied off in two small pigtails. She was a full head shorter than me too—but I recognized her face, even if it was flushed a far deeper red than usual.

The girl was Hoshihara.

"Oh, hey! Natsuki-chan! What perfect timing!" Sera exclaimed, peeking over my shoulder. "We were literally just talking about you. Not sure if you heard any of that, but Sakuma here was telling me about how—"

I whirled around at the speed of light and covered his mouth with both hands, dropping my carton of Soft Katsugen in the process—but that hardly mattered right now.

"That's enough," I hissed under my breath. "If you wanna continue this stupid conversation another time in private, we can, but you leave her the hell out of this."

Sera nodded a couple of times, and I removed my hands. He leaned in and whispered in my ear, "I'll hold you to that."

He pulled away, then turned to look at Hoshihara.

"Welp, guess I'd better get going! You two have fun now!" he said, waving as he walked off toward the staircase. This left me and Hoshihara standing there awkwardly.

"Er, yeah, I should probably get going too, ha ha… Sorry to interrupt!" she said, attempting to laugh it off as she turned to leave.

"Wh-whoa, whoa, whoa! Hang on a sec!" I frantically called after her.

As she slowly shifted back around, I could see the utter discomfort written all over her face.

"D-did you overhear what we were talking about?"

"Uhhh… Part of it, maybe?"

"What, um… What parts, exactly?"

"Everything after you said you were going to sock him in the mouth…"

I could have clutched my head in my hands and fallen to my knees right then and there. There was no talking my way out of it, then—she'd *also* heard him ask me if I still had a crush on her. *Ugh… This sucks, man!* My breathing grew shallower and shallower as waves of misery, shame, and hatred (directed at Sera) washed over me, and before long, I was sweating profusely.

"B-but it's totally fine, I swear!" Hoshihara tried to reassure me. "I'm not, like…weirded out by it or anything! Honest!"

Great, and now she's trying to console me*.*

This was dealing unprecedented psychic damage to my ego, but I took a deep breath and tried to calm myself down. At least she'd only found out about this now and not any earlier, I told myself. The fact that I was dating Ushio should've been more than proof enough that any feelings I had for her in the past were no longer at play. So maybe this wasn't the worst-case scenario after all—especially since Hoshihara herself was telling me it didn't bother her. In which case, perhaps the smart thing to do was to act like it really wasn't a big deal to me either…even if it kind of was, deep down. *All right, yeah. That ought to work. I think I can handle this.*

"Besides," said Hoshihara, "I've kinda had a feeling for a while now…"

This casual addendum completely obliterated my newfound poise.

"H-had a feeling about what?" I asked. "Wait… Since when?"

"Oh! Uhhh…" Hoshihara covered her mouth with her hand as if she'd just made a huge slip of the tongue. "Sorry, just…forget I said that!"

"No, no, no! Now you *have* to tell me! You can't drop a bomb on me like that and expect me to be able to sleep tonight!"

"Oogh…"

Now it was Hoshihara who looked like she'd been caught in an awkward position. Normally, I would've liked to say she didn't have to tell me if she didn't want to… But I knew this was one thing that would eat away at me forever if I didn't get closure—even if the truth would be a bitter pill to swallow.

"Well, when we first exchanged contact info," she began, "I remember thinking to myself, 'Hm… Does this guy have a crush on me?' So ever since then, basically."

"Hold on." For a moment, I stood there in a daze—like I'd been clubbed over the head with a rock. Then it sank in, and I nearly shouted in her face, "Wasn't that literally the first time we ever talked?! You're kidding me, right?!"

"L-look, I'm sorry, okay?" Hoshihara began to tear up.

Oh, crap… I'm getting way too emotional, aren't I?

"N-no, I'm sorry!" I said. "I shouldn't have raised my voice like that. My bad. I'll chill out, I promise."

What the hell was I thinking, yelling at her like that after I was the one who insisted she spill the beans? Man, I was such a jerk. I needed to find a way to repent for this and get back to our usual rapport before it cast a haze over our group activity day tomorrow.

I took a look around—and my eyes landed on my carton of Soft Katsugen lying on the ground. I'd forgotten to even pick it up.

Hey, that's it. Maybe if I buy her something to drink, that'll help clear the air.

I fed a few coins into the machine and pressed the button, grabbed the drink it dispensed, and offered it to Hoshihara. "Here," I said. "Consider this my way of apologizing."

"What? No, it's okay! You really don't have to do that…"

"I do, though. I'd feel really bad if I didn't do something. Just take it, please."

"All right, if you insist." Hoshihara accepted the blue drink carton and inspected it curiously. "Soft Katsugen, huh? What does it taste like?"

"I actually don't know. Never had it before."

"Wait. So you're gifting me some random drink you haven't even *tried*?"

O-oh, shoot! Good point… What was I thinking?!

I'd defaulted to getting her the same thing as me, but she was right; I definitely should have asked her what *she* wanted to drink. It wouldn't make for a very good apology if I bought her something on a whim that she ended up hating. How stupid was I?

Ugh, damn it… Intense self-hatred coursed through me. Hardly anything was more mortifying to me than moments like this, when I revealed just how socially inept and lacking in basic life experience I was through these little oversights. And now I could only stand there, wallowing in anguish, as Hoshihara stabbed the plastic straw into her carton and took her first, fateful sip.

"It's really sweet," she said, her lips broadening into a smile.

Well, at least she didn't hate it. This didn't erase my embarrassment, but it was definitely a relief. I picked my own carton up off the ground and gave the beverage a try myself.

Oh, I see… It's one of these *kinds of drinks. Not bad. Pretty tasty, I guess.*

"Did you come down here to buy a drink too, then?" I asked.

"Nah, I just needed to get away from the girl talk for a while," said Hoshihara. "Was getting a little too deep for my personal comfort level, that's all."

"Gotcha…"

And then she ended up stumbling into an uncomfortable conversation about how I used to have feelings for her anyway. I supposed it was an unlucky night for both of us.

"So, uh…" I said, pivoting. "Sorry, not to keep circling back to this, but…are you saying you basically knew all along, then?"

"Yeah, I felt like I had a pretty good hunch. No offense, but you're kind of easy to read, Kamiki-kun."

People said this about me fairly often, actually—that I was a terrible liar or that my expressions always gave my true feelings away. Yet for some reason, I never once considered that Hoshihara might have already figured out I had a crush on her. Looking back on all of our early interactions, I cringed at the thought of how cluelessly blatant it must have been to her.

"It's not only you, though," Hoshihara clarified. "I'd say I have a pretty good sense for that sort of thing in general."

"Dang… Yeah, that's impressive."

Come to think of it, she had instantly sussed out that Ushio and I were dating on our first day back at school from vibes alone. It was an interesting dichotomy to behold. While she was the stereotypical "clumsy ditz" character in our class, her social skills and perceptiveness were second to none.

"Well, the thing is," said Hoshihara, "I kinda had to learn this stuff the hard way after some awkward relationship drama back in junior high. Ever since then, I've tried to stay hypervigilant when it comes to gauging how other people feel about me. I actually find it really hard to be friends with someone if I can't get a good read on what their intentions are and what they might want from me."

"Oof, yeah… Rough world we live in, isn't it?"

It made total sense that a girl as cute and popular as Hoshihara would have had to deal with her fair share of unwanted suitors over the years—and learned to interpret many of the classic tells in the process. Heck, it was entirely possible that even her cheery ditziness was a defense mechanism she'd developed to conceal how keenly aware she was of these things. Like how swans looked so elegant gliding on the water but were always paddling their feet like crazy below the surface.

"That's insane to me, though," I said. "I never would have guessed that you had me all figured out from the start. I really hope that didn't make it super uncomfortable to hang out with me or anything."

"Yeeeah… Maybe a little bit at first," said Hoshihara, awkwardly scratching her cheek with one finger. "But I realized pretty quickly that you were totally harmless. And I mean, you didn't even really like me anymore after a certain point, right?"

"Well, not in a romantic sense, no…"

"Right, so I guess what I'm trying to say is that I knew you weren't gonna make things weird or ruin our friendship by asking me out, so it didn't bother me either way."

She "knew"? Like, for a fact?

This statement made me feel a bit conflicted. As did the unstated implication that it would have been "weird" or "ruined our friendship" for me to make an attempt. I thanked my lucky stars that she was telling me all this only now; if I'd found out back in June or July that she wouldn't have even *entertained* the idea of going out with me, it would have completely destroyed me. I might have dropped dead on the spot.

"Sorry, this might be a pretty embarrassing question, but… what made you so confident that I wouldn't try to ask you out?" I said. "Did you just think I didn't have it in me or something?"

"Ah ha ha… No, it's nothing like that," said Hoshihara. "Try again."

As she took another sip from her straw, she smiled knowingly like she was waiting for the lightbulb to go off in my head—but when it never did, she cocked her head in confusion.

"Wait… You *really* don't know?" she asked.

"No, sorry. But I'd appreciate it if you could fill me in, just so I know for future reference…"

Hoshihara's gaze suddenly softened, and her smile turned gentler than ever.

"I mean, Kamiki-kun…you were always—"

***

It was day three of our class trip. We'd be flying back home bright and early tomorrow morning, so this was effectively our last day in Hokkaido. After pulling into the parking lot and disembarking from our tour bus, we set foot in the seaside town of Otaru—the thin layer of snowpack crunching beneath our feet. The bitter chill and salty scent of ocean air tickled my nostrils and snapped my sleepy brain wide awake after the comfy, heated bus ride. I could hear the calls of seagulls in the distance.

Compared to far more developed Sapporo, Otaru had something of a lonely atmosphere to it. There were no tall buildings around, so the blue-gray skies felt vast and expansive despite being overcast by faint, nearly transparent cloud cover.

Like our first day in Sapporo, today was going to be a sightseeing day in which we were free to explore the city however we saw fit. But unlike that first day, we weren't technically required to stay with our free time activity groups, and we could even use public transit to go on slightly more long-distance excursions, so long as we made it back to the rendezvous point before it was time to head back to the hotel. This was apparently a new policy the

sophomore teachers were trying out for the first time in the interest of "respecting student autonomy," and most of my classmates were all for it.

Not me, though.

While I could appreciate the attempt at giving us more freedom, the simple fact of the matter was that kids would *always* organize themselves into groups and cliques no matter what you did. Which meant that everyone had to scramble to figure out what they were going to be doing that day, and with whom. It was like a weird brand of blitz diplomacy—just like when we were forced to pick teams for sports or group projects. And there was nothing I dreaded more.

"Sakuma," said Ushio, approaching me where I stood languishing in a corner of the parking lot. "Just to make sure, you haven't already made plans with anyone for today, have you?"

"No, I haven't," I said.

"Okay, yeah, I figured. Well, I was about to go talk to Natsuki and see if she wanted to do anything. You wanna come with, I assume?"

I was about to say "absolutely," but then I glanced over in Hoshihara's direction—and immediately got cold feet when I saw her already engaged with a large group of girls, no doubt discussing where they wanted to go and who would be traveling with whom. She'd probably received several invitations from her other friends already; I could see Mashima and Shiina among them, and even some girls from other classes.

This was to be expected for someone of Hoshihara's popularity. She was a fun girl to be around, so naturally she'd be in high demand. The sheer thought of inserting myself into that already crowded equation had me chickening out.

"Oh, wait," said Ushio, taking stock of the scene I was seeing. "You probably don't want to be the only guy in a big group of girls, do you?"

She knew me far too well.

"Yeah, not really," I replied, turning my gaze back on Ushio. "At the same time, I'm sure she wants to spend time with her other friends too—not just the same two people she hung out with on day one. And I wouldn't wanna ask her to change her plans on account of *my* comfort level. So I'm a little unsure what to do."

I really wished I wasn't so damn fussy, believe me—especially since this was the final day of the last class trip I'd ever get to go on, so I knew I should spend it doing *something* with *someone*.

"You wanna keep things simple and stick together, then?" asked Ushio.

"What, you mean, like…just you and me?"

"Yes, Sakuma. What else would I mean? Unless you wouldn't feel comfortable with that either, I guess."

"N-no, of course not! That'd be really awesome, actually… But, like…"

As I hemmed and hawed, Ushio furrowed her brow impatiently. "What is it? Something bothering you still?"

"I mean, are you sure you're okay with that? Wouldn't you rather hang out with Hoshihara and the rest of them too?"

"I wouldn't be suggesting it if I wasn't okay with it, silly. Don't worry about it."

D-damn, what did I ever do to deserve her?

A halo practically appeared over her head as the clouds parted and she descended from the heavens to save me from my own social awkwardness. That was Ushio for you—always super considerate and easily the most dependable person I knew. And yet, this sudden return to normalcy only served to highlight the contrast between the usual Ushio and her inscrutable behavior from the night before. Why had she acted so strangely during our card game with Sera? I still had no clue, but now wasn't the time to be cross-examining her; I wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth.

"Okay then," I said. "I think I'll take you up on—"

"Oh, Sakumaaa?"

A chill ran down my spine. Just when Ushio had allayed my fears of being left out, a fresh brand of terror billowed up deep inside of me. While I didn't even want to turn around, I knew trying to ignore it would only delay the inevitable. And so I gritted my teeth and begrudgingly looked my worst nightmare in the face.

"Sera…" I muttered.

"Hey, neat! Ushio's here too!" he said. "Well, isn't that just peachy. Whaddya say the three of us all go around town together?"

"Yeah, no thanks," said Ushio. "I think I'll pass."

This decisive rejection from her was reassuring to me; I'd been a bit worried that she'd start acting weird again with him around, but it seemed those fears were unfounded.

"Awww, shucks," said Sera. "Guess it'll have to be just me and Sakuma, then!"

"Wait, why me?" I said. "You know I'd rather die than hang out with you."

"But you promised me in the lobby yesterday, remember? You said we could continue our conversation another time…in private."

Ushio shot a wide-eyed look at me. "Is that true, Sakuma?"

"Trust me, it's not what it sounds like," I assured her. "He was just being extra obnoxious last night, and I needed to get him to go away somehow."

I clicked my tongue in frustration. Why did this guy always have to show up and throw a wrench in our plans?

"Okay, listen," I said to Sera. "I'll keep my damn promise—but not right now, okay? It'll have to wait until after the class trip is over."

"Yeah?" said Sera. "And why's that?"

"Because I want to spend my vacation with the people I actually like, obviously. And not someone who grates on my sanity with every passing second."

"Hrmmm… Well, you certainly drive a hard bargain." Sera rubbed his chin. I knew he wouldn't give in that easily, so I braced myself for him to counter with some other sneaky tactic. "All righty. Guess I'll have to go ask Natsuki-chan instead."

Somehow, I hadn't anticipated this angle of attack.

"Dude, *enough*…" I said. "Just give it a rest already…"

How many times was I going to let him use the same stupid ploy against me? He was only using Hoshihara's name to goad me, yet I couldn't help losing my cool each and every time. It was like a conditioned reaction at this point.

"Leave Hoshihara out of this," I added. "Are you trying to ruin her class trip too?"

"Wow, that's a pretty rude thing to suggest, don'tcha think?" said Sera. "Must be pretty scary living in that paranoid head of yours. You make it sound like I'm *always* out to get somebody, when all I'm trying to do is have a good time here!"

"The hell you are. Anytime you single someone out like this, it never ends well… Not that she'd ever agree to hang out with you in the first place."

"Hey, you never know until you try, right? Can't be so afraid of rejection that you won't even shoot your shot… Though *you* wouldn't know the first thing about that, heh. But don't you worry, pal. Your Uncle Sera'll show you how it's done. Here, watch this."

"All right, stop! I swear, if you don't knock it off right now, I'll __"

"Let it go, Sakuma," said Ushio, grabbing me by the arm.

When I turned to look at her, my heart sank. Her expression was neither angry nor sorrowful, but almost earnest and pleading. It was enough to make me feel terrible.

"We can just let him hang out with us," she said. "I don't want to spend our last day in Hokkaido bickering with each other."

I'd been about ready to blow a gasket, but this cooled me right off. I couldn't possibly argue with her when she was looking at me with eyes like that.

"Fine, whatever," I said.

As much as I loathed the idea of hanging out with Sera, I hated the thought of fighting Ushio on this even more, so I'd have to suck it up—at least for the time being. It wasn't like we had to spend the whole day with him, necessarily; he was a pretty capricious guy, so I could see him getting bored of us after a while.

"Just half the day works for me, by the way," Sera cut in, as if he'd read my mind. "Y'know, 'cause I wanna spend some time with my other friends too and stuff. So I'll get outta your hair once our free time is halfway over. How's that sound?"

Only half the day, huh? That was by no means a short period of time, but I hadn't expected him to offer us any sort of compromise, so it sure sounded appealing.

"Just one condition, though," Sera added.

Ah. Now I understood. Of course there was a catch. I couldn't even be upset at this, really—just disappointed with myself for not seeing it sooner.

"I wanna spend that half a day with Sakuma," he said. "And Sakuma alone."

"Uh, what?" I replied. "That doesn't even make any—"

"No way," said Ushio, cutting me off before I could finish. Her tone was every bit as firm as her expression. "We are *not* agreeing to those terms."

"Huh, really? I don't think it's such a bad offer, personally," said Sera. "You're more than welcome to go hang out with Natsuki-chan or whoever while you give Sakuma and me some guy time. Plus, you

can go on dates with him whenever you want, but how often do you have the chance to hang out with your other friends from school?"

"*I'm* the one who gets to decide how I spend my class trip, thank you very much. And why are you targeting Sakuma all of a sudden? I thought it was *me* you wanted to spend time with, not him."

"Humans are fickle creatures, my dear. And what, did you really expect me to keep fawning over you forever when you refused to even look my way no matter what I did? A little arrogant of you, don'tcha think?"

"Ngh…"

Ushio ground her teeth with chagrin; it seemed this last assertion of his had hit a soft spot. But as she grew increasingly more livid, I regained my composure. Something about seeing someone else even more pissed off at the object of my own ire helped to calm my own nerves, in a weird way.

While I didn't condone what Sera was saying by any means, I did agree with him on one thing: My own insecurities aside, I wanted Ushio to spend her class trip with her other friends too. Not because I didn't enjoy spending time with her, but—as Sera said—because she and I could go out on dates anytime, and there were precious few opportunities to hang out and see the sights with your friends in a new and unfamiliar town.

"So you just want half a day?" I asked.

Hearing this, Sera beamed giddily, and Ushio scrunched up her face.

"Wait, Sakuma—"

"It'll be over in no time, I promise," I said. "Then we can spend the whole afternoon checking out Otaru together."

Ushio didn't seem convinced. "But…"

"Don't you worry, my dear," said Sera, feigning a sweet smile as if to reassure her. "Nothin' bad's gonna happen. I'll return him to

you safe and sound."

Though Ushio looked conflicted, she ultimately sighed in resignation. "How long is 'half the day,' exactly?"

"Well, it's almost ten o'clock… So what if I have him back to you by one o'clock?"

"Okay. You'd better not be late."

"We won't be. Promise."

Ushio didn't say another word after that, heading over to where Hoshihara and the other girls were standing. At one point, she glanced over her shoulder at me as if she wanted to say something, but she faced forward again and kept walking. As I watched her trudge away by her lonesome, I felt my courage wane. Why did I feel like we were making a big mistake here?

Just as I got cold feet and was about to call her back, Sera clapped a hand on my shoulder. He wasn't gripping it or anything, yet it felt like he had me pinned down and there was nowhere for me to run. I could feel my whole body tense up as he flashed me his usual, carefree grin.

"Shall we?"

About ten minutes later, I stood waiting on the sidewalk all by myself.

"Where the hell did he run off to?" I muttered.

Almost immediately after Ushio left us, Sera instructed me to "hold tight for a sec," then promptly waltzed down the street. I was grateful for every second I didn't have to spend dealing with his bullcrap, but it did grind my gears a bit for him to wander off and leave me here without any explanation. Especially when *he* was the one who was so adamant about wanting to hang out with *me*…

Wait a sec. What if this is all just one big ploy to get me and Ushio apart from each other?! And now that we've fallen right into his trap, he's gonna swoop in and mess with her and Hoshihara or something?!

I definitely wouldn't have put it past him.

Damn it, why am I so stupid? Yet as I scrambled to pull out my phone and dial Ushio's number to check in on her, a compact sedan pulled up alongside me on the shoulder of the road. The driver's side door opened up, and the person who'd been driving the vehicle stepped out onto the sidewalk.

"Hop in, Sakuma," he said.

"Wait… Huh?"

It was Sera.

My brain glitched out for a moment as I tried to wrap my head around what I was seeing. Sera was…driving a car? In high school? Way out here in Hokkaido? My mind swirled with all sorts of scandalized thoughts. Had he stolen a car and was now driving it without a license on top of that? Should I yell at him, or should I inform the authorities, or should I just run like hell? There were too many options to choose from, and I couldn't process a single one—so I simply stood there rooted to the spot.

Then Sera reached out and slipped something into my hand.

It was—unbelievably—a driver's license.

"Don't worry," he said. "I know how to drive. Now don't just stand there—hurry up and get in before one of our teachers sees us."

"Huh? Oh, uh… Okay…"

I did as I was told and climbed into the passenger side. Sera got back in, put the car in drive, then stepped on the gas. The engine let out a low hum as we pulled away from the sidewalk.

"Seatbelt on, Sakuma."

"R-right, sorry…"

I pulled my seatbelt taut across my torso, then clicked it into the fastener. It was only at this point that the gravity of the situation

I'd just gotten myself into finally set in, and my blood ran cold as an icy sweat dripped down my back.

"W-wait, but…where did you get this car from, exactly?" I asked.

"It's a rental, bud," said Sera. "You didn't think I *stole* it, did you? Ha ha ha! Man, you can be a real numbskull sometimes, Sakuma!"

Despite Sera's obnoxious cackling, I did feel a bit relieved to learn that I hadn't been made an unwitting accomplice to a crime. This only lasted a moment before my next obvious cause for concern reared its head.

"You still shouldn't be driving, though!" I exclaimed. "I mean, you're in high school, for crying out loud…"

"Oh, didn't you know?" said Sera. "In Hokkaido, anyone's allowed to drive once they reach high school age."

"Wait, seriously?!"

"Yup. I mean, think about it. It's a pretty big island, right? Plus, it snows all the time. It'd be too dangerous to expect everyone to commute to school on bikes or mopeds all year round, which is why the prefectural government made driver's ed a mandatory part of any high school curriculum. They teach it as a part of home ec class—even let you go on test drives and everything."

"Whoa… That's nuts."

I had absolutely no idea. What a crazy regional quirk. I considered myself pretty well read, yet it seemed I had much to learn about the ways of the world.

Hey, hold up.

"Why home ec class?" I asked.

"I guess because they think of it as a necessary life skill, kinda like cooking and housework," said Sera. "Everyone's gotta know how to drive, especially out in the country."

"Ah, okay. Makes sense…"

Heck, even in the city, it was pretty inconvenient not to have at least *one* person in the household who could drive. In that sense, once could definitely argue that it fit more naturally into home economics than subjects like gym class or physics.

As I nodded in understanding, Sera suddenly burst out laughing like a rabid hyena who'd just eaten a whole lot of psychedelic mushrooms. It was so eerie and ominous that I was at a loss for words—but more importantly, I needed him to calm down and pay attention to the road. Once he'd finally gotten it out of his system, he reached up and wiped the tears from the corners of his eyes.

"Oh, man… You're so funny, Sakuma. I just made all that stuff up, FYI."

"*All* of it?!"

"Uh, yeah? Wasn't it kinda obvious? Not even a kid would fall for a complete load of baloney like that. Besides, I'm not even from Hokkaido, so how would that apply to me? Yet here you completely overlooked all the most blatant contradictions and only got suspicious about the home ec thing! Pffft! Ha ha ha!"

He clapped his hands together and started cackling like a ninny again.

So it was all a bunch of bullcrap, huh?

It did sound awfully strange, now that I thought a bit harder about it. Not that I should have *needed* to think very hard about it, I supposed. I should've known better than to take Sera's words at face value, even in a situation as bizarre and bewildering as this. Like, was I a complete moron, or what?

I thought about all those notorious phone and door-to-door scams and whatnot you'd sometimes hear about on the news; I'd always wondered how people could allow themselves to get swindled by such obvious forms of deception. Now I understood:

When someone had successfully disoriented you, it was a hell of a lot easier to get tricked into believing any lie they might tell you, no matter how ridiculous.

"Hm? Wait, back up!" I said. "How do you know how to drive, then?!"

"I mean, that license you're holding is real."

Oh, right… The driver's license. I almost forgot.

I supposed if he had a valid license, there wasn't technically anything illegal about this. But how could he have one? It didn't make any sense. Sure, the name and picture matched up—but he wasn't old enough to drive. I looked down at the date of birth listed on the license…and then blinked a couple of times.

I looked back up at Sera.

"Hey… How old are you?" I asked.

"Nineteen," he answered matter-of-factly. "Took a couple years off from school at one point, so I'm actually two years older than the rest of you. But let's just keep that between you and me, 'kay? Heck, some of my *teachers* don't even know."

"Damn, seriously? Jeez…"

Assuming the birthday on his license was accurate, he wasn't lying either. This threw me for a bit of a loop, but at the same time, it felt oddly believable. Looking back, he *had* struck me as a bit more mature than most kids our age when I first met him. That impression didn't last, but at the time, I'd chalked it up to him having grown up in the big city, where everything was a bit more progressive. But no—he was literally just older than us, plain and simple. Had he been hiding it on purpose? It was a strange feeling to learn this about him; in a way, it felt like I'd finally caught a tiny glimpse of this nebulous enigma's true form, if only for a split second.



"Where are we even going, anyway?"

We'd been bombing straight down one long road for a while now. I could still vaguely recall the Otaru sightseeing map in my head, and I was pretty sure there weren't many touristy spots so far away that you'd need a car to reach them.

"Cape Kamui," said Sera.

"Is that nearby?"

"Yeah, it's just right down this road. Look it up."

I did as I was told and pulled up the map on my phone. *Okay, let's see… Cape Kamui…*

"What the…?! That's ridiculously far! It's not even in Otaru!"

"Eh, shouldn't take more than an hour, if we floor it. Don't worry, I'll still get you back to your girlfriend on time."

"That's great and all, but…I'm pretty sure we're not supposed to leave the city in the first place, dude…"

"They didn't explicitly *say* we couldn't, though."

"Yeah, but still…"

Even if it wasn't technically breaking the rules, I was fairly certain the faculty would have a few choice words for us if they found out about this. In fact, I had a feeling it was against school regulations to even *get* a driver's license, whether you were of age or not—but since Sera probably got his before he transferred to Tsubakioka, maybe it wasn't a problem. Either way, he was definitely skirting the line.

I could have chided him a bit more about it, but this whole day had already been such a weird emotional roller coaster that I was too exhausted to bother. Instead, I leaned back in my seat and gazed out the window, watching as the deserted streets of sleepy Otaru gradually gave way to a landscape that looked more and more like Tsubakioka by the minute. I might have even mistaken it at first glance if it weren't for all of the snow on the ground.

Beside me, Sera started humming some new catchy pop song that I'd been hearing everywhere lately, tapping his fingers to the beat as he gripped the steering wheel with his left hand. He seemed to be in an awfully good mood—but then again, he kind of always did. I'd never seen him look grumpy or upset about anything, really.

"How can you be so…so *free* all the time?" The question had popped into my head unbidden, so I figured I might as well voice it.

Sera took a break from his a cappella session to respond. "Well, y'see, it's because my dearly departed brother—God rest his soul—told me something as he was lying on his deathbed. He said, 'Itsuku, I want you to—'"

"Yes, you already tried that one on me. Look, I don't need a genuine answer or anything, but could you at least come up with a lie that's *somewhat* believable?"

"Ooh, good retort," said Sera. "I see you're finally learning how to hold your own in these little back-and-forths with me."

I did not take this as a compliment.

"Anyway, let me answer your question with another question, Sakuma…" said Sera. "Do you feel like you're any *less* free than I am?"

"I mean… Depends on your definition of freedom, I guess."

"Sure, that's fair. Like, I think I heard some old philosopher once described freedom as 'the state of having the ability to govern oneself'… But wouldn't that make self-control a kind of freedom too? For instance, take someone who's able to stick to a long-term diet to lose weight, or somebody who can save up their money to afford a new game they really want. We act like that's a sign of 'restraint,' but isn't it really more of an indication that the person *isn't* a slave to their own baser instincts and urges? In that sense, you could even say that you and Ushio are actually freer than me."

I felt like I was being given some big-brained philosophy lecture now. And while I was certainly impressed that Sera seemed

to have a relatively well-thought-out position on a nuanced topic like this, it also didn't really answer my original question.

"Sorry, let me rephrase the question," I said. "What I'm trying to ask is: How come you're able to just do as you please all the time without ever giving a moment's thought to what other people might think of you, or whether they'll treat you differently for it?"

"I figure we just place different degrees of importance on those sorts of things," said Sera. "Even I have some amount of shame, believe it or not."

"Liar. I don't believe that for a second."

"No, it's true! I just try to throw caution to the wind and do the thing before any fears or regrets can catch up with me. It's like how the faster you ride a bike, the easier it is to keep your balance. Just gotta go for it, commit to the bit, and fake it till you make it… That's the only healthy way I know how to live and stay sane, anyway."

I couldn't tell if he was actually being sincere with me or not, but I'd kind of stopped caring at this point. I had to engage with the words he was saying in good faith regardless, or else this whole conversation would completely fall apart.

"Can you really call that a 'healthy' mindset, though?" I asked. "I feel like it'd get pretty exhausting to force yourself to keep living like that after a while."

"Yeah, did you not hear what I just said? If you ask me, folks like you and Ushio are *way* more free than a guy like me. I mean, the literal instant I get the idea in my head that something might be kinda funny or amusing, I can't help myself. I *have* to try it. Like I said, I'm a slave to my every urge and impulse. Or if we wanna say it in a slightly cooler, less masochistic way: I'm a devoted follower of my own basic instincts."

"…Still sounds pretty corny to me."

"But I've gotta say, it's a lot of fun. My life is always super enjoyable, every single day. So much so that I don't really care

whether I'm free or in control."

To this, I didn't say anything.

His lifestyle didn't sound enviable to me in the slightest. From the way he'd described it, it probably came with its own fair share of suffering. And yet, for the briefest of moments, I couldn't help but think, *I wish I could live like that.* It almost felt like he was slowly but surely whittling away at my entire worldview.

To be free was to be a slave to your own instincts.

To be normal was to let society dictate your values.

To be in love was to hurt and be hurt voluntarily.

When I realized the hidden, disruptive effect his offhand remarks always seemed to have on me, my breath caught in my throat, and I could hardly say a word.

"I don't get it… Nothing makes sense anymore…"

But my voice was drowned out by the echoing, windblown wail of the engine as we barreled around the bend into a long, dark tunnel.

The farther west we went along the coastline, the higher the piles of fallen snow on the ground became, narrowing the roadway as the shoulders grew thinner and thinner. Out the right-hand window, we had a spectacular panorama of the Sea of Japan—marred only by being slightly obscured by the unwanted sight of Sera sitting in the driver's seat. So naturally, I kept my eyes facing inland for most of the drive, and I told myself I could enjoy the view on the drive back.

That wasn't to say I was enjoying this little excursion by any means. But I could also feel my initial revulsion at simply being around Sera waning with time. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say I was growing numb to his presence.

"Hey, check it out," he said.

I looked over and saw a signboard for the exit to Cape Kamui. We hung a right as instructed, then climbed uphill.

"Good thing it isn't snowing right now, huh?" said Sera. "I know the forecast said the weather's supposed to get pretty brutal this afternoon, so I was a little bit worried."

"Why did you wanna drag me all the way out here, anyway?"

"For the gorgeous view, of course. I heard it's best in the summertime, but it should still be pretty beautiful in the winter, I figure. Can you imagine how great it'll feel to stand right out there on the edge, with the wind blowing through your hair?"

"I mean, yeah, that definitely sounds nice…"

Damn. Now I'm actually getting kind of excited.

We continued up the winding, mountainous road until we reached a large clearing that was apparently a parking lot—though there wasn't a single car parked in it, and the snow was too thick to see the pavement.

As soon as we stepped out of the car, a powerful gust threw my bangs into a disheveled mess. It was much windier out here than it had been back in Otaru—and a lot colder too. Definitely below freezing. I snatched my coat from the back seat where I'd left it and threw it on.

"God, it's freezing…" I said. "Which way do we even go?"

"Over here," said Sera, taking the lead.

I could see what appeared to be a sloped path going up the hill behind him, which I could only assume led out to the edge of the cape. I followed obediently after him and up onto the trail. The incline wasn't too bad, but there was so much snow on the ground that it made it very hard to walk. One false step off the side of the trail, and I'd sink down to my thighs in snow.

Keeping my gaze locked firmly on my footing as I inched along, I noticed some footprints in the snow that looked far too small to be human. Deer tracks, probably. It surprised me to think

wildlife would wander all the way up here, even in the snow—but then again, I'd seen several "BEWARE OF BEARS" signs along the road. While they were probably hibernating this time of year, I had to admit that the thought of getting mauled out here with no one else around for miles was not an appealing one.

I picked up my pace a bit. The wind howled past as we made our way up the zigzagging path toward what looked like a big torii gate with some signs posted around it. When we reached the top and could finally read it, we both stopped in our tracks.

"Looks like it's closed," I said.

"Sure does," said Sera.

According to the laminated warning posted on the closed-off fence portion of the gate, the area up ahead was too dangerous due to strong winds and inclement weather. Sera's shoulders slumped in dismay; even I felt a little disappointed by this.

"Aw, man… This blows," he said. "And after we came all the way out here too…"

"No point in crying over it," I replied. "Might as well head back to the car."

"Wait, I know! What if we hop the fence?!"

"If you wanna do that, that's your prerogative. I'm not trying to slip and fall to my death out here."

"Tch, fiiine… Guess we'll just have to give up."

And yet, Sera showed no signs of turning around. He stood there stock-still, staring up at the large wooden placard hanging below the top bar of the gate, where it read in big, calligraphic letters: "NO WOMEN ALLOWED BEYOND THIS POINT."

I had to admit, I was curious to know the story behind this myself. Thankfully, there was a signpost with a more detailed explanation off to the side.

According to legend, there was once a woman named Charenka who was the eldest daughter of an Ainu chief, and she fell in love with the great Commander Yoshitsune of the Minamoto clan after he fled to Hokkaido after the siege of Koromogawa. But when he sailed north to Asia in pursuit of his ambitions and left her behind, her grief was so great that she threw herself from the edge of these very cliffs and took her own life. Ever since, any ships that attempted to pass Cape Kamui with women aboard capsized, with not a single survivor managing to escape Charenka's curse… Or so the story claimed.

"Why only boats with *female* passengers, though, I wonder?" said Sera. "Wasn't it a dude who abandoned her? You'd think she'd have a grudge against men, not women."

"I mean, it's pretty common for curses to be rooted in jealousy," I posited. "She probably feels jealous of all those women getting to sail around on the ocean with their lovers, when *hers* just up and abandoned her. Makes perfect sense, if you ask me."

It was a legend based in very raw human emotions, that was for sure. And while I didn't buy all the stuff about curses and conspiracies, I could totally believe that there'd actually been a jilted woman who threw herself from these cliffs at one point.

"Well, if it were *me*," said Sera, "I'd sink every last ship that came by for the hell of it. No gender discrimination here, folks! Heh heh…"

"Oh, shut the hell up."

Sera gripped the fence and gazed off toward the distant cliffs at the cape's edge. "Jealousy, huh? Yeah, I guess that's what happens when you let yourself get too attached to one person. Shoulda played the field a little more, if you ask me."

"It's not that simple. People can't just *choose* who they fall in love with. And Yoshitsune lived way back in the Heian period, didn't he? No chance in hell you could get away with having multiple lovers back then…"

"Actually, I'm pretty sure it was kinda normal for nobles and aristocrats to have several women on hand at any given time. Yeah, you might only have one wife, but you could always have as many concubines as you wanted."

"Okay, maybe—but that's only if you were rich and powerful. It definitely wasn't the norm for the average person."

"Nah, even then, that was back when good ol' 'night crawling' culture was still in full swing, remember? Couldn't have been all that uncommon for ordinary men and women to sleep around and have two or three partners at once. And since everyone could get with just about anyone they pleased with no repercussions, there probably wasn't nearly as much jealousy going around back then as there is today, if I had to guess."

"I mean…"

I stopped short. I wasn't ashamed to admit that I didn't have an immediate comeback to this—but I still didn't want to cede him any ground. Or rather, I *refused* to; there was a voice in the very back of my head screaming at me not to let him win this, of all arguments.

"That's because night crawling was all about lust," I said. "Not love."

"So? Same thing, isn't it?"

"No, it's not. They're about as different as spaghetti and pasta."

"But spaghetti literally *is* pasta."

"No, it's a *kind* of pasta, you idiot. Lust is only one of many different forms of love… Or a component of it, I guess. At least in the sense of being physically attracted to a specific partner. But you'd never say that lust *alone* constitutes love all by itself—that'd be like pointing to a pile of screws on the ground and saying 'Hey, look. That's a car.' And you wouldn't do that, would you?"

"Ha ha… Well, you make a convincing argument."

Sera stepped away from the gate, and for a moment, I thought we might finally head back—but then he made an immediate detour down a smaller side path. I had little choice but to follow after him, the snow crunching underfoot with our every step.

"You're right," he said, facing forward as he walked along. "A handful of screws does not a car make. But a car still needs those screws to hold it together."

"What are you trying to say?" I asked.

"That you shouldn't make light of lust. Pretty much everyone's got it, and it's what opens the door for love to bloom in a lot of cases."

"Yeah, and it can also be what destroys it. Exhibit A: infidelity."

"You really don't wanna admit that physical attraction is important, do ya?"

"I'm happy to agree with that, I guess… But, like…"

I could feel my confidence rapidly dwindling as I spoke—to the point that by the end, my words were so soft that Sera probably couldn't even hear them over the wind.

Maybe I *didn't* want to admit it after all. Perhaps because lust was almost like a primal instinct, more than anything—a product of a hormone system embedded in our brains that existed for the sole purpose of selfish pleasure and release. Romantic love was different in that it was an emotion centered around wanting to make someone else happy. But you could argue that even this—the desire to be the one making the other person happy—was based in a sort of selfish gratification. So maybe love and lust didn't actually come from two entirely different places and motivations after all.

"Hey, Sakuma," said Sera. "Have you and Ushio—"

The wind suddenly picked up, and I nearly lost my balance. Had I been wearing a hat today, it would have gone flying off into the sea. It was a fell and frightening wind—as if we'd unwittingly

stumbled into the den of a massive, primordial beast that could not be seen with the naked eye. But I could feel its breath on my skin.

"Did you say something?" I asked, closing the gap between us to hear him better.

Right then, Sera stopped walking.

We were standing on a round observation platform that offered a 360-degree view of the surrounding area. Like a man hypnotized, I felt compelled to walk a bit farther and peer over the low protective fence that looked out across the Sea of Japan. It wasn't an amazing view by any means; it was hard to even see the horizon due to all of the cloud cover, and the air over the ocean was foggy as well. Yet I couldn't take my eyes off the water. There was something weirdly entrancing about it.

"Sakuma."

Hearing my name, I turned around.

For once, Sera's expression was dead serious.

"Have you and Ushio had sex yet?"

"Wha…?"

In the biting cold, I felt a sudden burst of heat from within.

"Wh-where the hell did *that* come from?!" I asked. "Stop trying to mess with me…"

"I'm not messing with you at all," said Sera. "It was a genuine question."

"Well, I'm not answering, so knock it off. This is hardly the time or the place… Not that I'd ever want to have that kind of discussion with a guy like you."

"So you haven't, then. I guess that makes sense." Sera wiped away the snow that had piled up on top of the fence, then sat down. "I bet you must feel pretty guilty that you can't force yourself to be sexually attracted to her, huh?"

All at once, every muscle in my body tensed up—as if an icy hand had traced its fingertips along the back of my neck.

"She's your girlfriend, yet you don't feel a shred of desire for her in that way," he went on. "If anything, you feel repulsed by the thought of touching the body she was born with. And the only reason you're doing all these mental gymnastics with me right now is because you're too afraid to face that simple fact. Isn't that right?"

Although the wind was howling, I could hear his every word crystal clear. I didn't want to hear *any* of this, yet I could neither cover my ears nor close his mouth.

"I mean, why else would you be so dead set on waving off lust and physical intimacy like they're just tiny, insignificant variables in the grander equation of love?" said Sera. "It's because you know that if you admitted those things are important to you, it would call into question whether you even *have* romantic feelings for Ushio."

I felt completely transparent—my knees unsteady, my bones paper-thin. Like the winds might even sweep me off my feet, if I wasn't careful. I tensed my core to hold myself down, then slowly sucked a deep breath into my deflated lungs.

"…You haven't told Ushio all this stuff already, have you?" I said.

"Wow… So you don't deny it, then," Sera replied with a delighted grin. He brushed a few errant locks of hair out of his eyes, tucking them behind his ear. "Don't worry, I haven't said a word to her. I mean, how could I? I'm not a total monster. I'd never have the heart to devastate her like that."

I knew I should take this assurance with a heavy hint of skepticism, given who it was coming from, but it set my mind somewhat at ease. And now that I'd begun to regain my composure, I clenched my fists and prepared to stand my ground.

"And why do you think it's such a problem, huh?" I said.

"Hm? Sorry, what do you mean?" asked Sera.

"So what if I'm not sexually attracted to her? That doesn't mean we can't still love each other. Being in a relationship with someone doesn't mean you have to be totally head over heels for every single thing about them." I raised my voice to emphasize my point. "Having a physical connection isn't everything to me. I can live without it."

"Pretty sure Ushio would cry if she heard you say that."

Sera let out a heavy sigh—his warm, white breath lingering in the frigid air for a moment before being whisked away by the wind.

"You're not wrong," he said. "And I'm not saying it *should* be everything. But I also don't think it's a good sign if you can already tell going into a relationship that it'll require one or both of you to make some major compromises. I mean, how are you two even gonna be intimate, if not physically? Flirting via text and whispering sweet nothings in each other's ears? You really think you'll feel satisfied with that alone?"

"I'll be just fine," I said without missing a beat. "I knew going into this that it would mean compromising on certain things. And isn't that what relationships are all about? Being willing to make those kinds of compromises for each other? It's like, I don't know… deciding you want more money to go on dates and buy the other person gifts and stuff, so you stop spending so much of it on frivolous things for yourself."

"C'mon, bud… I think this is a little more complicated than that."

"Look, I already told you: I'm fine with it. As long as Ushio and I can go out and see a movie, or play a few rounds at the arcade, or get ramen together and that sort of thing, that's more than enough for me. I don't need to pursue each and every dopamine rush I could get like you do. Let me enjoy my mundane little everyday adventures in peace."

"Wow… Way to dream big, Sakuma. You sound more like a jaded, middle-aged man than a high schooler in the prime of his

youth," Sera teased—but then he threw up his hands in surrender. "All right, you win! If you say you're willing to live without the physical aspect, I guess I can accept that… But can you say the same for Ushio? Sure, *you* might be willing to settle for a sexless relationship, but what if she wants more than you're willing to give?"

I faltered at this. He had a point; I couldn't say for sure if Ushio would be okay with that. If anything, her previous advances toward me seemed to suggest that physical intimacy was important to her. I'd just been doing my best not to look those feelings of hers in the eye until now because I was afraid to follow them to their logical conclusion.

"But, like…h-how would that even work, though?" I said.

"Use your imagination," said Sera. "I'm sure you can figure it out. Or if you're really that clueless, you could always ask Ushio to explain it for you."

"H-heck no! That'd be *way* too embarrassing…"

"Oh, give me a break." Sera heaved an exasperated sigh. "She's your *girlfriend*, Sakuma. This isn't junior high. If you're still thinking about sex like it's this nasty, shameful thing you can't even talk about, maybe you should try growing up a little."

I could hear him mutter the words "Friggin' kid…" under his breath.

"If you can't even have an adult conversation about this stuff," he went on, "then how the hell do you think you're mature enough to be in a long-term relationship? I can tell you right now that this thing's doomed to fall apart sooner or later. Might as well give up now."

I gritted my teeth. It felt like he'd stormed into my mental abode and tracked his muddy shoes all over the floor, then rearranged all the furniture while he was at it. And yet, as infuriated as I was, I couldn't deny that there was a part of me that kind of preferred the way he'd laid the place out. His arguments were completely valid—but I also hated him for it.

"I'll admit that I could've thought this relationship through a bit more before I got myself into it," I said. "It's true that I've been trying to avert my eyes and pretend like issues I should've known might turn into sticking points just…didn't even exist. As much as I hate to say it, you've given me some really valid advice and food for thought here. But…please, no more. I can't take another word from you right now."

"Too bad," said Sera. "Because *I* can't stand to watch you keep fumbling the bag and sabotaging your own relationship. No one's gonna come out of this unscathed if you don't hurry up and get a clue. Tell me something: Why are you going out with Ushio, anyway? Do you even actually *like* her? Or is this all for show?"

My cheek twitched ever so slightly. "What are you trying to say?"

Sera stood up from the railing and walked over to me. His coat flapped wildly in the breeze, and his carefully styled hair was thrown into further disarray.

"I'm asking if maybe you're confusing pity for affection here," he said—his unwavering eyes staring me down like two gun barrels as he approached. "Or maybe…"

I could almost hear him pulling back the hammer.

"You're just using this relationship with her as an easy way to prove to yourself and everyone else around you that you're not prejudiced. That you're a good person."

Another gust of wind blew—one so strong, it felt like a sudden blast of force against my entire body. Yet this time, I didn't so much as stagger. I stared right into the tempest as Sera closed the remaining distance between us.

"Don't be ridiculous," I spat.

Before I even realized it, I'd grabbed him by the collar, my hand gripping the fabric so tightly that it was trembling. Sera didn't

even so much as flinch—refusing to look away as though he wasn't remotely afraid of anything I could possibly do to him.

"Just who the hell do you think you are?" I said, fury simmering up from within me. "Why do you think you can just say stuff like that and get away with it? What did I ever do to you, huh? Why are you so obsessed with making me and my friends miserable? What do you even want from us, anyway?"

Sera didn't say a word at first.

The winds grew even fiercer. The weather had taken a clear turn for the worse. Soon, it might even start to snow, and this storm would turn into a full-on blizzard.

Finally, with my hand still clutching at his chest, Sera opened his mouth.

"I don't want anything from them, Sakuma," he said.

I could feel the slightest hint of body heat through the fabric of his shirt.

"*You're* the one I'm really after."

***

Wow, Ushio. Sounds like you've got a major crush on this Sakuma guy, huh?

Ha ha… Hey, don't make that face.

I can tell just from lookin' at ya—your face lights up whenever you talk about him. Pretty stark contrast from how bored you always look on our *dates.*

What's that? "Don't call them dates"? Why not? I mean, we're gonna be boyfriend and girlfriend sooner or later, aren't we? So why does it matter?

Yeah, I know. Don't worry, I remember what the deal was. I've just gotta get first in our grade on the final exams, right? That'll be a

piece o' cake. Small price to pay for the right to go out with a girl like you, heh.

So tell me a little more about this Sakuma guy. I know you said he was a real troublemaker in elementary school… Kinda got the impression that he was a little bit of a lovable idiot back then. But what about now?

Ah ha ha, dang. That's pretty harsh.

And you still wanna date the guy?

Nah, c'mon. No need to deny it. I can tell you've totally got the hots for him. Makes me a little jealous, to tell ya the truth, but now you've got me kinda interested in the guy. Maybe I'll try chatting him up next time I see him…

Oh yeah? Is that right?

Heh, that's funny. People say that about me *all the time too… That I can't take a hint to save my life. Maybe me and this Sakuma fella have more in common than I expected.*

Sure hope he and I get along. Feel like we could be real *good friends someday.*

***

"Uh, what?"

My grip on Sera's collar slipped, and I took a step back.

"You're 'after' me…?" I said. "What the hell do you mean by that?"

Sera was smiling. It was a gentle smile, as though he'd just inhaled the fragrance of a delicate flower and was now admiring it from afar.

"You remember Eriri-chan, Yuzu-san, and Nagi-chan, don't you? I'm saying I wanna add your name to that list."

"Are you screwing with me right now?"

My brain refused to compute this, not that there was any need to. This was exactly what he always did: try to stir up my emotions just to mess with my head.

"Not at all," said Sera. "I really like you a lot, Sakuma. I want us to be together."

"…It almost sounds like you're asking me out, dude."

"Yeah, because I am. Was that not clear enough? Though to be fair, I'm not sayin' I wanna make out or start doing flirty stuff with you or nothin'. Sorry to get your hopes up, if that's what you were lookin' for."

"Of course not, dumbass. Don't make me punch you in the face."

"Have to admit, I was only mildly interested in you at first, based on the stories Ushio told me. But after I actually started talking to you, I just couldn't fight the urge anymore—I *had* to dismantle your safe little worldview and twist your moral compass no matter what. And that's why I want you to join our little 'team,' as Yuzu-san described it."

"Not in a million years," I said automatically.

This was such a ridiculous proposal that I was more baffled than upset. But also, there wasn't a shred of sincerity in his voice—so of course I didn't take it seriously.

"What the hell kind of offer is that?" I pressed. "What is this, the last cutscene before the final battle in an RPG? 'Join me, and together we can rule the world'? Yeah, thanks but no thanks, Mr. Demon Lord. I didn't come this far just to throw it all away."

"I like to think I'd be more of a 'evil jester' type boss, personally," said Sera.

"Whatever. My answer's the same regardless: I'd never join up with the likes of you. Not even if hell froze over and the heavens came crashing down to earth."

"I see. Well, that's a shame."

Sera sighed and lifted his face to the sky. While I couldn't see his expression, he seemed genuinely disappointed—though this was probably just an act too.

Eventually, he lowered his gaze back to me, scratched the back of his head, and said, "What if I told you Ushio's planning to break up with you? Still a no, then?"

The very next moment.

The raging tempest ceased in an instant, and the whole world fell silent all at once.

As if I'd suddenly been cast into some weightless dimension frozen in time.

I thought I had to be hallucinating.

"I wasn't just pushing your buttons when I said your relationship's doomed to fall apart," said Sera. "I can say it with one hundred percent certainty."

A glimmering speck passed before my eyes—a snowflake dancing on the breeze, drawing a meandering, horizontal path from one end of my vision to the other.

"…And what makes you so sure, huh?" I asked, my tongue feeling unusually dry.

"Correct me if I'm wrong here," said Sera, "but you two agreed to keep your relationship a secret at first, didn't you? And yet, when I caught you walking around town together and asked if you were out on a date, Ushio admitted to it right away. Why do you think she'd do that? She must've had some reason for it."

"I mean, yeah? You goaded her into saying it."

"You sure that's all it was? Because if you ask me, it's kinda weird to go walking around our little downtown together looking like a couple in the first place if you *really* wanted to keep your relationship a secret. Tsubakioka's a pretty small place, with not a whole lot to do, so of course someone was gonna catch you red-

handed sooner or later. Smart girl like Ushio should've known better than to risk being seen by a guy like me."

Sera started walking. He stepped right past me to gaze out over the Sea of Japan, then stretched his arms wide as if to embrace the wind.

"Me personally? I think she was looking for an excuse to break up with you," he continued. "Get people to start spreading rumors and looking at you two funny…so she could turn around and say she wasn't comfortable with all the unwanted attention and suggest you break it off."

"You're jumping to way too many conclusions," I said, speaking to him as he stood there with his arms out and his back to me. "That doesn't prove anything—and you're not even focusing on the important part. You can overanalyze her behavior and say there were signs of her looking for an 'easy out' or whatever, but that theory doesn't hold much water if you don't also have an explanation as to *why* she'd want to break up with me so badly. And I'm pretty sure you can't answer that one."

"You're right. I don't have a solid answer for you there," Sera conceded, turning back around. "But I know for a fact that she wants to. Because she told me so herself."

"Liar. Now you're just making stuff up."

"I promise you, I'm not. I asked her about it in her room the other night before you came over and we played cards 'cause I could tell something was bothering her, and I was pretty sure you two wouldn't last long in the first place. Figured maybe she was thinking about calling it quits, so I pressed her on it a little bit. And when I told her all that stuff I noticed about her behavior, and my theory for why she didn't keep her mouth shut when I asked if you two were dating, she finally fessed up to it."

"I don't think I can keep doing this much longer."

I thought back on the confession she'd made to both of us the very same night, after losing that last round of cards. I could still

feel each word and every syllable eating away at me, like some slow-acting poison coursing its way through my body.

"That can't be true," I said. "She'd never confide in a guy like you."

"If you don't wanna believe me, that's up to you," said Sera. "Either way, you're gonna find out the hard way before too long, whether you like it or not."

The bitter cold from the hard ground seeped into my shoes, numbing my toes. It didn't feel comfortable. It didn't feel right. And yet, it was like someone had bolted my feet to the spot, and I couldn't move an inch.

All of a sudden, Sera let out an amused chuckle.

"What's so funny, huh?" I asked.

"Your *face*," he said, pointing—his tone so sickeningly sweet that you'd think he was trying to flirt. "That frustrated, baffled, crestfallen expression you always get whenever you know you're cornered, but still want to stand your ground, but can't think of a single word to say… God, I love it so much. I can't ever get enough of it."

A truly vile thing to confess.

I could feel a chill at my core as my body grew colder from the inside out. It was like the frigid air I'd breathed into my lungs had escaped and was now creeping through each of my organs. I hadn't eaten a thing all day, but I felt like I was about to puke. I'd known all along that Sera was capable of this kind of sinister cruelty. It was the single, solitary truth about him that I'd carved into the very forefront of my mind, lest I fall for his trickery once again. Yet every time, without fail, I—

My cell phone vibrated.

I pulled it out of my pocket and flipped it open.

"Is it from Ushio?" said Sera.

It was indeed. She'd sent me a text message: *"I'll be waiting in front of the music box museum."*

"Yeah, it's about that time, isn't it?" said Sera. "Guess I'd better get you back to your girlfriend, shouldn't I?"

He started walking back toward the car, but I was still rooted to the spot. As he passed me, he clapped his hand on my shoulder.

"Wouldn't wanna waste what precious little time you have left."

***

I only vaguely remembered what happened after that.

For the entire car ride back to Otaru, I hardly said a word—opening my mouth rarely to offer an uninterested "yeah" or "cool" to whatever Sera was telling me, though I couldn't recall a single thing he'd talked about.

Once we made it back to town, he let me out of the car, and I headed straight for the Otaru Music Box Museum, which was apparently only a few minutes' walk down the road. I checked the time on my phone; I was running about ten minutes late.

It was neither as cold nor as windy in Otaru as it had been at Cape Kamui. But the clouds still looked ominous, with scattered snow flurries every couple minutes. It wasn't so bad that I needed an umbrella, but I wanted to reach my destination and get indoors as soon as possible.

After speed-walking down the street for a while, a building with an antiquated, Western-style exterior came into view, which I assumed had to be the museum. And sure enough, I spotted Ushio standing outside.

"Sakuma!" she cried out, running over as soon as she saw me. "I was starting to wonder if you'd ever show up. Is everything okay?"

"Y-yeah, just fine…"

I didn't even know how I should interact with her right now. While I didn't believe everything Sera had told me, it was plain as day that there was something bothering Ushio related to me or our relationship. And I was afraid to find out what that was.

Ushio leaned in a bit as if nervously gauging my expression. "Did something happen with Sera?"

"Uhhh…"

As I fumbled for words, my stomach growled, reminding me once again that I still hadn't eaten anything. I placed a hand on my abdomen to try to rub away the discomfort, and Ushio gave me a concerned look.

"Wait, have you not eaten lunch yet? God, the nerve of that guy… Dragging you off and then making you starve too. Ugh…" Her frustrated grumblings done, Ushio grabbed me by the hand. "Come on. Let's go get some food first."

"Wait, but…haven't *you* already had lunch, though?" I asked.

"Don't worry about it. I could eat a little bit more."

I felt a bit bad, forcing us to change our plans…but I supposed it was really Sera's fault, not mine. Yet I didn't even have the remaining willpower to resent him for it right now.

We found a seafood restaurant nearby and sat down at the counter. I ordered a salmon and rice bowl, and Ushio got a mini tuna sashimi bowl. It was our second time getting seafood together since we'd been in Hokkaido—and while I certainly wasn't sick of eating it, I couldn't say I had much of an appetite despite my empty stomach.

"So where did you and Sera go?" asked Ushio.

"This place called Cape Kamui," I replied. "Not sure if you've heard of it."

"No, where is it?"

I proceeded to explain that it was about an hour's drive out of town—and, in the process, that Sera was actually nineteen and had

his driver's license as well. Ushio's eyes went wide and she gasped several times as I gave her the rundown of my little adventure with Sera. While I did stress that it hadn't been an enjoyable experience for me by any means, I didn't touch on any of the things we'd discussed regarding me and Ushio.

Once our orders arrived, it was Ushio's turn to tell me about what she'd been up to all morning. She, Hoshihara, Mashima, Shiina, Todoroki, and Nanamori had gone on a little sightseeing tour around the city. They took a cruise down the famous Otaru canal, had an early lunch, then got dessert at the original LeTAO cheesecake bakery. Ushio showed me a picture she'd taken of Hoshihara smiling with her cheeks stuffed and a smidgen of cream on her nose. It was pretty adorable.

Loosing an exhale, Ushio set her chopsticks down. She still had more than half her bowl left, but it seemed she was already full. I couldn't blame her for not being able to finish her food, given that she'd had a full lunch and dessert already.

"If you're not hungry anymore, do you mind if I eat the rest of that?" I asked.

"Oh, sure," she said. "Go right ahead."

I took her half-eaten tuna sashimi bowl and wolfed it down. I wasn't all that hungry anymore, but I figured it was still better than letting it go to waste.

After finishing up and paying our bill, we stepped outside and headed back to the music box museum, which Ushio had originally been planning for us to check out together (hence making it our afternoon rendezvous point). Upon stepping inside, we found ourselves in a vast, two-story hardwood hall illuminated by the warm light of hanging bulbs and vintage table lamps, clearly intended to lend the place an old-fashioned, nostalgic vibe. I could already see a huge variety of different music boxes spread out across various display tables, their delicate chimes filling the whole place with soft music.

"Whoa… It's so beautiful," Ushio said in wonder as she leaned down to take a closer look at one of the nearby tables. They weren't just beautiful to listen to; many had very intricate and unique designs as well. There were jewelry boxes that played melodies when you opened them, ones with dancing wooden puppets that spun around and around, and even a fair few disguised as stuffed animals with winding keys embedded in their backs. Merely looking at them was a lot of fun.

"Dang, some of these songs are pretty recent," I noted.

"Yeah, interesting," said Ushio. "Though if I were going to actually buy one, I feel like I'd want it to play something a bit more classical."

"Totally agree. Modern music usually starts to feel kinda dated and tacky after just a few years, but classical stuff is considered 'classic' for a reason, y'know? Those songs have already *proven* they can stand the test of time without ever getting old."

"I mean, that's not what I was trying to say, really…"

Ushio picked up a music box with glass housing, the kind where you could see all the internal components while it played. She twisted the key a few times, and it played the opening song to a popular anime from a few years back.

"It doesn't matter if a song feels 'dated' or not," she said. "Plenty of people still listen to songs from the past few decades, or from when they were teenagers. One of the most powerful things about music is that it's like a time capsule in that regard."

"Y-yeah, I guess that's a good point too. My bad."

She offered a strained smile. "No need to apologize, silly."

Ushio set the music box down, and we ventured deeper into the building, with her making frequent stops along the way to check out any music boxes that caught her eye.

"Hmmm… I dunno what to get," she said.

"Oh, you actually want to buy one?" I asked.

"Yeah, as a souvenir for my mom. She loves this sort of thing."

I had a feeling that Yuki would love just about any gift from Ushio; I could already picture her smiling giddily down at a little music box in her palms.

"What about for Misao-chan?"

"I'll probably just get her a box of Shiroi Koibito at the airport or something. She usually likes getting treats more than trinkets. What about you, Sakuma? Shouldn't you be looking for a gift for Ayaka-chan?"

"Yeah, I dunno… I'm not really sure what kind of music she likes, honestly. Maybe I'll get her some sweets or something too."

"Fair. Well, you can still look around for yourself, I guess. Not a whole lot of places that sell music boxes back home."

When she put it like that, I felt like it would be a shame *not* to pick one up. And although I hadn't had any intention of buying anything when we walked in, I did have more than enough leftover spending money to afford one.

We spent about an hour perusing all of the music boxes they had on offer. In the end, both Ushio and I settled on the simple, see-through variety, which were reasonably priced and fit comfortably in the palm of your hand. I already knew exactly where I'd display mine in my bedroom once we got back home.

After leaving the music box museum behind, we headed over to the Otaru Art Base, and visited the Stained Glass Museum. Upon paying the admission fee and walking inside, we discovered that the interior was far moodier than either of us had been expecting. The dim lighting was a stark contrast from the brightness of the music box museum, but it served to emphasize the vibrant colors of the intricately crafted stained glass windows that lined every wall. It was a powerfully beautiful place.

"Damn… This is pretty incredible," I marveled.

I hadn’t said it expecting Ushio to acknowledge or agree with me or anything, but I did notice that she didn’t respond. I turned to find her captivated by the large stained glass window we’d just walked past, so I stopped to take a second look. It depicted a person kneeling in prayer before a grave marked by a stone crucifix —with what appeared to be an angel watching over them, just off to the side.

I checked the adjacent placard and learned that the piece was named *The Angels’ Prayers*. In addition to a description of the artwork, there was also a verse from the biblical book of Revelation: “Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.” This was apparently the message the artist had been trying to imbue into the work—though I had to admit, I didn’t quite grasp the significance.

“Dang, this one’s gorgeous,” I said, voicing my impressions softly because I wasn’t sure if Ushio wanted to be disturbed while she contemplated it. This time, she responded.

“Mm? Oh, yeah,” she said. “Sorry, I got kinda entranced for a second there.”

“There sure are a lot of these that are just people praying, huh? But I guess that was probably your only real option back then, when tragedy struck.”

“Yeah, maybe so. Now that technology and modern medicine can solve a lot of those problems, people don’t need to rely on faith as much anymore… Not that there isn’t still plenty of stuff like that nowadays, where all you can do is pray things work out.”

I didn’t say anything to this, and Ushio quietly walked down the hall.

By the time we left the Stained Glass Museum, it was already getting a bit dark. The snow had let up, but there was still a thick layer of cloud cover hanging over us. It was 4:30 p.m., about time for us to head back to the rendezvous point.

“Guess we should get going,” I said.

"Yeah, okay," said Ushio.

It wouldn't take more than ten minutes to get there, so we took our time. But we didn't speak a word the whole way. With cars constantly passing us by on the roadway, and the sounds of calling gulls and young girls laughing in the distance, it was far from silent —yet I could still vividly hear Ushio breathing softly through her nose. Which I supposed only went to show how mentally preoccupied I was with her right now.

Eventually, the rendezvous point came into view. I'd figured we'd be a little early, but there were already several other students gathered there and waiting for the bus.

"Sakuma," Ushio said as we made our way down the sidewalk. "We've still got some time to spare. Want to walk around a little more?"

"Sure, I don't mind."

We took a left at the next intersection and headed toward the bay. As we made it closer to the wharf, the buildings got larger and started to look more like factories and warehouses, and the streets became more deserted.

Eventually, we came to a dead end, where the sound of waves crashing against the breakwater grew louder and the smell of sea salt hung heavily in the air. When I looked out over the water, I could see a large ship making its way to port.

"Damn," I said. "Feel like I could totally see some yakuza thugs making back-alley deals in a place like this."

"Stop, you're gonna creep me out," said Ushio. "Besides, they usually wait until the dead of night to do those sorts of things. And I'm pretty sure they mostly use private dining rooms in the backs of restaurants and places like that these days."

"Oh yeah? Sounds like you know more about this stuff than I do."

"It's only because they talked about it in this manga I've been reading. I'll lend it to you sometime, if you want to check it out."

"Yeah, I'd love to."

For the past month or so, I'd been lending Ushio several of my favorite novels and manga, but now that she'd gotten back into reading, she'd purchased some new ones herself. It was a great feeling to share one of your hobbies with someone else and see them slowly get more and more into it.

"So what did you and Sera talk about, anyway?" she asked abruptly.

She was clearly trying to sound nonchalant about it, but I had a hunch that it had been gnawing at her brain all day. I could see a hint of anxiety deep in her eyes that she simply couldn't conceal. Something told me she wouldn't accept me trying to paper over things just to reassure her—so while I wasn't entirely ready to talk about it, I figured I should be open with her. Plus, I knew it was going to eat away at me if I kept it bottled up forever.

"He told me you're thinking about breaking up with me," I said.

Ushio sucked a sharp breath through her teeth, though it was barely audible. She opened her mouth to say something, then closed it again and hung her head. Finally, after another few seconds, she peered nervously up at me again.

"And…what was your reaction to that, Sakuma?"

Wow. So she's not denying it, huh?

I felt shaky on my feet all of a sudden, like I'd taken a blow to the chin. I'd never been slapped across the face before, but I imagined this was what it would feel like—both jarring and sobering at the same time. Still, I tried to hold myself steady.

"I mean, I took it pretty hard, obviously. True or not, the thought of you being unhappy in this relationship but suffering in silence was really upsetting to me, not gonna lie."

Not to mention the fact that she confided in *Sera* about this, of all people, before coming to me or Hoshihara to try to address it. But I didn't want to say this out loud, since I knew it wouldn't accomplish anything aside from making Ushio feel bad.

"That being said…" I did my best to conceal my dejection and stay relatively mature about all of this. "If you're already starting to feel like you want to cut things off…then maybe that's ultimately for the best. I wouldn't want you to stay in a relationship that makes you miserable solely for my sake."

I had to admit, I was largely putting on a brave face here, even if I meant what I was saying. But again, I didn't want to act pathetic by demanding an explanation or begging for another chance or whatever if she'd already made up her mind, since that would only make it harder for both of us to come out of this without any hard feelings. Because even if we *did* have to call this off, I wanted us to stay in each other's lives.

"It's not your fault or anything like that," said Ushio, and I could tell from her expression that this was no hollow consolation. "And it's not that I don't have feelings for you anymore either. Because I do, to be clear. It's just that, well…"

Her voice took on a slightly more depressive note.

"Now that we've actually started dating, it's kind of changed my perspective a little," she went on. "I mean, don't get me wrong, I've been having a really good time going out and doing things with you, getting food together, and stuff like that. I still feel way more comfortable around you than anyone else I know. At the same time…I can't help but feel like we don't have to be boyfriend and girlfriend to do any of those things. And if being lovers doesn't come naturally to us, then we might as well just be friends, y'know?"

I chuckled weakly at this, though I knew it really wasn't something to laugh about. Mainly because I agreed with her.

To be perfectly honest, I'd been feeling the exact same way—which was why I'd been trying to force myself on occasion to act

more like her boyfriend and initiate more couplesy stuff with her. But the very fact that I saw those things as some sort of "quota" that needed to be met from time to time in order for us to qualify as lovers was probably indication enough that we were better off just staying friends.

"Please don't take that the wrong way," Ushio said, her eyes pleading and sincere. "I know it might not be the easiest thing to hear right now, but…I don't think this has to be a negative thing. I'd rather try to look at it optimistically, if we can."

I could tell she was trying to be very careful and considerate with her wording—though I could not for the life of me imagine how she could possibly spin this in a positive light. I waited as she took in a deep breath, then looked me straight in the eye.

"Like, you know that phrase, 'more than friends, less than lovers'? I've never been a huge fan of it. Because it implies that there's some objective hierarchy there and that being lovers is strictly superior to being friends."

A sudden flurry of ocean air blew between us; I strained my ears so as not to let a single word get lost within the howling wind.

"I don't see it that way at all, personally," she went on. "It's not a 'better' type of relationship—or even a closer one, in a lot of cases. There are plenty of people out there who will always prioritize their friends over their significant other, as well as friends who've been through way more with each other than even their own families. They're just different types of relationships, not two different *levels* of a relationship."

"Yeah, I hear you," I said. Now I could see what she was trying to say: in her mind, going from lovers to friends wasn't a "downgrade," per se—just a simple change in label.

"This isn't me saying 'Hey, I think we should break up.' This is me saying we never *were* lovers, Sakuma—not really. We're friends. We've always *been* friends. And I don't want to risk our whole relationship by trying to mangle it into something it's not."

There was a weight to her words that reverberated in my ears.

When she was finally done saying her piece, she let out a long exhale, as if a large weight had been lifted off her shoulders. But it seemed her self-confidence had left as well, as she looked up to warily gauge my expression.

"So, um… How do you feel about that?"

"Believe me, I don't want to lose you as a friend either," I replied, and Ushio's gaze took on a shade of relief.

Truth be told, I was still far from satisfied. Not that I didn't agree with any of what she was saying; it *did* seem like the safest, most logical choice for us. Yet there was something about this explanation that I just couldn't swallow.

There was nothing inherently worse about being friends than lovers. Ushio was totally right about that. At the same time…hadn't she *wanted* us to be more than friends? If not, then why had she made advances on me in the past, like stealing my first kiss or asking me to hold her? Had she simply changed her mind about that in the short time that we'd been going out? In that case: Why? Was our romantic chemistry not as good as she'd always envisioned in her head? Was there something I'd done to make her lose interest? I could accept the former, but what if it was the latter? What if there was another reason she was doing this that she simply wasn't telling me?

I needed to clear that up before this was over, for the sake of closure.

"Can I just ask you one thing, though?"

I could almost hear Ushio gulp as her face went taut. "Sure," she said, nodding.

"Is that…really all this is about? You don't have any other reason for wanting to break up with me?"

Ushio's gaze shifted. It was only the tiniest of movements, yet it spoke volumes. My trepidation was beginning to turn to certainty.

"I really hate to say this, Ushio, but…I kind of get the sense that there's something you're not telling me. And if you're only keeping it from me because you don't want to hurt my feelings or whatever, then I'd prefer you just come out and say it. Because I don't think…I'll be able to put this behind me otherwise."

I had to be prepared for the worst too. But nothing worth having could ever be gained here unless we both were willing to bare our souls, for better and for worse.

"I'm not sure we can call ourselves best friends if we're going to keep those kinds of secrets from each other," I said. "I need you to trust me a little more than that."

The large boat just offshore blew its foghorn.

To me, its wail sounded like an omen.

"…What's *that* supposed to mean?"

Ushio's voice was trembling. She clenched her fists as if attempting to suppress her anger, but I could hear and see it all too clearly in her tone and body language. And it wasn't just pure, unbridled rage either—there was a sort of yearnful desperation to it as well.

"So I'm not even allowed to keep certain things to myself anymore? Is that what you're saying?" Ushio asked. "I have to be one hundred percent open and brutally honest with you at all times, even when I'm really not comfortable sharing how I feel? Any other prerequisites I should know about if I want to apply for the privilege of being your 'best friend,' Sakuma?"

I couldn't move a muscle; I felt like I was bound hand and foot.

"Since when does simply being friends with someone mean you have to air out all of your dirty laundry to each other?"

I couldn't even blink myself free from Ushio's exacting gaze.

"Is wanting to end things amicably really so wrong?"

Tears welled up in her ash-gray eyes.

I swallowed hard. My mouth was dry as a desert, yet my palms were sweating like crazy, to the point that it felt like I'd dipped them in a sink full of cold water.

Here I thought I'd been prepared for this to turn ugly—but now regret was already beginning to creep up on me. Could I salvage this situation if I apologized and took everything back right now? I wasn't sure. I couldn't even tell exactly where I'd gone wrong. But I was painfully aware that things were only going to fall apart at this rate.

Ushio wiped her eyes with her sleeve, then looked back up at me. "Okay, fine," she said, her expression cold as ice. "Let me ask *you* something, then: Do you actually even *want* to be in a relationship with me, Sakuma?"

"Of course I do."

"Oh yeah?! Well, in that case…!"

A massive wave crashed against the breakwater.

With tear-soaked eyes, Ushio gripped the sleeves of her jacket. "How come you looked so terrified…the last time we kissed?"

The last time we kissed—that was up in her bedroom.

On the night she helped me finish my winter homework.

No… You've gotta be kidding me… This can't be happening.

Had she been able to sense it all along, then?

"So what if I'm not sexually attracted to her?"

"Pretty sure Ushio would cry if she heard you say that."

How crushed must she have been when she realized I was forcing myself to do something I wasn't truly comfortable with?

"No offense, but you're kind of easy to read, Kamiki-kun."

Why did I ever think I could get away with faking it?

Ushio had seen right through me from the very start, yet she kept quiet and continued going out with me regardless—all while smiling and acting as though everything was okay, and there wasn't anything bothering her whatsoever. Hell, she even tried to *end* things in a way that wouldn't require me to ever find out she'd been in pain.

And I'd just thrown all her efforts and consideration to the wayside.

I knew I had to say something, but what?

What could I possibly say to her right now that would make things right? Simply apologizing like there was nothing we could do about it would probably only make her feel even worse. But I couldn't deny it, and trying to explain myself would be rubbing salt in the wound. I needed to think of something, and fast—there wasn't much time left until we had to meet back up with the others at the rendezvous point.

Ugh, goddamn it… Why am I always like this?

"Sorry," Ushio said softly, averting her gaze before lowering her head.

"Why are *you* apologizing?" I replied. "You haven't done anything wrong…"

"Neither have you, though. There's no one to blame here. It's just a compatibility issue, that's all… Or, no—I guess it's even simpler than that."

Ushio turned her back on me, ready to leave.

"It's just a matter of…sexual orientation."

She took one step forward, then another.

And all I could do was watch her go.

She wasn't out of reach just yet; if I really wanted to, I could easily run up and grab her by the arm and try to talk this out a little longer. But something told me that emotionally, she was already far

beyond my grasp—and no amount of begging and pleading could ever bring her heart back to me.

It felt like there was a bottomless rift between us. A chasm that, in truth, I knew had existed there all along, but had only grown deeper and more eroded with time. For so long, I'd done everything I could to bridge that gap and reach her on the other side.

But right now, I was too afraid to even look over the edge.

***

After returning to our hotel in Jozankei and eating dinner, I headed straight back to my room and started packing up my things. We'd be flying out from New Chitose Airport early tomorrow morning, so I figured I might as well make sure I was ready to go. Not that there was much to do aside from setting aside an outfit for tomorrow and packing up the rest of my dirty clothes, which wouldn't even take ten minutes.

"Ugh… Damn it…"

And yet, I was hardly making any progress at all. It was like I had to stop and let out a sigh of self-pity after each and every tiny action I took.

"Dude, shut up already," said Hasumi. "You're gonna depress *me*, at this rate."

I totally deserved this noise complaint. In fact, I was surprised he'd managed to endure my insufferableness as long as he had.

"Sorry…"

"If you're trying to get me to ask what's wrong, it's not gonna happen. So you'd better just come out and say it if you really wanna share."

"No, I wasn't fishing for sympathy, I swear."

"Then knock it off. Next time I hear you sigh like that, there'll be hell to pay."

"All right, jeez…"

Great, now I'd put a damper on Hasumi's mood too. What a horrible thing to do to him on the last night of his class trip. And after he'd already done me such a favor by agreeing to share a room with a loser like me. What a terrible friend I was; even *I* was fed up with myself. How had I ever become such a pathetic excuse for a human being?

Right as I was about to stash away my wallet in my bag, a pillow whizzed across the room and smacked me right in the face, hard enough that my brain practically rattled around in my skull. I lost my balance and almost fell backward onto my ass.

"Hey!" I shouted at Hasumi. "Why'd you do that?!"

"I told you there'd be hell to pay if you didn't knock it off."

"But I didn't even sigh!"

"You totally did, dude. You're just too off in your own little world to realize it. Hell, you're even talking to yourself way more than usual."

"What? I haven't said a single word, though!"

This time, he grabbed the pillow from my bed and threw it at me. Unable to dodge it in time, I took another clean hit to the face.

"What was *that* one for?!"

"I dunno. Just for being annoying, I guess."

"Why, you…!"

I tried to return fire, but he effortlessly caught the pillow in midair and threw it right back at me. This was enough to push me over the edge of irritation into straight-up defiance, so I cocked back my arm and chucked my next pillow as hard as I could, channeling all of my pent-up frustration from the entire day into a single pitch. And this time, I hit my target right in the dome. Now Hasumi was getting pretty ticked off as well; he didn't even throw the pillow back at me and instead came charging at me while swinging it like a flail.

"Hey, offside!" I shouted.

"Aw, put a sock in it," he replied.

The pillow war raged on. Feathers flew, sheets were scattered, and even our electric kettle got knocked off the counter. It seemed the battle might never end.

Until our hotel room door clicked open.

"Hey! Keep it down in here, you two!"

It was our gym teacher, glaring at us with a vein bulging from his temple. Hasumi and I immediately ceased hostilities and set our weapons down.

"You're high schoolers, for cryin' out loud," he said. "Quit horsing around like a couple of little kids. I mean, look at this mess… Are you completely out of your minds? You'd better clean this up. And if you start making a racket again, I'll make you sit on your knees out in the hallway until the sun comes up. You hear me?"

"Sorry, sir…"

"Yeah, 'sorry' is right. Now don't let it happen again."

He slammed the door behind him.

Hasumi and I both sighed at the same time, then set about cleaning up our mess. How had the room ended up in an even *greater* state of disarray when I'd only been trying to pack up my things? Truly a mystery for the ages.

After getting the place relatively back in order, I sat down on my bed. "Hey, Hasumi?"

"Yeah, whaddya want?" he replied.

Apparently, he was still a bit grumpy with me. He knelt down and grabbed his water bottle from the mini-fridge, then stood back up and took a swig.

"Y'know… I thought I was doing pretty damn good for myself recently," I said. "Finally figured out how to socialize and have a good time with other people without stressing myself out over every

little thing… Or at least it felt like I had, compared to back when I had basically zero friends whatsoever."

Hasumi twisted the cap back onto his water bottle and sat on his bed.

"But I had it all wrong. I didn't actually 'grow' or unlearn any of my old shortcomings—it was just that I had a good group of friends who'd always go out of their way to make sure I felt comfortable. It's like I'm finally seeing how everyone else around me is way more mature than I ever realized, while I'm stuck here being the same socially awkward, sniveling little brat I've always been."

I could hear the self-deprecation in my own voice. Actually putting all this stuff into words made me feel like a real piece of work—a complete and utter laughingstock.

"And because I didn't realize that any sooner, I've hurt somebody I really care about. It's like, god…what do I have to do to just grow the hell up, y'know?"

"Not my problem, dude," said Hasumi. This was a curt reply even by his standards; he really was pissed off. "Maybe you should stop feeling so sorry for yourself all the time, for one thing. It's like you're too drunk on your own misery to get off your ass and actually try to *do* something about it."

"Wha—?!"

This hit me like a bag of bricks. Of all the people who might have called me out on such a thing, Hasumi was the last person I would have expected—which was probably what made it sting that much harder.

"Look, I'm sorry I pissed you off," I said. "But you didn't have to go that far, jeez… You really hurt my feelings, man."

"Sorry. Won't happen again."

"Don't say it in the first place if you're just gonna apologize right away…"

"No, that's what you're *supposed* to do."

I cocked my head. “Uh, what?”

“When you hurt someone, you say you’re sorry. When your friends go out of their way to do something for you or make sure you feel comfortable, you just say thanks. It’s really not that hard, dude. *You’re* the one who’s making these issues way more difficult and convoluted than they need to be. Stop acting like some high-IQ, glasses-pushing bookworm character who can’t comprehend basic human emotions, and just be normal.”

This was surprisingly sound advice. And here I’d thought he was just going to shrug me off; I felt kind of touched by his thoughtfulness. However…

“Okay, fair. But why are you being so weirdly harsh about this?”

“Because you got us in trouble with the teacher.”

“You’re the one who threw the first pillow, man.”

“Yeah, because *you* wouldn’t stop with the whole ‘poor me’ act.”

“Trust me, if you knew what I’ve been through today, you’d—actually, y’know what? Never mind. This is a waste of our time. Let’s just drop it already.”

I didn’t need us getting heated about this again. If I ruined my friendship with Hasumi here too, then this would officially be the worst class trip in the history of forever. I rolled over on my bed and stared up at the ceiling.

“So what do you do in a situation where a simple sorry won’t cut it?” I asked.

“Keep apologizing until they forgive you, duh,” said Hasumi.

“And if that doesn’t work?”

There was a long pause before his next answer. “Try to talk things out as much as possible, I guess. If nothing else, maybe you can at least learn why they don’t wanna forgive you and go from

there.” Hasumi let out a great big yawn. “All right. I’m gonna go brush my teeth and hit the hay.”

And with that, he headed off into the bathroom.

“Try to talk things out as much as possible.”

Have a heart-to-heart, in other words. Maybe he was right and that was the only way to solve this. There was no trick or cheat code to easily salvage a broken relationship—you had to do it the old-fashioned way. But assuming Ushio and I did sit down and talk things over, what would be my ideal outcome of that conversation?

What kind of relationship did I really want us to have with each other?

What was Ushio to me? And what did I want to be to her?

***

“I mean, Kamiki-kun… You were always looking at Ushio-chan, not me.”

I thought back on the conversation I’d had with Hoshihara the previous night, down by the vending machines, after she overheard Sera reveal that I once had a crush on her. She told me it never bothered her, since she was confident I’d never actually ask her out. When I asked her why, this was what she told me.

“What?” I replied. “I don’t look at Ushio *that* much, do I?”

“You do,” said Hoshihara. “You always have, ever since I’ve known you. It feels like anytime I look over at you during class, or when we’re walking home from school, you’ve got your eyes on her. It’s written all over your face, like you can’t help wondering what’s going through her head at any given moment.”

“Oh, come on. It can’t be that bad, can it?”

“No, it’s that bad. Trust me on this one.”

Hoshihara pursed her lips around the plastic straw and took another sip of her Soft Katsugen—which was almost gone, judging

from the way she had to suck so hard and so loudly on it that the carton deflated in her grasp.

"Not to mention," she went on, "I think the only times I've ever seen you really down in the dumps are when you're stressed out about something related to Ushio-chan."

"That…I can believe, yeah."

"See? That's what I'm saying. So it's a good thing you never asked me out."

I knew better than anyone that I no longer harbored any romantic feelings for Hoshihara, but hearing her repeat this sentiment over and over was enough to deflate my self-esteem.

Perhaps sensing my inner turmoil, Hoshihara backpedaled a bit. "Oh, but I'm not saying I wouldn't be flattered, for the record!"

"Y-yeah, thanks. Appreciate you letting me down easy, at least…"

"No, I mean it! But like, think about it. Imagine if you and I *did* start going out, just hypothetically. You'd probably still be just as preoccupied with Ushio-chan, right? And assuming I was your girlfriend, and I started developing even deeper feelings for you, that would probably make me feel pretty jealous after a while. I might even start to resent Ushio-chan as a result… And that's the absolute last thing I'd want to happen, y'know?"

"Yeah, no, agreed."

She and I were on the same page there. Even if something happened that made Ushio and I never want to talk to each other again, I'd want her and Hoshihara to stay friends forever. I didn't want to have to watch them slowly detest one another, especially not over a guy like me. I'd rather go be a loner again, in that case.

"So, yeah! I think you going out with Ushio-chan was the right decision, at the end of the day," Hoshihara said with a cheery smile. While I knew she was being genuine, there was something in that unwavering certainty that made me feel a little uncomfortable, so I

took another sip of my Soft Katsugen. I still had more than half the carton left.

"I kinda wonder about that sometimes," I said, my lack of self-confidence rearing its ugly head. "Every once in a while, I get the feeling that I really don't understand her at all. Sure, maybe I pay a whole lot of attention to her, but that means nothing if I can't pick up on any of the thoughts or feelings going through her head. And sometimes I can't help but feel like our relationship is slowly swirling down the drain for some reason I'm too dense to comprehend… which only gives me *more* anxiety."

"Ooh… Does someone need a little relationship advice?"

"No, it's not that. I mean, I don't know. Maybe I do, I guess…"

It was an all too common refrain when talking about communication problems in a relationship: *"I can't understand what my partner is thinking half the time."* Even if I felt a little ashamed to admit it, I supposed it was something that just about every couple in the history of mankind had to deal with at one point or another.

"Well, if you ask me," Hoshihara said in a gentle voice, "I'd say you're doing just fine. Don't second-guess yourself so much, Kamiki-kun. The fact that you care so deeply about what other people are going through is one of the best things about you. I'm sure that if you keep paying close attention to her and trying to be considerate like that, she's bound to let you in and start opening up to you more and more. Plus, I mean…" Hoshihara hesitated a moment. "I'm pretty sure Ushio-chan's, like, *really* in love with you."

"You think so?"

"Yeah. I mean, don't tell her I told you this, but…"

Hoshihara chuckled softly to herself in fond reminiscence.

"Whenever she and I are alone together…it's like she can't go three minutes without mentioning your name. You're *always* on her mind, Kamiki-kun."

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As I lay there gazing up at the ceiling, my vision began to blur.

I couldn't let things end like this.

It didn't matter to me anymore whether we came out of this as friends or lovers—I just wanted to keep her in my life, and to be able to smile and laugh with her again when this was all over. In that case, would it be best if I went to apologize to her right now? But then, what would I even say? What if I failed to express myself properly and only ended up making things even worse? The thought alone was enough to make my stomach churn.

What if I just sent her a text instead? That would reduce the risk of me screwing up and saying something I didn't mean, at least. If I really poured my heart into writing an earnest, thoughtful message to her, she'd at least give me the courtesy of a response, wouldn't she? *Okay, let me try to draft something up really quick…*

But it was no use. I was too tired to think straight, much less compose a heartfelt apology. After the day I'd had so far—first being dragged around and forced to deal with Sera all morning, then having a tough conversation with Ushio about breaking up on top of that—I felt completely exhausted. The lingering soreness from yesterday's skiing lessons probably wasn't helping either.

All I'd wanted was to enjoy my class trip and make it an experience to remember. And while I'd certainly accomplished the latter, it hadn't been for the right reasons. If it ended like this, the only memories I'd have to look back on would be of things I wished I'd done differently. I didn't want that, and I was sure that Ushio didn't either. This was the first school trip she'd ever been on, and it would probably be her last. She deserved better than for things to end like this…as did I. What an absolute waste.

I wished we could just try again.

Start the whole trip over, from the very beginning…

If I had a second chance to do things right, I'd avoid Sera like the plague and just focus on enjoying my vacation with Ushio. I could do better next time—I knew I could. I'd make this class trip

one for the history books. Something we could *both* look back on and always remember fondly. But how was I supposed to turn back the clock? It wasn't like I had a narratively convenient time machine on hand or anything.

Ugh, this is so stupid… I need to stop fantasizing and face reality.

Of course there's no way to—

"Wait a minute."

I shot upright.

All of a sudden, a crazy idea had popped into my head. It felt absolutely insane, but if I could actually pull it off, it might be just the ticket I needed to salvage this whole vacation and make a last-minute comeback from the brink of disaster.

I might not be able to start this trip over from the beginning.

But that didn't mean I couldn't extend it.

***

I crept quietly to the door and out into the hallway, careful not to wake Hasumi. It was five o'clock in the morning, and the whole hotel was deathly silent. Although I couldn't imagine any of our teachers being up and on patrol at this hour, I avoided making a sound as I tiptoed down the hall.

In my backpack, I had only the bare necessities; I'd left my suitcase in the room, thinking it would be too cumbersome to lug around.

After sneaking all the way down to Ushio's room, I took a deep breath, then called her phone. I waited on pins and needles as it rang once, twice, three times… But she didn't pick up. It seemed she was fast asleep.

It was too early to give up yet, though, so I put my phone away and tried knocking on the door—loud enough that it would

hopefully wake her up, yet quietly enough that it wouldn't echo down the hallway. After knocking on both literal and metaphorical wood, hoping that no teachers or students would catch me up and about, I heard rustling from the other side of the door.

Okay, phew. Sounds like she's awake.

I lowered my hand and waited there anxiously until she finally got up and creaked open the door, peeking warily out into the hallway in her pajamas.

"…What is it?" she asked.

Ushio sounded pretty damn grumpy about having been woken up, judging from her voice being a fair bit lower than usual and a lot more monotone. It was almost enough to make me lose heart, but I couldn't back down now.



"Sorry," I whispered. "Do you mind if I come in for a sec?"

"Ugh… Yeah, all right…"

She let me into her room without any further explanation, which I attributed to tiredness rather than a sudden indifference toward the events of yesterday. She probably wasn't awake enough to even think straight yet either.

Ushio sat down on her bed. In almost no time at all, her body swayed from side to side, and it seemed like she was having an extremely hard time keeping her eyes open. She seemed cozy to the point of torpid lethargy; I remembered what she'd told me before about having low blood pressure in the morning.

"Sorry for dropping in on you without warning," I said, remaining on my feet. "There's something I really need to tell you."

Ushio looked up at me with a vacant, sleepy expression. I couldn't tell if my words were getting through to her, but I still wanted to vocalize how I felt.

"I'm *really* sorry about what happened yesterday," I said. "I know you said neither of us are to blame, but I was definitely the one in the wrong. I never should have said the things I said, and I've been kicking myself for it all night."

I clenched my fists and lowered my head.

"More than anything, though…I feel terrible for ruining your class trip. It was supposed to be a time for you to make really great memories with your friends, and now it's probably going to be a painful thing to look back on, thanks to me and my inability to read between the damn lines. I really hate myself for that. If I could hit some sort of reset button and do this whole trip over again, I would."

I lifted my head.

"But I can't do that, obviously… So instead, I'd like to ask you to give me a chance to make things right. I've come up with a whole plan and everything—and I think it might be our only shot at making

sure this trip doesn't end up being a total disaster after all. Would you be willing to come with me and let me show you what I have in mind?"

Ushio blinked at me a couple of times. "Sorry, I'm really tired… I'm not sure I follow…"

This was such a rug-pull response to my earnest appeal that I could have fallen flat on my face. To be completely fair, it *was* five in the morning; I was the one who'd woken her up when she should have been fast asleep, so I only had myself to blame. It was just unfortunate that we didn't have the luxury to wait any longer.

I sat beside her on the bed and took her hand in mine. It seemed this physical touch, at least, was enough to make her eyes open wide.

"There's somewhere I wanna take you," I said. "Will you come with me?"

"O-okay… Okay, yeah."

Her eyes wavered restlessly, but I'd gotten the message across.

Well, that's the first hurdle cleared. I stood up, and Ushio rose with me. She proceeded to stare at me expectantly, as if waiting for additional instructions.

"You'd better get ready to go, then," I told her. "Don't forget your phone and your wallet. You'll probably wanna pack your smaller bag to bring along too."

"Wait… Are we really going that far?"

I nodded. "Yep."

Ushio furrowed her brow suspiciously, but she didn't press for further details. "All right. Then just give me a few minutes, and I'll get ready…"

"Sounds good."

I stared at her and waited.

But she just stared back at me.

"Um, I need to get changed," she said. "Could you look the other way?"

"Oh, my bad!" I exclaimed, whirling around.

As I heard the sound of clothes rustling behind my back, I let out a sigh of relief. Thus far, the plan was going off without a hitch. I knew going in that it was a pretty big gamble whether she'd even agree to it or not, so this was very reassuring. But I couldn't afford to get careless either. I needed to watch my words and express myself adequately so as not to blow this opportunity.

Ten minutes passed.

"Ushio, you ready yet?" I called out.

"I think I'll need another twenty minutes or so," she called back from the bathroom. She'd been in there ever since she finished changing clothes.

"D-does it really take you that long to get ready?"

"Yeah, I'm putting my face on right now…"

Putting her face on…? Oh, right. Makeup, duh.

I couldn't recall whether she did this every time she went out these days, but if she felt it was necessary to make herself presentable, then all I could really do was wait—even though we didn't have a whole lot of time to spare.

Almost exactly twenty minutes later, Ushio emerged from the bathroom, fully dressed and prepared for the cold, with her big winter coat on and everything. She still seemed fairly tired, but I figured she'd start to wake up once we actually got moving.

"All right," I said. "Let's get going."

"Okay."

We stepped out into the hallway. It was still dark outside, but no longer the sort of hour in which someone might bat an eye at us being out and about. Even if we were spotted by one of our

classmates, it probably wouldn't be a big deal—though if a *teacher* found us, we'd have no choice but to call the whole plan off. Guiding Ushio by the hand as she rubbed the sleep out of her eyes, I hurried down toward the main entrance.

"Hey, wait a sec!" she said. "Should we really be holding hands right now? Won't that just draw even more attention to us? Plus, I mean…it's kind of embarrassing…"

"It'll be fine," I assured her. "There won't be anyone in the lobby at this hour."

We descended the staircase and walked out into the hotel foyer—only to be immediately greeted with an emphatic "Good morning!" by the receptionist at the counter.

"M-morning," I replied, chuckling sheepishly as we shuffled past the front desk. I tried my best to act natural, like there was nothing remotely suspicious about what we were doing. As soon as we made it outside, Ushio wrested her hand free and glared at me.

"See?!" she said. "There *was* someone there!"

"Yeah, I know… My bad…"

I genuinely hadn't expected anyone to be working the front desk so early in the morning; being a receptionist must've been a less cushy job than I thought. At least they hadn't accosted us to ask where we were going or anything, so all was well that ended well.

It was piercingly cold outside. When I lifted my head, I could still see stars shining vividly in the predawn darkness. It was a sight so beautiful, I nearly gulped in awe. This was my first time seeing the night sky up here in Hokkaido, come to think of it. I would have loved to stay and stargaze for a little while, if we weren't in such a rush.

"Okay, Ushio. We're gonna head over to the bus stop now, but it's still dark, so really watch your step. Wouldn't want you to slip and fall."

"Yeah, I know, don't worry. Wait… Why the bus stop?" Ushio's footsteps came to a halt. I turned to see a look of abject bewilderment painted all across her face. "H-hold on a minute. We're not getting on a *bus* right now, are we?"

"No, we are. Or that's the plan, anyway."

"Is that really such a good idea? Will we even make it back in time for our flight?"

"Nope. And we won't need to either."

This finally snapped her wide awake. Ushio gaped at me like I'd gone completely insane. I'd been planning to explain everything to her once we got to the bus stop, but it seemed I'd have to stop and give her the rundown right here and now.

"I'm not ready for this trip to end quite yet," I told her. "I want one more day."

"Okay… And what are you suggesting we do, exactly?"

"We're gonna go on an adventure together. Just you and me."

Her gaze grew even more dubious at this, so I proceeded to explain.

"I know this class trip hasn't really been that bad overall. Going sightseeing around Sapporo together was a lot of fun, and we've gotten to eat a ton of tasty food too. Even learning how to ski was way more of a thrill than I ever would have expected. And yet… I can't get what happened in Otaru yesterday out of my head."

Ushio narrowed her eyes as if wincing in pain.

"And unfortunately," I continued, "it's the painful memories that usually stick with us the longest. So in a few years' time, when all of the moments we had here start to blur together, we might find ourselves looking back on this trip and only being able to remember the negative stuff. That's the last thing I want—not just for me but especially for you… I couldn't even sleep last night thinking about it."

I took a step toward Ushio.

"I know I can't just erase the bad memories, but I'd like to at least try to overwrite them with something one hundred percent positive if we can. Which is why I want to throw caution to the wind and take you on our own little Hokkaido adventure, so we can make all sorts of new memories together here before we head back home."

My warm breath turned wispy and white in the early morning air.

"What do you say?"

I'd made my pitch, and I was mentally prepared for any answer she might give. But even so, the long silence that preceded her response was hard to bear.

"Why does everything have to be so *extreme* with you all the time?" she groaned, pressing a hand to her forehead as if she had a migraine. "Have you gone out of your mind? How are we ever going to explain to the faculty that we just…decided to skip out on the flight back home? It's not like they can refund our tickets at this point either, I assume… We'd be causing a ton of inconvenience for a whole lot of people."

She was totally right. Even I knew that what I was suggesting was stupid and irresponsible. But it was the only sliver of hope I could think to grab on to right now, given what little time we had left to make a course correction.

"You really want to do this, despite all of that?" asked Ushio.

"Yeah," I said. "I really do."

My mind was already made up. I knew full well that we'd get in a whole lot of trouble for it. And I did feel pretty guilty for pressuring Ushio to be my partner in crime. Nevertheless, my desire to turn this trip around for the two of us completely outweighed those concerns.

"To be clear, this isn't a request or a demand," I said. "Think of it as an invitation. You're free to say no, and we can both walk back

into the hotel right now. I definitely don't want to force you into anything."

"Oh, come on, Sakuma… You can't do that to me…"

Ushio gripped her sleeves and lowered her head, as if she was at her wits' end and had no clue what to do. I was asking her to make a tough decision, despite my claims of not wanting to put any pressure on her. But if we were going to do this, it had to be her decision too—or else we wouldn't have a good time. And so I waited patiently for her answer.

Off in the distance, a motorcycle thrummed down the road. I couldn't imagine it being some biker out on an early morning drive through the mountains at this frigid time of year, so I assumed it had to be someone on their way to work or already out on the job. If so, I had to commend their fortitude; I'd have a hard time waking up and braving this cold every single day.

So afraid was I of hearing Ushio's reply that my thoughts wandered off to focus on random things like this. Eventually, she lifted her head as if she'd made up her mind.

"…And you *promise* it'll be a good time?"

"I'll do everything in my power to make sure of it."

Her expression shifted at that. The pensive, anxious look on her face slowly blossomed into one of newfound, defiant resolve.

"Okay… I'll go with you, Sakuma," she said. "Because, yeah…I really don't want things to end like this either."

My blood raced through my entire body. It seemed my last-ditch gambit had paid off. And while I couldn't rest on my laurels just yet, she was at least giving me a chance to salvage things, which definitely boded well. All that was left now was to make sure the journey itself was as enjoyable as possible.

"Thanks, Ushio," I said. "Then we'd better head on over to the bus stop. If we miss this first bus, we won't make it in time for our connection."

"Well, you could've mentioned *that* part a little sooner! Jeez…"

We hurried down the road toward the bus stop. Neither of us said a single word along the way as we focused on putting one foot in front of the other. Which was the right call, since we barely made it in time; the bus was already waiting there on the side of the road. Almost immediately upon climbing aboard, my frozen limbs began to thaw and relax in the bus's pleasant, heated interior. I heaved a sigh of relief as we walked down the aisle to a pair of open seats. Since this was the first bus of the day, there were hardly any other passengers.

"So where are we going, anyway?" Ushio asked while we waited for the bus to set off. "I'm guessing somewhere other than Sapporo, if we have to make a connection."

Her voice had finally regained its usual, relaxed timbre. It was a fairly minor thing, yet seeing her comfortable was still enough to make me smile.

"Correct," I said. "Our final destination is Cape Soya."

"Cape Soya, okay… And where's that?"

"In Wakkanai."

"Remind me where *that* is, again?"

"It's at the very tip of Hokkaido."

"I'll just look it up myself."

Evidently, my explanation was insufficient. Ushio pulled up her phone's GPS and did a search for "Cape Soya." As soon as she saw its location on the map, she whipped her head toward me in disbelief.

"…You're kidding, right?"

"Nope. That's where we're going."

"Wh-why did you pick a place like that? It's way out in the middle of nowhere!"

"Just figured if we're gonna make it an adventure, we might as well go as far as we can, right? Besides, doesn't the thought of going *all* the way to the northernmost point in Japan feel kinda exhilarating? Plus, since it's a lot farther out from the Sapporo metropolitan area than Otaru, we should be able to see a whole lot of interesting scenery along the way… At least, I'm pretty sure we will."

As I made my case, I slowly began to realize how childishly arbitrary my reasons for choosing it as our destination were, and I felt a little embarrassed. I'd been dead set on it from the moment the idea occurred to me, but perhaps I should have considered a few other options too.

"I see," said Ushio. "Well, that *does* sound like a very 'Sakuma' adventure, I suppose."

It sounded like she was judging me a little bit, but the corners of her lips curled up in amusement all the same. While I didn't get the impression that she was as enthused about the idea as I was, it didn't seem like she thought it was a complete dud either. Once again, I let out a sigh of relief. *So far, so good.*

Assuming everything went according to plan, we'd make it to Wakkanai sometime in the early afternoon. Once we did a little exploring around town and had a chance to check out Cape Soya, we'd catch a flight from Wakkanai Airport down to New Chitose, then fly from there back to Narita. We should even *theoretically* be able to make it back home to Tsubakioka before the day was done. It was a rock-solid itinerary—though it was going to cost us quite the pretty penny. Thankfully, I had enough set aside in savings to cover it.

Or at least, I hoped I did.

We made it to Sapporo Station at around 7:30 a.m.

Our fellow classmates should've been up and out of bed by now, so Hasumi was probably wondering where the hell I'd gone. While I'd considered sharing my plans with him, I ultimately hadn't told a single person where Ushio and I were headed.

On our way to the bus terminal, I stopped at an ATM to withdraw all my savings, and then we bought ourselves a light breakfast at a nearby convenience store, as well as a few snacks for the road. It was going to be a long drive, so we needed to stock up on food and drinks while we could.

"Hey, look," said Ushio, lifting her head. "It's snowing."

I looked up to see snow fluttering like powder down from the sky. The snowflakes were big too, even if there weren't very many of them at the moment. There was already a decent layer of snow on the ground here in Sapporo, but it seemed it would grow even thicker today. *Hopefully the snowy weather won't impact our bus ride at all,* I thought to myself as we arrived at the terminal. There were several reception counters side by side inside the building, with fairly long lines in front of each one already.

"I called last night to reserve our seats," I said. "All we have to do now is pay and pick up our tickets."

"Wow, I'm impressed," said Ushio. "You really planned ahead."

"Well, yeah! I told you I was committed, didn't I?"

We got in line. There were still fifteen minutes left before our bus was scheduled to leave, so we had plenty of time to spare.

"All right, Ushio. If you wanna turn back, now's our last chance… Are you *sure* you're okay to do this with me?"

"Yeah. I mean, we've come this far, right? Plus, I've gotta admit—you've got me a little excited to see this 'northernmost point in Japan' now."

"Cool… Okay then. Glad to hear it."

At the very least, she wasn't begrudgingly coming along with me, and that knowledge was enough for me. Anticipation zipped through me; it was almost our turn in line.

"I'll pay for our tickets," I said.

"What? No, that's okay," said Ushio. "I can pay my own bus fare."

"Don't worry about it. I'm the one who dragged you out here, so let me foot the bill. I'll feel bad otherwise."

"It's fine, really. I know you can't have *that* much money to spare."

"Nah, I've got more than enough—just withdrew all my savings. Let me cover it."

"I said it's fine, Sakuma. Stop acting like you're my *boyfriend*."

As soon as Ushio realized what she'd just said, she gasped and covered her mouth. I had to admit, that one stung a little bit.

"…Sorry," she said.

"Nah, it's cool. I shouldn't have been so pushy. If you wanna pay for your own ticket, then yeah, that'd definitely help out. Appreciate you chipping in."

"Sure, don't mention it…"

It's no big deal. Don't let it get to you, Sakuma, I told myself as our turn finally came. Ushio and I paid for our tickets: two seats side by side at the very back of the bus. And just like that, two months' allowance went right down the drain.

Our departure time was fast approaching.

"I'm gonna go use the restroom real quick," I said. "You need to go too?"

"Oh, no," replied Ushio. "I'm good."

I headed into the men's restroom and stepped up to the urinal. As I did my business, a thought occurred to me: Which gendered bathroom did Ushio use in public places like this? I knew she used the girls' bathroom at school nowadays, but I couldn't recall her having to use the restroom a single time on any of our dates, for instance. Did she typically try to hold it until she got home? If so,

then I'd feel really bad for her… And it would also be mildly concerning from a health standpoint too.

Once I was finished in the restroom, I asked again, just to be safe. "You sure you don't have to go? It's gonna be a long trip."

"…Okay. I guess I'll go too."

So she *had* been holding it in, then.

Ushio headed toward the restrooms, stopped to cast a quick glance back at me, then walked into the women's room. *Welp. Guess that answers that.* A minute or two later, she emerged, looking somewhat uncomfortable.

"Were you wondering which bathroom I would go into?" she asked.

Urk… Was I that obvious? Lying wasn't going to get me anywhere, so I figured I should come clean.

"I mean, I was a little curious, I'll admit. But yeah, I figured you'd probably use the women's bathroom. If for no other reason than that you'd probably get some weird looks if you were to go into the men's room looking like that."

"I actually did keep using the men's room at first," said Ushio. "But you're right—people *did* give me weird looks, or tell me I was in the wrong bathroom, or whatever… So after a while, I switched over to using the ladies' room."

She said this almost apologetically, as if she was making an excuse for something despite doing nothing wrong. I could only assume she still felt some amount of shame using the women's restroom—though personally, I didn't see why it was such a big deal.

"To be honest," she said, "I don't feel comfortable using either, actually… Which is really annoying. Like, at least let me use the *bathroom* in peace, you know?"

"Yeah, that's rough," I said. "Can't even imagine…"

I had it so easy compared to her; it felt like I was taking the escalator to the top of a fifty-story building, while she was forced to take the stairs, huffing and puffing with every step. So many of the privileges and comforts I took for granted in my everyday life were a struggle for her to even attain. The thought made my heart ache.

We headed out to the boarding area and got on our bus bound for Wakkanai. After shuffling down the aisle to the very last row, we sat down, with Ushio taking the window seat.

Soon, it came time for the bus to depart. We were still the only two passengers aboard when the doors finally closed with a *psssh* of compressed air as the engine kicked on and the driver pulled out onto the road. That settled it: There was no way we'd be going back to Tsubakioka on the same flight as everyone else now. We'd successfully made our escape from the class trip and were now veering off into our own adventure.

"Man, my heart won't stop racing," I said. I'd never broken any school rules before, so the thought that we'd abandoned our whole group during the class trip sent an exhilarating chill down my spine. "Guess we're officially delinquents now, huh?"

"Oh, please…" said Ushio, rolling her eyes with a smile.

About ten minutes after our bus departed, my phone buzzed in my pocket. Someone was trying to call me. "Aw, dang. It's Hasumi."

"You going to answer it?"

"I don't think so… Then I'd have to explain everything."

Not only that Ushio and I had left to go on our own trip together, but that we were heading from Sapporo to Wakkanai and wouldn't be back in time for our flight. I didn't feel confident that I could succinctly distill all of those details in a way that he could understand and sympathize with. And even if I could, there was no telling whether he'd keep that information to himself or feel compelled to tell the teachers.

Eventually, my phone stopped buzzing. Shortly after that, I got a text message: *"Dude, where'd you go? We're all eating breakfast without you."*

"Damn," I said. "That's gotta be the first text I've gotten from Hasumi in *months*. He must be actually kinda worried about me…"

Part of me felt a bit bad for not even giving him a basic update—but a bigger part of me felt way too mentally preoccupied with everything else going on right now to really care. It had been quite the eventful morning already, and the full reality of what we'd done still had yet to completely set in.

"Oh, hey… I'm getting a call too," said Ushio. "It's Natsuki." She looked at me, silently asking what to do.

It would probably be a good idea for us to explain the situation to Hoshihara, at least—even if she might be a little hurt that we'd run off on our own without looping her in. I probably should have let her know last night, in all honesty.

"You should answer it," I said. "I think she deserves to know."

"Yeah, okay," said Ushio.

She picked up the call, and I leaned closer so I could listen in through the tiny cell phone speaker.

"Hey, Ushio-chan? Are you okay?" asked Hoshihara. *"Where are you right now? We're all down here at breakfast, and no one knows where you are. We're getting kind of worried."*

"Sorry, Natsuki," said Ushio. "It's kind of a long story… Are you free to talk?"

"Yeah, I'm just eating breakfast with everyone, like I said."

"Are there any teachers around?"

"Huh? No, not right now… Ms. Iyo's running around the whole building looking for you and Kamiki-kun, though."

"Gotcha." Ushio closed her eyes and slowly exhaled as if to muster her resolve—then opened them right back up again. "Listen,

Natsuki. I'll tell you what's going on, but I want you to promise me you'll try to stay calm. And if possible, I'd appreciate it if you could make sure that no one else overhears this conversation."

"Y-yeah, of course… Gimme one sec."

Through the speaker, I could hear the sound of Hoshihara pushing back her chair to stand up. I assumed she was moving to a more secluded location.

"Okay… I'm good to talk now, whenever you're ready."

Ushio proceeded to explain the situation—starting all the way back from the break-up conversation we had in Otaru, much to my surprise. It seemed she really did intend to tell Hoshihara everything.

Hoshihara, for her part, listened with rapt attention—at points gasping along the way in response to each subsequent revelation. Thanks to Ushio's skillful summary, the two managed to cover all the important bases in only about five minutes.

"Okay, got it. So in other words…you two are running away with each other, basically?!"

"Er, well, I mean… Mmm…"

Ushio glanced at me as if hoping I'd throw her a lifeline. Although I felt like Hoshihara might be interpreting this as more of a romantic getaway than it actually was, I supposed her assertion wasn't technically inaccurate, so I nodded.

"Yeah, something like that," said Ushio.

"Ooh!" Hoshihara squealed. *"Wow, that's so bold of you two! Sounds like you're in for a real adventure! I'm kinda jealous, honestly!"*

She was clearly excited for us. On top of that, she didn't seem bothered that we'd left without telling her, which was a relief.

"So I'm guessing I shouldn't tell the teachers about this, then?"

Ushio covered the mouthpiece of her phone and faced me. "What do you think?"

I'd already been mulling this over during the course of the call; it was something we had to be very careful about. "I think she'd better not, yeah. Don't want to put her in the weird position of having to communicate that for us, and we don't know if they'd try to call the transit company and get them to turn the bus around or whatever."

"Good point." Ushio returned to the call, saying, "Yeah, I think it would probably be better if you didn't say anything, Natsuki. And not just to the teachers but to our other friends as well. Though I do feel bad for making them worry…"

"Hey, no worries! I totally get it. You two made this decision for yourselves, so obviously you're gonna want to see it through to the end. I'll be rooting for you both!"

Ushio cracked a smile. "Thanks, Natsuki… That means a lot."

This made me feel warm and fuzzy inside too. Although I still didn't know whether we were making a wise decision, simply knowing that we had Hoshihara's support was enough to make me feel somewhat reassured.

"Oh, by the way, is Kamiki-kun there with you right now?"

"Yeah, he's right next to me," said Ushio. "He can hear you."

"*Okay, then I'll just say this to you both: Once you make it back to Tsubakioka, you'd better tell me all about your adventure. And if you're okay with it…maybe the three of us can all go out and get food again together sometime too.*"

"We definitely will. I promise."

Agh, damn it… I feel like I'm gonna cry. This sentiment from Hoshihara was so incredibly sweet, it was like the warmth of her goodwill filled my heart. That I'd somehow managed to become friends with someone as considerate and kindhearted as her was

one of the few accomplishments I felt were truly worth being proud of.

"Well, all right! You two have a great time, then!"

"Thanks again, Natsuki. Talk to you later." Ushio set her phone down in her lap, then gently exhaled, like she needed a moment to bask in the afterglow of this conversation. "We're definitely going to have to buy her a souvenir."

"Yeah, for sure."

I wondered if there was anything Wakkanai was famous for. I had no idea how prosperous of a town it was, but I was sure we could at least find a gift shop somewhere. All I could hope for was that this bus ride would fly right by so we'd have as much time to explore as possible. I was really looking forward to this; despite a few remaining anxieties and reservations, my mood was absolutely on the upswing now.

Though I would feel even better if this snowy weather would clear up.

***

8:21 A.M.

Once we made it out of the greater Sapporo area, we emerged onto the exact sort of long, scenic highway you'd expect from a place like Hokkaido. The road itself had been cleared away, so you could see the pavement, but everything else was covered in a pristine blanket of snow—though for me, this wintry landscape had long since lost its novelty.

Even after hanging up with Hoshihara, Ushio's phone continued to buzz every few minutes or so as our other classmates attempted to text or call her. After a while, she turned her phone off; I assumed she didn't have the heart to keep ignoring them.

As for me, on the other hand—aside from that initial missed call and text from Hasumi, no one had bothered trying to get in contact with me. While this didn't come as much of a surprise, it was so blatantly emblematic of the difference in our popularity levels, I couldn't help but feel a little bummed out about it.

Eventually, one more phone call *did* come through.

"Oh, dang. My phone's buzzing," I said. "Wonder if it's Hasumi again… Wait, huh?!"

"Who is it?"

"It's Ms. Iyo."

Ushio's expression stiffened. Honestly, I was a little surprised it had taken *this* long for the trip's head chaperone to try getting in touch with us. Breakfast had to be over and done with by now, so it wouldn't be long before she'd have to rally the whole group together to head over to the airport.

"…Are you gonna answer it?" Ushio asked.

"I mean, she's our teacher, so I feel like I kinda have to. And she'll probably just keep trying if I don't."

I definitely didn't want to pick up the phone, when I knew I'd only be in for the scolding of a lifetime. On top of that, I didn't know what to say to her or how much was safe to disclose. Sure, we could at least tell her our destination, but would that really be wise? What if they tried to head us off at the pass or something? Then again, maybe it was too late for that at this point; I couldn't say for certain.

Aw, to hell with it. We're gonna have to explain ourselves sooner or later, aren't we? Might as well get it over with, I guess.

"Y-yes, hello?" I said, answering the phone.

"Kamiki? Is that you?" said Ms. Iyo. *"Where are you right now? Are you with Ushio?"*

She sounded like she was at her wits' end; I assumed she'd tried to call Ushio first, then dialed me instead when it went to

voicemail, since her phone was off. Or, who knew—maybe she just figured I was more likely to pick up. Not that it mattered.

"Yes, we're together," I said. "And we're not in any danger or trouble, don't worry."

"You're not?! Are you sure?!" Ms. Iyo let out a heavy sigh of relief.

It was the truth; we weren't in danger. I supposed we *would* be in trouble as soon as the faculty managed to get ahold of us back home.

"So where are you right now? You need to hurry up and come back to the hotel. Oh, and we went ahead and took your breakfast to-go, by the way."

"S-sorry, but, um…I don't think we can come back at this point."

"Huh? Wait, what do you mean by that? Just where are *you two?"*

"Uhhh, yeah, so about that… We're kind of on a bus heading due north right now…"

"What? A bus to where?! How far north, Kamiki?!"

"As far north as the road will take us."

"And where's that, exactly?!"

"Look, we're really sorry, but…we're not gonna make our flight, so if there's any opportunity for you to refund our tickets, please go ahead and do so. We sincerely apologize for the inconvenience, but we promise we'll be back in Tsubakioka later tonight, so please don't worry about us…"

"Of course *I'm going to worry about you! What do you mean, you 'won't make the flight'?! This has to be some sort of joke, right?! You'd better tell me exactly where—"*

I hung up.

My hand felt shaky and numb as I held my thumb over the End Call button. It was the same residual numbness I'd felt after hitting a ball at the batting cages at a wrong angle, though this time I knew there shouldn't be any physical reverberations. Perhaps I was simply feeling the immediate repercussions of the major decision I'd just made.

"Ms. Iyo…didn't sound *too* mad, did she?" Ushio asked nervously.

"No. I hung up before she had the chance to really chew me out."

"Guess we'll have that to look forward to when we get home, then."

"Yeah…"

For a moment, I was a little worried as to whether this might affect my academic record. Then I remembered that Ms. Iyo was the same person who hadn't given up on Nishizono, even after she physically assaulted two different classmates. So although I was sure we'd be in pretty deep trouble for this, I didn't think we'd get suspended or expelled or anything like that…most likely.

"I'd better turn my phone off too," I said. "Don't think I'll have the courage to pick up again if she tries calling back."

"Great, now it's starting to feel like we really *are* running away together…"

Ushio said this in such an off-the-cuff manner that it was hard for me to tell what she truly meant by it—but it seemed safe to assume she wasn't being passive-aggressive or anything, at least, so I figured I should keep it nonchalant as well.

"Yeah, no kidding," I mumbled back.

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9:10 A.M.

After eating the sandwich I'd purchased at the convenience store before we hopped on the bus, I was hit by a sudden wave of drowsiness. It was hard not to feel sleepy when gazing out at the window at the unchanging snowscape from my comfy seat inside our warm, northbound vessel. I glanced at Ushio, who was starting to nod off as well.

Perhaps a little nap wouldn't hurt; this *was* supposed to be a six-hour drive. Truth be told, I hadn't fully registered how far away Wakkanai was from Sapporo until we'd gotten on the bus. It was hard to believe it was even possible to drive straight north for that long and still be in Hokkaido. I'd assured Ushio that this was going to be an adventure, yet we were going to spend most of that time in transit.

Maybe I should have chosen someplace a little bit closer. My ever-lurking self-doubt was beginning to resurface.

"Sorry, I think I'm gonna try to sleep for a bit," said Ushio, rubbing her eyes.

"Yeah, go for it," I replied. "We still have a long way to go."

"Probably another four and a half hours or so, right? Just gotta hang in there."

"Man, I feel kinda bad now. Shouldn't have picked somewhere so far away."

"It's okay. Too late to turn back now… You should try to get some rest too, Sakuma."

"Yeah… I think I will."

Ushio wished me good night, reclined her seat back as far as it could go, and closed her eyes.

I looked up at the large digital clock installed at the front of the bus. It was a little after nine; our fellow classmates were likely

on their way to the airport, if they hadn't gotten there already. Ms. Iyo was probably still pulling her hair out with worry about us. Curious, I turned my phone back on for a second.

Oh god…

I almost let out a gasp. Not only did I have about a dozen missed calls from Ms. Iyo, but there were also several from my home phone and my mother's cell phone as well. Ms. Iyo must have gotten in touch with my family already.

Great, now I'm gonna get in trouble with my parents too… Though that should've been obvious from the start.

"Hm?"

I'd also gotten another text from Hasumi about thirty minutes ago; I figured I might as well give it a read.

"Hey, I'm bringing your luggage home for you. You owe me big-time."

I cracked a wry grin at this. Chances were one of the teachers had probably ordered him to do this for me, but I took him going out of his way to let me know as a sign of Hasumi's overall good nature. I'd have to buy him lunch or something once I got back to Tsubakioka—assuming I had any money left by then.

All right… I should get some sleep too.

***

10:45 A.M.

With bleary eyes, I awoke from shallow dreams.

My lower back was killing me. I lifted myself up in my chair and stretched out a little—only to find that to my dismay, my limbs were numb and my joints felt stiff. How long had I been sleeping, anyway?

About an hour and a half, huh? That's a pretty good nap.

My body was sore, but I felt well rested. I wasn't the slightest bit tired anymore. Turning to my side, I could see Ushio gazing listlessly out the window. It seemed she'd woken up before me. I leaned forward in my chair to take a look outside. The weather had only gotten worse while I was asleep; it was practically a blizzard at this point.

"Dang," I said. "Getting pretty nasty out there, isn't it?"

Ushio turned to face me. "Oh, hey… You're awake."

"Yep, just woke up. You sleep okay?"

"Uh-huh. Only woke up about ten minutes ago myself… But yeah, I wonder if they might have canceled the flight in this weather."

I checked the time. Assuming it hadn't been delayed, our class's plane should have taken off a good while ago and been well on its way to Narita by now.

"Guessing they made it out okay," I said. "Besides, just because it's a snowstorm out here doesn't mean the skies aren't still relatively clear closer to Sapporo. Speaking of which, where even are we right now?"

I powered on my phone to check our current location via GPS. As soon as the screen lit up, I saw that I'd received several more missed calls from Ms. Iyo, though they suddenly dropped off about an hour ago—which I figured was when they'd boarded the plane. I closed out of these notifications and opened the map.

"Looks like we're coming up on Asahikawa," I said. "Which means we're about halfway there, finally?"

Our bus was scheduled to arrive in Wakkanai a little after one o'clock…so we were still more or less on track. Which shouldn't have surprised me—bus drivers up here in Hokkaido had to be more than used to driving in inclement weather, so this must've been just another day on the job for them.

Unfortunately, that assumption wouldn't last for long.

"Attention, all passengers."

An announcement rang out over the intercom. Up at the front of the bus, I could see the driver speaking into what looked like a walkie-talkie.

"Due to poor visibility, we'll be continuing to our destination at a reduced speed for the time being. Please note that this will most likely mean a significant delay in our projected arrival time, so be aware and plan accordingly. We apologize for any inconvenience."

The announcement cut off with a loud, staticky *click*. His voice was fairly dry and monotone, and he'd spoken rather fast, so it took my mind a moment to catch up and process everything he'd said.

"Sorry, did he say to expect a 'significant delay'?" I asked Ushio.

"He did, yeah," she replied. "Due to poor visibility."

It seemed even Hokkaido natives had to exercise caution when driving in these poor conditions, though I wondered how "significant" of a delay this might entail. It hardly ever snowed back in Tsubakioka, so I really didn't have any frame of reference.

"You think it'll take an extra hour or something to get there now?" I said.

"Probably more than that," said Ushio. "Maybe *two* hours, even…"

"Seriously? Dang, okay…"

And just like that, the schedule I'd laid out in my head crumbled to dust like a castle made of sand. *So much for my "rock-solid itinerary"… Way to go, Sakuma, you idiot.*

"Are we still going to make it home tonight?" asked Ushio. The doubt in her voice felt like a dagger straight through my heart.

"If it's really a two-hour delay, then it might be kinda tough."

"All right. Suppose we'll have to find a place to stay the night, then. Hope we have enough money to cover that."

"Sorry. This wasn't supposed to happen…"

The whole point of extending our stay in Hokkaido was to overwrite the painful memories from our class trip with positive ones. Now it was starting to look like we'd be spending most of that extra time trapped on a bus in the middle of a snowstorm. Hard to spin that as much of an "adventure," really.

"Don't worry about it," said Ushio. "You can't always predict the weather… Besides, you literally threw this plan together overnight, didn't you? Of course you were bound to make a few oversights."

I didn't say anything to this.

She was probably trying to make me feel better, but having my distinct lack of forethought pointed out to me only made my shoulders slump even lower. And it seemed Ushio picked up on this too, as a panicked expression crossed her face like she'd made a slip of the tongue. *Great. Way to ruin everything, Sakuma.*

"Hey, I know!" she exclaimed, clearly trying to dispel the awkward tension. "I've got just the thing to help make the time fly by."

She stood up from her seat and sidled past me, then pulled down her bag from the overhead compartment. After fumbling around inside for a few moments, she produced a small rectangular box.

"Ta-da!" she said. "Look, I brought a deck of cards!"

Yeah, no. She's definitely just trying to make me feel better.

Ushio was not the type of person who'd say "Ta-da!" under normal circumstances. While I appreciated the gesture, seeing how desperate she was to lighten the mood made me feel even worse. But I knew that sitting here and moping about it would only make her consideration go to waste, so I tried to psych myself up again.

"Ooh, good call," I said. "We should totally play something."

"Any requests?" said Ushio. "Not sure I know that many two-player card games…"

"You still remember how to play Speed? We used to play that one all the time back in elementary school."

"Yeah, I remember. Okay, let's start with that, then."

Ushio lowered her seatback tray table and started separating out the black suits from the reds. I was a little surprised to see she'd brought her own deck of cards; she must have been hoping there'd be a chance to play some games with her friends at some point over the course of the class trip. And technically she had—if you counted that unfortunate game of President we'd played with Sera the first night.

Ugh, no… Don't think about that right now. I needed to forget about Sera and focus on having a good time with Ushio so that maybe that memory could be overwritten too.

"Okay," said Ushio. "Are you ready?"

"Whenever you are."

At the count of three, we each flipped over the top card of our draw piles.

***

1:00 P.M.

"Marshmallow."

"Workshop."

"Pizzeria."

"Almond."

"Doorknob."

"Bobblehead."

"Doghouse."

"…Enough." Ushio let out a heavy sigh, then thunked her head against the window.

"Hamburger," I said.

"No, I mean I don't want to play word chain anymore," Ushio told me. "Why did we even start playing it in the first place?"

"Well, because we've already played everything else we could think of."

"Yeah, but word chain is, like…the most boring pastime in existence."

She sounded pretty fed up—not just with the game but in general. And I didn't blame her; we'd been on the road for nearly five hours now, and we still weren't even two-thirds of the way to our destination. We were going so slow that I genuinely thought it might be faster if we just got out of the bus and *jogged* the rest of the way there. It was an irritatingly restless feeling, but it wasn't like we could tell the driver to speed up when we could hardly see for more than a few meters out the window.

Sadly, the weather had only continued to get worse and worse, to the point that we were in a complete whiteout. It was a miracle that we were even making any progress at all. And aside from a couple of quick bathroom breaks, we'd been cooped up inside the bus that entire time. The only small silver lining was that because the bus was virtually passengerless, we had the entire rear of the vehicle completely to ourselves and were free to stretch and spread out as much as we wanted.

"Oh, hey. Natsuki just texted me," said Ushio, checking her phone. She'd turned the power back on permanently at this point. "Sounds like they made it back to Tsubakioka. She says the teachers just released them to go home."

"Dang, they made pretty good time, then." I tried my best not to think about how Ushio and I would both be back in the comfort of own homes right about now if it weren't for this stupid odyssey I'd convinced her to go on with me.

"Maybe I'll give her a call…"

"Hey, good idea. I wouldn't mind talking to her for a little bit."

Ushio scrolled through her contacts to Hoshihara's name, then dialed. The other girl picked up on the very first ring.

"Oh, hello?" said Hoshihara. *"Ushio-chan?"*

"Hey, Natsuki. We're just kinda bored right now, so we figured we'd give you a call. Sounds like you all made it back to the school okay, then?"

"Yep! I'm heading home now. God, it's been such a long day, though… I'm exhausted… But anyway, what about you two? Are you in Wakkanai yet?"

"No, we're still on the bus, unfortunately… It's kind of a blizzard out here."

"What?! Oh no! Seriously? Ugh, I'm so sorry. That really sucks…"

"Yeah, it's a bummer, all right," said Ushio—and all I could do was cringe with guilt.

"Right, that reminds me! I know I already mentioned this via text, but…is it cool that I reached out to Yuki-san?"

"No, yeah—it's totally okay. I appreciate it, actually. Thanks, Natsuki."

Apparently, Hoshihara had gotten in touch with Ushio's stepmother to let her know where the two of us were and what our plan was. Ushio hadn't asked her to do this; it was something she'd done entirely of her own initiative, under the supposition that we were going to have to tell our families the truth sooner or later.

"Although I am a little surprised you had my mom's number," Ushio added.

"Yup, we exchanged contact info that night you had us over for dinner. But we don't really talk all that much, heh heh…"

The unspoken implication here was that they *did* talk sometimes—though about what, I couldn't possibly fathom. *Now I'm actually kinda curious…*

"And how did things go on the faculty front?" Ushio asked.

"Things were pretty frantic back at the airport. But in the end, they all kinda gave up and got on the bus back to Tsubakioka. Even Ms. Iyo."

"Interesting…"

It sounded like Ushio had a theory about this.

My guess was that Yuki called Ms. Iyo and gave her the full story. Considering Yuki was Ushio's parent and legal guardian, it only made sense that she wouldn't just keep it a secret for us like Hoshihara had. Ushio probably recognized that as the inevitable outcome too.

"Apparently, there's never been a case of a student going missing on a class trip before. Bet you two are gonna go down in school history, heh."

"That's…maybe not what I'd prefer to be remembered for, but noted," said Ushio.

"Oh yeah—is Kamiki-kun there right now? Can I talk to him for a minute?"

"Sure thing." Ushio handed the phone over to me.

"Yes, hello?!" I said excitedly. Her voice was a breath of fresh air from the outside world on this dismal, dreary bus ride.

"Hey there, Kamiki-kun! How are you holding up?"

"Could be worse. Just kinda sitting here twiddling our thumbs, mainly."

"Gotcha… So how are things going with Ushio-chan?" she asked, lowering her voice.

So *that* was what she wanted to talk about. I couldn't speak *too* frankly with Ushio sitting next to me, so I didn't bother lowering my own voice to match and instead tried to answer her question in vague terms.

"Still relatively decent so far," I said. "Though I think we're both feeling kinda bored."

"Yeah, not a whole lot you can do on a long bus ride aside from plain old chatting, unfortunately… But I'm sure things'll start to pick up once you actually get there."

"Hopefully, yeah…"

Hoshihara hummed contemplatively to herself for a moment, as if she was about to say something, then fell completely silent. So silent, in fact, that I wondered briefly if the call had dropped due to poor connection or something. But right when I was about to hang up and try again, I heard a groan of dejection from the other end of the line.

"Ugh! Dang it… Sorry, I can't really think of any good advice to give you right now…"

Advice? Oh, right. Duh. For a second there, I'd almost forgotten that Ushio had told Hoshihara about the two of us breaking up, albeit in the form of a very brief summary during our last phone call. It seemed she was worried about how things were going.

"Well, I appreciate the thought either way," I said. "Always nice to have friends who are concerned about you."

"You sure? 'Cause, I mean, I know it's really none of my business at the end of the day… But yeah, I dunno! Guess I can't help being a little curious, ha ha."

I could almost hear her fidgeting nervously through the phone speaker.

"Anyway, all I'll say is to try not to dwell on things you could've done differently because hindsight's always twenty-twenty. You're gonna have regrets and what-if questions no matter what you do, so just own your decisions and try to focus on having a good time."

"Hey, there you go," I said. "That was pretty damn good advice, I'd say."

"Wait, really? You think so?"

"Yeah. I'll try to keep that in mind, thanks."

"Woo-hoo! Okay, I guess we're good, then! Could you let me talk to Ushio-chan again?"

Quite the change of tune. Honestly, I wouldn't have minded talking to her a little longer, but I relinquished the phone to Ushio regardless. My mood was already a whole lot lighter from this brief interaction alone.

Just own my decisions, and try to focus on having a good time… Yeah.

It was exactly as Hoshihara said: We were already in this mess, so all I could really do was try to make the most of it. I should be using this overabundance of time alone with her to try to talk things over, or chat about anything and everything, and try to mend our relationship and bridge the gap between us little by little.

All right… Hope you're ready, Ushio, 'cause I'm gonna talk your ear off!

***

7:21 P.M.

I stared blankly at the seat in front of me.

To my side, Ushio was doing much the same.

It was now six full hours past our original ETA.

And we'd been on this bus for nearly half a day.

Long enough for both of us to feel like zombies.

With more than eleven hours down the drain, I wasn't even thinking about having a good time, or how we were going to overwrite the bad memories, or anything like that anymore. All Ushio and I cared about at this point was getting the hell off this bus as soon as possible. Everything else felt utterly trivial by comparison. Spending such an exorbitant amount of time in transit was enough to break the psyche of even the strongest of people.

I stood up, stepped out into the aisle, and arched my aching back. My joints sounded so brittle as they popped, you'd think my entire body had begun to rust over. More than anything, it was my morale that had taken the biggest hit after sitting still for so long without moving a muscle or saying a word.

"You, uh…remember how they used to play *Doraemon* movies on the bus rides home from elementary school field trips?" I asked, plumbing the depths of my brain for literally any conversation topic.

"Yeah, I remember," said Ushio.

"And how they'd have that teeny-tiny monitor near the middle of the bus so the people sitting in the back could see? It would slide out from that little side compartment where it was hidden and into the center of the aisle, like, 'vreeeem!' Man, I always thought those things were so cool. Like some kinda TV from the future."

"Yeah, I guess."

"Do you have a favorite *Doraemon* movie, or nah?"

"Sakuma, please. You don't have to force yourself to talk to fill the silence," said Ushio, not even bothering to look over at me. "I'm not even annoyed or anything, there's just no point. Like…why waste your breath?"

Okay, yeah, I give up. She clearly wasn't in the mood for idle chitchat. Forcing a conversation would probably make her even

grumpier; better to just stop now while I was ahead and shut the hell up.

"…Looks like we're not making it home today, are we?" said Ushio.

"Yeah, probably not."

She looked over at me, visibly annoyed. "So what do you want to do about Cape Soya?"

"We should still check it out, at least. If we don't do that, it'll be like there wasn't even a point in us coming all this way."

"I mean, was there ever *going* to be?" Ushio gently closed her eyes and rubbed her stomach, saying under her breath, "Ugh, I'm so hungry…"

This wasn't the time to fixate on whether she was having a good time or not; her basic bodily needs weren't even being met. But there was literally nothing I could do about it, which made me feel utterly pathetic. Powerless. Weak. And then one by one, all of the negative thoughts and insecurities I'd been suppressing came rushing to the surface and overflowed—like someone had pulled the cork on my bottled-up emotions.

"God, what am I even *doing*…?" I muttered, chastising myself. "Feel like I don't even deserve to be your friend anymore at this rate, let alone your boyfriend."

Ushio twitched, then opened her downcast eyes with a sigh. "Stop saying stuff like that. I know you're just putting yourself down because you want me to reassure you, and I'm not falling for it."

"No, I mean it… I feel like I've lost every last shred of self-confidence I had."

"Oh, is that right? Well, suit yourself, I guess."

She didn't yell at me, nor call me pathetic—she just completely shrugged me off. This struck me as unusually cold for her (even though I knew I was kind of asking for it). Or maybe she didn't have enough energy left to formulate a more tactful response… In which

case, this might actually be a good opportunity to share some of the more vulnerable thoughts I'd been having about us. If she didn't have the energy to think too hard right now, then I might get an honest, unfiltered response.

"It's not that I don't *want* to do intimate stuff with you, for the record," I said. "It's more like…I just can't make myself feel the urge to, if that makes sense."

Ushio didn't say anything.

"And so, yeah… I don't really know what to do about it."

"I mean, I'm just as lost here as you are," replied Ushio. "We wouldn't be having this conversation in the first place if it were an easy problem to solve."

It seemed my intuition was correct; it sounded like she was willing to speak frankly with me about these kinds of subjects right now. I figured I might even be able to get away with pushing the envelope a little further.

"I wonder if I can, like…*learn* to be more sexually attracted to you, y'know?"

Ushio whipped her head around to glare at me.

Aw, crap… Okay, yeah. Way too far. Not sure what I expected.

"Don't say that to my *face*, you idiot…" she grumbled.

She was so right, I didn't even bother trying to backpedal; all I could say was sorry. Ushio pressed her cheek against the window as if trying to cool her flushed skin at least a little bit. Honestly, it *was* awfully warm in the heated cabin of the bus.

"You say you want to be 'more' sexually attracted to me," she said. "Does that mean you *are*, at least a little bit?"

Her face was still pressed against the window, and her voice was fairly even, so I couldn't tell what state of mind she was asking this question from. I figured I should answer honestly rather than try to think up some strategic play.

"Mmm… I think it's less of an overall sexual attraction thing and more just that I find certain things about you and behaviors of yours, well…sexy, I guess?"

"Like what?" Ushio instantly replied, practically cutting me off.

"Like, when you have your hair up and I can see the back of your neck, or when you wear those black tights under your skirt, or the smell of your hair…"

"Ew, gross…"

"Hey, *you're* the one who wanted to know!"

Ushio's shoulders quivered for a moment, as though she was chuckling softly through her nose. The tips of her ears were bright red, but I still couldn't see her face, so I assumed she might be trying to conceal her embarrassment. These sorts of girly mannerisms of hers were the things I really did find cute about her. Though it wasn't long before that redness faded, and her shoulders began to droop.

"But I guess my body's just a bridge too far, huh…?" she said.

This was it: that same bottomless rift I'd felt between us back in Otaru. She was sitting in the seat right next to me—in this tiny, shared pocket of warmth safe from the elements all around us—yet somehow, she felt light-years away. Like there was nothing I could possibly do to reconcile that divide. But even knowing it was futile, I still felt compelled to reach out a hand and try to touch her.

"Ushio, I—"

Just then, a little announcement chime rang out over the bus's intercom, and the driver took his microphone in hand.

"Attention, all passengers. We will be arriving at our destination shortly."

***

"H-holy crap, it's *freezing* out here!"

The cold in Wakkanai was far beyond anything I'd experienced in Sapporo, Otaru, or even Cape Kamui. The low temperature was bad enough on its own, but when combined with the strong winds and heavy flurries, it was like I could feel my face literally turning to ice with each successive microsecond of exposure. All of the excess body heat I'd built up on the bus was drained in no time, and now I felt chilled to my core.

I looked over to see that Ushio's teeth were chattering too.

"S-s-so what do we do now?" she asked.

"Let's get something to eat," I said. "I'm so hungry, I feel like I'm about to keel over… I know there's a ramen place nearby. You wanna just eat there?"

"Yeah, sure… I could go for absolutely anything right now, as long as it's warm…"

"All right, let's do it."

We made our way to the ramen shop from the bus terminal as fast as our legs would carry us. I'd already seared the map of downtown Wakkanai into my memory on the drive up here—not that it had been difficult to do, since it wasn't a very big place.

While it was only about 8:00 p.m., the streets were virtually abandoned, even right here outside the station. I supposed that made sense. Even if the locals were used to this kind of weather, that didn't mean they wanted to be out and about in a raging blizzard. If you weren't careful and got lost along the road, or tripped and fell somewhere, it might just spell your doom.

"You still with me, Ushio?" I asked.

"Y-yeah, I think so…" she said.

She was trailing a little bit behind—and she was in *way* better shape than I was. It only went to show how much of a toll our long journey had taken on her, not to mention the snow and hunger. That I still had a bit more energy than her was something I chalked up not to a difference in stamina but to my sheer, inborn obstinance.

I wiped the snow from my eyelashes. For a moment, I considered pulling out my travel umbrella. It was only one of those flimsy collapsible ones, so I figured it probably wouldn't be very effective in this weather. Plus, the snow here in Wakkanai was fairly dry and powdery, so it wouldn't make a huge difference in terms of wetness.

We made it to the ramen shop in about five minutes. It wasn't a long walk by any means, yet it was still enough to make me feel both physically and mentally exhausted. After patting the snow off of our clothes, we stepped into the restaurant. It was a fairly cramped space, with only counter seating. There were just two customers aside from us.

After taking a quick look at the menu, we both ordered the same ramen. I got mine with fried rice on the side, while Ushio picked the gyoza. Neither of us had the energy to talk at this point, so we sat there waiting for our food in silence.

"Here y'go, kids."

Yes… Finally, some food.

This was our first proper meal in almost twelve hours. My mouth had been watering so much in anticipation that I thought it might overflow, but I gulped it down and started ravenously slurping up ramen noodles instead.

You could tell that Ushio and I were completely famished from how fast we wolfed down our food. Finally getting to enjoy a hot supper after twelve hours trapped on a bus would have made even the most average bowl of ramen taste like heaven, and this one was definitely hitting the spot. The salty broth, the fatty sliced pork, and all of the other ingredients came together to fill my empty stomach with pure, unadulterated bliss.

I drank down every last drop of broth and didn't leave a single grain of fried rice on my plate. Neither Ushio nor I said a single word until we were both done eating. Only then, when my belly was full and my mind was at ease, did I finally break the silence.

"Okay," I said. "So what's our next move from here?"

"I suppose we'll have to find someplace to stay," said Ushio.

"Right. From what I saw online, a lot of places close for the winter. Even the business hotels here are either far from downtown or ridiculously expensive. I could only find one real candidate that was even remotely realistic for our budget, so ideally, that's where I'd like for us to stay, but…there's one small problem."

"What's that?"

"It's about a thirty-minute walk from here."

Ushio grimaced.

Back in Tsubakioka, a thirty-minute walk would hardly be worth mentioning. But as we'd learned on the walk from the bus terminal here to the ramen shop, these were not exactly suitable weather conditions for a leisurely stroll around town. We might even get frostbite if we tried to make an arduous trek like that right now.

"Could we just call a cab?" asked Ushio.

"Believe me, I'd love to, but…I barely have enough money left over to cover our hotel. How much do you have on hand right now, Ushio?"

"Ten thousand yen, plus some spare change…"

"Yeah, I think we'd be cutting it a little close…"

Mmm… What are we supposed to do, then?

Obviously, we weren't going to be making an arctic trek through the tundra or anything like that—but the cold and wind still posed a threat, even here in town. I didn't want us to have to batter our already tired bodies any more than we needed to, let alone risk one or both of us getting frostbite.

As we sat there mulling over our options, I noticed that the other two customers who'd been sitting at the counter before we arrived—a pair of middle-aged men—were now eyeing us curiously. They leaned in and whispered to one another.

"Wonder what brings a couple o' young folks like them 'round these parts…"

"Must have business up here or somethin'. Can't imagine what, though."

They were obviously talking about us. *Ugh… Man, this is uncomfortable.*

Judging from the look on Ushio's face, she'd overheard this too. They must've been able to tell we weren't locals based on our conversation. Now I was getting a little uneasy; perhaps we should've watched our words a bit more.

"Let's go, Sakuma," said Ushio.

"Yeah… Agreed."

It seemed we'd just have to brave the storm.

In the end, we opted to try making the long walk to the hotel after all. Thankfully, it was right along the main road, so we didn't have to worry about getting lost or anything, at the very least.

Braving the ongoing blizzard was another story.

I was cold. Maybe colder than I'd ever been. Even with gloves on, I could feel my fingers growing numb as my extremities slowly iced over. And my clothes weren't doing much to block out the wind either, so every gust sapped even more of my stamina.

"Huff, huff…"

I felt like a mountaineer making a push for the summit in the dead of winter. It hadn't even been that long since we left the ramen shop, and already I could hear Ushio's breathing growing haggard beside me. I wiped my wet face with my sleeve, uncertain if it was sweat, snot, or snowmelt at this point.

How much longer until we reached the hotel? I couldn't even make out what lay ahead anymore. Surely we wouldn't walk right past it without realizing it, would we? How did the locals here ever manage to make it through such harsh winters? It almost seemed

too hard to believe. Or had we simply been unlucky enough to come here during a once-in-a-blue-moon weather event? My thoughts grew more and more scattershot as my brain tried everything it could to keep my mind off the cold.

"You okay, Ushio?" I asked. "…Ushio?"

I looked over, but there was no one standing there beside me. My heart sank immediately, and all the blood drained from my bleary head. I turned to look back over my shoulder and could see a lone fuzzy silhouette standing stock-still in the snow.

"Ushio!" I shouted, hurrying back to her. "Hey, are you okay?"

"Y-yeah, I'm fine."

Her complexion was pale. She sure didn't look fine. I grabbed her by the hand and started forging ahead once more, trying my best to shield her from the wind.

"H-hey… Let go of my hand."

"It's fine. You can deal with it."

"We're not even dating," she grumbled.

Oh, for the love of…!

This did it. She'd officially set me off.

"Now's *really* not the time to be worrying about stupid stuff like that," I said, then tried to drag her by the hand behind me—only for her to wrest herself free from my grip.

"It's *not* stupid." She sped up and stomped right past me down the sidewalk, like a child throwing a tantrum. "It's not stupid at all…"

I didn't respond to this. Instead, I stood there a moment, then hurried after her until we were walking side by side again. But it wasn't long before Ushio fell behind once more, and I had to slow down to keep stride with her.

My phone had claimed it was a thirty-minute walk to the hotel—but that was assuming we maintained the same walking pace all the way there. At this speed, it might even take us more than an

hour to get there. Perhaps it would be a good idea to stop somewhere and take a quick breather. Unfortunately, all of the stores we passed by were closed up for the day, presumably due to the weather. And there weren't a whole lot of businesses around here to begin with.

Eventually, we took shelter beneath the overhang of a large building that appeared to be some sort of community center. It wasn't enough to block out the cold, but it at least gave us a chance to catch our breath without standing directly in the path of the blizzard for a short while.

"Ugh… What a mess," I said, patting the snow off of my jacket. When I shook my head, a full snowball's worth of powder came sprinkling to the ground. I looked over at Ushio to find that she had a huge clump of snow atop her head as well, but she didn't seem to realize it. So I reached out a hand to dust it off for her, and—

"Wha…?"

She immediately slapped my hand away.

I supposed I only had myself to blame for trying to touch her without stating my intentions beforehand…but this automatic rejection still stung quite a bit.

"You've…just got some snow on your head, that's all," I said.

"Well, just *tell* me that next time," said Ushio. "I can get it myself."

I averted my gaze. "Okay, sorry…"

The storm showed no signs of letting up. And while I knew we had no choice but to fly home tomorrow regardless, I was starting to worry whether things would even clear up by then. And whether we'd be able to visit Cape Soya at all, for that matter. I'd vastly underestimated just how bad winters could get in northern Hokkaido.

"…Maybe we should just call a taxi after all," I said.

Ushio cast a dubious glance in my direction. “I thought you said we don’t have enough money.”

“Yeah, but what’s the point if we can’t even make it to the hotel? I mean, worst-case scenario…I guess we can always pool our money to afford a single or something.”

“A single’s not going to sleep two people.”

“I know. So one of us will probably have to spend the night in the lobby.”

“Okay, that’s even *more* delusional.”

Ushio let out a sigh. Her eyelashes were caked with snow, and her lips were starting to turn a little bit purple.

“We’ve come this far,” she said. “We’ll just have to power through.”

“But…you seem like you’re *really* struggling already.”

“I’ll be fine. I’ve got a lot more stamina than you.”

“You were trailing way behind me, though.”

“That’s just my normal walking pace.”

“C’mon, Ushio… There’s really no need to be so stubborn.”

Her pale cheeks flushed red in an instant. “God, would you *shut up* already? I said I’ll be fine, so have a little faith in me, why don’t you?! Or, what—are you just trying to play my boyfriend again?”

“No, I’m just worried about you…”

“Oh yeah? Well, you know what, Sakuma?!”

She looked me dead in the eyes as she spoke, each word dripping with spite.

“We wouldn’t be in this mess right now if it weren’t for *you* and your bright ideas… So maybe you should just keep your mouth shut and let *me* handle things for once. Because all you’re doing is making this stupid trip even worse than it already was.”

I felt like I'd been hit over the head with a sledgehammer.

This was the *last* thing I wanted to hear her say right now.

The whole point of us coming out here was to try to overwrite the bad memories from our class trip with new and good ones. All I wanted, more than anything, was for Ushio to have a good time. But it seemed I'd blown my one opportunity to make things right… No, I hadn't just blown it—I'd put her through nothing but total agony.

First, I'd made her spend twelve hours sitting on a bus, only to then force her to trudge through a raging blizzard with me at the risk of both our health. Looking at it objectively, this was more like a funeral march for our dead relationship than a revitalizing adventure. I hadn't overwritten any painful memories here—I'd only tacked on even more. And it was my fault for getting carried away, wanting to do something just to selfishly prove that I had good intentions and could take ownership for my mistakes. Ushio hadn't asked for that. She hadn't asked for *any* of this. God, I was such an idiot. Just how long was I planning to let this unmitigated disaster spiral out of control?

"…Sorry." It was the only thing I could think to say.

We had to go. This break had gone on long enough.

I started walking in the direction of the hotel again.

"Hey, wait a sec!" said Ushio.

A few moments later, I heard her follow after me.

But I made sure to stay a safe distance ahead.

Because I couldn't bring myself to face her.

After walking straight forward into a raging blizzard for god knew how long, we finally arrived at our destination. The welcome heat in the hotel lobby quickly set about thawing my aching, frozen muscles until they were simply sore and strained. I didn't want to have to take *one* step back outside for the rest of the night. In fact, I was fairly certain I'd die if I so much as tried. We hobbled over to the front desk like a couple of malnourished castaways who'd just

seen a rescue boat approaching on the horizon, and the young female receptionist looked up from her computer to greet us.

"Good evening," she said. "Are you two here to check in?"

"Uh, no… We didn't make reservations," I said. "Is that okay, I hope?"

"One moment, please."

Oh man. What were we going to do if there were no vacancies? I'd figured there was no point in calling ahead to make a reservation on the day of, but maybe I should have… Thankfully, my fears were soon assuaged by a warm smile from the receptionist.

"Yes, we'd be more than happy to accommodate you," she said. "Will it be just the two of you staying with us tonight? What kind of room or rooms were you looking for?"

Phew, thank goodness… Though what *were* we going to do as far as the rooming situation went? I glanced over at Ushio to get her opinion.

"I'm fine with whatever," she said.

So she claimed, but we weren't even in a relationship anymore; I doubted she'd want to share a room with me if she had any other choice.

Or maybe I was just projecting.

The truth was, I didn't feel one hundred percent comfortable being in the same room as Ushio right now. And if she were to call me out again, like she had earlier for ruining her class trip, I might not recover from the emotional damage this time. So in the interest of self-preservation, as well as protecting Ushio from further grief, it fell on me to make the obvious sensible decision.

"Would it be possible for us to get two sing—"

"Oh, yes—we also have a couple's room available, if that interests you," said the receptionist.

"…Pardon?"

"It's a more economical option we offer for pairs of guests like you. It's essentially a single room, but with a three-quarter bed that's just large enough to fit two, if you don't mind getting cozy. The rate would be less expensive than a twin room or two singles."

Of all the places for our relationship to be tested, I hadn't been expecting it here. Until now, there hadn't been any tangible stakes involved in whether we still referred to ourselves as a couple—but now that we stood to gain something by saying we were, and we could really use the extra cash, I felt like we had no choice but to reevaluate. But setting the financial incentives aside, how would *Ushio* feel about this, realistically?

"Or, what—are you just trying to play my boyfriend again?"

"We're not even dating."

More likely than not, she wouldn't be okay with it. That wasn't something I was willing to risk for the sake of a good deal, so I figured we should probably nix the couple's room option. I couldn't imagine it would be *that* big a difference, and Ushio's comfort and privacy were more important than saving a little money, anyway.

"No, that's okay," I said. "I think we'd prefer to do—"

"We'll take the couple's room, thank you," Ushio cut in.

Baffled, I turned to look at her, but her expression was firm; she appeared to have no problem with this whatsoever.

"Very well," said the receptionist. "Now, since you both appear to be underage, I'm just going to need verification from a parent or guardian…"

Ushio pulled out her cell phone and gave Yuki a call. I was about to call home to my folks too, but they only needed one parental cosign. I assumed it was a formality to cover their legal bases.

In any event, I had no clue what Ushio was thinking anymore.

Not to imply that this was a particularly recent development, but still.

Upon receiving our key, we headed up to the room and set our bags down. The room itself felt surprisingly big, actually—though the bed was a fair bit smaller than I'd expected. There was no way two people could fit on it without sleeping shoulder to shoulder. Now I understood why they explicitly advertised it as a "couple's room."

"You can go ahead and use the shower first, if you want to," I said. "I've gotta make a quick phone call."

"Okay, I think I'll take you up on that," Ushio said, then headed into the bathroom.

As soon as she closed the door behind her, I pulled my phone out of my pocket. I only had 5 percent battery remaining, so I grabbed my charger out of my backpack and plugged it in. Then I scrolled down in my call history to the number I was looking for and dialed. The phone rang a few times before the other party picked up.

"Hey, Mom?" I said. "It's me."

"Sorry, who's this?" said my mother. *"Because I know* my *son just got home from his class trip and is upstairs in his bedroom right now. You must have the wrong number."*

Hoo boy… I could already tell that she was extremely pissed.

"Um… No, it's me, Mom. Sakuma Kamiki… Your one and only son…"

"Where are you right now?"

Phew. It seemed she was willing to hear me out, at least.

"We're staying at a hotel in Wakkanai. The original plan was to come home today, but then our bus got delayed…"

"And how exactly are you planning to make it home, if I might ask?"

"We were gonna fly back to Narita tomorrow. There's just, uh… one small problem."

"Let's hear it."

"Well, um…I'm kind of all out of money. So if you could do me a huge favor and just…transfer some funds into my account, I'd very much appreciate it, ha ha…"

I sounded like a wheedling swindler, complete with the awkward laughter—but it was the truth. After buying our bus tickets and paying for our hotel room, I hardly had a single yen left to my name. I probably couldn't even afford lunch tomorrow, or to go to Cape Soya, much less a flight back to Tokyo. Getting my mom to send me more money was simply an unfortunate necessity if we didn't want to get stranded up here.

"Sakuma… Do you have any idea how much it's going to cost you to fly from Hokkaido all the way down to Narita?"

"Uhhh… Like, ten thousand yen, maybe?"

"It depends on what airline you're flying with, but if you want to book a connecting flight from Wakkanai only a day in advance, well…it's going to cost you a whole lot more than your New Year's money, I can tell you that much."

"What?! Seriously?! It's that expensive?"

"You could save a little money if you were willing to take the bus or train back to Sapporo first, but yes."

"Dang… How do you know all this stuff?"

"Because I already looked into it. For your *sake, bucko."*

I could hear a distinct, blustery exhale on the other end of the line. It sounded like my mother was smoking again.

"Sorry, I think I've learned my lesson about long bus rides. If we have to turn around and spend another twelve hours on the road

back to Sapporo tomorrow, I'm pretty sure we'll both go insane, so I'd really prefer to just fly back from Wakkanai…"

"Do you really think you're in a position to be making demands?" I winced, sensing the lecture that was about to follow. *"You seriously don't realize just how much trouble you've already caused, do you? Can you even* imagine *how mortifying it was to get that call from Ms. Iyo? I could have fainted, I was so embarrassed. And on top of that, you had to go and drag poor Ushio-chan into this mess too."*

"W-wait, Ms. Iyo told you that?"

"No, but I just know this whole thing must have been your *idea."*

Leave it to the woman who'd raised me from birth to have me all figured out.

"How is Ushio-chan holding up, anyway?" my mother asked, suddenly sounding a lot more concerned now that we were talking about someone other than me.

"She's in the shower right now. We had to make a long walk through the freezing cold to get here, so we're both pretty exhausted, but I think she'll be okay."

"I swear, you'd better get that girl home safe, Sakuma. Even if it means you *have to stay behind and freeze to death up there."*

"Yeah, I know, Mom…"

"Don't disappoint me, Sakuma. Even though I know that's kind of your thing…"

She followed this up with another long exhale—though I assumed this one was just a sigh, not her having taken another drag from her cigarette.

"…I'll wire you the money tonight. And I'll go ahead and book your flight too, while I'm at it. Just be sure to check your inbox. I'll forward you the details."

"Wait, seriously?! Oh my god, thank you so much!" I cried. "Actually, hang on! Sorry, one more thing—we still want to go visit Cape Soya tomorrow before we leave, so could you please include a little extra money for that? Just five thousand yen should be more than enough!"

"Are you trying to piss me off now?"

"Look, I promise I'll find a way to pay you back, okay?! We just…really need to do this one last thing! I'm begging you here!"

I knew this was a huge ask, so I reflexively lowered my head in deference. My mother couldn't see this, obviously—but it seemed she could still tell how serious I was.

"Ugh… All right, fine," she said—and I jerked my head up in surprise. *"But for the record, I expect you to pay back* all *of this money before you graduate, so you'd better start thinking about getting a part-time job or something. And if you're not on that plane tomorrow, so help me, I'll sell every last video game you own."*

"Y-yes, ma'am. Copy that."

"…Anyway, have a safe flight."

And with that, my mother hung up the phone.

Well, that takes care of our money problems, at least. I felt like I owed my mother yet another life debt for this one… Though I had to admit, I'd had no idea just how expensive traveling to and from Hokkaido could get.

I put some hot water on using the room's electric kettle and made myself some tea. Before I could even finish my cup, the bathroom door clicked open.

"Sorry I took so long," said Ushio.

"Hey, no worries," I said. "Guess I'll—"

I couldn't even get the rest of that sentence out.

Ushio walked back into the room garbed in nothing but a bathrobe—its belt tied tightly around her waist, its lapels hanging

loosely over her partially exposed chest. Her cheeks were flushed red, and her hair was still damp.

"G-guess I'll go take mine now, then," I said, stumbling awkwardly over my words before scurrying off into the bathroom to conceal my bewilderment. Once inside, I locked the door behind me and took a moment to collect my breath.

J-jeez, man… She almost gave me a heart attack…

I should have known that they'd have bathrobes here and Ushio might see fit to use one after getting out of the shower, yet it had surprised me nonetheless. *Man, I forgot just how* revealing *those things can be…*

Wait, what the hell was I thinking about here? I needed to hurry and get myself cleaned up so we could go the hell to sleep.

I stepped into the shower and turned the handle, feeling the water quickly warm up as it cascaded down my shoulders. I wasted no time washing my body and my hair, then rinsed and dried myself off with one of the towels hanging nearby. Then I went ahead and donned a bathrobe of my own. I didn't find it especially comfortable, to be honest: a bit airy down below for my liking, and I wasn't wearing anything but underwear beneath it, so my thighs kept chafing against each other—but I didn't really feel like sleeping with clothes on tonight either, so it was the lesser of two evils.

When I walked out of the bathroom, I found Ushio blow-drying her hair.

"Wow, that was fast," she said.

"Yeah, everyone always tells me that," I replied. "But I *do* still make sure to wash behind my ears and everything, for the record!"

"I mean, I wasn't doubting that, but okay…"

She'd just finished up with the blow-dryer, so she handed it over to me. As I dried my own hair, she went over to the bathroom sink and brushed her teeth. Then, as if we were some sort of tag team, I heard her spit out her mouthwash at the exact moment I

turned off the blow-dryer, so I took her spot at the sink and brushed my teeth as well. This was the last thing I needed to do before I could finally go to sleep.

After rinsing my mouth out, I stepped back into the room to find that Ushio was still awake, sitting with her legs dangling listlessly off the edge of the bed.

Did she want to talk about something, perhaps?

"What's up?" I asked. "Not ready to sleep yet?"

"No," she said. "Just wanted to ask what the plan was for tomorrow."

"Oh, right. I still owe you an update on that, don't I?"

I'd completely forgotten. Now I felt a little embarrassed for anticipating anything else.

I flipped open my phone and checked my messages to see that my mother had forwarded me our flight number and boarding information. We weren't set to take off until midafternoon. *Okay, cool. We should at least have enough time to check out Cape Soya, then.*

"All right, so it looks like we're gonna want to take the bus up to Cape Soya in the morning, then head straight from there to the airport for our flight," I said. "I'll send you the specific times and everything later so you can let your folks know."

"Okay."

Ushio seemed a bit crestfallen; I sat down beside her on the bed and tried to gauge her expression. "Do you not *want* to go to Cape Soya anymore?"



I could totally understand that, especially after what an unexpectedly brutal day this had turned out to be. If she wasn't in the mood for even a short bus ride after that grueling delay, I couldn't blame her. I was borderline traumatized by it myself. Although…it was also possible she just didn't want to spend any more time with me. If anything, that was the more likely answer.

"No, it's not that," she said. "I do still want to go see the cape. It would be a pretty big waste not to, after we came all the way out here."

"Okay. Well, I'm glad to hear that."

"…I want to apologize for what I said earlier."

Ushio shifted around on the bed so her whole body was facing me. She looked me in the eye for a moment, then lowered her head.

"I shouldn't have said the things I said," she continued. "I was just frustrated, so I took my anger out on you. And I'm sorry."

"Hey, don't worry about it. Not like anything you said was wrong. It was a stupid, last-minute idea on my part, and it ended up being a total disaster. If anyone should be apologizing here, it's me."

Still hanging her head, Ushio gripped the bedsheets with both hands. "I mean, the long bus ride *did* suck, yeah. And walking through that blizzard wasn't my idea of fun either. But those things weren't painful for me in the same way that Otaru was. They were more like…the 'fun' kind of shared adversity, if you know what I mean. A bit like the school marathon, for instance. When you look back on stuff like that, all you usually remember is how hard it was, and how relieved you were when it was finally over—but there aren't that many people who will tell you they *hated* those experiences, even in spite of all those struggles. They tend to come away with a positive impression of the event as a whole."

"Uh, speak for yourself," I said. "I don't know about you, but I *despise* big athletic competitions like that. Pretty sure most kids do, honestly."

"Okay, maybe that was a bad example… I guess it's just people like me who enjoy those kinds of things." Ushio held her head in her hands. "Ugh, sorry… I know I'm doing a really bad job of explaining it…"

She was pretty frazzled. I felt bad for thinking this, but it was almost kind of cute to see her scrambling to get her point across.

"It's okay," I told her. "I get that you're trying to express that you didn't mean it, which is probably the most important part. And I can understand what you're saying about how certain kinds of painful experiences aren't necessarily as bad as others. If it makes you feel any better, I'm really not that bent out of shape about it."

Ushio looked up at me with nervous eyes. "You're not?"

"Well, maybe a little bit."

"…Sorry."

"Aw, c'mon. I'm just kidding." I flopped backward onto the bed, then pulled the comforter over me. "Anyway, we should get some sleep. Wanna be well rested so we can get up bright and early tomorrow to go see Cape Soya."

"Yeah, okay."

Ushio gently lay down as well, and I pressed the button embedded in the headboard to turn the lights off.

The three-quarter bed was decidedly not that big. When I scooted in toward the middle a bit because I had one leg and one arm hanging off the edge of the mattress, my hand brushed against hers. We were close enough that if one of us rolled over in their sleep, they'd definitely bump into the other person (or fall right off the bed).

I thought I'd be able to fall asleep right away, yet my eyes remained wide open. Maybe I'd gotten so much sleep on the bus ride that my body didn't need any more now.

"…You still awake, Ushio?" I asked.

"Yeah," she replied immediately.

She rustled around a bit. It was too dark in the room for me to see her, but I could tell from her breathing that she was closer to me now than she had been before.

"Guessing you can't fall asleep either?" I asked.

"Not really," she said. "Think I probably slept too much on the bus…"

"Same, yeah. Feels kinda weird not to be able to fall asleep when you know you're so physically exhausted, though, doesn't it?"

"Well, for me…it's not just that."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Never mind. Don't worry about it."

"You know, it made me pretty happy when you stepped in and said we'd take the couple's room earlier. It was kinda nice to hear you call us that again…even if I know you were probably just saying it to save us some money or whatever."

"It's really not that big a deal."

"You remember that time we got crepes on one of our dates? They gave us a couple's discount there too, didn't they?"

"That they did."

"It's kinda funny, isn't it? Being able to reap some sort of benefit just purely by virtue of 'being a couple'… I mean, it's not like you have to sign a legal contract or anything to go out with someone. It's just a verbal understanding between two people—yet it still can have tangible perks sometimes."

"I suppose so, yeah."

"So hey… Assuming we still go out and do stuff together after this…do you think it'd be okay for us to keep taking advantage of couple's discounts and things like that?"

"Is this a roundabout way of saying you want us to get back together?"

"I dunno. I'm not sure, really."

"You're not sure?"

"Lovers, friends, colleagues… They're all just labels we use to describe different types of relationships, aren't they? And I guess lately I've been starting to wonder…how much value there really is in making those kinds of distinctions. Like, what does it matter whether we call ourselves friends or lovers at the end of the day, y'know?"

"You're saying we should just *call* ourselves a couple because it means we can exploit the system and get better deals from time to time?"

"Yeah, kinda. I mean, there's no downside, is there?"

"…That's not right, though, Sakuma."

"Huh? Why not?"

"You're basically deceiving people for your own selfish gain at that point. You can't lie and say you're a couple to get a better deal when you're not actually dating one another."

"But, like, didn't we literally just do that to get this hotel room?"

"That's different. And these are extenuating circumstances."

"If you say so…"

"Besides, didn't you know? A lot of places will actually make you *prove* that you're a couple somehow before they'll give you the discount. Like, they'll make you give the other person a kiss on the cheek or something."

"Wow, really? Huh… I had no idea."

"And if you can't even do that, then you obviously can't call yourselves a couple."

"Right, yeah."

"But if you *can* do that…then I suppose you can call yourselves a couple."

"Hm? Sorry, did you just say the exact same thing twice?"

"No. No, I didn't, actually."

"You sure? Oh, wait. I think I get it now. You're saying you want me to give you a kiss on the cheek, aren't you?"

"No! Don't put words in my mouth, stupid!"

"I dunno… It kinda sounds like that's what you want."

"Well, it's not. Not even a little bit… And even if it was, it wouldn't matter…because I know *you're* not comfortable doing that sort of thing."

"Yeah, guess you've got me there."

There was a long pause.

"You're right," I went on. "Kissing *is* pretty uncomfortable for me, if I'm being honest."

"I know," said Ushio.

"But I'm totally fine with hugging or holding hands, for the record."

"That's barely even romantic, though. Plenty of people do those things with their friends, their parents, or their siblings."

"Okay, fair… But there are also plenty of people all across the world who do way more 'intimate' stuff than that with people they don't even know—whether they paid for it, or decided to hook up after a night out drinking, or whatever it might be."

"Why did this get far more explicit all of a sudden?"

"Look, my point is: It shouldn't just be about whether you're checking all of the boxes when it comes to physical intimacy. Merely doing those things doesn't mean you're in a 'more intimate' relationship, necessarily—it's the *emotional* connection that really matters. And when you truly get to know, and love, and cherish

someone on a deeper level like that, well…I feel like you have every right to call that a romantic relationship. Even if you've never kissed or had sex or whatever."

"And what if the other person wants more than that?"

"Then…I guess you'd just have to find ways to compromise with each other."

"Yeah? And how are you supposed to do that, exactly?"

I reached over and gently interlocked my fingers with Ushio's. "Maybe something like this, for a start?"

"That's just a plain old lovers' handhold," said Ushio.

"Yeah, see? It even says 'lovers' right in the name. Surely that makes it far more romantic and intimate than that three-letter word people throw around like it's nothing."

"Okay, *now* you're just playing word games with me."

"Yeah, I know… Sorry, do you want me to let go, then?"

"I never said that. In fact, I think I'll go to sleep just like this, so don't even think about letting go until I give you permission tomorrow morning."

"All right. I'll do my best."

"…And one other thing."

"Uh-huh?"

A pause.

"What's the one other thing?" I pressed.

"If we *were* to start going out again," said Ushio, "then I expect you to give me at least two hugs per day, minimum. Those are my terms, if you want to compromise."

"Okay, sure. I think I can agree to that."

"Well, go on, then."

"Huh? Go on with what?"

"It'll be midnight soon. Better hurry up if you want to hit that quota."

"Oh, I see how it is, heh heh… All right, all right."

I wrapped my arms around Ushio.

And the two of us stayed there like that for a time.

"Okay, good night," Ushio whispered.

"Night," I whispered back.

***

By morning, the snowstorm had completely let up. You could even see glimpses of blue sky from time to time through little gaps in the thick cloud cover.

Ushio and I were on a bus headed for Cape Soya. No delays as of yet; we were proceeding right on schedule. We'd make it there in about an hour, so it was only about a twelfth of the bus ride we'd taken the day before. I figured it would fly right by before Ushio and I even ran out of things to chat about.

And so it did.

"Whoaaa, holy crap… It is *cold* out here!"

Not to mention the wind! The windchill was so bad, I thought it might turn me into a popsicle! It was a little better than yesterday, since there wasn't any snow, but cold was still cold. I glanced up at the digital thermometer embedded in the gift shop's exterior and saw that it was -7 degrees Celsius. *Yeah, that's pretty frosty, all right.*

"Sakuma!" Ushio called out. "It says the northernmost point is over here!"

"All right, let's go check it out!"

Ushio was in unusually high spirits today. I followed her down the path, and a triangular monument soon came into view. Apparently, that was it. Perhaps due to the icy weather, there was no

one else around. I walked up to stand by Ushio's side, and she turned to look at me. Her face was beaming.

"Let's do this together," she said.

"Yeah," I replied. "Sounds good to me."

She held out her hand, and I took it in mine.

And together, we stepped up onto the platform.

This was it: our final destination.

Our adventure was finally over.

***

After making it back to Wakkanai Airport with time to spare, Ushio and I boarded our flight back to Tokyo's Haneda Airport. According to my mom, she'd opted for Haneda rather than Narita because there was a direct flight to the former, but not the latter.

Once we landed, we'd still have a long journey back to Tsubakioka, but it was nothing compared to the bus ride from yesterday. Thankfully, my mom had said someone would be coming to pick us up from the airport. I wondered who it could be.

"Kamiki! Ushio!" a voice cried out.

As soon as we walked out into the arrivals lobby, I spotted someone I recognized. *Wow.* Of all the people who could've driven us home, I hadn't expected Ms. Iyo. We did have the day off from school, to be fair—as a compensatory holiday since our class trip fell over the weekend. But it definitely impressed me that she'd sacrifice her time off just to come all the way out here and pick us up.

"Ms. Iyo!"

Ushio and I ran over to her.

"How are you two feeling?!" she asked. "You're not hurt at all, are you?!"

"No, we're totally fine," I said. "Flight was nice and smooth. Got plenty of sleep."

"Yeah, I'm okay too," said Ushio. "They even gave us lunch on the plane."

Ms. Iyo hung her head and let out a heavy sigh of relief. Seeing how fraught with worry she'd been filled me with a deep sense of guilt. She'd put in so much work to plan out every last detail of this trip to make sure everyone had a good, safe time in Hokkaido, and our sudden disappearance had clearly taken a huge mental toll on her.

"Kamiki… Ushio…"

She called our names, then slowly lifted her head. And when we saw the look on her face, Ushio and I both gulped.

"Do you have *any* idea how much trouble and stress your selfish actions have caused for those around you? And I'm not just talking about me either—all the other teachers, the hotel staff, and even your fellow students were running around desperately trying to find you. I mean, come on, you two! You're in *high school*, for crying out loud! How have you not learned to follow basic instructions yet?!"

I couldn't say a word to refute this even if I wanted to. Both Ushio and I simply stood there in silence and let her yell at us.

"We're not the only ones who might have to suffer the consequences of your actions either," she went on. "Because of you two, there's now a precedent for students running away in the middle of a class trip—which means that next year's students might not be able to enjoy *nearly* the same level of freedom and autonomy as your class did. But I'm guessing you weren't thinking that far ahead when you made this decision, were you?"

"I'm sorry, Ms. Iyo," I said. "But, um, I just want to say…none of this was Ushio's fault, really… I'm the one who forced her to come along with me."

"No, I'm not letting you take all the blame," said Ushio. "I agreed to go with you of my own volition, so I still bear some responsibility for that."

"I wasn't finished," said Ms. Iyo. "Don't interrupt me."

"Yes, ma'am," we said in unison.

She proceeded to chastise us for nearly another thirty minutes. Only after wringing us dry of every last word of apology we could possibly give did she finally let out a sharp sigh and place her hands on her hips.

"So tell me," she said, looking at me and then Ushio as her expression suddenly softened from that of a spiteful demon to a tender smile. "Did you have fun, at least?"

Ushio and I both did a double take at this—but once we realized this meant the lecture was over, we each broke out in smiles as well.

"Yeah," I said. "It was a really good time."

"I don't think I'll ever forget it," said Ushio.

"Well, then that's all that matters!"

Ms. Iyo's voice regained its usual cheer so fast, it almost made me wonder if her angry demeanor just now had all been an act she felt forced to put on.

"Now, come on," she said. "Let's get you two home."

***

On our first day back at school, Ushio and I were the talk of the class for a little while. People wouldn't stop coming over to us during break periods and pestering us with questions, like why we'd bailed on the rest of the group or where we'd run off to. But we were both determined not to say a single word about what actually transpired.

"Hey, leave them alone!" said Hoshihara, shooing away a herd of gossipers for us. "That's their business, not yours! Stop trying to interrogate them!"

As always, her undying friendship and supportiveness made me want to tear up. And thankfully—whether due to Hoshihara fending them off or everyone getting tired of asking when we clearly weren't going to give up any details—people stopped bothering us about it by the time fourth period rolled around.

During lunch hour, I stepped out of class to take a leak.

Hoshihara seized the moment to pull me aside. "Kamiki-kun!" She peered at me with a great big grin on her face and clapped a hand on my shoulder. "Looks like you actually pulled it off, huh?"

"Nah, don't say it like that," I replied, chuckling sheepishly. "I don't deserve that much credit…"

Evidently, Ushio had already given her the rundown. I felt pretty embarrassed to know that Hoshihara had probably heard all about my stupid plan and all its oversights, but judging from her demeanor, it seemed like she'd come away with a positive impression of how I'd handled things overall.

"See? I told you so, didn't I?" she said.

"Told me what?" I asked.

"That Ushio-chan's really in love with you, Kamiki-kun."

"Ohhh… Yeah, maybe she is, isn't she?"

"Ha! Is that a hint of cockiness I hear? Boy, you've really changed, Kamiki-kun…"

"Er, do you mean that in a good way?"

"Of course!" said Hoshihara—though her wording sure made it *sound* like an insult. "Just don't get too comfortable, you hear me? You two still have a long road ahead of you. It's not starting a relationship that's the hard part—it's keeping it going."

"Yeah, thanks… I'll take that to heart."

I looked Hoshihara square in the eye. How many times now had this sweet, brave, and bubbly girl come to my rescue when I really needed a friend to lean on? That day we'd randomly bumped into each other after school and traded contact info had to be one of the luckiest things that had ever happened to me in my entire life.

"Well," I said, "if things *do* get rocky between me and Ushio somewhere down the line…I hope you won't mind me coming to you for advice again."

"Absolutely! I'm always happy to lend an ear," said Hoshihara. "Anyway, I'll let you get going! See you after school!"

And with that, she trotted back into the classroom.

I continued down the crowded hallway toward the boys' bathroom. When I passed by Classroom D, I spotted Sera leaning up against the wall, as if he'd been waiting there for me. When we made eye contact, he cracked a wry smirk.

But I ignored this and just kept walking right on by.

"Hey, hey, hey!" he exclaimed, chasing after me. "You could at least stop to say hi, sheesh! No need to play so hard to get all the time!"

I clicked my tongue in frustration, then turned around. "What do you want? I'm really not in the mood to deal with you and your stupid bullcrap right now, okay?"

"Wowie, Sakuma… You sure have been getting awfully feisty with me lately, haven'tcha? Not that I don't *like* seeing you stand your ground for a change. It's kinda cute, actually."

"You say that like it's a recent development. I've never been afraid of you."

"Oh yeah? You sure about that? 'Cause I seem to remember you tried to run for the hills that time we met up and got coffee… Or was that just my imagination?"

Is he talking about the time he introduced me to his girlfriend squad? Yeah, pretty sure just about anyone would feel intimidated in

that *situation, buddy.*

"Why are you bringing that up again?" I said. "Just forget about it already…"

"No can do," said Sera. "I could never forget anything about you, Sakuma. I'll always remember every word you speak, every action you take… Forever and ever."

Now he was trying to sound ominous to creep me out.

I assumed Sera was also curious to know what had happened between me and Ushio on the class trip after we last spoke. There was no way in hell I was going to tell him anything about that. He was the last person in the entire world I'd want to know even a single detail about our adventure—mostly because I didn't want to give him any material he could work with to try to sully those precious memories for me.

"So how'd things go with you and Ushio, huh?" he asked, right on cue.

"Like I'd ever tell you."

"You two gonna keep on truckin'? Or did you already break up?"

"I don't have to answer that."

"Well, it ain't gonna last, I tell ya."

Sera grinned at me, but not in his usual smarmy, insolent way.

No, this smile was a challenge. An arrogant, undaunted smirk.

"Face it, Sakuma," he said. "You and Ushio are doomed to fail eventually. All you've done is delay the inevitable. Sooner or later, you two are gonna hit another brick wall in your relationship, and this'll happen all over again. In fact, I can guarantee it."

"Yeah, of course you'd think that. I know *you're* going to be doing everything you can to instigate some sort of conflict between us at every turn."

"Nah, you don't have to worry about little old me anymore."

This was a bald-faced lie if I'd ever heard one. Sera was the one who'd orchestrated the discord between me and Ushio on the class trip, after all. He was probably already slinking around behind the scenes, trying to get dirt on us or devise some new scheme to make one of us resent the other. He'd probably keep at it until the day we graduated.

"Hey, Sera," I said. "What do you say you and I make a little bet?"

Sera raised a curious eyebrow at this. "Oh yeah? What are we betting on?"

"On whether Ushio and I will still be together on graduation day."

"Hoo-hoo! Sure, I'll take that bet. You two won't last even half that long."

"And I say we'll last even longer than that."

Sera was now grinning from ear to ear. It annoyed me to no end to see just how confident he was that he had this one in the bag. "So what do I get if I win?"

"Whatever you want."

"Mmkay… Then I want you to take a video of yourself trying to eat a whole plate of spaghetti through your nose and then post it online."

This cheeky son of a… Well, whatever. Not like it matters, since I'm not gonna lose.

"And what do I gotta do if *you* win, Sakuma?" Sera asked.

I mulled this over a while. *What would I like to make Sera do?*

"Okay, how about this?" I said. "If I win…"

Interview Log



Interview Log

Fusuke Noi

Wait, you wanna interview *me*? I mean, I guess I don't mind, but…shouldn't you be interviewing *her* instead? Isn't that how these things usually work?

Oh, you already have?

Ahhh, gotcha. And now you wanna get everyone else's takes, okay. Fair enough. But are you really sure you wanna hear from me, of all people? I mean, yeah, there was a time when I used to think we had a nice friendly rivalry going on, and she and I did spend a good amount of time together back in freshman year, but…I really don't think I've got anything interesting to say about her, if I'm being real with you. Don't think I ever had a very good handle on who she actually was or what kinda stuff she was going through. And now we don't even talk anymore, so…

Wait, for real?

She asked you to come talk to me?

Huh. You don't say.

Okay, I get it now. Let's go ahead and do it, then. Though I'm honestly not the most well-spoken guy, so if you wouldn't mind, you know, editing my words a little on your end so that they sound a bit nicer before you publish this, I'd really appreciate it.

So, about Ushio… Well, I met her on the track team our freshman year, obviously, and she was easily our best athlete for as long as she was there. She started off as a short-distance runner, then suddenly pivoted to doing long-distance stuff after a while. She was great at both, though—set some really impressive school records that stand to this day. Her form was incredible too. She had,

like, this *insane* spring in her step on every single stride. But it was her hard work, more than anything, that really propelled her to a higher level. She'd always talk about how hard it was for her to crawl outta bed because of her low blood pressure or whatever, but she'd still show up bright and early for morning practice without fail. And even after she quit the track team, she still went out running on her own time every single day… Now that's *real* dedication, if I've ever seen it.

Did I look up to her? Yeah, I'd say so, at least to some extent.

She was a great sprinter and marathon runner, and everybody on the team liked her, even the upperclassmen… On top of that, she was one of the most popular kids in school, just in general. Obviously, back then, it was mostly with the girls fawning over her all the time… But now I think she gets a pretty equal amount of attention from guys and girls in that regard. She's got, like, a whole fan club of guys on the track team. Some of them joined specifically because of her, and she's not even *on* it anymore! All their locker-room talk can get a little grating sometimes, honestly, but I guess I can't blame them for being in awe of her. I mean, I kinda was too, for a long time…

Er, but not like *that*, obviously!

I just mean as, like…a fellow human being, y'know? She just has this magnetic sort of charisma about her. You probably got a little taste of that yourself when you were interviewing her, I'm guessing. Like, she has this really refined, almost delicate look to her, yet at the same time, there's this aura about her that *commands* respect. And boy, lemme tell ya, you don't wanna get on her bad side. That girl will really let you have it if you ever do or say something that pisses her off…

Although, I've gotta admit…there was definitely a period of time last year when she kinda lost that for a little while. Back when she first came out, I mean… Or said she wanted to live her life as a girl from now on or whatever. It was like she went from a superstar to an outcast literally overnight. And I guess seeing her so weak and

vulnerable all of a sudden… I dunno. It was a shock to the system for me, to be honest.

Like, I found it kinda hard to even look at her for a while afterward. Because in my mind, she'd always been this really strong person, and I didn't want to have to see her like that… Which I realize is a pretty selfish thing to say. But you know what I mean, right? It's like when your favorite baseball player falls off, or some scandal comes out about them that makes you see them in a totally different light. You never want to see someone you used to idolize lose the spark that made you look up to them in the first place, y'know? Pretty sure most people can relate to that.

Hm? Did I notice any signs beforehand?

Ohhh… Yeah, I guess there were a couple things, in retrospect. She always *did* seem kinda distant and closed off from the rest of us on the track team. Like, she'd never come along when me and the other guys would all go to take a leak together, for one thing.

But it was still pretty sudden and unexpected for me, I'd say. And for a really long time, I just kinda refused to accept it. Even tried to fight her on it, like that would change her mind or something… Which was pretty stupid of me, looking back. So you can probably imagine why we're not on speaking terms anymore—I was one hundred percent in the wrong there, no doubt about it. Can't even blame her for hating my guts, honestly.

But you're saying she specifically gave you my name, huh?

Yeah, I really don't know why she'd do that.

Is there anything I'd like to say? To Ushio, you mean?

Oh, right. Of course she's gonna see this eventually, duh…

Yeah, okay. Lemme see here, uh…

Hey, Ushio. If you ever feel like you wanna seriously get back into doing track and field again…just let me know. 'Cause I've been really putting in the work myself lately, FYI. Don't think I could ever

be as dedicated as you were, but…if you ever want a rematch, you know where to find me. Just don't expect to win so easily next time.

Oh yeah, and try not to hurt yourself, all right?

Toka Shiina

Yes, okay. I understand.

I suppose I can say a few words, if you like. I'm guessing you just want to hear any general thoughts or impressions I have about Tsukinoki-kun as a person, correct? I can certainly do that, though I can't promise I'll have anything of interest to say.

I'm, well…not the most eloquent person, let's put it that way. People always tell me I give off "smart-girl vibes" or what have you, but I don't consider myself all that wise or intelligent. I mean, my best friend Marine knows me better than anyone, and she thinks I'm a bit of a space cadet, actually. Anyway, all that is to say I'm happy to answer questions, but please don't get your hopes up for any profound insights, for example.

N-no, you're too kind. But thank you, I appreciate it.

Well then, um… Let's see… So I'm not sure if this will make for very good interview material, per se, but you probably noticed that I referred to her as Tsukinoki-kun a moment ago, correct? And to be clear, that's what I've always called her, ever since we first met and became friends in sophomore year. But I have to say that lately, I've been feeling more and more uncertain about it.

I don't think I even registered that I was doing it until about two months or so after she came out, at which point I was like, "Hm… Should I still be using masculine honorifics for her now that she's a girl?" I suppose it felt easier and more natural to stick with the status quo, so I didn't end up making a change. I mean, it's a little intimidating to start calling someone something completely different all of a sudden, don't you think?

Yes, thank you! It *does* take a lot of courage! I'm glad you understand.

My friend Natsuki calls her "Ushio-chan" now, but I don't think I'd want to use something quite so girly as that. Not because I don't see her as a girl, mind you—it's more that it sounds a bit too cutesy and childish for my liking. I've always thought of her as a very demure and elegant person, so I feel like something a bit more mature and ladylike would be a better fit, if anything. At the same time, she and I aren't that close to begin with, and she explicitly said after she transitioned that she really doesn't mind if people keep referring to her the same way they always have, so I feel I may be overthinking it and assuming it's a bigger deal to her than it actually is.

Also—sorry, this is a totally unrelated personal anecdote—there was this friend of mine back in junior high who had to change her last name after her mother got remarried, you see. Her new last name didn't exactly roll off the tongue. But most of all, it just didn't really fit my impression of her as a person. And since I knew it wasn't a name she'd chosen of her own volition or anything, this was another case where I simply kept referring to her the same way that I always had.

Then, on graduation day, she actually came up to me, and do you know what she said? She said, "You know, you're the only one who still calls me by my old last name, Shiina-chan. That always made me really happy." This took me by surprise, of course, but it felt nice to know that she'd genuinely appreciated me continuing to address her that way. And I suppose that positive reinforcement might be part of the reason why, at least subconsciously, I don't feel like I should necessarily change how I refer to Tsukinoki-kun either.

Sorry, I feel like I've made this whole interview more about me than her.

What's that? Why don't I just *ask* her what she'd like me to call her?

I mean, I could… But I also feel like it'd be kind of awkward to make a last-minute change at this point, now that graduation's less than a month away.

Rin Mashima

Who, *me*?! You're kidding, right?!

Nah, c'mon. There's gotta be someone better you could ask. Go talk to Kamiki or Nakki or somebody. Oh, you already have? Mmm… Well, okay. I guess if Ushio asked for me herself, it's fine—though I really don't know why. Like, who the heck am I, y'know? I'm no more deserving than any of her other classmates… I'm, like, a C-tier friend to her at best.

Wait, really? She said all that?

Dang. I didn't know she thought so highly of me… Though I totally disagree, for the record. I'm just your average boring, innocent little high school girl. I'm definitely not some "impenetrable enigma" or whatever like she seems to think I am. Like, I'm flattered, but seriously—I'm just not that deep, sorry! My thoughts are shallower than a toddler in a kiddie pool! All I care about is having a good time with my friends. That's literally it!

Yeah, I did kinda think that there was something a little strange about Ushio at first. I mean, how many guys do you know who have *that* many girls fawning over them but show no interest in dating them whatsoever? That's, like, sacrilege for a teenage boy—which I guess is part of the reason why I wasn't all that surprised when she finally came out, even though everybody else was. I was just like, "Yeah, okay, that makes sense."

Sorry?

Oh, no—I'm not saying I expected it or anything like that.

I guess for me, I was less surprised about her being trans than I was shocked by how bold and unapologetic she was being about it, y'know? Like, this is a pretty closed-minded, backwater community we got out here. You start going around saying "Hey, everyone! I'm changing my gender identity!" in a place like this, you're pretty much asking for unwanted attention.

I'm sure Ushio realized that—it just must not have been as important to her as being able to express who she really is. And I totally get it. I wouldn't want to feel like I have to hide my true self for my entire high school career either. So I can definitely respect her decision… Just sucks that she had to deal with a fair amount of backlash.

Have you talked to Arisa yet?

Oh, you're doing her next, okay. Well, let me know when the article's done because I'm *very* curious to read what she has to say about all this. But yeah, no—she's the one who gave Ushio the most backlash for her transition, by far. Or I guess maybe "backlash" isn't the right word, since that makes it sound like Ushio did something to deserve it. It was more just Arisa giving her grief about it for completely selfish reasons.

How did I feel about that situation? Like, as a mutual friend, you mean?

Man, you're really busting out the hardball questions now, huh?

Mmm… I'd say it was pretty hard to watch, yeah. And I know this'll probably sound kinda hollow, since it's too late to change the past, but I do feel like I should've tried to do something about it sooner, in hindsight. I mean, I knew everyone *else* was too afraid of Arisa to step in. So was I, at first. But I feel like if anyone could've found a way to help the two of them bury the hatchet back before things really got ugly, it would have been me… And looking back on it now, I do kind of regret standing idly by, yeah.

Oh, sorry. No, we don't have to keep talking about Arisa.

Yes! Kamiki!

Jeez, it's pretty crazy how perfect he and Ushio seem for each other despite being so different, huh? But I guess they complement each other, in a weird way? Maybe it's one of those "opposites attract" things, I dunno. All I can say for sure is that Ushio definitely seems real comfortable and at home whenever he's around. I know they've had their fair share of hard times together too, obviously…

Oh yeaaah… The class trip, ha ha…

That might've been the single most shocking Ushio-related happenstance for me, personally. I also kinda couldn't help but laugh when I first heard about it. Like, dang, you two just kinda went for it, huh? But I think that was a pretty big turning point for them because they sure seemed to get a *heck* of a lot closer after that. Ushio prolly felt like she didn't need to hide a lot of the things she'd been feeling anymore.

Actually, she changed a *lot* just over the course of our sophomore year, now that I think about it. That transformation must've been a pretty miserable, grueling experience for her at times—but I think she also grew and gained a lot in the process, so props to her for sticking it out. I know I wouldn't be strong enough to make it through what she did; I'm way too quick to cave to peer pressure and fall back to maintaining the status quo. So yeah—if there's any one thing I can say that I genuinely look up to her for, it'd probably be that sheer perseverance.

Although I will say…and this is just my personal opinion, to be clear…

There could've totally been an alternate timeline where Ushio stayed in the closet and still had a perfectly good, wholly enjoyable high school career. I mean, people like to *say* that your teenage years are all about "finding yourself" or having these big, transformative character-building experiences, but like…you don't necessarily *have* to share your true self with the whole world either, if you don't feel like it. Especially since, let's be real—you're not

gonna stay in touch with 99 percent of these people after you graduate anyway, right? And I think there's something to be said for knowing who you are deep down but still choosing to put on the mask and play the role of a more unassuming character… Because that takes a whole lot of work too, lemme tell ya. Though I'm not trying to say one way is better than the other, or anything like that, obviously.

Wow, I'm being pretty unfiltered here, aren't I? Not that I think I've said anything super offensive or anything, but I'm starting to wonder if maybe I'm being a little *too* honest with some of these answers, ha ha… Feeling kinda nervous now, actually.

Are you gonna send me a review copy of this before it goes out for publication? Definitely let me go over it again once you get everything written up, okay?!

Arisa Nishizono

Look, I already told you, I don't have anything to say about Ushio. And I wouldn't have the right to talk about her, even if I did. I mean, do you know what I *did* to her?

Wait, you do?

She told you all about it herself?

And you still wanna interview me despite that? Are you crazy or just pulling my leg? Ugh, that makes literally zero sense… Did she put you up to this? Is this her way of getting back at me or something? By forcing me to recount all of the horrible stuff I did to her?

Okay, whatever. I'll talk, I guess. But don't get mad at me if people put you on blast for including me. This *is* gonna get posted online, right?

Yeah, no, it's fine. Appreciate the thought, but you don't have to worry about me. And yes, you can use my real name. Not gonna try to hide from the things I've done. Plus, it sounds like Ushio asked you to come get my side of the story, right? If that's really what she wants, then I guess I have no choice but to go along with it.

Anyway, yeah… So Ushio and I were in the same class both freshman and sophomore year, as you already know. And that first year, everyone totally adored her. Good looks, amazing athlete, straight A student, incredible leadership skills, super friendly to everyone she met. She really did seem perfect in just about every way. It'd be harder to think of something she *wasn't* great at. And… yeah, I kinda caught the Ushio bug too, for a little while. Honestly, I think just about everyone in our grade was either infatuated with her or jealous of her in one way or another. Yet she never let all that attention go to her head, or acted full of herself, or anything like that… Which only went to show what a genuinely good person she is, if you ask me.

But that's exactly what made it so hard to watch when she came into class wearing a girl's uniform that day in June last year, then told everyone she wanted to be a girl from now on. And for a long time, I refused to accept it. Like, I literally couldn't imagine a *single* reason why someone who'd been the envy of all her male classmates would ever want to just…throw it all away like that.

I could've totally understood it if it was just a cross-dressing fetish or something like that. Or if she was secretly a massive otaku and had a huge collection of half-naked anime girl figurines littered all across her room. Or, hell—even if she was a huge kleptomaniac or went around terrorizing stray cats for fun or whatever… Those sorts of things, I could've probably learned to accept, even if I obviously wouldn't *like* them.

But coming into class one day and saying "Hey, sorry for the mix-up, everybody, but I actually think I'm a girl, not a boy"? Yeah, no. That wasn't something I could easily brush off or try to overlook

like a weird personality quirk or a creepy hobby—because it was tied to her core identity and who she was as a person.

For a long time, I was in denial about it. Then, when I realized she was serious, I did everything I could to get her to go back to being the old Ushio, even if it was just on the outside. Because I mean, you can probably imagine how people in a place like Tsubakioka might treat someone who's openly transgender, right? So I tried to reason with her about it a couple of times, saying she should at least keep that sort of thing to herself, for the sake of her own future. But when I realized there was nothing I could say to talk her out of it, I started lashing out at her instead, writing horrible things about her on the blackboard, and stuff like that… Even got a little violent with her a couple of times. Sorry, I guess it was more than just a little. You can cut that word out.

Anyway, I know this'll probably sound crazy, but I genuinely believed I had good intentions at the time. Like, I really did think I had her best interest at heart, and all this cruel stuff I was doing to her was for her own good. But then, slowly but surely…everyone at school started to accept the new Ushio—even the ones who'd been treating her like an outcast just a few weeks prior! By the time autumn rolled around, she'd already regained her status as one of the most popular kids in school.

And it was only then, when I saw her enjoying that same level of popularity and acceptance as a girl, that I started to consider the possibility that maybe *I* was the one in the wrong. But I still didn't want to believe it. I kept telling myself things like, "Oh, this must just be a fluke because everyone in our class already knew her… Once she gets out into the *real* world, people are totally gonna treat her like crap." Looking back on it now, though, I'm just like, ugh… Why the hell did I have such a stick up my ass about it, y'know? For whatever reason, I just refused to change my mind. And then before long, it was *me* who didn't have any friends left in our classroom—not her.

God, I was so stupid back then…

Hm? How do I feel about her nowadays?

I mean…from what I can tell, she's been living her best life lately, so good for her. Don't see her all that often anymore, but she seems to be feeling a lot more liberated and fulfilled ever since the start of our senior year. Actually, no—I take that back. I think it was after that incident on our class trip that I first noticed that change. Which is funny because I remember thinking she was really stupid for doing that, but maybe she made the right call in the end, based on how happy she seems to be now. And yeah, who knows… She might never have reached this level of happiness if she'd never transitioned, so maybe she also made the right call in choosing to come out to everybody when she did. Not that there's any one right or wrong way to handle these sorts of things… I don't think it's as simple as that, necessarily.

But I will say that…yeah.

I do fully accept her for who she is now.

Getting to watch her walk so confidently down this path she's chosen for herself… It's a pretty incredible sight to behold, I have to say. She's so radiant now, it almost hurts to look at her for too long. Even if I'm only ever staring from afar these days.

Who, me?

Eh, I'm hanging in there, I guess. Considering I managed to completely alienate myself from my entire class last year, I think I'm doing pretty okay for myself. Definitely don't have anywhere near as many friends as I used to, and I don't think I'll ever make up with Ushio, but…that's just the price I had to pay in order to grow as a person.

Huh?

Jeez, you're really trying to put me on the spot here, aren't you?

I mean, does it even matter? I just told you I don't think we'll ever make up. Like, I genuinely cannot imagine a future where she

and I become friends again—and that's okay. I'm not someone she needs or wants in her life anymore, and that's perfectly fine. Hell, as far as I'm concerned, the sooner she forgets all about me, the better.

Wow… Don't think I've talked this much with anyone in a really long time, actually. But yeah, I think I've said just about everything I can possibly say about Ushio at this point. Man, I feel exhausted now…but also kinda refreshed at the same time, weirdly enough. Always feels nice to have an opportunity to get a few things off your chest, you know?

A final statement?

No, I just told you I've said everything I could possibly say… Man, are you this pushy with everyone you interview? It's kinda scary, not gonna lie.

Okay, okay, fine… I'll say one last thing.

Hey, Ushio. Take care of yourself, okay?

Natsuki Hoshihara

So, you'd like me to talk about Ushio-chan in general? Why, yes, I'd be more than happy to do that! I'll try my best to answer any questions you might have!

Oh, no need to be so formal?

Then do you mind if I just talk about her the way I normally would? Okay, yeah—I'll do that, then. Makes things easier for both of us. Sorry, I've never been interviewed before, so I guess I was just feeling kinda nervous… Wonder if Ushio-chan's used to this sort of thing. I remember seeing her get interviewed for some sports magazine back when she was still on the track team. I actually own a copy of that issue, ha ha. Couldn't help but go out and buy one when I found out Ushio-chan was going to be in it, even though I'm

definitely not their target demographic. It wasn't even, like, a big section or anything, but it felt so cool to be like, "Whoa… *Ushio-chan* said this stuff…"

Wait, is this not the sort of content you're looking for?! Oh god, I'm so sorry… Ugh, now I'm feeling all self-conscious. Can you just snip this part out or something? You can? Okay, phew!

So anyway, Ushio-chan and I have been in the same class since freshman year. I still remember the first time I saw her, I was so surprised—like, "Whoa, this has to be one of the most attractive people I've seen in my whole life!" It felt like she'd jumped right off the pages of a manga or something. I was such a nervous wreck the first time I went over and tried to say hi to her, you wouldn't believe it…

But when we actually started talking, I realized how friendly, considerate, and incredibly down-to-earth she is… And I was just like, "Dang. How can any one person be blessed with such good looks *and* have a perfect personality to match?" Everyone in our class loved her to pieces, and she totally deserved every last bit of the attention. And yet, looking back on it now…I can't help but wonder if maybe we were all putting too much pressure on her to be who *we* wanted her to be, and I actually feel kinda bad about that.

Because, see, everyone's always placed a ton of faith in Ushio-chan. There's almost this unspoken vibe in the classroom, like, "Oh, if *she* says it, then it must be true!" And I worry sometimes if maybe we're placing too much of a burden on her with those unrealistic expectations, since I can tell she works really hard to try to live up to them. I've definitely fallen into the trap of propping her up like that myself in the past—which I guess isn't a bad thing all the time, but it feels like there have been times when we've treated her like some godlike entity who can do no wrong rather than, y'know…an ordinary person like us. I kinda wonder if her appearance might have something to do with it, honestly—what with her being mixed, having slightly different facial features than the rest of us and this beautiful silver hair… It's a little hard sometimes to believe she's just

as human and flawed as we are when she seems so perfect in every way.

I guess that's probably a type of discrimination too, though, huh? It's not right to make assumptions about someone's character based solely on their looks, is it? Well, not that there aren't more deliberate things like makeup and fashion that can tell you a little bit about a person, but like…Ushio-chan can't help the way she looks, y'know? She was just born that way. Oof, yeah. Think I should probably reflect on that.

Wait, really? She said that about me? In her interview, you mean?

What?! That's so sweet of her… I don't think I deserve that much credit, if I'm being honest, but I'll give it a read as soon as it comes out.

Sorry? What made me reach out to her that day?

Mmm… Yeah, I dunno. I'm not sure I even *had* a specific reason for it, to be totally frank. I guess the biggest thing is that I'd always really, really looked up to her, which made it really hard to see her in such a low spot. Maybe that had a lot to do with it. And I think there was also a little bit of… Oh yeah! I remember now.

So this is gonna be a bit of a personal aside, but there was a period of time back when I started junior high that I took violin lessons for a little while, right? I've never really talked to anyone about it, funnily enough, because I quit after only one month, and I was afraid people might think I was some snooty rich girl or something, but yeah.

As for *why* I quit, though… It wasn't because the lessons were too hard or anything like that. It was actually because literally all of the other kids in the class were boys. Oh, and the teacher was a man too. And they were all really nice to me, to be clear! Like, they definitely didn't do anything to make me feel weird or left out or whatever… But it still felt extremely awkward and uncomfortable for

me. It started really stressing me out after a while, actually—which is why I ended up quitting after only the first month.

And when I looked over at Ushio-chan after she came out to the class that day…I couldn't help but be reminded of that whole experience. The thought that she'd probably been feeling like a fish out of water for years and years, when I couldn't even handle it for more than a month… It just made me feel awful for her. And unlike me, she couldn't get up and walk out of the classroom once she'd finally had enough; she had to stay and deal with the consequences of sharing her true self too. And boy, lemme tell ya—some of our classmates were *not* very nice to her in the immediate aftermath. Like, how could I *not* want to reach out and offer a hand of friendship to someone in need like that?

But anyway, yeah—that's all ancient history by now, thankfully. These days, Ushio-chan definitely seems to be managing just fine without any assistance from me. Though as her friend, I really hope that her brightest days are still ahead of her.

Oh yeah, have you talked to Kamiki-kun, by the way?

Ah, gotcha. Not yet, okay.

Yeah, Sakuma Kamiki. He and Ushio-chan go way back.

They've been friends ever since they were little kids. I'm sure he could tell you all *sorts* of interesting stories about her, if you asked. Pretty sure there's not a single person in the whole wide world who knows her better than he does.

Sakuma Kamiki

…And yeah, I think that just about covers it for our first two years of high school.

Sorry, could I get some water? My throat's getting kinda dry from all this talking…

Yeah, no, I'll be fine. We can keep going.

Oh, you want me to talk about *this* year now? Honestly, our sophomore year was so crazy and full of drama that our senior year's felt kinda run-of-the-mill by comparison. Both Ushio and I have been so busy with our schoolwork and part-time jobs that I'm kind of having a hard time even thinking of anything interesting that's happened… Well, aside from a few lame attempts to mess with us by this one student in particular.

Nah, nothing serious. I wouldn't even call it genuine harassment, necessarily. It's just this guy who seems to get a real kick out of pitting people against each other. And it's mostly targeted at me, not Ushio, so I'd rather not even talk about it. Don't wanna dignify that guy with an acknowledgment. It'd just be a waste of paper.

You wanna know more about my relationship with Ushio?

Well, we've known each other for pretty much our entire childhood and been really close for most of that time, aside from a couple years in junior high when we were kinda estranged for a little while… Sorry, did I not mention this stuff already?

Yeah, we're still doing just fine overall. Going out and doing stuff on the weekends, hanging out and studying for exams together… Well, not that we don't still have fights and disagreements from time to time, of course.

Really? You find that surprising? Sorry, maybe I'm making it sound worse than it actually is. Nine times out of ten, it'll be about something that's *super* unimportant in the grand scheme of things. Like her getting mad at me because I accidentally spoiled the twist of a book she was planning to read or something like that. It's nothing major, typically.

Although I will say…that on very, *very* rare occasions, there will be something that happens between us that makes me start to wonder if we've finally hit a dead end in our relationship—one that there's no turning back from. But it's never the sort of thing where,

like, one of us is clearly in the wrong and that person just needs to apologize. It's more like…we don't see eye to eye on a certain issue or we want different things. And we each recognize that there's no easy, clear-cut solution that'll make us both happy, which makes it really easy to fall into the trap of not even addressing the problem and just letting those feelings fester until we start resenting each other over whatever it is.

I guess the important thing to remember in those situations—or at least what always seems to help *us* make it through them, anyway—is that we're on the same team. So no matter what might come between us, we're still fighting toward the same end goal, which is for us to find a way to be happy together. And as long as that continues to hold true for the both of us, I don't think there's anything in the world that can tear us apart.

Wow, sorry. Got a little carried away there, didn't I? Almost sounded like a preachy shonen manga protagonist for a second… That's kind of embarrassing.

To be clear, I'm not trying to say that it's all about "the power of friendship" for us, or that "our faith in each other conquers all," or anything trite like that. Our situation is…a lot more complicated than that. But I don't mean that as a bad thing.

Phew. Dang, my voice is starting to get kinda hoarse, isn't it?

Anyway, yeah—I think that should give you a pretty good picture.

Do I have anything I'd like to tell her? I mean, not really… We already see each other almost every day. But I guess I might as well say *something*, just for the heck of it. Maybe even something a little bit cheesy that'd be too embarrassing to say in person, heh.

Okay, yeah. I think I've got it. You ready? Ahem…

Ushio… Here's hoping we'll be together forever.

EPILOGUE

Things Yet to Come



Epilogue:
Things Yet to Come

I DIDN'T HAVE CLASS TODAY until my second-hour seminar.

After locking the door to the apartment, I hopped up onto my bike and took the three-minute detour over to the nearby riverbank. The cherry blossoms were in full bloom, so I preferred to ride along the narrow embankment when I had time to spare, even if it was more of a roundabout way to the university.

As petals fluttered down before my eyes, I lifted my gaze, but I had to squint at the bright rays of sunlight pouring through the gaps in the soft-pink canopies. It was a very nice day—and surprisingly warm for the middle of April. So warm, in fact, that by the end of my commute, I was already regretting that I'd worn a Uniqlo HeatTech undershirt.

Shifting down a gear, I swerved through the main gate onto campus. After parking my bike, I headed straight for my building, passing by only a scattered handful of other stragglers as I went. When I stepped into class, I found that most of the seats were, as ever, already filled by my fellow classmates: college students of all ages and from all across the country, their chattering voices echoing through the spacious lecture hall. It was my second year of university, yet I still didn't feel like I was truly one of them.

Taking my usual seat at the very back of the classroom, I pulled out my notebook. A few moments later, a girl came over and sat down in the lone empty seat left beside mine. Her bleached blonde hair was tied off in a long ponytail in the back, and her shiny, manicured nails were painted a bright shade of cerulean blue. It was Arisa Nishizono.

"Morning," I said, thinking it would be awkward to ignore her.

"Hey," she mumbled back, not sparing me so much as a glance.

Yeah, great. Glad I bothered. Thanks for the whole one syllable, I guess. To be fair, I'd been half expecting the cold shoulder, so perhaps I should've considered myself lucky.

While this was obviously an unintended coincidence, she and I had somehow ended up enrolling at the same university in Tokyo. At first, I'd made an effort to steer clear of her for no real reason, but now we were on decent enough terms that we even spoke to each other occasionally. Though it had been Nishizono who first broke the ice.

"So how's Ushio doing?"

These were the first words she'd spoken to me since we'd graduated from high school. I couldn't help but chuckle; this was over six months into our first year of college, mind you—and I was pretty certain she wouldn't be caught dead talking to a guy like me if she could help it, so she must have been pretty damn curious. Since then, we'd had brief, sporadic interactions, which typically *also* revolved around Ushio.

"I see you've got your hair in a ponytail today," I noted.

"Yeah, because it's hot out," said Nishizono. "You got a problem with that?"

"I mean, no. Just found it interesting, since you usually wear it down nowadays."

Nishizono let out an indignant *hmph*. She was being awfully curt, but hey—at least she was engaging in the conversation to some degree.

"Think you'll ever bring back the pigtails?"

"Never."

"How come?"

"Too childish."

"You think? I mean, yeah, I guess you don't see very many college students walking around campus with pigtails, come to think of it…"

I kind of liked the pigtail look, honestly—not on Nishizono specifically, but in general. They usually told you something about the wearer's personality, bratty or otherwise, and it was just plain fun to watch them sway back and forth with every step. No other hairstyle I'd seen on Nishizono fit her quite as well.

"You know," I went on, "Ushio wore *her* hair in pigtails the other day."

"Wait, for real?" replied Nishizono, immediately taking the bait.

"Mm-hmm. Wanna see a photo?"

Nishizono eyed me suspiciously.

Then, after a long, *long* pause, she said, "Yes."

"Sorry, I lied."

Nishizono kicked me under the table—a sharp low kick right in the shin, with a windup and everything, despite the awkward angle. I writhed in agony.

"Don't just make stuff up just to screw with me," said Nishizono. "Next time you pull something like that, I'm gonna sock you right in the nose."

"Well, damn. All right, duly noted…"

Knowing Nishizono's history, I wouldn't put it past her. While she'd mellowed out a lot since high school, she still had a pretty short fuse and was far from someone you'd want to mess with.

"But, man…you sure were quick to take the bait as soon as I mentioned Ushio's name. Hey, no! Stop! Don't brandish your pen at me! That's dangerous!"

Okay, I think that's enough teasing for one day.

Once she'd calmed down, I tried to bring the conversation back to Ushio. "Y'know, if you're so curious about her, you could

always pay her a visit."

A hint of weakness flashed across her prickly, irritable expression. "Like hell I could," she said. "I wouldn't even know what to say… And I guarantee she still hates my guts."

"You think? I dunno, I'm not so sure about that."

"Well, I am. People don't just forgive and forget when it comes to those who treated them like dirt when they were going through a hard time in their lives."

There was a gravity to her tone that suggested she was absolutely certain of this. Since she clearly realized the severity of her crimes now, I felt like she might just have a shot—but maybe she was right. Maybe Ushio *did* still hate her guts. And yet…as selfish as it was for *me* to say, I would've liked to see them make amends someday.

"I don't see why it would hurt to try, if you're really that remorseful," I said. "You're more than welcome to drop in on her at work. Though she's very popular lately."

"Eh," said Nishizono. "Maybe if I'm feeling bold one day, I'll consider it."

We all had to share and live in this same world, so you never knew when you might have a chance encounter with someone from your past. Better to make peace and try to coexist in harmony with people than hold hateful grudges against them for the rest of your life, I'd say—even if I knew this was overly idealistic.

"…So hey," said Nishizono. "About the Ushio wearing pigtails thing."

"Hm? Yeah, what about it?" I asked.

"Was that all a lie? Or do you just not have a photo of it?"

I cracked a mischievous grin. "Wouldn't *you* like to know?"

"God, I hate you…"

Once my seminar was over, it was officially lunchtime.

The weather was extremely nice, so I decided to eat outside for a change. I swung by the campus market and bought a BLT, then grabbed a seat out on the terrace. As I sat there making short work of my sandwich, my phone buzzed on the tabletop.

"Long time no talk, dude. Whatchu up to right now?"

It was a text message from Hasumi—probably the first one I'd gotten from him in two, maybe three months now. After graduation, he'd gone off to a university in Kyoto, so we didn't really have any opportunities to meet up anymore, but we still made an effort to keep in touch from time to time. We never talked about anything of actual import, though, so there was no real structure or point to these interactions. They just happened when they happened. We had about the same rapport we'd had in high school.

I wrote up a quick response between bites: *"Hey, man. Just eating lunch. Got myself a BLT."*

Hasumi replied almost immediately: *"Gotcha. So is it lonely eating all by yourself?"*

"No. And how'd you know I was eating alone?"

"Oh, wait, you actually are? I was just making a joke. My bad."

He was not making me feel very enthused to talk to him right now.

"What do you even want, man? State your business."

"Just thought I'd let you know I got myself a girlfriend."

I raised my eyebrows at this. *Well, dang. Good for him.* This was certainly sudden and unexpected, but I felt genuinely happy for him all the same. I typed out a response: *"Wow, so you just wanted to brag, basically. But hey, congrats, man."*

About five minutes passed before Hasumi's next reply.

"Thanks, dude. Just really felt like I needed to share this happiness with someone, y'know? But you're the only person I could think of to tell. And yeah, I guess I am kinda bragging a little bit.

Was ready for you to give me the cold shoulder, tbh. Really appreciate you being happy for me."

I got a warm, fuzzy feeling in my chest. Hasumi was such an aloof and emotionally detached guy that I'd never expected to see such a sincere side of him. I almost wanted to take the train to go visit him right now.

I replied, *"Aw, shucks… Didn't know you thought so highly of me, man."*

"Nah, kinda the opposite, actually. You were just the one friend I was willing to risk hating me for wanting to gloat about it."

"Hey, how do you block someone from texting you again?"

What the hell was this guy's problem?

The one friend he was "willing to risk" being hated by—a harsh thing to say, yet I had to wonder if it was that low-key contempt we had for each other that had allowed us to stay friends for so long.

When you thought very highly of someone, those feelings could sometimes get in the way of being fully open with them and establishing true mutual understanding. On the flip side, when you *didn't* think all that highly of the other person, there were fewer reasons to restrain yourself from being brutally honest with them—which could be a good thing or a bad thing, depending on the situation. Perhaps the reason Hasumi and I felt so comfortable ribbing on each other was *because* neither of us cared all that much what the other person thought of us. It felt kind of messed up to look at it that way, but it seemed like a fairly common relationship dynamic.

"Oh, hey!" said a voice. "Kamiki-kun!"

Hearing my name called, I looked up to see a baby-faced boy with a packed lunch in his hands standing right in the middle of the terrace. He was Sonoda, a kid in the same department as me. I'd offered him directions once when I noticed him wandering cluelessly around campus like a lost puppy, and that had been impetus enough

for us to start talking. He was the very first friend I'd ever made in college.

"Mind if I sit here?" he asked.

"Yeah, no—go right ahead."

I quickly fired off one last message to Hasumi: *"Gotta go. Someone's here now."*

"No worries. Talk to you later."

I slipped my cell phone back into my pocket, then looked up at Sonoda.

"Girlfriend?" he asked me with a playful smirk.

"Nah, just an old buddy from high school," I said. "He's a bit of a weird one, though."

"Oh yeah? Well, to be fair…you're not the most normal guy either, Kamiki-kun."

"Wait, huh? Oh, come on. I'm not *that* weird, am I?"

"No, you definitely are." Sonoda flashed a sardonic grin, opened the lid on his packed lunch, and started eating.

I tilted my head for a moment; now I was feeling a little concerned. But in the end, I shrugged it off as just another bit of playful ribbing, like what Hasumi and I would always do. *It would be kind of nice if Sonoda and I could develop a similar rapport,* I caught myself thinking as I took another bite of my BLT.

Once I was finished with all of my classes for the day, I made a quick pit stop back at home, then headed straight over to the bookstore in the nearby shopping mall. Not because I needed to buy a book or anything—but because this was where I worked.

Standing behind the register, I assisted the bookstore's steady-ish stream of customers in whatever ways I could. I'd been employed here for almost a year now, and while it certainly wasn't the easiest or most lucrative job in the world, I'd actually found myself taking a fair bit of pride in my work as of late. I'd even taken

a new hire under my wing, and I'd been put in charge of writing some of the point-of-purchase signage and book recommendations whenever I had a little spare time.

Every time I read a great work of fiction, I couldn't help but recall that pathetic excuse for a novel I'd tried to write way back when. And although it certainly hadn't turned out to be anything worth reading, in the end, I still vividly remembered how much fun it had been to put pen to paper and see where I ended up. Maybe once I'd gotten a little more used to my new life in the big city, I would take a crack at writing again.

"Um, excuse me?" said a customer, snapping me out of my thoughts. "I'm looking for a particular book… It's this one here. Do you think you could help me find it?"

"Sure thing," I said. "Let me take a quick look for you."

I manned the register and helped customers for another few hours, and next thing I knew, it was closing time. I wished my boss and my coworkers good night, then headed out for the night. It was already dark outside as I collected my bike from the bike lot and pedaled for home—though I did make a quick stop at the supermarket near the apartment building to pick up a few groceries while I was out and about.

Eggplant was on sale, so I decided to make mapo eggplant for dinner tonight. To that end, I also picked up some minced pork, green onions, and Cook Do-brand sauce packets. It was a very simple recipe: just chop everything up and stir-fry it all together. Simple enough that even an idiot like me couldn't possibly screw it up—and it tasted pretty damn good. I was also in the mood for a little dessert tonight, so I went ahead and grabbed two baked custards while I was at it.

By the time I made it back home, it was already after nine. It was eerily dark and quiet in the living area of our two-bedroom apartment, so I flipped all the lights on and rolled up my sleeves to get started on dinner. Right then, my phone rang.

I checked the caller ID—it was Hoshihara.

"Hello?" I asked upon answering the call.

"Hey there, stranger!" said Hoshihara. *"How've you been?"*

"Yeah, hey. I'm good, I'm good. How 'bout you?"

"Oh, you know! Can't complain!"

I'd been feeling pretty tuckered out from work, yet just hearing Hoshihara's cheery voice was enough to make me feel all jazzed up and energized again. I walked over to the couch and sat down.

"Anyway, listen…I was gonna call Ushio-chan about this originally, but then I realized she'd probably be at work at this hour, right? So I figured I'd just call you instead, and you can fill her in later."

"Yeah, no worries. What's up?"

"There's been some talk about doing a little class reunion over the long holiday for Obon this year. Nothing formal or anything, but we were probably gonna invite Ms. Iyo, maybe try to book a venue, and stuff like that. But yeah, all that to say: We're just trying to put out some early feelers to see who all might be interested."

"Hey, that's a great idea. You can count me in, at least. Pretty sure I'll be back in town that week."

"Nice! Okay, then I'll put you down as a tentative yes. Could you make sure to ask Ushio-chan when you have a chance, then get back to me?"

"Yep, will do. Cool—guess I'll look forward to that. Sounds like a lot of fun."

"Oh, it will be, don't you worry! Marine and Shiina already said they'd be down too."

Mashima was also going to college in Tokyo on an athletic scholarship, though I hadn't seen her once since graduation day. But I didn't have her current contact info, and there was no real reason for us to meet up, so that wasn't too surprising.

As for Shiina, I'd heard she'd stayed back home in Tsubakioka to help out with the family business. It sounded like she and Hoshihara still met up fairly often.

"Oh yeah, and you know who else is—actually, you know what? I'll save that thought. I'd feel bad talking your ear off about all this stuff when Ushio-chan's not around. Though I guess you could ask why I didn't just wait to call another time, then, ha ha!"

"N-nah, you're all good."

"Anyway, I'll talk to you later!"

She hung up the phone.

Well, that was quite the frantic farewell… She sounded kinda all over the place. But I guess she probably has a lot on her plate.

After graduation, Hoshihara had enrolled at a local culinary school within commuting distance of her family home, and she was currently pursuing a career as a pâtissier. When she first told us this was her plan, I actually felt a little nervous for her; it was almost too in line with her self-established "foodie" persona, to the point that I couldn't help but wonder if she was doing it for the right reasons. But according to her, this had been something of a dream job for her ever since she was a little girl, so I kept that thought to myself. Both Ushio and I were fully supportive of her.

We still stayed in frequent contact, with Hoshihara always giving us the scoop on local goings-on back home and sending us photos of the latest sweets and treats she'd cooked up in her classes. Her sunny presence brightened our days even from afar.

"All right," I said, rising to my feet. "I'm officially starving."

I headed back to the kitchen. It was time to cook.

After watching a bit of TV while eating my dinner, I took a quick bath, lay back down on the couch, and cracked open a novel I'd brought home from work to kill time. By the time I was about halfway through, I looked up at the clock; it was after midnight. *Any*

minute now, I thought to myself—and then, sure enough, I heard the door click open.

Aha. There she is.

"I'm hooome…"

I set the paperback I'd been reading on the coffee table, then hurried over to the entryway. Ushio was already taking her heels off. It seemed like she must have been feeling kind of hot, judging from the way she'd rolled up the sleeves of her white uniform button-up and loosened her necktie.

"Welcome home," I said.

"Ugh, I'm so tired…" she groaned.

She tottered over to me on unsteady feet, and I wrapped my arms around her to give her a big hug—our first order of business whenever she got home from work. I could smell the alcohol on her, as well as the slight scent of cigarette smoke. After indulging in my embrace for about five seconds, she gently pulled away.

"Hi," she said with an affectionate smile, seeming a bit more refreshed as she continued into the living room. "What'd you have for dinner?"

"Mapo eggplant. Just the kind you make from the box. You?"

"Ooh, that sounds good… I just had the boss's curry again. Hate to complain about a free meal, but boy, am I starting to get sick of it."

She let out an exhausted sigh as she removed her necktie and laid it over the back of one of the chairs, then started unbuckling her belt.

"You wanna go get washed up?" I asked.

"Yeah, I think I probably should," she said.

She took off her slacks and folded them over the chair back as well, then walked off toward the bathroom while unbuttoning her shirt.

Ushio was working part-time at a well-known local bar. It was a pretty solid gig, with decent pay and good flexibility, so she'd taken it without any hesitation after being recommended for the job by one of her upperclassmen at her university. At first, they'd just had her working the floor—but when customers started showing up in droves specifically to see Ushio, they'd brought her behind the counter and taught her how to bartend. Like always, she was extremely popular with men and women alike, and she was almost working more than she was going to school nowadays.

Ushio claimed she wanted to make enough money to support her ideal lifestyle, and while I was definitely supportive of her, I did worry sometimes that she might be overworking herself a little bit. But she seemed to find her job extremely rewarding, so I didn't feel like it was my place to say anything.

She tended to take very long baths, so I picked up the book I'd been reading and cracked it open again. As the night wore on, I could feel my eyelids growing heavier, to the point that I couldn't properly parse the words I was reading on the page. Thinking I might try playing a mindless video game or something instead, I set the book down—but then my phone vibrated. *Who the heck is messaging me at this hour?*

I grabbed it off the table and had a look.

"No way," I mumbled in disbelief.

I did a double take—then a triple take—at the photo I'd just been sent.

And then let out a burst of laughter.

"Holy crap… He actually did it…"

As I sat there marveling at my phone screen, Ushio finally emerged from the bathroom in a baggy sweater and a pair of sweatpants, her hair wrapped up in a towel.

"Oh, wow," she said. "You're still awake?"

"Yeah, hey—come look at this." I turned my phone screen to show her.

"What is that, a crocodile?" she asked. "Wait a minute… Is that Sera?! Wh-why is he sticking his head in its mouth?!"

"Who knows," I said. "Maybe he lost a bet or something. Stupid idiot."

I genuinely could not believe that he still remembered our ridiculous agreement after all this time—let alone that he'd actually kept up his end of the bargain. As much as I still wanted nothing to do with the guy, I couldn't help but feel just a teensy bit nostalgic, seeing him still up to his same old reckless antics.

"What a weirdo," Ushio said, then returned to the bathroom to dry her hair and do her skincare routine. Once she was done with that, she came back and joined me on the couch as though she could finally take it easy for the rest of the night.

"I picked up a couple of baked custards," I said. "You want one?"

"Ooh, yes, please," said Ushio.

"What do you want to drink?"

"Just tea is fine."

"You got it," I said, standing up.

I boiled some hot water, then steeped a mug of plain black tea for Ushio—no milk or sugar. Then I made some hot cocoa for myself, carried both our drinks over to the coffee table, and went back to the fridge to grab our dessert. I handed Ushio a spoon and sat down next to her on the couch, ready to enjoy our little late-night snack.

"Oh yeah—so guess what?" I said. "I got a call from Hoshihara earlier. Sounds like they're trying to plan some sort of class reunion for when everybody's back home for the week of Obon. She said we're both invited. Think you'd wanna go?"

"Yeah, of course," said Ushio. "That sounds like a lot of fun."

"She asked me to get back to her with your answer, but maybe you should be the one to let her know. I'm sure she'd love to hear from you."

"True, we haven't had that many opportunities to talk lately… Maybe I'll give her a call tomorrow."

Ushio took a sip of her tea. Her eyes looked awfully tired.

If I remembered right, she didn't have class tomorrow until her third-hour seminar in the afternoon. Although we were going to different universities, our schools thankfully used the same lecture timetable.

"So how are things at work these days?" I asked. "Seems like they've been running you ragged lately."

"I mean, it's been pretty hectic, yeah," said Ushio. "Feels like we've been getting even more customers than usual—and we already had a lot. But I still enjoy it, though. Just meeting all sorts of different people, slowly getting to know them… It's kinda nice to play the role of confidante, y'know? Being the one they share their secrets with and all."

"Oh yeah? What kinds of secrets are we talking?"

"I can't just *tell* you, silly… But I will say this: You'd be surprised how many people there are out there who are dealing with the same sorts of struggles I used to."

Ushio took a bite of her baked custard.

"I don't even pry or ask questions or anything," she went on. "They just kind of slip those details in completely unprompted. I can understand, though. It's probably a lot easier to share those kinds of secrets with a random bartender than a friend or family member, right? Like, there's not a whole lot of risk there. Plus, they might not even *have* anyone else in their lives who'd understand what they're going through."

"Or maybe they can tell you're a good person who won't judge them," I said. "And you make them feel safe enough to be

comfortable sharing those things."

"That'd be really nice, yeah…"

Ushio smiled shyly, then scooped out the rest of her baked custard. Once she was finished eating, she set the empty container down on the coffee table and took another sip of her Earl Grey. Cupping the mug in her lap, she let her gaze sink down to the opaque, reddish-brown surface of the lukewarm liquid.

"I think most of all, they just want someone to know who they really are," she said. "At the same time, they feel terrified of being known. And I know that probably sounds contradictory…but I can really relate to that feeling. Like, it *pains* me so much to know exactly what they're going through that I could cry. And yet, they're not even looking for sympathy. All they really want is someone they can talk to about it. Someone who will hear them out and try their best to understand what they're going through. So I just listen—making sure to never interject with my own opinion, or offer advice they didn't ask for, or say anything at all that might downplay their feelings or suggest that they're not completely valid. And only then, when they've had the chance to say everything they want to say, do I even *think* about opening my mouth and offering them what little encouragement and support I can give. To let them know that I understand, and that they've at least got *one* person in their corner who's rooting for them."

I nodded, my full attention on her.

"And whenever they smile back at me after that—like they feel just a little bit better now, having talked to me about it—I can't even tell you how happy that makes me. It's like, wow… Maybe all that pain and suffering I endured for so long was worth it, you know? Not that anyone should ever have to go through what I did, obviously. I don't believe in 'building character through adversity' or whatever. But the thought that my experience can be a source of strength or reassurance for someone else… I don't even know how to describe it. It just makes my heart feel so full, and warm, and… and I just…"

Tears were welling up in the corners of her eyes.

"Hey, you okay?" I asked, offering her a tissue from the box on the coffee table.

"Thanks… Yeah, no, I'm fine. Just feeling a little emotional, that's all. I'm not tired or stressed out or anything like that, don't worry."

Ushio set her mug down and dabbed her eyes with the tissue, her gray irises glistening like gemstones behind her tears. There was no hint of sadness in them; it seemed I could take her assurance that nothing was wrong at face value.

"Oh yeah! Speaking of bartending!" she said, her tone perking right up as though she was trying to lift the mood. "I've actually been working on my own original cocktail recipe lately. I'm still trying to nail down the ratio, but I've already got a name in mind and everything. And it's nonalcoholic too, so even *you* can try it sometime, Sakuma."

"Hey, cool," I said. "I'll look forward to that. What's it called?"

"A Mimosa Confession."

I repeated the words in my head. "Yeah, that's got a pretty nice ring to it."

"I know, right?" said Ushio. "Though I'm kind of thinking about changing it, actually, just because there's already a kind of cocktail called a mimosa."

"What?! But it's such a good name, though…"

Too bad—though it sounded like Ushio wasn't all that attached. She proceeded to list off several other names she'd been considering, but none of them struck me as quite so memorable as the first one. Before we knew it, it was almost two o'clock in the morning, so we cleaned up after our dessert and brushed our teeth. I was feeling extremely tired all of a sudden; I probably shouldn't have stayed up so late.

"All right," I said. "Ready to go to bed?"

"Uh-huh," replied Ushio, rubbing her eyes.

"…You wanna sleep in my room tonight?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. C'mon."

Guiding Ushio by the hand, I opened the door to my bedroom and led her inside. After giving her a chance to lie down, I killed the lights and joined her on the bed. Once we were lying face-to-face, I wrapped my arms around her slender frame, and she slid hers around my torso. As I gently closed my eyes, I could smell the sweet fragrance of her leave-in hair treatment every time I breathed in, steady and sure.

No longer did I feel any discomfort at the thought of being intimate with her—that initial reluctance had gone away with time. Never in my life would I have guessed that simply falling asleep in someone's arms could make me feel as whole as I did right now. For it was only in these waning moments of wakefulness, as my consciousness floated further adrift into a stardust sea of dreams, that I'd ever known true contentment.

There was no place in time I'd rather be.

***

My heart was pounding in my chest like a stranger at the door.

Thump, thump, thump, thump.

The other boys in my class were already taking off their clothes. Everyone was so excited for our first pool day of the year. Everyone except for me. I could feel the air in the classroom getting thinner, as it slowly got harder to breathe. I could feel the sandwich my mom had made me for breakfast churning around and around inside my stomach. Some kind of fear and shame I'd never felt before was tying my intestines up in knots.

Why now? I'd been just fine with it last year, hadn't I? Hadn't I been *relieved* when they told us we'd be changing in separate rooms

from now on? Hadn't I told myself this would be *better*, since it meant I wouldn't have to get naked in front of the girls anymore?

Every cell in my entire body was screaming at me, *You don't belong here!*

I wanted to run away and hide. But I couldn't move a muscle. And even if I could, where was I supposed to go? I still had to get in the pool. I didn't have a doctor's note or anything. If I said I needed to sit out, the PE teacher was just going to yell at me. He'd tell me to stop being such a baby and go get changed already—right in front of everybody.

I didn't know what to do.

I didn't want to take off my clothes.

I didn't want the other boys to look at me.

How did everyone else make it look so easy?

I felt sick. Nauseous. I knew I didn't belong here.

But then, where *did* I belong? Could anyone tell me?

I couldn't breathe. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't breathe.

"Hey, are you okay?"

One of the few other kids who hadn't started changing yet walked over to where I was standing. I knew this boy; his name was Sakuma. We'd gone to the same kindergarten but never really talked to each other before. Yet he seemed worried about me.

"You don't look so good," he said. "Does your tummy hurt or something?"

And just then, through the storm clouds, I saw a single glimmer of hope.

I nodded.

"Was it something you ate?" he asked. "We'd better get you to the nurse's office."

Sakuma took me by the hand and dragged me out of the classroom. As soon as we made it into the hallway, it was like I could finally breathe again—and that nauseous, suffocating anxiety that had taken hold of my insides released its grip as well.

I couldn't believe it. How had he broken me out of it so easily?

It felt like it had to be some kind of magic.

"Um, h-hey…" I said. "Sakuma-kun?"

"Hm? Yeah, what's up?" he asked.

"I just…wanted to say thank you…"

Sakuma looked at me and grinned. "Aw, don't sweat it!" he exclaimed. His voice was loud enough not just to startle me but to drown out the voices in my head that were insisting I didn't belong here.

Wow… What a nice person.

As we took off running down the hall, I could feel the warmth of his hand in mine. His palm was a little bit sweaty, but his grip was firm. More than anything, though, there was a tenderness to it that made me feel completely safe and reassured.

He was a faster runner than me. So fast, it was hard to keep up.

But all I could do was hold on tight to that hand.

And hope it never let me go.



Afterword

WELL, THIS IS IT—the final afterword I'll ever get to write for *The Mimosa Confessions*.

To be completely honest, I feel like I've already written everything I could ever want to say into the text itself this time around, so I really don't have that much gas left in the tank at this point to give any additional thoughts or insights. All I feel right now is a sense of relief, like a student who made it safely through to graduation.

Actually, perhaps that's a better and more fitting way to look at this book than as a conclusion or an ending—try to think of it more as a graduation for this world and these characters instead. Yes, there will only ever be five volumes of *The Mimosa Confessions*, but that doesn't mean their stories won't go on beyond the words I've written here. They'll all go on to finish college, and look for jobs, and start their careers… Sure, they might just be fictional characters, but they still have their own lives to live, don't they? So I guess my point is: It's not that the *universe* of these books ends here, but that I'm simply stepping away from the author's seat and leaving the rest to the realm of imagination.

It's been three years now since the first of these five volumes came out in July of 2021, so of course it's going to feel sad to say goodbye. But again, I've said literally all I could possibly say with these characters, and I have no regrets in that regard. It's to the point now that even if someone put a gun to my head and tried to *force* me to write another volume, I'd just have to throw my hands up and say I've done all I can do.

I suppose if I *were* to write some sort of follow-up story, though, I'd probably want to make it something purely comfy and slice-of-life. No discrimination, no suffering—just Sakuma and Ushio having a nice night in, watching some movies, playing some games, maybe ordering a pizza, then fighting over who ate the last of the

ice cream, before whoever did buys a cake on their way home from work to apologize… Just something totally run-of-the-mill and ordinary like that. I think that'd be nice. I'll probably never actually *write* that story, mind you (I think it's most elegant to just let the tale end here), but it would make me very happy as an author if you, the readers, kept this world and its characters in your thoughts and remembered them fondly, if only for a little while.

Now, on to the acknowledgments.

To my editor, Hamada-sama: I feel like you've been letting me get away with writing whatever I want for quite a while now. I dearly pray that we still have at least a few more solid books in us—and that you'll treat me to a nice dinner too sometime, if you don't mind. Here's hoping we can continue working together for many years to come.

To KUKKA-sensei: You have my eternal gratitude for gracing these humble pages with your beautiful artwork for five volumes straight. To this day, I still have the cover art for Book One framed and hanging on my wall, right where my eyes can see it whenever I turn around from my writing desk. All of your illustrations have been astounding, though—and I still remember being so happy to hear that you were excited to draw these characters when I was first drafting up the initial plans for this series. I can't thank you enough for sticking it out with me to the very end.

And to all of my faithful readers: Thank you as well for coming along for the ride with me these past three years. It's all thanks to your passionate support that I was able to see it through. Reading your thoughts and impressions over the course of the series has always given me the motivation to push forward. Thank you also for all of the kind words and fan mail and such. I'm sure there were certain parts of these books that might have been hard or even painful for some of you to read. But if you can take that pain with you into the real world and turn it into empathy and compassion for your fellow human beings, well…as an author, I think that's about all I could possibly ask for.

May we meet again—in another time, and another place.

MEI HACHIMOKU

JUNE 2024

Mei Hachimoku

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Here it is: the final volume at last. I feel so blessed to have been able to see this story through to its end. Thank you all.

KUKKA

ABOUT THE ARTIST

It's going to feel really sad to say goodbye to *The Mimosa Confessions*, but it's been an honor to be a part of this incredible journey with Hachimoku-sensei. Thank you so much!

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